

## 1/ PITY POOR PUCKY!

A MINOR MIRACLE: there were still some inhabitants of the worlds of the 21st terrestrial century who had not yet heard of Pucky the mouse-beaver. Of course this was not exactly a tragedy for most of them: people suddenly encountering him for the first time were frequently in for some embarrassing surprises.

Such was the case of the insubordinate settlers in the high plateau country south of Venus City. They knew from experience that World Government on the home planet was not in the habit of dispatching a punitive expedition to nip such rebellions as this in the bud so they had decided to assert their independence by shaking off a slight burden of taxation.

Inasmuch as Perry Rhodan was off somewhere in the depths of the cosmos and could not be contacted, the Terranian World Government took matters in its own hands and assigned Pucky the task of keeping things in order on Venus.

Which the Vagabond leaper was only too happy to do.

So one day when a Disneyesque creature resembling an ancient cartoon rodent named Mack the Mouse, or something like that, appeared among the rebellious settlers, it was met with peals of laughter. They laughed even more uproariously when this comical cantankerous apparition asserted that it was an emissary of the Solar Empire, come in the interests of Law & Order.

Their laughter subsided only when the strange animal, who spoke impeccable English, brought its hidden faculties into play. The ring leader could not hide a single thought from him because Pucky was an esper, first class. He was also capable of appearing almost everywhere simultaneously because he was also a teleporter. And finally, all the settlers' weapons took minds of their own and assembled themselves high above the plateau, whereupon they fell into a very deep lake. Because in addition Pucky was psychokinetic.

Naturally this was enough to bring the settlers to their senses. With many fine words they begged forgiveness and promised to be obedient in the future and to pay the agreed upon taxes.

On the evening of this eventful day, Pucky permitted a celebration in honour of his obvious generosity. The leaders of the aborted uprising had invited him and they served him some vintage Venusian wine. It turned into quite a gay festival and Pucky's rising enthusiasm caused him to forget some of his better upbringing. In his squeaky voice he regaled them with some rugged spaceman songs which he had picked up from Reginald Bell. With husky voices, the men responded in a roaring accompaniment. In the forest which surrounded the colony, the animal fell into silent wonderment over this unusual bedlam. For them, too, a singing mouse-beaver was new to their experience. In great bewilderment, a ring-nosed beetle-eater crawled deeper into its hole and decided to look for a new home first thing in the morning. Even a half-deaf corkscrew worm bored its way deeply into the ground in order to get away from the intolerable caterwauling.

To put it mildly, Pucky was feeling no pain.

Of course he was vaguely disturbed, now and then, by a subtle intrusion of weak thought-impulses into his subconscious which did not originate in the settlers' brains, they being befogged by the strong wine they had consumed, but he tended to dismiss these exterior stimuli. After a task well done, hadn't he

earned himself a night on the 'town' so to speak? Why should he worry about the Terranian garrison at Port Venus, the capital city? They could wait until morning.

So Pucky continued singing and dedicated himself to the spirit of the occasion.

It was much later that night, while surrendering to the luxury of a soft bed in the mayor's house, when he sensed the thought-impulses again.

*Pucky! This is Command Headquarters of the Mutant Corps! Come in, please! Report your situation!*

It was too clear a signal to be ignored. He could detect in the vibrational pattern the personality of Betty Toufry, whose telepathic ability had often left him breathless with astonishment. Betty was in charge of the Mutant taskforce on Venus and it was she who had the basic responsibility for squelching the revolt of the settlers.

Pucky sighed and made an effort to clear his head.

*Goldilocks!* he thought, as he gradually regained his alertness. *The situation is splendid! All I did was get them alked up.*

Alked up?

The mouse-beaver grinned when he realized that this innocent one might not fully understand these special expressions of Bell.

*Wine!* he explained somewhat brusquely. *Very excellent wine! The revolt has been forgotten. Tomorrow I'll report in and I'll give you a kiss.*

Betty did not seem to be particularly enthralled by this prospect.

*You report in here at once! I have a new assignment for you.*

The mouse-beaver continued lying restfully in the bed but he shook off his feelings of fatigue. In the course of duty, had he also sampled too much wine...?

*What's up?* he wanted to know. And he was aware of not feeling very well.

*A special mission, dearie! the telepathic answer came back at once. You will have to take off early in the morning.*

Pucky let out an agonized groan and sat up in bed. He supported his back against the wall. The soft pelt of his tummy gleamed in the light of a street lamp outside the house.

*Take off? Will this gypsy life of mine never cease?*

Now Betty seemed to become almost impatient with him. *Pucky, you come here immediately or I'll advise Rhodan that you have refused to obey an order! He has expressly requested that you be assigned and...*

All at once, Pucky came alive. His fatigue and the queasiness in his tummy disappeared as though an

invisible hand had swept them aside. He jumped to his feet in the middle of the bed.

*Rhodan? Rhodan has requested me? Good old Chief! He hasn't forgotten me!* He was almost carried away by his emotions but got hold of himself. *I'll be there in 5 minutes. The spaceport?*

*Yes... and hurry!*

*I'm already on my way,* replied Pucky, and he began to get dressed. In his fine, delicate handwriting, he wrote a note of thanks to the settlers and warned them to dismiss any future thoughts of rebellion.

Then he concentrated on his goal and made his teleport jump. At first the air around him started to shimmer and then he disappeared. In the same second he rematerialised in Port Venus at the agreed location.

Betty Toufry didn't so much as blink an eye. She sat on her bed. She had modestly put on a house robe to cover a quite diaphanous nightie. The periods of night and day on Venus were not measured by Earthly standards because according to the rotation of the 2nd planet an actual night would amount to 120 hours.

The walls of the room consisted of viewscreens and control panels. Here all threads of the Venus control web came together; from this point the task assignments of the mutants were administered. In the absence of John Marshall, the actual Chief of the Mutant Corps, Betty had taken over his post.

"You sure this can't wait till morning?" asked Pucky. But then he recalled *who* had called for him. "Rhodan himself put in a request for me? In that case you could have called me sooner."

The girl—who had remained young as a result of biological cell showers on the planet Wanderer, administered to all important mutants—shook her head to clear it of Pucky's self-cancelling logic.

"Rhodan's call was only received a few hours ago on the hypercom. He put in an unusual order which we had to fill immediately. Only then was there time to think about you. You are a part of the equipment he requested."

"Me—a piece of equipment?" retorted Pucky indignantly and he squatted down on a chair. "Is that what the Chief said?"

"Naturally he didn't put it quite that way. He was very insistent that we only send you and no one else."

"Apparently he's fully aware of my qualities," replied the mouse-beaver contentedly.

"Hm-m, perhaps," the girl admitted. In outward appearance she might as well have been 18 or 30 but in actuality Betty Toufry was more than 60 years old. "At any rate, tomorrow after the sleep period you are to fly to Hellgate."

Pucky sat up straight and stiffened his big ears. Between his lips his incisor tooth became visible, which was an indicator of his mood. If it came into view you knew he was with the situation.

"Hellgate!" He shook his head wonderingly. "That furnace world, of all places! Couldn't the Chief have figured out something more sensible?"

"Hellgate is an important base and it has a transmitter station. It's the only planet belonging to a small,

unimportant sun, which is listed as ZW-2536-K957 in the Arkonide catalogues. Hellgate is exactly 12,348 light-years distant from Earth but it still belongs to the Arkon Empire. Fortunately no one pays it much attention, least of all the Arkonides themselves."

"Thanks for the lecture!" snorted Pucky disdainfully. "I could have looked it up myself. So what am I supposed to do on Hellgate?"

"Ask Rhodan, he'll know. I haven't the slightest idea what's happened there." In a subconscious gesture of propriety, she pulled her robe together and covered her knees, although this was wasted on Pucky, who might have responded more readily to a brace of fresh carrots. "And I also have no idea what the Chief wants with the VIP space jet."

"With what?!" Pucky gaped in dumbfounded amazement.

"It's a special model." Betty confirmed, and shared his wonderment. "A custom-made space yacht for millionaires. It's a kind the Arkonides were fond of using. You're supposed to bring the small ship to Rhodan on Hellgate."

"And then what—*walkback*?"

"Hardly. Why would he have been so insistent that you be the pilot? I just hope you know your way around in that thing."

The mouse-beaver put on such an air of superiority that Betty could hardly restrain her laughter.

"A minor detail! After all, I've been trained to handle all makes of spacecraft—even such a ridiculous VIP hotrod as that. When do I get going?"

"The equipment is still being loaded on board. Unfortunately, the long Venus night has just started but it won't make much difference to you if you take off in the dark. So make it about 10 hours from now. If you wish, you can still get in some sleep. The crews at Port Venus have been briefed and are hurrying up the preparations. Rhodan expects you at the latest within 20 hours."

Pucky revealed his incisor tooth and looked about him interestedly. "May I sleep here with you?" he inquired sanctimoniously and cast a yearning glance at Betty's bed. But Betty appeared to have no desire to scratch the mouse-beaver in his sleep. She discarded her robe, slipped under the downy quilt and shook her head energetically. "There's a couch in the next room. Good night!"

Pucky sat disappointedly in his chair for a few minutes, then teleported himself into the other room.

He was still sufficiently conditioned by recent celebrations to fall quickly to sleep and forget his troubles.

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The luxury spaceboat was in a class by itself. It lay flat on the cement pavement in the bright glare of the searchlights, next to the light cruiser that had brought it here from the Earth. The Arkonide name, *Koos-Nor*, was marked by black letters on the silvery hull. Its contour was that of a giant egg,

approximately 100 feet long and 60 feet in its central diameter. One gained entrance to the inner part of the yacht through an oval hatchway into the airlock. Its range of action was practically limitless if the required overhaul periods were not taken into consideration.

Pucky stood with Betty Toufry in front of the glistening marvel. "That thing must have cost a satchel of solars," he remarked. "I never thought I'd be the captain of a dream boat like that."

The girl looked at her watch. "You know the co-ordinates, Pucky. The chief engineer has briefed you on everything. What are you waiting for?"

"You're right, Betty. I guess I'll hoist a sail and get under way."

"That's the understatement of the year—and from you, of all people. Give my regards to Rhodan and the others. And—lots of luck!"

"Do you mean that well need it?"

"Certainly. Rhodan mentioned that this was an unusually dangerous undertaking."

Pucky grinned happily. "So it's an end to the boredom at last. All the other mutants are on special assignments and here I am on Venus, pacifying harmless settlers, merely for tax violations."

"Maybe it'd be different if they had a mouse-beaver tax," Betty smiled as she stepped back. "Go give 'em all you've got, Pucky!"

He grinned back at her and then jumped easily upward into the entrance hatch. The unused passenger ladder retracted automatically. Pucky waved a last goodbye and then disappeared into the lock. The heavy hatch cover closed slowly in the glare of the lights.

A few minutes later a vibration of power went through the egg-shaped frame of the ship. It rose up weightlessly and drifted slowly away into the night. The searchlights followed it.

Betty walked back to the edge of the field. As she stood there and looked upwards once more into the dark sky, there was nothing more of the ship to be seen. It was as though it had dematerialised.

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Which is what actually happened. Pucky had determined to make full use of the special capabilities of this Arkonide luxury yacht.

Ships of the *Koos-Nor* class were equipped with a special damping field that reduced the effects of entering and emerging from hyperspace to a minimum. On this basis these ships were licensed to enter hyperspace while inside a solar system, or to emerge into so-called normal space within the confines of a system. Only the extreme costliness of such an installation prevented all space vessels from being so equipped. The damping field generator was unprofitable for normal use—except in the case of these splendiferous VIP models, which an Arkonide inspector might utilize for the purpose of glamorizing the power and splendour of his empire...

Almost before the *Koos-Nor* had traversed the yellowish-white cloud layers of Venus, the mouse-beaver activated the DF generator. And in that moment the universe ceased to exist for Pucky—or more specifically: the mouse-beaver together with the luxury yacht had ceased to exist in terms of the normal universe because their state of existence was changed, having acquired a hyper-vibratory pattern of energies.

Until the material state was regained...

As the familiar pains of rematerialisation wore off, Pucky observed the suddenly altered constellations. Then he slipped out of the pilot's seat and decided that he would give the ship a closer inspection. He began to be plagued by curiosity as to why Rhodan had chosen to use this vessel. Instead of making a specific request for this magnificent plaything, why hadn't he just ordered up a heavily armed cruiser? How could a luxury yacht bring anybody successfully through a dangerous adventure?

In the hold he found the cases that had arrived sealed from Earth. But for Pucky the telekineticist, locks and seals presented no particular difficulty and so it was not surprising that the mouse-beaver was able to make an unabashed inspection of Rhodan's special 'equipment'.

10 minutes later he returned to the control room of the *Koos-Nor* and sat down slowly in the pilot's seat. In great wonderment he stared into the swarm of unknown stars before him.

And he whispered to himself: "I'd sure like to know what Rhodan has got to do with a masked ball..."

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Hellgate really seemed to be a gate to Hell, as its name clearly implied. No one could imagine a more lonely and desolate planet. Here it had been that Rhodan fought his first terrible battle with Atlan, the Hermit of Time.

Hellgate...

A sun-flooded hell of sand and rocks, devoid of all life or even hope. It would never occur to any rational form of life to settle here because there was nothing to sustain it. The solitary sun was located far from all space routes and was of less significance than a dust mote in the atmosphere of an inhabited planet anywhere in the Milky Way.

Hellgate...

Rhodan had singled out this hell world to become an important base and advanced outpost against the Arkonide Empire. No one would suspect his presence here—if indeed there were anyone who knew of his existence. This, however, was improbable. For almost 60 years now Terra had been considered destroyed, with Rhodan and his giant ship the Titan long gone into oblivion.

So it was on Hellgate that Rhodan constructed his steel-domed base, which provided in its interior the living conditions necessary for Earth life. From here he could make contact at any time with his widely distributed stations by means of the hypercom installation. A swift space vessel lay in a subterranean

hangar, ready to take him away whenever the occasion might require it.

He had been established for some time now on Hellgate without making headway toward his goal.

Standing at a distance of exactly 31 light-years was a dimly shining sun, a G-type body which was registered in the Arkonide catalogues as Revnur's Star. It was similar to the Earth's sun and could have easily been interchanged with it. 6 planets orbited around Revnur's Star but only the 2nd world was inhabited. The Aras, offshoots of the Springers and the Arkonides, had discovered it at one time and settled there. Just as the Springers lived principally by commercial trading and were thus referred to as the Galactic Traders, the Aras lived by another kind of specialty: they were the galactic Medical Masters and made their living through sales of their personally developed antitoxic serums and by maintaining a general medical surveillance of other races and their worlds.

In this connection they maintained on the 2nd planet of Revnur's Star the only existing galactic zoo and they had succeeded in discovering a life elixir in which Rhodan took an understandable interest. The 2 mutants, John Marshall and Laury Marten, had been established on the 'zoo planet', called Tolimon, as Rhodan's agents. It was just a week ago that John Marshall had radioed a message hinting of perilous conditions and asking for help. Since then his signals had faded. Nevertheless, Rhodan knew that Laury had succeeded in pilfering an ampoule of the life elixir from one of the laboratories.

Now he had to go personally to Tolimon in order to rescue his 2 mutants from unknown dangers.

Which was the causative factor behind Pucky's surprising departure from Venus.

The steel dome lay under the shimmering heat of a short Hellgate day. In its interior reigned a climate suitable for anyone accustomed to Earth's temperate regions.

Rhodan lay in his bath.

In the last few days he had listened once more to all intercepted hyperspace communications, which were registered automatically in the receiving station. Thus he was able to make a complete survey of events both inside and outside the Arkonide Empire. The ruling robot brain had succeeded in reestablishing law and order. Peace reigned in the Empire, a peace which was even respected by the Springers and the Aras. Nothing at all was ever mentioned these days concerning the annihilated Earth and also one Perry Rhodan appeared to have been forgotten, although at one time he had represented a monstrous danger to the Empire.

Rhodan smiled and stretched himself. Rendered almost weightless by built-in antigrav fields, he floated on the surface of the blue-green water. His body was bathed in the cool liquid, only his head remaining free. Without the slightest exertion, Rhodan remained afloat and enjoyed the rare experience of the grav-lav to the fullest.

He was not pleased by the prospect of the imminent flight to Tolimon.

He no longer feared the consequences of being discovered again by the Arkonide Empire but he wanted to defer such a rediscovery until he learned the secret of permanently prolonging life. So if he was going to have a look at Tolimon he would have to be disguised.

Upstairs in the Control Central a bell sounded followed by a piercing buzzer.

Rhodan made a few swimming motions and clambered out of the bath. In a few seconds a hot air stream

dried his wet body. Wrapped in his bathrobe, he ran to the Control Central and with the aid of the monitoring instruments there was able to determine that a small ship was orbiting Hellgate and attempting to establish radio contact.

Pucky...?

One minute later the viewscreen lit up. The life-sized image of Pucky's grinning face appeared, starting with his oversized ears, then his furrowed brow, those hound-dog faithful eyes of his, and the gleaming incisor tooth, ending finally with the green collar of his special uniform.

"Hiya, Chief! Can I land now?"

Rhodan shook his head reproachfully. "It's lucky for you, Pucky, that I had the foresight to shut off the automatic defence weapons. Otherwise nobody would ever have found a trace of you."

"But you were supposed to be expecting me, weren't you...?"

Rhodan sighed. "Pucky, you know your carelessness is almost fabulous. Okay, then, come on down! The invisibility screen has been lifted; you'll have no trouble locating the dome. Cut in your grav-fields so we can bring the ship inside. I'll open the lock."

He nodded once more to the mouse-beaver and turned off the communications. He dressed himself quickly and got into a spacesuit. Then he went to the airlock of the hangar where his other ship was stored. 2 minutes later he stepped out onto the glistening sand of the hell planet. The space suit's cooling system lowered the temperature to an endurable level.

Pucky was just landing.

*Stay in the Control Central, Rhodan thought intensely. He knew that since the mouse-beaver was a telepath he would be able to receive and understand his thought impulses with ease. Turn on the grav-field generator. I'll bring the boat into the lock.*

Pucky caught on immediately. The *Koos-Nor* became weightless, lighter than a sheet of paper. With his mass tractor beam, Rhodan was able to direct the hundred-foot vessel into the lock, close the hatch door, turn on the air system and finally allow the craft to settle on the hangar floor. While he was still in the process of getting out of his suit, the Space yacht's oval hatch opened—and then with one jump Pucky was in his arms.

