

On a lonely moon in deepest space a scout for Perry Rhodan's fleet encounters a strange, sentient orb. As a Springer attack force approaches the planet Goszul, the orbit reveals its awesome power... but what are its intentions?

Meanwhile on Goszul, the Springers seem to have been vanquished by the Plague of Oblivion unleashed by Rhodan and his mutants. But the Springers have one devastating card left to play—hidden deep in the mountains, their mightiest battleship is nearing completion...

*This is the stirring story of—*

## **A WORLD GONE MAD**

### **1/ PUCKYS PERILOUS PRETENSE**

"WE 13 MEN are opposed by a whole world!" growled Ragor, a patriarch of the Galactic Traders known as the Springers and himself till now holding the title of Governor of Goszul's Planet.

"A world we ruled till now!" a dark giant next to him murmured ominously. "I wonder what condition the Goszuls will impose on us?"

Bright sunlight from an alien star streamed through the wide windows of the assembly room in which 13 dejected men were sitting. The rays reflected from the polished surface of a long conference table.

There were several features the 13 had in common which clearly characterized them as a homogeneous group: Heavy beards half-covered all their faces... Strong noses and thin lips were common above their bearded chins... All had bush eyebrows—beneath which their eyes now held a peculiar mixture of distress and barely restrained pride bordering on arrogance. Their haughty heads topped sturdy physiques and now seemed crestfallen, displaying little of the great strength normally evident. The sinewy fists lying listlessly on the table lacked their customary energy.

These vanquished masters of their colonial world were waiting for their conquerors.

Patriarch Ragor had fled like the others to the abandoned administration building when the Plague of Oblivion caused a rebellion among the natives and the commanders of the Springer ships fled in panic. A 50-year quarantine had subsequently been imposed on Goszul's Planet by the Traders... costing them an important base.

Ragor cleared his throat. "They keep us waiting," he observed gloomily, trying to mask his impatience with an exterior show of calm.

"The prerogative of the victor," philosophized his neighbour.

"Yes, they give us time to ponder. When they occupied the Command Centre for our robots we were automatically rendered defenceless—which has brought us to this sorry plight."

Just then footsteps sounded in the corridor, followed by the opening of the door. Three men entered the room, accompanied by a seven-foot-tall robot which placed itself near the entrance without waiting for specific orders.

The people who entered were quite different from those waiting anxiously. They were humans like the others but distinguished by red skins and atypically beardless faces. In contrast to the sturdy Springers they were slender, almost delicate, though every inch as tall. These hitherto despised natives had suddenly become the masters and now for the first time faced their former governors in the sweet role of conquerors. But their frank, genial faces showed more joy of hard won liberation than pride of victory. Their simple raiment clearly revealed the primitive state of their culture imposed by their former rulers. The Galactic Traders had dominated Goszul's Planet and exploited its inhabitants with the aid of an army of programmed robots until the day the pestilence broke out and infected seven of the 20 governors, rendering them totally inactive. The diseased patients were still confined in hospitals with coloured spots on their faces and obliterated memories. Fear of contagion had driven the other governors together but when the four alien spaceships landed and put their army of fighter robots out of action they had no choice left but to capitulate.

The four ships were still stationed outside on the huge spaceport. Such ships had never before landed on this planet. They were gigantic spheres up to half a mile in diameter and their intervention had determined the outcome of the battle.

Ragor studied the men with pinched eyes and made no effort to rise from his seat. With a sluggish gesture he pointed to the empty chairs. Although he conceded that they were the victors he did not regard them as his real conquerors in the field.

In this respect his judgment was utterly erroneous.

The three men remained standing on their feet. The one in the middle, the old telepath Enzally, probed the thoughts of the governors and detected besides resignation and despair also resistance and secret hope. Yet he was unable to ascertain quickly what this hope was based on.

Ralv, the leader of the rebellion against the Springers and future head of government of the united planet, adopted an attitude of waiting for the time being. He left it to Enzally to say the first words.

The third man, however, was no Goszul.

His skin was tanned and his lean figure towered about five inches above Enzally and Ralv. His eyes showed nothing of the glum traces of age-old slavery and fear. They looked bright and expressed self-reliance and a sense of strength and superiority. The 13 governors didn't recognize his unpretentious uniform which had never before appeared in their realm.

There was only one explanation: the man was not a native but must have come in one of those four alien spaceships and belonged to the people who had inflicted the defeat on the Springers.

Ragor came to the same conclusion but was far from happy about it.

He would have been even much unhappier had he known that the man who confronted him was Perry Rhodan, who was careful not to reveal his identity for various reasons. His mission on Goszul's Planet was not yet fully completed. Although these 13 governors seemed to have lost all contact with their compatriots who had fled away into space, Rhodan preferred to be on the safe side.

He nodded to Enzally who had waited for his sign.

"Thank you, we prefer to stand up," said the telepath, who was the only one born on this world. "If you accept our conditions we'll come very quickly to an agreement. You've lost the fight and you're helpless. Even your robots refuse to obey you since they've been reprogrammed. We've no intention of killing you, we merely wish to isolate you. We're planning to put you on an island in the Western Ocean where you can spend the rest of your lives in peace in a good climate. A return to your own world is impossible since you're deprived of your spaceships."

Enzally paused and looked at Ragor. The governor was unaware that his conscious and subconscious thoughts were carefully studied. Nothing remained hidden from the probing telepath.

A murmur was audible among the 13 men. Several began to whisper but Ragor hushed them up with a wave of his hand.

"What will happen to the seven governors who are suffering under the Plague of Oblivion?" Ragor inquired. "Are we to leave them behind?"

"They'll go with you to the island."

"So that they'll infect us too?" Ragor was indignant and looked furious. "If that island is now free of this scourge, it won't remain that way very long."

Perry Rhodan gave Enzally a sign and addressed Ragor himself. "We've brought an anti-serum with us, Ragor. The disease has now been reduced to a harmless sickness—luckily only after the Springer commanders were put to flight. You'll be administered injections and you'll never come down with the illness. The seven governors we've found in the hospital have already recovered and will be able to accompany you to the island."

Ragor studied Rhodan intently. "You're not from this world?"

"No, my home planet is more than a thousand light-years away."

"Why do you interfere in this conflict?"

"Because we're concerned for people who are oppressed to be able to govern themselves. We've helped the Goszuls to overcome colonialism."

"And you don't make any profit out of it?"

"Certainly, Ragor. But you can't expect us to tell you all about that. All you have to do is answer one question: Will you submit voluntarily to the decision of the new government of this world in offering you exile?"

Ragor cast a sideways glance at his associates before he answered. "Are we allowed to leave Goszul's Planet in case we can get a ship?"

"In that case, yes. But you don't have a ship."

Ragor hesitated once again but it was already too late.

Enzally suddenly smiled and said to Rhodan, "I know where the ship is, sir! We can conclude this conversation."

Ragor stared uncomprehendingly at the telepath who had so casually given away his prized secret. He felt as if his whole world had suddenly collapsed and that his hopes were buried. Ragor had been anxious to gain a short breathing spell and wangle perhaps a few robot workers. Then it would have taken only a few more days to complete their mightiest battleship, hidden in a secret hangar in the mountains, and—after a quick blow for revenge he could have escaped with his partners in crime into space.

And now this...

Enzally stopped smiling and said coldly, "Thank you, Ragor, you've said enough. I can see that we're too lenient with you. You'll be deported to the island today."

The telepath turned to Rhodan. "They wanted to take the battleship of the Springers and destroy Goszul's Planet before returning to their sector of the Galaxy. Lovely people, really."

"Their mentality is such that they cannot tolerate defeat. However Ragor's attitude can't be used as a criterion for the entire race of the Springers. I'm convinced some day we'll reach an understanding with them. Not here and not with the governors but with others of their ilk. We better close this chapter right now. Ralv, you can attend to the duties of your office! Enzally, lees leave! What will happen here is no longer our business."

Holding their heads high, Rhodan and Enzally left the room. They walked past the motionless robot whose crystalline lenses stared rigidly at the 13 Springers whom he had formerly owed obedience.

Now it would be his task to take them to prison.

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Goszul's Planet circled around the star 221-Tatlira as the second of seven satellites. 221-Tatlira was the name given in the star-catalog of the Springers. It was 1012 light-years distant from Earth, where it was unknown to the astronomers.

In a bloodless coup Perry Rhodan's Mutant Corps had succeeded in returning the planet used as a power base by the Springers to their rightful owners. Four of the mutants under the leadership of John Marshall had created an artificial epidemic which produced splotches on the skin in the first stage and later seemed to affect the brain. Those who fell victim to the epidemic lost their memory. Of course there was an anti-serum available but the Springers had no knowledge of it. They succumbed to their terror and retreated in haste, leaving the 20 governors to their fate.

Only a few weeks after the outbreak of the disease its effect started to clear up. Memory returned and

the brain worked better than before. The coloured spots disappeared and the patients' health was restored even without injection of the serum. It just took a few weeks longer.

Rhodan presumed that the escaped Springers would soon learn these facts but he figured that the Springers whose medical knowledge was at a very advanced stage would nevertheless attribute the cure to purely accidental causes and would be wary of setting foot on Goszul's Planet for a long time.

But this assumption was where Rhodan erred and he was to find it out soon enough. At present he was too busy with the task at hand to worry excessively about the future.

Somewhere in the mountains was a secret dock where the Springers kept their robots working on a gigantic spaceship, adding the final touches. Enzally had read in Ragor's mind that the ship was being constructed according to the revolutionary design of the outstanding Springer scientists and that it surpassed the achievements of the Arkonides.

Rhodan simply had to gain possession of this ship!

This was the reason why he couldn't depart from this world and return to Terra where important problems demanded his attention.

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The briefing took place in the spacious Command Centre of the *Stardust*. The spacesphere measuring half a mile in diameter rested on the spaceport of the Land of The Gods, as the natives called the continent on which the Springers had erected their base, and it was surrounded by the three cruisers *Terra*, *Solar System* and *Centurio*.

Reginald Bell had taken his seat next to Perry Rhodan. Bell's reddish hair bristles were combed back and seemed to have an irresistible urge to stand up straight.

The mutants John Marshall, Tako Kakuta, Kitai Ishibashi and Tama Yokida sat at the side on a couch. The representatives of Goszul's Planet were seated across from them. Ralv, the erstwhile leader of the rebellion against the Springers, acted now as the liberated world's head of government. Next to him sat the telepath Enzally, a quiet and modest elderly Goszul. He was the only mutant Goszul's Planet had ever produced. And the third representative of the inhabitants who was present was Geragk, one of Ralv's aides in the clandestine resistance group they had formed.

Also attending the meeting were the commanders of the three cruisers. Their ships measured only 200 feet and looked like dwarves next to the *Stardust* although they were stupendous technical marvels in their own right. Captain McClears sat between Maj. Nyssen and Maj. Deringhouse, showing no concern whatsoever that he was outranked.

"The 20 governors have already been transported to their island and so are restrained from disturbing the peace," Perry Rhodan began, quickly glancing at Ralv. "I don't expect that they will find a possibility of escaping nor do I think that any of their tormented victims will seek revenge. Now Goszul's Planet is free and belongs once again to its indigenous population and we hope they will build a beautiful world."

Ralv felt that these words were directed to him and he nodded in assent. "You may rest assured that we'll show our gratitude by maintaining the freedom of our people. At the same time we've no objections if you establish a base on our planet for conducting a mutually beneficial trade."

"Now that we've done our job it's time for us to take leave," Bell interjected with a flourish. "There only remains the matter of Springer ship..."

"Only!" Rhodan interrupted him with emphasis. "That ship causes me the greatest concern. Enzally has surveyed the governors and determined that the hangar is located about 30 miles from here in the mountains. There are about 30 robots and robot specialists at work. They're completely self-contained and independent of any central control. They and the hangar are protected by 100 fighter robots who are programmed to attack everything that doesn't look like a Springer. It is impossible to deactivate them by controlling a Command Centre. They have to be tackled individually and put out of action. A formidable job!"

"Why is it so important to lay our hands on this half-completed ship of the Springers?" Bell asked.

"Very simple, Bell. We know that this ship is the most modern that has been constructed up to now. Its equipment and armament surpass in technical refinement anything we can imagine. We tend to think of the Arkonides as being at the apex of civilization and we strive to reach their standard. But don't forget that the Arkonide technology has stagnated for 8000 years in contrast to that of the Springers, who cut their ties with the empire at that time. They have made great strides and are in several respects definitely superior to the Arkonides. I'm certain that the construction of this ship will reveal many surprises to us. I'm simply curious, that's all."

Bell grinned. "Really only curious?"

Rhodan grinned back but became quickly serious again. "The fact remains that we have to capture this ship if only for the purpose of studying it. However we can't use force in order to keep the robots from destroying it as a last resort. I'm convinced that their programming contains orders to this effect."

"And how are we going to prevent them?"

"By a clever feint and the element of surprise. just how we're going to accomplish it I don't know yet. In any case we'll have to secure information about the situation first. Pucky will soon report to us. He's already there since this morning to investigate the site."

The news caused some excitement among the listeners since nobody had been aware that the mouse-beaver had received such an assignment.

"Pucky?" Bell groaned. "Pucky is in the shipyard?"

"Who else is better suited than our little friend? First of all he's the most perfect mutant we know. In addition to telepathy he's adept at telekinetics and teleportation. He can defend himself and retreat to safety any time things get too hot for him. Besides he doesn't look like a suspicious man but like an overgrown mouse. Maybe even the robots will consider him to be a harmless animal and disregard his activities."

"If I know Pucky," Bell commented "it'll kill him if the robots simply ignore him."

"He's too smart for that," Rhodan contradicted. "Anyway, however it may be, I expect Pucky back very

shortly. He knows that we're waiting here in the *Stardust* for his report."

One of the three officers in the background cleared his throat.

"Yes?" Rhodan turned to him to hear his opinion.

Maj. Deringhouse, the commander of the new cruiser *Centurio*, where 50 trim and lightning fast space-pursuitships were berthed, smiled a little superciliously. "If I'm permitted to make a remark: why go to all this trouble? I can attack the yard with 50 pursuitships and put the robots out of action."

Rhodan shook his head.

"You're thinking in strictly military terms and we won't be so stupid as to use such a dangerous approach. They're probably prepared to blow up the hangar and the ship, and one robot is enough to set off the charge. No, Major, we'll have to use our heads and you must admit that we've already had some experience in the past in this respect."

Deringhouse opened his mouth to say something in reply but chose to remain silent when he noticed Bell's sardonic grin.

"And when is Pucky supposed to come back?" inquired John Marshall, the telepath of the mutant mini-team that had already operated for some time on Goszul's Planet.

Rhodan shrugged his shoulders. "I expect him any moment. But many complications could've occurred to delay his return. If necessary Tako will have to take the risk of going to his assistance by teleportation."

The Japanese Tako was also a teleporter. He was able to dematerialise at will and to pop up bodily at any place he chose. All this took only a fraction of a second and Tako was thus able to span great distances without loss of time. He offered with his quiet and modest smile: "I'll be glad to go at once if you think that Pucky has fallen into a trap and requires help."

Rhodan shook his head. "We'll wait another half an hour, Tako. Then the time Pucky and I have allotted for this job will be up. Until then we'll have to give him a chance."

Bell was staring thoughtfully at the dark videoscreens of the control panel. He seemed to be occupied with a problem and trying to find an answer. Finally he said, completely unrelated to the topic under discussion: "Why do we have to be so secretive with the Springers? Why shouldn't they know that we're responsible for their defeat?"

"There are several reasons. As you know, the clan of patriarch Eztak is very eager to bestow the blessings of his colonial administration on us. We already had to drive him out of the Solar system once before. Don't imagine that this was the end of it. Some day he's bound to return—and I want to put this day off as long as possible. If he's now led to believe that he faces a new and powerful enemy in the sector he'll be more cautious. To fight two opponents in a rather narrow space is risky. But if he finds out that it was Terra that has frustrated his ambitions here also, he'll be more anxious than ever to concentrate the entire might of the Springers to destroy Terra."

"I can see the logic of that," Bell admitted, catching a glance from Maj. Deringhouse who obviously was also curious to know the reasons for Rhodan's strategy. "But do we have to be afraid of the Springers?"

