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THE CRYSTAL PRINCE

by K. H. Scheer

PROLOG

IN THE GREATER IMPERIUM of the Arkonides it is the year 10,496 A (for Arkon)-a time corresponding to the Earthly year of 9,003 BC. Thus it is a time in which the inhabitants of the Earth are yet submerged in primitive barbarism, knowing of neither the stars or the great heritage of vanished Lemuria.

By contrast-and despite the great war against the Maahks-Arkon is in its fullest prime. The present Emperor of this vast domain is Orbanashol 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 Orbanashol III has firmly established his dominion, there is one man whom the Emperor of Arkon must fear: Atlan, the rightful heir to the throne. After Gonozal's death, Atlan had disappeared without a trace, along with the former physician to Gonozal VII.

The young Atlan, who is still unaware of his true origin, is very much alive. While Orbanashol's henchmen stir up the entire galaxy in their relentless search for him, he takes an assumed name and joins more than 300 young candidates from the noblest families of the realm in a final test of manhood and completion. The outcome of this is of the utmost importance to the future course of his life.

Atlan seeks to win the coveted mark of knighthood for Arkonides, the Ark Summia, which will entitle him to the long-awaited activation of his "extra-brain". He knows no fear, for he is THE CRYSTAL PRINCE...

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ATLAN

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1/ THE GUARDIAN REPORTS

...This being the 1132rd positronic notation fed into the secret pulse code of the true Emperor, by reason of critical phase. These archives now protected against unauthorized access by high-explosive destruct mechanism, which is hereby activated.

Be it further set forth as follows:

At the time of his maturity, in the 18th year of his life and corresponding to Arkon calendar year 10497, Atlan was transferred to the Inner Circle.

After careful deliberation I have decided to send the Crystal Prince to the most significant of the 5 planets available to us for testing and evaluation.

Justification:

The operational pattern of the mercenary bounty hunters, the Kralasenes, as well as the modus operandi of their employer, acting Emperor Orbanashol III, provide a psychological basis for concluding that Atlan will have been sought everywhere by now—but for the time being not yet in the proving grounds of the world known as Largamenia.

Unquestionably the investigations of the search commandos will extend eventually to this principal planet of the 5 possible test worlds but it is hoped that the Crystal Prince will have gained a margin of time against them. Time is of the essence!

As revealed in my previous secret reports, it has been 14 years (Arkon time) since the personal data pertaining to the then 4-year-old Crystal Prince and heir to the Imperial Throne were rescued just in time from the hands of the secret police and Atlan's uncle, Orbanashol III. Therefore, during the severe qualification trials on Largamenia, any premature identification of Atlan is also out of the question.

Tanictrop, as a shining example of Arkonide scientists and a gifted man of both discretion and high personal courage, will henceforth be my assistant. It was Tanictrop's son, Macolon, who was to have completed his qualifying trials so that he might obtain the coveted Ark Summia but in this his luck did not prevail.

However, only a few trusted people know of his untimely death, so Atlan is to take over that role, in which his every physical and mental ability will be

required to win the Ark Summia. Integral to such an effort is the possibility of activating his extra-brain, which is present in almost every highly trained Arkonide—and which is an incalculable asset for any future ruler!

Atlan has always been kept uninformed in regard to his actual heritage and his future significance. My oath to his murdered father and my lord has hindered me from making such a revelation. Even though the circumstances of my lofty mission often made this promise appear to be antiquated and no longer applicable, ever since Gonozal's death I have never broken my word.

But now the time has come to enlighten the Crystal Prince. However, his impetuous temperament, his profound sensitivity and his deeply rooted inclination to subordinate all other interests to the security and welfare of the stellar empire of the Arkonides—all these considerations impose the need for a very prudent approach to such revelations.

In years past it has been difficult to hold the young prince in check. My psychological methods were necessarily variable and seemingly dilettante—but they served their purpose. Atlan's persistent questions regarding his true origin often brought me to the brink of mental and spiritual exhaustion.

He is unrelenting with himself and is bright and sincere. My proposal—it's been about half an Arkon year ago—to announce his candidacy for the final and most difficult qualification tests on Largamenia sent the youngster into a transport of ecstasy. Nevertheless this resulted in his pestering me all the more with his insistent questions. It was very difficult to make the proposition plausible to him that he should make his debut there under an assumed name, that for the time being he was to forget his own identity and represent another Arkonide.

The Crystal Prince finally agreed under one condition: that after a satisfactory completion of his tests he would be unconditionally informed. To this I acceded and to this extent the time of silence has come to an end.

However, the task of coordinating the personality and identity factors of the Crystal Prince with those of Macolon proved to be the most difficult undertaking of all, if not almost insurmountable. If it had been possible with the available state of technology to furnish Atlan with Macolon's brain-wave patterns, the problem might have been resolved as easily as the matter of outward appearances. Inasmuch as all appropriate attempts failed miserably in this regard, I was forced to take the longer and more awkward course of approaching the problem in reverse.

Before his death, Macolon had been known and loved as an officer of the Arkonide spacefleet. At that time he had been Chief of the 34th Lakan attached to the Tanterym Offensive Task Force. Naturally his dossier data and identity factors were registered in the Fleet's main positronic data banks as well as in numerous other auxiliary records.

With the help of my trusted friends, among whom are numerous persons of high influence, I was able to erase Macolon's actual data and surreptitiously replace them with those of the Crystal Prince. For many of my accomplices it was a venture of life and death—in fact four Arkonides were shot down by the automatic defences of the robot brain that they were forced to manipulate.

All of us must bear this painful loss as part of the price to be paid for overthrowing the criminal usurper, Orbanashol III. Before this latter adventure may be undertaken, however, Atlan's final cycle of development must be completed and he must be equipped with the Ark Summia. An Emperor whose extra-brain has not been parapsychologically activated is unthinkable.

We are aware of the fact that some Emperors in the past have not satisfied the requirements of these final tests but because of their lofty heritage and heavy positions of responsibility they were excused. In most cases the results were lamentable!

As a medical expert all I can say is that any Arkonide who has not withstood the qualification tests is not fit to receive the Ark Summia. Well... exceptions were made in the interests of the Greater Imperium. It is not my place to concern myself with the political orientations of my forefathers.

But Atlan must not fail! I have prepared him accordingly, having given him knowledge of many things and in unobtrusive ways I have provided him with his father's inheritance. Now events have been brought to the point where the seemingly impossible may be made possible. The Crystal Prince of the Imperium, rightful successor to Emperor Gonozal VII, has arrived in the final testing ground on the world of Largamenia.

He has already passed the scientific examinations with the effortless ease I had anticipated. However, now begins the testing period of his total person and the quality of his overall personality. And in this there are other standards of measurement.

I am advocating this course of trial and testing although there is a considerable body of Arkonide opinion that rejects such undertakings as being primitive in their nature. For example the view is held that sword fighting is a bit archaic for space age Arkonides. And there are many similar views as well.

But I believe that physical stress is neither inappropriate nor primitive. I too was once subjected to such tests. The concept of manly fortitude may be expressed in many ways but experience has taught me that body and mind are a single metal to be tempered in the same fire. The two must be alloyed together in the crucible of experience.

Now all that remains is to hope that Atlan will perform as expected. I have no concern about his personal capabilities—I only worry about the inscrutable vagaries of fortune! What can happen, for example, if he should meet a man who was very close to Macolon, perhaps a spaceman who might have gone

through experiences with Macolon that would only be known to the participants? That's only one of the many conceivable pitfalls. In my opinion the Crystal Prince is not nearly so much endangered by his forthcoming tests of manhood as he is by the possible vicissitudes of fate.

But then again, Atlan is prepared for such incidents. That sharp mind of his is apparently capable of mastering even insurmountable situations. He has proved that often enough on the planet of Gortavor.

Nevertheless I realize now with greater clarity than ever how hard it will be not only to keep a political fugitive alive and well but also to yet guide him on the way to desired results. However much I might wish to fortify the young prince with a full report of his true origin and the sterling qualities of his venerable father, this I cannot do—not yet!

So Atlan will have to negotiate the steep path without this—but I will be watching in the background. He must obtain the Ark Summia! There is no way to activate the extra-brain except through prescribed channels. Besides, it would be very damaging to the young man's self-confidence if he didn't succeed in achieving the A.S.

Signed: Fratulon, personal physician and confidant to his Omniscient Highness, Gonozal VII of Arkon. Registered on the 10th day of Tarman in the year 10497 A.

2/ FRATULON'S WARNING

Obviously the man approaching us was drunk. I had never seen even Fratulon in such a state of inebriation.

He belonged undoubtedly to one of the crews of the Fleet formation which had landed on Largamenia recently with engines almost burned out, their munitions holds emptied by their running battles and their provisioning all but exhausted.

We had heard reports of this particular unit's battles and heavy casualties clear from the Persypty sector which lay deep within the zone controlled by the Maahks. So it was not surprising that these men had been permitted certain liberties which normally would be prohibited.

I watched the big fellow at first with amusement but then testily as he gave signs of being wild and boisterous. His close-fitting ship's uniform would have given him a striking appearance if it had not been so dirty.

Beside me was my friend and companion in the examinations, Tirako Gamno. "That one's really blasting you with that look of his," he commented. "I think he has a half-conscious notion of giving you a bad time so we'd better get out of here before he tries it."

Tall and fragile-seeming in outward appearance, Tirako sighed when I shook my head. "The prospect no doubt fascinates you, right?" he said with a note of warning. "That figures! If you don't pass the *Ark Summia* with flying colours you'll get there by stubbornness alone. But—that's the proper attitude for such a primitive Arkonide process. It's abominable! Hadn't we better get going, after all, my esteemed Macolon?"

I grinned. Good old Gamno! He was smart, almost too smart, also aesthetic and well equipped with a fine gift of sarcasm—but once more he was fearful of getting into a possible complication.

It was incomprehensible to me why his father, who was certainly a man of experience, should have falsely evaluated his son's abilities to this extent. Of course Tirako Gamno had passed the first and second-degree examinations with an overall citation for being "outstanding", which was better than my own fairly successful performance. All of which had reflected his sharp intelligence and forever unquenchable thirst for knowledge. Now, however, he was to enter his

third phase of testing. By the multiple worlds of Arkon, how would he ever fare in that?

“Come on!” he urged me. “That fellow’s a giant. He’s even taller than you and wider and heavier too! He’s a burly slob—so what’s holding you?”

“His eyes!” I retorted. “They’re too clear and awake for a drunk. Oh—oh! Here he comes!”

The street was old and narrow. Tiftorum was the capital city of Largamenia and as such it could look back on 7,000 years of history. In fact the streets we were in now were a part of the historical sector, as evidenced by the poor and antiquated street lighting. This of course was in sharp contrast to the bright spectrum of brilliant modern lighting surrounding the places of entertainment and the numerous stores and even the fronts of the basement taverns.

As the stranger came closer I could see that he really was a big, muscular bruiser. His eyes had narrowed and were now not so discernible. Was he trying to conceal their revealing clarity? Fratulon’s teaching had been engraved on my memory: “Don’t trust a stranger if he is either too inconspicuous in his manner or too challenging.”

Tirako was still trying to convince me of my danger. “He’s the type who’s naturally against anybody in an officer’s uniform—maybe he even hates you. His kind is obvious—rowdies and street fighters. No respect for manners even in public!”

“Oh I’m on to him alright, “ I agreed, making sure to play the role of Macolon.

But he wasn’t far from wrong! This space soldier was an Arbtan, which meant fairly high rank among noncoms. As he came to a stop and stood before me he seemed to sway drunkenly. A number of pedestrians slowed their pace to observe us curiously. Although we were obviously being menaced, it would not occur to anyone to come to our assistance. All candidates for the *Ark Summia* were required to save their own necks. It was an unwritten law.

The Arbtan surveyed my tailor-made uniform, which was moss green in accordance with Institute regulations. Candidates like ourselves were also marked by insignia in the form of bright red stripes which came over both shoulders and reached almost to our belt buckles.

Tirako reached for his service weapon.

“Hands off!” I whispered to him. “Shut up and watch! You can also use this experience!”

Suddenly the spaceman gripped my left shoulder and his face came close to mine. “Well now, if it ain’t one of the fair-haired laddy boys fresh out of Faehrl—school for the sons of the demigods! Not to mention a baby-sitting outfit for backsliding cheats and fakes! Has Your Eminence ever smelled the stink of smouldering equipment and burning bodies, hah? Of course not—what would you know about that! But oh he’s wearing the nice red stripes on his shoulders now, isn’t he? All ready for the third phase, right? What happens then?”

Then Your Highness will be set loose over men like me. No practical experience, no feel for a real combat situation but a smart mouth, fine manners—and the *Ark Summia*. And at the first thunder of battle you'll go under cover. But at least one thing they've taught you at Faehrl is that the Maahks are pretty good shooters. You know what—I think I'll just knock you around a bit before you become my superior officer. That way I can get off with less time in the brig for messing you up!”

He guffawed and now also grasped my right shoulder. I was about to put an end to the matter with one of Fratulon's special leverages but then the thing happened that I had half expected. I knew his eyes were too keen for just a plain drunk. And now I heard him whispering to me: “Message from Fratulon. Danger! Watch for an officer of the *Argosso*. Name's Tschetrum, arrived with our outfit. Knows you well. Read the report, study his photo, be guided accordingly.—OK, now throw me!” As he spoke, something dropped into my pocket.

Again he spoke loudly and shook me, adding more insults. I shook off the momentary shock of his message and made a lightning move, lifting him off the ground with a special grip. With a yell he flew back and hit the ground so hard that I caught my breath. But I noted the skill behind this burly soldier as he completed a back roll, even though pretending to be hurt. Groaning and cursing he lay there for a moment.

I figured it was the time and place to strike the appropriate pose. “If I'm not mistaken, Arbтан, a flight patrol is due here any minute from your own combat unit. I don't believe your commanding officer will want any trouble, do you? I'll forget your insults. I am Macolon, the last commander of the 34th Lakan, Tanterym Task Force. Now get out of here!”

He sobered quickly and was even faster getting to his feet. The onlookers cleared out in a hurry. As the soldier stood there in feigned uncertainty there was an interruption from another quarter. We heard laughter from a lean-figured man who stood across the street under the dark red lights of a basement tavern. In the crook of his arm he carried a heavy shock-gun, which was a latest Fleet issue.

“With your permission, Your Excellence, my name is Morenth. I was about ready to give you a hand there, in case it was necessary. How could an Arbтан make such a mistake! “ He then made a slight bow and put his right hand to his forehead in greeting.

“Be careful!” whispered the Arbтан. “I'm leaving. I am your servant!” Then he turned and ran away.

The lean one laughed again. The triangular muzzle of his shock-gun was aimed at the ground. I looked at him suspiciously. How had he appeared so suddenly? Could he be a middleman for the Kralasenes or maybe even an authorized agent of the political secret police of Arkon? If any of these possibilities were true then the next thing in line would be an invitation. In fact he was already saying it.

“Highness, would you do me the honour of being my welcome guest here in the tavern? I can offer you rarities from all parts of the galaxy!”

“And intoxicating drinks, I suppose,” put in Tirako Gamno, “which can turn disciplined men into fools! Didn’t the Arbtan just come out of there or am I mistaken?”

Again Morenth laughed. There was something unpleasant about it. “You are not mistaken. I followed him out because I expected there would be trouble. And incidentally...” He indicated his shock-beamer. “I have a license for this.”

“He’s a galactic confidence man,” said Tirako in low tones. “Surely you’re not going to accept his invitation!”

“Of course!”

“You’re crazy!” he retorted. “What evil whim was it that made me accompany you into such an abysmal quarter?”

I said nothing because I was thinking of more important matters. The Arbtan had come out of this cellar tavern. Its proprietor had appeared at just the right moment. His invitation had not only been very sudden, I thought, but also without reason.

Nevertheless he must have had a reason! Was this another test? Inside, perhaps, would the officer be waiting that I’d just been warned about? Or would the latter be notified immediately so that he could come here personally and make a casual identification of me, meaning Macolon? But how could this lean one have known that I would be visiting this particular quarter of the city on this particular day? Did he have an efficient informer somewhere in the Institute? Could that have been one of the possibilities?

In any case I could not neglect a chance to clarify such an apparently organized sequence of events. I had to follow up the invitation! Of course there was some reassurance in the certain knowledge that all candidates for the third phase of testing were being closely monitored. But I was tormented again by the old question: why were they specifically after me, Atlan? Who was I, actually? From whence had I come? My memories from earliest childhood were vague. And still Fratulon remained silent.

Inwardly angered, I blurted out, half aloud: “I hope he gets flat feet!”

“Who—the proprietor of this tavern?” laughed Tirako, mistaking the meaning of my remark. “Shame on you! No true Hertaso and student of Faehrl should be making such statements! By the shimmering Arkon Triangle—where did I fail?”

I looked him over from head to toe. Tirako was actually grinning. My aesthetic friend was even high-spirited. That’s why it occurred to me that in our moment of crisis he must have been counting on his service weapon.

“*Would* you have fired?” I asked him. “On a deserving serviceman, an Arbtan in the Arkonide Space Fleet? Would you have done that?”

He warded off the suspicion with a grandiose gesture. “What made you think that? Never! But I had spotted this one at the tavern with his weapon. Maybe *he*

would be dead by now if I hadn't recognized his harmless shock-beamer! Of course, had I killed him I should have been quite inconsolable."

Suddenly Morenth's laughter faded as he noted in some consternation that Tirako was carrying a Luccot, which was a high-powered impulse raygun. The holding strap over the butt-end of it had been unfastened. It was dangling loosely from its holster as he walked along.

"I see you're improving, my friend," I complimented him. "I had not noticed our friendly host here. Let's go in..."

3/ IDENTITY CRISIS

The vaulted cellar chambers of Morenth's place were roomy and undeterminably extensive. Here a person could obtain many things and completely enjoy many pleasures in secret. Colonial Arkonides of Morenth's kind were equally hated or appreciated. It all depended upon whether or not somebody needed his services.

Only a few minutes had passed since our incident with the Arbtan. The Fleet's military police had made an appearance outside. It was amazing how those fellows could smell out trouble. In any case their C.O. didn't bother us. Our questionable host had hastily offered to straighten out the "little matter".

I welcomed the interlude as a means of withdrawing for a few moments. I got up from the pneumatic cushions of the booth that was located in a sort of alcove, excusing myself from Tirako and the two girls we'd been provided with for company. "I'll be right back," I said. "My hand hurts a little. Is there any first-aid material in the restrooms?"

Tirako wrinkled his brow in some surprise. The scratch on the back of my right hand hardly required such attention. One of the girls pointed out the way for me. Yes, what I needed would be found there. I left.

The guest rooms of this place, which was called the Red Arches, were overcrowded with the noisy and celebrating spacemen from the fleet unit that had just landed. I could sympathize with them. They had been through 4 long months in the most advanced fighting positions of the Maahk region.

When I reached the restroom I sent away the robot custodian who was engaged in cleaning work and then I locked myself inside one of the booths. A quick check of the chamber revealed that there were no remote video pickups in evidence. I opened up the small capsule that the Arbtan had given me. It contained a super-thin foil on which the writing was fully legible. There was no doubt that the message was from Fratulon.

Also there was a photograph which I unfolded first. It was in 3-D and colour, showing the same man in three different poses. He was of medium height, apparently, with average features and no special markings of any kind. But I impressed every detail upon my mind since I'd *have* to be able to recognize him.

“Tschetrum, 2nd Watch Officer of *Argosso*, 4 weeks personal companion to Macolon, just now landed on Largamenia. Information obtained from Chief Accountant at spaceport who got hold of crew list of armament supply squadron. My inquiries to Tanictrop were confirmed by him and some double-checking was involved. That’s why this last minute warning. Be careful in personal contacts. Tschetrum flew with Macolon on a special mission. Pay special attention to following data...”

I read the message several times until I knew it by heart. As usual, Fratulon had performed magnificently. It was still a mystery to me how he had come by all these special contacts and who had financed and built all his secret depots and strongholds. Evidently somebody with plans for the future had taken a hand in all this—but who was this somebody? My actual father? Politically interested power groups?

