

Atlan, the Emperor of Arkon, is faced with a terrible cosmic riddle. Why did an unknown race perhaps 100,000 years ago, institute an operation that would bring ruin and destruction to races in the far future? To save his own planet of Arkon 2 and to solve this hideous puzzle, Atlan must learn the secret of—

## **PLANET MECHANICA**

### **1/ THE COSMIC RIDDLE**

SILENCE.

It pervaded the control room of the incomprehensible spaceship.

Prof. Arno Kalup, Earth's leading hyperspace physicist, was leaning against a bulkhead with his arms folded and a tense expression on his heavy-jowled face. For once his cheeks did not resemble hamster pouches.

The men of the technical team were also silent but they kept watching the dome-like steel compartment which Perry Rhodan referred to as the 'coördinating switching station'. At the moment all that could be seen of the First Administrator was his feet and legs. The rest of him was hidden in the innards of a robot that we knew nothing about, other than that it was stationary and could not move. In addition, of course, we had learned how impeccable the machine's logical operations were before it had been shut down.

"Well...?"

Kalup's voice startled me. He had never been one to sound conciliatory or ingratiating but in this case the single word he uttered was more like the snarl of a threatening hound. Riebsam the mathematician was standing next to me. Being very reserved in his nature, he only cast a searching glance at his famous colleague.

Kalup suddenly shoved himself away from the wall. Moving ponderously around an instrument cabinet he finally stopped in front of the familiar pair of legs sticking out of the steel dome. As he snorted in an effort to bend his corpulent body forward, Riebsam frowned at him strangely. I couldn't tell whether it was a sign of amusement or inner constraint.

Kalup bent his knees sufficiently to enable him to poke a finger at Rhodan's thigh. "What have you found in there?" he asked in his typically loud tone of voice. "Have you stumbled on the Philosopher's Stone? Or do you really think that your cosmonaut brain can unravel things the experts have given up on?"

I found it somewhat amusing to watch Riebsam's face. There was no change in the expression of his eyes because he was afflicted by the effects of a retinal correction. However he accomplished the unusual feat of smiling with his upper lip while not moving the rest of his mouth. Reginald Bell, Rhodan's

2nd-in-command and closest confidant, suddenly chuckled at me. The relationship between Kalup and Rhodan might have been a cause of tension for an outside observer but in reality both men know what to expect from the other.

"You trying to turn lead into gold in there?" inquired Kalup, this time even louder.

Rhodan's legs moved and the hyperspace physicist stepped back from the flailing feet. I came over and took hold of the ankles, after which I pulled the highest statesman of the Solar Empire out of the enclosure.

Rhodan was bathed in sweat and his hair dangled down onto his forehead. He sat on the steel deck and looked about him calmly. "I'm certain that this opening is a maintenance hatch," he said.

Kalup's face flushed. "And just to find that out you've been fidgeting around for the past 45 minutes—in a mechanism that's irreplaceable to science? Sir, my time is extremely valuable. What were you fooling with in there?"

"He's been chasing little Kalups—what else?" interjected Bell.

Rhodan stared at me fixedly for a moment and then we both broke out in laughter that helped relieve the tension. Kalup was speechless; but he realized that in this moment the burden of nervousness we had been under for days had been lifted. The scientist left us although I knew he must be chuckling inwardly. He had never been disposed to detract from his fame as an irascible grouch by any display of levity.

I reached a hand to Rhodan and helped him up. Somewhat pensively he brushed off his soiled and dusty uniform. My appearance was no better than his because I had also attempted to solve the mystery of the so-called 'seed-ship'. After my arrival here I had dismissed the dignitaries of the Arkonide court. According to their view of the rights and duties of a ruling potentate it would have been impossible for me to personally inspect any such mechanical installations.

Rhodan took one more look around and shrugged. "Let's go," he said.

"You're giving up?"

"I don't have any other choice. Apparently your great Arkonide expertise didn't do you any good either—or did it?"

I glanced at him suspiciously. The barbarian upstart had used the word 'expertise' with a double-entendre. As was my custom I reminded him that my ancestors had conquered trans light space travel while his forebears were still living in caves.

"That figures," he nodded agreeably. There was a spark of humour in his grey eyes. "Besides that, all that we know today we learned from you Arkonides, wouldn't you say?"

I refrained from making any appropriate retort. Such problems had been aired between us more than enough in the past.

"Your helmet, Your Eminence," said Rhodan with irony.

I took the magnificent headpiece from him and clamped it under my arm. We finally left the place and found the intervening hatches open. In this ship there had never been any genuine life before. En route to

the exit we encountered an inspection detail here and there. Rhodan's specialists were trying at least to find out what kind of propulsion system was involved. Wherever we looked we encountered a robotechonology that was far more extensive and complete than anything known on Earth or in the Arkonide Imperium.

Lost in thought we walked through the long corridors and slid down the inactivated antigrav shafts until we finally reached one of the cargo locks. Here the Terran cybernetic specialists had set up their headquarters. Rhodan asked a few questions which could not be answered as yet. Beyond the open lock gates the tropical vegetation of the planet Snarfot could be seen. We knew that in this hot humidity there would be a rapid development of what the Terrans had appropriately named 'fat-moss'.

I had only learned of events on Azgola when it had become necessary to evacuate the intelligences who lived there. The natives who had always been naturally inclined to be as thin as spindles had been quickly transformed into corpulent, helpless creatures. Almost too late I had been informed that calorie-enrichened plant spores had been discovered in the atmosphere of this world and that they penetrated into the respiratory tract where they deposited their incredible fat contents.

Experiments had shown that a person forced to live continuously in a world contaminated by the 'fat-moss' spores would turn into a virtual colossus in just 4 weeks. Depending upon the density of the spore saturation of the air, the nutritional value of each breath taken in was found to range between 20 and 1110 calories. It was a matter of grave concern that the nutritive micro-spores consisted of 80% highly active fatty substances and only 20% carbohydrates and protein. Vitamins and trace elements had not been detected.

I had not been able to believe Rhodan's report until I had personally seen one of the inhabitants of Azgon weighed almost 330 pounds. His digestive organs had become inactive because the fat-moss spores penetrated the body exclusively through the respiratory tract. Rhodan and I had no other choice but to bring the endangered inhabitants to safety. The evacuation had only been completed a few days before.

During this time the planet Azgola had changed. Viewed from above, it seemed to be a flourishing world whose surface was entirely covered by a flawless green carpet. The fat-moss had not been stopped by any natural barriers. Its reproductive capacity was amazing and the sporulation was not controllable.

However we did not consider this plant's existence to constitute a danger for either Terrans or Arkonides because we had soon discovered the originators of the growth. Shortly after the events on Azgola the radio surveillance circuits of the robot Regent had picked up some strange impulses. We had traced the transmitter and discovered a spaceship which was sending out a call to a still larger vessel.

Rhodan had waited until the latter ship had emerged from hyperspace. Then it became obvious that whereas the smaller craft was merely a scout the major unit was a mission-assigned ship whose functions were astounding. Thousands of robots had emerged from the locks and were flying over the surface of the planet Snarfot, intent upon sowing the fat-moss spores in orderly succession. After a bitter conflict we finally succeeded in putting both ships out of action.

But the remaining question was who had sent out these fully robotized ships and who was it who was so anxious to have them spread this plague through the atmospheres of the warm oxygen worlds in the galaxy? Terran and Arkonide research teams were working uninterruptedly on a solution to the mystery but so far all that was known was that the spores were relatively harmless. Food research chemists were even claiming that the moss might help them to eventually solve all nutritional problems, the main proviso being of course the ability to technically control the growth and the harvesting.

It was a characteristic of the fat-moss to disseminate its calorie-rich ingredients by means of the airborne spores. Therefore no matter what methods of control were used a portion of this impalpable food dust always fell back to the surface of any world infested with it and a new carpet of moss would always develop. The atmospheric envelope surrounding Azgola had become so saturated with the spores that nobody could live there without facing the threat of taking in a few hundred calories with every breath.

The spores per se could not be destroyed en masse. They moved about freely in the warm air currents, rising aloft or percolating downward according to the variations of weather conditions. So we had tried to attack the moss itself as the source of the spores but after cleaning off an entire continent we would find areas we had swept over before with our disinfectant beams where the blue-green colouration of the plant growth was making itself evident again. Azgola had been transformed into a world virtually dripping with fat. The native fauna had perished from over-nourishment.

From this point of view the moss actually constituted a considerable menace, that is in cases where it was sown on any inhabited world. In order to prevent such an eventuality we had rendered the seedship inoperable. For several days it had been sitting here inactivated on the 2nd planet of the sun called Snarf—yet the growth was already starting. Within 3 weeks it had become clear to us that the seed robots had performed their tasks sufficiently before they were destroyed.

Rhodan looked around after we disembarked. He leaned back his head and sniffed suspiciously. "The spores are in the air already," he said. "It's time to get off Snarfot. This ship isn't going anywhere anymore. It won't be able to answer the coordinate signals of the scoutship and do any more planting on oxygen worlds. But our logic analysis has come up with an indication that there's still another of the big boats in action—a seeds hip designed for harvesting these plantation-type worlds. The question dangles, my friend—where is it?"

When he looked at me his facial expression seemed calm but I sensed the unrest within him. Rhodan was one of those Terrans who could be very disturbed by an unsolved riddle.

I walked a few steps farther and turned to look at the seedship. It was a huge cylinder, 1600 feet in diameter and more than 1 mile long. I could imagine the tonnage of seed cargo the giant holds must contain. When I expressed this thought to Rhodan he seemed to ponder over it thoughtfully. The linear battleship *Ironduke* had landed and several of its officers hurried past us. They saluted briefly but respectfully.

"You may be surprised, Imperator," he said finally. "My experts estimate the seed supply to be at most about 50,000 tons. By comparison with the cargo capacity of this Behemoth, that's not very much."

I was dumbfounded. At the same time the sense of uneasiness that had plagued me for weeks assailed me again. "50,000 tons?"

"That's better than none at all—we stopped it at that level anyway. Have you studied the recording we made of our interrogation of the ship?"

"Very carefully."

"We've drawn a few conclusions from it. The robot, which is the ship itself, maintains that its builders designed it specifically for this mission of sowing the seeds through space. The much smaller scoutship locates worlds with warm oxygen atmospheres and then calls for the seedship, which then proceeds without delay to accomplish its work. By this method perhaps many thousands of worlds have been

seeded without our knowing about it."

"It will be a long time yet, my friend, before we've fully explored the galaxy."

"True, but we're already looking beyond the fringes of the Milky Way—if only around the edges."

I chuckled silently to myself. That was the way with these foolhardy Terrans! During the 60s of the 20th century they had started to reach for the stars although millions of humans still suffered from hunger, the depths of their oceans had not yet been explored and vast primitive jungles still hid things never seen by human eyes. They had neither solved the mystery of life nor the problems of their environment and yet they had climbed into their flimsy rockets and flown to the moon. Now they were already peeking over the rim of the galaxy itself—a giant stellar island which no space faring race had come anywhere near exploring completely.

He smirked, probably having read my thoughts. "Forget it," he said. "It was just a side remark. The important thing is to locate the builders of these 3 spaceships. The information we got was insufficient. When we asked what these intelligences looked like the answer was that they did *not appear* to be anything but that they *simply were*."

"A curious phrasing," I admitted.

"Exactly! Presumably the seedship was built 'yesterday' but what 'yesterday' means to a mechanical entity could be anything to us.

"Perhaps 100,000 years."

"That's the way we look at it too. There's no way we can look at their concept of 'yesterday' in our own terms.

The only thing that was clear was that the builders had fallen into some kind of crisis. They sent out their special ships. The third vessel, that is the harvest ship, is supposed to have disappeared. In my opinion it's the most important link in this 3-way chain. The builders had a peculiar metabolism. On their homeworld the fat-moss grew until the planet cooled off to a point where the sensitive vegetation couldn't propagate any longer. They had fed themselves there simply by breathing their food—a pretty easy life, you might say.

I nodded thoughtfully. It was all very interesting but still did not solve the problems. I asked myself why these unknown people had not taken advantage of their excellent space technology and simply search out another world where they could continue their existence in their normal manner. Why had they constructed 3 special ships and assigned them the mission of flying out to all available worlds, sowing and harvesting the moss and bringing the extract back home? Such an operation was amazingly illogical. No intelligences to my knowledge would have solved such an emergency in this manner. Evidently the so-called 'builders' were equipped with an incomprehensible type of mentality. They had sought to import their food to their home world. No one had yet come up with an answer to the question of how they had actually assimilated the harvested extract. If this mystery race didn't have digestive systems in the normal sense they must have found a way to breathe in the fruits of their technically wasteful labours. How had this come about?

In principle the appearance of the scoutcraft and the seedship was interesting but from a political and military standpoint the event was immaterial. With the partial destruction of both vessels the danger had been eliminated. I was even wondering why we were still occupied with the whole business. In the vast

reaches of the galaxy there were other things we could be doing.

"Curiosity," my extra-brain informed me.

I laughed involuntarily. Rhodan glanced at me searchingly and then understood.

"What does your logic sector have to say?" he inquired.

"As to our motivation here? Just one word: curiosity."

His brow furrowed as he lifted his head again to breathe in the sultry air of the planet. "We won't be able to save the animals here either," he commented, "unless we find a way to lure that harvest ship in our direction. How are the spores gathered in? The fat-moss is far less productive than one might assume. Our research has uncovered some surprising results. The plant is rich in calories but when it's removed from the ground it doesn't send out any more spores. All the moss itself would yield is the spores it contains and that isn't much. So the harvesting process must specialize in gathering the free spores in the air. If you let a square meter of moss continue to live, in 24 hours it will broadcast more nutrition than can be extracted from 100 square meters of other edible vegetation during one cycle of growth. But with that information I've come to the end of my info about it."

We walked along the path that numerous boots had already marked on their way to and from the *Ironduke*. During its landing manoeuvre the battleship had crushed a portion of the tropical forest. Even the loftiest trees appeared to be blades of grass by comparison. I myself had arrived in a light cruiser from my robot fleet although the chief of protocol of my court had been of the opinion that such a ship was not dignified enough for the Emperor of the Greater Imperium. However I could not see why I should always be flitting around through space in a superbattleship.

Rhodan came to a stop in front of one of the *Ironduke's* landing struts which had sunk part way into the boggy ground. I looked at his chest where for a few months now his life-preserving cell-activator had been suspended under his uniform. He and I had become relatively immortal. Since the tragic death of his son we had not discussed the subject anymore.

When he touched my arm I thought that he was finally going to speak of recent events—but I was wrong. Rhodan was the type who always looked forward as a matter of principle.

"Your logic sector's opinion concerning our motivation here is false," he told me. "When we made our attack, the seedship sent out a distress signal. That call was picked up by some station and was confirmed in a pulse-burst code."

With this he had touched upon the weak spot in my own calculations, which had been the source of my uneasiness. I regarded my communicator helmet intently as though never having seen it before.

"So?"

"Where did that answer come from? What should we be getting ourselves prepared for? Do you realize that the existence of the fat-moss is completely immaterial in comparison to the menace that can suddenly emerge from an unknown sector of space? The Arkonide Imperium only appears to be strong but in its interior it's rotting more and more each day. The Regent commits serious psychological blunders and you can't run the Empire all by yourself. With your position wavering as it is you can't afford to continue having millions of Terrans sitting in the Empire's offices and ministries. The result will be a re-volt. Even donk-domes wake up, you know, if you cut off their inherited privileges."

He did not have to remind me of the sorry state of the Imperium. The rate of degeneration was advancing. The mental deterioration among Arkonides could not be halted anymore. I ruled over a stellar empire which upon close inspection would appear to be a scrap heap.

Rhodan passed the back of his hand across his lips.

Farther to the North we could hear the thundering ray-beams of the destruction command. The seed robots were being vaporized in flight.

"We should find out who built these robotships and where. Any intelligences capable of producing such masterpieces of technology should be able to launch a very battleworthy fleet. What are the findings of the Regent?"

"Findings?" I asked, nonplussed. "My friend, the Brain is busy working with about 20 billion variables. More than 40,000 special ships of my fleet are out in space but we have yet to receive a radio signal that can't be traced or explained."

"Can the Regent determine where the signals came from?"

"Probably. I'm waiting for more details. You're too negative, barbarian."

He shrugged and declared again that the fat-moss was innocuous by comparison. He kept emphasizing this point until Pucky suddenly materialized before us.

I never failed to be fascinated by this phenomenon—his physical materialization out of nothingness and jumping distances by means of paranormal powers. Yet my hand went instinctively to my weapon. A man in my position was well-advised never to regard an event as coincidence or any strange being as well-intentioned. Only a few days prior to my flight to Snarfot a man on the Crystal Planet had made a very sophisticated attempt on my life.

At the moment I recognized Pucky I forced a smile to my lips. He waved a greeting with his little paw-like hand and waddled up to us on his short legs.

"You've shut off your thought vibes," he said in his shrill small voice. "How come? How am I supposed to find you without any brainwave action? Aside from that—what are micro-transceivers for? We've been calling for 15 minutes."

"Who is we, Lt. Puck?"

The mousebeaver opened his mouth to reveal his incisor tooth. There was an aggressive gleam in his eyes. "That's right, Lt. Puck! Everybody gets promoted around here but not me. How come?"

He placed his small arms akimbo, sat back against the beavertail that emerged from the back of his uniform and looked us over critically from head to foot. I cleared my throat politely while Rhodan smirked.

"That was a straight question, little one. We'll talk about it later. What do you want?"

Pucky's attitude seemed to change, which alerted me. I knew the little fellow well enough to see through his mimicry fairly well. Although he wasn't human his face was surprisingly expressive.

"Oh nothing much. Just wanted to pass on a little information. Ara and Springer exploration ships have found 2 contaminated planets. The Regent has also reported in. A robotship came across a 3rd world, this time inhabited, and the natives are stewing in their own fat. All because of this grow-grow grass! A 4th planet, also sprouting those weight-bait spores, was spotted by Maj. Schopendust during a patrol flight. That one's inhabited too. So what happens now?"

Rhodan stood like Lot's wife. Some moments passed before he moved. He turned to me.

I couldn't resist being sarcastic. "What do you know! Four planets all at once! And I thought this moss was so harmless!"

He clenched his fists and stomped away. Pucky and I stood there, watching him go into the ship. I felt the mousebeaver's little hand creep into mine. Then I picked him up into my arms. I ran my fingers through his neck fur and nudged my nose against his. Immediately his natural disposition broke through. He laughed brightly and began to tell me about all sorts of little pranks which he referred to as 'play'. Now he was once more the lovable little unearthly imp whose keen insight and understanding were almost beyond expectation. But Pucky's greatest gift—aside from his paranormal faculties—was his tart criticism. He had his own criteria for judging things.

"What do you think, little one?"

"About what?"

"Those 4 planets."

"Hm-m... Two of them aren't important but the other two have people on them. Are you going to do something for them?"

"I won't have any other choice. I'll be sending out orders to the Regent at once."

