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WAR OF THE GHOSTS

by Clark Darlton

PROLOG

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

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

However the young Crystal Prince is still very much alive! After having been informed of his true heritage and having his extra-brain activated, his every thought and action is aimed at one goal: to overthrow the usurper.

Atlan's sworn friends and loyal supporters bring him to Kraumon, the private planet which holds the secret of Fratulon's principal base of operations.

Here the campaign against Orbanashol is to begin-but here also rages
THE WAR OF THE GHOSTS ...

CAST OF CHARACTERS

ATLAN—The Crystal Prince tries his hand at peacemaking

Fratulon—Atlan's foster father and teacher reveals his secret stronghold

Tirako Gamno—Atlan's friend and companion finds himself on a private world where there are "strangers in Paradise"

Ice Claw—The Chretkor has an icy feeling about ghosts

Parvon Kher and *Morvoner Sprangh*—Two phantom warriors of a legion of the damned

The Kralasenes—These bloodhounds of the usurper are "warmly" received

The Maahks—The "Big Foot" monsters are also from worlds between

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

ACE BOOKS EDITION

Managing Editor: FORREST J ACKERMAN

WENDAYNE ACKERMAN

Translator-in-Chief
& Series Co-ordinator

CHARLES VOLPE

Art Director

PAT LOBRUTTO

Editor

Sig Wahrman

Stuart J. Byrne

Associate Translators

ATLAN

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ace books

A Division of Charter Communications Inc.
A GROSSET & DUNLAP COMPANY
1120 Avenue of the Americas
New York, New York 10036

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First Ace Printing: November 1977

Printed in U.S.A.

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THE UNKNOWN still lay before me in spite of all I had come through. Fratulon and his secrets! Frankly I sometimes took a dim view of his perpetual mysteriousness, foster father or not. After all, he knew full well who I was or actually should have been from the start—the rightful successor to my father, Gonozal, who was treacherously murdered by my uncle, Orbanashol. Now in my place the murderer himself sat on the imperial throne of Arkon.

I had sworn to avenge this wrong and at my side were my true friends: Fratulon, Ice Claw and now also Tirako Gamno the young Arkonide. Farnathia, to whom I was bound by more than mere friendship, had fallen into the hands of the Kralasenes and thus was lost to me for the present. But I was determined to rescue her as soon as possible.

It was Fratulon who had saved me from certain death when I was only 4 years old and ever since then the henchmen of Orbanashol had pursued me. The worst of all such bloodhounds and bounty hunters was Sofgart the Blind. He had probably still not recovered from the defeat he had suffered by our escape from the Tarkihl and so he and his deadly Kralasenes were undoubtedly still on our heels.

Ice Claw was a Chretkor and looked as though he were made of ice. In other words he was practically transparent. When he was unclothed, all his internal organs and arteries and nerve fibres were clearly visible. Just slightly over 4 feet in height, he was in most other respects quite humanoid in appearance, except for his unusual, talon-like hands. Unfortunate was the creature they touched if Ice Claw wasn't in a friendly mood. His freezing claws were a frightful weapon but they had gotten us out of many a tight scrape.

And then there was Tirako Gamno, whom I had come to know on Largamenia during our tests to achieve the *Ark Summia*. This was a kind of final test of maturity, completion and manhood, which had led to the activation of my extra-brain. As an intellectual aesthete, Tirako appeared to be almost delicate and fragile but he was anything but a coward.

Thus there were the four of us who were bound to the battle slogan: "For Atlan and Arkon—unto death!" Perhaps it sounded melodramatic but we were in deadly earnest concerning our purpose. The Greater Imperium was ruled by a

scoundrel who ruthlessly hounded his opponents and had them assassinated while the main issue was the terrible Methane War against the Maahks, which still flamed across the Milky Way unabated.

* * * *

I was jolted from my thoughts as I heard heavy footsteps and the familiar metallic sounds of the ancient armour that Fratulon seldom removed even for sleeping. It had become a part of him like Skarg, the short sword he always carried.

Then his stocky, massive figure appeared in the ship's control room where I had just gone on watch after relieving Tirako.

"Well, my son," he said jovially, "how are you getting along with this old tub?" He seated himself in an upholstered chair and filled it amply.

I had to grin at his casual remark. The "old tub" he referred to was a disc-shaped spaceship with excellent flight characteristics. It functioned perfectly, having a powerful hyper-transition drive and being equipped with every imaginable piece of technological equipment that one could expect to find on board such a highly efficient vessel.

"Need you ask, Fratulon? Naturally I'm getting along with it. It's a very good ship. I'd like to know how you got hold of it."

Fratulon grinned back at me. "The first line of defence is a tight lip, my boy. I have to keep a few secrets to myself, even from my friends."

I threatened him jokingly. "You just wait until I'm the acting Emperor. I'll put you under a hypno hood where you won't get away with your double-talk and excuses. I'll finally squeeze the truth out of you."

"You already know plenty," he answered defensively, and then he stared thoughtfully at the viewscreen. "We've put four transitions behind us by now. We'll soon be there."

"But where is *that*?" I asked for about the 10th time in several hours.

"On Kraumon—I've already told you."

"That's right, but it's like everything else you've already said. It's the details that are missing. I presume that you're talking about a planet that isn't listed on the charts."

"Quite correct, and that goes for the red sun that it orbits. Besides, Kraumon is the only planet that star has, which is something of an advantage when tracking approaching ships. That's one of the main factors which made me choose it. We'll be safe there for the time being so that we can plan our next steps in peace and quiet."

"Our little Chretkor friend is anxious to curl his talons around the scrawny neck of Sofgart the Blind," I reminded him. "We have to rescue Farnathia. Can you understand my constant concern for her?"

“They won’t harm a single hair on her head, Atlan, you can depend on it. If I didn’t know that, we wouldn’t be sitting here philosophising about it. Now tell me—what do you really think of your friend, Tirako Gamno?”

His sudden change of subject surprised me. We had already amply discussed Tirako, so why the question now?

“In the first place,” I said, “to me he represents the younger generation who hate the Dictator and want to be rid of him. That in itself makes him trustworthy. He is among those who sense the traitor and criminal in Orbanashol and who wish to overthrow him.”

“Young people always want to overthrow something.”

“True, but this generation has a chance of making a proper substitute for that which is overthrown. That is the difference. Any dummy or hothead can simply tear down the old without offering anything in its place. Tirako knows the full truth and so it’s easier for him than his associates, who have no proofs and can only follow their instincts. He is from a good family and I’m certain that we can rely on him.”

“Of that I am also certain—otherwise we wouldn’t have taken him with us. I just don’t show anybody my best and most secret stronghold.”

We fell silent for a while. The 5th and last transition had been programmed already and soon it would automatically take place. We had all become accustomed to the unavoidable pains of dematerialization. It was all a part of the process. But it was worth it because by making these hyperspace transitions we could put many light-years behind us in mere fractions of a second.

Then Fratulon spoke again. “Kraumon is not a large planet and it looks rather insignificant to the casual observer. The atmosphere is thin but entirely breathable. Most of its surface is pretty much of a desert but at the equator there is a copious and often luxurious growth of vegetation—not only giant forests but also verdant steppes where the grass is a yard high. There are mountains and protected valleys where no intelligent being has ever walked before. The fauna is plentiful but they never overrun the place. Kraumon could be a small piece of Paradise.”

“And isn’t it?” I asked wonderingly. “I mean, if I owned such an untouched planet I’d make it into a Paradise if it wasn’t one already.”

“Well yes, from that point of view you might say Kraumon is a Paradise but it has not been entirely untouched. Anyway you don’t have to worry that anyone’s taken over in my absence—the station operates automatically.”

“Where is it located?”

“In an extensive area of forests, lakes and rivers. Speaking of Paradise, there is only 0.7 normal gravity there, the planet has a mean average temperature of 75 and a daily rotation rate of 32 hours. On a clear day you could get a terrific tan.”

“We’ll have little time for vacationing,” I interjected, and I looked at him questioningly. “In fact what is our purpose there? You haven’t explained that yet.”

Fratulon smiled with a hint of superior confidence. “First of all we’re going to hide because they’re still after us. Blind Sofgart’s not the only one searching for us. Orbanashol has hired other headhunters besides him. But we’re safe on Kraumon. I don’t think anybody knows of the existence of this planet out here on the rim of the Empire cluster and even if they do we can give them a hot reception.”

I remained sceptical, aware that the automatic programmer was initiating the final transition. Within moments neither Fratulon nor I felt much like talking because the pains of dematerialization came swiftly upon us. For the fraction of a second we were immaterial and formless along with the ship, yet we were being hurled through the 5th dimension toward our destination.

I was not very satisfied with this process and I could conceive of a time in some far future day when another kind of translight space-drive would be developed. Surely it must be possible, I thought, to traverse the hyper realms without being totally atomised! I was no real scientist but I was certain that there were no limitations to technological developments. They would always go on and on.

When we rematerialized I was convinced at first glance that the transition had succeeded. Only a few light minutes ahead in space was a solitary red sun. A slight distance from it I recognized the typical albedo reflections of a planet—reddish green. That had to be Kraumon.

Ice Claw came into the Control Central almost unnoticed. When I saw his fragile-looking figure I wondered again as I had in the past how he ever survived the transitions. If he was afraid of shattering to pieces due to extremes of temperature it seemed to me a fear of dematerialization would be even more to the point.

“Are we there yet?” he asked Fratulon after nodding to me.

“What you see there is Kraumon,” confirmed Sawbones. This was a nickname Fratulon had picked up during his travels, since he was a physician and surgeon as well as a scientist and ex-gladiator.

“Seems like most other planets,” commented Ice Claw as he looked at the screen. “You ought to turn on the magnification.”

“The radar indicators have just turned on,” Fratulon explained. “We’ll be picking up the echo beams any moment. I don’t know but I have a funny feeling...”

I glanced at him searchingly. Whenever Fratulon had a funny feeling, the reason for it was seldom amusing.

The indicator screens lit up and reproduced various portions of the planet’s surface under strong magnification. Simultaneously the first data readouts

appeared in the view rasters. Fratulon studied them carefully. As I watched him I could see that he was becoming increasingly concerned.

“Is something wrong?” I inquired.

He did not answer immediately. He carefully compared the new data with some notes he had taken from a cabinet under the navigation console. He frowned but still said nothing, so I utilized the time by observing the various viewscreens to see what there was to see of Kraumon.

It fit Fratulon’s description. I saw vast forested areas along the equatorial belt, big lakes and long, broad rivers which amply irrigated the land. In between were mountains divided by heavily verdured valleys. Beyond these were fruitful-looking plains and meadows which stretched out for hundreds of kilometres, where the terrain was again taken up by more forests and mountains and lakes.

Fratulon readjusted the electronic opticals and projected a desired monitor image onto the main panoramic viewscreen. It gave us our first look at surface details. Although the planet was at least 3 light-minutes away and we were approaching it at a rate of several hundreds of km per second, our tracking and sensing equipment brought the surface details to us so clearly that it seemed we were only about 1,000 meters above them.

Finally Fratulon broke the silence. “Any moment now my station should be showing up on the western rim. It’s early morning in the valley there, so the contrasts of light and shadow should enable us to see it all the better. On the panob screen to the left...”

He went on describing things while Ice Claw sat down beside me to observe the view. I must confess that at this moment I was more than ordinarily excited by the prospect of finally seeing Fratulon’s secret stronghold. Until now he had often mentioned it without going into any details.

Tirako Gamno also came into the control room and I signalled him to sit down but to remain silent. Just now Fratulon did not wish to be disturbed. We stared at the big screen as if entranced.

A mountain crept slowly into prominence on the planet’s dark rim but because of light contrasts it stood out in relief. As Fratulon increased the magnification we had the impression of plunging swiftly toward the ground. Then the view focussed sharply again. We saw a broad, green valley with rivers, lakes and forests, just as Fratulon had depicted.

But then we saw something else that was not as much in harmony with this Elysian type of landscape; seven great domes lay in a random grouping among some round, flat bunker-like structures and towers and other edifices of various sizes and shapes, whose purpose was indeterminate. Some of them were connected by covering installations of some kind while others appeared to be isolated. It was only later that I was to learn that even these were connected either by subterranean tunnels or hangar installations.

Gamno broke the silence this time. “It’s amazing that no one has discovered such a large stronghold as this by now,” he said wonderingly.

Fratulon leaned back to take a better look at the panob gallery screen. “I’m not so sure they haven’t,” he muttered, obviously troubled. “Something down there has changed. Even the mass detectors show a lower curve than normal, which means that matter in some form has been removed. By matter I mean anything—buildings, items of equipment, weapons... perhaps everything down there. Of course the buildings themselves are still there, all 47 of them—I just counted them. But something has to be missing from inside the buildings and storerooms. Thieves have visited Kraumon!”

I could only sit there and quietly observe the screen. I could make out nothing of a suspicious nature.

Ice Claw drawled out a suggestive question: “What kind of thieves, Fratulon? It couldn’t be our enemies because they would have destroyed the entire base. Or else they may still be there with a trap for us that we won’t be able to get out of.”

Fratulon shook his head slowly. “I don’t think so. Our trackers and sensors would have detected their ship even in the deepest underground hangar. No—other than my own spherical spaceship there’s no other ship on Kraumon. That part’s been determined. Somebody was here but they’ve left. And they took something with them if I can believe the instrumentation—in fact a great deal of material is missing. We have to find out what they stole.”

“It all sounds a little crazy to me,” I commented uncertainly.

“Not only crazy, Atlan, it’s practically impossible. That base is secured against any alien attack. Nobody can enter it without setting off an alarm and bringing the combat robots into action. Besides, the storage rooms are positronically secured, as well.”

“Pirates,” said Gamno, making a wild guess. “Maybe it was pirates who raided the place.”

“They only exist in fairy tales,” protested Fratulon but he did not sound too convincing. He nodded to me. “Start your landing manoeuvre, Atlan. Let’s not lose any more time. I have to find out what’s happened there—or what may be still going on. Tirako, you take over weapons control in case anybody tries something.”

“And what should I do?” inquired Ice Claw.

“You just sit there quietly and keep those glass knees of yours from knocking together,” advised Fratulon. “On Kraumon you’ll find a very nice range of temperatures.”

While I concentrated on my own assignment, Fratulon continued at the tracking and sensor controls in order to pick up every last scrap of data he could. Gamno checked over the energy cannon console as well as the defence screen switchboard. Ice Claw slouched in his seat and pouted.

I increased our velocity so as to shorten the approach time. The planet rushed swiftly toward us and we had to reduce the screen magnification. Otherwise a single building tended to fill the whole view gallery. Other than that, nothing changed. The terrain lay empty and deserted beneath us. I could not detect any movement and there was not even any sign of life in the valley beyond the base installations.

“I see outward changes as well,” commented Fratulon. “Some of the domes have been damaged as though somebody had tried to force their way in. I’ll have to confess, the closer we get the more disturbing it appears to be. I wonder what or who may be waiting for us down there.”

“If you ask me,” snorted Ice Claw, “I’d say there’s nobody waiting for us. If anybody ever really was there they’ve certainly long since disappeared. Otherwise, as you said yourself, we would have detected their ship by now.”

“Maybe only the *ship* has left,” retorted Fratulon laconically.

I had seldom seen him in such a state of deep concern. His greatest and most secret stronghold was no longer secret!

After making an approach turn, we had the sun at our backs as we finally dropped toward the surface. I reduced speed and glided low over an endless series of steppes, heading west. If my memory didn’t deceive me, the equatorial mountains and our valley should soon be coming over the horizon.

Ice Claw began to rattle and clatter audibly. I knew him well enough to detect that it was only a sign of his excitement rather than fear. Gamno’s right hand was on the main battery’s firing switch. Fratulon did not take his eyes from the viewscreen. This was in spite of the fact that the shields on the nearby viewports had slid back, offering a direct view of the terrain before us.

The mountain we were looking for came swiftly into view and began to loom larger. Fratulon gave me a few navigational instructions and I corrected our course. He wanted to approach the valley from the South, so now the sun was to our right. The valley was more extensive than its first appearance had indicated. A number of the lakes were connected by streams. Lush meadows alternated with dense forests. It was indeed an unspoiled Paradise, except for the dangling question of who or what may have made a forbidden entry here.

“Slower,” ordered Fratulon. “The station will be under us in a moment. We’ll land on the circular pad just outside the main enclosure. I think under the circumstances it would be better for us to continue closer on foot and also I’d say we’d better put on our combat spacesuits. In case of trouble we’ll be better prepared that way.”

“And the ship itself?” asked Gamno warily.

“Remains behind—but positronically secured.”

The buildings and domes came into view and I immediately located the round landing pad some 1500 meters from the station. The forest began just beyond it. We landed without incident. Fratulon shook his head several times but it seemed

that he had simply reconciled himself to the fact that unknown entities had found his base and partially ransacked it.

The engines became silent. I shut down all systems.

“Energy screen?”

“Not needed, Atlan. If anybody tries to force an entry into the ship, the screen turns on automatically because of the positronic protection system. We can leave it to take care of itself.” He stood up. “And now let’s get into those suits. We’ll also carry our impulse beamers—just in case. I don’t want to be mowed down by any possible attack by pirates.”

“So you do think it could be pirates?” asked Gamno.

Fratulon grunted something unintelligible and was the first to leave the Control Central. The rest of us followed him to the ship’s small armoury. Shortly thereafter we disembarked by way of the airlock. The air was a bit thin as Fratulon had mentioned but it only took us a few minutes to accustom our lungs to the altered atmospheric conditions.

During our landing I had already caught sight of the 100-meter hull of Fratulon’s other ship, on the forest edge near the station. As far as I could tell from a cursory glance, it was intact. The thieves—if thieves were actually involved—had apparently taken no interest in the spherical spaceship.

