

TUMITHAK OF THE TOWERS OF FIRE

by Charles R. Tanner

Death prowled the land with a hungry tread, and the Venus fire was the only law,
as Tumithak of the Corridors came out of the pits of darkness to make his last
great fight to reclaim the earth for his people.

Foreword:

FIVE thousand years ago, the savage shelks of Venus invaded this planet and drove Man from his proud place as master of the earth's Surface into the pits and corridors, where he was to skulk in fear and terror for twenty long centuries.

Three thousand years ago, the first pitmen emerged from their hole and defied the dominant race of shelks. From that moment, the war between sheik and man waged unrelenting until, some eight hundred years later, the last sheik was killed. Today, after a period of dark ages during which both sheik wisdom and human science almost died, Man is again winning back his once proud place upon

the earth, and we can even claim that some few sciences have been established on

as firm a foundation as before the Invasion.

Among these sciences (as a natural result of our search for the secrets of the

ancients) are the ones related to geology and archeology. We know far more today

then we did a hundred years ago of the life of mankind in the golden days before

the coming of the shelks; and we know far more, too, of the life of those strange ancestors of ours who spent their whole lives in the pits and corridors

under the Surface, in those long-gone days when the Beasts of Venus were lords

of all the earth.

And among the many legends which have grown slowly through the passing centuries, the greatest has always been that of Tumithak of Loor. It is little

wonder that this is so, for both legend and verified history have portrayed him

as the first man to brave the dangers of the Surface after the long generations

of pit-dwelling which our ancestors endured.

Now among all the tales of wonder, magic and prophecy which make up the saga of

Tumithak, some few, striped of their incredibility, give us an outline of events

that might well be historical and reasonably accurate. The story of Tumithak's

first journey to the Surface, for instance, or the one which tells of his arousing and leading his men to capture the little city of Shawn. . . And also,

there is the story of his adventures in Kaymak.

The first two stories appeared in print long ago. The third the author presents

here, in the hope that readers have not forgotten "Tumithak of the Corridors."

CHAPTER ONE

Incredible Rescue

THE room in which the workers toiled was about a hundred feet square, and windowless. The fact that the floor, walls and high ceiling were all of the same glassy brown composition suggested that the room was underground, as indeed it was. And on the far right, a flight of stairs running up the side of the wall, a broad flight with an ornate, carved balustrade, added any necessary proof to the fact.

There must have been thirty of to machines at which the workers busied themselves. On the side of the machines nearest the workers, a complicated series of thermometer-like tubes appeared, a half-dozen levers, and a small hopper. Each worker was engaged in slowly pouring into the hopper a substance that had the appearance of powdered iron, meanwhile watching carefully the gauges, his free hand hovering over the levers.

Most of the workers were old men, weak old men with looks of hopeless despair on

their faces. Others, a few, were younger looking, but the same look of almost resigned hopelessness covered their faces. Indeed, there were but four in the entire company whose faces showed any signs of vigor or of hope. And these four

sat close to the platform and the bottom of the steps, where their masters might

keep a sharp eye on them and be ready at a moment's notice to whip back any signs of rebellion.

Their masters! There were two of them, standing on untiring limbs on the low dais-like platform at the foot of the stairs, with their assistants squatting at

their feet. Strange as those assistants would seem to men of today, their strangeness was nothing compared to that of their masters.

For their masters were not men at all, but shelks, savage but intelligent beasts

from another world, who had ruled over the Surface from time immemorial. They were crustacean-like creatures; indeed, they might have been mistaken for gigantic lobsters at a distance. They had ten limbs, hairless and not at all unlike greatly elongated fingers.

Their bodies, reddish in hue, were shaped a good deal like a wasp's abdomen, and

seated directly upon that body, with no sign of a neck, was a head that was startling in its resemblance to a human one.

Save for the fact that it was hairless and had a grim thinness to the lips that

no man had ever had, a sheik's head might have been that of a man.

Their assistants were men. At least, they had the form of men. But none of the toiling slaves considered them as such. To them they were mogs--fawning, dog-like descendants of the men who had surrendered to the shelks in that ancient day when the beasts of Venus had conquered earth and driven the most of

the race into the pits and corridors where they still lived.

Time and breeding had changed the mogs considerably. Few of them were less than

six and a half feet tall, and most of them were closer to seven. Their hair was

black and they wore full black beards, and all were as lean and supple as greyhounds. And like greyhounds, their chests were developed out of all proportions to the rest of their bodies, which were bony and gaunt.

So the workers toiled at their machines, and the shelks and mogs sat and watched, drowsily; and the mogs even dozed. For they knew well that no man would dare to raise his hand against their masters. Besides, the masters were armed with the terrible fire-hoses, curious weapons consisting of a small box which was strapped on each sheik's back, from which emerged a hose that ended in a long tube thrust in a scabbard. Deadly weapons these were indeed, for they could throw a searing beam of heat that, even at a hundred yards, was fatal.

OF THE four younger toilers, the mightiest was Otaro. He had been a slave of the shelks but a few weeks. Before that he had been the chief of the Kraylings, a powerful tribe of pit dwellers who lived in a man-pit many miles from where he now toiled. Like all the Kraylings--indeed, like all the toilers in this room, who had once been Kraylings, too--he was black-skinned and woolly-haired. Unlike the others, however, the look of nobility on his face had not yet been erased by the knowledge of his servitude.

His mind was dwelling on the events of the past as he worked, and on the probabilities of the present. All of his life he had dwelled with the fear of the shelks upon him, for ever and anon, as long as the records of his tribe told of, the shelks had made periodic raids on his pit and carried off living prisoners to some unknown destiny. He and his people had always looked upon these raids as inevitable, and had come to accept them as part of the scheme of things. When it came Otaro's turn, there had been a fight. Yet the end was the same--when the battle was over, a living but unconscious Otaro had been picked up by the shelks and taken from his pit, to live and learn what the shelks required of living Krayling prisoners.

He was wondering now what might be going on back in the pit of the Kraylings. Had his brother Mutassa acceded to the chieftainship? If so, he might almost be content, for Mutassa would certainly make a great chief. But there was one Koudok--

Otaro gasped suddenly, his hand half raised to his mouth in an uncontrollable gesture of surprise. Then, instantly, a mask of immobility had swept across his face and he turned to face his machine again. But his heart was pounding, and ever and anon he stole a look, out of the corner of his eye, at the doorway high up at the top of the stairs.

For a man had appeared there, and Otaro had been looking straight at the doorway when he appeared. The man had withdrawn immediately, but not before Otaro had seen him plainly. Never had Otaro seen such a man--indeed, it was only in the oldest legends of his tribe that such a man had even been told of. He was a white man, tall and well-built, clad in a loose-sleeved tunic with a wide-pocketed belt. Around his head was a simple gold band such as the governors of sheik cities wore, and in his hand was a fire-hose, the weapon of the shelks!

In the legends of the Kraylings were stories of the miztas, mighty men of old who had once battled with the shelks and ruled over the Kraylings. And legend said that the miztas had gone away, long ago, promising some day to return

and

set free the Kraylings from their fear of the savage beasts that ruled the Surface!

So Otaro the Krayling bent to his work, trembling a little, and stole glances out of the corner of his eye at the doorway above.

And presently the man appeared again, stooping, cautious, so that the shelks would not see him. He moved toward the steps. Behind him another man appeared.

Otaro's heart skipped a beat, for this second man was a mog! And the mog stepped

forward cautiously and spoke softly to the first man. Quite certainly these two

were friends, but what could a mizta, a free man, have in common with a mog? Otaro had no time to answer this question, however, for just then a third man appeared, and his identity caused Otaro to lose all control of himself and to gasp audibly.

He hastily turned the gasp into a cough as one of the shelks raised his head, and bent to his work more busily than ever. For several moments he dared not look up again; yet every fibre of his being shrieked with curiosity.

