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FLIGHT FROM TARKIHL

by Clark Darlton

PROLOG

In the Greater Imperium of the Arkonides it is the year 10496 A (for Arkon)—a time corresponding to the Earthly year of 9003 B.C. Thus it is a time in which the inhabitants of Earth are yet submerged in primitive barbarism, knowing neither of the stars nor of the great heritage of vanished Lemuria.

By contrast—and despite the great war against the Maahks—Arkon is in its fullest prime. The present Emperor of this vast domain is Orbanashol 111, a man of brutality and cunning who is rumoured to have instigated the death of his brother, Gonozal VII, in order to take over the rulership for himself.

Even though Orbanashol III has firmly established his dominion, there is one man whom the Emperor of Arkon must fear: Atlan, the rightful heir to the throne. After Gonozal's death, he had disappeared without a trace, along with the former physician to Gonozal VII.

But perhaps the trail had not been sufficiently obscured, because Orbanashol's brutal agents, the Kralasenes, have suddenly appeared on the remote planet of Gortavor—where Atlan has grown to manhood under the watchful eye of Fratulon and in the protection of Tarkihl without knowing anything of his true origin. It is here that they have arrested the old physician without any warning.

Atlan must think of how to set Fratulon free and make his FLIGHT FROM TARKIHL...

THEY LIVED 10,000 YEARS AGO

ATLAN—The long-sought Crystal Prince must free his foster father from prison but only then does the long flight to freedom begin.

FRATULON—As personal physician to the former Emperor, this one-time gladiator is a man of mystery — and proves it now more than ever!

FARNATHIA—Atlan's childhood playmate and love, but also the daughter of the Tatto—which makes her a second target for the Blindman!

ARMANCK DECLANTER—The Tatto, or Regent of the planet of Gortavor.

SOFGART THE BLIND—Otherwise known as the Blindman, this human monster is feared across the galaxy as the leader of the bloody and unscrupulous, Kralasenes. He is known to have absolute authority from Orbanashol III himself, and his assignment is to bring Atlan's head back to Arkon!

ICE CLAW—A Chretkor. He may be transparent but he shows he has intestinal fortitude.

THE SILENT SERVANTS—Also known as Dumb Waiters, these “ghosts” of the deeper levels of Tarkihl have a peculiar characteristic that can often become a hazard.

The FLIGHT FROM TARKIHL becomes a series of harrowing adventures which reads like a tale from the Arabian Nights. Follow them now as they penetrate the forbidden depths of the Blue Section beneath Tarkihl and go farther than others have gone before into the unknown. What is the hidden city, the Barrier Zone, the Mucky River and the mysterious Threshold? You'll find out!

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

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ATLAN

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A Division of Charter Communications Inc.

A GROSSET & DUNLAP COMPANY

1120 Avenue of the Americas
New York, New York 10036

FLIGHT FROM TARKIHL

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DEDICATION

This American Edition
is Sincerely Dedicated to
ARTHUR LOUIS JOQUEL II
An Ancient Atlantean in
An American Body until
His Untimely Demise in 1974.
He Willed me his Atlantean
Collection, a Major Library.
With Gratitude & Affectionate
Memory — Forry Ackerman

First Ace Printing: October 1977

Printed in U.S.A.

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Guest Editorial
GALACTIC HISTORY
By
Erich von Däniken

Editorial Note:

Erich von Däniken.

A name to conjure with.

Charlatan or prophet?

Quack or crusader?

One thing is for certain: his unorthodox views have attracted the attention of millions of readers in a large number of languages and he gets paid a great deal of money for anything he has to say or write.

We are fortunate to be able to present to the readership of ATLAN this message by this intentionally controversial figure, translated from German by Wendayne Ackerman.

FJA

* * * *

I AM CONVINCED that with the ATLAN SERIES many readers' wishes will be fulfilled. For nothing has interested people (besides a glance into the future) as much as that past from which there are no reports available. And this has always been the case.

However, here also limits are placed on imagination and it depends on the authors to cleverly connect in a logical manner the elements of action they have invented together with vague hints from legends & religions. Only in this manner can the history of mankind—and also that of the Galactic peoples—be written... that history of outer space people who perhaps once upon a time may have visited us.

I've read PERRY RHODAN from the beginning and I am fascinated by the abundance of themes in it. Atlan complements Perry well. However, what was lacking so far—if Galactic history was to be recorded—was the description of those events that took place in the realm of the Arkonides and in the Milky Way before the discovery of Earth. Lacking were the adventures of young Atlan while

fleeing from his father's murderers. His experiences as a secret pretender to the throne of the Emperor and finally his first encounter with our ancestors, of which legends still exist today but about which concrete information is still lacking.

Thus are mixed in ATLAN reality & imagination and a mighty epos of our own past and that of alien cosmic nations whose former contact with us perhaps influenced our fate to such an extent that we still sense it today, even if unconsciously. Without this contact our life today might pursue quite a different course.

And the contact is one which might very well be repeated in the future.

I have been able to find out only very little about the large-scale action of ATLAN but the few hints suffice to make me curious. If I don't miss my guess, the PERRY RHODAN authors are bringing to life a series which already harbours within itself the seed of success.

In any event, I will not let pass by any of the adventures of Young Atlan and it certainly would not be the first time that fantastic novels supply seekers the longed-for hint re the right path to follow...

1/ BENEATH THE WEB

AN OMINOUS CHANGE had come. The old pattern had been broken. Tarkihl's imposing majesty was no longer a guarantee for the peace and tranquillity I had known...

For as long as I could remember, I had always lived on the planet Gortavor. Fratulon had always seemed to intimate that he had no knowledge of my parents, or at least he never talked about it. But after long deliberation on the subject I had developed the feeling that he knew more about it than he was prepared to say.

Gortavor was a remote world on the outer periphery of the greater Arkonide Empire. It played no significant role in the cosmopolitan affairs of the galaxy, and the fact that we never had much to do with the imperial authorities of Arkon had always seemed to suit Fratulon just right.

He was the personal physician to Armanck Declanter, the Tatto of Gortavor, and it was the latter we had to thank for the fact that our life had always gone along smoothly and peacefully—at least until our unfortunate episode in the Spider Desert.

Perhaps at this point I should also mention my friend Ice Claw. He was a Chretkor, and so it was for quite natural reasons that we had given him this unusual name. Ice Claw appeared as though he were actually made out of ice. His body was transparent, excepting of course his vital organs, muscles, bones and circulatory system. He sauntered about like a walking showcase for an anatomy course but aside from his short stature his shape was as humanoid as ours. In addition, however, he had a peculiar characteristic: when he was in a warm location he became amazingly flexible and agile but when he was cold he became almost too stiff to move. It didn't make too much difference to him, either way, but any rapid change of temperature always terrified him.

As I said, up to a certain point in time we had led a quiet and peaceful life, Fratulon, Ice Claw and I—until that ominous day when the old pattern broke.

A radio distress call for medical help had lured us into the Spider Desert of Gortavor. There we had been attacked by five ragged-looking men who were Arkonides like Fratulon and myself. It was only with the greatest difficulty that we had been able to put them out of action and return to Tarkihl, where a new surprise awaited us.

My 'uncle', Armanck Declanter, sent out a messenger and his Palace Guard to meet us and to take Fratulon into custody. The reason he gave for this action was that an agent of the Emperor had arrived who had brought with him this order for Fratulon's arrest. The Tatto himself was powerless to counteract the order.

No one paid any attention to me and Ice Claw. Nothing hindered us from entering Tarkihl as free persons but I caught a last look from my foster 'father' that was an obvious warning. As they led him away, he tried to signal me that I was henceforth on my own and would have to be very cautious.

Then Fratulon disappeared with the guard detail behind the walls of the mighty structure before us.

It was the beginning of a new kind of adventure—without my lifetime guide and protector.

Before I go on, however, I should say a few words in regard to Tarkihl, because under the connotation of palace one might have a quite different impression from what was actually the case.

Tarkihl must have been an ancient fortress at one time but no one knew who had originally built it. Although the structure was not unusually high it nevertheless covered a great area, forming a giant triangle. It required 3 hours for a person to walk around it on foot. Its basic material seemed to be bronze, apparently unwrought and unalloyed. The smooth surface of the walls was relieved by various elevations and projections. But other than that Tarkihl had always impressed me as being merely a clump of mountain in the desert.

Fratulon had explained to me that the greater part of the building lay hidden beneath the surface, much of which had probably never been explored. If he had not always admonished me against it, undoubtedly I would have followed one of the many secret passages into the depths. Ice Claw, who had apparently always lived on Gortavor, would have been the most likely companion on such a trek but even he was afraid of the sinister and the unknown. He probably feared that he might suffer an extreme transition between heat and cold.

As they took Fratulon out of our sight, Ice Claw was standing beside me. "What's the meaning of this?" he asked me. "Why should Fratulon be arrested in the name of the Emperor? What crime has he committed? And why doesn't Declanter do something about it?"

"You ought to know, Ice Claw, that Armanck Declanter can take no action against a direct representative of Orbanashol. He has to obey his commands whether he wants to or not."

Owing to Ice Claw's transparency it was hard to determine his expression but I thought I detected a sort of grim determination in his features. Which of course agreed with my own feelings in the matter. Whatever happened, we would never leave Fratulon in the lurch.

Finally Ice Claw spoke quite calmly. "Let's go into Tarkihl."

"Yes," I nodded decisively. "Come on!"

We entered the palace through a side entrance. Nobody detained us from doing

so, although in view of the situation I had expected to be stopped by a guard. We arrived inside the building without being noticed and then hurried as fast as we could to our living quarters.

We didn't have any idea where they had taken Fratulon but I presumed that he was now in that part of Tarkihl which Armanck Declanter had appropriated for himself and his family. The Tatto of Gortavor had two wives and from one of them he also had a daughter, Farnathia, who was 15 Arkon years of age. In my eyes she was the most beautiful creature I had ever seen and I'll venture to say that on her part she didn't exactly take me for granted. At any rate, we had formed a close friendship between us. There was hardly a day passed without our seeing each other. No one was aware of the feeling we had for one another, neither her father nor Fratulon.

"Well, what now?" asked Ice Claw as he sat down in a chair that was much too large for him. "We certainly can't just go and ask why Fratulon was arrested."

"That would be a big mistake," I agreed with him. "Besides, we don't have any idea of what he's been accused of. Maybe it's all just a mistake."

"I'd like to know if that surprise attack in the Spider Desert had anything to do with it," mused Ice Claw. His right 'hand' clenched into a taloned fist as though he wanted to transform one of the unknown robbers into a clump of ice. "Besides I'd never in my life believe that old Sawbones, is a criminal."

"Of course Sawbones didn't commit any crime," I answered, confirming his own assertion with extra conviction. "But you know he often made hidden inferences as though he were not too happy with the Emperor. Maybe he was a little too indiscreet about it at one time or another."

Ice Claw shrugged. "So how do we find out what's going to happen to him now?"

With the exception of its subterranean part, I knew Tarkihl very well. Here I had grown up and played, so that I couldn't help always finding new passages and secret doors around the place. I was able to envision how the unknown builders of this mightiest of structures must have lived here together, mutually watching and spying upon one another from secret hiding places.

Now I was grateful to them for their foresight. "Right out there in the corridor stands the figure..."

"Of that 4-legged monster?"

"Yes, that's the one." I smiled. "Have you ever noticed something unusual about it?"

Ice Claw was astonished. "What was I supposed to notice? Besides, it's mostly pretty dark in the corridor if you don't turn on the light."

"We'll keep the lights off this time, Ice Claw. Come along and I'll reveal a secret to you that nobody in Tarkihl seems to know about—except Farnathia, of course..."

"Farnathia?" asked Ice Claw wonderingly.

“You know that we practically grew-up together. Children have their secrets, and we were naturally quite proud of ourselves, knowing things that had remained undiscovered by the grownups. There is a passage through the thick walls. It connects our quarters with those of the Tatto.”

Ice Claw nodded. “Aha! And if Fratulon has been taken into the Tatto’s chambers that gives us a chance to listen in on them.”

“That was the original idea behind the secret passage. Come on!”

The corridor was more like a tunnel with an arched ceiling. A dim light emerged from a nearby shaft but it was enough to guide us in these familiar surroundings. We listened but could not detect any sounds.

Cautiously I led Ice Claw by the hand over to the strange figure that was fashioned of cold metal.

As a child I had always feared the strange being that the figure represented. I had never in my brief existence actually seen such a creature. It had a thick, powerful body that was supported by four legs. Its head was covered by a mane of golden yellow hair that almost reached down to the pedestal below. In the mouth were two rows of well-defined teeth which were capable of giving one the shudders.

Once more I made certain that no one was in the vicinity. Then I stooped down to the heavy pedestal and used both my hands to press simultaneously against two barely perceptible protuberances. Immediately we heard a faint rumbling that seemed to come from inside the metallic creature and at the same time it began to turn on its base. Beneath it an opening appeared and a staircase that led steeply downward into the depths.

Ice Claw stared into the deeper darkness below. “It’s a subterranean passage!”

“No, it only looks like it,” I reassured him. “It only descends a few meters before it goes up again. We’ll stay at this level, you’ll see. Come on, we have to hurry. The opening closes itself very quickly.”

I didn’t wait for him to make up his mind but slipped nimbly through the wide aperture, pausing on the first step. I turned and beckoned to Ice Claw, who finally overcame his initial misgivings and followed me. We had hardly descended to a safe distance before the opening began to close again. The creature statue swung back to its original position.

It was dark but farther ahead a weak light shimmered. It was a section of the passage wall that emitted its own illumination continuously. The light emerged from inside the bronze-like metal, fed by an unknown source of energy. Throughout Tarkihl there were many such lights.

“Won’t it get colder here?” inquired Ice Claw worriedly.

I had to smile at his one habitual fear. “No, the temperature is constant. But pretty soon now we’re going to have to be quiet. We won’t be able to talk, so stay close to me.”

The passage led in the general direction of the principal corridor which joined the various living quarters. The main corridor wall was so thick that it provided

the space necessary for this secret tunnel.

Far ahead, the murmur of voices became audible. It was no longer necessary to caution Ice Claw because the situation was obvious. He knew that if we could hear voices it was also possible for others to hear us, should we make a noise. The passage became narrower to where we could touch the walls simultaneously on either side of us. The ceiling was about 2 meters above the floor.

We crept along cautiously, step by step. The murmur of voices became louder until I was able to distinguish the grave tones of the Tatto from the deeper sound of Fratulon's words. The two men seemed to be alone but considering what had happened this was unlikely. Anyway, we would soon know.

Ten meters ahead of us a thin gleam of light was visible in the wall. There we found an elongated slot which was 5 centimetres high and half a meter wide, permitting two or three persons to stand beside each other in comfort and peer through. From a moderate elevation one could look down from here directly into the Tatto's conference room, which he used for consultation with regional representatives of the planet.

Massive pillars encircled the chamber as though they were actually supporting the richly ornamented ceiling. The walls were covered with variously adorned figures and I was convinced that some of them concealed other secret passages and listening posts. The oblong table and the chairs around it stood on a slightly raised sort of podium, while on the main floor were 5 rows of seats for occasions when spectators were allowed.

Today there were no spectators but I saw several rough looking characters who immediately reminded me of the men who had surprised us in the Spider Desert. Their clothing, almost torn to rags, bore the semblance of some kind of uniforms. They carried the most modern energy beamers and had occupied all exits. It looked very much as though the Tatto himself were also their prisoner.

Perhaps at this point I should describe the two men we were observing.

Armanck Declanter was slightly over 6 feet tall. His expression was grave and reserved. He always wore this stiff mask of authority when he had to deal with strangers.

Seated opposite him at the table was Fratulon. In contrast to the Tatto he was hardly more than 5'4" in height when standing. He appeared to be unusually fat and clumsy but those who knew him were well aware of how fast and nimble he could be when it was necessary. What another might mistake for fat was actually mountains of muscle which gave him an extraordinary strength. His yellowish eyes almost disappeared behind little folds of flesh in his face. His bald pate fairly glittered under the lights in the room but he had a full black beard to compensate for it.

As usual he wore his battle harness, which consisted mainly of battered chest armour that had been polished smooth from long use. Of course a comparative tin vest like that would mean nothing against an energy weapon but he would seldom dispense with this remarkable item of dress. Nor would he ever be separated from

his short broadsword, which I had suspected of having mysterious powers since my childhood. Especially its hilt with its incomprehensible carving had always fascinated me to an unusual degree. A glistening, silvery shape was there which I had never quite been able to make out, because it seemed to become featureless upon closer scrutiny. The weapon's name was 'Skarg' and this strange characteristic had always strengthened my suspicion that the sword possessed magical properties.

Fratulon was 55 Arkon years of age and was very shrewd. I harboured the suspicion that no one in the galaxy knew as much as he did. As a pretended bon vivant, he always maintained a gourmet sort of life style, eating and living well and not without his own share of company with the fair sex.

There was actually no one on Gortavor who knew where Fratulon and I had come from, since it was he who had brought me here. His medical knowledge was so vast and his cures so amazing that he had become the personal physician and confidant of the Tatto. He was not only the Palace 'Sawbones' but also a scientist and philosopher. For many years he had been an instructor of the young aristocrats who were attached to the Tatto's retinue and he was supposed to be very rich. His influence on Gortavor was very great, nor was he in any way inferior to Armanck Declanter, but after all the Tatto was still the Tatto.

However, at this moment I came to realize that there were still more powerful representatives of the Arkon government, such as the one who had caused Fratulon to be arrested.

As we looked down into the conference chamber we hardly dared to breathe for fear of missing a single word of the discussion. I was as yet unaware that today would mark a decisive change in my life.

* * * *

"...and such a charge against me would be more than ridiculous!" said Fratulon as he angrily banged his fist on the table. "What could I possibly have to do with such things—from here on Gortavor, of all places?!"

The Tatto did not appear to be very happy but he covered his indecision with an air of authority. "I cannot and will not decide the matter, Fratulon. Orbanashol's representative has the full authority of the Imperium and he has been commissioned to question one physician named Fratulon. Even I don't know any more than that. And I don't even *want* to know much more!"

"Who is this deputy from Arkon?"

"You'll see him soon enough, Fratulon."

I sensed with some surprise that the Tatto was treating my stepfather with more formality than usual. In spite of differences in rank they had always been good friends and had been quite informal with each other. But now...

"Where is this fellow?" thundered Fratulon. "Let him show himself and tell me to my face what crime I'm supposed to have committed!"

“That he will certainly do and very soon,” promised the Tatto calmly.

For awhile both men sat there silently and stared at each other, the one raging with anger and the other slightly embarrassed. At my first glance I could tell that the Tatto himself did not seem to feel too secure.

