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SPIDER DESERT

by Ernst Vlcek

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 barbarianism, knowing neither of the stars nor of the great heritage of vanished Lemuria.

By contrast—and despite the great war against the Maahks—Arkon is in its fullest prime. The present Emperor of this vast domain is Orbanoshol III, 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 still must fear: Atlan, the rightful heir to the throne. After Gonozal's death, this one had disappeared without a trace, along with the former physician to Gonozal VII.

But the death of his father had occurred during Atlan's earliest childhood, and he has no knowledge of his true origin. Having arrived to young manhood in the meantime, he lives with Fratulon, Gonozal's former physician, on a remote planet where he experiences a dangerous adventure in the SPIDER DESERT...

CAST OF CHARACTERS

ATLAN—The young Arkonide is reaching manhood without realizing that he is the long-sought Crystal Prince and rightful heir to the throne of Arkon

FRATULON—Atlan's mentor and protector, a versatile man of mystery

ICE CLAW—He has the touch of death

AZHIRA—A girl to be bartered for

PRONTIER—Azhira's father, whose treasures are not the usual kind

LAY MANOS—a 4-armed Manolian with not enough hands for his greed

Vafron—The dreaded henchman from afar

Plyturon—An ex-gladiator, like Fratulon

Kimyal—A Voolynesian monster with a false face

Noy Manos—Brother of the greedy one, also a Manolian

Ardelo & Waccor—Thieves of the treasure camps in the Marauthanian ruins

Farnathia—Atlan's childhood playmate and now the girl of his dreams

Armanck Declanter—The Tattor of Gortavor, Arkonide ruler of the planet

Skarg—The mysterious sword of Fratulon

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

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ATLAN

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by Ernst Vlcek



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1/ BENEATH THE WEB

On this far planet a turning point had been reached in the saga of Fratulon:

Gortavor was a savage young world where Arkonide civilization and untamed Nature made provisional peace in a sort of mutual symbiosis. Inasmuch as the Arkonides had no particular interest in cultivating the planet or entering into a systematic colonization here, the area surrounding the spaceport was the only main centre of their activity, supported merely by a minimal industry and the most indispensable of technical installations. By contrast, the maps of Gortavor indicated vast regions and lands unknown, which no Arkonide had ever explored.

Although an effective civilization had never taken hold here—or for that very reason—the planet experienced a lively influx of quasi immigrants and settlers representing a wide variety of peoples and races who hailed from all parts of the Greater Imperium as well as from distant regions of the galaxy beyond.

This questionable traffic consisted almost exclusively of irresponsible adventurers, frustrated misfits, lost derelicts and shady drifters of every description. It was such as these who stamped the overall character of the haphazard colonization, making of the planet a central distribution point for smugglers and undercover operators, a Paradise for thieves and swindlers, an asylum for murderers, outlaws and fugitives from justice in every walk of life.

Gortavor was located on the far flung outer ramparts of the Greater Imperium, which was why Fratulon had come here, as hunted as any man alive. Urbanoshol III, Emperor of the Arkonide Empire, had a very long arm, but apparently it had failed to reach this far. At least until now, Fratulon had remained beyond its grasp.

As personal physician to Armanck Declanter, he enjoyed both a great prestige and a certain degree of immunity. Armanck was referred to as the “Tatto”, which was an official title given to all Arkonide planetary administrators, and as such he shielded him from danger.

However, even though Fratulon had lived thus in relative security for almost 13 years, he had never ceased to be wary and alert. His life was burdened the shadows of the past, by memories which ticked constantly inside of him with the persistence of a time bomb. And one day this bomb was going to ignite.

But the day and the hour had not quite arrived when that past could be

brought to life. He would still have to maintain his silence. His secret would have to remain buried for just a while longer. But how much longer Days, weeks, years?

No! Of this he was certain: before this present year was ended, he would have to reveal the truth to Atlan.

Ere long now, the day and the hour would be at hand...

* * * *

Behind us, Tarkihl lay on the horizon. Ahead lay the vast wasteland of the Spider Desert beneath its eerie silvery roof.

I sat tensely in the driver's seat of the dune-rover. The seat next to me had been taken by old "Sawbones?" as I was wont to call my mentor, Fratulon. His face was expressionless as he stared out of our cockpit enclosure. I would have given much to know what was stirring in that bald cranium of his.

As I looked at him askance, he glanced at me briefly with his yellowish eyes—still without expression.

"Are you thinking of the distress call, Fratulon?" I asked, merely to be saying something.

"I'm merely thinking?" he answered, "that some humans out there are in trouble, and we have to help them."

I refrained from pressing him further. His silence didn't bother me. On the contrary, I was actually glad to be able to concentrate on our journey. To drive a dune-rover was comparative child's play. The tractor vehicle was low in contour, not much higher than a man and about as wide with a length of 18 feet. Its ground traction was such that it could negotiate almost any obstacle, and for this reason it was especially suited for travel through desert sands. But even so, there was a certain element of risk in making this thrust into the Spider Desert.

Aside from countless unknown dangers, there was a constant menace here which had given the desert its name. At an average height of 2 meters over the ground was a vast net of silvery strands as thick as an arm which stretched across the entire desert region. No one knew who had placed the net here or what purpose it served originally. It was suspected, however, that its designers had been those same beings who had created Tarkihl.

Many a soldier of fortune had set out to find the end or beginning of the mysterious net, but none of them had ever returned. The silvery strands still retained their secret. But one thing had been learned concerning their nature. At times this apparently self-contained network would begin to hum and vibrate. The eerie sound of the vibrations gripped all forms of life in some sort of a trance, causing hallucinations which had been fatal to countless desert wanderers.

I myself had never experienced the humming song of this spidery web, but I couldn't imagine how a person could fall under its spell if one were to exert the

necessary force of will against it.

When I once expressed these thoughts to Fratulon, he had answered: "Many who were older and stronger than you have fallen prey to it, Atlan." This had been earlier, on another occasion, but at the time it had vexed me because it seemed that he underestimated my abilities.

Since then he appeared to have altered his opinion of me. Nowadays it often seemed to me that he regarded me as an equal. Like this morning when the distress call had reached Tarkihl from somewhere in the desert. He had not objected to my taking the controls of the rover. I considered it as a form of silent recognition and it filled me with pride. Therefore I determined to substantiate his new-found confidence in me and to bring the machine safely to its destination.

In the seat behind me, the chretkor monstrosity stirred uncomfortably. "It's hot in here?" he grumbled. "At this temperature I'm liable to melt away."

I could not suppress a grin as I thought of the creature we had nicknamed "Ice Claw." His fear of extremes of heat and cold had become almost pathological. However, I did him the favour of increasing the air-conditioning, although at the start of our trip he'd complained about the low temperature and I had turned up the heat.

"Is that to your liking, noble sir?" I inquired sarcastically.

"Thanks, Atlan?" said Ice Claw, without taking issue over my tone of voice. "I can feel my bodily structure returning to a solid state."

Suddenly a sand dune loomed ahead that reached almost to the silvery net above.

"Go around it?" said Fratulon.

But I only laughed. "The rover will have that dune for breakfast!"

We reached the towering obstruction and I cut in the suction jets. Mounted laterally on the exterior of the caterpillar treads, they served chiefly to clear away such dunes as this. I throttled down our speed while the suction jets began to howl and pull down the slope before us. The sand was conducted through a system of tubes to the rear of the rover where it was then ejected by blowers.

Suddenly there was a tinkling sound and the jet howl became a thundering roar, causing the dune-rover to vibrate.

"What's that!?" I cried out in astonishment, glancing questioningly at Fratulon.

However, before I could get an answer from him I saw through the pall of powdery sand dust ahead and made out several shadowy figures approaching our machine. And then I knew: the sand dune was a trap set up by the desert dwellers.

Without much further deliberation I backed up the rover, withdrawing completely from the dune. Turning at a 90 degree angle I moved away at high speed. However, I had hardly emerged from the haze of dust before another dune loomed directly in our path. Managing just barely to avoid it I accidentally ran down a desert dweller who had suddenly appeared in front of the tractor. His wide cloak spread out and fluttered momentarily and I saw his tortured face quite

plainly before he disappeared under the ponderous treads. The rover rolled over him as we reached an open area. Ahead of us were no further obstacles. But I sped onward as though pursued by all the demons of the nether worlds.

“You can slow down now?” said Fratulon. “The danger is past.”

I dropped speed and gave him an angry glance. “Why didn’t you warn me before?” I asked irritably. “You knew the dune was a trap set up by the desert dwellers. You must have known they’d hide a lot of junk in the sand so as to foul up our suction jets. Why didn’t you draw it to my attention?”

“I thought you’d recognize the trap on your own?” answered Fratulon calmly.

Although he did not speak reproachfully I nevertheless took it as an admonishment. “Alright?” I said, “I didn’t see it as a trap right away, but when the situation became critical I reacted properly. Without any support from you I was able to get this rover out of the danger zone.”

“Therefore you are deserving of my fullest respect and appreciation?” he replied. “And yet, I have gained from the incident something that is a consolation to me.”

“What do you mean?” I asked belligerently.

“The fact that the pupil has not quite surpassed his teacher.”

We locked glances for a moment, and suddenly we had to laugh. Until now I had only regarded Fratulon as my mentor and guide, as my protector and even as a sort of father. But in this moment I noted that our mutual relationship had changed. It had become a comradeship between two men.

“I’m cold?” came Ice Claw’s complaint from the back seat. “I fear that my body will freeze into a solid block.”

I sighed, wiping the sweat from my forehead, and turned the air-conditioner to the hot side.

2/ STRANGE PARTNERS IN A STRANGE LAND

Fratulon perceived the approaching moment of destiny:

He had given Atlan a thorough course of training and education. He had instructed him in all branches of science, he had schooled him in all the martial disciplines and shared with him his own vast fund of experience. At age 17 Atlan was now a full-fledged, high calibre specimen of manhood. He no longer needed his training master and could now but increase his development through his own experience.

Fratulon could not do much more for him. Atlan would have to build his personality from his own reserves and intuition. And yet—it was necessary to make one final manipulation of his fate which was of the greatest magnitude of all. In order to shape his future, Fratulon knew he must conjure up the ghosts of the past...

* * * *

“Look there!” exclaimed Fratulon as he pointed ahead.

The sun had risen by now to an angle where it caused the silvery strands of the net to cast confusing shadows onto the desert sands, and thus my perception of details ahead was difficult. Thinking that my companion had discovered another obstacle, I slowed down abruptly. But then I saw what he was pointing at.

Through one of the regular openings in the net I could make out the form of a large bird of prey which was perched on one of the arm-thick cables. It was no longer alive and seemed to be bleached out, withered and more or less mummified.

I steered the rover underneath it as we drove along.

Sights such as this were not unusual in the Spider Desert. Although I had not yet experienced the hypnotic effects of the silver strands I had certainly seen many creatures who had become victims of the web in one way or another. Lurking in those shining filaments was a sinister power of death. Whoever or whatever came in contact with them was irretrievably lost. The victim’s blood seemed to evaporate with the swiftness of thought, and that which was left behind was a withered corpse. A fast way of dying but nevertheless terrible.

I caught myself thinking what might happen to Ice Claw if he were to contact

the web. Within his talons was a power that was similar to that of the net above us.

“Are you hot or cold now?” I inquired of him.

“Neither one?” he answered to my surprise. “The temperature is just right.”

I turned to look at him but had to turn away quickly as though I were Perseus observing the Medusa. Although I was accustomed to his appearance, in such a brief glance it had not been possible for me to distinguish his facial features in the crystal transparency of his head.

Ice Claw’s nickname was not alone due to the fact that all organic substance that he grasped with his claw-like hands became ice. Also in his appearance he seemed to have been sculptured from a block of ice. His head, body and limbs were completely transparent, and as a consequence his interior presented a startling but colourful maze of muscles, nerve fibres, arteries and vital organs. Moreover, it was not always easy for his closest acquaintances to glean much of his mood or expression from looking at his face. The transparency of his head deceived the eye so that it was difficult to determine whether his various sense organs were interior or exterior.

His shape was more or less humanoid although dwarfish. When standing at his full height he just came up to my chest.

Although it seemed incongruous, Ice Claw loved warmth. The warmer it was the more agile he became. Yet he feared any extreme of heat because he suspected that he might melt away. On the other hand, his fear of very low temperatures was equally as great because he believed that under such conditions the slightest jolt might send him shattering into nothing but splinters and crystals of ice.

His chief concern was always this phobia regarding heat and cold. Because he just couldn’t cope with it mentally he talked about it continually and as far as circumstances allowed he kept on requesting new adjustments of the temperature.

Inasmuch as the chretkor had no name, or perhaps to defend him against others he might have had, such as “spook”, “Iceman”, or even “Anatomy Chart”, we simply and quite aptly called him Ice Claw.

“Is that the right temperature setting for you?” I inquired.

“Yes, quite. I feel excellent at the moment?” he answered brusquely. “Why do you keep on asking? Are you making fun of me?”

I raised my hands in a mock gesture of defence. But before I could counter his remark, Fratulon interrupted.

“Are you sure of your course, Atlan?”

“Absolutely.”

I waited for him to elaborate on his question but he remained silent. It could well be that something had come to his attention that had escaped me. So I checked all the instruments again but could not detect anything that would indicate a deviation from our course.

“We’re travelling toward the Marauthanian ruins?” I told him. “That’s the

direction the distress call came from.”

As he nodded, his chubby double chin was noticeable. Fratulon was about a head shorter than I was and fairly corpulent in appearance. He might have been called fat unless one happened to know that his bulk consisted chiefly of muscles and that he possessed tremendous strength.

His head was bald, but by contrast the lower half of his face was overgrown with a black, luxurious beard. His shrewd yellow eyes were almost obscured by a welter of chubby wrinkles.

He did not attach much importance to the matter of clothing. If one were to draw comparisons between him and the Arkonide aristocrats who flaunted themselves around Tarkihl in a virtual frenzy of ostentation he might have appeared to be quite pitifully attired. He always wore one and the same set of harness which had obviously been forged a considerable number of years ago. When confronted with the question as to why he would never be separated from his battered and timeworn breast armour, he would only remark that it was a reminder of better days.

When we were alone together, even I could not elicit any details from him concerning such things. I had long since given up the idea of ever pumping him for his story. If he did not wish to air his secret of his own accord, then he could leave it buried where it was.

In Tarkihl the wildest rumours circulated concerning Fratulon. Whereas many of them were absurdities of the most shocking kind, still others carried a grain of truth. No one knew where he had come from or what he had been engaged in formerly. But he made no secret of the fact that he had once been a successful gladiator. In connection with those earlier days he had told me the most incredible stories. As a lad I had been so fascinated by them that I had sworn I would follow in his footsteps and even top his heroic deeds.

It seemed strange to me that when I had taken this oath at the tender age of ten he had nevertheless considered it seriously. I could still remember a remark of his that had made a lasting impression on me.

“One day when you are a grown man, Atlan?” he had declared, “you will surpass me in everything—of that I am sure. You will be more courageous and intelligent and will have a stronger will and vitality. And you will be in dire need of every bit of it because ahead of you is a thorny and dangerous road. But as much as it lies within my power to do so, I shall arm and prepare you for your task in life.”

I never did learn what he had meant by these intimations, but he had kept his promise and had been an outstanding teacher and trainer. He had transmitted to me his knowledge as a physician, a scientist and a philosopher, to the point where I had been able to work in Tarkihl as his assistant. He had also taught me how to fight and to use my powers of reason.

However, when I would press him for specifics of his past he would tighten his jaw and hold his silence.

I had him to thank for having taken me in from the age of four and raised me. But I could not believe that he knew nothing of my origin. He persistently maintained that I had been a complete orphan with no living or traceable parents at the time he had found me somewhere on Gortavor, but in the very next breath he would make some mysterious allusion to factors that he refused to elaborate on.

But as I say I had outgrown the time when I would press him with such questions. Now and again, however, when the opportunity presented itself, I would still attempt to trick him by artful and devious means. But even when he failed to see through my deception he would become as silent as the Spider Desert.

Fratulon was purported to be incredibly wealthy, but there was no more proof of that supposition than there was for any of the other stories that were told about him. There were even some who maintained that he wasn't an Arkonide, and considering his thick-set and stubby figure this was not entirely unbelievable. But this only caused Fratulon to laugh to himself, and he would say nothing to the contrary.

His most curious possession was the sword he wore. It was short with a broad blade and a pommel that bore a strange carving on it. This figure appeared to be worked in silver, but even under the closest inspection its details could not be clearly made out. On the contrary, the more carefully one studied it the more indistinct its contours became.

I had myself fought with Skarg, as Fratulon called the weapon, but could discover nothing unusual about it other than the fact that it sat very well in my hand.

"It's hot?" announced Ice Claw again.

Automatically, I regulated the air-conditioning for him.

Before us lay the monotonous landscape of sand, still overshadowed by the endless web of silvery strands. But its aspect had changed in the meantime. A wind had come up and was driving dust devils and a haze of sand before it. The visibility lessened as the sun shone faintly through the dust clouds.

"The wind is increasing?" I announced concernedly. "I think it won't be long before it turns into a sandstorm."

"You could be right!" agreed Fratulon. "Whenever you feel like it I can relieve you at the controls."

I was grateful for his offer. Not that I didn't trust myself to guide the rover even through the storm. It was just that my powers of concentration were lagging somewhat after the long drive, and it might do me some good to relax a while.

I pulled the rover to a stop and got out in order to go around to the other side, but just as I did so the ground suddenly gave way under my feet. I strove to hang on to the tractor treads of the machine but had already sunk down up to my waist.

The crystalline face of Ice Claw appeared in the cockpit hatch. He leaned way out and downward toward me, stretching out his hand-like talons. I hesitated,

mindful of his capability of turning all organic matter to ice that he touched, but of course my fears were groundless because just now Ice Claw had his strange powers under control. Yet by the time I realized that, I had sunk deeper and could no longer reach his “hand”.

Suddenly there was a grinding and rumbling sound from below, and the dune-rover sank on its side. The ground beneath me finally gave away and I dropped through a cloud of sand into the depths.

3/ IN THE LOST LABYRINTHS

Fratulon would soon mend the last chink in his armour, or test its strength once and for all.

Long ago when he had fled to Gortavor with the 4-year-old manchild in his keeping, the intent behind it all was to raise Atlan until the time should come to help him regain his own right and station. The first few years had been the most difficult because Fratulon had stood alone against an overwhelmingly powerful enemy. It had been a long, hard struggle until he finally established himself on Gortavor to the point where he could offer Atlan a maximum degree of protection.

He became an influential personality on Gortavor. His position as personal physician to the Tatto, Armanck Declanter, had made him practically unassailable. A portion of his prestige and influence had been transmitted to his young ward, Atlan, whom he had presumably found in the wilderness of this world.

Fratulon's camouflage was practically armour plated, with just one vulnerable spot: Atlan.

The youth's childhood memories kept emerging in such multiple forms as dreams and thought associations. The questions he asked both as a child and a strapping youth maturing to manhood continued to create problems for Fratulon. But now the period of all these difficulties was drawing to an end—he had successfully withstood the burdens of it. He was glad that he would not have to maintain his silence much longer...

