

Tumithak of the Corridors

By Charles R. Tanner

Foreword

It is only within the last few years that archeological science has reached a point where we may begin to appreciate the astonishing advances in science that our ancestors had achieved before the Great Invasion. Excavations in the ruins of London and New York have been especially prolific in yielding knowledge of the life that those ancestors led. That they possessed the secret of flying, and a knowledge of chemistry and electricity far beyond ours is now certain; and there is even some evidence that they surpassed us in medicine and some of the arts. Taking their civilization as a whole, it is quite doubtful if we have even yet surpassed them in general knowledge.

Until the time of the Invasion, their discoveries of the secrets of Nature seem to have been made steadily in regular geometric progression, and we have good cause to believe that it was the people of earth who first solved the secret of interplanetary flight. The many romances that have been written by novelists dealing with this time, testify to the interest which we of today take in the history of what we call the Golden Age.

But the present story deals neither with the days of the Invasion, nor with life as it was in the Golden Age before it. It tells, instead, of the life of that semi-mythical, semi-historical character, Tumithak of Loor, who, legend tells us, was the first man to rebel against the savage shelks. Although innumerable facts are still lacking, recent investigations in the Pits anti Corridors have thrown much light on what was obscure in this hero's life. That he really lived and fought is now certain to be true; that he accomplished the miracles accredited to him by legend is just as certain to be untrue.

We can feel sure, for instance, that he never lived for the two hundred and fifty years that are ascribed to him; that his wonderful strength and imperviousness to the rays of the shelks are mythical, as are doubtless the stories of his destruction of the six cities.

But our knowledge of his life increases as our credi-bility in the legends decreases, and the time has come when we can grasp dimly, but with a more rational viewpoint, the truth about his deeds. So, in this tale, the author makes an attempt to rationalize, to place prop-erly in its historical setting, the early life of a great hero who dared to strike boldly for Mankind, in the days when the Beasts of Venus held all the earth in thrall.

CHAPTER 1 – The Boy and the Book

As far as eye could see the long somber corridor extended. Fifteen feet high and as many wide it ran on and on, its brown, glassy walls presenting an unvarying sameness. At intervals along the center line of the ceiling large glowing lights appeared, flat plates of cool white luminescence that had shone without attention for centuries. At intervals equally frequent, were deep-cut doors, draped with a rough burlap-like cloth, their sills worn down by the passing generations of feet. Nowhere was the monotony of the scene broken unless it were in some places, where the corridor was crossed by another of equal simplicity.

The passage was by no means deserted. Here and there, throughout its length, scattered figures appeared men, for the most part blue-eyed and red-haired and dressed in rough burlap tunics that were gathered at the waist by wide, pocketed belts with enormous buckles. A few women were also in evidence, differing from the men in the length of their hair and tunics. All moved with a furtive slinking air, for though it was many years since the Terror had been seen, the habits of a hundred generations were not easily thrown off. And so the hall, its frequenters, their clothes and even their habits combined to complete the somber monotone.

From somewhere far below this corridor came the steady beat and throb of some gigantic machine; a beat that continued unceasingly and was so much a part of the life of these people that it was only with difficulty that they could be brought to notice it at all. Yes its beat bore down on them, penetrated their minds, and, with its steady rhythm, affected all that they did.

One part of the hall seemed to be more populous than any other. The lights here glowed brighter, the cloths that covered the doorways were cleaner and newer, and many more people appeared. Sneaking in and out of the doorways they went, for all the world like rabbits engaged in some big business enterprise.

Out of one of the side doorways, a boy and girl appeared. About fourteen years of age, they were exceptionally tall for children, apparently having already reached their full growth, though their immaturity was evident. They, too, like their elders, were blue-eyed and red-haired; a complexion due to the eternal lack of sunshine and lifelong exposure to the rays of the corridor lights. There was a certain boldness and quickness about them that caused many of the folk of the corridor to frown disapprovingly as they passed. One could see that these older ones felt that the younger generation was fast riding to destruction. Certainly, sooner or later, this boldness and loudness would bring down the Terror from the Surface.

But sublimely indifferent to the disapproval that was so in evidence around them, the two youngsters continued upon their way. They turned from the main corridor into one less brilliantly lighted, and after traversing it for nearly a mile, turned into another. The hall in which they now found themselves was narrow and inclined upward at a decided angle. It was entirely deserted and the thick dust and neglected condition of the lights showed that it was long since men had lived here. The many doorways were without the draped curtains that concealed the interior of the inhabited apartments in the larger corridors; but many of the doorways were almost entirely covered with draperies of cobwebs covered with dust. The girl drew closer to the boy as they continued up the passage; but aside from this she showed no sign of fear. After some time the passageway grew steeper, and at last ended in a cul-de-sac. The two seated themselves in the rubble that littered the floor and presently began to talk in a low tone.

"It must have been years since men have come here," said the girl, softly. "Perhaps we will find something of great value which was left here when men deserted this corridor."

"I think Tumithak is too hopeful, when he tells us of possible treasures in these halls," answered the boy. "Surely there have been men in these halls, searching as we are, since they were abandoned."

"Tumithak should be here by now," the girl said, after a while. "Do you think he will come?" Her eyes strove vainly to pierce the gloom down the hallway.

"Why, of course, he will come, Thupra," said her companion. "Has Tumithak ever failed to meet us as he promised?"

"But to come here, alone!" protested Thupra. "I should die of fright, Nikadur, if you weren't here."

"There isn't really any danger here," he said. "The men of Yakra could never enter these halls without passing through the main corridor. And many, many years have passed since Loor has seen a shelk."

"Grandfather Koniak once saw a shelk," reminded Thupra.

"Yes, but not here in Loor. He saw it in Yakra, years ago, when he fought the Yakrans as a young man. Remember, the Loorians were successful in their campaign against the Yakrans and drove them out of their city and into the corridors beyond. And then suddenly there was flame and terror, and a band of shelks appeared. Grandfather Koniak saw but one, and that one almost caught him before he escaped." Nikadur smiled. "It is a wonderful tale, but I think we have only Grandfather Koniales word for it."

"But really, Nikadur?" the girl was beginning, when she was interrupted by a rustling noise from one of the web-hung doorways. Like a flash, boy and girl both leapt to their feet and sped in panic down the passage without so much as a single glance backward, totally unaware of the youth who had stepped from the doorway and who was now leaning against the wall, watching their flight with a cynical smile on his face.

At a glance, this youth seemed not unlike the others who lived in the corridors. The same red hair and clear translucent skin, the same rough tunic and enormous belt characterized this lad as it did all the others of Loor. But the discerning eye would have noticed in the immense brow, the narrow, hooked nose and the keen eyes, a promise of the greatness that was to some day be his.

The boy watched his fleeing friends for a moment and then gave a low bird-like whistle. Thupra stopped suddenly and turned around, and then, seeing the newcomer, called to Nikadur. The boy stopped his flight, too, and together they returned, rather shamefaced, to the end of the passage.

"You frightened us, Tumithak," said the girl, reproachfully. "What in the world were you doing in that room? Weren't you afraid to go in there alone?"

"Nothing is in there to hurt me," answered Tumithak, loftily. "Often and often I have browsed around through these corridors and apartments and never yet have I seen any living thing, save the spiders and the bats. I was seeking for forgotten things," he went on, and his eyes grew suddenly brighter. "And look! I have found a book!" And, reaching into the bosom of his tunic, he drew forth his prize and exhibited it proudly to the others.

"This is an old book," he said. "See?"

It certainly was an old book. The cover was gone, more than half the leaves were missing, and the thin metal sheets of which the leaves were composed were even beginning to oxidize on the edges. Certainly, this book had been lying forgotten for centuries.

Nikadur and Thupra looked at it in awe, the awe that an illiterate person naturally holds for all the mysteries of the magic black marks that transmit thoughts. But Tumithak could read. He was the son of Tumlook, one of the food men, the men who held the secret of preparing the synthetic food that these people lived on, and these food men, as well as the doctors and the light and power men, retained many of the secrets of the wisdom of their ancestors. Foremost among these secrets was the very necessary art of reading; and as Tumithak was intended to follow in his father's footsteps, Tumlook had early trained him in this wonderful art.

So, after the two had looked at the book and held it in their hands, and wondered, they beseeched Tumithak to read it to them. Often, they had listened in wide-eyed wonder as he read to them from some of the rare works the food men owned, and they never wasted a chance to watch the apparently mystifying process of changing the queer marks on the metal sheets into sounds and sentences.

Tumithak smiled at their importuning, and then, because secretly he was as anxious as they to know what the long-forgotten script contained, he motioned them to be seated on the floor beside him, and opening the book, began to read:

"The manuscript of Davon Starros, written at Pitmouth, Sol 22nd, in the year of the Invasion, 161, or in the old style--AD 3218."

Tumithak paused.

"That is an old book," whispered Nikadur in an awed voice, and Tumithak nodded.

"Nearly two thousand years!" he answered, "I wonder what the figures AD 3218 stand for?"

He puzzled over the book for a moment and then resumed his reading.

"I am an old man, in these latter days, and to one who can remember the day when men still dared to fight, now and then, for liberty, it is indeed a bitter thing to see how the race has fallen.

"There is growing up among men in these days a hopeless superstition to the effect that man can never conquer, and must never attempt to even battle with the shells, and it is to combat this superstition that the author here writes the story of the conquest of earth, in the hope that at some future time, a man will arise who will have the courage to face the conquerors of Man and again do battle. In the hope that this man will appear and that he may know the creatures against whom he fights, this story is written.

"The scientists who tell of the days before the Invasion, inform us that man was once little more than a beast. Through thousands of years he gradually worked his way upward to civilization, learning the arts of living, until he conquered all the world for his own.

"He learned the secret of producing food from the very elements themselves, he learned the secret of imitating the life-giving light of the sun, his great airships sped through the atmosphere as easily as his watercrafts sped through the sea. Wonderful, disintegrating rays dissolved the hill that stood in his way, and as a result, long canals brought water from the ocean to inaccessible deserts, making them blossom like earth's most fertile regions. From pole to pole, man's mighty cities grew, and from pole to pole man was

supreme.

"For thousands of years, men quarreled among themselves, and great wars tore the earth, until at last their civilization reached a point where these wars ceased. A great era of peace settled down upon the earth, sea and land alike were conquered by man, and he began to look out to the other worlds that swung about the sun, wondering if these, too, might not be conquered.

"It was many centuries before they learned enough to attempt a journey into the depths of space. A way had to be found to avoid the countless meteors that filled the paths between the planets. A way had to be found to insulate against the deadly cosmic rays. It seemed that no sooner was one difficulty overcome than another arose to take its place. But one after another the difficulties in the way of interplanetary flight disappeared and at last the day came when a mighty vessel, hundreds of feet long, lay ready to leap into space to explore the other worlds."

Tumithak again paused in his reading.

"It must be a wonderful secret," he said. "I seem to be reading words, but I do not know what they mean. Some one is going somewhere, but that's about all I can make of it. Shall I go on?"

"Yes! Yes!" they cried; so he continued:

"It was under the command of a man named Henric Sudiven; and, of all the great company that manned it, only he returned to the world of men to tell of the terrible adventures that they met with on the planet Venus, the world to which they traveled.

"The trip to Venus was a highly successful one, and quite uneventful. Week after week passed, while the evening star, as men called it, grew ever brighter and larger. The ship worked perfectly, and though the journey was a long one to those who were used to crossing an ocean in a single night, the time did not hang heavy on their hands. The day came when they sailed over the low rolling plains and broad valleys of Venus, under the thick mantle of clouds that forever hides the surface of that planet from the sun and marveled at the great cities and works of civilization that were in evidence everywhere.

"After hovering over a great city for some time, they landed and were welcomed by the strange, intelligent creatures that ruled over Venus; the same creatures that we know today by the name of shelks. The shelks thought them demi-gods and would have worshipped them; but Sudiven and his companions, true products of earth's noblest culture, scorned to dissemble; and when they had learned the language of the shelks, told them quite truthfully just who they were and from whence they came.

"The astonishment of the shelks knew no bounds. They were skilled far more than men in mechanical science; their knowledge of electricity and chemistry was quite as great; but astronomy and its kindred sciences were totally unknown to them. Imprisoned as they were under the eternal canopy of clouds that bides forever the sight of outer space, they had never dreamed of other worlds than the one they knew; and it was only with difficulty that they were at last persuaded that Sudiven's story was true.

"But, once convinced, the attitude of the shelks underwent a decided change. No longer were they deferential and friendly. They suspected that man had come only to conquer them and they determined to beat him at his own game. There was a certain lack of the more humane feelings in the make-up of the shelks, and they were quite unable to conceive of a friendly visit from strangers of another world.

"The Tellurians soon found themselves locked up in a great metal tower many miles from their space flier. In a moment of carelessness, one of Sudiven's companions had let drop the remark that this flier was the only one yet built upon the earth, and the shelks decided to take advantage of this fact, to begin at once the conquest of earth.

"They took possession at once of the Tellurians' vessel, and with that unity of purpose that is so characteristic of the shelks and so lacking in man, began at once the construction of a vast number of similar machines. All over the planet, the great machine-shops burred and clattered with the noise of the work; and while the earth awaited the triumphal return of her explorers, the day of her doom drew nearer and nearer.

"But Sudiven and the other Tellurians, locked up in their tower, had not given up to despair. Time after time, they attempted to escape, and there is no doubt but that the shelks would have slain them to a man,

had they not hoped to extract further knowledge from them before they killed them. For once the shelks were in error; they should have slain the Tellurians, every one; for about a week before the date set for the departure of the shelks' great fleet of machines, Sudiven and about a dozen of his companions managed to escape.

