

Only through mass evacuation could the inhabitants of the planet Azgola be saved from the deadly Spores of Doom. And, in the final analysis, all oxygen-breathing worlds face the same threat from this lethal menace from the depths of galactic space. Everyone is at the mercy of—

SEEDS OF RUIN

1/ OBJECTIVE: OXYGEN PLANET

WITH MOUNTING SPEED the Scout materialized within the normal universe and shot off with mounting speed towards its distant goal. By the standards of its creators the Scout was not a large spacecraft, its cylindrical body measuring 30 meters diametrically and almost 100 meters in length.

Technically the ship was made up of countless details: wheels, hubs, relays, servos and electronic systems; controls, cables, tracking and direction-finding equipment. But to a human observer the Scout would appear as a well-functioning unit that reacted like an organically fused body. In strict scientific terms the ship represented a gigantic robot in which every single part was dependent upon the functionality of all the others.

Within 10 seconds of the Scout's emergence from hyperspace the Automatic Guard received an impulse awakening it to life. The impulse originated from a lens which had been activated by the cosmic rays within the universe.

The Guard glided below the polished suspension cable that determined its path. The path was always the same and it was always the same Guard using it. Having fulfilled its function, the lens slid a metallic lid over its sensory organ and its soft buzzing died out. Its part in the mission was over.

The Guard, a bead-shaped shiny steel structure, purred away like a satisfied cat, without haste and with steady speed.

Suddenly it stopped short. Projecting 2 telescopic eyes followed by a sensor, it inspected a damaged bit of cable.

It would be risky to continue beyond that point with its considerable weight. The cord could tear and the Guard, losing hold, would plunge down one meter onto the hard floor below.

Within supreme gentleness and care the sensor inspected the damaged point, then reported its observations. A tiny lamp on the Guard's side glowed. Slowly the mechanism rolled back, retracting its telescopic eyes in the process.

The Scout now knew that its mission was endangered. From a human standpoint its grasp of the situation was uncannily complex. The ship registered the catastrophe with all of its electronic and positronic senses and reacted exactly as its constructors had expected: as a superb unit.

The Guard reported its discovery to the Memory Banks. They, in turn, cut off the propulsion units before even attempting to repair the damage. The Scout lost speed after awhile it was only a metallic lump falling freely through star-studded space.

There was only one single robot within the Scout whose ability to move was not dependent on the entire unit. We shall call him Arthur, as his real name cannot be reproduced by human speech organs.

Arthur was practically the mech-of-all-trades on board, functioning as the crew whenever required. Thus far his services had not been needed as everything had proceeded as planned without a single error having occurred in all the previous planetary landings.

The defect discovered by the Guard and hindering it from continuing, compelled the ship to take unusual measures. As the Guard was part of the whole, it had to continue the work it had begun in order to prepare other sectors for the renewed tests they were about to conduct. Failure to assure the Guard flawless accomplishment of its task would spell the downfall of the Scout's entire mission. Its builders well knew that the moment could arrive when the intricately interwoven mechanism of the ship would be unable to help itself—which is why they had sent along Arthur.

After a short inspection the Memory Banks decided that Arthur should be activated to carry out the repair of the cable. The electronic barricade was released by an impulse and the container housing Arthur opened. 1,2, 3 and more control lamps flashed on as the robot's servomechanism was fed energy. The Memory Banks were in no hurry for undue haste could only harm Arthur. After such a lengthy rest he had to warm up slowly without any strain. Certainly he was robust and resistant but his programming required that Arthur be handled with utmost care.

A human would describe Arthur's appearance as ugly or, at least, unusual. The purpose for which he had been designed had made him into a wandering arsenal containing everything imaginable, the functions of which would keep the entire scientific community of Terra arguing for hours. Arthur's body was shaped like an inverted fishing boat, the outer surface literally studded with devices.

The robot rolled out of his container, steered by impulses emanating from the Memory Banks. He moved through a long, quiet passageway. At the far end of the passage were conical objects hanging from the ceiling like outsized bats that had settled there to roost. Arthur's rumbling and the whirring of his casters disturbed the silence although no one took any notice of his presence.

The Scout continued to fall through space. The lenses had closed their metallic lids and the colourful shimmering of the celestial splendour went unobserved. It was a world unto itself, plying this stellar immensity; a diminutive, solitary body, much too small to be of any cosmic significance. And yet it was executing an assignment which had already plunged part of the Galaxy into turmoil.

Before reaching the end of the passageway Arthur was steered into a tunnel, then carried downward in a lift. He waited until another entry opened, then pushed himself inside. It had taken 10 minutes for him to reach the Guard's initial starting point. At first it seemed as if a staggering problem presented itself as the Guard's path was far too narrow for a robot of Arthur's size. No matter how much force he exerted he could never succeed in moving forward. But now Arthur's specialization and the meticulous planning that had gone into his construction became evident.

Arthur divided in half. He put aside 2 side sections of his body and proceeded to select all the tools he considered important, fastening them on what remained of his body. Immobile and compelled to wait, the Guard remained suspended near him at the beginning of the cable. Now the robot advanced without difficulty. In a short while he reached the defective spot.

Arthur began to work at once. Attaching electromagnets at both sides of the damaged section to hold the rest of the cable in its normal position, he began to remove the unserviceable part. Tools and support arms appeared on the middle section of Arthur's body. They immediately began their precisely synchronized activity. While 2 grips removed the damaged bit, 2 others were busy preparing the overlapping sections for the replacement.

But this was not everything Arthur had to offer. He had meanwhile been preparing the substitute part for attachment. The robot carried out a multitude of movements that seemed arbitrary and meaningless in their variety. Arthur was a brilliant construction and he proved the point by completing the repair within 8 minutes. Then he retracted his grips and slid back. Reconnecting his middle section with the sides, he rolled back to the lift. Somewhat later he returned to his container, his energy was withdrawn and his mechanisms cooled off again. The electronic barrier was reinstated and the Memory Banks' interest in Arthur sank to nil.

The robot began a new rest phase. This time, however, it was short-lived. The Scout switched on the propulsion units and accelerated until it attained its former speed. The Automatic Guard whirred forward on its prescribed path, passing the repaired point with no delay and rolling on toward its destination. It stopped when it reached the Observer. Its sensor extended and it touched the awkward-looking apparatus.

The Observer trained its mechanical and electronic eyes upon the expanses of space. Searchingly they glanced at the stars as the Guard hastened on, awakening other devices to life. The Scout had reached the periphery of star cluster M-13. This was 33,500 light-years from Earth, a planet of whose existence the Memory Banks were unaware.

The vessel had not been built by humans and the mission carrying it through the universe was far too unusual to be a product of humankind.

The Observer received all perceptible emanations from the stars closest to the Scout. The entire data was immediately relayed to the Memory Banks, where it was decided whether the data warranted further investigation of one of the other suns.

After the Observer had presented exact reports on 10 stars, the Memory Banks made their choice. They selected a red sun, not very large, which should have some satellite planets according to the preliminary findings. The probability was great, greater than with any of the other 9 stars, that among these worlds a suitable one was to be found.

The Scout changed course to head toward the red sun. Having fulfilled its portion of the common task, the Automatic Guard hastily ended its activity. It was now time for the Scout's investigation sectors to contribute their share. The ship filled with the humming and chirping of countless devices receiving energy from the Memory Banks. Lights blinked on everywhere. The Memory Banks were operating at full capacity, checking each calculation 3 times before considering it relevant for final evaluation.

As the Scout approached the system the instruments determined that there were 5 planets revolving about the sun. Each of them had to be scrupulously examined as the ship was not just seeking any worlds whatsoever. Its builders were after a particular kind. They were only interested in oxygen planets with

atmosphere containing water vapour and an average temperature of at least 14°C.

The Scout had already ferreted out innumerable systems with no success. This time its electronic and positronic equipment was set on highest output and the seemingly still space between the stars was replete with invisible rays and impulses sent by the ship to learn as much as possible about the 5 planets.

Suddenly the cylindrical body thrust forward into the small system heading for the planet which seemed most suitable.

2/ AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR

When Chester MacDowell's father decided that his son was to pursue a political career, 2 obstacles arose. There was Chester's total ineptitude in the political arena. The young man was simply unable to act like a gentleman instead of a Canadian lumberjack. Then there was Chester's stubborn aversion to politics as a profession. Thus it was hardly remarkable that MacDowell's star dimmed on the political horizon before it had properly risen.

Chester's infuriated father instantly stopped all financial support of his son, declaring that he now would have to stand on his own 2 feet. That was the day on which Chester took a giant step downward. He tripped down the ladder of society to the very bottommost rung and became a vagabond. For over a year he lived that way, his knees and elbows poking through the threadbare material, his well-padded body gradually becoming gaunt.

Within days of his arrival MacDowell I would be turned out of every town in which he appeared on grounds of vagrancy and plainly given to understand that he was not welcome to return. Eventually Chester had his fill of the itinerant life. He decided to become a scientist. Had he mentioned this to anyone, he would have only received a compassionate smile in return.

6 years later, however, Chester MacDowell was Department Head in a Terranian institute of research on extraterrestrial life. He was still lean and rarely smiled. He had not spoken at all during the past 6 years.

Once more he had climbed up society's ladder, step by step, and with every step of the way he had become somewhat tougher and more experienced. It was said that MacDowell stuck to a problem with dogged persistence until he had solved it.

And he no longer was simply called Chester MacDowell. His name was imprinted in small black letters on the entry door to his office:

DR. CHESTER MACDOWELL.

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There was a brightly lit aquarium on his wide window-sill containing one solitary fish poised motionless among the water plants. The fish was old and ugly. His name was Shelby. Nobody knew why Dr. MacDowell kept the unsightly creature but no one would have dared to inquire about it.

When Joe David entered his Boss' office he customarily glanced first at Shelby, thinking: "He's still alive!" Then he turned to MacDowell, who was regarding him with seeming disinterest. "Well, David?" the Department Head inquired in a strange tone of voice that somehow struck David as being rehearsed. It was almost as if the doctor subjected his words to a strict inspection, uttering them only after he was certain of their lasting effect.

Joe David got the papers he had clamped under his right arm. "It's about Azgola, sir," he said, handing the papers across the desk. MacDowell's firm brown hands reached for them. "We have received the initial results from the robot Brain on Arkon 3," David reported with youthful enthusiasm. "The news will astonish you, sir."

"Thank you, David," MacDowell said. "I shall call you as soon as you are needed." Disappointed, the young man withdrew.

Chester MacDowell opened the file marked AZGOLA. Azgola was the name of a world the size of Mars revolving around the star Azgos. Certain events had occurred there which, while not alarming, had aroused the suspicions of Perry Rhodan and his friends. A very peculiar plant was spreading on Azgola. A scientist had aptly dubbed the plant "fat-moss". This moss, which grew profusely, continually released spores into the atmosphere which had a fantastic effect upon all living creatures that inhaled them, voluntarily or not. The spores contained as much as 80% highly active fats which deposited rapidly in the body. One gram of this fat developed a value of approximately 10 kilo-calories when burned by the body. The remaining 20% of the spore was made up of carbohydrates and protein.

What the spores totally lacked, however, were the essential vitamins and minerals. When Terranian agents arrived on Azgola the natives, thin as rails in the past, were so obese they could barely move. It was discovered that this strange vegetation must somehow be related to 2 ships of unknown construction which had landed on Azgola separately, a small ship having appeared first, followed after some time by one considerably larger.

Scientific teams from Earth, the Arkonide Empire and the Ara planets had been occupied for the past 3 months attempting to analyse the fat-moss. Intake of the nutritive spores came about by drop-infusion, that is, they were absorbed by human or similar bodies through the skin or by breathing. The discovery of these plants held promise of tremendous economic progress for they might present a quick solution to all food problems. And while some harmful side effects were obvious, such as the deficiency of vitamins and trace elements, this could be eliminated. Various scientists had also cautioned that since the nutritive substances went directly into the blood without passing through stomach and intestines, this might lead to disturbances of the digestive system.

But these were only possibilities for the future. The task for the present was to determine the origin and purpose of the fat-moss.

"You see, Shelby," Dr. MacDowell said to his fish, "you are well off in the water where the spores cannot exist. You could come to no harm if this stuff should be planted on Earth one day."

Shelby moved sluggishly through the plants, snapping in vain at the water-flea that was boldly dancing right in front of his face.

Aided by the robot Regent, Gonozal VIII had tried to classify the activities of the 2 mysterious spaceships whose presence was uncovered by agents of the Brain Trust. It was not certain whether there was a definite connection between these ships and the fat-moss. Only a robot brain of the capacity of the former Regent was in the position to coordinate the findings into a detailed logical computation, then create a final picture. What Dr. Chester MacDowell was holding in his hand was that result, produced by a soulless machine.

MacDowell began to read. His gaunt figure was bent over the desk. From time to time he ran his hand through his close-cropped, prematurely grey hair. After reading for awhile he cried out: "Good heavens!"

MacDowell depressed a button on the intercom. Joe David, seated in the front office, eagerly responded. "Yessir?" If he had hoped he would now be allowed back into MacDowell's office he was bitterly disappointed for the doctor only said: "I want to be connected with Terrania at once, David. Try to get one of the top men on the line, best of all Rhodan personally."

Hesitantly David regarded the little loudspeaker for awhile, then asked: "You mean the Administrator, sir?"

MacDowell replied: "David, if you will always need to have your superiors' orders explained you will never move out of that little front office."

Joe blushed crimson. Managing only a hasty "Yessir!" he desperately sought a way to get back into the doctor's good graces. At the moment, however, he could do nothing but carry out his order.

Meanwhile Chester MacDowell read the report for the 2d time. The findings of the robot computer made sense to him; yet instinctively he felt that something essential was missing. Somewhere there was a gap. But try as he would, he could find nothing wrong.

As he read, a familiar feeling crept up on Dr. Chester MacDowell, a feeling he had almost forgotten. He recalled that it used to appear in the past when the police were approaching to run him out of town for vagrancy.

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Reginald Bell yawned expansively. The sun was sending its light through the large windows, reflecting in pictures and gleaming objects. Bell reached into his pocket, pulled out a vita-lozenge which he must have had with him for weeks by the looks of it, unwrapped it and slid it between his lips with obvious pleasure. "I think," he said to the slender man behind the desk, "that you are taking the whole thing far too seriously, Perry. When we still thought that an anti might be going haywire under the influence of a cell activator I could understand your concern. But the situation on Azgola has nothing to do with Baalol."

Rhodan threw him a sideward glance and the uncouth sucking noises Bell produced as he rolled the lozenge in his mouth became barely audible.

The Administrator tapped the file on his desk. "The robot Brain has made some astonishing calculations. According to its findings there are at least 3 ships in our galaxy on a special assignment." He opened the file and began to read aloud. "First there is a small cylindrical ship 100 meters long. It, too, was spotted on Azgola before the fat-moss appeared. The Regent's logical computation states that this relatively small spacecraft was some sort of scouting vessel that was checking out everything."

"Just like the old Indians did," Bell muttered.

"The 2d ship," Rhodan continued, ignoring his remark, "was considerably larger. If the data from Azgola is accurate, the length is around 2000 meters, the diameter 500. The robot Brain states—and we have no reason to doubt its results—that it is a seedship."

"Seedship!" Bell repeated. "Now who would be interested in building a gigantic ship just to plant fat-moss everywhere that could actually solve the food shortages of entire planets? Maybe you think this ship is some sort of silent benefactor that pops up wherever people seem undernourished?" Bell was alluding to the formerly skinny natives of Azgola who had been so drastically changed by the fat-moss.

Rhodan smoothed out a sheet of paper. "They are certainly no benefactors. The robot computer has calculated with 95% probability that a 3d ship must belong to this group as well."

"As you sow, so shall you reap," Reginald Bell quoted.

"Quite right. So there must still be a ship around somewhere that is to bring in the harvest. Logically it will have to appear on Azgola soon as the moss has ripened."

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

"A copy of this report went to Dr. Chester MacDowell, head of the department for extraterrestrial living beings in Signal," Rhodan explained. "The research of all teams working on the nutritive spores is being coordinated there."

"MacDowell?" Bell queried. "Never heard of him."

"He hasn't been working for us for very long but the results he has achieved in this short period are well worth looking at."

The loudspeaker clicked, interrupting their conversation. Rhodan leaned over. "What's up, Sergeant?" he asked.

