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## **1/ THE MONSTERS & THE MOUSEBEAVERS**

THEY NOT ONLY looked like monsters—they*were!*

Their two-faced Janus heads were decidedly teardrop in shape and the pointed ends came up to elongated points—natural antennas some 20 mm long, which served the double purpose of sending and receiving their mental impulses. Nevertheless they were no more true telepaths than they were humanoids.

Their teardrop heads were equipped with 4 visual organs evenly spaced around them. By means of double ball-socket vertebrae the heads were connected to their 6-foot scaly-brown waspish torsos, each of which possessed 4 arms attached to the upper portion and were supported by 3 telescopic legs.

When the monstrosities set themselves in motion their unarticulated legs acted like telescoping shock absorbers, transporting their very thin bodies in a jumping motion, forward, backward or sideways.

A few hours ago they had disembarked by the thousands from their space armada and taken possession

of the planet. The native inhabitants were droll-looking mousebeavers who averaged about 3 feet in height. Being quite naive intellectually they merely watched the proceedings curiously, never suspecting that death had come to them in the form of these monsters. With more than 200 spaceships the strangers had landed on this cold, bleak, Mars-like planet which was known to humans as Vagabond.

Vagabond was the only planet of a dying sun, which it revolved around at a distance of 0.78 astronomical units. By Earth comparisons its radius was 0.6 and its gravity was 0.53 g. It possessed no oceans and not a single high mountain whereas 3-quarters of its surface was a ferrous rusty red wasteland.

At the edge of the desert near Vagabond's equator the monsters had landed in their peculiar spaceships. Following the pattern of their own double faces, which were like the Roman god Janus, the droplet-formed monsters had also given this form to their star ships, and at times there were two such double-faced ships in tandem.

With the calm assurance of conquerors accustomed to victory they soon began streaming out of their ships, none of which exceeded 200 meters in length. Each seemed to know what his assignment was. And what they proceeded to do was as incomprehensible as their appearance was shocking.

Suddenly a number of huge pieces of grotesque-looking machinery floated out of the ships, apparently held and guided by invisible forces. As for the mousebeavers who were observing all this from their distant hiding place, the events awakened in them their natural instinct for play, which was as much a part of their lives as eating and sleeping. Since they were fairly good at telekinesis they soon reached out with their paranormal forces and grasped the free-floating machinery parts in order to play with them.

In the same moment a few dozen mousebeavers emitted shrill cries and started rolling around on the ground. It was not long before they were dead.

More than half of the watching creatures had witnessed the inexplicable death of their comrades, yet none of the survivors got the idea that this sudden dying had something to do with their attempts to play—to play with the machines of these aliens which floated soundlessly from the ships and landed where groups of the monsters had been busy preparing for them.

The latter had paid little attention if any to this small drama of death among the native inhabitants. They regarded the mousebeavers' telekinetic playfulness as an expression of curiosity. The machinery parts were under control of the independently thinking and acting *Orgh*, which had answered the interference with a deadly counterblow. Their organic head antennas had warned them of the *Orgh*'s defensive action and for a second or so it had been impossible for them to communicate because the surging and waning howl of the *Ziupzip* had drowned out everything else.

Now the monster called *Oger-1* used his natural broadcasting system to make contact with *Oger-214*.

Monster #214 was standing at the farthest distance from the others near the last of the hills in view. It was characteristic of the monsters' mentality that each individual had only a reference number instead of a name. #214 had to use the prefix *Oger*, whenever he wished to identify himself among the members of another *shaft*.

Each *shaft* never exceeded the number 317 but never contained less than 109 individual members. #1 was always the *shaftgal*, an autocratic chief who was answerable only to the Gal. His powers of authority were established by law but this left him sufficient latitude to be a virtual lord over life and death.

"214, why hasn't the earth-moving project started?"

The sending and receiving organ of 214 functioned simultaneously in both directions. While his receiver was still conducting the question of Oger-1 into his brain and transforming the electrical impulses into thought, the answer was already going out over his antenna.

"The orgh lost its supply sequence, Oger-1. I have already sent my control signal to Nebu-56."

In one of the more than 200 spaceships, Nebu-56 had already determined the cause of the orgh's malfunction. He called to a shaftgal: "This is 56, Nebu-1. The attack of those animals has put an orgh out of timing. I will connect you with the orgh."

The independently thinking orgh heard the sharp question from Nebu-1 and then its answer rang out in the brain convolutions of Nebu-1. "Failure of 3 cell membranes due to telekinetic attack. Takeover of the function by gal-portion was only possible by rechanneling. This caused hold 7 to be unloaded before hold 6. The difficulty can only be regulated after total unloading. I must insist that any further telekinetic attacks be prevented!"

This was a death sentence for many mousebeavers on Vagabond. Even an autocratic shaftgal had to accede to the demands of an orgh.

Nebu-1 called over his organic radio to Cul-1 who was responsible for the security of all orghs. "This is Nebu-1! Our orgh requests the native animals be prevented from making any further telekinetic attacks!"

The monsters had no concept of communication beyond themselves. Whatever they said to each other had only to do with their work. There was no such thing as personality among them. Only the shaft had identity. The monsters took on the characteristics of the task that each shaft was assigned to. Aside from the Druufs, the galaxy had not witnessed such an extreme form of monstrosities since the beginning of its existence.

Cul-1 immediately made contact with the orgh who had failed to unload his ship according to program because of the mousebeaver interference. Shaftgal Cul-1 found out what defensive means the orgh had employed at the moment of the attack, which revealed that the natives could evidently be destroyed without difficulty.

At this same moment, on the edge of the western chain of hills a group of mousebeavers also decided to have some fun with these machinery parts that were floating through the air. Five of the cute little animals were all in agreement as to which of the mechanisms they would take hold of with their telekinetic forces and at a high-pitched chirp from the oldest among them they reached out simultaneously toward the cube-shaped object.

The thing suddenly rose 20 meters higher above its horizontal hover course but then began spinning as the pain-smitten animals cried out in agony, whereupon the mechanism shot vertically downward to the ground.

The monsters closest to the impact point attempted to jump away on their triple telescopic legs. As the 5 mousebeavers died, a menacing thunder emerged from the site of the machinery crash. Still more monsters started to move away. There was no sign of excitement or any other kind of humanlike emotion on their ugly faces with their shrivelled, onion-shaped noses. The only indication of their response to danger was their frantic attempt to get away.

The remaining mousebeavers looked at each other in puzzlement. They still had no thought that the death of their fellows was connected with their telekinetic activity. Suddenly a yellowish burst of radiation emerged out of nowhere and beamed them to death. A second energy burst fell upon the other group of mousebeavers with the same result.

But shaftgal Cul-1, who was responsible for the security of all orghs, was busy broadcasting special instructions on the general waveband for an immediate evacuation of the machinery-strewn terrain. The boiling and thundering sounds from the impact location increased from second to second.

The yellowish rings of radiation which had destroyed the mousebeavers vanished as swiftly and soundlessly as they had appeared. There was no indication of where they had come from. Also the strange energy beams which had enabled the orghs to unload the teardrop ships had ceased to operate. Where but moments before the machinery parts had been floating forward through the air in their programmed channels they had all simultaneously glided softly to the ground and now the monsters were hopping along between them in a hurried effort to reach their double-hulled ships.

Then the thin atmosphere of the planet was shaken by a tremendously loud explosion whose thundering echoes spread outward in all directions. There where the playfulness of 5 mousebeavers had caused a strange mechanism to bury itself in the earth, a volcano of energetic forces had broken out. Yellow gleaming waves of energy welled forth and flooded outward from the impact point with a deadly swiftness.

It was a race of life and death between the hopping monsters and the on-rolling tidal wave of yellow energy which devoured everything in its path, and the tandem-linked teardrop ships were simultaneously the goal and the target. Meanwhile jets of flame fanned out several thousand kilometres above the planet Vagabond and out of the small crater swelled more and more of the yellow energy as the swiftness of its flow appeared to increase relentlessly.

Everything that had been unloaded from the alien ships had by now ceased to exist and several hundred of the monstrous invaders had also fallen prey to the ravening forces. But now the yellow tide of energy seemed to sense the metallic masses of the tandem-hulled ships because the laterally propagating channels of destruction suddenly changed direction and moved toward the landing place.

Everywhere the deadly flood altered its course abruptly, converging into a single onrushing channel. Flowing at a depth of a foot or so across the sterile surface of Vagabond, the strange flood of energy did not appear to radiate any kind of heat. But whereas the surface of the fluidic force had previously been smooth it now revealed the first twisting ripples and eddies of a highly accelerated movement. The other hopping monsters soon became victims of their own technology.

The 5 mousebeavers had only sought to play with some things that had been floating through the air. However innocent and naive their natural instinct for playfulness, they had not died in vain. Either chance or some higher power had led them to grasp the core mechanism of a gigantic installation whose harnessed energies were to have pumped life into a mammoth power distributing station.

The monsters were helpless against this unleashed power. The released wave of energy hurled itself at the metallic masses of the spaceships and engulfed the first three of the teardrop vessels. Then as if this process of swallowing more worthy prey had been a signal for still swifter action the frightful yellow tide spread out over almost the entire area where the great armada had landed.

The ships' destruction or *absorption* proceeded soundlessly. When contacted by the yellowish flood, their metal hulls suddenly lost their form, collapsing into a sluggish liquid mass. Simultaneously these

masses were covered over by the on-pressing energy wall. They briefly left a dark stain behind them and then existed no more.

On Vagabond there were only 3 eyewitnesses to this soundless destruction of a mighty spacefleet. But these 3 mousebeavers could not comprehend that the extermination of the alien ships had saved their race from complete annihilation.

18 of the teardrop ships managed to flee. They had taken off silently but the 19th ship had not risen far enough to escape a high-reaching tendril of the deadly force. Upon contact, this vessel lost its form in a flash like its predecessors and collapsed into a sluggish, dark-staining residue which quickly faded and was no more.

The 18 star ships made a hasty departure from Vagabond, leaving turbulent air masses in their wake. There was no roaring or thundering of propulsion engines to be heard. The aliens disappeared in the direction of the small, feebly shining sun.

For 5 planetary days the fanned-out plume of yellow energy hung over the cold and desolate world but on the 6th day it dissipated and faded away without a trace.

Vagabond was Vagabond once more, Mars-like, chill and barren, and the mousebeavers continued to play through their simple and harmless lives. They did not know that they had escaped extinction by the skin of their incisors.

## **2/ MYSTERY OF THE IMPOSSIBLE**

McIntosh was a Communications Officer on board the *Potomac*. He was 53 years old and married.

The *Potomac* was a merchant spaceship of the Solar Empire which happened to be within 68 light-years of Vagabond as it plied its course toward Abel's Planet in order to pick up a cargo of lysir.

Lysir was a type of resinous gum which was only obtainable on Abel's Planet and was needed in great quantities on Earth. Through a refining process it was used to improve the material that Terran spacesuits were made of, which made them more impervious to cosmic rays than Arkonide spacesuits.

But McIntosh sat in the Com Room of the ship and thought neither of lysir nor of the planet Vagabond where Pucky came from—nor was he even thinking of spaceflight. His two youngsters Charles and Ben were keeping him in a state of continuous anxiety and fretfulness. The one boy was 18 and the other was 17. The older boy was always getting into some kind of trouble and his younger brother never failed to help him in the process.

What kind of jam might they have gotten into this time, McIntosh asked himself, and he dreaded his return to Earth. Whenever the *Potomac* was in port in Terrania he always had an automatic 3-day leave but McIntosh usually had to spend the whole 3 days agonizing over the further misdeeds of his sons and more than once he'd been forced to dig deep to pay for material damages they had caused.

He was thinking that if they had gotten into further mischief this time and if he had to pay out still more

money to cover the damages, then... But the unhappy thought was interrupted. The *Potomac*'s energy sensor had just come to life and in that instant McIntosh was transformed from worried father to a duty officer in the Com Room.

He looked at the sensor's oscillograph. On the upper portion of the display was an ominous maze of wildly peaking amplitudes and in the lower portion a diagram appeared. McIntosh was a quiet, withdrawn little man who had permitted himself the one indulgence of wearing a small goatee and refused to shave it off regardless of the hazing he took because of it. At this moment, the little man's eyes widened in astonishment.

He breathed excitedly. He sat frozen in his seat and stared at the oscillograph as though the apparatus had just confronted him with the master riddles of the universe. "Great galaxies!" he exclaimed to himself. "What the devil is that? I've never seen anything like that in my life!"

Although he knew very well that the small computer here always stored each oscillograph tracking event in its registers he simply had to make sure that it had done so in this case. This tangled maze of sine waves and amplitude spikes and the incomprehensible diagram seemed to him so important that he got up against his better judgment to check the positronicon and see if the sensor data were actually going into the registers.

Then he went back and sat down. More by instinct rather than circumspection, he turned on his space telecom and put in a hypercall to Terrania's main energy sensor station.

"This is merchant ship *Potomac* calling, code 0-34, Communications Officer McIntosh. There's a strong energy burst I'm picking up from the direction of Vagabond, presumably from the planet itself. Our present position from Vagabond is 68 light-years. The waveforms and diagram patterns are so strange and indecipherable that I am requesting an energy-trace checkout!"

The answer came back from the Terrania station on Earth: "Thanks very much for your report. Main sensors here have already picked up the blast trace, confirmed as Vagabond position. We'll contact you again if we need any further check-backs."

But the scientists in Terrania did not call back to Com Officer McIntosh. At least not immediately.

The *Potomac* landed on Abel's Planet which was the home of the half-intelligent Rikkers, a dwarfish humanoid race. There it took on its coveted cargo of lysir and was just taking off for its return trip when a telecom message was received from Terrania. Instead of flying directly to Earth the *Potomac* was ordered to first pay a visit to Vagabond and make a few turns around the Mars-like world in a reconnaissance orbit. Before McIntosh could ask any questions the great hypercom station on Terrania cut off the connection.

Capt. Hodkin, who looked like a heavyweight boxer anyway, proceeded to blow his top when McIntosh transmitted this order to him over the intercom. "OK, you got us into this detour, McIntosh! So you can just brace yourself for no 3-day leave when we get back to Terrania! Do you have to radio Earth for every minor detail that comes up?"

A half-hour later the *Potomac* made a hypertransition and emerged into normal space between the dimly shining small sun and the planet Vagabond. It was the 7th day after McIntosh's energy reading.

The freighter circled the desolate planet 8 times but as fate would have it the orbital passage took it 3 times over the critical location at an altitude of 1000 km. Unseen below was an area of some 2 square,

km which was completely glazed over and giving off a weak steel blue fluorescence. The *Potomac*'s energy sensor remained unresponsive. Even the previous day on Abel's Planet it had hardly revealed any more reactions. McIntosh was of the opinion that the major magnitude energy source had rapidly subsided.

McIntosh ventured to make a suggestion. "Captain, shouldn't we stay in orbit until we've gotten a full cartographic picture of the planet's surface?"

Hodkin glared angrily at his Com officer. "Who sent us that order? Certainly not the Chief?"

"No, Captain. At least it wasn't signed by Perry Rhodan."

"Then I wonder if you would be so kind as to let me in on the secret, Mr. McIntosh!" Hodkin exclaimed unpleasantly. "Who signed the order?"

"Grimpel in energy tracking, Captain. The name doesn't ring a bell."

"Nor with me either! OK, then we're going into course for Terra! So this world that has nothing to even sink your teeth into is the place where our mousebeaver Pucky came from? Hard to believe. But anyway, McIntosh, what the devil was it you detected? Did that energy blast really come from here?"

"Precisely from Vagabond's position, sir," replied McIntosh. His voice betrayed uneasiness. He had not forgotten how brusque the Terranian energy-tracking operator had been with him on the telecom.

18 hours later the *Potomac* landed at the gigantic spaceport in Terrania. The telescopic landing struts had hardly come into position before the merchant vessel's ship-to-ground intercom rang out:

"Communications Officer McIntosh, contact Mr. Grimpel, Chief of Energy-Sensor Section! McIntosh, report to Mr. Grimpel with all reconnaissance data! Communications Officer McIntosh...!"

The summons was repeated 3 times. It so happened that Hodkin and McIntosh were together when the call came through "You'd think they didn't know who's in charge around here!" grumbled Hodkin. "But now... McIntosh... if you tell Grimpel you made that suggestion about a complete cartographic survey and blab to him that I cancelled it, then... well, you know who'll be on the intercom! You catch?"

This time, however, McIntosh was quicker with the repartee, having momentarily forgotten that it was characteristic of him to always take a back seat. He nodded to his captain with a beaming smile. "Thanks very much, Capt. Hodkin, for giving me back my 3-day leave!"

The latter looked at him uncomprehendingly for a moment but then his grim expression was relieved by a smirk. He made a conciliatory gesture. "Oh sure, sure... You know, McIntosh, we're both getting to the age when we're likely to forget one thing or another. I'm glad you reminded me about your leave!"

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From their inception a certain amount of rivalry had always existed between Perry Rhodan's Solar Spacefleet and the merchant ships. Such vectors of tension were not easy to eliminate but the

psychologists had given up searching for causes after Reginald Bell had expressed himself on the matter.