"Evacuate the people into the cold regions. Both planets are supposed to have ice caps at the poles. There the spores will die out before they can be breathed in. Is that a good suggestion?"

I stroked his fur again and nodded.

"You're a pretty smart guy, Emperor," he said condescendingly. "If only you carried a little more clot... or do I mean clout? Those zombo Arkonides of yours don't take you serious enough. What's the use of the best orders and instructions if they're not carried out? And on top of that they try to do you in. If I were in your place I'd quit knocking myself out for such nucks! I'd blow the thistle on them, you know what I mean?"

This was a typical example of a Pucky critique on conditions which others might have circumscribed with fancy words. He called things by their right names and often completely by-passed both protocol and sentiment. In a sense he was irreplaceable. He even detected the sadness that secretly overwhelmed me and he was silent for a while before he spoke again.

"I guess I was uncouth again, right? Perry always says I shouldn't be so hypercritical. Forget it, will you?"

"OK, little one, it's forgotten. Anyway I don't think you're hypercritical at all. You're only very frank in



a special way, which isn't looked on with favour by many people and especially by Arkonides. Let's go. Are you staying with me today?"

"You're alone, aren't you?"

I nodded. Yes, I was alone. "Such is often the lot of a ruler, Pucky."

"Baloney! Now there's a viewpoint I'll never understand. Why don't you do what you want to? Oh well, there I go talking too much! I'll stick with you until you've issued your orders. Then I'll bring you over to the *Ironduke*. You'll make a 'jump' with me, won't you?"

I put in a call for a robot commuter which would take us to my cruiser. A far off in the heat-shimmering sky was the distant thunder of a Terran spaceship. There were men and true friends on board up there somewhere—people I could depend on.

The plan to turn over the Arkonide Empire someday to the earthmen was growing steadily all the time. It all depended on how Rhodan was waiting; that I knew. But he would not broach the subject unless I were to speak of it myself.

## 2/ IMPERILED IMPERIUM

"Don't! That's senseless!"

Rhodan struck my right hand and my readied energy weapon was deflected downward.

I felt that I was no longer in possession of my senses. Before me stood seven Arkonides. They were members of the Supreme Council, which had long ceased to be what my worthy ancestors would have understood by that term.

I stared into the faces of pampered and flabby creatures that I only reluctantly called Arkonides. As was typical of the idle hollow brains, however, they thought they were proprietors of all the worlds' wisdom. As a result of their State-financed lives of luxury they had been incapable of observing the most elementary of security provisions. They considered it an imposition to have to leave their sumptuous featherbeds or to miss an original concert. However they would never be able to conceive of how ludicrous their arrogance was or what pitiable specimens they appeared to be to men like Rhodan or myself. It was hopeless to try to make them realize that they had become no more than mentally and morally burnt-out shells with only a remnant of remaining initiative.

These gentlemen, 7 leading members of the scientific Supreme Council of Arkon, had been so careless in handling a sample of fat-moss sent in from Azgola for analysis that some of the spores had gotten into the atmosphere of Arkon 2!

It must have happened weeks before but we had only realized now what the impact of this strange growth could be on the most important commercial and industrial world in the galaxy. Some members of my own race had comported themselves like so many Terran schoolboys. Arkon 2, the home of 2 billion Arkonides and the location of trade colonies for some 4000 spacefaring races of people, had become

another 'Blubber ball'. The spores had already infested the atmosphere. This was something we had never dreamed of—but it had happened.

Upon returning to Arkon and hearing this news I had shouted like a madman. I had ordered the responsible parties brought to me under robot guard, closed all spaceports and threatened the severest penalties allowed by the law of my ancestors. I wanted to prevent the transference of the fat-moss spores to other worlds.

The political difficulties related to grounding all spaceships projected a situation which my 'distinguished' colleagues had refused to accept. If their degenerative stupidity had made them incapable of recognizing *any* difficulty or danger it would have been a shut and closed case. As they say on distant Earth, there's no cure for stupidity. But whereas they refused to accept the complications of the impact of their own actions they insisted on minimizing their disastrous failure in the first place. These lofty gentlemen still fantasized about an invincible stellar empire, considering themselves to be godlings of a higher order who could insult and belittle other intelligences, yet where the real crisis was concerned they were of the opinion that the whole business was 'probably not all that alarming'.

It had torn my patience to shreds. In addition to all my cares and worries concerning the Empire and our colonial worlds, here was a danger that only myself and the Terrans could fully comprehend. In the Supreme Council they seemed to regard the fat-moss as an interesting plant form, which it certainly was, but they could not see that it was also a grave threat to the lives of countless living creatures.

Perry was still standing next to me. His hand was on my arm. I had to pull myself together to avoid shooting these men down like a despot.

"It's senseless," he repeated. His voice was calm but firm.

With some reluctance I returned the weapon to its holster, but when I called to the Chief of the Guard Division, I was shouting again.

The triclops came up and dropped to his knees before me. "Your orders, Eminence?"

"Take them away under robot guard!" I commanded, breathing heavily. "These councilmen are under special court-martial restrictions. If they attempt to escape you are to open fire without warning, and that goes for any persons who try to approach them without my authorization. Failure to carry out my instructions is punishable by death."

My encoder machine was activated. I put in a call to the Regent, who was once more in control of the special robot commandoes, and 1000 combat robots marched forward. They were incorruptible, provided of course that no assassins had succeeded in tampering with their programs.

The councilmen were enclosed by energy grids and were led away. Still trembling with anger I watched them until they disappeared through the central court of the Arkon 2 administration building. Two days before, when I had taken off from Snarfot, I had not foreseen such dire complications.

John Marshall, chief of the Terran Mutant Corps, handed me a handkerchief. I must have stared absently at the piece of cloth. "I don't believe you have one, sir," he said.

I looked at him for another moment or two before I reached for the handkerchief. I felt that my eyes had watered considerably, which was a characteristic of Arkonides when under the stress of overexcitement. "Thanks, John. Did you uncover anything?"

"Nothing, sir. The Naats are reliable. Their commander understood your threat completely."

"And the councilmen—what was on their minds?"

The telepath hesitated. He looked about him as if hoping to be rescued. Pucky was present and ran interference for him. "Don't ask, Atlan. They hate you."

I laughed bitterly. They hated me! Why? What had I done to them? Was it too much to ask of the high and mighty ones that they show up twice a month at a council session? Wasn't it my duty to address the members of the Supreme Council, to present the problems and crises of the Empire to them and to hope for suggestions?

I needed another 10 minutes to compose myself. My logic sector remained silent. This specially activated part of my brain seemed to be equally at a loss for a solution.

"Arkon 2 is lost," I said dejectedly. "Before long the spore concentration will be enough to start the plague of corpulence—and what then? If this world must be given up, the Imperium is in checkmate. Do you know what that would mean?"

Rhodan walked through the chamber and stopped before a high window that was protected by an energy screen. The auto-lite controls had come on and the intense white light of the Arkon sun was appropriately filtered. Admiral Thekus, who was the present Commander-in-Chief of the Arkonide colonial fleet, attempted to catch my eye. A tall figure of a man with impressive features, he was one of the remaining few officials of my race from whom I could expect some initiative. I knew that he was not my friend but at the moment that was of secondary importance. The main thing about Thekus was that the welfare of the Imperium was first in his heart.

"Arkon 2 must not be given up, Your Excellence!"

Rhodan turned his head. He looked suspiciously at the older man, whose white Arkonide hair contrasted sharply with his dark shoulder cape. Thekus reminded me of the fighting men of my battlefleet. In those days, 10,000 years ago, we had been strong and ever ready for deeds of valour.

"Do you have any suggestions, Thekus?" I asked.

He looked at me as if we stood there alone. In spite of his mental alertness he could not consider Perry Rhodan and the other Terrans as coming anywhere near our own level of intelligence. For a fleet commander of the rank of a Thekus, any intelligence not born on Arkon had to be some kind of sub-species.

"Your Highness, an attempt must be made to destroy the spores."

"How?" interjected Rhodan. Then he turned his back on us again.

The courtiers of the local administration remained silent, nor did I have any inclination to question them. Thekus did not even favour Rhodan with a glance. I noted that Pucky's mouse nose wrinkled with anger. Apparently his telepathic faculty had enabled him to pick up a very unfriendly thought. But the little one controlled himself. All mutants present had received instructions to conceal their special abilities.

Thekus held his ground with dignity. "Your Majesty, Arkonide scientists will work day and night to solve

this problem."

He caught the import of my despairing laugh. His hands clutched at the hem of his cape. His gold-embroidered symbol of the Imperium glittered in the filtered light shafting into the room.

"Anything else, Thekus?" I asked.

He gave me no answer. One of my court sycophants permitted himself to give me a 'diplomatic smile'. His obsequious bowing filled me with disgust. "If Your Eminence will graciously consider how gravely the representatives of science regret this occurrence. We shall make every effort..."

"You will do nothing!" I interrupted him bluntly. "I thank you for your observations, Thekus. In the interests of the Empire, I am forced to introduce other measures.

Rhodan felt the hate-filled glances that focussed momentarily upon himself. The others had caught the true inference of my statement. The haughty gentlemen finally withdrew from our presence. After they had gone, Pucky switched on the air-conditioner. "It smells in here," he explained, looking at the rest of us somewhat testily. There were no contradictions.

Rhodan walked back through the reception chamber, which still reflected the magnificence of a more glorious past. "You haven't informed your people, Atlan?"

I shook my head negatively. It would have been wasted effort to advise the Supreme Council of the robotships we had discovered. They certainly knew that the fat-moss had appeared on some distant world yet none of them—including Thekus—had so much as inquired about the cause.

Rhodan reached for his peaked uniform cap and seemed to study it for a moment. "Poor Emperor," he sighed. "So here we are again—alone together in a strange land. Alright, then we shall begin."

How simple it sounded! I asked him the same question he had directed at Thekus. "How?"

"By examining all possibilities and coördinating our efforts. Do you think the weather of the planet can be influenced so that the overall temperatures will drop below freezing?"

"No. The climate-control stations were not designed for that. Arkonides love warmth and comfort."

"So I've noticed. Then the spores can't be killed off that way. I suggest that all moss-growth areas be swept with ultra-violet radiations. The robot fleet should be programmed accordingly and put to work on the project. We take off at once. We'll be closer to the Regent on Arkon 3. As soon as we get a reading on those alien pulse signals we'll plan the next step."

I nodded. I had no other choice but to make a compromise. Rhodan was well aware of the task he had burdened me with. If I were in his position where I could simply call a major meeting of active staff members and issue the necessary orders, everything would have been quite simple. But I was forced to explain everything to the Regent, case by case. Any false programming could ruin a project or mission. Lately the Brain had been making errors and nobody could trace down the causes. Besides, mechanical logic was too one-sided.

2 hours later we took off in the *Ironduke*. To me it was a blessing to be in the company of Earthmen again. I stood next to Rhodan in the Control Central of the battleship as we shot through the upper strata of the Arkon atmosphere and entered outer space. Below us the world of commerce and industry

dwindled away into distance. Col. Claudrin, the commander of the *Ironduke*, was a man who knew his business. He raced past the hot Arkon sun in such close proximity that it caused the defence screens to crackle. Rhodan didn't say a word. I thought it was admirable that he could remain so calm and confident while permitting his subordinates such a wide latitude of independent action in areas of major consequence.

*Applied psychology*, my logic section informed me.

The Arkon sun finally drifted off the viewscreens and the energy storm in our outer screens abated. We were on a straight line of flight, following the imaginary side of a triangle between planets. Arkon 3 was one of the planets which my ancestors had forced into a new orbit, thus causing Arkon 1, 2 and 3 to swing around the sun on a shared course at evenly-spaced points. So far this experiment had been unique in the history of the galaxy.

With a touch of ironic amusement I reflected that here at least was something the Terrans were not yet capable of. Immediately, however, my extra-brain advised me that the technical problem of relocating a planet could also be solved by the men of Terra. If they wished to they were capable of bringing the Sol planets Venus and Mars into other orbits. My relaxed mood yielded once more to my inner unrest. It was useless to be musing about the Terrans. Metaphorically speaking, the already mottled skin of the Imperium was at stake.

Rhodan's voice startled me out of my broodings. He was standing at the ship's P.A. microphone. "Attention, all hands. Take off your uniforms and bare your upper torsos. Flight control and engine room—cease acceleration and go into free fall. Bio-support control—drop cabin temperature to -2 Centigrade. Maintain this for 10 minutes and then return us to normal temperature. Carry on—that is all."

No one had to ask the reason: it was a matter of course for the Terrans to destroy any stray spores on board by exposing them to the effects of freezing temperatures. It was simple but effective. For a period of 10 minutes I froze in my thin underwear. Pucky was the only living creature on board who actually enjoyed the cold air. He closed his eyes and turned himself about in front of a main blower outlet while the icy wind rippled through his fur.

By the time all traces of any living spores had been removed from the ship's atmosphere, Arkon 3 was observable on the view screens. Three superbattleships of the Regent's security fleet came out to form an escort but we were surprised to note that their gun turrets were extended in combat position. Rhodan narrowed his eyes at this and clamped his jaws together in anger. Had the Brain lost its reason, confronting us like this with 3 gun-bristling giant ships? I contacted the Regent through my command transceiver and demanded that he call off these security units at once.

"Regent to His Highness," came a metallically harsh voice from the micro-speaker. "Special circuit A-1 speaking. Due to the appearance of alien life forms on Arkon 2, security program 'Teton' is in effect. I am instructed to prohibit any landings without an armed escort. This order includes all authorized vessels."

Bell stared at me, momentarily flabbergasted. "Alien life forms? Has the Regent flipped his lid?"

"He's referring to the spores," interjected Rhodan as he turned to Atlan. "It seems to me, old friend, that it's time to do something about those ridiculous security circuits. The robot Brain should be able to differentiate between *rational* life forms and plant spores."

I refrained from answering him but could not hide the loss of colour in my face. For many years the security circuit A-1 had been a welcome assurance for me. I had long assumed that with its help I would be able to contend with any and all types of emergency conditions. But here again was evidence that A-1 had received an unknown number of commands which could take effect without a true comprehension of the situation. Such programming was no longer applicable to the times. I began to tremble inwardly when I thought of what damage the robot Brain was capable of. I knew of 12 cases of error already which could have led to a catastrophe if I had not interfered in time.

Rhodan was worried. Bell came over and offered me a refreshment. "Hey now, have you ever seen your own corpse? You haven't? Then take a look in the mirror. Seems to me that ever since the Akons showed up that Brain has been off its rocker."

Bell meant well. His words struck a sensitive spot in me, which he only realized when Rhodan bluntly changed the subject. A-1 did not reply. We dropped down into the atmospheric envelope of the planet, answered 3 challenging signals with the current ID code and landed near the great dome of the defence screen which loomed above the robot as always. The engines died down. I picked up my helmet and started toward the airlock.

"Try to have the Regent hurry up," Rhodan called after me. "If we know where those robot spacers came from we'll also locate the harvestship."

'Hurry' the Regent? It was easier said than done, I thought grimly, as I left the ship. Rhodan should have known that I could hardly have any influence on the speed of the Brain's operations. I traversed the enclosure wall and stopped in front of the red danger line. Once more I was alone.

Before me a crevice opened in the great defence screen. I went across to it and passed through the opening, where I found a remote-controlled ground car that took me to the antigrav lift. The labyrinth below swallowed me up. The echoing of my footsteps here made me nervous and the swishing sounds of the repair robots everywhere stirred up a sense of panic in me.

Did the Regent need a major overhaul? It had been in existence for about 6000 years. How long could such a complicated mechanism continue to function accurately without a controlled inspection by rational, living beings?

Such questions had been on my mind for years. Both instinct and logic told me that one of these days some wornout part would cause a major short-circuit.

### **3/ AN "OUTSIDE" CHANCE**

The technical and scientific accomplishments of the Terrans had amazed me more than once in the past but this time I was ready to believe in miracles. By Earthly reckoning the date was 14 September 2104.

125 years prior to this the men of Earth only had vague ideas about travelling through space at the speed of light, with all of its attendant problems. It was true they had toyed with the idea of trying it someday but the uncertainties posed by contraction effects, as revealed by Einstein, had been as discouraging as

the still-unsolved question of propulsion. They had also been experimenting by then with photon engines but the developed technology and hardware still lay in the distant future.

A trip through space at speeds exceeding light velocity was considered to be a Utopian dream by even the most imaginative of scientists. A few years after the origin of such a theory, 2 representatives of my race had made an emergency landing on the moon. There Perry Rhodan had found them. He had taken over their knowledge and had built upon it ever since.

The unwieldy structure that now presented itself to my view had been built during the 90s of the 20th century. In those days Earth scientists had already begun to evaluate the use of translight hypercom techniques in radio astronomy. They were no longer satisfied with the process of analysing the variable impulses they received from radio stars but instead had gone over to a system that was based on the principle of wave-echo returns.

Using ordinary hypercom waves they beamed out reflector impulses by a method they had themselves developed, which were then echoed back from a target star. To my way of thinking it was almost impossible to simply bounce back a 3-dimensional beam of superordinate energy because material objects were unsuitable as a reflective substance. The structural mechanics of such paraphysical waves precluded any reaction to regular matter or normal energy phenomena.

The Arkonide hyperspace tracking of spaceships had always been based on a reaction to propulsion radiations which were in a related realm of energy. However, the Terrans had managed to even measure solid, massive bodies. Most importantly, they had succeeded in obtaining an echo image of stars. When I asked them how they did it they had told me, without undue presumptiveness, that Arkonide scientists must have also thought of the idea of using the gravitational fields of stars as a pulse reflector, since they were also in the superordinate range of energy.

I checked my spacesuit's oxygen and air-conditioning systems and grasped the control lever that governed my micro-pulsator drive. The outer hatch of the starboard equatorial airlock stood open and before my eyes yawned the vastness of space between the island universes. In an opposite direction, now obscured by the spherical hull of the *Ironduke*, was the glittering array of billions of suns belonging to our own galaxy. Although the native realm of my own race, star cluster M-13, was itself on the rim of the Milky Way, our present position was 5000 light-years beyond that fringe. We were thus in a region that was devoid of stars.

Millions of light years away we could make out countless points of light but each one of them represented another galaxy with its own billions of stars.

I stepped out onto the ring bulge. The energy grids of the engines had been shut down. Although there was still some residual radiation it was not at a dangerous level. The farther out I went the more the artificial gravity subsided. I came to a stop at the edge of the cowling bulge. My magnetic soles gripped the compressed steel of the outer hull.

Rhodan and the men of this special command detail had followed me. I hardly paid any attention to the distant island universes. I was already familiar with that giddy and awe-inspiring vista. Thousands of years ago I had flown beyond the rim of the Milky Way with all the bold pride of a conqueror. I had taken a look around and believed that one day I would be able to traverse the separating abyss. By now, however, I had become more moderate in my attitude. Any sentient creature would have to become meditative at the sight of this cosmic magnificence and vastness or they would not be worthy of the name 'sentiment'.

