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THE PLAGUE OF OBLIVION

by Clark Darlton

THE GREATEST SPACE-TIME SERIES-BAR NONE!

MORE FEARFUL THAN DEATH ITSELF

To forget... to lose all memory, all knowledge of your past....

The alien Springers fear such a fate more than loss of life—and so Perry Rhodan and the mutant corps have a devastating weapon when they unleash the Plague of Lethe in the battle to force the Springers and Mounders to set free the enslaved planet Goszul.

But can it be done—without infecting the entire galaxy?

This is the stirring story of—

THE PLAGUE OF OBLIVION

THOSE INVOLVED IN THIS ADVENTURE

Perry Rhodan—without Him there'd be no adventure! The New Power astronaut extraordinary

John Marshall—Esper in the Mutant Corps

Tako Kakuta—Another telepath in the Mutant Corps

Ishibashi, Yokida—Other members of the Mutant Corps

Pucky—The mutant mouse-beaver!

Reginald Bell—Rhodan's red-headed, dedicated best friend

Enzally—Only mutant among the natives of Goszul

Ralv—Leader of an organization formed to end the rule of the 'Gods' on Goszul—by force, if necessary

Geragk—Cohort of Ralv

Gorlap—Captain of a Goszul sea-ship

Etztak—A Springer patriarch of the Orlgans clan

Ralgor—Another Springer patriarch

RK-071—Battle-robot of the Traders (Springers)

RW-895—Sentry-robot of the Traders

Rendex—A Goszul workman

Fisher—Member of the *Stardust* personnel

Gromsk—Springer navigator

Hoflerys—A Springer

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1/ THE OBLIVION BOMBS

This heat is driving me *crazy!*” the man grumbled, fingering his shaggy beard with displeasure. “I’ll be glad when I can finally scrub all this mattress stuffing off. I’d still like to know what the point of this masquerade is supposed to be.”

The hot, disgruntled, puzzled man was John Marshall, esper, one of the valuable members of Perry Rhodan’s mutant corps, now sweltering beneath a radiant sun that might have shone over Tripoli or Buenos Aires—except that it warmed a planet billions and trillions of miles from Earth.

“There isn’t any point at the moment,” responded the small slender man opposite the telepath. Above *his* beard peered the narrow eyes of a young Japanese: Tako Kakuta, teleporter. “But if a Springer should show up on board, things would suddenly be quite different.”

“Pah!” Marshall accompanied his grunt of disgust with a disparaging gesture. “Tako, my friend, any real Springer would see right off that we’re nothing more than well made-up imitations—if you allowed him the opportunity to get a good look at us.”

“Then we won’t let him have that much time, John,” said the Japanese mutant with a fleeting smile. “Besides, it isn’t likely the Springers will come aboard: they have the Goszuls for that.”

The Goszuls were the natives of this distant world, which had been made a colony of that intelligent, space-faring race known as the Springers. The planet was occupied by the Springers/Traders as a military outpost and, at the same time, as a launching point for attacks against any enemies who appeared on the scene.

One of these enemies was Perry Rhodan, Administrator of the planet Earth.

It was against the Peacelord that the Springers’ plans were now drawn. Rhodan, of course, was well aware of the danger-fraught situation, which accounted for four disguised Terrans on the stern of a Goszul ship resting peacefully at anchor, seemingly innocuous, in the bay of a small continent the natives called the Land of the Gods.

The Terrans’ secret mission was to drive the Springers off Goszul’s Planet without Rhodan’s involvement becoming evident. While Rhodan’s fleet lay in wait eight light-days distant in space, the quartet had been left to its own resources.

John Marshall, able telepath, thoughtfully considered his three comrades. His

gaze was held especially long by Tako Kakuta the teleporter.

“Right,” Marshall said at length, “but the Goszuls have me worried. True, Kitai Ishibashi slapped a suggestion-block on them but we don’t know how long the treatment will last. Once they’ve begun to think for themselves again, they’ll become suspicious and betray us to those creatures of the Springers, the so-called ‘Intelligent Goszuls’. Don’t forget that the primitive natives here believe the Springers are gods.”

Kitai stroked his false beard. “How long a suggestion-treatment will last depends on the subject’s strength for mental resistance, so I can’t really say when these hearty seamen will begin thinking independently again.”

The fourth man smiled at the suggestor. He was Tama Yokida, another Japanese member of Rhodan’s Mutant Corps. His talent was telekinesis: he could move objects through space by means of nothing more than sheer will. “We can defend ourselves against them if we have to, Kitai,” he said, “but I hope it doesn’t come to that. The longer we can stay unnoticed, the better for our mission. Once we have the equipment we need, nothing more can go wrong.”

John Marshall cleared his throat. “The equipment is at the bottom of a river some miles from here, right in the neighbourhood of the Springer spaceport. Pucky had to sink everything he had with him or it would have fallen into the enemy’s hands. I’m glad he was at least able to save himself.” He looked around as though searching for someone. “Where is he, anyway?”

A high, chirping voice piped up from close behind John. “Here I am, dear friend!”

The telepath turned and stared in surprise at a high coil of rope lying near the railing. The coil was moving slightly. Two furry, pointed ears appeared at the upper end, then two gleaming eyes, and finally a long, sharp muzzle spiked with a few quivering whiskers. “Those beards look pretty good on you,” the creature added, while its quick and cunning eyes glanced warily in all directions. “All people should wear beards. Then they would look kindlier and more grownup.”

After making this suggestion Pucky crawled out of his hiding place and laid down on the deck between the four men. Here he seemed to feel safe from being seen.

Pucky was indeed an astonishing sight. He resembled a mixture of mouse and beaver, about three feet long not counting the tail, and covered with reddish-brown fur. His tail was broad and flat-sided like a beaver’s and supported him while he walked. At some distance Pucky made one think a certain Walt Disney character had stepped down from the movie screen but a closer look revealed the error in that thought. Besides, Pucky had talents Micky Mouse would never have dreamed of. This native of the distant, lonely world of Vagabond was at once a telekineticist, a telepath and a teleporter. Moreover, he was not only a member of Perry Rhodan’s Mutant Corps but also an officer in that elite troop. In its service he ranged the cosmos, helping defend the Earth against attacks by alien intelligences.

“Thanks for the advice,” Kitai said seriously, beginning to scratch the mouse-beaver behind the right ear. Pucky showed his appreciation by a mild purring. “Of course,” Kitai went on, “when I imagine *you* with a beard...”

The very idea of Pucky with a beard was too awful for him to finish the sentence (besides, he was too busy struggling to keep from grinning).

For his part, John smiled. “Pucky with a beard? A wonderful sight! This whole planet would jump out of the space-time continuum in sheer delight. For that matter, so would I.”

Pucky hissed warningly. John felt as though an invisible hand were lifting him into the air. If the situation at hand hadn’t been so serious, and had a prank been allowable, Pucky would probably have floated John telekinetically through the air, over the railing, and then let him drop into the water below. As things were, Pucky had to be content with giving no more than a gentle warning. “I’d like to know,” the mouse-beaver whispered, “why a beard would look funnier on me than it does on you.”

John Marshall was about to reply when his trained mind picked up some odd thought-impulses. He motioned abruptly to his three companions and pushed Pucky against the deck where no one could see him without coming on the upper deck. For almost two minutes John listened with half-closed eyes. Then he nodded slowly and looked at Kitai. While the others followed breathlessly, the telepath reported his findings in what was not far from a whisper.

“It’s our Goszuls—or at least some of them. They’ve shaken off your hypno-block, Kitai, and they’re wondering who we are. They see us on board their ship and they don’t know how we got here. They’ve figured out that we aren’t ‘Intelligent Goszuls’, those natives the Springers have hypno-trained. Our resemblance to the Springers doesn’t mean very much because these fellows have never seen any. They think we’re aliens, which is exactly what we are. They want to overpower us and hand us over to the ‘Gods’.”

Tako, the teleporter, looked down on the main deck where the Servants of the Gods, as the natives called those members of their race who had become suddenly intelligent, were coming on board to supervise the unloading operation for their masters. Several Springer battle-robots came with them as guards. “How can we do anything?” the Japanese asked in a whisper. “If the smart Goszuls notice us, they’ll set the robots at our throats. We don’t want to expose ourselves, do we?”

“That’s the last thing we want,” John agreed and pondered the matter feverishly. “Kitai, what do you think? Can you do anything from here?”

The suggestor shook his head. “It doesn’t look likely. The most effective way of getting the mutineers back under control would mean I would have to confront them face to face. Even if there isn’t any confusion to distract me and I can concentrate my will to the limit, I could affect them only partially from here.”

“In other words,” Tama Yokida, the telekin, concluded, “There isn’t much of a chance you could isolate a single individual from the crowd at this distance and control his mind—isn’t that what you wanted to say, Kitai?”

The suggestor nodded sadly and was quiet.

John Marshall suddenly pulled himself up straight. “We’ve got to do something, even if we have to slap a suggestive-block on the lot of them down there. The thought waves are getting stronger. It won’t be too long now before those boys drop their work and come after us. One of them is already feeling for his knife.”

Since the Goszuls lived in a civilization roughly comparable with that of the Earth during the 18th Century, knives were extremely effective weapons in their hands.

“That damned robot!” Kitai grumbled angrily. “Never in my life have I tried to force my hypnotic influence on a robot.”

John managed a weak smile. “I don’t think we’d get very far with that idea. Anyway, the robots would notice if anything started influencing their immediate subordinates. We’re stuck on the horns of a first-class dilemma.”

“Let’s ask Rhodan—maybe he can give us some advice,” Pucky suggested, still crouching between the men and trying at all costs not to be seen from below.

“Maybe,” John answered. “Only the question is whether he would want to. All of you know that the Springers must under no circumstances learn who’s meddling in their private affairs. It’s true that our miniature communicator has a range of three light-months and it’s also true that Rhodan is only eight light-days away—but I’m afraid we don’t have the time to contact him. Look down there!”

On the deck below, one of the stevedores had put down his tightly packed bundle and now, gesticulating wildly, stood in heated discussion with one of the ‘Servants of the Gods’. Standing guard nearby were two of the five battle-robots which had come on board. Robots like these were built to be fully positronic: they possessed normally functioning brains and not only could they formulate independent decisions but could act on them as well, as long as they stayed in contact with the central control. Their built-in energy-beamers made them well-nigh invincible fighting machines. Since the Goszuls knew nothing whatsoever of space travel, the robots probably seemed godlike to them. In the eyes of the natives, ‘the Gods descended from Heaven and then ascended again.’

The somewhat more intelligent servant of the Springers listened attentively to what the other Goszul had to say while his eyes settled on the steps leading to the upper deck. Then he nodded, pushed his informant aside, and strode to the staircase. He seemed to have in mind paying a call on the four suspicious individuals on the upper deck. It was fortunate the thought of taking a robot along as a guard did not occur to him.

John Marshall probed the Goszul’s brain. Aha—the native had been told that on board the ship four strange-looking aliens were to be found in whom the Gods might take an interest. In addition, John was able to pick up the Goszul’s name: Geragk.

Marshall motioned to Kitai. The two mutants worked well together; in any event, Geragk would later leave the ship without being able to remember

anything.

The ‘Servant of the Gods’ climbed the wooden stairs to the upper deck and then suddenly stopped, standing at the railing as though his feet were nailed down. Wide-eyed, he stared at the four men. At first glance he had thought them some of the dreaded ‘Gods’ but his mind was still functioning normally. Gods? Here on the deck of a primitive native sailing ship? What could that mean?

He bowed deeply but doubt flickered in his eyes. John sensed that Geragk was searching feverishly for an explanation. The Springers ruled this world, of course, but they were much too lofty to even concern themselves with the affairs of the natives, much less get involved with them in such a manner as this.

“I beg your pardon, O High Masters,” Geragk began hesitantly. He stared at the wooden planks under his feet as though he could find the text of his intended apology carved there. “But the captain is very much confused to learn of such illustrious guests on board his little boat. May I ask if I may be of service?”

Well, that was a relatively appropriate thing to say. John smiled. “It is good that you have come, Geragk,” he said. “We have undertaken a tour of inspection but, as you know, the primitive natives do not know who we are. We do not want to make use of force, so the robots will make sure that we can leave the ship unhindered.”

John realized that his words did not calm the Goszul in the slightest. Geragk was still firmly determined to report this inexplicable incident. There was only one thing to do, then: remove Geragk’s memory and in its place insert a false set of perceptions. Kitai took over for that.

The Oriental did not change his position. He remained sitting, finally allowing his gaze to settle on Geragk, who was clearly showing his discomfort during this unpleasant interview. But not for very long.

Geragk’s face suddenly brightened. He smiled in a friendly manner and bowed down so far his forehead almost touched the deck. Then, without a word, he turned and descended to the main deck where he headed in the direction of the Goszul who had pointed the aliens out to him.

John Marshall’s eyes narrowed. “This is only a breathing spell, Kitai. You can’t go down the line and influence them all one after the other. If we don’t want to be conspicuous, I’m afraid the only solution is a mass treatment—but I’d rather not risk it because of those battle-robots down there. They’d turn into fire-breathing monsters as soon as they became the slightest bit suspicious.”

“I’ll make them all fly into the water!” Pucky declared squeakily.

John pressed his finger to his lips. “Shhh! Not so loud, Pucky. There’ll be the devil to pay if anybody sees you. Nobody’s going to mistake you for a Springer patriarch, that’s for sure. Kitai, did you notice anything about this fellow Geragk? No, of course not. You’re not a telepath. But before you gave him the new memory and ordered him to forget what had gone before, I picked up some scattered fragments of thoughts. Nothing very clear, and unfortunately nothing really connected, but still some interesting odds and ends.”

“Like what?” whispered Kitai, keeping his eyes on the deck where the captain of the ship was talking with some of his men.

“It’s true Geragk wanted to report us to his superiors because he harboured a definite suspicion of us,” John replied, “but he wouldn’t have done it just to do the Springers a favour. He had other reasons.”

“What were they?”

“He wanted to prove to them a loyalty he didn’t really feel. I’m not completely certain of this but it seems to me he thought briefly about a secret organization that wants to fight against the Springers. This group would like to see Goszul free and independent again, I believe.”

“An underground?” exclaimed Kitai, astonished. “You mean there’s a genuine underground movement on Goszul? That I can’t believe. Who would dare challenge the Gods?”

“Those who know them best—that’s how it usually works.”

“They’re attacking now!” Pucky cried, interrupting the conversation. In a flash he teleported himself back into the rope coil.

The men sat indecisively in their places for a moment. Then Kitai said: “I’ll take them all on at the same time. We’ve got to stay on this ship because it’s our only hiding place. In any event, we can’t go ashore—too many unpleasant consequences.” With a fast look he assured himself that the robots were remaining stolidly in their places. So long as the events on board a native ship did not affect the interests of their masters, the robots were not concerned. “Sit here quietly until it’s all over,” Kitai added. “These boys will be back unloading their boat in no time, like nothing ever happened.”

Although John, Tako and Tama were well aware of their companion’s startling abilities, they always felt not a little dread when they witnessed him in action.

The ship captain seemed to have persuaded his crew—or at least a part of it—that something on board was amiss. Possibly he had been wondering why he did not know how the strangers had boarded the ship. In any event, he had not paid any attention to Geragk’s pacifying words. Instead, he had called something out to his crew. Not all of the men—but certainly a number of them—simply let their burdens drop and reached for their knives. Threateningly, they pushed in the direction of the upper deck.

The robots continued to remain passive.

Kitai concentrated and beamed his thought waves at the oncoming mob. The captain suddenly stopped and held his hands to his head as though something had struck him. Then he slid his knife back in his belt. Hesitantly, the other men followed his example. One of them turned and went back to where he had been working. As though today were a day quite like any other, he picked up his bundle again and resumed work.

Next, Kitai’s attention turned to the servants of the Springers. In spite of their relative intelligence, those artificially advanced Goszuls had not yet begun to comprehend what was happening aboard the ship. Before they could grow

suspicious, Kitai's influence enveloped them as well. There was little outwardly visible of their transformation: they simply forgot and that was all.

The day had been saved, or at least for the time being, anyway. There was even a lesson to be learned from the experience: Kitai's ability had its limits. After a certain length of time, the consciousness of the influenced person overcame and neutralized the barrier placed on it.

There was one other lesson also to be learned, and perhaps this was the most important one: the robots had not taken any notice of what had gone on in front of them. They had stood unmoving at their posts, insuring that no one attacked the servants of their masters.

It was hours later when the last bale was removed from the ship's hold.

"Just what exactly did we have aboard?" inquired Tama, who as a telekineticist could of course read no minds.

Before John Marshall could reply, Pucky, who in the meantime had again crawled out of his hiding place, piped up: "Hemp, or something on that order. The Springers pay good prices for it because they can manufacture a notorious drug out of it. A lot of planets have already fallen under the drug's influence."

"How do you know all that?" Kitai wondered, amazed.

Pucky aimed his pointed ears forward and chirped: "Pucky knows all!"

John Marshall looked up at the sky. "It's getting dark already. I'm still wondering if we really ought to stay on board or if we should instead go on shore. The Springers confine themselves pretty much to this continent: they hardly bother about the rest of the planet. If we want to attack them, we'll have to do it here."

"If only Rhodan would at least give us some instructions!" Tako complained.