"At terrific risk they made their way across the country to the place where their space car lay. An idea can be had of the dangers of the journey when one realizes that on Venus, that is, on the inhabited side, it is always day. There was no concealing night to enable the Tellurians to travel without hope of discovery. But at last they came upon their car, guarded only by a few unarmed shelks. The battle that ensued is one that should go down in man's history, to inspire him in all the ages to come. When it was over the shelks were all dead and only seven men were left to man the space-flier on its journey back to earth.

"For weeks, the great bullet-shape flier sped across the vast emptiness of space and at last landed upon the earth. Sudiven alone remained alive when it landed; the others had succumbed to some strange disease, a disease that had been given to them by the shelks.

"But Sudiven was alive and remained alive long enough to warn the world. Faced with this sudden terror, the world had little time for any but defensive measures. The construction of vast underground pits and caverns was begun at once, the intention being to construct great underground cities, in which man could hide himself and from which he could emerge to conquer his enemies at his leisure. But before they were well started, the shelks arrived and the war was on!

"Never, in the days when man warred with man, had anyone dreamed of a war like this. The shelks had arrived by the millions; it was estimated that fully two hundred thousand space cars took part in the invasion. For days man's defensive measures kept the shelks from gaining a landing space on the earth; they were forced to fly far above the surface, dropping their deadly gases and explosives where they could. From his subterranean halls, man sent up vast quantities of gases as deadly as those of the shelks, and their disintegrating rays sent hundreds of the space-cars into nothingness, killing off the shelks like flies. And from their fliers, the shelks dropped vast quantities of flaming chemicals into the pits that men had dug, chemicals that burned with terrific violence and exhausted the oxygen of the caverns, causing men to perish by the thousand.

"Ever, as men found themselves defeated by the shelks, they drove deeper and deeper into the earth, their wonderful disintegrations dissolving the rock almost as fast as man could walk through the corridor it dug. Men were forced from the Surface at last, and a million intricate warrens of corridors and passages honeycombed the earth for miles beneath the surface. It was impossible for the shelks to ever thread the mazes of the innumerable labyrinths, and so man reached a position of comparative safety.

"And thus came the deadlock.

"The Surface had become the property of the savage shelks, while far below them in the pits and corridors, man labored to hold on to the dregs of civilization that were left him. An unequal game it was, for man was sadly handicapped--the supplies of elements that produced the disintegrating rays gradually diminished, and there was no way of renewing them; they were unable to secure wood, or the thousand and one varieties of vegetation on which their industries were based; the men of one set of corridors had no way of communicating with the men of another; and always came hordes of shelks, down into the corridors, hunting men for sport!

"The only thing that enabled them to live at all was the wonderful ability to create synthetic foods out of the very rock itself.

"So it was that man's civilization, fought for and won after centuries of struggle, collapsed in a dozen years; and over it was imposed the Terror. Men, like rabbits, lived a life of fear and trembling in their underground holes, daring less each year, as time went by, and spending all their time and energy in devising means to sink their pits deeper and deeper into the ground. Today it seems that man's subjugation is complete. For over a hundred years, no man has dared to think of revolt against the shelks, any more than a rat would think of revolt against man. Unable to form a unified government, unable even to communicate with his brethren in the neighboring corridors, man has come to accept, far too willingly, his place as merely the highest of the lower animals. The spider-like Beasts of Venus are the supreme Masters of our planet, and--"

The manuscript had come to an end. Although the book had originally been much longer, although,

indeed, what was left of it was probably little more than an introduction to some work on the life and customs of the shelks, the remainder was missing and the droning sing-song voice of Tumithak ceased as he read the concluding unfinished sentence. For several moments there was silence and then?

"How hard it was to understand," said Thupra. "I only know that men were fighting with shelks, just as though they were Yakrans."

"Who could have conceived such a story?" murmured Nikadur. "Men fighting with shelks: Of all the impossible tales!"

Tumithak did not answer. For quite a while he sat in silence and stared at the book as one who suddenly beheld some dazzling vision.

At last he spoke.

"Nikadur, that is history!" he exclaimed. "That is no strange impossible tale of fancy. Something tells me that those men really lived; that that war was really fought: How else can we explain the life that we live. Have we not wondered often--have not our fathers wondered before us--how our wise ancestors ever gained the wisdom to build the great pits and corridors? We know that our ancestors had great knowledge; how did they come to lose it?"

"Oh, I know that no legend of ours even suggests such a thing as men ruling this world," he went on, as he saw the incredulous look in the eyes of his companions. "But there is something--something in that book that tells me it is surely true. Just think, Nikadur! That book was written only a hundred and sixty years after the savage shelks invaded the earth! How much more that writer must have known than we who live two thousand years later. Nikadur, once men fought with shelks!" He arose, his eyes gleaming with the first glow of the fanatical light that, in after years, was to make him a man apart from his fellows, "Once men fought with shelks: and with the help of the High One, they shall do so again! Nikadur! Thupra! Some day I shall fight a shelk," he flung his arms wide, "some day I shall slay a shelk!"

"And to that I dedicate my life!"

He stood for a moment with his arms outstretched, and then, as if oblivious of their presence, he dashed down the hallway and in a moment was lost in the gloom. For a moment the two stared after him in amazement, and then, clasping hands, they walked slowly, soberly after him. They knew that something had suddenly inspired their friend, but whether it was genius or madness they could not tell. And they were not to know with certainty for many years.

CHAPTER II - The Three Strange Gifts

Tumlook contemplated his son proudly. The years that had passed since he had discovered the strange manuscript and acquired his strange ob-session may have ruined his mind, as some said, but they had certainly been kind to him, physically. Six feet tall, Tumithak stood (an exceptional height for these dwellers in the corridors), and every inch seemed to be of iron muscle. Today, on his twentieth birthday, there was not a man that would not have hailed him as one of the leaders of the city, had it not been for his preposterous mania. For Tumithak was resolved to kill a shelk!

For years—in fact, since he had found the manuscript, at the age of fourteen—he had directed all his studies to this end. He had poured over maps of the corridors, ancient maps that had not been used for centuries—maps that showed the way to the Surface—and he was known to be an authority on all the secret passages in the pit. He had little idea of what the Surface was really like; there was little in the stories of his people to tell him of it. But of one thing he was certain, and that was, that on the Surface he would find the shelks.

He had studied the various weapons that man could still rely on—the sling, the sword, and the bow; and had made himself proficient in the use of all three. Indeed, in every way possible, he had prepared himself for the great work to which he had decided to devote his life. Of course, he had met with the opposition of his father, of the whole tribe, for that matter; but with the singleness of purpose that only a fanatic can attain, he persisted in his idea, resolved that when he was of age he would bid his people adieu, and set out for the

Surface. He had given little thought to the details of what he would do when he arrived there. That would all depend on what he found. One thing he was sure of—that he would kill a shelk and bring its body back to show his people that men could still triumph over those who thought they were man's masters.

And today he became of age; today he was twenty. Tumlook could not resist being secretly proud of this astounding son of his, even though he had done every-thing in his power to turn him from the impossible dream that he had conceived. Now that the day had come when Tumithak was to start on his absurd quest, Tumlook had to admit that in his heart, he had long been one with Tumithak, and that now he was eager to see the boy started on his way. He spoke:

"Tumithak," he said, "For years, I have sought to turn you from the impossible task that you have set yourself. For years, you have opposed me and persisted in believing in the actual possibility of achieving your dream. And now the day has come when you are to actually set out to achieve it. Do not think that it was anything other than a father's love that led me to oppose your ambition, and to try and keep you in Loor. But now that the day has come when you are free to (10 as you please, and as you are still determined to make your incredible attempt, you must at least allow your father to help you all he can."

He paused and lifted to the table a box about a foot square. He opened it and drew from it three strange-looking objects.

"Here," he said, impressively, "Arc three of the most precious treasures of the food-men; implements devised by our wise ancestors of old. "This one," and he picked up a cylindrical tube about an inch in diameter and a foot long, "is a torch, a wonderful torch that will give you light in the dark corridors, by merely pressing this button. Take care not to waste its power, it is not made of the eternal light that our ancestors set in the ceilings. It is based on a different principle and after a certain time its power is exhausted,"

Tumlook picked up the next object gingerly.

"This, too, is something that will surely help you, though it is neither so rare nor so wonderful as the other two. It is a charge of high explosive, such as we use occasionally for closing a corridor, or in mining the elements from which our food is made. There is no telling when it may come in handy, on your way to the Surface.

"And here," he picked up the last article, which looked like a small pipe with a handle set on one end, at right angles, "Here is the most wonderful article of all. It shoots a small pellet of lead, and it shoots it with such force that it will pierce even a sheet of metal! Each time this small trigger on the side is pressed, a pellet is ejected from the mouth of the pipe, with terrific force. It kills, Tumithak, kills even quicker than an arrow, and much surer. Use it carefully, for there are but ten pellets, and when they are gone, the instrument is useless." He laid the three articles on the table before him, and pushed them across to Tumithak. The younger man took them and stowed them carefully in the pockets of his wide belt.

"Father," he said, slowly, "You know it is not anything in my heart that commands me to leave you and go on this quest. There is something, higher than either of you or I, that has spoken to me and that I must obey. Since mother's death, you have been both mother and father to me, and so I probably love you more than the average man loves his father. But I have had a Vision! I dream of a time when Man will once again rule on the Surface and not a shelk will exist to oppose him. But that time can never come as long as men believe the shelks to be invincible, and so I am going to prove that they can really be slain—and by men!"

He paused and before he could continue, the door opened and Nikadur and Thupra entered. The former was a man now, the responsibility of a householder having fallen upon him at his father's death, two years before. And the latter had grown into a beautiful woman, a woman that Nikadur was soon to marry. They both greeted Tumithak with deference and when Thupra spoke, it was in an awed voice, as one who addressed a demy-god; and Nikadur, too, had obviously come to look upon Tumithak as something more than mortal. These two, with the possible exception of Tumlook, were the only ones who took Tumithak seriously, and so they were the only ones that he would call his friends.

"Do you leave us today, Tumithak?" asked Thupra.

Tumithak nodded. "Yes," he answered. "This very day, I start for the Surface. Before a month has gone by, I will lie dead in some distant corridor, or you shall look on the head of a shelk!"

Thupra shuddered. Either of these alternatives seemed terrible enough to her. But Nikadur was thinking of the more immediate dangers of the journey.

"You will have no trouble on the road to Nonone," he said, thoughtfully, "But mustn't you pass through the town of Yakra on the way to the Surface?"

"Yes," answered Tumithak. "There is no road to the Surface, except through Yakra. And beyond Yakra are the Dark Corridors, where men have not ventured for hundreds of years."

Nikadur considered. The city of Yakra had for over a century been the enemy of the people of Loor. Situated as it was, more than twenty miles nearer the Surface than Loor, it was inevitable that it should be much more conscious of the Terror. And it was just as inevitable that the people of Yakra should envy the Loorians their comparative safety, and continually make attempts to seize the city for their own. The small town of Nonone, located between the two larger cities, found itself sometimes fighting with the Yakrans, sometimes against them, as suited the convenience of the chiefs of the more powerful cities. Just at present, and indeed for the past twenty years, it was allied to Loor, and so Tumithak expected no trouble on his journey until he attempted to pass through Yakra.

"And the Dark Corridors?" questioned Nikadur.

"Beyond Yakra, there are no lights," replied Tumithak. "Men have avoided these passages for centuries. They are entirely too near the Surface for safety. Yakrans have at times attempted to explore them, but the parties that went out never returned. At least, so the men of Nonone have told me."

Thupra was about to make some remark, but Tumithak turned and busied himself with the pack of foodstuff that he intended to take with him on his journey. He slung it over his back and turned toward the door.

"The time has come for me to begin my journey," he said impressively. "This is the moment that I have awaited for years. Farewell, father Farewell, Thupra! Nikadur, take good care of my little friend, and—if I do not return, name your first-born after me."

With a dramatic gesture that was characteristic of him, he thrust the door curtain aside and strode out into the corridor. The three followed him, calling and waving as he walked on up the hallway, but without so much as a backward glance, he strode along until he disappeared in the distant gloom.

They stood, then, for a while, and then, with a dry sob, Tumlook turned and reentered the apartment.

"He'll never return," he muttered to Nikadur. "He'll never return, of course."

Nikaclur and Thupra answered nothing, only standing in uncomfortable silence. There was nothing consoling that they might say. Tumlook was right and it would have been foolish to attempt words of condolence that would have obviously been false.

The road that led from Loor to Nonone inclined very gradually upward. It was not an entirely strange road to Tumithak, for long ago he had been to that small town with his father; but the memory of the road was faint and now he found much to interest him as he left the lights of the populous portion of the town behind him. The entrances of other corridors continually appeared, corridors that were constructed to add to the labyrinthine maze that made it impossible for the creatures from the upper Surface to find their way into the great pits. The way did not lead along the broad main corridor for long. Often Tumithak would take his own way down what appeared to be quite an insignificant hallway, only to have it suddenly branch into another larger one, farther on.

It must not be supposed that Tumithak had so quickly forgotten his home in his anxiety to be on his quest. Often, as he passed some familiar sight, a lump would come into his throat and he would almost be tempted to give up his journey and return. Twice Tumithak passed food-rooms, rooms where the familiar mystic machines throbbed eternally, building up out of the very rocks their own fuel and the tasteless biscuits of food that these people lived on. It was then that his homesickness was the greatest, for many times he had watched his father operating such machines as these, and the memory made him realize poignantly all that he was leaving behind. But like all of the inspired geniuses of humanity, at times such as this, it almost seemed as if something outside of himself took charge of him and forced him on.

