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THE PLANET OF THE DYING SUN

by Kurt Mahr

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Where is the world on which — according to the message of the Unknown — the astronomical co-ordinates for their return may be found?

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**THE PLANET
OF THE
DYING SUN**

The Action & Adventure Happens with

PERRY RHODAN

Commander of the *Stardust II* and Astronaut #1

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Best Friend of Perry and Least Friend of Thora

THORA & KHREST

Exiles from Arkon, last of a superior race that lost the race

FELLMER LLOYD

He commits a breach of discipline, exposing the expedition to grave danger

TAMA YOKIDA

He must juggle an Arkon bomb, the deadliest weapon in the Universe!

LT. TANNER

Commander of Game Hill, camp on an inimical new planet

TANAKA SEIKO

Mutant whose brain feels as physical pain the hatred beamed at the New Power people as their mission is menaced on the treacherous planet Vagabond



PERRY RHODAN: Peacelord of the Universe

Series and characters created and directed by
Karl-Herbert Scheer and Walter Ernsting

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Perry Rhodan

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by Kurt Mahr

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1. STAR STRIDE

Strewn on the table in front of Perry Rhodan were the results of multiple measurements, of spectrum analyses and stellar luminosities.

In Khrest's opinion, they indicated the position and estimated distance of a star known to Arkonide astrogation and could therefore serve as a point of reference for their orientation.

The situation was this: Perry Rhodan had ended his mission on Gol, the fourteenth planet of Vega, which was a giant of methane and ammonia measuring three times the diameter of Jupiter and with an abnormal state of gravity prevailing on the surface.

Rhodan's mission was dedicated to the search for the World of Eternal Life and to finding a further clue on Gol as to its location. His exit from Gol had been strikingly spectacular: the search had been interrupted at the moment of greatest danger by the action of a pulsator, which had transported Perry's three separated groups out into space. He and his crew of three had been at the transmitter station; Major Nyssen and Captain Klein were located about fifty miles away in a disabled vehicle; and, finally, there was the *Stardust II*, the mighty spherical spaceship of the Arkonides. Men and ship were all reunited at a point in space so far beyond any charted routes that nobody knew where they were.

The mysterious, powerful pulsator was no more than a speck of dust compared in size to the tremendous volume of the twenty-five hundred foot sphere of the *Stardust II* and how it had accomplished such a herculean feat was incomprehensible even to the men who possessed encompassing knowledge of physics.

On the other hand, the phenomenon did not disturb them as much as might have been expected.

The fifty or sixty stars on the observation screen were quickly analysed. The data were classified and compared with the star catalogues on board the *Stardust*.

Thus it was found that none of the stars under examination bore any similarity whatsoever to the three million in the catalogue—with one exception.

This special star was Khrest's hope.

The star had a number of features which coincided with a stellar body in the Magellanic cloud outside the galaxy and known to Arkonide astronomy. It would

also have been an explanation for the low density of stars if the position of the *Stardust* was indeed outside the galaxy itself.

However, a more thorough examination failed to confirm the assumption. The star singled out in the preliminary investigation exhibited just as many features which disagreed with those of the star catalogued in the Magellanic cloud.

What worried Khrest—and Rhodan as well, although he refused to admit it—was much more the fact that the star, as most of the others observed, had a fantastic spectrum.

The theory that a fixed star is a ‘black body’, according to Planck’s law of radiation, was not questioned by Arkonide science. Thus every fixed star, including the few now seen on the observation screens of the *Stardust*, could be expected to show a continuous radiation spectrum which varied only—depending on the type of star—from more or less shortwave ultraviolet beyond a maximum in the visible range and reaching far into the infrared.

Nothing of the sort could be noticed on the stars which worried Khrest so much. Some of them displayed a spectrum which initially seemed to conform to the law of radiation but then suddenly broke the pattern someplace without any apparent reason. Others did not resemble any spectrum ever seen by Khrest or Rhodan. These stars were radiating selectively—like the flame of a candle or the beam of a flashlight.

One of the stars had a broken spectrum with two maxima—one in the green range and the other in the red. It had the effect of a shining brown point, such as never before observed in the sky of the galaxy.

Rhodan sighed. “Well, we have no idea where we are and we’ll never know unless a miracle, or something like it, happens.”

He watched the impact of his words. He had asked the two Arkonides into the Command Centre, as well as Reginald Bell, Majors Nyssen and Deringhouse and, finally, Tako Kakuta as a representative of the Mutants Corps.

Khrest was deeply discouraged and made no effort to hide his disappointment. Thora, the willowy, white-haired Arkonide woman, was gripped by a similar mood but she knew the attitude of humans toward a person who gave up hope too quickly so she stared firmly back at Rhodan with a resolute expression on her face.

The others were pictures of pure curiosity.

“Now what...?” asked Bell. “Are we stuck here waiting for a miracle?”

Rhodan nodded earnestly.

“Aren’t you going to at least tell what kind of a miracle you expect?” Thora asked, her voice irritated and nervous.

“I hope to be able to tell you that in a few hours,” answered Rhodan.

“What are you planning to do?”

“I’m going to look around—in a space pursuit ship.”

“Do you mean to cover a distance of a few light-years to the nearest of these stars in a pursuit ship?” Thora sounded cynical.

Rhodan shook his head.

“No. I won’t go any farther away from the *Stardust* than a few astronomical units.”

“What for?”

“This sector of space,” lectured Rhodan, “is the strangest in the universe that Khrest—let alone myself—has ever encountered anywhere. The nearest of this group of fifty-six stars is five light-years away from our present location, the farthest a hundred-eighty light-years. Beyond that boundary there exists at an enormous distance a barely discernible mass of matter, perhaps a galaxy.

“The star density in this area is much lower than within a galaxy but higher than one would expect outside. The spectrums of the fifty-six stars exasperate the analyst. According to all we know, there cannot be any such spectrums.

“The suspicion that the structure of the space in which we find ourselves is of a different nature than we are accustomed to is inescapable. However, since we cannot discover anything unusual with our most sensitive instruments, I’ll take a look outside the vessel.”

Deringhouse jumped up.

“Isn’t this my responsibility?”

Rhodan waved him away.

“No. Forget it!” Rhodan answered in a serious tone. “If my theory is correct, then...”

He did not finish the sentence.

Thoughtfully, he slowly walked over to the telecom and gave the order to have one of the small, fast machines readied for him in the northern airlock of the *Stardust*.

The pursuit ship darted out of the huge airlock. Although Rhodan was flying with only moderate acceleration, the tremendous sphere of the spaceship was shrinking terribly fast.

In the course of a few minutes the machine reached a velocity of three hundred miles per second. Rhodan throttled the engine and adjusted the thrust neutralizer so that also during free flight earthly gravity prevailed in his small cockpit. His measuring instruments remained at rest. Only the mass of the *Stardust* was registered, nothing else.

After having travelled for fifteen minutes in a straight line from the *Stardust* without noticing anything unusual, he increased the speed of his pursuit ship.

He flew around in a wide loop at about twelve hundred miles per second, ending his initial direction of flight and, finally, moved at a right angle to his prior course.

After another fifteen minutes had elapsed, he resolutely stepped up his velocity

with a short thrust to six thousand miles per second and set his course at 45° to the first as well as the second flight direction.

The mass of the *Stardust* still clearly showed on the indicator and the hull of the vessel shone like a bright star at an angle behind him.

An unreal star, thought Rhodan. The light which the *Stardust* reflected made him feel uneasy and he wondered why. There was nothing more natural than the sight of a ship transformed into a kind of star by moving far enough away from it.

Bell's somewhat nervous voice interrupted his thoughts.

"Why don't you call us? What's going on out there?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing."

Bell grunted contentedly.

"What did you expect?"

"I don't know. Something..."

"Hello! Do you still hear me? I asked: what did you expect?"

"And I said: I don't know," answered Rhodan.

A few seconds later Bell's gruff voice repeated: "I don't hear you anymore, Chief! What's the matter?"

Puzzled, Rhodan looked at the switchboard. The control mechanism did not register any damage. Everything aboard the pursuit ship was intact, including the telecom transmitter.

"Rhodan to *Stardust*!" he shouted. "Do you hear me?"

The answer was merely a monotonous murmur. The receiver was dead. They had not turned it off at the other end but they no longer heard him.

Without doubt they could follow his course with the aid of the mass detector. They knew that the spacefighter was still within reach of the *Stardust*. Rhodan was troubled by the thought of what Reginald Bell might do in his quick-tempered manner, shunning any compromise.

The *Stardust* must not be allowed to move.

Rhodan fired his forward jets. Brightly shining beams of particles shot as fast as light from the flat, wide jet orifices and began to counteract the forward flight of the space-fighter.

A number of ideas crossed Rhodan's mind.

He could give the *Stardust* a signal with the brilliant beam of his impulse-ray weapon to let them know that he was still alive. For the same purpose he could set off a bomb with a short time delay—

Then it occurred to him that Bell would interpret all such signals as a sign that he had encountered an invisible adversary. For that reason he discarded the ideas.

The forward jets required a few minutes of maximum output to retard the momentum of the pursuit ship. Still in the braking process, Rhodan pulled his machine around in a tight curve, severely taxing the limits of the neutralizers. Approximately ten minutes after losing contact with the *Stardust*, the pursuit ship was again able to resume its flight in the direction of the vessel

The *Stardust* had not yet moved. Rhodan checked the range finder and determined that he was about one astronomic unit, or ninety million miles, away from the spaceship. If he accelerated with top speed, he could possibly reach them before Bell gave orders to start for the rescue from his presumed dilemma.

They were bound to see on the observation screen of the mass detector that he was again approaching the vessel and would wait for him if they did not lose their nerve.

He pushed his machine to the limit. This way he would need no longer than half an hour.

His course was set for the *Stardust* and the narrow, bright band of light showed 0°. But it did not hold as steadily on the zero mark as it should have. The lightband quivered, wandered a few thousandths of an inch to the left, returned and drifted off again.

Rhodan disregarded what he meant to do and shut off the engine. The pursuit ship reacted promptly. Albeit hesitantly, the light-band indicating his course drifted steadily away without returning.

Rhodan observed the dial with fascination. Minus 1°—minus 2°—his machine obediently followed the influence of a force from an invisible source. Rhodan knew that the instruments recorded all details. Thus he would later be in a position to evaluate the record on board the *Stardust*. But he was gripped by impatience and he tried to locate the source of energy while the pursuit ship changed its course from mark to mark and from degree to degree.

However, the regular range finder did not detect anything except the mass of the *Stardust*, suspended motionless in space off to the side.

Yet the gravity indicator registered the minute influence of attractive forces and showed the direction in which the acceleration acted. Rhodan probed the space in that direction with all the instruments he had available but found nothing.

A source of gravity in avoid!

As ridiculous as the spectrums of the stars they had examined.

For half an hour Rhodan and his machine yielded without resistance to the mysterious influence. During that time he veered 10° from his original course until his ship threatened to bypass the *Stardust*.

At the end of that half hour the direction of his flight suddenly stopped changing. The gravity meter failed to show anything and the trajectory described by the pursuit ship was that of a freefalling object in an inertialess system.

The gravitation had ceased to have any effect. Somebody had turned it off.

Turned it off?

While he corrected his course and directed, at last, the nose of his pursuit ship toward the sparkling sphere of the *Stardust*, Rhodan tried to evaluate the amount of energy required to produce a field of gravity of the magnitude to which his machine had just been exposed. The fact that the change of course was steady and linear with time indicated that the source of the field was very far—at least three

astronomical units distant. To create an artificial field of gravity with strong effects at such a distance required more energy than—

Than what? More than the total energy, for example, at disposal on Earth. This was a field as radiated by a sun. But the gravitational field of a sun does not suddenly change as had occurred here.

There is no explanation, thought Rhodan with resignation.

He attempted once more to get in touch with the *Stardust*. But it was to no avail.

He remembered that he was thinking about a problem when Bell had called him and tried to recollect what it was. Something had bothered him, but what?

The light shining from the *Stardust*, of course!

Thoughtfully he stared at the glittering point of light made on the observation screen by the spherical hull of the mighty vessel.

Suddenly the revelation struck him like an electric shock.

Nowhere in the vicinity was there a source of light which could be reflected by the ship's body. It would have been ridiculous to believe that the light from fifty-six stars, the closest of which was five light-years away and the farthest a hundred-eighty years, could have been sufficient to light up the *Stardust* for a distance of more than 600,000 miles.

The vessel itself did not shine.

Then what? Rhodan asked himself anxiously and impatiently.

Under these circumstances he should have lost sight of the vessel after travelling more than a few thousand miles away. An object which does not have light to reflect and does not shine itself is invisible.

Nonetheless the *Stardust* was clearly visible. More than that: it shone brighter than the nearest star and had done so even when the pursuit ship was at the farthest point of its flight.

Was there a solution to this puzzle?

Rhodan did not find the answer before he got busy navigating his machine with its semiautomatic steering into the correct position near the giant sphere of the *Stardust*. Half unconsciously he searched the curved sides of the vessel for the reflection of the light by which the *Stardust* was so easily seen, but he found none.

Suddenly the telecom started to function again. "We're not going to let the machine enter if we don't get any answer!" He heard Bell's excited voice.

"It's all right!" Rhodan reported with relief. "Here I am!"

He heard Bell gasp for air.

"Why didn't you answer all this time?"

"I couldn't. The telecom didn't work."

"And now it's suddenly working again..."

"Yes. We'll talk about it later."

Slowly, yard by yard, the space-fighter floated toward the big northern airlock.

A guide-beam took over on the last stretch of the way and pulled him in without Rhodan having to do anything.

Rhodan made the prescribed check of all instruments. Then he got out. Meanwhile the lock had been filled with breathable air. He shed his protective suit while he went by walk-belt and antigrav elevator to the Command Centre.

“Three new riddles!” Rhodan said gravely. “The visibility of the vessel, the existence of a gravity source of variable magnitude and the failure of my telecom. Does anybody have an explanation?”

The question was rhetorical. He could see it on their faces. They expected him to give the explanation.

But he did not have an explanation anymore than they did.

“Well,” he continued, “we don’t know. We’re confronted with a mystery, or rather a number of mysteries, which cannot be solved even by Arkonide science. We’ll have to wait.”

This suggestion, however, was irreconcilable with Thora’s impatience. Her reddish eyes flashed boldly and a little angrily as she said: “Wait? Wait for what? There are fifty-six stars we can investigate. Why don’t we begin with them?”

She’s beautiful, thought Rhodan, taking his time to answer her.

“Because it would take too much time,” he said finally, “to search every star and its planets for clues. Moreover, this region of space presents so many problems which we cannot foresee, not to mention solving them.”

Thora did not agree at all. She was about to reply but Khrest broke in.

“In this connection,” he began, looking at Thora to beg her indulgence, “what I’ve found out in the meantime may be of interest.”

He handed Rhodan a few plastic strips. They came from the huge positronic computer on board the *Stardust*. This machine for calculating combinations ejected these strips which gave the evaluation of the mechanical brain either in Arkonide writing or in mathematical symbols in the case of pure calculating problems.

“I had a lot of trouble,” Khrest said with a smile, “to pose sensible questions and furnish adequate information to the computer. Here are the questions.” He handed Rhodan a written piece of paper. “And you’re holding the answers in your hand.”

Rhodan began to read:

Is it reasonable to proceed step by step on the dangerous search for the civilization which knows the secret of cell conservation?

The first question. The answer was:

The unknown civilization will share its knowledge only with those who prove by selective rules to have superior culture. (85.179% probability.)

Khrest pointed to the paper with his questions.

“After I received the first answer, I asked the second question.”

Rhodan read:

What is the nature of the selective rules?

And the answer:

The unknown civilization knows other selective rules besides scientific and technical topics. (100% probability.)

“This is trivial, of course,” said Khrest. “The positronic brain didn’t know how to deal with this question.”

The last question asked:

Which selective rules will we face on our search?

The answer followed:

All tests (selective rules) of scientific and technical nature have been concluded by the seekers. (52.112% probability.)

Rhodan thoughtfully studied the answer strip for a while before he returned it to Khrest.

“The last answer is almost useless, isn’t it?” said Khrest.

Rhodan shook his head.

“It would be useless if it had been stated with only fifty percent probability. But the computer must have deduced from some information which we didn’t entirely understand that the Unknown will in the future present enigmas which we have as yet not experienced. The period of the pulsator and time machines has passed. We don’t know what will come next. Perhaps it begins out there.

Thora broke in: “Do you think it would change the situation if we stopped wasting our time and started to act instead of waiting any longer?”

