

Mind Wizards of Callisto - Jandar 05

Lin Carter

Book One

THE QUEST FOR KUUR

Chapter 1

The Mystery of the Mind Wizards

When you have an enemy, you cannot rest in peace until you have destroyed him.

This is one of the great laws of life, and it holds as true for individual men as for nations.

As a warrior by inclination, a fighting-man by profession, I have made this dictum a part of my personal philosophy. And nothing that has ever chanced to occur in my long career of wandering and adventure has ever proved this belief an error.

And now we had indeed an enemy! An enemy secretive and furtive, shadowy and hidden, unscrupulous and insidious. There was no course open to men of courage and honor but to seek out the hidden lairs of that enemy and destroy him before he brought his cunning schemes to fruition and destroyed us.

In the years since I first found myself miraculously transported across the gulf of millions of miles of space by some mysterious agency to this strange and marvelous world, I have allied myself with a people called the Ku Thad. They are a brave and stalwart and freedom-loving nation of heroic and noble-hearted warriors, and the seat of their power is the great city of Shondakor the Golden, which arises amidst the Plains of Haratha on the River Ajand.

To their princess, the fair Darloona, I have given my allegiance and my heart.

And-by a miracle even more wondrous and inexplicable than that which so strangely transported me to this unknown and beautiful planet-I succeeded in winning her heart as well.

It is a miracle I will never completely manage to understand. That I, a wandering young adventurer from a far-off world, should have won the love of the most beautiful princess of two planets, remains and shall ever remain a mystery beyond the scope of my comprehension. It seems to me that I am a very ordinary young man, no braver or more handsome or more exceptional in any way than any other of a thousand young men. But my beloved saw in me some rare and precious quality that remains invisible to my own scrutiny, and chose me for her mate from all others.

It is no mere false modesty on my part to say that this marvel remains inexplicable to me, for I am no more humble or self-effacing than most men. It is simply, I think, that few men really deserve the wonderful gift of the heart of a lovely and noble woman. Once that gift has been bestowed upon us, we thereafter must spend the rest of our lives earning and deserving that gift.

However, against all odds, I had won through a world of perils to a place beside the Princess of the Golden City and had made her mine. Her kingdom, which now I shared as Prince Jandar of Shondakor, I have held firm against a host of enemies. Mere months before, the city of Tharkol, ruled by the mad queen Zamara, had launched an insidious assault against our realm. Armed with a secret weapon of immense power, the self-styled "Empress of Callisto" had sought to subjugate the Golden City of the Ku Thad as the first step on her ambitious program of planetary conquest. She had caught us by surprise, taking as her prisoners my princess and myself, as well as our staunch ally and comrade, the burly Perushtarian warrior, Ergon.

In a bewildering sequence of remarkable events, we had been able to turn the tables on Zamara, carrying her off into the wilderness of the Great Plains, safely eluding recapture by the Tharkolians until

narrowly managing to rejoin our own comrades.

And then had come a sequence of revelations so unexpected and surprising, that the entire history of this jungle-girdled world would forever after be changed because of them.

For Zamara was not truly mad, it proved, but had been seduced into her gaudy dreams of world conquest by an insidious band of telepaths who dwelt in a secret citadel in a far-off land, from which hidden fortress they worked to the destruction of the free cities of Thanator.

Once the full truth became known, Zamara was overcome by contrition and labored mightily to undo the damage she had done. From our most powerful enemy she became our staunchest ally, adding the armed might of her own warlike realm to the fighting legions of the Ku Thad in a mighty effort to throw down the power of our true enemy, the Mind Wizards of Kuur.

In this great crusade upon which we were shortly to embark, a second ally lent us his strength. This was the redoubtable and cunning Seraan of Soraba, a merchant city to the north on the shores of Corund Laj the Greater Sea, Kaamurath by name. His city-state had been next on Zamara's agenda of world dominance; apprised of this, the clever Prince Kaamurath had insinuated his master-spy, Glypto, into the city of Tharkol. It had been Glypto who was instrumental in freeing us from Zamara's captivity, after we had been taken prisoner in a daring Tharkolian raid.

Soraba is a part of the wealthy Perushtarian empire to the north. They are not a warlike people, the Perushtarians, but a nation of tradesmen and merchants. In the past, when internecine strife broke out between the several cities of their empire, the Perushtarians had been wont to hire the services of an immense mercenary army called the Chac Yuul, the Black Legion. But those days were over and gone, and in recapturing the kingdom of my beloved princess from the clutches of her enemies, I had taken a part in the overthrow of the Chac Yuul. Broken and dispersed, the warrior host had since vanished from the great stage of world events and no longer played any major role in the history of the Jungle Moon.

Hence the wily Kaamurath had been forced to rely upon his own resources in defending his realm from the ambitions of Zamara of Tharkol. Disguising himself as the merchant Shaphur, he had led a caravan of warriors, also disguised, to reconnoiter the situation, and we had fallen in with him after effecting our escape from Tharkol.

In time all of these matters had come to their resolution. And when at length it became known that a secret agent of the hidden fortress of telepaths-the "Mind Wizards," they styled themselves-had in fact been the power behind Zamara's throne, a fact cleverly concealed from everyone, including Zamara, it became grimly obvious to the sovereigns of Shondakor, Tharkol and Soraba that we should never be permitted to enjoy peace until we had rooted out and destroyed this secret nest of telepathic magicians who worked, and had worked behind the scenes for many years, to overthrow the kingdoms of Thanator.

It was some months after our return from these hazardous adventures that we prepared to embark on our crusade against the Mind Wizards of Thanator.

For that time we had labored mightily in preparation for this expedition. In our attack against the Mind Wizards, we had determined that speed was the essential factor.

Only one hemisphere of this planet is known to us. Thanator, or Callisto, is one of the moons of Jupiter. The astronomers of my native Earth will doubtless argue that Callisto is too small a world to sustain a breathable atmosphere, and too distant from the Sun for its surface to be warm and fertile, much less

tropic. With these learned teachings I cannot argue: all I can say is that I, Jon Dark, have dwelt upon this world for months, and that I still live and breathe and feel the warmth of a tropic daylight upon my flesh.

I expect no one to believe the amazing narrative of my adventures, for I can offer no tangible proof of their veracity to offset the calculations of astronomers. I suspect, merely, that the sages and scientists of my native Earth have yet to unriddle most of the secret mysteries of the Universe . . . and that the inexplicable existence of intelligent life upon the surface of the Jungle Moon is but one of those mysteries.

How I traveled here I can neither explain nor even understand. And why I continue to set down with a reed pen on papyrus this continuing narrative of marvels remains a puzzle even to myself. At periods a volume of these memoirs is transported through the jungles of the Grand Kumala by a picked war-party of fighting-men in my retinue to a mysterious jade disc which is the site of the Callistan terminus of a peculiar subspatial link between our two worlds. Who built this marker I cannot conjecture-what unseen and superior intelligence maintains this Gateway between the worlds is still a mystery even to myself. And whether these memoirs do indeed retrace the route I traveled years before, to materialize at the bottom of a jade-lined well in the central plaza of the Lost City of Arangkor in the trackless and unexplored jungles of southern Cambodia I dare not even guess.

The fact that human beings no different from my fellow Earthlings dwell upon a distant planet seems to me a fact of astounding importance to the future of mankind. It behooves me to pass along to my fellow Americans some record of the marvels and mysteries I have encountered here. If any eye but my own shall ever peruse these pages I cannot ever hope to know. Perhaps these memoirs go astray when they vanish up that pulsing beam of golden light that forms at random intervals within the jade Gateway . . . perhaps they wander forever in the far places of the Universe, a Universe whose vastness and many mysteries and inexplicable secrets I am only beginning to comprehend.

Or, perchance they molder into decay in a forgotten city of crumbling stone that has been lost for unknown ages in the midst of the Cambodian jungles.

I do not know; probably, I shall never know.

But write them I shall, hoping that across the vastness of some three hundred and eighty-seven million, nine hundred and thirty thousand miles they will somehow come into hands of men able to read them and to appreciate the transcendent significance of the information they contain.

To those readers, then-if any-I now speak. Doubtless to you my narrative of marvels and adventures upon a distant world will seem no more than an extravagant fiction. So be it. Read and ponder well; the decision of my veracity is yours to make. And stop to think: if this is nothing but mere fiction, then I must surely be the most gifted romancer in all the annals of fantastic literature since Edgar Rice Burroughs. For only an author of his great imaginative genius could concoct so weird and marvelous a world as Thanator, and make it real and living on the page.

Then pause to consider: would any author, able to invent such a stirring and vivid narrative, thronged with wonders, leave so many questions unanswered, so many mysteries unsolved?

Somewhere on the further hemisphere of Callisto, yet unknown to us, the secret citadel of the Mind Wizards lay hidden.

But-where?

Callisto is not a small world. It measures nearly three thousand miles in diameter, which makes it, with

Ganymede and Titan, one of the largest satellites in the Solar System-so large, in fact, that at the very dawn of the science of astronomy, the great Galileo was able to discover it by means of the small, crude lenses available to him. We are talking, therefore, of something in the neighborhood of twenty-four million square miles.*

And-where in all this twenty-four million square miles might the lair of the Mind Wizards be found?

Only the one hemisphere of Callisto is known to us and has been mapped by the cartographers of Thanator: the hemisphere which contains the Corund Laj, the Grand Kumala, the White Mountains, the Great Plains of Haratha, and the Sanmur Laj, or Lesser Sea, as well as the cities of Shondakor, Tharkol, Soraba, Farz, Narouk, Ganatol and Perushtar, and, formerly, Zanadar.

The opposite hemisphere is completely unknown. And we had good reasons to suspect that the hidden lair of the Mind Wizards lay in the trackless wilderness of this second hemisphere.

But again-where?

Luckily, we possessed two slender clues to the whereabouts of the secret citadel.

During the desperate attempt of the Ku Thad to recapture their city from the clutches of the Black Legion two years ago, I had been forced to fight to the death against the cunning devil-priest, Ool the Uncanny, in the Pits below Shondakor, in order to rescue my comrades Kojia of the Yathoon Horde and Lukor, the gallant and peppery little master-swordsman from Ganatol, who had been taken prisoner by the Chac Yuul.

At that time, and before our duel ended in his death, the clever little warlock who had been the mastermind behind the Black Legion, the power behind the throne of its leader, Arkola, had boastfully revealed to me some hint of the hiding place of his fellow Mind Wizards.

His words are burnt indelibly into my memory. Well do I recall that harrowing hour in which for the first time I matched swords against an adversary who could read my mind like an open book, and knew a split second in advance where my next stroke would fall.

Only by sheer chance had Ool been overcome and slain. But in his overconfidence, sure of his victory over me, he gloatingly let slip some small clue as to the location of the mysterious Mind Wizards.

Smirking in oily anticipation of his triumph over me in the deadly game of blade against blade, he had boasted to me, there in dank and gloomy dungeons, and his words remain in my memory to this hour-

I am one of the Mind Wizards of Kuur, dark shadowy Kuur that lies beyond the Dragon River amid the Peaks of Harangzar, on the other side of Thanator. My people share a curious science, a mental discipline that permits us to read the thoughts and minds of other beings . . . We are a small, a dying race; but we have a mighty power over the minds of other men, a power which, if used adroitly, can lay an empire within our reach.

Because of these words which Ool had incautiously let slip in the moment before he inadvertently tripped over the corpse of Bluto which lay sprawled out behind him, and fell, shattering his skull against the pavement, gave us our first precious clue to the whereabouts of the land of Kuur. It was in the second hemisphere, near a river amidst the mountains: that much, at least, we knew.

Our second clue had lain in our hands for months, but had somehow or other gone unrecognized all that

time until the sharp eyes and keen wits of old Zastro, the wise sage of the Ku Thad and one of our most trusted councillors, discerned its hidden meaning.

It was in the form of a small circular medallion of precious metal which Ergon had found about the neck of Ang Chan, another Kuurian, a second Mind Wizard, who had been the power behind Zamara's throne and the mastermind behind her mad scheme of world conquest, even as Ool had skulked and whispered in the shadows of the mighty warlord, Arkola.

There aboard Zamara's great warship, as a flying vessel of Shondakor closed in battle with it, Ang Chan had fallen to a chance-flung dagger wielded by Zamara herself, hurled at the wily mastermind by the outraged princess in the terrible moment in which she had at last discovered how the yellow dwarf had manipulated her thoughts to obey the bidding of the far-off Mind Wizards.

The medallion bore a seemingly meaningless inscription, curved and ragged lines gathering about a triangular symbol. The disc contained no message that was legible to me at the time, so I thrust it within my garments for later examination and promptly forgot all about it.

Chapter 2

Secret in Silver

In the great Hall of the royal palace of Shondakor were we assembled for the council of war.

Once the grinning idol of Hoom, devil god of the Chac Yuul, had leered down upon the splendid hall, squatting like a huge, obscene toad atop the dais of many steps.

Now the Twin Thrones stood upon that high place beneath a billowing canopy of cloth of gold, the thrones wherefrom Darloona and I were wont to preside over state functions.

At the foot of those stairs a great table of carven stone was set and many gilt chairs were drawn about this table, whose top was littered with books and documents, scrolls and charts.

At the head of this table I sat, as Prince of the Golden City. To my right sat Zamara, Princess of Tharkol, and to my left, the gross bulk of Kaamurath, Seraan of Soraba. At lower places about the table sat the lords and chieftains and courtiers of the Ku Thad realm-handsome and courageous Prince Valkar, majestic Lord Yarrak, the solemn-eyed arthropod Koja, and Lukor of Ganatol, and many another brave and stalwart ally, not the least among them, in our reverence and esteem, being the aged and silver-haired Zastro, the sage and philosopher of the Shondakorian realm.

Only my princess was absent from our council, but the voice of motherhood has a higher call at times than do the demands of statecraft. And our infant son, but newly born, loudly and insistently required her presence more needfully than did we.

For months we had labored, three cities in concord, to mount the greatest expedition of war ever launched across the face of this world-or, at least, the greatest known to our annals.

Since the destruction of the Sky Pirates of Zanadar, Shondakor alone of all the cities of the Jungle Moon possessed a fleet of the fantastic flying galleons wherewith the cruel corsairs of the City in the Clouds had long harassed the other kingdoms of Thanator. From our successful battle against Zanadar we had borne away two of the mighty ornithopters, the Jalathadar and the Xaxar.

But in the interval since the fall of Zanadar, and all unknown to us, the cunning Mind Wizards had moved in secret to arm the warlike Tharkolians with the flying ships—a secret weapon with which the self-styled Empress Zamara had planned the conquest of Thanator, never dreaming that she was but a tool in the hands of the Mind Wizards.

To Zamara's able craftsmen and artisans, the agent of the Mind Wizards, Ang Chan, had delivered the secret formulae and techniques whereby the amazing sky warships were built and rendered weightless. Carefully working in secret, the Tharkolians had completed two such aerial contrivances, which they had christened Empress and Conqueress. These two galleons of the clouds were the prototypes of a yet mightier number that would, it had been planned, form the greatest sky navy in the history of the planet, and which would subjugate the many kingdoms of Thanator to the rule of Zamara.

In the months since we had defeated the imperial ambitions of Ang Chan of Kuur and had won the contrite Zamara of Tharkol to our side, we of the Three Cities had labored tirelessly to prepare for the great expedition against the secret citadel of the Mind Wizards.

The bravest warriors, the noblest fighting-men, the most skillful archers and swordsmen of three kingdoms had trained unwearingly for their duties aboard the combined fleets of Shondakor and Tharkol. The finest intellects in three realms had pooled their wisdom to our aid; cartographers and scholars, geographers and explorers, had combined efforts to scrape together what few morsels of information or rumor, legend or hearsay, could be found concerning the unknown far side of the planet. The finest maps, the most detailed and reliable charts, had been compiled. They were the end result of months of discussion and research, the sifting of evidence and the comparison of knowledge. But these charts fell pitifully short of accuracy or detail. If we entered the skies of the unknown far side of Thanator armed only with these charts, we should be flying blind into an unknown and mysterious world. We might well consume months-years-in combing many thousands of square miles, in search of our uncharted destination.

At the culmination of a lengthy series of meetings, the final discovery came to light. During these councils we had painstakingly gathered together every minuscule scrap of data we possessed concerning the Mind Wizards. I had racked my brains for every tiniest bit of information I had learned from my brief association with Ool during my incognito tour of duty among the warriors of the Black Legion, and I had ransacked my memory to reconstruct, as accurately as possible, every word he had ever spoken in my hearing.

Princess Zamara did precisely the same, setting down for the scribes to copy out everything she knew or remembered about Ang Chan, and striving to recall every word, the text of every single conversation she had ever had with the yellow dwarf. We combed over this accumulation of material, searching for clues, but found little that was of any use to us.

As well, we examined minutely the contents of Ang Chan's suite back in Tharkol, fetched hither in the Empress. I don't know precisely what we had hoped to find—perhaps a letter, a map, a book, some kind of document that might indicate the location of the hidden lair of the Mind Wizards.

And then I recalled the curiously-inscribed disc Ergon had taken from about the neck of Ang Chan as he

lay dying in the cabin of Zamara's flying ship. At the time I had slipped this item into my pouch, vaguely planning to examine it later, which was something I had completely forgotten to do in the interim. The pouch still lay in a cupboard in my dressing room. I sent a servant to find it and displayed the thing before the council.

It was a smallish disc of some heavy, slick metal resembling silver. One side was smooth and blank, but the other was engraved with an odd design or pattern of curved and wavy lines which made no particular sense to me. It looked like this:

We passed the small silver medallion around the table, examining it one by one. No one could make anything in particular of it, until it came into the hands of wise old Zastro. He peered at it thoughtfully, then called for the document in which I had caused to be transcribed the several passages of dialogue which had passed between Ool and myself during the time I had served (under a false name) in the retinue of Prince Vaspian of the Black Legion. He slowly read aloud that particular information concerning the location of Kuur which Ool had let slip during our battle in the Pits.

When he raised his lined and weary face, his eyes gleamed bright with youthful zest and excitement.

"Do you not grasp the meaning of it, my lords?" he inquired.

Gallant old Lukor sniffed impatiently.

"I, for one, do not, friend Zastro," he said. "'Tis but a bauble, scribbled with a meaningless design, to my way o' thinking!"

"Then why should he wear it concealed in the bosom of his garments?" Zastro asked, gently.

Lukor wrinkled up his brow.

"Mayhap because it was precious to him-how can we guess?"

Zastro nodded slowly, silver beard gleaming in the shafts of brilliant day which fell athwart the table through tall windows.

"And perhaps we can guess why it was so valuable to him," he said. "We may assume that this Ang Chan was not intended to remain forever at the court of Tharkol, but would eventually, once his mission was concluded, have made his way back to his unknown homeland. Exactly how he would have effected this journey I cannot guess-nor does it particularly matter. But it seems to me that he would have had to keep about him, against that moment of need, some way of telling how to get home again across half the world. Is this not reasonable to expect?"

We all nodded or murmured acquiescence. Koja eyed the old sage with his solemn and inscrutable gaze.

"Are we to assume that you profess to see a map of some kind in the scribble on the reverse of the medallion?" he inquired in his harsh monotone.

The old man smiled gently.

"That is precisely the case!" he said. "Consider-Ang Chan could not have known precisely when it would become necessary for him to make his return journey. His return might have waited upon the successful termination of his mission, or it might have come about quite suddenly-for example, if his

identity had unexpectedly been exposed.”

“There is sense in what you say, Zastro; speak on,” Lord Yarrak bade, his eyes alive with keen interest.

“He might have been many leagues distant from his suite in the palace, absent from Tharkol on a mission for his queen, when the time for return came. Thus, would it not be reasonable for us to expect he would keep somewhere about his person at all times the means whereby to find his path back across half a world to shadowy and hidden Kuur? Now, for a man to keep a book about his person, or a pouch of papers, much less a folded parchment map, would be to arouse suspicions in all he met and to risk the loss of the return-chart in any one of a thousand ways.”

“Such as?” Zamara asked skeptically.

“Why, such as theft. A thief, brushing against him in the street—a burglar, robbing his apartment while he bathed—a fire breaking out suddenly, making it impossible for him to escape with aught but his life. But suppose, foreseeing these eventualities, he caused a miniature map to be engraved upon a bit of ordinary jewelry which he could wear upon his person at every moment of the day or night, waking or sleeping . . .”

“You mean—the medallion?” I said.

He nodded, smilingly, then traced with a careful hand a replica of the seemingly meaningless tangle of curved lines on a large sheet of blank parchment, and held it up for the rest of us to see.

“Now, observe this long line that threads its curving way through the midst of the design,” he said, indicating it with his forefinger. “Prince Jandar has told us that Ool the Uncanny mentioned that the lair of the Mind Wizards was ‘beyond the Dragon River.’ This line in particular catches my attention, not only because the small triangular mark is situated just beyond it, but because it is unlike the wavy lines that enclose it. The line coils and undulates like a serpent . . . and it may be because of that similarity that the Kuurians call it ‘Dragon River.’”

We stared intently at the replica of the miniature chart, listening in utter silence as the old man spoke.

“Now, as for these regularly wavy lines which we see both above and below and to the right of the serpentine line, they suggest to me nothing more or less than a stylized way of indicating mountain ridges on a map. Some cartographers, you know, sketch in miniature drawings of mountains, others prefer to illustrate the natural features on a map with some manner of conventional design. These wavy lines, then, could well represent the major ridges of the mountains which Ool the Uncanny called ‘the Peaks of Harangzar.’”

“Go on,” Prince Valkar urged.

“I believe that this triangular mark represents the secret citadel of the Mind Wizards. It may represent a single pyramidal building, or the entrance to a subterranean cavern system, a castle, or even a city. We have no way of telling that in advance, and shall not be able to make certain until we are on the spot.”

He put the replica chart down on the table and beamed upon us his serene, saintly smile.

“The most amusing thing about this humble discovery of mine,” he said, “is that I should not have been able to make these guesses if we did not have the vital clue Prince Jandar had already given us. Possessing this verbal information about the mountains and the river, it becomes possible to make sense

out of a map deliberately designed to look like a meaningless scribble. And, of course, the Mind Wizards could not have known what Ool the Uncanny had let slip in his conversation with the prince, that time they dueled to the death there in the Pits. Either bit of information is completely useless without possession of the other; possessing both, we should find it remarkably easy to find the location of Kuur.”

Fat, moon-faced Kaamurath of Soraba had lolled wheezing in his chair throughout this, sucking noisily on sweetmeats, his bright, quick little eyes fixed unswervingly on Zastro’s face. Now, for the first time, he spoke in his high, breathy voice.

“This personage is not entirely certain he follows the meaning of the admirable sage of the Ku Thad,” he said politely. “We still have half a world to search, do we not? And we must still cover many hundreds or even thousands of korads before we can hope to find the hiding place of the despicable Mind Wizards?”

Zastro smiled again. “Yes, but the Seraan forgets how rapidly the ornithopters cover ground; and how easy it will be to find a river that curves with this precise configuration. Besides, we will be looking for mountains. On this hemisphere of Thanator, only two mountain ranges of any particular size or importance break the flatness of the land-surface, the White Mountains of the Sky Pirates to the north of the Grand Kumala, and the Black Mountains of the Yathoon Horde to the south. The land-surface of Thanator is not extremely extensive; it is nowhere near the size of Prince Jandar’s home-world, whereon, he informs me, many score of major mountain ranges arise in six or seven different continental masses. No, sire, we shall find it easy to search from the air, investigate only the mountains, and we shall look for a river of this configuration. Besides, we have one further important geographical clue on the medallion which as yet I have not mentioned.”

“And what may that be?” the Seraan wheezed.

“This mountain at the end of the river, which is larger than any of the others, and whose crest seems to be cloven into three distinct peaks. That would seem to be a very distinctive landmark, and one we can hardly fly over, or near, without noticing. It would seem to be the mountain in which the headwaters of the Dragon River rise. It narrows our search considerably.”

And so the council determined that Zastro had indeed hit upon the secret of the medallion, and the location of shadowy Kuur was at last known to us.

We all felt jubilant over the discovery, and more eager than ever to launch our expedition against the homeland of the Mind Wizards.

As for myself, I felt a certain chagrin-mingled, it must be admitted, with wry humor.

For five months we had searched our wits and racked our brains for the secret of the location of Kuur.

And for five months I had-quite literally-been carrying it around in my pocket!

Chapter 3

Shondakor, Farewell!

Once the keen perception of Zastro had penetrated the mystery to its core, and we knew that we possessed, at very least, a vital clue to the location of Kuur, events moved rapidly towards our departure.

We would of course employ the sky navy of Shondakor for this purpose. There was never really any question but that we would fly to the secret fortress of the Mind Wizards. The ingenious and remarkable winged galleons invented by the Sky Pirates of Zanadar could traverse the globe far swifter than any army, mounted on thaptors or borne in chariots drawn by those ungainly, hippo-like draft-animals the Thanatorians call the glymph. True, the number of armed warriors and supplies we could transport by ornithopter was strictly limited, whereas by land we could move as large a host of fighting-men as we might care to assemble: but speed was of the essence, and the element of surprise in our attack might prove the single factor that would tip the scales of destiny towards victory rather than defeat.

And so the sky navy was made ready. Perhaps the term “sky navy” sounds a bit presumptuous; the flying galleons in the service of royal Shondakor were, after all, but two in number. Actually, it was the fat, sleepy-eyed Prince of Soraba who coined the term. Soraba is a maritime realm, and employs a mercantile navy to transport its goods between the four Perushtarian cities and also to trade with the cities of Ganatol and Shondakor, which are built on the shores of navigable rivers.

The neologism was invented in this manner. Kaamurath of Soraba had offered the use of his navy to transport the legions of war across that inland sea called the Corund Laj. Then, pausing, blinking thoughtfully, he reminded himself that the Golden City possessed its own navy—a small one, true enough—but a navy whose keels rode the golden skies of Thanator rather than her green seas. A “sky navy” he called it—*kajathol* in the universal language shared in common between all of the many human or humanoid races of Callisto.* The term caught on by reason of its novelty, I suppose, and was used to refer to our two winged galleons from that point on.

These two ships, as I have elsewhere mentioned, were the *Jalathadar*, captained by the indomitable Haakon who had served us so well during the expedition against the City in the Clouds, and the *Xaxar*, whose captain was, of course, the mighty Zantor, once a corsair chieftain of Zanadar and now a firm and trusted friend.

But the sky navy had recently been doubled in size, for our new ally, Zamara of Tharkol, had joined forces with us and her own aerial galleons, the *Empress* and the *Conqueress*, would fight by our side. Perhaps I should explain at this point—being uncertain if any eye but my own will ever peruse these pages, and, furthermore, not knowing if my hypothetical reader will possess intact the earlier portion of this narrative*—that the secret of building the remarkable aerial contrivances, believed lost with the fall of Zanadar, had survived among the savants of Tharkol. Zamara had originally intended to launch her own aerial navy as the prime instrument in her ambitious scheme of world conquest; now, by one of the small ironies of fate, she was employing her flying galleons against the secret stronghold of the Mind Wizards . . . who had given these secrets to her in the first place, hoping thereby to help her realize their own mad dreams of a planet-wide empire!

The shipyards of Tharkol had labored mightily for many months, perhaps the better part of a year, but thus far two ornithopters only had reached completion. A third and fourth vessel, which I understand she intends to christen the *Avenger* and the *Zarkoon*—which last is untranslatable, being the name of a mythological or legendary monster similar to the Harpies or the Furies of classical fable—were nearing completion in the shipyards of Tharkol, but neither would be sky-worthy in time to depart with us.

Thus it was that the armada we were soon to launch against our mysterious enemies consisted of four mighty war-galleons of the skies. And a mighty armada it was, armed to the teeth, its decks bristling with fighting men, its holds filled with the weaponry of war. Ever since our return from Tharkol we had been training men day and night for shipboard duties. And the cream of the fighting-men of the Three Cities (as we of Shondakor and Tharkol and Soraba thought of ourselves in our newly-forged alliance) were ours to command, the flower of the fighting manhood of three great realms vied for a chance to join our adventure.

This crash course in “skymanship” was only made possible by a fluke. The crew of the original ship, the Jalathadar, had been hastily and imperfectly trained by myself and my comrade, Koja of the Yathoon Horde, who had served in the wheel gangs of the Zanadarian pirate ships during an earlier period of enslavement. But our rude and fragmentary experience had later been polished with the aid of Zantor, who had joined us in the attack against the pirate city, and had gone over to our side with his entire crew of seasoned and experienced mariners of the clouds. Now that we had a veteran cadre of sky sailors amongst us, it was easy to divide the eager new recruits into teams, each under two or more veterans of the air.

The force of warriors we handpicked from the ranks of the Three Cities was comprised of the finest fighting-men in the world. Nor was their number inconsiderable, for ornithopters of the size and capacity of those which made up the armada could each hold a crew of one hundred and fifteen officers and men. Multiply that number by four and you achieve a total of something slightly under five hundred warriors. Since the armies of Thanator rarely total more than two or three thousand fighting-men, most of whom are poorly-trained and inefficient foot-soldiers, mere yeomen conscripted by force in time of war, our actual strength compared well with that of a genuine army. That is, few Callistan armies contain more than five or six or seven hundred mounted “knights.” The only exceptions to this are the Yathoon barbarians, gigantic hordes numbering in the many thousands, and every one a trained and merciless warrior, and, of course, the Chac Yuul, or Black Legion, a now (happily) broken and disbanded mercenary host of brigands who for years had terrorized the cities of this hemisphere.

