

Tumithak and the Ancient Word

By Charles R. Tanner

FORWARD

Out of the pits of and corridors into which they had burrowed generations before, mankind emerged some three thousand years ago to challenge the dominion of the savage Shelks of Venus, who had for long been the lords of the Surface. The long war between the two species that followed this emergence wrecked what little civilization humans had, as well as the weird, unearthly culture of the Shelks.

Today, however, after long, dark ages, science has again risen to a high state, and we can read rightly the story that archeology and legend have combined to tell us of the days when humans first struggled against those who had been for long their savage masters.

Already, many of the readers have read the author's version of the old legend of "Tumithak of the Corridors," the first man known to have challenged the dominion of the Shelks. Of his first journey, of his leading his tribe forth onto the Surface, and of the conquest of Kaymak, the writer has already told.

Now a hiatus comes into the story. After the events of the conquest of the great Shelk city of Kaymak, the legends become so full of magic and wonder that the author has thought it best that he omit entirely the story of the conquest of the Six Cities. The early Loorians and their allies did conquer those Six Cities, but as to the how—we can only say that we do not know. More than likely, it was due to their use of the same weapon that enabled them to wipe out Kaymak, coupled with the natural element of surprise, a most valuable "weapon" in those early days. Certainly, it was not due to any means remotely like the absurdities of the legends.

But following the story of this campaign against the Six Cities, the events in the legends again become conceivably possible. Therefore, let the reader imagine that five years have passed since the conquest of Kaymak, and that Tumithak is now lord of an empire on the Surface about the size of, and not remotely removed from, the ancient land of Minnesota.

CHAPTER ONE ~ Kidnapped

As far as the eye could see, the strange buildings of a novel city stretched away in all directions. These buildings were not the great stone structures of the Golden Age, not the weird metal towers of the Shelks, nor even the mighty plastic edifices of our present world. No, these buildings were a curious hybrid sort that had never existed before and were doomed to be destroyed and forgotten before the generation that dwelled in them was to pass away.

They were the homes of people, built and adapted from the wrecked and fallen Shelk towers of the city that those people had conquered and destroyed. For centuries, these humans had dwelled in the long, underground corridors, and what was more natural, when they came to live upon the Surface, than that they should simulate, as closely as possible, the way of life that was most familiar to them? So the fallen Shelk towers had been dismantled, their huge, metal walls cut up into plates and rebuilt into long, low buildings, about fifteen feet high and as many wide, and anywhere from a hundred yards to half a mile long, the interiors of which resembled closely the corridors with their attendant side apartments.

Some of the largest even had side branches, and the general tendency of orienting the buildings to secure the best possible lighting had brought back what was practically the equivalent of ancient streets.

The people that walked these streets were far different from the ones who, ten years before, had cowered trembling in their corridors, miles below the Surface. Most of these folk were under forty, for the older people found it hard to endure the vast changes in their way of life that Surface living entailed; most of them still lived in the corridors, though not so far below the surface as they once had. But the younger folk, living in this age of new hopes, and possessing the disrupter, that mighty weapon that made human beings once

more superior to the savage things that had for so long been their masters, these younger folk trod confidently about in their city and looked forward with neither fear nor anxiety toward each new campaign against the Shelks.

Now, on a certain day in late winter, one man, heavily clad in gaily colored, quilted jacket and leggings ran wildly down one of the streets toward the center of the town, evidently in the last stages of hysterical fright. Twice he was stopped by pedestrians, who tried to find out what ailed him, but each time he gabbled something unintelligible, pointing as he did so to a flyer that was rising and sailing away into the west, its huge wings flapping faster and faster as it rose. Each time, he broke away from his questioners and continued his headlong flight into the city.

He came at last to the huge building that housed the administrative bureaus of the city, and at the entrance he was stopped by a guard. He gab-bled wildly and tried to push his way past the guard, but the soldier forced him sternly against a wall and bellowed for his superior. By the time the offi-cer arrived, the winded messenger had gained some control of himself, had managed to explain at least part of his message to the guard, who now became as excited as the messenger. Both guard and messenger now broke into rapid talk, but the officer silenced the guard and listened to the still excited messenger.

A moment later, all three were speeding down the building's central corridor toward the main office.

They came to a door with a symbol on it—a Shelk's head, with a gold band on the brow. The officer knocked, a secretary answered, and after a moment's delay, they entered.

In the inner room a man sat at a desk littered with the thin, wooden paddles that were the closest humans had come to paper since his emer-gence. He was a tall, vigorous young man of about thirty, but already there were quite a few gray hairs mingled with the red about his temples. He wore a thin gold band around his head; his quilted jacket was tossed over the back of a chair, showing the blouse of the blue tunic he wore underneath. Vertical lines of worry were just beginning to show in his forehead above his nose, for the responsibilities that he bore were heavy, and he bore them almost alone.

But the messenger, the guard, and the officer paid little attention to his appearance. The officer opened his mouth to speak, but the messenger threw himself across the desk, crying out wildly: "Yofric has fled! Yofric the Stranger has fled in the Thirty-Seven, and has taken our lady! And the lord's son! Even now he flies into the west!"

The man behind the desk looked questioningly at the officer. The messenger had poured out his statements in one breath, almost as one word, and his listener had grasped the purport of little of it. The officer, almost as excited as the other, attempted to elucidate.

"Yofric the Stranger has stolen a flyer, my lord Tumithak, and has kidnapped Tholura and your son! Even now he is fleeing into the west in the flyer that he stole."

For a moment, Tumithak of Loor, whom two hundred thousand men called Lord, stood uncomprehending and dazed. Then, white-faced and trembling with anger and anxiety, he exploded into action. He turned and began barking orders.

"Prepare Flyer number Twenty-One for immediate action, Luramo," he snapped at the officer. "Mount a disruptor and a long-range fire hose with a needle beam. Find Nikadur and Datto and tell them to come at once. You!" he snapped at the guard, "find me Kiletlok the Mog and bring him here." And lastly, "You, messenger! Return at once to my home and bring here Domnik, the lady's servant. He'll know most of the wherefore of this."

The three flew out of the door as if on the wings of the wind, and Tumithak paced the floor impatiently for a minute of two. Then he picked up a hell and rang it vigorously. By the time a guard answered it, the Lorian leader had already donned his quilted jacket and was buckling it.

"Get me my arms," he demanded. "A short sword and my fire hose. Pack three or four knapsacks with pit food and a hospital kit. And send a mes-sage to Luramo that the Twenty-One must have extra power rods aboard."

The man darted away, and Tumithak was left to resume his frenzied pacing.

Kiletlok the Mog was the first of the men Tumithak had called for to arrive. A tall, lean man—so tall and lean, indeed, as to suggest that he was of another race. And this was the truth, for Kiletlok had been born into that race of humans whom the Shelks had bred from ancient traitors at the time of the Invasion. These men had been trained to hunt their fellows in the pits and corridors, and two thousand years of intensive breeding had turned them into the equivalent of human greyhounds. Kiletlok himself had been born in Kaymak and was a grown man before events had caused him to cast his lot with Tumithak.

The Loorian glanced up as Kiletlok entered, but he wasted no word of greeting.

“Yofric has kidnapped Tholura and my son,” he barked out. “You were right in your suspicions, I am afraid. My desire to weld all men into one union swayed my judgment.”

Kiletlok shook his head, and a frown puckered his brow.

“He was too tall,” he growled. “I suspected him of being a Mog from the first, you remember.”

“I admit it,” said Tumithak. “His hair fooled me, but it was obviously dyed. It is easy to realize that, now that we know him guilty. But no man ever looked more grateful and loyal than he did, on that day when I found him, apparently, freezing to death in the snow.”

“He was sent,” the Mog stated, positively. “No Mog would take an adventure like that on his own shoulders. They sent him here to do the very deed that he has succeeded in doing.”

You’re right, certainly. My wife and son are probably to be held by the Shelks as hostages. I’m sorry I didn’t listen to you, last fall. But that’s past,” Tumithak said. “He flew west. Where to, think you, Kiletlok?”

Kiletlok considered.

“Kuchklak, maybe, Lord Tumithak,” he said. “Possibly Knekhept, but more likely Kuchklak,”

He turned as he spoke, for Tumithak’s lieutenants, Nikadur and Datto, had entered. Their attitudes made it plain that they had already heard the news.

“You two will have to take over the work here,” Tumithak began, without giving them a chance to start the formal phrases with which they usually greeted him. “I’m preparing to leave at once to pursue Yofric. By the High One, I’ll slay that traitor and bring back Tholura and my son if I have to blast half of Shelkdom to do it!”