Finally Fratulon spoke again. “Looking at these guards and comparing them with the characters who jumped us in the Spider Desert leads me to some very strange suspicions, Armanck. And if they’re true I see I’m going to have a tough time of it in the next few hours. Or would you say, Tatto, that you have never heard of the Kralasenes before?”

There it was again, that same name Fratulon had used once before when he saw our attackers in the desert. At the time I was sure I had never heard this name before in my life, nor did Ice Claw know, either, who such people were.

“Kralasenes...?” The Tatto drawled the word, apparently surprised by it, but I could read in his face that he knew exactly what Fratulon was talking about.

“Yes, the Kralasenes,” my foster father repeated angrily. But suddenly there was a tone in his voice that was something more than just helpless rage. I recognized it immediately for what it was: it was actually fear. “The most inhuman, depraved and insolent hirelings in the galaxy—the mercenary troops of our dearly beloved Emperor! Their leader is...” He stopped suddenly and stared with widened eyes at the Tatto. He drew a deep breath and became silent.

Suddenly I, too, caught my breath. I had heard of the Kralasenes before but it all came back to me only now when I heard Fratulon refer to them as mercenaries of the Emperor.

Of course—the Kralasenes!

As far as I could recall, they were always sent on missions that were to be handled with the most brutal force. It was said that they had no conscience but it was also reported that they murdered and plundered in the name of the Emperor whenever they considered it to be justified.

Slowly I began to breathe again but not without tension. If the Kralasenes had my stepfather in their clutches, he was as good as lost. Behind this degenerate-looking outfit stood the power of the Imperium. Against such as these even Fratulon and the Tatto would not have a chance and now I understood the Tatto’s embarrassment and helplessness. On the one hand he would have gladly retained Fratulon as his friend and personal physician but on the other hand he did not dare to go against the will and authority of Orbanashol.

“Yes,” said the Tatto slowly. “It is none other...”

In plain view from where we stood we could see two guards standing next to a door which now opened. Seconds later a man entered who was more lean and withered looking than anyone I had ever seen in my life. He took 3 or 4 steps into the chamber and then came to a halt. His movements were strangely jerky, as though he were a puppet held by strings.

But what especially caught my attention was the fact that he didn’t seem to have any eyes. In their place were two cone-shaped metal objects about 4 to 5

centimetres in length which were joined by silver clamps. This strange pair of 'eyeglasses' was fastened to his head by means of straps.

I immediately assumed that the man was blind and was only able to see with the help of this curious instrument. Now his hesitant movements were more understandable. In spite of his very lean figure he wore a closely-fitting leather uniform or suit of some kind that only accentuated the meagerness of his withered frame. Even his sunken, bony face gave the impression of a living skull. On his head he wore a worn leather cap.

There was also something else quite noticeable about him. He wore a small, handy-looking energy weapon, an impulse beamer, which was fastened to his right forearm with a leather loop combination in such a way that he could fire it without having to draw it from a holster.

So it was this man who had entered the chamber, reminding me at once of an inhuman monster. And as I saw my foster father look at him I caught the expression of sheer horror in his eyes.

Without any doubt, he knew him.

Ice Claw and I were to learn very quickly who the stranger was.

"Sofgart the Blind!" Fratulon exclaimed, half choked with tense emotion.

For answer he received a sardonic sort of chuckle. Meanwhile the man took a few more steps until he reached the table. His left hand groped across the table top and he pulled a chair back to sit down. He stretched out his legs and then turned his synthetic eyes to look at Fratulon in obvious triumph.

"So this time we were on the right track," he said. There was such an icy chill in his voice that Ice Claw was forced to shudder.

As I was to learn later, this blindman, Sofgart, was known throughout the entire Imperium as the cruelest and fiercest agent the Emperor had working for him—and with *carte blanche* authority. He and his hireling group. He allegedly had an entire planet at his disposal where he brought his prisoners in order to question them while using his unbelievable methods for extracting information. Only when summoned by absolute top authority did he ever report back directly to Orbanashol III after one of his assignments.

What did this inhuman monster want of Fratulon, who had always been a kind foster father and friend to me? I was soon to find out.

"It took a long time to find you," said the blindman, observing his victim carefully. The synthetic eyes served to accentuate his horrible aspect. "I have an order from our Imperator to read to you and I am certain that you will be able to give me some valuable information. If not, you will be sorry. But before I proceed I have to make one stipulation: no names will be mentioned, no details, nothing. I am sure that you are aware of what and who is being referred to. Are you ready?"

Fratulon was not even able to nod his head. He sat in his chair as though he were paralysed. His face which had always been so well-fleshed and full of life appeared now to be thin and haggard. He seemed to know that his career was at an end.

Nevertheless I wondered at him in this fateful moment, although I could comprehend nothing of what was transpiring below in the conference hall. In spite of his fear, Fratulon finally found the courage to nod and confirm that he was prepared to hear the Emperor's message.

Sofgart spoke. "It is as follows: *The Crystal Prince is alive. Bring me his head!*" In spite of his apparent handicap, the blindman appeared to stare penetratingly at Fratulon. "Do you make anything of that, traitor?"

Whether or not my foster father could make anything of it I was not then able to judge. Certainly the Emperor's message was beyond me to decipher.

Fratulon sat there for a moment as one transfixed. Then he leapt to his feet and shouted: "The Crystal Prince is *alive*?! Whatever you may think, Sofgart, you cannot imagine how marvellous that news is to me. Because it means no more nor less than the fact that Orbanashol III is the false Emperor—an unlawful usurper! His nephew, the Crystal Prince, is the legitimate ruler!" He sat down again, apparently drained by this emotional outburst which undoubtedly would cost him his life. "What have I to do with it, Sofgart?"

Even the Tatto revealed that he was inwardly moved by all this but he continued to sit there and do nothing. I began to hate him, even though I could understand his hesitancy. If he were to act otherwise he would not only be gambling his own life but also his family, which included Farnathia.

The voice of Sofgart the Blind was still as cold as ice: "Your question is superfluous. You know very well what I mean and how I mean it. We are going to bring the head of the Crystal Prince to Arkon and you're going to help us do it."

"How could I do that?"

"You know how, Fratulon, better than I. The fact is not insignificant that you were personal physician to Gonozal before he suffered an unfortunate hunting accident which brought his brother to the throne."

"That so-called accident was murder," retorted Fratulon, who seemed to have no more inhibitions in the matter. It was as though he were now making every effort to attract the killer's attention to himself in order to spare someone else. "And perhaps you were the assassin, yourself, Sofgart the Blind."

For one long moment it looked as though the frightful blindman was about to spring to his feet but he controlled himself surprisingly well. As the armed sentinels rushed forward he waved them away with an imperious hand signal. "So, that is your conviction then, Fratulon? You know, of course, that you just pronounced your own death sentence..."

"Yes, I'm aware of that. So get it over with!"

Blind Sofgart returned a satanic smile. "We might just do that little thing, traitor. A quick extinction and all is over with, right? You're wrong! If you are to die, why deprive ourselves of the pleasure of it—even for yourself? You must be made to embrace death in an ecstasy of joy. But don't ask me what comes before that!"

"I'll try not to," said my foster father with such a tone of indifference that it

baffled me.

The entire situation was becoming more and more incomprehensible. Why was Fratulon challenging the blindman like this? Why pronounce his own death sentence by openly attacking the Emperor? What purpose could be served by this action? I had no answer—at least not yet.

The blindman leaned forward. “Listen well, Fratulon I’m going to make you a proposition. You are going to reveal to me where the Crystal Prince is hiding and I’ll forget what has just been said here. I’ll let you go free.”

By now Fratulon had recovered from his initial terrible shock. “You will let me go free, Sofgart? You probably don’t even believe that yourself, blindman.” His tone was becoming suicidally disrespectful. “There are a number of witnesses here—the Tatto and your own men. Are you going to kill them all to make sure they keep quiet?” He shook his head. “You’re sadly mistaken, funnel eyes—I’ll never fall for such a shallow promise as that!”

“You will tell me where the Crystal Prince is hidden whether I promise you your life or not! So talk!”

Fratulon smiled ironically. “Even if I were to tell you, assuming I knew, what would you do with him?”

“I’d bring his head to the Emperor as he has ordered me to do.”

“You’d have to kill him in such a way that his head would remain undamaged. That would take some doing, with an impulse beamer.”

“I have some rather artistic gunmen—they’re well practiced in such matters. As a matter of fact, if you’re interested we could give you a demonstration. First they slice off the legs and then...”

“Alright, that’s enough, you hell fiend!” exclaimed Fratulon in sudden revulsion. “But anything you try is useless. I actually don’t know anything about the Crystal Prince. I can only hope that he is still alive—for the sake of justice.”

“The Emperor has placed a price on his head—big enough to buy an entire planet, Fratulon. But the head must be undamaged so that it can be identified.”

“I have nothing to do with it!”

The blindman grinned craftily. “Is that so? Then why did a certain royal physician named Fratulon happen to disappear so suddenly and without a trace when Orbanashol assumed the deserted throne?”

“I had my reasons.”

“Of course, and I know what they are.”

“Not quite. The confusion and disorder then was not to my liking, so I left Arkon. Here on Gortavor I found a new home and a new job that suited me. I felt comfortable here so I never went back to Arkon. What was there for me? Perhaps to preserve the brother of my former master in the best of health so that he could have more murders committed?”

From my hiding place I could see that the blindman was controlling himself only with an effort. With every sentence, now, Fratulon was provoking him more

and more. I began to ask myself why he was doing it. What could he gain by so frivolously gambling with his life like this? Why didn't he try for a compromise of some kind with this sinister blindman—one that could serve them both in some way?

Finally Sofgart spoke quite calmly. "I know of a remote and delightful planet. It doesn't have a name but that's unimportant. Everyone I bring to that world never leaves it again. Are you that anxious to have a look at it, Fratulon?"

"You mean your planet-sized torture chamber? The unmentionable world of unmentionable pain? Why not, Sofgart the Blind? It would interest me. But I'm asking myself what you'd be able to learn from me there any more than here. I don't know anything and even you can't extract any more from me."

"That we shall see, Fratulon." He pointed to the other's armour. "What good is that going to do you? Or that sword you wear at your side? I'll let you keep them because how could they help you against our impulse weapons? No more than your subterfuges and evasions. I shall yet learn the truth from you. I'll give you 6 hours."

"Why the extra time?"

"For thinking it over, traitor. For a careful consideration of your alternatives: whether you'd like to continue here on this pleasant world as a physician or prefer to come with me and get acquainted with my own particular paradise. Do I make myself clear, Fratulon?"

"Oh it's clear, alright—it's just that I don't believe you. Even if I knew anything and I were to tell it to you, I can't see you having any gentle thoughts about sparing my life."

"At least you would die quickly," said the blindman. He stood up and gave a signal to his guards. Then he returned to the Tatto, who so far had not said a single word. "Tatto, you will be so kind as to show me the best and safest dungeon in the palace, where the prisoner can wait out his time. I don't want any harm to come to him. I still have use for him..." His voice became more threatening. "And above all, the Emperor will still have use for him."

The Tatto also rose to his feet. His gaze went briefly to Fratulon, in pity and regret. "The unexplored subterranean portions of Tarkihl are at your disposal, Sofgart," he said submissively. "I'll take you into the Blue Section."

After that, not another word was spoken. The guards came and led my foster father out of the hall. Sofgart the Blind and Declanter followed them in equal silence.

2/ FORBIDDEN TERRITORY

We waited a few minutes until the sounds of their footsteps had faded away. Then I drew Ice Claw back a slight distance where we could be safe from any eavesdroppers.

“What do you make of it?” I asked. “Fratulon is lost if we don’t try to help him.”

“We’ll help him,” replied Ice Claw determinedly. “Or do you think I’d leave a good friend in a fix like that, just because somebody wants to learn something from him that he doesn’t know?”

“Do you really think he doesn’t know?” I asked, dubiously.

“Naturally he doesn’t.” Ice Claw paused briefly, then added: “And if he really does know something, he surely has his reasons for keeping his mouth shut.”

I pondered over the situation. So they were taking him under the palace, into a region that even I was unfamiliar with, and which all of us feared. The ghosts of the long extinct builders of Tarkihl were said to still haunt the area. Whether the stories were true or not, I had no intention of venturing there.

At least not yet.

“Come on, Ice Claw, let’s go back.”

We heaved a sigh of relief when we were once more in Fratulon’s spacious living quarters and had the door shut behind us. I fixed a few refreshments because neither of us felt like having a regular meal. Once more we went over the incomprehensible events that had transpired. They seemed to clearly indicate that my foster father was boldly attacking the Emperor in order to divert attention from something else. He was now the prisoner of the dreaded blindman as a result.

But we still had 6 hours left.

Farnathia!

Strange that at just this moment I should think of her again. For her there was no danger in the present affair as long as her father stayed clear of the whole thing. But if I were to draw her into it then her life too would be endangered. On the other hand, I couldn’t leave Fratulon in the lurch.

But did this mean it was necessary to acquaint Ice Claw with my most secret feelings? Not by any means! This walking iceberg probably didn’t even know

what such emotions were in the first place.

“We have to talk to Farnathia,” I said.

“The Tatto’s daughter?”

“You know that I’m a friend of hers.”

“Of course—who doesn’t know that? You’ve known each other from childhood. But what’s that got to do with Fratulon?”

“I know that she is more familiar with the underground regions of Tarkihl than I am, at least from what she’s heard. Maybe she can tell us where the Blue Section is located.”

“That’s right, the Blue Section!” exclaimed Ice Claw, following my trend of thought. He nodded in agreement. “We could ask her.”

“You wait here,” I told him. After all, he didn’t have to know everything about us. “I’ll get Farnathia and tell her what’s happened. Then we’ll soon see if she can help us.”

“Watch yourself,” Ice Claw cautioned me. “You shouldn’t trust females too far.”

I left our quarters and took the official passage. It was not unusual to see me paying daily visits to the daughter of the Tatto, even now that we were older and more developed. Everybody knew that we had always played together as children and that even now we were almost inseparable. So why shouldn’t I pay her a visit?

I encountered no one along the way.

Farnathia occupied her own suite of rooms which were adjacent to the main quarters of her parents. It had never once seemed to bother her that she had one father and two mothers, only one of which was her real maternal parent, of course. In spite of this arrangement she had been strictly raised and she had never dared to go against her parents’ wishes in anything. This may have been one of the reasons why her love for me had always been so pure and innocent.

Cautiously I knocked on the door and she opened it.

With her 15 Arkon years she was almost fully grown. Although of delicate structure and just 5’5” tall, she could be considered quite well-proportioned. Her typical Arkonide eyes were a gleaming bright red and her silvery hair reached down to her shoulders.

“You, Atlan? I thought you were with your father...”

“Please, Farnathia, don’t ask any questions. Come with me!”

“But where?”

“To Fratulon’s quarters. I have to talk to you.”

“Is it so important?” she smiled teasingly. “What’s it about?”

“We mustn’t waste any time—not a single minute. Put on something warm because it may be chilly where we have to go. And no more questions now. My father’s life depends upon it.”

“What?! Then wait—I’ll just put on something real fast.”

I stood out in the corridor and listened in both directions. At any moment I expected to see one of the dreaded Kralasenes show up.

Finally Farnathia slipped through the doorway and she closed the door behind her. She wore a warm cloak and a scarf, both of which I had seen before. On her face was an expression of both curiosity and concern.

“What in the world is all this about your father?”

She did not know that Fratulon was only my foster father. I myself had only just recently learned this from him.

“Come on—don’t ask any questions!”

She followed me obediently but I had little time to take pleasure in the fact that she trusted me so implicitly. There was more here at stake than our friendship, our trust and perhaps even our love.

When we arrived at our living quarters I carefully closed the door behind us. Ice Claw was seated in a chair waiting for us.

“Greetings, Farnathia,” he said with relief and he got up to take her cloak from her. To me this was all a waste of time. We had only a limited number of hours. “Sit down and sharpen your ears—or has Atlan told you everything already?” he concluded.

“He’s told me absolutely nothing, Ice Claw. He’s as silent as a stone.”

“That sounds like him,” said Ice Claw.

“So don’t keep me waiting any longer. Tell me what happened!”

We told her.

She just sat there silently and listened. When I mentioned the ‘Blue Section’ and looked at her questioningly, she seemed to be trying to remember. At first she frowned in growing apprehension, finally turning pale in sudden fright.

“The Blue Section?” She stared at us fearfully. “Atlan, even you and I have never been there, although we always thought we knew Tarkihl better than most people. I’ve heard of it but that is all.”

“Where is it located?” I asked.

She pointed to the floor beneath our feet. “There—down under here somewhere. My father sends criminals and prisoners there to be locked up. It must be terrible in those dungeons. Also, there are supposed to be ghosts down there.”

“Let’s skip the talk about ghosts, Farnathia,” I said. “You know I don’t believe in such things. If there were any, we would have seen plenty of them already in all our excursions.”

“But Atlan, we’ve never been where they are supposed to be.”

This was true. The ghosts were said to exist in the lowest levels of Tarkihl and we had never been there. Few had ever dared to venture there, or so we had been told. But if prisoners and their guards were down in the Blue Section there certainly couldn’t be any ghosts there.

“Farnathia,” I said, “will you lead us to the Blue Section?”

She stared at me, horrified. “The Blue Section? You ask that of *me*?”

“I have to, Farnathia. My father’s life depends on it. You know I have to rescue him. If we don’t help him he is lost.”

“But this Blind Sofgart...”

“Anybody can be outwitted, even he. We’ll take along some food supplies and something to drink so that we’ll be able to hide out for awhile in the lower levels. Not too long, anyway, because in a few hours it will be too late. We have to make up our minds quickly. If you don’t wish to come along, at least tell us how to get there—but you have to hurry.”

When she looked at me it was with an expression of searching concern mixed with a kind of submissive loyalty. She trusted me but she had a terrible fear of that which lay ahead of us. “Alright, I’ll go with you,” she said suddenly, “but under one condition...”

“And that is?” I inquired tensely.

“My father must never know that I have helped you. He would never forgive me for doing something that he may perhaps not agree with.”

I couldn’t tell her a plain lie. “We can’t promise you that, Farnathia. because we don’t know what’s really going on in your father’s mind—and because we don’t even know how this adventure is going to end. Maybe we’ll succeed in freeing Fratulon and getting out without being noticed, and maybe not. If we’re caught at it, how will we explain your presence?”

She evaded my questioning look. “If that happens, you won’t be able to,” she said. “But anyway, I’ll lead you there. When?”

“Right now, Farnathia—and... and thanks!”

She smiled, which was always a beautiful sight to me.

