



101

VAGABOND OF SPACE

Clark Darlton

WHEN SCAMP MEETS TRAMP

PUCKY the Mousebeaver from the planet Vagabond meets up with a freewheeling traveller of the spacelanes and all hullabaloo breaks loose!

Can you picture the potential pandemonium with a shapeship whose freight is--

Teddybears?

And Torero is something else to talk about. Torero is a parakeet.

The Universe Tramp is a maverick, a spacer who breaks all the laws... but helps the shipwrecked survivors he finds living on a--

Living Planet.

You'll never forget the—

VAGABOND OF SPACE

WHEN THINGS GET TACKY EVEN A TRAMP CAN CAUSE A TRIUMPH!

PERRY RHODAN—The Solar Administrator is glad to owe a debt

PUCKY—The mousebeaver can spot a heart of gold, no matter how rough the exterior!

Reginald Bell—Perry's First Deputy prefers solid ground

Capt. Samuel Graybound—The *Lizard's* feisty captain believes in 3 things only: hyperjumps, his crazy parrot and teddybears

Ludmilla Graybound—Graybound's young wife is the only person he fears

Torero—Graybound's mutant parrot may not be so crazy after all!

Col. Ludwig Rammbuggl—Would like to retrain the 'Cosmic Tramp'—if only to pronounce his name right

Lt. Rex Knatterbull—The *Lizard's* First Officer takes a blind leap

John Marshall—The Mutant Corps leader looks for some cosmic contraband

Ivan Ivanovich Goratschin—The 2-headed mutant becomes the ultimate weapon

Capt. Richard Flexner—Startramp's president needs a pirate-hearted skipper

Col. Jefe Claudrin—The Epsalian commander's *Fantasy* goes astray

Maj. Behnken—The patrol cruiser's commander meets more than his match

Henry Smith—The *Lizard's* brow-beaten radio man has no complaints

Lt. Mahaut Sikhra—Nepalese whose commando unit is leary of 'microbes'

Lt. Dopner—The Customs inspector will never forget teddybears

Tama Yokida—A master telekin

Cadets Jenner and Klod—Crewmen of Mal. Behnken's patrol cruiser

ALSO NOTED AMONG THE SURVIVORS

Maj. Hunts Krefenbac, Lt. Brazo Alkher, Sgt. Radler, Drs. Arnold Kalup, Garl Nkolate, Carl Riebsam & Slide Nacro.

...and the spaceships *Fantasy* and *Lizard*

TRAMP! TRAMP! TRAMP! TOWARD—MONSTERS!!!

PERRY RHODAN: Peacelord of the Universe

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

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Managing Editor: FORREST J ACKERMAN

WENDAYNE ACKERMAN

Translator-in-Chief
and Series Cöordinator

CHARLES VOLPE

Art Director

PAT LOBRUTTO

Editor

Sig Wahrman

Stuart J. Byrne

Associate Translators

PERRY RHODAN

VAGABOND OF SPACE

by Clark Darlton



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PROLOG

IT IS THE DAWN *of a new era for Mankind.*

Since the adventures described in our previous diary, 57 years have elapsed. On Earth it is now 2102 A.D. and much has happened in the meantime!

The Druuf danger has passed since the overlap zone between the two universes has become too unstable to permit further penetrations. Supported by Earthmen, the Arkonide Atlan has succeeded in consolidating his position as Imperator. The treaty between Arkon and the Solar Imperium has borne fruit-especially for the Terrans, many of whom have already taken over important positions on Arkon itself. Atlan has to tolerate this because he cannot rely on most of the members of his own race.

The Solar Imperium has become a major commercial power along the rim of the Milky Way. For the past 22 years a virtual stream of immigrants has been flowing out to suitable colonial worlds. Also, on many of the planets inhabited by other intelligences, Terran embassies have been established as well as Galactic trading settlements.

In short, for many humans the dream of their forefathers has been achieved-the journey to the stars. And the same is true for THE

VAGABOND OF SPACE...

1/ A QUESTION OF-TEDDYBEARS?!

BORDERING the great spaceport of Terrania were row upon row of adjoining, flat-roofed building complexes where shipping firms and trading companies had established their headquarters. Here they were at a vital centre and source of interstellar commerce.

Somewhat removed into the background behind the main periphery of these complexes was a small but rugged-looking edifice built of heavy masonry and stone. Although it appeared to be a military barracks-like structure, it was not, as was evidenced by the sign in front. When one came close enough one could read the lettering:

STARTRAMP LTD
Space Travel Enterprises
Proprietor: Capt. Richard Flexner, Retired

However, on this particular day—March 16 of the year 2102 A.D.—if one were to come this close one would become aware of a thundering voice and a startling string of expletives ranging through several octaves. An uninformed visitor might have paled before such a flood of vituperation and quickly retreated but the young woman who had just arrived by taxi and was now approaching the building with a sure, firm step appeared to be quite familiar with the operation. She wore a light summer dress, a broad-brimmed hat, carried a dainty handbag and currently modish sandalettes. Her features might have been considered soft and gentle were it not for the warning spark of enterprise in her eyes.

Ludmilla Graybound, née McBain, was not a woman to be trifled with, as her wedded husband knew only too well. It was this husband, in fact, who was making all the uncouth commotion inside the Startramp office, little suspecting that his wife was in the vicinity.

Capt. Samuel Graybound had jumped up from his chair as though he had sat down on a bed of red-hot nails. “You’re going to have to say that again, Rich—before I’ll believe I heard it! The Cosmonautic Retraining Institute...?! Now what kind of undiluted fusil oil is that?. And what do they want with me? Those crazy blockheads—they can go to the devil!”

The man opposite him was the epitome of self-possession at the moment. He was seated behind an old desk that had to be at least from the previous

millennium. He was leaning back comfortably with his feet propped up on the pock-marked top. “My dear Sammy, you know that excitement is bad for the blood-pressure,” he said in a kindly tone. “Just go see them and then you’ll find out what they want from you. I don’t know any more than you do about it.”

“Cosmonautic retraining...!” Sam Graybound was not to be pacified. “As if there was anything they could retrain me in! These armchair commodores! They can take their retraining and—”

“Just take it easy!” warned the other man, who was none other than the head of the firm, Capt. Richard Flexner, Retired. “Don’t you jump the gun! After all, the Institute is under the Solar Administration. We have to give that some consideration.”

“Consideration... pah! We’re a private commercial company with 6 of our own space freighters. What’s there to retrain about with those? Are we going to all be working for the Government in the future? That’d be about all we need! It might jolt their sensitivities to know what we’ve stashed away behind our hatches now and then...”

“Be careful!” Flexner whispered in sudden dismay, while looking about as though for invisible eavesdroppers. “Not so loud! You’re bellowing loud enough to be heard in Terrania!”

“As far as I’m concerned they might as well hear it in Arkon!” raged Capt. Graybound heatedly. He stroked his matted red beard which did nothing to beautify his bilious countenance. His somewhat bulbous nose fairly trembled as though it were an indicator of his high agitation. His hamsterlike cheeks had lost their normal flabbiness, having suddenly taken on hard lines of anger and tension. It was a sure sign that he was close to exploding. “Look! Anybody who doesn’t blark (blackmarket) today is his own fool!”

Flexner turned pale. “Sammy, you calm down right now! Are you trying to scuttle us? Our name may not be the best in the business but we can’t afford to lose it! You’re supposed to be my partner, at least according to the stock shares that your esteemed papa-in-law is holding. We’ll both be keel-hauled if you don’t secure that trap of yours!”

Graybound was about to retort when he heard foot-steps in the hall. Startled, he swallowed hard and turned to stare as though hypnotized as the old-fashioned door latch began to turn. Flexner was also alarmed. A visitor? Hopefully he hadn’t heard more than he should. But then he sighed with relief as he recognized the graceful figure of Ludrilla Graybound.

She stepped into the room, closed the door behind her and turned to face both men with her hands on her hips. “What’s all the thundering about in here?” she wanted to know as she glared at her husband. “Come on, now—out with it!”

Sam Graybound was 52 years old while Ludmilla was obviously in her early 20s. Of course since her marriage she had abandoned some of her girlishness but anyone observing the married pair would have been struck by the difference between them at first glance. The old captain feared nothing in the world and

bowed to no authority. There was no danger that could deter him from carrying through an objective. With his own hands he would have pulled the Devil's hair out if someone asked him to, provided he knew where to find him. But where his little wifey was concerned it was a matter of unconditional surrender.

"But darling!" he crooned affectionately while pointing to a chair. "Don't you want to sit down first? We're just having a routine business meeting..."

"How often have I told you not to lie to my face?" she snapped at him while pushing his hand away. "Leave me alone, I can seat myself!" When she had sat down she continued quickly. "Since when is mixing my father's name with blarking and smuggling a matter of routine business?"

"We ought to put in soundproof walls around here," muttered Graybound shakenly as he pulled up a chair.

When he placed his weight on it, Flexner said a silent prayer. He was worried about his furniture. Graybound was stocky and had a powerful physique although his paunch was like a keg.

"What's this about smuggling?" Ludmilla demanded. As her eyes flashed at him, Graybound cringed involuntarily.

"We were only speaking in generalities," said Flexner, attempting to save the situation. "What's more important, my dear, is that your husband has received a summons."

"You mean a warrant...?" Ludmilla was genuinely shocked.

"No—a summons to the Cosmonautical Retraining Institute. The document was delivered early this morning. As you're no doubt aware, your man was supposed to take off today in the *Lizard*, en route to the Tuglan System."

"Yes, I know. Children's toys and teddybears for the little Tuglans. He told me about it."

"Oh yes, that's right, Mrs. Graybound. And especially teddybears. They're highly valued there and bring a good price." Flexner smiled non-committally. "Why, teddybears from Terra are among the most popular export items!"

Judging by Ludmilla's expression she was very sceptical about his assertions. Not that she had anything against teddybears but she was certainly wondering why they didn't manufacture the cute little stuffed creatures locally on Tuglan. "And then you received this summons?" she asked, trying to be convinced. She watched Sam Graybound who returned her gaze with obvious uncertainty. "What do they want with you? Have you been up to something?"

For a moment he lost his composure. "How should I know what those ox-heads want?" he shouted but immediately he became docile and meek again. "Excuse me, sweetheart. I mean—I don't know. I can't even imagine what it's all about."

"Retraining?" she queried thoughtfully. "At your age they probably won't be able to change much in you, wouldn't you say...?"

Graybound stiffened. He would not tolerate any aspersions cast concerning his age, especially from his own wife. He controlled himself with a great effort. "Age

doesn't make any difference," he advised her sternly. "A man is always as young or old as he feels."

Ludmilla smiled. "I'll have to remind you of that at the earliest opportunity." Then the smile faded. "Well, if you don't know what this summons is all about you should go there and maybe you'll find out. When are you supposed to go?"

"This afternoon—right away."

"I'll wait for you here in Mr. Flexner's office."

"Oh—that will be nice," sighed Flexner, glancing mischievously at his first captain and associate. "I'm sure we won't be bored!"

"That I can believe!" growled Graybound as he regarded the firm's president testily.

Flexner was the same age as he was but because of his leaner figure he appeared to be younger. He was unattached and had the reputation of a Don Juan. Throughout Terrania he was known as a good spender and a charming ladies' man. This wasn't very reassuring for Graybound but where Ludmilla was concerned he wasn't worried. The only thing that galled him was that she always had to be the first to know about whatever came up. Anyway it was none of her business.

"Well, guess I'll blast off. Retraining...! They're completely off their rockers! For all I know they'll assign me back to cadet camp!" He lifted his weight from the overburdened chair and strode to the door.

"Now watch yourself and don't do anything stupid!" his wife admonished him. "Just remember that there are people who are bigger and carry more weight even than you!"

"Pah!" was Graybound's only rejoinder as he slammed the door behind him.

Once through the hallway and out in the open he gave free rein to his feelings. He carried on a monologue with himself and called himself a fool for even answering the summons. After he had gotten a hundred meters or so away from the office his voice became louder. Nobody could overhear him now and it was a big relief. "These lousy rattlebrains!" he cried out. "So maybe they know a few scraps of theory but what's that got to do with practical experience? Nothing! Absolutely nothing! Regulation jockeys! Officials! Pah!"

With resolute steps he hurried to the parking place on the edge of the spaceport where his rental car was located. He unlocked it and threw himself into the upholstered seat, which creaked complainingly under his weight. But before he drove off he looked over toward the hangars.

There stood three ships belonging to the Startramp operation. All of them were somewhat antiquated freighters—spherical spacers, hypertransition types, no more than 80 meters in diameter. Inside were mostly cargo holds, narrow cabins and the engines. There was no room for luxuries. Only the *Lizard* was equipped with a few little extra items but then that was no one's concern except Capt. Graybound's and his 18-man crew.

"Retraining" he snorted, yet with some tribulation. "Maybe I can make it easy

for them!”

Then the car started off in a single lurch and transported Capt. Graybound to Terrania.

* * * *

It was a giant skyscraper on the edge of the city. A thousand office suites. Green grass strips and benches all around it. Nearby were the workshop labs and the experimental stations—another complex beyond it that was all fenced in and posted with guards.

This was the Cosmonautical Retraining Institute.

Chief Inspector Col. Ludwig Rammbuggl sat behind his massive desk and rummaged through the stack of papers that had been brought in to him. He was assisted by his secretary.

“Some new selections from the positronic brain—from yesterday and today. The applicants are scheduled to present themselves starting today, sir. I’ve taken care of everything necessary.”

“Very good, Pierre. Do we have any ‘draftees’?”

By ‘draftees’ he meant members of the space and merchant fleets who had not voluntarily applied for retraining but who had been classified by the positronic brain as likely candidates on the basis of all available data.

“Yessir, there’s one. A certain Capt. Samuel Graybound.” The secretary leafed hastily through the forms and finally pulled one set out that he handed to the colonel. “Here’s his dossier.”

Col. Rammbuggl studied the papers. Ordinarily serene, his face became clouded with concern. His brow furrowed ominously. With increasing impatience he leafed through the dossier and finally looked up in outraged amazement. “The Brain must have made a mistake,” he announced. “Some kind of mixup, surely!”

“Impossible, sir. You know as well as I do that mistakes are out of the question.”

“But that *is* the question!” retorted Col. Ludwig Rammbuggl disconcertedly. “Why this... this...” He looked at the papers. “This Capt. Graybound would never be suitable for handling one of the new class of ships! I’m even convinced he won’t show up at all. A chrako (character) like this fellow...”

The intercom buzzer interrupted him and the secretary hurried anxiously to switch it on. “Col. Rammbuggl’s office,” he answered.

“A Capt. Graybound is here. He has a summons...”

“Send him in!” interjected the colonel and then he leaned back in his chair. “Can you figure that? He’s responded to the summons!”

“Maybe you could be wrong, sir. The man might turn out to be more usable than you suspect. Often these private citizen dossiers aren’t as complete as they could be.”

“Perhaps,” the colonel conceded. “We’ll soon see.”

In fact they saw at once as the door banged open and Capt. Samuel Graybound stormed into the office. He stared first at Pierre, the secretary, and then at Col. Rammbuggl. His red hair was in a tangled mess and his flailing beard was equally wild and in need of grooming. His cheek pouches trembled with his angry impatience.

“Who sent me this idiotic garbage?” he roared in stentorian tones as he slammed the notice on Rammbuggl’s desk. “I have better things to do than to mess around with you ground-tied penzel jockeys!”

The colonel’s face flushed red. Twice he gasped almost in vain for his breath. Pierre drew back and stared at Graybound as though a monstrosity had been unleashed in their midst. He had never seen anyone comport himself like this in front of his chief.

“What...?!” stammered the colonel. “I *beg* your pardon!”

Graybound was momentarily fascinated by the beetlike colouration of the officer’s face. He stared as though at a scientific phenomenon. Then he shook his head and looked around for a chair. Not finding any, he was compelled to remain standing, but he leaned forward and braced his hands on the desk, which took his weight without complaint.

“My name is Graybound,” he said. “Capt. Samuel Graybound, commander of the freighter *Lizard*, with Startramp Limited. And who are *you*?”

Col. Rammbuggl was slowly recovering but the question sounded so contemptuous that he almost exploded and the reddish hue of his countenance acquired purplish overtones. “I am Col. Ludwig Rammbuggl, Chief of Personnel Procurement.”

Graybound leaned slightly closer and stared at the other incredulously. “Ramm-boogle...?” he said, and then burst out laughing. “By the rings of Saturn—man, what a *name*!”

“Sir? I—I beg your pardon...!”

Graybound still couldn’t believe it. “You mean nobody’s ever mentioned it to you—I mean, you aren’t aware of it? Then it’s high time somebody told you what a screwy-sounding...”

“*Sir...!*”

Graybound nodded with emphasis. “You got it right, buddy—and I’ll break anybody’s neck who calls me anything else!” He drew a deep breath. “Now will you be a good little fellow and let me in on what’s going on? Why did you ask me to come here?”

Having slightly risen from his seat, the colonel sank back finally and leafed through the dossier papers. “You are Capt. Samuel Graybound?”

“I think I introduced myself already. What’s the matter—you slow on the uptake or something?”

“You will merely answer my questions, nothing more. So are you or are you

not?”

Graybound sighed heavily and looked as though he were about to explain the multiplication tables to a child. “Yes, that’s me.”

The colonel looked at the papers again. “Married to Ludmilla, maiden name McBain?”

“Unfortunately,” Graybound grumbled.

“Partner in the firm of Startramp Ltd. and commander of the freighter *Lizard*, with an 18-man crew complement?” Col. Rammbuggl clearly indicated that he did not wish to be interrupted now, not even by answering confirmations. “As a young man you were an officer in the Terran Spacefleet but because of drunkenness and proven insubordination you were discharged...”

“False!” Graybound contradicted quite calmly. “I turned in my resignation papers before the jerks had a chance to kick me out. Please keep that in mind, Rumboogie.”

“Rammbuggl!” exclaimed the colonel, flaring up again.

“That’s no improvement,” commented Graybound sympathetically. “So okay—it’s Rammbuggl.”

“*Colonel!*” shouted the officer at the top of his voice.

Graybound shook his head. “I’m just a captain, if you don’t mind...”

The colonel gave up, returning to the dossier. “You were then a commercial captain of a first-line freighter for General Cosmic Company. After two years you left them to join Startramp Ltd., after marrying the only daughter of...” He checked the file again. “Ephraim McBain, who was the principal stockholder. That’s how you became a partner.”

“Yeah, but far from a silent one,” Graybound assured him candidly. Then his anger returned. “Hey, how come all this snooping around in my personal laundry? You take care of your own mess—and there’s plenty of that around here!”

Col. Rammbuggl’s face turned scarlet as he rose out of his chair. “You just watch your language!” he shouted indignantly. “If you don’t I’ll have you thrown out!”

“I’ll save you the trouble,” replied Graybound as he turned to leave. “What am I doing here, anyway?”

“You will stay!” roared Rammbuggl in desperation. He knew how hopeless the case was but he had his regulations to follow, so he returned to the dossier. “So you married your wife...”

“Sounds logical,” Graybound admitted thoughtfully. “I’d say that’s the only way you can get a wife, by marrying her. So that’s what I did.”

Rammbuggl composed himself and sat down again. “She’s quite young. Doesn’t the difference in ages matter?”

“Not to me—you want to make something of it?”

The colonel skipped the personal part of the file. “According to the further data here you were reported on twice for attempted smuggling. The evidence wasn’t

conclusive enough so that's why you're still a free man... so far. In addition..."

"All that's just slanderous hogwash," Graybound interrupted. "Bunch of jealous hotheads—just envious, that's all. Don't you run into that sort of thing, yourself?"

"All I can say is that you got off on insufficient evidence. At any rate you appear to have a rather loose relationship with the law."

"For which there's also insufficient evidence!" Graybound challenged triumphantly.