There were many possibilities. A thousand times I had thought of these questions and more or less dissected them, always turning new facets of the matter to the surface. Without the key to the puzzle, however, that’s all the farther I ever got.

But this time even Fratulon appeared to have come out of his taciturnity. He gave specific warnings, provided exact details and was quite frank and open about the capabilities and methods of his operation. Maybe he was here on Largamenia himself. It reminded me that I had not always been called Atlan. It was merely the name under which I had grown up in Fratulon’s care.

But if I were an object of search, if such powerful organizations of the State as political secret police and even the Kralasenes were looking everywhere for me, it meant that at my birth I must have had another name! Of course Fratulon wasn’t foolish enough to address me everywhere even as Atlan. Apparently even that could instantly betray me now.

I abandoned my brooding and destroyed the message according to instructions. The evidence burned to ashes in the wash basin, after which I washed away the last trace. Then I sprayed an antiseptic film onto the back of my hand and returned to Tirako.

He watched me thoughtfully and when he saw my hand there was a barely perceptible smile on his face. Of course the youngster had seen through my ruse.

Our host approached us laughingly and announced: “Everything’s been taken care of, Excellency. The officer of the guard was satisfied with my explanation. I take it you’re not going to prefer charges and demand a punishment for the offence?”

I waved a hand. “Nonsense! He was drunk. Tomorrow he’ll come to his senses. So what now, master of the Red Arches?”

“Prepare for a surprise, Your Excellency. My chefs are from many parts of the galaxy, and not only from Arkonide planets. I am going to...”

He paused as he noted my searching look, which was directed at someone beyond him. With an exaggerated accommodation he stepped to one side but could not refrain from following my gaze.

There was the officer, precisely the man I had just seen in the photographs that had been furnished to me. He had just entered the cellar tavern and now he looked about with an air of uncertainty as though he did not know whom to turn to. In that moment I guessed that the former 2nd Watch Officer of the *Argosso* had been drawn into a game in which the rules were unknown to him. He was a pawn. Somebody must have contacted him and requested him to come here.

When I saw him I decided upon a bold manoeuvre. I stood up abruptly and waved a hand, shouting across the tavern. "Hey Tschetrum old buddy! What brings you here?"

He immediately became aware of me. And now came the critical moment!

Morenth simulated a smile of complete innocence and moved even farther to one side. Which brought to my attention three silent strangers who seemed ready to close a trap. There was no doubt that they were armed—I'd seen that first of all. Under their wide capes, which gave them the appearance of travelling merchants, they were obviously wearing some kind of short-barrelled weapons—probably modern Luccots.

Deliberately disregarding them I again called out Tschetrum's name. And I laughed with the air of a man who was happy to see an old acquaintance again after a long period of time. The officer hesitated for a moment, staring at me questioningly, but then he began to smile. He took me for Macolon. I had won the first move.

Although the three spurious tradesmen withdrew in an unobtrusive way, they nevertheless remained within hearing distance.

Moments later I was embracing the uniformed newcomer, repeating his name aloud, and then I introduced him to Tirako Gamno. "This is Tschetrum, my former 2nd officer of the watch on the old *Argosso*. We flew a 2-man mission together once—I'll have to tell you about it sometime. Have a seat, Tschetrum! How's that old leg wound? Did it heal up alright?"

Tschetrum was too much taken by surprise to note any imperfections in my facial plastic surgery. For him I was Macolon! And finally he himself spoke the name.

At this the proprietor finally excused himself with a few courteous remarks. "When old friends and battle companions meet, there is much to talk about, Excellency. Permit me to return in a little while to see if you want anything."

He left—and I breathed a secret sigh of relief.

Tirako furrowed his brow once more. He had suddenly proved to be an unusually sharp observer. Quite inconspicuously he was looking across the room at the three strangers who were following the tavern keeper. That little detail he had also observed. He gave me a peculiar look but remained silent.

* * * *

I carried on a 2-hour conversation with the officer who had made such a sudden and unexpected appearance. He drank too much but spoke with enthusiasm and never once suspected that I might not be his former commanding officer. The strange intruders had disappeared. I had been publicly identified.

Shortly after 3 o'clock in the morning, Tirako insisted on leaving. He seemed to be wary of my high-spirited mood. Morenth had again contrived to be always around somewhere close to us. He did not miss a single detail of those things which actually only Macolon and Tschetrum could know about.

Tirako tugged at my sleeve. "The hour grows late, oh noble candidate for Arkon's highest award! We're having mission briefings in the morning. If you want to listen with a clear head, then I'd say it's time to..."

Tschetrum interrupted with loud laughter. "Ho! If you knew Macolon's staying power you'd lay off of him! 'That time on Arbtzuk he had it worse than this by far!'"

My presence of mind returned quickly. Arbtzuk...? I had never heard the name of the planet. Even Fratulon was not omniscient, after all. What had Macolon and Tschetrum experienced together on that world? I diverted us away from the risky subject and shortly thereafter we all decided to leave.

At that time, Tschetrum managed to whisper to me uneasily: "Do you have any idea why I was ordered to come here? Why didn't anybody tell me that I'd find you here? It would have made things simpler..."

I had to shift gears again. "Forget it! I pulled a few strings, is all. Naturally I knew that you had arrived with the armament supply force—but don't mention a word about it!"

"I'll watch myself!" he laughed, somewhat crestfallen. "My leave was cancelled. OK, many thanks. I'll have to assume further that my worthy commander took pity on me and sent me here to the Red Arches."

This was important information. Apparently the order for him to come here had been given to him by the C.O. of his own fighting ship. This would prove interesting to Fratulon, I was sure.

It was 4 a.m. by the time we said goodbye. Tschetrum went off in a troop personnel glider for men returning from furloughs and we ordered an air car.

"Let's have one of the oldest and slowest crates available," I stipulated, somewhat thick-tongued. "I'd like to stretch out my enjoyment of Tiftorum's bright lights before I submit to being cooked, roasted or maybe taken apart."

Morenth suddenly appeared to be in a hurry. He seemed to be off the hook regarding his own part in the secret strategy. He declined any payment for his services, maintaining that he was in my debt. After all, he said, he had been

spared the task of bringing that drunken spaceman to his senses in time to avoid trouble.

We left him. The ancient steps to the street level were steep and worn but right next to them was an antigrav lift. The aircar was already waiting for us outside. Although it was truly a vintage contraption it had a built-in robot control. Tirako programmed our destination into the autopilot. The machine lifted off.

I kept asking myself how the Arbtan had arrived at just the right time to warn me—above all, in just the specific cellar tavern that was involved in the plot! For the time being I abandoned my broodings on the matter but determined that sooner or later I'd get to the bottom of it. Most probably Fratulon had been instrumental in that part as well.

Tirako Gamno interrupted my thoughts. "It will soon be light. There on the horizon—don't you see the gleaming energy domes?"

Yes, I'd been aware of them for some time. They were the typical testing areas where candidates strove to win the *Ark Summia*. There was special technology available on the planet of Largamenia which made it possible to simulate a large variety of other-world environments. Under each of those energy domes was a different terrain and condition—ice-cold or molten or perhaps filled with poison gas, and often under conditions of super-heavy gravity.

Another name for the aspirant to this highest honour was Hertaso and much was demanded of him. He had to prove himself everywhere. Of course the necessary protective suits and other supplies and equipment were always placed at their disposal. Not even the masters of the *Inner Circle* who were members of the testing commission could set a man loose without protection in a hydrogen-ammonia atmosphere.

However it was not alone a matter of protective equipment. One had to know how to use and apply such devices and materials in a proper fashion under carefully planned and induced emergency situations. The failure or casualty rate was extremely high. Therefore it was not to be wondered that out of more than 35,000 candidates for the 1st and 2nd examination grades a meagre 800 had reported for the 3rd phase of the testing procedures. And many of these had been pressured into it by their over-proud families. Moreover, after even these had been subjected to medical and aptitude examinations there were only 342 actual final candidates chosen.

How many of these would probably survive and pass all tests from this point on?

It was as though Tirako Gamno had read my thoughts. "Not I!" he said.

"What?"

"I won't make it! I'd probably collapse under 2 gravs of pressure."

"Nuts to that, buddy! You're stronger than you think!"

"I mean a mental or psychological breakdown. I can't understand or even appreciate why a young Arkonide has to be tortured simply so somebody can

go through the motions of justifying their decision to grant or deny the *Ark Summia*. How many gifted men of our race might have earned and achieved their activation except for the fact that they couldn't physically endure?"

I turned in the narrow seat to look at him searchingly. "Those are revolutionary views, my friend."

He smiled and stared straight ahead—to the horizon where the energy domes glowed like a liquid incandescence. "Let's not talk about it any more. Incidentally you were pretty fidgety all of a sudden when Tschetrum mentioned that planet, Arbtzuk. A person could possibly think that you'd never been there."

I secretly cursed his talent for razor-sharp observation.

* * * *

...this being the 1134th positronic notation fed into the secret pulse code of the true Emperor, by reason of the 2nd critical phase. The high-explosive destruct mechanism has again been activated. An unauthorized retrieval of my notes is thus impossible.

Be it further set forth as follows:

In the past night period on the test planet of Largamenia, Atlan the Crystal Prince of the Arkonide Stellar Empire was forced to overcome an obstacle related to his identity alteration. Unexpectedly a certain Tschetrum, who is an officer of the heavy cruiser Argosso, made an appearance. This occurred as a result of his transfer to Admiral Genomarp's 904th Attack Group.

Owing to Atlan's exposure to discovery during the test period, my most vital task is to monitor any arriving spacemen who might have had a chance to be in close personal contact with Macolon. This precaution has proved to be justified! Tschetrum was discovered by virtue of the surveillance procedure. His experiences with Macolon could be sufficiently reconstructed so that Atlan could at least have time to study the most important phase of their joint missions.

An Arbtan by the name of Unkehtzu—connected with long-time friends in the Arkonide Fleet—was the one who made the deciding identification of the former 2nd Watch Officer of the Argosso. As a result, Unkehtzu has been listed for a commendation later.

It came to my notice that the Crystal Prince intended to visit the old centre of Tiftorum—and there was a threat of danger! Based on psychological probability it was anticipated that Atlan would look for the famous street of the Red Arches, and the Arbtan was accordingly sent there with the message. The most important and probably most critical factor in my calculations was the tavern's proprietor, Morenth, who is a middleman for Sofgart the Blind.

IF Atlan was going to be confronted with Tschetrum at all, it could only be there! The Arbtan was instructed to forestall any possible manoeuvres the

tavern keeper might attempt. He was to watch for Atlan's expected arrival and immediately make contact with him.

This plan succeeded. My calculations were correct. It was possible to warn Atlan in time and to inform him concerning Tschetrum. But this risky psychological game was not without its unknown factors. Morenth was not only himself prepared for making the test of identity but was even provided with suitable reinforcements. The Arbtan only got ahead of him by a matter of moments but otherwise Atlan would have been lured into the tavern on some other basis.

What is vital to my successful operation is the question as to whether Morenth and other middlemen of Blind Sofgart have any specific reason for this special investigation of Atlan. By the time the danger had passed my friends were able to advise me that all aspirants to the 3rd phase—that is, contenders for the Ark Summia—had gone through some strange experiences. That is gratifying to know.

It means that Atlan's case was not extraordinary but rather just one among 342 others. From this it may be deduced that Orbanashol's hunters are still groping in the dark. Latest reports from the four other test worlds indicate that the candidates there have also been subjected to close scrutiny. They are searching for the Crystal Prince of the Greater Imperium! They know that if he lives and is still reaching for the Throne he is now of an age where he must undergo his final tests. If the enemies of Atlan and myself are reasoning from this point and probably assuming that he is getting the help and support of influential friends so that he can challenge the Throne as the rightful Emperor of Arkon, then the Ark Summia not only becomes a clear indicator for them but plain and simply the key point itself.

If Atlan is ever discovered it will be at this particular time! And of course the unrightful Emperor is fully aware that the Prince can be dangerous to him after his extra-brain has been successfully activated.

In consideration of these suppositions it is clear to me that Atlan has never been endangered before as he is now. It is advisable to be constantly alert and on guard.

4/ THE TEST BEGINS

I had been accompanied to the locale of the first test by three officers of the Faehrl Commission. They were guarded and monitored by two registration robots. The officers who were highly qualified scientists and technologists with space experience were quite polite and correct. This was all I was permitted to expect from them.

Any slightest indication of assistance to me for the solution of problems or tasks ahead would have resulted in severe punishment for them and immediate disqualification for me. So it was useless to ask any leading questions.

Once more the robots checked the identification strip on my left wrist. It was firmly bound to the tissue itself and was unbreakable. It could not be removed. Even if an accident should cause my body to be mutilated this impulse strip would remain undamaged.

The robot flashed a violet signal light.

“Identified and ready for position one,” declared one of the officers. “Hertaso Macolon, will you please step forward?”

I stepped forward and took a position in front of the three men. The local test leader surveyed me intently. “Do you feel mentally and physically in condition to master the test which lies before you?”

“Yes, Your Eminence.”

“Very well. But in spite of the thorough instructions you have been given in the lecture halls of Faehrl, it is my traditional duty to warn you once more. You are risking your physical and mental well being. Is this understood by you as you face the starting mark?”

“Yes, Your Eminence.”

“You will be left to your own resources, Hertaso Macolon. Your trained intelligence will already have indicated to you that you must keep your senses alert and that you must not expend your physical reserves prematurely. Are you familiar with the operation of a primitive boat?”

I glanced across at the small skiff that was waiting for me. It wasn't even plastic; it was rustically constructed of wood. Outside of two oars in the oarlocks, a strong paddle and a hefty-looking pole that was taller than a man there was no evidence of any other articles of equipment.

Although this was all that met the eye it did not necessarily mean that I had to reach my goal with the boat. This realization in itself was one of those hints a candidate for the *Ark Summia* had to perceive. If he were not flexible and quick to adapt, his physical strength and prowess would avail him nothing. Each Hertaso knew by virtue of countless instructions that these tests were not for courage and agility alone. Success would depend on a total coordination of all available factors of ability. Thus it was possible that an apparently insurmountable problem or obstacle could be easily eliminated or resolved through a timely recognition of other circumstances and conditions.

The basic axiom behind all such instructions was: “Never forget to use your intelligence and powers of discernment! The extreme conditions you will encounter during your forthcoming trials will only become hopeless if you simply rely on muscular power or primitive tricks you may have picked up in the course of your own previous experience.”

I had no intention of surmounting the forthcoming trial by any such means. I knew there had to be better alternatives. Certainly the rowboat was a factor in the game. And reaching the goal was another. But how that was to be achieved was not specifically stipulated.

The test leader for this trial arena read the rules aloud once more. He concluded with: “Your time extends until sundown. Atmospheric pressure and oxygen content here are 35% below normal. This means, of course, that your physical exertions will drain your reserve staying power more rapidly. You may utilize any means you may deem suitable against obstacles or dangers you will encounter. You may fight any and all creatures you meet, according to your own judgment. You are to proceed as if you had made an emergency landing on an alien world—in other words, you are acting in the interests of the Greater Imperium. Any consideration, pity or reservation of any kind will be mutually inappropriate. All conditions of an involuntary landing in enemy territory will be simulated. You are without weapons and are only provided with a regulation flight suit. Your destination is a secret supply depot of the Fleet. If you fail to reach it, it means that in the actual situation you would be lost.”

“I understand, Eminence.”

“That is to be expected. Remember that your life and health are of secondary importance. Reaching the depot is not only in the interests of self-preservation; above all your mission is to deliver strategically vital information. You must assume that fleet units in space are dependent upon your information and you are to act accordingly.”

“My life is for Arkon, Your Eminence!”

This ended the prescribed formalities. The paltry indications that had been given me seemed to make the situation clear enough. I was to act and think as I would if I were on an alien world that was occupied by an enemy. However that did not mean that I had to give preference to the use of force in all of its various

applications. The test trials of the Third Phase were many-faceted. But then again it went without saying that a prospective Fleet officer, among other things, would certainly know how to make ample use of his highly trained body.

Much more important was the question of how he would use his intelligence. As a result of our many years of combat operations against the Maahks, we knew it was often a better alternative to negotiate with neutral alien races rather than try to convert them by force into dubious friends and allies. It was said of Arkonides that they were conquerors, hard and unrelenting, and this was largely justified. We did not hesitate very much where the prize of success was involved. Other peoples were variously motivated, perhaps, but these rigorous measures on our part were simply representative of the Arkonide mentality. Still, when occasion demanded we could also be shrewd psychologists.

Naturally the *Inner Circle*, composed of the highest officials of the Testing Commission, were inclined to test all *Ark Summia* applicants according to guidelines that not all Fleet commanders and politicians knew how to deal with. In recent times it had become desirable that the forces of leadership in all professional disciplines should be proficient in alien race psychology.

* * * *

At some distance in front of me near the towering cliff wall the big transport glider took off. With it went not only the three test officers but also the two monitor robots. To all appearances I was alone—alone in a synthetically altered environment beneath an energy dome of visibly broad dimensions.

The oxygen content of the atmosphere was still sufficient. Also, at least here at the rest point, the light air pressure had no appreciable effect on me. But under conditions of physical exertion this would no doubt change. What proved to be a more serious problem was the heat and humidity of the place. Both of these quantities had a reading of 96%.

I analysed my surroundings. The so-called starting point had been carefully selected. It lay in a deep, mountainous basin that was surrounded by steep and rugged cliff walls. It would have been foolish to consider scaling these precipices.

So all that remained was the boat.

It lay on the shore of a mountain lake that was also closed in by the precipitous cliffs. To the north of my position a waterfall roared downward from a mountain river, whereas in an opposite direction across the water there was a narrow canyon which was obviously the outlet. And there began the difficulty!

The opening in the cliffs was too narrow for this mass of water and this produced a damming effect. From there the waters plunged away in a surf-like maelstrom of deep rapids and whirlpools.

I took another look at the glassy smooth landing place for the transport gliders, realizing that many a Hertaso before me had probably disembarked here to be sent into the uncertain paths of their adventure. The thought that I would be constantly observed through hidden monitoring devices was of no consequence to me now. No one could or would help me here. Each false move would be penalized with a minus point on the scoring, which would be analysed by robot calculators. I knew that the comportment of the test candidates would be evaluated according to mathematically logical guidelines.

At least that was one consolation! We were spared the dubious judgments of supposedly disinterested persons who nevertheless were subject to influence by their moods or even their favourable preferences.

Testing, I drew in a deep breath of air. It was predominantly mouldy smelling. Beyond the outlet gorge the country appeared to widen out. I anticipated encountering tropical forests, the nature and extent of which were unknown. The reference to fighting “any and all creatures you meet” returned to my mind. In this connection I thought of my friend Tirako Gamno who had been picked up a few hours before me to take the first test. How might he be faring now? Of course I couldn’t be sure that all Hertasos had stood in this place or if each of them had had to survive that specific river journey.

But since the survival factors were always maintained at an equal level for all, I took it for granted that Tirako had stood exactly on this spot and stared into the muggy mists of the unknown with a thousand questions on his lips. It was possible that he lay even now somewhere down stream on a rocky shore, exhausted, near to death and waiting for help.

Help—?! How would that look to our monitors? What would the *Inner Circle* do in case of mishaps and accidents? What was in the rulebook where the life and well being of an unsuccessful participant was threatened? Were they actually left to an uncertain fate? Was it true that no thought was given to rescue them? Thus it had been stipulated and proclaimed, but I didn’t believe a word of it!

One didn’t just leave the young heirs of great families to lie here and die. Of course some deadly mishaps had to be reckoned with but I could imagine situations where even the well-intentioned rescuer might arrive too late.

I shook off these thoughts and concentrated on the task before me. I was supposed to reach a calm lake somewhere in the flatlands. There a depot had been built which was identical to those which the specialists of the Arkonide Fleet had established on countless worlds. Once I arrived there I would have won this phase of the testing—that is if I could manage to discover the undoubtedly camouflaged station in time and get it open.