* * * *

I dropped onto soft sand, breaking the impact with the natural resiliency of my legs. But further masses of sand came down upon me and I threw my arms over my face for protection and in order to breathe as I staggered forward through the gritty debris into the cavern that lay before me.

From above came a grinding sound and as I looked up I saw the vast shadow of the dune-rover settling further into the opening of the cave-in. I knew I had to move onward to get out of the way because the weight of the vehicle was liable to cause a further collapse of the ceiling.

I finally got out of the zone of danger, but since my visibility was poor I ran

blindly into an obstacle. It was a wall of molten sand that had cooled into a glass-hard surface that bristled with countless sharp splinters. In the process, I cut my hand.

I heard another grating and crunching sound and knew that the rover was slipping through. It came down with a crash and wedged itself between the wall and the rubble. After everything had settled and only the howling of the storm outside was audible, I heard Fratulon calling.

“Atlan!”

“I’m down here?” I answered. “I think I’m all in one piece.”

“At least that’s something!” I heard him remark.

Immediately after that I saw a powerful shape come through a dimly lighted opening next to the semi-suspended rover. For a moment the muscular short legs seemed to wriggle in the air; then the shadowy figure came down with a thud. Behind him came a slender, translucent shape: Ice Claw.

“What is this place?” asked the chretkor.

“I figure it’s some sort of underground hideout that could have been made by treasure hunters?” I answered, while carefully running my hands over the glassy sand wall. “It has every appearance of having been carved out with heat beam weapons.”

“No wonder the ceiling couldn’t support the weight of the rover,?” grumbled Fratulon. A pocket light flashed to life in his hand, and its powerful beam penetrated the vaulted excavation. “Now we’re in a fine mess. We won’t be able to retrieve that rover all by ourselves.”

I looked about in the cavern. Discounting the part that had caved in, it was still large enough to hold about 20 men. Fairly wide and elongated, it ended in a passage that turned to our left.

“At least we can wait out the storm down here?” commented Ice Claw, and he added with satisfaction: “Anyway, it’s pleasantly cool in here.”

“That sandstorm can go on all day?” retorted Fratulon irritably. “We haven’t got that much time. After all we aren’t out here on a picnic, you know. We’re trying to rescue some treasure hunters who’ve sent out a call for help.”

“But a dead sawbones isn’t going to do them much good, either?” I replied. “Don’t you think, Doc, that we ought to take a little breather? The sandstorm seems to have reached its peak. It would be suicide to set out into the Spider Desert under these conditions. You yourself have said that friction with the sand out there builds up a static charge on a person, which provides a conductor for the forces in the web strands over head.”

He stared at me in surprise. “You are aware of that?” he asked, wonderingly. “Of course you’re right, Atlan. We have to wait at least until the storm gets past its high point. Only then will it be possible to continue onward on foot.”

“Then let’s take a look around down here?” I suggested. I borrowed Fratulon’s flashlight and went to the end of the cave.

When I turned the beam of the flashlight into the narrow side passage I was disappointed to discover that it was only about 10 paces in extent, ending in another wall of solidified molten sand.

Fratulon appeared beside me. He shouldered past me and entered the tunnel which was so narrow that he almost grazed the walls with his shoulders. When he came to the end of it he drew his sword and struck the glazed surface several times with it. Several fist-sized fragments splintered away from the wall.

Suddenly he leapt back nimbly, replaced his sword, and brought forth his raygun. At first his action was puzzling to me because his wide body blocked my view, but then I saw that cracks were appearing in the wall through which a mass of loose sand was pouring into the passage.

Fratulon fired a wide-spread energy beam at it. I thought he was merely trying to melt the sand and stop its flow, but he wasn't satisfied with that. He simply vaporized it and melted his way in further. When he finally shut off his weapon I saw that he had made an opening that gave access to a cavern beyond. I aimed the flashlight beam through it and caught sight of a smooth floor and walls that were fashioned of some dull-shining unknown material.

"Zagooth, the lost labyrinth?" muttered Fratulon.

I looked at him questioningly but he gave me no explanation. Without wasting any words, he thrust himself through the opening and slid over the pile of sandy rubble into the cave on the other side.

* * * *

This cavern was larger and lay deeper under the surface than the sand-glazed hideout we had traversed in order to get here. Two separate passages, twice the height of a man and equally as wide, led off to the right and the left in exactly opposite directions.

"What does Zagooth mean?" I inquired of Fratulon. "I have never heard the name before."

"I only learned about it myself for the first time a few years ago, from a treasure hunter?" he explained. "It's long been known that the Spider Desert covers a subterranean maze of labyrinths, but so far only a few half buried fragments of it have been discovered. This dying treasure hunter asserted, however, that while investigating the secret of the deadly net of silvery strands he had come across charts of the original inhabitants here, and on that basis he had at least partially traced out the course of the labyrinths. But he couldn't continue his explorations of them because he fell into the hands of the desert dwellers and barely managed to escape and get back to Tarkihl."

"You never told me anything about that before?" I said in a slight tone of reproachfulness.

This elicited only a faint smile from him, almost as if he were trying to tell me there were far greater things than this he had remained silent about. I could even

accept that, but was vexed by the fact that he couldn't have confided in me concerning such a relatively minor item as this incident with the dying treasure hunter. Of course it could also be that he hadn't considered it worth mentioning, since it was not unusual that adventurers in the Spider Desert should be attacked by Zagors and Ooths.

"I have it!" I cried out suddenly. "The word Zagooth is a composite made up from the names of the desert dwellers—Zagors, and Ooths. But why were the labyrinths named after them? After all, they were built by the original inhabitants."

"But the Zagors and the Ooths live here?" declared Fratulon. He indicated the tunnel that led off to the right. "If we're lucky, maybe the labyrinths here are not choked up for considerable distances, and we may be able to cover a good stretch of the way toward the Marauthanian ruins. Using the compass we can get our bearings and won't have to be afraid of getting lost. Atlan, would you go back to the rover and fetch some of our gear? We only need the essentials—water and food for a day, the compass, and my first-aid kit."

I clambered back over the sand heap and hurried through the first cavern to the cave-in. The storm had blown in more sand, but the rover had not settled any deeper. I drew myself up on the caterpillar treads and ducked my head down against the storm, finally reaching the cockpit hatch and climbing inside.

It only required a few moments to gather the equipment and supplies together that we would need, and it didn't take much longer to stow them in a back pack and strap the whole thing over my shoulders. I was about to retrace my steps when I chanced to see another flashlight. I picked it up and took it along since it couldn't hurt to have two of the hand lights with us.

When I climbed out of the cupola it seemed to me that the storm was blowing harder. The sand whipped at me savagely, forcing me to close my eyes and hold my breath, I only dared to take a good breath of air after I had gotten down into the cave again. I quickly covered the short distance to the narrow side passage, but after taking a few steps inside I came to a halt.

Ahead of me everything lay in darkness. Why didn't Fratulon have the other flashlight turned on? Cautiously, I groped my way forward to the opening at the end of the tunnel. Then I listened. I had an impression of some furtive rustling or scraping sound, as though something were coming nearer.

I suddenly turned on my hand light. In its beam I perceived two Ooths who were creeping forward and had just reached the slope of sand before me. When the light fell upon them they jerked back and protectively raised boney hands in front of their faces.

Ooths were mutated Arkonides. They were reputed to be descendants of treasure hunters, whose physiology had been altered by radiations from the silver web. They looked like the mummified cadavers that had come in contact with the strands. Their faces were distorted masks that were devoid of nose, eyes and ears. The teeth in their wide, lipless mouths were powerful enough to sever a man's

arm with a single bite.

They only came to the surface during the night because light had the effect of blinding them and causing their bodily substance to decompose. Darkness was their element. They were night creatures who guided themselves by ultra-sound.

When I perceived the nature of my opponents, all I had to do was aim the beam of my flashlight at them in order to put them to flight. They cried out as the full intensity of the rays struck them and retreated in horrified panic into the lefthand side passage. I waited until the sound of their running feet had faded away, after which I negotiated the pile of debris and came down into the larger cavern.

There was no trace of Fratulon and Ice Claw.

I went to the mouth of the tunnel that led off toward the Marauthanian ruins. "Fratulon!" I shouted.

There was no answer. When I flashed my light further into the passage I saw a shadow flit into another side corridor. An Ooth...

I couldn't imagine that Fratulon had been overcome by the mutants, who feared nothing more than light. What had happened here during my absence?

I couldn't find any evidence that a struggle had occurred, so I finally turned to the righthand tunnel. If Fratulon had found some reason for leaving the cavern, then he must have used this passage, since it led toward the ruins we were heading for.

The tunnel led straight ahead, but I soon came upon a cross-passage. I swiftly turned my light beam into it in both directions and saw more Ooths hastily ducking out of the illumination into the safety of darkness.

There was nothing to be seen of Fratulon and Ice Claw. At the next cross passage the same experience was repeated. Three Ooths had been lying in ambush for me there, but again the beam of the hand light sent them screaming and fleeing in terror.

"Fratulon!"

Still no answer.

I became uneasy. I couldn't understand how old Sawbones and the chretkor could simply disappear. I had not been gone long enough for them to have covered much distance in the tunnel. They simply had to hear my calls!

In my perplexity I wandered into a side passage. Instead of being straight, however, it twisted in a serpentine fashion so that I could only see a few paces ahead. It seemed that I could hear sounds ahead of me which receded as I progressed. Therefore I began to move along more swiftly.

Just now it was immaterial who might be ahead of me. It made no difference whether it was an Ooth or a Zagor. I would intercept him and try to find out from him if he knew anything about what happened to Fratulon and Ice Claw.

When I came around the next bend I saw that the torturous passage suddenly came to an end. Right in front of me was an Ooth who was desperately trying to

climb up the smooth wall. He supported himself against the wall with his legs and arms and even managed to ascend a few feet, but then he slipped back again.

Then he realized that he was cornered and faced me ready to fight. Shielding his light-sensitive face with his hands, he turned toward me and crouched, prepared to spring in attack.

I pressed against the seamless wall while holding the hand lamp away from me. Since the light blinded him he would have to focus his charge in that direction, presuming me to be still in the middle of the passage.

In the very moment that he started his leap, a hand reached out of the wall and pulled me through with a mighty tug. It was not actually fingers that covered my mouth, but talons. I was surrounded by darkness. Yet strangely the passage I had just vacated was still illuminated by my flashlight. As though through a glass wall I saw the Ooth jump and grasp at emptiness.

Then I heard a cry that shook me to the marrow. A human cry—sounding as though it came from the lips of a woman.

4/ THE GIRL IN THE ARENA

The relationship between master and pupil was subtly changing.

Fratulon continued more and more to be amazed by Atlan's progress. It was often just little things that elicited the teacher's silent appreciation and admiration, but even when Atlan made decisions concerning matters of minor importance he demonstrated that each of his actions was the result of careful deliberation, at the same time being able to make up his mind in a hurry.

Fratulon recognized the fact that Atlan's basic education and training had come to an end and that he could no longer import anything new to him. Now Atlan would have to put his knowledge to practical use. Out of his successes or failures would come the further lessons of his life ahead.

And Atlan learned so swiftly that Fratulon could only admire him in silent wonderment. All of which enabled the master to lay aside his role of teacher, more and more. Gradually he could bring into emergence the actual relationship between them: he was Atlan's loyal and devoted servant...

* * * *

"Silence! There are Zagors here!" someone whispered to me, and I recognized the voice of Fratulon.

I experienced an unutterable relief at having found old Sawbones again. Actually it was he who had found me and pulled me into his hiding place, but just now it was a moot point.

Ice Claw removed his hard, cold hand from my mouth and turned off the flashlight that I was still hanging onto. I was incapacitated from my surprise.

"Wh-where..." I started to say, but Fratulon shushed me to silence.

It was only then that I had a chance to look about in my new surroundings. I found myself in a giant cavern. Behind me was a wall that appeared to swallow up all light that impinged upon it. Over me arched a great vaulted ceiling that I seemed to sense rather than see, because it, too, appeared to be composed of the same sort of absolutely dark material. In spite of this there was a pleasant and shadowless illumination here which seemed to come from no particular source yet appeared to emerge from everywhere.

The large chamber had the appearance of an auditorium or an arena, tapering

downward toward the centre in a basin-like formation. Instead of rows of seats in the circle, however, there were a number of convex elevations and hump-shaped rises on which there were various protuberances. Hunching and crouching on these were the tall, lean figures of reptile creatures wearing broad cloak-like garments.

Zagors!

There must have been about 20 of them sitting on the humps near the central floor of the chamber. They uttered inarticulate sounds in some kind of chant while beating time with their throwing and cutting weapons. Their great unblinking eyes glowed with a ghostly greenish light as they gazed intently at the girl who lay in the arena's centre.

The agonized cry I had heard must have come from her.

She lay stretched out on the ground, breathing laboriously. Her clothes hung in shreds from her body. Close to her head, a spear was stuck in the ground. As I looked at her, she grasped the shaft with her hands, supporting herself by it as she slowly got up. Meanwhile her eyes fearfully swept over the row of lizard like creatures who watched her with a predatory intentness.

Suddenly she sprang to her feet and attempted to escape from the central area. She clambered onto the first rise, eluded a Zagor who sought to block her, pressed through a gap between several of them, and scaled the next tier beyond.

One of the Zagors had followed her and when he came within range he thrust a barbed spear at her. The barb caught in her tattered cloak, jerking her back. The material tore loose, but the girl slipped backwards over the raised tier and into the arena again.

As she did so she screamed in mortal terror.

The Zagors loomed over her from right and left, striking out at her clothing with daggers, swords and lances. They were very adept at this and did not pierce the girl's skin with a single thrust. In spite of this her arms and legs and face were already badly bruised and scratched.

When she lay still on the ground once more, the Zagors, withdrew from her.

"We can't just stand here doing nothing while those monsters torture the girl?" I said, preparing to take action.

Ice Claw grasped my arm and detained me. "Fratulon is always saying that you are calm and collected in every situation?" whispered the chretkor. "But it seems to me that only applies when a girl isn't involved."

I shook him off. "I'd help any human in a case like this?" I declared.

"Undoubtedly?" Fratulon answered, "but don't you think, Atlan, that we should wait for a more favourable moment?"

I had finally collected myself and realized that of course they were both right. It wouldn't help the girl to just make a blind charge against the Zagors. We had to proceed with more intelligent tactics. Zagors weren't as easily intimidated as the Ooths. They neither shied away from light nor feared any kind of energy weapon.

“What do you suggest, Fratulon?” I asked.

He looked at me in some astonishment and said, “What do *you* suggest?”

For a moment I was surprised he had left the decision to me, yet I didn’t dwell on my reaction too long. Instead, I considered what we might do to help the girl.

She was an Arkonide woman, that I had easily determined—and she must have been beautiful before the Zagors had mistreated her so.

I recalled to mind what I knew concerning the Zagors. They were fairly primitive and only had crude weapons such as swords and spears. Initially they had lived in the jungle regions of Gortavor, but they had moved into the Spider Desert along with the treasure hunters and busied themselves here with robbery and plundering. Their total source of livelihood was the booty they won from their pillaging forays. No caravan or expedition was safe from them.

If they took prisoners it was only to sacrifice them to the silver strands of the web, in which they seemed to perceive their deity. The ritual involved was crude and horrifying. First they pursued the victim until its resistance was broken, after which they exposed it to the deadly forces of the net.

I shuddered to think that we had barely escaped this fate, ourselves. It had been none other than the Zagors who had planted damaging scrap in the sand dune in an attempt to disable the rover. If they had succeeded in stopping us, by now we would have been bleached mummies.

It was such a fate that now threatened the girl if we didn’t manage to set her free.

“How long will it be before they sacrifice her?” I asked.

“The girl is at the end of her strength?” said Fratulon. “Under normal circumstances they’d have taken her to the surface long before this, but I presume they are waiting for the storm to die down.”

I nodded in agreement, having had the same idea. “Then that may give us enough time to work out my plan.”

“What do you have in mind?” inquired Fratulon.

I did not give him an answer. It was gratifying for a change to turn the tables on him and leave him in the dark as to my intentions. Instead, I asked: “That secret door you pulled me through—does it also work in the other direction? Do you think Ice Claw could go back into the passage I came through?”

“I don’t see why not?” answered Fratulon as he furrowed his brow thoughtfully. “He had to reach through it to get you. But it isn’t a secret door exactly, it’s more like a matter projection, acting like a curtain that holds back both light and sound.”

“That’s good enough for me?” I interrupted, and turned to the chretkor. “I want you to go back into that passage and drive as many Ooths into it as you can find. Take both flashlights with you. With those you can drive them before you like cattle. Do you think you can do it?”

“There’s a pleasant climate in Zagooth?” replied Ice Claw. “Down here I feel

at my best.” So saying, he disappeared through the apparently impenetrable wall.

* * * *

The Zagors drummed a wild cadence with their weapons, obviously attempting to startle their victim into renewed effort. But the girl lay panting on the ground and did not move. When she raised her head once, the reptiles uttered a shout of triumph. But immediately thereafter they grumbled in disappointment when they saw that the girl was apparently too weak to get up again.

I turned to my friend and mentor, Sawbones. “Fratulon, do you know how many exits there are?”

He shrugged. “I’ve discovered two of them, on the other side between the rows of humps. The Zagors have guards over there—but there are probably other outlets.”

“That’s not so important. The main thing is to know which way we are to go, once we’ve freed the girl. In any case we have to go to the opposite side of this chamber.” As I started away with him, I asked: “How did you two ever get into this place?”

“When you went back to the rover, the Zagors showed up?” he told me. “Not wishing to get into a fight with them, we withdrew into the outer tunnel, merely intending to remain concealed. But then we saw that they had a prisoner with them, so we followed them. Then suddenly our retreat was cut off because a second group of Zagors came behind us. We were suddenly at the end of the winding passage, but since the Zagors who had preceded us couldn’t have evaporated into thin air I searched until I found the ‘secret door,’ as you call it.”

Under cover of the hump-shaped elevations we had almost reached the opposite side of the cavern when we heard the girl let out another scream. When I glanced down into the arena I was in time to see a Zagor jump in front of the girl and sweep his cloak aside to take out his sword. I knew he wasn’t intending to kill her but I was sure he meant to add to her pain by goading her with the sword point.

This I simply couldn’t permit. Before Fratulon could prevent it, I jerked out my raygun and quickly fired. A narrow beam of energy flashed out and struck the reptile’s skull. The Zagor dropped as though hit by lightning. The others became still for a moment as though struck dumb, but soon a bedlam of shouting arose. They lifted their weapons as if to defend themselves against an invisible enemy, and some of them timorously examined their dead companion.

“That was ill-considered?” said Fratulon reprovingly.

“Not at all?” I retorted, grinning at him. “You know you’re the one who taught me that trick—how to fire off a needle beam so nobody but the victim notices it.”

Fratulon had another objection on the tip of his tongue, but he refrained from expressing it.

We finally reached the other side. The Zagors had settled down again, having adjusted themselves primitively to the death of their companion. But none of them came near the girl any more.

I could see by her terrified expression that she would have liked nothing better than to run away from this place, but she was by now too weak to attempt it.

“I hope Ice Claw didn’t get lost in the labyrinth?” I remarked.

Fratulon merely shook his head.