"Hm-m-m..." The colonel searched further through the file of papers, finally picking up a blue card that had escaped his notice before. As he read it carefully his brow furrowed and finally he shook his head. "Here I have your evaluation summary from the positronic Brain, after we fed it your background. According to this it clearly indicates that you are a capable and experienced space pilot. The Brain further stipulates that you should be requisitioned for retraining and that you are a suitable candidate for handling one of the new class of ships."

Graybound reacted with new interest. He came closer again and leaned on the desk. Making room for himself he shoved some of the papers to one side and a few of them fell to the floor. Pierre zealously collected them and replaced them with the others.

"New ships? What does that mean?"

Col. Rammbuggl drew a deep breath. The time had come. This uncouth individual was going to be surprised.. With something of the air of a prophet he said, "What I'm talking about is the new trans-light linear spacedrive, which has been developed within the past number of decades. At present, Perry Rhodan himself is on a test flight with a larger prototype—experimental. He has not yet returned..."

"And he won't ever *get* back!" exclaimed Graybound, giving voice to his fears. "How can Rhodan stick his neck out like that with such an untried contraption?! He should have stuck with the old tried and true. The jump buggies are the only way to fly!"

"You need not concern yourself about the First Administrator," advised the colonel. "At any rate, other linear-drive ships will soon be deployed into units of the Fleet and for that reason we need capable commanders. In the Institute all candidates will be retrained. And that's why you're here!"

"Retrained? Me?" Graybound was frankly amazed. "You chose me of all people—for that? Man, you've snapped your coördinates!"

"I must ask you to please..."

"Go ahead and ask all you want, Col. Drambui! It won't do you any good! I'm sticking with the old faithful methods of space travel and I don't want anything to do with all this new-fangled baloney! Just tell that to your upstairs brass! Can I go now?"

"My name is Rammbuggl!" blustered the colonel in a last attempt to rescue his good name from this human bulldozer. "What you want or don't want is immaterial. The robot Brain has decided and..."

“Alright, hold it right there! What the devil is that electronic junkpile to me? I’m free to make my own decisions—or is somebody trying to change that around, too? Is this a democracy or isn’t it? Now take it or leave it—I won’t—and that’s that!”

“Wait!” Rammbuggl called after him. “You can’t simply cancel out of here without taking an examination! If you don’t pass the preliminary then nobody’s going to insist that you go into retraining.”

“Exam?” asked the old captain suspiciously. “What kind of exam?”

“Technical knowledge, character qualifications, general education—and whatever else...”

“Character qualifications, you say?” Graybound sighed his relief. “In that case I’ve flunked out already. Goodbye.”

“Stop!” the colonel shouted. “You have to wait—there’s still a test to take...”

Capt. Graybound hesitated. He slowly turned to regard the colonel speculatively. Then he finally nodded. “Well, I suppose you’re right. So here’s a test for you...” His voice changed suddenly. He stepped forward and thundered at the top of his lungs. “You’re the silliest blockhead on this whole silly planet—sawdust for brains! You’re a... a... yes, that’s what you are—*space debris*, Col. Bamboozle!”

“My name is Rammbuggl!” shrieked the colonel, choking in rage and confusion. The secretary cowered in a corner, staring at the scene as though it were a prelude to Armageddon. “I’ll have you arrested for libel! This is the very limit!”

“You mean I didn’t pass the test?” inquired Graybound politely, suddenly back to a normal tone again. “Or would you prefer a few more examples? Once and for all, you’re not going to get me on board one of those new-fangled sneaker ships—I’ll stay with my sky-jumper. Have you got that into your head, you imitation desk admiral? Get your sneaker crewmen somewhere else!”

From that moment on the spaceman’s name for the new linear-drive ships was destined to be the ‘sneakers.’ This was their baptism but neither Graybound nor Rammbuggl suspected it.

The colonel grabbed a big red penzel from his desk and drew a heavy line straight across the blue card from the positronic Brain. “Unsuitable!” he gasped almost breathlessly. “Absolutely unfit! Either in character or culture. Get out of here, mister! I don’t ever want to see you again in my life! And if I hear the slightest hint about you-any stepping over the line of the law—you’ll be in for a surprise. So you just watch yourself, sir—we are not through with one another yet!”

“That’s an open case of coercion and intimidation,” muttered Graybound, who was inwardly relieved. “You can count yourself lucky if I don’t turn in a complaint about you.” He went to the door and opened it. “Well, so long, Col. Drumbucket!” He slammed the door behind him.

“Rammbuggl!” came the muffled shout of the colonel for the last time.

Capt. Graybound strode vigorously past the woman secretary in the reception room without paying any attention to her. He also slammed the second door and reached the corridor. Then he quickly found the exit, the parking lot and his car.

Retraining! Of all snobbish theories! That would be just up their alley, though, to try to get him back in the straitjacket of being honour bound to duty!

At a high speed that was way beyond the legal limits, he raced back to the Startramp office, parked the car and swaggered back to his friend and associate.

“So you’re back again!” observed Ludmilla, somewhat relieved. “We were afraid they were going to keep you there.”

“Those meatheads!” Graybound sat down in a chair. “Retraining!”

“I have to admit,” said Richard Flexner calmly, “that there’s nothing about you that seems to be retrained. Did you really show up over there? What was it all about, anyway?”

“They wanted to get me to take over one of those sneaker jobs—straight Civil Service. Completely flipped their lids!”

“Sneaker jobs?”

“Yeah, those new-fangled contraptions, if you want to know. Linear-drive ships is what they call them, I think.”

“Oh *those* things!” Flexner nodded. He had heard of them. “They shouldn’t bother us with that nonsense. There’s nothing better than the old transition method.”

“That’s my sentiment exactly!” Graybound seconded him. He got up and went over to his wife, placing a hand on her shoulder. “This red tape’s put me back an hour on my schedule already. I’ll be back in a few days, so goodbye, sweetie. Gotta get those teddybears to Tuglan, you know. The little Tuglan tykes are waiting for them.”

Ludmilla looked in desperation at Flexner. “Does he really have a cargo of children’s toys?” she asked and it could be seen by her expression that she suspected something more like infernal devices on board the *Lizard*.

“I guarantee it,” Flexner assured her guilelessly. “You know if there are any inspections the cargo has to agree with the manifest. You certainly can understand that, my dear Mrs...”

“You shouldn’t mix into my business, honey,” interrupted Graybound with an impatient edge to his tone. But all she had to do was give him her big sad eyes and he melted. “I’ll bring you something when I come back.”

After giving her a goodbye kiss, he picked up all the freight waybills and customs papers from the desk and stomped firmly out of the room. This time he took a taxi which brought him close to the edge of the takeoff pads. The three ships of Startramp Ltd. were parked right next to each other and crewmen could be seen hurrying back and forth in the area. From all appearances it seemed that the two sister ships were just being loaded. There was a long line of electric hoists in front of the cargo locks. But the *Lizard*’s hatches were closed. The crew must

be all present and accounted for on board by now. Their ground leaves had ended at dawn, which was some hours ago.

As Graybound clambered out of the taxi an officer of the Port Authority came toward him. He pointed at the *Lizard*.

“Your ship, Captain?”

“Come on, Dopner, you know that much, don’t you...?”

“While on duty, Captain, I know no one and assume nothing...”

Graybound could feel his old antagonism against red tape and bureaucracy steaming up inside of him but he controlled himself. This fellow Dopner was too important to be ruffled. “Oh sure, I forgot. Allow me! I’m Capt. Samuel Graybound, Startramp Ltd. And who might *you* be, sir...?”

Dopner had to swallow on that one. “I’m Lt. Dopner, Customs Clearance. What’s your cargo, Capt. Graybound?”

“Teddybears...”

The lieutenant swallowed again. At first he stared at Graybound and then at the *Lizard*. He finally put out his hand and almost groaned, “Your papers!”

After receiving the documents he studied them with interest. At the Terrania spaceport merchant ships and units of the Fleet landed and took off every hour. Smuggling was hardly profitable anymore. Besides being severely punished, private commercial firms were handling government business. The Port Authority Customs Control merely saw to it that each and every ship was cleared in accordance with regulations and even that was usually a mere formality.

“Teddybears, eh?” Dopner shook his head. “You can actually find a market for them?”

Having gotten his papers back bearing the lieutenant’s signature, Graybound felt more expansive. “Come and take a look at the cute little fellows,” he invited. “Maybe I can give you one—for your children...”

“I don’t have any children. I’m not married.”

“Well, that’s no reason...” Graybound started to insist but then thought better of it. “Can I get a take-off clearance?”

“You already have it, Graybound,” grumbled Lt. Dopner as he hurried away.

Even a close observer would not have thought that he and Graybound were actually good friends. But the Civil Service regulations did not allow such friendships to be considered while one was on duty.

Graybound mumbled something about hanging all bureaucrats as he turned to board his ship. For various reasons a full-dress cargo inspection wouldn’t have been particularly convenient just now. Once they had taken off the danger would be past.

A man was standing in the open personnel lock of the 80-meter spacesphere. From Graybound’s position he looked small and far away but the figure was familiar to him. He took a gantry lift up to the cross-ramp which bridged over into the lock.

“Hello, Rex!” he said, carelessly touching the brim of his cap in a salute of greeting. “I guess you boys have been standing on a bed of hot coals, haven’t you?”

“We should have blasted off an hour ago, Sam. What held you up?”

“Later! For now let’s hit it! I’ve got the take-off clearance!”

The other man wore a lieutenant’s uniform. His swarthy face did not give an outward impression of trustworthiness and his flattened pugilist’s nose advertised a history of brawling. Certainly there was a sparkle of good nature in his eyes but it was in absolute contrast to his outward appearance and mannerism. Rex Knatterbull, as first officer of the *Lizard*, was Graybound’s closest confidant.

“Everything’s ready, Sam.”

“Then let ’er rip!”

Graybound stepped into the lock and made sure that the service ramp automatically withdrew from the ship. Together with Rex he hurried to the commercial freighter’s Control Central and closed the outer lock door. This automatically brought the ventilation system into operation, just as though they were already in outer space. The viewscreens also came on and revealed the expanse of the spaceport with its numerous ships. In the distance was Terrania. The energy dome above the main positronic Brain could be seen faintly glistening in the rays of the sun.

“All hands at stations!” came an announcement from the P.A.

“Take-off in 10 seconds!” said Graybound.

* * * *

After the first transition they flew onward at less than the speed of light. Only now could the new course be checked out and calculated because Graybound had a lot more on his mind than just flying to Tuglan. His real destination was 12,618 light-years away and was called Glatra 3, a world occupied by the Galactic Traders. For some Earthly commodities those bearded ones paid some handsome prices but of course Earthly authorities were not supposed to know about this kind of business. And above all they should not find out that the *Lizard* was flying to a Springer planet.

The computers went to work. The positronic navigator swallowed the input data and calculated the next transitions.

When the two men were alone again in the Control Central, Rex Knatterbull spoke up. “There was still something you had to tell me—about what held you up...”

Graybound nodded but instead of answering he got up from his chair and opened the door of his cabin. Contrary to all spaceship tradition, his own quarters were right next to the Control Central.

“Now, now my little pet—you want to come out awhile?”

Rex sighed. He was quite familiar with the Captain's fussiness over that crazy parrot of his. Graybound appeared to love the bird more than he did his own wife. He took it on every flight and regarded it as a sort of talisman. He claimed it brought him luck and nobody could talk him out of such nonsense. Just the name, Torero, made the parrot enough of a character but it also talked a blue streak and often it said things that seemed to make sense. Any reasonable person would have considered it coincidence but Graybound always maintained that the parrot had more brains than most of the hands on board the *Lizard*.

The croaking voice was heard in the cabin. "Hi there, Gramps!" Then there was a fluttering of brightly coloured wings as Torero perched on Graybound's shoulder. No one but Torero could get away with calling him 'Gramps'. He finally came back into the Control Central with the bird and sat down once more.

"They ordered me to come to the Cosmo Retraining Institute or whatever the devil they call that madhouse! They wanted me to be captain of a linear-drive ship. At least that's what the positronic Brain came up with after an attack of insanity. Anyway, this Col. Ramm-Bubble gave me a test and found that I was unsuitable. That's about the gist of it."

"Ram-Bubble? Pretty funny-sounding name..."

"I wouldn't talk, with one like yours," grunted Graybound as he scratched the parrot's head. "At any rate I gave them a piece of my mind. Linear drive! A bunch of sneaky tomfoolery! I prefer the hyperjumps anytime, even though they say transition systems have had their day. I wouldn't give you the whole Solar Fleet for the *Lizard*. They can't hold a candle to her!"

"Hm-m..." muttered Knatterbull, "I wouldn't like to have to depend on that. So you mean they simply let you go?"

"Oh, there was a small difference of opinion but nothing worth mentioning. The colonel proved to be very understanding and he dropped me as a candidate. After that I was discharged."

"Sounds suspicious," said the First Officer. "Mighty, mighty suspicious!"

"Rubbish!" contradicted Graybound. "All that happened was the robot Brain goofed up. It's possible, you know."

"Off your rocker!" squawked Torero with startling clarity. And who could say whether the perfectly timed remark was coincidence or not?

"Aw, shut your ruddy beak, dummy!" snapped Rex impatiently. He couldn't stand the parrot. "You'll see, Sam," he continued, "you're not through with them yet! They don't give up that easily. They need their guinea pigs."

"You mean for the new ships?" Graybound pondered this. "You know, you may have a point there."

"Sure I do! Don't you see? They just pick up the people they think aren't suitable for other things; they shove them into their shiny new space crates and shoot them off to the stars. Then if they don't come back, all they've lost is the ship. Right?"

Graybound shook his head. "Not exactly. Do you think they want to get rid of

Rhodan too?”

“Nonsense! Whatever gave you that idea?”

“The fact that Rhodan himself is on a test flight right now in one of those new sneaker ships. If *he* can stick his neck out on a test like that, then maybe the whole thing’s more kosher (kosher) than we thought. Or do you think maybe...”

“Of course that changes the picture. In that case they must really be looking for some pretty straight, respectable candidates. Which makes it all the more amazing that they came to *you*, of all people!”

Graybound almost shot out of his chair, causing Torero to cling precariously on his shoulder. “What do you mean by that, you old swindler? You think maybe I’m not a straight, respectable spaceman, you has-been fleet commander?”

“Crook! Murderer! Rat-catcher! Sweetie pie!” shrieked Torero, and continued in such excitement that Graybound had to give him a whack. Only then was the bird silenced.

“I mean suitable—you know, for the whole grind of the retraining program,” Rex hastened to explain to his boss. “You have an amazing talent, Sam, for misunderstanding everything...”

“So has that colonel!” laughed Graybound. “Man, I sure let him have it! Hm-m... then maybe the positronic Brain was right—I’m a capable and ingenious commander, after all. You know those think-machines can’t make any mistakes...”

“You just got through saying the opposite,” Rex muttered cautiously.

“Well, after all, a person has a right to change his mind,” retorted the old Skipper.

The nav-computer chucked out a card, which Rex picked up and examined. “Transition commit,” he announced. “Variance from our declared course is considerable. If Big Brother spots that...”

“It would be by accident...” Graybound checked the card and compared the data with the manifest papers, where the course he had filed with the Port Authority in Terrania was indicated. “Hm-m... A nice little difference, alright. But we can always say that our old bucket of bolts came up with the wrong calculations. They might swallow that.”

“Hardly,” said Rex doubtfully. “Ten seconds to go...”

* * * *

When they came out of hyperspace and rematerialised in the Einstein continuum of the normal universe, they had traversed a distance of 3000 light-years. The Tuglan System was almost in an exactly opposite direction.

“Next jump—30 minutes,” Rex announced. The First Officer was acting also as the navigator since with only 18 men the *Lizard* was actually undermanned. “We still have a little time.”

“What for?” asked Graybound, scratching his red beard in vague puzzlement.

Rex remained silent because a man in civvies entered the Control Central, carrying a scratchpad.

“What the devil, Smith!” shouted Graybound impatiently. “You should stay in the Com Room and not bother us unless you have to!”

“Wave-tamer!” squawked Torero appropriately.

Henry Smith was of delicate frame and apparently of a shy disposition, seemingly not at all suited to this environment. But it was a false impression. Like everyone else on board the *Lizard*, Smith had a few murky spots in his past and no one knew his real name. But he was an excellent Com man and electronics technician and that alone counted with Capt. Graybound.

“You keep your beak out of this!” exclaimed the latter, scolding his parrot. “Alright, Smith, what is it?”

“Radio signal,” replied the Communications man succinctly. “Translight transmission but not hypercom. Source—about 5 light-hours from here.”

Graybound jerked around. “So you wait till *now* to tell me? If that’s a picket ship of the Fleet...”

“It’s a cruiser, sir—heading straight at us.”

The First Officer jumped to his transition indicators. Still 28 minutes to the next programmed hyperjump. Much too much time.

“Heading for us?” gasped Graybound in startled dismay. “What do they want?”

“They didn’t say,” confessed Smith not too hopefully. “But what could they want of us? Declaration of course? Cargo inspection...”

“Muck-head!” said Torero, but as to whom the barb was aimed no one could be sure.

An uncontrolled hyperjump involved a number of dangers. A ship could go astray and never return. Of course all transition data were memory-stored in the nav computer and there was a possibility of reconstructing one’s course but it was a risk that even Sam Graybound could not become enthused about. Yet it was preferable by far to an inspection out here by the Military.

“Don’t give them an answer, Smith! Just keep your receiver open and don’t make a peep. Notify me when they start to come into range. That’s when we’ll have to pull out. For a calculated jump the countdown is still 25 minutes.”

Smith exited the room while Rex busied himself at the flight console.

“We could make a jump any time, Sam...”

“Hang in there, Rex—not yet! If we do it now and we’re lucky enough not to get lost, we’ll have to start all our calculations from scratch. So keep the regular program running. If the cruiser doesn’t crowd us too soon, we’ll make a normal jump. If it gets here in a big hurry—we’ll jump blind—anywhere... We’ll come out of it somehow—I hope.”

“Blockhead!” croaked Torero.

Graybound uttered a sulphurous oath. He took the parrot from his shoulder and

held it directly in front of his eyes. “Didn’t I tell you to keep your mouth shut, you little buzzard? I’ll lock you in the cellar, do you understand?”

Torero decided to shut his beak, which gained him the advantage of being placed back on Graybound’s shoulder instead of being locked in the cellar. Of course it wasn’t an actual cellar; what was meant was the *Lizard’s* ‘weapons cabinet’ which was located behind an innocent-looking bulkhead between the walls of the double hull. No one would be able to find the place unless the ship were dismantled. That was how well it was concealed and this was important because ordnance was not permitted on board commercial ships of this class. This fact alone gave Graybound reason to fear an inspection but there were also other weapons on board as well. There were even regular energy cannons that could destroy a cruiser if necessary—that is if it stood still long enough.

10 minutes passed in galling uncertainty until Smith came rushing back into the control room.

“The cruiser’s jumped! She popped up within less than a light-minute from us. The commander demands that we heave to and prepare for a prize crew to come on board. He also wants to know why we don’t answer.”

Rex spoke first: “Maybe we can hold them off 10 more minutes—that would be all we need.”

Graybound nodded. “Very well, Smith. Put that connection through to the Control Central. I’ll talk with that nosy skipper myself!”

20 seconds later the hard face of an officer of the Solar Fleet appeared on the viewscreen. His brow was furrowed by a frown of anger. “What are you thinking of—not to answer a cruiser call? Open your locks for inspection!”

First, Graybound tried to handle the situation the nice way. “It’s our com system, sir... it must be defective. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn’t. Happened again this time!”

“Don’t hand us that old fairy tale! We’ve heard it before. Identify yourself!”

“Freighter *Lizard*, of Startramp Ltd.—Commander, Capt. Samuel Graybound. Cargo consigned Tuglan...”

“Graybound?” groaned the officer, half incredulous. “The Startramp skipper with the parrot?” A pleased grin suddenly appeared on the man’s face. “We’ve lucked in! I’ll wager you wouldn’t be too happy to have some visitors over there just now, would you?”

“We’d even welcome a visit,” Graybound lied. In fact at the moment he cursed his own unsavoury reputation.

