

Mad Empress of Callisto - Jandar 04

Lin Carter

Book One

ZAMARA OF THARKOL

Chapter 1

On the Great Plains

Man's inability to foresee future events is one of Nature's kindest gifts.

Had I but known what would come about from that day's idle hunting expedition; no power in the world could have forced me to stir from the city of my beloved mate.

But a month of festivities and celebrations had begun to pall on one who was more accustomed to peril and adventure than to interminable laudatory speechmaking and the laying of cornerstones. And besides, the vanth were migrating.

Once each year this species of game traverses the Great Plains of Haratha to their mating grounds in the valleys of the Black Mountains. You might describe the vanth as stag or elk, for they are the closest you can come in terrene equivalents. A large quadruped, hunted for its succulent meat, which is greatly favored by the Shondakorians; a beast, however, not befurred but covered with a slick, supple hide like that of the seal or the dolphin; but a beast whose brow bears up a branching staglike crown of antlers nonetheless.

At any other season of the Thanatorian year, the vanth are elusive and fleet-footed game, difficult to catch and hopeless quarry to chase if you happen to be mounted on the restive and unruly thaptors the inhabitants of the jungle Moon employ in lieu of horses. The thaptor is a large, feathered but wingless avian vaguely like a cross between the ostrich and the legendary gryphon, and, like the ostrich, capable of attaining remarkable speed. But its gallop, if I may employ the word, consists of spurts of brief duration, while the mighty vanth can run all day without tiring.

During the short migratory season, however, the vanth traverse the Great Plains in gigantic herds, their single purpose consisting of the mating urge. The presence of mounted huntsmen, which at any other season would disperse them in rapid flight in all directions, they ignore at this season, intent only on reaching their mating grounds in the distant mountains.

Thus, with dawn, a gaily caparisoned hunting party rode forth from the great gates of the Golden City of Shondakor to hunt the vanth. And thus a sequence of events was set into motion which was to forever alter the destiny of a mighty empire and to reshape the future history of many nations.

I, Jandar of Callisto, soldier of fortune from the distant planet Earth, and my beloved Princess, Darloona of Shondakor, rode in the forefront of this expedition. Scarce a month before-as we Earthlings measure the passage of time-had we been wed, upon the success of my mission to rescue the Princess of the Ku Thad from her captivity and to destroy for all time that race of cruel and despotic warriors, the Sky Pirates of Zanadar. After innumerable adventures on the mysterious planet of Thanator, or Callisto, fifth moon of distant Jupiter, I had won a double victory: the conquest of Zanadar, the City in the Clouds; and the conquest of the heart of the most beautiful and desirable woman of two worlds.

Despite the alienage of my birth and despite my lack of noble or aristocratic lineage, I wed the woman I loved with the wholehearted consent of her people and of the peers of her realm. And today I reigned beside her as Prince of the Golden City. Such are the traditions of the Ku Thad race: the custom of a prince-consort is unknown to them.

We were very happy, she and I.

On that fateful morning, as we rode from Shondakor to hunt the mighty vanth across the Great Plains, we were accompanied by a party of our dearest friends and most loyal courtiers. Among these was the handsome and dashing Prince Valkar, with whom I had formed a firm friendship while we had both served incognito among that bandit-horde called the Chac Yuul, now long since dispersed and broken. With us as well rode gallant and chivalrous Lukor of Ganatol, that master swordsman who had taught me the ancient and noble science of the blade.

As well, there rode in our company the tall, gaunt, and solemn-eyed Koja of the Yathoon Horde, an alien insectoid creature, who had been my first friend on all of Thanator and into whose cold and passionless heart I had instilled the precepts of friendship. The ugly and doggedly devoted Ergon, a former slave of the Perushtarians, and the somber but valiant and heroic Zantor, who had been a great captain among the Corsairs of the Clouds, rode with us as well. And in our train thundered a half-company of the guardsmen of Shondakor, armed against any unlikely danger.

Oh, we were a gay and laughing band, as we rode forth from the Golden City that bright and brilliant morn!

How soon . . . how very soon . . . our gaiety was to darken with black tragedy and our laughter turn to grim sorrow . . . and again I say, we mortals are fortunate that the future remains clouded and unknown, so that we may enjoy each moment to the full, happily ignorant of what is soon to come.

It was Darloona who first sighted the white vanth. Her glorious eyes flashed with excitement, her lithe body stretched in the saddle as she spurred her capricious thaptor into full gallop. Off she sped, the long grasses sighing in her wake, one slim arm holding poised and ready the slender javelin.

Only a half-instant later I flew after her, jolting my steed into the charge, following the floating banner of her gorgeous scarlet mane. Ere long I had caught up to her and we rode together, side by side, in pursuit of the vanth.

A white vanth is exceedingly rare and the huntsmen of Callisto consider such a beast a great prize. And our vanth was indeed white as the new-fallen snow—a superb brute, fully grown, bearing up its proud crown of antlers like the unchallenged monarch of the wilderness he was.

On ahead of us he fled in great gliding bounds, flying like the wind. We urged our thaptors to an even swifter stride, lest the beast escape us by reason of its untiring and superior speed. In no time we had left the rest of our party far behind, with the sole exception of the determined Ergon. His squat, muscular figure bent over the saddlebow, his scarlet face dark with exertion, bald pate gleaming with perspiration, the Perushtarian flung himself after us before any of the others could follow.

I turned laughing back at him, aflame with the speed of the chase and the excitement of it all, and he twisted his ugly, square-jawed face from its customarily sour expression into a gleeful, froglike grin. Immensely strong he was broad-shouldered, deep-chested Ergon, for all his diminutive height and bowed legs. We had been slaves together in the Perushtarian city of Narouk, and had fought side-by-side among the gladiators of Zanadar, and the ugly, loyal little man was the most faithful of friends.

On and on ahead of us the white vanth bounded, gliding with an almost magical swiftness through the long, sere grasses of the Great Plains of Haratha. Ere long my thaptor faltered, gasping for breath through its gaping parrot beak, savage orange eyes rolling wildly. I strove to urge it on, employing the small wooden club called an olo which is hung at the saddlebow for precisely that purpose; but it was no good, for my steed was winded and its charge slowed, as did the four-legged bird-horses ridden by Ergon and

my beloved. We would lose the vanth, we knew, and must return to accept the laughing mockery of our fellow hunters with chagrin.

But-no!-for even as our mounts slowed, the vanth itself faltered in its flight, and, although it maintained a considerable lead on us, the beast no longer flew before us with the wings of the wind. Perchance it had strained a tendon in its headlong and precipitous flight, for I could see that it limped, gingerly putting its weight on one foreleg.

At any rate, from whatever cause, we still had a chance of coming within javelin-reach of the white vanth; so, instead of turning about to rejoin our comrades, now far behind us on the plain, we pressed on in hot pursuit of the limping vanth at diminished speed. And played into the hands of Destiny in so doing .

...

The Great Plains of Haratha are aptly named. From the inland sea of Sanmur Laj in the remote west to the Black Mountains of the far east, they dominate the southern half of this jungle Moon from the trackless jungles of the Grand Kumala on the equator to the austral pole itself-at least on the one hemisphere of Thanator known to me and to my companions; for the other side of this world, as I have elsewhere stated, yet remains an unexplored and impenetrable region of mystery.

For many hundreds of korads, then, the plains stretch, league after league of desolate prairie whose long grasses sigh and whisper beneath the winds. But by no means are the Great Plains of Haratha unbroken flatlands, for here and there, like miniature islands amidst an ocean, small clumps of trees break the monotony of the prairie. Generally, these are jaruka trees, which, with their gnarled and knotted black trunks and branches and thick growth of uncanny scarlet foliage, are the most common arboreal flora of the jungle Moon.

Towards one such stand of trees, our limping quarry now directed his faltering flight, hoping, quite obviously, to evade his hunters amidst the heavily overgrown copse.

As we neared the clump of trees in turn, we could not help but notice that even as our snow-white quarry was himself an unusual rarity among his kind, so were the trees among which he sought safe refuge.

That is to say, while the common jaruka tree has a black trunk and scarlet foliage, the copse ahead of us seemed to be made up of an equally unusual arboreal rarity, the sorad tree, which reverses the normal coloration, and boasts jet-black leafage with trunk and branches of curious scarlet wood. This copse in particular, I noted without thinking anything of it at the time, was also unusual in the extreme height of the sorad trees whereof it was composed. Commonly, it is yet a third species, the borath tree, which attains the greater heights; yet these sorads, their massive girth denoting hoary centuries of growth, soared to a stately height such as I have never before seen upon Thanator.

Unerringly did the limping vanth make for the safe refuge of this tall stand of sorad trees.

Unflinchingly did we direct our winded thaptors on its track.

We entered the grove virtually on the heels of the staggering vanth, but the underbrush was so thickly grown that neither Ergon nor Darloona nor I could freely cast our light javelins in an attempt to bring it down.

A narrow glade cut into the heart of the copse. Down its length the white vanth fled-but it was brought up short at the end of this glade, for here a solid wall of century-old sorads rose like a great palisade.

We sprang from our thaptors and advanced on foot as the white vanth turned at bay to face its hunters.

Darloona's glorious emerald eyes flashed with the excitement of the chase. Her superb bosom rose and fell, pantingly, as she breathed. Poised like a dancing-girl, my Princess confronted the vanth with lifted javelin. Against the gloom of the thick woods, the mighty beast glimmered ghostly white.

And then, like the phantom it so resembled, it vanished!

And in its place stood a small, dwarfed figure, swathed in heavy robes of neutral gray.

A strange little man, placid and plump-faced and smiling, with a butter-yellow skin, a bald head, and cold, slitted eyes of gelid ink-black venom.

Darloona gasped at this astounding apparition. Only a moment before the magnificent white vanth had turned at bay, menacing us with its crown of antlers.

Now it had melted into this air . . . and, in its place, a dwarfed figure in gray, smiling and enigmatic.

Magic! Or-dream?

Frozen with astonishment, I stood rooted to my tracks, staring at the yellow dwarf.

By my side, burly-chested Ergon glowered, one calloused paw gripping the heft of the great bronze war axe that seldom was far from his side.

"Where did yonder fellow spring from, Jandar?" he growled.

I shrugged. "As well ask, whither vanished the great white vanth we followed," I said.

"What vanth is that?" He grunted, curiously.

I stared at him, wondering if I had heard correctly.

"The great white vanth that fled before us across the plains," I said, wondering if we were both mad.

He looked at me in astonishment.

"I saw no vanth," he said puzzledly, "white or otherwise !"

Darloona and I exchanged a stare of amazement.

"But-I" I started to protest. But my protest was never concluded.

Because just then the weighted nets fell upon us from the branches overhead.

Kidnaped in the Clouds

It was all done so swiftly that it was over within seconds. A mind of consummate cunning, quite obviously, had spun the web which now entrapped us. But it was accomplished with such bewildering swiftness, that, at the time, I was too busy striving to cope with the mere succession of events to think much about it.

The nets were weighted with heavy stones and bore us to the ground. We sprawled, entangled in the meshes, and before either Ergon or I could free ourselves sufficiently to draw the hunting knives we wore scabbarded at our girdles, a horde of red-skinned men fell upon us from the branches above. They had the scarlet skin of Perushtarians, but their heads were covered with long black hair which they wore woven into a single thick queue down the back of the neck, like Chinamen.

This meant that, whatever they were, they were not Perushtarians, or, at least, not Perushtarians of pure-blooded descent. For the red men of the merchant empire were bald as so many eggs.

At the time, of course, I was too busy struggling against the many hands which clutched at me to worry about modes of hirsute adornment. This struggle, of course, was futile: tangled in the web as I was, I could not free my hands in order to cut my way free or use the sword I wore at my shoulder-baldric. Neither could Ergon, for all his burly strength. Our adversaries were too many in sheer weight of number, and had planned and doubtlessly rehearsed their attack in such wise as to render us helpless and securely trussed in half a minute.

We were disarmed, our wrists securely bound behind our backs with rawhide thongs, gags thrust into our mouths, and it was all accomplished with dazzling speed of execution. Then the squat red men with the thick black queues of plaited hair cut us free of the nets and dragged us to our feet, propelling us across the clearing and into the depths of the woods.

And all this while the yellow dwarf stood watching, a cold gloating smile crinkling his cold black slitted eyes.

In a detached manner, I could not help feeling an abstract sort of admiration for the speed and timing and efficiency with which our capture was accomplished. We were not handled with any particular brutality; neither were any indignities used against my Princess, although she was furious and raging, as was I. At the time, I did not feel any singular fear. Our captors had immobilized and disarmed us with great skill and cunning, but I remained calm and unworried, although I desired nothing more than to be free of my bonds and to get a sword into my hands.

The dispassion wherewith I viewed our present plight may easily be explained. I viewed our predicament, you see, as a temporary one. Not ten minutes behind us rode our true and loyal friends, Luker, Valkar, and Zantor. The master swordsman of Ganatol, the heroic son of Lord Yarrak, and the mightiest champion of the gladiators of Zanadar would be upon the scene in minutes at the most, and against their blades the squat, red-skinned ambushers would be helpless, for all their number. And at the heels of our friends rode a half-company of armed Shondakorian guardsmen.

No-thought I, detachedly-we had nothing to fear. Our position, although humiliating and uncomfortable, was temporary at most. Rescue, freedom, and vengeance rode towards us through the grassy plains with the speed of the wind.

Or so I thought at the time.

Our captors hurried us along through the thick underbrush and then thrust us into the most peculiar contraption.

It was like nothing more than an immense wicker basket woven of tough river reeds and stiffened with ribs of a light, fibrous, hollow, and tubular wood that resembled bamboo in all respects save that of coloration.

This basket was large enough to hold fifteen persons, as was shortly proved. For the dozen or so men who had seized us, together with the yellow, slant-eyed dwarf in neutral gray, and a young woman of aristocratic and even imperious bearing and hauteur joined us within the inexplicable enclosure.

I had naturally expected to be bundled into the saddle of a thaptor, for how else could our kidnappers hope to bear us away from swift and certain rescue? But the immense basket sat on the thickly grassed ground. It proved not even to be a wickerwork chariot as I had thought it to be at first glance. No, the huge light thing of woven reeds was hung from the branches above, for long woven cables or ropes went up from the rim of the basket into the leafy gloom above our heads.

What in the world did our captors hope to accomplish by this inexplicable act? I exchanged a wide-eyed glance and eloquent shrug with Ergon and Darloona. Were we in the hands of a pack of raving madmen? Did they hope to hide thus from the gaze of our rescuers? That was absurd and ludicrous: Valkar and the others would comb every square inch of this stand of trees until they found us.

As yet not one of our captors had so much as uttered a single word.

Now the imperious young woman who had joined us in the basket delivered a command in a sharp, clear voice.

“Cut us free, Zapur!”

One of the warriors plucked a hooked knife from his girdle, leaned from the basket, and began to saw at yet another rope. This rope was tied about the lower trunk of the nearer of the sorad trees. Simultaneously, another warrior leaned out from the other side of the basket and began cutting through a second rope, secured about another sorad trunk on the other side.

Surely, our captors were deranged! Their actions simply made no sense. And yet, with what cunning and sense of timing the red men had planned and carried out their plot! A cold little wind of intuition blew against the back of my neck.

A moment later, my intuition proved valid.

Our captors were not insane. Indeed, they knew exactly what they were doing.

For me jerked loose from the ground and swung up into the air!

Ergon and Darloona were struck wide-eyed with amazement. What was happening seemed to them inexplicable and utterly astonishing. I, too, was astonished; but I alone understood what was happening . . . and my former confidence at the certainty of a swift and easy rescue emptied from me on the moment, to be replaced by a growing fear . . .

For, while I had thought the only aerial transport known to the denizens of Callisto to be the flying ships of the Zanadarian pirates, this type of lighter-than-air craft had been used on my native Earth for generations before I had been born.

In short-we were riding in a balloon!

The capacious wickerwork basket was suspended by woven cables from a huge air tight gasbag filled, I suppose, either with heated air or with some gas akin to hydrogen or helium. The balloon itself was of some shiny woven material like oiled silk or wax-impregnated linen. Painted black, it had been invisible to us in the darkness of the copse, hidden among the black foliage of the sorad trees. Once cut loose, it swung aloft in instants. Now we cleared the topmost branches of the tall trees and floated free on the winds of the upper air.

The clump of trees dwindled beneath us. At the very edge of the copse I saw some of our would-be rescuers riding into the woods. Of course, it never occurred to any of our friends to look up and to search for us in the clouds!

I understood now why we had been so tightly and thoroughly gagged. And, remembering my former aloof amusement at our pointless captivity, and my bland assumption that rescue and vengeance lay only minutes away, I felt the sickening impact of worry, as the grim realization of how desperate our situation actually was came home to me.

But there was nothing I could do about it . . . at least for the present.

The young woman was laughing in delight and excitement at the success of the coup. Triumph flashed in her eyes as she exchanged a few words with the yellow dwarf, then glanced over at me with amusement. I eyed her grimly, inwardly furious.

She was a curious figure, I realized. Young and very beautiful, with the red skin of a Perushtarian. But, like the others, she was no Perushtarian, for the long silken banner of her glistening black hair floated on the winds about us. She wore an odd gown in a style unfamiliar to me, a light garment of silken stuff, tightly stretched across her breasts and fastened with a jeweled brooch over one shoulder, leaving the other shoulder and arm bare. She was, quite evidently, a woman of considerable wealth and importance, for expensive gems flashed at throat and ear, rings of precious metal adorned her slender hands, and a coronet of odd design encircled her brows, flashing with precious stones.

But I had not the slightest notion of who she was. To the very best of my memory, I had never laid eyes on her before in all my life, and I had no idea of why she had kidnapped us.

It was very obvious that the young woman was in command of this situation. The stolid-faced, bowlegged red warriors deferred to her with every token of awe and subservience. Even the little yellow dwarf with the slitted black gaze seemed in her service. She stood, tall, lithe, and laughing, one jeweled hand clinging to the guide ropes of the balloon, imperious and triumphant as a queen.

But queen of what-and where?

Few and widely-separated are the cities of Thanator the Jungle Moon. Several of the civilizations that share this world between them are wandering and homeless nomad peoples, like the insectoids of the Yathoon Horde or the bandits of the now-disbanded Chac Yuul legion. Our only enemies, the Sky Pirates of Zanadar, we had but recently destroyed, laying their city in ruins. And they dwell in the White

Mountains, far away to the northwest. The red empire of the Perushtarians is situated many korads to the northeast of Shondakor; and the four Perushtarian cities of Farz, Narouk, Soraba, and imperial Perusht itself, are widely scattered about the shores of the landlocked sea of Corund Laj. The nearest of the seven cities of Thanator to golden Shondakor is the city of Tharkol, which stands amidst the equatorial plains in the eastern extremity of the hemisphere.

With none of these seven cities is Shondakor currently at enmity, much less at war. With the exception of the Perushtarian merchant empire, the cities of Callisto are lone and individual sovereignties. Our relations with the city-states of Ganatol or Tharkol, for instance, are few; we exchange no ambassadors and we indulge in no trade or commerce. Both cities are vastly inferior to golden Shondakor in size, wealth, or power. For either metropolis to contemplate war with the Golden City of the Ku Thad would be absurd. They would have nothing to gain and everything to lose, for, having but recently broken the power of the Chac Yuul bandit legion, and having for all time exterminated the aerial corsairs of distant Zanadar, we have in recent months emerged as the most powerful nation on this planet.

Only the red empire of the Perushtarians are more numerous than the Ku Thad in terms of populace, and more wealthy. But the red men of Perushtar are the least warlike of all the nations of Thanator. They are a nation of tradesmen, a mercantile civilization like that of the ancient Carthaginians in the remote history of my own world.

For them to challenge the might of victorious Shondakor would be folly and madness. They do not even maintain a standing army, and during the long recent decades during which their trading caravans and merchant fleets were preyed upon by the flying corsairs of Zanadar, they grudgingly paid an annual tribute to assure their immunity from the depredations of the Sky Pirates, rather than raise an army of war.

Bound and gagged and helpless to discuss the situation with my Princess or Ergon, I could only lie, seething with silent rage, while these questions boiled through my turbulent thoughts.

By this time we had ascended to the height of at least half a mile into the air, and were drifting due east on the prevailing winds. Or so I guessed, anyway. It is somewhat difficult to judge one's direction on Callisto. The inhabitants of the jungle Moon have yet to invent the compass, and as this world is illuminated by a layer of luminous golden vapor in its atmosphere, one never sees the sun and thus cannot with ease or surety judge east from west, which is the easiest thing to do on my own native Earth. But judging the direction of our flight as best I could, we were flying east . . . east, towards the unknown edge of the world itself, for, as I have said, the far side of Callisto is a realm of unexplored mystery to the natives of this planet. Nothing at all is known of the other hemisphere, save that somewhere therein resides a mysterious people called the Mind Wizards of Kuur, with whom I have already had one encounter.

As related in an earlier volume of these memoirs*, while serving incognito among the warriors of the

Chac Yuul, I discovered that one of the advisors of Arkola, chief of the Black Legion, was a Kuurian named Ool the Uncanny. A little plump, placid Buddha of a man, bald, with slitted eyes and butter-yellow skin, the clever and cunning little priest had been none other than the power behind the throne, so to speak. A shudder ran through me at the memory of that uncanny battle in the Pits, when I had crossed swords with the cunning Ool, in a desperate, last-minute attempt to rescue my beloved Princess from a forced marriage with Prince Vaspian, the son of Arkola the Usurper. Although I am in my own right a master swordsman, Ool proved almost my match, for the little Kuurian possessed the weird power of mental telepathy and thus could read my mind and know my every thought. It is, as I discovered during that desperate duel in the dungeons, almost impossible to conquer a swordsman who can read your mind . . .

Suddenly I stiffened where I lay, helplessly bound in the basket of the drifting balloon!

Ool had been a little man, almost a dwarf . yellow-skinned and bald, with slanted eyes, gowned in a priestlike robe of gray . . .

My gaze flashed across the crowded basket to where the yellow dwarf squatted. His clever and beady black eyes bored into mine, almost knowingly. Almost as if he knew or guessed the direction of my thoughts, a cold and crafty smile hovered about his thin lips-and he nodded.

I tore my gaze from his slanted eyes, and lay stunned in realization.

One of the many mysteries that surrounded our capture was now solved.

For the malignant, gloating little dwarf, with butter-yellow skin was a Mind Wizard of distant and unknown Kuur.

Chapter 3

Prisoners of Tharkol

All the remainder of that long day we flew on, riding the winds far above the Great Plains, on and on into the remote east.

Our captors loosened our bonds, restoring circulation, and made us comfortable enough. They did not, however, remove the gags from our mouths for some reason. We suffered considerably from thirst, therefore.

Time and again I surreptitiously tested my strength against the rawhide thongs that bound my arms behind my back. Had I been bound with ropes, it is just possible that I might have been able to burst free of them, for, raised under the slightly heavier gravitational influence of Earth, my strength is somewhat greater than that of the average Thanatorian. But rawhide is a devilishly difficult thing to free oneself of, for as the untanned leather dries it also shrinks, and, being flexible to a degree, it “gives” ever so slightly to your efforts to- free yourself, instead of breaking.

Thus my attempts were in vain; but still I strove to loosen my hands. There was nothing else to be done, and it is not the way of Jandar of Callisto to yield supinely to captivity or to superior force. Far rather would I go down fighting with the last ounce of strength in my body, than to lie helpless without trying, however hopelessly, to win freedom.

Ergon, too, strove to win free of the thongs. The burly, sullen-faced warrior was gagged as were I and Darloona, but his scowling glare was eloquent. Had his mouth been ungagged, he would have made the air sulphurous with ‘oaths. From time to time, I saw his scarlet face congested with effort and the great thews that bulged in shoulder and upper arm tense and stand out in sharp relief like steel bands. But his strength, like my own, was insufficient to break free of bondage.

We were still riding the winds when night fell across the world. Nightfall on Callisto comes without warning and the transition from full daylight to ebon gloom takes only minutes. Thus, when the world darkened suddenly around us and the great moons rose, rich with their many colors, we realized we had been in flight for several hours.

Our flight ended shortly after the coming of the darkness. By the green and red and silvery illumination afforded by three of the many moons of Jupiter, we observed a city on the horizon. It rose from a hilly height amidst the plain and was nowhere near the sea, and therefore we assumed that it was none other than Tharkol.

We could not see very much of it because of our position in the basket, but from what we could observe, it was a large city of stone masonry, ringed about with the mighty bastions of a great wall. From a citadel-crowned and heavily fortified hill in the center of the city, broad paved avenues ran in every direction like spokes from the hub of a wheel. Towards this central citadel the queenly young woman guided our aerial vehicle.

The walls of the citadel drifted past below us. By the green rays of Orovad, or Io, which was then at the zenith, we saw beneath us a broad plaza or forum paved with smooth stone. Over this square, which was the courtyard of the citadel, our captress piloted the balloon.

A second ring of fortifications passed beneath us, and then, as the crimson rays of Ganymede added their illumination to the light of the first moon, we saw that the citadel which crowned the hilly height was built like an enormous ziggurat with many tiers.

Towards the third of these tiers we floated, descending as lightly as a floating leaf. Ranks of guardsmen stood stiffly at attention, the green and red moonlight sparkling from rows of helmets, breastplates, and spear blades. At a curt command they sprang forward, caught the drifting lines and hauled the basket down, tethering it securely to a lengthy mast or spar that struck out at an angle from the lip of the tier and which had obviously been designed for exactly this purpose.

It was the young woman who was the first to step from the basket. As she appeared to their view, the moonlight flashing on the jewels of her coronet, the ranked guards struck their mailed gauntlets to their armored breasts in a crashing salute, and thundered forth a great cry as if from a single throat.

“Hail, Zamara!”

So, at least, we had learned the name of our captress.

The guards bundled us out of the basket and lifted us down to the stone surface of the ziggurat tier, and again I could not help noticing that we were handled without roughness or insult. Zamara turned, made an imperious gesture, flashing in my direction one last triumphant, joyous glance of mockery and amusement from her brilliant eyes. Then we were bundled swiftly away, through a doorway whose lintel was carved with beaked and leering mythological monsters, and through a bewildering maze of corridors and passages into the citadel itself.

And thus ended our flight across the Great Plains of Haratha. If captivity must be our lot, at least ours was luxurious. I had expected to be thrust into the Pits, to be bedded on verminous and moldy straw in some lightless and fetid dungeon cell.

Instead, we were imprisoned in one of the upper levels of the citadel in surroundings of silken and

voluptuous comfort. Our “prison cell” was a spacious and airy apartment, stone walls draped with splendid tapestries, nests of velvet cushions arranged between low couches covered with rare furs. Few palaces, in my experience, can boast a more luxurious and beautifully appointed suite for their guests!

Herein, at long last, we were unbound and ungagged. Both Ergon and I had been on the alert for the moment, and when it came we fully intended to hurl ourselves on our captors in a desperate bid for freedom. But in this detail, too, the clever and cunning brain that lay behind the plot had already envisioned and forestalled such an attempt on our part. For as we were untied, alert and vigilant guards stood about us, many blades held unwaveringly at our breasts, quite effectively holding us at bay.

Once we were free, and stood glowering at the guards, helpless to attack, chafing our numb wrists, the guards backed slowly through the portal and left us to our own devices. The door, of course, was a thick and massive slab of the hardest of woods, bound with bronze studs, and securely locked and barred from without.