The soldier who had been sent for Tumithak’s arms returned as he spoke, and the Loorian was silent as he buckled on fire hose and sword. Then he turned to his two lieutenants.

“As usual, my friends,” he ordered, “You, Nikadur, are supreme in civil matters; you, Datto, in war or defense. I know not how long I shall be gone, but return I shall, some day, and my wife and son with me. I swear it by this band I wear on my brow.”

He strode to the door.

“You, Kiletlok, attend me. I will need your aid and your knowledge of Shelk ways.”

The two hastened out of the building and off in the direction of the airdrome. They had gone but a short distance when they met the messenger who had originally brought Tumithak the fateful message. Now he was bringing the servant whom Tumithak had called for.

This servant was a queer little fellow, a good foot smaller than his tall master, and he was slender almost to the point of emaciation. His skin was a curious slaty blue; and his head was swathed in layer after layer of ban-dages. For Domnik had been one of the savages of the Dark Corridors, and his ancestors, dwelling in eternal darkness, had gone centuries without seeing the light of day. So sensitive were their eyes that the light of the Surface, either sunlight or moonlight, was intolerable to them. So, though Domnik lived on

the Surface and wore his bandages constantly, yet his bat-like sense of hearing and his sensitivity to temperature change made him almost the equal of one who could use his eyes.

Tumithak ordered Domnik to follow him, and at once hurried on to the airport. The Twenty-One was awaiting them when they arrived, and they boarded it immediately. A moment later, with Kiletlok at the controls, it took off, flapping swiftly into the west.

For over an hour they flew, and while Tumithak quizzed Domnik about the events leading up to the flight of the stranger, Kiletlok's sharp eyes constantly scoured the horizon for signs of the flyer that the traitorous Mog had escaped in. The possibility that Yofric had altered his direction once he was out of sight came to Kiletlok, and he spoke of it to Tumithak. The Lord of Cities and Corridors pointed out that he would have to traverse at least three times as much territory to arrive at a Shelk city if he flew in another direction, while a short hundred miles would bring him to Kuchklak if he continued due west. So they flew on, and finally Kiletlok gave a savage shout, and pointed to a tiny speck on the horizon ahead.

"It is certainly the Thirty-Seven!" exploded Tumithak. "No other flyer in all the land would dare to be flying west at that speed now. After it, Kiletlok!"

There was little need to try to spur the Mog on, though. Already the flyer was being driven to the utmost; already its nose was pointed directly at the kidnapper. And slowly, inexorably, the distance between the two machines was being lessened.

Tumithak's and Kiletlok's eyes were intent on the distant flyer, which would soon be in range of their fire. So intent were they that they failed to notice a rising unrest in little Domnik. Twice the blind little fellow made attempts to speak, but some remark or ejaculation from one of the others would interrupt him, and he would apparently think better of it. At last, however, he overcame his backwardness and spoke up anxiously.

"Look behind, Lord Tumithak, and to the right. I feel the approach of another flyer."

Tumithak whirled instantly, but his eyes had no sooner fallen on the approaching Shelk flyer than he realized that Domnik's warning had come too late. Already the flyer was practically in fire hose range, and although the Loorian chief sprang instantly to the controls of the mounted disruptor, he was not soon enough.

A beam from the fire hose of the enemy flyer struck the barrel of the disruptor and the resulting blast of heat radiating from the suddenly heated metal made Tumithak draw instinctively away from it, even as he reached for the controls of his weapon!

CHAPTER TWO ~ Another Race

Undaunted, Tumithak unlimbered his own fire hose and sent a stabbing, vicious beam into the nose of the enemy's flyer. He had the satisfaction of seeing the motor explode instantly in the face of its savage driver, but the act came a second too late; for even as his own beam struck, the beam from the Shelk's fire hose, sweeping away from the damaged disruptor, caught the near wing at the point where it joined the body of the flyer; and, hesitating there for a single second, it welded the wing firmly to the body.

These flyers were ornithopters, which flew, not by the use of pro-pellers, but by the flapping of their wings. With its left wing unable to oper-ate, the Thirty-Seven began to fly in an erratic, descending circle; and Kiletlok was hard put to keep it from crashing into the failing Shelk flyer.

Fortunately, there was not a better aviator in all of Tumithak's domain than the Mog, Kiletlok. Somehow, he managed to coax his flyer to remain in the air until he found a spot clear of trees. Then he brought it down in an almost graceful glide to what might be described as a reasonably safe landing. All three were shaken up and a little bruised, but there were no sprains or broken bones; and in no time they were out of the flyer and won-dering what to do next.

They were in Shelk territory, of that they were certain. Therefore, the destruction of the disruptor must be their first concern. For the disruptor was a human-made weapon, the discovery of the martyred Zar-Emo, priest of the Tains; and it possessed the power of shooting a beam of radiation that caused the instant release of all the power contained in the white and shining rods which Shelks and humans alike used as an

energy source. As long as humans alone possessed this secret weapon, he stood superior to the Shelks. But if people let the Shelks capture it, their future would become as dreadful as the past.

So Tumithak saw to it first that the disruptor was taken apart as completely as possible. He intended to fuse the parts into masses of shapeless metal with his fire hose, but at Domnik's suggestion, he buried them instead, in spots some dozens of yards apart. There was practically no chance that any Shelk would ever find all the parts and reassemble them, yet Tumithak might be able to recover and repair them at some future date.

Then, after dismantling the semi-portable fire hose which had been mounted on the flyer and assembling it into a portable one for Kiletlok to carry, they set Out for the fallen Shelk flyer to see if it contained anything of value to them.

It was not far away. They located it almost immediately and drew near it cautiously, uncertain whether its occupants were all dead or not. There was no sign of life around it, and they drew quite near without a challenge from the machine. Presently, Tumithak said, "Listen, Domnik! Do those sharp ears of yours hear aught from the wreck?"

Domnik made a sign for silence, and while the other two held their breath, he cocked his head to one side and stood there, a comical little gray figure, his whole mind concentrated on his ears.

"One breathes," he announced, presently. "A heavy, wheezing sort of breathing. It is not the breathing like that of a Shelk. It breathes like a frightened man."

Tumithak eyed Kiletlok with uncertainty.

"A prisoner, do you suppose?" he asked.

Kiletlok shrugged. "Perhaps it was best if I looked," he answered, and before Tumithak could order otherwise, he boldly pushed open the door of the flyer's cabin and stepped inside.

Tumithak backed him up immediately, half expecting a blast of heat to burst from the interior of the ship. But they entered the cabin unopposed, and started in surprise at what they found there.

The Shelk who had been handling the controls of the flyer had been literally shattered when Tumithak's beam struck the motor. There had been two more Shelks, farther back in the cabin, and they, too, were dead, burned and crushed, slain either by the heat beam or in the resulting crash. But still alive, and cowering in the far end of the cabin, bruised and scratched but apparently unhurt otherwise, was a man.

He was a huge, fat fellow, so big and so round that Tumithak knew him at once for an Esthett. His size betrayed his race even before the Loorian noticed his sparse golden hair and beard and his now torn and disheveled robes of silken gauze.

Tumithak had first seen members of the curious race of Esthetts when he had been on that first historic journey from his home corridors of Loor to the Surface, ten years before. Fat and stupid, all their intelligence directed into a useless and decadent art, and lured with hypocritical lies by their savage masters, the Esthetts were nothing more than cattle to the Shelks. The Beasts of Venus bred them for size and full-bloodedness, lulling them into a sense of false security with an absurd belief of great appreciation for their art until the day arrived for their slaughter. Usually they were kept in deserted human-pits, although one or two towns which Tumithak had conquered had had Esthett yards on the Surface.

This Esthett cowered in the far end of the cabin, whimpering to him-self in an excess of agony. When he saw Tumithak, he hid his face in his robes and increased his hysterical sobs. Tumithak gave him a scornful kick in the rump and ordered him to arise. His command was unheeded, so Kiletlok seized the fat one by an obese shoulder and, not too gently, assisted him to his feet.

"Where was this flyer going?" demanded Tumithak, tersely. The fat one gave no answer. He was quite obviously in the grip of a powerful hysteria. Tumithak let drive a couple more questions, but the creature was quite unable to answer. With a gesture of disgust, the Lord of Shawm and Kaymak turned to leave the flyer, beckoning Kiletlok to follow him. The Mog gave the Esthett a shove that almost knocked him from his feet,

and strode after his master. The effect on the Esthett was rather surprising. With a squeal of frantic fear, he waddled after them, whining shrilly: "Don't leave me! Oh, don't leave me!"