“Ah, so there’s your parrot, I see!” The officer had noticed Torero sitting on Graybound’s shoulder. “Is it actually as smart as they say it is?”

“Meathead!” exclaimed Torero with unmistakable clarity.

It startled the officer. “Graybound, are you a ventriloquist?”

Graybound glanced at the chronometer. Still 5 minutes to go.

“Well, sometimes,” he admitted modestly. “But not now.”

“Hm-m... OK, so let’s knock off the levity. Open your hatches. The boarding detail’s on its way. I’ll come later.”

Smith called from next door. “They’re coming across, sir—6-man team!”

Rex looked worried. He had his hand on the override lever that would activate a ‘wild’ hypertransition. Graybound nodded his readiness but without giving the final signal. He didn’t want to just disappear without an explanation.

“Listen, Lieutenant, I don’t want to endanger your men, so I can’t let them come any closer. Don’t try to follow us. We’re under top secret orders and you can make trouble for yourself—do you understand?”

“Meathead!” repeated Torero with special emphasis.

Graybound signalled to Rex. The override lever slammed home.

The enraged cruiser commander, who was a major instead of a lieutenant, saw the *Lizard* disappear before his eyes. The prize boarding crew came to a stop in mid-flight, after which the men returned to the cruiser without having accomplished anything. The delay made it too late for pursuit.

The infamous Capt. Graybound had taken his *Lizard* into a hyperdive and was lost in the starry sea...

10 ADVENTURES FROM NOW

The Mystery of Who
is behind the
False Front

2/ A WORLD OF LIVING HORROR

On board the research ship *Fantasy*, Perry Rhodan and his men had not fared much better. When leaving Akon, 40,000 light-years distant from Earth, they became lost in the interstellar void. Although nothing was wrong with their new linear spacedrive, they attributed their disorientation to their quick ‘getaway’ from Akon.

The *Fantasy* was a spacesphere in the *Terra* class of heavy cruisers with a 200-meter hull; it had been partially redesigned to make room for the new space propulsion system. Instead of making hypertransitions it was capable of moving linearly through space at millions of times the speed of light. The principle had been acquired from the Druufs but it had been considerably revised and probably even improved upon.

During the flight of the *Fantasy* into the centre of the galaxy the ship had accidentally streaked through the blazing core of a sun. Its forcefield had been altered so that it simulated the characteristics of the system-wide blockade screen surrounding Akon. Thus the Blue System of Akon had acted as the counter-pole of a huge transmitter, drawing the *Fantasy* toward it. So the discovery of the home planet of the Akons had not been purely an accident. After the stellar collision their new course had been the effect of natural laws.

And now the return flight—lost... Where was the Earth?

* * * *

They were sitting in Rhodan’s cabin and were connected on video with Jefe Claudrin. But at the moment Claudrin had switched them to a view of the outer immensities. The unusually heavy profusion of stars revealed only too clearly that they were close to the centre of the galaxy. And they knew that the Earth, on the other hand, was located relatively toward the galactic periphery in one of the spiral arms that did not contain such a stellar density as this. But they had to find that area again if they were to have any chance at all of getting back. They had already sent out their first distress signal on a hypercom beam but it was problematical since they didn’t know their position.

“We’ve located a suitable target star, sir,” said Col. Jefe Claudrin over the intercom. “We’re heading toward it at 1 million speols. From that vicinity I

believe I could take some new position measurements.”

Reginald Bell was sitting next to Rhodan and he sighed. “You know this linear drive doesn’t particularly impress me. Sure, you can take a nice scenic tour of the galaxy and see a lot of stars. But is it really much faster than usual and is the system any safer? Until we’re positive, I’d rather stick to hyperjumps.”

“What about the pains of rematerialisation?” Rhodan reminded him.

“They were tolerable, Perry. A heck of a lot better than losing our bearings.”

Rhodan stared pensively at the fiery spectacle of the concentrated stars. Here the constellations had become distorted beyond any possible recognition. But the fact that they distorted themselves proved the ship was really moving! According to Maj. Hunts Krefenbac, their position now was somewhere between Akon and the Earth but he could not be certain of just where. Krefenbac was an experienced cosmonaut. At the first favourable opportunity he would recognize one of the constantly changing constellations and thus get his coördinates.

“Everything that’s new has to be tested, just like this,” said Rhodan. “You see, we were the guinea pigs, but now we know what improvements have to be undertaken. For example, the Kalup compensators...”

“How is that, please?” The question came from a huge man who was lying half-asleep in a form chair. He appeared to be over 6 feet tall. He had a fairly shiny bald head and pudgy cheek pouches. From his outward appearance one would hardly take him for one of Earth’s most capable hyper-physicists. “What fault do you find with my compensator, sir?”

“My dear Kalup, I have no complaints about it, but you’ll have to admit that certain improvements would be appropriate. It seems to me its operation is a bit too complicated. I find no fault in the actual operation of the converter itself but if it were to break down we’d really be in a bind. The only way you can make repairs is after we’ve landed.”

Dr. Arnold Kalup was pacified so he sank back again into the upholstered chair. “Oh that...! But you don’t have any other complaints about it?”

“None for the moment,” replied Rhodan as he looked again at the viewscreen.

Bell stretched his legs. He let Kalup get away with his little snub, which had been subtly camouflaged. Besides, the man was too valuable. But his cynical and arrogant ways were upsetting to Bell because whenever he got into a verbal duel with him he always came out on the short end. So he preferred to keep his mouth shut.

At the rear of the cabin the mathematician, Carl Riebsam, and the physician, Dr. Gori Nkolate, were conversing, but inasmuch as their voices were low the subject of their discussion remained a mystery to the others. Nor did anyone have a chance to find out.

A sharp jolt ran through the ship. Alarms screamed as two more jolts of equal strength wracked the vessel. The voice of the Chief Engineer shouted excitedly above the tumult: “Attention! Explosion in Sector BN-8! Extent of damage unknown. All machine rooms sealed off by automatic hatches—there’s a vacuum

leak!”

Rhodan had jumped to his feet. He looked at Kalup. “Your sector, Professor! The converters...!”

Kalup nodded calmly before getting up. “You see? You shouldn’t speak of the devil if you don’t want him to show up!”

Another emergency announcement came over the speaker: “Vacuum break confirmed. All hands remain at your stations. Get into your spacesuits! Stand by for further instructions.”

Rhodan hesitated for a second or so but then he realized that in the final analysis the whole load of responsibility rested on his shoulders, even though just now the emergency orders were being issued by Slide Nacro, the Chief Engineer. Rhodan’s place was in the Control Central with the commander, Col. Claudrin.

“You others stay here,” he said as he hurried to the door.

“Your spacesuit, Perry! We have a vacuum leak!”

Bell had jumped up and run to the built-in wall cabinet where the lightweight emergency suits were hanging. They were capable of preserving a man for a considerable time from the effects of airless space.

“No time now!” Rhodan called back. He was already out and sprinting down the corridor.

It was not far to the Control Central but he ran into a large number of crewmen who were hurrying along in spite of the order to remain at stations. They were all heading for their quarters to get into their emergency suits. Rhodan didn’t reprimand them; there wasn’t any time. Besides, it was the smartest thing they could do at the moment.

Col. Jefe Claudrin’s outward appearance was slightly reminiscent of the Mounders of Tophor’s clan. He was 5 feet tall and just about as wide, with a leathery brown skin and reddish hair. As a so-called EA, or environmentally adapted alien, he was accustomed to a 2.1 G gravity, so in spite of his awkward appearance he moved with a swift and sure dexterity which Rhodan never failed to marvel at.

“What’s the situation, Colonel?”

“Not good, sir. We can’t raise anyone in the machine rooms—no sign of life. I’m afraid they’ve had it, sir.”

The announcement was like an iron hand on Rhodan’s heart. He had no fear of possible danger affecting his own fate but he was suddenly fearful for the crewmen involved. They were men he might not have recognized by name but they had nevertheless freely volunteered to take part in this dangerous mission.

“Video intercom?”

“Blasted, sir. All connections out.”

It looked bad, alright. “Velocity?”

“We’ve dropped below light-speed, sir. Just going on our momentum. The explosion must have come from the Kalup converters.”

Rhodan knew that Kalup himself was not to be blamed. “Can you still manoeuvre?”

“Unfortunately not. The ship doesn’t respond to the controls anymore.”

Rhodan nodded slowly. “So we’re a wreck—no propulsion, without controls—finished!”

Col. Claudrin shook his head. “Shortly before it happened, sir, I was taking some tracking measurements. Three light-hours from here is a yellow-type sun like Sol. It probably has planets. Our flight line is practically straight toward it.”

“So? Are you saying we should attempt a landing with this derelict?”

“In the space-jets, sir. Not all the lifeboats could have been destroyed.”

Rhodan realized that Claudrin had held onto his nerves, in fact more so than himself. And it was exactly in moments like this that calm deliberation was more important than anything else.

“You’re right, Colonel. Find out how many auxiliary craft we still have at our disposal. I’ll look into the personnel situation.”

Before the commander could answer, Rhodan had already dashed out of the Control Central. He rushed through the corridor and jumped into the antigravitor, which brought him closer to the centre of the big spacesphere. He could hear Capt. Slide Nacro over some of the P.A. speakers that were still functioning in the area. The Chief Engineer was still giving instructions, making sure first of all that the survivors of the catastrophe stayed out of danger. His next orders pertained to the rescue parties which were to penetrate the disaster zone to render aid. From the gist of the instructions Rhodan was able to gather an idea of the extent of the damage. The whole propulsion area must have been destroyed. Only a few sections of the machinery had been spared. The power generators were still functioning as well as the life support systems. The only thing that remained a mystery was how a vacuum break had occurred, since the machine rooms encircled the damaged central zone.

Guided by Nacro’s instructions on the speakers, Rhodan pressed closer to the disaster area until he was stopped by an officer. This was Lt. Mahaut Sikhra, leader of the special commando task force. The rugged little dark-haired Nepalese had a reputation for pluckiness. He was directing the rescue operation.

“You can’t go beyond this point, sir.”

It seemed obvious. The force of the explosions had wreaked havoc in unsuspected places. Doors had been ripped out of their frames and torn and twisted debris was lying about in all directions. The vacuum of the void might have reached this area also if the hermetic hatches hadn’t held. They were now the only shield between the survivors and death.

“What’s the situation here, Lieutenant?”

“That’s what my men are trying to determine, sir. A small detail passed through an emergency lock into the engine-room area. I’m waiting for a report.” He held a micro-transceiver in his hand; it kept him in contact with his troops.

“Was the ship’s centre the only area that was hit?”

“Unfortunately not, sir. The explosion carved out a release channel. The weakest spots were the cargo holds and the hangars. The blast pressure tore out the bulkheads in that direction and caused further explosions in the weapons arsenal and in the lifeboats. Then came the ring-bulge engines. The detonations there tore off the cowling shields and produced an air leak. So in that direction there’s nothing left. I’m afraid the vacuum break-in took more lives than the explosion itself.”

Rhodan made no comment. The number of victims was still undetermined but it must be more than 100 men—maybe even 200. The ship itself was a wreck. Was there still a way out of this almost hopeless situation?

The micro-transceiver buzzed. Sikhra switched on. “This is Sikhra. Go ahead!”

“Sgt. Radler, sir. There are no survivors. All dead. If the vacuum hadn’t struck so suddenly, some of them might have made it to their emergency suits. But it all came too fast, sir.”

Sikhra looked silently at Rhodan. Then he spoke into the mike. “Alright, Radler, come back when you’ve checked everything. Seal off what you can, for salvage areas. Maybe there are still some quarters that remained airtight. Proceed cautiously.”

“You can depend on us, sir!”

Sikhra switched off while still looking at Rhodan. “We can’t do any more than that at the moment, sir.”

Rhodan only nodded to him. He experienced a terrible sense of emptiness. Did he himself bear the blame for this catastrophe? Or was it merely a statistical law that demanded sacrifices from tests of new discoveries? But could he perhaps have avoided such a sacrifice?

He turned around and headed back the way he had come. While en route he almost fell over Pucky the mousebeaver who materialized directly in front of him. As a teleporter, Pucky always found it easier to merely ‘jump’ from one location to another. Apparently he had located Rhodan telepathically in this case, so here he was.

“You couldn’t have kept the disaster from happening,” said the mousebeaver in his high-pitched voice. “Stop beating yourself over the head! Nobody’s responsible for that explosion—not even Kalup!”

“I’m not blaming anyone but thoughts can’t be helped,” returned Rhodan as he continued onward. Pucky waddled along behind him.

“Do you know how many men were killed?”

“I don’t know yet, but I do know there’s only a single space-jet that’s usable. All the others were destroyed. They were directly in the path of the blast as the expanding gases broke through.”

The space-jets were improved versions of the Gazelle scoutship class and were also disc-shaped. With a diameter of slightly more than 30 meters they didn’t

offer much room but in an emergency every compartment would have to be crammed full of survivors.

“We have to assemble all the survivors, Pucky. The main mess hall is still intact. Can you organize that operation?”

“Count on me, Chief!” nodded Pucky who was proud to be given an important assignment. He smiled briefly and then disappeared.

Rhodan headed for the Communications Central. He was thinking about sending out another distress call over the hypercom but unfortunately the idea was several minutes too late.

When he was within 20 meters of the door to the Com Room the deck seemed to rise up under his feet and he staggered wildly. As he reached out for support against the wall, the lights went out. Under his hands he could feel a familiar vibration dying out. The power reactors had ceased to function.

After that—an uncanny silence.

Rhodan collected himself and hastened onward. Being familiar with the corridor he was able to find his way in the dark. His groping hand found the bulkhead hatch and he pressed the release that opened it. And in that moment the emergency lighting came on which was powered by a bank of batteries. At least they had remained intact, apparently.

He was astonished to see Dr. Carl Riebsam, the mathematician. What business did he have here in the Com Room? Rhodan had thought he was back in his cabin where he had left him.

“You here?”

“You took off, sir, and nobody knew where you were. I figured we’d better get off a hypercom signal and we had just set up the call when the power reactor went out. I was just a minute too late.”

Rhodan’s flickering hopes suddenly faded. “So you mean you weren’t able to beam it out?”

Riebsam shook his head sadly.

Rhodan glared around at the radio panels. “You can’t make it on battery energy?”

“Only normal radio traffic, sir. And out here there’d be no purpose for that.”

Rhodan considered the point. “Why not? Our picket cruisers also patrol this section of the galaxy. Maybe one of them might just be in the area. So come on—let’s get on the air!”

Rhodan left him, knowing he could rely on Riebsam; he had other tasks of a more urgent nature to attend to. He had to make a last attempt to save the lives of the surviving crewmembers.

When he came into the Control Central, Pucky also made an appearance. Bell was already there, talking to Col. Claudrin. When he saw Rhodan he interrupted the conversation and hurried toward him.

“What’s the score, Perry? Is there any hope?” Rhodan nodded slowly. “There’s

always hope, as long as we are alive and can still use our heads.” He turned to Pucky. “Well, did you have any luck?”

“They’re collecting in the mess hall as ordered. So far there are 50 men.

“50?” Rhodan blanched. “Just 50 out of 300...?”

The mousebeaver made no reply. Having lost his usual ebullience he looked very sorrowful and forlorn.

“There have to be more than that,” interjected Claudrin. “I’ll get Nacro working on it. Many of the men may be in shock from the explosion, or maybe even paralysed from fear. They have to be brought to their senses.”

“Tell the men to proceed directly to hangar B. We’ll take off in the space-jet-in half an hour.”

Claudrin repeated the order and it was announced a minute later over what remained of the P.A. system. Rhodan had Pucky teleport him to the mess hall.

The officers, crewmen and scientists appeared to be confused and troubled. They were the survivors of a type of catastrophe which was not uncommon on the far star roads of interstellar space; in fact it was a disaster which few men ever lived through. They were among the few but the star road to safety was still an unknown way.

“We’ve blown some of the main bulkheads,” Rhodan told them. “Many of the airtight hatches have been damaged. Slowly but surely our air supply would either escape or go foul, because in the latter case the batteries aren’t strong enough to also handle the recycling system. So there’s no alternative but to abandon ship as soon as possible and there’s just one space jet left. We’ll take off in 25 minutes. Everyone will proceed to hangar B. You will put on your spacesuits—specifically the emergency suits, mind you. There are plenty of weapons and provisions on board the scoutship itself. So hurry it up, men, don’t waste any time.”

After that, Pucky and Rhodan also donned their suits. When they closed their transparent plastic helmets their air systems started to function immediately.

“Let’s take a last look at the machine rooms,” said Rhodan. “Maybe we can still find somebody.”

It was simple for Pucky to transport Rhodan with him in a teleport jump. All that was necessary was contact between them. The mousebeaver took hold of Rhodan’s hand—and ‘jumped’.

Five minutes prior to the stipulated time for takeoff there were 80 men assembled in hangar B. They were the only remaining survivors with the exception of Rhodan and Pucky, who came in last. Although the space-jet normally accommodated a crew of four there was still room for a number of men in the cargo holds and in the engine and power rooms. It had been a stroke of luck that the hangar B area had remained intact. Without the one remaining space-jet Rhodan and his men would have joined the legions of others who had never returned.

The quartering of the men on board the scoutship was accomplished without too much difficulty. Col. Claudrin also took over the pilot position here. He got

into the main flight seat immediately and waited for Rhodan's starting order. The giant hangar hatch swung open. The air rushed out at once, leaving them in the vacuum of the void.

Just as Rhodan nodded to Claudrin in a signal for take-off there was another explosion on board the *Fantasy*. The blast shock was so powerful that it shook the space-jet itself. Then the disc-shaped scoutship moved on the wide-gauge launch rails of the hangar and shot away into the blazing sea of stars. And not one of those glittering points offered a known point of reference.

Only the nearby yellow sun seemed to justify a lingering sense of optimism. There had been too little time, however, to make any instrumental observations of its specific nature. And even the theory that it might possess a family of planets was poorly supported by any known facts.

Prof. Arno Kalup maintained a reserved silence but his mind was working overtime. It was clear from his troubled expression that he was wracking his brain in a vain effort to explain the catastrophe that had occurred. Rhodan could sympathize with his situation but he gave him no words of consolation. He reasoned that the scientist had to wrestle with the problem first by himself.

The key men of the command and research staffs plus the mutants on board the *Fantasy* were fortunately among the survivors. In the twisted fate which had befallen them, Rhodan at least felt grateful for this. But as Claudrin made a course adjustment it was suddenly discovered that the ship only responded sluggishly to the controls. The colonel glanced quickly at Rhodan.

"Alright, Colonel," said Rhodan, "speak your mind. What's wrong with the jet?"

Claudrin answered with a shrug of his mighty shoulders. "I don't know but it looks as if this bird isn't as intact as we thought she was. I don't like the feel of her..." He fell silent for a moment while his practiced hands moved over the flight console. His deft, powerful fingers touched buttons and moved switches. Metre needles jumped, vibrated in place or fell back to zero. He looked up again. "Something's fouled up somewhere. Sir, we can't risk a hyperjump. We'll have to stay under light-speed. But maybe there's a Terran ship around here somewhere close."

"Perhaps," replied Rhodan pensively. He knew that this unknown part of the galaxy could be as much as 20,000 light-years distant from Earth, that is if the *Fantasy's* course indicator had been accurate. "I wouldn't depend on it," he added finally. "How about sending out an emergency call?"

The Com Room was directly adjacent to where the communications team had already set to work. However, a young lieutenant near the open door overheard Rhodan's question and countered it with a new piece of information.

"The hypercom is out, sir. Normal bands are all that's left."

Rhodan felt like gnashing his teeth. Was everything going haywire all at once? No hypercom! It was just about a foregone conclusion that no ship would be close enough to pick up a normal light-speed transmission in under a hundred years.

“Try it anyway,” he finally ordered.

Claudrin managed to veer the course enough so that the ship was heading straight toward the yellow sun.

Within about 5 hours they would be close enough to it to tell with any certainty whether any planets were there, which so far was only a supposition. And what would happen if they found none? Rhodan didn't care to pursue the thought of this possibility.