Fratulon had also looked over toward the vessel briefly before taking the lead and marching off ahead of us. He held his portable energy gun in the crook of an arm, and from his opposite side dangled Skarg, his mysterious sword. Ice Claw and Gamno walked together behind him and I brought up the rear. We were all excited but nobody wanted to admit it. What had happened here or still might happen was of great concern to me because after all Kraumon would one day become the main base of operations against the Greater Imperium.

We gradually approached the first outlying buildings which were just south of the rising, forested terrain. My eyes took in the entire complex as I looked beyond Fratulon and Gamno and even partially through Ice Claw’s crystal-seeming form. I tried to detect any sign of movement but failed to notice anything unusual.

I was already beginning to have hopes that Fratulon had been mistaken. Maybe the tracking and sensor equipment had been malfunctioning or the mass detector had somehow failed. But then I recalled that he had mentioned visible signs of damage here. The instruments could not have been at fault in that case.

We had come within 100 meters of the first building when something fantastic occurred which made all further speculations superfluous, at least as to whether or not anybody had discovered the base.

* * * *

Fratulon let out a cry and stopped suddenly as though rooted to the spot. Then he raised his arm as though in a slow-motion film and our eyes followed his pointing finger toward the forest.

Where we saw it also—or more to the point, we saw *him*.

The strange Arkonide must have been as surprised as we were because he stood there motionlessly as if frozen in his tracks. In that first moment I was asking myself how he had gotten so close to us without our noticing him. It was 300 meters to the edge of the woods and in between there was no covering whatsoever. We were 100 meters away from the first of the buildings.

Fratulon found his voice again and he held his beamer ready to fire. “Hey there, what are you doing here? Where did you come from?”

The unknown space soldier had undoubtedly heard Fratulon, because he leaned forward as though listening to him. But apparently he had not understood the question. He did not reach for the pulse gun at his belt but instead raised his hand in the air as though he intended to communicate by means of signs. Yet even as he did so, his hand slowly became transparent.

Involuntarily, I drew a sharp breath in amazement.

“He’s turned on his deflector screen,” whispered Gamno.

I knew that invisibility screens were just now in the stage of development but if there were such a possibility the effect here was something else again. The man before us had no deflector screen. The raised arm had by now disappeared entirely. Although he appeared strangely maimed by this, the Arkonide was in no apparent pain. He stood there only a few meters away and while we stared at him his legs became transparent.

Ice Claw snarled in a reaction of fright although he was more familiar with the aspect of transparency than anybody. Yet what we were witnessing here was something else. Without any technological means of doing so, the Arkonide was disappearing before our eyes.

But was it happening in accordance with his own will?

In this respect I had my first doubts when I saw the warrior’s expression of despair. His face was twisted in anger and fear. Then from one second to the other it became paler and glassier until finally all we saw before us was an armed torso and one arm senselessly waving in the air.

“Dammit!” Fratulon blurted out. “This just can’t be!”

The rest of the space soldier swiftly disappeared.

His footprints were clearly evident in the sandy soil. Fratulon went to the spot and felt around in the empty air, after which he bent down to have a closer look at the tracks. When he stood up again his face was grave.

“The tracks are real, so that the phantom had to be real also. His weight made firm imprints in the sand. The big question is why no footprints lead to this spot. Take a look here—you can see that his tracks came from nowhere and lead nowhere. The only prints are the ones he made where he was standing when we

saw him. Only way I can figure he got here was that he must have had wings or something.”

“Invisible?” asked Ice Claw with a shudder.

“Could be, because I only spotted him in the last few moments before he disappeared. Then, too, there was something else that was peculiar. He was wearing insignia and orders of merit that have long been abolished by Urbanashol because they were issued by Gonozal. Wearing those trimmings is punishable by death. The man we saw was wearing them although they’ve been outlawed for 15 years already.”

“Are you trying to say...?”

He nodded confirmation. “It’s the only logical conclusion, Atlan. That warrior is still fighting for Gonozal, your father. He must have lost contact with his top command. But then there’s this business of his sudden appearance and disappearance.” He shook his head. “That part I don’t quite grasp.”

True, for the latter there was no explanation. As we continued toward the station we watched our surroundings warily. To me the incident was more than just mysterious. Even though the warrior had lost contact with his high command and believed that he was still fighting for my long-dead father, the related phenomena remained a riddle. I became increasingly convinced that the man had not acted of his own free will when we saw him but that he was under some kind of compulsion. I could not easily forget the look of desperation on his face when he slowly became invisible.

Could this have something to do with a space-time displacement?

I didn’t care to pursue such imaginative speculations any further for the moment because we arrived at the first of the buildings, which was a flat, rectangular structure without windows. It had the appearance of a concrete block with a single door. Apparently it was undamaged.

Fratulon reached into his pocket and took out a small object, which I assumed was some kind of key. It was a key of unusual design. Fratulon went to the door in which no keyhole or other opening was visible. He pressed the “key” against a certain spot and the door swung outward without further ceremony.

“Just an ordinary positronic lock,” observed Gamno, as though its very simplicity were a letdown for him.

I said nothing but waited for him and Ice Claw to follow Fratulon inside. Then I entered a room that was brightly illuminated by indirect lighting and the door closed behind me.

I looked about in some disappointment. The interior was large but empty. Although there were no furnishings it reminded me of a sort of reception foyer. There were only several passages leading off somewhere, and that was all.

Fratulon must have read my thoughts. “From here you can get to any of the other buildings,” he said. “You just have to know which way to go. I wanted to avoid as much movement out in the open as possible, since we don’t know

what's wrong here yet. One thing for sure, somebody has been here, and we have to find out if anybody is still on the premises. That old space soldier who made such a weird disappearance couldn't have been responsible for all the changes I've detected, just by himself. Yet who else could have helped him?"

He led us into one of the passages, which soon ended before an elevator. By my calculations we descended about 10 meters in the lift and then found a continuation of the passage which led off in a westerly direction. Fratulon spent half an hour showing us through his private domain. Because of his previous reticence concerning the size and extent of the place our surprise was all the greater. In the supply rooms were weapons, provisions and technical equipment sufficient to outfit a modest spacefleet. There were hundreds of the most modern combat spacesuits and even an automatically operating tracking station in one of the domes, which we had already observed from the outside. It was connected with a communications and databank room where all the recent events had just been recorded.

Fratulon was sure that he could pick up some data here as to the activities of the unknown intruders, because now we were positive that they had been here. We had found evidence of their visit in one of the numerous armoury vaults. Here and there, apparently at random and in great haste, spacesuits had been snatched from their wall hangers. Entire shelves had been emptied of impulse guns, and a number of cartons containing energy recharge clips had been broken open or pilfered.

Fratulon frowned in thought as he observed the work of the robbers. "I don't understand it. Even if they had some way of getting in here they would have been detected immediately by the sentinel robots and been killed or driven out. Yet there's no sign of any dead bodies or even any evidence of a battle. It really looks like the work of ghosts, invisible phantoms of some kind who are pretty dam real—like that forgotten warrior we saw outside."

"Maybe they *are* ghosts," muttered Ice Claw uneasily.

None of us actually believed in ghosts but we all knew that there were some very strange things in the universe. Years ago Fratulon had told me the story of an exploration ship that had raised quite a furore in the days when my father was alive. The ship had gotten into some kind of cosmic storm and while in normal spaceflight it must have crossed a point where two coordinates of time had converged. The effect had been utterly incredible. The ship became two vessels which had almost collided with each other. Actually it was only one ship but it was existing simultaneously in two dimensions which by some phenomenon of nature were momentarily coexistent on one plane.

Fortunately the coordinates had shifted back into their original planes. Later during an investigation of the incident the commander had declared that he had been in contact with his counterpart on the viewscreen and that he had suddenly become blurred and then turned invisible—as well as the other ship itself.

I was reminded now of this old story and at the same time it brought to mind the old space soldier we had seen outside. Was it that the planet Kraumon lay in such a convergence point of time coordinates, the nature of which was still not understood?

When we came to the tracking and observation room, Fratulon closed the door behind us. For awhile he carefully inspected the automatic monitoring devices plus the timing registry of the observational data and then he turned to us.

“The equipment detected intruders here but each time the observations were of such short duration that some kind of error must be involved. Judging by the timing data it looks as though a tracking was made of ships or other things that materialized out of hyperspace near Kraumon and then went into transition again immediately—which would be senseless. But I’ll have to look into it more thoroughly before making any definite statements.”

I made no comment but my private suspicions seemed to be checking out more and more. It was a wonder to me that Fratulon had not arrived at the same conclusion by now.

We went to the regular storage room that was located in the same dome. Fratulon was able to determine that the robot guards had been activated repeatedly and had rushed to this area without having been able to find anyone. All they had been able to do was report to the Control Central that articles of inventory were missing.

“The sightings exterior to the station were always of very short duration,” said Fratulon after a thorough study of the instrument readings. “But inside the station the duration of each observation was 2 or 3 times as long. In spite of that the robots were always too late. There’s no explanation for it unless the thieves were teleporters, because that’s the only conceivable way for them to change from one dimension to the other at any time they pleased, which was apparently the case here. At least it had to be some such process as that.”

We wandered about for awhile, still trying to puzzle it out, but then we gave up. There was only one way to clear up the mystery. We had to wait until there was another alarm and then try to get to the indicated location as quickly as possible.

Fratulon showed us the automated kitchen which we reached by way of a covered passage. All we had to do was make a menu selection and within only a few minutes the desired meal would appear in the corresponding slot. There were also beverages of every kind.

For awhile we relaxed and had something to eat. Actually I didn’t have much of an appetite but I knew I had to eat something if I wanted to keep up my strength. Luckily I was able to get by on only one meal a day whereas Fratulon insisted he had to have at least the full 3meal schedule if he were not to fade away and collapse.

Meanwhile I had noticed that in each room a clearly visible plan of the entire station was displayed on one of the walls. All buildings and passages were etched onto a ground glass plate and designated by numbers. I asked Fratulon what the purpose was.

“Emergency maps,” he told us. “They light up in every room whenever an alarm is set off. Wherever I might happen to be at the time I’m able to see where something’s gone wrong and that way I can take the fastest route to the designated area. The chart lights up with indicators showing the quickest way to get there in each case. It’s all automatic. Even a stranger could use it.”

Having eaten our fill and made ourselves a bit more comfortable, we prepared to have a look at our living quarters because Fratulon intimated we might have to stay here somewhat longer than he had planned for originally. I had no objections aside from the fact that it was urgently necessary to find an explanation for the strange occurrences on Kraumon.

Our rooms were attractive and cozy and were provided with every conceivable comfort. Admittedly there were no windows but a floor-to-ceiling picture screen provided something more than just artificial scenery. A button selector gave one a view of any desired landscape, and the air-conditioning was automatically tied into the system so that if one were looking out at an ice planet, for example, he wouldn’t exactly be sweating at the same time.

I chose the primitive landscape of a pristine jungle world with a view of a lake where saurian creatures were cavorting about. Fratulon noticed this when he came to see me once more after the others had gone to their rooms.

“Aha—the romanticist, I see!” he observed, pointing to the view. But when he sat down his smile soon faded. “I’m worried, Atlan. Somebody’s discovered my station and is doing mischief around here. We have to find him!”

“You took the words out of my mouth,” I confessed to him as I stretched out on the bed. “But I’ve never been on a ghost hunt before.”

“No ghosts, Atlan! That old spacer we saw was alive! Ghosts don’t leave any footprints because they don’t have any feet. The thieves come out of another dimension, that’s all.”

I was about to answer him but didn’t get that far. A wail of sirens startled me and I was almost instantly on my feet. Fratulon shot to the door like a bolt of lightning. He jerked the door open and dashed to the corridor where the nearest emergency map was located. I followed him without even putting on my boots.

“It’s right close by, in the gymnasium!” Fratulon shouted to me, and he raced onward.

Without a moment’s hesitation I followed him. I gave little thought to Ice Claw or Gamno. Perhaps they were asleep and hadn’t heard anything. The gymnasium was only a few dozen meters away and meanwhile I overtook Fratulon because he couldn’t maintain his initial speed.

Then we were at the door. Breathing hard, Fratulon slowly and cautiously opened the door until there was a wide enough crack for us to be able to see inside.

We hardly believed our eyes.

At least 10 heavily armed space soldiers had backed into the farthest corner and were firing their impulse guns at something we couldn't see because it was apparently in the opposite corner to our right. The sharply focussed energy beams shot through the gymnasium, setting a lot of the exercise equipment on fire and causing the opposite wall to glow from the heat.

"Those idiots!" growled Fratulon, incensed. "They're going to wreck everything! What is this madness? I don't get it!"

Naturally I didn't comprehend it all myself. I carefully leaned forward to find out what these space veterans were shooting at so wildly. And it was then I saw the two Maahks.

I had seen Maahks before but only in films. Remotely humanoid in appearance, they were about 9 feet tall and over 5 feet wide. Their heads were directly attached to their torsos without any evidence of a neck, and a crest containing 4 eyes enabled them to look simultaneously in all directions. They were real monsters and practically invulnerable unless one caught them with a direct hit.

The two Maahks were answering the fire.

Fratulon pulled me back. "Have you lost your mind? If they see us it will be the end of us. We're unarmed."

"But what's it all about? I don't understand..."

"Do you think I do? At any rate it seems that Arkonides and Maahks are waging a private war here on my planet, and if my eyes don't deceive me they're fighting with weapons from my own arsenal. So we finally know who the thieves are—they're stragglers from the great Methane War."

I thought of the previous incident and the strange circumstances with which we had been confronted. I wasn't too sure that Fratulon was correct but I didn't have time to ponder the question. One of the Arkonide soldiers received a deadly energy shot in his chest. His combat suit was charred instantly but before the sinking man could reach the floor he dematerialised and vanished. The weapon in his hand went with him.

Two other Arkonides also began to attenuate but they were neither dead nor even wounded. They continued to fire at the Maahks until they had dematerialised. The others remained there fighting for awhile but then one after another of them also became invisible.

Fratulon couldn't hold me any longer. I pushed past him into the gym room. I wanted to see what was happening to the Maahks. For the moment I was oblivious to the danger my curiosity was exposing me to. One of the Maahks was just in the process of becoming invisible. He had ceased firing because he

could not see any more enemies. He seemed not to notice me or else he considered me of too little importance to even raise his weapon. His glass-helmeted head dematerialised, followed by the tremendous body and his pillar-like legs.

The other Maahk lingered longer so that he was seen also by Fratulon who had dashed in a panic to get me. He stood motionlessly beside me, watching in fascination as the second Maahk also disappeared.

Other than the destruction they had wrought, nothing remained behind that either of the two groups had brought with them. The first detail of robot guards came through the opposite door of the gymnasium and started immediately with the cleanup work. Fratulon did not concern himself about it. Wordlessly, he left the place and returned with me to my quarters.

He sat down again as I lay back on the bed. "I think I'm beginning to see a pattern in all this," he mumbled, still troubled, and it was plain to see that he still didn't have any plausible answer. "They seem to come into our plane of existence only under some kind of compulsion, yet they're pulled back into their own dimension whether they like it or not. And it's the same with the Maahks. But as far as we're concerned they're real enough because otherwise they couldn't fight with my weapons. The peculiar thing is, those weapons also disappear with them when they go. That's the part I can't comprehend."

"Do you believe they could have come out of the past?" I asked, because I had also seen the old forbidden insignia on the 10 space soldiers in the gymnasium.

"No, I can't imagine such a thing. That kind of an actual time shift couldn't be involved here because it would cause their counterparts to appear also. I still say that the ones we've seen are either stragglers or deserters from the Great War, and they've just happened to stumble on this station."

"And how do you explain the accompanying phenomena? Their sudden appearance out of nothing, right in the middle of the station, and their equally sudden disappearance? Ordinary deserters or stragglers can't do that."

"Then they could even be a special kind of stragglers," retorted Fratulon irritably. "Just now I don't feel much like discussing it. I'm tired. The alarm system will wake us up if the ghosts show up again."

"It failed to wake up Ice Claw or Gamno," I cautioned him.

Fratulon merely grumbled to himself as he left the room.

I stretched myself out on the bed and closed my eyes.

But I couldn't get to sleep for a long time and when I finally did slip off into dreams they turned out to be nightmares.

2/ "GHOST" TRAP

On the following day Fratulon was surprisingly purposeful and active. Right after we had all eaten breakfast in his automated kitchen he started a conference.

“I was awake for a long time last night and did a lot of thinking. If we’re going to find out anything at all it will have to be right from the source. So we’re going to have to catch one of these phantom Arkonides and question him.”

“Then you’ll have to catch a ghost!” said Ice Claw.

“These are not ghosts!”

“Alright, then, phantoms, spectres, apparitions—what’s the difference?”

Fratulon refused to be provoked. “Ghosts or phantoms or whatever... there’s a scientific explanation for whoever these people are who are hovering around this base. And if that is true then it should also be possible to trap them with scientific methods.”

Now his concept of the situation was getting close to my own suspicions, which his further statements confirmed.

“Scientific?” queried Gamno dubiously.

Then Fratulon opened up. “That’s exactly right—scientific! These old Arkonides with their outlawed insignia are a clear proof to me that this thing has nothing to do with any time-shift business or that they’ve jumped, say, 15 years into their future, or that we may have slipped 15 years back to them. No, all of these Arkonides are old veterans—members of some lost patrol, perhaps, who have actually lived 15 or maybe even 20 years since they became separated from their higher command. So that would support the fact that they continue to supply and equip themselves from the stores on this base. If we accept that then we’ve cleared up an important point: these apparitions are from our own present time.”

“So how does that help us?” Ice Claw wanted to know.

I was beginning to see what Fratulon was leading up to.

