

THE SEEDER

By MAX WILLIAMS

**Being just plain Pop was not enough
— he was bucking for All - Fatherhood.**

IT TOOK me less than three thousand years to catch up with Pop; which, all things considered, was pretty good going. I came out of overdrive at 018970 hours in orbit around an ugly-looking A3-type planet, and there was his ship below me.

I slammed my cruiser down right alongside—hard enough to pulverize a couple of feet of basalt and make Pop and his ship bounce a little. He'd put me to quite a bit of trouble and I was annoyed.

Pop got to his feet and stood there looking kind of sheepish as I climbed out of the cruiser. The old fool had his helmet off and was breathing in the foul atmosphere as if it were health gas. His gills

had begun to turn a little blue from the methane and CO₂. He was a character all right.

His name wasn't really Pop, of course. I guess the nickname had been tacked on because he was such an eccentric old codger, and because he looked like a couple of billion years old. Actually, of course, he wasn't nearly that old.

"Welcome aboard planet," he said. "I kind of figured you'd be along sooner or later. Or someone like you."

"Well, I'm here," I said. He looked harmless, but I kept a 201R projector on him just in case. Pop had given Security Division a lot of trouble, and I had strict orders.

I crawled over to his ship

and slid inside. The cabin looked neat enough, but the old fool had so much junk crammed into the ship you could hardly turn around. I found what I was looking for toward the bow—row after row of cylindrical canisters. I broke one open and the bio-detector on my back began to stutter like crazy. I dropped it and sprayed them all until they glowed dull green. By then the contents were cooked.

POP was still standing in the same place when I crawled out, looking as casual as you please. He only had a few eyes on me. Most of them he had turned toward the planet's oversize satellite and a raw, angry-looking sea that was breaking a few ship's-lengths away.

"How'd you catch up with me?" he asked.

"Space warp. You left a trail a child could follow." I moved around his ship and found the reason he was looking so innocent. He'd already set up one of his canisters and the seal was about to break. I sprayed it. So much for several billion one-celled forms of life bottled under pressure.

"All right," I said. "That's the last of them. Let's get going."

"Okay," said Pop. "Never argue with Security Division. Still, you've got to admit I gave you a good run for your

money. And I seeded quite a mess of planets."

I shouldn't have done it, but I was angry. I snapped a claw across his nerve center before he could draw it back into his shell. It must have hurt plenty, because ten or twelve of his eyes began to water.

"Seeded, hell!" I said. "You touched down on exactly 9080 planets, and I sterilized every one of them after you left. That's what took me so long."

He seemed to shrink a little inside, and for the first time I realized just how old the nut really was.

"All that time," he said. "All that effort wasted. Damn. Double damn."

"You should have figured that in the first place," I said. "Central Maxim 0438 clearly states that no life is to be introduced into the outer galaxies. And don't ask me why. I'm no biologist. I just follow orders."

"Listen," said Pop. "*Please* listen. Back at Central Galaxy they think we—our race—is pretty much immortal. But they don't *know*. They don't know for sure if *any* life will be left in our galaxy after two or three hundred wars like the last one and—"

"Hold it," I said. "You're wasting your time. I'm not a philosopher and you know it."

"That's right," said Pop. "And you're not a biologist,

either. You told me." He waved a claw in gesture of resignation number seven. "Well, maybe you're right. Maybe I have been an old fool. Let's go home. No use hanging around an ugly planet like this one." He made gesture of contempt number fifteen.

Well, I thought, that's a relief. Maybe the old geezer wasn't as crazy as I'd figured. Maybe he just needed some sense slapped into him. At any rate, he didn't make any trouble when I disintegrated his ship—the old crate wasn't spaceworthy to begin with—and he climbed into my cruiser meek as could be.

I PUT the drive in low and pulled out of the system. The next planet—Pop had landed on the third—was go-

ing through G14 disintegration into asteroids, but I eased through without any trouble and began to pick up speed.

Just then Pop swung around in his seat and made good-luck gesture eight and long-life gesture twelve toward the planet we'd left.

I stared at him. "I don't get it," I said. "Just a while ago you agreed that was an ugly hunk of rock. You even made contempt gesture fifteen—you spat on it."

"That's right," said Pop. "I did, didn't I? Right into a pool of brackish water." Then he began to chuckle. He kept on chuckling for five years, until I got annoyed and slapped his nerve center again.

Aside from that, the return voyage was uneventful.

E N D

THE POSSIBLE IMPOSSIBLE

When referring to technological advances, the word "impossible" must be used, if at all, with utmost caution. We should not forget, however, that all speculation on nuclear power sources is still founded on rather shaky ground. Thus, we render our cause a service of dubious value by referring to such vague potentialities. I, for one, am not yet convinced that within the next quarter of a century we will have a nuclear drive that could economically compete with chemical power plants.

—WERNHER VON BRAUN