Tumithak turned from the last large corridor to a single winding hall not more than a half dozen feet in width. There were no doorways along this hall and it was much steeper than any he had yet climbed. It ran on for several miles and then entered a larger passage through a door that was seemingly but one of a hundred similar ones that lined this new passage. These doors were apparently those of apartments, but the apartments seemed to be unused, for there were no signs of inhabitants in this district. Probably this corridor had been abandoned for some reason many years ago.

There was nothing strange in this to Tumithak, however. He knew quite well that these doorways were only to add extra confusion to the ones who sought to thread the maze of corridors, and he continued on his way, without paying the slightest attention to the many branching hallways, until he came to the room he sought.

It was an ordinary apartment, to all appearances, but when Tumithak found himself inside, he hastened to the rear and began to feel carefully over the walls. In a corner, he found what he was searching for—a ladder of metal bars, leading upward. Confidently, he began the ascent, mounting steadily upward in the dark; and as minute followed minute, the faint glow of light that shone in from the corridor below grew smaller and smaller.

At last he reached the top of the ladder, and found himself standing at the mouth of the pit, in a room similar to the one he had left below. He strode out of the room into another of the familiar door-lined corridors and turning in the direction that led upward, continued his journey. He was on the level of Nonone now, and if he hurried, he knew that he might reach that town before the time of sleep.

He hastened along, and presently he perceived a party of men in the distance, who gradually approached him. He drew into an apartment from which he peered out cautiously, until he assured himself that they were Nononese. The red color of their tunics, their narrow belts, and the peculiar way they had of dressing their long hair convinced him that these were friends and so Tumithak showed himself and waited for the party to approach him. When they saw him, the foremost man, who was evidently the leader, hailed him.

"Is not this Tumithak of Loor?" he asked, and as Tumithak replied in the affirmative, he continued, "I am Nennapuss, chief of the people of Nonone. Your father has acquainted us with the facts of your journey and asked us to be looking for you about this time. We trust that you will spend the next sleep with us; and if there is anything that we can do to add to your comfort or safety on your journey, you have but to command us."

Tumithak almost smiled at the rather pompous speech which the chief had evidently prepared beforehand, but he answered gravely that he would indeed be indebted if Nennapuss could provide him with sleeping quarters. The chief assured him that the best in the town would be provided and, turning, led Tumithak off in the direction from which he and his party had come.

They traversed several miles of deserted passages before they finally came to the inhabited halls of Nonone, but once here, the hospitality of Nennapuss knew no bounds. The people of Nonone were assembled in the "Great Square," as the juncture of the two main corridors was called, and in a florid, flowing speech that was characteristic of him, Nennapuss told them of Tumithak and his quest; and presented him, as it were, with the keys of the city.

After an answering speech by Tumithak, in which the Loorian worked himself up into a fine fury of eloquence on his favorite subject—his journey—a banquet was prepared; and even though the food was only the tasteless biscuits that constituted the sole diet of these people, they gorged themselves to repletion. When Tumithak at last fell asleep, it was with the feeling that here, at least, a tentative slayer of shelks might find appreciation. Had not the proverb been buried in centuries of ignorance and forgetfulness, he might have mused that a prophet is, verily, not without honor save in his own country.

Tumithak arose about ten hours later and prepared to bid goodbye to the people of Nonone. Nennapuss insisted that the Loorian have breakfast with his family and Tumithak willingly complied. The sons of Nennapuss, two lads in their early teens, were enthusiastic, during the meal, with the wonderful idea that Tumithak had conceived. Though the idea of any other man facing a shelk was incredible to them, they seemed to think that Tumithak was something more than the average mortal, and plied him with a hundred questions as to his plans. But, beyond having studied the long route to the Surface, Tumithak's plans were decidedly vague, and he was unable to tell them how he would slay his shelk.

After the meal, he again shouldered his pack and started up the corridor. The chief and his retinue followed him for several miles and as they went, Tumithak questioned Nennapuss closely as to the condition of the passages to Yakra and beyond.

"The road on this level is quite safe," said Nennapuss, in answer to his questions. "It is patrolled by men of my city and no Yakran ever enters it without our being aware of it. But the pit that leads to the level of Yakra is always guarded at the top by the Yakrans, and I do not doubt but that you will have trouble when you try to get out of that pit."

Tumithak promised to use an extra amount of caution when he reached this spot, and a short time later, Nenna-puss and his companions said good-by to him and he trudged on alone.

He moved more warily, now, for though the Nononese patrolled these corridors, he knew quite well that it was possible for enemies to evade the guards and raid the corridors as had often been done in the past. He kept well in the middle of the corridor, away from the many doorways, any one of which may have concealed a secret road to Yakra, and he seldom passed one of the branching ways without peering carefully U) and down it, be-fore venturing to cross it.

But Tumithak was fortunate in meeting no one in the corridors, and after half a day he came at last to another apartment in which was located a shaft almost exactly similar to the one that had brought him to Nonone.

He mounted this ladder much more stealthily than he had the first one, for he was quite confident that a Yak-ran guard was at the top and he had no desire to be toppled backward into the pit when he reached there. As he drew near the end of the ladder, he drew his sword, but again luck favored him, for the guard had apparently left the room at the top of the well, and Tumithak drew himself up into the room and prepared to enter the corridor.

But he had moved only a scant half dozen feet when his luck deserted him. He bumped violently into a table that he had failed to notice in the gloom, and the result-ing noise brought a bull—like bellow from the corridor without. The next moment, sword in hand, a veritable giant of a man dashed through the door and made for Tumithak.

CHAPTER III - The Passing of Yakra

That the man was a Yakran, Tumithak would have known, had he met him in the depths of Loor. Though the Loorian knew of the Yakrans only through the stories of the older men, who remembered the wars with that city, he saw at once that this was just the kind of barbarian that had figured in the stories. He was fully four inches taller than Tumithak, and far broader and heavier, and his chin was covered with a tremendous, bristly growth of beard—sufficient evidence in itself that the owner was of Yakra. His tunic was covered with bits of bone and metal sewn into the cloth, the former stained in various colors and sewn in a crude pattern. Around his neck was a necklace made of dozens of finger-bones threaded on a thin strip of skin.

Tumithak saw in an instant that he would have little chance with this huge Yakran if he were to stand fairly up to him, and so, even as he drew his sword and pre-pared to defend himself, he was casting about in his mind for some method to overcome him by strategy. The most probable plan, he decided at once, would be to drive him somehow into the pit; but to drive this colossus was almost as impossible as to defeat him by face to face fighting methods. And before Tumithak could devise any more subtle method of overcoming his adversary, he found his entire mind taken up with methods of defending himself.

The Yakran rushed at him, still shouting his rumbling war-cry, and it was but the merest luck that enabled Tumithak to avoid the first terrific blow aimed at him. Tumithak dropped to one knee, but in a moment was up again and only just in time to avoid another sweep of that glistening sword. On his feet again, however, his defense was perfect, and the Yakran found it necessary to retire a step or two, in order to prepare another of his lunging rushes.

Again and again the Yakran rushed at Tumithak, and it was only the Loorian's uncanny skill at fencing, learned through many years in the hope of facing a shelk, that saved him. Around and around the table, now close to the pit and now farther away, they fought ; until even Tumithak's steel-like muscles began to tire.

But as his body tired, brain quickened, and at last a plan came to him to defeat the Yakran, He allowed himself to be gradually forced to the edge of the pit and then, as he parried a particularly powerful lunge, he suddenly threw one hand high in the air and screamed. The Yakran, believing that he had struck him, smiled a vicious smile and stepped back for a final rush. Sword pointing at Tumithak's breast, he dashed forward, and as he did so, Tumithak threw himself at his opponent's feet.

There was a wild howl from the giant as he stumbled over the recumbent form, but before he could recover himself, he dropped heavily at the very edge of the pit. Tumithak kicked wildly, and the great Yakran, grasping frantically at the air, dropped into the well! There was a hoarse cry from the darkness below, a heavy thud and then silence.

For several minutes, Tumithak lay panting at the edge of the pit. This was the first battle he had ever had with a man, and though he was the victor, it was only by a miracle, it seemed, that he had not been defeated. What would the people of Loor and Nonone say, he wondered, if they knew that their self-appointed slayer of shelks had been so nearly defeated by the first enemy that had attacked him—and that enemy not a shelk, but a man, and a man of despised Yakra, at that? For several minutes, the Loorian lay, filled with self-reproach, and then, reflecting that if all his enemies were conquered with a margin even so small as this, his victory was certain, he arose, pulled himself together and left the room.

He was in Yakra now, and it was necessary for him to find some means of passing safely through the city in order to reach the (lark corridors beyond. For only through these dark corridors might he win his way to the upper Surface. He continued cautiously on his way, turning over in his brain plan after plan that would enable him to deceive the Yakrans; but he was almost within sight of the inhabited walls of Yakra before he conceived an idea that seemed to him to be feasible.

There was but one thing that all men in these pits feared, with a fear that was quite unreasoning: And it was upon this unreasoning fear that Tumithak decided to play.

He began to run. He ran slowly at first, a mere trot, but as he drew nearer the corridors where men lived, he increased his pace, running faster and faster until he was fleeing along like one who had all the demons of hell at his back. Which was precisely the effect that he wished to produce.

In the distance he saw a group of Yakrans approach-ing. They beheld him at the same time that he spied them, and in a moment more were charging down on him; quite aware, as he knew, that he was not a Yakran. Instead of trying to avoid them, he charged straight into their midst, screaming at the top of his lungs.

"Shelks!" he shouted, as though in the last stages of terror, "Shelks!"

The bellicose attitude of the men changed at once to one of extreme fright. Without a word to Tumithak or even so much as a backward glance, they turned, and as he dashed past them, they sped panic-stricken after him. Had they been men of Loor, they might have paused long enough to investigate, or at least, have held Tumithak and questioned him. But not these Yakrans. This town was many miles nearer the Surface than Loot, and many of the older men could still remember the time that the shelks had raided these halls on one of their rare hunting expeditions, leaving a trail of death and de-struction that would never be forgotten while those that witnessed it lived. So the terror was far more of a liv-ing thing to Yakra than it was to Loor, to whom it was little more than a terrible legend of the past.

And so, without a word of question, the Yakrans fled down the long corridor after Tumithak, through branching hallways and through doorways that seemed mere entrances to apartments, but were actually roads to the main corridor. Several times they passed other men or groups of men, but at the fearful cry of "Shelks" these always dropped whatever they were doing and followed the frightened throng. A good many dashed down branching corridors, in which, they imagined, lay greater safety; but the majority continued on their way to the heart of the city, the direction in which Tumithak was going.

The Loorian was no longer in the lead now, several of the fleeter Yakrans had passed him, terror lending wings to their feet. And so the size of the mob grew, and was augmented by greater and greater numbers as they came closer to the town center; until at last the corridor was filled with a screaming, terrified multitude in which Tumithak was completely lost.

They neared the wide main corridor, and here they found a great mass of people that had surged in from

every one of the branching corridors. How the news had traveled so quickly, Tumithak was unable to guess, but apparently the entire city was already aware of the sup-posed danger. And like sheep, or rather, like the humans they were, all had been seized with the same idea—the desire to reach the center of the city, where, they supposed, the greatest safety lay in the presence of the great-est numbers.

But now this frenzied confusion bade fair to defeat the plan that Tumithak had devised to cross the city safely under cover of the excitement he caused. To be sure, he had almost won to the center of the city without discovery, and the inhabitants were so wrought up that there would be little chance of anyone noticing that he was a stranger; but so thickly packed was the crowd that it became more and more certain that the Loorian was not going to be able to work his way through, in order to reach the corridors beyond. Yet in spite of the apparent hopelessness, Tumithak struggled along with the frantic mob, hoping against hope that he might gain a comparatively clear corridor beyond the city's center before the fright of the people died down to the point where they would begin the inevitable search for the one who had started the panic.

The crowd, its fright enhanced by that strange sense of telepathy that is evident in any large assembly of people, was becoming dangerous. Men were using their fists freely to hatter their way, they passed their weaker brothers, and here and there voices could be heard, high pitched with anger. Tumithak saw a man stumble and fall, and a moment later, heard a scream as the un fortunate one was trampled on by the ones behind him. Hardly had the scream died away when there was another cry from the opposite side of the passage, where another man had fallen and found himself unable to regain his feet.

The Loorian seemed little more than a leaf borne along on the stream of shouting, gesticulating Yakrans by the time he reached the center of the city. Time after time he had almost been swept from his feet, only to regain his balance by what seemed a miracle. He had nearly gained the huge square that marked the crossing of the two main corridors when he stumbled over a fallen Yakran and almost went down. He attempted to pass on, and then stopped. The form beneath his feet was that of a woman with a baby in her arms!

Her face was tear-stained and bleeding, her clothes were torn in a dozen places, yet she was attempting bravely to prevent the injury of her child beneath the feet of the multitude. Tumithak instantly stooped over to raise her to her feet, but even before he could do so, the crowd had pushed him almost beyond the reach of her. Sudden anger swept over him, and plunging out wrathfully, he dealt blow after blow into the faces of the onrushing multitude of creatures, who would have crushed one of their own people in their anxiety for personal safety. The Yakrans yielded before his blows, poured on either side of him for a moment, and in that moment, Tumithak stooped and raised the woman to her feet.

