



Warrior of the Dawn

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About Browne:

Howard Browne (April 15, 1908–October 28, 1999) was a science fiction editor and mystery writer. He also wrote for several television series and films. Some of his work appeared over the pseudonyms John Evans, Alexander Blade, Lawrence Chandler, Ivar Jorgensen, and Lee Francis. Beginning in 1942, Browne worked as managing editor for Ziff-Davis publications on *Amazing Stories* and *Fantastic Adventures*, both under Raymond A. Palmer's editorship. When Palmer left the magazines in 1949, Browne took over in January 1950. Browne ended the publication of Richard Shaver's *Shaver Mystery* and oversaw the change in *Amazing* from a pulp magazine to a digest. He left the magazines in 1956 to move to Hollywood. In Hollywood, Browne wrote for television shows including *Maverick*, *Ben Casey*, and *The Virginian*. His last credit was for the film *Capone* (1975), starring Ben Gazzara.

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Chapter 1

In Quest of Vengeance

It was late afternoon. Neela, the zebra, and his family of fifteen grazed quietly near the center of a level stretch of grassland. In the distance, and encircling the expanse of prairie, stood a solid wall of forest and close-knit jungle.

For the past two hours of this long hot afternoon Neela had shown signs of increasing nervousness. Feeding a short distance from the balance of his charges, he lifted his head from time to time to stare intently across the wind-stirred grasses to the east. Twice he had started slowly in that direction, only to stop short, stamp and snort uneasily, then wheel about and retrace his steps.

The remainder of the herd cropped calmly at the long grasses, apparently heedless of their leader's unrest, tails slapping flanks clear of biting flies.

Meanwhile, some two hundred yards to the eastward, three half-naked white hunters, belly-flat in the concealing growth, continued their cautious advance.

Wise in the ways of wary grass-eaters were these three members of a Cro-Magnard tribe, living in a day some twenty thousand years before the founding of Rome.¹ With the wind against their faces, with their passage as soundless as only veteran hunters may make it, they knew the zebra had no cause for alarm beyond a vague suspicion born of instinct alone.

And so the three men slipped forward, a long spear trailing in each right hand, their only guide the keen ears this primitive life had developed.

One of the three, a stocky man with a square, strong face and heavily muscled body, deep-tanned, paused to adjust his grasp on the stone-tipped spear he carried. As he did so there was a quick stir in the tangled grasses near his hand and Sleeza, the snake, struck savagely at his fingers.

With a startled, involuntary shout, the man jerked away, barely avoiding the deadly fangs. And then he snatched the flint knife from his loincloth and plunged it fiercely again and again into Sleeza's threshing body.

When finally he stopped, the mottled coils were limp in death. He saw then that his companions were standing erect, staring to the west.

From his sitting position he looked up at the others.

"Neela—?" he began.

"—has fled," finished one of the hunters. "He heard you quarreling with Sleeza. We cannot catch him, now."

1. Probably no race of man in all history has so stimulated the imagination of scientists as that of Cro-Magnon Man. The origin of the race is lost in antiquity, although its arrival on the scene was supposed to have taken place between 35,000 and 20,000 B.C. It is established, however, that hordes of the white-skinned, strong-thewed cave-dwellers over-ran, long before the dawn of history, what today is southern Europe and the Mediterranean Basin. This section of the earth's surface was sparsely populated, at the time, by Neanderthal Man—the last of the sub-human fore-runners of Homo Sapiens. Immediate warfare raged between the two. The Cro-Magnards, while lacking the tremendous muscles and long, ape-like arms of the Neanderthaloids, were far more intelligent (as witness the dimensions of their heads; a brain-case exceeding in size that of present day man), and gradually eliminated the native Neanderthals. Between the two, there was little difference in man-made weapons. The principal weapon of both was the club; but, in Cro-Magnon's case, this was augmented by the flint knife, clumsily shaped but effective. It is entirely possible that the latter people made use of the rope, both as one of the amenities and as a weapon of offense. Cro-Magnon Man was the proud possessor of a virtue both new and startling in a world given only to the struggle for survival. This virtue was Leisure—a period in which he was free to do things other than kill his enemies, hunt, and eat. He used his leisure to develop an artistic sense that found its expression in the painting of everyday scenes from his life. The walls of his cave served as a canvas; his materials, principally ochre, he took from the earth. He was the first Artist; and his paintings, still admirable considering the lack of guiding precedence, have endured to this day. In appearance, Cro-Magnon Man was ruggedly handsome, both in figure and face. He was long-headed, with a short face patterned on the diamond. The width was extreme, with high cheek-bones slanting up to a narrowing forehead, and down to a short, firm chin. Above a long, finely moulded mouth, the strong, usually prominent nose jutted out imperiously. The female was considerably smaller than her mate, often reaching no more than to his shoulders. Possibly she was lovely of face and figure; we of today have no evidence to the contrary. There are authorities who insist no finer specimen of humankind ever existed than the Cro-Magnard. Whether or not this is true, does not alter the fact that he was able to carve a secure niche in a savage and implacable world, and, at the same time, place the feet of his descendants on the path to civilization and a more sheltered life.—Ed.

The third man grinned. "Next time, Barkoo, let Sleeza bite you. While you may die, at least our food will not run away!"

Ignoring the grim attempt at humor, Barkoo scrambled to his feet and watched, in helpless rage, the bobbing heads and flying legs of Neela and his flock, now far away.

Barkoo swore mightily. "And it's too late to hunt further," he growled. "As it is, darkness will come before we reach the caves of Tharn. To return empty-handed besides—" One of his companions suddenly caught Barkoo by the arm. "Look!" he cried, pointing toward the west.

A young man, clad only in an animal skin about his middle, had leaped from a clump of grasses less than twenty yards from the fleeing herd. In one hand was a long war-spear held aloft as he swooped toward them.

Instantly the herd turned aside and with a fresh burst of speed sought to out-run this new danger.

"Look at him run!" Barkoo shouted.

With the speed of a charging lion the youth was covering the ground in mighty bounds, slanting rapidly up to the racing animals. A moment later and he had drawn abreast of a sleek young mare, her slim ears backlaid in terror.

Still running at full speed, the young man drew back his arm and sent his spear flashing across the gap between him and the mare, catching her full in the exposed side.

As though her legs had been jerked from under her, the creature turned a complete circle in mid-air before crashing to the ground, her scream of agony coming clearly to the three watching hunters.

Barkoo, when the young man knelt beside the kill, shook his head in tight-lipped tribute.

"I might have known he would do something like this," he said, exasperated. "When I asked him to come with us he refused; the sun was too hot. Now he will laugh at us—taunt us as bad hunters."

"Some day he will not come back from the hunt," predicted one of the men. "He takes too many chances. He goes out alone after Jalok, the panther, and Tarlok, the leopard, with only a knife and a rope. Why, just a sun ago, I heard him say Sadu, the lion, was to be next. Smart hunters leave Sadu alone!"

Tharn, the son of Tharn, watched the three come slowly toward him. His unbelievably sharp eyes of gray caught Barkoo's attempt at an unimpressed expression, and his own lean handsome face broke in a wide

smile, the small even white teeth contrasting vividly with his sun-baked skin.

He wondered what had caused the zebra herd to bolt before the hunters could attempt their kill. He had caught sight of them an hour before from the high-flung branches of a tree, and had hidden in the grass near the probable route of the animals once Barkoo and his men had charged them.

Barkoo, seeming to ignore the son of his chief, came up to the dead zebra and nudged it with an appraising toe.

"Not much meat here," he said to Korgul. "A wise hunter would have picked a fatter one."

Tharn's lips twitched with amusement. He knew Barkoo—knew he found fault only to hide an extravagant satisfaction that the chief's son had succeeded where older heads had failed; for Barkoo had schooled him in forest lore almost from the day Tharn had first walked.

That had been a little more than twenty summers ago; today Tharn was more at home in the jungles and on the plains than any other member of his tribe. His confidence had grown with his knowledge until he knew nothing of fear and little of caution. He took impossible chances for the pure love of danger, flaunting his carelessness in the face of his former teacher, jeering at the other's gloomy prophecies of disaster.

Tharn pursed his lips solemnly. "It is true," he admitted soberly, "that a wiser hunter would have made a better choice. That is, if he were not so clumsy that the meat would run away first. Then the wise hunter would not be able to kill even a little Neela. Wise old men cannot run fast."

Barkoo glared at him. "It was Sleeza," he snapped, then reddened at being trapped into a defense. He wheeled on the grinning Korgul. "Get a strong branch," he said sharply... .

With the dead weight of the kill swinging from the branch between Korgul and Torbat, the four Cro-Magnon hunters set out for the distant caves of their tribe.

Soon they entered the mouth of a beaten elephant path leading into the depths of dense jungle to the west. It was nearly dark here beneath the over-spreading forest giants, the huge moss-covered boughs festooned with loops and whorls of heavy vines. The air was overladen with the heavy smell of rotting vegetation; the sounds of innumerable small life were constantly in the hunters' ears. Here in the humid jungle, the bodies of the men glistened with perspiration.

By the time they had crossed the belt of woods to come into the open at the beginning of another prairie, Dyta, the sun, was close to the western horizon. Hazy in the far distance were three low hills, their common base buried among a sizable clump of trees. In those hills were the caves of the tribe, and at sight of them the four men quickened their steps.

They were perhaps a third of the way across the open ground, when Tharn, in the lead, halted abruptly, his eyes on a section of the grasses some hundred yards ahead.

Barkoo came up beside him. "What is it?" he asked tensely.

Tharn shrugged. "I don't know—yet. The wind is wrong. But something is crawling toward us very slowly and with many pauses."

Barkoo grunted. Tharn's uncanny instinct in locating and identifying unseen creatures annoyed him. It smacked too strongly of kinship with the wild beasts; it was not natural for a human to possess that sort of ability.

"Come," said Tharn. With head erect, the long spear trailing in his right hand, he set out at a brisk pace, his companions close on his heels.

They had gone half the way when a low moan came to the sharp ears of the younger man. In it was a note of human suffering and physical agony so pitiful that Tharn abandoned all caution and plunged forward.

And then he was parting the rank grasses from above the motionless body of a boy, lying there face down. From a purple-edged hole in his right side blood dripped in great red blobs to form a widening pool beneath him.

Tenderly Tharn slipped an arm beneath the shoulders of the youngster and carefully turned him to his back. Even as he recognized the familiar features, pale beneath a coat of bronze, he was aware of Barkoo behind him. Before he could turn, a strong hand thrust him roughly to one side and the older man was kneeling beside the wounded boy.

"Dartoog!" he cried, his tone a blending of fear and horror and monstrous rage. "Dartoog, my son! What has happened? Who has done this to you?"

Weakly the boy's eyes opened. In the brown depths at first were only weariness and pain. Then they focused on the face of the man and lighted up wonderfully, while a faint smile struggled for a place on the graying lips.

"Father!" he gasped.

"Who did this?" demanded Barkoo for the second time.

The eyes closed. Haltingly at first, then more smoothly as though finding strength in reliving the story, Dartoog spoke:

"It happened only a little while ago. I was near the foot of one of the hills, making a spear. A few warriors and women were near me; the rest of our people were in the caves.

"Then, suddenly, many strange fighting-men sprang out from behind trees at the edge of the clearing. They were as many as leaves on a big tree. With loud war-cries they ran at us; and before we could get away they had thrown their spears. I tried to run; but a big warrior caught me and struck me with his knife."

The son of Barkoo fell silent. Tharn, a flaming rage growing within him, bent nearer. Behind him were Korgul and Torbat, both very still, their faces strained.

"Then," the boy continued, "came Tharn, the chief, with our fighting-men. They came running from the caves and threw themselves upon the strangers.

"It was a great fight! Many times did the strange warriors try to beat back our men, and as many times did they fail. Tharn, our chief, was the reason. So many men that I could not count them, died beneath his knife and spear. But at last he, too, fell with a spear in his back.

"While they were fighting I crawled to the trees. Then I got to my feet and ran this way as far as I could. I wanted to find you, father, that you might go and kill them all."

Dartoog's voice, growing weaker, now ceased altogether. Twice he opened his lips to speak but no words came. Then, his throat swelling with a supreme effort, he cried out: "Go, father! Go, before they—" His voice broke, his body stiffened, then relaxed and he fell back, sighing.

Gently the father cradled his son's head in the circle of his arms. Once more the clear brown eyes opened. The man bent an ear to the lips framing further words.

"It—is—so—dark," came the barely audible whisper. As the boy finished speaking, his body slumped, his head dropped back and life left him.

Barkoo sat as graven in stone, head bowed above the dead body of his only son. There was no sound but that of the rustling grasses stirring lazily in the early evening breeze from the east.

Young Tharn was the first to move. Shaking his head like a hurt lion, he leaped to his feet, caught up his spear and set out at a run toward the distant caves.

By the time he had passed through the trees bounding the clearing before the hills, darkness was very near.

He came into the center of utter confusion. Everywhere about the wide clearing were bodies—some dead, others desperately wounded. Instantly Tharn set about organizing the dazed survivors; and it was only after the injured had been cared for and the dead placed in long rows in two of the recesses, that he found sufficient courage to ask about his father.

"We took a spear from his back and carried him to his own cave," was the answer. "I do not know if he still lives; he was not dead when we took him there."

Tharn, closer to knowing fear than he could ever remember, raced upward along the narrow ledges before the cave mouths. Near the crest he passed through the wide entrance of a large natural cavern, its interior lighted by means of dishes of animal fat in which were burning wicks of twisted grasses.

A group of warriors and women at the rear of the cave, drew aside as Tharn approached, revealing the magnificent figure of their leader lying upon a great pile of furry pelts. Although the eyes were closed and the strong regular features bore evidence of suffering, Tharn's heart lost its burden when he saw the broad chest rising and falling evenly.

Seated on a small flat-topped boulder beside the bed was Old Myrdon, pressing juices from herbs in a stone bowl. Old Myrdon had brought back to health more wounded fighting men than he could remember; and his long familiarity with death and suffering had completely soured his naturally acid disposition.

The young man placed a hand on the forehead of the sleeping chief, gratified to find the skin cool and moist. He noticed the compress of herbs bound in place high up on his father's back, and knew, then, the spear had not touched a vital spot, that with proper care rapid recovery would follow.

He moved to Myrdon's side. "Take good care of him, Old One," he said quietly.

The healer jerked his shoulder from under Tharn's hand. "I do not need advice from you," he growled, his wrinkled fingers grinding the rock pestle savagely against the bowl's contents. "If he lives it will be because I want him to live."

Tharn's grim expression did not change. "Take good care of him," he repeated evenly. "If he dies—you die!"

Startled, Myrdon raised his head. But Tharn had turned away and was striding toward the exit.

At the foot of the cliff he found Barkoo and Korgul and Torbat talking with a group of warriors. The son of the chief shouldered his way to the center. Darkness had come while he had been aloft and the only light came from two resinous flares.

In silence they looked at Tharn's set face. He was aware that they were regarding him strangely—almost expectantly. They seemed to sense that the carefree boy they had known was gone—replaced by a young warrior.

"Which way," demanded Tharn, "did they go?"

A tall, thin warrior with a bloody scratch across his forehead replied: "When they saw they could not gain the caves, they fell back. After they had disappeared among the trees, I followed for a time. Their path led into the south along the trail where we slew Pandor, the elephant, two suns ago."

Barkoo rubbed a hand thoughtfully across his smooth-scraped chin. "When Dyta comes again," he said, "we will start after them."

Tharn's mouth hardened. "You can wait for Dyta if you wish," he said slowly. "I am going after them now. They had no quarrel with us, but many of my friends—and yours—are dead. They killed Dartoog. They tried to kill my father. I am not going to wait."

"What can you hope to do alone, against many?" Barkoo asked in matter-of-fact tones. "Wait; go with us when it is light. There will be fighting enough for you then."

Without replying, Tharn stooped and caught up a flint-tipped war-spear. Then he re-coiled the folds of his grass rope about his shoulders and made sure the stone knife was secure in the folds of his loin-cloth.

He turned to the watching men. "I am going now," he said quietly. An instant later the black void of jungle had swallowed him up.

Chapter 2

Dylara

Uda, the moon, had not yet risen above the trees when the Cro-Magnon youth plunged into the wilderness of growing things. As a result he found his way purely by his familiarity with the territory and a store of jungle lore not surpassed by the beasts themselves. Because of the dense darkness, he was guided by three senses alone: smell, hearing and touch; but these were ample when backed by the keen mind and superhuman strength bequeathed by heritage and environment.

The narrow game trail underfoot swerved abruptly to the west and rose rapidly. For several hundred feet the way was steep, became level for a short distance, then fell away in a long gentle slope to flatness once more.

All this was familiar ground to Tharn. The ridge containing the homes of his people was behind him now; from here on for a day's march was nothing but level country.

Now came Uda, her shining half-disc swinging low above the towering reaches of the trees, her white rays seeking to pierce the matted growth below. What little light came through was enough for Tharn's eyes to regain some degree of usefulness.

He was moving ahead at a slow trot, an hour afterward, when the shrill scream of a leopard broke suddenly from the trail ahead. Another time, and Tharn might have gone on—too proud to change his course in the face of possible peril. But tonight he had more urgent business than a brawl with Tarlok.

Turning at right angles into the wall of undergrowth lining the path, he vaulted into the lower branches of a sturdy tree. With the graceful agility of little Nobar, the monkey, he swung swiftly westward again, threading his way with deceptive ease along the network of swaying boughs, now and then swinging perilously across a wide span from one tree to the next.

Directly below was the beaten path; and now he caught sight of the animal whose scream he had heard. Tarlok was pacing leisurely in the same direction as that of the man overhead, pausing occasionally to give voice to his hunting squall, his spotted form barely visible among the shadows. Tharn passed silently above him, the leopard unaware of his nearness.

Onward raced the Cro-Magnard, his thoughts filled with the quest he had undertaken alone. His savage, untamed mind had dwelt so steadily upon the outrageous attack, that it finally brought an emotion so powerful as to be almost tangible: Hate, and for a companion, Revenge.

Never would he rest until this unknown tribe had felt the weight of his own personal wrath. For what they had done they must pay a thousand-fold in lives and misery.

Without warning, the forest ended; and the cave lord dropped to the ground at the edge of a great plain, its bounds hidden in the ghostly moonlight.

A line of broken grasses began where the game path ended. So fresh was the trail, now, that Tharn knew he had best wait for sunrise before continuing the chase. He had no wish to dash headlong among the ranks of the very enemy he pursued.

A few moments later Tharn was sleeping soundly in a crotch of a high tree, his slumber undisturbed by the long familiar noises of a jungle night.

The sun was an hour high when he awakened. His first act was to climb to the highest pinnacle of the tree, and from that point attempt to pick out, if possible, the goal of those he sought.

He was immediately successful. Due west, far in the distance, he saw hills rising steeply amidst another forest. His sharp eyes followed a wide line of broken grasses, noting that it pointed unerringly toward those same heights.

Tharn smiled grimly to himself. Soon the first member of that war-party would make the initial payment on the blood-debt. Making certain his weapons were in place, the broad-shouldered young man slid to the ground and took up a circuitous route, avoiding the open plain, which brought him finally to the forest's edge at a considerable distance away from the others' point of entry at the far side of the plain. If he had crossed the plain, sharp eyes might have noted his pursuit from just within the forest edge.

Once the trail was picked up again, he took to the comparative safety of the middle terraces. Soon he was moving in absolute silence above a narrow pathway winding into the gloomy interior, the imprints of many naked feet clear in the thick dust. But he no longer needed such evidence; the humid breeze was bringing the assorted smells of a Cro-Magnon settlement close ahead.

So close were the hills by this time that he was momentarily expecting the trees to thin out, when he caught the sound of a faint movement from below. Warily he slipped downward until, parting the foliage with a stealthy hand, he made out the figure of a tall muscular warrior standing in the trail, his attitude that of a sentry.

Tharn felt his pulses quicken as a new emotion came to him. In all his twenty-two years he had never been called upon to take a human life, and he found the prospect somewhat disquieting. Yet it was just such a purpose that he had in mind and there was no point in wasting time with self-analysis.

Noiselessly he slid to the ground and stepped onto the trail a few paces behind the stranger. With infinite stealth he lessened the space between the unsuspecting warrior and his own half crouched figure. Forgotten was the knife at his belt; his purpose was to close fingers about the other's throat.

Now, he was sufficiently near. The muscles of his legs tensed for the spring—and the enemy whirled to face him!

When the guard saw the young giant's nearness and threatening position, his eyes flew wide in surprise and fear. His jaw dropped, but no sound came; his arms seemed frozen to his sides.

Before he could recover, Tharn was upon him. As the young cave-man's fingers clamped on the stranger's throat, a knee came up with savage force into Tharn's stomach, almost tearing loose his hold. But the maneuver cost the man his balance, and he fell backward with Tharn's weight across his chest.

Frantically the warrior fought to loosen the terrible grip cutting off his breath. He clawed wildly at the iron fingers, struck heavy blows at his attacker's face and body. But Tharn only tightened his hold, waiting grimly as the efforts to dislodge him became increasingly weaker. Then a convulsive shudder passed through the body, followed by complete limpness. The man was dead.

Tharn got to his feet. For a long moment he stood there, staring in wonder at the dead, distorted face. His thoughts were a jumble of

conflicting emotions: pride at vanquishing a grown man by bare hands alone; strong satisfaction in an enemy's death; and a feeling of guilt at taking a human life. What was it that Barkoo had told him, long ago?

"Death cannot be understood, completely, by one who has never killed. A true warrior takes no life without knowing regret. Slay only when your life is in danger, or when someone has wronged you. Those who kill for the love of killing are beneath the beasts; for beasts kill only for cause."

Tharn stooped, swung the corpse across his shoulder and entered the jungle. There he concealed the body and once more took to the trees.

The forest ended suddenly, some fifty yards from the base of an immense overhanging cliff. A single glance told Tharn that he had reached the trail's end, and he leaped lightly into the branches of a tree at the lip of the clearing. Swiftly he swarmed upward until a broad bough was reached that pointed outward toward the hillside.

Below and before him went on the everyday life of a Cro-Magnon village. Four women carved steaks from the freshly killed body of a deer; naked children climbed in and out of the caves and ran about the open ground; two girls, several seasons short of woman-hood, scraped hair, by means of flint tools, from a deerskin staked flat to the ground.

There was but one thing lacking in this peaceful, commonplace picture, and Tharn noted its absence at once. There was not a single grown male in sight! Did this mean a trap had been laid for the pursuit which the warriors of this tribe had every reason to expect? Were they, then, lying in wait for Barkoo and his men at the outer rim of the forest?

Tharn was about to start back toward the prairie, when he suddenly stiffened to attention. A woman—a girl, rather; she could not have been more than eighteen—had slid to the ground from one of the caves. The man in the trees half rose to watch her.

She was a bit above average in height, slim, yet perfectly formed. That part of her body not covered by the soft folds of panther skin was evenly tanned but not darkly so. Soft, lustrous brown hair fell to her bare shoulders in lovely half-curly that gave off reddish glints when touched by the sun's direct rays.

This breath-taking young person was coming straight toward the very tree that sheltered him. As she drew nearer, he could make out her features more clearly, and he saw that the wide eyes were also brown, flecked with tiny bits of Dyta, the sun (or so he thought); her cheeks were high but not too prominent, her nose rather small but beautifully shaped.

She walked gracefully, shoulders back, her head lifted proudly, an almost saucy tilt to her chin.

She passed beneath him and went on into the forest. Tharn came down quickly and set out to follow. Why he did so was not considered; some strange force drew him on. Less than twenty feet separated them, now; but so guarded were his movements that the girl was not aware of being trailed.

And now a small treeless glade stopped the stalker. Not daring to follow further, he watched her take an empty gourd from its hiding place in a clump of grasses and set about filling it with rich, red fruit from a cluster of low bushes.

Tharn watched her intently from behind the bole of a mighty tree. His eyes feasted on the matchless beauty of her face and form. Forgotten completely was the driving motive that had brought him this far from home. The flaming thirst for revenge was dead, quenched entirely by a flooding emotion, new to him but old as life itself.

A little later he saw that the girl's search for berries was bringing her close to a tree some fifty feet to his left. Swinging easily into the foliage overhead, he moved silently along the boughs until the strange princess was directly below.

And as he drew to a pause, Tarlok, the leopard, rose from the screen of leaves just beneath him and, crouching briefly, sprang without warning at the golden form fifteen feet below.

That second of hesitation on the part of the cat, saved the girl's life. Tharn, trained to think and to act in the same instant, was in mid-air as Tarlok's claws left the bark. And so, inches from that softly curved back, the beast was swept aside by the impact of a hundred and seventy pounds of muscular manhood.

Snarling its rage, the cat wheeled as it struck the earth, then pounced, almost in the same motion, at Tharn's half-kneeling figure. But, swift as was the movement, the man was quicker. Crouching under the arc of the hurtling body, the Cro-Magnard drove his long knife to the hilt in the white-furred belly. The force of the leap, plus the power behind that strong right arm, tore a long, deep gash, and the animal fell, screaming with pain and hate. Quickly he regained his feet and again threw himself at the two-legged creature in his path. But Tharn easily avoided the charge and vaulted into a nearby tree.

Blood streamed from the fatally wounded leopard as it turned to the man's leafy haven and attempted to scramble into the lower branches.

The effort cost Tarlok his remaining strength, however, and he toppled heavily to earth. Once more he sought to regain his feet, only to collapse and move no more.

As Tharn came down to the floor of the glade, he wondered why the scream of the giant cat had not brought enemy warriors running to the scene. That none had appeared made certain his belief that they were elsewhere in the neighborhood, and he breathed easier.

As soon as Tharn reappeared, the girl whose life he had saved rose from a clump of bushes a few feet away. And thus they stood there, each eyeing the other with frank interest.

Tharn's brain was awl. So much that was new and exciting had crowded into it within the last few hours that he was incapable of rational thinking. But this he knew: something had been born within him that had not been there an hour ago.

He spoke first. "I am Tharn," he said.

The girl did not at once respond to his implied question. She seemed hesitant, uncertain as to the wisdom of remaining there.

"I am Dylara," she said at last, her voice low and soft, yet wonderfully clear. "My father is chief of the tribe that bears his name. The caves of Majok are there," and she pointed toward the cliff, hidden from them by intervening trees.

Under the impetus of crystallizing realization, Tharn said what he had wanted to say from the first. "I kept Tarlok from getting you," he reminded her. "Now you belong to me!"

The brown-haired girl flushed with mingled astonishment and anger.

"You are a fool!" she retorted. "I belong to no one. Because you saved me from Tarlok, I will not call my people if you go away at once."

She turned and would have left him had not Tharn reached out and caught her by the arm.

Instantly she wheeled and struck him savagely across the mouth with her free hand, struggling to break his hold as she did so.

Then Tharn, his face smarting, hesitated no longer. With an effortless motion he drew her into the circle of his arms, tossed her lightly across one broad shoulder and broke into a run, heading back in the direction of home. His prisoner let out a single cry for help; then a calloused palm covered her lips.

And hardly had the echoes of that shout faded than six brawny fighting-men rose from the edge of the jungle, directly in Tharn's path!

At sight of the newcomers, Tharn whirled to his left, and raced away with enormous bounding strides despite the handicap of his burden. With loud yells and frightful threats beating against his ears, the cave man vanished into the tangled maze beyond the clearing.

Pursuit was immediate. For several hundred yards the chase continued at break-neck speed. Compared to those behind him, Tharn's passage was almost silent, his lithe figure slipping smoothly among the tree trunks. And then into view came the shallow, swift-flowing stream which he had scented while still in the clearing. Dashing into the water he splashed rapidly up-stream for a hundred yards, a sharp bend hiding him from the point at which he had entered.

Now he saw ahead of him that which he had hoped to find—the immense branch of a jungle giant, hanging low above the water's shimmering surface. Upon reaching the limb he drew himself and his captive into the leaves; then, stepping lightly from bough to bough, his balance controlled by a single hand, he moved rapidly inland, passing easily from tree to tree. Now and then he paused to listen for some indication of pursuit, but nothing reached those keen ears except the familiar sounds of a semi-tropical forest.

Tharn was beginning to wonder what far-reaching effects this half-mad abduction would have on his future life. He tried to picture his father's face when he saw his son returning with a strange mate, and the image was not an altogether pleasant one. Taking a mate by force was not entirely uncommon among Cro-Magnon people, although he had heard the elder Tharn declare that no true man would do so. The Hairy Ones took their women in that fashion; but then they were hardly more than the beasts.

And Barkoo! Tharn shuddered at the thought of his teacher's reaction. He would say much—remarks that would sear the hide of Pandor, the elephant!

He shrugged mentally. Let them, then! Many would envy him his prize; for certainly none among the women of the tribe was half so fair. He hoped that between now and the time Dylara and he arrived home, she would prove more tractable. Were she to repulse him in front of the others... He dropped the thought as though it were white-hot.

An hour later he descended at the edge of a small natural clearing. A spring bubbled in one corner, and beside it the girl was lowered to her feet. The man and the girl knelt to drink, then sat up.

Tharn glanced at her, and grinned when she promptly turned her back. She was angrily rubbing her wrists to restore the circulation his strong grasp had partially cut off.

"Where are you taking me?" she demanded, her head still turned away.

"To my caves and my tribe," Tharn replied. "You shall be my mate. Someday I shall be chief."

The quiet words brought the beautiful head quickly around, and the girl glared at him hotly.

"I would sooner mate with Gubo, the hyena!" she snapped.

Tharn's grin required effort. "I think not," he said calmly. "I will be good to you. You shall have the finest skins to warm you, the best food to eat. Your cave will be large and light, and no one will tell you what to do. Except me, of course," he added slyly.

She searched wildly for a telling retort. "I—I hate you!"

Tharn met the angry eyes with a serenity he secretly was far from feeling.

"You will love me. I will make you love me," he assured her.

By this time Dylara was so exasperated that she had almost forgotten her fright. What good did it do to argue with this headstrong youth? He turned back every command, every retort, with an unruffled aplomb that filled her with helpless fury. It was, she thought, like beating bare fists against a boulder. Angry tears welled up in her eyes, and she turned away, ashamed to show the extent of her agitation. Her father, she knew, would have warriors scouring the countryside in search of her. But how could they hope to follow a trail that led through the forest top? In all her life she had never heard of a man who used the pathway ordinarily reserved for little Nobar, the monkey. True, many of the tribesmen were accomplished tree-climbers, often ambushing game from their branches. But such climbing faded to nothingness when compared with this amazing man's superhuman agility and strength.

She stole a glance at his face. The broad, high forehead, the bronzed clean-scraped cheeks, the strong jaw and mobile, sensitive lips stirred something deep within her. She caught herself wishing she had met him under more favorable conditions. But, by taking her forcibly, he had turned her forever against him; she hated him with all the intensity of which she was capable.

And then, woman-like, her next words had nothing to do with her thoughts. "I am hungry," she said abruptly.

Tharn blinked at the abrupt change in the course of their conversation, but obediently he stood up.

"Then we shall eat," he assured her. "And it will be meat, too; I will show you that I am a great hunter."

It was a boast meant to impress. Dylara's lips twitched with amusement, but she said nothing.

Tharn raised his head, sniffed at the pungent jungle air, then set out through the trees, Dylara at his heels. Moving toward the east they came, a half hour later, to the banks of a narrow river. This they followed downstream until a game trail was reached.

Motioning for the girl to seek the concealing foliage of a tree, Tharn slipped behind the bole of another bordering the pathway. Drawing his knife, he froze into complete immobility.

Ten minutes, twenty—a half an hour dragged by. From her elevated position Dylara watched the young man, marveling at the indomitable patience that could keep him motionless, waiting. The strong lines of his body appealed vividly to her, although she was quick to insist it was entirely impersonal; she would have been as responsive, she told herself, had it been the figure of Sadu, the lion, crouching there.

Then—although she had heard nothing—she saw Tharn stiffen expectantly. Two full minutes passed. And then, stepping daintily, every sense alert for hidden danger, came sleek Bana—the deer.

Here was food fit for the mate of a chief! The man of the caves tightened his strong fingers about the knife hilt.

On came Bana. Tharn drew his legs beneath him like a great cat.

And then events followed one another in rapid sequence. As the unsuspecting animal drew abreast of him, Tharn, with a long, lithe bound, sprang full on its back, at the same instant driving the stone blade behind Bana's left foreleg and into the heart. The deer stumbled and fell. Dylara dropped from the tree, reaching Tharn's side as he rose from the body of the kill.

As he stood erect, still clutching the reddened blade, an arrow sped through the sunlight and raked a deep groove along his naked side.

At the shock of pain which followed, Tharn whirled about in a movement so rapid that his body seemed to blur. Before he could do more, however, a heavy wooden club flashed from a clump of undergrowth at his back, striking him a terrible blow aside the head. A searing white light seemed to explode before him; then blackness came and he knew no more.

Chapter 3

The Strange City

Dylara was first aware of a dull pain centering at the juncture of cheek and jaw. Half conscious, she put her fingers to the aching spot—and opened her eyes.

"How do you feel?" asked a man's deep voice.

Dylara, blinking in the strong sunlight, sat up. In front of her, squatted on his haunches before a small grass-fed fire, was a slender, wirily built man of uncertain age, his narrow hawk-like face creased in a thin-lipped smile as he squinted at her.

"I don't... What—" Dylara began in a dazed voice.

The man fished a bit of scorched meat from the flames and bit off a mouthful. "The next time," he said thickly, "be careful whose face you scratch. Trokar doesn't make a habit of hitting girls, but you turned on him like a panther when he tried to keep you from running away. He'll carry the marks for a while!"

Memories flooded in on her. She saw the sun-dappled trail; saw Tharn rise from the body of Bana, only to go down under the cruel impact of a heavy club; saw the horde of oddly dressed men spring from concealment and rush toward her. She had turned to run, but a grinning warrior had intercepted her. And when she had raked her nails across his cheek, his good-humored expression had darkened—she remembered no more.

"But—but Tharn?" she cried. "Where is he? Did you—Is he—"

The man shrugged. "If you mean the man who was with you ... well, we intended only to stun him. There is need in Sephar for strong slaves. But the club that brought him down was thrown too hard."

"Then he is—dead?"