As quickly as possible we packed some food and drinks into a sack that I was easily able to carry over my shoulder. As I look back on that day it is still inexplicable to me why I didn’t think of taking a weapon. Perhaps it was due to the excitement that the three of us were experiencing. In Fratulon’s chest was an impulse beamer. I knew that but it only occurred to me after we were already on our way and it was too late to turn back.

I carefully checked the corridor outside but it was empty. We left the apartment door open behind us in order to raise no suspicions in case somebody came looking for us. At Farnathia’s direction I again activated the mechanism on the statue that gave access to our secret passage. The base turned and we swiftly disappeared into the tunnel that joined our living quarters. The opening closed behind us.

I was somewhat perplexed that ‘our passage’ which we had used so often was the very one that also led to the lower levels. Farnathia had kept her secret very well. At the next opportunity I would have to ask her how she knew this but now there wasn’t time for it.

We followed the tunnel for awhile and finally came to the place where Ice Claw and I had done our spying. The conference chamber was empty now. We hastened onward with Farnathia in the lead. She turned into a side passage which we had

always carefully avoided because it led steeply downward into the depths.

I stopped. "Farnathia, where does this go?"

"To the Blue Section," she answered but there was no longer the slightest quiver in her voice.

"Alright then, lead the way! There's not much time left."

"Time enough to collapse from the cold," muttered Ice Claw.

I ignored his comment and hurried after Farnathia, who had gone ahead. Ice Claw followed close behind me, carrying the hand lamp that we had brought along.

After a quarter of an hour, by my reckoning we must have covered a distance of at least one kilometre and were probably 30 meters below the surface. I was certain that the official route to the Blue Section must be shorter than this because they wouldn't have taken the trouble to escort prisoners so far through these tortuous passages. Perhaps there was even an elevator somewhere.

Our footsteps echoed hollowly from the walls and ceiling. It sounded as though a whole company of troops were marching through this gloomy netherworld and it seemed to me our clatter might be heard a kilometre away. When I drew this to Farnathia's attention she came to a halt.

"It won't be much longer before we'll have to go more carefully," she said, "but here there isn't any danger. The Blue Section and the regular passage to it are separated from us by a wall that doesn't let any sound through it."

I looked at my watch. Since Ice Claw and I had seen the guards take Fratulon away, much time had passed. Unless Sofgart the Blind didn't decide to cut short the stipulated time period, we had about two and a half hours in which to work.

We hurried on then without further halts. I recalled many of the ghastly tales that had been told about the subterranean world of Tarkihl—how many people had tried to penetrate its mysteries and had never returned. Some rumours had it that there were even rivers and regular underground lakes down here but this I could hardly believe. And as for the ghosts, I knew there had to be a rational explanation.

I bumped into Farnathia, who had slowed her pace.

"We're almost there," she said softly. "Do we still have anything to discuss before we go on? Later we won't be able to talk because the Blue Section is kept under guard continuously. There is a staircase that leads directly from there to the upper levels but I don't think we'll be able to use it later for going back."

I had not yet thought of our escape plans. Once we had Fratulon it would be time for that. The main thing was first of all to get him safely out of his dungeon cell

"What's the matter?" inquired Ice Claw, coming up behind me.

"Nothing yet. We are about to enter the Blue Section," I advised him.

"Good! Then at least we'll have that much behind us," he said, optimistically.

"On the contrary, my friend," I said, counteracting his dangerous confidence,

“that’s where everything begins!”

He made a sound as though his teeth were chattering but he said nothing. Farnathia moved forward.

After another 10 meters the passage turned to the left and came to an abrupt end against a wall. The Tatto’s daughter waited until we were all together and then she whispered to us. “This is a secret door that no one knows about. On the other side is the Blue Section. But it contain’s many rooms all over the place that are used as jail cells. Atlan, it won’t be easy to find your father.”

“So we’ll just have to look for him.”

“Maybe the extra guards he’ll have will be a way of telling where he is.”

“That could well be.”

Before she opened the door she asked another question: “And what will we do if we encounter the guards? We don’t have any weapons.”

It was in that moment that I remembered I had forgotten the impulse beamer. I could have kicked myself. Ice Claw stretched out his talon-like hand, in which lay a deadly power.

“We can turn them into ice,” he suggested.

“If they give us that much time,” I countered angrily—but the anger was directed at myself. “Anyway, we should be able to take care of at least one of them and we’ll get his weapon.”

We agreed on a few hand signals by which we could communicate in silence. Then Farnathia bent down to open the secret door.

Without a sound the wall slid suddenly to one side. The girl was the first one to slip through the opening into a dimly lit but very wide corridor. She signalled to us to hurry. As we came through, the wall section glided back into place behind us, leaving not the slightest visible trace of a door.

We stood there motionlessly with our backs pressed to the wall. There was no place either to the right or the left of us where we could have concealed ourselves. If someone were to appear at this moment we would be lost unless we could manage to take care of the intruder before an alarm was given.

For the first time I realized what we were letting ourselves in for. What burdened my conscience the most was the fact that I had exposed Farnathia to the greatest danger. If something happened to her it would be my fault and I would have to reproach myself for it the rest of my life.

I heard the muffled sound of men’s voices as though from a considerable distance. They were somewhere to our left. To the right of us the passage lost itself in absolute darkness. In the other direction we could see the perpetually glowing squares of light at even intervals along the walls.

Farnathia beckoned us to follow her as she moved soundlessly toward the voices. More than once she made signs to me to indicate that here and there along the way she knew of the existence of other secret doors. No matter how hard I searched, however, I could not detect the slightest hint of their presence. The only

thing I noticed was that such places always seemed to be midway between two of the light squares.

Then we suddenly heard approaching footsteps.

Farnathia darted to the right side of the passage where a side tunnel connected to the main corridor. This time we didn't need an invitation. Ice Claw and I followed her silently and got out of sight not a second too soon. The shaft we had entered was so low that Farnathia and I could hardly stand up in it but the ceiling was still high enough for Ice Claw.

The footsteps continued to come nearer. Then their sound level seemed to remain the same for a few seconds, after which they receded again.

Farnathia took a slow, deep breath. "The change of the guard," she whispered to me. "We have to wait because the others will soon be coming back to go upstairs. At least now we can be sure that we only have *one* detachment of guards to face."

I nodded but said nothing.

It required 5 minutes for the guards who had been relieved of duty to return. On that basis the dungeons must be located several hundred meters from our present position, I calculated. We still had about 2 hours left, which should be sufficient time. We just had to make sure that none of the sentinels got away from us.

Judging by the sound of the footsteps there were 4 or 5 men at the most who now reached the stairs and began to ascend. Their footsteps became fainter until finally they could no longer be heard.

"Now!" whispered Farnathia. and she took the lead once more.

I could only wonder at her in silence. In this brief timespan, what had become of the girl who had been so fearful and shy? How she had changed! And all because we had to rescue my foster father from a dungeon?

Or were there still other reasons behind it?

We reached the place where the stairs led upward. They were wide and fairly well illuminated. I would have given much to know where they led but I didn't dare to ask any more questions. Ahead of us was an equally well-lit corridor. On both sides of the passage I could make out barred doors that were spaced at even intervals, which I knew were entrances to the individual cells.

But here was a new danger!

We had to pass these gated doorways and if there were prisoners in any of the cells they would be sure to see us and perhaps even recognize us. I signalled Farnathia to come to a halt and by means of our sign language I was somehow able to convey the problem to her.

At first she seemed to be startled by it but then she indicated that we could cautiously creep up on the cells and simply make a jump past the openings. Presumably the inmates would thus only be able to see us as flitting shadows and might assume that a guard had hurried past their door. I didn't think it was a very good solution but I couldn't think of a better one.

Before setting out again we took a closer look at the passage before us. It was perhaps 200 meters long and appeared to end at a smooth wall that was devoid of cell doors. Farnathia. indicated that the corridor turned there at a right angle and continued. Since we saw no one ahead of us it was certain that Fratulon would not be located in this part of the dungeon area. Accordingly, it was not necessary to search the cells that were before us. Fratulon's location would be marked by the presence of the guards.

Near the first two cells we took up a position next to each other and at a signal we made a simultaneous jump past the openings. The barred doors were so narrow that anyone inside the cells could not see very far to the right or left. But if any of the inmates were to press close against the bars he might be able to notice us.

During the jump, however, a quick side glance told me that both the cells were empty.

It required half an hour for us to cover the 200 meters and in spite of the time it took us we were out of breath when we reached the right-angled turn in the passage.

At this point we could now hear the voices of the guards. This time I would not permit Farnathia to take the lead. Gently but firmly I held her back and peeked around the corner down the final stretch of corridor. The confidence I had felt until then was shattered by what I saw.

Before me was another broad passage, well-lit, and lined on either side with cell doors. At a distance of about 50 meters were three Kralasenes and one Gortavorian, the latter probably one of Declanter's palace guards. It was quite evident that they were keeping a special watch on one of the dungeons and there could be no doubt that it was the one where my foster father was being held prisoner.

I drew back from the corner and dared to whisper: "I wonder how we're going to sneak up on them without them seeing us."

For the first time even Farnathia. seemed discouraged. "It's impossible, Atlan. The corridor is too well lighted and even if they aren't on the alert they still can't fail to see us."

I looked at my watch. "In less than an hour and a half they'll be coming to get him. We'll have to make our move in the next half hour if we want to have a head start." The situation was virtually hopeless but I could not and would not give up.

Ice Claw brought his crystal-like lips close to my ear. "Let me go on ahead," he whispered. "Since I'm transparent they'll get the shock of their lives when they see bones and living organs floating through the air. Then you can take advantage of the confusion and follow me."

I thought this over. It was probably the only choice we had. I was counting on the possibility that the Kralasenes had never encountered a Chretkor before. Or if they had ever seen one in normal daylight it would be different to see one down here under artificial lighting conditions. Then, if we could take advantage of their surprise...

“Alright, Ice Claw, but be careful,” I told him. “And don’t forget they are heavily armed. If they recover from their shock too quickly, you’re done for. They’ll kill you without blinking an eye.”

Ice Claw made a deprecating gesture with his taloned hands. “Many have tried that before.”

I held Farnathia’s hand as Ice Claw left the safety of our position and took the middle of the corridor, marching straight toward the four guards. Indeed he was a frightening apparition. The light passed through his glass-like body, giving the impression that his organs, nerves and bones were floating through the air.

Fortunately a further development of events came to our aid. The Gortavorian who was a member of the Tatto’s guard force turned at that moment and departed in an opposite direction. Apparently he was intent upon inspecting another part of the Blue Section which lay farther beyond. The three Kralasenes watched him go and in so doing they turned their backs to us.

I drew Farnathia along behind me as I followed Ice Claw swiftly. We were able to approach them within about 20 meters. Then one of the Kralasenes said something to his companions and as they turned around they became aware of Ice Claw.

For a moment they seemed to be hypnotized. They stood there motionlessly, staring. They might have remained in this state until Ice Claw had a chance of reaching them but they saw beyond him and also spotted the two of us following behind him. And certainly no one could argue the fact that Farnathia and I appeared to be quite normal looking Arkonides. It was this sight which again gave them their freedom of movement.

I could tell right away that in spite of their dishevelled appearance they were part of an elite fighting force, if one might pardon the use of the word ‘elite’ in connection with such as these. At any rate, they were well-trained and their reactions were swift.

But Ice Claw was swifter.

He was on top of them before they had time to desafety their weapons and raise them. At the same time I shoved Farnathia hard enough to throw her to the floor, for her own protection, and I dashed toward Ice Claw to give him a hand. Alone he would hardly have a chance against all three opponents.

But he was already in action.

Using both of his hands at once, he firmly gripped two of the men by their arms. With all his strength he closed his talons on their flesh and they cried out as their arms turned to solid ice. They simply dropped their impulse beamers and strove to get rid of the sudden pain of freezing.

The third Kralasene fired a shot but it bypassed Ice Claw at a safe distance. However, the heat of the raybeam served to render the Chretkor still more agile and swift. I could detect in him no negative effects from the sudden temperature change—but meanwhile I had by this time arrived at his side.

I knocked the weapon out of the hand of the remaining guard just as Ice Claw stooped down to obtain one of the impulse guns. Before I could stop him he killed all three of the Kralasenes.

When I stared at him in horrified amazement he remarked laconically: “Their lives or ours, Atlan. Simple as that.”

Farnathia finally reached us, her face pale from fright. She realized that I had thrown her to the floor for her own protection, so she didn’t say a word about my rough handling of her. She merely stared down, speechless, at the bodies of the three Kralasenes.

But finally she reminded us of our main objective. “Where is Fratulon?” she asked. “We have to find him.”

“He must be close by,” I said.

“The Tatto’s guard may come back soon,” said Ice Claw. “I’ll watch for him while you look for Fratulon.”

I had almost forgotten about the 4th guard, so it was well that Ice Claw thought of him. I went with Farnathia and made a check of the dungeons. It was either in the 10th or 11th cell that we found my foster father.

He did not appear to have noticed what had happened outside because he merely sat hunched over in his dungeon and stared into space. He didn’t even look up when he heard our footsteps.

“Fratulon!” cried Farnathia happily.

Then he looked up and saw us. I had never seen such an astonished expression in my life but it was mixed with horror. “Are you insane?” It was all he could say.

“Face the far wall with your back toward us,” I told him and I raised the beamer in order to melt through the bars of his cell gate. “It’s going to get a little warm in there.”

But Fratulon shook his head determinedly. “No, I will not let you set me free. I have to handle this whole thing by myself. You still have a chance to save your lives and get to safety. No one will suspect you if you go now.” He looked at me questioningly. “How did you ever manage to sneak past the guards?”

“They are dead,” I advised him.

Fratulon seemed to be more horrified than before. “Then you are lost, you crazy young fools!” he exclaimed. “How could you do such a thing?”

I was angered by his thick-headedness. “We wanted to get you out of here and we shall!” I answered him. “Don’t make any trouble for us—just face that wall. I’m going to blast this gate.”

This time he obeyed. He probably realized that he had no other choice since we had killed the three guards. In his mind this meant that there was no salvation either for him or for us.

After the bars were melted through it only required 10 minutes for them to become cool enough so that he could come out.

He studied Farnathia for some time before he spoke to her. “You assisted Atlan

in this? Then you are braver than your father. You must think a lot of me to have taken such a risk.”

I would have preferred telling him that she had done it for me but I decided to remain silent about it. Meanwhile Ice Claw joined us. He said he hadn’t found the 4th guard. Apparently the Tatto’s guard had left the Blue Sector by means of another exit.

Now Fratulon took over the leadership. “We’ll try to get to the surface either by your secret passage or up the stairs. Perhaps we can conceal ourselves for awhile in my quarters. Nobody knows who killed the three Kralasenes, and if in the meantime no one has missed you, it’s possible that...” He stopped suddenly.

And with good reason. Coming from the direction of the main corridor we heard the distant sounds of marching feet.

Ice Claw darted up the passage to the corner of the intersection and cautiously took a peek. Then he ran back to us swiftly. “It’s a full column of troops, Fratulon. At least 20 men—palace guards and Kralasenes. What do we do now?”

“Move! Follow me quickly! I know where we can go, at least for now...”

3/ CITY OF THE UNKNOWN

After awhile I began to be amazed at Fratulon's knowledge of these underground areas. We had long since passed beyond the regions that Farnathia knew about—even those parts she had merely heard about from others. We were now penetrating completely unknown territory.

It was my guess that Fratulon had been down here more than once in the past. He led us ever onward with the unfailing certainty of a sleepwalker, finding narrow side tunnels and secret doors that he opened with practiced ease. I didn't have time to ask questions now but I determined to make up for it later when the opportunity presented itself.

Finally, after a strenuous march through an unlighted passage, we came into a large chamber. To our great astonishment it was still furnished with ancient, half crumbled pieces of furniture. Fratulon watched us with visible enjoyment as we looked around in stupefaction at the great wardrobe cabinets and the chests and bed stands. It was not exactly cold here but I was freezing nevertheless. And of course the same was happening to Ice Claw, not to mention Farnathia.

"Where are we?" she asked, shivering.

Fratulon waved a hand at the beds. "Sit down, my good friends. Here we are safe for the time being. Atlan, what are you carrying in that sack?"

I sensed for the first time that I was hungry as a bear. "It's lucky I at least thought of bringing this," I said and I unpacked our supply of food. "But it would be a good idea while you're eating if you would answer Farnathia's question."

He chewed his food as he talked. "You mean, where we are? Well, we're deep underneath Tarkihl, about 100 meters below the ground level. You can rest assured that no one will look for us here. But we can't stay here forever."

"It's a long way back," Ice Claw reminded him.

Fratulon shook his head negatively. "You're wrong, my transparent friend. Right close by there's a staircase leading straight up to the surface but nobody seems to know about it besides myself. Within half an hour I can be at my apartment. In fact, I can get directly into my own room through the wall. We've been moving in a circle and just now we are beneath the Tatto's quarters." He smiled and pointed at the ceiling. "In fact those dungeons are vertically overhead."

“How do you know all this?” I asked him straight out.

He looked at me, it seemed, almost with forbearance. “In past years I’ve had plenty of time to study Tarkihl. I wanted to find out how it came to be and who built it. The end result was that I never found out but in the course of my searches I came to know almost all its parts and levels. Tarkihl is so tremendous a structure that if it were ever to be fully renovated there would be room here for millions of people.”

“And you know its secrets?”

“Naturally not all of them—but many.”

One other question weighed heavily on me and I could hold it back no longer. “Why did they arrest you?”

He looked at me in deep thought for a moment and then answered: “Judging by your remarks I can guess that you were witnesses to my arrest. I know that there are secret passages and listening posts around the council hall. So you saw it all—why do you ask?”

“And what’s happened to the son of Gonozal?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then I don’t understand why the trail Sofgart was following should have led to you in particular.”

“My lad, you mustn’t forget that I have lived much and seen plenty in my time. Besides, you know, I was personal physician to Gonozal. I’m not surprised that Sofgart traced me down.”

Ice Claw chewed and swallowed his last bit of food. I could see the small mass of nutrition slip down his esophagus. “What happens now?” I asked. “Do we stay here?”

Fratulon nodded. “For the moment it’s the safest plan I believe we can come up with. The only thing is, we’re going to be hungry again pretty soon. Tonight I’ll go up above and get us some backup supplies. If I have a chance I may also find out what they’re doing about my escape and who it is they suspect.”

Farnathia took a firm stand against this. “You will not leave here, Fratulon! Instead, you will describe the route to me! Nobody suspects me and everybody knows that I often wander around in Tarkihl. Even if somebody sees me it still won’t mean anything.”