"The exchange wants to know whether they should put through a call from Signal, sir. A certain Dr. MacDowell would like to speak to you.

"OK, Kenny," Rhodan agreed. "I'll take the call in my room."

Sgt. Kennwood confirmed and Bell, who had risen, switched on the videophone screen. Rhodan swivelled his chair around so that he was directly facing the screen. The man who appeared looked like an old soldier. His grey, short-cropped hair enhanced the effect. The skin stretching tautly over his square face was browned by the sun.

"I thank you, sir," the speaker said in a pleasant voice. "My name is MacDowell."

Rhodan nodded and held up the file marked AZGOLA. "I know why you want to speak to me, Doc."

"Sir, if the calculations we received from Arkon are correct, we must expect the harvestship to appear soon in the Azgos System. That could be our chance to learn more."

Rhodan smiled. "I've already considered that. At this very moment there are several units of the Solar Fleet and vessels of the Arkonide Emperor underway to patrol the Azgos System. If the harvestship should appear, the reception committee will be ready and waiting."

It was obvious that this fact reassured MacDowell. His tense face became somewhat more relaxed. Bell thought he was looking at a man who could be relied on. He decided to make a mental note of the scientist's name.

"This harvestship is puzzling me, sir," MacDowell admitted. "I can't shake the feeling that something is fishy." Rhodan was not the man to laugh off emotional statements. He knew only too well how often a flash of this sort had saved him.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Just try and imagine how the harvestship could go about it, sir. Our researchers have established that the spores can neither be reaped nor extracted. The fat-moss releases its fruit exclusively in the form of microscopic spores that fly out of the dense moss carpet at a relatively high speed. They only receive their actual nutritive value in the warm, oxygen-saturated atmosphere of a suitable world." MacDowell looked perplexed. "Do you have any idea how we could gather up the stuff with a spaceship, sir? I've been thinking about it a lot and I haven't come up with anything. If this harvestship does actually exist then we are probably in for some surprises."

"I am in favour of destroying this moss with acid or heat radiation," Bell interjected.

"There is absolutely no reason for such drastic action," Rhodan disagreed. "We have evacuated all of the natives from the space harbour in the vicinity of Timpik, the capital city, and taken them to another planet. Other than our researchers and agents there are no intelligent beings on Azgola. If we want to know what has actually happened and why it happened, there is nothing to do at the moment but wait it out."

Dr. MacDowell said: "I have discussed this with the most prominent agriculturists in this area, asking them how *they* would harvest the nutritive spores but not one of them could make a practical suggestion."

"And supposing this harvestship never arrives?" asked Bell.

Perry Rhodan waved this aside. The robot computer on Arkon 3 had never yet been mistaken. "It will come," he said simply.

At the other end of the line in Signal, Chester MacDowell had lost nothing of his disturbing feeling. He realized that it presented no immediate threat to the Solar Empire, which might be the reason that Rhodan did not devote the activity to this problem that MacDowell had expected from the Administrator.

When the conversation was over, MacDowell got up and left his office. In the front office Joe David made a crestfallen impression. "Is the call completed, sir?" the young man inquired. "As you can see, it is," Chester replied.

David swallowed hard and mentally chalked up a particularly black day on his calendar. "Someone is waiting for you in the small hall, sir," he hastily reported. MacDowell, who was on his way to fetch some material on the fat-moss case, was not exactly pleased with this intrusion.

"Who?" he sullenly inquired.

David, anxious to avoid any word that might incur further displeasure, cautiously remarked: "The man did not want to give his name but he insisted that it was important.

"Did he at least state his business? What project is he connected with?"

"I have never seen him before, sir," David reported.

MacDowell grumbled something as he left the room. He stepped out into the hallway and took the elevator. Gradually his anger over the disturbance subsided and he began to wonder who the mysterious visitor might be.

As he entered the small hall he immediately noticed the pleasant coolness of this room and breathed deeply. His firm footsteps echoed in the side passages. The walls were lined with colour pictures of creatures from other planets, one stranger than the other.

At the other end of the hall—on the uncomfortable bench avoided by all the employees during their break—sat an old man. He stood up slowly as Chester approached him. He was leaning on a cane and the hair under the fur cap he now removed was white.

"It is only an old man," thought Chester somewhat disappointed, although his curiosity was aroused. When MacDowell had stopped the old man said in a gruff voice: "I have been looking for you for over 6 years, Chester. Now I have found you." Dr. Chester MacDowell shuddered, a wave of emotion sweeping over him. He took one mental step into the past and envisioned himself once again filthy and in rags, running through the darkness, pursued by the police. Other memories were revived.

Chester MacDowell narrowed his eyes to a squint. "Hello, father," he said calmly.

3/ MYSTERIOUS MESSAGE

The Memory Banks were in the process of final computations which would enable them to make their ultimate decision. The Scout had examined each of the 5 planets at length and had finally entered the orbit of the 2d world. If there was any suitable place whatsoever for the seed in this system, it was only this planet, which was a young oxygen world with high temperatures and corresponding animal and plant life.

After the ship had thoroughly explored the surface it sent out an atmosphere diver. The diver plunged towards the planet. Under normal circumstances it would have accelerated due to gravitational pull and ultimately vaporized in the upper atmospheric layers. But the Scout, which could steer the diver by means of a complicated system, guided it on a flat course into the atmosphere.

Upon receiving a positronic command from the Memory Banks the diver opened a front flap. That was the beginning of a thorough analysis. The aerodynamic form of the diver was most utilitarian and it raced through the air like an arrow. Its outer surface heated up and began to glow dark red. The Memory Banks painstakingly monitored these temperature changes, retarding the diver's speed. It sank over 100 meters.

The Scout analysed the composition of the atmosphere and the living conditions at 5 different places. The diver was then summoned back and thoroughly checked out for fitness for subsequent flights.

By Earth time calculation on the Scout orbited the planet of its choice for over 6 days before it decided that this world was very well suited. When that moment arrived the life of the countless measuring devices was ended. Metallic lids slid over blinking lenses, the Observer ceased its reflex transmissions and the tearshaped Guard hung stiffly in its place.

Everything was clear. The Scout had discovered a suitable planet. Its mission was accomplished.

Now there was only one thing left to do: the 2d unit had to be informed.

From that moment on the Scout began to transmit signals.

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The heavy cruiser *Gulf of Mexico* had a series of routine jobs to carry out—which was reflected in the crew rooms by days of relaxing games.

The spherical vessel had assumed observation position in the star cluster M-13, if the term was still applicable in an area of almost unending extension. The tracking and positioning equipment of the heavy cruiser were constantly monitoring the stillness of this immensity and the structure sensors were held in readiness.

Only nothing happened.

Lt. Roger Yassord reported for his 4th hour of duty, appearing in Central Command with a dour expression on his face. Major Ankenbrand, Commander of the *Gulf of Mexico*, scrutinized him in astonishment. "What's wrong with you, Roger? You've had 6 hours to spend in some more or less interesting fashion." Yassord was not cheered by this reminder. On the contrary. His face became even more glum. "I just lost a fortune, sir," he declared grimly.

Maj. Ankenbrand, who had not even known that his lieutenant had a fortune to lose, was jolted out of his indifferent mood.

"Why, you didn't play with the crew, did you, Roger?"

"Not with the crew, sir. Only with Sgt. Schmidt," the lieutenant declared.

"With *the* Schmidt?" Ankenbrand asked incredulously.

Yassord didn't dare look at his superior officer. His eyes downcast, he managed only a meek "Yessir."

Maj. Ankenbrand cleared his throat. "How much did you lose?"

Yassord raised his hand as high as his hip. "A stack of chips up to here, sir," he rasped hoarsely. "Packed tight."

"That Schmidt is a scoundrel. Every cadet in the fleet knows that and no one plays with him. You, of all people, go and do it. Now how do you expect to pay your gambling debts?"

A mild smile appeared on Yassord's face. "Working overtime, sir," he suggested.

Ankenbrand felt a slight suspicion but suppressed it. "Overtime?" he repeated. The lieutenant spread his arms entreatingly as he walked towards the Major. "Sir," he said, "if I am allowed to work with you on your 6 hours of duty and you make out a report, perhaps I could get a double salary." Although he kept good discipline the Major had a sense of humour which made him very popular with his men. Heftily tapping Yassord's chest 3 times with his index finger he whispered: "Roger, that was the lowest trick you have pulled yet to get your duty extended. But I will not tolerate your working more than 6 hours in Central Command."

"I thought it might work, sir," Yassord apologized, chuckling.

The Major joined in his laughter as Pendermann, the First Communications Officer, burst out of the cabin and thrust himself between Yassord and Ankenbrand. "Sir!" he exclaimed, "we're picking up hypercom signals."

"From Terrania?" the Major asked hopefully.

"No, sir! The impulses are not directed and not meant for us because I cannot read them."

Ankenbrand and Yassord stared at each other silently, then Yassord commented with relish, "*your* shift is over now, sir.

Where are the signals coming from, Pendermann?" the Major asked, ignoring the lieutenant. Pendermann regarded his 2 officers with the expression of an expert compelled to discuss a difficult problem with laymen. "That transmitter must be somewhere in this star cluster," he dryly replied.

"That's a big help!" Yassord responded furiously.

Pendermann returned to his cabin. The 2 officers followed on his heels. Pointing at the oscillograph, Pendermann said: "You see, sir. The same impulse, over and over."

"Do you mean that the message is constantly being repeated?" Maj. Ankenbrand inquired.

"Yessir. One could almost assume that someone is in trouble out there and is sending a distress call seeking rescuers."

"Sounds a bit fantastic," the Major commented. "How can anyone expect to be helped if the messages can't be decoded and there's no way of localizing the transmitter?" He shook his head. "No, I don't think it is a distress call."

"You have any other idea, sir?" Yassord asked.

"Yes," Ankenbrand declared. "I believe someone is sending a message. And as it is considered very important, he is beaming it continually until satisfied."

"That means..." Lt. Yassord began.

"That means that we must inform Headquarters at once," the Major concluded.

As the *Gulf of Mexico* continued on its solitary journey through the sea of stars, Pendermann contacted Terrania to report the mysterious signal. By pure coincidence a report was received from Atlan by Perry Rhodan at the same moment. The Emperor of the Great Imperium informed his friend that the Regent on Arkon 3 had been receiving hypercom signals from the direction of star cluster M-13. Atlan informed Rhodan that it was the same impulse, repeated continually. The Administrator compared the 2 reports and knew there could be no error.

A minute later he went into action.

* * * *

"They are the same impulses," Bell stated. "We can neither decipher nor identify them. Apparently it is not a message but a special signal that makes no sense to us."

"Quite correct," Allan D. Mercant agreed, walking over to Bell. "But someone must exist who understands the significance of the signals. Perry is doing exactly the right thing in trying to locate the transmitter."

They entered a small electricar and Bell released the brake. Mercant glanced at him distrustfully. "Drive carefully," he cautioned.

Reginald Bell seemed not to have heard him. Thoughtfully he remarked: "We'll need several ships if we are going to attempt a triangle bearings tracer. That's the only way to search effectively. But what if the transmitter stops in the meantime?"

Mercant nervously clutched the side handles of the door as Bell raced across the plasteel floor at top speed. "We just have to be quicker than them," the Security Chief said. "Listen, Bell—do you really always have to drive so fast?"

"While Mercant is banking on the speed of the Solar Fleet he is griping about an electricar," Bell mused philosophically. He pondered this paradox, then replied: "I can just smell an interesting mission."

Mercant's ability to sense coming events seemed to have expired the moment he entrusted himself to Bell's driving skills. He only managed an incomprehensible growl.

"I'm sick and tired of that fat-moss by now," Bell declared. "Finally something interesting seems to be happening." His remark gave Mercant an idea but he hesitated to disclose it to the stocky man beside him.

Bell steered the car towards a square building, stopping exactly in front of the door. With a sigh of relief the Chief of Solar Security got out of the vehicle and followed Bell up the few steps into the house.

A tall, bald man approached them, greeting them humbly. "Have you seen the boss yet?" Bell asked without slowing down.

"The Administrator went upstairs a few minutes ago, sir," the bald man declared solemnly.

"Come on, Mercant" Bell called. "Maybe some results are in already."

They took the elevator. In the upstairs rooms they found Perry Rhodan engrossed in a conversation with several scientists. As Bell and Mercant entered he glanced up and smiled. "One moment, gentlemen," he said apologetically. "We want to let Mr. Bell and Mr. Mercant in on our plans."

A coloured star map was hanging on the wall, M-13 clearly outlined on it. Bell and Mercant noticed that various points were marked by pins.

"We will attempt to locate the alien transmitter from several sides. I have already given a small unit the order to start. Atlan will participate in the project. He will send out several robotships that will be in steady contact with the robot computer on Arkon 3. That way we might succeed in locating the transmitter. Both the *Gulf of Mexico* and the great Arkonide positronicon report that the call, or better still, the signal is still being transmitted."

"There is one thing I would like to know, Perry," Bell demanded. "Why are you so interested in this transmitter?" His freckled face broke out in an expectant grin. "Do you have some particular theory about this business?"

"Yes," Rhodan curtly replied, to Bell's disappointment. Mercant, who had been observing the Administrator closely, was certain that Rhodan had the same idea as had occurred to him during the electricar ride.

4/ A STRANGER IN SPACE

The music coming from the little platform at the back of the room sounded muted. A few couples were moving to the rhythm of a slow melody and white-coated waiters drifted silently between the tables.

Ernst MacDowell stopped and turned to his son. "Do you always frequent places like this, Chester?"

"It's the best club in Signal," Chester said. "There is an empty table over there. Let's sit down."

Young MacDowell was greeted from various tables and Joe David, sitting with a blond girl, nodded self-consciously at his boss. The two MacDowells took their seats and ordered. "I have thoroughly informed myself about your present occupation," the old man said. "I know now that I made a mistake years ago and I am ready to make good for it."

Chester watched his father expectantly, remaining silent.

"Do you enjoy the work in this institute? I mean, are you really interested in extraterrestrial life?"

The waiter brought 2 glasses and Chester took a deep gulp. "It is fascinating," he replied. "I could not imagine ever being occupied with anything else."

Ernst MacDowell straightened up, his pale face taking on some colour. He coughed slightly, as old men do, and his bleary eyes glistened. "Wouldn't you like to fly to one of those planets yourself some day and see it all up close?" he asked.

Chester MacDowell did not quite grasp the significance of the question. But somehow the conversation was taking a turn that began to disquiet him, although he did not know why. "I am a scientist," he said, "not an astronaut."

Softly the old man said: "What would you do if you were given the opportunity to fly in space?"

"I would do it," Chester replied without hesitation.

The old man stood up and Chester felt something akin to pride, seeing him standing there, still straight, the white hair framing his square face. "I am a rich man," Ernst MacDowell said, "very rich in fact. And I am old, much too old to do much with the money. That is why I bought a spacecraft, Chester."

Ernst MacDowell grasped his cane and looked over at the musicians almost nostalgically, moving the tip of the cane in time with the music. "It is not especially large," he said, "but it belongs to you."

With that last remark he turned and made his way past the dancing couples, his white hair gleaming like a silver flame. Chester, rooted to the spot, watched him leave; saw the doorman pull the doors open and his father walk out.

That was the last time Chester MacDowell ever saw his father. The next morning the postman brought the ownership certificate for the ship. The elder MacDowell had thought of everything. The envelope even included a takeoff and landing permit for all free planets of the Solar Empire, made out in the name of Chester MacDowell. The spacecraft was designated as a private research ship in the documents.

In addition to the official papers Chester found a small sheet of paper. On it an obviously unsteady hand had written:

THE SHIP IS VERY FAST—PERHAPS YOU CAN

CATCH UP ON 6 YEARS IN IT.

* * * *

Bell pounded the table with his fist. His companion, John Marshall, Head of the Mutant Corps,

acknowledged the burst of enthusiasm with a dim smile while Pucky, casually draped in a chair, indignantly bared his incisor.

"We've got him!" Bell cried. "Friends, this is a reason to celebrate."

"To work," Rhodan corrected him, and Bell's enthusiasm drowned in angry grumbling.

"Without diligence, no reward," Pucky sternly remarked, staring at Bell reproachfully.

Bell imagined a huge pan in which he intended to sauté the mousebeaver. And as he was certain that Pucky would be spying on the thoughts of those around him without letting on that he was, Bell thoroughly enjoyed heating up an enormous, imaginary, flame under the pan so that the food—consisting of Pucky and some onions—would fry faster.

