

Could the events on far-flung Azgola have disastrous consequences for the weary and recently stabilized Solar Imperium? Has some new power bent on universal conquest emerged from this distant planet? Who or what is Gorathon? Finding the answers is the mission of the men of Division 3... with a little help from—

SGT ROBOT

1/ MISSION UNKNOWN

INCREDULOUSLY.

Chuck Waller stared in utter disbelief at the strange scene before him. The hot light of an alien sun shone down on the wide field where a vagrant wind raised thin tendrils of dust here and there. Far off on the horizon he could make out the outlines of several low rambling buildings but even there he could see no sign of movement. An uncanny silence pervaded the place when it should have been swarming with life and activity.

Chuck went down the narrow ramp and turned around when he felt solid ground under his feet. Above him loomed the spherical hull of the good old *Gillaine*, a veteran freighter of the far spaceways scarred and pitted by cosmic dust and the poisonous gases of alien worlds. Its tough outer skin had lost its original sheen but Chuck Waller and his crewmen knew they could rely on the old ship as much as any other vessel of its class.

The *Gillaine* had traversed the great gulf of some 37,000 light-years between Terra and Azgo's Star within 12 days by shipboard reckoning. It was something of a record. Waller had come here to Azgola, the second planet of the system, in the hope of doing some profitable business. Azgola lay on the far rim of the Arkonide Imperium, well removed from all the normally travelled trade routes, and it was generally disregarded by the space-roaming merchants of the galaxy. Sometimes it was in just such a place that a trader could hit the jackpot.

At the present moment, however, Waller felt that he had drawn a complete blank. He had always heard a great deal about the Azgons—that they were offshoots of the original race of the Arkonides, that they were lean as spindles and had bald heads, that in the course of millenniums they had forgotten their technical know-how and had slipped back into a steam-powered civilization.

He had failed to learn, however, that they had died out in the meantime.

He opened his space helmet just far enough so that it could be closed quickly at the first sign of danger. The air-analyser had indicated that the atmosphere of Azgola was perfectly breathable but the suspicious silence here made him wary. He wanted to be ready in case anything happened. He instructed the

'Bridge' to break out one of the small groundcars that was carried on board the *Gillaine* .

His First Officer, Hank Cilley, inquired curiously: "So where are all those skinny egg-heads? Gone to sleep or something?"

"No idea, Hank," he answered, "but I think we'll soon find out."

"Hey, listen! You shouldn't be going alone. Who knows what you may run into...?"

"Relax," said Waller. "It looks like they've abandoned this spaceport. I'll just drive over to those barracks and check around. Then I'll come right back."

"Well... alright," grumbled Hank.

Meanwhile the big cargo lock had opened above and an open 4-passenger car was being lowered by a crane. Chuck waited until it reached the ground and the mag-clamps let go, then he climbed into it. He drew his weapon from his belt and placed it next to him on the seat, after which he started the vehicle and drove away.

Within a minute or two, Chuck was driving across a field of sparse dry grass and weeds. Grass—on the landing runways of a spaceport! He tried to estimate how long it would take for the chemical and nuclear poisons of rocket exhausts to dissipate enough for the ground to support at least a minimal amount of vegetation. Years must have passed since a ship had landed here or taken off.

The barracks buildings lay far ahead but he was approaching them swiftly. When he arrived in front of them he saw that the windows and sills were thickly covered with dust. He tried to discover a sign of life somewhere but without success. He drove past the nearest structure and stopped in front of the second one. Since he did not know what to expect here he did not shut off his engine. He got out of the car but with his weapon ready.

He stepped over to one of the dust-covered windows and tried to peer through it. As far as he could see, the room inside was empty. There was not even any furniture in evidence. As he walked onward his footsteps made a loud grinding noise on the ground. The piercing heat of the yellow sun was becoming unbearable. Perhaps this was the cause of his nervousness.

Behind the next window he saw a different scene. A desk and several chairs stood in a little office. The chairs were narrow and high-backed, evidently designed for the Azgons. There were stacks of paper on the desktop but covered with a thick layer of grey dust. The same dust lay on the floor with no trace of footprints anywhere.

The silence was suddenly broken by the loud slamming of a door. Chuck spun around as his heart seemed to jump into his throat. He had instinctively raised his weapon and tightened his finger on the trigger.

The door creaked again. It produced a dull bumping sound and then all was still. Chuck moved cautiously in the direction of the sound and came around the corner of the barracks. Just when he had the door in plain sight it began to show movement again. It was in the narrower front end of the building and when Chuck saw it swing slowly he ducked back slightly. It finally swung wide open and banged with a dull thud against the wall of the barracks. Chuck straightened up and looked dumbfounded, then began to laugh.

He watched how the wind came through the narrow space between this building and the one in front of it, whipping in such a way as to swing the door back from the wall and bang it into its frame again. It produced the same dull bumping sound he had heard before. He approached it and examined its lock. It contained a latching device similar to door hardware used on Earth. Dust and grit embedded in the mechanism kept the bolt from snapping into the latch-plate slot. Probably the door had been banging in the wind for many months.

Chuck shoved his helmet back and wiped the sweat from his brow. The heat was insufferable but the nervousness was gone. He was sure now that the Azgons had abandoned the spaceport. Perhaps alien spaceships no longer visited Azgola and of course the Azgons had no ships of their own. Or perhaps the space-traffic centre had been moved to another location on the planet. Perhaps this, perhaps that—there was no way of knowing.

He opened the door again and entered the building. Perhaps if he took a look around in here he might find some indication of why everything was so deserted-looking and desolate. He stepped into a dim corridor where the wooden floor creaked louder than the door. After taking a step or two he stopped and shouted a loud "Hello!"

The sound of his voice caused a little dust to sift down from a few places along the walls but that was all that happened. He continued his investigation. As though to convince himself that he had nothing more to fear, he opened doors to the right and left of him as he went along and swung them inward so that they banged loudly against the walls inside the various rooms. For the first time in months or years the old building was filled with the noisy sounds of life.

When he reached the end of the passage he shoved the last door inward and stopped to look into the room. The door had swung partly closed again and halfway obscured his view. He saw part of a desk and a chair. The desk was bare except for the dust. But *in this* dust there were marks as though someone had partially brushed it with their hand. There were other marks in the dust on the floor, like footprints. They came around the left side of the desk and led off to the right but the door obscured the rest of the trail. Chuck shoved the door wide open with his weapon and leaned forward to have a look.

Then he saw it.

The thing lay on the floor—a broad, fat form that was much too heavy to move. The massive body appeared to struggle to rise, then sank down again. The thing was alive. This was what had made the footprints.

Chuck Waller was only a freighter captain. He wasn't trained to handle such an unexpected and frightening situation. When he saw the terrible thing on the floor he could do nothing but yell out in alarm and start running. He spurted through the corridor, raced between the barracks buildings and sprang into his groundcar. He skidded around in a narrow circle and shot across the field toward the *Gillaine*.

Over his helmet transmitter he shouted to Hank Cilley to get the ship ready for takeoff at once.

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High-frequency hypercom carrier beams shot across the far reaches of interstellar space. Coded

messages raced back and forth between Arkon and Terra. The issue involved was a strange report—as garbled as it was incredible—which had been picked up by an Arkonide outpost station. It had been transmitted by a Terran tramp-ship named *Gillaine*, which was evidently on the outermost fringes of the known galaxy.

Gonozal VIII, the Arkonide Emperor, would not have attributed much importance to the report under ordinary circumstances. There was in fact a great temptation to consider the whole thing some kind of poorly staged hoax. Then perhaps later someday when time and funds were available a patrolship might have been sent to the area of space the radio call had come from, in order to have a look around. But special situations required special actions. Gonozal VIII knew that the Solar Imperium was on the alert for a certain enemy whose unfailing trademark was always strange happenings wherever he appeared. And the radio message from the *Gillaine* seemed to fit such a formula.

Therefore Gonozal VIII relayed the whole thing to Earth. Judging by the serious note of thanks he received in return for his trouble, it was obvious that Terra also attributed special significance to the incident.

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Maj. Landry had received the voice tape by messenger. He found it strange that his chief, Nike Quinto, should use this method of communicating with him. But at the beginning of the tape Quinto explained that he was tied up in an important conference with the Administration and the urgency of the affair described on the tape was sufficient justification for this means of informing him. The rest of the tape was in code to protect its contents from alien interception. Ron Landry had to make use of the decoder machine to find out what Col. Quinto had in mind.

Nike Quinto's explanation provided a rough but effective outline of the series of hypercom messages that had been carried on between Arkon and Terra. The original dispatch from the *Gillaine* was repeated without comment. Quinto did not express what he thought about it. His closing words were:

"There's nothing of note to report concerning Azgola and its inhabitants. Any book on the subject will tell you all you need to know. In this case you don't need any hypno-indoctrination. But ye gods!—we've never had to deal with such a backwoods planet before! Don't ask me how a thing like this could have happened without the whole Milky Way knowing about it. According to Arkonide records the last ship reported that touched down at Azgola went there about 11 years ago... an Arkonide vessel of course. Arkon has no record of landings there by Springers or other races. But since that time everything has been suspiciously quiet around Azgola.

"You probably know what this affair boils down to. The Baalol priests have pulled enough strange tricks before with their false activators, from pretty-smelling wonder flowers to hopping frogs. It's entirely possible one of the Baalol people may be behind this Azgola situation. That's what we have to find out. Get your men together and go! Don't lose a minute! There's a special ship waiting for you at the Terrania spaceport. I've already made all preparations."

Ron thought the report had come to an end and was about to shut off but before he could disconnect the decoder the colonel's voice came on again: "Do a good job, Major, and no goof ups! If you disgrace me my high blood-pressure will be the end of me!"

Ron smiled as he switched off. There had never been a communication from Nike Quinto without some reference to his high blood pressure.

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Larry Randall brought the glide-car to a stop and stared upward. "Don't tell me we're going to fly *inthat* thing!" he exclaimed.

Ron Landry had leaned forward to look up through the windshield. "It's a freighter!" he said in equal surprise. "Did anybody mention we were supposed to travel steerage or something?"

Lofty Patterson and the robot Meech Hannigan remained silent. The 5th man in the vehicle was Lt. Pauling, a young officer who had been instructed by Nike Quinto to bring Ron Landry and his men to the ship. It was obvious that he felt uncomfortable about the situation. "I'm sorry," he said, somewhat piqued, "but that's the ship that Col. Quinto has ordered to be ready for takeoff."

"It's just a tramp spacer!" complained Larry Randall. "We want to get where we're going as fast as possible, not stop somewhere on the way to sell a load of bananas!"

Lt. Pauling fell silent in his embarrassment while Randall looked questioningly at Ron.

"Let's have a look inside," Ron suggested. "Sometimes appearances can be deceiving."

The entrance ramp was an old-fashioned gangway with wooden flooring that one had to climb up on foot. The vessel was spherical and didn't measure more than 150 meters in diameter. Undoubtedly it was of private construction and not any too modern at that.

Lt. Pauling was the first to get out of the car. He stopped at the foot of the gangway and saluted. "I am to wait for you here, sir," he said.

Ron nodded to him, and he and the rest went up the ramp. When they were out of hearing range from Pauling, Ron asked without looking around: "What do you pick up, Meech?"

Meech's voice was calm and deep as he answered: "A couple of things that are pretty unusual. This ship's propulsion system must pack at least as much power as a battlecruiser. There are still other heavy power sources close under the hull—probably gun positions. If my sensors aren't lying..."

He was interrupted just as Ron stepped through the outer hatchway of the small personnel lock. It was at that moment that a loudspeaker blared forth.

"Nike Quinto to Maj. Landry! Proceed at once to the Control Central!"

Ron turned with a grin to Larry Randall, who was just behind him. "Looks like old 'High' Blood-pressure has cooked up a new surprise."

Once inside the inner airlock hatch they realized that they had been deceived by the ship's outward

appearance. The transverse passage to the main corridor gleamed spic and span. A swift walk-belt provided rapid transportation. At regular intervals along the walls were intercom connections which made instant communication throughout the ship possible. All bulkhead hatch doors had the new Henderson lock mechanisms. A little farther on was a sign in red-lit letters: GUN POSITION 1—E-DECK SHIP-TO-GROUND BATTERIES.

Somewhat bewildered, Ron Landry jumped onto the moving belt. "This time he really blew the budget!"

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En route they encountered no one, but the Control Central was crowded with crewmen and officers. When Ron opened the hatch door they stepped to one side and saluted. Ron greeted them affably and looked about him in an attempt to find a familiar face.

A young stranger with a captain's insignia stepped forward. "I'm Frank Bell, sir," he announced. "Until a few seconds ago, commander of this ship. We are ready for takeoff, sir."

"Just a moment," said Ron, confused. "Until a few seconds ago? Then who—?"

"You, sir," he explained with a smile.

Ron was only at a loss for half a second or so until he realized that Nike Quinto could not have done otherwise. He himself was in charge of this mission and could not be someone else's subordinate.

"Where is the Colonel?" he asked.

"He's not on board, sir," answered the captain. "The voice you heard before was from a recording."

"Do you have any further information for me?"

"Not directly, sir. There is another tape I am to deliver to you. Perhaps it will tell you what you want to know."

Ron asked for the tape and placed it on the playback machine. Since there was no security code involved he saw no objection to the officers being present while he heard what Quinto had to tell him. The instructions were fairly brief:

"This is the special ship I promised you, Major. It's camouflaged as a freighter but it's just about in the same class as a battlecruiser as far as capabilities are concerned. The personnel consists of 23 officers and 130 crewmen. The ship and the crew are assigned to you. Here at the Terrania spaceport the vessel is being taken for what it appears to be: a freighter. We have no reason for publicizing the fact that it's disguised although I don't believe that the enemy, if there is one in the first place, could learn anything from the personnel of our largest spaceport.

"We do want to be on the safe side, however, and that's why you'll be followed by a battle cruiser. It is the *Vondar* and its commander is Maj. Gerry Montini, whom you know. Montini has been instructed to follow your command in case of trouble but until then he will remain pretty well out of sight—for both you

and the enemy.

"I don't believe we've forgotten anything. You will take off at once—but don't forget to dismiss the officer outside who escorted you here."

Ron had to laugh. Nike Quinto wasn't likely to forget a single detail. He had even thought of Lt. Pauling. Without being asked, Larry Randall took care of dismissing the lieutenant down at the ramp.

Ron turned to Frank Bell. "One thing I still don't know," he said good-naturedly. "What's the name of this wonder ship?"

Capt. Bell looked at him wryly. "I guess it's supposed to be an omen," he answered. "The ship has been named the *Victory*."

2/ THE SILENT CITY

The spaceport of Timpik was exactly as described in the message from the *Gillaine*: it was deserted, partially overgrown with grass and wind-blown. Ron Landry had the same idea as Chuck Waller. He inspected the grass that grew haphazardly in large patches on the former landing field and tried to calculate how long it had been since the place had been in use.

The next thing he found out was that the supposed grass was actually an unknown kind of moss. Since moss generally grew faster than grass, Landry's estimate was shorter than Waller's. In Ron's opinion the moss had perhaps gotten started here only a few weeks ago, whereas Chuck Waller had figured on maybe months or even years.

Ron didn't spend any more time than was necessary on the spaceport itself. He knew that the purely physical data pertaining to the planet of Azgola had not changed from what was listed in the old Arkonide catalogues. Gravitation, diameter, axial rotation rate, inclination to the ecliptic, orbital period—all such items were still the same. Even the composition of the atmosphere had not changed. That the air seemed to be laden with fine dust he didn't consider to be of much importance. Dust was a thing one took as it came—or as the wind decided.

So he instructed Frank Bell to keep the ship on permanent standby for takeoff. He and his crew were to remain especially quiet. Only in case of danger was radio silence to be broken. He was then to make contact with Ron for his instructions. Ron and his 3 companions took an aircar so that they could pay a visit to the nearby city of Timpik.

Timpik was the largest Azgon settlement. As of about 20 years ago it was supposed to have had a population of 250,000. Ron figured it would be in Timpik if anyplace that he might learn what had happened to Azgola. Without wasting any time he took over the controls of the aircar himself and turned it at top speed toward the city which lay to the South of the spaceport.

So far he had had no premonition of what this mission might have in store for him, which he found to be strange. Some of his more recent assignments had led him to believe that he had developed a kind of 6th sense for trouble and danger. Working for Division 3 of the so-called Intercosmic Social Welfare &

Development organization, he had visited a number of alien worlds but usually right after landing he had been able to sense what was waiting for him.

At present this wasn't the case. Everything was so unusually calm and peaceful both around him and in him that he was just about ready to believe he'd be back on board the *Victory* in a few hours and headed for home.

His 6th sense had failed him, however, as he was soon to discover.

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At a good altitude they were following one of the wide, unpaved approach roads to the city. Although some of the first buildings were appearing on the horizon, so far they had not seen a living creature or even a vehicle of any kind below.

At the city outskirts Ron dropped lower and glided along between the old-fashioned buildings and houses. They were approaching a large street intersection. Just as they left the rows of houses behind them and were flying over the broad clearing of the intersection, they saw it.

Lying there in the middle of the street, it was fully as misshapen, puffy and bloated and ugly as Chuck Waller's dispatch from the *Gillaine* had described it to be. But it was not quite as repugnant and loathsome as Waller's report would have led one to believe—if one were to keep in mind that this was only a tremendously overstuffed man who was very ill.