For the third man had been his brother Mutassa, whom he had believed to be back

in the Krayling pit, ruling in his place!

THOUGHTS sped through Otaro's brain like the shadows of dancers about a fire. Who was this white man, so like the miztas of legend? Why was the mog seemingly

his friend? What, above all, was Mutassa doing with them? And what--he stole a

look at the stairs again--what were they about to do, as they stole silently down toward the shelks? Was it possible that they meant to attack them?

Yes, it must be that, for the foremost man, the mizta, had raised his fire-hose--

At just that moment one of the mogs raised his eyes. He saw the three, and, giving a startled yelp, flung himself at them. The fire-hose in the hand of the

mizta spat flame and fury, and the mog, smoking and screeching, flung himself,

dying, in front of the man.

The white one stumbled, almost fell, and to save himself, dropped his fire-hose

nozzle and flung himself back. He was on his feet instantly, but before he could

recover his hose, he saw that the shelks, aroused by the mog's cry, had leaped

up and were raising their own hoses to burn the white one down.

And then Otaro saw a sight that in his wildest dreams he had never conceived. The mizta screamed, a disconcerting scream that seemed almost a madman's yelp of

panic. Leaping from his place, some six steps from the bottom of the flight, he

flung himself directly upon the shelks, legs kicking and arms flailing, a very

embodiment of a whirlwind. The mog and Mutassa, who seemed a little uncertain what to do, waited but the slightest part of a second and then followed the white man's example. By this time the shelks' second mog had joined the fray, and Mutassa and the strange mog devoted their attention to him.

For the mizta was handling the two shelks alone, and a very good job he was making of it. With a god-like consistency, he had paid no attention to the shelks themselves when he landed among them. It was their fire-hoses that were

dangerous and it was their fire-hoses to which he directed his attention. He

grasped the nozzle of one even as he kicked viciously at the box on the back of the other. His foot missed the box, but landed on the jaw of the shelk who wore it, and as he wrenched the nozzle from the hose in the first shelk's hand, he flung himself at the other and crashed a foot into its face. The second shelk, almost blinded by the vicious kick, staggered back and raised his fire-hose again. The white mizta abandoned his attack on the first shelk, whose weapon was now useless, and leaped at the other. In a moment, his weapon, too, was useless and the two shelks, unable to conceive a man who could be victorious in a battle with shelks, rushed in to the attack unarmed. And then, unarmed as he was, the shelks learned what ensuing generations of their kind were to face from aroused and infuriated mankind. With feet and hands and even teeth, the white man tore at them, ignoring claws and snapping fangs, gouging and tearing at their limbs until he literally tore them apart. One attempted at last to flee, but the strange mizta seized him by a dragging limb and pulled him back even as, with the other hand, he choked that shelk's companion into black insensibility.

THE whole room was in an uproar. The majority of the men, the old-looking ones and the more hopeless, were huddled at the far end of the room, whimpering and wailing piteously. But some ten, the stronger ones, had pushed forward, and, although afraid to lend a hand, were watching the battle with fanatic eagerness.

And when the strange mog and Mutassa, Otar's brother, rose from slaying the mog assistant, they broke into involuntary cheers. Otar's brother raised a hand.

"A mizta, my comrades! A mizta come to rescue you! See how he has slain your savage masters? A mizta truly, come to rescue you from the shelks."

Otar hastened forward with him and Mutassa presented him to the white man.

"This is my brother Otar, Lord," he said. "This is he of whom I told you-- he who was lord of the Place before the shelks took him from us."

"And who is this great one, Mutassa?" he asked.

Mutassa was about to answer, but the white man motioned him to silence. He spoke himself.

"I am Tumithak," he said. "Tumithak of the far-off pits of Loor. Tumithak, the Lord of the Lower Corridors and Protector of the Tains!"

Standing there before them, his voice rose in volume and dropped in tone, and as he grew in excitement, the words fairly burst from his lips.

"Ten years ago, oh Kraylings, while I was still a child of fourteen, I lived, skulking like any other pitman, deep in the corridors of Loor. But one day I found a book that told of how once men were free, lords of all the Surface. It told of the coming of the shelks from another world, and of how men fought a losing battle with those savage beasts, and of how those men who still valued their freedom were forced at last to build the intricate pits and corridors which became their home.

"And when I learned from that book that men had once fought with shelks, I vowed

that it should be so again. So, when I grew to be a man, I set forth from Loor,
on the long journey up the corridors; for I was determined to seek the Surface
and slay a shelk, to prove to my people that it might still be done.
"Many were my adventures by the way, but at last I reached the Surface and slew
my shelk, bringing its head back to my people as I had vowed.
"Then my people made me their ruler, and greatly daring, I led them through the
Dark Corridors and the Halls where lived those fat cattle of the shelks, the Esthetts,
until at last we burst onto the Surface and overwhelmed the shelk-town
of Shawm. With the help of the Tains pitmen from another pit, I taught my people
the way to operate the complicated weapons of the shelks, and so we were able to
live in Shawm and defend that city."
"And with the help of the High One to whom the pitmen pray, I shall conquer more
shelks, and more shelks, and more shelks--until the time comes when the last
shelk, surrounded by his servile group of foul mogs, shall fall, stinking and
burning, to his deserved death!"

Tumithak, Chapter Two CHAPTER TWO of TUMITHAK OF THE TOWERS OF FIRE
Three Against the World

HIS voice, which had risen to almost a shout, ceased suddenly. His gesturing hands dropped to his side. His head was thrust back, his eyes to the ceiling. And even had they desired it, it would have been impossible to restrain the cheer that went up from those black ones who so short a time before had been hopeless slaves.
But even as they cheered there was one who detached himself from the still wailing group across the room and came forward hesitantly. He whispered something to one of the cheering black men that caused that one to cease his cheering and to look toward Tumithak uncertainly.
"One wonders, O mizta, what that foul mog does who follows you. Would a savior of men consort with a mog?"
The strange mog bristled, and a scowl spread across his face. He raised his arm in a threatening gesture and started to speak, but Tumithak silenced him for a moment.
"This mog," he said, "is my mog. Twice now, has he proved his loyalty to me. None who would be the friend of Tumithak can be the enemy of Kiletlok the Mog.
But that you may know him to be loyal, I will tell you of how I met him." Tumithak directed a look of half-affectionate pride at Kiletlok, and went on: "In Shawn, the fallen shelk town where my people dwell, we power our weapons with the white and shining rods of power which only the shelks know the secret of making. When the men of the Lower Corridors seized Shawn, some two years ago, they seized many of those shining rods, and with them powered the machines that they seized.
"But as time passed, the power rods were gradually used up, and the time came

when I saw it would be necessary to make a raid on some shelk town to secure more rods of power. So with seven men, I set out one day to seek another shelk

town. And on the third day I beheld a group of shelks and mogs approaching in the distance, so, concealing my men, we ambushed the shelks and attacked them.

Now fierce was the battle, for at its end all were dead save I and one mog. And

then that mog flung himself on his knees before me and called me master. He was

Kiletlok, and since then he has served me faithfully and well."

Kiletlok slapped his chest, and in his rumbling bass he growled assent.

"When a shelk slays another," he said, "the slain shelk's property goes to his

murderer. Thrice in my life I have changed masters that way, and if the last time, my master was a man, should that change all the teachings that I have been

taught? Nay. So I serve Tumithak and serve him loyally until he is slain by another."

This explanation seemed to satisfy practically all of the black men, and their

looks of distrust disappeared.

"But what of you, my brother?" Otarok said. "How came you to be with these great

heroes? And what goes on back at home, in the pits of the Kraylings?"

Mutassa's face clouded for a moment.

"There were ill times at the Place, after you left, Lord of the Kraylings. Strife and confusion and rebellion--"

Otarok's eyes flashed.