“You will not expose yourself to such danger under any circumstance,” I protested. “I forbid it!”

She glanced at me in amazement. “Forbid?” she echoed and then smiled. “Nobody can forbid me to do anything because I’m here of my own free will. But now you just think it over: if they catch Fratulon, everything we’ve done will have been in vain and even you, Atlan, and Ice Claw will come under suspicion. But nobody will be able to accuse me of a thing. I will merely have been on one of my little excursions, that’s all.”

Whether I cared to or not I had to accept her logic. Apparently Fratulon had

come to the same conclusion because without further discussion he proceeded to explain the way to her.

He had hardly uttered three sentences before she stopped him. “That’s enough, Fratulon. I know the place and from that point on I’m familiar with the route back to our living quarters. From there it’s only a few steps to my own rooms. It won’t take long for me to get back here.”

“And that’s just how long we’ll be worried about you,” said Fratulon, and after looking at her a moment he added: “Unless you make us a promise.”

“A promise?”

“That you will try to get back to your own living quarters—and that you will stay there. No one may have noticed your absence yet and you would be safe there. We three will remain here. Later when the furore over my escape has calmed down you can let us know. By that time nobody would get suspicious if you were to go on another of your little trips into Tarkihl.”

She shook her head. “You’ll never get a promise like that from me, Fratulon. I’m committed to this group now and here I’ll remain. Expect me back in an hour—maybe two.”

Before we could offer any rebuttal to this she got up and disappeared into the passage. I wanted to hold her back but Fratulon grasped my arm.

“Let her go, Atlan. She has a mind of her own. In the meantime it’d be a good idea for us to catch some sleep. We’re soon going to need all the stamina we can muster.”

I finally followed his advice and stretched out on one of the beds. In a short while I fell asleep.

* * * *

Farnathia immediately found the first of the secret passages which Fratulon had described to her. It gave her access to the ascending staircase, which she followed to the next landmark. Then she had to travel a distance in a horizontal direction until she made a sharp right turn and reached a corridor that was familiar to her. From here it was just 15 minutes before she saw her own living quarters before her. She opened the door and went in.

With a sense of tremendous relief she fell onto her bed and stretched out on it temporarily. The temptation to simply close her eyes now and think of everything that had happened as merely a bad dream loomed gigantically within her but the concern she felt for her friends was greater.

Hastily she got up then and turned on her video receiver.

She was in time to catch a local newscast and there on the screen was the insidious, goggle-eyed face of Sofgart the Blind. She had never seen the Blindman before in her life but my description of him enabled her to recognize him instantly. The loathsome aspect of the human monster frightened her to the point

where she would have preferred to turn off the video but she finally forced herself to listen to what he was saying.

Sofgart was reporting the fact that the ‘criminal’, Fratulon, had escaped, and he offered an unheard of reward for his recapture. This he was forced to do because Sawbones was so well loved everywhere that very few, if any, might be enticed to betray him. At the same time the leader of the feared Kralasenes announced a general condition of emergency, which at his bidding the Tatto had declared officially. The hunt for the fugitives had begun.

Farnathia breathed a sigh of relief as the repulsive face disappeared from the screen. It was like recovering from an illness, moments later, when she saw the captain of the Palace Guard take his place. The latter proceeded to transmit further instructions to the public in regard to the alert status that had been proclaimed.

Farnathia was soon able to observe that everything had become quite topsy-turvy. Fratulon must be tremendously important to Sofgart, she concluded, or perhaps the prisoner’s escape was out of proportion to the facts of the case simply because it threatened the executioner’s twisted ambition for the Emperor’s favour.

There was a knock at the door.

A shock of alarm ran through Farnathia and she didn’t dare to breathe. Had they already suspected her of something? But then she realized that if that were the case they wouldn’t merely be knocking. She went to the door and opened it.

It was her father, who was relieved to find her here. “So you’re home again,” he said as he entered. She closed the door and followed him. He pointed to the viewscreen. “Have you heard it all? Fratulon was able to escape.”

“Yes, father, I heard it. And I hope they don’t find him.”

He reacted in secret alarm and looked around as though fearing she had been overheard. “In Tarkihl the walls have ears,” he warned her. “You must not say such a thing again, do you hear?”

Her cool self-composure returned. “Don’t worry, father—no one can eavesdrop on us here. You can rest assured. I’m familiar with the secrets of Tarkihl.”

This seemed to mollify him somewhat. “All the same you have to be careful. This emissary of Orbanashol’s is a veritable devil. I’m afraid he will capture Fratulon again. After all, where can he go? Tarkihl is surrounded. Nobody can get through.”

“Father, was there nothing you could have done to help Fratulon?”

“Had I attempted anything, my child, it would have brought us all to the greatest state of misfortune. No one can go against the will of the Emperor without suffering dire consequences. I was not able to lift a hand for him but now it looks as if others have done it for me. Three Kralasenes were killed by the unknown rescuers. We just found this out. When the news was brought to Sofgart he flew into a rage. He’s vowed that he’ll take Fratulon’s accomplices with him to his private planet. What that means for them we all know.”

“First he has to catch them,” smiled Farnathia.

He stared at her quizzically. "You are glad that Fratulon was set free? Then you'd better not reveal that sentiment to anyone but me."

"Of course not, father. But who could have helped him?"

He shrugged. "By the way, where is Atlan? I've just come from Fratulon's quarters and he's not there. Even Ice Claw is missing, although the two of them entered Tarkihl after the arrest was made."

"Tarkihl is a big place, father."

"Yes, child, as a matter of fact it is very big. You know only a small fraction of it but that's still probably more than I do. How much does Atlan know about it?"

She knew she had to be on her guard now. "He has often accompanied me but I don't think he'd attempt to make an excursion alone and without my guidance. Why do you ask, father?"

"Well, it would be quite natural for him to get the idea of freeing his father, don't you think? In any case that's what I'll have to assume unless he shows up pretty soon."

"And if it were true, what would you do? Betray him?"

"No, but on the other hand I wouldn't be able to help him, either."

She took him at his word. He would remain neutral not only for his own sake but above all for the safety of his family.

"I'm kind of tired," she said. "I think I'd like to take a nap."

Declanter took one last look at the video screen where further instructions were being given in the form of moving lines of text. He turned toward the door. "I'll look in on you later," he said.

As she watched him go it was with the helpless awareness of having seen him for the last time. On the other hand, if she were to stay here now and forget everything connected with Atlan and Fratulon, she would have nothing to worry about. Nobody could accuse her of anything, not even this hideous Sofgart and his accursed guards.

Atlan!

She sprang up and carefully locked the door so that no one could surprise her. Then she looked through her small pantry for suitable food supplies. Having made a selection, she packed everything together in a bundle and fastened it with straps so that she could easily carry it over her shoulder.

She went through her rooms once more. She suspected that these, too, she was seeing for the last time. But it was quite likely that no one would become suspicious of her absence even if she disappeared for some time. They'd all have to assume that she had gone on one of her usual treks of exploration into Tarkihl and that she had fallen prey to the ghosts of the lower levels. No person in his right mind would make any connection between her and Fratulon. She finally took her bundle and opened the door.

And stood facing Sofgart the Blind.

For one long moment she felt as though she were going to faint. Her knees

began to tremble and she closed her eyes to shut out the sight of his thin figure and that terrible face. But then each passing second brought her closer to the stark realization that everything now depended upon her alone—upon her presence of mind and her entire comportment with this fiendish persecutor.

She forced a smile. “Oh!” she exclaimed but said nothing more.

The ugly grin on his face became a grimace. “Our pretty girl seems about to embark on a little journey,” he said, pointing to her food packages. “We are under an emergency alert, my child.”

Farnathia reasoned that the closer she adhered to the truth the less suspicious she would appear. “Not actually a journey, sir, just a short trek. I always take walks through Tarkihl when I get bored.”

“You may call me Sofgart.” He was uncommonly polite, she observed, in spite of herself. She did not interrupt as he continued: “You no doubt are very familiar with Tarkihl, I presume. Were you ever in the Blue Section?”

She trembled in a convincing display of horror and dread. “Oh no, that is naturally forbidden, sir—I mean Sofgart. I am not permitted to go there. My father has forbidden it!”

“And you obey all such restrictions?”

“Of course! I am an obedient daughter.”

“Good! That’s why I wanted to pay you a little visit. Your excursion can wait, I presume?”

She nodded silently and yielded as he pressed her back into the room. Then she found her voice: “What do you want of me, Sofgart?” she demanded anxiously.

He closed the door behind him. “Just a few questions, nothing more. What do you have in the packages?”

She hesitated, and that was a mistake. He snatched the packages from her unresisting hands and opened them. When he looked at her again he wasn’t smiling.

“You were going to consume all this on just a little stroll, my charming one? You must have an awfully big tummy.” Before she could prevent it he bent forward and stroked her stomach with a bony hand. “Doesn’t seem so big to me, though.”

To Farnathia, all appeared to be lost. Frantically she strove to find an excuse. “Once I became lost, Sofgart,” she said, forcing a tone of easy innocence. “And I didn’t find my way back for 2 days. I almost starved to death. I don’t want that ever to happen to me again.”

He kept looking at the supply of food. “I understand what you’re saying but I don’t believe you. You know where Fratulon is hiding and you wish to help him. Lead me to him.”

“I really don’t know at all

He came close to her and gave her a shove that made her fall across the bed. He sat down swiftly beside her so that she couldn’t escape. His right hand and the

impulse weapon strapped to his forearm were mere centimetres away from her body.

“Out with it, daughter of the worthy Tatto of Gortavor! Talk if you don’t want me to hurt you!”

She didn’t exactly know what he intended to do with her but her instinct warned her. She glanced about her in desperation, looking for a weapon. Over her head on a narrow shelf was a metallic figurine. It was a representation of the extinct 4-legged beast which was used in Tarkihl to mark the entrances to many secret passages. It was 20 centimetres in height and was very heavy. If she could just grab hold of it with one free hand and smash this detestable creature’s head with it...

Atlan had referred to the Blindman’s goggles as ‘funnel eyes’. He could not see as well or as quickly with them as he might have with normal vision. And that could be her salvation.

“I won’t!” she cried out, hoping to so incite him that his attention would be distracted.

He leaned closer to her and began to unfasten her cloak. Apparently he had trouble in finding the fastenings. For a moment all she saw of him was the leather cap that covered his head.

She jerked herself upward as though to get away from him and without looking up he sought to force her down again but at the same time she reached out with her right hand and grasped the metal statue. With all her strength she brought the heavy object down against the leather cap.

Sofgart the Blind collapsed instantly and fell across her. She could only free herself from under his weight with an effort. Sofgart was either unconscious or dead. At any rate, he did not move. On his forehead was a trickle of blood.

As swiftly as she could she packed the provisions again and went out of her room. She locked the door and placed the key in the pocket of her cloak. With a few hurried steps she reached her secret passage again and seconds later she disappeared behind its panel.

The way back was traversed without further incident.

* * * *

I woke up when Farnathia came in and simply dropped her food packages and broke out in tears. I sprang from the bed and hurried to her, taking her gently into my arms.

“Farnathia, everything is alright now. You are here with us again.”

But she did not stop crying. Her body seemed to be shaking from convulsions. I carefully guided her to my bed and made her lie down.

“You have to rest, girl. That was a long trip for you.”

Fratulon and Ice Claw had also awakened and they came over to us.

“Whatever is the matter with her?” asked Ice Claw vapidly.

I glanced at him angrily. “A block of ice like you wouldn’t be able to understand,” I said reprovingly. “After all, what she’s been through has been too much for her nerves.”

Farnathia sat up finally and looked at each of us in turn. “I can never go back to my parents now,” she said, and she started to sob once more. “I think... I may have killed Sofgart the Blind. He was going to... I mean, in my room he...” She broke off, unable to say more. Instead she fell back onto the pillow.

Fratulon had turned white as a sheet and he stared at me helplessly.

Undisturbed, Ice Claw turned his attention to the food packages and began to investigate their contents. Several times he grunted with satisfaction.

I placed a hand on Farnathia’s fevered forehead. “You have to rest first and then you can tell us everything. There is time now, do you hear? We’re all safe here. Or—” A sudden thought brought new fear. “Was somebody following you and that’s why you’re so out of breath?”

She shook her head but kept her eyes closed

We waited patiently. She thought she may have killed Sofgart the Blind but had she really? In any case she had had a fight with him and had gotten away from him. Of course this meant that for the time being she could not go back to the palace, perhaps never. Now she was bound to us for better or worse.

I did not yet know how true this was.

Fratulon whispered: “She will have to recover first and then she can give us a report on what happened.”

But Farnathia opened her eyes and shook her head. “I’ll tell you now and then sleep, if I can. It’s better for you to know now so that you can start figuring what to do next.”

She told us the whole story and concluded: “I really don’t know whether he’s dead or not. Maybe his leather cap cushioned the blow. At any rate, he was unconscious. But if he regains consciousness he will know that you are here below in Tarkihl. He put 2 & 2 together very quickly when he saw the provisions.”

We all remained silent for awhile.

Finally Fratulon said, “Tarkihl is fully surrounded. Even if we managed to get to the surface without being observed there would be no way of escaping. For the present there can be no thought of getting away but we can hide. That hiding place will have to be in the unknown depths of Tarkihl. Only there will we be safe.”

Ice Claw shuddered. “Is it cold there?” he wanted to know.

“You don’t have to worry,” answered Fratulon, a bit evasively.

I proposed that we extend our rest period where we were so that Farnathia would have a chance to recover. She must have suffered a terrible shock when she realized what Sofgart’s intentions were.

We ate only a small snack and packed the rest of the food for carrying it with

us.

Suddenly I was assailed by a frightening thought. “Fratulon—we don’t have any water. Farnathia forgot to bring any.”

He nodded slowly as though the thought had occurred to him long since. “The food supplies will last for quite a few days if we use them sparingly and one doesn’t die of thirst as quickly as he would from hunger. Besides, where we are going I can assure you there is more water than we can drink.”

“How do you know that?”

“I just know it,” he answered and therewith lay down on his bed and closed his eyes.

Which left me no other choice than to follow his example.

* * * *

20 hours later I was again forced to marvel at Fratulon’s astonishing knowledge. It was now clearly evident to me that this wasn’t the first time he had visited these forbidden regions of Tarkihl. However reassuring as this was for us fugitives it only served to deepen the mystery surrounding my foster father.

By now we had dispensed with the necessity of having to use concealed secret doors and passages. We walked through wide corridors and extensive halls whose ceilings glowed with a yellowish light and were often more than 10 meters above our heads. In many of the larger chambers and halls we encountered machines and apparatuses whose purpose none of us could even guess. Even Fratulon was unable to tell us what they signified or who had placed them here long ago. Or at least that was what he led us to believe.

Far beneath us under the solid rock was the source of a constant vibration and a barely audible humming sound as though motors or engines of some kind were in operation. Ice Claw ventured a guess that there might be perpetually functioning energy plants here somewhere which lighted the passages and provided all Tarkihl with power.

Farnathia was walking beside me. She had recovered by now and seemed to have regained her selfassurance. Having gotten over her initial shock she was now reconciled to the prospect of never being able to return.

Suddenly Fratulon came to a stop. “Just another 100 meters and you will be in for a surprise. I’ve been here often but never had the time to have a look around. But now we have time—lots of it. We’ll stay a day or two in the city.”

“City?!” I looked at him as though I suspected him of having lost his reason. “What do you mean by that? Don’t tell me that there’s actually a city down here!”

“I thought that’s exactly what I just said,” he retorted in a slight tone of irritation.

The corridor had widened out still more than before. It began to remind me of the great streets and avenues that I had seen in video films which had shown other

planets of the Imperium and their gigantic cities. Here too there seemed to be a number of vehicular roadways but the vehicles themselves were missing. Positronic guide rails divided the smooth metallic surfaces into 5 separate lanes, each of which was 5 meters wide. On the outer edges of each roadway were travelling slidewalks for pedestrians but at present these conveyors were motionless.

Then the boulevard we were following opened upon an unimaginably tremendous cavern.

At the moment there was no more appropriate description I could think of for what I saw before me. There lay a city, an actual city down here several hundred meters beneath the surface of Gortavor. The boulevard inclined downward into its centre and we found ourselves at an elevation where we could view almost its entire extent. There was a well-arranged network of streets lined with symmetrical buildings which were separated by various plazas and parkways whose blooms had long since withered away. Above it all arched a synthetic sky that was dominated by a brilliant atom sun. The diameter of the city must have been about 2 kilometres.

Fratulon took obvious pleasure in our speechless astonishment. He directed us to an outjutting observation point and we followed him. We came to where we could see the entire city.

“I discovered this,” he explained, “about 10 years ago when I first ventured this far. It’s a miracle of pre-Arkonide architecture and technology but to my best recollection I’ve never heard mention of it anywhere. Which leads me to believe that the memory of it has been lost. Both its age and its creators are unknown. It may not even have been Arkonides or their forebears who built this but beings who belonged to an unknown civilization that came to this world long before we did. When I first found this place I was mystified by the fact that the vehicles were missing which undoubtedly filled these streets at one time. They have disappeared like the people who once lived here.”

Ice Claw drily remarked: “Maybe they started off on an excursion and never found their way back.”

Fratulon nodded in serious agreement. “That’s no joke—you may be closer to the truth than you think.”

It was incredible. To think that people had been living entire decades in a vast palace and had failed to suspect that the remains of a once proud civilization lay under their feet.

We took a break and had something to eat. But I was gradually getting thirsty and mentioned it to Fratulon.

He dismissed the problem with a wave of his hand. “Don’t worry, my boy, there’s plenty of water down there in the city. Fresh water. The supply system is still working.”

This information was reassuring yet also vaguely depressing. Why had the designers and builders of such a city lived beneath the surface of their world when

the conditions were better up above? What circumstance had caused them to retreat into these subterranean depths? And what was more important, where had they disappeared to?

Fratulon appeared to have read my thoughts. "It's useless to go into questions about it, Atlan. I've cudgelled my brains about it for 10 years already and still haven't found an answer. The city is here. No more can be said. After we've finished here, let's have a closer look at it."

After we had rested and satisfied our hunger we continued down the boulevard and finally reached the first of the houses. Nothing could hold me back from entering one of them to get a drink of water although Fratulon indicated that we would soon be coming to a fountain.

The rooms were even still furnished. I was able to discern the purpose of most of the furniture pieces while others I could not figure out. But I found the water dispenser. When I pressed the release button, ice cold fresh water gushed out of a spigot. I drank until I couldn't swallow any more, and my confidence in Fratulon increased with each swallow.

The others had waited outside. Almost before I joined them they all started out again. Fratulon wanted to take us to a definite location that he knew from his previous visits here.