I walked slowly over to the rowboat. It was long and narrow with high gunwales, a pointed bow and a squarish transom stem equipped with a rudder and tiller.

But why that?

I had no sooner gotten into the boat to inspect it than I suddenly froze. All at once I felt calm and adjusted to my ordeal. What was I supposed to do with a rudder if I also had to row or paddle? After all, I only had two hands and one pair of feet.

Then I tensed as the first unpredictable incident occurred.

The stranger suddenly appeared from behind a large boulder next to the cliff. He held the weapon, a heavy Luccot, in two slender but sinewy hands. He was very tall and broad-shouldered. He was dirty, dishevelled and wild looking but his weapon appeared to have been sufficiently preserved to accomplish its purpose.

He wore a medium heavy combat spacesuit with a power supply and a collapsible pressure helmet such as was used by the Fleet landing troops. There was a flight unit attached to his back tanks for operation within an atmosphere but it had been shattered. Both of the counter-rotating helicopter blades revealed heavy damage from glancing shots. They were half-melted away.

He spoke in the rough dialect of colonial Arkonides, which was hard to understand. His movements were unusually sluggish yet powerful. “Oh no you don’t, my noble little Arkonide!” he exclaimed threateningly. “I’ve reserved that boat for myself! A man has to have *some* way to get out of this hole, doesn’t he?” He briefly indicated his useless rotor blades. His gesture with the gun muzzle was eloquent enough.

I got out of the boat without a word and pulled the bow up onto the shore, after which I sat down on the gunwale and regarded him.

“Oh I know, little boy from the Crystal World!” he ranted. “You’re thinking now that my humble self may be a part of your little test run, right? Wrong! I’ve got no part in it! I’m the real thing, laddy; I’m running from the search patrols as well as from a disintegration chamber. Now where do you suppose a deserter with his wits about him would turn on this planet? Naturally to one of the energy bubbles where the life-support conditions are at least bearable. A man gives things a chance, he hopes for awhile and then he has to look farther. Make no mistake, boy—I’ve had enough of your methane war. There comes a time when a man has to get out of it, sooner or later, don’t you think?”

He laughed easily but nothing escaped him. Doubts began to assail me. If I was looking at a programmed robot—which of course would still represent a certain degree of difficulty for me—I’d have to be careful to maintain my identity as Macolon and forget about being Atlan. But on the other hand it was unlikely that a machine could be made to simulate a person like this, from the way he acted.

I stood up. “Deserter?” I repeated slowly. “They’ll give you a roasting, space soldier!”

“You said it!” he confirmed, emphatically. “But only if they can find me. I’ve been in here for half a planetary year. They’re still looking for me. What do things look like on the outside?”

I sat down again on the boat and rested an elbow on my knee. “What’s it supposed to look like, soldier? Think it over!”

He shrugged his heavy shoulders and took a new grip on his weapon. Its muzzle swung in my direction again. “OK, move it, lad! Get out of my way!”

I had to stall for time. My doubts as to his genuineness had not completely disappeared. “Hasn’t it occurred to you that there must certainly be monitoring devices around here?”

He spat on the ground. “I was Arbтан of the landing commandos, a specialist in silent demolition. So don’t give me that nonsense! I’m an expert, boy! Didn’t you hear me say I’d been here for half a year? I’ve seen more Hertasoets than you think. There’s no monitoring here! The starting posts are seldom equipped with observation gear. And do you know why? Because after those transport gliders take off too many kids like you have gotten the idea to search the place in the hope of finding some clue or crutch to help them out. I’ll admit you’re not like those other fools. You seem to be a pretty good man. You didn’t waste any time on foolishness. But now get up and move out of the way!”

He came a few steps closer. I continued to stare at him. Inwardly I was highly tensed. Was this test to end here after barely getting started? This deserter was a factor which even the *Inner Circle* had not foreseen. He was the real thing—or at least he *could* be genuine! I knew that here on the planet of Largamenia a number of crewmen had escaped from ships that were in for overhaul.

And he fit the description perfectly! His insignia were letter perfect. Code number, unit symbol, weapons and equipment—nothing was missing. It would have been an almost impossible task to simulate his wild and savage appearance.

Besides that, he stank. Apparently he had not bathed for weeks. There were dried spots of blood on his suit which might have been from animals he had shot and butchered.

The weapon was de-safetied and ready, its focus adjustment set on wide-beam projection. If he had fully made up his mind I didn’t have a chance. Still—there was just one. He needed the boat!

I suddenly tucked up my legs and back-flipped into the boat. Then I peered at him over the rim. He cursed at me in the well-known patois of a Fleet spaceman.

I laughed. “Arbтан, I’ll make you a proposition. Now don’t lose your head! I’m not concerned with you or where you go. We have one thing in common—to get through that gorge. Then go where you want to. I’ve never seen you. What do you say?”

He spat again and came closer.

“Careful!” I warned him. “You’re a good ground-fighter, I can tell, but you’d better remember that you won’t be able to kill me and disintegrate me without a trace—unless you also destroy the boat. So?”

He looked about suspiciously and then back at the boat, whereupon he smiled thinly. “Not a bad argument, blueblood! It makes sense—but you’ve underestimated me. Before you die, let me say that I think you would have won your idiotic *Ark Summia* with flying colours. Sonny, I’m going to get you *and* the boat!”

He turned the focus setting. The glittering eye of energy in the cone-shaped muzzled narrowed to a brilliant pinpoint. I didn’t wait for him to complete the adjustment. Before he could aim and fire I slipped overboard into the water like an eel, taking the sturdy paddle with me. Almost simultaneously I pulled the boat partially from the bank. I was in the water and the craft’s hull concealed me completely.

“Now you have to shoot through two sides of the boat!” I shouted to him. “You’ll never be able to patch it, soldier! Temporary plugging won’t work. That water in the gorge will yank loose any caulking you can find! Or do you have better material at hand, ‘expert’?”

Again he cursed aloud and came closer. I had to distract him. The man was fully determined. I couldn’t give him time to think.

“Another problem—the wood will catch fire, soldier! Maybe you can put it out but by that time you’ll have holes big enough to shove your head through. There’s no way out of this rock trap except by boat, or do you think you can whistle up a short flight with those singed-off rotors? Whose line of fire did you run into, anyway—a sniper in the search patrol?”

“No!” he retorted exasperatedly. “It was some damned fool like you!”

“Oho! And where did he get hold of a high-power heater like that?”

Instead of answering, he jumped. I saw his feet going up over the bow. He wanted to get to the waterside of the boat so he could see me. But he had made a mistake. Granted, on land he could move faster than I could where I was at the moment. It wasn’t possible for me to dive under the boat because of its sharp angle to the bank. The water wasn’t deep enough there. But I had figured on his move—in fact I’d been waiting for it.

Except that he didn’t jump into the boat. He landed directly in the water, probably hoping to find a firm footing immediately. In so doing he offered me a much better chance to get at him than I had hoped for. Fratulon’s training bore fruit. The sharply pointed paddle was my broadsword. Before the deserter could stabilize himself I had found firm footing on the rocky bottom. When he reached out with his right hand to support himself on the edge of the boat, I struck home with the sharp edge of the paddle. His elbow shattered under the weight of the blow.

He staggered back in an outcry of agony and fell on his back halfway onto the shoreline. But that didn't help him much. Before he could aim the Luccot with his left hand, the sharp plastic point of the heavy paddle struck him in the throat. I had been forced to hurl it at him like a lance. There had been no time for a second strike at him at close quarters. He had gotten too far away.

A hard, sun-bright bolt of glowing energy whipped straight across the haze-shrouded lake. It struck somewhere in the cliffs and generated a gleaming heat spot, causing a slight dribble of molten lava.

I waded over to the dying soldier and took charge of his dangerous weapon. It had gotten wet but a Luccot couldn't be damaged that easily. I tried to stop the heavy flow of blood from his throat but it was no use. He was beyond my help.

What now? Break up the trial run and simply stay here on the spot? I knew it couldn't be considered. Had I not been cautioned against any act of sympathy or compassion? I could not suppress my feelings, at any rate. I was really sorry for this poor fellow. He had forced me into an action that I would have strictly avoided under normal conditions.

I pulled him up onto the shore and looked around for a place where I might be able to bury him. Wherever I looked, all I saw was solid rock. Finally I began to think again in a logical manner. I could not allow the dead man to delay me. On the contrary I should have been considering my new advantage. No—not mine alone! This test was a simulated emergency mission under hostile conditions. It was therefore fundamental that his equipment should be my first concern. The weapon plus the complete combat suit could be incalculably valuable to me now.

I began to strip him out of his suit. He was just my size and

At that point I stopped and swore. How was it he just happened to be my size? Why wasn't he short and stocky or tall and thin? Was I supposed to obtain his equipment in the face of mortal danger and thus demonstrate reason, adaptability and the power of decision?

I jerked the high-frequency oscillator knife from the armoured leg sheath of the combat suit and turned my attention to the so-called dead man. The humming blade easily cut through the solid bone sheath of the left side of his chest—which was typical of Arkonide anatomy. But in another minute or so I found that I had merely taken the synthetic life of an android-robot.

It was the most ingenious product of biochemical and electro-mechanical technology that I had ever seen. I opened the skull and found that it only contained communications circuits. There was no independently operating positronic brain.

So our little question-and-answer game was being led by a teacher from Faehrl, over radio; no doubt by a psychologist. With incredible shrewdness and skill they had offered me a chance to capture a weapon and a complete combat outfit. And I had made the most of it.

From that point on it became clear to me that without these things I'd never have passed the test. Probably beyond the gorge there were dangers awaiting me that I couldn't even suspect at present. An *Ark Summia* candidate who would have failed to take care of the "deserter" would have also given up his chances right there.

Hastily I donned the combat suit, fully realizing now why it fit so well and also why the rotor blades were damaged. I unsnapped the locking mechanism of the flying unit and disengaged its universal drive, laying the whole thing aside. It would only have been a hindrance.

My next concern was the weapon itself. Could it also be some sort of imitation? No—it was a genuine, fully loaded Luccot. So they'd even let a test-tube creature like this handle one of these? I should have caught on to the ruse if they hadn't been guiding its speech and actions by radio.

Now fully dressed and equipped, I shoved the boat into the water and got into it. I only had until sundown.

5/ THE RIVER OF NO RETURN

While traversing the outlet gorge beyond the lake I realized that although the rushing water was wild and rough it couldn't have really endangered any average *Ark Summia* aspirant unless he really pulled an awful boner of some kind.

But now, three hours after my start, I found conditions considerably changed. I had journeyed into a second lake which was also hemmed in by towering cliff walls. Without the necessary equipment they were unscalable. So now as before I was dependent upon the boat.

The previously wild mountain river found room for expansion here, which was to my advantage. The raging waters seemed to spread out in the long rocky basin and the strong current subsided accordingly. Yet the rate of drift toward the opposite end was quite noticeable. The closer I approached the towering precipices there the stronger it became.

I took the oars out of the oarlocks and moved swiftly to the stem. Of course the boat did not respond to the rudder alone. In a current like this I hadn't expected it to. So now the paddle had to be put to its purpose. Kneeling down, I thrust the paddle into the water and pulled heavily in a direction opposed to my drift. By this means I achieved some control of the skiff.

Fine, I thought, so this was the way they wanted it—"E" for effort! I was startled by the sound of laughter until I realized that I myself was the source of it. From then on I maintained a tighter self-discipline.

So far I had been unable to observe an outlet to the lake. By the Master Founders of Arkon—where was the water going? When I raised up higher in the boat, I saw it! And I let out a curse. They weren't sparing me anything!

Far ahead, almost indiscernible in the midst of foam-flecked masses of rock, I could see a low but widespread opening. Measuring perhaps 60 meters in width, it seemed to be a giant archway but its roof was barely above the surface of the water. In fact that ceiling was probably so low I'd have to duck down in the boat to keep from being knocked overboard.

So this was the outlet! The increasing current carried me relentlessly toward this portal of the underworld. There was no escaping it. I ducked down as far as it was possible while still working the paddle. Now more than ever I needed this useful device, which helped me at least to make critical changes in my course.

When I was only a few boat lengths away from the roaring throat of the tunnel I perceived the real trap. Suspicious-looking vapours were churning out of that rocky maw. I was already picking up their sharp, penetrating odour. My lungs reacted with a convulsive warning. Immediately I experienced the first attack of asphyxiation. The pains increased and the burning became unbearable. The sharp odour became more intense as I approached the opening.

Those were clouds of ammoniac fumes, highly concentrated poison gas such as was exhaled by the non-Arkonide Maahks as a combustion product of their life-sustaining hydrogen. In fact both elements were deadly to us. Now I knew why the *Ark Summia* candidates had been given such serious warnings. The prize was not to be won for nothing.

At such a high concentration the ammonia could only have been generated synthetically and injected into the rocky cavern under pressure. Normally ammonia formed in Nature in negligible quantities during the decomposition of nitrogen compounds as in the decay of plant and animal substances. It was an impossibility for it to occur naturally in such a concentration as this. The *Inner Circle* was playing for keeps with my health and my life.

In a reflex action which had been practiced thousands of times, my hand struck the emergency switch of my combat suit. Owing to more than 40 years of war against the Maahks, the men of my race reacted to ammonia fumes with the instinctive swiftness of an animal. But even then the only possibility of survival was an immediate switchover to an automatic oxygen system.

For this reason there was no Arkonide mission or combat suit which was not equipped with an instant-demand life-support system. In earlier days that didn't always apply but the Maahks had taught us this bitter lesson.

The sturdy plastic foil of my collapsible helmet unfolded almost with the swiftness of thought. Its hemispherical hood snapped down over my head and face and its magnetic rim clicked hermetically tight into the circular slot of my collar piece. I had held my breath although I felt that the poison I had breathed in was about to leach out my lungs. I exhaled in the instant I heard the incoming hiss of oxygen. Due to the resultant inner pressure the helmet completed its expansion to a smooth half-globe that was devoid of wrinkles.

At last I could take in air again but I could not suppress a convulsion of choking and nausea or the accompanying attack of coughing. But it might have been worse. The suit's automatic system had analysed the poisonous gas immediately. Spacemen such as the landing troop commandos were far from being able to operate the absorption apparatus when suddenly overtaken by ammonia poisoning—so this was also handled automatically. In my case it functioned without delay. A mildly sour vapour was mixed into my breathing air, which quickly alleviated the terrible burning.

I felt the sting in my upper right thigh as a built-in high-pressure injection needle administered medicine into my tissues to stabilize my circulation. I felt

better almost immediately. The red rings before my eyes dissipated and disappeared. Still panting, I raised up to look around.

I found myself inside an elongated cavern under the cliffs. The ceiling was still only a few feet above my head. The current was powerful and the sound of the rushing water was deafening. Far ahead I could see a spot of light which swiftly grew larger. It had to be the exit from this poisonous underworld.

I looked at the indicator lamps inside the suit. The ammonia gas was still as much in evidence as ever. Any man entering here would certainly meet his death if he were without protection.

Again I thought of Tirako Gamno. How had he passed through this chamber of torture? Had he succeeded at all in the acquisition of a protective suit such as I was wearing? Had he been able to handle the remote-controlled android also? If not, he would have had to suffer unspeakable torture in this tunnel. Perhaps he was dead by now.

Suddenly my boat shot out into the light of day. The channel widened and the racing current slowed down. Inside my suit an indicator lamp flashed violet. The danger of gas poisoning had passed. Here was a breathable atmosphere once more. After double-checking the analyser I released the helmet lock. The transparent foil snapped back behind my neck and packed itself into a narrow, barely perceptible roll.

My legs were painfully cramped from the crouched position I had been in. I straightened up with a groan and cursed aloud, then moved forward to the oars. I didn't want to lose any time. Although the sun was only vaguely discernible through the all-pervading mist, I could tell that it was already nearing the zenith.

By the time I replaced the oars in their locks and looked searchingly ahead, which I still assumed to be the direction of my goal, I suddenly felt overcome by a sense of dejection. Very probably many a Hertaso before me had gone through this stage. The Masters of the *Inner Circle* were either insensitive monsters or scientific zealots who were always thinking up new methods of testing.

Why? Why was it necessary to endlessly torture a young man when he was obviously willing to give everything he had to win the *Ark Summia*? Why couldn't they give preference to other things, like honouring and respecting his intelligence and well-founded learning?

Now I had mastered many things—or so I hoped!—and I had risked much, only to be unexpectedly-confronted with an obstacle that I might never be able to get through.

Far ahead but clearly visible from my position, it seemed that the natural direction of flow of a tributary stream had been altered. On the basis of my bitter experiences nobody had to tell me that something here had been manipulated by technical means. At least I had never seen a tributary that flowed into a river in *opposition* to the main stream's direction! Here Nature was somehow inverted. The small but enormously turbulent mountain stream shot away from a rock

ledge and thus formed a waterfall that served to increase the water's velocity considerably. At its point of impact it was compressed and diverted by what was most likely an artificially prepared channel, which then guided it to the final outlet. It was this that was placed at an obtuse angle to the direction of the main current in which my swaying skiff was drifting.

The resulting effect of this diversion was a water barrier. It was like a tidal wave which completely interrupted the favourable down-stream now. From all appearances there was a stretch of some hundreds of meters where there was no normal flow at all but instead a raging turmoil of crashing waves and crosscurrents in which even a modern boat would have become a plaything of colliding forces.

I suppressed my anger and decided for the time being to take a rest. My throat still burned and gradually the thin air and the lower percentage of oxygen had been taking effect on me. I was weary. So I rowed the boat toward the left-hand bank in order to...

My thoughts were interrupted. What was that? Sternward of the boat I caught sight of a brownish patch of colour. It was on the right bank in the bluish green wall of unfamiliar jungle growth. It lingered in my line of sight long enough so that I could identify it as a boat—or at least what was left of a boat!

I thought for a moment. According to the ground rules of this test I was to carry on like a spaceman under conditions of an emergency landing. I had to reach the depot. Was I to be' distracted by the wreckage of a boat?

My subconscious processes won out over logic. I was already rowing toward the discovery with all my strength, even before I had made any well-founded decision. I was there in a matter of minutes. The right side of the boat had been ripped open where the planking was smashed and splintered, the bow had been crushed. The paddle and one of the oars were missing.

I jumped to shore and pulled my boat up into the underbrush. Then I released the safety catch on my weapon. Before me was a thick tropical forest. I seemed to have won my way through the barriers of stone but what dangers lurked now in the middle of this thick jungle growth?

I searched for footprints and found them. The easily recognizable imprints had been made by boots that were standard issue to students. One of my predecessors had been stranded here, a Hertaso who had probably been sent on his journey shortly before me. I followed the trail until I discovered a low rocky ledge. My fellow testee had taken the precaution to leave the marshy shore area and find shelter on a stone elevation that was relatively free of vegetation.

I heard a weak cry, as though for help. After a few leaps upward among the rocks I came upon my friend, Tirako Gamno. And naturally he neither carried a weapon nor wore a combat spacesuit. How could he have survived the ammonia cavern without protection?

He was close to unconsciousness when I bent down and grasped him, raising him up. His normally lean and sensitive face seemed drawn and marked by the agonies he had gone through. He groaned and whimpered at the same time.

I didn't say much. In fact I completely forgot that this was a merely simulated mission. Suddenly I seemed to be actually on a world that was occupied by the enemy. I opened the first-aid compartment of my combat suit and administered what had been provided for such cases as Tirako's. He had to be stabilized and given artificial stimulation.

There were many drugs of this kind. They produced truly miraculous effects in terms of physiological intensity but a relapse later was practically inevitable. Any intelligent person avoided them yet there were situations like this where they were indispensable. So I set the indicator of the high-pressure hypodermic to the desired medical selection and then pressed the release button.

Tirako regained consciousness. He must have heard me while in a semi-coma and called out to me. Suddenly his eyes regained their clarity and his strength came back. A weak smile appeared on his lips.