"What mean you? Did Koudok--"

"Aye, Koudok!" Mutassa's eyes matched Otarok's as he told of the events that had

followed the capture of Otarok by the shelks:

"Koudok must have planned long and well, even before ever the shelk raid that took you off. For many of the captains and doctors were on his side when he staged his coup. And though few of the people would have followed him, they were

too afraid of the captains and the doctors to disobey. So I, who should have succeeded you to the chieftainship, was deposed and it was only through the kindness and sympathy of the common ones that I was able to conceal myself and

avoid the slaughter that Koudok had planned for me."

Otarok swore angrily.

"If ever I again see the Place," he swore, "Koudok shall answer to me--"

"Wait," Mutassa interrupted. "I have not told you the half. For two weeks or more, I skulked in the Place, hiding now in this apartment, now in that, cringing in deserted corridors and abandoned pits, and eating only when some pitying Krayling shared his rations with me. But at last a patrol of searchers

found me!"

HE PAUSED and glanced at Tumithak, who motioned him to continue.

"There were six of them and they all attacked me at once," Mutassa went on.

"I

tried to defend myself, but though I managed to avoid their swords, I knew it could be but a matter of time until they slew me, for I was so busy defending myself that I could not attack.

"At last I did manage to pierce one of the most careless, but the other five were pressing me entirely too closely--when suddenly I heard a cry from the upper part of the corridor, and a moment later, I found myself defended by two

strange men!"

Tumithak interrupted him for a moment.

"Kiletlok and I had been wandering on our way to Kaymak, the city from which the

mog came. A storm had overtaken us and we sought shelter in a cave. Before I had

been there long, I realized that the cave was the entrance to a man-pit, and I

determined to explore it and see if any men still lived there. We must have been

several miles from the entrance when we came upon Mutassa attempting to defend

himself from his enemies." He motioned to the Krayling to continue his story.

"Never have I seen such fighting as the mizta and his mog did," averred Mutassa.

"The corridor was but dimly lighted, and for a minute or two, my enemies knew not whom they were fighting. Two of them fell before it dawned on them that the

men who fought with them were other than common mortals. But when they saw that

they fought with white men--Ah, you should have seen the remaining throng flee!

We pursued them, but they managed to elude us, so we stopped for awhile and Tumithak told me who he was and I told him how I knew that he was a mizta.

"I told him of that long-forgotten day when men lived upon the Surface, and of

how the mizta ruled over all. I told him of the coming of the shelks, and how the miztas withdrew from the Surface. I told him of how they made the Place for

the black man, because of a legend that the white man had, that the black man must be kept in his Place. And I told of how the prophecy said that one day the

miztas would return to lead us again to the Surface, to conquer over the shelks.

"And he in turn told me of his life and of the great work to which he had dedicated himself. So then I knew him to be truly the great mizta of the prophecy, and to him I swore my fealty. And we went on into the Place."

"And Koudok?" interrupted Otarō.

"Patience a minute, brother. I have told you that the common people were all in

favor of me. Can you not imagine what happened when I returned, bringing a mizta

out of legend with me? The people defied their leaders and rose up against them.

Koudok and his leaders defended themselves in one corridor for a bare two days.

Then we captured them. They fought desperately, but their cause was hopeless. Koudok I slew with my bare hands."

Otarō breathed a sigh of relief. But not allowing this to interrupt him, Mutassa

went on:

"When everything was at peace again, and the disturbers were slain, the people

unanimously acclaimed me as chief. But I had sworn fealty to Tumithak, and he was leaving to continue his search for the rods of power. So I appointed lieutenants to rule for me in my absence and followed my lord in his quest."

The huge black man stole a look at Tumithak that was almost one of worship. Tumithak, seemingly a little impatient at the long synopsis, hastened to conclude the story.

"Kiletlok had told me that there were many power rods to be found in Kaymak,"

he
said. "So toward Kaymak the three of us directed our footsteps. We entered
the
city at night, for at night all shelks sleep soundly. Kiletlok led us to a
place
where, he said, the power rods were stored. We found them, but alas, daybreak
occurred before we could get out of the building. In seeking a hiding place,
we
found the entrance to this pit, in the building; and a long journey down the
corridor led us to this room."
He paused and looked about him.
"Is there another way out of here, except the way we came down?"
Otaro shook his head. "I have been here for weeks, and I know that the shelks
would not let us roam about this room with the freedom that we do if there
were
any chance of escaping. For well they know that an Arzan would gladly die
rather
than remain in this room."
"Arzan?" Tumithak caught at the unfamiliar word. "What is an Arzan, Otaro?
And
why die rather than remain in this room?"
"We workers are called Arzans by the sheiks," answered the Krayling. "It is
an
ancient word, a man-word, I believe. And here in this room, far underground,
we
labor to produce the white and shining rods which are the power by which the
shelks run their machines."
"You make the rods? Here?"
"Aye. That is why they store them in the building above."
"Now here is fortune indeed! But why die rather than remain in this room,
Otaro?
The work is none too hard, it seems."
Otaro smiled sadly. "The work is none too hard. And we are fed, and have
comfortable quarters. But--" He turned and indicated a gray-haired, bent, old
Krayling near him. "This, O Mizta, is Mitobi. He is twenty-nine years old,
and
has been in this room no longer than ten months."
TUMITHAK felt a thrill of horror shoot through him. "Is there poison in this
room, then?"
Otaro nodded. "Poison, indeed! But not such poison as man ever heard of. It is
a
poison light, mizta Tumithak, that glows from the machines when we feed the
iron
powder into it to make the rods of power."
"The iron?"
"Yes, truly. For of iron are the white and shining rods of power constructed."
Tumithak rose dizzily.
"And you have made these white and shining rods from iron?"
"Yes. For over three weeks."
"Know you how these machines work?"
"Why, yes. If one has a block of the metal called hooramnon *, it is not so
hard
to build a destabilizer, as these machines are called."
"Then--have each of these machines got blocks of hooramnon in them?"
"Certainly."
"Then tear them out! Conceal the hooramnon on your person. We must escape
this
pit and win back to Shawn or die in the attempt! Man needs this secret,
Otaro.
And Man needs you!"

For the first time in many weeks, the dulled eyes of Otaro broke into a glow. He turned to the other Arzans and gave them hurried orders. They had listened to Tumithak and Otaro as they talked and now they, or at least the ones that were strong enough, leaped hurriedly to obey his orders. In a few moments, they came forward with half a dozen blocks of grayish metal in their hands. WHILE they had been procuring the metal, Tumithak's mind had been racing madly, in an endeavor to devise a means of escape from the pit. Now he turned to Kiletlok.

"Do you know aught concerning these Arzans, Kiletlok?" he asked. "Do the shelks own them privately or are they servants of all? Do they remain always in one pit or are they sometimes transferred? Would they trust them to a mog or would they only trust them to a shelk? Tell me these things."

Kiletlok looked uncertain. Not knowing Tumithak's plan, he was unable to answer clearly. Tumithak saw his uncertainty.

"Look, mog," he said. "If you were to emerge from this pit, leading a pack of Arzans, would it look suspicious?"

Light dawned on Kiletlok. A grin spread over his features.

"I think it could be done, Master," he stated. "I think it might work if no suspicious shelk passed our way. For the Arzans are owned by the government and are often transferred from one pit to another. And sometimes from one city to another. Perhaps, therefore, we might even get aboard a shelk flying machine and capture it."

"Good!" ejaculated Tumithak. "Thus will we escape, then, as a group of Arzans being taken from this pit. Kiletlok will lead us, and see that you wield your whip realistically, mog."

Mutassa spoke up.

"That is well for the rest of us, mizta," he exclaimed. "But what of yourself?"

With that red hair and white skin, no shelk will believe for a moment that you are either Arzan or mog."

"Why then," said Tumithak, "my hair and skin must be changed."