"Gentlemen, why try to stop a healthy feud? You know rivalry even existed between Cain and Abel and if Old Man Adam wasn't able to handle his two sons do you think you could get the troops in the Solar Fleet to be friends with those merchant spacers?"

With the sense of facing a rival, McIntosh greeted the leader of the Energy-Sensor Centre in Terrania, Mr. Walter Grimpel. However, he was astonished when Grimpel spoke to him enthusiastically and thanked him several times for the interesting report that McIntosh had sent in during his approach flight to Abel's Planet.

McIntosh had to keep revising his attitude toward the Solar Fleet, and even though this Walter Grimpel couldn't have been more than 30 years old he was getting to like him more and more.

"Very fine now, Mr. McIntosh, if you'd just show me your data. You can't imagine how many sleepless hours this energy emanation from Vagabond has cost me. First of all I have a question: have you been able to figure out in the meantime what all those spaghetti wave patterns were trying to indicate? So far I've been at a loss. And you?"

This open frankness touched McIntosh more deeply than he cared to admit and a degree of cordiality developed between the two men.

McIntosh laughed. "I'm certainly happy to know that the waveforms as well as the pattern graphs are a riddle to you, too, Mr. Grimpel. But you must have deduced something by now. After all, here in Terrania you have all the instrumentation at hand and..."

"That's easy for you to say. Even the giant positronicon on Venus doesn't know what to make of that scramble of waveforms or the pattern graphs, and as to the magnitude of the forces we reported, all the robot brain could say was: '*There are no such adverse magnitudes of force possible.*' Nice, eh? But now have a seat, please, Mr. McIntosh!"

Two hours later when McIntosh made his way back to the *Potomac*, intending to use his short ground leave for a quick flight to England, Perry Rhodan found Grimpel's report on his desk.

"Vagabond?" he muttered thoughtfully. And immediately Pucky came to mind, since the mousebeaver had originated from that sparsely covered Mars-sized planet. "Energies which the Venus brain says cannot exist? And Grimpel can't make anything out of his sensor indications either...?"

Could it be that still more technical secrets lay slumbering in the depths of Vagabond than men yet suspected?

Rhodan pondered over this report much longer than he had intended to. Later in the evening when he returned to his office after a strenuous political meeting he reached for the same notes again. Something bothered him. He gave his full concentration to the written data before him.

"Hm-m..." He was about to signature the report when his eye was caught by a phrase: *cartography data from merchant ship Potomac ...*

He made a video telecom contact with Grimpel.

"This is Rhodan. I have your report. Why haven't you included the photographic data, Grimpel?"



On the viewscreen Rhodan saw Grimpel regretfully shrug his shoulders. "Unfortunately we can't do much with that, sir. Capt. Hodkin of the *Potomac* has not completed a 100% photographic survey of Vagabond. About 16% of the surface area has not been covered... so the whole input is worthless."

"But haven't you evaluated the mapping material you did receive, Grimpel?"

"I put it through everything I've got here but how can that help, sir, when the very location is missing that we determined here to be the point of origin of the energy eruption?" Grimpel's voice sounded exasperated and his face expressed great dissatisfaction.

"Grimpel," admonished Rhodan humorously, "kindly don't assassinate that freighter captain with your thoughts..."

Walter Grimpel started visibly as he felt himself unmasked. But now he gave full vent to his anger. "Sir, here I was on the trail of a tremendous phenomenon and suddenly I find that the tools have been taken out of my hands by somebody who doesn't understand what he's dealing with!"

Rhodan was startled by the other's burst of temperament. "Grimpel, will you vouch for the fact that this energy eruption actually came from Vagabond? Just think of how many bogey sources there can be over a stretch of many light-years which could falsify the sensor results."

But Walter Grimpel was sure of himself. "Sir, when this energy outbreak happened on Vagabond the *Potomac* was only 68 light-years away from it. Com Officer McIntosh only had an M-17 sensor at his disposal. Although that's an antiquated model it's completely precise at distances under 100 light-years. I have compared his results with ours. Sir, that blast occurred *on* Vagabond and I'm in a position to narrow down the source-point of this mysterious energy within 5 km!"

"I'll take you up on that, Grimpel, but I have a question: have you taken the trouble to compare the values of this energy trace with our energy data from the Druuf universe?"

"That's been done, too, sir! The greatest computer brain we have in Terrania refused to give an answer but the positronicon on Venus has determined within a certainty factor of 97.53% that this strange energy has nothing to do with the Druuf universe, and it also went on to say..."

Rhodan interrupted him. The grey eyes gazed thoughtfully at Grimpel's image on the screen. "I know. The Brain refuses to grant the possibility that this kind of energy exists. I'll come back to this matter and then I'll give you my decision as to whether or not I'll send you, yourself, to Vagabond."

Grimpel looked up in surprise. Before he could say anything, Rhodan added: "Three days from now at the latest, Grimpel. I'm taking off in an hour for Venus. Send over all available input on this that you have and deliver it to the boarding lock of the *Drusus* —including the material from the Communications officer. I'll question the positronic brain myself. Day after tomorrow I'll be back and I'll get in touch with you. Thank you very much, Mr. Grimpel."

Rhodan cut off. Just once he thought fleetingly of Pucky the mousebeaver before he turned to other problems. He had an instinctive urge to discuss this mysterious happening on Vagabond with him but Pucky was presently with John Marshall on a special mission to Arkon's Crystal World where they were helping Atlan with a mysterious political situation.

Later when Rhodan stepped into the boarding lock of the *Drusus*, which stood ready for takeoff, the

lock officer handed him the package from the Chief of the Terranian Energy-Sensor Station.

In 3 days at most, thought Rhodan, we will know more. He failed to suspect that he had forfeited a onetime opportunity.

### **3/ THE BLACK WALL OF DEATH**

Four great double-hulled teardrop ships dropped downward toward Vagabond. After landing close to the cold blue fluorescent surface of the crystallized energy pool, the ships' outer locks opened up. In each of the 4 alien vessels an orgh appeared to be active again with the task of unloading the cavernous holds because one set of machinery after another floated outward on invisible beams and the various assemblies came methodically together in a staging process as though being constructed by magical hands. Here was a technology that overshadowed anything that had ever been seen in this part of the galaxy.

Only a few dozen monsters moved about in their strange hopping motions near the edge of the glazed-over area and now they demonstrated that they were equipped with more than the transceiver organisms at the tapered ends of their teardrop heads. Hidden in their 4 arms were certain work tools which they now made use of. In these organic instruments alone was a monstrous alienness apparent. Out of tiny openings between their hook-like claws came beams of energy which cut into the crystallized surface of the glazed area and carved out ellipsoid 1-foot chunks of the fluorescent material. These beams were so powerful that they performed the carving—with effortless ease.

Then the independently operating orgh of the nearest ship must have taken over because the ellipsoid chunks of crystallized substance floated upwards onto the invisible beams and approached the vessel, finally to disappear into its open lock.

Meanwhile the machine parts had been assembled into a monstrous mechanism of some sort, which was standing at the edge of the solidified energy lake. From the highest hill in the distance a single mousebeaver witnessed the scene. Finally it drew in its broad beaver tail, took one more look at the hideous machine, assembly and hopped away in terror down the farther slope, finally taking refuge in its underground abode.

Measuring more than 200 meters in length, the elongated string of machinery suddenly raised up from the ground and hovered at a height of only 20 centimetres or so. Then it moved out over the two square kilometres of the glazed lake and went to work. Between the sweeping front edge of the assemblage and the crystallized surface below, the air shimmered strangely with a pale orange light. The peripheral zone of the fluorescent plane quickly broke up like an ice floe being carried away and melted down by a warm flood of water. But this process went further. Under the massive cleanup operation, this part of the once molten lake disappeared entirely without leaving the slightest trace of its crystal formation.

The decomposition and dissolving process seemed to accelerate almost by itself. The serpentine linkage of machines moved soundlessly forward, faster and faster, and in less than 10 minutes it reached the opposite edge of the glazed area. Then it whipped about and with even greater speed approached the landing place of the 4 tandem-hulled teardrop ships.

Two hours later, no crystallized lake of fluorescent energy was to be seen on Vagabond. The monsters had eliminated all traces of their presence here, yet they were still not satisfied with the results.

With a ghostly absence of sound, the long string of machinery was disassembled in the same invisible manner in which it had been put together and the individual components swiftly disappeared into the holds of the alien spaceships. In front of the vessels there were no more of the two-faced monstrosities to be seen. The elliptical hatches of the star ships closed. The vessels seemed to be ready to leave but no takeoff occurred.

Instead, a tornado broke out at a distance of some 100-km from the landing area and rose angrily above the rust-red deserts of Vagabond. At first it swirled in one spot and sucked up great masses of sand with its titanic forces. The longer the cyclone raged, the more it swelled in diameter, yet it did not move from the location of its origin. It also grew in height so that within half an hour the viciously spinning tower of dust reached an altitude of 20 km.

The roaring and howling of the whirlwind exceeded anything that Vagabond had ever experienced. In their deep and extensive burrows the mousebeavers huddled together and trembled, frightened by this natural catastrophe whose horrible song thundered in their ears. Even the most venturesome and curious of the comical creatures did not dare to go out and have a look around.

Finally the giant black pillar, measuring more than 15 km in diameter, began to set itself in motion. The super storm swept toward the former location of the crystallized lake at a tremendous speed. En route the cyclone tore up further masses of sand and took them with it. With deep rumblings and thundering it swept onward, darkening the skies and bringing with it the shadows of night. The 4 double-hulled teardrop ships lay on the landing field as though forgotten. The monsters inside appeared not to fear this titanic maelstrom of forces.

The storm mass reached the former area of the glassy lake and came to a hovering stop, at the same time lessening its whirling motion. Mountainous torrents of reddish sand poured downward over this portion of the chill planet. Within a few minutes the entire area was buried under a 20-meter layer of sand and even the 4 spaceships were not spared. The nearest crests of the hills hardly protruded from the drift-like surface. Within a short period of time the appearance of this stretch of land had been completely changed.

The cyclone moved onward but did not regain its raving rate of rotation. Although its forward movement was still in the range of 100 km per hour, the giant pillar slowly collapsed into a broad storm area much closer to the ground. Where it raced over the surface of Vagabond it left the earth buried under drifts and dunes of sand which finally covered an area 500 km long and 100 km wide.

As suddenly as they had mysteriously come into being, the catastrophic forces subsided, which was an indication that the entire storm had been generated by artificial means. And once more the dreary planet of Vagabond was dominated by silence, coldness and desolation.

Inside the second spaceship was *agal* to whom the 4 shaftgals were subordinate. Nothing in his physical appearance differentiated him from the others but in the manner in which he sat before his strange-looking observation consoles he expressed his power unmistakably. After observing the collapse of the cyclonic storm, he swung about in his oddly shaped seat and beamed a message through his sending organ to the shaftgal underlings.

"We take off in 5 units of time. The depressions left behind by our ships are to be camouflaged!"

The teardrop ships were in 20 meters of rust-coloured sand. They protruded some 80 meters above it. Now as one ship after the other rose soundlessly upward they all came to a hovering stop in the air. Beneath them were 8 long troughs in the sand, which had been made by their 4 double hulls. Then suddenly a vast invisible hand appeared to sweep over the sandy surface and fill in every hole, leaving no brace behind.

After that the ships picked up speed on a vertical course into the sky, where they disappeared in a frightening burst of acceleration. Nine hours after their landing there was no clue left on Vagabond to reveal the temporary presence of the aliens.

At this same time, Perry Rhodan contacted the chief of the Energy-Sensor Station in Terrania and assigned him the task of flying to Vagabond in a State-class cruiser, where he was to make a thorough investigation.

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Five days later, Walter Grimpel was back with his team again in Terrania. He sat in front of Perry Rhodan and gave his report.

"...so in the final analysis, all that can be said about our investigation is that we found nothing, sir. There wasn't the slightest suggestion anywhere to indicate that a super magnitude eruption of energy occurred on Vagabond. That's why the only thing we could keep going back to was that tremendous strip of sand. It's about 600 km long and it happens to cover the geographic location which we had previously determined to be the source-point of the energy outbreak."

So we tried to remove some of the sand over the area in question so we could take a look at the surface and after a few failures we even managed to do that. But there again, nothing was to be found. Still, I didn't want to just simply admit that I'd made a mistake in this whole thing. The ship was all set for takeoff again when I went outside for the last time... and that, sir, is when I found *this*." Grimpel produced a pea-sized lump of material which appeared to be surrounded by a cold blue fluorescence. He shoved it over to Rhodan.

With renewed interest, Rhodan picked it up with his fingers and then dropped it into his palm and weighed it. "Surprisingly heavy, Grimpel. What is it?"

Grimpel sighed in frustration. "Sir, I have to say we don't know!"

Rhodan looked at him in astonishment. Then, as was his habit in most moments of excitement, he calmed himself and spoke quietly. "Grimpel, on a research flight like that, didn't you have the right kind of technical assistants with you?"

The Energy-Sensor Chief raised up his hands defensively. "I had Dr. Innogow..."

"Innogow?" said Rhodan wonderingly. "And Innogow wasn't able to analyse this? That's amazing!"

"Sir, the physical behaviour of this fluorescent material is even more amazing. It doesn't show a reaction to any thing—completely inert!"

"But you certainly must have determined its atomic weight, Grimpel!"

"That we have done, sir, but it's a little bit hard to believe that the material in question is supposed to be just sand!"

"Sand?" Rhodan's gaze strayed into distance. Sand, you say? And you spoke of a sandstorm on Vagabond? This heavy material is supposed to be sand?"

Grimpel laughed in his embarrassment. "I asked the same questions of Dr. Innogow. At first he gave me a straight 'no' for an answer but then he hurried on to say that he had found *traces* of sand in it—maybe a 4,000th part of the total mass. He told me not to ask him what the rest of it was because he didn't know. And that just about winds up my report, sir."

Rhodan regarded him thoughtfully. "Grimpel, I'm missing an important point in your report. Didn't you see to it that some contact was made with the mousebeavers?"

"Of course I ordered such action, sir," said Grimpel. "But we didn't come across a single one of them within a thousand kilometres. We found a few finally at the southern pole and two days later we ran into a large group of them on the other side of the planet in the equatorial zone. Unfortunately they made it impossible for us to communicate with them."

"However cute these mousebeavers may be, with that playful instinct of theirs combined with their telekinetic powers they made a madhouse out of our ship! Whatever wasn't bolted down began flying every which way. Things started doing flips and falling even from the ceiling. . . and three times I myself was caught in the telekinetic grasp of one of those little devils."

"Sir, we had to get away from that bunch of little ruffians because after all we wanted to get back to Earth and not be forced to sit there in a demolished ship, waiting for a rescue expedition. Those mousebeavers can be a regular plague! The only thing that surprises me is that Pucky is so good-mannered by contrast. . ."

"If you only knew some of that little one's escapades, Grimpel," Rhodan cautioned him. But he was plainly not satisfied with the results of the reconnaissance trip to Vagabond. He still held the piece of mysterious substance between his fingers and now he looked at it again. "Grimpel, have you also checked the ground radiation?"

"Sir," replied the other with emphasis, "I don't think we left anything untried in order to solve the riddle of that energy blast. But everything was without result—everything!"

Grimpel met Bell at the door to Rhodan's office. Owing to his excellent memory for faces, Bell immediately recognized the Chief of the Energy-Sensor Centre and he knew of the assignment he had been on.

When he went into the office he sat down unceremoniously in the still warm seat Grimpel had left. "Well? Anything new, Perry?" he asked.

"Yes, this," said Rhodan, and he shoved the small piece of fluorescent material across to his friend.

"So what is it?" asked Bell without touching it.

"My chubby chum, I'll have you know that one-4000th of that stuff is sand!"

Reginald Bell leaned forward to look at the shining blue particle. When he carefully picked it up the first thing he noticed was its weight. "What the heck! This stuff's heavier than lead!"

"It's some super-heavy material—but that completely exhausts our knowledge concerning it. It was found on Vagabond under 20 meters of sand. In fact, my friend, exactly at the spot that Grimpel determined was the focal point of that energy blast. . ."

"Why didn't you let Pucky go along on that mission? For any action on Vagabond, he would have been the number one candidate!"

"You must certainly be aware of the fact that he and Marshall are with Atlan on the Crystal World at the moment and that he's indispensable there."

Bell smiled knowingly. "When you come on with that official tone of yours, Perry, you can fool others maybe but not yours truly. To take off the wrappings—the Vagabond excursion turned out to be a dud. Am I right?"

"This fellow Grimpel didn't get a single chance on Vagabond to make any useful contact with the mousebeavers!" There was an angry note in Rhodan's voice.

Bell grinned. "Did he and his ship have to merk off?"

"Right. Make a run for it."

Bell cut him short. "And you can't blame him for it, Perry! Those mousebeavers are really little rascals once they start playing. Have you forgotten already the tricks that Pucky played on us that first time and what we had to go through on Vagabond? I'm surprised that Grimpel even got out of there in one piece!"

"Hm-m. . . You build a pretty good case for Grimpel."

"All I'm trying to do is to consider the circumstances he had to face. But to get back to this lump of heavy material. . . have you given thought to the Druufs?"