In the era of the Sky Pirates, the corsair ships included a complement of some thirty-five officers and crewmen-most of whom were warriors, trained in sword, bow, javelin or lasso-while the remaining eighty members of the ship’s strength consisted of slaves chained to the wheels which powered the great vessels. We, of course, shunned the employment of slaves. This was not, I might add, because of any enlightened attitude among the citizens of Thanator against the institution of slavery (for, after all, what else can you do with captives taken in war except enslave them-the only alternatives being to butcher them, or to set them free to fight against you again, which is nonsensical). Nor was it, simply, that I had once worn the chains of slavery, groaning at the wheel of the aerial ships, and could not endure the notion of another mortal in the same predicament; in truth I must admit that, while I found my time at the wheel grueling and humiliating, it was not unendurable; I was not treated with any singular cruelty, and I found it an excellent way to build the strength of my back, chest, shoulders and arms.

But I am being facetious here, as you may have surmised. Actually, it was simply the most practical thing to do, to eliminate slaves from the crew-strength. We needed every single fighting-man we could carry-we had the vigorous young manhood of three kingdoms to recruit from-and we could hardly afford the luxury of carrying in each vessel eighty men who could not fight.

So we all took a turn at the wheel, even I, the Prince of Shondakor. And beside me at the grueling task cheerfully labored princes and nobles, officers and aristocrats, and the scions of the oldest and wealthiest and most blue-blooded houses in three realms. And not one of us, I’ll wager, but deemed our turn at the great wheels a privilege. For we served in a high-hearted crusade against the cunning and treacherous and secret foes who would undermine and destroy us with their uncanny powers.

In these preparations, Soraba, of necessity, played a minor role. While our Perushtarian allies were no less eager than we to crush the menace of remote and hidden Kuur, the red men are not sprung of a warrior race, and the ancient and honorable profession of arms has gone neglected throughout their history to their occasional detriment. This is an over-generalized statement, and is not entirely true, for Kaamurath of Soraba is a clever and farsighted man, and under his regime considerable strides have been taken to check and to reverse this racial disinclination towards soldiering. Years ago he realized that a principedom unable to defend itself against its enemies must buy peace, either through tribute to the foe or through paying the wages of professional mercenaries. And the squandering of money is not a situation which pleases the merchant-minded lords of the Perushtarian Empire.

Hence the fat, sharp-minded monarch years ago trained and recruited a warrior legion from among his own people, paying a high premium to overcome their innate distaste for the martial arts. And from among his finest warriors, selected in open competition against the flower of the fighting-men of Shondakor and Tharkol, we selected no fewer than fifty-seven.

That may not sound very impressive: but if you could see the average Perushtarian-fat, greedy, bejeweled, draped in gaudy silks, reeking of perfume-you would appreciate what a remarkable transition the Seraan of Soraba had accomplished within a single generation.

If he could not equal the Shondakorian and Tharkolian contribution in number of fighting-men, however, the stouthearted Kaamurath determined to uphold his end of the mutual venture by paying for almost everything. His artisans and craftsmen and traders put at our disposal, of course without cost, the finest weapons that could be found across the breadth of Thanator. He pressed upon us provisions, foodstuffs, medicinal supplies, armor, clothing. He outfitted the four vessels in the armada with the most accurate and superior navigational instruments, maps and charts, cordage and chandler's stores money could-and did-buy.

My admiration and liking for the shrewd, fat, soft-spoken little Perushtarian increased with the arrival of every new shipload of gear and provender. Kaamurath knew the value of a diol (as the basic monetary unit of Thanator is known) as well as any wealthy merchant-prince. He knew also that the conquest of his city would cost a million times what this generous outlay was worth. And he knew that victory over one's enemies is a bargain at any price.

The armada of the Three Cities was manned with the fighting strength of Tharkol and of golden Shondakor.

But we flew on wings of gold. Soraban gold.

At last the time had come and we were ready to depart. The men were fully trained, well experienced, and in fighting trim. All was in readiness to launch the first multi-national air armada in the history of this planet.

At my side on the control belvedere of the Jalathadar, the flagship of the new sky navy, stood my most gallant and trusted comrades-Prince Valkar, Lukor the Ganatolian, Koja of the Horde, stout, gruff old Ergon, and the savant, Zastro, wise man of the Ku Thad. It was suspected that his keen intellect would be needed on this expedition, for on this venture we crossed swords with cunning and clever foes. As well, a gallant youth named Tomar had joined the ship's company in a Thanatorian naval rank comparable to that of an ensign. This youngster had acquitted himself admirably on a former adventure, when it had been his quick wits and fearless daring alone had saved the Jalathadar from destruction at the hands of the unscrupulous traitor, Ulthar. Lukor, who had conceived of a paternal fondness for the youth,

vowed he would prove himself an asset on the quest.

It was a clear and brilliant morning: the skies burnt fierce gold in the weird, sourceless dawn of Callisto. The populace of Shondakor had turned out in all their thousands to salute us as we set sail over the world's edge. In brilliant robes, crowned with nodding plumes, decked with flashing gems as if for some high festival, they waved and cheered as the signal flags ascended the shrouds and the anchor lines were cast off, setting us free upon the winds.

From the great tier of the palace at the heart of the Golden City, I caught my last look at my beloved. Darloona, with our infant son Kaldar in her arms, crowned with a coronal of starry gems, blew me a kiss. The baby cooed and gurgled and kicked his heels, delighted at the color and pageantry of the magnificent scene. Beside my wife and child, tall, lordly Yarrak, Darloona's uncle and the senior peer of the realm, returned our salute as the mighty galleon rose above the crowded streets, her huge bat-ribbed wings catching the brisk morning breeze; and we were aloft.

Behind us from the naval yards the mighty bulk of the Xaxar ascended in our wake, her banners streaming, spread wings booming as they caught the rising winds. On the cupola atop the pilothouse I caught a glimpse of that great warrior, Zantor. Alone of the corsair captains of Zanadar, he had shown mercy towards his captives, and gentleness towards the helpless. The Sky Pirates had made him a slave-a gladiator, to fight savage beasts and wild men in the arena for their bloody sport: but I had made him a lord of Shondakor, and was proud to call him by the name of my friend. Grim and somber, impassive of mien, with brooding eyes, Zantor was a silent, thoughtful man; but this morning, with its rich color and music, flags rolling on the wind and cheering throngs on every rooftop and balcony, I saw him clearly, and he was grinning with delight.

Like immense, graceful birds, or flying dragons from the mist-torn skies of some lost dawn age, the two immense galleons rose into the air. With the Jalathadar in the fore, the Xaxar trailing behind, we glided in a great curve through the sparkling air. Twice we circled the towering spires of the royal palace of Shondakor in a stately circuit-and a third time.

Then we veered away to the west and a few points north.

The mighty metropolis shrunk behind us to a cluster of dolls' houses. Gold fires of dawn flashed in the glittering length of the river Ajand as in the mirror-bright blade of a slim scimitar. The crimson fields of the Great Plains filled our vision; the city dwindled astern, and was soon lost to sight in the distance.

The adventure was begun!

Chapter 4

The Armada Assembles

As the Golden City vanished in our wake, I turned to the pilothouse where Captain Haakon stood behind the young officer, Karan of Tharkol, who had drawn first watch.

“Captain, if you will take her up to the two-thousand-foot level,” I said.

He saluted crisply.

“Two thousand feet it is, admiral!” The signal was flashed to the mid-deck and relayed to the wheel-gangs below. The rate of our wing-beats increased; at the same time, trim-gangs drew taut the guy-stays on sturdy winches. The trim of our ailerons sharpened. At the bow, the rudder-gang threw their levers over in response to signal flags flashed from the fore belvedere. And we ascended by some five hundred feet to the height I had requested.

“Very good, captain,” I nodded. “West by northwest, and steady as she goes. Call me in thirty-five minutes; I will be below in my stateroom.”

Acknowledging his salute I turned and led my entourage down narrow, winding stairs within the forecastle to a long, low-ceilinged room where round ports, sheathed in glittering crystal, gave forth on a stupendous vista of crimson, rolling plains. Here, seated at a long table amidst a clutter of books and charts and scrolls, a plump, short, little man frowned up at me irritably.

He was red-skinned and bald, with sharp black eyes filled with ill-humor, and you would have thought him a pureblooded Perushtarian had it not been for his amazing beard. This hirsute appendage clung to the very tip of his fat double chin and thrust out, sharp and waxed to a point, in a stiff tuft. Since his face was otherwise as hairless as an egg, and, on the whole, much rounder, this jutting thrust of beard lent him a ludicrous appearance.

It looked, in fact, for all the world like a billy goat’s beard! But the possessor of this amazing appendage was inordinately proud of it. I suppose, to paraphrase an old adage, in the country of the bald the wearer of even a billy goat’s beard is king.

At any rate, my entrance was viewed with distinct displeasure. The little plump red-faced man darted an unwelcoming look in our direction and voiced a little sniff of peevish temper.

“How go your cartographic labors, Dr. Abziz?” I inquired, taking no notice of the little man’s disrespectful manner.

“They would progress much faster, Prince Jandar, if I might not be continually interrupted by great hulking warriors clanking about in all their steel and leather, with their great boots and clumsy hands!” the little man replied sharply.

I smiled, but refused to be made angry. This officious and sharp-tongued little gentleman was a distinguished cartographer, loaned to us by Prince Kaamurath from the famous Academy of Soraba. He was considered the foremost of living experts on the science of geography-or should it be “callistography”?-and held himself, evidently, in the highest personal esteem. I found him quite the most amusing little pedant it had ever been my fortune to encounter, so amusing, in fact, that it was nearly impossible to be offended by his peevish snapping tongue and puffed-up self-esteem.

“Ah, cousin? The work goes well, eh? Good, good!”

It was the gallant old swordmaster, Lukor, said this. Dr. Abziz stiffened in his chair as if suddenly finding a cobra coiled up in his lap. He utterly and completely detested Lukor, for Lukor was a Ganatolian, and the only thorn in the side of the vastly inflated ego of the Soraban pedant was the fact that he was not of the purest Perushtarian blood. His mother had been a Ganatolian woman, and it was through her, of

course, that he inherited the capacity for hirsute adornment, unknown to Perushtarians of pure descent. Lukor had discovered, quite early on, that while the irascible little geographer loved his thrusting tuft of beard with a rare passion, he distinctly disliked being reminded of his mixed heritage. It was therefore only natural for Lukor to bring up the subject of the Ganatolian side of Dr. Abziz's lineage at every possible conversational turn, for he delighted in puncturing a swollen ego almost as much as he enjoyed pricking a foeman's gullet with the point of his steel.

"If this . . . ah . . . gentleman could desist in claiming a familial relationship which could not conceivably exist, perhaps a scholar of some distinction could be permitted to resume his labors," Dr. Abziz implored of the room at large in a strangled tone.

Lukor chuckled, eyes twinkling merrily.

"With the very greatest pleasure, I am sure!" he said heartily. "Nothing delights me more than to accommodate a fellow-countryman! Ah," he breathed gustily, "how pleasant it is, here among all you Shondakorians and Perushtarians and Tharkolians and other such-like foreigners, for a poor, elderly, lonely, gentleman-adventurer from Ganatol to stumble upon a friendly face from home!"

And with that he dealt the fuming little doctor a stout thump between the shoulder blades that must have rattled his teeth. Abziz squeezed his eyes shut and pursed up his mouth as if in suffering so acute that words failed him.

Trying to conceal a grin, Valkar swooped down on Lukor, who was about to launch another conversational sally, and, firmly linking arm in arm with him, bore him away.

"Will you visit my cabin and share a rare old bottle of quarra, swordmaster?" the tactful prince asked. "I'd appreciate your expert opinion on the vintage . . ."

Lukor smacked his lips, eyeing Dr. Abziz doubtfully, but permitted the young prince to bear him off down the corridor. Next to a good fight, or to tormenting the waspish little Perushtarian geographer, the gallant old master-swordsman from Ganatol relished a fine vintage of quarra.* Valkar had foresightedly laid in a sizable supply of the beverage, as soon as he had seen how things lay between the peppery little cartographer and the silver-haired Ganatolian swordmaster.

As the door closed behind them, Dr. Abziz cautiously opened one eye and peered about, almost as if expecting Lukor to pop up from behind a chair and yell "boo"; ascertaining to his satisfaction that his tormentor had quit the premises, the little pedant uttered a snort and a loud sniff—a combination of sounds which somehow managed to convey at once disgust, relief, and satisfaction.

"Your forgiveness, my lords," he snapped. "But I cannot endure the presence of that-that-swaggerer! Seizing upon a fancied likeness to his late great-uncle, the fellow has thrust himself upon me at every turn, reeking of quarra, smirking, unreeling interminable family histories and genealogies, obdurately refusing to so much as listen to my patient, irrefutable arguments that we could not conceivably, by any stretch of the imagination, be related! Insufferable lout! That a mature gentleman of his years should swagger about like a young bravo, that-that terrible weapon slapping about his spindly shanks ohh!"

The doctor shuddered and closed his eyes again as if to blot the horrendous image from his memory.

The youthful Tomar, perhaps too young to see the humor in the scene, spoke up anxiously.

"Doctor, I, I'm sure Sir Lukor meant nothing by it; he's a wonderful old gentleman, and-and Prince

Jandar says he is the finest swordsman in all the world, even though he is so very old. But he really shouldn't annoy a great scholar like yourself, because we're depending on you to figure out our route to Kuur, and we know it must be very hard to do, and that only a great intellect could have the knowledge . . .”

The plump features of Dr. Abziz, which had been pursed into a tight expression as if he smelled something vile, relaxed at the boy's earnest words. He beamed on the youngster with something resembling a fond eye. Stiffly cold and formal with the rest of the officers, including myself, Dr. Abziz-unlikely as it may seem-had conceived of a certain fondness for the brave, manly, good-natured youth.

As he made quiet thanks to Tomar for his words, I reflected there might be hope for the old pedant yet. If Tomar could elicit a word of thanks from the stiff-necked old fellow, there might be a chance we could persuade him to join the human race after all!

Since the doctor had appropriated the stateroom for his studies, we tactfully left it to him and reascended the winding stair to the windy balustrade. Before long the clustered towers of Tharkol rose over the horizon, and, as we drifted nearer, we saw that the Conqueress and the Empress were already aloft, waiting for our arrival. Aboard the former would be Princess Zamara herself, for the beautiful young Tharkolian queen was a swordswoman of no mean repute, and eager to match her steel against the villainous Mind Wizards.

Also aboard the Conqueress I expected to find my old friend Glypto, the wily and cunning Soraban master-spy who had so brilliantly masqueraded, on our last adventure together, as a cowardly, sniveling, whimpering lickspittle of a starveling thief. The remarkably homely little fellow had played the part to consummate perfection, and never once during the days and weeks we adventured together had I the slightest suspicion his groveling, whining, self-pitying manner was assumed; nor that his beaked nose, stubbled and hollowed cheeks and glittering, wary eye concealed a calm, cool intelligence, agile, resourceful, fearless, and clever.

Streaming with banners, the Conqueress came about with majestic grace as we approached the city. As had been the case in royal Shondakor, the citizenry of Tharkol had turned out in strength for this momentous and historic occasion, and the broad avenues and mighty plazas and forums of the Scarlet City were gaily bedecked as if for holiday, and thronged with massed thousands who waved at us the flags of our own kingdom in friendly salute.

For several minutes the four galleons of the clouds circled about the city, gliding in a stately procession, tracing a circuit of the walls of Tharkol. To those thousands who viewed the amazing and beautiful aerial procession from below in the streets and squares of the city, it must have resembled a stately slow-motion ballet in the skies.

Then, assembling according to previous arrangements, the four mighty frigates formed an arrowhead or chevron formation, with the Jalathadar, as flagship of the armada, taking her position in the point of the arrowhead.

Now joined together in this high emprise, the armada glided from the circle and soared grandly off into the west, leaving the flag-bedecked city of Tharkol to cheer itself hoarse in our wake.

And thus began what promised to be the most incredible and momentous of my many adventures on the Jungle Moon, as we set forth on our expedition to the edge of the world and beyond

Chapter 5

Journey to the World's Edge

At the height of nearly half a mile above the surface of Callisto, the aerial armada of the Three Cities sailed majestically into the unknown west of the world.

On the glass-enclosed bridge of the Jalathadar, I mused yet once again on the mighty airships and the marvel of human ingenuity they represented. Nothing remotely akin to them had ever cruised through the blue skies of my native world, save in the fantastic romances of Jules Verne and the cryptic notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci. I suppose the ponderous and stately dirigibles of my planet's transient era of lighter-than-air flight must have seen something faintly akin to these majestic clippers of the clouds, but those days were long since past.

What a miracle of engineering the aerial galleons of Thanator represent! The long-ago invention of some forgotten genius of whelmed and conquered Zanadar, the great ornithopters are a marvel of the imagination somehow made real . . . and one of the many dreams of Leonardo da Vinci which have come true in the centuries after his time. After all, that most glorious genius of the Renaissance somehow envisioned the tank or armored car, the Gatling gun, that primitive precursor of the modern automatic weapon, the helicopter, and something remarkably like a cross between the pocket submarine and the diving bell. All of these the titanic vision of da Vinci pictured in graphic detail in his coded notebooks, leaving their eventual perfection to the mechanics and inventors of later generations. The ornithopter, or airship that flies by flapping its wings in imitation of a bird in flight, was one of his most amazing and revolutionary conceptions and the drawings of them in Leonardo's notebooks anticipate the engineering problems involved with startling accuracy, visualizing them in vivid descriptive terms. My professors at Yale told me that the problems of human flight fascinated da Vinci for years, and that he struggled long to perfect a working model. It was, I suppose, the simple problem of weight which defeated his magnificent dream and prevented it from reaching fruition, and which brought to an end his superb effort to give wings to man centuries before the triumph at Kitty Hawk.

If only the divine Leonardo could somehow have spanned the ages and the gulf of space, to peer down through the brilliant morning skies of distant Callisto to watch as the great armada of the Three Cities floated on throbbing vans through the golden dawn-how enthralled he would have been, to see his splendid dream achieved at last by the denizens of an alien world!

The ponderous dimensions of the sky-ships alone would have amazed him. Frigates such as the Jalathadar measure some eighty-seven feet from stem to stern and are built very broad in the beam, flat-bottomed and portly; but otherwise their appearance and design is greatly reminiscent of the majestic galleons of the Elizabethan Age which once navigated the piratical blue waters of the Spanish Main. They are built quite high in the poop and the fore-castle-the fore-castle rising to about forty-two feet above the level of the keel and the poop or stern-castle a little less, some thirty-five feet-with a broad mid-deck, lined with a carven balustrade. About the only thing they lack for the Spanish galleon look to be complete is canvas, for of course they have no use for sails, and, hence, none for masts either. (They do have two masts, but short ones, and principally for the display of flags; observation stations are mounted like crows' nests atop these short, stubby masts.)

The upper works of the forecastle bulge out sharply, an exposed belvedere giving a clear view on all three sides (and down, as well), and this belvedere opens into the pilothouse, with a balustraded observation deck mounted on the roof. The admiral's stateroom is located directly beneath the pilothouse, with the captain's quarters and the officers' dining room (which also serves as council room) to either side. Further down the sloping curve of the forecastle, at about what would serve as the waterline on a seagoing ship, are two more observation decks or balconies, one situated on either side of the forecastle, and the sterncastle has a similar belvedere and rooftop observation deck giving a clear view to aft; just beneath this is situated the vertical rudder fin, ribbed like a gigantic Chinese fan; this is attached to the rudderstock which supports the belvedere and which is itself attached to the sternpost and thence to the aft steering gear.

From either side of the rather broad maindeck, which is the one feature about the vessel which lends it a slightly ungainly appearance-more like a fat goose than a graceful swan, you might say-the hinged wings extend. They are a part of the hull, and extrude to either side at right angles from slightly below the deck-level. These wings are quite solid and immobile for about two thirds of their full extent, but from thereon they are hinged in an ingenious and rather complicated manner, with enormous pulleys and guy-stays which manipulate the outboard wingsections so they do, actually, flap up and down in a ponderous fashion. The movements of these hinged sections, as well as the complex system of ailerons, are controlled from the capacious hold built directly below the central deck. There, stacked one above the other with narrow balconies and platforms at each level, are the ranks of enormous wheels which supply the motive power for the wingsections. Or perhaps I should say it is the wheel-gangs, whose task it is to turn these immense gears by hand, who supply the motive power. Turning these wheels communicates kinetic energy through an amazing system of sequential cogwheels, pinion wheels successively engaging with larger cogs, and the whole connecting with the guy-stays I spoke of earlier. These guy-stays are tough and thin as the finest grade of nylon cord you could buy on Earth (they are actually made of the silk of an enormous kind of spider). Perhaps I should remark here that a clever ratchet-and-pawl arrangement on the wheels prevents any sudden reversal-otherwise, of course, the first contrary gust of wind would strip the gears, which could be disastrous. These guy-stays are coiled about gigantic winches just above the topmost wheel-systems, and they communicate from the winches to the outboard wingsections through rows of circular ports in the hull. These ports, incidentally, ventilate the entire hold, or wheel deck, as it is called, quite admirably. Please don't get the image of grimy, sweat-soaked wretches toiling at the oars in fetid darkness under the overseer's lash-the sort of scene commonly found in the marvelous pirate movies popular when I was a boy. The wheel-gangs on an airship like the Jalathadar do indeed perform great physical effort, similar to that of groaning slaves plying the oars in the hold of a Spanish galleon. But they do it in air-conditioned comfort!

If such sky-ships were made out of wood, the weight would be prohibitive, on the order of hundreds of tons, surely. But they are not. Instead, they are fashioned entirely out of paper-layer after layer of tough, coarse papyrus-like paper, soaked in glue, stretched over molded plaster forms, and baked in ovens. When "done," the plaster molds are chipped or broken away, leaving a hull-section molded of light, tough, amazingly strong laminated paper, from which the ships are put together. The Thanatorians also employ a powerful gas, like hydrogen, which fills the hollow double-hull (which is caulked until airtight, of course) and a series of airtight compartments in the bilge. The effect of this gas is to make the galleon almost completely weightless, just as in a German dirigible back in the First World War. The only known supplies of this natural gas were in the White Mountains, and they were destroyed when we conquered Zanadar. But recently the men of Tharkol found an even more capacious deposit of the gas in the Black Mountains near the south pole of Callisto.

The weightless effect of the stored hydrogen-like gas, of course, does much to render the galleons skyworthy. But the laminated paper construction is the real secret.

Who knows? If Leonardo da Vinci had known about papier-mache, the skies of the early Sixteenth Century might have been filled with such majestic aerial marvels as ply the windy heavens of Callisto!

The scarlet walls of Tharkol faded into the distance behind our sterns. The mighty armada of the Three Cities, cruising at about twenty-five miles an hour, floated due east at an altitude of about half a mile.

At this speed (which doesn't sound like much in the era of the jet airplane, but which is pretty fair for a vessel propelled by sheer human muscle-power alone) the armada could cover some three hundred miles or more during the hours of day. We could also, if necessary, cover about the same distance during the night, by rotating shifts of wheel-gangs on a watch-and-watch, or four-hours-on-and-four-hours-off basis, although that would be a grueling pace to keep up, and would only be used in direst need.

But if needs must, the armada could do it. And, at that pace, we could fly from pole to pole in about eight days, thus covering something like forty-three hundred miles in little more than a week's time. This we did not contemplate; at least, we did not look forward to the task. Generally speaking, the wheel-gangs do not power a sky-ship night and day; there are lengthy rest periods in which the vessels maneuver into the grip of one or another of the complex system of prevailing winds the Zanadarian pirates had traced and charted with great care and exactitude.

It was not my plan to do thus on the flight to Kuur.

On this trip we would be flying through skies whose winds had never been charted, for the simple reason that-insofar as any of us knew-the Sky Pirates had never ventured this far from home.

Neither had we.

With Tharkol lost behind in the mists of distance, we flew on over the easternmost extremity of the Great Plains of Haratha which dominate most of the southern hemisphere.

At noon my officers and I lunched in the long, low-ceilinged dining room. Dr. Abziz had testily set aside his books and papers for the occasion, so that we could use the long table for the purpose for which it had originally been designed, although he did give voice to a few pointed remarks about the mentality of men who think more of their bellies than of the recondite and abstruse questions of theoretical geography.

He was not in the least pleased when mischievous Lukor agreed heartily, begging us to hearken to his "learned cousin" and to take our empty bellies elsewhere, so that a "true son of Ganatol" might be allowed to get on with his work. Frostily declining to accept my amiable offer to join us for luncheon, the fussy little doctor decided to take his repast in the privacy of his cabin. Lukor alone professed to be disheartened by his decision.

Even an admiral works on the Jalathadar, so, after lunch, I served my scheduled term of duty at the wheels and retired quite early to my cabin. I occupied myself until dinnertime by bringing up to date this narrative of my most recent adventures. During the months between the collapse of Zamara's mad schemes of world conquest and the departure of the armada for Kuur, I had recorded these recent events in the first half of this manuscript* and I carried with me on the expedition the complete manuscript, to which I added from time to time.

That night I went to bed rather early, and, as the second day of our expedition proved uneventful, spent most of my off-duty time at the writing desk, keeping my journals up to date. In this I had the assistance of the aged savant, Zastro. During the past year or so we had worked together, he and I. The old sage

was fascinated by what I could tell him of life on my native world, to the extent of desiring to learn how to read and write and even speak English, which by this time he had thoroughly mastered. In return for my tutoring him in my native tongue, he assisted me in completing my mastery of his own language. For, while by this point in my adventures on the Jungle Moon, I could, of course, speak the universal Callistan language with great ease and facility, my acquaintance with the written characters and grammar was still cursory, if not rudimentary. So we spent the long, uneventful hours of the first two days of the expedition in our mutual exchange of language lessons, and portions of my recent journals I dictated to Zastro in English, so that he could practice his familiarity with the handwritten tongue.*

Again quite early in the evening of the second day of the voyage, after a turn at the wheels, I retired to my bed, wincingly aware of muscles I had forgotten I possessed. A few turns at the wheels will do that for even the most practiced athlete.

The second day had been, as I have said, much like the first. We flew over crimson meadows in no way different from the leagues of the Haratha plains we had traversed the day before.

But, towards dawn, I woke suddenly and sat bolt upright in my bed, aware of a stirring of inward excitement I could not at first account for. Then, looking at the dimly-burning time-candle in its glass bottle across the cabin, and counting the carefully-measured rings painted thereupon, I became cognizant of the time, which was about four A.m., and realized with a thrill what had awakened me. It had been my subconscious, which had evidently been counting the hours away. We had by this hour covered two hundred and thirty-seven korads.

That was making good time. But we were making more than just good time—we were making history!

For, at about the moment I had awakened from my slumbers, we had flown beyond the eastern limits of the map of Callisto.

We had, in fact, just flown over the edge of the world

Book Two

OVER THE WORLD'S EDGE

Chapter 6

Attack of the Zarkoon

Dawn broke like an immense, soundless explosion, filling the skies of Callisto with clear, brilliant, sourceless golden light.

The event which had transpired shortly before was too momentous to permit me to resume my interrupted slumbers. I rose, threw on my plain leathern tunic and boots, buckled the heavy girdle about

my midsection, and slipped my baldric over my shoulders so that my rapier hung in its scabbard at my left hip. Then, because the winds of morning were likely to be chilly at this height, I drew about my shoulders the folds of a heavy cloak of dark wool and left my cabin, ascending the narrow, winding stair to the observation belvedere atop the pilothouse.

Peering over the carven balustrade, I had my first glimpse of an unknown world.

The landscape below was dim with morning mist, but I discerned the level plain stretching beneath us, and could make out the dark, shaggy rondure of wooded hills. Far away on the gloomy horizon a river or lake glittered fierce silver.

Nowhere could be descried a hilltop castle, town, city, paven road or cultivated field. Nothing in view suggested that this nameless land was inhabited by men.

After a long look at the unexplored terrain I descended into the pilothouse and exchanged a few words with the duty officer. As might have been predicted, he had nothing to report. The wind we had been riding most of the night had slackened off at dawn and our speed was now cut in half. With the first light of morn, he had hoisted signal flags, receiving from the other ships in our armada the intelligence that nothing of note had transpired during the hours of darkness. Our approximate position at dawn he had then noted on the rough map which Dr. Abziz had completed the evening before. He had also roughly sketched in the line of the hills which were visible by morning, and the distant glint of water on the horizon.

As for Dr. Abziz, the irascible little geographer had risen as early as had I, and was already engaged in making his first notes on this new world whose periphery we had crossed in the early hours of morning. He gave short replies to my questions, for his entire being was concentrated on the landscape which gradually unfolded to our gaze below, as the warmth of dawn dissipated the morning mists. His keen eyes were intent on the spectacle beneath our keel, whose details resolved themselves bit by bit as the white fog vanished, and he was scribbling notes and sketching natural features busily. Receiving a few curt and even snappish responses to my queries, I turned away and left the little savant to his work.

Tomar brought a steaming mug of mulled, spiced wine and a dish of crusty, warm meat cakes to me on the bridge. Wrapped in my cloak, I stood munching these and sipping the hot wine, while staring down at the enthralling vista which gradually unrolled before my eyes.

First impressions can easily be wrong, of course, but the more I studied the unknown hemisphere beneath us the more I became convinced that the terrain immediately to hand was uninhabited. Nowhere could I discern the slightest traces of human habitation. We were, just then, flying over a wooded tract, a thick mass of scarlet foliage a shade or two darker than the red meadow-grasses of the plains. It was obvious no woodman's ax had touched those gnarled and mighty forest monarchs, nor had the underbrush been thinned out. And, as for the plains themselves, I could discern no road or pathway, no caravan track; neither were there any domesticated cattle browsing on the meadows, nor the smoke of cooking fires ascending on the morning breeze.