Tumithak snarled his disgust, as much at the delay as at the Esthett's character, but already his keen mind was analyzing this creature, wondering if, by befriending him, he couldn't make him of some use. Kiletlok, one of Tumithak's most trusted warriors, was a Mog, one of the foulest race of humans that had ever existed. Yet he had been a loyal and valued aid of the Loorian for over five years. And many another had been won to the Shelk slayer's cause who had first been his enemy or scorned as worthless. So he turned to Domnik.

"Bring that creature along," he said. "Lead him, and see if you can't silence his whimperings."

The little man took the Esthett by the arm and, as Tumithak and Kiletlok strode away, he followed after them. Tumithak had been chafing at the delay that the wrecking of his flyer had caused, and now the only thought in his mind was to follow the trail of his wife and son as fast as his legs would carry him. Unmindful of anything behind him, he was only dimly aware of the droning, soothing voice of Domnik as the blind one tried to calm the hysterical Esthett.

The flyer had gone down in late afternoon, and darkness overtook them in a wood several miles west of the crash site. The evening was cold, and the Esthett, in particular, was shivering in his gauzes, and his teeth were chattering before they stopped for the night. Tumithak would have pushed on, had the incident occurred a few years earlier, but his experience as a leader had, by this time, taught him to consider his men's comfort. Though his own men likely were chilled as well, they would never say anything. Regretfully he ordered a halt for the night. They gathered together a pile of sticks and set fire to them with their fire hose and sat down to eat a few biscuits of the dry, tasteless food concentrate that they had brought with them.

Domnik's droning sympathetic voice had worked wonders with the Esthett. His attitude was still fearful, and he did a lousy job of disguising the disgust with which all Esthetts habitually regarded the "wild men," as they called the pit-men, but his hysteria had waned. Only occasionally did he choke back a sob.

"My name is Lornathusia," he said in answer to Tumithak's questioning. But when Tumithak tried to find out from whence he came, he found himself up against a wall of ignorance. To the Esthett, the corridors in which he had been born were the whole world for him, and only the legend of the wondrous Surface where the Holy Shelk dwelled made him understand that there could be anywhere else.

"All my life," he whined, "was but a rite of worship of our Holy Masters. I was the son of a sculptor, and he taught me to follow in his foot-steps. When the Holy Shelks called him to the Surface, some eight years ago, I vowed that my work should be so fine that I would follow him as soon as possible."

He looked around him fearfully.

"This!" he whispered. "This I don't understand. I was taught, like all the children of my people, that the cities of the Shelks were vast dream palaces of heavenly loveliness. When word came yesterday that I, with six of my companions, was to be taken to the Surface, I was in a transport of happiness. When we emerged from the halls onto the Surface, and saw the strange metal towers of the city, we wondered, but we did not doubt.

"And then—ah!" he almost screamed, and for several moments, Domnik was busy calming him. When he was ready to speak again, Tumithak forestalled him.

"We know well enough what happened, fat on," he said. "The tale has been told before. The Shelk slew your companions and drew off their blood to prepare it for Shelk food. It's an old story. But why did they spare you?"

Lornathusia almost became hysterical again.

"Yes, why?" he moaned. "I do not know. I know nothing, nothing! Where are the glorious palaces of the Surface that I was taught to believe in? Where are my brothers and my father and my ancestors, whom I thought dwelling in happiness in those palaces? Where are the Holy Shelks who honor the works that my brothers toil to prepare for them? Who are these evil Shelk that slay and devour men? And who, who are you,

strange, wild, little men that fight with Shelk and slay them? Oh—my world is gone and destroyed entirely, and I am lost in a corridor of demons and wild men!”

He buried his face in his arms, but Tumithak, with a gesture that was almost gentle, raised his head and commanded his attention.

“Listen,” ordered the Loorian. “I may not be a painter of pictures or a builder of statues, but I am a man and the friend of all humans. And the Shelks who slew your friends lie dead in a wrecked flyer. So listen to me!”

He stood up, his eyes looking not at Lornathusia, nor at his two com-rades, but off into the dark, as though he saw there a vision.

“I am Tumithak,” he said. “Tumithak, Lord of Loor, of Nonone, of Yakra and all the Lower Corridors. I am the whelmer of Shawm and the pro-tector of the Tains, and the conqueror of Kaymak and the Six Cities. And eight cities on the Surface, inhabited by men, how to me and call me master.” Domnik was sitting cross legged on the cold ground, his head cocked intently as he drank in his master’s words. Kiletlok, who had heard Tumithak’s franti-cally intense story at least a dozen times before, and almost knew it by heart, nevertheless listened respectfully.

And Tumithak talked. He told of his childhood, cowering deep in the hidden pits and corridors of Loor; and he told of his finding of the ancient book that gave him his first inkling of the fact that humans had once ruled the Surface and fought with the Shelks. He told of his fanatic ambition to slay a Shelk as his ancestors had done and of his long journey up the corridors to the Surface to accomplish that ambition. And he told of how his people had made him their chief, and how he had led them in raid after raid on the savage Lords of the Surface, ever extending his own domain as Shelk town after Shelk town fell before him.

And he boasted of his great weapon, the disruptor, that tore apart by their own energy the white and shining rods that the Shelks used for power, thus making the Shelk’s own weapons the medium by which he slew them.

It is doubtful if Lornathusia grasped much of what the great pit-man said. The language that the two men spoke was the same, but their idea patterns were entirely different. Dimly, the Esthett did grasp Tumithak’s central idea. And, dimly, too, he felt that Tumithak was right. His beliefs had received such a terrific wrench that he was left with no faith or belief in any-thing, and he grasped at Tumithak’s exposition of the state of affairs.

And when Tumithak offered to take the Esthett with him, Lor-nathusia gladly consented to follow the Loorian, if need be, to death. The great fanatic had gained as a follower the representative of one more race.

CHAPTER THREE ~ Creature in the Night

Tumithak realized that his friends needed rest, and, being too keyed up by his tragic loss to sleep, he ordered the others to lie down and rest while he stood watch. He sat brooding in the dark, thinking of his wife and son, of the treason of Yofric, whom he was certain, by now, could be nothing but a Mog, and wondering if he was acting for the best in continuing in this fash-ion—making this journey to the Shelk city.

It must have been early dawn when he began to doze. It was not like Tumithak to sleep on watch, but he had gone through much during the pre-ceding twenty-four hours, and he had expended much energy in useless anger and anxiety, so perhaps he may be excused for his nodding. However, the fact remains that he did doze for a few minutes, and that he was awak-ened with a start.

Something had pulled gently at the pack on his back, either at the fire hose case or at the bundle of food and medicaments strapped below it. With a sharp exclamation, he snapped to his feet, his hand darting to the fire hose’s scabbard. The creature that had touched him he could see as a mere shadow, a four-legged shadow that leaped back into the denser shad-ows immediately, with a sharp, animal yelp of fear.

Tumithak’s cry, combined with the yelp from the animal, was suffi-cient to bring Kiletlok instantly to his feet. It woke Domnik, too, and caused the little fellow to act most peculiarly. Tumithak was standing, peering

into the shadows in an attempt to pierce the darkness so he might blast the unknown attacker with his fire hose. Kiletlok, too, drew the long nozzle of his own fire hose and held it at the ready. But Domnik sniffed the air eagerly, listened and then sniffed again. He sat for a moment, tense, and, it seemed, a little bit puzzled.

Then he began to whine and make queer barking noises. Tumithak had lowered his weapon to stare at him in uncertainty, when the little fellow sprang to his feet and leaped into the shadows in the direction taken by the mysterious creature when it fled.

Kiletlok looked at his master in perplexity.

"Is he bewitched?" he asked. "What has possessed him to flee after that unknown danger?"

Tumithak motioned him to silence and strained his ears in an attempt to hear what was going on in the woods. And Tumithak was remembering—

Long ago, when first he had led his Loorians and Yakrans out of the deepest pits and corridors that had so long been their home, they had found, on their way to the Surface, the blind savage four-legged creatures who were the allies of those savages—dogs they were called—and they had fought with such ferocity that it had been necessary to kill every one before the blind savages could be conquered. And when Tumithak remembered that, he realized that the animal that had approached him in the night might well have been just such an animal.

"They are returning," said Kiletlok, suddenly.

"They?" Tumithak looked sharply at the Mog. He had heard distant movement in the forest, but the Mog's ears were evidently sharper than his. Kiletlok was right. An instant or so later, Domnik appeared in the clearing, with his hand on the head of a huge, tawny beast, scrawny and lean and apparently not a little frightened.

"It is a dog, master," he said, evidently anticipating Tumithak's question. "It is a dog such as my people once possessed, the kind of creature that for ages lived in partnership with us in the dark. He is starving, and only his hunger made him dare to brave our fire in a desperate attempt to gain a meal.

