

**AT LAST! THE FIRST FULL-LENGTH
PERRY RHODAN NOVEL!**

PERRY RHODAN

**IN THE CENTER
OF THE GALAXY**

PERRY RHODAN

Into the empire of the Metalix—an intelligent but cruel race of robot men—journey the members of Perry Rhodan's staff. Homunk, an android crew member mistakenly identified as the returning god of these automatons, must fight to secure the freedom of the Galaxy. The battle between the non-believers and the crusaders begins as the monstrously evil-minded Metalix plot to destroy the Universe in their Solver Arrow armada.

What the future holds for the Terranian and Arkonide stellar empires can only be found out by this journey—

**IN THE CENTER OF
THE GALAXY**

A VISIT TO THE HOLY CITY

PERRY RHODAN—The Solar Administrator grants a wish

PUCKY—The philanthropic mousebeaver masterminds a mess

Maj. Lan Koster—A commander with no sense of humour

Homunk—The android the robots put all their hopes on

FR-7—A research robot who has all the answers

Harno—A mysterious being at the very end of time

The Robot Priest—To him, Homunk is the enemy

The Mousebeaver patrol—Iltu, Wullewull, Biggy, Ooch, Fippi, Axo and all the others

... and the space ship EX-238 & the mysterious *Silver Arrows*

COULD BE DEADLY!

PERRY RHODAN: Peacelord of the Universe

Series and characters created and directed by Karl-Herbert Scheer and Walter Ernsting.

ACE BOOKS EDITION

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IN THE CENTER OF THE GALAXY

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ORDER OF THE ACTION

1/ MENACE OF THE SILVER ARROWS

page *

2/ PUCKY IN PERIL

page *

3/ ROBOTS VS. ROBOTS

page *

4/ ELEVATION TO GODHOOD

page *

5/ REVOLUTION #2

page *

6/ SAVIOR OF THE UNIVERSE

page *

1/ MENACE OF THE SILVER ARROWS

NO MIRAGE.

The silver arrow was certainly no mirage—its image was right there on the telescreen. Seemingly motionless, it hung among the thousands of stars that constituted the centre of the Milky Way. This inner centre had a diameter of only 30 light-years and a volume of more than 8000 cubic light-years. In an average cubic light-year there was one sun.

“There’s another!” Maj. Lan Koster, in charge of the EX-238, tried, understandably, to keep his voice calm but his excitement was immediately detected. And no wonder, for his first officer was Homunk, an android from the planet Wanderer.

“This time we mustn’t lose it, sir,” said the artificial humanoid. “We’re getting closer and closer to its probable base—and we’ve got to find it.”

Lan Koster nodded agreement. He was a middle-aged man, corpulent yet lithe. A look at his papers would have revealed, to one’s surprise, that he had been in charge of various space exploration craft for nearly 20 years.

“Direct course toward alien object!” navigation officer Koster commanded and then turned toward Homunk. “Take over now, Homunk. I have to... er... talk to my commander. You understand...”

The android nodded. Something like a human smile flickered over his almost Terran features, then he took his place in the commander’s seat vacated by Koster. The next second he seemed to have forgotten the major. He lifted his eyes to the front screen. It was as if he were trying thus to hold onto the alien ship that they had now been following for hours.

Lan Koster left central control and slowly proceeded toward the main elevator. He took his time. He had every reason to, for when he rightly thought about it, this was the craziest assignment of his life.

Never before had he had such a mixed crew aboard, especially if he counted the passengers along with the crew. He could put up with Homunk, even though the android seemed to have little sense of humour. Also the research robot FR-7 would do in a pinch, even though he was always wanting to be smarter than anybody else and was fully aware of the superiority of his positronic thought processes. As to the rest of the company—except for the basic crew...

Koster sighed. He entered the antigravitation elevator and floated downwards.

As for himself, he would have thought it perfectly normal to decline the assignment. Not really because it was particularly dangerous—that would hardly have put Koster off—but because of the conditions connected with the undertaking.

First of all, Homunk. An artificial man, an android had become his first officer and deputy. Koster had nothing against Homunk except that he just *wasn't* human. But he was the personal adviser and friend of Perry Rhodan and that was decisive. Homunk knew the answer to practically every question.

FR-7 did not have the same eerie effect because one could tell just by looking at him that he was a real robot out of the factory. His walk betrayed a certain helplessness that afflicted all robots, no matter how well engineered. But this helplessness was deceptive. FR-7 was really built for research and resembled a walking laboratory completely equipped for immediate analyses of newly discovered organisms or inorganic materials. His miraculous positronic brain forgot nothing and learned something new every day. His right arm was built like a weapon.

It wouldn't have mattered to Koster to take these two robots on board. But occupying important positions—that was more than unusual.

Still—what wasn't unusual on this flight of the Explorer-238?

Koster walked out of the elevator and into the wide hallway that led to the passenger cabins. Since the EX-238 was a spacesphere with a diameter of 200 meters, it provided such unusual luxuries for its passengers.

Passengers! he thought angrily. Some passengers!

He should not have thought that.

He felt a strong shove against his back and stumbled a few steps forward. When he finally regained his balance and turned around, there was no one in sight. The hall was as empty as before.

“You rotten espers!” Koster shouted, and clenched his fist threateningly. “What underhanded methods! To read the thoughts of harmless men and then resort to telekinesis and assault them in such a wretched, dastardly fashion! Just you wait—!”

He had stopped by a door that suddenly opened by itself, as if guided by ghostly hands. Koster clenched his teeth and went in.

Shrill laughter met him as the door closed behind him. By itself, of course. A dozen small figures, hardly measuring a meter in height and covered with reddish brown fur, danced excitedly over beds, tables and chairs, until a curt command stopped them.

The command did not come from Koster but from one of the dwarfs.

The dwarf's name was Pucky.

“You wouldn't take our little prank amiss, I hope,” squeaked the little creature, pretending to look harmless as he squatted in front of the major and saluted him with his right paw. “I've often enough warned you to keep your thoughts well in

hand. It was Ooch who pushed you. Except for Iltu and me, he is the only real telepath of the clan.”

The clan, Koster thought to himself, is the right expression for the group. Twelve mousebeavers at once? No man could stand all of them together for any length of time, especially not when he thinks he’s normal.

And Koster figured he was normal. At least until the moment when Rhodan asked him to take command of the EX-238. Now he was no longer so sure.

“We’re getting a Silver Arrow on the screen, Lt. Pucky,” said the commander, trying to be polite to the small creature, not from any inner compulsion but from pure instincts of self-preservation. “We’re pursuing it.”

“Great!” piped Pucky and grinned. All the other mousebeavers grinned too. A parade of 12 glistening incisors. Expectantly, they looked at Koster. “Then we’ll soon get it.”

Koster had doubts. “You know that we’ve already lost a Silver Arrow twice because we hesitated to intercept it.”

“There’s some reason for it, Major.” Pucky was once more serious. “I don’t have to remind you. You know it as well as I. Standard procedure holds for this instance, too.”

“OK, Lieutenant,” Koster agreed and took pains not to think badly about the mousebeavers. “If you’d like to go to central control-robot Homunk is in charge now. I’ll be in my cabin if you need me.”

He turned around and kept his face frozen as the door was again opened and shut by ghostly hands. Regally he stepped into the hallway. He disappeared in the direction of his cabin.

“We’ll catch it yet,” piped up Ooch enthusiastically and leaped onto one of the beds. He was the only one of the mousebeavers except for Pucky and Iltu who had mastered not only telekinetics but also telepathy. It was no wonder, then, that he thought a lot of himself. “Is this our ship or not?”

“Maj. Koster is, after all’s said and done, the commander. “Pucky tried to dampen Ooch’s enthusiasm. “We can’t really complain.”

“If you look at it realistically,” chirped in a mousebeaver with striking curly hair who was standing off to one side, “he’s quite a rational individual, even though he’s a human being.”

Pucky threw the speaker a devastating look. “That was an entirely superfluous remark, Wullewull. Besides, it was stupid. Where would we be without the Terranians, hm? Have you forgotten that they rescued us when our own home planet was destroyed? Wasn’t it they who brought us to Mars where we grew up?” He cleared his throat. “You at least.”

“I didn’t mean it quite that way,” said Wullewull ruefully.

Pucky was silent and regarded the little band.

Besides himself and Iltu, 10 mousebeavers—it was more than anyone alive could bear. Ten half-grown mousebeavers perpetually ready to play practical

jokes; mischievous menaces born with telekinetic abilities. Worse yet: they insisted that these abilities were primarily for play. On all possible and impossible occasions, they ‘played’ at it. For the past few days they had put the EX-238 antigravitation elevator out of order and had assumed for themselves the role of the gravitational fields. Nobody had noticed a thing. Officers and crew were swept up or down as usual, but now they were held only by the telekinetic powers of the mousebeavers. Until Pucky caught onto it. The unlucky one was a fat technician who happened to be in the elevator at the time. He fell the last two meters into the shaft, landing on his hind end. Ten seconds later, the elevator was again functioning normally.

“Keep your hands off Biggy!” Ooch’s shrill voice startled Pucky out of his thoughts. He looked up. Wullewull had used the interval to waddle up to pretty Biggy who was known by all to be Ooch’s favourite. Since Ooch was the leader of their colony on Mars, no one tried to win pretty Biggy’s favours. No one except Wullewull. He stood next to Biggy and stroked her fur.

“My paws should be no concern of yours,” he shrilled back and flashed his one incisor. No mousebeaver had more than one tooth.

Wullewull had not yet finished speaking when he was already pasted to the ceiling of the great common cabin. Ooch held him there through telekinesis. Since Wullewull was also genetically endowed with telekinetic powers, the contest promised to prove interesting.

For this, Pucky decided, there was no time, however. “Stop it!” he hollered at Ooch, who shrank back immediately.

Wullewull fell from the ceiling and landed safely on all fours. Luckily just beside Biggy. As if nothing had happened, he took up the activity that Ooch had so cruelly interrupted. Biggy began to purr contentedly.

“The major has reported another Silver Arrow,” Pucky continued. “That must mean we’re getting closer to the home base of the aliens—which we want to find. We know their race only through their ships and their robots. Remember what you promised me before we started out and don’t forget it. You all came on board with me of your own free will. Ooch, you haven’t forgotten that, I hope?”

Ooch rolled up his eyes and tried to look innocent.

“Good,” Pucky grinned and nodded to Iltu. “I’m going to central control now. Iltu will stay with you. If there’s the least sign of mischief, she’ll only have to send a thought-impulse and I will come. And then... understand?”

Majestically drawing himself up to his full height, Pucky marched to the door, opened it telekinetically and strolled out onto the hallway. Behind him, the door closed upon itself again.

Ooch sighed. His incisor gleamed. “He’s gone... As for you, Wullewull!”

Iltu and Wullewull acted at the same time. Their telekinetic thought streams gripped the infuriated lover and chained him to the bed. The other mousebeavers howled with glee and danced through the cabin.

Only Biggy went up to the ignominiously defeated one, sat herself beside him

and took his hand. “You’re not jealous, are you?” she inquired innocently.

Ooch turned up his eyes before he closed them to give the impression of sleep.

Many problems, he thought to himself, are best solved in just this way.

* * * *

On the way to central control, Pucky reviewed again recent events in his mind. How had it all happened?

In the past hundred years the ships of Terra in their ever-wider interstellar roamings in space had always been reporting, on their way back to Earth, sightings of curious flying objects. These they had met in the deeps of space. They were slender, spindle-like craft with linear propulsion—or at least with a propulsion that enabled them to fly millions of times the speed of light. They avoided every attempt to contact them. But they did not attack, either. They simply swept away from their pursuers and vanished into the crowd of stars, mostly in the centre of the Milky Way.

No wonder, then, that the Terranians thought their home planet was in this region of the galaxy they’d always before steered clear of.

First signs pointed to mysterious vessels manned by robots. They must have had orders to avoid every contact with another race otherwise their constant flight would have been inexplicable.

One day, some time during the 24th century, a Terranian explorer cruiser was destroyed by one such Silver Arrow, as they called the unidentified ships.

At least, so it had to be assumed.

The cruiser had sent a hyperradio message, reporting that it was pursuing a Silver Arrow. Then the connection was suddenly cut off. The explorer never returned to Earth and was presumed lost.

Terra’s ships were all equipped with good protective shields and so were practically unassailable. They were also equipped with conversion cannons, the most fearsome weapons ever devised. The question was: how could a Silver Arrow possibly destroy the exploration vessel?

When matters had reached this stage, mousebeaver Pucky teleported himself from his country cottage on the shores of the Goshun sea to Rhodan’s office in Terrania. He materialized on top of his desk, discreetly cleared his throat and said: “Perry, there’s no trouble around here now and I’d like to go on a vacation.”

Administrator Perry Rhodan, the most powerful man on Earth and perhaps throughout the known universe, smiled indulgently. He laid aside the document he’d just been working on. In his grey eyes shone understanding for his little friend who had more than once rescued him from a hopeless situation.

“You’ve chosen the right moment, little one. Where do you want to go? To the tellers of tall tales? Are you going to take Iltu, along?”

“To tell the truth, Perry, I haven’t even thought about telling tall tales. Iltu will

come along, that's for sure. After all, she's my wife. But, besides her, I'd like to take along 10 more mousebeavers from Mars."

Rhodan frowned. It was clear he regarded Pucky's request as odd.

"Ten more mousebeavers? You've always said that they were safely tucked away on Mars and thus would not get into mischief."

"That holds even today but where I want to go they could do us all a great favour with their 'mischief'. They are good telekinetics, Perry. So are Iltu and I. That would make a total of 12 telekinetics. Don't you think that with common effort we could intercept a craft in mid-flight and direct it anywhere?"

Rhodan shook his head. "You speak in riddles, little one. Do you want to invent a new sport for the mutants?"

"Hee-hee, not a bad idea," Pucky snickered, amused. He moved a little closer to Rhodan. "But the matter is more serious. I want to spend my vacation doing mankind a favour."

"Well, well," said Rhodan, nodding in acknowledgment. "May I ask what kind of a favour you're referring to? To stop spaceships in flight and then direct them..."

"Just *one* ship and a specific one at that. I want to capture a Silver Arrow."

Rhodan's face suddenly took on a quite serious mien. He leaned back in his chair and stared at Pucky. The little mousebeaver shrank a little under the searching gaze of his great friend but he stood up to it. His back fur raised a little but that was not necessarily a sign of anger or embarrassment.

"So you want to capture a Silver Arrow? And how do you propose to do that?"

Pucky moved even closer to Rhodan "Very simple. Give me an exploration ship—not a large one, just a cruiser. Add a capable commander and the usual crew. Ten mousebeavers for building a telekinetic block—and maybe Homunk, if you can spare him. And a real robot, in case we run into telepathy. In addition..."

"...in addition a few hundredweight of frozen carrots to regale your mousebeavers at a proper party, I suppose."

"Wouldn't be a bad idea," Pucky nodded, all seriousness. "And as commander, try to pick an officer who understands a joke. Not a fried-up strategist without a sense of humour or a sense of nonsense... well, you know what I mean."

"I," Rhodan said slowly, "would not care to be that commander."

Pucky grinned. Then he seemed suddenly to listen inwardly. "Bell's coming. Do we tell him anything?"

Rhodan shrugged. "He'll find out sooner or later—why not now? Besides, he can be helpful to you."

Reginald Bell, Rhodan's closest friend and deputy, walked into the room. He was heavyset and still had his red stubbly hair. Since he was also wearing a cell activator, he had not changed for the past centuries.

When he saw Pucky, he exclaimed in surprise: "Good heavens! I thought you were going to take your vacation at the Goshun Lake."

Pucky suppressed a sharp reply and smiled amiably. "My friend," he began unctuously, "we have something of considerable importance to convey to you. We hope that you will contribute your unconditional support to our undertaking and..."

"When did you start talking so high-falutin'?" Bell interrupted and sat down in a chair next to the table. "Why are you talking in the plural? After all, that's only done by..."

"By 'we' I mean Perry and I," explained Pucky. "But you, considering your fatuous dimensions, should always refer to yourself in the plural, seeing as how you weight twice what normal people..."

"And how about being twice as smart?" countered Bell, secretly smiling at the mousebeaver's misconception of the word 'fatuous'.

"Hm," grunted Pucky and again suppressed a suitable remark. He was obviously having difficulties in containing himself. "Let's not discuss things that are undiscussable. Anyway, listen..."

In a few words, he explained his plan. Bell listened, caught a glance from Rhodan, nodded slowly and said: "The EX-238 is on the moon. She's been overhauled. Her commander is Maj. Koster, a very capable officer with imagination and initiative..."

"Hopefully not *too much* initiative," grumbled Pucky. "Every once in a while I'd like to give a couple of orders, too. After all, it's *my* expedition, in case you'd forgotten.

"Koster's the right man, believe me. And Homunk will be enthralled at the prospect of flying to the centre of the galaxy. I'm just asking myself how you propose to handle 10 mousebeavers; together. You know the little rascals from Mars. It's difficult enough to deal with one mousebeaver—but 10 together...!"

"Let me worry about that, Fatso." Pucky leaped from the table and waddled around the room a couple of times. "I guarantee that they'll listen to me and behave. I'm picking out those just right for the trip."

Bell looked at Rhodan questioningly.

Rhodan nodded and said: "Very well, Pucky, your vacation wish is granted. But be careful. I'm not happy about letting you go and I'd sure hate to lose you. The Silver Arrows... we don't know who sent them. We also have no idea what's on the minds of this unknown race, since they avoid every chance at contact. They avoid not only us but everyone else, too. No one knows who these aliens are. No one knows where their home base is. We can only guess that it's probably a planet revolving around a star in the centre of the Milky Way. It's dangerous to fly there at more than speol (speed of light) because the hazard of collision is too great. There are stars, too, that don't register on our radar. There are thousands of dangers that perhaps we even don't know the names of. You've chosen yourself an uncomfortable place to spend your vacation, Pucky."

The mousebeaver had stopped in front of Rhodan.

"Exactly," he said shortly and succinctly. "I will take a vacation but at least I'll

stay fit. I want to get my rest but not get fat from it.” He looked pointedly at Bell and then grinned with satisfaction. “So my request is granted—excellent. Then Bell can help me arrange all the necessary things. Gentlemen—we thank you.”

With that, Pucky disappeared.

Bell stared at the spot where the mousebeaver had stood. “What a crazy idea,” he murmured, and hit the table with his fist. “Really, an absolutely crazy idea!” He hesitated, then added: “I’d really like to join that little rascal but when I think of being cooped up in a spacecraft with 12 mousebeavers, I’d rather forego this pleasure. Maj. Lan Koster has my full sympathy! He doesn’t know what he’s in for!”

A prediction that was to be fully verified.

Pucky had flown to the moon with Bell. The spaceship EX-238 awaited orders to start. Maj. Koster knew how to hide his surprise when Bell handed him his orders from Rhodan. Then there was the stopover on Mars, where the colony of mousebeavers was in the highest state of excitement as they listened to what Pucky had in mind. When volunteers nearly overran him and Bell and almost stormed the ship, it became evident just what influence Pucky had over his own kind. In less than an hour he had chosen his companions and brought them into the EX-238. With wise foresight, he had taken not only male but also female mousebeavers. After all, he was travelling in the company of Iltu, so, to maintain peace, he had to put the others in the same position.

Then the leave-taking from Bell. With his well-wishes still in his ear, Pucky gave the order to start.

The EX-238 began its flight.

And now they were here, not far from the centre of the galaxy. Today they had met a Silver Arrow for the third time, and this time Pucky had told himself, it must finally work.

They only had to get close enough to their quarry.

He teleported the rest of the way and materialized next to Homunk in central control. Homunk did not betray his surprise at the sudden appearance of the mousebeaver by a single twitch of his features.

“Where is it?”

Homunk pointed at the screen.

“Distance the same: 7 light-seconds. Course unchanged. Speed increased. Navigation getting more difficult.”

Pucky did not answer fight away. He gazed at the screen. The Silver Arrow was easily recognizable in the magnification—a long, slender vessel like a torpedo. There was no indication what mode of propulsion might be guessed. The bow was rounded, the stem almost blunt. If the instruments registered the fight data, it was 100 meters long and 15 meters thick in the middle.

On the screen, which showed only a small section of the universe, more stars were to be seen than from the Earth even on a clear night. Star stood next to star.

The protective shield, now in constant operation, reflected their rays. The stars' pressure of light alone would have been enough to drive a propulsionless vessel to the edge of the galaxy, it was that strong.

"We must get to within a half light-second of the alien," Pucky said at last. "Then—perhaps—we'll succeed."

Homunk smiled.

"A half lisek? Whenever we step up speed, so does the Silver Arrow. It sets its pace according to us, not we according to it. Even now they're forcing their tactics on us. Maybe this time there aren't any robots on board, only their lords and masters."

Pucky jumped into the seat next to Homunk.

"Tell me, Homunk, what do you really think? You're from Wanderer, a world that no longer exists, the abode of the Immortal who created you. What do you know about the aliens we're pursuing? What do you know about the creators of the Silver Arrows? Why do they avoid all contact with us?"

The android needed no time to reflect. "I've never heard of them. There are no data for them in my memory bank. I can't help you—at least not yet."

Pucky stared darkly before him, poorer by one secretly treasured hope. He could not read the thoughts of the android, so he did not know whether Homunk spoke the truth. But why should the android lie?

Pucky looked at the screen again.

"How fast are we going?"

"Ten times the speed of light; we can't do more without danger."

Compared to what was possible in linear propulsion, their speed was almost ridiculous. Three million kilometres per second. Even so, it was too fast if a dark star should appear, a sun that could not be detected until the last moment.

"Let's try it at eleven; maybe then we'll get closer."

Homunk shook his head. "Hopeless. When we were cruising at speed 3 they kept their distance. When we increased our speed, the aliens did, too. Now we're going 10. And if we could speed up to 100 times the speed of light—the aliens can too. We know that they can go even faster. It's senseless, Pucky. We can catch the Silver Arrow only if we can outwit it. Since they've already spotted us, though, that seems a small hope indeed."

"Krosh!" Pucky was crestfallen. Yet his brain sought feverishly for a way out. There was the objective, so close, yet he could not reach it. The Silver Arrow was only a little more than two million kilometres away. A swift spurt of speed...

"No," said Homunk when Pucky suggested this to him, "that's just as senseless. The commander of the Silver Arrow most likely is a robot brain. He reacts in a fraction of a second. Before we can speed up, or at least at the same moment, he speeds up too. We've tried it already."

"How, then, can we possibly outwit him?" Pucky looked pretty helpless. He had thought the whole thing would be much simpler. To sight a Silver Arrow, to

get close, to set up a telekinetic block—and it was as good as done. The rest would be routine. They'd enter the vessel, disable the robots and interrogate the masters. That is, if the masters could be interrogated. But then...?

"It's hardly changed its course till now," Homunk offered into the silence. "Only when a sun's been in its way and had to be avoided. We can only guess that it's going to its home base."

"They can't be that stupid, Homunk. They know we're following them."

"But they also know that they can accelerate if they have to. I would bet that at the last moment the Silver Arrow will increase its speed to a thousand times the speed of light and then make a sharp curve. We'll lose him, and while we're still looking for him, he'll have long ago landed. Within 5 light-years we've got more than 500 suns. Would you want to search these one by one? You don't have enough vacation time!"

"Only three weeks," Pucky admitted, discouraged.

"For just one sector of 10 light-years diameter," Homunk continued, "we'd need about two years here in the centre, if we are to search it systematically. Besides, to accomplish even that in the time given, we'd have to hurry like hell."

"Would it do any good to ask Harno for help?"

That question had preyed on Pucky's mind for a long time. Harno, the mysterious manifestation in the form of a round black ball, had lost himself in the oceans of space and time for many years. When the mutants, in a concerted telepathic effort, called on him, they were to some extent successful. But so far, this strange being, which definitely lacked any organic structure, had not extended the help they'd asked for. As a rule, Harno would appear simply as a chrono-projection and had maintained that he could not come himself—or was not allowed to. He was at the very end of time, Harno had said the last time. And there he must stay.

What 'the end of time' was, no one could imagine. Not Rhodan, and least of all Pucky. Harno indicated that from his vantage point he could look back upon the past of the universe and thus could foresee its relative future. More he would not say. All this was enough fodder for the maddest of speculations.

"Harno?" Homunk suddenly took on such a disapproving expression that Pucky could make nothing of it.

"There are only three telepaths among you—I wonder whether that'll be enough."

"We've already done it with just us three telepaths from Earth."

"So what! That doesn't mean too much!"

"Something, anyway." Pucky shrugged.

Homunk concentrated again on the screen. The Silver Arrow was still two million kilometres away from EX-238. Apparently motionless. But as they were watching, a star on their right grew larger and larger and turned into a huge flaming sun. The instruments registered planets that couldn't be seen with the

naked eye. Then the sun grew smaller again and sank off to the right into the deeps of the universe.

“‘Something’ is not enough,” said Homunk and with this dismissed Pucky’s idea.

Pucky made no reply. He was listening inside himself and slid off his chair. “Sorry,” he murmured, a bit embarrassed. “I’m afraid I’d better get back to my friends. Iltu’s just sent a message.”

Homunk smiled knowingly. “Trouble?”

“A little, maybe.”

“Rascals—to use a human expression. Bell was right: 10 million fleas are more easily controlled than a mere 10 mousebeavers. That other time, the shenanigans with the antigravity gravity shaft...”

“It’s not so bad this time. It’s only a private misunderstanding.”

“I see,” signified Homunk and turned toward the screens.

Pucky waited another 2 or 3 seconds, then he dematerialised. He would show those ten ilts from Mars who was boss.

Besides, he wanted to cut a good figure in front of Iltu.

* * * *

After the rest period, Maj. Lan Koster returned to central control. The navigation officer sighed with relief. It was not to every one’s liking to work with a robot who could not be told apart from a man of flesh and blood.

The Silver Arrow was still 7 liseks (light-seconds) away and had hardly altered its course. It looked as if it were heading straight for its home base. But assuredly that could not be the case. On both sides, the closer suns pulled slowly away. Like beacons, thought Koster involuntarily and sat down. If one could know each sun in this sector, it wouldn’t be difficult to use them as points of reference. They would, in fact, enable knowledgeable persons to find their way surely and without hazard, while they would stand as life-threatening dangers to those not in the know. Under these circumstances, they might even prove to be a trap.

* * * *

That was it!

Suddenly Koster thought he knew why the Silver Arrow was moving ahead of them so unperturbed, always remaining at an equal distance and the same speed. It had no intention to escape; rather, it wanted you simply to follow it. Almost certainly it would not lead you to its home base.

“What are you thinking about?” asked Homunk.

Koster explained.

Homunk nodded slowly, then said: "If it's really as you think, we must adopt opposite tactics to get closer to the Silver Arrow. We must slow down."

"You mean...?"

"Exactly. The aliens will assume we've given up pursuit. They'll reduce speed, too, so that we won't lose them. Maybe we should even pretend we've had a breakdown. It's quite possible that this way we may lead them to some slip-up."

"There's also the risk of losing the Silver Arrow altogether. Anyway, we shouldn't do anything without consulting Pucky. He is, after all, the leader of this expedition."

"I'm surprised he's not here yet," said Homunk.

"It won't take long," Koster assured him; meanwhile he had gathered much experience. "Wherever he happens to be on the ship, he will snap up my thoughts. We won't have to call him especially for that. Any second he may..."

The door opened and Pucky came strolling into central control. His fur was dishevelled. His usually soft brown eyes glittered with anger and he closed the door behind him with unusual abruptness. "And you think," he growled in annoyance, "that the aliens in that ship up ahead will fall for your trick? I don't believe it but maybe it's no more senseless than to keep on flying after it."