Rhodan held up a sheet of paper, diverting Bell's attention. Pucky heaved a sigh of relief. "We have succeeded in getting bearings on the foreign transmitter," the Administrator reported. "Our positronic friend on Arkon immediately computed the findings and determined the point from which the impulses originated."

"At the periphery of star cluster M- 13 there is a red sun which is listed in the Arkon catalogue under the name of Snarf. Snarf is no less than 33,486 light-years from Earth and there are 5 planets revolving around it, the 2d of which, Snarfot, is an oxygen world."

He put the sheet of paper on his desk and gazed earnestly at the men gathered in the room. "Snarfot is a primeval planet, the only one of the 5 described as inhabited in the catalogue. This life, however, is not intelligent and hence cannot be responsible for the transmissions."

"That means that a stranger has appeared in the space around Snarf," Mercant surmised.

"Right, Allan. And to our knowledge there is only one means of entering this system, apart from the transmitters of the Akonians: spaceships."

Rhodan pushed aside the papers, got up and circled the table. "We must therefore assume that we are dealing with a highly intelligent race. This calls for proceeding with caution. Part of the Solar Fleet will fly to the vicinity of Snarf and Atlan will send out some robotships."

Bell raised some objections. "That would look a lot like military action, Perry. It would be psychologically wrong to appear with many ships at once, which might compel the strangers to act aggressively."

"You're quite right, Reggie," Rhodan agreed. "Before we order all the ships to Snarf we will scope out the situation with the *Ironduke*, then plan the next steps. If things get critical the other ships will join us at once."

"Do you intend to use mutants on this mission, sir?" John Marshall inquired.

"Yes, John," Rhodan replied. "I think it would be good for all 3 teleporters, Pucky, Tschubai and Kakuta, to be on board. Moreover, it probably wouldn't hurt to have a few other members of your Corps accompany us who are not on important assignments at the moment." He thought awhile. "It might also be good to take along a specialist," he said.

"Who do you have in mind?" Reginald Bell inquired.

"Dr. Chester MacDowell in Signal," Rhodan disclosed. "But MacDowell is working on the fat-moss business."

"That's just why," Rhodan answered his baffled friend.

* * * *

It was a strange coincidence: Perry Rhodan's request to join the expedition in the Snarf Solar System reached Chester MacDowell 1 day later than the ownership document for his new ship. He thus had 2 possibilities for space flight.

Wasn't it strange? He had fought for 6 years for this moment and now it had arrived and he found it hard to make up his mind. MacDowell had thought that at his moment of triumph—and it was a triumph that he had achieved this—he would feel totally different. But nothing happened. He sat behind his desk like every other morning, served Shelby dry fish food and signed the letters David handed him. And yet it was *his* day!

He looked out the window—his office was on the 3d floor—and watched the first rays of daybreak spread over Signal, brightening the dark recesses. David entered, bringing the usual pot of coffee he was balancing on a tray. He got a cup from MacDowell's closet.

The scientist watched him closely, wondering what the young man thought about these chores. "You have a new task commencing right now, Joe," he said.

David, who was just in the process of filling his cup, spilled some coffee, blushed and then smiled expectantly.

"You are going to become a pet keeper," MacDowell informed him.

"Certainly, sir," David responded automatically. Then he added in bewilderment, "I don't understand, sir!"

"During my absence you will look after Shelby," MacDowell said. "I will write down the feeding times; the water cleans itself automatically. See to it that the fish doesn't die."

"You are taking a trip, sir?"

Chester MacDowell could no longer postpone the choice between Rhodan and his father. He tried not to decide on the basis of personal prejudice. On the one hand he could undertake research of his own choosing without interference from anyone, whereas the work with the Administrator would be more or less dependent on orders from his superiors. However, the opportunity to be on shipboard with Rhodan and to observe the activities of his legendary mutants outweighed the disadvantages. "I am flying to Terrania, Joe," he said.

"My congratulations on your new job, sir," David responded. "Lots of success. And don't worry about

us. We will keep busy with the spores."

The scientist stood up and pushed away his coffee. "You know, Joe, I have a strange fate. I have never ever returned to any place I left so far in my life."

"This time you will return, sir," the young man replied with conviction.

"I have often been hard on you, Joe," MacDowell recalled. "But it was never meant maliciously. I only tried to spur you on. Perhaps I overdid it at times."

"I survived, sir," David answered, smiling.

They shook hands and Chester MacDowell took various important things out of his closet. David mutely watched him. Finally the doctor had everything stashed away.

He left Signal around 10 o'clock. He did not turn back as he climbed into the airtaxi and told the driver to take him to the airport.

Dr. Chester MacDowell never looked back.

* * * *

The *Ironduke* ended its flight between being and nonbeing, emerging from the semispace zone erected by its Kalups converter. In linear super-speol flight the 800 meter ship had reached the Snarf solar system.

"We won't penetrate the system, yet, Colonel," Perry Rhodan ordered the Commander of the *Ironduke*, Jefe Claudrin, a native of Epsal. "Before we know who the strangers are we will move in cautiously."

"The transmitter is still signalling, sir," Claudrin said, his eyes on the controls. "We could probably locate them easily now."

"Good, Jefe. You see to that. At the slightest suspicion of an attack we will alarm additional ships. I don't want any unpleasant surprises."

"I love surprises," Pucky piped up in the background. "They sweeten my life." He glanced around provocatively, hoping someone would take issue with him but he only noticed a slight grin on Bell's face. Pucky pounded his hairy chest with his little fists. "You doubt that, by any chance?" he challenged Bell.

"On the contrary," Bell hastily assured him. "I am delighted by your attitude." The mousebeaver was so surprised that he continued to gape for awhile. "Yes," Bell slowly explained, "I have one of those surprises for you that you so treasure." Bell figured that the mousebeaver's curiosity was greater than his mistrust—and he was right.

"Which surprise?" Pucky promptly asked.

"I forgot to bring the box on board with me that you secretly slipped me in Terrania," Bell sadly

explained. "Our departure was so hasty that I simply didn't think of it."

"It contained carrots," the mousebeaver icily disclosed.

"What a surprise," Bell exclaimed warmly and Pucky, trembling with rage, had to bear the laughter of all present.

"Matter sensor activated, sir!" Maj. Krefenbac broke into the amused crowd. Immediate silence followed. With a few steps Rhodan, Claudrin and Bell were beside the First Officer. "Spacecraft positioning from the Snarf System," Krefenbac reported. "It seems to be just one single ship."

Feverish activity ensued. Direction and position-finding equipment were actuated and the space around the red sun systematically surveyed. Like a tiny planet in the outer regions of the star, the *Ironduke* circled Snarf. Within the chosen course it constantly changed position. The alien ship, however, remained constant. That could only mean that it had entered orbit around one of the 5 planets.

"The ship isn't very large, sir," Dr. Carl Riebsam reported from the ship's positronic computer. "The computations show that it should have an average diameter of 60 meters."

"The signals are coming from it," Krefenbac added. "It just continually sends that same signal that is so puzzling to us."

Bell craned his neck in order to see over the taller men at the instruments. "What are we waiting for, Perry? Let's have a look from up close."

"Slow down, Reggie," Rhodan dampened his eagerness. He turned to MacDowell, who had remained silently in his seat. "What do you think, Doc?"

"If we assume that we are dealing with intelligent beings unknown to us then it is naturally difficult to discern anything just on the basis of the facts presently available. We do not know the mentality of these beings. Yet I would venture to contend that if they build spaceships and use transmitters that traverse hyperspace we can make some logical deductions that apply to them, at least in the technical field. Naturally I am only conjecturing."

"Just go right on MacDowell," Rhodan encouraged.

To MacDowell the hearty way in which Rhodan and his men treated each other was something altogether new. There was none of the strict discipline he had expected to find. There were moments in which the young officers addressed the administrator as "boss" without seeming disrespectful. Chester MacDowell could feel the mutual trust that this community had for one another but something inside him deterred him from simply joining them. Instead he withdrew, remaining silent and impenetrable.

The men around him did not push their friendship on him. They treated him with friendly reserve and waited for him to make the first move. However, MacDowell was a decided loner and the past years had almost made an outsider of him.

"The impulses can only serve to convey messages," he said. "Therefore we must assume that a receiver exists somewhere."

"The signals have been repeated for days now," Dr. Riebsam reminded him. "If there were a receiver and it had reacted, there would really be no more reason to continue with the signals."

"That's true," MacDowell conceded. "Still we mustn't assume that the party for whom the impulses are intended has heard them, just because we have. The transmitter will continue until it has achieved success.

"And what, in your opinion, is the nature of that success?"

Chester MacDowell had long since realized that the crew of the *Ironduke* said what they thought and the officers were no exception. But he was used to reticence, uttering an opinion on a problem only when he could be certain that he was right. More coldly than he intended he declared: "My opinions are of a purely speculative nature."

"They still interest us," Bell dryly answered.

"I think that ship is waiting for something," MacDowell reluctantly answered. "Otherwise there wouldn't really be any reason for not changing its position."

Rhodan nodded. "That is just what we will do—wait," he said.

5/ MUSTERING THE MUTANTS

Connector received the message that the Scout had found a suitable planet and passed it on immediately. The radio signal was relayed by several stations in the interior of the gigantic spaceship until received by the Commanders. The Commanders were not living beings. They were positronic machines that guided the 1800-meter-long cylinder through space and attended to all the tasks that would have been the duty of a living person in charge. Unlike the board positronic computers on Earthships, there were three Commanders, each of whom had one Messenger at its service. The Messengers were smaller versions of Arthur and were in constant communication with the Commanders.

In the course of time this setup had brought about a ludicrous situation which the robots were unable to cope with as they were not programmed for it.

The Messenger of the Second Commander had been slightly damaged and could no longer carry out all orders with usual efficiency. This meant that the 2 other positronic computers had to adjust their Messengers to the retarded speed of the one in need of repair until they were close to the Scout and Arthur could come on board to repair the defect.

This adjustment became more and more complicated until each Messenger was working at a different speed. Each Commander was in charge of a certain sector of the ship. The first was responsible for navigation and propulsion, the second controlled operations in the ship's interior, while the third was in charge of the seed team.

Precise cooperation between "1" and "2" was especially vital in order to safely steer the ship through the cosmos. For what good was it when Messenger "1" determined transition coordinates which "2" could not deliver quickly enough for evaluation. Since the work of "3" was dependent on "1" and "2", it could come about that "3" alerted the seed team because "1" wanted to start a transition which "2" could not

carry out due to the damage.

More than 4 times the seed team had been unnecessarily supplied with energy. How often the Connector had received the Scout's message could hardly be estimated. The initiated action got stuck at "2" each time, although "3" had been mobilized for action 5 times already.

The Commanders attempted to calculate the rate of speed of the Messenger but the erratic way the robot acted prevented exact measurement. The harmony of the ship was disturbed.

The Scout had been sending the same signal for many time units. Connector received it and passed it on. It passed various stations in the interior of the ship until received by the Commanders, who were confronted by the same dilemma in countless repetition. Messenger One sprang into action, calculating the Scout's position and the resulting transition data. The results were passed on to "2" and "3", but "2" was never ready to carry out the circuit switch for the transition at the right moment and so everything started all over again. Energies were spent futilely. Since the robots were not human beings and could thus only function within the scope of their programming, they had no alternative but to repeatedly make new attempts within those limits.

An intelligent being might have hit upon the idea of letting "3" do "2's" work or found some other solution. The positronic brains, however, untiringly calculated probability quotients based on the actions of the handicapped "2". "2" could no longer be guided, however, so any further attempts to regulate its speed were pointless. The only alternative left was to modify "1" or "3". The Commanders had to get "1" to pass on the data for the hyperjump at the very moment "2" was ready to operate the switch.

"2" had thus far made his way to the switch control 4146 times and had been too early or too late each time. A human would have surely been frustrated and abandoned the project. But the Commanders tried anew with each signal the Connector received and the robots did not hesitate to do their utmost to succeed.

Ultimately a coincidence ended the confusion. "1" had once more reported the new coordinates for the transition and "2" set out to operate the switch. The builders could have naturally designed switches to be activated by electronic impulse. But their strange mentality, which could not be compared with that of a human, made them prefer the mobile machines they called Messengers.

At last the second commander sent out its robot at the right moment and "3" supplied the seed team with energy. The enormous ship was thrust into hyperspace and emerged at the spot where the Scout was awaiting it: in the system of the red sun Snarf!

* * * *

3 days of Earthtime reckoning had passed. Even the calm members of the *Ironduke* crew had begun to get nervous. The little ship seemed to be unbothered by the presence of the liner, if it had noticed it at all, and continued to send its signal.

Further computations showed that the stranger was orbiting the 2d planet, known by the name of Snarfot. This was the only oxygen planet in the System and its surface looked just about the way scientists imagine the Earth looked in the Mesozoic Era.

On the 3d day Perry Rhodan appeared alone in Dr. Chester MacDowell's cabin. MacDowell put aside the book he was reading, turning down the corner of the page. He stood up and looked at Rhodan expectantly.

"Studying again, Doc?" Perry inquired in a friendly tone.

MacDowell perceived the warmth in Rhodan's grey eyes but he shut it out. "It is only a novel, sir," he said.

Rhodan sat down on the cot. He was wearing a simple outfit that fit his slim figure marvellously. MacDowell carefully studied the Administrator's face. He had to admit that it had a certain charisma. The scientist, quite a personality himself, realized that he was facing an out-standing man, one whose renown was not just based on his deeds but on his exemplary behaviour and on his humaneness. Even though MacDowell did realize this, he still could not bring himself to accept it deep down inside.

"Almost 3 days have gone by, Doc," Rhodan proceeded. "The ship has not changed its position or stopped signalling. What do you think of that?"

"It is still waiting for something, sir," MacDowell said, striding across the room. "Perhaps our presence is the reason nothing has changed. It is possible that they have become suspicious and are only continuing the transmissions to confuse us."

"That could be the case. However, I can think of at least a dozen other good reasons," Rhodan remarked. "In any case we are not remaining outside the System any longer. I'm setting a deadline of 2 hours. If nothing has happened by then we are going to approach Snarfot and have a closer look at our mysterious friend."

"And what happens if the stranger feels threatened and fires at us?"

Rhodan laughed and raised his arm reassuringly. "We have quite a good lieutenant in the battle station. His name is Brazo Alkher. I can't imagine that he would give that ship a chance to fire more than one shot."

"May I make a comment, sir?" MacDowell asked. For the first time Rhodan's face seemed to harden into a slight frown. "No one on board this ship needs permission to voice his opinion," he gently criticized.

MacDowell realized his mistake but pride prevented him from changing his attitude. He simply could not break out of the shell he had surrounded himself with for so many years. "If you destroy the foreign ship you won't have a chance to find out what its mission was," he stiffly declared.

Rhodan arose, revealing nothing of his feelings in his face, saying simply: "I know, Doc." He turned back at the doorway and looked at MacDowell. The scientist steadily returned his gaze even though it seemed that little lights were sparkling in the greyness of Rhodan's eyes. They regarded each other silently for awhile.

"We sometimes have nice conversations in Central Command during off-duty hours," Rhodan finally said. "I could imagine that you would enjoy participating, Doc." He then left without waiting for MacDowell's reply.

MacDowell slowly went over to his bed and sank down on it. "I am a stupid fool, Shelby," he declared

emphatically. He then recalled that the fish had remained behind on Earth and was probably being stuffed with loads of dry food by Joe David at that very moment.

He reached for his book but he was unable to concentrate. He was turning the pages absentmindedly when the loudspeaker above the cabin door clicked and an impersonal voice announced: "All men at their stations. Prepare for battle!"

MacDowell was startled. He put aside his book and lay there hesitantly for a few seconds listening to the hectic doings that suddenly filled the ship.

More orders issued from the loudspeaker and then he heard Rhodan say in his matter-of-fact manner: "Dr. MacDowell! Please come to Central Command at once. Our little friend has an interesting visitor."

MacDowell stormed out. Instinctively he knew that something decisive had happened, otherwise the Administrator would not have called an alert. Three minutes later he arrived at Command and Navigation Central of the *Ironduke*. Every officer stationed there was present. The mutants were gathered in one corner with the exception of Pucky, who was crouched in a chair.