Tumithak looked at the cowering creature contemptuously. It was a sorry looking thing, with tattered ears and a sore on one flank from some recent battle or accident, and ribs that seemed to be almost ready to break through its skin. But when the Loorian lord looked into its eyes, his contempt withered and dwindled away into nothing. The creature's eyes were big, and dark, and expressive, and he seemed to be pleading, not for life, not for food, but almost—almost he seemed to be pleading for a chance to prove himself worthy of his hire.

Tumithak jerked his eyes away from the dog's and spoke to Domnik.

"This creature speaks with his eyes instead of his tongue," he said, awkwardly. "Think you he would be of any value, Domnik?"

"Take him with us, lord," answered the little gray man. "And I will promise you that he will willingly die for you in exchange for his food and an occasional word of praise. Take him with us, and you will never regret it."

He looked eagerly at the Lord of Loor. It was quite evident that this was the biggest event that had occurred in the life of Domnik for many a year. And when Tumithak gave his consent, the little man fell on his knees and flung his arms about the creature's neck, whining and cooing to it until Tumithak would have almost sworn that he was talking to the beast in its own language.

Then Domnik began fumbling in the pack on his back, and before Tumithak's amazed eyes, he began to feed the creature the food that he had brought with him. He would have given the greater part to the animal, then and there, had not the Loorian stopped, and given up a share of his own and Kiletlok's rations, that Domnik might keep some for himself.

They sat for several hours now, discussing this new addition to the party. Domnik related story after

story to illustrate the rare loyalty and intelligence of the creatures. When dawn's first traces appeared, Tumithak started them off, and they again took up their journey into the west.

By mid-afternoon they had traveled some ten miles and were growing very cautious, for they knew that they could not be very far from the Shelk town. But no amount of caution would have availed them, had they known it, for already the Shelks, warned by Yofric on his arrival the day before, had set their trap.

That traitorous Mog, as soon as he arrived in Kuchklak, had reported the battle which he had seen in the distance. Practically the entire available armed forces of the town, Shelk and Mog alike, had set out at once to prepare an ambush several miles east of the town. And when Tumithak and his party, advancing westward, were still several hundred yards from the line of concealed Shelks, the Shelks to their right and left moved stealthily forward and surrounded them. The first intimation that the Loorian had of his enemies was when, at a given signal, the ring began to close in, and whistling, clacking Shelks and howling Mogs began to pour down on them from all directions.

Tumithak and Kiletlok drew their fire hoses at once and began a seemingly hopeless defense. The Esthett, as might have been expected, squealed and threw himself to the ground, where he lay cowering and shivering like a huge mass of jelly all during the battle that followed. The dog growled menacingly and started forward, bristling with anger. Without a doubt, he would have hurled himself on the enemy and died uselessly beneath the fire hose's ray, had not Domnik put his hand on his neck and spoken softly to him, keeping up a constant mumble of cautioning, remonstrative words.

The action of the Shelks was most peculiar, Tumithak thought. He was quite familiar with the Shelks' usual method of attack—the creatures hanging behind and urging their Mogs forward with clacking cries and threats until, if the Mogs were defeated and killed, they would rush their enemy and either die themselves or gain victory at once.

Now, however, for the first time, he saw Shelks, and even Mogs, fighting cautiously. They were not hurling themselves forward, in spite of the fact that they were far superior in numbers to Tumithak's little group. Instead, they were all seeking the protection of the trees and rocks. Still odder, they were apparently seeking to avoid hurting their opponents.

But the Shelks' "courtesy," if such it were, availed them little if they expected Tumithak to respond in kind. He and Kiletlok defended themselves and their companions as valiantly as they had ever done in their lives. His old trick—that of picking a tree that a Shelk was hiding behind and playing the fire hose on it until its moisture burst into steam, shattering the tree and often the Shelk behind it—this trick he used time and again. The Mog and he divided their work, as they so often did—while Tumithak took the offensive, seeking out and attacking individual enemies, Kiletlok kept turning, his eyes alert and his weapon ready to burn down any Shelk or Mog who exposed themselves in an attempt to attack.

"They do not attempt to slay us, lord," Kiletlok muttered, presently in a puzzled tone. "They plan some weird treachery, I fear."

"It is a weird treachery, indeed, that lets us live when they might slay us," the Loorian answered, smiling. But he was as puzzled as the Mog until presently, turning suddenly in the hope of catching some Shelk by surprise; he caught one in the act of swinging about his head a curious weapon that consisted, apparently, of a ball of metal at the end of a long cord.

He sent a blast of heat at the creature, and had the satisfaction of seeing it fail, charred and smoking, before it could accomplish its purpose, whatever that had been. But before he could lower his hose to see just what that purpose had been, he heard a cry from Kiletlok and, swinging about, saw the Mog entangled in a long cord, the end of which, weighted with a heavy ball, was winding itself around and around him.

And then dozens of Shelks were moving in toward them, all swinging the cords and hurling them at the humans. In the time that it takes to tell of it, Kiletlok was down, and Tumithak, himself, was struggling, with a half dozen cords wrapping themselves about his body.

In vain he tried to sever the bindings with the heat of the fire hose; the cords seemed to be made of some fiber that resisted the heat as though it were stone. And, indeed, it was, had Tumithak but known it; for these warbolos of the Shelks were woven of asbestos. The creatures knew full well that no ordinary fiber

could withstand the heat of a fire hose. So, once entangled in them, the entire group soon found themselves helpless and in the hands of the Shelks.

Then the spider-like beasts lost no time in binding the humans in their usual thorough way. Cord after cord was wrapped round and round each of them until they resembled more a quartet of fat cocoons than a group of humans. They bound the dog too, although several Mogs were bitten in the process, and, from the care which they exercised to avoid hurting any-one seriously, it became quite evident that the creatures were acting under orders. Someone had commanded that Tumithak and his companions be brought back unharmed, and those orders were being carried out to the letter.

When they had been bound until it seemed that there were no more cords left among the Shelks to bind them, the Mogs were ordered to take them up and carry them. Then on through the woods the strange party went, into the west and into Kuchklak.

The town of Kuchklak was a medium-sized city, probably having a population of thirty or forty thousand Shelks. Like most towns of its size or smaller, it rose suddenly out of the forest, a few square miles of metal towers from thirty to two hundred feet high, rising at crazy angles, their tops netted together with innumerable strands and ropes, and the ground beneath them destitute of any signs of vegetation. In the center, rising well above the others, was the tower of the King-Shelk, the governor of the city, and this tower served as a sort of administration building.

To this building, Tumithak and his companions were carried. The governor had been informed of the arrival of the captives and had dropped down from the maze of ropes and cords in which he usually rested and now stood on the dirt floor with certain of his captains around him. Tumithak and the others were brought in and laid down before him.

He gave the orders to unbind them in his clattering Shelk speech, and even waited for a few moments after they were unbound, evidently to allow time for the blood to be restored to their cramped limbs. Tumithak lay for a moment or two, recuperating; then he rose slowly to his feet. At a motion from the Shelk governor, a group of Mogs jerked the others to their feet also.

Then the Shelk chief spoke, and spoke in a clattering attempt at human speech which Tumithak, without much difficulty, understood. "You are Tumithak, the conqueror of Kaymak?" he asked. "You are the human who has overcome the Six Cities?"

Tumithak nodded, curtly. His eyes were sweeping about the room, missing nothing. His body was alert and tense, ready at a moment's notice to take advantage of the least thing that would offer him a possibility of escape.

"I am the leader of men," he admitted. "It has been given to me by the High One to lead the resurgence of humanity. But it is all humanity that rises against you, foul spider, not merely Tumithak of the Corridors."

The Shelk chief shrugged. "If you are the chief, I am satisfied," he clacked. "Have you heard what has become of your mate and offspring?"

Tumithak's face paled slightly. "It will be well for Shelkdom if little has happened," he said, tensely. "But if it pleases you, tell me what you have done."

The Shelk chief grinned a tight-lipped grin at Tumithak's obvious anxiety. "Fear not, wild man, they have not been hurt—yet," he said. "They were merely brought here to be bait, to lure you into our little ambush. We are not interested in your wife and child. You are the hostage we desired to secure. And—well, here you are. It has been told to me by one Yofric, whom I sent to spy on you, that your people worship you as a living God. So, we will hold you here and threaten your death unless your people give up the domain that they have taken on the Surface and retire again into the corri-dors from which they came!"