The Zagors started in again to make the drumming sound with their weapons. The girl buried her head in her hands and closed her ears, which caused the reptile creatures to redouble their noisemaking. Their inarticulate cries became louder and wilder.

Two of them suddenly sprang from their seats down into the arena. As the girl saw the flash of their weapons, she gathered herself together and prepared to flee—which was exactly the Zagors’ purpose. I clenched my fists, fearing that there would be a repetition of the hideous game I had interrupted before. But this time they didn’t get that far.

On the other side of the cavern, precisely where Ice Claw had gone through the curtain of projected matter, there was a commotion. A figure appeared, then another, and another, followed by still others. Soon there were 10 Ooths pressing forward between the tiers of protruding structures at the top of the amphitheatre.

When they saw themselves suddenly surrounded by the shadowless light, they sought to draw back, but others of their kind came through and blocked their retreat, pressing them further forward. Then Ice Claw appeared with his two brilliant hand lights, making it impossible for them to return whence they had come. The Ooths had no alternative but to climb down the tiers in search of another exit.

“Now’s the time,?” I said. “Get ready, Sawbones!”

Meanwhile, the Zagors had discovered the mutants. They ignored the girl and charged toward their assumed attackers. However, rather than brace themselves for a fight they staked their chances on flight alone. The light streaming at them from everywhere weakened their senses and added physical pain to their suffering. The only thing they could think of was to flee from the flood of light and return to the security of darkness. In their desperate confusion they kept running against the walls of blackness which absorbed all light.

“Now!” I shouted.

I leapt from my concealment onto one of the elevated tiers. Jumping from one rounded hump to another, I reached the floor of the arena, where the girl crouched in a half-raised position, looking on in bewilderment at the strange battle between the Zagors and the Ooths.

“Don’t be afraid!” I called to her. “We’ll get you out of this!”

When she whirled around toward me and screamed, I was puzzled by her reaction, wondering why she should fear me. But then I realized she was staring beyond me, and when I turned I saw a Zagor swinging at me with his sword. Just

as the blade reached the highest point of its arc, the reptile fell back, struck down by a shot from Fratulon.

“Keep covering me, Sawbones!” I shouted to him, then turned once more to the girl. Helping her to her feet, I asked her: “Can you walk by yourself?”

She took one step and fell into my arms, whereupon I simply lifted her up and draped her over my shoulder.

Fratulon had come to my side. He had holstered his energy weapon in favour of one he trusted more. In his hand was Skarg. In his eyes blazed a martial challenge. But there was no time for words as he turned to ward off an attack by two of the Zagors. One of them fell under a swift side thrust, and the other went down beneath a direct blow through the shoulder.

“Let’s get out of here, Ice Claw!” I yelled at the top of my lungs. I hadn’t seen the chretkor since his return but hoped he’d be able to fend for himself in the fray.

Fratulon arrived at a man-sized opening between two pillar-like structures. The first thing the Zagor sentinel there accomplished was to run straight into his sword. Old Sawbones beckoned to me and then disappeared through the opening.

I had just reached this exit when I heard a beastly cry behind me, and suddenly something grasped my leg. I lost my balance but managed to turn as I fell. The Zagor who clutched me had his spear raised in a position to run me through, but he was suddenly deterred. A small, slender shape fell upon his back as two crystalline arms encircled his neck. A visible shudder ran through the Zagor, after which he dropped to the ground and remained still. The chretkor had killed the reptile by merely touching it.

“Thanks, Ice Claw!” I said.

I got up with my burden and hurried through the exitway. Ice Claw kept behind me to cover our rear flank, but the Zagors did not pursue us. Apparently they were too occupied with the Ooths.

The girl on my shoulder did not stir, since she had lost consciousness.

Before us stretched a very long hall that glowed in the shadowless light. The ground seemed to exhibit a rippled or wavy configuration in an inconsistent pattern of large and small humps which extended over the walls and ceiling, as well. Between these at haphazard distances from each other were a number of odd-shaped openings.

The weird aspect of this chamber, suggesting a sort of organic growth, had the effect of making me dizzy. Suddenly I lost all sense of up or down. The elevations and declivities of the floor and the walls, the eerie light—all these impressions confused my senses to such a degree that I became disoriented and lost my balance.

“Over here!” I heard Fratulon cry out.

But I couldn’t see him. The contours of my surroundings swam before my eyes. I shook my head to clear my vision, and finally the stocky figure of Sawbones became discernible. He was standing in one of the unlighted openings, stretching out his powerful hand to me. I grasped it and was reassured by his

strength as he drew me toward him.

“What’s happening?” I gasped as he relieved me of the girl’s burden.

“You were the victim of a hallucination?” he explained. “I went through the same thing only worse. It almost had me convinced I had found an exit when I was actually about to step into a hole in the ground. But this form of architecture only seems to have fatal consequences when seen through human eyes. At any rate, Ice Claw came right through, as sure-footed as a sleepwalker.”

“But it was a little too hot for me?” remarked the chretkor.

“I’ve broken into a pretty good sweat, myself?” I confessed. I was thankful that Fratulon had taken the girl from me because I was also weighted down with the back pack full of our supplies.

“We’ll try this route?” said Fratulon, leading the way into a winding, tubular tunnel. A few paces inside we were surrounded by absolute darkness. “Since it isn’t lighted it’s probably never used by the Zagors. And it’s unlikely we’ll run into any Ooths in this part of the labyrinth. Do you agree, Atlan?”

“Only in principle.”

“And what disturbs you about my suggestion?”

“The fact that it’s a suggestion—not a decision?” I answered.

It had become apparent to me in recent days that he often just turned over the responsibility for things to me. This was an honour, in fact, because it was a sign of his recognition of me as a man. But then on the other hand I had to ask myself what hidden purpose lay behind it all.

5/ THE MARAUTHANIAN RUINS

Gradually, Fratulon was being relieved of an old burden of danger.

Atlan had grown up in Tarkihl. Tarkihl was the palace of the Tatto, Armanck Declanter, and was also the single bastion of Arkonide civilization on this lawless world—even though the mighty structure had not been created by Arkonides. The original inhabitants had built it.

There Atlan had the advantage of contact with people of high influence as well as the highest officials of the government itself, and he learned how to get around in the society of noblemen. Initially, Fratulon had feared such exposure for his protege because on the one hand it was hard to foretell how Atlan might be received by the aristocratic Arkonides, whereas on the other hand one couldn't ignore the question of what Atlan's attitude would be toward them.

It was a high-staked gamble, and the outcome had often balanced on a razor's edge.

There was no way that Atlan could betray himself—or at least Fratulon believed this, because the youth knew nothing of his origin. But Orbanoshol III, had his secret agents everywhere, including Tarkihl, and it was always to be feared that they might become suspicious.

But now the most dangerous period had passed. Atlan was no longer dependent on anyone's protection, since he could stand on his own. He would be able to guard himself against the murderers who were searching the entire galaxy for him...

* * * *

We had covered a considerable distance in the labyrinths of Zagoth, and according to our compass we had moved in the general direction of the ruined city, but this place concealed so many secrets and mysterious places and effects that I couldn't fully trust the instrument. Fratulon seemed to share my feelings because he made no objection when I suggested that we should return to the surface at our first opportunity.

We stopped to rest. Fratulon had come upon another matter-projection curtain, behind which was a spherical cave that offered us ample room. While Sawbones looked to the wounds of the girl, Ice Claw scouted a way to the surface. In order

not to go astray, he utilized a “cold-stic?” to mark the way. This instrument left no trace that was optically noticeable, yet the marks could be easily followed by Ice Claw because of the cold they radiated.

The girl had regained consciousness, and after Fratulon had treated her she rapidly regained her strength, as well. She willingly answered our questions.

“What is your name?”

“Azhira.”

“Azhira?” I asked her, “how did you come to be in the labyrinths?”

“Vafron, that monster!” she cried hatefully. “He handed me over to the Zagors!”

“And who is Vafron?”

“He and 4 other men came in contact with us two days ago?” she answered. “I hated him from the first moment I saw him, and the others didn’t like him either.”

I raised a hand to interrupt her, and I smiled. “Why don’t you tell it to me in sequence? I’m also interested in knowing where all this took place, and to whom you belong.”

She swept a strand of red hair from her brow and smiled apologetically. “You’ll have to excuse me if I don’t make much sense. It’s just that I’m still pretty mixed up and confused. What those lizard creatures did to me isn’t easy to forget.” She shuddered.

“You don’t have to tell us anything if you’re not up to it?” I said.

She shook her head. “I have nothing to be silent about?” she said, and then suddenly grasped my hand. “Will you take me back to my father?”

When I promised to do so, she told her story.

She and her father had joined a group of treasure hunters who had set up their camp in the Marauthanian ruins. There were still other groups who were constantly competing with each other. Not infrequently there were acts of violence and even bloody fights between these outfits.

I interrupted her again. “I’m familiar with the situation at the site of the ruins. You can boil it down to just the details concerning your own personal story.”

She told us how Vafron and his 4 companions had shown up in the ruins two days before. After negotiating with the other camps in the area, these men came to make contact with her father. Vafron proposed an organization and merger of all treasure hunters who were camped in the ruins—naturally with him claiming the command position.

Azhira’s father was more archaeologically inclined toward tracing the original inhabitants of Gortavor and was no soldier of fortune. After ascertaining that the other members of his party were not interested in any merger either, he had chased Vafron away.

But on the following day when her father was away from camp with a majority of the other men, Vafron made a forced raid on their little stronghold and stole her away. Then while they were en route to another ruin site they were attacked by

Zagors. One of Vafron's men could parley with the Zagors, and when it was learned they were demanding a human sacrifice victim Vafron had handed Azhira over to them.

It was not an unusual tale. Incidents of this nature were more or less a daily part of life at the Marauthanian ruins. Of course it had been rather irresponsible of her father to take her along on the expedition, but I didn't say so out loud.

"Will you take me back there?" she asked.

"We're headed that way?" I told her. "In Tarkihl we picked up a distress call which may have come from those ruins."

She clung suddenly to my arm. "I hope nothing's happened to my father!"

"You shouldn't jump right away to the worst conclusions?" I said, hoping to reassure her.

"But Vafron..."

"Every other man in those ruins is another Vafron. It's not likely that the emergency call was connected with the incident you described. It's more probable that your father might have sent out a call for help because he's worried about you."

I could see she thought that probability to be even less plausible. Fortunately, however, I was saved from having to think up any further words of consolation. Ice Claw had returned.

"I've found a way out?" he reported.

* * * *

We started to fear that Ice Claw wouldn't be able to find the exit he was talking about. At any rate he gave us a nervous time of it when he maintained that the air temperature had warmed up his cold marks so that he couldn't find the trail he had made.

"We'll never find our way out of here!" wailed Azhira.

As I saw her tremble in her fear I wondered how she expected to bear up under the rough life in the ruins. She didn't impress one as the kind of girl who would easily accustom herself to the raw life and customs of this wild planet. But she was beautiful, and maybe she thought that with her looks she could twist any tough tunnel-buster in the Spider Desert around her little finger.

"We're on the right course?" declared Ice Claw as he led the way.

We turned off our flashlights and saw that the passage we were in opened upon a long chamber which was illuminated by a dim source of light. The ground was an inch thick with sand dust which must have been blown in here from the surface through an opening somewhere. It was now only a matter of moments before we would find the exit.

"Daylight!" cried Fratulon, pointing ahead.

Then I also made out the narrow ray of light that slanted steeply into the

cavern. The opening in the ceiling was wide enough for two men to get through it at the same time. A sand drift reached from the floor practically to the hole. There was a fairly strong draft of air that caused the sand to swirl about and get into our noses and mouths.

Azhira coughed. I drew her to me instinctively to protect her, and she buried her face against my chest.

Fratulon gave the drift a light fanning with his energy beam so as to melt in a fairly resistive crust and hold the loose sand together. Otherwise we'd have just kept sinking back in the fine grit without ever getting to the opening.

“It wouldn't be at all wise to hike in the desert now?” remarked Ice Claw.

“Why is that?” I asked, wonderingly. “The storm seems to have calmed down to where it's bearable.”

“I'll grant you that, but up there it's still hot—in fact it'll be intolerable until the sun goes down.”

Fratulon laughed and reached into his medical bag. He handed Ice Claw one of his “cold-sticks”. “If you can't stand the heat, rub some of this into you.”

Before we left the labyrinth, we all had a few swallows of water. When I reached the surface I saw the ruins at once. They towered beyond the web into an early twilight sky.

“We've made it!” I shouted in relief as I helped Azhira to climb through the opening. “The ruins are close at hand. We should be able to reach them before sundown!”

Azhira gazed through the openings in the silvery net overhead at the half-crumbled buildings, which were in the typical funnel-shaped design of the Arkonides. When she spoke, her lips trembled slightly. “They are very eerie looking from here. Those structures seem to be part of a ghost city, but they are inhabited by criminals of all kinds.”

“If you have such a low opinion of treasure hunters?” I asked, “why have you chosen their company?”

“I didn't want to leave my father alone?” she answered gently. “He's so... vulnerable, so ignorant of the world. He needs someone to take care of him. Besides, how could I know that there were men who were capable of such low criminality?”

“That's all right, Azhira?” said Fratulon as he glanced at me reprovingly. “Atlan didn't mean to lean on you.”

I felt like asking him what I had said to her to suddenly make him so protective, but I refrained from doing so. When women were involved, one never knew where he stood with old Sawbones. I strode away swiftly, raising the dust behind me. I took no further heed of Azhira. From here on, I thought, Fratulon could take charge of her.

Ice Claw caught up with me. “It's hot!” he groaned. He kept rubbing himself incessantly with the coldstick. “I hope the Zagors don't track us here. I wouldn't

be much good in a fight—not in this heat!”

“We are almost there?” I said, trying to console him.

Fratulon remained a slight distance behind us and kept up a lively conversation with Azhira. I tried not to eavesdrop but couldn’t help catching a few fragments that reached my ears. What I heard was enough to explain Fratulon’s actions a little more clearly. I grinned secretly to myself. Old chubby Sawbones had taken a fancy to the girl, himself!

“I’m melting!” cried Ice Claw tormentedly.

“That comes from too much chatter?” I retorted. “When your mouth flaps, you know, it loads up your bodily crystals with more heat-energy.”

“If that’s supposed to be humour, Atlan, it’s pretty flat?” commented Ice Claw, somewhat surprised at my tone.

Suddenly, however, he stopped and placed a hand on my forearm. The coldness of his taloned grip was enough of a shock to bring me to an abrupt halt. I reached automatically for my weapon, but then I realized there was no need for it.

About 20 paces ahead of us was one of the rare tie-points of the spider web. Countless silvery strands converged here, forming a sort of platform where the bleached corpses of three humanoid creatures were to be seen. They were humans of Arkonide descent. Their once silvery hair was now shoulder long and dull grey, and it did not move in the wind.

I heard Azhira make an outcry behind me.

“Don’t look at them?” Fratulon told her.

“What do you make of them, Sawbones?” I asked. “It’s fairly obvious they’re victims of the Zagors.”

“A sacrificial offering of the Zagors to their singing god of the silver web?” said Fratulon with conviction. He frowned pensively as he shook his head. “I don’t like that. Whenever the Zagors go on a warpath to get sacrifice victims for their gruesome rites, a discharge of forces from the web is imminent.”

I nodded comprehendingly. Fratulon had told me often enough about the fact that there was an upsurge of vibrations and hypnotic humming in the silvery net from time to time, whenever the Zagors made an unusual number of human offerings to their god. It was suspected that the reptilian creatures had some way of sensing the approach of any rise in web activity.

I turned to the girl. “Do you know any of those men, Azhira?”

Sobbing in her revulsion, she pressed closer to Fratulon. “I can’t look at them!” she exclaimed.

“It could be possible, though?” said Fratulon, “that they are treasure hunters you might know. Just take a peek at them—you can stand that much, I’m sure.”

Fearfully, Azhira lifted her head and barely opened her eyes to peer upward at the three bleached and mummified deadmen. She fixed her gaze upon them as one hypnotized, seemingly unable to turn away.

“Yes?” she murmured softly. “I know them... at least one of them, anyway.”

He belonged to Lay Manos' outfit. He was an unscrupulous wretch and murderer .

"Let's go on?" urged Fratulon. As we moved forward he put his arm around the girl's shoulders.

It wasn't long before we reached the ruins. They consisted mainly of 8 funnel-shaped edifices, the largest of which was about 100 meters high. A predecessor of Armanck Declanter, the Tatto Marauthan, had ordered them to be built here long ago in the hopes of founding an Arkonide colony. But the attempt to create another bulwark of Arkonide civilization had been shattered by the victorious power of the Spider Desert.

At present the cone-shaped structures were mostly deteriorated. But the signs of decay and destruction could not be attributed alone to the effects of wind and storm. The greatest amount of deterioration had been caused by the Zagors and the treasure hunters who persisted in haunting the place and dwelling in it. The endless battles for control or advantage had been waged with every means available. The scars of this warfare were visible everywhere.

And yet, life flourished in the ruins.

It was a miserable existence, continuously overshadowed by the imminence of death yet spurred on by the illusive dream of incalculable riches. The men and women who came into the Spider Desert usually had a poorly formed concept of what they were looking for. They didn't commit themselves to any fixed line of procedure. It was immaterial to them whether they stumbled upon treasures of a long-lost culture in the labyrinths of Zagooth or uncovered a mother lode vein of precious metal or discovered in the ruins the treasure chamber of the Tatto Marauthan, himself. They hoped for riches in any form.

But only the dreams of very few people were ever realized. Only a very small number of these adventurers ever returned—and fewer still came back with anything to show for it. For most of them, the desert itself became their fate.

Such were the Marauthanian ruins: a small oasis of stranded souls whose strivings led nowhere and whose longings remained unfulfilled.

The separate buildings were connected in many places by structures fashioned of synthetic materials, and by suspension bridges. From some of the cross-supports hung smaller structures in the shape of baskets and crates which served as shelters for the treasure hunters. Other seekers of a hardier kind had used every variety of materials to erect veritable strongholds on the more inaccessible slopes or in the more defendable declivities of the ruins. In the course of time the most bizarre types of improvised structures had emerged out of the fallen masonry, like a growth of ulcers. Many of these fantastic looking places were stoutly defended and hotly contested.

At the moment, however, the ruined city looked dead and extinct. There was only a howling of wind to be heard among the looming walls of masonry, but no sign of life was to be seen.

Fratulon took in the ruins with a narrowed gaze. "Azhira?" he asked, "where is the shelter or hiding place of your father's group?"

“We’re on the highest level of that building that has only a part of its outer wall still standing,?” she replied, while indicating the direction with her hand.

The structure she had pointed out loomed 50 meters into the air like the skeleton of some prehistoric monster. Where one of the best preserved portions of the out-flaring main wall still remained, there on the highest level was a clumsy looking structure that appeared to consist of the most variegated kinds of materials.

“An easily defended stronghold?” observed Fratulon. He furrowed his brow and added thoughtfully: “But the way that leads to it goes through other ruins where we would be easy targets for rival outfits.”

I agreed with Sawbones. Of course we were a neutral party, but the fact that Azhira was with us could mislead her father’s enemies and make them regard us as some new form of opposition.

I sighed. “We’ll have to chance fighting our way through to Azhira’s father. After that we can try to find out who sent the distress call.”