“Wasting our time?” Rhodan smiled condescendingly. “You’re on the way to eternal life! How can you speak of wasted time?”

“I made a serious suggestion,” Thora said bitterly, “and I expect a serious answer.”

“You’ll get your answer,” Rhodan replied. “Only this time you’d consider my tentative ideas to be absurd.”

Tanaka Seiko occupied a single cabin.

Stardust II was basically a warship—a battleship built by Arkonide technology as the ultimate answer to the threat against the galactic empire by rebellious worlds. At full battle strength the *Stardust* carried a crew of a thousand men. The men were quartered together, the noncoms two to a cabin and each officer had a single cabin.

Tanaka stayed in such a cabin which was, for special reasons, situated not too far from the Command Centre.

Tanaka in the last few weeks had become one of the most important aides to Rhodan. He, Tanaka, possessed by an innate mutation the capability to receive radio waves as other people hear sound waves. He was able to understand radio transmissions without the help of a receiving set.

In addition to that, he was so far the only one of Rhodan's people who was able to receive the messages of the unknown stranger and to interpret them coherently. Rhodan had learned on Gol that the oscillations used by the unknown individual for his messages were the process of a higher order. If they wanted to find the secret of eternal life, which was in the possession of the Unknown, they had to be able to understand his messages. Tanaka was the only one who could boast of this faculty.

Shortly after *Stardust II* had reappeared from hyperspace in a highly unusual transition, the Japanese had been assigned by Rhodan to wait for any further messages from the Unknown. Ever since that time Tanaka was sitting in his cabin and his easy temperament served him in good stead in his task which consisted of doing nothing but wait.

At first he made himself comfortable in a soft contour chair. Then he found that too much comfort put him to sleep and he chose a hard stool to sit on. He planted his elbows on the table in front of him and put his head in his hands.

Thus he sat for hours. Half a day had already passed.

Tanaka's thoughts danced around in a disorderly fashion. They conjured pictures from his past life. He saw his little village Shibano and a few old houses in the neighbourhood.

He recognized them all except one which he had never seen before.

Tanaka concentrated on the picture in his mind and tried to recognize the building. It was located in the middle of the village and looked like a skyscraper.

A skyscraper in Shibano!

There had never been a skyscraper in Shibano and it was not likely that they would have one in the future. Shibano was only a fishing village.

It was more like a tower, about two hundred stories high. Was there really such a building on Earth?

Tanaka narrowed his sight. The home of his parents, all other houses and fishing cottages faded from his field of vision and only the towering skyscraper remained in his thoughts.

The tower had round windows, which added to its odd appearance. Tanaka sensed that something very strange had crept into his brain, playing tricks with his imagination. It made him visualize pictures which could not have come from his own thoughts.

During a moment of panic he tried to resist the alien influence. He struggled against the mind which imposed a picture of a twenty-five hundred foot high tower with round windows on him.

But he was overwhelmed by the impression. At the same time he realized that this could be the beginning of a new message from the Unknown. Never before had he made his presence felt in this fashion, but nobody knew how many different ways of transmitting messages were at his disposal.

The tower was growing. It seemed to approach Tanaka with great speed—or

Tanaka moved toward the skyscraper. Only one small segment remained, a round window. Now Tanaka could look through the window. He saw a small room which contained only one piece of furniture, like a desk. On the table was a piece of paper, or something similar, and a thin writing instrument.

Tanaka picked up the pen and began to write.

Did he really pick up the pen? Nonsense! He saw the entire picture as a figment of his imagination—or the thoughts of another, unknown mind.

Be that as it may, he took the pen and proceeded to write. Somebody appeared to guide his hand, since he did not know what he wrote, being unable to read it.

Then—

When Tanaka failed to answer Rhodan's call, Reginald Bell went to the cabin of the Japanese to look for him.

Tanaka lay unconscious in front of his table. Apparently he had fallen from his stool and knocked his head against the table.

It all seemed very peculiar to Bell. Why had Tanaka fallen from his stool?

There was a stack of papers lying on the table. Genuine paper, made on Earth, part of the *Stardust's* tons of supplies since it had landed on Earth.

The sheet on top of the stack showed some writing. Bell glanced at it and was about to put it mindlessly aside. The stuff looked like meaningless doodles drawn in boredom.

Then he looked again. The scribbling was carefully arranged in rows and some of the incomprehensible signs were repeated at irregular intervals.

Bell put the paper into his pocket and called the sick bay to take care of Tanaka.

Rhodan recognized the writing. He had already seen it twice before: on the transmitter in the Red Palace in Thorta and on the metal cartridge he recovered on his trip through time.

The positronic computer had deciphered both inscriptions. It had the data and was equipped to unscramble Tanaka's scribbling.

Rhodan programmed a copy of the note and inserted it in the computer. The machine took one hour's time and delivered the following translation on a plastic strip:

IF YOU, WHO DARES, ARE PATIENT
AND DO NOT SUCCUMB TO TEMP-
TATION, WATCH FOR THE WORLD OF
HIGHER ORDER. THE LIGHT IS NOT FAR
AWAY. (*Illegible letters, 91.998% prob-
ability for accuracy of translation.*)

At about the same time the positronic computer furnished the translation,

Tanaka woke up from his fainting spell.

He related what had happened to him. He remembered the events up to the time he had begun to write, but nothing else.

It was left to Rhodan to find an explanation. Rhodan did not doubt for a second that the Unknown had taken possession of Tanaka's brain in an inexplicable manner, as happened so frequently in this enterprise, and caused the Japanese to write down his message on a piece of paper which was not lying on a desk on the hundred-eightieth floor of an ivory tower but on Tanaka's table in his cabin.

This was what Tanaka had done and the message had been translated in the meantime. However, it did not seem to make much sense. At least nothing that Rhodan could understand right away.

Rhodan went up to the sick bay to talk to Tanaka.

"...Watch for the World of Higher Order," he muttered, staring at the plastic strip which he had brought along.

World of Higher Order? Around which of the fifty-six suns observed on the screens did the World of Higher Order circulate?

The telecom began to blare: "Second Pilot to Commander!"

It was Reginald Bell's voice and he sounded rather excited.

Rhodan picked up the nearest microphone.

"Rhodan speaking. What's the matter?"

He could hear Bell take a deep breath.

"Please, come to the Command Centre right away. The observation screens..."

Rhodan did not listen to the rest. With two, three mighty leaps he was at the door which rolled open much too slowly for him as he squeezed through the narrow gap and ran with wide jumps along the walkbelt moving down the hallway. Hastily, and pushing himself away from the walls of the shaft, he rode down in the antigrav elevator and arrived so quickly at the Command Centre that Bell stared at him dumbfoundedly.

The observation screens!

They showed what he had believed all along, because anything else did not make sense. He knew that some day he would see this view—and here it was!

The deep black background of space, strewn with the myriads of lights of the firmament, long bright veils of distant constellations of stars and the dark holes of the voids and obscure nebulae.

The view every space traveller was accustomed to see, as long as he remained in the galaxy. The picture that finally made sense after the long days of perplexed waiting.

"How did it happen?" he asked with a hoarse voice.

Bell shrugged his shoulders. The shock had not yet worn off.

"I've no idea. I looked at the observation screen showing the old view and when I looked again, it was here...!"

With a helpless gesture he pointed to the wide panel of the view screens.

Rhodan moved quickly. He gave precise orders to the range finder section. The range finders were surprised. But when they switched on their instruments they noticed how completely the sight outside had changed.

While they began their investigation, Rhodan studied the visiscreens in the Command Centre very carefully.

Something attracted his attention, unconsciously at first, then his eyes passed over it a few times before he focused on it.

A red disk! About the size of the Terrestrial sun as it would appear from the plane of Pluto's trajectory. The disk was blood-red as if it were not shining but *painted* red and illuminated from outside.

A sun!

Rhodan called the attention of the range finders to it. The *Stardust* was moving—with respect to the red disk—no more than two hundred-fifty or three hundred miles per second relative to the perihelion of the ship's course. This was enough for the range finders to compute a triangle measurement. Rhodan received the result after two minutes:

The red sun was approximately two astronomical units, i.e. a hundred-eighty million miles, away from the *Stardust*. Not as far distant as Pluto from the Sun. Therefore, this red disk was not as big as the Terrestrial sun.

Two astronomical units were no more than a skip and a jump for a vessel like *Stardust II*. Rhodan began to set the new course.

“Range finder to Commander. The sun has a planet, sir, probably only this one. Distance from the sun zero-point-seven-eight astronomical units, radius zero-point-six of Earth, distance from here one-point-two units. Resembles Mars, sir.”

The automatic pilot consulted the positronic memory bank, received the necessary navigation data and adjusted the course accordingly. The *Stardust* commenced a further stride in the quest for the “Fountain of Youth.”

2. WORLD OF MYSTERY & MENACE

“It was the only possible solution, wasn’t it?” Rhodan said.

Khrest looked a little mystified.

“Obviously you know more than I do. What solution are you talking about? All I can see is that things have suddenly become even more complicated!”

Rhodan laughed.

“It was an illusion. I don’t know how the Unknown managed to hypnotize the crew and the instruments and make them believe that they saw fifty-six fictitious stars in an unreal space and a splatter of matter in the background. Certainly not hypnosis in our terms. He’s sure to have many possibilities for conjuring hallucinations.

The fact is that we’ve been in the same position in space all the time. Whatever we and the instruments perceived was a very convincing deception.”

“And what was wrong with the telecom on board your pursuit ship? Where’s the field of gravity and what illuminated the *Stardust*?”

Rhodan raised his shoulders.

“I don’t know the answer—not at this time. If we choose to call the effect of an illusory space hypnosis, there could have been a hypnotic field surrounding the *Stardust* like a sphere. As long as the border of the field was between me and the vessel, I was unable to communicate with it. Maybe that’s the way it was. Perhaps the hypnotic field exerted no influence on the reflected light and I saw the ship in the light of the sun which I couldn’t see myself. These are mere assumptions. I have—for the time being—no explanation at all for the field of gravitation.

“All right,” Thora said a little derisively. “You knew it all the time. Now tell me, please, what harm it would have done if we’d started the search as I’d proposed!”

“First of all, principally for general reasons,” Rhodan replied. “If I find myself with my ship somewhere in unfamiliar space and also know that I really cannot see the space, I remain still. Granted, the probability that I fly away in an arbitrary direction was fairly scant because of the low density of matter; but why take such a risk if I can avoid it?”

“And another thing: if the *Stardust* had moved, where would it have gone?”

“Most likely toward the star which was the closest of the fifty-six,” she answered.

Rhodan nodded.

“Naturally. We would have set the vessel in motion and taken the normal spurt for the transition. But we wouldn’t have gone very far, because this red sun is exactly astride our starting stretch. We would have plunged into a flaming hot world to our untimely end.”

She looked at him, frightened and shaken.

“Will you believe me now that I had very valid reasons?” he asked, smiling at her. “Although it was, of course, impossible for me to know anything about the red sun.”

The planet was a plainly visible, monotonous and rather cold world. Rhodan flew twice around, learning all worthwhile details about its topography, weather, temperatures and rotation period. He also verified the most important fact, the absence of any intelligent life, at least on the surface of the planet.

In this he was disappointed. He had expected to find on this planet another clue to the galactic position of the World of Eternal Life. But who could give him such a hint, if there was no intelligent life present?

The planet was named Vagabond for it was aimlessly wandering around in a space bereft of stars.

It resembled Mars as much as if it had been created from the same mould. There were no oceans. The mean temperature on the surface was around 18° F. None of the peaks were higher than a few hundred feet and at least three quarters of the surface consisted of deserts containing iron oxide.

Rhodan selected one of the deserts as a landing place for the *Stardust*. He remembered the prediction of the positronic computer that there were no more technical surprises in store for them and he ordered a state of constant alert for the mutants on board the ship.

However, nothing happened. The *Stardust* landed perfectly without any difficulties. The ground on which it stood was firm and the gravity was no stronger than 0.53 G.

Now the great guessing game began as to what the Unknown intended to do next.

If you, who dares, will be patient and do not succumb to temptation... Rhodan reflected on the text of the trance message written by Tanaka Seiko.

“Sounds like patience is considered by the Unknown as one of the virtues with which his successor should be endowed, doesn’t it?”

It was simply a rhetorical question.

“Could be,” answered Bell. “We’d have by no means gotten off so easy if we’d

reacted to his crazy delusion. I resent that very much!"

Khrest agreed.

"Each time I ask myself anew," he said, "whether we're engaged in something too big for us to handle. What good will eternal life do us if we..."

He made a vague gesture and did not finish his sentence. Rhodan did not respond. He wanted to say something else, when he was interrupted by the intercom.

Lieutenant Tanner's face appeared on the visiscreen. He looked scared and rather baffled.

"I beg your pardon, sir," Tanner said hastily. "I wanted to ask for your advice."

"Yes."

The angle of sight turned quickly. Lieutenant Tanner's face disappeared and Rhodan saw instead one of the small storage rooms up on Deck F just below the northern pole of the ship's sphere.

"Can you see it, sir?" Tanner asked.

Rhodan saw it. A few portable telecom sets were stored in the room for the use of task forces leaving the ship on reconnaissance. The sets were no bigger than a handy transistor radio. They were meticulously stored on shelves.

But one of them had come loose and was hovering in the middle of the room about three feet above the ground.

It was an incredible and unnerving sight. Rhodan covered his eyes with his hand and looked a second time before he trusted his sight.

"Can you explain it, sir?" Tanner asked in a disturbed tone after Rhodan had remained quiet a long time.

"No!" Rhodan replied harshly. "Wait for me! I'll come up!"

Inside the *Stardust* prevailed an artificially created gravity which was adjusted to normal gravity common to both Arkon and Earth. Rhodan cursed the generators and everything else that was in his way as he was storming along the moving belts in the gangways.

Tanner was standing at the hatch, staring perplexedly at the dented set on the floor in the middle of the room.

"Did it fall down?"

Tanner nodded.

"Yes, sir. Suddenly there was a crash and it was lying there."

Tanner had big frightened eyes.

"It could have been one of the mutants," murmured Rhodan, "but I don't believe it."

Half an hour later he knew for sure. There were three mutants on board with telekinetic powers: Anne Sloane, the nine-year-old Betty Toufry and the Japanese Tama Yokida. Betty and Anne had spent the past half hour reading and Tama Yokida had been busy looking among the accessible records of the *Stardust* for astronomical catalogues which he could understand with his limited knowledge of

Arkonide writing. Tama Yokida was an astronomer.

None of them had demonstrated a flying mini-telecom for Tanner as a practical joke.

Tanner had come on one of his routine inspections to Deck F. Rhodan reflected that Tanner could just as well have arrived at the storage room a few minutes later. Then the incident would either not have been noticed or it would have caused far less commotion.

This realization was not very reassuring. It led to the conclusion that, possibly, similar incidents occurred at other locations in the ship and that they would only be detected if somebody was accidentally at the right spot and used his eyes at the right time.

Rhodan immediately ordered a thorough general inspection of the vessel, which was mainly carried out by robots because they were better equipped than humans to find the slightest irregularities.

The result was:

Two overturned fixtures in the storage room for replacement parts for measuring instruments on upper Deck E, fifteen lamps which had been switched on in various rooms, and a big refrigeration machine, busily producing carbon dioxide nobody needed.

From this last example Rhodan realized that the incidents, which at first seemed only astonishing or perhaps even amusing, could turn into something more dangerous. Whoever tampered with the ship's installations had the means of causing an improvised start of the *Stardust* or making the generators burnout by overloading them.

Rhodan prepared his countermeasures. The precedent of the pocket telecom seemed to show that the mysterious intruder had telekinetic or hypnotic powers by which he made himself invisible. Rhodan switched on the *Stardust's* automatic emergency alert and ordered the entire crew to assemble in the mess hall.

Then he sent the mutant Fellmer Lloyd through the empty ship.

Fellmer Lloyd had a unique talent. He was able to recognize the patterns of alien brainwaves. At first one got the impression that Lloyd was a telepath like John Marshall, who could read other people's thoughts. But Lloyd's gift was more of an exact, analytical nature. He could write down from memory what he 'saw'. They were wave patterns which—according to Lloyd's claims—were radiated by the observed brain. Only from the received pattern could he draw his conclusions about the contents of thoughts. He knew the code for deciphering the patterns but could not tell how he acquired it.

Rhodan had called him the 'locator', because he was able to detect alien brains over much greater distances than a telepath.

So the 'locator' marched slowly and with concentrated attention through the ship.

