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PALE COUNTRY PURSUIT

by Hans Kneifel

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 Imperator of this vast domain is Orbanoshol 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 Orbanoshol 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 Orbanoshol'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 and his companions take flight from the Emperor's agents—and thus begins the PURSUIT THROUGH THE PALE LAND...

CHARACTERS

ATLAN—The orphaned Prince of Arkon must flee the long arm of the usurper

FRATULON—Atlan's mysterious foster father must use every trick he knows to reach his secret stronghold

FARNATHIA—Atlan's childhood playmate and sweetheart, a princess faced with another's destiny, bigger than her own

ICE CLAW—A transparent Chretkor with claws of death—and a fear of everything

SORLACK—One of the rugged Akone inhabitants of the Pale Land, a trader in Seuder's Tent Town

UMMAN—Prince of thieves, lord of outcasts, ruler of the hell-hole of the North

THE KRALASENES—Mercenary killers of Sofgart the Blind. Like bounty hunters, they have orders to bring in the fugitives—dead or alive!

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

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ATLAN

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PALE COUNTRY PURSUIT

by Clark Darlton



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1/ TROUBLE IN TENT TOWN

I Hated myself.

I was still an inexperienced youngster lacking in wits and cleverness. My practical background and experience could not even approach being comparable to that of Fratulon. Of course I had told myself again and again that the know-how of life could not be bought and that it could only be gained through extensive trial and reflection but this was poor consolation. I had always been and would continue to be the greenhorn young friend of a heavyset old man named Fratulon. I was confronted daily with the fact of my personal immaturity and so I hated myself and my bad-tempered moods. And during these days since we had left the border of the Spider Desert and set out on the long trek to the remote settlement known as Seuder's Tent Town my moodiness had by no means improved.

I threw the wrench in with the other tools and straightened up.

"Ready, Atlan?" asked Fratulon gently.

I hunched my shoulders and aimed a furious kick at the special tire of our ground vehicle. "How should I know!" I exclaimed peevishly. "I'm just not with it any more. Everything I do disgusts me."

The pale sunlight appeared to be reflecting from Fratulon's bald head. His beard was bristly which was a sure sign that my words had irritated him. To be on the safe side I reached into the toolbox and took the wrench out again.

Fratulon drew himself up before me. I was more than a head taller than he yet that stocky figure of his in its battered and timeworn chest armour had always instilled in me a proper attitude of respect, as it did now. Arms akimbo and with fists on his hips he growled at me: "By all the red-haired goddesses I have known my son, you begin to vex me!"

I dropped my eyes to the repair work I had been doing and to the nuts I had listlessly tightened. In the settlement there had been only one vehicle for sale and it was this one here. Half battered to pieces by uncounted trips through the pathless wilderness in these northern regions, it was technically a junk pile.

"I didn't mean to," I said somewhat stiffly.

“But you succeeded.” Fratulon placed a heavy hand on the hilt of Skarg, which was his broadsword. “Now you listen to me, sonny! And mark well what I say. We’ve reached the high North region of this world, which is the beginning of the Pale Land. We’re not vacationing somewhere in a metropolis. We’re being chased by the deadly Kralasenes of Sofgart the Blind—you and I and Ice Claw and your young lady love. In case your lack of enthusiasm causes that snow car to fail us you’ll be to blame for the death of four people—and that unfortunately includes *you!* Perhaps that thought may relieve you of some of your boredom and disgust, Atlan!” He stared at me so challengingly that it seemed he was ready to fight.

“Forgive me,” I said. “I’m sorry. I’ve been in a strange mood ever since we were forced to start running. I don’t even know myself any more, Fratulon.”

“All the more reason to get re-acquainted with yourself,” he confirmed. “We’ve got enough on our hands just getting our equipment and supplies together, so we don’t need your fits of temperament to make life any more burdensome than it is.”

I regretted having allowed myself to get carried away by my thoughtlessness. Naturally, Fratulon was right. He was always right!

“I apologize,” I told him. “When will we be leaving?”

He made a slight gesture as though to dismiss the incident between us. Old Sawbones, my friend and teacher, was in a hurry to reach his secret stronghold on Gortavor in order to save us all. But according to him the way there was fraught with unusual dangers. And one thing I knew for sure—the Kralasenes were after us. However, they concerned me far less than the chubby-looking man before me, whose deepset eyes were regarding both me and our scrap-heap of a ground car.

“Tomorrow, day after tomorrow—who knows?” he answered. “Three days at the latest.”

“How long will it take us to get to this mysterious base of yours?”

“That will depend on the whims of Fate, which is a fickle entity as you have learned by now. It may not always be on our side, or even be less kindly disposed toward this rust buggy we’ll have to use!”

Then he also kicked the tire, with such force that the entire vehicle rattled. “And this is the wreck that’s supposed to take us to Warm Spot and beyond? It’s a risk to even drive this thing out of the settlement!”

“How true!” I said. “How is Ice Claw doing with the food supplies?”

“Fairly well,” said Fratulon.

We were in the settlement which consisted of 30 or 40 houses made of white-bleached wood. Although they were not ‘tents’, without exception they were cone-shaped with sharp peaks and in various sizes. Smoke curled upward out of most of the pointed roof-tops. Each house was surrounded by a stockade-sized wall of stone and all the buildings in turn surrounded a circular clearing in the centre of the settlement. Each domicile’s circle of stone enclosed a small inner court that was

sheltered from the wind and could be locked for privacy but all entrance doors faced the 'village' circle, which was traversed by a street of sorts that was in a deplorable condition. We had come upon this circle a few days ago, approaching it from the South, and soon we'd be leaving Seuder's Tent Town, bound for the far North—and as luck would have it, we'd be going in this rattling and puffing monstrosity.

"And...how is Farnathia?" I inquired.

"She's a very plucky and handy girl to have around," Fratulon assured me. "Just now she's looking after our clothing."

Our path together was unalterable now because none of us could risk going back. The Tatto would never be able to forgive Fratulon for having drawn his daughter into this whirlpool of events. And so we had to find our way through mysterious paths to the equally mysterious stronghold of Armanck Declanter's strange and mysterious personal physician. To prepare for that flight we were still busy getting all our supplies and equipment in order. On the amount, quality and reliability of that would depend whether or not the Kralasenes would catch us or if we would be able to leave the planet Gortavor.

"Good!" I said and looked at the position of the sun. "I'll have another look at the motors of this iron calamity."

Suddenly Fratulon grinned at me. "You know the statistics of probability say that no machine can have all of its parts fail at once, except for a total explosion. Maybe this venerable old jalopy will actually hold up for awhile. I'm sure I'll be able to change a few parts even while we're en route."

I pulled my gloves on tight. "You ought to go in and help Ice Claw now. I'll try to talk some sense into this crate."

Here on the border of the so-called Pale Land of the North it was a serious problem to even procure a litre of water. In these polar, regions, which were largely buried under ice and snow, only the hardest and most self-sufficient of men could be found—and very few women. These people were hunters and traders. The hunters were away on their trails or traplines at present and the merchants seemed to have sold out all of their wares. After considerable persuasion and the settlement of a high cash price, Fratulon was able to pick up this ground car which seemed to have originated from the earliest days of the Greater Arkonide Imperium. Fratulon's wealth was a matter of common knowledge but even for me it was always a source of continuing surprises. Even here and at this season it had been able to procure for us such scarce items as warm fur clothing, food supplies and a few weapons. But that was all—there wasn't anything else available. It was our task to sort out all the things we had been able to obtain and to put together a suitable outfit for our journey. Time was pressing. Our pursuers were undoubtedly on our trail by now and we were not yet ready to start.

“You still have to pick up the snow ointment from Sorlack across the way,” Fratulon reminded me.

“When I’ve finished here.”

He nodded and disappeared into the house. I was thinking of all the strange things I had heard about the Pale Land. Many Arkonides and numerous other beings from the worlds of the Imperium had set out for that region and vanished without a trace. In order to survive in remote settlements like this one, here in the crystal coldness, one had to be extraordinarily rugged both in body and mind.

Once more I carefully went over the individual parts of the propulsion mechanism of this 6-wheeled polar exploration vehicle. I checked the universal burner unit, the steam boiler and the synchronizer of the turbines which drove the generator, plus individual cables. I also inspected the spike and claw treads of the tractor drive, which had to be lowered by hand. Then came the small cargo compartment lined with cables and conduits and I even looked over our seats and safety straps. The fuel tank leaked but all I could do with the means at hand was to stop it up with an improvised wooden plug. Then I cleaned out all the smaller storage compartments and stowed away some of our gear while hoping that all my tinkering with this beast would help hold it together.

Just as I was closing the tool box the door of our dwelling creaked open and Farnathia came down the short access ladder in front. “I’ve brought you some hot tea,” she announced.

I looked at her, enraptured as I always was when I saw her. She was unimaginably lovely, especially now in her clinging suit of animal pelts and with the fluffy fur lining of her headpiece which framed her face like drifts of fresh-fallen snow. Any man would have to fall in love with her, and of course I was already there. In her heavy mittens she carried a clay mug from which a very aromatic wisp of steamy vapour arose.

I took the mug from her and grasped both of her hands. “Thank you,” I said. “Are you going to come with me?”

“Where, Atlan? You mean to get the snow ointment?” As I nodded, she answered, “Of course I will. All I’ve been doing all day is to sit around on the furs we bought.”

I put away my wrench and drank the hot tea which I found to be laced with a warming touch of alcohol. We looked at the surrounding countryside and for the first time it seemed to register on me as the light of the sinking sun fell across the landscape. It reflected the typical sad beauty and melancholy of all such regions of solitude. The area was fairly well covered with trees but the land elevations here were relatively low and undulating. As for what lay beyond—Fratulon had spoken of mountains and glaciers, of vast treeless steppes and permafrost cliffs and even of choking vapours and snow ghosts. Had he been speaking the truth or had he only sought to frighten us? On the other hand, his hidden fortress certainly must be

real or he would never have exposed us to this risk. So we still had a fairly solid chance of being able to leave the planet.

I placed the empty mug on a fender of the machine and took Farnathia's hand again.

She laughed. "Ice Claw is still afraid of the cold!" Our strange companion, the inhuman Chretkor, was always afraid of too much heat or too much cold but I had other things on my mind just now.

I shoved the heavy gate of the courtyard open.

Around the circle of houses facing the settlement's plaza we could see only 2 or 3 of the outer gates of the private courts standing open, including the entrance to Sorlack's general store. Light was shimmering already behind a few visible windows whose panes were almost frosted over. As we walked along toward the store we passed sled dogs half-buried in the snow and stretching racks where giant animal skins were curing.

Hand in hand we entered Sorlack's inner court, trudging through crunching snow. All around were sleds up-ended against the walls and stacks of bundled pelts which were frozen as hard as boards. As I yanked open the door of the building itself we were greeted by a shout from inside.

"Shut that door!" came Sorlack's sombre voice from the inner dimness. "I'm not supplying heat to the whole Pale Land!"

We slipped quickly inside and I pushed the creaking door shut. When our eyes accustomed themselves to our dim surroundings we could make out the figures of 6 or 7 men who were standing at the cluttered counter and bar, where they imbibed their drinks and haggled over merchandise. When they saw the aquiline face of Farnathia behind me their loud conversation was silenced. The men stared at her as though she were a creature out of fantasy or dreams.

"Fratulon sent me," I said as I pushed my way between rows of casks and bundled wares and also between the men. I drew the girl along with me. "I've come to pick up the snow ointment, Sorlack."

Sorlack was a bull-necked, unkempt-looking Akone with a bestial face. Without turning around, he reached behind him onto a rustically constructed shelf and then slapped a package on the counter that contained the tube of ointment.

"Hey, listen here, sonny!" wheezed one of the men through his teeth.

I gave him a nod while I asked Sorlack how much he wanted. When he named the price I saw him staring past me at the girl. There was a menacing silence in the room, except for the crackling of the fire in the fireplace and the deep breathing of the men. I knew it had been a mistake to bring Farnathia with me. I took out money and laid it down beside the ointment package.

"I'm listening," I finally answered my interrogator.

"How long you still staying in the 'Tents'?"

As the girl and I moved toward the door, the men formed a wide circle around us. Not one of them was looking at me. With burning eyes they were staring at Farnathia, who was becoming more worried with each passing second.

“A day or two,” I said. “Please let us through.”

I headed for the slight gap near the door but the men did not move completely out of my way. Close beside me and slightly behind, I heard a sudden gasp from Farnathia.

“Take your hands off me!”

I shoved the ointment into the pocket of my fur-lined cloak and drew a long dagger from my belt. I stared down the two closest men and growled at them: “Out of the way. Let go of the girl!”

I caught a side movement out of the corner of my eye and I turned. Raising my arm swiftly, I made a slicing thrust and cut. One of the fur-trappers had drawn Farnathia to him and was attempting to jerk loose her headpiece. This one cried out, both of his wrists showing bloody gashes. I pulled Farnathia close to me and sent one of the men yelling to the floor.

“Out of the way or you’ll get it!” I shouted, thrusting forward.

The injured hunter failed to draw his knife because I rammed him in the chest with my shoulder, simultaneously shoving the door open with my boot. As we went out a hue and cry went up behind us. I rammed the door shut with my foot and then braced my back against its board face and cross-braces.

Farnathia ran on a few steps but then came back, pleading excitedly. “Let’s get home! Fratulon will help us!”

I shook my head obstinately while keeping an eye on the nearby sled dogs, who were becoming restless. I gave Farnathia the package of ointment. “Run across and get Fratulon—tell him what’s happened! Hurry! I’ll hold them back!”

As she ran away, as her boot heels crunched through the snow and the dogs began to howl, a fragment of memory leapt into my mind. There was a similar scene inside a palace-like building that seemed to glitter in crystalline splendour. Chased by a gang of men, I finally concealed myself behind one of the many doors and great portals of the palace. Names which had no meaning here flashed before me like so many phantoms...Gonozal the 7th...*Arkon*... the Great Methane War...

The door and my backbone were both shaken by furious blows. My hand gripped the hilt of my long-bladed weapon. I knew we had to get out of here as soon as possible. This beautiful girl was a constant temptation to the men in this territory.

I heard Sorlack bellowing. “Get away from that door, greenhorn!”

“No way!” I shouted back. “The first one out is a deadman!”

“We’re not going to hurt you!” yelled someone else.

The dogs raised up from the snow and came closer. Outside the courtyard wall in the village clearing I heard footsteps... noises, voices. Fratulon? I slowly got away from the door. Orienting myself to my surroundings, I made a jump. Seconds later I held a bundle of sharply honed harpoons in my hands. Their leather straps and synthetic lead-lines slipped through the snow.

“You molested the girl!” I shouted. “I’m warning you!”

With a loudly complaining sound the door was carefully opened. Sorlack stuck out his swarthy head and looked at me. “You young fool!” he snapped at me. “We were just fooling around—and you almost severed this trapper’s wrists in here!”

“*This* isn’t fooling around!” I threatened him. I stood there with my legs braced apart and my throwing arm high, aiming a harpoon.

My breath made a cloud of vapour around my head. The needle point of the hunting weapon was aimed straight at Sorlack. There were footsteps behind me and I heard the stocky little man breathing hard as he dashed into the courtyard. As ever, he moved like a lean-muscled athlete, warrior-trained from head to toe. Few men knew that those apparent bulges of fat on him were knots of powerful muscle.

He came to a stop behind me and yelled out: “What’s going on here? I’ll permit no blood to be spilled!”

Sorlack threw the door wide open and spoke in some confusion. “Sir, blood *has* been spilled! Your son here has wounded a man.”

I did not move while the harpoon point still aimed at Sorlack, not wavering a fraction of an inch. “They molested Farnathia, Fratulon.”

Fratulon’s voice was as hard and sharp as an icicle. “Is that true, Sorlack?”

Other shadowy figures loomed behind the massive trader as the sun lowered in a glowing red sky behind the snow clouds.

“It was a joke,” he said. “You know how we are—hard maybe, but rough and hearty. The boys here were just fooling around.”

As Fratulon moved cautiously around me, his full-length cloak of fur revealed a flash of his breast armour which shone like burnished brass. In some language that was unknown to me he hissed something at the dogs. The animals drew their tails between their legs and slinked away, whimpering into a far corner. Now the door was fully open and the other men pressed out past the trader. A cutting wind came up from the West.

Fratulon had his hand on the hilt of Skarg as he announced loudly: “Then it was all a misunderstanding. The girl is not accustomed to your crude ways. She was scared to death. This young man has been trained to be a swift and deadly fighter and he defended the girl because he’s in love with her. And you have carried your hospitality a bit too far. Do you wish satisfaction, gentlemen?”

Sorlack called out: “No, not me. Far as I’m concerned, nothing’s happened. But this hunter here has a couple of sliced wrists.”

Sawbones, who was an outstanding physician, gave me a sign to stay back and then approached the men. He examined the man's cuts and shook his head, speaking in a tone of authority. "Atlan! Go home and help Ice Claw and Farnathia. I'll take care of these wounds. On this planet there is too much fighting and dying-we've all got to keep our heads about us."

"Truly spoken," rumbled Sorlack. "You said a mouthful! But come inside-I don't want to give warmth to this storm."

Fratulon came over to me, placing a hand on my shoulder to calm me down. No words were needed. I laid down the harpoon and went out. I crossed the outer clearing to our rented 'white tent' of a house and helped prepare our equipment and supplies for our imminent departure. The task was like the country, hard, burdensome, unrelenting-and just a bit too big for the four of us.

As I discussed it with Ice Claw, the weirdly transparent Chretkor expressed his own feelings. "I know it will be the death of me. I'll freeze and turn into ice.

Then I'll shatter like an icicle. But all the same, I'm coming with you!"

2/ GHOSTS IN THE SNOW

We had been 6 hours under way.

Fratulon sat in the driver's seat and guided the clattering snow car through terrain where the route was perceived more by instinct than by sight. I hunched next to Sawbones and observed the faint trail that a trap-setter must have made. The trembling compass needle pointed generally in the direction we were following.