"A spaceship has materialized out of hyperspace," Rhodan reported. "The sensors have already measured the ruptures in the space-time continuum and some data is at hand. It is a supership, almost 2000 meters long. It should be about 500 meters wide and is cylindrical, just like the smaller ship orbiting Snarfot."

"They belong together," MacDowell exclaimed.

"That's for sure, Doc," Bell agreed dryly.

"The signals have ceased," Claudrin announced in a droning voice. "That means that the transmitter has accomplished its task."

The faces of the men were flushed with excitement. MacDowell could well understand. He himself was deeply stirred by a totally new sensation, a strange tension that impelled him to act as quickly as possible. Now he understood the men over whom space had such a hold. Spellbound by the coldly glittering celestial splendour they travelled from planet to planet to satisfy an unquenchable longing. And in the depths of the universe there were ever new marvels and things that revealed to man how insignificant and tiny he really was—barely a cog in an incalculable wheel turned by a power beyond the conception of the human brain.

Everything in MacDowell yearned feverishly for the meeting with the strangers although he knew that others would come after them, even more alien, more incomprehensible.

"The giant cylinder was summoned into the Snarf System by the signals," Rhodan's voice broke into his thoughts. The Administrator was seemingly the only one who had his feelings totally under control, at least on the surface.

"Whoever set out in a vessel like that to get here is after something special, sir," Claudrin said. "What could possibly be of interest on Snarfot?"

"Perhaps there are giant carrots growing there," Pucky gleefully interjected.

"Quiet, little one," Rhodan admonished. "I wish I knew the answer to your question, Colonel. But I have

noticed something.

"Now don't torture us for nothing, Perry," Bell pleaded.

"I remember a report from our agents on Azgola," Rhodan said. "The natives told them about 2 ships that had landed on the planet before the fat-moss began to spread. The dimensions of those ships..."

"...were just the same as the two now so interested in Snarfot," Bell interrupted heatedly. "That cannot be a coincidence." He scowled at Rhodan and pointed at Dr. MacDowell. "That is why the Doctor is on board with us," he cried. "You sensed from the beginning that the signals might have something to do with that fat-moss.

With a slight motion of the hand Rhodan cut off his spirited friend's flood of words. "If you don't let me explain you will never find out, Reggie." He smiled. "Sure I had a vague hunch but it stood on such shaky ground it would have been senseless to mention it. Even now we cannot say for sure whether they are the same as the ships on Azgola. The natives could have lied or have been mistaken."

"I don't think so," Bell countered emphatically.

"We'll contact Atlan. The robot Brain on Arkon 3 can do the quickest computation for final certainty."

Shortly thereafter a hypercom message was sent by the *Ironduke* and the gigantic positronicon on Arkon 3 began its calculations.

It did not take long for the answer to arrive. All logical factors considered, they would have to be the same ships as had appeared months before on the Azgos star.

* * * *

In the *Ironduke*'s hangar next to the spacejets there were various 3-man destroyers. Their manoeuvrability made them lethal weapons in the hands of the right men. Every available nook on these small ships had been filled with ray cannons and torpedoes. Thus they were extremely effective in combat.

Rhodan was watching the hangar on the videophone screen. Torpedo mechanic Heystens crawled out from under one of the destroyers. A technician handed him a tool.

Tuff Pelant, standing off to one side with a microphone in his hand, turned to face the screen. His mouth was moving. Rhodan turned on the sound. "Space torpedoes ready for action, sir," Pelant said dryly. "Niles is just performing a final test on the special protective screens against tracking screens."

"OK, Tuff!" Rhodan nodded gravely. "Let me know when the 3 destroyers are ready to go." Pelant acknowledged and Perry could still see Heystens crawling up on one of the ships like a gigantic insect as the screen darkened.

Rhodan turned back and faced the expectant men in Central Command. "I will repeat our plan once more," he said. "None of us wants to initiate a space battle so we appear as unmilitary as possible and

yet obtain a maximum of information. When the 3 destroyers are ready to go the *Ironduke* will rush into the Snarf System with a short linear flight. The strangers will not be able to position us in the protective libration zone. There will be a teleporter on board each of the destroyers. Pucky will be together with Samy Goldstein and Heystens; Ras Tschubai with Tuff Pelant and André Noir the hypno. Tako Kakuta will be accompanied by Wuriu Sengu, our micro-visioned mutant, and Dr. Chester MacDowell, who has personally requested permission to participate." He was interrupted by cries of astonishment. All eyes turned to the scientist.

"So in addition to the teleporter we have a mutant on each of the destroyers as a valuable aid," the Administrator continued unperturbed and the commotion died down. We must succeed in dropping the destroyers with teleporters Tschubai, Kakuta and Puck in the vicinity of Snarfot. The rest is up to the mutants. Kakuta must teleport to the smaller ship which we think is the reconnaissance vessel while Pucky and Ras enter the seedship. The others will land on Snarfot and find good cover from surprise attacks."

Pucky stretched luxuriously, his button eyes sparkling. "You can sure rely on us, Perry," he squeaked in his high voice. "We will put the heat on those funny farmers all right."

"I want you to carry out this mission in deadly earnest and sober responsibility, Lt. Puck," Rhodan replied.

The mousebeaver was totally taken aback. Jumping off his chair he waddled towards Rhodan. "LIEUTENANT PUCK!" he lisped indignantly.

"For years now," Rhodan agreed ungraciously. "And still not advanced one officer's rank higher, you poor chap."

That was too much for the former inhabitant of the planet Vagabond. He floated up right under the ceiling. "Is this high enough for you? Now I am even higher than lovely Hunts Krefenbac, who is a Major after all," he shouted down, his oversized incisor gleaming like a fang. Bell looked up at him and grinned. "Self elevation leads to humiliation," he intoned unctuously.

Giving off a sound like a wornout siren, Pucky floated down again. Pointing at his chest he declared in an offended tone: "I'm always being picked on even though I am only a poor little animal," whereupon he uttered not a single word for over 6 minutes—quite an achievement for Pucky.

Preparations for the destroyers' special mission were in progress. Sengu took MacDowell over the hangar to acquaint the scientist with certain technical details. Kakuta and Tschubai spoke in hushed tones. Pucky finally joined them.

Suddenly Maj. Krefenbac, who had been monitoring the controls, called: "Quick, sir! The seedship is leaving its orbit."

Rhodan watched the tracking screen and the quivering of the oscillographs. "I think we shall have to change our plan a bit," he said casually. Reginald Bell stepped over to him. "What happened, Perry?"

"Something we should not have failed to consider," Rhodan answered. "The seedship is preparing to land."

* * * *

Because of his complex programming Arthur was considerably more versatile than a Terran technician. But he could not measure up to a living being in one point: he was unable to accelerate his work-speed. Every human is capable of working like crazy when the situation demands, straining his sweat-covered body to the point of total exhaustion. Arthur could neither sweat nor assemble something faster than his programming allowed. His grip arms worked at a certain tempo that was in turn dependent upon the speed of the revolution of certain bearings.

For a robot the word HURRY is a totally abstract concept as it can only comprehend the word TIME in a mathematical sense. When an intelligent being hurries, he is generally motivated by feelings of which a robot is not capable, no matter how complex a positronic machine it may be.

Applied to events in the seedship it meant that Arthur did not go about repairing the 2d Commander's Messenger with the required haste. The seedship was forced to retain its course and wait until Arthur had finished.

During that time "3" continually supplied the seed team with energy. In the large storage rooms of the ship thousands of seed robots awoke. The slide-bolts on the vertical pipes in the great seed silos opened automatically and the suction pumps conveyed the seeds to the filling depots.

In order to save space the builders of the robots had practically piled them up in shafts. Next to every shaft was a lift that rode up to the top machine just below the ceiling. There the first impulse was triggered and the seed robot arose. It went over to the lift platform, which groaned under the weight. The lift plummeted down and as the robots did not have sensitive stomachs, stopped sharply. The robot stomped away to get its seed receptacle flanged on. All told there were 300 of these shafts aboard the gigantic ship with around 100 robots stored in each of them. The seed team consisted of 28,436 units.

Unfazed by these facts, Arthur went about his business and completed the repair on Messenger #2. His many grippers operated with customary agility as he opened the locks of the broad backplate and peeled off the seals. The 4 mains were intact, the robot discovered. He removed them from their casing and took out the relays, then magnetically attached the individual parts to his depository funnel. The Messenger was now unable to make a single movement and the 2d Commander was nothing more than a helpless positronic machine that might, at best, give off a few inessential electronic impulses.

About half of the seed robots had gathered in the silo rooms. The lifts continually delivered more of them, who went over to the pile of empty seed receptacles and fastened them to their oval bodies. Once equipped with a container, the robot went to the filling depot and received its share of seeds. This all worked so smoothly it seemed a magician was directing the proceedings. The 3d Commander was in charge of this process. His Messenger was busily scurrying between the silos, adjusting the controls.

About 20,000 robots had been supplied with seeds as Arthur sealed the backplate back on and released the Messenger of the 2d Commander. "2" moved on as if nothing had happened. At long last the activities of the three Messengers were coordinated.

Connector informed the Scout and Arthur left the airlock of the seedship, correcting his course by means of a small backjet. For over an hour he was degraded to a mere synthetic satellite of Snarfot, then the Scout crossed his path. Arthur adjusted his speed and slowly glided over to the ship. Landing safely in the open lock he returned to his container.

Back in the seedship, the 1st Commander made computations for the imminent landing, then passed them on to "2". The propulsion units were still humming softly. Soon, however, their thundering drones would pierce the atmosphere of Snarfot. "2" tore the seedship out of its stable course and gradually steered it in increasingly narrow spirals towards the planet.

In the storage sector, supervised by "3", the last robot was activated. It did not need the lift as it had lain at the bottom of the shaft. It only had to get up, get itself a seed container and wait until it could enter the large airlock. Then it could commence the work held in such high esteem by its creator.

6/ SUPERIOR ALIEN MIGHT

The sight was fantastic. It exceeded anything Rhodan and his men had thus far seen in the field of robotics, even though it was only presenting itself on the panorama screen.

The gigantic seedship had landed on a high plateau. The stream of its mighty propulsion units had reduced entire forests of fernwood to smouldering ashes. Enormous airlocks opened, and out into the smoke rising from the scorched earth poured robots, robots and more robots.

It was an unending flow, a black mass of metal like a swarm of bees spreading out below them. Perry Rhodan could not remember having ever observed that many machines at one spot before in his entire life.

"There are thousands of them!" Reggie exclaimed, fascinated.

The throng began to disperse. Somewhat later Rhodan realized why; the robots lifted off the ground and flew away, held in the air by some unknown source of power.

Rhodan observed that there were various constructions: oval, round and trapezoidal. But they all could fly, scattering in all directions from the ship with increasing speed. And more were still flooding out of the airlocks, creating the impression that this process would last into eternity.

Without taking his eyes from the screen Rhodan said: "Get everything prepared for a short linear flight, Colonel."

They could tell that Claudrin had been lost in thought for his "Yessir!" sounded bewildered, as if he were awakening from a dream. But it was bitter reality. "We are still going to carry out our plan," Rhodan ordered.

The stream of robots broke off abruptly; the huge airlocks seemed abandoned. The last machines to leave the vessel lifted off into the air. Unlike their predecessors, however, they did not fly very far. They crossed the plateau and then the men in Central Command watched as they began to spray a light powder.

"What is that supposed to be?" Claudrin gasped.

"They are beginning to plant," Rhodan answered tonelessly. "They will cover this world sowing those seeds. They won't miss a spot."

"For what reason?" Bell asked.

"The fat-moss will begin to grow on Snarfot as it does on Azgola and perhaps on other planets we have not heard of yet." He frowned and Bell sensed that his friend had a disquieting thought.

"What just crossed your mind, Perry?"

Rhodan pointed at the screen. "Azgola and Snarfot are oxygen worlds. It seems the seed robots only appear on planets suitable for the moss."

"Naturally," the Bell replied. "We know the conditions that stuff requires."

"The Earth," Rhodan declared emphatically, "would be just ideal for these plants."

"Ship ready for linear flight, sir!" Claudrin's voice sounded resentful.

Rhodan grabbed the microphone. "Good, Colonel! Battle station clear?"

"All clear, sir!" The voice was lanky Brazo Alkher's.

"Pelant, how are the destroyers?"

"Ready to go, sir!"

Rhodan turned slowly. In each of the 3 destroyers there were 3 men, 2 of them mutants, waiting for the airlock to open so they could shoot out into space.

"Ready to go, Colonel!" Rhodan called.

A second later energy streamed from the Kalups converters to the propulsion units and the *Ironduke* sped into the zone between the dimensions. With titanic force the liner penetrated the system of the red sun, Snarfot.

It was impossible for any ship to track them during their flight within the libration zone. But afterward, when it would fully penetrate normal space, it would become a vast flame of blazing energy impossible to overlook.

Snarfot now filled the entire screen. "Open the hangar locks!" Rhodan ordered.

The destroyers rolled to their take-off positions. Dr. MacDowell, manning one of them together with Kakuta and Sengu, could hear the Administrator's voice over his helmet loudspeaker. The senior technician confirmed in a booming voice, perhaps fearful that he could not be heard or just plain excited.

"Out with you!" called Rhodan. Only the pressure absorbers prevented MacDowell's being smashed by the steamhammer-like pressure. Like 3 silverfish they darted into the black abyss of space which was brightened only by the luminous red sun reflected off Snarfot. The *Ironduke* appeared to be floating. Its huge body, over 800 feet in diameter, was suspended above the daytime half of the planet.

With lightning speed the destroyers withdrew from their mother ship and a cascade of events occurred all at once, one more ominous than the other.

* * * *

The metal cap slid up and the lens became visible, immobile and gleaming like the eye of a snake. The Observer grasped the situation immediately. An alien spaceship had materialized in the immediate vicinity, it reported.

Connector Scout calling Connector seedship. It took almost no time for the exchange of impulses. The weapon was installed in the seedship. The Scout had no access to it. The large cylinder was the more important unit and the builders wanted it protected from any threat. The moment the Connectors' exchange had taken place the weapon was prepared for firing.

The seedship, too, had immediately spotted the appearance of the *Ironduke* and an alert had been called.

The 2 robotships stayed in constant communication.

Then something monstrous happened, something that not even the builders had foreseen: living beings appeared on board the robotships two on the seedship, one on the Scout. They seemed anachronistic in the maze of cybernetic machines.

The weapon was fired and the automatic guard in the reconnaissance ship was sent on a new round by the memory banks. The electronic barriers on Arthur's container burst open. The living intruders had to be done away with and that was a job for Arthur.

Inside the seedship all the messengers that had been dispatched to deal with the intruders were stopped. Then Commander "2" once again fired the weapon.

* * * *

MacDowell's thoughts were racing faster than they ever had before. In front of him he saw Sengu's narrow back at the controls. Tako Kakuta was smiling grimly.

The cylindrical silhouette of the smaller ship that had kept course around Snarfot appeared on the screen. Rhodan's assignment to the teleporters had been; "All alien ships are to be put out of commission to prevent an escape." Kakuta was thinking about this command, hoping he could carry it out. Sengu, the Afroterranian, turned around briefly and MacDowell, who did not miss a detail, noticed that the mutant's face was drenched with sweat.

"When are you jumping, Tako?" Kakuta made some noise intended to resemble laughter but it sounded more like croaking. The teleporter was feeling insecure, something he had never before experienced and

it took a second look at the screen before he answered: "Now!"

To MacDowell, who had never witnessed the likes before, it was incredible to see Kakuta dematerialise. For a moment he thought he could make out a weak shimmering at the spot where Kakuta had just been, then the mutant disappeared entirely.

Sengu switched some controls. "So, Doc. Now we are landing!" he called over his shoulder.

* * * *

Kakuta's atoms, which for an incalculable timespan had been in x-dimensional space, regrouped into cell structures. Back in his original form, the Japanese mutant's reasoning power returned and he threw himself to the ground.

It was a perfectly normal reaction. He had materialized in the midst of an alien ship and he had to expect attack. He rolled to one side till he bumped into something solid which caused him to leap to his feet. There was some sort of cable leading overhead in the strangely illuminated passageway.

No living being was in sight. Kakuta breathed a sigh of relief and leaned his hand against the wall. He should not have done that for just as he did something moved in the palm of his hand. His arm recoiled and he let out a cry of alarm. Kakuta stared at the wall, transfixed.

A kind of cover had glided upwards and touched him. Below it was a glowing eye glaring maliciously at him.