Tumithak snorted. "I have taught my people that the race is all that counts," he exclaimed, "They will tell you to slay me and be damned. They will elect another chief and come here and wipe out this stinking Shelk-hole until no sign of it will tell where it ever was. Do you think humans are Shelks that they should give up because their chief has died?"

He looked at the Shelk chief boldly, but in his heart his boldness was spotted with doubt. He was not sure that his people would do as he had often commanded them; he had never been sure that his people would continue to battle with the Shelks without him there to command them. Yet it would never do to let this creature know that he had those doubts.

So, he faced the Shelk chief, unflinchingly and a little scornfully, in spite of the misgivings in his heart. But the wily old creature was not deceived. He chuckled a clattering Shelk chuckle and, turning, spoke a few words to his group of sycophants. They answered him, and after some moments he evidently reached some conclusion. He addressed Tumithak again. "These strange ones whom my people captured with you," he said. "Are they important ones among your people?"

Tumithak made no answer. Not knowing what the creature intended, he offered no information which might lend any sort of aid or comfort to the enemy.

The Shelk chief shrugged. "It makes little difference," he said. "There is room for all in the prison we have prepared."

He called a couple of his lieutenants forward and spoke to them in human speech, evidently so that the humans could understand him. "Take this group," he said, "and put them in the pit we have prepared. As for the female wild one and her cub—she will be of no more use to us now. Send her to the kennel of Yofric. He deserves some sort of reward, and he'll probably find some use for both of them."

This last remark, so characteristically Shelk-like in its cruelty, drove all thoughts of restraint from Tumithak's mind. He broke suddenly away from the two Mogs that were holding him, struck savagely at the one which had held him the more firmly, and leaped forward to strike at the savage Shelk chief. Unarmed as he was, he might have inflicted serious damage on the brute in a moment, but the odds were too great. A dozen Mogs and half as many Shelks swarmed over him, and he was trussed up again in thorough Shelk fashion.

They made Kiletlok and Domnik carry him. And with the tall, black-haired Mog carrying his head and the little, bandaged man at his feet, followed closely by the big dog, they made a queer group, indeed. Lornathusia, too, waddled close to the blind savage, and, surrounded by Shelks and Mogs, they left the administration tower. The group wound their way through the streetless maze of the city, and some half mile away, came to the place that had been prepared for their prison.

It was a pit, some fifty feet in diameter and as many deep. Quite obviously it had been prepared for some time, for though its sheer, polished sides bore evidence of the fact that it had been dug with a disintegrator, the clayey soil of the bottom had had time to support the growth of several thorn bushes about five feet high. These thorn bushes, apparently, were going to be all the shelter they would have, as well as their only chance for privacy.

The Mogs unbound Tumithak, fastened a rope under his arms and lowered him into the pit. They tossed the rope in after him and then, one after another, they lowered the other three men and the dog, tossing their ropes in after them, too. A Shelk then ordered them to throw the ropes in a pile. When they had done so, a fire hose in the hands of one of the Shelks quickly reduced the ropes to feathery ashes. Quite obviously, these ropes were not made of asbestos, as the others had been.

And now with the entire group of prisoners safely placed in their pit, the crowd of Shelks and Mogs gradually dwindled away, and they were left alone.

CHAPTER FOUR ~ Prison Pit

Tumithak had no sooner made sure that the last Shelk had disappeared than he arose from the listless, reclining pose that he had taken, and began a careful survey of the pit that was his prison. With Kiletlok, he discussed their predicament and the possibilities of escape. He even drew Domnik and Lornathusia into the conversation in the hope that one of them might be inspired to offer some suggestion.

They had talked for no more than ten minutes when a Shelk stuck his head over the edge of the pit and eyed them critically. His gaze took in the whole pit bottom. He must have stood there for three or four

minutes before he was convinced that all was well in the pit. He left at last—but in another twenty minutes he was back, giving the pit another searching inspection. Obviously, they had been assigned a guard.

There seemed little chance, then, for carrying into execution any plan for escape. Indeed, no plan suggested itself, for the prison was a most efficient one, indeed, without bars or roof. The very simplicity of the place precluded escape.

And so days passed.

Tumithak's anger turned to anxiety, his anxiety to worry and his worry to nervousness. He snapped at his companions when they spoke to him, brooded in silence and once broke into a long harangue against Shelk-dom that was as inane as it was useless. But the others, with rare judgment, realized the position he was in, and commiserated with him, refraining from anything that would add to his troubles.

On the sixth day their break came. They had racked their brains in vain to find some way out of the pit, and they had reluctantly given up, at last, the idea that they could ever scale the sheer fifty foot wall. Suddenly they were given with the idea that, if they couldn't get up out of the prison, there might be a possibility of getting down out of it!

It was the dog that showed them how this could be a possibility. They had been fed exceedingly well, considering their status, and at this particular time, the dog had been given more food than he evidently desired. In characteristic, canine fashion, he had carried his surplus to a far corner of the pit and was proceeding to bury it. He had dug a small hole when suddenly he became wildly excited and began to scabble enthusiastically at the soil, whining and barking alternately, and stopping once or twice to turn to the men as if calling to them to help him.

Tumithak and Kiletlok were engaged in conversation at the time, and paid little attention to the beast, but Domnik had been listening to him, and the little fellow, with Lornathusia behind him, hastened over to find what the dog had discovered.

In less than a minute, Domnik was back, as excited as his pet had been. He stood before Tumithak, obviously awaiting permission to speak. Tumithak nodded to him and: "A hole, lord!" he stammered, "Our dog has discovered a deep hole leading down into the ground. I cannot feel any bottom."

Tumithak stood up, excitement rising within him. Was it possible that a mode of escape had been given them? He was about to rush over to where the dog was still working, when he realized that it was almost time for the frequent inspection to occur.

"Get that beast away from the hole at once, Domnik!" he command-ed. "If the Shelk guard sees him there, he'll get suspicious at once."

Domnik turned and called, "Kuzco!" The dog recognizing this name as his, raised his head and whined in complaint, but when Domnik called the name commandingly a second time, he responded, leaving the hole and coming to Domnik's side. The blind savage placed a hand on its head, and when the Shelk guard arrived and looked down into the pit, the whole group was lounging about in their usual listless attitudes.

But no sooner were they sure that his inspection was over and the guard gone than they rushed over to the corner to inspect the hole.

It was a small hole, about six or seven inches in diameter, and by good fortune it was under one of the scraggly thorn bushes that were scat-tered about, and, therefore, more than likely invisible from the top of the pit. Tumithak stuck an arm into the hole and felt about. The hole was wider, farther down. He dropped a stone down, and failed to hear it hit bottom. A second, larger stone sent back a thud after a second or so. Tumithak frowned.

"It's not very far to the bottom," he said, with some regret. "Let's see if we can widen the opening till one of us can be lowered into it."

They proceeded to work on this idea at once. After taking out a few handfuls of dirt, they found that it

was easier to let it slide down into the hole. Evidently there was plenty of empty space down there. They had almost finished enlarging the hole when Tumithak called a halt.

"It's almost time for another inspection," he announced. "We've got to use the utmost care to avoid being caught."

He demanded that Lornathusia, the most elaborately dressed of them, give him a part of the outer robe of his voluminous garments, and tearing this, he made a square cloth covering for the hole. He pegged this down quickly with twigs from the thorn bush, and scattered dirt over it. Then they all hurried back to their usual sitting place, and when the Shelk guard came to inspect them, they were once more engaged in the interminable and innocuous conversation that the Shelk was fast becoming used to.

They finished enlarging the hole during the next interim between inspections. When the guard had come again, and gone, they removed the cover from their hole a final time.

"We shall lower you down by your feet, Kiletlok," announced Tumithak. "You are the tallest and slenderest among us. Feel about, and, if possible, look about, and get all the information you possibly can. I think," and he spoke doubtfully, and yet hopefully, "I think we are breaking into a corridor or a man-pit."

They lowered Kiletlok down, and in less than a minute, he signaled them to draw him back. They pulled him up at once, replaced the cloth, and hurried back to their sitting place.

"It's a corridor, all right," Kiletlok assured them. "It was probably well underground until this pit was dug. What incredible luck that this pit was dug so deep and no deeper!"

"Not luck!" said Tumithak, softly. "Have I not told you of the High One who has called me?"

Kiletlok said nothing. There was little or no religion among the Mogs, and he had never been able to understand the references to the "High One," which he heard in Tumithak's realm. Besides, his mind was now concerned with how they were going to get out, now that the means had apparently been given them.

"We could make our garments into ropes to lower ourselves into the corridor," he said, thoughtfully. "We might even find that this corridor leads to the Surface somewhere. But how, lord Tumithak, will we prevent the Shelks from following us? Every twenty minutes they come to look at us, and if we leave, it will certainly be but a very few minutes before they are in pur-suit, with lights and fire hoses."