John threw a quick glance at the slender Oriental. "If I'm not mistaken, Rhodan sent Pucky to tell us what he wanted. Up to now, Pucky has been silent. Perhaps it isn't the right time yet..."

The mouse-beaver understood John's gentle hint. Since he had met up with the four mutants to help carry out Rhodan's mission, he had not said anything about his plans—chiefly because the pressure of events had not left him the time. He cocked his head and chirped: "It's almost time now, my fellow telepath. You know that as well as I do. Only consider this man Geragk, who is just now leaving the ship with his robots. He is only one out of many."

"What are you trying to say about him?" John demanded. The direct question was necessary because Pucky could successfully block his own mind from unwanted intrusion by other telepaths.

"There are in fact some Goszuls with the idea of shaking off the Springer rule and driving the galactic traders back into the cosmos. They could be our allies."

"Great!" John murmured, his expression not especially enthusiastic. "And how do we get in touch with these resistance fighters? It isn't all that easy, is it?"

"But it is!" Pucky responded with a cheerful chirping, while watching the

seamen go below. Their work was gone, apparently, and their intention now was a bit of rest. "It's really very simple," the mouse-beaver continued. "Remember that mental voice you picked up recently? Someone was mixing himself in our telepathic conversation in just the same way one ham radio operator will break in on the exchange between two other hams. So there must be at least one other telepath on this planet."

John nodded slowly. "I had the same idea myself," he admitted. "But what makes you think he'll help us?"

With a tone of self-confidence that nearly bowled John and the three Japanese over, Pucky answered: "Because he's one of the most important men in the underground. When you hear from him again, try to make contact. It's that simple."

John recovered from his surprise. "How do you know all that?"

"I know even more than that," Pucky added, side-stepping an answer to John's question. "The name of this Goszul telepath is Enzally."

Tako closed his mouth and said nothing when John looked at him sharply and Kitai only shook his head and muttered something about "insidious secretiveness". Meanwhile, Tama watched the darkening sky with no particular interest in the discussion. The heavens were already dark enough that the unfamiliar constellations could be sketched out. Tama was an astronomer and this world was 1012 light-years removed from the Earth—reason enough, then, to be interested in the skies.

"And you're only now telling us this?" John asked the mouse-beaver reproachfully.

Pucky nodded self-assurance. "You never asked me before." Then, changing the subject, he added: "When are we going to retrieve the equipment I brought with me from Rhodan?"

John had almost forgotten about that. Of course! The equipment! Pucky had brought a number of boxes along with him on his adventuresome trip, all of which he had dumped along the way as a result of the unforeseen events that ensued. Everything lay well-packed at the bottom of a river away from human settlement.

"We'll have to do it during the day," John told the mouse-beaver. "We'd have to have lights at night and those would give us away to the sentry-robots posted all around the spaceport. Our chances will be better when it's light. Tomorrow, then, I'd suggest. By the way, Pucky, I have a question: what *did* you bring along?"

Pucky showed his large front tooth. Always, when Pucky grinned, this tooth came into view. It could be said that he grinned with his tooth, as paradoxical as that might sound. And when Pucky grinned, his speech was not as easy to understand as otherwise—that could not be helped. "Bombs," he whispered in his unbelievably high voice. "A whole load of bombs—fine little bombs!"

"Bombs?" moaned John, eyes wide and staring at Pucky. "What can we do with them? We don't even have an airplane to drop them out of. Besides, the minute we start throwing bombs we'll have the Springers on top of us."

Pucky shook his head in pity. “People are such thickheaded creatures,” he mused sorrowfully. “When they hear the word ‘bomb’, they automatically think of an explosion. No, colleague John, we aren’t dealing with bombs of the exploding sort this time. What we have here are bombs that devour themselves before they become effective. What could be simpler than that?”

Without understanding, John nodded. “Sure... what could be simpler?” he murmured, looking at the mouse-beaver as though he wanted to pull the fur over his ears. “I have a suggestion to make, Pucky. Why don’t you finally tell us what’s going to happen—before something happens to...”

Pucky’s front tooth suddenly disappeared. “Okay, friends, now listen to me carefully...”

* * * *

Seven planets circled the star Tatlira 221, which followed its path through the Milky Way 1012 light-years from Earth. Only its second planet supported intelligent life: the manlike race of Goszuls, now divided into two parts by the Springers. It was a member of that folk of galactic traders, a patriarch by the name of Goszul, who had discovered the planet and named it after himself. From then on, Goszul’s Planet had belonged to the Springer Empire.

For the Springers—also known as ‘The Traders’—there was no place they really called home. They crossed the galaxy in their enormous ships—and traded. Split as they were into numerous clans, they were not a unified people unless their interests were at stake. Then the Springers demonstrated an astounding unanimity, forgetting the disputes that often embroiled the various clans.

Now was a time when the interests of all Springers demanded their common action. The traders had discovered the Earth and were attempting to make it into another of their commercial outposts, rather like what had been done with Goszul’s Planet. That they had not yet succeeded was due entirely to the efforts of Perry Rhodan, who had energetically repulsed every one of the Springers’ attacks. Now the most powerful of the Springer clan leaders were gathered together for a summit conference on Goszul’s Planet. The main topic on the agenda was, as could well be expected, the question of how to take care of this enigmatic, troublesome and stubbornly resisting Perry Rhodan once and for all.

The first attacks by Rhodan’s mutants had considerably reduced the number of patriarchs present for the conference but the Springers were not yet ready to give up. Besides, everyone believed Rhodan was on Earth, some 1012 light-years away. No one yet suspected he was the mastermind behind the recent attacks.

Moreover, Rhodan was by no means a safe 1012 light-years distant. Rhodan’s fleet stood waiting just eight light-days out of the Tatliran system. With the fleet was the gigantic battleship *Stardust*, a space-flying globe 2400 feet in diameter, personally commanded and piloted by Perry Rhodan himself. The ship was not only outfitted with the most modern weapons available, mostly of Arkonide

origin, but also with two tele-transmitters. The latter were teleportation devices which did not require any equipment on the receiving end—in other words, with these it was possible to transmit an atomic bomb into the hold of an enemy spaceship, even though the enemy might be otherwise well-protected by force-fields. There was no defence possible against a space-fleet armed with a teletrans.

Accompanying the *Stardust* were three smaller, globe-shaped cruisers, each about 600 feet in diameter. Their commanders were Capt. McClears and Maj. Nyssen and Deringhouse.

The four huge spacecraft orbited the distant solar system in a vast sweeping arc, unperceived by the Springers' structure-sensors and thus unnoticed by the Traders themselves. Rhodan had no intention of officially involving himself in the current run of events, not even to the extent of appearing indirectly responsible. He had plenty of time to play a waiting game, for on Earth business was as usual. The unification of all nations into a world government had at last been achieved and he had been named to the post of Planetary Administrator for a term of six years. During his absences, his personal representative, Col. Freyt, carried out the duties of the position.

Not everyone shared Rhodan's calm. Certainly not Reginald Bell, his closest friend and collaborator. Bell's bristles of red hair were again an unruly mess, contributing little to the beautification of his broad face. In his eyes, blue as water, Bashed repressed anger. Outside of a few on-duty officers and radio operators, the wide control-central of the star-borne giant was deserted, but Bell had never been one to worry about the presence of subordinate officers when he felt the need to let his feelings fly. "Perhaps you'll be so kind," he growled hoarsely, "as to tell me what all this waiting around is supposed to prove."

Perry Rhodan continued his observation of the faintly shimmering viewscreen, on which Tatlira showed merely as a small and unimportant star. The weak light in the control room blurred the outlines of Rhodan's lean figure a little but the features of his face were clearly chiselled in the reflection from the screen. The taut lips, tightly pressed together, drew a straight line. A quiet flame of anticipation burned in the eyes. The dark hair was neatly and smoothly combed back, contrasting favourably with Bell's wild rust-coloured mane.

"Did you hear what I said?" Bell demanded impatiently when he received no answer.

Rhodan threw a quick look at him, then turned back to the observation screen. "Should I have?" he asked.

Bell's complexion grew somewhat darker and the ends of his hair trembled imperceptibly. Although his voice became somewhat softer, that hardly meant his agitation was any less. Quite the contrary. "If nobody's supposed to listen, why would I be talking? Look, I just asked why we're hanging around here in the middle of nowhere and what we're waiting for. That's all!"

Rhodan did not take his eyes from the screen. "We're waiting until we can land over there, eight light-days from here. Naturally, no one can predict how long

that'll be. It all depends on John Marshall and his mutants. And on Pucky.”

“It's always that overfed rodent!” Bell groaned, rubbing his chin. “You'd think *everything* depends on the New Power's answer to Mighty Mouse!”

“And it does,” Rhodan replied, trying to keep a straight face. “You know, I'm curious as to what Pucky will say when I tell him what the fellow who's supposed to be his best friend *really* thinks of him...”

“Good Lord—don't!” Bell cried, reacting as though someone had stuck a needle in his ample backside. “Anything but that! Don't irritate the rodent if you don't have to! I can't get back at him! Do you think I *want* to be flattened up against the ceiling again for three hours or for however long it takes that monster to decide to be nice and let me down again? Remember—I'm a man, not a mutant. I can't defend myself!”

Rhodan's gaze left the screen and he glanced thoughtfully around. A slight smile played on his austere lips. In spite of his relative immortality, he appeared to have aged somewhat in the past weeks. “So?” he said. Nothing more.

In the background, two communications officers nudged each other and chuckled. A little friendly amusement at Bell's expense would certainly be allowed.

“Or do you even care about my problems?” Bell said, putting forth a counter-question. He apparently expected no reply for he went on, “By the way, have you gotten any word as to whether or not Pucky finally did find the mutants?”

“He found them alright,” Rhodan told him, “although he did run into difficulties along the way. Just now our mutant commandos are sitting aboard a sailing ship in the harbour there on the coast of the Land of the Gods. The name of the ship escapes me at the moment. I'll have to admit, though, that Marshall hasn't reported since yesterday.”

“Maybe the Springers got them,” Bell suggested darkly.

“Let's hope not, Reg,” Rhodan said. “That would throw a monkey wrench in my whole plan.”

“What plan, for Pete's sake?”

“The plan to conquer Goszul's Planet peacefully.”

Bell stared at Rhodan in disbelief. He took a deep breath and exhaled with a distinct whistling. “A peaceful conquest? Quite an optimist, aren't you, Perry? I wish I could see things as rosily as you do. A peaceful conquest! These Traders have murdered our people as fast as they could get their hands on them.”

“Traders aren't the only ones living on Goszul's Planet,” Rhodan reminded him. “The primitive natives are completely harmless and those natives conditioned by the Springers, the Servants, will be relatively easy for us to deal with once they understand this operation involves their freedom. So why should any Goszuls have to die? The Land of the Gods is the Springer province and the planet is ruled from there. Furthermore, the usual number of Springers present at one time in the Land of the Gods is barely two dozen. The current gathering is an exception which we'll have to take into account. So you can see that we really

aren't facing very many human enemies. The thousands of worker and battle-robots on hand will be the opponents we'll have to take seriously. Otherwise, my hope is for a peaceful conquest."

"Well, I hope you enjoy yourself," Bell grumbled, still not sure just what Rhodan was driving at. "How do you propose to do it, if I may ask? Are we just going to wait out here until we rot?"

Rhodan pointed to a narrow rectangular box lying atop the control panel in front of him. On the container's side were several knobs and an array of lights shone along the top. "This is my contact with Marshall and Pucky," Rhodan explained. "I'm waiting for them to report. Till they do, we can't do a thing."

"If we used the teletrans we could teleport enough bombs to blast—"

"I've rejected that idea once before," Rhodan told him. "I don't want our position known. If we leave the job to Marshall and his group, the Springers won't suspect that we're behind it—even assuming the Springers ever even suspect that they're actually being attacked. They're more likely to believe their defeat on Goszul's Planet was a result of a quite natural disease."

Bell's face bore a puzzled expression. Then his eyes flashed. "I have the same high IQ you do but I've never been able to get anywhere with crossword puzzles. So would you finally tell me what's going on?"

Rhodan did. "Pucky took a number of useful items along with him but the most useful of all will probably be the Oblivion Bombs."

"The... what?"

"The Oblivion Bombs. They were developed along with their antidote on Earth. In short, the Oblivion Bombs are a form of biological warfare. After a certain time, the virus inside eats its way through the bomb's plastic hull and spreads in the open air. Every person infected by it will soon show symptoms of an unknown disease: red spots on the face, pains in the neck, tiredness, and so forth. Then comes the worst part of it—the brain will no longer function properly. The victim won't be able to remember anything. He will have forgotten everything he ever knew. He'll go mad, you might say."

"You call that peaceful?" Bell protested, shocked. "You want to make the Goszuls go crazy? What does this have to do with being humane?"

Rhodan smiled disarmingly. "You're forgetting the antidote, which works in the other direction. The afflicted will immediately recover without lasting ill effects, as if they were never sick at all."

Bell looked more perplexed than ever. "I don't understand this at all. Why the act?"

"The Goszuls and the Springers are descended from the same race—the Arkonides. They aren't at all immune to our diseases."

Dawn seemed to break over Bell's face. "Hmmm... and then they'll have to come to us if they want the antidote?"

Rhodan shook his head. "That isn't my intention. For me, the important thing is

that the Springers avoid Goszul's Planet... like the plague, if you will, from now on. If they think it hopelessly disease-ridden, they'll never come back. Do you have any better ideas?"

Bell had to admit that he did not. Now that his uncertainty and doubt had been eased, he seemed more relaxed: even his hair presented a less unruly appearance than earlier. He now knew what Rhodan was waiting for.

* * * *

John Marshall nudged his companions awake as dawn was breaking. The Japanese mutants opened their eyes and blinked in the sun's first rays streaming through the small porthole into the cabin.

"It isn't morning already, is it?" Tako complained tiredly, climbing out of his narrow bunk. "What's Pucky doing?"

The mouse-beaver materialized in the middle of the cabin as if he had heard Tako's question, which he may well have. "Here I am!" he announced in his chirping voice while he smoothed his fur. "I was taking a look around. The sailors are all still asleep. They must be resting up from all that hard work yesterday. Everything's quiet—perfect for what we have to do."

"I'm glad I'm not a teleporter," Kitai murmured, not moving from his bed. "Do you two plan on doing all the work by yourselves?"

"We'll probably have to, Pucky and I," Tako answered, buttoning his jacket. "The two of us ought to be able to do it if one can't. Now, there's a sandbank right by where Pucky had to drop the stuff. It'll be a good place to put the equipment when we bring it up."

"We'll bring it all box by box from that sandbank back to the ship," the mouse-beaver added, "providing, of course, the robots don't spot us. Those tin-men are outfitted with sensor devices, you know."

"Not to mention energy-beamers too," John warned sombrely. "You've got to be careful."

"Okay, we will," Pucky assured the telepath. He took Tako by the hand to guide him during the jump. "Ready?"

The other teleporter nodded and made an attempt at a smile. "I know the coordinates for the spring already, so holding hands isn't really necessary. Still, we're less likely to get separated this way."

"We'll land on the sandbank," Pucky directed. "If we run into trouble, don't spring blindly. Instead, jump back to the ship." He nodded. "Ready?"

John and both his friends watched as the mouse-beaver and the Oriental dematerialised. It was done as it always was: first, the teleporters appeared to be standing behind a glass-clear, shimmering wall of water. And then they were gone.

John, Kitai and Tama were alone in the cabin.

2/ THE ENIGMATIC ENEMY

The river flowed in the direction of the sea, which was not too far away. It cut through half that continent the natives called 'The Land of the Gods' but it saw little of the indigenous population. Unlike the other continents, the Land of the Gods supported a high level of civilization, due almost entirely to the Springer installations housed there. The contrast between the planet's two unequal cultures was especially emphasized by the technically advanced harbour facilities on the coasts: the equipment there was far too modern for sailing ships and consequently could not be used with full efficiency.

Most worthy of note was unquestionably the spaceport, which had to be regarded as the focus of the colonial administration. Here the Springer spaceships were brought in for repairs. There existed no home planet for the nomadic Springer race but various colonial worlds like Goszul's Planet had been made into outposts as necessary for the Springers' continued smooth-running operations in interstellar space.

Since Springer policy was anything but kindly towards underdeveloped races, all ground-based installations had to be protected against possible acts of sabotage by the natives. Thus the robots—highly developed, positronically controlled machines vaguely humanoid in appearance. Whatever weapon or defence mechanism a mobile and independent miniature fortress required for combat with any conceivable enemy, the robots were equipped with it. By no means was their resemblance to the Arkonide war-machines coincidental: the Springers had once been a part of the great Arkonide empire themselves and had later broken off to found their own cosmos-spanning network of wealth and power.

Precise boundaries were not to be found in the Springer realm. Wherever business could be done and a profit made, the Springers were there. Their business was business and they dealt with anyone in anything, so long as they could make a profit.

The Land of the Gods was supervised less by the Springers personally and more by the robots, reinforced by those Goszuls who had undergone hypno-training. As the Servants of the Gods, the latter were at once highly esteemed and feared by their more primitive brethren. In reality, their service to the Springers rendered the 'Intelligent Goszuls' traitors to their own people.

At its highest point, the sandbank was not even three feet above the surface of the water passing placidly by. The riverbanks on both sides were some distance

away, but not far enough removed to insure 100% safety. The river was no obstacle for the heavy battle-robots.