“There is somebody!” exclaimed Ice Claw. He pointed to the base of the nearest ruin, which was hardly more than 100 paces from us.

A quasi-humanoid creature with green skin had appeared there and was beckoning to us with all four of his arms. I realized that it was one of the dwarf-like Manolians who was dressed in the single-piece hooded cloak of one of the desert dwellers.

When he ventured a few steps from the protection of the ruins, the desert in front of us suddenly came to life. In various places the sand showed movement, and Zagors emerged into view. They must have crept up to the ruined city under cover of night and then burrowed themselves into the sand so that they could lie here in wait for unsuspecting treasure hunters.

At sight of the reptiles, the Manolian turned to flee, but before he could duck between the protective walls behind him, a spear plunged into his back.

I caught a last glimpse of the green-skinned creature as he collapsed, but I was now forced to concentrate on the Zagors, who faced us ready for a fight.

6/ IN THE PIRATES' LAIR

Impatiently, Fratulon looked forward to the day when his silence would be at an end.

Although he had believed that Atlan was not able to betray himself because of his ignorance of his parentage, there was one thing he had overlooked: namely, Atlan's childhood memories. They were dim and blurred and only seemed to occur feebly to him in his dreams. But also Atlan often had an association of ideas during conversations with certain aristocrats whose circle of activity revolved about Arkon and the Crystal Palace.

One day it turned out that some of these sporadic memory fragments almost proved fatal. Atlan related to a nobleman how he sometimes had certain mental impressions of Arkon and the Crystal Palace, although he had never been there before. The court sycophant and favourite of Orbanoshol immediately became suspicious, but before he could transmit his information, Fratulon had managed to silence him.

Atlan was the only witness to the deed. He asked him why he had killed this man in whom he had a blind trust and to whom he had given his friendship. At the time, Fratulon had been very close to revealing the truth to the boy, but he again restrained himself.

Reason had won the battle, and now Fratulon anxiously awaited the day when he could break his long silence...

* * * *

In the next moment there were only six Zagors left out of eight. Fratulon had killed two of them, and immediately thereafter two more were credited to me. I felled them with a sustained jolt from my hand beamer. And then the rest of them were upon us.

I couldn't bring another shot to bear but I was able to dodge a Zagor who was making a thrust at me with his spear. The force of his charge carried him past me and I struck him on the back of the head with the barrel of my weapon. Although the blow didn't knock him out, it staggered him enough to slow his reactions down. I was after him so quickly that he didn't have time to even make a defensive movement before I clipped him across his throat with the edge of my

hand. I heard his death rattle as he collapsed.

Only then was I able to look to my comrades, but it seemed they were no longer in need of my help. Fratulon stood there, legs apart, with Skarg poised ready in his hand. At his feet lay a bloodied Zagor. Another lay nearby in an unnatural position. Since he did not exhibit any visible wounds, I assumed that Ice Claw had taken care of him—just as he was taking care of the last one. As I looked at the chretkor he released the limp reptile from his deadly strangle hold.

Suddenly, Azhira let out a cry of warning.

I whirled about and sighted more Zagors emerging from the Spider Desert. “Get to those ruins!” I ordered, and I fired a few random beam shots at the new attackers before I took Azhira’s hand and ran with her toward the nearest funnel-shaped building.

Just as I thought we had arrived at a point of safety, the girl cried out and staggered. I barely blocked her fall. As I gripped her upper arm, something wet and warm seeped through my fingers—blood!

“Azhira, you’re wounded!” I exclaimed, somewhat shaken by the fact, and I drew her in under the protection of the out-jutting masonry.

She stared in wide-eyed perplexity at her bloodied arm. Then her gaze turned to the green-skinned Manolian, who lay close by with a spear protruding from his back. He was still moving.

“Fratulon!” Sawbones and Ice Claw had just caught up to us. “See what you can do for that Manolian,” I said.

The sturdy doctor-warrior grasped the 4-armed creature and drew him in under the protection of the wall.

In the meantime I had taken out my ray weapon again and turned toward our attackers, but the Zagors were already making a retreat. They must have realized that they couldn’t take us by surprise, and apparently they also feared that other inhabitants of the ruins might come to our aid.

“It’s alright now?” I announced with relief. “We’re safe... Ice Claw, keep an eye on the desert while I take care of Azhira’s wound.”

Fratulon had placed the Manolian on his side and was inspecting his back wound. However, the spear was so deep that it could not be extracted without wounding the creature more severely... As I met Fratulon’s gaze, he shook his head slightly.

I examined Azhira’s arm wound. “It isn’t bad?” I reassured her, and I slipped the back pack off my shoulders.

“I... I felt a terrible blow when that spear hit me. I thought it was going right through my arm?” she said, somewhat weakly. Her face was abnormally pale.

“It’s only a harmless flesh wound?” I told her. “I’ll bind it up and give you a sedative. After that you’ll feel better, Azhira.”

The Manolian opened his eyes and looked about him with a glassy stare. “What... happened?” he asked in broken Arkonide. He moved his 4 arms and

sought to touch his back.

“Be still?” Fratulon ordered, pressing the other’s arms back. “You need rest, friend.”

“Who struck me down?” asked the Manolian faintly. A greenish spittle appeared at one corner of his mouth.

“The Zagors hit you before you could get to safety?” answered Fratulon.

“Ah yes... the Zagors. I remember.

I had fixed Azhira’s arm wound and given her her sedative, so now I turned my attention to the Manolian.” We’ve driven back the Zagors,” I said. “They are no longer a threat to us.”

The Manolian made a wry face. “They are... a constant threat. They seek victims for their humming god.”

As his glassy eyes turned to me, I nodded. “We saw three of Lay Manos’ men who fell into their hands. Are you with the same outfit?”

The Manolian nodded weakly. “I am... Noy Manos... Lay’s second-in-command. When he saw you he sent me out here to... to bring you to him. Are you... ?”

“We’ve come from Tarkihl in response to a distress call that must have come from this area,” I answered.

“That is right?” he said and then paused to carefully draw a deep breath. Three of his arms jerked forward gropingly. As the three hands found my right arm and closed around it, their grip was very feeble. “You have to get to Lay... he wants to talk to you...”

“Is he the one who sent out the distress signal?” I asked.

The Manolian released his grip on my arm and sought to support himself on his four hands. “I’ll take you to him.” He collapsed, powerless to support himself.

“Was it Lay Manos who sent out that call?” I repeated.

But there was no response from the Manolian.

“He’s dead?” Fratulon confirmed. He closed his eyes and jerked the spear out of his back.

“And we still don’t know what’s going on here?” I said.

“You’re right about that?” replied Fratulon as he watched the desert with narrowed eyes. “At any rate we know why the ruins look so dead and deserted. The inhabitants are afraid of the Zagors because they’re on the warpath.”

I agreed. Normally the Zagors were content to just attack the caravans, but when the bloodlust came upon them and they were short of sacrificial victims they would form large war parties and even attack heavily defended strongholds and fortresses. At such times, one was not safe from them even in the Marauthanian ruins.

The only thing the Zagors feared then was the humming and vibrating of the silvery strands, because even they were not immune to the hypnotic emanations which were thus produced.

“I suggest we look up this Lay Manos character first of all and find out what he wants from us?” I said. “It’s just possible he could have sent out that signal.”

“But what will become of my father in the meantime?” objected Azhira, jumping to her feet. Since we gave her no answer, she made her own decision. “If you won’t go with me, I’ll make it up there alone!”

“*You’ll do nothing of the kind, my pretty child.*” It was a voice that came suddenly from behind us.

I whirled and stared at the 4 bowmen who had stepped forth from among the fallen blocks of masonry. Three of them were Arkonides and the 4th was a Manolian who held two drawn bows simultaneously. All arrows were aimed directly at us.

“Just don’t move from the spot!” warned one of the Arkonides.

This one had the most unusual hair style I had ever seen. Long and silvery blond, it framed his face something like a helmet but fell in artistic patterns and waves over his shoulders, reaching to his chest and down his back. “We’ll shoot if you make the slightest suspicious

Azhira cried out and ran away.

“Azhira!” exclaimed Fratulon, horrified. He was about to follow her but the 4-armed Manolian blocked his way with his doubly drawn bows. The 4 bowmen made no move to pursue Azhira, and I found out immediately the reason why.

High above us there was a deep-throated cawing sound as a mighty shadow plunged downward toward the ground. It was a giant bird of prey which spread out its wings over Azhira, grasped her in its claws, and lifted her into the air. Then it disappeared with her into a hole in the broken outer wall of the cone-shaped building.

The Arkonide with the unusual hair only grinned. “We will now disarm you and bring you to Lay Manos,” he said. “If you value your lives, it would be advisable not to resist.”

Fratulon grinned back. “You’re only doing us a favour, since we were more or less on our way to see Lay Manos.”

* * * *

The funnel-shaped structures were master works of Arkonide architecture. As a rule they were normally only accessible through entrances from below. The various rooms and living quarters were arranged in terraces on the flanged inner side of the cone form, so that the middle of each structure was free for flowering plants which were arranged in a park like splendour that was heavenly to behold.

But this pomp and magnificence was no more to be seen in the Marauthanian ruins. The built-in landscaping had deteriorated along with the buildings and the exotic plants had long since died out. Only a few of the hardier and more adaptive growths had managed to survive and send forth their tendrils and blooms among

the fragments and debris on each level. As a result of changed environmental conditions, even some of them had developed mutated forms.

“My name is Ardelo.” The Arkonide with the spectacular hairdo introduced himself as we climbed higher through access shafts and up half-crumbled stairs to the upper levels. “It might well be you’ll be dealing with me in the near future.”

“I hope you won’t regret later that you made our acquaintance, Ardelo,” said Fratulon. He gave him our names and the reason for our being here.

Ardelo only laughed. “Lay Manos will be glad to have a sawbones as his guest. When he finds out that you’re responsible for the well-being of the Tatto of Gortavor, he’ll be doubly impressed.”

We came to the upper end of the stairs. I estimated that we must be 20 levels above the desert. Through a gap in the outer wall I could see the great web far below, sparkling in the last rays of the setting sun.

Ardelo stopped before an abyss-like hole that was some 20 paces wide and sank a few levels into the depths. On the other side of the pit was a wall that was overgrown with plants with large yellow leaves.

“Hey, are you asleep over there!?” Ardelo called across the intervening space. “Let’s have the drawbridge!”

No sooner had he spoken than a part of the wall rattled out of the way, leaving an aperture about 6-feet wide. Shortly thereafter, a ramp supported by two iron chains spanned the abyss.

“Alright, get on over!” Ardelo commanded.

I was the first to walk onto the narrow bridge. Fratulon and Ice Claw followed me. On the other side we were received by 3 Manolians. The part of the building we entered had been really well preserved, even though none of the original furnishings were here anymore. On the walls there were still some fragments remaining of the self-illuminating material that had been used in various parts of the Zagooth labyrinths.

There was considerable disorganization here. Bales and boxes were stacked about in jumbled fashion among machinery parts, weapons, and food provisions. But immediately I noticed that the weapons consisted entirely of swords, lances, clubs and other primitive fighting implements. There was no sign of ray beamers or other modern weapons. Even Lay Manos’ men carried only primitive types of weapons.

It caused me to fear that we’d have little chance of ever seeing our energy weapons again.

Ardelo went with his cohorts into some lateral passage and left us in the hands of the 3 Manolians. They escorted us into a large chamber, the floor of which was covered with furs topped by a scattering of colourful pillows in all shapes and sizes. Along one wall were a number of plundered articles of furniture that were an unaccustomed luxury for those who lived in the ruins.

Another wall was broken through in various places, offering a good view of the ruins below. About 180 to 200 feet beyond these improvised windows a

slender wall fragment rose into the sky. On the highest pinnacle of this pillar was a fairly large platform where several of the giant birds of prey had built their nests. In that moment I chanced to see one of them land there with a Zagor in its claws. The ensuing shrieks and cacklings sent a shudder through me and I turned away from the horrible spectacle.

Not far away in the middle of the chamber was a throne-like chair in which sat an unusually large Manolian. On the chair's tall backrest perched one of the dangerous, carnivorous birds of prey.

"I bid you welcome, noble sirs!" announced the green man in faultless Arkonide, and he swept his arms open in an extravagant gesture. "My vassals have reported to me that you come from Tarkihl. This is excellent, as it should prove advantageous to my plans. After all, Prontier would be more likely to deal with noblemen than with men of uncertain heritage."

Fratulon took several swift steps toward the Manolian, but he paused when the great bird on the chair fluttered its wings restlessly and opened its sharp beak. "I am Fratulon, personal physician of the Tatto, Armanck Declanter," said Sawbones, with a grave dignity. "Am I to deduce from your words that you only sent out a distress signal in order to entice me here and exploit my services for some dark purpose of your own?"

The Manolian reacted in some surprise. However, he recovered quickly, apparently pleased. "Well, so you're the Tatto's private medico, eh? Then I may expect you to be a man of reason rather than one who might get carried away by foolish impulses. Since you are a physician, all intelligent life is sacred to you. So I'm hoping you will do everything possible to save Azhira."

I moved to Fratulon's side, while keeping a wary eye on the fidgety bird beast. "You haven't answered Fratulon's question yet. Lay Manos, were you the one who sent out that distress call?"

The green-skinned Manolian's face reflected a mixture of surprise and anger. "What are you talking about? What distress call? I don't even have a transceiver. And why should I send for help? I can take care of myself in any situation."

"If that is true, then you don't need us?" I retorted. "Let us go so that we can help the ones who sent the call."

"That is enough!" shouted Manos angrily.

The bird beast shot from the chair as though by command and sailed toward me on its giant wings. Before it could rake me with its talons, I was just able to drop to the floor out of its range. By the time I got to my feet again, the bird was already back in its place on top of the throne.

"That was merely a warning. The next time I send Ayff at you, your quickness will not do you any good. Who are you to put on airs with me, anyway?"

"I am Atlan, assistant to Fratulon?" I answered.

Lay Manos pointed to the chretkor and asked: "Who are you?"

"Ice Claw."

Manos nodded. "A fitting name. You look like a wandering iceberg that's gone astray in the desert." He smacked the arms of his chair with two of his 4 hands. "I can see I'm going to have to speak plainly to you. Basically it's immaterial where you hail from or what you want here. It's even possible that you don't know anything about Azhira and her father. But fate has thrown you together with the girl so that you are responsible for her."

"Lay Manos, you are unable to force us," Fratulon began.

But the Manolian interrupted him with a multi-handed gesture of impatience. "Get off your high horse, sawbones—this isn't Tarkihl! I know that you'll do anything you can to spare the girl's life. If you will do what I ask you will be a free man and can do your duty as you see fit. But before you help the ones who sent out the distress call, you must perform a service for me."

"What do you want of us, Manos?" asked Fratulon.

The Manolian sighed in evident relief. "At last you're talking like a sensible man. I want you to find Prontier and tell him that his daughter, Azhira, is my prisoner. He can get her back as soon as he relinquishes to me the treasures that he brought up out of Zagooth. If he refuses, his daughter must die."

"And why do you choose us to be your mediators?" Fratulon wanted to know. "Why don't you send one of your own people?"

"That was my original intention?" answered the Manolian, "but I've decided that none of my men are sufficiently fluent to be able to handle this negotiation with Prontier. You are much more suitable for that. And you should be glad I'm entrusting this assignment to you. I could just as easily have had you executed."

"I'll grant you that,?" admitted Fratulon. "But don't expect too much from us. We can't force Azhira's father to agree to the exchange."

"He'll meet my conditions?" said Manos, with conviction. "That is, if he wants his daughter back in one piece. You don't have to do anything more than to be factual with Prontier and come to terms with him as to what will be in store for his daughter if he doesn't hand over that Zagooth treasure. So that you may appreciate the confidence I have in your art of persuasion, I will permit your two friends to accompany you."

Fratulon persisted with a further inquiry: "Are you expecting one of us to come back with Prontier's answer?"

The other shook his head. "Once you've completed your mission, you are free. I'll send Ardelo along with you, and he'll bring back Prontier's message to me. You have just one hour to change the old fool's mind. If Ardelo isn't back here by then, Azhira will die."

"One hour!" protested Fratulon. "It may take us at least that long to fight our way through to Prontier's hiding place!"

The Manolian laughed. "You will go there by air, of course!" he announced.

I shuddered when I heard a cackling and cawing and beating of wings coming from the direction of the improvised windows. Four of the giant birds had just entered there and were settling to the floor of the hall.

“You will be as swift as the wind, and what’s more, you won’t have to fight it out with the other treasure hunters or the Zagors, either. On that basis also, there’s no reason for returning your energy weapons to you. I’ll keep them as a present to me.”

Fratulon clenched his fists angrily. “Manos, if you put us out in the ruins without weapons, you know we’re done for. At least give me back my sword and furnish my friends with swords also. If we face Prontier without weapons, we’ll be dealing from a weaker position, right from the start!”

Lay Manos considered this briefly. Then he yielded to Fratulon’s request and added: “Alright, sawbones, I’ll let you have your equipment back. And if you’ll take a piece of advice from me, I suggest you look up Komyal’s outfit when you’re through with Prontier. The Voolynesian has some radio equipment and is probably the one who sent out the distress call. A bad epidemic of some kind has broken out among his people—maybe a plague...”

“A plague!” echoed Fratulon incredulously.

“Yes, a plague?” confirmed Manos. “After you’ve taken care of my little chore you’d better go take care of the Voolynesians. Ever since this morning when word of the epidemic got out, none of the inhabitants of these ruins has dared to come out of hiding. We’d all be obliged to you, sawbones, if you were able to keep this thing from spreading.”

“Thanks for the information?” muttered Fratulon, suppressing his rage.

Ardelo came into the throne room and handed over Skarg and the first-aid kit to Fratulon. He also issued one sword apiece to me and Ice Claw. I noted that he had thrust my hand beamer into his belt.

“I wish you a happy flight and lots of success!” Manos called after us as we entrusted ourselves to the heavy talons of the mighty birds.

7/ THE TREASURE BARTER

Until now, no one had seen the real Fratulon.

There was a certain amount of personal gratification in playing the mystery figure. His was the role of the bon vivant who never failed to give an appraising eye to passing fair ladies, or the general epicurean and gourmet to whom food and drink were a part of his life style. These roles came easily to him because in certain respects they suited his character. And yet the personality he displayed to the aristocrats in Tarkihl was only a facade.

There was still no one on Gortavor who had come to know the real Fratulon, not even Atlan, although in the latter's company he often lifted his mask—to a point. It was just enough so that Atlan could not fully perceive his real identity.

Because Atlan could only know who his teacher was and what goals he had set for himself when the youth had withstood his final test...

* * * *

Although I was fond of flying, it was not quite to my taste to be in the clutches of a giant bird of prey, high over the desert—much less so to be an easy target for every enemy lying in ambush below among the ruins.

But fortunately there were no untoward incidents. It was nevertheless a relief to leave Lay Manos' roost far behind us and to come within sight of the gaunt ruin that was our goal. Here on the outer flank of the skeletal building remains, the bizarre structure of Prontier's shelter hung suspended.

We were almost at our destination when I noticed for the first time that we were being followed at some distance by a fifth bird of prey. Now it suddenly caught up and flew past us, circling close over Prontier's stronghold. I recognized the figure that the creature held suspended in its claws. It was Azhira!