"There we will find a good, comfortable shelter including water and some other things that may interest you. If we're lucky we may even find out what's going on overhead in the palace. The intelligences who built Tarkihl have thought of everything, even to such an extent that one day we may use a certain means of escape from here."

The way led farther into the dead city until by my reckoning we had reached its centre. Here was a circular plaza where many of the streets converged and rows of houses surrounded the place. It was the focal point of the entire city.

The artificial sky above us was blue and the nuclear sun now hung suspended directly above the circular plaza. I estimated that it might have been some 200 meters overhead but I could have been mistaken. The "horizon" was obscured by the buildings but it was easy to conclude that it consisted of walls of rock.

Farnathia was enthusiastic. "I never would have dreamed that something like this could exist right under our feet. It's fantastic!"

Fratulon stretched out his arms to his surroundings and made one turn around. "Here they have lived, the aliens who constructed Tarkihl. Probably from this point they ruled the whole planet just like the Tatto does today in the name of the Greater Imperium. Down here nobody will find us and we are safe. And now—follow me and you'll see what a good thing it is to be prepared for situations like this." His tone of voice became almost apologetic as he added: "Naturally I couldn't think of everything."

Ice Claw emitted a little moan of pleasure. "How warm it is, friends! At least the sun stays in one spot—I hope!"

"That it does but at regular intervals it goes out and then it becomes night—and

cooler. The automatic control for it is hidden somewhere deep down in the rock. I've never been able to locate it. It must be connected to the central energy station."

He led us to one of the houses which was a duplicate of all the others. A wide stairway led us into its interior. Everything here was in a surprising state of preservation just as though the original inhabitants might be returning at any moment, perhaps from a picnic excursion. Two hallways branched off from the large entrance foyer but so far I could see no doors.

Fratulon pointed to another staircase. "Let's go upstairs," he said, leading the way.

On the second and highest level there were doors. Fratulon opened one of them and made a mock bow as he invited us to go in. "May I show you my second home...?"

Him and his confounded secrecy! Such were my thoughts as I stood in the fairly comfortable-looking living room which was filled with every possible kind of furnishings and articles of equipment. Fratulon must have gathered these things from everywhere in the city as though he'd intended to open a museum. He had even found some energy weapons.

He stood there and grinned at us as we marvelled at his 'second home'. "I figured I'd be using this place someday," he said as he seated himself in a strangely shaped chair. "Ice Claw, close the door so we won't have a draft."

We also inspected the adjacent rooms. These were mostly unfurnished, however, but in a few of them were beds or cots.

Fratulon called out to me. "The second door on the left, Atlan. That's the kitchen!"

It was a good thing that I had braced myself against any further shocks of surprise. Of course a few things in the kitchen appeared strange to me but at least I could guess their purpose. At any rate the water faucet worked and in a cold chest I discovered provisions taken from the Tatto's own food stores. There was enough there to last for several months at least.

I went back into the livingroom. "You've done a real good job of planning your escape," I said and also took a seat. "Do you have any more surprises in store for us?"

Fratulon nodded. "Certainly. Didn't I promise you more?"

While still in his chair he operated a remote control. One of the cabinet doors opened. A video set extended outward and its small viewscreen lighted up at once. I recognized the council chamber of the Tatto.

"As you can see, we can follow everything that's going on upstairs. By the way, I didn't bring this set here. I found it here and it functioned perfectly. Too bad they're not in council right now but we'll catch them sooner or later."

The viewscreen darkened and the set disappeared again into its hiding place.

By this time Farnathia had also recovered from her surprise. I showed her the

kitchen and the food supplies. She could only shake her head in wonderment.

“It’s just as if your father had known this would happen, Atlan! Now I’m beginning to believe that everything will be alright. This Sofgart person can’t stay on Gortavor forever, if he’s even alive any more. I hope he’s still alive because the thought that I had killed a man would be unbearable.”

“He isn’t a man, he’s an animal,” said Ice Claw, who had overheard her remark. “Which of the beds is mine?”

His question was like a signal to us. We suddenly felt the leaden weight of fatigue in our limbs. Fratulon soon assigned us to our sleeping quarters.

4/ THE SILENT ONES

The 'sun' had dimmed out for a number of hours but I was unaware of it. Fratulon told me that I had slept more than 10 hours. I felt correspondingly refreshed and re-energized. The other two had fared no better or worse.

After we enjoyed a breakfast that Farnathia prepared for us we sat together in the living room. Fratulon was fooling with the video set and he showed me how to work it.

"This is the selector, Atlan. We can not only have a look at the council chamber but also some of the upper and lower levels of Tarkihl. There..." A new scene appeared on the viewscreen. "That's the Blue Section. Something's happening there, wouldn't you say?"

The wide corridor was crowded with the Tatto's troops and a few Kralasenes. They were standing around as though expecting something. Some of them wore leather field packs on their hips but we couldn't tell if they contained rations or munitions. At any rate they were all heavily armed.

In the background the staircase could be seen that led up into the palace. We also perceived movement there of some kind. Three men came down into the Blue Section and one of them was...

"Sofgart the Blind," commented Fratulon calmly. "So he has survived the blow you gave him, Farnathia. We'll soon know what he's planning."

Together with his evil-looking Kralasene companions he reached the troops and came to a stop. With a croaking voice he announced that they would now make a thrust into the unknown lower levels of Tarkihl in order to pick up the trail of the fugitives.

And he concluded: "I want them alive—Fratulon as well as the girl. You know the reward that has been offered for both of them. It's also possible that Fratulon's son is with them. There's no reward offered for him but perhaps for the weird Chretkor creature who must have killed at least one Kralasene if not all three. Where is the man who is going to be our guide?"

An officer of the Palace Guard stepped forward.

"Good," said the Blindman. "You go ahead and show us the way."

They all started to march and disappeared from our view as they moved out of range of the hidden camera.

“Do you think they’ll come this far?” I asked.

“It’s possible,” replied Fratulon thoughtfully. “That blind dog from hell isn’t afraid to try anything.”

“What can we do against them?”

“If they find us there’s only flight, my son. I know a way that leads still deeper into Tarkihl but we won’t be finding any more cities or even comfort. It would be a good idea to prepare four packs of food so that we won’t lose any time if they come here. That’s an assignment for you, Farnathia. I’ll have a look at the warning alert system that I found here before. It may be possible to activate it again.”

I asked no more questions. Fratulon no doubt knew best what there was to be done. While he was busy elsewhere I sat before the video set and soon found out the extent of its coverage. To my utter amazement I discovered that hidden cameras had even been installed in our former living quarters. After that I saw corridors in lower levels of Tarkihl which were lonely and deserted looking. Unfortunately I was not experienced enough to proceed systematically with the visual search.

In the meantime Ice Claw made a tour of exploration through the city and came back with a hoard of plunder that he intended to take with him. I was amazed at all the things he had found.

Shortly before it was time for our synthetic sun to darken, Fratulon returned. “I think it’ll work,” he said. “If they come to the city it will have to be by the same route we followed and a camera is installed there. The only thing necessary from now on is that one of us will always have to be watching the viewscreen. As soon as the Blindman and his men become visible on it we will have a half hour left. I’ll take the first watch.”

I was deeply disappointed that our respite was being cut short so soon, yet on the other hand I knew we couldn’t stay here forever.

After Farnathia fell asleep I went to my room. Ice Claw still sat on his bed and was rummaging through his collection of treasures. I grinned at him briefly and lay down on my own bed.

* * * *

Sofgart the Blind and his troops showed up two days later.

Ice Claw had the watch at the time and discovered them on the viewscreen. Fratulon ordered us to get the food packages and weapons and prepare ourselves for flight. He gave us 10 minutes, no more.

The enemy was visible only a short time on the viewscreen and then passed beyond the range of the camera.

“At any rate,” said Fratulon, “it took them 2 days to cover that comparatively

easy stretch. They'll be pretty exhausted but of course the sight of the city may perk them up to new efforts. However, from here on they won't be able to trail us if we're careful not to leave any evidence behind us. The city has a good dozen exits that lead off in different directions. We'll take the most difficult route."

"But Fratulon..." I started to object but he interrupted me.

"You have to trust me! I know exactly what I'm doing. The main thing is to shake off our pursuers. I don't like to leave the city any more than you do but it's useless to continue trying to hide out here because sooner or later they'd find us."

"And besides," said Ice Claw, "those super snoops will need at least a week to make a thorough search of the city. By that time we'll be over the hills and far away."

Fratulon nodded. "That bit about the hills doesn't fit the picture, of course, but otherwise you're perfectly right. We'll gain time and I'm certain we'll find a new hiding place. I have something definite in mind but first I'd like to explore another possibility."

We looked at him questioningly but he shook his head and kept silent. I knew it was useless to try to get any more information out of him at the present time.

We took our bundles and left the house. From that point on we took care not to leave the slightest trace behind us. There could be little doubt that they would find the house but then they'd have to conclude that we had vanished into thin air. Without any clue as to the direction of our flight they could waste another few weeks trying to search for us.

Ice Claw's reference to going 'over the hills' wasn't too far out of line inasmuch as all the streets leading to the outskirts slanted uphill toward the 'horizon'. Fratulon kept us going steadily at a rapid pace but we complied with his urging since we figured he knew best how much time we had. We entered a wide, level tunnel that led through the solid rock into the unknown underworld, and when we were well inside of it Fratulon called a halt.

"You'd better take a good breather here," he said. "We've still got a long way to go."

He retraced his steps to the entrance of the shaft, which was another one of the vehicular thoroughfares. He peeked out carefully and looked back toward the city. I followed and joined him, unable to restrain my curiosity any longer. Farnathia and Ice Claw had sat down on the curb stone bordering the roadway.

"See anything yet?" I asked softly.

He nodded without looking at me. "I see them standing over there across from us, 2 kilometres away. For the first time in their lives they're looking at this city. I'd like to know what they're thinking right now."

The pursuers were nothing more than tiny specks as seen from our vantage point. They were barely distinguishable against the background of the rocky walls of the gigantic cavern. Nevertheless I could see them although not in detail. I saw them over the roofs of the city, which lay in a depression. Just little dots that moved excitedly here and there.

“The city will delay them,” I whispered, although at this distance of over 2,000 meters they couldn’t possibly have heard me. “Fratulon, can’t you tell me where we’re going to go?”

He smiled for a moment but then became serious. “Alright, I’ll tell you. We’re going into parts of Tarkihl that are also unknown to me.”

I tensed. “Unknown? Then how will you guide us if you don’t know either the way or the destination?”

“I know a part of the way and I’ve read a description of the rest of it. We’ll have to go according to that.”

“Description?” Here was that mystery side of him again which had caused me so often to wonder at him. “Where would you find a description of things that are supposed to be unknown?”

“Among thousands of books in the Tatto’s library there is one in particular I came across. Nobody seems to have noticed its contents except myself. I’ve read it. It contains the entire plan of Tarkihl and also the escape routes out of it. Of course some things it contained weren’t entirely clear to me. And also you have to remember that the book is very old. Since it was written there could have been some changes made, either by Nature or by man. One thing that’s certain is that it was written by Arkonides and not by the builders of Tarkihl.”

It seemed to me to be very improbable that no one had discovered this book other than Fratulon. Could it be possible for such a book to remain in a library without ever having been read?

Far across the city the little dots became organized and began their march toward the centre. I could well imagine our pursuers’ present mood and state of mind, so I didn’t envy them.

Fratulon pulled me away with him. “We have to go on. It would be senseless to watch them from here to see what they do. And don’t forget: we must leave nothing behind us that could give them any clue as to which route we’ve taken.”

Ice Claw got into serious trouble when he started to throw away some of the first pieces of his collection of curiosities. Fratulon took him sternly and briefly to task and emphasized that he had been given sufficient warning. However, he promised that an opportunity would soon present itself for discarding all superfluous baggage.

The tubular roadway ended before a rock wall.

I asked Fratulon what the purpose of these vehicular passages could be if they all simply terminated somewhere. He suggested that there were two possibilities: either the builders of Tarkihl had planned a continued extension of them originally but were unable to complete them or else these smooth-looking rock walls at the termination points were nothing more than camouflage. Perhaps the roadways continued onward on the other side.

Here we were in the deep heart of Tarkihl but it still withheld its secrets.

Farnathia and Ice Claw followed close behind us as Fratulon discovered a narrow side passage which lay behind a secret door. Apparently he had been able

to find it solely on the basis of the description he had read because it could hardly be presumed that anyone could have even suspected the presence of the door without having had previous instructions.

Here, however, there was no more light. We had to turn on one of our hand lamps. The way led steeply downward. It became increasingly difficult for me to imagine that we could go much deeper under the planet's crust. According to my calculations we were already at least 1000 meters under the surface of Gortavor.

We finally came to a place where the passage widened out into a vast hall or cavern. Because of the limited range of our hand lights it seemed to stretch out endlessly before us.

And here we encountered the first form of life that existed in these depths.

* * * *

I had heard of the 'Silent Servants' before but had never obtained any detailed information about them. Only once in my life had I ever encountered one of these creatures. It was on one of my exploration hikes in Tarkihl but I had simply run away without taking a closer look at the strange, spherical shape of the thing.

From reports I had heard I knew that at one time they had come to the surface out of Tarkihl much more frequently than now. Their objective had been a kind of instinctive urge to serve the Arkonides, who were not at all inclined to accept such services. This was because they tended to perform tasks that made no sense to anyone.

Farnathia let out a yelp of fright when the light shaft of our lamp suddenly revealed a pale, faceless sphere supported by two spidery thin legs. Four other equally thin arms dangled about in the air as though in an attempt to communicate with us in sign language.

Fratulon had come to a halt. "The Silent Servants," he said quietly. "They're not dangerous but they can be a problem because they sometimes get in the way. Apparently they are creatures who once served the unknown builders of Tarkihl and have outlived their masters. We don't have to fear them because they are harmless. On the other hand they won't be of any help to us because there's no way of communicating with them."

Farnathia was clutching my arm so tightly that I almost cried out in pain. "The Silent Servants!" she exclaimed. "I've heard of them..."

"You mustn't be afraid of them," I assured her. "They're harmless and only want to serve us. But I've heard that being served by them can be a disadvantage and even sometimes dangerous."

There were more of them. The spherical shapes drifted past us in a grotesque sort of motion, seemingly unreal in their appearance. What did they live on down here where there was neither food nor light? Were they able to live in the dark and

multiply or were they immortal?

The third sphere appeared, then a fourth and a fifth... Soon we were surrounded by several dozen of them and all of them wanted to carry our bundles. Fratulon gave orders that we were not to release our food packages to them under any circumstance. However he said to Ice Claw: "Give them that plunder you're carrying. I'm sure they'll manage to lose it all somewhere and then we'll be rid of it."

Reluctantly Ice Claw permitted them to relieve him of his burden. The Silent Servants rapidly took all the keepsakes from him that he had gathered in the city and eagerly hurried away with them on their very thin legs. I could well imagine that the same would have happened to our food packages if we had handed them over to these obsequious bubble ghosts.

Ghosts!

I finally realized why everybody up above in Tarkihl believed in ghosts. The superstition was undoubtedly connected with these mysterious beings who had outlived their former masters.

"We have to get rid of them," said Fratulon. "But how?"

"Can't we put them to work in some way?" I asked.

"We might think of something but how do we make ourselves understood? Maybe we could send them into the city and let them take care of Sofgart the Blind and his troops."

"That would certainly delay them," I remarked but couldn't think of any other solution to the problem.

Farnathia drew me to one side. I sensed that something was troubling her.

"What is it, Farnathia? You want to tell me something?"

"Promise not to tattle on me?"

I didn't have the slightest idea of what she was talking about. "Of course not but don't keep me in suspense. What is it?"

She groped for something in the pocket of her cloak and then pulled it out. It was a ball of twine. In fact it was...

"A trail marker, Atlan. I've left a guide line behind us—not for those who follow us but for our own sake. We'd never get out of here if anything happened to your father. That's why I started unrolling the twine when we started out from the city."

Even were I to graphically describe my reaction at that moment nobody would be able to imagine the sense of horror that gripped me. We were lost because it was practically impossible for our pursuers to miss picking up the other end of the string. All they had to do now was follow it.

"How could you ever do such a thing?!" I asked in low tones. "Didn't Ice Claw notice it?"

"He was even helping me," she confessed.

My mind was racing. One thing was certain—we had to get rid of the marker

she had laid out. But who among us wanted to retrace the long way we had come in order to gather up the telltale twine?

“We have to tell it to Fratulon.”

“I’m afraid!” she protested.

In spite of my love for her this made no difference to me. Our lives were at stake. “Wait here, Farnathia. I’ll do it for you, and don’t be afraid. I think maybe your trail marker is our salvation from these Silent Servants.”

I went over to my foster father and reported to him what Farnathia had perpetrated in her anxiety. At first he was angered but then when I mentioned the Silent Servants his face brightened. Ice Claw was with us and he gave us a glassy grin.

“That’s the solution!” exclaimed Fratulon. He took the end of the string that Farnathia handed to him and turned with it to the nearest Silent Servant. “Roll it up!” he said slowly and very clearly. “Can you understand that? Roll it up!” He demonstrated by backing up a few meters and carefully collecting the twin into a ball. “Just keep following the twine till you get to the city.”

It required a few minutes for the spherical apparitions to understand what he wanted of them. Whether they were actually living beings or robots or maybe even androids with organic brains, the fact remained that they had been either programmed or trained to absolute obedience. Some of them hurried back into the passage and picked up the string while others took the twin ball and helped to collect it again. They vanished soundlessly into the darkness.

Fratulon breathed a sigh of relief and then turned his attention to Farnathia. “My child, we got out of that scrape this time but if you have an urge in the future to do something on your own you’d better consult me first. Will you promise me that?”

She nodded. “I promise.”

“Good! The Silent Servants will have their hands full to back-track that twine and roll it all up. It will lead them back to the city and they’ll meet our pursuers. I can imagine the shock it will be to their systems. I just hope they won’t kill off too many of those harmless animated bubbles.”

Farnathia tensed in sudden alarm. “I didn’t think of that!”

He waved a hand. “Don’t worry, they’ll defend themselves, those Silent Servants. I know they are capable of it but don’t ask me how.”

He seemed to know about everything yet he was inclined to reveal very little to us.

However I was soon distracted from my thoughts concerning the way he had handled the silent ones because some of them had remained behind and were swarming about us again. Fratulon kept pointing to the passage that led back to the city. He made signs with his hands, imitating the motion of rolling up the twine, and he kept repeating it until the ‘dumb waiters’, as Ice Claw called them, were forced to believe that gathering that string was the single most important task in the universe.