"Am I ever glad to see you again, Chief!" he twittered almost tenderly and threw his thin arms around Perry's neck. "I'm supposed to bring you greetings from everybody—and very especially from Betty."

"Alright, Pucky," Rhodan answered, deeply touched, and he stroked his little friend gently. There was an unusual friendship between this mightiest man of an entire solar system and this furry little "animal" who possessed the IQ of an above-average gifted human, in addition to being the most versatile of all the mutants. "I'm just as happy as you are, that you are with me."

"You could have fetched me sooner, you know."

"The necessity for it just came up and you know we can't be guided in these matters by sentiment. Have you brought everything I ordered?"



"Don't ask me. Betty took care of everything."

Men it should all check out. We'll take a look later. Let's go to the Control Central. I'll explain to you there what I'm planning. But I can tell you this much for sure: it's going to be a very dangerous affair."

"Suits me," grinned Pucky and he jumped to the floor. "I've been sitting around long enough getting bored to death on Terra and Venus."

"You'll be surprised," Rhodan smiled and he set up a screen around his thoughts so that Pucky couldn't read them. Though he himself was only a weak telepath, he was aware of his little friend's curiosity.

They arrived in the half-rounded Control Central of the dome and sat down. "Now little buddy, I want you to listen real well," Rhodan began. "You know that John and Laury were infiltrated on Tolimon in order to obtain the secret of the elixir of life from the Medical Masters. They were able to get hold of a flask of the liquid but then they ran into trouble. Since then we've lost contact completely. I don't know what's happened but one thing is certain: they need my help. Incidentally, you took your time getting here."

The mouse-beaver declared his innocence. "Betty told me I had 10 hours. So I flew under light-speed and only made 3 transitions. I didn't want to get here too early."

"When I told Betty not to take more than 6 days, she must have taken my instructions literally. I failed to suggest that 5 days, or even 4 would be preferable. Well, it can't be helped now. You are here. We can begin."

"With what?"

"With our preparations. We will disguise ourselves. Well, not you, of course, there'd be no point to it. Nobody knows you in this region of space so there's little danger anyone would associate you with me. I am going as an Arkonide—in fact, as a government inspector."

"Inspector?!" Pucky's eyes rounded in questioning amazement.

"That's right: inspector. I've learned from intercepted messages that the robot brain on Arkon is in the habit of sending out government inspectors to the worlds of the Empire to keep law and order under control. So if I turn up on Tolimon as an inspector, all doors will be open to me and I'll be paid the respect to which I'll be entitled. During the past 6 decades, respect for the Arkonides has been reestablished. Apparently that degenerated race has recovered. Be that as it may, you've brought me a complete outfit, everything I need for this masquerade."

"And what about me?"

Rhodan smiled inscrutably. "Tolimon is a very unusual world, little friend. It's known as the Galactic Zoo. For the most part they collect semi-intelligent creatures which, though admittedly developed beyond the animal stage, are not regarded as full-fledged intelligences. So people on Tolimon will be more interested in you than in me."

"Interested in me!" Pucky cried out suddenly filled with a terrible presentiment. "You "Don't mean to tell me, that I... no, you *couldn't* ask me to do that!"

"Why not? I'll be the powerful inspector from Arkon and you will represent a harmless, half-intelligent

furry creature that I keep as a servant. You'll see how much the Aras make over you. You're just the thing they need to complete their zoo. And then they will pay less attention to me."

"It's all very fine, indeed-but you want me to play the idiot role? Frankly, I don't think it's very funny."

"There isn't anything funny about this at all, Pucky. The situation is pretty darn serious because we don't know what's happened to Marshall and Laury. They may be in grave danger. When we show up there, our objective is to divert the Aras from them. And your part will be to divert the Aras from me. If you have any scruples about acting stupid, just remember this: if it takes a truly intelligent person to *act* less intelligent than he is. It's the stupid ones who always strive to act smarter than they are. That's just the way things are in nature."

Pucky cocked his head to one side, considering. "I know that's some of your Terranian philosophy but it's still a rough deal for me to act the part of your house pet."

"And my valet," added Rhodan. "Remember that I'm an extravagant Arkonide and I'm indulging in having a freak for a servant. Now don't be a party pooper, Pucky, or I may regret that it was you and no one else that I requested."

"Why didn't you choose Bell for the job? He wouldn't have to act like an imbecile!" Pucky grinned, pleased by the idea, but then became serious again. "Alright, let's get to work. When do we take off for this zany zoo planet of yours?"

"In exactly 10 hours. That's how long it'll still take for us to get ready. I have to brief you more in detail."

"Such as what's the full story on Marshall and Laury?"

"Their last report indicated that they had obtained a test sample of the serum but were in very great danger. Then they were cut off. It could be that their transmitter simply broke down but there could be other reasons behind the sudden silence. We soon know."

Pucky straightened up. In his brown eyes there was still a slight trace of indignant reproach but it was already mixed with a bit of eager anticipation.

Perhaps this adventure would end up being a ball, after all...

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The wake-up signal shrilled through the steel dome.

The 10 hours had passed. Rhodan and Pucky had a short but refreshing nap behind them. Everything was ready. Mission 'Masquerade' could now get under way.

"Do the imperial inspectors of Arkon always flit around in luxury yachts?" inquired Pucky while smoothing down his brown pelt. "You know, incidentally, I feel rather indecent without my impulse-beamer and my uniform."

"A dumb animal had to be naked," advised Rhodan. "And you are terribly dumb; never forget that!"

"It's a monstrous injustice, Chief! You have to promise that you won't let anybody get wind of the actual circumstances of this mission—especially Bell. Just think of what I'd have to put up with."

"It will remain our secret," Rhodan assured him. "Even Marshall won't have much chance to notice it because as soon as we've found him our masquerade will be just about over with. Is everything ready for takeoff?"

Pucky nodded absentmindedly. He couldn't take his eyes off Rhodan, who wore a gold-laden uniform covered with countless insignia of rank. Rhodan's lean figure resembled that of the Arkonides of the old dynastic ruling class. Thanks to an excellent tincture, the whites of his eyes now gleamed red and his hair, now white, would remove all doubt that one was dealing here with a genuine Arkonide.

"Everything ready," squeaked the mouse-beaver and he seated himself in the co-pilot's position next to his friend and master. "As far as I'm concerned, let 'er rip!"

"Then here we go," nodded Rhodan grasping the controls. The *Koos-Nor*, already outside the cupola, lifted weightlessly and rose slowly into the sky. Rhodan had studied the yacht's blueprints sufficiently to be familiar with the small ship from the ground up. The operation of its machinery was comparatively simple.

He decided against a long flight below light velocity. Instead, he threw in the hyper-compensator and made a single transit jump deep into the Milky Way. A 2nd jump brought him close to the vicinity of Arkon. Here Rhodan turned the ship around and deliberately shut off the anti-tracking protection of the compensator, whereupon he made a hytrans leap back in the direction of Tolimon.

For every hypersensor operator it would thus appear to them that a ship was approaching Revnur's Star from the direction of Arkon. Which was Rhodan's exact intention. The Aras on Tolimon had to be under the impression that somebody was going to pay them a visit but they would not be given time to make an investigation. Revnur's Star was far removed from Arkon and could be compared with an advance outpost of the Empire. It might even be surmised that the inhabitants of Tolimon were not overly anxious to establish contact with the Arkonides, least of all with one of the feared and unpopular inspectors.

The final transition jump brought the *Koos-Nor* directly into the middle of the system of the 6 planets of Revnur's Star. The disturbance of the space-time structure caused by the materialization was such that it could now no longer be ignored and so it was not surprising that radio calls made themselves heard in the receiver only a few minutes later.

Rhodan let his craft glide toward Tolimon at exactly the speed of light. He concentrated on the communications equipment, while Pucky hunched in his seat nursing an inner rage but nevertheless practicing how to be a stupid animal, which of course he was not, in any sense of the word.

A powerful voice sounded in the speaker. "Give your identification!" Its volume blanked out all other incoming signals. "What ship is that?"

"Here's where we separate the men from the boys," murmured Rhodan and he cut in his transmitter. "Arkon Inspector Tristol here," he announced and he made every effort to give his voice an arrogant, nasal inflection. "By order of the Regent of Arkon, I am arriving to conduct a routine inspection. Give me your landing co-ordinates."

The radio calls ceased as though cut by an axe. Rhodan's identification must have been picked up and comprehended by all ships in the vicinity. The shock of surprise appeared to have made the Tolimonites temporarily speechless. Probably the video image of his ship was already being relayed from station to station and security centres were busy checking their catalogues and searching for a classification. Perhaps they were also looking up the inspector's name: Tristol! Well, that part might be tough, because Rhodan had chosen the name arbitrarily. But after all, there were many inspectors.

"This is Tolimon Space Traffic Central! Landing permission granted. Come in at Trulan Spaceport. We will give you a guide beam without remote control. Everything has been prepared to receive you. End of transmission."

"Approach course as indicated," returned Rhodan and he shut off the transmitter. He faced Pucky with a faint smile. "Well, what do you think? How do I come off as an Arkonide?"

The mouse-beaver made a face as though someone had robbed him of his last carrot. "You make a good Arkonide but that's a better deal than I've got, having to play an idiot. I know I'm never going to live this down..."

"The dumber you are, the higher your life expectancy will be," advised Rhodan as he permitted the *Koos-Nor* to descend toward the 2nd planet. It wasn't long before the critical moment arrived.

A number of leading scientists and politicians had insisted upon greeting the Arkonide inspector right at the spaceport. They had gotten out of their ground cars and now approached the yacht in a colourful procession. As Aras and descendants of the Springers they were completely humanoid and resembled frightfully thin Earthmen. Their dress was distinctive. The scientists wore long white smocks of the type used by physicians on the hospital worlds of the Aras. On the other hand, the politicians preferred uniforms and colourful civilian clothing. It appeared that none of them was armed.

They stopped expectantly in front of the *Koos-Nor*.

Rhodan had observed the approach of the delegation and had not missed the opportunity to let Pucky search their minds. He could detect nothing more than a curious expectancy among the Tolimonites, as well as a slight trace of fear, but untouched by any particular malevolence. It was merely the completely normal reaction of intelligent beings to the advent of an important personage.

"Don't pull any bummers now!" warned Rhodan, swatting the mouse-beaver lightly on his broad hindquarters. "You follow me as soon as I give you the mental command. Don't forget that you're supposed to be one of those semi-intelligent creatures they collect here."

"So I'm supposed to act stupid but not make any blunders," sulked Pucky as he slipped off the couch. "That would strain the brain of a creature of total intelligence. Well, here goes!"

Rhodan raised an index finger warningly as the jovial smile disappeared from his face. As he opened the outer hatch of the lock, he transformed himself into a virtual mask of arrogance. He had rehearsed his role carefully.

The landing ladder extended itself automatically and forced some of the Tolimonites who had come too close to spring back out of the way. Rhodan hardly deigned to give even a nod to the upraised faces before him; then he negotiated the few steps of the ladder and stood on the planet Tolimon, which was known as the Galactic Zoo.

He waited in silence to be addressed.

A heavily decorated officer stepped forward, making the pretense of a bow, and spoke in pure Arkonide: "Velkata Dolimon, Lukstar Drizdl. Welcome to Tolimon, Inspector Tristol. We will make your stay on our planet as pleasant as possible in order to alleviate the burden of your heavy responsibilities. May we inquire how long you plan to stay?"

Rhodan glanced at him disdainfully. "That will depend on the circumstances. It has come to our attention that certain discrepancies have occurred in the management of the zoo. As inspector it is my mission here to investigate the case and to render an account to the Regent of Arkon."

"Oh but there must be some mistake!" The officer started and turned pale. "For a number of decades now there have been no complaints. I don't understand..."

Rhodan was able to determine telepathically that the man really didn't comprehend anything and he marvelled that he was able to receive the thoughts so clearly. Maybe Pucky was helping...?

"I will be the judge of that!" he interrupted, the officer. With a side glance at the other Tolimonites he added: "Who are these people? I wish no publicity, if you please."

A very tall and thin Ara hastened to reassure him. "Your wish is our command, sir. We only thought you'd consider it proper for us to send you a government delegation, so that we might determine your wishes immediately and attempt to satisfy them."

Rhodan narrowed his eyes and replied coldly: "You will be acquainted with my wishes soon enough. And there's one other thing I wish to make clear: several light-years from here a battleship of the Regent is awaiting my orders."

Still another officer attempted to alleviate the situation. "You will not be needing it, Tristol," he said. "We are loyal friends of the Empire and have nothing to hide. May we now accompany you to your residence?"

"Where is that?" asked Rhodan haughtily.

"At the edge of the city of Trulan, a palace, sir."

To the delegation's astonishment, Rhodan shook his head. "I do not prefer any palace. Place a car at my disposal so that I can select my own quarters. Also, I do not require a servant, because I have brought my own." He turned toward the ship's lock and called out loudly and clearly: "Pucky, come here!"

All eyes turned toward the lock as though they expected to see the Regent in person. But it was only the mouse-beaver who appeared in the dark oval aperture.

In a shrill little voice he squeaked, "Shall I bring the suitcase with us, my lord?"

"Naturally, you stupid beast!" replied Rhodan with scathing irony. "Hurry it up so I can set the automatic barrier."

Pucky disappeared and followed his cue. With a few adjustments the barrier was put into operation, effectively blocking anyone from entering the ship. Also, the remote control equipment was left on open receiver standby. By this means Rhodan would be able to bring the *Koos-Nor* to him, wherever he might

happen to be on this world.

Pucky took the heavy suitcase, which he lightened a bit with the help of his psycho-kinetic faculty, and shuffled down the ladder. Behind him the hatch closed automatically.

"Inspector Tristol, you have a remarkable servant there," one of the white-smocked scientists ventured to remark. "We have never seen such an animal. There is nothing like it in our collection."

Pucky listened with his head cocked to one side and managed a very innocent and stupid expression. It was amazing how easily this came to him. Rhodan made a mental note to bring this fact to his attention later. There was no time, however, at the moment.

"It comes from a very distant and isolated planet, which I chanced to discover during my travels. I took this sample of the species with me and I found that they are quite easily trained. At any rate, my servant, Pucky, is more trustworthy than any other kind, even a robot."

"Does he have any outstanding faculties?" asked the Ara, with interest.

"No, but he's quiet and faithful," replied Rhodan. "And now I'd like to have my car, please. We will have further talks tomorrow."

He looked about him searchingly and noticed a car, about a hundred yards distant, which had a teardrop design and rode on a single wheel, obviously maintaining its balance on the old well-known principle of the gyroscope.

"What about that one over there?" he asked.

One of the officers nodded quickly and ran off toward the indicated vehicle. In a few moments the gyrocar stopped before Rhodan. The officer got out.

"It is at your disposal, Inspector Tristol. But "Don't you think it would be better if one of the officials accompanied you and selected a hotel befitting your station? We have a number of suitable places in town and would consider ourselves privileged..."

"No thank you!" Rhodan interrupted him. With an arrogant gesture he brushed a hand through his white hair. "I prefer to remain incognito and take up my residence wherever I choose. You will hear from me tomorrow." He nodded to him curtly and turned to Pucky. "Hurry, put the suitcase in the car!"

Pucky thought angrily: *If there's much more of this, you can lump it!* But he took the suitcase obediently and shoved it into the car behind the driver's seat. Then he held the door open for Rhodan to allow him to enter. After Rhodan was established behind the simple controls, he climbed in behind him with the pretense of being laborious and clumsy.

While they drove away, Rhodan searched the thoughts of the delegation—Pucky meanwhile serving officially as a booster relay—and determined to his pleasant surprise that only a single officer in the group had second thoughts about him.

While Pucky lay grumpily in the back seat next to the suitcase, Rhodan grinned at him. "Well, Pucky, you're doing famously. You're already more of a sensation than I am—and if I'm not mistaken the Tolimonites are going to be ready to make a considerable offer for you. Wait and see; perhaps I can make a profitable deal out of this."

Pucky made no reply. He gazed passively out the window and bravely repeated an auto-suggestion to himself: *You must keep your cool, Puckykins, just cool it! Just take it easy! Rhodan doesn't know what he's saying and you have to excuse him. And remain very, very calm...* After a short mental pause, he added: *In case I blow it, you gods of the universe, then excuse me if I lose my carrots.*

"Okay, that's enough!" Rhodan told him, since naturally Pucky's thoughts were not hidden from him. So far everything has worked out perfectly. The rest is simple, if we can locate Marshall."

"Yes," Pucky condescended to answer. "If—!"

## 2/ TURMOIL ON TOLIMON

Owing to its remote and exposed position, the planet Tolimon was a point of departure for intergalactic expeditions and was therefore a forwarding station of the first order. The unique establishment of the giant zoological region attracted many visitors from other solar systems and members of all races had settled here to spend the rest of their lives in happy indolence.

So it was that the capital city of Trulan had become a true melting pot and this included the many types of buildings.

It was difficult for Rhodan to find his way in this maze of architectural surprises. He oriented himself principally by means of the thoughts of street pedestrians, who paid little attention to his vehicle. Probably the Aras who greeted him in the spaceport had not made his arrival public as yet.

Which suited Rhodan just fine.

Once he was even stopped and asked to show his papers. When the police officer took a look at his expertly forged identification and only then recognized the ostentatious uniform of the Arkonide inspector, he almost sank through the ground. He begged pardon profusely and offered his assistance. Rhodan waved him off impatiently and set the car in motion again. He seemed to be unconcerned that in the process he almost ran the policeman down.

Somewhat off the main thoroughfares they found a quiet hotel that was slightly hidden in the midst of a park. Rhodan rented 2 rooms for himself and his servant, paid a considerable advance and ordered that his sojourn there should not be made public. Naturally he was certain that the government authorities would learn within the next 5 minutes where he was located but it mattered little to him. It was only important that they got it into their heads that he placed no value on official receptions and wished to pursue his investigations as inconspicuously as possible.

As soon as Pucky was inside the room he let the suitcase drop to the floor. "If you'd like to know the facts, Chief, this sham is a real skunker as far as I'm concerned!"

With a sigh of satisfaction, Rhodan lowered himself into the soft upholstered chair close to the window, from which point he had a good view of the city. "Why call it a sham? I think you're well cast in your role. Certainly as an inspector I'm not at all bad and..."

"I believe that we have a primary mission here...? Where is Marshall hiding out? What's happened to him and Laury?"