Rhodan smiled coldly. "Of course not, Bell. But isn't it better to negotiate with a foe and make a friend of him some day than to exterminate him? In any case neither of these alternatives can be realized at this moment since Eztak and his friends are shunning this planet because of a terrible disease which doesn't exist. It'll take him quite a while to realize how innocuous this dread epidemic really is."

"What about all the other Springers?" Marshall queried. "There are many clans that keep in constant touch with each other although they have no other home than their ships. Won't they come back to salvage the abandoned technical installations?"

"Don't forget the quarantine they've imposed on this planet!" Rhodan reminded him. "Nobody is allowed to land on Goszul's Planet. At least no Springers!" Rhodan chuckled a little. "I wouldn't know which Springer would be courageous enough to brave the danger of an unknown pestilence in order to salvage a few robots, no matter how much they're worth!"

"You're forgetting the unfinished ship," Bell reminded.

Nobody suspected then that much more than the ship had been overlooked—but destiny would dramatically remind them at a much later date.

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Pucky was shrewd enough to materialize far enough away from the secret spaceship plant in the wilderness of the mountains.

He was very fortunate that his blind jump deposited him on a high plain strewn with rocks and a sparse growth of stunted trees which offered sufficient cover for him in case anybody was around to see him. He estimated that he was at most one or two miles away from the assembly plant. Since he was too lazy for running he wanted to cover the distance by carefully calculated jumps.

Looking at Pucky it was easy to understand why he didn't care much for running. Pucky really looked like a giant mouse with a flattened beaver tail. His big ears came to a point and were usually standing up. His rusty-brown fur was smooth and supple. He was but a yard tall and his short feet made him appear to be awkward. As far as his intelligence was concerned he far surpassed the average human being.

At home in a cold world circling a dying sun he belonged to a telekinetic species but due to the process of mutation he had also acquired the gift of telepathy and the ability to move by teleportation.

Sitting on his hind feet he surveyed his surroundings with keen eyes. He failed to receive thoughts but that would hardly have been possible there because robots don't think like organic beings. Their impulses couldn't be picked up, at least not by a telepathic brain.

The sun was beating down on the rocky surface and Pucky, who could stand cold better than heat, began to sweat. To gain a better view he lifted himself up in the air and motionlessly hovered at a height of 60 feet where it was also a little cooler.

The hangar was presumably located somewhere to the north. Pucky saw nothing but rugged cliffs and steep ravines. He wondered why the Springers had chosen to build their ship in this wilderness. It



probably must have been for reasons of security.

Suddenly he noticed a flash as if the sunrays were reflected from a shiny metallic surface.

Pucky strained his eyes and recognized a robot that slowly patrolled back and forth in front of the entrance to one of the many gorges about 600 feet away.

The mouse-beaver noted the direction and dropped down to the ground. He carefully concentrated on a high cone-shaped rock not far from the entrance to the gorge and made his jump.

Within the second he materialized again behind the rock. He took a deep breath and waddled out onto the plain as if he were a rabbit of the local fauna in search of food. This behaviour was probably not considered conspicuous by the robots, assuming they were programmed to treat only the native Goszuls as enemies.

The metallic monster kept patrolling before the opening to the gorge which was about 150 feet wide. It paid no attention to Pucky for whom this experiment was a matter of life and death. If the fighter robot failed to react to his approach he would be able to move around unmolested. It gave Pucky an unpleasant feeling in the pit of his stomach that he failed to be taken seriously but he swore that he would get even at the first opportunity.

Barely 100 feet away from the robot Pucky paused for a few minutes and thoroughly studied his adversary. Its arms extending at an angle ended in spiral-shaped barrels of lethal energy-beamers. The mouse-beaver knew he could be vaporized in a fraction of a second if the positronic brain of the seven foot giant regarded him as an enemy. Luckily this didn't seem to be the case. The robot didn't even know what a mouse-beaver was and as long as Pucky behaved peacefully he wouldn't be tagged as a foe.

The retracted antenna of the robot indicated that it was not tuned in to a command centre but was programmed by an individual data bank. If it was possible to get close enough to it, it could be deactivated and rendered harmless. However this was easier said than done. If the robot registered intelligence in a living being that didn't look like a Springer it was bound to react in a hostile manner.

Pucky was unable to solve this problem and decided to determine once and for all if he would be classed as an intelligent being by the positronic brain.

He went down on all fours and hopped straight to the silent guard who was impassively making his rounds. He was ready for an instant teleportation jump to save his hide if it became necessary.

If Bell could have seen his little friend in these circumstances he would have roared with sarcastic laughter. The mighty mutant Pucky acting like a common rabbit would have been the greatest joke to him. Luckily Bell was not on the scene to enjoy the spectacle in which the robot showed no interest whatsoever.

Pucky was completely ignored.

He would have loved to use his telekinetic power to hurl the robot 100 feet up in the air and let him crash to the ground as he had done many times with other robots. But he had to keep the promise he had given to Rhodan. He suppressed his urge and bounced into the ravine, passing close by the robot.

As soon as he was past the metal menace he tamed around and moved backwards as he was afraid that

he might get it in the back. But his fear was groundless. The robot took him for a harmless foraging animal that could have been seeking water from a spring. Such springs were few and far between in this deserted country.

The ravine became wider as he entered deeper but it remained dry. Only the increasing vegetation indicated more moisture in the ground. Pucky continued hopping away from the robot till he lost sight of it.

He felt relieved and was able to direct his attention to where he was going and it was indeed a sight to behold.

The ravine spread out into a round basin which was more than 500 feet wide. Steep walls of rock presented an insurmountable obstacle for unwelcome visitors. Nobody could have entered here unless he had wings. Long buildings housed machinery and workshops, Pucky noted in a quick glance.

The opening in the 150-foot-high mountain wall drew his attention most of all. It was more than 600 feet high and at least as wide. Bright lights flooded the inside of the mountain and revealed the shiny metal hull of a nearly finished spaceship. The entire length of the ship was hidden from the sight of trespassers by the protecting mountain. If Rhodan's information was correct the huge tunnel was more than 2500 feet long.

The Springers couldn't have selected a better hiding place.

A chain of fighter robots blocked the basin's sole exit. The metal soldiers stood silent guard and motionlessly faced Pucky, who squatted between some bushes, nibbling the sparse grass growing amidst the rocks. He pretended to show no interest whatsoever in the spaceship or the robots.

The positronic brains seemed to consider vegetarians as harmless creatures. Once again Pucky realized with great dismay that he was not accorded proper treatment, so to speak, as they slighted him by not regarding him as an intruder.

On the other hand he was quite happy about it.

But he would be unable to proceed by teleportation. Such activities would have been evaluated as a sign of intelligence by the watchful robots and dealt with accordingly. Pucky had no other choice than to approach the bristling frontline of shimmering metal by grazing in their direction.

Perhaps he could manage to reach the spaceship itself. The more information he would be able to gather, the easier it would be to plan the action against this stronghold.

And so he hopped and skipped with mixed emotions.

About 30 robots blockaded the valley. They formed a half circle curving toward the outside and were spaced about 15 feet apart. This was an enormous waste since each robot was equipped with formidable defensive powers. One of them could have defended the valley against an entire army if need be.

It proved how important this spaceship was to the Springers.

Pucky didn't have much time to think. With great reluctance he stuffed dried tufts of grass behind his incisor tooth, hoping to spit it out at the first opportunity. But it had to be done for appearances' sake. There was indeed a type of rabbit roaming Goszul's Planet and he endeavoured to imitate them.

Pucky's hair bristled uncontrollably at the back of his neck at the sight of the fighting machines close to him with their energy-beamers aiming straight ahead. Perhaps the robots had been standing immovably at the same spot for months, which didn't mean a thing to them: they lacked a sense of space and time and if their task consisted of waiting and watching they could've stood there a thousand years unless they received orders to the contrary.

It was all the same to Pucky as long as they didn't take notice of him. He hopped a few more feet and stopped at a green clump of grass.

The nearest robot was about 60 feet away and directed his gleaming lenses almost lazily to the trespasser. His neighbours didn't move at all.

Pucky had a funny feeling in his stomach which could not be ascribed to the mouthful of grass he had suddenly swallowed. Bravely he continued downing the unsavoury food to make himself look as much as possible like a local rabbit.

If only he could teleport himself out of there! But this could've ruined Rhodan's plans. The robots would be tipped off at once that the place had been discovered by enemies. They would take immediate action and perhaps even demolish the ship if they thought it was the only thing to do. Pucky took it for granted that the robots had obtained the information that the Springers' commanders had fled.

The grass tasted simply awful.

The next clump of grass grew exactly between the two robots posted in front of Pucky. The mouse-beaver overcame a shudder and bounced toward the green patch. He was holding his breath and concentrated himself so he could dematerialise instantaneously. He wanted to avoid this method of rescue unless it was absolutely necessary.

The nearest robot slowly turned in his direction. Its left arm moved almost unnoticeably and pointed directly at Pucky, who didn't dare breathe and resolutely continued hopping to the clump of grass which suddenly looked so desirable.

The next seconds were filled with unbearable tension. Would the robot assume it was necessary to kill the seemingly harmless animal? If so, certainly not out of boredom, which was unknown to the robots. But suppose the robots were programmed to keep all living beings out of the valley?

If this were true why didn't the robot at the entrance act in accordance with such instructions?

Pucky intended to ponder this question when he had time—which was not the case right now.

He reached the clump of grass and began to nibble at it. Although it was no tastier than before Pucky suddenly thought it the most delicious food he had ever eaten. This impression lasted only till his single incisor tried unsuccessfully to chew the grass.

The robot observed Pucky's grazing with obvious interest. Its weapon arm was raised and ready to shoot. If it had been its intention to exterminate the little animal it wouldn't have hesitated to do so. There simply wouldn't have been any logical reason for such a delay.

Pucky's quick mind grasped the situation instantly. He swallowed the unchewed bite of grass in a heroic self-sacrifice. His stomach threatened to revolt but this also passed. Shuddering inwardly he ignored the

vigilant robot and continued feeding on the grass.

The positronic brain of the lifeless guard registered a living being that looked neither like a Springer nor a Goszul nor like an intelligent creature. It was an animal that didn't have sense enough to avoid the proximity of the fighting machines. It was apparently unable to reason and therefore not intent on doing damage. Moreover it was eating grass and at home in this world. And the Goszuls were the only enemies the Springers had on this planet...

The logical conclusion was that the little animal was innocently grazing

Pucky noted with relief that the weapon arm was lowered and the robot was staring again at the exit of the valley. Pucky had withstood the worst test.

Nevertheless he decided not to act hastily and with this thought in mind he kept grazing leisurely no matter how badly his stomach was getting upset. Finally he moved on and hopped to the nearest building.

Pucky had a spine-tingling sensation in his back but he resisted the temptation to turn around. It worried him that the robot's mind would suddenly switch and change its decision. It wasn't much consolation for him that he wouldn't even feel his sudden death.

He ignored the next patch of grass and scrambled to reach the low building. Pucky felt unimaginable relief when he finally turned around a corner and was out of the robot's sight.

The mouse-beaver sat down to catch his breath.

The entrance to the hangar in the mountain was still 600 feet farther away from him. There were several storage sheds along the way as well as stacks of equipment such as metal frames, gleaming hull sections, scaffolding and big boxes. Work robots with predetermined special programming moved around everywhere between the sheds, taking care of their tasks. Various noises emanated from the tunnel as evidence that the construction was still in process.

The orders of the robots had never been changed and they were going to finish their job.

Nobody could possibly foresee what would happen after that.

Rhodan couldn't take the chance that the robots would take off with the new spaceship and escape to a pre-arranged meeting place in space.

Pucky was aware of these possibilities. It was his mission to find out when the critical time was reached.

Ten feet to the left a door suddenly opened and a work robot emerged. It carried a few drawings in its hand which obviously depicted a section of the nearly completed vessel. It was not armed like the fighter robots who were also present in many spots. But this didn't make the work robot less dangerous.

Pucky sat upright on his hind feet and chewed a few blades of grass as though they were manna in his mouth. The berth, the sheds and the stores or parts appeared to hold no interest for him. Nothing existed except the luscious grass he had found in the valley.

This was in all probability what the engineer robot thought since it barely seemed to notice Pucky in passing as it proceeded with peculiar jerky movements to the entrance of the tunnel where it met a few other robots with whom it began a conversation.

This worked out just fine, thought Pucky, happily spitting out the grass. At least he didn't have to swallow it this time. He kept his eyes on the area between him and the hangar and unfortunately neglected to observe what was going on behind him.

By the time he heard the steps it was too late to turn around. He received a hard kick from a foot and was tossed high into the air. When he hit the rocky ground he thought for a moment that every bone in his body was broken and he lay still, gasping for air. He was too surprised to think of teleporting himself to safety and now he saw who was to blame for the merciless kick.

It was a Springer.

His full reddish beard left no doubt that he was not one of the Goszuls and his sturdy figure was unmistakable proof that he belonged to the class of Galactic traders who had ruled this planet for so long. He wore black boots and tight pants. His white smock indicated that he was a scientist. A mane of unkempt bushy hair sprouted from the top of his head.

He mumbled something in a dialect which was unknown to Pucky and kept walking without paying further attention to his victim. Eventually the mouse-beaver was able to apply his telepathic resources which he had so foolishly neglected a few seconds before. If he had been on the hall it would have been easy enough for him to detect the approaching Springer in time.

*That's all we need—these pests running loose in the valley!* This was the content of the Springer's mumbling in the foreign language. And he added in Intercosmo: "I'll have to give the *chapex* new instructions or we'll be falling over these brainless breeders."

As he continued walking Pucky followed him with his mind sensors and learned that the Springer's name was Borator, that he was the technical supervisor of the project and the only Springer on the premises.

This had its advantages. Now that Pucky paid attention to the Springer he had no trouble following and analysing his thoughts. The necessity of separating and evaluating a stream of mixed impulses was eliminated because there were only the thoughts of one Springer present and all else was silence in the valley.

Pucky had to find a good place to hide from where he could listen in on what was going on without being seen. He slowly got up again. His side was still hurting him. Only by exercising great restraint was he able to refrain from paying the brute back in kind for his cruelty. He saved his revenge for another day when he would make the Springer rue his mean act. That much he promised himself to soothe his bruised feelings. He would zoom this Borator 100 feet up in the air and let him dangle there for a whole day. And then...

The sound of steps interrupted his Puckish vision of the future and sweet revenge. A work *chapex* walked past close to him with a fixed stare, without paying any attention to him. *There you have it*, thought the mouse-beaver; the robots were more humane than intelligent beings. At least the *chapex* left him alone.

Behind a stack of boxes Pucky found a safe hiding place where he didn't have to worry about being surprised. Most of the boxes would have to be removed before he could be detected and he was sure to notice it even when he slept.

Now that he was settled in relative comfort he began to concentrate on Borator. He had no trouble

perceiving Borator's thoughts and could thus 'hear' what he told the robots. The latter's answers however remained incomprehensible because Pucky was unable to pick up the positronic impulses without special receiving sets. Nevertheless he learned a few things which were of the greatest importance to Rhodan and his plans.

In particular he gathered that the gigantic space cruiser in the tunnel was scheduled to be finished and ready to start in about six days.

This was precious little time considering how much had to be done meanwhile. Pucky decided not to lose another minute. He concentrated on the control tower of the *Stardust* 30 miles away and took off.

He materialized in Bell's lap of all places.

## 2/ THE SPRINGERS ARE COMING

Exactly 20 light-hours away from the star Tatlira, twelve 600-foot-long tubular-shaped ships returned from hyperspace into the normal universe.

The 13th ship stood apart from the others. It was 300 feet longer than the rest but also looked like a tube with rounded ends. Along the hull were round illuminated portholes behind which distorted shadows of monstrous proportions moved.

Monstrously distorted...?

Commander of the Fleet Topthor, a figure weighing more than half a ton, bulked behind the controls of his Command Centre. He was only five feet high and his girth measured nearly 15 feet. In other words, he was about as broad as he was high. His shiny head was bald and he wore a reddish beard trimmed in the fashion of the Springers.