"Right," nodded Koster. "You agree, then?"

"Not necessarily. First I'd like to try something else. I'd like to take a good look at the Silver Arrow from close quarters. Homunk will go with me. You, Koster, will maintain your present speed while Homunk and I teleport ahead. It won't be difficult; I can sight the target directly. The return trip won't be much different."

"Do you think it's wise to let the aliens know that you have teleportation powers?"

"I won't let them know, Major. If possible, we won't even let ourselves be seen; but I want to know what kind of crew is on that ship. If there are only robots, as before, there must be a way to outwit them. It was nothing but a wrecked craft when I found a Silver Arrow for the first time. Even if the robot crew had wanted to, it would have been impossible for them to help me. There was also no communication with them.

"What do you think, Homunk?" Koster turned to the android.

"I'm ready," said Homunk briefly. He looked at Pucky. "You look as if your 10 friends had beat you up. More trouble?"

"I beat up Wullewull!" asserted Pucky energetically. "He's always creating problems. Besides, he's much too ugly for Biggy. In addition, she's engaged to Ooch."

"Complicated family affairs," droned Koster and shook his head. "Hopefully, even under these circumstances, you'll be in, a position, when necessary, to set up the telekinetic block that was planned. I can imagine that through the lack of unity..."

“Don’t worry, Major,” Pucky assured him. “Really, it’s all in fun. If it comes right down to it, I can rely on my friends. Homunk, do you need a spacesuit?”

“Not really. A vacuum doesn’t bother me.”

“Then wait here; I’ll be right back.”

When Pucky had dematerialised, Koster stared darkly at the screen. “I’m not sure we’re doing it the right way. Maybe the pretended wreck would have been the best solution.”

“Pucky’s the boss,” Homunk said, and grinned in a very human way. “And frankly, I’m glad of a change. Maybe we’ll know all in another hour.”

It didn’t take even that long.

* * * *

The two figures stood on the round hull of the EX-238 quite near the North Pole. The gravity of the huge sphere held them fast. Around them was the universe. To the naked eye the Silver Arrow was not visible but Pucky was in thought-contact with Koster. From him he found out what the coördinates were. Iltu acted as relay station and gave Pucky’s directions to the commander.

“Over there, the shimmering red sun, Homunk. That’s our direction. It would be simpler if I could receive thought impulses from the aliens but there aren’t any. Either the whole crew consists of robots or they know something about telepathy. It could be that they habitually shield their thoughts. The way back to the EX-238 will be easy, though. We only have to take bearings on the thoughts of the crew, that’ll be enough. Besides, I’m maintaining contact with Iltu.”

It was an unforgettable sight, even Pucky had to admit. The dense conglomeration of stars here in the Milky Way outshone everything else. From here, one could no longer recognize the neighbouring galaxies. Their dim nebulas were outdone by the gleam of the million suns that here were concentrated in a relatively confined area. It was bright on the artificial body named EX-238 but Homunk and Pucky threw no shadows for the light emanated equally from all directions.

“Let’s go—what are we waiting for?” Homunk extended his hand to Pucky. “I hope you can manage this long stretch. After all it’s 7 light-seconds.”

“I’ve teleported across light-years!”

Pucky took Homunk’s hand, concentrated for a last time on Koster’s running stream of information, closed his eyes—and dematerialised. Homunk disappeared with him.

When Pucky could see again, he and the android were floating in space. The EX-238 had disappeared, lost somewhere in the jumble of suns. They had missed their objective by a few kilometres. The Silver Arrow stood seemingly motionless in front of them; in reality it was streaking through space at the same rate as they.

A short tele-jump brought them onto the hull of the alien vessel.

Homunk switched his com-set on minimal range to lessen the danger of being overheard.

“You’ve noticed nothing, I suppose. Still no thought-impulses, Pucky? There must be somebody on this ship!”

“The pilot, for sure, but he must be a robot.” Pucky examined the metal of the hull and then bent down for a closer look. “Exactly as before: an unknown alloy. And old, very old. This ship has been in space for a long time.”

Homunk had not released the mousebeaver’s hand. He had to stand bent over for he was nearly twice as tall. Since he had spurned a spacesuit, he wore the communications device on his chest. Only thus was it possible to communicate with Pucky. At the same time, if he increased the set’s range, he could also talk with Maj. Koster.

“A hundred meters long—the navigator figured it right. Up front, there, you can see the outlines of a hatchway. Maybe the entrance.”

“We don’t need it. If we wanted to get into the ship we could teleport ourselves. Iltu has just sent word that its speed and course are still the same. If both keep it up, there’s a gigantic blue sun in their flight path. We should reach it in about 11 hours.”

“So there will be a change in course,” said Homunk. “Probably at the last moment. It would be better if we didn’t stand exactly here, on the outside of the hull. Gravitational fields will no longer be effective.”

Before Pucky could answer, something happened: the hatchway began to open.

It was about two meters long and a meter wide, an oval metal covering. Behind the flap a brightly-lit room arrayed with tools and instruments was visible. The inner hatchway remained closed.

Homunk had pulled Pucky back a few paces and had raised his right arm. In his hand there was suddenly a small but most deadly raygun. A precaution that at first proved superfluous.

“It could be coincidence,” Pucky whispered, still ready to teleport himself and his companion to safety. “Or do you think they’ve noticed us?”

“For certain!” Homunk had stopped and was staring at the open hatchway. “But what’s this? The inner hatch remains closed. So, nobody can come out to us without letting the air of the ship escape. They want us to go inside.”

That sounded logical. Opening the outer hatchway was beyond doubt an invitation that anybody would certainly understand. Not to take advantage of it would have meant abandoning a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Pucky saw this right away. But he was unwilling to fall into a well-prepared trap.

If a trap, then it had better be a profitable one.

“Inform Koster,” he whispered to Homunk. “I’ll give Iltu the necessary instructions. Hurry! Two minutes, no more.”

He turned off his communications set in order not to be distracted by Homunk’s conversation with the commander, and took up thought communication with Iltu

instead. Luckily, no transmitter was needed for that. Their telepathic connection could not be severed.

“Listen, Iltu, you know what’s happened. We’re going into the alien ship and you must maintain contact. If we’re in any immediate danger, we’ll teleport ourselves back to the EX-238. But in case we encounter no trouble we’ll try to establish some sort of communication with the alien crew. Koster is to follow us and not let the Silver Arrow out of sight. Do you understand?”

“Be careful, Pucky, Please!”

A smile flitted over Pucky’s face.

“Don’t worry. We’ll look after ourselves but we can’t let the chance to learn more about the aliens pass us by. They’re inviting us to board their ship. No other explanation for their opening the outer hatch while leaving the inner hatchway locked. They know we’ve been following them. They want to speak to us—if they can speak. I’m afraid they’re not telepaths. I’m even afraid they don’t emit any thought-impulses whatever.

“Robots?”

“It seems that way. As always: no living being on board, only robots. Who their master is we’ll learn later—*maybe*.”

“And if we lose you?”

“That’s quite possible. In that case, build a telepathic block with Ooch and try to track me down. In fact, Iltu, the thought’s not so bad. Maybe it will be the only way of finally finding the alien planet. They may carry us off but you will be right behind.”

“And if we lose contact with you, Pucky?”

The mousebeaver twitched his shoulders involuntarily. “Then it’s going to be a *very* long vacation, my sweet.”

He tuned in again on the communications set. He listened as Homunk gave final instructions to the commander and then again switched to minimal distance.

“Koster is informed,” said Homunk. “He will keep on behind us.”

Pucky nodded. “Let’s go—what are we waiting for?”

The airlock proved rather spacious but nothing in it indicated that any human or other organic beings were on board. No spacesuits, no air purifiers, no weapons—nothing. Only the hardware for the outer hatchway, the ventilation ducts and...

“Ventilation ducts!” said Pucky as they stood in the enclosure and waited for the outer hatchway to close. “Robots don’t usually need any atmosphere. Are our friends an exception?”

“The hatchway!” Homunk exclaimed. “It’s closing. It would be the usual procedure if human beings were manning the ship. Suppose all your conjectures are—right?”

When the hatchway was closed, they waited for the hiss of air flowing in.

They did not wait in vain.

“I do believe,” murmured Pucky in an excited voice, “this time we’re in luck

and will meet the masters of the robots—even if robots are manning the ship. They're letting air into the airlock. I don't think robots need air. When I entered a Silver Arrow for the first time. I had changed into a quantum of light due to the ultradimensional change-over of the molkex..."

There was not enough time for Pucky to describe his previous encounter for at that moment the inner hatch opened. Behind it one could see a bright hallway. It was as well lit as the pressure lock. The floor was metal, not covered by any carpets.

Homunk had once more hidden his weapon in his belt. With his quick reactions it would have taken only a fraction of a second for him to get it ready for action. It made no difference whether the weapon was in his belt or in his hand.

Pucky informed Iltu of all that was happening by merely thinking about what he saw and experienced. Now and then he received confirmation that his connection with her was still good. The EX-238 was following them at the same distance and at the same speed. Ten times the speed of light and the huge red sun was still 10 hours flying time distant.

"Apparently we're to leave the lock," Homunk guessed and started ahead. He kept close to Pucky, though, for if any danger should suddenly arise he did not want to be without the possibility of returning by teleportation. Without this possibility, the whole undertaking would have been sheer insanity.

Undecided, they stopped in the hallway. It led off to both right and left for about an equal distance. To the left was the bow, apparently the ship's central control

"Let's go," Pucky proposed and dragged Homunk along with him. "When the aliens invite us so kindly, we shouldn't hesitate to pay them a visit. Do you see the doors? Cabins? Do robots need cabins? It seems to me they're behaving in a very human way—and, if I'm not mistaken, they'll look that way too."

Homunk had stopped in the hallway and was starting some analyses. To this day, Pucky did not know how Homunk managed it, for he had no instruments to work with.

"The atmosphere is suitable for human beings," he said. "So, for you, too. Plenty of oxygen and other air constituents. I think we're going to see something surprising."

"I think so too," said the mousebeaver. "We must be dealing with a special kind of robots who love surprises. Before, the time I first..."

Again he could not continue the tale of his adventures for Homunk, as just now they heard footsteps. They sounded from the left and were coming closer. Then a figure appeared in the hallway.

It was a shimmering metallic robot without any clothing. Its walk was a bit heavy but one noticed it only if looking for it. And one looked for it because even from the very first it was plain that it was a robot that had to be dealt with. Its entire build suggested human engineers. It had two legs, two arms, hands with five fingers, and a small trunk with a humanoid head. Its two eyes glittered under

its bald metallic skull. Under it was set a well-shaped nose. The mouth was angular. Both ears were round, copied from the human.

A humanoid robot—as they had expected.

So, no surprise.

Pucky had taken Homunk's hand. He concentrated on the sudden leap that would bring them to safety, if necessary.

The robot came toward them and stopped close in front.

Pucky would not have been surprised to have heard human sounds from that angular mouth but he waited in vain. The robot only looked at them and it appeared that it analysed even their most secret thoughts, so sharp and penetrating did its cold gaze become.

Then it turned around and went ahead.

Pucky took off his helmet and hung it on his belt. Homunk disconnected the communications set. Then they followed the robot.

“I don't think we're in any immediate danger,” said the android. “How will we explain our presence, in case they ask? We shouldn't, after all, let them know that you're a teleporter.”

“They'll know it anyhow—or at least guess. There's no other reasonable explanation.”

The robot had stopped. The hallway had come to an end and a doorway about a man's height closed it off. Suddenly the robot turned around and bowed before Homunk. It did not pay any attention to Pucky. Then it stepped aside.

The door opened.

Behind it was a room crammed full of control instruments, screens, navigation equipment and all kinds of panels. In front of it all were comfortable chairs on runners to enable them to be anchored to the spot at any time. Some robots glided back and forth in the room without paying any attention to the newcomers.

On one of the screens, the EX-238 was clearly recognizable.

Behind them, the door closed with a dull sound.

Pucky still had hold of Homunk's hand. It was going much too smoothly and easily. For decades the Silver Arrows had avoided every contact with the spaceships of the Empire and now suddenly the opposite was happening.

Why?

A robot rose from a chair and came towards them. He, too, gazed at them with a searching look before he made the slightest of bows and indicated two empty chairs. It was such a human gesture that Pucky's every speculation was changed from one second to the next. These robots were surrounded by a deep mystery that had to be pierced. They had had some connection with men, that was evident. Even their appearance pointed to it. But also their entire behaviour, their gestures and their manners.

But who were these men? There was not a single instance of anyone's ever meeting them.

The lost cruiser...?

And if that—the crew certainly wouldn't have had enough time to train the robots in Terranian manners. Besides which, it was evident that the robots had existed for centuries—if not longer.

Homunk and Pucky sat down. The robot, too, took his seat in silence. He looked at the screen. There was nothing for Homunk and Pucky to do except wait and see what would happen. They used the time to observe the EX-238, which was in all its details as clear as if it had been just a few hundred meters away, seemingly motionless among the suns in space.

And then—suddenly—the EX-238 disappeared.

Nothing but the blazing stars filled the screen.

But the suns were no longer motionless; they seemed to wander. Then they streaked across the screen with vicious speed and disappeared at the edges.

Pucky and Homunk felt nothing of the unbelievable acceleration with which the robot ship must now be forging through space. From the movement of the stars it was also evident that the course was being constantly altered. All of this happened so fast and took them by such surprise that Pucky could not even think of teleporting them back to safety. If necessary, he would have done it without Homunk but now it was much too late. Even his telepathic contact with Iltu was broken.

“What is...?” Homunk began but Pucky interrupted him: “Don't worry. They can't harm us. If I wanted to, I could have them all whirling through the hallway like helpless puppets. We'll find the EX-238 again when there's more quiet and we can concentrate. Keep cool and hold yourself in readiness.”

“Nothing can happen to me but you're in danger.”

“No more than you. You don't know that besides being a teleporter I'm also a telekinetic. At the right moment it will come as a great surprise to them, you can bet on that. It'll be enough for me if they just take us to their planet of origin. If their lords and masters are not on board, hopefully they'll be there. I'd like to meet them.”

“Be careful! If they can understand us...”

“I'd be glad to let them have all my secrets if only they could understand,” replied Pucky and signalled quickly with his hand.

“Quiet now. I think their tin boss wants to say something to us.”

“‘Say something’ is good,” murmured Homunk. “It doesn't look like their mouths are made for speaking.”

The robot, who had sat with them in front of the screen, had stood up. With an almost courteous gesture, he bade the two prisoners—or were they guests?—to follow him.

Pucky waited until Homunk had gone ahead. The three robots remaining in control centre paid no attention to them. They sat in front of their control boards or busied themselves with various tasks. In the back of the control centre was a

huge structure with uncountable scales, dials, measuring instruments, levers and switches. Its massive pedestal was built into the floor.

As Pucky passed by the huge construction, a vague memory stabbed at him. Somewhere he'd seen such a thing before—but where? That time on the Silver Arrow? He was no longer sure but he made up his mind to search for further memory points. Maybe he could then picture what was actually going on here and who was behind the mysterious spacecrafts and their robot crews.

The commander—at least Pucky and Homunk took him for such—took them back into the wide hallway and from there to a different room. In the middle stood a table with chairs all around. On the walls were video screens and technical installation's whose purpose could not immediately be divined.

"I'm curious about what he's going to tell us," said Homunk and sat down without waiting for an invitation. The robot seemed to have expected nothing else and took his place without paying any attention to Pucky. There was nothing for the mousebeaver to do but follow his example, unless he wanted to remain standing.

"I notice they treat you with much more respect than me," he grumbled. "I wouldn't have thought these shabby robots were prejudiced."

"You're prejudiced yourself," Homunk pointed out to him. "May I remind you that I, too, am a robot?"

"Well, but first of all, you're only half a robot; and then, my value judgment concerns only these *sad* figures here. Besides which, you are mistaken when you ascribe any race at all to robots."

Homunk's expression did not change as he replied: "I'm afraid, Pucky, you'll soon have the surprise of your life."

Before Pucky could answer, his attention was deflected by a sudden movement. One of the screens flared up into constantly changing abstract patterns. The changes gradually slowed until the image was finally set. Then lines formed, creating new contrasts and impressions.

A sphere stood out. An exploration craft of the Terranian fleet. It raced through space with fantastic speed and was still accelerating. But its course was not right. Maintaining it would mean racing straight into the centre of a gigantic flaming sun.

"That's the ship that disappeared!" cried Homunk who, with his positron-directed eyes, could read the tiny lettering on the round hull. "The missing ship! What is this?"

The answer was not long in coming.

The Terranian exploration craft gave up its vain attempt at manoeuvring around as a Silver Arrow suddenly closed in from the side. At its bow, clearly recognizable, were magnetic clamps pushed far out from the hull and trying to catch the hurtling ship. But the exploration craft seemed to misunderstand the intentions of the Silver Arrow. It constantly altered its flight path without being able to escape the gravitational fields of the gigantic sun. The changes in course,

however, were enough to thwart the robot ship's attempts at rescue.

It was clearly evident that the commander of the Earth ship wanted to avoid contact with the aliens in order not to have to give away the galactic position of the Earth. Rather would he sacrifice himself and his crew than to be rescued by the aliens.

Pucky, who had breathlessly followed the show that was now being projected before his eyes, could well put together what had happened. The Earth ship had met a Silver Arrow and had immediately undertaken pursuit—that matched perfectly with the communication received at the time. Communications failed either because of technical difficulties or because of interference from the aliens. Apparently there had also been a battle during which the spacesphere was so damaged that it lost its ability to manoeuvre properly. That explained why it was hurtling directly into the sun. The Silver Arrow tried to rescue the ship, but the Terranians kept them from it. They had to assume—and seemingly rightly so—that such a rescue was motivated by anything but magnanimity. Terra's position must remain a secret at all costs—and there were too many indications and data on such an exploratory cruiser.

The gigantic sun grew ever larger. The spacesphere became tiny in comparison to the glowing star. It was now falling directly into its centre. Changes in course seemed no longer possible in the reach of the unbelievable pull of gravity. The Silver Arrow had fallen back and swung into a different path. In a flat parabola it tried to escape the heavy pull of gravity. The commander, whoever he might be, had given up the rescue attempt only at the last moment, for he managed only with the greatest of efforts to escape the sun's field of gravity. With increasing speed, the Silver Arrow vanished into the vastness of the universe.

The last seconds of the drama were approaching. Pucky watched the screen as if glued to it, without reflecting on whether this was a trick film or a genuine portrayal.

The hull of pure arkonite began to glow as the solar flares shot into space and enveloped the ship. Now it was naturally much too late for the crew to try to break away with a life boat—if indeed there ever had been any hope of that. It was much more likely that no one in the ship was any longer alive.

And then the exploration cruiser exploded and burst into a thousand pieces that disappeared like comets into the sun's fiery furnace. Seconds later there was no trace left. The screen went blank.

Homunk and Pucky stared at the robot dumbly. They couldn't say a word. Certainly they had an explanation of what had happened to the missing ship at last but they felt anything but satisfied. On the other hand, there had been definite signs that the Silver Arrow had wanted to rescue the lost Terranian ship.

The robot looked at them calmly and patiently. He seemed to be waiting for a reaction. What he had wanted to tell them was clear enough now. But it was not at all clear how they should reply.

Homunk did not move as he said: "He wants to tell us that they have no evil

intentions. They tried to rescue our ship. There must have been a second Silver Arrow nearby to shoot the film, though. Maybe the whole thing was staged just to gain our confidence.”

“When it was all happening, though, no one could know that we’d ever show up here. I think the film was genuine.”

“Assuming it was—what should we do now?”

Pucky had no chance to answer. It had also become superfluous since the robots now set the pace for any further action. The mechmen displayed a set of double standards towards the two intruders. It remained a mystery for the time being why the two of them were treated so differently.

The robot had stood up. He bowed to Homunk and then went to the door. Homunk had understood the invitation, stood up and followed him. Pucky, who was slowly beginning to burn over being ignored, wanted to stand up, too, but the robot stopped and made a preventive gesture with his hand. At the same time, he opened the door. Outside, two other robots were waiting. They came into the room and approached Pucky. Their movements were determined and purposeful. Their assignment seemed to concern only the mousebeaver, for they ignored Homunk altogether.

“Get your paws off me,” Pucky screamed as both robots grabbed for him. “If you touch me, I’ll scare the hell out of you.”

Homunk had stopped. “Looks like they sure are differentiating between us—racial prejudice after all!” he said. “I don’t think I have anything to fear, and *you* can certainly handle them alone all right. So go on, and I’ll follow the commander. If necessary, teleport yourself and look for me. We must find out what they’re planning, why they’re separating us, and how they think. Maybe it can’t be called a mentality, but they do seem to have some kind of self-concept. And it looks like you don’t make the grade here.

“They’ll soon get over that,” Pucky threatened and remained standing uncertainly. “But I should find out what they’re planning to do with me.”

“That would be useful. We have to know where we stand with them. Haven’t you noticed the respect they pay me? There must be a reason for it.”

“Do you think they’ve decided you’re not a human being after all but an android?”

“Seems more likely it’s the reverse: they think I’m human.”

Pucky sighed.

“Well, OK, I’ll behave. But if they treat me too badly, they’ll get the surprise of their lives. Just wait, Homunk, and see who it is around here who’s prejudiced. If only you were a telepath!”

“We still have our communications set. Don’t let them take it.”

Pucky grimaced as if to say: have you ever seen anyone take anything away from me? Then he let the two robots take him between them and actually march him off. It was just possible that they wanted to show him something.

Pucky had no idea how right he was in that assumption.

While Homunk and the commander disappeared in the direction of central control, the mousebeaver was gently urged the opposite way. Both robots seemed very sure of what they were doing and apparently had no idea with whom they were dealing. At this moment, it would have been more than easy for Pucky to teleport himself outside into space with his two attendants, to leave them there and jump back into the ship. But he saw that Homunk was right. First of all, they had to find out what was with these curious beings—artificial or not. I'm a fool, Pucky scolded himself as he reached a point in his reflections when he began to consider the robots as live creatures. They had been built and put on ships in which they made a wide area of the galaxy dangerous. But someone must have designed and produced them. To find these creators was the whole sense and purpose of their expedition.

But that was no reason to let himself be treated like a bothersome pest!

Pucky firmly planted his feet on the metal floor and stopped. The two robots grabbed him the harder—no trace any more of restraint or courtesy—and pulled him along against his will. It took all of Pucky's will power not to hurl them against the wall telekinetically. That satisfaction he wanted to save for later. The first order of business was to find out what they wanted from him.

Certainly nothing good.

They passed the inner hatchway of the airlock. Farther on toward the stern, the hallway ended in a rectangular door. The robots steered him towards it.

"Do they want to explain their method of propulsion to me?" Pucky brightened and stopped fighting against the rough way they were handling him. "But that's very friendly of you. For a long time I've tortured my head over which system you favoured." He shook his head. "Your creators must have been real idiots, though. They gave you a mouth—not to talk but to lubricate you!"

Speech was useless. There was no reply.

But when he finally got it, it was a real shock.

The two robots had pulled him through the rectangular door that closed behind them automatically. They were in a square room that took up the entire width of the ship. Directly behind it must be the propulsion machinery in which Pucky was so interested. The separating wall was crammed with instruments and switchboards. Robot technicians attended them, gliding silently back and forth without paying any attention to the new arrivals.

Pucky was dragged all the way to this wall of control panels.

The grip the two robots had on him was so hard that without his parapsychological abilities he would have had no chance of escaping them. The metal fists held him so that he could hardly stir but he didn't try to get free. He had to find out what they intended to do with him. This wouldn't take very long.

A third robot came up to them. The two must have transmitted an order to him, silently and without any gestures. Maybe they had some kind of broadcasting and receiving equipment in their positronic brains whose emissions could not be

registered by Terranian instruments.

The third robot opened a round hatch about half a meter in diameter in the middle of the wall. Behind it there was a small dark compartment. Enough was visible, though, to tell Pucky what it was.

It was the antechamber to the atomic converter.

At least now the question of the Silver Arrow's source of energy was clarified. They had an installation by which they could get energy from any material through atomic conversion. Whatever material was on hand could be put into the antechamber where it would be scanned by a tracing apparatus and then forwarded for further processing. Whatever couldn't be used would be shoved out the refuse lock. The rest would be advanced to the converter where the conversion would take place automatically.

Conversion of *any* material was possible.

Even organic material.

Pucky understood immediately that the robots had decided he should die. They did not take him for a fully developed living being and wanted to get rid of him. That was the reason for their contemptuous behaviour. Homunk had been accepted but he, Pucky, had not.

This realization filled him with such fury that for a few seconds he forgot all good resolutions. With one jerk he freed himself from the hands of the robots, who meanwhile had loosened their iron grip. In a single leap he sprang back two meters but the closed door prevented complete retreat. Stopping, he saw that his antagonists had drawn their side arms—small pistols that looked deadly. Probably rayguns. In this small room, absolutely deadly.

To Pucky's understandable fury were added instincts of self-preservation.

Lightning-fast he activated the telekinetic sector of his mutant brain. The robots' hands froze in mid-motion. And then the bodies of metal were lifted high by an invisible force and floated weightlessly in the air before they disappeared through the antechamber of the converter like so many pancakes. Pucky sent the third robot after them for good measure. It wasn't hard for Pucky to close the hatchway without coming near it. For safety's sake he let the door mechanism click shut. With the energy obtained from the conversion of three robots, the Silver Arrow should be able to cross the centre of the Milky Way three times easily.

The other robots had put their work aside. Pucky saw that they were unarmed. There were four of them, all technicians. Though they had seen what was happening certainly they did not understand. One thing they must, however, have understood: the little mousebeaver was their enemy.

They advanced.

Like the other robots before them, they acted in unison, as if according to a silent arrangement. They came at Pucky from all sides while he was calmly considering whether to avoid any further battles by teleporting himself to another part of the ship. But then the thought that four enemies more or less might play an

important role at a later stage of the game won the upper hand. Besides, it was time to unveil his own personality so that the robot commander would see what a mistake he had made by underestimating a mousebeaver. Such an underestimation had never yet done anyone any good.

The 4 assailants suddenly ran against an invisible obstruction in the middle of the room; they stood around perplexed. Then, before they could adopt other tactics, they were taken hold of by an irresistible force that picked them right off the floor. The same force flung them against each other, after they had a good running start in midair. The length of the room must have been 15 meters and the acceleration that Pucky imparted to them was enormous.

There was a frightful din as metal clanged against metal. The crash landing of a small aircraft could not have sounded worse.

With battered and partly damaged bodies, the 4 robots were hurled onto the floor as Pucky released them. They stayed where they had fallen and did not stir.

They had not exactly been turned into scrap iron but extensive repairs would have to be made to get them functioning again. For the time being Pucky had reached his goal. His fury had evaporated and he was no longer in danger.

This part of the ship now belonged to him.

He thought of Homunk and set the communications equipment on short-wave. "Homunk! Can you hear me? Where are you?"

There was no reply.

That did not mean much. Very likely Homunk had not turned on his receiver, since he would see no occasion for it. *Him* at least they were treating with all due respect.

"I'll worry about him later," murmured Pucky, put on his space helmet and locked it. Then he teleported himself to the outer shell of the ship where he could decide in perfect peace what he was to do next. It wasn't going to be simple. The robots would not give him recognition, and he had now dealt them a grievous blow. He was an enemy, while they had taken in Homunk with special courtesy. Really only because he was humanoid? Or perhaps they recognized his android construction?

Around him Pucky saw the bright spherical shell formed by millions of suns. They were now so concentrated that there could be no talk of constellations. Races evolving in this part of the galaxy must have quite a different idea about the creation of the universe than human beings. What did their gods look like, what was their religion? On Earth, the clear night sky was dark, for the few thousand stars visible even to acute eyes threw but little light there. But from here the universe must seem like a collection of stars crowding in upon each other and mutually influencing their orbits.

