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THE ORZU PROBLEM

by LLOYD BIGGLE, JR.

All he did was to obey orders—but out in the galaxy sizes can be terribly deceptive!



ALL RIGHT. So I've been in the government service for twenty years, and my rating is only Grade 10. That isn't *my* fault. The Special Problems Section is a tough place to work. I've been up and down plenty of times during those twenty years. I've dropped from Grade 3 down to

Grade 7, and once I went from Grade 2 all the way down to Grade 8. I never blamed anyone but myself for those demotions. When a man pulls a boner, he has to live with it.

This last time, though, I was at the top—a bona fide Grade 1, and the only one on this Base. Central Administration

bounced me all the way to Grade 10 without a hearing, and I hadn't done a thing. I was as innocent as a man can be in these corrupt times, and I can prove it.

It began with a letter, and the Chief brought it in himself. The Chief takes a personal interest in the members of his staff, and when he comes up with a first class stinker, he likes to see the expression on the face of the man that gets it. He leered at me, and slid the letter across my desk.

"Special Problems Section, Base XVI," I read. "Requisition: With all possible dispatch furnish one pair live Orzus to Galaxia Zoological Gardens. Details as to capture and shipment are left to your discretion."

"Pretty good joke," I said. "I suppose we tell them to go chase their own Orzus?"

"We do not," the Chief said.

I didn't like his tone of voice. I snapped, "Since when does the Galaxia Zoological Gardens have any authority over Special Problems?"

"Ever since the Galactic Commission passed a special resolution ordering all Special Problems Sections to extend full cooperation. Galaxia Zoological Gardens are to have a

prize collection of monstrosities from all over the galaxy. An added tourist attraction for the capital, they say, and maybe it's a good idea. If the collection is hideous enough, it might make the politicians look good."

"One pair live Orzus, coming up," I said.

With considerable reluctance I laid aside the problem of the decreasing birth rate on Par-mo, and went down to the library to stalk my Orzus.

Normally a problem of this type is no problem at all. Special Problems simply passes the request along to the local Colonial Administrator. The Administrator finds someone in his organization who can carry it out, and sends Special Problems a billing for any expense involved. Special Problems passes the billing along, with appropriate padding, of course, to the department that originated the request. And the problem is buried in an *Action Taken* file.

The library had a new girl in the reference section—a trim little redhead with green eyes and the kind of figure I didn't think they allowed out on the perimeter.

"Where did you come from?" I said. "I thought this

Base had some kind of regulation against being beautiful."

"I've heard that line eighty-seven times in the last four days," she said. "And I came out here to marry a man in the Supply Department."

"Dial me one pair of Orzus," I said.

She did. We worked out eleven different ways to spell Orzu, and all we got was a blank screen.

I went to see the Chief. "Just tell me one thing," I said. "What's an Orzu?"

The Chief laughed. "Maybe that's why it's a special problem." Sometimes his sense of humor is positively malicious.

I went back to my desk and prepared a message for the Director of the Galaxia Zoological Gardens. "With regard to your request for one pair Orzus, please advise as to planet and species desired."

I hoped he'd assume that this sector was overpopulated with Orzus and their near relations, and he'd have to do some research before he bothered me again. With luck, he might even decide to forget about his Orzus. I sent the message down to Communications, and went back to my problem of the birth rate on Parmo. I also went back to the problem of

the little redhead.

I've been married eleven times, at various Bases around the galaxy, and that doesn't include a number of unofficial cohabitation experiments. With due modesty I might say I've had a measure of practical experience that no psych-conditioning can touch, and it took me just three days to eliminate the opposition and take over.

There was only one drawback. She was a girl with old-fashioned ideas. No cohabitation for her—it had to be marriage or nothing. "All right," I said. "Let's get married."

We set a date. My work was going along nicely. There is nothing quite like a decreasing-birth-rate problem for a man planning to get married. Then back came the reply from the Director of Galaxia Zoological Gardens, by high-priority space relay.

"Orzus desired native to planet Arnicus, Pron II, Sector 1169," he wrote. "Reference *Journal of Galactic Explorations*, Vol. LXVI, No. 5, p. 1043."

Whereupon I wrote out a requisition for one pair of live Orzus, to be shipped to the Galaxia Zoological Gardens, and addressed it to the Colonial Administrator on Arnicus.

It was that simple. I sent it down to Communications. Communications sent it right back with a sarcastic note to the effect that there was no Colonial Administrator on Arnicus. In fact, there wasn't anybody on Arnicus. The place wasn't, deemed fit for human habitation.