"My hero!" he exclaimed. "Naturally you made the grade—the combat spacesuit and the Luccot—everything accounted for!" He coughed and his face twisted painfully.

I looked about us and saw that we were surrounded by marshy terrain. Here and there the swamp gases boiled up through pools of muck. Animal cries reached our ears out of the wilderness.

Tirako's condition was clearing up as the drugs took effect. "The only way through is by water, my friend! I've had a look around. The land is nothing but a bottomless morass. And I almost got eaten up by some kind of a monster. But what would one expect? I've made a disaster out of this test, ever since I started."

"Don't be silly!" I said, appeasing him. "I'll take you with me. Somehow we'll make it."

"What did you inject me with, liquid fire? Oh well, to me it should make no difference. I didn't get lucky like you. I wasn't able to get the best of that wild-eyed stranger. How did you do it?"

When I explained it to him briefly he nodded in resignation. "Yes, that's the way we should handle ourselves. The candidates ahead of me appear to have come through all right. At least I haven't seen any of them. That clever android seems to be used each time, wouldn't you say? The same play on psychology. But you see I don't fit into anybody's normal psychology. I just got scared and ran from him. That is, I noticed him sooner than you did."

"What?"

He laughed, apparently fully revived. "You can bet on it! I considered him to be a serious threat, so to me the better part of valour was to make myself scarce. So I ran to the boat and pulled away even before the personnel glider had

properly taken off. I was able to get away with it because I loused up their planning—as I figured. The stranger wasn't supposed to show up that soon. But what looked so smart at the time turned out to be dumb—right?"

I nodded but realized that Tirako's reaction was only one among many others that were conceivable. It was possible that some Hertasoos might have even attacked the armed "deserter" with their bare fists, which would have been the most stupid alternative of all. In such cases they would hardly have been able to get beyond the starting point. Where were they now?

Tirako stood up and stretched himself. "I think I'm ready for duty again, my friend. Of course I'll be a pain in the neck. As a brother of the exams I've blown my chances for the *Ark Summia* by acting so stupidly—so you should leave me behind. Somebody's bound to pick me up."

I waved off the suggestion and took another look around us. "How were you able to get through the ammonia cave?" I inquired at the same time.

"I figured you'd ask me that. I don't have the slightest idea, friend. I thought I was a goner and I held my breath as long as possible. It was horrible. Then the lights went out for me. I don't know how I ever got to this river bank."

I watched him closely as he nodded thoughtfully and then snapped his fingers. "OK, I know what you want to say before you say it," he continued. "Somebody must have helped me or I'd have never made it this far. Could be. It looks like they don't let the candidates die, after all. But a lot of good that does me! I've piled up so many minus points by now, my chances are gone. But if you keep going with your excellent score, this river stint will probably be your first and last test!"

"Impossible!" I retorted.

He put an arm around my shoulders and pulled me to him in a friendly manner. "Either way, you can make it. Each of us needs 10,000 plus points to win the *Ark Summia*. The number of tests is not important but no candidate is allowed more than 5 starts. If he gets his points on the first run, he may not have to try again. So you really have very good prospects."

He laughed but went into a new attack of coughing, which made him bend over. This enabled him to snatch the ultra-vibe knife from the sheath on my right leg. He was fast—in fact very fast!

But I was even faster! My heavy elbow jab sent him tumbling backwards and I was able to spring away. I could hear the high-pitched hum of the vibe-knife's blade. He had already regained his balance and leapt at me with the vibrating blade swinging like an arc of light.

I shot from the hip. The bluish-white beam of energy struck him in his midriff and its hefty impact whirled him to one side. A second shot finished him off.

The body was encased in flames in which the alleged Tirako Gamno screamed his last. Most of the android composition fell into ashes. I dodged the superheated air in his vicinity to retrieve the vibro knife, which he had dropped.

The unburned remains of the body convinced me that I'd really been dealing with a synthetic entity made of bio-tissue and robot parts. I had foreseen as much!

Whoever had used my deep affection for Tirako as bait for the trap had overlooked a few minor details. For one thing, Tirako never snapped his fingers. They had also failed to have him gripe about the examination methods and principles, which he would have started in on first of all—I could guarantee it. The last point but the most decisive one was the shoulder hug. The android had demonstrated more strength there than Tirako's more delicate frame was capable of. So the attack had by no means surprised me.

I laughed. The lofty Lords of the *Inner Circle* were clever but so far they had not been able to trap me into a really serious difficulty.

What had become of the real Tirako Gamno? I was quite certain that the android had spoken the truth when he had described Tirako's test start—meaning of course the Faehrl instructor who had been imitating him through the radio speaker system.

Judging by that, Tirako wasn't doing so well. Where was he? He had to be somewhere close by.

6/ THE *INNER CIRCLE* PLAYS FOR KEEPS!

I finally found him on the other side of the river. His adventure had been just as depicted by the android. He had actually fled from the “deserter”. He had also come through the ammonia tunnel but had evidently been saved. In contrast to the boat of his imitator, his own craft was still completely intact. I had gotten him onto his feet with the rest of my medical supplies. And now the crosscurrents and the surf-like water barrier lay before us.

Tirako was crestfallen. He knew that he had been disqualified. I knew it, too, but I kept silent about it. He was a man of mentality, a youngster who would prefer a sharp conversation anytime to a sword fight. Why didn't they give him a chance where his talents could be effective?

I had decided to take him with me. I wanted to spare him the disgrace—if that's what it was—of being picked up by a rescue detail of the *Inner Circle*. When I told him of my plan, he smiled, understanding my motive at once.

“That can chalk up some minus points for you, Macolon! Don't forget you've made an emergency landing and have to carry through in accordance with all its pertinent priorities. Since I'm no trained animal that can jump through hoops and give you support when occasion demands, I'd say your decision... Oh, excuse me, I guess I got to you with that unconsidered comparison. Of course I don't think we're either trained freaks or animals...”

I laughed since this was typical of Tirako's sensitivities. “Forget it, chum! It's too bad that you aren't the Imperator. Probably then the Methane War would soon be brought to an end.”

“Don't be heretical. Orbanashol is irreproachable and infallible in his decisions. Glory to him forever!” He coughed then and looked across at the water barrier.

I took out the micro-recorder from a leg pocket in the suit. It was standard equipment like the vibe-knife. True to my simulated role I spoke into the tape: “Macolon, Commander of heavy cruiser *Argosso*, logging the following data for future reference: Having been provided with a special mission ship for infiltrating enemy planet Largamenia, I succeeded in landing here after receiving damaging fire while entering atmosphere. I must reach the secret depot of the Fleet. While en route to destination I have discovered Orpton Tirako Gamno, officer of

scouting cruiser *Takatika*, who has been missing for weeks. He was formerly under my command on several occasions and is thus to be classified as reliable and trustworthy. I have decided to place this officer in service as related to present objectives. He is hereby under orders to support me at risk of his life with the objective of reaching the depot at all costs. This has become necessary in the interests of the landing fleet now waiting in outer space. Long live Arkon! End of notation.”

Tirako stared at me. I grinned.

If the scoring evaluations of my test mission were really being handled on a fully positronic basis, the calculators could not help but recognize my reasoning as a plus factor. It was obvious that two people could reach the hidden goal sooner than one. Incorruptible logic machines would have to arrive at such a conclusion!

“One might think you were the offspring of a galactic schemer,” said Tirako suggestively.

But the remark hit me sharply. I must have glared at him almost threateningly. Against my will I was forced to think again of my mysterious origin, of my guardian and teacher, the so-called “sawbones”, Fratulon, of my friend Ice Claw and, above all, of Farnathia, the enchanting daughter of the Tatto of Gortavor.

There I had spent the major portion of my childhood and adolescence—until Sofgart the Blind and his mercenary bounty hunters, the Kralasenes, appeared on the scene and shattered my last idyll. Farnathia, my first and only love—where might she be now? What had they done to her? Could I even dream that she still lived?

I heard Tirako’s voice as though from a great distance. “Friend, you’re trembling! Have I offended you? My remark was ill considered and impertinent. Forgive me.”

I shook away the haunting memories of the past. Tirako was genuinely concerned. He reproached himself without suspecting that he had touched old wounds of the spirit.

I punched him playfully on the shoulder. “I should have your worries!” I laughed. “Come on, it’s time! We’re going to have to get past that water trap.”

“How and what with? You mean in that tissue-paper boat? Out of the question! Not even a giant could propel it through those currents or force a way through those pounding breakers!”

Normally he was a keen observer but sometimes the more practical things seemed to escape him. How was it he had missed seeing the gunfire marks a few boat lengths above and beyond our position? Within a short distance of the energy burn, down on the bank, a few bushes had evidently been charred. The singed line of the raybeam shot was hardly discernible since the thick vegetation had already closed over most of it.

I checked my weapon and set the beam focus on medium width, after which I strode onward without a word. Naturally nobody could row against that synthetically generated wall of water! The Masters of the *Inner Circle* knew it also. What deductions could be made from this by an aspirant for the *Ark Summia*?

I had to find something which in any case had to be there. Hadn't they also sought to provide a combat spacesuit? Tests of this nature were classified as out of the ordinary. But anyone who didn't pay attention to them would never pass. I suspected—no, as a matter of fact I knew—what the *Inner Circle* expected of us! Reason and intelligence must dominate, even though of course under conditions of high personal risk.

“Macolon...!”

The cry had no vital note of alarm. However, I turned swiftly and raised the weapon to firing position.

Tirako Gamno had wanted to follow me but he couldn't. I noticed to my amazement that he was pushing against an invisible barrier which seemed to be highly stable yet very elastic. He threw himself forward and pressed his shoulder against an invisible something that was in his way but he did not manage to progress a single step farther. Then—a miracle! I heard my aesthetic friend curse like an old-time space soldier.

I couldn't refrain from guffawing at him.

Tirako gave up. I knew I'd not forget his reproachful expression for a long time to come. “Go ahead—laugh!” he scolded me. “It's bad enough to suffer humiliation without having it advertised, as well. What the devil is this?”

“Ask the ancient gods!” I exclaimed, still laughing. “Where's your schooling in hyper-physics? That's a high-power flexible energy field, my friend!”

“Oh...!”

He grasped very quickly that somebody considered his further progress here to be undesirable. I also perceived the purpose of the measure they had taken. My little trick with the recorder statement had probably been very effective where the robot evaluator was concerned but the secret observers on the Testing Committee were not quite in agreement.

They had long since written off Tirako Gamno as a contender for the final award. They wanted to see how I continued to handle myself. Since it was possible Tirako might notice some things that could still escape my attention, they were giving us to understand that he had to remain where he was. Very well! The situation was beginning to intrigue me.

“Orbton Tirako Gamno!” I called to him. “You are hereby ordered to remain here to guard the boats! I'll reconnoitre ahead on my own. You cover the rear as may be necessary.”

“Yes, Your Eminence!” he confirmed resignedly. “I understand.”

I found it quite pleasurable to be able to carry on a little psychological game with the observers. At the moment they were probably struggling with a few more problems than I was! Even they could not lose sight of the automatic evaluators. My instructions to Tirako would garner me still a few more plus points because it must be obvious to a robot observer that it's only proper for a scout to leave a sentinel behind him! After all, both of the boats were irreplaceable.

I went onward. The ray weapon rested in the crook of my arm—ready to fire.

* * * *

The outer lock door of the armoured glider stood open. Its engines weren't functioning any more. The vehicle was designed for missions inside a planetary atmosphere but now it was stuck in the morass clear up to its deck frame.

The marsh was very extensive and deep. The farther I ventured into the wilderness the more of an effort it had been to pull my boots out of the cloying mess of mud. Which was again an indication to me that there was no way around the water barrier.

Finally I had come upon the armoured glider. It was of Arkonide design, intended for commando missions in otherwise impassable terrain. I knew these ROTCO-19 models were not capable of flight nor were they equipped with antigrav projectors which could have made a person weightless. Mobile equipment like this was supposed to be light, manoeuvrable and fast. In the interests of such performance characteristics the craft had also been denied even an emergency caterpillar drive, common to most equipment of this nature. The ROTCO series basically utilized natural planetary atmosphere, compressing it and creating a supporting medium based on the old "aircushion" principle. If the technically simple and fairly trouble-free turbo-compressors were damaged or their vital air intakes were put out of commission, this kind of vehicle was no longer usable. It simply ceased to operate.

And such seemed to be the case with the armoured "cushion" glider before me. The tiny energy tracer in my suit had not made a peep, which was a sign that the craft's nuclear power system was not functioning. The glider had the appearance of a shell, whereby the two oval half-shells were fastened facing each other. The smooth upper surface was only interrupted by an armoured rotating turret which contained a small impulse-cannon.

There were no signs of the crew anywhere around. The craft gave every appearance of having been here in the muggy heat of the jungle for a long time. Of course the outer hull of Arkon steel was undamaged and free of rust. Almost all effects of the environment were resisted by these bombardment-proof molecularly-bonded alloys.

I plodded over the muddy ground, cautiously approaching it. I knew that this hovercraft had its purpose here. The test candidates *had* to locate it as a part of the plan. Otherwise no hint would have been given back there on the riverbank, however faint. It was clear to me now why somebody had singed some of the undergrowth there.

Until now I had failed to notice a rounded nacelle behind the gun turret, which obviously contained a turbine jet engine. Of course that kind of equipment also utilized the natural atmosphere for its operation. Deriving a thrust on a similar compression principle, the jet served to provide forward motion, once the craft was riding on its air cushion. The heating of the compressed gases, whatever their composition or chemical nature, was accomplished atomically in the plasma burner of the turbo-compression chamber. It was a crude but practical means of propulsion.

I took a good look at the jet exhaust area which had been discoloured by the highly heated gases. All indications were that the engine had not been in use for a long time. My first idea as to the probable hidden purpose of the armoured vehicle's presence here had been that perhaps I was supposed to dismount the jet and reinstall it on the rowboat as a powerful means of propulsion through the water barrier. However, a further brief inspection convinced me that this particular type of jet had no independent emergency energy generator, such as a micro-reactor, for example. The gas mixture drawn in by the turbine could therefore be heated only by the ship's larger installation. Without the pre-heating stage there could be no expansion and hence no thrust.

I gave up the idea. It was hopeless. I had to get at the puzzle from some other direction. The Lords of the *Inner Circle* were very ingenious indeed!

Thanks to the hard experience of my youth and careful schooling by Fratulon, by trained instinct warned me of danger here. I wasn't too happy about that wide-open airlock hatch! Instead of entering at first, I started to walk carefully around the craft—which was perhaps what saved me. The serpent-like but many-legged creature appeared to have been lying in wait for me inside the airlock. It shot out of the hatchway in an attempt to reach me with its first attack but it either didn't have enough spring or wasn't quick enough, because it missed me. I heard its frenzied spitting and hissing and then the body rose up about a third of its length to face me. On its armoured skull was a sharp horn that was perhaps 3 feet long.

I fired in the same instant. In the midst of the creature's second jump the white-hot beam of the Luccot caught it just below its outstretched head, which severed it and flung it away from the vaporizing upper torso. I waited until the thing's jerking death throes had subsided. But even then I remained alert to any surprises. The shot-up remains of the monster still measured about 10 meters in length and as I bent over it I saw to my horror that I had been mistaken in one assumption. Evidently from this point onward the Testing Committee was

playing for keeps! This was no synthetic or remotely controlled creation. It had been an actual monstrosity from some alien world. Touched by a momentary panic, I turned and fired into the jungle when I heard a suspicious sound there. Something fled away in great haste.

I heard a distant shout. It had to be Tirako. Naturally he had heard the report of my shots. I didn't answer, nor did I shoot into the air to signal to him that I was still functioning. My tactical assignment was set firmly in my head. If I had really been transferred to an alien world, even these shots in my own self-defence could betray my location to the enemy.

So the hope of adapting the jet engine to my purposes was out of the question. It would have served perfectly for propelling and guiding the boat. Maybe they had even made it to fit the transom stem of the skiff, just to increase the deception! I was getting to where I didn't put anything past these examiners of Faehrl. This time they had clearly put my life in danger. Or had the serpent monster gotten into the swamp vehicle unexpectedly?

When I finally entered the glider I discovered the answer to that question. This shelter was only accessible from one side and it appeared that the creature must have chosen it only recently. The 5 reddish eggs were only several hours old; in fact their shells were still relatively soft. One of them appeared to have been laid only in the past few minutes. Which explained the frenzy of the attack. The mother animal had sought to protect its young.

I didn't want to destroy the eggs. I took them outside one by one and bedded them down between some sheltering tree roots. In this damp heat they would have to hatch out, provided natural enemies didn't get at them first.

Inside the narrow 5-man crew cabin there was a bestial smell but I disregarded it, more intent upon an investigation of the power-generating system. One way or another, I had to make progress now. If the jet engine couldn't be used separately, my only alternative was to get the hovercraft in operation as quickly as possible. There was no way of negotiating that watery maelstrom in the river with only the rowboat. So what other choice did I have?

Ten minutes later I slumped into the pilot seat dejectedly. In front of me the maintenance hatch of the machine room stood open. The powerful suction and compression turbines for generating the air cushion had been demolished—deliberately, of course! So I couldn't use them for getting me out of the swamp and reaching the depot.

Behind the radiation shielding the small fusion-reactor was functioning again. I had only reactivated it to an "idling" level although I could have turned it on to full power with no particular effort. Under these circumstances what would be the use of current in the power lines? The heavy electric motors for the compressor turbines were beyond use. As for the energy cannon, it wasn't dependent upon the reactor anyway...

Thoughts about the cannon jerked me out of my mood of depression. Tensely, I looked up above me. The weapon's heavy cylindrical base mounting was directly over my head. Inside it was the fusion-reactor chamber. Under the conical cowling were the auxiliary devices that were vital to its operation, such as the nuclear fuel injection pump, the converter chamber for the independent power supply to the field generators for the heat and radiation protection screens, as well as absorption screening for overheating.

The converter chamber—that was it! All it did was transform a fraction of the liberated nuclear energy into a working current, which was used for building up the forcefields. It was self-evident that no material could withstand the solar temperatures in the superheated zone of the reactor. As also in the case of the rectified radiation in all its focussed concentration, only forcefields could resist such heat. The separate power supply for the energy gun was only for use as a last resort. Of course the cannon could be fired with it but only with a fraction of the energy that was possible if the firing beam were to be fed from a much more powerful source.

The rule of thumb was: the heavier the field charge, the more powerful the shot.

It occurred to me that this was why I'd been able to activate the main power reactor of the craft. Very convenient. Was I supposed to make use of the cannon? With all the power I could generate from the main reactor? If so, what was I to shoot at? Imaginary enemies? At some convenient lineup of robot commandos? Or what?

I jumped up and squirmed past the impulse cannon's base mounting. I yanked open the turret hatch and looked about me. Foliage and more foliage were all I could see in the near vicinity. But farther to the right on the other bank of the river I saw the "reversed" outlet of the mountain stream and the wildly surging waterfall.

I drew back into the turret and got into the narrow seat before the controls. I manipulated the switches there and the indicators flashed to life. The viewscreen of the optical target-seeker worked perfectly, as well as the 3-D position indicator of the radar tracker. The turret also rotated flawlessly and its elevation adjustment presented no problem. In contrast to the other furnishings and equipment in the vehicle, the impulse-cannon was in perfect working order.

Then I noticed something in the optical target screen. The image was clear, 3-D and in colour. The distant image was seen through the filigree pattern of the target markers. I depressed the button switch of the automatic range calculator and the electronic readout appeared in the upper right corner of my field of vision. I stared critically at the odd rock formation in my sights. It looked like an ancient, widely arching stone bridge from which a piece had been cut from the centre span.

The smoothly regulated magnification showed me some interesting details. It was not a bridge. Two rocky outcroppings merely reached toward each other over the raging tributary. It would have been possible to use the stone projections as a bridge if one were to place a few tree trunks across the gap.