Somewhere out there in the swarm of uncountable stars must be the EX-238, alone and lost. Iltu would be trying to reestablish contact with Pucky without letup. Even Ooch might be helping her. If only they knew the direction, they would succeed; but without directional beaming their thought impulses would

simply be lost somewhere in infinity.

Radio waves!

Pucky turned the sender onto maximum range and called the EX-238 several times running. Then he asked for verification and turned the set to 'receiving'.

At this precise moment he realized that the radio equipment was useless in this part of the galaxy. The interference of the many suns and radio stars was such that all sensible oral communications were rendered impossible. In the loudspeaker there was nothing but an unending crackling and ringing. No radio transmission could ever penetrate all this.

Pucky turned off the set. Helpless, lost and small, he stood on the hull of the alien ship, surrounded by the splendour of the million suns and the cold loneliness of the universe. He was alone, for the first time. in his long life, really alone. Only eternity stood by him but gave him no comfort. On the contrary, it mocked at him. In the middle of uncountable sun systems, perhaps even inhabited systems, he stood abandoned and waited in vain for help.

The robots! Only they could be of help now. If they wouldn't help of their own free will, they would have to be forced.

Pucky shook his head. To resort to force was senseless. The purpose of the entire expedition would be thwarted by it. Besides, there was Homunk. They had treated him better, and if the android was smart enough, perhaps he could manage to...

Pucky broke off his train of thought. It was clear that the initiative was taken out of his hands. There was nothing else for him to do but keep quiet and await developments. He should hide in the ship until Homunk had the chance to come to an agreement with the robots. So long as that was not the case, every attempt to get them to do something would fail.

The Silver Arrow's course pointed directly to a yellow sun that could not be more than one or two light-years away. It occurred to Pucky that they were in an area of relatively sparse suns, an area that stretched outward like a sphere. The nearest stars were almost all at an equal distance. Without any special flights of fancy, it could easily be determined that the yellow sun occupied an unusual position.

It had the effect of a focal point of the concentration of stars in the centre of the Milky Way.

If that was so, then it *was* the centre of the Milky Way.

And the Silver Arrow was flying directly towards it.

Then Pucky grasped that the trip into uncertainty would soon be at an end.

But not the uncertainty itself.

2/ PUCKY IN PERIL

As the Silver Arrow disappeared from the screen, Maj. Lan Koster had the EX-238 hurtle into space at an unheard-of speed. His thoughts alarmed Iltu who appeared immediately in central control along with Ooch.

It had always been difficult for Koster to differentiate between one mousebeaver and another. They all looked alike as far as he was concerned. But Iltu was a bit smaller than Pucky and built more gracefully; besides which, her incisor wasn't white but a soft rose. At first glance, though, these differences did not matter. Ooch however could well have been Pucky's twin brother. He had the same crafty expression, the same broad beaver tail and the same red-brown fur. Only he could not teleport himself.

Iltu brought him along. "We've lost contact," she piped up excitedly.

Koster pointed to the empty screen.

"I'm not surprised—the alien ship accelerated fast enough to make me suspect a jump through hyperspace—that they can fly at greater speeds than light. They have simply taken a gigantic leap and disappeared."

"Why have we lost contact?"

"Because the Silver Arrow radically changed not only its speed but its direction. Telepathic thought impulses are effective over great distances but only if they are beamed in a definite direction. Our radio contact is also off but that does not surprise me. There are too many radio suns in the neighbourhood. The interference is so bad that we can't even get through to Terra. It was ill-advised to let Pucky and Homunk go..."

"We must find them!"

Iltu's voice was still ringing in Koster's ears. He knew how much the little mousebeaver loved Pucky but there was no trace of despair and hopelessness to be heard. The little voice sounded worried, all right, but not really despondent and defeated. For a moment Koster was ashamed of having even thought of giving up in the face of a seemingly impossible assignment. Iltu read his thoughts. She came closer and took hold of his hand.

"Right," she said, "we must find them...?"

"Of course we'll find them," he nodded. "Even if we have to land on every planet in this sector of space. Even if it takes years, we'll find Pucky and Homunk. Maybe we'll meet another Silver Arrow and can follow that."

“Och!” said Ooch. It was his favourite expression in all possible situations and the real reason for his name. “If we do find another such ship, we’ll try the telekinetic experiment Pucky was planning.” He grew suddenly silent and listened inwardly. Then he continued, quite excitedly: “I have to go to the others! Wullewull has taken advantage of all this and...”

He ran to the door and was out in the hall before anyone could say anything.

“What’s the matter with him?” Koster asked, puzzled.

“Biggy!” Iltu, explained, then pointed to the screen. “Which sun are we going to start with?”

From the very first it had been a hopeless enterprise. The EX-238 was somewhere among a million suns and just one could be the right one. And hitting on the right one was the only way to rescue Pucky and Homunk.

The first three they came to had no planets. They were recorded to prevent a repeat flight.

The fourth sun had seven planets; the second one was inhabited. Koster circled it several times before he landed near a recently built city. The analysts reported that the inhabitants were a distant humanoid race, apparently colonists of the Arkonides. They had planetary space transportation and a robot technology.

Lan Koster assigned FR-7 to contact the natives, let him out through the locks and then threw a protective energy screen around the EX-238. He did not want to risk a surprise attack.

The robot marched directly toward the city. The landing of the alien spaceship had been noted and appropriate preparations had been made. On a small spacefield stood 7 ships, all spherical. Not one of them a Silver Arrow.

Even before FR-7 could reach the city, several motor vehicles met him. They kept a respectful distance and soldiers deployed into a protective chain. They did not come closer. Three beings in uniform set themselves in motion and came toward FR-7.

FR-7 had a positronic brain with a memory bank that put to shame any human memory. His training had crammed him with knowledge he could use instantly without having to ponder it. His insides began to work and before the three beings reached him he knew almost everything about them.

More than 5,000 years ago the Arkonides had forged ahead to this part of the galaxy. Altogether 10 different expeditions vanished in the concentration of stars at the Centre. They were never heard of again and were simply recorded as lost. This much FR-7 knew. The rest was the result of logical deductions.

The planet here was one of the many that were settled by the Arkonides. The assumptions were thus confirmed. Already FR-7 knew that he was not facing the creators of the Silver Arrow. He now activated his speech sector to be ready to understand and answer any sound symbols the aliens might have. His combination positronic structure enabled him to make sense of any vocalized speech after he had heard a sample of it.

The middle one of the uniformed beings was a robot. FR-7, having been built

and programmed by Terranians, bowed in greeting, but to the robot last. With this gesture he announced himself as a messenger of humanoids.

“Welcome to Zermalonka,” said one of the beings in a loud voice. “We don’t often have visitors. Who are you?”

FR-7 registered the information that here they didn’t know anything about either the rise or fall of the Terranian-Arkonide stellar empire. This particular race lived off to itself and even in 300 years of intensive exploration the Terranians had not been able to penetrate this region. The Europeans, who, a thousand years ago had landed in Africa or America for the first time, must have felt something like FR-7 now.

“I come to you from the Terranians, a mighty race, but with a request.” FR-7 did not behave instinctively but logically—and thus naturally as programmed in a human way. He stressed the power of Terra but added immediately that he was asking for something. That should assure him the good will of the Zermalonkites. “We’re looking for a ship. Did any ship land in your world just a short while back?”

“The last alien ship landed here 10 revolutions of the sun ago,” sounded the ready answer. In a fraction of a second, FR-7 figured the date. He knew the rotation and the revolution times of the planets. The ship the aliens were referring to landed about 7 years ago. “It was an exploration expedition from a neighbouring system. It stayed for half a revolution of the sun and then left. Is that the ship you’re looking for?”

“No,” replied FR-7. “We’re looking for a slender, silver torpedo with robots on board. If it was here, it must have landed three rotations ago, or even later.”

“It didn’t—we can’t help you.” For a moment it looked as if both beings and the robot wanted to turn around and go away. Then they hesitated. “A silver torpedo? And robots on board? Do you mean the Metalix?”

“The Metalix?” FR-7 searched his memory bank in vain. The Metalix were not recorded. “Who are they?”

“A very intelligent but cruel race who give no quarter nor show no mercy. A non-organic race.”

“Robots?”

“You may call them that but they’re different.”

“Different? How?”

“They act and think on their own. Their masters are unknown, perhaps non-existent. You can’t deal with them.”

“How do you know all this?”

It was the key question. FR-7 had driven his interrogators into a corner. They now had to show their colours—how they’d gotten their information without being destroyed because of it. For if the owners of the Silver Arrows could not be dealt with, and destroyed everything that came their way, then the Zermalonkites could not possibly survive—that is, if indeed they had the information.

“We received reports to that effect.”

FR-7 had to admit that it was a plausible explanation. If this planet had even some connection with other worlds, there could not be a better one.

“A last question and request: do you know where the home base of the Metalix is? And if so, would you mind telling us?”

Shocked, the two beings retreated a step; only the robot in the middle stayed where he was.

“The position of the home base of the Metalix? You want to know where it is? Whoever knows that will be destroyed and we don’t know a living soul who’s ever seen their world. We cannot help you, stranger.”

“I’m only the messenger of the Terranians,” FR-7 said and bowed stiffly. “On their behalf, I thank you. May we go?”

“Could we stop you?”

FR-7 shook his head, turned around and went back to the EX-238.

The Zermalonkites spoke logically and reasonably. FR-7 liked them. They didn’t waste any time on unnecessary things. Organic beings should take a lesson from them; then they could accomplish twice as much.

As the Zermalonka planet sank away from the EX-238 and they crossed to the next nearest sun system, FR-7 said to Koster: “Considering all the circumstances, it will take us 3,000 years to get to all the planets within the circumference of 10 light-years.”

Koster did not reply.

* * * *

After eight days the log of the EX-238 had the following entry:

Today, System Mora, three planets. Second planet inhabited. Reptile race, half intelligent. Agricultural civilization. No indication of our expedition’s target. First contact.

Koster, over-tired and exhausted, shook his head as Mora 2 disappeared from screens and instruments.

“That was the 40th try, Iltu. Negative. It’s senseless, believe me. This way we won’t ever again find Pucky and Homunk. No one knows anything about the Silver Arrows. There is only the hint the Zermalonkites gave us. It was the first and last one. It seems that the Silver Arrows don’t exist at all.”

“But they do!” The little mousebeaver had changed inside the week. She was of a more serious nature than Pucky and had always been silent and retiring. Now she seemed rather discouraged and despondent. But inwardly she did not give up hope. “We must find him! We simply must!”

Koster, who had never differentiated between the men of his regular crew and the mousebeavers, now bowed towards her and stroked her fur.

“We’ll find them, Iltu. Most certainly we’ll find them. I could never face Rhodan again if I had to go back without Pucky and Homunk.”

“I love Pucky,” Iltu whispered shyly.

It didn’t sound sentimental or mushy. Koster was deeply moved. Did it really make a difference with whom you were in love? Didn’t it also depend on how you loved? And Koster felt that Iltu’s love for Pucky was genuine.

“We’ll keep on looking,” he said and tried to sound confident. “The two of them must be somewhere and it would be ridiculous if we couldn’t trace them. We’ll ignore stars that aren’t in a direct course to the Centre. I do believe that the home base of the Metalix is at the exact centre of the galaxy.”

“Is there any evidence for that?”

“A lot. All previous sightings have been around the Centre. When these sightings are drawn on an astronomy map and connected by lines, all the lines cross at the Centre.”

“The Centre, well...” Iltu stared at the screens on which only silent stars were to be seen. While they had been talking, one of the stars had grown larger. It was the next objective of the EX-238. “At the Centre! What will we find there?” She looked at Koster questioningly. “I mean with respect to physical difficulties.”

“I don’t quite understand...”

“We’ve already seen phenomena that are totally strange to us. What will it be like there, where the concentration of stars is heaviest?”

“But it isn’t heaviest, Iltu. Several expeditions have reported that the exact centre of the galaxy is entirely without stars. These are very old reports of the Arkonides and other races. Earth ships have never come this far.” He shrugged his shoulders. “I wouldn’t know what natural phenomena we might expect there.”

“I talked about it once with Pucky,” Iltu said. “He thought it was even possible that gravitational conditions might be the reverse of what we know.”

“That’s nonsense, of course,” Koster instructed her and smiled a little. “Why should it be the reverse, of all things?”

“The centre of the galaxy is like the hub of a wheel, see? The entire centre of the Milky Way with its billions of suns is rotating around this hub. With its gravity, these suns are held in place; otherwise, because of the force of their centrifugal flight the suns would simply take off into intergalactic space. Pucky thought that all these suns were attracted to the Centre the way planets are to their suns.”

“Yes, but why should there be unusual conditions just because they revolve around the Centre rather than around a sun?”

“Well, of course not, but there’s a difference when the centrifugal force of 5 or 10 planets pulls at a sun or if billions of suns pull at a particular point. Pucky thought that because of these billions of suns there would be absolutely no gravity on the worlds in the Centre. It would be nullified by the centrifugal forces, maybe even exceeded.”

“A bold opinion, to be sure,” countered Koster and smiled indulgently once more. “But then, I could also theorize that the light pressure of the closely set stars would be so strong that its effects would be felt equally from all directions and a pressure-gravity would be created. There would then still be gravity.”

Iltu looked past Koster at the screen.

“It’s all theory—it doesn’t matter whose. We don’t know anything. We only know that Pucky has fallen into the hands of sinister living beings—if they’re living beings! With that, our knowledge ends.”

Koster did not stir as he said: “What about Harno? Pucky talked about asking him for help. I don’t know who this Harno is, I’ve only heard about him. Do you want to tell me, Iltu? Who is Harno?”

“An energy being, ancient and immortal. A mysterious being that feeds on starlight and has conquered time. It takes on the shape of a black sphere whose smooth surface can mirror events that are happening at the same time far away in space. But Harno’s size can change from that of a chicken egg—or assume gigantic proportions. He is energy—and time.”

“I’ve never seen Harno—but I’d like to very much sometime. Do you think you can get him to appear?”

“Pucky asked Harno for help once. Harno sent a projection and said he couldn’t come himself. I think it’s useless.”

“Nothing’s useless!” Koster seemed to be filled with a new fever for activity. The thought of a meeting with Harno excited him; Iltu could feel it. “Try to call him forth. I can’t see any other possibility of finding Pucky.”

“For that we need a strong telepathic block. Besides me, only Ooch is a telepath. It won’t be enough to penetrate to the end of the universe. And to the end of time.”

“The end of time...!” Koster looked at Iltu. “What could be the end of time? What does it look like *beyond* the end of time?”

Iltu did not reply. She stood up. “I’ll speak to Ooch. Perhaps we’ll try it.”

Koster nodded after her. “And I’m flying towards the 41st planet, Iltu.”

* * * *

“What was possible for the mutants must also be possible for us.” Iltu looked at the mousebeavers one by one. Silent, full of expectation, they squatted in the common room. They had listened to Iltu’s explanation and had expressed their doubts. A discussion arose but Iltu and Ooch had managed to counter all the arguments that were brought up. “You don’t necessarily have to be a telepath to serve as an amplifier. You are all good telekinetics and have properly activated brains. If we all hold hands, Ooch’s and my telepathic impulses will be amplified ninefold. They will reach Harno, wherever he might be.”

“Only four-and-a-half times,” Wullewull corrected.

“How so?”

“The ninefold effect has to be divided by you two—a quite simple mathematical step. I can do arithmetic. The teacher at school always said...”

“We know the story,” Iltu interrupted him. “Shall we try it or not? It’s for Pucky, don’t forget!”

The mousebeavers nodded in unison. The question had been unnecessary. They might be playful by nature and mostly had only nonsense in their heads but when it came tight down to it they could be relied upon. Besides which, it concerned Pucky, their acknowledged leader. Pucky was their ideal. It was he who had saved their race from final destruction because he had made friends with human beings. He was the most capable of them all.

Iltu took Ooch by the hand. To her left, little Biggy. Soon the circle was complete. The touching each other physically also established the contact of flowing thought streams which served to amplify the thought impulses set up by Iltu and Ooch. No word was spoken.

Iltu and Ooch concentrated only on their nearly unimaginable task, sending an SOS into eternity—and they didn’t even know in which direction this eternity was. Logically in the direction of the retreating universe, this much even Iltu knew, for towards the centre there was only the past. Harno, on the contrary, was in the future.

Absolute silence reigned in the room. Whatever was happening in the hallways or in central control might just as well have been in another world that had nothing to do with the concentration of the mousebeavers. Koster was flying toward a new sun system that made no difference—he might just as well have been a thousand light-years away.

Iltu constantly sent out the thought that would count most with Harno.

Ooch, too, was thinking it.

“Harno! You must help! Harno... Harno...”

Ten minutes went by. Half an hour.

After an hour they gave it up.

“We’ll try again after a break,” Iltu said calmly. “We have to have patience and never lose faith in our success. Without this faith the thought-impulses would be too weak. Doubts are like resistors in an electrical circuit. Maybe Ooch and I should emit more precisely beamed thought streams and also should change the direction frequently. I’m convinced that Harno will receive our call. And when he does, he’ll come. He’s sure to come.”

If Koster could have seen the mousebeavers now, he would have been astonished. He knew them only as a gay and frolicking band, without worries or cares. But now Ooch and Wullewull were sitting next to each other peacefully, their features reflective. Fippi was talking quietly to her friend Biggy and this time neither Ooch nor Wullewull was their main topic of conversation. The others had lain down to gather new strength.

But Koster could not see them; besides, he had other worries. The sun they were approaching had no planets and he steered toward the next one. Right and left were plenty of stars but he ignored them all. His direction was directly ahead where the Silver Arrow had disappeared.

Thus the EX-238 raced straight towards the centre of the galaxy.

Before they had reached the next star, however, Iltu suddenly appeared in central control. Koster had just let one of his officers relieve him and was about to go to his cabin. He almost stumbled over Iltu who materialized directly under his feet.

“We’ve done it!” Iltu was breathless with excitement. “Harno’s come—he’s come *himself!* In our cabin. Come on, Major...”

Koster took hold of Iltu’s hand and in no time he could see again. He was standing in the mousebeaver quarters. The absolute silence of the clan would have been strange and disturbing under other circumstances but in this case it was natural enough.

Near the long table in the middle of the room there floated a black, shining sphere. It seemed to swallow up all the light that fell onto its surface and if it reflected anything it surely wasn’t light. It was something indefinable and weird. Koster shuddered. Suddenly he was freezing.

Iltu let go of his hand.

“This is Maj. Koster, the commander, Harno,” she said.

Koster would not have been surprised if this peculiar thing would have answered aloud. But the answer was only in his brain, just like in all the mousebeavers’ brains. It was silent but clear; it even had a certain pressure and ached a little.

“You’ve called me and I’ve come. Pucky is in danger—in great danger. But not only Pucky. One of these days there had to be a meeting with the Metalix. They are a deviant species.”

Koster wondered what the sphere might mean by ‘deviant’. Robots were a normal sight among advanced civilizations of the galaxy. Every civilization, sooner or later, constructed machines and robots. In the course of development, it was natural that these robots would learn to think and act for themselves in order to make life easier for their masters.

“But these robots have no masters!”

Harno’s communication caught Koster in the middle of his reflections. That peculiar being—could the sphere be a being...?—must be a thought-reader. It had answered a question Koster’d never even asked.

“No masters? How can that be? Someone, surely, must have designed and built them. Could robots do it themselves?”

“At a certain stage. But that’s not the point, Koster. For these robots there are circumstances that must still be explained. Not now, not here, but later, when it’s time. First Pucky must be out of danger. I’ll show you where he’s to be found. By

the way, this ship is taking the direct course toward Pucky.”

“The centre of the galaxy?” Koster exclaimed.

“Exactly—the Centre.”

Or rather, the sun that’s in the Centre. It has only one planet. That is the home base of the Metalix.

The black sphere grew suddenly lighter and translucent. It disintegrated. In doing so, it changed into a half-shell of barely visible matter. Then it grew bigger. Sparkling points appeared from nowhere—stars. They formed themselves into a sphere. In the centre there were no stars, excepting one. It shimmered a quiet yellow light.

“That’s the centre of the Milky Way,” was the thought that penetrated into Koster’s brain from Harno, and into all other brains that were present in the room. “The red point is the EX-238—you can recognize it by its motion. Commander Koster, look to your course! The star-free area takes up two light-years. In the middle, the yellow sun, that is *it*. It’s easy to find.”

Iltu moved slightly. “Harno,” she said loudly. “What’s happening to Pucky? Can we land there without danger? Will we be attacked? We need your advice, your help.”

“I’ve shown you where Pucky is to be found; more I cannot do now. I’ll hurry on ahead and stay near your friend. No one will see me, no one will even guess at my presence. I can help only when life is in danger. At the moment there is no danger—at least not for Homunk.”

“And Pucky?”

“He knows how to take care of himself,” was the answer.

The stars dimmed and again the black sphere of energy and time appeared. It seemed to pulsate as it floated toward the ceiling.

“You’re going?” Iltu asked in despair.

“I must go,” Harno corrected her. “I will wait for you on the world of the Metalix. Land there. Nothing will make you seem more convincing than your own conviction that you are in the right. That is the only effective weapon against the Metalix, who, deep in their souls, are unsure of themselves. Put this uncertainty to use!”

Harno climbed higher, through the ceiling—and disappeared.

Koster looked at Iltu. “Soul?” he whispered. “Since when have robots had souls?”

Iltu, looked past him. “Pucky! I hope we won’t be too late...”

Koster awakened as if from a dream. “Don’t worry, we won’t be too late. I now know our target. We’ll manage it in one or two days or we’ll never manage it.”

As the door closed behind Koster, Ooch said: “Och!”

3/ ROBOTS VS. ROBOTS

Pucky teleported himself back into the Silver Arrow. Since he didn't know whether the sight of him might in any way jeopardize the relationship between Homunk and the robot commander, he kept himself hidden, avoiding everyone. Whenever anybody came near his hiding place, he would teleport himself to another part of the ship.

Never in his life had Pucky felt so humiliated. He was a pariah in the artificial crystal eyes of the robots. He simply was not considered an intelligent living being.

Like a hounded wild animal, he had to be alert constantly and flee whenever he heard steps. He dared not defend himself, even though it would have been easy enough for him to do so. They should keep on thinking that he had fallen into the converter with the robots and had been turned into energy. Maybe it would be better that way. Only Homunk would know that his friend was alive and waiting somewhere for the right moment.

The right moment...

Pucky was hungry. It had been hours since he'd had his last meal. Luckily he was wearing his spacesuit for in its pockets were energy and water tablets. Also medicines in case of need.

He swallowed a few pills and thought sorrowfully about the supply of frozen carrots that lay in the cold storage compartments of the EX-238. Then he thought about Iltu, He needn't worry about her, he knew that, but it disturbed him to think that she would be worrying about him. She would certainly try everything in her power to save him. Maybe she would even think of contacting Harno.

It was a peculiar friendship that bound Pucky and Harno They had not met often, the lively mousebeaver and the mysterious sphere that no one was certain could be called an actual living being or not. One day Harno had been found on an uninhabited moon of a planet. The black sphere was lying there in a star- and light-sparse sector of the Milky Way. It didn't even have enough energy any longer to change its location. It was the Terranians who helped it gather up life energy again and Harno had never forgotten this friendly service.

Pucky sighed and turned onto his other side. He lay in a dark room under the propulsion engines. Here he would not be found so soon. Yes, Harno could now be of help—and *only* Harno.

“If only he won’t turn up too soon,” murmured Pucky worriedly. “I have to find the home base of the robots first. Reg would really laugh at me if I went back to Earth without results.” He smiled to himself when he thought of his bosom buddy. “Will he be surprised...!”

The steady hum of the propulsion machinery made him sleepy.

Peacefully, as if he had not a care in the universe, and as full as if he had devoured 10 pounds of asparagus tips, he finally went to sleep.

Meanwhile, the yellow star in front of the Silver Arrow had grown steadily larger.

Homunk sat next to the robot commander before the screen.

They did not communicate, for the robot had never yet opened its mouth nor made any other sound. Homunk had addressed it in Intercosmo but had received no reply. He was being treated with special courtesy, almost with respect. He was not very worried about Pucky because he knew that the mousebeaver could look after himself alright.

He could have turned on the communication equipment but he wanted, if at all possible, to avoid rousing mistrust. Luckily he didn’t need to eat. His semi-organism was kept alive by the same inexhaustible energy source that gave him immortality.

On the screen, stars were retreating right and left. The same held true above and below their flight path. The ship now entered into a spherical space four light-years in diameter in which there was only one sun—the yellow sun that seemed to be the objective of the flight. In the Centre’s tremendous concentration of suns, nearly 35 cubic light-years with just one sun was as good as a vacuum. There, where the planet Earth revolved around its own sun, the identical conditions would have been interpreted as high density.

The yellow star quickly grew larger. Soon Homunk saw on the magnifying screen a planet circling the star. He had long known that the yellow sun was the centre of the Milky Way. It was thus the only star that did not follow the rotation of the galaxy. The Earth took about 200 million years to revolve once around this yellow sun.

“That planet over there—are we going to land?” He asked with a special purpose in mind: he wanted to find out whether the robot would interrupt his speaking. Since he could make out no reaction, he turned on his communications set with an unobtrusive movement of his hand.

“Pucky, I hope you can hear me. We are approaching a yellow sun that has one planet. It must be the home base of the robots. We’re going to land. Stay in the background until we find out what they have in mind for us. What they have in mind for you seems clear enough. They have acknowledged me but not you.”

He then turned the set to receiving, only to turn it off completely right away.

The interference was unbearable. Here there could be no wireless communication. This might explain why all races in this part of the galaxy lived isolated in their worlds and despite modern technology were backward in certain

ways. But if so, nature should have helped out with telepathy!

But not for robots, Homunk thought, and scolded himself for a fool. Robots could never be telepaths. They react to speech and planned programming, perhaps they also possess a limited independence; but telepaths...?

Homunk had at this moment no idea how badly he was in error.

The sun had grown gigantic. It glided sideways out of sight as the ship sank down upon the planet. Homunk could now see all the details of the surface on the screen. No one tried to stop him but then no one could know that he had a photographic memory. Later he could present an exact map of this world that had until now been unknown.

It was a world of the most modern robot technology, that was obvious at first glance. Extensive factories of flat, long buildings stretched along huge spaceports in which stood thousands of ships ready for flight. They were all Silver Arrows with only slight variations in size. The factories and spaceports were connected by wide avenues on which there was much traffic. Low, slender vehicles flitted back and forth, apparently guided electronically. The passengers were hard to make out but Homunk saw that they were also humanoids.

Oceans appeared, then again factories. In between, bald mountains and forests. Broad highways ran through it all.

And then it suddenly occurred to Homunk: Cities! There were no cities!

There were spaceports, takeoff and landing fields, huge factories and model highways. But cities were missing.

Did the masters of the robots live underneath the surface of their world? There was, after all, enough space available—the mountains and the forests. The beaches that seemed uninhabited.

With the last orbital approach, the Silver Arrow flew still lower. At the foot of a mountain Homunk then discovered a city. It seemed disappointingly small and seemed to be deserted. The buildings were anything but modem. They looked like the grey houses of a Terranian city of the 20th century. On the narrow streets there were old-fashioned vehicles, motionless and deserted like the houses. Nothing stirred.

Before Homunk could see any more details, the Silver Arrow lost more altitude and flew towards the next spaceport. With a gentle jerk the ship finally landed and stood upright on its stem next to ramps that rose up from the ground.

The commander turned off the motors with a final movement of his hand. The humming and vibration gradually subsided completely.