Back to the library I went, and my redhead wasn't exactly pleased to find me there on business. I checked out the reel of the appropriate number of the *Journal of Galactic Exploration*, and dug up a few survey reports on Arnicus.

I started reading, and what I found would have curled my hair if I had any. Arnicus is a super-tropical world, with two continents at its polar caps, and five thousand miles of boiling ocean separating them. The average temperature at its poles is 200 Fahrenheit in the shade, with lots of shade, in the form of slimy, swampy jungle.

Orzu himself was specifically designed for populating nightmares—a giant reptile, nine feet high at the shoulders, fifteen feet long, and with a bristling crop of tentacles where his nose should have been. It was also claimed that he had three eyes. I doubted

that the explorer had gotten close enough to count accurately, but on an Orzu one eye, more or less, couldn't have much influence on the total effect.

I wrote up a little report on the generally hellish nature of Orzu and his environment, and took it to the Chief. He read it through as if he enjoyed it immensely. "When do you leave?" he said.

"When do I leave?" I squawked. "Listen, I *can't* leave. I'm getting married next week."

"You don't say," he said. He pulled my file, and went through it, counting slowly. "...eight, nine, ten, eleven! It isn't as if it were something that hasn't happened before. You'll have plenty of time to get married after you collect the Orzuz." He grinned happily. "I'm glad this came along. I've been wanting to get you onto a normal-gravity base so you can see how much weight you've put on."

"That's a great idea," I said. "Send me back to Terra for that leave I was supposed to have last year. I think the girl would like that. But leave Orzu out of it."

"I'll fix it up with Exploration to get you a ship and

crew," he said. "But you go along to boss the operation. Either you bring back Orzu, or you stay on Arnicus and grow your own tentacles. Special Problems has a reputation to maintain."

As you know, Special Problems has top priority over any department except the military. It took just three days to get an expedition together and equip it. The military cooperated with the loan of a space cruiser.

As I had figured, my little redhead didn't take kindly to the idea. She was looking forward to getting married, which is an excellent state of mind for a woman to be in. When I told her we'd have to wait she threw a tantrum and quite a few other things. The same night I saw her down by the space port strolling with her man from the Supply Department. And when I went down to the library to wish her good by, she told me not to hurry back.

I LEFT for Arnicus with a Space Navy crew, a dozen experienced explorers, and the best equipment Base could provide. And there were several things wrong. No one on board had ever been to Arnicus be-

fore—and few of us were pleased at the prospect of going there.

My explorers were hardened individualists. The first day they got into violent arguments over Orzu and how best to cope with him. After three hours they'd split up into factions that weren't on speaking terms.

The man in charge of the project was me, and I was more concerned about my redhead than Orzu. Also, I'd never before been in charge of anything that involved more than one female filing clerk. It was not a pleasant trip.

On the fourteenth day I stood with the Captain on the bridge, absorbing my first view of Arnicus. What I saw made me sick. The planet was wrapped in swirling dirty, yellow-brown clouds, and where I caught a glimpse of land I saw nothing but a hideous purple vegetation.

The captain snapped out the necessary orders to put the ship into a polar orbit. "Which continent do you want to start with?" he said.

"I'd just as soon forget the whole thing," I said. "But as long as I can't, take your pick. Wherever you'd prefer to land."

"Land?" He stared at me.

"You want me to put this ship down in a swamp? Nothing doing. We stay in an orbit, and you ferry your men and supplies down by flyer."

"Now just how am I going to get a pair of Orzus into this ship by flyer?"

"That's your problem. But I'd suggest that you concentrate on *small* Orzus. There's the size of the air lock to consider."

I hadn't thought of that. There were, in fact, a number of things I hadn't thought of, as I found out when I started conferring with my exploration team on the subject of what to do with Orzu if we actually caught him.

My right-hand man was a veteran explorer named Jan Garish. A small, wizened man with a leathery, wrinkled face and a drooping mustache in which he took an obnoxious pride. He had spent most of his life knocking around in various galactic hell-holes. Though he'd never been on Arnicus, he differed from the rest of us in that he was looking forward to it.

"First thing we do," he said, "we test atmosphere. We get chemist to make some. We get engineer to make pressure cage. We get zoologist to tell us what

Orzu maybe eats. Then we catch Orzu, put him in cage. He lives, we tow cage up to ship. He don't live, we make chemist and zoologist try again, and we catch more Orzu. Simple, eh?"