The hawk-faced one nodded.

Dylara was too shocked to attempt analysis of her feelings. She knew only that an unbearable weight had come into her heart; beyond that her thoughts refused to go. Sudden tears stung her eyes.

The man rose and set about stamping out the fire. Watching him, the girl began to note how greatly this man differed from one of her own tribe. To begin with, he was smaller, both in build and in stature. His skin, under its heavy tan, was somewhat darker; his hair very black. He wore a tunic of some coarsely woven grayish white material; rude sandals of deerskin covered his feet. A quiver of arrows and a bow—both completely unfamiliar objects to the girl—swung from his shoulders, and a long thin knife of flint was thrust under a belt of skin at his waist.

His speech, too, had shown he was of another race. While it had been intelligible, his enunciation was puzzling at times; occasionally hardly understandable. The similarity to the Cro-Magnon tongue was far stronger than basic; still, there was considerable difference in subtle shadings of pronunciation and sentence structure.

He turned to her, finally. "Are you hungry?"

"No," she said dully.

"Good. We have delayed too long, as it is. Sephar is more than two suns away, and we are anxious to return."

He raised his voice in a half-shouted, "Ho!" In response a half-score of men rose from the tall grasses nearby.

"Trokar," called the hawk-faced one.

"Yes, Vulcar." A slender young man came forward.

"Here is the girl who improved your looks! It will be your duty to look after her on the way back to Sephar."

Trokar fingered three angry red welts along one cheek, and grinned without speaking.

In single file they set out toward the south. For several hours they pushed steadily ahead across gently rolling prairie land. The girl's spirits sagged lower and lower as she trudged on, going she knew not where. She thought of her father and the grief he must be suffering; of her friends and her people. She thought of Tharn once or twice; if he were alive, these men would not hold her for long. But he was dead, and the realization brought so strong a pang that she forced her thoughts away from him.

They camped that night at the edge of a great forest. All during the dark hours a heavy fire was kept going, while the men alternated, in pairs, at sentry duty. Several times during the night Dylara was awakened by hunting cries of roving meat-eaters but apparently none came near the camp.

All the following day the party of twelve skirted the edge of the forest, moving always due south. By evening the ground underfoot had become

much more uneven, and hills began to appear frequently. The nearby jungle was thinning out, as well, and the air was noticeably cooler. Just at sunset they finished scaling a particularly steep incline and paused at the crest to camp for the night.

Not far to the south, Dylara saw a low range of mountains extending to the horizons. Narrow valleys cut between the peaks, none of the latter high enough to be snow-capped. Through one ravine tumbled the waters of a mountain stream. The fading sunlight, reflected from water and glistening rocks, gave the scene an aura of majestic magnificence, bringing an involuntary murmur of delight to the lips of the girl.

"Beyond those heights lies Sephar." It was Vulcar, he of the hawk face, who spoke from beside her.

Dylara glanced at him, seeing the great pride in his expression.

"Sephar?" she echoed questioningly.

"Home!" he said. "It is like nothing you have ever seen. We do not live in caves; we are beyond that. It is from tribes such as yours that we take our slaves. Long ago the people of Sephar and Ammad were such as you. But because they were greater and wiser, and learned many things which you of the caves do not know, we have come to think of your kind as little more than animals."

Early the following morning they were underway once more. Shortly before noon they scaled the last few yards to a great tableland among the peaks. And it was then that Dylara got her first glimpse of Sephar.

A little below where she stood was a wide, shallow valley, most of it filled with heavy forest and jungle. Directly in the center of this valley, a jewel in a setting of green, lay a city. A city of stone buildings, gray and box-like, erected in the most simple of architectural design. With a few exceptions, all buildings were of one story; none more than two. Broad, clean streets were much in evidence, the principal ones running spoke-wise to converge at the exact center of the wheel-like pattern. Encircling all this was a great wall of dull gray stone.

But the most arresting feature of the entire city was situated at the hub of it all. Here, rising four full stories above the carefully tended plot of ground surrounding it, stood a tremendous structure of pure white stone, its shining walls adding materially to the dazzling effect given the awe-struck Dylara.

A hand touched her shoulder. Vulcar was smiling at her expression. "That," he said proudly, "is Sephar."

The girl could find no words to answer him. Here was something that all the tales repeated around a hundred cave-fires, during the rainy seasons, had never approached. Here might dwell the gods; those who sent the rain and the flaming bolts from the skies... .

"Come," Vulcar said at last, and the little party started down the grass-covered incline toward the valley floor—and Sephar.

The princess Alurna was angry. A few moments ago she had driven her slave woman from the room, hastening the girl's departure with a thrown vase. Raging, the princess paced the chamber's length, kicking the soft fur rugs from her path. Bed coverings were scattered about the floor, flung there during this—her latest—tantrum.

It is doubtful whether Alurna, herself, knew what brought on these savage fits of temper. Actually, it was boredom; life to the girl—still in her early twenties—went on in Sephar in the same uneventful fashion as it had since her great-great grandfather had led a host across the tremendous valley between the present site of Sephar and the northern slopes of Ammad.

Finally the princess threw herself face down on the disordered bed and burst into hysterical weeping. She had about cried herself out, when a hand touched her arm.

"Go away, Anela!" she snapped, without looking up. "I told you to stay out until I sent for you."

"It is I," said a deep voice, "Urim, your father."

The girl scrambled hastily from the bed, at the same time wiping away the traces of tears.

"I'm sorry, father. I thought it was Anela, come back to look after me."

The man chuckled. "If I know anything, she won't be back until you fetch her. She is huddled in one corner of the hall outside, shaking as though Sadu had chased her!"

Despite his fifty years, Urim, ruler of Sephar, was still an imposing figure. Larger than the average Sepharian, he had retained much of the splendid physique an active life had given him. Of late years, however, he had been content to lead a more sedentary life; this, and a growing fondness for foods and wine, had added inches to his middle and fullness to his face, while mellowing still further a kindly disposition.

Alurna sat down on the edge of her bed and sought to tidy the cloud of loosely bound dark curls framing her lovely head. She was taller, by an inch or two, than the average Sepharian girl, with a lithe, softly rounded figure, small firm breasts, rather delicate features and a clear olive

skin. She was wearing a sleeveless tunic which fell from neck to knees, caught at the waist by a wide belt of the same material. Her shapely legs were bare, the feet encased in heelless sandals of leather.

Urim drew up a chair and sat down. He watched Alurna as she freshened her appearance, his face reflecting a father's pride.

"Come, child," he said at last. "It is time for the mid-day meal. And that brings out what I came to tell you."

Alurna glanced at him with quick interest. "I thought so! I can always tell when you've got some surprise for me. What is it this time?"

"Visitors," Urim replied. "Three noble-born young men have traveled from Ammad to pay their respects. They have brought gifts from your uncle—many of them for you!"

Visitors from the mother country were rare, since few elected to attempt the perilous journey to Sephar. Alurna's uncle was king in Ammad, and the two brothers were warm friends. Urim, himself, had been born in Ammad, having come to Sephar as ruler when the former king, old Pyron, had died childless. Alurna had never seen the city of her father's birth, having been born in Sephar.

When Alurna had completed her toilet, she joined her father, and together they descended the broad central staircase of the palace to the lower hall. After passing through several well-furnished rooms, they entered a crowded dining hall and took seats at the head of a long table. The other diners had risen at their entry; they remained standing until Urim motioned for them to sit again.

Another group entered the hall, now, and all, save Urim and his daughter, rose to greet them. These newcomers were the visitors from Ammad, and as they approached vacant benches near the table's head, Urim stood to welcome them, his arms folded to signify friendship, a broad smile on his lips.

He turned to Alurna. "My daughter, welcome the friends of my brother. This is Tamar; this, Javan; and Jotan—my daughter, Alurna."

The girl smiled dutifully to the three. Two were of the usual type about her—slight, small-boned, graceful men with little to distinguish them.

But the other—Jotan—caught her attention from the first. He was truly big—standing a full six feet, with heavy broad shoulders and muscular arms and legs. His eyes were a cold flinty blue, deep-set in a strong masculine face. His jaw was square and firm, the recently scraped skin ruddy and clear. He carried himself with no hint of self-consciousness at

being in the presence of royalty; his bearing as regal as that of Urim, himself.

One after the other the three visitors touched the princess' hand. Jotan, the last, held her fingers a trifle longer than was necessary, while his eyes flashed a look of admiration that turned red the girl's cheeks. She withdrew her hand abruptly, hiding her confusion by hurried speech.

"My father and I are happy that you have come to Sephar," she said. "Food shall be brought to refresh you after so long and tiring a journey."

At a sign from Urim, slaves began to fetch in steaming platters, placing them at frequent intervals along the board. Baked-clay cups were put at the right hand of each diner and filled with the wine-like beverage common to Sephar and Ammad; an alcoholic drink fermented from a species of wild grape. Of utensils there was none, the hands serving to convey food to the mouth.

After spilling a few drops of wine to the floor as a tribute to the God-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken-Aloud, each diner set about the business of eating.

At last the mounds of viands had disappeared; the cups, drained and refilled many times during the course of the feast, were replenished again, and the Sepharians settled back to talk.

"Scarcely five marches from here, we were beset by a great band of cave-dwellers." Javan was speaking. "We beat them back easily enough; our bows and arrows evidently were unknown to them and sent scores to their deaths.

"But I tell you it was exciting for a time! They were huge brutes and unbelievably strong. Their spears—crude, barbaric things—were thrown with such force that twice I saw them go entirely through two of our men.

"But, as I say, we repulsed them, losing only four of our party, while over forty of the cave people died. We were not able to take prisoners; they fought too stubbornly to be subdued alive."

Alurna leaned forward eagerly.

"We have many slaves who once were such as you have described," she broke in. "But they do not take kindly to slavery. They often are morose and hate us, and need beatings to be kept in place. Yet their men are strong and fearless—and usually quite handsome."

From his place at the table, Jotan watched the face of the princess as she spoke. She seemed vivid and forceful—much more so than any other

woman he had ever met; and her beauty of face and figure was breathtaking. He resolved to become better acquainted with her.

The manner in which Tamar straightened at her last words, showed they had stung him—just why, was not altogether clear to Alurna.

"They are only brutes—animals!" he said heatedly. "They know nothing of such splendor—" he waved an arm to include the room's rich furnishings "—no tables or chairs, no soft covers on their cave floors. There are no walls to protect them from raids by their enemies; no ability in warfare beyond blind courage. They are half-naked savages—nothing more!"

A sudden commotion at the doorway caused the conversation to end here. A short, alert man with a hawk-like face and a distinct military bearing, strode into the room and bowed before Urim.

"Well, Vulcar," greeted the king, without rising, "what are you doing here?"

"I come," replied the warrior, "to report the capture of a young cave-woman. A hunting party slew her mate and captured her a few marches from Sephar."

"Bring her in to us," Urim commanded. "I should like our visitors to see for themselves what cave people are like."

Vulcar bowed again, then returned to the doorway and beckoned to someone outside.

Two Sepharian warriors entered, Dylara between them. She was disheveled and rumpled, the protecting skin of Jalok, the panther, was awry; but her head was unbowed, her shoulders erect, and her glance as haughty as that of the princess, Alurna, herself.

No one said anything for a long moment. The sheer beauty of the girl captive seemingly had struck them dumb.

Jotan broke the silence. "By the God!" he gasped. "Are you jesting? This is no half-wild savage!"

Alurna, her eyes flashing dangerously, turned toward the speaker. The first man ever to attract her, and already raving over some unwashed barbarian who soon was to be a common slave!

"Perhaps you would like to have her as your mate," she said sweetly, but with an ominous note in her tone.

Urim shot a startled glance at his daughter. He had heard that edge to her voice before this, and usually it meant trouble for someone.

Jotan kept his eyes on the prisoner. "She would grace the life of any man," he declared with enthusiasm, totally unaware of Alurna's mounting jealousy.

Tamar, seated next to Jotan, forced a loud laugh. "My friend loves to jest," he announced in a palpable attempt to break the sudden tension. "Pay no attention to him."

Although Dylara understood most of what was being said, she was too upset to follow the conversation itself. She was awed and a little frightened by the undreamed-of magnificence about her. As much as she had hated Tharn, being with him was far better than belonging to those who had her now. But Tharn was dead, stricken down by a slender stick and heavy club.

"Take her to the slave quarters," instructed Urim finally. "Later, I shall decide what is to be done with her."

Dylara was led up two broad flights of stairs and deep within the left wing of the palace, her escort halting at last before massive twin doors. Here, two armed guards raised a heavy timber from its sockets, the doors swung wide, and she was led down a long hall past several small doors on either side of the corridor.

The men stopped before one of these doors, unbarred it, and thrust Dylara into the room beyond. Then the door closed and she heard the bar drop into place.

At first, her eyes were hard put to distinguish objects in the faint light entering through a long narrow, stone-barred opening set high up close to the ceiling. Soon, however, she was able to make out the simple furnishings: a low bed, formed by hairy pelts on a wooden framework; a low bench; a stand, upon which were a large clay bowl and a length of clean, rough cloth; and, on the floor, a soft rug of some woven material unfamiliar to the cave-girl.

Utterly weary, the girl threw herself on the bed. Thoughts of Tharn came unbidden to her mind. How she longed for his confidence-instilling presence! Not that she cared for him in any way; of that she was very certain. It was only that he was one of her own kind; he spoke as she did, clothed himself as she was accustomed to seeing men clothed.

It was unthinkable that he was dead; impossible to believe that that mighty heart had ceased to beat! Yet she had heard the dull impact of wood against bone as the club had felled him, and he had not stirred when the strange men broke from the bushes to seize her.

Yes, he was dead; and Dylara's eyes suddenly brimmed with burning tears. She told herself that her sorrow was not so much from his death as the fact that, without him alive, she could never hope to leave this place.

The show of bravado, maintained before her captors, began to slip away. She was so lonely and afraid here in this grimly beautiful city. What would become of her? And that proud, lovely girl at the table with all those people—why had she looked at Dylara with such frank hatred?

She cried a little, there in the dim light, and still sobbing, fell asleep.

Chapter 4

Came Tharn

Sadu, the lion, rounding a bend in the trail, came to an abrupt halt as his eyes fell on the carcass of Bana lying across the path a few yards ahead.

An idle breeze ruffled his heavy mane as he stood there, one great paw half-lifted as though caught in mid-stride. Then, very slowly, impelled solely by curiosity, he moved toward the dead animal.

Suddenly something stirred beyond the bulk of the deer. Sadu froze to immobility again as the dusty blood-stained figure of a half-naked man got to an upright position and faced him.

For a full minute the man and the lion stared woodenly into each other's eyes, across a space of hardly more than a dozen paces.

Sadu's principal emotion was puzzled uncertainty. There was nothing of menace in the attitude of this two-legged creature; neither did it show any indication of being alarmed. Experience had taught the lion to expect one or the other of those reactions upon such meetings as this, and the absence of either was responsible for his own indecision.

As for Tharn, he was experiencing difficulty in seeing clearly. The figure of the giant cat seemed to shimmer in the sunlight; to expand awesomely, then contract almost to nothing. A whirlpool of roaring pain sucked at his mind, drawing the strength from every muscle of his body.

Tharn realized the moment was fast approaching when either he or Sadu must make some move. If the lion's decision was to attack, the empty-handed cave-man would prove easy prey.

Almost at Tharn's feet lay his heavy war-spear. To stoop to retrieve it might precipitate an immediate charge. But that might come anyway, he reasoned, catching him without means of defence.

What followed required only seconds. Tharn crouched, caught up the flint-tipped weapon, and straightened—all in one supple motion. Sadu slid back on his haunches, reared up with fore-legs extended, gave one mighty roar—then turned and in wild flight vanished into the jungle!

It required the better part of an hour for the cave lord to hack a supply of meat from Bana's flank and cache it in a high fork of the nearest tree. The blow from a Sepharian war-club had resulted in a nasty concussion and the constant waves of dizziness and nausea made his movements slow and uncertain.

For two full days he lay on a rude platform of branches in that tree, most of the time in semi-stupor. Twice in that time he risked descent for water from the nearby river.

It was not until morning of the third day that he awoke comparatively clear-headed. For a little while he raced through the branches of neighboring trees, testing the extent of his recovery. And when he discovered that, beyond a dull ache in one side of his head, he was himself once more, he ate the remainder of his stock of deer meat and came down to the trail to pick up the two-day-spoor of Dylara's captors.

That those who had struck him down had also taken his intended mate, Tharn never doubted. She—and he!—had been too well ambushed for escape. What her fate would be after capture depended upon the identity of her abductors.

But when Tharn had picked up those traces not obliterated by the movements of jungle denizens during the two days, he was as much in the dark as before. Never in his own considerable experience had he come upon the prints of sandals before this; nor had he known of a tribe who wore coverings on their feet.

He shrugged. After all, *who* had taken Dylara was beside the point. She had been taken; and he must follow, to rescue her if she were still alive—for vengeance if they had slain her.

By noon of the next day Tharn was drawing himself up to the edge of the tableland at almost the same spot from whence Dylara had her first glimpse of Sephar. And when he rose to his feet and saw the city of stone and its great circular wall, he was no less electrified than the girl had been. He, however, felt no dread at the prospect of entering; indeed, his adventurous blood urged him to waste no time in doing so.

As he raced through the trees toward Sephar, his thoughts were of Dylara. Reason insisted that she still lived—a captive behind that grim stone wall. He knew, now, that his love for her was no temporary madness, but an emotion that would rule his life until death claimed him. Her proud, slender figure with its scanty covering of panther skin rose unbidden before him, and he felt a sudden uncomfortable tightness

where ribs and belly met. Love was teaching Tharn of other aches than physical bruises... .

It was mid-afternoon when he reached the forest's edge nearest to Sephar. Several hundred yards of level open ground lay between the trees and the mighty wall, which evidently encircled the entire city.

From where he crouched on a strong branch high above the ground, he saw two wide gateways not more than fifty yards apart, both of them guarded by parties of armed men. His keen eyes picked out details of their figures and clothing, both of which excited his keenest interest. With its entrances so closely guarded it would be folly to approach closer during the day. While impatient to reach Dylara's side, he was quite aware that any attempt at rescue now would doubtless cost him his own freedom, if not his life, thereby taking from the girl her only hope of escape. He must wait for night to come, hoping the guards would then be withdrawn.

Reminded that he had not eaten since early morning, Tharn swung back through the trees in search of meat. The plains of this valley appeared to abound with grass-eaters; and not long after, a wild horse fell before his careful stalking. Squatting on the body of his kill, he gorged himself on raw flesh, unwilling to chance some unfriendly eye noticing smoke from a fire.

His appetite cared for, the cave-man bathed in the waters of a small stream. He then knelt on the bank, and using the water as a mirror, cut the sprouting beard from his face by means of a small, very sharp bit of flint taken from a pouch of his loin-cloth. Comfort, rather than vanity, was responsible; a bearded face increased the discomfort of a tropical day.

The sun was low in the west by the time he had returned to his former vantage point, and shortly afterward the heavy wooden gates were pulled shut by their guards, who then withdrew into the city.

Now, the grounds about Sephar were deserted, and soon the sun slipped behind the far horizon. Swiftly twilight gave way to darkness, and stars began to glow softly against the bosom of a clear semi-tropical night.

Two hours—three—went by and still Tharn did not leave his station. Somewhere below him an unidentified animal crashed noisily through the thick undergrowth and moved deeper into the black shadows. Far back in the forest a panther screamed shrilly once and was still; to be answered promptly by the thunderous challenge of Sadu, the lion.

Finally the giant white man rose to his feet on the swaying branch and leisurely stretched. Silently and swiftly he slipped to the ground. He paused there for a moment, ears and nose alert for an indication of danger, then set out across the level field toward the towering wall of Sephar—enigmatic city of mystery and peril.

After Vulcar had led the captive cave-girl from the dining room, a general discussion sprang up. Any reference to the cave people, however, was carefully avoided; the subject, for some reason that nobody quite understood, seemed suddenly taboo.

While the others were rapidly drinking themselves into a drunken stupor, Jotan sat as one apart, head bowed in thought. He found it impossible to dismiss the impression given him by the half-naked girl of the caves. She was so different from the usual girl with whom he came in contact—more vital, more alive. There was nothing fragile or clinging about her. He could not help but compare that fine, healthy, well-rounded figure with the pallid, artificial women of his acquaintance. Her clean sparkling eyes, clear tanned skin and graceful posture made those others seem dull and uninviting.

"Jotan!"

The visitor came back to his surroundings with a start.

Urim, his round face flushed from much wine, had called his name.

"Come, man," he laughed, "of what do you dream? A girl in far-off Ammad, perhaps?"

Jotan reddened, but replied calmly enough, "No, my king; no flower of *Ammad* holds my heart."

The faint stress he placed on the name of his own country passed unnoticed by all except Alurna.

"Of Ammad," you say, Jotan," she cut in. "Perhaps so soon you have found love here in Sephar."

The remark struck too close to home for the man's comfort.

"You read strange meanings in my words, my princess," he said evasively; then suddenly he thrust back his bench and arose.

"O Urim," he said, "my friends and I would like to look about Sephar. Also, if you will have someone show us the quarters we are to use during our visit... ."

"Of course," Urim agreed heartily. "The captain of my own guards shall act as your guide."

Vulcar was sent for. When he arrived, Urim bade him heed every wish the three guests might express.

As they passed from the palace into the street beyond, Tamar said softly:

"Whatever possessed you, Jotan, to say such things where others could hear you? A noble of Ammad, raving about some half-clad barbarian girl! What must they think of you!"

Jotan was mid-way between laughter and anger. Tamar's reaction had been so typical, however, that he checked an angry retort. Tamar was so completely the snob, so entirely conscious of class distinction, that his present attitude was not surprising.

"It might be interesting," he admitted.

Tamar was puzzled. "What might?"

"To know what they think."

Tamar sniffed audibly, and moved away to join Javan.

They spent the balance of the afternoon walking about Sephar's streets, viewing the sights. Shortly before dusk Vulcar led them to their quarters in a large building near the juncture of two streets—a building with square windows barred by slender columns of stone. Slaves brought food; and after the three men had eaten, the room was cleared that they might sleep.

Jotan yawned. "Even my bones are weary," he said. "I'm going to bed."

Tamar stood up abruptly. He had been silently rehearsing a certain speech all afternoon, and he was determined to have his say.

"Wait, Jotan," he said. "I'd like to talk to you, first."

Jotan looked at his friend with mock surprise. He knew perfectly well what was coming, and he rather welcomed this opportunity to declare himself and, later, to enlist the aid of his friends.

Javan was regarding them with mild amazement on his good-natured, rather stupid face. He was the least aggressive of the three, usually content to follow the lead of the others.

"All right," Jotan said. "I'm listening."

"I suppose the whole thing doesn't really amount to much." Tamar forced a laugh. "But I think it was wrong for you to carry on the way you did over that cave-girl today. Only the God knows what the nobles of Sephar, and Urim and his daughter, thought of your remarks. Why, anyone would have thought you had fallen in love with the girl!"

Jotan smiled—a slow, easy smile. "I have!" he said.

Tamar stiffened as though he had been struck. His face darkened. "No! Jotan, do you know what you're saying? A naked wild creature in an animal skin! You talk like a fool!"

"Javan!" He whirled on the silent one. "Javan, are you going to sit there and let this happen? Help me reason with this madman."

Javan sat with mouth agape. "But I—why—what—"

Jotan leaned back and sighed. "Listen, Tamar," he said placatingly. "We have been friends too long to quarrel over my taste in choosing a mate. Tomorrow I shall ask Urim for the girl."

"Your *mate*? I might have known it." In his agitation Tamar began to pace the floor. "We should have stayed in Ammad. I have a good mind to go to Urim and plead with him not to give her to you."

"You shall do nothing of the kind, Tamar," Jotan said quietly. He was no longer smiling. "I will not permit you to interfere in this. This girl is to be my mate. You, as my friend, will help me."

Tamar snorted. "When our friends see her, see her as the mate of noble Jotan, you will wish that I *had* interfered. A dirty half-wild savage! You will be laughed at, my friend, and the ridicule will soon end your infatuation."

Jotan looked at him with level eyes. "You've said enough, Tamar. Understand this: Tomorrow I shall ask Urim for the cave girl. Now I am going to sleep."

Tamar shrugged and silently turned away. Amidst a deep silence the three men spread their sleeping-furs, extinguished the candles and turned in.

As Tharn neared Sephar's outer wall, Uda, the moon, pushed her shining edge above the trees, causing the Cro-Magnon to increase his pace lest he be seen by some observer from within the city.

He reached the dense shadows of the wall directly in front of one mighty gateway, its barrier of heavy planks seemingly as solid as the stone wall on either side.

Tharn pressed an ear to a crack of the wood. He could hear nothing from beyond. Bending slightly forward, he dug his bare feet into the ground, placed one broad shoulder against the rough surface, and pushed. At first the pressure was gentle; but when the gate did not give, he gradually increased the force until all his superhuman strength strove to loosen the barrier.

But the stubborn wood refused to give way, and Tharn realized he must find another means of entry.

A single glance was enough to convince him that the rim of the wall was beyond leaping distance. It was beginning to dawn on the cave-man

that getting into this strange lair was not to be so easy as he had at first expected.

He concluded finally that there was nothing left to do but circle the entire wall in hopes that some way to enter would show itself. Perhaps one of the several gates would have been left carelessly ajar, although he was not trusting enough to have much faith in that possibility.

After covering possibly half a mile, and testing two other gateways without success, his sharp gray eyes spied a broken timber near the top of the wall directly above one of the gates. An end of the plank protruded a foot beyond the sheer surface of rock.

Tharn grinned. Those within might as well have left the gate itself open. Drawing the grass rope from his shoulders, he formed a slip knot at one end, and with his first effort managed to cast the loop about the jagged bit of wood. This done, it was a simple matter to draw himself up to the timber. There he paused to restore the rope about his shoulders, then he cautiously poked his head over the wall and peered into the strange world below.

There was no one in sight. Still smiling confidently, keenly aware that he might never leave this place alive, he lowered himself over the edge, swung momentarily by his hands, then dropped soundlessly to the street below. The first obstacle in the search for Dylara had been overcome.

Slowly and without sound the massive door to Dylara's room swung open, permitting a heavily-laden figure to enter. Placing its burden on the table, the figure closed the door, crossed to the side of the sleeping girl and bent above her, listening to the slow even breathing. Satisfied, the visitor stepped back to the table and, with a coal from an earthen container, ignited the wicks of dishes of animal fat. The soft light revealed the newcomer as a woman.

Quietly she arranged the dishes she had brought, using the low stand as a table. That done, she came to Dylara's side and shook her gently by a shoulder.

The daughter of Majok awakened with a start, blinking the sleep from her eyes. At sight of the other, she sat up in quick alarm.

The woman smiled reassuringly. "You must not be afraid," she said softly. "I am your friend. They sent me here with food for you. See?" She pointed to the dishes.

The words brought a measure of comfort to Dylara's troubled mind. She noticed this woman's speech had in it nothing of the strange accent peculiar to Sephar's inhabitants.

"Who are you?" Dylara asked.

"I am Nada—a slave."

The girl nodded. Who was it this woman reminded her of? "I am Dylara, Nada. Tell me, why is it you speak as do the cave people?"

"I am of the cave people," replied the woman. "There are many of us here. The mountains about Sephar contain the caves of many tribes. Often Sephar's warriors make war on our people and carry many away to become slaves."

Dylara watched her as she spoke. Despite a youthful appearance, she must have been twice the cave-girl's age; about the same height but more fully developed. Her figure, under the simple tunic, was beautifully proportioned; her face the loveliest Dylara had ever seen. There was an indefinable air of breeding and poise in her manner, softened by warm brown eyes and an expression of sympathetic understanding.

Nada endured the close appraisal without self-consciousness. Finally she said: "You must be hungry. Come; sit here and eat."

Dylara obeyed without further urging. Nada watched her in silence until the girl's appetite had been dulled, then said: "How did they happen to get you?"

Dylara told her, briefly. For some obscure reason she could not bring herself to mention Tharn by name. Just the thought of him, falling beneath a Sepharian club, brought a sharp ache to her throat.

There was a far-away expression in Nada's eyes as Dylara finished her story. "I knew a warrior once—one very much like the young man who took you from your father's caves. He was a mighty chief—and my mate. Many summers ago I was captured near our caves as I walked at the jungle's edge. A war party from a strange tribe had crept close to our caves during the night, planning to raid us at dawn. They seized me; but my cries aroused my people, and the war party fled, taking me with them. They lost their way in the darkness, and after many weary marches stumbled across a hunting party from Sephar. In the fight that followed they killed almost all of us, sparing only three—and me. I have been here ever since."

Dylara caught the undercurrent of utter hopelessness in the woman's words, and she felt a sudden rush of sympathy well up within her.

"Tharn was a chief's son," she said. "Had he lived, I am sure he—" She stopped there, stricken into silence by the horror on Nada's face.

The slave woman rose unsteadily from the bed and seized Dylara's hands.

"Tharn—did you say *Tharn*?"

The girl, shocked by the pain and grief in the face of the woman, could only nod.

"He—is—dead?"

Again Dylara nodded.

Nada swayed and would have fallen had not Dylara held tightly to her wrists. Tears began to squeeze from her closed eyes, to trickle down the drawn white cheeks.

And then Dylara found her voice. "What is it, Nada? What is wrong?"

The woman swallowed with an effort, fighting for control. "I," she whispered, "am Tharn's mate!"

At first, Dylara thought she meant he whom the Sepharians had slain. And then the truth came to her.

The Tharn she had known was Nada's son!

Impulsively she drew the woman down beside her, holding her tightly until the tearing sobs subsided. For a little while there was silence within the room.

Without changing her position, Nada began to speak. "It was my son who was with you. Twelve summers before my capture I bore him; his father gave him his own name. And now he is dead. He is dead."

A draft of air from the window above caused the candle flame to waver, setting the shadows dancing.

Nada sat up and dried her eyes. "I will not cry any more," she said quietly. "Let us talk of other things."

Dylara pressed her hand in quick understanding. "Of course. Tell me, Nada, what will happen to me in Sephar?"

"You are a slave," Nada replied, "and belong to Urim, whose own warriors captured you. Perhaps you will be given certain duties in the palace, or the mate or daughter of some noble may ask for you as a hand-maiden. As a rule they treat us kindly; but if we are troublesome they whip us, or sometimes give us to the priests. That is the worst of all."

"They have gods, then?" Dylara asked.

"Only one, who is both good and evil. If they fall in battle, He has caused it; if they come through untouched, He has helped them."

The Cro-Magnon girl could not grasp this strange contradiction, for she knew certain gods sought to destroy man, while other gods tried to protect him... .

"Then I must spend the rest of my life as a slave?" she asked.

"Yes—unless some free man asks for you as a mate. And that may happen because you are very beautiful."

The girl shook her head. "I do not want that," she declared. "I want only to return to my father and people."

"It will be best," Nada said, "to give up that foolish dream. Sometimes cave-men escape from Sephar; the women, never."

She rose, saying: "I must leave you now. The guards will be wondering what has kept me. Tomorrow I will come again."

The two embraced. "Farewell, Nada," whispered the girl. "I shall try to sleep again. Being here does not seem so bad, now that I know you."

Tharn regained his feet quickly after the drop from the wall, and looked about. Failing to detect any cause for immediate alarm, he set out along a broad street, hugging the buildings and keeping well within the shadows. The moon was quite high by now, the strong light flooding the deserted streets and bringing every object into bold relief.

The man of the caves did not have the slightest idea as to how he might locate the girl he loved; he proposed, however, to pit his wit and cunning, together with the stone knife and grass rope against the entire city, if necessary, until he stumbled across a clue of some sort that would bring them together. How he expected to snatch Dylara from her captors and win through to the forest and plains he did not stop to consider—time enough for that when she was found.

Abruptly the street along which he was moving ended, crossed here by another roadway. Down this side street a few yards, and on the opposite side, a huge stone building loomed, its windows barred by slender columns of stone. To Tharn's inexperienced eyes this appeared to be a prison of some sort; and as it was the first of its kind he had noticed, he decided to investigate—that is, if a means of entry could be found. The hope that Dylara might be held behind one of those protected windows spurred him on.

Nonchalantly the mighty figure stepped from the sheltering shadows and leisurely crossed the street. He did not wish to excite suspicion, should any chance onlooker see him, by a sudden dash. Reaching the doorway of the edifice, he glanced sharply about; from all appearances he might have been in a city of the dead.

Delicate fingers, backed by a shrewd, imaginative mind, found the rude wooden latch, and solved its method of operation. Gently he pushed against the door and, not without surprise, felt it yield. Slowly the heavy planks swung inward until a space sufficient to admit his

massive frame appeared, then he slid in and closed the door with his back.

The darkness was that of Acheron's pit; his eyes, keen as those of any jungle cat, were helpless to penetrate the blackness through which he moved with infinite stealth, arms outthrust before him, the cool hilt of his flint knife clutched in one muscular hand.

His nose warned him that there were men nearby; but the strangeness of his surroundings confused him as to their actual position.

One step forward he took—another, and yet another; then he trod full on the fingers of an outstretched hand!

Chapter 5

Pursuit

The instant Tharn felt his foot press the unseen hand he wheeled soundlessly and sprang to the door. Closing his fingers about the latch, he stood there, waiting. To rush out now would be certain to awaken the disturbed sleeper; otherwise the man might blame the mishap on one of his companions and go back to sleep without investigating further.

He heard a stirring in the darkness.

"Jotan."

In the utter darkness of the room the single word sounded loud as a thunder-clap.

"Jotan," said the voice again.

"Uh?" came an answering grunt.

"Are you awake?"

"I wasn't—until you woke me," said Jotan testily.

"I think somebody stepped on my fingers," the first voice said. "They feel like it, anyway."

"You must have rolled over on them, Javan. Go back to sleep."

Tharn followed the conversation with interest, surprised that he could understand the words. He waited patiently and without panic for the speakers to act or to return to sleep.

"I tell you, my hand was stepped on," Javan insisted.

"What are you two talking about?" broke in a third voice.

"Javan claims someone has been walking on him," explained Jotan. "Make a light; he'll not sleep until we search the place."