"The fear of death knows no luxury!" grumbled Fratulon. He turned the steering wheel which the former owner had bound with a wrapping of cord. "That's something you'll learn one day, my lad."

"I'm freezing!" complained Ice Claw.

I finally turned to Farnathia and held her hand for awhile. The girl did not appear to be frightened; her trust in Fratulon was greater than mine. We didn't even have a map.

"Luxuries?-who needs them here?" I said, just as our front wheels climbed over a yard-high boulder and the car reared up like a crazy horse. The tractor treads clanked heavily against the stone and ground their way through in a shower of sparks until the wheels touched ground again. "But this old crate is something less than a luxury!" I muttered, finally loosening my compulsive grip on my fur-lined seat, which had been necessary to keep me from being catapulted clear through the metal roof of the cab.

At present we were following a frozen creek bed where 3 feet of snow concealed the thick ice of the small stream beneath. White drifts and embankments passed us on either side where we could see the crisscross tracks of animals. All the trees were en-shrouded by hoods of snow. A sallow winter sun shone feebly over the Pale Land.

"Atlan, are you sure this car isn't going to explode?" Farnathia pulled back the furlined cowl of her cape and anxiously drew away from the dull-red glow of the burner tube. The small porthole next to her in the coffin-like confines of the cabin was covered with frost.

“I can’t be that sure but at least everything is still working.” I turned to her and smiled encouragingly.

But I was thinking: hopefully old Sawbones had been exaggerating last night when he had told us about the snow ghosts. Even a relatively harmless attack could be the end of us here. My tension grew the more we put distance between us and Seuder’s Tent Town. Six or more hours, a disturbing stretch of the way, and yet some 20 days of journeying lay before us.

“Do you know where you’re going, Fratulon?” I asked.

He nodded. “Yes—by heart. I could drive this at night if I had to. Besides, it’s straight North. You want to take over?”

I waved off the invitation to drive. “Later. Are you satisfied with my jury-rigged repairs?”

At murderous prices we had bought various spare parts which I had installed. Our fuel supply of lightweight oil was injected into the burner chamber which had also been packed with brown charcoal or marsh-wood plus marrow fat and other wood. Steam was being generated inside the long, narrow pressure tank that extended between the seats, adding to our uneasiness. The high-pressure steam drove a turbine arrangement which was connected by a rigid geared shaft to the generator. This in turn powered the separate motors in the wheel hubs and in the drive housing of the tractor chains. Everything was still holding together and the clock and other few instruments mounted between Fratulon and myself still registered a reassuring level of operation.

As we emerged from the level canyon of the creek bed into more open country, the compass needle veered slowly. Before us a broad valley spread out into the distance. Its slopes were fairly gentle but farther up where the white snows melted into the bright grey sky they were quite high and rugged.

“We going straight ahead?” asked Ice Claw. “I hope I won’t have to go outside!”

Fratulon seemed to sense that Ice Claw was ready to give voice to his anxieties again, which was his temporary way of getting rid of them.

“Ice Claw!” The one-time gladiator did not turn from the wheel as he spoke to the Chretkor.

“What’s the matter?” asked the dwarfish little alien creature, who had most of his transparent hide covered with furs.

“You’re sitting far enough away from the burner exhaust so at least you won’t have to be afraid of melting.

Ice Claw blew his breath against the frost-covered porthole on his side but then looked again through the front windshield which was kept defrosted both outside and in by an auxiliary blower system.

“You have a point there, Sawbones! I wasn’t thinking of heat. Come to think of it, I’m rather snuggly comfy.”

“Great! Now listen. We have 20 days of oil supply in the tank. We have axes and saws if we have to get firewood. You don’t have to get out of the car. So that means you’re not going to freeze. At least not to the point where you explode into a hail of crystals. Just relax and depend on us to bring you to a place where you’ll feel even better than you do now.”

The snowmobile steamer continuously picked up speed as it glided along over the snow and ice. The wide-tread brute-sized wheels ground forward through the soft drifts, the tractor chains rattled and clattered and the battered bearings set up a hellish clamour. Farther ahead there seemed to be a lake which was outlined by the contours and slope of the land. Except for Warm Spot there were only about 50 days out of the year in this region that were without snow and ice. At present, all was solidly frozen—in fact on the broad, flat plain before us there was but a single tree to be seen.

“You are my friend!” asserted Ice Claw. “I will help you to reach your station.”

The old physician merely grunted. Rattling and squeaking along, we gradually approached our goal. We were always seeing animal tracks or running through them—marks left by small, inoffensive creatures as well as by large and dangerous beasts or perhaps even the snow ghosts.

Without any preamble Fratulon relaxed at the wheel and began to tell us a story. “I remember one time after a bloody victory in the arena we all sat down to an excellent feast. The most beautiful dancing girls in the city were entertaining us. And the finest musicians! They seemed to be having a contest to see who could delight our ears the most. Sweating chefs roasted and simmered and broiled an endless variety of delicacies for us to make our palates celebrate as well. We felt like gods. The tables before us groaned with food and wine. Suddenly—I can see it as though it were today—the waiters came to a stop. The lively sound of the music was silenced. The dancers seemed to turn into warm-skinned, diaphanously clad statuettes. Then a curtain opened and a girl entered the hall. She was a miracle of beauty and her eyes gleamed with the impetuous fires of a noonday sun....”

I had to interrupt him, leaning forward and pointing past his head. “Fratulon—over there!” I blurted out.

Fratulon’s bristly beard fairly trembled as he replied: “Snow ghosts! They’re just watching us. There’s still no danger.”

We could see them plainly. Ice Claw and Farnathia leaned over our shoulders to also have a look. We could see 5 or 6 figures standing on top of a cliff that stood out on the plain like a tower. They were covered with dirty yellow furs of some kind and were not overly discernible against the snow background. They had the appearance of erect primates, something like giant, slender apes with long hair and small round heads. They stood in a small, huddled group yet seemed to move

restlessly about at the same time so that it was difficult to make them out individually. The clifftop was about 40 meters high and perhaps 100 meters ahead of the snout of our snowmobile.

Fratulon's voice was sombre as he announced: "Those are actually snow ghosts, alright. I hadn't expected to see them yet."

Ice Claw whimpered: "What do you mean—yet?!" Fratulon worked the accelerator valve. More steam rushed to the turbine and revved it up. More power was fed to the motors. The car picked up more speed. The screeching of the ancient bearings became an unbearable sound that rang in our ears like a cry of anguish.

"We're in the Pale Land," said Fratulon. "In about 10 days we will have reached Warm Spot. From there we head straight toward the Pole to get to our base. Between Warm Spot and the Pole you hardly see any snow ghosts, if at all, but they do wander about in the region we still have to cover to get to Warm Spot. It's just a little early to be seeing them, that's all. Anyway, last night you didn't want to believe me. What I wanted to say was that I didn't expect to see them this close to Sender's Tent Town."

I calmly asked him a pointed question: "What does one do to fend them off?"

Sawbones shrugged his shoulders apathetically. "The usual. If you run into them you can kill them."

This meant that they didn't normally show themselves in the open or come close enough, so it appeared that we wouldn't be able to use our three weapons against them.

"And... what could they do to us, Fratulon?" asked the girl. Meanwhile she sank back into her seat and strapped herself in again.

I didn't take my eyes off the distant figures. One of them on the cliff edge pointed to us. I could imagine what we must have looked like in their eye—a box-shaped thing with a long tube that black smoke came out of, to be swept away by the wind, and with man-high wheels that left a wide trail and a cloud of whirling snow behind them. Down here on the valley floor we probably appeared to be small and harmless—just the right size to make a surprise attack against. They were said to be incredibly savage and excitable, attacking everything that moved. Especially things that were undeniably the product of man.

"Nothing, if we can help it," Fratulon finally answered.

I knew him well enough to know that he was only pretending to be self-composed—in fact he virtually radiated an air of confidence—yet that sharp mind of his was already considering the possibility of having a run-in with the monsters.

"So—*can* we help it?" squealed Ice Claw anxiously.

"I don't know. At any rate we'll have to be on our toes in the next few days. Look, Atlan, they're leaving!"

“I know.”

The group was more discernible at the moment but it retreated slowly and somewhat reluctantly.

“I believe they are some kind of mutant offshoots of the beings who built Tarkihl,” said Fratulon. “I’ve already made a number of attempts to establish contact with them.”

“And...?” Farnathia inquired.

“No results. It’s not possible. Presumably they didn’t understand what I was trying to do. I’ve had to kill a few of them.”

“Do you think they would recognize you again?” the girl wanted to know.

“No. In those days I had more hair and I didn’t have a beard.”

“Is anybody hungry or thirsty?” asked Farnathia and she began to rummage through various food packages next to her. We were still racing along at a considerable speed between the rising foothills.

“Yes, I’m hungry,” said Fratulon.

“I’m not,” I told her.

Still 20 days to go, give or take a few. Twenty grinding days through this snow country that blinded the eyes and brought pain to the retinas. We were not only threatened by the dangers of storms and wild animals but now also by these strange creatures we had seen.

Fratulon’s elbow jolted me back into the present reality. “Spell me off awhile, Atlan,” he said. “Up ahead is another lake. In 3 hours it’ll be dark, but I want to spare the headlights for a while. There’s a cave on the other side of the lake where we can find shelter. I’ll show you the way.

“You’re on!” I answered.

Instead of getting out we slowed down the speed and scabbled across each other. I strapped myself into the driver seat. By comparison with the earlier part of our journey the going now was as smooth as on a paved street. But that could soon change—in fact, for certain. I readjusted the power output, took a look at the sun’s position and drove onward.

I noticed a change among us after I had only driven a short distance. I as well as the others had become quiet and less inclined to converse. The prospect of some 20 days more of this dangerous journey seemed to dim our hopes of ever flying away from Gortavor. Fratulon’s hidden ship, the *Omirgos*, was our salvation but under the present circumstances it appeared to be unattainably distant.

“The lake is frozen over,” mumbled Fratulon indistinctly as he sank his teeth into a slab of roast beef.

I grinned humourlessly. “That figures-considering how cold it is.”

“Will you listen to the lad!” growled Fratulon indignantly. “That’s really something—wisecracks with the sinking sun in your face and the first snow ghosts behind you. But I think the next 20 days will cure you!”

He gave me a broad, knowing grin while his eyes narrowed to slits. I trusted this remarkable man who could always come up with new tricks with the greatest of ease, at a time when other men would give up. Only I knew how much discipline lay behind the ability of this versatile man. Although I was an orphan whom he had found somewhere and raised, I was his son in more than one sense of the word. I had him to thank for what I could do. What he had not been able to teach me I had learned from his friends who were even more remarkable than he, if possible.

At the moment he exhibited an inner tension which led me to believe that he was preoccupied with perhaps a number of things. He watched every move I made with the gears or the wheel. He also carefully observed the country ahead of us and every once in a while he would check the rear-view mirror, the curved glass of which was also being defrosted by a hot-air blower. Apparently he was looking for any signs of an attack by the snow ghosts.

And all the while he ate and drank with the healthy appetite of a gourmet. He might have been thinking also of other problems but I couldn’t be sure. The plain sloped downward. The ground beneath the ice and snowdrifts slanted gently until in about another 30 meters it gave way to the icy surface of the lake itself. In contrast to the terrain we had thus far traversed, the lake was one big mirror that had been polished smooth by the wind.

“Take it easy! We’re liable to skid. Don’t try to steer it—use the tractor chains!” Sawbones rumbled at me.

I had to admire him. The old devil thought of everything.

I was to learn later that he was thinking thoughts I could not have surmised—since he had never divulged them to me. With some secret amusement, Fratulon was aware of my thoughts about him because he in his turn was thinking about me.

I have to save him, thought Fratulon, from Orbanoshol, that hangman in the Crystal Palace.

Atlan is his brother’s son and the only actual threat to his throne. If we don’t reach the Crystal Planet ahead of the Kralasenes, Orbanoshol will have him killed. But I’ll prevent even that—if I have to resort to means so primitive as to boggle the mind. By Arkon reckoning the remarkable little lad was only 4 years old when I fled with him. Just now it seems that our flight has not only been observed—but has also reached a critical stage. Until recently, Orbanoshol has been searching all over the galaxy for me and Atlan, but now his henchmen have found us.

Sofgart the Blind will spare no effort to capture us. Actually all we need is a one-hour head-start to reach the Crystal Planet. Just a few minutes of lead-time for each coming day—that’s all I want!

Atlan will survive these hardships because he's almost as capable as I am. But if he were my age and had my experience this trip would be much easier for him. And the girl—well, we have to take her with us, there's no other way! She'll be as much of a burden as the Chretkor with his continuous fear for his life. But the journey will become more perilous with each passing day.

Such were Fratulon's thoughts that late afternoon as he ate his roast beef and observed the slopes while keeping an eye on me and my handling of the steamobile out on the icy surface of the lake.

I reached down close to the poorly-insulated pressure boiler and grasped the lever that operated the tractor drive.

"Easy now!" warned Fratulon.

I nodded silently. The big tires still maintained a grip on the ice without skidding. I had to calculate the right speed for engaging the steel treads or the car would go into a spin. As our pace slackened and I reduced power to the caterpillar drive, I slowly lowered the lever. When I heard the scratching of the tractor spikes on the ice above the howling of the loose bearings and axles, I knew I had made it. Having timed the whole thing correctly, I slowly locked the cleat chains into position. A series of hard jolts went through the machine. Our smokestack belched out a swarm of sparks as the firewood collapsed and crashed down into the ash grating. Then the tractor gripped in and propelled us straight on ahead.

"Where is that cave from here?" I asked Fratulon.

"Across over there—more or less as you're going. There's a big rock that looks like an upraised fist. The cave is camouflaged and we'll have to back into it."

"Great! That's all need!" I checked both of the rear-view mirrors. Nobody was following us, but a blindman could have detected the trail we were leaving behind us. True, the wheels themselves were not marking the ice but the mirror surface behind us showed two rows of spike pits from which fine cracks radiated in all directions. The tractor cleats were not designed to be gentle.

The shadows were lengthening now. The day was ending, and before us still lay several hours of travel.

When I heard the exploding sound I waited instinctively to be blown to pieces. *The pressure tank!* The thought shot into my mind in that first instant.

Then I heard Farnathia scream, the Chretkor shriek and Fratulon curse—all at once.

Behind us the ice was splitting open.

3/ THE PHANTOMS STRIKE

The extent of the crack in the ice could not be determined at first but as the echoes of the thundering detonation faded away I could see in both rearview mirrors that the fissure was widening. It seemed to extend an unknown distance and to be developing on either side of the racing snow car.

“Open ’er up—straight on!” gasped Fratulon. “Give that turbine a full head of steam—wide open! The snow ghosts have found some way of breaking the ice but whatever—this will start a whole network of cracks all over the lake!”

“Nothing like a word of encouragement!” I grunted ironically. Down inside me my nerves were pulling tight enough to snap. I could feel the cold clamminess of drying sweat on my face and under my furs. I opened the steam valves wide and adjusted the synchro as precisely as possible. The car scurried zigzag over the lake like a giant bug.

“That’s doing it!” said Fratulon. He was busy checking both rear-view mirrors, alternately looking behind us and pressing his nose to the front windshield to look in every direction he could.

There was a crackling and rumbling beneath us. Then again, a loud report. The deep sound echoed vastly about us, whipping back and forth from the ice-walled mountains in a long roll of thunder. A second fissure was opening in a direction that was parallel to our course and yet it also turned 50 meters ahead and crossed our path.

“Hit it! Cross it before it widens!” yelled Fratulon while he grabbed one of our guns from the ceiling rack.

The burner exhaust was glowing almost white hot as it pumped out an oily black cloud of smoke that trailed behind us over the ice. I held the car on a direct line ahead while compensating for 6 churning wheels and wildly slipping tractor chains.

The fissure ahead of us, about 9 feet wide, rushed toward us with inexorable speed. New sweat broke out all over me but Fratulon continued to point ahead with merciless determination. The first set of wheels reached the edge, at first giving us the sickening sensation of sinking into nothingness but then bouncing wildly against the shrieking springs as the tractor treads ground off the edge and

the wheels hit the other side. The second pair of wheels went through the same gyration, hurling the cabin a yard high as we bounced again from the shrieking springs just as the caterpillar treads found traction on the opposite edge of the rift.

The snowmobile came whipping and spinning onto the ice. I channelled full power to the tractor chains while switching the wheels to free-floating neutral. We executed 3 full spins before the chain treads somehow found a grip again and then virtually catapulted us away from the threatening ice gap. On instinct alone I managed to stabilize our course and drive onward.

Still straight ahead toward the opposite bank of the lake where our deliverance loomed dimly through veils of mist and driving snow in the form of the fist-shaped mountain of rock. The sun disappeared behind a lofty shoulder of the crags beyond the shore.

“That was a cool performance, lad,” commented Fratulon, “but of course it didn’t quite have the old master touch!”

This was the master himself speaking, I knew, because in such moments he showed no pity for his student’s weaknesses. But whom was I to hate? Should I vent my spleen on him just because he was leaning hard on me now or myself because I didn’t have his age and wisdom?

I didn’t have time to reflect on the question because a third detonation shattered the spell of evening.

“Over there!” Fratulon pointed to our right.

I couldn’t make out anything; even his eyes were sharper than those of younger men. No doubt he knew what signs to look for.

“You’re welcome to trade places with me,” I told him irritably after awhile.

“I wouldn’t think of it!” he retorted. “Farnathia’s admiration would be lost on me if I gave it the master’s touch.”

“But she does admire you!” crowed Ice Claw mournfully. The thought of falling into the ice-cold water of the lake had been a shock to him. He was ready to start crying out his fears again.

I aligned our course with the target objective ahead and steered straight toward it. After awhile Fratulon calmly made an announcement.

“Let’s hope the snowstorm will have let up by morning. It’s bad news if you have to drive when you’re blind.”

“Snowstorm?” asked Farnathia. “What storm?”

“The one that’s coming up now as a prelude to the night. For us it’s an advantage because it will cover our tracks. At least in most places. After all it wouldn’t be sporting of us not to leave just a few clues here and there—otherwise how would the poor Kralasenes know where to look for us?”