Ron dropped the aircar at a sharp angle and set it down on the edge of the crossing. When he opened the door he experienced what Waller had sensed a few days before. The uncanny stillness of the city made him uneasy.

He instructed Larry to remain at the controls while he and Lofty and Meech turned their attention to the motionless figure lying in the street. When Ron approached to within a few feet of the fat man he saw that he was not quite as motionless as he had appeared to be. He was slowly drawing his knee forward under his body, inches at a time. He had shoved his arms forward in order to support his massive body but since his remaining muscular strength was not enough to support his weight he was also using his head, pressing it against the ground so that he could relieve the pressure on his arms.

Ron watched him anxiously as he finally managed to get his knee up under his stomach. Once he had accomplished this he groped behind him with his left foot, weakly and slowly as if his own leg were much too heavy to control. But finally he got the sole of his foot at the right angle. From this position he managed to give his bloated body a shove and since he was already almost in the shape of a ball he tumbled over his lowered head in a lugubrious kind of somersault. The figure lay there panting on its back, now a few meters closer to the edge of the street. Then it began to move its left arm in an effort to turn back on its stomach.

Ron finally understood the procedure. The poor fellow merely wanted to cross the street. Due to his unwieldy corpulence he had no choice but to make a series of clumsy somersaults. In a way the situation was ludicrous enough to be funny. Ron felt an instinctive urge to chuckle at the man's antics but this was checked when he had a closer look at the fat man. He was bald-headed and the torn condition of his

clothing revealed that the rest of his body was apparently almost hairless. And hairlessness was a well-known characteristic of the Azgons. So this man who was trying to roll his way across the street was an Azgon. He was a member of a race of people who had formerly been known for their tall, spindly bodies.

Obviously something had happened here in the meantime. Something that had transformed the thin and reedy Azgons into helpless great blobs of fat.

Ron stepped close to the man before he had a chance to, roll over on his stomach again. The Azgon seemed to notice him for the first time although his eyes had almost disappeared under thick layers of fat, they widened slightly at sight of him.

"Good morning, my friend," said Ron, greeting him affably in the Arkonide language. "If you wish we'll be glad to help you to get across over here."

It was always difficult to judge the attitude of an alien by appearances but it was even more so when the person's face was buried in fat and his facial muscles were abnormally sluggish. At least Ron could make out that the fellow was completely astonished. Perhaps it was startling enough in itself to see people again who were not mere mountains of corpulence.

The Azgon tried to lift his head but failed completely in the attempt. Instead, he moved his hand weakly as if to say "yes." Ron signalled to Lofty and the robot. Meech grasped the fat man by the feet while Lofty and Ron supported him under his arms. Even between the three of them it was an effort to lift the helpless body and carry it. When they finally placed their burden on the sidewalk, Lofty and Ron were streaming with sweat but of course the effort didn't seem to bother Meech at all.

Ron had a lot of questions on the tip of his tongue but he came to realize that the man lying on the sidewalk before him was probably not the one to give him the information he needed. But he spoke to the fat man once more. "Now if you want to do us a favour, friend, tell us where we can find the government or administration building."

The Azgon struggled again to raise his hand and managed to point down the street. Then his wrist bent slightly, indicating a turn to the left. "Second... intersection...!" wheezed the man's voice, half-choked with fat. "Keep... straight ahead to big plaza... left... The tower..." It was as far as he could get with his directions. His hand sank weakly to the ground and his eyes closed. The Azgon appeared to have fainted from his exertions.

"That ought to do it," Ron decided. "There should be some kind of sign or inscription on the government building. The Azgons use the Arkonide alphabet and method of writing."

They turned about and returned to the aircar.

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The directions turned out to be accurate. The 2nd street to the left was a stately boulevard. The houses were more ostentatious than elsewhere and the avenue was almost 100 feet wide—a rarity on Azgola where one ventured into the street in coaches or an occasional automobile of very ancient vintage.

2 km farther south was the large plaza the Azgon had mentioned and on the left side of it was a single large building which seemed to fit the description of 'the tower...' Ron landed the aircar in front of it. At the base of the tower was a broad open stairway with massive stone banisters supporting figures of animals at intervals. Ron kept the same pattern of assignments as before. Larry remained in the aircar with the motor running while Ron climbed the stairs with Lofty and Meech.

The big main entrance door at the top of the stairs didn't offer any resistance to speak of. It creaked and groaned as Ron leaned his weight against it but it opened readily enough. Beyond the portal yawned a dimly lit hall. The sunlight out in the street had been so bright that Ron had to stand there a few seconds to accustom his eyes to the relative darkness here. As Meech and Lofty came clattering and stomping up behind him he motioned them to a halt. He could hear the echoing of their footsteps dying away in the depths of the building. Then nothing—absolute silence.

Ron moved forward cautiously to the middle of the hall where he stopped to orient himself. In 3 different places the walls gave way to broad, carpeted staircases which wound upward to other levels. On the floor in front of him the dust was as thick as it was on the stair railings and the apparently costly carpet runners. To the left of the entrance was a small, glass-enclosed cubicle. Probably an information clerk had once sat there to give directions to the public concerning where to go in the building. Now of course it was empty.

Ron leaned his head back and, cupping his hands around his mouth, yelled with all his might. It was a long, unarticulated cry that was only intended to be as loud as possible. It rose into the tower, rebounded from walls and ceilings and came back in ghostly echoes but multiplied a hundred-fold. Otherwise nothing happened. There were no door slamming or footsteps to be heard. The tower was as empty and dead as the entire town. Or perhaps—like the entire planet.

Ron turned around. "It's no use," he said glumly. "We have to look through the whole place. Somebody must be somewhere. Meech... do you pick up anything suspicious?"

Meech shook his well-shaped head. "No sir, nothing. Everything is completely quiet."

"That was my impression, too," commented Lofty with a faint touch of sarcasm.

"Alright then—!" Ron headed for one of the 3 stairways and his 2 companions followed him.

From the outside he had noticed that the tower was at least 30 stories high. In an age of steam there were no elevators, at least not in buildings over 5 years old.

Upstairs on the 2nd level the stairs opened into 2 wide hallways which met each other at a slight angle just at the head of the staircase. Ron recalled that there were also 2 other staircases besides this one. The inside structure of the tower seemed to be unusually complex. Even here on the 2nd floor he was unable to figure out where the 2 other staircases came out at.

He turned to Meech, who was an excellent mathematician. "Where do the other 2 staircases lead to?" he wanted to know.

"About there... and there," answered Meech while he pointed to 2 locations Ron couldn't see—one straight ahead and one to the right. "But they don't come into this hallway, sir."

Ron sighed. "That means there are also mezzanine floors, right?"

"Yes—most likely, sir."

Ron made an attempt to count or estimate the doors that lined the walls of both passages. "This way there are about 50 rooms and again that many in the other direction," he said. "All told, that's 100 for these 2 corridors. Assuming that the other 2 staircases also lead to a level with the same corridor arrangement, that makes 100 rooms per staircase or 300 per full story. And the tower has about 30 such stories. That makes 9,000 rooms. Lofty, how long would you say it would take us to look into all of them?"

Lofty scratched his grey beard reflectively. "I'd say maybe 2 days," he answered after a few moments. "But what the devil—they must have been using telephones or some kind of communication system here!"

"Maybe we could find something like that," Ron agreed. "But even if we could get a phone device to work... if all the Azgons are like the one we saw in the street, not one of them would answer. They couldn't even lift an old-fashioned telephone receiver off of its hook."

Lofty only nodded glumly and looked about him.

"I'd suggest that the first thing is to look for tracks or footprints," said Meech. "It's more likely we'll find somebody on a floor level where there are tracks in the dust than we would on those levels where the dust has been undisturbed."

Ron stared at him. "By the ghosts of a hundred moons... you're right, Meech!" He turned with renewed hope to climb to the next level but he had not yet reached the first step before the unexpected happened.

From somewhere above in the tower came a cry—thin and weak—but clearly audible, Ron came to a sudden stop for a second, completely startled. Then he jumped to the staircase well and leaned out over the banister so that he could peer upward in the endless-seeming shaft. Far above in the dimness was the distant whiteness of a face.

And a voice cried: "Come up here—quickly!"

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Larry Randall had been staring so long at the sun-washed street that his eyes had begun to smart. He finally leaned back and looked at the shaded ceiling of the aircar. The heat was unbearable. Larry was getting tired. He had seen the ponderous Azgon from a distance and he doubted there could be any danger here if all the Azgons had become as fat as that one. They couldn't even walk. Besides, why should they try to attack? Nobody had done anything to them.

Thus reassured, he leaned back farther, stretched his legs out and surrendered to a leaden weariness. That was when the shadow swept over the street. Larry sat bolt upright but it was gone. The street was the same as before. He stuck his head out the side window and looked upward. The milky blue sky had not changed either. But Larry was positive that he had seen a flitting shadow.

He did not spend much time trying to figure out whether a swift shadow like that could mean danger or

not—but action was necessary. He checked his position and realized that this location would not be favourable in case of an attack. Only the bombastic architecture of the tower's stairway protected him on the left but he was exposed in the remaining 3 directions.

He lifted slightly off the ground and caused the aircar to drift slowly over the sidewalk. On the northern side of the tower, between it and the neighbouring building, there was a narrow and shady indentation. It was not much more than 4 meters deep but behind it was a wall that rose up to the 4th or 5th level of the tower.

He carefully manoeuvred the craft into the niche, tail first. This enabled him to keep an eye on the street as well as the sky. But by the time he had relocated to his satisfaction nothing new occurred. Larry debated whether or not to notify Ron. His micro-transceiver was capable of putting him in touch with Ron as well as with the *Victory*. Just a few words of alarm and Ron would return.

But in the final analysis maybe the shadow had only been an illusion. Larry decided to be silent for the time being. If anything really serious came up Ron would know in a matter of seconds. That was enough of a security margin.

Larry leaned back again and waited but this time he took care to remain fully alert.

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At 15:13 hours ship time the *Victory* registered a brief hyperwave pulse. For Frank Bell and his crew it made a small sensation. This was because the Azgons were still living in the steam age and they knew nothing of even normal radio communication, let alone hypertransmission. If the hyper-pulse came from Azgola, it meant that quite another type of people were present here.

The pulse duration had hardly been more than a microsecond, which was not long enough for the spherical antenna to register any clear directional trace. Frank decided to wait and only advise Ron in case the pulse was repeated.

For the time being there was no need to worry.

3/ ATTACK FROM NOWHERE

Ron hastily counted the levels between himself and the white face above him. He arrived at 16 and wanted to verify it once more but then the white speck in the dimness above disappeared. He was confident that the stranger would leave tracks somewhere which would indicate where he had gone. Briefly explaining to Lofty and Meech what he had seen, he started climbing.

Meech soon overtook him, taking the steps swiftly with the untiring strength of the robot he was, calculating distance and height of the stairs ahead with unfailing accuracy. Ron had no objection to

Meech going ahead and increasing his lead. It was probably better to have a fast-thinking robot ahead of him in case the situation upstairs turned out to be a trap.

Ron slackened his pace somewhat in order not to leave Lofty too far behind. By the time Meech waved at them from the 10th level they had only reached the 7th and were starting to climb to the 8th.

That was when the floor began to tremble and seconds later the thunder of a heavy explosion rolled through the city.

* * * *

They came in a startling way. They simply seemed to fall from above.

At first Larry thought the objects were giant birds that had leapt free of the tower roof in order to fly away. But instead of flying they plummeted downward. And they hadn't actually come from the tower; they had come from the roof of the neighbouring building, which wasn't quite half as high as the government structure.

Within a few seconds they dropped almost to the street before they braked their fall and hovered. Larry saw by their structures that they were aircars! They were larger than his and of a strange design. For a moment Larry saw the heads of a row of men through the side ports.

He bent forward and struck a control button which turned on his weapons system, realizing now that it had been a mistake not to advise Ron about what he had seen. The shadow must have been one of these vehicles—or perhaps both.

The 2 aircars had dropped to the open stairway of the main building, coming so close that one of them actually grated against the first few steps. The 2nd aircraft held back near the street, hovering only a few feet above the ground. Larry realized what they had in mind. A few minutes before, they had seen his own aircar sitting out in front. This was when they had first flown over. Now they had come back and were sure that their target was somewhere close by.

That settled it. This was an attack.

By the time the vehicle in the street turned slowly around to take aim at the niche between the buildings, Larry already had it in his sights. He could see the glitter of extended weapons facing him and knew what he had to do. Before the enemy could get off the first shot, Larry's thermo-cannon spewed out a thunderbolt of blinding white energy. The powerful discharge hissed straight to the street and struck the hostile craft so violently that it lifted it up and hurled it toward the row of houses on the other side of the plaza. Larry let loose with a 2nd salvo, this time striking the vessel on its bow. The impact sent it spinning. Like a giant pinwheel it swirled away over the plaza in a smoking and hissing course, leaving a flak of molten metal behind it. Larry turned his attention to the 2nd vehicle. On either side of it a large hatch had opened and 10 or 12 tall, broad-shouldered men were standing on the steps. Their heavy hand-weapons were aimed toward Larry's craft but they were obviously uncertain.

He knew he was sitting in a trap. The niche was too small to permit him to turn the ship. The lateral weapons were operable from the rear seats. He could have crawled over the back of his pilot seat but in

the back he'd be in a trap as well, if any of the men were better shots than he was.

Not having any time to lose, he reached for the heavy disintegrator that lay ready beside him. Opening the side hatch, he tumbled down out of the car. Now he was under cover of the tower wall. He held his breath for some seconds, expecting somebody to fire at the vehicle. If they used thermos he knew they would make it hot for him, even where he was hiding. He had to shove forward. Perhaps if he gave himself advance cover fire it would hold them in check until he got his head out to where he could see them.

There was only about a Moot space between the hull of the ship and the masonry of the building. Edging forward on his elbows and shoving the disintegrator ahead of him, he soon found that the metal barrel of the weapon clattered too loudly as he crawled. He froze where he was for a few seconds but nothing happened.

Just as he was about to shove the barrel of the disintegrator around the corner of the wall, he heard a faint humming sound. He knew what it was. He looked out quickly and saw the 2nd aircar shooting swiftly across the plaza. As it climbed at a steep angle he could see through its ports. There was only one man on board now. Larry refrained from firing after the fleeing vessel—it was enough to have it out of the way.

Across the plaza the damaged craft he had shot at was struggling somewhat off balance but was holding a course along the southern edge of the open space, close above the ground.

Larry straightened up. The other men the 2nd ship had left behind were nowhere to be seen. He cautiously hugged the wall while remaining close to the niche. As he lifted his arm to speak into his micro-transmitter he became aware of a thundering, vibrating sound that had probably been in the air for some moments before he noticed it. He listened in sudden surprise. The distant thunder came from the north—and there lay the spaceport. Was the *Victory* —?

Ron Landry's voice came from his receiver. "What's going on out there?"

"We're under attack," Larry answered. "By aliens in 2 aircars. And out at the spaceport..."

"I heard it," Ron interrupted. "What's your situation?"

"The aircraft have taken off but at least 10 men were delivered into the area—they've taken cover somewhere."

"Can you hold out?"

"If they don't come back here that won't be too much of a chore."

. Suddenly he thought of something. The aliens had seemed to be sure of their destination when they appeared. They knew where to find the opposition. Another detail had apparently attacked the *Victory* . The move had been well planned and prepared. Probably they knew very well that Ron and his companions were inside the tower. In that case—!

"Ron!" he yelled suddenly "They must be there in the building! Watch out!"

* * * *

The first hit came as a complete surprise.

Frank Bell was holding a coffee mug when the floor suddenly went out from under him and he tumbled forward. A rumbling thunder shook the ship. The bulkheads trembled. An instrument jumped loose from its fastenings in a vertical console and went crashing to the deck.

Then silence. Frank got to his feet. Two of his officers were crouched nearby on the deck, staring about in bewilderment. A cold mechanical voice spoke from the loudspeaker.

"Impact F-Deck North—absorbed by defence screen. Screen load 5% capacity. Enemy projectile was a guided missile with thermal-emission warhead. That is all."

Frank turned around and was at the pilot's console in 2 steps. "To your positions, gentlemen!" he ordered.

A small intercom screen lit up and Frank turned to it as he heard the voice of his chief tracking officer.

"We have no idea who it is, Frank," said the officer. "The rocket came from the northeast and more are on the way."

"How many?"

"From here to the horizon the count is 26, Frank. Others may follow at any moment. You heard the robot report—what are you going to do?"

Frank did not have to cogitate long. A single explosion had loaded his screen by 5%: 26 missiles were under way. And they were guided. The enemy could re-group them so that they would strike the *Victory* simultaneously. 26×5 was 130%. The screen would collapse and that would be the end of the *Victory*.

"We need instructions from Ron Landry," he answered, and he cut off.

He was about to contact Ron but he had not yet switched on the micro-transmitter before the 2nd warhead exploded. Just one. The defence screen held with ease, absorbing the greater part of the impact energy. The residual force thundered through the ship in a shockwave. The *Victory* rocked like a small boat in high seas. The bulkheads groaned and shrieked under the strain. In split-second intervals between the tumult Frank could make out the emotionless voice of the warning robot, which went on uninterruptedly with its technical announcements.