“It helps us plenty because we can proceed with a more logical thinking process—that is, those of us who *can* think!” snapped Fratulon. These two never seemed to be contented unless they were arguing with each other. “If they don’t have anything to do with timeshifts, then we can narrow it down to a dimensional displacement. They exist simultaneously in our normal plane and in

hyperspace. Now whether they change back and forth either voluntarily or involuntarily will have to be determined. Of course what I think is that it happens against their will but I have no idea of who or what is forcing them to do it.”

Since he had paused for a moment I took the opportunity to ask a question. “How do you explain the fact that they can take objects from here back into hyperspace? I mean, physical objects from our own dimension—weapons or supplies they may only be holding in their hands—and they go right along with them when they disappear. We certainly saw that happen when they were falling under fire from the Maahks.”

Fratulon glanced at me appreciatively. “That’s a very good, reasonable question, Atlan. I’ve also thought about that but to be frank with you I haven’t found any satisfactory answer. I can only grasp it by a sort of adaptive extrapolation, you might say. In other words, when these phantoms materialize out of their paranormal space and touch anything here while in that state—I mean if they grasp objects here with a willed *intent* to take them with them, then it happens. If the phenomenon were not connected with the will, then the whole floor they’re standing on might go with them as well. Fortunately we were witnesses to the fact that such is not the case.”

Gamno sought to bring himself up to date. “Then if I understand this correctly,” he said, “these lost unfortunates you’re talking about exist *between* dimensions. They can’t stabilize themselves either in one dimension or in the other. In other words they keep swinging back and forth between hyperspace and the normal universe. How is such a situation possible, or what would be the scientific explanation for it?”

Fratulon smiled. “That’s right—they exist between two spatial planes. But if you’re asking for an explanation I’ll have to pass. We can only guess at the fact, nothing more. There’s no explanation for it, at least for the time being. But at least with that much to go on we may be able to take some action. It’s thoroughly possible to capture something in our own dimension which has emerged from hyperspace—just as, for example, a teleporter can be held in a *para-trap*.”

“Aha!” exclaimed Ice Claw suddenly in apparent agreement.

I myself was suddenly aware of what Fratulon was getting at and I was frustrated by the fact that I hadn’t thought of it sooner. There was such a thing as a *para-trap*. It was made up of energy fields which were generated by a locked field projector. Anybody coming into the range of a sharply bound field of this nature had no recourse but to remain there until somebody released him.

“‘Aha!’ is the right way to sum it up!” said Fratulon, mimicking Ice Claw with equal satisfaction. “It’s the only way we can capture one of these phantom Arkonides. Of course I don’t have any idea of how long we could hold him in a locked field but certainly long enough to ask a few questions. And I have a pretty strong hunch that he’ll even be happy to give us some answers because

there's no way he can be lurking in this flip-flop state of existence by his own volition."

Gamno had an obvious question. "Fratulon—do we happen to have any of these locking field projectors?"

"I have a couple in storage but they still have to be installed. The only question is: where will the phantoms show up the next time? But maybe the theory of probability will help us there. It seems fairly certain that our visitors can exert a certain influence over where they materialize. The alarm-indicator system has stored information as to where they show up most often inside the station. That's where we'll set up the projectors and then we'll link them to the alarm system. That way the projectors will go into operation automatically if these ghosts appear where they are."

"Now *you're* calling them ghosts!" reprimanded Ice Claw.

"It's the simplest way to refer to them," admitted Fratulon, and he added: "The strange thing about this, though, is the fact that the Maahks have also been trapped in this situation. That could actually mean that some superior force or power is behind the phenomenon. It hasn't yet differentiated between Maahks and Arkonides."

Naturally I hadn't thought of this as yet. My first suspicion that all this had something to do with a new Maahk weapon was thus shot down by this new consideration.

Fratulon withdrew into the computer section while Gamno went back to his room to catch up on his rest. So I took Ice Claw with me on my planned inspection tour through the base. As a precaution we both carried our impulse weapons. The lighted maps of the station hanging everywhere on the walls served to lighten the task of orientation.

We didn't talk much as we were immersed in our thoughts, which revolved primarily around the ghostly apparitions. At any rate we were now supplied with a few tangible theories, although of course one might be as valid as another.

After about an hour we emerged from the inside of the base in order to have a look around on the surface. Fratulon had given me a positronic key that would enable me to open any locked doors. The sun had a reddish hue behind a scrim of clouds, and it was warm. On Kraumon the days were long as well as the nights. The lighter gravity felt just right.

We went beyond the area of the station proper, in fact in a westerly direction. Our ship lay at the other perimeter of the base. The ground was overgrown with thick grass and isolated groups of trees relieved the landscape here and there. In the distance below us I could make out the reflections from a lake that was nestled in a forested region.

I finally slowed my pace and let Ice Claw go ahead of me. He was apparently enjoying the warmth of the day. I knew him well enough to guess that he was already looking for a nice spot to take a sunbath. I had no objections to taking a

little break, myself. At a distance of 1 kilometre from the base, I sat down on a fallen tree trunk. Ice Claw circled the area for awhile before he finally lay down carefully in the grass and closed his eyes.

We were situated on the flat crest of a hill. The view in all directions was good and I noticed that actually we were in a large clearing in the forest. From our position all the trees and bushes we had passed formed themselves into a solid green wall. Toward the West the forest became thicker but its edge was still some hundreds of meters distant. Further below was the lake I had observed earlier.

While I sat there observing this idyllic panorama and enjoying the untrammelled beauties of Nature, there was a shimmering of the air not far from the western edge of the forest which seemed to be just above the treetops. At first I took it for a heat shimmer because the sun was shining hotly but then the mirage began to take on definite contours and I knew that an Arkonide soldier was materializing within about 100 meters of where we were. And he wasn't alone.

More and more of the veteran fighters were appearing out of nowhere but they had not yet become solid. At the same time, 3 Maahks also appeared in their heavy combat suits. While still in a semi-solid state they opened fire on the Arkonides, who returned the fire without hesitation.

Even as Ice Claw awoke in alarm from his semi-slumber and rolled next to me behind the protection of the tree trunk, the battling ghosts descended until their feet touched the ground. They took more solid form until they were as real as could be imagined. There could no longer be any doubt that they had emerged from hyperspace and now existed entirely in our own dimension. And they fought with an unbelievable animosity.

Whenever an Arkonide was mortally wounded, some unknown and incomprehensible force drew him back into hyperspace. He simply disappeared as if he had never been there. It was no different with the Maahks. One of them received 3 energy beams simultaneously in his tremendous body but he did not dematerialise immediately—or at least not completely. The centre portion attenuated into nothing but the pillar-like legs and the head portion lingered a few seconds, weirdly separated from each other. Then, as the torso-less head began to sink downward it also disappeared. The legs followed shortly thereafter.

The whole apparition lasted almost 10 minutes, during which time two Maahks died and at least 10 of the Arkonides. In a ferocious rage the remaining fighters charged the remaining enemy and brought him under their concentrated fire. But the attenuation took place even as this was happening. One after another the Arkonides became transparent and withdrew from our normal plane of existence to return whence they had come. The remaining Maahk followed them in the same manner.

Once more the clearing lay empty and deserted before us.

Ice Claw turned over onto his back and continued to lie there at my feet. “I think we’re totally out of our heads!” he exclaimed, looking up at me helplessly. “What we saw just doesn’t exist! We *must* have lost our sanity!”

“It could be that somebody’s crazy,” I told him, “but certainly not us. What we saw was no mirage, Ice Claw. Come along and prove it for yourself.”

I got up and waited until the Chretkor was also on his feet and then we went together to the place where the two ghostly groups had been fighting. The grass in the clearing had been trampled flat as though a horde of berserk porangs had charged across it. In many places the ground had been torn up and some of the bushes revealed dangling branches that had been singed, while others were still in flames. Fortunately it had rained the previous night and the sun had not yet been able to remove the dampness. The fire was unable to spread very far and it died out by itself.

But no matter how thoroughly I searched I couldn’t find a single physical article that the troops had left behind. Everything that the Arkonides and the Maahks had brought with them had also returned again into hyperspace.

I pointed at the huge imprints that had been left by the feet of the Maahks. “Do you think that phantoms can leave tracks like that?” I asked Ice Claw. “They were actually here in front of our eyes and they even killed each other. Even if they are in such an incredible state of existence they are still a reality and we have to get used to that fact. We can be glad they didn’t discover us. But on the other hand,” I added pensively, “it would be interesting to know whether or not they would become aware of us at all or try to aim their weapons at us.

“I wouldn’t like to take that chance, said Ice Claw. “If those ghosts show up again I’m heading for cover.”

“But we have to find an answer!” I retorted somewhat curtly.

Since we hadn’t put on our suits we weren’t able to report what had occurred to Fratulon over radio. But I felt it was more or less time to return to the station, anyway. Those para-traps had to be installed.

As we walked back to the base I had the uncanny feeling that we were being constantly observed—by eyes that looked at us from out of hyperspace...

* * * *

Fratulon listened silently to our report. After some cogitation he said: “Seems as if these phantom troops have singled out Kraumon as a specific theatre for their war games. Or it’s also possible that they’ve no other choice. On the other hand, here they can help themselves to weapons and supplies, so again that would indicate that they are able to select the areas of their materializations.”

“In the meantime,” I asked him, “have you figured out where we should set the traps?”

“There are two locations where the alarms are most frequently triggered. The arsenal and the main provisioning station where field rations and operational equipment items are stored. We’ll set up the locking field projectors there. We’ll tie the power feed to the alarm system and then all we’ll have to do is wait.”

“It’s as simple as that?” asked Gamno, who appeared to be well rested and fresh for action.

“At least it *sounds* simple but it remains to be seen,” grunted Fratulon as he led the way.

We procured the projection equipment with the help of several work robots and brought them to the planned locations. The work of connecting them went swiftly. Each projector and its method of operation were comparatively simple. As soon as an alarm was triggered, the corresponding projector would be activated, whereupon it would generate a spherical forcefield. Of course the field was not large in diameter but whatever was caught in the energy sphere would be unable to escape from the normal universe under any circumstances short of an insufficient supply of power. But Fratulon assured us that there was plenty of power available.

He observed his work with satisfaction. “OK, now they can come back any time they like but I sure hope we don’t just catch a Maahk. He wouldn’t be of much help to us. Just look at those gun racks! The Arkonides have stolen at least a couple hundred impulse beamers from me so they can fight their phantom war. Of course I ought to be thankful that’s all they’re after and that they haven’t taken a notion to destroy the power plant. Well, maybe we’ll soon know what this is all about.”

“If we catch an Arkonide,” I asked him later, “how are we going to cross-examine him?” We were all seated in the automatic kitchen and were waiting for the meals we had selected.

Fratulon answered without much hesitation. “I will interrupt the field power for the fraction of a second so that you can enter the para-trap and join the Arkonide. That should be long enough to let you get inside but not long enough for the prisoner to escape. It has to happen very fast and above all you’ll have to wear a combat suit because the air inside the sphere will be limited. A locked field like that is impenetrable even to the smallest molecule.”

I wasn’t too happy about the prospect. If the ghost Arkonide should open fire on me there’d be a real catastrophe because the walls of the bubble field would reflect the pulse beams and kill the attacker as well as his victim. Everything would depend upon making it clear to the Arkonide, as quickly as possible, that he was not in danger and that we wanted to help him. That would only be possible if I could talk faster than he could shoot.

Gamno read the apprehension in my face. “Should I go instead?” he asked, willingly enough, and for a moment I had the feeling that Fratulon would accept this suggestion.

But then he shook his head. “No, Tirako, let Atlan make the attempt. For our part we have to be ready to back him up in case of an emergency.”

I didn't like the entire setup. If I only had to deal with a normal flesh-and-blood adversary I wouldn't have hesitated a second. But we were faced with an unexplained phenomenon—and yet we had to get to the bottom of it. That night I went to bed with a troubled mind.

I must have been only partially asleep when I was suddenly jolted into wakefulness by the shrilling of an alarm signal in my ears. I leapt out of bed and hastily put on my combat suit. I left the helmet open, not intending to close it unless the air in the bubble field became stale. On the lighted map in the hall I could see that the mysterious visitors had again selected the arsenal as their target. I knew the shortest route without needing any reference to the map and I ran as fast as I could go.

I almost collided with Fratulon, who was approaching the place by another passage. Without a word we ran onward together. Breathless and almost giddy from our mad dash, we finally came to the arsenal where we had set up the para-trap.

The first thing I saw was 7 or 8 Arkonide warriors who were snatching up all the energy weapons they could reach in their immediate vicinity. With amazing speed they were stuffing their booty into plastic sacks. It was immediately evident that they were aware of not having much time for their actions and they didn't want to dematerialise and go back empty-handed into their own unreal dimension.

But all that was not important to me and Fratulon. We ignored the robbers and turned our attention to the old warrior who had been captured in our hyper-energy field and who was struggling in vain to break through its invisible wall. He was completely imprisoned.

“As soon as the others start to fade out,” whispered Fratulon, “we'll see if this works. Our prisoner should be held back, unable to leave. He should remain where he is, visible and in material form.”

By now Gamno and Ice Claw had joined us but they remained in the background to watch the proceedings. This time the duration of the Arkonides' visit was fairly long. It was well that Fratulon had thought of altering the programming of the robot guards. Just now they would not disturb us.

At long last it began to happen. One after another of the thieving war stragglers became transparent along with their plunder and then disappeared. The Arkonide in the para-trap was the only one who remained. His material state showed no signs of changing.

“So far so good!” said Fratulon with relief. “Now the only thing left is to get you into that energy field all in one piece before the prisoner can escape. You have a half hour—no more.”

I was already standing right next to the invisible barrier of the para-screen. The Arkonide had noticed us and had finally desisted in his futile efforts to get out. He did not appear to be frightened, in fact the opposite. In his eyes I thought I saw even a spark of hope. He raised a hand and made signs to us. Then he felt of his body as though it was hard for him to believe that he was still in a material state. His movements and gestures almost made it possible for me to read his thoughts.

In order to quickly demonstrate my peaceful intentions to him, I placed my weapon on the floor with the muzzle turned away from him. Then I made signs for him to imitate me with a similar gesture. He obeyed at once and then looked at me searchingly. I nodded to Fratulon, who was prepared for my signal.

Everything worked as planned, and with amazing swiftness. The barely perceptible wall of energy snapped off. In one jump I was next to the Arkonide, even as the locking field turned on again. The entire process had only taken less than half a second. The prisoner was taken by surprise and suspected a trap. He was about to reach down for his weapon but I stopped him.

“Whoever you may be, lay off of that. We want to help you. You and I are both together inside a hyperenergy field and you will not dematerialise while you’re here. My name is Atlan. Who are you?”

“Parvon Kher, officer in the imperial war fleet of our ruler, Gonozal.”

I felt it was useless just now to tell him that Gonozal had been dead for 15 years, murdered by his own brother who was the present Emperor. There were more important things to discuss and perhaps the time at our disposal was more precious than either of us suspected.

“What has happened to you? Do you have any explanation for your present condition? Tell me everything you know. We want to help you.”

For a fleeting moment it seemed to me as if Parvon Kher’s right leg were beginning to attenuate. For just the fraction of a second it almost became transparent but then everything was the same as before. He himself did not seem to have noticed the occurrence. But Fratulon had no doubt seen it because he made signs to me that I should hurry.

However, all I could do was bide my time while the other told his story.

“It was a long time ago,” began Parvon Kher. His service insignia seemed to have mouldered away or perhaps he had since found another uniform that was not his own. “In a neighbouring solar system we ran into a heavy Maahk unit and decided to attack and destroy their base. We landed in a number of ships and left them with the intention of raiding the stronghold on foot. Maybe that was a mistake but anyway we never saw our ships again. And I don’t know how many Maahks were inside of that heavily defended base, waiting for us to show up because the forces on either side of the battle didn’t all share the same fate. The cause of it all must have been outside, not on the planet itself. The Maahk High Command was testing a new weapon, a hyperenergy type of invention.”

“Go on!” I urged as lie made a pause.

“The result was an indescribably huge explosion and the effects of it were felt by the Maahks inside the fortress as well as ourselves. We were hit indiscriminately, Maahks and Arkonides alike, which the directors of the experiment must have been well aware of. They seemed to have no consideration for their own people and not a single Maahk on the ground escaped one kind of consequence or the other. The explosion killed a major portion of troops on both sides immediately but the rest of us dematerialised and were pulled into hyperspace. But there’s nothing there since all connection with reality is cut off. It’s only when we come back for a few seconds or a few minutes into regular space, like just now—although it’s sporadic and involuntary—only then are all objects and living things tangible and real for us. So we’ve used such moments to equip ourselves and get weapons and food.”

I was deeply impressed by this report and didn’t know what to say about it. Fratulon was gesturing wildly outside the energy bubble. He probably wanted me to hurry it up. But what was the use? Once the locking field shut off, Parvon Kher would disappear again and be lost to us. I still wanted to talk to him before that happened. I hastily summarized what I had learned and held up the note so that Fratulon could read it. He signalled me that he understood the message.

Then I turned to Parvon Kher again. “It appears that the Maahks also equip themselves in the same way. Why does the war continue even in hyperspace? At least there you should be able to make some kind of peace between you.”

“Peace?” queried the Arkonide, as though he could not quite grasp the meaning of the word. “Peace between Maahks and Arkonides? How can you even ask such a question? That almost borders on high treason!”

“The concept of peace can never be high treason, not even in the midst of a war,” I said, although I realized he didn’t understand me. “You and the Maahks exist neither here nor there. You swing back and forth between two universes. Instead of getting together and finding a mutual solution to your problem, you’re killing yourselves off. I would call that unreasonable and senseless, Parvon Kher.”

“Senseless or not, it’s my duty. And most of us have’ already died in that cause.”