Incapable of moving a muscle, the mutant watched the weird thing. It sensed it was being observed and became nervous. Kakuta pulled out his disintegrator and aimed at the eye whereupon the cover clapped shut and the fierce-looking thing disappeared.

Now Kakuta was certain that his presence was detected. Noticing that the cable above him was trembling, he wheeled around. At the far end of the passageway a tear-shaped figure appeared. It was hanging on the cable, rolling directly towards him. Kakuta forgot his paranormal abilities and began to run away. Finally he stopped and looked back.

The apparatus, whatever it was, was slightly swaying. While running Kakuta had touched the cable, causing it to swing.

But the metal thing had not stopped. It was only 10 meters away, approaching rapidly. The mutant wanted to flee but he had practically reached the end of the passage and did not know where to go.

His panic left him and he began to think reasonably. He heard the buzzing of the machine as it rolled closer, and trembled. Kakuta concentrated on the metallic wall blocking his way. Then he jumped...

He was surrounded by darkness. He could hear nothing but the beating of his own heart and his fitful breathing as he gasped for air. It was pitchblack in the room in which he had materialized. At first he did not dare to move. It took at least 3 minutes before he risked a single step. His arms outstretched to avoid bumping into anything, he moved on, holding his breath.

Suddenly he stopped short. He heard some noise and although he could not tell where it came from, he instinctively knew that something right next to him had moved.

Kakuta froze on the spot and began to contemplate fleeing to safety. But his tenacity prevailed. A grim look appeared on his face and he raised the disintegrator.

When something touched his back the mutant knew that he was not alone in the room. Something was out there in the blackness, something that might be out to kill him.

The mutant lunged forward and fired.

* * * *

The 3 destroyers appeared as yellow spots on the picture screen. "Kakuta has jumped, sir," Sengu reported. "We are preparing to land."

Rhodan knew that the other 2 destroyers would descend more deeply into Snarfot's atmosphere before Pucky and Tschubai would jump to the seedship. Sengu was by now on board the reconnaissance ship and would try to put it out of commission.

"Steer the *Ironduke* into an orbit, Colonel," Rhodan ordered the Commander.

Those were the last words he was to utter for the next 8 hours. He was going to spend that time in a death-like state of rigidity.

All of a sudden Rhodan felt a slight nauseousness welling up in him. Before he could wonder about its cause his vision went blurry and although he resisted with all his might, he lost consciousness within seconds.

Around him the men were sinking to the ground. Through-out the ship men were stricken until the entire crew lay in a deep, a narcosis-like sleep.

When the *Ironduke* had entered the Snarf System, Claudrin had braked. But in view of the fact that the linear vessel was going to enter an orbit, he had undertaken nothing to prevent the free fall in which it was plunging towards Snarfot.

Now there was nothing he could do about it. He was stretched out unconscious on the floor, his arms across Bell's chest. Central Command seemed deserted.

The *Ironduke* was plummeting towards Snarfot, accelerating as it fell. The voice of Tuff Pelant cut the silence. "Ras is going to jump, sir!" It was quiet for awhile and then Pelant's voice could be heard again, more urgent and disturbed this time. "Sir, why don't you acknowledge? Come in, *Ironduke* !"

But not one of the rigid figures moved. It was a ghostly scene and although Pelant could not see it, and uncertain premonition was plaguing him. "*Ironduke*!" he called loudly, and then the unrestrained temperament of a Latin American: "Come in! Report in, I say!" With every word he sounded more

emphatic, more desperate. Then it ceased altogether.

The *Ironduke* had reached the outer atmospheric layers. speed was so great that the barely perceptible vapour particles generated friction.

* * * *

The experience of countless missions had taught Ras Tschubai to coldly calculate his options in any situation and act accordingly. The African knew that he was invulnerable only if he reacted quickly enough. That swiftness, which he had often enough applied after a materialization, was the only reason that Tschubai was still alive. In several cases he had been fired at the moment he appeared and only another teleport jump had saved him.

Again he glanced over at Pelant, who seemed worried. Tschubai concentrated on his jump. André Noir, the hypnotic telepath, watched with seeming indifference. The mutant jumped and reappeared on the high plateau surrounded by scorched ferns and smouldering brush fires.

To his right was the enormous cylinder of the seedship. The airlocks must be on the other side, for he could not see any from where he stood. There was no one around. Tschubai slowly moved on. He thought he could smell the stench of the singed plants but that was only his imagination since his helmet was hermetically sealed.

Now he had to enter the ship as quickly as possible. The mousebeaver might have already arrived and be in need of help. Tschubai jumped again ... and his feet sank in mealy powder. He remained calm and did not move. As it was completely dark he had no idea where he had materialized. He decided to switch on his helmet lamp even though that would increase the likelihood of being discovered. The light struck grey walls. Millions of fine dust particles raised by his feet swirled in the lightbeam. He raised his right leg and easily pulled it out.

The jolt caught him so unexpectedly that he crashed to the floor with his helmet face down in the powder. As he struggled to his feet he had to wipe clean the visor in order to look out.

Now he knew what had happened. The strange substance had sunk ½ meter. It had simply slid deeper and his own weight had made him fall with it.

Tschubai ponderously stamped on and soon discovered that there was a wall facing him on the other side. He looked up and thought he could make out the ceiling. It did not seem to be even and there seemed to be some pipelines running under it.

Tschubai continued along the second wall until he hit a corner and was compelled to turn at a right angle. Now he was certain of where he was: inside a container of gigantic proportions that was about half filled with fat-moss seeds.

* * * *

By nature Pucky was a boundless optimist, which made him more or less reckless. Rhodan knew the mouse-beaver's weaknesses and so time and again he cautioned him not to get involved in any pranks. The effect of these "moral sermons", as Pucky called them, lasted as long as Pucky was on an assignment.

The mousebeaver materialized inside the ship, landing on a sloped surface that slanted obliquely downward. Swaying somewhat, Pucky glanced around. His surroundings seemed so strange that it took a few seconds for his sense of orientation to function.

The corridor—that seemed the closest one could describe it—was totally asymmetrical, a technical nightmare. Everything was bathed in fluorescent light and radiated a sheer unsurpassable cleanliness, nay, sterility.

Pucky waddled down the corridor that narrowed considerably the farther he went. Something was wrong with this floor! The mutant stopped and thoughtfully regarded the surface below him. It seemed to consist of individual parts joined together in a chessboard pattern. But it wasn't its appearance that disconcerted Pucky.

The floor had not been constructed for feet to walk on at all—neither human nor the feet of a mousebeaver. The teleporter felt like a troublemaker who spread filth and waste, noise and excitement in this hygienic silence. Oh well, so the corridor had not been designed for humans!

But who, Pucky wondered, could find these surroundings normal and right? A chill went down his spine. He continued down the corridor which was no corridor at all but something that was still beyond Pucky's comprehension.

Suddenly there was movement near his face. Something dangled down from the ceiling and looked at him. It was a spiral arm with a blinking bulge at its end like a rust-coloured growth.

Pucky could feel the hair on his neck bristle. Using his telekinetic abilities he tried to make the thing disappear. It zipped up to the ceiling and writhed like a snake.

"Alright, you infernal machine!" the mousebeaver exclaimed with satisfaction. "We shall do away with your curiosity."

But before he could turn his words into deeds the arm crept into the hollow from which it had appeared. Pucky was now certain his presence had been noticed.

But by whom?

Pucky began to suspect that it would not be so easy to find the propulsion of this ship, let alone put it out of commission. Without the help of Ras Tschubai he would never manage.

But where was the black mutant?

By means of telepathy the mousebeaver searched the surroundings and discovered Tschubai's impulses at some distance. The man, Pucky clearly sensed, was in no imminent danger.

He could not pick up any other thought waves. It seemed as if there were only 2 thinking beings on the

entire ship: Pucky and Ras. The mousebeaver was bewildered. The problems seemed to increase.

By now the corridor was so narrow that the mutant could not proceed. He stood there indecisively as a panel in the wall next to him opened. The resulting opening was just large enough for Pucky to fit through.

Before he got around to it, however, something rolled out of the opening. It looked like a child's tub turned upside down and was producing a menacing buzzing sound. It was a baffling vehicle. The only real purpose it could possibly serve was to destroy Pucky.

* * * *

Tako Kakuta knew instantly that he had not hit his foe in the darkness. He cried out in pain as he banged against a metal wall. Staggering, he fell to the floor and then crawled forward on hands and knees.

Suddenly it got bright and he was looking into a tubular shaft. The room in which he found himself seemed unusually small and the monster he was sharing it with hardly left him any room at all.

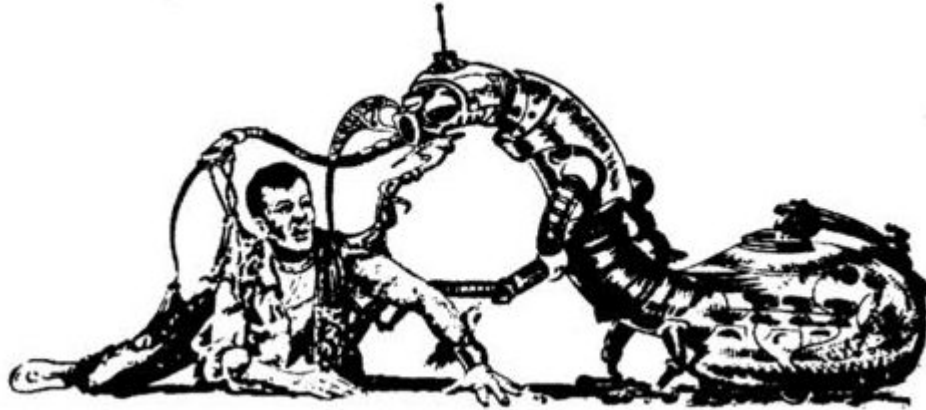
With a desperate exertion Kakuta managed to crawl into the shaft. For some reason the apparatus did not immediately follow him. It blinked and glowed and wildly waved its tentacle-like grippers when he turned back. The shaft was so low that Tako could not walk upright. Stooped, he could only move slowly. He did not dare any other jumps within the ship as his imagination conjured up terrifying images of what might be awaiting him.

Rrrumms!Rrrumms! The noise grated on his nerves. As he turned he spied the machine coming from the room. It was especially large but it was long and wide and almost completely filled the shaft on either side. It looked to Kakuta as if it were carried by an air cushion. He lifted the disintegrator and fired. Blue blazes flashed directly in front of the machine. The mutant was blinded by the reflection and staggered backward. The robot lunged out of the energy discharges, for that was what they had to be, and rushed unharmed towards Kakuta. The small man involuntarily cursed bitterly and fired quickly 3 times in a row. A cascade of blue flashes showered the shaft. The snapping of the unleashed energy sounded like muted cracks of a whip.

Kakuta realized that he could not get rid of his pursuer in this manner. He wondered sarcastically when he would ever find the time to look for the propulsion unit. The mutant ran on. Peculiar devices appeared ahead of him, suspended from the ceiling. For a moment he got the absurd idea that they might be fire extinguishers and rushed towards them. The objects were transparent. There was a green substance pulsating inside them. One glance told Kakuta that there were no switches or levers he could try. Stretching, he could just reach one of these funnels with his fist. He hit it fiercely, achieving nothing. The robot profited from Kakuta's futile attempt by gaining on him.

Kakuta discovered a side passage that led out of the shaft and stormed into it. Then he stopped short and waited until the robot was about ½ meter from the turnoff. He concentrated on the shaft, then carried out a short teleport jump. As he materialized he could just see the machine turning the corner. Kakuta was back in his original spot. He smiled contemptuously.

But there was that thing on its way back, whirring and vibrating like mad. It seemed to Kakuta that it had become somewhat smaller. That had to be nonsense.



Let us repeat this game, the mutant thought, and jumped into the side passage. As he materialized he was already awaited. A smaller version of the robot stood directly in front of him, grasping for him with 4 metallic hands simultaneously.

He divided into parts, Kakuta thought. But now, as the thing flung him about brutally it was too late for that realization. The other two-thirds of the robot also came rolling into the passage and reconnected with the part that was clasping Kakuta.

The teleporter resigned and let himself be dragged away. He could have easily freed himself with a teleport jump but he hoped that the robots would at last bring him to the place he had been headed for the entire time: the steering central or the propulsion room.

Had he had the faintest notion of Arthur's true destination, his self-assured smile would have frozen on the spot into a terrified grimace.

* * * *

Like any conceivable intelligent being that could exist in the depths of the cosmos, man is a creature inextricably linked to space. Back in primeval days of Earth when the power of reason was first awakening behind his flat forehead, primitive man recognized the function of the warming sun. The animal instinctively warms itself in its rays and humanity in some mysterious way fathoms its dependency on the yellow star its planet is circling.

Humankind's bond with the universe is completely natural and predetermined by its environment.

The first rockets lifted off and blazed a flaming trail into the blackness of the cosmos. The men responsible devised countless safety precautions to keep accidents at a minimum. In the course of time a security system was developed that was built into every ship. It was able to foresee almost any conceivable accident.

Like every other ship in the Solar Fleet the *Ironduke* was equipped with automatic controls which took over steering when manual control was interrupted. Generally this occurred when the pilot on duty switched to automatic. If the manual steering ceased without being transferred from human to autopilot,

nothing happened for a predetermined length of time. The ship held its course and speed until the safety threshold was exceeded, at which point control shifted to automatic.

The fact that the safety threshold lay below 10 minutes saved the lives of the *Ironduke* crew. The temperatures of the linear ship's outer surfaces approached the melting pot for normal iron and would soon endanger the special high-grade alloy steel. Right then the automatic switched on an assumed control of the giant spacesphere. None of the men moved as the ship emerged from the upper layers of Snarfot's atmosphere at full power and zoomed into space.

The absorbers prevented any injuries; otherwise the acceleration required to pull away from the planet's gravitational field would have hardly been bearable.

If they were aware of the behaviour of their mothership; the crews of the 3-man destroyers must have found it incomprehensible. The *Ironduke* vanished from the vicinity of Snarfot like a phantom.

This changed the picture entirely for those remaining behind on Snarfot. They were practically alone, unable to count on any support from the *Ironduke* .

6 human mutants, 2 men and a mousebeaver were confronted with the staggeringly superior might of a perfect array of machinery that functioned as a tight unit and that, by virtue of its unfamiliarity, possessed countless traps and methods of attack.

The fat-moss case had changed from a "boring matter", as Bell had called it, into a menacing situation. Around 28000 robots were floating above Snarfot, meeting no resistance as they scattered the seeds they brought from the seedship. Commanders 1, 2 and 3, a synchronized unit of positronic power, sent out their messengers to capture the 2 living intruders.

The seedship seemed capable of carrying out the programmed orders of its creators in every respect.

7/ INFINITY LOST

Dr. Chester MacDowell stood in the half-open airlock of the destroyer looking out at the primitive landscape. He had seen many pictures of alien planets in the research institute but this outdid them all. The abounding life evident in a multitude of forms, creeping, hopping, running and flying or climbing about in the trees and digging holes in the ground, totally absorbed the attention of the scientist.

Wuriu Sengu stepped next to him and pointed at a forest of horsetrees, or the Snarfot version of horsetail, remarking casually: "There, over the forest, Doc!—2 seed machines!"

By the time MacDowell glanced over there were already 5 gliding back and forth, dropping clouds of seeds. The scientist could feel the mutant's hand resting on his shoulder.

"The area where the seedship landed is 3 miles from here, Doc," Sengu said. "We could use the antigrav-drive on our combat suits to get there but that would be risking attack by the robots."

Reluctantly MacDowell tore his gaze from the landscape and turned to Sengu. "What do you suggest?"

he asked him.

Sengu grinned as if something terribly funny had occurred to him. "Let's walk," he said cheerfully.

It was clear to MacDowell that this relatively short hike could become exceedingly strenuous since the terrain was so overgrown and full of obstacles. Still he felt lucky to be setting foot on a strange planet for the first time. He thought back to the times when he had roamed cross-country as a vagabond; how he had lain in the open fields at the roadside on summer nights looking up at the clear sky. Although those nights were warm and a pleasant breeze was gently blowing, he had shivered at the sight and had begun to wonder how it looked on the strange worlds beyond those stars.