* * * *

“Four planets, sir.” The announcement was made by Hunts Krefenbac, the First Officer.

“Thank you, Major. Do any of them show any promise?”

“The inner one is molten. The two outer ones are methane giants. The second planet seems to be favourable. Breathable atmosphere but no continents or oceans. It's just a single land mass without vegetation.”

Rhodan turned to Claudrin. “Head for the second planet and try for a landing. We have no other choice.”

During the past 5 hours Rhodan had had time to become convinced of this fact. The space-jet was far too small to carry the 82 survivors for long. Of course the provisions and water supply would hold out for some time but men needed room to move around in. The final blast on board the *Fantasy* had caused damage to the scoutship which could not be ignored. The navigation controls were a case in point. At least it had come as an unexpected surprise.

The young lieutenant in the Com Room finally succeeded in getting out a short distress signal on the hypercom but even after a few seconds the transmitter's power was somehow shorted out. The beam pulse had been very brief and of low intensity. Only the most sensitive hyper-receivers would be able to pick it up—if at all. That is, if anybody was anywhere nearby. But not all ships of the Fleet possessed the special type of super-sensitive receiver that would be capable of detecting their signal. So although it gave them a spark of hope it was nevertheless a faint one.

The yellow sun was to their right as they approached the second planet. On the viewscreen they could now make out some of the surface details.

Bell appeared to have recovered from the shock of the ship disaster. “Looks pretty barren and monotonous down there,” he muttered. “No water, apparently—everything grey, without any forests or grasslands at all.”

“You're asking for a lot,” retorted Rhodan. “We can be thankful if we're able to land without a crash. This ship's propulsion unit needs repairs. Maybe we can find the trouble once we're safely down there. At least we'll have solid ground under our feet.”

They circumnavigated the planet twice at low altitude without discovering any

unusual features. There were no mountains or valleys nor any outstanding formations or any particular landmarks at all. The surface was a continuous, gently-rolling barren plain, a grey desolation without relief.

“That’s a funny kind of planet,” murmured Bell in a strangely husky tone of voice.

Rhodan was of the same opinion but he failed to comment. He did not wish to distract Claudrin from the imminent landing manoeuvres.

The colonel must have read his thoughts. “Actually it makes no difference where we land. One surface is the same as another. Shall we give it a try?”

Rhodan nodded but he spoke to the First Officer. “Make preparations for landing,” he ordered. “The planet appears to be uninhabited but distribute hand weapons. Give each man a heavy energy gun. The first troops on the ground will be Lt. Sikhra’s special commandoes. The other men will not leave the ship until he signals an all clear. We don’t want to risk having any more disasters.”

“You mean, sir...”

“I mean there’s even something wrong with the jet. The first thing we’ll do is to remove the main body of men far enough away from the ship. Then the technicians can take a look at the propulsion system. They may find out what’s wrong with it.”

In spite of his sluggish controls, Col. Claudrin succeeded in making a soft, smooth landing. Actually there was something too soft about it. It was almost as if the ground had offered a springy resilience to their contact. The viewscreens revealed the surrounding surface world in every detail. As indicated previously it was grey and devoid of any sign of foliage. Whether or not it was nothing but bare rock was not quite determinable on a visual basis alone.

Lt. Sikhra disembarked with five of his commandoes. They maintained contact with Rhodan and the others by radio. A native of Nepal, Sikhra had a reputation for his daring and bravery, yet he never made a move that wasn’t cautious and well-considered, especially when he wasn’t sure what he was facing. And such was the case today.

When the outer lock door opened, the air of the planet was found to be fresh and cool. The sun was high in the sky but did not seem to be exceptionally bright or hot. Its rays were apparently not strong enough to warm the surface very much or at least the ground wasn’t reflecting the kind of heat that might be expected. Perhaps the surface absorbed most of it...

Sikhra was the first to descend the landing ladder and set foot on this new world which was as yet unregistered on any Terran star maps. Although it had no name it was soon to receive one. The ground seemed to be strangely soft but he still didn’t suspect anything. It gave him a firm footing and he saw nothing threatening in the area. For the time being that was good enough. He signalled his men to follow him.

As they marched a small distance away from the ship, Sikhra had the impression of walking on the smooth, petrified swells of an ocean. The terrain was

gently undulating like this clear to the horizon without any variation or special markings. Like a level sea, it was without contour and monotonous.

“Air is good,” he signalled to Claudrin. “No life so far. Not too warm out here. The ground... hm-m...”

He stooped down and touched the surface with his hand. Instead of feeling cold it was faintly warm. Although it seemed hard it was not rock by any means. It was more like leathery skin.

Skin...?

“Nature of surface is undeterminable,” he reported. “It’s neither earth nor rock. Maybe we need a specialist out here, sir.”

“Have a further look around, Lieutenant.”

Shortly thereafter when Sikhra turned by chance to glance toward the ship, he was startled. Was the scout-ship standing in a depression of some kind? Or had it sunk that far into the ground? He also felt that his feet were sinking into the surface when he stood still and that’s when he became alerted.

“This surface isn’t stable, sir,” he reported. “The space-jet’s already sunk in a little.”

“Get yourself back here, Sikhra—on the double!”

As Sikhra started running with his men it seemed to him that a thousand greedy claws were clutching at his racing feet but it must have been his imagination. Or so he thought until he came close to the ship. The telescopic struts had disappeared completely into the greyish substance. He let his men pass him first up the ladder and then followed them.

The outer hatch had barely closed behind him before the propulsion units began to howl. Ignoring all else, he hurried into the Control Central to give a personal report. But even while in the crowded corridors he was aware of the fact that the disc-shaped vessel was not moving, in spite of the continued howling of the engines.

When he entered the Control Central he saw Rhodan standing next to Claudrin. Both men were staring as though entranced at the viewscreen where the monotonous surface of the planet still appeared to be unchanged.

Maj. Krefenbac came up to Sikhra. “I’m afraid you tipped us off too late,” he said gravely. “We’ve landed on a planet of mud!”

Sikhra shook his head negatively. “No, sir, that’s not mud or clay—it’s something else. Entirely different. It offers a fair amount of support. Maybe the jet’s just too heavy. It might not sink any farther, though.”

“We’re already mired in so we can’t take off—the engines aren’t powerful enough to hack it. Something’s grabbed onto us for good. We’re not getting loose.”

“I can’t understand it!” mumbled Sikhra, completely perplexed. “I was only outside for 5 minutes.”

Rhodan cut into this ticklish conversation. “Sikhra, it’s no fault of yours.

Nobody's to blame for the mess we're in. I'm afraid we're facing a completely unique situation. Just one question, Sikhra. Will the surface support a man?"

"Definitely, sir. It was only during that last second I realized I was sinking but it was because I had been standing there too long."

Rhodan frowned in thought. "That certainly doesn't sound as though we were dealing with ordinary mud or clay." He glanced quickly at Claudrin. After hesitating a few seconds he issued orders. "Keep on trying for a lift-off, Colonel. In the meantime I'll see to it that all hands are issued food and water supplies. They already have their weapons. We'll have to prepare ourselves for an extended stay on the planet—possibly without provisioning support from the ship."

"You can't mean, sir, that it may become submerged...?!"

Rhodan nodded. "But I do mean it, Colonel. It may sink more slowly when we've relieved it of our combined weight but the the elastic surface is thick enough it will certainly continue to sink. Who knows how far down the crust of the planet may be?"

By the time the first of the scientists stepped onto the surface of the uncanny world, the grey mass had already risen to the threshold of the outer airlock door. They were followed by the officers and crew. Rhodan was the last to leave the scoutship. As it was he had to climb up a cloying bank of the tough, yielding substance to get out and in his wake the greyish mass began to flow slowly into the vessel itself.

Within the space-jet all available energy was being automatically channelled into the radio transmitter, which was sending out an emergency call. No one could be certain whether or not the signals would be able to get through the mysterious mass of surface matter but they had to at least make an attempt to call for help.

Once removed to a safe distance, they all watched their lifeboat slowly sink from sight. They knew that the ground under their feet wasn't stable but it bore their weight. At least thus far.

When the upper dome of the scoutship disappeared completely, Rhodan switched on his micro-receiver and adjusted it to the wavelength of the distress signal. He heard nothing from the speaker. The grey mass absorbed the radio waves. Nobody would hear the call now—unless it had already been received somewhere. He switched off the instrument and stared helplessly at the spot where the ship had gone down. Then he pulled himself together.

"Let's get going a ways. Maybe we'll find some solid ground where we can set up our camp."

They began to march. The sun had lowered somewhat and was now casting long shadows behind them which were not too discernible against the monotonous ground colouration. Rhodan was in the lead with Claudrin. There wasn't any fear now of an attack. This world appeared to be definitely uninhabited. There was no sign of life anywhere. And yet—a breathable atmosphere.

It was this point that Rhodan kept wracking his brains about. How could the planet have such a good atmosphere without having produced any life? And there

was nothing here to renew it.

Somebody at the rear of the column suddenly emitted a shrill cry of alarm. Rhodan stopped. He looked around. And then he saw something that did not belong to reality. As though in a surrealistic dream, a *fantasy* of madness was materializing. Out of the gathering shadows behind them emerged a group of humanoid shapes, with arms and legs but no faces. They were grey in colour as though they had taken shape out of the ground itself.

But they *were* moving! They were following his men!

3/ DISTRESS SIGNAL

It was a blind hyperjump.

When the *Lizard* rematerialised and the stars became visible again, the constellations were no longer familiar. Capt. Samuel Graybound began to swear like the veteran spacer he was. To him it was the fault of the blankety-twice-trouble-blankety nosy Fleet cruiser that had forced them to change their course and flee.

“They think we’ve got nothing better to do with our lives than spend the rest of our days zigging and zagging around in the universe!”

Lt. Rex Knatterbull calmly minimized the predicament. “Don’t work yourself into a lather, Sam. We’ll soon know where we are and then we’ll calculate the new transition data. After all, the main thing is those characters didn’t nab us. If they’d caught us, though, I’d like to have seen the dumb look on that Major’s face, once he learned a little more about teddybears.”

Graybound began to laugh heartily. The thought of having tricked the Fleet officer served to appease his anger over the detour and loss of time. “It serves those boot-polishers right!” he said in a self-satisfied tone. “Those bloodhounds! There used to be freedom of the sea—what happened to freedom of space? The universe belongs to everybody. Everybody can deal with anybody he pleases and where he pleases. That’s the *true* democracy, for my money!”

Torero flapped his wings emphatically. “Long live Democracy!” he croaked. “Everybody’s got a right to die!”

Graybound glanced in puzzlement at the parrot, then at Rex. “Hey—he never said that before! Who taught him that one?”

Rex tried to think of a suitable answer but he didn’t get a chance to express it. Out of the Com Room dashed the small figure of Henry Smith who was waving his arms excitedly.

“Radio signals! The hypercom gave an alarm!”

Graybound turned livid with new anger. “What—not again! It’s just not in the odds that we could land again under the nose of a patrol ship! And I always thought the universe was a big enough place...”

“Sir, it was a short emergency pulse burst, like a distress call. It only lasted a few seconds and it was a sheer accident that I picked it up at all.”

Graybound studied Henry Smith thoughtfully, knowing that the slight-figured

little man was the sensitive type. When he finally spoke, his tone more or less summed up his inspection. “You blockhead! Can’t you keep your fingers off of that stupid equipment? As if we didn’t have enough to contend with, now we have to worry about other people on top of it! Where did the pulse signal come from?”

The Captain’s words had startled Smith into frozen immobility. He stood near the door looking miserable, not quite following Graybound’s trend of thought.

“I asked you, where did the signal come from!?”

“The range and direction haven’t been determined yet, sir. It’s not that easy...”

“In 10 minutes I want the position of the ship that called for help—and Satan will have your hide if you’re getting us into a trap!”

Smith vanished, somewhat baffled.

Rex roared with laughter and slapped his knees in glee. “That little bugger’s a scream! But he knows his stuff!”

“I’ll grant him that much.” Graybound was frowning at the profusion of unfamiliar stars on the viewscreen. “Do you have the glimmer of an idea of where we are? Take a look at the charts.”

They went to work with the star catalogue and checked out all the more unfamiliar sectors. They could not identify a single one of the constellations.

“We’ll have to reconstruct our last jump in a reverse playback,” Rex suggested. “There’s no other route we can go. Just leave it to me, Sam. We’ll breeze out of this yet.”

“Do whatever you want to,” commented the skipper.

“Democracy!” exclaimed Torero with a note of commendation.

“Listen, you little hobo, when I want your opinion I’ll ask for it!”

Torero drew in his head so that only his shrewd little black eyes peeked out of his feathers. Obviously he was pretending to feel guilty. Graybound growled like an angry tiger and took the creature from his shoulder. Without another word he placed it in its cage nearby and carefully closed the little gate. He pointed significantly at the sand in the bottom of the cage, a gesture which left nothing more to be said—even in parrot language. Then he stomped away into the Com Room.

Henry Smith stiffened and turned pale at sight of his boss.

“Well, Shorty—you got any results?”

“Right away, sir. The tracer antenna was in the wrong direction, so that’s what took so long. I have to convert the impulse intensity on a reverse arc and”...

“Don’t take my time with that technical jargon, Fuzz-Bug,” Graybound cut in on him but he was actually in a tolerable mood. Otherwise he would not have used the name “Fuzz-Bug”, which with him was a term of affection. “I want to know the range and direction.”

Smith turned back hurriedly to his work.

Rex Knatterbull shouted from the next room. “Hey, Sam! I think I’ve got it! Whee-oo!—if *that* isn’t a jump!”

Graybound clapped his communications man on the shoulder without realizing that he almost broke his collarbone. Then he went out into the Control Central.

“So? Where are we sitting?”

“Take a look for yourself, Sam. We jumped almost 20,000 light-years. How this old bucket stood up under that...”

“What did you say? Old bucket! Are you perchance speaking of the good ship *Lizard*? Another remark like that and I’ll have you walk the plank without a suit!”

Rex grinned. “Sorry, it just slipped out by accident. Anyway, we’re located just about here. High stellar density in this area. But from where we are now we can chart a course to Glatra.”

Graybound had almost forgotten the business part of their adventure. And yet there was that distress call. He couldn’t simply ignore it. He might be a little negligent concerning formal laws and regulations and maybe as a merchant he did have a few little ‘sidelines’, but if another man was in need he would give him a hand. That was his own law and never in his life had he circumvented it, even if it had cost him the shirt off his back.

“Hang loose for a while, Rex,” he told his First Officer. “First we have to know where that distress call came from.” Then he turned and shouted, “Hey, Sparks! Quit dragging your feet in there! Aren’t you through yet? What do you think this is, a vacation or something? Get a move on!” Turning back to Rex, he continued, “Reconstruct our transition hop so that we can get back to about where we were when we met that cruiser. That way we’ll get our bearings better.”

“As good as done, Bossman!” Rex grinned. Then he looked toward the Com Room. “That bozo’s really taking his time. You want me to make him shake a leg?”

“I’ve got it!” cried Henry Smith as he came stumbling into the Control Central. His whole face was beaming. “Distance is about 3 light-years. Direction: exactly 5 degrees to port off our stern course.”

Graybound’s face reddened with anger. “*About...?!*” he roared. It was so loud that Torero drew in his head in his cage. “What’s that supposed to mean— *about* 3 light-years! I want the distance exact enough to make a hyperjump. Do you understand that, you excuse for a brass pounder?”

Smith waved his hands excitedly to interrupt him. “The distance has been determined exactly, sir,” he shouted anxiously. “I only said ‘about’ because it’s slightly less than 3 light-years. I have the data here.”

He handed a slip of paper to Graybound who took it and studied it briefly. Then the red-bearded skipper grinned and nodded at Smith.

“That’s much better, Sonny. You did real well.” He stared at him for almost 10 seconds and then bellowed:

“Vaamooossee!”

Smith turned back into his own domain.

Rex took the data sheet from Graybound and studied it. “So it’s 2.86 light-years

away. The signal must have been pretty strong while it lasted, so that's why we were even able to pick it up."

"If it's a lousy Fleet cruiser we'll scam out. I don't have any reason to do them any favours." Of course Graybound didn't mean what he was saying, actually. He'd go to anybody's aid if they were in a bind, even for his worst enemy. He always went by the old adage that you could never judge the contents of a package by its label.

"Well, we could go have a look," suggested Rex.

Graybound stared at him in innocent amazement. "Were you thinking of anything else?" he asked. "You bet we'll have a look—if only out of curiosity!"

It took 20 minutes for the nav-computer to rattle out the necessary data. Then Graybound himself put the *Lizard* onto the right course and started the transition countdown.

Over the ship's intercom he briefed the crew concerning their situation and ordered them to man the camouflaged gun emplacements so as to be ready for any eventuality. He had no intention of being taken by surprise. If this distress call was a trap, then its perpetrators would find another reason to marvel at the capabilities of the old *Lizard*.

Transition.

New constellations appeared on the viewscreen and very close by was a yellow sun. But they had hardly seen this before Smith's shout sounded again from the Com Room.

"Another distress call, sir! Normal transmission. The source... 20 light-minutes!"

Graybound frowned at this. It seemed he had made a miscalculation. The distress signals were coming from the system of that yellow sun, perhaps even from one of its planets. It wasn't from a ship drifting helplessly in outer space. Probably somebody was stranded on the ground somewhere and wanted to be picked up.

For Graybound it was anything but a pleasant thought to contemplate loading up the ship with strangers and having to forego his business venture. He began to curse himself softly. First of all he cursed his Corn man although the latter had merely performed his duty. Then he cursed himself for having such a soft heart.

"Somebody's stuck down there," remarked Rex laconically.

An idea came to Graybound. "Maybe somebody else picked up those signals and are on their way here. Let's hold off a little while. It would be great if somebody else could save us the trouble. If we go into orbit around the system with the engines dead, nobody will spot us. Well, what do you think?"

Rex Knatterbull was also intrinsically a better man than his reputation might have indicated, so in this case he had certain reservations. "But it could be that they're in serious danger. Any delay might mean curtains for them. I don't think we should be responsible for..."

“Pah, responsible! I’m responsible for the men, the ship, the company and the cargo. If I give those guys a helping hand it’ll be of my own free will. Hm-m-m...”

He fell to meditating. Rex utilized the pause to set the *Lizard* straight on a closing course. Now they were flying directly toward the nearby sun. With their present speed of 0.3 LV they’d reach their destination within an hour or so if they didn’t alter course in the meantime.

“We could at least have a look at the situation,” Graybound said finally. “If it doesn’t amount to anything we can still pull back.”

Rex nodded his agreement. It was a compromise you could do something with. If anybody was really in trouble, old Red Beard would know what to do. In another half hour they determined that the sun possessed 4 planets. The inner orb couldn’t be considered but any of the other three were perfectly capable of serving as a temporary haven for shipwrecked survivors.

“Smith!!!”

When the Communications man heard his captain’s stentorian bellow he came close to wrecking his equipment in his frantic haste to jump to his feet. “Sir?” he stammered.

“Triangulations, man! Where are those signals coming from?”

Smith pulled himself together. “Sir... the signals have stopped but I was able to get an exact fix on them. I’m just now reducing the data...”

“Let me have it!”

Smith dashed back into the Corn Room and quickly emerged with a computation sheet. “Just my own notes, sir, before preparing a final log entry. I hope you’ll be able to figure them out.”

“Is this direction right?”

“The direction is certain but as far as the distance...”

“That’s no big deal now,” Graybound advised him. “Get back in there and stay glued to that receiver. If you hear the tiniest whimper I want you to let me know about it. You got that?”

“Very well, sir,” muttered Smith and he returned to his work.

Basically, Smith actually had the greatest respect for Sam Graybound. In fact he didn’t take offence at his blowups and rough-handed manner because he figured he was well paid for it all. Since he had dropped out of Government Fleet service because of certain minor infractions he was grateful for having found a job with Startramp. It was an outfit that wasn’t too probey about a man’s past. What counted was savvy on the job.