They also disappeared in the direction of the city and finally we were completely alone. We continued on our way, which led ever deeper into the unknown. Far ahead somewhere I thought I could make out the sound of a waterfall.

5/ THE SEA OF DARKNESS

The farther we pushed onward the louder the noise became.

Ice Claw had begun to shiver as it became colder. Finally he stopped. "I'll shatter to splinters, Fratulon, because we're wandering into an ice cellar. That's not good for my health!"

Even Fratulon came to a halt, along with Farnathia and myself. "Ice cellar?" He repeated the words thoughtfully. "No, that isn't an ice cellar, Ice Claw. We're probably approaching the water reservoir that was left by the builders of Tarkihl. It has little to do with ice. "

"Fratulon, you should know that large differences in temperature..."

"I'm aware of it but keep calm. The few degrees of difference aren't going to shatter you. The variance is very small."

We pushed onward.

I couldn't shake off the feeling that I had been here before or at least in a similar place. It was a dim memory lying half asleep in my subconscious but I didn't dare ask Fratulon about it. He himself appeared to be too preoccupied with the task of recognizing landmarks which were still in his own memory. If I were to disturb his concentration now we could go astray and that would be the death of us. I was sure that I'd never be able to find my way out of here.

The ground became damp and slippery under our feet whereas before it had been dry as dust. Ice Claw whimpered and scolded to himself all the while and every 5 minutes predicted his own demise. Fortunately, however, we were accustomed to his ways and were able to ignore his incessant prattling.

But I was freezing and so was Farnathia. I made her take my jacket and put it on over her cloak. After a slight pause we continued on without further interruption. In spite of the cold I felt thirsty. Since leaving the city I had not had another drop of water to drink.

The way widened out and its ceiling arched higher above us. I played the beam of the lamp along the walls. They were smooth, almost polished, but they were made of rock instead of the bronze-like metal that I was accustomed to seeing in the upper levels. Down here there was little doubt that Nature had been the architect, even though I knew that the aliens had come along later and offered some assistance.

Fratulon came to such a sudden halt that I bumped into him.

“We’ll soon reach the great underground lake,” he said as he began to unwrap his food package. “I’m for taking a break.”

“I have a couple of questions,” said Ice Claw anxiously.

“So ask them—now’s the time.”

“And you’ll answer them?” inquired the Chretkor somewhat doubtfully.

“At least I’ll try.”

“Alright then...” Ice Claw chewed his food with transparent jaws. “What is this great lake you’re talking about?”

“Nothing special, actually just a lot of water.”

Ice Claw swallowed audibly. “Well I figured it was water—but nothing else?”

“Necessarily so,” Fratulon answered with a hint of irony. “It has to have a shoreline.”

“Ah! Shores, too! That makes it a regular lake alright. And when we get there, then what do we do?”

“I don’t know,” replied Fratulon. “I only know of the lake, myself, from the descriptions I’ve read. What we are hearing must be the waterfall that feeds it. That fits with the description.”

We ate from our store of food, not knowing how long it would last. I noticed that Farnathia was hardly eating anything and I went over to her side.

“Aren’t you hungry, Farnathia?”

She shook her head. “Everything is so... so awful and unexpected. These caverns here are forbidden and maybe sacred places. We’re all going to have to die...”

I comforted her: “No, Farnathia, we’re not going to die. You’ve just been persuaded to think that way because nobody wants people to penetrate these parts. I don’t know, myself, why that is so. It may be a tradition that’s come to be misinterpreted.” I turned to Fratulon. “What do you think?”

He nodded. “You could be right, Atlan. Traditions are often falsely interpreted. That happens on every world.”

Farnathia managed to eat something although with an effort. I felt thirstier than ever. Finally, after hours it seemed to me, Fratulon gave a signal for us to break camp. We packed up our bundles and followed him. Now he was carrying the hand lamp and he moved ahead very slowly. With every step the roaring sound increased. I thought I could already feel the dampness in the air. Ice Claw, who brought up the rear, kept crying out that he simply wouldn’t be able to stand it and that at any moment he was going to shatter into a cloud of fractured icicles.

And then our path ended so suddenly that I almost stumbled and fell. If Fratulon hadn’t caught me it was quite probable that I would have fallen into the water because the shoreline was only about 2 meters wide.

Before us lay the subterranean sea.

In that first moment it seemed that we stood once more before the city, except

that now it was flooded over with water. The cavern was of similar dimensions and the same kind of artificial sky arched above it with an atomic sun in its centre. Of course it shone only very dimly now as though it were simulating night according to an automatic program.

To our right a giant waterfall plunged downward out of the darkness and created a deadly looking whirlpool of raging foam. The waves rolled across the lake and washed against the flat shore not 2 meters away.

Fratulon confirmed my suspicions when he spoke: "It would be my guess that there was also a city here at one time but it was inundated due to some natural catastrophe. It must have happened before the book was written because only the lake is mentioned. To be frank with you, I'm at a loss myself as to where to go from here. But at least we're not short of water. Atlan, I thought you said you were thirsty..."

I lay down my package and walked on the rocky shore. The water was comparatively smooth and the waves exhausted themselves at the edge. With my hand I ladled up the ice-cold liquid and drank. It tasted good and fresh. The others soon followed my example. After that we went onward with the cliff wall to our left and the lake to our right until we came to a sheltered spot that was comparatively dry. The fragments of rock around us served as makeshift benches to sit on.

Ice Claw forgot his fears and asked: "And what happens from here on, Fratulon? You read this mysterious book that none of us has seen. Are you ever going to lead us back to daylight?"

Fratulon glanced at him searchingly and then smiled. "Are you cold?"

I considered his question to be a diversionary tactic but at the moment I had other concerns. Farnathia's trembling body pressed against me as if seeking protection and warmth. I put an arm around her.

"Sure I'm cold, Fratulon!" retorted the Chretkor. "But I asked you a question."

"You mean, where we go from here? I have to try to remember, Ice Claw. I've only read portions of the book and at the time I didn't realize that I'd be needing such knowledge so suddenly. But you can rest assured that we will find the Threshold!"

"The Threshold? What is that?"

Fratulon's expression seemed to indicate that he had said too much. "It's a designation for something I read in the book. I don't know what it means but in any case it's probably a way out. This lake is one of the stations along the way that was indicated. So apparently we're on the right course."

"Why is it called a threshold?" persisted Ice Claw.

"I really don't know," Fratulon repeated.

That's all Ice Claw could get out of him and I wasn't about to try to do more.

Farnathia snuggled close against me. She wasn't shivering as much as before. The warmth of my body was obviously doing her some good. I was happy to be so

close to her. Judging by the looks she gave me, she appeared to share my feelings.

After awhile Fratulon said, “We have to follow the shore along to the left until we find the only passage that leads back into Tarkihl. After that we’ll reach the Mucky River—at least that’s what the book calls it. I can’t imagine what it refers to.”

Mucky River... It could be a mistaken translation, in case the original writing were in some other language.

“And what about the lake?” asked Ice Claw. “It keeps getting replenished with water as though there were also an outlet. Somewhere it must reach the surface again.”

“The part about an outlet is true,” admitted Fratulon, “but don’t forget that we’re more than a thousand meters under the surface. How could the water climb up above? It probably loses itself in the depths of Gortavor and vaporizes in the hot liquid core—or else it’s brought up above by means of some sort of pumping system. I don’t have any desire to get trapped in any such arrangement as that.”

He was right again on that score but our situation was hopeless unless he could find a way. What was this Threshold that he had just mentioned?

“Couldn’t we at least light a fire?” mumbled Ice Claw.

“Unfortunately we don’t have any firewood,” I said as I pulled Farnathia closer to me. “Anyway, I’m not cold.”

“*That* I can believe!” he answered with a knowing glance.

I felt like dumping him in the lake but instead I turned to Fratulon. “Where do we go first?” I asked.

“After we’re through resting we’ll attempt to find the passage at the other end of the lake. Then we’ll see where we go from there.”

I had lost all sense of night or day. Of course we still had our watches but the hours had ceased to have any meaning here. Time was sensed in terms of the distance covered and as related to hunger, thirst and fatigue.

Fratulon was the first to get to his feet. I helped Farnathia get up. In spite of my protests she insisted on giving my jacket back to me. She claimed that her cloak kept her warm enough.

In the same old formation we continued our march. The way along the shoreline did not get any wider, in fact narrower if anything. But the beat of the waves against the shore died down more and more as we moved away from the waterfall. The almost extinguished nuclear sunball gave very little light but it was enough so that we didn’t have to use our hand lamps. The other side of the lake merged indistinguishably into the underworld twilight.

Ahead of us the shoreline made a sharp turn to the left as though following an inlet. I noticed that Fratulon suddenly increased his pace as though he had just recognized another landmark mentioned in his book.

It was indeed an inlet of the lake but now our way led to a definite plateau that reminded me of the terraced entrance of a house. And even the entrance itself was

there.

Fratulon guided us there and then stopped. “That’s it!” he exclaimed as though relieved of a heavy load. “The way to the Mucky River!”

“If we don’t *land* in the muck,” I ventured to interject.

He took no notice of the sceptical remark but merely turned on his hand light and went on. For better or for worse we followed him without benefit of any further explanations.

Here the floor and the walls of the tunnel looked as though water had been flowing through it for a long period of time. The marks of water erosion were easy to recognize. Perhaps this had once been a tributary feeding into the lake.

“Darn it—it’s cold in here!” grumbled Ice Claw behind me.

I stopped and turned to him in exasperation: “You know I’m beginning to wonder about you, my little friend. In spite of our advice you wouldn’t take anything warm with you and you keep running around almost naked. It’s no wonder you’re freezing. Now keep your trap shut, will you?” Admittedly I was a bit rough on him but with his eternal prattling and carping he continuously reminded us of how cold it really was.

“Clothes don’t serve any purpose with me,” he explained. In fact he started in with a big lecture concerning his unusual metabolism but I silenced him with a gesture of impatience.

Far from being concerned with our dialogue, Fratulon had pushed on industriously. The tunnel made several turns until finally we came upon the remnants of a staircase which had been partly washed away. This was a positive indication that the passage had existed prior to the catastrophe. We pressed onward, slipping and sliding on the stairs which were practically only rubble by now.

At least we became a little warmer but of course Ice Claw then proceeded to complain about all the exertion.

Suddenly Fratulon came to a halt and shone his lamp on the walls as though he were searching for some definite sign or landmark. I couldn’t imagine that the water would have left any traces of markings here but then I remembered that Fratulon claimed the book had been written *after* the catastrophe.

“Aha, there it is alright!” he exclaimed and he held the cone of light on a sign that was marked on the wall. “Exactly as described. That mark must have been made by the author himself.”

“So what does the sign mean?” I asked him as I studied the incomprehensible engraving. There were just two undulating lines that looked like sine-waves.

“We’ll soon find out,” he said with typical taciturnity. “Now I still have to find the mechanism...”

We drew back to give him room as he felt along the rocky wall. For a moment I was visited by a terrible thought. What would happen if we had merely been lured into a deadly trap? What if behind the hidden door there were nothing but the

bottom of another lake? It would pour out upon us and sweep us away to be drowned.

But then I was given no further time for such reflections.

The wall opened up and no water poured forth from the opening. An almost warm breath of air struck us and behind me I heard Ice Claw emit a little groan of pleasure. Everywhere in Tarkihl the ventilation system functioned perfectly or we should have suffocated long before this. Somewhere in the depths all the machinery must have been working continuously as it had been programmed to do ages before.

“Wait here,” Fratulon told us. “I’m going ahead but don’t follow me until I call you.” Without waiting to hear our objections he disappeared through the opening in the rock.

We stayed where we were and turned on one of the other hand lamps. The secret door gave no sign of closing again. I could still hear Fratulon’s footsteps for some time before their sound faded away.

“Why is he going ahead alone?” whispered Farnathia anxiously.

“Maybe he suspects there are a few danger spots in there and he wants to check them out first,” I told her. “He’ll soon come back.”

We didn’t talk much because there was nothing to say. We could only wait for Fratulon to return. And finally we heard his footsteps again. Shortly thereafter we saw the light of his lamp and there he stood before us.

“Come!” he said curtly. “We’re one step farther on our way.”

Once we were inside the new passage he caused the rock door to glide shut behind us so that any possible pursuers wouldn’t be able to trace us. Then he took the lead again.

“Before we can get to the Mucky River we have to pass through a number of chambers. I’ve had a look at some of them just now. I’m presuming that they’re what’s left of former barrier zones or maybe some kind of experimental laboratories. The book also mentions them although of course it neglected to give any reasonable explanation for them. If you take care to always do what I tell you here you won’t get hurt.”

“Aren’t you going to explain...?” I started to ask but he interrupted me almost gruffly.

“When it’s time, Atlan. I still don’t know much more than the rest of you. In the first chamber there’s no gravitation, as I found out. That part we can handle but what comes after that... well, we’ll see.”

He came to a stop when we reached the first room, and we saw that it was quite empty. That is with the exception of rings and other hand-grip devices I discovered on the walls but at a height of at least 5 meters over our heads. This served to convince me that the unknown creators of Tarkihl had used this chamber for training future spacemen under the condition of weightlessness.

“It’s 50 meters across here,” explained Fratulon, “but if you’re not accustomed

to weightlessness you're liable to float around in here for hours. Just aim at that door over there and when you don't feel any weight be sure to shove off from the ground as carefully as possible. There are even holding rings on the ceiling. As soon as you grab one, correct your course if necessary. I'll go first, so pay attention!"

How was it that I was familiar with weightlessness? I had the feeling that I had experienced it before but at the time I must have been a child. At any rate I was confident enough to believe that I'd be able to manage it quite easily.

I whispered to Farnathia: "You go ahead of me so that I can help you if you get in any trouble."

She nodded but said nothing. Meanwhile we kept an eye on Fratulon. He stepped carefully across the invisible threshold into the chamber and took a tumble. But just in time he shoved himself from the floor and sailed directly upward with weightless ease until his outstretched hand touched the ceiling. Although he corrected his course from there he began to turn and twist in the air. When he caught the next ring he stopped his flight for a moment. He gave us a sign of encouragement and then flew onward in a direct line to the opening of the exit passage. Just before he got there he grasped another support ring. While holding onto it he shoved his feet forward far enough to where he could feel gravity again. Only then did he let loose and he landed on all fours inside the passage.

"Next, please!" he called to us.

Immediately after she shoved off, Farnathia overshot her direction and became disoriented. Without pausing to think I sprang after her. I caught hold of her and held on. Then we were drifting together through the gravityless room until I finally succeeded in grasping a lateral support ring. We had half of the distance behind us.

I aimed at Fratulon and shoved off again. At a short distance from the opening my feet touched the floor but I pushed away carefully. Then I felt gravity taking hold of us as we came in. Fratulon caught us before we could fall to the floor.

"Well done!" he complimented us and then called to Ice Claw. "Now you! Be careful you don't crash into the ceiling and shatter!"

However we were in for a miraculous demonstration. Ice Claw took two seconds to mark his course toward us and then he shoved off with quick decision. He made a straight flight right through the room and landed directly in front of us. We caught him and set him on his feet.

"By the gods!" exclaimed Fratulon. "Where did you learn how to do that?!"

"I didn't learn it, it's just plain ability."

I wouldn't have believed the Chretkor could lie so audaciously. Even a blindman could tell that this wasn't the first time in his life he had been involved with antigravitation.

We went onward and after 100 meters we arrived at the second chamber. We stood silently in the entrance and inspected it. None of us could surmise what was

waiting for us there. There were no items of equipment or furnishings, no support rings, no machinery of any kind. There was nothing but bare walls and a dull gleaming ceiling. The exit lay directly opposite us, 50 meters away.

Fratulon shone his light around in the passageway until he found a stone. It was as big as his fist. He threw it toward the exit.

And something unusual happened.

The rock flew only about a meter from us before it vanished. It simply dissolved in the air without a trace. But almost in the same instant it hit the floor at the other end of the room. It rolled a short distance and then lay there motionlessly, completely intact.

Fratulon breathed a sigh of relief. "Since I can't think of any better explanation," he said, "I'd make a guess this was some kind of matter transmitter. When we step into this room we will be dematerialised and transported to the other end. I presume it's a kind of experimental station. I'll go first again. Wait!" Before I could stop him he moved forward.

He disappeared in front of our eyes as though he had never been there in the first place but before I could rightly figure out what was happening he was already standing on the other side and was waving at us cheerfully. He said something to us but I couldn't hear a word. However, I had not heard the rock strike the floor over there when it hit. The room swallowed up every sound.

With an encouraging signal to Ice Claw I took Farnathia by the hand and stepped with her into the transmitter—and stood beside Fratulon in the same second. We had felt nothing, no pains of distortion, no loss of time. Nothing.

Ice Claw also passed over without a scratch.

Other rooms followed after that. In one of them we encountered the opposite condition of greatly increased gravity where we could only move forward by creeping on our hands and knees. Then came a test of extreme heat, followed by its opposite: extreme cold. And that's where Ice Claw gave us trouble again. He had no complaints about the heat but directly behind that chamber was the cold room. Although it was only 20 meters long it was at a temperature that was way under the freezing point of water.

We waited patiently on the other side and gave him time to come back to normal after his exposure to the heat. We could plainly see that he was having a battle with himself but fortunately we could communicate. The room did not subdue our voices.

Fratulon called to him: "If you run fast it'll only take a few seconds. Nothing's going to happen to you."

"I'll turn hard as a diamond!" wailed Ice Claw worriedly. "Even a single second might be too much!"

"Nonsense, you'll make it—you have to! Then we've got it all behind us. Ahead lies the Mucky River."

"That's no big consolation either!" the Chretkor retorted but he prepared himself for his sprint. "Get ready to catch me if I'm all in one piece! OK, now...!"

He took off and landed in our arms 3 seconds later—absolutely healthy and all in one piece. He panted hard but boasted: “There, what did I tell you! I made it!”

It left us speechless. What was there to say?

We did not find any experimental rooms to traverse after that, for which we were thankful because we had had our fill of them. At the river we would have to stop to rest if we didn’t want to over exert ourselves.

We continued for an hour without any sign of the rushing sound of waters—but suddenly there we were, standing at the river’s bank. When I saw the sluggishly moving mass before me I knew at once why the unknown author of the mystery book had dubbed it the ‘Mucky River’.

It wasn’t water that flowed in this subterranean course but rather a thick, gummy-looking mess that reminded me of molasses. Above it arched a lofty rock ceiling that was phosphorescent. I calculated that the river was some 200 meters across. It flowed from our left to our right, slowly and massively like liquid lead or mercury.