The Shelk slayer scowled. This was a serious objection, indeed. With neither weapons nor light, they certainly could not expect to get far in these corridors, when pursued by large numbers of foes who had both.

"We will have to devise some means to give us a longer start," he admitted. "If there was some way to deceive the Shelks into believing we were still here, after we had left..."

They sat and thought for several minutes. Then, from the most unexpected source, came a plan.

"I think I can help you out, lord of men," said Lornathusia.

The other three looked at him in surprise. It was so seldom that he offered any opinion or made any suggestion that they frequently forgot that he was there.

"You mean you think that you can deceive the Shelks?" asked Tumithak, doubtfully.

"I—I hope so," answered the Esthett, and Tumithak noticed that the doubt which he had half-way expressed had communicated itself to the fat one already. So he simulated a look of interest and hope as the other went

"All art, lord of men, is, in a way, a deception. The realists attempt to imitate nature artificially; the impressionists try to simulate emotions and moods by artificial means. I—I have some little skill in the carving and mold-ing of dead matter into the shape and appearance of living things. And perhaps I could build from the dirt around here, certain forms that might deceive a Shelk into believing that he saw us lying asleep."

At first, Tumithak was dubious. In the long centuries in which his ancestors had lived in their pits and corridors, all concept of art had been forgotten, and at first the idea seemed so strange to him as to be absurd. But then he remembered certain statues that he had seen in the Halls of the Esthetts in the upper part of his own corridors, and he became more interested.

"This evening, after the sun has set," he announced, "we will put your plan into execution, Lornathusia. And we shall all be indebted to your art, if we manage to escape."

There was little to do then, except to wait. The afternoon seemed interminable, but it ended at last, and night fell. As they had done on the other nights, the four men and the dog huddled together for warmth and pre-tended to sleep. Presently the Shelk guard came to the pit, with a huge light whose beams carried far into the night. He flashed the light about the pit; then, satisfied at last, he turned and left them in the dark.

"Who shall enter the hole first, lord?" queried Lornathusia, and after some little talk, they decided to lower Domnik. Tumithak was fairly sure there was no danger in the corridor, and the blind one was the smallest of the three and therefore could slip through the hole the easiest.

He informed the Esthett of his decision and the fat one told them to attend to the lowering of the little man while he worked on the dummy that was to take his place.

"But it will be necessary to leave at least his outer garments to clothe the dummy with," insisted Lornathusia.

Tumithak and Kiletlok had already begun to tie some of their own garments together to make a line to lower Domnik with. They left the Esthett scabbling together a pile of dirt from the pit's floor and hastened to the hole. A few minutes and they were back, looking in amazement at the remarkable image that was taking place under Lornathusia's pudgy hands. By the time the Shelk guard flashed his light down into the pit, the four men and the dog were, to all appearances, still slumbering soundly where he had seen them before.

They lowered the dog next. Kuzco was decidedly nervous since Domnik had disappeared, and they feared that some unexpected action of his might betray them if they didn't let him go to the little man as quickly as possible. Kiletlok followed the dog, leaving Lornathusia and Tumithak as the only ones in the pit, although to the eyes of the Shelk the entire group would still be intact.

And then Lornathusia began to work like a demon. It was necessary that both he and Tumithak leave during the next twenty minute period, and so it was necessary for two images to be made. He did finish them, and finished them in time for Tumithak to lower him into the corridor; but before the lord of Loor could drop down himself, he saw the beam from the Shelk's huge light sweeping along the edge of the pit. He flung himself under the thorn bush, flattened himself to the ground, and prayed silently that the creature wouldn't see him.

The light swept down the side of the wall opposite him, swung back and forth across the floor of the pit a couple of times and settled on the group of images that Lornathusia had molded. For a moment it hesitated—the Shelk was making sure that they were all there—then the light swept on. Carelessly it swung about the pit a few more times, and then it was gone. It had not even struck the thorn bush under which Tumithak crouched. Nevertheless it was a huge sigh of relief that Tumithak gave when the pit was again dark. And he wasted no more time in lowering himself into the hole and joining his companions.

The corridor they were in was entirely dark. Kiletlok and Lornathusia were seated quietly on the floor and called to Tumithak when they heard him drop down, to let him know where they were.

"Where is Domnik?" asked the Loorian, trying vainly to focus his eyes on something in the dense dark.

Kiletlok barked out a sharp laugh.

"Where is he not?" he answered. "He is here, he is there, he is every-where. He has cast aside his eye-coverings and is sniffing and squinting about and chuckling and talking to his dog like a very madman."

"He is at home here," Tumithak explained. "In such a dark corridor as this, he was born and raised. I think he is probably at ease entirely for the first time in many years."

Just then there was a slight sound to one side of the group, and as Tumithak swung around nervously, the voice of Domnik spoke up.

"This is a wonderful corridor, lord," he announced. "There are many apartments farther down, and, I think, they are all deserted. I imagine there is light down there, too, although it must be several miles from here. The strangest thing is that the entrance seems to be down the corridor from here!"

"Are you sure of this?" queried Tumithak.

"Indeed, yes, lord. There are many signs that tell me these things are so. Can't you notice the faint current of air that blows up from the lower part of the corridor, for instance?"

Tumithak, after a moment, had to admit that he could notice no current of air blowing from the lower corridor. The little savage shrugged.

"I am at home here, lord," he said.

Tumithak stood for a moment or two, uncertain. Then, yielding to the obviously greater knowledge and instinct of the sightless one, he gave the order to start down the corridor. Domnik suggested that they hold hands so that he might lead them, and acting on this suggestion, they succeeded in making better time than they would have, had the others been alone.

Yet the darkness pressed down on the three whose sight had been taken from them and gave them a curious feeling of futility and depression. Indeed, so rapidly did their spirits fall that it soon became obvious that unless they did discover lights further down the corridor, the little man might before long assume the leadership of the group.

But the possibility of discovering lights farther down the corridor had been suggested by Domnik, and the three peered constantly into the black in the hope of seeing some break in the oppressive darkness, and that Domnik had not abandoned the possibility was made plain by the fact that he still carried his eye bandage over his arm.

And at last, after hours of slow walking, they did behold a glow far down the corridor.

Kiletlok cried out, joyfully: "We're out! I see daylight!" But the others, knowing how uncannily like daylight the light from the great glow-ing plates that lighted up the corridors was, had none of the hopes that the Mog expressed. They knew that they had merely come, as they had hoped, to a portion of the corridor where the lights still glowed. Domnik regretfully replaced his bandages, and the others hurried forward with a new boldness, their confidence increasing in direct ratio with the increase in the light.

They expected to find people of some kind before long; but, surprisingly, they were disappointed. They walked a mile or more along the lighted corridor without seeing a soul, and then Tumithak began to look in the apartments that lined the hall. He found the apartments lighted, too, and furniture there, furniture that was whole and serviceable, yet that had over it a vague indefinite patina of age that seemed to hint that it had been ages since this furniture had been of use to anyone.

An uneasy feeling took hold of the Loorian, a memory of that feeling that had held him, years before, when first he had set out along the long corridor route that was to lead him to the Surface and to his first Shelk. This feeling increased as he went on, and even communicated itself to the others.

Presently Tumithak noticed an odd fact. In many of the apartments little piles of dust and calcite fragments lay, and after noticing them uneasi-ly for a while, his suspicions regarding them were confirmed. One of the piles disclosed a half dozen human teeth!

"Those piles of dust," he said, pointing. "They are all that remains of the inhabitants of this corridor. Something killed them long ago, so long ago that their bones have crumbled to dust. Something—is it something that is still here?"

It was a cautious group that moved forward, after that discovery. These people had no knowledge of

science at that time, in spite of the fact that they had learned to handle Shelk flyers and fire hoses and had even accidentally discovered the secret of the disruptor. Being ignorant, they were superstitious and believed in magic and in spirits. To them, it was none so strange that some inimical, intelligent force had invaded this corridor and slain all the inhabitants at some indefinite time in the past. The only question in their minds was that inimical force, still present, even now lying in wait for them?

They came to a cross corridor after a while, and Tumithak started in surprise at a sign he saw fastened to the wall. To the others it was merely an odd ornament of some kind, but Tumithak could read, and to him it was a sign that said, "The Food Machines."

"This is writing," he cried, astonished. "Writing such as my own people write! How could my people's writing be found in this strange and distant corridor?"

It was a wonder to him, but, after all, it need not have been. For nearly two hundred years before the coming of the Shelks, the human race had had but a single language and a single form of writing. There was no more cause for wonder over the writing than there was over the fact that every corridor Tumithak had ever explored had had people that spoke the same tongue.