“It seems we are not to be starved, at any rate,” Ergon grunted sourly. I followed his gesture, to see low taborets of inlaid wood laden with platters of cold sliced meat, fresh fruit, cubes of delicious cheese, and crystal pitchers of golden wine.

Having been gagged for many hours, it was our thirst which chiefly tormented us. The wine was deliciously cold, of exquisite bouquet and superb vintage. Once our raging thirst had been assuaged, we became aware of a ravenous hunger within, and fell to the other viands with a will. The meats were tender and delicately spiced, and the fruits and pastries were richly satisfying.

“How odd of our enemies to imprison us in surroundings of such luxury,” Darloona murmured, glancing about at the gorgeous furnishings. My heart swelled within me at the calm insouciance of her tones. Few of her sex could have endured attack, capture, and imprisonment without giving way to an hysteria of terror or a storm - of tears. But the brave and gallant Princess of the Ku Thad shrugged off the indignity of capture and the dread of the unknown fate reserved for us with the unshaken courage I could only admire.

For the ten-thousandth time I pondered the miracle of fate that had won me the love of so magnificent a woman!

“Perushtarians,” I commented around a mouthful of fruit, “have a natural love of luxury which extends, it would seem, even to the decor of their prisons.”

It was a feeble jest, God knows, but she laughed wholeheartedly.

“No Perushtarians these,” grunted Ergon glumly. “You must have noticed their braided hair, Jandar.”

I nodded. “But they have the scarlet skins . . .”

“I am a full-blooded Perushtarian,” he pointed out grimly, “and it is known that something in our blood inclines us to baldness. There is doubtless a strain of Perushtarian lineage in these dogs, but another race is blended therein as well. Noticed you their bandy legs and lankness of hair? What think you, then?”

Darloona set down her wine goblet with a decisive click.

“The Black Legion!” she said.

He nodded glumly. "Aye, Lady! And I know of but one people in whose blood is blended that of the Chac Yuul and of the Empire as well. The city of Tharkol!"

I rubbed my jaw thoughtfully. "I had assumed as much myself, Ergon, having noted the general direction of our flight as best I could from the bottom of that accursed basket. My Princess, has our city been at enmity with the Tharkolians within your memory?"

She shook her head puzzledly, glorious scarlet mane curling over bare shoulders.

"We have had naught, or very little, to do with Tharkol in my reign," she murmured. "And in the time of my royal father, little enough, beyond occasional trading. The Tharkolians are an unfriendly people and keep to themselves, for aught I know. The many long leagues of grassy plain that lie between our cities have, till now, served as a barrier between us."

"It would seem, then, that they have attacked us without provocation," I said.

Her emerald eyes flashed and her superb bosom heaved.

"They shall find they have seized a very deltagar by the tail, then, the fools!" she snapped venomously, naming a ferocious jungle predator feared across the breadth of Thanator for its fighting fury.

"By noon tomorrow, I doubt me not, they shall find the unconquerable legions of Shondakor camped before their gated" she cried.

"I hope you are correct in that, my Princess," I returned quietly. "But I fear me you are not . . ."

"What mean you, Jandar?" she flashed. "Valkar will waste not a moment in following us thither. To raise the legions of the Ku Thad and to mount an invasion of the lands about Tharkol will be pressed with all speed. Ere long the city will be ringed about with our armies, and I doubt me not but that the hosts of Shondakor will make short work of any such resistance as the Tharkolians may attempt. True, the walls of the city seem stout enough, but recall, my Prince, the two flying galleons at our command: by their employment, a host of valiant Shondakorian warriors may easily be carried over the walls of this accursed city, to invest with ease the very citadel of Queen Zamara . . ."

My beloved was right enough in what she said. The destruction of the City in the Clouds had left us in possession of two of the remarkable aerial warships of the Sky Pirates. These two ornithopters, as the ingenious Zanadarian contrivances are more properly termed, are the Jalathadar, captained by Lord Haakon, a gallant Shondakorian of noble birth who had sailed with the Jalathadar on her heroic maiden voyage against Zanadar*, and her sister ship, the former corsair vessel, Xaxar, which was under the captaincy of her original master, Zantor. We had at this time no particular reason to doubt that the twin sky-ships were the last of their kind aloft. For, while doubtless several if not many of the Zanadarian warships had been absent from the City in the Clouds at the time of our attack on the pirate stronghold and its destruction, the only known source of the levitating gas which permitted the aerial conveyances to resist the gravity of Thanator had been destroyed in the conflagration which had reduced to ashes the city of the Sky Pirates itself. Lacking the means whereby to recharge their hollow hulls and airtight holds with new supplies of the lifting vapor, most if not all of the flying ships by now were doubtless grounded-a fate which would in time render the Jalathadar and the Xaxar unable to navigate the skies of Callisto, as well.

I forbore to press the point, deciding it was better to permit my beloved to retain her hopes of early freedom. Nothing was to be gained by sharing with her the reasoning which impelled me to doubt that our rescue by our friends was as imminent as she believed.

But Ergon sensed my reticence. And later, after Darloona retired to her couch, worn out from the excitement of this unexpectedly adventurous day, he sought me where I stood at the barred window, thoughtfully looking out over the vista of the streets and rooftops of Tharkol, bathed in the multicolored light of the many moons.

“Jandar,” the ugly, faithful Perushtarian growled in my ear, “you had another reason for doubting the legions of Shondakor would be so quick on our trail, did you not?”

“I did, old friend,” I replied somberly.

“May I know it, then?”

I nodded a bit dispiritedly.

“There is no reason why you should not share my inward trepidations, Ergon, although I have good cause to spare my Princess. My reasoning is simple. Valkar will not be able to follow us, because he can have no notion of how we vanished from the copse.”

Ergon blinked at me, his heavy visage grim and thoughtful.

“You mean—“

“I mean that the balloon was released even as the guardsmen entered the wood behind us,” I said in low tones. “Valkar and the others would have first combed the copse itself, to ascertain that we were not hidden somewhere in the thick underbrush. By the time they made certain of that, and began to scour the countryside for some sign of us, the balloon would have been well out of sight. And besides . . . ‘ I hesitated.

“Yes?” he urged.

I released a weary sigh.

“And besides, Shondakorians know nothing of balloons, which are otherwise unknown across the breadth of Thanator. And there is simply no reason at all for our friends to have looked for us in the skies. . . . ‘

Chapter 4

The Empress of Callisto

With dawn the next day my Princess rose rested and refreshed, and filled with zest and good humor. It did not in the slightest serve to dampen her spirits to discover that the mailed legions of the Golden City were not as yet encamped about the walls of Tharkol. Doubtless, she said cheerfully, the host had ridden through the better part of the night, and would arrive later in the morning.

Ergon and I exchanged an eloquent glance, but neither of us disabused Darloona of her groundless optimism that rescue and vengeance were almost at hand. Indeed, we strove to put a cheerful face on events ourselves, in order to protect her peace of mind. I don't know about Ergon, but, for my part, this was not easy to do; I had spent a perfectly wretched night, tossing and turning, unable to quiet my seething brain until the early hours of morn, in which exhaustion finally induced an uneasy slumber shot through with menacing and unpleasant dreams.

We bathed and breakfasted sumptuously. Again I puzzled-not only as to why the Queen of this city had caused us to be taken prisoner at all-which doubtless we would discover in time-but also as to the peculiar luxury of our imprisonment. Few prisoners are jailed in silken apartments of decor so sumptuous as to befit the housing of state guests of royal blood.

The answer to this minor mystery, too, we would doubtless learn in time, I grimly conjectured.

We had just completed our leisurely meal when the measured tramp of booted feet in the hallway beyond signaled the arrival of guards come to escort us into the presence of the Queen of Tharkol. It seemed that we should soon learn the answer to at least one of the questions which had plagued me-that is, the reason why the Tharkolians had captured us, thus deliberately performing an act of war against a neighboring kingdom with whom they were, ostensibly at least, at peace.

There was no slightest opportunity afforded us for an attempt at escape. The cortege of guards sent to escort us thither numbered, as I recall, about twenty. The number had been calculated to a nicety, I thought. Had they been any fewer, two determined and desperate warriors, such as Ergon and I, might perchance have risked all on a try for freedom. But twenty fully armed warriors . . . the number was too great; to try for a break would have been utter folly, and quite futile.

Thus the guards formed a hollow square, with Darloona and Ergon and I in the center of the square, and marched us through the sumptuous palace of Tharkol and into the throne room of the Queen without a chance of a fight.

The moment we entered the throne room I stopped short in amazement. And perhaps I should explain at this point in my narrative something of the manner in which princes hold state on the jungle Moon. It has been my experience that the monarchs who rule the city-states of Callisto generally hold court in a large pillared and domed chamber or central hall of their palaces. During such occasions these monarchs are enthroned in a great chair, often situated on a low dais in the center of the hall, a dais usually raised two or three steps higher than the floor of the throne room itself.

Zamara of Tharkol, however, ruled in a different wise!

For -one thing, her throne room was the most enormous single room I have ever been in during my entire life. The great hall must have measured no fewer than five hundred feet from wall to wall. It was an enormous circular space, or rotunda, ringed with a circle of marble pillars of immense height and tremendous girth which soared up far above our heads to support a colossal dome so huge it would have done credit to the palace of the mightiest emperor.

Around the walls of this enormous rotunda stood, motionless and in complete silence, a vast throng of nobles and officials and courtiers. These numbered at least three times the number of such officials as generally attended a gathering of the court in my own city of Shondakor. They were Perushtarians, one and all, with scarlet skins and brilliant black eyes, attired in superb and costly garments which scintillated with colored fabrics and flashed with precious metals and sparkled with masses of expensive jewelry.

The overall effect was stupendous-stunning!

Holding this motionless and unspeaking crowd back, as it were, a ring of guardsmen stood three deep, entirely encircling the vast echoing room. Daylight glittered blindingly from polished helm, golden cuirass, kite shield, and spear blade. Cloaks of black and scarlet velvet and tall plumes of those same colors adorned these guards, who were, without exception, men of extraordinary height, physical development, and handsomeness. Like so many Adonises in gold, scarlet, and black, the triple ring of guards stood, frozen at attention, immobile as bronze statues. Not one of them was an inch less than six feet tall.

Again, the cumulative effect was staggering.

At the center of the gigantic hall, Zamara sat enthroned.

Her throne was a ponderous and shimmering thing of solid electrum which must have weighed a ton or more. Even if the tremendous throne was only plated with the precious stuff, the amount of gold and silver that had gone into the making of the alloy, represented in itself the ransom of an imperial province.

And, where most of the Princes of Thanator sit in state atop a dais consisting of two or three steps, such proportions were too modest for the likes of Zamara of Tharkol. Her dais was seventeen steps high, and towered above the heads of the throng like a miniature hill!

Her costume consisted entirely of jewels. These were either white or ice-blue diamonds, for the most part, or at least the Callistan equivalent of the diamond, a gem which the races of Thanator name ramazond. The wealth of many kingdoms adorned the body of this young woman.

She was certainly one of the most beautiful creatures I have ever set eyes upon. Slim as a sapling, graceful as a dancer, lithe, supple, and dangerous as a leopard, the warm scarlet of her naked arms, long legs, and slim waist contrasted startlingly with the bejeweled treasure she wore. Her face was heart-shaped, vital, alive, with enormous and brilliant eyes and a flowing mane of silken black, caught in a jeweled coronet of flashing stones. She sat in the mighty throne, a vision of incredible wealth, dazzling beauty, and awesome power.

I think I gasped at the sight of her. Directly above her soared the immense dome of lucent crystal. Daylight poured down upon her in a flood of golden fire that struck to glory the magnificent gems which adorned her half-naked body. She was stunning . . . and she knew it

In that moment of deafening silence when we stood, all three of us, frozen in amazement at the magnificence of this spectacle, an imposing chamberlain rang his mace against the marble pave with a crash of thunder.

“Kneel ye in the presence of Zamara the Magnificent, supreme and unchallenged Empress of all Callisto!” he boomed out in a deep, rolling voice.

As a field of wheat bends all at once beneath the unseen pressure of a mighty wind, so did all that vast throng of courtiers fall to their knees before the tall throne. Only we three captives remained standing.

Zamara caught our astonished gaze across the vast and glittering hall, and smiled a sly and mocking smile.

“The Prince and Princess of Shondakor and their servant may advance to kiss the feet of their Empress,” she called sweetly.

Ergon growled deep in his barrel chest, but whether it was from the affront of being called our servant, or from the insult to Darloona and myself, I do not know. As for myself, my fists balled and my jaw settled truculently.

Darloona, however, reacted splendidly. She was royalty born, whereas I was but royalty by marriage, if you know what I mean. She drew herself up splendidly, and made no reply. But the contempt she did not express in words was eloquent in every line of her body.

She was superb! Again I was grateful to the fate that had earned me the love of such a woman.

After a moment of eloquent silence, she spoke. The calm tone of her voice and the serenity of her expression belied the fury that must have seethed and roiled within her breast.

“The Princess of Shondakor will be pleased to extend the hand of friendship to the Princess of Tharkol,” she said tranquilly, “in the name of the bonds of mutual respect that have always existed between our cities . . . and of the peace between them which has, heretofore, remained unbroken for a thousand years.”

The rebuff was exquisitely delivered. Zamara flushed a deeper crimson and bit her lower lip in vexation as a gasp of startled shock went murmuring through the vast and echoing hall. Doubtless Zamara had thought to shame or fluster my beloved in contrast between their persons-Zamara enthroned in a glamour of incredible magnificence, at the height of her imperial power-and Darloona disheveled, in rude hunting costume, her glorious mane tousled and uncombed, her regalia left behind. But such did not occur. The innate majesty and queenliness of my beloved put to shame the ostentation flaunted by the bejeweled, self-styled “empress.” And-what made it all the worse for Zamara-she knew it. And so did everyone else in the room.

We were returned to our apartment and spent the remainder of that day in seclusion. Despite her small victory over Zamara, my Princess was in a perfect fury at this outrage, and paced the length of the room like a caged tigress, boiling with rage. Ergon and I sat together conversing in low tones, discussing our present predicament and our chances of somehow getting out of it.

Although she said nothing about it, I think Darloona knew by now that the host of Shondakor was not going to arrive before the walls of Tharkol in an hour or two, or even a week or two. The very real danger into which chance had thrust us had dawned upon her at last, as it had long since dawned upon Ergon and myself. Darloona’s royal fury at the outrage kept her, for the moment, too busy to think out the implications of our imprisonment. But Ergon and I knew them well.

For even if Darloona’s uncle, Lord Yarrak, did in fact discover our whereabouts and march to lay siege to Tharkol with the host of the Golden City, it would be stalemate. Zamara would display us on the walls and threaten to have us tortured to death before the entire army of Shondakor unless it surrendered-and, I very much feared, it would surrender. The person and safety of the Warrior Princess was sacred to the Ku Thad, and Zamara of Tharkol knew it well.

But there was another element in our predicament that tormented me. And that was the character of Zamara herself. We were prisoners, completely at the mercy of a megalomaniac who, drunk with pomp, pride, and power, had somehow managed to convince herself that she was destined to dominate the entire planet, and did not hesitate to entitle herself Empress of Thanator.

In a word-she was mad.

And there is simply no arguing with an insane person . . . especially if you happen to be helplessly in her power.

There was no telling what she might do. Because, in her madness, folly, and blind egoism, she was literally capable of doing-anything!

Hence it was imperative that we make our escape at once . . .

I have to laugh, looking back on it all. How many times have I read in fantastic fiction of a hero in a similar predicament to that in which Darloona and Ergon and I now found ourselves. Edgar Rice Burroughs, in his wonderful Mars Books, has thrust the valiant John Carter into the clutches of a Barsoomian jeddak a thousand times (indeed, I can't remember a single one of his marvelously entertaining novels in which the hero is not made somebody's prisoner at least once in the course of the narrative!), and the ingenuity of the various means whereby the greatest swordsman of two worlds escapes from whatever durance vile he finds himself in has never failed to amuse and entertain me.

But in real life, I am sorry to say, things are very different.

Our cell, though sumptuous, was still a cell-a chamber walled with solid stone, against which the strength of fifty men would exhaust itself without effect. The windows gave forth on a tantalizing vista of wall, street, and rooftops-but were heavily and securely barred with grilles of dense metal, impervious to anything lesser than a battering ram. At least a dozen guards were posted at the only entrance to our suite during every moment of the night and day, and even were I armed and free, it would take a superman to hew a path through so many mailed and vigilant warriors.

No, we were captives, and bound to remain so for the immediate future!

Worn out with futile plans and schemes, we listlessly nibbled at the platters of exquisite viands set out for us, and one by one went to our couches to seek such rest as weary minds might find.

It was several hours later when I came suddenly awake. The room was drowned in darkness, but the window was a tall rectangle of lucent silver lit by the gorgeous orb of Ramavad.

I could not at once think what it was that had so suddenly awakened me. But awake I was, quivering and tense and alert, as if, for all the depth of my exhausted slumbers, some unsleeping faculty had remained on watch, and had roused me as it sensed the stealthy approach of some unseen danger.

There it was again-that furtive ghost of sound!

The slither of sandal leather on naked stone.

And then I froze, every sense thrumming, as if suddenly a gout of ice water had sluiced me from head to foot.

For a man was standing near the head of my couch-I could see the outline of his black-cloaked figure etched in luminous silver from the moonlight streaming through the window-and it was neither Ergon nor Darloona.

Some unknown and mysterious stranger had made his silent, stealthy way into the room by dark of night, and crept towards me in the gloom.

I sprang from my couch and was upon him in a single bound.

And in the very next instant, I was fighting for my life!

Book Two

GLYPTO THE CHANTHAN

Chapter 5

A Secret Passage

Even as I pounced upon the cloaked figure it writhed from my grip. And in the next instant a wicked, hooked little knife flashed at my throat. I blocked the thrust with my forearm, seized the wrist of the assassin's knife hand, and wrung it cruelly, forcing a squeal of pain from the lips of my opponent.

The hooked knife fell on the silken carpets, but my mysterious opponent had yet other weapons. One of these, a bony knee, caught me in the pit of the stomach with sickening force. The breath whooshed from my lungs and I reeled groggily for a moment, struggling to catch my breath.

My opponent seized his opportunity and twisted from my grip. He was as hard to hold onto as a slippery eel, that fellow! In a swirl of his black cape he melted into the shadows of the chamber and had all but vanished as swiftly and mysteriously as he had entered it.

And this, no doubt, he would have done, had it not been for Ergon. We all slept in the same room, you see, but it was a large and capacious chamber with silk-draped couches scattered about, which afforded us considerable privacy. My Princess slept in a couch we had drawn into a niche of the wall, and, for her greater privacy, Ergon and I had rigged up a curtain which veiled the alcove. But Ergon sprawled on a couch across the room from me, snoring lustily.

The muffled sounds of the struggle had roused the faithful fellow. And, even as my slippery adversary wriggled free of my grasp and slunk into the deeper gloom, the burly Perushtarian was upon him with a tigerish lunge. He dealt the cloaked figure a stunning buffet and dragged him out into the moonlight where I stood, clutching my middle, and gasping for breath.

Tossing the limp figure to the floor in a swirl of black, ragged cloak, Ergon growled, "I believe this is yours, Jandar?"

"Indeed it is," I panted. "Ergon, strike a light to yonder candelabrum, and let us see what we have caught."

The hunched little figure huddled at our feet whined and sniveled as Ergon strode to an ivory-inlaid

taboret and touched a flame to the many-branched candlestick. In the milky light we perceived a scrawny, bent little man wrapped in the greasy folds of a ragged, patched cloak of black fabric.

“Cry you mercy, lords!” the little man snuffled. “If it be I have come into the wrong chamber by mistake, why-why-“

Ergon stripped the black cloak away and we peered down in amusement and curiosity at the whimpering, miserable creature that groveled before us. He was thin and scrawny and looked half-starved, with bony shanks and a huge beak of a nose, comical in a seamed and wizened face. It was impossible to guess his age, but his place in society was unmistakable.

Ergon grunted sourly, pointing to a brand burnt into the brow of the whimpering little man. “A thief,” he growled. The little fellow peered up at us fearfully, his one good eye shrewd and sharp and bright as a ferret’s, the other concealed by a black eye patch that lent him a rakish appearance. Lank, greasy locks fell in a tangle over a high bony brow. His thin-lipped mouth worked in stammering terror, a pointed chin adorned with a stringy tuft of ill-kempt beard. His hollow cheeks were stubbled, and the raw stench of cheap wine, raw onions, and sour garlic hovered about him, mingling with the odors of his unwashed body, and of the filthy, dilapidated rags that barely covered it.

“Not so-not so, lords, on my honor!” the one-eyed little rogue squeaked fearfully. “I am Glypto, an unemployed chanthan, at your honor’s service!”

Ergon chuckled and cocked an amused eyebrow at this. The brand on the scrawny little rogue’s brow was the Thanatorian character for chark, or “thief.” But a chanthan is quite another thing, indeed. The term denotes a certain class of landless but wellborn gentlemen of the chanar, the warrior-caste. The term is often stretched to lend a degree of spurious dignity to the more furtive classes of Callistan society, however.

No wonder it roused a chuckle from glum, glowering Ergon. Our greasy, whimpering little captive referred to himself as a “gentleman adventurer,” which was an overly polite euphemism for any sort of slinking rogue.

The scuffle had aroused Darloona. Clutching the coverlet of her couch about her, she asked what was toward. Spying her, our captive fell on his scrawny knees and lifted imploring-and none too clean-hands to her.

“Mercy-mercy for poor, starved Glypto, noble lady! Glypto meant no harm to the noble lords! Glypto mistook his way in the black of night, he-“

“Jandar, what in the world is this?” Darloona queried, her surprise giving way to amusement. I shrugged, laughing.

“An unexpected ally, my Princess! A friend who has come to extricate us from our predicament. . .”

Ergon frowned, wrinkling his bald scarlet pate. Nudging the groveling little rogue with a toe, he growled. “‘Tis but a thieving rascal, Jandar! Call you this whining horeb ‘friend’?”

“I do indeed, Ergon,” I smiled. “I will hail any man as my friend, who shows me a way to get out of this gilded cage in which we are locked.”

Darloona looked at me puzzledly. “But how can this little man help us?” she murmured.

“My darling,” I grinned, “he got in here somehow-and unobserved, since thieves are seldom invited to ply their trade in palaces. And however he got in-surely we can get out by the same route.”

Ergon’s brow cleared at my words and his surly gaze sparkled with zest at the thought of freedom. “Of course! Devil take me for a witless fool! Here, you-whatever your name is-we’re not going to kill you or turn you over to the guards-so cease your everlasting whimpering before you summon them hither with your uproar.”

Glypto’s snuffling was cut short, as he suddenly realized he was in no danger from us. His shrewd little eye peered up from where he crouched, sharp yet furtive, as if hardly daring to believe his good fortune.

“Glypto the chanthan, my masters!” he chirped brightly.

“Nay, ‘tis Glypto the Thief, I’ll wager,” smiled Darloona.

He ducked in an obsequious little bow.

“And you will have it so, gracious lady! Glypto the Thief-the son of Glypto the Thief-the grandson of Glypto the Thief-at your service, my masters!”

It was hard to keep a straight face when talking to the little fellow; everything about him was innately comical, from his ferretlike, twinkling one eye to his enormous beak of a nose which dominated his famished, wizened face as if in its growth, the prominent proboscis had drained his other features of their vitality in order to sustain itself. And his whining little voice, which either croaked like a frog or chirped like a sparrow, itself made you chuckle. For he spoke his Thanatorian with a drawl on the vowels and a rasp of the consonants that sounded for all the world like the Callistan equivalent of Cockney.

See here, Glypto,” I said severely, “you are in no danger of harm from us, so long as you do our bidding. We are held captive here, and if you assist us in making our escape, a rich reward will be yours. . . .”

He crawled to his feet, nimbly retrieving the little hooked knife I had wrested from him, which he restored to its accustomed place within the bundle of sour rags that clothed his scrawny form. Even standing, the hunched, sidling little man scarcely came up to Ergon’s collarbone.

“At your service, noble lords! How can Glypto the chanthan be of service?” he chirped inquisitively.

“We want to know how you got in here, guttersnipe,” Ergon grunted. In answer, Glypto rolled his one good eye eloquently skyward. We followed his gaze. Ergon growled a curse and I groaned.

For a black opening yawned in the ceiling!

Earlier, Ergon and I had searched every inch of the apartment, thumping every foot of the walls, hoping to find a secret panel or a concealed passage of some sort, as the palaces of Thanator are often honeycombed with such. We had even rolled back the carpets and tested the floors.

But it had simply never occurred to us to try the ceiling!

The little rogue grinned and strutted, preening himself in our eyes.

“An hereditary secret, my noble lords and masters!” he crowed. “Handed down over the generations from father to son! Aye, none less than the closely guarded secret of the House of Glypto!”

“And the meal-ticket of a family of thieving rascals, I doubt me not,” grunted Ergon, making as if to cuff the swaggering little fellow with a clout from the back of his hand.

Glypto cringed from the half-hearted blow, showing pointed, ratlike, yellowish teeth in a frightened snarl. But Darloona put out one hand to halt Ergon; her womanly heart was touched by the pathetic and yet amusing little man.

“Ergon, don’t strike him; he will help us to escape, and we should be grateful,” she said softly.

Ergon growled and spat.

“As you will, my lady. But trust the scrawny little horeb no further than an arm’s reach away. Such as he would sell us to the guards for a copper coin!”

Glypto made an elaborate, courtly bow to my Princess, stuck out his tongue at the surly Ergon, then pranced across the room to where the secret trapdoor gaped in the ceiling.

“This way! This way, my masters! Permit your servant to show you the secret of the House of Glypto!” he chortled gaily.

Darloona quickly donned her hunting garb while Ergon and I pulled on our leathern tunics, girdles, and buskins. Two moons were aloft in the night skies of Thanator, and the vast amber-and-ocher-banded bulk of mighty Gordrinator (as the Callistans term their primary, Jupiter) heaved up its mighty orb above the horizon by the time we were ready to depart.

A knotted cord dangled down from the panel in the ceiling, and by this we one by one ascended, with Glypto in our rear. We found ourselves crouched in a narrow crawl-space between the floors. It was dark and cramped, airless and stifling, but Glypto produced a stub of candle to which he struck a light. By the thin, wavering illumination of this bit of greasy wax we perceived that the narrow space between the floors consisted of heavy beams between which thin flimsy laths, coated with plaster, formed the ceiling. Glypto showed us how to crawl along the beams and cautioned us against putting any weight on the laths between these beams, warning us that they were not strong enough to bear our weight.

So we progressed on hands and knees, Glypto taking the forward position after carefully drawing up the knotted line, which he untied and stowed away beneath his rags. He also drew up and pegged shut the trapdoor: when shut, the hairline crack in the plaster was invisible from the room below, or so he assured us.

The crawl-space ended in a vertical wall wherein Glypto or his ancestors had cut a hole. Once through this we were able to stand erect, and found ourselves in a black and stifling passageway hollowed through the wall of the palace. We could stand erect, but could only go back or forward by inching along sideways, so narrow was the passage between the wall of our room and that of the next apartment.