Frank had to wait it out in a helpless rage while the ship rocked wildly back and forth. He was trying to figure out what was happening. Who was the enemy and what reason could he have to make such a heavy attack? He was still lying on the heaving deck when he suddenly heard the voice of his tracking officer through the bedlam. He raised up enough to be able to see the pilot's console. He could see the other's frightened face on the little screen. He couldn't hear everything that he was shouting but a few words came through—and they were enough.

"...a full group of 26—in close formation..."

Frank rolled to one side as a missile exploded outside. The deck heaved under him and slammed him against a row of positronic cabinets. For a moment he was knocked senseless but then he discovered that the jolt had thrown him in the right direction. There was a niche under one of the command consoles. The men who operated the other equipment were still at their stations. Frank crawled into the niche and balled up enough to be supported on every side against the heavy shaking of the ship.

It finally gave him a chance to turn on his micro-transmitter. "*Victory* to the Chief! *Victory* to Chief! We're under heavy fire!"

* * * *

Ron saw them coming. He had peeked out a bit too far over the stair railing and before he could duck back there was a brilliant coloured flash of light. In the same instant a glowing hot burst of bundled energy shot close past him. Far above in the roof of the stairwell something broke loose. A huge chunk of masonry came crashing down and went thundering to the ground floor.

Ron had gotten a clear look at one of the strangers. He was tall and very thickset, practically as bulky as the Azgon they had found in the street. When seen he had been in the process of climbing the stairs, which was apparently difficult for him. However he was still a hundred times more agile, by comparison, than the man they had carried from the street.

Ron did not believe that these newcomers were Azgons. If the whole planet was infected by this plague of fatness, why should just these men below have escaped it? No, they were aliens.

But from where?

Ron forgot about the man upstairs who had called to him. The ones down below were more important now. He instructed Lofty to wait at the stair landing of the 11th level. The balustrade would afford him excellent cover there. With his weapon he could command the stairs down to the 10th level until the curve blocked his view.

Ron himself turned to go down the stairs again. He wasn't worried about Meech Hannigan. The robot had the most logical brain that could be built. He would be able to decide on his own what he should do. He looked upward searchingly but there was no sign of Meech.

The lone enemy he had seen below had been between the 3rd and 4th stories. Judging from his heaviness and slowness he would not come much farther before Ron would be able to block his way. Depending on this conclusion, Ron hastened down the stairs. He took 3 or 4 steps at a time and while it was still safe he stuck to the outer curve of the stairwell.

The towering shaft of the stairwell was ghostly still except for the muffled thumping of his footsteps on the carpeted runner. He stopped at the 7th level. He hid behind one of the stone newel-posts that were placed at intervals along the stair railing, listening to a jumble of new sounds from below. He could hear heavy panting and muttered conversation. It seemed as if the enemy troops were not quite sure of what they should do next. Their uncertainty might be his chance. If he jumped them fast enough he might be able to knock some of them out of action before they could recover from their surprise.

They must have heard him thumping down the stairs. He would have to proceed soundlessly from this point onward. It might make them think that he was still lying in ambush for them several floors above. This time he kept to the centre of the stairs since the outer curve was no longer safe territory. There he might be seen from several stories below. With careful steps he moved downward, weapon in hand. The mumbling and panting sounds became louder. They couldn't be farther away now than 1½ levels. He wished he might be able to recognize the language they were using because that might tell him where they were from or who they were.

He had descended halfway between the 7th and the 6th levels when he heard a noise close by which startled him. Jumping to one side he struck his shoulder against the wall. When he looked below at the 6th-floor landing he saw the alien. He had just raised up from behind the railing and now aimed his heavy weapon at Ron.

Ron let out a yell and tumbled headfirst down the stairs.

* * * *

Within several milliseconds Meech grasped the new situation and all of its possible ramifications. He had heard the conversation between Larry and Ron over his transceiver. He had also witnessed the shot that almost grazed Ron's head and had made certain conclusions regarding the weapon used. It had to be a heavy thermo-beamer, the automatic type which a normally-built Terran would hardly be able to carry around as a portable weapon.

He had also observed the alien and noted his unwieldy bulk and slowness of movement. Even in view of a superiority of numbers such strangers would not have an advantage over the much more agile Terrans. He was also convinced that the enemy was aware of this shortcoming, so if the strangers knew they couldn't get the better of the Terrans and yet still made their attack they must be relying on some kind of trick. He had no way of determining what this trick might consist of because first he would have to know the intention or objective of the enemy. However he himself might be able to do something to prevent them from carrying out their strategy, whatever it was.

He got underway at once. Turning from the stair landing he went along the right-hand passage and opened up one door after another to have a look inside. It did not come as a surprise that some of the rooms were not as empty as the deathly stillness of the tower would lead one to believe. The misshapen and bloated bodies of a number of Azgons lay on the floor or on sofa-like beds and paid no attention to him. Before they could turn their heads to look at him he had already closed the door again.

With the efficiency of a mechanical thinker he avoided spending any time on wondering about the presence of the Azgons here. He was not concerned with why they were here and why they did not attempt to attract someone's attention or why they hadn't gone home and so forth. He was concentrating solely upon the alien enemy.

Behind the 25th door he finally found what he was looking for. This room was empty, meaning that the dust on the floor was undisturbed, but it also gave access to a narrow staircase that led into both the upper and lower levels. Without hesitation Meech descended the stairs. They led him to another small empty room below. When he crossed it and opened the outer door he discovered a passage that he had not seen before. He knew at once that he was on one of the mezzanine floors that were connected to the

ground floor by means of one of the other 2 main staircases. Going to his left he soon discovered the landing of the main stairway. Swiftly and soundlessly he descended.

* * * *

Ron had no time to think as walls, stairs and railings whirled past him. For a fraction of a second during his plunging descent he caught a glimpse of the huge fat alien and managed to fire a shot at him. A cry of rage followed the report. Ron's fall ended at the foot of the stairway. He was about to get up but froze where he was when he stared at a pair of tremendous boots directly in front of his face.

He stared at them as if hypnotized. He could not see the rest of the alien who towered above these pillar-like obstacles because he was still lying on his stomach. But he knew that the latter no doubt had his weapon in hand and would shoot him in the next second or so. Ron tensed his muscles as if to screen himself from the blast to come.

Then he saw the boots move. There was a heavy sigh as the leg shanks angled slowly back and the boot soles turned up. There was a thunderous crash and Ron rolled swiftly out of the way. For just a second he thought the alien had meant to jump him but when nothing happened he straightened up and saw the cumbersome stranger lying on the floor with his eyes closed. He realized that his wild shot must have struck home.

With a sigh of relief he stood up. And it was then that his micro-transceiver came to life. In response to its signal he turned it on and recognized Frank Bell's shouts which were accompanied by a bedlam of banging and thundering.

"...under heavy fire! We can't hold out much longer, sir! A group formation of missiles is heading for us. If they hit all at once we're done for!"

The situation was graphic enough to not require much time for a decision. "Take off at once, Frank!" he shouted. "Do you hear me?"

"I read you!" Frank called back. "Over and out!"

Ron turned off the device and looked about him, realizing that his attention had been taken from his surroundings for a few seconds. He took a few steps to where he could look downward toward the 5th level. Even before he heard the muffled panting he saw the shadow on the steps which came from behind the railing. He went for cover as the shadow began to move slowly to the right. In a few seconds the massive figure appeared. The alien was on hands and knees, supporting himself on his thick arms while he peered up the stairs. Ron raised his weapon. He didn't want to kill the stranger but preferred rather to let him come up and then capture him alive. But the alien braced his ray weapon on one of the steps, took aim at the upper landing and fired. The shot missed Ron by a considerable margin but it blasted a hole in the wall behind him where the masonry began to boil and steam. White-hot molten concrete splattered from it and struck the floor with a hissing sound. Acrid smoke rose up from the carpeting and obscured the view. Ron had to cough.

This gave the opponent a more certain target. Through the rising vapours Ron could see the enemy's weapon move more accurately in his direction. He had no choice but to spring forward for better vision

and to press the trigger of his much smaller weapon. A needle-fine ray of brilliant energy hissed straight at the opponent below. The impact lifted him up and knocked him backwards.

For just one second Ron thought he was the victor—but only for a second. Then he saw that he had fallen into a trap. Four ray-beams as thick as an arm caught him in a crossfire. He was almost singed by the pressing waves of heat. They didn't hit him but molten masonry dripped from the ceiling. Instinctively he raised his arms to protect his head while he staggered back, seeking shelter behind the balustrade. They couldn't see him from below, what with the rising smoke and steam that their destruction had caused.

They tried another tactic, however. Two of the heat beams shot close above the railing of the balustrade while the 2 others concentrated on the stair landings above and below him, causing them to start burning and melting down. Ron could see that he was hemmed in. The strangers only had to wait until he fell unconscious from breathing in the thick vapours. Meanwhile the unbearable heat was making the sweat run from every pore. The perspiration burned his eyes and when he tried to draw a breath he felt searing pains in his lungs.

He would not be able to hold out much longer. If Meech or Lofty did not come to help him...

* * * *

Meech had not counted on meeting one of the enemy on this particular staircase but when he did see him he reacted much more swiftly than the stranger was capable of doing. He raised his hand and out of his finger shot a high-frequency shock field. The hefty stranger yelled and then collapsed. He made no further movement. He would lie there incapacitated for at least 2 hours.

So apparently the enemy had the same idea. They had wanted to set up a pincers pattern and surround them. Their only disadvantage was their slow and ponderous rate of progress. Probably there was another member of the opposition on the 3rd set of stairs. Meech noted this in his memory bank and resolved to follow this clue as soon as he had brought help to Ron and Lofty.

He heard the hissing and thundering of the shots in the other stairwell. With a nimbleness that no one would have thought his heavy metallic body to be capable of, he leapt down the stairs from level to level and reached the ground floor just as Ron Landry was caught in the 4-way crossfire. Meech perceived the situation at once but his firing position was a bit unfavourable. He had to get up closer if he was to make an effective counterattack.

With the dispassionate calm of the robot that he was, he hurried up the stairs. On his way to the 5th level he saw that the stair landing above could not hold out much longer under the concentrated fire. Within a few more steps he found the enemy troops close ahead of him. Unaware of his presence they aimed their heavy fire at a sharp angle above them and worked over the stair landing.

Meech fired immediately. He hit the first opponent with a paralysis beam. This attracted the attention of the remaining 3 men and they began to turn around. However they were no match for the robot because of their heavy and cumbersome movements. They were unconscious before they could swing their weapons halfway around. There was a grotesque moment in which the massive figures stood poised there as though in pensive meditation—and then they all collapsed. A heavy automatic fell at Meech's

feet and he picked it up as though it were a toy.

"Ron!" he shouted up the stairwell.

Ron answered but what he croaked out to him he couldn't understand.

"Head for upstairs, sir!" Meech yelled to him. "The landing is going to collapse—hurry! I'll use another stairway."

He had to jump out of the way as one of the pillars of the landing tipped forward and came crashing down, ripping up a great block of masonry from the floor of the landing. Other parts of the supporting structure began to crackle and burst asunder. A few more seconds...

"Run for it, sir!" Meech shouted.

* * * *

Ron heard the warning cry of the robot as though through a long and narrow tube. He lay in the middle of the stair landing, propped up on one elbow and he was suddenly aware that there were no more shots. What was happening? He staggered to his feet but his joints pained him and every breath came close to making him faint. He answered the call but all he could manage was a short, croaking bleat. Meech was shouting to him to run up the stairs—to go higher. Why?

He felt the floor under his feet begin to tremble. He drew back when he saw the falling support pillar, and simultaneously a crack appeared in the floor. He finally understood what was going on. The steady firing had leached the masonry of its strength. Any second now the floor under him could shatter into powder and drop into the depths below.

He started to run. With every step he took it seemed as though a needle were shooting up through the soles of his feet clear to his ankles. He made a weak jump across the molten path that cut across the floor at the left end of the landing, and finally reached the steps above. Without looking back he climbed the undamaged staircase. As he looked up ahead it seemed impossible that he would get any farther than 1 or 2 more levels.

But far above him he could see Lofty Patterson leaning over a railing and waving at him. He couldn't make out what he said but near him he saw the pale oval of the strange face he had observed before all the confusion started.

It was at that moment that the stair landing behind him collapsed. Ron froze for a moment in breathless suspense as the masses of wood and masonry went crashing down through the levels below. The supporting walls failed to withstand the strain of the impact. Cracks appeared and soon the next landing down began to yield. And so it went like a chain reaction. For several minutes the towering stairwell was filled with deafening thunder. Down in the main hall a mountain of smoking rubbish piled up, burying the strangers who had caused the disaster. Below Ron's position the stairwell yawned empty—an empty shaft.

Where was Meech?

Suddenly Ron feared for the robot. He had been down there somewhere when he had shouted his warning to him. It seemed impossible to Ron that he could have reached the ground floor in time and come up one of the other staircases. He must be buried down there along with the enemy. Those tons of debris could even crush as sturdy an object as Meech the robot.

He was about to use his micro-transceiver to contact Meech when the stair under him began to tremble. A single stone pulled loose from the dangling step immediately below and plummeted down toward the heap of rubbish. Ron realized that the rest of the stairs had become unstable. If he stood around here much longer he would take the plunge like the strangers—and perhaps like Meech.

He clambered up farther, grabbing the stair rail and pulling himself along. As he looked up above he saw that Lofty was still up there with his unknown companion and was beckoning to him. He didn't know what they wanted. Behind him another part of the staircase fell into the depths. If he didn't hurry the whole disintegration would overtake him. Dredging up the last reserves of energy from his overtaxed body he struggled upward and just when he reached the stairs leading to the 8th floor the remains of the stairway between the 6th and 7th levels crashed down the shaft.

As he hurried up the steps and around the stair-landings he saw the additional cracks appearing in the walls around him and knew that the entire building was in danger of breaking asunder. Now he understood what Lofty and his companion were trying to signal to him. There was no way now of eluding the catastrophe. The way below them was cut off. Who could know what it looked like in the other stairwells? They only had one small chance left.

Ron stopped again, realizing that too much delay could be fatal, but his life would be forfeited anyway if he couldn't contact Larry. He pressed the release of his wrist transceiver and sent Larry the code signal. He was indescribably relieved when he heard him answer at once.

"Use the aircar, Larry!" he gasped into the wrist mike. "Come up the street side of the tower and you'll see us looking out one of the windows somewhere between the 10th and 20th floors. Come close in so you can pick us up—do you read me?"

"I read you!" came the answer.

As Ron moved onward he placed one foot in front of the other with a mechanical motion born of sheer desperation.

* * * *

Larry had started into the tower when he heard the hissing and thundering of the thermo-guns but he got no farther than the first flight of stairs before he realized that it would be careless to leave his station outside in the street. He had seen the *Victory* fade to a glistening point in the sky and he knew that for an indefinite period they would be left here to their own resources.

In spite of his burning impatience he had to go outside again. Out on the street everything was quiet so all he could do was take cover and wait. To the north he heard the din of heavy missile fire suddenly stop. The enemy had realized that the *Victory* had gotten away.

Then he picked up Ron Landry's emergency call. Although Larry had no idea of what was at stake, he dove into the aircar. Guiding it out of the niche he rose up the street side of the tower as instructed and kept peering through the windshield in search of Ron and Lofty and the robot. A few minutes passed without results. Larry hovered between the 10th and 20th levels, drifting back and forth, up and down, until finally he thought he saw an irregularity in the smooth wall. The irregularity turned out to be somebody's head. He saw an arm waving at him frantically.

He shot ahead and came to a stop a few seconds later next to the window. The starboard edge of the craft was against the wall and aligned with the ledge. The hatch swung open but somebody had forgotten to raise the window far enough and it shattered the pane. Larry saw 3 men waiting inside. He recognized Ron and Lofty but the third was a stranger—baldheaded and suffering from obvious overweight. No doubt an Azgon. Meech was missing.

Ron helped the Azgon onto the windowsill, after which he simply gave him a push. The unwieldy native cried out in terror as he tumbled into the aircar. Lofty followed him and Ron brought up the rear. He was breathing hard when he got in and closed the hatch behind him. "Get going!" he gasped.

Larry pulled the craft away from the wall of the building. "Where is Meech?" he asked.

"Lost!" came the curt answer.

It came as a shock to Larry. If they had lost Meech then their situation on Azgola was a bit worse than he had thought. Also, he had taken a liking to the robot. But he asked no further questions. Since Ron had given him no indication of what course to follow, he flew along northward over the broad plaza.

"There it goes!" shouted Ron.

When Larry turned around he saw him looking out the rear window while pointing toward the tower. A great crack appeared in the face of the building. Larry could see it lengthen and widen even as he looked. A huge section of masonry came loose from the wall and even before it fell to the street the entire structure began toppling. Moments later it crashed with a thunderous impact into the street. A cloud of dust towered upward and obscured the scene of the destruction.

Ron turned around slowly and wiped the sweat from his brow. "That was a little too close!" he muttered.

4/ THE PLAGUE OF "PLENTY"

Meanwhile the bald-headed fat man had managed to work himself into the seat next to Larry.

"Do you know of a safe place in the city or anywhere around here?" Ron asked him in Arkonide.

The man turned toward him wearily. "What kind of safety do you mean?" he inquired.

"You have seen that there are many men who are after us," Ron answered. "I'd like to get some information from you before I run into them again."

"I don't know those people," said the fat man. "I've never seen them before. They certainly are not Azgons and I don't know what they want here."