Then he signalled to Homunk to leave the cabin with him. The glass lenses of the other robots stared expressionlessly after him.

* * * *

Pucky woke up as the ship landed.

He sat up and listened. The propulsion machinery was silent. If he did not want to lose Homunk, he could no longer remain here in the ship. In an alien world—and where else could they have landed?—it would be well-nigh impossible to find the android again.

Pucky could not fly but he possessed powers of teleportation and telekinetics as no other of the mutants. In the course of his long experience he had managed to combine the two abilities. Plainly put, he could pull himself up by his own bootstraps, something that was impossible for any other living being. Through teleportation he could take himself any place he wanted and through the help of telekinetics he could hold himself there. Even when the place was several kilometres above the surface of a planet.

As a precaution, he screwed on his space helmet, for he didn't have the slightest idea whether the atmosphere of the alien world was breathable or not. Homunk did not have to worry about it but Pucky was an oxygen-breather like the Terranians. Since most of the inhabited worlds of the galaxy were oxygen worlds, that could be assumed to be the case here too. But he didn't want to take any chances.

He concentrated on an invisible point two kilometres above the ship. That would be enough for a first survey. Then he dematerialised.

Pucky saw at first glance that it was a huge and modern spaceport. Its limits to one side could barely be seen even from this height. Below him was the Silver Arrow. Other ships stood quite near it. Behind lay the endless warehouses or factories that Homunk had noticed.

Slowly Pucky let himself sink lower in order to be able to make out details.

The hatchway of the Silver Arrow opened. Homunk was the first to come out, accompanied by a robot, probably the commander. Pucky had to keep in mind that the fellow had condemned him to death. Now would be a good time to help him take a free flight without a parachute. It would tinkle nicely to have such a robot fall from a height of a few kilometres and be smashed to pieces on the hard concrete.

But Pucky postponed his revenge to a later time. Now he couldn't let Homunk out of his sight.

A teardrop-shaped car drove up and stopped in front of the Silver Arrow.

Homunk got in first, followed by the robot. The vehicle started up and glided across the landing field toward the flat buildings. At a safe altitude, Pucky followed them.

Homunk had no idea that he was being watched over in this way but, had he known it, he would no doubt have felt better. Silently he sat next to his equally silent companion and tried to understand the workings of the remote-control vehicle. Its operation seemed very simple, and after a few changes in direction to other guide runners, he was firmly convinced that he could drive such a thing himself.

They passed a few Silver Arrows that were obviously being prepared for

takeoff. Here, too, the work was performed exclusively by robots. Even in the vehicles they met sat robots. They paid no attention to him or to the commander.

The real inhabitants of the planet must have reached the highest stage of civilization when they themselves didn't have to lift a finger any more. They manned their ships with robots and stayed at home. Apparently they led a comfortable and lazy life underneath the surface, a life that doubtless camouflaged the danger of early degeneration.

Calmly Homunk analysed the planet's environment.

The atmosphere was breathable—Pucky would have no difficulties. The gravity was slightly under one G, a little less than on Earth. The revolution time of the planet was two Earth years. The existing tilt along its longitudinal axis ensured seasons between the equator and the poles, and a temperate climate. The rotation took twice as long as on Terra. Long days and long nights and seasons that were twice as long. The climate was tolerable.

The buildings came closer. Homunk was firmly convinced that the robot next to him was already in contact with his superior. He seemed as sure of himself and his objective as only a robot who was receiving running orders could be.

The avenue turned slightly to the left and the wagon was now fast approaching the buildings that had a cold and sobering effect on Homunk. Cold and sobering, like everything else he had come upon in this world and on the Silver Arrow. The aliens must have left the surface of their world entirely to the robots in order to be less disturbed in their own living quarters.

And yet something didn't entirely fit.

Homunk didn't know what it was but all his questions should soon be answered when he would finally stand face to face with the aliens who had him brought here.

The vehicle turned off the main avenue and approached a dome-like structure that, from the outside, did not appear to be as functional as the flat buildings. It was connected to the other structures by concrete tunnels 3 meters high. On top of the silvery shining dome there was a tall pole, at the upper end of which was a sphere.

The car stopped; the robot got out. Homunk followed him across an open court and entered next to him into the dome structure whose door opened in front of them as if moved by ghostly hands. A wide hall bathed in brilliant light was before them. In the middle of this hall, surrounded by half-buried generators and other machines, stood a huge shape that vaguely resembled the control brain of the Silver Arrow. A hemisphere formed the base from which the robot brain protruded. Its front consisted of switchboards and dials, and a series of screens forming a semicircle, levers and countless manipulation devices. Most striking, though, was the oval vaulted screen in the middle. It was positioned to face the entrance exactly.

Slowly the light in the hall dimmed; it became dusk.

The robot strode on and remained standing 10 feet from the technical giant.

Instinctively Homunk kept a step behind him, although he had no idea what was to happen now. He noted that the oval screen got brighter as it grew darker in the hall.

And then the first colour patterns flickered over the milky surface.

They were meaningless for Homunk but he got the idea that the machine was saying something to his attendant. A kind of optical communication, perhaps even a language. Other than the humming of hidden machines, nothing was to be heard. If it was a language, it was a soundless one.

Homunk reflected that this robot brain could very well be a relay station. The masters of this world gave their orders to the robots in this way, and so did not have to be seen themselves. These relay stations must be all over the surface. Homunk was convinced that he was being photographed now by hidden cameras that would project his image onto the screens of the aliens. They could now see him, while he had not caught sight of any of them. His expression changed into an iron mask. This way, they would find out nothing. If they wanted something from him, they would have to come to him and show themselves. Perhaps then they could come to an understanding.

The coloured patterns were now changing more slowly and often stood still for several seconds. Sometimes the same symbols appeared many times running. They were abstract and meaningless.

Deep in Homunk's memory banks something suddenly stirred. It was one of those chronicle-memories conveyed to him by the immortal and it was activated only when there was a stimulus to it. It could happen acoustically or optically—as in this case.

The patterns!

They were not so strange as Homunk's consciousness had at first assumed. They closed a relay and thereby a circuit. Here memory changed now to knowledge.

The colour patterns came fast and almost automatically; whoever was activating the keyboard knew his job well. It was hard for Homunk to follow the text but whatever fragments he could make out were sufficient for him to get an overview.

Homunk's expression did not change. It was much too early to let the aliens know that he had decoded their secret. He pondered over which of the symbols that were familiar to him were contained in the structure of that language, in order to get an indication of the aliens' origin.

Arkonidean perhaps?

The Arkonides had also sat in front of screens in their leisure hours and watched abstract colour patterns. For edification and recreation, without ever having understood any deeper meaning. They had simply enjoyed the orchestration of colours and forms, nothing more. It hadn't even occurred to them there was anything more to it than pleasure. In reality, however, Homunk understood now that there was something more behind it. A language. The

language of a race of which the Arkonides knew nothing any more. Not even the Akons who were considered the forebears of the Arkonides.

It was a language that must be even older.

How old, then, Homunk asked himself, must *this* race be?

He concentrated anew on the colour patterns.

At first he understood only fragments.

“...treat with utmost care... origin uncertain... the little companion is still alive... capture... not kill...”

The patterns died away.

Homunk's attendant, the commander of the Silver Arrow, took 10 steps forward and laid his hands on the keys of the switchboard. He waited a few seconds, then began to play with the levers and the push buttons. Immediately the screen lit up again.

This time the screen served only as a control. The image that appeared on it must also be appearing simultaneously on the screens of the aliens somewhere on or beneath the planet. The robot was answering his superiors.

“...attempts at communication unsuccessful... will keep on... the little companion disappeared... converter... seek directions...”

So now! The robot was asking for instructions. He was a receiver of orders, as Homunk had thought all along.

More than ever Homunk was now determined to find the aliens, to confront them and to demand an accounting. An accounting of what they had done with Pucky. He was alive, or so the patterns of the aliens indicated. They also did not want to kill him but they did want to capture him.

Was he, Homunk, not also a captive?

He looked at the screen again; the aliens' reply was:

“...avoid adding more fuel to the superstition. We must find out where he comes from and whether there are more of his kind. Communication is therefore necessary. Afterwards he must be destroyed in public to provide the proof that they are mortal organisms.”

Homunk understood faster than human beings. He thought nearly as fast as a robot brain. The robots wanted to kill him after the trial. They wanted to prove something by it. They wanted to prevent the spread of an existing superstition.

Since when did robots have superstitions?

Matters were getting more and more mysterious and insane. Homunk was aware that he was dealing with especially able and thinking robots but it was still incredible that they would therefore have developed a philosophy, even if this philosophy was made up only of superstitions. That was simply impossible.

The commander waited until the colour patterns finally died out, then he came back to Homunk. His eyes reflected both determination and doubt. Homunk was shocked to realize that in these artificial crystal eyes there was real life that could express feelings.

He met the robot's glance as if he were facing a human being whom he wanted to force under his spell. It was easy for him to behave with determination for Homunk had no brain centre that would allow him to feel fear of death. If he had any will to live, it was only to help human beings, for he owed them a duty. His own existence meant nothing to him.

The robot stood his glance for nearly two minutes, then turned away. He avoided the forceful spell of Homunk's eyes. His movements betrayed uncertainty and even shyness. But only for a few seconds, then the crystal eyes flashed into hardness. The orders of his superiors were stronger than any doubts.

The door opened. Ten robots marched into the dome hall and approached in step. They surrounded Homunk and the commander.

A bodyguard?

Instinct told Homunk not to wait any longer. The instinct was the end result of his experience, logically considered and used by his inpotronic brain with unimaginable speed. If the robots were really superstitious, then this unusual characteristic had to be encouraged, not checked. Besides, no understanding could be reached with the robots; however, he might be able to do so with their superiors who must now be found as soon as possible.

Homunk ducked under the outstretched arms of the robots and ran as fast as he could to the robot brain. With one leap he was on the wide base, reached into his pocket and drew his laser pistol. Its fine ray was hot enough to melt any metal. And the robots would hardly dare to put any similar weapon to use, for then they would run the danger of damaging the robot brain.

They hesitated before doing anything.

As they finally came at him with bare hands, Homunk raised his weapon and destroyed the first one.

But then he stared uncomprehendingly at what happened next.

The robots split forces. The commander and 4 of the newly arrived artificial beings stormed on while the 5 remaining robots attacked them from behind. A regular scuffle arose during which the robots hit each other with their steel fists. Dumbfounded, Homunk stood on the base of the robot brain and asked himself what the aliens might say to this peculiar and inexplicable behaviour of their thinking robots. And if they could observe the incident, why didn't they interfere?

The commander caught a fist on his head, stumbled and then sank to the floor. The concussion must have severed a circuit. The 4 robots who had sided with the commander immediately backed away and gave up the fight. They turned to Homunk who waited tensely for what would happen next.

It was obvious that they had no intention of carrying out the orders of the fallen commander, so Homunk hid his weapon again. He watched as the robots approached and stopped a few steps away from him. In their eyes he again saw an uncertainty that had already posed enough puzzles for him. He was almost shocked when the 9 robots bowed courteously in his direction and through gestures asked him to step down from the base of the robot brain.

Homunk saw no reason to refuse. There must be in this world different groups of robots and he had now fallen into the hands of the others. Perhaps he could get along with them better. Only the question was left unanswered as to what the real masters of this world would say about it. In the end, it was they who would make the decisions.

The robots surrounded him and marched past the robot brain to a second exit. The door opened but instead of an avenue under the open sky Homunk saw an endless, brightly lit tunnel that was barely 3 meters high. The floor was smooth but electronic guide rails were clearly visible. A closed car was waiting.

Homunk climbed in and sat down. He wondered about the hard seats that offered no comfort. It was as if only robots rode in these wagons, nobody else. Without any jerk, the vehicle finally started moving while the door to the dome structure glided shut. Four robots stayed behind. The other 5 had taken their places in the wagon. Homunk sat in the middle and tried to read their eyes.

What he found was neither comforting nor particularly alarming: the robots seemed to feel a certain awe paired with a determined fanaticism.

The puzzle did not grow less but more.

It was nearly unsolvable.

After two hours of rapid driving, the vehicle stopped. Homunk estimated that they were now more than 200 kilometres from the spaceport. He began to be worried about Pucky. How would the mousebeaver find him again? Maybe he should have left a distinct trail behind him, some recognizable signs. But now it was too late for that.

The 5 robots accompanied Homunk through a corridor into a round hall that was so like the first one that the android at first assumed that they had driven in a circle and had returned to it. Then various details told him that this robot brain was different from the one the commander had used to communicate with his superiors.

The oval screen was activated and as the colour patterns flitted over the convex disk, as the orders came and answers were sent, even Homunk began to doubt his own mind.

“I see,” said the machine to the robots, “that you acted quickly and properly. Now we have evidence that we were right. Everyone will find out about it before the nonbelievers can act. They are stronger than we are but we are in the right. And we have *him*. *He* will help us.”

“Where should we take *him*?”

“Into the temple of the holy city. That will convince everybody.”

“It will be done, master.”

Homunk could not translate all the ideas exactly. For many, there were only related concepts to help. One signal that had to do with him was entirely untranslatable. Also ‘temple’ and ‘holy’ were only vague substitutions for what they meant. In any case, it was clear from the short communication that there were two groups in fierce combat here. The believers and the non-believers.

But it wasn't only the robots that faced each other in hostility but also their creators and masters. It appeared to be a quarrel that did not concern power or wealth but an outlook on life. That was something so inconceivable that Homunk would rather have thought this all to be a delusion but the counter-indications were unmistakable. Above all, he had as yet no notion of having been selected as the decisive force in this conflict.

At any rate, he had no desire to be handed back and forth between these hostile parties. He could not negotiate with the robots for there was no possibility of any communication with them; but he could perhaps speak with the aliens themselves.

But no, there was a way to talk directly with the robots, too!

Of course—the patterns on the oval screen! He could understand the symbols that served as means of communication between the robots and their masters. He could plug himself in and so establish contact with the robots. He could then at last ask to be taken to the real rulers of this peculiar world.

The screen had gone out. Before Homunk could move, he was again taken into the car. He was treated with the highest respect but they also gave him no opportunity to say anything even about this treatment. The courtesy of the robots was downright disarming.

When the wagon started moving, Homunk decided that he would escape at the first opportunity.

He wanted to ferret out the aliens from their hiding place on his own and so finally to put an end to all this uncertainty.

4/ ELEVATION TO GODHOOD

For Pucky, things were substantially more difficult despite his nearly unlimited mobility. He could not let himself be seen without risking immediate capture and execution by the robots. He could also not communicate with them and had no idea that there existed a robot brain with an oval screen on which colour patterns were to be seen.

When he saw Homunk and the commander disappear into the dome structure, he waited for nearly half an hour. He floated above the ground at an altitude of two kilometres and had long since opened his space helmet for the air was fine and breathable. It was warm and he didn't have to turn on his heating system.

Below him lay the building complexes. They reached all the way to the horizon. There were enough signs to point to the fact that these were factories and other installations for the production of spaceships. A brief leap into one of these sheds confirmed his supposition. The production was fully automated. A single robot patrolled the assembly lines and the automatic presses, controlled the switchboards and checked the various stages of the production process.

When half an hour had passed and neither Homunk nor the robot appeared again, Pucky teleported himself into the dome structure. He could see that he was too late. Two robots lay motionless in front of a huge monster of a machine. It was quite obvious that they had met with violence. The one showed evident traces of Homunk's laser. The other exhibited much damage to his head.

Pucky had no idea that he was being observed by the robot brain. He knew nothing about the hidden cameras or the oval screen. He was looking for Homunk, that was all. But he found no trace of which direction Homunk had gone.

In any case, Homunk had not come out of the dome structure again, so there had to be a second exit. The door would not open but when Pucky worked on the hidden lock telekinetically, it slid aside. Behind it lay the tunnel with the guide rails.

"That's why I didn't see anything," murmured the mousebeaver furiously. "They've taken him away. Now I'll have the devil of a time finding him again. That's really..."

He broke off his thought as behind him he heard a rustling. About two dozen robots streamed into the dome structure and swarmed out in all directions. Pucky did the only sensible thing and teleported himself onto the robot brain. Here he

had the best view and was covered from all sides, Directly below him the oval screen was flashing its commands. It ordered the robots to capture the little alien alive.

It was Pucky's misfortune that he was counting on rayguns rather than on paralysing rays whose beams could be reflected from the dome's ceiling without harm to anything. He saw a few robots draw small weapons and aim them in his direction. He ducked down and waited. If they wanted to wipe him out, they would have to take the upper structure of their robot brain along with him. Just for fun, he hurled two of his adversaries against the wall and listened with satisfaction as metal clanged against metal. The robots didn't know what was happening to them as they were suddenly lifted into the air by invisible forces. They were facing something they did not understand.

Then Pucky suddenly saw the pale light beams race against the ceiling—and from there down towards him. Paralysis took hold of him so fast that he could not take any protective steps against it. He did not lose consciousness but did lose all parapsychic abilities. His eyes remained open though he couldn't move. He lay there and waited. Remembrance of the past was dimmed in part, while certain parts of his brain were completely paralysed.

One of the robots climbed on the machine and brought the captive down. He put him on the floor harshly and Pucky decided he'd make a special note of this particular fellow even though that was just about impossible. They all looked alike and bore no distinguishing marks.

The screen gave its orders.

Pucky could see the abstract colour pictures but they didn't mean anything to him. All at once Pucky felt himself being lifted up and carried away. While they were placing him on the floor of a vehicle, he felt the paralysis slowly lifting from him.

Not much longer and the robots would get the surprise of their lives, enough to make them believe in miracles. But Pucky had no idea that miracles were exactly what they could use least of all.

When the car, which had been driving through the tunnel, came out of the concrete shaft, it was night. The only planet of the yellow sun had no moon but there was no need for one. The night was brighter than day. An even luminosity shone in from all sides and precluded all shadows. The entire sky from horizon to horizon resembled a radiant dome with millions of tiny lights. All the stars were equidistant from each other and so there was nothing that could be called a constellation.

Homunk looked out the window. Outside was lonely countryside. In the distance rose a tall mountain chain: most likely the mountains at whose foothills the abandoned city lay. The 'holy city', as the aliens referred to it. As far as Homunk could tell, apparently the only city on the surface of this world.

They wanted to take him there. Why?

At the moment, the answer did not interest Homunk much. His first concern

was to get together with Pucky again. The mousebeaver would be looking for him and as long as he was in captivity—or for that matter, simply in the custody of the robots—that was well-nigh impossible. The tunnels, he had found out, did not lead straight down the planet's crust but ran along underneath the surface. Homunk was sure that he had to move around outside if he wanted to give Pucky the chance of finding him.

The 5 robots who accompanied him did not sleep. Their eyes were always open and they looked at him with a certain shyness which seemed to Homunk ever more weird. Past events had convinced him that he was dealing with very special robots. They had a mentality of their own, while in reality they should simply have been programmed. They believed, although robots should only be filled with straight data. They had feelings. As robots they were entirely abnormal and unpredictable.

Homunk felt his laser pistol still in his pocket. They had not disarmed him—also an entirely illogical way of behaving that was inconsistent with robot theory.

Homunk turned a little until he was sitting so that he could see the control panel of the car. His previous observations had told him that the energy conduits were hidden under the panelling. If this could be cut off, the vehicle must come to a standstill.

Carefully he drew his weapon and set it at peak performance. He took careful aim, so cautiously that none of his guards could guess his purpose. Then he pulled the trigger.

The blinding energy beam hit the control panel in the middle. There were a few small explosions, then the melted metal flowed onto the ground and immediately hardened again. Squealing, the emergency brakes took hold. The car's speed slowed, then the vehicle came to a stop with a hard jolt.

Homunk did not stop to think. In one leap he was at the door, shoved it open and sprang outside. His feet touched the soft, natural ground. Even grass grew here. He thought for a moment. Should he paralyse the 5 robots? All in all, they had treated him well, and he had no reason to destroy them. At the same time, they must not follow him now.

The door—!

He pushed it shut and with lightning speed welded it to the side of the car. This way it would take some time before the robots could get free and pursue him.

Homunk had to smile as he set out for the distant mountains. The robots had to follow an android, not a human being—the most developed android there had ever been. His energy was inexhaustible. He could run without pause until he'd circled the entire planet if need be. The robots could do the same but never so fast as he.

Behind him the car with the feverishly active robots disappeared behind in a depression in the ground as he ran down to a flat valley. Far in front of him, Homunk saw the shimmering surface of a small lake that extended between him and the mountains. It did not count for an obstacle, however.

Besides grass there were low shrubs and a few trees. He avoided these and ran

ahead mechanically. Since movement was no exertion for him, he used the time to think about his circumstances. It was more tragicomical than really dramatic.

Two different groups of robots were fighting over him. What role the aliens themselves took in this show was unclear. It seemed obvious, however, that they had split into two parties. The one wanted to kill him, the other regarded him as a valuable possession. It began to dawn on Homunk that he was a kind of key figure with which an ancient dispute would be settled. A dispute of a religious nature.

It sounded so far-fetched that Homunk began to despair of his rationality. Robots, thinking for themselves and yet receiving orders as positronic machines, had discovered religious problems and were trying to solve them. Why particularly he, Homunk, was playing a role in all this was not at all clear. With all his logic he could find no answer to the puzzle.

If he had thought less logically, he might perhaps have managed to figure it out.

He did not diminish his speed, even when he had waded through the lake along its bottom surface and had reached a forest. The trees were not very dense but lent him some protection against any pursuers. From above, visibility was good, but it was hardly likely that he could be discovered by an airship.

Gradually Homunk began to worry about Pucky. It was comforting to have the orders of the aliens say that the mousebeaver was not to be put to death, at least not right away. In any case, this particular order also advertised that Pucky was still alive and had escaped, just like Homunk. The only question was, how could they find each other again in a world that was as large as Earth.

Homunk tried once again to get into communication with Pucky through the communication equipment and, as he turned on 'receiving', he stopped in his tracks, bewildered.

All interference noises had disappeared.

There were rhythmic impulses but no interference sounds; they came too evenly and ordered for that. Probably they were command impulses of the aliens who were directing their robots in this way. Homunk tried to think why the solar interference was suddenly no longer effective and he came to the conclusion that only the planet's atmosphere was responsible. The upper atmosphere must have ionized levels that reflected all interference impulses back into space. Radio communication was possible below these levels but not above them.

"Pucky! Let's hear from you! Can you hear me? Turn on your receiver! Take my bearings, do you hear?"

Again and again Homunk spoke into his microphone, turned it off and turned on the receiver but the mousebeaver never replied. Either something had happened to him or he had given up too soon on radio communication. On the dayside, remembered Homunk, radio and communication had been impossible even below these reflecting layers. So the thing would function only at 'night', when the influence of the yellow sun, which was the nearest celestial body, became ineffective.

Radio communication only at night—that was something new. It was important

that Pucky would catch onto it and would eventually reply.

Homunk did not give up trying. At regular intervals he signalled to the mousebeaver and gave him the chance to answer.

Then, when he turned around, he noted with surprise that he was being followed.

* * * *

The paralysis lessened. Pucky remained lying down and tried not to call attention to himself. Carefully he felt his pockets. They had taken his raygun. He was without a weapon. Now, he was not really dependent on the raygun; besides which, it would not take him long to get another one. The main thing was that they'd let him keep his radio equipment. In this world, it would be useless, but later it might come in handy.

Without moving his head, he looked around him. He realized, to his immeasurable fury, that they had simply laid him on the floor of the vehicle. He could see the legs of the robots sitting on the benches. In the background was the control panel; to one side, the door. Vibrations came from below the metal floor. The vehicle must be racing at top speed towards an unknown goal.

Pucky didn't know whether he could turn on his TK powers or whether it was still too early to try. He could have tried out telepathy without much danger of being noticed. But simply to teleport himself away did not even enter his mind for that would have amounted to nothing but cowardly flight. And he would take flight only when something could be accomplished by it.

He held his eyes tight shut, after he'd concentrated on the control panel, groping towards the contact and steering points. He found thousands of them without grasping their meaning. He soon realized that it would be impossible for him to take over the remote-controlled vehicle. Even so, he now knew that he was regaining his strength and, with it, his abilities.

It was time to let the robots know it too.

There were 4 of them; he could count them by their legs. They all wore the deadly rayguns that, in other circumstances, could be used as welding tools. He had to be careful of these if he wanted to survive the next two minutes.

When Pucky was later questioned as to why he went about the whole thing in such a complicated way when it could have been accomplished quite simply, the mousebeaver only shrugged his shoulders and kept repeating: "Only somebody without a sense of humour could ask that—at the same time, I must admit that only a pretty macabre sense of humour let me act that way. I simply wanted to give an object lesson to the robots—and not only to the four who were guarding me. Every single one of them should realize that they were underestimating me. One has one's honour, after all, friends."

"Wasn't it too dangerous?" was most often the next question.

“Absolutely no more so than if I had disposed of them myself. But this way I’ve got a clear conscience. The 4 robots committed robocide by mutual agreement. They sat directly opposite each other and shot at each other until they were completely destroyed. I then teleported myself out of the car that continued on its way with its now worthless cargo. What was said at the final station about the scrap heap run amok, I’m sorry I don’t know. At any rate, as you can see, I managed to get out of it safe and sound.”

Later it could be retold in a light vein but at the moment it didn’t look as if the mousebeaver’s luck would hold. He floated high up in the air and saw the car disappear through a vegetationless, rocky countryside. In the west, the sun sank below the horizon. Stars appeared in the milky sky. They had actually been visible all day long but the yellow sun had outshone them.

There seemed to be no sky-watch here, Pucky thought. Otherwise he would have been discovered long ago. There were also no aircraft. Now and then, of course, a Silver Arrow was to be seen either landing or taking off, since there were spaceports all around. If the robot ships wanted to avoid contact with all other races, why didn’t they just stay in their own world? Why did they send off patrol after patrol? What were they really after?

Pucky teleported himself eastward and, in a fraction of a second, covered several hundred kilometres. Only the stars in the sky and the surface of the nameless planet beneath were visible to him.

It was not exactly an accident that after many hours he noticed a car standing stock-still.

Near a spaceport or around the area of a factory he would hardly have noticed it but here in the wild, untouched countryside, a standing vehicle was unusual. Robots did not drive out to the country to hold a picnic.

Pucky let himself farther down and floated a few meters above the vehicle. It seemed abandoned. The door was locked. But then Pucky stopped short. He discovered the welding seam and right away sensed what had happened. In this vehicle, Homunk had been taken away. The android had managed to outwit his guards; he had left them behind in the wagon and welded the door shut with his laser gun.

Pucky lost more altitude until he finally touched ground. The footprints pressed into the grass gave him his final answer. He stooped down and found the hole on the underside of the car. The robots had broken out to pursue the escapee.

Pucky breathed a sigh of relief. Finally he’d found Homunk’s tracks. It was now only a question of time until he would overtake him. He only had to be swifter than the robots who were in hot pursuit of Homunk.

* * * *

As Homunk detected the movements behind him, the sun was rising in the east, just over the tops of the trees. A short trial convinced him that radio connection

was again impossible. Then he changed his direction and ran up towards a plateau. The bushes were thicker here. Besides, he wanted to find out just who was following him.

As he'd expected, it was the 4 robots he'd left behind in the wagon. If he'd kept to his original speed, he would not have been overtaken but he'd dawdled because he'd thought he was safe. Under the given circumstances, the zeal of his pursuers could have only one explanation: they wanted to recapture him to keep him from harm. Harm that threatened from the other group of robots.

When Homunk reached the top of the mountain and could look down the other side, he stopped involuntarily. His view reached all the way to the mountains that were still a few kilometres away. Before them lay a broad valley, mostly grass-steppes and some few clumps of trees. A narrow creek wound its way from east to west.