Tharn heard one of the men rise and fumble about in a corner of the room. Suddenly a flame sputtered and took hold, lighting the room's interior with a feeble glow.

Waiting no longer, Tharn twisted the latch and tried to draw open the door. But something had gone wrong; he could not stir the heavy planks.

"There!" Javan shouted. "At the door! Didn't I tell—"

With a bound Jotan leaped from his bed and plunged forward, catching Tharn at the knees. The cave-man braced himself, then bent and grasped his attacker about the waist.

Jotan was a strong, agile man. As a rough-and-tumble fighter he had few equals. But when the arms of the intruder encircled his body and tore away his hold as though he were a child, he knew he stood no chance.

The Sepharian gasped aloud as he felt himself swung aloft. He had a swift glimpse of the awe-stricken faces of his friends; then his flying body hurtled across the room to crash against them with sickening force, sending all three to the floor, half-stunned.

Tharn seized the door-latch once more and surged back with all his strength. There followed the sound of splintering wood as latch, bolt and strike were torn away. A second later he had gained the street.

By the time those within were ready to attempt pursuit, the cave-man was a block away, running with the long easy strides of a trained athlete.

As he ran, Tharn drew his knife for any misguided person who might wish to bar his path. He was slowly drawing away from his shouting pursuers, when he caught sight of a second group of warriors not far ahead and coming at a run toward him.

Turning sharply into a side street, Tharn dashed on for a short distance, only to pull up short. The roadway ended here, nor were there streets on either side. Behind him the Sepharians had turned the corner and were bearing down upon him.

Tharn was no stranger to danger or sudden death. Life in the jungles and on the vast plains had little else to offer. Fear and panic were not likely to prolong life; Tharn knew not the meaning of either.

And so it was, that as the angry fighting-men rushed toward him, they were to find no terror-stricken creature at bay. Indeed, so savage was the bearing of their quarry that the Sepharians hesitated, then came to a full stop a few paces away.

They were many, at least a score, but the sight of the Cro-Magnon's brawny frame and rippling muscles gave a dubious aspect to the whole affair; nor was the stone knife in one powerful hand a matter to be lightly dismissed.

It was during this brief armistice that one Lukor, awakened by the tumult outside his windows opened the door of his home with the ill-advised intention of making an investigation.

"I am surprised—" he began; but an instant later he was infinitely more surprised when the impact of a naked shoulder into his stomach flung him against the far corner of the room.

Tharn's jungle-trained ears had caught the sound of a bar being lifted, and so swiftly had he acted that the door was slammed shut and the bar replaced before Jotan, first to recover, could send his weight crashing against the planks.

The moonlight filtering through the latticed windows revealed an open doorway in the opposite wall, and Tharn passed into an inner room. There were no windows here, and he stumbled over various furnishings before he came upon a rude staircase.

Taking three at a time, he bounded up the steps to the chamber above. Below he could hear the impact of bodies against the lattice-work of the windows. His enemies were getting no aid from the dazed Lukor; he had not yet regained his breath or his courage.

Without hesitation, Tharn crossed the room to its single large window and looked down. He was just in time to see the curtain of branches at the window beneath give way and man after man clamber through.

They did not all go in, however; five armed guards took up positions in the street. The Cro-Magnon had hoped to drop to the street as soon as the coast was clear, but now that avenue of escape was closed.

Something must be done, and quickly, Tharn realized, were he to outwit those whose feet were even now pounding on the stairs. Thrusting head and shoulders out the window, he looked up and saw, a few feet away, the roof's edge.

Quickly Tharn balanced himself on the narrow sill, his back to the street. Raising to his tip-toes he reached gingerly up. His finger tips were a full six inches short of the roof's edge!

A lone chance remained: he must jump for it. To fail would plummet him to the street below—to certain capture and possible injury. The sinews of his legs tensed; then he rose upward in a cat-like leap.

There was a second of breathless uncertainty; then his fingers closed on a flat stone surface.

Barely had the dangling feet cleared the upper edge of the aperture when the horde burst through the doorway. Finding no occupant, they dashed to the window and called to the watchers below, only to learn the forest-man had not re-entered the street. A thorough search of the room convinced them the man they sought had left the building, and they blamed the men below for having permitted his escape; in turn to

be jeered at as cowards for not searching Lukor's premises more carefully.

It was a puzzled crowd of disgruntled warriors that finally gave up the hunt. Some of the more superstitious were inclined to believe it was no human they sought—an evil spirit, perhaps, that had faded back into nothingness.

While a block away, Tharn, having fled from one roof to another, dropped easily to earth and set out for the huge white palace he had glimpsed from the house-tops.

The Princess Alurna was finding it impossible to sleep. For hours she had lain wide-eyed, tossing fitfully, seeking the rest that would not come. Before her mind's eye persisted the image of Jotan as she had first seen him; in her ears were the sound of his voice and the echo of his laugh.

Why must her thoughts stay with this handsome visitor? Had her imperious heart given way at last?

She tried to thrust out the idea, to submerge it beneath a wave of derision; but to no avail. The image prevailed, calling attention to a splendid body and compelling features.

Finally she rose and went to the low wide window. Kneeling there she rested her arms on the broad sill, looking out over the sleeping streets and buildings, silent and brooding beneath the moon's splendor. Far out beyond the walls surrounding Sephar she could see the dark primeval forest, and she shivered a little although the night was warm. Faintly to her ears, across the stillness came the distant challenge of a lion. Again she shuddered, and brought her gaze back to Sephar's streets. The minutes passed slowly... .

Suddenly she half rose in surprise as the almost naked figure of a man bounded from the shadows of a building across from the palace, and, entering the grounds, passed from sight somewhere below.

What did it mean? Was a resident of Sephar entering the palace for some mysterious reason of his own? Hardly. None would be so rash. Then, too, the figure had not been clad in the short tunic, usual dress of all Sepharians.

No; that shadowy figure meant danger. Jumping to her feet she ran to the door and flung it open. At her appearance the two warriors in the corridor sprang hastily forward.

"Get Vulcar at once," she cried. "Someone is trying to get into the palace!"

The moon's liquid rays did not reach the palace wall where Tharn was standing now. The white, smooth stone gleamed dully in the half light.

Moving as only the jungle-wise can move, he began to skirt the building, seeking an opening large enough to admit his giant frame. His bare feet were soundless on the grass; he was but a white shadow of a man.

There was no scarcity of windows, but all were barred by slender columns of stone. To attempt to force them would be a noisy method at best. If he meant to find and rescue Dylara he must resort to stealth and cunning alone. For all his herculean strength he would be helpless against an entire city.

He was nearing one corner of the building when his eyes caught sight of a narrow slit-like break in the stone just above the level of his head. There was no indication of bars, and as it appeared large enough to admit him, he caught the lip and drew himself up and within.

The awful stench that smote his nostrils nearly drove him back to the ground. He had no way of knowing, of course, that he had stumbled across a refuse chute; it was from this vent that waste was thrown into containers below.

Holding his breath, he clambered a short distance along the sloping stone, thrust away a wooden screen and stood upright.

He was in complete darkness. Moving slowly forward, his outthrust hands struck a wooden panel which proved to be a door. A second later he had solved the latch and stepped through.

Here, light came through several windows. He was in the palace kitchens, although his limited experience did not enable him to identify them as such. Across the room was a closed door; he directed his steps toward it.

Silently the door swung open, and the cave-man paused on the threshold of a large room, occupied by a massive table and numerous backless stools.

Tharn took in all that with a single swift glance. Something was moving beyond the hangings screening off the room ahead.

The curtains parted and five guards-men filed into the room. After glancing hastily about, they passed silently through to the kitchens.

As the last one disappeared from view, a disembodied shape merged from beneath the long table and vanished into the room beyond.

Aside from its furnishings it, too, was empty.

On went Tharn, combing each successive chamber for a sign of human life. He was determined not to quit this place until completely satisfied Dylara was held elsewhere. The task, not easy at best, would prove even more difficult with the palace guards on the lookout for an intruder.

Stronger by the minute was the realization that this strange race of people, who were capable of erecting their own caves of stone, who could make strange weapons to throw tiny spears with unbelievable accuracy, whose hands could shape such a variety of articles—were sadly lacking in the qualities without which Tharn could never have arrived at young manhood.

That five men could pass at arm's length from him and yet remain unaware of his nearness, was inconceivable to the man of the caves. Were their noses ornaments, he wondered, that they could not sense a hidden foe? Were their wits so dull they could pass up so obvious a hiding place as he had chosen?

No wonder that they had erected a great wall between them and the jungle! His lip curled with contempt as he pictured an army of them scattering before the charge of Sadu.

By this time he had reached the great hall inside the palace main entrance. A giant skylight high up in the ceiling, its cover removed during the dry season, admitted cold moonlight in a brilliant cascade of light that left no shadows or darkened corners.

From the center of the vast hall rose a gigantic staircase of stone to the second floor. Tharn, reasoning that the palace sleeping quarters would be above, stole warily toward the stairway.

And then a horde of armed men broke unexpectedly from a doorway across the hall, and spying Tharn, bore down upon him, uttering a chorus of exultant yells as they came.

One tremendous bound brought Tharn to the steps, up which he fled with all the speed of Jalok, the panther. Three spears hurled with senseless enthusiasm, fell short of their intended mark. But the shouts of alarm and excitement were fast arousing other inhabitants of the building. From somewhere above, Tharn heard a door slam, followed by the sound of running feet in the upper corridor to his left. Hence the moment he reached the landing he turned right and raced along the still deserted hallway, his naked feet soundless on the bare stone.

Because of the fugitive's silent approach, four guards, who stood facing in the opposite direction, did not hear him as he rounded a turn of the corridor and came toward them. At sight of those backs, Tharn slid to a stop and turned to retrace his steps.

Again he halted. To his quick ears came sounds of footsteps from the hall he had just left. With retreat cut off from both sides, he had but one chance for escape.

Choosing at random one of several doors on either side of the corridor, Tharn pushed it open, and still keeping an eye on the men outside, slipped within a softly lighted room. After gently closing the door, he turned—to stare into the startled eyes of the princess Alurna!

Tharn's first thought was that the girl would cry out in terror at his sudden entrance. Before she could recover her wits he had grasped her about the waist with one arm, at the same time clapping a hand across her lips.

Alurna lay within the circle of that mighty arm, making no effort to free herself. She was desperately afraid, more afraid than she could remember before.

The cave-man found himself on the horns of a dilemma. He had no wish to slay a woman; indeed he knew he could not, no matter what the provocation. On the other hand, were he to free her, she could have the guards here within seconds.

Their eyes met. Tharn was surprised that all trace of fear was masked within the cool gray-green depths, although the rapid pounding of her heart told him she was frightened.

Revealed to him with the quick intuition of a wild creature was something of this girl's true nature. He sensed she could be coldly calculating; that neither qualm nor principle would keep her from furthering her own ends. That, given the chance, she would betray him, he never doubted; but something told him she would never be driven to a rash act through ungovernable hysteria alone.

He removed his hand from her mouth, but held it ready to silence her again.

"What," whispered Alurna, "do you want here?"

Tharn shook his head. Any discussion, now, would be pointless. He must go on. At the far end of the room was a large unbarred opening—a possible avenue of escape.

Hesitating no longer he released the girl, pushed her aside and made for the window.

Alurna, confident now that this nocturnal prowler meant her no harm, remained standing where he had left her. While awaiting his next move, she fell to studying him from across the room.

He was the embodiment of physical perfection; certainly the most beautifully formed male she had ever seen before. The smooth brown body bespoke of suppleness and the nimble agility of a cat, despite banded layers of iron muscles rippling beneath an unclouded skin.

The face, with its frank, grave eyes, impressed her as being both handsome and highly intelligent. There was an air of majestic nobility in his posture and the poise of his well-shaped head that would have aroused envy in the heart of any Sepharian.

A muffled knocking at the door startled her; but before she could respond, the Cro-Magnon slipped past her to lower the bar into place.

Again came the soft, insistent knock. Tharn stepped close beside the princess, pointed at the door and then to her lips, at the same time pressing the point of his knife gently against her side. The meaning was clear; she must send away, unwarned, whoever was outside.

"Who is there?" she called.

"Forgive me for disturbing you, princess," came a muffled reply, "but the man you warned us of is somewhere near here. Have you seen or heard anything more of him?"

Alurna paused for a second, weighing her chances. But the cave-man's cold gaze conquered the temptation.

"No," she said, "I have seen nothing more of him. Go now, that I may sleep."

Tharn heard the man outside move away. Satisfied that he had gained a brief respite from discovery, he returned to the window.

He pinched out the flaming wick in the dish of fat standing on a wooden bracket nearby, to prevent someone in the grounds below seeing him at the window. In the moonlight he could see several groups of warriors about the grounds—patrols, posted to prevent him from leaving the building. But Tharn had no intention of leaving until Dylara was free to go with him.

From the floor above, and not far to his left, there jutted out a tiny balcony, its slender stone columns topped with a balustrade of the same material. As Tharn's eyes lingered there, an idea popped suddenly into his mind.

After placing the bowl of grease on the floor, he tore the bracket from the wall and wrenched one of its supporting wooden rods away. This done, he tied one end of his grass rope to the exact center of the thick cylinder and returned to the window.

Holding the free end of the rope in one hand, he poised the length of wood, spear-fashion, aimed carefully, then launched it toward the stone supports of the balustrade above and to his left.

Like an arrow it sped up and out, to pass cleanly between two of the columns. Hauling in the slack, Tharn felt the rod catch lengthwise above him; and though he tugged with all the strength of his arms, the rope remained secure.

Without a backward glance, the cave-man swung into space, at the same time clambering hand over hand up the swinging strands. As his feet left the ledge, he heard the door of the girl's room fly open and her voice ring out.

The echo of that call had not faded as young Tharn closed a hand on the balcony's rail, pulled himself over and leaped through the window beyond.

The chamber he had entered was dimly lighted by the moon's rays. Its dense shadows might conceal a score of armed foes; but Tharn had no time to exercise caution. Three giant strides served to close the gap between window and doorway. To find the latch required only an instant; and slowly, lest the door squeak a protest, he swung it back sufficiently to look out into the corridor. Finding it empty of life, he stepped out, gently closing the door behind him.

To his right, a short distance down the hall, were two great doors, both closed; to his left, a long stretch of gallery with doors on either side. The sight of these latter held Tharn's attention, for all were barred *from the outside*. Behind one of those barred entrances, he reasoned, might be Dylara.

Stepping quietly to the first he pressed an ear to the crack. Hearing nothing, he lifted the bar with infinite care and looked in.

The room beyond was deserted. He shut the door, replaced the plank and went on to the next. It, too, was empty.

Working his way gradually forward, he had covered perhaps half the hallway and was in the act of lifting another bar from its catches, when the double doors at the far end of the gallery were thrown open and a swarm of soldiers came racing through. Before Tharn could attempt to find cover, he had been seen, and with shouts of satisfaction the men ran toward him.

Realizing he was greatly outnumbered, the man of the caves turned to flee; but to his consternation another group of Sepharians appeared at

the corridor's opposite end and, warned by the shouts of their fellows, had caught sight of the giant intruder.

Tharn knew he was trapped! To enter one of the cubicles he had been searching would mean hopeless imprisonment. Once he was within, the enemy had only to slip the bar into place.

It appeared his lone chance for freedom was to cut a way through a living wall of armed men. Once past them, Tharn felt confident they could not overtake him.

Like two angry waves, the Sepharians hurled themselves on the lone Cro-Magnon. But the steel muscles and incredible agility that had brought their owner through encounters with savage dwellers of jungle and plain were not to be so easily subdued as Sephar's warriors had supposed.

Tharn sprang to meet them, charging full into their midst. Catching the nearest foeman about the waist, the cave-man swung him bodily from the floor and hurled him, a screaming projectile of fear, into the faces of his companions.

Four went down beneath the terrific impact; but before Tharn could follow up this momentary advantage, a swiftly descending club caught him a glancing blow behind one ear.

With a roar of fury the cave-youth wheeled and plunged his knife into the breast of the club-wielder; then seizing that weapon from the fingers of the dying man, swung it in a savage arc, splitting the skulls of three foes and transforming the weighty bludgeon into a handful of splinters.

Upon witnessing this superhuman feat, the balance of the Sepharians drew back in awe. Tharn, ringed about by a full score of enemies, their faces drawn and tense, stopped suddenly, caught up a stray club and once more charged.

For a moment it appeared the thin line of men would give way before that impetuous attack. The one directly in Tharn's path sought to dodge aside; but mighty fingers caught him about the neck, squeezed with irresistible force, and the man dropped, his vertebrae splintered.

Suddenly Tharn's legs were buckled by the combined thrust of three pairs of arms. As he fell backward, a club dealt his head a frightful blow; a great burst of fire seemed to sear his eyes—then blackness came as consciousness left him.

The sounds of struggling bodies, punctuated with screams of rage and anguish, awakened Dylara with a start. For a second she was uncertain

from whence the bedlam came; then she leaped from the bed and ran to the closed door.

From the noise that reached her, she judged some wild beast had been trapped in the corridor outside; surely no human throat could have formed the fearsome snarls and growls coming to her ears.

Soon she caught the sound of a blow, heavier than the others, followed by deep silence, broken only by labored breathing of many men.

What could it have meant? Had a slave—perhaps one of her own race—attempted an escape? Or had some great animal invaded this lair of man while searching for food?

The thought never came to her that it might have been Tharn surprised outside her door. So positive was she that the cave-man had died beneath arrow and club, that she did not dream she had been on the verge of rescue.

It was from her door that Tharn had been lifting the bar when attacked.

Chapter 6

Katon

A painful sensation in one shoulder brought full consciousness to Tharn, and opening his eyes he stared blankly up into the face of a Sepharian warrior. Noticing Tharn was awake, the man lowered the spear point with which he had been prodding the captive.

"So—you are alive, after all!" exclaimed the Sepharian. "You have a hard head, my savage friend; I thought they had beaten it in for you, last night."

The speaker's thin sharp face reminded the cave-man of Toa, the hawk. Tharn's lips curled with open contempt.

"The arms of your men are weak," he said mockingly. "It took many of them to overcome me."

An angry red came into the man's cheeks. "They meant to take you alive," he snapped. "Try to escape and you will find a quick death." He turned on his heel and strode away.

Tharn sat up and glanced about. It was evident he was in some subterranean spot; the air was cool and slightly damp, and there was that musty odor found only beneath the earth's surface. High up in one wall he made out an immense grating of some sort outlined against an early morning sky.

As the light grew stronger he saw the room to be tremendous. He noticed now that he was not alone; near the far wall lay a full score of sleeping men—many of them apparently cave-men like himself.

The sound of feet to his left attracted Tharn. He saw several men enter the cell through the room's single door, and place huge platters of meat on the several long tables near one wall. Noticing the sleeping men were rousing and taking stools about those tables, Tharn got to his feet and, ignoring their curious stares, joined them there.

Lowering his weight onto one of the three-legged stools, Tharn dipped into one of the great platters a neighbor had pushed toward him. As he ate, he looked about at the faces of his fellow prisoners.

They were an ill-assorted lot, most of them Sepharians, the balance men of his own kind. The former, without exception, seemed to carry themselves with the swaggering truculence of the true adventurer; the latter seemed sullen and aloof, like caged animals.

Among them all, however, was one who stood out in vivid contrast. Seated almost directly across from Tharn was a tall muscular Sepharian with a strong face and a pair of the bluest eyes Tharn had ever seen. His well-proportioned body, tanned almost to blackness, had much of the regal bearing that graced the cave-man's own.

Catching Tharn's eye, the stranger smiled suddenly, and unconsciously Tharn smiled in return. Thus encouraged, the Sepharian leaned forward and said:

"How did they happen to catch you?"

Those were the first actually friendly words Tharn had heard since the night he had left his own caves. For a moment he hesitated to answer, uncertain of the motive behind the other's interest.

"I was hunting for someone," he said finally.

The blue eyes widened a bit. "You mean they found you *in* Sephar?"

"If, by Sephar, you mean the strange caves inside the high cliff—yes."

The Sepharian shook his head in honest tribute. "But why did you come here? You must have known they would get you sooner or later."

"They have my mate here," Tharn explained briefly. "I came to get her."

"And now they have you both!"

Tharn's eyes narrowed and his jaw tightened. "They will not keep us," he said simply.

The other smiled a little. "I am Katon," he said, after a slight pause. "Who are you?"

Tharn told him, and the conversation lapsed for a while.

Meanwhile, a guard had entered the great room and approached Vulcar, the one who had reminded Tharn of Toa, the hawk. The two men spoke together for a few moments, then the captain of the guards came up behind Tharn and dropped a hand roughly on the cave-man's shoulder.

Tharn, in the midst of strangers, the memory of last night's battle still fresh in his mind, acted instinctively.

Bounding from his stool, he whirled on the startled Vulcar. Before the stupefied captain could lift a hand in defense, he found himself flat on

his back, two knees pinning his shoulders to the floor, while iron fingers were shutting off his breath.

The entire body of prisoners and attendants was thrown into confusion. One of the guards leaped to the side of the cave-man and would have driven a spear into his back had not Katon vaulted the table and shoved him sprawling.

As though by signal, the prisoners threw themselves upon the handful of guards, and the room became a seething inferno of flailing arms and threshing legs, the four walls echoing muffled shouts, screams, curses.

Unmindful of the tumult about him, Katon knelt beside Tharn and the now weakly struggling Vulcar. Grasping the Cro-Magnon's steel-thewed wrists, he tugged with all his more than ordinary strength to loosen the awful grip.

"Stop it, Tharn!" he panted. "Let go! If he dies they will kill you!"

Slowly the red mist of anger faded as Katon's words reached the savage brain; and slowly, almost regretfully, Tharn obeyed.

As he rose from the floor and stepped back, a large group of guards broke into the room and joined the fight between attendants and prisoners. With lusty swings of spear shafts the newcomers beat the battling captives into a semblance of order against one wall.

As for Vulcar—he lay where Tharn had left him, tortured lungs sucking air in great gulps as the livid hue of his face gradually faded. Vulcar had been very near to death.

Finally he got shakily to his feet, assisted by two of his men. For a full minute he could not speak as he swayed there, rubbing at the angry red welts where Tharn's merciless fingers had closed.

"Seize that madman!" he croaked at last; "seize and tie him! A few touches of the whip will teach him how to act!"

Before the hesitant warriors could act, Katon had stepped into the breach.

"Wait, Vulcar," he pleaded. "Do not have him whipped. The man is a barbarian; he believed you had attacked him, and acted so. Had he stopped to think, he would not have dared raise a hand against the mightiest fighter in all Sephar."

Vulcar was shrewd enough to see that Katon had made it possible for him to save face before the others without chancing another battle. He realized the cave-man would resist an attempt to punish him, and such resistance might inflame the prisoners anew.

"Perhaps you are right, Katon," he admitted reluctantly. "But I shall not be so lenient if it happens again."

Tharn, listening, shrugged indifferently. The incident was closed as far as he was concerned, and Vulcar's thinly veiled threat did not impress him.

"I was about to tell your wild friend," the captain continued, "that Urim has sent word he is to be brought before him at once. Perhaps you had better come along, Katon; you seem to be the only one able to control him."

The three men crossed the huge cell, passed through the guarded doorway and went up a long ramp to the first floor of the palace. There they turned left and moved along a narrow corridor until stopped by a heavy door. Vulcar rapped on this with his knife hilt, it opened from the opposite side and they stepped through.

What met the cave-man's eyes caused him to catch his breath, so unusual did it appear to one who had known nothing more elaborate than simple caves and tangled fastness of jungle and forest.

Here was a great, high-ceilinged room, well-filled with warriors, citizens, slaves—even a sprinkling of women—all grouped about a low wooden frustum, its four sides consisting of steps. On the flattened apex stood a large chair, complete with arm-rests and towering back. Here sat the dignified figure of Urim, ruler of Sephar.

As Tharn and his companions entered, all conversation ceased, every eye turned toward them, and there was a great craning of necks. Some of those present had heard details of the cave-man's capture—details that had lost nothing in the telling. His god-like figure, the rippling sinews beneath a sun-bronzed skin, the primitive loin-cloth of panther hide—all drew forth murmurs of admiration.

As for Tharn—he strode toward the elevated throne with all of Sadu's majestic fearlessness. His level gray eyes bored into those of the man above him, and despite himself, Urim stiffened under their challenge.

When they had halted, Urim spoke, addressing his words to Vulcar.

"Is this the prowler you captured in the slave quarters?" he asked, indicating Tharn.

"It is, O Urim."

The ruler's eyes shifted to the stiffly erect figure of Katon. "Why have you brought this man?" he demanded.

"The prisoner has been troublesome," explained Vulcar. "Since Katon seems able to manage him, I brought him along."

Urim's face lost some of its good nature. "Well, Katon," he said coldly, "I have not forgotten you. Do you find the pits more to your taste than being in charge of the quarry slaves?"

Katon's face was without expression. "Both places have their good points, O Urim," he replied evenly.

Urim scowled. "Let me remind you the Games are not far away. I doubt that you will find many good points there—unless they be fang points!"

He turned back to Tharn. "What were you seeking in Sephar, forest-man?"

"I came here for my mate," Tharn said briefly.

"Your mate?"

"Yes. She was taken by your men three suns ago not far from here."

Urim looked questioningly at Vulcar. "He must mean the girl you brought in a few days ago. I understood the man with her had been slain."

"This is the one," admitted Vulcar. "There is an arrow wound—a fresh one—in his side. When we took the girl, the man with her was struck by an arrow. But we thought he had died from a blow from one of our clubs; it seems impossible that he has survived its force."

For several minutes the ruler of Sephar sat lost in thought, his eyes on the giant Cro-Magnon. This wild man's fate was in his hands, and his alone. As a slave the man would make an excellent guard or warrior—that is, were he tractable, amenable to discipline. Yet something warned him this man would recognize no authority or law beyond his own. Such a slave would only stir up unrest, perhaps open rebellion among his fellows.

And so Urim made his decision.

"Confine him to the pits, Vulcar," he commanded in dismissal. "He is to take part in the Games."

Vulcar led them out. A few moments later the two prisoners were standing within the mammoth dungeon, watching silently as the great door swung shut, hearing the heavy bars fall into place.

Hardly had Tharn left the throne-room when Dylara and Nada entered, accompanied by two guards.

An amazing transformation had been made in the appearance of Majok's daughter. The stained animal skin, that once had afforded an inadequate covering, was gone—replaced by a sleeveless tunic that fell

from throat to knees. Her luxuriant curls of deep brown were neatly drawn behind her ears; on her feet were strong sandals of leather.

She hesitated slightly at sight of many strange faces, the serried ranks of motionless warriors about Urim's elevated throne, and, finally, the lordly figure of Urim, himself.

Regaining confidence, she walked slowly through the press of Sephari-ans as they cleared a pathway to the foot of Urim's chair.

Both women and their escorts halted a few paces short of the steps. Three heads were humbly lowered; Dylara alone gazed artlessly up at the monarch.

Urim hid his smile with a casual hand. Were all cave-people so difficult to impress? This savage girl was a beauty, though; the other women of the room certainly suffered by comparison. By the God! If there were not a hundred suitors at her heels before long he would have missed his guess. Even old Uglor, that confirmed misogynist, was staring at her, his heart in his eyes!

"Is this girl in your care, Nada?" he asked.

"She is, O Urim."

"She understands nothing of our customs?"

"That is true."

"She will be of no use, then," observed Urim, "until she has learned them. I think it would be best to keep her apart from the other slaves until then.

"You, Nada, shall teach her our ways; you are excused from other duties. See that she is taught to give service as a hand-maiden—she is far too beautiful for harder tasks. When she has learned all that you can teach her, let me know and I shall see to it that she has a kind mistress."

Nada could not hide her gratitude. It was clear that Urim had taken an interest in the new slave-girl, and it gladdened the older woman's heart to know Dylara's lot was to be an easy one.

Their interview ended, the two women were about to leave when the door opened to admit Jotan, Tamar and Javan.

Jotan, slightly in the lead, halted directly in front of Dylara. Indifferent to all else, he gazed deeply into the startled eyes of the cave-girl.

Dylara felt her cheeks grow warm under the unmistakable message in the man's eyes. She was conscious, in a peculiar detached way, of a strange, disturbing fascination. Somehow she knew this declaration was coming from deep within the heart of the square-faced young warrior; that the love he professed so silently was honest and complete.

Tamar nudged Javan sharply with an indignant elbow. "Look at him!" he growled under his breath. "There stands our friend—staring at a barbarian wench as though she were a nobleman's daughter! We've got to do something about this, Javan."

There was a dreamy expression in Javan's eyes. "She *is* beautiful, at that," he whispered. "Maybe we—"

His voice trailed off as one of the escorting guards, impatient at the delay, took Dylara by one arm and urged her on.

The movement brought realization of their surroundings to both the man and the woman. Jotan stepped aside to let them pass, his face expressionless.

Dylara and Nada walked slowly along the corridor between the two guards. The girl seemed subdued, deep in thought. Nada, watching her covertly, said:

"He loves you, Dylara."

The cave-girl nodded. "I know... . Who is he, Nada? I'm certain he's never seen me before. Do men fall in love so quickly?"

Her companion smiled. "They have been known to," she observed drily. "He is Jotan, the son of a nobleman of Ammad. He has been in Sephar only a day or two."

"I like him," Dylara said. "You must tell me more about him."

Nada glanced sharply at the girl. "I know only what is told by palace slaves and guards. Such tales are not always true."

The guards stopped before the door of the room where Dylara had spent the night before. Nada said, "This is where we are to stay until Urim is ready to give you to some woman of the court."

As the door closed behind them, she added: "They will bring us food, shortly. While we eat, I shall tell you all I can about Sephar and Ammad ... and Jotan."

Chapter 7

Woman Against Woman

As the door closed behind Tharn and Katon, the former noticed that, but for themselves, the great cell was empty of life.

"Where are the others?" he asked, as they sat down on a pile of skins near one wall.

"In the arena, I suppose," Katon replied. "We must have exercise in the open air almost daily if we are to be in condition to put up a good fight during the Games."

"Just what are these 'Games,' Katon? From what I could make out, both of us are to take part in them."

"Shortly before each rainy season," Katon said, "sacrificial Games are held in honor of the God-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken-Aloud. These Games consist of battles between men, and between men and beasts. At times animals alone fight, and hundreds die.

"Each succeeding day the victors of the day before are pitted against one another, until, on the last day, only one is left alive. That one, whether man or beast, is acclaimed as favorite of the God and is set free. Always, however, that one is an animal; never in Game history has a man survived. And that, my friend, is what we face."

Tharn shrugged, unimpressed. "Perhaps not. We may escape before then."

Katon shook his head. "No, Tharn. Always we are either locked in here or remain under the watchful eyes of many warriors during exercise periods in the arena.

"No, there is no escape—unless you can overcome every life-loving fighting man and half-starved beast of the Games."

He looked up in time to catch the slight smile on Tharn's lips. No shadow of fear, no hint of concern clouded the cave-man's calm gray eyes. Limitless self-confidence, backed by superhuman strength and nerves of granite, had rendered impotent the ominous note in Katon's words.

The Sepharian felt a bit exasperated. What was the use of warning this headstrong wild-man of danger if danger meant nothing to him?

"Don't you understand?" he exclaimed. "The chance of either of us surviving the Games is so small that we may as well forget it."

Tharn's smile widened. "We are not dead yet. Much can happen before the Games begin. The rainy season is almost a moon away."

Katon gave it up. One could not make the blind see, nor the deaf hear. This barbarian would lose his smile when they put him in the arena with a hungry lion!

Tharn, seeking to change the subject, said, "I saw that this man, Urim, hates you, Katon. Is it because of him that you are here?"

There was a wry twist to Katon's lips. "Urim and I were once great friends. I came to Sephar from Huxla, a city of Ammad, where my father is ruler. Upon arriving here, I entered Urim's service as a common warrior. During a hunting trip, I saved him from being mauled by a wounded lion. In gratitude he put me in charge of Sephar's quarries—a position much sought after by Sepharian nobles.

"And then I met a girl—the daughter of a nobleman. She was very beautiful; and before long we were in love."

Katon seemed to have forgotten Tharn's presence. His speech was slow, his words toneless and deliberate. The cave-man was quick to sense the other's mental suffering as he recounted a painful chapter of his life.

"As it turned out," Katon continued, "Urim, himself, desired this girl and was planning to make her Sephar's queen. When he learned that she loved me, his anger was very great, and one night I was taken from my bed and put here."

His voice took on a deeper note. "The next morning they called to take the girl to Urim. They found her on the floor of her room, dead, a knife driven into her heart. She had taken her own life."

The two men talked on, while the time slipped by. Finally their conversation turned to religion as accepted by the Sepharians. Tharn found his friend's explanation difficult to understand; a creed that allowed a single god both to threaten and defend his worshippers was far beyond his simple direct way of thinking.

One part of Katon's remarks on religion did interest him, however. This concerned the friction between Urim and Pryak, high priest in Sephar of the God-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken-Aloud. Of this, Katon offered the following:

"Pryak is as cruel and tyrannical as Urim is kind and just. Many rites and ceremonies introduced by the high priest have so angered the king that he has banned their practice—a move widening the rift between the two men.

"Twice, I am told, they have quarreled openly; but Urim's warriors and followers so outnumber those of Pryak, that the priest dares not persist. By doing so he might plunge the entire city into civil war; for much of Sephar would flock to Pryak's side, since he is the true representative of our god.

"Each passing day, however, brings the tension nearer a breaking point. Pryak is crafty and wise and very proud. Some day he will seek to overthrow Urim and put a more friendly ruler in his place. Even Pryak, himself, may take the throne. It would not be the first time in our history a high priest became king!"

The entrance of the balance of the prisoners ended their conversation at this point. After the noon meal was eaten the men lay down on their beds to rest.

Tharn found sleep hard to find. Flat on his back he lay, eyes fixed unseeingly on the grill-work far above him, while his mind reviewed the remarkable adventures that had befallen him since he had set out on a mission of vengeance.

How long ago it seemed, now, since he had taken up the trail of those who had attacked his people! And now he was a prisoner of a race whose very existence had been undreamed of a few suns ago. A captive, too, was the girl who had been so abruptly thrust into his life, bringing with her the beauty and pangs of love.

