

Element 82

by R. K. Wigal

The survey team consisted of the mission commander, two security personnel, and the science team director. As they materialized in the great chamber they came face to face with more than fifty armed guards. "Please lower your weapons," one of them said.

"Instruments down, gentlemen," the mission commander said firmly. Hands came down. To the speaker, "These aren't weapons. They're sensing devices. Our weapons are secured. I'm Mission Commander Theo Crane of the SRS Ranger. On my right is Science Team Director Jim Butcher. On my left are First Lieutenant Briggs and Second Lieutenant Renault of our ship's ECCO security detachment. Our intentions are peaceful. Your weapons are not necessary."

The one who spoke turned and nodded. He and fifty-four guards holstered their weapons. "I am Gab Rephal, Magistrar of Harkenow, one of four continents on this, our planet Cretain. Why are you here?"

"We are scientists and explorers, seekers of knowledge," Crane replied. "We are from Telluris, the First Pannade of Planet Earth. As we neared your planet, our systems began malfunctioning. We were fortunate to be able to establish an unstable orbit before our engines quit entirely. Some force on your planet disabled our ship. Our scanners detected an anomalous energy reading and traced it to this general vicinity. We came down to investigate."

"That agrees with my findings, Mission Commander," Rephal confirmed. "All our systems have been disrupted as well. Our communication centers are down, our power and traffic control systems are failing, and our travel conveyances are no longer operating. It is only by the grace of Prah that our above-ground traffic had enough time to return to the surface without mishap. Our detectors pointed in this direction before they too ceased functioning. I suggest we continue on."

The great chamber was a natural formation; long, high and narrow. Granite interspersed with veins of marble, agate and smoky quartz comprised the walls and ceiling. A great door stood at one end. Entrances to three tunnels stood at the other. Beyond one of those entrances lay a mysterious, powerful energy source.

Rephal spoke. "I know these halls. I will take two squads this way." He pointed to the left tunnel. "Four squads are at your disposal. First one to find anything will send runners for the others."

Crane replied, "Agreed! Briggs, you and Renault take two squads and search the right tunnel! Jimmy, the rest of us will search the middle tunnel. Any questions? Good! Let's go!"

Before long, Crane's team entered a dimly lit chamber quite unlike the one they had just been in. A pivoted turret with eight barrels pointing in as many directions was casting blue-white thermal dots onto the walls, melting the lead that comprised them. On the floor were eight small cars on ball-rollers vacuuming the liquid that flowed freely down the walls. They, in turn, through flexible tubing, were directing the melt into a larger main tube. The main tube passed through an even larger, circular, window-like opening in a section of wall near the floor at Crane's two-o'clock. Liquid lead was literally being sucked out of the chamber. A lone individual monitoring the extraction process drew a weapon as Crane, Butcher and their two backup squads approached.

Crane dispatched two squad members to go out and bring the others, then spoke. "Before you shoot all 18 of us, please, tell us what you're doing here."

The individual, standing no more than a meter and a half high, answered in a trembling voice. "A wandering star is nearing my world. Its rare form of radiation can destroy our atmosphere and

annihilate our people. Your walls are pure *Element 82.* We can emulsify and suspend it high above our planet in order to protect our atmosphere. There is more than enough here for our needs."

"I have no problem with what you're doing," Crane responded, "but I'm not from this planet. I have no authority here. The one you need to talk to will be arriving shortly. What happens to your project will be up to him."

The individual relaxed his stance a little, but he didn't lower his weapon.

Crane shifted his attention. "Jimmy, got a fix on the cause of the disruptions yet?"

"It's not the extraction process, Commander," he said as he read from his sense-pad. "That aperture over there with the hose running through it is a spatial rift, a hole in space. That's where all that troublesome energy's coming from."

"That explains how our friend got here," Crane mused aloud.

When the other teams arrived, Crane briefed Gab Rephal. Then Rephal spoke. "Please lower your weapon. We are not interested in harming you." He introduced himself, Crane and Butcher. Then he asked, "Who are you?"

The individual holstered his weapon and answered in a now steady voice. "I am Glinn. I am a geological engineer. My world is at your mercy, Magistrar.

"How much more time will you need," Rephal asked.

Glinn replied, "About six turns of your planet will do, but I would like to have eight for a margin of surety."

"Then you shall have eight of our rens, to extract all of the dark metal you will need," Rephal assured him.

"Thank you, Magistrar Rephal. I... Thank you."

Crane interjected, "If I may, Magistrar?" Rephal nodded and Crane shifted his attention. "Glinn, can you either close your spatial aperture around that tube, or turn off whatever generates it for a few hours? I need to stabilize my ship and these people need to stabilize and restart their various systems, all for safety's sake."

"I can reduce the size of the aperture, but I will no longer be able to communicate with my world, and I will be unable to receive technical support or supplies once I have done so. I will inform my people, and then I will proceed."

"Excellent. And don't worry, you're not alone in your endeavors. On board our ship we have engineering staff who can assist you, and any equipment you might need we can provide, fashion or manufacture. We've got your back."

"I do not foresee any problems, Mission Commander, but if I encounter any, I will seek your help. I am much appreciative. Thank you."

With security no longer a concern, Crane released his security team to return to the ship. Rephal likewise gave leave to his guards to return to their regular duty stations.

A short while later, Glinn spoke, "The aperture is closed, Magistrar; it is completely sealed. The energy is no longer a problem."

"That is good news," Gab Rephal said with a sigh of relief.

"Good news indeed!" effused Theo Crane, "News that calls for a celebration! Gab Rephal, Glinn, I would like very much for the two of you to join Jim Butcher here, and me, on board my ship, for food, drink and entertainment, all to laud our success today, and to commemorate our new friendship!"

"I would be very happy to join you, Mission Commander," Gab Rephal responded.

"Your unexpected invitation honors me, benevolent sir," Glinn added. "I accept with deep gratitude."

"Splendid, gentlemen. I'll arrange transportation. And call me Theo - we're all friends here."

GLOSSARY

ECCO:	Ether Corps Celestial Operations
Ether:	a medium once believed to comprise outer space
Magistrar:	governor, administrative leader
Pannade:	a united body of people comprised of two or more independent nations, nation states, states, provinces, or any other such territorial entities
SRS:	Science Research Ship