I was troubled by a half-formulated thought. What had bothered me especially at first glance? What was peculiar about that formation? In the course of millions of years the mountain stream could have hollowed out the massive rock wall and broken through it, thus creating a bridge-like formation. That was all. It couldn't be otherwise.

But then the solution to the mystery came to me. That was *not* all! The maximum setting of the target magnifier revealed the secret. Where the flood of waters was tumbling down a stone arch could have been worn through but not 20 meters above that level where the water had probably never been. Here some advanced technology had provided assistance—no doubt the Lords of the *Inner Circle*—in order to alter the course of the stream to my disadvantage.

I laughed aloud to myself, overjoyed by the discovery.

The position of the sun, however, revealed that I had lost far too much time. I could hesitate no longer. The impulse-cannon swung to the target. The “cold-ignition” fusion process began to build. I shoved the injection regulator to maximum and focussed on the target. If I could cause the overhanging masses of rock to collapse, it should form a diversion dam for the mountain stream. Then we would see what would happen to the water barrier in the main river!

I opened fire. A sun-bright bolt of energy thundered from the spiral muzzle of the cannon's field generator. The beam left a tracer track of vapour resulting from condensation of the very humid air, followed by a straight line of iridescence. There where the left-hand outcropping of stone emerged from the cliff, the unleashed fury of energy struck home. The usual impact detonation resulted, accompanied by a spray of molten lava. The thunder of air masses clapping back into the vacuum was deafening.

I quickly snatched up a pair of thickly padded ear protectors and slipped it over my head. My 5th high-powered shot was adjusted for a wider beam. This time it bored into the glowing and boiling holocaust and completely separated the hanging rock masses from the cliff. With a thunderous roar the huge fragments crashed downward into the streambed. The whole formation shattered into many pieces but I still wasn't satisfied.

I brought the entire cliff wall of the opposite bank under fire. After my 8th shot the safety switch shut off the reactor. Impatiently, I decided to risk everything. With the armoured point of the elbow joint of my spacesuit, I shattered the plastic safety cap of the red button for emergencies and depressed it with my thumb. It released the safety stop on the reactor output. Of course I had a chance of easily being atomised along with the cannon but I risked it.

The 10th shot brought down the rest of the rock masses. The added obstruction served to completely dam up the mountain stream. The waterfall farther down stream dried up to a mere rivulet.

After that I did nothing but run for all I was worth. It was a race against time in two senses of the word. On the one hand I had lost too much time and on the other hand it was healthy to put as much distance as possible between myself and the white-glowing base of that cannon. If it exploded, a synthetic sun would rise above the primeval forest.

Almost completely exhausted, I finally reached Tirako Gamno. He asked no superfluous questions. Naturally he had been able to observe what had happened. He had already shoved my boat into the water, ready for a quick departure. He was sitting at the oars. The insuperable wall of water had disappeared. The powerful main stream had carried away the last of the frothing eddies.

As Tirako began to row I stopped him. I had to do that part myself. He relinquished his place without a word and I started to row toward the middle of the river. Once there we were gripped by the full current. Moments later we passed the place where the water barrier had thwarted our further progress

“That’s a top-grade performance,” said Tirako with genuine praise, once I had caught my breath. “I’d never have thought of it. May I hear directly from the source, oh man of action? What went on there in the dimness of the forest?”

“A real drama, sonny,” I told him, taking a deep breath. “I know now, that nobody’s gotten this far yet. No Hertaso entered that tank before me.”

“Tank...?”

I described it to him. He nodded thoughtfully. An ironic smile played about his lips. “Seems to me the serpent creature was unforeseen. Wait and see, Commander, what surprises may yet be lying in wait for us!”

I looked back anxiously upstream. The hovercraft’s cannon didn’t seem to be acting up as I had expected. Otherwise we’d know it by now. Luck! Or was it?

I laughed sarcastically. Naturally—a robot commando from the *Inner Circle* would have blocked the explosion.

7/ DEADLINE: SUNDOWN

But further surprises seemed to be held in abeyance. Tirako and I had apparently made a false assumption. If the Faehrl examiners had any further life-and-death chicanery in store for us, not a bit of it occurred during the rest of the river journey. They were very shrewd—just waiting for the right moment!

The general goal of the test run was a small lake, which we reached about two hours after our experience with the water barrier. I had an instinctive feeling that other dangers awaited us here.

The lake was situated in the lowlands. After coming through one more tussle with racing rapids we had left the mountains behind us. All around us I saw a broad terrain that was gently rolling but covered with only sparse vegetation. Suddenly the tropical forest had faded away. A savannah opened before our view.

Here and there I saw spread-out copses of woodland and shrubbery. These thickets lay picturesquely between low hills and lush patches of deep grass.

My first thought was that we had very poor chances of concealment here. The terrain gave little promise of any place to hide and in such a place it would be difficult to sneak up on the target without being observed. It was intentional! We still had daylight on our side. By sundown I must have found the depot or the strenuously executed test would have been passed for naught—that is, passed so far! Either now it was a matter of life and death, or the rest of the task was so simple that for that very reason it was classified as the greatest difficulty of them all. Perhaps on the basis of previous events the *Ark Summia* candidates anticipated an increasing degree of difficulties ahead.

I avoided this trend of thought. It was entirely possible that this close to the goal a preference had been given to normality. I had separated from Tirako. It had been his wish to search for the depot alone. He hoped by that means to gain a few plus-points for himself. He wanted to keep out of my way because he feared he might damage my chances if he were with me.

I had also abandoned the boat and had begun to reconnoitre. Far and wide there was no sign of a depot. Of course it would have been unusual if it were visible here since Fleet security regulations required that it be camouflaged.

Farther ahead of me the predominantly steep shoreline eased off in a gentler slope to the water's edge. There it would have made an ideal landing place and a good spot for shipping out backup supplies. From there a few traces of several roads led into the countryside. Tirako had been lured by these faint tracks. I couldn't imagine how a man of his outstanding intellect and obvious talents for logical reasoning would *actually* permit himself to be misled by such deliberately planted signs.

It was probably a trap which he must have recognized. He figured he didn't have any more chances, so he wanted to help me. He 'Was deliberately running into a jam in order to perform a service for me.

I had activated the small tracking device with which the spacesuit was provided. In one form or another it would have to give me some sign of the depot's presence in the area, or else no one would have been able to locate it. Even the smallest trace of an energy pickup would have been enough to get a bearing on the general location of the place.

However the apparatus revealed absolutely nothing. I could conceive of a situation where the support base would have cut off all of its power-generating machines. It was a security measure which would be mandatory under top alert conditions.

I jumped to the next rise and took cover under a widespread tree. Tirako was already far away. He was following the road but the farther he walked out onto the plain the fainter the tracks became. I had let him take my vibra-knife. When properly used the razor-thin blade of compressed Arkon steel could be a dangerous weapon. The high-frequency vibrating edge of the instrument could even slice through solid metallic plastics.

As far as I could see, nothing was moving out there. Only to the south of my position I saw some peacefully grazing animals. They were too small to be dangerous. I had harboured an instinctive expectation of suddenly encountering some Maahk-type combat robots or other such automated creations but nothing of this sort developed. It looked as if they wanted to really test a person's patience and endurance.

How had Fratulon always put it? "Every action should be preceded by careful deliberation. To see, to distinguish and to know is the art of a true warrior."

Tirako Gamno approached a stand of trees that seemed to lead into a woodland area. He hesitated and then switched on the vibra-field of his knife. I could tell by the immediate reaction of my energy detector.

When he moved forward again, I caught sight of a quivering flash of something like lightning. It shot out from between the trees and with the swiftness of thought it materialized into a flickering energy field which enveloped Tirako. In the next instant, he disappeared

I stomped and swore. Hadn't I warned him enough?

But my attention was turned to the detector. The occurrence of the force lines around Tirako probably indicated a transport field generated by a matter transmitter. A high burst of energy had been released and my detector had registered it.

That part wasn't as important as the question of where the generator itself might be located. That's where the depot would have to be, provided that it was a depot transmitter that captured Tirako and not another one someplace else.

The tracer was still running. The racing blur of numbers under the tiny view-slot told me that energies were still being released somewhere. But the radiation quickly lessened and the luminous indicator finally fell to zero. I had seen enough. What I had picked up in just those few seconds had obviously been the dying down of a nuclear power generator. It had only been flashed momentarily to full power in order to operate the transmitter.

I could read the bearings from the calculator portion of my tracer. The fusion reactor was south of me, not far removed from the transmitter trap among the trees where Tirako had disappeared. Apparently the trap was set to capture each person who was impudent enough to follow those faint tracks.

I moved forward, taking cover as I went, until I reached the next strip of woods. Just before entering the forest thicket, however, I paused. A new idea had come to me. I knew very well that I could still use some favourable scoring on my test. If the entire 10,000 plus-points were to be won on the first trial, the candidate would have to be very convincing under every situation.

I was thinking of the automatic evaluator. That thing could only be outsmarted by a robot type of logic. I was bothered by those two trees where Tirako had disappeared. I didn't want to have that area at my back as I proceeded, which was a good idea, but I wanted to make a positive impression on the evaluator.

Placing myself once more in the role of a stranded spaceman, I turned on my recorder. "Macolon, commander of heavy cruiser *Argosso*, logging the following data for future evaluation: My companion has been captured in a transmitter trap. I have definitely located the depot which I must reach in the interests of the Greater Imperium. But I can't tell whether or not that trap is a part of the permanent defence setup of the depot itself. It could also be activated by possible enemy equipment set up here to the disadvantage of any approaching Arkonide. There can also be other installations of this kind in the vicinity. As a matter of precaution, I shall destroy the distribution point I have detected. End of notation..."

I pocketed the recorder and concentrated on my weapon. In the woods not far from the two trees in question, I caught a sudden movement in the bushes. Someone was making a rapid retreat. I couldn't see anyone. If it happened to be an observer of the testing team he would naturally be wearing a protective suit that also made him invisible.

With a grin, I depressed the firing button. The beam of energy slammed into one of the two trees just above the cluster of roots. It burst into flame instantly and then the lower third of it exploded. A generator had been installed there.

I ran into the woods, skirting the burning underbrush, and checked my tracer. The depot must be here close by, I reasoned, in which case I would be able to pick up at least a residual radiation of some kind of energy. It worked. I located the access door quickly and easily. Once more in a tree, of course. It seemed to me they could have figured out a more inventive way of ending this kind of qualification test.

I needed a few minutes to locate the fine lines in the rough bark. Behind that outline, I knew, was the camouflaged steel entrance hatch. I stepped back and raised my Luccot but then I lowered it again, as I perceived the crudeness of my intended action. It would have been a gross error to forcefully open the entrance lock. I'd have gotten some minus points for sure. There was a more elegant solution.

I pulled out the I.D. chit from the magnetic holder on my spacesuit. I knew by now that it would have been prepared with all of my pertinent data. This would be sufficient to convince the coded lock-mechanism of the portal that I was an Arkonide. I pressed the small plate against the area where I presumed the automatic lock to be.

The hatch swung open, including its covering of tree bark. The lights came on brightly inside. Before me was a spiral stairway of plastic material. Apparently this station didn't have an elevator or grav-lift. I exulted inwardly but still remained very much on the alert. In place of the Tester here so close to the goal, I might find one last problem in my path.

I descended to the entrance chamber. Beyond it I knew the communication room must be located. I waited in a state of high tension but nothing moved. Then I realized what the answer must be! They were horribly clever! There were no more dangerous obstacles down here but they were counting on the candidates to react as though there were—and that was the trap! Only a few steps from the final goal, the student could overstep his time limit. Outside the shadows of night were sinking over the land. I mustn't waste one second on useless caution now.

I leapt into the com room, turned on the equipment and depressed the call key. The big viewscreen lit up immediately and one of my most trusted teachers at Faehrl appeared.

That was odd, I thought—what had happened to his hair? He was bald. He was looking at me with an expression of distinct vexation. Then I noticed several heavy blisters on his nose and lips. Was it he who had been near the tree when I blasted it?

“End of test,” I heard him say. “Within the prescribed time limit. Get into the transmitter room and have yourself projected. You will be transferred to Faehrl. Hertaso Macolon, would you permit me a personal observation?”

“With pleasure, of course, Your Eminence!”

“After you observed a movement near the projector tree, you could easily have waited a few moments with that shot of yours.”

“Oh, that was you, Excellence? I am amazed and mortified! I had taken you for an enemy Maahk. Unfortunately my assignment was, however, to proceed with all means at my disposal and under all circumstances

“Thank you for your enlightenment. Now go. Hertaso Tirako Gamno has already arrived at Faehrl. You can relax. That is all.”

8/ ARK SUMMIA: KNIGHTHOOD OF ARKON!

“It is not the purpose of Faehrl instructors to be shot at by their students, do you understand?” shouted Admiral Tormanac. We called him Tormanac the Bold. “What were you thinking of?”

“Nothing, Excellence, except perhaps the approach of night and the time I had lost, plus my state of exhaustion.”

Tormanac was chairman of the *Inner Circle* and Chief of the Faehrl Institute of Largamenia. Before losing both legs in a space battle he had been Commander-in-Chief of the Arkonide Nebula Fleet.

Now, two planetary weeks following the events within the energy dome, and only two hours prior to what I hoped would be the conferring of the highest honour a young Arkonide could receive—he had summoned me here. Scolding softly but intensively, he walked past me on his synthetic legs. He stopped before the door and turned to me. I looked into a face that was marked by many reversals of fate.

No one knew exactly why he had been retired from active service. But it was said that he was not in favour with Orbanashol III. People who considered themselves to be especially well informed had even hinted that Orbanashol feared a possible Fleet revolt under Tormanac’s leadership.

At the rear of the room stood Tormanac’s personal test evaluator and technical adviser. Grumpily, Tormanac dismissed the robot and finally turned to me again. “Listen to me, young man—a few hours ago I spoke to your father, the honourable and meritorious scientist Tanictrop. He was horrified by your comportment! If I had heard of this incident sooner, you would have gone through a further testing. Is that clear?”

No it was not! He would not have been justified or empowered to do that. I had not asked my unwary teacher to linger in range of my fire. “No, Excellence, I emphatically reject your remark. You have no right. I beg your pardon but that had to be said.”

Had I caught a slight smirk on his face?

“Well, our young Hertaso appears to have a mind of his own, is that so?”

“Quite correct, Your Eminence. I’m a firm believer in the often-misused concept of justice and fair play. I had expected it would be practiced here, at least, in an exemplary Institute of the Imperium.”

“Don’t get too feisty, young man. That will do! In any case, your father was quite upset.”

He went over to an energy-screened safe and extracted an oblong envelope. “I have no right to ask this question—but is it customary in your family to transmit information and greetings in this antiquated form? After all, we do have micro-scribing machines.”

“It is customary,” I answered defensively but with reserve. “I am obliged, Eminence.”

He smiled again. What could it mean? For a man of Tormanac’s stature this was unusual behaviour.

“Read the letter—here, in my presence. Perhaps you may need an explanation of some kind.”

I wondered if it were possible for an alarm bell to sound in an Arkonide’s subconscious. It happened to me! Instinct also guided my hand to the place on my right hip where I normally carried a service weapon.

“Today you aren’t wearing a Luccot!” said Tormanac in a strange tone of voice. “It doesn’t go with a dress uniform. Read!”

I could sense that he was no direct threat to me. I tore open the envelope and read. The message had not come from the honourable scientist Tanictrop, whose “son” I had provisionally had the honour to be. It was from my guardian, Fratulon.

“Will you please read it!” urged the Admiral.

Fratulon seemed to have written his message in a great hurry:

Admiral Tormanac is a trusted and reliable friend. He is a full confidant and is informed about you personally. Your situation is becoming critical. The honouring ceremony and the conferring of titles will be broadcast publicly over television and radio. We are nearing the most dangerous hour of your life-course so far. It’s possible for people to see you on the broadcast who are completely unknown to me but who knew the real Macolon very well—and they might become suspicious. True, your outward appearance is that of Macolon but this broadcast is being distributed over the entire Empire network and we fear that somebody who could have witnessed Macolon’s death may be surprised to see him suddenly appear on his viewscreen. Be on your guard! I’ll try to ward off every threat I can. Confide in Tormanac. Your guardian and patient teacher... Fratulon.

I was tremendously surprised. I had long suspected that old Sawbones had some high-level connections but I had never imagined those levels might ascend to such as Tormanac.

“Well?” interrupted the Admiral. “Have you made up your mind?”

“Are you aware of the contents of this letter?” I inquired cautiously. “You find me at a loss, Excellence. What should be done?”

He looked at his watch. “Much and yet little. We have to bide our time. Your enemy is everywhere. I am please, Atlan, to officially make your acquaintance.”

I dropped my gaze. He sounded so solemn and formal. What was it he was trying to express?

“Your reaction against my reproach concerning your teacher was admirable. You have not disappointed me. It was exactly what I expected from you. The most difficult and dangerous phase for you will begin when you enter the activation room.”

“You mean I passed?” I interrupted breathlessly.

“Of course, right on the first test. You didn’t even have to solve the subsequent problems in your way. But just their evaluation alone would have gone over 10,000 plus-points. By telling you this I’m breaking a traditional rule at Faehrl. Nevertheless, I have good reasons.”

“Were my test results given any preferential treatment due to any partiality on your part? If such is the case, Your Eminence, I would have to decline the *Ark Summia*.”

He took a deep breath. Inwardly he seemed to have been rescued.

“I have been waiting for this question. It does honour to you, Atlan! You may be certain of my absolute loyalty.”

“Loyalty?” I repeated in some confusion. “Excellence, one only renders loyalty to personal friends, high-placed personages and...”

“Please be still!” he cut in almost sharply. “You can probably survive these last few hours without being informed. We have good reasons for that. As for your question—no. You were given no preferential treatment. In fact I wanted to see what you were made of since I was putting my trust in you. Contrary to your suspicions of favouritism, I can tell you now that I am the one who placed the killer serpent in the armoured glider. It was not foreseen by the others. The members of the *Inner Circle* took me severely to task for that. Now ask yourself if you can give any credence to my assurances.”

I was pacified. This man was too honourable to have manipulated anything in my favour. Anyway, the robot observers wouldn’t have let him get away with it.

“I believe you, Excellence.”

“Thank you. Then my conscience is relieved. You performed outstandingly. Now it depends upon us and yourself to protect you in the final phase of your development. During the activation of your logic sector—you call it the extra-brain—you and we will be helpless. Under no circumstances can the procedure be interrupted. You realize that a second attempt at activation is not possible. This is prohibited by the parapsychical laws involved. A second try would destroy your brain.”

“I have been made aware of that, Your Eminence.”

“Good. Wait a moment.”

Once more he walked over to the force-field security safe and this time he took out an unusual weapon which seemed to be very thin and flat in its contours. It was equipped with two metallic clamps which were linked together by a rod-shaped mechanism, and the beam projection barrel was very short. From the muzzle extended a conductor-like thread as fine as a hair.

“This is a so-called Luccot ‘sling’ which was once used by special commandos in the Strategic Space Defence forces. I’ll grant you it’s an old weapon but it operates perfectly. It’s to be carried under your sleeve on the left forearm. I’m assuming you can shoot with your left hand?”

“Of course, Excellence. I am ambidextrous.”

“That’s fortunate. The release mechanism is highly sensitive. If you wore this on your right side, handshakes and other manipulations would increase the danger of involuntary activation.

“Of the radiation muzzle?”

“Exactly. This is a fast and deadly weapon. The contact wire will be attached to the ball of your thumb. When you touch the flesh-coloured pulser on the end of the wire, the barrel will project out of your sleeve. From now on you’ll have to avoid close-fitting jackets. Once the barrel is out and pointed at the target the shot occurs without any further action on the part of the operator. This functions by means of a feather-triggered mechanism. It means you have to have a straight bead on your target before the barrel pops out, because then it fires. Do you think you can handle this instrument without any previous experience with it?”

The prospect made me a bit nervous, to say the least. If I were clumsy with it a severe accident might result. “Couldn’t I wear some other weapon, Your Eminence?”