"We're ahead of you there. Of course it goes without saying that Druuf ships could have landed on Vagabond and may still be cruising around somewhere in our own stellar continuum, but in the meantime our people haven't exactly been asleep. Whatever we have on record concerning the Druuf universe has been retrieved in order to help us decipher the pattern charts and a very wild assortment of sine waves. In this connection I've submitted, questions to the positronic brain on Venus. It gave me a flat no on the Druuf possibility so they couldn't have had anything to do with that energy burst on Vagabond."

Bell let out a groan. "Robot brain! Super-positronicon! The Think-Clinker on Venus! Always this mechanized think-tank business! Look—as a working tool I can go along with that contraption but that's the end of my sympathies for it. Perry, if only one breath of life could be breathed into it, then I'd recognize the decision of a positronicon. I'm sorry but I hate that cold-blooded number-shuffling monstrosity!"

"So in spite of all that, what if the Druufs have really been up to some kind of mischief on Vagabond? Are we as familiar with the Druuf universe as some people might think we are? I mean, do we know it like the back of our hands? In fact we should quit kidding ourselves that we're even at home in the starry

jungles of our own galaxy! So Venus positronic, my eye! What do you really know? Imagination and the powers of extrapolation, the very things that distinguish us as humans—your positronic has never heard of those. I have a notion that Druuf ships have been fooling around on Vagabond. What does your C-14 analysis show on this little heavyweight chunk—I mean, as to its age?"

"Nothing. And just so there'll be no doubt in your mind about that, Bell... that little chunk you happen to be holding between your fingers has refused to respond at all to a C-14 analysis. So what do you say now?"

Bell's gaze travelled several times between the small piece of material and Rhodan. He pondered the matter and then said: "OK, so no Druufs. No Druuf matter would fail to show some C-14. Well now, that *does* open up the doors! What next? Two weeks ago we were just getting acquainted with the water people of Opghan—and now this! But can we be sure the energy blast occurred *on* Vagabond and not *off* of it somewhere in the middle of the void? Are the readings of our sensors so exact that a mistake is out of the question?"

"I wish I could tell you that the tracing was not precise. Unfortunately that isn't the case and it was also unfortunate that I made the mistake of not sending Pucky to Vagabond. I don't mean to criticize Grimpel's work but I can't shake off the feeling that he's overlooked something important. So from here on in we're going to keep the planet Vagabond under constant surveillance."

\* \* \* \*

The monsters came a third time to Vagabond.

They were detected neither by Arkonide nor Terran tracking stations.

This time more than 500 double-hulled teardrop ships approached the equatorial zone on the opposite side of the planet. They landed in a gigantic circle formation which left a free area between them that was about 8 km in diameter. And this operation was led by the gal chiefs themselves rather than by the shaftgals.

Once more the mysterious unloading of their cargo holds ensued. And once again the two-faced monsters went hopping about in the central area, intent upon things that the concealed mousebeaver observers could not understand. Nor could any human have made rhyme or reason of the strange proceedings.

The monsters themselves were not aware of anything unusual about their activities. They had no capability of differentiating between good and evil. Any assignment was simply a task schedule to be carried out. Their very lives were nothing more than a continuing schedule of tasks. Even the lives of the shaftgals and—the *topgal* himself.

All of them were members of a community which had no concept of either coercion or submission. Although they were outwardly indistinguishable one from the other and each might as well have been the other's duplicate, nevertheless they were capable of recognizing individuals in their swarm. This recognition was even easier when they spoke to one another by means of their organic transceiver systems.

Each of them had an identifying wave pattern—a recognition characteristic that was fully as unique as human fingerprints. All it left out was the shaftgal prefix and the lifetime assignment number of each of the monstrosities. It did not seem unusual to them that they were registered at birth like so many physical commodities in a warehouse. Creatures who were alien to the concept of either joy or sorrow, who had never developed an individual ego and were merely components of a hive-intelligence—such as these could know nothing else.

The unloading operations in the giant fleet went on for two days. The mousebeavers living in their burrows near the landing area got their ‘money’s worth’, so to speak, as they peered out curiously from their concealment and watched the soundlessly floating machinery and saw the individual assemblies moving under invisible forces as they joined together into a long, corkscrew-like formation.

By the third day the observing mousebeavers began to get bored. Eight members of a 50-member community finally got together and agreed that they would take hold of this corkscrew thing, in spite of its 100-meter height, and make *it fly* ...

This team of 8 had the strongest telekinetic powers in their particular group. In altercations with other mousebeaver packs or tribes they had always managed to be the victors. They would simply unleash their paranormal forces against any hill inhabited by unfriendly neighbours and send it flying a few kilometres into the sky. Falling from an altitude of 3 or 4 thousand meters, nothing was left of such hills but shattered clumps of earth which often buried the offenders.

Thus, at a signal from their leader, the playful creatures reached out in concert toward the gigantic machine contraption. The structure appeared to break loose from the ground with a lurch but it had hardly started to move before the ill-fated mischief makers were seized by a titanic force that had nothing in common with their own telekinesis. At the same time the tremendous corkscrew construction was torn from its vertical position and soon lay hovering horizontally over the ground at an approximate height of one meter.

However the entire 50 mousebeavers, young and old, presented a frightful picture as they rolled across the ground in a paroxysm of pain. Their anguished cries were still ringing out over the dreary terrain as a wan of blackness swept upon the group of hills where the mousebeavers had their burrows. The wall struck with the swiftness of lightning and then was gone.

Of the assembled mousebeavers there was not a trace. From one moment to the next, down in the deep tunnels and burrows and extensive subterranean community rooms, all life was extinguished.

The monsters had struck back

As though moved by magic, the huge machine assembly straightened up again and found anchorage in the ground. Once more it towered 100 meters into the air. From that time on, the busy comings and goings of the monsters had no further witnesses.

Thegal known as Erin was inspecting the particular orgh on board his own vessel. Supported on an asymmetrical housing was an open, elliptical basin in which something floated which might have been plasma as well as a fluid mass of chitinish material. In the centre of the sluggish fluid a bright spot began to glow with a brilliant intensity as one of thegal's two faces turned toward it and focussed one spherical eye upon it.

He sent out a question over his organic communicator: "Orgh, are we being molested again?"



From the open basin, the answer emerged on the same wave channel: "Gal-Enn, there are still 3 communities within 200*couss* of distance. May I eliminate the creatures?"

"Eliminate them!" ordered the*gal* . "Reveal yourself, orgh!"

The*gal* took a step back and then lowered his head slightly while one of his 4 eyes watched the oddly shaped housing under the basin become more and more transparent. A confused assortment of small dark elements and encapsulated modules became visible within. Tiny tendrils of lightning were cracking in all directions. The*gal* raised an arm which came out of his waspish body at a point that would have been the breastbone on humans. He aimed the arm at a yellowish point between the capsule components. Spreading his 2nd and 3rd talons, he brought to light a tiny opening.

A high-pitched singing sound indicated that an invisible ray of energy must have been projected from the opening, for immediately a visible change came over the yellowish area. It swelled out like a transparent rubber balloon, embracing all the nearby circuit elements in the process. This made it possible to see clearly into the interior of the thing: an organism composed of chambers, muscles and sinews, but also containing helical fields which revealed an iron-filing type pattern of magnetic flux. Here organic and technological elements were combined in one entity which was just now being supplied with additional energy from Gal-Enn.

By the time the*gal* cut off his energy beam, the yellowish sphere occupied fully a third of the underhousing's volume. The singing sound stopped and the expansion of the yellow globe ceased. Also the transparency of the support casing began to wane. The*gal* dropped his arm and turned away. He exited the small room whose walls emitted a diffused light.

Death came again to the mousebeavers in the form of a soundless, lightning-swift wall of blackness. Doom had been unleashed and guided by the orgh, an inexplicable organic-electronic hybrid thing from a monstrous world, and in that moment several hundred Vagabond inhabitants ceased to exist. In a circular area of 1,000 kin around the landing place, Vagabond had truly become a desolate world in which not even a plant was alive.

\* \* \* \*

On the 6th day after the landing, 9 of the double-hulled ships returned from a flight over the planet. During the mission each ship had made two landings and in each instance one of the mighty corkscrew assemblies had been unloaded with the help of an orgh. The unwieldy mechanisms were buried in the ground until only a foot or so of the tremendous constructions protruded above the surface. However, prior to each takeoff from such an area, the black wall of death swept outward and cleared the terrain of life within a range of 80 square kin.

The 9 ships had barely landed at their original location before the last of the monsters disappeared back into their star ships. The huge installations in the clearing had been left to stand there in the eerie silence and desolation—an uncanny spectacle to any chance human observer.

With the assistance of 3 shaftgals, Gal-Enn issued a series of orders to the Control Central of his ship. The 3 shaftgals stood before a dark grey, slightly concave console board which presented a

haphazard-looking maze of thumb-sized knobs and other protuberances. Each of the monsters was using 3 arms at a time to manipulate one knob or another across the board without interfering with the apparently meaningless activity of his colleague.

By the time Gal-Enn had beamed out his final instruction, not even a shaftgal made any further move.

Considerably more than 500 alien spaceships lay on the surface of Vagabond, and each double-hulled vessel had its own orgh. By means of his special orders and with the help of the 3 assistant shaftgals, Gal-Enn had linked up all orghs into a single entity. Then with this single *orgh* the monsters proceeded to transfer their whole machine installation into the depths of the planet.

They were manipulating forces that were unknown to either Arkonides or Terrans. What would have been difficult problems even for Arkonide or Earthly technology were taken care of by the monsters with apparent ease. At a depth of 10 kilometres the massive bedrock became molten. A series of arteries of molten rock came into being, each of which flowed away from the boiling central magma pool and found its way into peripheral natural caverns, which became outlet chambers for the lava thus created.

Within a time span of half a day on Vagabond a great subterranean cavern came into being. The dome-shaped hollow space had a floor area of 5 square kilometres and an average ceiling height of 200 meters. Gal-Enn was no sooner informed by the orgh that the cavern had reached the required dimensions before he beamed out the command to start the transfer and installation.

The 3 shaftgals at the concave console panel made only a few more adjustments of the knobs with their taloned hands. Outside beyond the alien ships a phantomesque drama was silently performed. One assembly complex after another disappeared, apparently dissolving into thin air. Without using a matter transmitter or receiver, a gigantic machine installation spreading over 3 square km was transferred 10,000 meters deep through earth and rocks into a cavern that had just been prepared for it. Unit by unit, the huge components were again assembled in a circle just as they had been on the surface within the cordon of spaceships.

After the spectral performance had gone on for half a Vagabond hour, Gal-Enn received a signal which confirmed that the scheduled operation had been completed.

Gal-Enn no longer needed the concentrated energy of all orghs combined. His 3 shaftgals received orders to reduce the master hookup to the former pattern of individual orgh operation. The manipulation of the protuberances on the concave control board began anew.

Gal-Enn was not perturbed when a message came in over his alarm frequency: "Unidentified spaceship approaching planet!"

With a complete equanimity, Gal-Enn answered: "Activate visual obscuration!" Whereupon the unidentified ship ceased to be of interest to him. He knew from extensive experience that his fleet's visual blackout screen was more than adequate.

In the third ship beyond him, another shaftgal sat alone in a room that was filled with indescribable equipment. The complex instrumentation here had no resemblance to either Arkonide, Terranian or even Druuf construction. Here everything was as unspeakably alien as all other parts of this monsters' fleet from the unknown.

By means of his double face the shaftgal was able to watch the indicators both in front of him and behind him because he had an almost 360° vision and his 4 eyes as well as his 4 arms were busy. He had been

informed by the Gal-Enn that the installations deep within the planet's rocky crust had started into operation. His task was to determine whether or not the charges being effected were in accordance with the forecast planning of their scientists.

At an altitude of several thousand meters a Terranian ship of the light cruiser class had been flying around the planet for some hours while obtaining a series of cartographic photos and meanwhile the more than 500 monster ships lay below under a screen of invisibility as they waited for the first indications that their experiment was progressing as planned.

In his instrumented work lab the observing shaftgal compared his memory-stored data from the scientists with the indications on his multiple panels and screens. But he still hesitated to inform the Gal-Enn that the operation within the planet was turning out to be successful. Another Vagabond hour passed while the light cruiser of the Solar Fleet continued circumnavigating the planet and then the shaftgal became certain that their experiment would be crowned with success.

He transmitted the results of his observations to the Gal-Enn.

"Takeoff in 10 time units!" the Gal-Enn ordered.

He still continued to ignore the alien spaceship circling the planet. The 10th time unit was reached. Under their visual 'blackout,' the more than 500 monster star ships departed from Vagabond.

But they were too sure of themselves. In spite of their superior shielding they were detected by Terra's light cruiser. Yet the Terranians were dubious about their indications because this was not only a highly unusual type of tracking pickup, it was also unusable. They doubted the wave-reflection analyser and mistrusted especially the output data which maintained that at 74 km, green coördinates 45.32:49, a body measuring several km in diameter was moving toward outer space. The position indicator was switched to maximum magnification but it revealed nothing. Therefore the crew in the Control Central of the spherical ship came to the conclusion that their echo-wave analyser was in need of repairs.

So it was that a combination of chance circumstances enabled the giant fleet of the monsters to leave the planet Vagabond right under the eyes of the Terranian reconnaissance ship.

#### **4/ PUCKY'S CRISIS**

For some time now Pucky had been acting strangely. The mousebeaver who was also a lieutenant in the Mutant Corps was no longer *the* Pucky that everyone had always known.

After his last mission against Thomas Cardif on the important Springer planet Archetz the change began to occur. Following his return to Earth it was at first not noticeable but when it finally reached a certain stage of development Bell was the first to see it.

The red-haired first Deputy of the Solar Administrator had jokingly greeted him and laid a heavy hand on his shoulder. "Hi there, Mickey Mouse! What gives with you, little buddy? Are you sick or something?"

Pucky had seemed to be repulsed by his touch and had chirped out grumpily: "Oh, lay off the clowning, will you? Leave me alone!" Whereupon he had teleported away and left his erstwhile boon companion in dumbfounded solitude.

With a shrug, Bell had returned to his daily routine of activities but a few days later he was reminded of the situation when Perry Rhodan happened to mention something about it during one of their conversations.

"I don't feel right about Pucky, Reg. The little scamp seems to be out of tune with things. No more tricks or escapades... no more laughs. He even avoids me. Is he doing that to you?"

In his usual blustering manner, Bell told him what he thought. "Pucky is wandering around like a grubworm with 10 left legs! He acts as though he can't even stand his own company. Who knows what's gotten under his skin? But I think he'll straighten out again, Perry."

As the year 2044 neared its end the situation in the Arkonide Empire had settled down considerably and the men of Earth were granted a period of recuperation from their tensions and special labours in that area of duty. But from day to day, Pucky was acting more and more strangely. Whenever he had a chance he 'would sit in his bungalow and stare at the walls. In the midst of his broodings his incisor tooth remained stubbornly concealed.

He did not even know himself what was wrong. Although he did not feel sick he was depressed, listless and continuously perturbed. Often he would try to avoid facing himself in this mood but he had not succeeded any more than anyone else who had ever tried it.

Yesterday the Chief had given him a call. Perry wanted to cheer him up but Pucky didn't want to be cheered. He wanted to be left alone in peace and not have to talk to anybody or see anybody.

After a few sentences, Rhodan had given it up. In a disturbed frame of mind he had gotten in touch then with John Marshall, the Chief of the Mutant Corps. "Marshall, why don't you drop by and see me?"

And Marshall dropped by.

"Marshall, do you know what's the matter with Pucky?" Rhodan asked him.

Marshall did not know either. "He will not permit anyone to read his thoughts, sir," answered Perry Rhodan's best telepath. "But he also avoids any conversations. Maybe he really is sick, or else his age is suddenly starting to show. How old is Pucky, anyway? Do you know, sir?"

Rhodan regretted that he did not know. "None of us knows that for sure. I think Bell tried to get it out of him once about 20 years ago but he had acted like an aging old maid and resisted telling him. Strange, now that you mention it, and yet it's a worry to think that a rapid aging process might be involved here. I wonder if his little carcass would respond to a biological cell shower treatment?"

Marshall's next remark was directed more to himself than to Rhodan. "Pucky an oldster? That's hard to imagine but it's even harder to think of him as being sick. Doesn't he seem to you to be deeply-depressed, sir?"

When Rhodan leaned toward him, Marshall saw that the First Administrator's eyes reflected worry and alarm. "John, won't you make another attempt? Perhaps Pucky would confide in you..."

"In me, Chief? If he even avoids you and Bell and refuses to give any information, then I'm sure he's not about to let me get near him. Of course I'll make one more attempt but I don't think I'll have very much success."

\* \* \* \*

Rhodan personally invited Pucky to the New Year's party.

"Anything but that, Perry," Pucky declined listlessly. "I don't even want to see myself anymore. Why should I spoil the party for you? I have to distract myself somehow. I'd like to have a look at Paris maybe. That's supposed to be a real wild place. Are you familiar with it, Perry?"

But the whole thing was proposed with such a weary lack of interest that Rhodan finally became convinced that Pucky must be seriously ill. He described Paris for him as colourfully as possible but in the middle of the description Pucky waved it off apathetically.