Pucky emerged from nothing into something and watched as Tako appeared to form out of thin air in his turn. A fast look around assured the pair that they were alone. Besides, who would chance to pass by a lonely sandbank at this hour of the morning?

“It’s cold out,” Tako shivered unhappily. “Are we really going to take a bath at this temperature?”

“I’ll go first,” Pucky offered, “and make a test jump. I’ll bring back the exact co-ordinates and then we’ll spring together. We’ll materialize on the river bottom, which at no point is more than 15 feet deep. Then we’ll take a box and spring back here. At the most, we’ll only be under the water 10 seconds each time.”

“Ten seconds is a long time when you can’t breathe,” Tako ventured.

“I’m more concerned about somebody accidentally spotting what we’re doing,” replied the mouse-beaver.

Tako took stock of the surroundings. The north shore was flat and offered no cover. No human could approach from that direction and avoid being seen, to say nothing of a robot. The south bank was wooded and uneven, broken up by small inlets and protruding tongues of land. If there was going to be an attack, it would have to come from that side.

“As long as the sentry-robots don’t report us, there won’t be any attack,” the Oriental said, reassuring himself and Pucky. “Let’s get started now so we don’t waste any more time.”

Pucky agreed with that sentiment—and disappeared.

Tako waited.

Ten seconds later, Pucky and a glistening, dripping metal box materialized next to him.

“Even brought one back with me,” the mouse-beaver panted. “Good thing the current is hardly worth mentioning or otherwise half the boxes would have been washed downstream. As it is, all the boxes are in an area of about 50 yards. The water’s muddy but not enough to bother us. We’ll find everything easily enough, I’m sure. The distance from here to the boxes is exactly fifteen hundred feet due east. Now, shall we try it?”

“Alright,” said Tako and sprang with the mouse-beaver.

They were able to retrieve nearly everything inside half an hour. The work was easy at the beginning when the boxes were not hard to find but grew progressively more difficult as Tako and Pucky proceeded to the several boxes half-buried in the shifting sands on the river bottom. During the course of a number of jumps, however, they were able to dig some of them out and then transport them to the sandbank. There the boxes were piled up, towering to a respectable pyramid.

Regarding the pile, Tako decided to make a suggestion. “Why don’t we get these boxes here to safety before we go on? The rest are fine where they are,

which is more than you can say for this batch stacked up here in plain sight of the sand.”

“You’re right,” Pucky said. “It’s a good idea. I’ll take this case with the bombs and you take that one with the provisions. Okay, let’s go!”

It is a well-known law of physics that two objects cannot occupy the same space simultaneously. When the crate materialized in the middle of the narrow cabin, just about where John Marshall was already standing, one or the other had to give way. The loser was John. He was hurled to one side by what was almost a shockwave. He stumbled and fell into the nearest bunk, where he decided to remain until things calmed down.

Pucky materialized atop the box and looked around in the manner of a conquering hero. “Special delivery!” he twittered, and stepped from the crate to the highest bunk in an effort to get out of the way of the newly arriving second crate.

Tako slid down from the box and stood on the wet wooden floor. His clothes dripped.

“Is that everything?” John inquired from the bed, rather happy that at the moment Kitai and Tama were taking a walk around the ship to make sure no trouble was brewing among the crew. “There isn’t much room in here for anything else.”

Pucky’s neck fur bristled. “You can do a little work, too. Find a storeroom we can lock and put the boxes in there. Tako and I will be bringing back the other boxes while you’re doing that. There are about 20 altogether.”

“Twenty?” John groaned, leaping from his bunk hurriedly. “Twenty boxes like this?”

“Most are smaller and better packed,” Pucky replied. “They’ve suffered some from my having to drop them but fortunately they stayed watertight.” He motioned to Tako. “We’ve got some more work to do, so let’s get at it.”

And they sprang.

Right into a trap.

* * * *

RK-071 was one of the battle-robots detailed to maintaining the security of a specific area. Along with other robots like it, it generally stood inert in a shelter, waiting for a call to action from the sentry-robots on duty. There were substantially more sentry-robots than battle-robots in existence and it remained for the former to continually patrol their assigned sectors.

Such measures were only precautionary, of course. Certainly no one really anticipated an uprising of the relatively harmless Goszuls, not even the Governors of the Land of the Gods, who were suspicious by nature. The Springers believed the Goszuls were willing vassals, thankful for the ‘Gods’ personal guardianship

over them.

The robots were not affected by feelings or suspicions. They were programmed by the central positronic brain to carry out the orders it dictated to them. The robots acted on facts and nothing else.

The change in the sandbank was a fact.

Sentry-robot RW-895 registered the change and reported it to the central computer at command headquarters. There the report was evaluated and appropriate counter-measures were initiated. The battle-robot assigned to that particular area was the previously mentioned RK-071. It received the activation signal and moved out of the shelter, heading in the direction of the river.

Those on duty in the surveillance department at command headquarters apparently remembered the events of the past few days—in any event, they did not consider just one robot sufficient for the job. There was a mysterious enemy at large, too dangerous to underestimate, and in all likelihood no one born on this backward world.

The positronic brain in charge had concluded as much, anyway. But nothing more. When the question was put to it as to *who* was the enigmatic enemy, the brain remained obstinately silent. The identity of the troublesome foes was still unknown.

Six battle-robots marched from different directions towards the sandbank and RK-071 took command. On the south bank of the river a company of armed Goszuls stationed itself under orders to allow no one through the line and to arrest any suspicious persons.

While all this was going on, Pucky and Tako had been under the water, searching for the remaining sunken boxes and piling them up on the sandbank. The activity was difficult to make out from the riverbank; the scouts now and then spotted a human figure which could just as easily have been a Goszul as a Springer. What caused the central positronic some confusion was the small animal with reddish-brown fur.

And then the two creatures disappeared along with two boxes, seemingly dissolving suddenly into thin air.

That was the cue for the battle-robots to take over the sandbank. They marched forward, not even hesitating to plunge into the river. Water meant nothing to robots designed to operate in the conditions of outer space. They marched directly along the riverbed as if no water existed, emerging again at the shallower water around the sandbank. Then they buried themselves in the sand with the intention of not being immediately noticed when the strangers returned. The robots' orders were clear: the unknown agents were to be captured alive, not destroyed.

That—and *only* that—saved Pucky.

* * * *

Pucky and Tako materialized about 15 feet away from the stack of boxes. Their astonishingly sudden appearance did not perturb the robots in the slightest: robots wonder about nothing, not even the apparently impossible. Yet, before the robots had a chance to react and leave their cover, Tako had already picked up a box and disappeared with it.

That left Pucky, who was then looking around for a convenient box to take back. He heard a noise from behind and whirled around to see the four metal monsters lumbering threateningly towards him across the loose sand. Two of them were moving to the side in an attempt to cut him off from any retreat—which, as they were about to learn, is a difficult feat to accomplish with a teleporter.

Pucky let the box drop and teleported. He materialized 600 feet in the air above the sandbank, where his telekinetic ability allowed him to remain aloft and watch developments below undisturbed.

There was no problem in making out what was going on. Posted over on the north bank were three more robots awaiting orders. The Goszuls on the south shore had camouflaged themselves better but Pucky spotted them easily enough now that his suspicions were aroused. He had to admit that the Springers' surveillance system and functioned swiftly and flawlessly: the discovery of activity on the island and response thereto had all been accomplished inside half an hour.

And Tako, who had no inkling of what was taking place, could return at any moment.

Pucky decided to take immediate counteraction. He did not teleport but instead simply let himself drop. He hurtled down towards the robots like a falling stone, then shunted to one side and landed gently on the sandbank's western edge, about 150 feet from the robots. Only now could he concentrate sufficiently to use his telekinetic power.

Before it could turn around and comprehend the situation, one of the battle-robots was effortlessly raised into the air. It shot up like a bullet for a hundred yards, its trajectory enough to the horizontal that it shortly hovered over the wooded, partly rocky south shore where the Goszuls were emplaced. All things considered, Pucky had no time to play, but he could not resist the temptation. Instead of letting the robot merely drop, he made it loop the loop twice and then simulate a dive-bombing run on the astounded Goszuls. For the grand finale, the robot slammed into a rock on the beach at enormous speed. The impact smashed its metal head completely and the rest of it, a worthless mass of scrap metal, slipped slowly into the water, never to be seen again.

Now for the second robot.

That one ended its days on the same rock after a similar command performance of aerial stunts. The difference with the second robot was that just before impact it had managed to bring to bear its energy-beamer and melt a part of the rock into glowing lava. All to no avail, as it turned out, for the molten rock only helped hasten the robot's demise. Both sank with a hiss in the river current.

Just as Pucky was about to turn his attention to the third robot, Tako materialized directly between the two surviving robots. He was so surprised he could not move but luck was on his side. The robots paid no heed to his presence, occupying themselves with Pucky. They saw a dangerous enemy in the mouse-beaver—and were quite right in that observation.

Once received, an order had to be carried out faithfully. No command had been given for the enemy's annihilation. Robots had only little concern for their own existence, although the battle-robots constituted a definite exception to the rule. When the latter were in imminent danger of destruction, the inhibiting block-relays could be released to allow free use of their deadly weaponry.

"Back to the ship!" Pucky cried shrilly, knowing he had only a few seconds left in which to warn Tako. "I'll come just as soon as I'm done here!"

Tako obeyed and disappeared.

Pucky remembered John's views on humanitarianism and decided to put on an especially impressive show this time. At the same time he hoped that it would have an awe-striking effect on the Goszuls who were later to be made allies.

The last two robots became stunt-planes, performing directly over the Goszuls' heads. The natives didn't understand what was going on at all and believed the metal gods had gone mad. The 'gods' looped the loop, somersaulted, spun in spirals and performed other daring manoeuvres. Finally, as the climax of the show, they backed off from each other, turned, and rocketed towards one another. Short circuits set both off to wild shooting with the built-in beamers. Then they collided. Smashed together and half-melted, the two erstwhile stunt flyers plummeted into the river and sank amid steaming and hissing.

Even if they could not explain it, the Goszuls had watched the action with undivided attention. They were left with the belief that the two 'gods' had quarrelled and wiped each other out. No one suspected the little furry animal on the sandbank was responsible.

It was left for RK-071 to come to that absurd conclusion and thus it gave orders to its two metal compatriots for attack without quarter. Events had countermanded the old orders: the little enemy was too dangerous to be taken prisoner.

The metal colossi marched up to the river's edge and prepared to enter the water. Pucky recognized the danger at once. He knew that water would have no effect on the robots' internal machinery. He took a box and teleported to the ship.

When Pucky showed up in the cabin, Tako was just explaining the situation at the sandbank to John. Since Kitai and Tama had returned by this time, quarters were rather close.

"There he is!" Tako exclaimed, obviously relieved. "What happened? Did you have to flee?"

Despite the seriousness of the occasion, Pucky had time to feel insulted. "Flee?" he twittered, astounded and reproachful at the same time. "How can you even think such a thing? I just had an idea, that's all. Kitai, there's a whole company of Goszuls at the river, just waiting for you to give them the business.

Maybe you can make good allies out of them.”

Kitai’s eyes went wide. “A whole company? What are we going to do with it?”

“Quite a bit,” Pucky told him. “You’re going to suggest to them that they ignore all their orders and march to the harbour. We’ll be waiting for them here. I have an important mission in mind for those fellows.”

Kitai wanted to ask something else but a wave from John’s hand made him hold his peace. The telepath had already understood what Pucky was planning.

John turned towards Pucky. “Kitai will do what you say. Is all the equipment at the sandbank still safe?”

Pucky was getting ready for the jump. He had fixed his gaze on Kitai, whom he had to take along, and had also grasped his hand in his paw. “Not yet,” the mouse-beaver answered John. “Three battle-robots are on the way to take possession of it. Those walking tin-cans aren’t going to find that job as easy as they think!”

John was shocked. “Battle-robots? How are you going to...?”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ve already tried to give four of them flying lessons but they all flunked. Three more or less won’t bother me.” With that cryptic statement, Pucky disappeared. For that matter, Kitai was no longer in the cabin either.

Tako, who felt as though he had been left out of things, asked John: “What about me? What should I do?”

“Just wait,” Marshall decided. “Pucky will pick you up when he needs you. We can’t do anything more than wait now.”

Pucky materialized and let go of Kitai. There was nothing as yet to be seen of the robots: they were probably still underwater and could be expected to surface at any moment.

“Over there on the south bank, Kitai!” Pucky exclaimed. “The Goszuls are dug in over there—not knowing what to make of all the miracles they’ve been witnessing. Start working on them and don’t worry about what’s going on over here in the meantime. Your best bet is to get under cover first so the robots don’t find you.”

“Robots? What robots?”

“They’re playing submarine right now,” Pucky told him, not taking his eyes off the beach, “but they’re about to surface. We don’t have much time, so you’d better get going.”

Pucky noticed ripples in the water’s surface not many yards away. Then the metallic cranium of the first robot emerged from the depths.

Pucky loved variety. Nothing ran more against his nature than monotony. If he finished off these three robots the same way he had the first four, that would definitely mean monotony.

The mouse-beaver quickly formulated a plan and put it into action. Strewn over the south bank lay a large quantity of loose rocks and stones which he could easily manipulate telekinetically from the sandbank. Members of his species were wont

to call such activity ‘playing’ back on the lonely planet of the dying sun, and at long last Pucky could finally ‘play’ to his heart’s content.

The Goszuls had hardly recovered from their first surprise. Now they experienced their second. Only this time there was an endless stream of rocks flying through the air instead of robots. The rocks rose from the banks and shallows and sailed in dignified progression just above the water. At a certain point they dropped into the stream and sank with a gurgle. The Goszuls had no way of knowing that the rocks were burying three battle-robots whose energy-beamers were of little use underwater.

When Pucky had finished, a new island of rock stood close to the sandbank. The mouse-beaver knew that for the time being the robots were out of contention under the island. Perhaps in time they would be able to free themselves; but, then again, perhaps not. The fact that they could still transmit a report of events to headquarters bothered Pucky only slightly.

He looked for Kitai and found him hiding in the sand. “Any luck yet?” Pucky inquired.

“I think so,” Kitai replied. “It’ll be a few minutes yet before I’m through, though. I have to sweep the whole shore so I don’t miss anybody.”

“Okay, carry on, I’ll resume the transportation of the boxes and pick up Tako. We should be done in about half an hour.”

Pucky went back to the pile of boxes and disappeared with one second later. When he returned with Tako, he let the Oriental have the job of delivering the goods to the ship while he devoted himself to picking up the rest of the boxes from the riverbed.

Meanwhile, Kitai succeeded. That was demonstrated unmistakably when the Goszuls left their hiding places and formed into ranks. One of them took command and, paying no further attention to the two men and the mouse-beaver out on the sandbank, the Goszuls turned in the direction of the coast and started marching. There was a bridge not far from the river’s mouth, Kitai knew, and from there it was only a short distance to the harbour.

“They’ll reach the harbour tomorrow noon and then report to us,” the suggestor said, grinning at Pucky when the mouse-beaver came by. “They’re doing it mostly out of their own free will and they’re going to bring some of their friends with them. Tomorrow we’ll have to figure on a good-sized mob of volunteer helpers.”

Those we can use,” Pucky grinned back, taking Kitai by the hand. “And now, close your eyes, brother—I’m taking you back to the ship.”

Two hours later the entire load of boxes lay well-stowed in one of the large cabins in the ship’s bow. John and his mutants had moved in to keep an eye on the valuable cargo and now, undisturbed, they could inspect the contents of the water-tight boxes.

Pucky helped. He pointed to the stack with one of the small, longish and relatively small containers. “The contents are all the same. It’ll be enough just to open one.”

And that they did. When the box-cover was swung open, the mutants could only stare wonderingly at the double row of little bombs. Each was about the size of a normal hand grenade and their hulls were not made of metal but of coloured plastic.

Pucky pointed to the red bomb. “This one works the quickest. An outbreak of the epidemic can be expected within a week. The other bombs take longer. A complete list of bombs and their timing has been provided.”

“Germ warfare!” John whispered, not in the least enthused.

“No need to worry,” Pucky responded, looking quite happy. “The antidote is over there in the green boxes. Anyway, we stand on the verge of a war that’s going to be a lot of fun for us.”

“A war—and he calls it fun!” Kitai muttered.

Pucky smiled with pleasure. “*This* war, yes!”

3/ THE ENIGMATIC ENEMY

Kitai's hypnotic influence over Geragk did not remain effective very long. After the unloading operation at the ship had been completed, the Goszul reported the fulfilment of the assignment to the sentry-robot on duty, who then arranged for transport of the cargo to the spaceport. Geragk went home, sat down on his bed and let his head sink into his hands. Underneath the reddish-brown skin, his nerves seemed to quiver. An unsteady flame flickered in his Mongoloid eyes.

Had he forgotten something, something that had been of the utmost importance to him? Something that would have strengthened his position with the Gods? No matter how hard he tried to concentrate, the influence on his mind did not diminish. An iron band seemed to be wrapped around his skull.

Someone knocked on the door. Geragk gave a start, as though he had been caught in the act of doing something he should not. Oh yes... Ralv. Ralv had wanted to talk to him about something today. Geragk had almost forgotten. He let the late visitor in and closed the door again.

