

The Constructors, whose world lay somewhere on the edge of the galaxy, were thought to have been extinct for eons. Perry Rhodan and his staff soon discover that the heritage of the Constructors is as active—and as terribly deadly—as ever. The Terrans cannot destroy their enemy; instead they must somehow harness the tremendous power of the mysterious harvestships in the—

HERITAGE OF THE LIZARD PEOPLE

1/ ADVENTURE ON AZGOLA

8240 LIGHT YEARS from Arkon and 37,111 light-years from Terra—and thus situated at the border of the known universe and close to the gulf between the galaxies—was a lone sun.

It was listed in the star catalogues of the space-travelling races under the name of Azgos. Its 4 planets had never played a significant role and only the 2nd had ever been inhabited by living beings. It was called Azgola but its inhabitants, the once spindly Azgons, had been evacuated. This turn of events put Azgola in the focal point of attention of many galactic power groups. Now the heretofore little noticed planet far from the centres of conflict had become a touchstone of human intelligence because Azgola was destined to be the proving ground for determining the superiority of human beings over robots.

Rhodan's expeditionary fleet circled the system at a respectable distance. The Administrator himself was aboard the battlecruiser *Sirius* of the Solar class. He was accompanied by Reginald Bell and several mutants. The final review of the situation was arranged so that the commanders of the other units could take part by telecom.

Perry Rhodan recapped the prior events in a short outline for the purpose of acquainting with the facts all those who had been absent before. It was an essential precaution to make clear the imminent action to the fullest extent.

Rhodan paused for a moment and gazed thoughtfully at the array of little picture screens in the command centre of the *Sirius*. Each showed a face—trustworthy and highly determined. One of the faces was most remarkable because of its large size, the face of Col. Jefe Claudrin, Commander of the superbattleship *Ironduke*. He exhibited a confident grin.

Rhodan cleared his throat. "Don't be overly optimistic, Claudrin," he warned in an unusually serious tone. "We won't win this contest with the power of our war materiel. It will not be decided by our technical skill but by the power of our logic. We are dealing with an opponent whose positronic brain is far superior to ours. All will be in vain if we make the slightest mistake. I repeat once more so that everybody will be aware of the historical background: an extinct race, probably lizards, lived on the

planet Mechanica, more than 50,000 lightyears from the stellar cluster M-13. Their metabolism was distinctly different from our own. They did not take food in the same manner we do but lived from spores which they ingested through their lungs and probably breathed in through their skin as well. In order to obtain a sufficient supply of food they sent out robotships. They used 3 ships to do the job: The Scout to discover suitable planets, the Seedship with the spores as a cargo and the Harvestship, which has so far eluded us. We have already been able to find the scout and the planter and disposed of them. Now we are awaiting the arrival of the harvester. It should return to the Azgola system, provided we succeeded in operating the abandoned switch station on Mechanica in the correct manner and have transmitted the appropriate radio signals."

Rhodan paused once more. He knew that his men were waiting for his orders to start on their missions but the time had not yet come. "The lizards, who probably died out thousands of years ago, have created a gigantic civilization of robots. Those 3 ships were part of their heritage. The 2 most important ones have now been disabled and the danger of further epidemics eliminated but we also have to capture the harvestship in order to undo the damage they have caused. What happens to be good for one is not beneficial to one and all. The lizards sustained themselves with the spores of lichen whose seeds were sowed on planets with warm climates by the planting ship. The lichen grows quickly and requires no care. It blooms virtually without interruption and emits spores of microscopical size which are neither poisonous nor harmful as such: Their nutritional value is beyond belief. Breathing these spores provides extremely efficient nutrition but the deposition of fat within a few days is so excessive as to cause obesity which in the long run proves to be fatal. Nobody is able to resist this excess of fat as long as they must breathe. For this reason our scientists have picked the simple name of 'fat-moss' for this exotic plant."

Noticing that one of his commanders grimaced slightly, Rhodan raised his voice. "I realize that the gentlemen of the officer corps never had to fight a case of overfeeding in our history but this most incredible thing has now happened. We were forced to evacuate the 2 million inhabitants from the Azgola planet. The Azgons had become so fat that they could hardly move. We had no other choice than evacuation because we are still in the dark about the harvesting method of the extinct lizards. Presumably the moss is sensitive to cold temperatures and is destroyed below 10°C. However Azgola has a subtropical climate where the blubbery lichen proliferates and can't be weeded out. Of course it would be feasible to accomplish this now that the planet has been evacuated but it would mean that we can't use Azgola as a trap for the harvest- ship. This could cause the loss of Arkon 2 because the team of scientists who was assigned to study the lichen was so careless as to infest Arkon with the spores. The first effects are already visible. Vast stretches of the industrial planet's land are already covered by the moss and the Arkonides living there are beginning to get fat."

"Will it be necessary to evacuate Arkon 2?" Claudrin inquired in a booming voice.

"That is impossible," Rhodan shook his head. "Arkon 2 is much too important for the stellar empire of Atlan. Besides it could not be avoided that the spores of the fat-moss would be spread wherever they go. As useful as this plant is, it can turn into a scourge if it is not controlled. And we do not yet know how to control its deleterious defects. Nor do we know as yet how to harvest the spores and use them to best advantage. We can learn this only from the missing harvestship and that's why we are here and waiting. Furthermore, let me tell you a little more about the planet Mechanica. We located it by using the calculations of Arkon's robot Brain that evaluated the radio impulses of the 2 spaceships we have captured. It is an arid and cold planet and the robot civilization created by the lizards still exists—at least partly. We called the harvestship from the central station on the planet. The ship is waiting somewhere in space for orders which planet to visit next. We gave it the coordinates of Azgola. As soon as the harvestship arrives, the central station at Mechanica must be destroyed. This will be your job, Claudrin! You will stay on Arkon 3 till I give you the order to proceed."

"I'll be ready, sir," Col. Jefe Claudrin replied from a distance of more than 8000 light-years.

Rhodan continued: "We also found a clue on Mechanica how the lizards got their food and how the spores of the blubber moss can be adapted for human consumption in the future. Artificial suns were shining in huge glasslike cupolas which served as diningrooms for the lizards where they collected the spores. Later, when the planet became too cold, the harvestship brought the crops from the seeds planted on other planets into these cupolas. Then came a time when the ship failed to arrive and the lizards all perished."

"And why didn't the harvestship return?" somebody asked.

"We don't know. Perhaps it was due to some mechanical breakdown or the scoutship was unable to find suitable planets. Besides, we can't be certain that the absence of the harvestship was the real cause for the demise of the lizards. We don't know enough about it. But we are sure of one thing: we must find the harvestship in order to save Arkon. That's why we have embarked on this mission. We'll have to outwit an opponent who died long ago but whose heritage survives in the form of robots. The ship itself is a robot. Its crew—if there is one—consists of robots as well. If we succeed in building a transmitter station—and we are now making this effort on Terra—we can direct the harvestship to go to any point we choose. And this will make it more convenient for us to include the fat-moss in our nutrition."

Rhodan noticed some movement at his side. The mousebeaver Pucky had sat on a chair in the background. Now he had slipped down and waddled over to Rhodan. "How does this rubber moss taste?" he was interested to know. "Can it also be eaten? I have no desire to breathe it!"

"His gluttony takes the cake," Reginald Bell murmured from his corner. Pucky lifted a warning finger in his direction, causing Bell to swallow all further commentary.

"You can try it, shorty." Rhodan replied. "You'll soon get a chance when you go to Azgola."

Pucky shuddered. "Me—to Azgola? There's not a living being left..."

"Precisely!" Rhodan interrupted him quickly. "Let me present my plan before you complain. Then you can raise your objections if you still feel like it. Alright?"

When Pucky nodded without another word, Rhodan continued his briefing. "The harvestship—meaning the robot—must not be allowed to become suspicious. For this reason we keep all our ships away from the immediate vicinity. Only 3 teleporters—Pucky, Ras Tschubai and Tako Kakuta—will go to Azgola and wait for further telepathic instructions. That's all for now: We can only hope that the harvestship can be deceived by us and come soon. If not..."

The faces on the picture screens looked silently at Rhodan. The men began to realize how such a good thing as the nutritious spores undoubtedly were could turn into a danger. They could change the approach to nutrition for the entire Galaxy and facilitate their agricultural policy. But as long as the spores could not be properly gathered and their distribution expertly evaluated they remained the objects of deep concern.

The picture screens faded. A few minutes later a connection was made with Atlan, who was in charge of the operation on Arkon. The face of the Arkonide Imperator looked troubled and showed lack of sleep. "What's the situation there, Atlan?"

"Serious, Perry. "I've put Arkon 2 under quarantine. Nobody is allowed to leave the planet and we can already feel the effect of this measure as Arkon 2 is the hub of our trade and the seat of our industry.

However we were able to avoid a panic. The physicians are trying to cure the growing obesity and neutralize the forced feeding by inhaling the spores. They have had some success and managed to slow down the rate of fattening."

"Excellent," Rhodan expressed his satisfaction. "There must be a way of compensating the excess of carbohydrates by increasing the energy conversion of the body."

"Don't overestimate the limited possibilities of our scientists," Atlan warned, unconvinced. "The spores contain almost 80% of highly potent fats which are deposited immediately and completely in the body. The chemical combustion in the human body generates the equivalent of 9.6 calories for each gram of fat. The remainder of 20% is composed of carbohydrates and protein. The only critical substances are the fats, and we have to deal with those."

"First of all we have to get the harvestship," Rhodan replied firmly. "It should be the best way to solve our problem. As soon as we learn the right method of harvesting the spores, Arkon will be saved. And so will be the other planets where the lichen grows and whose populations can't be evacuated. So far we don't know how many other worlds have been planted by the seedship. The spores could spread like a plague throughout the Galaxy. If we can capture the harvestship intact we must be prepared to deploy it wherever it becomes necessary. You will have to be patient, Atlan. It would have been too great a risk to bring the harvestship first to Arkon 2. The Robot knows that the seedship never worked there."

"I understand, Perry. Besides, I prefer that you conduct your first test on Azgola and study the result. I'll keep in constant touch with you by hyperradio."

"Fine. Our communications won't be intercepted by the robotship. It reacts only to a special group of symbols and we will duplicate them as soon as it arrives. We were fortunate that we were able to pick up the construction details of the special transmitter on Mechanica and if everything works out satisfactorily we should be able to contact the harvestship."

"Yes," Atlan replied grimly: "If everything works out."

The next radio call went to Terra. The technicians assigned to the construction of the symbol transmitter promised to deliver the apparatus within a week. They were quite satisfied with the instructions they had obtained from Mechanica.

Rhodan concluded the call and sighed with relief. "Now there's nothing left to do for us but wait and hope that our technicians will have finished their job before the harvestship appears. We'll have 2 or 3 days leeway since it will probably take the ship some time to perform its operations for the harvest." He looked thoughtfully at Bell. "Would you please request the commander of the *Sirius* to approach Azgola within 20,000 kilometres? I'll be in the Command Centre in 5 minutes."

Bell got up and quickly glanced at Pucky. "Is it already time?" he asked.

Rhodan nodded. "We can't wait any longer. It would be too late once the harvestship is here. Under no circumstances can it be permitted to notice or suspect the presence of alien vessels. See you in 5 minutes."

Bell left. Pucky, the African teleporter Ras Tschubai and his Japanese colleague Tako Kakuta, remained silent. They did not seem to be happy with their mission. Never before had they been in a situation like this. They would eat no food for the duration of their visit to the lonely planet Azgola and still gain weight steadily. With each breath they would take in more calories than their bodies could get rid of. The

oversupply would cause them to become corpulent which was neither fatal nor dangerous in the initial stages but was something they would rather do without. Especially Pucky was more than displeased with the prospect. "Will we be getting fat just by breathing?" he asked again dubiously with a sour face: "Even if we don't eat anything?"

"You won't be hungry," Rhodan predicted. "You won't have to stuff any carrots in your pockets. I promise you you won't feel like eating them."

"Hm," Pucky grunted incredulously. "At least carrots won't make you fat." Then he cast an amused glance at the slender Japanese. "I'm very curious how Tako will look when he puts on a little weight. It wouldn't hurt him a bit."

"It won't hurt any of you," Rhodan assured him. "We have the necessary drugs to slim you down again after it's all over. However, you shouldn't gulp a bar of chocolate each time you take a diet pill. Right, Ras?"

The Afroterranian nodded guiltily. His craving for chocolate was common knowledge.

The 3 teleporters received their last instructions. Rhodan designated Pucky as leader of the expedition whose task was simply formulated: transport the intact harvest robotship to Arkon after takeover by the special transmitter.

The question was: would the vessel come?

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A teleportation was not necessary. When the *Sirius* was only 20,000 kilometres from Azgola, Rhodan ordered a Gazelle to be launched. These swift and highly manoeuvrable, disk-shaped reconnaissance ships could get away without a trace even if the harvestship were to arrive earlier.

"The Gazelle will put you down somewhere on Azgola," Rhodan explained to his 3 mutants. "You are at liberty to move around anywhere on the planet, which is now uninhabited. Find a good place to hide, perhaps in the city of Timpik, which previously had a population of a quarter of a million Azgons. Or you can stay in one of the forests. As soon as the harvestship shows up, Marshall will make telepathic contact with you. Or Betty Toufry if it is too difficult for him. You will act exactly according to my instructions. Is that clear, Pucky?" The mousebeaver nodded warily. "Why make a point of it? Did I ever fail to carry out your orders?"

He looked so guileless as to make Rhodan grin. "Let's not talk about that, shorty," he decided. "You know what I mean, Pucky. You'll do only what I tell you. We are not confronting a human opponent but a robot."

"Oh," Pucky scoffed, disappointed. "I've been in that rut before. Didn't we have enough trouble with the robot Brain of Arkon?"

"This one is completely different," Rhodan insisted. "The robot Brain of Arkon knew exactly whom it was fighting. It acted consciously and logically whereas the robot who is in charge of the harvestship

obeys the orders of a race that died out long ago. Thus it merely responds to prearranged instructions and we don't know what it will do when it learns that its instructors are extinct and its task has become superfluous. Perhaps it will try to attack us if we give it enough time. Maybe it will destroy itself—and this would be the worst disaster to befall Arkon. You cannot compare the harvestship at all with the robot Brain on Arkon, Pucky. This robot must not be permitted to find out that it has an opponent. And if it does, it must be instantly put out of action. In this respect it is a blitzkrieg although I can't predict how long you will have to wait for it to break out. None of us knows how much time the ship requires for its flight nor the place in the universe where it was waiting for orders."

"But it did receive such orders?"

"They were sent from Mechanica—assuming that we handled it correctly. We received a confirmation and it should be on the way by now."

"Onward to do battle with the robot!" Pucky chirped cheerfully as he waddled to the door.

"Wait, I'll go with you," Rhodan said and followed him into the corridor. Ras Tschubai and Tako Kakuta walked behind them and they all entered the gravitor to go down to the hangar.

The Gazelle was waiting to be launched. A young lieutenant saluted and reported to Rhodan: "Recship G-7 ready to start, sir!"

"Thank you," Rhodan nodded with a quick smile. "Drop the commando team off on Azgola. It doesn't matter where but it is important that you take as little time as possible. I don't want you to stay on Azgola any longer than necessary. As soon as you return to the *Sirius* we will retreat to our former position."

The 3 mutants said goodbye to Rhodan and climbed into the Gazelle. They were not in very high spirits, which nobody was anxious to admit.

Rhodan watched on the observation screen as the Gazelle was launched from the airlock and shot toward the nearby planet. The hot Azgos star shone brightly in the dark firmament. Azgola looked blue and green, reminding him of Earth. Its surroundings were indeed very similar to those on Earth although the planet was considerably smaller, about the size of Mars. The surface consisted of wide continents and oceans without islands. The land was mostly covered with forests and interspersed by big rivers. There were also a few prairies and some mountains with bare plateaus where the fat-moss thrived despite lack of care.

The Gazelle returned in less than 20 minutes and the lieutenant reported to Rhodan: "Passengers landed, sir."

Rhodan glanced at Bell, who stood next to the commander of the *Sirius*. He nodded silently and left the Command Centre without a word.

Bell took a deep breath. His face was grave as he worried about Pucky. although he constantly quarrelled outrageously with Pucky, everybody knew very well that the 2 most unlike beings were devoted to each other in great friendship.