He looked about the room. Surely, somewhere, he could find something that would darken his skin. Mutassa looked too, and presently the others took up the search. After a while, Otaro came forward with some grease from one of the machines, but upon trying it out, they were disappointed, for though it spread well, it changed Tumithak into nothing more than a rather dirty pitman. Then Otaro had a thought and, borrowing Tumithak's fire-hose, he stripped the clothes from the dead mogs, and in a moment had reduced them to sooty ashes. Mixing the soot with the grease, he soon transferred the Loorian into a fairly presentable Krayling.

"And now," said Tumithak, "who will volunteer to undertake this hazardous escape with us?"

He had forgotten the hopelessness of the Arzans' position. Every man

volunteered

at once and he was forced to reverse his position and ask for volunteers to stay. In the end, they asked him to appoint the ones who must remain, which he

did, picking those who seemed to be the least affected by the rays. "For," he said, "I leave you here with hope. Before the days of your servitude can be ended by death, I promise to come back to this city and free you. By the High One whom we all worship, I swear to conquer this city or die, with my people, in the attempt."

And then he and his little party, armed with the secret that was to place men again on an equal footing with their savage enemies, started up the stairs. *Uranium?

Tumithak, Chapter 3 CHAPTER THREE of TUMITHAK OF THE TOWERS OF FIRE
Flight from Kaymak

WHEN they reached the door and Kiletlok's hand was on the knob, the mog turned

and motioned the other to silence.

"We are about to leave this place of comparative safety," he whispered softly to

the group. "We are about to go out among the creatures who are the enemies of all of us. It is only by acting in such a way that we do not arouse suspicion that we may hope to win to greater safety. The actions of those whom we rescued

from the corridor I do not worry about.

"But master--" he paused and turned to Tumithak, almost pleading--"if ever you

have acted as a slave, act as one now. I know well your hatred of the shelks and

your bravery, but this is no time to display either of them. Remember this as you value your life--while you are in Kaymak, you are less than the lowest slave. Indeed, you are but an animal."

He turned without saying more, flung the door open, and the group stepped out into the open. Kiletlok took his whip from his belt, and with a snarl that was

typically mog-like, laid it across the back of the nearest Arzan. They set off

through the maze of shelk towers in the direction indicated by the mog.

The way through the streetless city was absolutely incomprehensible to Tumithak.

He realized that Kiletlok evidently recognized some of the landmarks, but to the

Loorian all the clustered towers looked alike and the way through them seemed endless.

And the shelks! They were clustered in the streets by the thousands. Tumithak soon realized that the safety of his group lay in the very number of his enemies. In a city so large and busy as this one, there was little time or desire on the part of the citizens to question anything a bit unusual.

Several of the shelks did look curiously at the group, but they paid more attention to Kiletlok, it seemed, than they did to Tumithak or the Arzans.

And

what mogs they saw drowsed sleepily in front of their masters' towers or slouched aimlessly along, bent on some idle journey or other, paying no attention whatever to the group. One, indeed, did direct a casual question to Kiletlok, but the mog answered him curtly and he wandered off.

And so, after a couple of hours' walking, they drew near to the eastern end

of
the city. And here, for the first time, they met with disaster.
For a shelk approached them, at a point where the neighborhood was
compartively[sic] deserted. It was about to pass them when it suddenly halted
and looked them over curiously. Tumithak saw its eyebrows raise in a
peculiarly
human sign of interest, and then it called sharply to Kiletlok. The latter
answered immediately by saluting, dropping his whip to the ground and bending
over on both knees to pick it up again. The shelk spoke.
"What do you with Arzans on the Surface, mog?" it clacked. "Is this not
forbidden?"
Kiletlok looked up, answered boldly. "These Arzans go to Chutlak," he said.
"My
master, Ket-1-ket the trader, sent me all the way from that town to bring
them
to him. He plans a power factory in that town."
The shelk's eyes narrowed to the tiniest slits.
"I fear your master trusts his mog too much," it sneered. "Did he remain in
Chutlak?"
"Yes, sir," answered Kiletlok, a little weakly, and Tumithak noticed the
faintest pallor beginning to touch his cheek.
"You have your order with you, I suppose," pursued the shelk. Kiletlok shook
his
head.
"It was taken from me when I was given charge of the Arzans," he said
stolidly.
The sheik gave forth a clucking noise, but whether it was expressing doubt or
annoyance or some other emotion, Tumithak could not say. Then suddenly it
smiled, a tight-lipped, dubious smile.
"Take your men to the tower of Chukhoka-klekht, at once," it said. "You must
have an order before you leave the city."
Kiletlok saluted again, and the shelk crawled off. Tumithak gave a sigh of
relief. But the mog shook his head.
"That one is definitely suspicious. Even now he is probably on his way to
report
his meeting with us to some one in authority. It is a race against time, now."
HE TURNED and led the way, at a dog-trot, through the maze of towers. It was
a
severe pace he set, for Kiletlok was a mog, and what was to him an easy,
jaunting gait was a strain indeed to the Arzans, and told to some extent even
on
the powerful Mutassa and the Loorian. But the entire group bore the pace
without
complaint, their minds on their ultimate goal, and even more on the danger
behind them. And at last, the towers ended and they found themselves standing
on
a broad expanse at the east side of the city.
Some distance away, a group of shelk-flyers bore witness to the fact that the
broad expanse was a flying field. There were fewer than a half-dozen shelks
scattered across the entire expanse and Tumithak blessed the vagrant fates.
There was still a chance to escape if--They advanced boldly out onto the
field
and in the direction of the largest of the flying machines. They were halfway
to
it when a clattering screech sounded behind them. Kiletlok paled and gave a
queer whining cry of despair.
"They've found out!" he moaned. "We just missed making it."
He slowed down his pace as he spoke and Tumithak realized that the leadership
of
the band had once more been placed on his shoulders. He reached into his

garment

and drew out his hidden fire-hose. And Mutassa, seeing this, grimly bared his sword and took his place at Tumithak's side.

"Make for that flyer as quickly as possible," ordered Tumithak.

The group of Arzans needed no second bidding. Already, behind them, they could

see the group of pursuing shelks unlimbering their fire-hoses and starting off

across the field. One enthusiastic shelk sent a beam from its weapon across the

field toward them, but the distance was too great to cause more than discomfort

to the group and to spur them to greater effort to avoid the blasting heat that

would be their portion if the shelks cut down the distance between them.

They were near the flyer now, and the group of shelks which had gathered under

it milled about uncertainly. These shelks were unarmed, but were gathered around

the door of the big cabin in various attitudes of pugnacity.

Tumithak saw that these creatures failed to realize their danger. He paused for

the smallest fraction of a second, directed a blast from his fire-hose into the

group and then continued running toward them. There was a squawk as the most exposed shelk felt the beam, and the entire group scrambled away from the door,

suddenly intent on finding a shelter from the deadly ray.

For a moment, it looked as if the little band of humans would manage to take the

flyer without further trouble. The shelks that were pursuing them across the field were still too far away to be a danger; the shelks around the flyer had scattered in panic before the incredible sight of an armed man, and the way to

the door of the flyer was clear. The little group was no more than thirty feet

from the door when an armed shelk suddenly appeared in the doorway!

TUMITHAK gave a cry of warning and instinctively threw himself upon the ground.

It was well for him that he did so, but for the Arzans following him it was not

so good. Tumithak's warning cry was a command for them to follow his example, but their reactions were too slow. The Loorian heard sudden cries of anguish and

knew that some of his companions had been seared by the beam. Even as he pressed

the lever that released his own beam, he realized that he was not a moment too

soon.

Mutassa, at his right side, yelled a hoarse warning, and Tumithak felt a sharp

bite at the right side of his head and smelled suddenly the peculiar odor of burning hair. But his own beam had caught the shelk full in the face, and the creature dropped its weapon before its heat could do any real damage.