Ralv was the leader of the organization that wanted to put an end to the rule of the Gods—by force, if need be. His dark-haired, deep red skin rippled over strong sinews: Ralv was apparently master of more bodily strength than most Goszuls.

"Don't you feel well?" Ralv asked Geragk when he sat down.

Geragk shrugged. "I don't rightly know just how I do feel. Maybe it's only the heat and all the work I had to do today. I feel like there's a heavy weight laying on my head."

Ralv looked at him closely. Then he nodded. "Rendex feels the same way today. I was just over to see him. He belonged to your unloading detail, incidentally. Is that a coincidence?"

"Is what a coincidence?"

"That he's feeling the same way you do."

Geragk looked at Ralv. "There was *something* on that ship but I don't know what it was any more. How could a person just forget something like that? I'm sure I'll remember it again but right now I don't know. Everything seems so strange."

Ralv switched the conversation to a new topic. "Some of our people were able to snare one of the sentry-robots and take it apart..."

"You killed a metal God?"

“Don’t talk nonsense! You know as well as I that all the stories about Gods and metal Gods are foolishness. Those so-called Gods are humanoids just like us. They have ships they can sail from star to star but that’s the only difference. They’re just looters who take advantage of our backwardness. They’ve enslaved our whole world with the help of their technological superiority. One day we’ll drive them off our world, which they call Goszul’s Planet.”

“But catching a metal God—er, a robot! Won’t the Gods suspect rebels are involved? They’ll have their battle-machines at our throats!”

Ralv’s expression grew mysterious. “Maybe you don’t know this yet, but we’ve gotten some unexpected allies. For some time now there have been strangers on our world. They have been fighting the Gods, too, and inflicting quite a bit of damage on them.”

“Strangers?” echoed Geragk, looking suddenly thoughtful. “Why is it that I seem to sense something when you say that word? I didn’t have anything to do with strangers today... did I... ?” He shook his head and balled his fists.

“Well?” asked Ralv, curious. “Still nothing?”

“I have to get some sleep, Ralv. Maybe I’ll remember it in the morning. I have the feeling that it’s important, very important. Anyway, what became of the robot you took apart?”

“What should have become of it?” demanded Ralv. “We examined the insides and found that the robot was purely mechanical. If we had to, we could even build more robots like it—if we only had the machinery necessary, and that won’t be too much together. When we’ve driven the Gods away, we’ll take over their factories and build ships ourselves which can reach the stars.

“Do we have exact information about all the factories?”

“Everything’s ready. We could have struck tonight ifENZALLY hadn’t warned us.”

“ENZALLY? What did the Seer say?”

“We ought to call him the ‘Listener’,” Ralv corrected, “because he doesn’t really see anything. Rather, he can read other people’s minds. And not only those of people—he can read the minds of the so-called Gods. And those of the strangers.”

“The strangers’ minds? Does he have contact with the strangers?”

He did have, but only for a few moments. He overheard a telepathic conversation, so the strangers must be mind readers too. When he tried to make himself noticed, though, the thought-waves broke off and he heard nothing more. He was able to learn this much, however: the Gods are the enemies of these strangers. The strangers call them ‘Springers’, by the way. The Springers have attacked their home planet but the strangers repulsed them. Now the strangers have come here to break up a Springer summit conference. We’ve seen with our own eyes how well they’ve done already.”

“Allies...” Geragk reflected. “We’ve never even dared hope for help from the stars but now suddenly it’s here. But why don’t they get in touch with us? Why do

they stay hidden from us?”

“They must have their reasons. Enzally is trying to reach them, although up to now he hasn’t had any luck. He’ll let me know just as soon as he learns something. You see—our situation isn’t hopeless by any means but for the time being we’d do well to wait and see how things work out.”

“Providing the Gods haven’t been tipped off too soon by the disappearance of one of their robots.”

“We’ll have to prepare for that possibility,” Ralv said, standing up. “Oh, and try to remember what happened on the ship. It’s rather peculiar that everyone under your command today is suffering from a loss of memory. Something mysterious is going on here.”

Geragk opened the door for him. “But what?” he asked, neither expecting an answer nor receiving one.

* * * *

The news of the bizarre fight between a small animal and seven battle-robots reached even the ears of the rebels in the underground. Goszuls, given the benefits of hypno-training, filled posts everywhere in the administrative complex, even tending the positronic brain and other important systems. Some of the Goszuls had taken note of the sudden attack order sent to the robots in the morning and later learned of the ensuing destruction of seven battle-robots.

Shortly thereafter, a further bit of news caused even more surprise and consternation, and not only among the Goszuls. Their Springer masters were astonished to find out that the company of Goszuls ordered to the riverbank was no longer following the orders. Following the annihilation of the robots, the men had moved out and were even now marching towards the harbour town. It was not known what the men intended to do there or who had given them the counter-orders.

As soon as he heard the amazing news, Ralv immediately went to see Geragk, who was not on duty that day and was spending the time in his apartment.

“I don’t know what happened,” Ralv told him, “but I think it’s absolutely necessary we do something about those men. I hope some of our squad-leaders didn’t get it in their heads to start the revolution on their own initiative. They wouldn’t have a chance against the battle-robots.”

Geragk had listened to the news in silence. His tone was thoughtful when he asked: “This creature that fought and defeated the robots—what did it look like? Wasn’t it human?”

“It wasn’t a Goszul and it wasn’t a Springer—it was an animal. Nothing human.”

“An animal can’t destroy robots!” Geragk said, not really understanding. “Or is it one of those strangers Enzally spoke of?”

“Possibly,” Ralv admitted. “Are you coming with me?”

The two men quickly left the building and took the next conveyance to the harbour town.

The company of Goszuls was still on the march, still in the same general direction. If they maintained their pace, the Goszuls would reach the harbour at the crack of dawn on the following day. Wishing to excite no suspicion, Ralv and Geragk had to patiently bide their time until then.

The evening and then the night passed. The two conspirators were fed and sheltered by a friend who also belonged to the secret organization. A messenger had been sent to find Enzally who, if not delayed, could be expected to arrive in three hours.

Time passed slowly.

They were unaware of the feverish activity that had taken hold of the surveillance teams at the administrative central. Radio messages criss-crossed the Land of the Gods and informed the Governors of the inexplicable events. A squad of battle-robots was assembled and sent out of the factory towards the harbour town. Pulling further reinforcements out of the spaceport defence forces seemed too risky to the Governors.

In the morning’s first light, the harbour looked like an army base. Battle-robots were stationed on all the important streets, checking each passing vehicle. Such checks were not unusual and were patiently endured by the Goszuls, who remained surprisingly disciplined.

Enzally the telepath was successful in entering the city without attracting any attention or suspicion. His searching thoughts located Ralv and Geragk and it was not long before he was knocking on their door.

The two friends breathed easier when they saw their visitor was the conspiracy’s most important member. They besieged him with questions but the aging telepath raised his hands imploringly and smiled wisely. He sat down on the edge of the bed. “Grant me a short pause, my friends,” he said. “I have come a long way and the road was not easy. The Springers have become restless—you see, I do not call them Gods anymore, either. Why I do not is simple to explain: I have received a new contact with the strangers. They are somewhere nearby, perhaps even in this city.”

“Here in the city?” Ralv blurted, hiding his surprise only with difficulty. “Where?”

“We will soon know for they have asked me to contact them again today. I do not know how many of them there are but at least two of them are telepaths like myself.”

Geragk sat in a corner and stared into space. He looked as if he were straining to focus all his faculties into pondering some problem. Enzally threw a quick glance at him and motioned to Ralv, who had wanted to say something. The telepath cocked his head and looked at Geragk penetratingly.

“I will help you refresh your memory, Geragk,” Enzally said suddenly.

“Perhaps that way we shall learn something more. What, then, was on that ship yesterday?”

Ralv understood instantly what was going on and held himself in the background, waiting. He knew that Enzally was probing Geragk’s thoughts and that the telepath just might succeed in penetrating the veiled portions of his memory.

“Odd,” Enzally murmured suddenly. “It is almost as if some manner of barrier lay in front of your mind—I can almost feel it bodily. It is nothing natural. Only another telepath, or a variation like a suggestor, could have set such a thing in your memory. Yesterday you were aboard the ship that is in the harbour? And something happened there? What was it that happened? No, you do not have to speak. That would strain you too much. Think, do nothing but think. Yes, that is better. Strangers were on board? The captain told you? Four strange men who looked like Gods? And you went to them—and then it was all over? You know nothing more?” Enzally sighed and leaned back. He kept his eyes on Geragk. “Look at me, Geragk! These four men—did you see them clearly? What did they say to you? Yes, you can remember if you want to! Yes—yes—you are remembering now! They were the ones who told you to forget everything. You and all the others in the crew! All of you forgot what you had seen! These four men are the strangers we have been looking for! They are our allies!”

Geragk seemed to wake from a dream. His eyes were wide, focusing on nothing. Then he shook his head and seemed to collect himself. “You’re right, Enzally. I remember now: the four strangers are on the ship. They gave me and my men the order to forget everything. Why would they do that, if they are our friends?”

Enzally smiled. “You are forgetting that robots were aboard too. What would have happened if the robots had become suspicious? The strangers are but four men, standing alone against an entire world. They must be careful. I believe, however, that they are looking for friends. We shall soon find out.”

“When?” asked Ralv, who up to now had been silent.

“Soon!” Enzally whispered, signalling the other men to be quiet. Still and unmoving, he sat on the bed, seeming to listen to something inside himself.

Almost 10 minutes went by.

Neither Ralv nor Geragk could guess what took place in that time. They knew only that the telepath was conversing with someone but naturally they were unable to listen in on either end of the exchange.

Enzally finally nodded several times and looked up. “Get ready, my friends. You are coming with me. I believe the battle is beginning.”

Geragk knew what the answer would be but he asked the question anyway. “Where are we going?”

“To the harbour. A ship is waiting for us there.”

The ship’s captain was firmly convinced that it was out of his own free will. He honestly believed that it was his own decision to ignore his instructions to take the

ship once more to the high seas. He personally wished to hold the ship in the harbour, he thought. He certainly had no idea why he was acting this way but he did so anyway. Kitai had reinforced the suggestive influence with enough emphasis to make sure the effects would last for some time.

Leaning against the railing, Kitai stood watch. Meanwhile, John Marshall and the other two mutants sorted through the equipment Pucky had brought. There was enough room in the cabin to lay the various items out in a line.

Pucky helped Kitai with the task of watching for the arrival of the three Goszuls. The mouse-beaver stood erect and extended his telepathic senses. It was not long before he could discover and isolate the correct mental impulses out of the thousands streaming towards him. He listened freely to the conversation between Enzally, Ralv and Geragk while they headed for the bay, dodging the checks by sentry-robots all along the route. Since even a telepath like Enzally could not intercept the thoughts of robots, staying out of their way was not always an easy task.

The three Goszuls were unquestionably honest in their intentions. The conversations to which Pucky was a witness proved the fact beyond all doubt.

The mouse-beaver teleported to Kitai's side. The Oriental gave a start when Pucky appeared next to him.

"They're coming," announced the mouse-beaver.

Kitai sighed. "My nerves are already shot and here you go popping around like a jack-in-the-box. Couldn't you just *walk* a few steps like any reasonable man?"

"But I'm *not* a man!" Pucky retorted triumphantly. His pride in the fact was obvious. "Why should I go to the trouble of walking when there's an easier way to get from one place to another?"

Kitai grinned. "As soon as I get the chance, I'm going to make you think you're a chicken. Maybe then we can have some fresh eggs for breakfast."

Pucky made a face, muttered something that Kitai could not understand and pointed to the shore. "Here come the three now—see them? The oldest one must be Enzally the telepath. John's 'talked' to him several times. The one on the right has to be Ralv, the leader of the rebels. So, logically, the one on the left must be our old friend Geragk, whom you've already given the treatment."

Kitai watched as the three men skilfully went around a sentry-robot, conducting themselves as though they had important business at the docks. They walked past the warehouses and neared the quay where the ship lay at anchor. In passing, the men greeted several Goszuls, who looked curiously after them.

Pucky's incisor tooth disappeared in his joyful excitement. "I'll tell the others," he chirped. "It isn't necessary that these three negotiators see our entire arsenal the very first thing. In this lovely weather we can do business out on the deck. What do you think, Kitai?"

"You'd better ask John. He's the boss."

"My boss, too?" asked Pucky in surprise—and was gone. He had once again decided to conserve his physical strength.

Kitai now turned his whole attention to the rebels, who were standing somewhere undecided before primitive gangplank connecting the ship with the quay. He stood up straight and waved to them.

Enzally returned the greeting and walked up the gangplank.

John Marshall and his group awaited their guests on the upper deck at the stem. With the help of the cosmetics Pucky had also brought along with the bombs the Terrans could at last alter their appearance. Instead of Springers they now looked like Goszuls. After all, their job was not mixing unnoticed with the galactic traders. The important thing was looking like the natives—at least to the eyes of the Springers.

Pucky kept out of sight. He would make an appearance a little later—and the mouse-beaver planned to do it in his typically spectacular fashion.

Enzally and John exchanged glances, each trying to size up the other. Thoughts crossed invisibly from one mind to another, searching, asking and answering. Then Enzally extended both arms and went to John.

“Welcome, son of a distant world!” he greeted in the purest Pankosmo, the universal trade language of both the Springer and the Arkonide realms. “You have come to help us. I can see that you are not lying.”

“We’re happy that we aren’t alone anymore,” John assured him, and greeted the other telepath’s two companions as well. Then he introduced the three Japanese. “Let’s sit down. We won’t be disturbed here and we can have a clear view of the bay at the same time. Enzally, I take it we have some things to tell each other.”

They all sat down on mats and coils of rope. A warm sun shone in the sky. Activity in the harbour was only slight. The sudden appearance of so many sentry-robots was certainly nothing unusual but some mistrust had been aroused by the presence of battle-robots stationed in all important paces.

“You want to know something about our organization,” Enzally said, matter-of-factly. Ralv is the one to tell you—he founded it and is the leader.”

Ralv nodded proudly and said: “Ask me any questions, sir, and I’ll answer them.”

John waved the formality aside. “Allies and fellow-conspirators are usually on familiar terms—there’s no need to be so stiff. My first question is this: how large is your resistance group? How many members does it have?”

Ralv’s expression was perplexed. “Hmm—to be honest, I really don’t know myself. Conditions being what they are, we couldn’t form a normal organization and expect to have the security we needed. All I know is that we have supporters everywhere, people who would rather see the Gods disappear today instead of tomorrow. Not everyone is ready to fight and risk or give up his relatively comfortable and secure life. Do you understand what I mean, sir—er, comrade?” John signified that he did and Ralv went on: “We have a password. We say it when we want to be certain of a man. If we get the correct answer, we know we’re dealing with a member of our organization.”

“Isn’t that still risky?”

“Not at all. There are no traitors in the Goszul race. Cowards at the worst.”

“Would you please tell me what the difference is in this case?”

Enzally entered the discussion. “Do you mind if I tell him? No Goszul would go to the Springers on his own and betray the resistance group to them. He would have to face the vengeance of his own people and the Springers would not protect him. Nevertheless, we do have enough people who are quite comfortable with their lives: they will never be stirred up against the Springers but neither will they betray the resistance fighters. Those are the ones we call cowards.”

“Suppose someone forces them to betray their fellow Goszuls?”

Enzally smiled coldly. “We are accustomed to bearing pain—and, if we must, to dying with our lips sealed.”

Now John smiled too but it was a smile of appreciation. “Then I wouldn’t call them cowards, Enzally. They too are brave—they just can’t decide, that’s all. So let’s not condemn them. Certainly they won’t hinder us. That’s what I wanted to know.”

“Your next question?” Ralv asked.

“Are rebels to be found only in this town or are there rebels in other towns too?”

Ralv answered: “All the Land of the Gods is full of rebels, waiting only for the signal to strike at their so-called masters. The rebels even have tools and weapons they can use to attack robots and render them harmless.”

“Battle-robots, too?”

Ralv’s expression became troubled. “Not yet—unfortunately. But once we take over the factories and the machinery we’ll...”

“The factories are guarded by battle-robots,” John interrupted, his tone serious. “You see, the thing’s impossible your way. We’ll have to go about it differently if we want to take care of the Springers and their robots.”

“We?” Ralv repeated in surprise. “Does that mean...?”

“Why do you think we’re meeting here? Now the robots are your masters but they in turn are only the servants of the Springers, whom you call ‘gods’. If we drive the Springers off this world, their robots will be left behind. Because of their programming, those robots will remain our deadly and bitter enemies. However, this problem is not impossible to solve. Under certain circumstances, a robot’s program can be altered. The main thing is that we get rid of the Springers.”

Ralv smiled unbelievably and Geragk did the same. Enzally merely meditated, his expression thoughtful.

John continued, looking at Ralv. “We have the means and the plan that can make the impossible a reality. I need your support and your complete trust to succeed, though.”

“If Enzally trusts you, then we do too,” Ralv stated simply. “He can read minds and knows that you’re not lying.”

“I’m a telepath myself and I can shield my thoughts,” John warned. “I can even

deceive him with misleading thoughts. My friend Kitai is a suggestor. He could force all of you to do whatever he wants and you would believe you were doing it entirely of your own free will. You see, your trust must be even more complete than you supposed. Are you still positive that you see genuine allies in us?"