Rhodan's nod was an order, causing Bell to direct the commander: "Return to our former position, Major! Distance from Azgola... 2 light-weeks."

The lone planet vanished from the observation screen within a few seconds. A planet where only 3

intelligent beings were left behind—2 humans and a mousebeaver waiting for the harvestship.

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Pucky looked around in all directions. He was far from enthusiastic about the scene. Neither were his companions elated about their surroundings. The Gazelle had deposited them on a high plateau without vegetation where not even the undemanding lichen had been able to take root. The stone was naked. The bluish peaks of a distant mountain range touched the clouds in the sky. The plateau was strewn with rocks.

"I'm not going to stay here," Pucky finally growled. "My fur will get wet if it rains. Besides, we can't take cover here when the ship arrives."

"It's up to us where we want to wait," Ras reminded him. "If we don't like it here we can look for a better place."

"Suits me," Tako smiled. "Let's pick a spot to aim for."

As they were unfamiliar with the geography of Azgola they were limited to teleportation by sight. By choosing a visible point, they could dematerialise and land instantly at their selected goal. In this manner they would be able to circle the planet in a few hours if they wanted to do so.

Ras looked at the distant mountain range but Pucky shook his head. "I've had it up to here with cold mountains—at least for now. Let's look down at the plain. It's not far to the rim of the plateau and we can walk over there."

They walked the short distance to the edge where the plateau sloped steeply into a wide plain. The slope was covered with gravel and the rock was divided by deep crevices. A few lone dwarf-trees were the only sign of vegetation on the otherwise desolate mountain landscape.

"Down there is a river," Tako said, studying the plain. "It winds through the impenetrable primeval forest stretching as far as the eye can see."

"I can see an island in the river," Ras observed, pointing in its direction. "Nobody would find us there and we'll be more comfortable than up here in the mountains. We can make a fire there if it gets too cold at night."

Pucky grinned as he concentrated on the jump. "To the island! Who'll get there first?"

Teleportation was a paranormal feat which required utmost concentration. A brain sector, lying fallow in all normal people, had to be activated. Such dematerialisation jumps were extremely strenuous in the initial phase of a teleporter but they performed it without trouble. Thus it was not surprising that the 2 friends responded almost simultaneously to Pucky's challenge. They disappeared from one second to the next—only a fraction of a moment after the mousebeaver.

Consequently Pucky was the first to materialize on the island in the stream. Due to the long distance it was rather difficult to judge the height precisely. He noticed at once that he was falling through the air.

Opening his eyes he had the presence of mind to grab the first branch within his reach. His fall was braked with a jerk and then he saw that he was hanging 20 meters above the mossy ground.

Ras Tschubai fell like a stone after he materialized. He was not alert enough to go through a subsequent teleportation and would have hit the ground very hard if the mousebeaver had not used his other ability and held the African up telekinetically, depositing him gently on the ground. Tako landed on a strong branch and clung to it tightly.

"Beat you!" Pucky exclaimed, releasing his stream of mental power. "You would have bored a big hole in the ground."

"Come down!" the African called. "This island is a beautiful paradise. It's surrounded by water like my native home where we had dense forests like this and unexplored rivers."

"Make yourself at home, Ras." Pucky replied and jumped down. "This is more to my liking."

Tako slowly climbed down the tree and dropped the last 2 meters into the soft moss. He examined it and frowned. "Blubber moss!" he snorted, disgusted. Pucky bent down and tore out a clump of the succulent plant. He sniffed it with suspicion and pronounced his judgment. "It doesn't smell of anything. I would have to starve from hunger to eat this stuff."

Ras looked at him curiously. "Aren't you hungry?" he inquired.

"No," Pucky replied. "Perry was apparently right that nobody is hungry on Azgola. How about you, Ras? You have a well-earned reputation for eating double portions of food. How about a nice steak?"

"No appetite," Ras declined. "I feel as if I had just eaten half a cow."

"That's about the way I feel, too," Tako confirmed patting his stomach contentedly. "The air of this world is very nourishing. A breath of air makes me feel pleasantly full."

"Wait a little," Pucky growled, and waddled toward the bank of the nearby river. "When you start getting fat you'll change your tune."

"I can stand a few more pounds," Tako reminded him, "better than you."

This had been a sore spot with Pucky for some time. In spite of his vegetarian diet he was inclined to be a little pudgy and each additional pound would be noticeable. He was extremely worried about his sleek lines and anxious to retain his privilege of calling others 'fatso'. It would have been a devastating blow to his vanity to be called such a name by Reginald Bell of all people.

The stream contained cool and clear water. They enjoyed a refreshing dip and decided to stay on the island. Since the planet was unpopulated they carried no weapons. Neither did they have any other equipment, provisions or radios. The latter could not have been used anyway because the harvestship had the advantage of very sensitive receivers.

When they finally settled down in a warm groove in the sand and watched the sun go down, Ras suggested: "Can you get in touch with Marshall or Betty or is it too far away?"

Pucky sighed condescendingly. "You'll never learn, Ras. The distance doesn't matter too much in telepathy. Of course it does play a certain role but only because it lessens the chances of picking up and

directing the impulses. If I can get in touch with Betty? Well, let me see."

He leaned back on the pad of moss and closed his eyes. His 2 friends watched him intently and were careful not to disturb his concentration. They surmised that the practice was a severe strain on the mousebeaver.

All of a sudden Pucky flinched. He opened his eyes and bared his incisor when he received the message from the invisible speaker many light-hours away. "Splendid," Pucky said in a loud voice so that the 2 men could hear him. "We landed alright. Tako was hanging in the tree like a ripe prune. We're feeling as fine as after a firstclass meal. When is the harvestship expected to come?"

He listened again and his face became apprehensive. Covering his incisor he nodded and looked in astonishment at his 2 friends. "Orders from Perry Rhodan," he satisfied their understandable curiosity. "He wants me to save my strength. I wonder why, don't you?"

"Probably for the reducing cure you'll have to take later," Tako ribbed Pucky. Ras laughed and ignored the scowling looks of the mousebeaver. "Orders are orders," he declared. "I haven't slept under the open sky in ages."

"Do you want to live like a savage?" Pucky growled, still infuriated.

They kept their tongues and enjoyed the sight of the sinking sun. The Azgos star dipped behind the dark-green roof of leaves which covered the primeval forest from the other side of the river to the horizon. Soon it turned dark. There were only a few stars shining in the firmament between the clouds.

"How beautiful!" Ras waxed enthusiastic. He was more in harmony with nature than most people and enjoyed the night in the open air as a special treat. But Pucky and Tako were not completely spoiled by civilization. They also admired the beauty and grandeur of nature, especially as the mosquitoes were satiated by the fatmoss. They nodded silently. Then they huddled closer together and tried to sleep.

Pucky woke up in the middle of the night. Something was wrong, he felt. Then he noticed that his fur was soaking wet. It was raining. It took a couple of minutes until his eyes became adjusted to the dark. Ras and Tako lay peacefully sleeping. The rain did not seem to bother them. It was still warm. The climate made the lichen grow like weeds.

The mousebeaver began to wonder if the Azgons had left anything behind in Timpik, such as blankets or tents. He pondered the idea for awhile without waking his friends, then decided to take a look for himself.

He knew on which continent the Gazelle had put them down and that the deserted capital was more than 2000 kilometres away. Of course he would not be able to find the city with his first jump but this did not matter to him.

Pucky concentrated in the direction of the city and dematerialised. When he was able to see again, he stood in the middle of a wide plain in foot-high grass which was smothered in many spots by the lichen. Two more jumps took him to the ocean and from there it was easy to find the city because he had the foresight to observe the topography of Azgola on his flight in the Gazelle.

The civilization of the Azgons was about 200 years behind that of the Terrans. They had steam-plants, electricity, sailboats and even airplanes with remarkably efficient propulsion systems. Thus Pucky was little surprised to notice that the street illumination still functioned. The lamps were burning in the main

streets, although a little weak and apparently with diminishing energy. However the dim light was sufficient for the purpose of the mousebeaver.

A dead city is one of the eeriest sights one can experience. The reasons are psychological because a city means life, traffic and activity. This is the scene with which one is so familiar. All through the night one encounters automobiles or late homecomers but in a dead city one gets the lonely feeling of being an outcast.

Pucky stood motionless and took in the silence. In the forest, on the island or on the plain he was not disturbed by the silence but here...

The street was lined by stores on both sides. Some were completely stripped of their displays and others were in such a disarray as to leave the impression that only the most valuable merchandise had been removed. There were also broken shop windows and looted stores. Pucky had fun on his 'shopping spree'. If the Azgons had not become so phlegmatic when they gained such terrible overweight, they would have emptied their stores before leaving their homes instead of abandoning most of their possessions. The mousebeaver soon found a well stocked department store.

Pucky had a very adaptable nature. With his gift for enjoyment he desired to turn his involuntary stay on the deserted planet into a pleasant vacation trip. This did not run counter to Rhodan's intentions, whose only concern was to know that the teleporters were ready when needed. What they did before the ship arrived was of no consequence to him.

The mousebeaver rummaged through 4 floors till he finally found what he was looking for. He carefully wrapped up the various goods in a big bundle. Now he knew the location of his destination and it was a simple matter for him to reach the spot on the island with a single teleportation jump.

Tako and Ras were still asleep although they were half submerged in warm water. However it had stopped raining and the first stars peeked again from the torn clouds. Everything would be fine as soon as the sun would shine once more in the morning.

Contrary to his original intention Pucky let the 2 men sleep and bedded himself down on his bundle to get a few hours of undisturbed rest.

Sleeping in the primeval forest on a small island surrounded by the warm clear water of a stream was a vacation his romantic heart had yearned for. By the time he fell asleep he had almost forgotten all about the harvestship.

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But it was uppermost in Rhodan's mind.

After receiving the confirmation that his 3 mutants had landed safely on Azgola, there was little to do but wait. He used the time to catch up on his sleep. Then he contacted the ships of his fleet to consult with the commanders, impressing on them to remain constantly on guard. The structure sensors were activated at all times as it was assumed that the harvestship would cover the great distance by hyperjumps.

Atlan had nothing new to report. The situation on Arkon 2 was as serious as ever but no catastrophe had occurred. In the beginning the Arkonides had put on a tremendous amount of weight but now the disagreeable process had slowed down. One aspect of the misfortune that made the economic situation easier was that they did not have to ship any food to Arkon 2. It enabled them to maintain the quarantine 100%. Rhodan assured Atlan that he would advise him without delay when the harvestship appeared.

Next Rhodan talked to Col. Jefe Claudrin. The native of Epsal exercised enormous patience. although his voice still boomed powerfully, he behaved with remarkable restraint. He already knew the planet Mechanica which he had visited together with Rhodan. The second visit would be much simpler. His mission was clear: destroy the control station of the extinct race so that the harvestship cannot receive its instructions. But Rhodan ordered him to wait.

After concluding these calls Rhodan met with Bell in the command centre. John Marshall and Betty Toufry joined them a few seconds later when they received Rhodan's telepathic request.

"How's our trio getting along on Azgola?" Rhodan inquired.

Marshall looked at Betty, who hesitated with her answer.

"How are they doing?" Rhodan repeated.

Bell's ears perked up because Betty looked more embarrassed than worried. "They treat it as a vacation, sir," she finally said reluctantly.

"What did you say? Vacation?" Rhodan stared at Betty. "Unbelievable!"

Betty nodded. "Yes. That's how Pucky put it. He got himself a tent and a canoe from the evacuated city. He paddles around in the canoe all day long and 'explores' the neighbourhood. He hardly gives the harvestship a thought."

"Is that so?" Rhodan mused, gazing at the control panel of the battleship as if it could give him some advice. "That's what he does."

"You can't blame Pucky, sir," Betty defended her friend. "You told him to wait for further instructions. I keep in constant touch with him and he'll break off his 'vacation' the minute the harvestship comes in."

"He better if he knows what's good for him," Rhodan replied grimly. "And what are his 2 friends saying?" Betty smiled mischievously. "They say that Pucky is right. If they sit around on the island and do nothing or try to keep busy it won't affect the purpose of their mission. There are no people on Azgola nor other sources of danger and Pucky claims that activity is good for their morale..."

"That rascal!" Bell blurted. "We're hanging here in space and sweating out the suspense while that little scoundrel is playing Robinson Crusoe and having a ball..."

However Rhodan suddenly seemed to have changed his mind. "I wouldn't envy Pucky if I were you, old man. Let him enjoy the first day. I'm afraid he won't have much fun on the second and the third. How would you like to get puffed up with pounds of lard? You wouldn't? But Pucky will have to go through it."

Betty was happy Rhodan showed understanding. Of course she knew that the Administrator had more serious trouble to contend with. The harvestship!

The mysterious robot that had been reactivated and sped toward them was armed with a harmless but highly effective weapon, a narcotic cannon. If it used it, it might be able to escape, which would make it virtually impossible to track it down again.

"I didn't mean it that way," Bell apologized, discomfited.

"I know," Rhodan smiled again. "It's really not Pucky's 'vacation' that bothers you, it's the waiting. I'm afraid we'll have to be patient, maybe very patient."

Somewhere in the endless universe was a vessel, steered by a thinking robot that was determined to carry out its orders. It could arrive in the system of the Azgo star at any moment—or it could take a 100 years.

* * * *

Each did what he liked in his leisure time. Tako made himself a fishing rod from some pieces Pucky had brought. He stood for hours at the bank of the river, casting his line with a fly he had constructed. He didn't get a single bite and toward the evening he began to doubt seriously that there were any fish on Azgola.

Ras Tschubai gathered dry wood and built a big fire. He sat with crossed legs in front of the meter-high flames and gazed through the blazing tongues of fire somewhere faraway, perhaps in the unknown idyllic past. His ancestors must have lived like this and he was enchanted with such a mode of life.

Pucky chose to be an explorer of nature. It would have been much easier for him to investigate the surroundings of the island by teleporting himself but this didn't tickle his fancy. He preferred to get into his canoe and start out on his discovery trip by paddling.

The current was not too strong. Pucky paddled upstream so that he could float back with the current whenever he became tired. He kept close to one bank in order to take advantage of the backstream.

The scenery was not all that different from that on Earth. It reminded him a little of the Amazon river although it was not as treacherous as it had been there a mere 100 years earlier. There were no predatory beasts, no snakes and no hostile natives. The climate was healthier than the tropics of Terra and it was safe to drink the water of the river.

Pucky paddled strenuously against the current. He would have given up his heroic efforts if he had not felt Ras Tschubai's eyes staring at his back. The African probably compared the little mousebeaver with one of his wild ancestors, a brave chief, and not wanting to rob him of his illusion, Pucky persisted in paddling his canoe.

Fortunately the river made a bend and he withdrew from the view of his friends on the island. He steered his little boat as quickly as he could into a lazily flowing sidebranch and penetrated deeper into the primordial forest. Here the water was dark and turbid. The mousebeaver half expected to see a crocodile emerge and snap its jaws at him but he kept reminding himself that no such animals abounded anywhere on Azgola—to the best of his knowledge.

Pucky felt satiated. although he had not taken a bite since yesterday he felt as if he had half a shipload of carrots in his stomach. He carefully examined his belly and thought he could notice that he was already getting fatter.

The offshoot widened to a lake with a different shore. The forest receded and gave way to idyllic sandy bays and grassy slopes. The lichen spread everywhere among the trees and in the grass. A waterfall gushed into the lake from the terraced hills rising in the background.

Pucky was very human in this respect: he had to know what lay behind it. He teleported himself and the canoe over the waterfall and it was well worth the effort, even more than he could have anticipated.

He landed on a big lake which was fed by another cascade at the far end. Several small islands with parklike landscapes enhanced the picturesque scene. He resumed paddling happily but suddenly perked up and stopped. *Strange thought impulses!*

Impossible! Not a single Azgon had been left on the planet after the evacuation. Or so they said!

Pucky concentrated on the thought impulses and determined that an Azgon must be present on one of the islands. As the Azgons were known to be peaceful and harmless, Pucky had no reason to be afraid. Besides he had to help the poor forgotten straggler because he was doomed to be smothered to death by all his fat if he remained any longer on Azgola.