"Nah, I'm not spending New Year's in Paris. I'll just stay inside my 4 walls. Do me the favour of keeping Fatso away, will you? I can't take his sympathy, however well he may mean it. What the heck! This is—this is unbearable!"

Rhodan stared thunderstruck at his viewscreen. Pucky had cut off the connection. In grave concern he muttered: "What the devil is wrong with that little monkey?"

\* \* \* \*

An emergency conference was to occur in which the main items of concern would be the log book of a certain light cruiser of the Solar Fleet and certain entries pertaining to the tracking system's echo-reflector operation. However, 6 days prior to this Rhodan was startled by a shimmering phenomenon in front of his desk, which resulted in the sudden appearance of Pucky.

"Hi, Boss!"

The mousebeaver sounded like his old self again.

Rhodan looked at him in pleasant surprise. "Well, Pucky! Are you alright again, old friend?" He was willing enough to fall in with the other's informal manner. He would have made even more concessions if necessary to cheer up the droll little fellow.

"Perry, what a fool I've been all this time!"

"You, a fool, Pucky? Have you been up to something again that's biting your conscience? Come on—I'll tell you beforehand that it's all excused and forgotten, little one!" Rhodan felt in an expansive mood, so he waved it all away with a magnanimous gesture.

Then he saw Pucky's incisor tooth in all its glory. The mousebeaver let out a whistle. "I'll accept that!" he said. "I'll just keep that general absolution on the shelf for next time, Chief, but I'm afraid I'll have to disappoint you. I really haven't been up to any shenanigans at all and I don't even know what was the matter—except that... now, Perry, you won't laugh at me... Please? The fact is, I'm homesick for Vagabond. It's enough to make me want to scream. So please, good old Perry, will you let me make a flight...?"

Homesick, thought Rhodan, deeply touched. He pulled Pucky to him and set him on his lap, placing an arm around him. "Pucky, you poor little guy..."

"Good old Perry! The mousebeaver's little arms went around Rhodan's neck and Pucky pressed his head against the chest of the most powerful man in the Solar Empire.

So he has homesickness, Rhodan was still thinking. This little scamp was homesick for the cold and dreary planet Vagabond and for his own kind. Just like any human who suddenly feels that he can't sink any roots in foreign soil.

"Pucky, you can start tomorrow. Do you want a ship to take you there or would you rather go alone?"

At these last words he was again presented with the full radiance of the other's incisor tooth. This sign was answer enough yet in his enthusiasm at being relieved of an unbearable tension, Pucky fairly bubbled. "Alone, Perry! What can I use to blast off in, Chief? You can trust me with a Space-jet—I swear I'll bring it back all in one piece!"

The First Administrator cautioned him: "But a Space-jet needs at least a 4-man crew, Pucky."

In a flash, Pucky removed his arms from around Rhodan's neck and straightened up. His shrewd little mouse-face turned up to him as he said: "Four men! I want to get to Vagabond, alone this time. And what's so hard about converting a Space-jet for a 1-man crew? A word from you and a few sharp robots—in 3 hours it'll be all hunky-tonky!"

The line had been reached that Rhodan would not cross. "Hold on, Pucky! Before we discuss your wishes any further, you're going to have to express yourself more appropriately..."

Pucky cut in hastily: "Perry, I don't think you realize the dangers of contamination I'm exposed to whenever I have to talk to Bell, and..."

One look from Rhodan was enough to silence the excited mousebeaver and yet Perry found it hard to suppress a smirk. Finally he even broke out in resounding laughter. Now that Pucky was happy again and was relieved at having finally realized what had been depressing him for weeks, Perry's own worries concerning the mousebeaver had been lifted and his hearty laughter merely reflected his own feelings.

At this moment Reginald Bell entered Rhodan's large office and workroom. He saw Pucky on Perry's lap and heard his friend's ringing laughter.

"Well, you two seemed to be pained out (feeling no pain)," he remarked unsuspectingly as he sat down on the edge of the desk.

"The pains all over with!" Rhodan confessed. "Everything is just fine now. However, my chubby friend, there is a slight damper on this celebration. As a matter of fact, Pucky was just saying..."

"Please don't, Perry!" begged the mousebeaver, interrupting his Chief.

But Rhodan would not relent. "Pucky was just complaining about you, Bell. He said that your improper manner of speaking was contributing to his delinquency..."

"Is that little ape on your lap feeling alright, Perry? Yes or no?" blustered Bell temperamentally. He slipped off the edge of the desk and came around to Rhodan, bending over Pucky as though to take hold of him.

"Watch it!" warned Rhodan. "He's still convalescing. He happens to be homesick and tomorrow he's flying to Vagabond alone in a converted, Space-jet."

"Homesick?" Bell became pensive and at once seemed to forget that he still had a bone to pick with the mousebeaver. "You poor little devil, you..." And the hand that was about to grasp him roughly now ended up stroking Pucky's fur.

"Lard pard," chirped the mousebeaver, "aside from Perry you're the greatest! Only you should try to teach me only half as many new slang words as usual from now on. Perry says that you might cause me to—"

"I can see that you've recovered amazingly fast, Pucky!" Rhodan interrupted him in a slightly sharper tone of voice.

The mousebeaver sought to soften things down. "Only because I get to fly home tomorrow, Perry. I could almost explode, I'm so happy. How much leave time do I get, Chief?"

"If nothing comes up in the meantime, how about a whole month for you, Pucky? Will that be enough?"

"A month, Chief—you mean a whole month of leave? Isn't that too much for me?" The little fellow came close to losing his mental equilibrium. In spite of his pranks and unsanctioned activities which had cost him many reprimands and extra unpleasant hours of punishment, he had not lost his natural sense of discretion. He looked from Rhodan to Bell. "A full month of leave... a real full month?" He still couldn't quite comprehend it but suddenly he became suspicious. "Or is this just putting me out to pasteurize because an action is coming up that you don't want me in on, Perry?" Against strictest orders he tried to use his telepathic powers to read the Administrator's thoughts but Rhodan had screened himself sufficiently to prevent it.

"Pucky, there are no actions pending," Rhodan assured him. "If it turns out that you are urgently needed during your time off, little one, then Ill contact you on the hypercom and call you back."

This seemed to mollify the mousebeaver but he still was shaking his head over the length of his leave. "What will the others in the Mutant Corps say when they, hear about my one month's leave?" he asked worriedly.

"Nothing!" replied Rhodan. "Because all the others have always taken their leaves, but you... you've been more than 70 years with me now, and that's how long you've been absent from your home planet. If we went by the book, Pucky, you'd have claim to 3 or 4 years of vacation... maybe even—"

"Anything but that!" Pucky interrupted, horrified. "Or do you want to get rid of me maybe? Or have me kill myself with boredom? It would be better for you to give Fatso the time I've got coming to me. He

loves to skon around (goof off) and do nothing..."

"Have you gone against orders and tried to read my thoughts again, you impudent little scamp?" asked Bell belligerently.

"Me? Disobey an order? I wouldn't think of it, Fatso!" protested the mousebeaver vehemently. "But you just don't realize what a field strength you pump out whenever you're indulging—as usual—in those way-out sluggard daydreams of yours!"

"I'll show you some field strength, you carrot gobbler!... Perry, you'll be doing the whole Solar System a favour if for a whole month you can send this... this..."

"Chief!" interjected Pucky with a squeal. "He wants to call me vermin but he doesn't dare to do it in front of you!"

"You lousy little—!" Bell was about to take hold of Pucky but his hands met shimmering air.

The mousebeaver had elected to make himself scarce with a teleport jump.

The next moment, Bell burst out laughing. "That little bum! He ought to know how glad I am that he's back to his old self again. So he's homesick, is he? That sort of gets me, you know? He's earned that vacation a thousand times over. Perry, is it OK with you if I get busy with a Space-jet conversion?"

\* \* \* \*

On this same afternoon of 4 January 2045, the fabrication department for custom-tailored spacesuits received a requisition for 30 pieces. The order was signed by Lt. Puck.

The department was not very happy with the assignment because the delivery schedule called for finishing all 30 of the suits for Lt. Puck this very same day. Of all the nerve! But the fabrication manager didn't dare to complain about it to Perry Rhodan. However, he did use the intercom to present his grievance to Reginald Bell because rumour had it that he was always having fights with this arrogant mousebeaver.

"What's on your mind?" asked Bell congenially after the manager had introduced himself.

The man started to complain but he didn't get very far.

"Who do you think you are!" Bell roared into the microphone and he saw the man jump in surprise on the viewscreen. "What are you thinking of? When a lieutenant in the Mutant Corps orders something to be fabricated on short notice then that's what you have to deliver. And now don't bother me about it!"

Angrily, he cut the connection, but he scratched his head and asked himself: "Whatever does that little monkey want with 30 spacesuits now? I could understand maybe 3 reserve suits but 30 all at once?! Hm-m, if I'm not mistaken I smell a *Pucky Special* behind that request... Here he is hardly back to normal and already he's itching for mischief. I'd like to know what's behind this solo flight of his to Vagabond.



\* \* \* \*

At 4 A.M. the next morning, Lt. Puck drove out to his Space-jet SJ-09, which was supposed to be capable of bringing him to Vagabond in two hypertransitions.

It was still early dawn in Terrania and people in the metropolis were still asleep, provided they were not on a graveyard shift. Traffic on the giant spaceport was fairly negligible. Out on landing strip 56 the impulse engines of a heavy cruiser were just dying down. The last guttering rumbles of the powerful propulsion units were echoing away.

The disc-shaped Space-jet SJ-09, measuring 35 meters in diameter, had gone through a number of hours of conversion work. A robot team had so re-circuited the controls that the ship could now be started, flown and landed by a single pilot.

As Pucky climbed up through *his* SJ-09 and went to the small control room, he felt like the emperor of China. His thoughts were already ahead of him on his forthcoming flight and he pictured his triumphant arrival on Vagabond in glowing Technicolor.

In this roseate mood he took his place in the special pilot seat which had been redesigned for his figure. He strapped himself in. His single incisor tooth was a glorious sight to see. Pretty quick now, Terrania would see a thing or two—just wait!

The powerful impulse engines of the Space-jet had been warmed up. The airlock closed. Video-voice contact with spaceport traffic control was in operation. The ship's positronic autopilot was all set to take the SJ-09 safely to Vagabond in just two hyperjumps. However, before all that Pucky wanted to demonstrate that he could fly one of these star boats all by himself.

"Your takeoff time is 4:18, Lt. Puck!" This had just come through from the tower.

And 4:18 A.M. inevitably arrived.

Pucky had picked up an expression from Bell which was sometimes used by pilots on the bigger ships. Referring to a full-powered multiple throttle position in the guide slots of the flight panel, Pucky bared his incisor gleefully and yelled, "*Slots out!*"

The SJ-09 roared to life, as the forces of the impulse engines were unleashed at maximum power. There was a sharp call from the control tower but Pucky neither understood it nor even cared to hear it.

Liftoff!

The SJ-09 began to accelerate wildly but Pucky held it at a 10-foot altitude over the Terrania spaceport. He headed straight for the control tower! Panob screen magnification 1.1, velocity 15 seconds after liftoff—530 km/ hr. As the Space-jet pulled up dangerously close to the tower it also broke the sound barrier.

Among a hundred thousand or so sleepers who jumped out of bed and cursed this unexpected nuisance

was one Reginald Bell. And he guessed at once who had probably unleashed the hellish turmoil.

"Bell here!" he called to the port traffic control. "Is that nuck (nut) out there, Lt. Puck?"

Above Terrania the Space-jet curved in hard flat spirals at reckless speed, gradually rising into the clear dawn sky.

"What did you say?" The infernal racket kept him from understanding a single word from the other end.

"Lt. Puck has..." The rest of the answer was obliterated in the blasting sounds ripping through an otherwise beautiful morning.

"Well, chout (chew out) him on the horn and tell him to knock it off—right now!" Bell yelled into his telecom mike. But he seemed to forget that now and again he had also taken the controls of a spaceship in hand and brought it down in a crash-landing approach. As far as Bell's own bad habits were concerned, Pucky was an excellent pupil.

Then a voice from the tower rang out in Bell's room: "We've been trying for 10 minutes to bring Lt. Puck back to his senses but all we get for an answer is '*slots out!*' Sir, do you feel alright?" The traffic officer on the viewscreen was looking at him concernedly.

The only thing wrong with Bell at the moment was a twinge of conscience. "Slots out!" was practically *his* invention! He had often yelled it himself during emergency takeoffs and crash-landing retrobraking.

"Yes, I'm OK but that racket is wrecking my nerves!" Bell hastened to say, and he cut off the connection.

Pucky knew how to fly and he loved it. A slow climb in a series of shallow spirals was irresistible. It made little difference to him if he arrived an hour earlier or later on Vagabond.

"Slots out!" How sweet it was, the way his space steed blasted into the blue! Alone in his glory, Pucky revelled loudly the whole time in a full repertoire of Bell's rather improper figures of speech. But suddenly he realized that it wasn't any fun to use this vocabulary because he had no audience.

Then he was slightly startled by a bellowing voice from his com speaker: "Lt. Puck, this is traffic control! You will establish a reasonable climbing course immediately or we'll have to abort your flight to Vagabond! We are waiting for your reply, Lieutenant!"

"With whom have I the pleasure of speaking?" asked the mousebeaver in icy tones. He had instinctually remembered that the controller's first obligation was to give his name and rank.

"Col. Eltzahn, Lt. Puck!"

"OK, Colonel, I'm on climbing course. I'll just do you that little favour!"

Pucky was just about the only one in the entire Solar System who could get away with such a retort under the circumstances and even the aggressive Col. Eltzahn had to swallow it.

The latter used a few expletives of his own after he had cut off the connection. "Maybe I shouldn't have leaned on that little scamp so hard," he grumbled. "Now he does me *afavour* as though *I'm* to blame!"

Pucky had ended his gleeful little foray by taking the Space-jet through a series of figure-flying manoeuvres at an altitude between 10,000 and 20,000 meters but finally the SJ-09 streaked upward on a regulation ascent course. The spacecraft's friction screening hardly encountered any more air resistance and the acceleration increased rapidly. Finally the time arrived when Pucky had to switch to his autopilot so that the main flight could be taken over by the preprogrammed navigation computer.

Yesterday Pucky had not protested, when Bell explained it to him: "You have no experience at all in carrying out precise transition calculations. I'll have them program your nav computer so that you'll come out of hyper within 8 million km of Vagabond. A mere kangy (kangaroo hop; kitty hop) hop like that you should be able to handle with one hand tied behind you."

This last part had served to bolster Pucky's pride. Although it was true that in comparison to the total distance of 2,438 light-years, a mere 8 million km really was a "kangy hop," and any cadet in the Solar Fleet with only 10 hours of flight time would have been able to land this Space-jet, which was an improved Gazelle type. Travelling on Earth by automobile was more difficult and considerably more hazardous!

The main synchro-switch closed into contact position. It was the last thing Pucky had to do. From then on the flight of the SJ-09 lay in the hands of the ship's computer.

The first transition occurred beyond the orbit of Erebus. The Space-jet rematerialised into normal space at a distance of 1,365 light-years from Earth. 30 minutes after that, the second and last transition followed.

When it was over with, Pucky still sat there in his seat with his safety belt buckled. He had forgotten it because there was something else on his mind as he stared incredulously at the panob screen.

"Am I going mad?" he cried, dumbfounded. "I came out cockeyed! That's no 8 million kilometres! From here to Vagabond it's 100 million km! OK, just wait, Fatso—revenge is sweet! I'll return the favour sometime. That's a dirty trick, making me sit out 100 million km at less than the speed of light!"

But in reality Pucky didn't mean half of what he was saying because his heart was beginning to pound with joy. He had even come out into normal space with his stern to the goal but now behind him he could make out the reddish, dimly gleaming point of light that was his home. And there was the dull red eye of the dying sun—the only star within many hundreds of light-years, and with but one small, cold planet.

He was distracted by the typical clicking sound of a tape strip popping into the receiver tray of the positronicon and he finally turned to pick up the piece of plastic metal foil.

"What—?!" It was naked fear that had made him blurt out the question.

According to the computer message, Vagabond had deviated 80 million km from its normal orbit and had approached its sun by a similar distance. Its present course would bring it so close to the central orb that the latter's centripetal attraction would cause it to plunge into it in collision. The surface temperature on Vagabond was already ranging between 113 and 134° Fahrenheit! The rotation rate had changed from 19.8 hours to 16.1!

That heat! Pucky thought in horrified alarm. And suddenly the calm and collected mousebeaver lost all rational perspective of what was mandatory and what was prohibitive under the circumstances.

In a case like this he should not land on Vagabond.

He should send a message to Perry Rhodan over the hypercom.

After all, he knew that for almost the past 4 months there had been some strange and as yet unexplained phenomena occurring on Vagabond.

And perhaps Pucky would have responded in the proper manner and done all the right things but at this moment his telepathic senses had become aware of despair, alarm, horror and death—fear. The creatures of his race were mentally crying out and pouring their telepathic impulses into one desperate distress call, probing outward with it into the depths of the void.

Pucky bit the controls.

Manual override—out with the autopilot.

Main synchro-switch—deactivate.

Although this time he didn't think to shout "slots out!" he nevertheless switched the impulse engines to full power and negotiated a manual turn. The inertial absorbers began to howl in complaint and two sirens started to shriek their warnings. Generator overload!