Rhodan nodded calmly. "So? Do you think we'd have gotten further if we'd simply landed here without any preparation and without a disguise? We don't want anybody to learn prematurely that the long-forgotten Earth is still in existence. If we had used force to help our friends, the whole galaxy would be aware of it. So our only alternative is to use a little trickery."

"Trickery my tail!" pouted Pucky and he sat down on the suitcase because he was too tired to climb into the other chair. "I'm tired of playing the dummy around here. After all, I'm more intelligent than these talismen can ever suspect..."

"They're called Tolimonites," instructed Rhodan.

"So what?" said Pucky indifferently. "Anyway, at the spaceport I detected that one of those white smacks was already toying with the idea of kidnapping me and putting me in the zoo. Do you think I should be happy about that or a little sensitive?"

"That's wonderful!" enthused Rhodan, and looked very pleased. "That's exactly what I was hoping for. They're starting to concentrate on you and forget me. You know somebody can still get the idea to check out Inspector Tristol with Arkon. If you are more important to them, however, that danger is unlikely."

"Me—in the zoo?!" exclaimed Pucky indignantly. Then he heaved a sigh. "For all I care! When do we start the search?"

"Or better yet, *where* do we start? I don't have the foggiest notion. They were in the mountains but they could just as well be here in the city by now. If Marshall's transmitter is out of order, we have to try using telepathy. We can send out mental calls at regular intervals and concentrate on getting an answer. It's the only way we can roust out Marshall and Laury."

There was a knock at the door. Rhodan cast a swift glance at Pucky. Resignedly, the mouse-beaver straightened his little shoulders. He jumped off the suitcase and waddled to the door. With a full-sweeping bow, he opened it.

Outside stood 2 Aras.

One was dressed in the fashionable style of a wealthy man while the other was in uniform. They were startled at the sight of the mouse-beaver but quickly regained their composure when they observed his humble manner.

"What is it?" asked Rhodan, putting a high note of disdain in his voice. "Who has the temerity to disturb my well-deserved rest?" He was already aware of who they were but the Aras must never suspect that he was able to read their thoughts.

"We were informed that an inspector has come here from Arkon to see that everything is in order," began the one in uniform as he stepped forward. "So we thought that this would be a good opportunity to denounce some of the customary injustices that occur on Tolimon. My superior, Col. Koplad, runs things to the advantage of his own pocket and neglects his duties with regard to Arkon. My promotion, which is long overdue, is always shoved aside because I am known to be an Arkon sympathizer. Moreover..."



"I did not make this long journey merely to regulate such trivial matters," Rhodan interrupted him. He gazed out the window as though bored with the interview and seemed even to have forgotten the man. "And you?"

The officer stepped back in bewilderment to make way for his companion. The well-dressed civilian had lost some of his self-confidence and did not seem to be so convinced of his case. He shifted embarrassed from one foot to the other. "Sir..." he began, hesitantly.

"Well?" Rhodan asked impatiently. "Is it important? I am not concerned with your personal grievances and I have no desire to mix into the internal affairs of Tolimon. Only speak if you have some validly important political abuse to report."

The civilian shook his head fearfully and bowed. "Excuse us, sir, for troubling you. It was not that important. Long may you live, sir!"

When the door closed, Pucky also shook his head. "And for such fools I have to bow, just because I'm your servant. No, I'll never live this down! I wish I were dead!"

Rhodan did not reply immediately. He cocked his head and listened with his eyes closed. Then he opened them and looked gravely at the mouse-beaver.

"That could be arranged, Pucky," he said softly. "Not far from here, probably under the hotel, there are some men who want to capture you. They are operating under orders from the top. You are supposed to be drugged and carried off to the zoo. If you defend yourself or should you prove otherwise dangerous, the men have a free hand to put you out of the way. So you see that your death wish can be obliged."

In the past few minutes, Pucky had only been acting as a telepathic 'relay' and so he had missed the import of this attempt on his life and freedom. Now he reviewed the situation, only to complain: "They want to cage me in like a wild animal! Me, the personal servant of the illustrious inspector from Arkon! Couldn't I take those fellows and... hm-m-m, may I teach them a lesson, Chief? They've earned it, haven't they?"

"All in good time. But how can you know their plans if you aren't a telepath? I'm afraid you'll have to wait until they betray themselves. It's better to search for Marshall; the animal catchers can wait."

"Animal catchers!" growled Pucky angrily. He made a single jump and landed on the white bed, where he lay down on his back and crossed his arms under his head. "If Bell ever finds out about this I won't have a moment of peace for the rest of my life. This is a planet of disgrace!"

"Don't worry about the dummies who have been taken in by our tricks. I want you to help me search for Marshall. They have to be hiding out somewhere and they are thinking. And if they are thinking it should also be possible for us to pick up their brain impulses."

"As if that zany Count Rodrigo de Berceo could think!"

Rhodan's smile was momentarily shadowed by concern, then he nodded slowly. "I should think so, even though I'm afraid that he has nothing else but our good Laury on his mind. That's what muddled things up."

"Yeah, sure," philosophized Pucky, at the same time looking terribly wise. "Love is to blame for it all."

I'm never going to fall in love."

"I wouldn't know who with," remarked Rhodan.

Without further comment, Pucky dedicated himself to the task of tracking down Marshall's mental vibrations.

\* \* \* \*

Rhodan relaxed and leaned back with his eyes closed. He concentrated on the incoming mental impulses but quickly realized that only some improbable stroke of luck would help him. He saw himself as an amateur radio operator who was trying to detect the messages of a colleague among thousands of transmissions—and even then without a recognition signal.

It was simply impossible to put the thousands or tens of thousands of thought emanations in any order, much less identify them.

But for this very reason Pucky came to the awareness of other things that were no less interesting to him. The impulses were very strong and concerned themselves principally with himself. Judging by their intensity, the originators of these thoughts would actually have to be right here in the hotel.

"They are coming," he said.

Rhodan opened his eyes in astonishment and came back to the hotel room. His groping thoughts had been far away without finding a trace of Marshall or Laury.

"Who is coming?"

"It's those characters who want to put an innocent mouse-beaver in their zoo. I'll send them flying out the window, even though they pretend to be government officials."

Meanwhile, Rhodan had also picked up the approaching thought impulses. "You'll do nothing of the kind, my dear friend. After all, what risk will you be taking if you let them bamboozle you? None whatsoever! On the contrary, I have high expectations from it. Maybe you'll find out something about Marshall. Besides, we can always keep in touch, and if it's necessary you can simply teleport yourself out of harm's way. So what can happen to you?"

"Nothing, nothing at all," admitted Pucky peevishly. "But that's just what bothers me!"

"How come?"

"The shame of it! I, the most intelligent of mouse-beavers, have to be dumber than a police rookie. At least the policemen on Terra. Maybe things are different here but dumb is dumb!"

"Whoever puts something over by acting stupid is smarter than those he deceives, Pucky."

The mouse-beaver swallowed an imaginary lump in his throat. "You always dish out your sugar candy

sticks for every medicine, no matter how bitter the dose," he had to admit. "But you have to promise me that Bell will never hear about this!"

"You already have my promise," nodded Rhodan.

"Alright then. So instead of taking a flying loop, the Aras will catch a stupid mouse-beaver. They're just about here now. And by the way, they are in mortal fear of you."

"It's no wonder, since they're thinking about the battleship that I can summon at any moment. In the past 56 years, the Robot Regent must have made a ruthless impression on them. There's no other way of explaining their fear of Arkon."

"Here they are!" Pucky whispered almost inaudibly. Then, telepathically, he added: *And now, ladies and gentlemen, we present Pucky Mouse-beaver, the world-famous film star, in the role of a blockhead! Attention! The show begins!* "

And in fact, it did begin.

There was a knock at the door. Rhodan again assumed his superciliously arrogant Arkonide manner. He winked almost indolently at Pucky and spoke loudly enough so that he could be heard outside the door. "Pucky, go and see who it is who dares again to disturb my repose. Tolimon appears to be a very restless planet but perhaps it's because they are anxious for me to start my investigations."

Pucky waddled to the door but before he opened it he made such a silly face that it bordered on impudence. His bow was extremely comical. 3 men stepped into the room and paid no attention to the mouse-beaver, even though their thoughts were exclusively concerned with him. They walked a few steps and stopped directly in front of Rhodan. They all bowed in deepest respect.

"We ask a thousand pardons," said the one in the middle of the trio while he tugged embarrassed at his colourful coat. "Perhaps we have come at an inconvenient time but..."

"Since I have not called you here, it is indeed inconvenient," Rhodan confirmed, with an indifferent arrogance that undoubtedly frightened his companions. Pucky bowed deeply again so that the men couldn't see his merry grin.

"It-er-has to do with an invitation from the Government," continued the Ara, who seemed more frightened than embarrassed. "Today a gala reception is to take place in honour of the most gracious inspector from Arkon. We request that you take part in the occasion.

Rhodan probed the spokesman's thoughts and detected the intent to overpower Pucky and take him away during his own absence from the hotel. A special task force for that purpose was already on its way. He leaned back in the chair and gave the impression that he was considering the offer.

"Will the Chief of the Government be present?" he wanted to know.

"Of course, sir! He has already suggested this evening and would consider it an honour if you would accept the invitation."

"At what time?"

"Uh... naturally, a car will be sent for you, sir. As soon as the sun goes down."

"Very well, I shall make an appearance. What about my servant?"

The Ara pretended to be startled by the suggestion. "Your servant, sir? What do you mean?"

"Is he also invited?"

"No, naturally not. Only the most illustrious guests are invited. No one will bring their servants with them."

"I see. Then I'll have to leave him here at the hotel."

The 3 delegates controlled themselves perfectly. They did not betray in the slightest degree how enthused they were over this decision, which heightened the triumph of their secret thoughts. At the door, Pucky appeared to have forgotten his sorrowful role. Rhodan noted that he was struggling to conceal his incisor tooth as well as his rising enthusiasm for this new game of deception. After all, it wasn't every day that one was captured to be put into a zoo. He seemed to have forgotten how much he had vexed himself over this only 10 minutes ago.

"Your car will arrive punctually," promised the Ara spokesman, whereupon the 3 henchmen drew back to the door with many bows. They cast covetous glances at the mouse-beaver and exited.

Pucky closed the door and squeaked restrainedly. "Ha-ha! Those fools! They see me in their net already!"

"And that's what has to happen!" Rhodan reminded him gravely. "Don't forget our plan. I will go to the reception but will only stay there for an hour. I'll think up some flimsy excuse to get away and then I'll come back to the hotel. By that time, hopefully, you will have been successfully kidnapped. We will keep in touch with each other. Naturally I will see that you are missing and I'll quickly make a big commotion about it. Then we'll see what happens."

"So what can happen? I'll guarantee you those characters won't know anything about it and they'll try to talk their way out of the whole thing."

"And I hope that you will pick up some information. You may run into the very people who pursued Marshall and maybe imprisoned him."

"We'll see," said Pucky. "But I'll tell you one thing: the minute they try to put me in a cage, I'll be gone!"

"You may be able to hightail it out of there sooner, Pucky. It will all depend on the circumstances."

"Never mind my tail," responded the mouse-beaver and he climbed onto a low couch in the corner of the room. "We shall see. At any rate, you're sure going to see the dumbest mouse-beaver you ever saw in your life."

"I certainly hope so," smiled Rhodan and he began once more to pursue his search for Marshall and Laury Marten.

\* \* \* \*

After Rhodan had gone and Pucky was finally alone, the mouse-beaver prepared himself for the forthcoming adventure. He did not regard the action as an adventure in itself but more or less as a lark. Nor was he far from wrong. The capture did not pose any particular threat to him, as long as he showed himself to be willing—and dumb enough.

Exactly 10 minutes later he began to pick up the thought-waves. Obviously the abduction was well planned and was being executed with the sanction of the highest levels of government. It was not surprising, since there was no assignment more important for the resident Aras than to find appropriate life forms for their experiments. Actually the zoo also had side benefits, being a centre of attraction for the profitable tourist trade.

There were 5 men in the group, who showed the hotel owner their authorizing credentials. Pucky listened to the conversation with interest and once more made sure that the door was not locked. Then he slipped onto the couch and stretched out on it comfortably, exactly as might be expected of a servant when the master is out of the house. At least most servants.

Then he closed his eyes and made believe that he was asleep.

The 5 men stopped before the door and prepared to break the lock, in case their quarry failed to open it. But then one of them tested it and found it unlocked.

"Such an unsuspecting animal!" he whispered as he pushed into the room. "As a valet he would be too careless and stupid for me."

*You'll be amazed,* thought Pucky as he pretended to be fast asleep. *And will you ever be surprised later!*

Merely the anticipation of such a pleasure inspired Pucky to give everything he had to his role. He let the 5 men come into the room without hindrance; only then did he pretend to wake up. He blinked his innocent brown eyes and observed the interlopers with astonishment. Apparently one of them was carrying a very deadly impulse beamer. They had come prepared to defend themselves. Well, in that they'd be deceived.

"Good evening," said Pucky in a clear voice. "My master, the honourable inspector, has gone out, unfortunately. May I be of assistance?"

One of the animal catchers went back to the door and out into the hall. A few seconds later he returned with a basket cage. A friendly smile lighted his crafty face. "We didn't wish to speak with your master," he said, as gently as possible. Apparently he was trying to win Pucky's confidence. "But we'd like to ask you to come with us."

"Mere?" inquired Pucky naively "I am not allowed to leave the hotel without my lord's permission."

"But your master is quite aware of this," said another Ara in a slight tone of reproach. "Naturally he is agreed that we present you to the scientific council of Tolimon. The council has never had the opportunity to examine such an intelligent animal as you."

"In a cage?" asked Pucky wonderingly and he showed an obvious aversion to the barred basket.

"Maybe you think I'm a beast of prey?"

"It's only-uh-because of the people," stammered another man and then he moved forward quickly in order to grasp the coveted research prize by the nape of the neck. "Just wanted to spare you any trouble."

Pucky fought to keep himself from exploding. Under normal circumstances this fellow would have been hurled against the ceiling by telekinetic forces. But this time he escaped such a fate. Putting on an act of frightened helplessness, the mouse-beaver cowered on the couch and allowed himself to be lifted up without resistance.

"A splendid specimen!" observed one of the men appraisingly as he opened the basket cage. "In with him, so he doesn't get any other ideas. The inspector will think that he went out and got lost in the city streets."

Pucky landed not too gently inside the cage, whereupon the door was promptly closed on him. Now that the abductors felt they had him safely in their hands, they dropped all pretense.

"Let's get out of here!" one of the men advised hastily. "When the Arkonide returns, he mustn't find any trace."

"I thought the inspector was aware of this," Pucky chirped out, making a good display of anxiety. "Aren't you handling me a bit strangely?"

"Keep your mouth shut!" one of the Aras snapped at him—which was a severe test for Pucky. How sweet it would be to escape! But he knew he mustn't. He had to act the part of a weakling and of a dummy. How could Rhodan ever do such a thing to him...!

The men placed a black cloth around the cage and left the room. Outside in the corridor they began to move more swiftly. Without interference they passed through the lobby and arrived at the street. Pucky felt the cage being shoved unceremoniously into a car, which got under way seconds later. The men did not speak any more now but their thoughts revealed more than enough for Pucky.

They were bringing him to the Zoological Ministry. He learned that the zoo was an establishment of the State and was under a special ministry which was principally composed of physicians and scientists. Perhaps there were also a few psychologists. He was to be examined and interviewed before they brought him to the open preserve.

Open preserve! In order to assuage his anger, Pucky giggled soundlessly to himself. He knew he was not in any danger but who ever thought it was easy to hide his light under a bushel? Until now Pucky had always taken the greatest delight in demonstrating his superiority to humanoid intelligences. But now he had to...

Well, there were ramifications!

It was a fairly long journey. He learned from the thoughts of his captors that the ministry was located at the edge of the city, where the necessary research and experiments could be conducted in quiet and seclusion. He was able to learn further that the abduction was not, in principle, based on any really evil intent. It was merely taken for granted that the Arkonide would never willingly part with his comical servant but they were simply obsessed by the idea of adding a rare specimen of semi-intelligent life to their zoo. A talking mouse-beaver would make a real sensation. Perhaps they could even find out where

the home planet of this remarkable animal was located. An entire colony of such furry creatures...

The Aras were allowing their fantasies to run away with them. Pucky was glad that he was concealed by the black cloth so that no one could notice his happy grin.

He would show them a thing or two. As soon as he could!

\* \* \* \*

It was not easy for Rhodan to carry on socially with the leading politicians of Tolimon while sharing the experience of the abduction with Pucky. Nor did he stay long at the reception. He made his departure with the excuse that he was tired from his long journey and wished to take a rest. Inasmuch as they had meanwhile taken the mouse-beaver into their custody, no objections were made. The car brought him back again to the hotel.

According to plan, he immediately noted his servant's absence and questioned the personnel, asking them if they had seen him. But from the manager on down they stubbornly denied having seen anything of a suspicious nature. Fear of state authority appeared to be no less on Tolimon than in any other part of the Milky Way.

Rhodan waited another half-hour and then notified the police. He explained that it was not the habit of his servant to leave the hotel without his permission. He made energetic demands that a search for him should be made.

The police promised to do everything possible. Naturally the fellows were lying, since they were working undercover with the abductors.

Then Rhodan lay down in his bed with his mind at ease, after he had made sure the door was locked and had shoved his hand raygun under his pillow.

He calmly dedicated himself once more to the difficult task before him, considering his undeveloped telepathic faculties. He sought to locate Marshall's thought impulses, keeping in mind that he must also maintain contact with Pucky.

And Pucky was just now standing before his examiners.

\* \* \* \*

The room gleamed in its cleanliness.

Bright lamps on the ceiling illuminated him in every part and swept away every trace of shadow. Before him sat 12 or 13 men in white smocks, the professional costume of the Aras, behind a horseshoe-shaped table. Their eyes were concentrated on the diminutive prisoner, who stood there with an unusually doltish

expression on his face. Behind him lingered 2 men with paralysis guns. They were watching the single exit of the room.

The man at the centre of the table—from his beard one might suppose that he considered himself as a Galactic Trader—leaned forward and looked at Pucky with a piercing gaze. "You are the servant of the inspector from Arkon?" he asked.