We flew on for an hour or more. I remained in the pilothouse, riveted to the scenery below, hoping that at any moment a trace of human habitation would come into my view. Such, however, was not the case. Gradually the land thinned out to bare, harsh soil, scrubby trees, rocky knolls. Here and there a river glittered, but never one which presented the distinctive configuration engraved on Ang Chan's silver medallion. Poor, thin little rivulets they were, trickling meagerly between banks of naked, eroded soil. This was a grim, hostile, barren land wherever we now flew by midmorning, and the lack of any signs of human habitation were not at all surprising.

By noon the situation had changed only in that we were now soaring over a rugged land of broken rock and naked hills.

By early afternoon, we observed a mighty range of mountains on the horizon, and, altering the approximately due west direction of our flight, we headed off into the north to investigate this range, which could very easily be the one depicted on Ang Chan's medallion.

In all, it was a tense, dreary and uneventful day, one of continuous suspense and waiting, which failed to eventuate in discovery.

Evening, however, was to prove remarkably different!

After many hours of silent vigil I had wearied at last. Leaving the bridge in the capable hands of Captain Haakon, I went down to my cabin, took a brief nap and brought these journals up to date. My officers and I had an early dinner that evening, and, at the conclusion of the meal, before retiring, I again ascended the narrow winding stair to the pilothouse for one last look around at the nighted landscape before taking to my bed.

The many-colored moons of mighty Jupiter were aloft. The green sphere of Orovad, or Io, glowed like a Chinese paper lantern through the dusk, and the frosted azure globe that was Ramavad, or Europa, flooded the land with dim radiance. Imavad, as the Callistans call Ganymede, was a crimson disc on the horizon, and the remote gold fleck of Juruvad, or Amalthea, burned like a glittering sequin against the night.

In the shifting and multi-colored rays of the many moons, the rocky scarps, profound chasms, sheer cliffs and sharp peaks wherever we now flew stood out in clear detail. I stood, wrapped in my cloak, one hand resting on the pommel of my sword, absorbed in the savage spectacle. Beside me on the bridge the duty officer at this hour, young Tomar, stood gazing down on this fantastic vista of broken rock and barren sand and fang-like peaks and pinnacles. The land below us looked as bleak and sterile as might the surface of Earth's cold, dead moon.

Such, however, was not the case: for there was indeed life on the mountainous land beneath us, as we soon discovered.

I was roused from my reverie when the youth Tomar touched my arm, pointing off to starboard.

"Something's coming, sir-look!"

I followed his pointing finger. In the tangle of conflicting rays of different-colored moonlight it was difficult to make out moving objects, but something was indeed approaching the armada from beneath. Something that flew.

It was ascending from a forest of needle-like pinnacles and for a moment I could make out nothing concerning it.

"Could it be a flight of kajazells, admiral?" the signal officer, who shared the bridge with us, asked.

The kajazell is a smallish winged lizard found mostly in the desert countries or in mountainous regions. But that which floated up towards us on the winds was no kajazell.

“I don’t think it likely, Drango,” I replied. “It’s too big; we couldn’t even see a kajazell from this distance.”

Then the flying object seemed to break apart or scatter, and to our even greater mystification we saw that the unknown thing which arrowed up towards us was not one creature, but several, perhaps eighteen or twenty or even more. Even scattered, the flying creatures could now be discerned to be of considerable size.

A cool breeze was blowing up my spine and I was conscious of an inward alarm I could neither ignore nor explain.

It was a sense of danger. Many times in my perilous and hazard-filled career of adventure I have felt that inward sense of imminent or oncoming danger; and never has it proven a false alarm. Still, I hesitated, waiting for more proof of approaching danger before giving the signal and rousing the armada.

“Whatever they are, they’re bigger than the zell and smaller than the ghasozar,” Tomar observed tautly. And he was quite right. And whether the flying creatures were related to either of the two winged predators he had named, we were entering a zone of extreme peril. Of the ghasozar, I have elsewhere recorded that they are dragonish flying monsters which closely resemble the tremendous pterodactyls of Earth’s nightmare Jurassic. The zell are much smaller but not any the less dangerous. Usually, but not exclusively, denizens of the desert-countries, they are small winged reptiles the size of terrene doves. On an individual basis they are relatively harmless, but when they hunt in enormous flocks they are very dangerous indeed. A sort of Jekyll-and-Hyde creature, when they assemble into gigantic flocks they become half seagull, half bat-winged piranha, and a flock of them can strip a human being to naked bones in seconds.

But these were neither kajazell nor ghasozar, but some third species of flying creature perhaps equally dangerous.

The signal officer on duty, one Drango, was ready to flash the alarm. By day signals are exchanged by means of colored flags run up the shrouds to the crows’ nests atop the double masts amidships, but by night similar signals are given by means of coded colored lanterns. Drango looked to me for my orders. But still I delayed, hesitated, temporized. In retrospect I admit to have made a serious error, but at the time my delay seemed reasonable. I had no knowledge of what the flying creatures were nor of whether they might be dangerous, and I was reluctant to rouse from their well-earned rest my weary mariners of the sky who would spring from their beds to the emergency stations on Drango’s signals.

And while I hesitated, disaster overtook us!

The winged creatures were strung out across the heavens in a long curved line, each creature spaced about twenty feet apart from its fellows.

Now that they were nearer, we could see them better. Smaller than the monstrous ghasozar, they were still somewhat larger than men, measuring about eight feet from barbed, sinewy tail to cruel, hooked beak. Their wings resembled those of immense vultures or condors, and were covered with long feathers of a metallic azure. Their heads were crested with a stiff topknot of blue feathers, touched with crimson at the tips; their bodies, however, did not seem to be feathered at all, but were covered with swarthy, brownish-yellow hide which paled to a bright canary-yellow at throat, breast, belly and thighs.

They were, then, not winged reptiles, but-birds!

They were the first and only winged avians I have yet encountered on the whole of this world. The only feathered creature known to me is a wingless quadruped of horse-like size and shape called the thaptor, which I have several times in these journals described as a semi-domesticated creature the Callistans employ for riding purposes.

That the unexplored further hemisphere of Callisto was inhabited by an hitherto-unknown species of giant bird was a remarkable discovery, of course.

But there were more and greater surprises yet to come!

The oddest thing about the giant bird-winged creatures was that they were essentially anthropoid or manlike in form. Disregarding for the moment their brilliant blue plumage of wing and prehensile, barbed and featherless tails, their bodies were quite manlike, with long gaunt arms whose hands ended in cruel hooked talons, and long, sinewy hind legs which terminated in powerful grasping claws. Stark naked, their bony umber-and-yellow torsos were encumbered with some articles or implements I could not at first discern. Then, as they flew nearer, I saw with an uncanny thrill of amazement that the bird-monsters wore crude harnesses of leather straps from which dangled stone axes, flint knives, short throwing-spears and a variety of curved scimitar-like sword with a wicked glittering blade of chipped obsidian.

They were not birds, but men!

And in the next instant they were upon us.

The panes of thin glass that shielded the bridge from the cold winds shattered as the foremost of the bird-warriors hurtled upon us. I was flung backwards by the thrust of one lean but powerfully-muscled bare arm. Sprawling on my back, I looked up into the hideous face of the monster-man who stood astride me, vulture-like wings spread, claws reaching for my throat.

One look had I into that nightmarish face, all clacking parrot-beak and mad, glaring orange eyes under blue-feathered, overhanging brow-and then Drango hurled himself between my recumbent form and the winged warrior. His rapier flashed from its scabbard to sink into the canary-yellow hide of the bird-winged savage. The monster-man uttered a harsh shrieking cry of rage or pain and batted him aside with one swinging blow of its long arm. Torn loose, the sword flew across the pitching deck, and from the gash in the upper breast of the bird-warrior a weird purplish gore dribbled.

However roughly manlike, the bird-warriors were not even remotely human, it would seem. For it was not the honest red blood of men flowed in their veins, but the purple gore of monsters.

The creatures were intelligent, however, which made them all the more dangerous. For they bore weapons, and obviously knew how to use them.

These scattered observations flew through my brain during the first instant or two we were under attack by the bird-warriors we came later to call the Zarkoon.

In the next instant I was on my feet again, my sword free of its scabbard and flashing in the moonlight. I sprang to return the attack of the Zarkoon savage . . . but too late to save Drango.

When he inflicted the slight wound on the breast of the first bird-warrior, the creature had flung him aside with one sweep of his long and powerful arms. Stumbling back against the broken window, Drango was seized in the cruel claws of the second monster-man. I can still remember Drango's cry of pain as those hooked talons fastened in the flesh of his shoulder.

In the next instant, the bird-warrior, still clinging to Drango's shoulder with one clawed hand, reached around with his other hand and tore at the hapless young officer's throat!

Hurling the blood-soaked body from him, the second bird-man clambered onto the bridge and seized young Tomar. The brave boy defended himself with his sword, inflicting a deep wound on the left shoulder of his monstrous adversary, which uttered a squawk of pain and outrage and sprang upon him, dealing him a buffet that knocked him flat.

In the next instant the bridge was alive with the winged monsters, and we were fighting for our lives.

Some distance from us, at the other end of the bridge, the pilot died hideously, literally torn asunder by the claws of two squawking bird-warriors.

I leaped to the defense of Tomar, who sprawled helpless on the deck, with the monster-man he had wounded straddling him and reaching for his throat.

My blade flashed, sinking into the brute's armpit and transfixing its very heart. One mad orange eye glared into mine, beak clashing and snapping savagely. Then that eye glazed and went dull, purplish oily gore gushed from the open beak and the Zarkoon fell dead.

Tomar sprang to his feet, snatching up his blade. The boy was white-faced and breathing in light, shallow gasps, but his jaw was set in a resolute manner and the flame of fighting manhood shone in his clear, steady eyes.

Only he and I by now were still alive. The bridge was littered with corpses. My blade flickered and played as the savage bird-warriors lunged at us: in a moment I laid another feathered corpse beside the first, and had sunk my blade through the shoulder-joint of yet a third.

"Set your back to mine, Tomar," I said. And we fought back to back for a time against the shrieking cawing monsters. Two more we slew, but for each that fell, two or three more climbed through the shattered windows to hurl themselves upon us.

It was soon over.

A stone ax caught the boy a glancing blow along the side of his head and he fell senseless, blood trickling down his pale cheek from an ugly cut. I stood astride his body and held them off as best I could, but not for long. My sword blade was caught in horny claws and torn from my grasp. Then a towering, lean-muscled form flung itself upon me and bore me to the deck. I strove with all my strength to keep that hideous clashing beak from my throat.

Dimly was I aware of one tall bird-warrior stooping to snatch up Tomar's unconscious body. In the next instant, as I watched with unbelieving horror, helpless to interfere, the monster-man flung the boy out of the window.

A moment or two later I was seized in the clutch of powerful arms, dragged to my feet, held helpless in the grip of two birdmen who cawed in hoarse triumph.

They dragged me to the broken window.

And then, sinking their cruel claws through the leather of my tunic, they flung themselves-and me-out the

window!

An icy gale roared about me as I fell like a stone.

Windows blazing with light, the vast shape that was the Jalathadar swung past me in the night, momentarily eclipsing the banded globe of mighty Jupiter; then it was whirled away on the winds and consciousness left me, and I knew no more.

Chapter 7

Captives of the Bird-Men

It was the rush of icy air against my face which revived me from my momentary swoon.

In an instant, my headlong plunge into the abyss was abruptly checked as the parrot-beaked creature which held me tightly in the grip of its hooked claws spread wide its indigo-plumed wings and broke our fall. The winged man swooped away to the left in a steep, sickening glide. Blinking away the tears the fiercely-cold wind brought to my eyes, I saw ahead of us the other survivors of the battle on the bridge. One of them bore a limp, dangling burden that must be the boy Tomar. Whether the lad yet lived or had been slain by his rapacious captors I could not at the moment ascertain, although I hoped against hope the youth had survived.

Striving with watering eyes to penetrate the dim gloom made bewildering by the tangle of colored moon-rays, I saw we swooped giddily over a tortured landscape of naked rock, carved into precipitous chasms and thronged with a fantastic maze of peaks and pinnacles. In another moment I was hopelessly lost, and could not guess in which direction we flew, nor in what position the armada might be found. The talons of my captor were tangled in my leather tunic and the monster-man thus carried me in such a position that I could gain no clear or unencumbered vista of either sky or land. We were, however, descending rapidly in a zigzagging flight composed of giddy sideslips, which were most disconcerting. In a few moments we were among the fang-like peaks. They rose all about us like the stalagmites in a mighty cavern, or a towering forest of petrified trees. Scarps and cliffs and sheer rocky walls hurtled by to every side. A moment more and the black mouth of a cavern yawned directly beneath us. Then the bird-monster who bore me folded his blue pinions and we fell like stones. The gloom of a mighty pit closed about us-overhead a dwindling circle of moonlit sky shrunk rapidly.

And for a second time I swooned.

An immeasurable time later I woke to find cold water splashing in my face. Groggily rearing up on one elbow I found the boy Tomar bending over me, his worried face a pallid oval in the darkness. He was bathing my face with a bit of rag.

“Are you all right, sir?” he asked anxiously.

I nodded, forcing a grin.

“I seem to be still in one piece,” I made reply. “How about yourself?” The boy indicated that he had not been harmed.

“They thrust us in here with food and water,” he said. Glancing around, I found that we were imprisoned in a cage of iron bars; walls, floor and ceiling were composed of barred grills, until our place of captivity bore a certain resemblance to a monstrosly huge birdcage—a resemblance I might have found amusing had it not been for the desperateness of our situation.

The cage was suspended by a chain of iron links from the rocky ceiling of the cavern which arched far above us, lost in the gloom.

Peering through the bars to ascertain as much as I could learn about our surroundings, I saw several similar cages also suspended by immense chains from the roof of the cavern. The light was too faint and dim for me to tell whether or not they were occupied.

We could see little of the remainder of the cavern, but it was obviously enormous and its floor must have stretched very far beneath us. The only illumination came from patches of phosphorescent mold or fungus which grew on some of the nearer stalactites. These glassy stone spears dangled from the black roof above and glistened wetly in the ghostly greenish glow.

The dish of food our captors had left us with looked distinctly unappetizing. Chunks of raw, bloody meat, some green with decay and crawling with maggots, reposed in a slimy stew. I silently determined that I would have to be a lot hungrier than I was, to attempt to down such unappetizing gobbets.

The food dish, by the way, was a shallow stone crock. The dish of water was also of smooth and hollow stone, evidently of artificial workmanship. The water, at least, was clear and fresh and cold. Doubtless it came from some subterranean pool or spring.

Tomar and I crouched on the floor of the cage, discussing our predicament in low tones. The iron bars were flat rather than rounded, and thus somewhat more comfortable to sit upon than might otherwise have been the case. But not much.

Our situation was dismal, if not quite hopeless. There was little hope that we could pry asunder the heavy iron bars, although these were very old and were scaly and red with centuries of rust. The lock that fastened shut the cage door was massive and antique and also thick with corrosion. But even if we were able to pry or break our way loose, we would still be suspended at an unknown height above the cavern floor, with no visible way to climb down.

Concerning this problem, our situation was mystifying. We might be suspended only ten feet above the stone floor—or four hundred! In the dim glow of decay, it was impossible to see anything beneath us. And from the way that echoes boomed and gobbled from wall to wall about the cavern, there was no way of telling our height. I plucked from the bowl a lump of greasy meat and let it fall between the bars of the bottom of the cage; although I listened carefully for any sound it might make when it hit the unseen floor, no such sound reached my ears.

There was nothing else to do; so, after a time, we slept.

It was the clash of horny claws against the cage-bars that aroused us; that and the buffet of heavy bodies that made the cage swing like a pendulum.

Tomar and I woke to stare into the fierce glare of mad orange eyes in a hideously beaked and

feather-crested face. Two of the birdlike monstrosities clung to the outside of the cage and one of them was fumbling with the old lock and with a huge key which hung on a thong about his scrawny yellow neck.

Wrenching the door open, they reached in and dragged us out. Kicking free of the swaying cage, the two bird-warriors fell with us in a tight grip. My heart was in my mouth, I must confess; a moment later, however, vivid blue wings were spread open to break our fall and Tomar and I plummeted into the middle of an astonishing scene.

We were set down atop a level stone platform. To every side steep walls of stone fell away-it was like being marooned atop a tall pillar.

Eight or a dozen similar stone pillars-some higher than ours, some lower-thrust up about our own level. Atop these there squatted a number of the birdwarriors. In some cases three or even four of the monstrosities clung to the top of a single monolith, in other cases, only one.

We could see quite well here, for crude torches, smeared with oily pitch, blazed here and there. These were thrust into crevices in the rocks, and shed a fierce, wavering orange glow upon the barbaric scene.

“That must be their chief,” Tomar muttered.

Directly before us, squatting atop a broad pillar, a particularly huge and gross and repulsive bird-man was seated. It was impossible to determine his age, but he was obese and swollen, his sagging belly and dangling jowls forming a striking contrast with the general run of his kind, which were gaunt and lean.

He seemed to be diseased, for his jowls-or wattles-were rough and red and seemed painfully bloated, and the feathery crest which adorned his flat, blunt skull was moulting, many of the feathers missing entirely, some dangling loosely.

His great hooked parrot-beak was cracked and ragged-edged, and his glaring eyes were buried in unhealthy reddened pouches. His immense wings, of a virulent and poisonous green, were folded and towered high above his hunched shoulders, lending him the ferocious aspect of a squatting demon, crouched for judgment of the damned in some dark and cavernous hell.

The rounded pillar on which he nested was streaked and splotched with oily droppings and littered with bits of broken bone. In one scaly claw he clenched a huge piece of raw, bloody meat from which he ripped and tore juicy gobbets. With his hideous, diseased wattles and repulsive beaked head he reminded me for all the world of some repulsive and gigantic vulture gobbling away at carrion.

The other bird-men clustered about on nearby pillars squawked and cawed and fluttered. From time to time the chief uttered a cackling, hoarse cry. Listening keenly to this exchange, I got the uncanny feeling that the monster-men were talking amongst themselves. At least, they seemed to have the rudiments of articulate speech, although so hoarse and metallic were their cawing voices that it was all but impossible to be certain. Nevertheless, listening closely to what transpired, I formed the impression that one of the bird-men, whom I thought I recognized from his harness and accouterments as having been among those who had captured us, and who may perhaps have been the leader of the war-party, addressed his gross chieftain by the name of Skeer, and was addressed in turn as Zawk. Another monster-man, aged and balding and rheumy-eyed, who seemed to hold some privileged position as counselor or shaman, and who made frequent comments on the indecipherable exchange of conversation, seemed to go by the name of Kloog.

At first the notion that these hideous beings had a primitive language seemed singularly horrifying, for creatures so low on the evolutionary scale ought not to be endowed with the rudiments of intelligence or social organization. But, upon later reflection, it seemed undeniable that such was the case. And, after all, they did possess weapons, however crude and primitive, and wear something akin to the trappings of a warrior. Why, indeed, should they not possess the gift of speech?

Although the clacking beaks and hoarse, metallic, cawing voices of the bird-warriors made it impossible to make out the words, I gained the distinct impression that Zawk was relating the circumstances of our capture, to which the chief of the bird-men, Skeer, and his decrepit counselor, Kloog, made occasional incredulous comments or queries. Doubtless, the Zarkoon had never before seen men like us, and had never heard of anything like the immense and weightless airships in which we traveled. Zawk waved his long, skinny arms wildly, as if attempting to describe the indescribable, and squawked and shrieked like a mad cockatoo.

The conversation seemed interminable. But, when at last it was terminated, I was left in bewilderment, having no clue as to what decision had been reached concerning our fate. Skeer, the chief, gestured with the greasy bone on which he was gnawing and two warriors sprang into the air from their perches, swooped down to pounce upon us, snatched us up into the air and bore us back to our cages, thrusting us within by bodily force, slamming and locking the gates behind us, and then flapping off into the gloom again, leaving us to our lonely thoughts.

Tomar kept a brave front, but the boy was inwardly worried. Nor could I blame him for this, feeling numerous trepidations myself.

“What of our friends, Prince Jandar?” he asked me a while later. “Will they not come to rescue us?”

“They will certainly try to, anyway,” I said, noncommittally. I tried to keep a bold face on things, but could not make up my mind whether it would be better to pretend to the boy that our situation was merely hazardous and temporary, or to share with him my own fears that we were completely on our own.

“You mean you don’t think they will be able to find us?” he asked.

“I can hardly guess, Tomar,” I temporized. “It all depends on whether there are many such cavern-mouths as the one we entered, or merely the one. If there are many such, they might spend weeks or even months searching for the right one . . . if, indeed, they succeed in guessing that it was into the cavern we were borne. I suspect it is more likely that they will think the bird-men nest among the peaks, and, searching the peaks without finding nests, they will think we were taken further away, and will spread out and search the surrounding mountains.”

He looked at me, a long, level stare with no fear in it.

“Then you think our chances of being rescued at all are very slight . . .”

“I think there is at least a chance. How good of a chance, I simply cannot guess,” I said, having decided to level with the boy rather than attempt to sustain his hopes with false assurances. “Surely our friends will not abandon us to an unknown and doubtless grisly fate without making every effort to find us. Of that much we may be certain!”

It wasn’t much, but it was the best I could offer.

He chewed it over in thoughtful silence, saying nothing more.

After a time we slept again.

And when we awoke, things had changed a bit, in an interesting way. For now we had a neighbor. The nearer of the cages which dangled about us was now occupied. Whether our fellow-captive had been there all along, but had been too weary or frightened or disconsolate to attempt conversation with us, or whether she had but recently been thrust into the cage during our last sleep-period I cannot say, but there she was. By now our eyes had adjusted to the dim trace of light and we could see the occupant of the other cage quite clearly.

“Why-it’s a girl!” Tomar shrilled, excitedly.

And so it was.

Chapter 8

Ylana of the Jungle Country

As the light grew stronger, we could see her more clearly. By now it was daylight in the outer world, and shafts of golden radiance streamed through the crater-like hole in the cavern roof. By this light we could see that the occupant of the cage which hung suspended from the rocky roof by a long chain was a young girl of about Tomar’s own age, which was to say sixteen or seventeen, I suppose, although I have never found it easy to estimate the age of the Callistans.

She was a slim, golden-skinned girl with long, untrimmed dark hair and long, bare legs. Her only garment was an abbreviated affair which seemed to be made of the tanned skin of some cat-like beast. This was draped about her rounded hips, stretched taut over her slight, adolescent bosom, leaving her arms and shoulders bare. She seemed to be a girl from some primitive tribe, for about her throat hung a rude necklace of ivory teeth or fangs, and a crude coil of copper wire was clasped about her upper right arm, with another about her left ankle. She wore thong sandals of tanned leather, a strip of leather wound about her brows restrained the rippling tide of her silky, night-black hair, and a rough leathern girdle cinched in her slender waist. From this girdle hung suspended an empty dagger-scabbard of stitched leather.

In the wash of daylight, we eyed each other with frank curiosity. As for the girl, she seemed never to have seen humans dressed as were we, and her great violet eyes widened with amazement at Tomar’s fiery red thatch and at my own straw-yellow hair, which I was by now accustomed to wearing shoulder-length in the fashion of Shondakor.

The girl was remarkably beautiful in an adolescent, tomboyish way. She had a strong jaw, pert tip-tilted nose, and a wide-upped mouth made for kissing as much as for laughter. Her lovely violet eyes were large, clear, fringed with sooty lashes, and her winging dark brows lent her an elfin look of fragility somewhat belied by the smudge on her cheek and the raw bruise on her brow. Her bare limbs were lithe and supple, slender but firmly-muscled, as if she was used to living out of doors in a hard life of struggle

and survival in the wild. But how such a lovely young creature could have survived for long in this harsh and barren land of gritty soil and sterile rock eluded my comprehension.

She was the first to break the silence. "Saoma!" she called, in a low, hesitant voice, using the universal word of greeting all of the nations of Callisto employ, which may, I suppose, be translated simply as "hello."

I returned her greeting. "My name is Jandar, prince of the Golden City of Shondakor," I said, "and my companion is Tomar, a warrior of the Ku Thad."

She wrinkled up her nose at these unfamiliar names.

"Never have I heard of Shondakor or of the Ku Thad," she said dubiously. "I am Ylana, the daughter of Jugrid of the jungle country."

"Then saoma, Ylana! Our own homeland is very far from here, for we have traveled far and were en route to another land when the bird-warriors attacked us, carrying off my young friend and myself," I said.

She absorbed this, continuing to eye us with frank curiosity.

"Never have I seen men such as yourselves, with hair and eyes of such peculiar coloration," she observed. Perhaps I should add in explanation of her words that Tomar has the green eyes commonly borne by members of the Ku Thad race, while my own blue eyes were inherited from my Danish mother. "The country of your tribe must indeed be very far from the Mountains of the Zarkoon."

"The Zarkoon? What are they?" asked Tomar.

She gave him a look of amused contempt.

"Surely, boy, you know that the Zarkoon are the creatures who hold us imprisoned!"

Tomar indicated that he did not in fact know the name of the weird bird-men who had captured us. The girl uttered a laugh.

"Then you must be very stupid! How could you not know of the Zarkoon? Did not the Elders of your tribe warn you a thousand times against venturing into their mountainous realm during the hours of darkness?"

Tomar exchanged a baffled glance with me. Obviously, he did not know what the jungle girl meant by the "Elders" of his "tribe." A child of one of the most highly developed urban civilizations on this world of Thanator, he had never before encountered a member of a backwards and perhaps even savage people.

"You must be a very stupid boy, indeed," Ylana observed coolly, a hint of mischief in her tones. Tomar flushed, stung by the taunting tone of her words. I suppressed a smile and held my tongue, but it amused me to discover that the flirtation-rituals of teen-alternates vary little, even between the planets.

"If you're so smart, how did the Zarkoon capture you?" Tomar retorted.

Now it was the girl's turn to flush and bite her lower lip in vexation. I could not help noticing how white and even were those small teeth, nor how ripe and lush were those lips; and I would be very much

surprised if the same observation had escaped Tomar's notice, as well.

"I . . . I knew well of the danger," she confessed, "but ventured hither nonetheless, to escape from my enemies. Alas, the terrible Zarkoon are as sharp of eye as the Elders warned . . ."

I cleared my throat. Something the girl had chanced to remark intrigued me. "Ylana, why did you say it was dangerous to trespass in these mountains during the hours of darkness?"

"Because it is then that the Zarkoon hunt, of course," she replied, obviously amazed at our ignorance of what were, to her way of thinking, the common facts of everyday life.

"Do they not hunt by daylight, then?" I asked. She flashed me a sharp look in which amazement and contempt were commingled.

"Of course not! During the day they slumber here in their hidden nests beneath the crust of the world, for the brilliance of day is painful to them. During the period of darkness they are free to roam the upper world without harm . . . the boy is very ignorant of these matters, but you are a grown man, a hunter, perhaps even a chieftain? Is it possible that the Elders of your tribe did not warn you of the habits of the Zarkoon, either? I am very surprised to hear it. . ."

The look the girl turned on me was one of admiration, and, bathed in the regard of those candid violet eyes, I felt more than a trifle uncomfortable. The frank invitation in that admiring gaze may have been simulated merely for the purpose of further teasing my teen-aged companion, but married men such as myself do not feel comfortable when young girls turn such eyes upon them.

Pretending to ignore the flirtatious look, I thought about the implications of this newly-gained information. The birdwarriors of the Zarkoon had the round, fierce eyes of parrots, and perhaps they were lidless eyes, which would explain why the full radiance of day would cause them discomfort. If the Zarkoon were accustomed to sleeping through the hours of day, then the diurnal period would be ideal for any attempt at escape we might choose to make.

As daylight gradually illuminated more of the immense cavern wherein we were imprisoned, filtering down through the great hole in the rocky roof, we saw that the walls of the subterranean abyss were cut into ledges, probably by aeons of geological action. Thereupon we could barely discern huge nests of woven reeds or sticks. These were scattered about the ledges in clusters, perhaps representing family groups, if the Zarkoon were high enough up the scale of social evolution to have arrived at the concept. Doubtless the bird-warriors, together with their females and their young, were now curled in slumber in those shadowy perches.

Looking down, it was obvious we would not find it easy to accomplish our escape, for we were suspended very near the roof . of the immense cavern, and the rocky floor, strewn with white bones, streaked with oily droppings, and littered with accumulated filth, was hundreds of feet below our level. Even if we could escape from the cages wherein the Zarkoon had imprisoned us, the slightest slip would hurl us into this chasm. To fall from this height would mean, if not certain death, at least broken bones.

However, I noticed that our cages were suspended rather near one wall of the huge cavern, and that the closest of the rocky ledges was at our level, or slightly below it, and about twenty or twenty-five feet away. The nearness of the ledge was tantalizing . . . it was almost near enough to be within our possible attainment, yet distant enough to make the reaching of it very difficult, hazardous in the extreme, and quite likely an impossible feat.

While I was busy pondering these matters, Tomar and the jungle maid had been conversing in low tones. The girl belonged to a primitive tribe which dwelt upon a jungle plateau not very distant from these mountains. The Zarkoon were the natural enemies of the Jungle People, and had preyed upon them for untold centuries. Further questioning from Tomar elicited less and less information from Ylana, for the girl seemed unable to comprehend that we were not huntsmen or warriors from a savage tribe similar to her own, but the representatives of a higher level of civilization. She was astonished and somewhat contemptuous of our thorough lack of information concerning the hazards and perils of this barbaric world, and her growing scorn for Tomar was expressed both by her contemptuous expression and by the scathing tone of her voice. She evidently considered the youth at my side a pampered and babied favorite who had been unaccountably shielded from exposure to the harsh realities of what were, to her, the common facts of life.