The *Stardust* was a tremendous vessel. It was divided into six vertical stacked-up decks, four of which were subdivided into upper, middle and lower decks.

There were more than two thousand corridors, not counting small gangways, and a multitude of large, medium and small rooms. Anyone who wanted to peer into each room once would have been kept busy for two months, eight hours every day.

Fellmer Lloyd, however, relied on his capability of detecting brainwave patterns over long distances.

Therefore, Lloyd required no longer than two hours for his inspection. Then he reported to Rhodan that he had found nothing foreign on the vessel and Rhodan concluded that there were, indeed, no extraneous subjects on board.

Rhodan assembled a convoy of three aero-cars. Each vehicle was occupied by five men. The crew was well-armed and had packed provisions for many days. They had to wear protective suits as the atmosphere on Vagabond was too thin for human lungs and the temperatures were too low. The aero-cars were completely enclosed with tiny one-man airlocks.

Rhodan himself took over the command of the small expedition. Major Deringhouse drove the second car and Lieutenant Tanner the third.

Thora did not fail to express her objections to the expedition.

“What do you expect to find?” she needled Rhodan. “Do you believe that invisible enemies have crawled into the desert sand and are waiting for you to dig them out?”

“What do you hope to gain by waiting?” Rhodan countered.

“What do you know! Weren’t you the one who, until now, was content to wait more than any of us?”

“That was a little while ago. Now the situation has changed.”

“Do you have your secret reasons again?”

Rhodan shook his head.

“No, not this time. Only the feeling that I can find out there what I’m looking for better than in the ship.”

Rhodan had already prepared for the expedition by having the vicinity scouted by Deringhouse and two fighter pilots, who had repeatedly flown over the surroundings. They were already familiar with the terrain and had not gained any additional knowledge on their reconnaissance flights. There were a few hills in the northeast, about fifty miles from the vessel, and nothing else but deserts for five hundred miles in every direction.

They had one accident. The thrust of one of the pursuit ships had been shifted—apparently spontaneously—to full power shortly after leaving the northern airlock of the *Stardust* and the machine had been driven high up beyond the atmosphere. The pilot had attempted to control the engine that had run wild but did not succeed. When he had given up hope, the power regulator returned, just as spontaneously, to normal and permitted the pilot, who was frightened to death, to set a new course.

Otherwise nothing had happened, but this accident worried Rhodan greatly.

Fellmer Lloyd also took part in the expedition. It had been arranged, however, that he could be brought back as quickly as possible to the *Stardust* if his presence was needed there. The command of the vessel had been taken over by Reginald Bell.

Except for the temperature, which the outside thermometer registered as 5° F., the day on this planet had nothing in common with a day on Earth. The three aero-cars were flying low over the red desert sand and covered the distance of fifty miles to the hills in about half an hour.

The hills stretched across an area of about 100,000 miles. To search such an area would require a week or two. Rhodan questioned whether it was worthwhile to go through with this task. For some reason of which he was not conscious he felt that the solution to this planet's mysteries would be found in these hills.

The day on Vagabond was only twenty-one hours long. The hills were situated on the northern hemisphere between 30° and 40° latitude and, judging from the position of the planet's axis, it was now late summer.

The first investigation of the surface in the foothills did not bring forth anything other than the strange incidents to which the men had gradually become accustomed. The steering of one of the aero-cars suddenly failed to function. The vehicle performed a few capricious gyrations before the man in control recovered from his shock and switched off the engine. The steering remained blocked for another ten minutes, but then could be operated again without trouble.

Rhodan's vehicle was suddenly hit by a rock the size of a football at a spot where his view was obstructed. He was unable to dodge it in time. There was a dull thump as the stone collided with the vehicle's body, but it was built for heavy duty and could not be damaged by a big rock.

They were lucky in the third accident. In the aero-car where Major Deringhouse was in charge, a small but heavy measuring instrument was dislodged from the boxes and struck a man so violently on the head that he was knocked unconscious. Fortunately, Deringhouse reacted instantly so that a crash of the aero-car, which was moving at the moment with a velocity of ninety miles per hour through the air, could be prevented in the nick of time.

Fellmer Lloyd, who carefully tuned in on the surroundings at all times, was unable to notice anything unusual.

At sundown Rhodan set up camp in a flat hollow between three hills, none of which were higher than a hundred feet. The aero-cars were secured and tents were pitched in the hollow. Rhodan assigned watches with great care and impressed on the guards that there was no excuse for not keeping eyes and ears constantly open in this neighbourhood and to watch out for the slightest, most insignificant changes.

He consulted with Deringhouse and Lieutenant Tanner about the events of the day after he had made a short but comprehensive report to the *Stardust*.

Deringhouse declared with emphasis: “In my opinion we have somebody at work here who, firstly, possesses very strong telekinetic powers and, secondly, doesn’t welcome us here. He’s attempting with a sort of war of nerves to spoil our visit here and to chase us away.”

They were sitting in Rhodan’s tent. The tent was a product of Arkonide fabrication. It resembled neither in appearance nor in quality any similar tents of Terrestrial origin. It was specially designed for use on worlds with life-forbidding atmospheres. It was airtight and equipped with air generators and purifiers. It also had a small airlock. The walls of the tent consisted of a plastic metal foil made of condensed molecules, which was amazingly thin but could withstand pressures up to a hundred atmospheres.

Rhodan had expected such an interpretation of the incidents.

“I don’t fully share your opinion,” he replied. “I’d prefer if I could agree with you, because my own conclusions give the whole affair much weirder aspects.”

“But put yourself in our adversary’s place. He has amazing telekinetic powers—probably more pronounced than our mutants. If he really resents our presence here he could cause us much more trouble than has happened so far.

“What strikes me is the fact that these incidents occur definitely in a statistical manner with reference to the time intervals, seriousness and type of objects. Do you know what I mean? There’s no system to it!”

Deringhouse took his time to answer but, after deliberating his reply, did not get chance to say anything, because the entry signal of the little airlock lit up.

Rhodan opened the door.

One of the guards entered. He did not take the time to remove the helmet of his protective suit. His voice sounded muffled through the vibrating faceplate, although he had to shout to be heard.

“I’ve observed some movements between the neighbouring hills, sir! Some animals apparently.”

He now released the lock of his helmet, letting it flip open.

“How many?” Rhodan asked.

“A flock of them, sir. About thirty.”

“Okay. We’ll be out.”

The guard fastened his helmet again and left. Rhodan and the two officers followed him after they had made their protective suits safe for outside.

The guard was posted on the summit of the highest knoll. Of all watches Rhodan had posted, this one had the farthest view. A small plain bordered the foot of the knoll in a northerly direction. The plain reached a few miles to the north and less than a mile to the east.

Before they had set up their camp they had noticed some vegetation on this plain—the first of the flora they had seen since they had landed on Vagabond. Rhodan had to postpone looking at the plants. They wanted to examine them in the morning when they proceeded farther north.

When he reached the top of the hill and the small pit the guard had dug out, he could see with the naked eye and without the aid of infrared binoculars that something moved on the star-lit heath. Deringhouse could make them out better.

He said: “these are...!”

Then he went down on one knee and looked through the binoculars.

“...beavers!” he added. “A horde of overgrown beavers!”

Rhodan watched them through his field glasses. About thirty animals, as the guard had said, sat on their hindfeet, ripped the herbs with their front paws and ate what they had torn off.

Rhodan did not quite agree with Deringhouse’s comparison. The thick lower body and the spoon-like tail resembled beavers. But the big round ears and the pointed jaw reminded him more of an oversize mouse. Oversize, because the animal’s bodies were three feet long.

They looked harmless but nevertheless...

“Lieutenant Tanner?”

“Yes, sir!”

“Get Lloyd up here!”

Tanner disappeared and returned barely three minutes later with Lloyd in tow.

“Lloyd, take a look at that,” Rhodan told him. “see if you can hear anything.”

Lloyd lay down on the sand next to Rhodan. Rhodan saw how he focused on the dark mass of the herd of animals for a few seconds. Then he closed his eyes and lowered his head.

It took quite a while till he was certain.

“No, sir,” he said finally. “Only confused and senseless patterns as usual with animals. These aren’t the beings you’re looking for.”

Rhodan nodded.

“Thank you, Lloyd. Go back to sleep!”

Together with Deringhouse, Tanner and the guard, he remained for a while on the knoll.

Around midnight—as measured in Vagabond time—Rhodan returned to his tent.

He was in deep thought. The existence of higher forms of life in a world with nothing to offer except aridity, cold and iron oxide, irritated him and made him nervous without admitting it to himself. Moving mechanically he pushed the buttons of the airlock and took off his helmet after the inner door of the airlock had closed behind him.

He thought about asking Khrest’s opinion. But what could Khrest know better than he himself. Since the intensive hypno-training he possessed the same knowledge as Khrest and he had more lucidity and better command because he had acquired it in an artificially compressed fashion whereas Khrest’s erudition had gradually and organically grown while amassing it in the course of his development.

No, Khrest could not help him. He had to find the answer himself.

He took the case with his infrared binoculars and put it in a small cabinet which was part of the tent's interior installations.

Something disturbed him when he put it there but he did not know what. His thoughts turned again to the matters which preoccupied him and he sat down on the edge of the cot which served as his bed.

He glanced again at the cabinet.

All of a sudden he knew what was wrong.

Before he went outside with Deringhouse and Tanner, he had put the portable telecom at the same place where his binocular case was lying now.

However, it was not there anymore. He jumped up and searched the shelves. The cabinet was only two feet high, containing two shelves. But the telecom was on neither one. He searched the pockets of his protective suit, under the bed and in the airlock, but the little set had vanished.

Without taking into account that this might have been another trick of the unknown foe, he ran out to alert the guards. At the moment he was still firmly convinced that somebody had been in his tent and taken the telecom.

He stepped out of the airlock and looked around. It was still quiet in the five tents. A shadow moved at the side of the hill in the south.

"Hey, guard!" Rhodan shouted into the microphone of his helmet.

Just then he received a strong shove in the back.

He tumbled forward and a blue-white flash blinded his surprised eyes. The outside microphone of the helmet picked up the roaring thunder bursting out simultaneously.

He got up rather shakily. He was blinded by the flash and all he could see were colourful dancing rings.

He called for the guards. He had seen one of the sentries on the slope of the southern hill shortly before the explosion. It was only a few yards away. The man should have been here long ago.

When his eyes returned to normal, he saw a crater in the sandy ground, an ugly circular hole about thirty feet in diameter. It was located where his tent had stood a minute ago. Nothing could be seen of the tent anymore.

The two adjacent tents had been hit by strong repercussions. Obviously they had remained tight, since the men now stumbling out in a daze and cursing loudly could not have survived the shock of an implosive decompression.

Presently, chaos and confusion reigned around him. Everybody shouted questions and it required his repeated orders until Rhodan could make himself heard.

"Everybody stay away from the crater!" Rhodan commanded. "there might be some tracks. We'll spend the rest of the night out in the open. Deringhouse, find a suitable spot! It must be at least three hundred feet away from the camp. Guard! Where are the guards?"

“Here, sir!”

Three men stepped forward.

“Which one of you was near my tent at the time of the explosion?”

Nobody spoke up.

“I saw one of you over there on the slope of the hill to the south. Who was it?”

Nobody.

“I don’t suspect anybody,” Rhodan explained as quietly as possible. “I just want to know if the man who was standing over there noticed anyone.”

None of the three guards admitted to being the man Rhodan had seen on the side of the knoll. He did not press the men any further. He would clear up that matter without their information.

Deringhouse had found a convenient place. The men switched on the thermostatic regulators in their suits and lay down.

“You didn’t have anything explosive in your tent, sir, did you?” Deringhouse asked.

Rhodan shook his head.

“That’s been on my mind all the time. I don’t believe I did. Besides, I’ve reason to believe that somebody was in my tent while we were observing the mousebeavers.”

He related the story of the vanished pocket telecom.

Meanwhile, Tanner kneeled at the edge of the crater. The hole was fairly deep, about ten feet. Whatever had torn Rhodan’s tent to pieces, the force had been more in a downward than a horizontal direction.

If it had been otherwise, Rhodan thought angrily, the same thing would have happened to the other tents as to his.

Tanner got up. Rhodan saw him shrug his shoulders and wipe his hands on his spacesuit with a baffled gesture.

“Find anything?”

“No, sir. If you ask me, this was a stick of dynamite or TNT. Nothing modern. It stinks like burned powder.”

Rhodan climbed down into the hole. In the glow of his flashlight he saw charred traces and some powder residue which covered the blasted sand. When he opened the aperture in the faceplate of his helmet and sniffed the incoming odour, he smelled the same thing as Tanner had, burned powder.

At the same time, Deringhouse had walked over to the hill where Rhodan claimed to have seen a sentry.

“Whereabouts was it, sir?” he called across. “Here?”

“A little farther to the right—in that direction—and up a few feet!”

Deringhouse followed the directions. The night was quite dark. Too dark to recognize the details for which they were looking. Rhodan could not see what the

major was doing.

Rhodan and Tanner stood at the rim of the crater, mulling over the cause. Tanner was about to say something when Deringhouse yelled.

“Come over here, sir!”

He seemed to be very excited. Rhodan bounded over taking advantage of the weak gravity. He leaped hastily and barely missed landing on Deringhouse’s back. Deringhouse squatted in the sand and pointed the beam of his lamp on something.

A track!

The sand which covered the slope of the hill and was kept in constant motion by the wind was not the most ideal medium for retaining a clear and lasting print.

But this *was* a track.

Two rows of impressions of parallel holes—spaced about the span of a hand apart—and leading askew up the hill. The distance between holes was no more than ten inches according to Deringhouse’s measurement.

It was an altogether strange track.

Lowering his head, Deringhouse studied it.

“A two-legged being, I’d say. A four-legged track looks different.”

“Beware of rash conclusions,” warned Rhodan. “It could just as well have been a long slender centipede.”

All at once it dawned on Rhodan that it was not a guard he had seen earlier. It had been the shadow of the being from which this track stemmed. The shadow of the being who had been in his tent and planted a bomb which had exploded five minutes after he had entered through the airlock, as though it had been rigged to the door with a time fuse.

Perhaps that’s how it was, Rhodan thought.

He would have been blown to bits along with his tent had it not been for his discovery of the disappearance of the telecom. Considering the fact that the world around here was swarming with telekinetic activists, he had drawn very naïve conclusions. It would have been more sensible to deduce that the unknown tricksters had played a joke on him with the telecom. But no, he had been convinced that the telecom was stolen.

What was this whistling and whining?

The wind. The perpetual wind in this world which continually churned up eddies of sand.

Deringhouse was just below the hill, not far from where Tanner was standing. Rhodan was at the spot where the mysterious track began.

Three lost figures in a strange world. Deringhouse had turned off his light. Nobody said a word. Rhodan felt a shiver running down his spine.

Who had planted the bomb? Or—what had planted the bomb?

A being that made peculiar tracks of holes starting somewhere and...

“Over here, sir!”

It was Deringhouse's voice. Rhodan was startled.

"I'm coming!"

Taking two long jumps, he was on top of the knoll. Deringhouse had already descended the other side of the hill and his flashlight was switched on again.

"At first I thought that somebody was lying here in wait for us," he joked with a contrived smile; "instead I found this."

Rhodan looked at it. It was the portable telecom set he had missed just in time to save his life. It was lying in the sand—thrown away as useless—and had a few scratches on its smooth plastic surface.

Rhodan picked it up and put it in his pocket. "And over there!" Deringhouse pointed something out at a spot a few feet below the place where they had found the telecom.

Rhodan pinched his eyes together till he saw coloured spots and opened them again.

But the sight had not changed.

The track ended at the place where Deringhouse had pointed. Deringhouse swept the whole area with his light without finding a continuation of the tracks.

"A track which ends as abruptly as it starts. What kind of a world have we entered?" Tanner asked in a gloomy tone.

3. THE DANGER DEEPENS

The following morning they held a brief conference about the best way to proceed. Lieutenant Tanner was of the opinion they should follow the direction of the tracks regardless of its peculiarities.

Deringhouse pointed out that anyone who suspected he would be followed would never leave a trail with such obvious telltale marks.

Rhodan did not claim, after all, that the unknown being—although capable of handling explosive bombs—was endowed with human logic and he stuck, therefore, to his original plan.

He proposed establishing a base camp in the centre of the hilly area and from there to comb the vicinity with open eyes and ears, letting Fellmer Lloyd put his unique talent to work to uncover the strange individuals. Last night's raid seemed to prove that this terrain was the home ground of the mysterious aliens.