Tumithak leaped to his feet and raced toward the flyer, calling to his companions to follow him. Had he stopped to look back he would have been dismayed at the damage the shelk had accomplished. Fully five of the Arzans were

injured too badly to follow the Loorian; several, indeed, were probably dead.

But here was no time for false heroics. The human race set a greater store by

live cowards than by dead heroes in those critical days. Regretfully, but without so much as a backward look, Tumithak ran to the shelk-flyer and boarded it.

THEY flew a good many miles before they saw any signs of pursuit. It was Mutassa, who had been glancing back anxiously every once in a while, who saw them first. They were but little dots above the horizon, but there was no doubt

that they were the dreaded flying police.

"They come, Tumithak," he said softly. "Four of them, I think."

Tumithak glanced back through the rear window and grinned bleakly.

"They do draw near, indeed," he said. "But we--we draw near to Shawm. And when

those shelk-flyers reach Shawm, they will find that man can be more than a match

for such crawling beasts as they. There are disintegrators at Shawm. And they have orders to destroy every shelk flyer that appears near the sacred city." Kiletlok's eyes widened.

"Master!" he ejaculated. "Have you forgotten that we ride a shelk-flyer?"

With a cry that might have been an oath, Tumithak whirled about to the controls

and threw the machine into a deep dive. He straightened it out into a zooming sweep, his face set and white. He saw an open place in the woodland where he might land the flyer. A few moments later, the entire group piled out of the machine and looked wildly about to see if the enemy were within striking distance.

They were. Not much more than a quarter of a mile away, four shelk-flyers drew

swiftly near. There seemed to be little hope for the grounded men, yet Tumithak,

now that he had reached the ground, seemed curiously unworried. And the Arzans

were soon to see why.

For suddenly the foremost flyer disappeared incontinently, with a sharp report.

The suddenness of it made them all gasp, and one can only imagine the effect it

had on the shelks in the flyers that were following. One moment the flyer was there--the next it was gone! And then that sharp report like a clap of thunder.

The other three flyers checked their flight hastily. Indeed the first went into

a sudden loop to avoid reaching the spot where the leader had met its face. But

their tactics were in vain. First one and then another vanished; presently, almost before the watchers on the ground realized it, their enemies had been reduced to the primal atoms from which they had been composed. And for the first

time in many a day, Tumithak heaved a genuine sigh of relief.

"Come, now," he said. "We are safe at last. Let us go on our way to Shawm. I have no doubt we will find a party seeking us."

He strode off through the trees to the north, the others following, and sure enough, before long they ran across a band of warriors who had fared forth from

Shawm to attack the supposed shelks in the grounded flyer. When they found that

instead of the shelks, they had come across their chief, their joy knew no bounds.

And so, amid shouts and singing and laughter, Tumithak came again into his own

city.

Tumithak, Chapter 4 CHAPTER FOUR of TUMITHAK OF THE TOWERS OF FIRE
The Great Weapon

THE days after the arrival of Tumithak at Shawm were busy indeed. The priests of the Tains, and especially old Zar-Emo, the high priest, welcomed Otarō with open arms and eagerly studied the secrets of the Arzans, aiding them to build the machines from which the white and shining rods might be made from iron. Hardly a week passed before the first machine was completed, and its precious block of hoorammon installed in it. They carefully avoided setting up the machine in the village, fitting up a cavern about a mile front the town to be used as the factory. There was some dispute about who would operate the dangerous machines, for the Arzans certainly had had enough of them, and none of the men of Shawm cared to shorten their lives by becoming the operators. But Zar-Emo pointed out that short exposures to the rays did little permanent harm, and so it was arranged that each man in the village should take his turn at it, thus forcing no man to act as operator oftener than once or twice a year. This, the high priest felt sure, would cause little inconvenience and practically no danger. Within a bare three weeks, Zar-Emo and Otarō had managed to start the actual production of the power rods. Proud indeed were the two, when they brought to Tumithak the first bar manufactured. It was decided to hold a ceremony, to make a holiday to celebrate what seemed to be their release from the last possibility of dependence on the shelks. Now, with the Tains' ability to produce and multiply the weapons of their wise ancestors and this new ability to manufacture the power that ran them, men began to feel a freedom that they had not known for thousands of years. The holiday was a great success. All over Shawm, and down in the pits where many of the people of Tumithak still lived, the folk celebrated with feasting and speeches. The speeches were nothing new; the pit dwellers, for centuries, had had little or no means of celebrating other than to boast or make speeches about their successes, but the feasting was a novelty, a novelty that was growing greater every day. When the people of Tumithak had come in contact with the Tains, they had learned for the first time that the synthetic food-cubes which they manufactured might have taste. And now Kiletlok had come among them, showing them that the very plants and animals which were so common on the surface might be prepared to be used as food and be made to reveal tastes so delightful that even the Tains were filled with gratified wonder. Old Zar-Emo outdid himself at the speech-making in Tumithak's banquet hall.

Indeed, so enthusiastic did he become that his speech outshone and outlasted even the speeches of those leather-lunged orators, Tumithak and Nennapuss of Nonone. And for once, even those masters made no attempt to outspoke him, for they were as interested in what he had to say as he was in saying it.

"The availability of large quantities of power rods," he said, "has given us the

use of several new machines. And the knowledge of how the rods are made has taught us several things about the marvelous way in which the High One constructed the matter which composes the earth in which we live. Indeed, we have learned so much that Otaro and I feel safe in announcing that soon we may

be able to greatly improve the weapons which we now have. Perhaps in a few weeks

we may be able to construct fire-hoses and disintegrators with ranges far larger

than those we have today.

"I do not want to raise your hopes too high, but it seems that there are things

about this matter that may enable us to produce weapons such as we--and perhaps

even the shelks themselves--are now totally ignorant of."

After the banquet, Tumithak questioned Zar-Emo further about this statement, but

the priest was very vague. Too little had been done in the way of experiment for

him to be able to tell very much of his hopes.

HAD old Zar-Emo but known it, he was dealing with forces far beyond the poor knowledge which he and Otaro possessed. Indeed, the shelks themselves, because

of its danger, had long avoided research along the very line that the priest was

now pursuing. But the old Tain knew nothing of that, and in the little laboratory in the cavern beyond the town, he and Otaro pursued their investigations. Until one day--

Tumithak stood outside the fallen shelk tower that he had fitted up as his home,

discussing probable campaigns against Kaymak with Kiletlok, and his lieutenant,

Datto of Yakra. Suddenly Datto pointed behind Tumithak and barked a wordless ejaculation of surprise. Tumithak whirled and saw, far beyond the town, a mighty

white column of smoke shooting up into the air. No sooner did he spy it than a

crash like all the thunderclaps of history struck him with almost physical force. He staggered and threw up his hands to cover his ears, and then, from the

direction of the power bar factory, came a blast of wind that truly did hurl him

and his companions from their feet and send them rolling along the ground for a

dozen yards.

Tumithak fetched up against a fallen shelk tower. He had not lost consciousness,

but he was dazed and badly shaken.

First and foremost, he was aware of a howling, shrieking, whistling wind. And there were frequent cracking and crashing and screeching sounds, like breaking

branches and falling trees, and the groaning of girders in the shelk towers, strained to their utmost. He heard a woman's shrill scream, and the gabble of

a

man's shouted question, cut short before it was finished. And then more crashes, and above them all the raging of the wind. He shielded his eyes from the buffeting of the gale and tried to look around. The wind eddied about his fingers and filled his eyes with dust. He rubbed them with his knuckles and swore; and from somewhere, not far away, came a panic-stricken scream, the scream that had sent his forefathers scampering into the maze of unoccupied corridors--the scream of "Shelk!" Could Tumithak have seen about him, could he have made against that wind, it is likely that he would have done what many others of his people did and fled to the corridors. But he was temporarily blinded, so he remained cowering where he was, crouching against the tower, and after a few minutes, to his surprise, the wind suddenly died down and, weakly, the sun shone through the pall of settling dust.