Pucky flew against all his training and reason.

Once straightened out on its course, the SJ-09 hurtled wildly toward Vagabond.

*Save them! Save them! Save them!*

This was the only thought that found room in Pucky's brain.

*I must save them from that flaming inferno. At least I owe them that. Who has made this attack on my home world? The Druufs? The Springers? The Aras? Oh Perry, you must help me destroy those scoundrels!*

Yet the idea of making a hypercom contact with his best friend simply did not occur to him. There was a short-circuit in his brain convolutions. He urged the Space-jet after the planet as it receded on its already dwindling orbit.

The SJ-09's acceleration went over maximum rating. The sirens continued to howl. Red lights flickered on the flight panel. Two vital relays had already gone out. Both of them were automatically replaced by reserve relay circuits but if these burned out there were no more spares.

Pucky let the sirens scream. He kept the impulse engines on full power overload. He was blindly determined to get to Vagabond as soon as possible at his limited under light speed.

He kept thinking desperately about the heat there. Instead of reasonable freezing and below-freezing temperatures it was going higher than 135° Fahrenheit in some areas! For his own kind he knew this would be like the fires of Hell!

Using the panob viewscreens, Pucky flew by sight alone. Everything he did was the wrong thing. If he had merely requested the ship's positronicon to calculate a short transition he could have been making a landing manoeuvre long since.

In this heat they'll die by the thousands!—he thought. Blazing galaxies, who could have done this?

He tried with all his might to make telepathic contact with at least one mousebeaver but could not get through And this only frightened him more. What was going on?!

In spite of the Space-jet's super-meteoric pace toward Vagabond it took a long time for the reddish light point to finally show a tiny disc. In a helpless frenzy, Pucky fixed his burning gaze on the disc emerging on his screen, unaware that panic had seized him.

The sudden thought struck him that he had 30 spacesuits with him on board the ship. How come I asked to have that many made? Why did it take me this long to realize that I was homesick?

But then even these thoughts were swept away. Distance reading: 28 million km. Velocity: 185,000 km/sec. Still a few minutes—2 minutes and 27 seconds. He didn't think of reducing his speed.

The disc began to expand with new rapidity. Vagabond seemed to be a balloon that was being inflated abruptly. Three sirens droned out: collision alarm!

Would Pucky come to his senses? After two more sirens were activated an emergency safety circuit threw in the automatic system in order to prevent the ship's crashing into the planet. The g-pressures soared abruptly but the inertial dampers took up the shock. The autopilot braked the velocity with maximum retropulsion and took charge of the SJ-09's reeling course. The Space-jet was still way too fast as it sideswiped Vagabond at a distance of 75,000 km.

Pucky saw the planet whisk across the screens in a sternward direction. This howling of sirens—what the devil was that? When he realized what was happening he used an emergency override circuit to knock out the last of the automatic controls. And that, too, was a violation of the primary rules.

*Let's turn this crate around!*

The disc-shaped spacecraft obeyed the directional pressure of the jet vanes. Vagabond once more came front and centre onto the screens. It became the bulls-eye objective.

Pucky seemed to be out of his mind in a transport of frenzied terror—a state which was augmented by a random telepathic inflow of distress cries, so poignant in their expression of global horror that the diminutive pilot of the SJ-09 was literally catapulted into a hypnotizing delirium.

Again, the disc of Vagabond expanded.

*SJ-09 into entry pattern! Hit that atmosphere!*

The first of the air masses began to stream past the SJ-09's protective screens. The friction was at first noticeable in the form of a rising whistle-which soon became a shriek, a high-pitched howl, then deafening thunder.

The ground appeared to be virtually shooting upward at Pucky. His speed was still far too great. On the override circuit there could be no sirens to give him a warning.

Pucky had come to Vagabond to make a great show. And this he did—in the form of a catastrophe. The ground...!

A crashing thundering crackling and booming mixed with glowing hot sand—sand being swept away by a heat hurricane. A Space-jet half buried in the ground—destroyed, a derelict, a twisted heap of scrap metal but no longer a vehicle of space. Pucky hung motionlessly against his harness in the special pilot's seat, his mouse-head slumped against his chest. He neither heard the hurricane raging around his beloved SJ-09 nor felt the heat creeping into the wrecked vessel—the swirling heat waves and the blowing sand...

## 5/ RACE AGAINST DOOM

At the time of Pucky's crash-landing on Vagabond, Dr. Innogow announced himself to Perry Rhodan. Although he did not have his data files with him it was clearly evident by his manner and expression that he had something of importance to relate to the Chief of the Solar Empire. It seemed hard for him to find a way to begin.

"Sir..." He drew a deep breath. "Sir, I'm sure you still remember that little piece of fluorescent material that Walter Grimpel brought back from Vagabond. At the time you'll recall that we were unable to analyse it..."

"But now you've analysed it, Innogow?" Suddenly gripped by a new excitement, Rhodan had straightened up and was now looking tensely at the scientist.

The other shook his head lightly, apparently dejected. "It would be too much to say for it... I mean, analysed isn't quite the word. However I've run across something that's very puzzling. Those waveforms and oscillograph charts kept bothering me but no matter how I tried to figure them out I was still getting nowhere."

"Day before yesterday I was checking back on some things in the Psychological Institute. Among the various activities there, the researchers had been taking some brainwave readings on a few telepathic mutants and fortunately or unfortunately—it still remains to be seen—their telepathic energies were measured and at the same time they recorded the wave patterns for further detailed study. They showed me two unusually good wave-chart recordings. I have to confess that they didn't mean much to me at the time."

"But tonight, sir, I had a copy of the two wave-charts sent over to me." For a moment the scientist made a weary pause. "Sir, that little piece of material from Vagabond is partly composed of *organic energy*!"

Rhodan stared at him. "Dr. Innogow—would you kindly repeat that?"

"Gladly, sir. That metallic-blue fluorescent material from Vagabond is partially *organic energy*. In a concentrated form it is the same kind of energy as is sent out by our telepaths when they are using their paranormal faculties!"

"And you discovered that when you compared the wave-amplitudes of an active telepath with those that McIntosh and Walter Grimpel both picked up during the energy outburst on Vagabond?"

The directness of this question made Dr. Innogow feel uneasy. "Sir, what I'm talking about is mostly hypothesis. I have to get used to the concept of *organic energy*, myself." He smiled. "Sir, you know every once in a while it's good for us researchers to strike a snag like this—just to remind us how little we really know. And right now I think I know less about this substance than I did before. It's a complete mystery. It's saturated, and at this level of saturation there is a bond between organic and synthetically generated energies. Several times this morning when I thought I had it about analysed I ran across traces of metal. Sir, it's a metal that we or the Arkonides have never encountered."

"What is your concept of *organic energy*, Innogow?"

Dr. Innogow looked at Rhodan somewhat helplessly. "All I can do is give you an unscientific definition. Grasping at straws, of course, if only to keep me from drowning in this morass of heretofore unsuspected concepts. . . but I have to differentiate between natural energy and organic. Putting natural energy aside for the moment, we can say that organic energy is a form of energy produced by a living organism. However in the present situation the case is complicated by the fact that this particular organic energy has taken a solid form. No, sir, not the form of matter! Outside of sand and traces of metal, if it really can be called metal, what Grimpel has brought with him from Vagabond is not matter at all.

"Sir, as a scientist I've never found myself so much at a loss, but if I have to run the risk of disgracing myself for all time and gamble my reputation as a researcher for making the following statement, I still have to say it: in my opinion, what Grimpel has brought to us is a form of organic energy that *isasleep!*"

Dr. Innogow did not realize how close he had come to the truth but of course he could know nothing of the existence of the orgh, the synthetic-organic hybrid life from an unknown monstrous world.

And he was even less able to imagine that monsters had not only returned to Vagabond after the energy disturbance there, in order to awaken the sleeping energy again with their technology, but had also succeeded in putting it to use again.

"Dr. Innogow, please continue this research," Rhodan urged him. "And above all I want to assure you that in my eyes you have by no means put your professional reputation on the line. On the contrary I must thank you for your display of courage. But let me know at once if you happen to find anything new in this area."

Rhodan noticed that Dr. Innogow left his office with more self-assurance than he had had when he entered it a good half-hour before.

"Hm-m. . ." he murmured aloud to himself and then put in a call to Terrania's vast hypersensor station. The connection with Walter Grimpel was finally made. Rhodan's viewscreen revealed the chief officer's startled face. "Grimpel, do you know whether or not Pucky's second hyperjump has been tracked?" he asked in his more typically curt manner.

"Yessir! We've picked up both transitions very clearly here. The mousebeaver must have landed on Vagabond by now. But so far he has not reported in over telecom."

A faint smile of amusement touched Rhodan's lips. He knew what a show the little fellow hoped to put on for his fellow mousebeavers. Pucky had plenty of time for mischief but not a second for a hypercom check-in with Terrania.

"He'll report in sooner or later," replied Rhodan but he had a momentary flash of uneasiness when he spoke these words. "Which brings me to why I called you, Grimpel. Keep Vagabond under observation

with your energy sensors until we know that Puck's on his return flight to Earth. Thank you!"

Shortly thereafter, Grimpel went upstairs in the station where 8 men were on duty in the space radiation tracking and analysis centre. "Anything new, gentlemen?" he asked.

"The man in charge on the present shift was a Singhalese named Malya. "No, Mr. Grimpel—except for a plus deviation of 2.35%. Vagabond appears to have too much energy. I checked it out with the astrophysical department but they reassured us immediately. They say the plus deviation is due to residual scatter effects from the original energy eruption."

Grimpel smiled cynically. After all he was one of the top specialists in his own field and he knew plenty about astrophysics. "Who gave you that information, Malya?" he asked.

"Prof. Alskund of the Astrophysical Lab."

"Hm-m... If *he* said that, it could well be. But something still bothers me about that. Advise me immediately if you pick up anything unusual from Vagabond. Pass that instruction along to the other shifts. Good day!"

When he was back at his desk, however, this 2.35% deviation kept bothering him. He made a video-voice contact with the same central he had just left. "Malya, did you give Prof. Alskund *all* the data you have on that deviation reading?"

"That goes without saying, Mr. Grimpel. We even had to wait 3 hours until we got the results back from Astrophysics. Prof. Alskund went all the way and put it all through the main computer."

That seemed to close the subject.

Unfortunately, Grimpel was not Bell who only trusted positronic readouts to a limited extent and was always opposed to regarding such mechanical sources as the ultimate authority for decision.

Walter Grimpel forgot the 2.35% plus deviation. However, when the personnel car took him to his apartment later the subject tugged once more at his instincts. Yet he did not pursue it. He rested on the fact that Prof. Alskund *was* the astrophysicist of Terrania.

\* \* \* \*

Completely crestfallen, Pucky stood in the middle of the control room of the wrecked Space-jet. Tears of anger and self-recrimination fell from his eyes. "What a colossal idiot!" he exclaimed inside his helmet. He had put on his suit immediately when the first awakening of reason had come to him—when he realized that the temperature on his home world had risen from below freezing to an infernally high degree of heat. "My beautiful SJ-90... it's scrap! And I... I flew it like a rank amateur—a double-tailed donk!"

He staggered to the special pilot seat and sank down into it. Outside the heat hurricane was sweeping across the deserts of Vagabond. The sun had doubled its apparent size now and was flooding the small planet with its searing heat waves. Although the control central was still in one piece the temperature inside had already crept up to 108° Fahrenheit.



The air-conditioning system had also been knocked out. The telecom was dead. The ship's machinery was a confused tangle of bent and twisted metal. Pucky had made a thorough inspection of his beautiful star ship, which brought him to the realization that he must have tried a landing against every dictate of reason.

It was precisely this fact he could not comprehend. But what frightened him more was that he couldn't remember what had happened.

He tried again to remember but he did not succeed. His memory appeared to have blanked out shortly after the second transition. As of a certain moment in time there was nothing in Pucky's mind but a gaping hole as far as recall was concerned. What he had done, thought or felt during that span of time—he had no idea.

Although it was still only 65° inside his suit the temperature in the control room had risen 2 more degrees within a space of 10 minutes. Now it read 110° Fahrenheit.

Suddenly he straightened up with a start. He was aware of a telepathic distress call. Only this time it did not throw him into a mind-blanking frenzy of panic. He carefully traced the location of the sender, concentrated for a moment, then disappeared in a teleport jump.

He rematerialised in complete darkness.

Abruptly Pucky came to the realization that he must now operate as Lt. Puck of the Solar Mutant Corps. His suit's spotlight flashed on. Before him he saw the kind of subterranean passage which he had not visited for more than 70 years.

He was home!

He was in a burrow! In such a burrow he had been born. Here he had lived with his parents and brothers and sisters. In such a place he had eaten, slept—and played.

But now he was receiving telepathic cries of distress from his people. They came from the far end of this unusually deep burrow. Pucky moved forward as swiftly as he could. The wide beam of the spotlight lighted his way. Now the tunnel led steeply downward as the telepathic cries for help continued uninterruptedly.

What has happened to my world?—he thought. Why have they dug themselves this deeply under ground?

He stumbled but regained his balance in time, then thought of covering the remaining distance in a short teleport jump. But just then the passage levelled out and opened into a cavern. A flurry of chirping cries greeted him as his spotlight revealed a small group of mousebeavers.

Good Lord!—he thought, horrified. They're all just children! Where on Vagabond are their parents?

The half-grown whelps were blinded by the light and quickly closed their big eyes only to break out in a pitiable whimpering. Pucky tried to read their thoughts but only reached a few of them. Most of this group of some 50 mousebeavers were babies and their weak mental emanations merely expressed instinctive wants: water, food, sleep. Their common cry was for the protection of their mothers.

Pucky did not attempt to speak with any of them. There was a certain relief in being able to communicate telepathically, he thought, but he soon discovered to his dismay that these puppies could not concentrate sufficiently to carry on any exchange of information.

Fear, anguish, hunger and thirst dominated the youngsters' entire emotional output. Water and food had to be brought here.

Pucky did not hesitate. He teleported back to the SJ-09. There he was shocked to discover that the Space-jet's coldroom was no longer functioning. The thermometer was already at 48°. He pulled open the door to the storage locker, jumped inside and closed it behind him.

*Child nutrition... Holy cow! I never learned that at the Space Academy! What can their little tom-toms digest and what not?*(No doubt he was confusing the term in his thoughts with tum-tums.)

Pucky started to plunder the supply of canned milk. He also stacked up 4 crates of fancy-grade carrots and filled a 50-litre canister with water. Gathering it all together, he made his jump.

The cavern was more than 800 meters under ground. The abandoned mousebeaver whelps chirped in fright again as Pucky rematerialised among them with his load of provisions and his bright spotlight. He snapped his helmet open and found the air in the cave to be quite breathable. Then for the first time he spoke aloud to them.

He spoke in his mother language to tiny mousebeaver pups and to youngsters who were the equivalent of 5-year-old Earth children. The longer he spoke, the more they seemed to be pacified.

He removed his spacesuit and sensed a heart-tug of compassion as he carefully picked up one of the babies and pressed it to him. He felt tears in his eyes as the little hands clutched at his fur and the little creature snuggled his head against him. In spite of hunger and thirst it was soon asleep.

"What do I do now?" he asked himself unhappily.

Completely helpless he stood there among the little whelps who were starting to whimper again. With ineffable tenderness he held the baby in his arms, not daring to move.

"Little one," he whispered. "Poor little tyke—just go to sleep now. Pucky won't leave you in the launch, or any of the others."

\* \* \* \*

When Pucky finally checked his watch again he was startled to see that he had taken more than 7 hours to attend to feeding the mousebeaver children. In the meantime he had sensed other telepathic distress calls. Either they were coming from the south or north polar regions where 70 Years ago no mousebeaver group had ever ventured before. His own search calls throughout the equatorial zones had remained unanswered.

As time passed he was being forced more and more to accept the terrible realization that only a few hundred of his race were still alive on Vagabond. All the rest of them, and especially the adults of his

species, must have died in the meantime.

He quickly climbed into his spacesuit again. He placed a spare spotlight with fresh batteries in the cavern where it would continue to illuminate the food and water supplies. In contrast to Earth children the mousebeaver pups were able to eat and drink by themselves only a few days after they were born.

"I'll come back soon!" he reassured them before he disappeared.

He made a return jump to the Space-jet. The cabin temperature had risen to 117°. His first thought now was to alert Perry Rhodan concerning the present crisis. The fact that the SJ-09's hyper-telecom was not functioning presented no insurmountable problem. He knew it would be possible to make a series hookup of the microcom sets in the spacesuits so that the amplified output could easily reach the interstellar hypercom station in Terrania.

He hurried to the supply locker. His eyes lit up behind the clear faceplate of his helmet when he saw the 30 spacesuits hanging there in a neat row, one after another. Using his telekinesis he drew the first one to him and opened it—then froze!

By the time he had inspected 10 of the suits he was trembling with rage. "Those bumblebee idiots!" he fumed. "Ye gods! How can I contact Perry or any of his spaceships now? I can't just stand by and see everything here go down to destruction!"

There was not a single minicom set in any of the 30 suits.

And his Space-jet was a miserable pile of junk.