But that was not all that ended Homunk's flight so abruptly.

Robots. Thousands of them. They came from all directions and seemed to have only one goal: the hillock on which Homunk stood. Maybe he could entrench himself here, on high; maybe hold them off for awhile; but in the long run, they must overpower him. But the robots didn't they have orders to treat him well and under no circumstances to kill him? Wasn't he to be taken to the holy city?

The holy city...!

Involuntarily Homunk's glance turned north, beyond the wide plateau, to the foothills of the mountain chain.

Only now did he see what he should have seen all along.

The city!

In the light of the rising sun, it lay there like the remains of long-forgotten days.

Its antiquity did not fit into this fully mechanized world. It was surprising that the city still existed at all. The word 'holy' here tipped Homunk off. The city must be the spiritual centre of the believing robots, who were the opponents of the non-believers. It was still incomprehensible why the masters would put up with these crazy robot antics and why they would not simply have razed the city.

The 4 robots got to Homunk and stayed with him. Their entire demeanour denoted humility and a plea for forgiveness, as they looked toward the distant city and, at the same time, noted the metal crowd on the flats below them.

Homunk shrugged and started down the valley.

Right and left, he was accompanied by the robots.

Thus Pucky discovered him. He had materialized at some altitude above them and had nearly come to grief before he saw the whole show. It made his eyes bulge. He gained altitude in order not to be easily discovered.

In the flats the armoured bodies of the robots shimmered like a sea of molten silver. Every movement was like a small wave ripping in all directions. As Homunk and his 4 guards came towards the crowd they parted their ranks, forming a wide opening to let them through. Dumbfounded, Pucky watched as

Homunk calmly and proudly strode through the honour cordon towards the city that was no longer far away. Behind him the ranks closed again and the crowd of robots followed him at a respectful distance.

It was a regular procession.

Pucky stayed straight above Homunk so he wouldn't lose him again. He could have teleported down to him as fast as lightning, to escape with him, but now his curiosity was aroused. He wanted to know what the robots had in mind for Homunk—and why they were behaving so peculiarly. There must be some secret there that might well be the key to the Silver Arrows' strange behaviour.

The sun was to the south when Homunk reached the edge of town. Here, too, robots were lined up on the streets. They stared in silence, full of expectation. The houses, seen close up, were exactly as could have been guessed from a distance. The walls were partly decayed and crumbling. Some roofs had caved in, destroying the upper stories. No one had thought to repair the damage. The streets were paved with cobblestones and were full of holes. There were no panes in the windows. Homunk realized that the city was uninhabited.

But now thousands of robots had gathered here to greet him. It was like being at a folk festival and gradually Homunk began to wonder what they expected of him.

In contrast to the old and crumbling houses, the shimmering dome structure in the middle of the city seemed new and cared for. Its walls also consisted of unfinished, hewn stone but the damage of time had obviously been repaired. A broad staircase led to the curved portal on either side of which stood guards. At the top of the dome stood a shimmering, metallic figure—a human figure, though not easily recognizable. It wore clothing reminiscent of overalls. Footprints on the roof indicated that it was set there today—to honour him?

Yes, that must be it. The robots had put his likeness up on the dome in his honour; steep steps led up to it. The robot guards opened wide the portal as he reached its height. They bowed.

Homunk felt his throat tighten as he passed them and went into the wide hall whose ceiling vaulted high above him. He was between his 4 guards. Still, they held back a step. Right and left stood robots, hundreds of them, the entire hall full of them. Everyone was looking in his direction, their eyes full of devout awe and joyful hope.

Hope... in the eyes of soulless robots!

Opposite the portal, at the end of the hall, there was a monster of a steel robot brain—at least that's what Homunk took it for. But as they came closer, he had to correct himself. It could not be the usual robot brain for it lacked all control panels and other attributes of technological wonders. In any case, there was only one video screen, exactly at its midpoint and two meters above the stone floor.

If Homunk had been a human being, his pulse at this moment would have stepped up, for on the only screen he at last and for the first time saw an alien for whom he had come to this strange world.

A human being!

His very short hair formed a triangle on his brow. Under it, the eyes looked stem and calm; they did not move. The nose was narrow and long. The mouth was drawn into a somewhat ironical smile. The chin was clean-shaven. The man—surely it was a man—wore a blue uniform with gold epaulettes. More could not be seen for the image reached only to the waist.

Homunk stopped a few meters from the screen. He could not take his eyes off the serious yet gentle face. Fascinated, he returned the glance until finally, almost against his will, he realized that he was facing no living image but a lifeless reproduction.

It was masterfully executed. Three-dimensional and coloured, at first glance it gave the impression that he was facing the living original or at least a video-screen that was projecting the image of the living original.

But it was only an image, a quite wonderful and realistic hologram, but still dead, perhaps dead for a long time.

When Homunk turned toward the guards, he saw that they stood beside him, bowing deeply and with lowered eyes.

All the robots followed their example.

They bowed before the image.

The image of a human being!

And as if at one stroke, Homunk understood what had happened on this planet.

He understood that some of the robots had waited for him for millennia perhaps. For him, whom they honoured as a god!

* * * *

At this exact moment, Harno appeared.

The black sphere materialized directly under the dome and at first was not noticed. It barely stood out against the dark ceiling; and besides, it stayed quiet and did not stir.

But it established contact with Homunk who was normally not sensitive to telepathy.

“You’ll have to play along, Homunk—don’t be alarmed, I’m Harno. Stay proud and unapproachable, as is expected of someone as honourable as you. Don’t disturb the illusions of the robots.”

Homunk inwardly heard the voice and froze. He knew who Harno was but he had no explanation of why that energy-being should come here now. Was Pucky behind it all?

“How did you find me?”

“I’ll explain everything later. Now just do exactly as I tell you. If the robots find out that they’ve been duped, you won’t live a second longer. They’ve waited too long for this moment of triumph to put up with any deception.”

“How can the robots think and behave this way? It’s totally against all known

laws and experiences. It's impossible!"

"Nothing is impossible when robots are left to themselves."

Homunk thought this over. Left to themselves? Could that mean...?

"Later," Harno repeated. "What is taking place here now has already occurred in other worlds. In worlds inhabited by organic intelligences. The slumbering memory and the hope for a miracle arouse an eternally returning combination of feelings that no thinking being can withstand for long, no matter whether it has an organic or an artificial brain. Sometimes it lasts longer, and groups that fight each other are formed. Like here."

Homunk saw that the robots straightened up again as farther up in the 'altar' a metal piece rolled back. A dull shining screen became visible.

It was oval.

The colour patterns came quickly and nearly automatically. Whoever was at the controls knew what he was doing. It was hard for Homunk to follow the text but segments were enough for a general idea.

It was a kind of sermon in which it was triumphantly mentioned that the creator had returned. They had waited 10,000 years for it—that was 20,000 Earth years. An unimaginably long time. Now the day of triumph over the non-believers could no longer be far off. Now at last they would be converted.

Homunk wished at this moment that Pucky were in his place. The mousebeaver had landed them all in this soup with his curiosity and his drive for exploration. But Pucky did not look in the least like a human being. They could not accept him as God. Maybe they even thought he was the devil. That would explain the ill treatment that had fallen his lot.

"They expect you to stay in the temple—for this is a temple that's a relic from long-gone days. Like the city. All the others were razed to the ground but this one escaped. The last sign of the old inhabitants who used to live in this world."

Homunk did not move, even though the final confirmation of his most secret fears hit him like a bodily blow. "Who used to live...? Are you trying to say that they are no more?"

"No more for a long time. Not for 20,000 Earth years. Time enough for the surviving robots to develop into what they are today. But my explanation will come later; I don't want to give it twice."

"And the oval screens? I was convinced they represented a connection between the robots and the aliens. I thought..."

"I've already told you that there are no aliens. Some of the robots partly obey the screens or brains. Others are entirely independent and rule in turn over these robots. They fight against the respect shown their extinct masters. But behind the robot brain that stands in this temple, a robot priest is hiding. He pretends to be speaking for the creator. So, a swindle, Homunk."

"The parallel of..."

"I've told you already, it has happened on nearly all worlds in similar

circumstances. You must remain standing when the robots leave the temple. Don't move and don't turn around. Look at the screen."

Homunk heard the noise of stamping feet as the robots left the great hall. It took a long time but then he heard the portal close with a dull thud.

Now at last he turned around and saw the black sphere slowly floating downwards. It grew larger and brighter until it filled the entire hall. It was as if the sun were suddenly shining through a wide window.

At the same moment, Pucky materialized in the middle of the room and landed, not very gently, at Homunk's feet. He shook himself and made sure he was alone with Homunk. He did not notice Harno's presence.

"I've been chasing behind you forever but the robots were guarding you as if you were the apple of their pie. When they came out of the building, I took the chance. Have they left you behind?"

Before the android could answer, Harno made himself noticeable and explained to Pucky in broad outline what had happened. The mousebeaver was so shaken that he made no reply. Wordlessly he squatted on a ledge and stared darkly in front of him. Then at last, after long minutes, he murmured: "Well, and what now?"

"That," said Harno, "is why I'm here. In 2 or 3 days the EX-238 will meet us here; until then we must make a clean sweep of it."

"A clean sweep? What do you mean? You surely don't want us to continue with this circus?"

"You're wrong!" Harno's thought impulse was strong and sharp. Pucky ducked involuntarily. "This is no circus. The robots are wrong only on one point: they take Homunk for a human being, an Arkonide, some kind of a humanoid. So they think he's their creator. But Homunk is an artificial man. He stands here for all other men and represents them. When the EX-238 lands, 50 men will come into this world. Fifty gods, if you will. It can lead to catastrophe."

Pucky looked at the picture on the altar. "And what should we do?" he asked in a small voice.

"We will organize that crusade," Harno replied.

5/ REVOLUTION #2

During the night Harno told them the history of the planet in the centre of the galaxy. The energy-being turned into a screen that filled the entire hall. From the distant past, it projected the events at a smaller scale. Homunk and Pucky witnessed the rise of the kingdom of the Metalix.

The dome hall became the galaxy.

The present sank into the sea of time.

* * * *

A fleet of 10 spherical ships was forging toward the centre of the Milky Way. Their path backward led to a spiral arm that reached deep into intergalactic space in which there was a scarcity of stars, lonely worlds in lonely space.

The scale changed as the yellow sun—in the time projection, a bit brighter—moved to the centre and details became clearer. The planet became visible. It revolved around its mother star in the orbit it was following to this day. The continents had not changed but the surface was without a sign of animal life. It was covered with broad steppes and huge forests. In the few oceans swam sea mammals that had not yet made the attempt to crawl onto land.

The fleet of 10 ships steered toward the planet, circled it and finally landed on a rocky plateau. At this point Harno explained to his audience:

“Radio communication of the expedition fleet with its home base had long been broken but it was an independent and self-contained system. After landing, the ships were dismantled so that the first shelters could be built. The old home base was overpopulated, the new planet uninhabited and capable of development—exactly what the Galacteers had been looking for.”

“Galacteers?” Pucky interrupted.

“They called themselves something else but the name suits me. Besides, it fits in every respect. Now see what happened next.”

Harno had become a sphere with a diameter of 10 meters. He rotated slowly like a planet so the entire surface could be seen. On it, in accelerated time, the first changes were depicted. In a few minutes, years and centuries went by.

The huge forests disappeared, making room for large cities and highways. Fields were planted and the civilization of the Galacteers entered an agricultural

stage. The many rivers made irrigation of the broad steppes possible and soon all kinds of fruits were growing and supplementing the initial scarcity of food.

“It’s not unusual for space-roaming races to forget their origins after colonizing a new planet. The new surroundings, the influence of strange cosmic rays and the striving of all intelligent beings to look to the future rather than to the past contributed to the trend. No wonder, then, that after a few thousand years the Galacteers no longer knew that they had come from another world. They lived in a sphere of suns. In their various legends, though, there was a world on which the sun sank and it grew dark. Here it was light practically all the time. Darkness could be created only artificially. And so, after a time, the Galacteers discovered again the benefits of darkness. They retreated below the surface of their world.”

The cities above ground remained but they did not grow. What did grow were powerful factories that gradually crowded out both nature and cultivated fields. An unimaginable industry arose until the first robots were created.

“It was only a re-discovery; the remembrance of machines that could relieve men of work existed deep in the consciousness of the Galacteers. So far the intensified radiation from the conglobulation of suns exerted a beneficial effect on their brains. They were still profiting from their favourable position in the middle of the Milky Way. Effortless production of synthetic foods made agriculture superfluous. The last fields gave way to factories. The first robot crews were installed.”

The position of the stars had not changed but again many centuries had passed. The rhythm of life of the Galacteers had changed. At night they withdrew underground to their dark housing while the robots continued to work in the bright light of the eternal stars. They produced the necessary food, arranged for amusements and even took care of their proper distribution to the various administrative districts. Robot stations relayed the appropriate orders. Still, these stations were run by the Galacteers.

“Again thousands of years went by. Out in the galaxy, ever more planets were settled. The original race of the Galacteers spread out but they lost contact with each other. On one planet, far from the original home base, a colony of Akons was established; from them the Arkonides developed later on. Nearer the edge of the spiral arm, where all traditions had long been forgotten, a wild man climbed out of the trees and swung a cudgel for the first time again. It was his first step towards civilization. And on the planet of the Galacteers, the planet of the yellow sun, development reached its absolute peak.”

Homunk and Pucky did not interrupt Harno’s soundless explanation. In the dome hall, silence reigned. No sound reached them from the outside and the sun must have set long ago. Time had lost its meaning for before the eyes of the two on-lookers passed thousands of years.

Now Galacteers were only seldom seen above ground. The surface was ruled by robots. They still served their masters, the humanoids, but a few groups began to dissent. At the beginning of this movement, they were roused out by the robot

police and destroyed. All of this happened without any Galacteer having to move a finger or even giving any orders. It happened automatically.

The cities of the surface crumbled away for they no longer served any purpose. Only one of the most modem settlements at the foothills of a mountain range withstood the natural decay. Perhaps because of the material, perhaps because of other reasons. In any case, one thing was certain: it was the city in which they now found themselves—the only city still in existence on this planet.

Until this moment the Galacteers had been only shadows without personality. But now the scales of the plastic time-projection changed again. The magnification was such that single Galacteers became recognizable. Harno recalled from the past what seemed to be a family.

“I’m now going to show you the decisive moment that spelled the doom of the Galacteers—not in a day but during the course of the next 2,000 years. The man there is the leader of an administrative district. His assignment is to give orders to the robots through the relay brain. He does it every day and it is the only assignment he has to carry out. But he is sick of it for it’s monotonous and there’s no room for initiative. The Galacteer—all Galacteers—is actually satisfied with this. He doesn’t want to work any more. Even thinking seems difficult and is an effort. He is glad that the robots relieve him of all work. But even giving orders is work—much too much work. And so it was inevitable that one day an idea would come to him. And not only to him.”

Homunk and Pucky looked into a dimly lit room. On a wide and sumptuously upholstered couch there lay a woman. She wore light clothing and was looking at a screen that had been affixed to the ceiling above her. Two children were tended to by robots. Though they fought against it, they were put to bed in an adjoining room.

The Galacteer looked like the man whom the robots had worshipped on the screen today. His widow’s peak reached deep onto his forehead and ended between his eyebrows. He was sitting at his control desk in his underground living quarters. A small screen serviced the control. On it appeared command impulses to be relayed to the robots on the surface.

The room blurred, became indistinct.

Harno explained: “The robots got the order to continue their present assignments if there were no special orders. The guardians of the brains were given the task to make any necessary decisions without checking back, as long as they were to the advantage of the Galacteers. At the same time, the order was given to reactivate the factories that had long been standing still, to produce new work robots. That was the beginning of the end.”

Homunk and Pucky saw it for themselves.

Most of the Galacteers had not worked for a long time and the responsible ones at most half an hour a day. Their brains, no longer necessary, deteriorated faster than their bodies. After a thousand years the Galacteers had lost the ability to move at all. They lay motionless on their beds and let their robot servants feed and

care for them. Soon the birth rate declined and the race was on its way toward extinction.

On the surface, things went on as usual. The production of commodities and food ran at high gear. In the factories, new robots were built every day while the old models were sorted out and discarded. Growth was greater than attrition. The planet was threatened with over-population because of the too-diligent robots.

The robots started by forgetting their real masters who had disappeared into the converters long ago. They were no more. And when one day an exploration expedition of robots penetrated to an underground city, they found only deactivated robot servants which they transported to the surface and there destroyed.

The robots had become, without wishing it, the lords of their world. They didn't know what to do with all this power and perhaps there would have been an unimaginable catastrophe if at this moment the robot brains had not taken the initiative. They had always existed just to relay the orders of the Galacteers. Why should it not continue this way? Outwardly, nothing was changed as the three or four dozen machines took control.

The production of new robots was immediately stopped, whereupon a kind of civilization whose like had never before been seen in the Milky Way had its start. It was a civilization with no desires for conquest; instead, it wanted to remain entirely isolated. But their independence led to the robot brains' learning to think. And with thought, they also learned to forget.

So the Galacteers became just figures in maxims, nothing more.

Here Harno came in again.

"Both the robots and the ruling robot brains disagreed as to whom they had to thank for their original creation. It was obvious they were not organic beings but had been created by a higher intelligence. Since they could discover only arrangements useful for robots on the planet's surface, they could only assume that this world had always belonged to them."

"They never had been servants, only masters."

"At this point, the split developed."

In their zeal to discover the truth about themselves the robots developed a philosophy, as crazy as this might sound. There were few scientific pointers for real knowledge, for the Galacteers had left no records behind them. The robots did not know what to do with the ever-running films. They were destroyed. Under normal circumstances the never-failing memory banks of their positronic brains now exhibited many symptoms of decline that could not be explained. Harno pointed out that stellar radiation intensified a million times, and in their inimitable combination, were responsible. Practically, on the centre of the galaxy were concentrated the collected cosmic rays of the entire Milky Way, and no place stood closer to *all* suns.

As further developments could not be followed on the projection screen, Harno took over the account:

“The ruling robot brains were in communication with one another and were aware of their great responsibility. They knew that the rule would end whenever men would rediscover the Central Planet, as they called it. On the other hand, the robots were anxious to be building spaceships in order to seek their masters.”

“A compromise was reached.”

“The brains realized that in the, long run they could not hold out against the wishes of several million robots. Without any previous experience, factories for Silver Arrows were constructed and put into operation. The robot brains created space travel from theory, from scratch, using only logic. The first ships completed successful experimental flights and production of a mighty fleet was begun.”

“In every ship there was a small commanding brain programmed by the mother brain. Whatever any commander might do, whatever might happen to him, he would have to make sure never to establish contact with alien spaceships. If a Silver Arrow would nevertheless actually meet an alien ship and contact it, a disaster prevention mechanism would simply destroy the Silver Arrow.”

And so the unending chase of the robots began, the chase that had to be senseless from its very beginning. They forged deep into the galaxy, found inhabited and uninhabited systems, landed on many planets and contacted their inhabitants. But never did they find a world of humanoids. When, in the deeps of space, they did meet an alien craft, they avoided contact. From time to time, a commander, despite all contrary orders from the brain on board, would try to establish contact with some alien ship but then the Silver Arrow either had to become independent and fly in the opposite direction from that given or it would self-destruct.

“And so it happened that the robots never did find their gods.”

“To the advantage of the robot brains, whose power grew ever greater and whose hunger for more power became more and more unimaginable.”

Harno was silent.

His magnified projection showed the city that would be called ‘holy’ by one group of robots. An underground shaft to the now empty living quarters of the Galacteers opened up. Three robots came up. They were carrying a huge rectangular thing that they handled with the utmost of care. They carried it to the dome hall and took off the drapery. It was the figure of the Galacteer that had appeared on the screen.

“The altar was actually one of the ruling robot brains,” Harno explained. “The 3 robots loosened some contacts and broke communication with the other robot brains. They removed the external controls so that no one could tamper with them. They took over the brain. When they had finally de-programmed it and were sure that they would not be betrayed, they restored a one-sided communication with the other robot brains and began their propaganda campaign.”

“Then there arose the two groups that are still in existence today, bitterly opposed to each other. One thought that the Galacteers would return one day to demand a reckoning, while the other group held fast to the theory that they had

been created to rule over both this and other worlds. While the first group deemed the human beings to be their gods, the other regarded them as their servants. These striking differences finally led to war.”

Harno became a projection of the planet again as he reported further:

“The robots who thought of themselves as the lords of creation naturally outnumbered the others. They were also in possession of most of the factories. Thus they had the advantage. But the others felt they were more in the right. Their 5 or 6 robot brains incited them to religious fanaticism that would make them fight to the point of self-destruction.”

“The Silver Arrows shot out into space and gave gruesome battle during which more than one ship was incapacitated. Those were the craft the Terranians had often met. The war finally ended without result, without conquerors and without conquered.”

“The ‘believers’ had accomplished what they wanted. Unhindered, they could claim the ‘holy’ city and here they could await the second coming of their gods. In their imaginations, the Galacteers had been transformed into gods who could work miracles.”

“In this group of robots, mostly examples of the original construction, there still slumbered the memory of a bygone service. They simply wanted to, had to, serve someone; but there was no one to be served. So, someone must be found. Life—if these robots had life!—seemed purposeless without having someone to serve. No wonder, then, that they took the appearance of Homunk as the fulfilment of an old prophecy, In their eyes, the Galacteers had at last returned—the creators, the gods, the masters. The servitude of the robots was at an end. The hour of freedom was near—whereby they meant the freedom to serve. As man was born free and experienced freedom, so the robots were created for service and could only look on service as the highest good. In reality there has developed a paradoxical situation in which the ‘believing’ robots behave quite normally, think and feel as they should, while the group that thinks soberly and realistically should be called quite abnormal. That’s why we have to convert the non-believers.”

“With a crusade?” Pucky shook his head and watched as Harno grew smaller and congealed once more into a black sphere. “No, count me out! What do these crazy robots matter to me? All I wanted to know is what was behind the Silver Arrows. I wanted to know who was leading them and why they avoided contact with us. Now I know. And I don’t care whether the robots are converted or not.”

“That’s not the point, Pucky. The fanatics have gained a great following since the appearance of Homunk. What was mere belief before this has suddenly become concrete. The gods are not dead after all; they live. The purpose for the existence of the robots has been moved towards the understandable: they can be servants again. If the believers lose, the victorious robot brains will change the programming of their ships. A huge fleet of automatically steered Silver Arrows will descend on men and worlds inhabited by humanoids until a battle unto death will take place. A whole swarm of deadly missiles will transform one planet after

another into suns and no one will be able to hold them back. Not even the Solar Empire.”

“And all this because Homunk happened to come here?”

“Yes.”

Pucky stood up and stared at the image of the Galacteer.

“If only I’d spent my vacation with the tall-talers! I could have spent all day in my cabin by the sea and have been with Iltu. My friends would have spoiled me and would have woven the most lovely tales for me. I could have eaten as many carrots as I wanted... no one would have bothered me. And instead of all that, I’m here to play a reformist. How could I have deserved it?”

“Because of your curiosity,” Harno replied.

Homunk had also stood up. “You can’t be serious about the crusade, Harno?” he asked. “Wouldn’t it be easier to re-program the robot brains one by one? That wouldn’t be too difficult.”

“If it were easy, it would have been done long ago, Homunk. Thinking positron beings cannot be programmed. They can only be convinced. And only by presenting evidence. In our case, the only evidence we can present are miracles. Miracles expected of superbeings or gods.”

“Miracles?” Pucky stared at Harno in shock. “Miracles...?”

“Robots are coldly rational beings—at least they consider themselves such. When something happens for which they have no logical explanation, they must take it for a miracle. They don’t know telepathy, since they are not capable of it. Every memory of teleportation or telekinetics is absent, since they have never experienced them. Even man would not have known anything about these things, if they had not taken place on Earth. We know that they did exist on Earth. Even the first Utopian histories of Terra’s antiquity only related parts of the deeply buried past. Teleportation, for us a perfectly natural phenomenon, must be the work of supernatural powers.”

“Supernatural powers have nothing to do with logic,” Pucky countered anew. “That way we’ll never overpower them.”

“At least we’ll get more followers for the believers. More we may not, cannot, hope for.”

Homunk asked: “When will the EX-238 land? Is it on its way here?”

“Tomorrow or the day after. I showed Koster the way after I’d received Iltu’s call for help.”

“Good girl,” Pucky murmured with dreamy eyes.

“You’d have done better to have left the ‘good girl’ at home,” Homunk said.

“Then Harno wouldn’t be here.” Pucky bared his incisor for several seconds as he grinned. “You’d do better to appreciate my mousebeavers when they’re let loose in this world to work the necessary miracles. Woe unto the robots when they actually are let loose!”

“The road to heaven sometimes leads through hell, Harno lectured them

soundlessly but insistently. Then he added: “When the robots return for the adoration of Homunk, I’ll turn on some magic. It’s been a long time since I’ve had to make use of magic but after all it’s for a good cause.”

“Hopefully there won’t be any trouble when the EX-238 lands,” Homunk added to the overall excitement.

* * * *

The next day, Homunk communicated with the robots for the first time.

To do that, he made use of the altar’s robot brain and its coloured symbols. He assured them that he was not God, only a representative of the former masters of this world. He was only the vanguard; soon the others would arrive.

“We’ve seen what’s been happening on this planet for thousands of years,” he said over the symbol screen to the silent robots. “You have done well in guarding the possessions of your masters, in furthering their work. But many of you have lost faith in the creators, the creators who gave you the ability to think. You have built spacefleets because you were able to think. But you’ve also forgotten—and that presages the doom of a civilization, decadence.”

The robot priest had watched motionlessly as Homunk took over the controls for the colour symbols with perfect assurance. It was not really the words that convinced him; it was this very sureness with which Homunk used the electric altar to carry out his purpose. At the same time, despite the conviction that this was no traitor but really one of the lords and masters who stood before him, the robot priest had doubts. Whenever the gods returned, he would become superfluous. He, who based his position of power on his imaginary contact with the beings who had long since disappeared, would be undone by their return. Thus, they were his greatest enemies.

Homunk, who had not the least idea what the robot priest was thinking, continued to speak over the symbol screen. He knew that six robot brains, controlled by this sector, were tuned into him. His colour symbols would be broadcast throughout the planet.

Just below the dome, Harno was floating invisibly. He was in telepathic connection with Homunk and was advising him. Pucky stayed hidden in one of the many unused adjoining rooms. Through Harno, he found out what was happening in the dome hall and what messages the android sent to the robots. More and more, he had to admit, the initiative was being taken from him. But he also saw that without Homunk he could have done nothing under the circumstances. His outward appearance simply did not fit in with the image that the robots had of their creators. In this world, he would always be the hunted.

“We had assumed that our return to this world would not be necessary again but we were wrong. We created you so that you could build a new civilization, not take sides and destroy each other. You are just as guilty as those who would shake off every remembrance of us. At the same time, both your groups are behaving

naturally. The one group would be independent and hammer out its existence as it wished but you want to be thankful to those who created you. At the same time, for convenience sake, you were grateful, for you do not want to take the responsibility. You push it off on the gods, as you called your creators. Perhaps it was only the priests, who did that not solely because it was convenient but for many additional reasons.”

He paused for a short time, as if to make sure of the robots’ reaction, but their eyes remained expressionless.

Harno explained soundlessly:

“Don’t go too far, Homunk. These are not organic beings but are filled with cold logic. They’ll accept no gods who want to punish them. They want nothing but to serve, because for that purpose they were created. Don’t tell them they want to serve only for their own comfort because then they’ll do the opposite simply to please their gods.”