“Under no circumstances!” he insisted. “Any other kind would be discovered. Anyway, during your activation you will only be wearing loose clothing, although your arms will be covered. In regard to your friend, Tirako Gamno, how much do you believe you can trust him?”

“He would do much for me and I for him.”

“We’ve noted that. It was in your interests that he deliberately triggered the transmitter trap. All right, you must try to bind him to absolute secrecy. You’ll have to invent some logical reason. Do you share the same quarters with him?”

“Yes. We have come to know and respect each other, rooming together. Our separate sleeping quarters are joined by a common living room and study chamber.”

“We’ll have to risk it. You can hardly conceal the Luccot sling from him. He is a keen observer. Now you will notice that here to the left of the reaction capsule is the safety mechanism. It’s only to be locked in place when you definitely have no need for the weapon. Otherwise you have to carry it with the safety in open position. Always avoid touching the contact pulser by accident.

This will happen whenever you crook your index finger or your ring finger, such as when touching the ball of your thumb. In case of danger it would be safest to make sure you're bending both fingers. Now remove your jacket, please."

Within a few minutes he had attached the Luccot sling to me. It fit snugly to my lower forearm just above the wrist. The two clamps held it firmly in position. The ignition or firing lead was brought out to the ball of my thumb where it was fastened down by a spray of living bio-tissue which was of course flesh-coloured and therefore made it invisible.

All except for the tiny protrusion of the pulser or firing button. I could barely notice it, myself, on the ball of my thumb.

"Now with the safety locked in," said the Admiral, "you should try it a couple of times. But hurry! Don't forget to bend your hand out of the way when you trigger it or the pop-out muzzle will strike against it. You have to get used to more or less 'throwing' the shot because with the automatic release it doesn't give you time for aiming."

I tested the thing for several minutes. The process fascinated me. After I had put my jacket on again I also practiced letting the barrel "sling" out from under my sleeve. I improved with each try. The end of the muzzle reached about to my fingertips in its extended position.

I finally said goodbye to this unusual man. He watched me go with an expression of deep concern. I had not counted on such an ally. I wondered about the other friends Fratulon might also have.

* * * *

The Hall of Truth was packed full to the last available seat. 342 young men had applied for the *Ark Summia*. Seven of this number were missing now, having been mortally wounded during the tests.

When I looked back at the three main tests I had undergone, this didn't surprise me. After the adventure of the river journey, my second trial run had been to salvage a small damaged spaceship. After repairing the cleverly sabotaged engines I had landed on Largamenia with the last dregs of my oxygen supply. The third test had placed me inside the energy dome of a hydrogen-ammonia world where I was to rescue a stranded ship's crew.

Tirako Gamno had given up early on four tries. He had passed the 5th test which had to do with 3-dimensional tactics. But of course we all knew that this could never gain him the required 10,000 plus-points in view of the big minus score he had against him.

At some distance in front of us was a platform supported by antigrav fields. On this sat the 39 members of the *Inner Circle* and Tormanac, who presided. He had eulogized the dead candidates and stressed once more the lofty

significance of the *Ark Summia*. In the Hall of Truth, the great Institute's largest auditorium, there was an oppressive stillness.

Regardless of whether or not they had passed, the Hertasoes present maintained a drilled-in discipline. They had stiffly taken their seats in the same hard folding chairs where they had sat during their lecture sessions. I was certain there was not one of the 335-surviving aspirants who knew whether or not he had achieved his honours—with the exception of myself.

However, the favour Tormanac had bestowed upon me was a questionable advantage. Each Arkonide present here knew who he was, where he had come from and who his parents were. I had no idea of these things!

I felt the light pressure of the strange weapon on my left forearm. My hand movements must have betrayed to Tirako something of my inner turmoil and he had taken notice. I had to control myself better. There was no point in feeling my arm all the time. Under no circumstances could I let anyone see the deadly weapon—not even friends who knew about it.

Above us on other antigrav platforms the parents of the candidates sat in loges. They were watching the annual ceremony as attentively as the aspirants. All of them desired secure futures for their sons in important government positions but in the next few minutes how many of their hopes would probably be shattered?

The absolute self-control demonstrated by all of these Arkonides was distressing to me. They made an outward show of complete calm. They would no doubt take the announcement of their sons' failures with the same equanimity. What their real feelings might be one would only be able to guess. Why didn't these influential high-and-mighties look for the failure within their own burning pride? Why did a young man like Tirako have to look death in the eye, only to end with failure? Those who had raised him were surely intelligent enough to have perceived his weaknesses long ago. So they had merely entered him in the race for the *Ark Summia* so they could say, at least, that he had been in the running. I knew very well what Tirako thought about the whole thing. He was not inspired.

With the exception of myself he was probably the only Arkonide in this hall who had looked forward to the opening of the *Inner Circle* ceremonies with a sense of resignation.

The names of the candidates appeared in rapid succession on a fluorescent announcement panel. As a part of tradition the comportment of the Hertasoes during their tests was evaluated and given various ratings. And therewith began the great lie. We sat there for hours and listened to the extensive panegyrics. Crass failures were patronizingly excused. It became clear to me why the founders of the *Ark Summia* had insisted upon point scoring by robots exclusively. If they had left the judging to Arkonides the whole thing would have degenerated into an endless game of manipulation.

I was becoming increasingly impatient. I noted that the floating cameras of the Arkonide TV system had pulled my face into close-up more than once. I couldn't forget Fratulon's warning. Unconsciously I felt the Luccot sling again. I felt Tirako's hand touch my leg and I looked at him. He shook his head almost imperceptibly.

Then I controlled myself again. Finally my name appeared on the lighted panel and held there. From now on it would be extremely dangerous. If well-informed observers had not seen Macolon in a long while, now they would have their chance.

Next to my name I could read the rapid spell-out of additional information: "Macolon, son of the honourable Tanictrop, former commander of heavy cruiser *Argosso*, on leave from Fleet service for *Ark Summia* candidacy examination..."

In obedience to regulations, I stood up. Two cameras glided toward me. I knew I must be visible now on a few 100 billion viewscreens. Since the broadcast transmission was over hypercom networks, reception occurred everywhere with no time delay, so in this same moment the viewers on more than 2000 colonized worlds were witnessing this event.

I heard my name called in solemn and formal tones: "Hertaso Macolon, step forward!"

At this moment the *Ark Summia* I had won seemed to be inconsequential. I could only think of the dangers it involved. How often in my life had I been pursued and hounded, without even knowing why! At present this unjust pursuit appeared to come into extreme focus. I walked down the long rows of seats like an automaton. Now in the loges I perceived the first stirrings of the onlookers. They must have guessed that the first of the candidates had been called who would be given the "completed" rating.

I went through the ensuing ceremonies as one in a trance. I was handed an antique-looking, specially prepared document on which my merits and awards had been inscribed. What had I done, actually, to justify the activation of my extra-brain? I had gone through some physical exertions, done some logical thinking and taken some potshots when it had been necessary. Wasn't a young man like Tirako Gamno to be classified 10 times over me?

I turned my head imploringly and saw him. He waved at me but today that could be excused. Normally such comportment would have been looked upon reprovingly.

I regained my inner composure. Patiently I endured the speech the chairman was delivering...

"... not only did you make the required number of points on your first test, Hertaso Macolon, but also in the two succeeding tests you again achieved the highest possible scoring. Allow us to express to you and your honourable father the highest recognition the *Inner Circle* is capable of. Since you are the Hertaso with the most outstanding record of attainment, we have decided to transfer you

with top priority to the authorities of the Parapsychic Activation Clinic. We congratulate you in the name of the Arkonide race and his Omniscient Eminence, Urbanashol III of Arkon. We wish you luck and success in your continued career, which shall be dedicated to the Greater Imperium. Please be seated facing the *Inner Circle*.”

I sat down in one of the seats of honour. They were placed in a forward position on the platform, arranged in a half-circle for the reception of candidates who had proved themselves worthy of the ultimate award.

After me there were 8 more candidates who were called forward. This meant that only 9 of us had passed out of the original 342 final contenders. It was a depressing total! Once more I turned to look at Tirako. He laughed cheerfully. He did not begrudge me the forthcoming activation.

I went through the balance of the ceremonies in a state of fear and uncertainty. Naturally the floating TV cameras ceaselessly pursued the Hertasoes who had been publicly announced as winners of the activation. Apparently Fratulon had foreseen how painful this moment would be for me. Painful? I doubted that was the proper description for it.

9/ AWAKENING AT CRISIS

It was 6 PM, planetary time, Largamenia. It was the year 10497, Arkon time—for me a year of destiny.

During the *Ark Summia* ceremonies, Tirako Gamno had not failed to detect the presence of the Luccot sling, so I had concocted what seemed to me a fairly logical explanation for it. I had told him something to the effect that my family had certain bitter enemies and also that a few crewmembers of the old *Argosso* had sworn vengeance against me. Or at least I said I assumed as much. Nor did I neglect to remind him of a few things he had been suspicious about himself—such as the 2nd Officer of the cruiser *Argosso*. In other words: Tschetrum.

Tirako had listened patiently to my explanations but he had *not* accepted them! In the end he merely smiled at me and asked me how he might be of help.

His parents had ordered him home from Largamenia and he was to have left within several days. For his own part he could have departed any time but he had been able to convince his father that his trusted friend—meaning myself—needed him for awhile. His father had accepted this but probably only because the worthy Teftenik Gamno had gotten the notion that it wouldn't harm his son at all to be in the company of an *Ark Summia* graduate.

“Try that thing again,” Tirako challenged me.

I was wearing the sweeping white robes which had been traditional apparel for thousands of years for those who were to receive the brain activation. They freed the body of undesirable restrictions. I lifted my left arm and was about to touch the triggering button on my thumb ball with the tips of my fingers.

“Stop—not that way!” he commanded me. “You're more dexterous than that! Are you paralysed or something? Don't raise your arm like you're waving goodbye. You have to jerk it up in a flash and hit the trigger at the same time. The raybeam has to strike at the moment your hand points to the target.”

I tried it again. Of course I had the safety catch secured.

“OK, that's a lot better,” he said. “Now once more, please.”

This time my hand did flash upward quickly. My imaginary target was a flower bowl on the mess table at the rear of our common living room. Apparently I would have hit the mark in a real situation.

“Good,” said Tirako approvingly. “Now all we can do is hope that you really do run into your big bad enemies.”

He laughed softly. I figured I had been a fool. How had I ever gotten the idea that I could deceive this sharp young fellow? He looked at me questioningly.

For a moment I was tempted to tell him the whole truth as far as I knew it. But then I thought better of it. “Just give me a few more hours, Tirako—only until they’ve released me from the parapsychic activation clinic.”

“I’ve guessed what’s going on,” he told me calmly. “You can depend on me, friend. But there is one question yet. If you can’t or don’t want to answer it, I won’t hold it against you. May I speak?”

I nodded.

“What can I do for you if the things you’re worrying about come to a head during the activation process? Normally, the process takes about 4 to 5 hours...”

He had grasped exactly what I was concerned with. It unnerved me somewhat. “Since you’ll be wearing your regular uniform you’ll be able to carry a weapon. Be my bodyguard. If anybody tries to kill me when I’m lying under the activating hood, then you...”

I stopped, suddenly aware of the enormity of my request.

“Yes? Continue,” he said calmly. “Tell me more, friend. Or did you think I really believed your story? A great mystery or secret surrounds you. It is apparently of a greater magnitude than you yourself suspect.”

I began to talk then, although I was violating Fratulon’s orders and going against my own intentions. In about 10 minutes Tirako Gamno learned who I was, or more to the point, who I was not. He became aware of my cares and worries, the mental and emotional dilemma—all the things I’d been concerned with for years. I even told him about Farnathia.

When I had finished I felt like a hollowed-out wreck.

He looked at me for awhile in silence before he finally spoke. “It’s not all that bad,” he said soothingly. “You’ll also pull through these last vital hours of your processing. Now is no time to despair. This girl Farnathia, who is so close to your heart—we’ll find her one day.”

“We?”

He nodded. “Yes, we. If you will allow me to, I shall remain at your side. Perhaps you need me. But now you have to get with it. The High Commission will be waiting for you. I’ll go along as your special aide and honour guard.” He turned and went into his bedroom, returning in a few moments with his service weapon.

I hesitated, regretting my open confession. Had I told him too much? But he perceived my inner conflict and his reassuring smile helped to appease my sudden doubts. I opened the door of our quarters and found two robots waiting.

They were both special android types wearing magnificent uniforms. As a part of the tradition of the occasion, they were to be my escorts.

I introduced my friend to them. “Tirako Gamno, special aide and honour guard.”

The robots marched forward, leading the way. I followed. Close behind me was Tirako. Beyond the block of dormitories we entered an air glider. It transported us to the imposing building that we had often regarded in hopeful wonderment during our student days. This was the mystery-enshrouded Parapsychic Activation Clinic, one of the most heavily guarded and security-isolated installations of the Greater Imperium.

The personnel carrier landed. A second robot escort detail met us at that point and led us through the first “lock” in the system of high-tension energy screens surrounding the place. It was necessary to also pass through a screen aperture in the second defence dome. There were no entrance locks for aircraft.

We arrived at the tube-like identification chamber. Here, in addition to a robot-brain type of computer, a battery of defence weapons had been installed. At this checkpoint only those persons were admitted who could present full authorization for proceeding onward. The identification procedure was painstakingly long and involved. But finally we passed through and found ourselves looking at the extensive and ancient building complex of the Activation Clinic.

Here the Greater Imperium’s greatest experts in the “para”-sciences carried on their work and researches. The Empire had invested tremendous sums in this institution in order to advance the so-called Science of Duality. These areas of parapsychology and paraphysics came under the highest security classification for the Military, since it was known that the Maahks were also pursuing research in this direction.

An honour guard had appeared, consisting of tall special troops from a space-landing commando unit. I was greeted officially but the commanding officer could not refrain from looking repeatedly at the ID badge that the robot brain had issued to me. Although Tirako had also received a clearance badge he was carefully scrutinized.

It was only then that we were finally allowed to pass into the Clinic itself. I again considered the situation. Admiral Tormanac had arranged to give me precedence as the first of the *Ark Summia* recipients. I knew that the instruments and equipment to be used for activating the “logic sector” of the brain were not arranged here in multiple sets for mass processing. There was only one setup, which was capable of handling one candidate at a time. In fact it was the same on the other four test planets where this same honour could be achieved. But what it meant for me was the possibility of gaining considerable time. If I had been forced to wait around all day for my turn at the processing, my chances for being activated would have been narrowed down.

My high score had given Tormanac a fully plausible reason for placing me first on the schedule. Which was of course customary. The student who had excelled the most outstandingly was always processed first. So I had a good chance to come through, provided that my assumed identity was not discovered sooner than expected. However, should that occur, or if it had happened already, I could expect the sudden appearance of the Emperor's heavily armed secret police. In that case the Kralasene pursuit commandos under Sofgart the Blind would not take long to arrive on the scene.

We were led into an extensive foyer. Here the full membership of the *Inner Circle* was on hand. I took an unobtrusive look around and suddenly suppressed an angry oath. The TV cameras were present again, floating in their antigrav force fields. Naturally, Tormanac had not been able to suddenly cancel the direct broadcast that was expected by billions of viewers. He had to tolerate the presence of the reporters.

I suffered impatiently through the reception address that was delivered in my honour. Finally the prescribed, well-phrased words pertaining to my future obligations were spoken again. Everything was taking too long. Tormanac knew it as well as I did but there was nothing to be done about it. At long last, the closing ceremonial question was stated:

“Are you prepared, Hertaso Macolon, to receive the high honour of the *Ark Summia* and to place at the disposal of the Greater Imperium and His Omniscient Eminence, Emperor Orbanashol III, the advantages and prerogatives there unto pertaining?”

I responded with the prescribed formula: “My life for Arkon, Your Excellence!”

With that I had surmounted the last formalities. Now came the practical application. I noted Tormanac's searching glance at Tirako Gamno. An officer of the guard commandos instructed Tirako concerning his duties as honour guard and special aide to me. Accordingly, as an observer of the activation procedures, Tirako was to raise an objection at the first sign of anything that appeared to be wrong. Also he had to be responsible for my physical wellbeing and see that I lacked nothing I needed.

It was a matter of course for the *Ark Summia* recipients to consign such tasks to their most trusted friends. Tirako was unhesitatingly accepted. I breathed a sigh of relief.

Tormanac accompanied me through several antechambers. We came to a stop before a meter-thick security door made of Arkon steel which was additionally secured by two deadly energy screens. Here he had a chance to whisper a few words to me: “Be careful! We've picked up a few clues indicating that you've been recognized as an impostor. We've already taken two crewmembers of the *Argosso* into protective custody but according to them there are also other witnesses who could confirm Macolon's death. Among them, is a hypercom

operator who was in contact with Macolon up to the last minute. He can't be located. Release the safety on your weapon.”

This threw me into a state of alarm. The things we had feared were now emerging. “Let Tirako know—I've told him everything. I had no choice!” I whispered back quickly.

With that our brief exchange was ended. Scientists in white uniforms appeared. They activated the security screens and opened the armour-plated door. Beyond it I saw another antechamber that was equipped with automatically functioning defence weapons. A giant viewscreen revealed the chamber lying beyond it. It was there that the activation equipment had been installed.

After we were led into the activation area, Tirako took up his post behind a transparent screen that could shield him from radiation. From that point he could observe everything that was going on. Once I had been placed on the wide couch, Admiral Tormanac and the members of the *Inner Circle* departed. Tirako was the last man in the large room who was informed about me and the impending dangers.

My head was held in position by wide clamps while over me hovered a metal hood. The latter tapered inwardly to a conical opening which gave access to the power cables. I was not to move, nor could I. My cranium had to remain precisely in the position in which the scientists had placed it. All I knew was that a sharply focussed light-beam marked the sector where the radiations were to have their effect.

In contrast to the commonly known equipment used for hypno-suggestion and training, the so-called activator bell was designed differently. It did not have to transfer any items of knowledge into the subconscious or the relatively involuntary centres of memory. Its purpose was to awaken a certain dormant sector of the brain which was present in almost all Arkonides and this was done in the course of a 5th-dimensional energy-tension process.

In the case of the *Ark Summia* recipient this did not happen like turning on a switch for receptivity to all sorts of outer impressions. Instead, the long-unused brain sector was excited by the 5-D impulses to reawaken. Our experts in the parasciences had determined thousands of years ago that this fragment of the brain—the so-called logic sector—had “operated” independently in ancient times. It had been an integral part of animal instinct and other known primeval characteristics such as the pronounced sense of smell and abilities like precognition and the natural alertness to danger, as well as an awareness of things unrelated to previous experience, which could only be overcome or brought under control by the unconscious intervention of a logical evaluating process.

Not all of these lost faculties could be reactivated but a fractional portion was capable of being regenerated. It had to do with the logical comprehension of all types of sensory data and information. Our experts were convinced that this

ability had originally been the most valuable. To this we probably owed our ascent from a Stone Age existence to a highly technological civilization.

The theory itself was somewhat questionable but there could be no doubt about the existence of a dormant brain sector. This had been proved by those who had received the *Ark Summia*. Arkonides having access to this sector, once activated, had a great advantage over their contemporaries. They could understand and grasp events of all kinds with a swiftness that was considerably superior to other people. For example, scientists with an activated logic sector could demonstrate much better results than their “normal” colleagues. Fleet commanders with a completed *Ark Summia* were almost invincible. They could calculate faster and more logically.

It was quite clear to me why Fratulon placed such great value on the reawakening of my extra brain. But to what purpose? How was I, the perennially pursued one, to ever be in a position where I might use this magnificent gift to advantage? How was I to ever become a noted scientist, economic expert or statesman when even a man of Fratulon’s high intelligence had been under the greatest pains for 18 years now to shield me from my pursuers?

Something seemed to me to be illogical about his intentions. I had only been able to restrain my growing impatience because instinct had always told me to hold off, to wait and see. After all, Fratulon was not one of those Arkonides who set things in motion without good cause.