Simple. I longed for the good, old, bring 'em back alive days, when a zoo only collected specimens from its own planet.

The captain gave me the ship's chemist for my exclusive use, and that worthy individual rubbed his hands together, stroked the two or three hairs surviving on his bald head, and vowed, Space, yes, he could duplicate the Arnicus atmosphere. He could duplicate *any* atmosphere—but he couldn't say for how long. How much of the stuff would Orzu be breathing per hour? Wouldn't it maybe be better to simply compress enough of the real thing to get Orzu to the zoo, and then let the zoo worry about it?

I didn't know, and I left it up to him.

The zoologist wasn't so easy. He was a member of my exploration team, but he hadn't volunteered for the job. I asked him how we'd pack back enough vegetation to keep Orzu alive. He said he didn't know,

that was my problem—and anyway, Orzu was probably carnivorous.

That possibility hadn't occurred to me, and in my last sleep on board the cruiser I was caught in a weird nightmare in which my little red-head developed a third green eye, sprouted long red tentacles, and tried to stuff me into a food synthesizer.

THE FLYER spiraled down over the north pole, keeping well away from the ocean. My chemist warned that it might be one churning vat of poison, and I didn't argue with him. Also, we wanted to keep as far from the smouldering equator as possible.

We skimmed over several hundred square miles of jungle without sighting a clearing, and finally we eased the flyer straight down through the trees. Tangled vines caught at it. Huge purple leaves flapped against the ports, and stuck there, blinding the pilot. It was raining globules of some unmentionable liquid.

We had special atmosphere suits with a built-in cooling apparatus. We climbed into them, and Jan Garish was the first man out the air lock. He begged me for the job, and I

gave in with appropriate reluctance. He took one step, and sank into the slimy mud up to his hips.

"Welcome to Arnicus," I said.

The rain left a sticky film on my face plate, and I had to keep wiping it off to see. I scrambled around Garish, found solid ground—I only sank in to my knees—and looked about. The others followed me. We stood shifting from one foot to the other, and watching each other to see if one of us would suddenly sink in over his head.

Garish floundered out of sight into the flapping vegetation, and quickly floundered back again. "We're in a swamp," he said.

No one denied it.

"Well," he said, "it gets worse in that direction. Maybe it'll get better the other way."

A good man, Garish. We found solid ground, and I began to feel better. I'd been wondering how anything as big as Orzu could exist in a swamp. We moved the flyer, brought out our tents, and made a camp. The chemist set up a laboratory in the flyer, and gleefully went to work on the atmosphere. My explorers went

back to their argument about how best to catch Orzu, if we could locate him. The locating didn't worry me. If Orzu was around at all, he wouldn't be easy to overlook. Nine feet high, the report had said.

While the rest of us were hacking out a clearing around the camp, Jan Garish took three men on a preliminary survey of our surroundings. "Don't try to bring in Orzu all by yourself," I told him.

"No," Garish said, after giving the possibility careful consideration. "Maybe we find tracks, though."

"I don't even want you tracking him, yet. He might have a nasty temper. If you find a place that looks as if a battle cruiser has ploughed through the jungle, just get back here fast."

We had the camp in order, and I was relaxing in my tent, comfortably sealed off from the sulphurous Arnicus atmosphere, when he returned. He stomped out of the air lock, pulled off his suit, and sat down glumly.

"Nothing," he said.

"No Orzu?"

"No nothing. Don't like the looks of this place. No birds. No animals."

"Just be patient," I said.

"Maybe Orzu sleeps in the daytime."

"Maybe." He grunted, and it was not an optimistic grunt.

The following day we organized our search. We split into three parties, and combed the jungle, working out away from the swamp. Nothing.

We shifted our camp, and kept moving away from the swamp until we ran into another swamp. Nothing. At the end of a week we went back to the ship to replenish our supplies, and then we tried again. Nothing.

Another week, and still a third, we stumbled and threshed our way through that putrid jungle. We slopped through swamps. We hacked our way through the thick, purple, slime-coated vegetation. We tripped over trailing vines that always looked like snakes, but never were. We chaffed in those cooled atmospheres, and we sweated in them, too, from sheer nervous frustration. Nothing.

The fourth week started out like the first three. Then, on the second day, I came floyn-dering out of a swamp and found a trail—not a very big trail, to be sure, but *something* had passed that way. I divided my men into two groups, and

we started out to follow that trail in both directions. I led one party, or rather, I ran on ahead of it.