TUMITHAK rose to his feet, blinking. He heard a man groan and saw him, lying in a corner between two buildings. He moved forward with the vague idea of somehow helping the fellow, and turned as Kiletlok hastened up to him. The mog seemed unhurt--indeed, he seemed quite in control of himself. He sighed with relief as he realized that Tumithak was comparatively unharmed, too.

"Was it a shelk attack?" asked Tumithak, still a little dazed. "Was it--" Kiletlok shook his head.

"It came from the direction of the power bar factory," he stated. "I do not know what it was, but I think--" he paused. "I think that Zar-Emo has learned more than he hoped about the making of matter."

"Zar-Emo!"

The name burst forth from Tumithak's lips in something like panic. Though still shaken, he hurried off through the town in the direction of the power bar factory, followed by the mog. They found Datto not far away, cursing over an injured wrist, and he joined them, and the three hurried through the town, followed by an increasing band of pitmen.

As they drew near to the power bar factory, it became obvious that Kiletlok's surmise had been correct. The increasing signs of damage showed that the plant was the center of the explosion. But words fail utterly to describe the scene that met their eyes when they finally came within sight of the former location of the cavern. For over a quarter of a mile around it, not a tree remained standing. And where the cave had been, there was a crater, a crater that was hundreds of yards across and a full hundred yards deep!

It took but a second glance to convince the crowd that there was little use in searching for survivors among the ruins. Plainly, there were no survivors--indeed, there were not even ruins.

The silent little group of men started solemnly back to Shawm. Not one but realized that the explosion had been a heavy blow to their hopes. The day before, they had looked confidently forward to the time when they would have sufficient power to attack another shelk town, perhaps even Kaymak, itself. But now--now they were no better off than they had been when Tumithak had set out

to
find more power bars and had found instead, Kiletlok, Mutassa and the Arzans.
The progress of man in his battle with the shelks seemed to have been
halted--for how long, no man dared to say.
They had almost reached the outskirts of the stricken town when Tumithak heard
a
cry of excitement from some of the men on the left of the group. He turned,
with
the others, and saw several Loorians gesticulating eagerly.
"A man, Tumithak!" one of them cried. "A man in that tree! Hurlled there by
the
explosion. One of those who worked in the factory, I think."
"It is Gastofac!" volunteered another. "Gastofac, the priest. He whom Zar-Emo
was training to be his successor."
Tumithak took charge at once and superintended the removal of the body from
the
tree. To his surprise, when they got him down to the ground, they found that
the
man was alive. And they were still more surprised when he regained
consciousness
on the way back to the town.
The man was suffering from extreme nervous shock, and it was all of a week
before the doctors would allow him to be questioned. Then Tumithak visited
his
home and deluged him with questions.
IT WAS, of course, the investigations of Zar-Emo and Otaro that brought about
the explosion," said Gastofac. "They thought they saw a way to increase the
release of power from the power rods. If they could control this, they might
build disintegrators and fire-hoses with greater ranges than those of the
shelks. This morning, they called me into the laboratory to show me their
latest
discovery.
"They had made a small machine, powered only with a small piece of power rod.
Somehow--it is hard to explain, because there are no words in our language
that
can describe it--somehow, the power was turned into a sort of invisible fluid
that flows in a wire. This fluid, which ordinarily could not flow in the air,
was changed somehow into a beam that was projected into the air like a beam
from
a fire-hose."
Gastofac paused, took a drink of water and rested for a moment. He went on:
"There were graduates on the machine to vary the intensity and the length of
the--'waves', Otaro called them. And when these graduates were set just so,
the
power in the power rods was given off faster. The speed could be regulated by
the settings on the graduates. I saw Zar-Emo direct the beam from the machine
on
a little piece of power rod no bigger than my finger nail. It glowed and
burned
furiously and gave off enough heat to warm the entire cavern."
"But--the explosion," interrupted Tumithak. "That is what I want to find out
about."
Gastofac gave a petulant exclamation.
"Wait a minute," he snapped. The man's nerves were badly frayed. "I'll be
telling you about it in a minute."
He settled himself into a more comfortable position in his bed and went on:
"The morning of the explosion, Otaro had spent two or three hours explaining
the
whole process to me. Then they decided that it would be best to explain it to
you, too. 'For,' said Zar-Emo, 'we are about to begin a very dangerous

experiment, suggested by our recent success. And if we fail in it, there must be

others to carry on our experiment where we left off'. So I was about to start off to get you when Otaru halted me.

"It is also well,' he said, quietly; 'to acquaint you with our intended experiment. If we should fail, perhaps you will succeed.' So they told me of their intentions and then sent me off after you. Apparently, after I had gone,

they decided to continue with their work--and apparently their fears were only

too well realized. Somehow or other, they accomplished the release of all the power in the power bars at once."

Tumithak rose to his feet in awe.

"You mean--all the power bars that we had stored in the factory went off at once?"

"Nothing else."

"And it was caused by a beam of force, of some sort, from a machine?"

Gastofac nodded.

"But if power bars can do this--"

Tumithak was dumbfounded. He was thinking of how, for years, he had carried a fire-hose on his back--a fire-hose that at any moment might have exploded and torn him limb from limb, had only the right force been directed upon it. He wondered how the shelks ever found them useful weapons.

And then he remembered the battle of Shawm, and how they had used the fire-hoses

against the shelks without any opposition of that kind from the shelks. Was it

possible that the shelks did not know of this power of releasing all the force

in the power rods at once? And suddenly it dawned on him that this must be so. He stood stunned by the magnitude of the thing. A vision of Kaymak swept before

his mind's eye--of Kaymak, city of a hundred thousand towers, and in every tower, no doubt, a power rod performing some useful purpose. And then he saw a

fleet of flyers sweeping over the city, and beams of force lancing down from them--

"Gastofac!" he barked. "We have work to do. Mighty work. It is for us to give men a weapon--a real weapon, this time, that will make us the masters for all time!"

Tumithak, Chapter 5 CHAPTER FIVE of TUMITHAK OF THE TOWERS OF FIRE

City of Fear

DURING the next few weeks, Tumithak's enthusiasm rose to white heat. As each new

detail came into his mind or was suggested by one of his lieutenants, victory seemed more certain. Of the four hooramnon cubes which they had brought from Kaymak, two had been lost in the fire and now but two remained. But with these

they built up two more machines for producing power rods, and, several miles from the new factory, Gastofac set up a laboratory where he attempted to duplicate the explosion that had killed Otaru and Zar-Emo. But he worked with small pieces of material.

And while he worked, others worked, too. Many of the Tains were taught by their

priests and the remaining Arzans how to manufacture the power rods. And hundreds

of fire-hoses were constructed too, and men returning from the factories at night often spent long hours after supper making themselves proficient in their use.

It was long before the Krayling could convince Tumithak that there was any advantage in organized soldiering.

But after long arguments, Tumithak began to see the sense in an organization that kept the captains informed at all times of their armies' doings, and so military discipline was impressed upon and reluctantly accepted by the pitmen. And then came drills and sham battles and fire-hose practice, and a sort of manual of arms developed, until, some months after the explosion, there came into being, in that little village of Shawm, the first army that Man had owned

in a good eighteen hundred years.

While the army drilled and trained and gradually took form as a real unit, men

worked and studied the intricacies of flying. There were three of these machines

in the possession of the pitmen, one which had been captured in the fall of Shawm, one which had been salvaged from a short battle a year before, and the wreck, now carefully repaired, which had brought Tumithak and his companions from Kaymak.