“A fine reason for the rest of you to be victimized by the same idea,” I said bitterly.

“What kind of life do you call it, anyway, the way we are? We aren’t really alive, either here or there. We’re nothing but a bunch of phantoms with no place to go, and our only salvation is death.”

“Then there should be a purpose to all such dying

During the next pause in our conversation I noticed that Parvon Kher was beginning to make the change. I swiftly felt behind me and encountered the wall of hyper-energy. I made a sign to Fratulon but he had already seen what was

happening. Parvon Kher was returning to the other dimension even while the field projector was still working. It meant that it would be impossible for us to keep one of these ghosts in a para-trap for more than 10 minutes at a time. The force that always returned them into hyperspace was stronger.

Then two things happened at once and perhaps it was this coincidence which was responsible for the events that followed. I was only able to reconstruct the sequence later.

Fratulon turned off the projector without my knowing it. At the same time, Parvon Kher's dematerialization proceeded more swiftly. In a completely instinctive reaction I reached for him and attempted to hold him back. But I thought I was still inside the spherical forcefield and was safe.

And that was my mistake.

I heard Fratulon's shout of warning but paid it no heed, failing to realize the significance of my hearing him at all. Had the field been there that wouldn't have been possible.

Parvon Kher's right arm was still real and tangible. I grabbed it and held on tight as though to keep the rest of him from escaping into the other dimension. This I could not do, no more than I could prevent Parvon Kher from taking me with *him!*

Fratulon, Ice Claw and Gamno were only a few meters away from me and I could see all three of them become hazy before my eyes, along with the room and everything in it. From their point of view, as I learned later, they saw me and the rest of the Arkonide suddenly become invisible.

And then I was weightless, floating above a clear blue lake.

3/ HYBRID WORLD

My first thought was for my space helmet since I hadn't yet closed it but then I discovered that I could breathe without difficulty. Except for my impulse gun I was still wearing the entire outfit I had had with me. I could feel the combat suit. It was real.

But what had happened to me? Like the other phantoms I naturally had the impression that I was real and in a clear state of existence even though I didn't recognize the landscape beneath me. But on Kraumon there were thousands of lakes like this one. Only—why had I become weightless?

"Don't be deceived," said a voice behind me, and when I turned around I saw Parvon Kher, who was again all in one piece. He was floating in the air like myself, about 100 meters over the surface of the water. "You and I are real. We can hear each other and grasp each other. But that scenery below isn't real—at least not for us. We could sink down through it clear to the core of the planet without feeling the slightest resistance. We wouldn't even be able to pick up a stone because it would fall through our hands. Now do you understand why we always have to make every possible use of the moments when the two dimensions coincide?"

I began to realize that I was lost. The force had drawn me with it as though I'd been sucked into a vacuum. The same thing had happened to me as to the Arkonides and Maahks who had been within range of that hyper-energy explosion. However it was a relief to remember that I had informed Fratulon of the most important facts concerning the situation. Maybe he'd discover some way of pulling us back, or at least me.

"Where are we, Parvon Kher?"

"This is not the world where you captured me, it's another—nameless and unknown. We often materialize here to continue our battles but there are no supplies or equipment here. That is only to be gotten on the Station World."

"Station World?"

"That's what we call your planet."

"It's called Kraumon," I told him. It didn't do any harm for him to know that much. I had to gain his confidence because I needed his help now. After all, he was more familiar with this strange state of existence than I was. "It's a secret

stronghold. But we have time to discuss many things. At the moment I have to find a solution to this predicament. I have to return to the normal universe.”

By now he was hovering quite close to me. “We’ve been trying to do that for almost 20 years, Atlan. We haven’t succeeded yet.”

“But I’m here through another set of circumstances than yours, Parvon Kher, and that’s why there may be another solution to it than for your own situation. Anyway, my friend Fratulon is now aware of the cause of all this and it’s entirely possible that he may even be able to help you. He’s a very capable scientist. Now tell me, what is happening here? Are we over this lake by preference or coincidence? Can we exert any influence at all on our movements?”

“Very little, I’m sorry to say. When we started to dematerialise in your base station I thought intensively of this planet since it’s relatively safe here. The Maahks are concentrated on another world than this one. They make a few surprise raids on us here but it doesn’t happen very often. I willed us here and here we are.”

“And if I should want to go back to Kraumon?”

“Then all you have to do is really want to get there and that’s where you’ll be. Of course that wouldn’t gain you anything because you can’t touch or feel anything—unless you happen to drop back for a short time into the normal plane of existence. But then you should snatch up all the provisions you can lay your hands on and take them with you. Otherwise you’ll starve like many of us have already. Do you see those plantations over there? We’ve struggled hard to develop them when we are materialized but the only time we can harvest is also in the short periods when we’re in the normal plane.”

We had drifted to the farther shore of the lake and now I could make out the plantations. There were bush-like trees which bore a yellow-coloured fruit. The branches bent down low under their weight. I was gradually beginning to understand the survival problem that faced these unfortunate bi-dimensional dwellers. They couldn’t make contact with anything in the normal plane of existence except during brief times of materialization. And whatever they touched then returned with them into the semi-reality of their other condition. However awkward and troublesome this process might be, it was their only means of avoiding death by starvation. And instead of being reasonable and pooling their intellectual and material capacities the Arkonides and the Maahks still waged war against each other.

Parvon Kher explained to me further that the materializations happened involuntarily and that they had no influence over them, although they occurred at least once a day. It also sometimes happened that they would materialize in the 5th dimension but that was always a meaningless excursion. The worlds there were empty and desolate. No one lived there and time was also different. He emphasized that it was fortunate for them that such materializations did not occur too often.

I was sure that there was also a different time-ratio in our present half-state of existence but couldn't quite imagine what the consequences might be. For me the only important thing was to make contact again with Fratulon. But at the moment I didn't have much time to think about it or to try to reach Fratulon for help. There were other problems facing us.

Two Maahks made an appearance. They were also floating above the plantation before us.

Parvon Kher jerked his impulse gun from its holster and was about to open fire on them but I stopped him.

"Don't! They haven't seen us yet, and don't forget I'm unarmed. Our firing power is weaker than theirs.

"But... but I *still* have to fight them!"

"You do *not* have to!" I informed him emphatically. "Why risk death when it's so certain?"

"Because this kind of existence is pointless."

"In that case you could have committed suicide long before this," I retorted brutally.

The Maahks appeared to be waiting for a materialization into the other plane so that they could at least get hold of some of the fruit below them. They must have been half starved to death, considering that they needed three times as much nourishment as we did to stay alive. But since they had no influence over their change of state they had to wait for their chance.

We "wished" ourselves away from them and as we did so we looked at the mountain that loomed into the sky not far ahead of us. Parvon Kher grasped my hand as with no additional effort we picked up speed and passed within a short distance of the Maahks. As I had hoped, they took no notice of us.

It was in the mountains that we encountered the other Arkonides from Parvon Kher's lost unit.

4/ LONG SHOT

In this hybrid type of space everything seemed to be real and substantial but it wasn't always possible to stand on firm ground. Although I could find no explanation for such a variable state of existence I had to accept it if I didn't want to lose my mind.

Parvon Kher was high in the esteem of the soldiers whose fate he was sharing. He told them of his adventure and introduced me. I maintained silence concerning my true identity and only gave them my name.

I was not surprised to learn that they still harboured some hope of a basic change in their condition somehow, because any process of Nature should be reversible. If I as a normal being had been transferred from the normal dimension into this semi-state of existence, then it should also be possible to permanently transfer a hybrid-space dweller from where we were back to the natural state. I confirmed their supposition in this regard because I also hoped for the same possibility, yet I was not able to make any concrete suggestion.

Strangely we were standing on solid ground and I began to suspect that even this world was not real. Maybe some hyper-energy explosion had also transferred it into the hybrid plane, which would make it appear to be real to us. But Parvon Kher told me this wasn't so, as was clearly evidenced by the intermittent plantation operation.

With their rayguns the Arkonides had melted some spacious caves out of the cliffs, in which they felt secure. Whenever the ground became tenuous and unstable for them they would shift into their usual floating state which could be maintained without effort.

I began to appreciate how desperate these bi-dimensional Arkonides must be. It was actually a wonder that they had even preserved half their intelligence this long. During our initial conversations I sought to learn everything I could about the events that had caused their condition. Later I hoped to contact Fratulon and give him any clues I could. I was sure that something would occur to him whereby I could at least be rescued.

When the campfire was lighted, Parvon Kher joined me. He brought along an old war horse whom I took to at first glance. Kher introduced him as Morvoner Sprangh, a veteran of the great Methane War against the Maahks. He was one of

the Arkonide commanders, about 80 years old, 6ft 2in tall, with a scarred face and a bald head. After we'd been introduced, he shook my hand and sat down on a boulder. Through the entrance of the cave I could see the last light of day fading away. It would soon be night—my first night on a world that actually didn't seem to exist at all.

“So you're from our normal universe?” he inquired congenially. His manner was much more informal than that of Parvon Kher, who tended to be slightly reserved and standoffish. “Then you can give us the latest news. We don't hear anything or see anything that could tell us what's going on because we can't cover a very wide loop. Just 3 or 4 systems maybe—that's all. But at least that includes the Station World.”

This had not occurred to me at all! “You mean your freedom of movement is limited?” I was surprised. So far I had assumed they could go anywhere they pleased in the universe. “Could you clarify that?”

“Nothing much to explain, Atlan. I'll grant you we can influence our range of movement but it does have its limits. Otherwise you can bet I'd have gone to Arkon to report our condition to Gonozal. Maybe he would have asked the Scientific Council to help us.”

“Yes, he certainly would have done that,” I said. But I decided not to report to either of them that Gonozal was dead.

It might have broken their will to live, in which case they would have ceased to be valuable confederates. There was still time for the final truths to be spoken. “But maybe there's some other alternative or possibility,” I continued. “On the Station World as you call it, I have a friend. He is also a scientist. Knowing him as I do, he's probably already working on a solution to the problem.”

“But we're not going to bring the Maahks through with us!” growled Morvoner.

I glanced at him searchingly and when I perceived the hate in his eyes I decided to be careful. “Of course I can't be sure, Morvoner, but I don't know if that can be avoided. If Fratulon really works something out that will pull us all back into real space—I mean, permanently—the Maahks will probably also be affected by it. They'll be permanently rematerialized along with the rest of us. To prepare for such a case, we ought to make some kind of agreement with them.”

“Make a deal with the Maahks?” Morvoner's roar of laughter almost pained my eardrums. “That would be useless! We know from experience that they don't keep their word. You know as hard as it is for us to even think of such a thing we've already tried to make peace with them but after that they pulled a raid on us and mowed down half of their unsuspecting victims. No, there can never be any peace made with the Maahks.”

So they *had* tried it already! Parvon Kher had not told me about it. “Morvoner,” I asked, “do you know how many Arkonides and Maahks there are in this hybrid state of existence?”

Parvon answered for him: “Of course the actual number isn’t known but I’d estimate the number of our own men to be about 500 and I’d say there are about 30 left of the Maahks. If you consider the enemy’s superiority over us, that makes an approximate balance of power between us.”

“And what were the figures when this whole thing happened originally?”

“About 5,000 to 300.”

I nodded. “So the ratio hasn’t changed. If the battle keeps on going there’ll be nobody left on either side.”

“We all have to die in the struggle,” muttered Morvoner.

It was now dark outside. When I realized that all of us including the cliffs and the caves were invisible to normal eyes, uncounted questions began to arise in my mind. There were no answers. Perhaps there were more secrets and unsolved riddles in the universe than I had suspected. Jumping through the 5th dimension had never been a problem for us because every hyper transition was such a jump. But in those cases we always returned to our own plane of existence.

“Don’t beat your brains out over it,” advised Morvoner. “You won’t come to any conclusions. Anyway, I think we can pay your friend Fratulon a visit, if he isn’t afraid of ghosts. Still, by now he should have gotten used to seeing us.”

“To have fear or anxiety concerning unsolved questions—that’s two sides of a coin,” I advised. “He has no fear but he’s mightily vexed over not being able to clarify this mystery. Perhaps we can give him some help and thus help ourselves.”

“First thing in the morning we’ll give it a try,” promised Morvoner, and Parvon Kher nodded in agreement.

* * * *

In the middle of the night there was an alarm and 4 Maahks made an attack on the caves.

Morvoner had given me an impulse beamer that had come from Fratulon’s arsenal. Although I accepted it I had resolved not to fire against the Maahks. I remained in the cave while Parvon Kher and Morvoner Sprangh led the Arkonides outside in an attempt to repulse the Maahks’ ferocious attack. I ducked behind a fairly large boulder which shielded me from observation as well as from any stray energy beams. I was able to peer over its top and watch what was happening.

Without regard to their own lives the Maahks stormed the cavern stronghold, each of them equipped with 3 or 4 energy weapons which they used alternately in rapid succession. Their heavy combat spacesuits were protected by defence screens which could only be penetrated by well-aimed concentrated fire. Some of the cave entrances were melted down, which took the lives of dozens of

Arkonides. They died in the fire of an enemy who took no prisoners and gave no quarter.

As I observed this I began to understand the old war horse's anger and hate and without yet sanctioning it. Nevertheless I had to admit to myself that their battle was one for naked survival. There were only two choices: fight or die.

And then one of the Maahks attacked my own cave.

As molten lava began to drop from the rock ceiling and threaten my position, all of my beautiful thoughts of peace were shattered as though by a single blow. It was too late now for me to come out of the cave without endangering my life. I had absolutely no choice other than to move cautiously to the cave threshold and also open fire on the threatening Maahk.

I would probably not have been able to handle him if some of the other Arkonides had not come to my aid. They had discovered the lone assailant just in time, recognizing the situation as an opportunity to surround him. Concentrated energy beams shot out of the darkness from all sides and impinged upon the Maahk's shimmering defence screen until it finally collapsed in a blinding flash. The succeeding shots, which included my own, delivered the death blow to the monster.

The night battle lasted 2 hours before the 4 Maahks were dead but it had cost the lives of 40 Arkonides. And their corpses were real—they did not disappear. They belonged to this Limbo world of semi-existence from which they would never more escape. I lay down on some sleeping blankets which I had fashioned for my bed, utterly exhausted, as Parvon and Morvoner returned. The surprise raid appeared to have been nothing out of the ordinary for them because they didn't even talk about it. I lay there for some time and reviewed the whole thing in my mind.

On the following morning I felt like a wreck but I did not reveal my fatigue to the others because today Morvoner wanted to go with me to the "Station World" in order to establish contact with Fratulon.

* * * *

It was not as easy as I had secretly hoped.

Morvoner and I left the cavern stronghold, floating away in a weightless condition, which he assured me was the best way to prepare for a change of state. I couldn't see any scientific basis for these processes so I submitted myself completely to Morvoner's 20 years of experience. Besides, I hardly had any other choice.

We ascended higher and higher. We had taken the precaution to close the helmets of our suits in order not to suffocate in case we ran into airless regions. But the Arkonide explained that this measure of precaution was superfluous as

far as a “transition” to another planet was concerned. The transfer occurred without any apparent passage of time.

I thought intensively of Kraumon and Fratulon’s stronghold.

Morvoner was doing the same so it should not be long before we had some results. Nevertheless it was startling to me when I suddenly saw the surface of the nameless world below me disappear, to be replaced in the same moment with the bluffed outlines of a planet which at once seemed familiar to me. I had had time previously to observe Kraumon during our approach in the spaceship.

Yes, it was indeed Kraumon, even though seen indistinctly as though through a thick layer of glass. On the other hand, Morvoner at my side remained apparently solid and real.

We sank slowly toward the surface and I soon made out the buildings of the base station. Even the spherical spaceship and our disc-shaped scoutship were still there, resting unchanged on their respective landing pads. Since we had not yet materialized we penetrated the walls of the main building as though they had not existed. Inasmuch as 24 hours had passed, our “changeover” would be occurring at any moment, but we could not know how long our normal state would last. I was in a hurry to find Fratulon although I knew he’d be jolted by my sudden appearance without any previous warning. The only question was where he might be at the moment.

On Kraumon it was early morning. I thought of his room and—shortly thereafter we were “standing” there. With a little concentration we could have lowered ourselves to the floor but it wasn’t necessary at the moment. We waited as we were, hovering over him.

Fratulon had just gotten up. Already dressed but still not washed, he sat at a table where he was studying some books. I could make out that they were tomes of a scientific nature. Some of the titles I saw indicated that they had to do with quantum mechanics and hyperenergy problems. Also there was a piece of paper on the table which was a copy of my message to him before I disappeared with Parvon Kher.

It is impossible to describe the feelings that assailed me at the moment. There was Fratulon before me and yet he might as well have been an infinity removed. I could have drifted right through him without his being aware of me. There was no way just now for me to commune with him because we were in two separate planes of existence. Each of us was unreachable by the other so I had to be content with at least being able to see him. However, he could not see me—and this was a phenomenon that I couldn’t comprehend.

I went closer and looked over his shoulder.

“Is he already working at it?” inquired Morvoner.

We could talk between ourselves but Fratulon was unable to hear us.

“It looks like it, Morvoner. You can see he’s deep into the right kinds of books. So he’s working on our problem and I’m sure he’ll find a way. The only question is, how long will it take him?”

“Have to wait and see—and we also have to wait until we materialize here, although I don’t know if it’s going to help us much.”

Perhaps not right away, I thought. That much was for sure. But I knew that Fratulon would double his efforts if he knew I was still alive. Maybe it would also help him if I were to quickly give him a few hints. I knew it was useless to write him a note in my present hybrid state because it would disappear with me as soon as I went back into our quasi-dimension. However, if he knew beforehand he might be able to copy a carefully prepared message before it disappeared again. I decided I would suggest this to him.