Glypto sent a chill of dread into the very marrow of my bones when he carelessly announced that the apartment next to ours housed none other than the gray-robed, slant-eyed yellow dwarf who had so cleverly assisted in our capture. This personage he called the Queen’s priest and councillor, and gave us to understand that his name was Ang Chan.

I knew-although my companions did not-that the yellow dwarf was one of the Mind Wizards of Kuur. This I had guessed from the start, because he was obviously of the same race as Ool the Uncanny, who by an odd and thought-provoking coincidence had also served Arkola the Usurper, the chief of the Black Legion, as his priest and councillor.

And, as I had excellent cause to know, Ool had been a natural telepath!

I had already guessed that Zamara's cunning accomplice was also a member of this mysterious race whose emissaries appear from time to time on the great stage of Thanatorian affairs, always in a position of enormous influence, to manipulate the flow of events for some purpose unknown and unguessable except to themselves. Assuming the Mind Wizards to be a race of telepaths, I suddenly understood many things which had baffled me before. So swift had been the succession of events, so dire the perils into which chance had thrust us, that the struggle to think of a solution to our predicament had occupied my mind to the exclusion of other thoughts.

But now, quite suddenly, it came to me how Darloona and Ergon and I had been lured into outstripping our hunting party, and had been drawn into the clump of woods where Zamara and her band had been hidden, prepared to seize us.

We had pursued a snow-white vanth.

A vanth that Ergon had not been able to see!

A vanth that had miraculously vanished into thin air before our very eyes, the moment we were beneath the hidden nets!

These thoughts went tumbling through my mind as I inched along the narrow passage between the walls.

Suddenly my whirling brain made sense of the chaos of mysteries into which we had been thrust.

Suddenly, one by one, the scattered pieces of the puzzle fell into place.

Suddenly, I knew the answer to the secret!

Chapter 6

The Captor Made Captive

For I suddenly knew that the shadowy and elusive Mind Wizards could do more than just read the minds of others. They could subtly and secretly influence those minds, as well!

For the human mind is much more than just a center of the cognitive faculty and a storehouse of memory. It is the switchboard of the senses: therein the ears and the eyes and the other sensory organs feed the results of their surveillance to be interpreted to the brain in the great nerve centers.

The vision center, for instance, digests and arranges into pictures the information gathered by the eyesight and fed into the brain in the form of electrical impulses passed along the nerve fibers.

It suddenly occurred to me that a trained and gifted telepath might well be able to tamper with the vision center of the brain, inducing the illusion of pictures directly to the brain-pictures the eyes themselves had not really seen at all!

Such as the elusive white vanth we had followed.

The vanth that had led us straightway into a cunningly laid trap.

The vanth that had somehow been invisible to Ergon.

The vanth that had disappeared, the moment we were beneath the nets. The vanth that had been invisible to Ergon for the very good reason that it had not really been there at all.

Concealed within the copse, Ang Chan had telepathically transmitted the cleverly sustained illusion of a fleeing vanth into the unsuspecting minds of Darloona and me. Because it was we two he wished to capture.

Ergon had not been induced to see the vanth because Ang Chan had no reason to wish to capture him.

It was mere chance that Ergon, alone of our companions, had been at the fore of the party with my Princess and myself when we saw-or thought we saw-the rare white vanth. Not knowing why we so suddenly broke into a charge, he unthinkingly spurred his thaptor in order to keep up with us, and thus had been captured as well. Had not the kidnapping been timed to a split-second schedule, in order for us to be bundled off in the balloon mere instants before the remainder of the hunting party entered the copse on our heels, Ergon would doubtless have been murdered on the spot. But that would have taken a few moments-and Zamara's scheme was not timed to include those few extra moments. So it had proved best to merely take him along.

Cold perspiration burst out on my bare forearms. Ugly, faithful, loyal devoted old Ergon! He owed his very life to the fact that Zamara's scheme had not included a few seconds leeway!

Once this simple fact entered my comprehension, other pieces of the puzzle coalesced neatly. We had been housed in such curious comfort, simply because Ang Chan's quarters lay next to our own.

Obviously, our capture was the initial phase in Zamara's megalomaniac scheme of world conquest. Seizing us left Shondakor leaderless. In our absence, the Shondakorian host would weary its strength and scatter its forces hither and thither about the Great Plains, searching for the lost Prince and Princess. In this interval of disorder and confusion and dispersal of strength, the legions of Tharkol would strike in an invasion that was doubtless the second phase in Zamara's plan of conquest.

But there was more to be gained from holding Darloona and me captive-especially if you have a trained and subtle telepath on hand! We had been housed in the apartment next to Ang Chan so that he could read our minds while we slept or idly conversed. And in our minds lay immensely valuable information of enormous use to any would-be conqueror, for Darloona and I well knew the details of the defense and armaments of Shondakor, the disposition of troops, the schedules of sentries, the flag signals-even the passwords of the gates, which were changed daily according to a prearranged system.

And now perspiration bedewed my brow as well. For if Ang Chan were beyond this wall, mentally

eavesdropping on us, he must surely by now know that we were escaping!

I reached out and seized Glypto by the collar of his cloak and hissed an urgent question into his ear. He shrugged, then fumbled along the inner wall until his sensitive fingers found some small aperture invisible to me in the uncertain light. Fitting his one good eye on the spyhole, the little rogue peered into the room beyond, then straightened, smirking.

“Nay, my master, the priest be not within. Oh-aye!-now that I call it to mind, this night our holy Empress holds a state ball to celebrate some coup or other against the realm of Shondakor, which city, the gossip of the taverns hath it, be the first prize on her list of conquests,” he said, offhandedly, not dreaming that it was our capture which had been the coup in question. We had seen no particular reason, as yet, to inform our involuntary little guide as to our identities, or the reasons for our captivity. Doubtless he assumed us to be courtiers suffering house arrest for some displeasure we had caused the Empress. Things had happened too swiftly, perhaps, for him to have yet noticed in the darkness and the confusion of our scuffle, that of the three of us only Ergon was a Perushtarian.

I relaxed a bit at the news that the suite beyond the wall was currently unoccupied; but the hour was very late, and surely the ball must have ended by now and the lords and ladies of the court would be returning to their suites. At any moment, the yellow dwarf from mysterious Kuur might enter his suite to eavesdrop on us. At any moment, then, he could discover that we had escaped, and would raise the alarm!

“We must be gone from this place just as soon as possible,” I whispered, thinking swiftly. “Glypto, where does the passage lead to in this direction?”

He fingered his tuft of beard with nimble, greasy fingers, thoughtfully.

“Now let me think on it, my master . . . past the royal apartments of the Empress herself, aye! And thence deeper into the inner citadel-“

“And in the other direction? Swiftly, friend-every moment counts!”

“Why . . . out through the walls of the keep, of course . . . ‘tis a lengthy and a winding way, I fear, but it ends at last in the sewers which honeycomb the space beneath the streets o’ the city, and thus to many o’ the safe and snug hidey-holes in the Thieves’ Quarter“

I cursed desperately, feeling the precious moments slipping away-and with them, this last small chance of our escaping.

“No good at all . . . that way would take too long, and if Ang Chan is what I fear he is, he could find us even in the sewers . . . is there any other exit nearby?”

Glypto squinted a bright, inquisitive eye up at me, curious as to my haste. “Oh, aye, a trap in each ceiling leads down into every room, even the Empress’s, though he would be a bolder chanthan than even Glypto who would dare to use it! Ooff!” he squeaked as I shook him violently, to shake his mind from these rambling reminiscences. “Aye, I’m thinking, lord, don’t shake the breath out of my poor old bones! A nearer exit-aye! I mind me that my grandfather had a stone hollowed away at ‘tother end, which lets forth on this tier”

“The third tier, isn’t it?” I demanded suddenly, a marvelous scheme having suddenly sprung full-blown into my brain.

“Aye . . . the third tier it is.”

“Where the balloon is tethered-the flying thing that carried us here?”

He nodded slowly. “Aye . . . guarded by three, or is it four, men at arms? Three, I think”

“I care not if ‘twere a dozen,” I said recklessly, with a grin of sheer mischief. “For the Lords of Gordrimator are with us this night! They must be, for at last things are going in our favor!”

Ergon’s froglike face looked at me bewilderedly in the feeble light of the flickering candle stub.

“Jandar, what is toward? You’re hatching some scheme, I’ll wager, but ‘tis past my wit to guess it straight”

“Everything will be explained in a moment,” I laughed. And then another thought occurred to me -a thought so deliciously pregnant with pleasurable possibilities that I stopped short in my tracks.

“Glypto-where is the suite of this self-styled Empress of yours?” I snapped.

His wizened face was every bit as bewildered as Ergon’s but there was no time to play the game of question-and-answer now. Sensing my impatience, he scuttled ahead of me down the narrow way, and showed me the position of the spyhole.

I slid the baffle aside, stopped, and fitted my eye to the tiny aperture. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the dimness, but then I began to make out the details of a huge room draped in silks, carpeted with rare furs, and thronged with paintings, statuettes, tapestries, and other artworks too numerous to list.

Directly in front of me, Zamara sprawled languorously on an immense low couch covered with costly furs. She wore a dazzling gown of some sparkling, expensive-looking fabric that looked like silver lame, and a gem-studded tiara flashed about her brows, caught in her ebon tresses. As I gazed upon this scene, the Empress of Tharkol was sipping a goblet of chilled wine while a slave girl knelt before her, gently massaging her feet with some perfumed oil. Even as I watched, Zamara dismissed the servant with a flick of her hand, turned to an immense mirror, and began lazily removing her jewels. The slave girl scuttled out, and, my eyes searching every corner of the room, I ascertained to my indescribable amusement and delight that Zamara was now completely alone in her apartments.

Taking my eye from the spyhole, I seized Glypto by the collar of his threadbare cloak.

“Where is the trapdoor in the ceiling of the room?”

“There, lord, but “

“Give me the candle. Ergon! Collar this rogue, and if he squeals, teach him the weight of your hand.”

“‘Twill be a pleasure,” Ergon growled, enveloping the little thief in brawny arms. From behind him, down the narrow passage, Darloona gazed at me with amazement and wonder in her emerald eyes.

“Jandar, what is it that you plan to do?” she asked.

I blew her an airy kiss.

“Beloved, we are going to escape in style-and we’ll be carrying a little ‘life insurance’ along, just in case a guard or two gets too handy with his spear! I’ll be back in just a moment, with a surprise for you all. While I’m gone, go back down the passage and find the exit that leads out onto this tier of the palace. If our luck is still with us, we’ll find the balloon still tethered there . . . get along, now, all of you!”

Faces mirroring their puzzlement, they crept off down the passage while I ducked through the low rat hole, crawled out on one of the beams, found and unlatched the trapdoor, opened it and swung through, to drop as soundlessly as a great cat to the floor directly behind the would-be Empress of Callisto!

Chapter 7

The Plaything of the Winds

Ergon’s mind swirled in baffled confusion, unable to discern from my gleeful and reckless grin and lighthearted words whatever plan or scheme it was I was hatching. But the loyal fellow did not pause to question my odd directions for a moment. Ugly, strong, and as utterly faithful as a huge mastiff, the burly-shouldered Perushtarian who had been my fellow slave in the pens of Narouk, my comrade among the gladiators of Zanadar, and who would remain my dogged and stouthearted friend to the last throb of his indomitable heart, turned and crept off down the winding passage, half-dragging our little guttersnipe of a guide in the grip of his powerful hands.

In a few moments Glypto, eyes goggling with terror, half strangled in the unthinking grip of those massive hands, timidly flapped his hands until he had attracted the attention of the surly, bandy-legged bald giant who bore him along as effortlessly as if he were a flimsy doll.

“What is it?” Ergon growled.

“The p-panel, noble lord! The p-panel that leads out to the p-parapet!” Glypto whined.

“Open it, then, rogue!”

“M-might it n-not be b-better to peer out first, and view the I-lay of the I-land?” the thief whimpered. Gruffly, Ergon nodded; loosening the bruising grip of his great paws, he permitted the scrawny thief to dig loose a morsel of clay, exposing a chink in the outer wall. Peering out, Ergon stifled a gasp of delight. Suddenly he contemplated the beauty of my scheme . . . for there before him, tethered to the low parapet, swung the capacious basket which had borne us thither on the winds, and above it, the huge gasbag of the balloon swelled against the glimmer of the many moons.

He understood that it was my intent to escape from Tharkol by means of the very instrument that had brought us here-the balloon!

True, three guards were stationed there to protect the flying vehicle of their Empress against any mischief which might befall. But, wrapped in warm cloaks, they huddled in the shelter of the parapet against the cold blast of the night wind, stealing forty winks against the next approach of their captain, walking his

nightly rounds. Unsuspectingly, they dozed if but lightly; and Ergon's hands itched to pounce upon them and batter them senseless, as he would have done regardless, even had they been twice their number.

He glanced speculatively about the broad terrace, which was clearly lit by the several moons and the mighty bulk of Jupiter itself. While I was about my mysterious business at the other terminus of the secret passageway, Ergon perceived no reason why he should not ready things at this end, so that all would be prepared for our departure as soon as I rejoined their company.

"Open it, cur," he growled.

The terrified little thief did not dare disobey: he winced in the crushing grip of this grim colossus and did not care to dispute with him, having already felt the iron weight of those calloused paws. With trembling fingers, sniveling a little in the extremity of his fear, Glypto disengaged the several flat pegs that held the hollow shell of stone in place beside its more solid fellows. The hidden door fell open.

Ergon thrust the shrinking thief into the ready grasp of Darloona, curtly bidding her watch he utter no single squeal or slip away. Then in three great bounds, the burly Perushtarian was upon the dozing guards.

The poor fellows never knew what hit them; in the weeks that followed, while nursing their hurts in the barracks infirmary, the three no doubt oft discussed whether it had been some night-wandering demon had swooped upon them from the windy skies, or mayhap some winged and dreadful predator of the heavens-a Ghastozar perchance-had torn them from their rest, hurling them to the terrace far below. They probably decided on the Ghastozar; but it was really only a surly-tempered Perushtarian who felt like a bit of exercise.

Having tossed the stupefied guards one by one over the parapet, after first ripping from their harnesses the swords and daggers they wore, Ergon dusted his hands with a grunt of satisfaction, and beckoned to Darloona to join him.

Accompanied by Glypto, the Princess swiftly crossed the terrace and climbed into the basket while Ergon held it steady. Then he handed in to her the several weapons he had so rudely harvested, and, naked sword clenched in one burly fist, held himself ready to sever the ropes which anchored the balloon to the balustrade and launch us forth on the winds the moment I had come.

He hesitated only a moment over the cowering Glypto. Then, as I had said nothing about turning the little rogue loose, he scooped up the squealing little man and tossed him into the basket beside my Princess.

Scarce was this done but I appeared in the entrance, a writhing bundle, wrapped in a silken coverlet, squirming in my arms. I climbed quickly into the basket, tossed my feebly-wriggling burden into one corner, beckoned at Ergon to join us, and curtly bade him cut the anchor cable. Moonlight flashed on the steely mirror of his blade as he swung it hissing down, chopping through the cable.

The basket gave A sickening lurch, and we were away!

The fourth tier swept down upon us, but we cleared it. Then the ziggurat-like citadel swam away beneath us, and the city itself, in a blur of streets, squares, and rooftops. Towers whistled by us as we soared above the world, mounting higher and higher in the grip of powerful winds.

And in another breath the walls of Tharkol receded from us in the moonlit dark, and we were free at last!

Laughing in mingled delight and relief, Darloona flung her arms about my neck. I crushed her to me and kissed her so thoroughly that she gasped.

She asked me something then, but the rushing winds snatched her words away as soon as they were uttered. Shouting louder, she asked me what I had gone back to do.

“Remember I said I thought it would be nice to carry along a little ‘life insurance’ with us on our journey?” I yelled back. The single universal language spoken across the breadth of Thanator by the several races which share the jungle Moon between them, unfortunately lacks a term for the concept, so I was forced to paraphrase it so broadly that its meaning eluded her comprehension. She shrugged, not understanding. I opened my mouth to attempt a further explanation, then grinned and gave it up.

Far easier, thought I, to illustrate the notion by action. Gesturing to catch her eye, I stooped and pulled back the flap of the silk-enveloped bundle I had so unceremoniously tossed into a corner of the swaying basket.

Now uncovered, a face looked up at us, flushed and furious, ripe lips biting frenziedly against my hasty gag.

Darloona’s eyes widened with shock and amazement, then glowed with mischievous humor. She plucked at Ergon’s sleeve, calling to his attention the captive which writhed and wriggled on the floor of the basket, glaring up at us with incandescent rage and hatred.

He looked, and laughed. Beyond him, little Glypto, cowering in panic in the far corner peeped at our captive through his fingers, then howled dismally, and covered his face in a very ecstasy of dread.

For, bound and gagged on the floor of the basket, Zamara of Tharkol glared up at us with murder in her blazing eyes!

Dawn was too near for any of us to think of trying to catch a bit of sleep—even if such had been possible, given the violence wherewith the raging winds tossed our basket about in sickening swoops.

It would have been completely impossible to have striven to maneuver or pilot the balloon, such was the force of the gale, so we did not even bother trying to do so. Let the winds carry us where they might; every moment took us further and further from the city of our enemies. And, rage how they would, the winds would die at last, and we could then take the balloon under control and guide it home to Shondakor.

Or so we thought, anyway.

Looking back on that dizzy voyage through the skies, I think we were all a little drunk with triumph. Our miraculous good luck in escaping from the Tharkolians raised our spirits giddily. We had been sunken in gloom and depression; now, having succeeded in escaping from the very stronghold of our enemies, we were all a little intoxicated, and thought ourselves the darlings of the gods.

The most deliciously hilarious thing about our escape was, of course, the manner in which we had turned the tables on our prideful and super-confident captors. Chief among whom was the self-styled “Empress of Callisto.” The captor had herself become the captive, and we had reversed our roles with a vengeance! We would not have been human if the situation had not delighted us so.

As for Zamara, the poor girl was wild and frothing with fury. She fought and fought, wriggling like a wildcat, in a futile struggle against the silken scarves wherewith I had hastily but stoutly bound her wrists and ankles when I dropped from the ceiling to seize her at her vanity table.

It had been Zamara's pleasure to seize and bind us and carry us off unceremoniously. But now the tables had turned, and it was the divine Empress who had been snatched up, securely trussed, and tossed into the basket, to be whisked away to an unguessable fate.

A lifetime of unbridled pride and vaunting ambition had made the red-skinned young woman a thoroughly spoiled brat. This was probably the first time since childhood that any hand had been raised in violence against her pampered and princely person. She fought, kicked, and squirmed against her bonds until her furious strength was exhausted. Then she gave way to her misery, and loosed a storm burst of tears. Relenting, Darloona bade us remove her gag, but when Ergon stooped to do so she sunk her sharp white teeth in the flesh of his hand and bespattered us with a torrent of curses that would have won her the awed admiration of a longshoreman.

We let her rant and rage and weep as she would, ignoring it, for in truth the wind whipped away the worst part of her sulphurous language. Little Glypto, doubtless a connoisseur of oaths, sat fascinated, drinking it all in. Doubtless he committed to memory some of the more anatomically ingenious of her suggestions as to our ancestry and personal habits, wherewith to regale his criminous compatriots when next he mingled among the lower classes of the Thieves' Quarter.

But we were humane in our treatment of Zamara, and I loosened her bonds and made her as comfortable as I could, without of course freeing her hands.

"You stinking horeb's-dung! You spittle of diseased maggots! You reeking gob of slime cast by a filthy reptile! You vile and loathsome offspring of a self-impregnating xanga! You toad's-dropping-you offal of garbage-devouring zulths! You-you-you dare touch with your fetid paws the sacred person of the divine Empress to whom the Lords of Gordrimator have given the very world!"

She raved on, tears pouring down smudged and dirty cheeks. I, of course, paid no attention to her tempestuous tongue. The poor girl was more than half mad, of course, to take unto herself divine prerogatives. Listening, Darloona half smiled.

"Perhaps we should replace the gag after all," she grinned.

Dawn broke, a blaze of gold. I went to the rim of the basket and stared about. Beneath us rushed an unknown country, wooded hills and vast rolling meadows. It looked nothing at all like the level plains that stretched between Tharkol and Shondakor: had the winds perchance carried us in the opposite direction-further into the east? The maps of the known surface of Thanator ended a few leagues to the east of Tharkol; beyond the borders of the known hemisphere stretched the unexplored and unmapped vastnesses of the far side of Callisto, which remained a region of shadowy and legended mystery.

For hours the balloon had flown through the darkness, a helpless plaything of the winds. How far had the winds carried us in that time, and in which direction?

And the winds still howled at gale force! If we were indeed traveling east, we would be borne into the unknown further side of the jungle Moon before we could manage to descend!

just then Ergon called my name.

I looked to where he stood across the basket from me, craning his head back, staring up into the sky, a strained expression on his froglike visage.

“What’s the matter now?” I asked. “Haven’t we got enough trouble?”

“It would seem that more lies in store for us,” he said grimly. “Look!”

I looked up . . . to see a hideous, bat-winged shape hurtling down upon us from the brilliant regions of the upper sky.

It was a gigantic Ghastozar-the most dreaded predator of the skies of Thanator.

And it was coming straight for us-

Chapter 8

The Terror of the Skies

“Aiiiiiii!” Glypto shrieked, cowering on the floor of the basket, curling into a ball as if to make of himself the smallest possible target.

As for myself, my heart sank into my boots, and stayed there. I did not in the least blame the scrawny little rascal for squealing like a stuck pig as the flying monster swept down upon us.

For the ghastozar is one of the most horrible of the many grisly monstrosities that prowl the jungle Moon. A flying reptile with vast membranous wings and terrible claws, it resembles nothing so closely as the terrific flying dragon of Earth’s remote dawn age-the dread pterodactyl.

It measures fully twenty feet from fanged snout to barbed and viciously-whipping tail, and the steely power of its gliding thews is such that it has been known to rip a fully grown deltagar to shreds. Since a deltagar is a monster resembling two or three saber-toothed tigers rolled into one ferocious avalanche of murderous fury, you can easily form an estimate of how formidable was the flying doom that now swept down upon us.

There was literally nothing we could do to protect ourselves. We were armed only with the swords and daggers Ergon had stripped from the guards before he tossed them over the parapet, and against the fury of the mighty ghastozar, these were as so many toothpicks. If the Tharkolians had been aimed with bows and arrows or with the light throwing spear used by Ku Thad huntsmen, it would have been quite a different story. Then we should have had at least a fighting chance against the winged dragon-monster of the skies. And a fighting chance is all I have ever asked of the inscrutable fate that rules our destiny.

But they had not been so armed, and our chances of fighting off the ghastozar were slim, and our hopes for survival few.

Ergon knew this as well as I: we exchanged a grim look, but did not discuss the situation aloud in order

to spare the women unnecessary fear. And now I regretted having carried off Zamara, thus exposing her to this horrible danger. The poor, deluded Tharkolian princess was mad, and had made herself our implacable enemy, but, having been lucky enough to escape from her clutches, and having by now left the city of Tharkol far behind, it was cruel of us to have thrust her into such peril. She could no longer do us ill, and I have never had the heart for vengeance.

Perhaps most of all, in a way, I regretted that little Glypto had been carried off with us and now faced a hideous doom in the jaws of the monster ghasozar. The little rogue had done us no ill at all, had in fact been the very instrument of our escape, and it was a sorry recompense for his services. But there was nothing I could do about it now, and soon very soon-my regrets would end as would my life.

As these thoughts spun through my brain the flying monster hurtled past us, curved about and flew towards us again. I do not know why the brute had not struck us on his first passage: he was hunting, which meant he was hungry. And we were prey.

Again he flashed past us without striking, and this time he halted and flapped around us in a slow circle, turning his hideous beaked head first to the one side then to the other, peering at us with little red eyes in which ravenous blood lust vied oddly with a hesitancy I did not understand.

“Why does he not strike and have done with it?” Ergon growled at my side. I shrugged helplessly.

And then, quite suddenly, the answer came to me.

The monster was puzzled! He had never seen anything like the floating balloon and its dangling basket before. He was not certain what we were, nor whether we were good to eat. He was-curious!

He flapped about, circling us at a safe distance, eyeing us warily. The dim, small brain of the flying reptile was baffled by our ungainly shape and our peculiar odor. He was hesitant to attack us, not knowing what we were, how we might defend ourselves, nor even if we were edible.

And suddenly, I knew we had a chance.

Galvanized into action, I let out a yip, attracting the attention of the others.

“Yell-wave your arms-make noise!” I commanded. And, suiting my actions to my words, I began capering about the basket, screeching at the top of my lungs and windmilling my arms in a wild, maniacal fashion.

The ghasozar flinched aside and withdrew, peering at me warily.

Ergon and Darloona instantly got the idea and sensed my thoughts. Solemn, glum-faced Ergon began an awkward dance from side to side, booming out loud cries and my Princess yelled with all the lungpower at her command. I could have laughed at Ergon’s self-conscious expression, as he soberly pranced about, waving his arms like a maniac, had not the situation been so serious and our danger so deadly.

The balloon wobbled and swung widely from side to side, almost pitching us out. The uproar we three made was deafening. And, true to my theory, the flying reptile withdrew to a safer distance, but continued to eye us in a puzzled fashion.

Never in all its days had the winged predator of the skies seen a flying thing that bobbed about so madly and voiced such a cacophonous battle cry. It was baffled. And it began to get angry. My plan, it seemed,

was not without its flaws. The tiny brain of the ghistozar had room for only one thought or emotion at a time. Wary puzzlement had driven out hunger; and now anger drove out wariness.

It swung towards us, fanged jaws agape, striking out with bared bird claws. At the last possible moment it swept to one side, but one flashing claw caught the swinging basket a mighty buffet, knocking us from our feet.

I staggered backwards, the rim of the basket striking me in the backs of the knees, and fell over the side!

A dizzy vista of grassy plains and wooded hills flashed before my eyes as I fell like a stone.

My hands thrust out automatically, clutching on empty air.

Then something slapped me across the face. I snatched at it with that utter desperation wherewith a drowning man is said to clutch at a straw.

In my case, however, the “straw” proved to be the end of a dangling line. It was the rope whereby the Tharkolians had tied down the balloon, anchoring it to the palace tier, but only later in retrospect did I manage to identify it. When Ergon had hacked it through, cutting the balloon loose, the severed line hung free. It was the end of this that my desperate hands now encountered and to which I clung by one hand with all my strength.

I hung about eleven or twelve feet below the basket, clinging to the very end of the line with both hands by now. The world swung giddily beneath my heels; the wind tore at me with impalpable fingers, screaming in my ears like a banshee as I clung for dear life to the end of the line.

Peering up I saw a row of frightened faces staring down at me from the edge of the basket. Ergon had his wide, froggish mouth open and was yelling something inaudible to me. Darloona was pale and wide-eyed, staring down at me, her knuckles pressed against parted lips. Even little Glypto was there, his scrawny, beak-nosed face white with terror.

As for myself, I must confess to feeling no fear at all. This is not vapid braggadocio, nor am I attempting to portray myself in an heroic light. Indeed, if anything, I felt furious and embarrassed at having fallen out of the basket like a stumble-footed clown. No, I have never thought of myself as being particularly heroic. It has always been my sorry lot to get into trouble, from which I then have to extricate myself as best I can. It has always seemed to me that I have simply done whatever seemed the only thing to do at the time, and generally in such hazardous or precarious positions as my present plight, I have simply been too busy trying to figure out what to do to have sufficient leisure in which to be afraid.