She was still conscious, as the wan smile that she bestowed upon him showed, and though he knew she was an enemy of his people, Tumithak felt a momentary pity that his ruse to frighten the Yakrans had been so successful. She was trying to tell him something, but so great were the confused shouts that it was im-possible for him to understand her. He bent down his head to hers to hear what she had to say.

"The doorway across the hail," she screamed in his ear, "Try to get through the crowd to the third doorway across the hail! There is safety there !"

Tumithak placed her in front of him and drove sav-agely into the crowd, his fists flashing out around her and protecting her as they moved. It was hard to keep from being hustled, against his will, into the central square, but at last he gained the doorway and thrust the woman through it. He followed her inside, and gave a great gasp of relief as he found himself free from the struggles of the crowd. He stood for a moment in the doorway, to assure himself that nobody intended to fol-low them, and then turned back to the woman with the child.

She had torn a small piece of cloth from the sleeve of her tattered garment and as he faced her, she paused from wiping the blood and tears from her face long enough to flash him a frightened, little smile. Tumithak could not but wonder at the apparent gentleness and refinement of this woman of savage Yakra. He had been taught to believe, since childhood, that the Yakrans were a strange race, not unlike our concept of goblins and witches, and yet, this woman might have been a daughter of one of the best families of Loor. Tumithak had to learn that in no matter what nation or age one finds one-self, he will find gentleness, if he looks, as well as savagery.

All this while the child, who had evidently been too frightened to cry, had been as silent as though dead,

but now it set up a lusty screaming. The mother, after attempting for several moments to silence it with croonings and whispers, at last applied nature's first silencer, and as the child quieted down and began nursing, she arose and motioning Tumithak to follow, led the way to the door-way across the room and entered the rear of the apartment. She was gone a moment, and then she called to the Loorian, and with a realization of what she meant dawning in his mind, he followed her. In the next room, sure enough, the woman pointed to the ceiling and showed him the circular hole of a shaft- leading upward.

"Here is the entrance to an old corridor that is not known to more than twenty people in all Yakra," she said, "It leads across the square to the upper end of the city. We can hide up there for days and the shelks will probably never know that we exist. Here is safety."

Tumithak nodded and began the ascent of the ladder, pausing only long enough to assure himself that the woman was following him. The ladder extended not more than thirty feet upward and then they found them-selves in the dark in a corridor that must have been un-used for many centuries. So dark was it that as soon as they moved away from the pit shaft, it was impossible to distinguish the faintest glow of light. Certainly the woman was right in calling this an unknown corridor. Even Tumithak's maps had never told him of this passage.

The woman seemed to be quite at home in the passage, however, for with a whispered word to Tumithak, she began to feel her way along the wall, only stopping now and then to whisper softly to her baby. Tumithak followed her, keeping one hand on her shoulder and so they felt their way along until they came at last to a spot where a single light glowed dimly, and here the woman sat down to rest. Tumithak did likewise, and the woman, reaching into her pocket, drew out a crude needle and thread and began to stitch the tears in her garment. Presently she spoke.

"Isn't it terrible," she whispered, her voice hushed as though she feared that even here the shelks might be listening. "What has started them to hunting again, I wonder?"

Tumithak made no reply and in a moment, she continued:

"My grandfather was killed in a shelk raid. That must have been nearly forty years ago. And now they have come upon us again! My poor husband! I separated from him almost as soon as we left our apartment. Oh! I do hope he reaches safety. He doesn't know about this corridor." She looked to him for comfort. "Do you think he will be safe?"

Tumithak smiled.

"Will you believe me if I tell you that he is surely safe from the shelks?" he asked, "Truly, I can assure you that he will not be slain by the shelks in this raid."

"I only hope you are right," the woman began, and then, as if she had noticed him for the first time, she continued, suddenly, "You are not of Yakra!"

And then, quite positively and harshly, "You are a man of Loor!"

Tumithak realized that the woman had at last noticed the Loorian clothes that he wore, and so made no attempt to dissemble.

"Yes," he answered, "I am of Loor."

The woman arose in consternation, clasping her baby tighter to her breast, as though to protect it from this ogre from the lower corridors.

"What are you doing in these halls?" she asked, fear-fully, "Is it you that have brought this raid down upon us? I could well believe that the men of Loor would ally themselves with the shelks, if such a thing were possible. And surely, this is the first time in history that the shelks ever came upon us from the lower end of the city."

Tumithak considered for a moment. He saw no reason why he should not tell this woman the truth. It could do him no harm, and might at least put her mind at rest, regarding the safety of her husband.

"It will probably be the last time that the shelks ever come upon you from the lower end of the city, too," he said, and in a few brief words, he explained to her his ruse and its rather appalling success. The woman was puzzled.

"But why should you desire to pass through Yakra?" she asked, incredulously, "Are you going into the dark corridors? What man in his senses would desire to explore them?"

"I am not seeking to explore the dark corridors," the Loorian answered. "My goal lies even beyond them!"

"Beyond the dark corridors?"

"Yes," said Tumithak, and rose to his feet. As always when he spoke of his "mission," he was, for the moment, a dreamer, a fanatic.

"I am Tumithak," he said, "I am the slayer of the shelk! You wish to know why I seek to go beyond the dark corridors? It is because I am on my way to the Surface. For on the Surface is a shelk that, all unknowing, awaits his doom! I am going to slay a shelk!"

The woman gazed at him in consternation. She was quite certain, now, that she was alone with a madman. No other could even conceive such an incredible thought. She clasped her child tighter to her and drew away from him.

Tumithak was quick to notice her attitude. He had, many times before, seen people draw away from him in just the same manner, when he spoke of his mission. And so, quite unoffended by her unflattering opinion of him, he began to explain to her why he believed it possible for men to once more engage in battle with the mas-ters of the Surface.

The woman listened for a while, and as he waxed more and more eloquent on his subject, Tumithak saw that she was beginning to believe. He told her of the book he had found, and how it had decided for him what his mission in life should be. He told her of the three strange gifts of his father, and how he hoped they would help him to be successful in his quest. And at last, he saw the look come into her eyes that he had often seen in Thupra's, and knew that she believed.

The woman's thoughts, however, had been quite different from what Tumithak believed. She had listened, to be sure, but as she listened, she was thinking of the fury with which Tumithak had attacked the terror-stricken mob that had nearly crushed her. She was studying the erect, handsome form of him, the smooth-shaven face and keen eyes; and comparing him with the men of Yakra. Ah! at last she believed, not because of Tumithak's eloquence, but because of the age-old appeal of sex.

"It is well that you saved me," she said at last, when the Loorian paused in his story. "It would have hardly been possible for you to force your way through the lower corridors. Up here, you may cross Yakra at your leisure, and leave it whenever you will. I will show you the way to the upper end of the city, now, if you wish."

She arose.

"Come, I will guide you. You are a Loorian and an enemy, but you saved my life, and one who would slay a shelk is surely the friend of all mankind."

She took him by the hand (though that was hardly necessary), and led him on into the darkness. Minute after minute passed in silence and then, at last, she paused and whispered, "The corridor ends here."

She stepped into the doorway, and following her, Tumithak discerned a faint light coming up through a shaft from the corridor below.

He dropped down the ladder that he could see dimly in the gloom, and in a moment was in the lower corridor. The woman followed him, and when she reached the ground she pointed up the corridor.

"If you are really going to the Surface, your road lies that way," she said, "and we must part here. My road lies back into the town. I wish I might know you better, O Loorian," she paused and then, as she strode

off, she turned to exclaim, "Go on to the Surface, strange one, and if you succeed in your quest, do not fear to pass through Yakra on your return. All the city would wor-ship you then, and do you reverence."

As if afraid to say more, she hurried down the passage. Tumithak watched her for a moment and then, with a shrug, turned and walked away in the opposite direction.

He had expected to reach the dark corridors soon after leaving Yakra; but although his maps told him much concerning the route he must take, they were silent concerning the conditions of the various corridors; and it soon became evident to Tumithak that he was not to reach the dark corridors that day. Fatigue overcame him at last, and entering one of the many deserted apartments that lined the passage, he threw himself upon the floor and in a moment was sound asleep.

CHAPTER IV - The Dark Corridors

Hours after, the Loorian awakened with a start. He looked about him vaguely for a moment, and then started into full wakefulness. In the corridor without, he had heard a soft rustling. Scarcely breathing, he arose and, tiptoeing to the doorway, peered cautiously out. The corridor was empty, yet Tumithak was certain that he had heard soft footsteps.

He stepped back into the room, picked up his pack, which he had removed before falling asleep, and adjusted it on his back. Then, once more carefully scanning the empty corridor, he stepped out and prepared to resume his journey.

Before going on, though, he drew his sword and looked thoroughly through all the neighboring apartments. It puzzled him to find them all deserted. He was quite sure that he had heard a noise, was quite sure, he felt, that someone, from somewhere, was watching him. But at last, he was forced to admit that, unless he was mistaken in their existence, the watchers were more clever than he; and so, keeping well to the center of the corridor, he took up his journey again.

For hours, he kept up a continuous, monotonous pace. The route was steadily upward, the corridor was broad, and to Tumithak's surprise, the lights continued undimmed. He had almost forgotten the cause of his sudden awakening, when, after traveling some eight or nine miles, he was suddenly aware of another soft, rustling sound, quite similar to the former one. It came from one of the apartments on his left, and he had scarcely heard it, when he sprang like lightning to the door from which it came, his sword flashing from its sheath. He dashed into the apartment, through the front room and into the rear one, and then stood foolishly, looking around him at the bare brown walls. Like the apartment which he had examined in the morning, this one was quite empty. There were no ladders up which the mysterious one might have escaped; indeed, there seemed to be no way in which anyone might have escaped discovery and, at last, Tumithak was forced to continue on his way.

But he moved more warily, now. He was as cautious as he had been before entering Yakra; in fact, even more so, for then he had known what to expect, and now he was facing the unknown.

As the hours passed, Tumithak became increasingly certain of the fact that he was being followed—was being watched. Time after time, he would hear the slight rustling noise, sometimes from the dark recesses of an apartment, sometimes from down the path of some dimly lighted branching corridor. Once he was certain that he heard the sound far ahead of him, in the hall that he was traversing. But never was he able to catch so much as a glimpse of the beings that caused the sound.

At last he came to a section of the corridors where the lights began to dim. At first only a few were affected, their light coming from the plates with a peculiar bluish glow, but before long the bluish tint was the rule rather than the exception, and many of the lights were out entirely. Tumithak traveled on in an increasing gloom, and realized that he was, at last, really approaching the legendary dark corridors.

Now, Tumithak was the product of a hundred generations of men who had fled from the slightest suspicious sound. For hundreds of years after the Invasion, an unusual sound had meant a man-hunting shelk, and a shelk had meant death, sudden, sure and unmistakable. So men had become a skulking, fleeing race of creatures that fled panic-stricken from the least suspicion of danger.

In deep-cut Loor, however, men had made a warren so intricate and lengthy that years had passed since

a sheik had been seen. And so it came about that men grew more courageous in Loor, until there arose, at last, a visionary who dared to dream of slaying a sheik.

But although Tumithak was bolder by far than any other man of his generation, it must not be supposed that he had overcome, entirely, the heritage that was man's. Even now as he trudged so firmly up the apparently endless hallway, his heart was beating wildly, and it would have taken little to send him back on the way he had come, his heart almost smothering him in his fright.

But apparently those who followed him knew well not to agitate his fears too greatly. As the corridors grew darker, the noises lessened and, at last, Tumithak decided that he was quite alone. Whatever had been following him, he felt, had turned back or continued down one of the branching halls. For over an hour, he strained his ears in an attempt to hear again the soft noises, but only silence was his reward; so his vigilance gradually lessened and he trod more and more carelessly up the hall.

He passed from a corridor of eternal gloom to one of eternal darkness. Here the lights, if there had ever been any, had long since ceased to glow, and for some time Tumithak felt his way along the passage, depending only on his sense of touch.

And in the corridor below, a number of dark, gaunt figures moved from the gloom to the darkness and hurried silently toward him.

As they went, they would have presented a strange appearance, could anyone have seen them. Gaunt almost to the point of emaciation, with strange, slate-colored skins, perhaps the most surprising thing about their appearance was their heads, which were wrapped with layer after layer of strips of cloth which completely covered their eyes, making it impossible for the slightest ray of light to reach them.

For these were the savages of the dark corridors—men born and raised in the halls of eternal night—and so sensitive were their eyes that the least light was an intolerable pain. All day long they had been shadowing Tumithak, and all day long their eyes had been veiled with the bandages, leaving the savages to move by their astounding senses of hearing and feeling alone. But now that they were again in the halls that were their home, they hastened to remove the cumbering cloths. And when this was accomplished they gradually closed in upon their intended victim.

The first intimation of their presence that Tumithak had after entering the darkness was when he heard a sudden rush behind him. He turned quickly, drew his sword and lashed out savagely. His sword cut through the air, he heard a sardonic laugh, and then silence. Furiously he lunged again, and again his sword met only empty air, and then he heard a new rustling in the hall behind him.

He turned, realizing that they had surrounded him. Sword flashing furiously, he backed to the wall prepared to sell his life as dearly as possible. He felt his blade strike something that yielded, heard a cry of pain and then suddenly quiet descended on the corridor. The Loorian was not to be deceived, however, he kept up the vicious beating about him with his sword, and presently had the satisfaction of hearing another groan of pain as he struck one of the savages who had attempted to creep under his guard.