"Yes, I am!" chirped Pucky, outwardly intimidated but inwardly boiling. "And my master is going to let you know how he feels about this, taking his servant—"

"We will do the questioning, you just give the answers!" interrupted his examiner. "Where did you learn the Arkonide language? Or do they speak the language of the Empire on your native planet?"

"My master taught it to me."

"Then your own language is different?"

"Naturally it's different. We communicate by means of unusually melodious whistling. For example a very high tone signifies excitement, whereas a humming note..."

"And your home planet?" interrupted the bearded one, who seemed to have no interest in the whistling language of the mouse-beavers. "Can you describe its position for us?"

Pucky nodded confidently. "Yes, of course. It's somewhat to the right of the coalsack."

"Eh?" The bearded one leaned forward with widened eyes. There was a single question in his expression. "Coalsack? What is that?"

Pucky searched the other's mind and perceived that the Aras referred to the dark cloud as the 'nebula of absorption dust' but he had no intention of enlightening them. Let them break their heads over the unfamiliar Earthly concept.

"A coalsack is a coalsack," he said importantly. "Is that clear enough for you?"

The bearded man shook his head. "We need exact information. We are going to turn off the lights and show you a star map, as seen from Tolimon. You will show us where your home system is located."

It became dark and then there appeared on the white ceiling a representation of the starry skies that almost stood out in relief. Pucky noted with satisfaction that the dark holes in question were realistically reproduced there. He pointed upward with a triumphant shout.

"There, the Coalsack. To the right of it!"

15 pairs of eyes stared upward at the projected star image and searched for a coalsack, without knowing what a coalsack was. Their deliberations were interrupted suddenly when Pucky emitted a shrill whistle and cried, "No, the other one! To the left, there in the corner!" There was a short pause and then: "But it could also be that one in the middle. I had no idea there were so many coalsacks!"

"What you probably mean by these coalsacks are the absorption clouds," said the bearded one searchingly. "Naturally your race is not schooled in scientific matters but at least you possess a certain intelligence quotient."



"What is that?" asked Pucky, pricking up one of his ears. "I have never heard that we have such a thing."

2 or 3 of the Aras failed to suppress their laughter. There was a slight pause, which Pucky used to think intensely: *Hey, Rhodan! Are you listening? Isn't this a ball?*

"The answer shot back with surprising swiftness: *I'd rather you'd quit clowning around and tried to find out something. about Marshall and Laury. Be more adroit with your questions and...*

*How is a dumbbell like me supposed to ask adroit questions?*

Rhodan did not send any more answers because the bearded one interrupted the momentary silence. "How did you come to the Arkonides? Did they take you from your home world?"

"I only wish I knew... it's been too long ago."

"Too long ago? How long ago is that?"

The ceiling lights came on again but the star map projection remained. There was a sudden note of interest in the bearded man's voice. Pucky perceived that he now had an opportunity to lead the thoughts of his curious questioners toward the theme that concerned him.

"How long?" he murmured, looking up guilelessly into the eyes staring at him. "Perhaps a couple of hundred years."

"You are that old?"

"What do you mean by old?" He pretended to be amazed by the concept. "I happen to be in the best years of my youth, if I may say so. The compliments I have received on all the other worlds that the inspector and I visited..."

But the bearded one was not interested in the mouse-beaver's penchant for acclaim. He had other problems on his mind.

"Does everyone on your planet grow as old as you?"

"Of course! Don't you people live to be a thousand years old?"

The bearded one gasped audibly. He stared at the mouse-beaver incredulously. The other Aras seemed to be very startled. In their minds was such a sudden confusion of questions and with so many ramifications that Pucky was not able to register them all at once. He only hoped that Rhodan was tuned in and could give him some help.

"A thousand years...?" The bearded one strained to appear calm. "Have you discovered a means of prolonging life?"

Now it was Pucky's turn to be astonished. "Something to prolong life? But why? A thousand years is enough, especially for just a servant like me. After my death, my master, the inspector, will have to look for another servant and then..."

"What?" blurted out 2 or 3 Aras simultaneously. In their dumbfounded amazement they became visibly

pale. "Your master also lives that long? Isn't he an Arkonide?"

Pucky sensed that he had almost made a fatal mistake. He attempted to be more stupid than ever. "What else can he be?" he asked, innocently.

The bearded one didn't answer but he was thinking: *Is it possible that somebody came previously to Tolimon to steal the serum, like that Springer who got away from us? Or that girl who was with him? Or could others have accomplished similar research and arrived at the same results?*

Pucky breathed a sigh of relief. The first clue to Marshall! But even the Aras didn't appear to know where he was now. That meant that this whole masquerade was in vain. Or did it...?

"As a constant companion of the inspector, you see much of the galaxy," began the bearded one again. "You visit all the worlds of the Empire and, as you intimate, this has been going on for centuries. Did you ever come across a world where humanoids were to be found who had a grade C stage of development?"

Pucky's attention shot to front and centre. That was the Earth! At least the Earth had been at that stage for the last 2 or 3 centuries. Grade C! Now he saw that in the 17th century an Ara ship had accidentally discovered the Earth and taken away several men for their zoo collection, where they still lived today. Only this Count Rodrigo de Berceo had managed to get away with Marshall's help.

"Humanoids with a grade C development?" Pucky repeated, pretending to search his memory. Then he shook his head decisively. "No, definitely not! Why do you ask? Is there such a world as that?"

Again he did not receive an answer but the thoughts of the Aras told him enough.

Yes, a few hundred years ago there was such a world. It had been discovered but through unfortunate circumstances the co-ordinates of its location had been lost. However, they had procured some specimens of the primitive race there and had placed them in the zoo after administering the life-prolonging serum to them. One of them had escaped. These damned Springers! What possible interest could they have in their prisoner? Star merchants...

But there was no clue as to where Marshall was hiding now. The Aras had lost all trace of the fugitives. It was as though they had disappeared from the surface of Tolimon.

Pucky used the pause to 'call' Rhodan: *Chief! Are you with this?*

*You're getting pretty close now, aren't you?*

*It won't get any closer. Can I scam out of here now?*

*Think it over, my friend. What will those characters think if you simply disappear in thin air? Wait for a better opportunity.*

*All right, I'll wait—but not for long. I'd rather search for our lost orphans by teleporting all over Tolimon rather than stay here and be looked at as the biggest dumbbell in the universe. Hold it! There's more coming...*

But Pucky was mistaken in hoping that he would learn more.

"We can skip the intelligence test," said the bearded one to his colleagues. "For him I would suggest classification C. Only the medical examination remains and I'm scheduling that for tomorrow. You, guard! Take the prisoner back to his cage." Turning to Pucky, he said, "You will be well taken care of by us."

With this assurance he got up and thereby gave a signal for breaking up the conference. He did not deign to give the mouse-beaver another glance and he seemed to have forgotten him completely. Pucky saw the 2 guards approach and was aware of their picking him up and carrying him away—which he didn't pay much attention to. He kept his eyes on the bearded one who had treated him so condescendingly and seemed to consider him as a higher grade of animal.

Who knows, he thought, whether there will be such a favourable opportunity tomorrow, that is, if I'm still here by then. Maybe a tiny reprimand wouldn't hurt. The main thing is, he's not suspicious of me yet.

But so what...? There isn't much time.

Pucky was no hypnotist, so he couldn't force anyone to do his bidding. But he was in command of tremendous psychokinetic powers and by that means he was able to start something.

The bearded one was accompanied by another Ara who was engaged in an intense conversation with his colleague. Suddenly this one was transfixed with an expression of astonishment as he quickly reached into his pocket and pulled out a pair of scissors—and proceeded to cut off the long grey beard of the Chief of the Investigation Commission. It happened in a lightning swift movement which was too fast for anyone to stop, least of all the perpetrator himself. But even the formidable chief of the commission was so flabbergasted at the sight of the insignia of his age and dignity falling to the floor that he stepped on it before he fully realized what had happened.

He came to an abrupt stop and stared while his consternated colleague swiftly concealed the scissors and started to tremble in every limb.

"Gragnor!" roared the no longer bearded one in terrible tones. "What's come over you? Have you lost your mind? I'll—"

"Mercy, Kluegh!" whimpered the beard snipper in a transport of sudden fear and he sank to his knees. "I "Don't know how that could happen! The Evil Spirit must have guided my hand..."

"The Evil Spirit has completely warped your reason! You are dismissed! I'll have to think of how to punish you!" His groping hand felt the remnants of his beard. "The laboratory department will be happy to receive a new experimental subject!"

He jerked around and exited the room, leaving behind him the astounded Aras and a completely unravelled Gragnor.

However, Pucky permitted himself to be led away without resistance. He kept his mouth firmly shut. His expression was that of a poor sinner being dragged to the scaffold, innocent of any blame.

His cell was a small room with a wooden bench and a wobbly table, with one barred opening that was probably the terminus of a ventilation shaft. When the 2 guards locked the door from the outside, the lights also went out.

Pucky sighed and tracked down Rhodan, whose thought impulses he picked up immediately. Moments

later he materialized in the familiar hotel room.

"You can do what you want to," he notified Rhodan, who was in the act of undressing, "but I'm not going back into that hole. Let those dummies crack their skulls trying to figure out how I got away."

Rhodan was not disturbed. He put on his pyjamas. "I don't think it will be necessary. We've picked up everything they know. At least one thing is certain: they don't have our agents. Marshall and Laury must be somewhere on the planet—or they are dead. I'm worried that we can't pick up their thoughts."

"I'll start the search tomorrow," Pucky yawned, looking at the couch from which the crooks had abducted him. "We'll sure be a laughing stock if we don't turn up a trace of them."

However, his prediction was not to be fulfilled so quickly.

After a restful night and a leisurely breakfast, Rhodan contacted the government authorities and announced that he would make an inspection of the zoo administration.

While the car came for Rhodan and took him away downtown, Pucky started his search.

He left the hotel and took a walk in the streets, clothed only in his natural pelt. Trulan was a rendezvous point for all the races of the galaxy and so it was not extraordinary that no one paid much attention to Pucky. Amidst the throng of strange life forms, the mouse-beaver was no more startling than a longhaired dachshund at a dog show. There were the inhabitants of Berenice, four-legged, insect-like creatures with squarish armour-plating and a predilection for bright colours; the chlorine breathers from Gradosima, who strode in their sealed spacesuits through Trulan, conducting themselves among the passersby with a frightful arrogance; and once Pucky encountered the panther cats from the system of Sagittarius, to whom he quickly gave a wide berth because he wasn't too sure how they would react to the sight of him.

The Aras and the Springers paid him not the slightest attention. To him there was nothing unusual about the sight of xenomorphs, exotic other-world intelligences and it had been reserved for only a selected few to have ever been confronted by the personal servant of the Arkonide inspector.

Pucky kept his senses continuously alert for any indicative thought streams and he probed the minds of every creature he met. He found much that would have amused him under different circumstances but today there wasn't any time for that. Only once did he mix into the affairs of Tolimon, when he detected a murderous intent in the mind of a heavily built Ara. The fellow was about to kill his wife. Telekinetically, Pucky forced him to give the nearest patrol officer a box on the ear, which caused the Ara to be taken, into custody. Meanwhile, the arrestee was not able to carry out his intentions and by the time he was released his anger against his wife would have subsided.

Satisfied by his good deed, Pucky sauntered onward.

He reached a poorer section of the city and soon found himself on surer footing. Spacious sidewalks were not to his liking. If he had a choice in the matter he would have preferred teleporting himself onto one of the rooftops in order to rest from his exertions. But a flying mouse-beaver was certain to make a bad impression. So he waddled onward until he located a seat in a restaurant.

If Marshall had a hideout in this city, then it would be here in the slum area where a person could disappear more easily. And this was in line with Marshall's commando training, because he wasn't able to remove himself to safety with a quick jump, as was Pucky's habit.

Most of the tables were occupied but Pucky was lucky. He found a spot next to the wall, sat down with a sigh and ordered a plate of vegetables and some fruit juice. He only ate meat when he had to.

Some of the patrons turned to regard him curiously. Even though they had seen many strange beings, it wasn't everyday, after all, that a mouse-beaver came among them. Pucky grinned back at them in a friendly manner, reading nothing but harmless curiosity in their thoughts. He busied himself with the vegetables and fruit of Tolimon, which pleased his palate very much. At least this was a change from the eternal carrots, which he was gradually getting tired of because of all the bets he was always winning.

The sun was bright and warm. No clouds were in the blue sky, which reminded him of the skies of Terra. For awhile Pucky forgot his cares, until an untoward event attracted his attention.

At a nearby table, several Aras put their heads together and started to whisper. They pointed excitedly toward the street where 2 remarkable-looking creatures must have caught their eye.

Pucky took a closer look.

The 2 creatures must have been at least 18 feet long, similar to giant worms. Most curious were their many short legs, on which they moved like Earthly centipedes. The front 3rd of their bodies were upright. They had insect heads beneath which were a pair of powerful arms and claws.

Froghs!

The Aras used them as watchmen for their zoo. If any of the zoo inhabitants tried to escape, the Froghs went into action. By employing all their legs they could run at a speed of over 120 miles per hour. Marshall had given a report about them, after he and Laury and the Count had managed to elude their pursuit.

What were these 2 Froghs doing in the city, especially in this disreputable quarter?

Pucky straightened up in order to have a better look at the unusual intelligences. He knew they were capable of speech so they must have rational minds that could be read.

And Pucky turned on his telepathy.

They were searching for 3 humans: A Springer who had given them a lot of trouble, a pretty female who had stolen a glass container of the life elixir and one escaped prisoner who had been freed from the zoo by the other 2.

Marshall! Laury! The Count!

Pucky had picked up their trail!

\* \* \* \*

Administrative details are always boring. Rhodan was sure of that after his first hour of inspection. The zoological ministry on the outskirts of the city was a veritable storehouse of documents and forms. Every

single area of the giant natural preserve out there on the plain between the mountains had been documented here in the ministry. There were data here concerning each individual zoo inhabitant, complete with origin, living habits, other habits and medical records. Also, all completed experiments were carefully and clinically recorded.

Rhodan made some spot-checks and generally comported himself so arrogantly that the Tolimonites' anger against Arkon grew from minute to minute. He was sure that any eventual real inspector coming here in the future would not find it easy. Nevertheless, the officials remained exceptionally polite, even though secretly they wished that some dire misfortune would overtake this obnoxious snooper.

Toward noon he took a break and had his car bring him to the employee-dining hall of the ministry. They had reserved a table for him where he could eat his meal in privacy. In keeping with the interstellar character of Trulan, he found something that was edible.

The time had come to reestablish contact with Pucky. So he searched and soon detected the incoming signals. It wasn't so easy to concentrate properly among the numerous patrons of the place, as they stared at him fearfully.

*Yes, Pucky, contact. What's the matter?*

*The trail, I've found it. Two Frogs are looking for Marshall. They think he's in the city. I'm following them. They know where he was staying before.*

*Where are you?*

*In the slums. Do you think Marshall was living here?*

*Try to find out. Maybe you'll uncover a clue.*

*It shall be done, Master. And how's it going with you?*

*Fine, thanks. I'm happy I didn't decide to become a bureaucrat.*

In Rhodan's brain emerged an image of Pucky's gleaming incisor tooth, which was so meaningful a signal that it tickled the mouse-beaver to transmit it. Then the telepathic contact faded...

\* \* \* \*

With increased speed, the 2 Frogs glided along the crooked street. It was all that Pucky could do to keep on their trail with his waddling gait. Heatedly, he cursed the unfortunate fact that he mustn't use teleportation at this time. It was sure to be noticed. Everywhere the passersby had reacted fearfully at the sight of the 2 zoo watchmen. They pressed back against the house walls and heaved sighs of relief after the creatures had passed. No one seemed to have an easy conscience, though Pucky couldn't determine why they held the centipede beings in such fear. Perhaps it was merely their appearance that made everybody uneasy.

Suddenly the 2 searchers came to a stop.

Though Pucky couldn't understand their language he could read their thoughts, which were independent of any form of speech. So he could easily follow the conversation of the pair of monsters, even though they were on the other side of the street.

"By all indications, the place must be somewhere close by."

"We don't know for sure."

"Let's follow up the clues; we can ask the occupants of the houses."

"Maybe somebody's seen the three of them."

"Good. I'll take this house. You take the other side."

They separated.

Pucky came to a stop. His hair seemed to stand on end when the one Frogg 'rolled' across the narrow street directly toward him, gave him a penetrating glance and then disappeared into the first house to begin his search.

They must have found a trace on Marshall. But there was no way that Marshall could be in the vicinity, Pucky knew, for otherwise he would have been able to pick up his thoughts. This made it highly possible that the trail the two Froggs were following was a false one.

Anyway—why shouldn't he have a look-see on his own?

With sudden decision, Pucky dematerialised in the hope that the passersby had enough to do to keep an eye on the Froggs, so that they wouldn't take notice of him. He concentrated on a short distance and then he was standing in a badly furnished room directly behind a poorly dressed woman who was stirring a pot.

He sprang again, one story higher.

Again nothing.

After 20 leaps he landed in an uninhabited warehouse, where he took the opportunity to catch his breath. Of course this was a planless and absolutely senseless search that he had entered upon. But, if the Froggs weren't stupid, then Marshall and the girl must have been staying in a house on this street not long ago.

Pucky sighed and gave another jump.

About an hour later he materialized in an attic room on the 15th floor. It was empty and evidently unoccupied, because the solitary closet stood wide open and did not contain a scrap of clothing. The bed was untidy and without a cover. There were 2 couches at the other side of the room. It looked as if these latter had been brought into the place later. Something here smelled familiar.

Pucky took another brief look around and was about to disappear again, when he paused, startled. The scrubby-looking dressing table with a broken mirror was empty. But not quite empty.

A tiny little bottle stood near the mirror.

Pucky narrowed his eyes and waddled over to the table, where he took the small bottle in his paws and sniffed it. The stopper was missing but there was still a trace of the yellowish fluid in the bottom of the container.

Pucky smelled it and then grunted in satisfaction. He hesitated for a moment, then shook out the last few drops of the yellow liquid onto his hairy chest. He put the bottle back, had second thoughts about it, picked it up again and went to the window. With a pleased grin, he threw it outside.

But the flask did not fall immediately to the street below. It was gripped in force currents of telekinetic power and carried high above into the blue sky, so high in fact that Pucky could no longer see it. Only then did he nod his satisfaction and step away from the window.