Observation screens lit up and depicted the stellar system the fleet was approaching with the simple velocity of light.

Topthor's powerful hands rested on a plastic sheet covered with alien letters. The document was the reason he took a hand again in the affairs of others. It was his duty and his profession.

Topthor's clan—or Mounders as they were generally called—had taken on the task of the firebrigade, so to speak, in the community of the Galactic traders. They didn't trade merchandise, their business was war. If there was a conflagration anywhere, they were called in. They were also riding shotgun for other ships and received remuneration from the clan that requested their protection.

Never in his life had Topthor feared an enemy or turned tail—except once. When he tried to attack a planet called Terra his forces were almost annihilated by Perry Rhodan's spherical battleship.

Topthor had made a resolution never to tangle with Perry Rhodan again. Not that he was a coward but he valued his life.

He smiled grimly when he thought about Rhodan. The Earthling was far away and not mixed up in the present affair. He faced a different enemy on Goszul's Planet—a disease. He only had to take care that he didn't become infected. Everything else was strictly routine. The rebellious natives would be punished, the contaminated robots and technical installations loaded into the hermetically sealed storage rooms of the ships and then he would supervise the transport of the new battlecruiser to its destination.

Topthor was still smiling when he picked up the letter and read the succinct text:

To Topthor, Commander and Patriarch of the Clan of the Mounders. Goszul's Planet has been put in quarantine. Disease of paralytic outcome. Incurable. Technical installations must be salvaged. Natives in rebellion and subject to draconic punishment. Secret battlecruiser to be delivered after completion with co-ordinates XXM-17. Governors and supervisor of shipyard must remain behind.

By order of all Clans

Etztak

Topthor put the sheet back on the table. The observation screen above it now distinctly showed the small yellow light of the sun Tatlira which was surrounded by several dots of light.

The planets.

One of them was Goszul's Planet.

Topthor leaned forward and switched on the communicator which connected him with the Command Centres of the other 12 ships. A pictoscreen which was subdivided into 12 areas began to glow. In a few seconds a face appeared on each of the squares. All looked expectantly at him.

They were without exception oversized Springers. Thousands of years ago when the Springers still inhabited planets, before they started to live permanently on spaceships, the clan of the Mounders had chosen a world with extremely strong gravitation. The result was that generation by generation physical changes had occurred which facilitated their adaptation to their new environment. And so the clan of the Mounders was created.

All twelve Springers wore the same stylishly trimmed beards and had clever but cold and wary eyes. Their lips were pressed together like a red line. Nothing of their bulky bodies could be seen on the screens.

Topthor couldn't suppress a fleeting smile as he looked at the faces of his commanders. He knew that they weren't afraid of the devil himself but were frightened to death by the mysterious and incurable disease. Frankly he had a queasy feeling about it himself but was loath to admit it.

"We're near our goal," he began in his sonorous, imposing tone which had already caused many a patriarch to increase his offer of payment for protection voluntarily. "You know what the purpose of our mission is and that it'll be far from easy. Our first task will be to occupy the construction site of the

spaceship installations in order to prevent an attack and possible destruction of the ship by the natives. I don't understand what these primitive natives can do against 100 fighter robots but Eztak has warned me not to underestimate them. Our second job will be to secure the robots and dismantle the equipment." He grinned half-heartedly. "I find it very strange that Eztak thinks of his profit last. It makes me wonder."

One of the listeners gesticulated and showed his agreement with Topthor. Indeed Eztak's attitude was highly suspicious and warranted closer examination.

Topthor turned to the commander. "Yes, Rangol, what's on your mind?"

"Is it possible that we underestimate the Goszuls? In my book they were rated as peaceful primitive indigents without ambitions. Their technology is outdated and far inferior to ours. I don't understand what made Eztak flee before them..."

"You forget about the pestilence," Topthor reminded him. "The thought of it doesn't exactly make me jump for joy either. You can lose your memory."

"And you want to land there in spite of it?" another asked.

"We've the special permission from the Council of the Clans. Our protective suits will guard us against contagion. Moreover we'll first deploy our robots who will do the most difficult and dangerous work for us. We're also expected to make sure that nobody leaves the stellar system."

"I thought the Goszuls have no spaceships," somebody interjected.

"That's true—but orders are orders. Apparently there must be some ships available to them besides the one we're supposed to take over. Be that as it may, we're going to blockade the system and we'll keep in close touch with each other. Only two ships will touch down on the planet: Rangol and myself."

Rangol didn't look very happy. The distinction elated him not in the slightest but he remained silent. It wasn't advisable to antagonize Topthor.

"Any questions?"

There were none.

"Alright," Topthor concluded. "Our navigator will give you the new co-ordinates. We'll separate in four hours. All radio stations will be permanently tuned in on reception. That will be all!"

The 12 faces faded from the screen as he disconnected the viewer. All further communications were conducted by the navigator from the radio room.

Topthor leaned back and looked with narrowed eyes at the planetary system of Tatlira which he was approaching at the speed of light.

Not without trepidation he asked himself what was in store for him there.

\* \* \* \*



When Pucky mentioned in his report he had eaten grass to convince the robots he was harmless Bell was bowled over with laughter. He couldn't stop guffawing and, given enough time would eventually have choked. This however was not the case.

Pucky's voice suddenly became shrill. "Do you believe it was so much fun for me too? If you don't quit gloating about my predicament I'm going to teach you another lesson, you red-haired bully! Well?"

His 'Well?' sounded so full of expectation that Bell quickly became apprehensive, remembering similar situations when he always had come out on the losing end. After all, he was only normal and had no telekinetic talents. He gasped for air, stopped roaring and panted painfully: "Don't take it so hard, Pucky! And what happened then? Did the robots fall for it and believe you were a bunny?"

Pucky nodded gravely. "Something like that. Anyway I managed to get through the chain of sentinels to enter the plant. A certain Borator is in charge of the project. A Springer."

This bit of news came as a surprise.

"So we won't deal exclusively with robots," Perry Rhodan contemplated. "This won't make our job easier but it shouldn't complicate it too much. We'll first have to take care of Borator before we start putting the 130 robots out of action as inconspicuously as possible. We should be able to accomplish this by using our new reprogramming impulse device. Unfortunately it permits only individual application. Therefore we'll be forced to get close to one robot at a time to change its programming. If the others get wind of it—and they're sure to notice it—we'll be in trouble."

"I'm still in favour of a surprise attack with a few pursuitships to wipe out the robots," Maj. Deringhouse interjected. But his remark failed to elicit any response from Perry Rhodan.

In any case it would have been quite useless because at that moment a red signal lit up at the intercom. A buzz sounded and the hitherto dark screen came to life. The worried face of Lt. Fisher who was on duty in the radio room appeared on the videoscreen.

Rhodan depressed a button to make the connection. "What is it, Fisher? Anything important? I'm holding a meeting and..."

"It's very important, sir! Our structure sensors have registered transitions in the immediate vicinity of the Tatlira system. It looks as if the fleeing Springers have returned."

For a second Rhodan seemed stunned. Then he got hold of himself. "I'm hardly inclined to believe this, Fisher. Verify the exact number and position of the transitions. Report the result to me at once."

"Very well, sir!"

The connection between the Command Centre and the radio room remained open. Since Rhodan seemed unwilling to embark on fruitless speculations, Pucky continued his report. However it was unavoidable that he attracted less attention than before. Everybody's thoughts were distracted by the sudden appearance of the spaceships nearing Goszul's Planet.

Who were they and what did they want?

Lt. Fisher didn't keep them long in suspense. "There are 13 ships, sir! Length about 600 feet, typical shape of Springer units. They entered from hyperspace at a distance of about one light-day. The intensity of the space structure disturbance indicates a transition of more than 3000 light-years. They're approaching the Tatlira system in a closed formation at the speed of light. I'll report again later."

Rhodan stared at the others. "They're Springers, after all! I don't get it. Perhaps they could be others."

"Definitely," Bell said in a tone of great assurance. "I'm sure that Eztak's people are fed up to the gills and wouldn't even dream of coming back. Besides they've caught the disease and can't remember a thing."

"Anyway they had time enough to send an expeditionary force to intercept us. We don't know yet who's coming and what they're after."

Pucky suddenly called out in a shrill, excited voice: "The spaceship! They came to get the spaceship that's almost finished!"

Rhodan couldn't hide his surprise. "You could be right, Pucky. But weren't the robots supposed to launch the ship on a course for which the co-ordinates have already been fixed? Come to think of it, Pucky, were the robots to leave with the ship or will they have to stay behind?"

"I don't know. I didn't have enough time to find out."

"It would be very important to know this. If the robots were ordered to leave Goszul's Planet in the new battle ship it could be the reason for the arrival of the fleet. Presumably they want to prevent the robots from carrying out their orders since the Springers are anxious to contain the disease on Goszul's Planet. But it really wouldn't make any sense. If the Springers assume that the carriers of the disease can be deposited on metal they must also believe that the whole ship is contaminated. I can't help thinking that somewhere there's a worm in the apple."

"I relish worms even less than germs," Pucky chirped bravely. "But I'm willing to dig out the worm for the sake of the cause."

Rhodan smiled. "This can be very simple or very difficult. The Springers' mentality is quite different from ours. We could be in for a disappointment if we learn the truth behind it. Just a minute, there's the radio room. Yes, Fisher, what's the matter?"

"We've picked up some radio signals. They haven't been deciphered yet but they resemble those of the Springers. I'll have the text in 10 minutes unless it's a secret code."

Bell put a finger on his nose, a sure sign that he was thinking hard. Rhodan looked at him with curiosity while Pucky bared his incisor and grinned unabashedly. A thoughtful Bell struck the mouse-beaver like the funniest joke.

Bell kept everybody in suspense.

"Well?" Perry Rhodan nudged him.

Bell looked up. "Something just occurred to me," he announced to his eager listeners. "If a fleet of the Springers: is in fact heading toward this planet and if they don't know that we're here, we better start considering if it wouldn't be advisable for us to bide somewhere. The question is only where. A transition

must be ruled out because it would give away our presence. The hangars at the edge of the spaceport are too small. Well, what can we do? Sink into the earth?"

His audience looked surprised. Bell had bit the nail on the head. They were sitting here debating their course of action without considering the fact that the former owners of this world were returning in 20 hours with an unknown scheme for retaliation. So far the Springers still believed they were only up against a disease and the natives. It was Rhodan's intention to maintain their illusions.

"In the subterranean hangars is room for the three cruisers," Rhodan said. "I'd prefer to have them close by even in the Springers land here. We've ways and means to keep them out of the hangars in case they want to investigate what's inside. A mere hint of pestilence will suffice for this purpose. That leaves the *Stardust* for which no hangar is big enough around here. Out in space it'd soon be detected by the sensitive instruments of the Springers."

Rhodan paused for a few moments in deep thought. Then he suddenly turned to Ralv. "You probably know all about this planet." The native nodded hesitantly. "Good. Can you tell me how deep your oceans are?"

Ralv looked dumbfounded since he didn't understand what Rhodan was getting at with his question about the depth of the ocean.

But Bell had grasped the idea at once. "You want to submerge the *Stardust* in the ocean!" he marvelled. "I'd never have thought of such a simple idea. That'll be wonderful; I always wanted to do deep sea research!"

"You won't get much of a chance to do that," Rhodan disappointed him.

Meanwhile Ralv had consulted with Enzally and Geragk. "About 20 miles from the West Coast lies a deep trench. Its mean depth is about 10,000 feet."

"That's perfect," Rhodan answered. "If the *Stardust* is under 7500 feet of water nobody will be able to detect the ship. And it won't make a bit of difference to the crew whether they're surrounded by water or empty space."

Pucky waddled across the Command Centre and planted himself before Rhodan. His tooth glittered provocatively but his brown dog eyes looked faithful and gentle as always. "Do you think I'm a fish?" he squeaked reproachfully.

Rhodan smiled indulgently. "Your flat tail could make me think you're at home in the water," he teased. "It's amazing that you come from a world where there's hardly any water. If it makes you feel better, nobody has said that you'll be sunk with the *Stardust*. On the contrary, I need you very much here on land."

Bell broke in. "What are we going to do? The three cruisers will be out of sight in the subterranean hangars and the *Stardust* will dive into the water. So far so good. But what about us?"

"Us?" Rhodan smiled broadly and seemed to enjoy himself greatly, which annoyed Bell only more. Nor could Deringhouse, Nyssen and McClears see why it was so amusing to beat a retreat.

Only the telepaths Enzally, Marshall and Pucky grinned as if they had been ordered to do so.

"Very simple, my friends," Rhodan continued. "We'll act crazy—that's all."

\* \* \* \*

The three cruisers *Solar System*, *Terra* and *Centurio* had hardly been stowed in the huge berths under the spaceport when Lt. Fisher caused some more excitement with a new report. "Sir! The fleet of the Springers is being dispersed. They are still 15 light-hours away and have begun to separate. It looks as if they want to blockade the entire planetary system."

Rhodan, who had listened to the broadcast on his little rustrad, waited a few seconds before he replied. He stood at the border of the spaceport and watched as the camouflaged gates slowly closed. The cruisers had disappeared from the face of the planet. Several reprogrammed robots of the Springers were posted at the controls. Anybody who wanted to open the hangars had to deal with them first.

"Tell Maj. Deringhouse to send me a reliable pilot with a pursuitship!"

Once the *Stardust* was at the bottom of the ocean it would be impossible to monitor the movements of the hostile fleet. But Rhodan had no intention of leaving the imminent developments to chance. His assumption that the fleet of the Springers would land on the planet in a closed formation apparently was not justified.

A minute later one of the smaller hatches of the *Stardust* opened up and a trim torpedo floated out. It touched down a few feet from Rhodan. The cockpit slid open and the youthful face of a man looked with an expectant smile down to Rhodan. "Sgt. Harnahan reporting for special mission, sir!"

Rhodan smiled back. "It won't be easy for you, Sergeant. You'll have to take the fleet of the Springers under observation and report every movement. Keep in constant touch with Lt. Fisher by radio. Go far out in space and avoid any encounters with the Springers. It is vitally important that nobody learns of your presence. You're our eyes and ears, Harnahan. Our rangefinders are blind. Good luck!"

"Thank you, sir!" the Sergeant replied and shut his cockpit. A second later the antigrav field carried the pursuitship up high. Then Harnahan started his engine and in a few moments disappeared in the blue haze of the atmosphere.

Rhodan watched him leave and felt considerably relieved. The small, highly manoeuvrable craft were lightning fast rockets which had room enough for one pilot only. Their armament consisted of one energy beamer and they were equipped with a defence screen. The pressurized cockpit was provided with climate control and a tiny airlock. The small fins of the needle-nosed rocket made flight in the atmosphere possible when the pilot preferred not to use the antigrav field which was the latest addition.

Many of these fighter craft were also equipped with the most sensitive rangefinder instruments, as was the case with Sgt. Harnahan's ship.

Bell came over to Rhodan and saw him peering into the sky. He followed his eyes and shook his head. "What are you staring at up there, hm? Harnahan is already thousands of miles away and he can't hear you if you're calling him. I think it's getting time we make the *Stardust* disappear."

Maj. Nyssen was put in charge of the spherical spacer and quickly steered the vessel to the selected spot 20 miles from the mainland. A few minutes later the colossus submerged in the waves of the ocean. A tenuous radio communication was its only link to the outside world, which was now hastily being prepared for the next scene.

A scene in a comedy with a very grim background.

Rhodan assigned the roles. "Pucky will lead the dockyard commando. The teleporter Tako Kakuta and telekin Tama Yokida will go with him. You'll take the new apparatus with you and your first job will be to immobilize the robots. The new instructions will have to be transmitted later on. I can take care of that myself. Ralv and his men will receive further instructions from Marshall, who is already informed about his task. Since we've no way of knowing what the Springers have in mind or whether they plan to land all together, we must be prepared for all eventualities. In any event we're going to amaze them with what can happen if the population of a planet loses its memory—and its inhibitions."

"The pestilence again?" Kitai Ishibashi, the suggestor of the Mutant Corps, inquired.