It was Fratulon's way of making us all burst out into roaring laughter—a trait which had gained him fame in all the taverns, caravansaries and arenas he had ever visited.

We reached the great rock formation just as the last light faded from the sky. The Pale Land greeted the night with the howls of the upcoming storm.

“Atlan!”

“Yes, Fratulon?”

“Take the portable lights and a gun and open the rear hatch. I'll back this crate into the cave. If any scanders come out of the cave, shoot first and ask questions later.”

I unstrapped myself. “What's a scander?” I asked a moment or two later when I jumped out into the snow.

“You'll know when you see them,” the bearded one assured me in a dry tone of voice.

I drew the long cable for the spotlights out of the cable drum and went stamping through the knee-high snow. Across my chest was the rifle. The two handspots lit up my immediate surroundings, their light shafts drifting before me like pale wandering phantoms among the tree trunks and casting long dark shadows behind the snow-encrusted boulders.

“Straight ahead!” roared Fratulon from the driver cab.

He proceeded to manoeuvre the vehicle slowly and carefully while the multiple wheels and the tractor chains made a jumbled clearing in the snow. Meanwhile I continued as directed. Masses of snow broke off from the low-hanging branches and covered my shoulders. Finally, after another 30 steps or so, the spotlights illuminated the entrance to the cave.

“OK, I found it!” I shouted above the noise of the whining turbine and the thundering wheels and chains.

Slowly the snow car thrust backwards toward me. I went on to the cave entrance. Above us arched the great rock pinnacle which really did seem to represent the contours of an upraised fist. Giant icicles hung down from the rocky walls, their needle points aiming at our heads and the roof of the automobile. If one of those missiles should break loose—! I turned with a shout.

“Fratulon—wait!”

The giant wheels braked to a stop with a squeal. Fratulon shoved his upper torso through the open cab window just as the smokestack belched a black cloud and a tongue of flame, scattering sparks and smoke among the white branches above.

“What's the matter, Atlan?”

I used the chalk-white beams of the spotlights to point upward. The bright light sparkled in a thousand reflections from the yard-long icicles. “If the snow ghosts ever get the idea...” I began.

“Alright! Shoot that stuff down—but get out of the way when you do!”

“I’ll give it a try!”

I took a few steps backwards but apparently we had been overtaken by our local nemesis. Suddenly several icicles began to ring like bells. One of them cracked and swung back and forth momentarily, after which it shot downward vertically. It hit the snow with a sharp thud and broke into pieces. Far above on the rock we heard shrill laughter. I bent down to place the grips of the two spotlights in the snow, and then I raised my gun. The first shot cracked out of the barrel, striking the base of the biggest and longest of the icy stalactites. It burst asunder in a veritable hail of glittering splinters. But from both ends of the long gallery the hanging barbs now broke loose without my having to shoot them down.

“The snow ghosts! Get your spotlights on them!” shouted Sawbones.

I fired twice more and then a yard-wide hole gaped in the curtain of ice above. I leapt backwards into deep snow, grabbed a spotlight and aimed it upward. I caught a fleeting glimpse of a vague shape that made a gymnastic swing across the cliff-wall and then disappeared. The echo of my shot came back to us, then faded away. The snow car’s machinery clanked softly and a stillness of night gradually pervaded the scene.

“They’ve gone,” I announced.

“Not for good,” responded Fratulon. “I’m moving on in!”

While I sought to calm my nerves I picked up the lights again, hung the rifle over my shoulder and stamped through the snow and broken shards of ice toward the cave entrance again. Sawbones followed me at a walking pace with the car. We arrived at the entrance and moved in a few yards but then the exhaust stack touched the ceiling.

“Stop!”

I shone the light into every corner of the cave as far as I could see. Even here there were animal tracks on the ground and the long brown-needled fragments of foliage that had been dragged in. There were some animal droppings here and there and a few small skeletons. With some hesitation I pressed onward but no wild beasts appeared to attack us. I came to a stop when I saw that I was at the end of the cave.

“No scanders, Atlan?” called Fratulon as he helped the girl down from the cab. It sounded almost as though he were disappointed.

“I feel like I’m missing something!” I answered sourly.

The three of us met at the entrance. Fratulon had idled down the machine so that it merely provided warmth and could supply a small amount of power. I set down

the spotlights but kept my rifle. The howling and whistling of the wind seemed to amplify itself in the cave entrance, creating an organ-like sound. As the first snow flurries came and I saw the heavy flakes settling down between the trees I knew we'd be spending only a short night here.

"Well, what now?" I asked Fratulon.

He struck a fist against his battered armour. "We eat. Farnathia will take care of that, won't you, girl?"

She smiled at us as she leaned against my shoulder. The unaccustomed strain of the journey was evident in her face. I was sorry for her but was not able to change what was. We could only try to make things easier for her here.

"I could even heat up some tea," she suggested willingly.

"Excellent!" said Sawbones in his rumbling voice. "We'll stay here till the first light of dawn. I'll take the first watch. Then it'll be your turn, Atlan. Portable spotlights, rifle and your dagger handy, right?"

I nodded. "I get the message. Do the snow ghosts fight at night?"

We were helping Farnathia to get back into the cab. Ice Claw crouched under a mountain of furs and stared at us with widened eyes. Nothing could be seen of him but his face. Apparently he sensed no danger of melting away under all those heavy coverings—or at least it hadn't occurred to him yet.

"There are no rules," Fratulon reminded me. "That's the *only* rule when you're crossing the Pale Land. On our way to the stronghold we'll still have to face a few adventures. Adjoever and Kermant Valley are only half-way stations."

I waited until nobody could hear us and then asked him: "Do you know the way, Fratulon?"

"Yes, as I've told you before—very well. I know all routes that lead to the base. After all, a fat old man like me has to have some certainties in all the unpredictable vicissitudes of life!"

I laughed. "If we only get there in one piece!" I said. "Then it will be time for hand-clapping!"

He went out again and took a turn of inspection around the snow car, which was parked in a favourable position. Although it was not completely sheltered inside the cave it was still largely protected from the cutting storm and blasts of snow. It was also ready for moving out again at a moment's notice. It was ready to climb the slopes in the morning, provided it had a sufficient head of steam. The one who had the watch would also have to take care of keeping the fire going in the burner.

"That would also meet with my approval," he finally answered. He had ended his inspection, which had appeared to satisfy even his standards of safety. He nodded. "Inside now. Let's have our supper!" Whereupon he climbed up into the cabin.

It was comfortably warm The ceiling lights and the chart lamps provided just the right amount of illumination. We ate our food and drank our tea. Although our food variety wasn't great it was filling and nourishing.

The tea had been prepared with a sweet-sour touch of fruit juice and a shot of alcohol, which served to warm us from the inside out.

Finally Fratulon straightened his sword and fastened his cloak. "You have two hours to sleep," he announced. He checked his rifle and then wrapped a length of the spotlight cable around his wrist. "And I'd advise you to start now. Lean the seat back so you can stretch out."

He snapped off the chart lamps and went out. Seconds later we heard his footsteps fade away.

"It isn't as dangerous as I thought!" murmured the Chretkor as he slipped his cowl down over his eyes.

After I had adjusted our seats back and locked them in position, Farnathia stroked my forehead. "Give me your hand, Atlan," she whispered. "That way I'll fall asleep better and won't have any fuzzy dreams."

A short time later we both fell asleep. To me it seemed only a few seconds before I felt Fratulon shaking my shoulder. I blinked and stared into his weary face. Ice crystals were thawing in his crinkly dark beard.

"It's time," he muttered heavily. "All quiet outside."

I disentangled my fingers from the sleeping girl's hand and went through the necessary motions of pulling myself together. In a short time I was outside. I had actually slept several hours without hearing the wailing of the storm or any other sound. Now as the icy wind blew in my face I began to follow the wide-spaced footsteps that Sawbones had made, doing my tour of duty through this stretch of untrammelled Nature before the cave in the rocky tower which stretched its fist into the night.

As I saw the last patch of stars fade away before the on-driving storm clouds I went back to the snowmobile and decided to build up more fire in the burner. I took wood, bone-oil and coal from the fuel bins and fed them all into the fire box. There was no way to avoid a banging and clattering as I turned the grate lever and dumped hot ashes into the hissing snow.

And so the night crept by with the two of us sharing watches.

At the first light of dawn we were under way again

* * * *

The next leg of the journey took us along the lake shore toward the northeast. We soon came into a region that offered a variety of changes from one minute to the next. Fratulon was at the wheel and was driving the machine almost at its

maximum. At first we travelled over a flat white plain where a wandering pattern of snowdrifts reflected the whimsical forces of the wind. Then came an abrupt change to valleys and hills, some of which we had to climb over. Visibility was fairly good, however, and we neither saw nor heard any snow ghosts.

Finally, toward noon, we came to one of the last mountain ranges before the polar region, according to Fratulon.

“We have a choice,” he said with a gruff abrupt-ness.

“What choice is that?” asked Ice Claw from the rear of the cab. “To freeze? Or to melt away in our own sweat?”

“The choice of making a long detour or to take a shortcut which is the more dangerous route,” said Sawbones. But he seemed to be directing the question especially to me.

I was momentarily at a loss because I was torn between alternatives that presented a dilemma. Where our vital headstart was concerned, the shortcut spelled safety yet the price of that would be an exposure to additional dangers.

“I’m for the shortcut,” I said finally. “I’d rather face dangers we can see in front of us than have death riding on our backs.”

“Right you are! I see that the education I gave you is beginning to bear fruit!” replied Fratulon.

So we drove along the ever-rising slopes of the mountains directly northwards toward the next halfway station. Actually this route appeared to be pleasant in its aspect and we made good headway. Farnathia held one of the rifles and kept an eye out to the rear. Even Ice Claw seemed to feel considerably better than he had for some hours, gesticulating with his childlike arms and chattering about his impressions and recollections. We all felt as though we were already in the vicinity of Sawbones’ mysterious stronghold. And yet that sense of death riding on our backs persisted.

“See anything back there, Farnathia?” I inquired.

“No, nothing. Only our tracks!” she answered.

This girl had been torn from the cloistered protection of her home and been thrown into this whole perilous adventure, mostly because of her attachment to me, I thought. “Looks as if the snow ghosts have dropped us out of sight and mind,” I conjectured after awhile yet I was reminded of the fact that the noise of this steamchugger of ours must sound like the thunder of a winter storm.

“I’m not cancelling out the possibility of an attack by them until we’ve reached the *Omirgos*,” commented Fratulon. He kept glancing above us to the upper slopes. Nobody knew what kind of ground we were traversing because of the heavy snow. All we knew was that it was reasonably firm and even After another half hour he added: “Well, we’re gathering experience as we go. You never can tell when we’re going to need it.”

I took a bite of roast meat that Farnathia had given me. “Wise men teach themselves through experience,” I answered. I was looking out at the lowlands beneath us which were apparently a swampy type of river drainage or one of the vast bogs that were typical of the Pale Land. “But specifically those experiences which they choose to have. On that score we don’t seem to be so wise.”

“At the moment there’s little choice,” asserted Fratulon, “because we are fugitives.

What happened then was something that we had unconsciously been anticipating. At first there was a sound as of distant thunder. Then Fratulon started cursing and turning the wheel like mad.

“Avalanche!” he yelled.

4/ FROM AVALANCHE TO CREVASSE

Before the snow car cut away to the left I glanced through the reeling windshield. I saw the steep slope which we had been following for almost an hour. It formed a steep, white, triangular-shaped wall. With the unaided eye it was difficult to see what was moving up there on the ridge but it could have only one meaning: snow ghosts. The car bumped and jolted to the left but then straightened out again. Fratulon pulled and shoved every possible control in order to get up all the speed the machine was capable of. The yowling concert of battered and overloaded bearings began anew.

“What is an avalanche?” asked Farnathia, shouting above the noise.

“A giant mass of snow that falls from the tops of steep slopes and pours down into the valleys, sweeping everything along with it!” shouted Fratulon. “Let’s hope we can beat it to safety!” He was straightened out on a course to his right in order to get out of a small forest of leafless trees.

On the far crest of the slope, a spray of snow plumed out against the dull-grey sky. It bloomed into a massive cloud that took on the shape of a giant steamroller within a matter of seconds.

I stared into the rearview mirror and held on desperately as our vehicle began to progress by jumps over the terrain, causing the tractor chains to spin free spasmodically and damage the bearings more.

“Faster!” shrieked the Chretkor. “Faster, Sawbones!”

“What do you think I am, an eagle?” retorted Fratulon with seeming calmness.

The doom cloud grew, finally taking a steady plunge down the slope. It picked up speed and doubled its size again. Then the tumbling masses began to churn and billow, causing even the snow at lower levels to start shaking loose behind us. It was as though a giant tidal wave were trying to overtake a lifeboat.

“Faster!” yelled Ice Claw, almost losing his voice. “We’ll get buried and be smothered!”

“What can we do?” I bellowed at Fratulon.

“Nothing,” was his laconic reply.

We raced on. Now the avalanche wave widened out and its fringes reached out toward the hurtling snowmobile. The unleashed forces of Nature that the snow ghosts had started became a pounding Juggernaut that struck the small forest behind us and flattened it like so many straws. Several boulder-sized snowballs crashed like thunder against our battered stern. The overworked drive mechanisms shrieked and howled. We began to smell fumes inside the cabin but took little note of them. Now the final wave of the avalanche reached us. A mighty fist struck us from behind and shoved us onward.

We were virtually lifted as though we had been a feather as the plunging snow pushed in under the wheels and tractor chains. We glided along as if on a flood crest, gathering speed, as the snow came inside and threatened to cover us. Ice Claw screamed in animal panic. I felt the girl's hand gripping deep into my shoulder. Before us the landscape seemed to change and came rushing at us like an animated nightmare.

"Made it!" I heard Fratulon's groaning shout of relief.

Two long arms of loosely packed snow overtook us to the right and left of the car and then came to rest. Our hurtling pace slackened. The wheels began to turn again and we climbed ahead out of the snow.

"We're saved!" said Fratulon matter-of-factly and he steered back onto his course to the right. The cabin was full of snow and it was starting to melt under the effects of the internal heat. Our boiler pressure had fallen and we were clattering along quite slowly. "Get this cursed snow out of here!" he ordered. "It's needed out there for the next spring thaw!"

I joined the others in the necessary work of digging ourselves out. By afternoon we were all exhausted but we found ourselves far removed from the snow-denuded mountain slope and we were still sticking to our shortcut.

Fratulon pointed to a distant hill ahead of us. "We have to go over that hill. Once we've made it we'll take a rest."

It was nothing less than a miracle that our poor rattletrap steed was still running and hadn't long since fallen apart. We actually made it to the hill but didn't relax until we had reached the top. We were unspeakably tired.

Fratulon leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes, and once more his thoughts were of things I was only to know of later.

Still 7 or 8 days yet to Adjover—the infamous hole of the North. And before that, the Valley of Steam. I hope we get through it. After Adjover we have to make it without this punky jalopy and really start to sweat. Especially to get over the glacier. So there's still no sign of Sofgart's Kralasenes—hm-m... This lad here is really remarkable; with his mere 17 Arkon years he can run rings around others of his age.

Three days yet to the Valley of Steam... no use telling them ahead of time. Better to let them see the facts as they come.

Can only afford a one-hour rest—otherwise we'll never pull ourselves together. The farther we go the more dangerous it's going to get. I'm glad I have Atlan with me. If we reach the base in time, that's when I'll need him the most.

Fratulon opened his eyes and gave me one of his challenging grins.

“What were you thinking about?” I asked.

“About that infernal tea that Farnathia is brewing,” he answered, “and about the days ahead out there in the Pale Land.” He pointed ahead and added drily: “Beyond the hills to the North.”

I warmed my hands around the hot mug that the girl had given me. I tried to recall what little I knew about the place called Warm Spot. It was a circular region surrounded by jagged terrain which was higher at the edges than in the centre. Measuring about 10 kilometres in diameter, its main feature was a lake of glowing magma. It boiled and hissed continuously and since time immemorial there had been no snow inside the crater. At the most, only heavy mists had been reported. Also, snow couldn't hold up against the head of its surroundings. The place couldn't be avoided because we had to stop in Adjover to overhaul our equipment and add to our supplies. But I wasn't concerned so much with the crater and its strange phenomena as I was with the lawless settlement itself.

I emptied my mug and hoped for better days.

“You thinking about Adjover?” my friend asked me.

“Yes.”

“We'll be given a hostile reception—it's always that way with them.”

“Because of who we are,” I asked calmly, “or for other reasons?”

“All strangers are met there with hostility and suspicion. They are lawless outcasts.”

I nodded; this is what I had often heard. The men up there were the off-scourings of the planet. As a boiling kettle gets skimmed off the top or overruns, civilization had rejected these men and driven them away as contaminants of various racial cultures. Their type wouldn't even be found in the slum sectors near the spaceports.

“I see.”

“They don't have enough women to go around,” he half-whispered in a very conspiratorial tone.

“You mean... “I didn't finish the question, since the answer was self-evident. It meant that the sight of a beautiful girl would send them raving. So I'd have to watch Farnathia every minute and not let her get an inch from my side. Whenever I had her with me there I'd have to be carrying a loaded gun.

“Do you understand?”

I swallowed with difficulty. “Yes.”

We ate our fill, washed it down and then inspected the snow car. Apparently the plucky old crate would hold up awhile yet but the farther we drove it the more it was likely that our sole means of transportation might suddenly drop out from under us.

Fratulon’s next remarks made me wonder if he had read my mind. “It’s a statistical certainty that each additional kilometre we drive this thing is going to add to its deterioration. The farther we travel ahead the more we should start getting used to the thought that we might have to be on foot the last few days.”

“If the boiler bursts we’ll take to the air!” prophesied Ice Claw, only proving, however, how macabre humour can sometimes get.

Fratulon shook his head. “Going it on foot will be a picnic compared to the terror and mayhem in Adjover. I ask you—all three of you not to forget that for a second. And now, let’s get on with it!”