He knew that the vial would not withstand the downward plunge. Nobody would be able to tell anything from the shattered shards of the bottle, let alone the fact that it bore no label or other written identification that might have betrayed its origin.

"These careless women!" twittered, Pucky disapprovingly. With obvious pleasure he sniffed at his chest and then rolled his eyes in delight. "No doubt about it. That's Laury's favourite perfume. It was sweet of her to leave this little greeting behind for me. So this is where they were staying."

Then he started out to search the room more thoroughly but he was alerted suddenly by an approaching surge of strong thought-impulses. Somebody came up the stairs, slinked along the hall and came to a stop outside the door.

Marshall...?

No, it was not Marshall, it was a Frog. Pucky recognized the identity of the creature soon enough to be able to jump to safety. The open door of the closet concealed him from the monster, which now pushed slowly into the attic room and looked about with cunning eyes.

Pucky peered cautiously around the door and shuddered. How could gentle Mother Nature have ever fashioned such a brute? By comparison, the vicious ring-nosed beetle-eaters on Venus were charming creatures! There were quite enough weird forms of life in the universe without adding Froghs, who, to put it mildly, possessed an unfriendly character. They were anything but simpatico.

Pucky always took a very dim view of distasteful contemporaries. In order to make them quite palpably aware of his feelings, he often threw all necessary precaution to the winds.

He waited until the Frog had closed the door, then he came out of hiding and asked, "Are you looking for something?"

The Frog came near to losing its balance as it whirled quickly about. With abnormally widened eyes and extended claws it stared at the unexpected apparition. Apparently it was at a loss as to how to react to the mouse-beaver, although as a watchman at the galactic zoo it had plenty of contact with semi-intelligent life forms.

"What... who...?" stammered the Frog in its own language, which Pucky was able to understand telepathically.



"I'm asking you what you seek here?" he repeated, in the universally understood Arkonide. "This is my room."

The Frog appeared to pull itself together. "This is government business," it announced. "Did a Springer recently occupy this room?"

"What gives you that idea? Who are you, anyway?"

The insect-worm produced such an expression of astonishment that Pucky laughed out loud. But this was all that was necessary to work the humourless thing into a rage. With a hideous hissing sound it rushed toward the mouse-beaver and stretched out its talons as though to strangle him.

"I'm a Frog, you little vermin! And if I'm not mistaken, you'd be better off in the zoo than running around free. I'm going to take you with me."

"Don't come within 3 feet of me," warned Pucky and he drew back a yard or so in order not to come in contact with the nauseous mass of flesh. "And where the zoo is concerned, you're mistaken. Incidentally, since we don't happen to be bosom buddies, I'll have you watch your language. You will oblige me by answering my questions, you travelling smokestack!"

The Frog appeared to be more accustomed to deference and fear for its presence. It must have been incredible to the creature that anyone could comport himself in this manner. Laboriously, it took a deep breath. "I'll make you pay for that, you vermin!" This seemed to be its favourite insult. "This very day you will be taken before the zoo administration. Do you know what happens then?"

"I couldn't care less," replied Pucky, unmoved. "And if you don't answer my questions now, I'll throw you against the wall and then out the window."

The Frog began to shake, which encompassed a considerable mass. The long worm almost filled the room. With interest, Pucky noticed that the serpent-like body began to turn pink. Perhaps that was what a young lieutenant would look like if one of his recruits asked him to shine his boots.

"You little wretch!" growled the enraged zoo guard. "Do you dare—?"

"You are looking for a Springer," Pucky interrupted, with continued disrespect. "Why here, of all places? Answer me or you'll be in for a surprise."

The mouse-beaver was gradually losing patience; moreover he saw that he could not retreat any farther. Certainly this Frog would have to be eliminated but first it was going to reveal what it knew.

The Frog was momentarily distracted. "The Springer? What do you know about the Springer I'm looking for?"

"I will do the questioning, do you understand? Now then, how did you pick up his trail?"

But the Frog was not ready to surrender its secret. Fortunately, however, it was *thinking* on the subject. And that was all Pucky needed. "Aha!" he observed calmly. "Another Springer revealed it to you. So you tortured him, did you? You're a murderer! And at that he lied to you, because there is no one in this room—besides myself."

In a state of complete bewilderment, the Frog stared at the small mouse-beaver who could extract

thoughts from its mind in such a cavalier manner. Its mental impulses became increasingly confused until they finally reached a climax with the decision to seize this uncanny opponent.

The Frog made a quick movement toward Pucky to grasp him. It didn't quite know what was happening then but it felt itself gripped by an invisible force and was hurled against the dressing table. It fell to the floor but quickly righted itself again.

Once more it charged Pucky but the mouse-beaver appeared to have grown weary of the argument. He activated his full telekinetic power, lifting the frog upward and holding it firmly in the middle of the air.

Terrified, the centipede began to screech piercingly while its body took on a discoloured, purplish hue. Its countless legs fanned the empty air desperately, trying to find something solid to stand on.

Its terror increased considerably, however, when it began to float toward the window, which opened as though pushed by a ghostly hand. Far below was the hard pavement of the street.

Pucky didn't hesitate any longer. He knew everything now that the Frog knew and as a merciless zoo guard it had earned death a thousand times over. So Marshall was hiding out with the Springers, who maintained a small headquarters on Tolimon. There he was in comparative safety.

No matter how hard the Frog sought to halt its passage by grasping the window frame, it moved outside into emptiness. And so it happened that the residents of the poor section of Trulan witnessed an incredible spectacle. They saw a flying Frog. The hated creature sailed elegantly out of an attic window, turned a few perfect spirals and then hurtled vertically downward a thousand feet to the pavement.

Its crashing fall attracted a commensurate amount of attention, even though this riddle of a flying centipede never could be solved.

By that time, however, Pucky was already back at the hotel waiting for Rhodan, whom he had kept telepathically informed of all occurrences.

The circle was closing in on Marshall and his companions. It could only be a matter of time before they were found.

Pucky was lolling lazily on the bed with his eyes closed. Suddenly, he was shaken to alertness when a thought-impulse hammered in on his consciousness. It was a thought-burst that came through with unusual sharpness. *By all the galactic nebulas! If Rhodan doesn't show up soon, these guys are going to rob me blind...!*

Pucky let out a whistle that was way off key and then he established contact with Marshall.

### **3/ A SURPRISE FOR THE SPRINGERS**

The room was dimly illuminated by a battered lamp and a few slanting rays of sunlight coming down from a small, barred window. 5 people sat around a worn-out wooden table. Apparently they formed 2 groups because the 2 husky men with beards hunched together and regarded the other 3 persons in an

unfriendly manner.

John Marshall searched the bearded Springers' minds and knew that from now on the partnership was not going to be either easy or cheap. The spirit of the Galactic Trader had been awakened in the 2 confederates and for such even friendship was a trade commodity.

Next to John sat Laury Marten, who had just turned 23. She was the daughter of the mutants Anne Sloane and Ralf Marten and she had inherited their telepathic faculties. But in addition to this she was also capable of changing molecular compositions in matter by means of her mental powers and so was able to walk through walls. The Japanese blood of her father had left traces in her features and it was her almond-shaped eyes in particular which had so infatuated Count Rodrigo de Berceo.

Rodrigo, who was the son of an Aztec princess and a Spanish nobleman, had been living in the zoo on Tolimon for almost 300 years. Together with 3 other Earthmen he had been abducted by space travellers during the 17th century and all had been made immortal by means of the mysterious elixir of life. His extraordinarily magnificent appearance had had its effect on Laury. A blindman could sense that the 2 were in love with each other. Rodrigo could thank this fact for his escape from the zoo.

His clothes, carefully reproduced by the tailor experts at the zoo, were quite out of the ordinary because they were in the style of the 17th century. Tight-fitting hip boots took in his short-length breeches; a broad waistband held his short armless doublet together. His wide shirt collar covered the upper portion of this jacket-like apparel with its pointed ends. Perpetually he wore his wide sword belt containing its sharply honed blade. On his lap lay his wide-brimmed hat with the long-flowing feather. Gleaming conspicuously over his doublet was a gold necklace from which depended an amulet depicting the Aztec sun god.

Under no circumstances would Rodrigo part with his unusual clothing and his primitive stabbing weapons. This had already led to many complications because the Count was a hotheaded and spirited man who made much of honour and pride.

He stroked Laury's hand beside him. "Just keep calm, my darling; we shall show them a thing or two. We were able to take care of the Froghs, so why not do the same for these mercenary petty merchants?"

Marshall gave him a warning look. He felt pretty well battered. The waiting for news of Rhodan had become endless and constantly thinking of lurking dangers had had an abrasive effect on him. Since he had left his quarters in the slum district, he had become uncertain. Added to this was the fact that the Springers were not to be trusted any longer, as the present conference had clearly demonstrated.

"Alright, now, Berzan, your offer can be discussed. You 2 are in the same trap as we are and that's why we're able to negotiate. If you turn us over to the authorities you'll also betray yourselves and then nobody gets helped, least of all us. The Aras are enemies of yours as well as ours. You want money in return for helping us further. But we don't have any money. In a few days, however, we'll be able to give you more than you could spend if you lived to be 100."

Berzan, the old greybeard, blinked his crafty eyes. "And where are you going to get the money?" he wanted to know. "How do I know you're not lying? Tulin and Egmon have warned us. They claim that you can read thoughts."

"I'm supposed to be a telepath? That's ridiculous! Wouldn't I have been wise, then, to the treachery you planned. Would I have come to you then and asked you for help? No, Berzan, the contention of your 2 friends is absurd."

"That's what I told them, too, my friend. But however that may be, we're demanding a better payment from you, because aren't we also putting ourselves in danger to protect you? Half of the planet is chasing you. The police are following every clue. And maybe one of those clues will lead them to us, in which case the work of decades will have been in vain."

"If they come, we will help you," assured Marshall in an attempt to be consoling but he recognized the validity of the other's reasoning. "In a few days, anyhow, you'll be rid of us."

The younger Springer leaned forward and looked at Marshall. "Where is it you want to get to? Who is going to suddenly provide you with money?"

In Rodrigo's thoughts, Marshall read the man's rising impatience. It wouldn't be long before the fiery Count would be after the 2 blackmailers with drawn sword. He would get the worst of it because the Springers were armed with impulse-beamers.

"Faran, you have to be satisfied with the fact that we are staying here with you until our contact man shows up with the money. Be patient." He turned to the Count. "And you, too, Rodrigo."

The 2 men were good friends and had long since dropped all formalities between them. The Count was also aware of Marshall and Laury's telepathic characteristics. So he drew his hand away from his sword, nodded slowly, and answered cautiously in Spanish: "I'd much prefer to run them through but if you think it best I will not do them violence."

"What did he say?" asked Berzan suspiciously.

"He believes that our contact may show up even today."

"Let's hope so," growled Berzan as he looked up at the window. "We're going now but don't get any smart ideas. The house is staked out. An attempt at escape would be foolish because we would alert the Trulan police. We have other hideouts besides this one, so they would lose track of us. But you they would find."

He got up with Feran and the two left the room. The door closed with a dull thud of the bolt as a heavy key turned in the lock.

They were alone.

"By the sun god of my mother!" Rodrigo sprang up trembling in every limb. "Why don't we have done with these greedy star pirates once and for all!?"

"Because we have to be smarter than they are," Marshall cautioned him, as he paced back and forth in the small room. "If I only knew in what region of Trulan we were in. They brought us here in the middle of the night."

"As far as I know, it's a suburb," put in Laury, who had remained silent until now. She took the Counts finely shaped hand in hers and glanced at him tenderly. "Our surroundings don't make any difference, sweetheart. Can't we be happy here just as well?"

Marshall came to an abrupt halt. "Laury!" he said sharply. "I don't object to your happiness but before you can enjoy it we have to hand over that serum to Rhodan. Your passion has lost us the last chance to

obtain the formula for its manufacture."

"But we have a sample of the miracle serum," the girl retorted, blushing, and she tapped the wide belt of her uniform. "It's only a small vial, I'll admit, but nevertheless it is a sample. Maybe our scientists can analyse it."

"If we ever get it to them," said Marshall, realistically. Then he changed the subject. "Why do we hear nothing at all from Rhodan? I can't understand it."

"We've hardly had any chance to send out any intensive thought impulses, John. We were never left alone and were always on the run. Our thought transmissions were drowned in the ocean of other thoughts in Trulan. Besides, Rhodan only has weak telepathic capacities. We have to think with more concentration, and then maybe we'll succeed in making a contact. Rhodan must be somewhere on Tolimon by now. It's been 8 days since we sent the distress signal."

"Yes, and then the transmitter broke down," said Marshall bitterly. "So let's make use of this time and put out calls to Rhodan. Maybe we'll be lucky. If the Springers come back, it will be too late. Even at night they don't give us any peace."

"Indeed they don't!" sighed Rodrigo and he drew Laury to him gently. Their lips touched fleetingly.

A suppressed curse escaped from Marshall as he turned discreetly away from them. "Rodrigo, perhaps you'll be good enough to leave Laury alone for a little while. She has to concentrate if we don't want to stay here in this hole forever. Even if Rhodan listens for us day and night he can never pick up our impulses unless they reach him in a concentrated form. He has to differentiate our thoughts from thousands of others and that he can never do unless we concentrate on him. Not even Pucky could do it, if he were here. But unfortunately he isn't."

Gently, Laury extricated herself from the arms of her lover. "Rod, he's right. Our love can wait until later. Just now our safety comes first and the task of delivering the serum unharmed. Our whole mission here will be in vain if we don't accomplish that."

Marshall turned around. "That's a wise decision, little girl. So I still have hope."

Rodrigo stood up, his brow furrowed indignantly. "John, if you were not my friend I should be angry with you but I can understand that your mission takes precedence. So what should I do while you two go into your telepathic work?"

Marshall gave a sigh of relief and smiled. "Nothing, Rod. Just sit there on the couch and cogitate, or as far as I'm concerned you can sleep. Laury and I will concentrate our thoughts on our position and broadcast it in all directions. I wish we knew more exactly what section of Trulan we are in. That would make the task simpler."

The Count sat down laboriously on the couch. His fighting blade hindered him in almost all of his movements but he did not seem to be able to part with it. "I'll take a nap because I am a bit tired. But wake me up if anything happens." Then he stretched out and soon the even rhythm of his snoring announced that he was asleep.

Marshall and Laury then concentrated on the task before them.

\* \* \* \*

Rhodan dismissed the car and went into the Hotel without his usual display. He found Pucky waiting for him.

"It's about time you got here," said the mouse-beaver. "Marshall is waiting for our help. I already know the direction but of course it's hard to gauge the distance. I'll have to make a jump."

"That's a bit dangerous," replied Rhodan. "In the meantime I also made contact and promised to put in an appearance as soon as possible. I had my hands full getting out of an invitation from the president to visit the zoo. He wanted to drive out there with me this very evening so that we'd have the whole day tomorrow for an inspection. I almost have the feeling that since I'm the assumed Inspector they want to get in good standing with me. So maybe they've got something on their slate to answer for."

Pucky wasn't paying the least attention to what Rhodan was saying. "But how else can we find Marshall? I have to jump. Then if I pick up the impulses from behind me we only have the final portion of the way to trace down."

"And I'm supposed to stay here in the hotel?"

"What else?"

Rhodan's expression was grave when he said, "My little friend, I'm afraid you haven't fully assessed the situation. Admittedly I came here very well disguised and nobody became suspicious. However, I happened accidentally to overhear the conversation of 2 Ara officers. The government of Tolimon has sent an official inquiry to Arkon to find out whether or not they have an inspector by the name of Tristol."

Now Pucky also became earnest. "Did they get an answer yet?"

"Naturally not. The Arkon registrar will not work that fast but I'm sure that it'll be stirring up some circuits in the mind of the Robot Regent. So you see that there's no other recourse but to pull a disappearance as soon as possible. So for that reason I'm going to go with you."

"You mean—go together in the teleport jumps?"

"Of course not. I'll take a taxi, preferably one of those fast airboats, and I'll follow you on each stage of your progress. We'll keep in mental contact and Marshall has only to keep up a normal rate of thinking. From here on, we won't lose him again. Let people think I'm making a minor inspection incognito. No one will dare stand in my way.

Pucky sighed and slipped off the bed. *Marshall, do you hear me? We're pushing out in your direction. Just keep on thinking and for my sake make it hot sausages or chilled carrots. As far as I'm concerned you can even tell jokes. The main thing is, one of you has to stay awake. Do you get me?*

*We understand!* came the double reply. Laury was also telepathing. *But hurry! And bring money with you, for the Springers!*

The hair at the base of Pucky's neck stood up. Money? For those swindlers..."

Rhodan mixed into the thought stream:*String the Springers along until we've found you. I'll take care of them.*

Pucky shrugged and proceeded to pack his uniform in Rhodan's suitcase. "You and your eternal appeasement policy! One of these days you'll pay for it with a load of grief."

"No more grief, I'm sure, Pucky, than your predilection for clever tricks in the wrong place. I even suggest that you stay out of sight during our dealings with the Springer agents. After all, the Springers have very unpleasant memories of a mouse-beaver who crossed their path in the past. I don't want to refresh those memories, by any means."

"They only got what they deserved then," said Pucky indignantly. "I think I've played this idiot business long enough now, not to have to stand aside while our friends are being saved. What will Miss Laury think of me? Or even this comical Count that they freed from the zoo. No, I'm coming with you!"

Rhodan raised his brows in astonishment. "You're certainly resolute about it, little fellow. Do you want to get us all into danger?"

"No, I don't want to do that, but if my appearance among the Aras didn't refresh anybody's memory it's not going to do it with the Springers because they've probably never heard of Pucky or Terra. I just think you're getting carried away with your precautions."

Rhodan was a man of swift decisions but he was wise enough to permit himself to be swayed by other arguments now and then. Why should he continue to vex Pucky any more? Besides, the mouse-beaver was probably right: nobody would be able to recall what he looked like. It was a long time ago.

Finally he nodded. "Alright then, Pucky, you win. We'll work it together."

The mouse-beaver was too wise to show his full satisfaction. He only grinned happily and helped his master with the packing, carrying on in his normal manner as a faithful servant.

"Oh lord and master," he intoned dramatically and bowed almost to the floor of the hotel room, "shall I carry the suitcase out or would you prefer that I teleport it into the good ship *Koos-Nor*?"

"Teleport it, you miserable wretch!" returned Rhodan with a similar theatrical flair and he waited until Pucky had disappeared with the luggage. Then he utilized the interval by checking the remote control device that he carried in his pocket. He did not yet realize how vital its function was to be, even before the sun went down.