Homunk understood that he could not go beyond a certain point. Pucky and he had not entered this world just to bring the robotdom back to sanity. They’d come, at most, simply to isolate the robots. To isolate them from the universe. For if the robots should take it into their heads, for whatever reason, to attack the unprotected planets of the former Empire, it would mean catastrophe. So long as they could not agree and were divided by internal strife, it would never occur to them to send out interstellar expeditions.

He must feed the present conflict.

“Even so,” he continued, “the sympathies of the creators are on your side, on the side of true servants who have not forgotten their origins. Not only does the rule of logic guide the universe but also the rule of morality. It is a rule that applies not only to all organic living beings but also to you.”

For the first time there was a reaction. A few of the robots in the first rows made approving gestures. One of them stepped forward and bowed before Homunk; then he pointed to the altar and the controls.

Homunk understood and stepped aside.

The robot ignored the priest and for a few seconds examined the installation; then he sent his answer over the symbol screens:

“As far back as our memory banks go, we have always advocated this moral and have fought for it. But in vain. The numbers of the non-believers grew even greater, for they had the factories and assembly lines for new robots. They built spaceships and weapons. Now they’re trying to exterminate us. They want to become the masters of our world and then to conquer the universe. They want to find the gods and show them who is stronger. We know that they think the gods are weak, easily wounded beings of organic origin who can be crushed with one blow. Even if that were so, they did nevertheless create us. Is it right to want to destroy them? We say no! And that’s why we continue to fight. Now more so than ever! Beside the masters who will return.”

The robot bowed and returned to the first row.

Homunk tried to figure out what Rhodan would have said if he were in Homunk's place here. Logically, he would hold the 'believers' in the right, in order to dam up the will for expansion of the robots. But was it right to interfere in the internal affairs of such a complicated civilization? Robots who were waging a religious war...!

The decision was not difficult.

"We'll break up today in order to be in the capital city to meet the ship on time. We'll leave the holy city to be guarded by the priests. We'll march till it grows dark. The faithful robot brains will send us means of transportation and will provide arms for our followers. Tomorrow the capital city will be in our possession."

The robots reacted immediately. Without any expression of feeling, they turned around and left the dome hall. In an hour, the first of them would already be marching. The metallic army would grow and start east toward the capital city and the spaceports. An army of robots that was determined it would be allowed to serve again.

Homunk stood motionless until the last had disappeared, then he looked up toward the ceiling. Harno, a great, shimmering sphere, floated slowly downwards. Just above the floor, he stopped.

The robot priest had withdrawn. Though it was precisely he who ministered to the belief in gods, promoted and defended them, deep inside he was convinced that there were neither gods nor miracles.

And now one was happening right before his eyes.

The weightless, weirdly shimmering sphere could not be understood through logic. Something emanated from it that could not be explained by normal scientific laws.

The priest drew back and, since no one stopped him, he disappeared in the back rooms of the temple for another thorough search of his memory banks to see whether the extinct creators had ever appeared together with such a sphere.

Pucky received Harno's signal and teleported back into the dome hall.

"Well, you've told them a pretty story," he said to Homunk and grinned in the direction of the symbol screen. "That's using reason properly, if you ask me. In my opinion, we shouldn't mess with this whole affair. The purpose of the expedition was to find out the origins of the mysterious Silver Arrows. We've done that. Whether the robots here believe in ghosts, gods or lubricating oil can't make any difference to us."

"But no," Homunk countered. "With the bare discovery of their home base nothing has been accomplished. This really unique civilization of intuitively behaving and yet logically thinking robots means great danger for all of us. If the so-called 'nonbelievers' should win the upper hand, their Silver Arrows will soon overrun the entire Milky Way. Don't forget that the natural resources of this planet are inexhaustible. Haven't you thought about why, on a planet at the centre of the galaxy and pulled by unimaginable centrifugal forces, there should be a

quite normal gravity? I will tell you, Pucky: because the entire planet consists of a solid metal core whose weight and gravitational fields compensate for these centrifugal forces. If the Earth were on this spot, it would have broken apart long ago. Only such a massive planet as this one could withstand the strain. The crust is only a few meters thick, then there are rocks; and at a depth of 500 meters there is the massive core. Out of it, a million spacefleets can be built.”

“How do you know all this?” Pucky asked in disbelief.

“From Harno,” said Homunk.

“Oh, well, if it’s really so... what now? Without the EX-238, we’re finished, particularly me. I can’t even let myself be seen by these crazy robots. They think I’m the devil or something. Frankly, Homunk, with me you’ll win no religious wars.”

“You’re just not built like a god,” Homunk smiled.

In the meantime, the robot priest had seriously deliberated trying to find a way out of the personal dilemma into which he was in danger of falling. There was only one possibility of restoring his prestige and even of increasing it: he had to prove that the so-called representative of the masters was a fraud. If he could manage that, there would be no one to fight him for pre-eminence any more.

Carefully he stepped to a wall in his private quarters, shoved aside a few newly installed panels and pressed various buttons. More panels slid aside and a screen became visible.

It was a multi-purpose screen.

After a few landscapes and technical installations, the inside of the dome hall appeared on the screen. The priest did not wince as he saw the mousebeaver standing next to Homunk and Harno. He knew right away it was the being who had escaped twice already by inexplicable means. It must be an organic being.

That could easily be proved.

With a few motions the priest changed the functioning of the screen. The hidden cameras were no longer sensitive to visible light waves in sending images to the screen but concentrated only on heat waves produced by living organisms.

The screen had become dark.

As the priest pressed appropriate buttons, the contours of the mousebeaver appeared on the screen. Otherwise there was nothing else.

The priest stared at the screen in disbelief.

Where was the representative of the masters? Only the little furry being had appeared. It threw off heat waves and was therefore organic.

And the emissary?

Neither he nor the sphere were visible.

The emissary was a robot!

The realization hit the priest like a bolt of lightning, though he, too, was a robot. Quite by accident he had been able to expose the new god as an impostor. He had managed to uncover fraud. A fraud that was greater and far graver than the

one perpetrated by him and to which he owed his present position.

The voice projection reproduced the conversation of the impostors but it was an unknown and therefore an incomprehensible language. It would only take a short while to decipher it, though. The priest plugged in supplementary equipment. He had to have evidence to destroy his hated rival for good. Perhaps, even, they were special constructions of the non-believers, and the capture in the ship, the flight and sudden appearance near the holy city was nothing but a clever trick in the strategy of their enemy.

The priest was triumphant.

He was smarter than the others.

Much smarter.

They would be surprised.

They would even be very surprised.

* * * *

All over the planet the mighty robot armies rolled toward the great cities where the robot brains stood. They soon met the first opposition, initially weak, disorganized and easily overcome. Already five hours after Homunk's call to arms, three robot brains were in the hands of the rebels.

Harno had left Homunk and Pucky to their own devices and after a few suggestions and advice had disappeared, not without having promised to return at the appropriate time.

Pucky had taken Homunk by the arm and teleported in the direction of the city. They hid in the topmost dome of a tall building close to the spaceport and awaited further developments in the events they had gotten under way.

It was an empty hall with abandoned machines and work benches. A few fully constructed robots stood lifeless on long shelves, waiting to be activated. The dust told them that the robots had waited for decades already, if not for centuries.

From the windows, Homunk and Pucky had a good overview.

"More ships have landed," Pucky reported while Homunk was searching the cupboards. "Those guys have gathered together a handsome fleet. It's swarming with soldiers and officers. But they all look alike. I would sure like to find the bat who wanted to throw me into the converter."

"Find the Silver Arrow in which we came and you'll have your rat," Homunk corrected dryly.

Pucky looked at him.

"The ships all look alike, too. What's in the cupboards? Anything to eat? I'm beginning to be bored with these stupid pills. There must be something to eat on this crazy planet!"

"What would robots eat?" Homunk asked. "Do you have any appetite for the finest of lubricating oils or graphite? In the main, though, my-hm-my colleagues

nourish themselves on atomic energy. How would that be?"

"Since you became the founder of a religion, you talk nothing but nonsense," Pucky said decisively. "No wonder your mechanical comrades are fighting each other because of you." He sighed. "I would bet a hundredweight of carrots against Reggie's stubbly hair that we'd find something to eat if we tried. And you know where? No? Then I'll tell you: in the former dwellings of the noble gods."

"Gods? You mean the creators of the robots?"

"Good guess, my friend." Pucky looked out the window again. "Something's happening outside but until the arrival of the EX-238 we have plenty of time. If Harno's right, the ship won't land before tomorrow noon."

"That'll be in about 30 hours, for the sun will go down soon. We can leave the robots to themselves. The spark has taken hold; we can't do any more. Let's hope the spaceport is in the hands of the believers when Lan Koster arrives. Until then, as far as I'm concerned, we might as well go carrot hunting."

Pucky grinned.

"I'm afraid they wouldn't have lasted these thousands of years but maybe we'll find other things in the refrigerators and the storerooms of the... what did Harno call them?"

"The Galacteers."

"Right, the Galacteers. Let's go see. Teleportation is a fine thing."

"It compensates you for your organic body which otherwise consists of practically nothing but handicaps," smiled Homunk and took Pucky's paw.

From Harno they knew that nearly everywhere under the cities there were living quarters that reached down 200 meters below the surface of the planet. A miscalculated leap was practically impossible, especially if Pucky was careful.

They materialized 50 meters below ground in a rectangular, bare room. There was no furniture at all. Several doors led into other rooms that seemed as cheerless as the first. It was cold, and if ever there had been a heating system here, it was no longer functioning.

"It doesn't look very livable," Pucky complained in disappointment.

"Let's look farther. I don't think these were living quarters. If so, there should have been at least the remains of some furnishings. They're made of durable materials."

After a few more tries, they landed in a huge hall with a low ceiling. In the middle was a nearly square basin, about three meters deep.

"A swimming pool!" said Homunk in wonder. "So they did not even do without that. I think we're getting closer. Well, what does your famous nose say? Any scent yet?"

Pucky sniffed around the air.

"Plenty stale, I'd say. Look at this dust, Homunk! Nobody's cleaned up for years. Since the robots established themselves as the masters of the surface, they couldn't care less about the nice underground quarters. Let's go on. I'm curious

about what all we'll find."

The farther they went, the more livable the rooms became. Harno had been right; the furnishings were of durable material that not even time could attack. The projection equipment and the receiving screens were still functioning properly, as a brief trial demonstrated. Homunk was interested in a control station as described and shown them by Harno. On the screen appeared, one after the other, various images of the capital city and the spaceports as seen from a small distance above ground. It was a puzzle how these pictures were made, for Pucky had seen neither low-flying satellites nor aircraft.

"We could await developments in peace and quiet down here," Homunk suggested. "We should go up only after Koster has landed."

Pucky did not reply. He was busy trying to open a heavy door. He could simply have teleported himself through the door but it was too risky. No one knew what lay beyond the door. He cautiously probed the electronic locks by telekinesis until he had familiarized himself with the wiring and switches. Then he started his move. Slowly the door swung open.

A frightful smell met the two explorers. Shocked, they retreated. Pucky closed the door as fast as possible.

"There you've got your something to eat," said Homunk.

Pucky made a face.

"Wager lost," he stated. "If you don't say anything to Bell, I can still keep my carrots."

"You didn't bet with Bell but with me. You're lucky you lost, otherwise you'd have to give me Bell's scalp. But you can keep your carrots. Still, there's something I don't understand: if the food was going to spoil, it should have done so thousands of years ago. There should be no trace left of it, also no smell. The ventilation here is working perfectly."

Before Pucky could answer, they heard footsteps.

Homunk reacted immediately. He took Pucky by the sleeve and pulled him into a niche next to a cupboard. They ducked down. The footsteps came closer. They were hard and even but also a bit unsteady, as if the alien were not used to walking any more.

The door opened and a robot came into the room. It stopped as it noticed the light shining down from the ceiling.

It was broadly and powerfully built, on its chest a screen that now lit up. The familiar symbols appeared in rapid succession.

Homunk nodded reassuringly to Pucky and came out of their hiding place. He ignored the robot and went to the controls of the symbol screen.

"Don't worry, Pucky," he said. "A worker or servant. Let's see what it wants."

The conversation that now took place was entirely silent as both screens flickered. They were the same symbols as came from the great robot brain.

"I await the orders of my master," he robot said.

Homunk's brain worked faster than any human brain. From the given facts and the question of the robot he came to conclusions that would have taken more time and more facts for human beings. But Homunk knew immediately that he was facing a robot that had lost every contact with the long-independent robot brains. Apparently it also had no sense of time. At any rate, it took Homunk for a Galacteer.

"Prepare a bath and bring me something to eat," said Homunk. Before the robot could go again, he added quickly, "And something to drink."

At the door, the symbol screen of the servant lit up again: "Does my master wish to eat before or after the bath?"

"Before, of course."

The robot disappeared. Pucky came out of hiding. Quickly Homunk explained what they had 'said' to each other. Pucky's eyes expressed wonder.

"How is it possible? Why isn't the robot astounded that you're here? It couldn't possibly assume that you've been sleeping for a couple of thousand years..."

"It doesn't know, Pucky. I would guess that contact with the surface was lost gradually. The Galacteers let the robots take over their world; Harno has already told us that. They stayed down below with their mechanized servants. As they slowly died out, the servants remained. There was nothing for them to do any more, and with greater and greater pauses from work, they deactivated themselves. The time that has gone by is meaningless for them. Whether it's a single night or 5,000 years—it doesn't matter. For the robots only a few hours have passed since they last saw a Galacteer. The robot thinks I'm one. Evidence that they were humanoids."

"Even so, I can't understand it. Its brain functions logically and perfectly. Why shouldn't it know what has happened on the surface? It must have been informed of the change."

"Didn't you once say that these robots had race prejudice?" Homunk smiled. "You apparently had no idea how right you were. Between the ordering robots of the surface and the silent waiters of the underworld, there was even then a strong, sociological difference that could be the cause of the present situation. As they gained mastery, the surface robots simply ignored the servants. They did not think it necessary to inform the servants or to reprogram them. So there is a third group of robots in this world, apparently the most friendly towards us."

"That makes no difference as far as I'm concerned. No doubt this servant will also take me for the devil when he sees me."

"More likely for a toy of its master's," Homunk said. "I'm only curious as to what it'll bring us. Hopefully not a sample of rotten food."

Pucky shook himself and disappeared with lightning speed as the door opened and the robot entered.

The robot was pushing a serving cart and steered it towards the low table that was surrounded by wide sofas. It gave Pucky, who was peeking around the corner of the niche in curiosity, a warning glance. The mousebeaver ducked and rolled up

his eyes.

An enticing aroma spread throughout the room.

The food, as Homunk ascertained through a quick olfactory analysis, consisted of synthetic materials. They were entirely suitable for a human organism and even the mousebeaver would not suffer any harm from tasting it. Four sizable bottles were also on the tray. In them variously coloured liquids floated back and forth. The robot servant disappeared soundlessly.

Pucky shot out of the niche and fell on the unexpected meal. For awhile he tasted the various dishes sceptically, even though Homunk had assured him that they were edible and he could consume them without risk. Then he decided on a kind of stew.

“Excellent,” he squeezed out while chewing. “Really excellent! I’d like to know what it’s made of.”

“I could tell you but it wouldn’t do your appetite any good. It’s synthetic, as I told you already. But nourishing.”

Pucky ate till he was stuffed. The drink seemed equally palatable. In one flask there was even a trace of alcohol. Just for fun, Homunk joined him in a glass.

Pucky drank all there was in the bottle, stretched himself out on the sofa, crossed his arms under his head and grunted: “You can send me two servants who will carry me to the bath.”

“They’ll carry you there just to drown you,” Homunk prophesied. “If you’ll take my advice, you should sleep for a few hours. I will give the robot appropriate orders.”

“Orders? What do you mean?”

“It’ll guard you while you’re sleeping and I’ll look around some more. I have to find signs of the Galacteers. They are a race whose origins interest me.”

“Me too. I want to...”

“You sleep, Pucky. That’s an order! You can’t do anything with an overtired teleporter even in an emergency. So be reasonable, little one.”

Pucky resumed his original position. A peaceful smile spread over his features. He was grinning in satisfaction.

“That’ll suit me fine, Homunk. Hopefully I won’t sleep for a couple of thousand years like the robots here below.”

“I’ll wake you at the right time,” Homunk promised and left the room. He closed the door carefully and activated his supplementary sense of orientation that from now on would mark his every step and record it in his memory bank. Whatever happened, he could find his way back again.

He met the robot in the next room and ordered him not to stir from the spot and to stop anyone who might want to go into the living room. The robot confirmed the order.

Homunk experienced no special surprises.

The underground world was just as it must have been during the lifetime of the

Galacteers. Everywhere he met robot servants who, when he drew close, automatically woke from their 'sleep' and humbly wanted to know what he wanted.

He went from apartment to apartment, passed by huge energy stations, control stations and now-abandoned amusement stations. There was even an artificially laid out park with meadows, ponds and small mountains. The Galacteers had known how to live here, underground. And yet they were extinct.

Perhaps because they had lived too well.

As Homunk was on the point of turning back again, he noticed a massive door, far heavier than those which had opened before him automatically until now. In front of this one stood two robots. They too were different from the servants. They carried weapons.

They looked at him with expressionless features and frozen eyes.

"What's behind the door?" Homunk asked with the help of the symbol screen that was to be found in every room.

"The other world," was the answer.

"Open."

The robots did not move.

"Entrance is forbidden."

"Who told you that?"

"All the order stations, master."

Hm, Homunk thought, they still call me 4 master". By 'order stations' they must surely mean the robot brains to whom the extinct Galacteers had given too much freedom. So much freedom as to let them become independent—and to let them lock up the Galacteers in their underground world.

That was it!

In a second, everything was plain to Homunk. He now knew why the Galacteers had become extinct. He knew the cause. It wasn't only the decadence, not only the laziness that stemmed from too much comfort, it was the robots who had played their part in the destruction. Perhaps intentionally.

They had locked up the Galacteers in their underworld living quarters and had hermetically sealed them off from the upper world. Possibly the robot brains had even given false reports to the Galacteers as to what was happening on the surface.

At the same time it was equally certain that the two guards in front of the door did not know what was really happening. Just like the servants, they had looked to their duty without noticing that changes had taken place.

"Open the door," Homunk ordered determinedly. "Other orders don't count any more."

The robots finally moved but only to raise their weapons. Their barrels now pointed at Homunk.

That was their answer. The screens remained dark.

Homunk had to know what lay beyond the door. Perhaps only the way to the surface, perhaps something else. The two guards did not represent much of an obstacle. He could always unplug them.

He paid no more attention to them and went forward until he had reached a bend in the hallway. He stopped, under cover, and drew his tiny laser pistol from his combination pockets. It was a most effective weapon, for even at a hundred meters its beam was so concentrated as to have a diameter of no more than a pencil point.

For a moment he considered whether it would not be better to fetch Pucky but then he decided to let the mousebeaver sleep. Pucky badly needed rest.

The robots had lowered their weapons as they saw that he was withdrawing.

He aimed at the first one and shot. Even before the effect could be ascertained, he aimed at the other one and bored a hole through its head with his energy beam. With that, he disturbed the electronic nerve centre and disabled it.

When he again approached them, they did not react. They stood motionless. Homunk went past them to the door. It was secured by a complicated magnetic lock that could only be opened by force. With a beam of his laser gun Homunk simply burned out a hole in the door and climbed through it.

In front of him was a tunnel.

Above, there was light. A fresh breath of air indicated a gangway to the surface. Guide rails pointed to freight elevators. At regular intervals there were corridors leading away from the tunnel.

From below came noises.

Homunk drew back far enough to be hidden in the shadows of the small platform separating the door from the shaft. And not a second too soon, for a square-shaped cubicle came floating aloft. It was remote-controlled, for no robots were to be seen, but the cubicle was filled with shining metal blocks that seemed freshly moulded. One could tell by the shimmering seams.

Slowly Homunk nodded to himself. He had surmised a long time ago that the robots were hauling their raw materials out of the deeps of the planet. Apparently they had already been doing it when the Galacteers were still alive and they had made certain that no one would disturb this particular arrangement.

Homunk himself was a robot of sorts and he could not but wonder with what care and finesse the Metalix had made themselves the masters of this world. They had succeeded in eliminating the Galacteers without bloodshed. It had been a peaceful revolution for a change in the power structure. Machines had driven their creators from the surface of their world and the human beings had thought it was their own idea.

Behind it all were the robot brains, the guiding lights.

They had to be put out of action to avoid this storm in the Milky Way.

Homunk watched one mine car after another sliding to the top and empty ones disappearing into the depths. There, in eternal darkness, robots were working.

Perhaps there were robots who had never seen the sun of their own world, perhaps did not even know what had happened during the preceding thousands of years.

Carefully Homunk stepped onto the narrow strips that led to the elevators.

As the next empty mine care swept by him, he jumped inside.

He had to know what was happening down below.

* * * *

When Pucky awoke, he instinctively looked at his watch.

He had slept for 10 hours and felt refreshed. The remains of his meal still stood on the table. Since he did not trust himself to call the robot servant, he busied himself over the remains and polished off everything that was left. He emptied a second bottle, belched in satisfaction and began to hope that Homunk would soon come back.

The android had been gone for 10 hours. A very long time to look around a couple of apartments. Hopefully, nothing had happened to him.

Pucky remembered the radio transmitter and receiver built into his spacesuit. He turned it on and called Homunk. There was no answer. There was no interference but it could well be that the massive rock walls let no radio waves penetrate. Besides which, Homunk could be heaven-knows-where.

“Certainly he’s somewhere,” Pucky grunted indecisively. “Too bad positronic brains don’t send thought impulses.”

He was startled when the door opened and the robot servant entered the room. But then it occurred to him that after all nothing much could happen to him. If the situation grew too ticklish, he could simply teleport himself to another spot.

With a waddling gait, the robot approached and stopped in front of him. On the screen, the colour symbols appeared but Pucky could make nothing of them. These Galacteers must have been even too lazy to speak toward the end, otherwise they would never have invented these crazy speech symbols.

“But my dear fellow,” Pucky piped up condescendingly. “You don’t by any chance know where my friend is? Do turn off your flicker box! I don’t understand any of it.”

“Our little master prefers a sound language?”

It was as if Pucky had received an electric shock. The words were loud and distinct, if a bit distorted. Not even the universal language but an ancient Arkonide dialect.

“Wha—”? Pucky said and sat down. He was so surprised that his short legs could no longer support him. He simply stared at the robot.

The robot did not move from the spot.

“Your command, master?”

Pucky began to slowly reconcile himself to the fact that the robot was capable of speech. Why he hadn’t spoken before this remained a mystery. There could be

a thousand reasons. There was also no reason why he addressed Pucky as 'master'.

The robots in the holy city and in the Silver Arrow had reacted quite differently. Perhaps these robots down below had received somewhat better training, Pucky surmised, not entirely groundlessly.

"I—ah—I want to know where my—hm—companion is."

"The great lord?" The robot seemed to know exactly whom Pucky was referring to. "He will return. Does my master wish to take a bath?"

"The Galacteers probably did nothing but eat and take baths, huh? Very well, a bath for me. But a warm one, please. With music."

"With music," affirmed the robot, turned around and went out of the room.

Pucky stared helplessly after him.

Ten minutes later the mousebeaver was washing off the dirt of the past few days in a huge basin. The water was comfortably warm and had an agreeable scent. From hidden loudspeakers issued soft, electronic music. An orchestrated ablution, as Pucky had desired.

The robot had disappeared with his spacesuit and his underwear. When he returned the laundered clothes, they smelled all fresh and new as if they had just been purchased in a store.

Pucky was slowly beginning to enjoy all this. But worry over Homunk took precedence. As he was dressing with the help of the robot—the servant could not be restrained from lending a hand—Pucky asked him: "Where, then, is the great lord, John? I have to know, d'you hear?"

"I can't say, but he will return."

Pucky gave up. The bath had not only refreshed him but had put him in good humour. If the funny robot didn't know where Homunk was, he would have to make a search himself. It wouldn't be long before he'd find him.

First thing, he found the broken-in door and the two fighting robots who bore unmistakable signs of Homunk's laser gun. It was a sign that took Pucky a bit farther. At least to the shaft. Here there arose the question of whether Homunk had gone up or down.

Down, of course, Pucky decided after a moment's thought. Homunk would already know what was on the surface.

Pucky teleported downwards.

According to his estimate, after a few short leaps, he materialized at about a depth of a thousand meters, which amounted to about a half kilometre below the upper layer of the planet's metal core. The robots had driven their mining operations this far down. Harno was right when he said that the entire centre of the planet was made of metal. The walls of pathways and the rooms through which Pucky passed shimmered silver, sometimes yellowish or almost black. Sometimes he had to duck out of the way of mine cars that seemed to be steered by ghostly hands as they drove to the shaft where they emptied their valuable

loads into the cabins of the conveyor belt.

Once he found a sign of Homunk's presence. The android had broken open a side door, behind which there was a machine storage room. There was no other exit and Homunk was no longer there.

Pucky did not stay here long. He guessed that the machines were remote-controlled for he met no robots. In the hallway once more he continued in the same direction and paid particular attention to any signs that might point to Homunk's previous presence.

He found none but suddenly heard footsteps. Quickly he hid himself in an empty mine car that stood on some sidetracks. It wasn't very bright here below but one could never tell how well the robots could see. In any case, the general dimness indicated that the robots were used to artificial light and had no arrangements for infrared.

Pucky listened. Something caught his attention but he didn't immediately know what it was.

Then he suddenly understood: these were no single footsteps but the steps of an entire marching column. They did not come toward him but went off in the opposite direction. It was a weird sound, here, a thousand meters underground.

Pucky climbed out of the mine car and continued on his way. To make greater headway, he teleported ahead a bit. The steps grew louder. Only now it occurred to him that none of the mine cars were operating any more. They stood fully loaded in the hallways but they did not move.

One leap more and he saw the robots.

There were about two dozen of them, three abreast, and they were marching toward some unknown goal. Not one of them looked around, so that Pucky could get to within a few meters of them.

And then he became aware of something else: the robots could be distinctly told apart from those he'd met on the surface of the nameless central planet. They were sturdier, nearly square, and had two powerful, five-fingered hands. As far as Pucky could determine, they were all unarmed.

The column marched steadily towards a huge door that cut off the hallway. The door opened automatically. Before it closed again, Pucky, too, slipped through—and stopped as if nailed to the ground.

He was looking out upon a huge hall with high ceilings and smooth walls. Flat and powerful machines were set into the floor, behind which rose iron bars and electrical equipment. The light was brighter here than in the hallways.

But that wasn't what astounded Pucky.

It was Homunk.

The android was standing on a mighty block of metal as on a podium. In front of him, filling the entire hall, were more than 1000 worker robots. They were looking expectantly at the oval screen whose controls were within Homunk's reach.

Pucky squeezed himself into a corner so he wouldn't be easily covered. He was sorry he couldn't understand the symbol language of the Galacteers but he could guess what was taking place here.

After the religious revolution, Homunk was trying to start a second one. The revolution of the workers.

6/ SAVIOR OF THE UNIVERSE

At the speed of light, the EX-238 was approaching the only planet of the lonely yellow sun.

Maj. Koster had ordered the ship to be put in combat readiness. All the crew were at their stations. Admittedly the former heavy cruiser was short-handed but automation made up for that.

Iltu and the mousebeavers had volunteered their services but Koster declined with a smile. "It isn't necessary," he assured Iltu. "We have enough people. I would rather you'd try to establish telepathic contact with Pucky. We don't know what to expect on the planet nor what has happened there. We don't even know whether Harno's information was correct."

"Why should he lie?"

"Maybe the sphere was just plain wrong."

"Harno's never wrong," Iltu maintained. "Are we going to land?"