“I’ll drive,” I told him, and once more we exchanged places.

A short time later I was again following the compass, whose steel finger kept pointing in the direction of our goal. We left the hill behind us and now came into a region that looked like the haunt of ghosts, even in the late afternoon.

* * * *

“My friends,” said Fratulon with unaccustomed gravity, “we are in a vast and empty wilderness. Basically the Pale Land is not dangerous in itself. The normal manifestations of Nature are only deadly for fools and blindmen. However, shortly ahead of us we are faced with three distinct dangers. You can believe me because I know this planet as well as a handful of others I’ve knocked around on in my time. These dangers are: the snow ghosts, the Valley of Steam and Adjover. Once we have gotten these behind us we’ll only have to struggle with Nature plus our own fatigue and sagging efficiency as a team. That’s the gist of what I had to tell you.”

Before us lay a typical polar plain of permafrost, as Sawbones called it. Our iron steed rattled along over it at a modest but steady rate. I reasoned that taking it slightly easier would prolong the lifespan of the snow car. Whether that might prove to be a right choice or a fatal mistake only the future could tell.

By now the Kralasenes, the hired mercenaries of the Arkonide Emperor, would have been well-advanced on our trail. We knew there could be no question about it, even though we had received no confirmation of it as yet. The main question was, how far were they behind us? As for myself I was rather optimistic. They weren’t sure exactly what direction we had taken and for the most part our tracks had been obliterated. Besides, between the point where they had started their pursuit and the place where we had begun our rapid march North lay a

considerable stretch of the Spider Desert. And there the drifting sands had left no track or sign of our passage.

“Thanks for the briefing, Fratulon,” I said while watching every detail of the terrain ahead of us. “But what can you tell me about this weird no-man’s land we’re heading into?”

Sawbones shrugged his wide but chubby-looking shoulders and grunted. “I wish there were something special I could tell you but one never knows out here. At any rate we have to watch out for the snow ghosts yet.”

“No doubt,” I muttered and we drove on in silence for awhile.

The broad plain stretched indiscernibly to the horizon, or in other words it reached out before us to where the eye could no longer distinguish the line between ground and sky. The terrain was basically flat and was covered rather evenly with about a yard-thick layer of snow. But from this white background rose trees, rocks and cone-shaped objects or hillocks which made the landscape look like a mad painter’s nightmare. The basic colour of everything was white but the ice-encrusted trunks of the bare trees glistened with a predominantly greyish colour whereas the rocks and hillocks gleamed with a strange unreal tone of brown. I heeded Sawbones’ advice by carefully steering a zigzag course through this region... northward toward Warm Spot and the Pole.

“Snow ghosts...” I mumbled half aloud to myself as I thought of them. Semi-intelligent mutated descendants of the enigmatic beings who had once established a highly advanced culture on Gortavor. In the course of centuries and millenniums they had degenerated into animals and for some unknown reason they furiously attacked anyone who entered their domain.

I steered around a tree that rose up like a grotesque skeletal fragment. Then I guided the clanking and puffing steamer around a conical hillock. The snowy surface beyond was completely smooth.

Too smooth! The sudden thought struck me. The characteristic ripple markings of the wind were missing.

“As I veered away from the area in a half circle, Fratulon commented: “What happening—a twitch of instinct?”

“You could call it that.”

“In the past few hours the snow ghosts have been strangely quiet,” remarked Ice Claw.

“Let’s hope they stay that way!” said Farnathia.

I had been watching her almost continuously whenever time and task permitted it. She wasn’t merely a beauty, she also had brains. In this present situation, which was an entirely new experience to her, she carried on as though such perils had been a part of her existence. She was one of us.

“I’d like to think that but I’m not counting on it,” I said reluctantly and I concentrated on the stretch ahead.

The vehicle was bumping with a hard screeching of springs over unknown rough spots hidden under the snow. The denuded trees and the weird rock formations glided past.

As I suddenly muttered a curse, Fratulon looked at me. “What’s wrong, lad?”

“I have a nagging suspicion—Do you think it’s possible for the snow ghosts to have planted a trap for us here?”

Fratulon was polishing a spot on his armour with the fur sleeve of his cloak. “Yes and no,” he said finally. “They’d attack at any opportunity but I don’t think they’re smart enough to do any premeditated planning.”

“Just the same I’m suspicious,” I answered curtly.

“That’s not only your privilege,” he countered, “it’s part of our life insurance!”

I steered the car on a continuing zigzag course or made sharp turns when necessary around the gaunt trees, the weird rocks and the conical earth formations, all the while keeping a wary eye on every part of the scenery. Finally I adjusted the feed valves and came to a stop.

“I’m not driving any farther!” I announced grimly. “You surprise me, lad!” said Fratulon.

“As far as I’m concerned I’ll bet you there’s a deep pitfall somewhere out there in the direction we’re heading. If we keep going this way we’ll fall right into it.”

Fratulon stopped trying to polish his armour. “I’m getting out,” was all he said.

He yanked the hatch open, paused in the circular opening for a moment and then jumped down into the snow. As I slowly moved the car forward he ran ahead and found a tree from which he cut a straight length of branch. As I followed him he probed the ground ahead with his staff and beckoned me onward. We progressed at a walk like that for some length of time while he searched for a pitfall under the innocent-looking white snow. Farnathia and Ice Claw leaned forward and watched him through the front windshield.

“Do you really believe they’ve made a trap for us?” the girl whispered to me.

“Yes, I feel it so strongly that I almost know it’s there,” I answered.

I kept the car edging forward. Sawbones ran through the deep snow heading North. He kept on raising his stick and jabbing it downward at the ground. But finally he stopped and shrugged. He turned and made a sign that he was at a loss. The ground was as solid and hard as ever.

I opened a window and yelled out to him. “Up ahead! About 100 paces—I can see it plainly!”

“I’ll watch my step! Keep behind me!”

“OK!” I shouted back.

The minutes dragged as though stretched out by an invisible agency. The wheels and tractor treads shoved us slowly onward between the trees and the rocks. Fratulon kept leading the way, still on smooth and apparently solid ground.

My tension increased. Instinct told me that in this region lay a trap of some kind. I didn't know in what form it might appear or even what it would look like or function. Just an instinct, nothing more. But also nothing less. I broke out into a clammy sweat as my nerves tightened under the rising suspense. Nothing happened. We kept driving slowly onward and straight ahead.

Suddenly Fratulon raised his hand. "Stop!" he yelled out loudly.

Still drifting toward him, I smiled. So it was true! My intuition hadn't deceived me. The tree branch sank deeply into the snow. Fratulon turned and signalled for me to stop.

I slowed down still more as I leaned out the side window and called to him. "Did you really find it? A pitfall?"

He shouted back: "No—something worse, Atlan: an earth crevasse!"

My brows shot up as I hit the brakes. A crevasse was worse than a pitfall. We had no equipment or means to get across such an obstacle. It looked as if our flight had come to an end at this point. I opened the door and jumped out. In about 20 strides I was at Fratulon's side.

A canyon-like split in the earth lay before us. There was a bottom to it but who could say what that layer of snow and ice down there might yet conceal—a bottomless drop?

I met Sawbones' yellow-eyed gaze as he pointed to it. "It looks bad," he said.

"So how do we get around *this* one?" I asked in some desperation.

And his answer astounded me. "I don't know. I see snow and ice down there but no ground. The snow buggy could drop through. Presumably we have to go around this."

This is what we had been daily expecting without realizing it or consciously daring to take it into account. Before us lay a possible abyss which made further progress impossible.

And the Kralasenes were somewhere behind us

5/ THROUGH THE VALLEY OF STEAM

How deep was the earth-rift actually? Was it conceivable that it could somehow be crossed?

“What can we do, Fratulon? So far you’ve managed to get us through every obstacle we’ve encountered.”

“I’ll do it this time also,” he answered, “but I have to think a little bit first.”

“There are only two alternatives: either we cross this thing or we find a way around it.”

“Need I say more?”

So there we stood in the desolate land and cogitated. The fate of four separate beings depended on our solution to the problem. When our eyes met we both knew we were in a high state of tension. Perhaps Farnathia and Ice Claw didn’t comprehend the magnitude of the situation, which was just as well. As for Fratulon and myself, the danger grew with every passing minute. We could already fancy seeing the Kralasenes as they raced onward, picking up our trail.

Finally Fratulon gave me one of his challenging grins. “Do we dare?” he asked cryptically. “You know—the danger route but the shortest one as usual?”

I looked again at the earth-gap before us. “I can give it a try. But whether or not our old cooker will make it is something else again!”

We stared at one another like two conspirators. “That ‘cooker’ has taken us this far,” suggested Fratulon with a new spurt of optimism. “One more exertion isn’t going to kill it.”

Thinking of one last alternative I asked him: “How far is it to the Valley of Steam?”

He grinned. “Five days, Atlan—unless you are walking. Then, as you say, that’s something else again!”

I was on the horns of a dilemma, torn between wisdom and scepticism on one side and foolhardy gallantry on the other. Suddenly I told him: “If you take the wheel, Sawbones—old friend and teacher—then maybe we’ll do it!”

He merely nodded. “It’s a deal.”

We went back to the snowmobile and took a few minutes' break. We fortified ourselves with hot tea and steaming alcohol. Then Sawbones opened the valves and moved us forward. A three-dimensional nightmare began.

At first we went straight ahead. Then the pointed prow of the vehicle sank downward. The heavy treads of the fires and the steel hooks of the tractor chains still gripped the snow and ice and the unseen ground beneath. Then our ungainly craft canted at a perilously steep angle and rattled its way down the cliff-like slope.

"There are some things even I can't see through," commented Fratulon as he jabbed the various controls.

"Meaning this slope, no doubt, and this canyon or deathtrap, whichever it is!"

"You might put it that way."

Entranced by the insane situation, we became silent. The car seemed to hang downward at an utterly crazy angle as it crept down into the fissure. Then, while all of us grabbed onto any protrusion we could find and while the motors and bearings sang and howled their terrifying cacophony of complaint, the snout of our beast began to straighten out once more. We were out on a thick layer of snow and ice but what abyss might lie beneath us we did not know. Nobody said a word or even moved. Slowly, inch by inch, the prow gradually levelled.

"I think we're going to do it again!" muttered Fratulon and though he held down our speed he still gave more power to the 6 motors in the hubs of the giant wheels.

Somehow we were across the danger gap before we realized it because soon we were lifting our prow again and were progressing up the other wall in a process of scrabbling upward and slipping back. Each of us probably had separate impressions. I began to believe that we might be traversing a canyon that in ancient times may have carried water to some marshy wilderness area.

The wheels lost their grip and slipped again. With a scraping and banging sound the tractor hooks gripped in and shoved us up the opposite slope. All of us there inside that cabin had a sensation of being intoxicated or out of our senses. Through the front windshield all we could see was a gyrating combination of snow and beckoning pale grey sky.

"I think we're doing it!" yelled Fratulon.

The burner chamber puffed and sparked as though possessed. The steam pressure from the boiler pushed the turbine into a pitched howl. The wheels and chains scrabbled and chewed away at the uncertain ground. As though in a slow-motion fantasy the snowmobile reared up and then slammed down at last on the horizontal plain.

"We made it!" exclaimed Fratulon.

"With all the sweat this cost us," put in Ice Claw, "we could have melted our way half the distance to Warm Spot. Meanwhile we have to find a camp for the night, Fratulon."

Sawbones gradually increased the car's speed and to grin at the Chretkor. "I'm for keeping on even speed now—slower but surer. The more miles we can squeeze out of this crate the better it is for us."

But the speed crept up, nevertheless. This day we had left some very obvious tracks behind us which could hardly be missed. There was neither the threat of a storm nor even a snowfall, so the Kralasenes would be able to pursue us through the weird area of the bare trees and strange rock formations. If it came to a showdown, Fratulon and I could defend ourselves. In fact we could probably handle a superior force if we had to. But if Blind Sofgart's cut-throats caught up to us it would not only come to that—undoubtedly Farnathia and Ice Claw would die at their hands in spite of what we could do.

The snowmobile's speed was now up to its old rate. We held steadily to the North and would reach the Valley of Steam and Adjover on our way. But when and after what unexpected events along the route? None of us knew. Did Fratulon truly believe he could reach his secret stronghold ahead of those hired murderers?

I turned to him. "My good friend and mentor..."

I said it loud enough for Farnathia and Ice Claw to hear me.

"I'm listening," he answered.

"Where and how will we spend the night?"

"Somewhere. I don't know yet. Still a few hours yet till nightfall."

"Right. But there are 3 persons here in the cab who have never crossed the Pale Land."

Fratulon laughed gruffly. "In this area there aren't many hiding places. Fortunately, the same thing goes for the snow ghosts."

Once again I seemed to be remembering something vaguely similar to this. I was in a vehicle of some kind that glided forward as though on soundless wings—quite in contrast to this rattling smoke trap of ours. I flew over the ground as though cushioned on a force-field. A mellow sun shone down on the level of landscape. In the distance rose the outlines of great cone-shaped buildings and I recalled I was steering toward one of these man-made mountains.

"But I think I've made such a journey as this before..." I began.

Fratulon shot me a worried look. "Atlan, are you daydreaming again?" he asked sternly.

"I don't know—I seem to remember..." As I murmured these words the alien buildings appeared to fade out of my mind.

"That's explainable," he chuckled and he slapped his metal cuirass so heavily that it gave off a dull booming sound. "Memories of fantasy! The immature dreams of an adolescent!"

We were way out again in a desolate expanse of wilderness which was so typical of the Pale Land. Nearby a vague giant shadow seemed to keep pace with us,

racing over the snow. It was our own shadow as the last rays of the sun fell horizontally through our windows. The strangely penetrating golden light seemed to be casting everything under a spell of enchantment.

Fratulon, doctor and warrior, looked like the patriarch hero of some ancient Arkon legend.

“We’ll be spending the night right out here in the middle of nowhere,” I said in a slight tone of complaint. “Like sitting ducks on the open snow of the tundra.”

Fratulon laughed, shaking his head to correct me. “Wrong! Tonight we’re going to push on farther. Using the headlights.”

“I don’t think I’m going to like that!” commented Ice Claw from the rear. He was helping Farnathia to prepare our supper.

“You’ll like it a lot less,” retorted Fratulon, “if the Kralasenes slice that transparent head of yours from your body! Atlan and I will spell each other off every 2 hours. We’ve got to increase our headstart on the enemy.

The snow car kept rattling northward. All of us, even including Fratulon, began to be concerned about the night to come. But until we got to the base there would be many more nights like this and a lot more reasons for being concerned.

* * * *

Six days

Six days including three nights of forced travel. The only thing wonderful about it was that our vehicle hadn’t simply collapsed under us. The complaining noises of the worn and battered machinery continued to increase as we progressed. Finally one of the motors gave out. We drove onward with only 5 of our 6 wheels under power.

Ice Claw alternately suffered and slept. Our last attempts at normal conversation slowly ceased. When we reached the Valley of Steam it was Fratulon’s turn again to take over the wheel.

He guided the clanking and yowling snow car through clouds of steam that gushed upwards out of sudden earth-rifts and we were often enveloped by them. Our wide-treaded wheels churned and slipped through slimy mud holes and sloughs where varicoloured mud bubbles continuously rose and collapsed with a blubbing sound while producing a smelly pall of vapours. We crossed this valley in silence while we coughed and our eyes streamed with tears from the irritation, though we pressed furs to our mouths and noses. It became unbearably warm and of course Ice Claw was the first to be heard from as he insisted that he was going to melt to pieces and die.

Trailing a pitch black smoke cloud behind it, the snowmobile clattered and slithered up the step-like slaggy terraces of the terrain, which were slippery because

of streams of hot water. The tractor chains gripped into the slimy layers of lime and clay with their worn but sharply polished cleat hooks, chopping and gouging the earth.

“In this area...” Fratulon was interrupted by a spell of coughing. “...you won’t find any snow ghosts.”

“Small consolation!” I answered, chokingly.

The crater-like edges of bubbling pools made loud crumpling sounds as they burst away under our plunging impact. Water and slime flowed on all sides of our clay-packed tires. There was no wind at all so that the vapour and steam and clouds of heavy gases hung over the valley like a dome, enclosing us in a weird world where even the sounds were dampened.

Once more we had cut down our time. Our headstart must have been at least several hours by now because otherwise we should have seen the pursuing vehicle of the Kralasenes before this.

Our car broke through the wall of mist. Fratulon advanced the throttle after we had gotten out of the valley basin and now we slid and slithered down a slope that was covered with loose layers of ashes, rough gravel and broken pumice-stone. The car picked up a racing momentum as we drove down onto the plain again.

In spite of the penetrating cold outside, we threw open the windows. The white-hot colour of the exhaust returned to its normal dark red hue.

“There ahead on the horizon... do you see it?” asked Fratulon.

He defrosted the windshield with a jet of steam. We observed a plain that stretched out in all directions. However, precisely toward the North the terrain rose gradually. On the horizon, perhaps two days away, we saw a towering pillar of smoke and vapour that must have been 10 km wide. Behind the lingering mists the sun of Gortavor was swollen and pale. It made a melancholy impression.

“I see it. Is that Adjover?”

Sawbones nodded slowly. “We have a lot of snow country ahead of us. But there near that volcanic smoke—the sign of Warm Spot—that’s where Adjover lies.”

We could make out the area vaguely. The wheels and tractor treads were digging through deeper snow. There would be snow and ice until close to Adjover, where the ice-free zone around Warm Spot began. The position of the crater was plainly marked by the rising cloud of steam and smoke. There was little wind there to the North and it seemed to stand motionlessly above the horizon.

“When will we get to that place?” asked Farnathia wearily. Her face expressed what all of us felt: isolation, melancholy and the expectation of terror and violence in the settlement which we could not avoid.

A warning light flashed at me on the instrument panel.

“Fratulon—quick! Cut the power!”

It was too late. With a dying screech another bearing froze. The second motor broke down. Another source of driving power was gone, this time on the right side. Fratulon had switched off quickly but the clicking of the control was only psychologically reassuring. It didn't change the facts.