"Hey, take it easy," someone called. "Maybe Orzu bites."

I didn't slow down. I'd stopped being afraid of Orzu. All I wanted to do was get my hands on him. I tore down that winding trail, widening the gap between myself and the others, and suddenly I came to a sharp turn and blundered into...

A TENT. A couple of men standing there, their atmosphere suits sticky with slime. Two, three more men hurrying out of the tent and gaping at me. Two more tents in the background, and beyond them, half buried in the purple jungle, the crumpled remains of a small space yacht.

They swarmed down on me and pumped my hand. Both hands. They climbed all over me. They mobbed the other men as they came up. They leaped and howled with joy, and maybe they wept a little, too. I couldn't tell, with them wearing suits.

When the celebration had quieted down, one of them, who seemed to be the leader, took me aside and started the

hand shaking all over again. "I'm glad to see you," he said. "Thought we were done for. We crashed two weeks ago. Smashed most of our equipment, and we're almost out of air, and—say, what are you doing here?"

I sighed. "Looking for Orzu."

He took two quick steps backwards, and then he jumped at me again, clamped a stranglehold on my neck, and pounded me on the back. "Man, you must be an expert! But how did you manage it in this jungle?"

"What are you talking about?" I said. "And who are you, anyway?"

He stepped back again. "Why, I'm Orzu. Who did you think I was?"

It was my turn to back away, and we were almost too far apart for normal conversation. "Orzu?" I repeated blankly.

"Stephen Orzu. I'm heading a research party for the University of Arcturus."

We got into his tent, somehow, and I told him my story. The air was thin, and he looked completely exhausted, but he laughed until he fell off his chair and rolled on the floor.

"You came all the way to Arnicus and spent three weeks in the jungle looking for..." He gasped for breath.

"Orzu," I said.

"But there isn't any Orzu!" he panted.

"There is an Orzu," I said, feeling the way a child must on Star-Festival Night, when someone says, "There isn't a Galactic Spirit."

I gave him a photo-copy of the report from the *Journal of Galactic Exploration*. He read it carefully, and rolled over onto the floor again. I quieted him down, and got him back onto his chair.

"According to this..." I began.

"I know," he said. "I wrote that myself for the *Journal*. But they left out some of it. They left out the part that said the creature's extinct!"

He sat there, tears running down his face and laughter choking him, and there wasn't anything that I could say. Not a thing.

"I named it after myself," he said finally. "I discovered it—discovered some skeletal remains, that is—and I've always wanted something like that named after me. The Bureau of Explorations has to approve it before it becomes official,

but that's a routine matter."

"Oh," I said.

"You're quite a few thousand years too late to capture Orzu alive."

"You don't say," I said.

"I can show you some lovely bones."

"No, thank you. I never was very interested in bones."

He cut short another spasm of laughter, and said thoughtfully, "You know, I wonder if this could be my fault. I wrote that letter in a hurry, and I just might have neglected to mention that Orzu is extinct. I'll have it corrected in the next issue of the *Journal*."

"I wish you would," I said.

"Otherwise, some naive clerk might get sent Orzu-hunting."

Eventually Scientist Orzu recovered sufficiently to show us the specimens he'd collected. There was life on Arnicus—lots of it, in fact. But it was small, and in our search for a nine-foot-high Orzu, we'd overlooked it altogether.

He showed us some nasty-looking reptiles, some odd insects, and an assortment of other small creatures. And a prize specimen.

"This should interest you," he said. "This is Orzu's ninth cousin on his stepfather's side."

It was Orzu, all right, in the

miniature. Tiny reptiles three inches long, but with all the tentacles, and the three eyes, and probably the evil disposition that old Orzu had. I tried to pick one up, and it bit me.

"I based my description of old Orzu on these," Scientist Orzu told us. "They could be direct descendents, but more likely they're another branch of the family. We'll probably never know, because fossil remains are hard to come by on this planet. Cute little fellows, aren't they?"

They looked repulsive to me, but I had an inspiration. "Let's call these things Orzu," I said, "and ship a couple off to the Galaxia Zoological Gardens." I wanted to salvage some measure of success from my three weeks in the Anicus jungle.

"Oh, no!" Scientist Orzu bellowed, rearing back indignantly. "I want my name on the big fellow. You wouldn't understand, of course, but it's a life-long ambition with me—to have a giant fossil named after me. This may be my last chance. You have to discover one of those things to have the privilege of naming it, and Space knows when I'll get away on another field trip."