Pucky steered toward the island from where the thought impulses emanated. He noticed that the surface of the water was not as clear as underneath. It was covered with a layer of blue-green fat. At first the mousebeaver did not understand what had happened but he soon guessed the explanation. It had rained the night before and a part of the spores suspended in the atmosphere must have come down with the precipitation. He looked at the shore of the island and saw that a shimmering layer also blanketed the plants and especially the moss.

Then he turned his attention to his canoe again and beached it on the sand. After pulling it out of the water he set out to locate the source of the vague and jumbled thought impulses. Meanwhile he had determined that at least two Azgons must be hidden on the island.

When he found them he saw that he was not mistaken. In a small clearing which was covered with moss and a few boulders and surrounded by bushes two Azgons lay stretched out on the ground. They had folded their arms under their heads and gazed at the cloudless sky.

The two Azgons were fat but not as fat as Pucky had expected. He concluded from the scientific gear standing around that they had been engaged in some kind of research. There was a tent pitched at the edge of the clearing.

When the mousebeaver walked across the clearing and stood still near the resting Azgons, he was startled by their lethargy. The less corpulent of the two barely raised his head, stared at him and said impassively: "We've got company."

Then he leaned his head back again and closed his eyes. The Azgons spoke a mangled Arkonide idiom which Pucky could have understood without his telepathic capabilities. And, vice versa, they must be able to understand him too.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, putting both hands on his sides. "Don't you know that Azgola has

been evacuated?"

The Azgon opened his eyes again, "Who are you?" Pucky took a deep breath. He understood that he wouldn't get anywhere without patience. He sat down and without beating about the bush gave them a quick report about the blubber moss. The two Azgons were apparently well-educated scientists and therefore able to understand his introduction. In conclusion he said: "They must have forgotten you or you would have left Azgola with all the others. What puzzles me however is how you managed to survive with all that cholesterol in your hearts. Did you stop breathing?"

The two Azgons now sat up and leaned their backs against a boulder. The larger one studied Pucky very closely before he informed him that they were indeed naturalists who were attracted by the ecology of the area. However they knew nothing about the spores. although they had lost their appetites and had eaten nothing for weeks, they felt pleasantly full and had constantly gained weight. If Pucky was of the opinion they were not too fat, he was badly mistaken. They had more than enough of it. They had been lying in the sun for days and hardly ever took a walk. It really was all the same to them, as long as they were left in peace. They had never had such a lazy life and it was great that they no longer had to eat. Being quite happy here, they had no desire to leave. Ever!

Pucky realized that their obese condition had caused the symptoms of lethargy. However it still remained a puzzle to him why they had not yet become so fat as to be unable to move. Were there fewer spores in the air of the island than in the higher regions or in the city? Had the water anything to do with it? He would have to leave it to Terra's scientists to investigate the reason. "They'll come and pick you up," he finally said. "Are there any more of you who were missed?"

"I couldn't care less," the heavyweight muttered. "I told you that we like it here..."

"I know." Pucky interrupted him. He was dubious and decided to inform Rhodan anyway. The scientists did not seem to be in any immediate danger but it was better to play it safe. "Well then, please yourselves and have your picnic!" He turned around and walked to his canoe, when one of the Azgons called after him: "You don't look so skinny either, roly-poly!"

Pucky stiffened like a pillar of salt. What had that joker dared call him? Roly-poly? That was...

He managed to control himself and ignored the remark with all the dignity he could muster. He continued on his way to the canoe and pushed it back into the water. Then he paddled vigorously out on the lake toward the waterfall.

Roly-poly!

He glanced furtively at his body. Not exactly thin, he admitted woefully. Rather plump in a span of a mere 24 hours. His legs looked sturdier and his arms showed some adipose. "Disgusting diet!" he grumbled.

Pucky teleported over the waterfall. He had suddenly lost his taste for the adventure. Only when he saw Tako standing at the shore of the island did his mood improve.

Even Tako had begun to look a little pudgy!

2/ THE HARVESTSHIP

The stellar vessel sped unerringly through space.

It resembled a huge roll, 500 meters in diameter and 2 kilometres long. The hull shimmered silvery. No hatches were visible. There were in a few places fine seams to indicate possible openings. For weapons? Or something else?

The ship was old. The shimmering hull showed numerous marks which were caused by tiny slivers of meteoroids. The colour of the aft section had changed and was now darker. It looked as if a hot ray of energy had set the surface of the hull aglow.

The vessel was not steered by human beings. The Control Centre had no semblance to anything Earthlings had ever seen before. It contained none of the usual control instruments and it would have been impossible to manipulate the course of the vessel. Most of the room was taken up by a complex structure that had to be designated as a positronic robot after a cursory examination. The robot was not operable by external guidance and had no independent centre for making decisions of its own. At the top of its enclosure was a thick cable which connected it with the electronic communication centre. The radio centre served the robot as receiver for commands as well as transmitter of its followup directions. It was the nerve centre of the system where the strings drawn by a long extinct race came together.

The spaceship also contained cabins and corridors but now it was difficult to guess for what purpose they were intended. Perhaps technicians of the vanished race of intelligent lizards now and then travelled with the ship when a planet was harvested but they could also have been utilized for entirely different applications.

The major part of the ship, however, consisted of rooms radiated by artificial suns. These rooms were empty except for an atmosphere which was continually maintained by smoothly functioning machines. At the ceiling were funnel-shaped openings which ended in narrow conduits and then converged in one place. From there a tube led to the upper section of the vessel. A round metal hatch closed it off from the vacuum. Other conduits spread to the lower reaches and ended in suction funnels equipped with seals.

Everything else in the vessel was automatically working machinery which was regulated by the positronic brain centre, the commander of the cybernetic system. The positronic brain had received its latest orders, computed the desired position and transmitted it to the hypertransition automaton which could perform transitions in the range of 100 light-years. Additional calculations were required between jumps. Since the order was not urgent, there was no reason for special haste. The harvested crop was ripe but it could wait as it could never get overripe.

Now Rabotax 3 had had to wait a long time. Perhaps it was due to a breakdown of the radio transmitter or it was the fault of Rabotax 2 and 1. Possibly the latter had failed to find a suitable planet. But why had the masters remained silent for so long? If they had encountered some trouble, they would have called him back. But this had not happened. He simply had not received another message from them.

Until now! A new world had been discovered and the seedship had done its job. A crop was waiting to be harvested, at least that was the crux of the new impulse message just received.

As a result, Rabotax 3 was now on his way. Transition and waiting. Again and again, hours and days. It was a long trip from the starless void to the rim of the Galaxy. Soon he would be there: 4 more

transitions.

Soon...

* * * *

Pucky crouched on a stone at the bank of the slowly flowing river and stared with a melancholy expression into the clear water. From time to time he touched almost compulsively his legs and arms and his furry belly. It was indisputable, he had gained weight and it was definitely very noticeable. He sighed and pondered which one of the curses in Bell's uninhibited vocabulary would fit this disgusting situation best.

Ras lay a few meters away in the shine of the sinking sun, and dozed. He had become much too lazy to keep the nightly fire burning. He looked much heavier and felt his stomach acting up. The nudging reminded of him of hunger but he had no appetite and couldn't have swallowed a single bite.

It was needless to say that Tako was almost in the same condition. The only difference was that his increased weight didn't show as much.

"I wish that harvestship would come," Ras growled, and rolled over on his other side. "I can't stand this much longer."

Pucky, who had just finished talking telepathically with Betty for half an hour, shook his head. "Who knows? We'll have to sit it out no matter how bloated we'll get."

"You'll soon pop your waist," Tako murmured drowsily. "Wait till little Betty sees you like this..."

"So what..."

Ras pointed up the stream. "I would like to know why the 2 scientists who were left behind up there are not getting fatter all the time. There seems to be a limit they can reach. Perhaps their bodies resist the worst of the calamity."

Pucky shrugged his shoulders. "At least we don't have to worry that we are in any real danger. We can always reduce our weight again. Wait a minute...!"

He suddenly paused, closed his eyes and listened inwardly. His 2 friends watched him silently and motionlessly. They knew that Pucky had received a telepathic impulse from the *Sirius* and responded to it. They were already bored with their life of leisure and welcomed any break, not to mention the hope that the communication could divulge the long awaited news which would end their 'vacation'. They had not even used their canoe for 2 days.

Pucky nodded repeatedly. He opened his eyes again and twinkled merrily at Tako and Ras. His incisor appeared for a moment, showing his happy mood. However he quickly hid it again and squeaked in a shrill voice, unable to control his disappointment. "That long? Still 3 days?"

Tako and Ras, who were unable to follow the silent conversation, had to restrain their impatience.

Pucky's terse remarks revealed nothing to let them draw any clear conclusions.

Finally Pucky leaned back and relaxed.

"Well, what's new?" Ras inquired impatiently. "How much longer do we have to sit around here?"

"They have spotted the harvestship," Pucky replied calmly. "It materialized close to this system and is about to enter it. They are not supposed to find us—at least they should not notice us prematurely. Therefore we must enjoy our vacation a little longer."

"The ship!" Ras exclaimed. "It came after all."

"Why get excited about that?" Pucky asked. "That's why we are here. What bothers me is that we still can't do anything. First we're supposed to find out how the ship harvests the spores. Nobody knows how long that will take but we have to observe it for a minimum of 3 days. Then we'll get new orders." He sighed. "3 more days to enlarge our girth. Bell will roar with laughter when he sees me."

"He better not, if he knows what's good for him," Ras said grimly.

"Right!" Tako agreed tersely while he scanned the sky. "When will it be here?"

"Marshall said it could arrive in 4 hours if it maintains its present speed. It's flying very cautiously and travels at about half the speed of light. Oh, one more thing: the ship from Terra has arrived and brought the special transmitter. There was no time to try it out and the first test will be when we have to use it."

"That's a pleasant thought," the Japanese commented sarcastically.

Pucky closed his eyes. "I think I'll catch a little more sleep. I don't believe we'll get much of it 4 hours from now when the chase begins."

"The chase?" Ras asked, astonished.

"Of course, what else? We must keep track of the ship wherever it flies over the planet. So I better sleep now."

There were no objections.

Hours passed and it got dark. Fortunately the last clouds disappeared but there were only few stars in the sky. Here at the outer reaches of the Galaxy the enormous difference between the collection of suns at the centre of the Milky Way and the dark depths of eternal light became obvious. Of course there were also stars in the firmament. However most of them were not lone suns but distant islands of worlds and spiral nebulas which sent their weak lights across millions of light-years to the Azgo star.

When Pucky woke up again, it was not by accident. Impulses hammered incessantly against his subconscious mind and disturbed the peace of his sleep. It finally penetrated that somebody was calling him.

Pucky! Answer me! This is Betty!

The mousebeaver sat up. Ras and Tako had stretched out next to him. Both slept deeply without noticing the disturbance—they were unable to receive thought impulses.

Yes, what's up? I was sleeping.

Listen, Pucky! The harvestship has reached the planet and begins to fly around it at a low altitude. We can't observe much from here because we are too far away. It has to be done on the spot. Now it has stayed for some time already on the day side. It probably has begun the harvest.

We're going to take a close look.

But be careful! The ship must not learn of your presence.

Why not? Pucky complained. The robot that's steering it must expect to meet inhabitants on the planet although it doesn't know them. I don't think it's dangerous if it notices us.

That's not it, Pucky,

Betty Toufry warned again. Under no circumstances must the robot be allowed to see that you are teleporters. That would make it suspicious. What would happen if it changes its intentions and vanishes, not to be seen again?

You've got a point, Pucky admitted. Alright, we'll watch our step. Wait for me, Betty. I'll report to you as soon as we sight the ship.

It was a simple matter for the telepathic girl aboard the Sirius to remain in constant touch with Pucky and his companions. All she had to do was to listen in on their conversations to know what was going on in Azgola.

"Hey, time to get up!" Pucky ended Tako's slumber with a poke in the ribs and Ras jumped up when the mousebeaver pulled his hair none too gently.

They discussed their plans and decided to leave the island immediately. They would have to return later on to pick up the two Azgons if they had the necessary time. If not, Rhodan would have to arrange their evacuation.

They held hands and jumped first into the city with which Pucky was already familiar. From there they preferred to take shorter jumps to avoid the risk of falling from unknown heights. They jumped toward the sun and they soon reached daylight. When they finally materialized on the peak of a 4000 meter-high mountain they had reached their goal.

The peak was a small plateau covered with many boulders which provided them good places to hide. It also gave them an excellent view in all directions and especially overhead.

"There it is!" Pucky exclaimed, ducking instinctively into the shadow of a rock. "A tremendous crate...!"

Tako and Ras saw it too. High above them, toward the east, a huge vessel was suspended in the air. One side gleamed silvery in the rays of the sun still low on the horizon. The other side looked almost black. There was no sign of propulsion yet the ship floated quietly and slowly as if it had no weight.

Under the body of the ship shimmered forcefields—at least that's how it looked. They swirled around in circles and broke the light which made them visible. There were 8 such fields which formed gigantic funnels underneath the ship moving along with it.

"Suction fields," Ras whispered. "They suck in the spores that fill the air. Very simple, come to think of it." "And how do the fields suck in the stuff?" Pucky inquired, intent on remitting the information to Perry Rhodan.

Ras shrugged his shoulders. "We can only make assumptions," he replied evasively. "The inflowing air is filtered and blown out at the other end. The spores are retained and collected. That's the way it must be done but how it functions exactly I know as little as you do. Maybe it is a kind of magnetism."

"Magnetism?" Pucky asked, astonished. "Are you trying to tell us that the spores are magnetic?"

"Well, it's not like that," Tako smiled, studying the large vessel attentively. "But the cells of the spores emit a certain radiation to which the suction effect can be attuned. The energy of the suction fields is related to the radiation of the cells. They behave like a magnet attracting iron. Maybe that's how it works." He didn't realize how close he had come to the truth.

"Nonsense!" Pucky decided rashly. Then he grimaced foolishly when Betty silently rebuked him at the behest of Perry Rhodan. The experts aboard the *Sirius* had made similar assumptions to those Tako had voiced. Without mentioning Betty's reprimand, Pucky added meekly: "But anything is possible, no matter how crazy it appears to be."

"It's not as crazy as all that," the Japanese lectured him. "They did something like that already 100 years ago on Terra when they harvested coffee. The ripe beans were charged with static electricity and sucked up with magnetic collectors. Why shouldn't the extinct lizards have thought of the same idea?"

The harvestship had moved away and then returned in a wide curve. The 8 suction fields still shimmered below its vast hull.

"I'd love to jump aboard and take a look at what they're doing there," Pucky said suddenly.

"We'll get that chance soon enough," Ras replied. "To tell the truth, I'm not exactly looking forward to it."

"I do! I don't want to get fatter."

Ras quickly glanced at Pucky before he raised his eyes to watch the ship again. "You're about as fat as you can get now," he claimed. "You look like a stuffed sausage."

Pucky gave no answer but he cursed vehemently in his thoughts and Betty was shocked by the incredible language her usually so amiable little friend used.

3/ IN THE REALM OF RABOTAX

Rabotax 3 materialized precisely at the predetermined position. The robot carefully steered the ship into the solar system and headed for the 2nd planet, which was its destination.

Rabotax had no feelings but was constructed so as to be able to perform independent deliberations

without further orders if it was in the interest of the builders and masters. And Rabotax reflected seriously as to why it had happened that it had waited so long idly in the void between the stars before being called to work again.

If the masters had found a method of feeding themselves without Rabotax' help, it was most illogical to put Rab to work once again. On the other hand it was equally illogical to keep Rab waiting such a long time if they had failed to develop such a method. Either way, there was no satisfactory answer.

It was a beautiful planet, Rabotax 3 noted. The homeworld of the masters must have looked like this when it was still warm and fertile. Then the sun died and with it the spores sustaining their lives. But at the same time the robot civilization was born.

Rab issued an order and the gigantic machines started up as so often in the past when the harvesting trips followed each other at short intervals and were not interrupted by extended pauses. The machinery began to hum and vibrate throughout the ship. The inductance field was generated to activate the cell radiation of the spores. Then the suction fields were turned on and the process of harvesting began.

Rabotax 3 knew that its work was beneficial to the inhabitants of a planet and that the entire race would be doomed to perish if it failed to perform its job. Nothing else could arrest the process of being smothered in their own fat. However this had happened only once when the masters had insisted on making the experiment. Rabotax had to intervene at the last moment to save the race that had not learned to gather the nutritious spores.