"Not quite," Rhodan grinned. "It would be too laborious and time-consuming. This time we'll have to act quickly as the Springers can arrive in 10 hours. Marshall will have Ralv and his assistants tattoo about 10,000 Goszuls and..."

"Tattoo?" Bell gasped.

"Right!" Rhodan said. "It's a harmless liquid but if it's applied to the face the skin will break out in magnificent colours. The people will look as if they had fallen into some paint cans. And that's just how the natives looked when they came down with the plague. Now if a colourful crowd like this plays the fool, the impression ought to be convincing. Kitai will see to it that the Goszuls put on a splendid show."

The Japanese grinned. "Nothing to it. The Springers will be flabbergasted to see what a man without memory can do."

It was easy enough for him to say. As a suggestor he was capable of imposing his will on the Goszuls and of helping them to perform the intended spectacle. If necessary the Goszuls would be accomplished actors without being aware of it.

Maj. Deringhouse looked out of the window of the squat building where they had taken up their position. The sun was low above the horizon and would soon go down. The Springers could be expected here at sunrise.

He sighed. "And what's my part?"

Rhodan cast a quick glance at him. "It's possible there'll be nothing for you to do, Major. It all depends on how things go, particularly whether the Springers drop in and what risks they're prepared to take. The five pilots and space fighters you're holding in reserve in the mountains will be inadequate to oppose the ships of the Springers but they can be deployed to good purpose against landing commandos. You'll have to wait for my orders. Don't act on your own!"

Bell stuck out his chest. "And what do you want me to do?"

"I'm afraid I'll have to disenchant you again," Rhodan replied. "You'll stick with me, where nothing is likely to happen."

"Headquarters again!" Bell growled in dismay. "While everybody else will cover himself with glory, we have to rot here. Here? Are we really going to remain here?" Suddenly he looked very apprehensive. "Not at the spaceport! What if the Springers decide to land here?"

"Then," Rhodan smiled amiably, "you'll have your adventure!"

A shrill voice interrupted the conversation. "Are you ready to take off?" Pucky looked urgently at Tako. The telekin Tama got up. Since he was unable to teleport himself he depended on Pucky or Tako for his transportation.

"Be careful!" Rhodan warned them and handed Tako a little rectangular metal box with various buttons and scales. "Take on the robots one by one. They must be lulled into a false sense of security or they'll sound the alarm."

"Don't worry, we'll be quiet as mice," Pucky chirped.

Bell snickered. "That shouldn't be very hard for you."

Pucky gave him a devastating look before he took Tako and Tama by the hand. Then a shimmering curtain seemed to be drawn between them and the others who were present and they vanished instantly.

They would materialize in the same second behind the stack of boxes in the mountain.

Rhodan motioned to Marshall. "You'll immediately initiate your action. Ralv already has his instructions. If the Springers touch down at some other place on the planet we'll be out of luck. But this is extremely unlikely. They are mainly interested in this continent and little else. Moreover this is the only spaceport which exists on Goszul's Planet."

Marshall saluted and left the building. A car was waiting for him and took him and his paraphernalia to the nearby harbour town where Ralv had assembled his faithful followers,

Only Rhodan, Bell and Deringhouse remained behind and the suggestor Kitai who was slated to follow Marshall a little later.

"And now," said the bored Deringhouse, "are we going to stand here till we take root?"

"No," Rhodan retorted. "Only till the Springers arrive."

### **3/ SPHERE OF MYSTERY**

Darkness fell when Pucky and his two companions materialized near the pile of boxes. Fortunately nobody was around and they could rush unseen to hide in the shadow of the boxes where they were safe for the time being.

"I wonder if they keep working during the night?" Tama asked in a whisper. The strange surroundings

gave him a creepy feeling, as if he were constantly watched by unseen eyes.

"Robots don't know fatigue," the mouse-beaver lectured him. "I'm sure that Borator will permit no interruption of work. He's well aware of what happened on Goszul's Planet and will be anxious to reach safety. The ship fits perfectly into his plans and you can almost guess what they are."

"You mean he wants to escape in it?"

"What else? But quiet, I hear somebody coming." Pucky waited a few seconds and then whispered, "It's the Springer; I can pick up his thoughts. He didn't go to sleep yet."

The three became motionless shadows crouching behind the boxes. Pucky listened into the darkness.

*Only five more days, Borator thought with a mixture of satisfaction and impatience. Then it'll be done. Those miserable patriarchs have left me in the lurch. They think I'll catch the disease and forget that I'm building a ship for them, If they believe that I'll hand over the spacer to them after it's finished they're badly mistaken. The pestilence didn't spread here and I can take a few battle-robots and some specialists with me; no problem. Are they going to get a surprise! These despicable...*

Pucky grinned happily. Their fear that the vessel would leave in five days with the arranged co-ordinates was unfounded. Borator had other fish to fry. Perhaps he even wanted to establish a new clan after seizing the ship.

He informed his friends in a low voice and added, "Borator is going to bed now. Maybe I can find out a few more details. We'd like to let him finish the job but unfortunately we don't have the time. When the Springers land the plant must be in our possession. Wait here, I want to snoop around a little."

This was another one of the expressions he had picked up from Bell. There were many more, less refined.

The two Japanese had mixed emotions about remaining behind in the unfamiliar place. They assured Pucky that they wouldn't move from the spot and the mouse-beaver leaped behind Borator.

The Springer turned around the corner of a warehouse and walked between some patrolling robots toward his living quarters which were located a short distance away from the shops. Pucky didn't consider it advisable to test the sympathies of the robots for a rabbit again and so he teleported himself to the house of the Springer where he waited for him in the shadow of a few dried-up bushes.

Borator kept thinking continually as he walked across his front yard, which was illuminated by a few lamps. He thought about everything except his precise plans. Unwarily, yet full of impatience, he ambled past Puck without an inkling that he was under surveillance. He opened his bungalow and switched on the light. The bright light shone on the bush behind which the mouse-beaver concealed himself. But Borator had only one thought in mind: to go to sleep. He was very tired. The thought crossed his mind how lucky he was that the robots never got weary and he hoped they would succeed in getting the ship ready to start in four days already.

Pucky waited patiently. When he concentrated very deeply he was able to see through Borator's eyes and watch what he was doing. A little meal, a shower and then to bed.

The thoughts grew more confused and soon trailed off into irreality. Borator had fallen asleep.

Now Pucky hesitated no longer. He disdained using his special gifts and instead simply climbed through the open window and cautiously jumped down to the floor of the bedroom. Borator snored and made a considerable noise which suited the mouse-beaver fine. Before he awakened the Springer he wanted to take some precautionary measures. Besides he thought he had noticed a sound in the hallway.

Did Borator have a special guard?

The door was left a little ajar and Pucky crept through the semi-darkness. A light was visible through the crack of the door and was reflected from the metallic back of a battle-robot standing motionlessly in front of the door.

Pucky pressed the impulsator to his body. Now was the time for the new gadget to show its worth. Without moving he aimed the lens at the back of the head of the automaton and pressed a button. He held it for five seconds and let go again.

if the gadget really worked, the robot was deactivated and could be reprogrammed anytime without difficulty. It now was prevented from interfering in the events unless it received a special order to do so.

But who should do it if not Borator?

Before Pucky turned his attention to Borator again he had to make sure that his cure was in fact successful.

Holding his box tightly he went out into the hallway and stood up before the robot. He looked into its blank lenses and tried to detect a trace of life but the positronic brain failed to notice him. It no longer showed any reaction.

Highly satisfied with the result Pucky decided to take care of Borator, when he suddenly noticed that the Springer had stopped snoring. He quickly increased his telepathic attention in order to receive Borator's thoughts. He was right. Borator had become awake. He was suspicious and wanted to check up if anything was wrong. As far as Pucky could tell Borator was armed with an energy-beamer.

Of course Pucky could have taken the safe way out by teleportation. However this was not only against his nature but also could have created the danger that the Springer would be warned and would take some undesirable measures.

The light flared up. Borator stood in the door opening and blinked in confusion at the scene before his eyes. There was the robot standing rigidly in the hall and the same creature which he had treated with a kick earlier in the day squatted in front of the mechanical titan. And what did he hold in his paws? A box? What kind of animal was it that intruded in strange houses at night with a box?

Borator was asking too many questions and forgot to take action. Pucky took care of it for him.

With irresistible force the raygun was wrested from the Springer's grip and weightlessly floated up to the ceiling, where it hovered in the highest corner, its barrel, aimed at Borator who followed the phenomenon with bulging eyes. His chaotic shreds of thoughts told Pucky that he began to question his own sanity. Well, this impression could be reinforced.

Pucky remembered with bitterness the kick he had," suffered and decided to combine business with pleasure. Borator didn't know what happened to him when he suddenly lost the ground beneath his feet.



After turning around 90° he was suspended horizontally above the floor, unable to move. In helpless fascination he stared at the shiny tooth of the 'rabbit' and wondered whether the animal was responsible for his incomprehensible misery or whether he was losing his mind. Yet he had to blame the little beast as it hopped below him to his bed and methodically began to tear the cover into strips, fashioning a rope by knotting them together. The odd metal box had been put on the floor while he was thus occupied.

Pucky returned and skilfully proceeded to tie up Borator, which he could do without trouble as Borator was still weightless and elevated three feet above the floor.

The robot stood idly by as if this was none of its business which, in a sense, was correct.

Borator was tied up in a bundle. As a precaution Pucky held him at the end of the rope. Then he gave the robot a friendly pat on the backside, took his impulse transmitter under one arm and the raygun, which was slowly floating down, under the other—and sauntered out of the house.

Borator followed him like a balloon, seemingly held only by the rope in Pucky's paw. The telekinetic power currents of the mouse-beaver kept him stiff and straight but Pucky was convinced that this effect could be achieved by Borator's ghastly fear alone.

Tako and Tama were seared to death when they saw the weird bundle floating through the night toward them. Pucky hung onto the line as if he were afraid to be carried away. His incisor glittered in his joy.

"We got him under control," Pucky giggled contentedly. "Tama can watch him while Tako and I go disable the robots."

The bound-up Borator sank to the floor and remained there immobilized. His eyes were shut. "It's a shame he's fainted," Pucky regretted. "I'll attend to him later. Stay awake, Tama!"

"You expect me to sleep with all this excitement!" Tama protested the insinuation. "Don't be long!"

"Ninety-nine robots! Do you think we can take care of them with a snap of our fingers?"

Pucky took Tako by the hand and they vanished in a jiffy.

Tama, who didn't feel very well, remained behind alone with the Springer who at this moment felt nothing at all.

\* \* \* \*

The first battle-robot presented no problem. It was posted close to the biggest warehouse at the beginning of a long chain of metallic sentries. Pucky and Tako were able to approach it within a few feet without being seen. Fortunately the lenses of the robots were directed toward the exit of the valley because no enemies were suspected to be in the basin.

Rhodan had stressed that the range of the instrument was limited and had been tested to be effective only up to 100 feet. The situation had one welcome and practicable advantage: although the robots acted independently of each other their reactions were also based on the attitude of the others. If one of the

robots allowed Pucky to pass without challenging him it meant to the next guard that he was harmless. Its vigilance was influenced accordingly.

Pucky based his tactic on this experience. "You stay here!" he whispered to Tako as they stopped in the shadow of the warehouse. "You've got a good view from here. If anything unforeseen should happen, teleport yourself back to Tama and see to it that the Springer is transported to Rhodan. Then you can get Tama. Don't worry about me! I can take care of myself."

Tama tried to hold him back. "What could happen to me? I've got a raygun and can blast a robot..."

"You'll do nothing of the sort!" Pucky cut him short. "If we use the raygun even the dumbest robot will be tipped off. But if we vanish in the twilight by teleportation they might think we're ghosts or something and they won't know what to do about it. So take it easy! We'll see it through somehow."

The few lamps shed only a scant light on the obscure terrain. The robots in their shimmering armour stood out much better than Pucky whose rust-brown fur was a natural camouflage.

Anyway, the first of the robots gave no trouble. Pucky turned it into a useless suit of armour by giving it a short dose of radiation. And there it stood, waiting for new instructions which didn't come.

The second and third fared no better and so it went with all the others that were distributed on the construction site watching for something to happen. And when finally something did happen they failed to notice it.

After half an hour Pucky had put 50 battle-robots out of action, or half of them. This left 50 more plus the 30 work robots working on the ship at top speed to get it ready.

Pucky returned to Tako. "Now we'll have to tackle the first line of defence which is blocking the entrance to the valley. They're standing only 15 feet apart and I'll have a tough job keeping them quiet."

Then the mouse-beaver went to work again. He approached the chain of guards from the back and was careful not to be seen. This was not especially difficult as it was much darker here than in the vicinity of the hangar.

Everything went smoothly until Pucky was halfway through. just when he started to take robot No.15 under treatment, No.16 slowly turned around and directed the beam of the light built into its forehead toward the origin of a noise it had heard.

Pucky found himself bathed in light.

The robot registered in a fraction of a second that it was the same harmless animal it had seen the day before but that it now held a small, faintly glowing box in its paws, with a lens which was pointed suspiciously at the robot's neighbour.

The animal was undoubtedly intelligent and therefore an enemy.

The robot reacted with lightning speed but its lethal energy-rays hit nothing but the parched ground and seared grass.

Pucky materialized next to the frightened Tako. "This time I almost got burned," he whispered to the Japanese. "I hope they don't sound an alarm. Let's see first what they're going to do."

The first 15 robots paid no attention to what followed. They stood motionless and utterly disinterested while the other 15 turned on their searchlights and swept the terrain. They found nothing of course but they were far from reassured. However none of them made a move to leave its place.

"I can't let myself be seen there," Pucky murmured disappointedly, then gave out a low whistle. "Tako, I'm a telekin, you know!" he exclaimed, as if he had made an earthshaking statement.

Tako reacted with slight amusement. "So what? What else is new?"

"Don't you get it? I can send this impulse transmitter box out alone. These pesky robots only scrutinize the ground. Our little friend, however, can fly. I'm going to put them into a trance by remote control. Why didn't I think of it sooner?"

"Necessity is the mother of invention," Tako commented, full of admiration for the way Pucky mastered his dilemma.

Pucky didn't have to make elaborate efforts. He crouched in the shadow of the warehouse and focused his whole attention on the faintly glowing instrument which suddenly became weightless and floated toward the line of sentries at the height of a few feet.

Robot No.16 ceased its activities and froze stiff. His neighbour followed his example and five minutes later the whole chain of robots consisted of harmless metallic puppets with no life of their own. They would stand there in stoic passivity waiting for the moment when a new order would restore their life again if it took a thousand years.

Pucky retrieved his set, told Tako not to leave his place and disappeared in the same second. When he returned a minute later the guards at the entrance to the valley had also been paralysed.

"Now we've only 19 more to take care of inside the plant. We can handle them too. The robot specialists will remain unscathed for the time being. Let them finish the ship first. Now we'll go into the last lap!"

It was midnight by the time Pucky finished his job. He had rendered 99 robots ineffective but was unable to find the last one despite his intensive search. Thus one of the dangerous fighting machines was still at large somewhere in the area, for time was too valuable to waste on hours of pursuit.

The work robots had not been distracted from their duties. Oblivious to the events, they stuck to their jobs and endeavoured to comply with the schedule laid out by Borator as supervisor of the project.

Pucky would be the last one to interfere in their task.

Tama breathed easier again when Pucky and Tako returned. He had been forced to listen for an hour to the gibberish of Borator, who had come out of his unconscious state. At first the Springer had uttered wild threats and then proceeded to make tantalizing offers for his freedom. Tama had refrained from all answers to avoid giving away his identity. Let the Springer rack his brain over whose hands he had fallen into.

When the Springer caught sight of Pucky he fell silent at once. Apparently he was worried because he had kicked him.

"We're ready to take off," Pucky announced without mentioning his concern about the remaining robot who was still intent on fighting for his old bosses. "All further decisions will be made by Rhodan. Tako, take care of Tama. I'm glad we didn't need him, after all. I'll transport Borator. You know the co-ordinates for Rhodan's conference room in the administration building of the spaceport!"

They got ready for the jump and suddenly the spot they had occupied was empty. Only the trampled grass betrayed that a few people had been present, although they seemed to have vanished in thin air.