Larry took the time to have a closer look at the man beside him since controlling the flight of the aircar wasn't as difficult now. The first thing that was obvious about him was that he had evidently not washed in a number of weeks. Yet he had the mannerism of a man who was conscious of his importance. There was a certain richness in the appearance of his clothing which consisted of an unusual combination of trousers, shirt and a cloak-like mantle or shawl. At any rate it seemed that he hadn't taken his clothes off for at least a month.

"Alright then," said Ron, continuing after a moment. "Whoever the strangers may be—we're looking for someplace where we can talk for at least an hour."

The Azgon thought for half a minute or so. "Let's fly to the Central Plaza," he suggested finally. "When we're in the centre of the square we'll have a clear field of vision in all directions."

Ron nodded appreciatively. "You're very shrewd. The pilot is sitting next to you. Just tell him where you want to go."

* * * *

The Central Plaza was the masterpiece of an architect who must have envisioned a higher level of advancement for his race. At present it appeared to be somewhat ostentatious with its imposing huge columns in the centre, which were in gross contrast to the narrow-faced old houses encircling the area. But one day there would be modern business buildings and palatial department stores in the place of the little houses and then the grandeur and beauty of the Plaza would come into a proper focus.

Once the aircar had landed, Ron immediately opened the door and got out.

The Azgon turned imploringly to Larry. "I'd appreciate it," he said, still breathing heavily, "if you would just let me sit here. Believe me—every movement I make requires a terrible effort."

Larry nodded amiably. "I don't think anybody's going to object to that. It's just as easy to talk to you through the open hatch." He opened the door on his side and also got out.

Meanwhile, Ron had taken a walk around the centre column in order to make a survey of the Plaza. When he came back he looked thoughtful and scratched his head.

"One thing's for sure," he said in a low tone to Larry. "As soon as we see the first hostile aircraft we'll have to shoot out of here. This big monument here is such a perfect landmark that they could even close us in with an old-fashioned howitzer in a matter of seconds."

Larry nodded in agreement. "Let's hope our portly friend can make it brief. He should be able to tell us in a few words what's happened here."

Lofty Patterson sauntered up to them. "Sure is a great place here," he commented in his typically

high-pitched voice. "That is, if your enemy is going to sneak up on you on foot. Otherwise we're sitting ducks." He seemed to share their uneasiness. "Tell you what," he suggested, "I'm not too interested in the politics of this situation—so while you talk to the Azgon I'll do a little reconnoitring, just for security coverage."

Ron agreed to this and he and Larry returned to the aircar. They sat down in front of the low open hatch so that they could talk comfortably to the Azgon.

Ron came straight to the point. "Something very unusual has happened on Azgola in the past few years or months or weeks—we don't know for sure how long a time this has been going on. Are you able to explain anything about it?"

The Azgon shook his head in slow deliberation. "No, I can only describe the events as I experienced them or as they were reported to me. Let me start from the beginning. My name is Bladoor. In the government of His Majesty, I was a minister concerned with labour and public welfare. I'm telling you this so that you will understand that I had free access to all the information.

"Almost exactly 9 weeks ago we observed an alien spacecraft as it approached our planet. It was comparatively a small ship. It landed on the continent we call Doorhadas where there are practically no settlements and of course no spaceport facilities. It landed on a wide grassy plain without any attempt to request a landing permit. By the time the news of its arrival reached Timpik, it had long since taken off again, as we later found out. But some days later another ship came and landed in the same place—only this one was a veritable giant. As in the case of the first ship, nobody came out of it. The vessel simply sat there and we assume that in the meantime it has also taken off again and disappeared."

You assume that?" asked Ron, amazed. "You don't know for sure?"

"No," said Bladoor. "I see that you don't quite understand this. You have to consider our situation here. We still use sailing ships to cross the oceans. Although we live in an age of steam power we don't even have the fuel you people refer to as coal. If a ship has a steam engine to drive it we still can't load it with enough wood to burn so that it can cross the sea without extra help from sails. So a journey across the ocean in the area we're talking about would take 4 to 5 weeks. We received notice of the first ship's arrival about 4½ weeks after the fact. It remained on Doorhadas for about 2 days and we didn't know it had taken off again until 4 days after we received the news of its arrival. And again 3 weeks later—or about 8 weeks after news of the first landing—we learned about the arrival of the space giant. We waited for further reports but we heard nothing more."

"But something else happened. Suddenly we ceased to be hungry and with the passage of time our satiety was complete. We not only *felt* full—we *were* full. Our weight increased, which affected all Azgons without exception. Daily increases of 5 to 7 pounds were not unusual. We didn't know what was causing it and we began to be frightened. But we couldn't help ourselves; we just grew fatter and heavier. The people could barely support themselves on their legs. Finally when they wanted to leave their houses they had to crawl on their hands and knees. At last they realized that they really didn't have to move about at all. By some mysterious means they received nourishment. They didn't have to worry anymore about earning money for food. There was no longer any need for leaving their houses. So they stayed home. The streets of the cities and villages became empty. All traffic ceased. What's more—all activity of any kind on Azgola died out entirely. Azgola is now a dead planet—at least in that sense—and nobody knows how much longer it will continue this way." He finally stopped because he was breathing hard. It had cost him a great effort to talk so much.

"Why is it," asked Ron, "that *you* are still this active? True, you're fatter than you ever were before but

you're far from being the size of some of your people we've seen already. How were you protected from this plague?"

Bladoor waved his hands helplessly. "I don't know," he said uncertainly. "During those days when the calamity first began I was very much occupied with important work. I was isolated day and night in my office and took no heed of what was happening outside. I only became aware that something was wrong when one morning my ring for a servant went unanswered. So I went out and then I saw the whole mess. Misshapen and repulsive fat men were actually rolling in the halls of the government building. It was an effort for me to even recognize some of my colleagues. By the gods—how they had changed! I managed to get one of them to tell me the whole story. He told me more or less what I've described to you already. Naturally I was wondering how I had been spared from this plague of corpulence but I couldn't think of any reason for it. All I could conclude was that my office must be especially shielded somehow. And that's why I chose to remain there. I didn't have to worry about food because I felt satisfied all of the time—although perhaps not to the same extent as the others.

"So I waited and with the passage of time I noticed that I too was gaining weight although not as rapidly as the others. From my window, hour by hour, I could see the streets becoming more deserted. I experienced many moments of desperation. But then I told myself that sometime or other someone would have to come to clear up this mystery. I continued to wait and finally you came!"

Ron pondered the information he had received. "What seems to me to be the main question is: in what way was your office different from that of the other minister you said you talked to?"

An idea had come to him which he took at first to be ridiculous but he finally decided that nothing could be overlooked until somebody came up with an explanation for this strange phenomenon. Could the air of the planet be filled with some kind of nourishing substance? Or was this whole thing due to some completely new and unknown effect? Did the 2 spaceships that had been observed have something to do with it? Might there be places on Azgola where the plague—if that's what it was—had not yet struck and where the people were still normal?

Apparently the question Ron had put to him was not difficult for Bladoor to answer. "In the first place I'm very sensitive to sounds," he explained. "As soon as I hear the slightest strange sound it affects my power of concentration. So that's why I have quadruple doors in my office. Secondly I love fresh air but I'm allergic to dust. That's why the screens on my windows have an exceptionally fine mesh. Otherwise I believe the only other thing that's different is the office furniture but I suppose that's..."

Ron leapt to his feet excitedly. "No, that's not important! You're right—the extra doors and the fine-mesh screens are the important difference. That's how you blocked out the food substance... at least to some extent."

"Food substance?" inquired Bladoor, mystified.

Ron was still standing in front of him and staring at him. "Yes! Don't you understand? The stuff must be flying around in the air. Lord knows what it can be. But when your people breathed it in they lost all trace of their feelings of hunger. In fact they were saturated—overfed! That's why they fattened up so fast and became so heavy that they couldn't move."

Bladoor stared back in amazement. "Yes! Yes!" he stammered. "Now I understand! But how could the substance get into the air? You have to remember that there are more than 2 million inhabitants on Azgola. It would take a stupendous number of tons of this material if it were to be distributed in the atmosphere sufficiently to keep 2 million people continuously satiated!"

Ron smiled. "There are methods you have probably never heard about. If such a food substance exists then it certainly wouldn't be difficult for its manufacturer to inject a sufficient quantity into the atmosphere." He shook his head. "No, the big question is why. Could it be a new form of attack that's supposed to precede an invasion of the planet? Or is there some reason behind it that we haven't guessed so far? If anybody could answer me that one..."

He was interrupted as Lofty appeared from behind the pillared monument. "I don't know," he said gravely, "it's nothing definite but I think I may have seen some movement in one of the streets."

Ron nodded to him. "OK, Lofty—we're getting out of here as soon as possible. Just keep on the lookout."

When Lofty returned to his post, Ron queried the Azgon again. "Do you think it's possible to locate a seaworthy sailing ship?"

Bladoor shrugged. "The ship isn't the problem," he answered. "The harbour of Timpik is about 20 km southeast from here and you'd certainly find a great number of oceangoing ships there but finding a crew would be another matter. There are no able-bodied seamen available now."

"I think we can take care of that ourselves," said Ron. "We should be able to navigate a medium-sized sailing ship across the sea. Unfortunately the aircar here is not designed for long-range flights. We should have used a Quad instead of this vehicle and then we'd be better off."

"But don't forget one thing!" warned Bladoor.

"What's that?"

"This calamity can strike you as well as us. If the substance really is in the air, then you are breathing it in the same as we are. Within a few days you could be just as misshapen and helpless as my own people who have had to crawl into their houses."

Ron admitted that he hadn't thought of this. Of course there was such a danger. They might have to figure on also being incapacitated within a few days. But by that time they would have had to discover where this unusual stuff came from and who this raving enemy was who attacked them.

He went to check on Lofty and found him crouched down by the steps of the pillar pedestal. He was still looking eastward intently.

"Anything new?" Ron asked him.

Lofty shook his head. "No but I have an uneasy feeling. Something isn't right over there."

Ron followed Lofty's gaze to where several streets converged into the plaza. He could see quite a distance without obstruction but the streets were empty. There was nothing anywhere of a suspicious nature to be seen.

"We're getting out of here, Lofty," he said. "Let's go!"

Lofty sighed and got up. "Sounds like a good idea."

When they came around the monument to the aircar they found Larry already at the flight controls. Bladoor was leaning back exhausted in the seat beside him. Ron caught himself glancing around in search of Meech Hannigan but then he remembered that they had 'lost' him. Ron let Lofty get in first and the smaller and older man swung nimbly into the rear seat. As Ron started to follow him—it happened.

Suddenly the air was filled with the thunder of a mighty voice. It came as such a shock of surprise that Ron didn't catch the first few words: "...a force 15 times superior to yours. This is Garathon, Commander of spaceship *Garath 43*. Surrender, Terrans, or you are lost!"

Now suddenly Ron had the whole picture as though someone had pulled a blindfold from his eyes. The unseen speaker spoke Arkonide. Considering that plus the fact that his name was Garathon and his ship was the *Garath 43*, only one conclusion could be drawn. He knew now who the unknown assailants were in the tower who had tried to finish them off. They were somewhat different in appearance than others of their kind he had seen before but they still had the same mode of operation as ever.

So that was it—the Springers had their hands in the action here on Azgola!

5/ THE RACE WITH DEATH

Ron threw himself inside the aircar and the hatch closed automatically behind him. "Take off, Larry!" he yelled "As fast and low as you can!"

Larry had only been waiting for the order.

Meanwhile the amplified voice was still bellowing out across the plaza. Garathon announced that he had the whole area surrounded with a superior force and that his guns would destroy the Terran ship if it tried to escape. Ron well knew that he meant every word he said but too much was at stake here. At least he couldn't just throw up his hands on the basis of threats alone.

The small craft seemed to leap into the air. For what might have been a 10th of a second it poised motionlessly a few meters over the ground in the shadow of the pillared monument. Then Larry cut in his horizontal propulsion and the aircar picked up speed. At a high rate of acceleration it shot straight across the plaza and caused Bladoor to let out a choking gasp. The roofs of the small narrow houses came rushing toward them with frightening speed. It almost seemed as if Larry were determined to plough right into the midst of them. Ron winced instinctively and leaned to one side as though it might help him to avoid the crash but in the last second Larry pulled up hard. He grazed a rooftop and flew straight across one of the streets that Lofty had been watching.

When Ron glanced below he saw 2 things at once—the squat, massive disintegrator the Springers had cleverly concealed behind an out-jutting house wall and the pale, greenish flash that suddenly enhaloed the thing's deadly muzzle. In the same instant the aircar reared at a crazy angle and the bucking motion threw Bladoor forward so that his head struck against the windshield. His excited gasping and wheezing ceased at the same moment because the impact knocked him senseless.

"Engine's gone!" shouted Larry. "Can't hold her up here now!"

Ron forced himself to be calm. He needed just a few seconds to let Frank Bell know what had happened. He knew that he must be holding the *Victory* somewhere in an orbit around Azgola.

He yelled out instructions to Larry. "Stretch out your descent as far as you can!" Then he sent the code signal over his micro-transceiver. There was no time to wait for acknowledgement. He gave a swift report of the events in Timpik and concluded with a few brief orders: "Call in the *Vondar*, Frank! See if you can bail us out of this and tell Gerry Montini to give you a hand. We have to get out of here as fast as possible or we'll be in worse trouble. That is all. No confirmation required."

Larry could not hold their present altitude and the aircar began to drop. The disintegrator had reduced the propulsion section to powder. The only reason the craft was still airborne instead of dropping like a stone was its favourable aerodynamic design. He kept it on a straight course along the street and the rooftops seemed to rush toward him and past him and then to rise above him. For a few moments he could see into little windows to his right and left. He wasn't quite sure yet whether or not he had bypassed the Springers' blockade ring but the street was empty. He had long since left the disintegrator and its crew behind him.

"OK, put us down here!" ordered Ron.

Larry tried to nurse the craft down carefully. The windows to the right and left of him blurred into a blinking streak and it seemed for a moment that the ship was being responsive to the controls. But then there was something—a heavy updraft followed by an air pocket.

Larry cried out a warning. Ron grabbed his knees. The world around him turned into a crashing wave of thundering impact and shrieking metal. He was catapulted forward and struck his head against something hard. A searing pain shot through him and then everything went black.

* * * *

The *Victory* was orbiting Azgola at an altitude of 2500 km when Ron Landry's distress call came through. Frank Bell took action at once and Gerry Montini on board the *Vondar* was informed of the situation almost in a matter of seconds. Since there was no further contact with Ron, this passed the command to Gerry. He decided to have the *Victory* wait until the *Vondar* could join it, inasmuch as his own vessel was standing off from Azgola at a distance of 8 light-hours. He prepared for a transition and soon jumped the great gap in seconds.

Frank saw the shimmering speck of the *Vondar* emerge from the void and before he could turn to speak to one of his officers the spacecom came to life. It was Gerry Montini. "*Vondar* here," he said curtly. "Send me your orbit coordinates, Frank. We'll get going below as soon as possible."

The course data were already stored in the positronic registers of the astrogation section. All Frank Bell had to do was press a few buttons, which instructed the computer to code the data and beam the information across. A few seconds later, when Montini interrogated his Nav Section to see if all necessary data were present for continuing the flight, he received a green signal.

He had no sooner joined the other ship in orbit than he began to move on. Without needing to be told, Frank Bell understood that he was to follow. He kept a distance of 30 km as the swift descent began. As

the 2 ships shot toward the surface of the small planet their heat shields and collision screens glowed brightly due to an ionization of the molecules of the Azgola atmosphere. Then they caught sight of the coastline—the landmass on whose eastern perimeter the most important city of Timpik was located.

From Frank Bell's previous report Gerry Montini knew that the Springers had a heavy arsenal of remote-controlled missiles at their disposal. He did not make the mistake of immobilizing himself by making a landing first. He maintained an altitude of 10 km while holding a velocity of Mach 5, darting over Timpik with the *Victory* in tight formation behind him. Automatic cameras were photographing the entire area. Within fractions of seconds the terrain pictures were re-translated into the positronic sensors which had been programmed beforehand with regard to what was being sought. The scanning analysis system processed more than 10,000 photos in half a minute.

Then Gerry heard the computer's response: "Nothing of an unusual nature. Everything quiet."

He hadn't counted on that. No more than 15 minutes had passed since Ron Landry's distress call and some kind of *tracemust* have been left of the conflict that had occurred there. He repeated his question to the sensor computer and received the same answer.

Gerry turned in his chair and got up. The officers in the Control Central interrupted their activities to stare at him.

"Something smells, gentlemen!" he declared in his hard, high-pitched voice. "The Springers have dispersed so completely that even the sensor can't find a trace of them. They must have been pretty much in a hurry and that means just one thing: they're afraid that Ron and his men didn't come here alone—so they're expecting us."

"Double the crews at all gun positions! Tell the *Victory* to do the same thing and give them the status of the situation. Everything depends on our being prepared for any kind of trouble—which can happen any minute!"

As he turned back to his place he left behind him a murmur of voices as his officers transmitted the orders while their small intercom screens flickered busily. Gerry slipped into his seat, leaned back and observed the wide, glowing panob screens. The broad circle of the city lay peacefully beneath the ship and no movement was discernible.