"If we had to," he said, "we could make it with the caterpillar drive alone. We still have enough reserve action to get us there."

He steered onward after that, with undiminished speed.

* * * *

The whole operation of this steamer was teetering at the limits of its capacity. Our wheel power was cut down and no doubt other hub motors would go out before long. Fortunately the tractor drive was functioning unimpaired. The hills and valleys of the last mountain range before the Pole emerged out of the mists before us as we gained altitude and approached the crater.

It was a bright sunshiny morning when we reached the edge of the snow and ice.

"We have to approach Adjoever with extreme caution," advised Fratulon. "Too many men have died here because they didn't watch their signals."

"I don't see any settlement," said Ice Claw.

"Beyond the fringe here is a small valley by the crater rim. The settlement is there because it's fairly well-protected from the storms. You'll only get to see it after we've passed through the gates."

"I see."

Farnathia had become slightly emaciated, which had taken some of her beauty from her. But a few nights of sleep and good food would restore her to her radiant self, just as I had always known and loved her. Ice Claw's spirits had sunk to their lowest ebb and all his fears and anxieties were coming out.

I myself felt tired and washed out. The lack of sleep, the monotonous diet and the continued nerve tension connected with the expectation of attack and pursuit, all these factors had served to leave us in a state of exhaustion. I could see it in the hard lines around Sawbones' mouth and when I looked at myself in the rearview mirror I knew I didn't look any better.

The puffing vehicle ground its way around the last turn of the approach road in the pass.

"Is it really going to be as tough as you say in this den of thieves?" I asked.

"Real rugged, my lad. At least until we are accepted by Umman, who is a tyrant until you put him in his place." Fratulon grinned as though actually looking forward to the conflict.

I couldn't say as much for the rest of us. Even before we had seen this badman's hellhole, we hated it.

6/ ADJOVER: HELLHOLE OF THE NORTH

Our relief valve blasted forth with a bellowing, hissing burst of steam, producing such a prominent cloud around us that it was impossible for the guards on the double towers not to become aware of our approach. Our lame, half-functioning vehicle finally came to a stop before the southern entrance to Adjover. Actually the temperature outside had continued to rise during the last few kilometres and it was now quite comfortable—like a pleasant afternoon in comparison to the weather we had come from.

“One thing more,” said Fratulon calmly. “From Warm Spot to the Pole is a zone whose strange effects extend clear into space.”

“What effects are you talking about?” I asked in new apprehension.

“Within that zone, no power machinery functions. It’s a mysterious barrier to electrical operation.”

Activity on the part of the sentinels interrupted further comment. The tower to our left was partially built into the dark rocks; in fact most of its battlements and galleries were reworked projections of the cliff. The rest of the structure had been finished with black, intermeshed square stones. We saw the muzzles of energy guns emerge from narrow slits in the wall.

A voice called to us over a loudspeaker: “Who are you?”

Fratulon cranked down a window and shouted back: “A wandering doctor surgeon without a home planet—also my children and one pickup. I’m a man with adjustable principles and very much knowledge. You will be able to use me.”

The voice returned: “Umman will decide that. There are four of you?”

“Right! Four people in a snow car that’s about to explode. We need supplies, sled dogs and a few nights of sleep.”

“Where are you heading?”

“To Kermant Valley.”

The other tower stood alone and was built of layers of round stone blocks. In thorough seams and joints of the structure there were traces of moss and stunted black grass and a few ferns. The almost indiscernible road we were on led to this

notch in the small gorge. The walls joining the towers to the strata of lava and the equally high cliff were also built of sawed blocks of lava which looked like glittering obdusian. Everything here exuded a damp and dismal atmosphere of foreboding.

“Kermant Valley? Are you crazy?”

“No!” yelled Fratulon. “We’re running from law and order! That’s why we’re stopping here!”

The comment of the still-invisible guard indicated that the valley mentioned was known to them, at least by name. There were countless legends on Gortavor about Kermant Valley but rare was the man who had ever been there and lived to tell about it. The aura of mystery Fratulon had managed to weave about us soon had its effect. A creaking plank door opened in the face of the heavy steel gate. A guard stepped out and aimed a heavy energy gun at us.

“Climb out!” he said gruffly. “Umman has to see everybody who comes here!”

He maintained a distance that made him safe from sudden attack yet enabled him to see our eyes. Here we were before the last bastion of Arkonide civilization on Gortavor. Beyond the heavy gate which could only be destroyed with energy weapons we saw the squat domes and square shacks of the outcasts. The guard was dressed in furs. His face was not at all reassuring. No vestige of refinement would be found here.

“You mean Umman can see everything here?” asked Sawbones, making a point of exhibiting his sword, Skarg, and his brightly polished armour.

“Everything—through the pickup lenses over there.”

The boy-sized apparition of the strange Chretkor did not seem to startle the guard. But his reaction to Farnathia was another matter. The moment she thrust out her white boots, which she had worn all the way from Tent City, his eyes widened as well as his mouth.

“Who is that?” he asked in a tone of rising interest.

“My sick daughter,” said Fratulon swiftly. “Can’t you see her consumptive face?”

The guard laughed unpleasantly. I reached for my dagger.

“I see a female, and a pretty one!” he said. “Maybe Umman will want her.”

My muscles tensed as I leaned back against the wheel cowling of the snow car. Farnathia was startled by the man’s greedy stare and came to my side. Ice Claw looked about him apprehensively while Fratulon took in the scene with the appearance of a quick-tempered trader who was nevertheless ready to palaver.

“Aside from that dainty dish, what have you got here?” the man mumbled, thrusting his head into the cab of our vehicle. “Nothing much in here. Empty oil cans, hardly any food left, a couple of worn-out old weapons... the usual junk. Nothing of value, no surprises...”

In one of the narrow apertures of a tower, a pair of camera lenses followed our every movement. Umman definitely appeared to be the ruler of this settlement. The presence of energy weapons indicated that the strange barrier zone Fratulon had mentioned was not in effect here. The guard stepped back and glanced sharply at the spy lenses.

“You’re not especially friendly here,” observed Fratulon.

“We don’t let just anybody who wants to in here,” said the man.

“Well, I’m not just anybody,” retorted Sawbones. “Perhaps my skills could save somebody’s life in there. I amputate, heal, cut bellies and sew stitches. I do plastic surgery and I also have many recipes and formulas for healing-salves. For example, take that infection behind your ear... I believe I can recommend something for you.”

The guard gave a signal to his unseen companions and somewhere a series of wheels and cog-racks began to move with a grating sound.

“How can you help a rash like that?”

Fratulon grinned at him benevolently. “With a piece of advice.”

“What advice?”

“Just apply plenty of soap and fresh water to it,” said Sawbones. “Now let us in.”

“OK, but park this thing in the market square. That’s where you’re expected. And don’t think you’re going to have an easy time of it here.”

We slowly got into the car and I took the wheel.

“After we’ve gotten acquainted,” replied Fratulon from the passenger seat, “maybe it won’t be so bad as all that.”

The barred gate drew slowly back into the mountain. It was a strange settlement. Did this gate protect the inhabitants from unwanted intruders or did it serve to protect the country from the residents of Adjover? It was hard to decide but we were ready for anything.

“Just remember everything I’ve told you in the last few days,” warned Fratulon.

“What else?” I responded. “Is there an inn or hotel or something similar here?”

“Unheard of!”

Apparently with its last dregs of energy our steam car rolled along through a winding street that was strewn with rubble and refuse. The entire place appeared to be under a shroud of vapour and smoke. Undoubtedly apart of the evil smell came from the various volcanic fissures in the ground which were gas vents for the nearby crater.

We noticed small structures with little windows that looked like pill-boxes or bunkers. The unpleasant-looking moss grew everywhere. Any stunted patches of grass in evidence certainly gave signs of not having seen any snow in many centuries, besides being littered with various rotting and discarded objects.

Gradually within a distance of about 500 yards the dwellings and buildings began to be closer together. The taller and narrower house fronts were separated here and there by some dome-like structures which had the appearance of igloos sprinkled with ashes.

“What a disgusting town!” said Farnathia with sheer loathing in her voice.

“I’ll grant you that,” replied Fratulon, “but there’s no alternative. Our only chance for survival is here. Otherwise we’ll starve—and this old cooker of ours has seen its last. We can’t use it any more.”

In a tense silence we arrived in the ‘town square’.

“It’s just as filthy here as in the rest of the place!” observed Ice Claw.

“But at least it’s the centre of the filth,” laughed Fratulon. “Atlan! As of now you are totally responsible for the girl. Just remember: here terror is the law. Whoever rules, rules by force. Whoever survives does so because he’s either stronger or faster.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” I promised.

We came to a stop before an official-looking structure. Roughly a third of the circle of house-fronts facing the plaza was interrupted by a large segment of ground where one of the largest igloos in town was located. On the roof of the squat hemisphere was a tower with a number of embrasures or slotted apertures from which protruded energy weapons, tracking grids, loudspeakers and antennas. The muzzles of the energy projectors had followed us as we approached and held steadily on us even after we had stopped.

After setting the various systems that were still functioning at lowest idling power, I jumped from the car onto the ground. The safety valve was stuck. If the steam pressure was not able to bleed off through the turbine, sooner or later the boiler was going to explode.

We were received in a bleak and cheerless atmosphere. A phalanx of grim and malicious-looking men stood waiting in fairly bristling antagonism. But Sawbones got down from the car with all the portly composure of a dignitary descending from a royal sedan chair.

He addressed them in a ringing voice. “Greetings to you, men of Adjovert!”

We were met with an icy silence. Ice Claw had gotten out of the snow car and now stepped close behind Fratulon, so enveloped in furs as to be unrecognizable. I reached up and helped the girl down from the entrance hatch.

“You are discourteous!” shouted Fratulon, provoked. “Is this any way to greet a wandering physician?”

One of the men turned his piercing eyes toward the girl, who stood uncertainly beside me. I took her hand, which gave her some comfort.

“This girl here!” the man shouted. “Let her come to us!”

Fratulon laughed harshly. “What do you want with a young girl who is suffering from a contagious disease? She is not of your world and you are not of hers. We’ve come here because we need to rest up, get some supplies and procure a sled for traversing the glacier. Our destination is Kermant Valley.”

The men fairly surrounded us. Under my furs I gripped my knife. If we could avoid it we didn’t want to reveal or make use of our small energy weapons. Fratulon and I were fast enough on our feet and anybody Ice Claw could get his fingers on would never again be able to seek an opponent.

The men had pressed close enough to look us over carefully. Among them was a thickset giant of an Akone with savage long hair who seemed to have an idea. “We need women in this outfit,” he said. “Not enough amusement around here. You want to buy supplies and equipment? Then let’s make a trade!”

Fratulon smiled plaintively. “We weren’t intending to pay you with produce, so to speak, or services. You have enough women here and besides that my daughter is sick. Can’t you see it in the thin paleness of her face—the effects of all her coughing and consumption? No, I can’t hand her over to you—she’s still needed.”

A surprised muttering ran through the belligerent group while view cameras and directional beam sound-pickup equipment still pointed at us from the igloo tower.

One of the men yelled: “The girl belongs here with us! She’ll brighten things up around here!”

This one stepped forward and scrutinized Farnathia boldly, even stretching out his hand to shove the hood back from her head. I still controlled myself but was fully aware of Sawbones’ warning glance.

“Why, she’s beautiful!” exclaimed the settler enthusiastically, as though he had expected the opposite.

I spoke up quickly. “We want to rent a house for a few days where we can sleep and also make hot water.” I noted that my voice had gotten hoarse because of my nerve tension and suppressed anger.

“Umman will want to see her!” said the big Akone loudly and he pointed with his thumb to the bristling tower. “Maybe she’ll be staying in his bunker!”

Fratulon cut in and went up to the giant. “You will not lay a hand on us. I demand hospitality here and our rights as guests! This I invoke and it must be given!”

A ringing burst of laughter was the answer.

“Hey fatman!” shouted the leader. “That’s a good one—you’re quite a clown! It so happens that there *are* no rights—because we’re the law here. You’ll do what we order you to do!”

“I’m sure that can be changed,” growled Fratulon. “You’re not only filthy but you stink—and your impudence is an insult!”

With a shout of rage the giant charged the little 'fatman'. In a tenth of a second Fratulon changed from a slow-footed trader to a whirling figure of action that the eye could hardly follow. He grabbed the other's outstretched arm, gripped, turned, bent down, heaved and sent the ponderous body of his opponent crashing to the ground with a sound like breaking timber. A cry went up in the circular plaza and several slatternly women carrying water on the far side of the clearing stopped suddenly to stare.

As two men came at me and the girl from two different directions, I almost hissed at them: "Stay where you are!" My voice virtually rasped out the warning in my rage. I whipped the knife out and took a step back until I was touching the snow car. Farnathia took refuge between two of the giant wheels.

But the men came on. I ducked under a powerful hay maker and sliced one of the attackers in the shoulder. The sharp blade cut through fur and leather. At the same time, even as he cried out in pain, I tripped him and sent him reeling back.

I turned swiftly to see the other man brace himself for a charge. My arm was ahead of me and the knife was its extension as I both parried his blow and slit open his forearm, after which I jumped back to Farnathia's side. She was still crouching in trembling fear between the tires.

While Fratulon swiftly pummelled an attacker into the ground and grabbed another by the head, banging it against his breast armour, the little Chretkor jumped onto a man like a monkey and grasped his head with his alien claws. The victim's sudden outcry became a choking, gurgling groan as his face visibly frosted over with ice and his breath turning suddenly to a snowy vapour. The man's entire head was converted to solid ice within seconds. Ice Claw sprang to the ground, scuttled between the legs of other attackers and grasped the arm of a man who was coming at the sobbing girl from another direction. Meanwhile, the watcher in the igloo still refrained from entering the action. The Chretkor's new victim yelled out in terror, running away and shaking his frozen arm.

The first opponent who had had the misfortune to tangle with Ice Claw stood motionless for a few moments in the middle of the plaza. Then his knees buckled and he fell to the ground. His arms made a feeble reflex movement as though to break his fall but his head struck the loose pavement resoundingly-and shattered into a thousand splinters of ice.

"Stop it!" shouted Fratulon and he knocked a man out of his way as though he had been an annoying puppy.

I stood protectively in front of Farnathia and threatened all comers with the gleaming dagger. The men paused as though frozen in their tracks when they realized what had happened. They stared aghast at the shattered man on the ground who had been a victim of Ice Claw's grip of frozen death. Then they turned in a body and fled. We remained alone in the plaza.

Fratulon turned to us. “Maybe now we’ll be accepted,” he said curtly. “We won’t be staying here longer than two days.”

“When you say here,” I asked, “where would you suggest?”

We needed a house and we had to find somebody who would sell us a few articles or supply them. Fratulon pointed across the plaza to a group of men and women who had been silently watching the swift conflict. Our remaining attackers had run over to join them.

“Go over there and ask their—and don’t fool around. Demand what we need!”

“Will do!” I replied. I gave Farnathia a sign of encouragement and moved swiftly across the plaza.

But I had only taken about 20 steps when a loudspeaker crackled with a hissing sound and a deep, mysterious voice rang out. The sound pervaded the entire settlement. “This is Umman speaking. I’ve been watching your combat. You may be fast but you are far from being the victors. You are under my energy guns. Come over here!”

I left that to Fratulon and meanwhile went over to the group of onlookers, stopping within about 10 feet of them. I told them in no uncertain words that I needed somebody I could deal with.

“Who are you, Umman?” shouted Fratulon. “I’m not too much impressed by your threats. Come outside and show yourself! Stop hiding and let’s talk face to face!”

The faces of the Arkonides before me all revealed various stages of deterioration, privation, resignation, coarseness and a blind hatred for us four intruders.

“Who will speak for you?” I demanded in a cuttingly sharp tone.

One of them pointed wordlessly toward the igloo, where the protruding weapons were now showing movement. A single shot could kill us all.

“The Kergone!” muttered a woman fearfully. She glanced back and forth between the igloo and Fratulon, who now slowly approached the structure.

“A Kergone?” I asked in some astonishment.

“Yes—he lords it over all of us.”

“I see.” I gave them a quick smile and swiftly joined Sawbones, who was being followed hesitantly by Farnathia and Ice Claw.

I pointed to the dome. “Umman is a Kergone. He’s the dictator here. Apparently he does no work and has them feed him.”

A bellowing laughter came from the heavily amplified speakers. Then they heard the voice of the ruler of Adjover: “So now you know I am a Kergone, which is something special around here. I am everyone’s master. Come to me and we’ll negotiate!”

Again I had to marvel at Fratulon. He raised his arms and called out: “Sir! Your place is the safest in this rotten hole. May we park our vehicle next to your igloo?”

“Be my guest.”

Fratulon shot me a quick but meaningful glance. He pointed to the snowmobile where a few unkempt children had gathered.

“Fire up the boiler and bring that thing over here next to the entrance. Otherwise they’ll steal what little food we have left and even that no-good ammunition,” Fratulon instructed, deviously.

To make sure of our signals I ventured a double-edged remark: “But... the pressure is down!”

Fratulon put on an act of impatient anger. “Then fire it up like I said, dammit! Are you feeble-minded or something?”

“Alright—so don’t blow a gasket!” I retorted. My choice of words let him know that I understood.

Without unusual haste I returned to the big car, climbed in and shoved all controls to the limit. In the burner chamber the oil jet opened wide and raised an inferno. Since the boiler had not released its pressure due to the faulty relief valve, it had a full head of steam already. But I kept the turbine low as I slowly fed power to the remaining motors. The tractor treads ripped stones from the black volcanic paving. I steered the heavy car carefully along the wide road across the plaza and parked it directly next to the round iron entrance hatch of the igloo. When I got out, I took our weapons with me plus a heavy bag with our most indispensable belongings.

“OK,” said Fratulon. “Stash that junk somewhere.”