Her own questions were keen and incredulous. When Tomar attempted to describe the realm from which we had come, she was sharp in her disbelief. A walled stone city, indeed! How could such structures be raised out in the open without being exposed to the savage depredations of the Zarkoon? And when Tomar strove to explain that in the city of Shondakor, fifty thousand men, women and children dwelt in peaceful harmony, she responded with shrill derision. How could so many chieftains dwell side by side without preying on one another's women? What vast herds must roam the jungles of our land, in order to sustain such an immense populace! When Tomar fumblingly tried, to describe the area of farms and fields which surrounded the Golden City for many miles, Ylana's disbelief became openly abusive. Tomar could not grasp the fact, but I understood that Ylana's tribe apparently had yet to discover the science of agriculture, and that the very concept of farmers growing produce for the consumption of the city-dwellers was completely beyond her comprehension.

"May I ask how you came to be captured by the Zarkoon?" I inquired. "Were you captured alone, or had you companions?"

"I was alone," the girl said with a sniff.

"But where were you going-and why?"

She shrugged. Then, with a little expression eloquent of distaste, she explained. "The Elders of my tribe would have given me as mate to a warrior whom I despised," she said. "Rather than endure his embraces, I fled in the night, hoping to find a haven among my mother's folk, the River People. But by night the Zarkoon range far afield, and they attacked me from the skies as I crossed the Stone Hills near the borders of the region of my mother's people. I was alone and had no warrior to defend me; however, my father had taught me somewhat of the arts of war and of the hunt, and thus I was fortunate enough to slay two of the monsters with my bow before they seized and disarmed me. How many did you slay?"

"As near as I can recall, we each slew five or six of the bird-warriors," I said. Her eyes widened in exaggerated unbelief.

"This boy slew that many?" she sniffed. "Doubtless they were females, or fledglings."

I again repressed a smile, and tried to convince her that we had fought against full-grown males. Poor Tomar was scarlet about the ears from this verbal abuse.

More to change the subject than anything else, I asked her how it was that her marriage had been arranged by the tribal Elders rather than by her father, Jugrid, for she had described her father as chief of the Jungle People during her earlier discussion with Tomar.

She shrugged dispiritedly. "True, my father is chief of the tribe, but it is the Elders who interpret the will of the Unseen Ones," she murmured. "He was helpless to oppose their wishes."

I pricked up my ears at this, for it sounded rather as though the jungle girl was talking of her gods. And, if so, this was most unusual, as the peoples of Thanator, as I have often had occasion to remark in these journals, do not worship any gods.

"The Unseen Ones!" she repeated again, and a trifle impatiently. "Is it possible that your tribe is so remote or so unimportant that you are not under the scrutiny of the Shadowy Ones?"

"Perhaps we know them by another name," I temporized. "If you could tell us a bit more about them . . . ?"

"I mean the Unseen Ones, of course," she snapped. And that was that. It seemed impossible to her way of thinking that we did not know what she was talking about, and we could elicit no further information from her. And, at this point, I desisted from further probing into the matter, for whatever primitive gods her tribe worshiped might well be a taboo subject.

Tomar was still interested in learning more about the habits of our winged captors. I suppose the youth had noticed, as had I, the implications for our escape in the fact that the Zarkoon bird-men are dormant during the hours of day.

"Why have they captured us, anyway?" he asked. "We gave them no provocation and our own homeland is so very distant from their domain, that there is no reason for them to consider us their enemies . . ."

His tentative tones died away in embarrassed silence, for once again he had exposed his ignorance of the facts of everyday existence before the pert and scornful girl, who regarded him with contempt and even pity, as if he were mentally retarded. She turned to me.

"Is the boy completely stupid, or has he been sheltered from the harsh realities of life?" she demanded, while Tomar flushed and bit his lip. "Not to know the reason for which we have been taken by the Zarkoon!"

I could not help laughing. "If he is as you say, then I am no better, Ylana," I admitted, "for I have been wondering the very same thing!"

Her huge eyes mirrored her surprise and consternation.

"But-did you not know that the Zarkoon are horrid cannibals-and that they will eat us alive when darkness falls" she cried.

And suddenly I didn't feel like laughing any more.

Chapter 9

The Expedition of Lukor

While these events had been transpiring, consternation and alarm reigned aboard the Jalathadar and her sister-ships. The uproar of the battle on the bridge, when Tomar and I had fought back-to-back, striving to hold off the attack of the Zarkoon savages, had roused the occupants of several cabins. Only moments after we two had been carried off by our Zarkoon captors, my officers came rushing up the stair into the pilothouse, a bit late to effect our rescue.

As it happened, Koja and Lukor were the first to emerge from the stairwell onto the bridge. Lukor, his silvery mane tousled from sleep, a coverlet hastily slung about his middle, brandishing his sword, was the first to view the scene of carnage, and froze motionless, appalled.

Koja was next upon the bridge, his mighty whipsword held at the ready in one bony hand, solemn great eyes expressionless in the horny casque of his face as they surveyed the corpses strewn about the bridge in pools of human and Zarkoon gore.

“Now, by the Scarlet Moon, what has happened here?” Lukor gasped in complete amazement.

Icy winds shrieked through the shattered window. Without a hand at the pilot’s wheel, the great clipper of the clouds careened drunkenly, wallowing from side to side. Lukor sprang to steady the wheel while the Yathoon warrior stooped to examine the bodies which were strewn about the deck.

“One yet lives,” he observed in his emotionless, metallic tones. It was the young signal officer, Drango. The terrible claws of the bird-warriors had mangled his throat hideously, and he lay in a puddle of blood, but a spark of life yet lingered in his breast. Koja ripped open a case of emergency supplies stored by the wall and strove to staunch his ghastly wound while gallant old Lukor, cursing sulphurously, wrestled with the obstinate wheel.

Captain Haakon was the next to reach the bridge, with the fussy little Dr. Abziz virtually treading on his heels.

“Lords of Gordrinator-what is this?” the grizzled chief officer cried in consternation, viewing the gory shambles of the pilothouse. Staring at the wreckage and the corpses, he nudged one of the dead bird-men with his foot. “What monsters are these?” he demanded incredulously.

“They are Zarkoon, of course,” the fussy little geographer sniffed, avoiding pools of blood fastidiously. He bent over to peer more closely at the dead monster. “Fascinating! So they truly exist after all, and are not merely mythological beings! My colleagues at the Academy will be intrigued at the discovery . . .”

“Zarkoon? What in the world are Zarkoon? And how came they here?” spluttered the apoplectic captain.

“They flew, obviously! And they are winged, cannibalistic bird-monsters who are mentioned in certain of the ancient legends and sagas we possess concerning this hemisphere,” Dr. Abziz said primly, answering Haakon’s questions in reverse order.

“The monsters must have attacked the ship from the peaks below,” Lukor said excitedly, relinquishing the wheel to one of the pilots who had just come on deck. “What carnage! Someone go and rouse the admiral! And should we not give the alarm if the ship is under attack?”

“It would seem that those poor fellows present on the bridge beat off the attack of these monsters, before falling prey to their weapons,” Haakon growled, “for the skies are clear and naught is toward on the mid-deck . . . ah, Sojan? Did you call the admiral?”

The officer addressed as Sojan burst upon the scene, white-faced and gasping.

“The Prince is not in his cabin and his clothing is gone . . . he must have roused himself and dressed-“

“What’s this?” Lukor cried, scooping up a sword which lay against the wall. Turning it over in his hands, he peered closely at the bejewelled hilt. “‘Tis Jandar’s sword, or I’m a bald-headed deltagar!”

“What?” the cry burst from all assembled.

The dying signal officer stirred in Koja’s arms. “. . . Jandar . . . and Tomar,” he gasped feebly from bloody lips.

“What’s that, Drango, lad? Speak up-what of the Prince?” Haakon cried, stooping by Koja where he knelt, tending as best he could to the dying officer.

“. . . Both of them . . . carried off by the winged monsters . . .”

“Eh? Carried off, you say?” Haakon groaned in consternation. “But where, man-where? In which direction?”

But that question would not be answered. Drango was dead.

Signal-lamps flashed a message of tragedy and terror from ship to ship. The armada halted, and swung in a great circle, hovering about the wilderness of cloven peaks of naked stone whereinto the fantastic flying cannibal-monsters had borne off both myself and the youth, Tomar. A council of war was hastily summoned. Although it was exceedingly dangerous to attempt to cross from ship to ship in midair, especially by night and under a stiff wind, the chief officers of the three other vessels swung aboard the Jalathadar to attend the emergency council.

Zamara of Tharkol, accompanied by the captain of her flagship, swung aboard, followed by the giant gladiator, Zantor, captain of the second ship of the Shondakorian contingent, the Xaxar. As the officers met together in the great stateroom, Prince Valkar, as vice-admiral of the expedition, told them the terrible story of the sudden attack and of our disappearance.

Anxious queries flew about the long table-Dr. Abziz racked his memory for every datum he knew concerning the feared and legendary bird-monsters-a furious discussion raged, but few conclusions were reached, or could be reached, where so many important details remained unknown.

My friends, of course, could not even be certain at this time whether or not I still lived. And no one had the slightest information as to where the Zarkoon had come from, nor in which direction they had flown, upon leaving the gore-drenched shambles of the Jalathadar’s bridge.

Valkar held to the position that nothing more could be possibly done until day. Then the galleons of the armada would split to search the surrounding mountains, and where possible, would lower by gig or skiff search-parties to comb the mountain-tops afoot. The small five-man skiffs had been an invention of the Tharkolians, and were so obviously useful that all ships on the expedition had been equipped with them. They consisted of twin pontoons filled with the hydrogen-like gas, five-seated cockpits, stiff, stationary

wings, and were driven by propellers powered by foot-pedals on the floor of the cockpits. This would be the first time the skiffs had actually been used, although of course they had been tested in the shipyards of Tharkol.

It was Lukor who chiefly opposed the decision to await the coming of day before attempting to search the peaks. The fiery old sword-master was all for launching a dozen skiffs at once to comb the nearer peaks before another hour was lost. Valkar patiently pointed out that the updrafts and air-currents in these mountains were uncharted, and that nothing was to be gained by endangering the lives of yet more men. At night, with the confusing moonlight, in an unknown country, the use of skiffs would be hazardous in the extreme, and probably fruitless.

As he was, in my absence, the senior commanding officer of the armada, it was his decision which carried the vote. Lukor, fuming, subsided with a sour grumble or two, and left the stateroom in a vile temper, mingled with fears for my safety and for that of young Tomar, for whom he had long since felt an avuncular affection.

The Yathoon chieftain, Koja, who had been my first friend on Callisto, had supported Lukor's argument. The solemn-eyed, gigantic insect-man felt keenly my loss, and, in his coldly unemotional manner, chafed at the enforced delay. He reached the main deck and joined Lukor as the gallant little sword-master prowled the windy balustrade, grumbling and cursing.

"Blast them all, Koja, the fools won't listen!" he seethed. "Every hour-every moment-may count! We should cast off in the skiffs now, and hunt down the hiding place of those winged devils! Jandar may need us desperately, the poor fellow! And the lad-what of him? Why, had it not been for that brave boy, we should all have perished horribly, through the treachery of Ulthar, during the expedition against Zanadar!*"

Koja's huge compound eyes glittered expressionlessly in the many-colored light of the moons of Jupiter.

"I am of similar opinion, friend Lukor," the gigantic arthropod said solemnly. "To my way of thinking the rescue of Jandar is of at least equal importance to the success of this expedition against the Mind Wizards. If we wait till day, the Zarkoon creatures may well use the margin of time to spirit away our comrade to an unknown lair too far distant, or too cunningly concealed, for the chances of discovery to achieve success. We are now within an hour of the moment in which Jandar and Tomar were carried off; and it seems to me wisest to pursue the bird-warriors now, while the trail, so to speak, is still fresh."

"Precisely," said Lukor, gnawing his moustache savagely. "And I am filled with uncomfortable forebodings that Prince Valkar will decide, if the search at dawn is in vain and Jandar is not then rescued, that to further delay the journey to Kuur would be to jeopardize the success of the expedition. Doubtless he will argue, however reluctantly, that the safety of the Three Cities depends on the attack against Kuur, and that the safety of three kingdoms must outweigh the safety of two men, however dear to us. I suppose he will argue in council that to remain here throughout the day, searching for our captured comrades, may risk Kuur's discovery of our mission, and thus we will lose the benefit of surprise. Curse it all, Koja, but I do despise the tendency of commanders to consider the mission of first importance, and the rescue of lost comrades distinctly secondary!"

Koja manipulated his brow antennae in the characteristically Yathoon equivalent of a shrug.

"I feel certain that Prince Valkar will do everything his sense of duty permits towards effecting the rescue of Jandar and Tomar; but he is a conscientious officer and takes his duties seriously . . . if he must decide to sail on and leave our friend to his unknown fate, surely it will be with the utmost reluctance."

“Reluctance be hanged, Koja!” the chivalrous little sword-master snorted. “I have never been able to sympathize with these high-minded principles of devotion to duty above all! To me, my love for my friends comes first and foremost above all other considerations. Curse me, but I’ll warrant you feel the same about it.”

Koja nodded somberly. “Jandar taught me the meaning of friendship, an emotion alien to my kind. That emotion I prize highly, as I do the safety of Jandar, my friend. To rescue him from peril I would willingly imperil my own life, as, I am sure, would you.”

“Agreed, my chitin-clad and loyal-hearted friend! Happily would I consign to destruction a thousand cities, when the life of my dear friend and old comrade in a thousand battles hangs in the balance. Devotion to duty is very high and noble a cause, in the abstract; but my first loyalty must ever be to those few I call my friends! Well, then, having agreed on the matter-what in the name of the Scarlet Moon are we to do about it?”

Koja regarded him solemnly.

“We have both argued in council as eloquently as our poor abilities afford, that all efforts should be immediately expended on an expedition of rescue. Prince Valkar has, however reluctantly, decided against this, and it was his opinion which carried the vote. We have no other recourse, then, but to strive to rescue Jandar on our own.”

The glint of joyous mischief flashed in Lukor’s keen eyes. Reaching up on tiptoe he essayed to give the gaunt, enormous insect-man a hearty slap on the shoulder. Since the arthropods of Callisto lack anything much resembling shoulders, he was forced in lieu to clap Koja on the back.

“A man after my own heart, my chitinous comrade; although you are not exactly a man in the biological sense of the word, the essence of manhood is in your heart! Very well, then, how shall we go about it?”

Their stroll during this exchange of conversation had carried them the length of the midship-deck, and, by a nice coincidence, they now confronted one of the canvas-covered sheds wherein the five-man skiffs were housed. Pausing in their circumambulations before this unguarded structure, an identical gleam flashed into the eyes of both and the same thought was born in their brains at the same time.

An eloquent look was exchanged in wordless silence between the peppery little master-swordsman from Ganatol and the tall, stalk-legged, inhuman Yathoon hordesman from the Great Plains.

“ . . . Dare we, friend Koja?” hissed Lukor conspiratorially.

The solemn-eyed arthropod blinked owlshly upon the tempting structure.

“Dare we not, Lukor? We have no other recourse, if we are to attempt to explore the peaks. Surely it would not be best for us to strive to seize control of the bridge and forcibly divert the Jalathadar from her present course. The skiff, however, is not guarded, but merely tied down. Doubtless we could sling it over the side by means of yonder boom, which was erected for precisely that purpose. We could then cast adrift, and ride the winds down to the mountain-country below . . . it will, of course, be dangerous . . . little in life worth the achieving, however, is achieved without some risk. . .”

Without further words the two busied themselves about the shed. It was the work of moments to unpeg the canvas, exposing the skiff. Floating in its cradle, it resembled to earthly eyes (had any been there to

observe it) nothing so much as an outrigger canoe, curiously fitted with wings.

Koja and Lukor had no difficulty in untying the skiff and conveying it to the rail where they attached it to the boom. Completely weightless due to the store of hydrogen-like gas contained in its double-hull, a child could have conveyed it across the deck with one hand without undue effort. And it was simplicity itself to swing the counter-weighted boom over the side so that the skiff was ready to be launched.

The Jalathadar circled the upthrusting peaks at an altitude in excess of three thousand feet. Cold winds rose from the chasms beneath, buffeting the light skiff from side to side and rattling the boom. Without further ado, Koja and Lukor clambered into the canoelike sky-boat and settled themselves side by side in the first two seats. A curved wind-shield of strong but lightweight glass rose before them, protecting them from the winds. Feeling for the pedals, they quickly familiarized themselves with the workings of the craft.

It was almost as simple as riding a bicycle-although, of course, neither Koja nor Lukor had ever seen a bicycle. The foot-pedals controlled the propellers, which were carved from thin, tough wood and situated in the tail-assembly, directly beneath and to either side of the vertical rudder-fin. The foot-pedals communicated kinetic energy to these twin propellers through long, taut-stretched lines of spider-silk, a light and extremely tough substance as strong as nylon and as light as gut. A system of levers, set in the cockpit panel directly before Lukor's seat, controlled the wing ailerons and the movable rudder-fin through guy-stays of the same substance. By manipulating these levers the individual piloting the skiff could vary the pitch of the ailerons or flaps on the wings and the rudder assembly in the tail of the craft; thus you could send the weightless skiff rising or falling, curving away to port or to starboard. In effect, the skiff was a miniature model of one of the great galleons; in practice, it was far more maneuverable.

"To the rescue!" crowed Lukor, as excited as a boy about to embark on his first adventure. With a splendid gesture he tripped the lever which released the skiff from the overhanging boom. The skiff coasted unsteadily away, flying parallel to the hull of the Jalathadar for a moment, then, as Lukor recklessly wagged aileron and rudder, the little craft veered away in a giddy half-circle, arching out over the abyss, and descending in a swooping glide more unsettling than any Coney Island roller-coaster could ever have been. Buckled securely in their seats, Lukor and Koja swung as the skiff lurched drunkenly.

In a moment the little craft rightened itself, catching the up-draft. Far above, the vast black shape of the mother ship eclipsed the many-colored splendor of the mighty moons.

Then it dwindled as the skiff arrowed into the abyss . . . and the adventure was begun!

Chapter 10

Across the Abyss

We fell into something of a glum silence after the jungle maid had made her unsettling announcement. In retrospect, I can see no reason why I had not guessed the cannibalistic habits of the Zarkoon bird-men before. They were hardly above the level of rank savagery, and, resembling monstrous vultures as they did, there was no reason not to suspect them of being man-eaters. Still and all, the news took me by

surprise, and it was hardly the sort of news one receives in equanimity, nor was it exactly calculated to put me into a serene state of mind.

Considering what Ylana had told us about the Zarkoon, it became more important than ever that we attempt to escape from the cages as soon as possible. But how do you get out of iron cages suspended above an abyss? And more to the point, what do you do once you have gotten out?

While Tomar queasily contemplated ending his days as chef-d'oeuvre at a Zarkoon dinner-table, I bent my wits to the problems of getting out of here before night fell. At which time, if Ylana of the Jungle Country spoke true, the bird-monsters would wake, doubtless ravenous and anxious for breakfast. Since we were to be that breakfast, we must make our escape now, if possible, and thus put as many korads between ourselves and the hungry Zarkoon as possible before night fell. It was still early morning, so we had, it seemed, plenty of time to make our escape.

How to make it, though-that was the question!

Our two cages were suspended from the roof of the cavern by iron chains, as I have said. It should be easy enough, by rocking the cage back and forth, for Tomar and I to swing near enough to Ylana's cage to reach through the bars of our own and seize ahold of her cage. Then, with a length of strap unhooked from my girdle, we should be able to bind the two cages together.

Calling over to the jungle maid, I apprised her of what I planned to attempt. Then, instructing the boy to spread his feet widely apart, and doing the same myself, we took hold of the bars and began to swing our bodies back and forth together.

Tomar expressed mystification at my reasons for wishing to do this, which in the interests of saving valuable time I had not bothered to impart to him. Nevertheless the boy complied with my wishes, and before very long we had set our cage swinging ponderously back and forth like the pendulum of some immense clock.

Nearer and nearer our ever-increasing swing brought us to the cage in which the girl was imprisoned. In a few minutes we had come so close to her cage that, on the up-swing, the bars of our cage brushed within inches of her own. Then we began trying to seize and hold onto the bars of the other cage. This proved very difficult to do: either we would bruise our knuckles painfully when the two cages came together, or in snatching out for the bars of the other cage we would disturb the evenness of our pendulum-like swing, which meant we had to start all over again.

After about a half-hour of trial and failure, we did manage to catch ahold of-and to retain our grasp upon-the cage in which the girl was imprisoned. While I held the two cages together with all my strength, Tomar hastily lashed them together with the leather belt from my harness.

Now that we were fastened together, the second phase of my plan went into effect. I'm afraid that both teen-agers eyed me askance as if questioning my sanity, when I told them what I intended doing. It was nothing less than to employ the combined strengths of all three of us in unison to pry apart the bars of Ylana's cage, permitting her to inch sideways through the opening.

This was really not as difficult as it may seem to whatever reader chances to peruse these pages. I am a full-grown man and have lived an active, athletic life and am thus no weakling. To this add the fact that having lived much of my life under the slightly heavier gravitational pull of my native Earth, my strength is proportionately greater than that of an average Callistan. My strength is not superhuman by any means, but, with two strong young people lending their strength and vigor to mine, and considering the fact that

the iron bars, while thick and heavy, were generations or even centuries old and deeply-eaten by rust, I thought we could pry the bars apart sufficiently for the slender girl to wriggle through.

It took us the better part of an hour, but we did it.

Ylana slid through the opening our efforts had made, with all the agility of an eel. The effort cost her a square inch or two of skin, but the girl managed it.

Then, at my urging, she climbed about on the outside of our cage until she reached the cage door, which was fastened with a huge, clumsy, old-fashioned lock.

I told her to pick the lock.

I had noticed earlier that she wore a bracelet of copper wire wound about her upper arm. Reaching through the bars from our side we held her securely, thus freeing her hands for the task. I doubt if the jungle girl had ever found an occasion to try to pick a lock before, but I patiently instructed her in the craft-which I had perforce mastered during my student days at Yale, in order to get back in my dormitory after hours, on the nights when a date kept me out later than the management allowed.

The lock was full of rust; the wire tended to bend under the slightest pressure. And standing with your feet braced against a slippery bar while swinging two hundred feet in the air is not exactly conducive to one's peace of mind. However, the plucky girl ignored the fearful height and the other distractions and worked away with grim determination to unfasten the lock. At length she succeeded and the lock sprung open.

Forcing the door open on squeaking hinges, we helped her inside, where she expelled a long-pent breath and huddled on the floor of the cage, indulging in a fit of the shakes for which I did not in the least blame her.

"Now what?" demanded Tomar, curiously.

"Now we get down to that ledge," I said, gesturing. He followed my gesture with a perceptible shudder, and made some remark, with not unreasonable trepidation, that the ledge was every bit of thirty feet away.

I nodded.

"That's what makes me glad we were captured fully dressed," I grinned, and set about the astounding process of taking off my clothes. Tomar gave me one astounded look and got the idea: we would tear our cloaks into strips, augment this length of cloth with strips torn from our tunics as necessary, thus fashioning as long a "rope" as possible. Then, tying our boots to one end for a weight, I hoped to be able to snag a spur of rock which thrust up from the edge of the nearby ledge, thus effecting a crude rope bridge over which we might be able to climb.

I had already pulled off my boots and was getting out of my sleeveless tunic by this time. Luckily for the modesty of the girl (who had by now recovered from her attack of the shakes and was viewing the striptease with considerable amusement, heightened, it must be admitted, by the scarlet-faced embarrassment of the boy who had perhaps never had occasion before to strip down to the buff in the presence of a young female) the traditional Callistan warrior's garb includes a skimpy sort of loin-cloth by way of underwear.

I should have stripped to the skin, underwear or no underwear, ignoring the presence of the jungle maid, had it been necessary, but luckily it was not. We had sufficient length of cloth and supple leather to reach the ledge without sacrificing our loin-cloths, which greatly relieved Tomar's sense of the proprieties.

I did not bother to point out to the scandalized youngster that Ylana was of a primitive level of society which probably could not afford the nudity taboo of higher civilizations such as our own. The girl was probably quite accustomed to seeing males of all ages in varying stages of undress, and would probably not have turned a hair had it proved necessary for Tomar or I, or both of us, to have given up even our loincloths for the purposes of escape.

Anything was better than becoming a Zarkoon breakfast!

Eventually the strip-tease was finished-although not without considerable embarrassment on Tomar's part. The girl delighted in bedeviling my young companion-she said she loved the shade of crimson he turned when blushing-and mischief sparkled in her enormous purple eyes as she gave voice to tart comments on Tomar's musculature (which she considered remarkably attenuated) and fleshly integument (to put it bluntly, she thought him scrawny in the legs and exceedingly bony in the ribs). This was said purely for the pleasures of mischief, of course, for Tomar was very husky and well put-together for his years, and Ylana later admitted in my hearing that the boy was remarkably handsome. The poor lad suffered through it in grim misery . . . anything to avoid becoming someone's breakfast!

There is no telling how long it took us to snag that trebly-damned spur of rock with the weighted end of our makeshift rope-ladder. The booted end of the rope was thrown out-fell short-or overshot its mark-or failed to loop about the sharp jut of stone-and had to be dragged back in, hand over hand, so many times that I lost count somewhere past forty.

Eventually, just as the ache in my arms and shoulders was beginning to assume king-sized proportions, the boots whipped about the spur, tightening a turn or two around the thrust of rock, and became securely wedged so that no tug, however strong, could dislodge them. Then came the question of who would be the lucky one who would be first to attempt to swing hand over hand the length of our flimsy rope and try to scramble up on the rocky ledge before one of the knots gave way under his weight, precipitating him into the abyss.

In the light of cold logic, the task should have gone to Ylana. She was the lightest of the three of us and was the one most likely to reach the ledge in safety. But, of course, I was hardly going to permit a mere girl to risk the dangerous crossing of the abyss first. I was about to take the responsibility upon myself, when Tomar spoke up demanding to be the one to try it.

At first I refused; but the boy would not listen to me. While we were still arguing the question he solved it by suddenly climbing out of the cage, seizing the rope, and swinging out over the abyss before there was anything I could do to stop him.

I crouched there on the floor of the cage with my heart in my mouth, watching the boy, naked save for a brief cloth wound about his loins, swinging along hand over hand the length of the wobbling rope. One slip of the fingers and he would plummet into the chasm beneath. And what if his weight should prove too heavy for the knots to bear, and the rope should come apart in mid-air-or the weighted end of the rope should jerk free of its place?

It took him the better part of three minutes to traverse the gulf, and I don't believe I breathed at all during that interminable wait.

The girl crouched beside me, eyes wide and unwaveringly fixed on the swinging figure of the nearly-naked boy as he swung slowly down the taut line. Her mouth was open and from time to time she wet dry lips with the tip of her tongue. One hand was clutched about my arm, and as Tomar reached the half-way point, the agony of tension and fear she was suffering was reflected in the way her nails sank into my bare flesh. At the time, so fully was my attention concentrated on the brave boy who dangled by his fingertips above the abyss, that I was hardly conscious of the pressure of those fingers on my arms. Later, however, they left bruises that took days to go away.

After an interminable time, Tomar at last reached the other side of the abyss. We watched as he swung himself up over the lip of stone and onto the ledge. A moment later the boy climbed to his feet, gave us a cheerful grin and a wave, and bent to fasten more securely the weighted end of the line.

And we relaxed and began to breathe again, the girl and I.

Such was my feeling of light-headed relief, that I essayed a joke at her expense.

“Scrawny as a half-starved thaptor he may be,” I joked, repeating one of the pointed remarks she had made about the boy’s appearance during the undressing incident, “but the boy is certainly brave enough, wouldn’t you say?”

Stung, Ylana turned a gaze of violet scorn upon me, elevating her pert little nose in a disdainful sniff.

“ ‘Brave?’ To swing along a rope? ‘Tis childish sport, for one raised in the Jungle Country,” she snorted.

And without the slightest warning, the girl flung herself out of the cage, wrapped her long bare legs about the swinging line, and nimbly traversed the distance in half the time it had taken Tomar!

Arriving at the other side, she levered herself up on the ledge, disdaining Tomar’s assistance, and sprang upon her feet. Putting her hands on her smooth young hips, the girl tossed her head and shot a mischievous little smile over at me.

I swung across the abyss myself, both pair of young eyes intent on my progress. To the teen-aged boy and girl, anyone over twenty-five is ready for the old age home, so I tried to do it as agilely as possible, but I fear my face was scarlet with effort and my chest bedewed with perspiration before I reached the security of the ledge. And I was by that point grateful enough for the helping hand Tomar offered. I clambered up over the lip of rock and sat there for a moment, catching my breath, considering what next to do. Our options were certainly few enough in number.

We had escaped from our imprisonment, but we were still prisoners, in a sense. That is, we were still within the vastness of the hollow mountain, and still prey to the dangerous Zarkoon. At any moment, Zawk and his bird-warriors might swoop upon us like hunting hawks. For, although it was still day, I wondered how trustworthy was Ylana’s information concerning the diurnal dormancy of the winged men, and whether or not a cadre of Zarkoon sentinels might not be on watch. Naked save for loin-cloths, and our boots, which we salvaged from the end of the line and made haste to don, we were few and unarmed and therefore relatively helpless before the blue-winged predators who ruled this cavern world.

And we had yet another problem to deal with.

We had emerged from our cages and gained a ledge near the roof of the cavern. The great circular crater or pit that was-insofar as we knew-the only entrance or exit from the cavern was in this roof. But we were on the opposite side of the cavern from it!