At the moment I was only interested in the cosmic tracking station which Terran engineers had brought here from the space sector of the Earthly sun. I had placed the largest fleet tender I had at their disposal in order to make the transport possible.

The hypercom radio telescope had been assembled under the weightless conditions of outer space. The beam antenna measured about 5 km in length. The observation station suspended from its funnel-shaped extremity was spherical in contour. The overall structure resembled an old-fashioned loudspeaker, with the 'horn' end turned toward the target area.

"When did you build it?" I asked over my helmet radio.

"In 1998," came Rhodan's answer out of my headphone. "Pretty amazing, don't you think?"

I nodded, genuinely impressed. They had grown up fast, these lovable barbarians of Terra.

Another man explained: "It would have been useless to erect such equipment inside the atmosphere. Aside from the unavoidable interference involved, the structure isn't stable enough to hold the weight of the antenna under grav 1 conditions. It only worked in outer space. Static there was negligible and the stability problem was easily taken care of. Care to do a little drifting?"

Yes, I was ready to 'drift' along with them. I activated my pulsator, shoved off from the ship's hull and sailed headlong toward the station. Above, below and around me was nothing that could be called material. The mighty gravitational field of the galaxy even held hard particles captive within its mass. If there was anything at all in this intercosmic abyss between the universe, it could not be anything measurable.

Soon the vast grid of the antenna loomed too large to be encompassed in our range of vision. It fell away into darkness. The open hatch of the power and observation centre gleamed like a distant star.

When we arrived at the airlock the powered ramp drew us inside and we waited for pressure equalization. Now that I was inside the radio telescope its effect was not so overwhelming. My ancestors had also placed similar constructions in space except that they hadn't worked on the principle of guided echo beams.

The command sphere or 'module' was much larger than I had assumed. Rhodan explained it to me with justifiable pride but he said that for the sake of simplicity they had tied this 'coffee strainer' to the outside of a heavy cruiser. Why build an energy plant, he argued, if vessels capable of travelling in deep space were available? That way the telescope could be given mobility. Of course near light-speeds couldn't be obtained with it because no way had been found to shield the mass of the antenna against inertial effects. And this I could well understand!

In spite of Rhodan's modesty I was aware of the great problems that had been overcome but I preferred to remain silent. My photographic memory was flashing other pictures to me out of Earth's past history. Well did I remember the caveman savages who came at me with their stone bludgeons and axes during my first expedition there in the northern forest regions. Thousands of years later I had witnessed other acts of brutality. People of other faiths and other colours had been persecuted merely because of the mistaken attitude that such people were not also human.

Now they had grown up, these inhabitants of Earth. I forced myself back to the present and allowed myself to be introduced to the station's crew members. Prof. Teitsch the astrophysicist was the chief scientist of the project. The observation central, had one of the largest view-screens I had ever seen.



When we entered we were greeted by the military commander, Maj. Sagho Benit, who understood his mission here. The heavy cruiser's weapons were under his command as well as the navigational aspects of telescopic sight alignment.

The observation chamber had been built into a former power plant room. Next door to it the astronomical and astrophysical computers were busy at work. Direct contact with vernier controls on the beam antenna added fine precision to the work of telescopic exploration.

"Please have a seat back here, sir," said Teitsch. "You can get a better view of the screen."

As I took off my cumbersome space suit many questions were on the tip of my tongue but I didn't want to seem too impatient. Rhodan smiled knowingly. Naturally he was aware of my anxiety. I glanced at him reproachfully and crossed my legs in obvious agitation. My mind was ablaze with urgent thoughts and calculations.

Two days after our arrival on Arkon 2 the Regent had submitted the figures we had been anxiously waiting for. It was necessary to determine where the answering signals had come from when the seedship had sent out its distress call. Since the signals had come in the form of pulse-bursts and a triangulation trace had not been possible, the results could not be very exact. It was a wonder in the first place that the Regent had been able to produce any coördinates at all. In this respect the robot Brain was irreplaceable.

The Regent had not been able to determine the actual location of the alien transmitter. Since the antenna energy of the impulses was not known there was no way of determining the distance involved. Nevertheless we had been able to calculate a directional line, even though the increase of distance would increase the degree of error. Our calculations were based on an X-Y search window of 1000 light-years. Still greater tolerances would be necessary if the transmitter was farther away than 30,000 light-years from star cluster M-13.

For 14 days all telescopes had been turned toward the space sector in question. The transmitter was located somewhere beyond the edge of the galaxy in the depths of intercosmic space. We had assumed it must be some sort of large spaceship or stationary platform since the existence of a planet out there had appeared to be unlikely. So the message we received from Maj. Sagho Benit came as quite a surprise. He asserted that Teitsch had discovered a hitherto unknown sun which in some unthinkable past time had escaped from the galactic family and drifted away into the abyss. The astrophysicist was also supposed to have discovered 3 planets associated with the distant wanderer.

An evaluation of all logic data indicated there was a much greater probability of the transmitter being on a planet instead of on a spaceship. After all our end goal was to find the homeworld of the 'builders' who had been mentioned by the seedship robot. So we had taken off to come to the cosmic observation station and have a personal look at the evidence. At the moment I could not allow my mind to dwell on the Arkon 2 situation. A mass panic was taking form there. The Arkonides were less agitated than the aliens who had been stranded on the planet ever since all ships had been grounded. In order to prevent a revolt from that source I had lifted the flight ban only a week before but with the proviso that all departing ships and their crews must be disinfected. Terran troops had forced the commanders of such vessels to keep their air-conditioning systems at -20 C for a period of 30 minutes. The inhabitants of tropical worlds had threatened economic reprisals because some of them had almost died in the process. However we had played no favourites in the matter and had held the safety factors at 10 times the level required. Only then had we allowed the merchant ships to leave.

I was glad to only have Arkonides to worry about from then on, where Arkon 2 was concerned. It would take them some time to be routed out of their lethargy. By that time I hoped that we would have

found a way to destroy the spores and the fat-moss growth.

"Snap out of it, friend," Rhodan whispered to me. "Teitsch's findings are promising."

I stirred out of my broodings and looked around apologetically. The room had gone dark but the giant screen lit up.

We were looking at the sharply defined echo image of a sun. It turned out to be a red star that was some 51000 light-years distant. After it had once been located through hyperspace, certain conclusions could be drawn with regard to its radiation frequencies and a spectroanalysis of its light had even been abstained. This revealed the normal structure of lines which indicated that it was a normal type of star. The question of whether it had strayed from the Milky Way or had been providentially created there was not germane to the problem before us. Professor Teitsch had called the star 'Outside', which seemed to be quite appropriate.

I listened to his exposition and he made it brief. "All attempts to discover another celestial body or such synthetic objects as spaceships or platforms in the assumed target area were without result," he concluded. "We even exceeded the tolerance factors provided by the Regent and additionally searched through a number of other regions very scrupulously. I emphasize the word 'scrupulously', gentlemen! Other than that star there is nothing out there capable of reflecting our echo pulses. If the Regent's calculations are correct or even approximate, there can be no question about it. We have found the location of your alien transmitter. 'Outside' has 3 planets and one of them should be of interest to you.

"Have you prepared the transition coördinates?" asked Rhodan.

"Yessir. However I would advise you to fly there in a linear-drive ship. The distance is very great and coordinate errors are not unlikely. Without very high-precision special equipment a true location trace is impossible."

Teitsch was right. No spaceship was capable of covering 51000 light-years in one transition jump. The tolerance threshold for matter and men lay in the area of 5000 light-years. Of course such thresholds could be exceeded but often with disastrous results. As far as a series of short hops was concerned, each of these only served to increase the margin of error. It would therefore be better to make the attempt in the *Ironduke*.

Rhodan nudged me and I turned to him. "Well?" he asked.

"Let's start—if possible, immediately," I answered.

"You certainly seem to be in a hurry, Imperator."

"Don't humble yourself by using my title so much, you little backwoods chieftain!" I retorted.

Rhodan's eyes went wide as Bell laughed.

"Touche!" rumbled the Epsalian, Jefe Claudrin. He produced a rascally grin which caused his squarish face to become even wider.

Rhodan muttered something I couldn't quite catch. We had often 'ribbed' each other as Bell expressed it. It was meant as a jest.

Rhodan stood up and stretched his arms. "Evidently you assume that the *Ironduke* is fully outfitted for a long trip like this. What about special equipment, elite troops, mutants—not to mention, shall we say, the water supply?"

"If I know Claudrin he'd rather be drawn and quartered than to short-change himself on equipment and supplies. What do you say, Jefe?"

Claudrin's massive chest arched outward as he burst into laughter that sounded like a thunder storm. He looked something like a sawed-off giant. He was as broad as he was tall. His shoulders were twice as large and powerful as those of a well-built Terran. Jefe was still wearing his micro-grav unit, which kept him under his accustomed pressure of 2.1 gravs. I couldn't imagine a better commander.

"That goes without saying, sir. The *Ironduke* is ready for the mission."

I also got to my feet and it was obvious to the others that the telescope station couldn't hold me here any longer.

"Take it easy!" Rhodan admonished.

Prof. Teitsch came up to us and I thanked him for the observation data.

"I hope I haven't made any errors," said the old man modestly.

"Have you been able to pick up any signals?" I asked. "Anything that would seem to be controlled radio traffic?"

"No sir—just our own pulses back. Nothing stirring on the planet. It wouldn't have escaped us unless they're using normal radio, which naturally couldn't reach us here. But there's been no sign whatsoever of any hypercom communication. After all, we're working here with 20 million times amplification."

I was just getting into my spacesuit when a young officer of the station crew stiffly announced that dinner was being served.

I saw the others' reactions. Rhodan seemed to smack his lips speculatively while Reginald Bell sighed audibly. Even John Marshall, always self-controlled, revealed a glitter of anticipation in his eyes. Cosmic stations were supplied with sumptuous provisions. There were things here that could never be stored or prepared on board a fighting ship, no matter how loose the regulations might be. Also every battle commander would have rejected the prospect of being invaded by an army of chefs. Such delicacies could not be prepared in the usual robot kitchen.

The Terrans suddenly stared at me as if I were a crispy roast à la 'Imperator'. I felt half-consumed before I retaliated, trembling with indignation.

"If you gourmets squander a single minute trying to stuff your fat bellies with chicken drumsticks and pastries and vintage wines, I'll call off my friendship with you!"

Rhodan favoured me with a muttered imprecation. Bell gave me a spiteful look and the spindly First Officer of the *Ironduke* poked at his midsection with his fingers. "Fat bellies—you don't say!" exclaimed Hunts Krefenbac in an injured tone. "When, may I ask, have you ever seen such a deformity on me, sir?"

"Party pauper!" cried Pucky. "I'll bet you they have strawberries here, too!"

"Get going!" I bellowed at them, "or I'm liable to go berserk!" I was only too familiar with these 'impromptu repasts' given in my honour. It would have cost us hours.

The men of the station crew had to struggle to keep a straight face. Meanwhile I ran around the circle of disgruntled-looking men from the *Ironduke* and wasn't too dignified as I shook my fist under their noses.

"Is this discipline?!" I continued to shout. "If you are that hungry I'll have you put off on Arkon 2 so you can *really* get your fill!"

"He forces me to a decision, friends," said Rhodan in mock sepulchral tones. "Back to the ship—but he's off our list, right?"

They all agreed but they went. I followed at their heels until one after another of them disappeared into the darkness of space. Across the gap the open airlock of the linear-drive warship glittered enticingly.

When I arrived on board I said scornfully: "Claudrin was no help to me over there. If he hadn't claimed that the ship is fully equipped and ready, I'd—hm-m-m."

As I looked about me maliciously I was met with such poisonous looks that I was forced to break down and smile in forgiveness.

"Gentlemen, your food concentrate rations await you," announced Rhodan. His mouth twitched suspiciously. "This Arkonide is a sly old fox. I must insist that you keep a close eye on him at all times."

Pucky was mad at me. I had deprived him of his favourite delicacy. I had grown too fond of him to leave him disappointed. I thought a moment and then took him by the arm.

"Let go of me, you red-eyed slave-driver!" he cried out.

I whispered to him swiftly: "By virtue of the power vested in me I hereby promote you to the commission of Major in the Arkon Fleet, with the special privilege of raiding the pantries of the Crystal Palace anytime you please."

Pucky's incisor snapped into visibility; but—whatever it cost him—the little fellow showed character. "Refused!" he retorted. "At any rate, I'll make a note of your good intentions. Maybe in a few years you can ask me again to be a major in your old scrap-heap of a fleet!"

I was speechless; Rhodan laughed until his eyes watered. And all this was happening just a few hours before the start of a mission which—strange though it might seem—could affect the weal and woe of a stellar empire. The loss of Arkon 2 would represent about 60% of our economic strength.

The incident was soon forgotten, however, and Teitsch sent over our coördinates. The nav-computers of the *Ironduke* set to work. Even with a linear-drive ship there were many details to consider.

I informed the Regent of our present status. My orders served to mobilize the home fleet, which deployed into an advance defence line 10 light-years beyond the fringe of the galaxy. The Terran fleet units formed a protective screen around the important colonial planets both in and around star cluster M-13. The radio traffic was developing a hectic pattern. Again the Regent made errors that I had to correct.

The 84th Terran Cruiser Group under Commodore Alfons Heindl had been attacked by a squadron of

battleships from my fleet because he didn't yet have the most current I.D. code in his IFF responses. I was only in time to avert a complete disaster. A merchant ship of the Springers inadvertently strayed into this battle area and was crippled by the Arkon superbattleship *Casol*. There were wounded, among them several who were critically injured. I drew a fast cruiser out of the line and transferred the merchant crew as fast as possible to the nearest planetary hospital. Before the Springer mission on the Crystal World could protest I contacted them over hypercom and guaranteed full restitution for damages.

Rhodan had completed his own preparations. The Terrans were exchanging significant glances as they saw me running like a madman from one communication console to another. After 4 hours of this I was exhausted but at last everything appeared to be back in order in the space sector embraced by the star cluster.

"Looks like we'll have to forgive you," said Rhodan in a subdued tone. "I mean, about the aborted gourmet banquet. We can see now why you were in such a hurry. Do you think you could stand a frank piece of advice, Atlan?"

I waved a hand dejectedly. Rhodan was a wonderful fellow but he only seemed to grasp now what it meant to be ruler over an inactive people and a stubborn machine.

"You should make up your mind. Plant a nice, handy atom bomb inside that robot Brain and turn over the remote firing-control to me."

I stared somewhere into a corner. He didn't know how often I had toyed with this thought. I decided to share my secret with him. "Friend, that might have been possible a few years ago. But since the advent of the Akons, I've even had to discard my sidearms when entering the Brain compound. Nowadays I'm X-rayed, searched and scanned with energy sensors. So who is really the Emperor anymore?"

When I left the Control Central there was an oppressive silence which only made me walk faster. "Don't give me pity!" was the unvoiced cry inside my brain. "Just don't show pity! Preferably give me your hate, or better, an honest friendship—but pity, never!"

I escaped into my cabin. The crew members were tactful enough not to disturb me. My cell activator was working more audibly than usual. Apparently my depressed mental state was producing a dangerous rate of cell deterioration, which the device was attempting to neutralize.

Once again I sensed how old I was. Did an Arkonide fossil like me have the right to guide the history of the present? I had never yet found an answer to that question. Emotion and logic were like oil and water: they didn't mix very well!

#### **4/ THE STAR VIKINOS—2104 A.D.**

The thundering of the Kalup compensation converter, commonly known as the Kalup, overrode every other sound. Even if one sought to turn one's attention elsewhere and not notice it, it was impossible not to hear it. It was a mighty sound which every man hoped would not diminish in strength.

Linear flight beyond speol (the speed of light) was based on a compensation or reflecting field which was

built up from lines of force from the 6th dimension. An object such as a ship, while existing in the spherical 'hollow' space of the Kalup field, was effectively screened from mechanical or energy effects of the Einstein continuum. In the same manner there followed a neutralization of 5-D hyperspace effects also, with the consequence that in the theoretically immaterial Kalup field an unstable condition was created which aligned itself with laws affecting an interstitial or 'between' space.

This so-called semispace, which was not mathematically comprehensible, had been discovered by the Druufs. It was from them that the Terrans had appropriated the secret of direct translight space flight.

As a result of these 'physical impossibilities' we found ourselves in an unstable libration zone where neither the usually inescapable dematerialisation due to hyperspace effects nor the influences of the Einstein universe were applicable. We were like a fly inside a rubber ball that was drifting on water, where the insect could not be affected by either the surrounding air or the water itself.

The only main difference was that the Kalup field was considerably more complicated. I knew that our velocity of millions of times speed was not even related to normal space. For us the ship's time was not distorted; it remained 'relative' according to Einstein and ancient Arkonide scientists' concepts. For us a minute was just the same as if we were on Earth. There were no contraction effects or any other distortions of the phenomenon we called time.

Even more amazing was the fact that it was possible to see into regular 4-D space with the help of the paramechanical stereoscopic tracking system. The hyperspeed stereoptic beam was surrounded by an isolating field which in itself was a secondary beam. So it was actually a Kalup unity which screened the tracking beam from normal and paraphysical influences.

In spite of our hurtling flight through semispace we were able to view the sector of the void which lay in the line of our course. As a result we were able to reach the most distant target star on a direct or linear line of flight. Course corrections were thus made by sight alone.

The *Ironduke* was a miracle of Terran technology. However, Rhodan was modest enough to admit that the field converters and this kind of propulsion system might not have been developed for another 1000 years if the Druufs had not furnished the data.

What a difference this was from our violent hyperjumps! With the advent of the first linear-drive prototypes the regular transition ships were obsolete. Nevertheless the standard-type ships were still used everywhere because it wasn't possible to convert all units to the new system in a short length of time. Even the *Ironduke* was still considered to be a prototype. Thus it was understandable that all crew members were keeping their ears anxiously attuned to the steady roar of the Kalup.

The sun called Outside was gleaming from the screen of the para-tracker. This was in an auxiliary tracking central which was dedicated exclusively to this special equipment, so indispensable to direct vision during linear flight.

I secretly felt my arm and found it to be as solid as ever. I couldn't get used to the idea of not being dematerialised after leaving normal space. As an Admiral of the Imperium, I had commanded an elite fleet, yet we had never been able to traverse great distances except by the exhausting process of the hypertransition, which represented a violent escape from normal space. Here I was simply flying as though in an airship which was racing toward a visible mountain range. I was not even nauseated. The only thing I had to put up with was the thundering sound.

I held my hands against my ears but it didn't do any good. It seemed to me that the sound was going to

drive me out of my skin.

Rhodan and the officers of the flight watch were already walking around in the central. I marvelled at these men. They had quickly accustomed themselves to the new set of conditions—possibly more swiftly than an Arkonide would ever be able to imitate. These Terrans were tough ones in the give-and-take department. They possessed a gift of which they were probably not aware. Their adaptive capacity was a phenomenon to other races, being richly endowed by Nature. Rhodan especially was one of those who could adjust himself at once to a new situation.

There was no more wondering at the fact of linear flight. They seemed to take for granted the motto that a thing must work and that was that.