Ralv nodded without hesitation. "Of course. Would you have told us all this if you had wanted to trick us? Tell us what we're supposed to do."

John Marshall had no need to search through Ralv's thoughts. It was clear the man was telling the truth. Even so, he had to be careful. Ralv would have his doubts when he learned what was going to be required of him and his countrymen.

"That's true—it isn't likely I would have told you all that if I had wanted to trick you," John said, at the same time transmitting Enzally some instructions via telepathy: *You must remain silent now since I'm not going to shield my thoughts. You can read them easily. Don't be afraid when you learn the truth. We'll discuss it later.* Aloud, he told Ralv that "It could happen that my plans will strike you as horrible and inhuman, especially since they affect your own friends. Many of them will have to be ready to voluntarily declare themselves willing to be taken ill,"

"Pardon?" Ralv demanded, not comprehending.

John expanded his ideas further: "You've already long realized that it's quite impossible to drive the Springers off the planet by force. My own race is in a state of war with the Springers and can't officially interfere with the traders' internal affairs. So we have to stay hidden. Then there are you and your people. You're too weak to openly come out against the Springers. So the only alternative left open to us is a stratagem of some sort."

"I can only agree so far," Ralv admitted, and Geragk seemed to agree, too. Enzally sat unmoving on a mat and meditated.

"A stratagem then," John continued, trying to find the words that would inform the Goszuls of his intentions as euphemistically as possible. "The Springers know only force when they want to reach a goal. If they must defend this planet against an attack, they will use force. But what will they do if they are attacked by something unknown to them—say a disease, a terrible epidemic, a plague."

"A plague?" Ralv indeed had his doubts. "You mean a plague could drive them away? And if so, what good is a disease-ridden planet? We'd all die."

"I'm speaking of a plague with no fatal consequences," John assured him. "What's more, we have an instantly effective antidote. One single injection is enough to make the subject healthy again."

The rebel-leader considered. "If I understand correctly, you want to wage a bacteriological war against the Springers?"

"Not just against the Springers—in a certain sense against the Goszuls too."

A shadow crossed Ralv's face. He shook his head. "This I don't understand. Why against us, too, if the only concern is getting rid of the Springers?"

"That's the stratagem! If the Springers even guess that the plague is artificially induced in an attempt to drive them away, they never will leave. They'll try to

develop a cure. No—under all circumstances our operation must leave the impression that an incurable disease has broken out on this planet. Only by this method can we get the Springers to leave Goszul's Planet forever. We have to panic them so much that they'll leave behind all their technical installations and their robots lest the equipment carry the plague with it into space."

Ralv and Geragk looked at each other. Finally Ralv said: "But no one will die—and everybody can be cured later?"

"Precisely," John answered. "The plague is extremely contagious and if we can spread it enough we can figure on about half the population being stricken. No one will die. On the contrary. On my home world, tests have shown that quite positive effects result when one is cured. It's like an inoculation of a mild sickness to build up resistance and thus make a person healthier than before. It's like that with our man-made plague. As soon as the sick have received the injection of the antidote, they'll fall into a recuperative sleep and wake up healthier than before, not to mention that as a result of the cure their intelligence will be 20% higher. That ought to be an advantage your race can make good use of."

Enzally suddenly looked up. "John Marshall, do you not want to tell Geragk and Ralv what will happen when the plague is unleashed? I believe they have a right to know."

"Of course I want to tell them. Still, I think it would be a good idea if no one besides us knew how harmless the plague really is. Only the genuine fear of the natives is going to convince the Springers that the disease has a purely natural origin." He nodded to Enzally, then turned to the other Goszuls. He continued, but in a different tone. "First, coloured spots show up on the face of the afflicted individual. Then they spread out all over the body. About a week later, the memory begins to deteriorate until it's finally gone. The disease has no other symptoms. Once the anti-toxin has been injected, the victim will return to normal in three days. The memory will come back, the spots will disappear and the reasoning faculty will work better than ever before."

Ralv looked at Geragk for some time before he spoke. "So it's only a temporary condition, something like a cold?"

"Yes, we could compare it with that, although the outer symptoms are considerably more frightening. But they have to be that way to accomplish our ends. So I ask you—are you ready to carry this plague to your people? The Goszul soldiers on their way here will help you with the job."

Ralv went numb. His face paled. "What...? You want me to infect my own people?"

"It's the only way to convince the Springers they have to get out before the plague gets them too."

For a few moments Ralv stared moodily down into the harbour's muddy waters. Finally he looked back at John. "Alright, then. Now tell me what I have to do."

4/ CURSE WITHOUT CURE

It took two weeks but Ralv's resistance group was built up to a well-hidden and excellently-organized unit. Its agents were everywhere, even in the administration and control centres of the Springers and their robots.

The Land of the Gods was a small continent with an area of about 45,000 square miles. It measured 300 miles in length while it was only 150 miles wide. The Springer Governors were situated in different locations and were in radio contact with each other. Contact with the planet's other continents was only slight; the Springers had no intention whatsoever of settling here and their only interest was the outpost. The natives not in service to the Gods were tolerated as long as they did not get in the way.

Each day John Marshall was given a progress report by Enzally, with whom he stayed in close telepathic touch. Part of the progress was with 'Operation Death Ship', which was to initiate the action against the Springers.

The success of 'Operation Death Ship' depended on whether the Springers would be so imprudent as to let themselves be infected—infected by *panic*, a panic that would drive them once and for all from a world that did not belong to them.

* * * *

From the west a medium-sized sailing ship approached the Land of the Gods. The sails hung slackly and disorderly from both masts; only a weak westerly breeze moved the air, hardly even pushing the ship forward.

The ship was in the neighbourhood of 120 miles from the Gods' coast and sailing slowly but steadily nearer the continent.

Several figures idled about on the deck. They were apparently doing nothing, although even a blind man could have seen that there was plenty of work to do. Dirt and disorder were everywhere on deck and in the stairways. Even some clothes were hanging out to dry on a line, blowing sluggishly in a light breeze that brought no coolness with it.

Things were not much different below deck.

In the cabins a number of sailors lay lazily on their primitive bunks, half asleep. No one bothered himself about them and even the captain seemed to care nothing

about the course his boat was taking. He stood behind the wheel on the upper deck, holding the spokes laxly in his hands. The helmsman lay below sleeping in his bed. Without even the captain's unconcerned steering, the ship would have been pushed by the winds farther to the east.

What did he want in the Land of the Gods anyway?

Letting loose the wheel, the captain rubbed his forehead. What was going on here?

Yes, what did he want in the Land of the Gods? He did not know anymore. Only vaguely could he remember the outbreak of the plague. It had been at least two weeks before, just as they had left the harbour on the Western Continent—and where was it that they had been headed?

The plague had struck the cook first—of course it had to be the cook! Red spots dotted his face and were even worse on his neck. The crew had isolated him at once but by then it was too late. Two days later the strange spots showed up without exception on everyone aboard. A light fever set in but otherwise no debilitating symptoms.

A week after that the cook had lost his memory.

No matter how much the others had tried to prod him he simply could no longer remember just who he was. He knew nothing more than that he was aboard a ship and had become ill. He could remember anything that had happened since that point of time but anything before that did not exist at all for him.

And then, two days later, everyone else had lost his memory.

It had been as though each man aboard had just been born. He had come to the world eight days ago with a functioning reasoning capacity and no memory. That was all.

Or was there more?

The captain shrugged. It was all the same to him whatever happened now. He had no idea why he was sailing east. The storerooms were empty, so perhaps he was supposed to pick something up in the Land of the Gods. But where? And what? He no longer even knew the name of the harbour he had sailed from.

No answer.

He looked down on the deck and watched the figures of his crew idling aimlessly there. What should he do with them? A man without a memory is like a child—only less reasonable. So could he blame them? And what lay before them? Wouldn't they be shunned like... well, like the plague, if they sailed into a harbour? Wouldn't they be locked up or even turned away in an attempt to keep the mysterious incurable pestilence from spreading?

In the distance of the eastern horizon a fleck appeared and quickly grew bigger as it drew near.

The ship captain squinted and tried to identify what was coming toward him. It couldn't be a sailing ship—too fast. The Gods had boats that sailed without wind—that was what it had to be.

If the Gods found out what had come to pass aboard the ship they might even have the idea of sinking it right there and ending the risk of further infection once and for all.

Yet in spite of his amnesia the captain's power of reason was greater than ever before. The first positive effect of the unknown plague had manifested: the captain's intelligence quotient had *risen*. Later, when he received the curing injection, this effect would remain permanently.

But how did he know that there was a Land of the Gods and that there were Gods there?

As the narrow torpedo boat came by and was tied to the side, the captain already knew how he could save himself and his crew.

His fears had been groundless.

The Springer on board the torpedo boat had no thought of sinking the ship with its disease-ridden crew. He was much too curious for that. The information he had received from his surveillance department had excited his interest. He did not know what was waiting for him but he felt that it had to be something of considerable importance.

A great danger was approaching from the west, the robot-sender had reported. It was to be found aboard a small sailing ship whose position was known. A more thorough investigation had to be undertaken. More than that the robot had not known either.

The governor, whose name was Gorlap, had not hesitated a second before having a torpedo boat readied for action. He would go to the sailing ship himself and find out what was supposed to be so dangerous for him. Pah, a sailing ship, dangerous for the invincible Springers! Ridiculous!

He did not yet suspect how quickly his opinion would change.

He sent 10 battle-robots aboard the ship as an advance guard. No resistance was being shown in any event. Quite the contrary. Seamen stood indifferently at the railing, watching the proceedings and not lifting a finger.

The robots boarded the ship and met no opposition.

Gorlap took no risks. He sent 10 more robots aboard. Although these were unarmed their brains were more advanced than those of the battle robots. If something was fishy here, the second detachment would smell it.

And they did in fact notice something. One of them radioed back: "The people here on board are sick."

Gorlap was unable to conceal his surprise. "Sick?" he demanded, staring at the sailors lounging on the railing. "What kind of sickness is it?"

"We cannot identify the disease," the robot answered.

No one could say that Gorlap was a coward. He armed himself with a deadly energy-beamer and climbed over the railing to the deck of the singular ship. His reddish beard, characteristic of his race, quivered with excitement.

Registering no opposition, the battle-robots posted themselves in inactive

positions.

Fear clutched Gorlap's throat when he saw the crew's spotted faces. While the Springers had every right to be proud of their medical progress, deep in their souls lurked a dread of unknown diseases. So often had the Springers landed upon an alien world only to meet a bacillus against which their bodies were defenceless. Entire clans had been virtually wiped out before the doctors could develop cures.

Here on Goszul's Planet there were no unknown diseases—at least not until now.

The man at the wheel let it go and came towards Gorlap, who stood motionless at the rail as though he suddenly could no longer move even a finger.

“What—what's going on?” the Springer asked, choking, and stared at the captain's spots, which allowed little of the natural skin colour to show through. “Are you sick?”

The captain wondered only briefly how, if he had lost his memory, he could still understand the Gods' language. He found no answer and did not trouble himself further with the problem. “A plague,” he said haltingly. “It broke out two weeks ago. No one on this ship stayed well.”

“Did anyone die?”

“No one. The disease doesn't seem to be fatal.”

Gorlap breathed easier. Perhaps it was merely a harmless infection and nothing more. “What port is this ship bound for?” he demanded.

The captain shrugged. “I don't know.”

“You don't know? Surely you must know where you were ordered to go.”

“Maybe I did know once but I've forgotten it. The plague took our memories. I know only that I'm the captain of this ship and that eight days ago I... woke up.”

“Woke up?”

“Like from a dream. Everything before that sank into nothing. I can remember only very little. I don't even know my own name. No one on this ship knows his name.”

Gorlap fell back a step and raised his hands as though to protect himself from the captain. Not far away a battle-robot readied for action.

“You've all lost your minds!” Gorlap moaned, horrified.

“Not our reason,” the captain said by way of defence, “only our memories, which is probably just as unpleasant. You shouldn't stay here much longer.”

Gorlap stepped even farther back. “We have cures,” he said, more to boost his own courage than anything else. “In any case, your ship can't dock in the harbour of the Land of the Gods. Turn back.”

“Back to where? I don't know anymore where I came from.”

Gorlap bit his lip. “Sail back to the west or my robots will kill all of you and bum your ship. Only that way can I be certain the plague won't strike the Land of the Gods.”

The captain shook his head slowly. The shadow of a cold smile flashed across

his face. “You’re wrong,” he said. “If you want to protect the Land of the Gods from the plague, you’ll have to destroy your robots and yourself along with my ship. You’re already carrying the disease germs now.”

The Springer answered by climbing back over the railing to the deck of his torpedo boat. He looked back at the ship, hesitated, then turned without a word and disappeared below decks. Seconds later the boat pulled away from the ship and sped away in an easterly direction.

Gorlap had not blasted the sinister vessel out of the water but he had left his 20 robots behind. Perhaps they did in fact already harbour the agents of the unknown sickness in their metal bodies.

And as for Gorlap himself?

The Springer banished the thought from his mind. He had not come in any direct contact with the diseased captain.

Contact?

Yes—had he not touched the ship’s flooring with the soles of his shoes and had he not also touched the railing with his bare hands?

He should have sunk the cursed ship after all! If the wind kept up like this the plague ship would reach the harbour in about a week. Certain necessary preparations would have to be made by then. Nothing was lost yet—any command centre could radio the robots aboard the infected ship the order to sink it. The robots would obey instantly even though it would mean they would end up at the bottom of the ocean. If they were not too far from the coast and the water pressure did not destroy them, they could save themselves.

Gorlap looked at his hands. The skin was deep brown and healthy.

How long would it take before the first red spots appeared—if they ever would?

* * * *

Numerous Springer spacecraft still orbited Goszul’s Planet in varying paths. A conference of the patriarchs of the various clans was in progress on this lonely outpost far from the trade routes; the purpose of the conclave was to plan the attack on the distant planet Earth.

The patriarchs had been terrified by the lightning attack by Rhodan’s mutants and horrified by the losses of men suffered as a result of that attack. They took to their spaceships and waited now in the void that was home to them, hoping that the governors would shortly restore normal conditions on the planet below.

They did not know who their enemy was and when several quiet weeks passed in the Land of the Gods they began to believe they were safe again. The first of the patriarchs landed their ships at the gigantic spaceport in the Land of the Gods although for the time being they did not leave them. The conference would be resumed shortly.

It was about the same time that the ship carrying the afflicted sailors was sunk

just outside the harbour entrance. Gorlap had ordered the robots to scuttle the ship not long before he lost his memory; it was his last conscious act. After that his past sank out of sight for him. Helpless and without any interest in what happened around him, he lay in a semiconscious state and unsuccessfully attempted to figure out what had overtaken him. He was still in that condition when the Governor of the neighbouring district finally sought him out.

With that the plague grasped its second Springer victim.

Meanwhile the first reports of catastrophe began to arrive from the primitive continents. Ralv and his organization made sure that the disquieting news would be discovered by the surveillance section and delivered to the Springers themselves.

Thus two objectives were obtained. First, the harbours were closed to all ships, thereby breaking off contact with the other continents. Secondly, the Springers were made to feel less and less secure.

Gorlap had been placed in a clinic staffed entirely by robots. There, work was done in an attempt to trace the cause of the plague. Even so, the virus could not be isolated and so no cure could be developed. When the governor of the adjacent district came down with the disease a few days later, and as the dark amnesia followed on the heels of the first spots, a nameless terror gripped the other 18 Springers. Disease and death were not unknown to them—after all, they were not immortal. But to remain with full reason but suddenly be bereft of memory—that was to them more horrible than death.

The Springers in the spaceships were naturally of a different opinion. They found themselves in relative safety and far from events taking place outside. Goszul's Planet meant nothing to them or at most a momentary meeting place. If there was anything to lose on the planet it was the technical installations and top quality robots, each one of which cost a fortune.

The patriarch Ralgor thought first of the robots when he heard the disturbing reports. He could imagine how the primitive natives would fall upon the unarmed automatons and tear them apart before the battle-robots could arrive and unleash their deadly energy-beamers.

Things should not be allowed to come to that. And when one stood helpfully at the side of the Governors, there might be a profitable business deal to come out of it. Ralgor had always wanted a factory—new battle-robot but up to now he could not afford it.

So he took over the controls of his ship, the *RAL II*, glided out of orbit and landed at the spaceport in the Land of the Gods where ships from other tribes already stood and waited.

Ralgor had no intention whatsoever of sitting idly by until the plague overran the entire planet and the Land of the Gods along with it. He wanted to build a good reputation here and so later come to be known as a man of initiative. He had hardly landed when he set up contact with the commanders of the other ships.

First he called Eztak, one of the oldest patriarchs among the group of

convening Traders. The suspicious old man at first did not want to listen when the much younger Ralgor tried to make a suggestion but then he began to pay attention with an increasing interest.

“It’s clear, therefore, that under these circumstances we don’t dare lose any more time. If we don’t want to endanger ourselves, we can’t remain here any longer. It’s time we come to a decision. Why did we come here in the first place? To work out a plan for making Terra into a trade colony. Since peaceful means no longer appear possible, our only recourse is to battle, even though we’ll have to risk some amount of destruction.”