The ledge, of course, did not run evenly all around the cavern. Which meant we could not just follow it around to the other side and climb out the crater-like hole in the roof. Neither could we go across the ceiling of the cavern by any conceivable means, not being able to walk upside down. No, we were going to have to do things the hard way, when it came to escaping from the cavern-world of the Zarkoon cannibals. We were going to have to climb down the sheer rocky wall, cross the floor of the cavern, and ascend on the other side, as near to the hole in the roof as we could manage. This would be hard, exhausting work and would consume many hours, I felt sure. And it would enormously increase our dangers of being discovered by a wakeful Zarkoon. But there was no help for it that I could see.

I rose to my feet, stretching to ease the kinks from my arms and the ache in my shoulders.

“Well, let’s get going,” I said.

The ledge was about two feet wide for the most part and by no means level. At times it dipped sickeningly; at other times it narrowed to as little as nine inches of rock. To further complicate matters, it was streaked and beslimed with the bird-like droppings of the Zarkoon. Our footing was thus precarious in the extreme. In some places we could stride along in single-file; in others, we inched along a hand’s-breadth at a time, with our backs pressed against the wall.

Tomar proved agile, sure-footed and calm-even when the footing was dangerous and uncertain. As for Ylana, my bosom filled with admiration for the sturdy jungle maid. If ever I am blessed with a daughter, I could ask for none better than a girl like her. She was brave and cool-headed, nimble as a mountain-goat, and her cheerful good-humor kept us all in fine spirits. It seemed a momentary truce had been declared in the mischievous rivalry between the two youngsters: they helped each other (and myself) over the hazardous spots without a quip or a sneer, clasping hands without embarrassment or rebuff. And when we reached the terminus of the ledge and had to descend to a lower outcropping, Tomar picked up the girl and handed her down to me, his arms clasped about her waist, and her arms about his neck, their faces rather close together for a moment, in wordless silence. I was grateful for the truce, and wondered how long it would last.

The second ledge descended at a steep incline and would, I guessed, take us twenty or thirty yards down the cliff before it dribbled away in mere stubs of outthrust rock, forcing us to hunt for another way down. We followed this declining ramp in single-file, the girl, as it chanced, going first for no particular reason. The incline was rough, uneven, and littered with pebbles, many of which were sharp-edged, and flinty rocks, and I thanked the unknown and mysterious Lords of Gordrimator for allowing us to resume wearing our boots before forcing us to traverse this path of broken rock.

Ahead of me, going around an immense boulder, Ylana suddenly froze and stood breathless and tense. Catching up to her I looked over her shoulder and felt the blood congeal in my veins. It was a danger I had anticipated, but had hoped to avoid.

Around the bend the ledge narrowed to a smooth boss of rock some three feet wide. And there, directly in our path, a huge, untidy nest of lime-smearred twigs, bits of cloth, dried grasses and gnawed white bones, blocked our way.

In the nest squatted motionless the immense figure of a great Zarkoon.

It was neither Zawk nor Skeer nor Kloog, they being the only three of their terrible kind I knew by name. But it was not the identity of the creature, but its presence, that mattered.

The brute was seated tailor-fashion in the bottom of the nest, his clawed feet securely clenching the sides of the nest lest he should lose his balance in his sleep and topple from his place of safety. His gaunt yellowish arms, terminating in those grotesque bird-talons, were folded loosely in his lap, and his blue-plumed, ungainly wings were half-folded over his shoulders. His beaked and hideous visage was hidden under one wing, and he looked for all the world like a pigeon asleep in his nest. And asleep he was, for I could see his bony chest rise and fall in the deep breathing of slumber.

He blocked our way. And there was no way past him.

Tomar had caught up with us. Peering over Ylana's shoulder, the boy took in the problem with one swift glance.

"Can't we brain him with a rock?" the boy whispered in my ear. I shrugged helplessly; we could try, but it would be difficult at best, as his head was half-hidden by the blue-feathered wing, and as I had no means of knowing how tough were the skulls of the

Zarkoon or how easy-or difficult-it might prove to slay one of them with my bare hands.

And there was another danger as well: suppose I didn't manage to slay the brute outright, but only injured him. His squawk of rage and pain might well rouse his dozing neighbors on ledges nearby, rousing a host of the savage winged monsters-if indeed some were not already alert and awake, as I half-feared.

But there was nothing else to do but give it a try. I was fumbling about on the ledge for a large enough rock, when Ylana caught my attention with a quick gesture, and pointed to the Zarkoon. Thrust through a loop in its leathern harness, the stone blade of a crudely-chipped flint knife glinted in the half-light.

That would indeed be the best weapon.

Gliding past the girl, I bent, plucked the flint knife from the breast of the sleeping monster-and drove it to the hilt in his scrawny breast!

Convulsing in a spasm of agony, he flung wide his gaunt arms, thrusting me off-balance. For a moment I teetered on the brink of the abyss as the monster-man lurched half-erect, vulture-wings beating, yellow beak gaping wide, eyes glaring, mad with pain.

In the next instant, Ylana seized my arm, dragging me back to a place of safety on the narrow ledge as the dying Zarkoon, eyes glazing, oily gore bubbling from its chomping beak, toppled past me over the edge of the abyss.

In the next fraction of a second I froze, knowing my worse fears had been true, and that other Zarkoon waked and stirred in the cavern world.

For a gigantic winged shadow fell across us as we crouched on the ledge. Ylana looked past me at the flying thing hurtling towards us-and screamed!

Book Three

LOST IN THE JUNGLE COUNTRY

Chapter 11

Winged Death!

As the skiff slid away from the hull beneath the keel of the Jalathadar and caught the up-draft blowing from below, its light, fragile wings shuddered from the impact. The slim little craft bounced-veered away sickeningly-and fell into a steep, descending spiral.

Cursing villainously, Lukor wrenched at the few simple controls, his silver hair whipping in the wind, his eyes watering from the icy gale. He didn't dare put too much stress on the ailerons or on the rudder-fan, for the full force of these winds could shatter them to fluttering rags in an instant. So, pumping away at the pedals like a madman, he attempted to ride down the wind as if he were in a glider. Within the next few minutes the canny old sword-master learned the tricks of operating the kite-like craft in winds of such velocity, and the ride became smoother and less hard on the nerves.

They glided in a great circle, entirely about the peak, searching the cliffs and ledges below for some sign that Tomar and I had come this way. Precisely what they were looking for, neither of them could have described with any precision-perhaps a fallen garment, a discarded weapon, or the body of an injured Zarkoon. Or our own bodies, I suppose . . .

However, they found nothing.

Widening their search to include the nearer pinnacles of rock, they flew for some time round and round the peak in ever-broader circles, and through the maze of rocky spires that thrust up against the night like fingers on the hand of a dead colossus. Craning over the sides of the craft, they searched and stared as broken rock and soaring pinnacle slid rapidly by them.

The moonlight was tricky, but it was far less difficult for them than it would have been for me. I am accustomed to the steady, unvarying silver light of a single satellite; they, from birth, were accustomed to the mingled and many-colored illumination of several. At any rate, they saw nothing which seemed to them to point a clue to the way my captors had carried me.

They searched till dawn lit the skies with its sudden, swift, silent explosion of golden radiance. By this time they had reached the broad slopes of the southern face of the larger of the mountains, and it was Koja who spied a fairly smooth and almost level incline on which it looked likely they could set the craft down without undue hazard. Both were by now pretty tired of pumping away at the pedals and Koja, in particular, was stiff and cramped from the narrow confines of the cockpit which was, of course, designed with the proportions of the human buttocks in mind.

So they coasted down and came to an abrupt halt near a jutting spar or splinter of stone, which Lukor lassoed with an adroit flip of the wrist. No more than could the mighty Jalathadar herself, the little skiff could not actually come to land on the surface, for she was as weightless as a helium-filled balloon. Moreover, to skid to a stop on the flint-bestrewn slope might easily puncture the paper-thin pontoons, releasing the levitating gas. So, anchoring the skiff securely to the spar, the two climbed out of the cockpit onto the dual pontoons and sprang lightly to the ground from there, leaving their aerial craft floating about

six feet above the slope.

“I’m beginning to think we’re searching in the wrong direction entirely,” Lukor complained. “Not a sign nor token the winged men bore our comrades this way. Or, if they did, they may simply have flown over this part of the mountain as it lay in their path.”

“You believe, then, that the winged ones are still traveling?” Koja rasped in his harsh and droning metallic voice.

Lukor shrugged dispiritedly.

“No, that hardly seems likely, my chitinous friend. A full-grown man and a husky boy must afford quite a burden to even so huge and powerful a creature as a bird-man! No, I’ll wager the monsters have gone to ground somewhere . . .”

“But where?”

“Ah, that’s the question-where?” Lukor grumbled, tugging his woolen cloak about him against the cold bite of the wind, which bit keenly into old bones at this height. His features set in a glum expression, the gallant master swordsman stared about him at the mighty panorama of mountains which marched away to every side. “Where?” he repeated, thoughtfully.

“Where would you nest, were you a bird-man, Lukor?” asked Koja tonelessly after a time. The Ganatolian adventurer shot him a keen, questioning glance; then his lean-jawed, trim-bearded face became thoughtful.

“Well, now . . . on some high ledge, mayhap, or up there among those giddy peaks . . . somewhere like that, I suppose . . . up where my natural enemies couldn’t reach me.”

“Or in a hole in the ground, perhaps?”

“Eh? What d’you mean by that?”

Koja flexed the knobbed antennae on his brow in a shrug typically Yathoon. “I don’t know; but while tells roost on peaks or ledges, as far as I am aware, yaks roost in caves.” Koja did not refer, of course, to the Tibetan draft-animal, but to a small bat-like denizen of the Callistan caves who bore the identical name, by one of those small, trivial coincidences.

“That looks like quite a large cave over there,” Koja added, pointing. Following the gesture with his gaze, Lukor spied a round black hole of considerable size in a nearby slope. He had not noticed it before, or, if he had, it hadn’t occurred to him to think so large a depression might afford an excellent haven for such as the bird-men. Now that he measured it with his eyes, it looked large enough to conceal dozens or even scores of the flying monsters.

“You may have something there, friend Koja!” he said zestfully, forgetting all about the ache of weary legs and the bone-deep chill of hours spent in the wintry mountain wind. “Let’s take a closer look . . .”

Scrambling down the slope, the two crouched cautiously by the mouth of the pit and peered within. After the brilliant glare of the Callistan day, it took their eyes some time to adjust to the dim gloom within the aperture, but even without being able to make out much in the way of the details, they could see that the interior of the cavern was truly immense-that, in fact, the whole center of the mountain seemed to

have been hollowed out by geological forces.

“Now, then! That’s what I call a proper cavern-why, you could hide a full-sized city down there!”

“And anything large enough to conceal a city ought to be big enough for a whole flight of the Zarkoon to roost in,” Koja remarked solemnly.

It was decided that they would venture into the cavernous subterranean realm and explore it further before venturing on. The two trudged back to the place where they had left the skiff tethered to its spire of rock, boarded the little craft and cast loose the line. By this time it was midmorning and the wind-currents had changed considerably, as the heat of day had by now warmed the air. Koja and Lukor found it a tricky business, trying to maneuver their fragile and ungainly craft into the mouth of the pit, and, once within, found themselves flying blind in a region of dense gloom. It took them some time before their eyes adjusted to the dimness, but when they had, the two found that sufficient illumination seeped through the hole in the roof to enable them to navigate safely within the confines of the cavern-world.

It was Lukor whose keen eyes perceived our minute figures clinging to the ledge on the opposite wall of the cavern. He sent the craft gliding swiftly through the dimness towards our precarious perch, but such was the immensity of the cavern that Koja and Lukor were forced to watch without being able to assist in my desperate battle with the nesting Zarkoon. As the slain bird-man toppled over the ledge and my young companions rescued me from a similar fate, the skiff swung up past the ledge-and it was this sudden and unexpected apparition that caused Ylana to shriek in alarm.

A moment later Koja brought the craft to a halt and held it motionless, drifting in the idle air-currents just above the ledge, while Lukor sprang down to clasp my hand, beaming with delight. Introductions were hastily made, and before Ylana had time to fully recover from her alarm and to adjust to the fact that the odd little man and the gaunt, gigantic insect-being were friends and their amazing flying vehicle a safe and useful tool, we bundled the jungle maid and young Tomar into their seats, and I climbed aboard, and we angled the craft about, heading back to the circular hole in the roof.

For, due either to the fall of the dead Zarkoon I had slain or Ylana’s scream-or perhaps both-the slumbering bird-warriors were by now fully aroused from their diurnal slumbers and aware that their dinner was in the process of escaping. From the nests which lined the ledges all about the walls of the enormous cavern, winged figures were hurtling themselves into the air, and many of them clenched in their sharp talons rude, stone-tipped spears or flint axes or toothed swords of glittering obsidian. Some, in fact, were armed with bows and arrows.

We soared out of the crater only moments ahead of the foremost flight of our pursuers, and as we flashed out over the flanks of the mountain, riding the air-currents in a long, gliding curve, I looked over my shoulder to see angry black flecks boiling out of the pit behind us. They looked for all the world like a swarm of angry bees pouring in a vengeful stream out of a nest which had been disturbed by an unwary or careless intruder. Soon their eyes adjusted to the brilliance of day, which, in the extremity of their rage, they did not let deter them from their pursuit of us. They came after us, flying at amazing speed, squawking like angry hawks.

Neither the Jalathadar nor any of the other ships of the armada were visible aloft. Either the four aerial vessels were out of sight behind the mountains, busily searching for us, or they had for some un conjecturable reason quit the scene entirely. With a quick decision, Lukor decided he could attain the utmost velocity by riding the current of air which presently sustained us, so he followed it rather than attempting to ascend to a higher level from which the armada might well have been visible.

Glancing back at the two youngsters, I suppressed a grin. For all her flaunted contempt and derision, the jungle girl had flung her arms about Tomar's neck and had buried her face in his chest. Looking distinctly uncomfortable, the scarlet-faced boy was awkwardly embracing her, gingerly patting her bare and rounded shoulder by way of trying to comfort her. I assumed correctly that the jungle maid was finding her first experience in a flying machine rather unsettling.

The winged men were hurtling after us in a long line, and they were obviously gaining upon us. For all the speed of the little craft, the powerful pinions of the Zarkoon drove them through the air at astonishing speed. The nearest of the monster-men was so close that I could see his glaring eyes, bright with fury, and his red tongue as his yellow beak parted to give voice to a screech of rage.

I could also see the great warbow he clutched, and the long, barb-tipped, blue-feathered arrows in the quiver slung across his tawny breast.

I did not like the look of those arrows.

It was impossible to discern the direction in which we were flying. I assume it was due north, or north and west, perhaps, but as the sun is not visible in the daylight skies of Thanator, it is peculiarly difficult to ascertain the cardinal directions. Burdened down with the weight of five passengers, the little skiff was flying sluggishly, wallowing from side to side in the air-stream, and I feared that at any moment it might sink from our combined weight, and descend into a region of calm

and motionless air, which would greatly reduce the speed at which we were flying.

Nevertheless, it soon became obvious that we were going to be able to hold our slender lead over the Zarkoon who pursued us. The aerial machine was tireless, but the bird-men were not. Their distaste for sunlight was beginning to overcome their rage and fury, and I saw that some of them had thrown away their weapons and were turning about, arms shielding their little eyes from the glare, heading back for the comfortable darkness of their cavern home. And as for those -who still hurtled after us, their wings, although powerful and capable of spurts of surprising speed, were obviously unable to sustain that speed for long. Rapidly beginning to tire, even the most determined of our pursuers were beginning to fall behind as their pinions failed and faltered.

But the foremost of the pursuit, the enormous birdman who clutched the bow and the quiver of long, blue-feathered arrows, refused to tire or to turn back. I recognized him from the distinctive marking on his indigo plumage: he was the chieftain, Zawk, the one who had captured Tomar and myself at the start of this adventure.

We flew on. Ahead, in the distance, a ridgeline of serrated peaks blocked our path. If we continued in our present course, we should have to rise above that ridge, perhaps losing the advantage of riding the air-current which was now all that gave us our slim lead on the Zarkoon. Of course, it was possible that the wind-stream rose to pass over the lip of the ridge, and would carry us with it. There was a possibility that this was so, but of course we could not be sure.

The skiff flew on, buoyant hull riding the wind. The barren landscape of tortured rock swept by beneath our gas-filled pontoons. Fang-like peaks flashed past as we threaded through a maze of steep pinnacles of stone. Ahead, the clifflike rampart rose in our path, blocking away the golden sky like a wall of granite. I must confess that my heart was in my mouth as we hurtled on with the vengeful Zarkoon warriors soaring like hunting hawks in our wake.

One by one, however, they fell away behind us. Their eyes could not endure the torture of daylight and, as their great wings tired, they fell back and sought again the cool gloom of their cavern home. At last, only Zawk remained following us. And then he, too, gave up the chase. Brandishing his great black bow with a last fierce cry, he turned about and soon was lost to sight, a winged mote floating among the peaks.

Now the cliffs rose before us and, lifted on the wind, we rose to meet them.

Lukor was wrestling with the controls. I could not see what he was doing. Then he turned a despairing glance over his shoulder to me. I leaned forward to hear above the winds as he shouted something.

“Something is wrong!” he cried, the wind whipping his words away until I could barely understand him. “We are sinking-the craft is losing buoyancy for some reason!”

“Well, no matter-we can land at any time now,” I shouted in reply. “The Zarkoon have given up the chase.”

He shook his head furiously, the wind whipping his silver locks into a tangle about his high, noble brow.

“That’s just it, Jandar, my friend! We can’t-the wind has us in its grasp now, and we are traveling too swiftly. If we try to land now the skiff will be torn asunder, hurtling us against the rocks below!”

And he was right, for at that moment we were flying through space at a terrific rate of speed. Here the air currents were drawn through narrowing walls of rock, like a broad river forced between the banks of a tight gorge. Focused into a narrow stream, the wind howled like a banshee and thrust our flimsy craft before it like a chip on the surface of a torrent.

And directly ahead of us the cliff rose like a mighty barrier. Within instants, unless we could break free from the grip of the gale, we would smash against that terrible wall and be shattered to atoms.

We could not descend; but if we could rise above the gale, we would enter into a region of calmer air where our headlong velocity would slow, and we could curve aside.

But we could not rise, for unaccountably the craft was losing her buoyancy almost visibly. Moment to moment we hung heavier in the roaring wind, and already the wings were shuddering under the buffeting of the blast. The craft wallowed sluggishly, wobbling from side to side. But what was wrong? Had the gas-filled pontoons sprung a leak?

I bent over the side of the cockpit, trying to see what was the matter. The wind made my eyes water and whipped my long yellow hair. Blinking the tears away, squinting into the blast, I searched the pontoons with a fierce, intent scrutiny.

And there I saw it.

Ere turning back, Zawk had sent one arrow after us in a final gesture of defiance.

Nor had his great bow failed him.

For, thrusting from the portside pontoon, the long shaft protruded, feathered with indigo-blue.

The Zarkoon bow had launched a feathered messenger of hate against us. And that feathered shaft

would soon prove a winged messenger of death!

For, sunk deep in the pontoon, it had torn a ragged gash in the molded paper hull-through which our levitating gas was swiftly leaking-

Chapter 12

The Monster from the Lake

“Hold on!” Lukor shouted, jerking the lever frenziedly.

The cliff-wall loomed up before our prow, blocking out the sky.

Here the wind rose, fiercely, soaring up and over the jagged edge of the barrier. And the skiff rose with it, climbing at a steep, impossible angle.

Lukor slammed the ailerons into their vertical slot, and kicked at the rudder pedals with every ounce of strength he possessed-fighting madly to coax every scrap of lifting power out of the hurtling machine.

Leaking gas though she was, the trim little craft was still made of laminated paper, tough and light as a kite. She was borne before the rushing winds like a cork in a millstream.

We rose at an incredible angle, virtually standing on our tail, prow pointed into the sky! Up . . . up . . . up . . . the rugged cliff flashing by . . . the serrated crest expanding as we flashed towards it-

And over it-

The little skiff shuddered like a live thing. Caught in the tide of wind that flowed up and spilled over the wall, we scraped over the crest. With a shattering impact one taut wing slammed against a boulder-and flew apart in flying rags and splinters-

Over the top of the wall we coasted. We got one swift look at the weird and fantastic thing which lay beyond the barrier-a vast plateau, circled with a cliff-like barrier, a dense tangle of scarlet jungle, threaded through with silvery rivers, and the broad glimmering shield of a huge lake.

Then, unbalanced because of the shattered wing, we cartwheeled madly, losing height and hurtling down at sickening speed. The tangled carpet of crimson jungle whirled up towards us. Lukor fought the controls, trying to ease the spinning craft into a glide, but we fell like a stone.

“Jump!” I yelled as the shimmering lake swung up to slap us. I sprang from the cockpit of the spinning craft, followed by Tomar and the jungle maid. I caught a glimpse of old Lukor standing up to spring over the side-

Then a thousand tons of cold water smashed into me and I sank into gathering darkness . . .

Gagging and fighting for air, I returned to my senses in a numb silence. I lay face down on a stretch of wet mud, soaked to the skin and vomiting a barrel full of cold fresh water. I staggered to my feet, lurched drunkenly, and fell to my knees.

I was dazed with shock, and momentarily deafened from the impact of striking the lake from such a height, and I ached all over as if I had been beaten with rubber truncheons. But I still lived, and no bones seemed to be broken.

Further down the beach I came upon Lukor, his clothes a soggy ruin, pouring water out of his boots and cursing because he had lost his favorite stiletto. He was not exactly disarmed, however, as he still wore his trusty sword. He was in a fine temper, but looked little the worse for wear. It would take more than a ducking in the lake to beat the spirit out of the gallant old Ganatolian!

“Where are the others?” I asked. He made some reply, but I could not understand him, because of the ringing in my ears. At first I feared lest my eardrums had been ruptured when I slammed into the lake, but it proved only a momentary discomfiture and already I was recovering, although I still could not hear him.

Sensing my problem, he pantomimed, and I turned to see the girl, sleek with water as any mermaid, half dragging the floundering form of Tomar out of the lake. She waded up to us and cast the boy down before us with a little pretty expression of disgust.

“Pooh!” she snorted. “The boy is useless. He cannot even swim!”

And she was right-poor Tomar looked as if he had swallowed half of the lake. And from the amount of water he began gagging up, I believe he had done so. But, though sodden and green about the gills, he had survived the crackup of the aircraft with no serious hurt that I could see.

“Hah!” Lukor cackled with fierce pride. “I am not so bad a pilot after all! I believe, Jandar my friend, I will ask for a command in the sky navy, when we are out of here.”

“Not so bad?” I laughed. “You nearly killed us! It’s sheer luck we aren’t all drowned! And if you call that a landing . . . !”

“Pah, my boy-anything you can walk away from is a good landing-ask Zantor sometime! And, outside of a ducking, we are in fine enough shape, I’ll warrant!”

It was Tomar who asked it.

Still lying in the mud, he looked about him dazedly, then up at me, eyes wide and questioning in his pale face.

“But where is the lord Koja?” he asked.

His clear young tones faded into silence. There was no sound, save for the ripple of wavelets on the beach and the distant cry of sea-tells.

Lukor looked down at the sodden boots he held in his hands. His features were averted but I saw them go blank and empty. Was it a tear went trickling down his cheek, or a drop of lake-water from his damp head? I cannot say. But I think I know.

For Koja was not on the beach.

Towards evening we built a fire at the edge of the jungle and cooked a fat, waddling lizard-thing Ylana had brained with a stone. She and Tomar had built a bonfire, gathering dry leaves and fallen branches, and

Lukor touched it alight with his flint-and-steel. We chewed half-burnt, half-raw lizard meat in a moody silence.

We had spent the afternoon searching the beach in both directions for what must have been miles. The lake was very large-so large that we could not see the further shore, save as a dim, misty line against the dark cliffs beyond. But we found no sign of Koja.

The warrior princes of the Yathoon horde roam the Great Plains of Haratha from the Black Mountains near the pole to the fringes of the Grand Kumala. There are no lakes or seas for thousands of miles in the southern hemisphere of Callisto, and only one river.

There is no reason to think, therefore, that any of the Yathoon have ever learned how to swim.

“’Tis my fault,” Lukor muttered. “I am not such a good pilot after all.” Suddenly, and for the first time, he looked old, his shoulders stooped, his eyes dull and weary in a face lined and scored with wrinkles.

I put my hand on his shoulder. “You did the best that you could do, under the circumstances,” I said quietly. “No one could have brought us down without a crackup with one pontoon empty and one wing shorn away. At least you took us down in the lake. If it had been the jungle, or the shore, none of us would be alive now. You did the best you could, Lukor.”

“I know. I know,” he sighed.

After the meal we slept huddled about the fire. The night was made hideous by the distant cry of beasts, but we kept the fire piled high with dry wood and nothing dared come near the blaze in the night.

We slept like dead men, the sleep of the utterly exhausted.

And, thank God, there were no dreams.

Dawn woke in the skies, a blaze of pure golden fire. We were stiff and lame from our exertions, but woke refreshed and ready for whatever the new day would bring. Ylana told us that her people camped along the hunting trails to the north of the vast plateau, and that the lake in which we had fallen was situated in the southern part. We debated as to what to do. Ylana was reluctant to rejoin her people, for even though her own father, Jugrid, was chief of the Jungle People, he had been forced by the all-powerful Elders to give her up in marriage to the man whom she detested, a fellow named Xangan, a surly, repulsive, overbearing lout who had often accosted her and attempted to force his attentions upon her. This Xangan, it seemed, was the favorite grandson of one of the Elders, an old man named Quone, and thus enjoyed a favored position among the jungle warriors. The Elders had sided with Xangan against Jugrid in this matter of the disposal of his daughter’s hand in marriage. Ylana did not say so in so many words, but I got the distinct impression that the Elders were happy to seize upon this pretext to diminish the authority of the jungle chieftain, thus enhancing their own position as interpreters of the will of the Unseen Ones.

It was, I reflected, an old and oft-told tale-the struggle for supremacy between the temporal and the spiritual authorities for the dominance of a realm. The covert contest between king and high-priest had

repeated itself over and over again in the history of my native world, and it seemed that in this respect, as in so many others, the inhabitants of Thanator proved their essential humanity.

“Then you would, of course, prefer not to return to the country of your father?” I asked.

The jungle maid nodded. “When captured by the Zarkoon, I was trying to reach my mother’s folk, the River People,” she said. “Their country lies east of here, beyond the Stone Hills, in a lush meadowland through which the River of the Groack wanders, on its way to the Great Waterfall . . .”

“And what might the groack be?” I inquired.

The girl shivered slightly. “Fearsome reptiles which infest the Great Lake and the river, as well.”

“All right, then: how can we help you find the country of the River People?”

Ylana crouched on her knees and sketched a crude map in the sand. It showed that we had come out of the lake on the north shore, and that the River of the Groack emerged from the lake almost exactly one-quarter of the way around it, wove between the Stone Hills, and then traced a curving path through the meadowlands which occupied the extreme eastern portion of the plateau.*

We breakfasted sparsely on nuts, berries, and a large, sweet fruit the Thanatorians call the temorak, a term I might translate crudely as “wine-melon,” since it is from the juice of this melon-like fruit that the vintners of Thanator ferment their vinous beverages. Tomar and Ylana gathered this meager meal while Lukor and I sought to procure something in the nature of weapons wherewith we would be able to defend ourselves against whatever predators or human foes we might chance to encounter on our journey to the River Country. We found a clump of orange, bamboo-like trees which, with a trifle of labor, could be snapped off cleanly at the joints, which were spaced fairly evenly about eighteen inches apart. From these we fashioned rude quarterstaves or poles about six feet long, which would have to serve as our only means of defense. Tomar also rigged a crude sling on directions from Ylana, who was expert in the use of this weapon, while the girl gathered smooth, rounded stones from along the lake-shore. By early morning we were ready to depart.

As we made our way due east along the shoreline, I had leisure to reflect on the curious information Ylana’s map revealed. I refer to the fact that, unlike terrestrial rivers, the River of the Groack towards which we were bound did not feed into the Great Lake, as the body of water was called, but out of it. My knowledge of these matters is admittedly a trifle hazy, and marooned here on Callisto as I am, I am, of course, quite a few million miles away from the nearest reference library, but I am of the opinion that the River of the Groack presents an unique phenomenon.*

All that day we tramped along the shore of the Cor-Az (which is Thanatorian for “Great Lake”), and by early evening we were foot-weary and very hungry. Lukor, wistfully eyeing the lake along which we strode, made some remark about fishing-poles in connection with a speculation as to what manner of plump, delicious denizens the waters might contain.

As I was feeling half-starved by this time, the notion struck me as a highly promising one. We had the fishing-poles already, for our bamboo staves would serve that purpose admirably; and, as for fish-hooks, the coil of copper wire the jungle maid wore about her upper arm could be as easily put to that use as it had been for the purpose of a pick-lock.

We decided to stop for the night and to see what sort of a dinner the Cor-Az could afford us. While Tomar and Ylana searched for dry wood along the edges of the jungle, Lukor and I worked short lengths

of the flexible wire into something rudely resembling hooks, affixing these to the end of our staves by means of long threads unraveled from our garments-or from Lukor's garments, that is, since my raiment still consisted of nothing more than a ragged loincloth and a pair of sky-boots.

Considering the make-shift nature of our fishing gear, it is surprising that either Lukor or I achieved any measure of success in our efforts at providing piscatorial provender for our dinner-table. The lake, however, seemed to be teeming with some Thanatorian variety of fish unfamiliar to me, for in no time Lukor, to his great delight, succeeded in landing two enormous salmonlike fish which Ylana brained with a flat rock. During the next few minutes I landed a remarkable specimen myself, which must have weighed ten pounds, and our prospects of going to sleep that night with full bellies seemed assured.