The impulse cannons on the roof had a circular radius of action but there was an area of 4 to 5 meters out from the walls of the igloo which was out of the angle of their range. With an apparent air of carelessness I walked around the place and stashed our belongings at a location that was at least 120° from the front where the snowcar was sitting.

“Wait until I open the door!” boomed the loudspeaker.

Fratulon and I were figuring how much time we still had. It would have to be a surprise attack. I had seen something when I stashed our belongings and it gave me an idea.

“Ice Claw! Farnathia!” I shouted suddenly. “Come over here! There’s a spring here where we can get a drink and wash up!”

I was so urgent about it that they obeyed. Even Fratulon came strolling casually after us after taking a leisurely look around. We went around the edge of the clean springwater outlet, taking off our gloves and pushing back our head cowls.

We waited...

7/ THE PRINCE OF THIEVES

Originally the Kergones had been pseudo-amphibians, creatures which could move on land as well as in water. They were humanoid, approximately human size and were covered from head to foot with a dark scaly skin. They had always seemed to the Arkonides to be like armoured toads with excellent intellects. But how one of them had come to this area remained a mystery. That he had managed through sheer terror to dominate such a brutalized group of Arkonides as this bordered on the miraculous. Be that as it might, the fact remained that here in Adjover was a structure on the top of which rotated an impulse cannon. Of course at the moment its projector was not aimed at the four newcomers.

Ice Claw's transparent head was reflected in the mirror of the pool as he whispered almost inaudibly: "Why are we washing ourselves here, Atlan?"

I washed and massaged my eyes and then looked through my fingers at the smokestack of our machine, which was nearing its last few seconds of existence.

"Because we have to convince this Kergone," I replied in equally low tones.

Fratulon grunted in agreement and thought: This Atlan! A very foxy lad... never thought he'd respond so well to an unspoken command. He really has the old Gonozal brains! Such a pupil would be a joy to any teacher.

Now Farnathia whispered to me. "Convince him of what, dear?"

When I saw her face once more, her beautiful hair and her dainty, slender hands, I could understand the reactions of the greedy inhabitants of Adjover as well as the Kergone. Once they had laid eyes on her they recognized her as the one treasure we had brought with us.

"That he should be more hospitable!" muttered Fratulon.

We didn't have long to wait.

We deliberately gave the impression of being thirsty and unwashed visitors who had nothing on their minds but to rush to the water which we had so long been lacking but all the while we kept an eye on the snowcar and the igloo.

When it happened we reacted instinctively and threw ourselves to the ground. Nobody saw it but everyone heard it. The heavy pressure boiler of molecular-

laminated steel was blown to bits by the accumulated high pressure of steam. There was one hard shock of explosion and then the air was filled with a hail of fragments, wheels, pieces of tractor chains, frame sections, rocks and other parts now reduced to a flying shrapnel of granulated junk, along with rocks and chunks of pavement. While a giant cloud of steam spread out on all sides, we jumped up with our energy weapons.

“Quick—follow me!” said Fratulon.

We ran wildly to the entrance of the igloo. The wall was bent in and the round hatch hung awry and blasted inward, barely supported by twisted hinges on a warped frame that had been ripped out of its stone anchorage. With a single shove Fratulon slammed the useless hatch cover into the interior and then jumped through into the front part of the room. I sprang after him and pointed my small snub-nosed beamer at the being who was in the centre of the large circular chamber.

“Here we are,” said Fratulon with an affected calmness, “and I must say I’m surprised.”

Umman was a cripple!

He crouched in a powered cart contraption made of tubular sections and reinforced steel wires which contained a dozen or so servo-mechanisms. Before the Kergone was a fairly simple control panel where several warning lamps were flashing at him. All view-screens were knocked out of commission, now showing only a blank dull green.

“I am no less surprised,” said the Kergone in a hollow voice. It sounded as though he were speaking to us from under a layer of muddy water.

“Nevertheless you still seem to be holding back, Umman!” said Fratulon.

Ice Claw and Farnathia pressed into the room behind us. We saw some other servo-mechanisms around the place, another door that led somewhere into the interior of the igloo, a bed and all the facilities for making life comfortable.

“I am the Prince here in this settlement!” exclaimed the Kergone while he looked us over. “That explosion—it was your snowcar, wasn’t it?”

“The pressure boiler,” I confirmed. “All we’re after is the right of hospitality that a visitor should expect.”

“I am the Prince. I don’t do any work. The others feed and pamper me because they fear me and also love me. I tell them what to do.”

Fratulon calmly went around the dark-scaled Kergone and wearily scanned his control panel. He snapped off the main switch and the warning lights darkened immediately. “For the next few days,” he announced, “you will give out the instructions we tell you to. Don’t blame us—you asked for it. We came here in peace!”

Umman turned his large dark eyes upon us. They were filled with hate. He screamed at us: “The first chance I get I’ll destroy you!” He gazed at the girl with such a burning desire that I involuntarily touched the hilt of my knife.

“We need food and rest and supplies,” Sawbones told him. “Nothing else. And we aren’t going to steal anything. We’ll pay for everything we get. Also if there are any sick people I’ll treat them.”

Still vicious, the Kergone snarled at him: “The Kralasenes of Sofgart are after you!”

“Even that will not alter the balance of power here, my Prince,” said Fratulon sarcastically.

“I can’t defend myself!” wailed Umman. “I’m a cripple.”

“Don’t expect any sympathy from us,” I told him. “Where can we sleep?”

The Kergone remained silent while he stared defiantly at Fratulon. Sawbones waited awhile and then shrugged. He aimed his weapon at an open cupboard that was loaded with canned goods and other food items. We could see by the labels that these were costly imports which had somehow found their way here.

“It will make an unpleasant stink in here if I roast all your delicacies,” said Fratulon while he grinned at Umman with a feigned look of friendly concern. His finger tightened on the trigger.

“No—don’t! Go into the house next door opposite the spring! It is empty!”

“Good!” I said. “Fratulon, will you please watch him and get him straightened out on his instructions?”

My friend patted his armour and laughed heartily. “Will do! I’ll give you 3 hours over there to get settled. I’ll be here and I’ll see to everything we need.”

“OK, come on, Farnathia!”

Still carrying our weapons in hand, we left the igloo. The settlers had collected outside and formed a wall of fur-clad bodies but at a respectable distance. They were looking at the small crater in front of the igloo and all the debris lying about, including some spots where the moss was smouldering under a grey pall of smoke.

“We’re all really tuckered out,” I said. “Let’s hope we find what we need.”

“I want a long hot bath,” muttered Farnathia.

We opened the door of the cubically shaped house, which appeared to have three storeys. Ice Claw turned on an old-fashioned, flickering lighting system. It was comfortably warm inside. Apparently they got their heating from volcanic sources such as a tapped subterranean reservoir of naturally hot water. Although some things were very rustic and untidy, we nevertheless found all the basic necessities one would expect in a simple household.

“First Farnathia…” I started to say but was interrupted by the buzzing of the house communicator.

Fratulon? I turned on the old apparatus and found it to be in surprisingly good working order.

Sure enough, there was the face of our companion. He winked at us. "I've arranged some service for you.

A few women will come there and bring you what you need. Also, I'm sending over a few goodies from the scaly Prince's pantry. Atlan, I'll take the first watch here and then you spell me off."

"OK, we're doing fine. Don't forget to get us a good, fast team of sled animals."

"Already on order," smiled Fratulon.

"Good, but first the problem of hygiene... "And I described our schedule.

About an hour later we had all taken a bath in a walled tub-like enclosure. Clothes had been washed and boots polished. Burst seams in our apparel had been sewed. In various rooms we found beds and just barely clean covers.

When I kissed Farnathia and took hold of her hand before she went to sleep she smiled up at me. "The food and all was good, Atlan. But we haven't yet reached our destination."

I patted her and shook my head. "But we have more than half the way behind us and we'll also manage the rest of it."

"I think I can believe that, now that I've really come to know the three of you," she said.

"Sleep now."

I also lay down to sleep. We knew we were being protected by Fratulon, who had demanded cooperation from Umman in forceful terms, but we still bolted the doors and windows before going to rest and we kept our weapons beside us.

Later in the night I received a signal from Fratulon and I took over for him in the 'palace' of the dethroned Prince.

* * * *

The sled was just the right design for a swift thrust through this region which offered its many contrasts of heat and snow and ice sheets covered with falling ashes. Five Hr'ssecs were harnessed in a span between four long shafts that extended out from a basket cradle, where deep pouches were provided for carrying game or, in our case, our luggage and weapons. The passenger cradle was open at the back but covered with a net that could be fastened to the basket edge with heavy hooks... but the wide sled runners were the feature of the outfit. With a simple lever movement, four reel-like casters could be let down but during a run through snow they could be snapped sideways like insect legs. They were ideal for operation over solid ground where there wasn't any snow. This was the fairly

new sled and team that we found in front of the house after Fratulon had relieved me the second time around.

“Tomorrow at dawn!” he whispered to me.

“Nobody should know where we are going. This Kermant Valley...” I stared to say cautiously.

“Is sufficiently unknown,” he interrupted me, “to mislead anybody. Besides, once we’ve gone out through the North gate of this settlement we’ll have a balance of power between us and the Kralasenes. Taking it all in the balance, I’d say it would take a very unusual surprise to catch us napping now!”

Farnathia was considerably astonished by the sight of the exotic-looking vehicle. “I don’t believe it!” she exclaimed. In an unbelievably short time she had become her beaming self again. Whenever she showed herself outside the house I had to constantly watch against any molestations of her by the other men.

Fratulon was explaining: “Any pursuit by airborne vehicles is impossible where we’re going. We are going to reach Kermant Valley, my stronghold on Gortavor, and the *Omirgos*.”

As to air pursuit, even Ice Claw realized he was referring to the energy barrier zone as the restriction.

We had five Hr’ssecs in harness, ungainly and evil-looking beasts with feet that could spread out on snow like the webbed feet of water fowl. Their heavy heads with forward-jutting horns were red as fire, as though they were on the verge of apoplexy, and they bellowed and bleated without any apparent cause. Their fur was long and white but hung down in dirty, matted tufts. They were harnessed by an elastic yoke and guided with reins which passed through ringed bits in their mouths, and when they ate, the rings made a sound like sleighbells. I reflected that visible impressions would not count as much as performance. The important thing was if they could run swiftly and safely.

I grinned at Fratulon. “Someday maybe I’ll write my memoirs—and I’ll really know how to describe an optimist.”

This strange man who was carrying his dangerous weapon around as though it were only a pocket knife continued to be a mystery to me. A fortress in the vicinity of the Pole, of all things! He ranged from being a simple gladiator to a gourmet, art connoisseur and an outstanding surgeon and physician. The spectrum of his capabilities was beyond what I could ever experience or attain to. Who was he, actually? And who was I to have my destiny so interwoven with his? Riddles, mysteries, curiosities.

“I’ve had my sleep,” he said. “Early in the morning I’ll get everything rolling. Before you go to bed, get all of our gear together. We’ll want to get under way as soon as possible.”

We merely nodded at each other and he went into the Prince's igloo. Ice Claw and I and Farnathia packed, ate plentifully and then went to bed.

* * * *

When Fratulon entered the bunker again he saw that the Kergone was reading from a lighted reading cube. "I see you're getting yourself an education, Prince," he muttered. Since the explosion the workmen had installed the door again but as for the rest of it Sachnes had given them strict orders to forget it.

"Is that supposed to be a sin too?" snapped Umman. The creature had reluctantly adjusted himself to the situation but Fratulon did not doubt for one second that he'd strike at him at the first opportunity in a complete rage of vengeance. As the Prince of this community the scaly one had been humbled too deeply. And Fratulon kept the master key to the weapons and observation system in the mysteriously deep pockets of his full-length cloak.

"Not necessarily," Sawbones admitted. "The deeper the sin the greater the chance for virtue. Anyway, have I paid you enough?"

Under his compulsion the Kergone had issued the necessary orders. The best supplies for about a 6-day trek, the best animals and the best kind of sled had been the visible results.

"Yes, that you have!" admitted the Kergone. He shut off the reading cube and turned around in his cart toward Fratulon. By a touch of his hand across optical contacts or just the change of a finger, Umman could cause a number of mechanical responses within the cart and drive it.

"Money talks," said Sawbones. "But of course you can send out a man after me to follow my trail, I suppose. He could probably catch up to the sled."

Fratulon looked about him, noting that the Prince's stock of provisions had visibly diminished. It reminded him somehow of his own condition on Gortavor. He had about run out. In fact he had had it up to his neck with the planet. And sometimes farther. The time was ripe to get off of it.

"Money is the sixth sense, which makes it possible to appreciate the other five, as anyone knows," said Fratulon. "Incidentally, you don't seem to be too comfortable with me around."

The dark-scaled alien laughed humourlessly. "Do I have any other choice?"

"No."

Fratulon was busy thinking. In spite of every observation or inquiry he had not been able to either see any signs of pursuit by his nemesis or learn even if he were being pursued at all. Of course if the Kralasenes showed up at the present moment he would be able to ward them off with the special armaments at hand. Where were those hired deputies of the tyrant? Undoubtedly out of revenge, Umman would

waste no time in making an alliance with the forces of Sofgart the Blind—or if not, they would handle him the same way that he had. Be that as it might, the girl and I would have to be protected and taken away from Gortavor.

The time for it was ripe. A vital change for me was imminent which would not only give an altered meaning to my life but would also add a new dimension of the mind and spirit. Fratulon was becoming restless. He would have preferred being under way already.

He looked at his watch. Still 8 hours until morning. But he nodded with satisfaction when he remembered that he'd be cutting that time in half with 4 hours of sleep.

“When will you be leaving us, my dear friend?” asked Umman with malice.

“Who knows?” replied Sawbones non-committally.

His inner thoughts continued unabated. The pursuing group of Kralasenes probably wouldn't number more than 20 men. Too many logistics problems otherwise. Besides, the indications of statistical probability were that a single man could accomplish more than a small army-under special circumstances.

And en route to the *Omirgos* there would be sufficient ‘special circumstances’.

8/ THE NARROWING CHASE

I couldn't wait to get through the northern gate. In a matter of minutes now we would be leaving Adjover as fast as we could go. I checked over the ropes and straps once more, making sure our weapons and supplies were safely packed onto the sled.

"OK, let's go—everybody on board!" I said, helping Farnathia into the sled cradle. We were able to support our backs against the heavy protective netting at the rear. There were no lights in the village but I was certain that we were being observed by many curious eyes.

I looked above us. The sky was clearing up exceptionally well. The great column of vapour rising beyond the crater walls a few hundred meters beyond this location was presently drifting away at an angle over Warm Spot. The day gave promise of being beautiful and clear. It was just right for our highly adventurous sleighride behind five odoriferous animals.

There was a movement to my left—Fratulon. He grinned, raising his hand in recognition.

He snapped his fingers. "Go!" he exclaimed. "The Prince is incapacitated for the moment."

He handed me a roll of unbreakable adhesive tape. It was obvious that he had probably shut down all the power controls and tied Umman into a helpless bundle.

Once more we had gained a bit of leeway for our operations.

"You mean we can really take off?" inquired Ice Claw plaintively. For days now he had hardly given voice to his inner anxieties.

"We have to. The last stage of the journey!"

Sawbones tightened his gloves and swung on board. At present the sled runners were suspended and the wide rollers were in operating position. I tightened the fastenings of the net and then the whip cracked. Fratulon jerked on the five double reins in his hands and our draft animals set out in a bedlam of bleating and roaring. We rolled noisily over the uncertain pavement, across the plaza and then down the steep exit road that led through the stretched—out settlement to the northern gate.

As the last dwellings came into sight and we emerged from the Adjover gully, there was a narrow strip of light on the eastern horizon. The stars were fading. We were starting the last leg of our unusual journey.

Fratulon shouted a comment: "If these animals can keep up a speed like this, we'll only need 3 days!"

"They're hefty as robots," I commented back.

Twenty furry paws drummed against the ground in a swift, clattering cadence. Umman's final orders had caused the gate to be opened and we swept through between the guard towers and out of the settlement's canyon. Before us lay the gentle downslope of the crater region, which would make a transition to frozen glacial terrain somewhere to the North.

Our trail was straight as an arrow. In the days ahead neither wind nor storm nor rain would obliterate our tracks. It would make it easy for anyone following us. As we drew away from the crater, the smoke and vapour column over Warm Spot became increasingly discernible in its frill extent. In our wake was a fine pall of ashes which lingered in the air as a signal of our passage.

We didn't know what may have happened in Adjover in the meantime. At any rate we kept the five animals running as fast as they could go. They would serve us as far as the edge of the glacier, as I had learned from Fratulon. In fact, this subject was touched upon as he fell into a conversational mood.

"Incidentally... in a cave on the glacier I've hidden two Markas against a time of emergency like this..." He then launched into an explanation of where the special ice vehicles could be found.

He seemed to lose himself in a flowery description of the locality he had in mind—of rocky cliffs and curtains of ice, of tunnel-like caverns with eerie echos where glacial ridges as sharp as a knife could trap the unwary. I listened to every word because if we were separated I would have only his description alone to help me locate the sled-like contraptions.

"Is that the only means of conquering the glacier?" I shouted.

We had to raise our voices above the rattling of the land casters, the creaking of leather straps and the noise of the animals.

"Yes—unless one of us can fly!"

"I wouldn't doubt you could do even that!" declared Ice Claw.

Holding Farnathia in my arms, I could feel her warm young body under her furs. Dimly visible in the morning light ahead we could see where the ice and snow was appearing again.

Suddenly Fratulon spoke up. "Don't ask me how or why but I have a feeling that the Kralasenes have just arrived at Adjover!"

I stared at him uncomprehendingly. Was it more than just a premonition? Even he didn't seem to know but it was reasonable to assume. They were on our trail. Maybe they had spotted us already...

* * * *

The igloo was jammed. Thirteen Kralasenes watched in silence while their leader cut through the bonds which had imprisoned the Kergone.

He had hardly found his voice again before he blurted out, "Who are you? You're Kralasenes, aren't you—mercenaries of Sofgart the Blind?"

The others remained silent and looked wonderingly about them as they listened to their leader's reply.