Dylara! Where was she now? Did she believe him dead, a victim of arrow and club? Had she given up all hope of ever seeing again her father and the caves of Majok, to accept tamely the life of a slave?

In spite of having known her only for a short time, he doubted this. There was too much of the haughty pride of a born princess in her to submit tamely to such a fate. Given the chance she would brave the perils of jungle and plain in an effort to locate her own tribe.

As he lay there, motionless, watching sunlight streaming through the opening overhead, the resolve grew strong within him to win Dylara's freedom, and his, from this strange place and its stranger inhabitants. They had him now—but it would take more than a few doors and walls to keep him.

When the door had closed behind Dylara and Nada, Jotan turned to his two companions. He found them staring at him reproachfully.

"And now," Tamer said bitingly, "now that half of Sephar knows you are in love with a slave-girl, perhaps we can pay our respects to Urim, whom we have kept waiting."

Jotan was suddenly conscious of the curious eyes of men and women. Beyond the crowd of Sepharians was Urim on his elevated chair, peering over the heads between him and the three men near the door.

Jotan chuckled a little. "For her I would keep many kings waiting," he said in a low voice. "But you are right, of course. Come."

The three men moved through the crowd. Jotan's arrogant bearing and handsome face drew forth almost as many whispered comments as had the appearance of Tharn earlier that morning.

At sight of the three visitors, Urim's florid countenance lighted up with pleasure; and half-rising, he called to them.

"You are welcome, noble guests from Ammad!" he cried. "I had hoped you would come here, this morning. Come closer; there are many here who have asked to meet you."

When they had reached the frustum's base, Urim descended and, in turn, presented various members of his retinue. Introductions were acknowledged, and there was much small talk.

Jotan's interest in the somewhat lengthy ceremony was purely mechanical. His thoughts were with the cave-princess he had met at the door; in fact, he had thought of little else since he had first seen her on the day before. His determination to ask Urim for her had been strengthened by the chance meeting, and he resolved to wait no longer; as soon as these introductions were finished, he would make known to Urim his wishes.

As he stood there, head and shoulders above the throng about him, a pair of flashing gray-green eyes watched him intently, eyes that had burned angrily as they observed the meeting between him and the cave-girl. They were the eyes of the princess Alurna, who, with her hand-maiden, Anela, had come into the room by another entrance at the very moment Jotan had barred Dylara's path. Unobserved, she had witnessed the entire incident, and her hatred for the lovely captive was intensified a hundred-fold thereby.

Alurna had slept but little during the night before. After Tharn had vanished through her window, she had gone back to bed—but not to sleep. She could not banish thoughts of Jotan; she could not close out the memory of those flint-like blue eyes that could soften so wonderfully when their owner smiled.

And so, near morning, she had finally admitted to herself that she loved this broad-shouldered visitor from a distant land. Her admission brought with it no peace of mind; for, she told herself furiously, it would have been bad enough to love anyone; but to feel so toward a man who had eyes only for another—and a savage, at that!—was more than she could bear. Utterly miserable, she bit her lips to force back her tears and glowered resentfully at the unsuspecting Jotan.

Introductions completed, Urim returned to his chair and his duties. The others broke up into little groups; some attending closely the details of various petitions and demands of Sephar's citizens; others conversing among themselves and paying no heed to what went on about them.

Tamar, Javan and Jotan formed one of these latter groups, having withdrawn to some distance from the throne itself, at Jotan's whispered request.

Alurna saw the three men move apart from the rest.

"Quick, Anela," she murmured, grasping the girl's arm, "get close enough to those three to hear what they say. Don't let them suspect you are listening. Go!"

Anela nodded, and slipped away through the crowd... .

"What now?" asked Tamar, eyeing Jotan's set face narrowly.

Jotan was watching the gradually thinning knot of Sepharians at the foot of the throne. He said:

"When Urim has finished there, I shall make my request of him. Until then we may as well wait here."

Tamar scowled; then suddenly he smiled. "Listen, Jotan," he said rapidly, "let it go for a few days. After all, you want to be sure of a thing like this. Then, if you still want her—why—take her. It won't be necessary to go about telling everyone she is to be your mate. Javan and I can arrange to get her for you without it being known you are interested. Then, after you've had her for a while, if you still feel the same way, let it be known she is your mate. I've an idea, though, that it will never get that far. You'll learn that—"

Tamar saw the gleam in Jotan's eye, gulped, and was silent.

For a long moment Jotan stared at his friend, his expression one of mixed pity and scorn. Then, with cool deliberateness, he turned and started toward the throne.

"Wait, Jotan!" Tamar stepped in front of him. "I was wrong. I shouldn't have said that. I see how it is, now, and I'll help you all I can. But at least do this: Wait until you can speak to Urim alone. Tonight, after the

evening meal, draw Urim to one side and make your request—not while all Sephar is watching you."

Tamar's distress was so genuine that Jotan stopped. After all, it meant the difference of only a few hours; if such a concession would appease his friend it would be a small price to pay.

"Very well, Tamar," he agreed. "I will wait until then."

None of the three noticed a figure detach itself from the fringe of the crowd nearest them and hurry away.

When the eavesdropping slave girl reached Alurna's side, the princess drew her into a deserted corridor outside the room.

"What were they saying, Anela?" she asked impatiently.

"The handsome one spoke of asking your father for someone—a woman. One of the others sought to change his mind, but he would not listen."

Such a soul-searing flame of hate went through Alurna that her heart seemed to wither in its heat. At sight of her mistress' expression Anela shrank away in terror.

"Did he say when he intends asking for this woman?"

Anela swallowed. "Tonight," she faltered, "—after the evening meal."

For a moment Alurna stood there in thought. Then, dismissing the girl with a gesture, she turned and strode rapidly along the corridor, away from the audience hall.

Her head pounded with jumbled thoughts. Over and over she told herself that Jotan should never have the golden-skinned cave-girl. There were ways to prevent it; no slave could have the man Alurna wanted!

The princess went directly to her own apartment. Closing and bolting her door, she sank wearily onto the wide bed. With an arm across her eyes, she lay down, thinking bitter thoughts and shaping many plans to prevent Jotan from having the girl he desired. Each plan, however, was discarded in turn as being either too difficult to accomplish or too liable to failure.

How? How? How? Ask her father to refuse Jotan's request? No; that would bring to light facts she preferred kept hidden. Have her killed? Too dangerous. If Urim ever discovered who was responsible she would pay a terrible price.

And then out of nowhere came her answer. Alurna rolled over and sat up as the idea took shape in her mind.

"Anela!" she called.

Immediately someone tried the door, and finding it locked, rapped timidly.

Alurna rose and admitted the still apprehensive girl.

"Listen to me closely, Anela," commanded the princess, closing the door. "Do you know Meltor?"

Anela was surprised. "Why—yes. He is one of the guards stationed at the palace entrance."

"Tell him," the princess said crisply, "to come here at once."

The slave-girl started to say something, reconsidered, and went out. A few minutes later she was back, followed by a tall slender young man, whose dark expressionless face bore a long livid scar across one cheek.

"Leave us, Anela," Alurna said softly ... "Sit down, Meltor."

The man lowered himself stiffly on the edge of a stool and looked at Urim's daughter with steady eyes. His face might as well have been masked, so completely was it lacking in expression.

"Meltor," said the princess, "I have kept a secret of yours for many moons—a secret that, were I to divulge it to a certain nobleman, would cost you your life. Am I right?"

A shadow of uneasiness crossed the warrior's face.

"Did the daughter of Urim," he said dryly, "summon me here that I might be reminded of something best forgotten?"

Alurna smiled. It was not a nice smile. "The nobleman, too, would like to forget. But he cannot—until his daughter is avenged."

Meltor said nothing.

"It is not a secret to remember," Alurna said smoothly. "I want very much to forget it. And if you will help me, Meltor, I promise never again to remind you of it."

"What is it you want me to do?"

The princess bent forward. "Deep within the jungle beyond the Gate of the Setting Sun, is an old abandoned house of stone. It was there Rydob, the hermit, lived for uncounted years. Do you know the place?"

The young warrior nodded. "Yes, I know where it is. Nobody goes there since Rydob's bones were found on his own door-step."

"Yes," Alurna said contemptuously. "They fear Rydob more after his death than when he lived. I hope you are different, Meltor."

The man flushed. "I am not afraid, daughter of Urim."

"Good! I knew I could count on you. Now listen to me carefully; there must be no mistakes."

For half an hour the princess spoke steadily. The guard listened attentively, interrupting now and then to ask questions; twice he offered suggestions.

When Alurna had finished, Meltor remained silent for a few minutes, mentally reviewing the plan's details. The girl watched him with narrowed eyes.

"I shall need help," he said at last. "I have no right to enter the slave quarters."

Alurna nodded. "I shall leave that up to you. You are known to the guards there; find one you can trust and enlist his aid. Promise him much, but tell him no more than is necessary."

Meltor got to his feet. His face had resumed its habitual lack of expression.

"Your orders shall be carried out, daughter of Urim," he said flatly. "I will report to you, here, when I have finished."

The door closed behind him.

Chapter 8

Abduction

The humid heat of early afternoon hung in shimmering waves over Sephar's walls and buildings of stone. Except for an occasional perspiring warrior or slave, hurrying on some urgent mission, the broad avenues were quite deserted.

In a palace wing containing the female slave quarters, Dylara and Nada were together. The daughter of Majok lay stretched at full length on her bed, hands locked beneath her head, drowsily watching a patch of sunlight near the ceiling. Nada nodded sleepily on a low stool near the bed.

Dylara yawned audibly to break the silence. She rolled over and touched the older woman on one arm.

"I don't want to sleep, Nada," she protested. "Let's talk awhile. You promised to tell me about him—Jotan, I mean. I keep thinking about him—how he acted, staring at me the way he did."

Nada smiled, and patted the hand on her arm. She had been thinking of her only son—of him whom she had last seen as a little boy. She had wanted to overcome a strange reluctance to question Dylara about him; what he had been like, if he was big like his father ... little things that meant much to a mother.

"I will do the best I can," she said. "What I say will be only what is repeated among the slaves and guards."

"Jotan's home is in Ammad—about which I have already told you. His father is a nobleman there—one of the most powerful and influential men in that country. Jotan is well liked by all who know him; they say his followers would die in his service and count themselves honored."

"I think I can understand that," said Dylara dreamily. "There is something about him that takes hold of you—awakens your imagination. Many girls must care a great deal for him."

Nada glanced sharply at her, and was on the point of making some comment, when there came a sudden brief rap at the closed door.

"I wonder who that can be," she said, frowning. Rising, she crossed to the door and drew it open.

A guard in a grayish-white tunic stood at the threshold. Behind him, half-concealed by the shadows of the hall, was a second man.

"Urim," said the guard gruffly, "wishes the slave-girl Dylara brought to him at once."

For some reason this unexpected summons alarmed Nada. "I do not understand. What does he want of her?"

"I forgot to ask him!" retorted the guard sarcastically. He beckoned to Dylara. "Come; I have no time to waste."

The cave-girl approached uneasily, affected more by Nada's concern than the prospect of being brought before Urim.

The guard stepped aside to let her pass, then turned to leave.

"Wait!" Nada cried. "I am going with you."

The man scowled. "I was not told to bring you," he snapped. "You stay here." He went out, slamming the door.

Dylara, a man at either side, was led down the long corridor and through the double doorway. There they paused while the two men held a brief conversation in whispers too low for the girl to make out their words.

And then the second man approached and took hold of her arm. "You are to come with me," he said. "I am to take you to Urim."

Dylara's skin crawled under the contact. She jerked away. "I do not need to be held."

The dim light hid the man's angry face. "Slaves do as they are told," he reminded her coldly. "Do not forget that."

Grasping her arm roughly, he strode along the hall, the girl beside him. Shortly afterward they descended the great staircase to the main floor of the palace.

They met no one on the way, the intense heat having sent the palace inhabitants to their beds to rest until early evening.

To Dylara's mingled surprise and alarm, her escort moved straight to the great doorway leading to the palace grounds. Four guards lounging outside the entrance watched them pass, nodding briefly to the man with her.

They turned into one of the wide streets that led to the city's outer wall.

Dylara fought down a wave of panic. "Where are you taking me?"

The man was quick to sense her fear. He tightened his hold on her arm.

"To Urim," he replied briefly.

"Where is he?"

The Sepharian turned his head and frowned at her. For the first time Dylara noticed the long white scar across his cheek.

"You ask too many questions," he said roughly. "Now keep them to yourself."

A cold hand seemed to close about the girl's heart. She knew, now, that Urim had not sent for her; that she was being led into some horrible danger. Worst of all, there seemed no way to prevent this man from doing as he pleased. The street was deserted; and even should someone appear, an appeal for help would probably be useless.

Soon they reached one of the huge gateways in the wall about Sephar. The warrior drew Dylara to a halt as two guards sauntered in their direction.

"Well, Meltor," said one, a tall, languid man of middle age, "what are you doing out in this heat? And with a girl, too; up to your old tricks, I suppose."

Meltor smiled without humor. "This is something else. If I may speak with you privately... ."

Dylara, under the watchful eye of the second guard, watched them step away a few paces and engage in a whispered colloquy. Meltor did most of the talking, speaking earnestly and at length. The other nodded from time to time, appearing properly impressed. Once or twice he glanced with interest at the girl.

Meltor had evidently gained his point. He approached Dylara, now, a triumphant curl at the corners of his mouth.

"We must hurry," was all he said. Together the man and the girl passed through the twin gates.

Beyond the open ground Dylara could see the grim forest rising dark and forbidding against the sky. And yet she wondered if it was more to be feared than the city of stone behind them. Danger lurked in the jungle—ah, yes; but it was danger both direct and elemental—not hidden beneath hypocrisy and artifice.

Why had she been taken from Sephar? She was certain this man was not acting in his own behalf; someone else was behind it all—someone who did not want others to know. It could not be Urim. Urim was chief; he need not hide his activities from anybody. Yet who else could it be?

Suddenly a great light burst upon her. Jotan! He was responsible—it could be no other! Because she belonged to Urim he had been forced to have her stolen from the palace and taken to some out-of-the-way spot that he might be with her. This was the answer—the only answer!

Belief became certainty; and with it came indecision. A strange mixture of dread and exultation came over her. Her heart beat faster at thought of meeting the man who had aroused within her an emotion as yet unfathomable. But matters were being brought to a head much too quickly to suit her—she needed more time.

Unconsciously she slowed her steps, pulling back at the grip on her arm. They were already within the jungle, hidden from Sephar by a bend of the trail underfoot.

Meltor, satisfied that the girl would accompany him peaceably, had relaxed his hold.

Suddenly Dylara twisted free, and before the surprised warrior could interfere, she whirled about and dashed away in the opposite direction.

Meltor wheeled and took up the chase, crying out hoarsely for her to stop. But the rage in his voice only spurred on the girl to greater effort.

Along the trail they raced, a few yards apart, their sandaled feet kicking up little puffs of dust and powdered vegetation. The nimble-footed girl was gradually increasing her lead, seeking to gain the bend in the trail with enough time for concealment before Meltor could catch sight of her again.

And then, without warning, something caught at her ankle, plunging her headlong to the ground with terrific force. Half-stunned, she made a weak effort to regain her feet, when a strong hand grasped her roughly by an arm and jerked her upright.

The rage-distorted face of Meltor swam hazily before her. She blinked rapidly in an effort to dispel the fog.

"You little fool!" The words seemed to come to her from across a great distance. "Try that again, and I'll—"

There sounded a sharp ringing "crack," and Dylara staggered back, her left cheek flaming from the force of an open-handed blow.

The slap transformed the girl from a dazed, bewildered child into an infuriated tigress; and for the next few moments Meltor had all he could do to keep from being badly mauled.

Exhausted, she finally sank to her knees and burst into a storm of tears. Meltor stood by, more or less winded himself, fingering a long scratch alongside his nose, waiting for the girl to regain composure.

At last he pulled her to her feet, and urged her along the path into the west. Dylara, her once spotless tunic grimy and torn, accompanied him docilely now, too weary to resist. She knew by this time that Jotan had nothing to do with her abduction; no hireling of his would dare handle her so roughly.

An hour later they entered a small clearing, deep in the heart of the jungle. In the center of the open ground stood a rambling, one-storied building of gray stone, weather-beaten and unkempt, its unprotected windows staring vacantly like the dull lifeless eyes of a corpse. Despite the flame-tipped rays of the mid-afternoon sun which flooded the clearing, Dylara shivered, conscious of the miasmatic atmosphere of the place.

Nor was Meltor entirely unaffected by the eerie aspect of dead Rydob's former residence. Details of stories he had heard about the old hermit came to him now, and he caught himself glancing nervously about.

A short series of stone steps led to the half open door. A profusion of vines and creepers had sprung up unchecked, partially covering the stairway. Meltor cautiously kicked the vegetation away, aware it might be the hiding place of little Sleeza, the snake—Sleeza, whose bite meant a lingering, painful death.

Suddenly the man jumped back, voicing a yell of terror, and almost upsetting Dylara. His prodding foot had torn away a curtain of foliage, disclosing the bleached skeleton of a man, stretched out on one of the steps. The skull had rolled a few paces away, and lay there grinning malevolently up at them.

Dylara shuddered, shrank back. She had seen the bones of man before; but under present conditions and surroundings the gleaming skeleton seemed a horrible prophecy of her own fate.

"Who could it have been?" she asked in an awed whisper.

Meltor forced a grin. He had managed to regain control of his shattered nerves.

"Old Rydob, the hermit," he replied. "And no prettier in death than he was in life. Some say he was the brother of Pryak, the high priest."

Taking Dylara by the elbow, he urged her past the pile of bones and over the threshold.

They came into a huge, high-ceilinged room, well-lighted by the sun. From its appearance the girl judged that Rydob had spent most of his time here; the ruins of a bed stood in one corner, while a large table in the center of the room held a jumbled collection of stone dishes and

bowls. Several tunics, rotten with mildew, hung across one of the three chairs about the table.

And over everything was a thick layer of dust and cobwebs and the droppings of countless rodents.

Meltor kicked over two of the stools to clear them of dust, replaced them, then cleared the table top in the same way.

"Sit there," he said, pointing to one of the stools.

Dylara obeyed without a word, watching the man seat himself across the table from her.

There followed a period of silence. Thus far, Meltor had carried out his plan to the letter. But now, faced with the unpleasant part of his task, he was beginning to feel decidedly qualmish.

How truly beautiful she was! Not the empty loveliness of perfect features alone; there was personality and fire and a keen, alert mind mirrored in those grave brown eyes and the sweet curve of sensitive lips.

And then he thought of Alurna and the secret she held, and the memory put an abrupt end to growing misgivings.

Dylara, who was trying to fathom what lay behind the man's cold expressionless face, broke the silence.

"Why have you brought me here?"

Meltor hesitated. Why not tell her? Perhaps the knowledge would drive her into making a second attempt to escape. And then... .

"I suppose there is no reason why you should not be told," he said slowly. "It will make no difference—now.

"You have made an enemy in Sephar. How it happened, I do not know—nor does it matter. It is enough that you are in the way—and must die."

The calm emotionless statement brought no sense of shock to Dylara. She had known what was coming—known it as surely as though he had said the words an hour ago. In a curiously detached way she was conscious of the brilliant sunlight streaming through the windows; of the strident voices of many birds in the nearby jungle; of the slow-moving wind among many leaves... .

"I do not want to kill you," Meltor continued. "You are too young to die. I would like to let you go—to leave you in the forest to go back to the caves you call home."

As he spoke, his hand dropped below the table's edge, fumbled there, then reappeared, a long knife of stone in his fingers.

"But I dare not do that," he went on, in the same flat monotone. "You might turn up again in Sephar and ruin everything. I cannot risk it."

Was he, Dylara wondered, trying to goad her into some act of resistance, that he might escape the stigma of cold-blooded murder? Fascinated, unable to look away, she watched him lift the keen-edged blade.

Suddenly he rose and lunged across the table toward her. Dylara knew the moment had come.

Chapter 9

Torture

Jotan pushed back his plate and sighed wearily.

"I can't eat in this heat," he complained. "Besides, I have no appetite."

"It *is* hot," Javan agreed through a full mouth; "but then it's always hot at this time of day."

Tamar helped himself to another serving from the pot on the table. "It's not the heat alone that's taken his appetite, Javan," he observed disagreeably. "Our friend is so eager for evening to come that he can think of nothing else. It is then, you know, that he will become the laughing-stock of all Sephar by asking Urim for a cave-girl to take as his mate."

An hour before, the three visitors from Ammad had left the palace audience hall and returned to their quarters. After bathing and getting into fresh tunics, they had sat down to food brought from the palace kitchens.

Rising, Jotan crossed the room, sank down on a pile of sleeping furs and pulled off his sandals. Then he lay down, covered his eyes with one arm and was soon asleep.

Presently Tamar and Javan finished eating. The latter at once sought his own couch; but Tamar remained at the table, deep in thought.

Two hours went by, and still Tamar remained there, head bowed in his hands. The slaves had long since cleared the table and departed, leaving the three men to themselves.

Abruptly the seated man raised his head, his expression that of one to whom a momentous idea has come. For a long moment he remained thus, then got silently to his feet and tip-toed to the door, let himself out and, despite the withering heat, started briskly toward the palace.

The four guards stationed at the entrance stiffened to attention as he approached. Tamar halted a few yards away and beckoned to one of them.

"Do you know me?" Tamar asked haughtily.

"Of course!" replied the young warrior humbly. "There is none in all Sephar who does not know Tamar of Ammad."

"Good. Take me at once to the quarters of the female slaves."

The eagerness in the young man's face was replaced by doubt.

"I am not permit—" he began hesitantly.

Tamar cut him short with a gesture. "Do as I say," he snapped. "The responsibility will be mine."

The warrior bowed. "Follow me."

They entered the great hall and ascended to the third floor. Outside the twin doors leading to the slave quarters they were stopped by two guards on duty there.

Tamar's guide addressed one of them. "Rokor," he said, "this is the noble Tamar of Ammad. At his command I have brought him here."

Rokor bowed deeply. "It is an honor to meet Urim's guest. How may I serve you?"

"By taking me to see one of the slave-girls here—the cave-girl, Dylara."

Something akin to a leer crept into Rokor's expression. "Oh, yes; I know the one you mean. If you will come with me... ."

Tamar dismissed the first guard and followed Rokor through the twin doors and down the corridor. Halting before one of the numerous doors, Rokor unbarred and opened it, then stepped aside that Tamar might enter.

A tall slender woman of early middle-age rose from a bed in one corner. But for her tunic of a slave, the visitor would have taken her for the mate of some Sepharian noble.

At his appearance, the eager expectant air she had at first assumed, faded, replaced by one of questioning doubt.

Tamar turned to Rokor. "She is not the one," he said testily. "This is not Dylara."

The guard scratched his head, baffled. "She should be here. This is her room. Urim told Nada, here, to teach her our customs."

Nada came forward and placed a hand on Tamar's arm.

"Do you seek Dylara?" she asked tensely.

Tamar nodded. "Do you know where she is?"

The woman looked meaningfully at the staring guard. "If I may speak with you alone... ."

Tamar sent the man out, and closed the door.

"Well ... " he prompted.

Nada looked at him searchingly. Since Dylara had been taken from the room over three hours ago her concern for the girl's safety had steadily grown. She was convinced Urim had not sent for Dylara, but realized she was powerless to act in her aid.

Why Tamar had come here puzzled her; but he might be of assistance in clearing up the mystery surrounding Dylara's absence.

"What do you want of Dylara, noble Tamar?" she asked.

Tamar showed his surprise. "You know me, then?"

Nada smiled. "There is not a slave in the palace who does not know of you and your two friends."

Tamar hesitated. Something told him he would lose nothing in being frank with this woman. And there was something amiss here; Dylara's absence and this woman's concern made that evident.

"I can think of no reason why you should not know," he said. "You see, my friend Jotan has the mad idea he is in love with this Dylara. I have tried to make him see that one in his position cannot mate with a barbarian; but he will not listen. He means to ask Urim for her tonight. I came here to talk to the girl—to make her understand she could never be happy as the mate of a man so far above her. If she promises to have nothing to do with my friend, I will promise to arrange for her freedom, to return her to her own people."

It took an effort for Nada to repress a smile. "Does anyone else," she asked, "want to keep Jotan from having her?"

"Not that I know of," Tamar said, puzzled by the question. "Why do you ask?"

"Because one of the guards took Dylara from here shortly before you came. He said Urim wanted her, but I think he lied."

Tamar stiffened. Was this some of Jotan's work? Had his friend suspected one of his companions might seek to interfere, and to thwart them, had the girl removed to another place?

He would go back and confront Jotan with this evidence. To think the man did not trust his own friends!

But what if Jotan had had nothing to do with taking the girl? Would it be better to remain silent, so that when he did learn she was missing it would be too late to discover what had become of her?

And then, cutting through the fog of selfishness and snobbery like rays of the sun through mist, came a new trend of thought, far more worthy of the real Tamar.

Jotan was his friend! They had fought side by side against a common foe; they had hunted together, traveled vast distances together, sought adventure together, gone hungry and cold—together. Ever since boyhood they had been companions—closer than brothers. And now he, Tamar, was on the verge of disloyalty to his own best friend!

His eyes blazing, he caught the astonished Nada by an arm.

"Who took her?" he demanded hoarsely. "Where is he, now?"

"It—it was Fordak," Nada stammered, staring wide-eyed at the man's taut face, "—Fordak and another whose face I could not see."

Tamar let go of her arm, threw open the door and went out. He found Rokor leaning against the opposite wall, waiting.

The man from Ammad masked his emotions by resuming an air of indifference.

"Come, Rokor," he said easily, "I am ready to go. The girl I came to see has been taken to another part of the palace. I have decided not to see her, after all."

As the two men walked along the corridor, Tamar said, "By the way, Rokor, do you know a guard called Fordak?"

"Why, yes," Rokor said. "He stands watch at the entrance to the slave quarters. I, myself, relieved him shortly before you came up."

"Do you know where he can be found at this time of day?"

"Probably in his room, sleeping."

"Will you take me there? I have something for him."

In his eagerness to please the noble visitor from Ammad, Rokor quite forgot to be curious.

"Gladly," he said. "Come this way."

Tamar was led to the second floor of the palace, and along a corridor to the wing housing the warriors of Urim. Rokor stopped before a narrow opening and pounded heavily on a closed door.

"Fordak!" he bellowed; "open up here! You have a visitor."

They heard someone moving about inside, and a second later the door swung back.

A thick-shouldered man, inclined to fatness about the middle, stood there, his coarse black hair tousled, eyes heavy with sleep.

"Who wants me?" he grunted.

"This is Tamar of Ammad," Rokor explained. "He has something for you."

Tamar interrupted. "You may leave me here, Rokor. I can find my way out when I have finished with Fordak."

When the guard had gone, Tamar turned to the man Nada had named. He found the fellow eyeing him respectfully.

"Fordak," said the man from Ammad, "I have need of a fearless warrior to do something for me. One who can do as instructed and, at the same time, keep his mouth shut. You were recommended as such. Will you help me?"

Fordak rubbed one side of his bull neck with a calloused palm. "What do you want me to do?" he asked warily.

"I cannot tell you, here," Tamar said. "Come with me to my quarters and I will explain. You will be well rewarded for your work."

The guard's wide face lighted up. "Then I'm your man," he rumbled. "Lead the way."

A few minutes later, Tamar, with Fordak in tow, opened the door of the building set aside for him and his companions.

Jotan and Javan were still sleeping. Tamar closed the door and dropped the bar into place.

"Sit down," he told Fordak, pointing to a stool. He crossed the room and prodded the sleeping pair into wakefulness.

"Jotan and Javan," he said, when the two had risen, "this is Fordak, one of Sephar's finest warriors. Fordak is going to help us in a little matter, aren't you, Fordak?"

The guard nodded, his broad cheeks creased with a wide smile at being treated so familiarly by a nobleman.

Jotan was staring at his friend in frank bewilderment.

"What are you getting at, Tamar?" he asked. "Why have you brought this man here?"

"Yes," Tamar went on, ignoring the questions. "Fordak is going to do a great deal for us. To begin with—" he dropped a hand lightly on the man's shoulder "—he is going to tell us *what he did with the slave-girl, Dylara!*"

As Tamar spoke the last few words his fingers bit fiercely into the bare flesh beneath his hand.

The speed with which Fordak lost his smile was almost laughable. He bellowed out something unintelligible and started to rise; but Jotan, his face suddenly white beneath its tan, crossed the room with a single bound and slammed him back on the stool.

Tamar flipped a knife from its sheath and pressed the point lightly against Fordak's spine. "Sit still, you!" he said frostily.

Jotan's face was haggard. "Has anything happened to Dylara?" he asked thickly. "In the name of the God, Tamar, tell me quickly."

"Just this," Tamar said. "While you and Javan were asleep I went to the palace to ... on a personal matter. While there, I learned that Dylara had been taken from the slave quarters by this man on the pretext of taking her to Urim. Another man helped him; who, I don't know. Knowing you would be interested in learning what had happened to her, I brought our friend, here, along to answer your questions."

Jotan thanked him with a glance. Then he turned to the seated Fordak.

"All right," he ground out savagely, "what have you done with her?"

Fordak looked at him sullenly. "I don't know what you're talking about," he mumbled. "You have no right to keep me here."

Jotan, his face convulsed with anger, grabbed the man by the front of his tunic with one hand and shook him savagely. Fordak, struggling to twist loose, aimed a wild blow at his tormentor, and received in return a mighty smash full on the nose that knocked him to the floor, half conscious, blood pouring from his nostrils.

"Get up!" snarled Jotan. He kicked the dazed warrior brutally in the side. "Either that tongue of yours starts to wag or it comes out—by the roots!"

He reached down, caught a handful of Fordak's rumpled hair and pulled him to his feet. The guard stood there, swaying, and would have fallen had not Jotan shoved him back on the stool.

"Where is she?"

Fordak wiped his nose with the back of one hand and stared woodenly at the crimson stains left there. He knew he must tell; he could not bear further punishment.

And then he remembered what Meltor had said. The princess Alurna had wanted the girl disposed of; to tell what he knew would bring down the wrath of Urim's daughter upon him. He shivered at the thought; for he did not want to die.

"Where is she?"

Fordak moved his head in silent negation. "I don't know."

Jotan clenched his fist to strike again. Tamar caught his arm.

"Wait," he said. "Let me talk to him." He pushed back Fordak's head. "We know you're mixed up in this, Fordak. You and another guard took the girl from her room. Tell us where she is and you shall go free—as soon as we find you have told us the truth."

"I don't know," said the man stolidly.

Jotan swore impatiently. "I'm through wasting time," he said. "Dylara may be in danger. I'll get the truth from him."

He motioned to Javan. "Get me a fire bowl."

When his friend had handed him a bowl of fat, he lighted its wick with a glowing coal from an earthen jar and came back to Fordak. The seated man watched him, apprehension in his eyes.

The flame wavered in the faint breeze from the windows. It suddenly had become very quiet in the room.

Jotan drew the flint knife from his belt and began to run the blade back and forth through the candle's flame.

"What are you going to do?" Tamar asked.

The lips of his friend were pressed into a straight line. "He's going to talk. Be ready to listen."

Another minute passed. Jotan continued to move the knife blade to and fro in the heart of the fire. Fordak could not tear his eyes from the objects in the man's hands. Great beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead.

"Tie his arms and legs," Jotan said.

Those words seemed to release Fordak's paralyzed muscles. Voicing a wild cry he bounded from the stool and was nearly to the door before Tamar and Javan brought him down. He continued to struggle frantically while they bound lengths of rawhide about his arms and legs. When he was securely tied they dragged him back to the stool.

Jotan said, "Take off one of his sandals."

Fordak yelled in terror and jerked back, almost falling from the stool.

"Stuff something in his mouth before he has half the city here."

Gagged and bound, Fordak was helpless to do more than gurgle and sweat as Javan knelt and bared one of his feet.

"Now," Jotan said grimly, "we'll see what effect this will have in getting information."

With a quick movement he placed the white-hot length of flint firmly against the delicate skin of the instep and held it there.

An eerie, muffled scream pushed past the gag in Fordak's mouth. So intense was the note of animal pain that the three men felt their flesh crawl with the sound.

Abruptly the bound guard stiffened, his eyes swam in their sockets, and he fell back in a faint.

Jotan rose and tossed the knife aside. "Get some water," he said. "One treatment like that should be enough."

They removed the gag from the unconscious man's mouth and doused water in his face. After a moment he groaned weakly and opened his eyes.

"Where is Dylara?" Jotan asked, for the third time.

Words came spilling out. "I—I'll tell you. Don't burn me again. I can't stand it. I'll talk. We took her—Meltor and I. Meltor made me help him take her. He said Alurna told him to do it."

"Alurna?" Jotan was astonished. "What had she to do with it?"

"She wanted it done. Meltor said she ordered him to take the girl to the house of Rydob outside Sephar. He was to take her there and kill her, then hide the body so no one would know what had happened to her."

Jotan paled. "Where is this house of Rydob?"

Fordak gave directions. When he had finished, Jotan said: "Tamar, get three or four of our men and meet Javan and me at the Gate of the Setting Sun. Hurry!"

Tamar went out.

"Get our weapons together, Javan," Jotan ordered. "We'll meet the others at the gate."

Javan was slow to comprehend. "Where are we going?"

"Into the jungle," said Jotan evenly. "To the house of Rydob!"

Alurna had slept well during the mid-day heat. When she awakened, her first thought was of Meltor and his errand. Lying there, the room darkened against the blazing sun, she allowed herself to think of Jotan, smiling when she realized he was free, now, to fall in love with her. No longer was there a barbarian slave-girl to blind him to the beauty and charm of Urim's daughter.

After a while she sat up, stretched her soft muscles with all the sleek satisfaction of a jungle cat, and summoned Anela.

The slave-girl was aiding her in effecting a leisurely toilet a little later, when a brief rap sounded at the door.

"That must be Meltor," Alurna said contentedly. "Let him in, Anela."

But when the door was opened, it was another man who stood there, his tunic torn and stained, his broad plump face lined with suffering.

"It's Fordak!" cried Anela.

The man staggered to a stool and dropped onto it, exhausted.