And with each rotation of its axis Vagabond moved a step closer to that deadly sun.

The mousebeavers had brought their children into the deepest burrows on Vagabond in the desperate hope of saving them from the destruction. The adults of the species must have all died in their further attempts to rescue their offspring.

Pucky only felt contempt for the Terranians who had neglected to install minicom sets in the spacesuits. Yet he did not hate them for it. He made no paranoiac transfer of responsibility to them for the demise of the mousebeaver nation. Instead, Pucky accepted the blame himself.

His Space-jet was a tattered derelict. With his crash-landing he had cut off any possibility of return and thus he had condemned himself and the last of his kind to death. He buried all hope of being able to contact a Solar ship with the single minicom he possessed. The transceiver's low power capacity had a very limited hypercom range. But in the last few days of his life he was not going to use that as an excuse to merely sit around and complain.

Pucky turned on the minicom. He sent out his distress signal, gave his name and position and repeated the call 20 times, after which he listened. The loudspeaker only returned the static of the void; there was no answer to his distress call.

\* \* \* \*

So far he had located 8 mousebeaver colonies which were widely separated over the planet and hidden in the deepest possible caverns. He had taken care of the most important groups. In this process he soon determined that even his supplies of food and water were not inexhaustible. He was completely out of carrots by now and since yesterday the condensed milk had also been used up. He still had 1120 litres of water left in the ship's tank.

Pucky had just finished taking his inventory and was about to go back to the control room when he detected a strong telepathic impulse.

At last—an adult mousebeaver!

*I'm coming!*

he called back mentally. *I'm bringing food and water. What is your name? My name is Pucky... ah, Plofre fre dag ga ...!*

The latter phrase was untranslatable but all the more understandable to the other mousebeaver. Pucky was amazed to receive the impression that he was not to bring either water or food.

*Why put off death only another few days when the black wall can come upon us at any minute?*

In spite of his astonishment over this cryptic statement he did not ask questions in return. *Wait for me—I'm coming at once!* he telephated. He hurried back to the cold storage locker which no longer deserved its name. He filled a canister with water and obtained a large package of energy concentrates. Then he went to the supply locker and took one of the spacesuits with him.

After that, he made his jump.

1,700 km north of the equator on this 4th day following his crash-landing on Vagabond, he encountered his first adult mousebeaver. His outside thermometer indicated the murderous temperature of 142°.

At first there was no sign of him but after sending out repeated search calls he finally received a weak answering cry: *here!* It was so attenuated that he could not determine its source.

*Think harder so that I can find you!* Pucky sent back urgently.

It was impossible to see more than 3 steps in any direction. A single, unceasing sandstorm enveloped the whole world of Vagabond, whipping the air masses to ever higher temperatures.

Then came the call—from below. Its sender was in one of the earlier inhabited burrows which seldom went deeper than 50 meters.

Pucky teleported. His spotlight came on. He knelt down beside a full-grown mousebeaver who seemed to be close to asphyxiation. By this time Pucky had regained the cool collectedness which was typical of all Rhodan's close companions. He reached for the spare spacesuit and forced his kinsman to get into it, after which he closed his helmet for him. Then he had a chance to check the natural air pressure in the cavern.

The instrument clearly indicated that the planet Vagabond was getting ready to throw off its atmosphere. For Pucky it was proof that the hours of his native world were counted. The gravitational field of the sun was already reaching out its greedy claws for its mantle of air. Or was it?

Pucky thought a moment.

Could it be that Vagabond was revolving so fast that it neared the point where the atmospheric envelope would automatically be spun away into space? But in that case wouldn't the process of total dissolution begin, where there would be earthquakes and the whole planetary structure would be shaken by its approach to the sun until it finally broke into pieces?

Inside his spacesuit where the temperature was more bearable at 65°, the other mousebeaver recovered swiftly. He blinked curiously at Pucky but his apathy was depressing. He neither asked where his rescuer had come from or who had put the suit on him. Nor did he expend a single word concerning the brilliant rays from the spotlight.

So Pucky had to take the initiative. He wanted to know more about the "black wall".

Lt. Puck of the Mutant Corps, himself a mousebeaver, soon came to realize what 70 years among Terranians had made of him. It was only with the greatest effort that he could grasp the other's thoughts because of the latter's complete lack of technical knowledge.

*Thirst! Thirst!* This was all that the thoughts kept repeating.

Pucky took a quick look at his air-pressure manometer. He knew that if he quickly opened the other's helmet and didn't let him take long to drink there would be little danger of his suffocating, in spite of the lowered outside pressure.

When the canister meter showed that the mousebeaver had taken in about a litre of fluid he stopped him. *That's enough!* —he telepathed, and closed his helmet for him. *And now Bikre, repeat what you told me about the black wall.*

Bikre began to relate his experience with the black wall and also asserted that many, many of his kind had suddenly disappeared. Then without any connection or preliminary explanation he began suddenly to speak mentally of "black flying shadows."

*What, Bikre? Black flying shadows? What did they look like?*

Pucky began to tense inwardly with excitement. He could clearly remember what he and his brothers and sisters and parents and all of his family had called Perry Rhodan's *Stardust 2* when it had landed here 70 years ago: *a black flying shadow!*

He forced Bikre to draw the form of the spaceships on the floor of the cavern. He couldn't make much out of the 2-dimensional rendering. *Try to imagine what the flying shadows looked like when you saw them, Bikre!*

In the next moment Pucky pricked up his ears, even though listening with his mind. Teardrops? Two teardrop shapes hooked together in a single unit? Dark grey, almost black in colour? And what had these alien spaceships unloaded from their holds?

*Imagine it once again, Bikre... these long, twisted things...*  
He backed up his order with a strong hypnotic suggestion.

The 'thing' was described as a super-sized corkscrew or spiral. It was 100 meters long. But what was

Bakre envisioning?—this whole construction buried in the ground with only a small part protruding? Then the black wall had suddenly swept across the observers but Bikre had teleported even more swiftly. When he had finally dared to return to the place where it had happened he found that there were no more of his kind existing in a wide area surrounding the buried spiral machine.

Pucky's brain tried to compete with a positronic calculator in that he strove to simulate the logical processes involved. Alien spaceships... spiral machine assemblies 100 meters long... submergence of such installations in the ground. And now Vagabond's orbital relationship to its sun had rapidly deteriorated...

He shook Bikre. *Can you show me the place where the long, twisted 'thing' was buried in the ground?*

Before they teleported, Bikre had to have a drink again plus some of the energy concentrates. Then they jumped and rematerialised in the midst of a thundering, sand-blown heat storm. Bikre intimated that the 'twisty thing' was buried here somewhere in the ground.

After 3 short exploratory jumps Pucky stood before a blackish, spirally contorted shape that seemed to have a running thickness of about 1 meter. The storm had uncovered about 10 meters of its length. Antennas!—he thought. And antennas were associated with a source of power...

In the next instant Bikre was looking around perplexedly at the interior of the SJ-09's control room.

*Sit down there and don't bother me—I have things to do!*

Thus 'spoke' Lt. Puck of the Mutant Corps.

\* \* \* \*

Pucky slaved away like mad. To Bikre who was witnessing technological things at close range for the first time in his life, what he saw this other mousebeaver Pucky or 'Plofre' doing was interpreted as *play*.

Pucky suddenly let out a Bell-flavoured curse as Bikre also started to 'play.' A half dozen prepared pieces of equipment sprang up from the deck and swirled around in the air directly in front of his faceplate.

*Bikre, cut out that playing at once! If you do that again I'll dump you out into the open!*

The next moment Pucky was fairly dancing with rage. Bikre had responded to the threat by simply releasing all the objects from his telekinetic grasp, whereupon they crashed to the floor—including the very instrument that Pucky had needed most urgently.

After inspecting it he slumped. "Ruined!" he groaned aloud. "Another hope shattered. But I guess you can't help it, Bikre. How could you know that as one of the last of the mousebeavers you've just destroyed the last chance for all of us?"

He suddenly had a feeling of being alone. When he turned to look for his companion the place where he

had been sitting was empty.

*Bikre?*

Pucky repeated the telepathic call.

Bikre had taken Pucky's exasperated admonishment too literally. Bikre, the last adult mousebeaver he had found on the doomed planet, had teleported away.

*Bikre!*

In a desperate frenzy he sent out his para-call and finally he received an answer. "No...!" he groaned in despair but his cry came too late to prevent Bikre's death out there in the inferno of Vagabond.

When Pucky got to him and found him close to the entrance of his burrow he realized that Bikre had had no conception of what danger was involved in his playfulness. He had opened the helmet of his funny new suit. The blasting sandstorm at boiling temperatures had robbed him of the necessary strength to close the helmet again. Bikre's answering call to Pucky had been his last utterance in life.

\* \* \* \*

The raging sandstorm threatened to blow Pucky away. He quickly activated his defence screen and set his small antigrav generator to operating in reverse. When it reached 2 g he was twice as heavy as on Earth and his weight on Vagabond was 4 times normal. This steadied him to where he had a chance to cast a disconcerted glance at his watch.

4 p.m. Vagabond time and still night?

"Those lousy aliens in their flying teardrops!" Pucky was beside himself. "Them and their corkscrew antennas! Bikre, Bikre... why did you rob me of my last chance to patch up that energy sensor? Now how can I ever find that hellish power station that's driving this world into the sun?"

When he returned to the ship and entered the half-opened airlock, he turned off his antigrav. "Bikre..." He spoke the name softly when he reached the control room but the last adult mousebeaver of Vagabond was dead now and could not answer.

Pucky was about ready to also wait for death but he had lived too long among humans for that. Perry Rhodan had drilled into him by his own example that one does not give up until he has drawn his very last breath.

"And if I did give up, old Fatso would be ashamed he had ever known me!" Pucky suddenly heard himself saying.

He leapt from his special seat and began pacing the control room while carrying on a long monologue with himself. Many physical problems were involved and yet this 3-foot, droll little creature was cold-bloodedly analysing the situation even while conscious of the fact that his native world was hurtling ever more swiftly toward the atomic holocaust that was its central star.

Suddenly Pucky stopped with a jolt of inspiration. Perry! he cried out aloud. "You're still going to pull me out and the little babies too! I'll send you a signal, alright—I'll bring you to Vagabond with some fireworks...!" And then, suddenly not quite so enthusiastic: "But first I have to find that power station. Ah, Perry, if I were as smart as you I'd be able to guess where to look for it!"

As though listening to his own thoughts he raised his head abruptly. He tried to recall the coordinates that Walter Grimpel had defined when the energy eruption had occurred here. He drove himself to remember and wore himself out in the process until finally, after an hour or so, he gave it up in a mood of discouragement. It so happened, however, that at the moment he was standing in front of the small ship's positronicon.

"I have to get this thing working again! If I patched up that energy sensor before it was dropped by Bikre I ought to be able to do something with this—but if Grimpel's data aren't in the registers then Perry and Fatso can just strike one Lt. Puck from the mutant list!"

As fast as his little legs could carry him he ran to the completely demolished power and engine room of the SJ-09. He needed a transformer, a small converter—among a hundred other incidental items.

Once arrived at his destination he found that the superheated sand from the storm was blowing in through a rip in the outer hull that was a meter wide and 8 meters long. In an opposite direction, however, the hull had crumpled in such a manner as to obstruct the exterior winds. Otherwise everything would have been buried by now in the reddish sands.

The cooling system in his suit was working under an ever increasing load. It was an unmistakable sign that the constant increase of the planet's temperature was reaching a point where the storm would become a hurricane of hot gases—after which Vagabond would no longer have an atmosphere.

Pucky squirmed through the gaps of the demolished machinery of the SJ-09 while the beam of his spotlight barely served to penetrate the red-hot blasts of sand that the storm whipped through the cracks. He thought fleetingly that he was about to repeat the classical search for the needle in the haystack—or that he was grasping at the proverbial straw—but it did not divert him from his purpose. Using all the concentration he could muster he unleashed his telekinetic powers to tear loose a small converter. This he caused to float to the passage that led to the small control room.

Again he gripped in with his telekinesis. Bent and twisted steel beams blocking his way had to yield to his invisible pressure. Heavy equipment with shattered cabinets and torn housings were wrenched from their final anchorage and disappeared in the darkness of the storm outside.

Finally after an hour's search, Pucky began to despair. He needed a certain kind of small relay circuit which was indispensable for a voltage control in supplying power to the ship's positronicon. He had found 4 of them so far but all of them had been damaged beyond repair.

In the midst of this nerve-wracking search he was distracted by another telepathic distress call from the group of mousebeaver children he had first discovered on Vagabond, down in the cavern that was 800 meters below the surface.

*Pucky, why don't you come to see us anymore? We're lonely down here. And we're awfully afraid!*

These were the anguished emanations from the youngsters whose parents had all died.



*Your little sun has gone out, Pucky. Don't leave us here all alone!*

The 'little sun', of course, was the spare spotlight he had left with the little ones. Even though it had been operating continuously for several days, Pucky still couldn't understand why it wasn't working anymore.

But I can't go there now of all times, he thought somewhat helplessly. However, for the first time in many a day his incisor tooth suddenly came to light, even though briefly.

He still had the means of quieting those youngsters: hypnosis! Using his telepathy he traced them and then sent them a strong hypnotic suggestion of reassurance. Almost instantly the mental cries of distress subsided. And once again he continued his search for the relay circuit amidst the ruins of the Space-jet.

Pucky was startled by a shaking and vibration of the ground. Vagabond was being visited by its first planetary tremors. Between the sun's gravitational grip and the rising centrifugal pressures from its wild rotation rate the small planet was on the verge of breaking up.

This process might go on for weeks yet but it could also cause the structural dissolution of Vagabond within a few days and Pucky held out little hope for the longer period of grace. Minutes went by as the rumbling and roaring continued in the depths of the ground and one earth-shock after another struck the surface world. The Space-jet was rocked heavily back and forth. Pucky climbed onto a twisted cross-brace and in spite of his suit's cooling system he could feel how hot it had become.

Finally the planet-wide seismic disturbance died down. The mousebeaver felt himself driven by invisible whips in his frenzied search for the special relay circuit. There had been 2 dozen of the things in the machine and power room but where were they now? Were they still here somewhere in the junk-pile or were they already under the hot sand which was becoming higher and deeper with each passing minute?

His helpless rage over his imminent fate caused his telekinetic powers to increase tremendously. Using these titanic forces he literally tore the junk-pile apart, even hurling the heaviest pieces away in high curving arcs. Then he even embraced the masses of sand and his telekinesis swept the red desert dust outside against the storm forces, where the hurricane picked it up and carried it away.

Pucky's arm trembled when the beam of his hand-light fell on three of the precious relay circuits all at once. Two of them were still undamaged.

"And now lets go!" he exclaimed, urging himself into action.

## **6/ LAST HOURS OF VAGABOND**

The positronic registers contained Walter Grimpel's coördinates which designated the area of the energy eruption on Vagabond. When he finally held the plastic foil strip in his hands, Pucky felt that it was Christmas and that he had just received the most beautiful present in his life.

But then his enthusiasm burst asunder like an exploding rocket.

"*Sonow* what do I do with it?" he asked himself disconcertedly. "How do I find the equator? How am I supposed to pinpoint a longitude of 43 degrees, 6 minutes and 21 seconds?"

In spite of the perfect functioning of his air-conditioning unit, Pucky was damp with sweat. His eyes narrowed bitterly the more he looked at the computer readout strip and finally he threw it into a corner. "My reason has deserted me!" he reproached himself. "Energy eruption! Bell, it's a good thing you're not here or You'd nag me about this stupidity to the end of my life! What do I care about the place that Grimpel located from the Earth? How could anything still be there if the energy blast *wasthat* big?"

In the next moment he was again in front of the positronicon. Actually, Pucky had performed a miracle in having rewired the equipment necessary to make the computer work again. He knew that the device must know the coordinates of his crash-landing because the Space-jet had been functioning up to the moment of the crash.

Another readout strip popped out into the small receiver slot. Pucky reached for it quickly. He read his present latitude and longitude as 00:00:09/171:38:56, which indicated that he had crashed just south of the equator.

His mouse eyes widened as he contemplated the computer console. It was the only possibility of showing him a way out of his predicament. It must certainly contain the normal planetary data in its memory bank and it must have registered the changing data picked up by the ship's sensor devices during the approach flight to Vagabond.

"Listen, you!" he said to it as though he were addressing a Terranian. "If you leave me in the lurch you can just take the blame if they set up my epitaph on Earth a few days from now. So you'd better listen carefully..."

It was Pucky who had to concentrate, however, as he contemplated making a large number of adjustments on the programming panel. The question he was about to ask the positronic brain was extremely complicated. The computer would have to calculate the location on the planet which would have received the first impetus to move it from its normal orbit, based on the changes observed since then and up to the time of the landing. Further, from that the brain had to derive coordinates which could guide Pucky to the power station.

Pucky was completely convinced that the destiny of his home world was concluded and that no power in the universe could keep Vagabond from plunging into its sun. But he did not care to share the same fate. He wanted to return to Earth. He hoped to set up a distress signal that would advise Rhodan of his peril—for him and the mousebeaver children. They were presumably still down there in the deep cavern provided that the earthquake hadn't caved it in.