The planet seemed to be uninhabited. There were deserted cities and an excellent road system but no people or other intelligent beings. They must have abandoned the planet even before the Scout arrived.

The memory bank of the robot had already recorded a similar case. The Scout had once found a suitable planet for seeding on the other side of the Galaxy and initiated the process. There were all the signs of a superior civilization but one that no longer existed. Magnificent cities and well-preserved spaceports were a testimony to a highly intelligent race. A net of traffic arteries, plainly visible from outer space, connected the cities of the continents. The ships were waiting to be launched but there were no people to use them. Nobody lived in the cities which lay deserted in the warm sun. The air was good and clean but no one was left on the planet to breathe it. The populace had emigrated to unknown places. Rabotax had never been able to determine where its inhabitants had gone.

Now Rab confronted a similar situation although the civilization had obviously not yet reached the age of space travelling. Here the natives had also left for no apparent reasons and without any clues to their destination.

However Rab could not let this be of concern. The robot had its task and would carry it out. This was all that mattered and nothing could deter it from its duty.

The suction fields functioned perfectly and collected the valuable spores in the ship. They passed through a huge system of filters into silos to be stored. Drops of a binding agent were injected. An oily sediment of the spores formed at the bottom and grew thicker, slowly filling up the storage space with a highly concentrated mash of nutrients. The contents of a full silo was enough to feed the population of an entire planet for many seasons.

Rabotax 3 was unaware how marvellous this operation was. Rab didn't realize what blessings it could bring to the Galaxy nor imagine how disastrous its prolonged absence was for those worlds which had been visited by the Scout and the planting ship but not his own.

The circles Rab drew became larger and the silos kept filling up, rendering the atmosphere of the planet pure again.

As far as Rabotax was concerned, the effect it had on the surface of the planet was normal although it was remarkable in the eyes of the observers who continuously and unobtrusively watched the robot's activities.

The *Sirius* had moved as close as one light-year to Azgola. Rhodan stood in the Command Centre and studied the picture screen intently. The enormous magnification enabled him to discern many details but the great distance made much of it look blurred and unrecognizable. From a distance of one light-year Azgola was merely a point of light without magnification, hardly bigger than an average star.

But Pucky was close, as close as though he were standing in the Command Centre of the *Sirius* .

"They're following the harvestship," reported Betty, who maintained contact with the mousebeaver. "The ship takes a long time to finish the harvesting of a certain area. Pucky believes it will take a week to do the job at the pace they're going."

Reginald Bell listened, unable to suppress a grin, half amused and half worried. Rhodan glared at him and Bell's grin instantly faded.

"A week...?"

"If we wait that long..."

"We won't," Rhodan said to Betty. "Now that we have that transmitter again, we're going to use it. There's no reason to wait since the Azgons have been taken off their planet." He paused and looked thoughtful. "It would be best if the Azgons could return to their home but it's impossible with all that menacing moss growing there. There must be a way of eradicating it without making the planet uninhabitable. Maybe we could use cold?"

Pucky's latest observation rendered further speculations superfluous. Betty transmitted the thoughts of the mousebeaver immediately and so directly as to make everyone in the Command Centre believe that Pucky was among them.

"The moss... it's withering away. It looks shrivelled. It's the truth, by George! It couldn't be an accident..."

"Quiet!" Rhodan demanded. "Betty, tell Pucky to describe exactly all the details. What's happening to the moss?"

"It's wilted without a doubt! We've jumped to some other places where the ship has harvested the crop but it's everywhere the same. How does harvesting the spores affect the moss on the ground like this?"

"We don't know, Pucky, but we'll find the answer. It's the solution to our problem. Stay with the ship and make sure that you can confirm the facts. Does the moss die out after the harvest?"

3 more hours elapsed before it could be established with final certainty that the lichen died as soon as the planted area had been harvested. It appeared to be leached of its vigour after having served its purpose. It suddenly proved to Rhodan that the extinct race of lizards were humane creatures. They had

developed a strain of moss which would destroy itself after the harvest so that it could do no harm to other creatures. However they had failed to take into account that even a robot could not be made to be foolproof or that, as in this case, the transmitter sending orders to the robot could become defective. But this did not detract from their good intentions and moral persuasions. It affirmed once more the experience of Perry Rhodan that intelligent beings who had no resemblance to humans could think much more humanely than humankind. The physical life-form made no essential difference when it came to rational and civilized achievements.

"Excellent, Pucky. But you'll have to remain 3 full days on Azgola as planned. We've got to make sure there'll be no surprises." Betty gave Rhodan's message to the mousebeaver.

"I'm already satisfied that this is the case," the mousebeaver rejected it as an unreasonable demand. "I'm now weighing a ton, not to mention Ras. You won't have a scale aboard the *Sirius* big enough to weigh us."

"I'm glad to see that you haven't lost your penchant for exaggeration," Rhodan retorted. "You'll be surprised how quickly you'll be back in trim when we meet again on Arkon 2."

"Hey, what did you say?" Pucky asked, astonished. "Betty must have heard you wrong."

"No, she didn't," Rhodan informed him. "I'll see you on Arkon. You'll go aboard the harvestship as soon as I give you the order and you'll have to do this even before we can know whether the robot will follow the orders of our special transmitter. You might be in for a few bad surprises."

"I'm too fat to get excited about surprises," Pucky replied. "But let me remind you Perry, 50 more pounds and we can't jump anymore."

Silence. This was a possibility which Rhodan had not foreseen. although he was certain that the weight as such did not prevent a teleporter from performing a jump, the mental strain played a considerable role. The constant gain of unwanted fat was undoubtedly a severe strain. A teleportation jump required total concentration and if Pucky's mind was distracted by his increasing corpulence his ability to concentrate was impaired. He had a tendency to think that fat people were mentally lazy but he was right to be worried.

"Let's say 2 more days. Then we should know enough. Do you think you can take it on the chin that long?"

"2 days—? I'll try. I hope I won't get a permanent double chin."

"Stay in those areas that have already been harvested," Rhodan advised. "Maybe you'll even get some of your appetite back."

"Food? I don't think I'll ever eat again," Pucky said in disgust.

"Is that so?" Rhodan murmured with a smile. "I'll remind you of this the next time I catch you in the kitchen of the *Sirius* up to your elbows in fresh vegetables."

Pucky didn't bother to reply. His thought impulses were shut off abruptly.

* * * *

The harvestship continued to ply its rounds for almost 3 days, filling half its silos. The job took less time than Rhodan had anticipated. The blooming moss was killed wherever the suction field touched it and no new spores were produced.

There was no indication that the robot had become suspicious. After finishing its task it would continue its journey to Mechanica and deliver the collected crop of spores without requiring additional orders.

Meanwhile the special impulse transmitter, flown back from Terra, was made ready. It had been constructed in strict accordance with the description found on Mechanica. The frequency was set to conform with the harvestship transceiver and there was no reason to expect that the robot would know the difference. It would have to assume that the impulse signals came from Mechanica, the home of the extinct race that had created it, and be obliged to carry the order out without hesitation.

At least that was what Perry Rhodan hoped for.

The final briefing was transmitted by both Betty Toufry and John Marshall.

"How do you feel, Pucky? How are you 3 fellows getting along?"

"Don't ask!" the mousebeaver exclaimed dramatically and Betty tried to convey his emotions. "I'm sure I weigh 500 pounds."

"You're putting me on!"

"But it must be close to 200 pounds," the mousebeaver replied firmly. "The same goes for Tako and Ras must be about 300 pounds. He looks like a chocolate pudding."

"Dr. Manoli will give you the works. He'll have you back in shape in no time," Rhodan promised, wondering whether to be amused or worried. He had trouble picturing a 200 pound mousebeaver but he realized that such a ludicrous incongruity was possible. "You won't have to wait much longer now."

"Is it time for action?" Pucky sounded relieved. "Great! When can we take the big jump? Or shall I go alone...?"

"Nobody's going alone!" Rhodan interrupted Betty as she transmitted Pucky's response. His own telepathic ability was too limited to pick up Pucky's impulses. "You'll all jump together but only when I say the word. We don't want to put the robot on the alert so that it can take defensive action. If it gets a chance to use its hypnotic beamer, I don't know where we'll wake up, if ever."

"I got the message, Perry!" Pucky reassured him. "But the sooner the better."

"I thought you wanted to make a little vacation of your trip." Rhodan reminded Pucky of the time on the island in the river. "Why are you in such a hurry now?"

"Do you think I'm as bad as those 2 natives in the forest at the Cascade Lake? They'll be disappointed when the blubber moss is gone and they'll be forced to go to the trouble of eating again."

"I'll have the transmitter ready," Rhodan returned to the real subject under discussion. "But I'll use it only after you've boarded the harvestship. I'll try to make contact with the robot commander. In the meantime you must secure its hypnotic weapon and disengage the propulsion system of the ship. Whatever you do, don't let the ship get away!"

* * * *

Ras Tschubai slapped his fat thighs. "If this goes on, I won't be able to move in a couple of days. Too bad we don't have a scale."

Pucky rolled his eyes and examined his bulging body. "To get on a scale would be the last thing I want to do but soon I won't care anymore what happens to me. You watch your figure all your life and in one week you look like a huge hippy-pudgy mouse. If I see one of those blubbermoss lizards, I'll skin it alive."

"That wouldn't hurt it a bit," Tako commented. "Everybody knows that lizards shed their skins regularly."

"They do?" Pucky asked, astounded. He had a dense fur and found it difficult to believe that anyone could lose their skin. "Be that as it may but I would give that lizard a piece of my mind." He looked at the sky where the huge vessel circled gathering the spores. "I wonder how much longer we will have to wait. The last teleportation jump has been much harder for me than before."

"For me too," Ras confirmed with apprehension. "We ought to warn Perry Rhodan."

"He knows it," Pucky declined. "If it won't work out, it will be his fault. Why does he wait so long?"

"He must have his reasons," Tako said, apologizing for the Chief.

Of course Rhodan had valid reasons.

And this difficult period of waiting finally reached its end.

The mousebeaver perked up when he received Betty's thought impulses. *Attention, Pucky! Teleport to the harvestship in exactly 10 minutes!*

So sudden?

Pucky gasped involuntarily without taking his eyes off the slowly circling vessel. *Does the transmitter function?*

That we will know only when we use it,

Betty replied. *In case of emergency, Rhodan wants you to jump back to Azgola.*

I wouldn't think of it,

Pucky protested vigorously. *We'll take over the harvestship with or without the transmitter.*

The fact that he received no interdiction deeply astonished Pucky. Rhodan gave him a free hand. He hardly had any other choice if he didn't want to lose the ship.

Pucky looked at his watch. *In 8 minutes. Wish me luck!*

Everybody does! came the reply.

About 100 seconds before the jump, Betty sent a final message. *Attention, Pucky! The automatic weapons of the harvestship, probably hypnotic batteries, must be put out of action at once. Urgent order. Is that clear?*

Acknowledged in my own best interest, Pucky replied, checking his watch again. *50 seconds to go... 10 seconds... Now!*

The spot where they had stood was suddenly empty. Only a slight flickering of air was left to indicate that 3 living beings had disappeared into the 5th dimension. But it took merely a fraction of a second.

* * * *

Rabotax 3 registered the disturbance of the time-space continuum with intellectual curiosity, if the interest of a robot could be so described.

The disturbance was so slight that it could not stem from a transitioning spaceship. Since nothing but a spaceship could perform a transition, the cause of the disturbance was unknown for the time being.

More than 50% of the spores saturating the atmosphere had already been sucked in and processed as mash. Half the silos were filled and the task would soon be finished.

Suddenly a signal flashed: FOREIGN CREATURES ENTERED THE SHIP!

Without stopping the harvesting machinery, Rabotax 3 alarmed the Weapon Control Centre and put the ship in a state of defence.

It had only seldom happened in the past that alien intellects had attacked the ship but it did happen. Rabotax remembered one such case and the eventful hours flashed through its photo-cells in the fraction of a second. At that time the scoutship had found an inhabited planet and rejected all attempts of the population to make contact with the visitor. A little later the planting ship arrived and showered the planet with the seed of the moss, ignoring their radio signals as well till it departed. Later Rabotax received the command impulse to begin the harvest. Rab rushed to the planet but was greeted in an unfriendly manner. As soon as the robot commenced its work it was attacked by a squadron of small but highly manoeuvrable spaceships which opened a blistering fire. Several energy beams hit the rear of his ship and would have destroyed it completely if Rab's Weapon Control Centre had not reacted in time. The Robot's hypnotic guns were turned on the aggressors and their ships spun out of control, crashing on the surface of the planet except for those whose automatic recovery system remained intact. After the interlude Rabotax finished its work undisturbed but the battle was not forgotten.

A little later—after the planet of his masters had rotated more than 1000 times around its sun—a second attack took place, not in the vicinity of a planet, but in outer space. It would have been a minor episode if it had not occurred under somewhat remarkable circumstances due to the fact that the attackers were not

organic beings but robots. A small fleet of 4 spaceships had pounced on Rabotax and the hypnotic guns had fizzled. There was no malfunction but they failed to have the expected effect. They could paralyse only living organisms, were ineffectual against mechanical foes. The 4 raiders unleashed a barrage of energy beams and heatwaves on Rabotax and in the end the automaton tried to save itself by calling for a cease-fire with its enemies. They responded to its call and agreed on a compromise. Rabotax had to give them assurance it would never intrude again in this sector of the Galaxy and would refrain from revealing the location of the incident. Then they let the robot go. Rabotax had learned very little about the 4 small mysterious spaceships which were also piloted and commanded by robots but it was enough to stimulate some ideas from which Rab drew certain amazing conclusions, to wit:

A great and highly intelligent race had once lived in this sector of the Galaxy. In the fairly typical course of their development they had spread out to other stars and eventually perfected the art of automation. And with the latter they started their own decline. Their robots relieved them of work and finally did their thinking for them as well. The race died and the robots remained. They consciously took over the heritage of their creators and built a mighty civilization in a gigantic realm of stars. Their realm was hermetically sealed off from all intelligent organic beings to whom they felt inferior despite their enormous material power. They were limited to drawing from their experiences of the past and unable to conceive new thoughts, whereas organic intellects keep growing and developing original ideas. They are creative and robots are forever sterile.

Thus a great body of robots existed somewhere between the stars of the Galaxy among the other empires. It was not isolated by energy screens but guarded by patrols of vigilant robots. No alien ship could trespass on their mysterious realm without running the danger of destruction. It was the luck of Rabotax to be saved by a fellow chapek. Rab was recognized as a 'member of the race' though not independent but acting in the service of absent masters.

Rabotax was fond of recalling the experience. Once Rab even toyed with the idea of escaping the masters and joining the robots but couldn't defy the laws of controlling Rabotax 3, metallic servant. They had to be obeyed.

And now the disturbance...

Somebody had intruded into the ship from another dimension. Rabotax was unable to explain it but with robotic efficiency reacted automatically and thus with instant speed. First the ship had to be defended, then time enough for questions.

The guns slid their barrels out of their covers and pointed them at the stars but the rangefinders were unable to locate an opponent. The space remained empty. No alien ship was in sight.

Inside the vessel all partitions were closed in order to lock in any intruders although Rabotax realized that this was useless. If the stranger—or strangers—had passed through the 5th dimension, a wall of steel was no obstacle for them.

And then came the emergency signal from the Weapon Control Centre. It stated simply and clearly: ALL GUNS INOPERATIVE. CAUSE UNKNOWN.

Rabotax knew that it faced a superior adversary. And more happened as Rab waited...

* * * *

The 3 teleporters materialized in a high and wide room which was filled with a variety of machines. They materialized ready to teleport away again if the circumstances so dictated.

However there was no need for it as everything remained quiet at first.

Ras and Tako stood idly by for the time being, leaving it to Pucky's telekinetic abilities to disable the critical machines. To accomplish this, the mousebeaver first had to find out the functions of the machines. Since machines were not telepathic, Pucky had to rely on observation and his technical understanding.

After 10 seconds the first change was noticed. A bank of instruments in a far corner began to hum.

"Ras!" Pucky whispered nervously. "Jump outside and come back right away!"