"I came as soon as I could, princess," he babbled. "I came to tell you so you would not punish me. They forced me to tell; they burned me until I told them. I would have come sooner, but the ropes were tight."

Alurna shut him off with a gesture. "What are you trying to tell me?" she demanded. "*Who* made you tell *what*?"

"The men from Ammad." Fordak was beginning to gain control over his shaken nerves. "Jotan and Tamar and Javan. They tortured me until I told them where Meltor had taken the slave-girl."

Rapidly he related all that had taken place in the visitors' apartment. Being no fool, he exaggerated the amount of suffering he had endured; thus might the heart of Alurna be touched with pity.

When Fordak was done, Alurna went to the window and stood there, her back to the others, staring into the grounds below. What was she to do? Jotan was already on his way to the house of Rydob. If Meltor had wasted no time, Jotan could not possibly arrive soon enough to save Dylara from death.

But would Meltor do his work promptly? There was a cruel streak in the man—the same characteristic that made a leopard toy with a victim for hours before putting an end to its misery. And that girl had been very beautiful... .

She turned. "You may go, Fordak."

The man was worried. "I could not keep from telling, princess. They burned—"

"Get out!"

Fordak got unhappily to his feet and limped from the room.

"Quick, Anela!" said the princess. "Get to Vulcar at once. I want five of his most trusted men to meet me at the Gate of the Setting Sun. Should he ask questions, tell him I will explain later. Go!"

"Where are you going, princess?" the slave-girl asked as she started for the door.

"Into the jungle," was the calm reply. "To the house of Rydob!"

Seven men stood in a group at the mouth of a trail. Behind them lay a tract of matted jungle, over them towered the branches of forest kings, and directly before them was a small clearing containing a rambling, one-storied building of gray stone, weather-stained and unkempt.

"That must be the place, Jotan," said one of the men. "It answers the description you gave us."

Jotan nodded. "They must still be in there. Otherwise we should have met this Meltor on his way back. If only we have arrived in time.

"We must spread out, then come up to the house from all sides. Two of you go with Tamar and circle around to the east. Keep within the jungle's fringe that you may not be seen from the house. The rest of us

will close in from this side. You have five minutes to reach your places. Go."

The minutes dragged by. None of the four appeared to feel an urge to talk. A heavy silence had fallen on the jungle about them. Even the hum of insects, the voices of the gaily-colored birds, the chattering monkeys, were stilled. The same strange tenseness that precedes a tropical storm, an atmosphere of impending conflict, seemed to hang over them.

Jotan straightened. "They've had time enough. Come on."

The four men stepped into the clearing, spread fan-wise, and headed for the building, moving at a half-trot.

The door was closed. In absolute silence they stepped over the heap of bones that once had been Rydob, mounted the steps and halted there.

Carefully Jotan closed his fingers about the latch. The heavy planks swung inward enough to satisfy him that there was no bar in place.

Suddenly Jotan drew back and drove his shoulder against the wood with all his weight behind it. The door flew open and the four men came piling into the room, knives of stone held in readiness.

That mad rush came to an abrupt halt, and what the men saw brought a chorus of astonished exclamations from their lips.

Flat on his back in the center of the room, partially hidden behind an overturned table, lay Meltor of Sephar. From his left breast stood the hilt of a stone knife, its blade buried deep. He was quite dead.

The girl was gone.

Chapter 10

The Hairy Men

For several moons now, Urb, the Neanderthal, and his tribe had found it increasingly difficult to locate game in the neighborhood of the family caves. The reason could be any one of several: a nearby water-hole dried up until the rainy season came again; a family of lions holed up close by; an absence of adequate pasturage.

Urb sat crouched near the foot of a lofty escarpment that contained the tribal caves. His deep-sunk button eyes, beneath beetling brows, indifferently watched the young ones of the tribe playing about the clearing between jungle and cliff. Below a flattened, shapeless wedge of nose, his thick pendulous lips worked in and out in worried and laborious thought. As leader of his tribe, Urb was concerned about the lack of game.

It had been comparatively cool here in the shadows of the scarp during most of the morning; but with noon growing near, the sun's direct rays began to penetrate the thick growth of black coarse hair with which Urb's gross body was almost entirely covered.

And so he rose at last and, like the great bull ape he so closely resembled, clambered awkwardly but quickly to one of the caves.

Just inside the entrance he squatted his two hundred and fifty pounds on a boulder and fell to watching Gorb, his eldest son, put final touches to a flint spear head. After heating the bit of rock in a small fire for several minutes, Gorb would withdraw it, hastily touch a spot near the edge with a drop of water which caused a tiny bit of the flint to scale away, then repeat the entire process. It was a long and tedious task; but Gorb had that untiring patience given to those for whom time has no meaning. Eventually, his perseverance would reward him with a fine weapon.

Urb was secretly proud of his son. Even as a boy, Gorb had shown no interest in hunting or in war. Beneath his sharply receding forehead was the brain and soul of a true artist—a soul that found its expression by the creation of implements of the chase and of battle. No other member of

Urb's tribe could even approach the artistry Gorb put into his work; no other could fashion a spear so true in balance; none could produce a flint knife so keen-edged and well-formed.

The half-finished spear head reminded Urb of his own immediate problem.

"Gorb," he said, "only two kills have our men made in the past five suns, although all have gone forth each day to hunt. It is not because Narjok or Bana or Muta run away before we can kill them. We cannot find them at all; only twice in those five suns have we come upon the spoor of any one of them."

Gorb paused at his work and drew a hairy forearm across his sweaty face. "Last night," he said, "long after Dyta had found his lair, I heard Sadu roaring and growling among the trees. It was the noise of a hungry Sadu; he, too, was angry because there is no meat."

Urb grunted. Since the day before, he had been turning an idea over in his slow-moving mind, and now he sought to put it into words.

"Tomorrow," he said, "when Dyta first awakens, some of us will look for caves far from here. I will go; Boz and Kor and Tolb and you, Gorb, will go with me. There are many hills; there will be many caves in them, and much meat in grasslands nearby. When we find a good place we will come back for the others of our tribe."

"Good!" approved Gorb, turning back to his labors. "It has been many suns since I have eaten all the meat I can hold. I will go with you, Urb."

Early the next morning a little band of Neanderthal men descended the escarpment and set out toward the rising sun. They were six; besides those named by Urb, Mog, the sullen, had been taken. All were armed with huge flint-studded hardwood clubs, so heavy that only an arm of great strength might wield one; rude knives of flint and short-shafted spears completed their armament.

They moved along with the curious shuffling gait peculiar to their kind alone. Their passage seemed to diffuse an atmosphere of terror and dread, striking dumb the countless denizens of the teeming jungle. Urb was in the lead, his small black eyes darting about for the first sign of danger, ears and nose alert lest Sadu or Jalok or Tarlok find him and his fellows unprepared. But if any of the more formidable beasts were near, they remained concealed. Only Pandor, the elephant, neglected to give the Hairy Men a wide berth when several were together—Pandor, who feared no creature that walked or flew or wriggled.

The shaggy-coated males moved steadily ahead, their objective a group of low mountains far to the east, the upper portions of which were clearly discernible on the few occasions the band crossed a clearing of any consequence.

At noon they halted on the reed-covered banks of a shallow river; and while Urb and Tolb hunted game, the others rested beneath the broad boughs of a jungle patriarch.

Soon the two hunters returned, bearing between them the still warm carcass of Muta, the wild boar. Each of the six hacked off a juicy portion and devoured it raw, blood matting the hair of face and chest.

After drinking at the river's brink, the brute-men stretched out beneath the trees, covered their faces with huge fronds of a palm tree and slept until mid-afternoon. Urb roused them, then, and once more the savage band took up their march.

Darkness was near when the six passed through a fringe of jungle and paused at the foot of a lofty cliff. Urb, deciding too little daylight remained for them to attempt scaling the vertical slope, ordered the Neanderthals back into the forest.

Here they supped on flesh of the boar killed earlier in the day, then sought couches among the tree branches. During daylight it was all very well to sleep in comfort on the jungle floor; but during the night it was safer aloft. The great cats usually laid up during the day, digesting the previous night's kill; but once Uda, the moon, made an appearance, the forest abounded with hungry carnivora.

With the first rays of the morning sun the six men began the perilous climb. Slow-moving and awkward, they made hard going of the ascent, but their tremendous strength aided them where lesser muscles would have failed altogether, and finally the crest was reached.

Here they stood at the edge of a great tableland, clothed with primeval forest from which, in the distance, loomed four low mountain peaks. Game seemed plentiful; as they watched, a herd of antelope grazing to their left caught their scent and bounded away across a narrow ribbon of grassland which lay between the forest and the plateau's edge. A band of monkeys chattered and scolded at them from the safety of middle terraces, while a cloud of raucous-voiced birds rose with a whirring beat of wings and flew deeper inland.

Not far to their right was the entrance to a narrow deep-worn game trail leading into tangled mazes of brush, creeper, vine and trees. It was

toward this trail that Urb turned his footsteps, motioning for his companions to follow.

"Here is food enough," he exulted. "If we can find caves in those hills, we will go back to fetch the rest of our people."

In silence the six frightful, man-like creatures faded into the black shadows of the overhanging forest, their goal the towering heights at the far end of this plateau.

And directly between them and their objective lay Sephar, mysterious city of an unknown race.

Dylara lay face down on a broad branch, her head pillowed on a heap of moss, biting her lips to keep back tears of bitter anguish. The swollen ankle throbbed steadily, its pain almost unbearable.

And she had been so close to freedom! From her place high in the tree she could see the stone walls of Rydob's dwelling, evil and grim in the sun. Behind those walls lay the dead body of Meltor, slain by his own knife.

She felt no regret for having killed him. It had been his life—or hers. When he had lunged across the table in an attempt to stab her, she, acting by instinct rather than thought, had thrust her weight against the table. Meltor, off balance, went over backwards, his head striking hard against the floor. Before he could regain his wits Dylara had torn the knife from his hand. He cried out once in mortal fear as the blade swung high, flung up a futile hand to ward off the blow, and died as polished flint pierced his heart.

No—she felt no regret for having killed him. What she did regret was the mad impulse that had sent her running blindly into the open air. So anxious had she been to flee that horrible place that she had no eyes for what lay in her path. As a result, one heel had trod full on the whitened skull of Rydob the hermit. Dylara's ankle had twisted beneath her, pitching her headlong into a tangle of vines at the base of the steps.

She was up at once; but the injured ankle buckled under her weight and she had fallen again, crying out in agony.

For a little while she had remained there, stroking the injured member, already swollen and turning blue. Finally she got to her hands and knees and, with many pauses, crawled toward the trees ringing the clearing.

How she managed to clamber into the branches of one giant tree and work her way a full fifty feet above the ground, Dylara was never to know. So awful was the pain that her mind seemed numbed; only an

unflagging determination drove her on. She stopped at last, on a thick bough and lay there, completely exhausted.

It was comparatively cool there in the shelter of the foliage. Soft jungle breezes stirred the branch gently and she was soon asleep. A bird twittered and cooed close by, and the wind blew lightly across the troubled face, smoothing its tired lines... .

And as the weary, pain-wracked girl lay sleeping, four heavily armed men stepped into the clearing and moved stealthily toward the house of Rydob. They entered; and after a few minutes, reappeared at the doorway, to be joined by three other warriors who had come up to the building from the rear.

"It seems hardly possible," Jotan was saying, "for a mere girl to kill a grown warrior. For all we know, another man may have slain Meltor and made off with Dylara."

"It's my guess," said Tamar, "that the girl caught Meltor off guard and stuck a knife in him. She's not like the women we know, Jotan. Hers has been a wild, primitive life, filled with danger. Because of it, she would be far more resourceful than Sepharian women have need of being. Taking a life probably means nothing to her.

"No," he concluded, "I've an idea she's well on her way back to her caves by now."

Javan, impatiently listening to the conversation, touched Jotan's arm nervously.

"There is no point in staying here," he complained. "It will be dark soon, and the jungle is no place to be after sundown."

Jotan smiled wanly and clapped him on the shoulder. "Of course. I have no right to expose you and Tamar to danger on my account.

"We will return to Sephar now. But tomorrow I shall return here with a warrior who is versed in tracking. With his help I should be able to learn what has happened to Dylara."

"We will go with you," Tamar said quietly. And Javan nodded agreement.

The seven entered the game trail and started back toward distant Sephar. Jotan led the way, his wide shoulders drooping disconsolately. It was clear the loss of the lovely cave-girl had hurt him deeply.

The return journey was about half completed when Jotan stopped suddenly and raised a cautioning hand.

"Listen!" he exclaimed softly.

The seven cocked their ears alertly.

Faintly, mingled with the everyday noises of the jungle, came sounds of murmuring voices and the tramp of feet from around a bend in the trail ahead.

"Probably warriors from Sephar, hunting game," Tamar said. "Let's join them; they may have news for us."

Jotan frowned. "Hunters don't go blundering about so carelessly," he reminded. "Hide in the undergrowth until we can make sure."

A moment later, six human figures appeared in the path. Five were fighting-men of Sephar—all well armed. The sixth was a girl in a close-fitting tunic that emphasized the lithe softly-curved body it covered. Her face was set in determined lines as she moved on, looking neither to the right nor the left.

Tamar, lying next to Jotan behind a screen of vines, nudged his friend.

"Alurna!" he breathed. "What can she be doing here?"

"Looks as though Fordak was telling the truth," Jotan whispered. "She *is* mixed up in this. He must have got free and gone to her with the story.

"Well, let her go to Rydob's house. She'll find little there to please her!"

As soon as the princess and her escorts were out of sight, Jotan called his men from their hiding places and they took up their interrupted progress toward Sephar.

Chapter 11

From Jungle Depths

Urb, the Neanderthal, was beginning to tire. He and his five hairy companions had been on the march since Dyta had risen, and even now the sun was hunting a new lair for the night. From the frequency with which those behind him were stumbling, he judged they, too, were tiring.

But the mountains were close, now. He and his men were almost certain to reach them before darkness came. There they might find caves near grasslands rich in game. Urb's mouth watered and he was aware of being very hungry.

A faint breeze, blowing lightly against their backs, changed its course suddenly and came whipping in from the west. As it flicked across their faces the six Hairy Ones came to an abrupt halt, standing stiffly as though turned to stone.

Urb sniffed in short rapid inhalations, his unkempt visage twisted in a ferocious scowl.

"Men!" he grunted. "The hairless ones! It has been long since we have found such. Hide!"

With a degree of soundlessness surprising in such clumsy bodies, the six Neanderthals faded into the mazes of undergrowth at either side of the path.

Hardly were they hidden, when Alurna and her five companions came into sight. They were moving slowly, the girl limping slightly from a bruised heel, her sandals scuffed and dusty.

The girl stopped and turned to the others. "Is it much farther, Adbor? I don't think I can take another step."

"Courage, my princess," smiled Adbor, a tall, slender man with a great shock of blond hair. "A short distance more and we shall be there."

Alurna sank down on a fallen log, removed her sandal and rubbed the bruised heel.

"I'm afraid you'll have to carry me from here on," she sighed. "My feet ache terribly."

Silently the foliage parted an arm's length from the girl's half-bent figure, and in the gap were framed the brutal faces of Urb and Mog, the sullen. Urb gave the female only a passing glance; his attention was riveted on the five unsuspecting men. The woman was not armed—the men were; and it was the males who must die before they could bring their weapons into use.

Meanwhile, the stunted mind of Mog, the sullen, was laboriously following an altogether different trend of thought from that of his leader. His unblinking pig-like eyes were intent on the sweetly curved back directly in front of him, and he was increasingly aware of what an altogether desirable bit of femininity this hairless she actually was. His tongue moistened suddenly dry lips and he shifted his weight uneasily from one foot to the other.

Urb waited no longer. Slowly he brought up his left hand, caught a small branch between his fingers, then suddenly clenched his fist.

The wood snapped with a sharp clear sound, freezing the five Sephari-an guards into instant immobility.

But not for long.

As the sound of breaking wood rose on the still air, six grotesque figures rose in a rough semi-circle about the group in the trail, and simultaneously five mighty stone-incrusted bludgeons were hurled with unbelievable force and accuracy.

The startled Sepharians never succeeded in bringing their own weapons into play. Before they could fully comprehend their danger all five were stretched on the jungle path. Three were dead as they fell, heads crushed like brittle twigs; another died almost as quickly, his back snapped as a dry branch is snapped beneath the broad feet of Pandor, the elephant.

Only one still lived, a club having dealt him a glancing blow aside the head, laying his flesh open in a great gash and rendering him senseless. Gorb was more adept at making clubs than he was in their use... .

Five clubs were thrown; there should have been six. Only Mog, the sullen, retained his hold on his murderous weapon. As his fellows loosed their cudgels, Mog sprang forward, caught the paralyzed girl about the waist with one immense hairy arm, and before the others could fathom his intentions, had turned and fled back along the pathway as quickly as his short bowed legs could carry him.

The remaining five watched Mog's hurried flight until he had passed from sight. His purpose in stealing the she was clear; their surprise came only from his way of taking her—and the fact that seldom did a Hairy Man mate with a member of another race. But then Mog was a surly brute, unable to find among his own people a mate willing to endure his temper and moods.

The Neanderthal men gathered about the bodies of the five guards. Gorb, true to character, took up several of the scattered weapons and examined them closely, noting with envy that they had been fashioned with far greater skill than he possessed. He puzzled long over the bows and arrows, but his limited intelligence could make nothing of them and he finally cast them aside.

At last the five took up their march toward the distant mountains. They moved more cautiously now than before, realizing they might meet more of the hairless men.

Urb, still in the lead, noticed, a while later, that the forest was beginning to thin out. Soon he caught a glimpse of a plain marking the edge of the woods. He paused, nose searching the humid breeze.

They edged forward at a brief guttural command from their leader, until they came to open ground.

Before them, beyond level grassland, rose the gray stone walls of Sephar, looming huge and impressive in the light of early evening. White tuniced warriors lolled before broad gates leading to many stone buildings beyond.

Urb shook his head regretfully. "We must look elsewhere for caves," he said. "To make our homes near here would mean much fighting with the hairless ones. It is better to go where we may live in peace. Come."

With bowed shoulders and awkward shuffling gait the five frightful men turned back for the long journey to the distant caves of their people.

Soon they were filing silently past the five motionless bodies in the center of the trail. And through narrowed, blood-filled eyes, through a red film of hate and pain, Adbor, Sepharian warrior, watched them go, and planned a sanguinary revenge as payment for the death of his four friends and the theft of the princess Alurna, daughter of his king.

Two hours later, just as the night's first shadows fell across the path, a searching party found his unconscious body face down in the rotting vegetation of the trail. Tenderly they lifted him up, cradling the blond,

blood-soaked thatch in their arms, and bore him back to the city. There, men trained and schooled in the treatment of wounds, did all they could to revive the numbed brain of a courageous warrior.

They were only partially successful. With closed eyes Adbor gasped out, in a few broken sentences, his story of death and abduction. Something of his former strength seemed to come back to him as he spoke. Raising on one elbow, his eyes now wide and staring beyond those about him, he cried out, shrill and loud:

"Give me my spear—my bow! I will follow them! I will—"

His voice broke and he fell back limply. Adbor was dead.

Above that still form men looked at one another in silence and in horror. The Hairy men! Creatures so seldom seen as to be almost mythical, but whose savage and brutal natures were known from horror tales told at many a dinner table and about many a camp fire.

Vulcar was the first to speak. "I must take word to Urim. For the last two hours he has been storming about the palace demanding he be told where Alurna is. Now, I don't know what he will say—or do... ."

He shrugged. "Make preparations to send out a searching party the first thing in the morning. I will lead it."

Slowly the hawk-faced warrior set out for the palace with the message that must wither the stalwart heart of him for whom Vulcar cared above all others.

Alurna had been conscious of a bobbing, rocking sensation for some time before she opened her eyes to the world about her. For a moment she watched the procession of thick greenery at right angles to the direction in which she seemed to be moving; then sudden recollection flooded her mind and she awoke to the horror of her position.

It was then that she became aware of the hairy back beneath her and a great calloused hand clamped about her wrists.

Instinctively she attempted to struggle free; but the nightmarish brute only tightened his grip and without pausing in his loping gait turned a snarling, bestial countenance toward her. At the sight, Alurna felt her senses reel and she closed her eyes with a shudder of loathing.

Mog, satisfied his captive would remain passive, transferred his attention to the path underfoot. The hairy one was beginning to regret the decision that had cost him the companionship of his fellows. To cross, safely, the miles of jungle and forest between his present position and the caves of his tribe, would require all his strength and cunning.

Alone, armed only with club and spear, he could prove fairly easy prey to any one of many enemies. Jalok, the panther, agile and fearless and wantonly cruel; Conta, the cave bear, who fought on his hind legs; Tarlok, the leopard, beneath whose spotted hide lay such strength that by comparison Mog's stalwart thews were as nothing. And then there was Sleeza, the giant snake, whose slimy coils held the strength of ten Mogs.

Most fearsome of all, however, was Sadu, the lion, tawny of coat and shaggy of mane, whose absolute fearlessness, speed of attack and irascible temper, backed by steel sinews and mighty fangs, caused the balance of jungle folk to give him a wide berth.

Above and about the lumbering monstrosity and its still, white burden, scampered, flew, slunk and crawled the superabundant life of this green world, their voices and movements adding to the vast ocean of sound rising and falling about the ill-assorted pair.

While far behind them came Urb and the others; but the distance between was growing rapidly greater so swiftly was Mog covering the ground.

And then, with almost frightening suddenness, Dyta, the sun, disappeared from the heavens and darkness fell upon the jungle. The Neanderthal mouthed a few disapproving grunts, peered about nervously, then swung sharply to his left and forced his way through foliage to the base of a great tree.

Alurna clung fearfully to the shaggy neck as the great brute pulled himself into the lower branches. With the coming of night her fear was intensified a thousandfold; but even more than she feared Mog was her dread of the brooding jungle and its savage inhabitants. She reproached herself silently for venturing from the security of Sephar's walls. Woman-like, she blamed Jotan for everything—had he not fallen in love with the cave-girl nothing like this would have happened.

Mog paused upon a broad bough well above the ground. Placing Alurna in a sitting position here, her back against the tree's bole, he tore free a length of stout vine and bound her wrists securely behind her back.

Satisfied his prize would be helpless to escape, Mog let himself down on a branch directly under her and sought a comfortable position in which to sleep out the night.

Alurna, hemmed in by a wall of blackness which her untrained eyes were unable to penetrate, could hear the Hairy One as he settled himself.

She knew there would be no sleep for her this night; she was far too frightened to think of closing her eyes for an instant.

Seconds later she was sound asleep; and though the balance of the night was made hideous with the savage voices of jungle denizens, the exhausted princess did not stir.

A rough hand shook her awake. She shrank away with a whimper of fear at sight of Mog's forbidding face a few inches from her own. The Neanderthal freed her wrists by breaking their bonds with his powerful fingers, then swung her once more to his back and slid to the ground.

Noon found them at the outskirts of the forest. Mog had pushed ahead far more quickly than he had thought possible. Alone, without allies, he feared an attack at any moment from some forest dweller. There would be no safety for him until he was safe in the caves of his tribe.

With the forest behind him, Mog trotted across the narrow ribbon of grasses to the lip of the almost vertical cliff overlooking the tree-filled valley below. A portion of the boar killed two days before was cached in one of those trees; once he and his captive were safely down the cliff they could eat without wasting time in a search for food.

But Mog began to realize it would prove no small matter to transport the girl down the abrupt incline. Indeed, it would require all his own strength and limited agility to get himself down without the added burden of a helpless she.

Then came the thought that she might be able to do so without his aid. Not ungentle he lowered her to her feet and signed that she should start down. When Alurna, correctly interpreting his gesture, glanced at the hard earth so far below, she gasped aloud and drew back, trembling.

Mog, sullen and short-tempered at best, did not intend wasting time in coaxing her. Raising a bulky fist, he shook it threateningly under her nose, then once more pointed to the edge of the precipice.

Alurna could not help but feel she preferred death by falling to being mauled by this uncouth beast-man. And so, gritting her teeth and tensing her muscles to control their trembling, she lowered herself over the brink and began the tortuous descent.

Those long agonizing moments which followed were to live forever in the memory of Alurna, princess of Sephar. Slowly, inch by inch, she worked her way downward, feeling in an agony of suspense for footholds where she was confident no such holds existed. At times her entire weight was suspended by her fingers alone, while both feet searched for some projection to which her sandaled foot would cling.

She knew, now, it would have been wise to have tossed her sandals down first; her bare feet would have held to the rock with more certainty—but it was too late for that.

Gradually she sank farther and farther from the lip of the escarpment. She dared not glance above or below; her gaze was glued continuously on the uneven surface over which she was passing. Her fingers were raw and bleeding by this time; but she clenched her lip between white teeth and went on.

At last the strain, both to limbs and to nerves, was nearing the breaking point. Alurna knew she could not hold on much longer; if she failed to reach the valley floor soon, she must fall the balance of the way. Then, as the desire to loose her grip, whatever the consequences, seemed too overpowering to resist, her feet came to rest on level ground.

Tired, high-pitched nerves gave way, and Alurna sank to the ground and burst into tears. Had she acted at once, she might have escaped, for Mog was still fifty feet above her.

But she was conscious only of relief from the peril just undergone; and Mog found her huddled in a pitiful heap at the very spot where her feet had first touched solid earth.

Lifting her easily to his wide back, he took up his club from where he had dropped it from above, and moved at a half-trot toward the nearby forest.

While from the depths of a tangled maze of cloaking underbrush, at the very point he was nearing, two baleful yellow eyes were fixed in unblinking attention upon him and the girl he carried!

The morning after Alurna's capture, twenty warriors were assembled in front of Sephar's palace. It was evident they awaited someone, for their eyes turned often to the great doors.

And then came Vulcar, arms laden with an assortment of weapons. Rapidly he handed them out to the twenty until each was fully armed. This done he barked out an order and the men formed into ranks, four abreast and five deep.

His hawk-like face set in stern lines, Vulcar faced them. "Warriors of Sephar," he began, "you know what has happened to the daughter of our king. You know, too, that five of your comrades died trying to save her. Most of you knew and admired Adbor. I saw Adbor die. He died while calling for his weapons, eager to take up the trail of those who had stolen the princess.

"To you goes the honor of avenging your comrades and returning the princess to her father, alive ... or dead."

As the calm voice ceased, a score of right arms shot up and a resounding shout rose from twenty throats.

"Then come," said Vulcar quietly, and turned to lead the way.

But before the men could move to follow him, a deep voice from the palace doorway bade them wait.

Clothed in the simple harness of an ordinary warrior, and fully armed, Urim descended the steps and came up to Vulcar.

"I will go with you," he said simply.

Vulcar had been afraid of this. Urim no longer was a young man; to take him along might cost Sephar a ruler, as well as its favorite daughter.

"O Urim," he said, "may I say a few words to you before we go?..."

"My king, trust me and these warriors to find Alurna. They are young and fully trained. For hours they can press onward so rapidly that anyone less hardened would drop behind within an hour. To slacken their speed for one less trained might cost much precious time."

Urim, ready to override any protests, could not help but see the logic of the words. For several moments he stood with bowed head while impulse battled with good judgment.

"Take your men and go without me, my friend," he said at last, his voice unsteady. "I am an old man, and useless. I should only delay you."

He turned and strode back into the palace before the troubled Sepharitan could frame a reply.

Ten minutes later the twenty and one entered the trail that led past the scene of Alurna's capture the day before.

Half an hour later another band of men filed through the western gates of Sephar and entered the mouth of the same path. There were eight in the group: Jotan, Javan and Tamar with five of the warriors who had come with them on the long journey from Ammad to Sephar. Their destination, now, was the house of Rydob, and with them was a man adept at following a spoor, however faint.

Tarlok, the leopard, crouching among the dense foliage of a thick branch above the trail, watched them pass. Soundlessly he bared glistening fangs, and his yellow eyes narrowed into twin slits of hate. Tarlok detested these two-legged creatures; but even greater was his fear of them, for his mate had fallen, a moon ago, beneath the sharp sticks of such man-things.

Chapter 12

Enter—Pryak

Hardly had word of Alurna's disappearance flashed through Sephar, that same morning, than a young under-priest was seeking admittance to the secret chambers of Pryak, high-priest to the God-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken-Aloud.

It was no simple matter to gain the subterranean apartment far beneath the temple. Only a chosen few had ever set foot within the holy-of-holies; this young man was not one of them. But his excited manner and the announcement of information "for Pryak alone" had brought him to the very door of the high-priest's suite. But here he was stopped by Orbar, second only to Pryak, himself.

Tidor was no fool. To be first to acquaint his chief with important information could gain him recognition as a loyal and conscientious follower. Men had risen high with such a beginning.

And so when Orbar sought to learn what word Tidor had brought, he was met by the unchanging retort: "I will tell Pryak—none other!"

Finally Orbar began to lose patience. "You may not see the most-high," he snapped. "Tell me what you know and I will pass it on—if it be worth-while repeating. Come, tell me, or I will teach you what it means to cross Orbar!"

Tidor trembled inwardly. He had heard gossip as to the fate of some who had angered Orbar. He was about to blurt out the news, when there came a sudden interruption.

The door to Pryak's apartment banged open and a short, frail-appearing man appeared in the doorway. He was well past middle-age, with sparse graying hair that straggled untidily past the neck line of his tunic. His wrinkled face was twisted in anger, and his shifty, close-set eyes of watery blue glared at the two men before him.

"What means this clamor, Orbar?" he demanded shrilly. "By the God, am I to be disturbed by petty wrangling on my own door-step? Who is this youth?"

Orbar's manner was humble, now. "Tidor, an under-priest, has come with word which he claims is of great importance. I tried to learn from him if the information was worthy of your attention, Most High, but he will tell me nothing."

Pryak turned on the young man. "What is this news?"

Tidor gulped. "O Voice of the God," he said shakily, "I have learned that Alurna, daughter of hated Urim, was stolen yesterday while in the jungle. A roving band of Hairy Men killed her guards and took her.

"An hour ago Vulcar and twenty men left to hunt for her. Urim stays at the palace, sick and miserable, waiting Vulcar's return."

Pryak's scowl had deepened as the youth spoke. "And you call that important? What do I care if that soft-hearted fool loses a worthless daughter? A sound whipping will teach you to—"

Suddenly the high priest fell silent. The anger twisting his features began to fade—replaced by a cunning, scheming expression no less repellent... .

"And yet," he said slowly, "we may be able to make use of this information. If I could be sure ... Orbar! Call to my rooms the Council of Priests." He was speaking rapidly, now, his face flushed with excitement. "This may be the day of our deliverance!"

Tharn lay flat on his back on a heap of furs and watched a pattern of sunlight on the wall above his head. Today was his second as a captive, and already his patience was wearing thin. He knew, now, why the other cave-men imprisoned here wore constant expressions of aloof sullenness. To be cooped behind rock walls day after day instead of being free to roam forest and plain as they had done since boyhood, was enough to sour any temper.

He wondered where Katon had been taken. Shortly after the noonday meal, his friend had held a long whispered conversation with two of the guards—a conversation of considerable importance, to judge from Katon's expression. He had said nothing to Tharn about it in the hour between the conference and the arrival of two men who had taken him away.

Tharn gave up trying to find an answer to the puzzle and dozed off. He was awakened a half hour later by the sound of the cell door opening. He raised his head in time to see Katon enter with two palace guards. Without hesitation the three approached Tharn's couch and he rose to meet them.

"Come, Tharn," said Katon hurriedly. "Urim is waiting for you."

The cave man did not move. "Why?" he asked laconically.

"It is my doing," Katon explained impatiently. "I went to him with an idea, and he thinks enough of it to send for you."

Tharn was satisfied. He could trust Katon. Besides, it would be good to quit this dank place—if only for a little while.

Heedless of curious stares from the other prisoners, Tharn and Katon passed from the room, a guard leading the way. And shortly afterward they stopped before the door of Urim's apartment. In response to their knock, a hollow voice bade them enter.

Tharn could hardly credit his eyes at the change in the man who slumped dejectedly on a couch near the far wall. In place of the proud ruler who had ordered him to the pits, was a hollow-cheeked, sunken-eyed old man.

At the entrance of Tharn and the others, Urim slowly lifted his head and looked full into the calm gray eyes of the giant savage. Under their quiet, sympathetic expression a gleam of hope flickered into his own tired eyes and he squared his shoulders.

"Have you told this man of your plan?" he asked Katon.

"No, Urim," replied the Sepharian. "I thought you might wish to do so."

Urim transferred his attention to the cave-man. "Yesterday," he said, "my daughter was taken by a band of Hairy Men. What do you know about such men?"

Tharn smiled. "Since I was a little boy I have heard many stories by men who have fought the Hairy Ones. They are slow and clumsy and do not think quickly. The warriors of my tribe do not fear them."

"Good!" Urim exclaimed. "Now I will tell you why I sent for you."

"When Katon, here, was told by one of the guards that Alurna had been taken, he came to me with a suggestion. He thinks that by reason of your wide knowledge of the world outside our walls, you might be able to trail these Hairy Men to their caves and rescue my daughter—if she still lives."

"Do this, and you and your mate shall go free—and Katon, too. But if you fail to return with Alurna within the moon, the life of your mate is forfeit."

Tharn frowned thoughtfully. "If I do not find your daughter, yet return alone, what reward is mine?"

"None! It would be as though you had not set foot beyond Sephar's gates."

"Which means I must take part in the Games; and Dylara remains a slave." The cave-man was thinking aloud.

Then: "I agree, Urim. I will start at once."

Little Nobar, the monkey, awakened Dylara by dropping empty bean pods on her upturned face. She blinked in the sunlight filtering through the leaves, and sat up.

Her first thought was that she was actually free. Yet to be accomplished was the task of learning the direction in which lay the caves of her people, then crossing that distance alone, exposed to many dangers.

Dylara, in her accustomed environment, was a resourceful young woman. The prospect of a long journey—just how long a journey she could only surmise—concerned her far less than had the prospects of a lifetime of slavery in Sephar. All her life she had rubbed elbows with jungle beasts. Since infancy the green wilderness of the forest had been her front yard. Night after night she had gone to sleep with the roars of lions and the hunting squalls of leopards for a lullaby. She had learned to respect and avoid Sadu and Tarlok and Jalok—but not to fear them. She knew they hunted man only when other food was denied them—and that was seldom. She knew that a tall tree was a sure haven from all three; for Sadu could not climb at all, while Jalok and Tarlok would not venture among the smaller limbs able to bear her weight but not theirs.