When he finished his input programming, he decided to do something about the babies. The computer would require at least a half-hour to arrive at an answer to his compounded question.

He hurried to the storage locker. There were still 29 spacesuits hanging here, although none of them possessed a minicom. He tied them together in a bundle with a synthetic piece of cord. Grasping the package firmly, he teleported.

He rematerialised in the dark cavern which contained about 50 of the young mousebeavers. The cave had withstood the earthquake without damage but the tunnel to the surface had collapsed. He received no cry of greeting from any of the youngsters. Evidently his hypnotic thrust at them was still in full effect.

The first thing he did was open his helmet and breathe in the cool fresh air with relief. The mousebeavers who had placed their children here must have guessed what was in store for their world. But even here at this depth not one of their offspring would have survived were it not for the fact that the hot sandstorm on the surface had closed up the entrance and thus created a heat-isolation barrier. Also the earthquake had increased the insulation so that the meagre air supply could not escape or be contaminated.

But how long would this air hold out?

Pucky turned on his spotlight and played its rays across the little slumbering tykes. He gave them a continued hypnotic suggestion to keep on doing exactly what they were doing—to sleep, sleep, sleep! When they were asleep and not moving they needed less oxygen and would not suffer from pangs of hunger.

Then Pucky teleported back to the SJ-09. He arrived just as the positronic brain read out the answer:

*Impetus to orbital variation occurred in the equatorial zone: percent probability, 97.64. Hypothetical distance from landing site is 672 km: percent probability, 80.05. Location of power station at a depth of 5 to 15 km: percent probability, 73. Direction of station, directly east: percent probability, 97.64.*

Pucky memorized these figures immediately. He felt uncomfortable about some of the lower percentages of probability. It only served to prove that in spite of all technology a Space-jet in these circumstances was no better than a primitive lifeboat on a storm-lashed sea.

Pucky made his preparations carefully. He was especially painstaking in his choice of hand weapons. Having selected two impulse blasters and one thermobeamer, he then made a general inspection of his spacesuit. Laden with a maximum supply of ammunition and food, he finally teleported from the Space-jet, making a leap that was approximately 670 km eastward.

When he rematerialised he was gripped by the heat hurricane and whirled up through the turbulent air and sand like a withered leaf. He had to make use of telekinesis to reach the ground. With his suit generators going at peak capacity he activated his multiple defence screens. But he quickly refrained from trying to use his searchlight. The sharply focussed rays did not penetrate the storm more than 2 meters in any direction.

He had hardly gotten to his feet before he sensed a mental pressure of some kind that he had not noticed until now. He recalled the perilous adventure that he had come through with Rhodan and Sengu on Barkon. In the battle with the Invisibles there he had almost been overwhelmed by a very sudden pain in his head, yet here it was different—quite something else!

Again he used his telekinetic strength to anchor himself in the sand against the raging heat storm and with the help of telepathy he searched for the source of the mental pressure which was growing stronger by the minute.

Pucky did not know of Dr. Innogow's discovery or that what he was dealing with was organic energy—nor did he realize that at this moment his hair under his spacesuit was beginning to bristle.

He had a feeling that from second to second he was gradually becoming disoriented. Even his telepathic tracking faculty seemed to be failing him. Yet he felt quite clearly that he was not under attack and the whole experience brought on a sort of frustrated rage which had the effect of making him think very sharply for a moment. The mental pressure came at him from 18 different directions. He felt sure of

himself but did not understand why.

There was no one on Vagabond who happened to know that 18 spiral-shaped constructions of more than 100 meter length had been embedded into the surface of the planet in 18 different locations.

When the mental pressure became unbearable for him, Pucky made a short teleport jump in an easterly direction. Here the pressure was only half as strong.

"Pressure...?" he heard himself saying. He realized that what he had come across involved some kind of natural impulses of extraordinary power. Instead of attacking him they were merely streaming past him. "Gosh darn it all!" he exclaimed. "Everywhere there's always something different to face! To the devil with it!"

However the trouble with Pucky was that he was Pucky whose chief characteristic was curiosity. Struggling to ignore the mental pressure, he deliberately followed the impulse stream and finally obtained a telepathic bearing on the direction of its origin.

"It's behind me!"

He jumped, and yelled out when he rematerialised. In an agony of pain he threw himself onto the searing sand—only to be free of the torment in the same moment.

"Well, what the—?!" He started to exclaim in wonderment as he got up again but he had only straightened up halfway before the sensation struck him again.

In a flash he dropped down again and lay on his stomach. From that position he activated his searchlight. There was something very uncanny about this pain phenomenon. The beam of his searchlight still did not penetrate far through the swirling sandblast of the storm. He finally began to crawl, taking care not to rise up too far at any time. Like a thief he slowly circled the area.

Suddenly he discovered something black in front of him which curved upward at an odd angle. He recognized it as something he had seen before. It was exactly what Bikre had shown him—a corkscrew-shaped antenna!

Once more Pucky did not dare move. His insistent curiosity did not quite reach that far. Seventy years of training under Perry Rhodan had instilled caution in him although at times he had ventured where a full battalion of daring men would not have gone.

The twisting antenna towered 4 meters above the ground. The heat storm was sweeping more and more sand away from it and more of the structure was being exposed.

"What kind of star-hoppers managed to install this gadget from Hell?" he asked himself angrily.

He probed upward with his arm for a moment but pulled it back with a shrill squeak of pain. The mental pressure had struck like a titanic fist as though his arm itself had served as an antenna to receive the eerie force. It took him some time to recover. He did not try it a second time. But when he sought telepathically to track the source again his mental tendrils seemed to reach into nothingness.

A soft warning hum inside his suit advised him that his cooling system was being overloaded. The remaining air masses of Vagabond were actually beginning to glow! His outside thermometer was not registering which meant the temperature was over 1475° Fahrenheit.

"Sssaossao!" Pucky cried out in a high pitch, in his excitement reverting to his native tongue. "Pretty soon even the sand is going to start melting!"

He looked at the small meter panel inside his helmet, just below his faceplate and saw that the inside temperature had risen to 82°. He quickly switched all generator outputs into the cooling system, with the exception of one protective field screen. He needed that to keep the red-hot sandblast from him.

Seconds later the warning hum was silenced. The mousebeaver resumed his telepathic search for the source of the alien impulses. And once more he seemed to be reaching into emptiness. But then he suddenly sensed something. Something was there!—a very weak impulse somewhere far beneath him. He could not know that he had tracked down an electronic-organic hybrid—that alien life form which was known as orgh.

"Just you wait, chum," exclaimed Pucky, "you're in for a surprise!" And he teleported toward the impulse source.

He landed 10,000 meters under the superheated surface of Vagabond in a gigantic dark cavern. Using his searchlight he was able to make a quick survey of his surroundings. Pucky was seized by a grave sense of foreboding as he observed the frightening array of huge machines. They all stood there in absolute silence like harbingers of doom.

He felt the naked fear rising within him which gave him an urge to flee from these uncanny apparitions in a single teleport jump. But his curiosity held him long enough to remember his best friend, Perry Rhodan, who would never have run away from something that was merely black and operating without a sound.

But where was this creature whose impulses he had detected through 10,000 meters of thick rock and heavy layers of earth?

Pucky stood between two giant machines which were as high as a house and he played the searchlight beam across them. Two hundred meters overhead was the curving rock ceiling. His concentrated light beam ran along it until it became lost in the distance. It gave the mousebeaver his first real impression of the size of this subterranean power room. But his search for the source of the impulses revealed nothing.

He teleported as far as his searchlight had reached. Suddenly he almost forgot to breathe as he discovered something that filled him with a morbid fascination. It was a covered or enshrouded contraption of some sort that reminded him of a giant worm, yet his thought probes still revealed no alien impulses.

He didn't want to admit to himself how much this whole situation was disturbing him. He concealed his uneasiness with the argument that *the other one* whom he had detected from above near the antenna was probably capable of screening off his thought emanations.

But basically he did not believe this was the case. He sprang about in short teleport hops, crossing the vast chamber from one side to another and going from end to end of it. The longer his search remained futile the more uneasy he became.

Then the second seismic shock struck the planet Vagabond. Even as Pucky teleported to the surface he heard the first roll of thunder almost in the planet's very core. He figured it would be better to be melted by heat rather than be buried under 10,000 meters of rock.

The half-hour he spent waiting on the surface was like an eternity while the ground shook and the titanic gaseous hurricane raged above. But the planetary trembler ceased as abruptly as it had begun. Pucky teleported back down below to the giant installation, prepared for any magnitude of destruction, yet to his amazement there was no sign of damage. And once more he started an intensive search for the other presence.

The whole thing seemed to become more eerie and uncanny as time passed without event. He couldn't understand why no one attacked him in spite of the fact that his brilliant spotlight made him a perfect target. Nevertheless he had not given up the idea of detonating this cosmic power plant so that its energy eruption would attract Rhodan's attention. However, the longer he moved around these dark, shrouded machines of alien design and form the more difficult his plan appeared to be. He could no longer regard the project as offering a 100% probability of success.

By now he had made well over 100 separate teleport jumps around the mighty cavern and his watch kept telling him how much precious time was passing. No one needed to tell him that Vagabond had meanwhile come still closer to the sun or that it was only a matter of time before his native world would plunge to its fiery destruction.

Suddenly during one of his teleports he was struck by a powerful impulse. He traced the source swiftly and was soon standing in front of a dark, asymmetrical housing. He immediately sought to communicate with whatever might be inside the thing but there was no answer—just the steady stream of impulses.

The mousebeaver began to doubt his senses. He was receiving thoughts but why didn't he get an answer to his questions? And why wasn't he able to understand the mental impulses that came to him?

He was reminded of Barkon again but there he had clearly sensed that the incomprehensible thought-streams were hostile to him whereas here there was simply a neutral impulse emanation—nothing more.

His widened searchlight beam embraced the entire small structure which measured about 2 meters in height and 5 meters in length. And he suddenly noticed that numerous connecting cables led to this installation from all directions.

Slowly, he raised the muzzle of his impulse blaster until it was aimed directly at the centre of the shrouded contraption but he could not find the courage to activate the weapon. Once more he gathered all of his telepathic powers and sent out a command to the thought source, insisting that it communicate with him.

Again with no results.

There was only the continuing stream of impulses.

"What do you think this planet is—a football?" asked Pucky threateningly.

He hesitated a few seconds more and then the pulse beam of his blaster broke through the thing's outer shroud and bored into the interior of the alien structure. The next moment he gasped aloud, not trusting his eyes. He turned off his searchlight and only the blaster beam illuminated his surroundings. But it was not consuming the outer shielding of the contraption. It penetrated it but did not destroy it. And somewhere in the heart of the assembly there was something that simply arrested the destructive beam.

Suddenly he wondered if he were the victim of a hallucination. Deep within the thing he perceived a

strange yellowish point of light. The point began to grow. It became bigger and bigger as though being inflated and it was this light globe that was blocking his energy beam!

Of all times, a new planetary earth-shock began to be felt. Pucky held the firing contact of his weapon firmly depressed, still aiming at the swollen balloon of yellow light. *It's you or me!* he exclaimed mentally using the maximum output of his telepathic faculty. *Speak! Make yourself understandable!*

But an orgh is not a telepath. He can only communicate on the organic wavelengths of the monsters. He received Pucky's telepathic impulses as an additional source of energy but he did not recognize them as a form of communication. As for the blaster's fiery beam, he also regarded it as nothing more than new energy. What he couldn't absorb organically he deflected into the electronic portion of his being.

Such was the orgh's concept but the reality of the matter was that the impulse beam was an alien form of energy—and it was deadly!

It was then that the mousebeaver realized where the terrible rumbling had come from at the inception of each seismic shock. The orgh was rumbling! Its energies rumbled, thundered and raged.

Pucky teleported but he had caught just a glimpse of the beginnings of a mighty bolt of lightning. He teleported more than 2,000 km from the focal point but at the moment of rematerialisation he had to close his eyes against a blinding flare that shot 10,000 km into space and reduced the sandstorm to a zephyr by comparison.

*Perry, there's my call!*

Such was his prime thought as he teleported to the last group of living mousebeavers on Vagabond, while the entire planet trembled under the impact of a catastrophic explosion.

\* \* \* \*

At this moment on the monster world *agal* was reporting to his shaftgal: "Our stellar experiment has been ruined in its final stage. The best orgh we ever developed has failed us!"

## **7/ PUCKY'S GREATEST PERIL**

Toward the end of September 2044 a routine inspection was made of all spaceship logbooks but a certain important positronic entry was overlooked. Shortly after the turn of the year a special detailed inspection was made of all old logbooks and included among them was the ship's record of a certain light cruiser which had visited the planet Vagabond in the previous year.

This time all log entries were being processed case by case through the main positronicon in Terrania and finally on the night of January 8 of the new year the inspection commission put in a top emergency

call to Perry Rhodan.

Perry Rhodan reacted to this by waking up Reginald Bell and Allan D. Mercant, the Chief of Solar Intelligence, as well as a certain group of scientists. Also Dr. Innogow was awakened along with all his colleagues who were still helplessly baffled by the pea-sized chunk of blue fluorescent material from Vagabond. In addition an alert signal reached the supply depot manager in charge of Stores Unit 18/Omega. A few minutes later this man rushed in desperate haste to the depot compound and searched feverishly for a certain wave-reflector device which had been dismantled from a light cruiser in September of the previous year. He finally found it and raced with it to Rhodan.

While en route he exclaimed to himself: "The Chief wants *this* thing? Glord, what can he want with such an obsolete piece of junk?"

But the device *worked*. In fact it operated perfectly with an error deviation of only 0.0005%.

It was then that Terrania's great hypersensor station cut into the emergency conference. "Sir—tremendous energy eruption on Vagabond! The planet must be in flames by now and is in danger of flying apart within a matter of hours!"

Rhodan's face froze. Bell turned pale. The two men exchanged frightened looks. Rhodan's hand jumped to the alert button. It was the signal control for sending a red alert to the Solar Fleet. The viewscreen lit up and with it the hypercom panel for interstellar communications came to life.

"What ship have you got in the area of Vagabond that's carrying mutants and teleporters? This has top alert priority!"

A dozen men around him held their breaths when he asked this question. And the answer came back promptly.

"Sir, no ship with teleporters is in the area designated..."

"What light cruiser's closest to the planet?"

"The *Burma* under Joe Pasgin, on a course to..."

"Thank you!" Rhodan cut the hypercom connection and turned to the viewscreen, which was on a closed channel to the telecom station. "You heard that?"

"Yessir!"

"Emergency order to *Burma* ! Set course for Vagabond! Max speed! Pucky is in terrible danger! Also alert Arkon 3. Request robot Brain also beam this command to the *Burma* . Advise me immediately contact is made with Pasgin! Also rush all sensor and analysis data on Vagabond to me as fast as possible—that is all!"

Then he cut off this connection as well and finally leaned back in his chair with his eyes momentarily closed.

Bell was shaken and despondent. "And here both of us figured we were making Pucky happy with that vacation leave!" If I had a nice sound-proofed padded cell I'd like to yell my head off..."



Rhodan cut him off with unusual vehemence. "Do you have to make it harder on me?"

Rhodan's stocky companion took no offence at the reprimand. Bell reached past him and made a connection with the spaceport.

"Message to *Drusus* ! Emergency standby for priority takeoff! The Chief and I are coming on board—that is all" Then he looked grimly around him at the assembled group of experts. "Gentlemen, you will kindly accompany us!"

When he stood up he turned on his wrist minicom which established an interference-free connection with the hypercom station. Although the briefing in Rhodan's office did not break up in a panic, nevertheless there was not a minute wasted.

Eleven minutes later they all entered the groundlock of the *Drusus* . This was Rhodan's flagship, almost 1 mile in diameter, and was the largest class of battleship in the Solar Fleet.

At the same moment that the super fighting ship thundered into the night above Terrania, Pucky held a mousebeaver baby tenderly in his arms and whispered: "If my friend Perry Rhodan didn't see those fireworks it's going to be curtains for all of us! But you just keep on sleeping, little one. This headache isn't for you—it's for Perry Rhodan now! He's the greatest, though—only one of his kind. If anyone's going to yank us out of here it will be Perry!"

Pucky gently stroked the little creature's silky fur.

\* \* \* \*

Lt. Hendrik Olavson, a natural born spacer, shoved in an intercom key almost as soon as the emergency order was heard on the hypercom speaker.

*"Emergency order to Burma! Change course with top speed for Vagabond! Major energy eruption detected there. Pucky presently on Vagabond. In maximum danger. Signed—Rhodan."*

The *Burma* was a light cruiser of the 100-meter class. Just 15 minutes before this the ship had emerged from hyperspace and had gone into an approach course to 456LL4, a planet of the Arkonide Empire, where it was to relieve the Terranian crew stationed there.

Joe Pasgin, commander of the *Burma* , was jolted from sleep in his cabin by the emergency. "Olavson!" he shouted as he sprang out of bed.

Olavson interrupted him from the pilot's seat in the Control Central. "*Burma*'s on new course—the positronic's already working out the coördinates. Transition about 5 minutes!"

"OK!" was all Pasgin had to say as he pulled up the last zipper on his uniform.