To our disappointment concerning the nature of the river was added a worse situation: our path came to an end here. It ended practically in the mucky liquid itself. To the right and left of us was nothing but sheer cliff walls. We stood on a rocky outcropping and stared helplessly at the river.

“Let’s take our break here and then we’ll think about it,” said Fratulon. “So far we’ve always found a way.”

6/ THE MUCKY RIVER

During our entire period of rest, Fratulon sat there and appeared to be pondering over something. He seemed to me to be searching his memory for some elusive item in particular. We did not disturb him because it sometimes made him angry when he was thus interrupted.

I finally got up and went over to the river's edge. After some hesitation I stuck my finger into the strange, mucky substance. It was cool but felt like some sort of pulpy mash. Although I could see the bank on the other side, the river faded away to our left and right into a shimmering mist. I calculated that our visibility here was about 300 meters.

Finding a stone nearby, I picked it up and threw it in a wide curve into the sluggishly flowing liquid. It struck the surface but failed to sink immediately.

Behind me Fratulon said: "We have to cross this river. The book made that very plain. But it's impossible. If we only had a boat of some kind..."

"What we're missing," I answered hopelessly, "is some of that furniture we saw in the city. With that we might have built a raft."

"Furniture!" I turned to see him looking at me with a new enthusiasm. "In the book there was mention made of furnished rooms that were located between the Threshold and the river. Apparently we passed them on our way here. You wait with the others—I'm going to have a look!"

"After the barrier zone I didn't see any branching passages," I told him.

He smiled at me appreciatively. "Naturally not, my boy, but there are always secret doors."

He was right. We could have gone past a dozen secret passages without noticing them.

Fratulon stood up and, armed only with a pocket lamp, disappeared into the passage from which we had emerged. Farnathia had removed her cloak because it was comparatively warm in this location. Even Ice Claw seemed to feel comfortable here.

The latter pointed to the Mucky River. "Probably nobody could ever drink that stuff."

"I wouldn't advise you to try it," I said. "But I'd like to know what it is."

"That makes two of us," answered Ice Claw, getting to his feet. And he added: "I'm going to look around in this area. Maybe I'll find something." Whereupon he

also disappeared into the passage.

Farnathia and I were alone.

When I sat down beside her, she snuggled close to me. I recalled the many excursions we had been on together even when we were children but today I keenly sensed that it was more than mere friendship that bound us one to the other. The assurance of having her close to me gave me a feeling of being somehow hidden and secure.

“Are you afraid?” I asked merely to have something to say and to conceal my emotions.

She looked up at me. “I’m not afraid because you’re with me.”

Her simple trust in me was heart-warming but at that moment I was compelled to think of Sofgart the Blind and his unscrupulous tactics. He had disrupted this girl’s life perhaps beyond repairing. I knew that if I ever encountered him I’d kill him.

“Fratulon will find us a way out of here,” I confirmed, attempting to buoy up her hopes.

She nestled closer to me. “Whether he does or not, the main thing is that we are together. I only fear for my father. The Blindman will take revenge on him.”

“He hasn’t any reason to because all you did was try to defend yourself. He knows that very well. Nothing will happen to the Tatto.”

We remained silent for awhile. Ice Claw was the first to return. His hands were empty.

“All I found was bare walls,” he announced glumly. “Fratulon has vanished. He must have found some offshoot tunnel or something. “

“Did you go as far as the barrier zone?”

“Yeah—no trace of him.”

Fratulon’s complete disappearance was less call for alarm than it was a kind of reassurance. The instructions in the mysterious book really appeared to be valid. It gave strength to the hope that he would find materials with which to construct a raft.

He came back to us half an hour later. “We’re in luck,” he informed us as he sat down. “Of course we’ll have to drag the stuff about half a kilometre. But we’ll build the raft.”

“Do you think it’ll get us to the opposite bank?”

“Even that stone you threw didn’t sink right away, so it means this muck will support us better than water would. Only thing is, it will offer more resistance to our passage.

“There’s another thing to worry about,” interjected Ice Claw. “If the right place to land over there looks anything like this spot we’re going to have a hard time searching for it.”

“One thing more,” said Fratulon abruptly. “Sitting here talking about it isn’t going to get it done!”

Farnathia remained at our makeshift campsite while Ice Claw and I followed Fratulon back into the passage. He had left his secret door standing open so that we didn't lose any time in arriving at our destination. There were a number of smaller rooms here which had been melted out of the solid rock and provided with ventilation shafts. There was a film of dust on the articles of furniture and equipment but they were similar to what we had seen in the city. They were also made of the same synthetic materials as well as metal. I had the impression that these were some kind of emergency shelters but of course I could have been mistaken. We knew very little about the unknown people who had built Tarkihl.

"The only question is whether we'll be able to work with this material or not," muttered Ice Claw doubtfully. "If it's lasted for thousands of years we're not just going to be able to take it apart with our bare hands."

"I've already thought of that," said Fratulon, "so I took a further look around. A few rooms away is a workshop. And in a pinch we have the rayguns. This material can't stand up against a heat beam."

In the work area we found some tools and equipment that were designed for sawing and cutting but they weren't very useful for our purpose. All we could do was to cut some of the elongated boxes and chests we found and reduce them to pieces of a size we could carry. Of course this was managed with the help of one of the impulse beamers that Ice Claw had had the foresight to bring along. The rest of our weapons were with Farnathia.

When I expressed my concern over the heaviness of the material, Fratulon sought to reassure me. "The muck will carry it," he said. "The specific gravity of that stuff is greater than water. That's my least concern. What I'm wondering about is if we can make headway enough in that soup to actually get across. At any rate the writer of that book must have done it or he would not have been able to describe what lies beyond."

"Then we'll make it, too," I said with renewed confidence.

With a new spurt of zeal we fell to work and dragged everything piece by piece to the small natural platform by the river bank. After throwing a chunk of the material into the sticky brew and determining that it floated and continued to remain afloat, we welded the rest of it together into an unwieldy looking raft.

Farnathia helped wherever she could but mostly I saw her gaze wandering toward the other side of the river where all details were lost in the pale mist. It was clear to all of us that this would be a journey into uncertainty but we could neither sit where we were nor turn back.

Finally the raft was ready and once more Fratulon advised us to take a well-deserved rest.

"Those Dumb Waiters could have helped us here," grumbled Ice Claw, inspecting his claw-like fingers to see if they were still undamaged. "They're silent, alright—they only show up when you don't need them."

He could not know how true his statement would prove to be.

We had something to eat while Fratulon went back once more into the cavern

rooms to obtain drinking water. He brought us two full canisters which were located in the work shop and these we loaded on the raft along with the balance of our provisions. Only then did we shove our improvised ferry boat into the mucky stream.

It only sank a few centimetres into the heavy mash.

We sprang onto it swiftly and took up the clumsy paddles we had tinkered together. The resistance of the river was so great that I almost broke my own paddle on the first full stroke. However, we finally navigated slowly away from the bank although we drifted more downstream than we moved in the direction we wanted to go.

“We mustn’t get too far off the course,” warned Fratulon. “We have to get across no matter how hard it is on all of us.”

It was easier said than done. We rowed and paddled desperately in the untrustworthy broth and came very slowly away from the shore. Retracing our way was now just about out of the question because we were 10 meters downstream from our little rock platform and could not make a centimetre of headway against the current. Our actual distance from the rock-walled bank of the river was only about 3 meters while the slow drift of the mash carried us inexorably along with it.

The situation seemed to be unreal, as in a nightmare.

The paddles sank into the muck and appeared to shove the raft up and forward through it but when the pressure of our strokes subsided, our crude vessel simply sank back into the mess. Swimming was also out of the question because we would have been carried away by the liquid, if indeed the stuff could be called a liquid at all. At any rate, after 10 minutes of strenuous effort we were about 50 meters away from the bank and an equal distance downstream.

“Take a break!” ordered Fratulon, lying down on the deck. “I can’t paddle any more.”

None of us could. Farnathia wanted to spell us off at the paddling but we wouldn’t let her. Just now even she couldn’t help us. Ice Claw complained and announced the fact that he was too warm. I ignored him.

After a few minutes we took up our labours again in order not to drift too far off course. Gradually we gained experience and managed to approach the other side at a slightly faster pace but it wasn’t fast enough.

I was the first to hear it. It was an irregular sort of heavy ‘splashing’ sound. At first it was faint but with every minute it became louder, coming from the direction in which we were drifting. At first I wasn’t able to identify it but finally a horrifying suspicion struck me.

The River—as we simply referred to the current of viscous mush—must be plunging over a precipice into the depths. Probably in large globs, which explained the strange splashing sound. No matter how hard I looked, however, I could not yet make out the beginning of the dropoff.

Fratulon had also guessed the kind of danger we were drifting toward. He

yelled a warning to us and we doubled our efforts with the paddles. We had to reach the bank on the other side or we would be irretrievably lost.

We had long since passed the middle of the River. We were now able to push forward faster although not fast enough to be able to catch our breaths for a single moment. The ominous splashing and plopping sounds of the falling mush blobs came closer and closer.

I fought to keep from my mind the horrible vision of what lay ahead. I saw us tipping over the edge of the rocky ledge on the fragile raft, gripped by the swiftening flood of the nameless muck or even immersed in it. We were hurtling into the abyss and perhaps diving into a lake of the sticky syrup. Maybe we would come up and maybe not. In any case we wouldn't be able to breathe and we'd ultimately drown.

"With luck we'll still be able to make it!" Fratulon's encouraging shout interrupted my morbid thoughts. "It must still be more than 300 meters to the fall but the bank is only 80 meters away."

He was probably right but my arms began to feel paralysed. I could hardly move my paddle. It was the same with Ice Claw, yet he paddled onward, desperately throwing his last ounce of strength into it. Even Farnathia tried to paddle with her hands in order to impel us toward our goal.

Still 50 meters to go to save ourselves.

Then I saw the abyss. It seemed to hang there in the air before us but what I was looking at actually was the surface of the lake that lay at a lower level. I estimated it to be about 100 meters below. We wouldn't be able to live through the drop even if it had only been water.

The current had become stronger. We were still 30 meters away from the other shore.

Suddenly and without a word of explanation, Fratulon shoved his paddle into Farnathia's hand and before we could stop him he jumped into the muck in front of the raft. He sank swiftly but only to his midsection. Later he told us he had touched bottom with the paddle and thus knew how deep it was.

He grabbed onto the raft with both hands and began to move against the stream toward the bank. Also in silence, Ice Claw and I perceived his intention. We leaned heavily on our paddles to help him and even Farnathia pitched in until her brow was running with sweat.

We kept coming closer to the shore, where I could see the outline of a narrow footpath. If we could reach it we would be saved—at least for the time being. But the drop to the lake below was only 100 meters away by now.

Now the muck only reached to Fratulon's knees and when he stood still he could hold the raft steady, preventing it from going adrift any farther. Without further hesitation I also jumped into the stubborn brew in order to help him. I felt the heavy pressure of the slow flood against my shins but now I knew that nothing more could happen to us. We were sure of getting to the river bank and whatever occurred beyond that would make no difference to me.

We drew the raft up onto the shore because nobody knew yet whether or not we might need it again.

“We were lucky,” said Fratulon as he pointed to the sharp line in the river where the falls began. “We could have been goners for sure.”

Which none of us could deny.

We gathered our provisions and brought them to safety . The path along the bank was only one meter wide but it was enough. It led in both directions.

As I exchanged glances with Fratulon I knew that we both had the same idea.

“Wait here,” he said to the other two. “Atlan and I are going to take a look at the lake.”

We didn’t have far to go. I shuddered when I had a firsthand view of the dropoff. Great slabs and chunks of the muck fell into the depths and sank into the almost motionless surface of the lake. Its viscosity was so great that there were not even any waves. The path ended abruptly at the edge.

“I didn’t think it went any farther beyond this point,” said Fratulon, “but I had to be sure. We have to go upstream until we get to the next passage. And then we go on.”

“On to where?” I ventured to ask.

He looked at me with an odd expression but answered: “To the Threshold, my boy.”

Again I decided to ask no more questions. He must know what lay ahead of us and so far he had guided us well. I placed my complete trust in him.

“We ought to get in a few hours of sleep,” I remarked.

He nodded. “And that we shall do, but not here. Once we’ve found the passage it won’t be far from there to the chambers where the ancients had their living quarters. There we’ll have a complete rest because we have to think of Farnathia.”

When we returned to the others with our plan they were visibly disappointed that our hard-earned rest was to be postponed. We picked up our packages and marched upstream until we finally discovered the hoped-for tunnel in the face of the rocky wall. We saw that the path continued onward along the river bank.

When Fratulon encountered our questioning looks, he said: “There’s nothing about it in the book. Probably the author didn’t take the trouble to explore that far. And we won’t either, unless the tunnel doesn’t take us where we want to go.”

We turned on one of our lamps because it was dark in the passage. However we still felt the steady vibration under our feet, which told us that the power-generating facilities were working even here.

There were no more secret doors. On a number of occasions we came upon side tunnels that branched off somewhere but Fratulon ignored them. He resolutely followed the main passage until it widened finally into a larger tavern or hall which was evidently a main tiepoint of the tunnels or distribution point. Fratulon came to a stop.

He regarded various entrances to separate tunnels and then pointed to one of

them. “That must be it! Just about 50 meters to go now and we can sleep for a couple of hours.”

We didn’t ask questions because fatigue weighed down our limbs like so much lead. If it had been up to me I’d have voted for 2 or 3 days of rest. It was plain to see that Farnathia could also have used a longer period of recuperation. Only Ice Claw seemed to be fresh and lively but this was probably due to the fact that the temperature held constantly at a level of about 68.

The chambers designed for living quarters here were not any different than those we had seen on the other side of the river. They offered us protection and safety, which was the main thing. There were even such conveniences as fresh water and bathroom facilities.

Ice Claw grunted in satisfaction and tossed his pack of provisions onto one of the beds. “Goodbye!” he said categorically. “I’m staying here!”

Fratulon nodded. “You have company,” he answered, “for at least a day.”

“Only one day?”

“Naturally—or did you think that just around the next corner there is a nice store in which you can buy everything you need? Our supplies won’t last us another week.”

Farnathia. cleansed herself and then lay down to rest. She was asleep before I could even say a word to her. I was equally tired. We were all worn out and exhausted.

7/ THE THRESHOLD AT LAST!

When I awoke, Fratulon was not in his bed. Ice Claw was still asleep as was Farnathia. On my foster father's bed I saw a note.

I got up carefully in order not to awaken the others and I went and picked up the message. It read: "On the way to the Threshold there's another difficulty. Have to do something about it—maybe negotiate."

That was all. It only served to deepen the mystery. With *whom* did Fratulon propose to negotiate?

I was assailed by a horrible thought. Surely he wouldn't be crazy enough to use one of the communications devices around here to put himself in touch with Sofgart the Blind! He ought to know how senseless that could be. Besides, it would reveal to our pursuers that we were still alive. He surely wouldn't do anything as rash as that, I reasoned, or else he would have discussed it with us beforehand.

But what was this difficulty, then, and with whom was he trying to barter?

Although I lay down on my bed again I did not close my eyes. According to my watch my sleep had lasted 10 hours, and it had refreshed me. I also felt hungry but decided to wait until the others had awakened.

My original optimism had subsided somewhat. Everything had looked quite different to me when we had rescued Fratulon from his dungeon and managed to flee. But now we had been on our way for days already and hadn't come very far, where distance was concerned. We were still located inside Tarkihl somewhere, but even if the world up there came to an end we wouldn't notice it. We were so near and yet so isolated from everything.

Where could we go, actually? Tarkihl was surrounded by the Kralasenes. Nobody could go in or out of it without being monitored accordingly. There was only one way of eluding such a blockade: we simply had to find an exit that would lead to the surface so far away from Tarkihl that we could leave the whole siege ring behind us.

Was Fratulon's often-mentioned Threshold such an exit?

He spoke softly in order not to awaken Farnathia. "Then that gives us time now to grab a bite to eat. I'm as hungry as a... as a..."

"As a Chretkor," I suggested helpfully.

He grinned and nodded in agreement.

Farnathia raised up from her bed. “I don’t have any objections to that,” she laughed. But her smile faded when she read the note. “Negotiate? Whoever could he negotiate with down here?”

“It’s all the same to me.” Ice Claw was already exploring the food packages. “We’ll find out soon enough.”

He was right. There was nothing we could do about our situation at present, until Fratulon returned. Until then we intended to make the best use of our time.

Another 3 hours went by—hours of restless waiting.

Just as I was beginning to be seriously concerned about Fratulon, we heard his approaching footsteps. They had to be his footsteps because who besides ourselves would be down here?

And it was Fratulon.

“You’re finally awake?” he said as he came into the room. “I was beginning to think you might sleep for at least a couple of weeks yet. Did you find my note?” he asked as he sat down.

“Where did you go?” inquired Farnathia. “With whom were you negotiating?”

“Oh, did I neglect to mention that? The Silent Servants, of course! It’s mentioned in the book that they won’t permit anyone to go to the Threshold.”

None of us had thought of the spherical denizens of these lower levels—the Dumb Waiters. But how could anybody negotiate with them when they appeared to be deaf and dumb?

“And what did they have to say?” I asked ironically.

He shrugged. “Not a word, but their actions and sign language indicated quite plainly that they aren’t letting anybody get through. They are blocking the way to the Threshold.”

Ice Claw spoke with some agitation. “Will you please tell us, once and for all, what this Threshold business is all about?”

“I don’t know, myself,” Fratulon answered calmly. “I only grasp a hint of its nature from the book. From the slight mention that was made of it I gather that it refers to an exit from Tarkihl. And an absolutely safe one, at that. That’s all I know about it.”

“And those Dumb Waiters refuse to let us through?”

“I can’t interpret their attitude in any other way—it’s quite obvious,” Fratulon confirmed. “I’ve tried for hours to drive them away but it’s useless. There are too many of them.”

“We could use them for puck pins,” suggested Ice Claw. He referred to an ancient but once popular game which was somewhat similar to bowling except that a heavy metal "puck" was used instead of a bowling ball.

“You don’t have that many pucks or legs,” Fratulon admonished him.

If this Threshold were truly our only salvation, it was nevertheless certain that we would have to reach it. On the other hand we couldn’t bring ourselves to use

force on the harmless bubble creatures. We would certainly be able to roust them out of the way with our beamers but that could not be done without casualties among them. Perhaps there was another way.

“So what now?” I asked helplessly.

“First of all, I’m hungry,” said Fratulon.

* * * *

An hour later we packed our things together and followed Fratulon into a wide corridor, which to our astonishment was well-illuminated. The air was also warm and fresh. Down here everything seemed to be functioning just as well as it had thousands of years ago.