"Father!" she cried out despairingly.

What was Lay Manos' purpose in this manoeuvre?

An opening appeared in the strange construction atop the towering wall. A humanoid figure showed itself, but I could only make out the upper portion of it. I caught sight of wavy, long white hair framing a very ancient-looking face.

"Azhira!"

The bird carrying Ardelo flew so close to the aperture that the white-haired one drew back in startled surprise. In the next moment the barrel of a ray weapon loomed in the opening.

“Don’t be stupid, Prontier!” yelled Ardelo. “If you open fire on us you won’t see your daughter again—at least not alive!”

“Then what do you devils want from me?”

“We’ve come to work out a price with you for your daughter?” shouted Ardelo. “Lay Manos sent us. Let us land first so we can go into the details!”

The opening banged shut with a loud slamming sound, but before us was a porch like platform. The ray weapon had disappeared.

First, Ardelo was set down by his bird beast—then Ice Claw and Fratulon and myself in succession, until all of us felt a firm support under our feet. I breathed a big sigh of relief.

“You take it from here, Sawbones?” said Ardelo. “But just don’t forget the girl’s life is at stake. Don’t try any tricks. In one hour, Lay Manos will send a bird after me to bring me back, and he expects to get a positive decision.”

“I’ll keep it in mind?” Fratulon promised, glumly.

In front of us an armour-plated door swung upward, revealing an Arkonide. He was armed with a dagger and wore his unkempt hair tied behind his head in a knot. Behind him appeared two more men in an equally dishevelled condition.

“You men are armed?” said the man with the hair knot. “You’d better leave those weapons at the entrance.”

Fratulon shook his head. “We come in peace, but we will not humble ourselves before you. Prontier will have to trust us if he’s interested in seeing his daughter again. We’re keeping our weapons.”

I could see uncertainty in the Arkonide’s face. Probably Prontier had told him to be sure to disarm us before leading us to him, but since the facts didn’t fit his instructions the sentinel didn’t know what he should do. The decision was made for him by Prontier himself.

His voice came to us from inside the stronghold. “Let them in, Waccor. I’ll receive just two of them, but no firearms! You keep an eye on the other two in the meantime!”

The man called Waccor made way for us. As we passed him he singled out Fratulon and myself. “You, Fatso, and you, little friend—you get to see the Professor. And you two...” He pointed to Ardelo and Ice Claw... “...are going to keep me company.”

We entered the improvised fortress, which appeared no less bizarre on the inside than it had from the exterior. The entire structure was supported by an assortment of metal and plastic beams which were cross-braced by other supporting members. From this network of girders a number of compartments had been suspended, which served the inhabitants as living quarters and storage rooms. The largest of these compartments loomed above us, composed of sturdy

sheets of armour plate. A hatch opened in its floor and a rope ladder dropped down.

“I demand to be present at the negotiations?” announced Ardelo as he determinedly gripped his weapon.

Fratulon grinned and shook his head. “Your boss told me to handle this deal, remember? So I can also choose my partner in this. You heard the Professor’s conditions—no firearms. It’s better that you remain here, Ardelo. Ice Claw will keep you company.”

Ardelo stiffened visibly at this. His face darkened under its fixed shroud of hair. I thought he was about to lose control and draw his weapon, but then he thought better of it and complied with Fratulon’s instruction.

“That’s better, Ardelo?” said Fratulon. “Manos will be pleased with you.”

I was the first to climb the rope ladder. When I came up through the trapdoor, the barrel of a heavy raygun was thrust under my nose.

“Take it easy, Professor,?” I advised him. “Lay Manos sent us here to palaver with you—nothing more.”

I remained near the trapdoor with my hand fairly close to the hilt of my sword as I regarded the person facing me. Frontier was tall and slender but appeared smaller than he actually was because of his stooped posture. His long, narrow cranium was almost entirely obscured by the wild confusion of his long white hair. Beneath a high forehead sparkled a pair of dark eyes which alternately watched me and then Fratulon as he grunted his way through the narrow hatchway and joined us. His wrinkled face gave him an ancient appearance, but this impression was counteracted by the alert life energy that burned in his eyes.

“You can put your weapon away, Professor?” said Fratulon. “You have nothing to fear from us. We do not belong to Lay Manos’ outfit. He has forced us to be gobetweens for him. We had to accede to his demands so as not to endanger your daughter’s life.”

Frontier inspected us searchingly. “Actually, you don’t look much like criminals?” he said, finally. “Who are you, and what have you to do with that Manolian?”

Fratulon briefly told him our story. It boiled down to the fact that we had come from Tarkihl in response to a distress call, we had saved Azhira from the clutches of the Zagors, and then had fallen into the hands of Lay Manos and his men.

“I’m inclined to believe your story?” said Frontier, but he still trained his weapon on us. “The only thing I don’t understand is why Manos chose you, his prisoners, to carry out this mission. He must realize that you wouldn’t voluntarily go back to him.”

“Manos has given us our freedom?” I interjected. “But he’s sure that Fratulon, as physician to the Tatto of Gortavor, will not gamble with your daughter’s life. The real reason Manos let us go is that he fears the epidemic that’s supposed to have broken out in Komyal’s camp. It’s to his own interest that we prevent the plague from spreading.

“I’ve heard about the plague?” said Prontier. He gave us another testy look, then made a decision to dispense with the weapon. “I believe you. I don’t see any reason why you should try to deceive me. So what is the message you are supposed to give me from Lay Manos? What is he asking in return for Azhira?”

Fratulon stated the condition succinctly: “He wants the treasure you brought up out of Zagooth.”

Prontier’s eyes widened in astonishment. “What, treasure?”

Fratulon and I exchanged quick glances. Prontier’s surprise appeared to be genuine.

“I haven’t the slightest idea what treasure he’s talking about?” said Fratulon, “but I gathered the impression that Manos was sure of it. He seemed to have information that you have found something of value, and that’s what he wants in exchange for Azhira. If you do not fulfil his requirement he will kill the girl. That is no idle threat, Prontier. I’m convinced he means business.”

“So he knows that I’ve found something in the labyrinths that I attach a value to?” muttered the Professor, more or less to himself. “Where did he get this information? It could be that one of my men has mentioned it to some of the other treasure hunters. I might have known that they were not trustworthy. I hired them at the Gortavor spaceport although I realized that they were only adventurers and fortune hunters. But you can’t scare up a better type of men…”

“It’s no use trying to figure out who could have told Manos about your valuable discovery?” said Fratulon. “He’s got your daughter. He’ll only set her free in exchange for the treasure.”

Prontier slowly shook his head while a bitter smile touched his lips. “Lay Manos could not have found out what my find pertains to because I’ve not discussed it with anyone,” he said. He shrugged his shoulders resignedly. Then he looked at us again and added: “The Manolian will not set Azhira free, even if I give him all my treasures.”

“You leave that to us, Professor?” I answered swiftly. “We’ll see to it that he keeps his part of the bargain.”

Prontier did not seem much convinced by my words. Again he shook his head. “Manos will be disappointed if I turn these treasures over to him—because to him they are completely worthless. They are only cultural artefacts of the original people of Gortavor which only have a hypothetical value. See for yourselves.”

Prontier turned to the rear section of the room. As he turned his back to us I heard a series of strange noises through the trapdoor. I went over to the opening and looked below.

I saw Ice Claw struggling with Ardelo. The chretkor sought to grasp Ardelo with his claws, but the Arkonide was much too nimble for him. He seemed to know what uncanny power lay in Ice Claw’s hands. He struck the chretkor over the head with the butt of his weapon.

Ice Claw succeeded in grasping Ardelo’s neck with both hands, and he closed his grip. I was about to breathe easy again when I noticed that this seemed to have

no effect on Ardelo whatsoever. Which led me to suspect that his special hairdo was insulating him from Ice Claw's deadly forces.

The Arkonide broke free of the grip and struck Ice Claw down with a vicious blow. I was in the act of ducking out of sight when Ardelo, discovered me and aimed his beamer at me.

"Don't move, Atlan?" he warned me, "or your career as a junior sawbones will be cut real short!"

"You must have lost your mind?" I blurted out at him. "If Manos finds out how you've interrupted our dealings, he'll let his birds have you for supper!"

Ardelo laughed. "They've gotten used to Zagors. Besides, I don't give a hoot about Lay Manos. I'm going to have that treasure for myself. Now move! Tell the Professor to hand it over or I'll broil all of you alive up there! And don't let him get any smart ideas. His loyal servant, Waccor, has told me what the jewel box looks like where the treasure is kept."

So Waccor had turned traitor, I thought, and here Ardelo was also going behind Manos' back who thought he could trust him. It was grotesque and somewhat ironical that all of them were after a treasure that wasn't worth a thing to them. I might have found it all amusing if Azhira's life hadn't been at stake in the matter.

"I won't wait much longer, Frontier!" shouted Ardelo.

Without moving from my place, I said: "Give him the treasure, Professor."

"But then what happens to Azhira?"

"Didn't you say, yourself, that Lay Manos probably wouldn't go for the trade?" I reminded him. "If Ardelo thinks the treasure will make him happy, then give it to him."

"Atlan is right?" I heard Fratulon say behind me. "It makes no sense for us to sacrifice ourselves over that jewel box. We'll manage to find another way to set Azhira free."

Even as Fratulon spoke I was aware of small noises behind me that sounded like the opening and closing of a container, and I knew that Sawbones had caught my secret signal and followed through.

Right after that, Frontier moved into my field of vision, carrying the jewel case. It was about the length of a forearm, half as wide, and a hand breadth deep. I took it out of Frontier's hand and handed it down to Ardelo, who received it without lowering his weapon.

"It feels pretty light?" he said suspiciously as he weighed the box in his hand.

"It's an old superstition that the worth of something has to match its weight," I said.

"Just the same I'm going to see if this thing is also slightly empty or not?" insisted Ardelo, drawing back toward the armour-plated door. He reached behind him, pulled back the bolt, and shoved the door open.

Only then did he open the cover of the box.

His eyes widened in horror as a greenish cloud of gas poured out of it. He cried out. The weapon fell from his hand. He clutched at his throat, gasping for breath. He staggered outside where he stumbled and fell across the platform. I watched him as he went over the edge, still clutching the chest to him, and fell away into the depths below.

“Now all my work and research has been for nothing?” commented Frontier gloomily. “And there’s no possibility of saving Azhira.”

* * * *

“I couldn’t imagine that Ardelo would go over the edge with the box?” said Fratulon remorsefully. “That vial I placed in the chest only contained some knockout gas. Anyway, you don’t have to give up yet, Professor. We’ll just climb down and fetch your treasure back.”

Frontier waved off the suggestion with a deprecating gesture. “That isn’t what I meant at all when I said that my researches have been in vain. It doesn’t even make any difference to me whether I retrieve those archaeological artefacts or not. If I lose Azhira, nothing else would make any sense or have any value to me. Lay Manos won’t believe me when I tell him I have no articles of value with which to pay the ransom for Azhira’s release. He will assume that I am not interested in making such an exchange, and he will kill her.”

“We’ll find a way to outsmart that Manolian?” I declared, although at the moment I didn’t see any way out. “We don’t have to advertise the fact that what he wants doesn’t actually exist, you know.”

“Atlan has a point there?” agreed Fratulon. “We could pretend to be agreeable with his terms for the exchange, but first we have to gain some time so that we can work out a plan.”

Meanwhile, we had all come down the ladder to the lower floor level near the door. It was at this moment that Ice Claw recovered from the blow he had received from Ardelo. Having overheard some of our conversation, he proceeded to give us some added information.

“While you were negotiating with the Professor?” he said, “Waccor and the other two men with him went out of here somewhere. He made an excuse to them that the traps had to be checked that protect the approaches to this place, but it looked to me as though he and Ardelo had something cooking between them. At first it seemed ridiculous to think that the two of them could be working together in secret, but I kept an eye on them just the same. So it didn’t come as a complete surprise to me when Ardelo made his attack.”

He stared at his hands perplexedly. “But I still don’t understand why my forces had no effect on him.”

I explained it to him: “I saw you at the time, Ice Claw. It was that crazy hairdo of his—it worked like an insulator against those iceberg hands of yours.”

Fratulon spoke up: “There’s no doubt about it—Waccor and Ardelo have made

a deal between them for dividing up the booty. And if Waccor doesn't find any loot with Ardelo's corpse he'll assume that it's still up here in the stronghold. Presumably he'll get some cronies together in an attempt to storm this place."

"Just let him try it?" commented Frontier grimly. "I'll give those crooks a hot reception. I have an energy weapon against their spears and bows and arrows. Besides, there is a series of traps he'll have to deactivate before he can get here."

"Nevertheless, Professor, you aren't going to be safe here any longer?" put in Fratulon.

"Nor *was* I?" retorted Frontier. "I had imagined myself to be safe because I trusted my men. I noticed some of their duplicity for the first time when I was in Zagooth. They left me behind, probably in the hopes that I would become lost in the labyrinths, but I found my way out. They protested their innocence in the matter but I didn't believe them. When we returned here to the shelter I found that Waccor had been tied up and the others killed. Waccor told me that Vafron had forced his way in and stolen Azhira. Now I'm just about convinced that Waccor let Vafron come into the fort."

"Wouldn't it be possible?" I said, "that Waccor might get together with Vafron again? If Vafron made it once into your fortress he ought to be able to do it a second time. You have to get out of here, Professor, before Waccor gets reinforcements and lays a siege on this place."

"Let them come?" he answered, crestfallen. "If I can't hold out here I have a means of escape that even Waccor doesn't know about. But why should I run away at all? I don't have anything more to lose. Let Vafron have his little triumph."

"If there's an escape route, so much the better?" I said. "You can leave your base together with us and be undetected. That way, the others will think we're still here. And while they're storming this place we can be trying to rescue Azhira."

"How will you accomplish that?" asked Frontier, gesturing in a sign of resignation. "I don't have anything I can use that Manos would consider to be a fair exchange for Azhira."

As I was about to answer him I heard a persistent cawing sound outside.

Ice Claw exclaimed: "That's Lay Manos' bird beast—the one that's supposed to bring Ardelo back!"

Frontier cried out in despair, turning to Fratulon. "If the bird doesn't bring Ardelo back, Manos will kill my daughter! Can you deny that?" He was shaking Fratulon's shoulders by now. "What can we possibly do? Ardelo is dead! That bird will fly back alone and..."

"No?" I interposed, decisively. "I'm going back in Ardelo's place."

"That would be suicide, Atlan?" Sawbones retorted. "Manos would suspect a trap and he'd feed you to his carrion monsters."

"Not if he swallows the bait I'm going to dangle in front of him?" I answered. "I'm going to tell him factually that Ardelo is double dealing him, and I'll also let him know we don't trust him, so that's why I've come to him with empty hands."

He'll have to accept that when I propose we select a neutral meeting place where Azhira can be exchanged for the treasure. What place would you suggest as a meeting point, Professor? It should be easy for Lay Manos to get to, and it should be one that's familiar to other groups of treasure hunters. I'll tell him that we'll meet there at dawn to hand over the ransom. Actually, the rest of you will have to win over some other camp of men to our side in order to play them against Lay Manos at the right moment. If some of the others smell a treasure they'll be ready to fight, so while the thieves are all busy bashing each other's heads in you can be trying to free Azhira and me.

"That sounds easier than it will be to actually accomplish," cautioned Frontier.

"Nevertheless it's a good idea?" Fratulon argued and he added: "At any rate it's the only way we can gain more time. The only thing I don't like is that you're offering yourself as a hostage to Lay Manos, Atlan. I..."

Ice Claw interrupted him impatiently. "We can't wait any longer or that bird's going to fly back alone. So what meeting point are you suggesting, Professor?"

Frontier hesitated and then said: "Marauthan's main reception hall would be as suitable as any other place."

"Marauthan's main hall it is!" exclaimed Ice Claw, and before anybody could stop him he dashed outside onto the platform.

"Ice Claw!" I shouted after him, and I was about to chase him when I came to a sudden stop in the open doorway.

The great carrion bird shot down at that instant, grasped the chretkor about the shoulders with its talons, and flew away with him.

"See you at dawn!" yelled Ice Claw. Then the bird beast disappeared with him among the night-shadowed crumbling towers.

I turned back into Frontier's shelter, scolding aloud to myself. "That crazy chretkor—you never know when he's going to try something on his own! One of these days, that stubborn, animated anatomy chart..."

Fratulon tried to console me, clapping me on the shoulder. "There's an advantage in Ice Claw's going instead of you?" he said. "When we contact Komyal's outfit I'll need you as my assistant. Ice Claw wouldn't be able to help me combat the epidemic."

Frontier was incredulous. "Do you mean to say you're actually going to try to penetrate the stronghold of the Voolynesians? But what will happen to Azhira then?"

"We've come out into the Spider Desert to bring medical help to some treasure hunters who are in an emergency situation?" Fratulon explained. "Whatever happens, these people need our help and I'm not going to leave them in the lurch, Professor. But we'll also try to help Azhira. Maybe it's even possible to combine the two efforts in one. Now show us that secret exit of yours so that we can get out of here."

Frontier shrugged dejectedly and led us into the rear part of the hideout. Between several bales of material he showed us a square declivity in the floor.

The bottom of the inset area seemed to be composed of the same armour-plate type material as the rest of the floor, but Prontier explained it to us.

“This is not solid matter, but a projection of something that is deceptively similar. The generation of this matter projection is one of the secrets I was able to salvage out of my expedition into Zagooth.”

“We’re familiar with this phenomenon,” said Fratulon. “So what is underneath here?”

“There’s a shaft that leads almost in a straight descent through the outer wall to the base of the whole coneshaped structure?” answered Prontier.

“Then there’s nothing left but to climb down through it?” Fratulon concluded.

8/ THE DREADED TRAP

Fratulon had his own background of explorations and hidden discoveries.

During his 13 years on Gortavor he had made countless trips into unknown regions, and therefore he knew the planet like no one else. He was as much at home in the eternal snow fields and ice floes of the polar regions as he was in the steaming jungles of the equator. During his travels he had unravelled countless mysteries pertaining to the original inhabitants and had learned to use them to his advantage.

However, all those lonely excursions into the wildernesses of Gortavor were not motivated by a lust for adventure, as he pretended to others. Rather, they had been for the sole purpose of making preparations in case that Atlan's pursuers picked up his trail.

However safe he and Atlan might appear to be in Tarkihl, he nevertheless had to be ready for the day when someone would come and tear the mask from his face.

Fratulon was prepared for this. On Gortavor there were a thousand hiding places where he and Atlan could find refuge.

But the Maraathanian ruins did not happen to be one of them...

* * * *

The shaft appeared to be endless. It plunged down along the flanged outer wall into the depths, apparently having served once as a ventilation channel. At even intervals, fist sized holes had been made through which one could get a good view of the outside, but they also served handily as handholds and toeholds. No one knew why Maraathan had created this ventilating system, and I myself had never heard of this kind of arrangement in one of the conical structures. It was probably a good guess that Maraathan's architect had sought to obtain quality of air-conditioning for the living quarters of the building, by utilizing the increased draft that was created by this means.

Such were my thoughts during our descent.