Matters turned out otherwise, however, as is so often the case on the Jungle Moon. For, in providing for our dinner, it seemed we were robbing another "fisherman" of his own. Our crude fish-hooks, I assume, had landed right in the middle of a school of fish a hungry groack had been engaged in herding together to satisfy his own ravenous gullet. And he did not appreciate our poaching on what he evidently considered his private game-preserve.

Our first inkling of this fact followed shortly after we had succeeded in landing the third fish. Quite suddenly, about twenty yards out from the shore, the placid waters of the Cor-Az exploded into spray and an immense, serpentine neck thrust itself up from the waves. An alligator-like head the size of a barrel swiveled towards our direction, and two lidless eyes, lambent with cold ferocity, fixed us in their gaze. In the next instant we were scrambling up the shore in several directions as a vast, scaly form came slithering through the shallows at something close to the speed of an express-train.

The colossal Plesiosaur on Earth has been extinct, I suppose, since the Jurassic era. But I can assure you, from personal experience, that here on Callisto the giant reptile, or something remarkably like it, is still going strong. This particular specimen, which came slithering out of the lake hot on our heels, must have measured at least thirty-five feet from fanged snout to the tip of his tail . . . and that's about thirty-four more feet of reptile than I feel comfortable with!

The groack had flippers rather than legs, but he could cover the ground at a fast clip for all of that. As we took to our heels in all directions, Ylana slipped in the wet sand and fell to her knees. This did not escape the cold gaze of the lake-dragon, and he swerved in his pursuit to bear down upon the jungle girl. I believe the original reaction of the groack was simply annoyance at finding someone poaching on his private supplies of food, but by this time, having caught a whiff of juicy manflesh, he abandoned his original intent of chasing away the fisherman, deciding to feast on fishermen rather than fish.

Tomar was the nearest of any of us to Ylana when she slipped and fell. Without a moment's hesitation the boy turned back to help the girl. Snatching up the fishing-pole Lukor had flung aside in his haste, the boy ran directly between the girl and the lake-monster. As the groack bent to investigate the helpless maid, Tomar jumped in front of it with a loud yell and gave the brute a staggering buffet across the snout with the bamboo staff. I don't imagine the blow caused the reptile much hurt, but it certainly made it angry.

Giving voice to a deafening hiss like a steam-whistle, the groack lunged after the boy. Tomar dodged nimbly to one side, scooped Ylana up in his strong young arms, and headed off in another direction.

Before the groack could lumber off at this new tangent, I had turned back to intercept it and gave it a good thwack with my own pole, which for some reason I still held. Then Lukor came dancing in from the other side. The spry little Ganatolian was the only one of us who still retained a real weapon, and in his case he had his trusty steel rapier with the basket-hilt. This blade he sank into the throat of the groack,

who again screeched like a locomotive whistle, and went lumbering after Lukor, forgetting to go after Tomar or the girl, who had reached the edge of the jungle by now.

I gave it another whack on the head from my side, and as it swung its head back towards me, Lukor again sprang to the attack, sinking his point into the brute's neck. Groggily, the reptile swung hissing to deal with this adversary, and I came in again to deal it a smashing blow alongside the skull. The rhythm of battle was established by now, and I had learned a valuable bit of information about the lake-dragon: its dim little nubbin of a brain was only large enough to contain one idea at a time, and thus between us, Lukor and I could probably keep the brute baffled and at bay for some time. Had it hurled itself in headlong and undeviating pursuit of any one of us, that unlucky person would doubtless have soon served the groack as its dinner. But it was unable to keep on one track, and acted in response to each individual stimulus in turn. Soon Ylana, nursing a twisted ankle, entered into this dance of death with her sling. One well-placed stone smashed out one of the groack's gnashing fangs, and a second injured its left eye. In the meanwhile, Lukor kept pricking it in the neck, hoping with one of his strokes to penetrate the monster's tough scaly hide deep enough to sever its spinal cord.

Things were taken out of our hands, however.

Thunkk! A black-feathered arrow suddenly materialized in the brow of the reptile, protruding from between its glaring eyes.

Thunkk! Thunkk!

Two more arrows flashed, burying themselves in the soft flesh of the unprotected throat, just beneath the jaws.

Black gore gushed between the gaping jaws as the giant reptile lurched groggily to one side, eyes glazing. The first arrow had pierced its tiny brain by a lucky shot, but it took it quite a time to realize the fact that it was already dead.

We sprang back from the floundering monster, staring around to discover the source of the mysterious arrows. Night had fallen during our battle with the lake-dragon, but several moons were aloft and by their many-colored light we saw a large party of men standing at the edges of the jungle.

The foremost of these was a hulking, unshaven lout, naked save for a tanned hide slung about his hips and a necklace of ivory fangs. He held, nocked and at the ready, a fourth arrow, ready to loose from his great sorath-wood bow.

The other warriors in his party sprang forward to dispatch the dying reptile with their flint-tipped spears.

But he stood facing us, a leering grin on his heavy features.

I did not care for his looks.

Neither did Ylana. In fact, when the girl spun about and saw our rescuer, she gasped aloud, and her taut face went pale. I gathered from this that she was acquainted with our rescuer; and, soon enough, this supposition became a fact.

"You!" she said faintly.

The big man grinned at her nastily.

“Ylana, are you acquainted with this warrior?” I asked, wishing I had something other than just a splintered fishing-pole wherewith to defend myself. She nodded wearily.

“He is Xangan, the man they would force me to mate with,” the girl said with despair eloquent in her tones.

“Seize the girl and kill the men,” ordered Xangan. The others sprang upon us with spear and club and stone ax.

Chapter 13

I Make an Enemy-and a Friend

There were twenty of them to the four of us, and considering that we were outnumbered five to one, it might have seemed the height of folly to have attempted to fight the jungle men. But it goes against my grain to yield supinely, even to a superior force. It is like giving up-and if I have learned one thing from a lifetime of adventure, it is: never give up-fight to the last!

Someday, I have no doubt, my luck will run out and the blade of an adversary or the claws of a jungle beast will take my life. Until that day comes, however, I will fight for life and freedom even against impossible odds.

So-when the first jungle man sprang at me with his stone-tipped spear-I batted the shaft aside and knocked him sprawling in the sand with a right to the jaw. The second, who attempted to brain me with his ax, I kicked in the pit of the stomach; he promptly lost interest in the conflict, sagged to his knees, and began losing his lunch all over the sand.

Lukor, to my left, had already run one warrior through the shoulder with his rapier, and was holding two others at bay with his flashing steel. Tomar had laid one jungle man unconscious, using the bamboo pole as a club, and was fighting off his companion, while the girl Ylana was employing her sling with devastating effect. Recalling that David had felled even the giant Goliath with just such a weapon, I caught a flying glimpse of the sling in action as she felled the third of the warriors who had sprung upon her. I don't think we killed anyone, but there were more than a few broken teeth, pierced shoulders, and aching heads, before we were done. Xangan, I noticed, displayed the prudence of a born general by staying out of the fight entirely. He lurked on the edge of the jungle, dodging behind a tree whenever one of Ylana's missiles came hurtling his way. His major contribution to the battle was that of urging his men on with loud shouts, while remaining safely out of harm's way himself. I began to understand why the jungle maid despised him so.

It was soon over, of course; and, of course, we did not win it. There had hardly been a chance that the four of us, armed with bare fists and sticks and stones, could defeat twenty full-grown men armed with spears, clubs and stone axes. But when, at the end, they crushed us down by sheer weight of numbers, I had at least the grim comfort of having fought for my life.

Once we were safely trussed with leathern thongs, Xangan left his place of safety to strut about, puffing out his chest, and giving us dangerous, evil looks. From the way he postured boldly, glaring threateningly on four helpless, bound captives, you would have thought he had captured us all by himself. I could have laughed at him, except that I lay face down in the sand with someone kneeling in the small of my back, a position hardly conducive of risibility.

While the warriors stood about, puffing and blowing from their exertions, gingerly fingering this or that painful portion of their anatomies, Xangan strode up to Tomar—who had fallen while trying to defend Ylana to the last—and, with one eye on the girl to see how she liked it, gave the helpless boy a cruel kick in the side. Tomar took it in silence, of course, but I gritted my teeth and made a silent vow to repay Xangan for that cowardly blow someday.

Ylana spat sand from her mouth, and gave the smirking bully a glare that would have shriveled most men in their tracks. Then Xangan strode over to where she lay and looked her over gloatingly. Her abbreviated garments were torn and disarranged, and generous portions of girlflesh were bare to his greedy scrutiny. He said nothing, but his gaze was insult enough. The girl bit her lip, crimsoning. I could cheerfully have killed him.

Then he walked over to where Lukor and I lay bound and looked us over suspiciously. I gave him look for look.

“You,” he growled, prodding me with one foot. “Where did you get that yellow hair?”

“It was a birthday present from my mother,” I said calmly. “Where did you get that yellow stripe down your back?”

The other warriors laughed at this, but Xangan flushed with rage and made as if to kick me as he had kicked the boy. Something in the cold, level look I gave him made him change his mind. He flushed even darker—which roused a few chuckles from those of his men who had not missed the exchange. I got the impression that Xangan was none too popular, even with his own warriors. This was only to be expected. They had fought like men, as had we. They had no reason to despise us, and every reason to feel contempt for Xangan, who had hid until the fight was over and he could safely emerge.

“Shut up, you fomak,” he blustered. A fomak is a venomous cave-spider, and the term is not one of endearment.

“It takes one fomak to recognize another,” I responded with a smile. This got a laugh, too. He growled an oath, looked me over with an elaborate pretense of contempt, and turned on his heel.

“Slay the men,” he said. And my heart sank within me. Was my long road to end here, in an alien land, among strange men? Here, where my princess should never know the manner of my death, nor my comrades avenge it?

“I don’t think we should do that, Xangan,” said one of the warriors, most unexpectedly. He was a good-looking fellow, somewhat more clean-cut and intelligent than the others, from his stance and features. I had noticed him watching me with an expression of something very like admiration in his face, while I had given Xangan taunt for taunt. Now he stepped forward to confront his chief, who stared at him slack-jawed in surprise.

“I don’t care what you think, Thadron—my orders come from the Elders,” Xangan blustered.

The young warrior whom he had addressed as Thadron shook his head firmly.

“Whatever orders you may have from the Elders could hardly cover this present situation, Xangan,” he said in a calm, reasonable tone of voice. “For none of us, and least of all the Elders, could have guessed we would discover Jugrid’s daughter after all this time, and in the company of strangers.”

Xangan tried to stare him down, but failed. “You will obey my orders,” he grumbled weakly. Thadron shook his head.

“Not in this case, I fear. We must find out who these men are and from whence they come. The Elders will want to question them, surely. So we must take them back to the caves with us.”

The others seemed to agree with this, for they nodded to each other, murmuring assent. The sharp eyes of Xangan observed this, and evidently he decided this was not the time for a showdown. He made a hasty attempt to reassert his authority.

“We will let the Elders decide the manner of their death,” he said loudly. Then, with a wicked gleam in his eye, he added nastily, “and the degree of punishment for your insubordination, Thadron!”

If he had hoped to disconcert the other by this pointed remark, he failed signally, for Thadron smiled and said serenely: “Yes, let us abide by the decision of the Elders in this as in all other matters, Xangan-including the punishment of chieftains who overstep their authority!”

And so we were saved-for a time, at least. The jungle men got us to our feet and marched us into the trees, which closed about us with a rustling of scarlet foliage. Within moments all sight or sound of the Cor-Az was lost to us; and within half an hour, so twisting and winding were the jungle trails, we were thoroughly lost ourselves, and could not possibly have retraced our steps to the shores of the Great Lake unaided.

Lukor and Tomar and I were en route to an unknown fate. Our deaths, at best, had but been postponed for a time. Well, I cannot speak for Tomar in this, but as for such as Lukor and I, adventurers of our breed regard any respite with a high degree of optimism mingled with hopes for an even more fortunate turn of events in the near future. We do not give up easily, even when marching to face the unknown.

With Ylana, however, the fate towards which she was being forced was all too known. With every step she took, the jungle maid was drawing closer to a miserable fate in the arms of a cowardly bully whom she despised. This being so, I could only admire helplessly the gallant courage of the brave, resourceful girl. She walked the jungle path with her shoulders back, her head held high, and a resolute expression of aloof contempt on her features. Whatever horrors and degradations awaited her at the end of the trail, she would face them boldly and unafraid.

I felt proud of her, and my only regret was that she had fallen into this dismal situation through my own misfortunate attempts to help her avoid this very fate. She was a lot of woman, for all her tender years, and the boy who truly won her heart would be a very lucky man.

Xangan strode on ahead of us, with the stride of a victorious conqueror, for all his sneering cowardice. But the other jungle men, I noticed, seemed a manly lot. They treated us with dignity and offered no discourtesies even to the helpless girl. Xangan may have been a rarity among his people-even the finest barrel can hold a rotten apple or two-but I judged that, on the whole, Jugrid’s people, while they may have occupied a lowly rung on the ladder of social evolution, were of a superior breed.

Thadron in particular seemed to be a decent fellow. He fell into line at my side, and, once Xangan had taken his place in the lead and was well out of earshot, opened a conversation with me. He was curious as to my coloring and inquired, politely enough, as to my homeland. I was cautious about revealing overmuch concerning our true origin or mission into this hemisphere, for it was impossible to know if word of our presence among the jungle men might somehow come to the attention of our enemies the Mind Wizards, so I responded to his interested queries in an off-hand manner, replying that my homeland lay at a considerable distance from this region.

Thadron sensed my reticence, although he could hardly have guessed my reason for it, and respected my desire to keep my native land a secret. Considering his innate courtesy and gentlemanliness, I was thankful that it was not necessary for me to lie to him. For of course I had but told him, strictly speaking, the truth. Since my native land was at that moment something like three hundred and ninety million miles away, it could certainly be said to be at "a considerable distance" from these jungles.

To his other questions, I responded in more detail. Thadron was curious to learn if men with yellow hair, fair skins and blue eyes were common in my homeland, and I told him that such as I were common enough in my land, but that we came in a variety of shades, which seemed to satisfy him. He also displayed a certain curiosity in the peculiar means by which I had laid out several of his fellow-warriors, armed only with my bare hands.

"Do the men of your land commonly fight with balled fists, rather than with spears or axes?" he asked. I repressed a smile, and soberly told him that such was, in fact, the case. Few Americans these days fight with spears or stone axes, I said with a straight face, whereas the art of fisticuffs enjoys considerable popularity. We chatted for some time over the fine points of pugilism. I have elsewhere* observed that the manly art of fisticuffs, for some reason, is quite unknown upon Thanator. It is not that fighting with bare hands is despised as an ungentlemanly method of combat. It is, simply, that it has yet to be invented upon the Jungle Moon, and the man lucky enough to know how to use his fists is never without a weapon on this world.

"I should like to see you demonstrate this peculiar mode of fighting," Thadron remarked.

"Free my hands, and I will be delighted to give you an exhibition," I said, with a slight smile. "I should greatly enjoy demonstrating it upon the person of your chieftain, Xangan," I added, which brought a smile to Thadron's own lips. We exchanged a glance, and I knew that he agreed with my rather low estimate of that individual.

As we penetrated more deeply into the jungle, the foliage closed above us, locking out the illumination of the many moons which had lit our way. Now we went forward in a darkness which was all but impenetrable, and this struck me as being just a bit curious. My experience with jungles is somewhat limited, but I have always found that the hours of darkness are the most dangerous time to be abroad in the jungles of Thanator, for the terrible predators which inhabit such regions generally prefer to sleep by day, prowling the jungle aisles by night. I asked Thadron about this, and he seemed puzzled at my query.

"Save for the fomaks in the cave regions, and the occasional pack of wild othodes," he said, "what is there in the jungles which could do us harm?" The fomak, as I have already explained, is a large and venomous kind of spider whose bite is deadly, and the othode is a burly, frog-faced animal with short purple fur, which rather resembles a mastiff and which can be domesticated. Neither creature is commonly found in the jungle countries of the one hemisphere of Callisto with which I am most familiar, although packs of othodes are sometimes encountered in the southern parts of the Grand Kumala. I asked Thadron if there was no reason to fear such jungle predators as the deltagar or the vastodon, but he seemed never to have even heard of these monsters. At length it occurred to me that the jungle

country atop this plateau was insulated by hundreds of miles of barren, rocky wilderness from other jungles. It had been isolated for untold ages, and perhaps formed a refuge for forms of life elsewhere either rare or extinct, much like the “lost world” of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s famous novel, which was also situated upon an isolated plateau, if I recall the details of the romance correctly. There were already several reasons for me to assume such was the case, for neither Zarkoon nor groacks were known in the other hemisphere of Callisto, save as legends.

All that night and much of the next morning we wound our weary way through the gloomy jungles. Some hours after dawn we emerged into a hilly region, where many caves could be seen. Here savages of Xangan’s breed could be seen, women tending the cook-fires before the caves, old men scraping hides, naked children scampering about. All fell silent and ceased whatever they were doing as we came into view.

Xangan now strutted and swaggered about, feeling that all eyes were upon him. In loud, blustering tones he described to the crowd, which rapidly assembled to observe us, how we had been subdued with great difficulty after a terrific battle. Without exactly saying so in so many words, he left an impression in the minds of his rapt audience that he had occupied a position of importance in the forefront of this battle, and had performed deeds of ferocious and daring courage. Thadron smiled quietly to hear him brag, but most of his fellow tribesfolk seemed to believe his boasting.

We were led through the narrow ravine, whose rocky walls were lined on both sides with the black mouths of caves, to a flat space before a large, imposing cavern. There a number of scrawny old men bedecked with colored beads and plumes sat comfortably in the hot daylight. These, I correctly assumed, were the Elders of the tribe. Xangan swaggered in front of them, describing all over again the mighty battle in which he and his twenty warriors had with great effort overwhelmed one warrior, one silver-haired old man, and two teen-agers. Several of the Elders looked amused, obviously seeing through his bragging, but others seemed to take his words at face value, including one keen-eyed Elder whom, I guessed correctly, was Xangan’s own grandfather, the chief of the Elders, Quone.

“What do you think will happen to us, Thadron?” I asked in a low voice, while Xangan bragged and swaggered. The young warrior shrugged.

“I imagine the Elders will be too confused to deal with you themselves, as the case lacks all precedent in our tradition. They will probably call upon the Unseen Ones to decide what should be done with you.”

Ylana had mentioned these “Unseen Ones” back when we had been prisoners in the cavern-world of the Zarkoon. She had not explained what she meant by the term, and for some reason I had not pursued the matter at the time, assuming that she referred to the gods her tribe venerated. Now I asked the friendly young warrior who these Unseen Ones were. He looked at me in surprise.

“Why . . . they are the Unseen Ones, Jandar-the Masters! Is it possible that the Elders of your tribe, however distant your land may be from our own, do not serve the will of the Unseen Ones?” There was incredulity in his voice. I shrugged.

“Apparently such is the case,” I admitted, “although perhaps we know them under some other name. What do they do-what are they like?”

He spread his hands helplessly.

“Only the Elders converse with them and can interpret their will,” he confessed. “I have only seen them once, and that was when I was a child and a terrible plague was devastating the tribe. The Elders begged

for their assistance, and when they came, I saw them only briefly and from a distance.”

“Oh? And what did they look like?” I asked-never dreaming how his answer would petrify me with horror.

“Like men, but different from us, of course. They were smaller than men, with slant black eyes, yellow faces, and they wore strange grey raiment which covered their entire bodies . . .”

And I went cold, stunned by his words.

For well did I know the little, dwarf-like yellow men with slant black eyes and robes of neutral grey.

The Mind Wizards of Callisto!

Woe unto us, if Thadron’s estimate of the situation was accurate, and if the Elders should summon their unseen masters to decide our fate.

For we would be given over into the hands of the very enemies the armada had flown here to root out and destroy!

Chapter 14

The Flint Knife

The Elders interrogated us at some length, once Xangan had put the finishing touches on his own version of our capture. The one who asked us the most pointed and searching questions was Quone. He was a tall, gaunt old man with a bald, knobby skull, crowned with fugitive wisps of silky, colorless hair, and a remarkably homely visage. His nose was prominent and hawk-like, and this, taken in conjunction with his air of cold hauteur, his supercilious expression, and his manner of elevating his chin, lent him a physiognomy strikingly Roman. I have seen precisely that same combination of features on Roman portrait-busts in the Metropolitan Museum, but in the case of Quone, he looked like a Roman senator fallen into barbarism, for his scrawny frame was draped in tanned animal hides whose fringes flapped and dangled about his bony shanks, and his noble brow was crowned with gaudy feathers, while his wattled throat was adorned with necklaces of colored beads, shells, and the ivory fangs of beasts.

His questions were acute and perceptive. Whereas Thadron-and even Ylana-had unquestioningly assumed us to be strangers from a tribe as primitive as their own, the Elder instantly guessed us to be aliens from a more advanced civilization. He examined our clothing with keen and curious eyes; Lukor’s clothing, that is, since Tomar and I wore nothing but sky-boots and ragged loin-cloths. Lukor, of course, wore the sleeveless, open-necked leather tunic, voluminous white blouse with tight cuffs, girdle and short cloak commonly worn by members of the warrior class throughout the other hemisphere.

Quone was interested in the brilliant red gem Lukor affected rakishly in one earlobe, in the supple, suedelike leather of his tunic, which was dressed and tanned in a manner superior to anything the jungle men knew, and in the ornaments of precious metal wherewith the sword-master’s girdle was adorned.

Lukor, whose stiff-necked sense of the proprieties was ruffled by the personal nature of Quone's interrogation, made terse responses to each query. He gruffly denied knowledge of the techniques of tanning leather to such suppleness, and declared himself likewise ignorant of the weaving methods used to produce such fine fabrics as composed his cloak and blouse.

The other Elders-there seemed to be seven of them in all-were a gaggle of toothless, rheumy-eyed old fellows who lazed sleepily in warm daylight, content to leave the questioning to Quone. I got the impression that he quite dominated the group.

I tried to keep my answers to his questions as unspecific as possible, when the interrogation got around to me. We were adventurers from a far-off land, I told him, strayed here by accident. We had been captured by the Zarkoon, and, together with Ylana, had narrowly managed to escape from the clutches of the cannibal bird-men. Fortunately, Xangan and his band had encountered us too late to see the flying machine in which we had descended to the plateau, so I was spared the necessity of explaining our possession of such a craft, and Ylana said nothing of it.

Jugrid, the king of the jungle tribe, had arrived on the scene during our interrogation. He was a big man with stalwart, clean-cut features and a powerful physique, and had about him a certain natural majesty. He was a born fighting-man and I must confess I liked him from the first. Together with Ylana and Thadron, he seemed to represent a superior strain; there was a definite innate nobility about these three which set them apart from the bulk of the tribesmen, who, save for a few tall, well-built, intelligent-looking men and women, seemed otherwise composed of hulking, unappetizing specimens like Xangan, or vulgar and slatternly women.

The glances of pity and commiseration Jugrid silently exchanged with his daughter did not escape my eye. Jugrid had evidently hoped the girl had by now long since effected her escape and had found safe refuge among her mother's tribe, the River People. He took no part in our examination and his very presence was pointedly ignored by Quone and the other Elders. I got the distinct impression that the Elders seized every possible pretext to put the jungle king in his place, which they obviously conceived to be definitely subordinate to their own.

Although Xangan had loudly argued we should be put to death at once, to prevent our escaping and returning at the head of a war-band of our people to avenge our capture upon the tribe, Quone was much too canny to acquiesce to his grandson's bullying demands.

"They shall be hostages," he croaked, "wherewith we may bargain should others of their tribe come seeking them."

Xangan grumbled and blustered, but Quone had made up his mind and that was the end of the matter.

"And, as well, I doubt me not the Unseen Ones will be interested in them," he concluded. As you can imagine, my blood ran cold at his words. The very last thing I wanted to do was to have our presence on the plateau brought to the attention of the Mind Wizards. With their uncanny telepathic powers, they could penetrate my mental defenses in a moment, and discover the existence and the purpose of the armada in this hemisphere, and we should lose the slight advantage of surprise we perhaps still possessed.

Quone ordered us held in a small cave whose mouth was blocked by a palisade. That is, he ordered Lukor and Tomar and I thus imprisoned. As for the jungle girl, she would be held by the unmarried women of the tribe until "the moons were right" for her long-delayed wedding with Xangan. By this term, I assumed the Jungle People placed some superstitious value on astrology, and deduced from the

movements of the Jovian moons times deemed propitious for various tribal activities.

We were thrust into the narrow cave, together with food and drink, and left to our own devices until such time as the Mind Wizards could be informed of our existence and give their judgment on our disposal.

And there was nothing to do but wait.

We searched the cave thoroughly, but found it secure. It ended in a passage which narrowed into a small pocket, blocked by a massive boulder. The roof arched above us, without chimney or fissure, and the sides of the cavern were smooth and unbroken. The only way out was the cave mouth itself, and the palisade wherewith this was closed was made of heavy logs, deeply buried in the soil and trimmed off to meet the lintel of the entrance with only a half inch of leeway. There did not seem to be any way we could effect an escape and we were guarded night and day by two warriors who squatted before the palisade, alternately dozing and playing some sort of dice-like game with knucklebones for pieces.

So we resigned ourselves to durance vile, keeping our eyes open for any opportunity to get away. Our chances for such seemed rather slender. There was simply no way out of our cave, and we soon decided that if we were going to make a break for it, we could only do so when the palisade was opened. This happened three times a day, when the gate was opened to replenish our supplies of food and water and we were escorted out of the cell for the purpose of relieving nature. Alas, on these occasions we were so heavily ringed about with guards that to try for freedom would be either an exercise in futility or in suicide.

Time weighed heavily on our hands. There was simply nothing to do but sprawl about, and either nap or converse. From time to time our boredom was relieved by a visitor. Xangan came strutting by to insult us in his loud, blustering way-staying safely on the other side of the bars and well beyond our reach. After a time we simply ignored him and pretended he was not there, and before long he found the baiting of men who ignored his baiting so lacking in savor that his visits dwindled and eventually ceased altogether.

A much more welcome visitor, however, was Thadron, the handsome, intelligent young warrior who had prevented Xangan from slaying us on the spot when we were captured. He visited from time to time, conversing through the bars, and seemed sympathetic to our predicament, although his words were guarded and neutral, due to the omnipresent guards, hulking louts of Xangan's cut who listened with suspicious ears to every exchange.

Ylana also visited us now and again, for she was only watched, and not caged up as we were. I strove to find out how long it would be before the Mind Wizards were made aware of our captivity and would come hither to decide our fate. She did not know the answer to this question, for the Elders jealously guarded from the knowledge of the rest of the tribe the method by which they communicated with the Unseen Ones, as it was their exclusive monopoly of the channel of communication from which they derived their authority over their superstitious fellow-tribesmen. It would be many days, however, as she guessed from previous experiences.

To relieve the indescribable tedium of my captivity, I begged some writing materials from her. The Jungle People lacked the art of writing, but I had noticed they kept a domesticated breed of thaptor-like four-legged fowl, and it is from the quills of the thaptor that the Shondakorians and other civilized nations fashion writing implements. It was easy enough for her to slip me a handful of feathers through the bars on her next visit, and she also gathered at my request a quantity of gurom-bark from a grove on the borders of the tribal area I had noticed upon first entering the vicinity.

The gurom tree sheds thin shells of flexible, starchy white bark with a very smooth surface on the inside,

and it peels into thin sheets and may be used for writing much in the same way the American Indians used to employ birch-bark in my native land. The guards raised objections to her procuring this bark, but the maid faced them down and browbeat them into surly, grumbling silence. I admired the way she invented a plausible lie on the spur of the moment, saying I wished to compute the astrological signs for the most propitious time for her mating with Xangan. Evidently, to the primitive minds of these savages, an astrologer is worthy of much of the veneration that would otherwise be displayed towards priests, if the Jungle People had a priesthood, which, in common with the other nations of Thanator, they do not.

Using the smooth white bark for writing-paper, and trimming the quills into pens, I made a crude kind of ink from drinking water mixed with some black powdered mineral I scraped from an outcropping of ore, and thus had something wherewith to pass the time. We devised a game to while away the hours: I marked the largest sheet off into squares and taught Lukor and the boy the old terrestrial game of checkers, which we played with colored pebbles.

Ylana had brought me such a supply of bark and quills, that I also decided to pass the tedium of our imprisonment by setting down this account of my adventures since the Zarkoon carried off Tomar and me from the pilothouse of the Jalathadar. My "ink" was thin and watery, and my pens were not of the finest quality, but I found that by printing the English characters in capitals rather than by using the ordinary cursive I generally employed in the composition of my journals, I could set down a narrative which was fairly legible. Since I had filled my spare time aboard the airship by recording the more recent events, I decided to pass my enforced leisure in the same manner, and thus brought my narrative up to date, picking up the story where I had left off, and incorporating into my account the tale of Lukor and Koja's own adventures, which the gallant little Ganatolian had long since recounted to me.

I became so caught up in the relating of this narrative, that I devoted most of the waking hours of my next several days to completing the makeshift journal. Luckily, during this same period, Lukor and Tomar fell in love with the game of checkers and amused themselves while I was engaged in my literary labors. The Thanatorian mind is singularly intrigued with board games, I have noticed, and they have invented any number of games strikingly akin to chess and Parcheesi, and one that is virtually identical to the popular game of scrabble. From the fascination my two comrades displayed in the simple game of checkers I quickly taught them, I perceived an Earthling stranded by chance on Callisto could easily make his fortune by introducing the Thanatorians to a variety of such games, providing he could secure the local equivalent of a copyright to them.

It was in this manner that we passed the tedious period of our imprisonment without the grueling boredom such an interminable waiting-time would otherwise have inflicted upon us. I lost track of the number of days we endured in our Stone Age dungeon-cell, but it must have been a week at least. If not, then it certainly seemed that long.