But a real wonder awaited them when they turned up that corridor and came to the rooms where the great food machines stood. For cluttered in front of the machines were literally dozens of the piles of dust that were all that were left of the people that had once inhabited this corridor. Large numbers had evidently come here to die, that was certain. Disregarding the piles of dust for the time being, Tumithak set to work at once to inspect the food machines, for they were already beginning to feel hungry, and they knew not how long they might remain in this corridor. Food was certainly going to be a necessity, and now that the means of providing it had been supplied, the sooner they produced it, the better.

He found the machines well supplied with the fuel they used, he tested the fans that sucked the air into the chambers, and inspected the pulverizers that ground the rock into minerals necessary in the food's preparation. Then he started the machine and clapped his hands in satisfaction when the throb of the motor started, built up, and speeded into the steady pulsation that indicated that the machine was in working order.

But a moment later, the pulsation slowed down and stopped.

Tumithak frowned and began a more thorough examination than he had first given the machine. He thanked his stars that his father had been a food man in his old home, and that he had insisted that Tumithak learn the same profession. He was quite familiar with the construction of these machines (although he was totally ignorant of the chemical theory on which they worked), yet it was some time before he found out what was wrong. In fact, he overlooked the trouble because of its very simplicity.

The machine had stopped because it was unable to get any sulfur. The rocks before it were mostly phosphates, and for some reason, the machine had not been moved from its place, but still stood, trying vainly whenever it was started, to extract sulfur from the phosphate rocks.

The people of that corridor had probably lost entirely the art of reading. The production of food had become more of a religious rite than an art or a science. Little by little the true scientific facts of food production had been forgotten, until at last people depended entirely on this machine and forgot that the machine depended on them. As long as the machines could get all the elements necessary for the building of food, they ran on and fed the people that worshiped them.

But there came a day when the machines had bored entirely through the sulfide and sulfate rocks and came to a vein of phosphates. Then they slowed and stopped, waiting for the people to move them to a more suitable area. The food supply ran slowly out, and the people died, praying, around a machine that seemingly had betrayed them.

Of this, of course, Tumithak was ignorant. He wondered at the death of those people, even as the machine slowed and stopped. He wondered as he and his companions searched about and found the sulfate rocks in the sides of the corridor and while they dug out the rock and fed it to the machines. He was still wondering when the food cubes began to collect in the discharge chute on the side of the machine.

When the group was well supplied with food, they made bundles of it, and proceeded to start again on

their journey in search of the entrance which Domnik still insisted was farther down the corridor. They walked on for several hours, and then the light plates in the ceiling began to dim again. Every now and then, they would run across one that was out entirely. After an hour or two of walking, the dark ones had become so common that they moved in a continual gloom. Then, finally, the gloom became darkness and they were forced to join hands and trust to the leadership of Domnik once again.

They had walked on silently in the dark for some time, when Domnik suddenly tensed and squeezed the Tumithak's hand. He stopped and whispered his mouth close to Tumithak's ear.

"There is someone or something near us, lord," he said softly. "I can hear breathing just down the corridor."

"What is it?" asked Tumithak. "What can you tell me of it?"

"It huddles closely to the wall," answered the blind one. "And it moves toward us cautiously. It's footsteps—eh! That is odd. It moves on two feet, lord, yet I hear the sound of two breathings."

The group stopped, silent save for a faint whimper of fear from Lornathusia. Their superstitions were aroused again, for certainly this thing that approached them could not be human. And what wonder, what horror would it turn out to be, that walked on two feet and breathed with two mouths? They all listened but it was only Domnik who heard enough to be able to interpret the motions of the thing.

"It has stopped moving toward us," he whispered. "It is aware of us, I think. It has heard us and is taking refuge in one of the apartments."

They stood for a while, uncertain whether to proceed or not. Minutes passed, and to Domnik's straining ears came only the sound of muffled, labored breathing.

"This creature fears us," Tumithak decided at last. "It has fled into that apartment for safety, and it is concealing its breathing in the hope that we will not hear it."

"Let—let us leave it alone and go on," suggested Lornathusia, timorously. And although the others showed their contempt of his cowardice by silently ignoring him, yet they started forward, with the evident intent of following his advice.

They reached the doorway where the mysterious creature was hidden, giving it a wide berth, for they had no intention of letting some weird monster leap out and catch them unawares. But as they passed, no weird creature of the dark came forth from the doorway, but instead the distinct sound of a sob!

Tumithak stopped, frozen in his tracks, Kiletlok, behind him, stopped, too, uncertain, puzzled by some vague familiarity in the sound. Domnik, whose life was based on sounds as much as the other's was based on sight, gave a joyful, incredible cry and wheeled toward the apartment's door. Only Lornathusia was unaffected by the sound, but he stopped as the others did and crouched whimpering against the far wall of the corridor.

Then Domnik and Tumithak were rushing through the door and into the apartment, and a light was suddenly flashed in their faces, while a scream, a very feminine scream, came from the apartment's occupant.

And Domnik was crying, "Lady! Lady!" and Tumithak was rushing forward to seize his wife in his arms, and Tholura was laughing and crying at the same time, still clinging tightly to the form of her little son, who, waking from the noise, was looking about him and wondering what all the excitement was about.

CHAPTER FIVE ~ Legacy of the Ancients

A scrambled, tear-fear conversation ensued during the next fifteen minutes. Gradually, Tholura learned of the adventures that had befallen Tumithak since Yofric had kidnapped her, and, gradually, she informed him of the events that had brought her, so incredibly, to this deep corridor.

Briefly, her tale was as follows: She had been held by the Shelks until the capture of Tumithak, and then she had been sent, as the Shelk chief had ordered, to the kennel of the Mog, Yofric. This Mog was a mongrel of sorts, He was not of the pure Mog race, but had, somehow, the blood of some other race coursing through his veins. It was because of this that he had been able to deceive Tumithak into thinking him a pit-man and because of this, too, he was scorned by the average Mog, for if the Mogs had one virtue, it was pride in their race and their trade. But Yofric had none of this pride nor of any other virtue. He brought Tholura and her son into his kennel and announced to the cringing creature that was his wife that, hereafter, she was to share his favors with Tholura.

At first, of course, this female was filled with hate toward the Shelk slayer's wife, and Tholura might have been slain in her sleep had she not acquainted the shrewish creature with the true state of affairs at the first opportunity.

When Yofric's mate realized that Tholura's only desire was to escape, she assumed what was at least an apparent friendliness and offered to help her get away. The very next night (Yofric being away on some business for his master) this creature brought a light and a packet of food, and led Tholura to a cavern in a hill, a mile or so beyond the town.

"I must leave you here," she said. "For I must not be missed when Yofric returns in the morning. This is the entrance to a corridor, and it is reputed that there is another entrance at the other end. It will not be safe for you to try to travel these woods, for they are usually full of Shelks and Mogs. Go down into this corridor and seek for the other entrance. If you find it, you can surely make your escape. If not—" She shrugged. "After all, you told me that death was preferable to slavery with Yofric."

So Tholura had taken the light and the pitifully small packet of food and had entered the cavern. It was a short one. In less than a quarter of a mile, she came to a pit with a flight of stairs cut around its sides. She started down these stairs and—

"Never have I seen such an incredible flight of stairs," she told Tumithak. "They wound round and round, dropping down and down. I must have been nearly an hour in descending them. At last I came out into a corridor that was not greatly unlike the corridors of my own home. There were apartments along this corridor, too; but instead of being the homes of people, as I hoped, they were filled with shelves, shelves that covered every wall; and these shelves were filled with books. I could have counted books by the hundreds, Tumithak, yes, by the hundreds of hundreds. But of living people, I found no more than you did, my lord."

Tholura had been eating as she spoke, as had Tumithak's little son. At the mention of books, Tumithak stood up, the light of interest glowing in his eyes.

"Could you lead me to the place where you saw these books?" he asked. "It may be that we can find books of great value. A book is a wonderful thing. It was a book that led me to my great adventure and to the idea that men might slay Shelks."

Tholura assured him that the place where she had found the books was not far away.

"I feared to leave the steps, once I found myself at the bottom of them," she confessed. "They were the only exit I knew. I gradually explored around them, but I have never let myself get very far away. I knew that if I ever got lost down here, I might easily starve to death before I found a way out."

She rose as she spoke, and the rest of the group did also. Lornathusia accompanied his rising with the usual grunts and groans that were characteristic of him. A few minutes later they entered a long hall whose apartments were, as Tholura had said, lined with books.