On one point they all agreed: the unknown being who committed the attack belonged to the race from which they hoped to obtain further clues to the World of Eternal Life.

The *Stardust* reported all quiet on board. They had nothing for Fellmer Lloyd to do.

During an uneventful flight of several hours, the three auxiliary vehicles covered the distance to the base camp, a central location selected by Rhodan on the map. Rhodan did not take any chances. He kept the engines running under full power and maintained an average altitude of three hundred feet.

Without any further incident, the small column reached a gently rolling valley stretched between two rows of hills, the highest of which was about two hundred-fifty feet above the floor of the valley.

While they set up their camp—with one tent less than the night before, depriving Rhodan of his privilege of a private tent—he tried to figure out why the inhabitants of this planet had restricted their activities to the night. During their flight they had neither sighted any of the mouse-beavers nor one of those who had intruded into his tent.

The environment of this planet was hostile enough by day but at night the

temperatures dropped to minus 22°F. Why then?

After a lunch out of cans from Arkon, Rhodan gave his instructions for the search. He did not intend to waste any time. At least one of the aero-cars was to be deployed at all times. Rhodan had assigned a crew of two—or three in an exceptional case—for each sortie. That way he always had well-rested reserves while the remaining men stayed in the camp. Each vehicle was equipped with efficient ultra-search devices so that the probe did not have to be interrupted during the night.

The mission was: to investigate everything that moved, take photographs and make a report. No single-handed actions!

Rhodan expected the search to last a maximum of ten days. He was convinced that he would find something before the end of ten days, although he did not know what made him think so.

After their assignments two of the aero-cars got ready for the first flight. Rhodan took the third and went with Major Deringhouse on a short reconnaissance flight which was not part of the program.

They cruised initially in an easterly direction, since the two other machines flew over the south and south-west territory. Rhodan was piloting while Deringhouse was on the lookout with his keen eyes.

Deringhouse did not consider this flight very promising. He would have counselled against it, if he had not been grateful for the diversion.

Vagabond's sun shone with a peculiar red light. In time their eyes got used to it but the colours were undergoing changes so that the blue-grey spacesuits, for instance, became a shade of green.

"A strange world!" Deringhouse mused.

"With strange denizens," Rhodan added after a while.

They were in constant communication with their camp and the other two reconnaissance vehicles. Nothing unusual happened anywhere. After the excitement of last night, boredom began to sink in. The aero-car's engine was humming monotonously. Deringhouse felt sleepy, but with Rhodan alert at the controls he was loath to admit to Deringhouse began to check the instruments in order to keep busy.

Outside temperature was 35.2°F., air pressure 89, violet sky, cloudless.

Time 16:05 local time. The local day had twenty-four hours and fifty-two minutes Terrestrial time.

Beep... beep... beep...

Rhodan looked at the grav-meter which showed a red light as a signal that it had registered some irregularity.

Rhodan called the Range Finder Section and reported:

"Weak, variable gravitation in northeast."

He decided to go a little lower.

As the aero-car went nose down into a flat valley the grav-meter indicated the

disturbance more clearly, a sign that the vehicle was approaching the source of gravity.

“What do you think of it, sir?” Deringhouse asked.

Rhodan shrugged his shoulders.

“Could be a gravity generator. Quite powerful. Somewhat stronger than the one we have in the aero-cars. None of our vehicles is in the neighbourhood, so...”

He left the conclusion open.

The grav-meter indicated definitely where the gravitational force could be pinpointed. After a few seconds Rhodan determined that it was moving. The thing they were chasing seemed, indeed, to be a vehicle.

“Be ready to shoot!” ordered Rhodan. “I don't want to be caught unprepared.”

Weapons were a regular part of the aero-cars' equipment. Rhodan had a variety of them installed.

Deringhouse was getting ready. When Rhodan turned around briefly to look at him, he saw him grin.

“Don't be reckless,” he warned Deringhouse. “We shoot only if we have to.”

Deringhouse nodded.

The sound signal of the grav-meter grew into a continuous, unpleasant beeping. Rhodan damped the sound.

The terrain over which the aero-car was now moving suddenly displayed a surprising regularity. The hills were all of the same height and size and shaped in an identical manner. They stood in straight rows and if they had not looked like the same sandy hills as all the others on this planet, one would have thought that they had been artificially constructed.

Rhodan kept the vehicle just a few feet above the ground and moved carefully between the two rows of hills. Nothing could be seen of the thing that caused the grav-meter to beep.

This was astonishing. According to the instrument the origin of the gravitation was no more than three hundred feet distant and they could see much farther than that in the clear atmosphere of the planet.

“Perhaps you can...”

He had not finished asking his question when all of a sudden he saw it.

He had been looking for something comparable in size to their aero-car.

But the thing which drifted out between two hills was a glittering sphere of no more than three feet in diameter.

“Damn it! Do we have light bodies here too?” Deringhouse cursed.

Rhodan merely shook his head. The thing out there was solid. It had walls of a glittering material with which he was not familiar but apparently could be felt if touched by hand.

Rhodan slowed down abruptly so that the aero-car was creeping forward by

inches close to the ground. He approached the glistening sphere, which had now stopped in the middle of the shallow valley.

The distance did not exceed one hundred fifty feet. A great many thoughts crossed Rhodan's mind in a flash. Whatever it was over there—how could he make it clear to it that he had no hostile intentions?

“Get into the airlock!” Rhodan yelled at Deringhouse. “Open the outer hatch and wave or do something to welcome him! Go on!”

Deringhouse was startled but, nevertheless, nimbly climbed into the airlock. A few moments later Rhodan saw his arm vigorously waving from the hatch.

Still one hundred feet to go!

Within pistol range, he suddenly noted, and wondered about the thought.

He stopped the aero-car at a distance of sixty feet. The sphere did not move but Deringhouse was still waving.

The aero-car touched ground; Rhodan got up from his seat and squeezed himself behind the ray gun. He did not exactly know why he did it but he had a feeling of impending danger and it was better in any case...

At this moment the scene changed.

The iridescent sphere suddenly jumped into the air like a rubber ball and went clonk on top of the vehicle's body. Rhodan felt a severe jolt and saw stars before his eyes as his head struck the gunsight of his thermo-beamer.

The whole world spun around him in dizzy circles. From somewhere came Deringhouse's angry, shouting voice. Hills, valleys and glittering spheres whirled turbulently around and even if Rhodan had been in control of himself after the hard blow he had suffered, he could not have found the target for his impulse-beamer.

Something soft and growling fell on top of him, moved back and was thrown once more against him at the next turn the vehicle performed.

It was Deringhouse. He had come out of the airlock and attempted to get the neutron-beamer into operation. Rhodan wanted to call him but something grabbed the vehicle with a mighty jerk and slammed it to the ground with a crashing sound.

Then silence returned again.

Rhodan had not lost consciousness. He knew what was going on around him although his head droned.

He sat up and saw that he had fallen between two rear seats. The seats were in an abnormal position. The backrest was horizontal and the seat was vertical. He looked through the rear window and saw the sand on which the vehicle was lying. The side windows were lined up on top of each other instead of running from front to back.

“Deringhouse!”

“Yes, sir!”

“Did you get hurt?”

“No, but I can't move.”

“Wait till I get there!”

The neutron-beamer was torn from its mounting. The front plate, which carried the entire weight of the heavy weapon, pinned Deringhouse down in his seat. Only with Rhodan's aid did he manage to shove far enough away to crawl out from under it.

“Everything all right?”

Deringhouse examined his body and took a deep breath.

“I'm fine, sir.”

They closed their suits and climbed up over the seats to the hatch. Rhodan saw through the side windows that the sphere had vanished.

The outer hatch of the airlock was ten feet above the ground since the strange weapon of the mysterious adversary had turned the vehicle on its end.

Rhodan jumped down, thermo-blaster in hand. But there was nothing around at which to shoot.

They walked around the vehicle and found that the metal body had withstood the battering very well.

However, the vehicle's front end pointed skyward and it was thus incapacitated.

“We can try to rock it,” Deringhouse suggested.

“Maybe we can make it fall down right side up.” Rhodan agreed. But first Deringhouse climbed on Rhodan's shoulders back into the vehicle to switch on the engine, so that the aero-car's fall would be cushioned by the gravitation field generated by the engine.

They took their positions with the upright vehicle between them. Rhodan called the signals.

“Heave!” Deringhouse pulled to his side.

“Ho!” Rhodan pulled in the opposite direction. They got the heavy vehicle moving in no time at all. Soon it was swaying like a tree in a storm and it was only a matter of seconds before it would topple forward.

Rhodan relaxed his efforts in order to let the vehicle fall on the right side where Deringhouse stood. Rhodan had a fingerhold in a window frame as the smooth body did not offer much to grip.

“Heave!” Deringhouse shouted.

“Ho!” Rhodan answered.

As the vehicle swung back, he felt it jerk. Rhodan's fingers scraped and lost their hold. The vehicle tipped over with incredible force.

“Stop!” Deringhouse yelled. Rhodan saw him leap away from under the falling vehicle as if shot from a gun. He hit the ground, tumbled and got up in a cloud of dust.

The aero-car had landed just as they had hoped. The running engine had lessened the impact. Everything was in order except...

“You very nearly crushed me to death,” Deringhouse said with an embarrassed smile.

Rhodan gaped at him.

“I did...?”

Deringhouse was as much surprised as Rhodan.

“Didn’t you give the vehicle a last push to make it topple over?”

“Not at all. On the contrary, I didn’t do anything anymore. I stopped pulling to make sure that the thing would fall in the right direction. I thought you...”

Deringhouse’s eyes popped out.

“The telekinetics...!” he groaned. “They’re playing tricks on us. First they spin the vehicle around like a top and then they almost crush me to death by throwing it on me!”

They both agreed that there was no other explanation. They went back into the aero-car and Rhodan hastened to get out of the place as quickly as possible. Evidently even their Arkonide aero-car was no match for the alien foe without special precautionary measures.

After they had left behind the area with the strange identical hills, Deringhouse spoke.

“How about this whirling around? Do you believe it’s a telekinetic effect?”

Rhodan laughed.

“We’re racking our brains about the same things, aren’t we? I was just thinking about it. I don’t believe that the spinning was caused by telekinetic force. I don’t think that telekinetic being has enough power to accomplish such a feat. After all, the aero-car is an enormous mass.”

“What else could it have been?”

“I’d say a rotation field. I believe I could achieve the same effect if I’d alter one of our gravity generators to produce a rotation field.”

Deringhouse muttered something. Then he said:

“Very advanced technology, wouldn’t you say?”

Rhodan nodded.

A few minutes later they landed in the base camp. Rhodan had given a short report about the incident to Tanner via telecom shortly after starting his return flight and had not communicated with anyone since.

Rhodan got out. Tanner came running toward him. He looked very disturbed.

“Sir!” Tanner gasped. “Lloyd is gone!”

“Where?” Rhodan asked tersely.

Tanner regained his composure and gave a hasty report.

“After the two aero-cars returned, Lloyd showed up and asked me for one of the vehicles. I agreed to give him one under the condition that he would take at least one other man along. But he wanted to fly alone. I refused. He began to deride me and said that, first of all, I had no authority over him as a mutant and, secondly, he

could accomplish more in one flight than we could in a thousand as long as we left him alone.”

Tanner shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

“I objected,” he continued, “but he simply got into one of the aero-cars and took off. After all, I really don’t have any authority over the mutants.”

Rhodan slapped him on the shoulder.

“Don’t worry, Tanner. I’ll give him a good talking to when he returns.

“*If* he returns!” groaned Tanner. “We’ve been out of communication for ten minutes!”

Seconds later they were up in the air again.

Tanner knew the direction in which Lloyd had departed and from whence his last message had come. The second aero-car stayed behind Rhodan’s machine. While Rhodan steered he gave his men a short but enlightening lecture about glittering spheres, rotation fields and overturned cars.

“This world isn’t deserted,” he concluded. “Looks are deceiving. If you don’t keep your eyes open, you’ll be guaranteed a very short life.”

One man of the rescue party was assigned to call Fellmer Lloyd continuously on the telecom. But Fellmer Lloyd did not reply.

Rhodan had no illusions. If Lloyd did not answer one could not exclude the possibility that he had met his death. There was hardly a loss which could have been more tragic for Rhodan. People like Fellmer Lloyd were worth ten times their weight in gold in the situations they faced.

Lloyd had taken a northerly direction from the start. The only hope Rhodan had was that Lloyd had followed the same direction on his flight. It was the only way to find him.

Rhodan had no intention of interrupting his search for days, regardless of the importance of one man.

After half an hour’s flight they found Lloyd’s machine. It was lying, overturned, on its side and was apparently heavily damaged. Rhodan recognized charred spots on the vehicle’s body.

Not far from the aero-car one of the mouse-beavers they had watched last night was lying motionlessly in the sand. The animal seemed to be dead. While Rhodan carefully set down his aero-car next to the damaged vehicle, he asked himself whether the mouse-beaver could have any connection with Fellmer Lloyd’s accident.

They got out. Rhodan examined Lloyd’s machine. He found it empty and so severely damaged as to immobilize it. The vehicle had apparently crashed from considerable height. The impact had, among other things, ruined the telecom so that Lloyd could not have used it even if he survived. They did not detect any blood. But there were imprints in the sand which could have been made by a man, considering that the wind had had more than an hour’s time to blow them away.

They were leading away from the wreck up a hill and disappeared where the wind was blowing more strongly than in the protected hollow.

In the meantime Deringhouse examined the mouse-beaver.

“I’m no space-veterinarian,” he said, “but in my opinion this fellow has broken his neck.”

He lifted the animal’s head and twisted it demonstratively in all directions.

Rhodan nodded. Right now he was not interested in mouse-beavers. Fellmer Lloyd had probably survived the crash and crawled away some place. Rhodan sent the five men of the second aero-car out in the direction of Lloyd’s tracks to comb the neighbourhood for the mutant.

Deringhouse’s attention was still concentrated on the dead animal.

“The head is much too big,” he said. “Don’t you think so?”

Rhodan waved him away. “For all I care, it can have two heads. I want to know where Lloyd is!”

Deringhouse got up and walked away from the mouse-beaver. The animal had left rather distinct tracks and a struggle seemed to have taken place where it was now lying. The ground was dug up and Deringhouse could not figure out who the other fighter might have been.

The track of the mouse-beaver stretched out over a great distance. Deringhouse followed it. When he had moved so far away that he had lost sight of Rhodan and the three vehicles, he pulled his weapon.

The track led around the side of a knoll and disappeared in a hollow between two hills. Deringhouse followed cautiously and came to a hole which entered the ground in an inclined direction. The track came from the hole.

Disappointed, Deringhouse turned around and walked back. A mousehole, a little larger than usual on Earth, but still only a mousehole.

What else did he expect?

When he came back between the hills, he glimpsed something on the opposite slope. At first he did not recognize the significance of the sight, but when his memory returned, he scurried over.

“I found something!” he shouted into his helmet’s microphone. “Over here!” Flailing his arms, he ran up the slope with grotesque, twelve foot long leaps and reached the thing in a few seconds.

It was half buried in the sand. The sand formed a ring-shaped wall around the object as if an irresistible force had pressed the thing—into the ground.

Deringhouse extricated it. It seemed to be a fairly thin metal foil and it glittered, although it was less iridescent than an hour and half ago when he had seen it for the first time.

It was anything now but a sphere. The same force that pushed it into the ground had transformed it into a shapeless glob of sheet metal. But there was no doubt that it had been the same sphere, or the same type of sphere, they had encountered on their flight to the east.

Perry Rhodan concurred in his opinion after he had studied the piece of metal thoroughly. The thing was fairly light since the metal was so thin. They had no trouble carrying it over and loading it into one of the aero-cars.

Deringhouse returned to the spot where he had unearthed the thing. Rhodan warned him:

If this sphere was occupied by anyone, he must be still alive! There's nothing left in this piece of metal. Keep your eyes open!" he admonished him.

He reached the spot without hindrance. It was just below the top of the knoll. He climbed up to the top and looked around. He was about to turn away when he saw, against the shine of the quickly setting sun, a dark line which stretched across the slope on the other side of the hill.

It took three wide jumps for him to get there. It looked exactly as he had expected. Two rows of small holes, ten inch intervals between the holes and the length of a hand's span between rows.

The track started at the place where he stood and ended about sixty feet down the hill.

One hour later they located Fellmer Lloyd. The sun had set in the meantime and they had to find their way with portable searchlights.

Lloyd was completely exhausted. He was put into one of the vehicles and Rhodan postponed, for the time being, questioning him and giving him a lecture.