Ras knew what to do and that it was not dangerous since the ship was in the atmosphere of Azgola. If the guns protruded from the hull of the vessel it was the proof they needed that the weapons were controlled by the humming instruments.

Ras disappeared and was back in 3 seconds. "The guns have moved into position," he reported tersely.

The first problem was solved. The range of the narcosis guns was unknown but the possibility had to be considered that they could endanger the *Sirius* and the other units if they would shoot in all directions. It was a must to put them out of action.

Pucky stood motionlessly in the middle of the room. He stared at the bank of instruments and concentrated. All of his energy flowed into the sector of his brain which generated kinetic forces. Powerful mental waves pervaded the instruments, located the contacts and disrupted them. The circuit was broken and the flow of energy ceased.

The hypnotic guns were suddenly stalled in their positions. Immobilized, they were useless objects. The connection to the Command Centre was interrupted.

Pucky sighed with relief when Ras confirmed this condition after a second jump to the hull outside. Thus the first part of his task was solved. However, the commander of the ship, the robot, was still in control. Perhaps they would not have to put Rab out of action.

The propulsion system was next.

Betty! Do you hear me?

Her answer was instantaneous. *Very well, Pucky! We're watching the ship on the observation screen. How about the guns?*

We've taken care of them. Is the impulse transmitter ready?

We're all set to put it in operation in 20 seconds. Now foul up the propulsion system to prevent the robot from escaping!

Pucky nodded without giving an audible answer. Where was the power plant of the ship?

Suddenly he heard the hatches in the corridor close up. There were rumbling noises all over the vessel. The teleporters realized at once what was going on. The hatches were closed to seal the Command Centre off from the other parts of the ship. The robot had registered the entry of strangers and wanted to keep them from reaching the Command Centre. It obviously failed to realize that they were teleporters. That was its mistake.

"From now on we'll stay together," the mousebeaver decided. Tako and Ras were pleased with his order. They didn't relish the idea of becoming separated in the lifeless vessel although they could have saved themselves by jumping out of any nasty situation.

This was true, but not for long, as Rhodan now began to beam his command impulses from the special transmitter to the harvestship.

The propulsion of the robotship was such a complicated system that Pucky was reluctant to interfere telekinetically. He found its location in the aft section and cautiously considered his next step for fear he might accidentally damage an irreplaceable part of the mechanism. If he disabled the ship it would never be able to proceed to Arkon where it was needed to rid the second planet of the spores. Therefore he chose a more sensible method than the indiscriminate destruction of machinery whose designers were long dead or forgotten: Pucky simply disconnected the cable leading from the Command Centre to the power plant housed in the rear section.

It was a clever solution but it caused some effects which disturbed Rhodan when he used the impulse sender he had received from Terra to instruct the robot commander that it was to discontinue its harvest at once and proceed to the Arkon system, whose coördinates were simultaneously announced. The entire message was repeated 3 times.

As soon as this had been done, a safety device of the transmitter burned out and incinerated a vital part for which no replacement was immediately available. The technicians were furious but there was nothing they could do. The transmitter could be repaired on Terra again but this didn't help them now.

To make things worse, the harvestship failed to respond to the beamed command. It continued its flight unperturbed and gathered the spores of the fat-moss as if nothing had happened.

4/ RABOTAX VS. PUCKY

Pucky!

The mousebeaver failed to answer the telepathic call of Betty Toufry.

He had left Ras and Tako behind in the power plant compartment after he had severed the cable leading from the Command Centre to the propulsion assembly. He searched numerous rooms and corridors till he finally reached an almost circular room in the nose of the ship, half of which was occupied by a huge metallic structure. It looked rather plain and unimpressive compared to the steering controls and vast array of instruments built into Terrestrial or Arkonide spaceships. However this did not deter Pucky from concluding that he was in the Command Centre of the harvestship.

The metal block did not react in a visible manner. Pucky took his time to study it cautiously. It certainly did not look like the guiding robot, assuming it was that. The functional parts were concealed by a protective metal plate which Pucky could not penetrate with his eyes. But he had other ways of investigating the inside of the automaton: telekinetic inspection!

With his mental rays Pucky was able to scan invisible objects as satisfactorily as though, touching them with his fingers. Thus he obtained a concrete shape of the invisible contents in the enclosure which confirmed his tentative conclusions. He stood before Rabotax 3, the robot commander of the ship.

Pucky! Betty called again from the *Sirius* .

What is it?

The ship doesn't respond to our signal. You must try to immobilize the ship to keep it from eluding us.

Oh, blast! Pucky blurted. *Did the transmitter conk out again?* It didn't occur to him at the moment that the failure of the ship to react to the command could be due to the break in the cable.

We must leave it up to you. Don't let us down!

I understand, thank you.

Then he added: *Please don't disturb me now. I'll try to establish contact with the robot.*

Betty withdrew and Pucky turned his full attention to the colossus of steel again. The more he inspected the intricate components the less he could doubt that it was the brain guiding the ship. But how could he communicate with the robot? Did it understand a language? Could it read thoughts? Or did it only follow electronic or positronic impulses?

All of a sudden a thought-wave interrupted his reflection of these questions *Pucky! Help us—quickly! The machines...*

It was Ras! He seemed to be in terrible danger. Pucky was puzzled why he didn't extricate himself with a teleporter jump. Was he unable to do it?

Pucky pulled himself together, concentrated his mind and jumped into the room where he had left Ras and Tako. When he materialized again, he noticed at once that something was amiss. He was suddenly overcome by a feebleness which caused him to slump to the floor. He had trouble recognizing Ras, who lay crumpled on the floor next to some metallic figure that was about the size of a big man and moved around. Tako was lying motionlessly in a corner.

Pucky was still able to think but he no longer received any impulses from the others. He was in a state of paralysis which he could not explain. It probably originated from the mysterious figure that now stood waiting at the wall.

Inertia rays? A type of narcosis weapon, perhaps?

Pucky was unable to move but he didn't lose consciousness. He could open his eyes but it was impossible for him to turn his head. His position allowed him to see Ras, who seemed to be in a coma and didn't stir at all.

They were outmanoeuvred and made helpless by the robot. Since Rhodan's impulse transmitter had broken down, they were in dire peril if the robot succeeded in repairing the damage on its own. This was a possibility which had to be seriously considered. If fighter robots were aboard, there were probably also work robots present that could put the propulsion system back in operation. However there was still time for a reprieve.

Hello, Betty!

There was no answer. The telepathic connection with the *Sirius* had ceased. They could expect no help from Rhodan, who would be inclined to wait instead of interfering with a hasty action.

Pucky studied the robot that held them captive. The monster had not only the approximate size of the human form but somehow resembled it, if only remotely. In what image had it been created? In that of the lizards? It rested on 4 tiny rollers which were partly hidden under its rectangular body. Its head and torso were not separated by a neck but were fused in one piece which was topped by a slender, swinging antenna. It obviously was linked to the central robot by a radio connection—a connection which could not be broken. Still it was worth a try.

Although Pucky was completely paralysed and unable to move his limbs, he thought it might be possible for him to generate and emit telekinetic rays. He felt certain that the fighter robot constantly produced an inertia field and if it could be stopped it would lose its effect.

He concentrated all his power on the flexible antenna but achieved nothing despite straining his last reserves. Pucky was so consternated that his head began to swim. He found it hard to believe that he had lost his superior mental powers.

Pucky observed from the corner of his eye that an opening appeared in the opposite wall. He heard steps—irregular, almost awkward-sounding steps which came steadily closer. Then the opening was darkened by a shadow that did not represent human features.

Pucky strained his eyes but it was difficult for him to see much. As far as he could make out, a block of metal entered the room. It didn't move on rollers but walked on legs!

The sound of steps ceased. The sudden silence was ominous. Something was about to happen—but what? Pucky noticed that the paralysis holding his body stiff became less rigid. He was able to turn his head enough to see the mass of metal. Ras and Tako also showed slight signs of motion again.

The figure was indeed a chunk of metal but it was not completely made of metal. On its front was a curved face of glass or plastic, similar to that of a television screen.

Pucky's impression was soon confirmed when the curved face became splashed with colours which quickly formed a picture. And what a picture it was! An ordinary room with a table and chairs—and a Terrestrial television set. It looked exactly like his room in his cabin at the Goshun Lake near Terrania. And there—was the Lake on the screen!

Pucky's astonishment grew when the picture of a forest was superimposed on the shining surface of the lake—an African jungle scene. Next to it appeared a typical Japanese landscape with blossoming cherry trees.

Then the pictures and colours swirled around and formed a new image. The image of the universe. A

vessel glided between the stars. To judge by its shape it could be the harvestship. It gleamed like a rod of silver against a scintillating backdrop of flaming suns. Suddenly it was stopped in flight and remained suspended in space as if held by a mighty fist. The picture of a planet unfolded below the vessel. It represented without doubt the landscape of Azgola.

The ship circled over Azgola and began the harvest. And it finally began to make sense to Pucky.

* * * *

Rabotax 3 was little concerned about the intruders and left it to the Weapons Control Centre to deal with them when Rab received a signal from its interspace receiver. It was a message from Rab's masters.

Rabotax registered the command and related information. Rab confirmed the message but the robot's answer got lost in space since Rhodan had no receiver to intercept it. Nobody else could pick it up with the possible exception of the robot receiver on Mechanica that wouldn't know what to do with it.

The message was repeated 3 times and then the impulses ceased to come in. Rab was told to stop work although the automaton couldn't understand why it was interrupted prematurely. However it was not its job to analyse the instructions of its masters. They had directed it to a new destination and it stored the given coördinates in its memory.

Rabotax instructed the robot chief engineer to depart with the speed of light. The transition coördinates were to be relayed in time. Nothing happened. The motor failed to start and the ship kept circling as if no new orders had been handed down. The suction fields were not deactivated and continued to collect the spores which were processed in a nutrient mash as before. The silos kept filling up without interruption.

Rabotax repeated its orders although it realized that the first futile attempt was a sign that its communication line with the propulsion system was defective. As expected, there was no response to the renewed command either.

While the defect could have been the result of an ordinary mechanical failure, the preceding events persuaded Rabotax that this was not the case. Rab requested a report from the Weapons Control Centre and was informed of the narcosis gun breakdown which had already come to Rab's attention earlier. How this had come about remained a mystery because no external force had been used.

Before Rabotax could figure out an answer another space disturbance occurred. A little rotund figure materialized in the Command Centre, less than 4 meters from Rabotax. It had come from the 5th dimension without using mechanical aid. The memory bank of Rabotax contained no record that an organic being had the capability of performing such transitions by itself. Only spaceships could execute transitions, carrying with them organic beings who could never do it alone.

However this creature proved that it could be done. Rabotax quickly realized the enormous potential danger of the little creature and immediately instructed the Weapons Control Centre to restrain the strangers before they could do more harm. Within a few seconds Tako and Ras were cornered and paralysed. Pucky suffered the same fate when he rushed to their assistance.

Rabotax felt the kind of satisfaction its robotic nature permitted. The strangers were disabled and the

flight could be resumed. . .

This was the problem!

Rabotax had recorded the received command 3 times and transmitted it twice. Only one more opportunity was left. If the next attempt failed, Rab would have to wait till the messages were repeated again—and this could take a long time. The robot was not allowed to initiate the flight on its own.

The defect had to be fixed at once! It was the little stranger who had done the damage and if he valued his life he would have to help them get started again.

Rabotax sent the videotranslator to the Weapons Control Centre where the prisoners lay helplessly on the floor. Rab had already met humanoids before and they constituted no danger. However these were different. They possessed powers which made the exercise of extreme caution advisable.

The translator had to display a variety of pictures, some of which reflected the images in the mind of the prisoners themselves, before they finally grasped the idea. As soon as they had caught on, Rabotax demanded categorically: "Restore my communications to the propulsion system again!"

* * * *

"He's back again! I can receive him." Betty showed immense relief when she reported the message. A smile lit up her face. Rhodan and Bell breathed easier. They exchanged brief glances with joy in their eyes. "Are they alright?"

"They're alive. Pucky claims they had been paralysed for some time by mysterious rays. Even his paramental powers were blocked. Now they have achieved some form of communication with the chief robot who is using a pictorial language gadget. The robot insists stubbornly that they repair the damage they have caused. What shall I reply?"

Rhodan murmured: "Our intention of operating secretly had unfortunately been foiled. The 3 teleporters were discovered and it would be a mistake to persist with this strategy. The robot seems to be much too shrewd and resourceful. But if they're on speaking terms, Pucky may have an excellent opportunity to stipulate conditions before he makes the repair."

Betty Toufry nodded. *Do you hear, Pucky? First state your conditions, then fix the trouble!* She paused. *What conditions?* Looking questioningly at Rhodan she interpreted the shrug of his shoulders. *Anything! Just try to gain time!*

She listened a moment, after which she said to Rhodan and Bell: "He got the point. He'll try to talk the robot into taking them to Arkon."

Rhodan was speechless for a second. "That's what he said?"

Betty chortled softly. "At least that's what he thought."

* * * *

The exchange of questions and answers between Rabotax and Pucky had taken considerable time since it was carried out by visual means. A few phrases required almost half an hour.

"Are you able to restore the function of the propulsion system in full order?"

"I've disrupted it," Pucky pressed his point, "and therefore I know how to put it back in order."

"Then do it!"

"And what are you going to do with us?" Pucky's question was superfluous. He knew that he would no longer depend on the mercy of the robot once he gave it its freedom of movement. He could teleport himself instantly to Azgola or to the *Sirius* and this was equally true for Tako and Ras who were still lying on the floor and watching the critical negotiations with wide open eyes.

"I'll take you to my masters as soon as I have finished my task. But if you refuse to obey my order you'll die."

"And you can circle over Azgola for all eternity!"

There was a pause. The picture faded from the screen. Pucky took a deep breath and looked confidently at his 2 friends. "Don't worry, I'll soften him up."

"I'd like to see a soft robot," Ras commented, causing Tako to grin.

After a few minutes elapsed Rabotax returned with its next question. "How did you manage to get into the ship? You are capable of transporting yourself through the 5th dimension. The logical conclusion is that you can leave again anytime you desire. Why don't you do it?"

"I also have a question. Did your masters make a law forbidding the abuse of all intelligent beings who might be detrimentally affected by your harvesting activities?"

The answer was unequivocal: "The growth of spores frequently takes place on planets which are populated. The inhabitants don't know how to regulate the intake of this food and become as fat as you. But I get there in sufficient time to make the harvest which eliminates all further danger. Yes, there is such a law."

Pucky sighed with relief. He knew that the robot had to observe the law whether it wanted to or not. It was empowered to defeat its attackers but was not permitted to destroy entire civilizations. This had to be avoided under any circumstances if possible. "Are you obligated to undertake the harvest of all planets which have been seeded by the planting ship of your masters?"

"Yes, if there is a civilization that is in peril of destruction."

"Very well then. I know of a distant planet whose natives are suffering from these spores. The harvest is overdue and each hour you spend here increases their danger. The planet Azgola where we're now is uninhabited. Under your laws this makes it of secondary importance to the other planet. Do you follow

me?"

"I have received another order which takes precedence."

"Even if the world I have brought to your attention perishes?"

There was a long pause. Obviously Pucky's questions and arguments had created some confusion in the rational decisions of the robot commander. Unfortunately Pucky had not yet become aware that both of them had talked about the same planet, Arkon 2.

"If you don't restore the power of my propulsion system, I won't be able to help you."

"If I do, will you let me lead you to the endangered planet?"

"No, I can't do that. I'll interrupt my present work but only to carry out a new assignment I have received from my masters. I have no choice but to obey the command impulses."

Pucky perked up. "Command impulses? Did you receive a radio message from your masters?"

"Yes, I did."

"When was that?"

Rabotax mentioned a time which was unfamiliar to Pucky. Nevertheless it was unmistakable that it was very recently. Pucky was suddenly struck by the revelation and was imbued with new hope. "Can you tell me the coordinates of the planet where you have to go next?"

"It would be too difficult. But I can show you the direction. Look...!"

A picture of the universe appeared on the screen. Most of the constellations were unknown to Pucky but he easily recognized the Azgos star. A beam of light drew a line through the cosmos toward a concentration of stars in a region where the Arkonide empire was located. His assumption was confirmed and the ruse had worked. The robot had received Rhodan's transmitter impulses, mistaking them as hoped for the command of its masters.