"That's right. We are after Fratulon the physician. He has three people with him... These bonds appear to be his handiwork."

The Kergone began to howl. "That dog! That scum! He blasted open this bunker by placing his steamobile in front of it and letting the boiler blow up! Then what he did was to take the master key

The rest of his statement was drowned out in the sudden rough laughter of the Kralasenes. They slapped their thighs and struck each other's shoulders in a transport of ringing merriment. Umman crouched miserably in his little wagon and could only manage a pained, plaintive grin.

These 14 men really appeared to be hard and brutal. They would soon capture this sawbones and bring his head back with them! They were tall, broad-shouldered men with faces burned dark by the sun. Their heads were marked by battle scars. Here and there was a missing ear or a horrendous facial scar. A third had a broken chin and another man displayed the marks of an old bum that looked like a triangle.

"Where did he go?"

Umman groaned out the details. "He went out the North gate with our best roller sled and five of our fastest Hr'ssecs! He said he was going to Kermant Valley."

The leader whistled through his teeth. Was it sheer admiration or mere surprise?

"Do you want to help us? Blind Sofgart will reward you."

Umman nodded. In a rage he still remembered his feelings during the past few days. His entire authority over Adjover had been placed in question. He would have to take some hard action to reestablish his position. Against these men, Fratulon didn't have the slightest chance.

"He has a head start," said the Kergone angrily.

"We figured that. When did he pull out of here?"

Umman regretted that he did not have the key to his control panel. He did not believe the surgeon-gliadiator when he had told him he would leave the master key behind. “At first light of dawn,” he answered. “At a tremendous speed and with our five best draft animals.”

The Kralasenes carried small but high-intensity energy weapons of Arkonide design. A number of them were also armed with regular knives, swords, explosive weapons or small battle axes. They carried light knapsacks on their backs, containing their field rations. They appeared to be extremely fast and rugged.

“So,” said the leader pensively, “it’s over the glacier and into Kermant Valley... Do you have a couple of Markas for us?”

“Yes. We’ve always kept some big ones hidden on the glacier. But we don’t have enough roller-sleds and animals left. Let me think. Maybe we could...”

The door burst open and a guard from the North tower rushed into the room. “Umman!” he shouted. “I’ve found something! As the doctor was racing through the gate he tossed something into the air. I saw it flash like a piece of metal but I didn’t think that...”

“Give it here, you idiot!” thundered Umman.

The guard reacted in fright, backing into two Kralasenes who held him, and the Kergone snatched the key out of his hand. He inserted it immediately into a slot on his control panel. In a moment the instruments began to light up and start blinking. With a few adjustments Umman isolated the damaged circuits of his control equipment and cleared up the interference.

“Now I shall obtain what you need. But a few men from the settlement will go with you. They will bring back the sleds.”

“That’s fine—but time is wasting!” said the leader menacingly.

Unabashed, the mercenary fighters wandered about in the igloo. They turned on reader cubes and read the titles, opened up some of the cans of imported delicacies, tried the bath and various other facilities.

Umman began to bellow into his microphone. With a few short bursts from the impulse cannon he terrorized the settlement. The result was that within a very short time the necessary roller sleds were towed into the plaza and the draft animals were fetched from their sparse pasture.

“Do you know that your weapons or any powered equipment will not function beyond this point?”

“We’re aware of that! That’s why we’re practically on foot, you might say. Come on, Kergone, where are your men?”

The leader was neither good nor bad. He appeared to move like a marionette. He was a kind of human robot who was loyal to anyone who paid for his services, whether pursuit or murder was involved. He was a mercenary, a highly efficient gliadiator.

He would fight to the extreme and shove anything out of his way that hindered his objective. The goal was vital: either the capture of Fratulon and Atlan and the other two—or their death.

“They are coming! They are obeying me again! Just wait a little bit longer!” pleaded the Kergone.

“We know that you will do everything necessary to obey Sofgart the Blind,” asserted the leader calmly. But there was a definite warning in his words.

“That is true, sir!” whined Umman.

Outside there was a noticeable sound and movement. The sleds and animals were there. The settlers of Adjover felt threatened once more by the impulse cannon and other energy weapons of their dark-scaled Prince, yet they were also confused and uncertain regarding the new visitors, with whom they also associated danger—and quite correctly.

“You will get everything we have to give you!” sighed the Kergone. “We’re going to try to help you so that you can capture Fratulon and his three companions as quickly as possible.”

“That is our only purpose.”

The Kralasenes worked swiftly and methodically. Once they recognized the means of accelerating the preparations, they gave the settlers a hand. In the early afternoon three roller sleds left Adjover at a breakneck speed.

The last act of the chase had begun.

Umman the Kergone was hoping that the Kralasenes would bring back Fratulon’s head on a pole. He knew it was unlikely they would kill the girl. They would give her first to him and then when he was tired of her he would turn her over for the general use of the entire body of men in the settlement.

* * * *

We did not feel overly confident. The inexplicable feeling that the Kralasenes could see us with just a little luck caused us to be both uneasy and dejected. Except for Fratulon who didn’t seem to be bothered by it at all. He drove the animals, however, as though his life had been wagered in the race. At first we rushed across the ice-free terrain, raising a plume of dust behind us, and then when we came to the snow and ice we stopped long enough to clap the rollers up and lower the sled runners. The animals gave no sign of fatigue.

“Our pursuers are no better off than we are!” commented Fratulon. “They don’t even have a fast glider.”

“We may still outrun them. How far is it to the glacier?” I asked.

After the runners were firmly in place, we climbed back into the basket cradle. On the snow and ice the animals were only slightly slower. Instead of the clattering

rollers we now heard the sliding hiss of the wide runners. And once more the strange Hr'seecs produced their unaccountable outcries as they plunged onward.

"If we could keep going through the night," said Sawbones, "we could reach the upper rim of the Asaka Glacier by early morning!"

I cursed half aloud. The way to the legendary Kermant Valley was long and difficult. But we didn't have any choice in the matter. The Kralasenes were behind us and the goal was ahead, with unknown dangers in between.

"Of course the only illumination we'll have is the stars," added Fratulon. "But keep your chin up! I know every boulder in this area!"

A lonely and desolate land greeted us. Compared to the terrain we had raced through thus far, this region was emptier and more monotonous. Aside from the fact that it rose gently toward the edge of the glacier it was devoid of any outstanding rock formations or any other kind of special feature or landmark. There was hardly a means of orientation but Fratulon appeared to know the way exactly. He stood up in the sled with his legs firmly braced apart and handled the reins and the whip with unflagging skill. Stretching out behind us was our wide, well-trampled trail.

Ice Claw's voice penetrated the steady thumping sound of the draft animals' feet. "If they are following us we should be able to see them by now!"

"We'll see them!" promised Sawbones.

Farnathia turned to look back. Our tracks made a line so straight behind us that they might have been drawn with a ruler. Suddenly she became excited. She pointed and cried out: "Back there on the horizon... there's a dust cloud! Just like we were making before!"

I also turned to look. Since we had been ascending a gradual rise for several hours we had a tremendous view, especially of Warm Spot's giant vapour cloud. The sky was a brilliant blue and completely clear, without a single weather cloud. Our track converged to seeming infinity on the southern horizon. On that far horizontal line we could plainly discern a tiny plume of dust and ashes. It could be caused by no one but the Kralasenes.

"Fratulon!" I called out. "They're back there!"

"I figured as much!" he called back.

I estimated the distance. Not much more than 30 kilometres, perhaps even less.

"They look like they've had a chance to rest up and start out fresh!" wailed Ice Claw disconsolately. "They're going to catch us!"

"We still have a head start," retorted Fratulon. "And they don't know the glacier. But I know every ice crystal there on the Asaka!"

His composure was uncanny, I thought. Or was he just trying to reassure us?

We fell silent but kept turning to look back. The dust plume seemed to come nearer. They were apparently closing the distance between us. Our tension

increased as our uneasiness grew. A presentiment of approaching doom enveloped us. Only my capable mentor and guide seemed to be equal to the situation. He drove the animals onward, racing up the long rise at an unrelenting pace. Gradually as we receded from the Warm Spot country the temperature dropped.

“If we could keep this up—maybe 4 days!” said Fratulon.

“But it may take longer?” I asked.

“Yes—but not much more than that.”

Meanwhile we were moving through this invisible zone of force where our energy weapons could not function—but such was also the case with the vicious mercenaries of Sofgart the Blind. Somewhere beyond the northern horizon lay the stronghold where the mysterious *Omirgos* was waiting. But the Kralasenes were onto our trail and wouldn't give up now. They had discovered us at last.

“I'll bet Umman betrayed us!” shouted Ice Claw. “I didn't expect anything less,” replied Fratulon, “but there was no reason to kill him.”

The animals were still running fast and did not falter. They were as rugged and persevering as a winter storm.

“Presumably we have the Markas for getting across the glacier,” I said. “But how will those mercenaries follow us?”

Fratulon snorted grimly. “You have a lot to learn yet, Atlan. Those outcasts in that settlement also do a lot of hunting on the glacier. So they probably have some glacier sleds stashed away the same as I have!”

“You were up here before?” asked the girl anxiously.

“Doesn't it look as though I knew the way to my own base?” returned Fratulon evasively.

“It is more than just an appearance,” I said. We raced onward. The looming line of the horizon came closer. Beyond that rim the glacier began. In the gradually dwindling light of the day we could still see that the Kralasenes were driving their beasts unmercifully and our lead over them slowly diminished. Three or four days more... would they be able to overtake us? It would be a suicidal mistake for us to underestimate them for a second. The day became colder, cuttingly cold. We wrapped ourselves in our furs and closed up our collars and sleeves. Facing forward in our line of flight, we were relatively unprotected. The paws of the animals kicked up a swirling flak of snow and ice particles that blew against our faces. It was growing darker swiftly but the Kralasenes had the advantage over us. We had to break a trail as we went, which served them as a guide.

9/ MAD RACE ON THE GLACIER

None of us would ever be able to forget that night.

It was like a wild, mad dream. Our nerves were at the breaking point. No one was hungry any more. Only a few swallows of water from the fur-lined canteen wetted our throats, which seemed otherwise to have closed up.

Our 5 draft animals were nearing the end of their capacity. It was around midnight. Like the sled and our own strengths they would have to hold out a few more hours. The rising grade of the land became sharper. Fratulon, who had held the reins and the whip since our start, appeared to need no sleep or food or encouragement. Besides that, he seemed to have the eyes of a nocturnal bird of prey.

“Don’t tell me you can see anything in this pitch darkness,” I said. “My eyes are younger and sharper but even I can’t see a thing!”

He must have been grinning at me. I felt the frosty vapour of his breath in my face briefly before it was whipped away by the wind.

“Just now I’m going by instinct and feel,” he answered. “How are the others doing?”

“I think they’ve actually managed to drop off to sleep,” I muttered.

There was a vague gleam of snow around us and under the runners of the sled. We couldn’t even see the tracks they made or the wide trail of trampled snow made by the feet of our animals, which were now making slow headway. Farnathia and Ice Claw were huddled together at our feet in the basket cradle of the sled. Their heavy cowls were low down on their faces.

“That’s just as well—let them sleep!”

We conversed in relatively low tones but now and again we could hear a new sound through the sharp howling of the wind—the urgent cries of the Kralasenes, who chased after us through the darkness. Both of us, the pursued and the pursuers, had refrained from lighting torches.

“Is the terrain still familiar to you?” I asked after a while.

“That it is, lad!” said Fratulon. His voice was husky with fatigue and tension. “At our present rate we’ll get to a level area in about 45 minutes and from there on we’ll be on our last lap!”

“I see.”

Again we caught the faint sounds of whip-snapping and the bellowing of hard-driven animals. The sled runners kept up their steady hissing song. Our 5 draft animals began to pick up a little speed, but they no longer bleated and bellowed, evidently too exhausted for that. I wanted to make a check of our weapons but it was too dark.

“The distance between us seems to be shrinking!” I called out. “Is that cave pretty close by now?”

“No doubt about it!” returned Fratulon’s reassuring voice.

He jerked the reins and carefully applied his whip, causing the sled to pick up still more speed. The long climb was behind us and now we were out on the flat terrain he had mentioned. It was a wonder to me how a man could find his way so precisely in this darkness. Only the changing position of the sled gave an indication of our course. Before us was a fairly bright plain that contrasted with the black wall of the sky. There at the horizon line the glacier began. It was a giant ice mass that had come to rest and ceased to move farther. Sawbones had given us a description of its appearance. Here and there, he had told us, were splinters or rock which had shoved through the ice and towered above the surface like the broken teeth of a Titan. There were few crevasses and Fratulon had confirmed that he knew them all. There were blocks of ice that towered high at the glacier’s end, where they dropped vertically into vapour-shrouded depths that could not be traversed.

“Can’t this thing go faster?” I asked uneasily as I grabbed on tightly anticipating a sudden lurch. We were shooting swiftly through a snowy rift that pointed in the direction of our course.

“It’s useless. The animals would break down and besides we can only look for the Markas by the light of dawn. You keeping an eye on our luggage?”

“What else?”

The temperature had sunk to its lowest level. The Asaka was no doubt quite close to us now. We were freezing and if we had to get out soon and move about the exercise would do us good. Our pursuers were out of hearing range but that was due to the convolutions of the terrain here. We sensed the end of the wild pursuit ahead of us, but we’d still have to blunder onward for 2 or 3 days through this desolate wasteland. In fact, after the glacier we would have to depend upon our own leg power.

“Naturally I still have a trick or two in store for them...” said Fratulon. But even he appeared to have lost something of his former assurance and confidence.

Instinctively I was preparing myself for one final battle. A futile combat against a superior force of Kralasenes who had no fear of death.

“Listen to me!” said Fratulon. “If something should happen to some of us or possibly myself—it’s imperative to a vast number of other humans that you, Atlan, manage to reach the *Omirgos*. I am less important, Ice Claw and the girl absolutely do not count—now don’t be so shocked. It’s true. In an emergency you must leave us and save yourself. You will understand later, OK?”

I tensed hard at the shock of this revelation while gripping the edges of the jumping and leaping cockpit cradle. Fratulon was driving the animal’s mercilessly now. When I raised my face against the wind I saw the reason for it. The darkness of the sky was giving way to a pale grey light. The new day was giving the first signs of dawn.

“The only thing I get from that,” I said, “is that you’re figuring you may have to die.”

“It’s a wise man who never takes tomorrow for granted,” he confirmed, more or less indirectly. “Do I have your promise, Atlan?”

“What promise?”

“That you will place your own survival above all else and that you will refrain from acting as you might wish to. You are important! I have taken care of you and raised you through these many years and I know better than you. Will you promise this?”

For a while my confused thoughts travelled in channels of seeming madness but finally I answered. “I promise it, Fratulon.”

“Good. Then all is well.”

The wind rose with the first light of day. We raced onward. When I was able to see more clearly I noted that our tracks marked a straight and unerring course. An unflinching instinct had guided Fratulon like an invisible compass. Ahead of us rose blocks of ice and small sawtooth mountains of pure white where winds and changing temperatures had sculptured strange and curious forms. We saw various dark markings which were apparently the entrances to caves.

“There it is up ahead. I’ll make a search and you take care of everything while I’m doing it!”

“It’s a deal,” I agreed.

Now that we had reached the first signs of the glacier, Fratulon changed the course of our ice-encrusted vehicle. He moved in wild zigzag curves around the vast chunks of ice and raced toward his destination. The sled bounced and creaked and shook off some of its ice crust. Farnathia and Ice Claw woke up and at first were completely disoriented.

“The Asaka!” yelled the Chretkor finally in panic. “It’s cold—icy cold!”

“That’s usually the case when you’re in glacier country.” remarked Fratulon.

“I’m going to freeze!” screeched Ice Claw. “I’ll turn into a block of ice and if the sled hits a bump I’ll explode to bits!”

“Just now you’re not going to have time for that!” I assured him.

The sled raced along sharp edges of the ice and under arching masses which formed spectacular bridges and tunnels. Once when we swept through one of these openings, Fratulon turned around suddenly with a heavy calibre gun in his hand—the kind that fired explosive charges. The pistol roared out five times to our rear, shattering vital support points on the hanging ice bridge we had passed under. About 50 tons of glassy ice splinters crashed down behind us, forming a wide barrier wall across our trail.

“Now it’s an obstacle course!” commented Fratulon. He gave me the weapon for reloading, indicating that I should put it back into his cloak pocket when it was ready.

Our wild race continued. Now the animals faltered and stumbled frequently but Fratulon was merciless. Finally he turned the sled and raced out into a narrow ribbon of ice that arched like a spoon handle toward a massive block of ice that rose in jagged peaks before us. To our right was a 100-foot dropoff but to our left yawned a series of crevasse-like canyons which fell away into greenish, unfathomable depths. At the end of the bridge span I saw a cavelike opening with a low ceiling. The animals momentarily lost their footing on the wind-polished ice. The sled runners teetered on the edge and I dared not look to either side. But our momentum carried us and the draft animals found their feet again. We ducked as we shot onward through the opening, where we were surrounded by ringing echoes.

“Up ahead the downslope begins!” said Fratulon. “After we’ve unloaded, turn the team around.”

“Will do!”

As we came out of this natural tunnel onto a circular area of ice, the sun came up. Its light poured down on the white landscape and made it glisten like a world of diamonds. Sawbones pulled back on the reins with all his strength. The Five Hr’secs slid to the edge of the plateau and then stood there trembling. Sweat and melting snow dripped from their bedraggled fur but the tips of their horns were still encrusted with ice.

“Everybody out!” cried Fratulon, leaping over the side of the sled.

We worked then in a frenzy. Ice Claw and I helped Farnathia out and we all got busy. I laid out our meagre belongings in a row, distributed the main weapons and ammunition belts, and we cleaned out the basket cradle. Fratulon had disappeared at our backs into the greenshaded entrance of a cave, where a number of smaller access tunnels were visible. I took a quick look around... Ice Claw and the girl were dragging our luggage to the edge of the small plateau, beyond which the tremendous steep slope of the glacier fell away.