Behind him the low-ceilinged chamber of the Control Central had become silent again. All orders had been issued and the crews of both ships were on combat standby. But nothing happened. A quarter of an hour went by without even a hint of any movement on Azgola. The only event was the call from Frank Bell at the end of 15 minutes. He was asking permission to make a landing but Gerry held off. He ordered another 15-minute waiting period. If nothing happened by then, both ships would make a simultaneous landing at the Timpik spaceport.

His own uneasiness grew as the minutes passed. The quarter hour was not completed before he agreed to land. In still closer formation the 2 ships moved away from the city in a northern direction. Beyond the town they lowered their altitude and approached the big empty spaceport at a glide angle. As far as any hostile activity was concerned, the positronic photo-sensors were completely quiet. No trace of the Springers was detected. Gerry Montini considered it to be purposeless to continue under such a tight mode of security so the auto-positronic nav-system was instructed to set the *Vondar* down on the field as quickly as possible.

Air-search scouting vehicles were readied at the exit locks. Gerry didn't want to lose any time. No one

knew what had happened to Ron Landry. However, the *Victory* had made a plus-or-minus 2-km error in tracking the spot where his last message had come from. It was somewhere in the middle of the city and Gerry was sure he could find some clues if he took a close enough look around.

The *Vondar* came to earth, followed closely by the *Victory*, approximately in the same location where the latter vessel had been when the invisible enemy struck. Gerry put out an order that the ships' engines were to be kept on a takeoff readiness standby during the whole time of the mission on Azgola.

Which was a fortunate decision.

Because the warning system only picked up the swarm of long-range missiles after they had come over the far edge of the spaceport. The enemy had been clever enough to make an early warning impossible. The rockets had been guided low above the houses of the city so that they were far inside the critical range of the tracking equipment by the time they came onto the radar horizon.

It meant that the *Victory* and the *Vondar* would have to take the first volley. And if their defence screens managed to hold up under it they might be able to take off before the next group hit. Gerry Montini grasped the situation immediately and hit the telecom switch that gave him a contact with the *Victory*.

"All hands hit the deck—take cover!" his voice shrilled over multiple speaker systems. "Grab anything that's solid!"

Behind him was a creaking of chairs, the sound of hasty footsteps. Then everything was quiet. Seven out of 12 seconds allowed by the warning system had ticked away. Gerry made a quick inspection of his surroundings and saw that his men were in secure positions. He braced his feet against the flight console, knowing that his pilot's chair was solidly mounted to the deck. As long as he kept his weight against the adjustable backrest of his chair he would be secure enough. Involuntarily he held his breath.

Then the missiles struck, far too swiftly to be seen optically on the panoramic screens. One-half second before impact the warning system emitted a short shrill howl and even before it finished the panoramic view gallery flared up with a blinding white light as the first impact sent a vicious jolt through the ship.

As far as the stability of his position was concerned, Montini was in for a surprise. His legs were simply knocked to one side and something lifted him out of his chair as though gravity had stopped. He had a split-second clear impression of equipment cabinets and consoles standing motionlessly below and around him as if he were suspended in the air. Then a second jolt slammed him to the deck where he struck his head hard against metal plates. For one long moment the rapid succession of explosions came to him only faintly as if through a long and narrow tunnel. The roaring inside his skull was drowning out everything else.

After that Gerry's vision cleared—in fact brilliantly. This was because the light gleaming from the big viewscreens flooded the Control Central with an almost blinding intensity. While supporting himself on his hands and knees, he looked around him and saw each individual dust mote starkly outlined across the deck.

A new explosion knocked the *Vondar* on its side and Gerry was jerked in the direction of the fall but he managed to remain on his hands and knees. When he saw the sudden red glow outside he knew that the defence screens were loading up to the limit of their capacity. If the bombardment didn't stop soon...

The next explosion caught Gerry in the middle of such thoughts and he was simply picked up and slammed back flat on the deck again. His breath went out of him while coloured rings danced in front of

his eyes. There was a strobe-like flickering of reddish light in the Control Central. Streaks and bands of red-glowing brilliance danced from the viewscreens.

Gerry leapt to his feet, not caring whether he was holding onto something or not. Feeling somewhat dizzy he staggered to his seat again. The telecom was still on but the little video-receiver had tipped over. When he hastily set it upright again the screen was grey and lifeless. The video portion of contact with Frank Bell had been knocked out.

"*Vondar*calling*Victory* !" he shouted hoarsely. "*Vondar*calling..."

"This is the*Victory* ," answered a voice that didn't sound any steadier than his. "Frank Bell here. How does it look over there with you?"

Gerry sighed in relief. If that was Frank's only worry then things must not have gone so badly for the *Victory* . "Still here," he answered. "We can still take off. Are you ready over there?"

"Any time," was Frank's prompt reply.

"Then let's go!" yelled Gerry. "It won't be more than a minute or minute and a half till the next salvo. You'll have to dig out on full power!"

"I read you, sir."

As the contact was cut off the speaker crackled noisily. Behind Gerry, the First Officer had already given the order for takeoff. The light hum of the engines which had permeated the ship before now grew to a vibrating thunder. The panob screens were still 'blind' because dust clouds raised by the explosions still obscured the field of vision. Gerry only knew that they had left the ground when the shrill takeoff warning sounded.

It was not any too reassuring because he didn't know yet how much damage the last enemy rockets had caused. The engines seemed to be normal but it could be that they were not delivering their former maximum power. Which was what the *Vondar* needed in order to escape the next attack. The dust curtain began to thin out and Gerry could see outlines of the barracks buildings on the southern edge of the field. A few moments later the outlines of the city of Timpik appeared in the distance. In an opposite direction was the spherical hull of the *Victory* , which was ascending at the same speed as the *Vondar* .

Again Gerry Montini breathed a sigh of relief. The speed with which the swirling dust masses disappeared along with the wide stretch of the spaceport and the outlines of the city below was gratifying. The engines didn't appear to have suffered greatly under the bombardment.

Then he saw the next batch of rockets rise above the city. Now everything depended on just one question: which had the greater acceleration capacity, the 2 spaceships or the jet-propelled enemy missiles? The latter had the highest initial velocity but if the *Vondar* and the *Victory* could reach that speed before the impact, all would be saved.

The men in the Control Central waited for Gerry's orders but he only stood there motionlessly and watched the screen. There was nothing to say. All they could do was wait. The hostile missiles were approaching with agonizing slowness. The surrounding sky lost its milky-blue brilliance and turned to a deeper violet. Stars began to appear. The deep blackness of outer space finally replaced the last trace of colour.

At an altitude of 80 km above the surface of Azgola the *Vondar* was steadily picking up speed. Close by, the *Victory* held the same pace. The rocket swarm was still 132 km away. But its velocity was greater so far and it had not yet been decided whose propulsion system would win the race.

Then came the moment in which the positronicon reported that the rate of closure was lessening. The rockets were still approaching but whereas before their rate of closure had been 200 m/sec it had now dropped to 180 m/sec. And it continued to decrease.

Gerry tightened his grip on the edge of the flight console. This still didn't mean salvation. If the missiles only had an approach rate of 1 m/sec they could still reach their targets. Just now they were mere tiny light-points in the depths of the void—a full swarm of them, more than their screens could handle even if they had been intact.

170 m/sec... 150...

Time dragged like a sluggish fluid. Tension grew in the Control Central. The distance was now only 67 km!

Then the positronicon was heard from once more. Out of the speakers came a long-drawn sharp buzzing sound. Gerry whirled around, realizing what had happened before the computer announced it.

"Approach rate negative!"

The words sounded flat and impersonal as one might expect from a soulless machine—but they indicated that the two Terran ships had won the race with death. The Springer rockets were falling back. Their jets couldn't match the engines of the *Vondar* and the *Victory*.

Gerry took just a few seconds to let his tension subside and to drink in the sensation of boundless relief. Then he sat down again and turned his flight chair to look at his officers.

"Gentlemen, we made it!" he announced. "Direct the auto-positronics to go into a stable orbit at 15,000 km from the surface. We'll remain there long enough to repair damages and make further observations of the planet. Our instruments have picked up enough data in the meantime concerning those enemy rockets. Issue orders to have all battle positions on standby and to prepare the anti-missiles for launching. We'll not be running from them a second time."

6/ VENGEANCE OF GARATHON

It was the first time in his 'life' that Meech Hannigan was forced to marshal all of his strength. Even in the most dangerous situations he had always gotten by previously while only using a fraction of the power built into his mechanical frame. But in this case he had to dredge up every erg of energy in him. If he were to escape the collapse of this tremendous structure he would have to move with the speed of a racecar.

He knew that Ron Landry had reached safety and he had overheard the radio instructions to Larry Randall to come up the tower wall in the aircar. He had also foreseen more swiftly than anybody that the stability of the entire building was affected by the disintegration of the staircase. He leapt down the stairs

and reached the main foyer just in time. The stair landing where Landry had tried to hold out under fire from the aliens finally gave way and the process of general collapse began.

After he reached the street he sprinted along in the shadow of the house walls. Nobody saw him. Larry Randall was already manoeuvring his aircar up the wall of the tower. Far above he could see 2 heads looking out a window—Lofty and Ron. Their full attention was on the rising vehicle.

Meech never did anything by instinct or unconsciously. During the few seconds since his flight from the tower an extensive positronic program had been developed within him. He had made a summary estimate of the situation according to the information he had up to that moment. He had arrived at the conclusion that whoever the aliens might be they must have a well-equipped base somewhere on Azgola. Now that the *Victory* had taken off and withdrawn from the scene, this was what Ron Landry and his companions were up against, with nothing but their hand weapons and the built-in weaponry of the aircar. It was highly probable that they would be in trouble before the *Victory* came back.

In such a case it might be well for one of their number to remain undiscovered. Neither Ron Landry nor the enemy would be aware of his presence. Meech was sure Ron would think the collapsing tower had buried him. The enemy, who had lost a number of their men in the incident, had no less reason to doubt that one of the opposition had also been killed. So when the tower collapsed in thundering ruins and raised a huge cloud of dust behind him, Meech Hannigan became an unknown factor in the equation affecting events on Azgola. When he had taken pains not to be observed during his escape, this was his sole intention.

He finally saw the aircar flying along over the street in a northerly direction. He waited and watched it for awhile because by its slow pace it was obvious that Ron hadn't yet decided where to go. This proved to be a valid conclusion when seconds later the aircar turned west into a side street. Just before it passed from his sight, Meech noticed that it started to pick up speed.

But robots are not dependent solely upon the 5 human senses and in fact the word 'sense' in itself must be modified in its meaning when applied to a robot. It would be difficult to compare the combined optical-positronic faculties of such 'sensory' equipment with human vision or to think of a process of scanning images produced by complex lenses on synthetic fluorescent retinas as a 14 sense" of sight at all. At any rate, Meech also had a brain section which could detect radiations emanating from any modern energy-generating source. Of course even for him it would have been impossible to quickly detect the presence of a gasoline engine or electric generator unless he saw it or heard it or was able to 'smell' it, so to speak, by making an analysis of exhaust products. But he could detect any small fusion engine such as was used in aircars and other vehicles because of its radiation—in fact around corners or even 10 corners, as clearly as a man might see a bright lantern in a very dark street.

So Meech was soon aware of the fact that the aircar turned again toward the south. He was able to trace it although its speed had increased considerably. But wherever it flew, Meech would be able to get to that place eventually.

He got underway again, this time combining both speed and caution. While satisfying both of these requisites he increased his pace to about 20 km/hr. If Ron's vehicle was going to land anywhere in the city he figured he'd not be more than 15 minutes behind it.

The radiations from the fusion motor gradually became weaker. Meech estimated that he would still be able to track the emanations for another 12 to 15 minutes if the craft continued at the same speed and in the same direction. Beyond that point he would be forced to rely on other methods—perhaps less precise and more time-consuming—but he had no doubt that he would eventually catch up with Ron

Landry.

Fortunately he soon noticed that the aircar had ceased to recede from him. On the contrary it seemed to be approaching him slowly. Meech's logic told him that what was really happening was that the vehicle had stopped somewhere and that the rate of 'approach' he was sensing was due to his own progress as he moved swiftly past the silent houses and through the empty streets.

He maintained his pace until he reached a street intersection and suddenly realized that the aircar wasn't the only source of radiations that were impinging upon his sensors. He made a quick analysis and concluded that the new diffusion field he detected was also being generated by fusion motors. The sources were still quite a distance away but spread out on a wide front from east to west. Inasmuch as there was only one Terran vehicle on Azgola, the whole picture began to look precarious.

It only took Meech about a millisecond to decide that he would not warn Ron. He could detect that the Terran vehicle was encircled and in such a case he would not be able to help Ron. Instead he threw away his caution and began to move at the highest speed his mechanical body could develop. It would have been an unusual sight for anyone to have observed the robot darting through the streets at somewhere around 35 km/hr.

He too heard the amplified voice on the loudspeaker and he intercepted the emergency call that Ron sent out to the *Victory*. He calmly realized that the identity of the enemy force was a Springer clan. Why the ones seen on Azgola did not have the same appearance as others of their kind was a question Meech relegated to some later deliberation.

Soon thereafter he perceived that Ron Landry and his companions must have fallen into the hands of the enemy. The disintegrator salvo echoed loudly in his energy sensor and the crash of the aircar against the pavement would have been clearly audible even in human ears. But Meech's sensitive acoustical receptors could also detect that the aircar had not crashed from too high an altitude and that therefore the Terrans were probably still alive. The Springers would take them with them and so Meech would have to follow them.

Temporarily he took cover in the shaded portico of a house and waited to see what the Springers' next move would be. He could sense that their aircraft took flight almost immediately and receded toward the South. In that direction the city outskirts were not very far so it meant that the Springer stronghold must be out in the country. Meech knew that he would soon lose the direct trace he had on the moving air vehicles but if he kept on toward the South he would have to eventually pick up the radiations of other equipment such as a nuclear generator or a hypercom transmitter, which would show him the way much more clearly than the relatively small fusion engines.

The first thing he did was to inspect the area of the ambush. He located the central plaza and in a side street he discovered the wreck of the Terran aircar, which was no longer usable. Just as he was about to start southward, the *Vondar* and the *Victory* appeared over the city. He observed their manoeuvres and when they landed at the spaceport his sensor equipment enabled him to be an indirect witness to the desperate struggle of both ships to escape destruction there. He made a mental note not to count on help from the Terran spaceships in the immediate future. The Springers on Azgola were too heavily armed.

So he finally set out toward the south. The clear, unemotional logic of the robot told him that the situation for the Terrans on this planet wasn't any too promising.

* * * *

Ron Landry was driven to consciousness by excruciating pain. He wanted to leap into the air but something held him fast. Someone close to him laughed derisively. This angered him so much that he forced his eyes open although the lids seemed to be heavy shields of lead.

At first what he saw was blurred. It took time for the outlines to come into focus. There was a roaring and buzzing pain in his skull but more than this it was sheer rage that dominated him as he stared at the sneering man in front of him.

It seemed to him that he had seen this face somewhere before but it could be a false impression. The Springer, if that's what he was, wore no beard and his face was puffy and bloated. In fact his whole body appeared to be affected by the local plague of fatness. He sat on a massive chair behind a small desk on which a switchboard was mounted. Ron didn't know what the control panel was for and he cared less. He made a second attempt to stand up.

The Springer leaned forward slightly and moved one of the switches. In the same moment Ron let out a yell. It was as if someone had shoved a red-hot needle into the back of his skull. The pain was so intolerable that he drifted back into unconsciousness for a few minutes.

When he came to again the Springer still had his hand on the switch. "Take it easy and nothing will happen to you," he said. "You know I have to be on my guard because you seem to be a violent man."

Ron cursed his weakness. It was almost impossible for him to even turn his head. Within his range of vision he could see that the room was about 10 feet wide and perhaps only 6 or 7 feet deep on either side. To the right and left of the small desk or console were the grey cubicle cabinets containing the generators which were connected to the switchboard. When he also noticed several coloured wires extending from the generator boxes toward himself he suddenly knew who had given him the jolts of pain in his head.

Also there were no windows here. The light came from a row of bright blue glow tubes suspended from the ceiling.

Ron glared at the Springer. "Where are my men?" he asked.

"None of your business," came the answer. The man spoke softly but he kept a sharp eye on his prisoner. Ron made a note of this.

"Are you Garathon?" he inquired.

"Yes... is the name familiar to you?"

"It is... from whenever it was that you so courageously attacked us with your superior forces."

It struck again—the terrible burning pain in his head. He had not seen the Springer move the button switch. The shock came with surprising swiftness but this time he remained conscious. His anger kept him awake.

"Let's have no insults," admonished Garathon with a grin. "By the way, I happen to be a cousin of

Alboolal. You remember Alboolal, don't you?"

Ron searched his memory because the name sounded familiar. He had been involved with a Springer named Alboolal somewhere in the past. In fact quite awhile back. It must have been... yes, it had been that time on Ghama, the water world where the Springers had captured some survivors of a space wreck. That is, a space wreck they had caused. Ron and Larry had put a stop to the activities of Alboolal and his clan. They had taken them prisoner and brought them to Terra. Probably the courts had sentenced them to no less than 20 years of forced labour so that they could make up for part of the damage they had caused.

Now Ron understood the connection here. Garathon was trying to avenge his cousin Alboolal. He knew he'd be lucky to ever get out of this prison. "Oh yes, I remember Alboolal," he retorted while managing a sarcastic smile. "Just now he must be asking himself if it's worth it to make attacks against Terran spaceships."