After awhile Fratulon left his room. We followed him on his round of inspection and also encountered Gamno and Ice Claw, who unsuspectingly walked right through us while squabbling with each other over some inconsequential trifles. Ice Claw, however, was the only one who seemed to shudder involuntarily when he made “contact” with me. I resolved to tell him about that sometime.

“You have good friends,” said Morvoner as we watched Fratulon check over his remaining stores of equipment and supplies. “This weird little one—is he *really* transparent?”

“Yes, he’s always like that. Ice Claw is a Chretkor.

“I’ve heard something about them, Atlan. A very strange race, and damned cold, too, if you shake hands with them!”

Fratulon set out to complete his rounds alone while Gamno and Ice Claw went to have their breakfast first. We followed Fratulon.

He went down into the lower underground levels and began to inspect the power station there. If he would at least talk aloud to himself!—I thought desperately. Although I could not read his thoughts I could hear every sound as well as I could make out various details around me.

Fratulon began to work on the power equipment but I did not know what he had in mind. All that Morvoner and I could determine was that he was changing some junction boxes and making new connections. Had he already found a solution to the problem?

“It could happen any time now,” said Morvoner somewhat impatiently. “The materializations always occurred rather on schedule with me. If I had a watch I could practically predict them each time.”

One thing I knew was that we couldn’t force our materialization into the other plane. In the other plane! Involuntarily I was already using such an expression for the normal universe. How quickly one became adapted...!

Morvoner gave me a nudge. “It’s starting. Do you see how everything is getting a more definite outline, how objects are becoming clearer and easier to

see? From the other side your friend should soon be able to see you, in case he happens to turn around. But he'll notice us alright, before we disappear again."

Fratulon's figure was slowly but actually beginning to appear more solid and stabilized. I began to see more details than before. And by luck he turned around in this moment, probably to check some readings on the wall meters. I almost had to laugh as I saw his face become almost rigid from his shock of surprise.

"We don't have much time, Fratulon," I said hastily before he could start questioning me, because I knew it would waste our moment of contact. "From now on, carry your photo-recorder with you so that I'll be able to transmit messages to you optically. I'm all in one piece here. Are you going to be able to bring me back?"

It took a few seconds for Fratulon to collect himself and recover from his surprise. He nodded briefly and indicated Morvoner. "Who is that?"

"Will explain later—don't know how much time we have. I'll try every day from now on to make contact with you. You may be able to solve this thing with a hyperenergy detonation."

"Been working on that. What does it look like... over there?" Naturally his curiosity could not be restrained.

"A bit crazy, everything is so different. Now that you ask me it's unexplainable, paradoxical and illogical. You'd have to see it for yourself."

"No thanks! You're getting transparent again. Come back soon, I'll keep on working and..."

When he stopped talking I knew we had become invisible to him. For awhile he stared at the spot where he had last seen us and then he went back to the labours that pertained to my salvation. He was really cold-blooded, this Fratulon. Nothing phased him.

"He's a good man," said Morvoner. "Maybe he'll really do it, at least in your case. I think that any other salvation would come too late for the rest of us. We've been in this hybrid state too long."

"There's always salvation if one believes in it," I admonished him. "Are we going back to the caves?"

He nodded and grasped my hand. Seconds later we were in the midst of a raging battle.

A dozen Maahks were engaged in a new attack against the cavern stronghold in the mountain, and this time in broad daylight. Six of them died before the rest of them finally fled but also many Arkonides had met with death.

By nightfall everything was quiet and peaceful again. Morvoner and I finally found time to report our adventure to the survivors.

Parvon Kher was silent for some time before he spoke. "The normal dimension...? The more I think of it, it seems it would be like entering an alien universe. I'm almost afraid of it..."

Nor was he alone in this opinion.

* * * *

From Ice Claw's personal notes:

Ever since Atlan disappeared I've felt a strange uneasiness. Of course Fratulon has tried to explain this thing to me and Gamno but when he starts throwing around all that technical jargon it's enough to drive a person up the wall. Neither an Arkonide nor a Chretkor could understand that—and certainly Chretkors are intelligent. Anyway, I'm not a scientist.

So now he's down there fooling around in the power planet section and he says he's going to try bringing Atlan back. Just how he's going to manage that is a complete mystery to me and Gamno. Yet we trust his knowledge and ability. It would not be the first time he's found a way out of a hopeless situation.

Today I was present when Atlan materialized again.

During the past few days we had all become accustomed to the ghosts and were hardly even startled anymore when they'd suddenly show up around the station, either inside or out. On the other hand, the old Arkonide fighters also ceased to be skittish when they came to us. We had a pretty active contact with their phantom world.

Fratulon has explained to me and Gamno that it's impossible for these bi-dimensional people to bring any objects into our own dimension but they can take anything back with them that they pick up from this plane. So when Atlan appeared again it would be no problem to hand over a message to him if it was prepared in time. This was why Fratulon had written Atlan a letter and kept it ready to give to him as soon as he showed himself.

Gamno had been assigned to check our scoutship outside. We feared that the Maahks might materialize there and try to damage it. The Maahks must have already seen that we were in contact with the Arkonides and that we had allied ourselves with their cause. So we had to watch out for them.

I was helping Fratulon, who kept on making new calculations and was running our two technical robots back and forth so much that I was afraid their positronics would break down at any moment. But they held up under it all.

"What have you written him, anyway?" I asked, referring to the letter he wanted to give to Atlan.

Fratulon hardly looked up from his work. The letter was sticking out of his breast pocket. "If my theory is correct and everything works like I think it will, we'll be able to bring everybody back out of the other dimension, including Atlan. But also the Maahks. Now I don't intend to have my station get all shot up and that'll surely happen if they're going to try to keep going with their warfare. That's why I've asked Atlan to make sure the Arkonides understand they're going to have to cut out all of that mess. Whether or not he'll be able to convince them is another question."

“That depends a lot on the Maahks, doesn’t it?” I said.

“It’s always depended on both sides,” he corrected me. “But *some* side has to make a beginning—to make peace, I mean. Why shouldn’t Atlan be the one to start it?”

“But you aren’t telling him anything else?”

“That comes later. I haven’t finished my preparations yet. Come here and hold this cable for me...”

I kept looking about me in all directions but if Atlan was there I wasn’t able to see him as yet. An eerie sensation crept over me whenever I thought about his being a ghost who could go right through me.

When he finally did materialize, there were two Arkonides with him. One of them I recognized. He was the soldier we had caught in the energy trap and who had taken Atlan with him. The other old fighter had a scarred up face and a bald head.

Fratulon didn’t lose a second. He gave Atlan the letter and then he photographed a message written in large letters which Atlan practically held in front of his nose. It was only then that the conversation began and nobody knew how long it would last.

“This is Morvoner Sprangh and this is Parvon Kher, Fratulon—they’re the two Arkonide commanders. We’re having a bad time with the Maahks. They seem to be getting very active lately. The attacks happen almost daily now. Are you making progress with the work?”

“I think it’ll work alright but you’ve got to be patient.

“We need weapons,” said Parvon Kher. “Do you have any objections if we help ourselves?”

“So far you’ve never seemed to need my permission,” retorted Fratulon, somewhat irritated. “Try to make peace with the Maahks—but that’s all in the letter. At any rate I’m not going to bring anybody back if a truce isn’t made. Otherwise—just Atlan alone.”

Actually I had wanted to exchange a few words with Atlan, myself, but I had waited too long. He disappeared from view before I could open my mouth, and Fratulon’s letter went with him.

A short while later Gamno showed up and reported that he had seen a Maahk outside near the edge of the forest. “He just appeared all of a sudden and he was looking at the big ship. I don’t think he saw me because I took cover right away. Think it was a coincidence?”

Fratulon looked up from his work. “Definitely not, Tirako. They have their eyes on the ship. It’s a wonder to me it’s still standing there intact or that they haven’t tried long ago to steal it but maybe its mass is too great for them to take it with them into hybrid space. Still, if they can’t steal it they’ll probably want to destroy it. It’s lucky that neither the Maahks nor the Arkonides have heavy weapons because the defence screen can handle any shot from a hand beamer.

Nevertheless I suggest that one of us should man the fire control station on the big ship when we start the experiment.”

I knew, however, that it would still be some time before that happened. In the meantime, the photograph had been developed. Atlan’s handwriting was clear and legible. Fratulon read the message aloud:

“My friends: I’m beginning to accustom myself to this strange state I’m in and I’m getting a picture of the situation over here. Of the Arkonides and Maahks who were pushed into hyperspace 20 years ago, there are only about 10% of them left. They’ll keep on fighting each other until there’ll be nobody here. If you discover a way of bringing me back, do it quickly and don’t worry about the others here. That may sound hard but I don’t see any other possibility. Otherwise their war will be carried to Kraumon. How far have you gotten with your preparations?”

That was all. No vital information, no tips or clues; nothing. Fratulon had the same reaction as I did but he concealed his disappointment.

“Got to keep going,” he said, and he continued with his work just as though we had not been present.

I nodded to Gamno and we both left the power station.

Later when we were having something to drink in the kitchen, Gamno commented: “I’m trying to figure this. As far as I can see, all the bi-dimensional people materialize at the same time, including Atlan, wherever they happen to be. And that tells me that there’s some unknown common factor binding them all—which also means that if we try to just pull Atlan back alone they’ll all come back into this universe, permanently.”

I had to admit that Gamno’s assumptions made sense. One proof had been the Maahk he had seen outside near the ship. A comparison of timing had shown that the Maahk had appeared at exactly the same time as Atlan and his two companions, and his materialization had lasted exactly as long as theirs.

“All that won’t keep us from helping Atlan,” I said stubbornly. “Fratulon knows the risks involved. We have to tell Atlan that nothing can be done about preventing the others from coming. He has to see to it that those old war dogs and the Maahks finally make peace.”

On the following day I also encountered a Maahk and I was lucky that this time the length of the materialization was very short...

Gamno was busy helping Fratulon, who hardly saw his bed anymore. I took over the normal daily tour of inspection, which had become a standard operating procedure by now, and after doing the station itself I went up to the surface to take a look at the ship. I was carrying my impulse gun and was wearing a combat spacesuit since we never ventured outside anymore without this protection. My helmet, however, was open.

Suddenly I saw a shimmering in the air about 100 meters ahead, between me and the big spherical spaceship. A giant Maahk materialized and saw me. But he

had probably had his eyes on me before he appeared because he immediately raised his weapon and aimed at me.

In a flash I closed my helmet and snapped on my energy screen. The first ray beam shot past me. My screen could have absorbed it easily but if the Maahk got the idea of bringing me under continuous fire by emptying his entire charge of energy at me, the situation could be dangerous for me.

He got the idea.

I shut my eyes, blinded by the raw energy that poured over my screen and turned it into a ball of light, with me in the middle. My greatest fear was the tremendous heat differential that was building up because the screen could not shield me for long against this onslaught. Nor was it possible at the moment for me to return the fire and if I'd been able to it probably wouldn't have had much effect.

This state of affairs lasted only 10 seconds, however, and then the firing suddenly ceased. At first I couldn't see anything because my eyes had to adjust themselves to normal sunlight, which seemed like relative darkness. But I was finally able to make out that the Maahk had disappeared. Which meant that there would be no more materializations today. I shut off the defense screen.

All around me was molten sand which was in the process of hardening again or glazing over. I gingerly worked my way out of the area and finally came to the place where the Maahk had been standing. The ground had been heavily trampled by his ponderous feet, which proved that I hadn't been dreaming. Now I could imagine what would happen when we pulled Atlan back to us—and if Gamno proved to be right.

I checked the security coverage of both ships and then returned to the station. Fratulon informed me that Atlan had made no appearance today.

* * * *

That evening we all met in the kitchen. We made our food selections and had our supper while Fratulon talked to us without much optimism.

"Just a few more changes in the power hookups and the experiment will be ready," he said. "Whether it'll work or not I don't know, but even if it does work our problems are not going to be over with. I can only hope that Atlan is alive and well. What could have detained him from coming to us today?"

I tried to reassure him. "There could be many reasons. Today the transition was only for a few seconds. He could have been too late."

"Maybe he's here even now but we can't see him," said Gamno, looking about him instinctively. "Since he's able to hear us, as he claims, then he's aware of the present status."

"I'll only pull him back when I can be sure those Maahks are going to keep the peace. They themselves have to be advised of that."

“Maahks only communicate with each other by means of ultra-sonic impulses,” I interjected, speaking from experience. “How do you talk to them?”

“Atlan will have to figure it out, or else those Arkonide commanders. Reason will out.”

We soon went our separate ways because there wasn't much left to talk about. All questions remain unanswered.

And the next day there were still more questions because again Atlan failed to appear. Instead, 27 heavy impulse weapons disappeared from the arsenal.

5/ AMBASSADOR IN LIMBO

“I’m certain that the Maahks are planning a death blow against us,” said Morvoner as he checked the energy charges in his weapon. “And what you tell me about your friend Fratulon I don’t like at all, Atlan. You’ve missed contact with him twice because the time was too short but you were able to hear his conversations with his companions. According to what you heard it looks as if we’ll all be pulled back automatically when you are. And that includes the Maahks. I’d like to know what he’s waiting for. Isn’t it all the same whether we fight them here or there?”

I didn’t answer right away. I stared thoughtfully into the flames of the fire in the cave. We were fairly safe here because Parvon Kher had posted some guards outside. If the Maahks opened an attack we would be given the alarm immediately. New supplies of weapons had been brought in, of course from Fratulon’s armoury. He had been highly irritated by it but I was sure he would not vent his rage on me because of the thieves.

“Peace must be made with the Maahks, Morvoner. We don’t have any other choice. Somebody has to talk to them.”

“Atlan, have you also thought of the possibility that such negotiations could work to the disadvantage of all of us?”

“How so?”

Morvoner passed a hand over his scars and sighed. “Put yourself in the place of Fratulon and in the Maahks’ place. He’s holding up on the experiment because he’s afraid that the war will continue and that his station will be damaged. The Maahks know that and you know, Atlan, that the Maahks can still destroy the station even if they stay here in hybrid space, because they’ll keep on materializing periodically. So if Fratulon refuses to act he still hasn’t gained anything. The Maahks would take a fearful revenge against him. Isn’t that logical?”

It was logical enough, but would Fratulon see it that way?

“I’ll go talk to the Maahks,” I offered. “They’ll listen to me when they learn that I’ve just recently joined you and haven’t ever taken part in these terrible battles of mutual destruction. If they are reasonable they’ll make peace.”

“But they are not reasonable!” Morvoner bellowed at me angrily.

“And neither are you!” I shouted back with equal ire.

We fell silent. Parvon Kher came to the fire and sat down.

“What’s all the shouting about?”

When I explained it to him he shook his head. “You’re attempting the impossible, Atlan. We won’t have any peace until the remaining 20 Maahks are dead. Besides, it isn’t all that certain that we’ll always remain in the normal universe even if the experiment succeeds. Maybe Fratulon’s theory won’t work out right and only you will go back. So why worry about it? Let things take their natural course without going out of our way to ask for trouble.”

On this particular night the Maahks remained quiet and withheld their attack. As day began to dawn in our unreal world even the last sentries lay down to rest. I myself was refreshed and I was determined today to take the risk and attempt to make contact with the Maahks.

Without being noticed I left the cave and refrained from going into the usual hovering state. The ground was firm again and so I could progress on foot, which was needed exercise for my muscles. I pushed my way down to the plantation area in the hope that the Maahks would be most likely to be found there. My two impulse guns dangled in holsters on my belt. Even I didn’t fancy facing the giant creatures unarmed.

My way led through the deep forest. Morvoner had said that the Maahks also liked to stay in this area because the tree trunks and the heavy canopy of foliage offered them protection and concealment. Perhaps I’d be lucky and meet with them right away.

It wasn’t quite clear to me yet what I was going to say to them, if they allowed me to get that far at all. After all, so far the only contacts with them had resulted in shooting, not talking.

Many of the great tree trunks had diameters of up to 3 meters. Even two Maahks could hide behind one of these trees at the same time if they chose to. I was relying on their curiosity to keep them from killing me on sight because it certainly wasn’t often that a lone Arkonide ventured into their territory.

“Stay where you are, dwarf!”

The voice rang mightily in my ears and I complied instantly. The Maahks could adapt their articulatory organs for speaking Intercosmo and so I knew there would be no problem with regard to communication. Although I looked cautiously about me in all directions all I saw was the tree trunks and underbrush. But then I saw a movement to one side of me, as though one of the trees were splitting in two. The second trunk turned out to be a Maahk.

As he came out from his hiding place he aimed his beamer at me.

“I want to talk to you!” I shouted loud enough so that he’d be sure to understand. “It’s important.”

He came to a stop. Apparently he was alone. “You wish to talk with us? That’s senseless. We haven’t said a word to each other in several decades.”

“Then it’s about time we began. Important events have occurred that could change this whole deplorable situation for all of us.”

“Only death could do that—perhaps.”

I decided to make use of the opportunity. It was unlikely I’d have another chance. So I reported to him everything that had happened and that I had only been with the old Arkonides for a few days. He knew of the “Station World” because the Maahks also got their supplies from there. When he heard that Fratulon was preparing an experiment that would be an attempt to pull them all back into normal space, I noticed the first positive reaction: he lowered his weapon and shoved it into his belt. Of course he knew very well that I wouldn’t have been able to kill him quickly with a surprise shot from my own gun but nevertheless I took his action as a gesture of good faith. Nor did he demand that I surrender my two energy guns.

“This story is too interesting to keep from my companions,” he said. “Go on ahead there—I’ll show you the way.”

I would have found my way without his help because the heavily trampled footpath couldn’t have been missed. Again I was forced to wonder why the trees and foliage and the forest floor were real to us whereas the plantation fruit by the lake could only be picked from their plane of existence during certain periods or at certain intervals. Perhaps various part of this whole world changed back and forth sporadically.