Frontier had led the way, followed by Fratulon, and I brought up the rear. Frontier was armed with his energy weapon and I had also retrieved my hand beamer that Ardelo had appropriated from me, since he had dropped it during his

precipitate reaction to the anaesthetizing gas. Fratulon contented himself with his beloved Skarg. I had taken over his instrument case from him inasmuch as he had enough difficulty in negotiating the narrow shaft without it.

Finally I felt ground under my feet. Here the darkness was more complete than it had been inside the shaft. I groped along the wall until I came to a place that was dimly illuminated by starlight. Between several outcroppings of the ruins ahead of me I saw two phantom-like figures rise up. In my reaction I bumped into somebody, and at hand was clapped over my mouth.

“Zagors!” whispered Fratulon close to my ear.

Involuntarily I pulled out the beamer. Fratulon released his hand from my mouth and I crept closer to a low wall in front of me in order to have a clear view of the field of ruins before us.

At first all I could discern was the heaps of rubble and the remains of fallen walls, but then I caught a movement there. A Zagor moved soundlessly in the shadow of a wall, and two others crept along on the other side of it. They were moving toward some objective which lay in a direction away from our hiding place. We found ourselves directly behind them.

As Fratulon turned toward me I caught a winking reflection of Skarg in his hand, and he signalled me to put away the ray weapon. I placed it in my belt and drew the sword that Lay Manos had furnished me.

Suddenly I heard a sound that could not have been made by the Zagors. It was more like the furtive scraping of soled feet. Then the figure of a man appeared behind one of the walls. He carried a spear, and in his hand was a curved sword.

In that moment he discovered the three Zagors and cried out in alarm as they charged upon him. It was also the signal for us to make our attack. Fratulon flew toward the four fighting figures with arms widespread for battle and there was a tangle and blur of bodies before me as I arrived. I ripped open the leg of a Zagor and knocked him out with the flat of my sword, but before I could pick out another opponent the fight was ended.

Fratulon had taken care of the other two Zagors with his bare fists. Now he dragged the man out from under the two unconscious reptiles by the collar of his cloak.

“Just take a look, Atlan—see what we’ve found here!” said Fratulon in feigned surprise. “What a coincidence, to run into an old acquaintance!”

“Waccor!” I exclaimed in my astonishment.

Prontier left his concealment and joined us. When he heard Waccor’s name he cried out, “Traitor!” He was about to attack him and I had to pull him back forcefully.

Waccor gasped his relief at sight of us. “What luck that you showed up just now! Otherwise those beasts would have done to me the same as they did the other two.”

“That would have been no loss in your case, you traitor!” cried Prontier, beside himself with rage.

“Keep your voice down, Professor?” Fratulon admonished him. “Who knows how many Zagors may be running around loose?”

“There aren’t any more of them here in the ruins?” Waccor said. “But outside of here it’s swarming with them. During daylight they’ve been digging into the sand and now they’re all coming out of their hiding places.

“You were probably too yellow to risk yourself going through the desert, weren’t you?” said Fratulon scornfully. “Or are you still waiting around for that bosom buddy of yours, Ardelo?”

Waccor shook his head. “I saw him take that fall from the hideout?” he said, with a shaky voice. “You really took him in with that jewel box. It’s his tough luck that he let himself be fooled by it. What difference does it make to me?” He shrugged. “I’m not that anxious to have the treasure.”

“Oh yes?” Fratulon queried sarcastically. “So why are you still wandering around down here in this area? Would you by any chance be trying to figure how you can crack that stronghold?”

Waccor’s answering laugh sounded somewhat hollow. “It was stupid of me to get mixed up with Ardelo, but I also realized that I could never go back to Frontier. So I was figuring what other outfit I could join up with. Since I wouldn’t be too welcome with Lay Manos, either, the only other choice seemed to be Komyal. I’ve always had good relationship with the Voolynesians.”

“Aha!” Fratulon grunted knowingly. “So you wanted to win over the Voolynesians to the idea of helping you get the treasure from the Professor!”

“What are you talking about, Sawbones?” retorted Waccor, irritated. “I only wanted to join up with them, that’s all. The treasure had nothing to do with it because I’ve forgotten about it.”

“So? Then it looks as though you didn’t make it with Komyal’s group, and that’s why you’re back snooping around here.”

Again, Waccor shook his head. “Komyal accepted me with open arms. He needs every sound man he can get, because some of his men are stricken by the plague. When I told him that you and your assistant were with Frontier, he sent me out right away to contact you. He says he sent out a distress call and that he needs your help, Sawbones! I was just now on my way to you with my two companions when the Zagors attacked us .

“So Komyal was the one who sent out the call.” Fratulon seemed to deliberate on this. He looked Waccor straight in the eye when he asked: “Are you prepared to lead us to him?”

“That’s why I’m here?” Waccor answered eagerly. “I’ll take you there. There’s even a bridge near here that leads to the ruins where Komyal is camped, so we can avoid the desert sands. I’ve no stomach for running into any more Zagors tonight. In fact it’s advisable for us to get out of this area.”

Fratulon was still hesitant. “Waccor, you’re a born schemer?” he said, cautiously. “Maybe you’ve missed your calling—you might have gone far in the court of Orbanoshol III. You betrayed Frontier to Lay Manos and then went

behind Manos' back in your dealings with Ardelo, but now you're offering your dubious loyalty to Komyal. How many masters do you actually still serve?"

Waccor was surprisingly frank: "Basically, I'm working for number one—*me...*"

"How is it you did not turn to Vafron, since you gave him a tip or two in the past?" persisted Fratulon.

And once again Waccor was amazingly frank: "Vafron has joined forces with Komyal, Sawbones—or didn't you know that?"

* * * *

Waccor climbed up through the ruins with an incredible agility. We were hard pressed to keep up with him especially the Professor, who was not accustomed to such physical exertion. He kept stopping to rest and catch his breath, so the rest of us were also forced to take a breather.

"Hurry!" Waccor urged us. "Every minute can be a matter of life and death. If Komyal's men don't get help pretty soon, this plague is going to wipe them out!"

Our way led almost entirely over fragmented outcroppings of masonry and through crumbling levels of the former main structure, some of which threatened to crash into further ruins at any time. We were still in the same building remains where the solitary pinnacle stood that supported Frontier's stronghold, but we were now on the opposite side.

When we reached the highest elevation in this particular area we came upon a suspension bridge that spanned a 100 meter gap to the next structural remains of a principal building. At its lowest arc the bridge almost reached down to the silvery strands of the web, which at this place extended itself between the two former cone-shaped structures.

"Komyal's fort is over there?" said Waccor. "We're almost there. We have to go real easy when we're on the bridge. It mustn't start swinging and it can't be loaded too heavily, otherwise it will touch the net below. The best way is to spread out with plenty of distance between us so we can distribute the weight better."

Frontier came panting up to the platform that the bridge was anchored to. I had followed close behind him during the climb in order to help him. He turned to gaze upward for the last time toward his stronghold, which was clearly visible from our location and stood silhouetted darkly against the starry heavens.

Waccor grinned at him. "Aren't you afraid that during your absence somebody is going to steal your treasure, Professor?"

As Frontier maintained a stubborn silence, Fratulon answered for him: "In his own mind the Professor gave up that fort a long time ago—ever since he realized he couldn't trust his men. You can rest assured Waccor, that the treasure has been moved to safety."

I caught a gleam in Waccor's eyes, but he refrained from asking any further questions on the subject. In the long run he wanted to give the impression that he had no further interest in the alleged treasure.

"Wait till I give you the signal, Fratulon," he said as he stepped out onto the bridge. "Then follow me."

When he had gotten far enough away, the Professor spoke to us in low tones. "Do you think you should reveal to him the meeting place we've indicated to Lay Manos?"

"Leave that decision to me, Professor?" Fratulon answered softly.

"You can move out now, Sawbones!" called Waccor. He was at a distance of about 15 meters from us, out on the bridge. "The rest of you follow at the same distance from each other."

Fratulon moved cautiously onto the bridge, which had already begun a gentle swaying motion. He tripped slightly on a loose plastic plate underfoot but was able to catch himself on the handrail rope.

"Hey!" yelled Waccor anxiously. "You'd better pay closer attention to where you're walking, Sawbones!"

Prontier then stepped onto the bridge and moved forward cautiously. I followed him at a distance of 15 meters. We made fairly good progress, as the bridge gyrated less than I had feared it would. When I was about in the centre of the bridge I saw that the silver strands of the net were only an arm's length below. Waccor had reached the other side. I thought I could make out a signal from him in the darkness, and then he disappeared into a dark opening in the building wall. Shortly thereafter, Fratulon also disappeared inside.

Suddenly, Prontier let out a cry and he made such a strenuous movement that the bridge began to shake. I saw him let go of the guide ropes to bring his energy weapon into play. He was firing at something below us. There was a light flash below, followed by the death cry of a Zagor. Against the starlit sands of the desert a shadowy group of moving figures was to be seen.

I also brought out my beamer and fired into the file of Zagors under us. They were angling for the Professor with long, grappling hooks.

"Don't bother about the Zagors!" I called to him. "Just keep going. Just a little further up the bridge and you'll be out of their reach!"

But Prontier was no longer able to follow my advice. The swaying of the bridge caused him to lose his grip. He slipped down and only just managed to hold onto one of the heavy supporting cables. I ran to him but arrived too late. The barbed ends of the grappling poles had caught in the lower ends of his clothing, and the Zagors tugged so hard that Prontier's resistance was overcome.

He fell screaming through the net below and hit the soft sand, whereupon the Zagors immediately tossed him upward again. After three tries at it, they landed Prontier's body on one of the arm-thick silvery strands of the web, where it remained.

Automatically I turned away. Often enough had I been forced to witness what

happened to the unfortunate victims who came in contact with those gleaming strands. Frontier could not be helped anymore. All I could do was forge ahead to the other end of the suspension bridge.

There two powerful Arkonides were waiting for me, who promptly relieved me of my weapons.

The same fate had already befallen Fratulon, and I heard him cursing and complaining about this shameful way of treating a physician and surgeon.

“No need to get worked up about it?” said a man with a deep, resonant voice. “We’ve left you the tools of your profession—and besides, you can’t fight sicknesses with a sword.”

Several men laughed. I was shoved through a passage into a room that was illuminated by two torches. There I saw six men forming a ring around Waccor and Fratulon. One of them was of average height but had an unusually powerful physique. This Arkonide wore chest armour like Fratulon, and as I came in he was in the act of tossing the sword, Skarg, to one of the other men.

Fratulon whirled around swiftly and caught the weapon by the hilt before the other man could grasp it. I reacted instantly and landed a heavy blow into the mid-section of the startled man next to me, whereupon I relieved him of the sword he had taken from me. Then I sprang forward, shoved my way through the men forming the circle, and placed my back to Fratulon, who had already taken up his battle stance.

From a safe distance the muscular Arkonide asked him: “Have you come here as a medical man or a barricade buster?”

“For the very reason that I come to you of my own *free will* in the capacity of a doctor, I will not permit you to treat me as a prisoner?” said Fratulon. “If you need my help, I’m willing to give it to you. But when you want my Skarg, instead, I’m forced to take it from you.”

The husky Arkonide who seemed to be the spokesman was nonplussed for a moment, but then he laughed. “Your words have impressed me, Sawbones?” he said, appreciatively. “You have a right to keep the sword. You know you have to excuse my actions here. I’ve been dealing so exclusively with bandits and bums that I’ve forgotten how you’re supposed to treat a gentleman. My name is Plyturon. May I make amends with a handshake?”

Fratulon was so hesitant about taking the preferred hand that a questioning frown came to Plyturon’s brow.

“It could well be?” Fratulon explained, “that the local disease is contagious and can be transmitted by contact.”

Plyturon laughed again. “Ah yes, the disease! It’s definitely not transferable or by now we’d all be down with it. But come now, I’ll take you two to Komyal. It’s a pity that Frontier is no longer alive. The Voolynesian would have liked very much to talk to him.”

“His death is no great loss,” interjected Waccor quickly. “This sawbones and his helper have had his full confidence. They know plenty about the Professor and

can tell everything to Komyal that he wants to know about him. Of that I am certain.”

“Well, if that’s the case?” said Plyturon, “then we can forget Prontier.”

Fratulon’s quick glance at me was a confirmation that we were thinking the same thing. Waccor must have told Komyal about Prontier’s treasure—and he had probably just now tried to apprise Plyturon of the fact that we knew where the treasure had been hidden.

We were led into a windowless chamber the other entrances of which had all been walled up. One half of the vaulted hall was lighted by ten torches. The other half lay in darkness and was separated from the rest of the room by a crenellated wall that was about as high as a man’s head.

In the centre of this wall was a portal-like structure reaching to the ceiling, and its gates were standing open. Between these open gates was located a strange kind of vehicle—or at least that was the best designation I could find for it.

It consisted of a giant bowl, about 2 meters in diameter, which was supported by 4 wheels and 6 articulated supports designed for forward locomotion. Within the bowl lay a gelatinous mass of something that appeared to be pulsating.

“Komyal,” said Plyturon, “here is the medico and his assistant.” When he had finished making this announcement, he drew back to the wall.

From the bowl emerged a large pseudopod, in the densified end of which a human face formed. The eyes stared at us, the mouth moved and spoke in perfect Arkonide. “I should have thought that you would respond more quickly to my call, Sawbones. If you had departed immediately after receiving my radio message you would have had to arrive here long before sundown.”

“We were held up, Komyal,” answered Fratulon. “First we lost our dune rover, after which we ran into a fight with the Zagors, and finally we fell into the hands of Lay Manos’ band. But I hope that our help doesn’t come too late. Where are the men who have become afflicted by this epidemic? I’ll be glad to take care of them at once.”

“There’s no epidemic, no plague, no disease at all?” answered Komyal. The pseudopod with the human face turned to one side as the Voolynesian added: “In sending out that distress call I was merely doing my friend, Vafron, a favour. Is this sawbones the man you are seeking, Vafron?”

Behind the crenellated wall loomed five figures which could not be distinguished in detail because of the poor illumination there. But they were quite recognizably humanoid, in fact Arkonide.

One of these men said: “Yes, this sawbones, Fratulon, has fallen into my trap.”

9/ AMBUSH IN THE HALL OF SPLENDOUR

The greatest danger of all had been prepared for only in theory.

Fratulon had put Atlan through countless tests to prove himself. Those proofs which called upon his psychic capabilities seemed to balance out equally with those which challenged his physical qualities. It was important for Atlan to have a quick mind, but it was much more important for him to know how to handle himself with weapons. He must be capable of defending himself in every type of situation.

This was an additional reason why Fratulon took him along on dangerous missions where not infrequently the outcome could be a matter of life and death. So far, Atlan had withstood every test and had overcome every danger. It was a good point of departure for the battles for his existence which were yet to come.

But Fratulon was not certain whether or not Atlan could also pass the test, alone and unaided, against Orbanoshol's special bloodhounds. For these coldblooded bounty hunters were deadly, stronger and more dangerous than all the opponents that Atlan had encountered so far.

* * * *

The distress signal had only been sent out in order to lure us into a trap! And fools that we were, we had just blindly bumbled our way into it.

In this light it may even have been a blessing that we were held up by our encounters with the Zagors and Lay Manos' group. Otherwise, we might long since have been dead. On the other hand, we might have become more cautious and suspicious had we not been distracted by these other events.

At the moment, however, the question of who this Vafron might be and why he had drawn us into this trap was unimportant. I drew my sword at the same moment as did Fratulon. Waccor jumped back from us and joined Komyal's men who stood along the wall. I calculated that our chances with them were fair since they were only equipped with swords like ourselves.

"Come on, you scoundrels!" shouted Fratulon. "You'll find out that the private belly-stitcher of the Tatto, Armanck Declanter, knows his way around with something more than a scalpel!"

"Stop!" cried Vafron. He had taken a few steps out from his concealment and

was holding up his hand peremptorily. And now I saw that he was wearing a tattered uniform of the Arkonide Fleet. “Komyal, tell your men they are to make no use of their weapons!” He had turned to the Voolynesian, who had exuded a number of extra pseudopods which now extended from their container bowl. “Our agreement was that you would deliver the doctor to me alive.”

The Arkonide-moulded mouth of the Voolynesian intoned: “He belongs to you, Vafron. None of my people will harm a single whisker of this Tatto’s physician. I myself am interested in keeping him alive.”

Vafron looked in surprise at the pseudo-head of the creature. “Strange that you should suddenly take interest in him, Komyal?” he said. “I’ve paid you for delivering me Fratulon unharmed. But your words almost sound as if you wanted to go against this agreement now.”

Komyal’s simulated face revealed an almost human grin. “By no means, Vafron. But the point in time of that delivery will be decided by me. Before I hand him over to you, there are a few things I wish to find out...”

“I’ll not have you haggling and bartering over me!” shouted Fratulon angrily. “Just come on! We’ll see if you are a match for me and my assistant!”

The only one who accepted the challenge was Plyturon. He drew his sword and took a professional battle stance. “Fratulon?” he said, with a malicious smile, “you look to me like a man who’s carried a victory wreath or two from the arena in his time—but I must confide that I was also a gladiator.”

“Get back, Plyturon!” commanded Komyal. “No blood will be spilled in this room today! And you, Fratulon, shall see that you have no choice but to surrender to me without resistance.”

When Fratulon turned to face the Voolynesian he found that he could not tear his gaze away from him again. I saw a change come over Sawbones. His face tensed and twisted as though he were being subjected to a superhuman force, as though he were marshalling all of his strength to combat something that had seized him.

It was evident to me at once that an uncanny power was being projected from the Voolynesian, which had brought Fratulon under its spell. Even though I was aware of this I glanced at Komyal—and was also unable to break loose from his gaze.

The formless, colloidal thing flowed over the edge of the bowl to the floor and glided with a wavy motion toward us. Komyal had extended two pseudopods. One of them had formed itself into a human face; on the end of the other one an oversized giant eye took form.

A magical force emerged from this eye. I could neither turn my gaze away from it nor think clearly. I was devoid of my own will, and though I sought to think of other things and to turn away from the glowing, iridescent eye, it was to no avail.

Fratulon was worse off than I was because it was on him that Komyal was concentrating his hypnotic powers. Out of the corner of my eye I had a blurred

impression of my old Sawbones trembling and falling to his knees. He was using every effort of will to combat the influence that had taken possession of him.

“You cannot oppose me, Fratulon?” I heard the Voolynesian saying. “You must obey me. You will tell me everything I wish to know from you.”

“No... Fratulon’s lips murmured almost inaudibly.

“Yes!” said Komyal firmly. “You will truthfully answer all of my questions. I will ask nothing else from you. It is too bad that Prontier is not alive, for I would have been able to extract the desired information much easier from him. But even you will tell me what I wish to know!”

“I... will do it!” whispered Fratulon.

The amorphous mass of living substance had almost reached us. Now the giant pseudo-eye rose higher until it was on a level with Fratulon’s face. “You have knowledge of a treasure that Prontier has obtained?” asked Komyal.

“Yes, he told me everything about it!” said Fratulon. He spoke as though blurting everything out would free him from a terrible pressure. The words fairly bubbled from his lips. “In Zagooth he has made many valuable finds and has hoarded them in his stronghold. But they aren’t there anymore. Prontier distrusted his men—and with good cause, as it turned out. Waccor betrayed him to Lay Manos and the Manolian stole Prontier’s daughter, Azhira, in order to hold her for ransom and get the treasure in exchange. The exchange is supposed to take place at dawn...”