I was relieved to note that no one took notice of my own state of confusion. Or was I wrong? I looked around me suspiciously and found myself marvelling at the fact that I could turn my head. *Degeneration syndrome!* commented my extra-brain callously. It disconcerted me so that I must have looked angrily at Claudrin who sat next to me, for he raised an eyebrow at me curiously. My smile was not genuine enough to reassure him and I saw him give a signal to Rhodan.

The latter came over toward me. "Problems?" he inquired. His searching gaze only stirred me up all the more.

"Nonsense!" I retorted.

"It's our speed, isn't it? Everything's in order so just relax. I'm pleased that I can impress an Arkonide petty chief—pardon me, an Arkonide ruler."

Col. Claudrin chuckled at this. He caught the connection of Rhodan's irony. Angered, I got up and went over to the automatic drink selector. Rhodan could be very cynical. But—didn't he have a reason for it? How often had I impressed upon him in the past that Earthmen were insignificant in comparison with the greatness of the Arkonides?

This bit of reflection served to calm me down again. I was even able to smile as the grey-eyed barbarian joined me. "You are and remain a savage," I told him. "Even monkeys can get used to space flight without developing complexes. If you had lived in the 15th century you would probably have been a pirate or swashbuckling raider—or perhaps an Admiral for one of the Hanseatic towns, paid by the shopkeepers. You would have looked just right on the poop-deck of a merchant galleon."

Bell made a dry comment. "Strange sort of conversation on board a linear battleship of the Solar Spacefleet. Is that all you have to say?"

"Maybe after 10,000 years there's nothing new," interjected the mousebeaver.

In addition to the bedlam of the Kalup the robot speaker began to blast forth with announcements. I had always hated the unmodulated, metallic tones of a robot. We were close to our goal as evidenced by the disc of Outside which had formed on the viewscreen. The distance was now 'only' 1100 light-years. Claudrin ordered us into our seats. Our journey had not taken any longer than a jet trip from Berlin to Tokyo in 1977. I wondered if by chance this had occurred to Rhodan. Without Arkonide technology the Terrans would not be any further along now than a primitive stage of space travel using nuclear-fueled rockets at best. Now we were penetrating intercosmic space in a giant of the void.

The synchro-automatic shut off the Kalup. The thundering rose to a peak for a moment and then was

suddenly silenced. There was still a pain sensation upon entering normal space. When we emerged we found ourselves at a highly relativistic level of speed which was close to the light-barrier. Here there were immediate effects of time contraction which gave us the illusion that we were still racing toward the red sun at millions of times the velocity of light.

Our retro-engines were under full power load as we reduced our speed at the rate of 500 km/sec<sup>2</sup>. The Einstein effects subsided gradually. Although we had lost our sense of time we could tell by the output of the retro-engines how long we would actually need to return to manageable velocities.

Ahead flamed the lonely red star. We plunged into the system at 30% the speed of light and later Rhodan ordered the ship into free fall. Our instruments indicated that this sector of space did not contain cosmic dust.

"There will be a mission briefing," droned Rhodan's voice from the speakers. "Officers and noncoms report to messhall 2 in 10 minutes. Crew members will listen in over general intercom. The scientific team will also attend. That is all."

Prof. Kalup happened to be present in the Control Central and he suddenly reddened visibly. "The scientific team is *requested* to also attend," he corrected.

Without blinking an eye, Rhodan spoke levelly into the microphone. "You have just heard the dictum from our genius fringe," he announced. "Alright, the gentlemen of the scientific team are hereby requested. Anything else, sonny?"

"I forbid this form of address!" bellowed the crotchety savant.

"How come? I've often told you that your great grandfather might have been my son or even my grandson."

"You be nice now, little Kalup," said Bell. "That goes for me, too, you know. Before we took off for the moon back in the 20th century, your great grandmother handed me 20 pink carnations. At that time she was just 4 years old, very small and dainty. She wore a charming organdy dress and called me uncle. What more do you want?"

"That's the height of impudence!" The scientist stamped out of the room but we heard him chuckling to himself as soon as he went through the hatch. I liked Arno Kalup very much. He was a type who'd rather bite off his tongue than say a friendly word but such pretended cynicism was always transparent.

After checking my watch I looked at the viewscreen. The *Ironduke* was swinging around. We had arrived in a system that neither Terran nor Arkonide had ever seen before. Professor Teitsch had done his work well. It went without saying that the Terrans were doers. If the Imperium only had 1 million Arkonides like Rhodan, Teitsch or Kalup, I would have gladly renounced my high position.

\* \* \* \*

The briefing session was short yet comprehensive; in other words, typical of Rhodan. The orders he gave and the strategies he set up in 15 minutes would have required at least 4 days of hard work for me.



He did not have to do any programming or wait anxiously to see if his commands were carried out accordingly. In the entire Solar Fleet there was no one who would not have understood immediately.

Formerly I had assumed that I might establish order with a technologically perfect robot fleet. What I had lacked there in quality had been made up in quantity. It had been a wrong choice. The Terrans continued to fascinate me as they always had. They were the future rulers of the galaxy! It could only be for the good of all concerned for me to place my illusory power in their hands and to remain in the background as a friend, adviser and subordinate official. For Arkon and my people there could be no better solution.

During these 15 minutes I had won through to a decision which I had struggled with for years. Everyone wondered at the change in me because I suddenly appeared to be relieved and cheerful. Rhodan made the thoughtful comment that he saw in my red Arkonide eyes the old glimmer of fire that he had known and feared at the time of our first encounter.

"Do you know the story about the old skinflint and crank who only had a happy smile on his face just before his death?" I asked him.

"I knew such a man—it was long ago. His heirs were quarrelling at his death bed and there was only one who wiped the sweat from his forehead and spoke to him consolingly. The miser wanted to leave him gold and power because no one before had ever lifted his head or given him water without an ulterior motive. When the helpful one declined, the old crank smiled. He realized then how insignificant all those things had been which he had treasured and defended with his sword. He had suddenly repented, you see. He came to the end of his ways but his new life began at the moment of his death."

The men around us looked at me gravely. They sensed something of a momentous nature in my meaning.

"Were you that helper, Atlan?"

"Yes."

"And who was the miserly crank? Who was the one who fought with the sword so much that he forgot his love for others?"

"A German kaiser of the Holy Roman Empire. The name is unimportant."

Rhodan took a deep breath and a slight flush of colour came to his face. "What are you trying to tell me?"

I was able to laugh once more. A nightmarish burden had been lifted from me. "Later, little barbarian. I, too, have made a great decision in life. I don't know how—but it is irrevocable. Atlan of the House of Gonozal is not capricious."

"Sounds like something a Viking prince might have said," Bell commented.

"I was such a Viking," I told him. "Your Terran experts still don't believe that there was a Viking tribe even in the time of Charlemagne that knew how to sail ships and tack against the wind. In the muddy bottom of a certain fjord in the Northland a steamship lies buried—date of construction, 802 A.D. What do you know of your own history?"

I had practically sabotaged the mission briefing. Rhodan had to raise his voice to bring the discussion

back on course. "Later, friend." He smiled understandingly. "I'd like very much to hear the story. Well, now, Claudrin—your eyes are fairly glistening!"

"That was more inspiring to me than our whole space journey, sir," said the Epsalian. "Holy Jupiter—sailing ships! How great that sounds! It carries the flavour and smell of salt water which doesn't exist on Epsal; it invokes a vision of hard men with wooden implements and muscles of iron. I can hear the thundering breakers and the foaming sea..."

"And I," interrupted Rhodan, "can feel the pain of a festered tooth or an infected appendix and other sicknesses they had to suffer in helpless misery. Or how about amputations without anaesthetics? Hygiene in those times would have really been something for *you* to experience, of all people. With your fanatic ideas of cleanliness it would have driven you out of your mind. Just ask Atlan and then your romantic illusions will fade in a hurry."

I laughed uproariously. Yea verily—such was life in those days!

"Gentlemen, may I have your attention!" shouted Rhodan impatiently.

The officers present suddenly stiffened. The rising tide of conversation was silenced. The youngest officer of the *Ironduke*, Lt. Brazo Alkher, was still wide-eyed in daydreams. How easy it was to inspire them with such tales—these topnotch specialists of a specialized age.

"By way of a recap," continued Rhodan, "we will begin with the outer planet. According to preliminary outputs of the analysers it's probably an uninhabited giant. I lean toward #2 as the homeworld of the 'Builders'. The actions of both of those robotships is a mystery. Everything seems to indicate that they somehow got out of control. The missing harvestship strengthens that theory. Most probably we are in for a number of surprises. The technology of the Builders is pretty disquieting but the information from the seedship doesn't help us at all—it's just the strange jargon of a giant robot. Nothing we can effectively penetrate. You should know that by now, gentlemen, because you've poked around enough in the innards of the seedship."

Prof. Kalup cleared his throat significantly.

"You, too, Kalup," said Rhodan. "What are you muttering about?"

"Who's muttering?" retorted Kalup in a threatening undertone. "I merely cleared my throat."

"Nexttime put it in writing, young man."

Lts. Alkher, Nolinov and Mahaut Sikhra grinned in unison, as was typical of young men of their age. To me it was marvellous that they could do so.

"We'll go into an orbit first, pole to pole. You will only be concerned with attack manoeuvres if dangerous weapons are used. Switch to robot automatic mode. The anaesthetizing ray of the seedship isn't a thing I can forget so soon. In case we're knocked out again, the *Ironduke* has to pull out of the danger zone as fast as possible. So those are the general instructions. But remember your special orders. Any more questions?"

No, there were no more questions. Rhodan closed the meeting and returned to the Control Central. The battleship pushed on into the system.

As presumed, planet 3 was a gas giant hostile to life. The matter analysers told us what we needed to know about the composition of the atmosphere. The mutants could not detect any paranormal brain wave emanations. From experience we knew that no intelligent life could evolve on such worlds. There could be primitive life forms there but they did not concern us.

Since planet 2 was hidden behind the red sun we investigated #1 first, which lay before us. Its surface was a molten mass. Obviously there could be no life there either.

Rhodan ordered a cessation of our speed and once more requested ready reports from every station. I sensed his uneasiness. His pretended calm could not hide it from me.

I was thinking over the data outputs we had gotten from the seedships: a cybernetic summation, highly specialized and complicated. In all such data formats it was easy to make errors or misinterpretations. We had asked the computer why the Builders hadn't emigrated in order to cultivate their nutritious moss somewhere else. It had answered: "They do not emigrate—they are."

What were we supposed to infer from that? What was the meaning of 'they are'?

Looking at it from another standpoint it was obvious that the scoutship as well as the seedship had not been operating according to any rational plan. Sowing the moss was illogical if the harvestship was never going to show up to gather in the spores. What was to be deduced from that? My extra-brain told me that the Builders had abandoned the defective ships and had probably sent out other vessels of similar construction.

This answer made sense provided that the unknown Builders had not elected to settle on some other world. Upon further reflection it became clear that the information taken from the damaged seedship was of no particular consequence. We had only been able to crystallize a few facts from it—such as the existence of a galactic race who nourished themselves through their breathing tubes because they didn't have digestive organs.

It had further been determined that the homeworld of these intelligences had cooled off—probably due to an orbital shift. A cosmic catastrophe could also have taken place or maybe they had been visited by an ice age such as had been known in Earthly history.

These were some factors we could work with but the general data obtained from the master robot of the ship were unusable.

I waited until the *Ironduke* resumed speed again. The second planet appeared behind the fireball of the sun as a crescent. Our tracking stations were doubly manned. As for radio signals, nothing was stirring.

"Maybe they've degenerated," ventured Bell. He squinted at the relief screen of the echo sensor.

The warship's engines thundered. We hurtled at high speed toward the sun. Rhodan was taking the most direct course. The power plants went into full phase operation, supplying current to the energy screen. We passed Outside within 8 million km at 25% light speed. Nobody paid any attention to the magnetic storms created in our protective fields, which were sensitive to the mechanics of gravity. I held a straight face. They were somewhat foolhardy, these conquerors from Terra.

The raging reaction subsided as we withdrew from the vicinity of the atomic oven. Now in full phase, the second planet drifted onto the forward viewscreens. The outboard optical pickups were also working so that we could observe a colour 3-D image of the celestial body.

Nevertheless it required another 2 hours before we had come close enough. In the interim there had been an incessant activity of observation, measurements and analysis. Although we had not yet set foot on the planet it no longer held any secrets from us in terms of climatic, atmospheric and geographical factors. By the time the retro-engines went into full power operation the physical sensor data were announced. The planetary rate of rotation was only 13 hours 42 minutes, so we knew that there was a rapid change from day to night. At the equator the gravity measured 0.89 gravs. The oxygen atmosphere was similar to that of Earth at about 10,000 feet, so it was breathable. The mean temperature was around the freezing point. In view of the swift axial rotation there could hardly be any extremes of climate.

No oceans or major rivers were in evidence. The ice-covered poles made the planet appear more like Mars than Earth; Mass, density, inclination to the ecliptic and such other matters were only of incidental interest. For us it was a practical matter to know that we could emerge in warm clothing and without breathing apparatus. The leaders of the commando details received their instructions accordingly. The light gravity here was welcome because the equipment of the landing personnel was considerably heavy by Earth standards.

The *Ironduke* came to rest at a distance of 300,000 km from the second planet. We were at the end of our journey. Now the telescopes and relief sensors fell to work. The long-distance analyses were confirmed. We discovered vast desert regions where the reddish-brown colouration gave a strong indication of oxidation and again I was reminded of Mars. The recognizable elevations of terrain only reached 1000 meters or so in a few places.

All in all this looked like a world that had started its cycle of deterioration at least prior to 100,000 years ago—perhaps even millions of years. We didn't know. Certainly #2 must have been a life-generating and fruitful planet. No one could say how it had moved to a farther distance from its sun. The atmospheric envelope was overcast with veils of clouds. Here and there we also saw swirling eddies of dust and sand which indicated surface storms.

While I was still standing in front of the viewscreens attempting to solve the riddle of the Builders, an alarm came through from Com Central.

When Rhodan switched on the intercom the face of the officer in charge became visible. "We've been picking up radio signals for about a minute now, sir," he announced excitedly. "Normal UHF. The signals are weak but they never seem to end. A pretty heavy traffic, sir."

"UHF?" asked Rhodan incredulously.

"Yes sir—ultra-shortwave."

"Nothing else? What's on the higher bands?"

"Not a thing, sir. The planet has a reflective layer but the UHF gets through. We can't pick up regular shortwave out here. The frequencies vary but they're all on the UHF band. They seem to be using voice transmission principally."

"Strange! No hypercom pulses at all? Are you sure?"

"No way, sir. But as I say there's a real wild traffic on the UHF."

"Have you tried any decoding?"

"The automatic decoder is running, sir, but so far all we're getting is groups of symbols—complete gibberish."

Rhodan switched off. I watched him tensely. Finally he spoke the words that I had often heard on Terran warships. They had even been used in Nelson's time. The Solar Fleet had adopted them. "Mr. Claudrin, *clear the ship for battle*. As a precaution we'll show the opposition our gun turrets."

"Place the ship on battle standby, Mr. Krefenbac," said the commander, passing the order to his First Officer.

The latter pressed a red button and the spherical hull of the battleship began to resound to the howl of sirens. These were old, familiar sounds. How often had I myself ordered battle readiness; how often had I flown into battle to meet the enemies of Arkon with a broadside of atomic fire? In that moment I wished that I might be once more in command of a squadron or two.

Just now the *Ironduke* was more like an anthill. Everywhere was a teeming surge of apparent confusion. Only an expert could have perceived the underlying semblance of system in what was going on. Every lever and switch-setting counted. I listened to the clanging of armoured hatches as they closed automatically, thereby sealing off the various sections into more than 2000 hermetically sealed compartments. A proper subdivision of the ship was as important as the disposition of weapons.

The small monitoring screens lighted up. Each of them revealed a separate compartment. This way the staff of the Control Central was in touch at all times with the crew. Blue indicator lamps signalled that the auto-com system had switched to radio communication. Contact by wire could be destroyed by an effective hit. The Terrans had spared no cost to eliminate this source of failure.

The outboard cameras were now picking up a view of the armoured gun-turrets as they emerged from the hull.

They were operated hydraulically, which I found to be worthy of note. On Arkonide fighting ships this was accomplished by means of magnetic power. Since such traction fields were dependent upon nuclear powered current, battle damage could have serious consequences. Even if the turrets themselves remained undamaged they were often rendered immovable. The Terrans employed an ancient but foolproof method. Every gun turret had its own hydraulic system and in emergencies the whole setup could still be operated by means of hand pumps. It was a ship that could fill an old admiral like myself with enthusiasm. Tradition and the most modern technology had been advantageously combined.

After 2 minutes the first ready reports came in. After 3 minutes all stations had announced themselves to be in combat readiness. This was a record that Arkonides would never have achieved. The crewmen of the *Ironduke* seemed to be professional experts. How had they reached their battle stations so quickly? Probably they were shot through pneumatic tubes.

"Much too slow, *much* too slow!" said the commander emphatically. "I've seen better than that. After mission completion, all hands will prepare for a number of readiness drills. You may pass that on, Mr. Krefenbac."

Rhodan smirked; I was shocked.

"Prepare to get underway in 3 minutes," ordered the Administrator. "I'll want a 60-minute polar orbit. Make calculations and come about. Carry on..."

I was the most critical observer on board. I drew comparisons between Terrans, Arkonides and all of the spacefaring races I was familiar with. The Terrans scored the highest.

The ship's engines thundered briefly and then we went into the approach manoeuvre. Beneath us arched the surface of the second planet of the star Outside. The power plants were rumbling industriously. Our energy screens were capable of holding off an atomic storm but I wasn't counting much on being met with offensive weapons.

John Marshall pointed reproachfully to my spacesuit. I put it on since it was a part of regulations. Then Rhodan even ordered our helmets sealed and had us switch to radio voice-com. The Terran was very cautious.

"Well now!" said someone.

When I turned to see the cause of the exclamation I also saw the city below us. It was gleaming on the remote optical screen.

"Amplify!" Rhodan requested.

The city seemed almost to leap into the ship. We could make out various types of architecture but the buildings apparently had one thing in common: they seemed to consist of some kind of trellis or gridwork made out of silvery shining beams or framework elements.

"Hm-m..." Rhodan cleared his throat. "Steady as she goes. Keep the photo reconnaissance rolling—we'll want all details on film. And prepare for topographical analysis."

We went around the planet which also turned beneath us because of its rotation. If we remained long enough in our orbit we would soon have a total survey of the surface. I wondered why Perry didn't send out photo-recon rockets. These would have wrapped up the cartography in a matter of a few hours. But when tracking reported that aircraft had been sighted below I knew why the missile probes hadn't been launched.

The energy sensors were also heard from and I was startled by the instrument readings. Some very complex nuclear processes were at work down there.