\* \* \* \*

Ralv and Enzally had no trouble bringing more than 5000 Goszuls together the same evening. They were all willing to play the part assigned to them. The preparations didn't take very long and after they had 'contracted' the disease, the natives were taken to the spaceport in special vehicles where they were put up in the spacious administration buildings to be coached for their performance.

In the meantime Pucky, the two Japanese and their prisoner also had arrived. This changed Rhodan's plan a little. He sent John Marshall, Enzally and 200 'sick' people to the valley where the hangar was located, with orders to wait for the coming Springers in case they showed up there. They were treated by the suggestor Kitai who taught them how to behave. The two telepaths Marshall and Enzally were to insure that nothing went awry.

There were still six hours till the expected arrival of the Springers.

No report had as yet been received from Sgt. Harnahan according to Lt. Fisher on board the *Stardust*, as Rhodan learned in response to his inquiry. Otherwise everything was in good shape on board and it was fascinating to observe the variety of deep sea life. There were several interesting organisms whose forms, due to the water pressure...

But Rhodan had no interest in the life of the deep sea. He instructed Fisher to let him know at once when Harnahan called in and cut off the connection.

Where was Harnahan?

\* \* \* \*

The little spaceship soared into space with tremendous acceleration, which was completely compensated for by the field of forces generated in the craft. Goszul's Planet receded at fantastic speed and virtually fell into the black depth. Uncounted stars shone all around the firmament and distant galaxies could be discerned by a weak light which had travelled millions of years.

Harnahan once again experienced the exhilarating feeling of being absolutely alone in space. This didn't keep him from studying and recording all details of his surroundings, which was the purpose of his mission.

Goszul's Planet had now become a bright star receiving the intense light of its sun. Harnahan changed his course a small amount to move into the shadow of the planet. This wouldn't help him much in an emergency but it made him feel better.

The Springers were still many light-hours away and it was useless to switch on his rangefinder instruments. He had to find the most favourable location for observing them from where he could not be easily detected.

He pulled the special map Rhodan had given him from his pocket. It was a schematic representation of the entire planetary system at the given time.

The fourth planet seen from the sun caught his attention. It seemed to have at least 50 smaller moons circling around it in various orbits. This small system looked at first sight very attractive to Harnahan. He adjusted his course once more and raced toward his new goal almost at the speed of light.

After less than an hour he had to slow down in order to avoid a collision with the small moons. The whole system could be compared to a mixture resembling the rings of Saturn and an asteroid belt. The broken parts of an old twin planet—or perhaps those of a large moon—rotated around the fourth planet in many different paths. They didn't form a well-ordered ring like the debris of the former moon of Saturn and they didn't circle like asteroids around the sun but remained in the vicinity of the central star.

He found it somewhat difficult to get his bearings among the satellites. According to his estimate the fleet of Springers was still 10 hours away so there was time enough to look around and find a suitable spot.

Many of the fragments were no larger than a mile in diameter; others measured up to 30 miles. Cautiously he manoeuvred the little rocket through the maze of slowly moving rocks, enjoying to the fullest extent the sensation as the only living being in a wilderness.

Here nothing and nobody could exist without aid for the bare necessities of life. Here he ruled alone. Rhodan and his friends were far away on a little point of light more than a light-hour distant.

He had already retracted the metallic cover from his cockpit and had an unobstructed view from the canopy. Flying by sight he no longer relied on his instruments. The little craft reacted to the slightest pressure of his hand. While the cockpit was very narrow the excellent climate control made him quite comfortable.

Harnahan took an energy tablet and a sip of water from his supplies. His air and food reserves were sufficient for three months but if this was merely a precautionary measure it also provided considerable reassurance.

A fairly big moon came into view at his side. Its rugged and irregular surface showed long mountain chains and deep valleys where no light from the far sun or its dim reflection on the planet ever penetrated. Harnahan guessed its diameter to be about 50 miles, the size of a rather substantial asteroid.

If anyone asked Harnahan later on why he had picked this particular moon as his observation post he received contradictory replies. He alternately stressed the fact that the topographic features of the surface provided an abundance of hiding places and at other times maintained stubbornly that an inexplicable feeling had attracted him to the place. Whatever it was, Harnahan couldn't have made a better choice.

The sergeant twice circumnavigated the moon before he picked the most favourable of the mountain

formations. Slowly and carefully he steered his rocket down to the surface and finally sat down on a plateau on top of one of the highest peaks which towered hundreds of feet above most of the others.

From this base he could survey all directions and the view encompassed more than 70% of the sky due to the extreme curvature of the surface.

There was a small depression at the middle of the plateau, just big enough to hold his pursuitship. If he went to the trouble of covering the top of the rocket with some of the numerous loose rocks lying around, it would be impossible to detect the ship no matter how closely a pilot flew over it.

Harnahan studied it with great care before he manoeuvred his craft into the hollow by means of a weak antigrav field surrounding him. It finally came to rest so that the canopy barely extruded from the shallow hole.

The gravitation scale indicated only 0.01 G. This was extremely low, so low in fact that he would have to be very careful not to exceed the escape velocity by an inadvertent movement putting him in orbit around the moon as a satellite.

Harnahan looked at his watch. It was time to settle down. He closed the helmet of his pressure suit and squeezed through the little hatch which served as a simple airlock. He didn't even bother to take a weapon. What for? There was nobody here to menace him and he also wanted to have his hands free to collect the rocks and heap them on the hull around the canopy although it really wasn't hard work to pick up the stones which were light as feathers.

Harnahan had frequently been out in space and the lower gravity of the moon was no new experience for him. Nevertheless it was a little different here. As soon as he crawled out of the rocket and raised himself up, the mountain top receded below him as if he had pushed himself away with a kick. He ascended more than a hundred feet and slowly turned over. The sky revolved around him and he believed for a harrowing moment he was falling into the universe. With a few purposeful movements he slowed down his rotation. Eventually the surface of the moon appeared again below him and came gradually closer. He was falling.

He came down about 500 feet away from the rocket and landed on the slope of the peak, where he instinctively tried to hold onto an outcropping. Then he broke out into laughter, the carefree laughter of a boy who got away with some well-planned mischief.

He focused up the incline of the peak onto the plateau and pushed himself gently up. He was propelled like a projectile above the rim of the platform and floated down close to the rocket.

Now he had gained confidence that he could move around in any direction on this world. It was simply a matter of adaptation and a little practice.

There were more than enough stones strewn around. He gathered them one by one and put them on the rocket so that nothing but the canopy was exposed. He felt certain that the ship was invisible from outer space whereas he could monitor the entire planetary system because the slow rotation of the moon enabled him to look in all directions. Even a sudden start presented no difficulty since the almost weightless stones didn't amount to a significant load. They would simply slide off and glide down to the moon.

Harnahan looked at his watch again. He had at least five hours before anything was likely to happen. Perhaps he ought to get in touch with the *Stardust* and let Fisher know where he stayed? But there was

nothing urgent about it. He would rather use the time and the unique opportunity to take a look at the strange uninhabited world around him where locomotion was a pure pleasure.

For a moment he considered taking a small raygun from the ship to use its recoil for controlling his speed and direction but decided against it. Even if he missed a jump he couldn't get hurt in the deepest fall, owing to the minimal gravity.

After a last look at his well-camouflaged rocket Harnahan gave himself a shove and soared at a tangent into the black sky like another celestial body with almost no mass to tether him to another sphere. He aimed his leap to cross the valley separating his peak from a somewhat lower neighbouring mountain top. He passed over steep cliffs and deep rugged gorges where he would have been reluctant to land. However a single push would be sufficient to disengage himself.

His slight apprehension was unfounded. He had directed his flight so accurately that he safely set foot on the next peak.

It didn't look much different from his own plateau. With two more leaps he was carried two miles forward and down into a plain. For the next 10 minutes he amused himself bouncing up vertically with ever bolder and higher leaps.

He estimated he had reached a height of 500 feet before he slowly floated down again. Then he tried to break the world's record in broad jump. He succeeded easily with a spectacular parabola covering a distance of more than 1500 feet. It was a respectable feat which was sure to make his friends envy him when he bragged about it.

His experiments carried him near a remarkably smooth mountain range which closed the valley like a wall. There were only a few peaks reaching a height of 6000 or 7000 feet. Harnahan discovered some ledges on the cliffs. after a closer inspection. As a climax to his adventure he desired to hurdle this obstacle and to undertake a long flight from the ridge.

However it proved a little more difficult than he thought. He went straight up in his first attempt but failed to get close enough to the wall to grab a hold. When the upsurge diminished he slowly dropped down along the wall, which was nearly in his reach.

The second time he did better. He landed on a small ledge 300 feet above the plain. Had he been stranded in a similar situation on Earth he would have huddled on the mountain and waited till a rescue team came to his aid. Here it was entirely different and he was able to look down into the abyss without any feeling of dizziness.

The wall above him was not as smooth as he had first assumed. There was another outcropping about 150 feet above him. He jumped up again and was able to grasp it and pull himself up.

After a few more jumps he finally stood on the mountain ridge. it had taken less than half an hour. The view surpassed his imagination. There was no atmosphere to dim the distant horizon. The tips of the farthest mountains extending above the curvature looked as clear and near as if he could vault across in one leap. The wide plain stretched more than 6000 feet below him. Now he could fulfil his lifelong dream and jump off the mountain as he had so often wished after a hard climb to a crest where he could see lakes and valleys nestled at the bottom. Spread out his arms and fly! At last he could do what he had always hankered to do!

At the opposite end of the valley he recognized his peak. A long way to walk but he would sail across.

Harnahan had a sense of intoxication. With a cry of joy he bounded upward and glided along the ridge, which showed only a few crevasses and was not very wide. The precipice on the other side was not as steep but the bottom was full of cliffs and ravines.

The mountain ended abruptly in a sheer wall. Harnahan cautiously approached the precipice and looked down into the depth. He had the impression that the basin which was almost completely surrounded by mountains was even lower than the plain from which he had ascended but this could have been an illusion created by the almost vertical slopes.

Harnahan stood at the chasm for a few minutes, taking in the view which would have given an eerie feeling on Earth. Then he decided to make his old dream come true.

He took a running start, jumped off the edge, spreading his arms and soaring like a bird into the void.

Slowly he began to fall. The mountain wall was gliding up behind him while he gently floated in a wide curve down to the floor of the valley.

It took a long, long time before his feet touched the ground again. He did it with a grace which would have delighted an observer. Harnahan had already improved his skill to such a degree that he was able to change his position as he desired during his nearly weightless fall.

He landed somewhere near the centre of the basin but a little closer to the adjacent mountain.

A nearby peak attracted his attention. It was a very regular cone of modest height with a blunt apex resembling the nose of an oversize spaceship. The rock was smooth without extrusions. Somehow it gave the impression that the surface had been shaped artificially, which was of course utter nonsense. There was not a living soul in this forsaken place who would undertake the work of forming such a rock.

After staring for the longest time at the cone Harnahan recognized a rectangular outline which looked like a door.

A door leading inside the rock?

Harnahan thought he was making a fool of himself but took a tentative 100-foot jump in its direction.

The door was still there!

However it really looked less like a door and more like a metal plate fitted into the smooth wall of stone.

He leaped again and came within 300 feet of the implausible door. Harnahan took a deep breath. He remembered hazily that he carried provisions for no more than three hours—and took a final jump.

He landed exactly in front of the metal plate. Three steps led from the plate down into the mountain and ended before the door.

On the threshold of the door rested a sphere glowing all colours of the spectrum.

*Welcome, Harnahan! something sounded in his brain. I've had to wait a long time for you.*



#### 4/ GOSZULS GO CRAZY

As a precautionary measure Topthor ceased all radio communications with 11 of his ships. He only maintained contact with Rangol's ship accompanying him. The videophone had a limited range and there was no danger of anyone listening in.

"In half an hour we'll reduce our speed," Topthor said to Rangol, whose face appeared on the pictoscreen. "We'll head straight for the spaceport on Goszul's Planet and land there. It'll depend on the circumstances what we do next."

"Why don't we go first to the assembly plant? We know where it is."

"The ship isn't ready yet and it won't get away from us. The supervisor of the project is a man called Borator. He's supposed to be trustworthy, whatever that means under the circumstances."

There was a long pause. Both were busy with their own thoughts, which were at variance from each other. Unity was only essential when the danger became acute.

Goszul's Planet grew bigger as the velocity of the ships diminished. Meanwhile the 11 tubular cruisers had complied with Topthor's orders and patrolled the system, making certain that nobody left or entered.

After a few minutes the West Coast of the continent which was called Land of Gods by the natives moved out of the shadow of the night into the glaring sunlight. A new day began there.

"We're arriving at the right time, Rangol. Although I don't have the faintest idea what the natives are doing on the planet whose government has broken down, it'll be best to proceed with caution. If the pestilence has spread farther we'll have to deal with a bunch of crazed people; if not, perhaps with rebels. Either way we'll have to carry out our mission."

"What if we catch the affliction?"

"Don't worry about it. We'll first send out our robots to salvage the equipment and sequester them together with the material in special loading hatches. Then we'll put them in a vacuum where not even the most resistant bacteria can survive."

"A good idea," Rangol lauded him. "I can't imagine a better disinfectant than empty space."

"Right," Topthor agreed. "Look out now, we're going to land soon. As far as I can tell, the spaceport is completely deserted. Not a soul in sight."

The two ships descended to the abandoned spaceport and finally touched down. Topthor had the feeling that all life had ceased on Goszul's Planet. He studied the wide expanse with suspicious eyes. The administration buildings at the border of the field also seemed vacant.

The sun rose over the hills in the east and painted the last shadows with brilliant light.

The weighty colossus at the controls of the *TOP I* chased away his deep-seated misgivings with a wave of the hand. "We'll let out 50 work robots and an equal number of battle-robots," he advised Rangol,

switching on the intercom that connected him with his staff officers. "Perhaps the Goszuls have retreated into the mountains. It's strange that none of the guard robots is present."

The officers on duty reported. Topthor didn't take his eyes off the distant buildings as he ordered: "Disembark 50 work robots and 50 fighting machines for their protection! Use prepared hatch! Rangol, take over the remote control of the work force. I'll handle the fighter contingent."

Ten minutes later 100 heavy robots rumbled over the extended ramps and stepped on the contaminated planet which seemed to be devoid of all life. They formed two battalions and marched toward the administration buildings and the control centre of the robots stationed on Goszul's Planet.

The Mounder sat like a huge clod on his unwieldy chair and supervised the action. Using an impulse transmitter he exercised direct control over his fighting unit as he preferred not to leave the necessary decisions to the positronic brains.

At first nothing at all happened. Rhodan kept his surprise waiting for the fullest effect.

The remote-controlled army had gone half the distance when suddenly something began to move between the sparse trees in front of the building. Topthor noticed it at once. They were obviously Goszuls, the native inhabitants of this world, as Topthor recognized. He had consulted a reference book to obtain the pertinent information for his job before he embarked on the expedition.

By magnifying the scene on his picture screen he made closer observations. Masses of people poured forth from the wide open doors of the building and stormed against the approaching robots as if they wanted to overrun them.

For a moment Topthor was baffled. Then he saw something which sent shudders down his spine: the faces of the Goszuls exhibited the unmistakable signs of the dread pestilence. Their foreheads, cheeks and necks were covered with red and blue splotches. Some of the natives wore no shirts and their exposed chests resembled a palette.

Topthor's hand trembled on the remote control for his robots. He was an unscrupulous character afraid of nothing but he didn't relish deploying robots against unarmed primitives. Besides the laws of his clan forbade such actions.

Then the next act unfolded with a real shocker for him.

A phalanx of fighter robots that had been left behind by the occupation force of the Springers advanced at the rear of the Goszuls. At first glance it looked as if the robots were driving the Goszuls before them with their energy-beamers pointed at their back and ready to shoot. The Goszuls lunged at Topthor's formations but bypassed them and ran toward his ships. They reached them in a few minutes and began to dance around them with wild howling.

Topthor was shaken. So this was what happened to halfway intelligent beings when they lost their memory! They no longer recognized spaceships and were totally unaware of the danger they could present.