"If no one prevents us, yes. In any case, because of the interference in the radio equipment I can't ask for the usual permission to land. Besides which, no one knows whether the robots could even understand us."

The navigation officer came up to them. He made a wide circle around Iltu. The crew of the EX-238 had plenty of experiences with the mousebeavers. And they hadn't always been pleasant.

"Sir, our distance is two light-hours. Should we keep up our present speed?"

"Right now, yes. No observations? No Silver Arrows?"

"Nothing, sir. They've been sighted all over the Milky Way, but here, where their home base is supposed to be, there apparently aren't any. If I could make a comment, sir..."

"Comment away, Lieutenant."

"It looks as if the Silver Arrows have withdrawn to their home base. Perhaps they're waiting for us."

"How could they know we're coming?"

"Homunk, sir."

Koster nodded slowly but was looking at Iltu.

She said nothing.

The door to central control opened. Wullewull came strolling in, his fur in

frightful disarray as usual and his uniform sloppily put on. "Iltu, I want to go back to Mars," he piped with a plaintive face and sprang in one leap onto the corner couch that used to be reserved for Pucky. But now Wullewull could indulge himself. "This Ooch is a braggart, a show-off, a coward, nothing but a common..."

Iltu threw Koster a helpless look, went to Wullewull and patted his back. "Trouble because of Biggy? Why don't you keep your hands off his girl? Look, there's Fippi. I know she's secretly wild about you and your excellent abilities. I won't come right out and say she's in love with you but at least she finds you interesting. More interesting, in any case, than Ooch. And Fippi is very pretty, you must admit."

Wullewull was all ears. He squatted down and looked penetratingly at Iltu.

"She's wild about me and finds me interesting?"

Iltu nodded earnestly.

"More interesting than Ooch?"

Again Iltu nodded.

Wullewull slid slowly from the couch, drew himself up to his full height of one meter, smoothed his fur hastily and stated: "You're right, Iltu. Fippi is a beautiful girl. I can't understand why I've preferred Biggy. Biggy's a nothing. I can't understand what Ooch sees in her. But he's always had strange taste." Head held high, he strutted out of central control and forgot to close the door from pure excitement. Iltu did it telekinetically for him, then she looked at Koster.

It took 10 seconds, then both burst into laughter. Even the lieutenant joined in and forgot his vanished Silver Arrows.

"You sure can handle them, Iltu," Koster acknowledged. "Do you really think he won't fight with Ooch over Biggy any more?"

"Not over Biggy but from now on they'll be fighting over Fippi."

"Aha, you do know Wullewull well."

"That, too, but most of all I know Ooch. He begrudges everybody everything. He would even fight over me with Pucky if he didn't have so much respect for Pucky."

On the screens the planet had grown larger. Koster and his officers now saw exactly what Pucky and Homunk had seen before them. The surface consisted of coherent landmasses, interrupted only by inland seas; the huge factories, no cities, very little agriculture and the highways. Also expansive spaceports and whole fleets of Silver Arrows.

Koster had their flight speed reduced. They were still in combat readiness. Their protective screen was turned on.

At a height of 100 kilometres, the EX-238 circled the planet in the centre of the galaxy.

On the magnifying screen all details of the surface were plainly visible and shortly after two trips around the planet the observers noticed things to give them

something to think about. Several huge robot armies were sweeping over the continent. They had various destinations but always seemed headed toward where the concentration of industry and spaceports was particularly heavy.

The largest of the spaceports was the goal of three different armies, one of which was crossing the flatland in front of the western mountain chain.

Koster had to look twice before he could believe it. "Strange," he then said. "They're carrying something in front of them and, if I'm not mistaken, it's a human figure. It can't very well be Homunk but it looks just like him."

"It's clearly distinguishable," the lieutenant confirmed. He was staring at the screen in amazement. "A human figure. There's some shining metal. Do you suppose it's some kind of a symbol?"

"The way they're carrying it in front of the army might lead to that conclusion," Koster said. "But why should the robots be doing it? That's no procession there below!"

"It looks like it, though."

It really did look like it. Unfortunately, a little later when two small and agile Silver Arrows attacked the army with air weapons that shot into the columns of robots, it no longer looked like a procession.

"War!" shouted the lieutenant. "They're at war there! That makes our mission more difficult. How can we possibly land?"

The attacking ships turned around after a short while and disappeared in the direction of the city. The robots that were destroyed stayed where they had fallen while the rest of the army continued its march. In front, the human statue was on a stand carried by 4 robots.

"We'll try to make our peaceful intentions known to them before we land," Lan Koster said with determination. "Until now they've ignored us completely. Either they're too busy with their own affairs or they think we're not dangerous. That would suit us fine."

At a low altitude the EX-238 flew toward the city, losing still more altitude. Three or four Silver Arrows crossed their path but they avoided them in good time and changed their course. Once they could even see an air battle. Two small spaceships were shooting at each other until one plunged down and disappeared in the flames of an explosion. Only a smoking crater was left in the middle of a long, flat building.

Above the spaceport, Koster turned off the explorer ship's engines. The gigantic sphere was now held only by gravitational fields and floated motionlessly over the landing field at an altitude of 500 meters. All the protective screens had been activated to prevent a surprise attack. In weapons control, the men sat behind the fire control panel and waited for the order to attack. The order did not come.

Far below the battle raged for the possession of the spaceport.

The approaching army with the human statue was still 20 kilometres away but it looked as if dissension had broken out within the city itself. A strong police cordon surrounded the spaceport. It was attacked by apparently disorganized

troops and independent hordes of different kinds of robots. The battle they saw now was more gruesome than anything the crew of the EX-238 had ever seen. Of course only mechanical beings were destroying each other but they used every imaginable method in doing so. It was also precisely the mechanical nature of the combatants that made this gruesomeness necessary. A robot would cease fighting only when its brain was destroyed. And he was not afraid of being destroyed. They were not motivated by self-preservation; their only goal was to disable their opponents.

The robots fought with modem rayguns, heavy work tools, iron bars and bare steel fists. They fought until their opponents were out of combat or until they themselves were destroyed. Often this happened only when their bodies were almost entirely shattered and demolished. Only when their brains gave up did they give up.

Koster turned to FR-7, the research robot of the expedition.

“FR-7? Do you recommend landing?”

“Without landing we’ll never find out what’s happening below.” The powerful robot pointed to the controls of the spaceship. “I’m leaving the EX-238, then you can turn on the protective shields again.”

“You’re going alone?”

“Yes. They’ll listen to me, these Metalix. I am anxious to get to know them.” He made a rattling noise. “After all, they’re basically my compatriots.”

Koster agreed. At the moment he could think of nothing better. If only Pucky would show up! He could, after all, teleport...

The spacesphere sank slowly down. There was enough room so that no Silver Arrows would be damaged. With a small jerk, the EX-238 finally touched ground. The humming of the engines stopped.

On the screen their surroundings were easily visible. The heavily armed police were still defending the spaceport but they were gradually being pushed back. The powerfully built robots, unarmed but in the majority, were stronger.

FR-7 waited in the airlock. No pressure equalization was necessary and the outer hatch could be opened immediately and without further ado. The explorer robot brought his weapon arm into the most advantageous position and let himself be carried to the surface of the planet by an antigravitation field. Behind him the protective energy field once more enveloped the EX-238.

“I’m going toward the police cordon,” FR-7 radioed back. “So far they haven’t noticed me but that will soon change. Stay tuned. Maybe I’ll need directions from you.”

“Avoid combat—if it’s possible,” Koster told him again. “Otherwise do as you think best.”

Of course FR-7 would do as he thought best. He’d even use his weapon if he thought best but he would still have to inform Koster and ask permission, if there was time.

He saw that the defenders of the spaceport had received reinforcements. Out of an underground hangar came about two dozen armoured vehicles that fired energy beams into the ranks of the attackers and destroyed more than half. To FR-7's surprise, the survivors drew back immediately. It was not an act of self-preservation but the robots must simply have seen that without more powerful weapons they could do nothing against the tanks. They would get weapons or else attack at another spot.

Four of the spaceport defenders had by now noticed FR-7. They saw he came from the ship that had just landed and was unarmed. While the tanks were pursuing the retreating Metalix, the 4 robots came toward FR-7. They stopped close in front of him.

FR-7 knew hundreds of languages and as many dialects. He tried several varieties of Arkonide dialects and after the third try got the desired result.

"It is good," said one of the Metalix, "that your ship landed just now. We don't know who you are and we also don't know where you come from but you could not have come at a better time."

FR-7 was not omniscient. He did not understand what they meant by their statement. In his opinion this reception was too cool. They acted as if they had been expecting them and were not particularly excited over it. And the EX-238 people had been expecting the exact opposite.

The Metalix! The cruel robots who avoided all contact with other intelligent beings, even with robots!

And now they simply welcomed them...

FR-7 decided to be on his guard. His right arm with its hidden weapon stayed at the ready. He did not trust this calm.

"I am glad that our visit is welcome to you," he said in old Arkonidian, a language that was hardly to be found in the Empire any more. "It is awkward for me to witness strife that does not concern me."

It sounded like a statement but it was really a question. And it was promptly answered.

"They are rebels. They were stirred up—by organic beings no less—that came to our world as prisoners. For thousands of years there has been nothing but peace and quiet here. Now there's rebellion. It will soon be ended, though."

Organic beings? FR-7 found no explanation for this. They could not mean Homunk, for Homunk was an android, a half-robot. And Pucky? No, they surely couldn't mean Pucky.

Before FR-7 could say anything, a tumult arose some 100 meters away. Ray beams whooshed over the heads of some robots but then the two parties seemed suddenly to unite. A detail of half a dozen Metalix marched in step towards FR-7 and his four companions.

The explorer robot took a few steps backward to get better aim if necessary. He did not like the approaching marchers.

“Who are they?” he asked.

The four Metalix with whom he had just been speaking had followed him. They were careful to keep him in their midst.

“Religious fanatics,” explained one of them to the great puzzlement of FR-7. “They belong to a sect that believes in the return of the old gods. They come to determine whether their prophet has lied to them.”

FR-7 had a positronic brain with a memory bank whose capacity was commensurate with his importance. As far back as he could remember, he had never come across robots who believed in gods. Fanaticism was against all logic; belief had nothing to do with knowledge. And robots were capable only of knowledge.

Who were these Metalix who wanted to know whether their prophet had lied to them?

The detail had in the meanwhile reached them and had come to a halt. One of them stepped forward. On his chest a small screen began to show abstract patterns in rapid succession. One of the four robots standing next to FR-7 answered the same way.

It was not difficult for FR-7 to identify the colour patterns. They were present in his memory bank. That would indicate that the Metalix were once connected with the Arkonides or their ancestors.

“We’ve agreed to a truce,” the sectarian signalled. He did not differ in build from the defenders of the spaceport but was quite different from the retreating attackers. So there must be three groups fighting each other, FR-7 concluded. The puzzle did not grow any the less thereby. “The truce cannot be lengthened beyond the time when the other armies arrive. We want to use the interval to convince ourselves, commander.”

The robot who was addressed as ‘commander’ was on FR-7’s right.

He answered with the help of the screen: “Go ahead, convince yourselves. Do you think this primitively built robot is a god? Do you think he’s an organic being or even one of the returned lords and masters? He can barely understand our sound language but that can be explained. Reasonably and logically explained, not with belief and intuitions. Probably he was built by the crew of one of our lost ships and now he is returning. We’ll find out. But one thing is sure: he has nothing in common with the gods that caused you to fight each other. Your battle is lost, you may be certain of that.”

The six observers looked at FR-7 who was careful not to betray by any movement the fact that he understood the symbol language. He was determined not to let this trump card out of his hands.

The video-screens started talking again.

“That’s no god. Did he come from the alien ship.

“Yes.”

“The prophet foretold his appearance. Size and form fit the description. But he

also said that the gods would come with him. We don't see any gods.”

“So he lied.”

“We don't know yet who else might be in the ship, commander. We are not convinced. May we go into the ship?”

“No, that's impossible. Not because we're afraid you'd find any gods there but because it would be against the law. Also against all reason. No one may go near an alien ship before its appearance is explained. You have interrupted our conversation with its representative. Return to your army and keep the truce.”

The six Metalix looked at FR-7 once more with penetrating glances, then turned around and marched away. Their movements betrayed uncertainty and doubt.

The explorer robot's brain was working feverishly. The given data, his banked memories and superior logic created a first picture of the present circumstances. With a 90% certainty, they must mean Homunk when they said prophet.

If that were the case, then Homunk had designated the crew of the EX-238 as gods. FR-7 was reminded of the human figure that the robots carried in front of the army. Under no circumstances could Homunk have driven the robots insane in so short a time. Conclusion: the robots were already insane when Homunk had appeared. He had simply made use of an existing situation. He had foretold the arrival of the EX-238. And when he promised that the EX-238 would contain gods, he must have meant the Terranians.

The connections were becoming ever more clear. The one group of robots denied the existence of gods—or humanoids—while the others were prepared to fight for their belief in gods.

FR-7 recalled the huge masses of robots sweeping toward the city. He recalled the rebellion in the camp of the defenders, their uncertainty before they caught sight of him.

He could figure clearly what would happen if Maj. Koster and 10 officers left the EX-238 and stepped down onto the spaceport. Their appearance alone would, at the moment, decide the state of affairs in this world to their advantage.

Nearly half of the robots on this planet believed in gods.

If the gods really came, everybody would know.

With that, he made his decision.

FR-7 made it a few hours too late.

* * * *

The army of the holy city had reached the edge of the factory city.

The robot brain that was stationed here had been taken by the believers through surprise attack and had been re-programmed. It kept functioning independently but now on the side of the religious fanatics.

Then two things happened almost simultaneously. On all screens of the relay

stations and the robot brains there appeared an announcement that originated from the priest of the holy city. It said with shocking clarity that the prophet had been a false one. The analytic screen showed that the supposed emissary was not an organic being but a robot. Therefore a fraud. Unfortunately, the little companion of the 'prophet' was organic but he did not resemble the gods in the least.

The announcement came like a bolt of lightning.

Within seconds the whole war had become meaningless. The opposition would become so strong in the next few hours that a further forging ahead of the armies would have amounted to intentional self-destruction. If not...

And if the priest's announcement was wrong!

Even while the appropriate inquiries were begun, the second incident took place. A detail of the believers had got the chance to look over the alien who had arrived in the spherical ship. They confirmed that it was a robot and therefore no god.

With that, the cause of the believing robots was lost. Their anger now turned from the ruling robot brains and their servants to the robot who was built deceptively like the vanished gods. He had not only lied to them and given them false hopes, he had gotten them into this war and thereby had put them in a fatal position. If the gods had really appeared, there would have been no opposition any more. This way, they'd lose all their following.

It was Homunk's misfortune that at precisely this moment he materialized holding onto Pucky's paw in the middle of the army of the believers. His sudden and inexplicable appearance generated some kind of superstitious awe in the robots but they were determined not to be duped.

Steel fists reached out and separated Homunk from Pucky, who understood the situation immediately, but who did not want to teleport to safety by himself. Besides which, there was sure to be a misunderstanding here.

Homunk was of the same opinion. There wasn't any explanation for this sudden change in the behaviour of the Metalix but surely he would soon find out what the cause of it was. For a moment he saw the face of the priest of the holy city but Homunk did not grasp what that had to do with it all.

Homunk dispensed with the long-winded symbol language. From Pucky he had found out that the robots could also speak a sound language and used an old Arkonidian dialect.

"What do you think you're doing?" he demanded of the Metalix who held him fast as if they wanted to make sure that he wouldn't disappear again without a trace. "The gods will surely punish you for this when they arrive."

"The gods *have* arrived but they are as false as you. One of the robots stood straddle-legged in front of Homunk, his fist raised as if to hit him. "They are robots like us. And you."

"The ship has landed? The great spherical ship?" Homunk did not in the least hide his joy, for if Koster had arrived with the EX-238, then what he had foretold had come to pass. Even if the believers had found out that he was not human but

half-robot. "Take me to it."

"I can't understand a word!" Pucky's squeaky voice could hardly be heard. Two robots had grabbed the mousebeaver and were dragging him in the opposite direction. "I have to disappear, Homunk. I'll get help from Koster. Just wait until I come back with my army..."

There was really nothing for Pucky to do except to dematerialise. The robots grabbed at him carelessly and nearly broke his bones. He had an idea they wanted to do away with him, even if he had no idea what for. Even so, before he disappeared, he wanted to teach these robots a lesson that they wouldn't soon forget.

He turned on his telekinetic powers and freed himself from both his torturers. Before they could recover from their surprise and draw their weapons, Pucky had lifted them into the air.

The other robots had never seen anything like it. They stared at the miracle that was taking place right before their very eyes.

Weightlessly the two Metalix, suddenly helpless, floated upward. Pucky even pinned their arms to their sides so they couldn't make use of their rayguns. After a minute, both were tiny points on high. Then—Pucky let go of them.

They fell like two stones, bounced into the middle of the gaping crowd, ripping 4 or 5 others down with them. The clang of bursting metal mingled with the outcry of the believers. Then all was suddenly silent.

Everyone was looking at Pucky. Steel hands reached for their weapons.

Pucky, who had decided to free Homunk no matter what, gave up the project. With lightning speed he teleported to an altitude of five kilometres and held himself there through telekinesis.

Below him, the army was undulating. Details were no longer recognizable at this altitude but this much was certain: the army was no longer marching. The spaceport was only a kilometre away and on the landing field rested the EX-238 with its mighty telescoping supports.

The hatchway was open.

Ten men in the uniform of the Terranian spacefleet went toward the cordons of robots, unarmed and sure of themselves. Pucky delayed leaping into the EX-238. He would rather await developments here.

And he saw the cordon close and take the 10 men into their midst. Steel hands searched them for weapons.

Then they whisked them from the field in a wagon.

Pucky understood that a powerful change had taken place. Something must have happened to bring this about. It was the only way their sudden turning against Homunk was to be explained.

Pucky teleported into the central control room of the EX-238.

Lt. Schlenkowa sat in front of the controls and was staring at the screens. His right hand lay on the control button for the weapons centre. One push and the EX-

238 would be spewing death and destruction.

But the lieutenant did not push the button.

“You’re right, Iltu,” he said to Pucky. “They shouldn’t have gone. Now they’re in a spot and we can’t rescue them without putting them into the greatest of dangers.”

“I’m Pucky, not Iltu,” Pucky told him. “You Terranians will never learn to tell the difference between us. Man, if you’d pay attention to Iltu’s rose-red incisor, you couldn’t go wrong! You observe everything else so exactly. But now explain—what has happened?”

“Pucky!” the lieutenant was obviously relieved and seemed not even apologetic for his mistake. One mousebeaver, he must be thinking, is just like another. And Iltu knew how to teleport herself, too. “At last! We’ve been expecting you for ages.”

Briefly, he sketched out what had happened. He concluded: “When FR-7 told us that these robots here took their creators and therefore all humanoids for gods, Maj. Koster thought it would not be dangerous to leave the ship. It was the only chance to establish contact, since we received no reply to our radio messages. Then the surprise attack took place. We couldn’t possibly interfere without endangering Koster and his people.”

Before Pucky could answer, Iltu materialized in central control. She had received the thought-impulses of her mousebeaver and knew that he had returned. After a short greeting, she said: “The little pole-cats are burning to prove themselves right. Ooch said that if you hadn’t come back now, he, along with Wullewull and Axo, would have smashed up the whole spaceport. We’ve all been asking ourselves how they were proposing to do that.”

“Me, too,” Pucky grinned fleetingly. “It’s not quite so simple. Even so, I still don’t really understand what’s happened. Nearly half the Metalix were on our side and now they’ve suddenly turned against us. Homunk must know, but they’ve taken him prisoner.” He looked at the screens. “They’re leading Koster and his people away. To the dome over there. A robot brain, if I’m not mistaken. Perhaps there everything will be explained. Iltu, fetch Ooch, Wullewull and Axo. Get an aero-glider ready. We’re going to free Homunk.”

“And Koster?”

“Homunk is in greatest danger—I believe.”

He was right, for fallen gods plummet deep. Mostly so deep as to be dashed to pieces.

* * * *

The fighting between the two different robot parties had stopped. Their leaders had declared a truce. On the other hand, the work robots who had been stirred up by Homunk had declined all negotiations and had drawn back into the tunnels

after their first attack had failed. They could not have cared less whether the “prophet” Homunk was an organic being or a robot. Their indignation at having had to work for thousands of years under false assumptions and so having been led around by the nose could not, however, be so easily appeased.

In the meantime, the priest had arrived from the holy city. With great powers of persuasion and through a practical test he proved to the leaders of the believers that Homunk was in fact a synthetic and not an organic creature.

“We’re all convinced,” he finally shouted while his harangue was at the same time being broadcast over the symbol screens, “that the gods are still living somewhere and will return one day. They are not extinct, as the non-believers maintain. Some stayed in our world, degenerated and disappeared. There can be no doubt about that. Even the appearance of the impostor tells us that the masters are alive. He has their form; he was created in their image. How could that happen if they were no longer alive? That’s why we have to wait for them but first we’ll make an example of this traitor. Together with other false gods, we’ll destroy him publicly.”

Homunk looked at the priest and tried to fathom his motives. It was difficult to imagine the psychological impulses of a full robot. In this case, though, there was no other explanation. Robots thought reasonably and logically. One could only *believe* in miracles. If they actually took place, a reasonable and possible explanation must be found for them, so that *belief* would continue. At the same time, it was apparent that the priest himself was the last one who really believed in the return of the gods. He *knew* that there were no miracles and no gods but if the others would know it too, he would lose his position of leadership. That was why he saw a deadly enemy in Homunk.

“Am I allowed to say something in my own defence?” Homunk asked the two robots who stood on either side of him. “I’m afraid your priest is making too simple a thing of his accusations. May I speak?”

“Every defendant has the right to speak in his own defence.”

Homunk stepped forward.

The army of the believers had withdrawn to the second robot brain in the city. It was one of those that had been re-programmed. With its help, symbols and direct images could be broadcast throughout the planet. Since air communications were impossible during the day, they used cable circuits.

Homunk now stood next to the priest on the podium. The dome had been rolled back and only the free sky vaulted over the technological array. In the hall itself, more than a thousand robots had gathered. The rest of the army was camped outside. It would have been impossible to break through the tight ring of metal bodies by force.

“I have to make clear,” said Homunk, as he stood in front of the cameras, “that the accusation of the priest is built on false premises. I have never said that I was one of the gods. All I said was that they had sent me. And that’s true! I have also never said that I was an organic being. The gods would be unwise not to conform

to circumstances. Once they had created you in their own image, what would have been better than to send you an emissary who was built along similar lines? Yes, I'm a robot, but I'm more like the creators than any of you."

Homunk paused. He did not expect any answer. At least not yet. For a moment he had to think of the immortal of the planet Wanderer to whom he owed his own existence. Perhaps it was really something like a god but it was ridiculous to designate human beings as such. But the robots did not know this. In their opinion, it was the humanoids—whether Arkonides or Terranians—that were God.

Their god. Since he had first created them.

"The gods never abandoned your world," Homunk continued. "They came from other worlds and stayed. Perhaps they died of their own free will after they had created you and gave you the powers of thinking. But be assured that there are even now thousands of planets on which they are living. You have ever and again met their ships in outer space, among the stars but you have always avoided them. Why? I know that it was the non-believers who did it but isn't that more proof that even they believe? They simply did not want any evidence for the existence of the creators, that's all. But now no one can go against the evidence, for the ship has landed. The very ship whose arrival I prophesied to you.

The priest shouted in between: "And from that very ship, only a robot emerged!"

"Haven't I said already," Homunk interrupted him, "that the messengers of the gods are suited to the circumstances in which they find themselves? Naturally a robot must make the first contact. What's so wrong about that? But in the ship itself there are the masters, the creators—or, if you will, the gods. They are powerful enough to destroy your world. They know things you can't even imagine. You, with all your thinking, are sterile and rigid, but organic intelligences never stop developing. They are ever broadening out and always learning something new. They are far superior to robots. I tell you..."

Homunk was interrupted.

The screens of the robot brains abruptly went dark. A strong humming filled the hall. The priest sprang to the controls and manipulated them. Then, suddenly, there was a loud voice. It came over the loud speakers amplified many times. It was to be heard all over the planet, wherever there were any robot-brains.

The voice said: "Ten persons have just left the alien ship—natural imitations of the beings whom the backward group would call gods. They were seized immediately. That alone is sufficient evidence that they are neither masters nor creators. If the false priest were right they could never have been taken captive. If there really were gods, stronger and mightier beings than we, then they would never have let us capture them. The evidence will be given in front of the control station; it will be proof enough that the gods are more easily destroyed than we, the robots. The broadcast will begin in 10 minutes."

This broadcast, Homunk thought, will be a slap at the 'non-believers' but no

more. Still, at least one Terranian will have to die. In front of the cameras of an entire world. His death would show that he was no robot, that he was a human being.

In other respects, too, the demonstration would have its drawbacks. The so-called believers would see with their own eyes how one of the legendary creators would helplessly bleed to death. They would know that the gods were as mortal as they; in reality, even more mortal and more easily wounded.

He turned to the priest.

“How did you find out that I’m a robot? You knew it without having to kill me first.”

“There are scientific ways.”

“Why shouldn’t they be used in the forthcoming demonstration as well? The death of a god will destroy your planet.”

“A god who lets himself be destroyed is no god.”

Logically, that was right. If the gods were really that mighty, they would know how to take care of themselves. Homunk could find no counter-argument for that. He had only 8 minutes left. If by that time he couldn’t find a convincing solution, one or even all of the crew of the EX-238 would have to die in order to prove that they were no gods.

The devil take all gods! thought Homunk in anger. In reality, though, he was angry with himself, for it had been up to him to explain to the robots in time. But he had only fed their superstitions. And their disappointment must now be so much the greater.

Seven minutes more.

At the entranceway to the door, there was a commotion. After some disturbance, the masses divided and opened a narrow passageway between them. A detail of the powerfully built work robots marched toward the robot brain and the leaders of the believers. It was a contingent of a dozen Metalix who’d been living underground for thousands of years and, until a short time ago, had thought they were busying themselves for their creators.

They crowded their way forward till they were at the podium. One of them stepped up and said in a loud voice: “We demand the release of your prisoners. If, you destroy them, we won’t work any more.”

Homunk was thankful for the workers’ intervention but at this particular moment it meant only delay. The time remaining for the 10 men from the EX-238 was growing inexorably shorter.

The priest spoke before anyone could say anything.

“The creators built you to work for our civilization. If you stop working, it will amount to mutiny. Anyway, you’re superfluous. You, too, will be destroyed.”

Only 5 minutes till the demonstration...

“The creators intended us to work for them. You let them die underground in order to rule yourselves. When the creators return, they will punish you for that.”

“They’ll never find their way back again.”

“They *have* found their way back!”

Only 4 minutes!

A silvery shadow flitted across the blue sky. Homunk reacted more quickly than a human being; he also reacted more quickly than the robots and so he had recognized the shadow immediately: it was a small glider from the hangars of the EX-238.

The shadow turned back and floated motionlessly above the robot brain. Slowly, it sank farther down. Only now did the thousands of robots in the hall notice it. They waited expectantly.

The glider landed gently on the upper platform of the robot brain.

When Homunk recognized the passengers, his hopes fled. He wondered at the mousebeavers, at Pucky most of all, but he gave them credit for their attainments. Still, he could not imagine of what help they could be to him or to the 10 men of the expedition. Before the announced demonstration—or execution—only three minutes remained.

In the glider sat 4 mousebeavers.

One of the mousebeavers, Pucky, sprang with one leap out of the glider and landed exactly between Homunk and the priest on the lower platform that served as a podium. “Well?” he said triumphantly.