He ducked into a tent, and came out with an armful of

bones. "Look at him!" he purred.

I know a fanatic when I see one, and I didn't press the point. "Then how about *Morzu*?" I said.

He beamed at me. "I have a better idea. Let's name it after you!"

"No, thank you," I said, when I had my shuddering under control.

"Well, Morzu sounds good." He chuckled. "I guess it will see *more zoo* than Orzu, at that!"

I wasn't carrying a blaster, and probably it was just as well for Orzu that I wasn't.

The scientist had already solved the problem of atmosphere and diet for his specimens, so we sent the ship a *mission accomplished* message, and started packing. Everyone was happy except Jan Garish, who went around mumbling because he wouldn't be able to set foot on the southern continent. We ferried our own equipment, and Orzu's, up to the cruiser, along with two extra pairs of Morzus for the zoo, and in the words of the Captain we got the hell out of there.

WHEN WE reached Base, I left the space port on the

run to look for my little red-head. She'd moved, and when I located her new address her husband came to the door. She'd married her man from the Supply Department, and he gave me a brief description of what would happen to me if I tried to bother her, and slammed the door in my face.

At that point I was boiling hotter than the ocean on Arnicus. I tore back to the space port and got the Morzus shipped to Galaxia by slow freighter, hoping they'd die before they got there. I spent two hours composing a message for the Director of the Zoological Gardens. I told him that Orzu was rare and almost never seen alive, but I was shipping him not one pair, but two, of practically the same thing—a first cousin we were calling Morzu. I added some details about diet and atmosphere that Scientist Orzu had supplied, and a few precautions on the care of Morzus that I made up on the spot. I also told him that the creatures were extremely active, and he would have to provide an unusually large amount of space per animal if they were to thrive. I sent the message off, and hoped for the worst.

I was still steaming mad the

next morning, when Scientist Orzu called at my office. Why not? I'd lost my girl, and spent three weeks in that jungle hell, and all for nothing.

It was nearly a year later that I learned the fate of the Director of the Galaxia Zoological Gardens. As I'd hoped, he assumed that Morzus were roughly the same size as Orzus, and he worked day and night to have a sealed cage ready for them when they arrived. It was an enormous cage, some thirty feet high and covering four acres, with a transparent ceiling so that the visitors could walk around on top and look down on the giant reptiles. Of course he invested a lot of money in expensive heating and atmospheric equipment, the total bill running into the hundreds of thousands of credits.

Along with the Morzus we'd sent him specimens of Arnicus soil and jungle vegetation, and when he'd gotten a roaring jungle going in his cage, someone turned the Morzus loose there, maybe thinking they would grow up to the size of old Orzu. Those microscopic reptiles disappeared into that four-acre jungle, and the last I heard the zoo personnel were still looking for them. The

Director was fired for squandering the tax payers' money.

I expected a reprimand, and it wasn't long in coming. Two weeks after I saw the news release about the director, I was knocked from Grade 1 down to Grade 10, fined two years of seniority, and confined to Base for eighteen months.

It was all done without a hearing, as I said, but I knew I deserved it, I didn't even file an appeal. I considered it worth it, at that price, and when I think of the zoo personnel beating through that Arnicus jungle looking for Morzus, I still get laughing fits.

Then the trial brief arrived, and you could have warped me twice around a comet. It wasn't the Galaxia Zoo that filed the complaint—it was Scientist Orzu! A balder concoction of lies I have never seen. My party, he said, kept him starving in the jungle for two weeks without bothering to rescue him. We caused irreparable damage to valuable scientific specimens by forcing him to pack his belongings with undue and unnecessary haste. We appropriated to our own use four valuable specimens as the price of getting him off

Arnicus at all. We made no effort to salvage his thoroughly smashed space yacht, which was government property. And so it went, through four and a half pages.

My screams of protest could have been heard as far away as Sirius, but it was too late for counteraction. Why, I asked myself. Why? What did I ever do to him, except save his life?

But it proved to be very simple. Orzu had suffered a crushing defeat. He had to take it out on someone, and I'd insulted him. It turned out that another scientist had done some browsing on Arnicus fifty years before, and he found skeletal remains of the same reptile that Orzu wanted to name Orzu. He also had the same idea about getting the big fellow named after himself, and he got his claim in first, by forty-nine years and six months.

So I got demoted and fined for something I didn't do, and still maintain that I'm innocent. It certainly isn't my fault that the official name for Orzu's pet fossil is Smith.

THE END