Pucky maintained an outward calm as he replied: "Very well, I agree that you first carry out your mission. I'll restore the connection between you and the power drive."

Rabotax 3 showed no sign of relief or satisfaction. "Your 2 companions will remain paralysed till we start."

Pucky had to give his consent since he saw no other possibilities at the moment. As soon as the screen of the pictorial communicator went dark Pucky could feel his paralysis wane. He was able to move freely again and to receive Betty's thought impulses from the *Sirius*.

Undeterred by the mobile communication set, he said to Ras and Tako: "Don't worry. The robot will release you as soon as I connect the cable again. It better or I'll rip it apart!"

His friends could barely blink their eyes to show their appreciation.

Without further delay he left the room and teleported himself to the spot where he had disrupted the

cable.

Attention, Betty! he called.

Yes, Pucky?

The robot has received the signals of the special transmitter. I'm going to repair the connection to the propulsion system. Follow the ship but don't interfere unless it deviates from its course to Arkon. Is that clear?

After a short interval she came back with the authorization: *All clear, Pucky. Good luck!*

Pucky gave no answer. He concentrated completely on his task. It was easy enough to find the break although it was invisible to the naked eye. The thick cables had been loosened at a coupling and separated from making contact by a millimetre. It required an enormous effort to pull the cables together so that the contact surfaces touched once more and reestablished the connection. He satisfied himself that it would be simple to break the connection again if it would turn out to be necessary. The experience had taught him moreover that the propulsion system could function independently which meant that it would continue to respond to the last signals from the robot before another interruption occurred.

Pucky carefully examined the black cable. It was only partly concealed under a metal channel. The unmanned ship lacked unnecessary beauty, having been built for the purpose of bare utility. It would have been much more difficult to find such an important link in a terrestrial vessel.

Somewhere in the aft section of the vessel the vibration and humming of machinery increased. Pucky noticed a slight shift of equilibrium as the ship changed course. Then the antigrav field became activated. Pucky was impressed. The rule of law did not allow the robot to destroy the life of organic beings without valid reasons. If he had failed to activate the antigrav field Ras, Tako and Pucky would have been mercilessly crushed by the imminent pressure of acceleration. Their lives were not in jeopardy.

The ship was not equipped with windows and Pucky had no way of observing the course it followed. He could only hope that his guess was correct and that the command impulse the robot had cited had indeed come from Rhodan.

Could it have come from anyone else? The lizards had died out long ago.

As the harvestship accelerated and embarked on its course toward distant Arkon, a small craft departed from the *Sirius*. It carried the special transmitter to Earth where it could be put back in operation. The commander of the swift reconnaissance ship was given instructions to fly to Arkon as soon as the craft was usable again. Rhodan was hopeful that it would get there in time to let him control the harvestship.

Then he took up the pursuit of the robot.

5/ PUCKY'S PRIDE PERPLEXES

More than 50,000 light-years from the stellar cluster M-13 an isolated red and virtually burned-out sun

traversed the starless space. It was circled by 3 lifeless planets of which only the 2nd showed the remnants of a former civilization, which had sprung up far from all inhabited worlds and then declined again. Nobody had the slightest inkling of its existence until the Terrans discovered it accidentally. They called the sun Outside and the planet Mechanica.

Mechanica had been the home of an ill-fated race that had made desperate attempts to survive. Their 3 robot-piloted ships had ventured into the neighbouring Galaxy and sought out planets to sow and reap the moss which provided their staff of life. They had become totally dependent on these 3 ships and all work on their planet was performed by fully-automated servants. Then a mishap occurred in the central impulse station and the connection with the 3 ships was lost. They were deprived of the nutrient mash made from the spores of the moss and were condemned to languish and die, leaving behind the planet of automation, Mechanica.

The planet was no longer a threat to visitors although there were still a few narcosis guns left intact. Rhodan had been unable to destroy all of them on his first visit to Mechanica. The robot civilization had been neglected for too long a time to react quickly. The robots were able to perpetuate themselves but made mistakes in their service. Thus, the radio station which was to maintain contact with the 3 spaceships had become defective as well as the guidance system of the automatic cannons.

Col. Jefe Claudrin, Commander of the *Ironduke*, based his hopes on these existing flaws when he left Arkon and headed for the sun Outside to carry out the mission Rhodan had assigned to him.

The gigantic battleship, a sphere of the Stardust class measuring 800 meters in diameter, sped with incredible acceleration toward the outer edges of the Galaxy. It was equipped with linear drive, which eliminated the necessity of going through a transition to reach its destination. The vessel could reach a million times the speed of light as it travelled in semispace between the regular Einstein universe and the 5th dimension. The star of its destination was made visible by a figuration sensor.

The agglomeration of brilliant dots of light receded behind the ship. The stellar cluster M-13 grew smaller and turned within a few hours to a luminous blurred spot, one of which the universe abounded in countless numbers—and yet this pale spot of light represented one of the largest realms of stars that had ever existed. However it would have perhaps been more accurate to say that it was the largest stellar realm that the Terrans had come to know. There could be hundreds or even thousands of such domains in the depth of the Galaxy which had no contact with each other and knew nothing of their existence. Despite the incredible velocities the spaceships of the Earthlings had attained, the Galaxy did not give the impression that it had shrunk. It was still as if a man walking on foot wanted to try to find the only living person on an otherwise uninhabited planet. The vastness of the Galaxy was as unimaginable as the mind-shattering velocities. But this galaxy was merely one of millions and the space between them was empty.

The Terrans had reached the stars but only a few in their own Milky Way. They constantly encountered new surprises, good and bad, as they discovered new civilizations.

What would they find in the future when they would leave the Milky Way and explore the infinite expanse of intergalactic space? Jefe Claudrin pondered the thought as he watched the Galaxy begin to compress behind him into a wide milky ribbon. Yet he would never reach intergalactic space, merely its edge where the sun Outside was located, a sun which had begun to burn out thousands of years ago because it radiated its energy to sustain the life of a race of lizards.

Claudrin's enormous bulk rested in a special seat. He stared in fascination at the forward section of the panoramic observation screen. In the black infinity of space before his ship stood a single star. It shone

red and menacing like a furious eye. Except for this star, Claudrin discerned only feebly glimmering patches—distant galaxies, bigger or smaller than the Milky Way and millions of light-years away. Their light would shine after they were long gone and forgotten. It would travel through space, on and on to the end of time till, it finally reached its destination where nothing existed anymore.

And what would happen then? Claudrin sighed. He liked to dream when the automatic pilot steered the ship and he was alone in the Command Centre. Especially on occasions like this one when he was entrusted with a mission taking him into unknown regions.

The last of the farout suns quickly retreated on his right and left and submerged in the anonymity of the wide mass of light as the red star before him grew larger.

And suddenly he noticed another star. It had sprung into view as abruptly as if it had been instantly created. Smaller and white in appearance, it almost seemed to touch the red giant as it moved away from the *Ironduke*.

A moving star? Jefe Claudrin leaned forward and avidly studied the picture screen. There was no reason to alert the ship. In case of an attack the battleship was prepared to defend itself automatically but there was nothing to indicate that such an attack was imminent.

A state of 'night' prevailed aboard the ship. A period of rest had been put in as the flight to the distant star took considerable time and Claudrin was reluctant to break the rest unless it became inevitable.

As he watched the moving body he soon realized that it was not a star but a huge spaceship travelling on a course which the *Ironduke* would cross before long.

Claudrin's tremendous but dexterous hands adjusted a knob to magnify the picture. As the mysterious object came into closer view he saw that it was indeed a spaceship in the shape of a cylinder.

Why would a spaceship ply the empty space between the galaxies? Claudrin wondered whether he was on the threshold of a stupendous discovery. The velocity of the strange ship surpassed the speed of light as his instruments verified beyond a doubt, proving that it had a linear drive. But who except the Terrans and the Druufs had a linear drive? Who was the pilot at the controls of the cylindrical ship a few light-days away and what did he look like?

Col. Claudrin wiped the sweat from his brow and leaned back in his chair. He didn't have enough time to contact Perry Rhodan, who was somewhere between Azgola and Arkon. Was he authorized to make his own decision and pursue the stranger or would it be considered neglecting his orders? What if he failed to reach Mechanica in time to carry out his task.

The answer was clear. He was not allowed to do it. Whatever happened, the original order took precedence and no matter who the stranger was, crossing the path of the *Ironduke* by the most incredible coincidence, he would have to let him escape in the vast space where he might vanish forever.

Jefe Claudrin did not yet realize how wrong he was. He didn't know that he was not the first one who had encountered a ship of a hitherto unknown race. Nor could he suspect that the first visitor was the involuntary guest of Rabotax 3.

The cylindrical vessel quickly moved toward the edge of the observation screen. It seemed to have increased its speed, possibly as a result of having spotted the gigantic spherical ship of the Terrans. Apparently it tried to maintain a safe distance and it was fast enough to require a daylong pursuit if the

Commander of the *Ironduke* actually entertained such an idea.

Jefe Claudrin sighed again. There he was rushing to a desolate world, missing the chance of his life because he had to follow orders. If the ship had attacked him, he could have taken action but the intriguing stranger avoided all contact, depriving him of any justification for taking the chase.

As silently as it had emerged from eternity it disappeared again. A passing star full of mysteries that did not yield its secrets, a fleeting vision in the dark.

When it was gone it left behind the dying sun of a lifeless world whose image had become bigger and moved closer.

Claudrin continued to gaze at the screen after the speck of light had faded away. He knew how minuscule the probability of such an encounter was. The odds of 2 ships of alien races meeting in space were one in a billion. Now that it had happened the chance had slipped away.

2 hours later Claudrin ended the rest period of the *Ironduke*. The ship circled the red system in a wide orbit, waiting for a signal from Rhodan over the hyper-transceiver.

Claudrin surmised that the Terrans were not the only ones who had discovered Mechanica. Or could it have been a pure accident that the spindle-ship had followed the same course?

Claudrin decided to report the baffling encounter to Rhodan later on. Perhaps it was still possible to trace the stranger.

* * * *

"You won't believe it," Pucky said with an embarrassed gesture, "but I feel hungry."

Ras and Tako sat across from him on the bare metal floor of the room they had chosen as their temporary living quarters. There was not a single comfortable room aboard the harvestship.

The African nodded, unsurprised. "Strange as it may seem—so do I. Wouldn't you think that we have accumulated enough fat in our bodies to last us a few weeks?"

"Maybe so but my stomach doesn't seem to think so." Pucky grumbled in disgust. "Anyway, where is my stomach?" He touched his misshapen belly with a glum expression, trying to find his stomach hidden under deep layers of fat. "I can't find it. I must have lost it."

"It won't hurt it if it shrank a little," Tako tried to console him. "It will be easier for you than for us to be on a diet since you are a vegetarian."

"This isn't a diet, it's starvation," Pucky replied indignantly. "First we get saturated with fat by breathing the air, then we must suffer the opposite. I'd like to know when we'll get to Arkon."

2 days had passed from the moment the harvestship had departed and leaped forward by transitions in regular intervals. Only in the pauses between the leaps was Pucky able to make contact with Betty, who

informed him of the progress he made on his flight to Arkon.

Everything had worked out according to the plans of Rhodan and Pucky. The 3rd command impulse had reached the propulsion control and the ship began to move again. The order to proceed to Arkon for the harvest had been accepted and complied with. In the meantime the Gazelle had taken the defective impulse transmitter back to Earth. Colonel Claudrin had received orders to fly to Mechanica and stand by for further instructions. The entire operation proceeded without a hitch.

Pucky stretched himself. "A reducing cure not only calls for depriving the body of its well-deserved food but also for a maximum of exercise. In other words, I'm fed up with sitting around. I think I'll snoop around a little."

Ras advised caution. "What if the robot doesn't like it? Are you going to ask it?"

"Through that cosmic picture box? Why?" Pucky got up. "It'll be around if it doesn't like it. Perhaps I can find something to eat."

"Sure, some lube oil," Tako observed sceptically.

Pucky teleported and disappeared. He materialized in the corridor and began his inspection. All bulkhead doors were open again so that the mousebeaver could enter all compartments without difficulty.

The nose section of the huge vessel was basically one big robot whose central nerve system was Rabotax, who controlled each function and initiated the orders for their execution. The day before, Pucky had engaged in a long conversation with Rabotax—using the pictorial translator, of course—and got to know the robot, if such a phrase could be applied to an automaton. The mousebeaver had felt an odd sympathy for the mechanical and lifeless structure that was capable of thinking and taking action. It had a superior memory but lacked the cerebral cogency to differentiate adequately and recognize the deceit with which it had been tricked.

Pucky came to a broad hall with a low ceiling. In its centre was a round closed lid which aroused his curiosity. It looked like a hatch leading to a lower room. He was tempted to open it. His physical strength was too limited but he succeeded in sliding it to the side by using his telekinetic power.

A sweetish odour emanated from the round opening and enveloped Pucky as he peered down where a grey mash was slowly stirred by metallic blades. Bright lamps on all sides raised the temperature of the silo. The smell was so satiating that Pucky instantly lost his appetite and gave his undivided attention to his new discovery. He surmised that this was the place where the spores of the fat-moss were mixed in a semi-liquid food which then could be sprayed like an aerosol and inhaled as the extinct lizards were accustomed.

The heat in the silo indicated that the spores could be kept alive only in an environment above a certain degree of temperature. Pucky realized how valuable this ship could be for humanity. If the supply of a full ship could feed the entire race of lizards for months or years, not many barrels would be required for the average crew of a Terrestrial spaceship. The future of intergalactic flight had been hampered by many hitherto unsolved problems, of which the question of food was only one. However if this was the solution...

Pucky closed the lid again and continued his search. He was only one meter high, as before, but his girth had expanded twice its former size, which made him look almost like a fur ball. More than a big mouse he resembled an overfed brown bear, with a beavertail, walking on 2 feet. His movements had become

more measured and his good-natured canine eyes were half covered by bulges of fat. His face had lost his natural look of shrewdness as it was too round and contented to convey such an expression.

However Pucky was far from contented. When he stopped in front of some metal sheeting shining in the light of the ceiling lamp, he was flabbergasted at seeing his reflection. Although it was slightly distorted, it was clear enough to frighten him. In the shape he was, he couldn't let himself be seen by other people. What would Bell say? Or Betty? Would she be disappointed...?

He resumed his walk again, moving briskly with firm quick steps. The main corridor was nearly one kilometre long. It had no doors or partitions to block his way. It began 500 meters from the tail end of the vessel and ended where the domain of Rabotax began, 500 meters from the nose.

Pucky preferred to give up his sleep so he could exercise. Walking was the best way to get back in trim. He began to perspire after a few minutes.

For some inexplicable reason it was very warm in the ship although there was no need for it except in the silos. Moreover, lights were burning throughout the ship, something Rabotax did not require. Presumably technicians of the lizards were sometimes present on the flights—or were in the past. There was no other explanation for this practice. The fact that the air was continually ventilated must have served the same purpose.

Sweating profusely, Pucky walked several kilometres up and down the corridor. There was nothing to see except bare walls of metal and he felt bored. He would have given up the monotonous exercise but the thought of Bell's roaring laughter at the comical sight of his bloated corpulence kept him going. Under no circumstances would he give him that satisfaction, even if it meant walking around for days!

After 7 kilometres of marching he was abruptly stopped in his tracks. He had become drowsy as his legs almost mechanically moved and carried his heavy body. He kept his eyes barely opened enough to see the sidewalls and stay in the right direction. Thus he almost stumbled over the obstacle that got in his way. The object was already familiar. It was the visual translator.

It formed a picture in colours and Rabotax inquired: "Why are you doing this?"

Pucky was taken by surprise. "I'm too fat and I want to get thin again."

Rabotax got the idea. "You spent too much time on that planet before it was harvested. Usually the process of reducing doesn't take too long but you don't have your normal activity. Are you in a hurry to get thin?"

"The sooner the better," Pucky replied, not knowing how Rabotax could help him. "If my friends see me like this, they'll die of laughter."

The robot showed no sign of amusement. "Do you want me to help you?"

Pucky stared at the image on the picture screen. "If you can do it without harming me."