Pucky came back with a report: "Everything is shipshape on board the yacht. It's still there at the spaceport, untouched and unharmed, although I noticed a couple of light cruisers that have been posted in the vicinity.

"That's strange," murmured Rhodan. "Very strange. They couldn't have heard from Arkon already, could they? And even so, they'd still have to act as though there were an inspector named Tristol. They would take care not to show their suspicions openly."

"Okay, so what?" growled Pucky impatiently. "What are we still waiting for? I want to meet this Count Rodi... ri... rigo."

"Rodrigo," Rhodan corrected him. "From a long line of Spanish nobility, out of the 17th century. At that time, he was fairly well known. But I'm warning you! He's a hot-blooded type and maybe he's even a little superstitious. Don't take him too lightly. In his day the noblemen were accustomed to demanding satisfaction for any insults by means of a deadly duel. And I don't know how good you are with a sword."

"Mat do you mean, insult?" asked Pucky, amazed. "I certainly don't want to insult him. At the most, maybe teach him some manners."

"You may be in for a surprise," prophesized Rhodan and went to the door. "And now, let's get going, we haven't any time to lose. It will be dark in 3 or 4 hours. We must have found them by then."

"They're in the bag!" grinned Pucky as he waddled along behind his master. Downstairs in the lobby he changed again into the submissive servant. Looking innocent and exceptionally stupid, he strained to keep pace with Rhodan, which was difficult. Only the fact that Rhodan had to wait for the air taxi he had ordered enabled Pucky to make up for the other's head start.

"You might try to slow down a little," the mouse-beaver panted peevishly when he finally stood next to Rhodan in front of the hotel. A streamlined cabin car lowered itself toward them and landed on the cultivated lawn. "Next time I'll teleport and leave you running after me!"

"Behave yourself!" warned Rhodan as he climbed into the cabin. Pucky followed him. The pilot was terrified at the sight of the uniform of the all-powerful Inspector and all but shrank away under his controls.

*And now keep your mouth shut, if you please, and act like a timid servant, or this will be the last time you ever go on a mission with me!*

This telepathic threat frightened Pucky sufficiently to make him creep onto the back seat and screen his thoughts. Rhodan suspected that they weren't very complimentary to him but at this moment it made little difference. Once in awhile Pucky's presumptiveness had to be watered down.

"Fly slowly in a northerly direction," he told the pilot next to him. "Only change direction when I tell you to. Not too high, if you please. I wish to view the city to full advantage."

"As you wish, Inspector, Your Grace!"

Rhodan did not reply. He looked straight ahead as the air car rose to an altitude of 150 feet. In this area there were no skyscrapers or towers, so that no collision with buildings was to be feared.

In the meantime, Laury's thought impulses had ceased. Only Marshall was still 'sending' and he was thinking of everything he could in order to stay awake, although it was still bright daylight. Rhodan concluded from this that the 3 fugitives had been through a period of unusual exertion.

He spoke to Pucky in English so that the pilot wouldn't understand. "You won't have to teleport. We'll just fly along in this direction until the impulses are definitely under us. Then we'll know we're directly over Marshall's location."

And that's the way it happened.



\* \* \* \*

Count Rodrigo woke up when Marshall shook him. Laury sat on the other couch and rubbed her eyes.

"They are directly over us. Pucky and Rhodan." Marshall pointed to the ceiling. "They say we are in an isolated house on the edge of the city and are surrounded by a large park. This is probably a main headquarters for the Springers."

"Is Pucky here, too?" Laury brightened up immediately. "What luck for us! Pucky is the greatest hero I know."

The mouse-beaver's popularity with the female gender was generally well known but Rodrigo didn't yet know who Pucky was. He rose up slowly from his sleeping bench and stared in wide-eyed astonishment at Laury.

"Who is this hero?" he asked testily. His hand moved automatically to his sword hilt. "If anyone is entitled to protect you, then it is I. Or do I have a rival for your affections?"

With a fleeting grin, Marshall cast Laury a warning glance. "Take care with Pucky. Laury is right: he is indeed a hero! And I don't know any woman who does not like him or hold him in high esteem. Why should Laury be the exception? You'll have to get used to it, Rod."

"Never!" Rodrigo jumped up and walked fiercely back and forth in the room. "I will never tolerate a rival. He will have to fight me in a duel!"

"You'll come out on the short end," Marshall warned him again, while maintaining a sober expression. He knew that Pucky could overhear them and was confident of a little variety in the meeting between Rod and the mouse-beaver. "Pucky is one of our best mutants."

"Another man with supernatural powers?" The Count seemed disappointed. "Apparently much has changed on Earth. The world is ruled by sorcerers."

"Take it easy," advised Marshall and listened once more within himself. Even Laury appeared to have forgotten the Count. They had placed themselves in contact with Rhodan.

*We will land fairly close to you in the air car, announced Rhodan. We can't use the pilot. What do you think I should do with him?*

*Bring him along, replied Marshall. We'll get away in the air car and lock the Ara in here. Quite simple.*

*And what about the Springers watching you? I know—I'll come there in my official capacity as Inspector. That will intimidate them.*

*Maybe they've gone.*

*Perhaps.*

Another quarter of an hour passed. They remained in touch telepathically but did not transmit any further. Count Rodrigo continued waiting in sullen silence and occasionally cast dark glances at Marshall.

They were startled when the door suddenly burst open and Berzan stormed into their prison. "The Inspector from Arkon," he gasped. "He has landed in the park and is approaching the house. Do you have any idea what he wants from us?"

Marshall remained quite calm as he nodded slowly. "Perhaps, Berzan. Perhaps. Wouldn't it be a good idea for us to unite under these circumstances?"

"Haven't we always been allies?" asked the Springer with such an air of innocence that it seemed butter couldn't melt in his mouth. "Naturally we won't tell the Arkonide that you are with us. But how could he have found out about you?"

"Yes," Marshall nodded calmly. "That's what I'd like to know."

Meanwhile, Rodrigo had finally decided that only an act of bravery would convince his beloved Laury that he was the only knight of her heart. He drew his sword with a lightning swiftness and placed its point on the chest of the bewildered Berzan.

"You miserable lout!" he shouted dramatically but in deadly earnest. "You change your loyalties like an evil wind in our sails. Then be advised that we can do the same, sir. We will henceforth dispense with the protection of your clan and thus you will not receive any pay. And as far as the Inspector is concerned, lead him to us. But swiftly, before my blade tickles your backbone!"

"Stop it!" shouted Marshall. "It would be better for Berzan to lead us up to the outside. Let's all go together to greet our lofty visitor."

The Springer had thus refrained from using his weapon. He had no intention of cutting off such an apparently promising source of profit. At the moment the visit of the Arkonide was the greatest danger—and yet it was a mutual danger. After it had passed, one would look further into this matter...

Without concerning himself further with Rodrigo, he turned around, opened the door and strode ahead. Marshall and the others followed. They knew what a surprise the Springers were in for and that the unhappy situation they had fallen into would soon be rectified.

Unfortunately they had forgotten a certain unpleasant factor which has often caused the best-laid plans of men and mouse-beavers to go awry.

It was, specifically, that factor which is generally designated as chance...

#### **4/ DRAGNET**

Glogol, Chief Inspector of the Arkonide Empire, was approaching the solar system of Revnur's Star on a routine circuit flight in order to visit the 2nd planet, known as Tolimon.

2 heavy cruisers escorted him, in case it should be necessary to enforce any possible demands he might make. Glogol himself was travelling only with a few servants and the customary personnel of a luxury yacht, whose resemblance to the *Koos-Nor* were nothing short of astonishing.

Glogol was a true Arkonide of the ruling class. His remarkable intellectual faculties and his penchant for decision-making had led the Robot Regent to take him into his confidence. He was tall, with white hair and reddish eyes—and thus his appearance was precisely the same as that of Rhodan in his present disguise. Even the splendid uniform he wore was practically a duplicate.

He signalled his radio officer. "Make contact with Tolimon and announce our arrival. I request a proper state reception, suitable accommodations and a staff of attendants. I want the responsible government officials to put in an appearance at the spaceport."

"Very well, Inspector," responded the officer, eager to please, and disappeared back into his station. Not 2 minutes later he reappeared, with an indescribable expression of amazement on his face. "Sir...!" he stammered, shakily. "The Space Authority on Tolimon wants to speak to you before granting a permit to land!"

It took Glogol almost 10 seconds before he could speak. Then he exploded! "What are you saying? That they are insubordinate to an inspector? Are the Aras starting a rebellion or something? What impertinence...!"

"They say it has to do with emergency mode VB-17," interrupted the communications man, uncomprehendingly.

Glogol's attitude changed instantly. "Why didn't you tell me that immediately, you dumbbell? That changes the face of things." He got up. "Come, show me the microphone!"

Glogol didn't know very much about technical details but then that was not a part of his profession. But on the viewscreen he recognized the face of an Ara, who observed him searchingly. The man's boundless astonishment was genuine.

"You are actually an Arkonide?" stammered the Ara, as though he had expected something quite different. "Then why do they send us 2 inspectors?"

Glogol felt as though struck by a bolt of electricity. Immediately he was suspicious. "Two inspectors? What are you trying to say?"

"Sir, since yesterday Inspector Tristol has been on Tolimon. He has orders to inspect the zoo administration."

"Is that so?" Glogol cocked his head, considering. "Tristol?" Finally a faint smile touched his lips. "I hope that this Tristol will also be at the spaceport when I land with my ships."

"At the present time he is on an inspection flight and can't be reached."

Glogol felt cheated out of the diversion of making a surprise visit but he recognized the potential danger of a false inspector. There was no time now for diversions. He had to take action.

"Inspector Tristol is an impostor," he said coldly. "Arrest him. I shall land immediately, with or without

your permission. The formalities can come later. Meanwhile I am dispatching an inquiry to the Robot Regent."

"We have already seen to that and we still expect an answer today. But—perhaps it is well to send a 2nd inquiry in order to be sure."

Glogol sensed the other's suspicion and turned pale. With an oath, he got up and returned to his private quarters. These accursed Medicos! They didn't believe that he was the real Inspector. Well, he'd make them pay for that.

On the other hand, he realized that a suspicious attitude on their part was preferable to carelessness and gullibility.

He had never heard the name Tristol. And besides, there were only 10 inspectors of the Empire. He knew them all. There was no Tristol among them.

He established an alert. The 2 escort cruisers took up battle positions, descending in close formation with the yacht into the atmosphere of Tolimon.

Almost at the same time the answer from Arkon was received in Trulan.

There was no such person as Inspector Tristol.

\* \* \* \*

Rhodan and Pucky climbed down from the air taxi and looked around them.

The park consisted principally of a meadow which had been planted with small bushes. Trees on its borders concealed it from the outside world. The villa-like house stood by a peaceful roadway in the northern outskirts of Trulan.

The pilot leaned out the cabin window questioningly. "Shall I wait for you, Inspector?"

"You will accompany us," Rhodan informed him. "I wish to make certain that I'll not have to return on foot to the city."

"But, sir..." the pilot began, reproachfully, only to be sharply interrupted by Pucky.

"Get out! When my master gives an order it has to be obeyed. Haven't you ever heard of the experimentation centre of the zoo? Do you want to end up there?"

The pilot began to shake visibly. With a daring leap, he jumped down into the thick grass.

Rhodan led the way. Over by the house there was no movement of any kind and everything had the appearance of abandonment. But Marshall's thought-impulses came through clearly: *We're coming outside now, Chief. The Springers have become suspicious and they're escorting us.*

*They'll certainly have some respect for an inspector*, returned Rhodan.

They were still about 20 yards from the house when the main door opened and a bearded man approached them. In outward appearance he might have been 60 years old, which actually told them nothing. He made a gesture behind him as though to deter others from following him. Alone and armed only with one of the ordinary rayguns in his belt, he came up to Rhodan and his companions. He glanced wonderingly for a moment at Pucky but then returned his attention to Rhodan.

"An inspector from Arkon," he murmured. "Then our friends have not lied to us."

"I am Tristol," said Rhodan, dropping some of his assumed arrogance. "You have assisted my people and have earned an appropriate reward. That you will receive as soon as we are out of danger. Do you believe me?"

The bearded man nodded almost imperceptibly. "My name is Berzan, Inspector. Just one question: Are you an inspector?"

Rhodan read the suspicion in the Springer's mind. The man just couldn't see any connection between the prisoners and an Arkonide.

"Do you have any doubts about it?" Rhodan pretended to be surprised. "Arkon has spies everywhere. My people are operating under orders of the Robot Regent. What's so unusual about that?"

Berzan moved a hand absently to the grip of his gun but he had no intention of using it. Pucky recognized this at once and took no action. But he was ready.

"It's very unusual, sir, because 2 minutes ago the Trulan police were placed on alert. Arkon has answered the inquiry from Tolimon. There is no such person as Inspector Tristol. Therefore the inspector is an impostor and is being sought. It won't be long before the police pick up the trail that will lead them here to this house."

Instantly Rhodan shifted gears in his plans. In fact he saw the incredulous look of astonishment in the taxi pilot's face but he didn't concern himself over it.

He smiled at Berzan. "You are right, Berzan. I am no Arkon inspector. You don't like the Arkonides, Berzan. I know that. So why should you turn me in? Do we not have mutual enemies in the Arkonides and the Aras?"

But Berzan didn't go along with this. "I smuggle medicinal items for a living. My clan chief is Rohun, the Springer captain. I don't like Arkonides but I recognize the Empire. You are an enemy of the Empire, and I can't work with you or your friends any longer. Frankly speaking, it's too dangerous. So pay your debt, take your people—and get out of here!"

Rhodan was amazed by the bearded Springer's sincerity, for he was not unsympathetic towards them. He knew it would be senseless to sway the man politically. "Very well, you will get your reward, Berzan. Where are my people?"

Berzan turned around and signalled toward the house. "Feran, bring them out. They're free."

Rhodan took a purse containing money out of his pocket and gave it to the older man. The latter quickly inspected its contents and let out a whistle. He was completely satisfied with the payment.

Feran came out into the open, followed by Marshall, Laury and the Count.

Berzan took Feran to one side and spoke with him in low tones. Rhodan had no further time to deal with them. He knew that for the moment there was no danger of a betrayal, if ever. Marshall came up to Rhodan and joyfully shook his hand.

"That was just in the nick of time, Chief. I don't know how much longer we'd be safe here. The Springers have lost their enthusiasm for getting their fingers burned. OK, excuse me. Laury wants to say hello. And then I want to introduce Count Rodrigo de Berceo..."

Laury was blushing now, since she realized that Rhodan must have been informed about her love for the Count. She extended her hand timorously. Rhodan smiled softly at her and returned her squeeze gently.

Then he turned his attention to the Count.

Rodrigo had removed his wide-brimmed hat and now he flourished it in a courtly bow which would have done credit to any nobleman of the 17th century. Then he stepped forward and with a second bow gave his name and also the names of his noble parents. "I am most delighted," he affirmed, "to finally make the acquaintance of the friend of my lady companion and I consider it an honour, Rho—"

"No names!" warned Rhodan sharply. "I am the Chief, no one else."

Rodrigo reddened slightly but recovered gracefully. "Forgive me, Chief. I almost forgot to be discreet." He looked about him searchingly, only giving the mouse-beaver a fleeting, curious glance, and then turned to Marshall. "So where is this fabulous hero and lady-killer that you told me about? I don't see him."

"Pucky?"

"Yes, I presume that's the name. I'd like to give him a piece of my mind."

"Well, just open your eyes, Rod. You are standing before Pucky."

In the meantime, Laury had bent down to the little mouse-beaver and was stroking his fur. "How are you, my little friend?" she said to him with a friendly smile. "Can you imagine that Rod is jealous of you?"

But Pucky did not answer. He continued to stare disconcertedly at the Count, who opened his eyes tremendously and looked down incredulously at the mouse-beaver.

"Shoosh!" squeaked the mouse-beaver finally and gasped audibly. "So what masked ball is this comical character going to?"

The 'comical character' perceived the jest very clearly and drew back. "Is that this Pucky person?" he wanted to know.

"Who else?" replied Marshall.

Rodrigo narrowed his eyes and again turned his attention to the mouse-beaver, who was starting gradually to recover from his amazement.

"You are Pucky?" he asked again.

The mouse-beaver sat back comfortably on his hindquarters. "Do you have any objections? If I looked like you I wouldn't ask stupid questions. That only makes the first impression worse than it was in the first place."

Rodrigo took 2 steps back and swiftly drew his sword. "Defend yourself or I will send you to the ignominious fate you deserve!"

Laury let out a shrill cry and jumped between the 2 fighting roosters. Rhodan glanced at the 2 Springers. They were inspecting the contents of the money purse and were paying no attention to what was taking place. They appeared to be oblivious of their surroundings.

Pucky began to squeak with laughter. He hopped around merrily on his short legs. His glistening incisor tooth shone gleaming white in the sunlight. "Where we come from, only old women wear such knitting needles!" He whistled off key. "My son, I'll teach you some respect with my left paw!"

Rodrigo forgot his good upbringing. With a cry of rage, he rushed upon the mouse-beaver, who only straightened up slightly and met his gaze. As the Count was about to make his thrust he suddenly felt his wrist jerk powerfully. The pain was so great that he let go of the blade. To his unbridled bewilderment, the weapon came alive. It described a shallow curve and hurled point-first into the nearest tree. The sword penetrated the trunk almost a foot deep and remained there, trembling from its swift flight.

Rodrigo stared alternately at Pucky and at the swaying blade.

Pucky nodded triumphantly; he hopped over to Laury and took her hand. "Now tell me," he chirped tenderly, "you haven't actually fallen for this jack-in-the-box, have you?"

But Laury withdrew her hand from him. "Pucky, you're mean!" she sobbed and she went over and placed her hand on her lover's shoulder. Don't be angry, Roddy. Pucky doesn't mean it that way. He just has a habit of pulling those silly jokes of his. Forgive him, if you can."

Count Rodrigo proved that he could be magnanimous. He patted Laury's arm gently and then went over to Pucky. "I don't think it was so silly," he said. "It was a very excellent magical stunt, Pucky. Sometime you will have to show me that trick. From now on there will be peace between us."

Pucky took the outstretched hand in his paw. "Agreed. And as for that trick..."