By now I had been lying almost 5 hours on the couch. I had heard nothing other than a continuous humming plus the occasional murmur of voices from attending scientists. We Hertasoos had imagined the most fantastic things about the activating process but those who really knew had only smiled in silence. I had more or less expected a sudden flaring up of long unknown mental forces, to the accompaniment of ethereal voices and soft music, but nothing of the sort had happened. Whatever the activation bell was radiating was inaudible, impalpable and optically invisible.

Hadn’t this logic sector always been talked about? As Arkonides we had always dreamed of being among those who could be awakened. But if I had thought that in a few hours I was going to be transformed into a mental genius who could handle in his head mathematical problems of the kind that were normally fed into robot brains, I was mistaken.

I was disappointed, in fact extremely so. Something, no matter what—but something should have happened at least, more or less as a sign of a resulting change of some kind. When I turned my eyes upward so far that they began to pain me, I could just see Tirako Gamno. He was still standing behind the radiation shielding.

At last it was over with.

The scientists appeared within my restricted field of vision. The humming stopped and the big bell-shaped hood swung to one side. The metal clamps gripping my skull were released and I was carefully brought to a sitting position.

“How do you feel, Excellency? Nausea? Giddiness? Is your vision clear?”

Oh, so now I was already being addressed as nobility! Indeed I felt well and I expressed as much.

“Amazing!” they exclaimed, praisingly. “We only know of a few cases in the long history of the *Ark Summia* where a recipient...”

Somebody had activated the door, causing it to glide upwards before I could be questioned. My treatment was at an end. The scientist, a parapsychicist, stopped in mid-sentence, listening to sounds from outside. Tirako and I had also heard the loud voice of Admiral Tormanac. In fact now he was shouting. Then there was a shot. The roar of the high-powered beam was unmistakable.

“No one may enter the activating room!” I heard Tormanac bellowing. “I don’t care what your orders are or by what authority you are here—I must insist that you leave at once! Even the Imperial Secret Police.”

It told me enough. Tormanac was trying to warn me or he would never have raised his voice to this extent. Tirako acted swiftly. He knew as well as I did that it was no longer possible to get out by way of the main steel door. The ISP were there—the bounty hunters and executioners of the Imperial Secret Police. These men had far-reaching authority which even a man of Tormanac’s stature could not obstruct for long.

“Where’s the rear exit?” asked Tirako sharply, weapon in hand. “Don’t ask any questions! This is an assassination attempt!”

I didn’t wait for the flustered scientist to answer. I ran to the assistant who had obsequiously opened the vault-like steel door. Before that door was the last security chamber with the defensive battery of weapons. I shoved the elderly man to one side and pressed the closure button of the meter-thick door. While it closed slowly I saw the agents of the ISP pushing into the outer room!

They were notorious for their unscrupulous methods and their highly technological systems of interrogation. Ever since Orbanashol III had been in power, the ISP had risen tremendously in the scope of its authority.

I pulled the protesting scientist back with me a few paces and then jerked up my left arm. My two middle fingers touched the firing button on the ball of my thumb. Since the Luccot sling had been de-safetied, the barrel snapped out of my sleeve almost simultaneously with the shot. The beam of energy struck the closure circuit of the door just as it closed, creating an explosion that damaged the switch and effectively sealed the entrance.

The ISP had arrived a few minutes too late. Apparently Tormanac had managed to hold off the police commandos as long as was necessary.

“Tirako,” I called to my friend, “the exit door is there to your right behind that control board!”

He moved with surprising swiftness. He was already opening the normal-sized door and looking beyond it as I ran through the large chamber. Behind the main steel door I could hear a fusillade of powerful weapons. If they sought to break down the Arkon steel barrier by force they would be faced with a problem. Such ponderous material didn't melt down too easily.

I arrived at the exit door and saw a passage beyond it.

"Where now?" inquired Tirako. "I guess you know we won't get out of this trap unless somebody's stationed some helping forces here."

That was also my one hope. If I had been given a half-hour lead time I'd have been safely out of the Clinic and away but now this situation seemed to be hopeless.

I ran down the passage with Tirako behind me. The corridor branched out before us but the lighted letters which gave us directions were a big relief.

"Turn left to the transmitter room!" panted Tirako. "If we can reach it and if we..."

He was silenced by the thunder of a salvo of shots. Apparently a battle was going on ahead of us. Since I couldn't imagine any resistance on the part of the uninformed scientists against the invading ISP forces, I had to conclude that Admiral Tormanac had also posted a few sentinels here as well. They certainly must have received some very special orders.

We proceeded once more. The corridors seemed to be endless. The farther we went the louder became the sounds of battle. They seemed to come from the direction of the transmitter room. Gradually it was getting hotter. To the bedlam was added the shrieking and whistling of fire alarms. Somewhere ahead they were duelling with high-energy weapons and the rising temperature was an unavoidable consequence.

Before us was another heavy door constructed of Arkon steel. Just as I was about to press the unlocking switch, the massive portal swung open by itself. Somebody must have seen us just in time over the closed-circuit video system. A loudspeaker crackled to life nearby. I could not recognize the voice but its owner knew my real name.

"At last I found you, Atlan! You can't come this way any more without a protective suit. Don't bother to try—get to the main transmitter room. You'll find a 3-man sending chamber marked #5. It's been programmed for you. The energy cage is activated and shows a violet signal light. Get through the antechamber and use the right-hand door. If you go left you'll come to us. We've barricaded ourselves in the armoured foyer. The heat's at 3,600 Fahrenheit, so watch it, Atlan! Even our suits' heat screens can't hold up much longer. Go to the right and..."

Another thunderous salvo was heard. The man who had been instructing me failed to answer my repeated shouts into the wall microphone. The ISP were using modern repeater Luccots with a capacity of 50 shots per second. Without

special protection it was no longer possible to remain alive in the armoured antechamber.

The automatic fire-fighting system had been operating for several minutes but if there was much more shooting this whole building would go up in flames. Which seemed to be immaterial to the ISP commander.

We went through the armoured bulkhead hatchway and found even here that the temperature was considerable. I knew nothing of the safety setup in this part of the building, even from hearsay. It must have been excellent, however, or the continuous release of nuclear energies would have reduced the structures to ashes by now. Also, even in the relatively less important areas than the Para-Clinic it was customary to use energy screens and armoured access doors, especially where the transmitter rooms were concerned.

While I activated the unlocking mechanism of the unfamiliar door I had been directed to, Tirako closed the main entrance hatch. He was about to destroy the switch mechanism but prudently changed his mind. It was hot enough in here already.

My flowing robes got in my way. They reached almost to the floor and hindered my freedom of movement. I looked cautiously beyond the door that glided upward before me. There was a giant hall. It was a special transmitter room of the Clinic. By the varying sizes of the installations here I realized that one could even undertake major transferences here to other planets. Which explained the elaborate security arrangements. Because of the Methane War, long-distance transmitters were especially guarded.

“Anybody here?” asked Tirako. He seemed to be the personification of self-composure.

I shook my head and stepped aside to let him in, after which I closed the entrance by a touch of a button. “Destroy that locking mechanism on the double!” I urged him. “We have to protect ourselves from that direction. Use a needle beam.”

I hurried on into the great chamber and searched for the #5 transmitter, which was a 3-man sender. Behind me I heard the roar of Tirako’s beam shot. For a fraction of a second the hall was bathed in blinding light. A hot shockwave reached me but it died swiftly because here there were enough cold air masses to quickly absorb the nuclear heat.

I found #5 far away in a remote corner. Above the cage-like dematerialiser blinked a violet signal light. The apparatus had actually been programmed and was ready for a transmission. This could only have been prepared by men who saw themselves engaged in a hopeless battle against insuperable odds. Why had they done this? Only because they had received special instructions to do so—perhaps from Tormanac? Or were there still more profound reasons behind this whole thing?

I did not have time to carry through my train of thought. About 20 meters away from us the rematerializing field of a larger transmitter flashed to life. This apparatus was capable of handling 5 men at once. I caught sight of dark-red uniforms—the hated colour of the feared ISP! The filigree of shimmering lines solidified and the transmitted men became stabilized in the flesh.

They were wearing combat spacesuits but had not yet been able to activate their individual defence screens because such was not possible during a transmitter transference. Tirako yelled something unintelligible but it didn't matter since he also opened fire at the same moment. I also fired. The Luccot sling performed admirably although I could only aim by means of my outstretched arm. Since it was set on a wide beam, my aim didn't matter. Its effect was destructive enough. The bodies inside the transmitter cage seemed to break into flames and collapse; however, one of the intruders managed to put up a defence.

A rapid repeater salvo slammed past me, causing a switchboard behind me to explode. Glowing white metal and plastic fragments sprayed far and wide. I crouched behind the cover of a converter, which was the only thing that saved me from the deadly shower.

“Are you hit?” yelled Tirako.

My answer was a well-aimed shot at the adjustment switch on the receiver cage. It shattered in a display of fireworks. The transmitter's shadowy energy field collapsed and disappeared. A wave of heat swept through the vast chamber. No more shooting could occur in here or we'd be sacrificing ourselves also to a flaming death.

A quick glance around convinced me that the other transport equipment was not turned on. No secret police could find access through them. Tirako was already standing beside the grid cage of #5. He stood outside the red danger circle but seemed to be quite familiar with the instrument readings.

I ran over to the 5-man machine that the ISP men had just attempted to use, hoping to pick up one of their heavy weapons. I didn't succeed, however, because the robot-guided air-conditioning system went into emergency action and turned on the automatic fire extinguishers. A white foam rained down from the ceiling onto the burning transmitter. It covered the corpses as well as their weapons. Here and there a glowing flame licked outward from the smouldering apparatus.

“Get back—you're risking your life!” shouted Tirako. “Those beam guns can explode if the extinguishers don't work fast enough!”

I followed his advice and quickly joined him. In this area the heat was not so unbearable.

“The Luccot sling isn't enough for this kind of combat,” I said, hurriedly. “The barrel snaps back into place after each shot.”

“Maybe you won't have to use it much longer, if at all.”

He pointed to the control panel of #5 but it was a gesture of despair. I also noted that the controls were not equipped with an automatic timing release. This equipment had to be operated from the nearby control station but the crew had disappeared.

I ran to the station room and peered through the armour-plastic window. Then I opened the steel door. There was no one to be seen. Suddenly Tirako was standing beside me. I thought swiftly. Unexpectedly, something happened that made me start in alarm. Mistaking my action, Tirako dropped to the floor, simultaneously turning with his weapon, ready to fire.

“No, no! Nobody’s coming—not yet!” I protested. “We still have a few minutes. But Tirako—my head...!”

He got up and helped support me. I heard hi in gasp in his excitement. “What do you feel? An impulse? Atlan, remember the activation! It’s becoming effective, perhaps faster than expected. The pressure of events...”

“I know, I know!” I interrupted him. “Please be quiet!”

I virtually listened to myself inwardly. Then I caught another whisper of that eerie voice. It was as though some invisible entity were speaking directly into my ears. Still, it was not acoustical in its nature. It was more like a telepathic communication that came from the depths of my subconscious mind.

Unconscious of speaking aloud, I asked questions, while Tirako grasped my arm.

Listen to the shots, the sounds of battle! something whispered to me. It could only be my activated logic sector. *That means you still have friends who are alive. Get them, rescue them! Somebody has to operate the controls!* Thus ended the first communication of my awakened extra-brain.

“Fantastic!” whispered Tirako in utter fascination. “That’s out of this world!”

“How did you know...”

“You spoke aloud, repeating what it said! Somebody is still trying to save our necks! Of course there’s shooting outside! How come I didn’t think of it?”

I began to move with the quickness of a robot, at the same time sensing a complete inward calm. Was this also attributable to the activated sector of my brain? “Tirako, cover me. Behind us there’s only one door—the one we came through. The main entrance is here, through the control room—our last chance for operating this equipment! I’ll fetch that man who’s still fighting outside.”

“You’ll be burned to a crisp!”

Wordlessly I pointed to a large wall cabinet I hadn’t noted before. In it were heavy protective spacesuits. Suddenly I was seeing my surroundings with other eyes. Tirako helped me into the combat suit. It was equipped with a heavy-duty power supply that was capable of generating an effective high-tension defence screen. It could shield me from temperatures as high as 5400 Fahrenheit.

Passing through the control room, I jerked open the steel door at the rear. Behind it was a short passage lined with armour plating. It ended at a radiation-shielded lock door, behind which we could still hear the sounds of combat.

The ceiling can be broken through, came the subtle whisper from my inner brain.

I started anew but this time I didn't waste time on superfluous conjectures. The logic sector appeared to have the ability to announce itself independently of the conscious will.

"Tirako, watch the ceiling in the transmitter room! If I were an ISP agent I'd try to get in from overhead. A demolition charge would be enough—no shockwave and practically soundless."

My friend looked at me in amazement but he caught on. Inside my head I heard laughter.

"Be still!" I commanded, again speaking aloud unconsciously.

"What? I don't think I—Ah yes, I see. But, by the Crystal World, I'd never seen anyone who could laugh like that in the face of such danger!"

"Just voicing a grin, my friend."

"Are you ever going to get started? I wouldn't be so derisive of the ISP if I were you. They'll do anything and everything to catch you."

"Which includes you, my boy! Do you want to bail out of this? You can tell them I forced you to come with me. Dead men can't talk, you know."

He stared at me horrified. "Is that statement also based on advice from your logic sector?"

Again I sensed internal laughter. Instead of answering, I opened the steel door of the lock. The thunder of battle became more audible. When I passed through the opening the door closed behind me and Tirako vanished from my view. I activated the micro-reactor in my backpack and switched on my defence screen. With a crackle of small lightning from the discharge poles, the energy field enveloped me.

I hesitated momentarily, anxiously uncertain, but finally ventured to depress the release button of the second lock door. If the effects of extreme heat were to prevent its opening, then we were lost. Somebody *had* to operate the transmitter from the control room!

"Don't worry," whispered my new internal companion. "Arkon steel is more resistant than a light energy screen. Since your unknown friend is still shooting, it can't be prohibitively hot in there."

Involuntarily I made a gesture of slapping my forehead but only succeeded in hitting my faceplate. Now I understood why the activation was the most significant event in the life of an Arkonide.

The ponderous hatch glided outward. Although I was braced for a shock I was not prepared for the infernal storm that howled in around me. Gases heated to an incandescence blasted into the lock chamber, slammed me against the

bulkhead and finally buffeted me around on the floor. If the materials used here had not been of Arkon steel, this part of the building would have long since collapsed, since normal masonry could not have withstood this thermal onslaught.

As the difference in pressure equalized itself, the hurricane subsided somewhat. But without the protective screen around me I would not only have been crushed but also snuffed out in a pall of ashes. I got up, ignoring my bruises, and pushed forward. I couldn't run because of the cumbersomeness of the heavy suit.

In the blinding glow of the room beyond I made out a body lying on the floor. I could see the yellowish-white contrast of his energy screen against the superheated air of the room. The man appeared to be completely exhausted, perhaps also wounded. He was lying close to the outer portal as though he had attempted to open it and failed. The weapon had fallen from his hand. It was glowing a dull red and had become unusable.

The indicators inside my suit registered danger levels. The heat was at the limits of the equipment's capacity. Without delay, I bent over my unknown ally. Through his faceplate I made out a lean face distorted by unspeakable pain. When he saw me, he seemed to laugh ironically.

I asked no questions. His radio communicator must have ceased functioning early in the battle. I dragged him by the shoulders into the lock. Closing the door, I activated the chamber's ventilation and heat-absorption system. This was a decontaminator airlock for transmitter travellers who might be wounded, poisoned or otherwise in need of stabilization and relief. The place was also designed for equalizing high temperatures and superheated non-organic substances.

But to me it seemed hours before the incoming fresh air finally lowered the level of heat. When the temperature got down to about 120 Fahrenheit, I opened the inner door of the lock. Again I dragged the stranger with me, since he was obviously incapacitated for the moment. Once inside the transmitter section I placed him gently on the floor.

Tirako was there. He waited until I had deactivated both of the suits' energy screens and then he helped me to open the other man's helmet. The first thing we heard was a groan of pain. As fast as possible we got him out of the spacesuit and then we saw the cause of his torment. He was far too badly burned for us to be able to help him. Apparently his defence screen had failed for a fraction of a second but it had been long enough for the incandescent gases to do their deadly work. The entire lower part of his body up to his waist was a terminal case.

"Atlan..."

"I am here. Be silent, my friend. We're going to try to..."

“No!” he gasped, with an ominous rattle in his throat. “The others... they’ve fallen! Screens failed. I... I welded the entrance shut. But hurry. Get me to the transmitter console... hurry!”

He is right! declared my logic sector. *Impossible to help him. What are you waiting for?*

I grasped him under his arms and with Tirako’s help I transported the man to the control keyboard.

“Place my upper torso up on the cabinet,” he groaned. “No... don’t let me sit! Hurry—across there! Have to be able to reach the green-striped section of the board.”

Tirako struggled to hold back a sob of emotion—pity for the mortally wounded fellow who strove to help us. According to his wish, we laid him across the console itself so that he could reach the controls.

“That’s it! Go into #5 transmitter—quickly! I can’t hold out much longer. Atlan—my life for you and our people! Hurry!”

Tirako and I ran. Over our heads the ceiling began to crumble. I jerked Tirako’s service weapon from him and fired several highly charged shots upward. Somebody fell with a cry of mortal agony through the suddenly gaping hole.

Then we were in the transmitter. We could see our helper only vaguely through the armour-plastic window of the control room.

“He can’t make it!” exclaimed Tirako fearfully. “Nobody can hold out in that condition! I’d never have believed that...”

He was silenced by the appearance of the dematerialization field. In spite of it all, our friend had carried through!

Above us, at an angle, I could see the first of the police robots floating on antigravs down through the hole in the ceiling. However, before the fighting machine could shoot at our transmitter I was already in the throes of pain that accompanied dematerialization.

Tirako became a vague shadow. Then my senses left me...

10/ THE MOMENT OF TRUTH

I fell into Fratulon's arms. Beside him was Ice Claw. Behind my two old friends I was aware of several men whom I had never seen before.

"Take it easy now, son—real easy!" said Fratulon softly. "You have really passed your test! Ah, your friend Tirako Gamno. Welcome to my stronghold. I hope it's clear to you that there is no returning from now on. You will be hunted like Atlan. But I'll see to it that your father is not molested. Of course he has no idea that his son has rushed in where angels fear to tread!" Fratulon's laugh was deep and mysterious.

I stared down into the broad face of the relatively short man, who was nevertheless tremendously strong. Under squinted folds of skin I could see his yellowish eyes, which appeared to gleam with an inner triumph. And well I knew why!

He had achieved his goal. Not only had I obtained the *Ark Summia*, I had also been able to elude my pursuers and get away at the last moment. Yes, he had achieved something. As for myself—what had I won?

When I disengaged myself from his powerful arms I bumped against his chest armour. So he was still wearing that beat-up abomination. And naturally he still carried the short sword on his belt—a weapon to which he had given the resounding name of Skarg. He was a very strange man, indeed, my guardian and teacher.

Ice Claw came up to me. The little Chretkor was beaming for joy. This companion of my youth was always afraid he would melt in an extremity of heat or shatter to pieces under any extreme of cold. He placed both claw-like hands on my shoulders. To shake hands with him wouldn't have been advisable. If he should happen to tighten his claw it would turn a person to solid ice.

Taking no chances, Tirako drew back from us. Ice Claw's body was completely transparent. That is, beneath his outer structure one could clearly see his organs and blood vessels. He was a walking anatomy chart!

"Atlan, welcome! I'm sorry I couldn't be with you but Fratulon is a stubborn man—he wouldn't let me!"

“You should be glad of that!” I smiled, and I breathed deeply. The weakness was finally leaving me. Transmitter jumps were always strenuous. “Be grateful, little one. Where I just came from you really would have melted away!”

“May the Great Chrekt forbid!” he cried out, and held up his hands against the very vision of such a horror.