He knew that the red-hot pain would follow and he closed his eyes in anticipation of it. By concentrating he withstood it better than the previous 2 times. When he opened his eyes again he saw that the Springer's face was twisted with anger.

"I'll wipe that sneer off your face, Terran! You'll live to curse the day you captured Alboolal!" He quick calmed himself and leaned back in his chair. But his tone was derisive when he spoke again. "Of course I could remind you for the 3rd time that I will not tolerate any rebellious remarks and that you can only harm yourself if you keep on saying things I don't wish to hear—but I know it won't do any good."

Ron nodded. "Could be," he answered evenly. "But since you're so sure of yourself you'll no doubt be wanting to tell me what the Springers are doing on Azgola."

Garathon did not make up his mind at once. "It has to do with a major piece of business," he answered hesitantly. "I don't think you have to know more than that."

"I can see that," said Ron. "Business is so good that you've grown as fat as a Kalaan swamp-toad."

Garathon's hand shot forward and Ron saw that his outstretched fingers touched a different button this time. He tensed his muscles but something attached itself to both his arms and he was pulled down with irresistible force. He groaned aloud.

Garathon laughed and then became grave again. "As a matter of fact you're right. Our stay on Azgola has its unpleasant side. Its very irksome to put on so much weight but anyway our location is a fairly healthy one. We're not affected here as badly as the poor Azgons who can't even move anymore because of their fat."

Ron had to force himself to remain calm. "What is in the air?" he asked in a hard tone of voice.

Garathon seemed to be startled. "In the air...? Nothing. But I told you this is none of your business!"

"You jelly-bellied coward!" Ron snarled at him. He wanted an end to this unequal struggle—come what might. "Even in your own fortress you're afraid of us!"

Garathon leaned forward slowly. Far away, as though beyond the walls of the room, a mighty gong sounded. The ringing swelled inside Ron's head until his skull seemed ready to burst. Then something gave. In the next instant Ron was surrounded by nothing but night—the dark and soothing blackness of

night...

7/ DOOM-DUST MERCHANTS

The damages suffered by both spaceships proved to be fairly insignificant. As far as the defence screen generators were concerned all that was necessary was to give them half a day to build up again with the energy reserves.

Meanwhile the positronic sections of both Control Centres were busy tracing back the courses of the hostile missiles. Since the enemy had held their trajectories at a very low angle they had only been detected when close to their targets, so the data on hand were not complete. All Gerry Montini found out was that the rocket swarms had come from 2 different battery locations and that both bases were on the same continent where the Azgons had built their capital city.

Furthermore the astronomical sections of both ships were incessantly at work with the task of making observations of the planet's surface. Gerry was aware of the fact that he was taking a risk because Springer ships were probably somewhere in the vicinity and they wouldn't want anybody to discover their activities. But he also knew that his mission had turned out to be one of major importance—especially since it had suddenly become evident that the Springers had their hands in this affair on Azgola. Vital assignments were seldom without their element of risk. So this was the risk part and Gerry was taking the gamble.

The survey of Azgola's surface revealed that the largest continent embraced almost the entire northern hemisphere but it was practically uninhabited. Apparently the land there was so barren that the Azgons hadn't bothered with it. Wide stretches of the terrain gave back a pale yellow-green reflection as if from dry grass.

Gerry decided that since the Azgons had shown little interest in their largest land mass the Springers wouldn't have any particular preference for it. It was a wild guess with nothing to support it but Gerry decided to bank on it.

The *Victory* was instructed to remain behind in an orbit around Azgola while the *Vondar* prepared to make a second foray below. Gerry set his course so that he would avoid the more dangerous section of the planet's surface. The ship plunged downward almost vertically toward the northern continent.

A group of specialists was preparing to disembark.

* * * *

Meech Hannigan was on his long march.

The land was flat and offered a wide range of vision, which had both advantages and disadvantages. He

was equipped with an excellent optical system that was much more long-range than either Terran or Springer vision. He did not have to fear that anyone would take him by surprise out here but it would be natural for the terrain to be under tracking surveillance. Such tracking devices could see farther even than a robot and the flat land offered Meech no concealment.

At any rate he would be able to detect a radar sweep and then it would only be a question of whether he could disappear fast enough before the Springers became suspicious and came out looking for him. He had left the city far behind him. When he looked back all he could see was a few outlines of some of the tallest buildings above the horizon.

There were a number of roads which led southward out of Timpik but Meech avoided them. They offered even less protection than the open grasslands. He also noticed that the country was on a gradual down-slope—probably toward the sea. There was more of a salt tang to the air than he had detected farther north.

And there was something else he noticed. Under normal conditions his innards required a ventilation system. It was a simple matter to use the air itself as a gas coolant if it did not contain elements which might harm his complicated internal workings. Only in the vacuum of the outer void was Meech completely independent of his environment. His ventilation system was equipped with a number of filters which kept out impurities and which also cleaned themselves from time to time. However automatic the process it did not escape his positronic consciousness. Therefore he had noted that since his landing on Azgola the filters had seemed to need this self-cleaning more often than was normally the case. Of course it was understandable when one saw how muggy the atmosphere was and how the wind kept stirring up columns of dust. The only question was, where did all the dust come from? The grass under his feet was dry but it left no part of the ground uncovered. The ocean wasn't far away so the humidity content of the air should be considerable, as his instruments could detect. So why all the dust?

Meech was not aware of the Azgons' problem. He had not been present during the conversation between Ron Landry and Bladoor. Nevertheless a question took form somewhere in the midst of his data banks and his logic circuits. He wondered if the dust content of the air might have something to do with the corpulence of the Azgons. What would happen if the dust were in some way a nourishing substance?

The thought would only have been absurd to a human but Meech was not subject to any biases of opinion. He could only judge according to what had been dumped into his memory cells—which was more or less a form of pseudo-experience. He could imagine how it would be possible for someone to spray into the air some kind of nourishing fatty acid so that when people breathed it in they would get fat. Why couldn't something like this have happened on Azgola?

Of course it wasn't an easy question to answer so Meech tucked it away where he wouldn't forget it, until such time as he could obtain some further information about it.

Night came one hour later but it did not present an obstacle to Meech. His robotic vision functioned as well in the dark. He kept on heading directly south and finally, about 1½ hours after sundown, he detected the first traces of an alien energy source. It was almost on a direct line of his march. He only had to correct his course about 1 degree west and after that he remained keenly alert to any further signals from his energy sensors. That is, he activated a special circuit which gave priority to all reactions stemming from certain bio-mechanical organs.

Within a few minutes he was able to determine that at least 3 different energy sources lay ahead of him. They seemed to be arranged in some symmetric order in relation to each other. Meech was receiving a

strong output from one of them while the other two were weaker although clearly noticeable.

Here on Azgola it required no guesswork to figure out what lay ahead there in the darkness. The Azgons had no equipment that Meech could detect from a distance. Ron Landry had been forced to abandon his aircar back in Timpik. What did that leave?

The Springers!

Meech could tell that the ground under him and the air around him had become damp. The soil was spongier now as the grassland gave way to marshy terrain. It made no difference to him even though he was heavier than a man. He would sink more readily into a swamp but his strength outweighed the disadvantage. There was no bog or swamp that Meech couldn't have worked his way out of, so he kept on going.

Of course later he was forced to forge ahead more slowly. By now the energy radiations had become so strong that he estimated the nearest source to be less than 1 km away. But the Springers would have set up some kind of security system to prevent unauthorized persons from getting into their stronghold. So Meech cut off his special circuit and concentrated his attention on his immediate surroundings.

Seconds later he discovered a detection device that had been installed in the ground before him. All that was visible was a round little knoll, perhaps 1½ feet in diameter, which protruded no more than several inches above the surface of the marsh. It had 2 symmetrically opposed protuberances which looked like the spouts of old-fashioned coffee pots. Meech knew what they were for: they were lens hoods concealing transmitters and receptors of some kind of light beam such as infrared for example. Back on Earth the same principle was used to activate escalators and open doors in department stores. But here any beam interruption would probably set off an alarm system. The setup was simple but effective. If the infrared lamp under the knoll had not radiated a characteristic field, Meech would not have noticed it or considered this device to be dangerous.

He took considerable time to make a decision—that is, for him a 10th of a second was quite awhile. He could try to give the thing a wide berth but probably the Springers had their whole place surrounded by an interlinking series of infrared beams. He could also go over the dome-like hood through the dead space between receptors but maybe there was an additional arrangement that would activate an alarm if one were to step on the device. There were a number of other alternatives and Meech sifted them all through with the patient logic of a robot. Finally he decided in favour of the simplest of them all. He bent his knees deeply and then made a mighty jump.

* * * *

Garathon, leader of the stronghold on Azgola, left his work room where a few close-mouthed underlines had installed some very special devices for him. The other men from the clan of Garath knew nothing about Garathon's special form of amusement.

He went through the dim-lit corridor which connected his room to the rest of the base. The passage was subterranean for the same reason that the rest of the stronghold had been largely placed under ground. The only thing showing above the surface was a low dome, the top of which was no more than 5 meters over the level ground. The whole installation was a masterpiece which the architects of the clan had

completed in less than 7 days. Of course the facilities were a bit meagre where items of comfort were concerned but Azgola was strictly a matter of business. When a Springer was sufficiently enticed by a chance for profit he was always ready to dispense with many conveniences.

The air in the shaft was fairly humid and it was so warm that beads of sweat came out on Garathon's forehead long before he arrived at the messhall where he had asked his confidants to meet him. He cursed Azgola and the strange dust-spores that infested its atmosphere. Yet at the same time he remembered he had come here of his own free will—for the purpose of monetary gain.

In front of the messhall the passage opened up into a sort of foyer from which other corridors branched out in various directions. Garathon stopped for a moment to look about him, not without pride, into the maze of tunnels and passages which led to other halls and chambers. He was the master of all of this and when he went away from here he would be among the richest of Springers.

He opened the door to the messhall and stepped inside. The room had been planned to accommodate 50 men at a time. The base crew numbered 48. The benches and tables were vacant now except for one small area at the rear of the hall. Garathon approached his 4 confidants and greeted them silently with a wave of his hand. Groaning under his abnormal weight, he eased himself down on the bench.

"Well, we've got them now," he said.

Across from him sat Garhalor, a smaller and apparently younger man who had cut off his beard like all the rest—but in his case the luxurious hair that was customary among Springers was also missing. In reality Garhalor was a few years older than Garathon, his chief, and his words carried weight in their conferences.

"That's not the end of it yet," he replied to Garathon's opening remark. His expression was glum. "Do you think the Terrans are going to leave their men in the lurch? They won't take this lying down."

The man sitting next to Garhalor was Garrhegan, the youngest among them but also the biggest in physical proportions. He laughed comfortably. "I wouldn't worry too much about it," he said. "Their first two ships were taught a thing or two!"

Garhalor raised a warning hand. "Terra has more than 2 ships," he interjected. "And the Terrans are stubborn and tough. They won't give us any peace."

Garathon interrupted the discussion. "Garhalor is right. But we only need 10 or 12 more days to finish the installations that will be a continuing source of profit to us. Until then we have this stronghold and the 2 defence batteries, which should be enough for us and Galuik to keep the Terrans off our backs."

"That reminds me," said a 4th Springer named Garr. He was a medium-sized man of average appearance and was less influential here than the others. "During that operation in the city, Galuik's losses were pretty heavy..."

"Yes, and the Terrans only lost one!" added Garathon angrily.

"In any case he's got to have backup reserves. He won't be able to manage with what he has left."

Garathon decided without hesitation. "Send him 5 men. That will have to do."

Garr noted this on a piece of writing foil that he quickly took out of his pocket. He was in the habit of

noting down everything, even items that a child would be able to remember with ease.

"Let's get on with it," demanded Garathon. "What's the status of the collectors?"

The question was directed at the 5th Springer in the room. He sat at the table as though he were not a part of their group, which was partially true. Even his name, Lag-Garmoth, indicated that he belonged to another subordinate clan. Garathon had 'borrowed' him for this project because Lag-Garmoth was a biochemist and Garathon's clan could not supply any specialists of this type. Such a man was needed here on Azgola. In accordance with ancient ritual, Lag-Garmoth had been sworn to silence. In return he had been promised such a share in the profits that any Springer would have sold out his best friend to obtain it. In spite of this, Lag-Garmoth and Garathon couldn't stand each other. They were of the same age and of more or less the same degree of intelligence.

"They are coming along," answered the biochemist curtly. "I'll be ready at the appointed time."

"Not sooner?"

"No."

For the first time he looked at Garathon. The latter could read the warning in his eyes which told him he shouldn't dare to ask why. So he cancelled the question and turned to another line of inquiry.

"Do you have any new ideas about where this stuff could have come from?"

"The substance consists of spores from a species of moss," replied Lag-Garmoth, "which must be available in great natural quantity somewhere on Azgola. These spores contain a highly effective nutrient which finds its way into the breathing tubes and lining of the lungs. You might say this is a form of predigested nourishment. The stomach is not needed in the process of assimilation. The nutrients are immediately..."

"Alright, alright!" Garathon interrupted. "I was getting at something else. Is the moss related to other mosses on Azgola? You know we've been asking that question often enough."

Lag-Garmoth moved his right hand in a rocking motion as though to describe a ship at sea. "I don't know yet. We still haven't found any native moss that may be related to this peculiar growth—but that doesn't mean there isn't any."

"That's right. But is there a possibility that the original spores might have migrated here through outer space?"

"No. Moss is a relatively organized organic substance. The spores could not survive the interstellar environment."

"Alright," persisted Garathon, "but there's plenty of evidence to indicate that the moss isn't native to this planet—the main fact being that only a short while ago the Azgons were thin and fragile. So if that's the case, *where* does the moss come from and *how* did it get to Azgola?"

"*Where* it comes from I have no idea. As to *how*? Don't forget the story we heard about 2 alien spaceships that were supposed to have landed here a short time ago."

"That's east-west of nowhere!" snorted Garathon. "There are no unknown space-travelling races in the

galaxy!"

Lag-Garmoth shrugged. "Then there's nothing more I can tell you," he answered. "But I have a question, myself." His gaze slowly swept the group. "You were asking about the collectors, which will automatically gather the moss spores, compress them and make them ready for shipment. I think I've made it clear enough that their construction requires just about all of our reserve power sources. I have requested that all personal use of energy be held to a minimum. Just a short while ago 2 important pieces of machinery went out of operation. This was caused by a series of sudden power drains. It will require 4 hours to get that machinery into operation again. If I can make up for that downtime it'll be thanks to me and my men and to no one else. I'd like to know who is responsible for this?"

Garathon knew the energy consumption of his torture instruments but he managed to look about him innocently. "Was it any of us?" he asked calmly. One after the other made a sign of denial. "So it's nobody here. I'll look into the matter," he concluded as he got to his feet again.

"What's to become of the prisoners?" asked Lag-Garmoth indifferently.

For perhaps half a second Garathon lost his composure. But then he finally realized that the close relationship of the 2 questions was purely coincidental. The thing about private use of energy and then the question about the prisoners—Lag-Garmoth must have hit upon both ideas in close succession but only by accident.

"Why do you... I mean, why worry?" he said hesitantly while recovering from his startlement. "We'll take them with us when we leave Azgola so that they can't do any sabotage or cause us trouble."

Lag-Garmoth made no reply to this. He seemed to be satisfied. Garathon went out of the room. It irked him that he had momentarily lost his self-control. He felt nervous. The air, the humidity and this weird manna from nowhere—it was enough to drive a man mad.

8/ AYE, ROBOT!

He awoke in an ocean of pain.

He wanted to yell but he couldn't get enough air into his lungs and his vocal cords seemed to be numb.

Garathon! It was his first thought. The name seemed to be a vial of all the world's wrath.

He finally managed to open his eyes and look around him.

They hadn't taken much pains with his quarters. The room was small, cubical and bare. The single item of furnishing was an, old-fashioned glow-lamp in the ceiling. Ron Landry lay on his back. When he turned on his right side he found himself staring at the smooth material of the wall. It was spray plastic, a substance with which one could make solid walls in a very few minutes.

In the wall at right angles to this one was a door—or at least the outlines of one. He couldn't make out the slightest indication of a means of opening it, which of course was what was intended by the Springers.

A door that couldn't be opened from inside reduced the task of keeping an eye on the prisoners.

Ron attempted to get to his feet but as he did so a new wave of burning pain engulfed him. He braced himself against the wall and waited with his eyes closed. When the pain finally subsided he let go of the wall and entrusted himself to his own 2 legs. It worked. He sensed a slight dizziness and the straight lines of the room angles wavered at times but that was all. That he could put up with.

He didn't want to find out anything more for the moment. He knew it was useless and even dangerous for him to exert himself. He had to recoup his strength so he sat down again and leaned back against the wall. He reflected that by now he must be hungry and he tried to calculate how long it had been since he had eaten. This wasn't possible because he didn't know how long he had been unconscious. His watch was gone as well as all the other small instruments he usually carried with him on a mission. This he had been aware of during his conversation with Garathon. The Springers had taken everything from him, first among which had been his weapon, of course.

But this hunger situation was very strange. It was not only that he didn't have any hunger; he felt as if he had just come from a sumptuous meal and had actually eaten a little too much. It was the mystery of Azgola. Something was suspended in the air which made a person satiated and fat—a strange substance that the body seemed to absorb greedily. And the Springers were turning it into a business.