No one had paid any further heed to the air taxi pilot, who had learned from Berzan's opening remarks that a false inspector was involved here. The Ara had drawn away from them and used the general confusion to get back into the cab of his machine. Before anyone could stop him, he took off in a vertical climb.

Rhodan was the first to notice it, then Pucky.

"I'll fetch him back," the mouse-beaver volunteered. He began to concentrate for a jump, but Rhodan shook his head.

"Let him go, Pucky. Let him alert the Trulans if he wants to. We're going to disappear from here. When they come, they'll be looking in the wrong place."

He became silent as a 3rd Springer emerged from the house, a redheaded man with a tremendous beard

and the figure of a professional wrestler. With a penetrating gaze fixed upon Rhodan, he approached the group,

He stopped and looked at Rhodan's uniform as though it were an unusual work of art. "So you are the false inspector," he said.

Rhodan read the man's thoughts and was startled. But it was probably to be expected. He maintained his equilibrium. "Do you have any objections, my friend?"

"On the contrary!" The redhead laughed broadly, perfectly at ease. "I have nothing to do with the trap you've gotten yourself into." He waited until his colleagues were also listening to him. What he had to say actually did concern them all. "I suggest that you start worrying about a new hiding place—and quickly. A few minutes ago a luxury yacht and 2 heavy Arkon cruisers landed at the Trulan spaceport. Inspector Glogol will be pleased to find a colleague of his on Tolimon. Incidentally, my name is Tulin."

Marshall looked alternately from Tulin to Rhodan.

Rhodan smiled pleasantly at the redhead. "Thanks for your advice, friend. I think well make our departure now. Is there anything else?"

"No," said Tulin brusquely. "Just make sure you get out of here in a hurry because the police will soon know that you were brought here in a taxi. We don't want them to find anybody here with us, do you understand?"

"You're not very friendly but on the other hand your rectitude is refreshing," Rhodan complimented him, then he signalled his own group. "Come, friends. Count, don't forget to pull your sword from the tree. We have a long walk ahead of us, so we'll have to hurry." He nodded to the Springers. "Again, many thanks for your assistance to this point. We can't ask any more from you. Good luck!"

In some perplexity, Laury and Rodrigo followed Rhodan and Marshall. In his waddling gait, Pucky brought up the rear. They could tell from the storm of incoming thought-impulses that Trulan was becoming a giant hornet's nest.

The chase had begun.

\* \* \* \*

When it became apparent that everybody had been taken in by an impudent impostor, the humiliation of it served to inflame the anger of those who had been duped. Security and alien control authorities activated all available forces to apprehend the vanished 'Inspector' without having any clear idea of what his motivation had been.

Glogol went a step further. He sent an emergency radio dispatch to the Regent of Arkon, the response to which was the arrival of a powerful battlefleet. Tolimon was sealed off hermetically from the outer void.

A strong detachment of troops rushed to the spaceport and surrounded the luxury yacht of the false



inspector so that it would not be possible for anyone to enter it. They did not wish to destroy the valuable ship, since it was not manned and did not pose a threat in itself.

Of course that was a mistake but it didn't make much difference.

A systematic search of the city was instituted. The police began their search in the downtown area and only proceeded slowly to the outskirts. When they finally arrived at the villa of the Springers, they did not find anything there that was suspicious. The taxi pilot had been called hurriedly into the situation and stood perplexedly before the old pensioned officials of the zoo administration, who were very indignant over the inconvenience and promised to complain to the government.

And so the confusion continued unavailingly.

\* \* \* \*

The fugitives traversed the outlying cultivated fields between several suburbs until they reached the shelter of a small woodland area. Here they paused to rest.

Count Rodrigo snorted angrily. "Why do we have to go sneaking off like a bunch of seared Indians? Don't we have enough weapons to fight them on the run?"

"Weapons we have," nodded Rhodan calmly, "but what would be the use? We can't wage war against an entire planet—and we have no reason to. It's enough that we've raised all this suspicion. Now we must disappear without a trace. One day we'll come back and pick up the formula for the life elixir—should it become necessary. We have a sample of the serum; that may be enough."

"So now how do we get out of here?" asked Marshall, who knew conditions on Tolimon only too well. He was thinking of the fearsome Froghs and their swiftness. "Our only means of flight is out at the spaceport."

"Precisely!" confirmed Rhodan quietly. "And now Pucky's going to find out if we can move the ship to us. If my remote control gear is still working, that should be no problem. But I have to be sure they haven't secured the yacht to the ground. That could cause heavy damage to the hull. Pucky will have to cut loose any such anchoring lines before I summon the ship."

Pucky had pricked up his ears. Another mission? "Now, Chief?"

Rhodan nodded. "But watch out, young fellow! The city is swarming with police and they're also looking for you. Don't let yourself be seen under any circumstances. You can hardly make it in one jump because we don't know the exact distance."

"I'll make it if I concentrate on the ship. You can help by visualizing the ship with me, Perry. Then it will go easier..."

Rhodan closed his eyes. It was not difficult for him to imagine the interior of the ship. Naturally it wasn't difficult for Pucky, either, but he seemed to think that two heads were better than one.

"The main control panel is shaped in a half circle, above which you'll see 5 viewscreens. Their controls are in the form of round dials. The 2 seats are in front of it, while to the right there is the communications installation..."

"He's gone," said Marshall.

Count Rodrigo let out a cry of astonishment and mumbled something about 'wizard sorcery'. He had never witnessed teleportation before. Laury remained silent. She crouched close to the Count on the soft ground. All around her were thick bushes and high trees. There was only some visibility directly overhead. The sun was already sinking toward the horizon. It seemed very much as if they'd have to spend the night out in the open.

Rhodan opened his eyes and remarked: "Let's hope he didn't miss his jump and land in the midst of police troops. Of course they can't capture him but I'd prefer that nobody saw him now." Again he closed his eyes. *Pucky? Where are you?* he thought intensely.

Marshall also picked up the mouse-beaver's answer:

*The second jump got me to the ship. This port is going crazy with police and the military. The real inspector is here, too, and he's nosing around the Koos-Nor. What should I do?*

*Have they got the ship tied down?*

*Nary a cable. They don't know about your remote control gadget.*

*Great!* enthused Rhodan. *Then get back here at once on the double!*

But Pucky took his time.

He stood in the small control room of the space boat and used the periscope to watch the proceedings outside on the landing field. Here inside the ship he felt completely safe and he figured it might be useful to Rhodan if he could bring him some information.

He cautiously penetrated the thoughts of the Inspector, who was strutting around the *Koos-Nor* in his magnificent uniform speculating on how the impostor had possibly gotten hold of this special VIP model of a ship because these luxury yachts were only reserved for inspectors of the Empire and the wealthiest members of the ruling class. One of them must have used a fictitious name, but why?

Glogol couldn't arrive at any answers to his questions because it didn't occur to him to consider other than an Arkonide behind it all. He turned arrogantly to the Minister of Tolimon Security, who stood next to him. "Have you caught the impostor yet?"

The frightened Minister sought to collect his wits. "Not yet, Your Grace, but our men are combing the city. The criminal must have had assistants here. We shall find them."

"The assistants do not interest me!" Glogol shouted at the startled official. "I want to uncover this impostor who dared to go behind the Robot Regent's back."

"Of course, sir." The Minister bowed. "The necessary orders have gone out already. He will die and..."

"I want him alive!" cried Glogol, almost beside himself. "By the hotspot of the Hell planet! What can I do

with a dead impostor? He couldn't tell me anything!"

The intimidated Minister hurried away in obsequious haste, probably because his chief concern was understandably to get out of the Inspector's sight. Glogol watched him go, thinking thoughts that filled Pucky with visible amusement. This arrogant fellow was a typical Arkonide, all right. Entirely different than Khrest or Thora, of course.

Pucky cleared his throat while he watched Glogol call a couple of Tolimites over to him and talk with them. During this he pointed a number of times at the *Koos-Nor*. Suddenly the mouse-beaver began to tremble with rage when he became aware of what the Inspector had ordered.

Specialists were supposed to cut open the hull of the abandoned yacht with torches. Glogol was hoping to come across clues concerning the impostor, inside the ship.

Such a thing could not happen under any circumstances.

Now it would have been a simple thing if Pucky had merely teleported himself back to Rhodan, who could have then put his remote control device into action. But Pucky wasn't much for the simple things of life. He loved to complicate situations and then let events take their course.

This Glogol character was simply not simpatico. Very seriously, he had a lesson coming to him, but it had to be done without raising suspicion. The best deal would be to make the Inspector ridiculous and then nobody would take time to think of causes.

Pucky began to grin as he concentrated, sending his telekinetic forces streaming toward the Arkonide.

Glogol was still instructing the technicians when he suddenly felt a curious tugging sensation in the region of his stomach. It was as though someone were pulling at his colourfully striped Admiral's trousers. He looked down disconcertedly but couldn't discover anyone who had the temerity to attract his attention in this manner.

But the tugging became more insistent. With a snap, his gold-embroidered belt parted and fell to the ground along with his gun holster. The weapon, desafetied by the fall, discharged and was thrown far out on the landing field by its recoil action.

At the same time, Glogol's pants slipped down and became curiously animated. They glided gracefully away and finally disappeared in the direction of the nearby jumble of houses.

Glogol wore long underwear and an arrogant Arkonide in long underwear was a bit more hilarious than a normal Terranian in similar attire. All his dignity was gone. Staring wide-eyed and trembling in every limb, Glogol watched his trousers soaring away, unable to explain to himself how they had slipped from him without the slightest action on his part. The Tolimonites 'in his vicinity comprehended no more and no less than he did but they had to accept the evidence of their eyes and what they saw had nothing to do with an Arkonide inspector. Before them was a ridiculous figure in pink underwear and socks that had been tattered in the action. Only the jacket laden with insignia and orders of merit was a reminder of former magnificence.

Some of the police officers began to laugh uproariously.

At first Glogol didn't hear them but then his face flushed with anger. He stormed about in a rage and shouted at the miscreants. But the result was other than he had expected.

The soldiers and their officers, the returning Minister of Security and various public representatives lost all of their timidity and reserve. They could feel no fear or respect for an inspector in his underwear. He was a man just like themselves—but a funnier one. Undressing like that in the middle of the spaceport!

Glogol staggered as the waves of laughter crashed against him. He looked for something to hold on to and supported himself on one of his aides who was always beside him.

"You will rue this day!" he screamed at them, his voice almost cracking. "It's an insult to the Empire! The Robot Regent will not let this injury go unpunished, I'll see to that!" Suddenly, as though transformed, he became cold and collected. His voice acquired its customary inflexion, even though in his present attire his arrogance was not quite as impressive. He spoke to the technicians who were still doubled over with merriment. "Enough! Start to work! I want to be inside that ship in just 10 minutes!"

Then he ordered his aide to remove his trousers.

\* \* \* \*

When Pucky rematerialised in the forest hideout 10 minutes after Rhodan's order, he was still smirking. He had hardly taken form again before he sank weakly to the leafy ground and shook with laughter. Rhodan, who had telepathically witnessed the events with mixed emotions, had only refrained from interfering because he suddenly realized that the mouse-beaver's childish mischief might have some wide-ranging consequences. Once the real Inspector's authority had been impaired, the flight from Tolimon would certainly be easier.

Marshall and Laury were also aware of what had happened but the Count was frightened almost out of his wits when Pucky suddenly appeared in their midst. Least of all did he understand the grins of amusement on the faces of the 2 men, Pucky and the girl.

"What's happened?" he wanted to know.

Rhodan explained it to him. Then the nobleman's features also lit up with a merry smile. Apparently he could quite easily picture a prince in long underwear and his reaction indicated that a man so attired even in the 17th century would not have made an imposing figure.

"Very well done, my little knave!" He bent down and patted Pucky's fur. "In their merriment the people of Trulan will forget to search for us."

"But they won't forget our ship," said Rhodan, sobering, and he turned his attention to the remote control device. "It's time we worried about our safety. If we give Glogol a chance to recover he can block our escape—in spite of his present embarrassment. I just picked up the thoughts of an onlooker there and it seems he is wearing his servants pants. Poor fellow."

"Who, the servant?" asked Count Rodrigo.

"No, I mean Glogol. No more stripes on his pants."

Marshall grinned.

Rhodan adjusted a few little wheels and indicators on the small box, which had a needle-thin antenna. Then he turned it toward the spaceport and manipulated a lever that was movable in any direction because of its ball-socket mounting. The small directional viewscreen remained dark because it was not useful for such a short distance.

"Won't they chase after the ship if it takes off suddenly?" asked Marshall anxiously. "We can't get on board before they'll be on top of us."

Rhodan turned to Laury. "Give me the serum flask, Laury. We're going to be moving fast and I don't want you to lose it."

He took the small vial and examined it for a moment with interest. Only then did he answer Marshall. "You're right, John. As soon as our ship lands we have to try to get inside and take off quickly. The police will chase it over here. It might be a good idea to pull a diversion stunt. Let's see what happens."

The minutes ticked away. The 4 humans with Pucky sat there in their hiding place and stared up at the sky, which was taking on the first shades of darkness. It wouldn't be long before it was night. If they could wait that long...

The *Koos-Nor* appeared over the edge of the city. With a moderate speed it flew along close above the last outlying manor houses and held a course straight toward the patch of forest. Rhodan could make out clearly the 3 or 4 flashing points of light that shot laterally toward it and attempted to attack it.

"I thought so," he murmured. "Pucky! Jump into the *Koos-Nor* and report what you see from there. I'll steer the ship according to your directions. Get it?"

"You bet!" returned the mouse-beaver—and dematerialised.

Count Rodrigo stared dumbfounded at the empty spot and drew closer to Laury. Telepathy and teleportation continued to be incomprehensible magic mischief to him, no matter how hard everyone tried to explain it.

*I'm in the control room. Defence screen is on. The Aras are attacking. Pucky made a slight pause and then continued: I also turned on the radio receiver. The Inspector has ordered the 2 cruisers to get into the action. The Koos-Nor is to be destroyed. What should I do?*

Rhodan moved the guide lever of his remote control box. Marshall and Laury saw the ship curve sharply away. Then it hurtled with a tremendous acceleration toward the setting sun.

"Tell me when you come in sight of the ocean, Pucky. And whatever happens, stay inside the ship. You will be in no danger."

Rhodan had spoken aloud without realizing it, which was helpful to the non-telepathic Count. But Pucky's answer returned soundlessly again, which was only perceivable to Rhodan, Marshall and Laury.

*Danger...? What in the heck is that?*

Rhodan smiled briefly but sobered quickly. He followed the flight of the Ara ships, which also raced toward the setting sun. They would be in for a surprise, he determined.

Within 2 minutes, Pucky was heard from again: *The ocean is under me, Boss!*

"Good!" Rhodan answered. "You will now peel gracefully off your course, then simply make a crash dive into the water and disappear. Buckle yourself in tight so that you don't get hurt. Okay—in exactly 10 seconds." Although he spoke aloud again, the message was telepathed.

Pucky didn't give any direct answer but Rhodan was able to tell by his thoughts that he understood and was following instructions. The remote control box came into action again. More than 120 miles distant, the *Koos-Nor* responded to the slightest impulse. It curved almost vertically upward, then remained hanging motionlessly in the air for a moment—whereupon it dropped like a stone into the deeps.

To any observer it had to appear as though the propulsion and control systems had failed. And there were certain eyes that followed the event attentively. Only half a minute later, Glogol knew that the yacht, with the pilot on board, had crashed into the sea. And thus the false inspector's escape route had been cut off. He was still somewhere in the city.

Trulan was hermetically sealed off. No one was permitted to leave the city until further notice. A second dragnet search was begun, this time more intensively than before.

All agents and smugglers in the ranks of the Galactic Traders were looking ahead to very uncertain times.

## 5/ "THIS CRAZY PLANET!"

As the *Koos-Nor* fell, Pucky became weightless.

He was tightly strapped into the pilot's seat. This manoeuvre of letting a spaceship fall into the ocean waters wasn't new. It was not dangerous for the passengers as long as the ship remained leak-proof.

Then the plunging ship hit the surface of the water. The inertial shock absorbers reduced the shock of the impact to zero inside the vessel.

*Now she's sinking under!* Pucky reported to Rhodan. He watched the activated viewscreens, in which the initial bright green of the water became darker. Then finally the screens went completely black. *I must be pretty deep already.*

*I'll bring you to a stop,* came Rhodan's answer, *so that the pressure won't be too great. Incidentally, your pursuers have disappeared. If you want to, you can come back to us now.*

*Can't I hang around awhile longer? In the woods there we're cut off from the outside world but here I've got the radio receiver. I can spy on what kind of assignments Glogol is handing out and what kind of grief they're trying to cook up for us.*

Imperceptibly, Rhodan hesitated, but then he thought back: *Okay, Pucky, but I want you back here in half an hour.*

Pucky gave free rein to his incisor tooth and screened his mind. He unstrapped himself and hopped happily into the passageway in order to find the ship's pantry.

Even a mouse-beaver's tummy occasionally required sustenance.

The radio receiver was on full blast. Reports from the search parties were coming through in an unbroken stream. A smugglers' nest had been uncovered but the criminals had escaped without being identified. It was further confirmed that a number of Arkon battleships had been sent to the area and had now set up a blockade around Tolimon. This measure seemed to be superfluous at the moment, since the false inspector's ship had been seen to crash into the sea. At least they knew that the impostor was not inside the yacht He and his strange servant must still be somewhere in Trulan.

Pucky gained 3 inches of stature when he was also mentioned in the announcements.

But then a thought occurred to him: why not convince this Glogol and the Tolimonites once and for all that he and Rhodan were still present in the city? That would serve to concentrate the search in Trulan more than ever—and thus narrow down the area of danger. Then Rhodan could wait at his leisure where he was, until it became completely dark.

He didn't think it was necessary to make Rhodan aware of his decision and he made a jump toward Trulan. That about 250 fathoms of water lay between him and the surface didn't bother him in the least.

Pucky rematerialised in Marshall's former hideout in the slum area because he could visualize the wretched attic room most clearly. Nothing had changed and it seemed that the dead Frogg was the only creature who had been there besides himself.

The mouse-beaver went to the window and stared down into the city. The streets were unusually deserted looking, except for rushing police cars which were disgorging legions of uniformed search commandos, who swiftly disappeared into the houses. One would assume that not even a mouse could escape them.