Maybe the Silent Servants were responsible for the general maintenance. If they were a form of organic life and yet did not reproduce, they had to be immortal. Or if they did reproduce, what did they feed on? I was more inclined than ever to the view that they were either androids or robots.

Finally we were facing them.

Without making any attempt to attack us, they blocked the corridor in a deep-flanked formation. They simply stood there on their thin legs and flapped their multiple arms in the air while making threatening signs.

“Will you look at that!” cried Fratulon as he came to a stop. “What are we supposed to make of it? They don’t respond to anything—I’ve made our intentions very clear to them. So they must know that we want to get through them. But they won’t let us go any farther.”

They had gathered in a band of at least 7 or 8 solid rows. They did not have faces in which we might have read their expressions but their actions left no doubt about their intentions. They also seemed to be quite different than the Silent Servants that we had encountered at higher levels of Tarkihl. These creatures were apparently not inclined to be helpful—on the contrary.

Perhaps they were thus serving other entities? But whom?

And I had always assumed that the deeper I penetrated into Tarkihl the more easily I would be able to solve its riddle. It turned out to be exactly the opposite. I could find no solution to the problem.

“That does it!” exclaimed Ice Claw, ready for action. Apparently he had given up his idea of ‘puck pins’ in favour of a more direct approach. “Cover me with your beamers, just in case—we’re going to have to use some gentle persuasion!”

Neither Fratulon nor I made any protest against his intention. Although by comparison to us he was small, his legs were proportionately long, and now they bore him swiftly through the first ranks of our opponents until he landed fully in their midst.

What happened then was flabbergasting to say the least: 4 or 5 of the bubble creatures threw themselves upon Ice Claw and succeeded in lifting him off the

ground. They grasped him with their fragile-looking arms and carried him away.

“Help!” the Chretkor yelled in unbridled panic. “Don’t just stand there—do something!”

But Fratulon held us back. “Of course! That’s it!” he exclaimed. “Why didn’t I think of it before?”

“Think of what?” I asked, perplexed. But I put my beamer back in my belt.

“They help and they serve—and that also means us! They feel they must *bring* Ice Claw to the Threshold! And here I’ve spent hours trying to clear them out of the way—figuratively, of course! They won’t be shoved aside.”

Ice Claw disappeared somewhere beyond our field of vision.

“What makes you think they’ll take him to the Threshold or that we’ll find him there again? It could just as well be that they’ll steal him off to some other place and maybe even kill him.”

Instead of answering my question, he said, “Come on! We mustn’t let Ice Claw out of our sight!”

He had long since disappeared from our view but I didn’t hesitate to follow Fratulon’s advice. I held onto Farnathia as I moved forward, to make sure that the Silent Servants wouldn’t pack her off in some other direction.

It was a strange sensation to step into the midst of the silent ones and have them lift us at once into the air. I held on tightly to Farnathia with my left hand while gripping the butt of my impulse-beamer with the other. I was determined now that I would use the weapon in an emergency whether our opponents were organic life forms or androids.

Fortunately it wasn’t necessary.

We were all being carried in the same direction. I could already see Ice Claw at a distance. They had set him down and he stood there with a look of stupefaction on his face. He frantically clutched the package of food to him but the Silent Servants didn’t so much as try to take it from him. His face brightened considerably when they also brought us into the room where he was and set us down on our feet. Silently as ever, the creatures then withdrew.

“Well,” said Fratulon, “maybe I overestimated the problem, if it ever was one. Of course it didn’t occur to me to just jump into the middle of all those Bubble Things because for one thing I didn’t have any backup cover at the time. How was I to know that they only wanted to help when they were standing in the way?”

“You call this help?” I said as I looked searchingly around. Aside from a poorly-lighted rock cavern and a few dark openings, there was nothing to be seen. “What makes you think that they’ve brought us to your Threshold?”

“This landmark fits the description, and also the Silent Servants were mentioned—of course in another way. The author of the book must have used force to get through. At any rate he spoke of an acute danger that barred the way to the Threshold.”

“Well, I’d like to know once and for all what this Threshold is,” said Ice Claw.

“I don’t see any.”

Fratulon went a few meters forward into the chamber while keeping an eye on the Silent Ones. To our surprise they did not attempt to follow. Instead, they remained behind at some distance from us.

“OK, now follow me slowly. We have to find the right passage.”

There were 5 tunnel entrances and they all looked alike. At any rate we felt relieved that the spherical creatures did not follow us. It seemed as though they were afraid to enter a region that was forbidden. Maybe they had been programmed that way. By now I was fully convinced that they were androids.

Fratulon selected the middle tunnel. We had to turn on our lamps because here it was completely dark. We travelled almost 100 meters to find that the shaft merely came to an end. There wasn’t even a sign of a secret door. It was quite obvious that we had chosen the wrong way.

“Let’s try the others,” grumbled Fratulon disappointedly.

After the fourth try we were lucky. After we had penetrated the fourth passage for 100 meters or so the walls and ceilings became illuminated. This had not occurred in any of the others. Instead of ending abruptly it led into a rectangular chamber which, though bare of any equipment or furnishings, offered two more lighted openings for us to choose from.

We took the passage to the left.

This time we were led into a room that was filled with viewscreens which were built, into the metal-coated walls at even intervals. Under each of these were small control consoles with a chair in front of every one of them. It was a regular communications centre!

“Is this supposed to be the Threshold?” panted Ice Claw, who was fairly exhausted by now.

Fratulon was hesitant about answering but finally he said, “No. This can’t be it. It must be at the end of the other passage. However, now that we’re here...”

The rest of his statement was obvious. He was right, of course, because a little rest would do us good—especially Farnathia. But so far no complaint had come from her lips.

Fratulon set down his provision pack and sat down before the controls of one of the viewscreens. It seemed to me that he pressed a few knobs and operated switches merely at random but I changed my mind when the screen suddenly brightened.

The council chamber of the Tatto!

Farnathia practically stopped breathing when she saw her father. I could feel her tension because she was leaning closely against me and my arm was around her.

Fratulon operated other controls, among which was the sound and volume adjustment. This brought in the croaking voice of Sofgart the Blind. When I saw the Blindman on the screen, my fists clenched involuntarily.

But then I heard what he was saying. "... dismantle or demolish it. One of these days Tarkihl is going to be blown up because it is used by criminals as a place to hide. The Tatto will get a new palace, of course, but we have to do away with antiquated relics of the past when their time has come."

"I will never allow Tarkihl to be destroyed," retorted Armanck Declanter. His statement elicited a murmur of agreement from the other Gortavorians who were in the hall. "It's been standing since time immemorial and it's a heritage of our past, which is as unknown as our future. I also don't believe that Orbanashol III would concede to it."

"He heeds what I say, Tatto!" cried Sofgart. "Have you forgotten that it was your daughter who tried to murder me? I could hold you responsible for that."

"That you cannot, Sofgart, in spite of your terrible power! Search for your prey if you will but leave my daughter and Tarkihl alone!"

The camera turned again to the leader of the Kralasenes. His face reflected rage and animosity. But it also revealed a trace of disappointment and helplessness. "My men are still ransacking Tarkihl but this is the best of all hiding places. However, the fugitives can't stay down there forever. They'll have to come to the surface one of these days, if they can find a way. And then we'll have them! I shall see to it that every spot on this planet is placed under observation by MY troops or secret agents. They shall not escape me. Not even the Tatto's daughter!"

"You will not harm her," returned the Tatto calmly.

"The search continues," retorted the Blindman coldly.

Fratulon shut off the equipment and turned around to us. "He doesn't appear to have the absolute authority that we feared he had," he said, directing his observation especially to Farnathia. "Nothing will happen to your father, my child. Nor will Sofgart order the destruction of Tarkihl. He'd be a dead man in a minute if he tried it."

"What about his men, the Kralasenes?" I asked.

"In an emergency you can depend on our men of Gortavor."

Meanwhile, Ice Claw had wandered about and determined that there was no other exit to the room. Since he could often think in practical terms, he put the question to Fratulon: "So what about the Threshold now? This isn't it, so where is it?"

"It must be at the end of the other passage, just be patient. You heard what the Blindman said. Every spot on this planet will be guarded. So if we actually reach the surface... what then?" He watched our reactions, which must not have appeared very positive. Above all, Sofgart would make sure the spaceports were carefully monitored. When we didn't answer him, Fratulon continued: "You have observed that I know Tarkihl very well, better at least than you do. And there is still more that I know. On Gortavor I have a number of secret bases that no one knows about but me. There I have a store of provisions, weapons and equipment. There I have certain plastic materials with which we can alter our appearance. I also have several hypercom transmitters... well, you'll see. That is, if we can find

the Threshold.”

By now I was beginning to share some of Ice Claw’s frustration about this ‘Threshold’ business. It was also starting to get on my nerves.

We hurried back through the passage and arrived again at the chamber with the two tunnel openings—two, that is, in addition to the one we had come through. We were relieved to find that the Silent Servants were nowhere around. Apparently they considered their assignment completed.

Once more Fratulon led the way as we entered the passage that had not yet been explored. It is somehow not possible for me to describe the excitement which gripped us as we followed him. Ever since the start of our adventurous flight this Threshold had been our objective, yet none of us could even guess what it might be. Fratulon’s mysterious book had represented it to be our sure salvation, so if all the other instructions in the book had turned out to be valid thus far, that’s what it would have to be!

Once more the walls of the passage were made of the same bronze-like metal which I had become accustomed to in the upper levels. It emitted a soft, steady glow from its own substance. Our own lamps were no longer necessary.

Finally a room opened up before us but it was not like those we had entered previously. This was something entirely different.

It might have been described as spherical in shape except for the fact that its floor was flat and smooth. By comparison with other end chambers we had visited, this one’s floor space was unusually restricted, consisting of only a few square meters. Yet starting from the entrance the walls curved back in a deep arc and then arched widely above us to form a domed ceiling, as in a vault. So it was in effect a sphere with a flat floor.

All around us in the walls we saw concave or hemispherical indentations which appeared to be made of quartz. At first glance they reminded me of some sort of special viewscreens. This impression was fortified by the fact that each concavity revealed a scene or landscape which was both in colour and in relief, as though 3-dimensional. What struck my mind at first was that I was looking through portholes or open hatches in so many airlocks and I failed to realize just how valid my first hasty presumption happened to be.

They were windows into another dimension. Or were they simply some sort of pictures?

Fratulon signalled to us. “Remain where you are. I have to check out my information.” He went over to one of the quartz ‘windows’ and began to manipulate certain controls that were located just below it.

And now I had time to take a closer look at these so-called pictures. One of them showed a jungle scene with a marshy lake where giant saurian creatures were feeding. Next to that appeared a modern super city, apparently the central hub of some world of the Greater Imperium. Next to that was the blackness of space and the glittering stars of the universe such as I remembered seeing in video films. There was a slow movement of the star field as though the scene were being

captured by a camera on board a spaceship that was travelling perhaps at the speed of light. The rest of the concave viewscreens revealed desert planets, cultivated landscapes or worlds at an advanced state of technology.

And then I saw a picture that appeared familiar to me. Fratulon stood in front of it and did something to the controls which seemed to cause the scene to grow sharper and clearer minute by minute. What we were looking at was the Spider Desert of Gortavor.

The Spider Desert!

We had come from there at the time Fratulon was captured. It was a region that was generally shunned and considered to be dangerous. This was because of the mysterious silvery cables that stretched out everywhere above the sandy wastelands, appearing to reach into endlessness and end nowhere. Certainly this 'net' was a dangerous menace whenever it began to 'sing'. Under the strange spell of its vibrations a man could lose his reason and become light-headed enough to bring about his own demise.

So why was Fratulon concerning himself specifically with this particular picture? Short of any more patience, I asked him: "Fratulon, what do these pictures mean? Why do they seem to be so real and alive?"

He turned his head slightly to look meaningfully at me and Ice Claw. "They are real and alive," he told us. "What you are seeing here is reality—the present. This is the Threshold!"

"And what, then, is the Threshold?"

"Nothing more than a transmitter station. Of course it's a special kind of transmitter. It's been operating for thousands of years and was never shut off. The author of that book I've mentioned so often has told a story of how he penetrated this far into Tarkihl and lived to return to it from the outside—but he returned in a spaceship from Arkon."

I stared at him as though he were a ghost. "What are you trying to tell us?"

"It's quite simple, my lad." He pointed to the concave screen where the supercity appeared with its cone-shaped buildings. "He merely stepped into that picture."

Ice Claw had by now recovered from his surprise. "Fratulon, if this is a transmitter station and we're able to pick out any desired destination, why are you fumbling around with that particular window or hatch or door or whatever it is? That can only bring us into the Spider Desert and the least we can expect is that the Kralasenes will be waiting there for us."

Fratulon nodded with satisfaction. "I'm happy that you at least get the gist of all this and have quit gaping in amazement over the fact that we can flee from here to any part of the universe. However, if we went to such places, Ice Claw, what would be the use? Imagine, for example, what would happen if we were to show up on Arkon. There as on all worlds, Sofgart's men would be waiting for us, whether they suspected anything about a transmitter or not. It would be a move into a blind alley."

“Is Gortavor any better?” inquired Ice Claw doubtfully. “This is the first place they’ll be looking for us. “

“Certainly, but not in the particular place where we’re going. The Spider Desert has always been avoided because it’s cost so many Arkonides their lives. No one knows its origin or its purpose but obviously it offers only death and destruction. The net—! What is the net? Nobody knows what it is—and neither do we.”

“And in spite of all that you plan to go there—with us?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I’m planning to do. For us it’s the safest route.”

“Gortavor?”

Fratulon continued to manipulate the controls. The picture became still clearer. The hemispherical cavity in which it appeared was more and more like an open hatch before us. I seemed to feel the warm desert air against my face, as though it were drifting into the spherical room where we were standing.

“Yes, Gortavor,” he finally answered. “I mentioned my secret strongholds which no one knows about but myself. They are located for the most part in uninhabited regions and are approachable through fairly deadly avenues. Nobody would venture to such places, not even Sofgart the Blind and his Kralasenes.”

I was only listening to him with half an ear, so to speak, because the concave window fascinated me much more. Had I not been in control of myself I might have submitted to an inner urge to step right into the middle of the picture. It had an almost hypnotic effect upon me. Farnathia held tightly to my arm as though she suspected what was going on inside of me.

“For the builders of Tarkihl, this was their means of communication to the outside. And not only that. Given the right co-ordinates and control settings, the matter transmitter took them to any world they wanted to visit. I’m not fully familiar with the selector programming, so we have to make our preferences from what we see before us. At the moment, the best choice is Gortavor, however paradoxical that may sound.”

I was of course familiar with the basic operation of a matter transmitter. In the normal kind of equipment one stepped into an energy grid cage and permitted himself to be transported to another location. Quite simple. But a transmitter that looked like a viewscreen was new to my experience.

“Do you recognize the part of the Spider Desert that we’re looking at here?” I asked.

“Certainly. It’s a few days march from my closest stronghold. I would suggest that you prepare yourselves. Ice Claw, when you step through the transmitter screen it will suddenly get very warm for you. Do you think you can stand it?”

“Do I have any choice?”

“That’s the right attitude,” Fratulon said approvingly and he turned a red knob suddenly to the right—all the way. “Well, we should be set to go now. As soon as you see me go through, follow me.”

I felt Farnathia’s fingers dig tensely into my arm as Fratulon stepped boldly

into the quartz-like hemisphere of the screen and disappeared into the scene of the desert.

Actually he did not disappear entirely. He suddenly became greatly reduced in apparent size and was standing out there in the middle of the desert landscape. I could clearly see him as he turned around and beckoned to us.

“Let’s go!” I said to Ice Claw. “You’re next!”

“What else?” he grumbled disconsolately and stepped into the concavity.

One second later he stood next to Fratulon, seeming to be no larger than my thumb.

Farnathia. stared at me anxiously and released her grip on my arm. But I grasped hers and drew her with me. As we entered the strange Threshold of escape I did not look back into Tarkihl. For the moment I had had my fill of it.

As I went through the dimensional portal I felt nothing.

In the next instant I stood close beside Fratulon and Ice Claw, still holding onto Farnathia, and there we were in the inhospitable desert which was completely embraced by the silvery strands overhead. Far away on the horizon I made out the dark silhouette of Tarkihl where it projected partially above the surface of Gortavor.

Other than this, the desert was empty. There was no way back to Tarkihl for us. The transmitter had disappeared.

Fratulon guessed my thoughts. “It’s possible to come through the Threshold from Tarkihl but you can’t go back through it. My stronghold lies ahead of us. There we will be safe.”

Ice Claw stared at the bleak landscape. “Ahead of us? How far?”

For the first time I thought I recognized a trace of embarrassment on Fratulon’s face. “Now don’t take offence at a little white lie I had to use. I had to keep up your courage by letting you think that I had one of my secret bases practically at our doorstep. Naturally that isn’t so because we have to cover a real stretch of ground to reach our destination. We have to go North.”

“To the North?” Suddenly Ice Claw did not appear to be so confident or contented. “You don’t mean—the White Country!”

“Unfortunately that’s exactly what I mean,” Fratulon confirmed.

Ice Claw was not the only one to experience a shock of fright, because my reaction was the same as his. I had heard much of the country of the North where there were supposed to be incredible masses of ice and snow. For Ice Claw it was the very place where he would explode in a thousand splinters if he really went there. First of all, however, I thought of Farnathia. We were not sufficiently equipped to undertake such a journey. I said as much to Fratulon.

“Take a rest, my friends. Then I’ll explain my plan. It is so simple that Sofgart the Blind would never think of it. He wouldn’t imagine that after a successful escape we would let ourselves in for something like this. And that’s why he won’t catch us. We’ll walk—we’ll Simply have ourselves a nice, long walk.”

As Ice Claw unpacked his food supply he tried to suppress his emotions. “A walk? How long a walk is that?”

“A fairly good stretch, at least one or two weeks, if we don’t come across some inconspicuous means of transportation. So now get some food into you. We’ll need all our reserves of strength to get to my secret base. Meanwhile, let the Blindman and his guards ransack Tarkihl all they want. They won’t find us there.”

Soon the sun would be setting. Then it would be dark and cold. However, we still had warm jackets and Farnathia’s cloak. We couldn’t light a fire because any air patrol would detect it immediately.

To the North...

We had eluded certain death, so why should we lose our courage now? Ahead of us was the North country and also freedom. Fratulon had brought us this far. He would also bring us to his stronghold, which probably lay beneath the eternal ice.

Before we broke camp I looked behind me for the last time. The shadow of Tarkihl was merely a vague outline against the horizon now because twilight was approaching.

Farnathia came close to me and took my hand in hers.

Whatever might lie before us, we would walk into the future together.