But, though Tumithak continued to defend himself to the best of his ability, and lashed about with the courage born of desperation, he had little doubt as to the outcome of the struggle. He was alone, with his back to the wall while his enemies, already numbering he knew not how many, were constantly having their numbers added to, by the arrival of others. Tumithak prepared to die fighting, his only regret was that he must die in this stygian darkness, unable even to see the opponents who conquered him—and then suddenly he remembered the torch, the first of his father's strange gifts.

With his left hand, he fumbled in his belt and drew out the cylinder. At least, he would have the satisfaction of knowing what sort of creatures these were that had attacked him. In a moment he had found the switch and filled the hall with light.

He was totally unprepared for the effect that the brilliant beam of light had upon his enemies. Cries of pain and dismay burst from them, and Tumithak's first sight of the savages was that of a dozen or more scrawny, dark-colored figures that buried their heads in their arms and turned to flee in terror down the passage. Panic-stricken, bawling strange, harsh words to their companions, they fled from the light, as if Tumithak had suddenly been reinforced by all the men of Loor.

For a moment, Tumithak stood dazed. He was, of course, unable to account for the sudden flight of his at-tackers. The idea occurred to him that they fled from some danger that he was unable to see and he flashed his light about the corridor fearfully, but at last, as their cries diminished in the distance, the truth gradually dawned on him. These creatures were so much at home in the dark that it must really be, thought Tumithak, that they feared the light; and though he could not understand why this should be, he determined to keep the torch burning as long as his route remained in the dark.

So flashing its rays this way and that, up branching corridors and into open doorways, the Loorian continued on his way. He knew that any thought of sleeping in these dark halls was out of the question, but this bothered him little. Shut up in the pits and corridors for centuries, man had forgotten the regular hours that he had once kept, and although he usually slept eight or ten hours out of thirty, it was entirely possible for a man to go forty or fifty hours before he felt the necessity of sleep. Tumithak had often worked steadily, under his father, for as many hours as this, and so now he felt confident that he would be out of the dark corridors long before he gave way to fatigue.

He munched, now and then, on the biscuits of synthetic food that he had brought with him; but for the most part, his entire time was spent in carefully scanning the corridors before and behind him. And so the hours passed. He had almost reached the point where his fears were allayed sufficiently to allow him to enter one of the apartments and seek slumber, when he heard, far behind him in the corridor, a strange inhuman snarl. Fear seized him instantly, he felt a sudden crawling sensation at the back of his neck, and, darting instantly into the nearest doorway, he extinguished his torch and lay trembling in an excess of fear.

It must not be supposed that Tumithak had suddenly become a coward. Remember the courage with which he had faced the Yakran, and the dark savages. But it was the inhumanity of the sound that terrified him. In the lower passages, with the exception of rats, bats and a few other small creatures, no animals had ever been known. Except the shelks. They alone had followed man into his pits, and so it was natural that to them alone could Tumithak attribute the sound that had certainly come from, some large creature other than man. He was yet to learn that there were other animals from the Surface that had been driven into these upper corridors.

So now he cowered in the apartment, vainly attempting to lash his courage to the point where he could go out and face his enemy. Suppose it were a shelk, he argued. Had he not come all these dangerous miles for the sole purpose of facing a shelk? Was he not Tumithak, the hero whom the high one had called to deliver Man from the heritage of fear that was his? And so, with arguments such as this, his indomitable spirit lashed his body into a semblance of courage, until at last he arose and again entered the corridor.

As he might have known, it appeared empty. His flashlight lit up the passage fully five hundred feet away, but the corridor was apparently quite deserted. He continued on his way; but as he went, he now paid more attention to the lower corridor than he did to the corridor above. And so, presently, he noticed, at the very limit of the light, a number of strange, slinking figures that followed him at a safe distance. His sharp eyes told him that these creatures were neither shelks nor men; but what they were, he was at a loss to guess. It was many generations since the men of the lower corridors had even heard of man's one-time friend, the dog.

He paused uncertainly and watched these strange creatures. They slunk out of reach of the torch's rays at once, and after a moment Tumithak turned and continued his journey, half convinced that, in spite of their size, they were merely some large species of rat, as cowardly as their smaller brethren.

In this he was soon to find himself mistaken. He had continued for but a short distance, when he heard a snarl in the corridor ahead of him; and as though this were a signal, the beasts behind him began to draw steadily closer: Tumithak increased his pace, broke into a trot, and finally into a run; but fast as he went, the beasts behind him were faster, and gradually closed in on him.

It was when they were but a little less than a hundred feet behind him that he noticed their masters. The savages that he had vanquished a few hours before had returned, their faces buried in the swathings that they had worn when they stalked him in the corridors beyond Yakra. And with whispered urgings, they drove the dogs on until Tumithak again found it necessary to draw forth his sword and prepare to defend himself.

The beasts from the upper end of the corridor had appeared by this time and the Loorian soon found himself surrounded by a snarling, snapping pack of creatures, against whose numbers it was utterly useless

to attempt to defend himself. He slew one, another fell snapping at a great gash across its mangy back; but before he could do more, his light was knocked out of his hand and he felt a half dozen hairy forms leap upon him. He fell heavily to the ground with the clogs on top of him, his sword flying from his hand and disappearing in the darkness.

Tumithak expected to die then and there. He felt the hot breath of the monsters on various parts of his body, and that strange feeling of resignation came over him that almost every one feels in the presence of almost certain death, and then - the dogs were pulled away, and he felt hands on him and heard soft, muttering words as the savages felt over his body. He was pinioned to the ground by a half dozen wiry hands, and a moment later a band was tightened around him, fastening his arms firmly to his sides. He was picked up and carried away.

They carried him on up the corridor for some distance, turned after a while into one of the branching halls and continued for a long time before they at last halted and threw him upon the ground. Around him he heard many soft sounds, whispered conversation and the rustling of moving bodies, and he decided that he had been taken to the central halls of these creatures. After lying for some time, he was rolled over and a pair of thin hands felt him all over, and then a voice spoke firmly and with authority. Again he was picked up, and carried for a short distance and then he was unceremoniously dumped down upon the floor of what he suspected was the floor of an apartment. Something metallic clanged on the floor beside him and he heard the departing footsteps of his captors in the corridor without.

For a while Tumithak lay still, gathering his thoughts. He wondered vaguely why he had not been killed, little dreaming that the savages knew well enough not to kill their meat until they were ready for the feast. For these savages had no knowledge of the preparation of the machine-made food, and lived by preying on Yakra and other smaller towns that existed far down the branching corridors. Reduced to such desperate straits, anything that would provide sustenance became their food and for many generations they had been cannibals.

After a while, Tumithak arose. He had little trouble in working loose the bonds of cloth that he was tied with; the knowledge of knots that the savages possessed was elementary, and so it took less than an hour for the Loorian to free himself. He began feeling carefully over the walls of the apartment, in an attempt to acquaint himself with the features of his prison.

The room was little more than ten feet square, and the walls were broken by but a single door, the entrance. Tumithak attempted to pass through this door, but was halted immediately by a growl and a snarl, and a rough, hairy body pushed against his legs, driving him back into the apartment. The savages had left the dogs to guard the entrance to his prison.

Tumithak stepped back into the room and as he did so, his foot struck an object that rolled across the floor. He remembered the metallic object that had been thrown into the apartment with him and wondered curiously what it was. Groping around, he finally located it, and to his joy realized that it was his flashlight. He was quite unable to understand why the savages had brought it here, but he decided that to their superstitious minds, it was something to fear, and that they thought it best to keep these two dangerous enemies imprisoned together. At any rate, here it was, and for that Tumithak was grateful.

He turned it on, and looked around as its rays filled the apartment with light. Yes, he had been right about its size and simplicity. There was little chance, none at all, in fact, of his escaping unless he passed through the beast-guarded doorway. And in the light, Tumithak saw that the savages had left him but little chance to escape that way. The entire pack of over twenty dogs stood just without the doorway, their eyes dazzled and blinking in the sudden light.

From within the doorway, Tumithak could look far up the corridor, and he could see no one at all in all that stretch of hallway, as far as his light reached. He flashed it down the hallway; it, too, was empty. He decided that it was probably the time of sleep for these savages, and realized that if he was to escape, no better time would offer itself than the present. He sat down on the floor of the apartment and gave himself up to thought. Somewhere in the back of his mind an idea was glimmering, a faint conviction that he possessed the means to escape from these animals. He arose and looked at the pack, huddled together in the corridor as if to protect themselves from the unwelcome rays of the torch. He turned to study the room, but apparently found little there to favor his half-formed plan. Suddenly, though, he reached a decision, and feeling in the pocket of his belt, he removed a round, pointed object, and pulling a pin from it, hurled it out among the pack

and threw himself flat on his face!

It was the bomb, the second of his father's strange gifts. It struck the floor of the corridor without, and burst with a roar that was nothing short of deafening. In the confined space of the passage, the expanding gases acted with terrific force. Flat on the floor though he was, Tumithak was lifted and hurled violently against the opposite wall of the apartment. As for the beasts, in the corridor without, they were practically annihilated. Torn bodies were flung in every direction, and when Tumithak, bruised and shaken, entered the corridor a few minutes later, he found it deserted of every living thing. But the scene resembled a shambles, with blood and torn bodies strewn all over the corridor.

Sick with the unaccustomed sight of blood and death, Tumithak hastened to put as much distance as possible between himself and the gruesome scene. He hurried on up the corridor, through the still smoke-laden air, until at last the air cleared and the horrors of the scene could be forgotten. He saw no signs of the savages, although twice he heard a whimpering from the doorway of some apartment and knew that a dark form probably cowered, terror-stricken, in the darkness. It would be many, many sleeps before the savages of the dark corridors forgot the enemy who had caused such destruction among them.

Tumithak emerged again into the corridor that led to the Surface. For the first time since he set out on that route, he retraced his steps, but it was with a definite object in view. He arrived at the place where he had battled with the dogs, and retrieved his sword, finding it without difficulty and noting with satisfaction that it was entirely unharmed. Then he once again took up his journey to the Surface, continuing for long without meeting with anything that could give him cause for alarm. At last he decided that he was past the dangerous parts of these halls, and entering one of the apartments he prepared himself for a long-needed rest.

He slept long and dreamlessly, awaking at last after more than fourteen hours of sleep. He immediately took up his journey again, partaking of his food as he went and wondering what this new march would mean for him.

But he was not to wonder for long. He was quite aware, from his maps, that he was now more than half through with his journey, and so he was not surprised when the walls of the corridors, which, ever since leaving Loor had continued as smooth and glossy as those of his own home, now began to assume a rough, irregular appearance, almost like that of a natural cavern. He was, he knew, approaching that section of the corridors which man had carved out in the days of his first panic-stricken flight into the earth. There had been little time, in those first days, to smooth down the walls of the corridors or to give them the regular rectangular appearance that they were to have in the lower corridors.

But though he was not surprised at this appearance of the passages, he was totally unprepared for their next change. He had traveled perhaps three or four miles through the winding, narrow caverns, when he came upon a well-concealed pit-mouth that led far up into the darkness. He could see that there was a light at the top, and gave a sigh of gratitude, for his light had begun to show the first signs of failing. He climbed the ladder slowly, with his usual caution, and at last, emerging warily from the mouth of the shaft, he stepped into the strangest corridor that he had ever beheld.

CHAPTER V - The Hall of the Esthetts

The hall in which Tumithak found himself was more brilliantly lighted than any he had ever seen. The lights were not all of the usual clear white, here and there blues and greens vied with reds and golden yellows to add beauty to a scene that was already beautiful beyond anything that Tumithak had ever imagined. For a moment, he was at a loss to understand just where the luminescence was coming from, for there were no shining plates in the center of the ceiling, such as he had always been familiar with. But after a while, an explanation of the system of lighting dawned on him, and he saw that all the plates were cleverly concealed in the walls, so that the light reflected from them produced an effect of soft, creamy mellowness.

And the walls—the walls were no longer of the familiar glossy brown stone; they were of stone of the purest milky white! And though this in itself was a wonder that must have excited the Lorian's astonishment, it was not the color of the walls that held his attention riveted to them. It was the fact that the walls were covered with designs and pictures, intaglios and bas-reliefs, to such an extent that not a clear space was visible on walls or ceiling, at any place along the corridor. And even the floor bore an intricate design of varicolored inlaid stone.

Now, Tumithak had never dreamed of the possibility of such a thing as this. There was no art in the lower corridors, there never had been. That had been lost to man long before the first passage had been blasted down to Loor. And so Tumithak stood lost in wonder at the marvel that confronted him.

Although most of the wall was covered with design, there were many pictures, too. They showed in detail many wonderful things, things that Tumithak could scarcely believe existed. Yet here they were before him, and to his simple mind the fact that they were here in pictures were proof that somewhere they existed in reality.

Here, for instance, was a group of men and women dancing. They were in a circle, and they danced around something in the center; something that could only partly be seen. But as he looked at it, Tumithak again felt the hair on the back on his neck begin to rise—the creature had long and spidery legs, and from somewhere in his subconscious mind a voice whispered, “Shelk.”

Turning with a puzzled feeling of disgust from that picture, he came upon another one—it depicted a long corridor, and in it a cylindrical object that must have been eighteen or twenty feet long. It was mounted on wheels and around it were gathered a group of eager, waiting humans, with happy, excited looks on their faces. Tumithak puzzled over the pictures for many moments, unable to understand them. They didn’t make sense. These people did not seem to fear the shelks! He came upon a picture that proved it. It showed again the long cylindrical object, and at its side were three beings that could be nothing but shelks. And grouped around them, talking and gesticulating, were another group of humans.