The Maahk warriors saw me but before they could react in their usual manner my leader shouted a warning to them. The others’ weapons lowered. Only then did I have a chance to take a look at the main headquarters of the remaining 20 Maahks. They were living as primitively as we were in the caves. Trees had been cut down and their trunks had been stacked in such a way as to form a protective barricade. The Maahks lay on the ground or stood about and stared at me as though I were some kind of freak or monstrosity. Certainly they had never had an armed Arkonide in their midst before.

The Maahk who had captured me reported to the others what I had told him and then I myself had to repeat the whole story. As far as I could make out they all seemed to become very pensive.

Finally an especially large Maahk pointed to me and asked: “How do we know this isn’t a trap? The Arkonides are very cunning and sly. I can’t conceive of their making us a peace offer after they’ve almost brought us to extinction.”

I attempted to explain that making peace was the only way that it would make it possible to go back into normal space. I truthfully laid out the reasons for this and concluded: “The experiment will only be made when the fighting has been stopped. It’s senseless for all of you. Each of you blames the other side but even Maahks should know that in a war it’s always like that—one side blaming the other. With such an attitude there can never be peace. Now, however, there is an urgent and logical reason for ending the war between you.

They did not appear to be completely convinced. A few of them even became threatening and demanded that I be disarmed. There were others, however, who suggested that they observe Fratulon at his work in order to check the validity of my claims. The whole thing turned into a regular council meeting and it seemed as though they'd forgotten me. I sat on one of the big tree trunks and had a good view. I wondered what Morvoner might say if he could have seen me now. He'd probably conclude that I'd lost my mind.

It didn't take me long to see that the Maahks were not in agreement with each other. Most of them argued for a continuation of the war and my execution. Later, they said, they could always check my story to see whether or not I had lied. There were only three Maahks who took my part and among them was the one who had brought me here.

Once more I employed every art of persuasion with them in order to talk them out of their intentions but at the same time I was checking my surroundings for an escape route. I still had my weapons. Apparently they all thought it a foregone conclusion that I wouldn't attempt to use them. Besides, I had not yet been officially sentenced to death.

The forest began directly behind my back. If I could just take cover among those huge boles it was possible that they wouldn't find me. Of course I had already tried to use the "wishful thinking" method of just floating away back to the caves in the mountains but I remained where I was. So it appeared that the hovering method of travel only worked on certain occasions also.

The Maahk I had first encountered came up to me. "I'm sorry, Arkonide. I believe your story."

"That won't help me much now. It was well intended."

"I know, but the majority are for your death."

"Just because I'm an Arkonide?"

He hesitated for a moment. "Yes, just for that. One of us tried like you did to go into the enemy camp and talk of peace but we never saw him again. The Arkonides murdered him. You will atone for that crime."

It was a sheer mockery of justice but I couldn't make the Maahk see it that way. I didn't have much time left because the council meeting was coming to an end. They had probably agreed on the death sentence for me. It seemed to be a foregone conclusion and I decided not to wait around.

"Look over there!" I said to my reluctant guard. "What's that between the tree trunks?"

As he strained to see something in the direction I had indicated, I toppled back swiftly and landed hard on my back. Luckily I was not injured and was able to jump up immediately and race into the woods, where I ran in a pattern to get as many tree trunks as possible between me and the alien camp.

Not 10 seconds later an inferno broke out behind me. Energy beams flashed at random, striking trees and causing them to burst into flames. I heard the rumble

of the heavy pillar-like legs of the Maahks as they rapidly approached. I made a 90-degree turn and soon discovered a giant tree root that was exposed several meters above ground. There were 3 or 4 narrow crevices beneath it which seemed large enough to conceal me. Even as I ran toward it I selected which one and then threw myself down and crawled hastily inside.

Not a second too soon.

Three Maahks ran past me so closely that I feared their weight might shatter the protecting root but luckily that wasn't the case. Nor had they detected my tracks. From my concealment I saw them towering above my position but only for a few moments and then they were running onward. Nevertheless I lay where I was. There was no sense in attracting their attention to me by making another dash for freedom. They would surely kill me.

I saw a fourth Maahk but wasn't sure whether or not he was my "friend". He moved slowly and deliberately but seemed not to be very keen about the chase. Yet I noticed that he searched every square meter of the forest floor and reacted slightly when he saw the tree root. His weapon was in his hand, ready to fire. All he would have to do was to aim at the root and fire. That would have been the end.

But he didn't do it.

Of course it was also possible that the other Maahks who had preceded him had made enough tracks to mislead him. At any rate he straightened up again and continued onward, after casting one more glance at the giant tree root. Personally I was convinced that he had spotted me but of course I had no proof.

I tried again to think intensively of the cave stronghold but once more it failed to work. Also an attempt to make a transition to Kraumon failed. I remained underneath the tree root, which was as solid and real as anything in the normal universe.

The sound of pursuit gradually ebbed away. The Maahks separated but they did not give up the search. It could be that their camp was deserted and without guards. For a moment I fought the temptation to go back there and destroy their weapons cache but then I dropped the idea. With a lot of luck I had escaped death the first time but I wouldn't make it a second time.

I remained where I was until the sun was high in the sky and there were no more suspicious sounds in my vicinity. Then I crept out of my concealment and sought to get my bearings. The terrain slanted downward toward the lake but also ascended into the mountain. So if I followed the ascending slope I was bound to approach my destination.

I passed the deserted camp at some distance and felt a little safer after that because the Maahks were searching for me in a downhill direction. But it was possible also that some of them might be lying in ambush for me up ahead because after all they were aware of the cave stronghold.

I continued to be cautious, observing each clearing carefully before I crossed it. Both my energy beamers were in my hands, ready to fire. If I concentrated both beams I'd be able to penetrate a Maahk defense screen, I was sure.

Gradually the trees began to be spaced farther apart, offering me less cover. I hurried onward at a faster pace. And now finally I succeeded in achieving the floating state which I had needed so urgently before. I rose up off the ground toward my goal. This revealed to me that apparently I hadn't possessed enough power of concentration during my perilous situation to be able to make a location change by means of thought transition. It was a factor I hadn't taken into consideration before.

Morvoner and Parvon Kher met me at the outer perimeter of the cave area. They had no idea of where I had been or what I had experienced. Together with a few other warriors they were practicing war games in a mock attack on a Maahk, who was represented by a large rock.

"So there you are!" Morvoner's voice boomed out at me as he let his men seek cover. "Where have you been hiding?"

This whole time I had been wondering whether to tell them the truth or to keep silent about the entire matter. I would have to admit a failure which would only serve to rake up more hatred for the Maahks among the Arkonides. And I myself would offer them proof that there could be no negotiating with the enemy.

Nevertheless I decided to speak the truth. "Morvoner, I was in the camp of the Maahks."

He stared at me as though convinced I had finally gone mad. Then he sent his men and Parvon Kher's soldiers into the caves and sat down on a nearby boulder. "Where did you say you were?" he blurted out.

I reported to the two commanders, describing my attempt to talk with the Maahks. They listened to me almost with disbelief until I came to the part where they condemned me to death. Then their faces brightened noticeably.

"Well then!" exclaimed Morvoner, sounding relieved. "So you see we were right' You just can't negotiate with any Maahks. Even if they take a vote they end up killing. No, we'll have to wipe them all out, there's no other choice."

"And that Maahk who came to negotiate with you that time? Wasn't he also condemned to death by you?"

Morvoner nodded with perfect equanimity. "Yes, he was killed, I'll admit that, but at that time it was quite another situation. Besides, he came to demand our surrender. That was such an insult that we simply had to silence him where he stood."

It was an argument that could have called for several rebuttals but I refrained from commenting on it. Instead I said: "The fact that I escaped and am alive to tell about it is something I have to thank one of those Maahks for. He let me get away although he could have killed me easily there where I was hiding helplessly

under the tree root.” I described the details of my flight. “So you see, Morvoner, there are different kinds of Maahks just as there are different kinds of Arkonides.

He thought about that and then nodded. “Of course that is so but what good is such knowledge in our case? None, I tell you. Now just forget all this talk of peace when the only reality we’ve got is a war.”

He was right, I was right, the Maahks were right. All of us were right and for that very reason it was useless.

I changed the subject. “Today I must try to make contact with Fratulon. I have to talk him into making the experiment in spite of the risks. Even in face of the danger that the war will continue on Kraumon. If we bring the ship’s guns into play we can settle the matter in a hurry.”

“You’d better go alone, Atlan. If I don’t go along maybe you can talk to him better.”

I thanked him and looked up into the blue sky. This time I could fully concentrate.

* * * *

Fratulon had finished his preparations. When I found him he was sitting in the kitchen with Ice Claw and Gamno. They had eaten and had something to drink. Their conversation was low-toned and desultory and finally I discovered the reason for their depressed mood. Today was the third day in which I had not made an appearance. They were very worried about me. Since I couldn’t determine the time for my materialization I had to wait and so I was a witness to their conversation: “We can’t worry about it,” Ice Claw was saying, and he held his glass carefully so as not to cause its liquid contents to freeze solid. “If I were you I’d carry out the experiment anyway, whether those Arkonide and Maahk ghosts kept fighting or not. You can’t expect Atlan to bring about peace in 3 or 4 days after they’ve been trying in vain to do it for 20 years.”

“So then what happens to Kraumon?” asked Fratulon. “Should we surrender this base?”

“Maybe so,” said Gamno, “in one way or another. “If you were able to just bring Atlan back by himself the Arkonides would think they’d been betrayed and they’d try to get revenge, not to mention what the Maahks would also do. Besides, it’s not certain yet whether the thing will work or not, anyway.”

“My calculations check out!” declared Fratulon peevishly.

“Then get along with it—make the experiment!” said Gamno decisively.

If they were thinking this way, I reasoned, my own mission here was going to be light. In Ice Claw and Gamno I had some good allies although I fully shared Fratulon’s apprehensions. It was obvious to me that he was merely fighting for time. Perhaps he hoped secretly that the Arkonides and the Maahks would

mutually get rid of each other before he started the experiment. That way he wouldn't have a problem. However, we didn't have that much time.

Ice Claw brought up another question: "What do you think would happen if you released your hyper-energy explosion at a time when there didn't happen to be any Arkonides or Maahks on Kraumon?"

Fratulon shrugged. "I assume they'd drop back into normal space wherever they happened to be at the time. By the gods, how do I know?! I've never conjured up ghosts like this in my life!"

But Ice Claw had raised an interesting question. What might happen actually if we were all on the other bi-dimensional world when the explosion took place? It would probably be best not to try it. Maybe nothing would even happen.

The three became silent again just as I started to sense the approach of materialization. I hadn't brought a written message so I was hoping that the normal state would last long enough for us to clear up a few questions.

Ice Claw saw me first. As I came to the table and sat down on one of the empty chairs, he shouted: "There he is!"

"It's about time!" said Fratulon. "Where have you been hiding?"

"I don't know how long I can be with you, Fratulon. So don't ask unnecessary questions. Give me a time when you'll try the experiment so that I can be sure to be here on Kraumon. Maybe there's something to your theory that the others will stay where they are, and maybe not. We'll have to anticipate that they'll materialize here. I tried to make a peace arrangement but it fizzled. So you'd better man the fire control station on board the big ship—that way we'll be prepared."

"And the base itself?"

"If the others *don't* come through with me to the normal plane, it's more likely than ever that it will be lost. Ganno is right, they would wreak terrible revenge, and they could do it. So I think it will make more sense if I can set up a period of neutrality with the Arkonides, enough to let them see our good intent. We have to leave the Maahks to chance. If they remain on the other bi-dimensional world, so much the better for us. On the other hand, if they materialize here they'll at least be able to see that I spoke the truth. I explained the whole setup to them and warned them about a continuation of the war but they did not believe me."

Fratulon fixed his gaze on me. "I'll carry out the experiment in exactly 24 hours from now. We know now that the time ratios of both planes are identical because we've made comparisons. So in 24 hours your time the explosion will take place. It will be harmless to us because it will have no detonating effect in normal space. It will only exert force through the hyper-energy fields. I've calculated everything precisely."

“Very well then, I’ll be here with the Arkonides within 24 hours.” I took the glass away from Ice Claw. “We eat and drink ‘over there’ too, you know. Much obliged.”

When we heard the alarm, nobody became very excited. Only Fratulon got up and went over to the lighted station plan on the wall. Then he came back to the table.

“The arsenal again—what else? I don’t know if it’s Maahks or Arkonides this time but it doesn’t make any difference anymore. I’ll be glad when this whole ‘haunting’ period is over with. Then I’ll put those old war horses in their places, once and for all. Those poor old comrades have really reverted to the primitive.”

“Nothing much more basic than being a ghost,” commented Gamno with a grin.

Shortly after that I dematerialised, abruptly and without warning. I remained awhile and then returned to my phantom planet to report to Morvoner and Parvon Kher what I had learned.

On the following day the entire ghostly army of the Arkonides would be present on Kraumon to await the hyperenergy explosion.

6/ THIRD PARTY

The next morning I returned to Kraumon in order to pass the last few hours of my present state in the vicinity of my friends. Morvoner and the others were to follow me within a few hours. I did not realize then what the consequences of my somewhat sentimental decision would be.

Fratulon was making the last preparations. Gamno was helping him. Ice Claw was on board the big spherical spaceship where he was checking out the fire control system.

It was then that the alarm sounded.

Fratulon was startled. Of course he was not aware of my presence as I had not yet been able to make contact with him. “So soon? That’s unusual. Ordinarily they materialize much later in the day. We’ll have to postpone the experiment and...”

Gamno interrupted him after checking the lighted station plan. “It’s not the arsenal this time—it’s the observatory.”

Fratulon dashed to the indicator map. “They’ve never shown up there before! Something else must have tripped the alarm. Maybe a spaceship is approaching us.

“A ship?”

“That’s right—or have you forgotten Sofgart the Blind? He and his Kralasenes will never get off our trail but I would never have believed they could also find Kraumon. We have to destroy the ship before the crew gets a chance to announce their discovery over hypercom. You stay here, Tirako. I’ll take care of that other ship!”

He hurried away without waiting for an answer. Invisible and in a sense disembodied, I followed him, anguished over not being able to make contact with him. But perhaps I could do something else. First, however, I had to know precisely what had set off the alarm.

Fratulon’s experiment had to be made at the moment when our materialization took place. That same moment offered the one chance to damage the ship that was entering our system at the same time, in such a way that it could neither return where it came from nor even send out a distress signal. This meant that both events had to take place simultaneously. But how would Fratulon be able to

guess what I had in mind? The ship was certainly more important than the experiment because the latter could be repeated at any time.

In the observatory the viewscreen had turned on automatically. Fratulon made some vernier adjustments until the slowly moving blip first focussed sharply and then resolved itself into a torpedo-shaped spaceship. The sensor data came in rapidly and indicated that it was only 20 meters in length. Also, it was moving at less than the speed of light.

I was familiar with this type of small, fast and manoeuvrable interceptor. The imperial secret service, the police and space patrol forces used them—as well as the bloodhounds of Sofgart the Blind. Perhaps it was mere coincidence which had brought the ship into our system but also we may have left some trace behind us that someone had found. I'd soon know which.

Fratulon did not deliberate long. I knew that the station did not have any really long-range ordnance with which to ward off an outer space attack in time. There was only one alternative: the cannons of the spherical spaceship. Of course their use would put the final seal on our discovery, and if the alien ship managed to get away, Kraumon could be forfeited as a result. So I decided to take the risk of missing out on my chances for a return to normal space, at least for now.

Without any lapse of time I was out in space by the approaching ship. In my dematerialised state I was able to penetrate it and was soon hovering in the middle of the control room, which was little more than a cockpit. Three Arkonides wearing secret service uniforms were seated in the flight control seats, obviously tense with expectation. I could almost read their thoughts, so intent were they at their respective tasks. Also if they were Arkonides there would be little doubt that they were in the employment of Blind Sofgart, whom I had barely escaped several times in the past just by the skin of my teeth.

I calculated that I still had several hours before I would materialize. If they reached the planet before that time I would not be able to perform my planned action. However, my hopes were pinned on the probability that nobody would be so foolhardy as to approach a suspicious planet and try to land on it without taking certain precautions. Certainly Sofgart's henchmen wouldn't be stupid enough to make such a mistake.

For awhile I listened to the sparse conversations, which failed to tell me whether or not they were here only by chance. Yet that really didn't make any difference. They must never find out that Kraumon was Fratulon's base and stronghold.

Without any introductory remarks, one of the Arkonides suddenly spoke: "That must be it! So our tip-off was valid after all!"

I'd have given a lot to know what "tip-off" he was talking about but nobody mentioned another word about it. They were a taciturn bunch and I could understand why. The tension fairly crackled in the small flight cabin.

I inspected the entire ship and tried to plan where it would be best for me to do my work of sabotage after I had materialized. Perhaps I'd only have a few seconds of time in which to come in material contact with the normal plane and try to damage an important part of the ship. Most urgent of all was the hyper transmitter because at all costs they must be prevented from beaming out any distress signal containing their position coordinates. That would be taken care of automatically if a defect occurred in their power plant.

So first of all it would be the transmitter.

I hovered over it and located the most vital and indispensable parts but at the same time I cursed the fact that my hands passed through solid objects without effort. I was helpless at the moment.

On the viewscreen over the control console Kraumon was starting to show recognizable details although for me they were still a bit blurred. However, I had almost accustomed myself to this kind of vision.

The three men became somewhat more talkative.

"The Blindman is going to be happy with us," said one of them. "I'd like to know why this Fratulon character is so valuable."

"It has to do more with that youngster he has with him," said another. "There's a mystery surrounding him but nobody seems to know what it is, other than Sofgart. Anyway, it makes no difference to us. The main thing is to get the reward."