It would certainly be a good business if they went about it right. In the far reaches of the galaxy there were plenty of worlds where people were hungry, either because the ground was unfertile or they didn't have methods of producing synthetic foods or there was simply an overpopulation. If the Springers succeeded in marketing a food that could satisfy hunger by merely breathing it in, they would certainly become rich overnight.

Ron could understand the secrecy with which they had surrounded their activity on Azgola. They had had some bad experience with Terran Intelligence, especially Garathon's clan which Alboolal had belonged to. They didn't want to be disturbed during their work on Azgola so nobody must know that they were here. The Azgons couldn't betray them since they had no means of interstellar communication. The Springers had no doubt sent their ships out somewhere into space where nobody would be looking for them because here in the vicinity their propulsion systems could be traced, even from afar.

Ron also realized that the assignment Nike Quinto had given him was taken care of—if he were to take it literally. There were no Baalol priests on Azgola. The situation Chuck Waller had reported could not be attributed to the mysterious cell activators which some of the Baalols were purported to be wearing. The strange developments on Azgola must be tied somehow to the 2 alien spaceships that Bladoor had mentioned.

He tried to formulate some sort of logical picture of what could have happened here. Where had the ships come from, the little one and then the big one? Why had their crews not been seen? What had the 2 spacecraft been doing on this planet? Of course there were robotships. The major part of the Arkonide fleet was composed of such ships. Although the Azgons had no space technology of their own they had developed a keen ability to tell which types of ships belonged to which galactic civilization.

Spaceships of this particular type had never been seen before on Azgola. Judging from the description that Bladoor had given of them, Ron doubted that they had ever been seen anywhere by anybody else. An unknown race of star travellers? It was hard to imagine—and yet Ron knew that such a possibility had to be included among the hypotheses he had to work with. He toyed with the fascinating concept for awhile and then turned his attention to more immediate problems.

For one thing, he had to get out of here. He thought of Garathon again and suddenly it occurred to him how strange it was that the clan chief knew him—also that he had been involved in the arrest of Alboolal. The identity of all men working for Nike Quinto in Division 3 was a highly classified secret. In fact nobody knew what Division 3 was all about anyway, much less the names of its agents. Of course there were unavoidable situations where Nike Quinto's men had not been able to camouflage their activities very well and in the course of such missions some of them had become known to outsiders. But certainly Garathon had not been present that time on Ghama.

So how would he know...?

The answer was fairly obvious. Garathon had subjected them to a mento-interrogation—perhaps all of them but perhaps only himself alone. It must have been during Ron's first period of unconsciousness. In the minds of Ron, Larry and Lofty were a great many items of highly secret information which were locked away under a memory key so that no known mento-probing method in the galaxy would be able to extract them. But the general memory content was always wide open to any halfway effective equipment. Yet a man's name and activity also belonged to the general area of memory.

So that was how!

The more he thought of Garathon the angrier he became. However harmless the memory data might be that he may have extracted from his mind, a shrewd operator equipped with highly efficient positronic computer facilities could tie together a great deal of information concerning the purpose, methods and activities of Division 3 as well as the whole setup of Intercosmic Social Welfare and Development.

Garathon constituted a threat to the Earth!

Ron realized that he would have to do something. He couldn't just lie here and wait for the enemy to take the initiative, he had to figure a way to make a move.

It was hard to take any effective action inside a small bare room with a locked door and no visible mechanism for opening it. He could of course pound on the door and attract the attention of a guard, who was undoubtedly around somewhere, but guards were naturally suspicious types who didn't offer one much opportunity to escape. And the Springers were not the kind of people to walk blindly into a trap.

Ron made a mental review of the things that had transpired in the last few hours. He had to find some kind of point of reference. They had crashed in the city and had been knocked out. The Springers had picked them up and brought them here, where Garathon had put them under a mento-probe. After that he had continued to be unconscious and finally came to in Garathon's 'work' room. He had talked to Garathon. Garathon had questioned him further.

The interrogation!

Ron didn't know what kind of equipment Garathon had used to force information out of him but knowing Garathon one thing was certain: he had used every possible means of finding out what he wanted to know. This meant that he had probably strained the capacities of both his equipment and his prisoner to the limit. Perhaps he had even overestimated the mental stamina of his victim and strained him too far.

Ron knew a number of cases in which mento-monitoring like that had led to insanity. And that was his clue to action.

It was a role he hadn't played before so he took a few minutes to prepare for it. He figured out what he was going to do and in what sequence he would do it. He also tried to guess the various possibilities of reaction he might expect from the hypothetical guard but he didn't arrive at anything definite. If he responded at all, Ron would have to watch for the right moment. There was no planning he could do which went further than the moment in which the guard would open the door to have a look at him.

Ron began to pound on the door. He shouted and screamed, making sure that his voice sounded shrill and abnormal, the while he laughed intermittently like a madman. He raged and jumped and threw himself on the floor, got up and rammed his shoulder against the door, producing saliva and rolling his eyes—and due to the actual poor condition his body was in at the moment it was no wonder that genuine foam finally formed on his lips.

He drew back to charge at the door again but at that moment it opened.

For a fraction of a second Ron paused in his act. Then he carried on with it. He made his legs jerk and without moving his arms he fell on his back. He stammered meaningless words and tears came to his eyes from having rolled them so wildly.

Actually he felt a surge of triumph. He knew the game was paying off.

The one who stood in the doorway and regarded him keenly with lifeless eyes was not an ordinary security guard: it was a Springer robot.

* * * *

Meech was fairly confident that everything was alright.

Nobody seemed to have noticed that he had gotten through the ring of infrared security beams and penetrated the inner area of the base. He had waited a couple of minutes although for him each minute was like half an eternity. Then he had moved onward.

Now he saw the outlines of a dome structure emerge before him, much larger than the dome cover on the warning device he had jumped over. The radiations emanating from the 3 power sources he had detected from a distance were now coming at him at a sharp angle from below. So the actual stronghold lay partially under ground.

But here came the question of how he was to enter the dome. If the Springers had taken such care to secure the surrounding terrain with alarm systems, it would be the hardest task of all to get into the stronghold itself without being detected.

Nevertheless Meech didn't hesitate to approach the place. He touched the material of the dome and found it to be smooth plastic steel, a molecular mix of high polymer plastic and iron. It was possible to put up a dome like this within a few hours because it could be sprayed or poured into place. For Meech this was his first real proof that the Springers had been pretty much in a hurry to construct their base.

He had progressed about 10 meters along the rim of the dome when he discovered some lines in the

surface which formed a rectangle. They were actually very narrow grooves, probably not deeper than a few thousandths of a millimetre. A human eye would have no doubt overlooked them.

Here was a hatch door.

Meech realized that there must be others here because the Springers had air vehicles. Inasmuch as he hadn't seen any such craft outside he knew they must be inside the dome somewhere. But no aircar could come through this particular hatch. He realized he had no other recourse but to locate the larger vehicle lock hatch if he wanted to rescue Ron Landry and his companions. They couldn't just run away on foot; they'd need a swift aircar.

He continued onward and within half a minute he found the larger lock door. It was closed tight like the other one but its outline reached far up the curved surface of the dome. Apparently this hatch was large enough to admit 2 aircars at once. He stood there quietly while his discerning eyes examined the area around the edges of the concealed opening. He saw nothing that might represent a releasing mechanism. There was just the smooth wall of the dome.

How did they open the lock?

Meech reached out and touched the surface just inside the hatch groove. He had hardly contacted the cool metal plastic when he sensed a rapid series of pulses. They represented alien numbers but Meech understood them. His programming included a number of robot and computer languages. He kept the contact while he 'listened':

IF (T) 990, 991, 200

990 CALL IN

He sensed that the positronic 'creature' under the smooth material was reacting to its own program, registering his hand pressure as logic condition 990 and proceeding to follow the 990 instruction accordingly: *CALL IN*. This meant an alarm signal. Within seconds the whole base would know that a stranger had attempted to open a lock hatch.

Meech reacted instantly, realizing that it was lucky for him that the Springers hadn't had time to install the most ultramodern equipment for their gate-security robots at this particular base on Azgola. Their positronic sentries operated more slowly than Meech Hannigan, Sergeant in the Terran Spacefleet, now on a special mission as member of Intercosmic Social Development and Welfare.

The sentry robot would have required 9 nanoseconds to carry out instruction 990. Meech only required ½ nanosecond to counter-signal:*EXEM*.

It brought the thing's logic processes to a stop. In its own positronic language,*EXEM* was equivalent to a parity stop. It meant an error had occurred somewhere and that the normal program should not be followed. The sentry robot was much inferior to Meech. It had no way of differentiating between its own internal signals and one from outside.

At any rate it did not carry out the 990 instruction. However, it automatically went back to the start of the same program cycle. But Meech had removed his hand in the meantime and so this time around the sentry robot gated over to logic condition 991. In its program a 991 was interpreted as: **ALERT HOLD!** Meaning no action yet.

So the hidden sentry remained quiescent, on the alert to sense any further action outside.

Which happened very quickly. Meech had figured out what was involved here. Somewhere on the broad surface of the hatch door was a specific place that a knowledgeable person could touch when he wanted the lock to open. And this was the spot that had to be located. He proceeded systematically, knowing that he'd probably trigger the sentry robot many times into sensing that a stranger was outside. But he knew also that he could block any hostile reaction by always beating the gadget's program cycle with a counter-signal. There was no danger as long as he acted fast enough and nothing threatened him in the meantime from the outside.

The place he was looking for must be large enough to not require much searching by the person trained to use it. Perhaps it was at least the size of a Springer's hand so that there would not be much danger of touching surrounding areas and setting off a false alarm. It would also have to be within easy reach of a Springer's arm, so it would certainly not be located any farther up the dome than 2.5 meters.

With this orientation Meech continued his search. To his own perception it seemed a long time before he finally touched a place on the hatch that did not appear to be suspicious to the robot. He could sense the positronic program in progress under the hard surface:

1F (T) 990, 991, 200

200: OPEN

Meech took a step back as the lower edge of the hatch lifted soundlessly from the ground. The entire section of wall moved a few inches inside the dome and then slid upward. A spacious, dimly lit room appeared beyond the opening.

He stepped inside because he knew he had nothing to fear just now. The sentry robot had recognized him as 'friend' and would not 'call in' an alarm. There was no danger from behind him so he could turn all of his attention to what lay before him.

This room excited his interest. From the hatch to the opposite wall the place was filled with various kinds of vehicles ranging from simple aircars to a disc-shaped space-going lifeboat and heavy land rovers which were similar to the Terran Quads. He made a mental note of the exact location of the spaceboat which was closest to the lock hatch. If he were going to save Ron Landry and his men he would have to use this. He was convinced that he would be able to operate it. The craft's pilot mechanism worked on the basis of positronics, which was also the basis of Meech's own intelligence. They would understand each other, he and the ship.

His next item of investigation was the inside of the lock door. As he had expected there was a clearly marked location where one should apply hand pressure to open the lock. Meech concluded that there must be a similar mechanism inside the spaceboat which would accomplish the same thing. Certainly if anybody were going to leave the place by spaceboat he would not reach his hand out a porthole to activate the lock door.

Now he knew enough to find his way quickly in this chamber. The next thing on the program was to find out where the Springers kept their prisoners. When he walked across the vehicle hangar he saw a number of doors in the opposite wall. As he approached the first one, it opened automatically. He discovered behind it a small rectangular room in the walls of which were 3 murky openings.

Antigrav shafts. Meech recognized these as entrances to the subterranean part of the stronghold. He did

not hesitate to step into one of the yawning shafts and permit himself to be carried into the depths.

While he was drifting downward he received a pulse signal that filled him with a great sense of relief. The final question had been where to flee in case the rescue operation succeeded but now it had answered itself.

His escape route was already mapped out.

9/ A GAME OF MADNESS

The Springers hadn't taken any pains to disguise their robot with simulated flesh covering or form. It was a heavy but agile framework of plastic metal and unbreakable glass. In imitation of its creator it walked on 2 legs but otherwise bore no resemblance to a human being.

However this did not matter to Ron Landry at the moment. He knew that the robot was carefully studying his behaviour and was trying to arrive at a decision. Undoubtedly it was only a sentinel type. It had no medical knowledge and more than anything else it would have required a high order of programming to understand that a man could pretend to be what he was not. A robot could not understand how a man could appear to be sick or act abnormally without actually being in such a condition.

What Ron had expected happened. The robot came to him and lifted him up from the floor. Ron ceased his flailing and ravings as if he had been taken by surprise. Actually he didn't want the heavy-handed robot to manhandle him. He had to avoid broken bones if he was going to accomplish anything. So he let his head roll back in the thing's metal arms while rolling his eyes wildly and muttering incoherently.

As the robot carried him through a corridor he had a chance to study the immediate area. There were a number of doors similar to that of his own cell and Ron assumed that Bladoor, Lofty and Larry would be here somewhere behind three of them. He noted the location.

At the end of the passage was a medium-sized rectangular room in which he caught an impression of various pieces of technical equipment. Here the robot eased its load down on a kind of stretcher bed. Ron instantly jumped up from it, continuing his pretense. He knew his guardian would be quicker than he was. The robot spun around, reached out its arms and shoved him back onto the cot. "*Strak!* Lie still!" it rasped at him metallically in Arkonese.

Ron obeyed but he watched the robot as it stood silently beside the medical couch and stared across the room at a doorway, beyond which the corridor continued. Apparently it was transmitting a signal that Ron could neither see nor hear but another robot must have received it. He soon heard clanking, echoing footsteps approaching, and in a few moments the 2nd robot stepped into the room. Ron took a swift look at it without letting on that he was still able to comprehend what was happening. This 2nd machine was more complex in its makeup and was obviously a superior type of robot. It proceeded to examine the prisoner. It turned Ron over onto his stomach and stepped back cautiously when he began to rave again.

Ron only quieted down when the new robot left the room. He was secretly relieved. Even the superior

programming of the more complex machine had failed to make a decision. The next one to have a look at him would be a Springer of flesh and blood. And that's what he was waiting for.

It was quite awhile before footsteps were heard in the corridor again. He was on his stomach once more and had his head turned at an unnatural angle so that he could watch the entrance through half-closed eyelids. Meanwhile he did not forget to keep on grunting and mouthing wild sounds such as one would expect to hear from a mentally disturbed person.

The robot was the first to enter. The Springer who followed it turned out to be Garathon.

In an instant Ron's buried anger flared up. It took a supreme effort not to forget that he was supposed to act insane. He leapt from the stretcher cot, ran headfirst against the opposite wall and fell panting to the floor. At a low command from Garathon the robot sentinel picked him up and carried him back to the cot.

By this time Ron had closed his eyes but above him he heard Garathon's voice. "You're putting on a show for me," he said in low tones. "You're pretending to be out of your head. What you're really waiting for is the moment when we let down our guard so that you can make a run for it—isn't that about the gist of it?"

Ron made no response. It was obvious that Garathon was going to try to trap him in his own game. The whole thing depended on who could hold out the longest.

"You won't get away with it," Garathon continued. "In a few seconds we'll soon find out what's going on here."

Ron heard the scraping of feet nearby. Something cold and metallic touched his arm while another device of the same material was placed against his skull.

"Go!" ordered Garathon.

A crackling explosion of lightning bolts went off inside Ron's brain. A searing pain ran through his body. He arched upward and screamed—this time for real. He fell off the couch and writhed about on the floor. When the pain ebbed away he felt so weak that he could not lift himself up by his own strength.

But he continued his act, muttering incoherent fragments of words and making a pretense at tearing his hair, though weakly. Out of sheer numbness he was hardly aware of it when he was lifted up for the 3rd time and deposited on the stretcher cot.

Then he heard Garathon's voice beside him again. "You know that you won't be able to stand another jolt like that," he said. "The next one could kill you. So you'd better get up and confess that all this is an act. If not... the robot has his hand on the switch."

Ron's tortured thoughts were racing. On the one hand he could open his eyes and actually admit that his mental derangement had been a put-on but Garathon would kill him anyway. On the other hand he could keep up the pretense. But Garathon had no use for a lunatic and he would still get rid of him—so what difference did it make?

He rolled onto his side and groaned, emitting a series of half-articulated curses while drool spilled from his mouth. He could not see above him but when he opened his eyes he saw Garathon's thick legs close in front of him. The seconds ticked slowly away, each a small, unbearable eternity. He couldn't see the

robot or the deadly switch. He only knew that Garathon was right. In his condition he would not be able to stand another pain jolt. It would be the end of him.

Another second... and still another...

Garathon's legs moved suddenly as he turned around. Ron tensed every muscle in his body, preparing for the lightning bolt.

But then he heard the Springer talking. "Stop! Take your hand away! He wasn't lying to us."

Ron had been so unprepared for success that he would have burst out laughing if he had had the strength to do so. Instead he just lay there and continued to mumble incoherently.

A few more minutes went by without event. Ron could feel his strength slowly returning. He made a new attempt to rise up suddenly like a madman while he let out an insane yell and he almost got off the stretcher before the robot grabbed him and shoved him back again.

When he opened his eyes he saw Garathon on the other side of the stretcher bed where he seemed to be busy with one of the technical apparatuses nearby. Prior to this Ron didn't have time to observe the machines around him very carefully. But now that he concentrated on them he quickly realized where he was. All around him stood the cerebra-generators, transformers and tape banks that were used for a mento-interrogation. It was here that Garathon had given him the brain-probe before bringing him out of his state of consciousness. The apparatus the Springer was working with now was a pre-conditioner. Its purpose was to raise the brain potential to the point where mental resistance against the interrogator was no longer effective.