Rhodan remained poker-faced. "Very strange, gentlemen. They have mastered the most high-quality carbon-catalysis cycle I know of but they only communicate by ultra-shortwave. UHF techniques can't be compared with the level of science represented by their state of advance in nuclear physics. It's like arming the *Ironduke* with bows and arrows instead of impulse cannons." He turned to the intercom. "Attention, Mr. Alkher. Keep your fingertips on the buttons of that fire-control console!"

## 5/ THE GRIM REAPERS

Our target positronics had reacted just a microsecond faster than the enemy. I was heavily shaken by the concussion of our broadside salvo. A thunder reverberated in all compartments like an earthquake but

the attacking beam had been spotted in time. It swept harmlessly past the *Ironduke* .

About 70 km below us we saw 5 sugar-loaf gun emplacements of a defence fortress explode like so many atom bombs. The rising mushroom cloud indicated that a fast nuclear chain reaction had taken place. The shock-wave blasted across the flat terrain, destroying nearby structures and raising dust tornados, but we were too far away to feel any effects from it.

10 seconds prior to this action, telepath John Marshall had told us that there was no one alive on the planet anymore. Marshall's information in this area was reliable. He and the other mutants of the Corps had yet to be mistaken. So when the fortress had automatically opened fire on the *Ironduke* , Rhodan had permitted a full counter-attack.

On the viewscreens, other than the lingering evidence of the chain reaction, nothing was to be seen within the range of our optical system. The aircraft we had noticed previously had disappeared. But I was surprised to see them show up again as soon as the storm winds from the shock blast had cleared away the nuclear cloud.

"Are those airships unmanned?" inquired Rhodan.

Marshall and Pucky 'listened' again with their uncanny senses. The women of the Corps had not been included on this mission so we were missing 2 valuable telepaths in the persons of Betty Toufry and Ishy Matsu.

"No life," replied John. "There isn't a thinking brain anywhere on this world."

Rhodan appeared to be indecisive at the moment. The warship was poised motionlessly above the desert. Farther eastward was a long line of hills. The fortress had been located in front of them. To the south of the low mountain chain we had discovered the buildings of a city. It was the largest we had seen on this world which I had just decided to call Mechanica.

We had scanned the surface meticulously. Although most urban areas were in a state of decay the little robotships were seen everywhere. They seemed to be responding to an ancient programming. Each unit flew within a certain sector of the terrain. Here and there we had seen formations of spherical-shaped craft but none of them had paid any attention to us.

Even the other defence installations we had discovered near the cities had not been active. The one that Rhodan had just destroyed was the only fortress that had given a sign of programmed robot activity.

When I told the Terrans the name I had given to the planet, Bell had a comment. "Not bad—seems to be good enough for such a sandpile," he said. "Well, what now? If you ask me, this place lookstoo harmless! We're still up here in one piece but I sure wouldn't take a chance on landing."

Rhodan switched the optics to 20 magnification. The tower-like structures loomed taller but the picture quality was not too sharp. This was a typical distortion effect of the atmosphere. "You just read my mind," he said, "but we have to land all the same."

"What—?!"

"Otherwise our plan will be too difficult to carry out. We'll screen off the ship—then come what may. Marshall, I'm asking you seriously for the lasttime: is there any organic life on Mechanica or not?"

"No life, sir."

"I'll second that," chirped Pucky, who was looking intently at the screens. Making a grandiose gesture with his paw, he added: "Those are just thick-headed robots who are still following orders from 10,000 years ago. They won't stop that nonsense until they turn to rust. Everything down there is mechanical. I'll keep any machines away from the ship."

He ignored our sceptical glances. Once again the little fellow was feeling very strong.

The radio traffic on *Mechanica* had not changed. We were receiving countless signals, many of which were also on medium and long-wave bands. It was obvious that the robotships were being guided by means of the signals. Once we realized this we had started a search for the transmitter. Initially we had made the mistake of thinking that there were stations everywhere. But these turned out to be relay stations which were apparently controlled from a central source. We had located them when we found the giant city. Somewhere there must be a giant station, we reasoned, which was capable of transmitting a great number of frequencies simultaneously.

The radio specialists of the *Ironduke* estimated that the total output power was probably about 50,000kw. I could well imagine what a forest of antennas would be involved. Actually the central station must be composed of many transmitters unless they had found a way to work on many frequencies with a single installation. I considered that to be unlikely. If the group-symbol signals were coming in sequential order, one after another, a single station might have sufficed. Of course, for the purpose of encoding specific messages we utilized a multiplexing technique across an entire waveband—but we also used frequency multipliers and pulse-burst transmission. Such was not the case here. All receivers on board were receiving on various channels at the same time. So there had to be a large number of transmitters involved.

"Apparently each robot unit or specialized work-group is guided from a certain station or transmitter, on certain channels," Rhodan speculated.

I tended to agree with him.

A report came through: "Sir, we have an energy trace southwest of the city, range 123 km at 192 degrees. Energy type: controlled nuclear fusion. Apparently another defence installation."

After listening to this, Rhodan hesitantly picked up the microphone. The crew in the Control Central waited silently. Colonel Claudrin gripped the switch controlling the autopilot for emergency acceleration. Rhodan asked again if there were any sign of life here and the mutants repeated their negative confirmation.

"Attention, Tracking—are we within sight of the fortress?"

"Almost, sir. We're about 20 km below the echo horizon."

"Attack the place," I advised. "All you'll be harming is machines, and we'll be sparing ourselves from a hit."

Mathematician Riebsam was heard on the intercom. "Physics lab reporting... The energy beam that missed us before came from an anaesthetizer cannon. No thermal effects; no residual radiation in our outer screen. Caution: the defence installations appear to be armed with the same weapons which the seedship used against us."



"Very humane," I commented drily, "but I'd still attack. Who knows what goes on in a robot mind?"

Right after that a third fortress was sighted. However, it lay considerably east of the city, which was apparently surrounded by a ring of such installations. Rhodan finally issued orders. A thrust burst from the engines sent the *Ironduke* gliding upward. From an altitude of 80 km the gun towers of our objective were clearly visible.

"Fire control officer—your target is at 192 degrees. Do you recognize?"

"Target recognized, sir," answered Brazo Alkher.

I had ceased to wonder why a man with a service rank of lieutenant should be in charge of the fire-control central of the battleship. Alkher was a phenomenon. Rhodan seemed to know why he had not promoted Brazo. He had him pegged for one of those men who would someday help to guide the history of the Solar Imperium. Therefore he wanted him as long as possible under his control.

"Fire when ready."

Perry had hardly gotten the words out before the *Ironduke* was jolted back again by the recoil of its guns. I was half blinded but before I closed my eyes I saw the sunbright bolts of energy leaping toward the fortress. It also dissolved in a mighty explosion.

We waited until the shockwaves had subsided. The unknown city was veiled in turbulence-lifted sand clouds. The crystal grains in the air formed a reflective curtain which threw back our tracking beams. Within an hour the storm ebbed away. The city's tower-like buildings were still standing. If any of them had collapsed we were not able to discover them. The transmitters were working the same as before.

Rhodan leaned back with a sigh. "Well, that convinces me that the name of Mechanica is well-suited for this world. A live civilization wouldn't be very happy with us. Are the robotships still flying?"

"Big flocks of them are taking to the air again. Others are landing. On the horizon there's a movement of some kind of elongated aircraft."

"Otherwise no action?"

The officer in charge sounded incredulous. "Not a thing, sir—absolutely nothing. Nobody's paying any attention to us."

Rhodan went over to the telescopic viewer section. He swung the magnifying cameras around until a high rocky plateau came into view. "Colonel Claudrin, land us at the foot of that elevation. The ship's polar dome may rise above it but nonetheless we'll have a good protection."

As we returned to the Control Central the *Ironduke* picked up speed. On one of the monitor screens I saw Brazo Alkher. He was seated at the main switchboard of the positronic fire-control console, his fingertips lightly resting on the weapon selector buttons. If necessary he could convert Mechanica into an inferno of destruction.

We were now drifting over the ground at only 2000 meters. Thus it happened that two of the industriously busy robotships were swept by our energy screens. They flashed to extinction in bright bursts of light. We waited breathlessly. Alkher had leaned forward slightly over his buttons. As minutes

passed without event we all proceeded to relax again.

Rhodan laughed doubtfully. "If this isn't the calm before the storm, my name isn't Rhodan!"

"And I'll swallow the *Ironduke* for a headache pill!" cried Pucky. "*Something* down there must have noticed us by now."

The landing struts were extended. Without a bounce or a jolt, the 800-meter Colossus set itself down. The unfolded landing pads sank into the ground until they reached bedrock. The auto-stabilizers levelled us out. Struts 4 and 7 went deeper while others contracted. The gravity neutralizers shut down and only the main piles for the power plants continued working at full load. Our defence screens were set at a density phase of 12. Closely enveloping the ship, they did not touch the ground. I knew of no single weapon that could have broken through or neutralized this concentration of energy. Moreover, Terran battleships were designed to resist an onslaught up to 3 times their own firing power. We were safe.

The sun lowered toward the horizon and the short night of Mechanica soon arrived. When I went to bed I was plagued by troubled dreams. At times I would awaken with a start to listen to things that were only the product of a nervous imagination. The night was only going to last 5 hours and yet I had not enjoyed a minute of restful sleep. Breathing heavily I lay back and groped for the switch to the auto-ventilator, causing it to turn on and blow through my airfoam mattress. My cabin was large and pleasantly furnished and I suspected that Perry had relinquished his quarters to accommodate me. But that did not change the fact that I couldn't sleep.

My logic sector kept giving me warning signals and pieces of advice. So far our operation had gone on without untoward event. On board the *Ironduke*, however, people seemed to have forgotten what we had come here for. It was not a matter of studying a mechanized planet or of trying to see if we could more or less cleverly avoid its more dangerous elements. Much more important was the search for the harvestship. I presumed that it was here on this world. Where else was it supposed to be? From a logical standpoint, if it answered the call of a seedship on some seeded planet it would have to return eventually to deliver the harvest to Mechanica.

On the other hand, this reasoning was contradicted by the fact that the Builders had died out. Yet if everything was still in order here why shouldn't the harvestship still be usable? The transmitters were still working; countless airships moved along over the deserts; and even one of the fortresses had reacted to our presence.

After an hour's brooding on the problem I believed that I had the answer. It was obvious that the scout and the seedship were no longer following the original program. Position data were no longer radioed to Mechanica, which meant that the harvestship couldn't take off. Therefore the latter vessel had to still be here-right here on a dead world in the middle of the starless abyss between 2 galaxies.

Now I could no longer find any rest. Angered with myself, I sat up and brought my feet to the floor. Rhodan was sleeping in the quarters next to me. I was thinking of waking him up. Slipping on my stately Emperor's uniform, I went to the bulkhead door that separated us. But just as I was about to press the release button I suddenly became ashamed of myself. How could I think of robbing my friend of his sleep?

I relieved my feelings by cursing heavily in the language that had been used in the time of the Normans. Bitterly I sat down on the edge of my bed and pulled at my fingers until the knuckles cracked.

Finally I began to try to figure out how we might trick the robot control of the harvestship into flying to

Arkon 2 immediately and saving my people. It would be necessary to convert one of our transmitters, work out the correct signal impulses and then go out into space to imitate the seedship. Only in this way would a solution be possible.

*Possible?*

asked my logic sector disdainfully.

I pressed my hands against my temples and mentally condemned the scientists who had activated my extra-brain thousands of years ago.

*It's useless!*

said the logic sector. *Call the doctor. A deep-sleep treatment would be the proper thing just now.*

I realized I was on the verge of having some kind of breakdown. I submerged myself in a yoga exercise that I had learned in ancient Tibet. It helped. My restlessness subsided finally.

\* \* \* \*

A terrible uproar suddenly came over the P.A. system and the alarm sirens began to howl. The piercing sound went right through my limbs and I sprang up in confusion. Rushing through the darkness of my cabin I tripped over a stool and fell to the deck. I hastily groped for the light switch. My impulse-gun lay on the desk. I fastened on my weapon belt and ran to the door.

Once outside I heard the general bedlam more clearly.

Claudrin's voice thundered from the speakers. "This is the Commander. What's going on?"

Somebody tried to answer but the yelling was so loud that I couldn't understand a word. Then somebody else took over. "Officer of the watch here," he said. "The guard in the chemiculture rooms must be seeing things. He says all the plants have been ripped out of their culture beds or their feeding tanks. The whole mess is on the ceiling!"

"Tracking to Commander," interrupted a third man. "A cluster of spherical ships is passing over us. We are picking up a strange radiation. But it isn't dangerous."

Rhodan emerged from his cabin. He ran past me without a word and I followed him with my weapon ready to fire.

How could they be picking up an unknown radiation when the *Ironduke* was surrounded by the best defence screens in the galaxy? It must be something that could not be absorbed or reflected by our fields

Naturally the whole crew was already on combat standby. All stations were manned. The men we saw running through the passages in their thin underclothing were those who were not on duty. Later I couldn't remember how I had gotten from the central level down to the chemiculture chambers.

All Terran spaceships were equipped with these 'hot-houses' where vitamin-rich food plants were grown. During long voyages, fresh vegetables were indispensable, and also the plants served to provide a

natural regulation of the ship's atmosphere.

The mutants were there ahead of us. Naturally the teleporters among them had 'jumped' to the scene, as Ras Tschubai superfluously explained. Somebody was guffawing out of control. Reginald Bell was wearing a pair of lilac-coloured pyjamas printed with yellow butterflies and pink clover leaves. In a pinch this might have been taken in stride if it had not been for the ludicrous contrast of the impulse-beamer he was carrying which was as long as his arm. It was the first time I had ever seen a crew member on a Terran battleship in such a fantastic getup.

"Everybody calm down!" shouted Rhodan. At least he had on his uniform trousers. On his bared chest dangled the cell activator which had spelled doom for his unfortunate son.

The 'hot-house' guard was a young man with a blond crewcut. He was still trying to stutter an explanation. No doubt he was a fine soldier but the wild antics of the plants seemed to have robbed him of his senses.

"Get hold of yourself," said Rhodan calmly. Everything quieted down. "Now what's the matter here? Why did you set off the alarm?"

"Sir—I—see for yourself!"

We went into the first of the culture rooms. These were long chambers which were bathed in artificial sunlight. Here the best topsoil from the Earth was used in order to insure a fresh food supply for the spaceman. In other rooms were the nutrient tanks for chemiculture. Special plants had been cultivated which flourished better in space than on the Earth itself.

"I'm losing my mind!" said Bell as he stared incredulously at the ceiling.

I looked first at the empty plant beds which had been cared for by robot caretakers. Various kind of lettuce and vitamin-rich carrots had been cultivated here but now there was nothing to be seen of this luxury. Our 'agricultural produce' was stuck to the ceiling as if it had been glued there.

"My carrots!" cried the mousebeaver, beside himself with consternation. "My lovely carrots! And they were so round and crunchy—juicy!" Rhodan grasped my arm and drew me back as the plants above us began to disintegrate and liquefy. We had to get out because of the rain of vegetable juice.

"Tracking to Chief. The round ships have left us. The radiation dropped off and is no longer measurable."

It was then we began to guess what had happened. Rhodan coughed. Bell ran a hand across his red whiskers.

"Did you notice something?" I asked. "When that alien energy radiation came in here, the plants flew upward, and at the peak of its field strength they disintegrated. Once they were juiced out they fell back but by that time the radiation faded away. Now nothing is stirring. Would you like to know the purpose of all those robot aircraft?"

Rhodan cut me off. "Much obliged. Even Terrans can figure that out, Arkonide!"

"You impertinent little barbarian!" I countered angrily.

He laughed at me and then went to the nearest intercom. He took the microphone off the hook. "Colonel Claudrin, do you hear me?"

"I can even see you, sir. I decided to get up here to Control Central."

"As might be expected of a commander, Jefe. Now hear this—these are general orders: If you see any of those spherical ships approaching us again, shoot them down at once. They are harvesting units."

"They're what?"

"They are small planetary harvesting craft. Long ago they had the task of collecting moss spores. Why they are still trying to work a desert world as though it were a food source is anybody's guess. Probably the last of the Builders neglected to turn off their whole robot harvesting system before they died. So the harvester fleets will just keep on flying until one day they'll crash from deterioration. Now, do you understand?"

"Not at all, sir," grumbled the Epsalian. "What does that have to do with our own plants?"

"My carrots!" wailed Pucky ruefully.

"Shut up, Lieutenant!" Rhodan snapped at him, and for once the mousebeaver was at a loss for words.

"You still listening, Jefe?" he continued. "That radiation that was detected by our sensors is harmless. It must be a type of energy that has the same effect on plants or just the seed fibres as a magnetic field has on iron. Now we know how the fat-moss spores are collected: they are simply sucked up in the force field and a high-frequency effect pulverizes them—and finally the seed-meal is liquefied."

"I thought the Builders couldn't swallow anything. How could they breathe in the juice?"

"I think they had a way of drying out the extract and dispersing it again in a spore-like form—but don't ask me how. Anyway it seems we've solved the riddle of these wandering aircraft."

I was a bit sceptical although the events we had witnessed seemed to offer no other explanation. I tried to find another answer but without result. The botanical experts inspected the other culture rooms and found that nothing had been spared.

Rhodan contacted the commander again. "Jefe, you'd better start taking on extra oxygen. Let's be prepared for anything."

We were all immersed in our thoughts when we jumped into the axial lift and permitted ourselves to be borne upward in the antigrav field. In the passage by the cabins we found Prof. Kalup waiting. He had leisurely dressed himself. "I'll look into this energy suction field," he promised us. "Do you have any ideas?" He seemed to address his question to me.

"None at all, Professor," I told him, "unless plants radiate something that could be useful in a physical or mechanical sense. I assume that the local intelligences must have specialized in this area. You'd better not try to duplicate the suction field. Even if you hit upon the principle involved, in any case it would take too long—and time we haven't got."

He pursed his lips and gave me a penetrating look.

Whatever you think, sir. Naturally, it isn't something we could come up with in a day or so."

Rhodan joined me in my cabin. He dropped onto the bed and locked his hands behind his head. "Don't think I've forgotten your main worry," he said. "Your concerns are also mine. If Arkon 2 has to be given up, you won't be able to hold back the economic collapse of the Imperium. The effects on Terran export trade would be felt. Do you think the harvestship is here on Mechanica?"

I listened to the high whine of the turbo pumps. Claudrin was pulling in the outside air and disinfecting it. The natural oxygen of the atmosphere was being separated from the other gases and our liquid oxygen tanks were being filled. "We'll probably track it down to the spaceport of the city. First we'll have to look for the hypercom installation. Once we've found it we'll have to see whether or not we can make it activate the robot operation of the ship."

"That much could be assumed. And then?"

His searching gaze made me nervous. I selected a button on the refreshment dispenser and the cup slid out of the slot.

"Want something to drink?"

He shook his head.

"Perry, *we have* to find an answer!"

He got up and stretched. "Try to catch a little more sleep. In an hour it will be light outside—then we'll take a look. If the harvestship is as big as the seed vessel we shouldn't be able to miss it."

When he left me I started pacing the cabin.