Pucky concentrated on one of the main plaza-type pedestrian malls about half a mile distant—and made his jump. Teleportation was a unique and wonderful, process. You thought of your target or goal, concentrated on it, dematerialised and covered the intervening distance without any passage of time. Then rematerialised at your goal.

And so it was with Pucky.

Naturally this jump was fraught with considerable risk. There wasn't any danger at all of rematerialising inside solid objects but if one returned to normal space in the midst of enemies and if they reacted quickly enough...

It was lucky for the mouse-beaver that in his case they did not do so.

Pucky appeared almost in the centre of the plaza and found himself surrounded by a crowd of civilians who were all staring in a certain direction. Military troops patrolled the place with fire-ready weapons in their hands. In the wide main streets, police cars raced with open sirens and drove pedestrians into the entranceways of the houses.

Pucky looked carefully around. He encountered astonished stares of people in whom comprehension

was slowly dawning. Evidently his picture had been broadcast everywhere along with that of the 'Arkonide'.

Pucky began to run when the first few fingers were pointed at him. Then all hell broke loose.

The people simply ran after him, stammering words at him and falling over obstacles in their path. It was not easy for Pucky to escape his pursuers with his short legs, especially now that the police had been attracted and wanted to determine the cause of the confusion.

"The fake inspector's servant!" a man shouted hoarsely and ran into a policeman, for which another officer held him and prevented him from grasping the fugitive. While the situation was being explained, Pucky reached the edge of the plaza.

The shouts of the citizens spread through the crowd. The military took over immediately. The entire section of the city was blocked off and systematic search begun.

Pucky wanted to avoid making a disappearance right in plain view of the Tolimonites. It had to appear as though he had taken refuge in one of the houses. Of course if it was only a matter of a few yards, short jumps might not attract attention.

He found an opening and ran straight across the street between travelling vehicles and past excited policemen. Before anyone could catch their wits, he reached the fronts of the houses.

Now he had time.

In a slow and dignified manner, he waddled back and forth just as though the entire pursuit were a matter of complete indifference. Within a matter of seconds, however, he was rediscovered. Weapons bristled into evidence and were aimed at him. Shouts rang out; there were yells of commandos. One officer approached him on the run.

Pucky made an elegant turn to his left and disappeared into a wide portal. When he was out of sight, he teleported to the roof of the building. From here he could use his telepathy to observe the success of his action. He crept cautiously to the edge of the flat roof and looked down.

The street in front of the entrance looked like a military training ground.

The news of his appearance must have spread like wildfire because now an open car turned a corner coming from the plaza and swiftly approached. Brakes squealed and then the Inspector got out.

Glogol had located a spare pair of trousers, which lent him the colourfully magnificent appearance of an admiral of the Arkonide spacefleet. Brandishing his raygun, he made a path for himself through the crowd and reached the officer in charge of the search. Pucky could 'hear' every word being spoken.

"The servant of the false inspector, you say? Where is he?"

"He escaped into this house. My men are searching it."

"Does it have rear exits?"

"They're already covered."



Glogol cleared his throat. "Advise me when you catch the fellow. I wish to interrogate him personally."

"We'll corner him, sir, because he can't be far. The eye witnesses report that he's an awkward walker. He's some kind of semi-intelligent animal, who was in the zoo earlier, and..."

The officer didn't get any further. As though by magic, his uniform hat crammed down over his face and left him in the dark. Glogol observed this feat of sorcery of his subordinate, for which he had no explanation at the moment. Then he recalled his own experience with his trousers. He looked carefully about him, holstered his gun and used both hands to secure his pants in their present position.

On this crazy planet it seemed that anything was possible.

"Stop this foolishness and chase down that rogue!" he said with amazing calmness. He climbed into the waiting car and sank into the upholstery with a feeling of relief. Now nothing could happen to him. "And don't forget: I want him alive!"

The car pulled away.

The officer removed his hat to straighten it out. He examined it for a few moments, shaking his head and then put it on again. Whereupon he stormed into the suspected house in order to spur his men on to greater efforts.

One thing was certain in any case: the quarry had to be somewhere in the vicinity.

And he would be found!

\* \* \* \*

Rhodan looked at his watch. He furrowed his brow. "It's time that Pucky was showing up. The half-hour has passed. In 2 hours it will be dark."

"He wanted to monitor the radio," Marshall suggested. "So its not surprising if he screens his mind and forgets what time it is."

All about them it was still. Not a person was visible on the fields and meadows. Police patrols which had been reconnoitring back and forth over by the outlying villas suddenly disappeared in the direction of the downtown area. They marched off in a systematic manner and turned their backs on the patch of forest.

"They really seem to think we're still in Trulan," murmured Rhodan with some relief.

Marshall closed his eyes and placed his mind in a 'receiving mode'. It was not an easy task to crystallize and understand individual impulses in the confusion of thoughts storming in upon him. But he succeeded.

"There are new directives!" he whispered, as though to himself. "One of the fugitives has been seen in one of the main plazas downtown." Suddenly, Marshall opened his eyes in astonishment and looked at

Rhodan. "The servant of the false inspector!"

Rhodan let out a groan. "Pucky! Who else? His figure is unmistakable and can't be confused with anything."

"Except another mouse-beaver," said Marshall.

"Other than Pucky the only other mouse-beavers are on Vagabond, the planet of the dying sun. So it has to be Pucky. He's left the *Koos-Nor* and is starting monkey business again." Rhodan frowned. "Well, you wait till he gets back here and I'll give him a piece of my mind. After all...!"

"Yes?" chirped Pucky, somewhat conscience-stricken, and he shrank back when Rhodan jerked around toward him. "After all, I just..."

"What have you just, Puck?" It was bad news when Rhodan shortened his name like that. "Come on, speak up! Why can't you stick to my instructions?"

"You told me once that doing something unauthorized could be forgiven if I had a good reason and made something good come of it."

"Oh I did, did I? So what? How does that change the fact that you let yourself be seen in Trulan, right in the middle of town, and attracted more police attention to us?"

"On the contrary, Chief. I've attracted them to a spot where we aren't. It's in one of the main plazas and..."

"Alright, alright!" Rhodan ended the argument because he already perceived the strategy. "Nevertheless I want you to advise me in the future of your separate undertakings. —So what is the result of your efforts?"

"They've seen me in the city and are searching through every house. Nobody is thinking about these woods."

Rhodan looked across to the edge of the city. No one was to be seen there now. The search commandos were probably on their way to the centre of town.

He nodded to Pucky. "Alright, my friend. I'll close one eye."

"Why not both of them?" suggested Pucky.

Rhodan grinned and sat down again. "Let's wait till it's dark."

\* \* \* \*

Flight operations were considerably more difficult after sundown. There were still a few small units which flew over the outlying areas of Trulan and lighted the landscape under them with their probing searchlights. But at greater altitudes the lights of larger airships were seen blinking here and there.

Undoubtedly the Empire's auxiliary fleet was farther out in space in order to put a final stop to any fugitive breaking through the blockade below.

Rhodan took this into consideration when, toward midnight, he took out the remote control box and turned it on.

Count Rodrigo was asleep. Beside him lay Laury, also sleeping. The two seemed to suit each other, thought Rhodan fleetingly, but they were worlds apart. What would Rodrigo think of the Earth of the 21st century? Would he be able to adjust himself to it?

Marshall stirred. He lay with his back supported by a tree trunk. In his lap was Pucky, who murmured something unintelligible in a borderland of sleep, then whistled softly and rolled into a ball again.

Rhodan smiled. His eyes had become accustomed to the darkness and he could make out details quite well. The dials of the remote control gear glimmered faintly. Here he sat now with his people on an alien planet in the midst of a pack of hostile inhabitants, practically weaponless, and with his sole resource a luxury yacht, down in the depths of the sea.

But he possessed a group of confederates who were worth more than any weapons. He had Pucky, a three-ply parapsychic with a heart of gold; Marshall, a telepath and his friend; Laury—well, at the moment he couldn't depend on her completely but nevertheless she had procured the serum for him; and finally there was still this Count Rodrigo de Berceo, who was very good with a sword.

Soundlessly the luxury yacht came down through the overhead roof of foliage and landed softly in the small clearing. Rhodan listened in all directions, seeking contact with any possible foreign thought-impulses in the vicinity. But no matter how hard he searched, he detected nothing. No one had noticed the event.

He let his companions continue sleeping and went to the small ship, which gave the impression of a giant whale here in the clearing. Its silvery metal hull shimmered in the light of the distant stars. It was wet, with sea-water.

Only after opening the outer lock did he go back and awaken his companions.

In less than 5 minutes the planet sank away beneath them into the eternal day of the interplanetary void, which was continually illuminated by the sun. Tolimon became a silver crescent. Trulan could be seen clearly as a twinkling diadem of diamond lights on the dark portion of the planet. Apparently the city was still awake in its search for the false inspector and his curious servant.

Rhodan set the controls on automatic pilot and turned around. "Rodrigo, there's nothing you can do now. Laury will show you to your cabin. Get some sleep now. We don't know what's still ahead of us so it's best to be fresh and rested. Laury can also go to sleep."

He waited until the two had disappeared into the passageway, noting that Pucky's grin followed them.

Marshall looked questioningly at Rhodan "And what about us?"

"I want you to stay here with me until we've made our first transition. For that we need to get light speed and it'll take us 10 minutes to get there. These 10 minutes are the most critical of the entire mission, Marshall. You take over the control console of the heavy impulse-disintegrator and destroy any attacker who shows himself within striking distance. You don't have to wait on my permission to open fire; you've

got carte blanche, right now."

Marshall nodded and disappeared into the narrow weapons control cubicle. Pucky gazed thoughtfully after him.

"And me?" he pouted. "What am I supposed to do?"

Rhodan pointed to a comfortable couch next to the communications and radar equipment.

"Lie down and wait. Watch the viewscreens. Or man the search radar. Call, out every ship sighting. You can see there's plenty to do. If I'm not mistaken, things are going to get hot around here in a hurry."

Rhodan was not mistaken.

On the tracking screen a green, oval-shaped blip was seen to creep from an angle onto their course. Numbers whizzed across the right-angled scale of the tube raster, showing distance, velocity and mass.

Rhodan muttered a reflective "Hm-m-m" and then said: "Heavy cruiser. It's best that we disappear as quickly as possible. Our speed is just under 0.8 light velocity. There's still a way yet to go. An awkward situation, to say the least."

"Marshall can take care of that one," growled Pucky.

Rhodan shook his head. "Too many men have failed in their missions because they overestimated their strengths and capabilities and I'm not about to make the same mistake. We can't make out against a heavy cruiser. Well be lucky if our defence screen holds and we're not cracked open by the first shot."

"But I don't want to be cracked!" exclaimed Pucky indignantly. "I'm not a nut!"

"At least not an empty one," confirmed Rhodan but with gravity. He looked at his instruments. "Velocity 0.89 speol. We'll soon be there." He picked up the intercom mike. "Marshall, maybe you'd better wait till the enemy opens fire—and then return the compliment."

"Will do, sir," came the reply, calm and collected.

Now the ship was recognizable on the visual screens. It was one of the spherical spacers having a 600-foot diameter, classified by Rhodan as a 'Terra Class' cruiser. He had no desire to destroy a ship of the Arkonide Empire, which was once his ally and would be again someday.

0.94 speol—only a few seconds more!

Pucky had already turned on the radio receiver. He adjusted the controls as a voice blasted through and drowned out all other sounds. The broadcast was on all frequencies and it was obvious that it came from the nearby ship, which now swung around and matched their course. The *Koos-Nor* and the heavy cruiser glided through the void in parallel formation. Weapons were in firing position on both sides but the giant held off its attack.

The voice in the speaker was reduced from its crackling blast to a volume that made the words clearer. "...ordered in the name of the Empire to cease your acceleration! You will surrender or be fired upon. The Regent of the Empire wishes to speak with you. Answer!"

Rhodan gave a signal to Pucky, who signalled back. The mouse-beaver turned on the transmitter, selecting an appropriate wave band.

The Robot Brain on Arkon apparently wanted to see this reckless Arkonide who had dared to represent himself as an inspector. Rhodan smiled because he understood the motive of this logically cogitating positronic robot that ruled an entire stellar empire. To accomplish its virtually unimaginable task, the machine had need of human powers and, above all, human initiative. An Arkonide who could manage to deceive an entire world and come off as an actual inspector should certainly be able to accomplish more useful wonders.

This was why the Robot Brain had given orders not to kill the miscreant. Rhodan knew he could relax. Under no circumstance would the heavy cruiser open fire.

More or less reassured, he spoke into the microphone. "Message received and understood. Who are you?"

He was hoping to gain time. Once in hyperspace he would be lost to his pursuer because the hyper-compensator was already activated. Nobody would be able to detect any warpage of the space-time continuum or to track their course. The luxury yacht would disappear without a trace into the depths of intergalactic space.

"Commander RO-867 here, by order of the Regent. You will surrender!"

So this was a robot! The heavy cruiser was commanded by a fighting robot of the Arkonides. That made the situation considerably easier because there was no possibility of a robot's going against the Regent's directive. With a human commander a point might be reached where his own power of decision making could handle any possible surprises. With a robot it was different. When Rhodan perceived the Robot Regent's hidden motive, he knew his life was no longer in danger. The fighting robots had received an order to capture him alive and they would adhere stubbornly to that order, even if observance of all related commands allowed the quarry to escape.

"I have to be sure, RO-867, that you are not bluffing. Give me your recognition signal."

It was a thinly veiled diversion manoeuvre because the space speedometer already registered 0.98 light speed. Only 10 seconds more.

"You have only 5 seconds!" said the loudspeaker and in the same moment several flashes emanated from the equatorial region of the other ship.

The brilliant bundles of beamed energy crossed the path of the *Koos-Nor* but were ineffectual. Now Rhodan was not quite certain whether this was a warning salvo or a badly aimed blow of annihilation.

His hand moved to the lever of the hypertransition equipment.

Still 2 seconds. It would be a blind leap into the other dimension. They would rematerialise at a distance of anywhere from 100 to 200 light-years.

"You're too late, RO-867!" he said calmly and pulled the lever.

The mighty spacesphere disappeared. In the very same moment it was replaced by alien constellations which had not been there before.

Rhodan examined a calibrated scale. "123 light-years," he murmured. "We made it."

Pucky slipped off the couch and beamed. "Then there's nothing else, Chief, except to drop back to Earth. I still have something to straighten out with Bell. I have him, specifically, to thank for steering me onto those raggedy settlers on Venus and..."

"It's not time for Earth yet," replied Rhodan, shaking his head negatively. "At least not just now. You know, you ought to consider what may have been going on out here in the past 60 years. Can you be certain, nowadays, that transit jumps can't be tracked in spite of hyper-compensators? You see? It could be that they might still follow us and track us home. No, we'll stay out in space for a few weeks, maybe cruise around and find some remote planet. There we can listen in on the universe awhile and wait till the dust has settled. Our action on Tolimon may tickle the memory banks of the Robot Regent and awaken a few old memories. Sooner or later the Brain is going to think of Rhodan."

"A remote planet?" Pucky grimaced and his incisor tooth disappeared quickly. "Where?"

"Somewhere," said Rhodan and prepared for the next hyperjump.

\* \* \* \*

After the 4th random transition, the *Koos-Nor* materialized close to a curious looking solar system. A giant red star was accompanied by a small blue dwarf, which only had one planet. The red mother orb had two of them.

A double solar system, its suns only light-minutes apart!

The radio receiver was silent. It was reasonably certain there was no intelligent life in this part of the universe, which supported the assumption that the 3 planets before them were uninhabited. Whether or not humans could even exist on any of them was a moot question.

Pucky regarded the 2 suns distrustfully.

Rhodan read his thoughts and smiled wryly. "That's right, Pucky—if one of those worlds is suitable, we're going to hang around awhile and have ourselves a vacation. Nobody's searching for us here. As soon as the Milky Way uncurdles, well take some back alleys and sneak back to Earth."

Pucky's face was a study in chagrin. "Vacation? I'll bet you a raw carrot to a diamond one there's no movies down there, no Reggie to heckle, no pretty girls to make over me..."

"Alright now, don't be silly!" Rhodan interrupted with some vexation. He turned on the spectro-analyzer to check out the planets. "Go wake up the others."

Pucky dutifully waddled toward the door. But happening to glance at the clock as he did so, he turned around and asked, "What do you mean, wake them up? They probably haven't gotten to sleep yet! At least not Laury and Uncle Touché."

Rhodan raised his head and studied the mouse-beaver intently. "Pucky," he said slowly, gravely, a warning note in his voice, "Laury is a respectable girl. And I'm sure the Count..."

"Yes, yes, I know," Pucky agreed, nodding, the while making a precautionary move toward the door, which he opened and exited part way into the corridor before finishing his thought. "She's a respectable girl—but she's also in love..."

Then he wisely disappeared.

Rhodan looked at the closed door and sighed, waiting for the results of the automatic analysis test of the 3 planets.

When Marshall came sleepily into the control room the decision was already indicated. The *Koos-Nor* flew at the speol toward the solitary planet of the blue companion star.

"Pucky said something about a vacation," said Marshall. "Are you serious?"

Rhodan pointed to the viewscreen, where the planet was taking on a discernible shape. "Something like that John. It's a paid leave of absence but it's up for grabs who's going to pay off in the end. Not us, I hope."

The door opened again. Pucky came in, gingerly carrying the Count's sword in front of him. With a single jump he landed on the couch and lay the murderous weapon beside him.

"*Hethrew* it at me!" he muttered fretfully. "That Count sure has a short temper. How was I to know that..."

"Aren't you an esper?" Rhodan inquired with obvious reproach.

Marshall observed the telepathic mouse-beaver critically. "Do I detect the green tinge of envy?"

"Green tinge! Hmphf! You must be colour blond! I mean cuddle blind! Aw, go climb a carrot!" spluttered Pucky, then turned his attention to concentrate on the image of the approaching planet, which he suddenly found to be of profound interest.

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THE PSEUDO ONE

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

THE DAMNED OF ISAN.

Victims of hydrogen war holocaust.

Decimated remnants of a once advanced culture that went down to defeat in an atomic Armageddon, a



Final War.

It is among these unfortunate survivors of planetary warfare that Perry Rhodan and his people find themselves after the Affair of the Pseudo One, just completed, on Tolimon.

Unusual adventure & exciting events await the Rhodanites in an uncharted area of space, among the despairing inhabitants of Isan in—

UNKNOWN SECTOR: MILKY WAY

by

Kurt Mahr

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