His left hand, already touching the firing control button for the ship's ray cannons, quivered and pulled back. No, Topthor didn't shoot at defenceless people. He was willing to take on any opponent on more than equal terms—but not defenceless and sick people!

Rhodan sighed with relief as he was lying in wait. Whoever Topthor was, he had now attained a favourable judgment in his eyes. He was an adversary and Rhodan had to settle his account with him but he was no ogre who spilled blood for pleasure.

Topthor didn't know it but he had just saved his life.

Topthor turned his attention again to the odd robots and wondered what had happened to them after they had been abandoned: They couldn't have been afflicted by the disease. Yet this was exactly the impression they gave. How else was their peculiar behaviour to be explained? Topthor was in no position to know that all robots on Goszul's Planet were reprogrammed in the meantime to serve as faithful tools of Rhodan.

He didn't even know who his foe was. He assumed Rhodan to be 1012 light-years away on Earth where he planned to avenge himself some day for his defeat. Here he believed he was up against the Plague of Oblivion only.

But now their own robots challenged him. And they did it with amazing precision. Their first energy salvo came so surprisingly that Topthor failed to react quickly enough. Before he could direct his fighting machines to activate their protective screens, half of them melted away under the steady fire of the attacking units. The others fought desperately under his command but were unable to prevail against the superior forces.

It took no more than five minutes till his fighting detachment was completely annihilated. Yet the work robots remained unscathed.

And here was a contradiction which puzzled Topthor: if it was really a fact that the infected robot units on Goszul's Planet had lost their positronic memory and therefore didn't know what they were doing, why did they destroy only the battle-robots? Why not the workers too? They must have retained their memory regardless!

Or did somebody else direct them? But who?

He passed the order to the work robots to return to the ship. Obediently the 50 mechanical men turned around and marched toward the vessel but they didn't get very far. The battle-robots were quicker and blocked their retreat. Then they drove them with their heavier bodies toward the edge of the spaceport.

Topthor watched helplessly as his work crew was taken prisoner. It was a sight he would never forget.

Rangol stared wide-eyed from the videoscreen. His brown face had turned ashen grey and the tip of his beard trembled. "What's going on, Topthor? How is it possible...?"

"I don't know!" Topthor cut him short, staring at the howling Goszuls who were still frolicking around the ships with waving arms as if they wanted to greet the Gods descending from heaven. "I really don't know. The robots must have become crazy too. I wonder what the conditions are at the hangar?"

"Does it make sense to salvage crazy machines?" Rangol asked.

Topthor gave no answer. He kept gazing at the demented mob between the ships and looked at the administration buildings where the last robots disappeared behind the trees.

Then he switched on the intercom. "Both ships ready to start. We've got to save the new cruiser in the

mountains. It never must be allowed to fall into enemy hands. You'll be given the co-ordinates of its location. Start in 30 seconds by antigrav in order to avoid injuries to the natives."

Silently as they had arrived, the two ships took off again.

Down below on the spaceport 5000 Goszuls kept yelling madly and wildly flailing their arms. They were indeed acting like a bunch of crazy people but at this moment Ralv's people were not play-acting.

They were genuinely happy.

\* \* \* \*

Rhodan was surprised by the sudden retreat.

"I find it hard to believe that the elite troops of the Springers can be routed so quickly," Rhodan wondered, trying to understand the reasons for his opponents' action. "They must have a terrible fear of the disease—particularly because it affects the robots."

"It's perfect nonsense that a positronic brain..." Bell began to lecture, pausing abruptly, He looked none too bright when he stared at Rhodan. "You mean to say that the Springers actually believe this?"

"Looks like it, doesn't it?"

Bell became pensive while Rhodan operated his tiny transmitter. "Hello, Marshall! You can expect the Springers any moment now. Probably only two ships. From the conversation we've intercepted we've learned that it's our old friend Topthor again and a Mounder named Rangol. They didn't harm the natives but will brook no interference from the robots to gain possession of the cruiser. It's more valuable to them than all the robots together on Goszul's Planet."

"We're ready for them," the telepath replied. "The battle-robots at this location have been reprogrammed according to your instructions. They're now under our control. In the meantime Borator has returned and he plays his role excellently."

"He's not playing a role," Rhodan countered. "Kitai has treated the Springer in such a fashion that he has become our convinced ally. Borator believes he's acting of his own free will. Furthermore, you all must act as if you were working under orders from the Springers. You've lost your memory but are finishing the construction of the vessel. The insane logic of the whole affair ought to confuse Topthor thoroughly."

"Let's hope so, sir!"

"You can bet your life!" Rhodan assured him and clicked off. After a short reflection he called the *Stardust*. "Hello, Fisher! Is everything under control? How are your finned friends doing?"

"They're continually swimming around the window hatches as if they wanted to come in. Unfortunately we don't have permission to take a walk on the ocean floor, but..."

"This restriction is still in force, sorry! Any messages from Harnahan?"

"He hasn't called yet, sir!"

"I don't understand it. Maybe the column of water is too high and we have used radio waves too weak to penetrate to your depth. There must be some explanation for the silence of the space fighter."

Harnahan is very reliable and..."

"Report to me at once if you hear from him," Rhodan interrupted, ending the conversation. His set would automatically switch on again when Fisher called him.

Rhodan turned to Maj. Deringhouse. "What kind of a person is Sgt. Harnahan, Deringhouse?"

The major's eyes popped. "What do you mean by that?"

"Well, is he really dependable? Is he cool and sober or a dreamer? Is he a realist or does he speculate? How does he react under duress?"

Deringhouse narrowed his eyes. "I don't know how to answer that, sir. All I know is that Sgt. Harnahan is an excellent pilot and a responsible man. Why should he behave differently alone in space than travelling in our company

"It's just a question I asked, Major. Forget it!"

Nobody knew better than Deringhouse that Rhodan didn't ask unnecessary questions. Suddenly it didn't seem so strange to him to inquire about the attitude of the pilot because of the long overdue report. A man was liable to get the craziest ideas roaming in a tiny rocket through the infinity of space.

"Maybe Harnahan is a romantic character," Deringhouse broke the silence.

Rhodan barely looked up. "The thought has occurred to me. Well, we'll see how Harnahan is going to explain his long silence."

Reginald Bell had remained quiet throughout the conversation. He preferred not to reveal his own opinion.

## **5/ PEACEFUL PERSUASION**

At first Harnahan was convinced he had lost his mind and that he saw and heard hallucinations.

As far as hearing was concerned it was much easier to assume it was an illusion—but seeing was believing. The iridescent sphere remained before his eyes, waiting motionlessly at his feet, its size about twice as big as a basketball.

It seemed to consist of metal but if Harnahan had been told it was made of plaster, he would have believed it too.

He suddenly felt as if something was happening to his brain. He sensed that it was nothing evil. There was no threat in the cautious probing of his conscious and unconscious thoughts. And there was the soundless voice which he believed he had heard before: *No, Harnahan, you're completely sane. What you're seeing and perceiving is real. I've already received your thoughts when you were approaching this world. I didn't want to frighten you and so I waited until you discovered me.*

Harnahan had the impression that the coloured reflexes on the smoothly polished surface of the sphere underwent a change. It gradually became black as the universe. The distant stars were mirrored as in the quiet water of an unfathomable mountain lake. And then, as Harnahan looked closer, he noticed that the stars were getting bigger and closer.

*Don't be incredulous, Harnahan, but I can also show my thoughts optically. What would you like to see? Your ship in which you came? The planet from which you've left? Oh, I see it's not your home world.*

Harnahan watched as the stars on the black mirror face shifted and the gleaming canopy of his rocketship came into view as if he hovered 50 feet above the mountain peak.

"It's incredible!" he gasped. "How is this possible? A technology which can achieve this feat must..."

*Nature holds much richer treasures than any technology!*

The sentence burned like a light in his brain. The strange being must have thought it. Slowly it dawned on Harnahan that the sphere was not a technical marvel of an unknown race—it was a member of a race itself!

The sphere was alive!

*Of course, I have life, Harnahan, but I'm alone. There are no other members of my race unless they were created by accident like myself. On your chronological scale I'm about 5,000,000 years old.*

"I must be delirious!" Harnahan thought desperately but the sphere remained right there at his feet and reflected the stars on its curved surface. And the sphere emitted thoughts which he could understand. It was not only intelligent but also telepathic. If he expressed thoughts in his mind it was capable of perceiving them too.

*Yes, I understand you and furthermore I know the reasons for your being here. I'm willing to help you and Perry Rhodan against the Galactic traders.*

Harnahan was startled to the utmost. "What do you know about Perry Rhodan?" he asked in his helmet. Suddenly he got the weird idea that the ball at his feet could be a miniature spaceship harbouring unimaginably small intelligent beings inside.

*I know all there is to know about Rhodan, Harnahan. But don't let this worry you. Your secrets are safe with me.*

Harnahan stood on this moon without an atmosphere in the presence of the greatest miracle ever beheld by human eyes. Above him sparkled the unending light of the stars, which made him aware of his utter solitude. He was alone and had to cope with the impossible.

*Your race is mighty, Harnahan, the thoughts of the sphere interrupted him as if they were spoken words, but even the mightiest have some weaknesses. And so do I. I can live anywhere in the universe, also in a vacuum. My spherical shape represents the most favourable of all forms since it is best suited for withstanding the highest and the lowest pressures. I've been on this moon for 700 years storing energy for the continuation of my journey through the universe. The stars radiate too weakly here. Although it is sufficient to maintain my life I can only retain a tiny amount of energy. At this rate it will take a millennium before I can resume my voyage again.*

"I don't get it—it's beyond me," Harnahan groaned, frustrated by his inability to comprehend the incomprehensible. "Who... what are you?"

A sudden merriment filled Harnahan's brain and he felt as if the sphere was laughing. However he received no answer to his question."

*You're waiting here for the ships of the Springers who are on their way to attack a defenceless world. The Terranians desire to help the weak. I offer you my assistance in return for a reward.*

"A reward?" Harnahan gasped.

*Yes, energy. You've got an abundant supply of it and I wish to receive energy from you for aiding you in your battle against the Springers. I need enough energy to get closer to the sun where I'll be able to take care of myself.*

*I've got to consult Rhodan, Harnahan thought. I can't make any commitments without his approval. If he refuses—but why should he?*

He was interrupted by the sphere. *I'll support you.*

"How do you propose to do that?"

*It all depends on the circumstances. The least I can do is give you a continuous report of the Springer ships' advance. Optically, of course. My energy reserves are too small to intervene myself. Go and bring your ship over here!*

"My ship? What for? It is camouflaged so the Springers won't be able to detect it."

*Can you get in touch with Rhodan without your ship?*

Harnahan shook his head. "But what if the Springers see me?"

*I've got enough energy to handle that, the mysterious creature promised. GO GET YOUR SHIP!*

Harnahan looked at his watch. It was already quite late. His excursion through the valleys and over the mountains had taken a lot of time. And now this long conversation with—well, with whom really? He sighed. "I won't be able to get back before another hour. And then we'll have to be prepared that they may stumble on this moon by accident and instigate a search."

*Then they'll also regret it by accident, came the reply. And now get going or it'll really be too late. I'll answer all your questions later.*

Harnahan thoughtfully gazed at the darkly shining sphere for a few seconds, then turned around without a word and took off with a vigorous push against the ground.

His third leap took him far out across the plain.

\* \* \* \*

After the suggestor Kitai had telepathically purged Borator and administered a thorough treatment to him, Pucky took him back to the valley of the shipyard. The Springer had been indoctrinated with his rules of behaviour. Faint motley spots indicated that the Plague of Oblivion had already impaired his brain. At least so were Tophthor and his companions led to believe.

Pucky transmitted Rhodan's latest instructions to John Marshall. The short encounter at the spaceport proved that the Springers were more afraid of the epidemic than they had dared hope. Moreover they were now firmly convinced that the plague not only afflicted human but also positronic brains, a fact which must have been a devastating shock to Tophthor as Pucky vividly described.

"Bloodshed must be avoided," Pucky declared, looking around in the basin which was still barricaded against the outside world by lines of battle-robots.

For the time-being the 200 Goszuls were put to work helping the robots with the completion of the ship in an effort to expedite the construction. They pretended to suffer from the communicable disease without having reached the crazy stage so far.

Pucky commented, "Rhodan is of the opinion that this will scare Tophthor out of his wits and make him depart on the double, never to be seen again around here."

"I doubt that we can avoid bloodshed if he lands here," Marshall objected. He knew how ruthless the Springers were and he expected even more brutal methods from the Mounders who were deployed as special shock troops. "Wouldn't it be better to make a counter-attack? We had agreed to repulse Tophthor and his men with all the means at our disposal. Have these plans been changed?"

Pucky grinned, exposing his incisor in lonely splendour. His tooth caused him to lisp a little although he was fluent in several languages. "Yes, to a degree. Tophthor has behaved more decently than we expected. He has held his fire against the unarmed Goszuls and Rhodan admires him for that. So the word is now more than ever: *Bluff Tophthor!* In doing so we have to watch that he won't find out who we are. In particular he's not allowed to catch sight of me because Ezztak might have told him something about me. But you've got enough men here..."

A buzz coming from a little box on the table interrupted him. Marshall apologetically glanced at Pucky and pressed the button. A voice which Pucky recognized as Borator, who was under hypnotic influence, said excitedly: "Ambush by a fighter robot in the vicinity of the valley exit. Four Goszuls were killed, the others escaped."

Marshall was stunned but he quickly overcame his consternation. "A battle-robot? That's impossible! All robots have been reprogrammed and they won't attack Goszuls. What measures did you take?"



Borator had no doubt whatsoever that he was in charge of the project. He was commissioned by several of the clans to build the first ship of a new class. He would finish his job in four, or perhaps three days, and deliver the new vessel. "I've given orders to the sentries to shoot the robot that's running amok on sight. Where did the faultless positronic brain go wrong?"

"I don't have the faintest idea, Borator. I'll check into it myself. You can stay on your job."

Pucky took a deep breath. "The infallible positronic... that's it! The robots are flawless. It's completely out of the question that one of the reprogrammed robots would run amok against our own people. Consequently it must be a robot that was not changed over. It's the one I was unable to locate on my first mission. We're lucky that it's given itself away already. I'll be right back, John..."

"Wait a minute!" John Marshall jumped frantically up but the chair across was already empty. Pucky had teleported himself to some other place.

Marshall began to suspect where that place could be. He tucked his impulse-beamer into his belt and ran outside. He sprinted along the chain of guarding robots, hoping he wouldn't come too late to help Pucky. On the way he tried to make telepathic contact with the mouse-beaver. But Pucky seemed to be too busy to concentrate on thought messages.

\* \* \* \*

When Pucky materialized in the valley he saw a mass of Goszuls running toward him. They violently gesticulated with their arms and uttered cries of horror.

Before the Goszuls could reach him he jumped again and materialized behind them. The robot that had informed Borator was stationed at the exit of the valley. It was the same robot that was the first to be deactivated by Pucky earlier.

But before the mouse-beaver had a chance to question it he found some grisly evidence. The bodies of the four Goszuls were crumpled on the ground and furnished him a clue. The unreconstructed robot that was still following the Springers' instructions had to be around here somewhere after it had escaped the cleanup operation in the wake of the take-over. This was the only possible explanation.

The emergency caused it to shunt a circuit and act independently. It had observed from a safe place how the valley and the plant were occupied by the Goszuls and a few unknown people. Subsequently it witnessed the reprogramming of its mates. By rights it now should have attacked the assembly plant and the robots who had turned hostile. However, thinking machines have a built-in tendency for self-preservation when this serves the purpose of their masters.

RK-176 knew it didn't have a ghost of a chance against its 99 fellow robots. Maybe it could disable 10 or 20 of them in a surprise attack but then it would be crushed by their sheer numbers. That way it would accomplish nothing at all. It was more important to get the news of the events which had overtaken the isolated valley to the outside world. The governors had to be informed of the dismal state of affairs. At the entrance of the valley only one guard was posted. If RK-176 could do away with the guard the way to the city was open.

It started out and soon ran into the arms of 20 Goszuls. The natives had just passed the sentry at the entrance with whom they were already acquainted, Robots were a familiar sight to them.