Meanwhile Lloyd's machine had been stripped of all usable equipment. Without further delay they started on their way back. They reached the base camp a short time later and Lieutenant Tanner breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the two aero-cars land.

Lloyd was bedded down and treated. Rhodan gave a detailed report to the *Stardust* to which Bell replied:

"I'd have preferred if Lloyd had picked some other day for his escapade. I wish he were here right now. Things are pretty topsy-turvy around here."

He told Rhodan about a number of mishaps. Somebody had left open the outer hatch of a loading lock and the inner hatch was left open at the same time despite the electrical control which normally prevented it. The result was that the *Stardust* had lost thousands of cubic yards of breathable air. Fortunately, there had been nobody in the storage room at the time and the automatically operated safety hatches had closed up so that nothing serious occurred.

Bell had ordered the crew to wear spacesuits inside the ship and to keep them closed at all times.

"I'll send Lloyd over as soon as I've interrogated him," promised Rhodan. "But I think we'll get closer to our goal if we keep him here instead of letting him search the whole vessel again."

Since Fellmer Lloyd was in no condition to be questioned by the time it was

midnight, Rhodan tried to catch some sleep for a few hours. He had been awake for twenty-five nerve-wracking hours. Although he had various Arkonide tablets available which made sleep unnecessary without undesirable side effects, he preferred a healthy, natural rest.

However, his thoughts made it difficult for him to fall asleep. He now shared a tent with Tanner and Deringhouse. The two officers slept quietly and, it seemed, untroubled.

By contrast, Rhodan mulled over the recent events and the more he pondered them, the more he realized that the position of the *Stardust* had become nearly untenable in this world.

The alien adversary had at first begun to try out his telekinetic powers on simple things, such as switches which had only two positions, or light objects which were not tied down.

Then he proceeded with aimed actions. A stone had struck Rhodan's aero-car and the pilot of another vehicle was nearly killed.

Now in the third stage of this peculiar altercation, his enemy obviously specialized in more complicated activities. Rhodan tried to picture in his mind how difficult it would be to manipulate by telekinetic methods the complicated electronic switch arrangement to keep the inner and outer hatches of the airlock open simultaneously. He was unable to grasp it clearly since he had no such telekinetic capabilities.

He could guess the outcome of further developments. When the enemy had learned to operate telekinetically the weapons of the *Stardust*, the battle would be as good as lost.

There were only two alternatives. Retreat or surprise attack. The enemy must be destroyed quickly in order to prevent a serious disaster.

However, the obvious difficulty he confronted was that the enemy could not simply be destroyed as soon as apprehended. He possessed the knowledge for the sake of which the *Stardust* had come to this planet. If the foe was annihilated, this knowledge probably would be lost with him.

Other considerations occurred to Rhodan. The glittering ball, for example, and the bomb that blew up his tent. Why, if he was such a proficient telekinetic manipulator, did his adversary choose to employ other means?

How could the behaviour of the sphere be explained? Was the rotation field spinning around the aero-car a warning, an attack, or what?

Was the...

The green lamp at the door of the airlock lit up.

Rhodan touched the button on the table at his side.

The door opened and one of Tanner's men entered.

His helmet was open and flipped back.

"Lloyd has come to, sir," the man said softly.

Rhodan got up.

“Okay. I’m coming.”

Quietly, so the other two would not be awakened, he closed his spacesuit, donned his helmet and left the tent with the messenger. Lloyd had been put up in a storage tent which Rhodan carried along in case he took prisoners who could not be housed together with humans-or for wounded men who required care in separate quarters.

Lloyd had been made comfortable. When Rhodan entered, Lloyd stood in the middle of the tent.

“How do you feel?” Rhodan inquired.

“Thank you, I’m all right again,” Lloyd answered.

Rhodan sat down on the edge of his cot.

“Where did you get that crazy idea?”

Lloyd shrugged his shoulders.

“I had the impression that I could do a lot more for our cause if I were left alone. That’s why I requisitioned the aero-car and flew away.”

“You almost flew too far for your own good,” Rhodan chided him.

Lloyd turned away and started to walk around in the tent.

“That’s right. Luckily everything turned out well.”

“Listen, Lloyd!” Rhodan began in earnest. “We’ve got to make one thing clear once and for all. Hey, what are you doing? Are you listening?”

Lloyd had kept walking. Now he stood at the other end of the tent, turning his back on Rhodan, where the light which was close to Rhodan barely reached.

Something at the back of the man’s head attracted Rhodan’s attention and startled him.

But suddenly there was no more time to think. At the same moment Rhodan jumped up from the cot to take cover behind a table, Lloyd whirled around. He held a thermo-blaster in his hand and the beam, fine as a needle, shot accurately at the spot where Rhodan had sat one-tenth of a second ago.

The table behind which Rhodan had sought cover rattled and fell over. Rhodan shot from behind the table-top. The beam of light from his impulse-ray gun hit Lloyd squarely in the chest. Lloyd managed to raise his arm once more but he could not trigger his weapon again. He crashed noisily to the floor.

Rhodan waited a little before he came out from behind the table.

Then he stepped over the body of the dead man, left the tent and called a guard.

One of Tanner’s men doubled as a physician. He had been a medic before he joined Rhodan and knew a lot about medicine although he was not trained to handle complicated cases.

Rhodan told him to examine the body.

In the meantime the entire camp had been aroused. The men did not talk much. They were shaken in horror because one of their own people had dared to shoot at their commander.

Rhodan and Deringhouse were present as the medic examined the body.

“You’ve given him an injection, haven’t you?” Rhodan asked.

“One?” answered the medic. “He was so knocked out that he needed five of them before he even remembered his own name.”

He took Lloyd’s clothes off and placed him on a long narrow table.

“Cut him up!” ordered Rhodan. The medic jumped. “What? I can’t do that!”
“Go ahead! It’s an order.” The medic gulped. “Very well, sir!”

Deringhouse gave Rhodan a furtive glance.

“Do you expect something in particular?” Rhodan nodded.

“Have you ever looked at Lloyd from the back?” he asked.

Deringhouse could not figure out the purpose of the question.

“No,” he replied hesitantly.

“That’s regrettable. Lloyd had a bald spot on the back of his head-about the size of a half dollar. It was odd, because he had a lot of hair growing on his head.”

Deringhouse narrowed his eyes.

“So...”

Rhodan pointed to the body.

“This Lloyd has no bald spot. He’s got hair all over his head!”

The medic had begun to work on the body.

Rhodan had never seen a face as pale as his.

“No blood, sir!” the man choked. “Not a single drop!”

Rhodan went to the table and picked up the amputated leg. The cut section did not look like a leg at all. About two inches of a plastic mass resembling skin formed a ring about a bone which reflected the light where it was cut.

“Metal!” exclaimed Deringhouse.

Rhodan nodded.

“This beast is a perfect android!”

4. THE MAD BOMB

After that nobody doubted that Lloyd had met some horrible fate and was no longer alive.

Somebody had captured him and used him to create a robot in his image in an incredibly short time. A robot who could be relied on to kill the leader of the intruders before he was unmasked.

Despite all these suppositions, Fellmer Lloyd came staggering down one of the hills in the north shortly after sunrise next morning. His legs were so weak that he simply dropped when he saw that he had attracted someone's attention.

Ormsby, the medic who had so much trouble the night before with the android Lloyd, got busy again. But this Lloyd had a bald spot on his head and when Ormsby examined his bones with a fine probe, he obtained real calcium.

Rhodan waited impatiently until he was able to question Lloyd. Reginald Bell's appeals for help from the *Stardust* were getting more urgent all the time. Their opponent had activated one of the lighter impulse-beamers and burned a long furrow into the sand before they had discovered it and switched it off.

Presumably Lloyd had the key to the secret. Rhodan decided to interrupt the search immediately and to leave the planet for a while at least, if Lloyd did not bring any pertinent information.

Ormsby did his best and by noon Lloyd had recovered enough to confer with Rhodan, who interrogated him so long that the mutant almost collapsed from fatigue. But by then Rhodan had learned the following facts:

The steering of the aero-car Lloyd was flying suddenly failed. The vehicle crashed and Lloyd was knocked out for some time. When he came to, the first thing he saw was the dead mouse-beaver and then an iridescent sphere hovering above the ground close to the rodent.

Lloyd got out of the wreck and tried to attract attention. But suddenly the sphere flew up into the air as if pulled by an invisible thread, moved some distance away and was thereupon flung down with great force on the slope of the hill. Lloyd saw how it was flattened out.

After that he felt it would be more prudent to leave the scene of the accident, at

least until help arrived. Armed only with his impulse-beamer he felt helpless against the invisible enemy. He crawled away between the hills, but he did not get very far. Something he could not see hit him on the head and instantly knocked him out.

When he woke up again, he found himself in some kind of machine hall. It was fairly large but unusually low. There were a lot of machines which he did not recognize and about a dozen little beings who worked at the machines. After a few minutes he decided that they, too, were mechanical robots. They did not resemble humans in the slightest. Instead of a head they had a crown of arms and two legs which ended in smoothly polished metal clubs.

Lloyd was paralysed and lying on a stretcher but not tied down. He suspected that he had been drugged. His space helmet had been removed. He was able to breathe but the air was very foul.

After one hour had elapsed, a few of the robots dragged him into a small room adjacent to the hall. He was put on a seat which looked like a lie detector to him. Then he got another blow on the head and was again unconscious.

When he woke up the second time, he was lying in another room. There was nobody around. He found the helmet of his spacesuit on the floor. He put it on and tried to open the door of his room. He finally succeeded. He was again in the machine hall he had seen previously. He searched the hall and found an exit which led to an elevator. He used the elevator to go up and discovered that he had been underground all the time.

The elevator stopped and he got out at the side of a hill. There was nobody to prevent him from leaving. When he tried to call the camp with his helmet's transmitter, he found that it had been demolished. They probably thought that by doing this they could keep him a prisoner.

Notwithstanding the perils, he crisscrossed the territory for hours during the night and finally reached the base camp, hungry, thirsty and utterly exhausted. It was much more likely that he would have missed it.

Yes, he was confident that he could find the machine hall again.

Yes, he had studied the brainwave patterns. And this came as a surprise.

"I've analysed many patterns," Lloyd said. "some from people who were completely different from myself. But I've never experienced anything like this."

"They have two basic oscillations, sir. One indicating a fantastic, almost ridiculous urge to play and another revealing such a deep hatred that it makes my head hurt. Hatred against the enemy, hatred against the intruder and hatred against everything that doesn't belong here.

"I believe that these beings who emit these two waves simultaneously must be mental cripples. The urge to play and the abysmal hate go together as little as... as..."

He wanted to use a familiar comparison but could not think of any.

"Did you see any of these individuals who harboured both these urges?" Rhodan asked.

“No, sir. All I saw were the little robots.”

“Hate and play—did they always appear together?”

“No. When I was lying in the hall, I only felt the hatred. The urge to hate and play at the same time was noticeable when I tried to crawl away from the aero-car.”

Rhodan had now determined what he had to do next. He instructed Bell to send him five more aero-cars with a total crew of forty men, armed to the teeth. As soon as the reinforcements arrived, Rhodan would let Fellmer Lloyd locate the hall in which he had been held captive. Then they would see what else had to be done.

There had been one more incident on board the *Stardust*. One of the protective screen generators malfunctioned and endangered some sections of the vessel with gravitation fields up to 15 G.

A few people collapsed and suffered bone fractures or concussions. It took fifteen minutes until they could regulate the generator which had been enveloped in an extremely strong field.

Khrest and Thora were close to despair. This was provoked not only by the anguish they suffered but also by the fact that it was not in their power to break off the mission and leave the planet. Khrest had tried to persuade Rhodan, but the “abominable, stubborn Earthman,” as Thora called him in a fit of anger, declared that he would order retreat only when the situation was really hopeless.

Nobody assumed that the opponent would voluntarily allow them to enter their underground support base. Rhodan advanced very cautiously in the aero-car which he occupied with Fellmer Lloyd and Major Nyssen, who had been in command of the reinforcements.

Lloyd directed them. Sometimes in the wrong direction, but the squadron gradually made progress.

The day was ending when an incident occurred which made it plain that they were approaching their destination.

Major Deringhouse, who was in charge of the second machine, had pulled up closer to Rhodan and was flying a few yards behind him and off to the side. Rhodan had instructed all pilots to stay at the same height as himself. He never flew more than three feet above the ground so that the enemy would sight them as late as possible. It offered the advantage of unhampered mobility combined with an extra margin of protection due to the close proximity to the ground.

Deringhouse announced over the telecom:

“Sunset in twelve minutes, sir. Do you think we—”

Then the ruckus started. Rhodan already knew the effect. Something lifted him with brutal force and attempted to toss him against the wall. The world outside the windows was whirling around.

But this time Rhodan was ready for it. With his last ounce of strength he clung

to his seat and yelled into the telecom:

“Stop and get out! Find cover!”

With a desperate effort his hand reached for the drive shift. The motor generator counteracted the alien force with full power and he managed at least to slow down the rotation. Rhodan reversed his direction and manoeuvred the spinning vehicle over the nearest hilltop.

The disturbing influence did not cease, but became weaker. Rhodan forced the vehicle down on the sand. It turned once more around on its axis until the friction dissipated the energy of the weird weapon.

A little woozy, Rhodan and his men got out. Nyssen had hurt his head and his legs were shaky.

Deringhouse’s vehicle had been much less affected. He reacted instantly and took cover behind the hill. The other aero-cars had not been exposed to the attack. Only two of them had advanced over the hill at the time Rhodan was assaulted.

They had enough time to turn back and to land.

The crew wore Arkonide transport-suits which generated their own protective fields. In addition, the suits had a provision allowing the wearer to put on a helmet, thus transforming them into complete spacesuits.

Rhodan made his men move forward toward the ridge of the hill. The sun went down and when they arrived at the top of the hill they had to use infrared binoculars to be able to see.

Fellmer Lloyd was first in line.

“Damn it,” he swore softly. “All these hills look alike, but I believe that the hall is under that one there!”

He pointed to a rather flat hill lying northeast about six hundred feet away.

“Where’s the entrance to the elevator?” Rhodan asked.

“If this is the right hill, it’s about thirty feet above the bottom and almost exactly in the middle of the side.”

Rhodan did not know what defences the enemy had and he could not wait until they demonstrated them all. He picked five men and advised them that they would have to leave the cover of the hill and expose themselves to the enemy.

“I’ll go with you!” he assured them.

Major Nyssen had brought enough transport-suits for everybody. Rhodan changed into one of the suits, put on the helmet and checked it according to the safety rules.

Then they got under way.

Without special precautionary measures they marched over the top of the hill and down the other side. Rhodan was first and the five men followed in single file. In this manner they presented their adversary—assuming that he was in the other hill—the least possible target area.

Rhodan had inserted the infrared filter behind the faceplate of his helmet. He searched the terrain with a portable infrared light for signs that they had been

discovered.

They did not have to wait very long. Rhodan glimpsed something dark tumble clumsily through the air and somebody behind him shouted in panic:

“Take cover!”

Rhodan alone remained standing.

There was a blinding flash and a crash which was reduced to a tolerable level of decibels by the helmet microphones. At a distance of thirty feet to the right of Rhodan gaped a crater of the same size as had been blasted under his tent two nights ago.

It had apparently produced a strong pressure wave. The rim of the crater had a three foot high wall of sand.

The men rose again.

“What fool screamed ‘take cover’?” Rhodan demanded.

“I did, sir!” Somebody spoke up. It was Corporal Seaborg.

Seaborg raised his hand to let Rhodan know who was speaking.

“You young jackass!” Rhodan bellowed, more amused than angry. “Remember that you’re wearing a suit with a protective screen. If we get hit by a missile this shield cannot ward off, taking cover isn’t going to help either. Keep marching and don’t hold up the works!”

“Very well, sir!” Seaborg replied.

They resumed their forward march. The foe seemed to have realized the futility of throwing these weapons resembling old-fashioned hand grenades and remained quiet for a while.

This permitted Rhodan and his men to reach the valley between the hills before the real show began.

One of his men suddenly screamed loud and long. Rhodan turned around and saw in the glow of his searchlight a man being carried away through the air in wild gyrations.

“Go back!” Rhodan~ shouted. “Over the hill!”

He pulled along two men who failed to understand as quickly as Rhodan what was going on. They were already halfway back when the horrifying rotating field grabbed the second man and whirled him away through the air. They scurried up the side of the hill in long leaps, aided by the low gravity, and reached safety before the attacker could snatch a third victim.