Homunk did not lose any time.

“In the hall of the other robot brain the robots want to execute the 10 people they’ve taken prisoner. We have to do something.”

“Maj. Koster...? Where?”

“On the other side of the city.”

“How do you know?”

“It just came over the communication set.”

Pucky looked around him.

“Can you talk to them from here?”

“I think so.”

“Ask that fellow over there.”

The fellow—Pucky had indicated the priest—had recovered from his surprise. He knew that the mousebeaver was an organic being and no robot. But he was also not one of the creators. So he was the very opposite of a god.

Even so, before he could say anything into the microphone, Homunk was after him: “Turn on the communication set. I’ve got an important message. Quick!”

The priest hesitated.

Homunk forced his way past the priest. With but one glance he comprehended the controls of the robot brain and their functioning. He pressed a button. The screens flickered. On one of them there appeared a clear image. It showed the other robot brain and, before it, the prisoners.

Maj. Koster and his 9 companions stood wedged in among the robots. Now a junior officer—Homunk remembered having seen him in the mineralogy section of the explorer ship—was brought forward in front of the waiting cameras.

“What do you want to say to them, Pucky? They can hear us and see us.”

“Wait,” the mousebeaver counselled with determination. “They will be surprised! There are other methods to serve as evidence in determining whether someone is a human being or a robot.” He turned to the visible camera lenses in the robot brain and spoke louder, this time in the dialect that was used by the Metalix. “Stop! If you kill this man, you will all be destroyed. Consider just what you are doing—or better yet: listen to what I have to say to you. Maybe you don’t like my looks, which says something about your stupidity and narrow-mindedness, but that makes no difference now. I have set a bomb on the other side of your planet. Through teleportation, in case you know what that is. I will describe the place and you can check whether my statements are true. The bomb is no bigger than one of you but if it’s set off it will gobble up your planet in less than two days. Ever hear of chain reaction? Here, look at my hand...” Pucky held up his right arm. In it was a small black box. In the middle of its lid was a white button. “When I push the button, the Arkon bomb—named after its discoverers’ home world—will detonate. The planet will turn into a molten sun since its entire core consists of heavy metals. You must then flee with your ships or else be converted into pure energy. Even if you kill just one of the prisoners, I will set off the bomb. Well, that was what I wanted to tell you. The next move is up to you.”

He stepped back and stopped next to Homunk.

The android looked at Pucky with new respect.

“You’ve certainly come up with something original, little one. Rhodan would be amazed, if he knew.”

“Not so loud, maybe the Metalix can understand English.”

“Hardly. Tell me, is it true about the bomb?”

“Yes, it’s true. If the robots don’t behave themselves, there won’t be any planets in the centre of the Milky Way, only two suns revolving around an invisible central point. Finished!”

When Pucky said ‘finished’ he was serious. There was no argument that could have deflected him from his purpose.

A loud, deep voice sounded out. It was the same voice that 10 minutes before had announced the ‘demonstration’. But that didn’t mean much, for the artificial vocal chords of the robots all produced nearly the same sound.

“What is an Arkon bomb?” the voice asked.

Pucky looked at Homunk.

“If you can, explain it to them. I can’t. I only know what can be done with it, not more.”

Homunk said: “The Arkon bomb is the latest method of destruction of the humanoids. After detonation, it produces an atomic conflagration that cannot be

put out for any element above the atomic number 10. The conversion stops only when the planet has no more of these elements left. As far as I can ascertain, the average order of elements in this world is around 50. There will never have been a brighter nova in the universe... if the bomb is detonated.” Homunk added a few technical details and concluded: “You don’t want to believe in the return of the gods but there is one thing, and in that you do believe, regardless to which of the 3 groups you belong: you believe in force and might. It is the only argument that counts with you. For that reason, we brought the bomb. Convince yourselves that it is in the exact spot that was described. And let the prisoners go immediately so that they can return to their ship.”

“The demonstration will be delayed,” was the reply.

Pucky cursed in fury.

“A fig-headed bunch, the Metalix. They need a lesson. Should I set off the bomb?” He held the black box aloft again. “Just a button to be pushed and...”

“Wait!” This time Homunk, just like Pucky, spoke in old Arkonidian dialect so that the robots could understand him. “We’re giving them their last chance.”

The lieutenant of the mineralogy section had been returned to the other 9 men. There could not be any talk of freeing the captives yet. Even so, for the moment, the danger of immediate execution was staved off.

The priest drew up to Homunk.

“We won’t have anything to do with it,” he said. “You are free to go. “Do you want the war to continue or do you want us to go back to the holy city?”

That was a bit surprising, even for Homunk. This sudden change of mood was a sign that the technical data regarding this bomb had been enough. But if *one* robot was convinced it existed, then all must be. As regards logical thought, they were all the same.

“That’s up to you,” Homunk replied.

Without looking at him again, the priest turned around and gave the leaders of the army his orders. In broad columns, the robots left the dome hall and gathered outside on the square. Only the 12 work robots stayed behind. They were undecided and simply waited.

Pucky looked at them disinterestedly. He, too, was waiting. For the decision of the Metalix.

It came a few minutes later.

“The demonstration is unnecessary since the dispute between us and the fanatics has been settled. No one believes in gods any more. You may leave our world.”

On the screen, it could be seen that Koster and his 9 companions had been freed. They went through a lane formed by two rows of thousands of robots and reached the spaceport. Without further delay they returned to the EX-238. Behind them the outer lock closed and seconds later the protective shield was re-activated.

One of the workers detached himself from the group and stopped in front of

Homunk.

“You are going away?”

Homunk nodded. “Yes.”

“Even if the 10 men who look like our masters are really no robots?”

“Even then. Why should we stay here?”

“You know what will happen?”

“No. What will happen?”

The robot did not answer immediately. He seemed to be considering whether what he had intended to say would get him in trouble. Then, nevertheless, he decided to speak.

“The believers and the non-believers have been living on the surface of the planet. They were there when the masters were still with us, eventually withdrawing underground where they finally became isolated and died. The present conflict keeps the planned fleet of Silver Arrows from being built. For thousands of years we’ve been supplying the raw materials. They’ve been stockpiled and they’d be enough for 100,000 Silver Arrows. The equipment is ready. The ships only have to have a hull installed and that is quickly poured and done. It would be the most powerful fleet that has ever taken off from any planet and if we’d begin work tomorrow, it would be ready within a year.”

Homunk looked at the expressionless lenses of the speaker. “There aren’t enough robots to man so many ships,” he said.

“You’ve seen the work shops, the installations and the factories but you’ve never seen the underground warehouses. The crews for the attack fleet are ready. A push of a button would activate them. There are 10 million robots.”

Homunk was silent for a long minute. Beside him stood Pucky, silent and small, an unobtrusive figure. Yet, in his hand rested the black box. It made Pucky the key figure in what was now happening. With his help, the threatening attack on the universe could be averted.

Homunk had 60 seconds to imagine what would happen, when...

* * * *

The war on the central planet was at an end. At last the robots could think of turning their plans of thousands of years into a reality. Fifteen or 20 robot brains had *unanimously* assumed all power. They could command inexhaustible resources, for as man was made of dust, so the robots were made of the strong metals of the central planet. Millions or billions. Maybe even a trillion Silver Arrows.

The robot brains gave the order. Whether believers or non-believers or workers—everyone obeyed. The long-prepared work process would continue. The production would not be interrupted again. Every day thousands of ships would be built, 10 thousand new robots. The mightiest power that had ever been seen in the

galaxy would be hammered out of the ground, piece by piece, and in every sense of the word—from an earth that would give up the purest of raw materials.

It took just a year, then the robot brains gave the order to start.

The weight of the central planet diminished noticeably as the fleet took off from it. The sky darkened. Only the work robots and the core personnel remained behind.

And the robot brains.

The fleet began with a search for those that could one day return to take up the rule, for those whom many took for gods but who were no more than normal mortal humanoids.

Their weapons were not as good nor as effective as those of the Terranians, not even so good as those of the Arkonides, the Akonides or the Springers. But the Silver Arrows were under a single command and they outnumbered everyone. They penetrated all outer fortifications, all space forts and all safety belts. They swarmed over the galaxy, bringing death and destruction.

The crews were not human beings, not even monsters. They were merciless robots, possessed by a single idea: they did not want to be servants any more. They were only afraid of the ‘gods’, of the humanoids, and therefore they wanted to exterminate them.

Homunk could see the afflicted world before him.

From the universe came the Silver Arrows, clouds of them, and plummeted down on the nearly defenceless planets that had no idea of any danger. The Federation had been broken up; the races lived isolated and only for themselves. There was no communal defence. The robots had an easy thing and they didn’t need more than a day for a planet.

They left behind them a burnt but glowing world that would support no life for thousands of years.

Then the next and the next...

Until the Silver Arrows found the Earth.

Here they found stronger defences, for Terra was armed. But even 10,000 transform cannons could not, in the long run, hold out against the millions of Silver Arrows. The first outposts of the defence were broken. A whole swarm of suicidal robot ships descended upon them, strafed the ground and left behind them nothing but a flaming sea of destruction.

It didn’t matter to the robots if they were destroyed in the process. Ten thousand or 100,000 Silver Arrows—what did it matter when a new fleet was being readied at the central planet...?

When the last ships of the Terranians perished in a burning atomic cloud or fled in panic into the universe, only one burning planet, the third one, revolved about the sun. The rest of the Silver Arrow fleet gathered. The moon was destroyed, Mars and Venus reduced to ashes. They flew toward the next sun system.

From the central planet, the second fleet started out.

The third was being built.

As the fourth was ready for flight, there were scarcely any humanoids left.

The gods had died and there were only robots left.

Robots that reproduced themselves constantly, ever faster, ever more developed, ever more power hungry.

And when nothing was left to conquer, they dared to take the leap over the great abyss and forge on to the neighbouring galaxy. No one knew what they would find there but perhaps there their advance would be stopped.

But mankind could no longer profit by that chance...

The weird vision had lasted only a minute but for Homunk these 60 seconds seemed like an eternity. He awoke as if from a dream and looked at the worker robots.

“Why are you telling me this?” he asked.

“Do you have to know the reasons?”

“They interest me. I am myself an android and think more logically than a human being. You are a robot and think equally logically. True, I must admit that I’ve never met more intuitively behaving robots; even so, logic retains its upper hand. You would tell me the intentions of the Metalix only when it would be to your advantage. This advantage interests me.”

“Your arrival has changed the situation in our world. The surface robots have united. Until now, the religious war took its toll. We have always had to work but now we’ve threatened to stop. We have no weapons to defend ourselves. Thus it will be our fate to be melted down and re-built or simply be re-programmed. As we are now, we will not continue to exist. In other words: the future of our world and our race does not concern us any more. We have become the sacrifice to unity. But you’ve already said that we feel and we think. That’s why I’ve told you the truth. We want our revenge before we’re destroyed.”

Pucky toyed with his black box. “Should I press the white button or not—for you, you say, it wouldn’t make any difference any more?”

“Right,” said the robot and looked at the mousebeaver carefully. “So you can set off the bomb. You would save the universe from destruction by doing it.” He turned toward Homunk again. “Leave our world now. We are grateful that you came.”

Without waiting for an answer, the work robot turned around, joined the other eleven and marched at their head out of the empty dome hall.

Above on the platform of the robot brain, Ooch clambered out of the cabin of the glider. He assumed a stance and squeaked: “Well, Homunk, what do you say now? We only have to appear and the Metalix evaporate. Without our intervention, Koster and his men would have come to a bad end indeed.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Homunk admitted. Still, he hesitated. The quick conclusion seemed a bit too abrupt for him. He could not imagine that the robots would give up so easily. Besides, they had not demanded the removal of the

dangerous bomb. "Climb back in, Ooch. We're flying back to the EX-238."

Before he and Pucky could climb up to the glider, the robot screens lit up. This time the loudspeakers were not on.

The robot brain itself took up communication with Homunk.

While he was reading the symbols, he was translating aloud, so that Pucky could understand the message: "We're giving you 10 minutes of your time to leave our world. Hurry, before it is too late. End of transmission."

Homunk looked at Pucky. The mousebeaver held up his black box.

"Ask the thing what's up."

"What for? We'll return to the ship, then we'll see. I don't know if you're thinking what I am. Only I wouldn't want to make the final decision, because I don't know if I could justify it. You know what I mean...?"

"The bomb, of course. Don't worry, that decision is not up to us but up to the robots themselves."

"How do you mean?"

"Wait," Pucky said mysteriously and took Homunk's arm. "Let's teleport."

When they were sitting in the glider, it lifted immediately under the practiced hands of the pilot Ooch. They headed toward the spaceport. There the spherical spaceship EX-238 towered over all the Silver Arrows that stood around it by the hundreds. There were hardly any robots to be seen. In the east, the army of the believers, who no longer believed, was moving out of the city.

The protective shield of the EX-238 was withdrawn as the hangar lock opened. Five minutes later, Homunk and Pucky were in central control. Lt. Schlenkowa had relinquished command to Maj. Koster again.

"At last!" Koster did not hide his relief. "I was afraid they'd hold you back."

"I'd like to know how," Pucky growled, and devoted himself wholly to greeting Iltu, who returned his greeting affectionately.

"Pucky put pressure on them," Homunk explained and reported to the Major what had happened. Koster's face was thoughtful long after the android had finished his report.

"I don't quite understand," he said slowly and turned on the intercom. On the screen appeared the face of the officer responsible for the weapons room. "Repeat again, Lt. Werner, what you gave to Lt. Puck today."

The lieutenant excused himself, disappeared for a few seconds and then reappeared with a piece of paper in his hand.

"An Arkon bomb, sir. And a remote detonator and a dummy bomb. Besides which, a radio amplifier. That's all, sir."

The screen darkened.

Maj. Koster and Homunk looked at Pucky.

Pucky was crouched next to Iltu on the couch. They were holding hands and looking as innocent as lambs.

"Well?" said Homunk. "I find you're irresponsible, after all. Had you noticed,

Pucky, that you're sitting right on top of the box? Your weight isn't much but it's enough to depress the white button."

Pucky grinned, pulled the box from under his haunch and handed it to Homunk.

"You can take it back to Lt. Werner. We don't need it any more."

"The amplifier, right? What good is it?"

"It looks beautifully dangerous," Pucky confessed. "And you must admit that it served its purpose, right? Of course you can press the button for hours and nothing will happen. There isn't even a battery inside."

Homunk took the box, looked at it, shook his head and laid the amplifier on the control desk in front of Koster. Then he turned back to Pucky.

"Now you'd better explain..."

"Just a moment!" Koster interrupted him excitedly and pointed to the outside screen. "There's someone in a tank. What's that structure on top?"

"A screen," whispered Homunk. "Ha! A message in symbols. I'll read..."

"...before we destroy you, you should know that your plan has failed. We've found the bomb. It is now on a remote-controlled spaceship and has nearly passed out of our sun system. Out in the universe, it can detonate all it wants. It will do no damage..."

"...that was the message. Now the armoured ship is drawing away again. Be careful, Koster, do you have all the protective shields working? Take off. The robots are going to attack."

Koster gave the necessary orders.

Even while the protective shields activated, a few dozen Silver Arrows took off from the landing fields. A hundred meters from the EX-238, the around parted. Energy cannons appeared and opened fire immediately.

The glaring flame beams glided ineffectively off the protective shield of the EX-238.

The spherical spaceship started up.

On the vidscreen, the city sank away below. The Silver Arrows slipped in from the screen's edges and attacked concentrically. They had astonishingly powerful cannons but they could not penetrate the three layers of the protective shield. Perhaps if they concentrated on one particular point of it and held it under constant fire...

Koster stepped up speed.

The central planet of the Milky Way grew ever smaller. At last the first stars appeared, so close together that there seemed no way through them. But the first ones were still two light-years away.

Since the attack of the Silver Arrows did not let up, Koster ordered the use of the transform cannons.

Homunk had gone up to Pucky. He sat next to him and Iltu. "You bluffed the robots?" he asked.

Pucky shook his head. "It only looks that way. I swindled them with the box,

that's true. But not with the bomb. What they found and loaded into their rocket was the dummy. The real bomb lies 50 meters under it in a dried-up swimming pool of the old Galacteers."

Homunk looked at Pucky searchingly.

"And where is the remote-control button?"

"In the dummy."

Homunk stood up. He paced central control up and down while outside one Silver Arrow after another was torn apart by frightful explosions. Against teleported atom bombs, neither protective shields nor evasive manoeuvres provided any protection.

It was easy to guess the rest.

Even Pucky had not the courage to take responsibility for the destruction of the central world. He left it to the robots themselves. He had put the detonator into the dummy. If it was dismantled, the real bomb would be detonated by remote control. Even if it was moved from its place. The robots would only have had to have left the dummy alone to save their world and themselves. But the robots had loaded it into a rocket and shot it into space.

Fifty meters under the surface of the central world the atomic fires were already raging. They could not be put out and they would find enough to feed on to convert the entire planet into a sun very quickly. In an hour the robots would know that they were lost. The emigration would begin but there would be perhaps only 50,000 Silver Arrows that would be on the hunt for human beings. A danger for which Terra would be prepared—if it ever reached Terra.

The last five Silver Arrows disappeared in the direction of the central planet.

The EX-238 exceeded speed and left the Einstein universe.

Pucky freed his hands from Iltu's. He stood up and went toward Koster and Homunk. In the background, FR-7 stood with expressionless features.

"Homunk, did I do right?" the mousebeaver asked. His voice sounded a bit uncertain.

The android nodded. "None of us had any other choice. I know exactly what would have happened if you had not done as you did. And I will impress upon Rhodan what a danger these curious robots would have been to us all."

"But... I'm still reproaching myself. If I'd never hit on the crazy idea of capturing a Silver Arrow during my vacation... what would have happened then?"

"It would have taken a bit longer, that's all, Pucky. The robots would have united at last, whether in 100 or 1,000 years. Finally they would have found out that human beings were no gods. You can rest easy, little one. Your idea to capture a Silver Arrow was certainly the best idea of your life. You've saved the universe—and that's no exaggeration."

Pucky stared at him, then his eyes lit up. He stretched himself and grew a few centimetres taller.

"You'll say that to Perry, too, won't you?" he wanted to know.

“Naturally, because it’s the truth.”

“Reggie will explode!”

“Hardly. He’ll first be shocked, then relieved. He’ll pat you on the back and nominate you for the medal which you richly deserve.”

“A medal? You mean—Perry will bestow a medal on me?”

Homunk was disposed for endless patience but gradually all this questioning rubbed against his electronically guided nerves. But when he was about to answer, the door was ripped open.

Two completely dishevelled mousebeavers stormed into central control. A third followed. He looked as if he’d been caught between two wringers and had managed to save himself only at the last moment.

Pucky stared at them furiously. They jerked him out of his heavenly dream and brought him back to reality.

“Ooch and Wullewull! I should have known! What’s the matter? And what does Fippi look like?”

Wullewull let out a stream of invective that would have put even Bell to shame. With both hands he pointed at Ooch. “Him—I caught him! He’s been flirting with Fippi! That’s shamelessness for you, after I’d given up Biggy to him. He can’t let me have anything, the jealous rat! But I showed him...”

“He’s done nothing of the kind!” protested Ooch indignantly. “Ask the others who’s done what to whom, Pucky. Every one of them will tell you...”

“I don’t want to know who’s beaten up anybody. I want to know who started it all!”

“Ooch started it!” said Wullewull.

“Wullewull started it!” said Ooch.

Pucky looked at Fippi questioningly.

“Alright, Fippi, who *did* start it?”

Fippi lowered her eyes in embarrassment. She had folded her hands in front of her and twiddled her thumbs.

“Really, it was *Axo* who started it all,” she confessed hesitantly. Both Wullewull and Ooch pointed their ears and made stupid faces. “He told me that I was the sweetest creature that he’d ever seen and he wanted to show me the machine rooms if I would go with him. Just then, Ooch came around. In order not to have to go with *Axo*...”

Wullewull and Ooch looked at each other. Grimly they nodded. Without bothering further about Pucky, Fippi or Iltu, not to mention Homunk or Maj. Koster, they flitted into the hallway outside.

Pucky looked after them in contentment, then said to Fippi: “If you want to see *Axo* again, I’d advise you to do it quickly.” Fippi disappeared like a bolt of lightning.

Iltu pressed herself to Pucky.

“You sure know how to handle them.”

“That’s my style,” Pucky stated and grew a few centimetres taller again.

At that moment, the navigation’s officer said: “Commander, spacecraft ahead. They are also staying in interspace with linear drive.”

Maj. Koster threw a glance at Homunk. The android shook his head.

“It can’t be a Silver Arrow. They stayed behind us. Can you exactly determine their location?”

“Of course.”

Maj. Koster turned on the special radar screen. By means of its refined transformation system, it was possible to identify materials that had left the Einstein universe and were staying’ in the area bordering on hyperspace.

It was a Silver Arrow.

“It’s rather small,” Koster observed. “At most 20 meters long. Let’s get closer. Perhaps at last Pucky will have his opportunity to capture a Silver Arrow and take it home with him.”

It was, of course, a joke, but Pucky took Koster’s words seriously. He waddled to the screen and studied the object in question with special care. It grew slowly larger, the closer they came.

“Don’t the robots notice anything?” he finally asked Maj. Koster.

The commander answered after a brief pause. “Of course. The Silver Arrow is holding its speed and its direction unchanged, even though we’re getting closer. Either there’s a purpose to all this or...”

“Or...” Pucky pressed. “I know what you’re thinking but say it out loud. The others should hear it too.”

“Or the ship has no crew.”

“That’s exactly my opinion. The Metalix don’t have any crewless ships, however, except for one. Namely, the one where they put the dummy bomb.”

Koster looked at Pucky in wonder.

“Our dummy bomb? That would be a crazy coincidence.”

“The entire universe is a crazy coincidence. I’ll bet our dummy bomb is in that ship. Let’s get closer, then I’ll see.”

“Teleportation?”

“Naturally.”

Iltu shook her head and drew back onto the couch. She knew only too well that she could not talk Pucky out of this venture. Homunk said: “We’re in linear space, Pucky. I don’t know...”

“It’s quite safe. Of course it would be possible to capture the thing in front of us and return to the normal universe but we’ll only be wasting time. I’m not on vacation forever.”

The small Silver Arrow was flying close to the EX-238. The distance was only a few hundred meters. It was obvious that the craft was not being steered, that it held its course exactly, unswervingly.

Pucky concentrated and sprang.

He materialized in the Silver Arrow and immediately noticed that the craft's interior had not been completely finished. He was glad he had closed his space helmet before he jumped, for in the rocket there was no air. There also were no compartments, hallways or cabins. Except for the propulsion room, the ship was empty. It consisted of a single long room. In the middle of the room lay the dummy bomb.

Pucky looked at it with mixed feelings. It looked exactly like the genuine Arkon bomb but it was empty inside. Such dummies were often used to fool an enemy but they were also useful for transporting food, supplies or other equipment.

Pucky made the rounds. The ship was not manned. Not a single robot was on board.

Pucky returned to the dummy bomb.

He was about to teleport himself back to the EX-238 when an idea came to him.

The fine lines of the rectangular flap were clearly to be seen on the otherwise smooth surface of the dummy. To one side there was the button that would open it. Pucky bent over and pressed the button.

The flap opened. Behind was a tiny chamber. The remote control detonator was held by two clamps. It was still set in the same position as Pucky had left it. Over it was the pin that would press the button that would detonate the bomb. This pin would automatically be released if unauthorized hands touched it or even if the whole mechanism was moved.

Pucky stared alternately at the pin and at the button.

The pin was safely anchored, and the button had not been pressed.

The Arkon atom bomb had never been detonated.

At first Pucky experienced something like relief, even if it was only robots who might have been destroyed. But then he thought of what Homunk had said, had prophesied.

And Homunk himself was a robot.

It was perhaps the greatest battle that Pucky had fought during his entire life. It was a battle with himself, with his conscience. Till now he could always comfort himself that it was the robots themselves, after all, who had activated the detonator. But now no one could take the responsibility from him. He had to carry the load himself on his not exactly broad shoulders.

At this moment Pucky felt he had grown older for the first time in centuries. In the past, he would not have hesitated a second before pressing the button. The hyper-impulse would have sped through space at a speed greater than light and would have reached the tiny receiver of the Arkon bomb. The impulses could not be delayed nor deflected by the influences of the suns. Unerringly they would have reached their target and detonated the bomb.

Pucky only stared at the button.

In the radio there was a crackling.

“Pucky,” said Maj. Koster with concern. “What’s happened?”

“Nothing. I’m standing in front of the dummy.”

“Good. You’ve won your bet. Let’s go on.”

“I’ll be there right away. I just have a few details to take care of.” Pucky turned off the radio equipment.

Then he bent down and pressed the detonating button.

As he straightened up, his usual happy-go-lucky face was dead serious. He knew that with a single push of his hand he had condemned an entire civilization to death. In but an hour the atomic fire would eat its way to the surface of the central planet, break through and go wild. Nothing could stop it.

Only now was the universe saved from the onslaught of the Metalix.

Pucky threw a last glance at the bomb, then teleported back to the EX-238.

At the moment he materialized, Axo raced through the door, ran along the arc of the semicircle of the control room and ran back out into the hallway. Breathing hard, Wullewull and Ooch were right behind him. Whenever they wanted to make their telekinetic powers felt, Axo countered with the same kind of block.

Pucky threw a puzzled look after them.

“There’s something for you,” Iltu piped up in indignation. “If you must know, Axo had nothing to do with it. Fippi lied to you. She was the one!”

Pucky shook his head as if to ward off evil spirits. “What a witch!” he murmured. “Women—!”

“Pucky!” Iltu cried, piqued.

Pucky ducked and looked around helplessly for Homunk. The android came up to him and patted him on the shoulder. “She won’t hurt you; after all, I’m with you,” he said. “Don’t be angry with Fippi. Or haven’t you ever in your life got out of a bad situation by lying?”

Pucky shook his head emphatically. “Never!”

Homunk changed the subject.

“Well, what was in the Silver Arrow? Did you find the dummy bomb?”

“Yes.”

“Everything alright?”

“Yes.”

“Sure everything’s OK?”

“Devil take it, yes!” Pucky turned away in anger and strode to the door. “Everything really was OK. Any more questions?”

Homunk looked at him steadily. “No thanks. It’s not necessary, Pucky. If you say so, it must be so. I believe you.”

Pucky came back, took Iltu by the arm and pulled her out of central control. The door snapped closed behind them. For a moment Axo’s piercing shrieks could be heard for Ooch and Wullewull had finally caught up with him.

With expressionless features, Homunk sat down next to Maj. Koster in front of the controls. He looked at the screens. "The course, sir?"

"Direct course to Terra, Homunk. You can take over now. I'm going to sleep. Wake me when you think it's necessary." Koster stood up. "Funny, don't you think?"

"What's funny?"

"Pucky's funny! Since he came back from the Silver Arrow, he's behaved very strangely. Don't you think so?"

Homunk stared at the screens. "You must be mistaken, sir. I haven't noticed any change."

"Really? Well, then I'm mistaken. See you later."

Homunk, who did not turn around, heard the door close. He nodded to the navigation officer. "Course clear, Lieutenant?"

"Course clear, sir."

A few hours later the EX-238 had reached the border of the central constellation and passed through it. In front of it lay free space, and at a distance of more than 40,000 light-years there was a small, yellow sun, not yet visible, but undoubtedly there.

The EX-238 increased its speed.

The concentration of stars in the Milky Way grew less. They had also left behind them the light of the stars to the stern, where it had gone dark.

Homunk began to wonder whether the destruction of the central planet, something like the navel of the galaxy, would substantially influence the gravitational conditions of the Milky Way.

He hoped not.