Looking backward on such moments, having somehow or other escaped from them, I have usually been ludicrously weak-kneed with reaction. After the danger is past, then you have plenty of time to be frightened at the danger. But while you are suffering through it you just haven't got time enough for fear.

I have often wondered if other men who have led exciting lives of action and peril have found this to be true, or if the experience is uniquely my own.

At any rate, I was boilingly angry at my ludicrous position. I began trying to climb up the rope, but this proved very difficult to do. Each time I shifted my weight, the free-hanging basket swung widely to one side while I, hanging like a weight at the end of the dangling line, swung in the opposite direction. The dizzying business of swinging about, the vertiginous vista of hilltops spinning madly below my heels, the

screaming wind that buffeted and tore at me, combined to make it difficult and dangerous to try to climb the rope hand over hand.

But there was nothing else to do.

And then another factor entered into the situation to further complicate it. And that was the ghastozar itself.

The flying reptile had noted my fall from the basket, and now as I swung temptingly to and fro like a fat worm on a fishhook, the winged monster made a savage stab at me.

Fanged jaws snapped sickeningly close to my legs as the thing whirled by. It passed so near me that the wind of its passage flung me about in a dizzy whirl. I kicked out with both boot-heels the next time it came at me and I think it must have gotten a kick in the head for it flinched aside, shaking its head numbly.

As it veered away one great black batlike wing dealt me a terrific blow.

Stunned for a moment, my grip on the line was loosened.

And I fell free.

For a dreadful, endless moment the sky was beneath me and the world was far above.

Then my legs slammed into something and I instinctively clung to it with all the strength of my desperation.

My eyes were weeping from the stinging wind, and I could see nothing. I had come crashing down atop something and the impact drove the wind out of my lungs. Gasping for breath, blinking blearily, I clung blindly to whatever it was that I had fallen astride.

A moment later my vision cleared and I sucked air into my panting lungs and saw what it was that I had landed upon.

And then it was that I felt fear, you may be certain.

Numbing fear . . . hopeless fear . . . such as I have seldom known, and would prefer never to experience again.

For I found myself seated astride a rounded, enormous bulk, my legs clasped about its under-curve, and my arms wrapped tightly and desperately about a long extension that branched off the parent body. It was rough and cold to the touch, with a leathery texture most peculiar and difficult to identify.

In another breath, however, the world righted itself and I had time to discover my predicament. And, believe me, dear reader, the blood ran cold in my veins.

For I had fallen upon the ghastozar, and was now seated astride the dreadful monster of the shies!

Book Three

BORAK THE YATHOON

Chapter 9

The Scarlet Arrow

Wrapping my arms about the snaky neck of the ghasozar, I clung to the back of the monster with desperate strength.

Below my heels the wooded landscape swept by at dizzying speed. Above me, the balloon careened along, basket swaying drunkenly from side to side, a helpless plaything of the rushing winds.

A terrible fear possessed me. I could taste it, sour and metallic, in the back of my mouth. Fear, I discovered, had an oily taste like brass.

My heart thudded painfully against my ribs. I panted for breath, lungs burning. The wind lashed my bare arms and thighs, whipping my hair, making my eyes water until my vision blurred.

Would this terrible voyage into the unknown never end?

And how else could it end . . . save in death?

The flying monster flapped its ungainly bulk in wide circles around the balloon. Gradually it penetrated into the dim, small brain of the winged reptile that it bore an unaccustomed weight on its back. The dreadful head craned about, peering at me, fanged jaws agape. Eyes of red flame glared into mine-eyes empty of thought, eyes filled with blood lust and furious rage.

I crouched lower, clinging between the brute's shoulders, burying my face in the base of its neck. It craned and twisted, madly striving to reach me with those yawning jaws that bristled with razor-sharp fangs. Gusts of putrid breath blew in my face sickeningly. The clash of those chomping teeth rang in my ears. Droplets of drooling spittle sprayed my arms and shoulders as the maddened ghasozar strove in vain to reach me. But its coiling, snaky neck could not quite twist back far enough so that those hungry jaws could sink in my flesh, to rip and tear.

In its wild, careening flight, the ghasozar had forgotten about the runaway balloon and as it strove to get at me its outstretched wings struck and snagged the gasbag.

The wings of the flying monster, like those of the terrene bat it so resembles, or those of the prehistoric pterodactyl it resembles even more closely, evolved from the forepaws of the brute. The ribs of the wing are really elongated fingers, ending in hooked and Tazory claws, with thin membrane stretched between them, taut as a drumhead.

It was one of these fishhook claws that brushed the wobbling gasbag

Brushed-and snagged and tore!

So close were we at that instant that I heard Ergon's deep voice, cursing, and Darloona's shrill cry of alarm.

In the very next moment, the maddened monster veered away in a long gull-like curve to one side. But the damage was done. A long rip, about two feet in length, scored the smooth, tight rondure of the gasbag. And the vapor gushed from it in a torrent.

I have no idea what the gas was that Zamara employed in her aerial invention, whether it was hydrogen or helium or some gas peculiar to Callisto and unknown on my native planet. But it was lighter than air and served to lift the balloon aloft. Now, as the unknown gas rushed from the bag, it shrank in upon itself, wrinkling, sagging, losing tension. It began to empty swiftly, and as it did so the balloon began to sink toward the ground below.

I had a horrible picture in my mind-a vision of the balloon hurtling into rugged, wooded hills at terrific velocity, mangling and crippling its helpless occupants. And, surely, had the vessel continued at its original speed, the flight would have ended with tragic swiftness.

But as the vapor escaped from the collapsing gas bag, the balloon sank toward the ground. As it lost altitude, it left the region of the howling winds, and fell into a layer of calmer air. Thus its velocity lessened rapidly as it sank lower and lower.

And by this time we had left the wooded hills behind and were flying over an immense region of level, grassy plains-doubtless an eastern extension of the Great Plains of Haratha. We could see clearly by this time for dawn had long since lit the vaporous skies to luminous golden fires. We had flown all night in the grip of the winds, it seemed.

So when the balloon eventually struck the ground, it would come down in the flat plains. And there was a good chance that those within the basket would survive unharmed.

My aerial steed, stung to fury by the unexpected and maddening sensation of being ridden by one of the little two-legged creatures from the flying basket, lost interest in the rapidly deflating balloon. It soared about the skies, hurling through a series of aerial maneuvers designed to dislodge me from my precarious seat between its shoulders. I have never ridden a "bucking bronco" in a rodeo, but I have no doubt the experience was similar. I clung to the enraged reptile, retaining my seat at times with the greatest difficulty.

And suddenly I found myself flying over an immense cortege that wound across the plains for miles, or so it seemed. Beaked, restive thaptors drew great rolling chariots or huge wains laden with folded tents, stores, and gear. In the forefront of the vast procession, and to either side, an armed host of peculiar beings rode astride the bird-horses. These warriors were naked, their attenuated limbs clad in a shiny chitin like the shell of the lobster. Knobbed antennae sprouted from the horny ovoid casques that were their heads, and eyes like globular clusters of black crystals peered solemnly skyward to observe my flight.

I recognized the procession for one of the vast migrations of the Yathoon Horde, a barbaric race of coldly intelligent but humorless and emotionless giant creatures evolved to reason from some species of insect as we humans are from the higher primates.

During the first weeks after my arrival on Callisto I had been taken captive by one such clan of the

Yathoon, and during that captivity I was instructed in the one language spoken universally across the face of the jungle Moon by all intelligent races. My memories of that period of enslavement, which was brief in term, are clear and sharp, because it was during that interval in my adventures on this mysterious world that I made my first friend and first met the woman to whom my heart was sworn.

But I had not the slightest desire to repeat the experience again, for the second time I should probably not be so lucky as the first. That is, I had established friendship with a Yathoon chieftain, Koja, whom I had rescued from certain death. The cold, logical, emotionless arthropod had learned from me a concept alien to his weird, uncanny kind: the concept of friendship. Thus, to repay me for my kindness in saving his life, he had set me free. Had things not eventuated in that manner, I might to this day be a naked, hopeless slave of the nomad insectoid warriors.

We swept across the Yathoon line of march, and the mighty procession halted in its tracks to observe this curious phenomenon. Never had the Yathoon warriors seen a human riding a monster ghasozar through the skies as if it were a thaptor. And doubtless, in their cool, unemotional way, the arthropods were curious.

I had by now lost sight of the balloon. Perhaps it had come down somewhere behind me; at least it was no longer visible aloft. I was grateful for this small favor from the inscrutable fates, for the sight of the drifting balloon with its basketful of human riders would have puzzled and intrigued the Yathoon yet further.

As it was, a party of mounted warriors detached itself from the main body of the nomads and rode across the plains in pursuit of the aerial dragon and its human rider.

The bird-horses of Callisto are capable of bursts of surprising speed, as I have mentioned elsewhere, but are seldom able to sustain it for long. And the winged dragon upon whose back I rode could easily outdistance them, I knew. Thus I expected the nomad warrior troop to fall back after a time.

This, however, did not happen. My reptilian steed was flying sluggishly, and was descending lower and lower. Vast, ragged batlike wings drummed and boomed, flapping like sails. Perhaps the brute was wearying rapidly from my unexpected weight—there are few flying creatures on this world who could bear two hundred pounds of human rider without tiring. Or perhaps . . .

But then I saw the cause.

I had not seen it happen, but one of the Yathoon chieftains had loosed a shaft against my winged and monstrous steed.

The war bows of the Yathoon Horde are terrible engines of murderous might. They are far bigger and stronger than terrene bows, and can drive the deadly three-foot-long arrows for hundreds of yards with unerring accuracy. Something in the peculiar muscular construction of the solemn arthropods makes them master archers: in this particular warrior art they far surpass their human brothers.

A scarlet arrow transfixed the skull of the ghasozar.

Eyes glazed, bloody froth bubbling from gaping jaws, the monster sagged towards the ground with a dizzying lurch.

Even so terrible an injury might not have slain the ghasozar at once, had it not been for the dread venom wherewith the Yathoon warriors anoint their arrows.

It is a nerve poison which attacks the major ganglia of the brain and nervous system with frightful speed. A human, or ;mother Yathoon, struck or even nicked by these poisoned shafts will collapse in a fraction of a second. But the monster reptile, with its sluggish little brain, had managed to sustain its flight and to remain aloft for perhaps ten minutes.

But it could do so no longer.

Folding its vast wings, the dying reptile fell like a plummet. I sprang clear just before it struck the surface of the plains with a sickening impact and the crunch and snap of breaking bones.

I owe my continued existence in this life to two chance factors. One was that we were flying only thirty or forty feet above the ground when the ghastozar fell. The other was that the plain was carpeted in a thick, springy growth of long, thick grasses which broke my fall and cushioned me against the impact. As it was, however, I was stunned and groggy and lay sprawled on the ground for a moment before I was able to stagger to my feet.

The world swam about me in dizzy circles. I was lame in every muscle; covered with bruises; and half shaken out of my wits.

However-I yet lived!

I had not thought to elude death for long, mounted on the back of the maddened and ravenous pterodactyl. Chance or luck or inscrutable fate had once again preserved me from certain death. I forced a grin. I didn't mind being the darling of the gods, but I wished they didn't play so roughly with their toys!

The thud of clawed feet drumming against the turf roused me from my stupor. I looked up to see the Yathoon party advancing rapidly towards me. The foremost warrior, an immense creature who must have stood nine feet tall, still had his bow strung and a second scarlet arrow, its bladed barb smeared with nerve poison, nocked and ready to let fly at my breast.

I held my hands well away from my weapons, as the nomad warriors came up to me, circled about me, and halted. They formed a great open ring, with myself at the center.

They were armed with huge spears, tufted with feathers, twelve feet from bronze-shod butt to wickedly barbed point; with deadly eight-foot-long whip swords, whereof the Yathoon are undisputed masters; and with bows and arrows.

And I had only the rapier which Ergon had taken from the guards.

Thirteen fully armed Yathoon savages to one lone human warrior: it was not the fairest of odds. I did not even have a fighting chance. I pride myself on being a master swordsman, and I have been told that I am one of the finest men with the blade on this planet.

But I didn't really have a chance of defending myself. And on such occasions I have found it wisest to yield to overwhelming numbers in a grimly philosophical way, hoping for a chance to escape later on.

This is not really a question of bravery, but one of commonsense. On the one hand lay certain death, on the other an unknown future. Who could say what opportunities for escape or rescue that future might hold?

So I surrendered and let them strip me of my weapon.

But I didn't like doing it. Surrender, even against insurmountable odds, always rankles.

I was now at the whim of the Yathoon chieftain. Or such I assumed him to be, from the richness of his weapons and accouterments and the servile, obsequious manner in which the others treated him.

He sat in the saddle, scarlet arrow nocked and pointed at my breast, and red murder was in his inscrutable jeweled eyes.

His chitinous visage was unreadable, his black crystalline eyes held no emotion. Then, after a moment, he lowered the bow and relaxed the tension in the bowstring.

“What manner of creature are you?” asked Borak the Yathoon.

Chapter 10

I Become a Possession

There was nothing else to do, so I decided . to put a bold front on the situation. I faced him squarely, arms folded upon my breast, now that his underlings had disarmed me.

“I am a warrior, and a chieftain like yourself,” I said calmly.

He eyed me solemnly.

“That well may be,” he said in his harsh metallic voice. “But never in all my days have I set eyes upon a being such as yourself, with such odd colorations of eyes and hair and hue of skin.”

He was quite right, of course. With my straw-blond hair, the clear blue eyes of my Danish mother, and my fair skin which had borne a rich tan from the daylight of Callisto, I am unique among all the peoples of this world. I continued to put a bold front on it, however, and dissembled without seeming to do so.

“I am a stranger from a far-off land,” I said, “and, so far as I know, I am the first member of my race to penetrate into these regions.”

He absorbed this in a ruminative silence. Of course, I had told him nothing more than the strict truth. As the country of my birth was, at that moment, something like 387,930,000 miles away, it could indeed be most aptly described as “far-off.”

“What is your name and your present allegiance?” he demanded tonelessly.

“My name is . . . Darjan, and I am in the service of Shondakor the Golden,” I replied. I doubt if the Yathoon even noticed my slight hesitation before giving a version of my name which I had previously employed when captured by Perushtarian slavers from Narouk. My reasons for employing a pseudonym

are simple. By now the name of Jandar is known the breadth of Thanator as the hero of a thousand daring exploits of valor and conquest. It seemed prudent to adopt a name unknown to any, for I never knew when I might encounter an old enemy who still nursed an ancient grudge.

He absorbed this in thoughtful silence; then—"You are strayed far indeed from the realm you serve," he muttered. I nodded.

"I am on a mission of great importance for the Princess of my city, and have been unfortunate enough to become lost," I said.

"How come you ride the ghashtozar?" he inquired. "If the warrior legions of the Ku Thad have domesticated the dragon of the skies, I have yet to learn of it."

I shrugged helplessly.

"Lost and wandering my party was attacked by a hunting ghashtozar and I was carried off by the monster. I managed to loosen myself from its claws and climb astride its shoulders and was about to attempt to wound the brute with my sword and bring it down when you accomplished the task for me with your arrow."

He said nothing. I stood, forcing a pretense of calm self-assurance, although the sweat was trickling down my sides beneath my leather tunic.

Clearing my throat a bit, I said into the silence: "I am very grateful that you have rescued me from the beast, and offer you the gratitude of Royal Shondakor. If you will permit it, I will now be upon my way, for the message I bear on behalf of the Throne of Shondakor is one of inestimable importance."

"You mean to traverse the Great Plains afoot and alone?" he asked.

"There is no other way," I said. "I have no currency wherewith to purchase a mount, and could hardly impose on your kindness and generosity by asking for the loan of a steed."

He made no reply, but sat staring at me expressionlessly. All about me his warriors stood or sat their saddles, bending upon me their inscrutable gaze in a tense silence.

A silence that began to seem ominous . . .

"May I ask the name of him to whom I am indebted?" I ventured.

"I am Borak, a komor of the Horde," he said. A komor is a rank akin to chieftain in the military aristocracy of the Yathoon nation; a chieftain leads a retinue of warriors and is responsible for a section of the Horde in war. There are sometimes as many as sixteen or twenty komors in any given Yathoon clan, depending on its size and might, and these serve directly under the akka-komor, or high-chieftain, who is inferior only to the Arkon or "warlord."

"Then I am indebted to Borak the komor," I said. I used the word uhorz which connotes indebtedness; it happens to be one of the few feelings akin to friendship or gratefulness that are known to the cold, unemotional Yathoon.

"And now . . . if I may . . . I must be about my journey. I have a long way to travel, and my mission is one of the utmost importance," I said. It was worth a try, anyway.

But not this time.

“Your mission, whatever it may have been, ends here,” he said harshly. “I care naught for Shondakor the Golden, whose power does not extend to the Great Plains. You are now an amatar of Borak the chieftain; bind him!”

They bore me back to the main body of the Horde, a helpless prisoner, my wrists bound behind my back with thongs. I was sunk in a black mood of depression, and yet my position, grim as it was, was not without a certain touch of humor. For I knew why Borak had made me captive-it was because of my yellow hair, blue eyes, and fair, tanned skin. I was a creature unique in his experience-a rare object, a curiosity. And that made me a thing of value in Borak’s way of thinking!

The Yathoon are very low on the scale of civilization; they are barbarians, nomads, like the Mongols or Tartars of Earth’s ancient history. They wander the plains in migrant clans, scorning to dwell in cities, and hence their culture is extremely primitive because they have never had the leisure to develop or discover the civilized arts. They neither read nor write, and thus have no literature, not even songs or sagas. Since they do not indulge in trade, they have no use for money and no conception of a system of currency. But, for all the world like great solemn jackdaws or pack rats, they prize their individual hoard of treasures.

These treasures are sometimes gems and precious metals, but not always. They can be comprised of anything rare or unusual or curious: a bright feather, an oddly colored pebble, a bone, a bit of shell. I, with my peculiar coloration, was just another curio to their primitive way of thinking. Thus I was not even so high in the social scale as to have the dignity of being a captive or a slave. I was an amatar-a “possession”-a soulless thing!

And where the element of humor entered into my condition, was that this was the second time that this had happened to me-and for precisely the same reason. For during my first period of captivity in the Yathoon Horde I had been captured for the same reason-my peculiar coloring!

Once the war party rejoined the main body of the Horde, the vast number of warriors and animals rumbled slowly into the march again, bearing me with them, lightly but securely trussed and tossed into one of the huge wains that belonged to Borak’s retinue. The Horde was coming out of the extreme south, wandering north and east, and from this I gathered that they were returning from one of their periodic visits to the Black Mountains near the southern pole of Callisto.

Somewhere in those unknown mountains, in a Secret Valley whose whereabouts is jealously hidden,

reside the females and the young of the Yathoon nation. The warrior clans roam the Great Plains, hunting meat and warring on each other, but periodically they journey south to the Secret Valley, the hidden heartland of their race, where, under a never-broken truce, the warriors of fiercely rival clans mingle peacefully for a time. There they breed and there the females rear their young.

A strange, savage, grim people, the Yathoon! They know not the meaning of peace or friendship or love or fatherhood. Eternally at war with each other and with all other people of this jungle Moon, they live out their stark, humorless lives like cold machines, devoid of kindness or loyalty or worship or comradeship or any of the softer, warmer, more human emotions and values that make life worth living for such as we. Almost I could find it within my heart to pity them

However, the grim emotionlessness of the Yathoon has another side beyond mere deprivation. If they know not love or kindness or mercy, at least they are equally immune to jealousy or hatred or cruelty.

Unlike those same Mongols and Tartars to whom I have just compared them, the Yathoon never torture their victims and take no pleasure in the sufferings of others.

So my captivity would be lighter and less perilous than it might have been, had I been taken prisoner by one of the more “civilized” of the human races of Thanator, among whom torture is common. I recalled the high civilization of the Zanadarians to whom, as to the ancient Romans of my own world, savage and bloody gladiatorial games were a popular form of entertainment; or the sophisticated mercantile empire of the Perushtarians, who have made a commercial success of the cruel and ugly practice of human slavery. Yes, I was perhaps lucky to have fallen into the hands of the weird and inhuman insectoid creatures . . . they at least were kinder to their “possessions” than were most of my fellow human beings to their unfortunate slaves!

Rolling along in the wain, I pondered my situation, which was dismal enough. Out of the frying pan into the fire, as the old apothegm has it. From captivity in Tharkol, to slavery among the Yathoon. And where were Darloona and Ergon and the others? Had they survived the crash of the balloon safely, or were they injured or even dead? It was torment to me, not knowing whether my beloved Princess lived, and not knowing her whereabouts.

The clan who held me captive reminded me in many ways of Koja’s clan. But I doubted that they were the same. There was no reason why they should be, for the mighty Yathoon nation was divided into many clans, all strikingly similar. The Yathoon culture, such as it is, achieved its present level of social development uncountable millennia ago, and froze in stasis. Little has happened to change their ways in all those ages. In this respect, as in their physical being, they closely resemble the social insects-ants, bees, termites-who achieved a social organization on Earth millions of years ago, and have developed no further in all that time.

Koja’s clan roamed the Plains below the jungle country of the Grand Kumala. That was something like three hundred and fifty korads (or about 2450 miles) from here. I knew the warrior clans of the Yathoon Horde held hereditary tribal rights to certain clearly demarcated areas of the Great Plains. Thus it was unlikely, if not actually impossible, that this should be the same clan as that which took me prisoner when first I arrived on Callisto nearly two years ago.

That night we made camp, drawing the wains and chariots into a great double circle, patrolled along the outer perimeter by mounted guards, while the retinue of each chieftain staked out a portion of the inner area for his uses and erected his tent. The ordinary warriors slept on the bare ground, rolled in hides and furry cloaks, while the chieftains slept within the tents, surrounded by the hoard of jackdaw’s treasure. That included me, of course.

They fed me a thin, watery gruel and, leashed to an underling named Hooka, I was led out into the open to perform my natural functions before being bedded down for the night. This was humiliating but, again, not without an element of humor: I was to be walked on a leash to relieve myself, for all the world like some rich Park Avenue matron’s pet poodle!

On the way back to my quarters I made an important discovery. A voice hailed me: a voice that I recognized)

“Jandar!”

I looked up in astonishment.

“Ergon, you old rascal! So you survived the wreck of the balloon!”

“Aye-not without a share of bumps and bruises, though. So you got away from the ghastozar. . .’

“Yes; how is my Princess?”

“Unharmd but furious at this captivity. She will be delighted to learn you are safe and near. Princess Zamara will not be so pleased, however. She had been enjoying herself by tormenting your lady with dire, gloating predictions of your grisly death in the jaws of the ghastozar. Little Glypto says-“

But then Hooka was upon me, jerking at my leash savagely.

“No talk!” he grated, jerking me along.

I exchanged a wave of the hand with Ergon before he, too, was jerked along by the Yathoon who was walking him as well.

I was so weary from the exertions of the previous night that I slept soundly, with no dreams. True, I was a prisoner with small hope of freedom. But at least my Princess was safe and unharmed, if an amatar like myself.

At least we were all together again.

Chapter 11

A Glimpse of Freedom

Although I was bedded down in the central tent wherein slept my owner, Borak, I was not permitted to sleep in his company. A nest of furs in a far corner was set aside for me, with several folding partitions separating the master from his store of treasures.

My nest was comfortable enough, I suppose, although I shared it with a curiously misshapen tree root, the polished skull of a jungle deltagar, an egg-shaped stone banded with stripes of some yellow mineral, a sack of broken glass and bright pebbles, among which were about a dozen diamonds the size of walnuts, and a jumble and clutter of odds and ends of every description.

This junk I shoved aside, making a bed for myself up against the outer tent wall.

I had been asleep for some hours, as I later judged the time, when suddenly awakened by a hand laid lightly on my mouth. I shot bolt upright, tingling in every nerve, until I recognized the scrawny, cheerfully grinning little rogue who had so unexpectedly roused me from my slumbers.

“Glypto? How came you here?” I whispered hoarsely.

He held up a bit of copper wire, then pointed to the slave ring about my ankle, chained to a tent pole.

“Glypto the chanthan is the master of many arts,” the bony little rascal chortled, “and not the least among them is a certain skill at the opening of locks. Few are the locks that can withstand the skills of Glypto, the son of Glypto, the grandson of-“

“Spare me the genealogical reminiscences,” I groaned protestingly. “My Princess-is she unharmed? Ergon-“

“We are treated well, as prized possessions of a chieftain known as Gorpak, whose scout party chanced upon us shortly after the flying thing came down with many bruising and bone-crushing bumps from its giddy travels through the skies of-“

I cut this flow of pointless verbosity short with a grim gesture.

“Have you some message for me, or is this just a social visit?”

“Oh, yes my master! The lord Ergon-who has laid hands of cruel violence upon my person, as you shall hear-the lord Ergon bade me inquire of you whether or not we should attempt an escape during the hours of darkness. I can open all our locks, for my skills are such that no lock devised by human ingenuity can for very long withstand the subtle probings, and the clever pokings, of Glypto’s cunning and oh-so-sensitive fingers-“

“Do you know where the thaptors are penned?”

“Alas, but not It is pitch-black outside, and the two great moons, formerly aloft, have since sunken-“

“Can you spare me a bit of that wire sufficient for me to free myself from the lock?”

He nodded and worked it back and forth until it broke in two. I secreted the length of wire within the lining of my tunic.

“Very well, then. Tell Ergon that when we camp tomorrow night we should both try to find out where the beasts are penned; then, when we are given our nightly walk for sanitary purposes, whichever of you four I see I will say something like ‘It’s a nice night for a stroll,’ which is the signal to await the middle of the night-say about this present hour-then we shall separately free ourselves and meet at the pens for an attempted break. Do you understand all that?”

He nodded eagerly.

“About the mid of night ‘A nice night for a stroll’-meet at the thaptor pens-aye, my master! Glypto will pass the word to our companions in misfortune!”

“Very well, then. Now get you gone, back the way you came, and be wary of the sentinels . . . good luck!”

He melted into the shadows, then darted back to thrust something into my grip.

“A small gift selected from the hoard of Gorpak, which may come in handy, master!”

Then he wormed his way under the edge of the tent and was gone in the night.

I looked down at the object he had thrust into my grasp..

It was a slim scabbard of green leather stitched with gold wire. In it was thrust a long dirk or poignard of blue steel, with a slender, tapering blade that was a deadly needle of razor-edged steel, with a hilt studded with rough gems.

I chuckled with surprise and tucked the thing beneath my tunic.

No telling when a weapon might come in handy!

That day we covered many weary, endless leagues of grassy plain under a sky of burning golden vapor.

As nearly as I could judge our direction on a world in which the sun does neither rise in the east nor set in the west, the Horde was moving northward in a succession of slow stages. Wherever they were going, they were certainly in no particular hurry to get there, for the vast procession dawdled along with frequent stops.

The reason for this was, quite simply, that they were actually going nowhere at all. The Yathoon Horde had left the Secret Valley in the Black Mountains at a certain season of the Thanatorian year, in order to follow the vast migrant herds of the vanth. I have already explained how, at this time of year, the vanth migrate across the Great Plains to graze and breed among the foothills of the mountain country to the south. The Yathoon were engaged upon a vast, year-long hunting expedition which would gather and preserve game meat to be taken back to their females and their young in the Valley of Sargol.