As he lay on his back, a lonesome man in torn clothing whose entire possessions were in the frayed pocket of his old army jacket, he started to ponder about how he could win for himself some little piece of that infinity. At such moments he was so far away from those suns that the attempt to envision the endless reaches almost pained physically.

He wanted to gain some foothold in that boundlessness with the vague hope of later gaining more; then advancing to the outer edges in order to look beyond them into the Incomprehensible. And during one of those nights MacDowell stood up, a haggard shadow, and drove his emaciated body over to the road.

Then he stood at the side of the highway, bearded, tired, armed with nothing but his steadfast will power. He began to wave his thumb but the car lights only swooped past in the night.

No driver would stop, MacDowell did not look trustworthy and it was midnight. He realized that he would have to walk to the next town as he did not want to wait until daybreak.

After 2 hours he arrived at a motel. The lights were still on. A sullen figure was slumped in a rocking chair on the veranda watching the moths flitting around the lights. There was a sign above the entrance and as MacDowell came closer he read that they were looking for a helper.

He pulled himself together and stepped into the light. The man stopped rocking and his scowling face became even more guarded. "What do you want?" he asked in a sleepy voice.

MacDowell controlled his mounting anger and pointed at the sign. "I am the new helper," he boldly stated.

The man laughed loudly, took a newspaper from behind his back, folded it painstakingly and began to beat in time to the melody of an unfamiliar song. MacDowell watched him. Inwardly he resolved to make it this time—because he would not have the strength for an attempt elsewhere.

"We don't hire any tramps," the man declared indifferently.

"I am a university graduate," MacDowell calmly said. "I will work for half the normal salary and there is nothing I can't take care of for you.

How much humiliation must a man endure in order to shake off some dirt that was actually only on his clothes?

"Wait until it gets light," the man said.

MacDowell settled on the veranda, his feet dangling over the side. Somewhat later a car drove up but

when the driver spotted MacDowell he drove away.

"You don't exactly seem to be a good advertisement for our place," the man in the rocker said. When MacDowell turned to him he saw a wide grin on the man's face. He knew he had won.

"Let's go, Doc!" Sengu cried, his voice tearing MacDowell away from the past.

"It feels strange to me, Sengu," he said. "This is my first time on a different planet. I have seen pictures but that is vastly different from reality."

Sengu smiled. "That goes away," he assured him. "I can't even remember what I thought the first ..." He broke off abruptly as if reluctant to talk about it. He switched on the protective screen to shield the destroyer from possible attacks. On his wrist he wore a small transmitter with which he could switch it back off.

They started on their way. The ground under MacDowell's feet felt oddly soft and elastic. Sengu, not wasting a word on it, took the lead. He had that quiet determination which the scientist had noticed in all of Rhodan's associates. These men seemed composed and secure in every situation. Perhaps it was their feeling of solidarity that imbued them with this calm.

MacDowell mused about whether he now had seized some part of the Universe; whether he had come any closer to the truth he was seeking. The answer was somehow appalling.

What he had done was nothing. He had travelled a distance and was now standing on another world. If it turned night he could probably see the stars in frosty remoteness endlessly far away.

"WE DON'T HIRE ANY TRAMPS!"

What were they other than vagabonds aimlessly roaming between the systems? The stars rejected and repelled them, remaining alien in their glowing grandeur.

MacDowell bumped into Sengu, who had stopped suddenly. He hastily mumbled an apology but the mutant waved it aside. "We have been discovered!" he said.

A seed robot was hovering above them. The fine dust from its container rained down on them.



"There is only one," the mutant quickly added. "If we split up for awhile it will make it difficult for it. It won't know whom to follow. Go on, Doc!"

Sengu ducked between the bushes and MacDowell did not hesitate to flee in the other direction. He ran through the underwood, brushing against leaves and branches. At last he stopped to check whether he was being pursued.

To his amazement he discovered that the flying machine had taken no notice of them whatsoever. The unperturbed robot was still sowing, flying in loops to assure even distribution of the seeds.

MacDowell wondered whether he should return to his original spot but then it occurred to him that Sengu would probably head for the seedship.

The scientist was alone now. He was used to that, however, and was not even worried. He continued, taking long strides and studying his surroundings attentively.

"Everything OK, Doc?" The voice rang so unexpectedly in his ears, it startled MacDowell. Then he remembered the helmet loudspeaker and heaved a sigh of relief.

"That thing paid no attention to us," he said. "It just keeps on strewing its seeds," Sengu commented matter-of-factly.

MacDowell pulled apart some dense shrubbery in order to make some headway. After awhile he heard the mutant's voice again. "Somewhere ahead of you there is a tree with large leaves. You will easily find it. It is the only one of its kind around," said Sengu.

MacDowell looked around, shading his eyes with his hand. He finally spotted the tree towering above

the thicket about 100 meters ahead. "I see it," he reported eagerly.

"I'll be there in a moment myself," Sengu told him. "You can't miss it. Wait for me."

How had that blasted fellow managed to get there that quickly, MacDowell wondered. The mutant had probably headed for the spot from the beginning while he had blindly run away.

"Alright, Sengu," he replied. He could visualize the broad grin breaking out on the Afroterranian's face.

The next step was his last.

A dark shadow shot out of the underbrush ahead. They collided. MacDowell let out a stifled cry and lost his balance. Something furry and quick-footed darted away in panicky fear from MacDowell. The scientist toppled over backwards, his back striking a gnarled branch that flung him to the ground.

"What's wrong, Doc?" Sengu called.

He had startled some animal which had knocked him down in its wild flight. MacDowell tried to explain it to the mutant but as he parted his lips he realized that speaking caused him agonizing pain. He moaned faintly.

Sengu's voice showed great concern. "What happened, Doc? Are you hurt? Where are you?"

"I'll be right there," MacDowell said through clenched teeth. He broke out in a cold sweat and vomited profusely.

I have got to get up, he thought. But he couldn't. He could hardly move. A huge bug crawled across the view panel of his helmet. MacDowell could see the precise working of its thin legs. The leisure with which the insect moved eased his growing panic.

"Are you alright?" Sengu asked again.

"You go ahead," MacDowell managed. "Don't wait for me."

It's my spinal column, he thought. *It must be broken.*

Sengu was saying something but his voice was no more than a rumbling sound, some unpleasant, senseless croaking. MacDowell's eyes became hazy.

The death he suffered was completely undramatic. A frightened animal ran him down and by unfortunate coincidence he tripped over a branch. An accident, nothing more.

So this was the end. Chester MacDowell, who had set out to glean some trace of infinity, died as lonely as he had lived.

"WE DON'T HIRE ANY TRAMPS!"

MacDowell tried to smile. When Sengu found him he wanted the mutant to see that he had been without fear in his final moments. Suddenly he thought he was lying on his back in a meadow. It was nighttime. He could hear the humming of cars in the distance. The stars seemed to be brighter than usual, as if a mysterious camera had brought them closer.

A man in a rocking chair was sitting next to him. His rhythmic swaying made MacDowell tired. From time to time the droning of the cars became louder, almost sounding like an agitated human voice.

A wind came up. Its mild breath, wafting across MacDowell's face, carried the scent of fresh boughs of pine after a rainfall.

The stars were very close. Almost like a cloth spreading over him ...

When Sengu found him less than an hour later, he was already dead.

MacDowell was right when he sensed that he would never be returning to Signal.

8/ MENACING MECHMEN

The robot stopped. Kakuta craned his neck to catch a good glimpse around. He still had not broken away from his captor, hoping to reach his destination quickest this way. What he now saw was not exactly encouraging.

There were no significant devices or controls in view. The walls and ceiling were identically polished to a smooth finish. The grip-arms encircling him tightened their pressure. The mutant clamped his jaws.

The robot seemed to have arrived at his destination as he made no attempt to pull Kakuta any farther along the passage. Kakuta decided to try something.

"Can anybody here understand me?" he called loudly in interkosmo.

The robot, its gleaming lenses trained on Kakuta, failed to exhibit the slightest reaction.

"We can't stay here forever," Kakuta remarked agreeably. "Is there any chance of coming to some agreement?"

Arthur made a raspy noise and rolled forward. A panel in the wall in front of them had glided open, revealing a room that brought back memories to the mutant. It was somehow familiar. He could not give it any more thought, however, as the robot loosened its grip. Kakuta was standing on his own legs again. He regarded the machine suspiciously, whereupon an intensive buzzing sounded.

Tako Kakuta raised his eyebrows and spread out his arms. "Why, we are getting closer," he said. However, the robot turned and rolled out.

"Stop, old pal!" Kakuta called. "You want to leave me here alone?"

Arthur did not disclose any further intentions and the room closed behind the robot. Kakuta heard a strange sound, as if someone were scraping across a rough floor with a wide broom. He wondered whether this room was to become his prison, in which case he would have no difficulty in breaking out. He just was not sure what the robot and its masters would do about his repeated escape attempts.

Where were the builders of that machine, anyhow? Why didn't they make an appearance? Could that vessel possibly be an unmanned robotship? He would never find the answers if he didn't take action. Kakuta stretched his stiff limbs.

New sounds reached his ears and he wheeled around. Simultaneously he felt himself being swept away by a force he could not withstand, as if a gigantic suction cup had fixed itself to his body. He felt himself losing ground, then he was in a horizontal position. He felt nauseous. Through his view panel he perceived unfathomable black depth into which he was plunging.

Now he knew where the robot had brought him and what had happened.

For the past few minutes he had been standing in the ship's airlock and when the airlock wall was opened, he was pulled out by the suction.

Kakuta found himself in the midst of a void—in outer space.

* * * *

Pucky floated up under the ceiling in the nick of time. The robot had fired at him from an invisible chamber and the wall where the mousebeaver had just been standing now crystallized and fell apart. The mutant activated his telekinetic powers and blocked the robot's driving mechanism.

The machine started up again.

Pucky looked down, aghast. Just as he had eased his paramechanical pressure the robot had moved on. Pucky knew that he could not continue to hover below the ceiling and simultaneously control the propulsion mechanism of his foe.

Normally, as the mousebeaver had thus far experienced with Terran and Arkonide robots, a machine that had been stopped by telekinetics without outside help or even repair work. Hence his opponent had to be in touch with someone who fixed the drive as soon as Pucky's strength failed. The mutant was thinking feverishly as any second could spell death.

He attempted to lift the machine and hurl it to the ground but there was something between him and the robot, some kind of magnetic force. He could not see it but he could certainly feel it and it prevented him from carrying out his action. He could lift the metal monster somewhat but that was the extent of it.

By pure instinct he lowered himself a bit and the robot's second shot missed. Pucky knew he could not hesitate any longer. His mechanical enemy was surrounded by an invisible magnetic field which was able to diminish paranormal influences.

Pucky teleported in the direction of Tschubai's familiar thought stream. He landed in an extensive room and spotted several bins connected by a network of pipes.

Then he started. About 20 miles away a man-like apparition lunged towards him, gesturing wildly. Without thinking twice, Pucky gave off a telekinetic shock that hurtled the creature to the floor.

"Pucky!" the voice shouted in his helmet loudspeaker. "Have you gone mad?"

The mousebeaver's round eyes widened in horror. The weird figure totally covered with a white substance was none other than Ras Tschubai!

"Ras!" Pucky squeaked. "You look like a meal-worm."

Tschubai got to his feet and the mousebeaver heard him giggle. The African pointed at one of the storage bins. "I landed right inside of a container for fat-moss seeds," he explained. "That stuff is still sticking to me."

Although he generally had to be reminded of his duties, it was now the mousebeaver who remarkably changed the topic. "It appears that there are only robots on board. I can't pick up any thought impulses other than yours. I have only run into one robot till now. It tried to do me in, short and sweet. It had partial screening against my telekinetic powers.

"What did it look like?" Tschubai asked as he began to methodically dust off his combat suit. The seeds formed a cloud around him.

"Just about like that," Pucky drily stated, pointing at something approaching behind Tschubai's back. Ras turned and saw 2 machines gliding towards him rapidly, despite their clumsy appearance.

"Over there, Ras!" the mousebeaver shrieked and his little arm pointed at the silos. They made a short teleport jump and the robot's shot rang in vain. "We should shoot, too," Tschubai insisted as Pucky materialized beside him. He grasped his disintegrator and aimed at the 2 robots, who stood baffled—should the concept of "baffle" be applicable to them at all.

Pucky lowered the teleporter's arm. "Wait!" he pleaded.

Tschubai snorted indignantly but he stuck his weapon back in his belt.

"They are our only chance of finding the ship's machines right now," Pucky argued. "If we destroy them it might take hours of looking.

The teleporter realized that Pucky was right. They would have to carry on this dangerous game to gain information. The spaceship was far too alien and different from a Terran for them to initially operate well.

"Over here," Pucky whispered, although it was surely impossible to remain hidden long. Pucky tugged on Tschubai and they crossed under one of the silos.

The 2 robots had spotted them again. The first shot fired brought unexpected results. The filling apparatus below the silo broke off and twisted with a grating sound, getting stuck on one of the bin legs.

Pucky acted on pure instinct—and that saved his life as well as Tschubai's. He didn't take the time to cry out a warning, he simply grabbed the African by the arm and jumped.

The flood of fat-moss seeds, weighing many tons, poured out of the severed opening into the shimmer of the dematerialising figures. The room filled with white clouds of seed-dust whirling erratically as new messengers came piling into the fog and chaos. The well-coördinated unit of the seedship had suffered a severe blow. It had damaged itself.

The 2 teleporters had escaped at the last moment, jumping deeper into the ship's interior.

* * * *

Still one mile away from the ship, Wuriu Sengu met up with André Noir, the hypno. Sengu spied the slender figure in a small clearing and headed for him. "Wait, André," he called over helmet com.

The mutant stopped and waved. In the midst of the towering plants he looked like a dwarf.

"Pelant stayed on board the destroyer. He was unable to contact the *Ironduke* so he wants to find out what happened."

An uneasy feeling crept up on Sengu. They were dependent on the support of the linear ship unless they were to alarm the Fleet with a hypercom distress call.

"Maybe the crew of the seedship put up a raybelt around Snarfot that is interfering with communications," he suggested.

Noir Was uncertain. Sengu was so close the hypno could see how pale his face was through the visor. "If that were the case, Rhodan would have certainly done something," he disagreed. "He would have assumed that the destroyers had been attacked and that we might be dead by now."

"There is one sad bit of news already," Sengu sombrely disclosed. "MacDowell is dead. He had an accident."

A grim expression appeared on Noir's face The sudden death of the scientist proved how dangerous their mission was—and how happy a man could be if he survived.

"I think," Noir softly said, "he was a pretty lonely man."

Sengu nodded, silently wondering what they had actually undertaken to facilitate the doctor's assimilation into their community. Not much, he admitted to himself. But MacDowell had given them no indication that he was willing to be anything but a loner.

"I buried him over there," the African said with a vague motion of his hand. "The ground was so soft I could dig with a sharp piece of bark. I think he would have been pleased with the spot."

They continued until they could make out the outline of the seedship. It was a strange sight, that technical masterpiece in the midst of this wilderness. There were some seed robots gliding over the land like insects, their metallic bodies gleaming in the rays of the Snarf sun.

100 meters farther they met Goldstein and Bob Heystens. They also reported that they had been unable to contact the *Ironduke* .

Goldstein, the telepath, was one of the mutants who had been given a cell shower because of his invaluable experience with molecular restructuring. He shook his head pityingly when he heard of

MacDowell's tragic end. "His ideas were proud and strong," he said. And that from the mouth of a telepath was the highest praise imaginable.

Heystens, absentmindedly attempting to scratch his head, smacked his hand on his helmet. Hastily he dropped his arm.

"We met up with some of those seed robots on our way over here," he said. "Oddly enough they ignored us and continued their work."

"Right," Sengu affirmed. "MacDowell and I made the same observation."

Heystens slapped his thigh hard. "All the better," he said. "The ship is over there and Ras is surely working inside with Pucky. We should hurry to help them."

Wuriu Sengu, whose micro-vision enabled him to see through meter-thick walls, glanced shortly at his companions. Then he said laconically. "Let's go."

In a body they marched towards the mysterious ship.

* * * *

Kakuta hung in space, looking at the conglomerate mass of stars that made up the centre of star cluster M-13. The Japanese mutant had never been a talkative man. More than anything he loved to sit alone on quiet evenings on the porch of his bungalow on Earth and wait for nightfall. But there he had the sounds of the animals around him, the distant humming of the city and, occasionally, the rumbling of spacecraft passing overhead in the dark sky.