From the freshly risen sun's position Dylara realized she had slept the entire night on this narrow branch. As she drowsily reviewed the previous day's events, she remembered her injured ankle and bent hurriedly to examine it.

She was relieved to find hardly any swelling there, nor was the damage to strained ligaments so great as she at first had feared. Rising, she tested her weight on the one foot and found that, beyond an occasional twinge, it would support her.

Slowly she worked her way down to earth and stepped into the trail. Here she waited a few minutes, planning her next move. She finally decided to follow the path westward away from Sephar until a cross-trail to the north turned up. Such a route would eventually lead her to the heights from which she had first looked upon Sephar. From that point on, finding the caves of Majok should not be impossible.

She skirted the clearing containing the house of Rydob, walking within the jungle's fringe to avoid being seen by anyone who might be within the building, and soon was traveling due west.

As she moved slowly ahead, limping slightly, she noticed the imprints of monstrous, man-like feet in the dust of the path. At first she examined the marks closely; but her limited woodcraft did not permit their identification, and she gave up trying.

The makers of those strange prints, Urb and his savage band, were plodding westward along the same path only a few hours ahead of the cave-girl.

Chapter 13

Death Stalks the Princess

As Mog, the sullen, shuffled across the narrow strip of cleared ground toward the game trail into the jungle labyrinth, he was mentally congratulating himself at the ease with which he had obtained a desirable mate. Within little more than a sun from now he would be exhibiting his prize to the envious eyes of the men and the jealous stares of the shes.

Mog was moving down-wind, and so engrossed was he with self-congratulations that he utterly failed to sense the presence of a tawny shape hidden in the thick growth at the trail's mouth.

It was Sadu, the lion, crouching there, massive head flattened to the ground, hindquarters beneath a taut frame, waiting for the approaching prey to move within the radius of his spring.

On came the Neanderthal. Suddenly a terrible roar came from the ground almost at his feet, and a huge body flashed from the cloaking verdure and leaped at the hairy chest of the astonished man-thing.

Mog's reaction was instinctive. As Sadu's roar broke the silence, the Hairy One tossed Alurna aside and swung up his massive club to beat off the attack.

But in vain. Mog had been too well ambushed to stage an effective defense. Full on his shoulders fell the awful weight of the great cat, the club brushed aside as though it did not exist, and Mog went down as though pole-axed.

With wide distended jaws Sadu lowered his head past the futilely flailing arms. There was a sickening crunch of bone as giant fangs closed on the face of the struggling figure, and Mog, the sullen, was no more.

Alurna, prostrate where Mog had tossed her a few feet away, watched the grisly drama with frightened eyes. During the brief interval in which Sadu had made his kill, she might have risen and taken to her heels, but a paralysis of fear kept her motionless.

Now Sadu rose to his feet, shook himself until the thick mane fairly flew, then placed a heavily taloned paw on his prey and turned his leonine head to look slowly about.

At last his round yellow eyes came to rest on the prone figure of the girl. For an endless moment he regarded her with a fixed, unblinking stare; then the wrinkled lips curled back, exposing blood-reddened teeth, while from the cavernous chest came a low growl that coursed up and down the girl's spine like icy fingers.

For what seemed ages to Alurna that stare never wavered. The long graceful body with its tremendous sinews seemed to expand larger and larger until it loomed great as that of an elephant. She could feel a scream of horror and protest forming in her throat; but before it could find utterance; Sadu swung his head back to the corpse and settled down to feed.

Alurna felt a wave of relief so intense she nearly fainted; it required several minutes to beat down her weakness sufficiently to think of escape.

Some twenty paces to her left towered a mighty tree, its wide branches offering a secure haven could she but reach them. Only half that distance, however, separated her and the lion; and if she made a break for the tree, Sadu could be upon her before she had taken half a dozen steps.

But the beast might not try to stop her. The princess Alurna knew nothing of lions and their habits. Only in the arena during the Games had she seen a live one and then always from a distance. And so she resolved to lie quiet and wait for the animal to be done with its feeding. Perhaps then it would rise and stalk back into the jungle, leaving her unmolested.

The young woman lay perfectly still, trying to close her ears to sounds of grinding teeth and splintering bones. Once she shut her eyes on the revolting picture of Sadu at dinner, but opened them at once. To watch fragments of Mog disappearing into that monstrous maw was bad enough; but to see nothing, while an overwrought imagination sent the beast slinking toward her, was more than human nerves could endure.

Suddenly Sadu rose from the Neanderthal's body and gave voice to a low ominous growl. Alurna saw that the cat's attention was fixed on something beyond her, and she cautiously turned her head toward the cliff.

A few feet below the upper edge were several man-like figures clinging to the vertical surface. Carefully, each inched its way downward, testing each foot-and hand-hold before continuing on.

For a brief, ecstatic moment the girl took them to be warriors from Sephar; but then she saw they were creatures identical to her late captor, and suddenly heightened hopes plunged to a new depth of misery.

Sadu stood as a statue of bronze, the lazy jungle breeze ruffling his tawny mane, narrowed eyes intent on the slow-moving figures. For several minutes he stood thus, then lowering his head he seized the corpse of Mog by one arm and dragged it from sight deep into the luxurious growth of vegetation beside the trail. Not once during this change of position did he glance toward the watching girl.

The moment Sadu disappeared from view, Alurna sprang to her feet and plunged blindly into the jungle at a point farthest removed from the beast. Her only thought was to put all the distance possible between Sadu and herself. She dared not take to the open for fear the Hairy Men would catch sight of her and hunt her down.

For nearly two hours she struggled on, tearing her way through a tangled confusion of creepers, trees, ferns, broken branches and bushes. Several times she tripped and fell headlong, only to rise and stumble onward. Her tunic was stained and torn, thorns and branches having ripped the material in many places.

At last, after unwittingly changing her course many times, she sank to the ground beside the hole of a great tree in the center of a small clearing deep within the heart of the primeval forest.

Completely exhausted she lay half-conscious on the soft carpet of grasses, her tortured lungs laboring to bring oxygen to an overtaxed heart. Gradually her eyes closed, her heart slowed its mad tempo, she breathed more calmly as fear left her. As from a great distance came the low monotonous hum of insects, the subdued twitter of birds and rustlings from many leaves. Alurna slept... .

When she sat up, several hours later, the glade was filled with the half-light that presages nightfall. She stood up and looked about, aware of the danger she had courted by sleeping on the ground in a territory where savage animals were so plentiful.

Abruptly the fading dusk deepened into darkness. The girl's tiny supply of courage fled with the light, leaving a frightened child to grope her way to the base of the lofty tree, where she managed to climb among the branches.

Here she found two thick boughs close together and extending horizontally outward in about the same plane. Sitting with her back against the rough trunk, she stretched tired legs along the two branches and composed herself to wait for the dawn.

Scarcely was she settled than the scream of a great cat sounded beneath her, and she heard the animal on the ground at the foot of the tree. For a short time it circled the clearing, then came the sound of rustling undergrowth and Jalok, the panther, was gone.

That night was the longest Alurna had ever known. The chill dampness of the nocturnal jungle penetrated to the innermost parts of her body until she was certain she would never again be warm. The single thin garment she was wearing was no protection; in fact, it added to her discomfort by absorbing moisture from the damp air.

Later, the heavy blackness about her was dispelled by rays of the full moon as it climbed until it seemed to hang close to the mighty tree that sheltered her. So bright was the glare that Alurna could see objects so small as to escape notice during the day. Several times she saw tiny rodents scurrying across the clearing, and once she saw little Sleeza kill and swallow a field mouse.

Twice she heard large bodies moving in the tangled fastness about the clearing, but what made the sounds remained a mystery. At frequent intervals the savage roars and screams of fierce beasts reached her ears, but always from a distance.

At last the seemingly endless night began to wane, and near daybreak the girl dozed fitfully.

When next she opened her eyes the sun had risen, flooding the glade with life-giving, hope-reviving rays. Alurna rose, unkinked muscles cramped from long hours in an unfamiliar position, and descended slowly to the ground. She was aware of being very hungry as well as possessed of a raging thirst. Acting on these needs she entered the forest to search for water and food.

Shortly thereafter, and solely by chance, she came to a small swift-moving mountain stream. Here she knelt and drank deep of the cold water, then, greatly refreshed, rose, and set about gathering fruit from the plentiful supply everywhere about her.

After eating, she bathed in the river, its waters soothing to the scratches and bruises of yesterday's mad dash through the jungle.

By the time she had dressed again, the sun was quite high. While she had been in the water she had caught sight of a narrow game trail

leading in the direction she was confident Sephar lay. Spirits soaring, she started out for home, her step springy with confidence.

By noon the sun's heat had become so oppressive that she stopped in the shelter of a tree to rest. She was tempted to climb into the branches and sleep for a while; but the thought of being forced to spend another night in this wilderness drove away that temptation. It could not be much farther, she reasoned, before the base of the great plateau about Sephar was reached.

Her sweat-streaked face set in stubborn lines, the daughter of Urim stepped once more into the trail and plodded doggedly on. And every step was taking her farther and farther from her home.

It was not long after, that Tarlok, the leopard, his belly empty from a night of fruitless hunting, caught scent of her. Slowly, with infinite stealth, he slunk upwind, keeping within the jungle's edge until he caught sight of the girl's bowed shoulders.

Tarlok's jowls dripped with anticipation. Of all creatures known to him, none was more easily taken than man. A quick stalk, a sudden spring—and once again Tarlok would feed.

Nearer and nearer he approached, moving warily lest the girl take alarm and climb high into some tree. When almost abreast of her, he boldly stepped into the trail, not ten feet behind his unsuspecting prey.

It was then that Alurna, warned perhaps by some subtle sense, turned around.

Vulcar of Sephar and his band of twenty warriors having safely descended the precipice at the same point where Alurna had inched her way down earlier that day, assembled at the mouth of a pathway into the uncharted wood before them.

"They probably came this way," Vulcar said. "Look about for some sign of their passage."

A few minutes later a shout of triumph from one of the party brought the others to his side. He was pointing to a mark in the trail's dust—the large square imprint of a great flat foot, grotesquely human.

Vulcar smiled with grim satisfaction. "We are on the right track," he declared. "Let us go on; we have work to do."

As unwittingly as though it did not exist they passed the spot where their princess had entered the jungle. They did not see the broken and twisted greenery in the forest wall, and had they done so they could not have interpreted its meaning.

The men of Urb, versed in jungle lore, had found her trail at once, just as they had picked out Mog's bones where Sadu had left them. But Urim's daughter held no interest for any one of them, and they had made no effort to track her down.

For the balance of the day Vulcar and his companions pushed ahead on their mission of rescue—or revenge. Because they were smaller and more active they covered ground much more quickly than their bulky quarry. Consequently they were rapidly overtaking the five Neanderthals.

Near sunset the winding path debouched into a small clearing, through which ran a fair-sized stream. Here the pursuers found the first positive indication they were on the right track. On the near bank of the river were ashes of a small fire, still warm to the touch. Scattered about it were the gnawed bones of Muta, the boar—already picked clean by hordes of ants.

At first, Vulcar's men had clamored to dash ahead in hot pursuit. But the hawk-faced leader decided against it, saying a short rest and full bellies would help them to fight better than if they were worn and hungry.

"But if we wait," argued one, "the Hairy Men may reach their caves. We cannot fight against an entire tribe of them."

Vulcar shook his head. "Had they been close to their caves," he pointed out, "they would not have stopped to eat and rest. No; we will stop for a little while and eat of the food we carry; then we can go on even more quickly than before.

"Five of us will go slightly ahead of the others. In case the Hairy Men find that many are following them they may run away. If they see only five, however, they are sure to attack. Then the balance of us will fall upon them!"

There was no gainsaying the soundness of Vulcar's plan. Even the most action-eager warrior saw its beauty. And so the men dropped to the ground beside the river, ate of the cured strips of meat carried in their shoulder pouches, and drank from the river.

After a short rest period, Vulcar called them together and gave the word that began the last stage of the journey.

While only a short distance ahead, Urb and his four companions plodded slowly on toward their distant homes.

Darkness was not far in the offing, and Urb was inwardly debating on ordering the men to the trees for the night, when Tolb, at the rear of the column, voiced a low note that arrested the others in mid-stride. Turning

as one, the five stood motionless, their ears, keen as those of Sadu, himself, cocked to catch and interpret what Tolb had heard.

Urb, wise old campaigner, was first to identify the sounds. "Men!" he grunted. "The hairless ones! Hide."

Silently each Neanderthal man stepped behind a trunk of one of the trees lining the path. Mighty clubs swung ready in steel fingers; narrowed eyes beneath overhanging brows scanned the open ground of the trail. The minutes lengthened... .

And then five white-tuniced figures appeared at the far end of the path and came on at a half-trot. Slung across their shoulders were short bows; at their backs hung arrow-filled containers, and in their right hands dangled clubs, smaller than those used by the Neanderthals but still formidable weapons.

Not until the group had drawn abreast the ambushers did Urb give the signal. Then his fingers closed on a dry branch, and five immense bludgeons hurtled toward the startled Sepharians.

It requires far more skill to hit a moving target than a stationary one. Then, too, the half-light near the end of day does not add to the chances of a successful cast.

Three of the clubs missed their marks altogether, one struck a shoulder glancingly, while the fifth crashed into the base of a neck, snapping the spine and killing the stricken man instantly.

Behind the cudgels blundered the Hairy Ones, drawing flint knives as they came. If they had expected to catch the enemy unprepared and demoralized, however, they were badly disappointed.

A barrage of Sepharian clubs flashed to meet them. Two found marks: one striking Kor alongside the skull, knocking him flat; the other caught Urb, himself, a glancing blow atop the head that made his knees buckle briefly.

The Neanderthal chieftain recovered quickly and with an angry bel-low sprang at the nearest white-clad figure. Disregarding the darting knife, Urb caught him by the tunic with one hand and drove his fist with inhuman force full into the Sepharian's face.

There was a dull crunching sound of crumpling bones and the hairless one slumped forward, his face from hairline to chin driven through the back of his head.

The two remaining guards were still in the fight, seeking to out-man-euver their less agile foemen and knife them from behind. The shifting feet stirred up dust from the trail until a cloud enveloped the fighters.

And then a ringing shout echoed above the panting, twisting bodies, and into battle came the balance of the Sepharians.

At sight of these enemy reinforcements, Urb and his three remaining henchmen turned and fled, leaving the fallen Kor where he lay. The newcomers pursued them for a short distance, then, seeing they were empty-handed, turned back.

Vulcar called his men together, determined the extent of any injuries, then turned his attention to the bodies in the trail. Coolly he ran his knife through the throat of the still stunned Kor. A brief examination proved the other two casualties to be quite dead.

After detailing four men to scoop out shallow graves for their late comrades, Vulcar sent the others into the foliage on either side of the trail to find Alurna. He believed she had been bound and gagged to prevent any warning of the ambushade, and he pictured her as lying helpless nearby, awaiting release.

Until long after darkness, Vulcar and his men searched for their princess. Again and again they shouted her name, straining to catch an answering cry that did not come. Finally, after hours of systematic effort, in which every inch of ground for yards around was combed, the realization came that Urim's daughter was as lost to them as though they had remained in Sephar.

To Vulcar, the awful truth came as a sickening blow. So certain of success had he been at learning they were close on the heels of the Hairy Men, that the final disappointment almost drove him mad. All he could see was hopeless suffering dulling Urim's eyes and lining his face... . Vulcar beat his fists together in impotent fury at his own helplessness.

Reluctantly he gave the signal to abandon the search, and with bowed shoulders and bent head the captain led his command back toward Sephar and a waiting father.

Dylara sat beside a tiny brook and allowed its cool waters to chill her aching ankle. It had begun to swell again from the strain of a full day's slow progress, even though she had stopped many times to give it rest.

An hour from now it would be sunset. Soon the forest denizens would be coming here to drink. Soon, too, would come the meat-eaters, to lurk beside the pathway, awaiting Bana and Neela, whose succulent flesh they loved.

The cave-girl bent and washed the dust from her hands and face, drying the skin with grass. Then she rose and retraced her steps to the base

of a tall tree. Favoring her ankle as best she could, Dylara climbed well above the ground, sought and found a properly placed limb on which she could spend the night, and fell promptly into dreamless sleep.

She had no more than closed her eyes when a group of eight men passed below the branches of her tree and stopped at the water's edge. One of the eight walked slowly back and forth on the near bank, his head lowered, studying the ground.

He halted suddenly, stooped lower, eyes intent on something there. Then he beckoned to the others.

"Look!" he exclaimed. "There, in the mud. See those marks? She sat here, bathing her feet. And here!—here are the prints of bare feet."

Jotan, following the pointing finger, nodded, his handsome face shining. "They must be hers. Are they recent, Modilk?"

"So recent," said the long-faced Modilk solemnly, "that the slave-girl must be within a few minutes of us."

Javan spoke now, his voice worried. "Where are we to spend the night, Jotan? The big cats will be hunting soon; we must find a safe place."

Jotan slapped his friend's shoulder comfortingly. "We'll find Dylara first," he said, "then make camp for the night. A circle of brush fires will keep the lions and leopards away."

The eight men waded the stream, not bothering to remove their sandals, and pressed on into the north.

While a stone's throw behind them, aloft in the branches of a leafy tree, slept the girl they were seeking.

Chapter 14

Forest Trails

"It was here we found the dead guards. Where, or in what direction, the Hairy Men took Alurna is not known. Vulcar and his men followed this trail away from Sephar."

The guard detailed to show Tharn the scene of Alurna's capture had told all he knew. To the cave man it more than sufficed; following a trail left less than a sun before would not tax his prowess.

"You have told me enough," Tharn assured him. "Hasten back to your chief and tell him I will return soon—his daughter with me."

The Cro-Magnard, a slight smile touching his lips, watched the retreating figure until it disappeared around a bend of the trail. Even then he did not move, but stood quiet, arms folded across his swelling chest, drawing great draughts of humid air deep into his lungs.

Free! Gone were stone walls, cold floors and barred doors. No longer must he go only where others permitted. There were soft grasses and growing things about him. Overhead was the limitless blue of space; and there was Dyta, the sun, sending golden spears to prick, with welcome heat, the smooth skin of the cave lord.

Siha, the wind, moving in little eddies and gusts, brought to his nostrils a heavy pungent cloying odor belonging only to the jungle; the combined essence of uncounted varieties of plants, together with the comingled scent of endless small life that makes of the jungle a teeming city in itself. Overhead, little Nobar, the monkey, sat on a low-hanging branch and scolded roundly the two-legged creature in the trail below.

Yes, it was good to be free again. Good to know the pure pleasure of unlimited vistas of trees and plains. A vision of his father's caves and the members of his tribe rose before him, bringing the pangs of homesickness. But superimposed on the familiar scene came, unbidden, the lovely face and softly rounded figure of Dylara.

Siha veered sharply and came sweeping at right angles across the path. Tharn stiffened for strong in his nostrils was the scent of Tarlok,

the leopard. He was instantly alert—a wary jungle denizen who wheeled and faced upwind, eyes narrowed, the sharp blade of flint ready in his right hand.

The strength of the great cat's scent faded as the creature moved farther away. Whether or not it had caught Tharn's scent did not interest the cave-man, now; a retreating danger ceased to be of interest.

For a few minutes Tharn carefully went over the floor of the trail at the point where the abduction had taken place, as well as the neighboring undergrowth. Soon he found the several hiding places of the Hairy Ones; and a bit later he came upon the delicate footmarks of Alurna within the trail itself. One of these prints was almost obliterated by the broad square mark of a great naked foot; it was here Mog's initial leap had ended beside the girl.

Dropping to hands and knees, Tharn placed sensitive nostrils close to the marks. To that unbelievably keen organ was borne the individual scent spoor of Alurna, as well as that of Mog, the sullen. Immediately there were engraved on Tharn's memory, scent impressions he would recognize among a hundred others for a long time to come.

He found more of Mog's footprints, all leading along the path and away from Sephar. He followed these, increasing his pace when they showed no indication of swerving from the trail. Satisfied that locating Alurna's captor was only a matter of following the path underfoot, Tharn went on. He felt no inclination to hurry. Too long had he been denied freedom from supervision. The sooner he found the missing girl, the sooner he must return to Sephar—even though he and Dylara were to be freed the moment he returned.

As he strolled along, he was reminded of the bow and arrows hanging at his back—these and a stone knife and a grass rope were the weapons he had chosen when preparing to leave Sephar.

The bow, he found, was fashioned from a hard black wood. Its inner surface was nearly flat; the outer quite round. Both ends were gracefully tapered, each notched to hold a string of catgut.

The arrows were made from the same wood as the bow. Their heads were of flint, painstakingly shaped into the likeness of a small leaf, and exceedingly sharp. Each head was fitted snugly into a deep groove, packed about with a clay-like substance and hardened by fire until nearly impossible to loosen. Near the butt of each arrow a thin rounded bit of wood had been inserted to guide its flight.

Bordering the trail some fifty paces ahead, stood a small tree. During some recent storm a lightning bolt had torn a jagged streak in its bole, close to the ground, leaving a strip of white wood gleaming in the sun.

Partly through accident and partly by clear reasoning, Tharn drew the bow with the finished technique of a veteran archer. His left arm, stiffly extended, pointed straight at the selected mark; his right hand, fingers hooked about the string, came smoothly back to a point just below the lobe of his right ear.

There sounded a singing "twang" and a polished bolt flashed in the sunlight, passed the tree's bole by a good foot and disappeared into the foliage.

Tharn ruefully rubbed an angry welt on his left wrist where the bow-string had stung him. He understood, now, why many of Sephar's warriors wore wristbands.

With his knife he hacked off a strip of his loin cloth. This he bound about his left wrist, then took up the bow, his chin set in determined lines.

On his third attempt he hit the mark, sending an arrowhead deep into the center of the white patch.

The cave-man all but shouted aloud. Lovingly he ran his palms over the black wood. No matter what he had suffered at Sepharian hands, they had repaid many times over by disclosing to him the power in a gut-strung branch. Now in truth was he lord of the jungle! He pictured Sadu dead, a few well-placed arrows in his carcass. And shaggy-coated Conta, the cave-bear; of what protection his tough hide against such keen-tipped shafts?

Clearly, Tharn had forgotten the mission that had sent him into the jungle. Everything ceased to exist for him except the bow in his hands and the quiver of arrows at his back. Although he continued on toward the west, his progress was slow and uncertain; for the cave-man was determined to become an expert bowman without delay.

At first he was content to use nothing more difficult than tree trunks as targets; but as he increased in skill his ambition led him to seek more difficult marks.

Nobar, the monkey, industriously occupied in searching the hairs on his belly for dried bits of dead skin, almost fell from his perch in fright as something streaked past his nose with a vicious hiss. With the nimble alacrity of his kind he rocketed thirty feet upward, where, from a

swaying vine, he hurled a torrent of verbal abuse at the grinning youth in the trail below.

The hours sped by, but Tharn never noticed. At first he lost almost every arrow he shot, but little by little his skill was increasing. He attempted drawing the bow with either hand; he sought to release a second arrow before the first had struck; he shot at birds on the wing.

Darkness came upon him without warning. Then it was he remembered he had not eaten since morning. An inventory of his supply of arrows revealed only eight remained of the full two dozen he had brought from Sephar.

He would sleep now. In the morning he would find food and water. And he would make his kill with an arrow—of that he was determined. The bow had proved a wonderful toy; when Dyta came Tharn would prove its practical worth... .

With the first rays of the morning sun Tharn slid from his arboreal couch and set out at a rapid trot along the trail into the west. An hour later he was crossing the narrow belt of grasses bordering the precipice overlooking a forest-filled valley.

Here he found where Mog and Alurna had started their tortuous descent. Here, too, were signs of the passage of other Neanderthals, and those of Vulcar's searching party.

Before descending the cliff, Tharn turned back to the plain in search of food. Not long after, he had completed a successful stalk of Narjok, the horned deer, and brought it down with a single arrow. After devouring a generous quantity of raw flank-meat, he drank deep of the waters of a small spring and came back to the brink of the precipice.

Tharn went down that vertical cliffside as though it were a broad staircase. At the base he found a tangle of overlapping footsteps leading straight toward a game trail leading into the nearby jungle. Toward its mouth moved the young giant; and so confident was he that Alurna had been carried along this path that only by chance did he keep from losing valuable time.

As the Cro-Magnard neared the trees, the undergrowth parted with a slight rustle, and Gubo, the hyena, slunk deeper into the forest.

At the first sound of disturbed brush, Tharn had pivoted about and with unthinkable quickness unslung his bow and fitted an arrow into place. At sight of cowardly Gubo he smiled and relaxed; but before he turned back to the trail, he saw signs of a recent struggle in the matted

grass close by. It might have nothing to do with the business at hand—and, again, it might.

A brief investigation gave him the complete picture. Here, Mog had gone down beneath Sadu; a few paces away were the broken grasses where Alurna had been tossed. He knew, without troubling to look, that Mog's bones were bleaching behind yonder wall of verdure.

Well, the Hairy One was dead; it would save Tharn the task of killing him. Now all that remained was to take the trail of the frightened girl at the place where she had plunged blindly into the dark waste of jungle. She could not have gotten far; and, except for the unlikely chance that one of the big cats had pulled her down, his mission should be finished before nightfall.

Delaying no longer, Tharn took up the trail of the princess, forging rapidly ahead and following with ease the evidence of her hurried flight.

Soon he came to the tiny clearing in which Alurna had spent the previous night. Circling about, he quickly picked up her trail out of the glade, went on across a short stretch of jungle and out onto the banks of a little stream.

Here he found traces of small sandals in the soft mud. That these had not been even partially obliterated by prowling beasts was evidence of the spoor's freshness.

By this time the mid-day heat was at its strongest. Tharn paused long enough to slake his thirst, then set out along the same pathway taken by Alurna not long before.

A half hour later he was moving steadily ahead at a half trot, expecting to come upon the girl at any moment.

Suddenly he came to a full stop, head thrown back, sensitive nostrils searching the light breeze. And then he moved—as lightning moves.

Only the trembling of leaves marked where he had entered the trees overhead.

Chapter 15

Treachery

In the apartment of Pryak, far beneath the temple of the Sepharian god, a number of priests were grouped about a long table. At its head sat the high priest, Pryak; at his right was Orbar, second in command. The balance of the stools were occupied by six under-priests, all stern, silent men of middle-age, with that air of inflexible righteousness which appears to be the hallmark of their kind.

Pryak, his close-set eyes of watery blue blazing with an inner fire, rose from his chair.

"For many moons," he began, choosing his words carefully, "the loyal servants of the God-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken have been forced to bow to the unjust commands of a hated oppressor. Now the time is at hand to end this oppression. The way has been shown to me by our God; listen closely, for the future of the priesthood in Sephar depends on how faithfully my orders are carried out.

"This is my plan... ."

For nearly an hour the high priest spoke without interruption. His cold, crisp sentences seemed to explode in the listeners' faces. Twice, old Cardon, grizzled from passing years of service for his God, half rose from his stool, words of protest forming on his lips. But each time the mad glare of Pryak's eyes gave him pause.

When the high-priest had concluded, he watched the faces of his audience, waiting for his words to sink home. Much depended upon their reaction.

Somehow the very audacity of Pryak's plan seemed to carry weight with the under-priests. Smiles of admiration appeared on several faces; one of the Council chuckled openly. Cardon, alone, seemed unconvinced; but he knew well his chief would brook no interference once he had determined to act.

Pryak was satisfied. "It is agreed, then," he said. "We meet in the Room of the God at the hour named; the others will have their instructions before then and all will be in readiness."

In the palace throne-room, Urim, ruler of Sephar, sat slouched in his chair atop the dais. Despite the grief and worry from loss of his daughter, Urim was determined his duties should not be shirked because of personal sorrow.

The late morning audience was nearly over. Save for a few citizens and a handful of guards attending the king, the hall was empty. In another hour Urim could return to his private quarters.

A guard entered the room and moved directly to the foot of the dais. Head bowed, he waited for permission to speak.

"What is it, Mosark?" Urim asked dully.

"Pryak, Voice of the God, is outside asking for an immediate audience. With him are more than a score of priests."

Urim pursed his lips in surprise. What could have gotten into that gabbling old fool to seek out one who despised him and his kind? Once a year Pryak came to the palace with a group of his attendants to discuss the rites held during the Sacrificial Games. It must be that reason Pryak was here now, although he was much earlier than usual.

Best see him and get it over with. He was very tired; perhaps he could sleep a little during the afternoon. Time passed quickly when spent in sleep; by evening Vulcar should be back, either with Alurna or with word she would never return. This uncertainty of her fate was what he found unbearable; if only he could *know*...

More likely he would get the truth from the barbarian whom Katon had recommended so highly. Everything about that young man emphasized his fitness to cope with the wilderness and its savage life. There was a keen alert mind behind those fine gray eyes—and a body well able to carry out the dictates of that mind.

"What shall I tell him, Urim of Sephar?"

Urim shook off his thoughts. "Bring him in," he said resignedly. "His men, too—let them all in. Except for their wagging tongues they are harmless."

At Pryak's entrance, Urim rose and nodded briefly in formal recognition of the other's office, then sat down again. The high-priest acknowledged the nod as curtly, and came close to the dais.

The balance of the priests spread out in a rough half circle close behind their leader. Urim noticed all were clad in the long, loose-sleeved robes

ordinarily worn only during the rainy season. None was armed, it being forbidden for members of the priesthood to bear weapons.

Pryak was quick to notice that which he had foreseen and counted upon: the relaxed watchfulness and lack of discipline among the handful of armed men attending the king. This, he knew, was due to Vulcar's absence from Sephar; had not the hawk-faced captain gone after Alurna, Pryak would have feared to put his plan into execution. Vulcar had always been suspicious of the priesthood; twice he had warned Urim that Pryak was overly ambitious.

"O Urim," began Pryak, "the Games honoring our God begin soon. Before then I mean to show how mistaken you are in your ill-advised interference with the laws of worship. It is I, Pryak, Voice of the God, who shall say how He is to be honored. I must warn you, if you persist in meddling, your God may turn against you and your people, sending sickness to take its toll, and causing your hunters to return empty-handed from the forests.

"Only a sun ago your own daughter was taken by the Hairy Man. Can you say her loss was not due to your—"

The arch-priest was permitted to go no further. Urim's face had grown steadily darker as mixed anger and amazement rendered him speechless. But mention of Alurna brought strength to his tongue.

Voicing a cry of rage, Urim leaped to his feet. His words were loud against the room's sudden hush.

"Silence, mangy son of Gubo! Must my time be wasted by your senseless chatter? I have told you that cruelty has no place in our faith. Too many times have I told you this; if you speak of it again, the God shall have a new 'Voice'—one able to recognize my authority!"

By this time Tidor, the neophyte, had edged his way past the flank of Urim's guards, slipping stealthily from sight behind the frustum. Here he paused, drew a long stone knife from the folds of a sleeve, then stole cautiously up the serrated side of the dais.

Tidor's heart swelled with pride. It was not every young, untried priest who could be relied upon to carry out so important a mission. Pryak had promised him much if he succeeded. Even if half those promises was kept, Tidor would rank high among his fellows.

Crouching low, Tidor clutched his knife tighter within his fingers—then silently and swiftly he sprang!

A swelling cry of horror from the guards halted Urim's ringing words, and he whirled about as a white-clad figure closed upon him. Before he

could lift his hands in defense, a slender blade flashed evilly in a brief arc before striking deep into his breast.

Death came instantly to Urim of Sephar; and his body rolled limply down the steps of the dais, nearly upsetting Pryak as it struck the floor.

Tidor's moment of victory was short-lived. One of the guards snatched a knife from his belt and flung it, point-foremost, with all his strength.

Tidor screamed once in pain and terror as the heavy blade sank hilt-deep into his neck. Then his knees gave way and he fell face down across the great chair. Urim was avenged.

And now the momentary paralysis of the guards snapped like an overdrawn bowstring. Seizing their weapons they threw themselves at the priests with the commendable intention of butchering the lot. But in place of an unarmed and fear-stricken group of priests, they were confronted by an orderly band of unflinching men, each with a long knife drawn from the folds of his left sleeve.

The guards skidded to a halt in open-mouthed astonishment at this feat of legerdemain; and Pryak, quick to take advantage of their baffled state, scrambled atop the dais and cried out to gain their attention.

"Hold!" he shouted. "In the name of your God! Heed my words before His wrath falls upon you! Urim is dead because he would be greater than his God. Would you suffer the same fate?"

The guards shifted uncertainly. The words cut through the red curtain of their fury, weakening the resolution to wipe out, in blood, the result of their own negligence. But fear of their God—already strong enough in man to be basic—stiffened their limbs and flooded their hearts with indecision.

Had they a leader, someone to rally them to action, Pryak and his followers would have been dead within seconds. But the wily arch-priest had foreseen that, with Vulcar away, there would be none hardy enough to oppose him in taking the entire city.

"Drop your knives!" Pryak put into his voice all the force and depth he could muster. "Let those who are loyal to their God drop to their knees and ask that He accept them into His service. Delay not, lest He strike you down as unworthy!"

One by one dead Urim's warriors sank to their knees and bowed their heads. Soon there was none within the chamber who remained erect, save Pryak and the Council of Priests. This latter group had huddled together close to the door during the excitement; only after all danger had passed did they resume their habitual expressions of arrogance... .

From his elevated position Pryak looked down with mingled elation and disbelief at the many bent backs and lowered heads. Frantically his crafty brain sought for some means of making this triumph final and complete.

An inspiration struck him, then, and he lifted his hands high and turned his face toward the ceiling.

"Let no one move or speak!" he commanded loudly. "The All-powerful is speaking words of wisdom and guidance for my ears, alone. Let there be silence while I receive His message!"

A shiver ran through the kneeling men. The God was actually looking down into this room, seeing all that went on, and doubtless ready to blast anyone foolhardy enough to interrupt His message.