“I don’t care about any trading posts,” Eztak answered. “I just want to get even with Rhodan. He’s caused our clan too much loss already.”

“Then why are we sitting here waiting for the Goszuls to cause even more damage? How many of us have they killed already?”

“Are you sure it’s really the Goszuls?” Eztak asked impatiently. “The methods being used are more like those of another race, located a thousand light-years from here.”

“The Terrans don’t know where we’re having this conference.”

“Alright then,” said Eztak, acknowledging Ralgor’s point. “What do you suggest?”

“That we call the conference into session immediately and finally decide how and when we’re going to attack Terra.”

Eztak nodded slowly. “Good. I agree and support your plan. But what about Goszul’s Planet? Haven’t you heard about the plague yet? It’s raging all over the primitive continents and now it’s spreading to the Land of the Gods. Two of the 20 Governors have already been stricken and deprived of their memories. We don’t have any sort of cure for it.”

Ralgor sensed his secret goal coming closer. “That’s why I’m recommending a fast decision about Terra. Then we can leave Goszul’s Planet before the plague strikes us too. We’ll be able to save at least the most valuable robots, which can be reprogrammed anytime by the positronics aboard the spaceships.”

“I’m beginning to understand,” smiled the old patriarch. “But I don’t know if I can agree with your conclusions. The installations on Goszul’s Planet are the common property of all the Springer clans. Wouldn’t we be enriching ourselves unlawfully?”

Ralgor felt it would be better to change the subject. “Will you call the conference into session, Eztak? You’re the oldest.”

“I’ll ask the others if they’ll come,” the patriarch promised, although not committing himself to anything.

Ralgor broke the connection and sat alone for some time in the control room. Then he decided to take a short walk outside the ship. Surely a look around would not hurt anything.

He left the *RAL II* with the ship’s navigator and took the next robot vehicle to

the town.

5/ PUCKY'S INTERLUDE

John thought it wise to leave the headquarters on the ship in the harbour.

He and his mutants had already had the injections protecting them from the Plague of Oblivion, although Pucky had been claiming ever since that the increased intelligence quotient resulting from the disease would not hurt anything. The rebel leaders were also immunized against the imaginably terrible plague, which in reality was not even as dangerous as a normal case of the flu. John discussed that aspect a number of times, asking his compatriots what the harm of losing one's memory was if he could regain it at any time and find himself more intelligent than ever? "It's like a painless narcotic," he said, "from which one wakes healthy."

The sailing ship was lying at anchor about a hundred yards from the quay when Tako returned from a mission. As usual, he materialized among the mutants sitting on the upper deck. A conference was in progress with Ralv concerning the next action to be taken. Pucky was lying on his back, having Tama scratch his belly.

Ralv gave a start. He had not yet gotten used to the extraordinary abilities of his new friends.

John looked up. "Any success, Tako?"

The Oriental nodded and sat down facing the group. "I can report that in the last few weeks the resistance movement has made remarkable progress. Ralv's name has become a kind of magic word. People obey his instructions without any argument and with complete faith. I brought the box with germbombs to the eastern continent and there the contents were dispersed."

"You were gone quite a while—close to three hours."

Tako shrugged. "The rebel group there is quite isolated and I had to answer a lot of questions. Although they may trust Ralv completely, they couldn't repress their curiosity. You understand that, Ralv."

The red-skinned rebel nodded. "My instructions are terse and explain little. Those people naturally used the opportunity to get a glimpse of things behind the scenes. What did you tell them?"

"The truth—what else?"

John's eyebrows flew up. "You told them what's coming for them? They know that they're going to infect themselves and other people—that they're going to

lose their memories?”

“Yes, and I told them why it has to be this way. If they want the Springers to leave their world in panic and without any bloodshed, then they’re going to have to do what we tell them. Maybe the Goszuls don’t understand our plan perfectly but they do feel that there isn’t any other way. This evening the bombs will be planted in several cities on the eastern continent and the germs allowed to escape.”

“So we can expect the outer symptoms of the plague to show there in about a week. With that, the first part of our assignment is completed.” John appeared relieved. “It isn’t easy to infect an entire planet, even when the cure is along with you. But when this planet is free again and its inhabitants healthy, their intelligence will have increased so much the Goszuls will be able to start making progress. The curve of development in the future will go straight up on a graph.”

There was silence for a few moments. The sun blazed hotly out of the cloudless sky and in its glare the almost motionless water in the harbour shimmered like molten lead. Some Goszuls lounged idly on the quay, waiting for any bit of work that might come along, but the robot central had not issued any new work assignments for some time.

Those Goszuls did not yet know that the plague-germs were already working on them or that perhaps as soon as the next day red flecks would appear on their cheeks.

Tako sighed. “I’d like to sleep a bit, John. What’s my next job?”

“I can’t say until Enzally gets in touch with me tonight. It’ll depend on him when and where we go into action. The Springers are maintaining a waiting posture—ever since two Governors came down with the plague, they seem to have become cautious. All contact with the natives is being avoided. By the way, the robots sank our ‘Death Ship’. Luckily, the crew was able to save itself by swimming ashore.”

“They hadn’t forgotten that?” wondered Tako.

“The memory is suspended but one is still capable of performing practiced skills. Besides, the memory isn’t extinguished completely. How could that be possible if everything comes back later? The true memory has to be somewhere. So the seamen swam to shore and infected other people.”

Ralv stood up. “I still have some things to take care of. If anything new turns up, I’ll have a message sent to you.” He went to the railing on the middle deck and climbed down a rope ladder to his boat, which floated alongside the ship. With quiet strokes of the oars, the boat made for the quay. Ralv waved back to those on the ship and then was lost between the warehouses.

Kitai sighed. “Ralv isn’t a bad fellow. He must really trust us or otherwise he’d never do all this for us. When all is said and done, he’s the one who’ll be responsible to his people.”

“Without us,” John said, “the Goszuls would be repressed and exploited by the Springers for the rest of eternity. Ralv is fully aware of that.”

“You’re right, John, but I don’t admire the fellow’s sheer courage any less. His influence is enormous. In these last few days I haven’t had to force anybody under my will.”

John was about to answer but suddenly raised his hand and asked the Japanese to say nothing more. Pucky too sat up straight and listened with closed eyes. The three Japanese sat quietly, knowing that the two telepaths were in the process of receiving a mental message. It could only be coming from Enzally, for as far as they knew there were no other telepaths on Goszul’s planet.

It was a strange, even an uncanny scene.

The man and the mouse-beaver sat unmoving on the wooden deck in the brilliant sunlight, listening to a silent voice. John’s face was intent, crossed once by a brief shadow, which gave way to an amused smile, Pucky’s reactions were astonishingly similar. His incisor tooth showed that the boredom of the past few weeks appeared to have passed. He stroked his neck fur now and then, indicating that the change of pace would not be without difficulty. Otherwise, it was not possible to determine from either his or John’s reactions just what the change of pace involved.

Enzally must have had a great deal to report, for the unnatural silence lasted for more than 15 minutes. Finally, John straightened up from his cramped position and took a deep breath.

“That was Enzally,” he said after glancing at Pucky. “He’ll be coming to see us towards evening when he’s learned more details. Apparently something’s going on over by the spaceport. You ought to take a look into that, Tako. The Springers are landing. We thought they’d disappear instantly when they found out about the plague. They’re in contact with the Governors so they know what’s happening on Goszul’s Planet. I don’t exactly understand this.”

“So what happened, then?” Kitai wanted to know.

John looked musingly at the sky as though he could find the answer there. But Rhodan was too far away. “The Springers are landing,” he repeated. “We knew that about 30 of them were orbiting the planet and we hoped that they would flee. But our expectations didn’t pan out. They’re doing just the opposite of what we’d anticipated—they’re landing on this world, which must seem disease-ridden to them.”

“This I don’t understand,” the Suggestor admitted. “No one is going to willingly expose himself to the danger of losing his memory. They must have a good reason to be landing.”

“And they do!” John confirmed grimly. “Enzally was able to overhear some of them—telepathically, of course. They’ve long since written off the planet and its ruling Governors but not the technical installations or the robots. Those are their major concerns.”

Kitai’s perplexity was evident from his expression. “Frankly, I don’t get it. Surely they know that the plague germs have spread everywhere, even to the point of being found on metal. They’re not going to risk being infected, are they?”

“They underestimate the danger,” John explained. “Their greed is greater than their caution. A battle-robot is worth almost as much as a small spaceship. Goszul’s Planet is at the moment like a city during an army’s retreat, wide-open for plundering. Everyone is going to try to enrich himself as much as possible. The Springers are businessmen.”

“They’re also fighters, unfortunately,” Tamara murmured with some melancholy.

“That we know only too well,” John agreed. “And so I don’t believe Enzally was able to find out everything. I’ll bet anything they have something more in mind than stealing robots and machinery from themselves.”

“But what?”

“Let’s wait till Enzally comes. Maybe we’ll learn more then. He’ll be here in a few hours.”

Because he was too lazy to retract his incisor tooth, Pucky, who had been silent up to then, lisped when he asked: “Would anybody mind if I took a look around?”

Rather perplexed, John asked a counter-question: “Take a look around where?”

“Where do you think? Around the spaceport, of course. It’s only a mouse-hop away.”

“For teleporters, maybe,” John answered, and thought for a few seconds about it. “Four eyes will see more than two and two telepathic minds will learn more than one. Alright, then, but don’t let the Springers see you. Some of them would recognize you as the little guy who played hob with their robots. That would throw a wrench in our plans.”

“Nobody will see me,” Pucky promised, in no way concealing his pleasure in looking forward to the adventure. “I’ll be back soon and tell you what the Springers are up to—besides swiping robots.”

So saying, he disappeared.

John stared at the place where Pucky had been sitting. “I’m quite happy being a human, but still, I often wish I were a mouse-beaver. Those little fellows have it good.”

“But Pucky is an unusual exception for his species,” Kitai reminded him. “Mouse-beavers are normally unintelligent and unnoteworthy creatures. Pucky is to them as a telepath is to a normal man.”

“Okay, point conceded,” John said. “Often, then, I’d be happy to be Pucky. Is *that* correct, at least?”

Kitai grinned. “Except that you can hardly speak of a ‘correct wish’, I can understand your feeling. Myself, I’d like to be able to read thoughts as well as suggest. It’s in human nature to want more than you have, no matter how much you already have.”

“And you might call that perpetual dissatisfaction with what you have the main spring of human progress,” Tako philosophized and stared reflectively at his bare toes. “I’m hungry.”

They all laughed at his sudden shift of mental gears and then looked to John, who nodded and stood up. "Let's go below," he suggested. "It's cooler there and anyway, I'm hungry, too. I hope Pucky will be back shortly."

That was a hope sadly not to be fulfilled...

It wasn't that Pucky was careless but his curiosity was more powerful than all his caution.

His first teleportation brought him to the edge of the vast spaceship landing field. He hid himself among factory buildings which had little in common with the sprawling administration buildings in which the robot plants were housed. A sentry-robot patrolled unsuspectingly back and forth in the immediate vicinity. Pucky knew that there was a wireless communication link between it and the nearest battle-robot and so took care not to be spotted.

What struck him first was the large number of Springer spaceships which had landed on the field and even now stood on their bulky tails. Each one was more than 200 yards long and there were at least 20 such ships—their silver hulls gleaming in the sunlight and impressively embodying the Springer power. Each ship had the power to blast Goszul's Planet into a molten hell-world on which no life was possible.

The plague and Springer greed would prevent that, Pucky suddenly realized. This world would not be annihilated as long as an operable robot remained on it.

Pucky ducked deeper in the shadows of the foundry and into a hollow in the ground. It was better to operate from here because although the actual edge of the landing field was 150 feet away, there was no cover available.

The mouse-beaver determined that the sentry-robot was making its usual rounds and getting farther and farther away from the foundry. Pucky's task now was searching out the right ship and hoping that with a certain amount of luck he would not materialize right before the eyes of Ezztak, who knew him.

For safety's sake, Pucky decided to do a bit of telepathic scouting to sound out the area. He worked for almost two minutes at trying to pick Enzally's thoughts out of the confusion of mental impulses streaming at him, then gave it up. The Goszul probably shielded his mind automatically and instinctively when he was 'at work'. Pucky did the same himself, finally. The only thing left was to take a look at the landed Springers.

The Springers were luckily not robots and it was not difficult for Pucky to locate their thoughts and read them. The job was not a simple matter either for while at least 20 persons were aboard each Springer ship, Pucky was interested only in the captain and the current patriarch of the clan. The mouse-beaver had to spring blind with his thoughts into the first ship, so to speak, and scout around until he found the patriarch.

Meanwhile, his body remained behind with lessened reaction capability, a situation which Pucky was not entirely pleased with. But there was nothing he could do about it. Besides, he felt he was relatively safe here.

As he isolated the thoughts coming at him and worked down to only a single

source, he realized he was witness to a conversation for he was receiving two thought patterns 'speaking' on the same 'frequency'.

So I think there's been a lot of exaggeration again. They won't let us go on leave outside but they're going to leave the ship themselves tonight.

But after all, there's a conference...

So what if there is! The point is, this alleged plague is dangerous for us, they say, while it doesn't seem to bother them. I'd like to make myself independent.

You know the punishment they give for that, Holflersy. I don't think you ought to run the risk.

Pucky grinned and changed the frequency. He did it with the same ease the man of the 20th Century changed stations on a radio.

Anyway, he had learned that the ship captains had a meeting planned for that evening. It would now be quite advantageous to be able to read the thoughts of one of those captains and thus avoid any surprises later. Even Enzally had not known what the Springers planned this time.

Now here was another soundless voice. Someone was thinking hard but no one was answering. He must be alone. Pucky listened and found he had been indeed fortunate. It was pure chance that he had turned in on the great Ralgor.

Ralgor sat in his private cabin and turned over in his mind what he wanted to say at the first conference of Springer patriarchs. He was working out his speech silently in his head, which did not at all prevent him from being overheard by somebody.

Often he muttered something to himself. "If I can only convince Enzally," he growled discontentedly, and thought further: *I have to train all his attention on Terra and make sure Goszul's Planet falls more into the background. The Governors alone hardly have the energy to call on the bases for help and in a few weeks the plague will have gotten them too. The plague is really a blessing for those who know how to cash in on it.*

"I can call both my other ships here by hypercom," he continued aloud, as though mere thinking were no longer enough. "Their holds will accommodate at least 200 battle- and sentry-robots. I'll make the biggest haul of my career, not even counting what I can get in the way of equipment from the spaceship works when I..."

To Pucky's sorrow, the honest businessman's train of thought was suddenly interrupted. Someone must have entered the cabin.

"Sir, here is the star-chart you asked for," Aha, that must be the navigator, Pucky suspected. "The spring co-ordinates have been calculated. Do you believe we can do it?"

"Certainly!" Ralgor answered, although not thinking about what was to be done or what it was that had to do with a jump through hyperspace. "Give this paper to the radio-man. He's to immediately send a coded message to our clan's other two ships. Let me know as soon as we get an answer."

Then he was alone again but Pucky's hopes were not fulfilled: Ralgor did not return to his secret plans. One thing was clear to Pucky: Ralgor's intended looting of Goszul's Planet had a close connection with his plans for Terra and the just delivered star-chart. And the summoning of Springer ships from his own clan was a part of his plan. Just what the plan was, Pucky did not know. He had to find out.

Hm, this Ralgor did not know him and had never seen him before. If he saw him, that would not be dangerous at all. Besides, Ralgor would have to be cautious not to let his fellows learn of his secret plans. If he suspected that Pucky had something to do with Perry Rhodan and Terra, he still would not dare say anything about it.

Pucky took a deep breath and teleported. He landed precisely in Ralgor's control room but was lucky: the Springer had his back to him and was studying the star-chart the navigator had just brought him. He sat on a stool, not knowing that not three feet away a small, inconspicuous something materialized out of nothing and quickly crawled behind the open door of a wall cabinet.

Pucky had a good view from there as well as being well hidden. He now had to find out what section of the galaxy Ralgor was showing such a great interest in.

Suddenly Pucky sensed the approach of other thoughts. Someone stopped outside the door and stepped in after a perfunctory knock. It must be the navigator who had appeared earlier.

"The radio message was transmitted as ordered and the answer has just been received, sir. The *RAL III* and *RAL V* will arrive later this evening. As ordered, they will orbit Goszul's System at a distance of two light-days."

Ralgor looked up and grinned spitefully. "It's been Goszul's System for a long time," he said, revealing a part of his secret plan. "Perhaps one day they'll call it Ralgor's System."

The navigator grinned back. "A good piece of business?"

"Of course! Would I bother with it otherwise?"

The fare of the navigator grew serious. "What can our clan do with a disease-ridden planet?"

Ralgor's reaction was unexpectedly curt. "I'm happy that even you can't figure out the answer to that question. That convinces me that the other Patriarchs themselves won't be able to see my true intentions. You can go, Gromsk. I'll want to leave the ship at sundown. You win take care of the necessary relieving of the watch detail. I'd like the *RAL II* to stand ready for lift-off until I return."

The navigator left the cabin without answering.

Ralgor bent over the table and checked over the star-chart and the spring-coordinates drawn there on for 10 minutes more. Then he stood up, glanced at the chronometer built into the wall, and left the cabin. He did not shut the door but simply left it ajar.