The shrill cries of the two abducted men could be heard in the helmet’s receivers. They had been hurled in a southerly direction. Rhodan continued sweeping the neighbourhood with his searchlight but found no trace of them.

Suddenly the cries ceased. They heard two dull thuds at short intervals, then everything was very quiet.

“Lieutenant Tanner?”

“Yes, sir!”

“Take an aero-car and three men. Try to find the lost men!”

“Very well, sir!”

Tanner had watched the two men flying through the air. He knew the direction in which they had been driven away. He was furious about the ambush but went silently to the rescue with his three men.

Rhodan had learned what he wanted to know but it had cost him two men.

The vortex created by their antagonist seized its victim even though he was protected by a defence screen. Although they were unable to penetrate the shield, they scooped it up with the same result. They were firmly enveloped in their protective screens and if the screens were rotated, the men inside were turned around, too.

Rhodan came reluctantly to the conclusion that they had to deploy stronger means for their attack. The necessary force to overcome the adversary exceeded the capability of his moderate expedition.

Rhodan sidled up to Fellmer Lloyd.

“Do you get any vibrations?” he inquired.

“Oh yes,” replied Lloyd. “It makes my head hurt the whole time. They hate us more than I can express in words.”

Deringhouse was lying nearby. From time to time he raised his head above the cover of the ridge and peered through his infrared field glasses.

“Heaven protect us,” he murmured, “when they get the idea to come out of their lair to annihilate us!”

Tanner returned around midnight. He had found both men—dead. The protective screens of their suits had not been able to withstand the mighty onslaught. The field of the screens had become neutralized by the influence of the aliens’ weapon. When the influence ceased, they had plunged down from considerable height and died as a result of the crash despite the low gravity before Tanner had been able to locate them.

Rhodan felt a cold rage welling up in him.

He seriously considered calling in the *Stardust* to work over the enemy’s base with the vessel’s vastly more efficient arms, but concluded that he would prefer to make ten other attempts before he took a chance with the *Stardust*.

He kept pondering the situation.

Then something happened which rendered his deliberations superfluous.

It started with a rumbling roar like thunder. Before they knew where it came from, the ground began to shake under them.

Seconds later a wide crack appeared in the opposite hill where the enemy was hidden.

Behind Rhodan one of the aero-cars began to totter and fell on its side.

“An earthquake!” somebody shouted.

Rhodan looked across at the gap and realized all of a sudden that he would never get another chance like this.

“Let’s go!” he shouted, climbing up to the top of the hill and waving where everybody could see him.

It took a few seconds until they all got back to their feet. The tremor became more violent and many stumbled as the ground buckled under their feet.

They went all together over the hill and ran down the other side. They rushed forward through the valley in wide jumps.

The adversary made no move.

While they were running Rhodan shouted to point out the spot where—according to Lloyd—the elevator shaft terminated. They were unable to recognize it from a distance but when they reached the place they could see a small platform on the side of the hill. It was square and the sides were about six feet long.

Fellmer Lloyd pressed forward.

“Here!” he puffed.

He dropped down and wiped the sand from the platform with both hands. A smooth grey surface appeared underneath. Rhodan turned on his light and they examined it in bright illumination. Lloyd ran his fingers over the plate and suddenly it slid open. It was dark behind it. Rhodan aimed his light down and found a shaft the same size as the platform, going down about thirty to forty feet deep.

An antigrav elevator! Rhodan threw in a handful of sand and watched it float down slowly.

“We’re going in!” he said.

Rhodan was first, with Fellmer Lloyd right behind him. Above their heads the shaft was quickly filled by the men who were in a hurry to get down.

In the excitement they had forgotten to worry about the earthquake. Rhodan strained his ears as he went down the elevator shaft. Above the murmuring of his men he could still hear the rumbling inside the planet. The tremor was not yet finished but it seemed to have shifted somewhere else.

A few moments later they reached solid ground again. The elevator opened into a little hall and the entrance door to the machine hall was, according to Lloyd, in the wall across.

Rhodan waited until as many men had come down as the little room would hold. Then he aimed his heavy thermo-impulse-beamer at the door and blasted it away.

They saw a glaring flood of light. Hastily they jumped through the opening where they presented a perfect target for the enemy and took cover behind the first suitable object.

They met no resistance.

What’s going on? Rhodan wondered.

The hall looked just as Lloyd had described it. It was large but surprisingly low. The installations which abounded—some anchored to the floor, others on movable casters—did not resemble anything Rhodan had seen before. An alien technology

on a foreign world.

Where were the little robots?

His men spread out. Even when the robots recovered from the earthquake and dared a counter-attack, they would not succeed in routing their opponents.

Fellmer Lloyd motioned to Rhodan.

“What’s the matter?”

“I don’t feel a thing anymore, sir!” Lloyd answered. “The birds seem to have flown the coop.”

Rhodan nodded and got up. He waved his men on to proceed along the left and right side walls.

They crept cautiously forward, crouching behind covers, but when they found no obstacles they became bolder and marched along the walls while Rhodan advanced alone on the walk in the middle of the hall.

They approached the end of the hall when they were attracted by a weird machine standing close to the wall. It was bigger than those in the hall but it had hitherto been covered from sight by other installations.

The thing was a flat cylinder, about fifty feet in diameter, and so high that it touched the ceiling. It reminded Rhodan of a medium-sized cyclotron. Rhodan was unable to see whether it was solid or only a ring. The left half of the cylinder was tilted as if the ground under it had raised up and a ragged crack ran along the smooth metal surface.

Then they saw the robots.

They consisted mainly of a bulky midsection in the form of an ellipsoid and were made of a grey metallic substance. Below the ellipsoid extended two short stumps of legs without feet. The upper end had a rotating ring with short arms.

The contraption was about twenty inches high, standing up, Rhodan guessed.

Fifteen of them were lying in front of the fractured cylinder and this seemed to comprise the entire complement of the hall.

Rhodan called his men. Carefully they disentangled the pile of collapsed robots. Although one could never be sure as far as robots were concerned that they were really destroyed or merely temporarily put out of action, everything pointed to the fact that these little machines had come to the end of their mechanical lives.

“Let’s carry them out!” Rhodan ordered. “We can examine them on board the *Stardust*.”

They dragged them, for the time being, to the little hall where the elevator was located. In the meantime Rhodan and Deringhouse investigated the hall. With Lloyd’s guidance they found the smaller rooms adjacent to both sides of the hall. However, they were no more successful in ascertaining their functions than that of the machines in the main hall.

After they had inspected the building for half an hour Rhodan became convinced that the sign he pursued was not to be found here. The hall contained two dozen fascinating machines, the side rooms another dozen, and it would have

been very challenging for Terrestrial technology to take them apart and determine the principle on which they operated.

But here it was just as impossible to obtain information about the galactic position of the World of Eternal Life as out in the cold sand of the desert.

This was not the place to gather the desired knowledge. Heaven knew why the great unknown mentor, who was pulling the strings in the background, had brought them here.

Rhodan waited until his men had collected the lifeless robots in the elevator room and then sent them all up. He left last. He would have liked to seal off the hall so that nobody could enter until they had finished their search on the planet for what they had come to discover. Then he would have liked to return for a more thorough exploration of the building.

But he did not doubt that many more than these fifteen robots existed on this planet and that he could not prevent them and their masters from returning to the hall as soon as he and his men turned their backs.

With his thoughts in a turmoil he drifted up the antigrav elevator shaft to join his men waiting for him at the hill. The sun was shining brightly.

“Back to the aero-cars!” Rhodan ordered.

The robots were quite heavy. Even a strong man could not carry more than one of them.

Rhodan stayed at the end of the troop. Deringhouse joined him.

“We haven’t found out much, have we?” he asked.

Rhodan shrugged his shoulders.

“Let’s wait and see. I imagine we can disassemble the memory bank of the robots and decipher the information. The creators of the robots are the people we want. The robots ought to know something about where to find them.”

More by accident than real intention Rhodan looked at the watch attached to the left sleeve of his transport-suit. The watch had adjustable timing and it was set for Vagabond time.

“Four o’clock local time,” murmured Rhodan. “The thing must have stopped. What time have you got?”

Deringhouse raised his arm.

“One minute past four o’clock, sir. Your watch is right.”

Rhodan stopped, grabbed Deringhouse by the shoulder and turned him around so that he could see the sun.

“Sunrise is supposed to be at six o’clock plus. Tell me, what the devil is the sun doing in the sky at four o’clock?”

The records which the *Stardust*’s monitoring instruments had made during the earthquake shed light on the phenomenon.

The Vagabond sun was a star in the phase of regeneration—a dying sun insofar as its radiation decreased but, on the other hand, a star which would be reborn in a

not too distant future, by astronomical standards. During the cooling off period the substance of the sun contracted and created a core of unbelievable density. Every shift inside the core produced mass shockwaves which were propagated throughout space with the speed of gravity.

And more than that. Since the part of the sun's core which was not displaced by the shock deflected the effect from the direction from which it happened to be in relation to the shaken segment, it resulted—most of the time—in very well defined fields of disturbance so that someone on Vagabond might not notice the earthquake, whereas, a spaceship millions of miles away in space could be in the middle of a shock-field.

This time, however, the shock-field of the convulsing core had been primarily concentrated on Vagabond. The result was a dislocation of its axis and a formidable earthquake.

Nobody was eager to contemplate what would have happened in such a case on a world which was not as cold and dry as Vagabond. The fact alone that Vagabond was already cooled to the core and its centre was no longer liquid and that there existed no oceans on its surface, prevented a devastating holocaust. Vagabond had merely changed the position of its axis and settled down again.

This also proved to be the explanation for the strange experience Rhodan had had earlier at the beginning of the mission when he was on a patrol in a space pursuit ship. Apparently his ship had also become a victim of a similar displacement in the core of Vagabond, although the effect had not been as strong as the one causing the earthquake.

In any case Rhodan was certain that a pure accident was responsible for his gaining access to the machine hall. The shock-field had not been artificially triggered, it was the planet itself that produced it just at the moment when it was most convenient for Rhodan.

Rhodan returned with his men and the captured robots to the *Stardust*. Lieutenant Tanner held the camp in the centre of the hills with ten men. Rhodan wanted to wait till the technicians discovered what data the robots retained, but a preliminary examination revealed that the structure of the mechano-beings was so complicated that they would require at least a week in terms of Terrestrial time to finish their task.

Rhodan debated whether to abandon the camp or return to it in full force.

Then something happened that gave him a new idea.

It came as quite a surprise as quiet had reigned on board the *Stardust* for two Vagabond days.

On the day, however, when Rhodan tried to make up his mind about his next step, a heavy gravity generator shortly after midnight started to produce so much gravity that it was eventually torn from its mounting and floated humming through the vast generator hall.

The technicians hovered over it on a repair rig and brought it back down by cautious regulation.

There were, moreover, a series of smaller mishaps, but they had to wait till noon for the main event.

Rhodan was just returning from a short lunch in the mess hall when the sirens began to wail. He started to run and reached the Command Centre at the instant Reginald Bell issued his commands over the telecom.

“Attention, all guards! Off duty time is cancelled! Guard unit one, first group, occupy Command Centre! Clear all battle stations and man with double crews! Alert, range finders: double your crews!”

“An Arkon bomb has broken loose from its rack in arsenal Deck E. Alarm state number one.” Rhodan stopped in his tracks.

An Arkon bomb!

Weapons which had the capacity to cause an un-extinguishable atomic conflagration of all elements above the atomic number 10 and of any other chosen element by setting the trigger of the bomb for the specific selection.

The bomb triggers in arsenal Deck E were set for 26. Atomic number 26—iron. There was more iron present in the *Stardust* than in a steel mill! The ship was doomed if the bomb exploded!

Bell finished his broadcast. He turned around and looked at Rhodan.

“Do you agree?” he asked gravely.

Rhodan nodded.

Thora appeared at his side. Her eyes were wide open and she moved mechanically, as if in a trance.

“No!” she whispered. “You can’t do that. You have to evacuate the vessel!”

Rhodan shook his head.

“That would be the best way to lose it.”

Then he moved quickly. His helmet was lying on the pilot seat. He put it on without closing it.

“Constant communication!” he said tersely and went out.

Thora stared in consternation.

“Where is he going?” she asked.

But Bell had other matters to attend to and did not answer her.

Three minutes after the alarm call the Command Centre was occupied by the guards. Bell assigned them to their stations and cautioned them to be on the alert.

“Rhodan is up on arsenal Deck E. His orders must be instantly obeyed. Shut your helmets and maintain radio silence!”

Rhodan did not go alone. The two Japanese, Tako Kakuta and Tama Yokida, accompanied him. They were both mutants. While Rhodan had no preconceived plans for using the teleporter Kakuta, he knew very well on the other hand that he would need the telekinetic Yokida.

The Command Centre of the *Stardust* was located on Deck D. They had to

surmount a height of close to five hundred feet from there to Deck E. The antigrav elevator terminated about nine hundred feet from the entrance to the arsenal.

The wide transport conveyor had been cleared in the meantime. Bell had opened the hatch to the arsenal from the Command Centre and they all could see the metallic egg from far away as it was suspended motionlessly six feet above the floor near the hatch.

“Yokida, go to work!” Rhodan said sharply. “Guide the bomb to one of the racks and hold it there!”

Yokida went in through the hatch and focused his eyes firmly on the bomb. He knew the type of bomb with which he was dealing and that he had to be careful to stay away from the trigger.

He stopped. Rhodan watched him and saw how the muscles in his neck bulged. All of a sudden Yokida started to lean and staggered forward. He would have fallen down if Tako Kakuta had not rushed to his aid and caught him in the nick of time.

“I can’t do it, sir!” Yokida grunted. “He’s holding it too tightly!”

Rhodan clenched his fists.

He! Who was he?

He pushed the Japanese to the side.

“Tako! Watch it!”

The Japanese knew what he had to do. Rhodan leaned heavily against the bomb which was hovering capriciously in the air. The Japanese held his outstretched arms underneath. If the bomb was suddenly released by the unknown telekinetic power, he would have to catch the heavy weapon or it would smash to the ground and trigger the ignition.

Rhodan’s efforts, however, proved to be in vain. Whoever was toying with the dreadful bomb held it in such an unrelenting grip that Rhodan was unable to move it a fraction of an inch.

“We’ll have to dismantle it!” panted Rhodan. “Tako, get the tools!”

Tako hurried away.

A few seconds later the bomb began to move. Holding his breath, Rhodan followed as it slowly drifted toward the hatch and out into the hallway to the right toward the northern airlock.

Rhodan placed himself in its path and tried for a second time to stem its advance. He might just as well have attempted to stop an armoured tank. The bomb simply shoved him over to the side.

It continued drifting down the hallway. There was no doubt that it was aimed for the airlock.

“Command Centre!”

“Speaking!”

“Open airlock inside!”

“Very well, sir!”

The huge loading hatch rolled up. The bomb moved toward it.

Tako Kakuta came running with a toolbox. Rhodan made a negative gesture.

“Too late now! Fasten your suits!”

They remained right behind the bomb.

“Yokida!”

“Yes, sir!”

“Watch the bomb. It’s possible this joker might get tired of playing around and simply let the bomb drop. Then it’s up to you to hold the bomb securely.”

Yokida nodded.

They passed through the hatch, the bomb no more than three feet ahead of them.

“Command Centre! Shut the inside and open the outside hatch. Hurry!”

They complied with the order.

“Protective screens out!”

“Protective screens out, sir!”

The pumps worked at full capacity. Before the bomb had traversed the airlock, the inside pressure had been equalized with the outside pressure. The outer hatch rolled up and—to all appearances—the unknown force was directing the bomb toward the outside.

“The bomb’s leaving the ship!” Rhodan said quickly. “We’ll reinstate the protective screen with the least possible radius as soon as the bomb is past that distance.

“Tell Tanner to return to the ship as quickly as possible. Let him leave tents and equipment behind. If the bomb explodes out there over the sand with the iron oxide, this planet will be an atomic furnace in half an hour.”

The bomb drifted out of the airlock. The narrowest radius for the protective screen extended one hundred fifty feet beyond the ship’s hull. If the bomb got as far as that without exploding, at least the ship would be saved.

“Attention...!”

And then, when nobody had expected it, things took another turn. The bomb interrupted its slow progress for a fraction of a second, awkwardly rotated halfway around its short axis and reeled toward the ground.

“Yokida!”

The Japanese leaned recklessly out of the hatch, tenuously holding onto the frame with his fingertips. Tako Kakuta stood behind him, ready to help in case he slipped. Rhodan crawled on his stomach to the edge of the hatch. He could see the bomb slowly falling down along the ship’s hull, following the weak gravity.