The commander let the two men talk without any comment. He kept his eyes solely on the viewscreen and I was relieved to see that Fratulon's stronghold was just now on the opposite side of the planet. This helped me gain time even though Fratulon from his position was no longer able to track the ship, unless he had a couple of observation satellites in orbit.

"Is it true that nobody is on to the clue we picked up?" inquired the first Arkonide, and I waited in suspense for the answer. "I mean, in that case we'd have to divvy up with somebody else."

Now the commander entered the conversation. "Kroner, will you shut up! We'll never catch Fratulon if characters like you are on his tail. All you think of is the reward. Concentrate on your job! And just so's you can relax—we're the only ones who have this clue. Nobody else has ever heard of this planet and the man who told us about it is dead. And dead men tell no tales."

This was all that he mentioned about it but it was enough for me even though I didn't know who his informer had been. He was dead so that took care of that. The only ones who knew the secret now were just these three Arkonides. Regardless of the issue involved I felt regret that these three men must die and by my own hands.

Once more I studied the hyper-transmitter until I knew precisely that it would take me about 3 seconds to put it out of commission. It would take days to

repair it, provided of course that they had the corresponding spare parts, which I doubted.

Then I turned my attention to the power and propulsion room. My work there would take a little more time and I could only hope that such time would be at my disposal. If Fratulon went ahead with his experiment at the same moment it might have various effects which could hinder me in carrying out my self-assigned tasks. For example, as a result of a hyper-energy explosion I could be pulled away toward Kraumon to become materially stabilized there. But it could just as easily happen that although I fell out of hyperspace I would remain on board the ship, visible in the normal plane of existence.

Or also, nothing at all might occur.

It was useless to indulge in any further speculation. I would have to wait for results and then act accordingly. There was nothing else I could do.

On the other hand, if there were only some way that I could inform Fratulon of my plans...!

Suddenly I had an idea. If I were to write a message now and place it somewhere in plain sight for Fratulon, then during the general materialization the note would become visible and I'd thus be able to warn him of my actions. If necessary he'd have to put off the experiment for a day or so. The only vital part then would be to advise the old Arkonide troops but that was no great problem. I could make contact with them any time.

I did not hesitate any longer. I always carried writing foil with me and I also had a stylus. Since I was real to myself I was able to prepare the message without any trouble. The only thing now was to get it to Fratulon in such a way that he would be sure to notice it. Where would he be when the materialization started?

Today there was only one place he could be at such a time: the power plant, the centre of his experiment.

I "wished" myself there—and I was there. Gamno sat at the main control console of the rewired installation. The console top was empty. Any note placed there would certainly attract attention, especially if it were in my handwriting. So I placed it in that position where it was clearly visible to me. For his part, Gamno could not see it, and once he even passed his hand through it. For him the note existed in another dimension.

Without losing any more time I returned to the ship of the secret police where I found everything unchanged. I prepared myself for the approaching changeover. In any case I could be sure now that Fratulon would hold off with his experiment exactly 2 extra minutes, which would give me time to put our pursuers out of commission.

* * * *

I was to learn later what was happening meanwhile at the base:

In order to prevent any possible interception of radio messages, Fratulon sent a robot guard over to the spherical spaceship with a written message, which advised Ice Claw of the approaching vessel. Ice Claw was instructed to open fire at once if the ship landed. No questions asked, nothing. Just immediate destruction. Fratulon knew that not only his life but my own depended upon such a measure as this. He had no other choice.

He remained in the observatory until the robot returned and confirmed that his instructions to Ice Claw had been acknowledged. Only then did he return in a better frame of mind to the power plant deep below the surface. This was at a time when my note was already there. Under normal conditions he might have swept it off the console top inadvertently but in its present state it remained where I had placed it.

He also received an invisible visit from Morvoner and Parvon, who became convinced that all preparations for the crucial experiment had been made. The other Arkonides—that is the entire phantom army—were outside the station in open territory so that their sudden materialization would not cause any damage. They had seen no sign of the Maahks. No doubt they had remained on their bi-dimensional world in order to take advantage of their materialization by plundering the plantations. In the interim there had been no surprise attacks.

When Morvoner and Parvon finally materialized in the power plant room and immediately became visible to Fratulon, he was about to close a switch that would activate his experiment—but at that moment he also saw the note with my handwriting on it. He read it hastily, looked at the clock... and waited.

He waited exactly 2 minutes.

* * * *

When I saw the objects become more sharply focussed on board the alien ship I knew that my materialization was imminent. I just had time to withdraw from the control room before I felt myself standing on a solid metal deck. From there I would have to take ten steps to reach the hyper-transmitter. I had lost 20 seconds.

But with 2 or 3 adjustments I put the hypercom out of commission. Then I ran back into the power and propulsion compartment where I had already rehearsed my actions. I had calculated that I would need just about 1 minute here. If in the meantime one of the Arkonides should appear from up forward I'd have to neutralize him or he'd kill me. Luckily for me, nobody showed up and I was able to complete my sabotage work.

When this tripped off a shrill alarm in the tiny ship I knew that only seconds remained for me. By my reckoning, Fratulon must be activating his experiment at

that very moment. Exactly 120 seconds had elapsed since the start of the materialization.

I had squeezed myself into the farthest corner of the compartment, seeking cover behind a generator so that the enemy would not discover me immediately. But nothing happened so far. Perhaps the three Arkonides were looking first for a malfunction in the alarm system. It may not have occurred to them yet that something was actually wrong with their propulsion unit. They would only discover the defect of the hypercom when it was too late.

Suddenly I had a sensation as though an invisible force was beginning to pull at me. I had already closed my space helmet in order not to take any risks. I knew that if my dematerialization did not occur soon I would have to leave the ship in material form because it was falling with an increasing velocity toward the red sun and within a few hours it would plunge into it and be consumed. Before that time, however, the experiment must have succeeded, or if not I would simply returned back to the bi-dimensional world. In either case I would have been removed from danger.

I dematerialised but it was entirely different than before. I felt disembodied as usual and I practically “fell” through the hull of the ship into empty space but my conscious mind registered every detail. It was as though the ship remained behind me although it was on a collision course with the red sun and was unable to change it. Kraumon stood off slightly beyond the sun and to one side.

I too was hurtling toward the system’s central star but I could definitely see that my single destination was Kraumon. When I tried to feel my body I couldn’t find it. Previously I had always been able to feel my body as though it were physically real but not this time. Yet I could see it.

The experiment... had it really succeeded?

Kraumon grew swiftly before me. Nothing braked my incredibly swift fall, which appeared to presage my ultimate destruction. Even if I were bodiless such an impact would shatter whatever essence that contained me—or if there was to be no impact then the other alternative faced me of falling straight on through the planet itself and continuing on into eternity.

But all my fears turned out to be superfluous.

I also saw 4 or 5 Maahks falling through space toward Kraumon. By this I was certain that Fratulon’s hyper-energy explosion had affected everyone involved in a bi-dimensional state whether they were on Kraumon or anywhere else within the extensive range of its effects. I did not concern myself about the Maahks but instead concentrated on the moment when I would reach the planet’s surface.

Actually nothing happened at all.

In one second I was looking down at the station below me. It rushed swiftly at me until the buildings took in my entire field of vision. In the next second I was

standing on solid ground outside the base among the Arkonides—and all of us were fully materialized and in the actual material state.

The only question remaining was how long the condition would last.

But I didn't have time to think about it nor did the Arkonides. Blinding beams of energy came from all sides and killed at least 100 of the Arkonide troops before the rest of them could put up a defence against the Maahks' treacherous attack. I had turned on my own defence screen and sought cover in the nearby forest. I couldn't make it to any of the station buildings. Three Maahks stood in front of the nearest dome and fired uninterruptedly. Our big spaceship was at the other side of the base area, which prevented Ice Claw from taking a hand in the battle.

So it seemed that my altruistic mission had been in vain. The Maahks had not accepted my recommendation and although the warlike Arkonides had their shortcomings in this case they were blameless.

A hot wave of anger engulfed me. So this was the thanks we got for having brought them back into the normal universe! Once they had finished the Arkonides they would no doubt attack the station itself. Only now they were no longer bi-dimensional—they couldn't disappear anymore. And that, in a sense, could be their undoing.

I found shelter among the trees and observed the fight from a safe distance without taking part in it myself. Before the total number of seven Maahks could be destroyed, about half of the entire Arkonide force was killed. By my reckoning there were now 200 Arkonide survivors and thirteen Maahks. So the old ratio stood more or less the same.

My main worry now was how to get to Fratulon.

* * * *

My target building was only a few hundred meters distant but that journey turned out to be a virtual Odyssey. The surviving Arkonides had gone for cover in the outlying buildings of the station, where they had entrenched themselves. Some of them hurried into the now familiar arsenal in order to replenish their supply of weapons and energy recharges. There was nothing to be seen of the remaining Maahks.

The Arkonide sentinels let me pass when they recognized me and Parvon Kher discovered me shortly thereafter.

"Looks like it's working," he said, clapping me on the shoulder. "This Fratulon fellow is tremendous. Now we're back again in the world of reality."

I pointed behind me at the corpses lying about. "It doesn't look any better than the unreality we came from, Parvon Kher. Is this mad slaughter to continue forever? There is no place for this war on Kraumon because it is precisely here that we are preparing galactic peace."

“The Maahks started it, you know that yourself—or weren’t you here when it all began?”

“Yes, I witnessed it, and the blame is not on your side. I know you were only defending yourselves. Nevertheless I’ll never give up hoping that all this can be brought to a stop.”

“A futile hope,” said Parvon Kher. “This war has become so much a part of our flesh and blood that it seems we can’t live without it.”

“That I’ll agree with!” I answered bitterly. “Soon there’ll be none of you alive and all because you don’t want to live without war.”

“The problem will be solved when we’ve destroyed the rest of the Maahks. It’s as simple as that.”

“I’m afraid it isn’t all that simple,” I retorted, and I left him standing there.

When I encountered Fratulon in the power plant area he hugged me wordlessly. Gamno came up and slapped me on the shoulder. He said nothing either but I knew what he was trying to say. Morvoner Sprangh was also present but he merely nodded silently.

“So now the problems are only getting started,” said Fratulon as he glanced significantly at Morvoner. “We have to try to hold this war off, to keep it at a distance from the station. Morvoner has promised to see to it that the Arkonides get off the base proper and draw back into the woods. If no peace can be established, then the final conflict will happen there.”

“It’s all so damned senseless!” exclaimed Morvoner bitterly.

“Of course it is,” Fratulon agreed. “Especially now when you could all be leading a normal life again. Normal and natural, that is. But instead you seem to want to die an unnatural death.”

Morvoner surprised us then with a revelation. “I’ve given over the top command to Parvon Kher,” he said. “I don’t wish to be a part of this bloodbath anymore. Atlan has convinced me that killing can only be justified in self-defence. So we should only engage in defensive actions, no more attacks. Naturally I’ll be with my comrades if the Maahks make any more raids but I’ll never again plan an attack against them or lead one.”

Ice Claw made a surprise entrance. He had put the big ship under positronic security again and turned on the defence screen. I was the first one he greeted but then he reported: “The robot brought me the orders because I wasn’t on radio intercom. So this whole thing has worked out, as well as the matter of the foreign ship. I lost it in the trackers and sensors but as far as I could see of its course it must have fallen into the sun. Wasn’t that a bit too rough, Atlan?”

Before I could react to his question or vindicate myself, Fratulon answered for me: “No, Ice Claw, their penalty was not unjust, and there’s no way you could connect that event with the war between the Arkonides and the Maahks. Their fight is senseless because now they could easily finish out their lives either here or on some other world. They keep killing each other merely out of habit. But the

men who were on their way here in that space interceptor might have betrayed us as well as the existence of this base, and what that could have meant you know, yourself. Our mission would have come to an end and Orbanashol would have remained the Emperor of Arkon forever.”

It was too late for him to catch his mistake.

Morvoner glanced quickly from him to me. “Orbanashol? Who is Orbanashol? The Emperor of Arkon is Gonozal. We have given our oaths of loyalty and obedience to him alone, forever.”

Now it was Fratulon’s turn to give me a helpless look.

I shrugged and opened up to Morvoner. “I’ve kept it from you until now, Morvoner, but Gonozal has been dead for 15 years. He was murdered and after his death his brother, Orbanashol, took the throne. You couldn’t know that so up to this point your oath has been valid. But now it is null and void.”

“Gonozal—dead?!” I could see that this was a very real shock to Morvoner, which brought him all the closer to me. He must have revered my father very much. “Murdered, you say? By whom?”

Before Fratulon could answer, I took charge of the situation. “I’ll explain it all to you later, Morvoner, after we’re straightened out here on Kraumon. Those men whose ship is failing into the sun were after us. They are bloodhounds of the new Emperor and they are our enemies as well as yours. You’ll understand that when you come to know everything that’s happened. I sent them to their deaths because we didn’t have any other alternative but you can believe me when I tell you that they are working with the murderer of Gonozal. You will soon come to understand the connection.”

“Your word is good enough for now, Atlan. You know that I’m your friend and that I trust you. But later you’re going to have to explain it all.”

“I’ve promised you that already,” I assured him.

* * * *

The news that Gonozal had long been dead seemed to have no impact upon the course of events as far as the Arkonide warriors and the Maahks were concerned. Their mutual hatred was so deeply rooted that the war was continued in spite of its absolute futility.

In spite of an urgent appeal by Morvoner, Parvon Kher considered it his bound duty to root out the rest of the Maahks. So when on the second day after our return to normalcy the Maahks renewed their attacks I took it upon myself to make a peace offer, speaking over the station’s outdoor P.A. system. At least Parvon Kher had gone along with that much.

The Maahks ceased firing and listened to the message. I repeated it three times in order to make sure that everyone understood it. I counted seven Maahks who

stood on the edge of the woods and listened. From all appearances they seemed to be undecided whether to carry out their raid or not.

But then the monstrous betrayal happened.

Parvon Kher gave orders to fire.

It was only with great difficulty that I kept Morvoner from rushing out to the Arkonides in a transport of rage. I knew that we could exert no further influence on that which now ensued. Our last chance for peace was gone.

The surprised Maahks had turned off their defence screens as otherwise they would not have been able to hear the P.A. announcement, so now for a few seconds they were defenceless. Five of them fell at once while the remaining two charged the Arkonides, creating such havoc that I couldn't watch it anymore. They wreaked a terrible revenge for the presumed betrayal and finally died in the concentrated fire of the defenders.

According to my calculations now there were only 6 Maahks left and about 80 Arkonides.

* * * *

On the following morning, Fratulon said: "I like this fellow, Morvoner Sprangh, Atlan."

"That makes two of us, Fratulon."

"We have to make sure he doesn't make some stupid mistake that would cause him to be lost to us. Don't you think you should tell him the whole truth now? Perhaps it would be better."

I didn't have to ponder the question for long. Once more it seemed that Fratulon had read my thoughts. "You're right, Fratulon. I'll talk to him today. I'll need a few documents of proof and they are in the scoutship. Will you give me the key to it?"

As he gave me the key he said, "You know where the documentation are kept. Once you convince him we will have gained a valuable ally. Acquaint him with the swearing in procedure. If he'll take the oath he'll belong to us."

Ice Claw came unceremoniously into Fratulon's room. "I don't understand it," he announced by way of greeting.

"What makes it so special if you don't understand something?" asked Fratulon.

Ice Claw did not seem to take offence. "All those dead Arkonides and the dead Maahks outside—they've disappeared. Can you explain it?"

"Disappeared?!" Fratulon appeared to be shaken by this. "What do you mean, disappeared? Have the others buried them already?"

"Of course not! What would be so strange about that? They haven't been buried at all, they've simply disappeared. They've turned invisible. After they died they returned into hyperspace."

Fratulon thought a moment and then offered a theory: "Perhaps it's because they were too long in the other plane. They're too heavily tied to it. Even though they were pulled back to normal existence by the explosion, once they are physically dead here the hyperspace connection takes effect again. Mental resistance may have something to do with it—it dies out when they die. That would be the most plausible explanation. Anything else would be a bit too wild to contemplate."

"You mean I shouldn't work up a sweat about it?" asked Ice Claw. "I'm dead serious!"

"No—that's *too* serious. It might be bad for your health," advised Fratulon, and he then turned to me. "Go and talk to Morvoner. See if you can win him over to our cause."

After Morvoner's separation from his troops he had been assigned a room inside the station. This had occurred as a result of the betrayal of the Maahks. Parvon Kher and his remaining 80 fighters had been restricted from entering the base. They were encamped on the edge of the forest.

Morvoner was already awake. When I told him the purpose of my visit he asked no further questions. He washed and dressed and after shoving his energy gun in his belt he followed me. I made no objection to the safety precaution although I myself was unarmed.

We left the station and crossed the open space to the disc-shaped ship. With the help of the positronic key I opened the entrance hatch and shut off the alarm system. After we entered I carefully closed the airlock hatch again so that we would be safe from surprise. To make doubly sure, I also activated the defence screen.

In the small control room I pointed to one of the seats. "Sit down, Morvoner. I have something to tell you. You said my word was good enough but I'm going to give you more than that. After I show you some evidence of what I am going to say you will be able to decide whether you're on our side or not."

"You know that I'm on your side, Atlan."

"But you don't know everything yet," I told him, deliberately holding off his premature eagerness. "Just wait and see and then decide. It's better that way."

He took a seat while I procured some photographs and documents from the wall safe. Then I also sat down.