The Yathoon are the greatest hunters I have ever encountered; the greatest, in fact, that I have ever even heard of. In part their supremacy in this art is due to their innate nature: they are emotionless, coldly logical, and their thinking processes are thoroughly alien to ours. They are, therefore, capable of cool, infinite patience. A Yathoon hunter will track his game unswervingly, untiringly, for weeks on end whereas we more volatile humans will quickly become bored and turn to something else. Then again, the Yathoon are uniquely outfitted by nature for the role of huntsmen because of their peculiar sensory apparatus.

I don't know enough about the scientific study of the insect life-forms to be able to say with any certainty that this is true of terrene arthropods, but the Thanatorian variety have radically different senses from we humans. They see differently, with superb perception of distance and a heightened sensitivity to color. My friend Kojia has told me that he and his kind can perceive twenty-seven different and clearly distinct colors in that segment of the visual spectrum we humans lump together crudely under the single heading of "red." As well, the insectoids have a greater sensitivity to odor than do we. They can sense the presence of game on the wind long before they can see it, and with their amazing ability to perceive color they can see through nature's every attempt at camouflage.

The Yathoon have another sense which they call hamouph and which is completely unknown to us. It seems to be the dimly telepathic ability to detect the nearness of highly developed living organisms, excluding vegetation and small, insignificant kinds of game, combined with a sort of locator-ability. In pitch-black night, a Yathoon can somehow sense the nearness of a large animal, and can pinpoint his location with remarkable precision. I have come to the opinion that this sensory ability detects the vital aura of life-force exuded by larger animals.

The organs of the hamouph-sense seem to be the branching knobbed antennae which sprout from the forehead of the Yathoon, or from where the forehead would be if they had foreheads, which they do not. But even the Yathoon are uncertain as to this sensory apparatus, and the brow antennae seem also to be the site of another sensory organ as well. It seems odd to me that the same organ should serve two

dissimilar senses, but such seems to be the case.

To preserve the meat they catch during these interminable hunting expeditions, the arthropods have domesticated a peculiar distant relative of theirs called the xanga. These are a species of wingless insects about the size of a full-grown dog, which resembles nothing so much as immense greenish gray bumblebees. The xanga are monosexual-if that's the word I want-and oviparous. That is to say, they are simultaneously masculine and feminine, or at least their bodies contain the rudimentary functions of both sexes. At certain seasons, one organ exudes a sperm-like secretion which fertilizes the ova-like cells developed in a neighboring organ. When the eggs have grown to a certain stage, the xanga hunt their prey-any smallish mammal or reptile which contains a sufficiency of fatty tissue-pounce upon it, and paralyze it with the venom contained in their stingers.

The eggs, thirty or forty to a breeding period, are then deposited in the stomach cavity of the helpless catch. The venom perfectly preserves the paralyzed catch and antibodies therein fight the process of decay and the proliferation of maggots. The fatty tissues are therefore ready to be devoured when the larvae of the xanga hatch within the flesh of the host.

Over countless ages the Yathoon have bred and domesticated these insects and a pack of the xanga accompany each hunting expedition so that the unique properties of their venom (which is harmless, once it has stabilized in the blood of the game) may preserve the meat they take. The ingenuity of the entire process is quite remarkable. In a terrene analogy, you might say the xanga venom acts as a sort of embalming fluid, inhibiting the decay of the meat, and it becomes neutralized in the blood so that the meat thus preserved may be eaten, either raw or cooked, without any ill effects.

Toward the xanga packs, the Yathoon have evolved a relationship that could be described as containing the rudiments of affection. There is no overt friendship in this relationship as, for example, in that which exists between a human huntsman and his hunting dogs; but a crude proto-affection is there to be seen. Every huntsman will have his favorite among the xanga pack, and these are generally singled out by possession of a pet name. For example, Borak's favorite xanga was an immense brute he called "Durgo," which means something like "trustworthy."

How infinite are the abilities of intelligence to adapt to the environment . . . and to adapt the environment to the uses of intelligence!

The day-long hunt contained one bittersweet moment for me and my fellow amatars.

Toward midafternoon the shadow of a cloud moved across the forefront of the immense procession. I looked up . . . and my heart literally stopped beating in my breast.

For it was no cloud that had temporarily obscured the golden brilliance of the Thanatorian heaven.

It was an ungainly aerial contrivance, the work of human intelligence. The smoothly curved hull, ornamented with cupolas and balustrades and balconies and belvederes, floated to the measured pulse of fantastic jointed wings. Long banners unrolled slowly on the wind, fluttering from sternpost and pilothouse and masthead.

At an elevation of about one thousand feet, the amazing aerial contraption drifted overhead lazily, dwindling slowly away toward the eastern horizon.

It was the dream of Leonardo da Vinci materialized into reality by the brain of some unknown genius of Callisto . . . a true ornithopter, a bird-winged flying ship!

I watched it sail lazily overhead and shrink slowly into dark mote down east with an ache in my throat.

So near . . . and yet so far away!

It was a symbol of freedom and safety and rescue-although, to the Yathoon, it represented a potential menace. The chitinous arthropods drew in their ranks, nocked their bows, prepared for attack which did not come. To them, the Sky Pirates of Zanadar were still a living menace. Remote and inaccessible, set apart by their taciturnity from all intercourse with the human races which shared their world, the Yathoon could not have known that the Zanadarians had fallen and the Sky Pirates flew no more upon the golden skies.

They could not have known that two of the flying galleons had survived the destruction of the pirate fleet, the Xaxar and the Jalathadar, now in the service of Shondakor.

With an ache in my heart, I watched the stately galleon of the skies vanish gradually into the glare of the east.

I did not need to see the golden banner that floated from her stern to know her for the Jalathadar.

And I knew that among her crew were gallant Lukor, stout Koja, young Tomar, Captain Haakon, Prince Valkar, or other of our loyal friends, searching the Great Plains for some sign of Darloona and Ergon and myself.

That night, as Hooka took me for my walk, I spied Ergon being walked on a leash by a member of Gorpak's retinue.

"Looks like a nice night for a stroll," I greeted him, casually.

"It does that, in truth," replied Ergon.

"No talk!" grated Hooka, jerking my leash.

Chapter 12

Escape by Night

My dinner that night consisted of the usual wooden bowl of thin, watery gruel in which a few lumps of tough meat swam soggily. I devoured it mechanically, hardly bothering to taste it. Then I lay down in my nest among the treasures of Borak and awaited the hour of my escape.

Alas, the appearance of the Jalathadar in the skies had thrown the chieftains of the Horde into consternation. The Sky Pirates were seldom if ever known to raid this far south, because in this part of the world there were no cities, hence no merchant caravans, and hence nothing for the aerial buccaneers to raid. Borak and certain of the other chieftains, among them Gorpak, conferred late into the night,

discussing this problem and examining and rejecting various schemes for the protection of the clan. I lay in the darkness of a far corner of the tent, shielded by partitions, counting the minutes and anxious to be gone.

True, I was not under observation and could perhaps have effected my escape then and there. But I deemed it too hazardous to do so while the tent was filled with Yathoon and the sentinels outside wide-awake and vigilant. So I composed myself, and tried to emulate the patience for which the arthropods were famous. Once the war council had ended, and the chieftains returned to their own quarters, and Borak himself fell asleep, the guards outside would relax their attention and I could make my break with every chance of success.

It grew later and later. Had Ergon and the others already unlocked their shackles and crept to the thaptor pens? Were they waiting for me now, nervous, tense, fearful that my escape had been discovered? Had this cursed, poorly timed council ruined all our plans? Should I wait no longer for the appropriate time, but try to escape now, despite the danger of detection?

These questions seethed and swirled through my restless brain in a turmoil of confusion. It might well prove wise to delay our break until the next night, but I had already given the signal to Ergon, and it was too late to change the plans now.

At length, as the night wore on and the council remained undismitted, I resolved to try it, for better or for worse, for I could wait no longer. At any time the greater moons would begin to rise, followed by the gigantic, luminous orb of mighty Jupiter itself. Night would become as bright as day, and the chances of our making a successful escape from the encampment of the Horde would lessen dramatically.

I had surreptitiously practiced unlocking my slave collar with the aid of Glypto's bit of wire, and was confident that I could repeat the action in a trice. The locks were old and primitive, for the Yathoon do not work metals, and our shackles were plunder taken in a raid long ago, or so it seemed from their condition. I fished out the bit of wire Glypto had given me and inserted it into the lock, bending it this way and that to conform to the configuration of the lock's interior mechanism. A few moments later the lock sprang open with a click of metal which seemed startlingly loud to me, in my tense and jumpy mood.

I waited for an endless moment, holding my breath in suspense, to see if one of the Yathoon should come hither to investigate the sound, but this did not happen. Busy with their discussions, the arthropod chieftains had disregarded the odd noise as being merely one of the numberless small sounds of the night.

Loosening the gem-hilted dagger under my tunic, I crept under the tent-flap and slithered into the drainage ditch that ringed the tent of Borak.

And I froze motionless

Not ten feet from where I lay, one of the guards of Borak's retinue stood; staring up at the sky, leaning on a spear.

Had the insect-man heard the rustle of the tent fabric as I wormed under it, or the sound I had made, slithering into the ditch? Heart thumping painfully, mouth dry with tension, I lay motionless, waiting for discovery.

The guard made a weird sight, staring up at the sky where as yet only the smaller of the moons were aloft. Dim shafts of multi-colored moonlight drew highlights from the crablike shell of oily chitin which encased his many-jointed, attenuated limbs. The faint light flashed and glittered in the huge bulging eyes of

the uncanny creature. These eyes were swollen globular patches made up of ink-black, mirror-bright crystals. He looked like some fantastic statue of glimmering metal, some alien god or demon, as he stood motionless, bathed in the dim flickering rays of the colored moons.

Following his fixed, unswerving gaze, I stared aloft but could see nothing in the skies above which might have attracted his attention. Perhaps the nearness of the Jalathadar had prompted the wary Borak to warn the guards to be on the alert for a reappearance of the flying ship.

At any rate I lay there, sweating, my guts knotted with suspense, waiting for him to move, wondering if he was going to stand there all night long.

Armed with the poignard Glypto had given me, I suppose I could have leaped upon him and struck him down. But the Yathoon are not easily slain with a small blade, for their greasy chitin protects their vulnerable organs like a suit of armor; and surely the sounds of the struggle as we thrashed about would have been heard by the chieftains within the tent.

Then, all of a sudden, without the slightest warning, the guard turned and stalked away in the opposite direction, leaving me limp and gasping with relief.

I scrambled to my feet and darted through the trampled grasses to the inky shadow of the next tent, and began making my way as swiftly and as silently as I could to the collapsible pens where the riding thaptors were housed.

I had carefully marked the location of the pens in my mind when the Horde made camp earlier that evening, memorizing landmarks so that I could easily find them in the dark. Staying in the dense shadow of the tents as much as I could, I unobtrusively made my way through the camp. Half a dozen times I stopped short and froze motionlessly in the shadow as a Yathoon stalked by. Their huge multiple eyes give them uncanny night vision, as they gather much more light than do our organs of sight, but luckily none of them saw me.

After an interminable time I managed to reach the thaptor pens without being detected. The restive bird-horses, uneasy and alarmed because of the unusual activity in the camp, capered and trotted about, clashing their parrot beaks and hissing like steam whistles. In the uproar it seemed unlikely our getaway would arouse attention.

Crouching in the thick grasses, I peered about, searching for my friends. Had they managed to escape from the tents of Gorpak, or had they been seized during the attempt?

A hand closed upon my foot and I almost jumped out of my skin. Jerking around, I saw Ergon's froglike face glowering at me from a nest hollowed in the grasses.

"Jandar! We had almost given you up! I was about to send Glypto to see what had become of you--"

"An unexpected war council in Borak's tent," I whispered. "Occasioned by the appearance of the Jalathadar this afternoon; did you see the ship as it passed over our line of march?"

"I did," he grunted, "but failed to recognize it. Your lady knew it at once, though."

"Where is she?"

He waved one hand. "Yonder, hiding by the water trough. Think you the Jalathadar will double back,

giving us a chance to attract her attention?”

“There’s a chance, at least. The fact that the Horde is camped here must have given Haakon cause to wonder if we might not have been taken prisoner. But we’ll see—the problem now is to get out of the camp!”

“While waiting all this cursed time for you to come, I got five of the thaptors saddled up; they are tethered yonder by the trough. I have been devilishly worried that some capok would come ambling by and wonder why five beasts are still saddled up, but thus far nothing had chanced. Let us be gone from this cursed place before we are discovered . . . “

“I say amen to that,” I replied in English, not bothering to translate. We wormed our way over to the trough, where my Princess lay, with Zamara near and little Glypto crouched trembling in the shadow of a bale of dried grasses. Exchanging urgent whispers, we climbed through the fence and mounted the saddled thaptors. They didn’t like the idea of being mounted, and were unhappy about wearing saddles, and squawked and clacked their beaks and made quite an uproar. But luckily no one came to investigate the noise, as this is the usual behavior of thaptors, who have never been thoroughly domesticated anyway.

Now how do we get out of here, Jandar?” Ergon growled.

“We unlatch the gates and ride out, leaving the pens open behind us,” I said swiftly. “That way all the thaptors will bolt for freedom and the Yathoon will be too busy trying to round them up to notice us making our getaway. So, at least, we may hope!”

Unbelievably it was even simpler than it sounds. The moment I tripped the latch and the gates swung open, sixty tense, nervous, squawking, quarrelsome thaptors made a frantic burst for freedom. We merely rode along in the midst of the herd. With unerring accuracy they stampeded towards the perimeter of the camp, where rude earthworks had been built up to encircle and thus protect the encampment. Each time the Yathoon Horde makes camp they go through the routine of digging drainage ditches and setting up earthworks and erecting the pens, even if they only plan to spend the night before packing up and moving on. I believe, in this respect, they unknowingly emulate the ancient Roman legions.

Guards sprang up in front of us along the rampart, waving their arms and uttering harsh cries, trying to divert the stampede. But the wild thaptors refused to be diverted, and the guards vanished in a whirl of dust as the thaptors simply ran them down, trampling them underfoot. Then the earthworks rose before us, a rampart of packed earth about six feet high. The thaptors rose up and soared leaping over the ramparts in one smooth wave that was beautiful to see.

Before us stretched the endless plains, dim in the vague moonlight. The herd kept on straight in the direction in which it had first headed, although the herd began to thin out along the edges as groups of bird-horses detached themselves from the main body of the stampede, peeling off in all directions, obviously for the purpose of making their recapture more difficult.

We five managed to stay together, but with considerable difficulty, for our unruly mounts desired to veer off in this or that direction. To enforce discipline we freely used the little knobbed olos.

We flew along like the wind. Our beasts were wild with joy at freedom, and sped straight out into the shadowy plains with every ounce of speed their wiry, lean-muscled bodies possessed. They could not for very long manage to sustain this dizzying sprint, but while they could, they put the encampment behind them further and further with every instant of time that passed.

These were not the only thaptors the Horde owned, of course. There were many such pens scattered about the camp, each containing between twenty-five and two hundred beasts, depending on the rank and importance of the clan chieftain to whom each pen belonged, and to the size of his retinue. But by the time the Yathoon saddled up and rode out into the plains to start trying to round up the runaways, we should be long gone.

Or so we hoped.

I leaned over the stiff ruff of bristling feathers my thaptor wore for a mane, feeling exultation rise in me, heady in my veins like rare champagne. The taste of freedom can make you drunk with joy, if you have not sampled the beverage for some time. Ahead of me, riding like the wind, my Princess turned to laugh joyously, her magnificent eyes smiling into mine. For the millionth time I gave thanks to whatever fate had made so glorious a woman mine.

By contrast with Darloona's wild excitement, the Princess of Tharkol clung fearfully to her steed, her face white with terror. The events of the last couple of days must have seemed like a nightmare to Zamara, for seldom could the proud and pampered Princess of Tharkol have been used with such rudeness.

We had snatched her from her bed, bundled her bound and gagged into her own balloon, carried her off for a wild ride through the skies, endangered her with pterodactyls, crashed her unceremoniously into the plains, gotten her captured and enslaved by a wandering army of savage and inhuman nomads, and now thrust her into the midst of a wild and giddy stampede of maddened thaptors!

The divine right of kings-or whatever silly philosophy she believed governed her incontrovertible right to do what she alone wished-must have become severely bruised in the recent succession of events. To say nothing of a tender and overinflated royal ego.

When one is carried off in the night by one's own captives, it must be difficult to sustain the belief in one's divinely decreed destiny to rule the world!

As for Glypto, the little rogue was also white with terror and retaining his place astride the galloping thaptor with the very greatest difficulty imaginable. In fact, I expected the little rascal to go flying at any moment, from the way he was bouncing about in his saddle. But he wrapped both arms around the arched neck of his thaptor and clung on with every atom of strength his wiry little body could muster. But he was tough, the little bantam, and displayed unsuspected reserves of what I can only describe as guts. Life in the gutters and alleys of Tharkol thins out the weaklings early on, I surmised: to survive at all, he must have been tough and resilient and adaptable.

Glypto had survived. And he might even survive this wild, nightmarish gallop through the windy dark. But-from the way he was bouncing up and down in his saddle-I presumed he would not feel like sitting down for some days to come.

The headlong pace of our steeds slowed now as the beasts lost their wind. They began to stumble and stagger, gasping for breath, froth dribbling from the gaping beaks.

The larger moons soared up, one by one, over the edges of the world, flooding the plains with beautiful colored light.

We were lost and alone and unarmed in an unknown world.

But at least we had regained our freedom.

Book Four

SHAPHUR OF SORABA

Chapter 13

Lost on the Great Plains

After a time our beasts became exhausted and could no longer sustain their speed. We permitted them to come to a halt, and dismounted stiffly from the saddles. No sign of pursuit was either visible or audible, and, as we had ridden a considerable distance from the Yathoon encampment, we assumed it unlikely that any of the nomads were on our trail. Doubtless they had their hands too full of the problem of rounding up as many of the escaping thaptors as they could to bother about us. If indeed our own escape had been noticed, which was not likely.

Although we were by now completely lost on the Great Plains, without food or provisions or much in the way of weapons, save for the two poignards Glypto had discovered amid the hoard of Gorpak, one of which I had and Ergon the other, we were unafraid. In fact, we faced the unknown future with great confidence: we were free, we were together again, and we had a fighting chance of finding our way home.

In fact, our chance was better than that, for we knew our friends were searching for us, as an aerial galleon such as the Jalathadar can cover an immense tract of land very swiftly.

We camped where we were. None of us had extra clothing or anything in the way of bedding, but the night was warm and the grasses were deep and we were exhausted from the strain and exertion of our escape and our wild ride over the plains, and knew we could sleep soundly. Luckily we had all been fed earlier in the evening, and thus did not suffer from hunger, although I for one could certainly have done with a drink of water, and so, doubtless could my companions, especially the women.

Of the two women, Darloona was a tower of strength but Zamara, predictably enough, was a continuous headache. My Princess was too delighted to be free again to bother much about bedding down amidst the grasses, and viewed the entire experience with a boyish delight as an unexpected adventure. Her high spirits and enthusiasm were an inspiration to us all, and I loved her all the more for her humor, bravery, and cheerful willingness to endure discomfort.

The self-styled Empress of Callisto, on the other hand, could not stop complaining. She raved and ranted on about the affront to her imperial rank, cursed the Yathoon as unfeeling savages, and even had the nerve to protest about the undignified manner in which we had arranged our escape. The rest of us paid little attention to her fuming display of temperament, and Ergon, sprawled out beside me listening to

her curse and complain, grinned sourly.

“It has been like this ever since Gorpak found us in the wreckage of the balloon,” he grunted. “She was astounded that the Yathoon warriors did not know who she was, or what she was, I should say. And it enraged her that they paid not the slightest attention to her protestations that she was the Empress of the world and that by taking her prisoner, they tempted the wrath of the Lords of Gordrimator, whose anointed vicar on Thanator she was.”

He chuckled. “The ultimate insult, which left her gasping and in tears, was that Gorpak’s warriors chained her together with Glypto and your lady and myself. For an Empress to be chained with common slaves was a shock to her self-esteem from which she has not yet recovered!”

I laughed. “We shall have to find some way of disabusing her of this notion that she is the darling of the gods. The fact of the matter is, quite simply, that she has been deluded by Ang Chan.”

“The little yellow dwarf who contrived our capture in the woods? What part does he play in these mad dreams of world conquest?”

“He is a Kuurian from a far land on the other side of the planet,” I informed him. “I have met his kind before. One of his brethren, a clever little devil who called himself Ool, had connived himself into a position of high authority among the Chac Yuul. The Kuurians are Mind Wizards; they have the peculiar ability to read men’s minds, and they know what you are thinking as well as you do yourself. And now I have reason to suspect that they have also the power to intrude into your mind and plant illusions there—such as the white vanth Darloona and I pursued into the woods that time—the vanth which you could not even see, for the very good reason that it was Darloona and I they desired to capture, while they cared nothing about you.”

“A strange story, Jandar,” Ergon mused, rubbing his jaw with one huge, scarred hand. “It sounds like magic to me, and magic is something that I have never bothered to believe in. Had anyone else told me such a story, I would have thought him a fool or a madman or a liar. But I know you too well by now to think you qualify for any of those titles.”

Darloona, curled sleepily near us, spoke up. “Jandar speaks the truth, Ergon. He fought and slew this Ool in the Pits of Shondakor, and the little yellow man, thinking himself invulnerable because he could read Jandar’s mind and knew where he would thrust his sword next, unwisely bragged aloud of the secret plans of the Kuurians, whom, it seems, work behind the scenes to influence and direct other nations, for some cunning and mysterious purpose of their own. And we did indeed see a white vanth, that day.”

Zamara had permitted her ravings to subside, as it became obvious none of us was listening, and had heard our discussion. Now she came over to where we sprawled in nests of trampled grass. She was still a remarkably beautiful young woman, though her finery was by now reduced to rags and her hair had not been tended for days. Her brilliant eyes flashed and her lovely face flamed with indignation and fury.

“What madness is this you talk of, fools? Ang Chan is the wisest of my councillors and a holy man, the veritable mouthpiece and oracle of the gods! You call him a cunning and unscrupulous rogue, plotting treason—deluding me? But this is madness! The Lords of Gordrimator in Person have descended to hail my future glory and to assure me of Their unfailing support and miraculous assistance in paving my way to the Throne of Shondakor—“

“Princess, is it not true that this Ang Chan possesses a mysterious power to influence the thoughts of

others, and to make their eyes see what his own mind wills? Was it not by this power that he made us see the illusion of the white vanth, in order to lure us into the woods where you were waiting to carry us off?"

She snorted indignantly at my words.

"Of course! He has the power to work holy miracles-a power given him by the Lords of Gordrinator in order to serve their ends-nothing more!"

"Perhaps not. But consider . . . if he could make us see a vanth where Ergon saw nothing . . . could he not also have made you see this visitation from the gods you speak of?"

"That was a holy miracle! A blessed vision!"

"Is it not at least possible that the vision was induced in your mind by the cunning of Ang Chan?" I argued persuasively. "You must admit that it is at least possible that our interpretation of this vision is correct?"

"I-I-I admit nothing! You speak blasphemy against the Lords-and treason against your Empress!" she stammered.

Darloona eyed her with cool amusement.

"I suspect that the Princess of Tharkol is trying desperately to persuade herself, not us, that her visions were holy truth," she observed. "And I further suspect her vehemence stems from her own inner doubts, rather from any irrationalities in our version of these events."

Zamara glared at her in a paroxysm of furious outrage. Her breasts rose and fell as she panted, and her superb eyes flashed dangerously.

"You-dare?" she hissed.

Darloona shrugged. "Not having been a witness to these visions myself, I cannot be certain of their veracity," she said calmly. "But I would, I think, tend to be suspicious of anyone who tells me he has received miracles and visions from the gods. If there be any gods at all, in truth they dwell far away and seldom have anything much to do with human affairs-as witness the wars and tyrants and injustices that flourish unchecked, or, rather, are checked only by human effort and courage and dedication, if they are checked at all. And I would tend to be doubly suspicious of any miraculous visitations that tell you what you most want to hear: that you are destined for glory and greatness and deserve to rule the world. That sounds like wishful thinking, you know."

Words failed Zamara at hearing these unutterable blasphemies spoken in so calm and reasonable a tone of voice. Speechless, she stamped her little foot in rage.

"There-there is no arguing with one who refuses to believe!" she cried in vexation.

"There is also no arguing with one who insists on believing in the incredible against all reason and commonsense," Darloona smiled.

The Empress turned on her heel and went fuming off, to throw herself down for the night in a nest of grasses. She had removed herself as far apart from we unbelieving mortals as she could, without getting

too far away for us to spring to her protection should danger arise.

We laughed and joked a little between us, then gradually let weariness overtake us and drifted, one by one, to sleep. The thaptors grazed on the thick grasses, tethered near to where we were bedded down, their reins securely knotted in the roots of nearby bushes.

We slept soundly, dreamlessly, and woke with dawn refreshed.

Refreshed, but furiously hungry and afire with thirst! There was nothing we could do to assuage either hunger or thirst for the moment, however, so we simply ignored them as best we could, keeping our spirits high and facing the pangs of our empty bellies with as much fortitude as we could muster.

Darloona remained cheerful and uncomplaining, and not one word of peevish ill-temper escaped her lips. Zamara, in striking contrast, wept and whined and whimpered.

I would have thought her convictions of her divinely-ordained destiny would have sustained her in the face of such trials and discomforts, but such, it seemed, was not the case.

We mounted and rode into the plains. Ergon was in the fore, his keen eyes searching the meadowlands.

When I asked him if it was game he was on the alert for, he grinned and advised me he was keeping on the lookout for a jinko. When I blandly asked him what kind of a creature a jinko might be, he goggled at me with astonishment, then shrugged good-humoredly.

“I keep forgetting that you are not native to Thanator,” he shrugged.

“Then permit me to remind you of my ignorance, and to inquire again into the peculiarities of the jinko,” I smiled. “Let us hope that they are good to eat and easy to kill, for we have only two daggers between us and I am famished.”

“It is not a beast at all, it’s a plant,” he explained. “A most curious plant, however, in that it possesses the power of locomotion, otherwise denied most forms of vegetation.”

“A walking plant, eh?” I repeated, wonderingly. “Well, the wonders of Thanator never cease to amaze me. I trust this perambulating vegetation is, at least, edible.”

He then expanded on the unique qualities of the jinko, a plant superbly designed by nature to subsist in desert places, but often found amidst the plains, especially in such parts of the plains which are devoid of rivers, ponds, or lakes. The jinko, it seems, is drawn to the nearness of subterranean water sources by some occult sense. Having found such, the jinko sends down its mobile rootlets to suck up the water, which it stores in hollow, bladder-like leaves, and upon which it sustains itself during further perambulations about the landscape in search of yet other sources of liquid nourishment.

The arrangement sounded most novel to me, but it was not, after all, very much more peculiar than that of the so-called “air plant” of my native world, which roosts in trees and drinks sustenance from the atmosphere alone, without recourse to the soil which is the common food source of most plants.