Graybound gave Rex the sheet of figures. “He says the direction’s for sure... can you tie it in?”

The First Officer compared the data with output ciphers that were showing on the nav-computer’s screen. He nodded. “It’s the second planet, alright. If that distress call came from anywhere it would have to be from there. Should we go

have a look?”

“Of course we’ll go have a look! What else?”

Rex grinned and shook his head with a mixture of amusement and resignation. In the ensuing pause in the conversation, Torero was heard from.

“Let me out of here!” he screeched.

Graybound didn’t even turn to look at him. “Shut your beak. We’re busy!”

The bird’s answer was prompt and to the point: “Bums! Hypocrites! Rabble!”

Graybound regarded his heavy fists reflectively and spoke half aloud for the parrot’s benefit. “I know, old buddies, you’d like to twist that smart-alec buzzard’s dirty little neck! I sort of go along with that myself but you see he can’t help being a dummy. It seems his family line came from Hiroshima and the little blockhead was also born in that area. What we’re dealing with is a mutated parrot and that’s what’s got him fouled up in the head-pan. He considers himself better than other parrots. He only thinks he’s a mutant but actually he’s just a stupid dumb blabbermouth of a bird. So if you guys will go easy on him I’ll try to do the same...”

Rex did not let this distract him from his work. He was accustomed to Graybound’s unique habits such as talking like this to his own two hands. Since Torero decided to merely play the part of being insulted and only sat on his perch in sulking silence, Rex was able to finish up without delay.

“Right on the nose—the second planet,” he said. “We’ll be making an entry into the atmosphere in a few minutes. If our instruments are still working right I’d say the air down there is breathable.”

There was a gleam of suspicion in Graybound’s eyes. “Is this system registered in the charts?”

Rex shook his head. “No—nothing listed in the catalogues, either. Why?”

“I was thinking we might luck in and find some valuable minerals or other raw materials. That way at least we wouldn’t have made a dry run with this detour.”

He took another look at his instruments. “So far I haven’t picked up any definite details. Optically the surface down there is so hard to see that it might as well not be there. No sign of any continent—completely featureless. Looks like one solid land mass.”

“That’s one break,” said Graybound. “Then at least we won’t drown if we make a crash landing.”

“Where did you get a crazy notion like that?”

“I was just kidding.” The old skipper grinned and studied the viewscreen where the planet was becoming more discernible. “But something is funny about all this, don’t you think? What do the analysers have to say about it?”

“That’s just it!” grumbled Rex, somewhat mystified. One after the other he read the meter indications. “There’s a heavy reading on physical material down there but not one compound is inorganic. That isn’t possible—a whole planet can’t consist entirely of organic substances!”

Graybound stared at Rex in perplexed amazement. “Come again? Organic? The whole surface of the planet?” He shook his head. “Impossible!”

“I know it’s impossible but can the instruments lie? Do you think maybe they can be fooled? Or maybe we’re crazy.”

“Organic!” Graybound couldn’t buy it. “Maybe they’ve got the ultimate population density down there—standing on each other’s feet, so close together that the analytical tracers can’t get through them.”

Rex immediately blasted this wild theory. “The figures I get give a partial indication that the stuff is about 200 feet deep all over the surface. Now could you perhaps explain how it’s possible...”

“Alright—OK!” said Graybound in self-defence as he continued to stare at the screen, lost in thought. “It was just an idea.”

The planet had become larger but its albedo appeared to be unusually weak. There was hardly any reflection of the sun’s rays from its surface.

“Nothing but grey and no contours,” muttered Rex. “I never ran into anything like this before, myself. No mountains or valleys. No rivers or forests-not any vegetation at all. Yet the whole thing’s organic! It *is* impossible, actually, as far as I...”

Graybound got up. “Smith!” he called out. “No more signals from down below?”

“The receiver’s completely silent!” was the reply.

Graybound sat down again. “He’s an idiot but can’t help it,” he declared. “How are we supposed to locate these castaways?”

“You think maybe their radio’s shot?”

“Looks that way. First they sent out a hypercom signal, so they must have a modern ship. Then came normal signals which also faded out. So I figure their whole communication system’s kaput. But why?”

Rex gave no answer because he didn’t have one. He manoeuvred the *Lizard* into an orbit around the second planet and sank deeper into the atmosphere. The analyser indicators did not change their readings. Down below on the surface there was a complete absence of inorganic material.

The first glimmerings of a suspicion stirred in Graybound’s mind but it was so incredible that he rejected it at once. Yet he could not subdue the thought. It kept surfacing as the only logical conclusion that could be drawn from the analytical indicators. Suddenly a coarse cry from the parrot tore him out of his brooding.

“Right you are, you red-bearded monstrosity!”

Graybound overlooked the insult, seeming not to have heard it, and that alone was an indication of his mental disturbance at the moment. “Are you a mind-reader or something?” was his only rejoinder. He glared in desperation at Rex. “Can it really be possible that the planet is organic? That it... is alive...?”

The First Officer was a man who was completely realistic and did not believe in supernatural things. Of course he realized that in the endless reaches of the

universe one could bump into some miraculous-seeming phenomena which could not be explained on the basis of normal human knowledge. He also knew that there were extra-terrestrial life forms which had not previously been imagined. But he also knew that all such forms of life had one thing in common. There was always some parallel or precedent to go by.

“A living planet?” Rex started to guffaw. “No, there’s never been anything like that! How could it ever come into existence?” But when he happened to glance again at the analyser board he frowned. “Hm-m-m...” he muttered, still sceptical.

The monotonous grey surface could at last be seen more clearly. Actually, when observed from above it had the appearance of a gently undulating sea that had suddenly frozen solid. There were no whitecaps but there were low crests and shallow troughs which could only be seen under magnification.

Graybound pointed to the scene, beginning to doubt his own theory. “And that’s supposed to be alive?” he said.

“I’m with you,” returned Rex, supporting his scepticism.

The instruments, however, flatly stated the opposite.

Smith appeared at the door. “Do you think I should try to contact them? Maybe they’ll answer.

Graybound was startled out of his meditations. “Don’t you dare! You want to have somebody after our necks? We still don’t know what the game is here. Besides, we’ve got other problems. So just hold off till you’re told, do you understand?”

“I get you, Boss,” was the answer. Smith was so disconcerted that he forgot to say “sir”.

Torero had buried his head in his feathers. He could only be heard muttering in muffled sounds to himself. It sounded something like, “Help, the police are coming!” Apparently he had decided to sleep for awhile.

“If they’ve landed down there we should be able to spot their ship,” said Rex. “At least that won’t be made entirely of organic material! The analysers would indicate it immediately.”

“Right on the beam!” Graybound agreed, secretly glad to have a respite from unwanted thoughts. It was more like a temporary stay of execution. “Let’s find that ship first and have a look at it!”

For the time being the thought of a ‘living’ planet was shoved into the background although it was not completely forgotten. They were flying along at a low altitude above the surface. On the night side there was a complete darkness below because there was practically no reflection of the starlight, as though it were being almost totally absorbed. But, then the sun came up over the horizon and it was light again. There was no sign of a stranded ship.

The planet was as large as the Earth and had approximately the same strength of gravity. It would be some time before they could cover the entire surface in their search.

Suddenly Rex straightened up from his momentary state of lethargy. He pointed at the viewscreen. “There...! What the devil is that...?”

Graybound seemed to awaken from a dream. “Where?”

“Right in our line of flight! I’ve cut down the engines so we can move in a slow drift. Do you see it?”

“What... who? The castaways?”

Graybound had already made out what Rex was referring to. Down there on the rolling plain, several figures were moving. Perhaps 7 or 8 of them. Undoubtedly, they were men.

But something about them wasn’t quite right.

Rex manoeuvred the *Lizard* directly over the group and cut in the antigravs. Now the ship hovered motionlessly above the men—if indeed they were men.

It was this that Graybound was beginning to doubt, as a matter of fact. At first his suspicions were vague but then a conviction came after due consideration. The figures showed no reaction whatsoever to the appearance of the ship. If these were the ones who had sent out a distress signal, their present action was certainly strange.

“Get closer!”

The *Lizard* lowered toward the group of figures. Graybound didn’t take his eyes from them. They had come to a halt.

It was then that Graybound realized they didn’t have any faces.

4/ ATTACK OF THE MONSTER MEN

“Lt. Sikhra!”

The Nepalese came running up at a fast trot. “Sir?”

Rhodan pointed toward the shadowy figures which were shambling strangely along the dim horizon. They stopped. But a ceaseless milling and swaying of long, apelike arms caused Rhodan to snap: “Take a detail of your men and find out who they are—or *what* they are.”

“Do you think...?”

“I haven’t any idea about them. I’m only wondering how men can suddenly appear on an uninhabited planet—or something that looks like men. So go take a look. And at the first signs of any attack you are free to open fire.”

Bell was standing next to Rhodan but he waited until Lt. Sikhra had gone before he spoke. “What’s going on with you, Perry? So far there’s never been a time when you yourself avoided making contact with alien intelligences. Maybe they can help us.”

Rhodan gazed toward the weird group of figures. Then he shook his head and pointed at the ground. “Bell, have you given any thought yet to what that might be? Do you really think we’re standing on some kind of stone or granite—or maybe on mud or a slow-action bog? Do you mean to say you didn’t notice anything peculiar when our space-jet sank?”

“What was I supposed to notice?”

Rhodan shook his head in wonderment. He looked questioningly at Claudrin, who was listening to the conversation with no more comprehension than Bell. “You didn’t notice anything either, Colonel?”

“No—not that I was aware of...”

Rhodan took a deep breath. “I was the last one to leave the disc as it was sinking and under the hull I noticed a funnel-like formation. It was opening like a giant mouth to swallow the ship. Now understand me correctly, Colonel! The mud or whatever else you want to call it—it pulled back before the weight of the ship could compress it. It pulled back as though it were a voluntary action!”

The colonel stared at Rhodan, flabbergasted. Bell had straightened up with a start and now was nervously shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

“All of which brought me to a completely insane supposition and I kept it to myself because I didn’t want to panic anybody at the time. I know now, however,

that this morass is alive. It can even think and rationalize. In fact very logically. It swallowed the ship in order to cut us off from any possibility of escape.”

“Perry... come on! That isn’t... no! It can’t be!” Bell had become pale. The circle of listeners had grown larger. No one was paying any more attention to Sikhra’s commando detail.

“Nevertheless, Bell, it’s possible. Later the specialists can give us a more specific answer but for the moment we’ll have to be satisfied with the uncanny fact that we’ve encountered a form of intelligence which is a total conglomeration of every organic cell on this world. It’s a kind of giant amoeba. We know from reports from exploring expeditions that such cases have been observed more than once before. Of course the expeditions didn’t dare to make a landing but in our case we had no choice.”

“A one-celled animal—so big that it can span a whole planet?” Bell shook his head and stared at the ground in mixed horror and curiosity. “I can’t believe it! If it’s true, then why doesn’t it just gobble us up where we’re standing?”

“You mean, the same as it did the ship?” Rhodan shrugged. “I don’t know. And besides...”

He was interrupted. At the end of their column someone was shouting. Then came the first hiss of energy weapons and the glaring flash of their beams.

Rhodan pulled his own weapon from his belt and raced away in the direction of the commando group. Some of the pluckier men followed him.

* * * *

As reported later by Sikhra, when he and his men approached the motionless figures it was clear to see that although they possessed human-like shapes they had nothing else in common with actual men. They were composed of the same material as the planet-sized microbe they were standing on, as though they had been crudely formed out of the surface substance itself. They did not respond to calls or shouts.

Then Sikhra had turned on a portable lamp and directed its rays toward the alien things. At once, they seemed to come to life! They sprang! Together they moved in a concerted attack upon the humans!

When the first alien threw its powerful arms around one of the cadets and began to pull him down into the yielding surface, Sikhra had opened fire.

Rhodan arrived in time to see the helplessly yelling cadet sink deeper into the ‘ground’. It would have been useless to shoot at his abductor because it would have also endangered the creature’s prey. Now the young commando was up to his chest in the muck. The horrible monstrosity that still clung to him was once more uniting with the grey mass from which it had come. It seemed to flow sluggishly back to its source—and it took its victim with it. His agonizing screams were soon choked off, leaving the small party of humans stunned with shock.

It was in that moment that Rhodan knew they were all lost if a miracle didn't happen. The planetary monster not only possessed a certain degree of intelligence but also an astonishing imitative instinct. It had looked upon the men as a welcome booty and it had copied their shapes accordingly. It was completely useless to destroy such imitations because they would only be replaced by others—and still more, by the thousands or the millions. If necessary—even billions!

In spite of this, however, they must not give up the fight. It required a period of time for the monster to replace its plastic images.

“Pucky!”

The mousebeaver teleported to Rhodan's side.

“There, little one!” Rhodan pointed to the cadet whose head had nearly disappeared, but whose arms were desperately flaying about in his trap. “Pull him out of there—telekinesis! But don't go too close!”

Pucky understood. He concentrated on his task and sent out streams of force from the telekinetic centre of his brain. The force streamers gripped the unfortunate victim without endangering anyone and then began to draw him slowly out of the resisting morass.

“Sikhra!” Rhodan called to the lieutenant. “Destroy all those figures! They have no individualities of their own, so don't hold back!”

The five remaining members of the commando detail at once opened up with a murderous fire. Rhodan's words had freed them of any last compunctions. The energy beams caused the grey figures to melt down quite readily. The smouldering, molten masses were swallowed up by the living ground. Heavy wave formations were generated from each of such areas as would happen if one were to drop a stone into water. But these waves were very slow-moving. They rolled sluggishly under foot as though in a slow-motion film.

Could the incredible monster sense pain?

Rhodan didn't know nor did he care. They had to fight back and defend their lives. They were being attacked by a materially superior being. Meanwhile Pucky had managed to free the cadet from his prison. The last of the clinging grey muck dropped away from him and then Pucky set him down again. Whereupon his companions immediately took charge of him.

“Let's go on!” Rhodan ordered. “We mustn't linger too long in the same place. We can't let the monster have time to form new imitation men. I think it takes him a certain length of time to do it and that's what we have to keep ahead of!”

As they started their march again, Lt. Sikhra and his men formed the rear guard. They kept looking behind them so that they would be able to see any signs of danger in sufficient time to avoid surprises. They had recovered from the last shock and were now more familiar with what was involved.

Darkness fell swiftly but their powerful hand lamps lighted their way. However, they might have done just as well without them since the landscape continued unchanged and no obstacles of any nature lay in their path. Rhodan

marched at the head of the column along with Bell and Jefe Claudrin. Pucky had joined the other three mutants and was now being carried by Ivan Ivanovich Goratschin, having settled himself comfortably between the giant's two heads. John Marshall and Tama Yokida were conversing in low tones about their remaining life expectancy. Which was the same subject being discussed by Rhodan, Bell and Claudrin.

"So how do we get out of this?" asked Bell who wasn't particularly fond of their ceaseless walking. "Since the monster covers the planet all we're doing is walking around on it."

Rhodan nodded. "That figures; but as long as we keep moving it can't find a point of attack. It needs time to shape itself and come at us. So all we can do is keep in motion until somebody rescues us. Old buddy, I don't mind telling you we've never been in such a hopeless situation before."

"But the monster isn't intelligent in our sense of the word," commented Claudrin, who sought for a ray of hope, however dim. "If he were he'd simply swallow us, marching or not."

"I don't think it can do that," said Rhodan, who had discussed this with Dr. Gori Nkolate. "It not only thinks slowly, it can only react slowly. We saw that when it swallowed the space-jet. If we were to remain very long in any one place, the same would happen to us."

"So as long as we keep moving, nothing can happen to us?" Bell seemed visibly relieved, yet another thought bothered him. "But we can't just keep going endlessly! When do we sleep? When do we eat?"

"We have to, Bell—we haven't any other choice!"

"So how do we sleep?"

"I've been working on that problem," said Rhodan. "We can always set up sleeping schedules for maybe 5 or 10 men at a time. The others would have to carry them because there can be no bedding down in the normal way. However, let's wait till daylight because then there might be other possibilities."

And so they marched onward with the alien stars above them and the elastic hide of a hungry monster beneath them. Until the day finally dawned. And then what they had been fearing began to happen.

Ahead of them they saw the first of the man-things silhouetted sharply against the morning sunlight. During the entire night nothing had happened. They had even been able to try the sleeping shifts while men were being carried and they had managed to eat while walking. But now that the light had come the monster seemed to awaken to attack.

There were at least 200 of the manlike outgrowths which were now moving slowly in their direction. They were larger than the figures encountered the previous evening but they still carried no weapons. It was apparent that the monster was not able to simulate inorganic materials.

"There's some of them off there to the right!" shouted someone at the rear of the column. "They're cutting us off!"

They were also coming from the left and from behind. Hundreds of them—perhaps thousands. Rhodan experienced an unfamiliar sensation of weakness in his knees. At first he attributed it to sheer fatigue but then it became frighteningly clear to him that it was a symptom of actual fear.

He, Perry Rhodan, was terrified!

It was no consolation to realize that everybody was afraid now and that he was no exception. The situation was hopeless and a hideous death lay before them. Certainly they could delay the ultimate end for awhile—but how much longer?

Bell had turned pale. His red bristle of hair stood up straight from his head but this time nobody was in a mood to make fun of it. Not even Pucky, who had come up to them with the other mutants.

“What now?” asked Pucky, who was back again on the powerful shoulders of the double-headed Goratschin. “Knock off and blow the whistle?”

Rhodan was aware of being the focal point of everyone’s anxious gaze. He shook his head. “Not yet, little buddy. If it’s time to blow the whistle, we won’t go out without a fight.” He looked about him and met the eyes of his men with firm decision. “We’re going to carve ourselves a passage through them. Before they can form again we’ll be gone. How much that will help I can’t say but at least we’re going to give it a try. You want to give up while we still have a spark of life and hope in us?”

For answer they all shook their heads without a word and took the safeties off their weapons. Rhodan had not expected any other reaction. He observed Goratschin speculatively but decided that he would reserve the ‘Igniter’ as his last line of defence.

“I don’t know,” he continued, “why the monster has to imitate our form in order to attack us. It may be that it’s never encountered another life form before now and it may think that it can only conquer us in our own image. And maybe individually we’re too light-weight and small, comparatively speaking, to be... well, swallowed up. At least that’s one possible explanation.” On a sudden thought he turned to John Marshall and Pucky. “You two are telepaths. Can’t you pick up any kind of thought impulses from this monster?”

The two of them denied having sensed anything at all.

“Too bad,” said Rhodan. “Then we’ll just have to follow our own instinct for self-preservation. Lt. Sikhra, you man the rear guard. Major Krefenbac! Take the left flank—and you, Claudrin, cover us on the right. Bell and I will spearhead the front, which will handle the breakthrough manoeuvre. Actually, the fact that the monster’s started a big attack like this gives me some food for thought. In the direction we have been heading there must be something that could offer us some protection. Otherwise, why should the monster try to prevent us from continuing our course?”

This idea made sense to all of them. They continued their forward march. The figures behind them did not come nearer and the grisly phalanxes to their right and left moved in at only half their usual pace; but those in front made a concerted

attack at twice their normal speed.

“Fire!” Rhodan commanded without the slightest compunction.

His fear had subsided. The cold steel of their weapons renewed his confidence and this apparently was the case with everyone. Even Bell’s red bristles seemed to be lying flat again and his rugged face had taken on a healthy flush of angry belligerence. Twenty blinding bolts of lightning issued from as many weapons and easily found their targets. The humanoid figures came to an immediate stop when they were hit, as though some kind of machinery in them had ceased to function. They started to glow with the white-hot energy and then to melt down. Devoid of any sustaining structure they collapsed into a flowing grey mass that simply rejoined the surface material. Whether or not they now consisted of dead substance was a moot point.

The counter-attack had produced a gap in the monster phalanx. When it was wide enough the Terranians stormed their way through it. It was only after Lt. Sikhra had reached the safe territory beyond and joined his companions that the remaining monstrosities turned to pursue them.