Tirako cleared his throat nervously. As one transfixed he stared at Ice Claw’s head. His brain was clearly visible.

I looked about me. The receiver transmitter, a small 2man cage, took up the greater part of the chamber we were in. “Where are we?” I inquired.

“On Largamenia, lad! Deep under the solid rock of a mountain that is covered over by one of the simulation domes. How’s that for a hiding place?” He laughed while he adjusted his battle harness.

When I released the magnetic fastenings of my spacesuit my white robes became visible. Fratulon stepped back with a gleam of wonderment in his eyes. How well I knew this solemn and formal facial expression by now!

“Alright, lay off that!” I said defensively. “Don’t start in with ceremony again—all those fine words and speeches of praise! I’ve had my fill of them!”

“We are not here for that, Your Majesty,” said one of the strangers present. He placed his right hand to his forehead and bowed. His companions kneeled down and placed their fingertips over their eyes. It was a traditional gesture that was made to...

It wasn’t possible for me to finish out the thought. I felt every muscle in my body stiffen. This... this wasn’t possible!

But it is! came my voice within, as matter-of-factly as usual. *This greeting is given only to the Emperor or the Crystal Prince.*

My momentary rigidity relaxed but there were red rings before my eyes. They condensed into pinwheels. I was aware of excited voices and the hiss of a high-pressure injection needle. My arm began to smart but the attack of faintness had been overcome for the moment. I could even see clearly again.

The three men were still kneeling. The older Arkonide stared at me searchingly. It was he who had addressed me with that, to me, inconceivable title.

“I am Arctamon,” he said, “former special adviser in domestic affairs to His Highness, Emperor Gonozal the Seventh of Arkon. I was also able to escape the agents of the fratricidal usurper, Orbanashol III. I greet Your Majesty in joy, thankfulness and humility.” And now even he kneeled down!

“Please... please get up, sir, I beg you! You... you shouldn’t do that! I’m not deserving of it. I don’t understand at all...”

I felt Fratulon grip my upper arm so severely that I had to groan aloud. “You have to get hold of yourself,” I heard him say. “The moment of truth has come, Atlan. That’s what I promised you. Your scientific education has been completed and your test of manhood has been crowned by the *Ark Summia*

which you have richly earned. Let me be your Chief Aide. Of course I'll always see in you the helpless lad that I brought to safety some 14 Arkon years ago. Emperor Gonozal VII, murdered by his criminal brother, was your good and illustrious father—a man of splendid capabilities. You are the lawful Crystal Prince of the Realm, the future ruler of the Greater Imperium. Through the death of your father, you already have the legal status of Emperor Gonozal VIII. I hail and honour Your Imperial Highness!”

“Fratulon... don't you kneel! Don't do it! And I beg of these noble gentlemen to get up, please. You are embarrassing me!”

The old man who had introduced himself as Arctamon looked at me as no Arkonide had ever looked at me before. I saw joy and veneration and relief in his eyes, of such proportions that it made me uneasy again.

I turned imploringly to my friend Tirako. He was there—naturally he was there—but how he looked! He stood stiffly behind me with legs apart in regulation parade rest position and with his right hand pressed to his heart. This greeting was given by officers to their Commander in Chief and of course also to the Emperor of the Empire.

He was apparently attempting to merely stare “through me” as custom demanded but fortunately he wasn't able to. His lips trembled, as did the hand on his chest. Actually it was Tirako Gamno who unknowingly helped me to regain my normal senses.

I came to him and messed up his already dishevelled hair. “You dummy!” I scolded him. “Do you have to do that? Do you have to get stiff-necked with an old buddy you've sweated it out with under fire?”

“But Your Majesty...”

I stomped on his foot and he was unable to suppress a yelp of pain. I grinned at him. “Ah, so maybe everyone is coming to their senses? Fratulon...” The old Sawbones from Gortavor apparently had no intention of baring his uprooted psyche like Tirako Gamno. “I'm just too stirred up and astonished,” I told him. “I can't express myself more reasonably than I have already.”

“Oh but it was quite reasonable,” replied my former teacher.

Arctamon smirked slightly. Like Tirako Gamno he seemed to be a good observer and also a very good psychologist. He had probably been waiting long for my appearance. A man in his position would have wondered, naturally, just how the Crystal Prince of the Realm had turned out. His reservations were justified. After the flight from Arkon and under Fratulon's unconventional methods of education I might have become a man who was completely obstinate and insufferable. And now after the revelation of my origin some streak of arrogance that had been hidden in my subconscious might have become noticeable. Many negative possibilities concerning my person must have been thinkable.

So now I understood why the old man had looked at me so strangely. Not every son could be equated with his father! For example, Tirako Gamno had failed to become a cold-hearted businessman but was instead a relatively frail and aesthetic youngster who wanted to know as little as possible about his father's merchant spacefleet.

"I'm tired. My nerves are frayed and I don't have my wits about me just now. I wonder if I could have a few hours of rest. Fratulon, can one take a bath around here?"

11/ HIS MAJESTY, GONAZOL VIII!

Seven planetary days had passed since I had been told of my true origin, which to me was still unimaginable.

I had been having meetings almost incessantly with Fratulon, Arctamon and the three other men of his retinue so that I could be informed concerning the path of my life to come as well as the details of my father's terrible fate.

Fratulon had been present during a hunting expedition on a primeval jungle world when Gonozal VII "suffered a misfortune". It had been no accident—but rather a well-planned murder. Naturally the crime had not been committed personally by my father's brother, who was now the present Emperor, Orbanashol III.

It was patently clear, however, that my father had been killed by order of his younger brother. The time for it had been favourable. As the Crystal Prince of the Empire and the only son of the ruler, I had just reached my 4th year of age. My uncle had seized the opportunity to convince the freely elected members of the Supreme Council of Arkon that for my sake and in the interests of the Greater Imperium he, Orbanashol, should occupy the Regency in the place of my father until the time of my final examinations and maturity.

Fratulon had made timely provisions for such an event. While he was still living, my father had already placed vast financial means and supplies and equipment of every nature at his disposal. He had always been wary of an assassination attempt so he had placed his full trust in his personal physician Fratulon, which had proved later to be a very wise move. Filmed evidence, secret documents of State and recorded conversations between the Regent and his vassals had convinced me that Fratulon had seen through the treacherous plot to take power, in sufficient time to make the necessary preparations.

At that time I carried the name my father had bestowed upon me at my birth. I was called Mascaren. However it had always been my mother's wish that I should be called Atlan, and Fratulon had never forgotten this.

Only a few months after assuming the Regency, Orbanashol took over absolute power. Because of alleged objectionable intrigues and charges of incompetence the Supreme Council was dissolved and Orbanashol's political henchmen took over the vacated seats in the Parliament of the Empire, after

which he was officially declared Emperor. From that point on my life was as good as forfeited.

Orbanashol III, as my uncle was now called, had made the mistake of underestimating my father's foresight and Fratulon's skill and adroitness. Of course there were numerous persons in all important departments and institutions of the Empire, especially in the Fleet, who had seen through Orbanashol's foul machinations. And thus Fratulon was able to find many allies. My personal identity data were erased from the registers of the robot brain on the Crystal Planet and from then on the "helpless child" of the murdered Emperor could not be found, as far as records alone were concerned. Not even the ISP had been able to prevent this erasure. Fratulon and his friends had always been a little bit ahead of them.

I assumed the name of Atlan and, with the help of high officials in the Fleet, Fratulon was able to bring me to safety. One of those who helped him had been Admiral Tormanac. In fact he had ordered a pursuing ISP spaceship to be destroyed. Of course no manipulation inimical to the State could ever be traceable to him but if he had not been so powerful and popular he would undoubtedly have forfeited his life by that action. Even someone of the stature of Orbanashol could not dare to eliminate this Fleet admiral who was so esteemed by the people. Nevertheless it had been possible to more or less put him "out to pasture" on the testing planet of Largamenia, removing him from active service on the basis of his two artificial legs—although that affliction had not ever hindered him before on the front lines of battle.

However, my uncle had felt the "boomerang" effect of this action only two days ago. A man like Tormanac never gave up! It was he who had arranged my escape from the Clinic. The technicians in the transmitter control room had been among his most trusted accomplices in the plan.

The further course of my life had been determined by Fratulon. He had not neglected to provide for me the equivalent of a first class college education. Since he couldn't possibly be knowledgeable in every branch of knowledge, scientific experts in various fields of study had secretly become my teachers. Although I had not been able to publicly pursue my higher education, this method had nevertheless been effective. As luck would have it there was an old Arkonide law which permitted such instruction to be officially recognized, provided the student could prove himself in the examinations.

Well, I had apparently demonstrated well enough on Largamenia that my erudition and training had been of a high calibre. Now everything depended upon my taking over the high position to which I was entitled. Necessarily, this meant an overthrow of the acting Emperor.

The intentions here were perfectly legal and all of it sounded very fine but my logic sector had whispered rather mockingly to me that Orbanashol would no doubt have something to say about being removed from power. Which Fratulon

fully realized. Our most urgent measure now was to turn to the Arkonide people, widely dispersed as they were on several thousands of colonized worlds, and to inform them concerning the facts of the situation.

After my acquisition of the *Ark Summia*, I had achieved a completely new status. Prior to that I had been forced to remain in obscurity. Without the *Ark Summia* my chances would have been zero. But now my logic sector had been activated. I had been recognized openly at least by certain responsible officials. This had been the prerequisite. Now I was in a position to come forward and take an active part in my own destiny. Although the false Emperor had known that the easiest and most likely place to catch me would be on one of the five test planets, he had missed his greatest chance by only a matter of minutes.

Thanks to Tanictrop I had been able to assume the identity of a dead officer. Now I could stop the masquerade.

* * * *

I got up from the operating table and looked at myself in the mirror. Two of the strange men who had accompanied Arctamon here were very capable surgeons and biochemists who had assisted Fratulon in an operation which had restored my genuine face. Now I was Atlan once more but with that identity I could never have been granted the *Ark Summia* since the latter process was a matter of public scrutiny.

The post-operative pains were gone. Under the effects of a bio-synthetic plasma, the incisions had closed without any trace of scars within a matter of hours.

A half-hour before this we had received some very crushing news. My pretended "father", the great scientist Tanictrop, had been apprehended by the Kralasenes of Sofgart the Blind shortly before his planned escape. On a very sleazy pretext they had shot him. Tanictrop's death struck deep into the roots of my being. Without the self-effacing help of this man I would not have had a chance to take my final tests.

Then, only a few minutes ago, we had received the second depressing piece of news. Admiral Tormanac had been taken into custody, in fact by the Chief of the ISP himself.

This very high-ranking officer, known as Offantur, had been brazen enough to accuse the beloved Fleet commander of being an accomplice to my escape. If I regarded my Uncle Orbanashol with abysmal contempt and hoped for his well-deserved death, this man Offantur inspired me with an unquenchable flame of hate. He was a monster in human form. There was no more willing instrument that Orbanashol could have found than this chief of the Imperial Secret Police. 14 years ago this man had been the Chief Aide to my uncle, and Fratulon had been able to show me photographic evidence that it was he who had directly murdered my father during the hunting expedition.

Offantur had arrived on Largamenia only one day after my escape from the Paraclinic. His first move was to set up a total blockade around the planet. Even the interplanetary transmitter traffic had been cut off. Largamenia belonged to defence sector Orbys-Nukara and all of its Fleet units were placed on top alert.

Offantur was of course intelligent enough to know that this measure would be extremely unpopular with the public but that was not all. In view of the importance of the ceremonious events of the *Ark Summia* awards, Arkonide TV networks had sent at least 30 camera crewmen to the test planet. This not only included cameramen but also a fairly large technical staff and in addition the best-known news reporters of the Greater Imperium had been present. Naturally these men expressed their own views concerning the unexpected events which followed. So it was that the ISP chief had not done any favours for the Emperor with his brazen actions.

* * * *

Fratulon appeared in the room wearing a Fleet combat spacesuit, over which was his battered and inseparable war harness. “Ready, Atlan? You sure you want to risk it?”

I dismissed the question with a wave of my hand as Tirako handed me another combat suit. The magnetic fasteners had already been opened for me.

“The planet looks as if somebody had spaded up a giant anthill. About 20,000 ISP troops have landed. At least 1,000 ships of the Orbys-Nukara Task Force have all local space blocked off. Now maybe you can see why I wasn’t so keen on an immediate takeoff!”

I listened for some sort of communication from my logic sector since I had already become accustomed to it. But it remained silent.

“What we’re after now is quite simple,” I said. “It would take us months to ever find such a splendid opportunity as this to come across all the leading newscasters and reporters of the Imperium in one place. I have to speak with them!”

“Granted,” replied Fratulon. “But if your reasons are tremendous, so is the danger. During your school time on Largamenia I’ve only been able to collect about 100 trustworthy allies, so in an emergency we can’t expect any backup protection or fire cover.”

“We won’t need it,” I told him. “We’ll just appear on the scene, present our proofs and disappear again. If this stronghold of yours is as safe and undetectable as you think it is, we can return here and hide as long as we please, until the other side gives up the chase.”

Fratulon narrowed his eyes at me. “Very well. Your Highness has given the command. Dammit—until now I was the one who gave the orders!”

“And that you will be again,” I said, allaying his fears. “Don’t think I will ever under evaluate your background and experience. But my justifications for the present action should be obvious.”

“That they are. All right, then let’s get going. But I’ll be glad when we’re back safe again inside this structure.

Tirako secured the fastenings on my combat suit. I made a test activation of the power supply and saw that the indicators were normal. “We’ll get back here,” I said. “Just make sure nobody tracks us.”

He nodded. It had been taken care of. The chief of the only tracking station that could concern us was on his side—as a matter of fact on my side! It was gratifying to finally be able to say such a thing.

A half-hour later we were transported out via the transmitter. We came out in the immense cellar vaults of a trusted confidant. I hadn’t yet made his acquaintance but he was the exact opposite of Morenth who had long since been the first to challenge my identity. A few minutes later, Tirako Gamno and Arctamon came out of the transmitter, to be followed then by heavily armed men. The latter greeted me respectfully.

I thanked them for their loyal support and then gave them an audience in which I listened to their personal wants and concerns. This Fratulon had advised. He insisted that duties of this nature were, after all, within the sphere of responsibility of a Crystal Prince and future Emperor.

By nightfall the preparations had been made. Mestacian was the name of the merchant who owned this vast ancient system of storage vaults. He had just returned from a reconnaissance flight.

“The people of the main city of Tiftorum are in a revolutionary mood, Your Majesty,” he reported. “The ISP is overstepping its powers and making infringements which are not likely to go unchallenged—especially here, so far removed from the triple star of the Arkon worlds.”

“Please, friend, you may call me Atlan.”

The elderly man laughed. “I will take that liberty. Thank you, Atlan. You will find support everywhere. My men have been spreading rumours about strange events. All the reporters and special correspondents of the public communications services are already alerted. Questions are becoming more insistent. The gentlemen of the news media have already suspected that things aren’t right here. We have often taken the liberty of whispering your name and high station among them.”

“Any casualties?” asked Fratulon with his usual startling frankness.

“No. We were careful. The printed fliers giving Atlan’s life story and the truth about Gonozal’s death have been distributed. We dropped 100,000 of them from an air glider. I’ve heard that some of them have shown up in the main news control centre. They say Offantur is raving.”

“I hope that lard-head comes apart at the seams,” grumbled Fratulon. “Atlan, it’s time.”

We took the garments that had been prepared for us and put them on over our combat suits, after which we got under way.

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In spite of the prevalent turmoil, the old section of Tiftorum took on its usual life style by nightfall. We avoided the use of aircars and took to the rolling sidewalks. Near the old Patrium, a historic arena with at least a 10,000-year-old history, we came upon the first of the lookouts that Mestacian had posted.

“Everything’s fairly quiet, Your Highness,” he said in low tones. “There are 50 men besides myself stationed in the area. In case of emergency we have three aircars available at various locations. One of them is equipped with a small matter transmitter. If you are forced to use it, the last of your companions going through must activate its built-in detonator. The timer will run for 2 minutes after it’s set. We don’t want the machine to fall into the hands of the ISP.

Armed with this information, in addition to our heavy repeater Luccots, we proceeded onward. Tirako and Arctamon were on either side of me and slightly behind. The inside of the ancient battle arena was as deserted looking as a graveyard. Here we were supposed to meet with some of the news representatives. Mestacian had assured us they were reliable.

I slipped on my infrared goggles and looked around. Night had suddenly been turned into day. A few minutes later I became aware of 8 or 10 people who had concealed themselves under a semi-collapsed spectator gallery. I was informed that they had brought with them a robot camera equipped with a direct broadcast transmitter. If the video pickup of our interview could be transmitted into the Largamenia distribution networks and then onto the space beams over hypercom to the Empire communications systems, it would mean a tremendous victory for me.

Fratulon went ahead to meet them. I heard a low mutter of voices. Then he beckoned to me. Moments later I was standing in front of the reporters and network correspondents. They had taken a great risk in coming here. Fratulon had already issued the necessary introductory information and now one of the newsmen was excitedly talking into his microphone. I was “on the air”.

“You are risking your heads, gentlemen,” was my opening statement. “The despotic dictatorship of my uncle, Orbanashol III, does not permit such liberties. Of course your announcer’s face will not be seen on the viewscreens but the ISP will have no trouble identifying his voice. If you wish I can offer you asylum with me.”

These words were heard by billions of Arkonides. Somebody had whispered to me that the present direct broadcast was being relayed from Faehrl but that it

was being systematically interrupted by the technicians at the hypercom station. But some of it was getting through and I was making a surprise appearance to the viewers—which must have also been a surprise for the ISP.

“That won’t be necessary, Atlan,” said the announcer. “I am relying on my immunity. No one can take the risk of arresting or convicting me for straight, objective reporting. Atlan, I have to question you on a number of different items.”

“10 minutes, no longer,” I answered. “By that time the ISP will be onto us. They’ll be able to trace this pickup point very easily. Please get to safety with the documentary proofs that my father’s physician has given you. He is my guardian and the one who has preserved me.”

“We’ve already taken care of that but you must understand that some of these explanations are still in doubt. Of course it’s common knowledge that the Crystal Prince disappeared as a child, without a trace...”

Thus he continued. I became impatient. Fratulon had already put out a signal to call in the air-car that our contact man had told us about. When it landed, Tirako acted on his own but judiciously. He turned on the built-in transmitter so that it would be ready for instant Use.

Before the camera I introduced myself and answered all questions truthfully. Fratulon fortified my declarations with 3-D colour photos from my childhood. This was when I was still in the Crystal Palace, and later on Gortavor.

The professionally sceptical mood of the newscasters gradually changed. They were nonplussed. The announcer’s voice began to shrill with a new excitement. But when he began to address me again we heard the distant sound of a raygun shot. It was our prearranged warning signal.

I broke off the interview quickly and sprang into the air glider. Moments later I had already been transported and was back in the hidden stronghold. Fratulon, Tirako and Arctamon followed me. Shortly after its takeoff, the glider and transmitter exploded.

Then we were standing before the big viewscreen, watching the ensuing broadcasts. We saw ISP troops and even their chief, Offantur, made an appearance, during which he was also interviewed. He disputed my claims, saying that they were lies. He said that the proofs presented were falsified.

Much to my relief, however, he did not dare to take the courageous newsmen into custody. All he was able to do was give them a sharp warning. However, this wasn’t a smart move on his part. The representatives of the Arkonide public communications service protested in still sharper terms, boldly rejecting any restriction of their legally established freedoms.

I began to smile.

The situation wasn’t quite as simple a thing to handle as Offantur had imagined—not any more! Now maybe I wouldn’t have to remain in concealment

all the time. I'd soon be able to present myself to the public and pursue my course.

The telecast went on for hours. The commentators and news analysts appeared in endless succession.

“The wheel of destiny rolls on!” said Fratulon suddenly. “Friends, the real battle is beginning. For Atlan and Arkon. From here on, it's life or death!”

THE END