“There is an interesting development?” observed Komyal. “So Prontier had decided to accede to Manos’ demands?”

“Yes, he had no other interest than to see his daughter again?” Fratulon blurted out. “After Ardelo took his fall, we sent Ice Claw as the mediator to the Manolian. He was to transmit to him the conditions of the transfer...”

“And what is the gist of those conditions?”

“At dawn, Lay Manos is to bring Azhira to Marauthan’s main reception hall. That’s where we will hand the treasure over to him...”

“That you will not do!” interjected Komyal scornfully.

I saw the luminous eye begin to darken as the Voolynesian flowed back to his dish vehicle. As the hypnotic effect of the giant eye faded away, I began to emerge from its grip proportionately and regain the ability to think clearly.

My first clear realization was the fact that Fratulon had not broken down even under the pressure of hypnosis. He had tricked the Voolynesian by appearing to reveal everything he knew, but the ruse had actually enabled him to dodge many questions of a more dangerous kind. I couldn’t help marvelling at old Sawbones. Although he had not been able to avoid the hypnotic power of the Voolynesian entirely, he had nevertheless succeeded in imparting to him more or less what he wanted to let him know. He had only transmitted those details which tied in with what we had planned.

Fratulon put on a show of breathing heavily and balling his fists in feigned

anger. “You out-smarted me, Komyal?” he said. “But don’t think that makes you win the game. Even if you know that the treasure is hidden in Marauthan’s reception hall, it won’t do you any good. You won’t be able to salvage it because Lay Manos will be there before you.”

“I have often questioned just how tough Lay Manos’ outfit really is?” said the Voolynesian. “Until now I have put off putting his alleged strength to the test, since there was no reason for it. But now I have a good excuse to bring that braggart his destruction. Vafron, I’ll show you how it’s done around here to become the ruler of the Marauthanian ruins.”

A faint smile touched Vafron’s sharp-lined features. “I’m not at all concerned with governing the inhabitants of these ruins?” he said. “When I requested all the groups here to unite themselves under my command, I only did it so that I could back myself up with as many men as possible. There was no way I could know that Fratulon would dispense with the support of Declanter’s troops and that he’d come into the ruins comparatively alone. I’ve never had the intention of being a resident here. The ruins are all yours. And now that you’ve gotten what you wanted and Fratulon is of no further use to you, you ought to turn him over to me. I ask for nothing more.”

“He’s yours?” Komyal asserted. “But I’m not quite through with him yet. He has to accompany me to the reception hall. Once I’m in possession of the treasure I’ll hand him over to you.”

“I’m warning you, Komyal, don’t press this game too far?” said Vafron threateningly.

The Voolynesian remained unimpressed. “If you simply must try your strength against somebody, Vafron, then save it for the fight with Lay Manos’ men. And if it means so much to you to keep this Fratulon of yours alive, then you’d better keep a sharp eye on him I’m holding you responsible for that—that he doesn’t escape, and that nothing happens to him.”

Vafron’s cold eyes turned to Fratulon as he said: “I’ll take care of him alright!”

In that moment I was wondering whether or not these two men had known each other in the past and maybe had an old account to settle between them. But as I examined Fratulon’s profile carefully I saw that his face was devoid of expression.

* * * *

“I’ve never seen Vafron a single time in my life?” said Fratulon. We had arrived at the loftiest of the cone-shaped edifices. He spoke to me the first time since leaving Komyal’s stronghold.

“So what’s bothering you about him?” I wanted to know.

“I’m just asking myself how Vafron is supposed to keep an eye on us when he doesn’t even show himself?” answered Fratulon.

We had covered the distance from Komyal's hideout to the building with the reception hall by way of the labyrinths. This offered the advantage that we didn't have to fear falling into an ambush by the Zagors, because in that portion of the labyrinths which lay under the ruined city the reptilian creatures were seldom seen. But Komyal had chosen the Zagooth route primarily so that Lay Manos' men would not be able to observe the deployment of his fighting forces. It was intended that the Manolian should move unsuspectingly into a trap—exactly as Fratulon and I had figured it out in the first place.

Our main problem was how to elude our guards in order to free Ice Claw and Azhira, who certainly must have been left behind in Lay Manos' lair because the latter would probably be too shrewd to bring them here. Yet the fact that Komyal's men continually surrounded us was the lesser difficulty. Fratulon seemed to be more concerned about the fact that Vafron held himself in the background even though he was responsible for our safety.

Since Fratulon didn't express himself about it on his own accord, however, I approached him on the subject directly. "What do you think of Vafron?" I came right out and asked him.

"I can't quite figure him out?" Fratulon replied.

I persisted: "He seems to me to be more dangerous than Komyal and Lay Manos put together."

"In any case, he's dangerous to us?" was all he would say.

Komyal had 8 powerful men to carry him in his dish container although its wheeled base had its own motive power. I wasn't quite sure whether the motor was defective or if he had himself carried merely to show off his power.

I was inclined to believe that the Voolynesian possessed the heaviest striking force within the ruins. For after all he was in command of 50 men, which was certainly at least twice the number that Manos had at his disposal.

There could actually be little doubt about the outcome of the forthcoming battle. Komyal not only had a superiority in numbers; he had the greater tactical advantage. While his men could carefully prepare themselves for what they knew they'd be facing, Lay Manos was unaware of the ambush.

Komyal's men deployed themselves around the great reception hall and took positions close to the outer approaches so that they could cut off Manos' men from retreating. They also found concealment at higher elevations so that their arrows would be within range of Manos' most feared weapon, the giant birds

By means of a simple device they were able to reach inaccessible places where no one would expect to find them. This device was a long rope with a barbed hook on the end of it. They were so skilled at throwing the heavy barb that they were able to assail vertical walls. Catching the hook securely on some protuberance or recessed spot, they would then climb up the rope into lofty hiding places.

This method of overcoming vertical obstacles was not new to me, because on a number of occasions Fratulon and I had put it to good use. But until now I had not known that the inhabitants of the ruins were familiar with it.

Marauthan's former hall of splendour was still fairly well preserved, if one discounted the fact that the ceiling had fallen in and that only the sky spanned the gap between the lofty walls of the ruin. The local inhabitants had moved the fallen debris to the sides, stacking it against the walls and forward in such a manner that a descending pattern of tier like levels had been formed, thus creating a sort of amphitheatre. By this process an arena had finally come into being, in which the inhabitants of the ruins more often than not conducted their war games.

Here it often happened that prisoners were forced to fight Zagors, or tests of courage were required here of new members joining one of the groups, or duels were fought between the leaders of several groups. In any case the inhabitants of these ruins never seemed to be lacking in reasons for conducting their war games.

"They're coming!" cried one of Komyal's bowmen from a high lookout point.

Immediately, all the rest vanished into their hiding places. Komyal had his container brought in under artfully arranged monolithic stones which formed a vault-like enclosure where he would be safe from Lay Manos' bird beasts. The warning call was a signal for our guards to drive us out into the open arena. At the same time they aimed their spears and arrows at us so that we would have no chance to escape.

"Alright now, act like you're free!" ordered one of our 4 guards—it was Plyturon. "You have to carry on as though nothing has happened so that Manos doesn't get suspicious. If you try to warn him you'll become a couple of walking pin-cushions!"

In the air above the arena the first of the giant birds were already appearing, each of them carrying one of Lay Manos' warriors in its claws. Most of the latter were Manolians, so at this distance I couldn't make out whether or not Lay Manos himself was among them.

The birds deposited their human cargos on various blocks of stone and masonry around the arena and then rose into the air to circle above us. By the time about 20 of Lay Manos' men had deployed themselves around the arena, an unusually large bird appeared with a Manolian in its talons. As it swept down toward us, I recognized Lay Manos.

"That lousy crook really did leave Azhira and Ice Claw back in his hideout?" I said angrily, although we had both figured on it in our plans.

"That won't do him much good?" said Fratulon.

"How are we going to handle this mess?" I asked.

As Lay Manos was hovering within only 5 meters of the arena's floor, somebody shouted: "It's an ambush!"

It was a signal for the start of the battle. While Komyal's bowmen brought the bird beasts under attack, his swordsmen and lancers charged upon Lay Manos' men.

Lay Manos' favourite bird, Ayff, was the first victim of the hail of arrows. The loyal creature dropped into a tail spin, still holding its master aloft until it had brought him to a soft landing near the first rocky tiers of the amphitheatre, on the

floor of the arena, where even then it sought to shield him with its widespread wings.

“Let’s get out of here!” Fratulon shouted to me, and we ran for the protection of some of the ruin fragments.

But he came to a stop short of the goal. Plyturon and the other three guards with their bows and arrows blocked our way.

“Only way you’ll get past us?” said Plyturon, “is when you’ve led us to the treasure.”

These were the last words he spoke, because in that moment he and his companions were struck down by a fiery beam of energy. Our path was free—Lay Manos’ men had inadvertently blasted the obstruction out of our way. I wondered briefly how they had gotten hold of the ray weapons but didn’t dwell on the question. The battle exploded around us.

From the direction of the stone chamber where Komyal and his bodyguards had taken refuge came a frightful din and clamour. As I looked there I saw one of the monolithic supports, melting away under an energy beam, which caused the entire structure to collapse, burying Komyal beneath it.

“I’ll bet that Voolynesian didn’t expect a turn of events like that?” I said.

Fratulon bent down and picked up two discarded ropes which were attached to grapple hooks. He tossed one of them to me. “We may still be able to use these climbing ropes?” he told me.

I knew what he had in mind, but at the moment I was concerned with another matter. The first thing we had to do was to leave this fighting area behind us.

There was also no way of forgetting Vafron, and I kept wondering where he had disappeared to.

10/ IN THE SPELL OF THE SINGING GOD

Aside from his mission of shielding Atlan, Fratulon had to guard himself against a standing death warrant, owing to his intimate knowledge of certain Arkon secrets of state.

Orbanoshol III was a fierce and ruthless ruler. As Emperor of the Greater Empire he consolidated his power by mercilessly destroying every opponent, each in his turn, and by instituting large-scale punitive actions against races, peoples or civilizations which refused to submit to his regime. Although aside from these little side skirmishes his imperial troops and war fleets had been deeply involved in a galaxy-wide war against the methane breathers for some years already, now as before the Arkonides were at the flowering pinnacle of their development.

However, this high status was in no wise attributable to Orbanoshol III. Quite to the contrary, he was in the process of slowly but surely destroying everything that his predecessor, Gonozal VII, had built up.

Orbanoshol III had only come to the throne because his brother, Gonozal VII, had lost his life in a hunting accident. At least this had been the official version. But there was a rumour to the effect that Orbanoshol III had instigated the hunting accident in order to seize the power for himself. And no one knew better than Fratulon how much truth was behind this rumour. For the physician in attendance to the Tatto of Gortavor, Armanck Declanter, had also been the personal physician to Gonozal VII, and Orbanoshol's seizure of the throne had consequently made it necessary for him to flee for his life. He knew too much.

But he had also left Arkon and the Crystal Palace behind him in order to save the life of Atlan, who was then but 4 years of age...

* * * *

“Here’s where we have to climb up?” said Fratulon, and he pointed to the wall that rose vertically before us.

Forty meters overhead we saw the breaks in the wall which led into Lay Manos' throne room. Not far away, the needle-like wall fragment rose upward which supported the nesting place of the great birds of prey. At the present moment there were only two of the birds in evidence.

We had negotiated the staircase that Manos' men had constructed and had thus

climbed up through a number of levels of the building. But inasmuch as the fortress was doubtlessly being guarded by some of his men, we did not dare to approach the drawbridge. The last part of our journey had to be accomplished by climbing the vertical wall. It was the only means of penetrating the stronghold without being detected.

Fratulon swung the grappling hook and hurled it powerfully aloft. At the very first try the hook caught hold in a fissure some 20 meters above us. I required three tries before I also found an anchoring point for my own hook.

We clambered up the loosely flapping ropes and reached the first stage of our climb without incident. Here was a projection of the wall which left enough space for both of us to stand on. I looked across toward the giant birds and noted that they were still undisturbed, acting as though they had not yet discovered us.

“If we’re lucky?” said Fratulon, “they’ll remain peaceful.”

I harboured the secret hope that they were trained to respond only to Lay Manos’ silent mental commands. But I did not express it—perhaps because life on Gortavor had made me somewhat superstitious.

“Are we going to take the last stage in one throw?” I asked, doubtfully.

“Give it a try?” Fratulon advised.

I started the boarding rope to swinging and with each revolution let out more line. Then I finally heaved the hook upward with full force. I heard it clanking and scratching as it struck the wall, but it soon dropped down again. On the second try, the hook took hold.

“See if you can match that, Sawbones?” I challenged, grinning at him.

He gravely shook his head. “No time to play games. This time we’ll use the one rope. You go up and I’ll follow.”

“Too bad?” I answered, disappointed. “I’ll bet you would have needed more tries this time than I did. But you’re right as usual.”

I clamped my sword between my teeth in order to have it ready in case of any surprises, after which I went up the rope hand over hand. Just beneath the wall opening, I paused to listen. There was no sound to be heard from the throne room, but I didn’t yet trust the situation. Using wall protuberances and crevices to support me, I climbed along until I was under the next opening. At that point I listened again. Still no sound inside. Only then did I risk raising myself up into full view so that I could take a careful look into the interior.

It was empty.

I signalled to Fratulon that it was all clear and swung into the room. With sword in hand, I took a look around. When Fratulon arrived, I could report confidently that no one was present and our entry had not been noticed.

He merely nodded, moving silently to the exit of the throne room. Before he stepped into the adjacent room he stopped and pointed ahead. There lay two men on the floor whose bodies had been riddled by energy beams. Obviously someone had already been here before us—which was all the more reason for being super

cautious.

After a few more steps, Fratulon stopped again. I also listened, and it seemed to me I could hear distant voices.

“Somebody’s talking?” I whispered to Sawbones.

He nodded, moving forward again. In one hand he carried Skarg and in the other was his coiled boarding rope. I followed his example and also coiled up my rope, carrying it with me ready for use.

We came closer to the origin of the voices. But suddenly they were silenced. Then came the low sound of a woman crying or moaning.

Azhira!

Fratulon tensed and hurried his pace. I wanted to caution him not to do anything rash, but he was already on his way. When I came around the next bend in the corridor he had already vanished from my sight. Two passages branched off at sharp angles in separate directions. There was a tell-tale sound to my left, and again I heard the soft whimpering of a woman.

Someone was saying angrily: “Go ahead and scream—I want them to hear you!”

Nursing the hunch that both passages led to the same place, I took the one on the right—and that was our salvation. I came to a room where the ceiling had caved in, revealing a patch of open sky above. Before me were 5 Arkonides wearing tattered uniforms of the Imperial Fleet. One of them—it was Vafron—held Azhira in front of him as a living shield, with a dagger at her breast.

I was also aware that one wall of the room was overgrown with creepers and vines of various kinds. Within a few steps of me was Ice Claw, tied to the wall with the rough, heavy lianas.

Vafron pressed the dagger still harder against Azhira’s breast. Her face twisted in pain—but then suddenly her eyes widened.

“Fratulon!” she cried out in astonishment.

The stupid little fool!

Vafron and his men would not have discovered Fratulon if her cry had not betrayed his presence.

The men brought their rayguns into play. Azhira tore herself away from Vafron and ran to Fratulon who had jumped back into the corridor. An energy beam flashed out. I let out a wordless cry in order to distract the men from Azhira and Fratulon, and it did cause them to turn their attention to me. It confused them to be faced with enemies from two directions at once.

Again a ray beam flashed, but not in my direction. Azhira cried out and arched backwards even as I slung the grappling hook forward with all my strength. The heavy barb struck one of the men in the chest and penetrated his body. The force of its impact knocked him back into the midst of his companions.

It gave me time to turn to Ice Claw and free him with my sword. But it was ill-advised since it gave the three remaining men a moment of respite. They had

recovered from their initial surprise and now faced us in earnest. They would surely have shot me down in cold blood had it not been for an unexpected occurrence.

Two mighty shadows loomed above us—the two giant birds from the nest. I had no idea what had excited them but was grateful for their interference. They plunged down through the opening in the roof onto Vafron's men. Vafron shot one of them, but before an energy beam struck the other one it had sunk its talons into the face of one of the men.

"Let's go, Ice Claw!" I yelled to the chretkor, and the two of us retreated through the passage I had chosen.

At the intersection we joined Fratulon.

Behind us we heard the injured man cry out as though he'd been impaled. "I'm blind! By the gods, I can't see anymore!"

Fratulon had also perceived that our only chance lay in flight. It would have been suicide to close in battle with Vafron and his men. With their energy weapons they outmatched us by far.

"What about Azhira?" I asked as we ran along through the passages and rooms and stairs of Manos' stronghold.

"She's dead!" was the answer.

She had shielded Fratulon from a death shot with her body.

"Vafron came here over the drawbridge,?" Ice Claw told us. "He made no bones about advertising that Manos was also a henchman of his.

"Let's hope Manos hasn't pulled it up yet," I said

"He's not able to?" commented Ice Claw, and added: "As payment for his services, Vafron has sent him to his Great Reward."

We were almost there. To my best recollection, all that still lay before us was one staircase and a short passage, and then we would be at the drawbridge. I was not mistaken. When we reached the end of the corridor beyond the stairs, there was the entrance hall—and beyond it the drawbridge still spanned the abyss.

On the bridge itself crouched a man who was wounded and who had apparently dragged himself there with his last ounce of strength. He was holding something in his hand. When he saw us approaching, he laughed loudly and made a sudden movement.

"Duck!" I yelled as I threw myself to the ground.

In the next moment there was a tremendous explosion on the drawbridge. The wounded man had committed suicide in order to blow the bridge to pieces.

The explosion had hardly subsided before Fratulon jumped up and ran to the dropoff. He swung his boarding rope over his head and then hurled it across the gap. The barbed hook caught on the other side, apparently caught fast in a ground declivity.

Fratulon tugged on it with all his strength in order to test the rope's holding ability. When he was satisfied that it would support our weight, he tied his end of

it to some heavy vines that grew against the wall.

“Alright, Atlan—you first!” he ordered.

I responded without argument and moved across the abyss with a wide-swinging movement, hand over hand. Even before I had reached the other side, Ice Claw followed me. The rope supported both of us.

I drew myself up onto the opposite platform and waited to help Ice Claw. After both of us had solid ground under our feet, Fratulon ventured across the chasm. Since he wasn't much lighter than Ice Claw and myself together, I added my weight to the grappling hook by standing on it. It was no harm to play it safe.

Sawbones made it. He came puffing up onto the platform and yanked the hook out of its anchorage. In the very moment that Vafron appeared in the fortress entrance, Fratulon hurled the boarding hook across. Vafron had to take cover in order to avoid the dangerous missile, and it gained us the time we needed to get to safety.

We hurried down the steps.

“Now we've got a big enough lead on them!” panted Fratulon. “By the time Vafron and his 3 men get across the gap we'll be way out of range of those beamers!”

“He only has two men now?” I retorted. “The third one had his eyes scratched out by one of the birds.”

“That makes one of them for each of us?” said Ice Claw.