There was one thing that particularly impressed Tumi-thak in these pictures. The people were all fat. Not a one of them but was florid and grossly overweight. But it was probably natural, thought the Loorian, of people who lived near the Surface and were apparently without any fear of the terrible shelk. Such a people would naturally have little to do but live and grow fat.

And so, musing and looking at the pictures, he continued along on his way, until he saw in the distance, up the corridor a ponderous human form and realized that he was reaching the inhabited part of these corridors. The form disappeared down a branching corridor, almost as soon as he glimpsed it, but it was enough to make Tumithak realize that he must go much more carefully. So, for a long while, he slipped cautiously along the side of the passage, using every opportunity that was offered for concealment. He found a thousand things to excite his wonder; indeed, ere long he found himself in a constant state of astonishment. Great tapestries were hung along the wall at one spot; at another, his heart leapt into his mouth as he came suddenly upon a group of statues. It was hard for him to realize that these carven stones were not really men.

There had been no doorways on the sides of the corridors at first; but now the corridor widened until it must have been full forty feet broad, and apartment entrances began to appear. High and wide, these doorways were, and the “curtains” that covered them were of metal! It was Tumithak’s first contact with true doors, for in Loor the cloth curtains were all that ever separated the apartments from the corridor without.

Minute after minute passed, as Tumithak continued on his way. The pictures on the walls grew more elaborate, the corridor grew higher and even wider; and then, in the distance, Tumithak saw a number of human forms approaching him. He knew that he must not be seen, debated for a moment the advisability of turning about and retreating, and then he noticed an open door close to him. Before him was discovery and danger, behind him lay an unthinkable retreat. Tumithak had little choice in the matter; in a moment he had made his decision, had pushed the door wide open and stepped inside.

For a moment he stood, his eyes, used to the brilliant light without, failing him in the gloom of the apartment. Then he realized that he was not alone, for the room was occupied by a man who, to all appearances, was so frightened at Tumithak’s sudden appearance as to be quite speechless. Tumithak took advantage of the other’s evident fright to observe him carefully and to look about the room for some means of escape or concealment.

The room was lighted much more dimly than the hall, the light coming from two plates concealed in the wall near the ceiling. The walls were of a uniform dull blue and in the rear a tapestried door led to the back room. A table, a huge, padded chair, a bed, and a shelf that was filled with books, made up the furniture of the room. And in the midst of the bed lay this huge man.

The man was a veritable mountain of flesh. Tumithak estimated that he certainly must have weighed four hundred pounds. He was well over six feet tall, and the bed on which he lay, and which would easily have held three of Tumithak's fellow citizens, was completely filled with his bulk. He was a florid, full-blooded type of man; and his pale blond hair and beard only served to accentuate the redness of his face and neck.

But the coarseness of the man's features was offset by the refinement of his surroundings. Never had such luxuries been dreamed of by the man of Loor. The clothes that the man wore were of the finest texture imaginable, sheer gauzes that were dyed in the most delicate shades of nacreous pinks, and greens, and blues. They flowed down over his form, softening and dignifying the immense obesity of him. The bed-clothes were as fine and sheer as the man's garments, but of a deep shade of greens and browns. The bed itself was a revelation, a glorious triumph in inlaid metals that might have been wrought by some wonderful artisan of the Golden Age. And flung across the floor was a rug— And the pictures on the wall—

The man suddenly regained control of himself. He set up a scream, a high-pitched womanly scream that seemed strangely absurd coming from one of his bulk. Tumithak was at his side in an instant, with his sword at the fat one's throat.

"Stop that!" he ordered peremptorily. "Stop it at once, or I'll kill you!"

The other subsided, his screams at once becoming a series of involuntary agonized groans. Tumithak stood listening, fearful that the first scream might have been effective, but the silence from without was unbroken. After fully a minute, the man spoke.

"You are a wild man," he said, and his voice was full of terror. "You are a wild man of the lower corridors! What are you doing here among the Chosen Ones?"

Tumithak ignored the question.

"Make another sound, fat one," he whispered, fiercely, "and there will be one less mouth to feed in these halls." He looked toward the door anxiously. "Is any one likely to enter here?" he asked.

The other attempted to answer, but apparently his fear had by now rendered him speechless.

Tumithak laughed scornfully, a strange elation possessing him. It was indeed pleasant to the Loorian to find some one that feared him so terribly. Man had not felt this strange sense of power often in the preceding centuries and Tumithak was half tempted to increase the other's fears, but in the end this emotion was overcome by his curiosity. Seeing that the fat man's terror of the sword was a very real one, he lowered it and returned it to its sheath.

The fat man breathed easier then, but it was some moments before speech returned. Then when he did speak, it was only to repeat the question he had asked before.

"What are you doing here in the halls of the Esthetts?" he gulped fearfully.

Tumithak considered his answer carefully. These people, he knew, did not fear the shelks; clearly, then, they were friendly with them. The Loorian doubted the advisability of confiding in the obese craven, but at the same time it seemed absurd to fear him or any others like him. And the natural conceit that is a part of every great genius made Tumithak long to boast of his mission so that at last he decided to answer the question.

"I am on my way to the Surface," he said. "I come from the lowest pit of all, so far down that we have never even heard of the halls of the Esthetts, as you call them. Are you one of the Esthetts?"

"On your way to the Surface!" said the other, who was now fast losing his fear. "But you have not been called! You will be killed at once. Think you that the Holy Shelks will permit any one to attain the Surface uncalled for?" His nose twitched scornfully. "And a wild man of the lower corridors at that!"

Tumithak was stung by the scorn in the other's voice.

"Listen, fat one," he said, "I do not ask the permission of any one to visit the Surface. As for the shelks,

my whole object in reaching the Surface is that I might kill one of them.”

The other looked at him with a look that Tumithak Was at a loss to interpret.

“You will soon die,” said the Esthett, calmly. “There is no need of my fearing you any longer. Surely any one who speaks such unthinkable blasphemy is doomed even as he says it.” He settled himself more comfortably in his bed as he spoke, and looked at Tumithak curiously.

“From where, Oh, Wild One, did such an impossible idea come to you?” he asked.

The Loorian might have had a feeling of anger at the other’s attitude, had not this question shown him a loophole for expounding his favorite subject. He began to tell the Esthett, in elaborate detail, all the story of his mission. The latter listened attentively, so interested, apparently, that Tumithak grew more and more inter-ested in the telling.

He spoke of his early life, of the finding of the hook, and the inspiration it had given him; he told of the many years of preparation for his journey, and of the many adventures he had had since he left Loor.

The fat one was strangely interested, hut to Tumithak, wrapped up in the story of his mission, it never once occurred that the Esthett was sparring for time. And so, when he was finished with his story at last, he was quite willing to listen to the Chosen One’s story of his own life in the marble halls.

“We who live in these halls,” began the Esthett, “are those chosen ones of the race of mankind who possess the one thing that the Holy Shelks lack the power of creating beauty. Mighty as the Masters are, they have no artistic ability, but in spite of this they are quite capa-ble of appreciating our art, and so they have come to rely upon us for the beauties of life, and they have given it to us to produce all the great works of art that decorate their wonderful palaces on the Surface! All the great art works that you see on the walls of these corridors have been executed by me and my fellow-citizens. All the rich paintings and statuary that you will see later, in our great square, all these are the rejected specimens that the Holy Shelks have no need of. Can you imagine the beauties of the accepted pieces that have found their way to the Surface?”

“And in return for our beauty, the shelks feed us and give us every luxury imaginable. Of all mankind, we alone have been chosen as worthy of being the friends and companions of the world’s masters.”

He paused for a moment, breathless with what was apparently an exceptionally long speech, for him. After resting a while, he went on:

“Here in these marble corridors, we of the Esthetts are born and educated. We work only at our art; we work only when it suits us, and our work is carried from here to the Surface above. There it is carefully explained by the shelks, and the choicest is preserved. The artists who produce this work — listen carefully, wild man — the artists who produce this work are called from their home to join the great guild of Chosen Ones who live on the Surface and spend the rest of their lives decorating the glorious palaces and gardens of the Holy Shelks! They are the happiest of men, for they know that their work is praised by the very Lords of Creation themselves.”

He was panting with the effort caused by his story, but he struggled bravely on:

“Can you wonder that we feel ourselves superior to the men who have allowed themselves to become little better than animals, little more than rabbits skulk-ing in their warrens, miles below the ground? Can you wonder that—”

His speech was suddenly cut off by a sound from the corridor without. It was the sound of a siren, whose tones grew shriller and shriller, higher and higher until it seemed to pass entirely beyond the range of sound heard by human ears. The Esthett was suddenly beside himself with eagerness. He began to struggle out of his bed, managed after several fail-ures to get to his feet, waddled to the door and then turned.

“The Masters!” he cried. “The Holy Shelks! They have come to take another group of artists to the Surface. I knew they would be here soon, wild man, and it was not for nothing that I listened to your long, tiresome story. Try to escape if you can, hut you know as well as I that none can escape from the Masters. And now I go to tell them of your presence!”

He slammed the door suddenly in Tumithak's face and was gone.

For several minutes, Tumithak remained motionless in the apartment. That sheiks were so near to him seemed incredible. Yet he expected every minute to see the door open and to have the horrible spider-like creatures rush in and slay him. At last, it seemed, he was in a trap from which there was no escape. He shivered with fear, and then, as always, the very intensity of his fear shamed him and caused him to take a new grip upon himself; and though he trembled violently at what he was about to do, he moved to the door and examined it carefully. He had decided that the chances of escape would be greater in the corridor than if he waited here for the sheiks to capture him. It was several minutes before he discovered the secret of the latch, but then he swung the door open and stepped into the corridor.

The corridor in Tumithak's vicinity was fortunately empty, but far up the hallway, the obese Esthett could still be seen, bustling ponderously on his way. He had been joined by others, many as fat as he; and all were hastening, as fast as their weight would let them, up the corridor, in the direction in which the square of the city evidently lay. Tumithak followed them at a discreet distance, and after a while, saw them turn into another corridor. He approached the corridor cautiously, the determination forming in his mind to slay the fat one that intended to betray him, at the first opportunity. It was well that he used care in his approach, for when he peered around the corner he saw that he was not a hundred feet from the town's great square.

He had never seen such a great square. It was a huge hail over a hundred yards in diameter, its tessellated marble floor and carved walls presenting an appearance that made Tumithak gasp in wonder. Here and there statues stood on van-colored pedestals, and all the doorways were hung with beautiful tapestries. The entire square was almost filled with Esthetts, over five hundred being present.

Not the halt, its furnishings nor its inhabitants had much effect on Tumithak. His eyes were occupied in observing the great cylinder of metal that lay in the center of the hail. It was just such a cylinder as the one he had seen on the carving when he first entered the city—eighteen or twenty feet long, mounted on four thickly tired wheels and having, he now perceived, a round opening in the top.

While he looked, a number of objects shot out of the opening and dropped lightly before the crowd. One after another, just as jacks from a box, they leapt from the opening, and as they nimbly struck the ground the Esthetts raised a cheer. Tumithak drew hastily back, and then, his curiosity overcoming his caution, dared to peep again into the hail. For the first time in over a hundred years, a man of Loor gazed upon a sheik!

Standing about four feet high, they were indeed spider-like, just as tradition said. But a close look showed that this was only a superficial resemblance. For these creatures were hairless, and possessed ten legs, rather than the eight that belong to a true spider. The legs were long and triple-jointed and on the tip of each was a short rudimentary claw much like a finger nail. There were two bunches of these legs, five on each side, and they joined the creature at a point midway between the head and the body. The body was shaped much like the abdomen of a wasp, and was about the same size as the head, which was certainly the strangest part of the entire creature.

For the head was the head of a man: The same eyes, the same broad brow, a mouth with tight, thin lips, and a chin—all these gave the head of the creature a startling resemblance to that of a man. The nose and hair alone were missing, to make the face perfectly human.

As Tumithak looked, they entered at once upon the business that had brought them down into the corridor. One of them took a paper from a pouch strapped to his body, grasping it nimbly between two of his limbs, and began to speak. His voice had a queer, metallic clack about it, but it was not a bit hard for Tumithak to distinguish every word he said.

"Brothers of the Pits," he cried, "the time has come for another group of you to make your homes on the Surface! The friends who left you last week are eagerly awaiting your arrival there, and it only remains for us to call the names of the ones to whom the great honor has fallen. Listen carefully, and let each one enter the cylinder as his name is called."

He paused, allowing his words to sink in, and then in a silence that was impressive, he began to call the names.

"Korystalis! Vintiania! Lathrumidor!" he called, and one after another, great, bull-bodied men strutted forward and climbed up a small ladder that was low-ered from the cylinder. The third man called, Tumi-thak noticed, was the one who had conversed with him in the apartment. The look on his face, as well as on the faces of the others, was one of surprise and joy, as if some incredible piece of good luck had befallen him.

Now Tumithak had been so absorbed in observing the shelks and their vehicle that he had forgotten momentarily the threat that the Esthett had made, but when he saw him approaching the shelks, the Loorian's terror returned. He stood, rooted in his tracks with fear. But his fear was unnecessary, for apparently this unexpected piece of good fortune had driven everything else from the simple mind of the Chosen One, for he climbed into the cylinder without so much as a word to the shelks standing about. And Tumithak gave a great sigh of relief as he disappeared into the hole.

There were six shelks, and six Esthett's names were called; and as fast as they were called, their owners stepped forward and clambered, puffing and grunting, into the car. At last, the sixth had struggled down into the round opening and the shelks turned and followed. A lid covered the hole from below, and silence reigned in the hall. After a moment, the Esthetts began to drift away, and as several moved toward the corridor in which Tumithak was concealed, he was forced to dart back through the passage some distance and slip into an apartment to avoid discovery.