Was Garathon going to set up a second probe? He must know that he couldn't monitor a person who was mentally deranged.

But then Ron realized that a pre-conditioner could be used just as easily to lower the brain potential. It was this condition a mental patient was subjected to as the first step in healing procedures. So apparently Garathon was going to attempt to bring him back to 'normal'.

Ron had no intention of being the recipient of Garathon's helpfulness. *Now* was the critical moment.

Garathon stood within his reach. Having left it to the robots to guard him, he had turned his back to Ron. But the robots had now witnessed the fact that Garathon himself was convinced of the prisoner's disturbed mental state. Therefore their mode of vigilance had changed. The only danger to watch out for now was to keep the prisoner from harming himself in case he should start blindly raving again. They didn't expect him to be capable of anything more than that.

Not more than a foot and a half above Ron, Garathon's energy gun was hanging in the belt of his cloak. The weapon was seated loosely in its holster. He knew that if he could grasp its butt he could pull it free.

As he slowly pulled his knee under him he didn't forget for one second to keep muttering and scolding out loud to himself. And when he opened his eyes he rolled them crazily as usual.

Then he made his jump. Since he didn't have all his normal strength he relied on the full force of his leg muscles. The leap carried him sideways off the stretcher and he crashed into Garathon's back. Just as he caught a glimpse of the robots turning toward him he grasped the butt of the energy weapon and pulled it free. He fell to the hard floor between Garathon and the couch but simultaneously he swung the

gun-barrel around toward the larger robot. He pressed the trigger with all his strength.

The robot had been about to fall on him and hold him down. Ron's unexpected attack had convinced it that Garathon was mistaken in thinking that the prisoner was actually insane. But even a complex type of robot needed a few seconds to switch from one program to another and react accordingly. It was Ron's salvation. The first shot caught the thing in its middle and blasted the metallic body asunder. Broken and burned parts clattered to the floor. A wave of unbearable heat flooded the rectangular room.

The 2nd robot hadn't yet moved. Ron destroyed it before it could complete its slower programming processes. Only then could he turn his attention to Garathon. Disarmed and frightened, the Springer had retreated behind the preconditioner console. When Ron turned toward him he threw his arms protectively in front of his face and yelled. "Don't! Don't do it! Spare me!"

The sweat was dripping from Ron's forehead. The heat radiating from the broken parts of the robots was into able.

"Get out there into the corridor!" he snapped at the Springer.

Garathon hesitantly lowered his arms and saw that Ron was pointing with the weapon back to the original corridor where the prison cells were located. He came out from behind the console and marched obediently ahead, Ron following at a safe distance of 10 feet.

Ron did not delude himself concerning his situation. To break free it had been necessary to destroy 2 robots. The noise involved must certainly have been heard by somebody. In a few minutes the other Springers would be coming to see what the trouble was. It was an open question whether or not they would value Garathon's life enough so that he might use him as a hostage for his escape. For the moment he shoved this thought into the background.

He shouted at Garathon. "Open the doors of the cells where my men are located!"

Garathon stopped and turned around. "You... you can't do that...!" he stammered.

Ron took a step toward him and aimed the weapon at him. Then Garathon turned again and went on to open the first door. He stopped in front of it, which was a mistake.

Lofty Patterson must have been waiting a long time for just such an opportunity. Probably he had not been able to understand the exchange of words between Ron and the Springer while listening through the door. He didn't know who had opened the door. Goaded by all the anger that had gathered in him, he came out like a shot and catapulted into Garathon. The latter fell back screaming and flailing his arms frantically to protect himself. But Lofty had caught his enemy and wasn't about to let him go. It didn't matter what the odds were or how big and strong his opponent was by comparison. In a blind rage he went after him with his bare fists. Garathon was too terrified to even defend himself. His arms hung helplessly at his sides while he howled and pleaded and tried to duck the hammering blows.

In this moment Ron was seeing the Springer for the first time in his true colours. He could be overbearing while he had his opponent bound and wounded in front of him but in his heart he was a coward.

"That's enough, Lofty," There was an obvious note of loathing and disgust in Ron's voice. "All you can do is get your hands dirty."

Lofty looked up from the Springer who was now beneath him on the floor. He turned to look at Ron in

surprise. "Sir...!" he cried out. "How did you...?"

Ron waved a hand. "No time now, Lofty," he interrupted. He turned his gaze from the older man to Garathon "Let's go! There are still 2 others!"

Without further argument the Springer got up and went to the next door. This time when he opened it he stepped back quickly. But Larry Randall wasn't the type to jump blindly into danger in spite of his anger. He stood against the far wall of his cell and didn't move. Without letting Garathon out of his sight, Ron stepped into the doorway.

"Come on out, Larry," he grinned. "We still have some unfinished business."

Larry returned the grin and came out calmly. He saw the fat Springer standing against the opposite wall of the passage. Garathon's face was blanched with fear. "Is that the man who...?"

Ron nodded. "That's the one."

Garathon pressed himself fearfully against the wall. His face turned a shade whiter. Larry only stared at him for a moment or so and then ignored him. "Where is Bladoor?" he asked.

Ron pointed to the Springer. "He will find him for us. Let's go, Garathon!"

The Springer moved a few more steps along the passage. He bypassed one of the doors but Ron said nothing, merely watching him until he opened the one beyond it. This time Garathon was not as cautious because he didn't expect much reaction from Bladoor; yet when he looked into the cell Ron saw a startled expression on his face. Ron shoved the Springer aside and personally inspected the small bare room.

Bladoor lay there flat on his back. During the past number of hours his body had become still more bloated. Ron needed no doctor to tell him that Bladoor was no longer alive. The aircar crash, his capture by the Springers, the mento-probing—all of it had been too much for his stamina. He had died from pure neglect.

Ron turned to stare coldly at the Springer. "*You* are responsible for that," he said. "*You* have killed this man!"

Garathon shrank back, raising his hands imploringly. He opened his mouth to speak but terror made him speechless for the moment.

Then suddenly another voice was heard: "*Who* has killed *what* man?"

Ron spun around. Standing next to him, Larry partially blocked his view—but what he saw was enough. Looking back in the direction of the interrogation room he saw five Springers blocking the passage.

A sense of bitter resignation swept through him as he realized that time had run out.

Meech Hannigan soon discovered that the stronghold had a much smaller crew than might have been expected. It made his task that much easier. When he reached the bottom of the grav shaft he encountered no resistance so he proceeded along a bare, dark passage into the interior of the dome.

He penetrated into a complete maze of corridors, small rooms, an endless number of doors, intersections and hub-like junction points. Each time he became aware of an approaching Springer, all he had to do was slip into a side passage. Since his positronic sensitivities were infallible he was always able to avoid falling into enemy hands.

Not that this would have been something to worry about. There could be no doubt that he was the most powerfully armed single entity on the planet. But he didn't want to start any excitement until he at least knew where the Springers kept their prisoners.

He inspected several junction points where doorways led off into other subterranean corridors. At first he didn't know what to make of the machinery he saw installed in several places where a great bustle of fabrication was going on. But then he recalled the theory he had been toying with hours before when he had sought to find an explanation for the sudden corpulence of the Azgons. A light dawned. The Springers had chanced upon the same idea and were trying to turn it into a profitable business.

Meech registered everything carefully in his brain and continued onward. Within about a half-hour after his entry into the dome he began to hear loud angry voices somewhere far ahead of him. His superior hearing system enabled him to recognize a voice he had often heard before. He hastened onward.

He passed through a medium-sized room where there was a stretcher cot and a number of machines which were related to mento-technology. The passage continued on the other side of the chamber. Meech hesitated for a moment. Not more than 10 meters inside the corridor beyond he saw five Springers standing with their backs to him. They were arguing menacingly with a group of men who stood just ahead of them in the passage.

Meech went into a combat mode. He had reached his goal.

* * * *

Garathon's voice was high-pitched and hysterical as he screamed at Lag-Garmoth. "Kill them! These are the prisoners—they've broken out!"

Meanwhile Ron had turned toward his new opponent. He struggled to maintain an outward calm as he spoke in a level tone of voice. "Whoever you may be, Lag-Garmoth don't listen to this man. I know that you seem to have the advantage of us just now—but not enough to keep me from giving this coward what he deserves before you can shoot me down." He heard a choking sound from Garathon behind him.

Lag-Garmoth's weapon did not waver but he smiled. "Don't worry, Terran," he answered. "I have plans of my own." Then the smile faded. "Who has been killed?"

"An Azgon," said Ron. "Your men captured him along with us and nothing was done to help him

although his condition must have been critical. They imprisoned him here and allowed him to die."

Lag-Garmoth's eyes narrowed as he looked at Garathon. "An Azgon?" he queried. From his tone of voice it was obvious that he neither knew of the situation nor approved of it.

Garathon had slightly recovered from his fearful state of mind. "Yes, an Azgon," he answered calmly. "He was with these men so we had to bring him along."

Lag-Garmoth remained impassive. "It was our intention that we would not get into any conflicts with the Azgons, under any conditions whatsoever," he said. "You know that as well as I do. We won't be able to work here on Azgola if the natives are hostile to us, even though they may be lying helpless and too sluggish to move inside their own houses. *Soyou* have to take an Azgon captive and bring him here to let him die?" These last words had a threatening undertone to them.

Garathon straightened up. He was almost his old self again. "Who is the commander of this base?" he demanded in a shrill voice. "You or I?"

"You are," Lag-Garmoth conceded, "but I am not one of your underlings. I belong to another sub-clan. You made a contract with me and now I see you don't intend to stick to it."

Garathon came away from the wall and stood in the middle of the corridor with his legs braced apart. "You will put these Terrans back in their cells," he commanded. "After that we can discuss the contract but not until then—is that clear?"

It was obvious that Lag-Garmoth was becoming tense. He was evidently prepared to give a sharp retort but he was interrupted.

From behind him in the passage someone spoke very calmly and casually. "Whatever the issue of the argument is, gentlemen, you will first lay down your weapons before continuing the discussion."

"Meech—!" yelled Ron.

There was a brief second of dead silence in the corridor before Ron shouted again in triumph. Lag-Garmoth whirled around but Meech was far too fast for him. There was no visible discharge as he lifted his hand and fired. He had chosen the mento-beam because a basic rule of his robot consciousness was to avoid spilling any blood.

Lag-Garmoth groaned and staggered to one side, falling to the floor. One of his companions was also knocked out of the fighting. The remaining three obeyed Meech's order and dropped their weapons.

Meech did not move from his position but his voice expressed urgency when he spoke to Ron. "Sir, we have to hurry. We have to get out of here as quickly as possible!"

Ron turned to his 2 companions. "You heard him—let's go!"

No one could explain later what caused Garathon to take action just then. Perhaps it was the realization that his role would be at an end if the prisoners got away and Lag-Garmoth brought the situation concerning the Azgon to the attention of the rest of the base personnel or perhaps it was merely an instinctive reaction on his part. In any case, he suddenly charged Ron Landry. Ron wasn't prepared for the attack and he cried out while lifting his weapon. Garathon had apparently been waiting for this because his hand darted up and tore the energy pistol from his grasp. Ron quickly grabbed the other's

arm above the elbow and held it in a raised position. He knew he'd be a dead man if Garathon succeeded in bringing the weapon down to firing level.

Meech could not interfere because he would have shot Ron as well as Garathon if he fired.

The Springer had suddenly developed a murderous strength, perhaps due to blind desperation, and Ron was tiring quickly in his weakened condition. Garathon forced his hand downward and for what seemed to be a terribly long second Ron stared into the round muzzle of the gun.

But then somebody yelled and jumped into the fray. Ron caught a fleeting glimpse of Lofty Patterson's short grey hair and his flying beard as Garathon let out an answering cry of rage. In a lightning quick movement Lofty had managed to twist Garathon's wrist around just as the weapon fired—straight into the Springer's face.

Lofty sprang away and leaned back against the wall, staring down incredulously at the dead body. "I—I didn't mean to do that!" he stammered.

Ron clapped him on the shoulder. "You didn't—he shot himself," he said reassuringly. "Let's go!"

Lofty allowed himself to be turned away. The three Springers standing between Meech and Ron moved willingly out of their way. Meech turned about and took up the lead. Larry Randall brought up the rear but he bent down first to pick up Garathon's fallen weapon. Meanwhile Ron and Lofty had appropriated the weapons of the other 2 unconscious men.

"The faster we move," said Meech, "the more chances we'll have of getting out of here."

But no one blocked their way. In a very short time Meech led them to the vehicle hangar. They boarded the spaceboat he had singled out and Meech took over the controls himself. It took him 2½ seconds to find the control for opening the hatch. He activated it and the great door slid upward. The small craft raised up from the floor and glided slowly and peacefully out into the night.

Meech remained silent until they had left the fortress far behind them. It was only then that he reported his experiences. He left out no detail of his observations, which included a full description of the machinery he had seen in the subterranean rooms of the Springer stronghold. It was clear to everyone now what the enemy was engaged in. They had discovered Azgola's secret sooner than the Terrans. Whether or not they knew what the nutrient substance was that filled the air like a suspended aerosol mist, the fact remained that they were taking full advantage of this newfound wealth on the planet and were making a business out of it.

Meech guided the lifeboat eastward and out beyond the coastland. The pulse signal he had received while sinking in the antigrav shaft had told him that one of the Terran spaceships was preparing to make a landing somewhere far to the East.

* * * *

The *Vondar* was prepared to take off again when the small flying disc was tracked on the sensors and appeared moments later on the optical screens. Meech Hannigan had signalled through just in time. Gerry

Montini waited for them although he was anxious to show his heels to this treacherous planet as soon as possible.

The 4 fugitives were taken on board. Gerry wanted to turn over the ship command to Ron Landry but Ron waved him off.

"I'm bushed," he said with a rueful grin. "All I can think of now is a nice comfortable bed. And also of course—a report from you as to what you were doing here."

"That part's easy," Gerry told him. "We knew something very peculiar was going on here. That was obvious from Chuck Waller's report alone. We couldn't land on the central continent because any time we came within gunshot of those Springers they opened up on us. But this bigger continent seemed to be free of any strongholds. So we came down here to let a few specialists take a look around."

Ron stared at him expectantly. "And...?"

Gerry ran a hand through his hair. "They ran into something that was pretty peculiar alright. Almost the entire continent seems to be covered with just one species of moss. It has a characteristic of sending out spores continuously. And those spores are mainly made up of—well, I don't know what the devil you'd call it for sure. At any rate they're terrifically nourishing. One gram of moss spores contains more nourishment than a full-course dinner with the appetizers thrown in. From soup to nuts. The worst part is that the spores are such tiny particles that they can be breathed in without knowing it. They spread through the body and feed it. The men we sent outside gained 5 pounds in as many hours."

Ron nodded. "Did they have a biologist with them?"

"Naturally."

"What did he have to say? How come the moss has only become noticeable lately? Why didn't the Azgons get fat centuries ago?"

Gerry rubbed his chin. "You have a point. The biologist had a look at a few native species of moss which can still be found in a few places—and that's what really turned him on."

"Why?"

"He said the differences were too great. The moss we're worried about couldn't possibly have any relationship with the natural biological evolution of Azgola."

"So—?"

"It must have been imported here from another world."

* * * *

24 hours later Terra was informed of the situation. Also, the report advised that the Azgons were on their way to sure extinction if they could not be evacuated in time. Since Azgola only had a population of

2 million this was not an insuperable problem for the Terran fleet. Action was taken immediately.

* * * *

In his apartment in Terrania, Ron Landry checked his weight on the scales. During his mission on Azgola he had gained 30 pounds. It would have been much worse if the Springer base where he had spent most of his time had not been located in the middle of a marshland where the heavier humidity trapped the spores and made them sink to the ground. Moreover the Springers had probably set up their collector equipment outside the swamp and were drawing in spores for their processing machinery.

30 pounds! It was going to be quite a chore to get rid of that much superfluous weight.

* * * *

Within a few hours the evacuation of Azgola were in full operation. The Springers did not interfere. They were content to be left alone by the overwhelmingly powerful fleet.

Behind all the activity going on with regard to Azgola, no one noticed that Terran and Arkonide ships were patrolling the galaxy side by side in an effort to find out the whereabouts of the 2 alien ships that had been responsible for the Azgola crisis.

An unknown race of intelligences somewhere out there in the depths of space—this was the sensation of the day wherever anyone was informed about events on Azgola.

ORDER OF THE ACTION

[1/ MISSION UNKNOWN](#)

[2/ THE SILENT CITY](#)

[3/ ATTACK FROM NOWHERE](#)

4/ THE PLAGUE OF "PLENTY"

5/ THE RACE WITH DEATH

6/ VENGEANCE OF GARATHON

7/ DOOM-DUST MERCHANTS

8/ AYE, ROBOT!

9/ A GAME OF MADNESS

10/ HEAVY GAINS

THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

SGT. ROBOT

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Original German Title:
"Der Robot-Sergeant"

First Ace Printing: March 1977
Printed in U.S.A

THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

SOME UNKNOWN RACE was trying to solve its food supply problem in a fantastic manner—of this Rhodan was sure. What he did not know was the origin of the race, probably highly intelligent beings, nor the principle on which they were operating.

"I'm in favour of destroying this menacing nutritive moss with acid," Bell recommended. "Or heat radiation."

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