“Come on!” ordered Rhodan, urging the men onward. “We have to get a good lead on them!”

This tactic soon left the monsters far behind until finally they sank back into the surface without a trace. After the human survivors had marched for another hour without incident, Rhodan finally ordered a halt. Most of the men dropped where they were in exhaustion—even too tired to eat. They closed their eyes and tried to sleep.

Although Rhodan had still not had any rest he refused to grant himself the luxury of a catnap. He could not escape the feeling that there were other surprises in store for them yet, even though the monster had remained passive during the past hour. He and Bell and Col. Claudrin made a general inspection. There was sufficient food on hand as well as reload cartridges for their energy weapons. But it was calculated that the ammo would be exhausted after 5 or 6 more attacks like the last one. Beyond that point there was only Goratschin. The 2-headed mutant was capable of converting matter into nuclear energy at great distances.

After making his survey of the group, Rhodan finally permitted himself to sit down. Beneath him he sensed a faint vibration of the treacherous ground. Although he did not sink into it he would not have been surprised if he had. The world-spanning plasma mass of the monster undulated away in all directions to the horizon. He wondered—did it actually cover the entire planet? Or were there still places it had not yet covered? Perhaps ancient mountain peaks somewhere.

Rhodan cursed their precipitate landing. They should have made a closer survey of the planet beforehand, in which case he would have had an answer to his question. His roving gaze suddenly held on a distant point at the horizon. It was like a low outcropping, flat but extended. If the distance did not deceive him, that ‘hog-back’ was several hundred meters long. It was unusual. So far the monster had not formed any protuberances like that.

A trap...?

Rhodan rejected the thought almost immediately. This plasma horror wasn't that intelligent. So far it had only known how to produce a single weapon: the imitation man-forms. So how could it come up with the idea of making an artificial island—and what purpose would such a manoeuvre accomplish?

A piercing scream tore Rhodan from his thoughts. He sprang to his feet. Close to one of the lieutenants—it was the lanky officer of the watch, Brazo Alkher—a humanoid figure swelled up from the surface like a bubble. The legs, arms and hands took form, but there was no face.

Maj. Krefenbac reacted with incredible speed. He whipped his weapon out of its holster and sprang between Alkher and the forming monstrosity. His energy beam destroyed it before it could do anything. Rhodan breathed a sigh of relief. The plasma presence did not represent an immediate danger although its constant annoyances could prove to be dangerous in the long run. Eventually they could be forced to succumb to it.

When a second monster figure appeared, Rhodan ordered a resumption of the march.

After another hour's trek, when the sun had risen higher and the light was much better, Rhodan came to a stop and borrowed Claudrin's field glasses. He carefully studied the low-lying hogback ahead, which couldn't have been more than 5 kilometres distant. The first thing he noticed was its brighter grey colouring. The skin of the plasma monster was darker. The sunlight was reflecting more brightly from the outcropping than it was from the surrounding surface. This comparison alone served to strengthen his conviction that the low rise consisted of inorganic material.

"Onward!" he said finally while pointing ahead. "It could be that we may be sleeping better tonight." Then a thought occurred to him that for some unimaginable reason had skipped his mind until now. "Pucky!" The mousebeaver was beside him at once. "Pucky, do you see that hill up ahead? Take a jump over there and see what it is. But come right back—without delay!"

The mousebeaver was happy to finally have an assignment again. He nodded obediently and concentrated on a teleport jump—then dematerialised. Within about 10 seconds he was back.

"It's an island, Perry! A sure-enough island of rock! But it only sticks up about 20 meters above the ocean of plasma. Probably the top ridge of a mountain."

Rhodan nodded with a sense of relief. "In a few years it will also disappear, if not sooner. You did well, Pucky. Now we finally have a destination."

After fighting off 2 or 3 more attacks by the man-things they arrived at the outcropping of rocks by late afternoon. It turned out to be 300 meters long and 100 meters wide. Not very large and completely devoid of vegetation; solid rock. In other words, solid ground to stand on!

Rhodan immediately organized sentinel posts in a ring around the island, all guards being assigned to keep a surveillance on the 'beach'. The possibility had to

be considered that as soon as the plasma beast realized this place was offering shelter to the humans it would cause its humanoid figures to try to conquer the island. And it was not too slow to realize such things, as was indicated by past experience.

The sun was still high in the sky when the expected attack took place. Rhodan and his men had long since been watching the apelike figures rise up from the plasma sea and take form all around the island. Apparently they were the monster's only means of sweeping upward onto the land. The creature's surface was fairly rigid and immovable in a sense but at least its walking 'extrusions' might be able to capture and eventually absorb the men, given enough time.

Rhodan stood like a field marshal on the flat top of the rise. From here he had a clear view of all sides. He had assigned fighting units to the officers which were quickly organized and deployed. He kept Pucky next to him so that he might use him as a courier for his commands.

The nightmare army of monster men began to move. About 10 feet away from Rhodan stood Goratschin. Fundamentally the Russian mutant was a congenital monstrosity. In his native land he had suffered much from the scorn and disdain of his countrymen because of his two heads, until he had been taken over by a criminal genius known as the Mutant Master. Later, Rhodan had taken him into the Mutant Corps.

Inside Goratschin's double brain the ominous ignition impulses could be generated. They remained harmless and without any effect as long as they were not concentrated on any selected focal point. Then of course an atomic explosion was inevitable.

Rhodan signalled to him. "Out there, Goratschin—the enemy attack front. Destroy it."

The mutant nodded without a word. One of his faces revealed a cheerful grin while the other countenance remained grave and stern. The two heads were not always in agreement with each other but they both obeyed Rhodan's commands unconditionally. The right head had already turned toward the target area and now the left head slowly turned in the same direction until both pairs of eyes were fixed upon the same point.

Then the disruptive impulses came to a focus at the target.

The men threw their arms over their faces to keep from being blinded. Out there among the plasma figures a piercingly bright fireball flashed into existence and expanded violently. It devoured all of the mock creatures in the area and caused them to return to their mother substance in glowing molten droplets. A hole was created in the 'skin' of the planet monster, which became filled with a glowing mass. The edge of the crater dissolved then and the hole began to spread.

The black mushroom of smoke clambered swiftly into the sky, making a grim signal of the presence of human intelligence. But it was also a sign that humans knew how to protect their own skins. The fireball subsided but the mushroom continued to spread out into the upper reaches of the atmosphere.

But the crater in the ruptured surface also remained. A little later, Rhodan sent Pucky to take a look at the area and the mousebeaver reported that the glowing mass had disappeared. But he also confirmed that the hole did not fill in again.

Goratschin caused three more such explosions, after which the plasma monster desisted in its attacks. Apparently it was intelligent enough to perceive the futility of its actions. It would require time now in order to conceive of some new tactic.

Rhodan breathed a sigh of relief.

The second major onslaught had been repulsed. However, in spite of this welcome development the fact remained that their overall situation had not been improved in any measurable degree. They were still stuck here on a desolate monster world and were not sure of their lives. Their food provisions could not be replenished and water was getting short. If no one picked up their distress signal, their death was a certainty.

In fact death was more certain now than it had ever been before in their long experience.

25 ADVENTURES FROM NOW

Other Adventures are

Put in the Shade as

The Shadows Attack

5/ LIZARD vs. MONSTERS

Capt. Graybound only needed a few quick observations to arrive at the same conclusion as Perry Rhodan. The planet's mystery was revealed to him.

"It's no wonder," commented Rex, "that the analyser only indicated organic material. Do you think maybe it's one giant amoeba?"

"I didn't say it was," contradicted Graybound emphatically. "I'm no scientist. At any rate it looks like no individual life-forms ever evolved down there—just one solid entity that's probably growing bigger all the time. Don't ask me how it's possible. Man, I sure wouldn't like to be in the shoes of those survivors if they landed here!"

"That's why their transmitter faded out—they're dead."

"Hm-m-m..." Graybound did not appear to be as convinced as his companion that the castaways were dead. He looked down again at the area where the *Lizard's* beam fire had vaporized the manlike figures.

"Are you telling me that anybody could survive even a minute on top of that thing?" asked Rex doubtfully.

"Wanna bet?" challenged Graybound. "We can always land and see for ourselves. Then at least we'd know if our search for the survivors would make any sense."

"Land...!" exclaimed Rex in alarm. "Have you lost your mind?"

"Cracked in the head!" called the parrot with a tone of conviction but the two paid no attention to him and his screeching protests.

"Why not? Plasma is easier to destroy than metal or other inorganic materials."

Rex shook his head. "No, I can't agree with you there. What good would it do you to just take pot shots at a monster like that? You can't kill it because it's too big. It's better to just start searching for those castaways."

Of course this was an argument that even Graybound had to recognize. It was with an effort that he finally tore his gaze from the still gleaming crater that the ship's guns had created in the living surface of the planet. "I'll go along with that," he grumbled, only to add threateningly: "But don't think you were going to override my decision! The thing about landing here was just a joke. I wanted to see how you'd react."

Having thus attended to the matter of his authority, Graybound turned the navigation over to Rex and concentrated again on the viewscreen. The *Lizard* was

just drifting slowly along over the featureless landscape, following an imaginary line of latitude. It might take days before they discovered the survivors, if at all.

Flying in a westerly direction they outran the sun, which brought them into the night side. Graybound turned on the main searchlights, which swept their broad and brilliant rays along the surface. The *Lizard's* speed was reduced still more. If the ones they were searching for happened to be only a hundred meters outside the light beams they could not possibly be seen but Graybound assumed that they would at least have signal rockets or flares with them. If not, then they could use energy weapons. They could make their presence known with those, most assuredly.

The night passed without event. Of course it had been a short night period of only a few hours' duration because they overtook the sun again.

In fact, it happened three times.

* * * *

"If you ask me, there's no sense to this," said Rex Knatterbull as the sun came up for the fourth time.

Graybound answered with an angry grimace. "I'm still not going to give up!" he growled stubbornly. "Not when we've invested two flight days already looking for them. I have to see these idiots with my own eyes—landing on this planet without checking the surface first! I want to tell them how stupid they are and that they'd be better off staying at home and leaving space travel to experienced men like me. Let them take up farming or something, like milking cows." Graybound was in a lather now. "And that's what the Government pays money for! They send out blockheads like these guys in expensive ships and then sit there and wonder why they don't come back! Pah, and *me* they wanted to retrain! They can't even be satisfied with the old reliable ships. The miserable nitwits!"

"Good-for-nothings! Dumb heads!" exclaimed Torero in loud agreement, no doubt hoping that this would get him out of his cage.

But Graybound didn't have any time for him. "We'll search some more!" he announced, getting up. "I'll get some sack time for awhile and in two hours we'll switch places."

The First Officer was quite content to be alone for awhile. He cut in the autopilot to hold the ship steady on course and then took over the Captain's observation post. The first thing he overlooked was the rocky promontory to his right on the horizon and the mushroom of smoke beyond it because he was also nodding from weariness. When he finally woke up Graybound, he innocently reported: "Nothing unusual sighted, sir."

Graybound muttered unintelligibly into his big red beard and took over his watch position. So that he wouldn't feel so lonely, he finally took Torero out of his cage. The parrot screeched for joy and made itself comfortable on its master's shoulder. Thus the two of them watched the viewscreen together.

Meanwhile Com Operator Smith had also gotten some sleep. After a hurried bite to eat he again took over his position at the radio controls. He turned on the receiver and checked all available wavebands in the silent hope of picking up a signal. Basically what he hoped for was to be able to demonstrate to his chief how indispensable he was.

And fate finally granted him his wish.

Graybound's barely opened eyes were like two fried eggs as he looked for anything moving down below on the monotonous surface. Suddenly he was torn from his half-slumber by the Com man's precipitate entry into the Control Central.

"Radio signal, sir! It's voice com, sir—uncoded! They're calling us!"

Graybound rose up so abruptly from his seat that it caused Torero to lose his grip and the bird fluttered to the floor. He ran back and forth while croaking out a sulphurous stream of invectives.

"Voice com!" yelled Graybound incredulously as he pushed past Smith into the radio room. With one kick he knocked the ludicrous little stool out of the way which the delicately-framed Com Operator was accustomed to using. "Where the devil's the mike?"

Smith joined him in some confusion. He had imagined that his moment of triumph would be different than this. Maybe a fatherly pat on the shoulder at least, words of recognition or some kind of praise for his alertness—but nothing!

Instead, Graybound kept yelling, "What I want to know is where the microphone is! How can I find my way around in a bunch of macaroni like this?" Smith didn't have time to deliberate on the question; he hastily manipulated the controls and opened a 2-way communication.

Words in English came faintly over the speaker. Graybound had to bring his ear closer to it to understand any of it.

"—passed us by 3 degrees. Urgently in need of help! Come in, please—but do not land on the regular surface if you value your lives!"

"I know that, you dumb heads!" bellowed Graybound at the top of his voice, once he had located the microphone. "Let's have your position!"

The voice on the loudspeaker was suddenly silenced. Apparently the person at the other end had suffered some kind of shock.

Then another voice was heard—this time calm and self-assured. "Our position is unknown. We're transmitting with a micro-transceiver here. Do you understand me?"

"I've been trying to!" retorted Graybound, now happily malicious. "But just keep on yapping and we'll trace in on you!" He turned swiftly to Smith. "Quick—wake up the First Officer! Tell him to get to the Control Central on the double!" After Smith disappeared he turned back to the mike and took the unknown speaker to task. "Are you the commander of the crashed ship—or did you maybe decide to land of your own choice? If you did, it would serve you right if you were left sitting there, wherever you are!"

It took a few seconds for an answer to come back: “You must be some kind of clown!”

For a moment Graybound was speechless. But when he found his voice again he spoke without reservation. “Why, you conceited ape! You’re too dumb to land a ship without crashing and on top of it you come on with the smarts! Now I like that!” He nodded to Rex who had come storming into the adjacent Control Central. “Man, am I waiting to see you!”

“The feeling is mutual,” came the reply, with a note of amusement.

Graybound stared in a rage at the microphone but finally he started to grin. He always welcomed the challenge of good repartee—but only up to a point. The minute he sensed the slightest note of superiority in the other he would fly into a fit.

“Just keep talking, Your Highness. Talk so we can trace you.”

“All you need to do,” said the stranger, “is to circle the planet at a greater altitude. You’ll see a few nuclear mushroom clouds. They mark the location of a granite rise where we were able to save ourselves. The outcropping is free of the plasma.”

“Oh, you mean you were able to tell the difference?” marvelled Graybound sarcastically. “I thought maybe you’d take the whole thing for a dish of pudding. Very smart—I sure have to hand it to you!” Then he realized what the stranger had said. “Mushroom clouds? How about that? Did you throw atom bombs at the planet?”

“Something like that.”

Rex had overheard this conversation, so he took the *Lizard* to a higher altitude and started his search. A few minutes later he saw the telltale clouds and set a course for them.

“I figure you’re the commander of a picket cruiser,” continued Graybound. After all he wanted to know who this was so that he could plan what kind of precautions to take. “How many men are with you?”

“Eighty-one. We’re not very finicky, so we’d be happy if you’d just find a place for us inside the cargo hatches or in the companionways somewhere.”

“Oh no you don’t!” objected Graybound, alarmed. “Not in the cargo holds!”

The tone of the stranger’s voice remained unaltered. “Oh? And why is that?”

Graybound countered with more bellowing. “I asked you a question and I want an answer! Who are you? What’s the name of your ship?”

“We don’t have a ship anymore. As to who I am, you will learn that soon enough.”

While Graybound digested this impertinence, the *Lizard* approached the rocky island and hovered motionlessly above it at a height of 100 meters. The viewscreen could be seen easily from the Com Room. Torero had collected himself and flown up to the top of his cage where he sat hunched in speechlessness. He followed everything with his shrewd eyes as though he

understood all that was going on in the Control Central. And perhaps he did.

“It’d be good timing to land about now,” suggested the voice on the loudspeaker. “It’s genuine rock—massive and solid.”

Rex Knatterbull pointed to the viewscreen. “That it—land’s surrounded by plasma monsters. They keep forming out of the surface and they’re marching toward the rocks. If we don’t hurry it’ll be curtains for those guys!”

“We’ll show them what the *Lizard* can do,” returned Graybound, and he spoke into the microphone. “A landing would be too dangerous now. You’d better head for cover—we’re going to wipe out those things!”

“They’re very slow,” came the reply. “By the time they get here you could have lifted us out of here—don’t you understand?”

“Oh I understand, alright, but I can’t hear you!” roared Graybound. He came into the Control Central. His orders to the men at the gun positions were short and to the point. Then he nodded to Rex. “OK—let loose!”

The *Lizard* bolted toward the monster army and opened a murderous fire. All guns flashed their ravenous lightnings down at the surface and found their targets. The molten figures sank back into the pools of plasma around them. The ship created a ring of fire around the rocky promontory. From all sides the sluggish muck began to flow into the craters that were being produced.

“I think that ought to do it,” said Rex.

Graybound observed his work of destruction and nodded. “Of course we can’t kill off the monster itself with our popguns but at least those conceited idiots down there will have more respect for whom they’re dealing with. From now on they’ll be a little more polite to me.”

In the nearby Com Room Smith was carrying on a conversation with the stranger below. A few snatches of the discussion drifted into the Control Central and reached Graybound’s ears. His red beard began to tremble. With a snort that would have done credit to a hippopotamus, he came up out of his seat in high dudgeon. In almost two jumps he was next to Smith, whom he shoved ruthlessly out of the way. This time he located the mike immediately.

“Just save your wind down there, you imitation substitute for a spaceman!” he bellowed indignantly. “From where you’re *sitting* you want to give *us* some good advice? If you weren’t so thick between your ears you’d be someplace else by now. If I had my druthers I’d just as soon pull out and leave you where you are!”

“Fortunately I know that you don’t mean that seriously,” replied the stranger. He didn’t seem to take Graybound’s abuses very much to heart. “And now if you will land, please...!”

In a rage, Graybound had to stamp his foot on the deck, but he signalled permission to Knatterbull and then lectured into the mike. “Listen, greenhorn, I’m going to tell you something and you listen good! You don’t fool around with old Capt. Sam Graybound and do as you please! So alright, I’m taking you on board my ship because it’s the human thing to do, but you’re going to stick to the quarters you’re assigned to. If I find any of your men snooping around I’ll dump

them into space, is that clear?”

“Oh quite!” was the amused reply. “Is it that you have something to hide?”

Graybound gasped but he did not have a chance to draw on his stock in trade for a suitable rejoinder. While his First Officer made a gentle landing with the *Lizard*, the air in the narrow Com Room appeared to shimmer, faintly simulating a whirlwind—and then out of nothingness appeared Pucky the mousebeaver.

Precisely under Graybound’s nose on the narrow console board.

Once more the air went out of the Captain’s lungs. He stared incredulously at the 3-foot creature and began to think he was having hallucinations. What happened then, however, soon changed his mind.

In his shrill voice, Pucky launched into a tirade. “You big-mouth red-haired monstrosity! You soulless pirate, you! How can you dare to talk to the Chief that way? You insect—you insignificant flea! You... you *nothing!*” The hair at the nape of Pucky’s neck was standing straight out. His mouse eyes, that usually were so gentle and faithful-looking, now fairly burned with scornful lightnings.

Graybound had drawn back in alarm. His beard trembled in his agitation. This screeching critter on the radio console had to be real, even though he could not explain how he had gotten here. And to top it off, the little beast could talk! It was too much to comprehend.

“Do you have any idea at all who you were talking to all that time? You were talking to *Perry Rhodan*, the Administrator of the Solar Empire!”

Inside Graybound there was a sense of worlds collapsing like a house of cards—the present, the future, his plans—everything. He was ruined—wiped out—gone! He made no answer. Broken in body and spirit he staggered to the Control Central and sank into his upholstered chair.

“I think I’m having a stroke!” he wailed in desperation. “Can it really be true? I’m dreaming—that’s it, a nightmare! It just can’t be so! Perry Rhodan—of all people in the galaxy!”