I leapt into the sled and grabbed the reins and the whip, turning the team around. The exhausted animals came to life once more and gained speed, pulling me back over the way we had come. I drove about 200 meters through the tunnel and wondered if I should jump out before we reached the precipice. Instead I drove the team out onto the narrowest part of the ice bridge and left them there.

“That’s a good enough road-block!” I told myself, throwing away the whip.

When I came back to the plateau I was in time to see Fratulon emerge from the cave with two strangely-shaped toboggan sleds. They were of an unusual construction, each with 2 fashioned of leather and crossbars, powerful braking levers, and a small luggage compartment.

“Quickly!” he shouted. “Load up and get into your seats! I’ll take the girl. You follow me, lad! Right in my tracks!”

“Nothing will stop me, Your Excellence!” I retorted.

We stowed our gear. Several blanket rolls were tossed into some small crevasses because we couldn’t use them. We fastened on our weapons as well as we could. Fratulon showed Farnathia how to crouch down into the small seat and shove her legs under the protection of the flexible slats, after which she was strapped in with leather belts.

“Thirty kilometres downhill, Atlan!” called Fratulon. The sun gleamed from his chest armour.

We might as well have been madmen. Like legendary figures out of another time, here we were on a planet with spaceports and nuclear power plants, sitting in our fragile toboggan sleds—one of the most primitive inventions of the humanoid species—preparing to conquer a precipitous glacial slope that was 30,000 meters in extent. By the time we reached the extremity of the Asaka icemass we’d probably be breaking the sound barrier. I looked at the heavy steel hooks at the ends of the braking levers and shook my head. We had to be insane, I thought.

“All the gear tied on?” asked Fratulon.

“Yes!” cried Ice Claw nervously as he buckled himself into the front seat of our sled.

“All set, Sawbones—you start us off!” I shouted.

“I shall now teach you the fine art of toboggan sledding! Watch me carefully, lad!” Fratulon laughed back at us.

I watched every one of his movements. From a canvas pouch under his seat he produced two large yellow pairs of goggles. He shoved one pair over the girl’s head cowl and fastened the other over his own face. Then he pushed the sled to a specific position on the edge of the plateau. The upcurved prongs of the runners supported a windshield. When the sled was teetering on the brink of the icy slope, Fratulon got in and strapped himself down. Whereupon he then tipped the sled forward and shot away.

“I’m frozen stiff...” stammered Ice Claw in a high-pitched anxious voice. “I’m solid and as transparent as a chunk of glacier ice. I’m going to shatter in a cloud of crystals!”

“One thing I’ll say for you, Ice Claw, you never keep your fears buried!” I told him. I fastened my goggles and shoved the sled forward. We neither saw nor heard any sign of the Kralasenes.

Then I also tipped my sled over the edge. I felt the snugness of the leather seat under me as I shoved my boots into the harness staves. All this was new to me but my fatherly friend, my stern teacher and mysterious partner on this mad adventure, had been to the Pale Land before and seemed to know every ice crystal on the way. I picked up speed, noting the faint marks of the other sled ahead of me on the ice. I clicked home the wide safety strap around my middle. The wind struck my face but the goggles protected my eyes. We raced down the vast slope. Before our velocity became critical I managed to pull my gloves on tight and double-check the fastenings that secured our weapons. Then I gripped the brake levers and hung on, testing them briefly as we went. They sent up a spray of ice crystals behind us. I felt finally that I would know how to handle the contraption. Far ahead and below me I saw the long, swift shadow of Fratulon on the sled that held the girl I loved.

“I’ll burst! We’ll hit an ice block and I’ll die!” shrieked Ice Claw.

“Stop distracting me!” I scolded him.

A few seconds later I couldn’t hear a thing. The wind of our passage howled and whistled in my ears. The spots on my head and face that were not protected by the goggles or the long-haired fur of my headpiece threatened to freeze. We hurtled onward and now the steep slope revealed such dangerous obstacles as fissures and boulders and jagged crags of ice. I braked into right and left turns and strove to stay in the tracks of our cool-headed toboggan expert.

Was it only seconds? Or was it minutes that passed in that mad, hurtling plunge? At any rate we swept downward at increasing speed, following a moderately zig-zag course. The glacier which lay over a barely visible mountain chain did not drop away too abruptly but its northern slope did remind us of the long ascent we had made in the roller sled. Now and then we braced ourselves with gritting teeth to shoot through narrow ravines of ice and snow where we took banking turns that shoved us deep into our seats—or we would meet a rise and leap with sudden weightlessness into the air, perhaps as much as 20 meters before hitting the downslope again. The rest of it was like a slanting mirror with a few outcroppings and rills here and there.

A timeless period passed... until later I finally saw the other Marka and threw all my strength into the brake bars. Shortly thereafter we came to a stop beside it. Fratulon was missing but Farnathia sat there trembling from fear and cold. She pointed upward at a craggy outcropping. “He’s up there—he’s taken a weapon with him!”

Even as she spoke I looked up and saw Fratulon, the heavy leading Marka of the Kralasenes and the puff of smoke that came out of his light rifle barrel. Almost simultaneously I heard the whip-like report snapping through the dry cold air. One of the distant figures on the Marka moved and arched backwards half out of the sled and then collapsed, at the same time letting go of the brake hooks.

The vehicle, which must have contained at least seven Kralasenes, swerved from its course. It disappeared into a depression, then shot into sight again while going into a whirling spin across the ice, after which it collided with tremendous force against an ice block. With a brittle sound the block crackled and clattered and a shower of broken wreckage shot away on either side, slithering onward down the slope of the glacier.

Not a soul appeared from behind that barrier. Presumably all seven of the Kralasenes died after Fratulon's shot had killed the brakeman.

I released the brake hooks and moved on slowly until Fratulon caught up again and passed me at a breakneck pace, sweeping straight down the slope. The blinding white nightmare continued. Sometimes racing and sometimes slowing down, we evaded the rocks on our way, approaching the glacier's edge and the beginning of the valley. Somewhere behind us but no longer visible in the vast expanse above, there was still at least one big Marka loaded with Kralasenes who would be out to avenge the death of their comrades.

We were too numb to fear. I even lost my sense of time.

Ice Claw seemed to faint several times, so great was his fear of our striking a boulder or ice block or crashing into a fissure.

Finally, just before noon, we arrived at the only spot where a last sled run from the glacier was possible. As we glided the sleds out onto the adjacent area, trembling from our tensions, we looked ahead into nothing!

"Fog!" said Fratulon, coming to a stop, and he unstrapped himself. He reached for his rifle again. "Farnathia is exhausted. We'll tow her along for awhile."

He waited while we unloaded the second sled. A fur-wrapped package of food had come loose during the trip and had been lost.

"What are you going to do with the rifle?" I asked, while packing the girl in with more furs to keep her warm.

"Shoot!" was Fratulon's curt reply. The explosive weapon was of course all he could use in this energy barrier zone.

"Shoot?—at whom?"

"Three guesses!"

After a short while when the second Marka shot into view through an ice gully, Fratulon fired at it. He hit the brakeman again and managed to cause the big sled to capsize, strewing its passengers across the ice. Either dead or wounded, they slid to the bottom of the glacier.

With Ice Claw and Farnathia in the remaining sled, Sawbones and I moved forward, towing the vehicle with us across the level ice. Once more we took up our flight, this time on foot, and soon we were enveloped by the fog. Fratulon reached into his pocket and extracted a round, flat object. Checking some figures on its face, he announced: "Straight ahead!"

Ice Claw got out once in awhile and helped us push while Fratulon and I took the lead. Farnathia had fallen asleep from sheer exhaustion. The heavy yellow-white fog seemed to muffle every sound. Rapidly we were approaching the mist-shrouded Valley of Kermant.

The way seemed to be safe but it stretched into seeming eternity. Our feet pained us, costing us extra energy to withstand the misery, and the effort of towing the sled also slowed us down.

"In two more hours we'll have it made, Atlan!" said Fratulon.

Heavy-footed and worn, I stared at him with bloodshot eyes.

10/ VICTORY & DESPAIR

We staggered along like sleepwalkers.

In reality our strength was not even going to last another hour. After this long swift flight through days and nights of climbing and fighting our way, this fog-shrouded plain left us numb. We barely managed to stumble along. If we had lost Ice Claw it was likely we might not have noticed it.

“Two hours—is that true? Or are you lying to me or keeping something else from me again?” I asked through cracked, leathery lips.

“No, Atlan. Look down at this snow.”

I stared at the ground. The snow was thinning out. Here and there were patches of brownish moss in the previously unbroken white. But the mist grew heavier. Fratulon kept his compass before him and stumbled on ahead.

“The snow... it’s melted.”

“Kermant Valley is also free of snow and ice but hidden by this fog,” muttered Fratulon.

He reminded me just then of some immortal figure out of a saga who was regaining his vital forces as he neared his homeland.

“But this fog can also hide the Kralasenes from us!” I said weakly.

“It’s less than 2 hours from here. One last effort, lad! You’ve held up well, boy, just like a brother to an old battle-scarred gladiator like me!”

He grimaced at me in what seemed to be a helpless smile. His face was terribly marked by all his exertions. Little streaks of blood had frozen around cuts made by flying ice. And it occurred to me that I probably looked no better than he.

“It’s not only the Kralasenes we have to watch out for. We must be careful as we approach the centre of the valley.”

“Why?”

“Snow ghosts, Kralasenes, other dangers... you name it! The planet is a place of the damned! Danger and violence flourish here in the place of the plants and flowers you’d find anywhere else!”

“That’s a big consolation to me!”

We came to a stop and unloaded the Marka with aching backs and shaking muscles and then took Farnathia between us. We staggered onward. The closer we came to the centre of the valley the more I was amazed at our surroundings.

The snow continued to thin out before us until the open patches of ground began to connect with one another where moss and grasses appeared and continued to become greener. To my further wonderment I now began to see small plants and bright blossoms between the soggy green clumps of grass in the drifting damp fog.

As we moved onward in a wavering course, suddenly Fratulon came to a halt. He set down his pack and shoved the girl to me as he bent over.

“Tracks?” I muttered but he turned and motioned me to keep my voice down.

He pointed to some marks in the mossy ground. “Footprints of the snow ghosts!” he whispered. “Keep your guns ready!”

Ice Claw and Farnathia and I took our rifles from our shoulders, checked their charges and cocked them in readiness. We picked up our packs again and formed a single-file chain. Fratulon led the way, followed by Farnathia and Ice Claw, while I brought up the rear. We didn’t dare lose sight of each other because we could disappear in the thick fog within only a few steps.

Fratulon had become wary. He was sure that after his long absence there would have been attempts made to pillage his secret station. If all we had to contend with was snow ghosts it wasn’t too dangerous but if the Kralasenes had beat them here it was another matter. Anything was possible. With loaded and ready rifles we moved onward in a straight line. Sawbones had told us that the immediate surroundings of the station had been kept clear of snow and fog by special technical effects. The grass was deeper now. We saw more flowers and even passed a small tree. Somewhere was the sound of a running brook.

Fratulon raised a hand. “Stop!”

He drew our attention to a landmark, which was a cubical stone standing there in the drifting vapours surrounded by colourful plants.

“A few yards away is the end of the fog,” he whispered. “Be ready!”

“We’re with you!”

We stood there and listened. There were no footsteps to be heard. The gentle splashing of the little brook seemed to lull our senses. A slightly discernible zephyr moved the mist along like a swarm of swirling veils but it was still uncomfortably dense. I could barely make out Fratulon and his bald head, not 10 yards away. He raised his arm in a signal and we moved forward slowly and soundlessly. Then we heard shrill laughter. Somewhere somebody was running through the fog and cursing in an unknown language. My fingers almost cramped around the stock and barrel of my rifle. Then the mists thinned suddenly and brightened, cut through and flooded by the rays of the sun, as we emerged from the fog zone.

“There—our salvation!” said Fratulon, pointing ahead.

I was speechless.

An idyllic scene opened before us. It was in the centre of a circular zone that was walled by the mist. I saw green trees budding with flowers and ripening fruit, and the running brook. Straight ahead was a white-walled low building with a grass-grown roof. The structure appeared to have been built of massive blocks of stone which were coated over with a hard, glassy substance. There were no windows. There was a single steel plate that served as an entrance hatch, approached by a narrow white pathway. Of course the 100 or so snow ghosts there did not especially harmonize with this peaceful scene. They formed a ragged circle around the building, carrying heavy stones and clubs and looking, with their long yellow-white fur, like—well, what one might picture snow ghosts to be.

Only about 500 yards separated us from the station.

“What now?” I whispered.

“Give them a surprise volley of fire,” he whispered back. “Then follow me as fast as you can!”

“I’m ready!”

The snow ghosts were using all their strength in an attempt to get inside the building. We raised our guns and began to shoot. Almost every shot struck one of the yellow-white figures. Ice Claw emptied his magazine in a rapid series of shots and then sprang back behind us.

The pack of raging creatures began to show a reaction. Some of them dropped in their tracks while the others started to run about in all directions like so many headless chickens. The wounded ones dragged themselves under the doubtful protection of the trees. We advanced step by step but now we shot at a slower rate and aimed more accurately.

The girl was between the two of us and then Ice Claw reappeared from the fog bank with a fresh magazine loaded into his weapon. I stumbled suddenly and fell forward, yet even as I fell I heard a noise behind me and a gasp of pain. I turned but my rifle barrel was in an unfavourable position.

“Farnathia!” I yelled.

The rest happened with lightning rapidity. I saw two fur-clad figures jump at the girl as Ice Claw turned and got in the way of Fratulon’s line of fire. Almost simultaneously I was rolling across the ground to evade the shots of a third man who had emerged from the fog.

“Atlan! Help me! They’re taking me!”

Pulling the frantically struggling girl between them, the two Kralasenes disappeared into the heavy curtains of mist. I was filled with a wild surge of anger as I leapt to my feet and raised my rifle, firing one shot after another. But then I lowered the weapon helplessly.

Fratulon got the third Kralasene in the head, was the one that had fired at me. I broke loose and plunged into the fog.

“Atlan—halt!”

It was Fratulon’s voice, reminding me of my promise. I knew that voice better than any other and I also knew the language of its inflections. Now he was ruthless and lull of stern authority. I knew that in this case my lifetime friend was demanding unconditional obedience and that he knew how to back up his command. When Fratulon spoke in that tone, I knew the cold, hard resolve that was behind it.

I paused in mid-stride and halted. Then I turned and walked past Ice Claw, who was still firing into the milling pack of snow ghosts. The recoil of the heavy rifle shook his childlike frame with each shot.

Fratulon’s weapon was aimed at my legs. “I’ll shoot your legs out from under you,” he growled, “if you run after her!”

“But... they’ve stolen her! I love her, Fratulon—I have to go after them!”

“Love is perishable,” he said. “You would never be able to find her. Forget the girl!”

I was beside myself. I was not able to think clearly at the moment but my mentor’s voice held me in its spell.

“Other tasks are waiting for you. Let’s go! We have to get into the station! Your hot-blooded emotions are blocking our last chance! The Kralasenes can fire at us from the fog!”

My head slumped. I obeyed. We aimed at the creatures who still offered us resistance but finally they fled as we pushed through to the entrance.

Fratulon spoke a command which was unintelligible to me and the heavy steel panel opened for us. We were saved.

* * * *

“The time is ripe—overripe! Duties and responsibilities await you that are of much greater significance than the loss of a loved one!” said Fratulon, placing a consoling hand on my shoulder.

I couldn’t dismiss the suspicion that the energy barrier zone between Warm Spot and the Pole had been generated by some mysterious means of his own in order to shield Kermant Valley from discovery. The massive door had glided shut behind us but here inside there was light and warmth. The installations here were highly technical, in fact for me and Ice Claw they were bewildering. In this place the energy barrier was gone.

“What duties are you talking about? What does all this mean? How did you acquire these things and all this science and technology?”

With a patronizing but noncommittal grin on his face, Fratulon looked around at the installations inside his stronghold and then returned his gaze to me and Ice Claw. He pointed to the *Omirgos*. “There are some things that are so secret... I don’t even discuss them with myself,” he said cryptically. “Later, lad—later!”

I couldn’t think coherently any more. Farnathia had been captured and now faced a destiny that I failed to imagine. We were at our goal now in the midst of all this bewildering, flashing and glowing equipment—the terminus of our long and desperate flight. Where did we go from here? In a partially separate room—could see the base of a giant crystal that must have measured at least 8 meters in diameter. The crystal was glowing with a golden inner effulgence and pulsed in a strange, slow rhythm. I lowered my rifle. Ice Claw was also completely confused. We could understand nothing of this and thus we were completely dependent upon Fratulon.

“Inside that crystal are 1024 forcefields,” he told us, “and that’s the means by which we’ll be able to leave Gortavor. I mean right now, in a very few seconds.”

I gasped at him—in a barely audible whisper: “You mean... that’s the *Omirgos*?”

“Yes. Sooner or later we would have left this planet, anyway. But what’s happened was made it imperative, Atlan, that you undergo your first real test and begin to fight for your rightful inheritance!”

He said this with a formal solemnity I had hardly ever heard him use before. There was a touch of both pride and sadness in his words. But in my mind I was still with the girl. I longed for her. I would never in my life be able to forget her. Fratulon appeared to guess my thoughts because he persisted stubbornly, pointing to the giant crystal. It was glowing more brilliantly now and with an increased tempo in its pulsations.

Fratulon took my hand in a painfully hard grip. “Come!” he said quietly.

In all this confusion of feelings and conflicting considerations, the sound of his voice was my only focal point of reason, the only consolation I had left to me. Ice Claw followed in silence. We approached the crystal, we passed through its surface and disappeared into its soft golden glow—where we dematerialised.

Gortavor was a part of the past.

I was aware of trembling when I realized that something was happening to the three of us. An unknown future reached toward me with cold, sharp talons. I had a presentiment that all my previous adventures had been but a warm summer zephyr compared to the hurricane of events that awaited me in an unmeasured succession of tomorrows.

Gortavor... was gone. Whither now?