Pucky waited a moment, then hurriedly slipped out of his hiding place and rushed to the table. He was so small that he had to climb up on the stool before he could take a look at the star-chart!

Star-charts are difficult documents to read. One must study them thoroughly to get anything out of them especially when the notations are incomprehensible.

Pucky looked at the confusion of tiny points connected with each other by dotted lines. On the lines were numbers, under which were names that had no meaning for him.

A second chart showed an enlarged section. The few star systems were no longer mere points but composed of stars and the planets that belonged to them. It was not a problem any longer to identify one of these systems, especially since it had been marked by a red 'X'.

Pucky realized that Ralgor was interested in the planet Earth and its sun.

There was a noise behind Pucky. He knew before he could turn around that he had not been careful enough. Ralgor had come back.

The Springer let out an astonished cry when he saw the strange creature bent over his charts. At least two seconds went by before he could master his surprise. His right hand went to his belt and pulled out his beamer. The barrel was aimed at the mouse-beaver.

Pucky could have teleported but it would have struck him as a cowardly retreat. Anyway, dematerialising took at least a second. The Springer would have had sufficient time to shoot him dead.

But there was another and better way.

"Good day," said Pucky in perfect Pankosmo, unsheathing his incisor tooth in a friendly way. "How do you do, Ralgor?"

The Springer was so surprised his jaw dropped. "You can... speak? Who are you?"

"You can talk, too, right?" inquired Pucky conciliatingly. He concentrated his whole attention on the gun. His telekinetic power took hold of the pistol carefully and the barrel suddenly pointed towards the ceiling. The Springer was so surprised to see an inanimate object suddenly show an urge to become independent that he was no longer capable of any action. Astounded, he watched as the beamer slipped out of his clenched fingers and floated to the ceiling as though it had become a balloon. At the ceiling the beamer stopped and took aim at Ralgor's head.

"Are you going to be polite now?" asked Pucky, twittering like an Earth bird. "Close the door!"

Ralgor was of no mind to obey the order. Uttering a second but this time enraged cry, he threw himself at the invader. Pucky remembered John Marshall's earnest admonitions and decided to forego any further experiments. He dematerialised and passed up the really amusing part of the adventure.

Ralgor was thrown forward by the force of the sudden spring as his powerful hands grasped empty air. He banged his head against the board communicator and ended up with a colourful bruise, whose presence he could never explain adequately to the other members of his clan when they sympathetically inquired about it.

Uncomprehendingly he stared at the charts.

Involuntarily his hand swept them from the table. His skull was pounding.

Then he sank heavily into the stool where Pucky had just been standing three seconds before.

Damn! There *were* such things as ghosts!

6/ PLOT AGAINST TERRA

“They’re cooking up something about Terra!”

John looked incredulous. “I thought they had discarded that idea long ago, Pucky. I can’t imagine they’d try again. The first lesson should’ve taught them better.”

“That fellow had maps with Earth marked very distinctly. I bet it’ll be on their agenda tonight. We should make it a point to have our observer present at the conference.”

“Enzally is going to give us an account.”

“That won’t be enough, especially in view of the fact that we can also accomplish a very positive purpose with our visit.”

“And what would that be?” John leaned forward, curious.

“We’re going to infest the meeting of the patriarchs with the plague,” Pucky stated.

The telepath was about to make a declining gesture but he stopped in the middle of the movement of his hand. A shadow of concern flitted across his face. Finally he said hesitantly, “It’s a truly fantastic idea, Pucky. However I believe I’ll have to obtain Rhodan’s permission first. Without his express permission we can’t infect Springers who aren’t stationed on Goszul’s Planet. The disease is contagious and they’d spread it throughout the universe. I refuse to contaminate the universe deliberately.”

“Why don’t you ask Rhodan?” Tako suggested. “He knows whether it’s justified or not.”

John considered the suggestion to be very reasonable. He extricated the little transceiver, which was capable of broadcasting up to a distance of three light-months, from its hiding place. It took 30 seconds to make contact with the *Stardust*. “We’ve a rare opportunity to surprise all the Springers in this land at a meeting in one room together. Shall we afflict them with the plague or not?”

“That’s a very direct question, John. I’ll give you an equally straightforward answer if you can give me some information. What is the subject of their consultations?”

“Nobody knows for sure. Pucky thinks it’s the invasion of Earth.”

“They haven’t been cured yet,” Rhodan murmured, mulling it over for a few seconds. “Okay, here’s your answer: if the Springers decide tonight that they want

to invade the Earth, they must be infected. Have I made myself clear?"

"Yes, sir! What happens if they carry the plague out to the universe?" Rhodan's smile could almost be felt the whole distance of eight light-days. "Not much," he said and broke off the connection.

John didn't look much the wiser as he stowed away the transceiver. At a loss to understand his boss he looked perplexed at his friends. "Did you get that? 'Not much,' he said. I wish I could understand him!"

"Is that necessary?" Pucky asked, then quickly added: "Be careful, I can feel Enzally coming. I hope he didn't notice our doubts. It wouldn't help matters very much."

However Enzally appeared to be unconcerned. He greeted the four men with the same bow he made to Pucky, took a seat and said with a complaisant smile: "The meeting of the Springers will begin any moment. I came in the official car of the Spaceport Administration to advise you of the conference. Oh, you're wondering about the car. Well, now we've got friends everywhere. To get back to the Springers: what do you intend to do? Blow up their meeting?"

"We're planning to strike them with the plague," John said sternly.

A cold smile flickered on the face of the old Goszul. "Splendid! These business gods have seen what happens to a race that is afflicted with the Plague of Oblivion. As soon as they notice that they've caught the disease they'll flee in desperation to find a cure somewhere in the universe and we hope they'll let us live in peace from then on."

Tako had opened an oblong box from which he had taken five little bombs. John noticed that he weighed them appraisingly in his hands.

"Pucky will accompany you. It's better if two teleporters take care of this task. Throw the bombs and get out at once. Perhaps you, Pucky, will first be able to learn something about the purpose of the meeting. Rhodan gave orders to drop the bombs only when the Springers let it be known that they really intend to attack Terra."

"You may depend on us," Pucky reassured the telepath. He took two of the five bombs and seized Tako by the hand.

A second later they both had vanished.

* * * *

The two teleporters materialized not far from the building at the side of the spaceport which was already familiar to them and where the conference was scheduled to take place this day. Enzally had accurately described the location to them. There was nobody in the vicinity nor were there any other guard robots except two husky battle-robots who were posted at the entrance to the building with their weapon arms ready to shoot. It was hopeless for them to get past them.

"We'll have to jump directly into the lion's den," Tako decided, not very

enthusiastically. He looked like a genuine Goszul and it was impossible to tell the difference between him and the natives of this world. “We don’t know where we’ll wind up. If it happens to be in the middle of the assembly room they’ll be in a tizzy.”

“Especially when they see me,” Pucky modestly presumed. “On the other hand I’ll be able to extricate myself better than you because I can also use telekinetics. I’ll twist their noses.”

Tako said with a fleeting grin: “Okay, you jump first and come back at once so you can give me exact location. Then we’ll jump together.”

Pucky looked around. “Stay here behind the taxicab station and hide as well as you can. There seems to be nobody around here. A Goszul won’t give you away and I don’t see any robot patrols. I don’t think it’ll be too risky.”

“Besides you’ll be coming back right away,” Tako reassured himself.

Pucky dematerialised and the Japanese remained behind alone, prepared to disappear the moment it became necessary. However everything was quiet. The spaceport with its huge ships lay deserted. At the far side a robot made his rounds. The sun had already set below the horizon and the light was getting dim.

It took five minutes till Pucky returned. “I’ve found an excellent place,” he reported in his high voice. “Sort of a gallery above the conference hall. Nobody will be able to see us and we’ll have a perfect view. We can even hear each word that is spoken and since each clan of the Springers speaks a different dialect, they’re conversing in Intercosmo. Give me your hand, it’ll be safer.”

They leaped together and landed a fraction of a second later in a dark room which was poorly lit by the light shining down below. They could hear the babble of voices.

“The gallery,” Pucky whispered. “Let’s proceed cautiously when we reach the aisle. I imagine that people used to occupy this gallery before but the Springers are now decimated and have enough room down there.”

They left the room in which all sorts of old equipment and junk was stored, such as a robot that was out of order. It was much lighter on the gallery and there were few places to take cover. They had to take their chances in the hope that nobody would see them. On all fours they crawled to the rail and cautiously peeked over it. What they saw made their hearts beat faster.

About 20 Springers sat or stood in groups, talking to each other in animated conversation. Apparently a pause had been called in the deliberations to give the individual Springers an opportunity to discuss the subject under debate freely.

Up front at a long table sat Ralgor—whom Pucky recognized from the colourful lump on his forehead, although it was the first time he saw it—and Eztak. The patriarch with the grey beard kept talking with great insistence to Ralgor but the two listeners on the gallery were unable to understand a word. Pucky concentrated his telepathic powers on them and found that Eztak was considering a possible invasion of the planet Terra. He outlined his plan which he wanted to introduce for debate. From the scraps of thoughts emanating from

Ralgor it was precisely the plan he had in mind for which he wanted to win the support of the older Eztak.

“I believe we’ll have to plaster them with our bombs,” Pucky whispered to the impatiently waiting Tako. “They’re about to lose this planet and they’re already scheming to conquer a new one. We’ll throw a monkey wrench into the intrigues.”

There was a big hubbub in the assembly hall. Eztak requested the patriarchs to go back to their seats. He waited till calm was restored, then began to speak.

“We came initially to Goszul’s Planet to consult about measures we could take to counteract the growing menace posed by Perry Rhodan. Unfortunately our action was delayed by some unforeseen events. Now another disaster has occurred. A plague has broken out on Goszul’s Planet whose nature is completely unknown to us. We’ve learned to our great dismay that we’re not immune to it. According to the latest reports seven of the 20 governors are already infected and have lost their memories. We, who haven’t been in contact with the Goszuls, have so far been spared. But it is obvious that we’ll have to leave as quickly as possible to avoid exposure to the disease.”

Eztak waited till the general commotion subsided. In a changed voice he continued. “At this point I’d like to remind you of the real purpose of our meeting which wasn’t called to negotiate questions of trade. My clan was repulsed by a powerful opponent in an attempt to make contact with the planet Terra. I’m referring to Perry Rhodan, the Administrator or President of the planet. He seems to have gained assistance from the Arkonides, whose sudden burst of activity is inexplicable. Rhodan succeeded in destroying a great number of our ships by deploying unknown weapons. Furthermore, Rhodan is definitely in possession of the secret of the Eternal Planet, the legendary world where immortality can be won.”

Again the assembly began to seethe with excitement. The patriarchs put their heads together and started to whisper to each other. They were lured by the promise of eternal life more than by all the riches in the world. A myth suddenly seemed to have become a reality within their reach.

But Eztak tolerated no interruptions. “We’re forced to leave this planet, that much is certain. Under the prevailing conditions I’m going to propose a quarantine of 50 years for this world to the Council of Traders. Much to my regret we’ll have to abandon our technical installations here. My advice, which is shared by Ralgor, is that we rush with our ships and adequate reinforcements to the planet Earth and annihilate Rhodan’s fleet. I’m convinced we’ll find more treasures on Earth than anywhere in the universe. I need to remind you only of the Planet of Immortality.”

Somebody in the background got up and inquired: “How about our armed escort?”

Eztak seemed to have expected the question. “Topthor the Moulder! Yes, I’m afraid we can no longer rely on him. He tried during my negotiations with Rhodan to attack Terra by himself and suffered terrible losses. Almost his whole armada

was devastated. When I later requested his help he was in panic flight. I hardly believe that he'll be ready to attack Terra again."

"Why don't we make a deal with Rhodan if he's so powerful?"

"He's very powerful indeed! Does anybody in this room believe we can expect advantages from such a mighty adversary? He's making the conditions, not us! What could we gain under such circumstances? No, we've got only one choice: we must attack Terra by surprise and weaken its defences to such a degree that we can take possession of it."

Three or four patriarchs shouted excitedly. "What are we waiting for? We're wasting our time with talk. Let's leave Goszul's Planet where nothing is any longer to be gained and hurry up to get to Earth where we can reap the fortune of the Arkonides! We'll force them to tell us the location of the Eternal Planet and we'll gain immortal life."

Etztak made a declining gesture. "Our decision must be unanimous and we can't afford a leak of our plans. Are there any arguments against it?"

A young Springer in the first row raised his hand. "Are we going to leave our battle-robots on Goszul's Planet?"

Ralgor at Etztak's side became restless but controlled himself beautifully and left the answer to the older Etztak.

"Do we have another alternative?" Etztak asked with raised eyebrows. "Our means of disinfection against the Pestilence of Oblivion are ineffective. Under no conditions are we justified to carry this vicious disease into the universe. We'd all suffer unthinkable consequences. We could be responsible for the loss of memory of the intelligent races in the world—a nightmare too terrible to contemplate!"

The subject was too unpleasant for Ralgor. He interrupted Etztak: "Any other objections? If not, I'd suggest we take a vote."

The old Springer agreed. "Is there anybody here who is unwilling to join in a collective action of the Galactic traders against Terra for the purpose of making a colony of the planet and securing the secret of eternal life from Perry Rhodan?"

The question had been put in such a way that nobody answered. Thus the proposal to conquer the Earth was unanimously adopted.

Etztak nodded with satisfaction. "Now let's agree on the details. I suggest we remain in orbit around Goszul's Planet for three more weeks to gather our forces. Why pick another place...?"

Pucky had heard enough. He turned to Tako. "Are you ready with the bombs? I think we ought to let 'em have it now."

The Japanese pulled his three plastic containers out of his pocket.

"Set the fuse for five seconds!" Pucky instructed him. While they prepared the punishing blow, further serious problems were discussed in the hall below. The two mutants were no longer interested in their evil designs since the patriarchs had no chances of putting them into effect.

Tako was busy setting the third fuse for the ignition. Then he looked up. Pucky

was ready. “It’ll be five seconds after they hit. There’ll be a harmless detonation which serves to scatter the bacteria. It’ll also make it look like an explosive bomb. Here we go—one, two, three!”

The five bombs sailed in a high curve through the air and fell in the midst of the assembled people, hitting the ground and the tables. For a second a hush fell over the gathering, then Ralgor, who was the first to recover from the shock, yelled: “Take cover!”

This was easier said than done. Nobody knew which way to jump and how much time they had to get away before the bombs blew up. They all automatically hit the ground in the hope that their neighbours would shield them from the exploding fragments.

When the blast of the five detonations finally came and nothing really happened, they felt greatly relieved and suspected a dirty trick—which was not far from the truth. However, nobody had an inkling of the fact they were bacterial bombs.

Etztak quickly returned to his seat. He held a little raygun in his hand and searched the gallery with his eyes. The bombs had come from up there.

But Pucky and Tako were already out of sight.

7/ ROBOTS AMOK

Perry Rhodan flicked back the switch and broke the simul-contact with John Marshall. The slight background noise of cosmic static became inaudible. Slowly he turned around and looked at Reginald Bell. The two men were alone in the spacious control centre of the gigantic *Stardust*, eight light-days away from Goszul's stellar system.

"What do you say?"

Bell's face showed doubt. "Why did we have to put on such a big show on this planet if all we wanted to do was chase away 20 Springers? It would have been sufficient to infect them alone."

"Not really," Rhodan contradicted. "If only the patriarchs and their crews had become sick they wouldn't have known where they caught the disease. Of course they don't really know it even today but they must assume that also the robots and machines on Goszul's Planet are contaminated. Moreover they've witnessed the ghastly spectacle of the Goszuls losing their memory and having to start all over again from the beginning. Without such a demonstration the expected effect would've been far less persistent. Now we've accomplished two things. They'll put Goszul's Planet under quarantine and abandon their plan to conquer the Earth very quickly."

"I hope you're right, Perry. I'd hate to have to battle it out with these Springers forever. After all there are other tasks waiting for us which have to be solved."

"The meeting of the Springers took place eight days ago. Meanwhile the first symptoms of the sickness must have appeared on board the ships of the Springers. Our instruments show that they're still circling the system at a distance of two light-days and are constantly receiving reinforcements. Major Nyssen of the *Solar System* reports that he has counted a total of 69 ships so far."

Bell whistled through his teeth and tried to smoothen his recalcitrant hair bristles with his hand. "That's an awful lot. I'd like to know how we're going to tackle them."

"We won't have to. The bacteria will do it for us. Nyssen has informed us that numerous consultations have taken place these last few days. The patriarchs visit the commanders of the newly arrived ships. Therefore we can take it for granted that they have all contracted the disease by now. You can bet that all hell will break loose among the Springers in one or two days."

Bell glanced expectantly at the long row of dark control lamps. Each one of the lamps was in electronic contact with a ship of the Springers. The wireless circuit was hooked up to the structure sensor and the positronic brain. As soon as a Springer ship performed a transition in space, one of the lamps lit up. Automatic calculations furnished the direction and distance of the transition within seconds. A graphic system recorded all impulses on a map, which clearly showed where each clan had moved.

“They should start scrambling helter-skelter any moment now,” Bell muttered. “When they realize that they’ve come down with the sickness they’ll try to get hold of the nearest doctor.”