We rode on across the Great Plains, strung out in a wide front, each of us keeping an eye open for the elusive and invaluable jinko without which, I assumed, death from thirst and starvation was to be our lot. Zamara complained, loudly and continuously, about her hunger and thirst, but sulkily refused to assist in the hunt. It occurred to me to suggest that, as the chosen darling of the gods, she might expect miraculous

relief for the asking; but that otherwise, unless she helped search for the jinko, she would have no claim in the partaking of its fluids.

She cursed me sulphurously, but began searching for the jinko as soon as she thought I was not watching her. I exchanged a grin with Darloona.

“Another week of this and, between us, we’ll make a human being out of her,” the Princess chuckled.

Chapter 14

The Tree that Walks like a Man

Before we had been riding for more than a couple of hours, Ergon raised an exultant shout and whirled his thaptor off in the direction I assumed to be north. He rode straight for a large, conical-shaped tree that towered above the plains to the height of some fifteen feet or so.

Riding up to where he had halted near the peculiar-looking tree, I called out to him. “This is a jinko? You didn’t tell me they were as large as this-I was watching for something more like a bush.”

“Such they usually resemble,” he grinned happily, “but this is the grandfather of all jinkos!”

He climbed down off the back of his bird-horse, and made a warning gesture of caution.

“Don’t talk too loudly or move too swiftly,” he advised, “or you will scare it off.”

I elevated my eyebrows.

“Scare it off? You mean the thing has-intelligence?” I asked incredulously. He shrugged indifferently.

“I know not whether it be true cognition, or mere brute instinct,” he growled in a low voice, “but they are somehow sensitive to the nearness of warm-blooded creatures, and any abrupt movement in their immediate vicinity may alarm them into flight. And, while they are generally ponderous and slow of movement, I have known instances when it was necessary to gallop after one for the better part of half a korad before you got near enough to snatch a drink of water.”

Glypto, Darloona, and Zamara had ridden up to where we stood by this time. Wiser than I in the techniques of stalking the wary jinko, they dismounted slowly and formed a great ring about the tree, slowly moving in from all sides simultaneously.

The jinko, by the way, resembled an overgrown bush more than a tree, on closer inspection. That is, it seemed to have no central trunk from which the branches grew, but was a thicket of intertangled twigs, each about as big around as my forearm. The base of these twigs was a tangled network, like a great pad, which rested on the surface of the plain. Below this pad hairy rootlets of sinuous and snaky prehensile ability wormed deeply into the ground-I knew this because even as I advanced slowly upon the tree from my side of the circle, one wriggling rootlet came sucking up out of the soil and slithered

inquiringly in my direction. In fact, it snuffled inquisitively about my feet like a wary and nearsighted dog!

The twigs extended about a dozen feet in all directions from the central mass, shaping the jinko into something like a squat cone. The twigs ended in swollen, purplish bladders rather like elephant ears, but much fatter because of the water stored within them. The fullest of the “leaves” were a good four or five inches thick and the larger of these must have contained nearly a gallon of water each.

The tree was aware of our presence now. The rootlet which had been sniffing at my ankles, recoiled suddenly into a tight spiral, quivering and tense with alarm. Bristling long hairs or minor rootlets sprouted from the length of the wriggling, prehensile thing, and these vibrated, stiff with alarm.

I was reminded, uneasily, of a rattler, coiling and vibrant, about to strike. Snakes are unknown on Thanator, I believe, and Ergon, sensing my trepidation, advised me the tree was harmless.

Reaching up, we selected the fattest and largest of the bladder-leaves we could, and began cutting them off the branches with our knives. The tree jerked this way and that, trembling, trying to snatch its leaves from our grasp.

The leaves were quite easy to detach. Once you snapped one loose, water dribbled from the end of the branch, which was hollow like a pipe or a garden hose; but the opening quickly swelled shut with an oozing, gummy substance. Watching this curious phenomenon, I suddenly realized that the “leaves” we were plucking were nothing like leaves at all, but were more like bubbles or balloons! For the gummy sap which oozed from the end of one branch from which I had just snapped off a “leaf,” now swelled into a reddish bubble from the water pressure, and as I watched, it began slowly to expand into another elephant-ear-shaped bladder. As the gummy stuff stretched and dried, it turned purple.

When we had harvested enough bladders of water, Ergon bade us stand clear of the tree. Once it perceived itself to be no longer ringed- about, the jinko nervously detached itself from the earth, and began scuttling off to the west, squirming along on its wriggling rootlets, swaying from side to side in a most amusing fashion.

Picking up its stride, it rocketed off across the plains and dwindled from sight. When last seen, I would say it was running much faster than a man.

Thanator-world of wonders!

You drink from the bladder-leaves by cutting or tearing a slit about two inches wide in the purplish flesh, tilting this aperture towards your mouth, and squeezing the bladder gently, causing the water to squirt into your mouth-and all over your face, if you fail to aim it properly.

The water was pure, clear, cold, and indescribably delicious.

Ergon made a fire with dry grasses and cut two of the empty bladders into long strips, toasting these in the blaze. They sizzled like steaks roasting on charcoal, giving off a steamy, spicy odor that was not exactly meatlike, but not quite vegetable either. When the strips were done sufficiently, we feasted on them. The purplish flesh, now crisp and brown, had a stringy, fibrous consistency like good lean beef, but a succulent, mealy taste like hot tortillas.

Anyway, they were tasty and filling. Even Zamara devoured them hungrily, failed to complain at the primitive nature of the feast, and carefully licked up every crumb from her lips with a small, pointed pink tongue.

We had drained dry, then cooked and eaten, only two of the jinko leaves. As we had plucked about seventeen before permitting the walking tree to scuttle away about its business, we had provisions of food and drink sufficient to last us for several days.

Resting awhile, seeing that the thaptors satisfied their thirst, we mounted and rode on, refreshed and filled.

Now the only pressing and immediate problem which we faced was that we were lost.

This was a problem that took some thought to solve.

We had been in the plains to the east of Shondakor when first taken prisoner. The balloon had flown us yet farther east, to the city of Tharkol. In making our escape from Tharkol by balloon, we had been carried, as far as we could determine, due south to be brought down midway between Tharkol and the Black Mountains. Midway between the city and the mountains we had fallen captive to the Yathoon Horde.

But which way had the Yathoon nomads taken us-east or west? I believed we had traveled due west during our captivity in the Horde, and should therefore be south of Shondakor. But Ergon was of the opinion that we had been headed north, and might by now be on a line between Shondakor and Tharkol.

It was a pretty problem, indeed. If we went in the direction I suggested, and if Ergon proved correct in his estimate of our present location, we should end up near the city of Soraba on the shores of Corund Laj, the Greater Sea. And that would make us farther from Shondakor than before!

The damnable part of it all was that we could not be sure. This was due to the peculiarities of Thanator itself. The sun is merely the brightest of stars in these skies. In fact, only rarely can you discern its position in the heavens at all, due to the weird layer of translucent golden vapor which blankets the Jungle Moon high in its upper atmosphere. Daylight on Callisto is caused by some mysterious fluorescent effect in this golden vapor, which causes it to blaze into illumination. But this happens all at once, throughout the entire sky.

On Earth, things are so much simpler. The sun rises in the east, and that's all there is to it! Once you know this fact, you can figure out your direction during any daylight hour. But not so on Thanator. And here they have yet to invent the compass!

At length we resolved our differences, arrived at a compromise, and struck off in a direction that we generally agreed would in time bring us within eyeshot of Shondakor.

We crossed the plains by slow, easy stages, with frequent stops for rest and nourishment. Had it been just Ergon and I alone, we could have made much better time, because we would have increased the pace, driving both ourselves and our thaptors mercilessly.

But we had the women to think of, and scrawny little Glypto. Half-starved most of his miserable life, the little guttersnipe lacked the stamina of a warrior. So we catered to him and the women, nor did we treat the little rogue harshly, demanding he keep up with us. He was no enemy, but a friend, and I must admit that I felt just a bit guilty at forcing him to endure these adventures. He had been brought along with us by a combination of accident and mistake, and it seemed a bit unfair. I must say, all things considered, he was a more amiable and useful companion than his Queen, who alternately raged or wept, whimpered or cursed. He was good-natured, comical, and quick to help. He amused Darloona with his quips and

antics, and he delighted in tormenting glum Ergon.

He delighted in mimicking Ergon's goggle-eyed glower and froggish grimace, and skillfully parodied the bandy-legged Perushtarian's rolling gait, which always reminded me of a sailor's. Ergon suffered Glypto's clowning in indignant, grim-jawed silence, but, when stung to the quick, made to cuff the capering little thief. If any of those heavy-handed blows had actually landed, Glypto would have clowned no more-nor, for that matter, would he have stirred from a hospital bed for a fortnight.

But he seemed to know by sheer instinct when Ergon had taken enough, and whenever his antics had goaded the bald-headed Perushtarian to the brink of rage, the smirking little rapsSCALLION slackened his play and turned to other trickery, leaving Ergon to huff and puff as his temper slowly subsided.

There was a considerable element of play in this, as if it were almost a game shared between them. I have a feeling Ergon, in his dour, grumpy way, rather liked the chipper, droll little guttersnipe, and that little Glypto admired Ergon for his strength, valor, determination, and dogged loyalty. The unspoken, almost unavowed, friendship or comradeship which grew between the two very dissimilar men was touching, in a way. Neither admitted to any fondness for the other: Ergon snorted, and called him "gutter-scrapings," "garbage-picker," and like terms of disrespect; Glypto, on the other hand, employed his nimble wits to invent a variety of amusingly apt, if impolite, titles for Ergon. Of these the one which amused me most was "Sir Boiled-Frog," a deft allusion to Ergon's scarlet hide, bald head, bowlegs and froglike mouth.

Our supply of jinko bladders lasted us six days without scrimping.

On the seventh day we encountered, and raided, a second jinko. Our second was nowhere near the size of our first, which had been indeed, as Ergon termed it, the "grandfather of all jinkos." This one, by comparison, was only a niece or nephew. Moreover, we took it on the wing, so to speak: it was not rooted, but roaming free, and we had to chase the nimble rooted little bush about three-quarters of a mile before we "winded" it sufficiently to bring it to a stop, which we effected by the simple process of surrounding it on thapTOR-back, then dismounting to prune it of the larger of its bladders.

The poor thing trembled in terror all the while, but we did not denude it, picking only the larger of its leaves, before turning it loose to scamper off. The leaves were nowhere as large as the ones on the first jinko, but their water was no less fresh and cold, and the flesh of the bladders was, if anything, tenderer, juicier, and more succulent.

That was on the seventh day of our escape from the encampment of the Yathoon arthropods.

On the eighth day we saw the caravan.

Chapter 15

Taken by Surprise

The caravan consisted of about two hundred men and animals strung out in a long line that wound across

the Great Plains for nearly half a mile. Teams were hitched to large covered wains which, with their four wheels, light construction, and felt coverings, bore a striking resemblance to the covered wagons which played such an important role in the opening up of the American West.

The drivers of these wains, and the scouts, guards, and outriders, who fanned across the plains in every direction, keeping a lookout for bandits or raiders, had the scarlet skin and bald heads and beardless faces of Perushtarians.

Leaving Glypto behind to stay with the women, Ergon and I went ahead to investigate the caravan and to form some estimate of the danger it presented to us, if any. We dismounted and wormed a way on our bellies to the crest of low hummocks from which we could view the extent of the caravan without being seen ourselves.

Ergon looked them over with a suspicious eye and a glum face.

“Sorabans,” he grunted sourly.

“How can you tell?” I asked. He indicated the emblem which was emblazoned on the breasts of the riders’ tunics and stenciled on the sides of the wains. It was also tattooed or perhaps branded on the upper chest of the thaptors where their feathers thinned out to a creamy fuzz. This symbol bore little relation to the earthly kinds of heraldry known to me. It was a complex design of flowing, intertwined arabesques and flowery tendrils.

“The emblem of the House of Iommon, a family of merchant princes very powerful in Soraba, who maintain a branch in Narouk,” he growled. Ergon had been a slave in Narouk when first we had met, which explained how he was able to recognize the blazonry.

“Slavers?” I asked.

The Perushtarians have made of the breeding and training and selling of slaves a major industry and a fine art, and the last thing I wanted was to fall in with slavers. Not when we were this close to Shondakor, surely!

He shook his head, almost reluctantly.

“I have never heard that the Iommon interests extend to slavery,” he said grudgingly. “They have a monopoly on sea trade between Soraba and Farz, and a share in the weaving and dyeing works in Glorious Perusht itself. They maintain a great fleet which plies the waters of the Corund Laj between the far-flung cities of the empire.”

“Then we are in no danger of being enslaved by them?” I pressed. He shrugged.

“I should not think it likely. But it would be best if we permitted the caravan to pass us by without discovering our presence. We have been in enough trouble on this adventure, as it is. But there is something strange here”

“What is that?”

He shifted about to a more comfortable position in the grasses.

“I have never heard that the Iommon indulge in overland trading expeditions, and cannot imagine why

they should bother to do so, since they enjoy a monopoly on sea trade. And I cannot help wondering where they have been, and where they are going. Their wains seem full of goods, their mounts travel-stained and covered with road dust; from this, I would assume that they have completed a successful trading venture and are en route home again.”

It took a moment for this to sink in. As it did, and as I began to realize the implications of this, my heart sank.

“You mean you think they are heading for Soraba?” I asked, hollowly.

“I must assume so. And they could only have come from Tharkol, for there is no other city hereabouts.”

“That means we have been traveling in the wrong direction, all this while!” I groaned.

He nodded, grimly. “I’m afraid so, Jandar.”

“Then every hour we have ridden has only put more distance between us and Shondakor,” I said in despair. He nodded again.

“I can only think so. We are headed due north, towards the shores of the Corund Laj, where the city of Soraba rises at the head of the Sorabian peninsula.” He nodded over his shoulder. “We should have been traveling in that direction, all this while!”

Just then we heard a despairing cry from behind us. We whirled to see mounted warriors cantering in a circle about Darloona, Glypto, and Zamara. They were caravan guards, from the emblems on their tunics, and they had ridden through the hillocks behind us, taking the women by surprise.

“Well, that blows it,” I said grimly.

“Do not bother to translate, Jandar,” Ergon grunted. “I think I can guess your meaning.”

Since we were discovered, there was no point in trying to hide our position, and I had no wish to be parted from Darloona again. Ergon and I rose to our feet and hurried down the slope. One of the caravan guards spied our approach and cantered toward us.

He was a sulky-faced, grim-looking specimen, with a squat neck and a bullethead and surly, suspicious eyes, hard and mean and wary. A curved scimitar or cutlass hung at his girdle and in his left hand he carried a long war spear tufted with scarlet and black feathers, these being the heraldic colors of the House of Iommon.

The blade of this spear was pointed at our chests. We came to a halt and stood there empty-handed. My dagger was concealed beneath my tunic, as was Ergon’s, or so I suppose.

Breathing heavily, Ergon stood in silence as the guard cantered up to look us over.

“What have we here?” the guard growled, eyeing us up and down with curiosity.

“Harmless travelers,” Ergon said quietly. “Why do you molest our women and our servant?”

“Why do you spy on the caravan of Lord Shaphur from a place of concealment?” the guard countered. Ergon had no ready answer for this and wisely held his tongue.

“We are no bandits, as you can see for yourself,” I spoke up. “Two unarmed men, two women, and a servant pose no threat to your caravan. We were merely observing it from a place of safety, to see what it was and if it posed any threat to us. We are harmless travelers, bound for Shondakor.”

His eyes were still wary and suspicious.

“Perhaps this is true,” he grunted. “Then again, perhaps it is not. You are certainly a long way from the Golden City, and if that indeed be the goal of your journey, then you are taking a very roundabout way of getting there. Or so I gather from your tracks, which are heading in the wrong direction.”

I was sweating, but tried not to show it.

“So we have just discovered from observing the direction in which your caravan seems to be traveling. I’m afraid we have been lost for some days, and, if your caravan is returning to Soraba, as we assume, then we have indeed strayed from our path. With your permission we will mount and be off.”

“Not so fast,” he growled, jabbing the spear in my direction. “I cannot permit you to pass on my own judgment; the Lord Shaphur himself will interrogate you and decide what should be done.”

“That sinks it,” I breathed to Ergon. And again I did not have to translate my terrestrial idiom for him to understand my meaning.

The master of the caravan-Lord Shaphur of the House of Iommon-was an immense, obese Soraban who rode at the head of the procession in a wain outfitted with great luxury and comfort. Cushions were heaped into a cozy nest at one end of the luxuriously carpeted wagon, and therein the merchant princeling sprawled at his ease, sipping a brandy-like cordial called quarra and munching sweetmeats and small pastries from a huge tray of glittering silver.

Shaphur of Soraba was one of the fattest men I have ever met. He must have weighed close to three hundred pounds, with his vast paunch and wobbling jowls and several chins. He was dressed in the fantastical manner affected by the Perushtarians of the great houses, in a loose robe of silken stuff edged with gold fringe, hung about with tassels, adorned with sashes, and pinned with gaudy jeweled brooches.

His robes were an incredible, eye-hurting clash of colors-olive green, fuchsia, violet, canary, three shades of pink, indigo, umber, and carnation. The Perushtarians are a gaudy, mercantile people whose civilization always reminds me of the Carthaginians or Phoenicians of my own Earth-a nation of shopkeepers, an empire of merchants. They have the flashy Semitic bad taste of their terrestrial counterparts, and overdress to a fault.

This Shaphur was no fool, for all his appearance. He looked to be a jolly fat man, beaming with good humor, his paunch and chins and jowls quivering as he chuckled at his own jests, but behind the fat, scarlet, merry face was a first-rate brain, and his eyes were small, shrewd, cool, and intelligent.

He received us informally, squatting comfortably in his nest, in the shade of a striped awning. Gauzy-pantalooned slave girls knelt to either side of him, making certain that his goblet was never empty and his store of sweetmeats ever replenished. He looked us up and down with clever, measuring eyes, all the while stuffing himself with sugary pastries, which he conveyed in a never-ending stream from platter to gullet, shoving them in with both fat hands whose greasy fingers were glittering with a profusion of gems.

“What an oddly mixed traveling party, to be sure!” he chuckled to himself in a husky, gasping voice,

beaming all the while a broad, benign smile. I could not help noticing that this genial smirk did not extend as far as his eyes, which were cold and cunning and watchful.

“A Shondakorian lady of noble birth, quite obviously, accompanied by three Perushtarians from very different levels of society: a lovely and highborn lady of evident breeding, a burly rogue who seems suited to be a warrior or a gladiator, and a scrawny starveling from the gutters who would seem to have run afoul of the law-if I mistake me not the brand of thievery on the creature’s brow-ho, hot”

Glypto tugged a greasy forelock in an obsequious manner.

“Not so-not so at all, mighty and gracious lord! Glypto, the son of Glypto, the grandson of Glypto, at your Magnificence’s service! A nobly born chanthan, alas, upon whom Fortune has declined to smile . . .”

“Ah, so; of course,” Shaphur chuckled. “The borders between chark and chanthan are narrow, at best, eh? Ho, hot A merry rogue!”

Then the cold, thoughtful, measuring eyes turned upon myself.

“And you, my lad-what of you, eh? The strangest of all in this strangely mixed company of ‘harmless travelers’!” he puffed in his light, wheezing voice. “What of you, eh? A stranger from a far-off land, no doubt; for never have I laid these tired old eyes on a lad with such peculiar coloration!”

“From a far-off land, even as you surmise, Lord Shaphur,” I replied in even tones. “But, oddly mixed as we are, which is an accident of fortune and not of design, we are indeed harmless travelers as you say. And we would be on our way, if it please you”

“To Shondakor, I believe, if my outriders report correctly. Well, well! Yonder beautiful lady is indeed Shondakorian, if I may trust my weary old eyes to tell aright, but the rest of you . . . eh! What business can so many Perushtarians have in the Golden City?”

“Our business is our own, Shaphur!” a clear contralto voice slashed through the Soraban’s labored, breathy tones. I groaned inwardly. For it was Zamara!

“Lord Shaphur, dear lady,” he chuckled. “Let us observe the amenities, if you please”

“Lord Shaphur, I mean,” Zamara said in a throttled voice.

“That’s much better . . . your gracious ladyship would be, I believe, a Tharkolian, as would also be yonder starveling, as the both of you twain boast that hirsute adornment of pate denied to we coastal dwellers of the pure blood?”

“Tharkolians, yes . . . lord,” Zamara said. She pronounced the word as if it strangled her to refer to another person by his title. It came to me then that perhaps Zamara possessed a modicum of good sense, after all; at least she had not yet loudly announced that she was Empress of all Callisto, and demanded that the smirking, oily fat man grovel at her feet.

“A pair of Tharkolians, a stranger from a far-off land a noble Shondakorian lady, and a Perushtarian-from?” he spoke sharply, stabbing a hard glance at sullen-faced Ergon.

“Narouk,” grumbled Ergon unwillingly.

“ . . . Narouk . . . ah, yes, our sister city! Well, well. I understand you five so oddly ill-assorted traveling companions have become lost for some days past and strayed from your route . . . eh?”

“That is the truth, Lord Shaphur,” I said evenly. “And, with your gracious permission, we should like to be on our way.”

He flapped pudgy hands in horror at the suggestion.

“Oh, but, surely not until you have partaken of our famous Soraban hospitality!” he protested, wheezing. “Deprived of the civilized comforts during your unfortunate journey, reduced to devouring the crude and scarcely edible leafage of the elusive jinko, mounted on ill-trained and highly unsuitable steeds which bear, I perceive, tribal markings of the Yathoon barbarians . . . surely you must be my guests for a time, while you recover from your ordeal! Azaroosh, see that our guests are fed and made comfortable.”

The guard so instructed made his salute and turned to guide us. Zamara sharply overrode this.

“You hold us captive, then?” she demanded imperiously.

Shaphur’s fleshly face assumed a grimace of surprise.

“Ah, noble lady, you are in mistake! I, Shaphur of Soraba, your captor? Never! Say, rather . . . your gracious host, until such time, in the very near future, when you have recovered yourselves from the travails and discomforts of the journey . . . Azaroosh!”

And so we became the “guests” of Shaphur, merchant princeling of Soraba. Well, I suppose it could have been worse.

After all, Zamara had yet to tell him his guests included the regnant prince and princess of Shondakor, to say nothing of the divinely appointed Empress of the entire planet!

Chapter 16

A Little Soraban Hospitality

It could indeed have been worse. Our quarters were in a large and commodious covered wagon whose interior was thickly and comfortably carpeted and cushioned. It was not, of course, so richly decorated as that sumptuous vehicle in which Lord Shaphur traveled in state, but neither was it Spartan in its furnishings. The Sorabans are more warlike and monarchical than the rest of the Perushtarian race, but they do enjoy their creature comforts and have much the same taste for luxurious accommodations as their cousins of Farz and Narouk and Glorious Perusht itself.

Our wagon, like most of the larger wains, was drawn by a huge, lumbering, heavy-footed draft animal called the glymph, which the Thanatorians prefer as a beast of burden to the light, wiry, temperamental thaptor. The difference between the two beasts is much the same as that between the horse and the ox

back on Earth. Glymphs, however, don't look much like oxen. They are about as large and fat and heavy as rhinoceroses and look quite a bit like the extinct prehistoric triceratops, with their flaring neck shield of thick bone and several horns adorning brow and snout. They are slate gray in coloring, which hue fades to a dingy yellow in throat and chest and belly, and for some inscrutable reason of her own, Dame Nature has seen fit to ornament the imposing creatures with tiger-stripes of an amazing shade of crimson.

Our glymph lumbered along, head down, waddling with its heavy-footed stride, the reins held by our driver, a glum, unspeaking Soraban with a long nose and small, suspicious eyes called Laalmurak. He sat on a sort of buckboard in the front of the wagon and kept an eye on us, although an unobtrusive one. We were neither bound nor shackled, as befitted our ostensible position in the caravan as guests of the management.

It wasn't bad, all things considered. We had luxurious sleeping-furs to curl up in and a plenitude of plump, soft pillows, and none of these things were exactly unwelcome to us, who had spent the past seven days sleeping on the hard ground curled up in the grass like so many rabbits. And Shaphur certainly set a fine table for his "guests" !

I had almost forgotten what real food tasted like, after a week of subsisting on broiled strips of jinko bladder. As the caravan creaked and rumbled along, we sampled a profusion of covered dishes which fitted neatly into small legged trays ideally designed for eating while in motion. These contained a delicious, piping hot meat stew in steaming gravy, spiced fish-cubes in cream sauce, hot meal-cakes sprinkled with sarowary seed, marrow of argang in jelly, fresh fruit, candied nuts, and beakers of a cool, green, mint-flavored wine that rather resembled crime de menthe.

We fell to with lusty appetites, emptying dish after dish with gusto. If this was Soraban hospitality, thought I, where had it been all my life!

The only dish unfamiliar to me was the argang marrow, a blackish, pungent paste that tasted vaguely like caviar-although it had been so many years since I had last partaken of that terrene delicacy, that I could not be certain my taste buds weren't fooling me.

The argang was not a fish, despite its caviar-like flavor, but a kind of crustacean found in the coastal waters of the Corund Laj, and a delicacy greatly prized by the gourmets of the Perushtarian empire-which is really an oligarchy, by the way. For although the Perushtarian cities are leagued together under the rule of a sovereign, his rule is a formality, and the wealthy merchant princes are the actual monarchs.

Ergon munched the caviar-like paste with a rare good humor. It had been a long time since he had left Narouk, and in all that time he had enjoyed few of the traditional delicacies of the Perushtarian art of cooking.

"Superb!" he mumbled, licking the last morsel off his thumb. "Do you know, Jandar, that the -humble argang has a larger relative called the harthak? Only a half-spoonful of marrow may be extracted from the lowly argang, but it's larger relative, I have often thought, might yield a bushel of the stuff, were it not so damnably unfriendly!"

I chuckled. The harthak, I knew from conversations with Zastro, the old sage of the Ku Thad, were shellfish the size of a full-grown deltagar, and the most dreaded 'denizen of the deeps, save for the dragon-snake itself. The harthak were able to devour men alive, and did so without compunction, when the unwary diver came too close.

“I thought the harthak were prized for their enormous pearls, not for their contributions to the dinner table,” Darloona smiled. Ergon nodded froggishly.

“Alas, ‘tis so, my lady. But to each his own taste; for myself, I would rather fill my stomach with this delicious stuff than adorn my body with pearls. You cannot eat pearls, you know!”

“With a mouth the size of yours, my Lord Frog-Face, you could make a try!” quipped little Glypto, dodging an instant later as Ergon threw a spoon at him.

Replete, we napped for a while on the thick rugs, waking when night fell. Of all the times I have been held prisoner on Callisto, it seems to me that never have I been fed so splendidly. Even the luxurious cell we had shared in Zamara’s palace had not offered a better cuisine. But I may be wrong: hunger always makes the best sauce! “Why do you think this Soraban lordling has taken us prisoner?” Darloona asked, nestled comfortably in my arms, as we watched the many-colored moons of Callisto rise one by one into the night sky, round and ripe and richly colorful, like Japanese paper lanterns.

“I don’t think we are exactly prisoners,” I replied. “There are our thaptors, tethered to the rear of the wagon, and Shaphur has yet to put us in chains.”

“But surely, Jandar, you did not believe his sly words about being our ‘gracious host’?” she asked incredulously. I shook my head.