Then the telecom speaker rang out again. The unmistakable voice of the mammoth Brain on Arkon 3 could be heard. It repeated the same emergency message verbatim.

My God!—thought Joe Pasgin on his way to the Control Central—if Arkon 3 is also relaying the message there must not be much left of Vagabond!

Lt. Hendrik Olavson didn't even glance sideways as his commander sat down in the copilot's seat. He had his hands full to get the *Burma* onto its new course but he seemed to be orchestrating the ship's complex systems like a musician. A kind of 6th sense always seemed to tell him what he should do and Hendrik Olavson never failed to prove that his reactions were correct—usually within a fraction of a second before the unexpected happened.

The ship's positronic computer chucked out the data strip for a transition to Vagabond. Olavson clipped the plastic strip to his flight console and fed in all the required hyperjump programming, not neglecting meanwhile to bring the small spherical ship to the necessary transition velocity. He was not fond of going into transitions from a standstill. In spite of his daring temperament he considered such a manoeuvre much too dangerous.

The *Burma*, carrying a regulation crew of 150 men, was a class of ship that had an almost uncanny acceleration capability. It could be brought to speed in 5 minutes. Naturally, since the heavy propulsion units were of a magnitude somewhere between those of a heavy cruiser and ships of the Solar class, all those accoutrements normally taken for granted on such vessels had to be sacrificed—and this included its armaments. Spacers of the State class were long range reconnaissance ships and because of their super engines could reach the most distant goals with lightning swiftness.

Now however they had to get there faster than usual. Pucky's life was in danger!

All crewmembers knew the mousebeaver. They had all had opportunities to get a hearty laugh out of his pranks and had often been amused by his manners of speech but they were all equally aware that Pucky had been in many a serious encounter, that he had demonstrated unexcelled courage and cold-blooded decision and that many a man owed him his life.

"Now he's in a tight spot himself," said Olavson grimly, as the positronic counter called out the countdown to transition in a metallic voice.

72 seconds before the jump to Vagabond, the Com Central was heard from. "Hypercom station, Terrania," announced the Communications officer.

And Terrania came through "*Attention, Burma! Maximum hazard conditions for Vagabond landing! The planet is close to plunging into its sun. The energy eruption has accelerated this process. Do not land, by order of the Chief! Further orders from Chief Administrator to Burma crew: when you fly around Vagabond, think of Pucky in unison with the greatest intensity possible! For First Administrator Rhodan, signed—Bell.*"

15 seconds to transition. The *Burma* was already flying at a speed of 0.7 light velocity. Olavson had switched on the synchro-pilot and committed all navigational and engine functions to the positronic. The young lieutenant and his commander glanced at each other briefly as though they knew what to expect.

"Hang it all!" said Pasgin. "Of all the troops it could happen to, does it have to be that little runt who gets thrown into the cooker? That is, if he's still alive!"

Then the transition came.

The star-strewn void disappeared in an instant and with it the *Burma*, only to rematerialise in normal space many light-years distant. A blaze of light flooded from the viewscreen into the Control Central. The *Burma* had emerged from the para-void between sun and planet. Solar distance: 84 million km! Distance to Vagabond: 9.5 million km!

There wasn't a single Terranian who cared about making such a close fly-by to any sun, whatever its stellar characteristics. In such regions one was never safe and apparently the automatic pilot was of the same opinion. The *Burma's* reaction to the dangerous gravitational pull was a wild crescendo of its super-powerful engines.

No word was spoken in the Control Central. From the Com Room came the concise announcement: "Our position reported to Terrania. The Chief is en route to Vagabond in the *Drusus*."

Pasgin depressed the general stations key of the ship's intercom. "Think hard of Pucky!" he called into the mike grid.

None of the 150-man crew thought the order unusual. They had all witnessed the miraculous paranormal feats of the mousebeaver.

With thundering impulse engines the *Burma* raced toward Vagabond, which seemed to have become a tiny sun. It was throwing off protuberance-like fountains of incandescent gases into space. The men of the *Burma* did not have to be astrophysicists to interpret what they saw on the panoramic screens. Vagabond was in the process of losing the last glowing remnants of its atmosphere. It was the final reaction before the break-up and ultimate plunge into the sun.

Hendrik Olavson hurled the ship forward with all the power he dared to utilize. He had switched three of his power plants over to the spacesphere's defence screens in order to make them super strong. He did not know quite what to expect when the *Burma* got within a few thousand meters of the surface of Vagabond and began to fly around the planet.

Joe Pasgin repeated his instruction to all hands over the intercom: "Think intensively of Pucky!"

As always happened during any close flight approach to a world, Vagabond now appeared to be flying up out of the depths to meet the *Burma*. The closer the doomed planet came the more terrible was the spectacle of its fiery dissolution.

"And that little furball is still supposed to be alive?" asked one of the men in the Control Central. There was a note of despair in his voice.

Then the spectacle before them grew more alarming and Olavson began to hear his commander's heavy breathing.

"Energy trace?" asked Pasgin swiftly.

"Working since end of our jump," came the curt answer.

These men who had already witnessed so many wonders of the galaxy were staring in fascination at a conical blast of yellow energy. It was an energy form they were unable to fathom.

"Don't get too close to that," Pasgin told his lieutenant.

The latter only nodded while he hurled the *Burma* toward Vagabond.

The commander's voice was again heard on the intercom speakers: "All hands into spacesuits!"

At 49000 meters altitude Olavson swerved the *Burma* into a slightly new course. In an uninterrupted stream the positronicon was spewing out new data on Vagabond—the readout figures for a dying world.

"Still nothing..." muttered Pasgin.

Still no sign of life from Pucky.

Pasgin shot a question to the Com Room: "Has the Chief been advised that we're starting our flight around Vagabond?"

"Chief just advised. An answer is coming in from the *Drusus* !"

The Com Room channelled it to Control Central: "Search for Pucky!" Find the little fellow! Find him at all costs!"

It was Rhodan himself, a man who feared for the life of a friend and yet knew that even he could not manufacture a miracle.

"Pucky..." Olavson spoke the name slowly. "Pucky," he repeated and shook his head despondently.

A depressing message came through from tracking: "Strong planetary quakes—major intensity! If this magnitude of seismic disturbance continues, Vagabond will break up within the next 10 hours."

Somebody in Control Central interjected: "What do you mean, 10 hours? It will be sooner than that! At most it'll be 4 hours with Vagabond's high speed of axial rotation!"

The *Burma* circled around a flaming inferno—a world now devoid of an air mantle where the oxygen-saturated earth was yielding up its last remnants of air, with explosive spurts of glowing gases, causing the ground itself to turn into lava. Temperatures were prevalent on Vagabond now which only the rarest of alloys had ever been able to withstand. The spacesphere was going into its 15th orbital flight around the planet. Joe Pasgin heard Olavson's despairing voice.

"Still nothing..."

Whereupon he again shouted over the speakers: "Think still harder of Pucky!"

But in the same moment Pucky was there in a brief flash and he jumped with a startled shout to catch something the mousebeaver tossed to him.

"Catch, Pasgin, and handle my little one carefully!" In the following instant, Pucky disappeared again.

"Hit the brakes, Olavson! Bring the ship to hover position!" yelled Pasgin in a transport of sudden relief. But what was he holding in his arms? Something that was concealed inside a Terranian spacesuit but which did not fill it properly.

And standing close to Pasgin was Michel Dagan, unable to close his gaping jaw because something was also lying in his arms.

"By all the planets of the Milky Way—and throw in the satellites!" Pasgin blurted out in a shout of celebration. "This must be a Pucky*Junior!*"

"You're close!" peeped Pucky behind him. The mousebeaver appeared a second time, bringing 4 more little whelps. "But that one's a little Pucky*lina!*" And again he was gone.

"Glord!" the Commander yelled. "Message to the Chief! Pucky is here!"

The scene in the Control Central of the *Burma* was one that had never been witnessed in the history of the Solar Fleet. Six officers stood there and held little creatures in their arms while Pucky kept coming and going.

"I could scream!" the mousebeaver shouted once in a rage but nobody knew quite what he was referring to because he kept working back and forth like a shuttle.

Once more Pucky rematerialised in the deep cavern, 800 meters below the blazing surface. His native world was shaking in its seismic death throes and all around him everything was rumbling and swaying. Suddenly something heavy struck his plastic metal helmet and slammed him toward the ground but not too quickly to prevent his teleporting himself a few paces laterally by sheer instinctive reaction. His searchlight soon revealed that where he had stood the cavern's roof was bending downward and coming apart.

In a second or two Pucky and the still sleeping youngsters here would be buried under 800 meters of earth and stone! In a seeming blind frenzy, yet not completely bereft of his reason, the plucky mousebeaver went into swift action. One, two, three, four, five—as many babies as he could gather—and still a sixth between his legs, with a seventh tucked on top of it. With these last seven he teleported up to the *Burma* just as the balance of the cavern crashed in ruins over the remaining offspring of the race.

"How many are there?" was Pucky's first question as he clapped back his helmet for the first time in days and looked around with his gleaming mousebeaver eyes.

"28 of them, Lt. Puck!" Joe Pasgin had used Pucky's military designation without thinking.

"28 out of thousands..." Pucky was suddenly weary and his eyes changed from gleaming to dull. "Just 28... and all because a gang of stellar aliens decided to play football with Vagabond!"

Pucky wasn't aware that the Commander had switched the sound and video pickup into the Com Central where the operators perceived at once what Pasgin intended. Thus over hypercom Perry Rhodan became an eye and ear witness on board the *Drusus* while Pucky told his story.

But the mousebeaver didn't say too much. He suddenly realized that the *Burma* was still hovering over Vagabond. "Hey, Pasgin, after all this do you want us all to dive into the sun together? Let's merk out of here! Vagabond could explode any minute now!"

"Right!" Olavson took Pucky's urgent invitation as an order and accelerated the *Burma* under full power. It was what Pucky or Bell would have called a 'slots out!' condition and it was just in time because in that moment the panoramic viewscreens flooded the Control Central in blinding light. Several of the men yelled in momentary panic.

But Olavson had already committed the *Burma* to the synchro and the ship's positronics took over. It took some time before the men regained their ability to see.

"Where's Vagabond?" asked Pasgin as he pointed to the panob screens which now only revealed the Moloch monster that was the local sun.

"Exploded!" chirped somebody. "I probably held my impulse blaster on that yellow eye too long. Anyway, Joe..." And Pucky briefly flashed his incisor. "You have to admit, I set up a fancy distress blinker for you guys! But I've only found out in the past few hours that the hellish power plant deep within the planet's crust could cause Vagabond to explode... What could that have been—that yellow bubble of light?"

No one understood what he was saying and they comprehended even less how an entire planet could be consumed in a flash of raw, gleaming energy.

"We're not moving, Commander!" Olavson called out in alarm. "The *Burma* has stopped accelerating!" Yet by the sound of the thundering engines on full power thrust the spacesphere should have been hurtling like a bolt of lightning out of the small solar system.

In one teleport jump, Pucky was in the energy tracking centre and looking at the double waveforms on the oscillographs. Although he still knew nothing of Dr. Innogow's discovery he recognized the partially organic nature of the energy which still remained here although Vagabond had already exploded and disappeared.

"Standing transition!" he shrieked piercingly. "Get out of here!"

\* \* \* \*

Halfway between Vagabond's sun and the Earth the *Burma* emerged into the normal continuum.

"Please, Joe," said Pucky, "lay off any new hyper hops for a while. First we should let the little kids come to. Did you tell Perry where he can find us? Do that, Joe, and I'll go to the sickbay and see how the youngsters are doing."

But within less than an hour Pasgin was shouting at Pucky over the video intercom: "What kind of a gang of little rowdies did you bring on board? How come you passed them off as babies, you shameless little liar? Little devils would be a much better description!"

In the cabin Pucky had taken over, the mousebeaver looked in some perplexity at the intercom video screen. He was slightly taken aback by the raging countenance of the Commander.

"What have the little whelps gotten into, Joe?" he asked a bit uncertainly.

"Two of your little mutts have just turned on the fire extinguisher system in the machine room and half drowned the place with water! How did they even know how to turn it on? Can they read thoughts like you? Are we faced with a bunch of teleporters and telekins? And you can just stick that shiny tooth of yours behind your lip! I suppose you find those little runts amusing, right?"

"Well, I—"

Pucky gave up. The Commander had to turn away momentarily to handle a message. When he returned to the screen his tone was threatening.

"Pucky, we just caught up with three of the little devils, not a moment too soon..." He turned aside, distracted by more reports. "What's the matter? What? Not again! Where? What do you mean they want to shoot something? Impulse cannon #2? Oh, no—!" Back to Pucky: "Pucky, did you hear that? Now look—either you put those little pirates under lock and key or I'll have you courtmartialled! Pucky..."

But Pucky was no longer in his cabin. He had rushed out of it and was already hunting down his junior fellows. When he caught four of the 'innocent' rascals in the food storage hold he was forced to get angry with them himself. They had ripped open a flour sack and were having a great time scooping the dusty contents through the wide-mesh screen of an air exhaust shaft.

He had hardly brought them under lock and key and finished given them a scolding when a shout of alarm came over the intercom P.A.

"Pucky, what's wrong with the ventilator system?"

He wasn't talking. Off he went again on a hunt for other mousebeaver pups who were getting into mischief. It was with mixed feelings that he caught one of them in the file storage room where the youngster had emptied every drawer and dumped everything onto the floor.

"This is Control Central, Pucky!" It was Joe Pasgin's voice on the speakers. "We've caught one of your tykes up here and for a change he wasn't doing anything but what does it mean when he keeps squeaking something like 'og tille tu?' Does he want something to eat?"

"Og tille tu?" repeated Pucky. "Joe, that means he has to..."

"What?" yelled Pasgin. "Oh no—that does it!"

But Pucky didn't answer. He had teleported back to the room where he had placed most of the surviving mousebeavers. He counted them swiftly—27 of them. The 28th one was in the Control Central and was squeaking *og tille tu!* Pucky's incisor tooth beamed in all its glory. He would show Joe Pasgin how he could handle this problem.

\* \* \* \*

Perry Rhodan and Bell had transferred over to the *Burma* .

"Little fellow..." It was all Rhodan could say at first to Pucky but it seemed to express everything.

But nobody could drag Bell out of the room where all the baby mousebeavers were kept. He had immediately taken all 28 of them to his heart and in a strange way Pucky's favourite buddy had also

become theirs.

Meanwhile Pucky delivered his report. He did not embellish anything as far as his own acts were concerned but on the other hand he didn't exactly efface himself. When it came to the aliens in their tandem-hulled ships his rage was almost uncontainable as he described how they had come to Vagabond and set up their infernal doom machine.

"Then we can probably prepare ourselves for a dangerous encounter with an alien race sometime or other," said Rhodan thoughtfully when Pucky had finished. "Intelligences who ruthlessly destroy other races do not particularly appeal to me..."

"There's *nothing* appealing about them!" said Pucky bitterly. "Those murderers!"

Perry was stroking Pucky's fur, which was rare for him. "Pucky, nobody should bury himself in his own hatred. Little chum, hate is poison. Maybe the aliens were not being deliberately malicious. Their sensitivities and perspectives might be other than ours. But we'll find that out when we finally meet them. The most important thing, however, is that your race did not become extinct. You saved the last of them and now you'll see how they'll make themselves at home on Mars, where they will again become what they were: a continuing species. A mousebeaver nation. Pucky, I'm proud of you!"

The mousebeaver was deeply touched by this but in order not to be overwhelmed by his emotions he turned the subject away from himself. "But don't let Joe Pasgin know we're bringing them to Mars, Perry. He comes apart every time he even thinks of us mousebeavers. The only thing that seems to calm him down is one little phrase. It must have a certain hypnotic power over him..."

"What phrase is that, Pucky?"

"Og tille tu," replied Pucky with big innocent eyes. But when he heard Rhodan break out into ringing laughter he knew that he had read his mind.

## **ORDER OF THE ACTION**

### [1/ THE MONSTERS & THE MOUSEBEAVERS](#)

### [2/ MYSTERY OF THE IMPOSSIBLE](#)

### [3/ THE BLACK WALL OF DEATH](#)



[4/ PUCKY'S CRISIS](#)

[5/ RACE AGAINST DOOM](#)

[6/ LAST HOURS OF VAGABOND](#)

[7/ PUCKY'S GREATEST PERIL](#)

[THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME](#)

UNLEASHED POWERS

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

KHREST had to close his eyes for a moment.

His worst fears were surpassed by the evidence before his eyes. The three aliens ran around the disk in a high state of agitation in an obvious attempt to find a way of gaining access through the protective shield of the little spacecraft. One of their visible efforts was a huge hole they had burned out of the ground with their thermobeamers. Their attempt to get to the jet from underneath had failed but this did not dampen their frantic activities. They kept furiously attacking the invisible screen and tried every imaginable experiment to accomplish their purpose.

For awhile Khrest watched them motionlessly. Then he drew his weapon. It was an automatic reflex, triggered by determination to save the space-jet at all costs. He drew a bead on the alien trespassers.

Don't be a fool! His logic asserted itself. You'll lose the ship as well as your life!

\* \* \* \*

An enemy of aliens, next issue's account is the action-packed story of a—

## FRIEND TO MANKIND

by

William Voltz