For some minutes Pryak remained as motionless as a figure hewn from stone. Arms and neck must have ached from their unnatural position, but not the tiniest muscle trembled under the strain. At last his arms dropped to his sides and his head resumed its normal position.

"Arise!" he called out; and when the now thoroughly subdued guards and the under-priests had obeyed, he said:

"The God is pleased that unworthy Urim is dead, and suggests his passing serve as warning to others as blind. He commands me to rule in Urim's place, and orders His people to honor their God and make offerings to Him as they did before Urim was king.

"And now let all leaders and subjects of palace and city be told I am king; and at the time of the morning audience, tomorrow, I shall speak to them from the palace courtyard. Go!"

When only the Council of Priests and Pryak, himself, remained in the throne-room, the new ruler gave them their orders.

"The city is ours," he said, "and we shall make its people recognize my power. Each of you will mingle with Sephar's citizens, spreading word of how they will benefit by this change.

"Also you will tell of the lavish Games to start within the next few days—far earlier than usual. Make them understand that even the greatest city of all Ammad has never provided such entertainment as I will give them. When they hear this, they will forget any resentment they may hold toward us; for most of them care not who rules, so long as the Games are exciting.

"Go now, and return here when darkness comes. Orbar, arrange for these bodies to be removed and thrown to the beasts. Report to me when you have done so; there are orders I want given to the palace attendants. For the time being you are to serve as captain of the guards."

Chapter 16

Return to Sephar

For the first time since she had started out that morning, Alurna was beginning to question her opinion of where Sephar lay. She sought to push out the thought lest it became certainty and bring utter panic in its wake.

She forced her mind into other channels. How silent the jungle had become! Somehow its spells of stillness were harder to bear than the most sinister of sounds. Unconsciously she strained her ears for some sound to relieve this feeling of complete loneliness.

Something was moving in the trail behind her!

Alurna was turning, even as her brain received the warning. Standing in the path was Tarlok, the leopard, less than ten paces away.

Stricken dumb with terror, Alurna could only gaze wide-eyed at that sleek, spotted head. The narrowed yellow eyes, the white teeth with four long fangs predominated, the back-curling lips drawn into a grimace of blood-lust, even the somehow ludicrous long white hairs on the upper lip—all were stamped indelibly within her mind.

Tarlok was enjoying himself. The utter fear expressed in every line of his prey's face and body appealed to the cruelty in his nature. Purely as a means of adding to that fear, he made a little half-spring toward the girl.

Voicing a half-mad sob of absolute despair, Alurna sank to her knees and closed her eyes to wait for a horrible death.

There followed an agonizing few moments of silence. Why did death delay? Alurna fought to keep her eyes tight shut; but terror plucked at the lids, forcing them open. Hardly more than a yard away was the cat's sleek, savage head!

And then something hissed through the air between the girl and the beast. Emitting a shrill scream of surprise and anger, Tarlok reared high above the kneeling figure. That awful sound was more than Alurna's taut nerves could withstand, and she toppled forward into merciful unconsciousness... .

Her next conscious sensation was that of flying, and she shuddered, believing it the brief delirium preceding death. But as the floating feeling endured, she slowly opened her eyes and saw that she was being borne through the forest top in the arms of a half naked man.

"The leopard?" she said weakly. "What happened? How—"

A slight smile touched the man's strong, finely-shaped lips, lighting up his handsome, tanned face. "Tarlok is dead," he said. "It was very close; my rope caught him just in time."

He halted and placed her in a sitting position on a strong branch, then sat down beside her. "I was beginning to think you would never open your eyes again," he continued. "We have come a long way since I picked you up in the trail."

Alurna was staring intently at him as he talked. "I have seen you somewhere, before."

Again the man smiled. "Yes," he said. "You have seen me before. It was only a few nights ago that I entered your room while the palace guards were hunting me."

"Of course!" Alurna exclaimed. "I remember. But you were caught and sentenced to the Games. Have you escaped from Sephar? And how did you happen to find me?" She broke off, laughing. "Not that I'm sorry you *did* find me. If you hadn't—" She shivered, leaving the sentence unfinished.

"Your father sent me to take you from the Hairy Ones," Tharn explained. "It was Katon's idea."

Whereupon he told of the agreement reached during his talk with Urim. The princess was secretly elated by one particular provision of the pact—the promised return of the Cro-Magnard girl to this man for succeeding in his mission. With Dylara gone, there was no reason why Jotan could not be won by Urim's daughter.

"Will you take me home, now?" she asked.

Tharn nodded. "We will go on until darkness, then sleep in the trees until morning."

He stood upright on the swaying bow, then bent and caught Alurna about the waist and swung her lightly to his back. The girl's arms slipped instinctively about the strong neck, and the young cave lord set off along the leafy avenue he had been following.

The first few minutes of the journey were never to be forgotten by the awed princess. Tharn's path took him high above the ground to where encumbering masses of tangled creepers did not reach. From one slender

branch to another the majestic figure raced along with an easy sureness remarkable to behold.

Alurna forgot her fear of the heights, presently, admiration taking its place.

How confidently this god-like creature threaded his way across the network of bending boughs, where a slip might mean an awful death to them both! What splendid thews he possessed, to carry her as though she were a day-old babe!

Occasionally the rays of the sinking sun reached them through breaks in the foliage above, disclosing to the rapt eyes of the princess the horrid depths beneath.

Soon the dizzying bounds from one great tree pinnacle to the next ceased to be breath-taking, and Alurna rested against Tharn's warm shoulder, her nerves calm and relaxed.

Tharn's thoughts were far afield. Soon—another sun, in fact—Dylara and he would be on their way to the caves of Tharn. And Katon would go with them—Katon, his good friend.

The blue-eyed Sepharian and he would hunt in the forests with Barkoo and Korgul and Torbat. Katon would teach them to use the bow. Perhaps his friend would find a mate among the girls of the tribe. Then in truth would they be as blood-brothers!

How wonderful it would be to have such a companion! Always before he had spent much of his time alone, ranging the jungles for the adventures he craved. In all his tribe there had not been one he was drawn to; none he liked and respected enough to adopt as an intimate. Barkoo, of course, came closest to being such; but Barkoo carried far more years than he, and was given to the conservatism of old men.

The others were so far short of his own physical and mental stature. They could not race at break-neck speed through tree tops; they could not scent game from afar; they feared the great cats, unless in the company of many warriors.

It would be different, now. He would teach Katon the forest lore that had made Tharn master of the wild places. They would be always together—inseparable.

Only a few minutes of daylight remained when Tharn and his burden reached the forest's edge near the base of the sheer cliff between them and Sephar. Tharn realized they could not hope to complete the ascent before the light failed; so, selecting a tall tree, he fashioned a rude platform of branches high above the ground and covered it with leaves as a comfortable bed for the princess.

As for himself, he curled in a crotch of the same tree, a few feet beneath her, and, after waiting until she had ceased turning uneasily on her primitive couch, dropped off to sleep.

The sun had barely cleared the eastern horizon when Alurna opened her eyes. For a long moment she gazed blankly at the ceiling of vegetation; then memory returned and she rose to her feet on the lattice of boughs that had served as her bed.

Something of the beauty of the untamed forest came to her as she stood there, drinking in the sea of green through sleep-freshened eyes. An early morning breeze stirred the vast expanse of leaves like an invisible hand; multi-colored birds flashed among the myriad branches and festooned vines, uttering strident cries or now and then surprising her with a burst of melody from some feathered throat. Already familiar were the ever-present troops of sure-footed monkeys, swinging and racing among the tree-top terraces—chattering, scolding, inquisitive.

This, she reflected, was the jungle—gaudy and sparkling and inviting on the surface; grim, and the lurking place of savage horror beneath its glamorous exterior.

There was a soft sound at her back, and she wheeled—to look into the quiet face of the cave-man. In his arms was a quantity of fruits; and Alurna was suddenly aware of being very hungry.

While they ate, seated on the bed of leaves, Alurna chattered continuously, asking many questions, seeking to explore the depths of her rescuer's mind and character. She found herself admiring the utter lack of self-consciousness in his replies and actions, while his habitual reserve and dignity of bearing compelled her respect.

Finally they descended to the ground and crossed the ribbon of grassland to the base of the lofty escarpment. Alurna, looking up at the upper rim so far above, shook her head in wonder.

"I'll never be able to climb it, Tharn," she protested. "How I ever managed to get down it without falling, is more than I know."

"We can not wish ourselves to the top," Tharn pointed out. "Nor is there any point in remaining here. We can at least make the effort."

It required more than an hour for them to gain the upper edge of the plateau. Alurna was helpless to aid him by doing any climbing herself; Tharn literally had to carry her up that vertical slope.

When they stood at last on level ground, the cave-man did not stop to rest. After they had crossed the narrow stretch of plains bordering the

forest, Tharn turned to his companion. "I am going to carry you, again," he said. "Hold me about the neck and do not be afraid."

With that, he lifted her easily, and supporting her thus with one arm, took to the trees. With the pathway through the branches lighted by Dyta's powerful rays, and with the knowledge that only a few hours remained before he would reclaim Dylara, Tharn elected to travel swiftly; and when the forest-man hurried, there were few of the jungle folk that could match his speed.

Onward he went, racing along swaying limbs, leaping outward across space to hurtle into the embrace of another tree at the dizzy height of the forest top, his free hand finding, unerringly, some waving bough at the very instant those sure feet came to rest on some strong branch. Now he threaded his way above the hard-packed earth with all the grace and agility of a tight-rope walker, prevented from falling only by an uncanny sense of balance. If handicapped by his burden, none might have guessed it; certainly he could not have moved with greater speed and surety had he been unencumbered.

Alurna lay quiescent within his grasp, looking up at the immobile face so near her own. It was restful to lie against the broad chest, her cheek pillowed on a firm shoulder, and be lulled to drowsiness by the rhythmic sway of this tireless body. A feeling of complete peace gradually suffused her entire being, her eyelids grew languorously heavy, closed of their own volition... . Alurna fell fast asleep.

How long she slept Alurna never knew, but her eyes opened as she felt the arms about her relax their grip and lower her to her feet. There was something almost of roughness in the action, and she looked up at Tharn quickly. To her surprise he was standing with head thrown back, nostrils twitching as he sniffed the wind from the north. His face seemed tense, strangely drawn.

She put a hand on his arm, her white fingers gleaming in sharp contrast to the tanned forearm.

"What has happened, Tharn?" She glanced uneasily about at the surrounding foliage. "Are we nearly to Sephar?"

Tharn was not listening. To his sensitive nostrils the wind was bringing the scent of a lion—and of a girl. The odors were commingled and of equal strength, sufficient evidence to Tharn that the girl might be in danger.

But the scents alone had not brought the tenseness to his face. There was a haunting familiarity to one of them—that of the girl.

And then he was galvanized into action. Whirling, he scooped up the girl and placed her on a thick branch, close to the bole.

"Remain here until I return," he commanded. "I will come back for you."

"But why—" began the princess, then realized she was addressing thin air. Tharn had gone, speeding through the trees into the north.

His mate was in danger! The thought echoed and re-echoed in his mind, even as logic told him it was next to impossible for Dylara to be elsewhere than in Urim's palace. Yet he would stake the evidence of his senses against reason itself—as, indeed, he was doing now.

If his passage through the trees with Alurna had been rapid, he was literally flying now—hurling himself from one branch to another with reckless fury—taking chances he ordinarily would never have considered.

While ever stronger to his nostrils came the scent of Sadu—and of Dylara.

At last he caught sight of her, seated on a fallen log at the edge of a trail, carefully massaging an ankle.

And at the same instant, from his elevated position, he caught sight of Sadu a few paces behind the unheeding daughter of Majok. The beast was lying belly-flat behind a curtain of vines; and even as Tharn discovered him the cat was preparing to spring.

The man of the caves never hesitated. Like a falling stone he plummeted earthward, dropping in front of Sadu as the beast rose in its spring.

Dylara, aroused by crashing foliage, leaped to her feet and whirled about. She cried out awe-struck wonder as she saw the young man who had died beneath a Sepharian club standing between her and an on-rushing lion.

Powerless to move, she watched the Cro-Magnard crouch to meet certain death. In the single instant that elapsed before Sadu reached him, she saw Tharn's hands were empty.

And then her jaw dropped and her eyes flew wide with amazement. Tharn had leaped forward and sent his shoulder crashing into the side of the soaring brute. Sadu, caught off balance, spun sideways and fell heavily. He was up instantly, growling horribly, and in mad frenzy turned upon Tharn.

What Dylara witnessed then was something that was to go down in the folk lore of future generations of the Cro-Magnard people. She saw the clenched fingers of the man swing forward with every ounce of power in that mighty arm, backed by the insane fury of utter desperation.

The iron fist struck Sadu full between the eyes, crushing the skull like a hollow melon and driving splinters of bone into that savage brain.

Dylara, weak with relief, felt her knees buckle as the lion sank lifeless to the ground. Tharn, his knuckles throbbing with pain, jumped forward and caught her about the waist. She turned her face to him, then, and he saw that her eyes were wet with tears.

Her warm red lips, slightly parted, were very near his own. Drawn by an irresistible impulse, Tharn bent his head to meet them. The girl saw the clean, firm mouth come close, yet she did not shrink away. Something was stirring deep within her—something that had never known life before this moment—something she had no time to analyze.

Suddenly she wanted more than anything else to feel that mouth pressed against her own. She lifted her face for Tharn's kiss... .

"Dylara!" said a quiet voice.

The man and the girl sprang apart. Facing them, now, was a group of eight Sepharian warriors, a tall, broad-shouldered young man at their head.

Dylara knew the leader at once. It was Jotan. She saw that his expression was very stern, and she knew instinctively that he was thinking of her in Tharn's embrace.

Jotan ignored the cave-man. "We have been searching for you, Dylara," he said quietly. "Come, we shall return to Sephar at once."

Before she could frame a reply, Tharn had stepped in front of her. There followed a tense, electric moment of silence as the two men eyed each other.

"She is mine," Tharn said, without heat. "She goes with me."

Jotan gestured with one hand. In response, seven spears were leveled at the cave-man's naked chest.

"You are wrong, my friend," said the leader. "I am taking her with me. I have nothing against you; you may have your freedom if you go at once. Otherwise, you go back to Sephar as a prisoner. Resist, and my men will kill you."

Tharn was thinking rapidly. To attack eight armed men would be a fool's act. Alurna was waiting for him back there in the jungle. And in Alurna he had that which would put to naught those seven spears.

Let this man take Dylara back to Sephar. Tharn had only to return with the princess Alurna and claim his reward from Urim. That reward was—Dylara! He knew Urim would keep his word, no matter what objections were offered by this man.

"Well?" The word was clipped, cold, impatient.

Without a word Tharn turned and leaped into the branches overhead. He had not dared to offer Dylara an encouraging sign, fearing to arouse the Sepharian's suspicions.

The cave-girl watched him go, disbelief uppermost in her mind. It was not like Tharn to give up so easily. But did she want him not to give up? She had thrilled to his strength, his agility and fearlessness during the encounter with Sadu. No other man could have thus faced the jungle king with empty hands—and lived.

But were such qualities enough? She stole a glance at the handsome young Sepharian. In him was more than mere physical appeal. This man gave an impression of consideration and thoughtfulness. He would never take a girl against her will as Tharn had done. He was of a race that had risen above cave life. His people had learned life could mean more than the hunt—more than sleeping and eating and talking. Would not living be richer, more full, with this man than it could possibly be with Tharn?

Meanwhile, Tharn was speeding back through the trees to join Alurna. Led by his unerring sense of direction he soon entered the tree where he had left her.

She looked up with a relieved smile as he came into view. "I was beginning to think you had forgotten me," she said warmly. "Whatever possessed you to run away like that?"

Tharn had never liked giving long explanations. "It was nothing," he said lightly. "Let us go on."

They descended and walked slowly, side by side, along the trail. Alurna wondered why the cave-man no longer raced ahead as he had done before. But Tharn's purpose was clear in his mind: it would be best, he decided, to let Dylara and the Sepharians enter the city ahead of him.

Nearly two hours later they rounded a bend of the trail and came to a halt. Alurna gave a little cry of happiness. Directly ahead, beyond a brief expanse of open ground stood Sephar's walls. Turning to the silent

figure at her side, she caught his arm and, like an eager child, sought to hurry him on.

Nor did Tharn need persuasion. He had stopped only because his ever-present sense of caution bade him go slowly. But the impelling hand at his arm removed the last lingering trace of reluctance.

They were half-way across the clearing before one of several warriors about a gateway spied them and raised a shout that brought a dozen guards from inside the walls. At sight of the cave-man and his companion the entire group came running toward them.

Once more Tharn stopped, hand dropping to the knife at his belt. But the impatient voice of the princess beat down his suspicion.

"No, Tharn, no! Those are my father's men. They come to welcome us."

His fingers relaxed their hold on the knife, but his hand remained close to its hilt. And then they were surrounded by the men of Sephar.

This detail was in charge of Lodorth, a tall, rather fleshy warrior of middle-age, very straight of back and given to the blunt speech of a soldier. Alurna remembered him as once having been stationed at the palace.

"Ah, princess," Lodorth said soberly. "We believed you to be dead or hopelessly lost. I am glad to be first in welcoming you."

Alurna was all smiles. "My father is worried, I know. I must go to him at once, Lodorth."

An expression which the girl could not define passed across the officer's face but he made no reply. Instead he turned to his men.

"Disarm this man and bind his hands!" he ordered, jerking a thumb toward Tharn.

Upon hearing this, the cave-man reached quickly for his knife, but froze as he felt several cold flint spearheads against the skin of his back.

"Disarm him!" barked the leader curtly.

One of the men stepped forward, and with a wary eye cocked toward the motionless figure, plucked the stone blade from Tharn's loin-cloth.

Then Alurna found her tongue.

"You are a fool, Lodorth!" she cried, turning on the captain. "This man saved my life. Give him his knife and show him your respect, or you shall answer to Urim—and to me!"

Lodorth eyed her stolidly. "Pryak is king, now," he said, his face an impassive mask. "Urim is dead!"

Chapter 17

Reunion

Pryak, seated in one of the great rooms of the palace, was deep in conversation with Orbar, his lieutenant. The room, itself, was swarming with white-tunicked priests, their babbling voices adding to the atmosphere of confusion and disorder.

A knock sounded at the door and it was opened to admit three people. As they entered, a sudden hush fell over the milling throng of priests.

Pryak, aroused by the abrupt cessation of sound, looked up questioningly. At sight of the newcomers his eyes opened wide in surprise; then his lips curled in a smile more disturbing than the blackest frown.

"By the God!" he exclaimed, mock pleasure in his tone, "I welcome the daughter of Urim! I was told you were dead, princess—taken from us by the cruel jungle. And now you have come back! I shall enjoy hearing of your adventures."

The thinly veiled contempt in words and tone brought a wave of red across Alurna's pale, grief-stained face. Then she spoke—and her words, barely audible from the choking emotion behind them, carried such hatred and loathing as to hold Pryak petrified on his chair.

"Murderer!" she whispered. "Little man of filth! It was you who caused the death of my father! Who did it for you? How long do you think you can hold Urim's place before some *real* man takes your place—and twists your wrinkled neck?"

Pryak, his face livid with rage, leaped from his stool and lifted his hand to strike her into silence.

The blow never found its mark. Tharn, standing near Alurna, and forgotten by the others, had moved almost before Pryak was off the stool.

And so it was that Pryak, Voice of the Great God, found his bony wrist seized by fingers of steel and his swinging arm halted as abruptly as though it had encountered one of the room's stone walls.

Before the startled priest could cry out or his astounded followers interfere, he was snatched bodily from his feet and flung almost the entire length of the chamber.

Four priests were bowled over by the catapulting body; those human cushions were all that saved Pryak from injury.

Tharn went down, then, beneath a horde of fanatical priests. And before they had him bound and helpless, more than one felt the weight of his fists and the strength of his arms. At last they dragged him to his feet and stepped aside as Pryak, rumped and bruised, came forward.

"For what you have done," he growled hoarsely, "you shall pay in blood and suffering. When the lions hunt you down in the arena during the Games, wild man, remember that you dared to lay hands on Sephar's king."

Tharn laughed in his face. "Better the fangs of Sadu," he giped, "than the stench of a priest!"

Stung by the taunt, Pryak went white. Unexpectedly, he lashed out with a bony fist, catching the young cave-man flush on the mouth. Tharn's expression did not change under the blow, but something crept into his eyes that made Pryak shrink back in alarm. Then, remembering the captive was bound and helpless, he drew back his arm to strike again.

This time, however, a tall figure stood between him and Tharn—Lodorth, under-officer in Sephar's forces.

"You wish the prisoner taken to the pits, O Voice of the God?" The contempt in Lodorth's tone was poorly concealed.

For a moment Pryak considered ordering the man aside. He hesitated, then nodded assent and turned away.

"And the princess?" Lodorth called after him.

"Leave her here."

"This way," said the soldier to young Tharn, and together they moved toward the exit.

It was clear to Tharn that this warrior was no admirer of the treacherous high priest—a conclusion strengthened by the incident in which Lodorth had saved him from a second blow. He wondered if others in Sephar felt so toward their new ruler.

Presently they reached the entrance to the subterranean cell. Releasing the monstrous bar, Lodorth cut Tharn's bonds and motioned for him to enter.

Once within, Tharn's first thought was that he had been brought to another cell. Instead of the score or so of prisoners he had expected, there were fully a hundred men gathered here. Then he began to pick out familiar faces; and an instant later his doubts were dispelled as Katon came forward to welcome him, his blue eyes sparkling with pleasure.

"Tharn!" he exclaimed joyfully. "I knew you would return. Did you find Alurna?"

"I found her," Tharn admitted ruefully. "But it would have been wiser to leave her at Sephar's gates."

Katon's smile faded. "You are right, my friend. Everything seems to work against us. You and I both have been hurt by this change. Had not Pryak gone completely mad, you and your mate would be starting for home by now, and Urim would have set me free.

"But all that may as well be forgotten, now. Soon the Games begin; our chief worry will be to save our skins."

Tharn looked about at the many strange faces.

"It appears we shall have plenty of company," he observed.

"There are many others besides these," was the reply. "Pryak fears many of Urim's friends and intends using the Games to eliminate them. A room across the hall is filled with at least as many as you see here; and many of those men loved Urim and hate the one who caused his death.

"Pryak hopes to accomplish a double purpose this time. He will gain favor by offering the bloodiest Games ever held; also, he expects to wipe out all who oppose him by sending the opposition itself into the arena.

"I am told," Katon continued, "that many savage beasts are held ready to be sent against us. More than ever, Pryak is determined the final victor shall not be human. Were a man to prove the God's favorite, Sephar's populace might turn to him so strongly as to weaken Pryak's position."

Tharn grinned. "At least we shall have our fill of fighting."

"More than my fill!" retorted his friend, dryly.

Tharn, glancing about the crowded room, uttered a startled ejaculation and pointed toward a figure huddled near one of the walls.

"Who is that?" he asked. "Even with his face hidden in his hands, he seems known to me."

Katon grunted. "And well he should! That, my friend, is Vulcar—once captain of Urim's own guards!"

At Tharn's expression of shocked incredulity, he continued:

"He was brought here, yesterday, with nearly a score of warriors. In all the hours since, he has not spoken—only sits with bowed head. He, once

so proud, is now humbled and beaten—crushed by the death of the man he worshipped."

Tharn studied the dejected figure. Courage might dull under such a blow as Vulcar had taken; yet it would still be courage. Experience told him a brave man is brave until death takes him; a coward, while occasionally rising above his weakness, remains a coward. And certainly Vulcar was known to be a man of courage.

From the moment of Tharn's recapture a plan had been taking form in his shrewd mind. He had never been one to accept resignedly what fate appeared to offer. If these other prisoners were ready to die in the arena, that was their affair; certainly he did not intend giving up so easily. Men like themselves had put them in this hole; and what one man could do, another could undo. The worst enemy of his fellows was their patient acceptance of what Pryak had decreed for them. If that viewpoint could only be reversed... .

Taking Katon by the arm, he started across the room toward Vulcar.

"What are you—" Katon began, then subsided as the cave-man frowned and shook his head in warning.

When within a few paces of the former captain, Tharn stopped and turned his back, and Katon's, to the unheeding Vulcar.

"I tell you, it seems hard to believe," Tharn began, his voice raised somewhat above its usual pitch, "that none of Urim's friends has courage enough to avenge his death. Why, had I served under him, I—"

"Who says none hopes to avenge Urim?" The quiet words came from behind them.

Turning, they found Vulcar, head lifted and shoulders squared, regarding them fixedly.

The Cro-Magnard simulated surprise to hide his sudden elation. "If I am wrong—" He stopped there, waiting.

"What chance have we to avenge him?" Vulcar demanded, his hawk-like face drawn into lines of helpless fury. "Here we are—thrown into a hole, sentenced to die for the satisfaction of a false God—and to save Pryak from sleepless nights!"

Tharn appeared sympathetic. "Given a chance, however slight, would you take it?"

"Take it?" echoed Vulcar. "Of course! But there is no—"

"Are there others who feel as you?"

"I know of eighteen—those who went with me to search for Urim's daughter. When we returned to Sephar, Pryak's men overpowered us

and brought us here. I am almost glad, now, that we did not find Alurna."

"Alurna is in Sephar," Tharn informed him. "I brought her back."

"You?" Vulcar came to his feet in surprise. "How did you get her?"

Briefly, the cave-man told of what had taken place. When he was done, Vulcar stepped forward and placed both hands on Tharn's shoulders.

"My life is yours for what you have done," he said simply. "No matter what happens to her as Pryak's captive, it cannot be so horrible as death in the jungle."

For a moment the three men were silent. Then Tharn said: "Let us sit here where we shall not be overheard... . Katon, what can you tell me of the Games?"

"What do you want to know about them?"

"Everything," Tharn said promptly. "How far are the pits from the arena itself? How many of us are sent into the arena at one time? How, and when, are we given weapons?"

Katon was eyeing him strangely. "Why do you want to know those things?"

"I will explain that after you have answered my questions."

The conversation that followed was carried on in low voices. Katon did most of the talking; from time to time Vulcar added details. Tharn did little more than listen attentively.

At last the cave-man expressed satisfaction. "I think it can be done," he said slowly. "There is one weakness they have not covered."

"*What* can be done?" Plainly, Katon was puzzled. "What is behind all this, Tharn?"

Tharn leaned forward. "We want two things—and so does every man in this room and the room across the hall. First: freedom. Second: death to Pryak! Are you with me?"

Vulcar made a face. "Either one is beyond our reach. What can a few unarmed men do against all Sephar?"

"What have we to lose?" demanded the Cro-Magnard. "All of us are supposed to die within the arena. If we must accept death, why not do so while trying to escape?"

Katon and Vulcar exchanged glances. It was evident neither had thought of it just that way before.

"What," Vulcar said softly, "do you suggest?"

"To begin with," Tharn said, "it would be wise to have three or four more hear my plan. They in turn can pass the details on to the rest of the prisoners. Those across the hall must be included, and I have an idea how that can be arranged. We shall need every man we can get."

Vulcar said, "Let me pick the four."

Soon the former captain was back, his selections close at his heels. Tharn and Katon rose to meet them.

"These are good men," Vulcar said. "I know them all. They are ready to follow your lead."

"This one—" He indicated a short, squat man with heavy features and much coarse hair on chest, legs and head, "—is Brutan. He likes to fight."

Unexpectedly Brutan grinned. "Yes," he said in a deep, harsh voice, "I like to fight. I will fight anybody. I will fight you!"

Tharn grinned back at him. There was something likeable about this rock-like Sepharian.

"This," continued Vulcar, "is Rotark. He is not afraid to die."

Rotark was tall and very thin, with a long, sorrowful face. "Why should I be afraid?" he asked in lugubrious tones. "There is no pleasure in living. Soon we shall all be dead."

Next, Vulcar jerked a thumb toward a young, very handsome warrior whose tunic was amazingly clean and spotless in contrast to those of the others. His thick blond hair was neatly pushed back from a high, rounded forehead.

"He is Gorlat," said Vulcar. "He does not like to fight, but will do so to keep from being killed. Few men are his equal with a knife."

The blond young man smiled but said nothing.

"Brosan, here, you already know."

Tharn nodded. He remembered that pock-marked face, as well as the unconcerned grin exposing yellowed, broken teeth.

The cave-man came directly to the point.

"We are supposed to die in the arena for the amusement of Pryak and the people of Sephar. To me, that seems wrong. It would be better if Pryak and his priests were the ones to die."

"I think that can be arranged. Listen, and when I am done, let me know what you think of my plan."

They listened closely and without interrupting. And while he awaited their reaction, they looked at one another in silence, while broad smiles began to steal across their faces. Even Rotark's lips twitched in approval.

"Good!" said Brutan the laconic.

"Even though we fail," said Rotark mournfully, "it is worth trying."

Gorlat said nothing, but his smile matched the brilliance of his hair. Katon and Vulcar regarded the cave-man with respect, deeply impressed with the plan he had offered. They realized the force of this barbarian's personality—that intangible requisite of all who would be leaders—had grasped the imagination of these men, winning their loyalty and unstinted support.

"When shall we tell the others?" Brosan asked.

"Go among them now," Tharn advised. "Explain our plan briefly, but cover every point. Warn them not to chance arousing suspicion among the guards. Everything depends upon absolute secrecy."

It was on the following day that the great Games began.

When the door closed behind Tharn and Lodorth, a feeling of loneliness swept over the princess Alurna. She had come to regard the cave-man as her friend—perhaps the only friend left to her in all Sephar. She glanced fearfully at the face of the high-priest and found nothing there to reassure her.

Pryak's expression was stern; but that sternness was a mask to hide an inner perturbation. For there had come to him the realization that in this frail girl lay a vital threat to his newly won power.

He silently cursed his stupidity in receiving her so ungraciously, and silently he thanked his God that he had been prevented from actually striking the princess.

Alurna, he remembered, was more than Urim's daughter; she was niece to the most powerful figure of the known world—Jaltor, king of far-off Ammad, and commander of the greatest force of fighting-men ever assembled. Urim had been Jaltor's brother... .

Eventually, Jaltor would learn of his brother's death. As a statesman and ruler, he would understand that Urim's passing was incidental to a change in power and one of the hazards of kingship.

It was not likely, however, that Jaltor would regard in a similar light an overt slight or actual cruelty to a niece. As a possible threat to Pryak's position as king, Alurna was not to be considered; only a man could rule men. For that reason alone, the high priest had no valid excuse to do her harm.

His course, then, was plain; every effort must be made to win this girl into regarding him as a friend, lest word reach Jaltor that his niece was a mistreated prisoner in Sephar.

The chill faded from Pryak's expression like snow under a hot sun. "I have been wrong, princess," he admitted, with passable humbleness. "As Urim's daughter, you are entitled to every respect and honor. From now on you may depend on being accorded both."

Alurna could hardly believe her ears. What had come over this old man, to change him so quickly and completely?

Her response was instant and characteristic. "I want nothing from you, priest!" she snapped.

Pryak lost his smile, but none of his urbanity. He beckoned to a nearby attendant. "Escort the princess to her rooms," he instructed. "See to it that her every wish is obeyed."

When Alurna had gone, a thoughtful Pryak dropped onto his stool across from Orbar and pursed his lips reflectively.

"There must be some way to dispose of her," he said, "without incurring the wrath of Jaltor."

Orbar grinned evilly. "A knife in the dark... ." He let his voice trail off meaningfully.

"You are a fool!" growled the new king. "Her uncle and his men would be at our gates within two moons. I dare not risk—"

He broke off as an under-priest came hurriedly from across the room and bowed before him.

"What is it, Baltor?"

"The three nobles of Ammad are here, asking that you see them."

Pryak sighed. Here were others he must treat with deference, lest his failure to do so cause international complications. He was beginning to understand that even an all-powerful monarch must recognize the importance of individuals other than himself. He felt vaguely distressed... .

"Bring them to me, here," he said.

A moment later Jotan, Tamar and Javan approached the seated men and bent their heads in formal recognition.

"How may I, king of Sephar and Voice of the God, serve our noble visitors?" asked the arch-priest loftily.

Jotan acted as spokesman. "By granting us permission to set out for Ammad. Already have we delayed longer than was intended. To avoid the rainy season we should like to leave at once."

Pryak thought for a moment. He must not let them go so easily. They might think that he was relieved to be rid of them—that his hospitality was less than Urim's had been.

He said, "Would you start on so perilous a journey without first showing honor to your God? Tomorrow the Games begin. It would be wise to attend the first two days; otherwise misfortune may beset your path to Ammad."

Jotan was shrewd enough to yield. He guessed that Pryak was expecting to strengthen further his position as king by exhibiting the three Ammadians to the crowd as his intimates.

"Agreed," he responded. "I know that Jaltor, my king, will be greatly interested in an account of the lavishness of Sephar's Games."

It was then that Pryak found a solution to his problem!

Jotan, thinking the interview ended, had turned to go.

"Wait, Jotan of Ammad!"

The men from Ammad turned, surprised by the urgency in the high priest's voice. Pryak had risen and was coming toward them.

"There is something you can do for me, Jotan—a small matter, but one that will relieve a rather delicate situation."

"Of course," Jotan said quickly.

"It concerns Alurna—Urim's daughter. She is not happy here. Since her father's ... passing, she seems anxious to leave Sephar.

"It is my thought that she go with you to Ammad. Her uncle, Jaltor, would welcome her, I am sure; and she would be content there. Will you take her with you?"

Jotan saw his chance! Ever since Dylara had been taken from him by Pryak's men a few hours before, Jotan had been at his wits' end for a way to get her back. The guards, learning she was an escaped slave, had taken her from the Ammadians as a matter of course; for, as a slave, she was the property of Sephar's king. Jotan had not demurred, partly because it would have been useless to argue the point with anyone lacking authority to make a decision, and partly because he was confident that Urim, when asked, would give the girl to him.

But upon learning of Urim's death, and of Pryak's seizure of power, Jotan's hopes began to fade. Pryak's reluctance toward granting favors, however trivial, was a matter of common gossip. This, coupled with the fact that the high priest might not be inclined to be overly cordial toward a close friend of the former ruler, decided Jotan against asking for the slave-girl—a decision strengthened by Tamar's logic during a discussion held shortly before the three friends had come to the palace.