Rhodan smiled indulgently. “I don’t know where they can find a doctor but they really have no reason to be worried. You don’t think I’d spread a contagious epidemic throughout the Galaxy? Don’t let it bother you, Bell. The Springers will have coloured faces and lose their memories for a few weeks but then the symptoms will diminish and eventually go away. In six days the bacteria will lose their potency for passing on the malady. The prerequisites for a widespread infection of other races don’t exist.”

Bell had listened attentively. “Why didn’t you ease John Marshall’s mind when he raised objections to the dissemination of a plague?”

“Because everybody—including him—had to be convinced that it was a serious ailment. One of them could have made an involuntary slip and betrayed the secret. You see, we had to use no more than a bluff.”

“And what about the improvement of intelligence?”

“This happens to be true. When the patients recover from their illness they’ll be smarter than before.”

“The Springers too?”

“I hope! If they have more sense they might give up the idea of the Earth’s annexation to their empire.”

Bell grinned with satisfaction. “You’ve mollified my moral scruples and Marshall will also feel better when he learns the truth.”

“It’s stiff too early for that,” Rhodan said and suddenly paused.

One of the red lamps in the control panel lit up. Almost simultaneously a card was ejected from a narrow slot and flipped down on the table. Rhodan picked it up and read it. “Transition direction sector XP-578-H. Distance 389.057 L.Y.”

“Meanwhile Bell had consulted an astronomical map. “It’s exactly in the opposite direction from Earth!” He looked up in astonishment and smiled. “Does that mean they’ve changed their mind and they...”

A second lamp flashed, followed quickly by a third.

And then a pyrotechnical display without precedent in the command centre of the *Stardust* began: All lights flashed and the slots which were connected with the positronic brain spewed out card after card.

Bell gave up checking all positions on the stellar map. A few random checks

were all he needed. “Not one of the ships has made a transition in the direction of Terra!”

In less than 20 minutes 69 lamps flickered on the control panel. The entire fleet of the Springers had fled in headlong panic in all directions of the universe.

Rhodan stared at the rows of red lamps and the stack of report cards. His face was taut and didn't reveal his satisfaction. There was a cold glint in his eyes but they lacked their usual stem look. His mouth was drawn tight. “I regret only one aspect,” he murmured without looking at Bell. “But I can't have everything, I suppose.”

“What aspect is that?”

“That we were unable to talk to the Springers. I'd like to win them over as friends.”

* * * *

In accordance with Rhodan's radioed instructions, John Marshall began to distribute the healing serum to the contaminated continents where it was received by Ralv's assistants and administered. It consisted of a tiny needle which was saturated with the serum and was imbedded in a small medical patch. The injection occurred by simply putting the strip on the skin. After two days the coloured spots disappeared from the skin and on awakening after the third night the memory returned and the intelligence of the patient increased by approximately 20%.

The same day the fleet of the Springers scattered in frantic flight, John and his mutants left the sail ship to take up new quarters in the vicinity of the spaceport. They moved into the official residence of the Supreme Governor of the Springers, who was lying in the hospital vainly trying to remember who he was.

The building which was not very large was surrounded by extraordinary security installations. A single push of an alarm button sufficed to place an energy curtain around the entire house which could not even be penetrated by a battle-robot.

Here John felt safe. Since half of the governors had been felled by the dread scourge, the robots had become restless and it was brought home to John that the battle was not yet over.

Ralv was slated to drop in for a report. While Pucky perched on the flat roof on the lookout for trouble, watching all directions, John and the three Japanese waited for their ally. The rebel leader had changed in the recent past. The former guerrilla fighter, who was always forced to live in the shadows, had turned into a responsible statesman. His bearing was confident and he regarded his friends from another world as equal partners without forgetting to show his gratitude.

He began his account. “Last night we succeeded in occupying a substation of the automatic control centre. Ten guard robots who were guided from the substation committed self-destruction.”

John was startled. “Self-destruction?” It was impossible since the guard robots possessed no weapons. “How did they do that?”

“I’ve no idea. We took over the substation, located outside town, after we overwhelmed the battle-robot on duty there, which was easy enough. One of our men ran him down with his vehicle. Unfortunately he died as a result of the accident but the robot was hurled so hard against the wall that he was turned into a pile of junk. When we gained access to the control room we learned, with Enzally’s help, how to operate the guidance panel, and we gave orders to the 10 sentry robots assigned to the 13 governors in the administration building to attack and kill them.”

“That was a foolish idea,” John expressed his disapproval, beginning to understand what happened.

Ralv didn’t let himself be interrupted and continued. “The 10 robots stopped and remained motionless. Then they began to glow inside and melted away till nothing was left of them except a few shapeless lumps of metal.”

“Short circuit!” John said knowingly. “The built-in safety factor. They’ll never attack a Springer unless they are first reprogrammed and this can be done only from the central command headquarters, which is firmly in the hands of the battle-robots and the other remaining governors. What are the last Springers going to do, Ralv? The fleet has deserted them and Goszul’s Planet is under quarantine. In other words: nobody is permitted to land here.”

“Our people are doing an excellent job of surveillance,” Ralv said proudly. “Enzally listened in on one of the first meetings. The governors realize that they were abandoned on a contaminated planet and that nobody will come to their rescue for fear of catching the disease. Naturally the governors don’t relish the thought of spending the rest of their lives in isolation. What they need is a spaceship to escape from this world and the plague of oblivion—before they forget everything.”

“That sounds very reasonable. But the question is where will they get such a ship? As far as I know there is no inter-galactic spaceship available to them, only small vessels on which they could barely reach the nearest planet. But that would hardly serve their purpose.”

“Somewhere they must have a ship. A big one. At least they were discussing it. Unfortunately Enzally was unable to find out more because they stopped talking about it.”

“A big Springer ship?” John said in measured tones, thinking feverishly. Didn’t Rhodan once express his wish to be able to study leisurely the technical details of a Springer ship? Maybe here was his chance. “We must determine what the governors have in mind.”

Ralv countered: “The robots are causing me much more concern. How are we going to be masters of our own planet if the robots are trying to prevent us? We have already formed a provisional government and are ready to start the work of reconstruction. But we are facing new difficulties because the robots must have

received instructions to drive us away wherever they see us.

“What do you mean?” John inquired curiously.

“Previously we were the servants of the Gods. We worked together with the robots and took orders from them. Nowadays we can’t even get close to them without being attacked, even when we have no hostile intentions.”

“The governors must have given them instructions to that effect. They don’t want the robots to be in contact with the natives in order to avoid their contagion. This is understandable. You see, Ralv, everything has a natural explanation.”

The rebel was about to reply something when he was interrupted.

A little metal box which was placed on the only table in the room began to buzz and a red lamp flickered at the same time.

John jumped up and rushed to the table. He pushed a few buttons and answered: “Taskforce Marshall.”

“Rhodan speaking,” came the prompt reply. “We’ll land in 10 minutes.”

For a second John lost his speech, then he said hastily: “The planet is still under the control of the Springers, sir! The robot command centre is still in the hands of the governors and they’ve instructed all battle-robots to...”

“We intend to disrupt the operations of the command centre,” Rhodan explained in a calm voice. “Where are you and your men?”

“At the west side of the spaceport. You’ll easily recognize the lone building by its flat roof.”

“Don’t turn off your transceiver so I can home in on it. What could the robots do against our four ships?”

“I don’t know what they’ll do,” John admitted. He realized that Rhodan never took unnecessary risks. He treasured his life as much as the next man—perhaps even more because he was, in a sense, immortal. Yet a thrust by a knife could kill him.

“See you soon,” Rhodan ended his message.

Ralv had listened with great interest. He understood the exchange of words which was carried on in the language of the old ‘Gods’ and was descrambled by the receiver.

John felt that an explanation was in order. “These are my friends. We live in the same world and they’ve come to liberate your planet forever.”

Ralv wavered in his self-assurance. “Liberate us? Why should anybody help us so unselfishly? What made you do it? I’ve never asked you these questions.”

“Rhodan will give you the explanation,” John put him off. “We don’t have time for discussions now, it’s time to act. In a few minutes the Springers who are still here will begin to get wise to whom they’re dealing with—provided they’ve already heard about Terra.”

Eight minutes later the sky over the spaceport was darkened as the gigantic sphere of the *Stardust* slowly descended and touched the ground of Goszul’s Planet for the first time. The three cruisers, *Terra*, *Solar System* and *Centurio*, sat

down so that the *Stardust* was protected between them.

An antigrav transporter took Rhodan and Bell to the house where John waited for them. The energy curtain was deactivated and the little vehicle landed on the roof where they were greeted by Pucky.

“How are you, Pucky?” Rhodan bent down to stroke the ear of the mouse-beaver. “Did you have a rough time?”

“No, it was wonderful,” Pucky shook his head, to Rhodan’s surprise. “I didn’t have to look at that monster for a couple of weeks.”

The ‘monster’ was leaving the transporter and heard the last words. Bell’s hair bristles stood on end but he amazed everybody by keeping his mouth shut. Solemnly he strutted past Pucky as if he were just another dog unworthy of his attention. He found the entrance to the house with somnambulistic dexterity and went down inside.

Pucky followed him with his eyes in extreme disappointment. Rhodan smiled and consoled him. “Don’t take it so hard, Pucky. He must have resented your remark in the bottom of his heart and didn’t want to admit it. You’re a telepath and ought to know...”

“That’s just it!” Pucky complained in undiminished astonishment. “He didn’t even think about me or call me names in his mind. I simply didn’t exist for him.”

“He must have been lost in thought,” Rhodan guessed.

“Yes—always the same and it was complete nonsense too. Pancakes... chocolate pudding... crabs in jelly... cough drops...! What do you make of it? That’s not the way a rational man would think.”

“Oh yes!” Rhodan shook his head still chuckling. “He’s a sly dog. He thought of that poppycock to keep you from finding out what he really thinks. Anyway... what’s new around here?”

Pucky changed the subject with remarkable speed. “We’ll have to do something about the control centre for the battle-robots. It’s about a mile and a half from here. We either must storm it or destroy all robots, which would be a shame.”

“I feel the same way,” Rhodan agreed. “I’ll see you in 10 minutes down there at Marshall’s. Till then keep a sharp lookout here and maintain telepathic contact with the Springers. Please report any change in the situation.”

He followed Bell and caught up with him in Marshall’s room. After greeting the mutants he met Ralv, who was overcome by inexplicable awe when he looked into Rhodan’s eyes, despite his new rank as future head of the government. Yet he quickly realized that he wasn’t facing a conqueror but a friend. Impulsively he seized Rhodan’s hand and pressed it firmly.

They hardly had time to exchange a few words when Pucky materialized between them. “The robots—they’re on the march!” he exclaimed breathlessly. “They’ll be here in 15 minutes. Two hundred of them!”

Rhodan’s face became a shade paler. Though he knew that the *Stardust* alone could turn the 200 robots into a worthless pile of scrap, this fact did little to

console him. The Goszuls would need these robots badly to rebuild their world—or they'd have to forego a unique opportunity to utilize the already existing technological achievements.

“The governors,” said John, who misinterpreted Rhodan's reaction, “are responsible for this. A single bomb would be enough to...”

“No!” Rhodan rebutted. “I prefer to negotiate with the Springers. But first we'll have to take care of the robots. Pucky! Tako! You're teleporters. Enter the central control station and disconnect the impulse machines. Pucky, you can read my thoughts and you know what I want you to do. I want to save the robots. If they're deactivated they'll be harmless and we can reprogram them later at our convenience. Do you follow me, Pucky?”

The mouse-beaver nodded. “We'll be back right away. Come on, Tako! Give me your hand!”

Staunchly thinking about pancakes and pudding Bell stared at the spot where Pucky had just been. He would show that confounded mouse what good telepathy was if he refused to have his brain picked!

John Marshall regarded Bell with a cocked head, cast a questioning glance at Rhodan and finally inquired: “Do you feel alright, Bell?”

“Eh... why?”

“Because you keep thinking...”

Bell cursed all living and unborn telepaths, consigning them to hell. What business of Marshall's was it what he thought? He was about to give a nasty answer when Tako materialized again. The slight Japanese took a deep breath before he announced: “We ran into battle-robots inside the station! They started to attack us and it won't be as simple as we had hoped.”

“What's the matter with Pucky?” It was Bell who piped up.

“He's holding the position. I came to tell you that it'll take at least three minutes—if he can do it.”

Rhodan switched on his wristband transceiver and called the *Stardust*. “Fisher! Activate the defence screen! Don't return the fire of the robots if they start shooting. Pass on identical instructions to the three cruisers.”

Then he quickly turned to Tako. “Go back to help Pucky. Take my impulse-beamer! One robot more or less won't matter.”

The Japanese took the weapon and disappeared. Rhodan hurried with the others to get to the roof of the building where they had an excellent view. They could look over the entire spaceport to the opposite side where the administration buildings and the governors were located. Not far from the buildings was a detached house with a spherical antenna from where the command impulses were transmitted in all directions. It was the control centre of the battle robots.

The robots marched forward in a broad front with lowered rayguns. They represented a strike force of unimaginable, devastating power and it was terrifying to think that the Springers might order them to assault the nearby city when they

saw that they were helpless against the four spaceships. They would run amok and create a bloodbath of atrocious proportions.

“I hope Pucky makes it,” Bell whispered to Rhodan. He could sense that Bell worried less about the attacking robots than his friend Pucky himself. “We ought to help him.”

“It’s too late for that, Bell. He’ll have to see it through by himself.”

The first robots reached the invisible border of the energy dome which surrounded the four vessels. They stopped abruptly and immediately opened fire with all the weapons at their disposal. Colourful rays bombarded the unseen wall, were reflected and harmlessly scattered at all angles. Some of the robots were struck by their own beams and sought safety inside their own protective screens.

After the robots began the systematic encirclement of the four ships to take them under concentric bombardment, the mechanical army came to an abrupt halt. It was as if time had suddenly stood still.

Almost in the same second Tako and Pucky materialized at the rim of the roof. They gazed for a few moments at the immobilized fighting machines and then approached the waiting group. The mouse-beaver gave Bell a triumphant look and reported to Rhodan: “I had to sever the coaxial cable to the antenna but it’ll be easy to repair it again. The robots are stopped in their tracks without an impulse and they don’t know what to do. I assume that they’ll soon return to their quarters to await new instructions. As soon as the antenna is fixed again we can start to reprogram them.”

“Well done, Pucky,” Rhodan lauded his friend, putting his hand on his furry head. “That goes for you, too, Tako. For that matter I must express my gratitude and appreciation to the commando team, John Marshall. Without you my task would have taken much longer and wouldn’t have been accomplished with so little damage.”

“But the plague...” John began, only to be quickly interrupted by the smiling Rhodan. “It’s no worse than the flu or the measles. We’ve got an anti-serum, but even if we didn’t have it, there’s nothing to be afraid of. Two months after the Springers have fled they’ll realize that they’ve made us a free present of the planet. But then it’ll be too late for them to recapture it. We’ll already have made our preparations.”

“But what about the 13 Springers who are conspiring in their headquarters to do their worst?” Bell queried.

“We’ll enter into negotiations with them. It has always been my desire to start a dialogue with the representatives of that mighty race and it seems to me that the time is ripe to hold such conversations under favourable conditions. They can’t fall back on their accustomed sources of power whereas we can enjoy our superiority now to the fullest extent. And believe me, Bell, the outcome of our talks will look accordingly. The initial position at negotiations is always more important than the negotiations themselves.”

Pucky suddenly slipped out from under Rhodan’s hand, which had been patting

his fur, and went over to Bell. With a gentleness that appeared rather odd he took the hand of the surprised Bell into his own and chirped: “Forgive me, Reggie, if I’ve insulted you before. I didn’t mean it. And thank you for having stopped fixing your thoughts on pancakes and pudding. Now I know at last what you really think.”

“Alright,” Bell muttered, deeply touched, looking up to the sky as if there was anything to be seen. “Alright, old boy! We’ve always known what we really think of each other.”

“Old boy?” Pucky piped up. “If you’re referring to *me* you’re way off the beam. If I’m old you’re a baby whose diapers are...”

Bell cast an imploring look at Rhodan and took a deep breath but Pucky didn’t let him get a word in edgewise. “For your information, I’m only 150 years old, my child! But that’s no age for me. You belong in kindergarten with your 40 years, especially if one considers that your brain is just beginning to develop. Furthermore, somebody ought to tell you for once that you...”

“Pucky!” Perry interrupted calmly. “Didn’t you want to skip over to the Springers and request a parley?”

The Vagabond leaper became mock serious as he answered, “Yes, that’s right, Mr. Rhodan, sir. I’m glad you reminded me.” Then, glancing at Bell with his gentle brown eyes, Pucky added: “But when I get back I’ll tell this... this... this...”

He couldn’t find the right word so to save himself embarrassment he dematerialised.

Bell gazed thoughtfully at the suddenly empty spot. With Pucky safely out of earshot, he admitted aloud: “He’s really a cute little critter.” Then he thrust his hands in his pockets and strolled to the other side of the roof, where he studied intently the motionless robot army.

Rhodan stood next to Marshall. Both men followed Bell with their eyes. “That’s what you call a clever retreat,” the telepath commented.

“Let’s hope the Springers are just as clever,” Perry replied, shielding his eyes with his hand in order to look at the building a mile and a half away where at this very moment the 13 governors were confronted with what was probably the greatest surprise of their lives.

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Clark Darlton