"Follow the translator, it will lead you," Rabotax advised in his factual manner. "And don't be afraid!"

Pucky felt relieved. If there was a quick method to get rid of his fat, it could make him only happy. Walking it off was not a cure that appealed to him, especially not in his present surroundings.

He followed the little robot to the rear of the ship into a small room which he had not yet seen before. Its ceiling had numerous little jets which looked like a shower. The floor was perforated metal but Pucky was unable to recognize what was below it.

2 seconds later he was bathed in a lukewarm stream of air.

"You'll have your normal figure back in one hour," Rabotax predicted.

* * * *

The harvestship passed unmolested through the chain of defences guarding the interstellar fortress of Arkon. The powerful automatic guns and their commanders held their fire because Atlan had seen to it that they treated the harvestship as a friend and refrained from putting obstacles in its way.

Rabotax was aware that it approached a populated world but this did nothing to deter it. The scoutship had been here before it and must have chosen the 2nd planet as a safe place to let the planting ship seed the fields or Rabotax would not have been ordered to go there.

The *Sirius* followed the robotship from a cautious distance. Rhodan watched the movement of the flying colossus with tense fascination. Betty sat next to him with furrowed brows, betraying her state of anxiety.

"Pucky is behaving very strangely," she finally voiced her fears. "He is suddenly shielding his thoughts from me, which he didn't do before. It is as if he wanted to hide something from us."

Without taking his eyes off the observation screen, Rhodan asked: "What would he want to hide from us Betty? He probably does it instinctively and without deliberate intention." He shook his head.

Betty held another opinion but remained silent.

The *Sirius* stopped its flight at a safe distance.

Atlan had kept Rhodan informed about the situation on Arkon 2. He had described it as not serious but highly unpleasant. The Arkonide administration officials who were mostly degenerated and phlegmatic had gained so much fat that they moved even less than usual. It affected not only their physical but also their mental activities. The absence of instructions from Arkon 1 or 3 contributed to a general atmosphere of a lazy holiday and everyone enjoyed the languorous life. They failed to realize the real danger brought on by the propagation of the fat-moss and the dissemination of its spores and could feel only the happiness of their good fortune which relieved them even of the trouble of eating.

All connections to the other planets of the Imperium had been disrupted and no trade whatsoever was conducted anymore. This trade was vital not only to the normal existence of Arkon 2 but its interruption at the central source led the whole mighty stellar realm to the brink of disaster.

Under these deteriorating conditions the commander of the harvestship arrived as a saviour. Nonetheless, the rash response was to hold him also responsible for their predicament. The flight of the robot was monitored with extreme suspicion by all command stations of Arkon and the ship was kept under close surveillance. However there was no general battle alarm in effect because the most

dangerous weapon of the harvestship, the narcosis guns, had been put out of action.

The spore-laden atmosphere of Arkon 2 was rent apart with a whistling sound as the harvestship hurtled through it without noticeably slowing down its speed. Only after circling the planet 3 times did it begin to decelerate. Then the suction fields began to shimmer in the air and gather up the spores.

Rhodan took a deep breath. "I believe we did it," he said slowly.

Bell kept his eyes glued to the observation screen. "Looks like it. It'll take at least a week to finish the harvest on Arkon. Till then we won't have to worry about surprises."

"Shall I call Pucky and the others back?" Betty asked.

"No," Rhodan replied, shaking his head. "It would be too risky. The robot has accepted their presence and is now used to it and they can also exert some pressure. We don't know how it will act when it feels free. It is not a robot in our sense. I am certain that the radically different mentality of the lizards had left its distinctive mark on the structure of the robot. Moreover, it won't hurt our teleporters anymore to stay aboard the ship and begin their reducing cure. They no longer have to inhale the spores and they have nothing to eat. They'll let us know when they get too hungry."

"Hm, too bad," Bell murmured, disappointed.

Rhodan looked at him, a little puzzled. "What's too bad?" he drawled.

Bell sighed and shrugged his shoulders. "I would have liked to see Pucky's paunch. He must look like a balloon."

"Is that so?" Rhodan chided him. "Pucky sacrifices his pride for us and you want to poke fun at him. Is that nice, my fine friend?"

"Who said I wanted to laugh at him? I only wanted to see him."

"You'll get to see him soon enough," Rhodan grinned. "He won't lose it all in 6 days. He'll get rid of his fat when Dr. Manoli treats him."

Bell hid his displeasure and resumed his observation of the harvestship, which slowly drew circles over the plains of Arkon 2, sucking up the air in its funnels.

Rhodan turned to Betty. "How are Pucky and the others getting along?"

Betty called Pucky at once.

We're fine, thank you, Pucky reported. We can stand it. Rabotax is a good fellow.

Who?

Oh, the Commander of the harvestship. Its name is Rabotax.

A good fellow?

Speaking figuratively, of course. We're getting along splendidly. It promised to put in a good

word for me with the masters.

"I don't get it," Rhodan admitted.

Pucky explained it to him and added: "I'm sure we can come to terms with it when we tell it the truth. I'm inclined to believe that it'll cooperate with me even without your impulse transmitter."

"We won't take that chance. We'll get the transmitter back in 3 or 4 days and then we can see. Don't forget that the fat-moss is also smothering 2 other inhabited worlds and we'll have to clean them up too."

"And what are we going to do with all that pap? Let me tell you that the silos will be running over when Arkon 2 and two more planets have been harvested. You'll have to find a place for the stuff."

"I've already taken care of that, my little friend. Atlan has agreed to store the nutrient either on Arkon 3 or one of the colonial planets. I believe we can make good use of it later on."

As Pucky failed to make any further comment, Rhodan suggested: "If you feel like it you can come here for awhile. After all we're in sight of each other and you can jump back anytime."

"No!" Pucky hastened to reply. "It is better if I keep an eye on Rabotax."

"Really!" Rhodan was astonished at his quick answer. "Didn't you just tell me that we can depend on him?"

Pucky refrained once more from answering. Although Rhodan was mystified he did not delve deeper into the matter. The mousebeaver's sudden change of mind baffled him. Why did he refuse to visit the *Sirius* with a quick jump? He had taken it for granted that Pucky would welcome the change.

"Very well," Rhodan finally decided. "Please yourself. One more question. Do you have any complaints, I mean healthwise? Are you famished?"

"Everything is in excellent shape," Pucky replied, "and we don't feel hungry either."

Rhodan was at a loss to understand Pucky's response but he thought that the mousebeaver must have some reasons of his own to make such claims. It was apparently useless to insist on further questioning his motives. "Alright. But let me know if there's anything I can do for you."

The conversation broke off rather abruptly but Rhodan had a strong impression that Pucky was far from unhappy about it. On the contrary, his behaviour exuded much satisfaction. Why, Rhodan was unable to figure out.

Nor could Bell come up with some plausible reason. He gave up his speculations in utter frustration.

6/ KNOCKOUT MISSION: MECHANICA

The harvestship spent 6 days to collect the spores and exterminate the lichen from Arkon 2. The

Arkonides began to slim down naturally. In 2 or 3 weeks they would be able to forget their weird affliction.

Meanwhile the impulse transmitter had been brought back from Terra. The repair had been a simple job for the technicians and they gave assurances that they had eliminated the trouble and that the transmitter was now in perfect condition.

Rhodan waited patiently. Finally, on the 7th day, the robotship finished its work. The suction fields were shut off and the continuous circles were given up for a straight course. The harvestship slowly ascended to the stratosphere, where it waited for new orders.

Rhodan took his time. Being confident that the impulse transmitter functioned satisfactorily, he decided to eliminate first the only source of danger which still could haunt him.

Atlan informed him that the first relief teams had landed on Arkon 2 and that the fattened officials had been aroused from their lethargy. Arkon's trade centre became active once more.

Now the main transmitter on Mechanica had to be destroyed and orders to this effect were issued to Col. Jefe Claudrin without further delay.

* * * *

At this time the *Ironduke* was in orbit around the system of the red sun Outside.

A magnified picture of the 2nd planet was in the centre of the observation screen. Claudrin studied it carefully as he had done almost uninterruptedly for 6 days. He had taken only short breaks to give his body the minimum of sleep it required.

Mechanica was about the size of Mars. Most of its surface was a desert but previously it must have been fertile land. Empty cities and huge automatic control stations were located at many places in the desert. They showed no signs of destruction except the normal dilapidation wrought by the passage of eons.

Claudrin knew that most of the narcosis guns had been destroyed on their first visit but he was also aware that a sufficient number of them were still left in a condition where they constituted a real danger. Thus it would be necessary to launch a surprise attack before he landed. Experience had taught them that the automatons reacted with reliable precision but much too slowly.

The location of the main control station on Mechanica was known.

Claudrin stiffened when a lamp among his controls flashed. The Communication Room of the *Ironduke* was calling him. He pushed a button and said: "Commander speaking! What is it?"

Claudrin's voice matched his enormous physique. It was loud and booming. Even when he whispered he sounded like a drill sergeant barking commands at recruits.

"Hyper-radio call from the *Sirius*, sir."

"Rhodan?"

"Yessir. Shall I switch it to the Command Centre?"

"Of course. Why not? Hurry up! Don't keep us waiting!"

Claudrin remained seated in his chair and waited till the radio officer switched the call and Rhodan's face appeared on the picture screen. He looked as if he spoke somewhere aboard the *Ironduke* instead from a distance of 50,000 light-years.

"Any news, Colonel?"

"All quiet and in exemplary order, sir," Claudrin boomed, suppressing a fleeting grin. "We're waiting."

"We're through waiting," Rhodan replied. Claudrin detected a grim inflection in his voice. "Knock out the main Control Station on Mechanica as instructed."

"Shall I use force?"

"You'll have to, Colonel. We won't need the station and nobody will get killed. There's no intelligent life left on Mechanica. We've seized control of the harvestship but we must prevent it from receiving orders from Mechanica. The Control Station, which is nothing but a powerful radio station, had to be shut down for good. It's the only way to insure that the harvestship follows exclusively *our* directions. We know the code of the necessary radio impulses and have no need anymore for the station on that planet. Any questions?"

"When shall I begin the attack?"

"At once! I give you 5 hours to carry out your mission."

"5 hours?" Claudrin looked at Rhodan. His tense lips betrayed his doubts. "That may not be enough."

"It depends on the circumstances," Rhodan replied. "Make sure that they are favourable."

"You can trust us, sir."

"I know," Rhodan affirmed before his face faded from the picture screen.

Claudrin kept staring a few seconds at the empty screen before he turned the connection with the radio room off. Then he switched on the intercom which piped his voice into every cabin of the gigantic battleship. In a few words he gave an outline of the situation and alerted the ship for the attack. The men rushed to their battle stations. Their almost imperceptible state of tension vanished completely. Each man knew his duty and place in the complicated machinery of the ship which still depended on the skilful operation of its crew.

Claudrin waited till his officers—except those who were assigned to special commando teams—had assembled in the Command Centre. Then he gave the chief pilot the signal to approach the target.

The planet virtually leaped toward the *Ironduke* as the battleship gathered speed on its new course, hurling itself at the robot world like a bird of prey. Speed, Claudrin knew from experience, was the best

tactic to apply in this case to evade the automatic defence installations. Once he had destroyed the main Control Centre of Mechanica it would be the final blow which turned it into a dead planet.

Mechanica did not possess an energy screen for its defence. *The Ironduke* pierced the upper layers of the atmosphere and began to slow down only after the cities in the desert swooshed by in a blur underneath the ship.

"Forward gun position ready!" Claudrin called through the intercom.

"Ready!" confirmed the officer in charge in a calm voice. He couldn't get excited about an attack on automatons after having been through many a fierce fight.

Claudrin didn't leave the observation screen out of his sight. He had no trouble orienting himself. He vividly remembered the deep impression of his first visit to the planet and had not yet forgotten its topographical features. Then the deserted world had looked eerie because neither he nor Rhodan knew what its surface concealed. Now the situation was different. Mechanica was bereft of life and the remaining robots followed outdated orders given in the millennium of masters perished long ago.

As the ship reduced its speed the cities became clearly visible. However there were no overt signs of a defence.

A low chain of mountains rose in front of them and disappeared behind the ship as suddenly as it had seemed to spring up.

Desert. A city.

And then—the gigantic master station complex with its domes and installations bristling with batteries half covered by sand!

The Ironduke dodged a small fleet of useless harvestships still circling over the desert in search of spores. Its speed was still too high to execute an effective attack on the target. Although Claudrin had expected to find the station, he was surprised by the abruptness of its appearance. "Keep going!" he ordered his pilot. "We can't stop now. Turn around behind the next mountain and fly low!" He turned to the intercom. "Prow gun! Stand by to fire!"

The battleship raced across the desolate wasteland, quickly leaving the master station of Mechanica behind. They watched it shrink on the horizon and reached the mountain 20 seconds later. *The Ironduke* veered in a wide curve and further reduced its excessive velocity. By making the turn they crossed a certain place in the mountain twice, a crucial circumstance which came close to being fatal for Claudrin and his men.

* * * *

For hundreds and perhaps thousands of years the sensitive scanning instruments of the robot station had failed to receive and transmit the frequencies of alien bodies. It had always been the same impulses emanating from the same harvestship to which it had responded with customary routine.

The automatic scanner was connected to the powerful machinery deeply imbedded in the slope of the mountain which operated the narcosis gun independently of a central command. Although its function was not directed by the orders of the master station, it received its energy impulses from there and would have been only a mass of metal without it.

The scanning robot seemed to awake from a long sleep when the alien ship appeared on the horizon and headed for the mountain. Relays began to click and solenoids closed circuits. The awesome power of the cannons was still locked up in the safe recess of the mountain and the positronic banks slumbered undisturbed until excited by the impulses from the alarm contact.

The machinery suddenly sprang into action. Energy began to flow through the connections of its circuits. The inexhaustible source of the wireless master station were tapped from the distance.

The gun turrets were rolled out but the *Ironduke* had already crossed the mountain between 2 peaks. It looped around to return as the mountainside opened up and the guns slid from their bunkers. Sensor rays shot in all directions, searching for the enemy—and locked on to him.

After the *Ironduke* had swung around it took a straight course toward the master station beyond the horizon of the desert. Colonel Claudrin's massive figure rested firmly in his special seat as he issued terse instructions to his pilot. "A little faster!"

The *Ironduke* accelerated again.

"Lower!"

The ship dropped 200 meters after passing over the mountains which quickly blended into the sand.

The observation screen of the *Ironduke* showed the details of the view in great magnification. When Claudrin looked for the last time at the mountain slopes, he noticed a gleam in the reddish shine of the distant sun. He detected the gun which was out in the open and saw it raising its menacing barrel. Nobody knew the effective range of the weapon although they had tried to arrive at exact calculations. However Claudrin knew that he was at this moment still in its zone of influence which had been so difficult to guess.

He reacted with incredible speed. "Switch to automatic control! Hold course to master station!" he bellowed at the startled pilot, who instantly followed his order. The dark mass of the planetary positronicon which had just appeared on the horizon moved a little to the right into the centre of the range finder as the automatic pilot took over.

"Open fire!" Claudrin's second command went to the gunner at the prow. "Maintain automatic continuous fire!"

The beam of fire hit the desert and drew a deep sizzling furrow through the sand. Claudrin watched it, realizing how much luck he needed to save everybody.

The trail of fire melted the sand in a straight line of destruction. In a few seconds the sand became glazed and the straight furrow was long enough to show its direction. Following its line, it aimed directly at the dark complex of the master station which kept rapidly moving closer.

Claudrin felt the sudden numbness of his limbs, which frightened him although he had foreseen it. He knew that his entire crew would also be exposed to the same influence at this moment. They would more

readily succumb to it than he because his resistance was so much greater, being stronger than Terrans and more adaptable to his environment. However he was reluctant to gamble on his superior strength and therefore had earlier given those 2 instructions. Now it became evident how necessary they were.

The pilot slumped as he was hit by the shockwaves of the narcosis gun. He knocked his head against the padded edge of his instrument console. He raised his hands as if he sought something. Then they went limp and dangled lamely beside the pilot chair.

But the *Ironduke* held a steady course. The automatic pilot had taken over and the ship raced undeterred toward the master station. With the same unfailing accuracy the energy beam tore a straight and deadly line on the surface of the planet, coinciding with the course of the ship and pointing directly at the master station.