However the Elders established communication with Kuur, the shadowy country of the Mind Wizards was evidently at some considerable distance from the caves wherein the Jungle People dwelt. And then one afternoon Ylana came by to exchange a few words with us through the bars. The plucky jungle maid seemed even more downcast than usual, and I asked her the reason for her woeful looks.

"It is just that we shall see each other no more, after tomorrow," she said sadly, "and that this makes me unhappy."

Her words were directed to me, but I noticed that her eyes strayed in the direction of Tomar, who lay watching her as we conversed. Something had passed between the two youngsters during our adventures together, despite all the tauntings and rivalries, and from Tomar's moody silences and her lingering, backward glances after one of her infrequent visits I imagined that the two had conceived of an

affection-doubtless nothing more serious than the teenage crushes I had suffered through when I had been their age, but none the less painful and hard to endure for all that.

But at the moment I was not thinking of “puppy love,” but of the more serious implications in her sad words.

“Why is that, Ylana?” I asked. She regarded me with a long, pitying look.

“Because that croaking old zell, Quone, has just gone about the village informing the tribe that by dawn tomorrow we will be visited by an emissary of the Unseen Ones,” she said.

Lukor broke off his game with a startled expletive.

“By the Red Moon, girl, d’you mean those uncanny yellow rascals will be here by morning?” he demanded.

Ylana nodded sadly and Lukor exchanged a fierce, meaningful look with me.

“Then we must make our escape tonight or never, lad,” he said to me in tones too low to reach the ears of the guards who squatted on their hunkers to either side of the cave-mouth.

I made no comment on this, nor did Ylana. But something in the intensity of the stare with which she caught my gaze alerted me. When her gaze dropped deliberately and meaningfully to her right foot I followed her look. She stood near the barred gate, negligently resting the tip of one foot on the bottom crossbar, so that her buskin-shod toes thrust through the narrow grill just a bit. And I saw with an inward thrill of excitement that her buskin was bound about the toe with an extra thong

There was something tied to the sole of her footgear which she wanted me to take from her!

I signaled Lukor with a fierce gesture. Sensing my meaning without words, the old fellow came over to the bars and began loudly questioning the maid as to what sort of a dire and grisly execution we might expect, when at the tender mercies of the Unseen Ones.

He stood, blocking the sight of the guards, while I dropped to my knees, swiftly untied the thong, and slid my fingers under the sole of Ylana’s buskin. As the thong loosened, a short, hard, thin object dropped into my palm, which I slid into the top of my own boots. I did not have to look at it to guess what it was, for my fingers had traced its outline.

It was a flint knife.

And at last we had a weapon!

“So farewell, Jandar-old man-Tomar,” the girl said, turning away. “We shall not speak again, I think. Farewell!”

“Farewell to you, Ylana, and . . . thanks for everything,” I said. She smiled faintly, turned on her heel, and departed.

It would have to be that very night, we decided. But not when we were let out after the evening meal for sanitary purposes, for at such times ten or a dozen of the jungle warriors escorted us. It would have to be later, on some pretext or other.

As soon as Ylana left, we three retreated to the back of the cave and discussed our chances of escape in whispers. Deciding on a plan of action, we returned to the front of the cave, and tried to busy ourselves at our usual occupations. Tomar and Lukor pretended to play checkers, although their hearts were not really in the game, and as for me, I scribbled away writing these pages. Nothing in our behavior could possibly have suggested that we contemplated making a break for freedom that very night, I am sure.

The hours of afternoon wore on. Never had time seemed to move with such a dreary, dragging pace. The minutes slid by with a leaden slowness. Finally, just as our nerves were frayed almost to the breaking-point with the suspense of waiting, night fell. The guards opened the gate, shoved in our dinner, and, a while later, escorted us to the banks of a narrow stream used by the tribe as a jakes, and escorted us back, locking us in securely.

Like most primitives, the Jungle People are wont to retire as soon as night has fallen. Stuffy, ill-ventilated caves are badly designed for lamps or torches, and there are few things savages can do in darkness-hence they have the habit of crawling into their sleeping furs when darkness falls. One by one the men of the tribe strolled back to their caves, yawning sleepily. One by one the scampering urchins were summoned to bed by the women. Finally the narrow little valley-like open space between the cave-lined cliffs was empty of people. Even the burly, dog-like othodes went indoors, since by night the Zarkoon fly the skies over the plateau, and have been known to swoop down upon the village, carrying off a stray child or beast.

Only our guards were left, and they were curled up, snoring loudly, before the mouth of our cave.

I gave Lukor the signal and he rose from his furs, went to the front of the cave, and rattled the gate, calling loudly.

“What do you want?” one of the guards grunted sleepily.

“I need to relieve myself,” Lukor informed him with prim, fastidious dignity.

“You had your chance earlier, with the others,” the guard yawned.

“I am an old man, and I cannot wait till dawn,” Lukor said. “Take me down to the stream like a good fellow.”

“Go back to sleep, or do it in the back of the cave.”

“I have no intentions of doing either! Take me down to the stream, will you?”

“Oh, take him down, Brokar, or we’ll never get any sleep,” grumbled the second guard.

“Why don’t you take him, Cadj, if it bothers you so much,” Brokar suggested. “I’m just getting comfortable!”

“All right, I will! C’mon, you, and no tricks now-“

The second guard, whose name seemed to be Cadj, climbed out of his furs, unlatched the gate and let Lukor out. He loomed head and shoulders above the smaller, frailer, silver-haired Ganatolian, and was a burly specimen of primitive manhood. In his eyes, the silver-haired Lukor was a feeble senior citizen on a

par with the tottering old grandfathers who made up the seven Elders, and the furthest thing from his mind was doubtless the possibility that the old man might attack him.

Which is exactly what happened!

Just as he unlatched the gate, Lukor and Tomar hurled themselves against it. The wooden gate slammed open, knocking Cadj sprawling. It was so unexpected that, save for one startled squawk of surprise, the guard did not even voice an alarm before Lukor hurled himself upon him, and slit his throat with the stone knife. The other guard uttered a bubbling groan and relaxed even as the first man, curled sleepily in his skins, was struggling to his feet. Tomar and I were upon him in the same instant. The boy kicked him in the stomach as he got halfway to his feet and Brokar fell to his knees gagging and gasping for breath. Before he could do anything I knocked him cold with a karate-chop to the nape of the neck and he fell forward on his face, out cold.

In complete silence we bundled the two in their furs, closed and latched the gate behind us, snatched up their flint-tipped spears, and ran for the edge of the jungle. I suppose we should have knifed Brokar as well as his comrade, but I am too squeamish to kill a man in cold blood and even Lukor, pragmatic old rascal that he is, was too innately chivalrous to do the deed. But with any luck we should be miles deep into the woods before anyone discovered our absence.

One last thing I had taken with me, and that purely through the sudden impulse of the moment. I seized up the bundle of manuscript I had worked on during our imprisonment, to relieve the tedium. I kept it neatly bundled in a scrap of hide, together with my pens and quantity of the black powder from which I manufactured my crude, homemade ink, which was tied in a twist of leather. I don't know exactly what possessed me to salvage the manuscript from our cave. Perhaps it suddenly occurred to me that it would be unwise to leave behind any clue by which the Mind Wizards might be able to ascertain my identity. Whether or not they knew I had come hither from a distant world I could not-be sure, but it seemed unwise to chance it.

We raced through the light of the many moons, out of the narrow vale without discovery, and through the hills. Ahead of us loomed the black-and-scarlet wall that marked the beginning of the jungles. Lukor had passed to me our precious flint-bladed knife: thus it was that I clenched the small weapon Ylana had given to us in my right hand as we covered the last few yards that stretched between the rocky, barren region and the edge of the dense jungles.

And thus it was that in the same instant a gaunt, monstrous figure stepped suddenly from the gloom of the jungle's verge to block my path I drove the dagger, swift as thought, directly at its breast to pierce its heart

In the same instant Lukor behind me cried out-

“Koja!”

Chapter 15

The Last Farewell

It was indeed Koja who blocked my path, although I recognized the familiar casque-like face and blackly-glittering compound eyes of the faithful fellow a fraction of a second too late to halt or to turn aside my dagger.

Had it been any other than the mighty Yathoon, he would have died in the next few moments, his loyal heart transfixed by my keen-bladed knife. But thank God it was Koja and not one of the human inhabitants of Thanator, for Koja is a Yathoon, and the Yathoon are arthropods-insectoid creatures, whose gaunt bodies are sheathed in crab-like chitin. The slick, horny integument armored his breast as might some cuirass, and thus my blade as it struck his bosom, glanced aside, inflicting no hurt and merely scoring a long scratch on his tough chitin-clad breast.

We halted there in the gloom of the jungle's edge, Koja solemnly assuring me he had taken no harm from my involuntary blow. I was shaking like a leaf from nervous reaction. Again I thank God it was Ylana's little knife I had held, and not one of the long spears we had taken from the guards. I can think of few fates more horrible than to be the inadvertent cause of the death of a friend, and Koja had been the first creature on all Callisto to give me his friendship.

"My-dear-old-friend!" Lukor gasped, clapping the giant insectoid in an impulsive embrace, "we-why, we thought you dead, days ago-drowned in the lake-"

"As Jandar would say, 'I yet live,' " the expressionless Yathoon said in his uninflected metallic voice. It was the nearest thing to a joke I could ever recall the humorless great creature having said, and I regret I was still too shaky from having almost slain him to laugh.

"But what happened to you-how come you here?" Lukor burred. There were tears in his eyes and he kept touching Koja repeatedly, giving him little taps and affectionate slaps on the back as if to reassure himself the gaunt giant was real and solid and not the Callistan equivalent of a ghost.

"We of the Horde cannot swim," Koja explained simply, "so after I rose to the surface, I clung to the wreckage of the skiff which of course could not sink, as one pontoon was still filled with gas. It seemed to take forever before we drifted ashore, but eventually the skiff beached itself on the sand, evidently at some considerable distance around the curve of the lake from where you yourselves emerged from the waters. I arrived at the place where you had apparently made a fire after you had already departed down the shore towards the east, and have been tracking you ever since."

"Oh, Koja," Tomar cried, "we searched and searched for you, ever so far up the shore, truly we did!"

Koja flexed his brow-antennae in the Yathoon equivalent of a shrug.

"I know you did, little one, for I saw your footprints in the mud. And by the same markings I followed your path easterly around the curve of the lake until you evidently were attacked by the monster lizard-"

"The groack," I said, nodding.

"Is that what they are called? Well, anyway, from the mark of many feet upon the ground, and the arrows left in the body of the monster, I deduced you had been seized by a war-party and since then I have been following your trail through the jungles. I have been lurking about for some days in this place, trying to discover where you were being kept prisoner, and, having once ascertained that fact, trying to figure out some method of setting you free. You can imagine my surprise, just now, to watch as you freed

yourselves by some ruse and came fleeing exactly towards the place where I stood concealed, spying upon the cave-village.”

“It’s wonderful to see you alive and well, Koja, old friend,” I said, “but we had better continue the explanations later. Right now we should be putting as much distance as possible between ourselves and the jungle men, who will be hot on our trail as soon as they discover we are missing.”

Koja solemnly agreed as to the wisdom of this, and led us off into the jungle. It was dark as pitch once we were deeply within the jungle and the boughs had woven together above our heads into an impenetrable screen of foliage through which only an infrequent and fugitive wisp of moonlight managed to filter. But the great many-faceted eyes of the Yathoon arthropods can see far better in the darkness than can our relatively feeble human organs of vision, and we followed his lead, covering ground far swifter and easier than we could possibly have done alone and without his aid.

The Yathoon are superb huntsmen, and I have elsewhere noted they have remarkable powers of observation. The big fellow led us unerringly through the tangle of jungle paths and by dawn we had penetrated quite deeply into the central regions of the jungle-clad plateau. By now, I had no doubt, the jungle men had discovered the slain guard and the fact that we had escaped; also by now the Mind Wizards would have arrived at the cave village to examine us. It yet remained to be seen whether or not Xangan and his warriors would attempt to track us down. There was a good chance that they might not even try . . . after all, the plateau covered an enormous expanse, and was mostly jungle, and we could be anywhere by this time. Still, I thought it likely that they would be on our trail.

Our problem was, quite simply, that we had nowhere to go. Unless we tried to reach the edge of the plateau, and then attempted to climb down the sheer cliff and somehow escape into the mountains, we could only hide in the jungle. Lukor broached the subject of the River People, whose territory to the east we had been attempting to reach when Xangan’s party had intercepted us. This, we decided, was a dubious refuge at best; at worst, it might be a trap. For, if only two primitive tribes shared the jungle plateau between them, and one of these lay under the thumb of the Mind Wizards, could the second tribe have escaped the same dominance? By now, it was at least possible, war-parties of the River People might be searching for us, as well.

Koja then voiced an idea which seemed the most promising of the few alternatives open to us. Surely the armada would be searching for us, or for Koja and Lukor, at least, knowing they could not have flown very far in the skiff. The Jalathadar of the Xaxar might in fact be cruising overhead at that very moment. If that were so, they could neither see us nor we them, due to the dense jungle foliage. He therefore suggested we take the shortest route to the shores of the Cor-Az, for there in the open we had the best chance of spotting one of the vessels of the armada or of ourselves being noticed by our friends who would certainly be searching the landscape beneath their keel with sharp eyes, alert for any sign of us.

“The wrecked skiff, at least, should easily be seen and noticed from above,” Koja said. “I dragged it well up out of reach of the waves, and arranged the one wing left intact so that it stands out, throwing a prominent shadow whose regularity should draw the attention of our friends aloft. It is there beside the skiff, if anywhere, we are most likely to be seen.”

“Makes sense, I suppose,” Lukor said. Then, clearing his throat, he ventured: “But is it likely the armada is still cruising about near here? Surely they would have scanned the plateau region many days ago, and, having found us not, have either widened their search into more distant regions, or, I fear, given up the search entirely by now, resuming the postponed expedition against Kuur.”

Koja regarded him owlshly.

“There is logic in what you say, friend Lukor, but I can think of no plan with better chances of success.”

Nor could any of us, so we decided upon Koja’s plan then and there.

By mid-morn we reached the lake-shore and Koja led us unerringly to the remains of the skiff. As he had pointed out, it certainly made an unmistakable marker on the beach, whose surface was otherwise smooth and empty in either direction. We searched the skies until our necks ached, but, alas, the heavens were as empty as the beach.

“If our friends have not abandoned the search, they must have left the vicinity of the plateau or surely we could see the ships,” Koja admitted somberly. “Lukor was correct, and I am guilty of wishful thinking.”

“I wonder,” Tomar spoke up unexpectedly. The boy felt himself very much the junior member of our little band, and seldom voiced an opinion, as if hesitant to intrude on the councils of his elders. We encouraged him to explain himself, so he added: “They may have flown on to search the mountains surrounding this plateau . . . but doesn’t it seem likely they will be coming back this way for one final look before sailing on to Kuur?”

We agreed there was much in what he said, and decided to wait a while before attempting to circumnavigate the Cor-Az and find our way down the cliffs. The hours dragged by at a dreary pace, and I passed the time by writing these last few pages in my journal, since I had impulsively carried the manuscript and my writing materials along with me when making the escape from the jungle men. It has occurred to me that even if we do decide to move on before the armada returns to the vicinity of the Great Lake for one last look around, I might be wise to bury the manuscript beneath some sort of marker which would catch the eye of our friends. Pursuant to this notion, Tomar gathered for me from further up the shore a quantity of stones from which we could hastily build a cairn to make the hiding place.

Towards late afternoon a peculiar grunting cry, deep-throated and guttural, came to our ears. Koja listened to it for a time before deciding that it was coming nearer.

“They are hunting us with othodes,” he said in his metallic expressionless voice.

Othodes are husky, burly brutes about the size of bull-mastiffs, whom they rather roughly resemble if you can overlook their six short, stumpy legs, remarkable purple hide, and ugly neckless head whose principal features are goggling eyes and a froglike gash of a mouth that stretches from ear to ear and from which blunt, powerful tusks protrude. They hunt in packs in their wild state and are ferocious, intelligent beasts whom certain of the nations of Thanator domesticate and use as we Earthlings use hunting-dogs.

I had never before chanced to hear the hoarse, grunting cry of othodes, but I did not care to dispute Koja’s judgment in the matter.

So the jungle men were on our track, after all! Well, I had feared as much. And there was nothing we could do but attempt to elude recapture as long as possible. Luckily, night was about to fall, which ought to help us a little.

And now it occurred to us to curse our lack of foresight. If we had hit upon the idea earlier in the day, we might have cobbled together a crude sort of raft from fallen tree-trunks and jungle vines, and poled out into the lake, putting miles of water between us and the vengeful savages who now pursued us. True, the Cor-Az was probably the lair of more than one such monster reptile as the groack which had attacked us many days ago, but with a modicum of luck we might have gotten across the lake by now

and be climbing down the cliff-like side of the plateau before Xangan and his cohorts had any idea of our whereabouts.

Well, it was too late now to try it, for the jungle men were getting closer with every moment, and I have never seen the sense in crying over spilt milk! The best thing to do would be to strike off into the jungle and lead our pursuers as far away from the wreckage of the skiff as possible. And to elude capture until daylight, if we possibly can.

Night has just fallen with that swift, sudden extinguishing of light that makes the coming of darkness so remarkable here on Callisto. I am hastily scribbling down these last few lines by the bewildering, many-colored moonlight as Tomar and Koja and Lukor are bundling up our few possessions, ready to flee into the jungles.

In just a moment I will place this final sheet together with the rest of the manuscript in the hole Tomar has dug, and we will pile the stones he gathered upon it, making a tall cairn or marker which we hope will catch the eye of any of our friends who may fly over the shore for one last look before going on to Kuur.

Perhaps it would have been wiser had I written this narrative in the Thanatorian characters, rather than in English. But, surely, any of you who notice the cairn, and land to investigate, and dig up the cache, will recognize the manuscript for what it is. Luckily, Zastro, the old sage or savant of the Ku Thad, is among you; he is the only being on all this Jungle Moon who can read and understand the English language, save myself. I know this, for I have been his tutor in my native tongue, and he has proved a brilliant student.

It is to him, then, that I must address these last words. They must be few, for the eager baying of the othodes is growing nearer and nearer, and my companions are ready to depart and are anxious to be gone.

Zastro-if indeed you ever read these words-know that we are heading due northwest into the jungle, and then intend to angle off directly west to the very edge of the plateau, where we hope to find a way down the cliff and may perhaps lose ourselves in the mountain-country. If we can at all do so, it is our intention-as of right now-to find our way back to the range of peaks which Ylana called the "Mountains of the Zarkoon." The only landmark known to us is the great crater-like hole in the flank of one of these peaks, the hole which leads into the cavern-world of the birdmen.

It will of course be dangerous for us to lurk very long in the vicinity of the entrance to the subterranean lair of the Zarkoon, but somewhere on that slope, in an open place, look for another cairn like the one under which you found this manuscript. There I plan to deposit further instructions as to the direction in which we will be traveling, if indeed we are not seized by the Zarkoon themselves, or fall prey to some other monstrous and unexpected peril.

Very soon now we shall leave this place, leading the jungle men as far away from the wreckage of the skiff and the cairn we will have built above this hidden manuscript as we can do. Koja plans to return to a point further up the jungle trail by which we came here, and then to strike off anew into the west. He hopes by this stratagem to confuse the othodes, to mix our trails, leading them away from the skiff, in order to prevent them from discovering the cairn and, perhaps, destroying or carrying off this manuscript.

Only you will know for certain if our plan succeeds! For if you find this manuscript and are reading these words, then our trick will have worked and we will have succeeded in leading our pursuers astray.

Look for a similar cairn on a flat, open space near the entrance to the cavern of the Zarkoon.

If you do not find it, then that will mean we were either recaptured by the jungle men before escaping from the plateau, or fell victim to some predator or catastrophe on our way to the mountains.

And if we are recaptured, the chances are very great that we will be taken into Kuur itself as prisoners of the Mind Wizards. Surely they will want to drain every bit of information from us they possibly can, before slaying us.

As it is possible I will be dead or a slave in Kuur shortly after you read these words, we may never see each other again. It is difficult for me to realize that my long adventure perhaps ends here. To all my friends and comrades, I say-farewell!

To my beloved princess-farewell, my beloved! I love you with all my heart. My last thought in this life will be of you. The last word I will speak with my dying breath will be your lovely name.

And to our child, whom I may never see again, whom I may never watch grow to proud manhood-farewell, Kaldar, my son! Grow strong and manly-make your mother as proud of you as I would be, were I there by your side!

And never give up hope until you have proof of my death.

For I yet live. And while I live-I have hope.

Book Four

ZASTRO'S NARRATIVE

Chapter 16

In Search of the Castaways

And now it is I, Zastro-whom Jandar has called the "sage" and "savant" of the Ku Thad-who must take up the pen let fallen from his hand, to record something of those events whereof I am the witness.

Whether or not I am truly the "wise man" the Prince of Shondakor has so often named me, I must leave to the estimate of my peers and to the judgment of posterity. It is, however, true that in a world of warriors and adventurers, the passion which has consumed my years is the curious desire for abstract information, and the even more curious desire to grasp what little can be understood of the laws of nature and of the workings of the minds and hearts of my fellow beings.

Since this is but the simple truth, my reader (if any) can readily appreciate what a treasure-trove of tantalizing mysteries Prince Jandar represents in my eyes. To meet and to converse with an intelligent being from another world was an opportunity so remote from the furthest reaches of possibility, that I

could not have anticipated such a dream might ever become reality. Thus, from the first moment I encountered the Prince, I have seized upon every opportunity to query him concerning the mysterious world from whence he came, and the creatures, strange to me but familiar to him, who make of that distant world their home. And in recompense for the knowledge he generously saw fit to impart to me, I have shared with him whatever poor lore or learning of my own he might desire.

On this matter of language I fear I permitted my curiosity to stray completely beyond the bounds of prudence. We men of Thanator, you see, of whatever race or nation, share between us one and one only common tongue. Thus it has ever been, and the fact seems to my ignorant mind only fit and natural. Why should two men have two different words for “tree” or “moon” or “water”? Indeed, how could two different words describe the identical thing? For all that these hypothetical two men dwell far apart, is not “water” still and always “water,” in whatever land or realm these two might chance to dwell?

The fact had seemed so thoroughly self-evident to me that not only had I never chanced to question its veracity, I had never even thought of it before my first meeting with Jandar the Earthling. Yet here was a man who had needed to be taught the universal language spoken by all men, even by the arthropods of the Yathoon horde! The very concept of “another language” was so startling in its novelty as to consume my imagination. Quite simply, I could not rest until I “learned” this Jandarian tongue myself.

In this effort the prince kindly assented to assist me, although I fear my questionings must have become wearying and importunate. But we learned together, he and I—the written characters and the modes of punctuation in that tongue that only he would have thought to label “the Thanatorian,” and I the weird intricacies of both spoken and written “English”—as he, quite inexplicably, says is the name of the language spoken in his native land, the “United States.” I should have thought the tongue would naturally have been called “Unitedstatesian,” but such, he has informed me, smilingly, is not the case.

So much for my acquaintance, such as it is, with the language spoken upon the Earth. I insert this boring digression into a narrative of perils and exploits as much to explain my lamentable errors in what I write, as to justify them.* But now permit me to resume the narrative at the point at which I possess information unknown to our lost friends.

When dawn broke on the morning after the night during which Lukor and Koja set out from the Jalathadar to search the mountain-country for some sign of Jandar or Tomar or of the amazing winged men who had—as far as we knew—carried them off after the battle on the bridge, the fact that the Yathoon and the Ganatolian were inexplicably missing was discovered almost at once when they did not appear at breakfast with their fellow-officers.

In consternation lest the winged men (whom I must accustom myself to calling “the Zarkoon”) had raided the airship on a second occasion during the same night, Prince Valkar, as vice-admiral of the expedition, ordered the Jalathadar searched thoroughly. And by this means it was before mid-morning firmly established that Koja and Lukor were in truth no longer aboard.

Happily for our peace of mind, the mystery proved of very brief duration, for almost simultaneously was it also discovered that one of the gigs or skiffs was likewise missing. It did not require much thought to perceive that these two facts obviously bore relation to each other; in fact, recalling that both Lukor and Koja had argued forcefully and eloquently at the midnight council that a search for the prince and his youthful companion should commence immediately, rather than awaiting the coming of daylight, Valkar instantly guessed that the impulsive sword-master had recklessly taken matters into his own hands, with the collusion of the faithful Yathoon.

“So now we have four missing persons to find!” Valkar swore, although the severity of his tones were

belied by a slight grin of reluctant admiration. "Curse that old rapsallion!" he chuckled, "or do I mean 'bless him'? Well, at any rate, I find it difficult to condemn any man who puts his loyalty to a friend so far above a devotion to abstract duty."

It was decided to emulate the covert designs of the Ganatolian adventurer at once. Search-parties were dispatched in the other skiffs to explore the terrain at close quarters, while the four great ornithopters which comprised the armada were dispatched to cruising above the mountains in the four cardinal directions. It was thought likely that, even should the skiffs find no trace of our missing friends on the peaks and slopes and summits, the four mighty galleons of the clouds, with their greater range, might spy the skiff in the distance, if still airborne, or chance to view a flight of the winged men (I mean, the Zarkoon).

All that long day we searched, and much of the night, and all of the two days and nights which followed. That we discovered absolutely no trace of either the skiff or the Zarkoon or of our lost friends may be assigned to the obvious fact that we did not know what to look for, with any precision, nor in which direction to look for it.

It was as if the mountains had opened a great mouth in their flanks and swallowed them, skiff and Zarkoon and all. It was all very mysterious. More than that, it was frightening. Especially since the insufferable Dr. Abziz (a savant for whom I have much the same opinion as Lukor's) frequently made reference to the cannibalistic nature the sagas and old tales assign to the legended Zarkoon.

Even to those among us most adamant in our determination to find Jandar and the other lost members of the expedition, it soon became obvious that we could not continue the search much longer. Every day we remained here searching-every hour we circled and circled the skies-increased the risk that the Mind Wizards might discover our presence in their hemisphere, and might guess the nature of our mission. And thus we should lose the one slender advantage we possessed-the factor of surprise.

Thus, on the following day, a council of the leaders of the expedition was convened in the stateroom of the flagship at the request of Prince Valkar, acting in the absence of Jandar as his vice-admiral. The issues under discussion centered, of course, upon the present problem: should the armada continue its search for our lost comrades, or should it continue the flight against Kuur?

Not one person at that council argued that Jandar, Koja, Lukor and the youth Tomar should be given up as dead. Many and eloquent were the arguments presented in defense of a continuation and an extension of the search. And yet, with considerable reluctance, it was readily admitted that this unanticipated delay in the expedition could only work to the good of the villainous Mind Wizards, and that every hour the expedition was delayed by the search increased the possibilities that the shadowy Lords of Kuur might discover the armada in their skies. Yet what was to be done? To simply fly away, leaving the Prince of Shondakor and his friends and courtiers to their unknown fate would be despicable and obviously repugnant to all at the council.

It was left to Zantor of the Xaxar to propose the solution to this dilemma which was eventually adopted. It will be recalled that Jandar had first met and become friends with this former corsair captain of the Sky Pirates during his last period of imprisonment in the City in the Clouds. Jandar had been captured by the slavers of Narouk, one of the city-states of the Perushtarian Empire* who periodically paid a tribute in human flesh to the aerial buccaneers. Having fallen from the favor of Prince Thuton, monarch of Zanadar, because of his more humane treatment of his captives, the former captain of the frigate Xaxar had been himself degraded to the level of a slave, and fought among the gladiators of Zanadar. Among the warriors of the arena Zantor had won a high place, due to his bravery and his prowess in the martial arts, as well as to his natural powers of leadership.

When Jandar and his comrade, Ergon, were consigned to the Pits of Zanadar and were doomed to fight among the gladiators in the games, Zantor had befriended them. Jandar had been instrumental in saving Zantor's life when a conspiracy, led by Prince Thuton's favorite, Panchan the Golden, had attempted to poison him before a gladiatorial contest. Thus, when, in the fullness of time, Jandar made his break for freedom during the annual games, Zantor and the former buccaneers of his crew, who had been consigned to the Pits of the arena to fight and die beside their captain, led a mutiny among the gladiators in support of Jandar's fight for freedom. It was this unexpected slave revolt which had proved the decisive factor in the struggle of the free and sovereign states of Thanator against the aerial tyranny of the Sky Pirates. Prince Thuton was slain by Jandar's own sword in that revolt, and the Sky Pirates were crushed for all time, and their very city itself had been destroyed.

From the holocaust which enveloped Zanadar, Jandar and most of the rebellious gladiators had escaped in the Jalathadar, which had arrived in the proverbial nick of time to participate in the battle which destroyed the City in the Clouds. One other aerial galleon had escaped the cataclysm and that was the Xaxar itself, for Zantor and his loyal crew had escaped from the arena into the streets of the city, managing to reach their ship, which was moored at the sky-docks, and cast off in time to join the Jalathadar in the last battle wherein Zanadar was whelmed and brought down to flaming ruin. From that day to this, Jandar has had no more loyal or more faithful friend than Zantor of Zanadar. Forswearing their former allegiance to the throne of Prince Thuton, the ex-corsair and his entire crew of sky-going buccaneers had become loyal citizens of the Golden City, and had formed, in fact, the original nucleus of the new Shondakorian sky navy.

These facts being well known to all present at the council, it was a surprise to none when Zantor spoke up, offering a plan of his own which he thought could serve to resolve the dilemma. The giant warrior is a grim and somber man of few words, little given to making speeches. But in this particular case his simple eloquence served him well.