He half expected some Esthett to enter the apartment and discover him, but this time luck was with him and after a few moments, he peered cautiously through the door to find the corridor empty. He emerged and quickly made his way to the main hail. It was deserted of Esthetts, now, but for some reason the cylinder still remained in the same spot; and Tumithak was suddenly seized with an idea that made him tremble with its magnitude.

These shelks had obviously come from the Surface in this car! And now they were going back to the Surface in it. Had not the Esthett, whom the shelks named Lathrumidor, told him that occasionally artists were called to live upon the Surface among the shelks? Yes, this car was certainly going to return to the Surface. And, with a sudden rush of inspired determination, Tumithak knew that he was going with it.

He hastened forward and in a moment was clinging to the rear of the machine, clambering for a foothold on the few projections that he could find. He was not a moment too soon, for hardly had he gotten a firm grip on the machine than it leaped silently forward and sped at a vertiginous speed up the corridor!

CHAPTER VI - The Slaying of the Shelk

Tumithak's memory of that ride was a wild kaleidoscopic jumble of incidents. So fast did the car speed, that it was only occasionally, as they slowed to turn a corner or passed through an exceptionally narrow hail, that he could lift his eyes and look about him.

They passed through halls more brilliantly lighted than any he had yet seen. He saw halls of metal, polished and gleaming, and corridors of unpolished rock where strange things fled wildly out of their path, howling mournfully. There were passages where the car rolled smoothly and swiftly over a polished glistening floor, and corridors where the vibration of passing over rough rock threatened to hurl him at any moment from his precarious position.

Once they passed slowly through a marble passage-way where Esthetts were lined on either side, chanting a solemn and sonorous hymn as the car of the shelks passed through. Tumithak was certain that he would be discovered, but if any of the singers saw him they paid little heed, evidently believing him to be a captive of the shelks. There were no longer any pits or branching hallways now, the entire road to the surface was one broad main corridor, and along this corridor the car sped, carrying Tumithak ever nearer to his goal.

Although the car's speed was not great as measured by the speed of the cars we use today, it must be re-embered that the fastest speed the Loorian had ever conceived was a fast run. So it seemed to him now that he rode upon the very wings of the wind, and his thankfulness knew no bounds when the car at last slowed to a speed that enabled him to drop to the ground in a section of the corridor that had apparently been un-inhabited for many years. All thought of continuing the ride was abandoned, now, his only desire was to end the devil's ride that he had so foolhardily undertaken.

For a moment, Tumithak was inclined to lie where he had fallen, at least long enough to regain control of

his dazed faculties, but the sudden realization that the car of the shelks had stopped, not a hundred yards away, brought him instantly to his feet, and he flung himself hurriedly through the nearest open door. The apartment in which he found himself was dust laden and bare of furniture; it was obvious that it had been long unused, and so, convinced that no danger awaited him there, Tumithak returned to the door and looked out at the car.

He saw at once that the queer door or hatchway in the top of the car was open, but it was several moments before the occupants began to emerge. Then the fat head of one of the Esthetts appeared and its owner laboriously dragged himself up and over the side of the car. He was followed by a shelk, who leaped nimbly to the ground, after which the car slowly emptied until all twelve of its occupants were in the corridor. They all turned, then, and entered an apartment, the only one visible that bore a curtain over the door.

For a while, Tumithak remained in his hiding place debating his next move. His instinctive timidity urged him to remain in hiding, to wait—for days, if necessary—until the shelks had re-entered the car and departed. His curiosity demanded that he attempt to discover what the strangely allied party was doing beyond that great tapestry-covered door. And his wisdom told him that if he intended to continue on his quest, the best course was to keep on at once up the corridor, while the shelks were still within the apartment—for he knew that he was but a few short miles from the surface, toward which he had been traveling for so long.

His better judgment conquered at last and he chose the latter course, determined to forget the party, and so emerged from the room and began to run lightly and silently on his way; but as he passed the great doorway and saw how voluminous were the folds of the draperies and how easily one might conceal himself in them, he determined to have one last look at the shelks and their strange friends before continuing. So, suiting the action to the thought, he stepped to the opening and, drawing the curtains around him, parted them slightly and looked into the room.

The first thing to strike his attention was the immense size of the room. It must have been eighty feet long and half as many wide, truly an enormous room to the Loorian; and its ceiling was lost in gloom. So high was it that the lights, which were arranged around the room at the level of the shoulder, were not bright enough to show any of its detail. Tumithak had a queer idea that there was no ceiling, that perhaps the walls rose higher and higher until at last they reached the Surface. He had little time to speculate on this possibility, however, for he had hardly noticed it when his eyes fell upon the table. A great low table, it was, a long table covered with a cloth of snowy whiteness and piled high with strange articles that Tumithak saw were intended to be foods. But the Loorian looked at them in wonder, for they were foods such as he had never before heard of, such as his ancestors had not known for many a generation, the thousand and one succulent viands of the Surface. And around the table were a dozen low divans, and on some of these divans the Esthetts were even now reclining, greedily partaking of the varied foods.

The shelks, strangely enough, were not joining them in the feast. Behind each of the ponderous artists, a shelk had taken his place, and to Tumithak's notion, there was something ominous in the way they stood, silently watching every move the Esthetts made. But the self-styled Chosen Ones were quite at ease, gobbling their food and grunting appreciative interjections to each other, until Tumithak turned from looking at them in disgust.

And then, suddenly, there came a sharp command from the shelk at the head of the table. The Esthetts looked up in consternation, dismay and a pitiable incredulity in their faces. Ere they could move, however, ere they could even cry out, on each a shelk had leaped, his thin-lipped mouth seeking, finding unerringly, the jugular vein beneath the folds of flesh in the fat one's heavy throat.

Vainly the artists struggled, their slow, helpless movements were unavailing, the nimble shelks easily avoiding their groping arms while all the time their teeth sank deeper into the flesh. Tumithak gasped in horror. As one in a trance, he watched the movements of the Esthetts become feebler and feebler until at last all motion ceased. The Loorian's brain was in a daze. What— what on Venus could be the meaning of this? What connection could this grisly scene have with the lengthy explanation of the lives of these people that Lathrumidor had given him in the marble halls below? He gazed at the scene in horror, unable to move his eyes.

The Esthetts were quiet now, and the shelks had raised themselves from them and were busy with some new occupation. From beneath the table they had drawn several huge, transparent jars and half a dozen small machines with long hoses attached. These hoses were fastened to the wounds in the necks of the

Eshetts and as Tumithak looked on, he saw the blood swiftly pumped from the bodies and ejected into the jars.

As the jars filled with the liquid, the bodies of the Esthetts collapsed like punctured balloons, and in a few moments they lay, pallid and wrinkled, on the floor about the table. The shelks showed no excitement in their work; apparently it was merely a routine duty with them, and their calm business-like methods served only to add to Tumithak's terror; but at last he over-came the paralytic fear that held him, and he turned and sped frantically away. Up the corridor he ran, faster and faster, farther and farther, and at last, spent and breathless, unable to run another step, he darted into an open door, and flung himself gasping and panting upon the floor of the apartment it led into.

Slowly he regained control of himself, his breath re-turned, and with it some small measure of confidence. He berated himself harshly for his cowardice in so losing control of himself, yet, even as he did so, he trembled at the thought of the terrible sight that he had witnessed. As he grew calmer, he began to wonder at the meaning of the events that he had seen. Lath-rumidor, the Esthett, had led him to believe that the shelks were the kindly masters of the immense artists. He had spoken of the journey to the Surface as being the culminating honor of an Esthett's life. The shelk who had spoken in the great hail, too, had intimated as much. Yet for some strange reason, at the first opportunity after leaving the city, the shelks had slain their worshiping servants, and slain them in a way that seemed quite usual and commonplace to them. Strive as he might, Tumithak could not account for this appar-ent anomaly. And so, cowering in the rear room of the apartment, puzzling over the unnaturalness of the day's adventures, the Loorian fell into a troubled sleep.

It is not to be wondered that Tumithak was puzzled at the strange events of the day. He knew of no relationship between animals, such as existed between the Esthetts and the shelks. There were no domestic animals in the pits and man had not known of them for centuries. Other centuries were to go by before they were to know of them again, so there was nothing in Tumithak's life analogous to the status in which the shelks held the Esthetts.

Today we know that they were—cattle! Lulled into a sense of false security by hypocritical lies, bred for centuries for the full-blooded, bovine stupidity that was characteristic of them, allowed no means of intellectual expression except the artistic impulse which the shelks scorned, they had become, after many generations, the willing creatures of the Beasts of Venus.

And by a strange combination of the lies of the shelks and their own immense conceit, they had come to look forward, from earliest childhood, to that happy day when they would be taken to the Surface—to become, unknowing, the food of their masters. Such were the Esthetts, strangest, perhaps, of all the various races of men evolved by the breeding of the shelks.

All this, however, was far beyond the comprehension of Tumithak - or of any man of his generation. And so it was that even after he awoke and resumed his journey, he was still unable to account for the strange relationship. But the puzzles which a semi-savage mind cannot solve, it soon forgets, and so it was that before long Tumithak was strolling along on his way, his mind entirely at ease.

Since passing the hall of the singing Esthetts, during his wild ride, Tumithak had seen no signs of habitation. Apparently the corridors were entirely too near the sur-face to be inhabited by man. So Tumithak saw no one in the corridors and traveled for several miles undisturbed. At last he came to an abrupt end of the passage, and here found a ladder of metal set into the wall that rose higher and higher in the gloom. Filled with a suppressed excitement, his heart beating noticeably again, Tumithak began the ascent of what he knew to be the last pit before he reached the surface. He emerged from it in a hall of strange black stone, and removing from his pouch the last of his father's gifts, he started along the upward slope, the weapon held gingerly in his hand. The corridor was narrower than any Tumithak had ever seen, and as he walked along the walls drew still closer together, until it was not more than two feet wide. The grade became steeper and steeper and at last became a flight of stairs. Up these Tumithak strode, every moment his heart heating wilder, and at last he saw what he knew to be his goal. Far ahead, a light shone down in the corridor from above, a light far brighter and harsher than any of the lights of the corridors, and of a strange reddish tint. Tumithak knew, as he looked on it in awe, that the light was the light of the Surface.

He hurried forward; the ceiling became lower and lower and for the last few yards he was forced to stoop, and then—He reached the top of the steps and found himself standing in a shallow pit, not more than five feet deep. He raised his head, and a low gasp of absolute unbelief escaped from him.

For Tumithak had looked upon the Surface...

The vastness of the scene was enough to unnerve the Loorian. It seemed that he had emerged into a mighty room or hail, so tremendous that he could not even comprehend its immensity. The ceiling and walls of this room merged into each other to form a stupendous vault like an inverted bowl, which touched the floor of the vault at a distance so far away that it seemed utterly incredible. And this ceiling and these walls in places were of a beautiful blue, the color of a woman's eyes. This blue glowed like a jewel, and was mottled with great billowy areas of white and rose, and as Tumithak looked he had a vague feeling that those enormous billowy spots were slowly moving and changing in shape.

Unable to take his eyes from the sky above him, Tumithak's wonder and awe began to turn into a great fear. The more he looked, the further away the great dome seemed to be, and yet, curiously and terribly, it seemed to be closing in on him, too. He was sure, after a moment, that the great billowy spots were moving, and he had a dreadful feeling that they were about to fall and crush him. Sick and terrified at the enormity of the scene before him, he darted back into the passageway and cowered against the wall, trembling with a strange, unreasoning fear. For, raised as he had been in the close confines of the corridor walls, living his whole life under the ground, Tumithak, when he first looked upon the Surface, became a victim of agoraphobia, that strange fear of open spaces, that in sonic people, even today, amounts to a disease.

It was nearly an hour before his reason was able to gain control over this strange fear. Had he come thus far, he argued with himself, only to return because of the appearance of the Surface? Surely, if that mighty blue and cloudy vault was to fall, it would not have waited all these years just to fall on him. He took a deep breath, and reason prevailing at last, he again looked out upon the Surface.

But this time his eyes avoided the sky, and he directed his attention to the floor of the "room." in the vicinity of the pit this floor consisted of a thick brown dust, but not far away this dust was covered with a strange carpet consisting of thousands of long green hairs thickly matted together, completely hiding the dusty floor beneath. In the middle distance were a number of tall, irregular pillars whose tops were covered with a great huge bunch of stuff, of the same color and appearance as the hairs of the carpet.

And then, as Tumithak looked beyond the grass and the trees, he beheld a wonder that surpassed all the other wonders that he had seen, for hanging low in the dome above the trees was the light of the Surface, a brilliant, blinding orb that lit up, redly, all that vast space of the Surface.

Speechless with awe, Tumithak looked upon the sun-set. Again came the dizzy, sickening rush of agoraphobia, but with it came a sense of beauty that made him forget his fear, and gradually calmed him. After a while he turned his eyes and looked in the opposite direction; and there, towering high above him, were the homes of the shelks!

Fully a dozen of the high towers were visible, obelisk-like they stood there, their metal walls gleaming redly in the light of the sinking sun. Very few of them stood perfectly erect, the strange unearthly artistic sense of the shelks causing them to be built at various angles from the perpendicular, some as much as thirty degrees. They were of varying heights, some fifty, some as much as two hundred feet high, and from their tops long cables hung, linking all the towers together. Windowless they were, and the only mode of ingress was a small round door at the bottom. Not one of all these towers was more than fifteen feet in circumference, so that they gave an appearance not unlike a bundle of huge needles.