RK-176 acted hastily and without its usual circumspection when it opened fire on the inoffensive natives, killing four of them. Only after the survivors began to scream and flee in panic did it realize it had made a grave mistake.

However it was too late and it couldn't be undone. RK-176 turned its attention to the sentry who had witnessed his deed and let the Goszuls run away. It proceeded toward the narrow cleft in the rocks where the lonely figure of the robot guard was clearly visible between the shadows of a few bushes.

The automaton would have laughed bitterly if it could have done so but a robot never smiles and, conversely, never suffers pangs of conscience.

RK-176 knew exactly what it had to do. Its weapon arms went into the horizontal firing position. Its lenses were fixed rigidly on the new opponent as it advanced toward the sentry.

By means of its receiver RK-176 ascertained that its reappearance was no longer a secret. The hunt for it had already begun.

Pucky came a few minutes too late. He found the molten debris of the robot in the seared grass and bushes. The energy rays had also left their mark on the rocks but there was no trace of the resisting battle-robot. It must have already gained a considerable head start.

The mouse-beaver cast a regretful glance at the pile of junk and teleported himself on top of a rock which rose more than 1500 feet above the plain. From there it was possible to see the ocean if the view was clear which, however, wasn't the case today. Yet it was fair enough.

At a distance of two or three miles he spotted a moving black object, which intermittently flashed a silvery light when it caught a sunray. It proceeded steadily and rapidly in a south-westerly direction.

It was the fleeing robot!

Pucky grinned expectantly. His inborn urge to play triumphed over his good training. At last he had a chance again to perform his tricks. He regretted only that he had no spectators.

Hm, he could fix that...

RK-176 marched at considerable speed but couldn't go fast enough to get away from a teleporter like Pucky, of course. It still was unaware that a pursuer was on its metal heels and thought it had made good its escape. Its positronic brain was still busy trying to find a logical explanation for the developments which had occurred at the site of the hangar, but it found none.

Pucky materialized 30 feet behind the robot and concentrated his telekinetic powers on it. His invisible mental vibrations seized the metallic monster and nailed it to the spot in an iron grip.

RK-176 came to an abrupt stop as if paralysed by a sudden breakdown of its mechanism. But this was not the case—quite the contrary. Its positronic brain began to work feverishly but futilely, unable to find solutions for its plight.

"You've killed four people," Pucky said pointedly in Intercosmo: making sure that the robot was unable

to move. "For this you'll be junked. Is there anything you wish to tell me?"

RK-176 rasped mechanically. "I've acted in accordance with my orders. No Goszul is allowed in the vicinity of the construction site. Who are you?"

"Wouldn't you like to know? Okay, you may turn halfway around. But if you've any intention of shooting at me, you better tell me first. In that case I'll make short shrift of you."

Naturally the robot would try to kill him. Pucky knew this only too well. Indeed it was the robot's duty to make such an attempt, which was exactly what it did the instant it caught sight of the mouse-beaver. The two energy discharges were wide of the mark.

"You've sealed your fate!" Pucky growled, staring straight at the monster's eye-lenses. "And now you're going to learn how to fly..."

RK-176 was not designed for flying but now its brain registered that the gravitation of the planet was diminishing and that it became weightless until it was lighter than the air. It began to rise like a balloon.

Pucky teleported himself back to the entrance of the valley and steered his victim with skill and joy. The robot provided a spectacular show by continuously blasting away with both rayguns in the hope of scoring a lucky hit.

At this time Marshall came running around the corner of the valley's exit and was gratified to witness the performance. It was well worth his long run.

About 100 feet away Pucky squatted on a strip of grass, resembling an airplane model enthusiast who proudly showed off his latest product, flying it around the sky by remote control. In effect, this was just what Pucky was doing.

Suddenly the little speck high up in the sky began to fall, growing rapidly in size. Pucky turned to John, beaming happily. "Now you're going to hear a big bang," he predicted. "The thing is going to explode. I've never tried it before from such a height."

"Why do you want to destroy him?" John asked. "We could reprogram him too."

"Not this one." Pucky shook his head as he watched the wildly firing monster of steel gaining more and more speed. "It would be too much trouble. You sure know how to spoil a fellow's fun..."

"But..." John shut up. The spectacle also fascinated him. Besides he knew that he couldn't change Pucky's mind. The mouse-beaver seemed to be awfully mad at the robot which now came down at a fantastic speed and bit the ground at a distance of 500 feet.

At first it looked as if nothing much had happened. The robot's great mass caused it to penetrate deep into the rocky ground. This was made much easier by the melting of the rock due to the uninterrupted firing of the energy-beamers so that the automaton virtually landed in a puddle of lava.

Then there was a blinding flash. A white cloud formed like a mushroom above the place of impact till the wind blew it away.

Pucky breathed loudly. "A truly splendid crash!"

John Marshall went over and put his hand on Pucky, bending down a little. "I wouldn't have believed you can enjoy so much smashing up things."

"Sometimes I get the greatest kick out of it." Pucky looked up to the blue sky and narrowed his gentle brown eyes. Without changing his tone of voice, he continued: "Take my hand! I'll jump back to the hangar. It's better if you come with me."

John knew that Pucky had no trouble teleporting together with him. Before they left he also looked up to the sky.

The tubular spaceship of the Springers crossed low over the mountains which had hidden it from their sight up to now.

\* \* \* \*

Tophthor gave Rangol a sign. "I'll put down my ship on the plateau near the valley. There's not enough room in the basin. An auxiliary ship will take a scouting team into the valley. You'll stand by at an altitude of 30,000 feet, ready for action. Keep in touch with the communication centre."

"Will you leave the ship, Tophthor?"

"I'll lead my men. Keep an eye on what's going on but don't intervene with an attack which could endanger me and my men. At the slightest sign of a threat by contagion, our plans will be revised."

The orders of the Mounder were transmitted by intercom to all departments of the ship as it slowly descended horizontally to the plateau bordering the valley on a precipice 1500 feet high.

As soon as the vessel touched the ground a hatch opened and a bulky attack ship emerged. It was held 18 inches above the rocky ground by an antigrav field. Men in battlesuits rushed from the large vessel into the much smaller one. The hulking square figures of the Mounders looked awesome and menacing. Despite their appearance these enormous chunks of men were incredibly agile and swift in their movements.

The hatches of the mothership closed up again. It remained waiting for instant action the moment Tophthor gave the order. He kept in constant contact with his deputy commander via the transceiver in his helmet.

Tophthor was the last to climb into the attack ship. The craft silently rose 10 feet, floated over the edge of the chasm and cautiously sank slowly deeper. Tophthor paid scant attention to the pilot and the 20 Mounders accompanying him. His eyes were riveted to the observation screen.

There he was at the famous place where the secret ship was constructed which if its builders could be believed was capable of conquering the universe. Tophthor had no idea what the advantages of the new class of ships were but he began to believe that the rumours he had heard here and there were no idle gossip.

His craft gradually went lower. Now he clearly recognized the robots in the first line of defence facing

the exit of the valley just as Ezztak had described it to him. Everything appeared to be in good order. No plague, no insurrection of automatons, no crazy Goszuls...

Topthor suddenly remembered that no Goszuls were allowed to work on the ship. Borator exclusively used robots. At least in the past. But that could change today or tomorrow.

He still believed he held all the strings in his hand and didn't suspect that he was only a puppet on a string pulled by somebody else.

Perry Rhodan!

\* \* \* \*

John Marshall, the suggestor Kitai and Pucky kept out of sight and watched with undivided interest the landing of the Springers.

The work in the plant proceeded on as if nothing had happened. Borator sat in his office issuing new instructions. The first flight test was scheduled to take place already the day after tomorrow. The robots were working in high gear. He was lucky he had help from the Goszuls too.

Outside the shadow of a Springer attack ship glided over the ground. As soon as it touched down the formidable figures of the Mounders sallied forth from its hatch. Impulse-beamers were at the ready in their fists. Their spacesuits were closed but communication was made possible through transceivers.

Borator looked up knowingly and rose from his seat. Kitai's will guided him as he stepped outside to meet the Springers. He didn't show the slightest sign of surprise. "Did you come to take delivery of the ship, Topthor? Have you been sent to me by Ezztak?"

Topthor slowly lowered his impulse-beamer as he stared at the splotchy face of the engineer. He felt certain that his protective suit made him immune to any infection. Nevertheless he was unable to get rid of the uncanny feeling that he confronted an unknown and unpredictable enemy.

"Did you come down with the plague too, Borator?" he asked, taking a step back. Out of the corner of his eye he could see a group of Goszuls coming out of the hangar with a few work robots—not paying the slightest attention to the Mounders—and walking to the adjacent shed. "What business do the natives have here? Are they also diseased?"

Borator nodded as if they were only temporarily and slightly indisposed. "We're all sick but so far we have yet retained our memories. The dissolution of the brain occurs after a few weeks. The ship will be completed before then. As far as the Goszuls are concerned, I was forced to put them to work because the robots couldn't have finished the job alone before—before I lose my memory." Borator pointed to a battle-robot standing in the distance. "I'm not the only one who's affected that way. The robots will also suffer a loss of memory and I won't be able to depend on them much longer."

Topthor retreated another step with a warning glance at his men. "When will the vessel be ready, Borator?"

"In about a week. Then you can take over the ship."

"And when... I mean, when will your memory fail?"

"I don't know, maybe already tomorrow. It would be advisable if you prepare to assume my duties here."

"Take over your job? And your illness too?"

"It's already too late for that, you've got it," Borator said impassively.

The Mounder paled behind his faceplate. "But we're wearing protective suits!"

Borator smiled coldly. "So did I ever since I heard about the first case in the valley. You can see for yourself what good it does. No, you'll have to put all personal considerations last and think only of saving our ship. It must never be allowed to fall into the hands of strangers."

"No bacillus can penetrate the cover of my protective suit," Tophthor reverted to the topic which was most vital to him. "Before we return to our ship we'll first go through a vacuum chamber in which every germ will be destroyed."

"You can only put your suits in a vacuum, not your bodies," Borator replied matter-of-factly. "Don't be under any illusions. You are lost the same as I and the robots and the Goszuls on this world. All that's left for you to do is to take the ship to some point in space and leave it there with opened hatches for transfer to our people out there. They will know how to find it later when the disease is gone. As for you, Tophthor, you'll be lucky if you still know your name in a week."

"Borator!" Tophthor's voice had a mighty ring matching his massive body. "I didn't come here to listen to madness! Everybody seems to be on the job in this valley. I haven't noticed any crazy workers."

"We've got them alright," Borator quietly contradicted, waving his hairy chin toward a battle-robot which was just rounding the corner of a low storage building. "You won't believe it but the positronic brains are the first to act funny. just listen..."

Tophthor looked reluctantly at the heavy robot which was slowly coming in their direction and passed them a few feet away. The hunk of steel ignored the newcomers. It didn't even give them as much as a fleeting glance.

It kept walking and softly singing a tune. It was a rather simple and monotonous melody but the words were in Intercosmo: and clearly audible.

"Who am I...?"

I'm searching and pain,

Hunger and desire,

Compulsion and striving in vain...

Dreams and illusions. Light...?

Yet in the end—thirst and desire.

I wish I could fly to a blue star..."

Topthor gaped with open mouth as if his beard had suddenly become heavy and pulled his chin down. Then all his limbs started to tremble as he painfully stammered: "What's... that...?"

"A poem," Borator explained. "RK-064 has composed the tune and words!"

The 20 Mounders behind Topthor had gradually withdrawn step by step and now stood once more at the hatch of their attack ship. A sign from Topthor would have been enough to make them scramble aboard in a hurry. But Topthor, although severely shaken, wasn't ready to give up yet. His fingers gripped the butt of his weapon. "Why didn't you destroy RK-064?"

John Marshall chuckled in his hide-out as he repeated Topthor's question to Kitai who sat next to him. Kitai suggested his answer to Borator who instantly picked it up. "Why should I destroy it? If I did, I'd have to do away with many more valuable robots. Sooner or later they're finished anyway and as long as they don't cause mayhem I can see no reason to hasten their end. By the way, work robot RA-007 has started to write a dramatic play."

Pucky laughed so hard he almost fell off his seat. "This is much too silly to make Topthor run! I'd love to turn him into a little spaceship. It would be the easiest thing for me to make him fly to the nearest moon where his men can pick him up."

"Don't you dare!" Marshall snapped angrily. Topthor is a practical and logical man. He'd suspect a telekinetic trick and connect it with Perry Rhodan. Rhyming robots frighten him much more because it's beyond his comprehension. Kitai, keep it up. I think we'll soon have Topthor where we want him."

While dramatic plays were also part of the cultural life of the Springers, Topthor had never shown any interest in the arts which didn't bring a profit. He gazed with amazement at the speckled face of RA-007 and suddenly felt an indescribable terror. His limbs began to tremble and he had trouble staying on his sturdy legs. "And what effect does the plague have on people?"

Before Borator could answer him one of the Goszuls came into view as if by request. With a beaming smile he approached the group of Mounders who under normal circumstances would have scared him to death. He probably would have fainted at the sight of these monsters whereas now he didn't show the slightest consternation.

"Look for yourself!" Borator murmured as the Goszul stepped between him and Topthor. The native had long dark hair and his naked chest was covered with red and blue spots. His face showed many hues of colour and his brain seemed to be debilitated by the dreadful scourge since he obviously was incapable of realizing the dangers he incurred from the Mounders.

He took the impulse-beamer from Topthor's trembling hands and smilingly began to play with it. Before anybody could stop him the pale-green energy-ray sizzled from the weapon and vaporized a slice high up on the rocky face. The Goszul shook his head in puzzlement and handed the weapon back to Topthor before he could leap to safety. This startled the Springer more than anything else.

With an amused smile the native continued on his way, crossing the line of the baffled Mounders without a sign of fear.

Borator turned again to Topthor. "There you have it, Topthor. It's a disease which makes you forget everything. He's not even aware of any perils. He trusts his worst enemy. The race of the Springers will be doomed if we lose our memories and don't know who our enemies are."

Topthor held his weapon in his limp hands. "We couldn't recognize our enemies?"

"You can't even remember your own name," Borator stated and continued in a businesslike tone. "May I show you the ship now? You'll have to launch it into space no later than a week. I hope you'll still be well by then but you probably have more men who can take your place if something happens to you. The last group will have to put the ship on its course."

"And what will become of us?" Topthor inquired.

Borator made an uncertain gesture. "You'll have to make your own decision, Topthor. In a week at the most your mind will stop functioning although your body will go on living. But is this really so important? What matters most is that we comply with our orders and deliver the new ship to the clans."

"I didn't get orders to rot from a disease!" Topthor suddenly blurted out. His whole body was shaking. "These fiends wanted to send us to our doom and they hope to save the expense in the bargain. Of course, I'm supposed to forget what I've coming! But I'll make them account to me. Let 'em get their own ship! You can tell 'em that from me, Borator, if you still can remember it!"

Turning to his men, Topthor ordered: "Get back aboard the ship! We won't go through with this deal." And again to Borator: "Do you really think we've caught it?"

The engineer made a sad grimace. "I'm afraid there's nothing you can do about it, Topthor."

The Mounder bellowed a curse and climbed into the cockpit of his ship. The hatch closed and seconds later the ship lifted off vertically and soon disappeared beyond the rim of the mountain wall.

"That was all?" Pucky piped up with disappointment. "No fireworks, no telekinetic razzle-dazzle? Nothing!"

John sighed with relief as he patted Kitai on the back. "Well done, my friend! Borator gave an excellent performance. It's a shame he doesn't know it."

"Well?" Pucky insisted, squatting on his haunches on top of the table. "I asked you something, John!"

The telepath stroked the thick fur of the mouse-beaver. "You ought to be happy that we pulled it off without resorting to stronger measures. Sometimes peaceful persuasion is more effective than a deadly display of fire and brimstone. Only the living can remember."

While Pucky tried to digest this bit of wisdom the huge shadow of the cylindrical ship rose from the plateau and raced with terrific acceleration into the blue sky.

Topthor called the other 12 ships but there were only 11 that answered.



As Harnahan started his little ship he believed he was dreaming. Perhaps he was sick and suffering from the symptoms of space-fever. Or the solitude could have made him delirious and his adventures were merely a figment of his imagination produced by his subconscious mind.