“That’s right—just him of all people!” confirmed Pucky. He jumped from the console top and waddled gravely into the Control Central, where he drew himself up before Graybound.

Meanwhile, Rex had been too busy with the landing to be disturbed, but now he shut off the engines and observed the mousebeaver in obvious wonderment.

“Looks like you just played the wrong number.”

“That lousy no-good Smith!” exclaimed Graybound, seeking to shift the blame. “Where is he, anyhow?”

There was a choked sound of moaning under the navigation chart table. Then a voice whispered, “I don’t feel very well, sir. All the excitement...”

“Yellow belly!” thundered Graybound, but he quickly changed the subject. He studied Pucky carefully. “How did you get on board?”

“Teleportation, my good man. Haven’t you ever heard of Pucky? That’s me!”

Graybound grasped his beard. “Good Lord! Pucky! Then you’re the little freak

who...”

“I *beg* your pardon?” said Pucky warily.

“Nothing,” Graybound answered evasively. Meanwhile he had calmed himself down to some extent and was searching for a coverup, both for himself and his cargo. “We’ll just have a look to see what we can do.” He got up. “Rex, you take charge and get one of the holds cleared out. The teddybears can be put in lock 7. I think with bedrolls on the deck in there we can fix up a place for them. And for Rhodan and his officers... Hm-m-m...” He fell to pondering once more.

Pucky grinned knowingly. He was already aware of the problems the old red beard was wrestling with. Of course the skipper forgot to realize that there was also such a thing as telepathy. But it was just as well.

As Rex went out of the room, Graybound bent down and stroked the back of the mousebeaver’s neck. “So you’re the famous Pucky I’ve heard so much about. You must be real smart and brave. It’s an honour to meet you. Come on, let’s go. The Chief is waiting.”

It was with very mixed feelings that he stepped into the corridor that led to the airlock. If he could stall for just a half hour it might work. By then Rex would have made a place for the castaways. Then the rest of the holds were shut off and would remain so. Nobody would get suspicious.

He left all bulkhead doors open behind him because the air of the planet was quite good. Holding Pucky by the hand he walked past some of his crewmen. They could only stare after him, their mouths agape. It took him some minutes to realize why. The mousebeaver had vanished and there he was with his arm hanging out and strutting along the passageway like an ape. The men must have thought he’d flipped his lid or that he was trying to invent a new dance.

Or both.

50 ADVENTURES FROM NOW

Hark to the
Signals from Eternity

6/ A TRUMP FOR THE TRAMP

“Of course you will have this impudent fellow placed under arrest immediately, sir?” asked Col. Claudrin. He was supported by the confirming nods of Bell and Maj. Krefenbac who stood beside him. “It’s a clear case of insult to the Head of State.”

Rhodan smiled and shook his head. “But my dear Claudrin, who wants to get so upset about it? Our good friend Graybound didn’t know with whom he was speaking. Besides, you know, he may have a good point. We should have really examined this planet more thoroughly before we made a landing. In fact we did not perform as very experienced spacemen.”

Claudrin drew up his bulky frame. “Whatever you say, sir. It was only a passing question.”

They watched while the *Lizard* touched down expertly within a hundred meters of their position. Then the antiquated engines shut off and the sudden silence following the thundering demonstration was almost painful.

“But he ought to get his ears knocked back a little,” muttered Bell. “Nobody can get away with calling us idiots!”

“Pucky is with him,” said Rhodan, “and I’m sure what he has to say will be enough for anybody’s ears. However, we shouldn’t forget that if it weren’t for Capt. Graybound we’d be sitting here 10 years from now. It appears that he’s the only one who picked up our distress signal. Therefore, we owe him our lives.”

Bell made no reply. He finally saw the other side of the coin. People who came to save your life might be entitled to a few impertinences.

The guard details were still posted around the island but so far no new monster men had taken shape. Had the plasma creature given up the fight or was it hoping that the other ship’s skipper would also be stupid enough to land on its surface? Perhaps they would never know the answer.

Pucky materialized beside Rhodan. “There’s some new developments,” he whispered surreptitiously. “That old pirate isn’t so innocent...”

“I thought as much,” answered Rhodan in an equally low voice. His telepathy was good enough to be able to receive Pucky’s thoughts. So by the time Capt. Graybound appeared in the opening hatch of the *Lizard* and stared down at Rhodan, the wily space tramp was exposed without knowing it.

It was a good thing that his crew couldn’t see their blustering captain now

because he had apparently blustered his last. With a nimbleness that was surprising to the onlookers, he swung down the ladder and took a deep breath—then strode across to Rhodan.

“My ship is at your disposal, sir,” he murmured when he came up to him. He took the Administrator’s hand and pressed it powerfully. “My men are just getting a few cabins ready for you. May I ask why you landed here on this desolate world? Where did you leave your ship?”

“It exploded in space—about 3 light-years from here. We landed in a scoutship but it sank. Then we took flight and found this island. That’s about the gist of it.”

“Oh?” Graybound exhibited every sign of embarrassment. “Then you didn’t land here by choice? In that case I’ll have to retract everything I said to you before.”

“Forget it,” smiled Rhodan.

But then he was distracted by some searing curses emanating from the *Lizard’s* open airlock. Something in brilliant technicolor came fluttering through the air and landed right on Graybound’s shoulder. Torero had finally located his master.

“You old swindler! You dumb ninny!” he scolded at Rhodan who had leaned forward to look at him with interest. “What do you say now?”

Bell’s eyes and mouth were all wide open at once but he finally caught his breath again. “This is too much!” he groaned as though defeated. “He also has a pet bird!”

Graybound was torn between anger and embarrassment so he decided on a compromise between the two. “He’s a smart bird even if he gets fresh sometimes. Naturally he doesn’t know you, Mr. Rhodan.”

Suddenly everybody became very quiet because of Pucky. The mousebeaver had never seen a parrot before in his life and most certainly not one that could speak and then dare to refer to the Administrator of the Solar Imperium as a swindler and a dumb ninny. Pucky’s mouth was slightly agape. His single incisor tooth seemed to lend a melancholy expression to him and it was so strange that even Bell refrained from laughing. It was only Torero who seemed ready to make an issue of it. He fluttered his wings excitedly.

“Hey—a fang—face-fly-catcher!” the bird croaked out loudly and clearly.

Pucky snapped his mouth shut but he still remained silent. This creature had a mind—and what a curious one it was!

Since the potential perils of the encounter did not materialize, Rhodan was enjoying the performance both visually and audibly. Even the other officers had come closer to watch. They had never yet seen the mouse beaver at a loss for repartee. Until now. As for Graybound, he was secretly elated by the show his pet was putting on because every minute of delay now represented more security for himself. It would gain more time for the rearrangements going on inside the *Lizard*.

“Hey, fathead!” squawked Torero as he looked directly beyond Pucky. His sharp eyes held steadily on Bell’s flushed face. It was quite obvious that this time

Bell was his target. But even Bell failed to make a comment. In his silent astonishment he swallowed the insult.

Then Col. Claudrin stepped forward so that his mighty figure obscured Pucky and Bell simultaneously. Disregarding Rhodan he bellowed at Graybound. "Listen, you, why don't you take this circus someplace else! Are you out of your mind or something?"

Graybound gave the native Epsalian a very jaundiced look. It was true that Claudrin was shorter than he but on the other hand he was more than twice as broad. The volume of his thundering voice was greater than anything Graybound had ever experienced and those giant fists left no doubt as to what they could be used for.

But Graybound's unscrupulousness was matched only by his utter lack of fear. As a matter of course he had respect for Rhodan but this walking tree stump was something else again... "You ought to be left behind on this hunk of rock! With your bulk we might not be able to lift off!" he bellowed back and he noted with satisfaction that Claudrin paled. Whether from anger or fear could not be determined. "At least that would give the poor monster maybe three weeks' supply of fat to live on!"

He then proceeded to ignore the colonel because meanwhile Bell had recovered from shock and had stepped closer to inspect the parrot intently. "So what do *you* want? Torero isn't for sale!"

"Just a plain old parrot," muttered Bell disappointedly as though having expected something else. "Is he trained to talk like that?"

Before Graybound could put an end to this whole business, Rex Knatterbull appeared in the entrance hatch of the *Lizard*. "Everything is ready for taking on the passengers!" he called.

In trying to attract Graybound's attention, Rhodan touched his arm with his index finger. Torero made a treacherous jab at him with his sharp beak but Rhodan reacted with surprising swiftness. In the next second he held the struggling little ruffian in his hands.

"Murder!" screeched the parrot as it made desperate struggles to escape. "Help! Murder! Crooks! We're only poor little smugglers...!"

Rhodan looked at the bird in amazement and then set it back on Graybound's shoulder. He winked at the old captain confidingly. "Smart little beast—that's what you said, Captain. Do you still think so now?"

"I also said he gets fresh sometimes, sir. And he doesn't always speak the truth." Obviously Graybound was anxious to change the subject. "Would you kindly ask your people to go on board now? My crewmen will show all of you to your quarters." After a moment's hesitation, he added: "I'd appreciate it, sir, if you would instruct your men to remain in the places assigned to them. You know, my ship isn't any too modern..."

"I understand," Rhodan agreed with a nod. "You may rely on us."

As the boarding operation proceeded, Graybound and Rhodan waited at the

bottom of the passenger ladder.

The old spacer took a close look at every man who passed him on the way up. Torero muttered scoldingly to himself but every once in awhile the bird would aim an appropriate barb at the men passing by.

“Potbelly!” he crackled at Claudrin and only Rhodan’s warning glance kept the Epsalian from wringing the creature’s neck.

“Beanpole!” was the title he bestowed upon the lanky Maj. Krefenbac, much to Graybound’s secret amusement.

When the diminutive Capt. Nacro came along and Torero referred to him as a ‘dwarf’, Rhodan was seriously startled. This was no longer a mere matter of coincidence, he reasoned. The parrot was not simply talking to itself or mimicking a number of opprobriums haphazardly. He was using the words intelligently. His observations were almost always related to the event or circumstance.

In fact—could one even say *almost*?

It was a two-sided question. He would have to look into the matter of this parrot later. One of the two questions only Capt. Graybound would be able to answer.

After the *Fantasy*’s surviving crew had been quartered and Col. Claudrin’s loud complaints about the ‘garbage scow’ had subsided somewhat, Rhodan took John Marshall to one side and ordered him to make a quiet surveillance of Graybound’s thoughts—especially whenever he was thinking of his cargo. Then he and Pucky went on into the *Lizard*’s Control Central.

Graybound wasn’t happy about the invasion of his sanctum but even though he was co-owner of a private freightline business the fact still remained that Rhodan was the Solar Administrator and his special powers automatically made him the Commander-in-Chief over any Terran spaceman. If Rhodan wished to spend some time in the Control Central there was no way of vetoing the situation. And as for this mousebeaver critter... In sudden startlement, Graybound remembered something else about him: the little wretch was a teleporter! He resolved not to forget that.

“OK for take-off!” he told Rex as he turned to Rhodan. “We’re not as roomy here as on the big ships. You take my seat and I’ll stand.”

Rhodan accepted the offer and seated himself. Then he asked casually: “Capt. Graybound, what is it that you are actually smuggling?”

Rex Knatterbull jumped as though stabbed. He leaned closer to Rhodan, apparently not recognizing who he was—or perhaps it was that he didn’t *want* to recognize him.

“You want me to bounce this guy off the ship?” he asked.

Graybound made a wild gesture of negation. “Keep your trap shut, you donk! Bounce Rhodan off the ship? Don’t make me laugh!” Then he came up for air. “Did you say smuggling, Mr. Rhodan? How did you mean that?”

“What’s your cargo?” grinned Rhodan. “You know our Pucky is also a telepath.”

“Just toys—and teddybears. They’re for the Tuglan children. By the time we get there they’ll probably grow beards, from the way things are going!”

“Ah... teddybears...” Rhodan seemed to pronounce the word speculatively as he looked at Pucky. Thoughts were exchanged. Rhodan became aware of what was in Graybound’s mind. “And what do you have *inside* the teddybears?”

Graybound’s ruddy face blanched. This must be the work of the devil. Had the world gone mad? This little mousebeaver pest with his thought-reading—that was it! That had to be the answer! The fuzzy scoundrel had revealed everything to his Chief. And who could keep anybody from thinking?

“Take off, I said!” he barked at Rex impatiently.

The First Officer pulled back on the flight lever and the *Lizard* ascended with thundering engines. Swiftly the small rocky island fell away below—the chance haven that had saved the lives of Rhodan and his men.

Rhodan spoke calmly to the First Officer. “Don’t forget to mark this system’s coördinates in the charts. Perhaps later we’ll make a visit here under more favourable conditions.” Then turning to Graybound he continued. “Well, Captain, do you really think you can’t confide in me? After all, you know, we should be friends. You did save my life and that has bargaining power. You are in a position to ask a favour. If possible I’ll try to take such facts into consideration.”

Graybound stared at Rhodan incredulously. But then his face brightened up. “Sir, where my cargo’s concerned—especially the teddybears...”

“That, my good fellow, is not in the deal. I’m granting you one wish and that would only be wasting it. No, it’s not what you think. Do you think I would seek to ruin your business? Of course such a step would be necessary if you were furnishing alien races with weapons or narcotics without restraint. But the fact is, you’re smuggling medicines because on Glatra 3 there’s a good profit for such a commodity. Your competitors, the Aras, are too high-priced and, besides, they cut corners on quality. Actually, all you’re doing, Graybound, is performing a worthwhile service. Of course, medicines have to be taxed according to our tariff laws—although I’ll admit that the governing regulations may require some overhauling. Here now, what kind of a face is that?”

Actually, Graybound looked as if somebody had just told him his ship had been confiscated. His normally magnificent red beard seemed to droop despondently and even Torero let his wings sag as though he had understood everything. Of course he was probably only responding to his master’s mood without actually knowing the reason for his sadness.

“What’s the matter with you?” Rhodan insisted, while Pucky suddenly broke into a grin. “I’ve just given you a reprieve!”

“Oh, I’ll grant you that,” replied Graybound but he remained in deadly earnest. “But how can there be any more fun in smuggling if it’s made legal?”

Rhodan had to restrain an urge to chuckle. Of course he could understand Pucky’s unruffled cheerfulness in the matter but he did not share it with him. “You mean—if medicines were open for trading you’d smuggle something else?”

“I didn’t say that!” protested Graybound in alarm. “I just said it’d take all the fun out of it!” He pulled himself together. “OK, so why don’t you quit playing around with me, Mr. Rhodan? Why don’t you give it to me straight—I’ve just made my last flight. Or am I supposed to believe you’re going to leave some skin on my back?”

“Yes, that you can believe, Graybound.” For a few moments Rhodan watched Rex Knatterbull, who had turned on the autopilot and was now feeding transition data into the nav-computer. “Incidentally, do you know our present position?”

Graybound thought he wasn’t hearing correctly. “What!” he gasped. “Do you mean to say you got lost before your ship exploded?” He shook his head. “How can that be possible?”

His thoughts in this connection remained unspoken but Pucky was alert as usual. “He’s getting impertinent again,” the mousebeaver chirped to Rhodan. Graybound reddened somewhat in his embarrassment but he remained silent.

“You mean—we must be amateurs? My dear Graybound, we were test-flying one of the new linear-drive ships and we ran into trouble. That can happen, you know. We slipped off course and then the catastrophe happened.”

Graybound remembered. “The new linear drive—that figures! They even wanted to retrain me and make me a commander of one of those ships. But I told them to go whistle at the Institute. Ha! Imagine retraining *me!*”

“Not a bad idea,” commented Pucky unabashedly. “If I could imagine this brute to be a gentleman.

This brought Torero out of his lethargy.. “Dirty rat!” he screeched, and then fluttered up to his cage. He scabbled inside it and used his beak to close the door behind him. Nothing like playing it safe, he seemed to be thinking.

There was an indefinable expression on Pucky’s face as he watched the parrot. Then he shook his head. “Like master, like bird,” he commented.

Rhodan continued. “So you were named for Cosmonautic retraining at the Institute? Hm, remarkable. Very interesting! But that would mean that the robot Brain selected you among many candidates as being suitable material. That’s a good sign, Captain—really a very good sign. Naturally the Brain doesn’t merely check out those who apply but all space pilots in service. Anyway—you were there. Congratulations, Capt. Graybound.”

“Congratulations?” queried Graybound incredulously. There was a barely perceptible tremor in his voice, the volume of which had subsided noticeably during the past hour. “Why should you congratulate me? After all, I turned it down.”

“That makes little difference, Captain. You pass in regard to professional and character aptitudes.”

“I don’t think I turned out to be suitable culturally, Mr. Rhodan,” said Graybound swiftly. “A certain Col. Rumbuckle made no bones about that. Hm-m... come to think of it, I had to strain a bit to show him the lower side of my nature.”

“Isn’t his name Rammbuggl?” asked Rhodan, attempting to remember. “Yes, I believe that’s it. Well then, I’m certainly looking forward to seeing his report!”

Graybound half choked with embarrassment. “Sir, did you say I had one favour to ask?” As Rhodan nodded, he continued swiftly: “OK, then here it is: don’t ever read that report from Col. Rambugle! When you see it you’ll reject it immediately! So just do me the favour—don’t read it!”

Rhodan smiled and clapped Graybound on the shoulder. “That I can promise you. If it were not for you I’d never be able to read another report in my life. So I can just as well skip that one.”

Graybound sighed in relief. He had realized in the meantime that his comportment at the Institute would have unpleasant consequences. But now he was free of such worries.

Without taking his gaze from the viewscreen the First Officer announced, “Transition in two minutes, Captain.”

“We’re making a big jump, Mr. Rhodan,” explained Graybound with new zeal. “It will bring us to a place where we can get our bearings better. In two jumps after that we’ll reach the Solar System.”

* * * *

The transition was accomplished smoothly but when the normal universe materialized around the *Lizard* a surprise was waiting for Graybound. In addition to the stars there were other objects which came into very clear visibility. Three patrol cruisers of the Terranian Fleet hovered close by as though they had been waiting for the return of Graybound’s freighter.

The old red-bearded skipper rubbed his eyes. “Rex!” he exclaimed. “This isn’t possible—am I seeing ghosts?”

“I don’t know about you, Sam, but I’m looking at three cruisers. One of them has the markings of the ship that tried to stop us before. That feisty commander must have called in some reinforcements.”

“What are you talking about?” inquired Rhodan.

Graybound explained the former incident to him and concluded: “I don’t see how that character could ever have guessed that I’d reconvert the jump coördinates to get back here but him sitting here now with two of his buddies to check my cargo is a heck of a lot more than a lousy coincidence!”

Before Rhodan could say anything, Smith interrupted. The frail little Com man was capable of an astonishing shrill volume when it was vital for him to be heard. “They’re challenging us to stop! If we try to escape again they’ll open fire immediately!”

“Did he say that?” asked Graybound in astonishment. He seemed to have forgotten Rhodan’s presence completely. “Rex! Let’s merk!”

Rhodan finally got in a word. “Don’t leave too hastily, Graybound. This time

the commander is forewarned about your tactics. He would track you down. At this close proximity it would be easy for him to triangulate on your transition because of the warp-shock intensity. You'd no sooner materialize than he'd be there—and he'd blast you and your ship out of existence.” He smiled faintly. “My Fleet has been well-trained. Those cruiser commanders are exceptional space pilots.”

Graybound's shoulders slumped. “OK, Rex—hold off,” he said resignedly. “So do we submit to an inspection?”

“I didn't say anything about that,” replied Rhodan. “I'd prefer that my presence on board your ship remained a secret for now but if it can't be avoided...”

He shrugged. “See if you can get around a full inspection. Talk with the commander and try to quiet his suspicions.”

Graybound made a wry face. “Do you know what a chore that is?” he said frankly. “These guys know all about me, actually.”

“The lousy sneaks!” scolded Torero angrily but he took the precaution to remain in his cage. “Shoot the whole kaboodle!”

Rhodan had gotten up and now he stepped closer to the parrot. After regarding the bird in silence for a few moments he said suddenly: “If you open your beak once more at the wrong time like that, we'll have to give you a hypno-block—do you understand?”