These three machines were continually making short experimental flights designed

to teach the pitmen the advantages and the limitations of flying, and, strangely

enough, it was burly Datto of Yakra and the Shelk-Slayer, himself, who were[sic]

the most interested and most expert of the newly created group of aviators. And

they learned much, as the days went by, until they were able to fly the machines

as well as any shelk. But by that time there were only two machines. The other

was lost in the river that flowed not far from Shawm, as were the bodies of the

two promising young Tains who had been flying it at the time.

Twice during those months, Kiletlok, who also had come to know quite a bit about

aviation, dared to take one of the machines on scouting expeditions to the very

outskirts of Kaymak itself. Actually there was little danger. No shelk in his wildest imaginings would have dreamed that a mog would dare to manipulate a stolen flying machine, and that he would do it on the very outskirts of the city

was utterly incredible. So Kiletlok made his flights in safety and learned much

of value concerning the road to Kaymak and the best vantage points from which to

operate.

AND thus at last came the day when the march on Kaymak began. It did not begin

with a parade. No troops marched bravely into the wilderness with bands playing

and banners waving. Indeed, no troops seemed to march at all. But a hundred pitmen melted into the forest, scattered, and began a hundred solitary marches

toward an appointed meeting place.

And the next day a hundred others followed. And the next day, another hundred.

So gradually, Tumithak's entire army drifted slowly through the woods toward

the
shelk-city. But behind, in Shawm, Tumithak and certain of his lieutenants
remained. Day after day, the women and children of the town saw their
husbands
and fathers leaving to fight the shelks, and still Tumithak, with Mutassa,
Kiletlok, Datto and others, waited in the fallen shelk-towers of Shawm.
And then at last, when people had begun to wonder, and to mutter among
themselves that perhaps Tumithak, himself, was none too certain of living if
he
attacked Kaymak, the two fliers rose one day and set off into the south. In
the
smaller of the two flew Datto, with his big nephew, Thopf, and Gastofac, the
high priest of the Tains. In the other flew Tumithak and Kiletlok and Mutassa.
Tumithak made no attempt to suppress the excitement that he felt. And as mile
after mile was put beneath them, his suspense grew greater and greater, not
untinged with a little fear.
At last, afar off, they saw the towers of Kaymak. Kiletlok pointed them out
to
the Loorian, silent with awe at the stupendous importance of the moment.
Tumithak nodded gravely, himself impressed into silence. But Mutassa spoke.
"If our plans have not gone astray, mizta, our army is waiting somewhere
below
us.
Tumithak nodded. "They await, well enough. And somewhere, off to the east,
Datto
and Gastofac await our signal to attack."
"Then--"
"Yes, we are ready. Take the controls, Kiletlok."
The mog eagerly slid into the seat vacated by Tumithak, and the Loorian
turned
to the strange machine that had been fitted up in the seat beside him. He
flipped a couple of the strange switches, still made in careful imitation of
the
switches of the shelks, drew down a depressor of the sort that took the place
of
dials, and lowered the barrel of a strange machine-gun- like object that
projected out of the window.
Far below was a single isolated farmhouse, a shelk-tower that was one of the
first outposts of the distant city. Tumithak directed the barrel of his
weapon
upon it, pressed the slide and waited, breathless, upon the result. In spite
of
the many tests that the machine had had, there was still an element of
uncertainty, for, after all, the pit-men had no certain means of knowing
whether
the shelks had a protection against this weapon or not. Perhaps all their
planning had been in vain, perhaps--
The sides of the shelk-tower bulged outward. The tower split at the corners,
from the bottom to halfway up. Dust poured out; the top rocked crazily.
Then the sound of the explosion reached them, a great, crackling roar like a
clap of thunder combined with the shattering of a dozen great trees. The
corners
split the rest of the way up and the top began to lean. The tower fell with a
crashing clang, and smoke and flame poured from the ruin. The wrecked
building
passed beneath them, and as Mutassa leaned out of the side window and looked
back he saw a shelk crawl painfully from the mass of wreckage and drag itself
away.
Tumithak's eyes were glowing.
"Faster, Kiletlok!" he ordered. "If we can do that here, let us waste no time

in
getting to the center of the city."
A moment later, Tumithak's keen eyes spied another shelk tower. Again he
aimed
his tube and again he had the satisfaction of seeing the tower leap into the
air
and spread itself out. But this time no injured shelk crawled from the ruin,
and
Tumithak smiled grimly.
Another tower appeared--and disappeared the next moment. And then another.
Then,
far to the west of them, a column of dust rose in the air, and Mutassa
pointed
it out to the Loorian. Tumithak nodded with a satisfied air.
"Datto has found that his weapon is satisfactory, too," he said. "We will be
busy from now on."
Indeed his words were painfully true. In less than a minute he blasted
another
shelk-tower and found it necessary to order Kiletlok to swing in a circle so
that he might attack another that they had almost passed. And then he found
it
necessary to swing quickly on another.
THEY were over the outlying suburbs of the city now. It could be but a matter
of
time before the city knew of their raid. It was Tumithak's desire to do as
much
damage as possible before the shelks realized what was happening. Straight
for
the city's center they flew, and behind them they left a wide swathe of ruin.
The continual concussions of sound from beneath almost deafened them. Once
the
air pressure from a particularly violent explosion caused the flyer to rock
crazily, and it was all the mog could do to get the vessel under control
again.
And when he did, a new danger confronted them. Speeding toward them from the
left, plainly visible a couple of miles away, came a good dozen shelk-flyers!
Tumithak swung his instrument about and ordered Kiletlok to turn toward the
shelks. His haste was inspired by the realization that he was woefully
ignorant
of all the weapons of the shelks, and the knowledge that it was necessary to
get
in the first blow; for if they let the shelks get close enough to attack with
some unknown weapon, there could be little hope for the thousands that now
filled the forests to the north of Kaymak. So it was essential that he
conquer
those shelks before they even realized that they were in the fight.
They flew on, and Tumithak held his weapon directly on the foremost flyer,
held
his slide depressed, and swore mightily under his breath because nothing
happened. Would they never come within range?
Or were they already in range, and protected against the wave beam?
That possibility almost caused him to faint with fear. Almost instantly, he
was
the Tumithak that had crawled fearfully up the corridor, years before. All
the
boldness, all the belief in his high destiny began to ooze out of his
conscious
mind. And then, just as his parched lips moved to form the words that would
bid
Kiletlok flee, the foremost shelk-flyer exploded--almost, it seemed, in his

very

face. Actually, it was still nearly a mile away, but to Tumithak's wrought up emotions, it seemed near indeed.

Hardly daring to hope, Tumithak directed his weapon on the next shelk-ship, and

it exploded. Incredibly, one after another, they all burst into flames and dust;

after a few minutes, the air was clear of them and the Loorian again directed his weapon to the ground.

By now, the ship was over the most thickly populated portion of the city. The shelks were aware that something unprecedented was happening. Kiletlok was swinging the machine in huge circles, and Tumithak was sweeping his weapon in wide swathes to take in as much of the city as possible. And away off on the western horizon, a long trail of smoke showed where Datto emulated Tumithak's example.

Mutassa uttered an excited ejaculation.

"Look below," he cried. "There is the factory where they manufacture the white

and shining rods. There is the place where they imprisoned Otaro and forced him

into degrading slavery! Strike there, Mizta! Strike there and avenge the thousands of Kraylings that have died in slavery."

FOR a moment or two, Tumithak hesitated to follow Mutassa's suggestion. He knew

that by exploding the factory, more damage might be done than in any other way,

but he was thinking of the possibility that there might still be Arzans in the

pit far below who could be killed if he blew up the storage building on the surface. But a moment's reflection made him realize that the Arzan's prison was

almost certainly too far below to be damaged, and it would be no difficult thing, providing Tumithak won this battle, to dig them out with disintegrating

machines. And so he set his instruments and depressed the slide--

The factory disappeared in a cloud of dust. Almost instantly, it seemed. The cloud spread rapidly over the ground. It billowed up--and as the first sound of

the explosion reached the flyer, it seemed as if the whole end of the city suddenly rose toward them. A blast of air, upward rushing, struck their vessel--and suddenly Tumithak knew what was going to happen.