"My lords, I suggest the armada resume its expedition against the Mind Wizards of Kuur," Zantor said, when the vice-admiral had yielded the floor in his favor.

"You do not believe, then, Captain Zantor, that we should continue the search for our lost comrades?" Prince Valkar asked, permitting an expression of surprise to appear on his features.

The grim-faced giant shook his head.

"You did not permit me to finish," he said. "I was going to suggest that the armada voyage on to Kuur, leaving my own ship, the Xaxar, behind to prosecute the search for Jandar and the others."

The Princess of Tharkol spoke up at this point.

"You then feel, Captain Zantor, that one ship may succeed where four ships have failed?"

"I don't know, Princess," admitted Zantor stolidly.

"I but make the suggestion in the nature of a compromise. To hold the entire armada here is obviously to jeopardize the success of our mission of war against the Mind Wizards. Yet to depart entirely from these mountains were to abandon our admiral, the Prince of Shondakor, and our dear friends, to an unknown fate-which would be callous, unfaithful and inhumane. It is quite possible that one ship such as the Xaxar may in truth fail to find the whereabouts of our lost comrades, yet the attempt must and should be made, for it is yet too soon to give up hope that Jandar and the others yet live. It also seems unwise,

to my way of thinking, to tie up the entire armada in this search. As I see it, my lords, the expedition has at this time two purposes. The first is to find, if possible, and, if possible, to rescue, our lost friends. This the Xaxar may well be able to accomplish, through vigilance and luck. The other is to invade and conquer or destroy the country of the Mind Wizards; and I see no reason why the three remaining vessels in the armada, lacking only the assistance of the Xaxar, should not be able to accomplish this second purpose, so long as it has not lost the valuable advantage of surprise.”

“I agree with Zantor, and volunteer to join his crew,” ugly, loyal-hearted Ergon growled.

“And I, too, would like to lend my slight, inconsequential skills to the success of this mission,” chirruped the sly little one-eyed thief, Glypto. His volunteering was most unexpected, but Zantor seemed to welcome it, for he favored the odd, quaint, cunning little guttersnipe with a friendly nod and a slight smile. Doubtless he recalled to mind the good service and faithful assistance the little rogue had given to Prince Jandar and Princess Darloona only a few months before, when it had eventually come to light that the thieving rascal was, in actuality, not a spawn of the Tharkolian gutters at all, but the brilliantly ingenious and resourceful master-spy of the Seraan of Soraba, our trusted ally in this venture.* Glypto, although no warrior, had volunteered for service aboard Zamara’s flagship, the Conqueress, as part of the Soraban contingent. That the wily little fellow had conceived of a warm admiration for Prince Jandar was widely known; thus his volunteering to assist in searching for the lost prince should really have come as no particular surprise to the members of the council. It is just that, due to his consummate skills as an actor, we were all so accustomed to thinking of him as a whimpering, cowardly little sneak thief, and his speaking up at this time to join a desperate and dangerous quest seemed somehow out of character.

Close upon Glypto’s bid to join the crew of the Xaxar, half a dozen more of Jandar’s trusted friends and comrades spoke up to beg the same privilege. Laughingly, Valkar lifted a hand to silence them.

“We’re going to have to draw the line after Glypto, I think,” he said smilingly, “or half of the warriors on the expedition will be crowding aboard the Xaxar in order to help rescue Jandar, and that would leave the rest of the armada somewhat undermanned! However, there’s much good sense in what Captain Zantor has proposed, and the leaving behind of one ship should not seriously impair the fighting efficiency of the armada. Let us put Zantor’s plan to a vote. . .”

Chapter 17

The Quest of Zantor

Needless to say, the council voted overwhelmingly in the affirmative to give Zantor’s plan a try. But Zantor himself spoke up, over-ruling Valkar’s half-hearted objection to the addition of new members to the crew of the Xaxar. He pointed out, in a reasonable fashion, that certain of us possessed skills which might be of greater use and value to the search for the lost prince than to the expedition of war. Valkar saw the sense of this and withdrew his objection, leaving it up to Zantor himself to choose between the many who clamored for the privilege of a place on the Xaxar.

In all modesty, I must here admit that the first to speak up after this ruling was myself. Considering my years, I can hardly claim to be either a warrior or an adventurer, but I pointed out to Valkar that we

might discover some message left behind by Jandar, and that, as I was the only person in all the armada who had become acquainted with his native tongue, English, I should be permitted to join the expedition against that contingency. This was agreed to. And then another individual, also no warrior, spoke up to demand room be made for him aboard the Xaxar. That he volunteered for such a dangerous mission truly came as a surprise to all—for it was none other than the puffed-up and argumentative little geographer from Soraba, Dr. Abziz!

“But, doctor, we will certainly be calling upon your skills as a geographer in our own search, for the whereabouts of Kuur have yet to be ascertained,” said Prince Valkar in considerable puzzlement at this unexpected request.

“Nonsense!” snorted the acerbic little Soraban. “In Ang Chan’s medallion-map you have what can only be assumed to be an accurate representation of the territories surrounding the secret citadel of the Mind Wizards. And in the maps and charts and notes I have already had copied and distributed among the several ships of this armada you already possess everything I know or can conjecture regarding the terrain of this hemisphere. From this point forward in time, my presence upon the Jalathadar becomes superfluous, and as it is my express desire and plan and purpose to join in the search for the lost members of the expedition, I expect you, sir, to accede to my request.”

“Very well. We shall leave it to Captain Zantor, as it is his decision to make.”

Zantor then, in his serious way, inquired if Dr. Abziz had any particular reason for wishing to join in the search for Prince Jandar, to which the little geographer replied, “My desire to assist in the rescue of Prince Jandar is purely altruistic; however, in the case of certain other members of the expedition who are lost, strayed or stolen, my motives are more selfish.”

“What do you mean?”

“I refer to one Lukor of Ganatol,” the doctor said shortly, with a little gleam of malicious humor in his eye. “That gentleman and I have been at odds to a certain extent, as many of the members of this council must be aware. Now that my principal duties have been accomplished, and my further presence aboard this flagship has become superfluous, I should dearly love to take part in the rescue of Lukor of Ganatol, if only to view the expression on that gentleman’s face when he discovers that, for his rescue, he is at least in part beholden to me!”

We laughed over that, as you may imagine. I can well picture how discomfited Lukor would be, to find out that the conceited little Soraban whom he had delighted in baiting, had taken part in the dangerous mission to effect his rescue!

Following this, the council ended its meeting, deciding to give the Xaxar thirteen days in which to search for the lost prince and his companions, before rejoining the expedition at a locale specifically noted on the map. As did Dr. Abziz and Ergon and Glypto, I then went to my quarters, packed my gear, and moved to new quarters aboard the Xaxar.

A short while later the armada formed again into its chevron formation and, exchanging by means of signal flags a salute and best wishes with the Xaxar, sailed off into the east and, before long, dwindled from sight, vanishing motes in the glaring golden skies.

Then began the lonely quest of the Xaxar to find out what peculiar fate had overcome Jandar of Shondakor . . .

As the armada had already searched, in a general fashion, the vicinity of the mountains of the Zarkoon, as we later learned was their name, we first voyaged rather extensively to the south, then the west, and then the north. Much new geographical information was added to our maps during these specific ventures, each of which, I might add, consumed on the average about three days and nights. It was purely an accident of chance which caused us to waste these nine days in searching in the wrong direction for the lost members of the expedition, although we could not of course have known this at the time.

Only when, on the morning of the eleventh day after we separated from the armada, with our voyage into the east, did we come to fly over those territories in which Jandar had actually adventured. Our previous ventures, of course, had discovered nothing concerning the fate of our friends; but before long, as we were flying over the ring of mountains which encircled the mysterious and jungle-clad plateau, we experienced the thrill of the long-anticipated discovery.

For there on the smooth and sandy shores of an immense lake we sighted the wreckage of the skiff. It was, I believe, Ergon the Perushtarian who first spotted the wreckage, and the excited cry he voiced aroused the ship's company. Those who were below came pelting up the stairs to the mid-deck or the various observation belvederes to see what Ergon had discovered.

It was unmistakably the wreckage of the skiff. There was no question about this, for it lay imbedded in the sand in such a position as to cause the one unbroken wing to thrust up at a sharp angle which cast a long shadow across the sand—a shadow of such regularity as to be undoubtedly an artificial, indeed, a man-made, object.

Zantor brought the aerial galleon to a halt and we began to descend to investigate further. From our height at that time it was impossible to tell if any bodies lay strewn about the wreck. We lined the deckrail, jostling shoulder-to-shoulder for the best view, watching with eyes which ached from the strain, dreading to hear—the anticipated cry that some keen-eyed observer had sighted the first body.

But no such cry came, to our immense relief. It would seem, unless they had perhaps been carried off by whatever predators might haunt the unexplored jungles of the plateau, that none of our comrades had been killed in the crackup of the skiff. (We did not at once realize, you will understand, that the skiff had actually fallen into the lake; this fact was not discerned until later, and at this time it was understandable to guess that the skycraft had for some reason crashed into the shore.)

Flying ships such as the Xaxar cannot safely come to rest on the ground, save in special docks specifically designed to that purpose. So, having descended to as low an altitude as Captain Zantor deemed safe, the craft came to a halt and crewmen slid down ropes lowered over the side. The first of these to reach the sand was Ergon, who sprinted for the wreckage, prowled about it, and then emerged to call up to us the wonderful news that no one was in the wreck.

Ergon did not, for some reason, perceive the cairn. In fact, it was Glypto—who stood near me on the deck—who spotted it first and called the attention of those down on the shore to the pile of stones.

Again, we watched with great suspense and excitement as Ergon and the other men carefully pulled the pile of stones apart, found the hole Jandar had caused to be dug beneath it, and drew out the bundle of manuscript the lost prince had therein concealed. This was brought up to the ship at once, and I was summoned to the captain's stateroom to examine it.

With trembling hands I opened it, and announced to Zantor and the other officers who stood ringed about that it was indeed, as we had naturally already guessed, the work of Prince Jandar. Instead of the paper we Shondakorians employ, the narrative had been set down on some smooth, thin, white

substance which resembled bark. And, instead of ink, the writer had used a muddy fluid of indeterminate hue, difficult in several places to make out. As it would obviously take me some hours to read the manuscript, Zantor and the others left me alone in the stateroom for that purpose, and while the rest of the day dragged on, parties of men descended to explore the shore in both directions and to penetrate the edge of the jungle at various points to see if some further traces of our lost companions might be discovered.

I read the manuscript as swiftly but as closely as I could, and thus learned for the first time of the existence of the Zarkoon-world on the interior of one of the mountain-peaks, and of the primitive tribes who inhabited the plateau. All of this material you will have already perused, for I have added this last installment to the large bundle of manuscript Jandar had already completed during the opening phase of our voyage hither.

It was the matter in the final pages, of course, that was most pertinent to our expedition. While it was wonderful to learn that Jandar and Tomar, together with Lukor and Koja, had thus far managed to escape death and to elude their pursuers, the desperate straits in which they stood in peril of momentary recapture just prior to the concealment of the manuscript were of immediate and transcendent importance.

Night had already fallen across the world as I hurried up the winding stair into the pilothouse to apprise the impatient Zantor of what had transpired. I found the giant warrior pacing the bridge with heavy tread. With words tumbling over each other on my tongue, I communicated the perils in which Jandar and the others had stood, according to the last passages of the document, together with information as to what the Prince had planned to do next.

“Then we had best weigh anchor for this peak whereat Jandar had hoped to deposit further information concerning the route they would choose to take, should they manage to elude recapture by the jungle savages,” Zantor murmured. I confirmed his words, and described as best I could the crater-like opening which marked the entrance to the subterranean world of the Zarkoon. This was, you will recall, the landmark Jandar had indicated in the last pages of the manuscript.

We flew thither that very night. By the brilliant light of the moons it was not particularly difficult for us to sight the crater-like hole in the flanks of the mountain. We had, of course, noticed it already, during our search of these very mountains, but at that earlier time we had no particular reason to examine it. Now, towards early morn, we came to hover above the approach to this crater. With archers at the ready, in case the winged men should come out of their cavern home and attempt any action against the ship, we lowered well-armed warriors to the side of the mountain.

For many hours these men searched diligently, without, however, finding any second cairn or other token of Jandar’s presence here.

“Perhaps it proved difficult for some reason to erect a second cairn here,” Glypto argued. “Jandar might have scratched a sign or a message in some prominent place here on the slope, which we cannot make out with clarity until daylight!”

“There is much in what you say, Glypto,” the captain said somberly. “Very well; we shall ascend to the three-thousand-foot level and await daybreak before resuming our search of the mountainside.”

As you may imagine, we got little sleep for the remainder of that night. While parties of vigilant archers stood watch on rotation against any attack on the part of the Zarkoon, those of us who tried at all to sleep tossed and turned in our bunks. In the minds of us all, I am sure, the same questions revolved.

Had Jandar and his companions escaped from the plateau, or had they been recaptured by Jugrid's jungle men?

If they had managed to elude recapture, had they perchance fallen victim to some monster of the cliffs, or to some predator of the mountains?

Or had they perhaps been attacked by the Zarkoon while ascending the slope of the mountain, and before they had been able to build the cairn Jandar had promised to leave, or to inscribe whatever token or sign of their whereabouts he intended to make for our guidance?

None of these important questions could yet be answered. And that was the reason few of us, if any, got any sleep that night . . .

When daylight came at last we sent down search-parties amounting to perhaps forty men or more. I accompanied the foremost of these, on the premise that it seemed likely any directions or instructions Jandar had left for us might be in the same language as the manuscript.

We combed the slope of the mountain all that day, without finding the slightest trace that Jandar or any of his companions had ever even reached it. Towards early afternoon Zantor dispatched two skiffs under the command of Ergon and Glypto to explore the ravine at the bottom of the cliffs surrounding the plateau. By nightfall they returned, and again it was to report in the negative. There was no evidence that our lost friends had ever climbed down the cliffs, crossed the ravine, or even entered the mountains which encircled the plateau of the jungle men.

On the following day, which was the thirteenth since we had parted from the armada, Zantor sent heavily armed warriors into the subterranean world of the

Zarkoon to explore that region, hoping perhaps to discover that Jandar or his companions had been seized by the winged men. The Zarkoon fled into the remotest recesses of the immense cavern after several of their number had attacked the skiffs and were either slain or driven off. The cages Jandar had described were found, but they were empty and contained no signs of recent human occupancy. The nesting-place of Skeer, whom Jandar had called the chief of the winged monsters, was likewise discovered and was identified as such on the basis of the descriptions given in Jandar's manuscript, which I had by now rendered into our own Thanatorian tongue and imparted to my comrades. In that nest was found what Jandar would probably call a "jackdaw's hoard" of miscellaneous treasures-bones and shells and feathers and teeth and scraps of carven wood and brightly-colored cloth. Rusted implements of human workmanship were found among the bird-man's loot as well-dagger hilts and broken sword-blades, old dented helmets and odds and ends of jewelry. But not a one of these items could positively be identified as having belonged to Jandar, Tomar, Lukor or Koja.

That night we flew in the Xaxar into the northerly corner of the plateau, and descended in force upon the country of the Jungle People. We found the village deserted, save for the small, thaptor-like fowl domesticated by the jungle men, and a number of stray othodes who scuttled off at our approach. It was easy to surmise that the savages had fled into the jungle at our appearance in the skies. With dawn we spent many wasted hours searching the jungle in hopes of encountering Jugrid's men, but they evidently knew every place of concealment the dense undergrowth afforded, and we were unsuccessful in this venture as well.

We were by now mid-way into the last day of our expedition. If we were to rejoin the armada, as originally planned, we would have to depart soon. Already, in fact, we had lingered overlong, but Zantor

was grimly determined to exhaust every possible avenue of investigation before giving up.

And-just as we were gathering aboard and preparing to up anchor and be off on the voyage to Kuur-at last we made a discovery!

A lone human figure appeared at the edge of the jungle and stood timidly staring up at the gigantic galleon which floated above her head like an astounding apparition conjured into reality by some magician.

Ergon and several crew-members swarmed down the rope ladders to effect her capture. But the child-for she was scarcely more than that-did not attempt to flee back into the shelter of the trees, and waited for them to approach her.

They soon returned to the ship, the jungle maid climbing the ladder with them. As she gained the midship deck, I saw that she was of about an age with Tomar, a long-legged, stunningly attractive girl wearing an abbreviated garment of tanned hides, her long bare arms and legs adorned with primitive jewelry.

“Is your name Ylana, my child?” I called out to her as she climbed nimbly over the rail and stood, staring about her in wonderment. She turned her wide eyes upon me with surprise.

“I am Ylana of the jungle country,” she admitted. “But who are you, old man, and how do you know my name?”

I introduced myself and explained that Jandar had described her in such detail in his manuscript that it was possible for me to guess her identity at a glance. The jungle maid did not understand the method by which Jandar had communicated with me-I gathered from her demeanor that the art of writing was all but unknown to her people-and asked me eagerly if Jandar “and that boy,” by which she evidently referred to Tomar, were aboard.

When I said that they were not, her face clouded and her eyes fell. At Zantor’s suggestion I took her below and offered her food and drink, which she fell upon as though famished. While she satisfied her appetite, I elicited from her, in bits and pieces her own story.

Chapter 18

The Mystery Deepens

“Yes, I know that Jandar and his friends escaped days ago,” the half-starved jungle maid told me there in the cabin as she devoured the meal hastily sent up from the galley. “For the morning after they managed their escape the emissary of the Unseen Ones appeared in the village, and there was a great uproar when the guards stationed outside the prison-cave were found, the one dead, the other one stunned and groggy.”

She made a little expression of distaste. “That brute, Xangan, hastily summoned a war-party and whistled up the hunting othodes, and plunged into the jungles in pursuit of the escaped prisoners.”

“Did he find them, and bring them back?”

“I do not know,” the girl admitted. “In the confusion of the moment I myself managed to elude the attention of the women consigned to watching over me. I snatched up a spear someone had left leaning against a rock, and ran into the jungle. There was so much milling around and people yelling that no one realized I was even gone until sometime after I had made my escape, I am sure.”

“Well, what did you do then?”

She shrugged wearily. “I tried to get through the jungles to the south in order to reach the country of my mother’s people, but I got lost. The hunters of my tribe may know these jungle paths well, but I am less acquainted with them. I have been stumbling around in circles for many days, as well as I can guess. A big lizard treed me for one whole day before giving up and ambling off in search of a dinner that could not climb trees-“

“I thought you told Jandar there were no dangerous beasts in the jungle?”

“Well, I did. The big lizards are troublesome, but fat and slow moving. They would eat you if they could, but a person can easily outrun them, or simply climb a tree and wait for them to move along,” she said.

“Very well-please go on.”

“There’s nothing much more to tell you, Elder,” the girl said, finishing her repast. She evidently assumed we Shondakorians, for all our amazing flying ships, were a tribe essentially like her own; and, come to think of it, she was not far off the mark in addressing me as “Elder,” for my years, and the small store of wisdom I have managed to accumulate during those years, have earned me a position of respect as a senior counselor to my prince and princess: hence I am, in her sense of the word, very much an “Elder.” But I digress-the fault of old men given to garrulous habits, I fear.

The maid continued her story.

“I wandered through the jungle for days, or so it seemed. I tried to slay a beast with my spear, but it got away, taking the spear with it. I ate lizard eggs and some fruit and berries. Then I came out here, almost exactly where I had gone in. I would have ducked back and tried again, but I could not help noticing that the village was empty of people, and the caves deserted. This puzzled me-as you can imagine. And then I saw your-“ she fumbled for a word to describe the Xaxar, but, as her primitive vocabulary evidently lacked any term which would adequately apply, she merely gestured around at the cabin.

“It looked very much like the flying log Lukor and the insect-man were riding when they rescued us from the caverns of the Zarkoon,” she said. “So I let myself be noticed, hoping that I was right and that you were friends of Jandar and Tomar.”

“So you know nothing whatsoever about the possible recapture of our lost friends?”

“Nothing at all, I’m sorry to say,” she admitted.

“If Xangan had succeeded in capturing them, would he have taken them to Kuur?” I asked.

“What is Kuur?”

“The country of the Mind Wizards,” I said.

“You mean the Unseen Ones? I don’t know. If there is some reason why the Masters would be very interested in Jandar, they might have done so.”

“Do you know where their country is?”

She shook her head.

“Do you know in which direction it lies, or how far away it is, or how to get there?”

The answer to all of these questions was negative.

I let her rest and bade the steward lay out fresh garments and hot water so that she might wash herself and change her raiment, and went up to the bridge to report to Captain Zantor.

There was nothing more we could do here, he decided reluctantly. And we were overdue to rejoin the rest of the armada. We would take Ylana with us, however. That much at least we could do, for she was desperate to escape from the marriage with Xangan which the Elders of her tribe were adamant in forcing upon her.

We flew across the plateau into the east and before the daylight was extinguished we had traversed the ravine which encircled the jungle plateau and were soaring above the unknown mountains which rose on its further side.

Zantor kept the wheel-gangs working all night to make up for lost time. Under the light of the many moons, we flew for hours over previously unexplored mountains without sighting any sign of human habitation. Over a midnight lunch with Dr. Abziz, neither of us being able to sleep, we discussed the mysteries of this unknown hemisphere. The irascible little geographer was puzzled to find that this side of Thanator, or “Callisto,” as Jandar sometimes called it, was so unlike the side we knew. Most of the known hemisphere is occupied by plains and seas and jungles, with only two ranges of mountains; but the far side seemed almost entirely given over to mountains, and on the whole was harsh and infertile, for the jungles of the plateau were the only extensive regions of lush vegetation we had yet encountered.

“Odd, too, that the side of our planet most familiar to us is the home of so many nations,” the doctor pointed out, tugging thoughtfully on the little spike of beard which was his pride and joy, “while this hemisphere, insofar as we now know, is so very sparsely inhabited. Why, we have yet to find a single city! Nothing here but savage tribes, and those befeathered cannibals!”

By day we reached the meeting-place previously decided upon, but the skies were clear in every direction and there was no sign of the armada. This was a trifle strange, but not necessarily a cause for alarm.

For two days more we lingered at the rendezvous without any sign of the armada. Then, growing increasingly alarmed, we began exploring the territory from the air in an ever-widening circle. We found no sign of human habitation, and no sign of the missing ships, not even their wreckage. Neither did we discover the land of the Mind Wizards, although, from a study of Dr. Abziz’s map, we had a fairly accurate notion of what the terrain in its vicinity should look like from the air.

As time dragged on, it became increasingly evident that something had happened to the armada. We had been a bit late in arriving at the rendezvous-point ourselves; but the armada was very late. We began to

speculate that the three missing ships had run into serious trouble.

“Well, it’s obvious, isn’t it?” Ergon growled over dinner one night. “They found Kuur, and attacked it, and were somehow captured or destroyed! If that hadn’t happened, they would surely have met us at the place and time we had agreed. Maybe we were a little late, but they would have waited for us-if they could! But they couldn’t, because by that time they were either dead or imprisoned.”

“Maybe,” Zantor said slowly, rubbing his heavy jaw in a thoughtful fashion. “But if they found Kuur-why can’t we? We’ve been flying around for days, and we have, thus far, covered very many korads. There are mountains beyond numbering, and winding rivers aplenty, but none with the configurations matching those on the silver medallion. How much longer can we continue looking, without finding either the armada, or the Mind Wizards, or both?”

“Eh, sirs,” Dr. Abziz interjected at this point. “I would put the same question, but in a simpler manner: how much longer can we continue looking? Period. For, as you must have noticed from this meager fare set before us, our supplies of food and drink are almost exhausted.”

At this, Glypto spoke up, a gleam of mischief twinkling in his shrewd black eye.

“As Sir Lukor would say, were he but here, perhaps the good doctor thinks too much of his stomach, and not enough of our missing friends! I, for one, will gladly tighten my belt a bit, in order to keep on searching . . .”

“A scholar of my repute,” Abziz said huffily, fixing one eye on the smirking master-thief with a supercilious expression on his scarlet face, “cares little for the fleshly pleasures, among which is the gross matter of nutriment! But we cannot realistically expect a ship full of young fighting-men to stay in trim for long on such skimpy rations.”

Before long it became distressingly obvious, even to the die-hards among us, that it was futile to continue the search. The quest of the Xaxar had doubly failed-failed not only to discover Jandar’s party, but failed to find the armada, as well.

So there was nothing to do but turn back, and retrace the long voyage back to Shondakor in defeat. We could not prosecute the war against Kuur all by ourselves, for a single ship against a city made for unequal odds. And whatever magic the Mind Wizards had used to destroy the three ships of the armada, they should be able to use against our lone vessel with ease.

But new galleons of the skies were nearing completion with every hour in the shipyards of Tharkol. And valiant warriors by the scores and the hundreds would compete eagerly for the honor of serving aboard the second armada, when it was ready to depart. Distressing as was the sad news we must now bring back to the lords of the Three Cities, at least it was not-final.

Jandar, Tomar, Lukor and Koja-their fate was as unknown as were the fates of Valkar and Zamara and all the others. They may have survived the destruction of the fleet, and capture at the hands of the Mind Wizards. At least, until we found unquestionable proof of their deaths-until we found their very graves-we were determined not to give up all hope.

But it was with a heavy heart in every breast that we turned our prow towards Shondakor and set sail for the Golden City of the Ku Thad. I did not look forward to the unpleasant duty of telling Princess Darloona that her beloved mate was either dead, or hopelessly lost, or a prisoner in the unknown country of the Mind Wizards!

I knew the gallant and courageous princess too well to fear that she would utter one word of displeasure towards any of us. She knew we had done the best we could, and that the man does not live upon this planet who could have done more to find the lost warriors. But I dreaded the sadness in her lovely face and the emptiness in her eyes, when she heard the grim news we must bring her . . .

But yesterday we arrived above Shondakor and moored the lone surviving vessel of the great armada to the upper tiers of the great palace whose spires soar up from the heart of the Golden City.

True to my estimate of her character, Darloona did not let one word of criticism fall from her lips when she heard our halting tale. But the expression of agony which convulsed her features as we told of the unknown fate of Jandar cut me to the heart.

The jungle maid, Ylana, was overwhelmed by the splendor and magnificence of the superb capital of the Ku Thad. But her shy and awkward feelings of being a lonely stranger amid so glorious a throng were swiftly banished by our wonderful princess. Despite the agony she endured, Darloona saw the discomfort Ylana suffered, and embraced the girl, folding her to her heart, and told her she was at home and among friends, and would dwell in a suite all her own near to the apartments Darloona herself inhabited.

And then, instinctively guessing how to set the jungle girl at her ease, she sat down on the steps of the throne, and gave her the infant Prince Kaldar to hold. Soon the maid was beaming smiles, chuckling at the antics of the fat babe, and feeling very much at home.

Despite my weariness I have ridden all night through the Grand Kumala with an escort of Ku Thad warriors.

Now as the titanic bulk of mighty Gordrinator lifts itself over the horizon, I stand before that enigmatic thing of pale green jade which Jandar calls the Gate Between the Worlds. Here it was, upon this very spot, years ago, that Jandar the Earthling first materialized upon the surface of our planet. And to this place he has come three times ere now, over the years, to leave upon this mysterious disc of glistening stone the manuscripts wherein he had written down for the eyes of the men of his world an account of his adventures and discoveries upon Thanator.

I do not know if any eye but mine will ever peruse these pages. And Jandar, too, often wondered about this, as he placed in the center of the jade disc his manuscripts. Perhaps they dematerialize, to rise up the sparkling beam of unknown force, to traverse the immense gulf of nothingness that lies between the worlds, only to vanish forever from all knowledge, lost to wander forever between the countless stars. Or perhaps, as was Jandar's oft-expressed hope, they retrace his journey back to his own native world, which he calls The Earth, to materialize unharmed at the bottom of the jade-lined well that lies amidst the ruined city in the jungles. And whether then they are somehow brought to the knowledge of the men of his world, or lie in the ruins to molder and decay unseen, unread—who can say?

Only you, who read these words, can know the truth . . . if you exist!

Why I perform this curious task I cannot really say.

No, that is inaccurate: I do know why!

I do it in memory of Jandar of Callisto—my prince, my pupil, and my friend.

He would have wished it so. All the long days he toiled at the completion of this latest manuscript would

otherwise have been wasted in vain.

He would have wanted me to have set down, however crude and unskillful may be my gifts at the composition of narratives, some account of the circumstances which followed his disappearance from the bourne of human knowledge.

Aye, even as he stood on the brink of the Unknown, he would have bid me do what I have done!

Whatever his nameless fate-whatever the mysterious doom which has fallen upon the noblest hero of two worlds-he would have wished an account of these last and final adventures to be sent through the Gate Between the Worlds . . . perhaps to vanish in the far places of the Universe . . . perhaps to come at last to the amazement and attention of his own countrymen.

“A story is only as good as the ending of it,” he would say, with a reckless grin.

Whether or not I shall ever stand in this place again, to set within the Gate an account of my future adventures, I cannot say.

I am old, and my days are few.

And, alas, only I, Zastro of the Ku Thad, know the language of your world!

Whether the true ending of the story will ever be made known, is a question I cannot answer.

Perhaps it is best to end the tale in this manner. Like all heroes, Jandar of Callisto will someday fight his last battle . . . and venture through the Black Gates of Death to whatever undiscovered country lies beyond. Perhaps it is best that the story ends here, before that last battle is fought . . . if, indeed, it has not already been fought.

And so I wonder, in my philosophical way, if perhaps it is not best that we do not know, that we never know, the end of Jandar’s saga. Let us leave him as we saw him last, going forward into unknown perils, fearless and unafraid, his heart staunch and unshaken, stout and loyal friends at his side, and brave laughter on his lips.

It is not, after all, such a bad ending.

Will the story of my life end so gallantly?

Will yours?