From that moment on, Torero acted as though he'd been transformed and he kept his beak shut.

Smith yelled again: “We're supposed to open the hatches! A Maj. Behnken is heading up a prize crew with four other men. What should I tell them?”

Rhodan nodded affirmatively at the tramp ship skipper.

“Tell them to come on board!” ordered Graybound but it was with very mixed feelings. In spite of Rhodan he did not feel at all secure. “The locks will be open for them.”

Rhodan motioned to Pucky. “Let's go hide ourselves in the Com Room.” To Graybound he added: “Try to get rid of them. I'll be behind you if necessary. But remember that I'd like to avoid having them know I'm here. I don't even want the Fleet to know that our first linear-drive flight failed.” He paused, then clarified the statement. “Of course it did not fail, actually. We made a tremendous discovery.”

But if Graybound assumed he was going to find out about Rhodan's discovery he was disappointed. The Administrator went with Pucky into the cramped Communications booth.

Graybound ordered the airlocks opened. Rex Knatterbull went to receive the major and guide him back to the Control Central. Although his face was expressionless his clenched fists revealed only too well what frame of mind he was in.

Graybound waited, gradually realizing that not much could happen to him. In an extreme emergency he'd lead the major into the Com Room where the worthy

gent would certainly be in for a surprise. But if it could be avoided at all he naturally wanted to respect Rhodan's wish for secrecy. However, he mused, he had to remember that 'charity' begins at home.

Having seen Rhodan leave, Torero probably assumed that he was alone with his master again. He batted open his cage door and flew to Graybound's shoulder.

There was a sound of footsteps in the companionway and then a major came in with two cadets. The latter two carried energy pistols in their holsters. Maj. Behnken took two steps and then halted. His searching gaze was fastened on Graybound for a moment and finally a scornful grin came to his hard features.

"So you are the legendary Samuel Graybound? Frankly speaking, I had imagined you to be different."

"That's frank enough," replied Graybound while making every effort to keep himself calm. "And you are Behnken, I suppose?"

For a second the cruiser commander was nonplussed and then his face took on a pinkish tinge. "*Major Behnken!*" he corrected him with special emphasis. "To you I'm still a major!"

"Good, Major—then for you I'm still a captain, alright?"

Maj. Behnken's face became redder. Of course the two cadets beside him were poker-faced but there was a gleam of amusement in their eyes.

"*Man!*" exclaimed the major, who was beside himself with anger.

Graybound still controlled himself, remembering Rhodan's request. "I have to admire your gift of observation, Major," he smiled, but his tone of friendliness was deliberately deceptive. "I *am* a man. May I ask, if you please, to what branch of mammals *you* belong?"

In the Com Room next to Rhodan and Smith, Pucky brightened with a merry grin. He was becoming fond of the old pirate. The way things were going, this might be an enjoyable trip home, after all.

"Well?" grunted Graybound since he received no answer.

Behnken was not in a mood to converse any further with this loutish captain. Instead, he turned to his two men. "I'll handle the situation here. Join the other cadets and search the ship." After Rex had gone out with the two cadets, he turned back to Graybound. "And now between us two, old man—you tried to make me look foolish in front of my men and you almost succeeded. So I'll be sorry for you if we find the slightest thing out of line on your ship!"

Graybound smiled. "Go ahead and search, Major. You won't find anything—mostly teddybears. Unless you'd say *they're* out of line!"

"You just wait!" growled the major. "If we want to we can always dig up something!"

"Oh, is that so?" asked Graybound interestedly. "If you want to you can always dig up something? That's putting pretty much on the table, isn't it? What you're saying is that you can hang a crime on anybody who doesn't part their hair the way you like it! Now what do you think your head man, Perry Rhodan, would say

to that?”

“In any case he’d be grateful to us for relieving people like you of their commissions. You make the spacelanes safe, you carry on underhanded businesses and make life unnecessarily difficult for the security patrols.”

Graybound was coming to a slow boil. He could not tolerate any uncomplimentary allusions to his qualities as a space captain and this conversation galled him. He forgot his resolve to be cautious because if anybody attacked his professional integrity it snapped him right back to being Samuel Graybound himself.

“Why you drivelling skon!” he roared. His sudden change and the volume of his attack was enough to cause the major to back up against the door to the Com Room. “You silly greenhorn, you! If you don’t straighten your mouth out I’m liable to forget myself and do it *for* you—is that clear? You... you...”

“Misfit! Bonehead!” screeched Torero, seeking to give staunch support to his master. The parrot had been getting more enthusiastically excited about the argument all along and now he flapped his wings for emphasis.

Maj. Behnken was basically a proper Fleet officer and had always fulfilled his duty but this confrontation with Capt. Graybound strained the bounds of his experience and taxed his nerves. However, before he could reach for his service gun the door of the Control Central opened to admit his four cadets. They escorted Rex Knatterbull between them; he held a teddybear in his hand. The First Officer’s expression said more than words.

Graybound saw that his game was up. “Hi, boys,” he said weakly, nodding at the search team.

Ignoring Graybound’s familiarity, one of the prize crew spoke to the major. “Sir, we have uncovered smuggled merchandise.”

Maj. Behnken’s face beamed with delight. “You mean that’s it—the Teddy doll there?”

“Sir, it’s *inside* the Teddy. You can see for yourself.” The cadet took the toy from Rex and gave it to Maj. Behnken.

The latter took it and held it up somewhat clumsily but then discovered a hole in the back of the stuffed creature. He looked inside and saw the evidence. His eyes gleamed in triumph as he glared at Graybound. “That, my good man, should be the end of your career. Your ship is hereby confiscated. One of my flight officers will pilot it back to Earth. And you, *Civilian* Graybound, will spend the rest of the flight on board my cruiser. We have special quarters for you there, excellently appointed—with security locks! There you can...”

“Cut-throat!” raged Torero as though he had understood every word. “Low-down murderer! I’ll tell your wife...”

“And as for the parrot,” continued Maj. Behnken, undisturbed, “just toss it into space.”

Graybound clenched his fists. “Oh, no, you don’t!” he rumbled threateningly. “Not if you don’t want something to really happen around here—mainly to *you!*”

“There he goes threatening again—you heard that, Jenner and Klod. For that it’ll be two months extra!”

Graybound glanced desperately at the Com Room door. To his way of thinking it was high time for Rhodan to take a hand in this. If something didn’t happen pretty soon he’d be spending the next 10 years in the slammer for slander and assault against an active officer of the Spacefleet. “Who’s handing out the threats around here?” he fumed. “You mean to say your service regulations mention that parrots are supposed to fly in a vacuum? I’ve got news for you, hangman! Torero goes where I go—even if it’s to jail—and that’s final!”

The major finally lost his patience. He shouted at his men. “Put the red beard in irons and bring him to the cruiser! Then send over Lt. Drummond. He’ll bring the *Lizard*... now there’s an insidious name for you! He’ll take this ship back to Earth.”

To Graybound’s unspeakable relief he was spared any responsibility for the next step. Perry Rhodan came out of the Com Room. He stepped over to the exit of the Control Central and turned facing them as though to block the way.

“Capt. Samuel Graybound remains here, Major,” he said quietly. “You happen to be in error.”

Maj. Behnken whirled as though he’d been bitten by a snake. In the inadequate lighting of the place he did not recognize Rhodan immediately. After his crashlanding and his experience on the plasma planet the Administrator’s uniform had been anything but improved upon. On the contrary, it was so dirty and in need of mending that it was unrecognizable.

“And who do you think *you* are!” snapped the major in an imperious tone of anger. “You’ve probably been hiding, right? Judging by your uniform you’re a Fleet officer who has deserted—otherwise what would you be doing on a smuggler ship in the first place?”

Meanwhile Jenner, one of the major’s cadets, was making wild motions with his hands. His eyes were almost popping out of his head while his mouth gasped incoherent syllables of warning. Apparently he had important news for him yet did not dare to interrupt his tirade.

On the other hand, Graybound was almost choking on his own suppressed laughter. The situation was so hilarious that it practically took his breath away. Here before his very eyes the Administrator of the Solar Imperium was getting chewed out by a mere major as though he were a dim-witted high school freshman. And what impressed Graybound most of all was the fact that Rhodan never ceased smiling through it all.

When Maj. Behnken finally finished, Cadet Jenner made a supreme effort to speak. “Sir! There’s been a mistake!” he stammered. “That’s-that’s...”

“Please stop gaping when you speak to me!”

“I...” Jenner couldn’t go on. It was hard for him to breathe.

But Maj. Behnken had become wary. Did his cadet know this man that he had surprised on board Graybound’s freighter? Maybe he was an important catch.

“Who are you?” he demanded, again imperiously—but then he seemed to lose his voice suddenly. His jaw dropped open and Graybound was almost afraid his eyes would fall out of his head.

Which was the moment in which Pucky decided to make his entrance from the Com Room. With his arms crossed and his chest out, he waddled straight across the Control Central and drew himself up imposingly in front of the major. “Well?” he chirped. “Were you about to say something?”

The major stared at Pucky as though he were seeing a ghost. Even if he had failed to recognize Rhodan he could not mistake the mousebeaver’s identity if he had been blind and feeling him with a stick.

“The mousebeaver!” he groaned. “Lt. Puck!”

Pucky beamed and turned to Rhodan. “Do you see now who’s the most famous? But, after all, I’m a mouse-beaver and there’s only a handful of us in the whole universe!”

Maj. Behnken shut his mouth tight. His face was no longer flushed with indignation but instead was suddenly deathly pale. Since he appeared to stagger, Graybound leaped forward. All heart now, he helpfully shoved a chair behind the major.

“You... you are... the Administrator?” He sank down on the chair and dosed his eyes. Actually it would not have taken much more to make him collapse in a faint.

Rhodan, however, startled him out of his state of fog. “Listen to me carefully, Major. You’ve said a few things here and also taken certain actions beyond your authority or competence. But we’ll forget about it—under one condition!”

The major opened his eyes again and when he clearly recognized Rhodan for sure, he jumped to his feet. His mind seemed to be back in order once more. “Sir?”

“You are to forget completely whatever you’ve seen or experienced on board the *Lizard*. That goes for you and your four men. Have I made myself clear?”

“But this contraband, sir...?”

Rhodan indicated Graybound. “The worthy Captain here is actually carrying out an assignment for me. Or did you wish to question the legality of my own activities, Major?”

Behnken slumped inwardly. “Naturally not, sir. I only thought...”

“So you will forget this meeting, is that clear? In which case I’ll also forget some of your remarks.” Rhodan looked at the four cadets. “And if you men have any desire to continue as members of the Fleet, I advise you to do the same. Forget everything about Capt. Graybound’s apparent smuggling operations or that you encountered me on board the *Lizard*. And now, gentlemen, I wish you a good flight.”

He gave the major a short nod and then left the Control Central. Pucky waddled after him like a faithful hound but not before winking confidentially at the old red-

bearded swashbuckler of a captain. He had become quite fond of him already.

Maj. Behnken stared at Capt. Graybound. Finally a sheepish smile touched his hard face, because after all he was neither a wet blanket nor did he feel ready for a pension. He now proved that he could be adaptable and was able to rationally adjust to a very sticky situation. “Excuse the delay I caused you, Captain. It’s our duty, you understand, to carry out routine inspections and controls in this sector. I’m happy to know that your cargo is clean. From here on I wish you clear flying.”

“Wretch!” screeched Torero with implacable maliciousness.

It startled the major but he kept his decorum. “A smart bird you have there, Captain. Take care now!”

Graybound nodded to him graciously and went to the door with him. “You’ll be able to find your way, Major—Rex, guide the gentlemen to the lock. Make sure they put their helmets back on before they leave the ship. After all this they might forget!”

When the room was empty he smirked with satisfaction. After the door had closed, he sank down into his flight chair. Behind him somebody cleared his throat. Henry Smith emerged from the Com Room. Then he was standing there by him, grinning sheepishly at his chief.

“You sure gave it to them, sir!” he said admiringly.

What happened then was the most frightening of all and it scared him half to death. Graybound actually nodded to him in a friendly manner and spoke to him in a normal tone of voice. “Yes, Smith, that we did. You were a great help to me. Without you we would never have met up with Perry Rhodan.”

Smith staggered back to the Com Room, hurrying as best he could to mark this day in red on the calendar. Although Capt. Graybound had evidently not been retrained in the Cosmonautic Institute, nevertheless a certain change had come over him. At least temporarily.

Torero shook his head disapprovingly. He screeched angrily: “Kindergarten! Space Cadet Graybound!” Then he fluttered up to his cage as if his entire world had crashed into ruins.

Rex Knatterbull came back. Shortly thereafter the *Lizard* went into transition and by ship’s time it was the same day when they reached the Solar System. While the ship was dropping vertically toward the planetary ecliptic of the Earth at 0.1 light-speed, Rhodan and Bell came into the Control Central. Graybound got up politely and offered the Administrator his seat.

“Listen, Graybound—my men are going to stay on board the *Lizard* until tomorrow. Then they’ll be picked up. You yourself are to remain silent concerning your experience and my presence here. You never ran into me at all. It will have to stay that way until the official version of my return has been made public. It would not be good to have everybody know that the first test flight of the new spacedrive ran into trouble. I think we understand each other.”

“Oh yes, completely, sir.”

“Excellent. Then-there’s one more thing. You are a part of the Startramp organization. In the future I’ll be giving your firm some inside assignments, which you may take or reject at any time at your own option. I am indebted to you for what you have done but I know you would reject an outright payment of money as a reward. This trip, however, has meant a loss of revenue for you so I’d like to replace those losses. Would 50,000 Solar Credits be a fair compensation?”

Graybound groped about to support himself as he stared at Rhodan. “Fifty thousand...?” He drew a deep breath. “I wouldn’t have made that much in 10 such flights, sir. Besides, answering your distress signal was... well... an unwritten law...”

“Would the delay have caused you a financial loss or not?” Rhodan interrupted. Bell stood next to him and winked craftily at Graybound, at the same time nodding for emphasis.

Graybound returned the nod.

“Well, then,” sighed Rhodan in relief, “so that no one will get the wrong idea, I’ll transfer the money to the account of Startramp instead of to you personally...”

“I’d prefer it that way,” interjected Graybound, “if only because of Ludmilla.”

“How is that?”

“Eh? Oh, my wife. You know...”

“I know,” said Rhodan, hastening to express a tacit male understanding of such things. “So you are married? I congratulate you.”

“Hm-m...” Graybound seemed to be disconcerted. “Say no more,” said Bell who had remained silent until now. “If you’re leary of your wife she must be a real Amazon because you’re not exactly the shyest person we’ve met.”

“Hm-m...” repeated Graybound in some embarrassment. But he made no further comment on the delicate subject.

It may also have been due to the presence of the First Officer, who was piloting the ship with a sure and expert hand into the Earth’s atmosphere. After flying to Terrania he set the freighter down softly in its own berth at the spaceport. The howling of the engines was silenced. The *Lizard* had terminated its unusual journey. And the teddybears for Tuglan still rested undisturbed in the cargo hold. All except for one of them, which Pucky had appropriated as a Souvenir. Or at least this was his excuse.

* * * *

The time came for goodbyes.

Rhodan shook hands with Graybound. “Good luck, Captain. We will always be indebted to you. If you ever get into difficulty just remember that you have some good friends—myself, Mr. Bell, Pucky, as well as about 70 grateful officers, scientists and crew members of the Fleet. We’ll always be there to back you up. And believe me, Capt. Graybound, you and I will be seeing each other again. The

Earth needs men like you—both now and in all the future to come.”

Graybound was visibly touched. In his embarrassment he had to blow his nose. Then he also shook hands with Bell. At this moment Pucky appeared and after closing the door behind him approached Graybound directly. In one jump he was suddenly on the old red beard’s broad shoulder and he threw his arms around his neck. There was a smacking sound as the mousebeaver kissed him right on the nose.

“I’ll tell Ludmilla!” screeched Torero jealously and he added the most appalling threats he could think of.

Since at his elevated position he was near the cage, Pucky held his fist under the bird’s beak. “Then you’ll really learn to fly—in a vacuum!” he almost hissed at him indignantly. But actually he wasn’t serious because his incisor gleamed joyously. Sliding down over Graybound’s paunch to the floor, Pucky took Rhodan and Bell by the hand. “See you soon, Sam!” he exclaimed. And before Graybound’s eyes the two men and the mousebeaver dematerialised.

He was alone again with Rex Knatterbull and Com Man Smith. In some confusion he hastily wiped his eyes and then he suddenly noted the look of uneasy curiosity on their faces. He drew up at least 2 or 3 inches more to his full height.

“What are you gaping at?” he roared at them in his usual volume as he brought his fist down so heavily on the chart table that it almost collapsed under the blow. “Don’t you have anything better to do? We’re taking off in the morning! Get everything ready. This time our *official* course is Tuglan. Unofficially—you already know the score. They’re still waiting for the teddybears, so there’s no ground leave for anybody yet! Come on, lift a leg, you lazy louts—get to work!”

Rex grinned and busied himself with the charts. In the Com Room Smith smiled in secret satisfaction and looked over his panels at random. The Boss was back to normal again. And thank Heaven for that! A soft-spoken Graybound would really be something to worry about.

When Graybound left the ship it was obvious to any observer that he was the only one who had disembarked. With a swinging stride he walked directly to the Customs gate where Lt. Dopner surveyed his approach with interest.

“Well, back so soon? What’s the cargo?”

Graybound cleared his throat. “Toys and teddybears from Tuglan. For Terra.”

He walked proudly past Dopner who stared after him gapingly.

“Wh... what...?”

Graybound turned. “Taking them back tomorrow.

That stuff’s not worth handling.” He stood there for a moment, waiting. “Perhaps you don’t believe me? You want to make a check?”

But instead of waiting for an answer he turned and went on.

“So where’s the little woman...?” squawked Torero on his shoulder. He added a shrill whistle. “Yeah, where’s the little...”

“Shut your mouth!” bellowed Graybound while completely ignoring several

idle workmen nearby.

Instead of taking a taxi he went on foot across the peripheral area of the spaceport. He wanted the feel of good, solid ground under his feet. The feel of the Earth. The sky was blue and the warm rays of the sun made him open up the worn jacket of his uniform.

Then he began to hum an old favourite tune and Torero accompanied him with an odd parrot whistling.

Thus Graybound marched along the edge of the world's greatest spaceport, satisfied with himself and the universe.

But a watching officer of the Port Security Section was making a side remark about him to his sergeant. "Well, there's old Graybound, back again. I'm wondering when they'll lift his license. Men like him don't belong in space. The very idea, walking around like that with a crazy parrot! Ha! If he ever runs into Perry Rhodan he'll have a shock in store for him! The Chief isn't as lenient as we are..."

And the sergeant nodded, eager to please his superior.

But Graybound continued unconcernedly. In time with his tune he kicked a rock ahead of him, fondly imagining that the stone was a certain Mr. Behnken.

Or maybe even Col. Bamboozle.

Or any other supercilious stuffed-shirt...

100 ADVENTURES FROM NOW

It's Action in the
Star Station in the Void

THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

HE felt the hot, glowing beam of the thermo-gun as it hissed close past his skull. He threw himself to one side and fell as he did so, but he rolled once and then sprang to his feet. He wasn't far now from the door. The Springer had lost precious seconds since it was hard for him to believe that any of the Terrans would seriously attempt an escape. His first shot had been wild because of his surprise. The second one, however, would be closer and effective.

Richard knew that he was lost if the door turned out to be one with stubborn hinges that would take him more time to open than it would for the Springer to get a clear shot at him. Nevertheless he kept on going. He *had* to make it. He realized in the moment that the Ghamese and the Springer appeared in the square that no other Terrans would know about the crash of the lifeboat on Ghama if at least one of the survivors couldn't manage to get out of the submarine city and reach the Terran base.

Once in the hands of a Springer, a Terran could give up hope of ever being free again!

This is a preview of the action next month in—

“Action: Division 3”

By

Kurt Mahr