“No, he was just amusing himself at our expense. But I think he doesn’t quite know what to make of us, and is sort of keeping us on hand hoping to find out more.”

“Well, I hope Glypto doesn’t talk too freely,” she said, with a slight shiver. “The poor, miserable little creature has not the manly fortitude to endure much pain, should Shaphur put him to the questioning with any severity.”

Only a half hour before we had been awakened from our drowse when guards rode up to carry off the little thief for further interrogations before the lord of the caravan. He had been carried off, shrilly protesting his innocence of any wrongdoing, in the clutches of grinning guards. They had yet to bring him back.

“There is no good worrying about it, my Princess,” I said, hoping to calm her fears. “For there is nothing we can do about it, in any case.”

Ergon grumped, clearing his throat.

“We could climb out of this thing, get on our thaptors and be off across the plains,” he growled. “I still have my dagger.”

“I have mine, too,” I said. “But how far do you think we would get before the outriders were on our necks?”

“Not far enough, I suppose,” he grunted. “But it irks me sorely, Jandar! Every minute we bump along in this fancy cart, we are being carried further and

further away from Shondakor “

“And nearer and nearer to Soraba,” added Zamara, tartly.

“Why should that trouble you unduly, Princess?” I asked, glad that we were all on speaking terms again. Quite a bit of her high, imperious ways had been knocked out of her by our recent ordeals, captures, imprisonments, and escapes. These days, why, she was almost human at times.

“The Sorabans are no friends of mine,” she said darkly. “My embassies demanded they surrender sovereignty to me last month. I had planned, by this time, to have included both Shondakor and Soraba within the borders of my empire. Now that my plans have gone awry, the rulers of Soraba are well on their guard.”

“Which is why you did not announce your true identity to Shaphur when he questioned us, I suppose?” asked Darloona.

Zamara shrugged. “Of course. It would have been madness.”

Ergon craned his head.

“Here comes that little guttersnipe, back again,” he growled disgustedly. “I had thought that maybe we were getting rid of him this time,” he swore.

Darloona grinned mischievously.

“Oh, Ergon, you great dissembler! You know you’ve really grown quite fond of the little scoundrel.”

“I’ve grown used to him, if that’s what you mean, my lady,” he grumbled. “It was the silliest mistake I’ve ever made, pitching the squealing little runt in the balloon basket while Jandar was off fetching her high-and-mightiness, here.”

Zamara bristled.

“Mind your tongue, slave! You refer to the Majesty of Tharkol! Were I back in my realm, I’d have your tongue slit for such insolence.”

Unimpressed, Ergon voiced a rude snort.

“Doubtless you would, lady. But in Tharkol we are not, and right now we are fellow captives, and I’ll say what I please.”

Zamara subsided in a fuming silence while we turned to assist little Glypto to climb into the wagon. He was pale and whimpering with fear, and his one good eye, bright as a ferret’s, rolled from side to side in terror. There was a purplish bruise on the side of his lank, unshaven jaw that had not been there previously, and another above his eye patch. He tumbled into the bottom of the wain, moaning piteously.

Ergon crouched over him, his ugly face anxious.

“Are you all right, little man? Did they beat you? Here-have some quarra.”

Glypto lapped up the potent brandy like a thirsty hound, and sank back gasping for breath.

“Did they beat poor Glypto?” he quavered. “Unmercifully! Unjustly! But good, brave Glypto the chanthan . . . told them nothing! Nothing at all! He remained faithful to the trust of his friends, although the

great, cruel guards beat him with their terrible fists, and kicked him with their great heavy boots, and cursed him for a rogue and a thief and . . . and called him terrible names!”

Darloona shoved Ergon away, telling him to fetch a dampened cloth, and bent solicitously over the whimpering, moaning little rascal, who proved far less hurt than you would have thought from the way he carried on. He seemed to have been slapped a couple of times, and perhaps shaken up a bit, but he was otherwise unharmed.

Ergon joined me at the rear of the wain.

“Do you think he said anything unwise, Jandar?” he growled worriedly.

“What do you think?” I countered.

He grumbled unhappily.

“I think he’d probably sell his grandmother to be ground into sausages, to avoid a kick in the pants,” he rumbled dolefully.

“I’m afraid I agree with your estimate of Glypto’s fortitude,” I said quietly. “The little fellow has many sterling qualities, but bravery in the face of punishment is not among them. We may, I think, assume that by now Shaphur is delightedly aware that his guests include at least three members of the royalty. Quite a coup for him, then, if he can manage to get us back to Soraba safely!”

“Then we must make certain he does not,” he said grimly.

“Yes; but my former objection still holds,” I reminded him. “We could doubtless get to our steeds unobserved, and perhaps even leave the caravan unseen, but the outriders would be onto us in no time, for, with all moons aloft, ‘tis as bright as day on the plains at this hour.”

“What we need is a diversion,” he said thoughtfully. “Could we set the wagon afire?”

“With what? We have neither candle nor lantern.”

“I still have my flint-and-steel,” he said.

Then he stopped short.

For the caravan suddenly exploded into uproar and confusion! Thaptors bolted, or reared squealing-men yelled lustily-ahead of us somewhere a wain went crashing over on its side with a jolting thunder of splintering wood!

And a huge black shadow traversed the sky.

“A diversion, eh?” Ergon boomed heartily, staring skyward with an expression of slack-jawed amazement and huge joy.

I followed his gaze.

Above us, at the height of only a hundred feet, the Jalathadar serenely floated through the skies under the glory of the mighty moons.

Book Five

ANG CHAN OF KUUR

Chapter 17

An Unexpected Meeting

It was not so much a matter of attempting to escape, as it was of taking advantage of the occasion. The sudden and unexpected arrival of the flying ship, which hovered above us like some immense and mysterious apparition conjured out of thin air at the whim of a playful magician, threw the orderly Soraban caravan into whirling chaos.

It is quite possible that the news of the destruction of the corsair fleet and of the overthrow of the City in the Clouds had not yet reached the rather remote and secluded seacoast cities of the red men. There is little intercourse between the several city-states of Thanator, and they are wary and suspicious of each other, when not actually at war. And, as well, hundreds of leagues of savage jungle or untamed wilderness stretch between them, rendering travel hazardous and infrequent.

At any rate, the Sorabans reacted as to the presence of a powerful and ferocious enemy. The heavy, lumbering glymphs waddled about squealing in panic, toppling the wagons and smashing the wains to splintering ruin as they stampeded. The restive, unruly thaptors broke free and fled in every direction. In a trice, the placid and well-ordered procession was a milling tangle of shrieking bird-horses, plunging and rearing, dislodging their riders and snapping with sharp wicked beaks at those who strove to calm them. Bales, barrels, and bundles went toppling to be trampled in the dirt underfoot as guards dodged the beaks of the panic-stricken thaptors and raced to block the escape of the rhinocerine glymphs.

In such confusion-made doubly chaotic by the darkness and the many-colored blur of moonlight-escaping was easier than I could have asked. Our wagon came to an abrupt halt when the glymph hauling it started at the shadow of the ornithopter and backed into the traces, crushing the footboard. Our driver, Laalmurak, was pitched headlong from his perch and must have flung himself into a ditch, thinking the Sky Pirates were upon him, for we saw no more of him, nor did he interfere with our break.

Ergon and I sprang over the rearboard of the carriage and jumped down to the ground. The thaptors we had ridden out of the Yathoon encampment were tethered to the rearboard of the carriage, and, although they bucked and reared squealing, and lunged to snap at us, Ergon snatched up the little knobbed club that hung at the side of their saddles, and bludgeoned them into dazed submission.

Fortunately, the Lord Shaphur had seen no reason to unsaddle our mounts, which would have required finding sufficient space in one or another of the heavily-laden wains wherein to store the saddle gear, hence the beasts were ready for riding.

While Ergon, growling sulphurous oaths and whacking lustily at the heads of the brutes with the little club, held the bird-horses under control, I assisted Darloona and Zamara to dismount from the carriage. Little Glypto, still limping and whimpering from the effects of what he described as a cruel and merciless beating at the hands of Shaphur's brutal guards, climbed down painfully.

Within just a few minutes we were in the saddle and ready to go. Ergon slashed through the tethers with his dirk and we guided the beasts off the road and across the plains in the general direction of the Jalathadar, which had drifted slowly by overhead, and was engaged in wheeling about in a slow and stately maneuver, prior to making another pass over the length of the caravan whose progress its appearance had so precipitously disrupted.

These things we accomplished-miraculously-under the very noses of the red men of Soraba, not one of whom took the slightest notice of us in the act. They were busy chasing their runaway steeds or attempting to round up the lumbering glymphs. If any of them had sufficient leisure to spare us a glance, he likely saw Ergon-a bald-headed, red-skinned Perushtarian-and not the rest of us. For Ergon sat tall and erect, taking a prominent position for that very reason, while the rest of us bent low in the saddle and kept our faces hidden as best we could. But, so complete was the milling confusion into which the procession had degenerated, that I doubt we were noticed at all.

Thus, by a happy accident which might well prove our salvation, we bade the Lord Shaphur a hasty adieu, and left the hospitality of Soraba behind us.

We headed out into the moonlit plains at a right angle to the road the caravan had been following, which was only a beaten track through the grasslands of northern Haratha, and not a paven way.

If the caravan had been headed in a northerly direction, as was our surmise, then our route was due west. We were riding, then, more or less in the general direction of Shondakor, although of course the Golden City of the Ku Thad lay many korads distant. With luck still on our side, as we assumed, it seemed likely we should not have to traverse the leagues of meadowland bestride our steeds, but should ride, or rather fly, in comfort and safety.

But that still remained to be seen.

The problem was, quite simply, one of finding a way to attract the attention of our friends aboard the Jalathadar.

The mighty galleon of the skies was slowly cruising at about thrice the speed of a racing thaptor, and now rode at a modest elevation of about eighty feet aloft. As the great airship swung about for another leisurely pass over the caravan, many eyes probed through the moonlit darkness from above, narrowly surveying the Perushtarian caravan. I have no doubt our friends aloft were pausing to investigate the peculiar circumstance of finding a merchant caravan in this part of the country where, as I have intimated earlier in this narrative, there is little reason for any caravan to be.

Our only hope of rescue, then, lay in somehow catching the eye of one of the alert watchers from above.

But how?

The elusive moonlight was brilliant but confusing to the sight, for several of the many moons of giant Jupiter were aloft-and the web of light and shadow they cast was tricky to the eye. The shifting moonbeams-lime green, silvery azure, dim red, pale golden-made it curiously difficult to perceive details

or to see colors.

Of course, this is usually the case on virtually any world at night, or, at least, on any world of my experience. On Earth I have noticed that it is nearly impossible to make out any colors even by the light of a full moon, the only exception to this rule being scarlet or crimson, which take on a darkly purple tinge by the gray-silver luminance of Earth's only satellite.

This being so, we thought it likely we might hope to attract the attention of our friends aloft by doing something distinctly curious and odd.

So we rode out boldly into the plains, directly away from the caravan, keeping well together in a clump for added visibility, and making not the slightest attempt to conceal our flight. The caravan guards, we knew, were still too busy rounding up their beasts and organizing a hasty defense for the expected battle against the aerial corsairs (as they doubtless suspected our craft to be one of the flying buccaneers of Zanadar), to bother about us, or even to have noticed as yet that we were missing. Hence our failure to attempt to conceal our flight from the caravan was not likely to bring about immediate recapture or even pursuit by the Perushtarian warriors.

It was, however, very likely to catch the eye of someone aboard the Jalathadar, and to arouse his curiosity. He would understand the Sorabans mistook his ship for a Zanadarian corsair; but he would naturally expect the members of the caravan to seek their security in numbers, rather than to go racing off across the plains as we were doing.

Such, at least, was our estimate. And such, indeed, was our only hope at present.

As we rode out of direct view of the caravan, I sat straighter in the saddle and held my head high. My yellow hair, which is of a coloration utterly unique among the many nations of the jungle Moon, has saved my life on more than one occasion. And if any detail of our appearance were likely to attract the attention of our comrades aloft, it would be the bright, straw-yellow locks bequeathed me by my Danish mother.

Or so I hoped . . .

Once we were out of sight of the confused mass of roiling men and beasts and overturned wagons that had been the merchant caravan of Lord Shaphur, we boldly strove to call attention to ourselves.

As we rode, we shouted and windmilled our arms, staring up as the galleon cruised by, silent as a ghost, enormous as a cloud, directly above us

And halted!

Someone above had seen us; someone, perhaps, had recognized us. Or had. they?

A moment later rope ladders came tumbling over the side and we raised a ragged cheer. Swiftly we dismounted, Ergon and I tumbling out of the saddle, with Darloona and Zamara and little Glypto not far behind.

The vessel hung directly above us, blotting out the moons: a vast, fantastic winged shape of blackness. Ergon sprang up and seized the lower rung of the nearer ladder, then reached down to give a hand to one of the women. I leaped into the air to catch the bottom rung of another ladder, and gave poor stiff and sore Glypto a hand.

Then we clambered up the swaying ladders slowly, hand over hand. Below us the thaptors, delighted at the unexpected prospect of freedom, cantered blithely off across the grasslands, anxious to get away from their proximity to the hovering aerial monster. I wished I had taken the time to remove their bridles, reins, and saddles, so they could enjoy their newfound freedom unencumbered by the accouterments of enforced domesticity, but the rescue of my Princess was of uttermost importance in my mind, and doubtless, with their sharp saw-toothed beaks, the unruly gryphon-like creatures would manage to free themselves of the straps and saddles before long.

Forgetting the thaptors, I grinned at the prospect of a safe and comfortable flight back to Shondakor in style. A bit of luck had come our way at last, I thought to myself.

Above me I could see Ergon bestraddling the rail, and heard him cry out as he gained the deck. The wind of this height snatched his words away so that I was unable to hear what it was he had called out. Undoubtedly, he had hailed with delight one of our dear friends on the deck-Koja or Valkar or that little gamecock, Lukor.

Then Darloona climbed over the rail, helped by one from the deck whose face I could not make out, as he was only a black silhouette against the moons. She too voiced a sharp cry of delight, I assumed, before vanishing from my sight.

Below me little Glypto clung dizzily to the slats of the rope ladder, squealing in terror at the height, shrieking as the ladder swayed to and fro in the wind of the great jointed vans that beat up and down in slow booming strokes, maintaining the vessel's height.

I grinned at his panicky distress. Soon enough the wizened little thief would be wined and dined in the captain's salon, and when we returned to the Golden City tomorrow, Darloona and I would find the means of repaying the little fellow's adventures on our behalf with a cozy sinecure. True, the little man had been an unwilling accomplice in our escape, but we should make all his perils and sufferings up to him, I was sure. He would doubtless feel well repayed for his discomforts and dangers by being given a commission as a tax collector!

Grinning at the thought, I climbed the last few yards and reached up, took hold of the rail, and started to haul myself up.

A dark shape blotted out the moons above me as it stood at the rail.

I looked up smiling . . . and felt the world fall apart under me.

For I looked into the bland, smiling face of Ang Chan.

Chapter 18

The Secret of Zamara

The evil, slitted eyes of the yellow dwarf gleamed into mine as I clung to the rail, frozen with shock and

utter astonishment. He smiled benignly at my expression; the smile, however, did not extend as far as his eyes, which remained cold, wise, and cunning.

So complete was the amazement which gripped me that for a moment I was incapable of thought or action. I was possessed with a feeling of horror, which numbed my brain and paralyzed my limbs. How came the yellow devil aboard the Jalathadar-had the Tharkolians somehow tricked or overpowered or captured the galleon of the skies? And if so, what had become of our friends who must have been aboard the craft at the time of its seizure? Gallant Lukor and loyal Koja and bold Valkar and the others would surely have resisted the boarding party with all the valor and courage they possessed. Were they themselves captives of the yellow fiend from mystic Kuur? Were they perhaps-slain?

While these frightening conjectures whirled through my dizzy head, burly arms seized me and dragged me over the rail to stand me on the deck of the Jalathadar. The midship deck swarmed with the brawny, truculent warriors of Tharkol; nowhere could I see Shondakorian captives. Across from me, held helpless in the grip of many hands, Ergon glowered wrathfully, and Darloona cast me a beseeching glance, white-faced, from fear-haunted eyes. My comrades had been seized and gagged as they reached the deck rail, and I now realized that their cries had been of astonishment and horror, not of delight, as I had at first assumed.

The Tharkolian warriors trussed my hands securely behind my back, relieved me of my dagger, which I still wore concealed in the breast of my tunic, and sent me stumbling across the swaying deck to stand with my friends.

The irony was heartbreaking: an instant before we had stood on the brink of freedom. And now we were again thrust into the shackles of captivity.

Zamara alone stood free and unbound. She bestrode the deck like a conqueress, black locks flying on the winds, her lovely face arrogant and proud, flushed with triumph, laughing at our discomfiture. At last the tables were turned, and she was the victor again, the captress, and we were once again the captives, subject to her lightest whim.

But how had this amazing reversal of events come about-and how could the Tharkolians possibly have captured the Jalathadar? The great ornithopter could not land, must remain ever aloft. How then could it possibly have been boarded and taken? Surely, not through such flimsy and capricious a device as the balloons whereby we had been first captured and had later effected our escape from Tharkol?

Ang Chan greeted his empress effusively.

“How fortunate, Royal Lady, that the Prince of Shondakor chanced to bare his head to the rays of the many moons! Even the shifting hues of the moonlight could not conceal from our eyes the unlikely yellow of his hirsute adornment!”

She laughed recklessly.

“And how fortunate, Ang Chan, that the Arkonna reached its long-delayed completion in time to rescue your Empress from the clutches of our enemies. You are to be congratulated!”

He bowed obsequiously. “It was a matter of prime importance, which I pressed with all urgency. Luckily the vessel was so nearly finished that it was only a question of days”

These cryptic words made no impression on my dazed mind. Arkonna is the Thanatorian word for “high

king” or “emperor” with a feminine ending: it meant, then, “empress.” But what did these puzzling remarks mean? Had the captors of the Jalathadar rechristened the vessel already?

While these questions revolved through my brain I was so positioned by those who held me that I faced the prow of the vessel. Within my sight was the door which led down to the private quarters of the captain. The door was familiar to me, of course, for I had passed through it many times. But now, gazing at it unthinkingly, it came to my attention that something was strangely wrong with its appearance. Just what it was that seemed wrong I could not at first identify.

And then it came to me. The blazon painted on the panel of the door was not what it should have been!

The royal blazon of Shondakor, you see, consists of a shield of gold charged with a winged crown above crossed swords. After we had seized the vessel many months ago, we had painted out the blazon of its original Zanadarian corsair captain, replacing it with the royal emblem of the Golden City.

But the emblem was different, now: it was a crimson field which bore eight black crowns, a blazon which was unfamiliar to me. Then it came to me where I had seen that strange coat of arms before-on the armorial plaques and banners which had adorned the great hall of Zamara’s palace in Tharkol!

The eight crowns must represent the eight cities of this hemisphere of Thanator. The blazon, then, was of the world empire whereof Zamara in her madness dreamed.

Which meant . . . we were not aboard the Jalathadar at all, but on a newly built Tharkolian vessel!

The thought electrified me; I stiffened in the grasp of my captors, looking about me with a startled gaze. Now that the veils had been stripped from my eyes, so to speak, I noticed things that had eluded my attention previously. There were subtle differences in the design of the deckhouse, in the sculptured adornment of the balustrade; minor innovations in details of the rigging and the equipment stored or housed on this deck.

Ang Chan caught my eye. Bland amusement gleamed in his slitted eyes. The yellow dwarf, with his uncanny mind-reading powers, must have sensed the tenor of my thoughts, for he came over to where we stood and laughed.

“The Prince of Shondakor has surmised the truth, I see,” he purred. “Doubtless the noble Jandar was of the opinion that the ambitions of the Empress Zamara were the delusions of a deranged mentality! How could a single city such as Tharkol, for all the might and valor of her legions, conquer the seven cities of the world? Vast distances, impenetrable jungles, savage wildernesses and uncharted seas separate the cities of Thanator the one from the other; to dream of welding these far-flung realms into a single empire must have seemed to the noble Jandar a mad dream and nothing more But now you perceive a frightening truth, which places the imperial ambitions of Tharkol within the borders of possibility, am I not correct?”

“You are,” I said, striving for calmness. “For I perceive that the city of Tharkol has discovered, or has been given, the lost secrets of constructing the aerial warships of Zanadar.”

Ergon grunted and Darloona stiffened with astonishment at my words, but the Mind Wizard only smiled and made an ironic little bow as if saluting my powers of deduction.

“Quite so,” he said silkily. “Doubtless the Prince of Shondakor assumed the science of building the ornithoptors lost with the destruction of the Sky Pirates. Such is, however, not the truth. For the Lords of

Gordrinator have revealed unto the chosen vessel of their will, the future Empress of all Callisto, the techniques perfected by the Zanadarian savants. And you stand aboard the Arkonna, the prototype of the flying navy of Tharkol, which has been under construction for the past three months, together with her sister ship, the Conqueress, which will shortly reach completion.”

Zamara interrupted Ang Chan abruptly. I got the impression that she had wished to announce these triumphs before us herself, and resented his assuming the role of spokesman.

“Enough, yellow dog! Guards-remove the prisoners to the cabins aft and see them securely imprisoned. Use them not with unwonted severity, however, for they are valuable to us and their persons are not to endure mistreatment. Later, we shall interrogate them at our leisure.”

Ang Chan bowed to her peremptory wishes and we were led away.

Our cabin was commodious and not uncomfortable, if Spartan in the bareness of its furnishings. We were at the rear of the flying ship, stationed directly over the rudder assembly, and the creak of cordage and the boom of wind in the rudder were deafening, however. The rudder, like that on the Jalathadar and her sister ship, the Xaxar, was a towering structure of ribbed vans rather like an antique Chinese fan, by which the vessel was steered. A row of barred windows looked out on the rudder assembly and gave us fugitive glimpses of the night-drowned landscape which glided steadily beneath our keel.

We discussed the rather gloomy situation into which chance or fate had now thrust us. Darloona was incredulous over the fact that the warlike Tharkolians possessed an airship, and apprehensive concerning the implications of this fact on the future security of Shondakor.

“How could Zamara have rediscovered the Zanadarian secrets?” she wondered, as we shared a meager breakfast served us by surly, watchful, and unspeaking guards.

“What is more curious, my lady,” grunted Ergon sourly, “is how the Tharkolians came -by supplies of the lifting gas which makes the sky ships airworthy. When we touched off the gas mines in the White Mountains, destroying the city of the Sky Pirates, I thought we had eliminated the only source of the mysterious vapor known to exist.”

I set down my goblet. “That may well have been the truth, Ergon,” I said. “But at that time we discovered that the lifting gas wherewith the hollow hulls of the ornithopters are charged was explosive and flammable. On my own world we have a similar gas which was also once used in the construction of flying vessels and which is also explosive and flammable. We call it hydrogen. And our savants possess knowledge of a technique whereby the elements which constitute ordinary water can be divided by use of a force we call electricity. By this manner, it is easy enough to produce as much hydrogen as may be wanted. However, I had not thought the several races of Thanator possessed any knowledge of electricity. Perhaps I have underestimated the cunning and cleverness of the Mind Wizards of Kuur in this respect, as in others.”

Darloona sat frowning slightly, nibbling absently on a bit of fruit. “What worries me most,” she confessed, “is that if the Tharkolians have one sky ship already in operation, and a second near completion, and an entire fleet of others under construction, poor Zamara’s mad dreams of empire may yet attain reality. That will be a grim day for Shondakor, and a grim day for all of the cities of Thanator . . .”

Little Glypto huddled woefully on one of the bunks, clutching his bony shanks. “Far better, my masters, had we stayed with the Lord Shaphur!” he whimpered.

I shook my head wearily. "It is all my fault," I said. "How foolish of me to have mistaken the Arkonna for the Jalathadar! It simply never occurred to me that the flying ship could be any other than the Jalathadar. The Xaxar, which Zantor commands, is somewhat smaller and higher in the aft-section. . . ."

Darloona slipped her hand in mine.

"The fault is not yours, beloved," she said. "We had none of us the slightest reason to guess the Tharkolians knew the secrets of building the ornithopters. Your mistake was perfectly natural; indeed, I made it, too."

"What baffles me," Ergon growled, "is how the Queen learned the building of such ships. The levitating vapor is but one of the secret techniques. How did she learn of the molded-paper construction which makes the vessels light in weight yet strong? The Zanadarians pressed wet paper sheets over plaster forms and baked them, once they had been impregnated with glue. The lamination process alone is one that involves many secrets . . . and, of course, we cannot accept the lady's mad belief that these secrets were imparted to her by the Lords of Gordrimator. The gods may or may not be omniscient; but it is a fact of history that they have seldom, if ever, meddled in the affairs of men."

"I'll wager it was the doing of Ang Chan," I said grimly. "You will remember the positioning of his apartments in the palace of Tharkol? He was only separated from our own suite by a wall, near enough to read our minds as we slept and learn the secrets of the defense of Shondakor and the disposition of troops. But when Glypto led us through the secret passage hollowed within the walls, we discovered that the private apartments of the Queen also lay nearby . . . near enough, I'll wager, for his telepathic powers to feed images and visions into her brain as she slept. For surely if one has the power to eavesdrop on the minds of men, one has also the power to subtly insinuate thoughts and pictures into that mind. The cunning of this yellow devil is extraordinary. He has deluded the Queen of Tharkol into thinking that she is an instrument of destiny, chosen by the gods to conquer the world. And all the time she is nothing more than an instrument of the Mind Wizards of Kuur, who secretly plot the conquest of Thanator for their own hidden and inscrutable ends-"

"You lie, you blaspheming Shondakorian dog!"

Out of nowhere a shrill voice, choked with wrath, knifed across my ruminations.

We started, upsetting the wine goblets. For the voice seemed to come from the empty air itself.

In the next instant the mystery was solved. For a hidden panel in the wall clicked open and Zamara stood before us, flanked by two powerful warriors whose naked blades were leveled at our breasts.

Chapter 19

Truth and Trickery

Never before had I seen the would-be Empress of Callisto in such a towering rage. Her handsome

features were distorted into a staring mask of fury. Her brilliant eyes blazed with wrath and the emotion which flamed up within her lithe and supple figure was so furious that she trembled in its violence. Almost I despaired of my life in that instant. So maniacal was her rage, that in the next moment I thought to hear her command her guards to bury their steel in our hearts.

“These are the same vile slanders and vicious insinuations wherewith you strove to beguile me from the truth of my revelations, that first night we spent on the Great Plains after making our escape from the encampment of the stinking capoks!” she spat. “You strove to turn me against the gods then, and you scheme to do so now.”

“How could we be other than sincere in our statements, since we could not have known you were listening to our conversation from a place of concealment?” asked Darloona, reasonably.

The sheer commonsense of her words took Zamara aback. She blinked, fumbling for words. At her side, the glowering guards fingered the hilts of their weapons, waiting for the word to sheathe their blades in our breasts. I could feel the sweat break out on my forearms and my brow.

Into the tension of this emotion-charged scene, the calm reasoning of Darloona interposed itself between our helplessness and Zamara’s fiery wrath. Indeed, looking back on the scene, I am convinced that it was the words which Darloona now spoke which served to save our lives. For she alone remained cool and collected in the heat of the moment.