## 6/ THE "COLLECTOR" SPEAKS

The interceptors of the 2nd Pursuit Group shrieked past us overhead: 27 ships, each equipped with a built-in impulse-cannon, were attacking a formation of robot aircraft. The latter were of the spherical type and had appeared on the horizon 20 minutes after our launch manoeuvre from the *Ironduke*.

We had landed on the summit of the low mountain range, from which position we could observe the battleship. Behind us stood the 2 quads of our commando detail. Other troops were on their way to investigate the undamaged defence installations. Rhodan wanted details concerning the anaesthetizing guns. Our specialists had been ordered to make every attempt possible to obtain one of these weapons in operating condition together with all supporting equipment.

I hadn't been in agreement with this. Just after daybreak we had flown over the city. We had not been able to discover any major spaceship similar to the seed vessel in spite of help from all tracking and sensor equipment available. The energy sensors had revealed that atomic power plants were functioning in at least 3 locations but nowhere was there any indication of the harvestship.

When we returned we had decided to make a thrust into the city with the flying tanks. These were models which were an improvement over the Arkonide shifts. Above all their armament had been perfected as a result of installing stronger power plants.

We had taken cover behind the multi-purpose tanks. The converter barrels of the impulse-cannons extended toward the pale-blue sky. In spite of the relative thinness of the air we found we could breathe quite well and since the 27° F. temperature was only slightly under freezing it was bearable. In front of us was our portable field-intercom unit. It kept us in contact with the *Ironduke* where at the moment all positronic computers were busy supporting our operation.

Shortly after our departure the ship had been hailed on the radio from a robot source. Again the signal had come in the now—familiar groups of symbols so that a decipherment should not be too difficult. Meanwhile Rhodan kept his narrow-eyed gaze directed at the skies; We were wearing warm combat clothing and our weather helmets contained transceivers. Our weapons were of the latest design. The thunder of the pursuit formation continued unabated as we listened in on the voice traffic above. The pursuit leader, Maj. Campani, was flying personally on the mission.

"Covey to nest," came Campani's voice. He was using regulation code language, addressing the ship. "The robots are still on course."

Rhodan did not mix into the interchange. Colonel Claudrin knew what he was doing.

"Nest to covey—get above them and attack out of the sun. We're starting to feel their suction field."

"I read you, Nest. Wilco. Over and out."

I nodded in silent appreciation. These were men we could rely on. The interceptors shot upward at a steeper angle, after which they dipped downward again and swept toward the formation of spherical robot craft. I saw the familiar white needles of lightning leap from the fighter nose-cones and before I could close my eyes the robotships exploded. Their fragments fell away below in a shower of sparks and flames.

The pursuit group passed above us again with a speed of at least Mach 20. Even as I turned my head they were out of sight, and seconds later the shockwave hit us. I pressed my hands against my headphones and threw myself to the ground behind the nearest tank. The *Ironduke* had not fired a shot. This was Rhodan's preference as long as the ship's interceptors were able to control the situation.

Perry got up and dusted off his combat uniform. We were surrounded by the 40 troops of our commando detail. Among them were Pucky, teleporter Ras Tschubai and teleseer Wuriu Sengu. The remaining mutants were either in the ship or engaged in the investigation of the fortress on the eastern side of the city.

Our earphones rattled. "New formations coming from the North." Claudrin's face appeared on our intercom unit.

"What? Already?"

"At least 50 ships, sir. We have them on our screens. Don't you think you'd better come on board? It doesn't look very friendly out there."

"You should be able to handle only. 50 ships."

"You have my word on it, sir. I—hold on, sir. We're getting a report from the math department.

I leaned over the intercom panel, tensely waiting. The results of analysing the robot radio call were coming through. We had traced the location of the sending station and found it to be in the city.

"You don't say!" I heard the First Officer exclaim. Whenever Krefenbac uttered his favourite expression, it meant something was happening.

We saw Claudrin on the screen again. "Here's a good one, sir. The decoding turned out to be easy—same symbol groups that were used by their scoutship. That shows that we're on the right planet."

"Get to the point! What does it say?"

"Well, here's the text: Dispense your yield or I will destroy you.

The colonel fell silent. We waited but he didn't say anything more.

"You mean—that's it?"

"Yessir. We also have the logic evaluation already."

"And...?"

"A commanding robot unit has mistaken the *Ironduke* for the harvestship. The command station is unable to recognize our crew as organic life. We are being ordered to scatter out the harvest."

I buried my face in my hands. My worst fears had become reality. During our patrol flight, when we didn't find the harvestship, my logic sector had already come to the conclusion that it could not be here on Mechanica.

Claudrin concluded his report. "The math department confirms that the harvester ship is not here and hasn't been here for a long time. So that also confirms the data we got from the seedship. The third unit has actually disappeared. One more thing, sir! Tracking reports that a suction field has just appeared south of the city. That's where those transparent domes are that you photographed. Riebsam figures they are the 'messhalls' of the Builders. The harvestship evidently sprayed out its cargo into the warm air over the domes. The now-extinct inhabitants used to go inside and satisfy their hunger by breathing in the spores."

I could hardly conceal my despair. Everything we had done was in vain! How could Arkon 2 be rescued from this devilish fat-moss plague if there wasn't a harvestship anymore? My mental logic sector addressed me, completely devoid of any consideration. For it the case was closed. *Fly home at once; start evacuating. Arkon 2 is lost.*

"No!" I shouted.

Rhodan spun about to stare at me. The other Terrans looked at me dejectedly.

"Your extra-brain, Atlan?" asked Perry quietly.

I nodded, unable to speak a word. Pucky came and cuddled up to me. Lieutenant Nolinov signalled his



men away to one side. They all watched me sympathetically but that didn't help. Rhodan was busy thinking and I noted that his face remained expressionless. I began to look at him hopefully. What was going on in that ingenious brain of his?

"He's rummaging through his bag of tricks," Pucky whispered to me. "Don't disturb him."

We waited for 15 minutes. During that time two more pursuit groups were launched from the *Ironduke*. The combined thunder of their engines seemed to shake the dead world. The spherical ships we had sighted were shot down but this time they had sought to defend themselves. Claudrin reported their use of an unknown weapon which had almost destroyed an interceptor. It was a form of energy that seemed to dissolve matter. "It's similar to our disintegrators," Claudrin concluded.

At first Rhodan made no comment but then he jumped up suddenly. When he spoke, his voice was trembling. "That's the answer!" he exclaimed. "Nolinov, get your men on board. We're flying back."

Terrans were not in the habit of questioning the purpose of an order. Perhaps they might have if someone other than Perry Rhodan had given the order, however. Even I clambered silently through the manlock of the flying tank. The bank of converters howled to life. The antigrav field made us weightless and the impulse jets propelled us through the thin air.

I asked no questions. Rhodan didn't seem to have his idea completely formulated as yet. Arkonides could also be patient when it was necessary. A half hour later we were back on board the *Ironduke* and Rhodan alerted the scientific team.

\* \* \* \*

5 auxiliary craft from the *Ironduke* circled high above the city. Their video pickups were being beamed to the battleship. We had worked out a remote monitoring and reconnaissance system.

300 troops, aided by teleporters, had attacked a defence installation and we had been able to take possession of it in an undamaged condition. It had also been only common-sense to disconnect the weapons from their power supplies. Ordnance teams were in the process of dismantling one of the anaesthetizing guns. Prior to invading the fortress, the seer Wuriu Sengu had been able to observe how the device operated. Kalup claimed that he would be able to reproduce such a weapon in a short time because he said he understood the principle of it already.

Thus Rhodan's second objective was achieved. He pulled the men back from the fortress and put them to work on the plan he had worked out. I was accustomed to expecting almost anything from my Terran friend but this time he almost took my breath away.

He was not disturbed by the ceaseless attacks from the robots' hips. So far we had only been forced to use the *Ironduke's* weapons once. With a wide-beam bombardment from the impulse-cannons we had shot down a group of about 80 aircraft. There was no return engagement.

It was another indication that the Builders had not foreseen the advent of aliens among them. Their weapons technology had been neglected. They had not developed anything more than the disintegrators and the anaesthetizer guns.

But why should they have done any more than that? Their sun was a solitary star in the depths of the intergalactic void. Probably they had never encountered another form of intelligence. In fact, maybe they had not even believed in the existence of other life forms. This was a widespread error among races of the Milky Way. Even most Terrans before the Space Age had been convinced there could be no other rational creatures but themselves. The theories kept piling up. But as far as I was concerned even the most convincing arguments were immaterial. I wanted to save Arkon 2. Rhodan could sense my bitterness when the antigrav hauler brought the captured anaesthetizer cannon on board.

On the other hand I had failed to notice how feverishly the *Ironduke*'s labs were working. The command robot's UHF calls were incessant. Every 10 minutes the same symbol-group message was received. By evaluating and analysing the numerous radio signals, our positronicon had been able to furnish us with a 'dictionary'. We knew about 2000 ideational concepts that we could thus encode into the right sequence of symbols.

We found it amazing that the command station did not put a stop to the useless attacks. A mechanical brain of the Regent's quality would have taken other measures long before this. But our interceptors were continuously engaged and anything they couldn't handle was taken care of by the battleship's batteries.

The fortresses did not constitute a threat to us. In fact we were beyond their firing range. Specialists had been able to inspect a damaged robotship which was about 20 meters in diameter. It consisted mainly of cargo holds and was unsuitable for space flight. No anaesthetizing weapons were discovered on board but a beam projector was found that was constructed along the lines of a disintegrator system.

We had considered the plan of collecting some of these aircraft and taking them to Arkon but it was not feasible because all these harvester units were guided by an unknown robot station. It might have taken us months to imitate such a guidance system.

\* \* \* \*

The conference took place in the Control Central. The mathematicians made a presentation of their findings and Riebsam's explanations sounded fairly sensible. "Among other things the purpose of the plan is to bring a stop to these attacks. We're going to represent ourselves as being the harvestship and we'll announce in symbol language that we have no 'yield' on board. We'll be transmitting on the same frequency band that was used to challenge us. At the same time we'll request the coördinates of planets where the seedship was active. That way we'll find out whether or not there is still a contact between Mechanica and the seedship. If that works out, then we'll have to store the data in our registers. Then under controlled conditions we'll retrieve the data, reanalyse it and determine whether or not the infected planet Azgola is included. Using the indicated format we will then prepare similar data concerning Arkon 2. We'll send the coördinates over hypercom to the command station, which would then have to transmit such data to the harvestship."

I cleared my throat nervously. Had Riebsam forgotten that we knew nothing of the whereabouts or existence of this vessel? It turned out that he had kept this in mind.

He continued calmly: "Of course if the harvestship has been destroyed due to some accident, then all of this will be fairly useless. Nevertheless we should try it. I'd be happy to find out how the station transmits

its commands and what frequencies and symbols are used. Maybe we can even discover why the harvestship has failed to appear. If it has anything to do with a fault in the transmitter circuits, we may be able to correct such a condition."

"Too many ifs and maybes, Doctor," I objected.

"That's true, sir, but we'll make a start along the lines we've discussed—and then we'll see how far we get."

"That's my plan," said Rhodan. "Somewhere there must be a source of error. We know that the distress calls of the seedship were answered. Therefore a contact still exists. I want to know why we're being mistaken for the harvestship and why the real one doesn't show up."

We continued the discussions for another 2 hours and finally I agreed. If we proceeded logically it would be like groping our way along a guidestring that was doubtlessly there. I looked on while an auto-transmitter was programmed. The symbol groups were perfect. Our message contained the announcement that we could not dispense any harvest 'yield' because we had no cargo on board.

Then began the experiment of deceiving a machine that was unknown to us. The commanders of the observation ships received orders to run a triangulation trace on the robot station. Rhodan threw the transmitter switch and the tuning selector switched to the waveband of our caller. The symbols were broadcast and finally we waited.

It had never been this quiet in the *Ironduke's* Com Central before. We settled down for a long period of waiting while our auto-transmitter kept sending out the message continuously. After 4 minutes our receiver came to life. We registered the signals and after relaying them to the computer for analysis we waited again.

"The robot has heard us," said Rhodan. "At least that's something, Doc. Prepare the next transmission. Ask for coördinates of the seeded planets."

The decipherment of the incoming signal succeeded on the first try. The text of it appeared on a backlighted screen. I leaned forward and read: "Dispense—dispense—dispense—dispense—!"

I felt as if I were slowly becoming petrified. On the screen the word 'dispense' appeared at least 500 times. Rhodan's deep sigh brought me out of my temporary paralysis.

"Take it easy," he said. "Nothing's lost yet. It's just that something doesn't jibe. Somehow there must be a reason for the request. Doc, send out the second message."

The auto-transmitter started humming again. This time we had to wait longer for an answer but in the meantime the tracking centre announced that the attacks had ceased. The flying spheres were once more in their harmless flight patterns over the desert. Only a few of the suction fields had been detected.

When the second robot message came in it was very long but by now we were getting used to this strange method of communication. The results of computer analysis appeared on the screen.

"Collector inoperative. Data available. Dispense—dispense—dispense..."

Rhodan straightened up slowly from watching the race of words on the screen. Kalup was busy scribbling notes on a pad. We looked at each other.

"Before you start talking, let me say something." Kalup's voice sounded very objective. Heads turned toward him as he continued. "The station that is challenging us and also controlled those attacks is only a planetary control point. It's unable to carry out logical processes like the Regent. That's why we are mistaken for the collector or whatever you call it. Its programming is only designed for handling the local reaper fleet. It's also why we keep getting the command to 'dispense' our cargo, which is also sent continuously to the flying spheres. So that explains their senseless pattern of action. If we're supposed to be the harvestship, our real 'partner' in crime, so to speak, has to be the intercosmic central which registers all coördinates. If it's possible to make it operative again we may be able to achieve what Riebsam has suggested. So what are we waiting for?"

This launched a hectic discussion until it became dark outside. We were oblivious to it, however, as we continued our planning. Meanwhile the tracking data from our Gazelles came in. They had traced the location of the planetary transmitter to within a meter of accuracy but by now the latter had become of secondary importance to us. We knew it was not a major type of computer—or in a cybernetic sense it was not complete. The main question was: how could we locate the central control which Kalup had referred to as our 'partner'? The local robot had called it the 'collector'.

It would be a hopeless task to search through about 100,000 buildings. Evidently the city had never served as a place of actual habitation. Our photo analysis had revealed the entire layout as being one technical installation after another.

I had an idea. Rhodan sensed it and looked at me inquiringly. "Send a Gazelle into space," I said. "Tell the commander to make a hyper-jump—say 100 light-years—and from there he can beam out a distress signal, just like the one that was sent out by the seedship. The same hypercom frequency should be used. By now it should be possible for us to reconstruct the required group of symbols. We already know that the 'collector' responded to such a signal before. So it will do it again—and then we can trace it down."

"That's the idea of the year," said Perry. "Major Krefenbac, take the G-14 and get going. Professor, do we know enough now to be able to reproduce such a distress call?"

Kalup favoured him with a hard stare. "I'd rather do it than stand here talking about it."

As Rhodan laughed, obviously reassured, I felt a new surge of hope. Yet I had to ask myself how we could repair an alien robot brain in alien territory. That wouldn't be possible even with the Regent, and it had been built by Arkonides.

Kalup soon delivered the necessary signal data and Krefenbac was able to take off within 45 minutes. We were sure he had made his jump when we detected the warp-shock from his transition. After 1 hour the hypercom receivers registered activity. Out of the decoders came the same distress call that had been used by the seedship.

Suddenly the Collector answered with such a powerful burst of transmitter power that it blew some of our receiver fuses. The other local Gazelles immediately started their triangulation work. When the final signal impulses came through, we knew where our 'partner' could be found. 'He' was not in the mechanical city as we had assumed but was farther out on the southern outskirts.

After Rhodan signalled Krefenbac to return, he checked his watch. "We eat first, then 3 hours for sleep. After that, a mission briefing. Call in the pursuit units. We've got the culprit cornered!"

It remained to be seen whether or not the 'culprit' would be as mild-natured as the planetary central.

## 7/ A GHOST TOWN COMES TO LIFE

Our advance resembled a major offensive. Rhodan had sent in 500 Terran combat robots which were the latest type known as Phalanx-13. I was always amused by the human propensity for borrowing names and concepts out of the past history of their planet. The robots actually moved forward in a phalanx but at least they knew how to break up their closely-packed ranks in case of danger—in which case they would get away by using their antigrav units and would know how to take cover.

We followed them in our all-purpose tanks. After flying into the city we had encircled the hypercom central that the tracking ships had located and then we landed. At the moment we were gliding over the terrain on our repulsion fields. Now and then we would drive along on the surface, using the tractor engines, and then we would elevate again on the repulsor fields.

We were no longer molested by the planetary station nearby. It seemed to ignore us as though we were the inconsequential nuisance factor. The other quads advanced to the right and the left of us. Rhodan had ordered a continuous video contact between all units. At intervals of 10 minutes we received status reports from the guard watch on board the *Ironduke* but they were uneventful. Everything was quiet at the ship site.

The city was a ghost town, its inhabitants long extinct. The trellised buildings we had observed prior to our landing were also here on the outskirts. Apparently they had served some technical purpose. The architecture was strange, giving very few hints as to the physical appearance of the Builders. We had not noticed any signs of either stairs or elevators. Instead we noted that there were wide metal ramps everywhere which spiralled up the exteriors of all the structures. Dr. Gorl Nkolate, the African specialist in extraterrestrial adaptive surgery, advanced the theory that these extinct intelligences had probably evolved from a crawling race of lizards.

The connecting streets between the buildings were narrow. The surface covering consisted of heavily-weathered metal plates which splintered or fell into dust under the weight of our tractor vehicles. The city was extremely ancient. Most of the technical installations appeared to be beyond repair and unusable. Seemingly, however, they had remained in service until the very last moment.

We had worked out a 'Maintenance and repair theory'. Obviously the most important machines had been tended and cared for; otherwise the planetary transmitter and the reaper units would not have been able to function. They were probably not any less ancient than the subordinate equipment which had fallen into decay. Accordingly there must be repair robots which were specialized in maintaining the precariously functioning transmitter—and even in that case malfunctions had already crept in. Some of the fortresses, for example, had been found in a condition of complete decay whereas others had operated faultlessly. The Collector, which to our way of thinking was the most important equipment on Mechanica, had also suffered some degree or deterioration.

The principal question was why the distress calls were answered so promptly while other things were left unattended, without response. Rhodan thought that only a part of the Collector's circuits were in disrepair, which implied on the other hand that the assigned maintenance robots must have failed in their duties somewhere.

The theories became more numerous and involved as we pressed onward through the weird city. There were no large plaza areas because every square meter of the surface had been put to use. The narrow confines caused us to lose sight of the other bank units as we progressed but that did not cause us to wander off our course. Whenever we would become slightly disoriented we would rise up on our antigravs and take a look around, after which we would return to the ground and proceed on our tractor treads.

Rhodan and Bell were present in our vehicle along with the mutants Pucky, Ras Tschubai and Wuriu Sengu. The 20 commando troops on board were under command of Lt. Brazo Alkher, whose detail was designated S-1. The mutants were only answerable to Rhodan himself.