"Quick, Kiletlok," he cried. "Up and away!"

But avoiding the consequences of his rash act was about as easy as avoiding the

beam of a fire-hose would have been. The concussion from the explosion hit the

flyer before the words were out of his mouth. The plane swept upward, indeed, but upward and backward, and it was not of Kiletlok's doing. In the grip of the

mighty uprush of wind, the ship was as helpless as a leaf in a December gale. It

was tossed higher and higher--and then it was falling, twisting and turning, and

its three occupants were grasping wildly to find something to hold on to.

Kiletlok had been tossed from his seat and was making vain efforts to find his

way back to it. Mutassa was lying in a corner with a dazed look on his face, while Tumithak, the only one who retained his original place, was clinging with

both hands to a stanchion to keep from joining his two companions on the

floor
of the cabin.

Through the window, Tumithak could see the earth below, and it seemed to be rocking like a ship in the wildest of storms. Once the entire flyer turned over

completely, and to the three it seemed as though the world swept up and over them and back again in a cosmic somersault. And all the while, the ground grew

closer and closer and closer.

Tumithak, looking out the forward window, saw the ground sweeping crazily toward

him. The horizon suddenly leveled off and he realized that they were about to crash. And then there was a grinding, wrenching, tearing sound as the flyer struck the surface--on its wheels--and skidded along the ground to a groaning stop!

At the very last moment, the flyer had righted itself, just in time to strike the ground safely.

To be sure, it was but comparative safety; Tumithak was wrenched from his grip

on the stanchion, and his head struck smartly against the window, but though this dazed him and raised a lump that remained for a week, it did no further damage. Kiletlok and Mutassa, although badly battered, were able to stagger to

their feet.

THE scene about them was indescribable. They were on a tumbled, rock-strewn, distorted terrain where hardly a thing suggested that a few minutes before there

had been a city. Smoke poured from cracks and crevices in the rock about them,

and only here and there could be seen twisted metal sheets and fragments of girders that indicated that once a shelk city had reared proud towers to the sky. Through the gloom caused by the dust and smoke, the sun shone feebly.

The three stood uncertainly awhile and then started off in the direction that seemed most likely to be the north. They knew that northward, back in the direction from which they had come, the army awaited its moment to attack the disorganized and panic-stricken shelks.

They made little progress. They must have climbed over a half a hundred tumbled

hummocks of rock without seeing the slightest change in scenery. They must have

traversed at least a mile and a half, and still all about them was smoking ruin.

At last, scrambling over a huge ridge of ruins, they ran almost face to face with a party of shelks who were fleeing the city. Doubtless the creatures had not the slightest inkling of what had caused the terrible holocaust, but the sight of the three strange companions--pitman, Krayling and mog--traversing this

vast scene of wreckage, linked somehow in their minds with the destruction of their city, and though they were unarmed, they attacked at once, armed only with

the confidence that was born of two thousand years of shelk domination over man.

Curiously, at that fateful moment, Tumithak was confident, confident of his high

destiny. Surely the High One whom the pitmen worshipped would never have brought

him so far through the battle to let him die now. And in an unarmed battle, a man was more than a match for several shelks. He stood his ground, in spite of

the fact that there were eight or nine shelks in the party.

As he strode forward boldly, he was quite sure that Kiletlok and Mutassa were behind him, and it was not until Kiletlok's cry of "Flee, master!" came to him

from a dozen yards away, that he realized that the other two had not remained with him. And by that time it was too late.

HE TURNED part way, and saw Mutassa and Kiletlok fleeing. He turned back, and saw the shelks sweeping down on him. And he stood his ground, still outwardly confident, but inwardly wondering just a little what method the High One would

use to rescue him from this predicament.

The shelks' method of fighting was peculiar. For countless generations the creatures had done all their fighting with the highly developed scientific weapons that they had brought from Venus or appropriated from the humans of the

Golden Age. All idea of hand to hand conflict had been forgotten by them generations ago. So there was no subtlety, but only savagery in the first creature's onslaught. It sprang high into the air when it was close enough to Tumithak and fell upon him, all ten of its limbs swiping wildly, like the arms

of a woman learning to box.

Tumithak could think of no better defense than that which he had used in the pit

of the Arzans. He grasped one of the shelk's limbs and jerked the creature to him, he seized another and gave a wrenching, twisting motion and the shelk screamed in agony. Before the thing could recover from the pain of the attack,

Tumithak launched a fist full in its face. Then three of the creature's limbs managed to struggle up between Tumithak's body and its own, and using them for

leverage, the injured creature pushed itself away from the pitman's dangerous embrace.

By this time, however, three more shelks had managed to reach the struggling pair. They attacked at once. Tumithak realized that he was about to be overcome

by sheer force of numbers. He would not be conquered by the creatures so much as

veritably buried beneath them.

So quick had been the shelks' attack that even yet the mog was not a hundred yards away. He heard and hesitated; so great was his ingrained fear for his savage ex-masters the mogs, that he continued running for several seconds.

Then

he slowed his pace. After a second, he began to run back toward the scene of the

battle. Mutassa, seeing him turn, slowed down and turned about too.

They saw Tumithak struggling feebly beneath a mass of shelks. The maze of shelk

legs made it seem that their numbers were greater than they really were, and Tumithak's chances seemed hopeless. Almost as one, the two slowed down their pace again. They were about to flee once more when they heard Tumithak call a second time. They looked at each other sheepishly, and then Kiletlok, as if apoligizing[sic] to Mutassa, murmured, "He is my master!" and sped toward the scene of battle. He had not taken a dozen steps before he heard Mutassa's

steps

behind him, and the voice of the Krayling saying, "And mine, Kiletok[sic], and

mine!"

It was not a moment too soon as far as Tumithak was concerned. He had managed to

keep the shelk's teeth from his throat, but in so doing he had gotten his wrist

between the shelk's head and his throat, and the shelk, bearing down on his arm, had forced his wrist into his throat, cutting off his wind and effectually choking him. Things were spinning around him, and he had almost lost consciousness when Kiletlok pulled the savage creature from him. And then, suddenly, the entire face of the foremost shelk blackened and smoked! The creature screamed its clacking scream and fell choking to the ground, Another shelk screamed and then another! Tumithak's foes were falling away from him, running, clambering across the rough terrain, and dying as they fell. Plainly, on those that fell and died were the searing black marks of the fire-hose! Tumithak turned, and was only half surprised at the sight that greeted his eyes. Some distance away a flyer had landed. Crouched at the door, smoking fire-hoses in their hands, were Datto, Thopf and Gastofac. As they saw the last of the shelks fall, they rushed forward, shouting, and Datto grasped Tumithak's hand in his own. "We thought you lost, Lord of Shawm!" he cried. "We thought you lost!" and there was more emotion in his voice than Tumithak had ever heard before. For a moment he pumped Tumithak's hand up and down and then turned away as Thopf put his hand on Tumithak's shoulder and said with heartfelt sincerity: "Thank the High One you have been spared to see this victory." Tumithak staggered a little. "We are victorious, then?" he asked, trying to keep his voice steady. Datto grinned all over his smoke-blackened face. "Victorious? Proud would I be to hail you as Lord of Kaymak, were Kaymak aught but a smoking ruin. I doubt if a hundred hell towers yet stand in Kaymak. And the few hundred shelks that were left alive flee southward." Tumithak nodded, as though in silent prayer. But his eyes still had battle hunger in them. "Let us join our forces," he said. "We may yet be in at the finish." The door of the machine closed behind them. The machine rose, its wings flapping slowly, and flew off into the haze-blanketed south.