It took but a glance for Tumithak to realize that these books were old, incredibly old, and the sort that were used before the Invasion. Their pages were of thin sheets of some durable metal, metal that was made to last for centuries and that, even so, were beginning to corrode on the edges. Such pages as these had never been made by pitmen. No, they had been printed by those wise ancestors who had lived on the Surface and fought with the Shelks, when first the invaders came from Venus.

The irony was that the original dwellers in that corridor, neglecting their books for what was probably some vague, religious reason, had forgotten the art of reading and writing. Eventually, they had gone to their

death from starvation with the secret of their salvation literally being stored on the walls around them.

These works, Tumithak was to find out, had been carefully picked by the ancient one who had brought them there. They were works of science, nooks of knowledge, a careful ground-work in all the stupendous accumulation of facts that had been available to the giant minds of the Golden Age of the Thirtieth century of the pre-invasion era!

Of course, Tumithak did not realize this at once. Indeed, after an hour or more of haphazard investigations, he was almost ready to give up his attempt to find any book that would add to his knowledge. This was due to the fact that he had, unfortunately, run across a shelf of books on higher mathematics, and he was far from able to deal with these yet.

After a while, he heard of cry of pleasure from, of all people, Lornathusia. The Esthett had exclaimed with pleasure once or twice over a few of the more exquisite bindings and had at last begun to listlessly glance through the rest of the books. And now he had found one with illustrations, colored illustrations that had brought his startled gasp of appreciation.

He held up the book to Tumithak, and the latter glanced at the picture and then, interested, began to read the caption. For some moments, he perused the book, looking at the other illustrations and growing more and more interested. The book was a text of the fundamentals of astronomy, and the illustrations were of nebulas and planets and satellites, as seen through the marvelous telescopes of the Golden Age.

Tumithak must have read a third of the book before the increasing complexity of the ideas caused him to stop in wonder of it all. He raised his head to find Tholura and his son asleep, with Domnik and Kiletlok seated cross-legged on guard at the door and Lornathusia pouring over the illustrations in another book. The Lorian's head was buzzing with immense thoughts, the magnitude of which he could hardly conceive. He had read of galaxies, and he had read of atoms, and of neither of them had he ever suspected. His mind was filled with awe and, more important, with a vast desire to learn more of the fundamentals of the universe.

So the group remained in the corridor of the books for several days, while Tumithak searched and sorted and gradually accumulated a collection of volumes that represented to him the most basic facts available. Then, making a series of bundles, he packed them on the backs of himself and his fellows, and they started out up the almost interminable flight of steps to what they hoped might be freedom.

They rested frequently. The dog was uneasy, and had to be coaxed up the stairs. Lornathusia, with his immense weight, tired easily and had to stop often, and even the leader with his weight of books and his son in his arms found a frequent rest not undesirable.

But they reached the top at last. Reached it with the dog's uneasiness approaching a frenzy and with Domnik himself whispering warnings. The little fellow was certain that Shelks were either in the corridor or recently had been. So the group hesitantly left the steps, moved into the corridor, and down it, their light flashing about to warn them of any danger. They had almost decided that any danger that had been there had withdrawn, when it swooped down on them. Concealed in a short passage beyond the steps, a group of Mogs and Shelks emerged and rushed toward them with howls and clackings, while from closer to the entrance, another group came sweeping down.

The unarmed, laden group could offer little or no resistance. It was Kuzco, the dog, that presented the greatest problem to the enemy, but even he, snarling and snapping, was at last beaten down, smothered with Mogs, and bound in the usual thorough Shelk fashion.

There were but two Shelks, and these, in the usual Shelk style, held back during the fight and encouraged the Mogs with cries and whistles. Tumithak paid little attention to them, even after he had been captured and bound. His attention was attracted by the Mog that was apparently in charge of the others, for this Mog was Yofric! And it would be hard to say what emotion was uppermost in Tumithak's breast, as he struggled between despair at being again captured and hatred for the creature that had been instrumental in twice leading him into the hands of the Shelks.

The precious books that the group was carrying were carelessly cast aside as the Mogs picked up their opponents and started for the entrance to the cavern, leading up towards the Surface.

Yofric, in an excess of spite that could only have come from the jealous engendered by his overpowering inferiority complex, walked along beside Tumithak, boasting and threatening as though he, himself, was the supreme Lord of Kuchklak.

“So, the wild one considered himself wise enough to escape from Yofric of Kuchklak, eh?” he sneered. “He thought ‘I am Tumithak of the Wild Men and everyone must bow before me.’ But I - I, Yofric, brought you out of your hole, I captured you once, and now I have captured you again. I have taken your mate from you once, and I will take her away again. And I shall make her my mate in the end—not from any love I have for her, Tumithak of Loor—but from the hate I have for you!”

He carried on in this vein as they wended their way down the corridor, his eyes seeing nothing but the smoldering glow of anger in Tumithak’s eyes. He did not notice the contempt with which even the Shelks watched him, for Yofric had reached a high point in his life, and he was enjoying it to the fullest.

They came to the mouth of the cavern and passed through into daylight. From somewhere off in the trees, Tumithak heard a cry, the cry of a human. He thought little of it at first, then he noticed that the Shelks were uneasy. The full import of their uneasiness was slow in dawning; but he finally realized that it meant that there must be humans in the wood of whom the Shelks were ignorant. The Shelks were made aware of those humans in no small way.

The cry was repeated and answered from an opposite part of the forest. Someone shouted, “They came from the cave. Concentrate on the cave!”

The Mogs dropped their prisoners and drew from their belts the whips and javelins that were their traditional weapons. The Shelks were drawing their fire hoses and—and the Shelks were failing, smoking, victims of fire hoses in the hands of the humans who suddenly materialized from behind rocks and trees by the dozens.

They were black warriors, Tumithak saw with delight, men from the great corridors of the Kraylings, who, under Mutassa and Otar, swore allegiance to Tumithak and were among his best warriors.

It must be said that the Mogs fought valiantly. One of them even seized the fire hose from the hand of his dead master and attempted to use it. But he had never held a weapon such as that before, and he did little with it. Within ten minutes after the fight had begun, the Shelks were dead, and such Mogs as were not, had been seized by the big, black warriors and were now securely bound.

The Kraylings who picked up Tumithak and his group were lesser officers who did not know the great Lorian nor any of his companions. In their fear of making a mistake, they left them bound until they took them before the leader of the group, the lord Mutassa. Mutassa, of course, unbound Tumithak and the others at once, with elaborate apologies. Tumithak laughingly silenced him.

“All will be forgiven if you will but answer my questions,” he assured the other. “What are you doing here, and how many have you here, and what are your plans? How did you come to rescue me so fortunately?”

“Lord, it was the last thought in our minds that we were going to rescue you. When you left us, in Shawm, we waited for days without news from you. Then came a Mog, unarmed and carrying a white cloth, tied to a stick. This white cloth, he told us, meant that he was not there to fight, but to talk. He told us that the Shelks had captured you, and that they would surely slay you unless we gave up all our land on the Surface and retired to our corridors again. And he told us that they also held your son, and that they would slay him, too, unless we gave them the secret of the disruptor.”

“And what answer did you give them, Mutassa?”

“The Mog started back to Kuchklak the next day. I went along to see that no harm befell him, and my men came along to see that no harm befell me!”

Tumithak stared at him, unbelieving.

“Mutassa!” he cried. “You mean that you marched on Kuchklak to defy them?”

The Krayling chief looked uncomfortable. "Forgive me, lord," he prayed. "If I had known that you were really alive still, I might have acted otherwise. But when could one believe a Shelk or a Mog? I thought they had slain you, and I was thinking only of revenge."

Tumithak laughed a laugh of pure joy. For ten years, yes for many more than that, he had carried a burden, the burden of humankind's salvation. He had thought—no, he had known—that his people's destiny rested on his shoulders. He had hoped—yes, he had prayed—that others might, before he died, learn to believe in themselves and to trust to their own might instead of in their faith in him. And here—here was an army, an efficient, well ordered army of men, marching against Shelks; in spite of the fact that they believed that Tumithak of the Corridors was dead.

The lord of Loor laughed again.

"Mutassa," he said. "List me the men that you have with you and their arms. Dispatch a detail to the corridors to bring back some bundles of books they find there. Give an order to advance on Kuchklak, disruptors to the fore. And bring before me the Mog, Yofric. He and I have a little score to settle. We are going to conquer Kuchklak, Mutassa, but first I am going to slay Yofric with my bare hands."

And he did. With the information in the books of the library Tholura had discovered, he was able to devise more weapons and begin the restoration of human knowledge, science, and, yes, art.

THE END