The men of the *Ironduke* fell to the floor wherever they were. However they didn't lose consciousness, either because they were already too far away from the gun in the mountain or the gun did not operate with full energy. The human nervous system was paralysed with the exception of certain areas of the brain which still were able to function to a limited extent. And the danger lessened with each second.

Claudrin had to use all his remaining strength and power of concentration to make his decisions. They were not yet out of danger and if more guns were triggered they would be finished.

The *Ironduke* was—shorn of human control—on its way to destroy the technical miracle of an extinct race. An ironic fate destined that the gigantic chapek complex of Mechanica was to be annihilated by an automaton. The eternal cycle of evolution and dissolution would be completed not by man but by his most ingenious creation—the robots.

Claudrin noticed that his paralysis diminished and that he was able to move again. He must have reached the limit of the range where the gun could exert its insidious effect.

He tried to get up but failed. Fortunately he was in a position to watch the front and rear screen without turning his head. The glowing glassy track ran straight as an arrow through the desert ending near the mountain behind him. In the opposite direction were only a few kilometres separating him from the master station. The *Ironduke* would reach it in 5 seconds.

1... 2 seconds. Then 5.

The energy beam consumed the protective metal of the first dome and burned the vital inner centre. It incinerated switches, generators and memory banks and continued on its relentless way to finish the work of destruction for which it was deployed.

It would have been possible that a part of the installations escaped total destruction and remained operable if the explosion that followed had not occurred. As a result an intricate bank of servomechanisms toppled into the pool of fire of a generator. The tremendous power of the detonation tore the master station apart.

The *Ironduke* was caught by the shockwaves of the blast at the moment when Claudrin hit the automatic pilot with his fist in order to turn it off and slow down the speed of the ship. The pilot was still crumpled and immobilized in his seat. His eyes stared with an expression of immense astonishment at the control panel before him.

Claudrin had no illusions about the stroke of luck from which he had benefited. He had merely grazed

the effective field of the narcosis gun. Had it been different, the *Ironduke* would have automatically circled the planet for hours on end spewing a blistering ring of fire which would have left a glazed track to baffle later visitors.

He made another effort and stopped the energy flow to the gun in the prow. The lethal beam of fire was extinguished as abruptly as it had flared up 30 seconds earlier.

Claudrin completed his run around the planet. Then he had recovered sufficiently to raise himself. The pilot had regained consciousness. A quick investigation showed that only one man had taken a bad fall and injured himself. It was a small price to pay for the huge redhot crater—which marked the spot where the inventive race of lizards had erected its formidable monument.

The narcosis guns failed to respond to their second approach. They had been knocked out together with the master station—and simultaneously with all the other armament for the defence of Mechanica which still had remained till then on the surface of the planet or hidden under it.

"Go into orbit around the stellar system!" Claudrin directed the pilot, awkwardly stretching his body. Then he called the radio room and asked the officer to get in touch with the *Sirius* by hyperradio as intended.

He looked at the clock and smiled happily. Since the beginning of his attack on Mechanica exactly 3 hours and 15 minutes had passed.

* * * *

"...there is only one explanation for the inadequate performance of the narcosis gun, sir. We flew over it when we reached the mountain and triggered the alarm. Then we passed a second time on the way back over the gun which was now out in the open. Since it was outside it reacted faster and was able to shoot at us. However it was still a few seconds too late. The *Ironduke* must have skirted the boundary of its field of influence and caught only a weak shock-ray."

"Sounds plausible," Rhodan agreed, looking thoughtfully at the picture of Claudrin. "What's your position now?"

"System Outside, sir. I'm waiting for your orders."

"Proceed to Arkon, Colonel. We'll probably meet there and return together to Terra as soon as we've finished cleaning up the mess. Anything else?"

Claudrin hesitated a moment before he reported to Rhodan his encounter at the rim of the Milky Way with the mysterious spaceship which had the unusual oblong shape. He concluded: "I've recorded the course of the spaceship in the data bank of the *Ironduke*. If it didn't change its course since I spotted it we should be able to determine the destination of its flight."

Rhodan had listened attentively with a furrowed brow. Bell's red hair bristled, a sure sign that he was excited.

"Cylindrical shape?" Rhodan finally said. "None of the races we know except the Fantan people, who no longer engage in space travel, have built spaceships of this form. Strange, very strange. One could almost believe..." He fell silent.

Bell interjected. "One could almost believe that Col. Claudrin has come across a messenger of an alien civilization. What if the lizards survived after all?"

"Hard to believe," Rhodan said, shaking his head. "And if they still exist we have nothing to fear from them. They were a peaceful and harmless race. The only weapon they used was the narcosis gun, which was not lethal. No, I think you were right in the first place that Claudrin saw the ship of a race unknown to us."

"Are we going to...?"

"No, we'll wait," Rhodan squelched his question and turned back to Claudrin. "I'll see you on Arkon, Colonel. I want to take a close look at the computer data of the course of that ship."

Rhodan left the radio room and returned to the Command Centre of the *Sirius*. Bell followed him.

"We better forget about that ship for the time being, my friend. We haven't solved all of our problem at hand yet." Rhodan reminded Bell.

"Arkon is out of danger. The harvestship can receive no orders except ours," Bell insisted.

"That remains to be seen. Let's go," Rhodan cautioned.

A few minutes later they stepped into the room where the technicians had set up the special transmitter. A picture screen which was connected to the observation panel in the Command Centre framed the planet Arkon 2 and the ship of the lizards above it which still circled the globe after the harvest.

Rhodan gave the technicians a sign. The prepared data were inserted in the robot transmitter. They contained among others the coördinates of the 2 inhabited worlds where the moss also grew. Three separate commands were to be transmitted to Rabotax. The harvestship was instructed to reap the spores from the 2 planets before proceeding to a certain position in space at the rim of the Galaxy where it was to wait for further orders.

"When will the teleporters come back?"

Rhodan glanced at Bell and chuckled. "You can hardly wait to see your friend Pucky again, can you?"

Bell grinned unabashedly. "You guessed it, Perry. For days I've tried to picture what he must look like. It's simply frustrating. I hope he doesn't get sore if I can't keep a straight face when I see him."

"Pucky has a sense of humour but he'll have some fun with you too," Rhodan warned in amusement. "I'd advise you to refrain from any outbursts of laughter. If you must guffaw, he'll play one of his cute telekinetic games with you. I can already see you floating through the corridors of the *Sirius*."

"Phew!" Bell exclaimed in consternation and stroked his stiff hair.

Rhodan became serious again and turned to the technician, asking: "Are you ready?"

The technician nodded.

Betty Toufry and John Marshall entered the room. Rhodan inquired: "Have you kept in touch with Pucky?"

"Yessir. Pucky, Ras and Tako are ready to teleport. As soon as the ship reacts positively to your command signals, they'll jump back to the *Sirius* ."

The *Sirius* followed the harvestship at a close distance. Any change of course would be registered instantaneously. The structure sensor was turned in on the ship. Rabotax could go through a transition. There was no danger of losing Rab. The first of the 2 planets it was supposed to visit was less than 100 light-years from Arkon, a distance which could be traversed in a single jump.

"Ready!"

Pearls of sweat rolled from the forehead of the responsible technician. He knew how much depended on the faultless functioning of the transmitter he had repaired without getting a chance to perform a test.

Rhodan looked at the picture screen. "Go ahead!"

The technician pushed a button and activated the transmitter. The impulses of the symbols were beamed to the harvestship. They were received by the radio centre of the robotship and transmitted to its commander Rabotax.

2 anxious minutes elapsed after the message had been repeated 3 times. Then came the answer.

Rabotax confirmed the instructions and the robot reported that it would take off in exactly 2 time-units to fly to, the 2 assigned planets and then stand by at the position requested.

Rhodan felt relieved and the technician wiped the sweat from his brow. However it still remained unclear how long 2 time-units would last.

"Betty, tell the 3 teleporters to come back now. I believe everything is working out alright."

Betty made contact again and informed Pucky of Rhodan's request. She listened a few seconds before she reported: "They are going to jump into the Command Centre because they are more familiar with its location." She paused again for a few moments and announced: "They're here, sir. The harvestship is now unoccupied."

Bell could barely conceal his disappointment that he had to wait a little longer to behold the grotesque bloated figure of the mousebeaver. Although he didn't feel tempted to laugh at the swollen girth of Ras and Tako, the sight of Pucky would tickle him to death and he already savoured his unrestrained mirth in delighted anticipation.

It took about 3 more minutes till the harvestship began to soar out into space. Rhodan was suddenly beset by some twinges of doubt. Was he deceiving himself? What if the harvestship vanished without a trace in the depth of space and he couldn't find it anymore? The possibility could not be entirely ruled out in spite of the structure sensor. However his optimistic confidence regained the upper hand. Pucky had lauded Rabotax. It would carry out the orders he had given it. It was pure nonsense to doubt it.

It was unnecessary for the *Sirius* to follow Rabotax. It was clearly apparent on the observation screen

that the ship steered straight to the prescribed point of transition, where it dematerialised a few minutes later. Then Rhodan would have to wait only 15 or 20 minutes to receive the report that it had arrived at its destination from the units of his spacefleet which were stationed at the goal.

Rhodan turned to the technician. "That will be all for now. Take the transmitter safely back to Terra. Some day we're going to need it again." Then he tapped Bell on the shoulder and said: "Now it's your turn. They're waiting for us in the Command Centre. Marshall, prepare the infirmary for our patients. They should start the treatment of the 3 mutants today."

Bell overtook Rhodan and ran down the corridor. He was in such a hurry that Rhodan and Betty couldn't keep pace with him. Betty smiled faintly but said nothing. Rhodan had a hunch that she enjoyed a secret which she wanted to keep to herself but he thought no more of it when they entered the antigrav elevator and floated up to the Command Centre.

Bell was about 20 meters ahead of them when he reached the door to the Command Centre and opened it. As soon as the panel started to slide into the wall recess, he squeezed himself through the crack. He took a deep breath and put his hands on his ample hips. Suddenly he gasped.

"Hi, fatso!" Pucky greeted him.

Bell didn't even notice that Rhodan and Betty entered the Command Centre. With bulging eyes he stared at Pucky, Ras and Tako. His red hair stood straight up and he didn't seem to trust his eyes.

"What's the matter, fatso?" Pucky asked in his most cheerful tone of voice, parading before Bell like a peacock. "Did you swallow your tongue?" Facing Bell and scrutinizing him, he taunted: "If I'm not mistaken you must have gained a few pounds since I saw you last. You'll be busting your britches, fatso."

With gaping mouth Bell gasped for air like a fish out of water. "What... the devil-?!" was all he could stutter.

Rhodan laughed uproariously and grabbed the nearest chair. Several officers watched the scene, trying to disguise their amusement. Betty was still smiling. She had already told Rhodan in a few words what had happened. Pucky had been careless about shielding his thoughts and had given away his secret. But Betty was not one to spoil his fun. She was pleased to see Pucky tease Bell and relished that he got his comeuppance.

Ras went over to Rhodan. Passing Bell he patted him on the shoulder and commented: "Don't take it so hard, old boy. Nexttime we'll take you to the harvestship."

Tako grinned in a friendly manner without adding any barbs of his own. He was as slim as before his adventure. None of the trio had gained as much as one gram. The treatment of Rabotax had performed miracles.

Bell pierced Pucky with his eyes. "You... it can't be!"

The mousebeaver waddled toward Bell and patted his belly. "If you keep this up, no girl will look at you anymore, fatso," he said in a grave voice. "Look at me! You've got to watch your figure a little. Don't eat like a pig! Take me, for example... but it really wouldn't make much difference anyway, fatso. I doubt that a girl would bother to look at you even if you were thin."

"As if they were looking at you!" Bell groaned, imploring Rhodan with his eyes.

Rhodan merely shrugged his shoulders and grimaced wryly as if to say: You asked for it... don't look at me!

"Of course they do!" Pucky crowed, sticking out his chest and showing off his enviable figure to Bell. Then he pranced to the door and announced to his enraptured audience: "Now I'm going to get something to eat. I'm hungry."

Pucky headed straight for the kitchen of the *Sirius* and began to devour all the fresh vegetables he had fancied during his absence.

Bell pleaded with Ras in stunned incredulity: "How did you do it? I thought that blubbermoss made you fat."

"The harvestship had some equipment for defatting us painlessly. We didn't find out what they used it for originally but it certainly served *our* purpose. We were reduced to our former weight within one hour."

Bell was goggle-eyed and didn't know whether to believe Ras or whether he was in on a conspiracy against him.

"It's like getting under a shower and feeling a blast of air," Ras amicably continued to deliver the information. "You just get under it in the nude. That's all there's to it."

"Only one hour?" Bell asked dubiously.

After Ras reassured him Bell left the Command Centre dejectedly and without another word. Once he was in the corridor they could hear him mutter till he was out of earshot.

"So much for that," Rhodan cleared his throat, trying his best to be serious again. "Pucky stole the show from Bell again. Ras and Tako, please report to me in my cabin after you have undergone your medical examinations. Betty, I wish to thank you for your valuable assistance on this mission which we now have concluded... or will conclude in 10 more minutes at the most."

He walked to the door of the adjacent radio room and almost bumped into an officer when he opened it. "Hyper-radio call?"

"Yessir, from the *Ohio*. Just a short message."

"What does it say?"

The officer read it from a piece of paper: OHIO, POSITION XB23 Z13 REPORTS HARVESTSHIP ARRIVED AS EXPECTED AND COMMENCED HARVEST.

Rhodan put his hand on the officer's shoulder and said, highly pleased: "Thank you, Davis. This is excellent news. Confirm the receipt!"

He nodded and returned to the Command Centre. "Course Arkon 2!" he ordered the chief pilot.

Later, when Pucky, Ras and Tako submitted their detailed reports, Bell attended the session. He seemed to have swallowed his pride and didn't show his disappointment. However he was more pensive than usual and paid little attention to the discussion. When they touched the topic of the defatting shower

again he perked up from his brooding and his face assumed a vivid expression.

Shortly before the landing of the *Sirius* he seemed to have made up his mind. "How do you intend to dispose of the harvestship after it has finished its job?" he inquired.

Rhodan gazed quizzically at his friend. "I've given orders to let the ship stand by at the rim of the Galaxy. It'll wait there till we need it again. We've got to make sure that the spores of the lichen won't infest any other planets."

"H'm... near the stars at the border."

"Why?"

"May I know... uh... the position?"

"Why, Reggie?"

Bell looked embarrassed. He squinted at Pucky, who sat on the couch with crossed legs, munching a carrot. "Oh, I just wondered," Bell gulped. He had forgotten that Pucky never missed monitoring his thoughts.

"Wow, fatso!" the mousebeaver suddenly squealed and laughed shrilly. He dropped his carrot and clapped his hands in sheer delight. "Bell wants to go to Rabotax and beg *arobot* to trim his fat belly! It's getting to him, hee hee, he wants the slim figure shower!"

"Pucky!" Bell's voice sounded outraged and imploring at the same time.

The mousebeaver stopped laughing. He slipped off the couch, went to Bell and took his hand, shaking his head slowly. "I'm sorry, Reggie, but all the shower can do is to nullify the effect of the spores so that the weight of your body is normal again. You see, Rabotax can't help you. But there *is* another treatment for you."

"Yeah?" Bell put all his fervent hope in one word. He bent down to Pucky, who advised him solemnly: "Yes, there is hunger and exercise!"

Bell grimaced as if somebody had poured a bucket of cold water over his head. But Pucky was not so heartless as to persist in torturing his good friend for the sake of sweet revenge. He showed that he could be forgiving. "By the way, Reggie, why do you want to lose weight? Did anybody say you are fat? *I* did? I was only kidding you. You aren't overweight. I'm sure every girl in Terrania would be chasing you if you'd only look a little friendlier. I'm sure they would."

A smile slowly spread over Bell's face. "Do you mean it, Pucky? Honest?"

Pucky nodded sincerely. He waddled back to the couch, winking at Rhodan, and jumped back on his favourite seat. "Of course, fatso. Would I say it if I didn't mean it?"

Bell thought for a moment, then he shared the infectious merry laughter which had broken out but was no longer intended to be at his expense alone.

ORDER OF THE ACTION

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HERITAGE OF THE LIZARD PEOPLE

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