Yet there was that mysterious voice again, entering his brain across a distance of many miles. You can ponder your doubts later, *Harnahan. You don't have time for it now. A ship of the Springers is heading for this moon. Hurry up if you don't want to die. Come to my valley!*

Harnahan moved fast. In less than a minute he landed in the basin where he had found the enigmatic sphere. It was still lying on the same spot but the picture on its surface had changed.

*Remain in your ship, Harnahan. You may observe everything without trepidation. You'll be perfectly safe. As for the Springer, however...*

The sphere was a mere 30 feet away from Harnahan. He was able to recognize everything that was depicted on its surface. There was a ship of the typically tubular shape of the Springers. He noticed that it hugged the periphery of a—his?—moon as if it searched for something. He had the impression that the sphere had grown a little and was still in the process of expanding itself. It also seemed to have taken on a richer, more satisfied glow.

More satisfied?

This incredible suspicion germinating at this moment in Harnahan's mind later proved to be quite correct. Right now he had no time to contemplate such ideas. He took his eyes off the picture on the ball and peered across the plain.

The Springer ship came exactly in his direction, turning its nose a little to starboard to clear the barrier of the mountain and abruptly increasing its velocity. It was due any instant to hurdle across the ridge.

And there it was! Harnahan intently watched what was going to happen next. Unless the commander of the ship was asleep he must have already detected the little pursuitship. Harnahan's hand automatically gripped his control stick. In one stroke he could make his rocket shoot vertically up into the sky.

Without changing its course the Springer ship continued its flight straight into the star-studded sky. Harnahan thought he noticed that its speed slightly diminished.

*The ship has exceeded the escape velocity of the moon and won't be caught by it. Unless it is found by the other Springers its crew will perish.*

Harnahan followed the big ship with astonished eyes as it became rapidly smaller and disappeared behind the steep rocks. His practiced eyes had noted that it had lost its driving power and merely kept moving by the momentum of its mass. As soon as it left the gravitational field of the moon it would fall into space till a larger moon or perhaps the sun caught it.

"Did you destroy its power plant?" Harnahan asked, looking at the sphere whose diameter now measured three feet. "The people in that ship will be doomed."

*I didn't destroy the power plant, the silent answer came. I've merely siphoned all their energy*

*with the exception of their emergency batteries which I left intact because I didn't intend to deprive them of the life-sustaining system. Otherwise the ship has no energy. No propulsion, no weapons and no hyper-transmitter. Nothing.*

"How did you accomplish this?"

*I could drain your energy too if I so desired. But Perry Rhodan fascinates me. Please inform him of my presence here. Before he leaves this stellar system I'll send him a message that I expect a visit from him some day. It doesn't matter if it takes 10 or 50 years. I've got the time but I don't want to wait a thousand years—or rather 800 years which I now have to spend here.*

As Harnahan switched on his little hyper-synchron transceiver, which enabled him to communicate over a distance of two light-weeks without a time delay, he told the strange entity: "I'll advise Rhodan of our meeting. But now I've got to report my position."

*Make your report. You'll find out that the dispute on the second planet of this system has already been settled. The Springers were put to flight. They've lost all interest in carrying out their expedition. You may return now—at least you'll receive orders to this effect in a minute.*

Lt. Fisher of the *Stardust* answered Harnahan's call. "Man, Harnahan! Why didn't we hear from you sooner? You can come back now. We no longer need to observe their position. The Springers took it on the lam. Where did you get stuck, by the way?"

"On a moon of the fourth planet. Can you connect me with Rhodan?"

"Can't be done, sorry. I'll tell him we can expect you soon. He'll be tickled to hear from you. Get going!"

"But..."

"Sorry, Sergeant, no more time. The *Stardust* is getting ready to emerge again. Call back later. Out!"

The receiver was silent and Harnahan turned it off. He opened the airlock and went over to the sphere. He looked at the black surface and saw several cylindrical ships in a formation. There were 11 ships grouped in a circle around a larger one. To their left was a planet.

*It's the outermost planet, the thought impulses explained. They're regrouping again to abandon the system as quickly as possible. However they received the SOS signals from the missing ship and will first go to rescue it.*

Harnahan bent down to the sphere. He was anxious to touch it with his hands but didn't dare. "What kind of a spirit are you?" he exclaimed. "What are your powers?"

I am I, Harnahan. I can't tell you more about myself but I'll show you what I can do.

The picture of a swirling ocean was reflected on the spherical surface and Harnahan saw the *Stardust* emerging from the depth of the water and slowly drifting over the foamy white caps of the waves. It soon reached the shore and landed on the spaceport.

The three cruisers had already left their subterranean hangars. The ships' crews mingled everywhere with the Goszuls, who still displayed the red spots on their faces but otherwise acted completely normal.

"You're a living television screen," Harnahan whispered in awe and added with curiosity: "What's the limit of your range?"

Instead of an answer the picture of the sphere changed. Harnahan watched as he left their own stellar system—at least this was the impression the image created. Racing a million times faster than light into infinity he incredulously beheld the rotating spiral of the Galaxy. He must have leaped across ten thousands of light-years.

Then he plunged back and was suddenly on the moon again. He knew that he had never moved from his spot, and yet...

*I can observe any point in the Galaxy and make it visible for others. Unfortunately I can communicate with others only up to 200 light-years. You see my resources are limited.*

Harnahan suddenly felt cold in his heated spacesuit. He began to grasp what power was possessed by the spherical being that seemed to consist of solid energy and received its sustenance from the light of the stars. He had witnessed its ability to tap the energy converters of spaceships but had also learned that he had never encountered a more benevolent living being.

*And now go back to your friends, Harnahan. Tell my story to Perry Rhodan only and keep it secret from all others. I've got to rest and save my strength because I have access only to feeble stellar energy sources here. Goodbye Harnahan! Some day we'll meet again.*

Harnahan gazed a little longer at the sphere. Then he abruptly turned around and walked back to his rocket. He climbed aboard and closed the hatch.

As he activated the antigrav field and slowly lifted off, he cast a lingering glance at the darkly flickering ball in front of the metal door leading into the mountain. He should have inquired about it. But then he shook his head. Some day he was going to learn what lay behind that door—if it actually was a door.

Soon the valley faded out of sight and he was engulfed in the starry sky, all alone once more in his snug cockpit.

## **7/ LAST COMMUNICATION OF THE INCREDIBLE ORB**

The gigantic vessel glided at a snail's pace out of its cave in the mountains. The antigrav-field held it weightlessly suspended a few feet above the ground. At both sides Goszuls and work robots kept the gleaming hull from scraping the rocky walls. Borator excitedly ran back and forth. He talked with his hands and feet—and sometimes with his mouth. This ship was his life's work albeit he failed to understand all the intricacies which the technicians and the robot specialists had devised.

Rhodan experienced the same difficulties. He realized that only a thorough study of the blueprints received from Borator would divulge the inner secrets of the new ship.

However it was apparent that the propulsion was based on well-known Arkonide methods and had

undergone only minor changes which enabled the new owners to fly the ship as they were accustomed. Tests and experiments had to wait for a more opportune time. Rhodan was eager to leave Goszul's Planet as soon as possible.

Only one man was inside the huge cylinder as it entered the open basin in its full length of 2500 feet: Reginald Bell.

Despite his vehement protests Rhodan had appointed him commander of the conquered cruiser. Bell was not especially keen on playing with unknown forces. Only after it was brought home to him that nobody else could be trusted with the unique and priceless vessel could he be talked into taking over the command.

The ship had a diameter of more than 600 feet. The interior of the vessel was not yet completely outfitted. However this bothered Rhodan very little. He couldn't have used the enormous seats of the Mounders anyway. The engineers and technicians in the capital of the Earth, Terrania, would take care of these last details.

Bell deactivated the antigrav-field and was glad to feel the slight jolt reassuring him that he had solid ground under his feet. He left the Command Centre and appeared a minute later in the exit hatch, which was big enough for an elephant. His face beamed with delight. "Hey, Borator! You've built a nice little ship. Congratulations!"

"I'm happy you like it, sir!" the Springer replied. He was still under Kitai's influence and firmly convinced of being master of his own will. He would be vexed in a few days when 20 Springers on a lonely island bombarded him with peculiar questions for which he had no more answers than they.

"It's a superb ship indeed," Rhodan commented. He was talking to Ralv close by. "We'll take it with us."

"Will you come back?" inquired Ralv, who had been promoted to Chief of Government in the meantime. "You've promised..."

"We'll set up a trading base here," Rhodan reassured him. "My authorized representatives will arrive in a few weeks. The bastions the Springers have erected here will protect you. You'll be able to repulse any assault from an enemy who would try to enslave you again. But I believe you'll have nothing to fear from the Springers for the next 50 years as long as the quarantine lasts."

Bell came over. "Okay, I'll fly this tub!" he grinned. "When do we start?"

"In three hours. I'd advise you to fly the 'tub' to the spaceport near the city. This will give you a chance to test it. Pucky can accompany you so that he can bring you back in case of emergency. After all, you're no teleporter."

"Pucky!" Bell murmured, peeved. "Always Pucky! Let him come for all I care—if he isn't seared."

The mouse-beaver stood in the elephant-sized hatch. "Poo, scared!" his shrill voice started Bell. "I'm not scared! The only thing I'll ever be afraid of in my life is that you'll get sense, buster!"

Bell winced as if he wanted to cry. He implored Rhodan: "What am I going to do with him, Perry?"

"Take him along to Terra! You'll travel together. Maybe you'll learn to get along. A long, lonely flight through the universe is supposed to work wonders."

Bell stalked away. His red hair had risen like rockets on his head. Without looking back he disappeared behind Pucky in the ship and the hatch closed with a dull thud.

John Marshall, who had been standing nearby, joined Rhodan. "Hm," he muttered, "I only hope it works. After all, Pucky is also a telepath."

Rhodan smiled confidently. "I'm sure he'll remind Bell of it at the first opportunity," he said a little mischievously as he watched the tremendous ship ascend vertically. When it reached the rim of the plateau, it suddenly shot like a bullet into the bright blue sky and vanished in a second.

Borator pensively gazed for the last time at his proudest achievement.

\* \* \* \*

Rhodan's fleet crossed the path of the fourth planet and neared the calculated transition co-ordinates with the velocity of light.

The *Stardust* was flanked by the cruisers *Terra* and *Centurio*. The *Solar System* and the latest addition, the battleship of the Springers with Bell at the helm, followed at a distance of 0.00001 light-seconds.

Only one other man was present in the Command Centre of the *Stardust* with Rhodan—Sgt. Harnahan.

The fourth planet swiftly passed by at starboard. The countless moons were minute points of lights and it was impossible to make out the one on which Harnahan had landed.

Rhodan professed no doubt when he asked: "What did you say was the range of your sphere?"

"Two hundred light-years—or so it claimed."

"Strange," Rhodan mused. "It has always been assumed that the range of telepathy is unlimited. Apparently this isn't always true. Marshall can't reach Earth from here either. Nevertheless—200 light-years..."

And now he sensed it. It felt like a soft hand gently touching his head and an extraneous thought imposed itself on his own. Rhodan quickly glanced at his fighter pilot for confirmation that he experienced the same sensation.

The incredible orb contacted them. *You see, Perry Rhodan, Harnahan was right. Did you receive my message that I'm waiting for you? No—first return to Terra, it's more important. But remember me, Perry Rhodan. I don't want to wait eternally although we're both immortal.*

"Who are you?" Rhodan asked.

Harnahan perceived the amused smile as well as Rhodan.

*You humans are curious—and curiosity is the mainspring of civilized progress. I believe that your*

*curiosity will lead you to me some day. Till then—farewell, Perry Rhodan! And many thanks...*

Rhodan was puzzled. "Thanks? Thanks for what?"

*Again he felt the laughter in his mind. For the energy I've drawn from your ships. No, I didn't take too much, not enough for a long flight. But I believe you'll be able to hear better and farther. Good luck to you and Terra!*

The fourth planet and its moons faded in the distance.

"What shall I call you?" Rhodan inquired.

There was no answer. The mystifying intelligent being remained silent. Rhodan tried again to make contact but his attempt failed. He looked at Harnahan. "What's your opinion, Sergeant? What's the real truth about this creature? Is it a living organism? Is it energy or spirit? Man, you've seen it with your own eyes. Can it constitute a danger?"

Harnahan looked into space at the glittering stars. A soft line played around his closed lips. His eyes glistened moistly as he slowly shook his head. "I don't know the answers to your questions—except one, sir. The last. This being will never become a threat to us. Yes, I've seen and felt it. However I sensed neither evil nor fear. No, sir, the orb is no menace to us and never will be. Quite the contrary!"

Perry Rhodan also stared into the panoply of stars. A few hours ahead of them was the transition point. At a stroke the universe with all its stars would vanish—and instantly emerge again anew more than a thousand light-years away.

He turned around and looked at Harnahan's face. "Alright," he said softly, with an odd undertone in his voice which was so used to giving orders. "I feel as you do. If the sphere isn't perilous it might be very helpful in the future. And we're going to need all the help we can get when..."

He fell silent. But Harnahan was also human and therefore curious. "When will we need help, sir?"

Suddenly Rhodan smiled indulgently. "When the Springers notice they haven't lost their memories—and I'm afraid that it'll be the case in a few weeks." His smile faded as quickly as it had appeared. "Now we'll have to see what Bell is doing. In a few hours..."

Bell's face popped up on the videoscreen. "Yes, Perry, what's the matter?"

"Test transition across 2000 miles! Are you ready, Reg?"

Bell nodded resignedly. Behind him Pucky was showing his tooth with a grin.

"I don't care. But I know full well that everything functions perfectly and..."

"Ready?" Rhodan interrupted him.

"Ready!" Reg looked back over his shoulder. "I'd like to see who wouldn't be ready in such company—*Ouch!*"

Bell rocketed upward and out of the picture, to be replaced by an impious creature which looked like a close-up of Mickey Mouse. Pucky flashed his incisor with unrestrained glee mixed with menacing

mischief. "He's always starting something," the alien from planet Vagabond lisped in his most guileless manner. "Shall I teleport him to hell?"

Rhodan maintained a stern visage but his voice betrayed a suppressed chuckle. "Better not, Pucky: we need Bell awhile longer yet. Besides, the devil wouldn't thank you for causing so much competition—or didn't you ever hear of unfair competition?"

"No," the mouse-beaver innocently shook his big ears. "Never. What is it?"

"It's *atelekinutty louse* -beaver letting a valuable Earthman die of hunger on the ceiling!" Bell shouted from above, out of sight. "Let me down at once or I'll... I'll... Alright Pucky—I'll do nothing! Peace?"

Bell's legs came dangling down on the videoscreen and soon he took his place again at the control panel of the Springer ship. Pucky obligingly made room for him.

"Now, how about a test transition?" Rhodan inquired.

Bell beamed. "With pleasure, my Lord and Master. I don't know what I'd rather do. How much longer do I have to wait?"

2000 miles away the mouse-beaver made chirping noises and shook his shaggy head in wonderment.

"Well, then, get going!" Rhodan prodded.

Sgt. Harnahan looked back at the rear observation screen, trying to hold on with his eyes to a planet with many moons which was rapidly receding into the universe. His nature was romantic, dreamy. In his eyes gleamed that quality commonly shared by Perry Rhodan and most of his associates: the sense of wonder that sparks the eternal quest for knowledge.

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INCREDIBLE ORB

THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

A WORLD GONE MAD

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

Five hytrans light-year leaps across interstellar immensity lies distant Arkon, Realm of the Tri-Planets. And the time has come at last when Perry Rhodan feels himself in a position to



fulfil his 13-year-old promise to Thora & Khrest to return them to their home world.

But the Peacelord reckons without the—Naats! Triclopean creatures whose three eyes peer out of leathery black skulls and whose faces are noseless.

En route Arkon, Rhodan et al are captured & imprisoned and their giant spaceship *Ganymede* also held prisoner. On Naat, Pucky is actively involved in the adventures that this enforced detour entails.

A super story awaits you in the next episode of PERRY RHODAN as you fly through hyperspace

TO ARKON!

by

Kurt Mahr