Deck E was situated high in the upper half of the *Stardust*. Unless a miracle happened, the bomb was going to collide with the vessel’s midsection and *Stardust*’s existence and the crew’s lives depended on whether the trigger would be released by the impact.

Rhodan remained cool and calm. He tried to estimate the distance which the bomb could still fall.

Another one hundred fifty, maybe one hundred eighty feet.

Yokida moaned. Rhodan wanted to turn around and look at him but at this moment the bomb decreased the speed of its descent.

Only sixty feet from the hull!

Fifteen feet away from collision and doom, the movement of the bomb stopped completely. For a moment it hung trembling in the air *and* then...

...then it started to rise again. At first slowly and, hesitantly then a little faster and more determined, it finally approached the airlock hatch with considerable speed.

“Yokida!” Rhodan shouted. “We’ve got to intercept it!”

They were ready. Yokida closed his eyes, concentrating his mind in a superhuman effort to guide the bomb. It wobbled and came closer. It was now about six feet higher than the floor of the airlock.

“Down three feet!” Rhodan directed.

Yokida followed his instructions. He lowered the bomb and hauled it in with his telekinetic powers.

“Now!”

They grasped it simultaneously. For a second the bomb felt as light as a feather. Then they suddenly felt the entire weight of the heavy missile and the strain made their foreheads break out in sweat.

Up front they heard a thud as Yokida dropped unconscious to the floor. With his last strength he had pushed himself away from the hatch and tumbled inside.

They dragged the bomb back to the arsenal.

Groaning, their hands clasped under the bomb, they carried it down the hallway into the arsenal and gingerly lifted it onto the rack from which it had broken loose.

One last push and...

“Careful!”

...there it was.

With aching fingers Rhodan locked the harness holding the bomb in place.

He ripped off his helmet and took a deep breath. His hands were trembling as he wiped the sweat from his brow.

Tako looked at him and Rhodan broke into a grin.

“That’s that!” he said and slapped the Japanese on the back.

It took a work detachment three hours to fasten all weapons in the arsenal so that it would be difficult for the stranger to repeat his experiment.

During those three hours Rhodan had a heated discussion with the two Arkonides, Khrest and Thora. They both voiced the opinion that the last episode had exceeded their limit of endurance and that it was imperative for the *Stardust* to depart from this planet without any delay.

Rhodan disputed this. He had devised another strategy in the meantime. He could not convince Khrest and Thora that it would be foolish to abandon their task now. But he made it clear to them that he was in charge and that he could make the decisions with or without their consent.

Finally Khrest said:

“All right, you’re the commander and let nobody say that an Arkonide doesn’t adhere to discipline. We’ll debate it no longer but you must be aware that we don’t see eye to eye.”

“You’ll agree with me,” Rhodan replied in a conciliatory tone, “when this action is finished.”

Thora said no more. But he could see the fire of her anger in her eyes as he had not seen again since the first year he met her.

Rhodan issued his orders. He would take part once more in the new expedition. He stressed to his officers:

“We haven’t got a second to lose. The sooner we’re on our way, the better the chances for our survival.”

In the meantime. Lieutenant Tanner had returned with his men. He had left the tents and the equipment behind as ordered.

The expedition was ready to start in the evening. It consisted of ten aero-cars, seven of which were loaded with various equipment and weapons. Other than Khrest and Thora, Rhodan had so far told nobody anything about the details of his plan. When Reginald Bell inquired what the seven car-loads of weapons and other sophisticated implements would do him for his purpose, Rhodan answered:

“We’re going to play a little game with the strangers but this time we’re going to choose the time and place, where it isn’t so hazardous for us.”

5. RHODAN'S REVELATION

Nobody knew better than Rhodan that the probability for his success was no more than sixty percent. This was the evaluation he had obtained from the positronic computer.

That he decided nevertheless to undertake this expedition was based on his belief that it was better to attempt something moderately promising than do nothing at all. Moreover he hoped to divert the danger from the irreplaceable *Stardust* by his tactics.

They set up the equipment they had brought in the neighbourhood of the camp Lieutenant Tanner had occupied till the last minute. Rhodan made a point of taking along only such machinery and weapons as required extremely complicated operating methods.

They were in unanimous agreement with Rhodan that the mysterious individual tried his hand like a child, starting to play with simple toys and gradually mastering more complicated games. At this stage it would have been no challenge for him to pick up a telecom or something similar and throw it into the sand.

Rhodan was still as convinced as ever that the unknown opponent was at home here in the hills and that he amused himself with the objects on board the *Stardust* because there was nothing better to do around here.

Rhodan's theory was to offer him some entertainment close to home in the hope that he would be distracted from the *Stardust*. If he could be lured to play with the gadgets displayed, they might—with luck—be able to capture him.

The camp was expanded to accommodate all personnel. A massive hill was located between the camp and the place where they had set up their hardware. Guards were posted near the ridge of the hill where they were safe in case the stranger started to tinker with the weapons.

Rhodan espoused his theories to the men about the appearance of the adversary:

“To begin with we've got to assume,” he explained, “that the enemy—just as the Arkonides did in the past and the human race will do in the future—has created his robots in his own image. What we can expect, therefore, is a being without a head, an ellipsoid shaped torso, two legs without feet and a ring with

twelve arms. The whole creature is no taller than twenty inches.

“If you notice anything like that, try to capture it regardless of whether it’s a robot or an organic being. You won’t be able to tell the difference at first sight anyway.

“And watchout for the glittering spheres! They’ve got diabolical weapons and don’t know the meaning of a friendly gesture.”

Then they settled down to wait.

A few crazy incidents occurred but they failed to detect the perpetrator. A medium-size impulse-cannon started to fire and to circle wildly around. It burned deep furrows in the slopes of the neighbouring hills before it came to rest again.

The technicians on board the *Stardust* reported that the scratches on the pocket telecom stolen from Rhodan’s tent before it blew up had been traced to the hands of a robot.

This was interesting as Rhodan had thus far assumed that the bomb had been planted by an organic being who had also stolen the telecom. What the technicians had discovered was proof that the attempt on his life was also carried out by robots.

Furthermore, the technicians had conducted a C₁₄ analysis to ascertain the age of the robots. As a result they had determined eight C₁₄ half-life values corresponding to an age of at least forty-five thousand years.

This came as a great surprise. The robots even preceded the Arkonide culture.

Rhodan had some doubts about it. He kept it to himself since he could not prove his suspicions.

These mental reservations, however, did not change his strategy. For his search for the world of cell rejuvenation it was immaterial what sort of beings held the information he was seeking.

During the night Fellmer Lloyd came running from his tent and screamed so loudly that he woke up the entire camp.

“They’re coming!” he shouted. “I can feel it! They’re going to attack us!”

Rhodan was the first one at his side. He did not doubt that Lloyd was right but he jabbed him in the ribs to bring him back to his senses before he made everybody hysterical.

“Get a hold of yourself, man!” Rhodan chided him. “What’s the matter?”

“Hate!” Lloyd gasped. “Incredible hate! It woke me up and my head’s still spinning. I can hardly hear you anymore.”

Rhodan ran up the hill. Lloyd thought that the enemy was coming from the north.

The two guards on the ridge had not yet noticed anything. Rhodan called more men to come up and to man the cannons which had been positioned on the hill.

It baffled Fellmer Lloyd that he did not feel the childlike urge to play which he had described as the second characteristic of the alien race.

“Nothing but hate!” he muttered.

Rhodan gave his instructions.

“We’ll hold our fire as long as it can be reconciled with our safety. We’ll use the psycho-beamer and try to paralyse their will.”

He did not really believe that the psycho-beamer would be effective. Robots could not be hypnotized.

A few more minutes elapsed. Fellmer Lloyd seemed to suffer more and more under the hate of the aliens. He was lying next to Rhodan, moaning, his helmeted head pressed to the ground.

Then they came! Five iridescent spheres! They leaped spiritedly over the top of the opposite hill and went down into the valley where Rhodan had laid out his equipment.

Glittering in the dark, they radiated a diffuse light. They seemed to know their goal exactly, since they did not linger in the valley but came directly up the hill.

The psycho-beamers began to work—without success. The distance shrank and they all knew what would happen to them if the spheres managed to get over the top.

“Fire!” Rhodan bellowed.

None of the defenders could foretell the effect of the Stardust’s weapons on the spheres. Nonetheless they hoped to be able to parry the onslaught.

Nobody had anticipated the next turn of events.

The de-crystallizing field of the disintegrator on the left flank hit the sphere in the front. At the same instant there was a blinding and thunderous explosion. When they were able to see again, the struck sphere had completely vanished and the others were drifting helplessly and aimlessly down the slope.

Rhodan’s men vented their pent-up anger. Before he could countermand his orders, as it seemed likely that they could retrieve the remaining spheres harmlessly, salvo upon salvo had been fired from the guns.

The battle at ‘Game Hill’ lasted only a few minutes. The five glistening spheres were destroyed and Fellmer Lloyd heaved a sigh of relief as the bane of the overwhelming hate subsided.

“When did you notice that the hate ceased?” Rhodan asked. “I mean, after which one of the spheres was destroyed?”

Lloyd shook his head.

“No, sir. It isn’t the way you think. You assume that most of the balls were occupied by robots and that a live leader was in one of them. Not at all, sir. The hate diminished step by step with the elimination of each sphere and it completely disappeared when the last one was destroyed.”

This caused Rhodan to reconsider his conclusions. It upset his theory that this entire civilization was comprised of an army of robots and that only one or two organic beings had survived.

Rhodan wondered whether it was advisable to wait any longer. The enemy had

been defeated and would probably not dare to attack their hill position again. The question remained, however, how to seize the foe.

He was certain that the situation in this vicinity would remain quiet from now on and he reproached the guard for reporting the next morning that one of the oscillographs placed on the other hill had registered a colourful pattern on its screen.

Yet as Fellmer Lloyd awoke from a long sleep, recovering from the vicissitudes of the night, he also registered instantly the emissions of an alien brain that had—as he described it—a passion for playing.

Rhodan went to the guard he had ridiculed and apologized. Then he marched up the hill and joined the guards. He remained there until he had seen with his own eyes three more incidents. A shooting neutron-beamer, a working calculator and a refrigerating machine spouting liquid air by the bucket.

Although it gave him satisfaction that the opponents were attracted the same as before to the toys he presented to them, Rhodan was highly vexed by the events.

Not only because Lloyd now claimed that the playing instinct was free of hate, whereas he had previously maintained that they existed simultaneously, but also because the behaviour of the enemies could not be understood unless considered to be schizophrenic.

He did not get very far with assessing the implications. One of the guards called over the helmet radio and his voice sounded quite agitated.

“Something’s moving in the valley, sir! Could you come up and look at it?”

Rhodan climbed up the hill for the second time that morning. He was curious as to what kind of a movement it was that the sentry could not clearly identify from a distance of only one hundred feet, but now he saw for himself.

Something was at work under the sand. It looked as if a mole was digging an exit.

It took a few more minutes until a hole appeared in the ground. Something brown pointed out for a second, then retreated. The sand was stirred up once more and circulated around the little hole like water flowing down a drain.

Soon the hole was five times as large. Once more the pointed brown digger protruded but found the hole still too small. The work continued and just as the observers had reached the peak of suspense, the hole was big enough to allow the brown animal with the pointed nose to come to the surface.

It was a mouse-beaver and it behaved in a very peculiar fashion.

The animal hobbled from one of the machines to the other and showed its curiosity by sniffing at them down the line.

The little refrigeration machine—the same one which had been set into operation an hour earlier—particularly attracted its attention. The mouse-beaver sat on its hindlegs before the machine and awkwardly touched its plastic surface with its underdeveloped forelegs.

Sitting upright the animal measured about three feet. The refrigeration box was a cube half as high.

The mouse-beaver limped a few feet back, turned around and stared at the box.

Then the most unbelievable thing happened.

The box left its base and levitated in the air. The mouse-beaver sat motionlessly regarding, the object.

Then the machine turned on its side and started to move toward the mouse-beaver. When it had approached within eighteen inches, the animal moved out of the way. The box kept moving in the same direction and came to a halt above the hole dug by the animal. It hovered a few seconds and slowly descended into the opening.

The mouse-beaver had turned around following the machine with its eyes. Then the animal, too, hobbled to the hole and disappeared inside.

Seconds later the scene looked the same as before, except for the new hole and the vanished refrigeration machine.

Rhodan got up. His head was swimming and half subconsciously he questioned whether to trust his eyes.

He heard one of the guards breathe very hard. The men looked at him and demanded an explanation.

“Come with me!” he said in a brittle tone. “Pack provisions for five days and carry handguns. We’ll crawl into this hole where the machine has been taken.”

The episode was reported to the *Stardust* where everyone awaited a further comment from Rhodan. But he wisely refused to speculate on the ramifications of the matter.

“I don’t know any more about it than you do,” he replied rather brusquely to Reginald Bell. “I’ll know more after we get into the hole.”

They started out and left Lieutenant Tanner and five men behind in the camp. Rhodan told Lieutenant Tanner to insist on strict vigilance and reassured him by reminding him that the weapons of the *Stardust* had proved to be far superior to the adversary.

The hole dug by the mouse-beaver was large enough to allow easy passage for the animal with its fat hind-quarters. Since that was about equal to the circumference of a human torso, Rhodan and his men had no trouble getting through.

The hole led down into a shaft five feet deep. Then it took a right angle turn into a long tunnel. Rhodan, who was first in line, illuminated it with his searchlight as well as he could. The searchlight reached over half a mile but he was unable to see the end of of the tunnel.

“We’ll try it, anyway!” Rhodan decided.

Half an hour after Rhodan had entered the hole with his men, Lieutenant Tanner

received a call from the *Stardust*. Bell was at the other end of the line and, to judge from his face, he was more than excited.

“The chief has already left,” Tanner said.

“Then relay the call to him!”

Tanner shrugged his shoulders.

“The chief has ordered strict radio silence. It can be broken only by himself.”

Bell hit the table with his fist so that he made the telecom jump.

“Take down what I tell you!” he ordered. “Disregard his instructions and pass the message on. He’s got to know this!”

“I’m listening, sir!”

He flicked the switch for the automatic recording set.

“The technicians have disassembled and examined the robots. Although their bodies are mechanical structures their brains are of organic growth with infinitely lasting life. The mental processes of the robots are, therefore, on a par with other organic beings.”

“By any comparison they excel in a complicated memory bank. We have so far succeeded in deciphering two items.”

“First: robots received orders to attack immediately any alien invading this world and to annihilate same by any and all means.”

“Second: there exists a total of twenty robots on this world. The last data about organically grown beings go back forty thousand Vagabond years, corresponding to thirty-five thousand Terrestrial years.”

And in a less official tone Bell added:

“I hope, Lieutenant, that you realize the importance of this information.”

Tanner hastened to assure Bell that he was fully aware of its significance. They finished their conversation and Tanner tried to get in touch with Rhodan and his companions.

After a while he succeeded in contacting Rhodan, who responded exactly as Tanner had feared.

“Who’s the fool calling me? I’ve given strict orders to maintain radio silence!”

Tanner apologized and cited Bell’s insistence that his instructions be followed through.

“All right,” Rhodan relented. “But make it short!”

Tanner repeated the message he had received a few minutes earlier.

“You can tell Bell,” Rhodan replied, “that this isn’t news to me!”

Rhodan signed off abruptly, leaving Tanner—utterly astonished—to report back to the *Stardust*.

It must have taken the mouse-beavers many days to burrow this tunnel, mused Rhodan. He estimated that they had crawled about three miles from the entrance hole in the last three hours. Still the end of the tunnel was not yet in sight within

the maximum range of his searchlight.

Rhodan tested the air from time to time through the valve in his helmet and determined that it remained fresh, leading to the conclusion that the tunnel must be vented at both ends.

Rhodan also used a lighter flame to check the movement of the air. The tiny light, barely sustained by the low oxygen content of the atmosphere, gave no indication of any airflow.

This caused him to deduce that a large air reservoir was located between their present position and the other exit to the surface. A cave, for instance, would prevent the flow of air.

The thought gratified him because he had a very clear idea of what was in store for them farther ahead in the tunnel.

On the other hand, he did not have much reason to be satisfied with the developing situation. He had entered the tunnel with thirty men. Of course, it was not very appealing to crawl through the tunnel, which was so low that it permitted nothing else except lying prone on the belly and inching forward with the elbows.