"Gonzal was the rightful Emperor at the time you were serving in the Fleet. He was assassinated by his brother, Orbanashol, who has since assumed the powers of the Emperor of Arkon. I have the substantiation of these facts, which are from reliable sources, and I'm going to show it to you. Fratulon was personal physician to Gonzal and he was forced to flee, taking me with him. Morvoner, I am Gonzal's son and as such I am the rightful heir to the throne. I was 4 years old when my father presumably was killed in a hunting accident. Until a short time ago I did not know my true identity but I know it now. I seek

worthy allies and comrades in arms, my friend. Fratulon certainly counts as one of them, as well as Ice Claw and Gamno. All of us hope that you will belong to our group, and that's why I've taken you into my confidence. The decision is yours—but don't be too hasty. Whoever becomes my friend and whoever is a member of our central core may also have Death as his companion.”

I actually expected him to spontaneously declare himself to be my confederate yet I felt no surprise when he did not.

“Atlan, I believe your every word,” he said, “and this news really shakes me to my foundations but don't ask me for an immediate answer. I'm in the habit of very careful deliberation when it comes to such matters. I know I'll react favourably to all this and will join you—nevertheless no one will ever accuse me of having decided at the drop of a hat. I need the time... let's say, one day...”

I shook his hand. “One day is not too much to ask for a decision of such magnitude, Morvoner. Now ask whatever questions you have, if some of these things seem to need more clarification. Back there 20 years ago, did you leave a family behind you?”

“Even if I had I would have been long dead for them, Atlan. I'm free, completely free—but I'm also old.”

“A man like you does not measure his age in terms of years,” I assured him, with conviction. “You have a wealth of experience and that's why I'd like to ask you if there's any solution in the case of Parvon Kher. I would not like to see him die.”

“He'll die just like his men and the Maahks. No one will be left.”

I took him at his word because I also knew this. My last scrap of hope vanished in this regard. “And there's nothing we can do?”

He shook his head. “No, we can't do a thing about it. Absolutely nothing.”

After that I showed him the few documents we had which confirmed my claims. The mute testimony wasn't much but it must have convinced him beyond any shadow of a doubt that we were speaking the truth. Nevertheless he still adhered to his intention to think it over. By the next day he would have arrived at his decision.

* * * *

However foolish it may have been, I decided to make one last try. The next morning I left the station and went unarmed to confer with Parvon Kher and his greatly reduced contingent of troops. Only 80 soldiers were left out of the original 5,000 men who had been rubbed out in a futile conflict which made a victim of either side.

“Morvoner is a coward,” he announced by way of greeting, and he didn't so much as offer me a seat on the broad tree root he was sitting on. “He's left us in the lurch.”

“Intelligence and cowardice are not always to be compared, Parvon Kher. The Maahks might have been ready to negotiate if you had not acted too hastily. All of you might have peacefully lived out your lives here on Kraumon. But all that’s over and done with. The only thing you have to look forward to is death.”

“We’re not afraid of it, and besides, we’re doing our duty.”

For a moment I considered revealing the truth to him but then thought otherwise. “Each does his duty where he sees it.”

“That’s what deserters often say.”

I was losing my patience. “If you were a man of reason I could show you that you are the deserter but I’m afraid any further argument would be purposeless. Your minds have been warped by a fixed idea and nobody can help you anymore.” I got up and looked toward the station. “Maybe one day you’ll come to your senses and then you’ll always be welcome on the base. From here on, however, you’ll have to straighten yourself out on your own. Farewell, Parvon Kher.”

“The best to you, Atlan,” he almost growled. He was too stubborn to yield even one inch.

I returned to the base whose borders were guarded by robots. It was impossible for anyone to get into the place unnoticed.

Morvoner came up to me before I had reached the first of the buildings. “For Atlan and Arkon—unto death!” he said ceremoniously, raising his hands. Then he reached out to grasp mine.

“So you have decided?” I asked superfluously, although I wanted to assure myself.

“I did that yesterday even before I learned you were the son of our Emperor.” He pointed beyond me. “Were you able to accomplish anything?”

“No, but it was to be expected. Parvon Kher and his warriors are lost. The Maahks will snuff them out.”

“They’re obliterating themselves,” replied Morvoner, and he led the way as we entered the dome, intent upon finding Fratulon and the others. Our new alliance had to be formalized.

We found all of them in the observatory. Fratulon indicated the viewscreen as we came in.

“You did a good job, Atlan,” he said. “Do you want to be a witness to the final phase?”

At first I didn’t know what he meant but then a short impulse from my extra-brain reminded me of the Kralasenes. “How much longer?” I asked.

“Half an hour. The red star’s gravity is exerting an increasing force on the ship. Even if their propulsion were intact there’d be no chance for them now. Soon it’ll be over with—they’re probably dead by now anyway.”

I saw a flaming solar protuberance reach out into space as though to grasp the tiny blip of light that represented the bounty hunters’ ship. It seemed as if the

great star were growing impatient to receive its burnt offering. A feeling of bitterness crept over me as I thought that I had caused the deaths of three Arkonides. But what else could I have done?

Fratulon placed a hand on my arm. "Either they would have betrayed us or we would have had to keep them as prisoners for the rest of their lives. After all, you gave them the quick way out. If they had returned without us, Blind Sofgart would have punished them in a much more lingering manner."

We waited in silence until the ship finally plunged into the sun and resolved itself into its atomic components. It only lasted a second or so and then it was over with. Fratulon shut off the viewscreen.

"Morvoner has made his decision," I announced.

We placed our hands together, one on the other, and recited the oath together. And now we were five.

7/ PHASE OUT-PHASE IN

For a few days we had peace and quiet.

Only rarely did we catch sight of the Arkonides who had pulled back into the forest to the North of the base. On a reconnaissance foray I saw them starting to build log cabins. I kept myself in concealment from them as I only wished to observe.

We had not seen any signs of the six surviving Maahks. Perhaps they had withdrawn down to the lake, which was a few kilometres distant at least. In that area there was wild game as well as plants bearing edible fruit. As far as I was concerned they could spend the rest of their lives there if they wanted to. Since there were no female Maahks among them there was no danger of a Maahk population expansion.

The situation was largely the same with the Arkonides. They would gradually die out and cease to be a source of danger, aside from the fact that in their remaining life span they would also be unable to leave the planet of Kraumon since the only available spaceships belonged to us.

And that was precisely the point that was to be brought to our attention later.

Meanwhile the work robots on the base had cleaned up and repaired the damages that had been caused by the “phantom” contenders. For me and Fratulon and Gamno and Ice Claw it was the beginning of normalcy, if indeed anything about our lives could be called “normal”.

Then, too, Morvoner Sprangh was a part of us now and he was gradually made aware of all our secrets. He was inflamed with the idea of fighting against the brutal usurper Orbanashol and hurling him from the throne. Although he himself had had no experience under the tyrant’s rule we were able to show him documents and other proofs which would have thoroughly convinced a far greater sceptic than he was.

We then considered the plans for the immediate future. We had been able to determine that the station had been restored to the point where it was once more ready for action. The day came when we were all together at mealtime and Fratulon reviewed the situation.

“It wouldn’t be wise for us to jump the gun prematurely,” he told us. “Yet the incident with that search ship that fell into the sun shows us all too clearly that

they're still on our heels. I don't know how our trail was picked up but it's a sure sign that somebody found a clue. You must not underestimate Sofgart the Blind. He is our immediate and most sinister enemy."

"In Gonozal's time we didn't have such characters," asserted Morvoner. "In those days nobody was spied on and pursued—much less murdered. There were just laws that one was held accountable for and if a person was in the right he was able to benefit by right justice."

"Much has changed since my father's death, Morvoner," I told him in all truthfulness. "Your strictly but justly ruled Imperium of the past has now become a bloodthirsty dictatorship which no one dares to oppose. But whoever risks it will have the bloodhounds after him—as in our case."

"Just let them come!" exclaimed Morvoner. "They won't take *this* base! But it's too bad my remaining Arkonide warriors are so stupid. They would be splendid confederates to have."

"Their routine of habit and hate have made them unusable for such a task," said Tirako Gamno. "I often think it would be better if they were dead."

"You mustn't say that!" cried Ice Claw, somewhat outraged by the idea. "They have been through an incredible gamut of terrible suffering. They should have earned their peace and reward by now."

"They don't want peace!" interjected Morvoner. "Unfortunately I have to agree with Gamno. They would be better off dead."

"Only a short while ago you were also living on such hate," I reminded him.

"That was a different situation, something else entirely. A man has to be flexible in his attitude and be able to make compromises. Even the Maahks have shown that they were ready to negotiate, if anybody gave them a chance. But I'm afraid it's too late now."

"Perhaps not," said Fratulon, although not too optimistically. "There's been peace these past few days. I hope it will stay that way."

Before any of us could continue the discussion, the alarm bells rang. We remained seated and stared at each other. There hadn't been any alarms for a long time now because if any Arkonide had tried to enter the station the robot sentinels would have always sent him back. And of course there were no more ghostly invasions.

So what could this alarm mean?

Fratulon finally got up and went over to the illuminated map with an almost deliberate slowness. "The worst it could be would be a signal from the tracking station," he said, "which would mean that another ship is approaching us. The station is programmed so that nobody can come into this system without being detected, and their only target would have to be this planet since it's the only one here." When he reached the map, however, he suddenly whirled to face us. "The disc I" he exclaimed, referring to our scoutship. "The alarm is coming from there! Let's go, friends, that calls for action...!"

The disc—our splendid little flier that had brought us here!

“An attack!” shouted Gamno, springing to his feet.

We couldn't be sure of that. There was no direct video contact with the scoutship. Short of running outside to see it, the only other alternative was the observatory. Up there we'd be able to see it directly. Fratulon decided on the safest method.

When the observatory's big screen brightened we saw our flying disc standing in the approaching twilight of evening. But by contrast to the concentrated energy beams of the Arkonides the twilight was converted to a blackness of night. The glaring bright coruscation of flames glancing off the defence screen blinded us and made us close our eyes.

The objective of the incorrigibles was immediately apparent and Morvoner expressed it aloud: “They want the ship so they can leave Kraumon. They don't dare to make a try for the big ship because it's too much for them. Fratulon, can they blast through that defence screen?”

Fratulon squinted his eyes, straining to look at the fire-bathed ship. Our observation screen brought it so close to us that we seemed to be only a few dozen meters away from it. He seemed to be undecided as to what should be done.

“It would be possible if they were systematic about it and all stuck to the same method. Then the screen would collapse. Then they'd be able to break through the outer lock door without doing irreparable damage.”

“In that case we'd better do something to keep them from it, Fratulon!”

I was completely in agreement with Morvoner. We couldn't just stand there and watch while the Arkonides took our ship. But before I could say anything something happened that made any other comments superfluous. It wasn't ourselves who blocked the Arkonides from handling the ship but rather a totally unexpected ally: the Maahks!

They must have approached from the forest without being observed because their attack came with surprising swiftness and deadly precision before we could do a thing about it. At least half of the Arkonides died before Parvon Kher could organize a defence. The ship had suddenly become incidental although it was basically the reason for the entire massacre.

Morvoner stood next to me and groaned aloud. “By the gods, we can't permit that! We have to help them...!”

“They were going to steal our ship,” said Fratulon in a colder tone than I had ever heard him use. “Sooner or later this decisive encounter had to take place. I have no intention of keeping the Arkonides or the Maahks from killing each other. And I'd like to give you something to think about: do you think, Morvoner, that there is a single Arkonide or Maahk out there who would ever thank you for hindering them in their mutual murder—or for perhaps dying yourself in the attempt?”

Morvoner stared in fascination at the viewscreen but did not give an answer.

The Arkonides had taken cover on the edge of the forest and were now returning a concentrated fire against the Maahks. By actual numbers the ratio began to straighten out again. Three Maahks died almost at once. The remaining three gave up the senseless fight. Ignoring the Arkonides they turned back to storm the ship.

I looked over at Fratulon. He had no other choice now but to take action if he did not want to endanger the ship. His face had become angular and hard, revealing a severity in him that I had never seen before.

Pressing a few buttons on a nearby emergency panel, he made contact with the combat robots who had been waiting in the arsenal for years to receive a battle assignment. With a radio impulse he released their security block and gave them the order to move into the fighting. What happened then, and which we were able to observe from the safety of the observatory, was the final consequence of the implacable hatred of the Arkonides and the Maahks and their unwillingness to compromise.

Only when faced with a threat of death exterior to themselves was there an astonishing unification of thought whereby both sides were forced to work together but by then it was too late. Neither the Arkonides nor the Maahks had an opportunity to benefit by a lesson that cost them their lives.

Under cover of super powerful defence screens, the heavy combat robots emerged from the station and marched out onto the field of battle. In fact they moved right into the crossfire of the contending forces and took prompt police action without any favouritism for one side or the other. Their one objective was to defend the scoutship, nothing more.

We followed the ensuing events in silence. Morvoner's fists were clenched as he saw his former comrades fall one by one. I was sorry for him at the moment but I knew he'd recover from the shock when everything was over with. We had done more than enough in the interests of peace, and from that point of view we were not to blame for what was happening.

The Maahks were the first to hold their fire against their normal foes. Instead they levelled a concentrated defensive fire against the robots, and moments later the Arkonides followed their example. For the first time in their turbulent history, representatives of both enemy races faced a common enemy. Without any previous agreement they fought as allies together in order to save their lives. In the face of common death they had finally seen the truth and grasped the meaning of collective action which would have meant survival. It was a perspective that arrived too late.

"Can't you call back those robots?" asked Ice Claw.

Fratulon gave no reply. I was sure that he could have done so with ease but I realized that in another sense he could not stay the punishment he had unleashed.

We would only be safe on Kraumon when the last of those Arkonides and the last of the Maahks had fallen.

I saw a few of the robots succumb to the fury of concentrated energy beams. Sporadic shots still bounced off the ship's screen but they could do no damage now. Three Arkonides retreated into the woods but two combat robots followed them with merciless precision. Shortly thereafter we saw distant lightning at a distance between the trunks and a few trees burst into flame. Then the two robots returned unscathed to the main scene of the fighting.

I turned away and sat down. Gamno joined me.

"It's horrible!" he said hoarsely.

I only nodded in silence.

One hour later, Fratulon ordered the robots to return to the station. Their grim labours were finished.

* * * *

The air transport flier from the spacesphere had brought us to the peak of the nearby mountain and set us down there. Below in the station there was no one because it was no longer necessary for anybody to stay there,

Fratulon had announced the arrival of a new phase of work without expanding on the subject but when we left the big spaceship on our present excursion he had said this was a well-earned day of rest. So we were on the mountain now enjoying the view of the Paradise planet that we had all to ourselves once more.

Farther below was the lake with its forested shores and its islands. Beyond stretched the grassy plains, whereas the buildings of the base could be seen below us to our left. Aside from a few crude cabins and barricades in the woods there were no signs left of the Arkonides and the Maahks. The dead of those lost legions of the damned had returned whence they had come: into hyperspace.

The war of the ghosts had ended.

Which could not be said of our problems, however.

"Are we going to stay here?" I asked Fratulon. "What's the next chore we have to tackle?"

He did not look at me. His gaze swept the forests and steppes of his planet but he answered me: "We still have work to do here at the base. This phantom invasion has delayed us. The supplies and equipment that have been pilfered will have to be replaced. Fortunately there are no further repairs to be made, at least none that are of any consequence. If we are going to continue to operate successfully we can only do so when we are sure of having a safe sanctuary here on Kraumon, which will mean that we'll have to be fully able to defend ourselves against attacks from the outside. What we need is heavy weapons. I'm thoroughly convinced that those three bloodhounds of Sofgart the Blind didn't come here by chance. The conversation you overheard on board their ship is

clear enough evidence of that fact. Who can say that such an event will not occur again?"

Ice Claw had been listening and now he made some inquiries of his own: "Then what you're saying is: we're going to stay here awhile longer? I'm just wondering where you're going to get all this equipment for beefing up the station. Heavy ordnance like you're talking about can't be picked up at the store around the corner—aside from the fact that there aren't any stores available."

"Now that's a real sharp observation," said Fratulon with a touch of sarcasm. "I didn't quite have a shopping tour in mind. Naturally the items I mentioned are already here. They are in deep storage far below the surface and all that's necessary is to bring them up and install them. Of course there's a lot of work involved in all that but we do have the robots. On the other hand I'll confess there are some items that are still lacking and those we'll have to see about."

Morvoner had been standing slightly apart from us but had nevertheless followed the conversation thus far. Instead of entering into it he had waited until Fratulon and Ice Claw fell silent again. Then he turned to us but seemed to be addressing me primarily.

"You told me what happened—that is, 15 years ago. What I'm interested in knowing is what's going on *today*. I mean, has the Imperium expanded? What's become of the war against the Maahks? Are we going to conquer them?"

Fratulon answered for me: "The whole war against the Maahks just keeps on going and there's still no end in sight. Of course the Imperium has expanded, necessarily so, because new planets kept being added—especially those that became involved because of the fighting itself, aside from the fact that a galactic war causes new worlds and races to be discovered. As to who will win? I'm sorry, Morvoner, I don't know the answer to that question, myself. Could be that both sides will lose just as we have witnessed here on Kraumon. "He looked down toward the station again. "In any war, both sides must lose, Morvoner—it's a natural law."

"I wouldn't have agreed with you a short while ago," admitted Morvoner, "but I realize it now."

We remained on the mountain for about three hours and then the flier took us back to the base again.

Ice Claw headed for the automatic kitchen. I accompanied him, ever fascinated to see the food and drink he consumed going down through his body. At such times he would smile with forbearance but usually did not spare me his ironic remarks.

Gamno and Morvoner went on a hike down to the lake to take a swim and bathe themselves.

On the following day the real work of fortifying the base would finally get underway with the installation of some major defensive weapons. We were determined not to be taken by surprise again.

None of us knew then that we did not have much of a reprieve at our disposal. The new menace was already approaching and this time there weren't any phantoms involved.

This time we would be met by hard reality.

THE END