For how long the Loorian gazed at these amazing scenes, he could not tell. Of all the wondrous sights, the strangest, to him, was the sunset, the gradual sinking of the great red light into what seemed to be the floor of the vast chamber. Even after the sun had disappeared, he remained gazing absordedly at the walls, which still glowed redly where it had been. . . . And then—

Tumithak had not heard a sound. Lost in wonder though he was, his ears had remained instinctively on the alert, and yet he had heard nothing. Until suddenly there was a scratching, rustling noise behind him and a clattering, metallic voice barked staccato words of command.

"Get—back—in—that—hole!" it spat, and Tumithak's blood turned to water as he realized that a shelk had stolen up behind him!

The next second seemed a year to the Loorian. He turned to face the beast, and in that turning a thousand thoughts raced through his mind. He thought of Nika-dur and Thupra, and of the many years that he had known them; he thought of his father and even of his little remembered mother; he thought, strangely enough, of the huge Yakran that he had tumbled into the pit, and of how he had bellowed as he fell. All these thoughts rushed through his mind as he turned and then his arm flew up to protect himself. Utterly instinctive, the action was; it seemed that he was not in control of his body at all. Something outside of him—greater than himself—caused him to flex his fingers, and as he did so the revolver, the last of his father's three strange gifts, spat flame and thunder! As in a dream, he heard its spitting bark, once, twice, thrice—seven times; and into the shallow pit tumbled the dead body of the shelk!

For a moment, the hero stared at it dumbly. Then, as the realization that he had accomplished his mission came over him, a great feeling of exultation seized him. Quickly drawing his sword, he began to slash at the ten long finger-like legs of the shelk, humming, as he did so, the song that the Loorians sang when they marched against the Yakrans; and though there were strange questioning clacks and clatters from the direction of the homes of the shelks, he methodically continued hacking until the head was free from the body.

Then, realizing that the voices of the shelks were much nearer, he stuffed the bleeding head into the bosom of his tunic, and sped like the wind down the steps of the corridor.

CHAPTER VII - The Power and the Glory

Tumlook of Loor, the father of Tumithak, sat in the doorway of his apartment, gazing out into the corridor. It was a lonely life that he had led for the past few weeks, for although his friends had tried to cheer him with the customary optimistic chat-ter, he could see that they all believed that his son would never return. And indeed, it would have been a bold man that would argue that Tumithak had even so much as passed the city of Yakra.

Tumlook knew the opinions of his friends and he was beginning to believe as they did, in spite of the fact that they did their best to make him think that they expected wondrous things of his son. Why, he wondered, had he ever let the youth depart on such a hopeless quest? Why had he not been more stern with him, and driven the idea out of his head while he was still young? So he sat and berated himself, in this hour just before the time of sleep, as the life of Loor passed by him in an irregular, intermittent stream.

After a while his face brightened a little. Coming down the hall toward him were the two lovers whose long friendship with Tumithak had made a bond that Tumlook felt that he had somehow inherited. Nikadur hailed him, and as they drew near, Thupra ran up and kissed him impulsively on the cheek.

"Have you heard aught of Tumithak?" she cried, the question that had become almost a form of greeting between them.

Tumlook shook his head.

"Is it likely?" he asked. "Surely, after all these weeks, we must look upon him as dead."

But Thupra was not to be discouraged. Indeed, of all Loor, it is probable that she alone still maintained the confidence that amounted to a certainty that Tumithak was safe and would return in triumph.

"I think he will return," she said now. "You know, we are sure that he reached Yakra. And has not Nen-napuss told us of the huge giant that was found dead at the foot of the Yakran shaft? If Tumithak could conquer such a man as that, who could overcome him?"

"Thupra may be right," said Nikadur, gravely. "There are rumors in Nonone of a great panic in Yakra, during which a man of these corridors is supposed to have passed through the town. The rumors are vague and may be only gossip, but perhaps Tumithak did reach the dark corridors."

"Tumithak will return, I know," Thupra repeated. "He is mighty, and—" she paused. Far tip the corridor, her ears caught a sound and she listened questioningly. Then Nikadur heard it, too, and last of all, it reached the ears of Tumlook.

A shouting, a distant shouting that grew louder even as they listened. Several passing pedestrians heard it, too, and paused; and then two men turned and hastened off in its direction. The trio strained their ears in an endeavor to distinguish the meaning of the cries. Several more men came speeding up the corridor, running in the direction of the noise.

"Come," cried Nikadur suddenly, consternation written in his face. "If this be a raid of the Yakrans—" In spite of the cries of Thupra, he sped off, and Turnlook hesitated only long enough to dart back into his apartment and arm himself before he followed.

Thupra, however, was not to be left behind. She caught up with Nikadur in a moment, and in spite of his protestations, persisted in going with him. And so the three, joined, soon by many others, rushed on in the direction of the excitement.

A man passed them, running the other way. "What is it?" came a chorus of a dozen voices, but the man's only answer was an unintelligible gabble of words as he ran on. The crowd's ignorance was not to continue for long, though, for at the very next turn of the corridor, they beheld the cause of the tumult.

Down the corridor came marching an incredible procession. A group of Loorians led the parade, dancing and cheering like mad, while behind them came marching a well-known figure—Nennapuss, chief of the Nononese, with his retinue of officers. Nennapuss was followed by what must have been almost the entire population of Nonone, all gabbling and shouting madly to the Loorians whom they passed. It was not at the Nononese that the Loorians stared, however, but at the ones who followed them. Behind Nennapuss' men came a crowd of Yakrans, each carrying aloft a white cloth on a stick that still, after so many hundreds of years, denoted a truce. Datto was there, the burly chief of the Yalcrans, and his huge nephew, Thopf, and many others of whom the Loorians had heard from the Nononese, and there, high on the shoulders of two of the mightiest Yakrans, was riding—Tumithak!

But when the eyes of the Loorians looked upon Tumithak, they looked no further. For the sight they beheld was so incredible that it seemed impossible to believe that they were not dreaming.

He was dressed in garments that, to their eyes, were beautiful beyond telling. They were of the finest texture imaginable, sheer gauzes that were dyed in the most delicate shades of nacreous pinks and greens and blues. They flowed down over his form, clinging to his body and giving him all the appearance of a god. Around his head was a metal band not unlike a crown, such a band as legend said the king shelks were wont to wear.

And, most unbelievable of all, he held his arm aloft, and in his hand was the wrinkled head of a shelk!

Tumlook, Nikadur and Thupra never knew when they joined the crowd. One moment they were rushing down the corridor toward the incredible procession, the next, it had absorbed them and they, too, were a part of the howling, enthusiastic mob that fought and laughed its way toward the great square of Loor.

They reached the crossing of the two main corridors and formed an immense crowd with Tumithak and the Yakrans in its center. The crowd continued its chattering and cheering for some moments and then Tumithak, mounting the stone pedestal that had long been used for speakers, held up his hand for silence. Quiet reigned almost instantly, and in the lull, the voice of Nennapuss, that instinctive master of ceremonies, could be heard.

"Friends of Loor," he cried. "Today is the day that will live forever in the archives of the three cities of the lower corridors. It has been unnumbered years since the three cities have all met on a friendly footing, and to bring that about it has taken an event so incredible that it is well-nigh impossible to believe. For at last a man has slain a shelk—"

He was interrupted by the booming voice of Datto, the much-decorated chief of the Yakrans.

"Enough of this talk," he shouted. "We are here to do honor to Tumithak, the Loorian, who has slain a shelk. Let us shout and sing songs in his praise. Let us bow to him, Nennapuss, we who are chiefs, let us call upon the chiefs of Loor to bow to him also, for who could slay a shelk if he were not far greater than we."

Nennapuss looked a little nettled at having been interrupted at his favorite pastime, but before he could

answer, Tumithak began to speak. And at his word, Yakran and Nononese alike listened with respect.

"Fellow Loorians," he began. "Brothers of Nonone and Yakra, it was not for honor that I journeyed to the Surface and slew the beast whose head I hold in my hand. Since I was a boy I have felt that men could fight with shelks. It has been the ambition of my life to prove that fact to everyone. Surely no citizen of Loor was less of a fighter than I. Many, indeed, have scorned me for a mere dreamer of dreams. And I assure you that I was little more. Can you not see that man is not the weak, insignificant creature that you seem to think? You Yakrans have never cowered in fear when the men of Loor came against you! Loorians, have you ever trembled in your apartments when the Yakrans raided your halls?"

"Yet the cry of 'Shelk!' will send you all fleeing panic-stricken to your homes! Can you not see that these shelks, although mighty, are only mortal creatures like yourselves? Listen to the story of my deeds, now, and see if I have done aught that you could not have done"

He took up the recital of his adventures. He told of the passing of Yakra, and though the Loorians cheered a bit there was silence among the people of Yakra, and then he told of the dark corridors, and the Yakrans, too, cheered as he recited his story of the slaying of the dogs. He told of the halls of the Esthetts, and in glowing colors described to them the beauties there, hoping that he might arouse in them the desire to possess these beauties.

And then he tried to tell them of the Surface, but here words failed him; it was hardly possible, in the limited vocabulary of the corridors, to tell of the things he had seen. So he went on from this to tell of the slaying of the shelk, and at last the story of his return.

"For some reason the shelks did not follow me," he said, "and I reached the first halls of the Esthetts in safety. And here I was discovered, and had to fight a battle with a half dozen of the fat ones before I could go farther. I slew them all," Tumithak, in that sublime unconscious conceit of his, failed to say how easy it had been to slaughter his huge opponents, "and taking from them these garments, continued on my way.

"I came again to the dark corridors, but even here no one opposed me. Perhaps the terrible smell of shelk was so great that the savages feared to come near me. So at last I came to Yakra, and found that the woman whom I had met on my upward journey had told her story to Datto, the chief, who was ready and eager to do me honor on my return home. And so I came to Nonone, and after a time to Loor.

He ceased his story, and again the crowd broke into cheers. The cheers increased, echoed back against the walls until the great hall rang like a bell. "Great is Tumithak of the Loorians!" they cried, "Great is Tumithak, slayer of shelks!" And Tumithak folded his arms and drank in the praise, forgetful for the moment that his entire mission had been to prove that it did not take a great man to kill a shelk.

After a while, the tumult began to die and the voice of Datto was heard again.

"Loorians," he shouted. "For many, many years, the men of Yakra have fought unending war with the men of Loor. Today that war ceases. Today we have found a Loorian who is greater than all Yakrans, and so we fight with Loor no more. And to prove that I speak truth, Datto bows in allegiance to Tumithak

Again the cheers, and at last Nennapuss arose.

"It is a good thing that you have done, O Datto," he said, "and truly Tumithak is a chief of chiefs if there ever was one. Now there has been little enmity between Loor and Nonone in the past, and so our cases are different. For it is said that in the olden days, the people of Loor and Nonone were one. Thus, we hear of the days of the great chief, Ampithak, who ruled—" here Datto whispered something fiercely into his ear, and the Nononese flushed and went on, "But enough of that. Suffice it that Nennapuss, too, bows to Tumithak, chief of chiefs and chief of Nonone."

Again there was a great demonstration and after a while, Datto began to speak again. Would it not be a seemly thing, he asked frowning fiercely, for the Loor-ians to recognize Tumithak as their chief also, thus making him king of all the lower corridors? The Loorians raised a cheer, and then Tagivos, the eldest of the doctors, arose to speak.

"The people of Loor have a government somewhat different from that of Nonone and Yakra," he said. "We

have not had a chief for many years. However, it might be a good thing for the three towns to be united and so I will call a meeting of the council to decide on it.”

The council was soon grouped together; Tagivos, Tumlook and old Sidango leading them, and after a while they announced that they were agreed to recognize Tumithak as their chief also. And so, amid wild cheering, that made it utterly impossible to distinguish a word that was said, Tumithak became chief of all the lower corridors.

Datto and his huge nephew, Thopf, the foremost of the Yakrans, were the first to swear allegiance to him, then he accepted the fealty of Sidango, Tagivos and the other Loorians. It gave Tumithak a queer feeling to touch the sword of his father and to hear his oath, but he maintained his dignified bearing, and treated Tumlook in just the same fashion as the others, until the ceremony was over. Then he called for attention.

“Friends of the lower corridors,” he said. “A new day dawns for man today. It has been over thirty years since war has visited these corridors and in all those years men have almost forgotten the arts of war. We have lived in a spirit of slothful peace, while above us the enemies of all mankind have grown stronger and stronger. But in making me your chief, you have ended that era of peace and brought upon yourselves new lives of action. I will not be a peaceful ruler, for I, who have seen so much of the world, will not be content to skulk idly in the deepest corridor. Already I plan to lead you against the savages of the dark corridors, to claim those halls as our own, and to fill them with the lights that still gleam in the deserted corridors that we no longer use.

“And if we conquer those savages, I shall take you against the huge Esthetts to show you what beauty can do for the life of man. And the time will surely come, if the High One be willing, when I shall lead you against the shelks themselves, for what I have done, every one of you can do, and shall do.

“And if anyone feels that the task I call upon you to do is too great, let him speak now for I will not rule over man against his will.”

Again the cheers broke out, and gathered volume, and rang from wall to wall of the great square. In the excitement and enthusiasm of the moment, there was not a man in all the crowd that did not feel that he, too, might become a slayer of shelks.

And while they cheered and sang, and worked themselves into a frenzy, Tumithak stepped down from the stone and strode off in the direction of his home.

The End