The result was understandable: claustrophobia. The men became nervous. They bandied words despite Rhodan's orders to remain quiet at all times. Rhodan exhorted and cajoled them alternately.

However, their irritation became more and more aggravated. The subterranean sojourn would have to be ended soon.

But it took three more hours. The sun outside must already have set long ago, Rhodan guessed. He now estimated the distance from their starting point to be five or six miles.

The men had become extremely restless. They began to ask Rhodan with increasing frequency to break off the effort despite the probability that it would now take more time to crawl back than to continue forward, and that they would have to do it backward since there was no possibility of turning around in the narrow space.

"Take it easy, boys! We'll soon be there!" Rhodan kept encouraging them.

He hated to mouth such phrases but he thereby regularly restored silence, at least for a few minutes.

Finally they saw the light at the end of the tunnel.

At first Rhodan believed that it was a reflex of his strained eyes. He remained lying still, closed his eyes for a while and opened them again.

The glimmer of light was still there.

He switched his searchlight on again and tried to recognize what was ahead.

The light beam revealed nothing. Whatever was up front was still too far away to be made out. But Rhodan spurred his men on.

"Let's go, boys! We made it!"

They moved forward at a faster rate than before. Rhodan observed that the tunnel was not shored up in any way. It was excavated in firm sand and appeared

to be safe, but the inner surface was left uncovered.

Another forty-five minutes and the tunnel widened a little. Rhodan stopped and turned off his searchlight once more. The mysterious light was now close by, perhaps one hundred fifty feet away, but he still was unable to identify its source.

“Careful now!” he warned.

They advanced slowly and cautiously, trying to avoid any noise.

After thirty more feet the passage was big enough to let them get up on their knees.

Then the tunnel ended suddenly.

The walls receded left and right at almost 90° and they faced a cavern. A brightly shining plate was suspended in its centre high above the ground.

Rhodan scanned the cavern with his light. It was empty except for the plate and the little refrigerator lying on the floor not far from the exit of the tunnel.

Rhodan rose up and stepped out of the tunnel. He ran quickly over to the shining plate and investigated it.

“Take pictures!” he suddenly shouted. “Quick!”

The man with the Arkonide camera had so far not had the slightest indication why he had had to drag it along. It took a few seconds before he realized that Rhodan was addressing him and Rhodan minced no words.

“Come here!” Rhodan ordered. “Wide angle lens! What are you waiting for?”

Turning a lever, the man zoomed in with his lens on the plate above and started to take pictures.

He saw for the first time what the plate depicted.

He was so startled that he almost forgot to operate his camera.

Rhodan had already recognized it before and he knew that he finally had arrived at the goal he was seeking on Vagabond.

The object which looked like a plate from the side was a model of the Milky Way. At first glance he was not sure whether it was a model of the Milky Way or possibly another galaxy. But it did not make sense that the Great Unknown, with his unlimited resources, would have projected the picture of a strange galaxy in the cave of the mouse-beavers.

The man kept shooting with his camera until the projection dissolved in a rain of glittering points which lit up the subterranean cave brightly.

Subsequently it turned so dark that they could see nothing with their blinded eyes.

Somebody switched on his flashlight, but Rhodan ordered him to turn it off.

The light went out. For a while they did not understand why Rhodan had demanded it, but in time those with keen eyes could make it out.

The cavern had a number of exits. A weak light shone through some of them, diffuse and barely discernible. Starlight from the sky of Vagabond.

Rhodan approached one of the exits. It was shaped like the tunnel through

which they had entered. Its walls reflected the dim light of the stars, showing some kind of covering.

It was leading rather steeply upward. When Rhodan turned up his head as far as his helmet permitted, he could see the stars above.

“Light!” he ordered.

A dozen flashlights blazed up.

The strong light exposed the smooth floor of the cavern and the walls covered with something resembling plaster. The cavern had an irregular shape. The northern end looked like a rectangle and the southern like a semi-circle. The total area was about three hundred square yards.

Along the walls were piles of dried plants in a neat arrangement. The plants were of the species they had encountered on the surface of Vagabond. It was of the same variety on which the mouse-beavers were feeding the first night they had watched them.

Mouse-beavers!

“Where’s the rascal who stole our refrigerator?” Deringhouse asked.

He was standing next to Rhodan. Rhodan pointed to the exits.

“Outside, feeding with the others.”

“Others? What others?”

Don’t you see that there are twenty-four pads here? That is if you want to refer to it as straw.”

“You mean to tell me that these animals use these for beds?”

“Yes, beds, if that’s how you prefer to call them.”

Other than that there was nothing unusual. If the mouse-beavers had collected stores of food in the normal manner of rodents, they probably were hidden in the numerous burrows radiating in all directions from the cave. Rhodan did not care to look into them.

They left the cave through one of the light shafts. The shaft was too sleek to climb up. But the moderate gravitational pull did not hinder them very much and so they were able to reach the upper rim by a vigorous jump. They shinned themselves up and emerged from the ground out into the open.

Rhodan had deliberately selected this particular shaft. Several tracks trailed from the spot where it terminated in the sand of the desert.

They followed them cautiously toward the north and around a hill. They were led into a valley which was wider and longer than the other valleys in the area. There was some sparse growth which could clearly be distinguished against the light-coloured background of the sand.

Farther north a dark mass was visible. The fringes of the mass seemed to be in constant motion.

They went closer and when they inserted the infrared filters into their helmets, they recognized a herd of mouse-beavers grazing peacefully.

They counted twenty-four animals.

“Well,” Rhodan said finally, “it’s time to go back!”

However, the night had another surprise in store for him. As they marched south to some place where they could summon Lieutenant Tanner to bring the aero-cars without disturbing the leisurely feeding mouse-beavers, Rhodan studied the terrain around him.

All the hills looked the same. Not very high and not very large. They gave the appearance of an artificial landscape. He recalled that he had had this impression once before, when he and Deringhouse had first run into the opalescent sphere.

This was the home of the mouse-beavers. One of these typical hills was constructed over the cave they had just left, and presumably, an identical cave was located under each of the other hills.

A few hours later they were back on board the *Stardust*. Lieutenant Tanner was directed to break camp and to return with the tents and the equipment.

The pictures taken in the cavern were developed but Rhodan had not yet shown them to anyone.

However, he was going to show them in the evening at the Command Centre.

“Before we look at the pictures,” he began, “a few things must be clearly understood.”

His audience was the same as at the beginning of the enterprise, when the *Stardust* was motionlessly suspended in the vexing region of space with fifty-six peculiar stars. They were hanging on his words with rapt attention.

“We’ve come here to find another sign of how we can reach the world whose civilization has discovered the biological secret of cell conservation thus the secret of eternal life. For this reason we have dubbed our project ‘Fountain of youth.’ ”

“We were convinced that we could find on this planet an intelligent race that is in possession of the desired clue. We were hoping to gain the confidence of this race.

“A few days after we arrived here, we noticed that an invisible telekinetic intruder amused himself by pushing buttons, lifting objects and playing all sorts of tricks. We set out on an expedition, soon encountered an exotic, glittering sphere and assumed that it was a product of the alien race. The same race which had a few hours earlier demonstrated its hostility by attempting to blow me sky-high in my tent.

“We persevered in our efforts to track down the elusive strangers. During the first days none of us kept in mind that the positronic computer on board the *Stardust* had predicted the end of the purely technical tests. We were once more prepared to face a race with unheard-of resources, and to gain its secret regardless of its superior technology.”

“Strangely enough everything went suspiciously well. We occupied the subterranean machine hall with negligible losses and were even aided by the lucky coincidence of an earthquake. A subsequent attack by the opponent was easily

repulsed.”

“This astonished us.”

“You!” Bell said dryly. “Not us.”

“Have it your way—me,” Rhodan answered with a smile. “We suddenly realized that the adversary was not so superior after all, even though he knew how to create rotating gravitation fields. In addition we must take into account the observations made by Fellmer Lloyd. Whenever he received a brainwave pattern, it betrayed a blind, destructive hate or an uncontrollable, childlike urge to play.”

“How much longer will it take us to wake up to the realization that we were on the wrong track and that there are in reality two intelligent races on Vagabond?”

His question shot like a shockwave through his audience. His listeners were so startled that they gaped in amazement at Rhodan without uttering a protest.

“Two?” Deringhouse finally gasped.

Rhodan nodded.

“Which one is the second?” Bell asked.

“The mouse-beavers!”

“Impossible!” Deringhouse shouted. “Lloyd studied them on the night we set up the first camp in the hills. He didn’t find anything to support your statement.”

Rhodan nodded a second time.

“The selective rule—as the positronic computer calls it—consisted of two parts. We first had to discover that there were two intelligent races on Vagabond and then we had to verify which one held the key to our quest.

The mouse-beavers are a race such as never before encountered in our—that is, the Arkonide—experience. There can be no doubt about it that the intelligence of these animals is of intermittent nature.”

“What do you mean by that?”

The question was fired—with a minimum of respect—by Bell.

“An intermittent intelligence is characterized by the fact that the affected being is alternately intelligent and unintelligent. Have I made myself clear?”

“No! Are we to understand that the mouse-beavers are smart from Monday to Wednesday and dumb from Thursday to Sunday?”

“Something like that,” Rhodan said quietly. “The interval is different. It coincides with the night and day cycle; The mouse-beavers lose their intelligence—which in any case is probably very limited—in the darkness of the night and regain it when the sun rises again. Since this effect does indeed occur, it’s only natural that it’s in harmony with the environment of this world. Mind you, it strictly varies with light and darkness. Otherwise the beavers would have been dumbfounded by the earthquake which changed the position of Vagabond’s axis.”

An animated conversation ensued.

By odd contrast the two Arkonides, Khrest and Thora, remained completely quiet. Rhodan smiled at them and Khrest smiled back but Thora raised her

eyebrows.

They represent the heritage of a knowledge fully aware of the existence of unknown mysteries, thought Rhodan. When will our hotheads from Earth learn that nothing's impossible just because they haven't seen it yet?

He interrupted the discussion. They refused to accede to his arguments—as could be plainly seen on their faces—but accepted the proposition he offered.

“I’m going to prove my theory to you. The *Stardust* will remain a few more days on Vagabond and we’ll have the opportunity to observe the mousebeavers further.”

Then he proceeded with the next topic.

“Nonetheless we have—in spite of our ignorance—discovered the remnants of an ancient culture on Vagabond. I admit that I believed for a few hours that this planet is the World of Eternal Life and that the little robots were the helpers of the Great Unknown who is leading us in our search.

“Well, I was wrong. The Unknown is probably considerably older than the Vagabond culture. In the meantime the robots have been dissected. They know a great many things of which we have no knowledge and other things, albeit trivial, are unknown to them. For ten thousand years they’ve obeyed the last command they received: to repulse intruders and to make them perish.”

“Their brains are organic, probably because it seemed to be the simplest way for their masters to make them. The brains are preserved in a tank containing liquid nutriment sufficient to sustain them for one hundred thousand years.”

“However, the mechanical energy of the robots was supplied by generators. One of them was shattered in the big earthquake and the result was fifteen inanimate robots. Somewhere there must be a second generator which supplied the remaining five robots that raided us and were destroyed.”

“We now have the opportunity to bring the fifteen robots back to life and to adapt them so that they won’t regard us as deadly enemies. We’ll do our best to accomplish it.”

He smiled.

“Anyone in our position cannot afford to pass up the slightest contribution to his knowledge. I believe that we’ll be able to gain much valuable insight into Vagabond’s culture.”

He reached for the stack of pictures lying on the table.

“The most interesting aspect of the robots,” Rhodan said as if talking to himself, “is that they retained without reservations the entire knowledge of their extinct masters. A hand grenade is as good a weapon for a robot with orders to kill as a gravitational rotation field, a fact we had at first failed to understand. This seems to have taught us a lesson about another facet of robot logic: attack with anything at hand, as long as it can be used as a weapon.”

He picked up the picture on top of the heap.

“Of all these pictures there is only one I have to show you. It exhibits what

we've hoped to find on this planet."

He inserted the picture in the projector. The room went dark as he switched on the projection light.

In three-dimensional projection the audience saw a cropped sector of the galaxy model they had found in the cave of the mouse-beavers. In the centre of the picture was a little point of light from which a shining band extended to a much brighter star in the upper right-hand corner of the picture.

"I have to make some comment here," Rhodan broke into the silent attention. "Initially, the point in the centre could not be seen. At first glance the light band ended nowhere. We had to use all the refinements of Arkonide development technique to make the little point visible."

"We've determined that all stars in this model are shown in accordance with their actual brightness. The result is quite surprising. The star we're concerned with doesn't radiate any light. The light it emanates is reflected from other suns in the vicinity.

"This star is a planet without a sun!"

"Is it the World of Eternal Life?" Khrest asked.

"That's what I think," Rhodan answered. "I wouldn't know what other meaning this picture could have."

"And which star is at the other end of the light band?" asked Bell.

"*Vega!*"

Somebody was breathing very hard.

"Then we know our present galactic position?"

"Yes, we do. We're at a distance of twenty-four hundred light-years from Vega and Sol."

His listeners fell silent again. They marvelled at the reproduction of the mysterious projection Rhodan and his men had discovered and photographed in the cavern of the mouse-beavers. Although they were loath to admit it, they felt a growing admiration for the strange, fabulous technology of that unknown race inhabiting the World of Eternal Life.

A world, as they now had learned, moving alone and sunless through galactic space.

Since they were now familiar with the location of the mouse-beavers' retreat, it was no longer difficult for Fellmer Lloyd to hide in their vicinity. He confirmed what Rhodan had predicted.

During the day the mouse-beavers were creatures with moderately developed intelligence but with an extremely strong parapsychological, telekinetic sense. Their very pronounced urge to play was commensurate with their limited intelligence.

During the dark hours they turned into unintelligent animals feeding on the vegetation of the valleys. A few hours before dawn they returned to their caves to sleep. By the time they woke up, the sun was shining in the sky and their

intelligence was restored.

One of nature's infinite variations!

Fellmer Lloyd no longer perceived the consuming hatred which reposed in the brains of the robots; organic brains which were protected in a tank of special material so that they were invulnerable to the influence of the Arkonide psycho-beamers.

Ten Vagabond days after they had detected the model of the galaxy in the cave of the mousebeavers, the *Stardust* was ready to take off. There was no necessity for Rhodan to make a detour to Vega as the picture indicated. But he deemed it advisable to apprise the men in the eight auxiliary ships and possibly Colonel Freyt on Earth of the events which had taken place in the meantime.

Consequently they set course for Vega.

Rhodan regretted very much that he had not enough time to explore the secrets of the ancient culture of which the twenty robots were the last remnants. Diligent attempts to bring the robots back to life were in progress. As soon as the data for their commands had been corrected, they would voluntarily reveal their knowledge. However, Rhodan felt that the full extent of his desire to know the secrets of Vagabond would not be satisfied until they returned there to investigate the machine hall. Meanwhile they had to be content with what they could pry from the data banks of the robots. Among that was the realization that the robots had the capability to rise and fly above the ground for short stretches utilizing a tiny gravity generator in their ellipsoid-shaped bodies. This cured Rhodan's nightmare, because it finally explained why the tracks of the robots started and stopped suddenly.

Two enigmas still remained unsolved:

Why had Rhodan's telecom failed to function on his first reconnaissance flight to explore the sector of the fifty-six stars?

And why was he unable to see the light of the Vagabond sun directly, whereas he could perfectly well see it reflected by the *Stardust*?

The explanations would have to come from the Great Unknown.

At least now, for the first time on this long and arduous search, they knew the co-ordinates for the location of the World of Eternal Life.

Thora entered the Command Centre just as Rhodan was about to set the autopilot to launch the *Stardust*.

Imperiously, the beautiful platinum haired Arkonide strode past Bell. Ignoring him as though he were a fixture, she addressed Rhodan.

"Will we ever return to Vagabond?" she asked the Peacelord.

The leader of the New Power nodded.

"Definitely. I don't greatly relish the company of creatures who playfully push Arkon bombs around in the air and try to kill men and crush them under

overturned aero-cars, but I must pay another visit in order to take a further look at the machine hall.”

The regal woman said, “You’re right,” and her tone was surprisingly agreeable.

It was not this proud alien’s nature to apologize for unpleasant behaviour but she demonstrated by her voice and expression that she was anxious to make up for her reaction against Rhodan, even though her act had been no worse than an angry look.

Perry smiled in return but held back something more that he felt for this strange female from the stars. He would first have to seek out the secret of the Great Unknown before he could relax and unravel the secret of her puzzling Arkonide psyche.