The quad rolled out of a canyon-like street into a stretch of undeveloped terrain. Actually this area was a wide circular strip, 50 meters across, which encircled the Collector. We came to a stop. The telecom reports told us that the other units had also reached the target area. I leaned forward to look outside. The port covers had not yet been closed and the troops who were with us craned their necks to look out through all the hatches.

Off to our right we saw the first of the combat robots. There were 30 of the machines which were moving in a double-rank formation. We waited. The sun we had named Outside had just come up a few minutes before. The day on Mechanica would last about 7 hours, which was time enough to carry out our plan.

Rhodan sat next to the driver. I was looking outside through the airlock hatch.

"Strange," said Perry. "It's as silent as a tomb here. Wuriu, do you see anything?"

I turned to look at the mutant, who was staring ahead like a blindman. His eyes had taken on a milky hue. He possessed the faculty of being able to see through solid matter. "Only machines, sir," he finally answered. He sounded as though he were far away.

"Where? Beyond the open circle?"

"Yessir. It looks like a robot brain. Everywhere there are circuits, relay sections, transformer stations, conductors and cable conduits. It's very complicated, sir."

"Do you see robots or anything moving?"

"No. Everything's stationary."

Rhodan pressed his lips together. I took the aerial photos out of my pocket. The circular clearing or wide avenue surrounded the building complex, which measured about 2000 meters in diameter. Viewed from above, it gave the impression of being a circular fortress surrounded by a moat.

In the central portion we had detected the power station. At the moment the reactors there seemed to be inactive, yet at the time when the Collector had responded to our simulated distress signal they had all been in operation. It indicated that the machines were still in functioning order.

The commando troops discussed the situation quietly among themselves. On the whole it was nerve-wracking to me.

"Want me to jump?" inquired Pucky.

Even Ras Tschubai looked questioningly at Rhodan but the latter shook his head.

"What for? Wuriu only sees equipment and machines. I don't think you can determine what the Collector is thanking. We'll move onward until something happens."

"*Will* something happen?" I asked uneasily.

"I don't know. If all that's still working is the hypercom transmitter, nothing much can happen. But I can't imagine they would have created such a vital installation as this without protective equipment. For instance, why aren't there any defence screens?"

"This is Kalup," rumbled the telecom speaker. "We have a new logic evaluation. If the extinct intelligences were a lizard life form as those crawl-ramps would indicate, they would never have developed energy screens in our sense of the word. Each life form has its own conception of what is effective in terms of a defence system. Creatures who have evolved close to the ground think primarily in 2 dimensions and they will plan and operate accordingly."

"2-dimensional?" said Rhodan doubtfully. "They plan and operate in the 3rd dimension with their aircraft and their translight spaceships do pretty well with the 4th and 5th dimensions. How do you reconcile that with your theory?"

"It's not my theory. The computers arrived at that result. But you have to differentiate between normal existence and the life-vital aspects of spaceflight in this case. Aircraft were built in order to collect the last available spores. When nothing more would grow on the planet, 3 spaceships were built. They probably had thousands of years for such a development because the cooling of the atmosphere was a matter of millennia. When their own vegetation died out, they had no other choice but to secure a source of nourishment from elsewhere. A good support for the 2-dimensional concept is the fact that the Builders never got the idea of leaving their own world. Instead, they sent out robots. Did you really take a close look at the seedship? Most of the machines were extremely low-lying and flat in construction."

We looked at each other again until Reginald Bell lost his patience. "Why all the talk?" he blustered heatedly. "Why don't we get going? We'll soon find out what these unknown critters left behind them. If they've left some defences that still work, so we'll know then what action to take. Alright...?"

I breathed a sigh of relief. The depressing atmosphere changed. Rhodan's commands were heard in every vehicle. "Proceed as planned. The circular installation seems to be cut through and interlaced by many access channels and alleys. If you can't get through them, fly over any obstacles. Captain Nacro—let your robots form the advance column."

Our armoured carrier moved onward. We glided slowly out into the broad, circular street while the other units appeared to the right and left of us. The robots stomped their way along ahead of us. They had turned on their defence screens. I could see our driver groping for the switch to our own automatic defence system.

"Lay off that," Rhodan told him sharply. "I want to pick up undistorted sensor data. An energy screen makes too much interference."

"No energy trace," announced our instrument man. "All reactors quiet. There are only some weak residual radiations."

I began to feel uneasy again. Just 50 meters in front of us the honeycomb walls of the buildings towered upward. Here on the exterior there were no spiral ramps to be seen but our air photos revealed a maze of them in the inner courts of the compound.

There was a sound of metal screeching under our tractor chains. I was about to suggest that we turn on the defence screen anyway but my first words were drowned out as the telecom speaker seemed to explode. We heard a bellowing shout of alarm from at least 20 men.

We stopped. I followed Rhodan out of the lock and we took cover behind our vehicle. The quad tank to our right was hovering a few meters above the ground and was enveloped in a reddish glow of light. Before we could comprehend what was happening, it started to rotate. Within a few moments it was spinning so fast that its contours were no longer discernible. Finally it was like a high-speed propeller and all we could see was a glittering spiral.

The shouts of its crew were only audible for a few seconds under the terrible effect of the centrifugal forces unleashed inside the tank. If the driver hadn't been able to turn on the neutralizers, no one would have been able to survive inside. The spinning vehicle rose into the sky, where it was suddenly knocked out by what seemed to be a bolt of lightning.

Rhodan must have had the same idea as I did because we raised our impulse-beamers to our shoulders simultaneously and fired at the spot where the reddish ray of energy came out of the ground. We had surmised that a projector must be concealed there. The thunder of our weapons brought our troops out of their momentary stupor and suddenly the place was an inferno. Sunbright needles of searing heat struck the terrain at sharp angles, generating boiling furrows and exploding craters.

The heavy cannons of the tanks added their fire power. Only the robots stormed the area directly with all their weapon arms spewing destruction across the defence strip, where one projector after another was detonated.

Rhodan grabbed my arm and pulled me back as white-hot shockwaves blasted across the open area and scattered debris rained down like shrapnel. We didn't know if this was from the highly accelerated quad or from other sources. I jumped into the open lock of our own vehicle, falling in the process and striking my face against Rhodan's boot. At the same time I almost smashed my finger when it was caught between my weapon and the steel floor. The hatch slammed shut behind me. I had barely had time to pull my feet in out of harm's way. Somebody dragged me inside and I collapsed in a seat, breathing heavily and nursing a bloody nose.

We drew back to the street opening on the edge of the clearing. The port hatches had closed and the howling converter banks told us that the defence screen had built up around us. Several minutes passed before Rhodan's voice was heard. He shouted into the microphone and ordered everyone to calm down. On the viewscreen served by the outside cameras nothing was to be seen but the heat-raised terrain and 4 ruined combat robots.

Other than the converter sounds there was silence. Rhodan dispensed with reproaches. "Where is the crew of the S-5? Come in, S-5. Do you hear me?"

There was a crackling in the speaker but we waited in vain for an answer. Finally the commander of one of the Gazelles broke in. "Atomic explosion, sir—at about 5km altitude."

"When?"



"2 minutes ago."

Then we knew what has happened to S-5. We fell silent until finally we heard from Professor Kalup. His voice seemed to tremble as he attempted to explain the incident.

"A tragedy, sir—something nobody expected. The vehicle was rotating at least 50,000 times per second until it blew apart. Some kind of antigrav vortex is involved. We don't know the direction of rotation but the vector thrust is vertical."

"Thank you!" Rhodan's eyes burned with anguish as he thought of his men. "Attention, all crews: open fire with disintegrators. Do not fly over the circular area as we are not sure of the extent of the danger zone. Direct your fire toward the terrain near the base of the building wall."

The molecule-disrupting disintegrators vaporized the area designated. A number of invisible projectors exploded. Then we made a test to see if our combat robots could cross the strip in safety. Nothing happened to them.

"Attack!" ordered Rhodan. "Use the entrances. The robots will lead the way".

\* \* \* \*

We had found a repair robot. It was broad and flat as a board and was equipped with many-jointed arms as well as an antenna. Meanwhile Kalup had joined us and expressed his opinion that the thing was probably functional but needed a supply of operating current. The antenna served the purpose of receiving power through the air but it wasn't getting any at the moment.

When he tried to feed it on a 380-volt 3-phase line the robot had given out a rumbling sound for a moment but then the 15-amp fuses broke down. After putting in 25-amp fuses and trying again, the 10-foot contrivance started to move.

That was how it had all started but at the moment the fiendish thing was skilfully preparing to disassemble me. It had reared up in front of me like a giant snake, throwing 4 steel arms around me and pulling my feet off the ground with a 5th prehensile member. Our hyper-physicist seemed to think the whole affair was comical. Although he sought to free me he was laughing so hard that tears came to his eyes.

Certainly I didn't present a very dignified appearance, yet if my rib-cage had been of the human variety it would have been crushed under the pressure of the robot arms. However, since the chest cavity of an Arkonide is protected by solid plates of bone, I was able to endure the torture. I dangled as helplessly as a child in the monster's clutches. Perhaps the pressing metal limbs would have been tolerable to a degree if I hadn't suddenly heard a hissing sound above me. A white jet of flame made it quite evident that the mekker was planning to do a little welding on me. The heat came closer and closer to my chest but Kalup couldn't help me. His laughter almost sounded abnormal by now as though he were going into a fit.

I began to shout in fear of my life. Rhodan and the others had gone on ahead. If Kalup hadn't been

laughing like a lunatic, Perry would have been at my side long before this. As it was, however, he seemed to be assuming that I had just told a very funny story.

Behind me there was a humming sound. My arms were pressed to my sides but I could still move my head. That's how I noted that the robot was preparing to drill into my left shoulder blade. Just what it expected to accomplish wasn't clear to me. It leaned forward and I found myself in a prone position. I now had a fine view of the proceedings but I wasn't at all happy about it.

Kalup put a hand to his heart and became faint. At least this allowed me to yell without interference from him. The material of my uniform was beginning to blister. The arc flame of the welding extension was nearing the place where my cell activator was located. Apparently the maintenance robot had been attracted by the impulses from the device.

Pucky was my salvation at once. But while putting his telekinetic forces to work he forgot that I was still in the grip of the machine. So I went with it when it was banged about 10 times against the ceiling. When the flexible grippers finally let go of me I started to fall but the mousebeaver caught me just before I reached the floor and he lowered me gently. All I could do was groan aloud while the remains of the robot fell writhing to the steel floor plates.

Pucky observed me with curious interest as Kalup finally got control of himself. The latter's heavy panting was louder than my moans of pain and relief.

"What happened?" came Perry's voice from around a corner of the passage. He stormed into view with weapon in hand. I greeted him with an imprecation while Pucky explained to him the situation he had found me in.

"Man, I didn't know if it was the Emperor or not!" he concluded. "He looked more like a tomato in a juice press—that's how red his face was!"

Rhodan was impudent enough to start grinning at me. These Terrans had a sense of humour that was all their own. An Arkonide could never have found anything funny about what happened but here the top Earthly scientist practically had a heart attack laughing.

I got up with a groan and looked to see if my chest had acquired a welding seam. The burns were painful but I had somehow come through it all in one piece.

Kalup's mind was back on our main objective already and he appeared to have forgotten the incident. In spite of my injured dignity I found his remarks to be interesting.

"...no way of finding the defective installation. This station isn't too big but for us it's pretty involved and complex."

"So what are the possibilities?"

"Well, we've found a few hundred of these repair robots. Our successful experiments here makes it obvious that their power source has failed. On the other hand we're picking up about 40 different kinds of symbols on the radio. They are emergency calls. It means that various circuit sections here are announcing that something's wrong with them. So we should activate the robots with portable batteries and put an observer on each one of them. They're bound to lead us to the sources of error which we can then take a look at ourselves. Only these special robots can know which installations are in need of repair or overhaul."

The solution was simple and obvious, once it was explained Kalup could think swiftly and logically. Rhodan acted immediately and hailed the *Ironduke*. Colonel Claudrin received instructions to supply the necessary batteries.

We inspected one of the quiescent robots and Riebsam suggested that it might have been simpler to activate the power plant itself. Rhodan objected to this because we didn't know which reactor had been provided for that purpose nor did we know what might be malfunctioning in the power transmission system.

One hour later the technicians arrived with the batteries. Rhodan and I kept out of the way because the vibrations from our cell activators really seemed to stimulate the robots. We had 500 security troops standing in front of the strange machines with their weapons ready to fire. So far, 111 of the maintenance robots had been counted.

"Look, they're moving," whispered Rhodan.

In silent suspense we looked down into the main hall where we had discovered 14 of the repair units. Nothing else moved in the station. The rotation field seemed to have been the only defence weapon to worry about. The individual attack on my own person had most likely been a freak accident.

We realized that the maintenance units were variously specialized in their computer circuits—and programming. Some remained motionlessly where they were while others set themselves in motion. They crept along with the help of elastic metal bands which stretched out and contracted in a way that gave them a forward locomotion. They looked like giant caterpillars. Now I too believed that the Builders must have been either lizards or reptiles.

We walked to the inner court, which was actually a smaller circular area surrounding the power supply centre. The work reactors did not stir. They didn't seem to be in contact with the robot inspectors. Pucky and Ras Tschubai went to look for the long-range transmitter station. It turned out that the robot central we had taken to be in charge here took up very little room. The greatest amount of floor space was occupied by the intercosmic hyper-transmitter.

We set up our headquarters in the inner court. The observation troops followed every robot that crept away in any direction. There was a mounting traffic of signals and when we processed them for evaluation we found that exactly 42 of the machines had gone to work. This number matched the number of emergency calls we had detected.

Kalup was elated. "Right on the nose!" he exclaimed. "One of those 42 error signals concerns us and soon all we'll have to do is find the harvestship."

"Sure, that's all!" I laughed despondently. I fell silent, however, when my extra-brain told me something that Kalup had overlooked. I turned so suddenly that Rhodan was alerted.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Be careful," I warned. "If the transmitter starts to work, it will broadcast all the position data that it received from the seedship and stored in its registers. It doesn't matter where the harvestship is—if it exists at all it will fly an undeviating course to the fat-moss planets, in the order named. Naturally it will process the world that comes first on the list—but Azgola is near the end of it. We have to interrupt the hypercom transmission. We should be able to locate those memory banks."

"And...?" asked Rhodan anxiously.

"We'll tap them—it*must* be possible!" The position data for Azgola ought to be in the second to last place—maybe even the final spot. We don't know if the seed-ship has reported its activity on Snarfot. So we only have to analyse the last 2 items in the registers. When we know which symbols represent the coördinates of Azgola, we can switch the programming and only let that information be transmitted. Once the Azgola position has been sent out, we interrupt the transmission again."

"A very bold theory," said Kalup. His eyes began to gleam. "Yes but there's no other choice," I said. "We must prevent the naming of any planet other than Azgola. The *Ironduke's* radio watch will have to determine when the last of the Azgola impulses have been beamed out—then we'll shut off the transmitter. Assuming that the harvestship will respond, it will be the job of Terran science to develop a symbol group as soon as possible that will represent Arkon 2. With that we'll decoy the reaper ship to the spot where we need it. Does that sound feasible?"

Although he didn't answer he began to do some figuring. Riebsam closed his eyes and leaned back in a portable field chair. It was enough for me that the Terrans were onto the problem. They'd probably suggest improvements over the basic idea.

Rhodan alerted the crew of the battleship. Meanwhile 42 troops of the observation detail were watching exactly that many repair robots, some of which had reached their maintenance targets. The automatic signals kept piling up.

Ras Tschubai and Pucky were on standby for action. They were to teleport as soon as anything happened that even hinted at any activation of the data transmitter. In that case they would be the only ones capable of moving fast enough.

If the harvestship received just one undesirable planetary position we'd be unable to prevent it from going to the wrong planet and harvesting it. I no longer believed that the reaper vessel had been lost. The trouble was probably here with the robot dispatcher equipment, which was not able to relay the data received from the seedship.

The final waiting began.

## **8/ MECHANICA STRIKES!**

There was a sudden thunder as if a bomb had detonated. The covering grates of the lattice-like buildings swelled outward and then clanged back into position, creating such a bedlam of sound that we were forced to take cover.

The power station had come to life. The roaring of the reactors drowned out our shouted comments and cries of warning. Metre-long discharge lightnings leapt from spherical antenna terminals, then quickly stabilized into wireless power transmitter beams which bridged the inner circular area with a maze of brilliant lines of light.

We couldn't understand a word of what we shouted to each other but actually no communication was necessary at the moment. We knew that the maintenance machines were doing their job. Many pieces of equipment which had been silenced due to the natural processes of wear and deterioration had been repaired and caused to function again.

The power plant had been the first to come back into service. If the other repair robots were proceeding with equal speed to correct their selected points of damage, the situation could become critical. We saw that the robot inspectors were developing a hectic pace of activity, and with the arrival of the regular power the other machines were mobilized which had not responded to our batteries. They swished through the passages, ran over some of the less cautious commandoes and disappeared into openings in the floor which we hadn't noticed previously, since their hatch covers were only now being activated. These probably led to standby rooms where the specialist robots were programmed to wait until summoned by an emergency call.

I bent down and made a run for the communications tent which we had set up near the main entrance. Rhodan was hunched over the videophone screens. The confusion that had broken out in the Collector area could ruin our plans. When I saw Perry's lips moving I pressed past him and reached for my radio helmet. When I put it on I immediately heard all the voice traffic going on. Somebody was yelling with the same urgency as I had heard before when we were attacked outside. Apparently the automatic installation was coming up with a new form of defence.

"You're free to fire!" shouted Perry. "So start shooting! Hit anything that moves!"

The reason for this was seen in the viewscreens. A new kind of squatly-built robots had appeared. They streamed up out of the floor openings or came chuting down the spiral ramps to attack our observers who were watching the work of the robot inspectors. In 2 places we noticed iridescent flashes of energy which suddenly vanished, along with 2 of our men.

"Rotation fields!" announced Brazo Alkher over the voice com. "They're using their red beam again."

Capt. Nacro, our Martian chief engineer, had already taken action. The phalanx chapeks flew to the scene, penetrating the metal gratings of the buildings like cannon shots and entering into specific target areas. The roar of the impulse-weapons mingled with the shouts of the commando leaders.

We were also exposed to the defensive fire. A quick thinking sergeant raced his tank over to the tent and stopped in a position to screen us off. We took cover behind the vehicle and also opened fire. I had set my hand weapon to project a narrow beam because I had planned to cut off the apparently active hyper-transmitter by destroying several of its main cables. But for present purposes this wasn't suitable. Our attackers were too solid to be affected by the needle beam.

Farther to our right another quad tank started to rotate. At the same time we heard a shout of alarm from Lieutenant Nolinov. In fact his voice cracked in his excitement. "Sector 7 calling! Somebody get here on the double! Sector 7! A hyperwave converter has started up. On one of the screens here there's a model of the galaxy and its peppered with a bunch of green blips of light. Those must be the seeded planets!"