“Sister,” she said, “for we are fellow rulers, sisters in a sense, sharing between us neighboring thrones, believe me, it is you who blaspheme here, although you know it not.”

Zamara, her right hand lifted in an imperious gesture, as if about to signal her guards to fall upon us, checked the gesture. It was as much the serene reasonableness of Darloona’s tone, as well as the surprising import of her words, which served to check the rage of the Tharkolian princess.

Her furious gaze turned on Darloona, who regarded her with calm, unfrightened eyes, an expression of sadness on her features.

“I-?” Zamara gasped in a strangled voice.

My Princess nodded sorrowfully.

“Yes, Zamara, although it pains me to speak of it thusly. O, listen to me, royal sister! We are both women, born to be fooled and victimized by men, for all our regal authority and majesty of birth! We are both queens, are we not-Both born to the throne, both born to rule, you and I. Surely by now you must have learned how cunning, unscrupulous, and ambitious men flock about a throne, flattering and lying and betraying one another, eager to grasp as much of our own power as their scheming wiles can win. Is it not so?”

Wordlessly, Zamara nodded.

“Very well! Then hearken to our words, which you overheard from your place of concealment while spying on us-and understand that we could not have known that you were listening, and thus we spoke our minds, and gave voice to the sincere opinions of our hearts. Is this not obvious?”

Again, the logic of her words, and the calm fearlessness in her voice and composure, wrung a reluctant nod from the infuriated empress.

“Very well, then. Zamara, royal sister, we believe-me know-that you have been cunningly and systematically deluded and deceived by this sly yellow dog who has wormed his way into your highest councils. He is not the first of his kind we have encountered among the councils of our enemies. When the Prince Jandar, my mate, entered in disguise the legions of the Chac Yuul which had seized and conquered my realm, he found a cunning Kuurian named Ool occupying a high position of great power and influence. And this Ool had won an office of great and subtle power over the superstitious minds of the simple Black Legion barbarians by a trumpery cult of his own creation. A false god he called Hoom was the method he employed. And under his sway the Chac Yuul won the realm of Shondakor from my people-even as, under the influence of his fellow countryman, Ang Chan, you are now embarked on an attempt to conquer not only Shondakor, but all of the cities of Thanator.”

Zamara stared at Darloona, the color draining from her scarlet visage. The madness and the fury had faded from her magnificent eyes, to be replaced by thoughtfulness.

“Something of these matters regarding the priestling, Ool, and his hold over the former Warlord of the Chac Yuul my spies have informed me,” she muttered slowly.

Darloona rose to confront her.

“Think, royal sister! Never before in all the history of warfare did it occur to the mercenaries of the Black Legion to conquer a city or to seize a throne. And in the councils of the Black Legion dwelt a yellow-skinned foreigner from Kuur, squatting like a cunning spider at the center of his web! Never before in all the history of mighty Tharkol did it occur to any of your ancestors to attempt the conquest of the world. And in your own councils dwells yet another yellow-skinned foreigner of Kuur, spinning his plots and subtle intrigues! Can you not see the similarities between these events?”

Zamara eyed her distrustfully, saying nothing. But the expression in her features, and the look in her eyes, conveyed the fact that she was indeed listening and thinking-however reluctantly.

“The Lords of Gordrinator have visited me in my dreams,” she said sullenly, after a little silence.

“Was it the gods, or was it the weird power of Ang Chan, interfering with your sleeping mind?” Darloona pressed her. “If you overheard our conversation, you will recall our discussing how Ool the Uncanny influenced the Black Legion warriors-through the cult of the god Hoom. Is it not reasonable to guess that this second Kuurian used the same method to influence you-the gods? And furthermore, Zamara, can you doubt the ability of Ang Chan to insinuate his own pictures or thoughts into your brain? You know that he is perfectly capable of performing this feat, because you were present when he did it to us, causing us to see the illusion of a white vanth, which led us into your trap. If his mental power could persuade us that we saw a white vanth where there was really no such beast, certainly those same powers could persuade you that you had received the visitation of the gods.”

Zamara wavered indecisively, biting her lower lip with vexation. She was an intelligent girl, with an excellent mind. And I could see that Darloona’s calm and reasonable arguments had made some impression on her, but how much of an impression it was impossible to ascertain.

At this point, I spoke up.

“Queen Zamara, in my homeland the philosophers hold to an axiom which says: when confronted by two alternate solutions to a question, the less fantastic of the two is most likely to be the true answer. Think! The Lords of Gordrinator may or may not exist; and if they do exist, they may or may not influence the

actions of men; and if they do influence men upon occasion, they may or may not have influenced you. But the abilities of Ang Chan certainly do exist. We have all experienced his powers in action. There is no question of his uncanny ability to tamper with our very thoughts. Now: faced with the question of whether the unknown and inscrutable Lords of Gordrinator have visited your dreams, or whether it was merely the known and genuine power of Ang Chan which made you think so, and remembering the axiom I have just mentioned, which of the two assertions is more likely to be true?"

We waited. Would her intelligence win out over her delusions, or would human nature conquer the dictates of reason and commonsense? For Zamara very desperately wanted to believe her visions and voices and gods were true. She possessed a vaulting ambition; it would be very difficult for her to turn her back on the luring dreams which promised crowns and glory and conquest. What monarch would not wish to believe he is the instrument of the gods, the chosen favorite of fortune, the darling of destiny? To believe what you want to believe is only human nature.

And Zamara was very human.

But reason won out over avarice and vainglory.

Her features strained and pale, her eyes mutinous, her voice hesitant and reluctant, she said: "It is more likely to assume . . . that Ang Chan has used his powers to delude me"

At that moment we heard the guards beyond the door of our cabin ring their spears against the deck in salute.

And one of them called out: "Make way for the Lord Councillor Ang Chan!"

The next moment a key grated in our lock.

We were about to receive a second visitor!

The yellow dwarf paused in the open doorway to look us over with keen, wary eyes. Two guards flanked him, eyeing us truculently. We sat about the folding table which was littered with the remnants of our morning meal. I held a silver winecup in my hand as if I had just emptied it. Zamara and her guards were nowhere in sight; we had, by sheer urgency, begged her to trust us for the moment, and thrust her and her warriors back into their place of concealment, regaining our own seats a bare fraction of a second before the door opened, showing us the bright morning sky and the smiling person of Ang Chan. He entered, bowing amiably.

"This unworthy person thought it wise to visit his guests and ascertain their comfort and, ah, the measure of security they enjoy, before our arrival at Tharkol necessitates his attentions," he said in a suave, good-humored voice.

There was no reason Ang Chan should not be in a good humor, as he held the upper hand. Perhaps even the winning hand, although that was yet to be seen.

I came directly to the point.

"You are one of the Mind Wizards of Kuur, are you not, my lord Ang Chan? I knew a countryman of yours, one Ool, called 'the Uncanny' by the simple warriors of the Black Legion he had bewildered and awed by his telepathic powers. Do you know him?"

He surveyed me with amused, twinkling eyes.

“The mission of the worthy and resourceful Ool was known to this humble person, but, alas, not the worthy Ool himself. I believe the honorable and inestimable Ool met his untimely demise at the hands of a certain terrene adventurer who calls himself Jandar of Callisto.”

I nodded. “That is true, Ang Chan. Tell me, are you of Kuur born with your abilities to manipulate and eavesdrop upon the minds of others, or is it a skill acquired through training?”

“Your inquisitiveness may lamentably shorten your duration of existence, Prince Jandar,” he observed. But good humor was irrepressible. “An inclination towards the art is innate in our race; proficiency in the art, however, is the result of stimulus by certain rare drugs upon the proper brain centers, employed in accord with certain disciplines of mind, body, and spirit. Why do you bother to inquire into the minor attainments of this insignificant person?”

“Because I am interested to find out how you worked this trick of fooling the Queen of Tharkol into thinking herself visited by the gods,” I said boldly.

He drew in his breath, his eyes suddenly going cold and opaque. Then he relaxed with a small, chilly smile.

“You are insolent,” he observed. “And that is unwise. When one holds the power of life or death over you, it is imprudent to provoke him so.”

“Then you are in control of events here, and not your Queen?” I demanded hotly. “I surmised as much!”

He smiled thinly. “Zamara is the beloved of her gods and leaves many of her merely mundane affairs to this lowly person,” he admitted, suavely.

“Gods of the same sort as Hoom, the idol of the Chac Yuul—a thing of dead, empty stone?” I pressed.

“In dealing with the lesser races, we of Kuur oft have found it auspicious to play upon their superstitions,” he said.

“Then, like me, you are a skeptic?”

He shrugged casually. “The gods may, after all, exist in one sense of the word or another. But if they do, they seldom bother with mortal men”

“And, with your telepathic powers, you find it easy to make superstitious men believe they have experienced visions of the gods—when it suits your purpose to do so.”

“All too simple,” he laughed. “The lesser races are eager to be convinced of their own importance in the eyes of their gods.”

“As it was easy for you to convince Zamara of her divinely-ordained destiny, because she hungered to believe therein?”

“The ambitions of royalty render it easy for us to gain ascendance over them by telling them what they most desire to hear,” he said blandly. “Their own convictions of superiority shape them as a tool to our uses. But it is not of these matters I would speak—”

His voice broke off suddenly and his face paled. Slitted eyes bulging with horror, he sucked in his breath and spat aloud one word.

“Tricked!”

The rasp of steel sounded behind us.

We turned. Zamara stood there in the secret opening, her face hard and cold, her eyes ablaze with deadly anger, a naked dagger clenched in one white-knuckled hand.

“Condemned, you mean, yellow dog of Kuur!” she hissed. “Condemned out of your own mouth, you treasonous, treacherous snake!”

Before any one of us could move or speak her hand released the blade in a blurring gesture.

The steel blade flashed across the room. But whether it struck the Mind Wizard or not, none of us could tell.

For in the same instant he vanished into thin air!

Chapter 20

Battle in the Clouds

We stared in utter amazement at the empty space which had been filled an instant before by the body of the yellow dwarf. He had flicked out of existence like an apparition, and it was a moment before any of us could grasp the fact of this miraculous disappearance. The two guards who had flanked the Kuurian shrank aside in awe and bewilderment. Even Zamara, amidst her blazing fury, was struck dumb with amazement.

Of us all, it was Ergon who first realized the truth.

“Our minds!” he bawled. “He’s in our minds-get him!”

And, like a maddened tiger, the brawny, bandy-legged little colossus threw himself upon the empty air where Ang Chan had stood. There transpired an enigmatic, nightmarish battle. It was as if Ergon struggled with a tangible but unseen ghost! He seemed wrestling with the thin air itself.

Then I saw an even stranger sight-drops of blood oozing one by one out of empty air!

And I understood the truth behind the inexplicable phenomenon in a flash, although it took the quick wits of Ergon to realize it first. Ang Chan had not vanished-he had telepathically rendered himself invisible. That is, using his mind-controlling powers he had made us believe he no longer stood there. And had it not been for the dagger Zamara had flung at him, which wounded him and slowed him, he would have

been out the door before any of us had guessed the truth. But the blood which uncannily fell from empty air told me he was still solidly and physically there, despite my inability to see him.

Strange-strange, to see brawny Ergon bellowing lustily, struggling with empty air! But it was not empty air-he was wrestling the wily and invisible Mind Wizard.

I sprang forward to lend him a hand, but the Herculean thews of the bald Perushtarian had already pinned down his invisible adversary, and even as I knelt by him, Ergon took hold of something with both strong hands and thumped it against the deck resoundingly.

And the limp form of Ang Chan melted into view again!

Panting with breath for breath, Ergon grinned up at me triumphantly.

“Mind-powers, eh?” he grunted happily. “I bethought me that if I banged the yellow man’s skull against the deck a time or two, he’d lose the power to hide himself from our eyes-and there he be!”

We gathered quickly about the stunned Kuurian. His breathing was shallow and he was rapidly losing blood. Zamara’s blade had caught him under the left shoulder, near his heart. His crimson gore gathered into a pool beneath him even as we watched.

“A fitting death for the treacherous dog,” Zamara snarled venomously. “Let him die where he lays.”

“A pity to let Ang Chan escape in death before he has answered a few questions,” Darloona observed coolly. Zamara glanced at her, inquiringly. Darloona smiled.

“He could tell us much, could he not, Zamara?” she murmured. “Such as the reason why Kuur plotted to spur you to conquer the world, and what the Kuurians had hoped to gain from your victories? Or where next they planned to insinuate an agent, should they fail in their dominance of the Queen of Tharkol?”

Zamara flushed, eyes dropping. “You are right again, to my shame,” she muttered. “Guards! Bind the wounds of this yellow snake and fetch the ship’s doctor-“

At that instant an outcry exploded on the deck beyond our cabin and we staggered to keep our balance as the deck swung dizzily under our feet. A bugle screamed the call to quarters-the thud of running feet drummed on the deck-the snap of bowstrings twanged like plucked lutes.

“What in the name of a thousand devils is going on?” Ergon growled, scrambling to his feet. I joined him and we went out onto the deck, followed by Darloona and Zamara, leaving the Mind Wizard to the ministrations of the guards.

An amazing spectacle met our eyes!

The golden skies of Thanator were ablaze with day. Crisp clouds floated by, struck to gold by the brilliance; and there before us, sweeping grandly about as if to ram the Tharkolian airship, the mighty Jalathadar bore down upon us in all her grandeur. Aye, there was no mistaking her, on this occasion, for the royal colors of Shondakor fluttered from her prow and she was so near I could make out the solemn-eyed, chitinous features of Koja and the white locks of gallant Lukor in her pilothouse!

Almost in the same heartbeat of time our loyal friends recognized the crimson mane of Darloona and my own yellow locks streaming in the blaze of day and a mighty cheer went up from the decks of the

Jalathadar at the sight of us. She trimmed her vans and came about into the wind, warriors thronged in the gunwales ready for the boarding. An instant later grappling hooks crunched into the deck rail of the Arkonna and the Tharkolian vessel lurched as the mass of the attacking sky ship dragged against her flight. The Tharkolian archers were already at the rail; lifting their bows, while swordsmen hacked through the grapnel lines. Another moment and battle would have been joined, there amidst the clouds.

In that desperate moment, however, Zamara revealed her true self!

“I bid you-hold!” she cried, her silvery voice rising like a clarion above the tumult. Springing to the rail, one hand grasping the rigging, she interposed her own body between her archers and the boarding parties. Bows were lowered as her warriors recognized their queen.

“Helmsman-strike your colors,” she called and the proud ensign of Tharkol sank from view. As it fell a great shout of victory went up from the decks of the Jalathadar and men in the gold-and-purple livery of Royal Shondakor came swarming across the perilous lines, Koja and Lukor and young Tomar among the first of them to reach the decks of the Arkonna. The Tharkolians fell back to the mid-deck, yielding their arms sullenly.

And then it was that Zamara came down from the rail and strode to where we stood. Chagrin and humiliation were in her face, and tears of defeat ran down her cheeks, but her head was held proudly high and never had she looked more beautiful, or more human, than in that moment when she acknowledged her folly.

She went up to where Darloona stood and looked her straight in the face unfalteringly.

“Princess of Shondakor,” she said clearly, “I have been a fool. I have made myself your enemy when I am not even worthy to be your friend. I have sinned greatly against the Crown of Shondakor without cause or reason. I yield myself into your hands. Do with me as you deem just, but spare my people who followed me into folly and madness because of loyalty and trust. I surrender myself to you, and I beg your forgiveness.”

If the self-styled Empress of Callisto had never looked lovelier than in that moment of humility and surrender, never had I felt prouder of my Princess than in the moment that followed. For Darloona stepped forward and embraced Zamara and kissed her tenderly and called her friend and sister.

“Wiser heads than yours have been deluded by the cunning wiles of Kuur, my dear,” she said softly. “You have the forgiveness of Shondakor for the asking, as you can have the friendship of Shondakor, if you care to ask for it.”

That was a bit too much for Zamara to endure and she burst into tears. Darloona slid her arm about the slender waist of the distraught queen and led her back into the cabin so that she could compose herself in private.

And so, it seems, we had won a good friend, where we had only found an implacable enemy before.

“All’s well that end’s well,” I said to Ergon as he came stumping up, glum-faced, to where I stood.

“If it’s to be time for trite phrases, Jandar, I’ve one for you,” he said sourly. “And that I ‘dead men tell no tales.’”

“What do you mean by that?”

He cocked his head towards the cabin.

“The yellow dog of Kuur will bark no more, I fear. Zamara of Tharkol has the wrist of an assassin; I’m glad she didn’t take it into her head to aim that dagger at you or me, Jandar.”

And it was true. Ang Chan was dead, and with him died the untold secrets of Kuur.

“I found this under his robes, suspended about his fat neck on a thong,” Ergon said glumly, handing me a small plaque of silver. I turned it over in my hand and examined it curiously. It was some sort of amulet or talisman, the gleaming metal engraved with curved and meaningless lines which trailed away at the edges of the plate. I could make nothing of it, but slipped it into my pouch to examine later at my leisure. Mayhap wise old Zastro, the sage of the Ku Thad, could spell me its meaning. There was no inscription on it that I could see.

Zamara and Darloona rejoined us a while later, and my Princess greeted Koja and Lukor and others of our friends with great happiness, introducing the Princess Zamara to them as “our ally.” Zamara received their salutes in a subdued fashion but without surliness as far as I could see. I had acted more wisely than I knew, a time earlier, when at the approach of Ang Chan I had urged the wavering Empress to conceal herself behind the panel again, to listen to our conversation. It had been my hope, of course, to draw out Ang Chan in private, thinking I might get him to confirm in his own words the truth of what Darloona and I had striven to prove to Zamara. The plan, as any reader of this narrative has seen for himself, worked splendidly.

But it had been touch and go there for a few seconds! How easily all could have been lost, had Ang Chan bothered to use his telepathic powers! The most casual glance into the contents of my mind would have exposed my plan, and revealed the fact that Zamara stood concealed behind the secret panel. For some reason, thank the Lords of Gordrinator, Ang Chan had not done so . . . it may have been mere negligence, or perhaps overconfidence, or, just possibly, that my inspired burst of eloquence (if so I may term it most immodestly) had intrigued him to the neglect of caution.

But how I had sweated there for a moment or two; and how easily the roll of the dice could have gone against me. . .

It was not a gamble I would care to risk again.

But all had worked according to my hastily contrived plan. The only drawback, of course, had been Zamara’s explosion of murderous fury at discovering that the wily, smirking Kuurian had indeed tricked and deluded her cruelly, using her for his own mysterious purposes. It was a great pity she had struck down the yellow dwarf in her rage, for he could have told us much.

At any rate, having swallowed the truth in all its bitterness at last. Zamara was a changed woman, and the extent of this transformation was amazing to behold. In the place of strident arrogance went soft-voiced humility. Instead of vaunting egotism she displayed quiet majesty. These new virtues, added to her undeniable vividness of character and intelligence of mind made her a stunning beauty. Darloona glowed with pride as she saw the change in Zamara reflected in the eyes of both the Tharkolian officers and the Shondakorian warriors. The poor men, being mere men, could hardly take their eyes away from the radiant Princess of Tharkol.

Sniveling little Glypto had maintained a rather low profile during these swift-moving events.

Now as we stood talking on the deck, one of my officers raised a cry, pointing below. We crowded to the rail to see a vast procession drawn up beneath our two ships amidst the mighty plain.

“Why, what in the world,” I murmured in surprise. “It is the caravan of Shaphur! Whatever had possessed him to follow us here . . . ?”

Looking up I caught the smiling face of Glypto.

Even as I looked an amazing change came over the cringing little fellow.

He straightened from his habitual crouch and stood tall, straight, and lean. The smile on his features was an honest, open grin, and not at all the servile leer I had become accustomed to. As I watched, speechless with surprise, he removed the black patch, revealing an eye as bright and keen and clear as its twin.

“Not the Lord Shaphur, I’m afraid, Prince Jandar,” he said—and the whine and whimper were gone from his tones, leaving them firm, manly, and deeper in timbre than before.

“Glypto?” I murmured dazedly. “Whatever do you mean . . . ?”

“Not the merchant Shaphur, but Kaamurath, Prince of Soraba,” he said. “Whose eyes and ears in Tharkol I have been, in all the weeks just passed since first the Princess Zamara demanded he yield up the sovereignty of his realm to her imperial throne!”

An expression of utter stupefaction stretched the homely face of Ergon into a comic mask of amazement.

“I . . . you . . . w-what . . . ?” he stammered

Glypto laughed and performed a capering little dance, sketching a parody of a bow. And for a moment the little, leering rogue we had known before this keen-eyed, smiling stranger replaced him, stood before us.

“Yes, friend Ergon, I fear I deceived you all! But it would have irreparably damaged my disguise had you known the whimpering little rascal you cuffed and cursed stood at the right hand of the Seraan of Soraba, and was accounted the finest swordsman in the four cities of the Perushtarian Empire,” he smiled.

Ergon could only groan. It was the only time in my experience that I found him unable to think of a thing to say!

Epilogue

The Council of the Three Cites

The Seraan of Soraba spread huge tents amidst the grasses of the Plains of Haratha and we met in formal council within the hour.

Many minor mysteries had now been dispelled, leaving the greater mystery of Kuur unresolved.

Now I understood at last why there had been a merchant caravan on the plains where no caravan had any reason to be. The answer was that it was a military expedition, disguised as a caravan. The guards and the drivers of the wains, the outriders and the caravan beast-tenders were all seasoned and veteran Soraban warriors. And the gross merchant Shaphur was the clever and keen-wined Seraan, or Prince, of Soraba.

Alerted to danger by the insane and imperious demands of the Princess of Tharkol, Prince Kaamurath had dispatched his ablest and cleverest advisor, the master spy Glypto, to the Scarlet City. There, in the guise of a thief, Glypto had gained much intelligence regarding the imperial ambitions of Zamara. It was not, we now learned, pure chance that had led the little “thief” to our sumptuous prison-suite, but Glypto’s desire to discover who we were and why we had been taken captive with such extraordinary care. Thrown in with us by the tumultuous rush of events, he had continued to play his role while observing carefully all that passed, knowing all the while that his Seraan was near, among a company of valiant warriors. And when we had fallen in with the “caravan” Glypto had been taken from us, apparently for brutal interrogation, but actually to give his report to his lord. The bruises he had displayed upon his return were the result of makeup, and his whimpering terror merely the acting of a consummate artist.

For me, the most amusing of all these revelations was the discovery that never once had Glypto actually lied to us about anything of importance!

And he actually was a chanthan, or mercenary adventurer, and the son and grandson of a chanthan even as he had claimed at the time! It was in that capacity that he had first joined the service of the Seraan, who rapidly promoted him to a high position because of his proven merits.

No particular friendship had ever existed between -Soraba and Shondakor; but neither had there ever been any rancor or enmity between the two cities. Now that it seemed we had an enemy in common, it seemed natural to join forces against that enemy. In this decision our newfound friend and ally, Zamara of Tharkol, grimly vowed to do her share.

“Only by the narrowest intervention of sheer chance were the wiles of Ang Chan of Kuur exposed before they had caused a vast war to erupt between the cities of Thanator,” she said determinedly.

“I agree with the royal lady of Tharkol,” Prince Kaamurath said in his breathy voice. “The plots of Kuur, which the Prince of Shondakor has just explained, imperil my realm as well as your own. Something must be done to put an end to this menace”

“Will the Seraan be willing to undertake war against Kuur?” Darloona inquired. The fat merchant prince puffed out his cheeks as if in indignation, then subsided thoughtfully. For once he was not gobbling sweetmeats and gulping wine: hard, practical, and serious was this Perushtarian monarch, surprisingly different from his brother rulers.

As if he, too, possessed the power to read minds, and had somehow sensed the tenor of my thoughts, he spoke out in thoughtful, measured tones.

“We of Perushtar, I know, are often thought unwarlike, more concerned with our purses than with honor,” he said. “In some measure there is truth in this, but not entirely. There comes a time when only war will serve the needs of the realm; men must be willing to fight against aggression, if there is to be peace. And trade and commerce flourish best when peace exists between kingdoms. Thus, upon my

accession, I assembled and trained a host of warriors, which is something no Seraan of Perushtar has done before my reign.”

This was quite true, of course. Previously, the Princes of Perushtar had purchased the service of that host of mercenary warriors, the Black Legion, to fight their battles for them. But since the Ku Thad succeeded in breaking the Legion, the custom fell into disuse, there being no longer any Black Legion to hire. And in another way Kaamurath of Soraba differed from his fellow princes; generally the Seraans of Perushtar are powerless puppets, and the reins of power are firmly grasped by the wealthy merchant clans who dominate the oligarchic state. But Kaamurath had somehow won the support of the great merchant princes, using a coalition of their strength as the base of his power. He was a rare individual in the Perushtarian Empire, and a valuable ally to have with us in any war against Kuur.

“Shondakor agrees,” Darloona said in return, “but will Soraba fight with us, or merely stand by while Tharkol and Shondakor carry the battle alone?”

Prince Kaamurath gave her a long, level look, and then smiled grimly. “Princess, we will stand with you in this endeavor. For no man can say where next the Mind Wizards will seek to spin their plots-mayhap in mine own realm! For that very good and very practical reason, Soraba suggests we take the initiative and carry the war into Kuur itself.”

“But who knows where the kingdom of the Mind Wizards is?” asked Zamara.

“The information I had from the lips of Ool the Uncanny,” I said, “was that the kingdom of the Mind-Wizards is concealed somewhere on the other side of this planet. It is common knowledge that those lands are uncharted and unexplored, doubtless for the simple reason that no travelers have ever been permitted to return from those lands. Thus we may expect to find the Mind Wizards maintain some manner of surveillance over the roads that lead unto their hidden and secret realm.”

“The skies of Thanator are a road no warrior can guard,” Zamara said. “I will place my ships, the Arkonna and the Conqueress, under your command, Prince Jandar, if you will. And I will fill those ships with the noblest and most skilled and valiant fighting-men of Tharkol!”

“To which we will add our vessels, the Xaxar and the Jalathadar,” Darloona added, “which will be manned by the finest warriors of Shondakor. Our combined fleets will comprise the mightiest war fleet upon the planet. Kuur shall reel and crumble beneath our combined assault!”

“And, for my part, I will drain the coffers of Soraba,” said Kaamurath, “to outfit the four galleons of the skies with the finest weapons that may be purchased. Food and drink and supplies of every kind will Soraba give to this expedition, and our most knowledgeable explorers and navigators, map makers and geographers, will be at your command.”

And so it was decided, and swiftly. Never again would we let the cunning yellow men of mysterious Kuur gain the upper hand.

From this moment, although they knew it not, we were at war against them.

For our real enemies had never been ourselves. Tharkol was no enemy to Soraba, nor to Shondakor.

Our secret and hidden enemies all the time had been the Mind Wizards of Callisto!

And now, at last, the veils were stripped away from our eyes, and we saw things clearly. And as I sat

there in the tent amidst the Plains of Haratha, I vowed within my heart that never should I rest until this last and greatest threat to the peace of the jungle Moon should be crushed in blood and flame.

I would lead the greatest expedition ever launched across the borders of the known surface of Thanator into an unknown and mysterious world. And there, in secret and shadowy Kuur, I would cross swords at last with my deadliest adversaries-the dreadful and sinister Mind Wizards of Callisto!

And in the battle I would either emerge the victor or go down to a miserable death.