The solitude in which he was now contained was absolute—it was final and subject to no changes. Kakuta learned that silence could be painful; that it could be oppressive in this majestic abyss.

Easily he turned on his own axis. His mind told him that, because it felt as if the stars were moving around HIM. He was the midpoint of an unending arena, everything happening around him.

Then the Scout appeared in his field of vision, a mere black shadow, darker than space itself; like a hole that had been punched out.

Tako Kakuta knew that his simple safety suit was ultimately no safeguard in the absolute vacuum. He would have to get back on board the alien ship and accomplish his assignment.

A sense of his minuteness threatened to overpower him. He felt disappointed in some inexplicable way. That sensation astonished him. It seemed like a holdover from childhood. As a youth he had often felt disappointed when he had longed for something and failed to get it.

But here in the Universe there were no reference points. He did not even know what it was he was so deeply yearning for. He simply hung there regarding the stars and fighting against the emptiness within.

Perhaps I am tired, thought the mutant. A tired old man who fancies he can bring about changes

in the depths of the Cosmos. Kakuta had been alive a long time. The cell showers granted him at intervals preserved him from death.

He carried out his next teleport jump with a certain laxity of concentration.

Kakuta materialized in front of a glimmering wall that seemed to be made of several individual parts. The robot that had pushed him out of the airlock was nowhere to be seen. The gleaming surface blinded him and he had to step back. Gradually his eyes became accustomed to the harsh light and he could distinguish contours.

He surmised that he had jumped directly into Central. His first observation was the absence of any living intelligence; now he was certain that he was on a robotship.

He did not know any more about cybernetics than any other schooled member of the Solar Fleet and he was doubtful that he could even apply his meagre knowledge here. A positronic brain always followed the logical guidelines established by its programming, of that he was sure. But what if the constructors of this ship had invested their robots with null-A logic which was incomprehensible to a human?

This was no time to philosophize. He had to deal with it and fulfil his assignment.

The wall facing him was divided into sections, some of which were recessed so that niches broke up the symmetry. It was clear to Kakuta that it would be futile to look for switches or controls: there was no one on board who could operate them. The mutant guessed that electric impulses originating in that room manoeuvred the ship.

If he wanted to cripple the Scout he would have to sever the connection between Central and the rest of the ship. He slid into one of the recesses and caught sight of cablecords thick as an arm. They were close to the ground and connected the sections of the wall. The material was of a dark red hue and, like everything else, clean beyond belief.

The cable, if such it was, doubtlessly served to conduct energy. Kakuta was no fool. He knew that actual destruction of the cord might jeopardize his life. At its re-entry points into the wall the cable was anchored by thick-rimmed flanges.

Kakuta hesitantly pulled back. Systematically he examined niche after niche with no interference from the ship. The artificial brain that had the mastery over this technical marvel knew of his presence in Central. There could be no doubt that it was seeking ways of removing him.

Kakuta was just examining the last recess as Arthur rolled into Central. The robot divided, leaving its large middle piece at the entrance while the outer parts rolled towards the mutant.

Kakuta pulled out his weapon and stood waiting.

The machines were advancing cautiously. Just a few meters in front of Kakuta they stopped and only the blinking of their lenses proved that they were observing him. Kakuta glanced sceptically at the 3-part robot and then decided to proceed with his examination.

At the same moment he was on the floor, screaming in pain. His body twitched convulsively. He had been shot by some kind of weapon having a paralysing effect. He wanted to teleport but his brain seemed drained and he was incapable of producing coherent thoughts. His teleporter capacities were also affected, to his bewilderment.

Whimpering, Kakuta managed to get to his knees, when a second wave struck him, more terrible than the first. Everything darkened before his eyes. Kakuta shrieked and tossed about aimlessly. He tried to reach for his weapon but his hands only flapped beyond control on his lame arms.

He felt himself being seized and thrust upwards. The mutant desperately tried to carry out a teleport jump but there did not seem to be any energy left in his tormented body. His exhaustion was so extreme he thought he might faint.

Still his vision became clearer and he could make out what was happening. The robots were tearing off his safety suit.

The ship's positronic command had logically concluded that he could only return to the ship if his suit shielded him out in space. Kakuta did not have to be clairvoyant to foresee the robots' intentions: they were going to push him out of the ship again—this time without his suit.

He was puzzled by this. Why didn't they simply kill him now that he was in their hands? But it was futile to try and comprehend the logic of their programming. Perhaps death within the ship was prohibited or whatever.

One thing was certain: in a few short minutes Tako Kakuta would be flung out of the airlock and drifting eternally through the reaches of star cluster M-13 unless he entered the gravitational field of some sun and burned up.

But he would not notice any of this. The moment the airlock opened he would be dead.

* * * *

First it was the ticking of some distant clock, then the sound thickened into vehement knocking. Pucky released Tschubai's arm and looked around.

"Without your help I would be a dead man by now," the African said, patting the mousebeaver on the shoulder.

Pucky casually waved this aside. "When you get the chance you can show your gratitude with a juicy carrot, Ras," he replied, grinning. "Now we have to work on this," Pucky pointed at 3 dome-shaped objects jutting out from the floor. The domes were covered with gleaming plates.

"What is that noise?" Tschubai wondered uneasily. "It sounds like someone is hitting a hollow wall with a hammer."

"I would say that there are neither hammers nor walls," the mousebeaver sarcastically remarked. "The knocking sound is coming from this funny apparatus."

"Maybe it has something to do with the propulsion of the ship," Tschubai optimistically guessed. "Then we would finally be at the right spot."

They could hardly know that they were in fact standing in front of the Commanders of the seedship, which at that very moment were summoning the 3 Messengers to Central to stop the intruders. Since the Messengers could only move by mechanical means, it took awhile for them to come the distance the mutants had gone in practically no time.

Pucky gingerly felt the dome with his parasense. He had a hunch that were circuit connections. Yes, there were thin energy traces leading to all sides and spreading throughout the ship. They were standing in front of the heart of the giant cylinder, the alien positronicon or whatever it was.

"You are not exactly talkative," Tschubai said reproachfully.

Pucky signalled him to be silent with a nod of his head. He had spotted the main relays, as though under crystal-clear water, and determined that they were brought into the desired position by means of electric impulses.

He gave free rein to his telekinetic abilities and was amazed at how easily he was able to move the complicated switches, even put them out of order.

If the entire ship was dependent on these 3 domes, and the mousebeaver did not doubt that for one second, then he had almost stopped it from functioning right then and there.

He did not venture to say which sections might still be undamaged but in the interplay of all the cybernetic forces the breakdown of one part might mean total collapse.

A sudden stream of thought struck Pucky and he flinched as though actually hit. Then he calmed down. People had arrived outside the ship and a telepath was with them: Goldstein.

Pucky tried to contact Goldstein but somehow he seemed totally confused. "What's going on?" Tschubai impatiently demanded, noticing the tension in the mousebeaver's face.

"Goldstein is outside the ship," Pucky told him. "He just thought something peculiar."

Before the African could articulate his question, Pucky said: "The seed robots are crashing—simply falling to the ground." His incisor showed as he triumphantly added: "And I know why, Ras."

"You destroyed some part of those gadgets," the teleporter guessed.

"Yes, I did," Pucky modestly replied. "It is really quite simple if ..."

He stopped as he heard the rolling noises of the approaching Messengers. With a touch of gallows humour, Tschubai pointed at the machines and casually said: "Now you can demonstrate HOW simple it is, little one." And he pulled his disintegrator out of his belt.

9/ CRISIS: KAKUTA

Awakening was far worse than the plunge into those bottomless depths had been when he lost

consciousness. Rhodan thought he was bound by sticky ropes. His limbs were so clumsy he felt as though he were wading through a deep moor. He had a foul taste in his mouth and a ringing in his head, as if he had been struck with a club.

His memory returned and Perry opened his eyes. Jefe Claudrin was kneeling next to him, staring at him in amazement. They were still alive and still in Central Command of the *Ironduke* .

The Colonel tried to speak but after the first few words he moaned and clasped his forehead. He seemed to be worse off than the Administrator.

Rhodan began to perceive the whole row of groaning men attempting to get to their feet. The coloured circles dancing before his eyes changed into their faces, which were strikingly pale. *I probably don't look much better*, he thought. He could feel his blood circulation increasing as he gradually regained control over his body.

"This is my favourite position," a croaking voice claimed and Rhodan spotted Bell creeping on the floor, a forced smile on his face.

Rhodan laughed. His laughter resulted in the feeling that the back of his head was going to explode.

"What happened, sir?" Claudrin gasped as he struggled to his feet. Rhodan had to answer that same question several more times in the next 10 minutes, as all sections of the *Ironduke* checked in for the same information.

Rhodan pressed both hands to his temples. "We were attacked," he told Claudrin. "Presumably with a weapon that influenced our nervous systems in some unknown way, causing paralysis."

His eyes fell on the board clock and he wiped his forehead incredulously. "Eight hours have passed, Colonel!" he exclaimed in dismay. "Eight hours ago we dispatched the destroyers."

Claudrin stepped over to the controls. "The ship is on automatic steering, " he snorted with animosity. "We have already left the Snarf System behind."

His frustration about that fact was plain to see and he seemed to be reproaching himself for its occurrence.

"Just keep cool, Jefe," Rhodan admonished as he finally managed to stand upright. He still felt somewhat uneasy but made it over to Claudrin and glanced at the control panel.

Bell had also arisen and joined them. "What should we do now, Perry?" he asked.

"Turn back in any case," Rhodan decided. "We can't simply leave our men and Pucky alone on Snarfot. The teleporters must have surely accomplished something by now."

Claudrin's leathery face creased thoughtfully. "What happens if we are hit again, sir?"

"At least we have been warned," Rhodan said. "We will stay protected within the libration zone until close to Snarfot and then turn on our normal protective screen.

"Those fellows seem determined to sow their fat-moss seeds on Snarfot without interference," Bell remarked. "Either they are starving or they have some other intention. But what could be so significant

about that planet?"

"Alkher calling, sir," a voice over intercom interrupted him.

"Is there any target on which we can firebrand our answer to that sneak attack, sir?"

Rhodan smiled. "Control your zeal, Lieutenant. You may just get something to set your target sights on real soon. We are heading back to Snarfot."

Before the officer in the Combat Central could give vent to his enthusiasm Maj. Krefenbac reported another call.

"It is Pelant, sir," the Major reported. "He has been trying to reach us for quite some time. He seems distressed."

The telecom screen began to flicker. Tuff Pelant's face appeared and his relief was plain to see. "I don't think that you voluntarily made that outing, sir," he said.

Rhodan gave him a brief rundown of events. "How are things on Snarfot?"

They heard Pelant giggle and his face assumed an expression of contented glee. The anxiety and fears of the past hours had melted, making him talkative.

"You missed a grandiose spectacle, sir. The seed robots suddenly plummeted to the ground and now they are lying about everywhere, totally immobile. They all seem to be affected, sir. At least I can't see any more in the Snarfot sky. " His face flushed as he recalled the scene. "They came down like stones, sir, one after the other."

"That's Pucky's work," Reginald Bell interjected. "He'll give the seedship a hard time."

"Which means that all the robots are in contact with the ship. Pucky can hardly have knocked them off individually," Rhodan thoughtfully remarked.

Somewhat reticently Pelant said: "I already had the same idea, sir. I think you can make a safe appearance with the *Ironduke* now."

"Keep your eyes open, Pelant," Rhodan told him in a friendly voice. "You will see the *Ironduke* set in for a landing shortly."

Pelant nodded enthusiastically and Rhodan ended the conversation. Perry motioned to Claudrin. The man from Epsal took over the controls. The mighty propulsion units of the *Ironduke* quivered with the increased load as Claudrin switched on the brake aggregates to slow them down.

"First of all let's deal with the scoutship and get Kakuta back on board," Rhodan decided. "We have to make sure that it doesn't escape from the Snarf System."

* * * *

The Scout completed its 369th revolution around the planet Snarfot and was about to begin the next one. Its cylindrical body changed from the day to the night side of that world at regular intervals, blazing brightly as it shot out of the darkness.

The Memory Banks were overloaded by the constant input of new data that had to be processed and evaluated. Connector had lost contact with the seedship, which could only signify that the intruders had been far more effective than on the Scout.

The Scout had defeated the invaders, as it possessed Arthur, who was able to activate an almost inexhaustible reservoir of counter-measures.

The shockwaves had disabled the stranger so that he could no longer utilize his incomprehensible ability to change localities. The stranger had further protection which equipped him for survival in outer space.

The Memory Banks had ordered Arthur to remove the intruder's protection and the robot was doing as he was told. Kakuta was a helpless, whimpering bundle in the tight grip of the robot.

The air which the Japanese mutant inhaled as Arthur tore off his helmet was sticky and low on oxygen, proof that it was not being replenished. And why should it be? There were ordinarily no living beings on board and as for the mutant, it was irrelevant whether he suffocated on board or in the airlock.

Kakuta was totally stunned by a third shockwave. Arthur removed the last shreds of his protective suit. The Memory Banks were in constant touch with the robot who picked up Kakuta as if he were a doll. He rolled out of Central with him as the fragile body of the mutant began to tremble lightly.

Kakuta regained consciousness but he was so weak he could barely open his eyes. He felt half dead already and his will to resist was reduced to a barely perceptible twitching in the hindmost corner of his brain.

Arthur dragged him through small passageways, using some sort of lift twice. Kakuta sensed that they could not be far from the airlock.

At that moment the Observer reported to the Memory Banks that the alien vessel had returned and was approaching the Scout. The Scout recognized the danger because it was more than doubtful that the seedship was still able to fire THE WEAPON.

The Memory Banks proceeded to produce an entire series of electronic impulses. The Automatic Guard began to move along its cable, the buzzing it produced resounding in the long corridor. Another impulse went to Arthur, who simply dropped Kakuta and headed in another direction.

Kakuta tried to lift his head but simply could not. He only knew that the robot had deposited him somewhere. Could he already be inside the airlock chamber? The mutant felt the nearness of death. It did not frighten him.

Suddenly the ship seemed filled with a hectic flurry. Things were pulsating and buzzing all round him and the floor began to vibrate.

A bell rang in Kakuta's head, its sound penetrating his brain as if to forcibly rouse him.

And then he knew what was happening.

The cylindrical ship was leaving the orbit of Snarfot, preparing for a hypertransition. Everything in him resisted the thought yet he continued to lie there as though in a torpor. He did not want to leave. He sensed that the departure of the scouting vessel would be irrevocable. Even death in the airlock now seemed preferable to the fate awaiting him.

Tako Kakuta then got up. With a super-human effort he struggled to his feet. Although tottering like a drunkard, he did not fall down. His face was contorted into a mask of pain, his eyes burning feverishly.

As he staggered along the corridor with his disintegrator poised, looking for Arthur, he looked fierce and challenging.

* * * *

Rhodan almost touched the microphone with his lips. His angular face remained unchanged. "Attention D-Airlock," he called. "Lieutenant Nolinow, assemble 50 men in the hangar and prepare to board the alien ship.

"Our friend is leaving the Snarfot orbit," Bell, who had been monitoring the tracking screen, reported.

Rhodan reacted lightning-quick, switching the intercom. "Alker!" Rhodan's voice was not even raised. "Are you ready?"

"Naturally, sir."

With diminishing speed the *Ironduke* was entering the Snarfot field of gravity. The Scout meanwhile broke out of its orbit, the energy it released causing the *Ironduke* tracking devices to hit top values rapidly.

"I don't want you to wreck it," Rhodan reminded the young officer. "Don't forget that Kakuta is on board."

"Let the Colonel align it longitudinally to the cannons," Alkher said. "Then there is less danger of heavy damage."

"I shall try to oblige, Lieutenant," Claudrin promised. "And you reward my efforts with a solid hit."

Rhodan could just imagine the smile crossing Alkher's bony face.

"I'll try, sir," the Chief Combat Officer replied.

"Alien ship accelerating!" Maj. Krefenbac called.

"OK, Jefe," Rhodan calmly said. "Show those guys what we have to offer."

The *Ironduke* streaked through space; its mighty propulsion units seemingly knew no hindrance. The gravitational pull of Snarfot could not even affect the speeding sphere.

"Change of course," Claudrin called, announcing the new values. Abruptly the *Ironduke* changed course by a few degrees, now apparently headed away from the reconnaissance ship. But this manoeuvre was deceptive as the Scout would likewise be changing course once it left the immediate vicinity of Snarfot.