Pressure waves from the tank's cannon fire threw me against the tent. Rhodan had directed the crew to take aim at the robots that were projecting the rotation beams. The whirling quad stopped its motion and fell back to the ground.

"Take over the communications tent!" Perry shouted to Nacro.

By now I was back on my feet and I saw Pucky beckoning to me. He was to bring me to the action centre that Nolinov had called from. I ran to him and scooped him up in my arms. Hold tight but relax," he instructed me.

A sharp pain shot through me. Pucky's teleporting faculty generated a 5th-dimensional dematerialisation field, from which we were transmitted in the form of energy patterns. Before I had fully registered the pain, however, we arrived at our goal. Before us was a great, dome-like chamber. Rhodan and Ras Tschubai materialized next to me.

A section of the wall which we had not recognized as a screen during our initial reconnaissance tour was actually showing us a view of the Milky Way. Beneath the screen was the semi-circular control console of a computer memory unit. We were convinced that the seedship's position data were registered there.

Outside there was a new thunder of weapons fire. Then suddenly appearing defence robots didn't seem to be agreeable to our penetration here. We looked around and saw a part of the outer wall dissolve under fire from the disintegrators of one of our all-purpose tanks. The pilot brought it through the gaping hole and we realized it was the quad containing the sensor instruments. The scientific team had arrived on schedule. Kalup and Riebsam jumped out of the airlock when the quad came to rest. The hyper-physicist was still struggling to catch his breath.

We noticed that 2 repair robots were extending their instrument arms into some circuit cabinets and soon the projected image of the Milky Way became clearer. The light blips shimmered brilliantly. Somewhere nearby there was a rumbling of other activated machinery—in an adjacent sector where Brazo Alkher and his men were stationed. In spite of the emergency, Alkher's voice sounded calm when he called to us. "You'd better get in here, sir. Something's going on here that I don't understand."

Again we started running. Kalup followed us, audibly gasping and panting. In the connecting passageway were 3 soldiers situated behind a portable disintegrator. They opened fire whenever a combat machine appeared. We were enveloped in clouds of smoke and a stink of burned plastic and melting insulation. We could only hope that none of the irreplaceable conduits had been destroyed but we couldn't tell which were the vital ones and which were not.

Rhodan slid back the sliding door. Before us was a control central that we dubbed the 'dispatcher room'. Here were the automatic readout circuits which picked up the stored position data from memory and beamed them out. Or at least we assumed that this was the operation here.

Our electronics experts had insisted that there wasn't any other possibility. They said that a hypercommunications installation had such obvious features that it couldn't be mistaken for anything else.

The ceiling was buzzing and fluorescing with the field-isolated power beams which carried the energy that flowed from the atomic reactors. A distributor transformer complex picked up these work currents, transformed them into different levels of voltage and transferred the supply through arm-thick cable conduits into a bank of fuses and breaker-switches. We didn't dare approach this coupling complex because we didn't know what high-tension forces might be present.

"Watch out now!" Kalup called to me. "The impulse converter is operating."

Our robo-mechs rushed into the 'dispatch room' with 2 portable teleoms. With these we made contact with the *Ironduke*.

The howling became louder around us as more and more of the equipment came into operation. The work of the repair robots seemed to be succeeding. It was hard for me to remain calm now. Technicians set up an isolation screen for us and we took cover behind it.

"Get back!" I called over my helmet radio to Alkher's men. "If we have to shoot those conductors there'll be shrapnel flying. You've done your work!"

Perry called to Jefe Claudrin on the telecom. The Com Central of the battleship was standing by.

"So far no hypercom signals," he advised us. "Stand by. I'll notify you at the first long-range peep!"

Kalup was staring tensely ahead. I followed his gaze.

"Do you see that?" he said. "There—that main tumbler switch! It's operated mechanically. Primitive, I must say!"

I finally saw it. The switch was as long as an arm and was standing out from the wall at a 45° angle. A repair robot had just extended its instrument arms and was removing the metal cover from a switch cabinet. Inside I could make out a weird arrangement of wheels and cogs. An overheated motor there apparently didn't have the strength to operate the lever.

· We heard Riebsam from the other room. "The transmitter is getting power but no signal output. What's the matter?"

Outside the thunder of weapons continued as a Gazelle arrived with a new contingent of robot troops.

Kalup put on his radio helmet. "Riebsam—what kind of circuits does the dispatching unit have? High voltage?"

"No. It's a low-voltage system with a main transformer in between. Can't be anything else. The transmitter isn't getting any input from it. The indicators here are red. Something's wrong in your area. The memory registers are functioning."

I began to realize why Kalup had asked the question and I soon understood why he was staring at the blocked lever. If the dispatcher unit was on a low-voltage network, a normal switch could be used. It was not necessary to make a lightning closure of the contacts. I finally got up and walked toward the repair robot like a sleepwalker.

"Atlan...!" Perry's shout resounded in my earphones.

"Let him go," I heard Kalup say. "He's on to the situation. That blocked lever is the contact switch between the auto-transmitter and the memory bank. Claudrin—it'll happen any moment now!"

The robot was in my way and too big a safety risk. I destroyed it with my disintegrator and its remains fell back with flailing and twisting tool-arms. The drive-motor was burning. I aimed a fine D-beam at the 4 leads on the commutator and cut through them. This also burned out the separate safety fuses and the motor went dead.

Under the lever was a layer of hard sediment about the size of my finger. I banged my gun barrel against it but it was crystal hard. It blocked the slide slot so that the lever couldn't move. I was filled with a new confidence now. Under the obstruction—which I took to be some kind of resinous lubricant—I detected

the gleam of contacts. I was determined to get the lever down no matter what happened.

I took a small hammer from the tool belt of my combat suit and struck the hardened resin that was blocking the slot. The stuff splintered away like glass. Once I had freed the slot I wondered superfluously why the repair robot hadn't done the same thing. It had gone first to the drive-motor, which it naturally detected as the source of electrical malfunction. Which proved that the Builders' robotechology wasn't any too advanced. The machine should have discovered that the electro-mechanical setup wasn't working because the lever was blocked.

When I pushed down on the switch it slammed home. There was a spray of bluish sparks and I dove for cover as an alarm overhead began to whistle. I made my way back cautiously and saw Rhodan beckoning to me. I was the only one left in the dispatch room. The soldiers were still in the connecting passage. As we entered the first chamber we heard Riebsam's announcement. "Signals coming through," he said. "What was the matter? The error lamps are out."

Claudrin's voice bellowed from the telecom. "Transmitter's on the air—single symbol output!"

Rhodan raised his weapon, already starting to aim at a conduit. I grabbed his wrist.

"Have you lost your mind?"

"Hold it a sec! Claudrin, can you hear me? What did you say? You're only getting one symbol? Always the same signal? Or are groups of symbols coming through now?"

"No—just the one signal repeated."

"Don't shoot, sir!" said Kalup. "There's the answer! The station first has to call the harvestship. Wait—no data will be given out yet. Claudrin, watch for return signals from space. If the reaper ship exists, it will return a recognition signal. Register that because we still need it. Also capture that outgoing symbol on your recording tapes—then relay it at once to the computer for analysis."

Rhodan was sweating. Before he could say anything, however, we heard from Claudrin again. "The answer's coming in! It's also a single symbol. Location of the sender is at least 30,000 light-years away. That could be the harvestship. It's apparently giving a ready signal. The reaper's standing by, ready to receive. I—wait, the planet transmitter is cutting in. Watch it—here come the data!"

By this time Rhodan had come to the same conclusion as I. We didn't fire our weapons because there was a better way than destroying conductors. Without exchanging a word, we ran through the passage and into the dispatcher room. We both reached the contact lever at the same time and struck it upward.

"What the devil!" We recognized Riebsam's voice in our phones. "The red indicators again! The data output has stopped."

"Mission accomplished, Doctor!" said Rhodan as he finally relaxed. "That's just what we wanted!"

The *Ironduke* was heard from. "You did it! The remote station is putting out the same response signal as before. And we have the analysis. The signal says: "Transmit at once, give new assignments." Sir, if that isn't the harvestship, my name isn't Claudrin!"

Perry and I left the dispatcher room. The first part of our plan had succeeded. In the other room we found that Kalup had left the scene. Now it was up to him and the cybernetics specialists on the ship to



extract the data concerning Azgola from the memory bank.

Capt. Nacro announced that the attacks by the combat machines had started to subside: 500 of the alien defenders had been destroyed. Everywhere we could still see the inspector robots and their maintenance counterparts. They were working industriously at the inoperative components of the installation.

\* \* \* \*

A new development was looming. Now the battle between robot and robot was waxing full. Since we only had 1000 combat machines on board, this gave the opposing force an advantage of about 20 to 1.

3 hours after the intercosmic control central had been activated, the surrounding fortresses began to send out their main waves of mobile fighting units. They were nightmarish contraptions, some of them as large as a Terran all-purpose tank. Inasmuch as they were equipped with remote-controlled rotation field projectors and anaesthetizing guns, the situation soon became desperate.

Although our combat machines were not affected by the paralysis rays they were quite susceptible to the 'spin' beams, which shot them into the sky. Their defence screens didn't help them here because they were still subject to the rotational motion.

Our pursuitships made attack dives against the slowly advancing chapeks and swept them with atomic fire from their nose cannons, but in spite of this new enemy contingents continued to appear. We didn't dare expose the *Ironduke* to the anaesthetizing beams. Most likely the rotation fields wouldn't have posed too much of a threat to the huge battleship but we couldn't take the risk of having the crew become paralysed.

Rhodan also hesitated to take off at present for fear of coming within range of the fortress guns. We had sent out three Gazelles and all of them had been fired upon. The G-7 under Mahaut Sikhra's command had been struck by a full anaesthetizing bombardment and only the auto-pilot prevented the friction-heated ship from crashing. It streaked away like a white-glowing meteor and was eventually saved.

If the *Ironduke* were to rise above its landing place it would not have been able to remain in the atmosphere. We would have had to retreat out into space, which would have made our work difficult if not impossible. So our activation of the repair robots had resulted in dire consequences. The awakening of the intercosmic transmitter had brought the main command station into action. This is what had launched the main offensive which was not to be compared with the futile sorties of the little reaper ships.

This was a serious battle. *Mechanica* was defending itself in full force. We had pulled back our armoured troop units. The attackers could only be even partially contained by blitz raids from the interceptors or by our mechanical ground troops. The heavy armaments of the *Ironduke* could not be brought into play. The front was circular and we were at its centre. The anaesthetizing ray of a *Mechanica* robot had a range of 5 km and we couldn't let such machines approach any closer if we wanted to keep the crew out of danger.

The mutants were also engaged in the battle. They made full use of their special faculties by either throwing the combat machines back or destroying them with micro-nuclear bombs which they were able

to plant in the midst of the deadly melee. Ras Tschubai had been narcotized during one of his jumps and Pucky had gone in to bring him out of the danger zone.

By now the defensive battle had been going on for 2 days by Earthly reckoning. Kalup and his scientific team were faced with the task of analysing about 8000 position coördinates from the Mechanica memory registers—an assignment which would have taken years of effort without the help of the positroniccomputers. Fortunately it was relatively simply to identify and isolate a group of symbols relating to any particular planet. But then the task remained to determine such a world's actual location. We couldn't make the mistake of sending the reaper ship to the wrong destination.

Two hours prior to this the last analysis had come through. It developed that the Azgola data were not at the end of the list. We had found the coördinates well mixed in with the others. The comparison checkouts were still in process but we were sure now that we were on the right track.

Since the opening of the main local offensive we had been forced to evacuate the transmitter central in the city, due to the fact that the combat machines from the fortresses had also appeared in that area. Long-range reconnaissance had revealed that after we left the enemy robots had also pulled back. Although we had left our special equipment there our remote cameras revealed that the local machine forces paid no attention to such devices. All defence machinery seemed to react solely to the presence of organic life.

Kalup came into the Command Central, from which point we were witnessing the battle. We had seen 600 of our phalanx robots destroyed. It was time to leave the field, so to speak. The professor handed the prepared program strips to Rhodan. Owing to the alien aspects of the technology involved we had been forced to feed the symbols into a Terran converter apparatus which by great effort we had managed to adapt to the reader circuits of the Mechanica memory bank. I had suggested that we might send out the data impulses directly over the ship's transmitter but Rhodan had insisted on taking no chances. He wanted to use the Mechanica station and perhaps this was the safest way after all.

"I think it will work," said Kalup wearily. "Don't ask me if we'll be able to control that thing again—we simply have to try. We've done everything in our power. Just send out these symbols and wait to see what happens. Make sure the Collector doesn't try to add any additional data to the signal. If the harvestship flies to Azgola, we'll have to try influencing it further from our end of the operation."

We didn't burden him with any further questions. We knew how strenuously the scientific team had been working and I could sympathize because I also felt utterly exhausted.

Our little commando force was ready. Pucky and Ras Tschubai were to transport Perry and me to the Mechanica central. There was nothing to do except to feed our prepared tape strip into the central programmer, hit the read-out contact and come back. We hoped to be able to accomplish this in the space of just a few minutes. We had taken the precaution to put on our Arkonide combat suits, which at least afforded some protection because of their antigrav and defence screen equipment.

We checked our weapons, took a firm grip on our teleporters and made the jump. Even as I sensed the pain of the transition we were already there in the Collector's command central. The reactors were still in operation. Everywhere there was a humming, jangling and rumbling activity. We were in the hall where the memory bank was located. The control console was still undamaged.

Without going into any discussions, Rhodan leapt forward and shoved the tape strip into the program slot. When he depressed the readout contact the machine began to function. Seconds passed. Blinking control lamps indicated that the programmer unit was accepting the data. I went quickly into the

dispatcher room and threw the contact lever, after which I returned to the others. We had done all that we could.

"They're coming," said Ras. He stood in the entrance and waited for the steel successors of a race of intelligences who had left no other trace of their existence.

Actually, only the spiral ramps had given any hint that they had possessed a different bodily form. And of course the serpent-like robots supported this probability. If the Builders had been motivated by the same instincts as all other intelligences they would have created their mechanical creates in their own likeness, from which we could draw our own conclusions.

We noted that the transmitter had come to life. Its robotic controls seemed to have been waiting for the input of a symbol signal.

"Let's teleport," said Rhodan. It was the third remark that had been made during the entire operation.

The mutants brought us back to the ship. The crew was listening breathlessly to the signals coming in on our hypercom receivers. Moments later the answer came from the depths of the outer void. At first we recognized the familiar response signal but this was followed by 2 additional symbol groups which we turned over to the math section for analysis.

Meanwhile the leader of the pursuitships reported in. "Campani speaking. We keep running into the narco beams every time we get above the energy horizon of the forts. We can only make a limited use of our weapons and we have to maintain a high velocity so that we don't become targets for the robots. The phalanx units are way out-numbered. So far about 900 of them have been knocked out by the spinner beams. I am requesting permission to return to the ship."

"Permission granted," answered Perry. "You'd better come on board—and hurry. We're taking off."

The Collector continued to transmit but it did not give out any further position data. What we heard was unimportant. It was simply sending out its usual call. The harvestship returned one final message, to the effect that it had gotten under way. Our tracking of its position was not certain. Kalup was of the opinion that the reaper vessel had probably been hovering in deep space for centuries, waiting for new coordinate information. It must have become inactive when the transmitter on *Mechanica* failed.

Pucky took a close look at his disintegrator. "Should I?" he asked.

I nodded. "Destroy the memory bank and come right back."

He disappeared in a shimmering halo of light. Within 5 minutes he returned. "Well, that's taken care of," he said matter-of-factly. "That thing won't be handing out any more information."

A humming sound was heard in the *Ironduke's* outer defence screen. We were being attacked by the rotation beams. The task of bringing the interceptors through the launch locks was taking too long and was a cause for serious concern. Claudrin was becoming uneasy so Rhodan made a decision. "To pursuit leader! Break off the entry manoeuvres. Make a high-speed run for outer space and we'll take you on board when we get there!"

"Roger, sir!"

I listened to the thunder of our engines. The battleship became weightless. My attention was riveted to

the view-screens where a magnified view of the city's forest of antennas could be seen. The transmitter was still in operation but its activity now was futile. No doubt the robot inspectors had been alerted. We didn't know how capable they might be of repairing a damaged mechanical brain. On the other hand there could be a backup system that we hadn't discovered.

It was absolutely vital now to bring the harvestship under our control. We planned to incapacitate its reaper units slightly so that later we could try to contact them with a special transmitter and feed the Arkon 2 coordinates into their programmer units.

Operation Mechanica ended without fanfare. After the hectic pace of the past few days the rumble of the engines had a sporific effect on us. Even before our takeoff I was practically numb. The roar of our weapons hardly reached me. I recall that two of the fortresses were blasted into the air almost directly beneath us as the *Ironduke's* batteries again reacted faster than the enemy.

We hurtled out into open space. More than 50,000 light-years away was the gleaming star-ball of the galaxy. To us it was an enchanting spectacle. While the sun we had named Outside dwindled beneath us, we took the last of the interceptors on board. Their pilots were exhausted. They had been 24 hours without any sleep.

The battleship's hyper-transmitter went into action. All commanders of the Terran fleet stationed in star-cluster M-13 were informed of what had happened. Also they were given orders to fly to Azgola to keep a lookout for an alien ship.

Before we went into the linear flight mode, Rhodan took a seat next to me. He looked up meditatively at the panob screens. "I don't know why—but I think we're still going to be in for some surprises."

I shrugged my shoulders wearily. "I'll settle for anything as long as the harvestship shows up. How does it look on Arkon 2?"

Perry hesitated. He didn't have to tell me that some of the Arkonides were already suffering from over-nourishment.

I fell asleep in the Control Central. My last waking thought was for my homeland. What would the future bring?

## **ORDER OF THE ACTION**

[1/ THE COSMIC RIDDLE](#)

[2/ IMPERILED IMPERIUM](#)

3/ AN "OUTSIDE" CHANCE

4/ THE STAR VIKINGS—2104 A.D.

5/ THE GRIM REAPERS

6/ THE "COLLECTOR" SPEAKS

7/ A GHOST TOWN COMES TO LIFE

8/ MECHANICA STRIKES!

THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

PLANET MECHANICA

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Original German Title:  
"Der Planet Mechanica"

### **THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME**

THEY WERE OUTMANOEUVRED and made helpless by the robot.

Since Rhodan's impulse transmitter had broken down they  
were in the dire peril.

The telepathic connection with the *Sirius* had ceased. Pucky studied the robot that held them captive: it was a monster.

Although Pucky was completely paralysed and unable to move

his limbs, he thought it might be possible for him to generate and emit telekinetic rays. He concentrated all his power but achieved nothing despite straining his last reserves.

Pucky found it hard to believe that he had lost his superior  
mental powers!

The sound of steps ceased.

The sudden silence was ominous.

Something was about to happen—but what?

\* \* \* \*

You'll find out in—

HERITAGE OF THE LIZARD PEOPLE

By

Clark Darlton