“They're still superior to us with those energy weapons?” warned Fratulon. “There's no choice left but to lure them down into Zagooth. We can't face them until then, because we'd certainly be no good against them in the desert.”

“Instead of facing them at all?” I suggested, wouldn't it be better to try to reach Tarkihl? Maybe then they'll give up the chase.”

Fratulon shook his head. “Vafron will never rest until he's intercepted us. He's gambled everything in the hopes of catching us. He even made our escape from Marauthan's hall possible so that he could set up an ambush for us in Lay Manos' hideout—because he knew that's where we would go next. No! Vafron will not give up.”

We finally left the stairs behind us and stood on level ground. The Spider Desert lay before us in the sunshine. The air shimmered and we were half-blinded by the glare of the sun reflecting from the silvery strands of the web. The heat was almost unbearable.

Ice Claw clung to my arm with his frigid hands. “I'm melting!” he exclaimed fearfully.

Behind us the footsteps of our pursuers were audible on the stairs.

“What are we still waiting for?” grunted Fratulon. He started to move but I placed my hand on his shoulder, holding him back.

“Don't you notice something?” I asked him. “A sound in the air-like humming. Take a good look at the filaments of the web. You can't see them clearly. They

seem to be slightly out of focus and blurred. They're vibrating, Fratulon!"

Not far from us a Zagor appeared. He seemed not to notice us. Instead, he moved with a sort of ambling and wandering gait through the desert.

"If we go into the desert now and are exposed to hallucinations?" said Ice Claw with a shudder, "we'll be lost!"

"Would you rather surrender yourself to Vafron?" asked Fratulon, and he ran onward into the desert.

A shout came from behind us. "There they are!"

Then I hesitated no longer but fled also into the desert, with Ice Claw close behind me.

"I guess it's all the same to me whether I get shot or I melt away in the heat of the sun?" muttered the chretkor.

Suddenly an arc of light like an intertwined rainbow seemed to emerge before me—and I stepped into it.

* * * *

It didn't do me any good to tell myself that this was only a mirage produced by the strands of the web. Even though I was conscious of being victimized by it, the hallucination could not be dispelled.

The illusion was complete.

Beneath me was a broad band of light that was composed of all colours of the spectrum. The rainbow path was easy to walk on, feeling soft and resilient under foot. It made a steep ascent before me, reached a high crest and then made a broad curve to finally complete its circle.

The most fascinating part about it was that the colour band widened out with distance rather than narrowing in perspective. Even while I ascended I still felt that I was on a level surface. Gravity seemed to be effective in all directions of the rainbow on which I found myself. I ascended yet seemed to stay on the ground, and I developed the impression that I was running in one spot, while the rainbow continued to move beneath me. I seemed to be some laboratory animal running in an endless treadmill, getting nowhere although it raced beneath me like mad.

It made no sense to me to keep moving in one spot, so I attempted to push my way to the edge of the rainbow. I left the blue zone, ran across various hues of green into the yellow band, changed from there into the orange area and then reached the field of red. I must be almost there! Lavender, violet, blue—now I must be at the rainbow's extremity. Blue—green—yellow—red... I became desperate.

Then the apparition dissolved.

I was in the desert once more.

What had become of Fratulon and Ice Claw? Where were Vafron and his companions?

And where was the giant spider web? I looked up into the sky. There were no silvery strands above me. Was I no longer in the Spider Desert?

Suddenly, there was Tarkihl. It loomed above the desert like a low bronze mountain. Someone was running toward me. It was Farnathia, beloved Farnathia!

“Atlan—watch out!”

I threw myself at the feet of the girl of my dreams

There was an explosion as though a sun had burst above me. Although I had not looked into the exploding ball of fire, I was blinded. Farnathia had dissolved into nothingness. It must have been caused by Fratulon’s calling to me.

Instead of Farnathia I suddenly saw a soldier. He and I were standing together in the midst of the nothingness. Only the two of us. He moved toward me in a strange manner while red flashes seemed to shoot from his right arm. Some of the flashes struck me in the face and I sensed a sweetish taste on my lips.

Blood!

The soldier was bleeding. His uniform was in rags. He seemed not to notice me. There was a transfigured look on his face as though he were seeing something miraculous which was veiled from my own vision.

One of Vafron’s men!—I thought with a start. He was wounded and couldn’t see me. His right arm hung limply from his side, but the left hand was raised up, clutching a ray weapon. His index finger curved inward, and suddenly there was a blinding sunburst very nearby.

“I’ve caught you, Fratulon!” shouted the man. His voice sounded strangely pleasant in my ears, but I was displeased that he had mistaken me for Fratulon. “And I’m going to kill you whether Vafron likes it or not!”

Suddenly I was seeing strange images that were anything but pleasant visions—somebody wearing armour, striking at a man who was spewing death from his energy weapon. The man with the sword was Fratulon; the other collapsed in a fountain of blood. Then this realistic picture instantly vanished—and instead I saw the soldier burst into bloom. All over his body it seemed that red buds were shooting out of him, unfolding flowery leaves of blood which then became a red flood that poured into the desert sands.

Something grabbed hold of me.

I heard Fratulon’s hoarse voice. “Look at him closely. He was one of our enemies. I have killed him.”

I stared at the sea of red blossoms. They wilted and flowed away, becoming grainy like desert sand.

“Atlan, do you see the desert sands, saturated red with the blood of our enemy?”

Yes, I saw the reality of it!

“Shake off your illusion!” he urged me. “It works if you concentrate on specific points of reality. There concentrate on that spot of blood!”

“Everything is swimming in front of my eyes!” I muttered irritably. In the place of the blood-soaked desert sands was a sea of red water.

“Our enemies aren’t faring any better?” Fratulon explained. “They’ve also been hit by these hallucinations much more than I. Many times I can shake off the mirages and see clearly. You must try it, too, Atlan!”

I made an effort to do so, and for a moment I really saw Fratulon before me with his chest armour all spattered with the enemy’s blood. “I can’t look at any more red!” I cried out—and was again immersed in the reddish ocean.

“Stay here. Don’t budge from the spot!” Fratulon ordered. “I see one of the enemy watching Ice Claw, but he doesn’t seem to consider him as an opponent...”

Fratulon seemed to swim away, or was he wading? No, that wasn’t right, because when a person waded through water he had to go against some kind of resistance. Fratulon was running as though there were no obstacle at all before him. In actuality there was no resistance, the water only existed in the world of my illusions.

I held out in my place as Fratulon had instructed me to do. The waves rocked me back and forth and I seemed to be getting seasick. It’s nothing but imagination!—I told myself. But it didn’t help the nausea that was rising in me. I had to get out of there. Then I saw salvation over my head—a pier or platform of some kind. How steady it seemed in the plunging surf.

I jumped but fell short of my goal. I blinked, and then I recognized what it really was. Instead of a lifesaving landing platform I was looking at the deadly web of silvery strands!

The other one also made a jump. Who he was or where he came from I didn’t know. For me he was just the *other one*. Did he also wish to save himself from the foaming sea on a more “peaceful shore?” Let him go ahead, and then there’d be one less scoundrel in the world.

But what then, if the *other one* was Ice Claw!?

“Ice Claw!” I yelled, and walked across the raging tide toward him. “Ice Claw, don’t—it will be your death!”

“Now I’ll get you, you hell hound!” bellowed the *other one*. It was not Ice Claw, after all. “I’ll break your neck with my bare hands, old Belly-stitcher!”

Then I knew that the *other one* was either Vafron or one of his men. Now Fratulon appeared at my left, but the man looked upward as though Sawbones could be seen in that direction. Undoubtedly he saw him there, but he didn’t know that a mirage-like reflection of the air was fooling him. Fratulon used it to his advantage. With drawn Skarg, he crept toward his adversary—and the latter believed that the threat approached him from above.

He sprang upward, and this time he managed to grasp something. But his cry of triumph died on his lips before he could get it out. I stared at him, fascinated—he had turned into a creature of incredible beauty. I knew what was there in reality, although my eyes were shielded from it.

“That’s one more out of the way!” I heard Fratulon sing out. “Now all that’s

left is Vafron! Here—I'm bringing Ice Claw to you. From now on, the two of you stay together!

Somebody clutched at my clothing. "You're cold as a block of ice, Atlan!" I heard Ice Claw's familiar voice.

For a moment I saw the chretkor's crystalline face, but then I was alone again, enshrouded by veils of greenish light. Only the pressure of Ice Claw's hand told me that he was there.

"There's nothing cold around here for miles, Ice Claw?" I said. "We are in the Spider Desert and the sun is burning down on us. You have to get that into your consciousness."

"But I'm cold!" wailed the chretkor. "What good is it for my reason to grasp the truth of things? For me my feelings are what count. And I feel the coldness creeping into my body. Don't bump me, Atlan, or I'll break to pieces!"

"Ice Claw, it's hot!" I insisted, trying to make it sink into his mind.

"No! No!" he countered. "Whatever you say—I feel myself growing stiff! And the cold is coming from you! Dammit, Atlan, you're cold!"

He let loose of me abruptly.

"Ice Claw, don't run away!" I called after him desperately, groping about me. But the chretkor was no longer there.

"I need a warm climate." I heard his voice emerge from somewhere out of the green veils of light. "Got to have warmth and I'm going to find it!"

"Ice Claw!"

There was a sound like a death rattle, followed by a sigh of relief. "I've found a source of warmth, Atlan!" cried Ice Claw triumphantly. The coldness can't get the best of me anymore. I can warm myself here."

I shuddered instinctively. I stumbled against something. As I groped about with my hands I felt the contours of a humanoid figure that crouched in front of me.

The greenish light layers began to dissolve. I was back in the Spider Desert again. At my feet I saw Ice Claw kneeling on top of Vafron with his taloned hands gripping the area of the other's heart. Vafron had died a quick death. His heart must have turned to ice with the swiftness of thought.

I looked about me. Fratulon was only twenty paces or so away. He came toward us slowly, obviously in a state of complete exhaustion. His battle against the mirages must have drained his last reserves of strength. I also saw Vafron's other two henchmen. One of them lay covered with blood in the sand. The other was dangling from one of the silvery strands overhead.

When Fratulon shoved Ice Claw off of his victim, the chretkor continued to stare incredulously at his icy talons. Sawbones proceeded to search Vafron. After a while, he stood up again, appearing to stare through narrowed eyes into nothingness. Then he uttered a loud curse.

"What's the matter?" I inquired. "What did you find?"

Pointing to Vafron, he said: “They were Kralesians!” He gave no further explanation, finally changing the subject. “We have to go back to Tarkihl. Get the rayguns from the corpses. We’ll still have good use for them.”

I made a suggestion: “Shouldn’t we try to find Komyal’s radio equipment and send for some help?”

Fratulon was decisively against this. “No way! We’ll make it back on our own.”

I did not understand why he refused to call for help, but I contented myself with his decision. Fratulon must certainly know what he was doing.

11/ FROM DEADLY VISIONS

The long arm was casting its shadow.

Orbanoshol III was not the rightful successor to Gonozal VII. The former Emperor had left a son behind him who was 4 years old at the time of the accident. But the Crystal Prince had disappeared immediately after Gonozal's death. Orbanoshol had declared him also dead and assumed the throne. Rumour had it that Orbanoshol had not only eliminated his brother, the Imperator, but that he also had the latter's son on his conscience.

But Orbanoshol knew better than this. He had had nothing to do with the disappearance of the Crystal Prince, and he suspected that he was still alive. Because of this, Orbanoshol III saw that his power was endangered, and therefore he instituted a feverish search for him throughout the galaxy. However, until now it had not met with success.

Orbanoshol's sole point of reference was the fact that someone else had accompanied the rightful heir to the throne when he had disappeared. With Atlan, the Crystal Prince, had gone Fratulon, the mystery shrouded physician to Gonozal VII.

For 13 long years, Orbanoshol's search for Atlan had been without success. But now old Sawbones, Fratulon, was forced to ask himself whether or not the Imperator had finally picked up the proper trail...

* * * *

The dune rover had been stripped out completely.

The Zagors had stolen everything that wasn't riveted down. Of course we had figured as much, yet I had secretly hoped they would at least leave the radio unharmed so that we could make contact with Tarkihl. Maybe Fratulon might have even changed his mind and could have been persuaded to call for help. But now such speculations were more or less immaterial.

We retreated into the machine's cockpit in order to take a rest. So far the Zagors had been unusually quiet. But this was the way they always became after their "singing go?" of the silver strands had made a manifestation.

I searched through the rover for food supplies and articles of equipment we might have used. But the Zagors hadn't overlooked a thing. The water containers

had been emptied to the last drop.

It made me swear aloud.

Ice Claw fooled with the air-conditioning system, but he didn't succeed in getting it to operate. "What I wouldn't give for a little refrigeration!" he said. "I won't be able to stand this heat much longer—I'm going to melt!"

The chretkor's perpetual yammering was slowly getting on my nerves. "If you do melt?" I snapped at him, "I'll collect you in a container and bury you in any place you choose!"

As was to be expected, Ice Claw was offended, but as far as I was concerned, so be it. I was suffering hardships as much as he was, but I didn't keep crying about it to the two of them.

Meanwhile, Fratulon had not reacted to any of this. He only sat there and stared into emptiness. I was certain that he was thinking about Vafron. He had referred to him and the others as "Kralesians."

When he finally did move, it was only to leave the cockpit and the rover. "We have to move on?" he said tersely, and he set himself in motion.

The sun was at its zenith and shone down on us with a merciless intensity. The silvery net over our heads did not provide very much shade, but nevertheless it was some relief to seek even that protection.

In order to follow its shadow we had to move in a strange zig-zag fashion. It reminded me of my childhood when I used to play a certain game with Farnathia. In designated rooms of Tarkihl we would avoid stepping on certain mosaic tiles in the floor while we would favour others. Whoever was first to step on a green tile would lose. And on other days other floor tiles would be taboo...

What we were doing now was similar. Ice Claw and I played the rules of the game and followed the shadow lines of the silvery net. Only Fratulon failed to concern himself with this and walked straight ahead. After a while I realized that it took a lot more out of me to follow the weaving path of the shadows, so I finally chose the route Sawbones was on. But Ice Claw was not to be diverted.

In a corner of the dune rover he had found a white chart or map of some kind, which he had fastened over his head. Although the white material served to reflect much of the sunlight, he continued to complain as much as before.

"If I survive this march through the Spider Desert?" he said gravely, "I'm going to build a monument out of ice. I'll take a trip to the polar regions and there I'll carve a giant statue out of the ice and have it brought here. And I'll spare no cost on whatever technical installations it will take to keep the monument from melting down under the searing rays of the sun."

* * * *

"Zagors!" shouted Ice Claw and drew his raygun.

"Leave your weapons where they are!" ordered Fratulon as he continued

forward unconcernedly.

The sun had passed its highest position, yet it was even hotter than before. The sand seemed to reflect more heat than ever. I would have preferred taking off my boots, but then the soles of my feet would have probably been roasted by the sand.

“Zagors!” Ice Claw exclaimed again. “Dam it, Sawbones, don’t you see those reptiles? We’re moving straight at them.”

“Let them have their peace?” said Fratulon. We could hear the weariness in his voice.

“But they’ve taken up positions against us?” cried Ice Claw, alarmed. “They’re moving!”

“That’s only the wind!”

“They’re coming at us!”

“It’s only an optical illusion. The shimmering of the air is tricking you.”

We passed the 20 Zagors without event. Ice Claw calmed down when closer inspection revealed that they were dangling from the silvery strands of the web. What visions must the humming and vibrating net have enticed them with to make them jump into its grasp?

It would remain their secret forever.

* * * *

My feet became heavier and heavier.

In front of me, Fratulon was staggering through the sand. Whenever he would lift one foot he would lean toward the other, so that looking at him made me quite dizzy. It cost him such an effort to wade through the sand that it seemed his feet were asleep.

But he would not take off his chest armour.

I begged him to. “You must feel as though you were in a bake oven?” I said. And I told him: “Your armour is sucking in heat and accumulating it?” I implored: “Throw your cuirass away. Rid yourself of all that ballast!”

But there was no more use demanding that of him than it would have been to ask him to take off his skin.

Ice Claw and I supported each other as we went along, which was more to my benefit than his because his body felt pleasantly cool.

“Do you hear it, Atlan?” asked Ice Claw.

“The humming?”

“Yes.” Now we are goners! The web is beginning to vibrate again... the singing is in the air...!”

“Fools!” Fratulon snapped at us without turning around. “That’s only the wind playing through those strands!”

I shook my head doubtfully, although he couldn’t see me. Ahead of us rose a

strange but somehow familiar structure. The silvery strands no longer seemed to exist. I tore myself away from Ice Claw and hurried my steps, finally overtaking Fratulon.

The strange image loomed before me from the desert like a mountain of bronze. It was not especially high, but nonetheless gigantic. Its profile was that of an obtuse triangle, 10 kilometres long and 6 kilometres wide. I knew that massive pile by heart, because from my present position I would not have been able to thus observe its architectural dimensions.

“Tarkihl!” cried Ice Claw.

So it was the beginning of another mirage. It was the peculiar subtlety of the silvery strands not to produce frightening visions but rather to entice us with the visions of secret desire. Thus they were magically materializing the palace of Tarkihl for us out of the desert sands. It lay there in the rays of the setting sun, glowing with the colour of solid, unworked bronze. Its countless dome like protrusions threw long shadows onto the desert.

“We’ve made it!” I heard Fratulon exclaim in triumph.

I hastened my pace still more. If I was to be the victim of an illusion, then I should not be denied the vision of Farnathia, as well. I wished for her. With every fibre of my will I sought to conjure her there. But the silvery strands did not materialize her out of the desert.

Instead, the humming and vibrating created a troop of soldiers.

I came to a halt.

This was no illusion. The images were too real. The soldiers had the right proportions in relation to their surroundings and they produced sounds that matched their movements in an exact formation.

This was reality.

We had actually made it. But for some reason I experienced no elation about it.

The soldiers came to a stop in front of us. They were all tall, imposing Arkonides who wore the uniforms of the Tattos’ Palace Guard.

Their commanding officer stepped in front of Sawbones. “Fratulon, physician to the Tatto, Armanck Declanter, I arrest you in the name of Orbanoshol the Third! I shall expect you to offer no resistance and to conduct yourself in a manner that will do credit to a man of your station.”

“Resistance? Conduct?” said Fratulon critically. He knew he was too weak for either a proper defence or even acceptable comportment. He swayed slightly, vacillating for a moment, but when he finally addressed the leader of the troop guards his gaze was firm. “Who issued the order for my arrest?” he inquired.

The guard officer hesitated, but then he controlled himself and answered in a confidential tone: “A confidant of the Emperor has arrived at the palace. He has full authority here. It’s this one who put out the warrant for your arrest. You will follow us now, Fratulon.”

The Tatto’s crack bodyguards surrounded Sawbones and marched away with

him toward Tarkihl. Ice Claw and I were left behind, completely disregarded. And I was too stunned to even collect my wits about me. Everything had happened with such surprising swiftness.

Fratulon put under detention? For what reason? What had he done?

I could not comprehend it all.

But I was determined to find out. I took Ice Claw's crystalline arm and followed the soldiers to Tarkihl.

Whatever may have happened, old Sawbones could count on me!