"Watch out, Brazo!" Bell exclaimed.

The cylindrical body of the Scout gradually turned. Its distance from the *Ironduke* had increased but it was not flying longitudinally.

"Ready, Nolinow?" Rhodan inquired.

"Let her go, sir. The task force has been deployed to the spacejets and is waiting to seize the aliens."

Rhodan dispensed with a reply for at that moment Alkher had fired one shot from the ray cannon.

"I think that suffices, sir," he calmly reported.

The Administrator glanced at the telescreen. Apparently the ship was not equipped with weapons for a space battle since it did not return fire.

"Alien ship going off course, sir," Krefenbac reported.

"I think you can go out now, Lieutenant," Rhodan said into the microphone. "Give our regards to Kakuta."

Instantly the hangar locks opened and 5 spacejets streaked into space. On the screen they appeared as light dots racing away from the *Ironduke* towards the reconnaissance ship.

Alkher had done a good job. He well deserved his reputation as the best combat officer in the Solar Fleet. With almost instinctive certainty he had disabled the foe with a single shot. Now 50 specialists were underway to capture the ship.

"Nolinow will handle it well," Rhodan said. "Colonel, prepare for a landing on Snarfot. And send a hypercom message to the fleet units assigned to Snarfot. Tell them to go into transition and come to our aid. I don't want to take any unnecessary risks."

The Terranian ships and their Arkonide robot convoy were contacted. They comprised only part of the massive fleet Rhodan commanded.

As the *Ironduke* prepared to land, Rhodan was thinking that despite all these ships he could not get the entire Milky Way under his control.

And this Galaxy, at the periphery of which the Earth was revolving around an inconspicuous sun, was only one of many.

* * * *

The blow hit Kakuta with undiminished impact, hurtling him against the wall. His weapon fell to the floor and he felt as if his ribcage had been broken. Straining with all his might he pumped air into his martyred lungs. The mutant tried to understand the significance of the jolt. Had something inside the ship exploded?

The vibrations of the floor had ceased and an icy terror gripped him. Had the ship already completed a transition? Then it was the pain of distortion that he felt.

He pushed away from the wall and moved forward, legs far apart in order to retain his balance. For the first time he noticed that a wound on his arm was bleeding. The robot must have done it. Kakuta raised his head in bitter defiance.

He entered a small shaft. The lamps began to flicker as if they weren't getting sufficient energy.

Then he saw Arthur!

The robot was at the end of the shaft, busy with something he had just fetched from an opening in the side wall. Kakuta did not know what it was but he suspected that it had something to do with the mysterious explosion. He felt the compulsion to stop that machine's activity.

The mutant staggered on, his feet thundering on the floor like weighty wooden blocks. Ten meters distant from the robot he reached for his disintegrator.

The weapon had disappeared. He realized that he had lost it when impact of the jolt knocked him off his feet. Nonetheless he proceeded, impelled by a hazy obstinance that told him he had not lost until they destroyed him.

Arthur interrupted his work. He separated one of his outer sections and sent it against Kakuta. The mutant strode toward it with fists clenched. Unconsciously he registered some movement in the background, shadows flitting in the corridor.

Kakuta collided with the robot section. They toppled over but he got right back on his feet, prepared to continue the fight.

"Tako!" someone called. "Get away from that thing."

Kakuta uttered a snarling cry and was about to attack again. Something scorching hot whizzed over him.

"He doesn't have a safety suit on," a voice could be heard saying out of the fog that was beginning to engulf him. "Get one from the jet, Jeffers."

I must stay on my feet, Kakuta thought. He tripped over something on the floor. Somebody reached for him and it was not the hard grip of the robot but a helping human hand. The mutant moaned softly.

"They really roughed you up," the voice said compassionately.

Kakuta felt overwhelmed by a boundless weariness. He tried to speak but his lips only trembled.

Stant Nolinow supported him under his arms and led him away over the ruins of Arthur.

Then Kakuta knew that he was saved.

10/ LOST CHILDREN OF THE SEEDSHIP

Like a phantom the *Ironduke* appeared over the high plateau. Its airlocks had opened and several hundred men in Arkonide combatsuits jumped out.

Rhodan drifted slowly to the ground, tightly clutching his beamer. He saw the men sailing through the air around him. Their nearness imbued him with a sense of security.

The seedship lay below like a sleeping mammoth. Claudrin had remained behind in the *Ironduke*. Any attack on the descending men would be answered by him with a shot from the ray cannon.

The world below Rhodan stood at the beginning of its development. Here there were still endless swamps teeming with primeval life. Saurians stamped through the dense jungle and meat-eating plants set their traps. Earth must have looked very similar in times immemorial.

The air around him quivered, distracting his thoughts. Gratefully he looked up into the hazy sky. Hundreds of ships had just broken out of hyperspace near Snarfot. By now they would be in touch with the *Ironduke*, prepared to lunge towards Snarfot at any moment with lethal might.

He heard the soldiers around him break out in exuberant shouts. The experienced combat troops knew only too well the significance of that shockwave.

As the first troops landed on solid ground they stormed towards the seedship as ordered. The Arkonide suits made them seem awkward.

Above them hung the sphere of the *Ironduke*, carried by the force of the antigrav fields. Rhodan could imagine Claudrin striding back and forth in Central Command, complaining to Dr. Riebsam that he had to stay on board when there was finally some action.

Rhodan landed securely with both feet on the ground. Bell landed next to him, triumphantly waving his weapon.

Sgt. Hoelscher ran over to them, pointing at the receiver clamped under his arm. "The Colonel just reported that the seedship has been sending several impulses over hyperwave, sir," he eagerly informed them.

"Presumably emergency signals," Rhodan said thoughtfully. "The seed ship must have called for help."

Bell threw a sidelong glance at his friend. His freckled face was flushed. "And will it get help?" he asked.

"We will ask Atlan," Rhodan replied. "He has this area under close surveillance by the robot Brain. The Regent will determine whether the seedship received an answer to its emergency signal."

Hoelscher stuck the little device into his belt and looked expectantly at Rhodan.

The Administrator pointed at the alien ship. "The airlocks are still open and our men are waiting," he said. They set off; 300 soldiers of an elite division had gathered in front of the ship. Silently they waited for Rhodan to appear.

John Marshall, Chief of the Mutant Corps, had also landed nearby. His pale face was a striking contrast to the colourful surroundings as he came towards Rhodan.

"I have succeeded in contacting Pucky telepathically," he said quietly. "The mousebeaver claims that we can safely enter the ship. Goldstein, Tschubai, Heystens, Noir and Sengu are already inside."

Rhodan recalled that Pelant had stayed in the destroyer.

"What about MacDowell?" he asked.

Marshall concentrated. After awhile he dejectedly replied: "He is no longer alive, sir."

Rhodan's face hardened. He called Hoelscher and the slender sergeant rushed to his side. "Claudrin is to contact Atlan," Rhodan ordered. "Perhaps the Emperor can determine whether the distress calls sent by the seedship were answered. Take care of it, Sergeant."

Hoelscher avoided looking into the Administrator's frowning face. He turned to attend to the connection with Claudrin.

"Marshall, you and Reggie come with me. All the others wait here in front of the ship until we call you," Rhodan commanded. "If you have had no word from us within an hour, the ship is to be thoroughly searched."

Some movement in the airlock caused him to wheel around. But it was only Pucky, who came waddling out, waving at him. "I thought I could show you the way. The ship is pretty big," he cheerfully said. "There is a nice conversation with the commander waiting for you in there, Perry."

The special emphasis Pucky placed on the word "commander" made Rhodan suspicious. He knew, however, that it would be useless to question the mousebeaver. Pucky was especially fond of surprises and he would not let this one pass.

* * * *

"At first Ras and I thought they would attack us as they came into the Central. Ras wisecracked that I should do the same thing to them that I had managed so easily with the relays. We grabbed our weapons, ready for an attack. But they indicated to us that they wished to negotiate. The destructions had made them peaceful and the loss of countless seed robots must have been a hard blow too." Pucky raised his voice. "But the sight of the 3 robots is deceptive, Perry. In reality the entire ship is one single robot whose functions are inextricably intermingled. Each part is dependent on the others; if one stops it is questionable whether the next will still be capable of carrying out its task. We have discovered that the ship is divided into 3 sections with 1 commander responsible for each section. Yet these 3 positronic brains are linked so that the work of one is impossible without the other 2. Section 1 is responsible for space. It computes and evaluates data for hyperjumps. The 2d Commander is in charge of the ship's

machines; the 3d oversees the seed robots. Each Commander has a moving robot at its disposal to perform what is required." Pucky bared his incisor and grinned. "Those are the 3 fellows," he said.

"So that means that there is not a single living being on board," Rhodan queried.

Pucky shook his head. "We cannot compare this ship to the Arkonide robotships—it's different. The mentality of its constructors must be basically different from ours. Their communal spirit must be substantially more developed than ours because that is the only explanation for the interdependency of the individual parts of this ship. I contend that this ship was purposely built this way for the simple reason that the builders thought it was the ideal solution."

"That is a fallacy, of course," Marshall remarked.

"That's for sure," Tschubai interjected. "From our point of view it can't work in the long run. We are individualists. We think for ourselves and any stereotyping is repugnant to us. These concepts are unconsciously reflected in our ships. A creature that is confined within the masses and consequently dependent on them will ultimately come to the conclusion that it cannot exist without interdependency. And its ships would be constructed from the standpoint."

"Ships like these," Pucky added.

They were standing in the seedship Central. The Messengers had withdrawn to the Commanders' domes. The surroundings seemed fantastic to Rhodan; he could not remember ever having seen something so alien. The culture that produced this ship must be totally different from that of humans. He thought of Pucky's words. Where had the mousebeaver obtained his information?

"We were just in the process of teaching the robots our language when the *Ironduke* troops landed," Tschubai said.

"What are you talking about, Ras?" Bell asked in amazement.

"He's right," Pucky said in his high voice. "The robot—we have to regard the entire ship as THE robot—tried to communicate with us. We realized that our 3 friends here were able to produce certain sounds, even though they were not human tones and we were unable to understand a single word. I don't know much about linguistics but the machine seems to be a phenomenon in that field. Ras and I pointed at various objects and told it the corresponding expression in the English language.

Rhodan asked incredulously: "You mean you can talk to these robots?"

"There is just ONE," Pucky corrected him. "You have got to regard it as a unit or you just won't understand."

Rhodan gazed at the blinking mosaic of the 3 domes. The 3 Messengers stood next to it, motionless. He decided to experiment, although he did not expect success.

"Who built all of—" He broke off to correct himself. "Who build YOU?"

A sonorous voice that seemed to issue from the domes answered without emphasis: "The constructors."

That might have been a perfectly correct answer from the robot's point of view but Rhodan was totally dissatisfied. "What do the constructors look like?" he asked.

"They don't look like—they are," was the reply.

He turned to Pucky, seeking help, but the mousebeaver looked back regretfully. "They don't think in our concepts, Perry," he squeaked. "You have to approach them differently."

"When were you built?" Rhodan asked this time.

The robot seemed to hesitate and it took almost a minute for it to answer. "Yesterday," it said.

"Yesterday?" Rhodan repeated, perplexed. Then he realized that the concept of "time" was totally abstract and relative to a robot. The ship could be 1000 or 1,000,000 years old and yet again perhaps only 4.

"You surely serve some particular purpose," Rhodan carefully phrased. "Which?"

"I must sow the fat-moss," the ship replied.

Rhodan became impatient. He saw that his questions were being answered truthfully but in a simple logic that would get him nowhere.

"What purpose does the fat-moss serve?" he asked.

"Food for the constructors," was his answer.

"When is the harvestship arriving?" Rhodan inquired. The answer was more exciting than the previous ones. It was: "Never."

Rhodan raised both arms as if imploring the machine but his eyes gleamed alertly. There was the possibility that the robot wanted to mislead him. "Why won't it arrive?" he asked insistently. "It is senseless to sow if no one can fetch the harvest."

"The harvestship is missing," was the explanation.

A shiver ran down Rhodan's spine. The 3 robotships were following a certain programming but something had gone wrong. At some point a defect must have arisen. The harvestship had disappeared and the Scout proceeded with the mission together with the seedship. Rhodan sensed that the builders of these ships had not instructed their robots to distribute their seeds everywhere in the galaxy. The coordination of the robotships had broken down. Perhaps the harvestship had even been destroyed while the other two had gone about their work with unknowing arbitrariness.

Rhodan reflected that only now would the real problems present themselves; that what had transpired on Snarfot was only a small prelude to what they would be investigating in the future.

The men outside came to his mind. He sent Tschubai out to reassure them.

Then he continued his questioning of the robot.

He learned that the constructors had instructed the seed-ship to sow the seeds in suitable worlds. Rhodan discovered that these mysterious constructors, about whom the robots were unable to reveal much, did not by nature possess digestive Systems with stomachs and intestines. The fat-moss had

always grown on their native planet. Intelligent life had consequently developed accordingly and so adapted its intake of nutrition to enable it to subsist on fat-moss. The alien intelligences were nourished simply by breathing.

"What necessitated planting fat-moss on other worlds? Was the world of the constructors overpopulated?" Rhodan wanted to know.

"No, but the planet began to get cold and the plants could no longer exist. Since the constructors had no other means of nourishment they built the 3 ships, the seedship, the Scout and the harvestship. The three were dispatched. The harvestship was to collect the fruits of the labour and return with the nutritive substances in a highly active form."

It was strange to hear the robot talking about itself as if the subject were a totally strange being.

"Why didn't the constructors move elsewhere?"

"They don't move elsewhere—they are," was the reply.

A distressing thought crept up on the Administrator but he did not pursue it. The strangers had attempted to maintain their standard of nutrition in their customary way.

Before Rhodan could pose any more questions, Tschubai returned.

"Hoelscher got a message from Claudrin," he stated. "Atlan reported that the Regent on Arkon 3 did intercept confirmation impulses that had originated in the far distance."

"Did you send a call for help?" he asked the ship.

"Yes."

It seemed to Rhodan that the answers had been predetermined, they came so rapidly now.

"4 tracking signals were sent. They indicate that we are in difficulty."

"Will someone come to your aid?"

"Never," came the reply.

Was he being told lies? The Regent was practically infallible. If he determined that the distress call received an answer that was as good as definite.

Rhodan realized that he could go on questioning for hours without making more headway. Either the robot's knowledge had been purposely limited to protect the constructors or the ship was telling lies.

It was strange indeed to think of this massive cylinder as a liar. He would have to leave further examination to the scientists but he assumed that they would not find out much more.

Rhodan decided to station a few ships on Snarfot until Terran and Arkonide scientists would arrive.

"We didn't find out too much," Bell remarked in a resigned tone.

"That wasn't to be expected," Rhodan replied. "In any case we will pursue this matter as the constructors should prove substantially more interesting than their ships."

"They are not interesting—they are," Bell teased. Rhodan remained serious. "I believe that those words have a profound meaning," he said. He turned to Pucky, who was restlessly hopping about as if he could not wait for the end of the interrogation.

"Is the ship able to start without outside help?"

"I'd stake my whiskers on it: no!"

"Lead us out of here," Rhodan ordered.

With Pucky waddling in the lead, they left the Central. The Messengers remained rooted to their spots while the Commanders exchanged information. This time no repairs were possible as there was no more Arthur to carry them out. Even if he were to appear on board he would go on strike in view of the complicated damages.

Rhodan and his men arrived outside. A feeling of pressure that had been cramping Perry's chest the entire time dissolved and he breathed a sigh of relief. Bell seemed to have undergone a similar experience because he said: "It felt like a cemetery in there."

Behind Rhodan lay the incapacitated ship, a marvel of perfected technology. Before him lay the expanses of primeval land, hot and steaming, a gigantic fuming kettle filled with life.

Between them the seed robots lay scattered, the lost children of the seedship. They had crashed in swamps and deserts, in seas and on mountains. Unless a miracle occurred they would in time disappear from the surface. Changes in the landcrust would enfold them, earthquakes would wrench them into the depths and erupting volcanoes would bury them under steams of lava.

Time would cover them and they would be forgotten.

All things come to an end, Rhodan thought. He switched on the antigrav. device on his combatsuit and leisurely drifted up to the *Ironduke* .

HERE'S HOW IT HAPPENS

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SEEDS OF RUIN

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