Several times during the interview with Pryak, Jotan had been near to blurting out a request that Dylara be given to him. But his pride would

not permit the risk of being coldly refused, and each time he had bitten back the words.

But now—now the picture was changed. Pryak had opened the way for a counter-proposal; one the priest could hardly refuse because of his own request.

Jotan hid his elation behind an expressionless face. "I will gladly do as you have asked, Pryak of Ammad. Incidentally, there is a trifling favor you can grant me—if you will."

Tamar, listening, groaned inwardly.

"What is this favor?" asked the priest cautiously.

"I have become interested in one of the palace slave-girls," Jotan told him. "I should like to have her."

The modestness of the request confused Pryak. Somehow, such a petition seemed irrelevant, too petty.

"Of course," he agreed quickly. "I had expected that you would ask for something of more value. Take whichever slave you want—several, if you like."

"Your kindness indicates how generous a king rules Sephar," Jotan said smoothly. "If one of your men will accompany me, I shall give him the necessary instructions."

"Baltor, here, will carry out your orders." Pryak indicated the attendant who had ushered them in.

When they had left the room, Jotan said to the attendant:

"Go at once to the quarters of the female slaves. Instruct the guards there to turn over to you the slave-girl known as Dylara. You will bring her to my quarters."

"I understand, noble Jotan."

"When you have done this, return to the palace and seek out the princess, Alurna. Convey to her my greetings, and say that I wish an audience with her at her convenience... . Is all this clear to you?"

"Yes."

"Good! Report to me when you have finished."

Chapter 18

Death in a Bowl

Dyta, the sun, climbed his blue ladder and looked down at the city of Sephar in its mountain fastness. Behind those gray stone walls hummed an activity found there only five days in every twelve moons.

For today was the first of the Game days. Since early morning the streets leading to the great amphitheater were packed with an eager citizenry, pushing and jostling its way toward the arena's several entrances. Those first to arrive had their choice of seats; consequently many had huddled beneath heavy cloaks outside the barred gates during the dark hours, awaiting the moment when they might enter.

It was a colorful throng, every member light-hearted, gay and friendly. Men and women pushed and tugged at their neighbors—friend and stranger alike—to keep the milling mass moving. Most of them carried parcels of food, for the Games lasted each day until the hour of sunset. Whole family groups were numerous: father, mother, and the brood of children. Many of the latter were mere infants, watching the swarm of shifting humanity with wide wondering eyes.

Patrolling the avenues and directing the crowds at the gates were many priests in white tunics. This was to be their day, as well; for shortly before the Games got under way, elaborate rites, honoring the God, were to be held, in which every priest was to take part.

Truly, this was the day of days.

In the great cell beneath Sephar's streets, Tharn, Katon, Vulcar, Rotark, Brosan, Brutan and Gorlat squatted in a group about a huge earthen bowl of stewed meat. They, together with the balance of the prisoners, had been aroused from sleep an hour before sunrise, and had been given food that their strength and endurance might be equal to the tasks ahead.

Katon, seated across from Tharn, caught the Cro-Magnard's eye and nodded significantly.

"For a man who may be dead within a few hours," he said grimly, "you seem very cheerful."

Tharn grinned. "Would you have me seek out Pryak and beg for my life?"

The others laughed. Brutan put down a bone from which he had gnawed the meat, and belched with frank satisfaction. "I will show them how a real man fights!" he declared. "With my bare hands I once slew a leopard!"

Brosan made a derisive sound. "It must have been a very old leopard."

Brutan's complacent expression vanished. "You lie!" he bellowed, glaring belligerently at his heckler. "It was a great, full-grown—"

"Quiet, you fool!" snapped Katon. "This is no time to start a brawl."

Brutan mumbled something under his breath and went back to his bone.

Rotark wiped his lips with the back of his hand. "How many of us will see the end of this day?" he asked in doleful tones. "Take Gorlat, here—so careful not to soil his tunic. It may soak in his own blood before darkness comes again!"

The blond young man kept his mechanical smile. He said: "Not if they give me a knife... ."

Something in the soft words brought a momentary silence to the group. What had Vulcar said yesterday about this handsome, graceful youth? "Few men equal him in handling a knife... ."

Katon said, "It will be an hour before the Games actually get under way. First they must finish the rites honoring the God-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken—a lengthy ritual. Then the guards will come, select a few of us, give them arms and send them into the arena."

"Somehow," Tharn said thoughtfully, "I wonder if it is wise to wait until the third day before putting our plan into action. After three days many of our men will have died in the arena. We shall need every man we can get."

Katon rubbed his chin, frowning. "True," he admitted. "But to hurry this thing would be fatal. The guards must be satisfied that everything is going smoothly before they relax their watchfulness."

"Although we shall lose men," he continued, "I believe many of the soldiers and citizens of Sephar will join us when the revolt gets under way. Few, I imagine, regard Pryak with favor; they should welcome a chance to end his power and make one of their own men king."

Then and there the germ of an idea was implanted in Tharn's mind—an idea destined to bear fruit in the days ahead.

For the better part of an hour the seven ring-leaders moved about the chamber, talking with groups of prisoners, discussing various phases of the plan Tharn had concocted. So confident did the seven seem, that many a despondent captive was caught up by their infectious spirit and began to grow impatient for the Games to start that the two days might pass the sooner.

At last the noise of sandaled feet sounded in the corridor, and a moment later the door was thrust open.

Five men came in: four well-armed priests wearing white tunics edged in black; and another, who was as different from the nondescript priests as Sadu differs from Botu, the jackal.

Head and shoulders above his companions towered this fifth man; his face was strong and proud, and from either side of a blade-like nose, eyes of blue fire swept over the crowded room.

Katon nudged the Cro-Magnard. "That tall one is Wotar, director of the Games. He is no priest; and before Urim died, was one of Sephar's most powerful nobles. He has been Game director for a long time; and since he seems still in charge, must be high in Pryak's favor."

Wotar may have heard the whispered words, for he glanced sharply in Katon's direction. The glittering eyes stopped at the sight of Tharn, taking in the graceful contours and swelling thews beneath the clear bronzed skin.

"You," Wotar said quietly, crooking a long forefinger at the cave-man.

At first, Tharn did not fully comprehend; but when two of the priests laid hold of his arms, his doubt was gone.

"Goodbye, my friend." Katon's voice was sad. "We shall watch for your return."

"I will be back," Tharn promised from the doorway. Then he was gone, the great door crashing shut behind him.

Tharn, preceded and followed by guards, was led along the corridor to where it ended before a narrow door. In response to Wotar's knock it opened, disclosing a small chamber almost filled with a miscellany of weapons of every type known to prehistoric man. An attendant stood in the center of the room, awaiting instructions from the director.

"No weapons," Wotar said briefly. He turned to the cave-man. "You are to go directly to the arena's center and wait for whatever I send against you. Make a good fight of it and the crowd will be for you. That

can mean much to you. If you manage to kill your opponent, return here at once. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

Wotar nodded to the attendant and the arena door was opened, flooding the room with sunshine. Tharn, blinking in the sudden light, stepped out on to the white sands of Sephar's Colosseum.

That which met his eyes was something Tharn was never to forget. The sandy floor was perhaps three hundred feet in length and half as many in width—a perfectly symmetrical ellipse surrounded by a sheer stone wall twelve feet in height. Beyond that wall the spectator stands began, tier upon tier of stone benches sloping up and back for fifty yards to the last row.

The thousands of seats were filled with a shifting mass of humans, most of whom had risen as Tharn came into sight.

Never before had the cave-man seen so many people at one time; and the noise and confusion affected him exactly as it would any jungle denizen. His first instinctive impulse was to retreat, not because of fright, for he knew no fear, but because it was strange and unpleasant and, worst of all, there was that infernal din which only man of all animals can long endure.

The cave lord halted and half turned as though to withdraw, but the crowd, believing him to be afraid, set up an ear-splitting clamor of cat-calls, whistlings and raucous shouts that whirled the barbarian about in sudden anger.

For a long moment he glared at the multi-eyed beast above him; then a slight sound at his back aroused him to his immediate surroundings.

He wheeled just as a huge figure launched itself at his neck. Before Tharn could prevent it, strong fingers closed about his throat and the impact of a solid body sent him staggering, saved from falling only by superhuman effort.

During the seconds in which all this transpired, Tharn had discovered what it was that had leaped cat-like upon him. He saw a great hulk of a man, naked except for a pelt about his loins; a man with muscles bulging so in arms, legs and shoulders as to constitute a deformity. He was not quite so tall as Tharn, with an ugly, hairy face, contorted with rage.

With the speed of a striking snake Tharn's hands came up, caught the wrists at his throat and tore away those choking fingers as though they were so many strands of cobweb. Then Tharn seized the other before he could twist free—caught him by thrusting an arm between the crotch of

those gnarled legs while the other hand held to a hairy forearm. Lifting him thus, Tharn swung the man aloft like a bundle of grass, then flung him heavily to the sands a dozen paces away.

The onlookers came to their feet with a swelling roar of approval. This was what they had come to see; and they set up a deafening clamor that seemed to shake the stands. Tharn never heard them.

Now the dazed enemy was scrambling to his feet. Before he was fully erect, Tharn was upon him with the silent ferocity of Jalok, the panther. Grabbing the cringing man by the throat, the cave-man lifted him bodily from the sands, and holding him at forearm's length, shook him as a terrier shakes a rodent; shook him until the screaming voice was stilled as the senses fled and the white figure hung limp and motionless within Tharn's grasp.

Then, while the crowd watched in thrilled horror, Tharn dropped to one knee, placed the dead weight of his unconscious foe against his leg and snapped the man's spine as he might have broken a slender branch.

Rising, Tharn tossed aside the lifeless body and, not deigning to acknowledge by look or gestures the pandemonium of acclaim, disappeared through the arms-room door.

On the same morning that the Sepharian Games had opened, a band of fifty warriors, clothed only in animal skins about their middles, halted on the outskirts of an impenetrable forest which towered across their path. At their backs was a broad prairie that had required many days to cross.

The leader of the group, a man of heroic proportions, called together three of the men and engaged them in earnest conversation. Several times he gestured toward the mouth of a game trail leading into the jungle; but the others continued to shake their heads as though unconvinced.

"He would not go that way," one of them was saying. "In that direction are high hills, and beyond those are great mountains he could not hope to pass."

"We do not know that he came even this far," said another of the three. "We lost his trail over two suns ago; he may have changed his path many times since then."

Their leader silenced them with a wave of his hand. "You have told me nothing to change my mind. The trail lies ahead; when we can go no farther will be time enough to turn back and seek in a new direction."

A few minutes later the last of the band had passed from view between the walls of vegetation lining the narrow path.

Dylara, seated just behind the retaining wall of the arena, watched Tharn's broad back pass through the little doorway. About her was the murmur of many voices exclaiming over the exhibition of brute strength they had just witnessed. Dimly she heard Alurna telling of being rescued by that same forest god, the three nobles from Ammad serving as audience.

The cave-girl was trying hard to analyze the tangled emotions resulting from Tharn's appearance. Something related to the sensation she had known when he had taken her in his arms after striking Sadu dead, had come back to her. Why did sight of him make her heart leap with that peculiar breathless swoop? No one else she had ever known could effect it so. How handsome, how magnificent he had appeared, standing there on the white sands, sweeping the crowd with a contemptuous glance before leaving the arena.

She stole a glance at the handsome profile of Jotan as he listened politely to Alurna's story. How fortunate she was to have won the love of this man. In him were qualities all women sought in the men of their choice. Good-looking, kindly, thoughtful, an honorable position in his world—what more could any man offer?

Yet only Tharn, untamed man of the caves, could make her heart leap and thrill—something Jotan might never be able to do.

Last night a priest had come to the great room where she had been taken upon her return to Sephar. He had brought her to Jotan's quarters, and she had spent the night there, sharing a room with the princess Alurna, who had welcomed the opportunity of leaving the palace.

The two girls had little to say to each other. Alurna had regarded the slave-girl with unmasked loathing; while Dylara, after the first cold rebuff of her attempt to be friendly, had withdrawn into a shell of silence.

On the following morning, however, Alurna had surprised Dylara by displaying an attitude of warm friendliness toward her. Behind this sudden change was the secret decision of the princess to undermine Jotan's attempts to win the slave-girl... .

Just as the second event was about to get under way, Jotan got up, excused himself and made his way to the section of the stands reserved for Pryak and the Council of Priests. There he took a seat beside the high priest.

Pryak glanced at him with a questioning lift of his eyebrows.

"O Voice of the God," said Jotan, "my men and I have kept our promise to attend the opening of the Games. We are anxious to start on our journey, and ask your permission to depart without further loss of time."

Sephar's enthusiastic reception of the Games thus far, had put the king in high humor.

"As you wish, Jotan," he said, rising and placing his hands on the other's shoulders. "I ask of the God a safe and uneventful journey for you and your men. And to Jaltor of Ammad, I send my greetings and avowals of lasting friendship. Explain to him my reasons for placing Urim's daughters in his care. He will approve, I am sure."

"All you have asked shall be done," promised Jotan. "And now, Pryak, king of Sephar and Voice of the God, I bid you farewell."

Turning, Jotan hurried along the stone aisle to his own lodge and waiting friends. Once there, he raised himself to his full height and waved both arms above his head.

Directly across the arena a group of some forty or fifty warriors rose in a body and started toward the nearest exit.

"Come," Jotan said, motioning to the balance of those in his party. "We start at once for Ammad."

Dylara stood up, casting one last look toward the closed doorway through which Tharn had passed not long before. He had been her last tie with the old life. Now she was about to leave all that behind, to go into a new world at the side of a man she greatly admired. Why was her heart so heavy? Was it because she would never again see the caves of her people—the face of her father? Or was it because Tharn was lost to her, forever? Even should he come through the Games alive, she would be gone—separated from him by the vast distance between Sephar and the country Jotan called home.

Jotan had told her something of the long stretches of untracked jungles and waterless plains between Sephar and Ammad. From others of the visitors she had heard stories of savage beasts and wild tribes of men that haunted the mountain trails and forest-cloaked ravines to the south. And beyond the mountains began a level monotony of grasslands that reached to still more mountains forming the boundary to Ammad itself.

The street before the building allocated to the visitors swarmed with hurrying figures bearing a wide assortment of articles to be bound into individual packs for easy handling.

Jotan took active charge. Quickly the line of march began to take form. Broad-shouldered men swung compact bundles to their backs; well-

armed warriors took up their positions; and last of all, strongly made litters of animal skins stretched between long poles, arrived for use of the two female members of the party.

Dylara, following the example set by Alurna, seated herself in the exact center of the sheet of skins as it lay in the street. Two brawny attendants stepped forward, bent, one at either end of the wooden poles, and in perfect unison swung the rods to their shoulders.

From his position at the column's forefront, Jotan looked back and waved a greeting to the two girls. Satisfied that all were in place, he shouted a command and the safari got under way.

Across the city they marched, through wide-flung gates in the great walls, and on across the cleared space beyond. Before them rose the majestic trees and thick matted foliage of the forbidding jungle; and here, leading directly southward through a tangled maze, was the beginnings of a well-beaten trail, the first of many such roadways the little cortege must follow before far-off Ammad could be reached.

Just before the marchers entered the forest, Dylara turned to look back at Sephar's walls, grim and impressive under the sun's flaming rays. Still behind those sullen piles of rock was the man she could not forget. Something deep within her whispered that she had found love only to lose it; that happiness for her lay in forgetting, forever, the stalwart young giant who had snatched her from a peaceful, uneventful life.

Once more she looked back, and abruptly the stone walls wavered and dimmed as hot tears flooded her eyes... .

Chapter 19

A Lesson in Archery

Dyta, the sun, swung lazily toward the western horizon. And with the coming of dusk, Pryak rose from his bench at the edge of the arena in Sephar's amphitheater and gave the signal ending the first day of the Games.

At his gesture the spectators climbed to their feet and pressed toward the exits. They were less lively—more subdued than when they had poured into the enclosure hours before. Perhaps the constant association with death during the long day had sobered them, hushing their tongues at last. But on the morrow they would be back, yesterday's scenes forgotten, appetites whetted once more for hours of carnage.

While far beneath Sephar a roomful of tired unsmiling men spread their sleeping furs for the night in ominous silence. For them a long day had ended, yet taut nerves relaxed but slightly; for all knew that on the next day the wearying ordeal must begin anew.

Morning found most of the prisoners awake and moving about the cell when the morning meal was served. After the attendants had withdrawn and the crowds were beginning to stream into the amphitheater, Tharn called a number of prisoners together.

"Get ready," he said. "The guards are due here any minute. Listen at the door, Katon; when you hear them, let us know."

Turning, the cave-man pulled Vulcar into position as the central figure of the group. In this formation they waited expectantly, all eyes on Katon at the door with one ear glued to the crack between door and jamb.

Suddenly Katon straightened. "They come!" he whispered, and sprang forward to join the others.

At his words, the prisoners, yelling in well-simulated rage, pounced on the hawk-faced Vulcar. The one-time officer was swept from his feet and sent crashing to the floor with a resounding thump. A second later he was at the bottom of a pile of raving madmen, all clearly lusting for his blood.

It was this scene that met the eyes of four guards and Wotar as they came into the room. Taking in the situation at a glance, the director barked a curt order that sent the guards into the scuffle. Using spear butts as flails they managed to beat the cursing prisoners from the limp body of a disheveled Vulcar, who got painfully to his feet.

"What means this?" Wotar thundered. "Is there so little fighting in the arena that you must brawl amongst yourselves?"

Vulcar, still trembling from his narrow escape, hurried to explain.

"These men," he panted, indicating the scowling faces about him, "hate me because they think I am responsible for their being here. I have tried to tell them it was Urim's fault, that I had only obeyed his orders; but they would not listen. Some cried out that they would kill me; then all of them sprang upon me. I would be dead now, had you not come. As soon as you go they will try again. Put me elsewhere, mighty Wotar; I am afraid to stay here."

Vulcar's voice broke with fear, and he trembled so that he could hardly stand.

Wotar's lips curled with contempt. "Put him with the prisoners across the hall," he instructed one of the soldier-priests. "Perhaps they will be more gentle and considerate."

Wotar was an intelligent man; but he failed to notice that the departing prisoner no longer seemed the craven weakling of a moment before. Too, he failed to perceive the poorly hidden satisfaction of the other captives... .

The Game director, an experienced showman, had planned as the second day's opening event, something calculated to arouse the spectators to the highest pitch of excitement. Once in that frame of mind they would follow each succeeding event with increasing enthusiasm—enthusiasm being the barometer by which his fitness as director was measured.

Three times his finger crooked; each time a man stepped forward.

Quickly the guards took up positions and the three prisoners were led away.

In the arms-room each participant was handed a bow and three arrows. Wotar gave them instructions, the outer door was opened, and Katon, Rotark and Tharn stepped onto the sands.

From the stands came a full-throated roar of approval. Tharn's fabulous strength and agility they remembered from his initial appearance; the others they also recalled as being exceptional fighting-men.

This morning Tharn was feeling remarkably light-hearted. His supreme self-confidence gave him assurance his plan of escape would come off perfectly when the time was ripe. And certainly he was enjoying himself! These battles with men and with animals, with death the penalty for any mistake in tactics, were doing much to satisfy that deep love of adventure which was so great a part of him.

The men crossed the arena's entire length, halting a few feet from the eastern wall. Then they turned about and waited, watching silently the wooden door of the distant arms-room.

They had not long to wait. Scarcely had they turned when that door opened and three warriors, each with a bow and three arrows, came out. They were clothed in white tunics, with legs and feet bare. All were taller than the average Sepharian, with wide shoulders, narrow hips and slender well-formed legs.

"Sephar's three finest bowmen," Katon murmured. "The tallest is Maltor, at one time chief of archers under Jaltor, and probably the greatest man with a bow in our history.

"I had forgotten the report that he would fight in the arena. Since he enlisted in the Games only to display his bowmanship, he may withdraw at any time. Watch him constantly, for he is our greatest danger."

He fell silent then, sudden lines of worry on his face. "Tharn, I remember, now, that you know nothing of fighting with a bow. We must work out some way of covering you."

The cave-man permitted himself a grim smile. "You are wrong," he said quietly. "The bow and I are good friends. I will keep up my end of this fight."

Katon was satisfied. "Good. Now if only we can outwit them... .

"Let them shoot first. Watch the fingers of their right hands; when they open on the arrow's haft, jump quickly aside, keeping an arrow ready in your own bow. The moment you regain balance aim quickly and send your first answer.

"Aim always for the belly. A man can shift his head and shoulders much quicker than he can his middle. Besides, his belly is a broader mark.

"Ready now! They are getting close! Tharn—Maltor is for you. Rotark—see what you can do with the man on his left. The other is mine.

"Ah! they have stopped. They still are too far away to risk a shot. Being careful, I suppose; they had better be!

"Tharn! Thrust two of your arrows point first in the sand within reach. Fit the other to your bow. Do the same, Rotark.

"Careful now! They are starting this way again! Maltor is no fool; he is trying to coax us into wasting arrows."

Katon fell silent. His two friends, their bows half drawn, arrow points held downward, stood relaxed, intently gauging the approach of the enemy, now a scant forty paces away.

An absolute silence had enveloped the entire amphitheater as every observer of this tense drama strained his eyes to catch the impending action.

Now Maltor, arrogant and impatient, stepped a pace or two in advance of his companions. Notching an arrow, he nodded over his shoulder to the others, who came up beside him. Three bows were raised in unison; the warriors aimed their shafts carefully, each at a different member of Katon's troupe. The human targets stood at ease, seemingly indifferent to their danger.

And then the scheme the wily Maltor had evolved was flashed on the enemy with a suddenness and brilliancy of execution that would have done much to settle the final outcome—had it succeeded.

A split second before the arrows were released, two of the three archers turned their aim toward the same target as that selected by Maltor. Immediately three bowstrings twanged as one, sending three flint-tipped shafts with incredible swiftness at a single mark.

To avoid one swiftly flying missile was difficult enough; to dodge three, so cunningly spaced that a move to either side would avail naught, was all but impossible. Yet in the flicker of time required for the arrows to reach him, Tharn had acted in the only manner possible to avoid impalement.

Flat on his face dropped the cave-man, the three bolts passing inches above his descending head to shatter against the stone wall beyond. As he fell, Katon and Rotark fired their first arrows.

One found a mark. A man screamed suddenly, horribly, and sank to the sand, a wooden shaft protruding from his abdomen. Rotark had followed instructions!

Had Katon's target been less agile there would have been two casualties. But the man managed to avoid that flashing point by a sideward lunge, keeping his balance with difficulty in the shifting sands.

Meanwhile, Tharn had not remained passively in a reclining position. As the opening barrage passed over him, he rose to his knees and dispatched his first arrow at the foe Katon had given him.

Maltor was too seasoned a warrior to be caught napping. Even though he had momentarily dismissed Tharn as a source of danger, he had kept an eye on the cave-man. And that precaution enabled him to twist aside barely in time to keep from being struck.

The veteran bowman gasped incredulously as the stone-shod missile whined past. He marvelled that a man's arm could be capable of driving an arrow with such superhuman power.

It was Maltor's last thought in this life.

Even as Tharn released his first arrow, his right hand shot out, snatched a second from its vertical position in the sand, strung it and let go—all within the quiver of an eye-lid. Maltor, still trying to regain balance, was in no position to dodge again.

Those in the stands saw the famed bowman straighten as though jerked upright by an invisible hand. Mouth agape, eyes staring in uncomprehending horror, he remained upright for a long moment, while a red line trickled between the fingers he had clapped to his side. Then he turned in a slow half-circle, his knees buckled; and Maltor sank to the sands, dead where he fell.

So savage had been the force behind Tharn's arrow that head and shaft had passed completely through the Sepharian's body.

Rotark, watching, spellbound by the brief drama, was shocked from his inertia when his bow was torn from his grasp and hurled several yards away. One end struck him, in its flight, full across the face and sent him sprawling.

An arrow intended for Rotark's heart had, instead, crashed against the hardwood bow in his hand. The impact cost Rotark two of his teeth; an inch or so either way would have cost him his life.

While the doleful one was still falling, Katon's bow spoke a second time and the last enemy dropped, mortally wounded.

Rotark, gloomier than ever, got unsteadily to his feet, spat out two teeth as an involuntary offering to the God-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken-Aloud, picked up his splintered bow and started for the exit.

Katon and Tharn grinned quietly to one another and followed him.

And the thrilled thousands in the stands released at last the breath they unconsciously had been holding for long seconds.

And so the day wore on. Many times during the passing hours guards entered the great cell to select men for combat in the arena. Some of those selected returned, others never came back; but survivors outweighed, by far, the losses. The reasons were two: Every man knew that survival, now, would heighten his chance for freedom when the break took place. As a result he fought with determination and daring not possible without hope to feed upon.

Wotar was responsible for the second reason. The director knew from years of handling these Games that spectators thrilled more over duels between men than over those between men and beasts. As a consequence he husbanded his supply of warriors, sending enough of them at one time against the jungle creatures that the latter almost invariably succumbed before they could do much harm. Only when a man proved an exceptionally able warrior were the odds more nearly even.

About mid-way in that long afternoon, Wotar and his men entered the dungeon and took Tharn, alone, with them. The cave lord looked back as he passed through the doorway, in time to catch an expression in Katon's eyes that was very close to being fear. It came to Tharn, then, that should he perish in action, the planned revolt might never take place. On his leadership depended the hopes of every man in that room.

Once more Tharn found himself in the arms-room. The attendant there looked questioningly at Wotar.

The master of the Games ran a thoughtful eye over the Cro-Magnard's splendid body.

"Give him a hunting-knife—and nothing else," he said finally. "So far this man has had an easy time of it. Now we shall learn just how much of a fighter he really is!"

Silently the guard presented a long-bladed knife of flint.

Once more the arena door opened; and Tharn, blade in hand, strode into the amphitheater.

The shrill cacophony which greeted him held a welcoming note that did not escape the young Tharn. For the first time, he raised his eyes to the innumerable tiers, observing with wonder the mammoth sea of faces turned in his direction. Near the arena wall on his right, and half way to the far end of the arena itself, was that section occupied by Pryak and his numerous retinue. Tharn had no difficulty in picking out the high priest's unimpressive figure seated close to the protecting wall.

The cave-man's reverie was abruptly shattered as the massive gate at the enclosure's far end began to swing open. For a moment nothing

appeared; then slowly and majestically there emerged from the darkened interior Tharn's arch enemy—Sadu, the lion!

Chapter 20

Revolt!

As Sadu, the lion, came into full view, a collective groan rose on the afternoon air. Then came scattered boos and cries of disapproval from various points in the stands.

"Give him arrows and a bow!"

"No man can kill a lion with a knife!"

"Death to Pryak!" shouted some more hardy soul.

Scattered protests began to gather volume until they beat as a steady roar, filling the entire arena with ominous sound. Armed priests, stationed at the upper edge of the retaining wall, began to move uneasily among the seats to restore order.

Suddenly the mounting crescendo stilled, as action on the arena sands seemed imminent.

Sunlight, flooding the huge oval, bathed in golden glory the calm figure of the man and the tan coat of the jungle king. With striking clarity it picked out the corded muscles and swelling muscles of this cave-god. His handsome, finely-shaped head with its crowning mop of straight black hair; his shoulders, wide and erect; his mighty chest, narrow waist and tapering hips—all made up a picture of physical perfection that no observer was likely to forget.

And yet, invincible though this Cro-Magnard appeared, he seemed puny and pitiable when compared with the huge beast that Wotar had sent against him. Never before had so magnificent a lion appeared in Sephar's Games. Even Tharn, jungle traveler for most of his life, had blinked disbelievingly when Sadu made his entrance.

Sadu padded gently forward, the lithe sinews of his giant body rolling smoothly beneath a shimmering hide. He seemed unruffled and serene; only the angry lash of his sinuous tail told of a seething ferocity within that lordly head.

Armed only with his painfully inadequate knife, Tharn advanced slowly to meet certain destruction. He knew his chances for victory were

so slim as to be almost non-existent; yet the self-confidence and resourcefulness born of a hundred battles against overwhelming odds were weapons more dependable than the flint blade he carried.

Sadu stopped his own advance when the hated man-thing started toward him. For several days now, he had been underfed, goaded about with sharp sticks and shouting voices, harassed and annoyed until he was angry enough to have charged a regiment. Yet that unfathomable sense of caution, so strong a part of every wild creature, held him motionless before the deliberate approach of this two-legged enemy.

Tharn halted. Only a few paces separated the two as they stood unmoving. The man's eyes were riveted on the lion's restless tail; by its movements could he know what was taking place in Sadu's brain.

Slowly Sadu settled into a crouching position, head flattened, hindquarters drawn beneath his taut frame, tail twitching in jerky undulations. A vagrant breeze ruffled the thick mane at his neck... .

Suddenly the tail stiffened and shot erect; and voicing an ear-shattering roar, Sadu sprang at the man in his path.

Sadu, the lion, had felt man's tender flesh beneath his yellow fangs and murderous talons before this. He expected no more resistance from this one than had come from those others.

It was an astonished beast, therefore, that crashed to the sand where the man had been—and was no longer. With an uncanny agility Tharn evaded that lightning charge; then, so quickly that human eyes were hard put to follow, he leaped in and drove his heavy knife deep behind Sadu's left shoulder.

The jungle king, snarling hideously from unexpected pain and shock, wheeled and struck in one simultaneous motion; but Tharn, leaping high as the great cat turned, vaulted completely over the broad back, the dripping knife still clutched in his hand. Before Sadu could reverse himself, the blade flashed again, striking at the base of the tawny neck where lay the great spine.

The flint bit deep but missed a vital spot by half an inch. Sadu had moved in a rapid sideward maneuver as Tharn's arm was descending, and while the wound that resulted was painful, it was by no means fatal.

Worst of all, the blow had cost the Cro-Magnard his only weapon. Sadu's sudden shift had torn the knife from Tharn's fingers before he could tug it free, leaving the blade sunk deep, haft still standing upright like a miniature cross.

His blood crimsoning the white sands, Sadu whirled about, sending a shower of the fine particles high into the air. Once more he hurled himself at his elusive foe, and once more Tharn dodged aside. But this time his foot slipped a little in the yielding sand. One flailing paw struck his chest a glancing blow, the claws raking long scratches there, and Tharn was catapulted heels over head a full fifteen feet across the arena.

A little murmur of protest came from the ranks of spectators. They had witnessed what had promised to be an ineffectual struggle develop into a battle between giants, with its ultimate outcome very much in doubt. Now, through a quirk of fate, the grim battle was ended; the favorite they had acclaimed was doomed.

Sadu leaped forward to make his kill.

Tharn, helpless, knew life had run its course. Nothing could save him now.

And then fickle fate shifted once more. Tharn's right hand, pressing against the ground in a last futile effort to throw himself to one side, closed purely by chance about a hard object which he instantly identified as the hilt of a stone knife, dropped there, doubtless, by some warrior earlier in the day.

Recognition and action came together. Tharn raised the weapon, hilt between thumb and bent forefinger, and, while still in a sitting position, flung it with all the concentrated strength of his powerful arm point foremost at the on-rushing bulk.

As in a dream he saw the sliver of flint streak through the sunlight to meet the great head. Full into Sadu's right eye sank its entire length; then a crushing weight came down on Tharn's chest and he knew no more.

He could not have been unconscious for long; for his eyes opened in time to see Sadu's lifeless body being dragged away. Two guards were standing over his own supine figure, evidently seeking to learn the extent of his injuries.

"He lives!" ejaculated one in surprise, as Tharn's eyes fluttered open.

In answer the cave man got unsteadily to his feet, and while the effort sent a spasm of pain through his bruised chest and aching ribs, his face betrayed nothing of his suffering.

Leisurely he brushed sand from his back and legs, then turned and walked toward the western gate. Heedless to the thunder of acclaim beating against his ears, he disappeared through the arms-room door.

Once within the common cell, Tharn told enough of his adventure to dull the prisoners' curiosity, then edged away to join Katon.

Thus the day wore on. Now and then guards would enter, pick out a man or two and depart. Once, Brutan came back from the arena with his left cheek laid open from an animal's claw. But the wound had dulled no part of his braggardism and he told a highly colored tale of an encounter against nearly impossible odds.

Later in that afternoon, Katon had been summoned, to be absent for what seemed an age to Tharn. But return he did, unscathed, a broad smile lighting up his face as the cave lord came forward to welcome him.

A bond of friendship, based on mutual respect and admiration, had formed between these two men; a bond which passing days but served to augment. It was destined to be that rare understanding known only between men, wherein each finds within the other something of himself.

Just before the day's end, Brosan went out, a quip on his lips and a careless wave of his hand to the others. That joking remark and carefree gesture remained with every man in the cell, for Brosan never came back... .

Darkness came at last, and for a second time the roaring of beasts and shrieks and moans of dying men ceased in the oval above. Food was brought and the weary gladiators ate and drank, doing their best to forget tiredness and strain.

Sleep came slowly that night to most of them. Within every heart was strong desire for the morrow to come—the new day for which all had waited. There were some here who would never see a second sunrise; but, as is usual under such conditions, each man looked for death to single out any one other than himself.

Less than a day's journey to the north of Sephar's walls a party of fifty warriors supped on the freshly-killed meat of Neela, the zebra, shortly before Dyta slid below the western earth-line. All that day they had traveled slowly along a thread-like game trail leading directly south. At times, for hours on end, they had walked through sombre depths of brooding jungle, beneath grotesque shadows of forest kings. Again, their way was across wide reaches of gently undulating prairie, where thick yellow grasses, deep to a tall man's thighs, stirred beneath the touch of baking winds.

Always, however, they had moved into the south, and ever in the lead was he whose decision, based solely on a vague premonition, had brought them so far from home. On this man's left forearm was the painted insignia of a chief... .

With the sudden coming of night, the entire party took to the safety of high branches on either side of the trail. When Dyta returned on the morrow, they once more would take up their march into the mountains to the south ... always to the south.

Once more, dawn poked gray fingers through the overhead grill-work of the great cell beneath Sephar's amphitheater. And from the same point came sounds of Sephar's thousands, filing again into their seats for another day of grisly entertainment.

Tharn rolled over, sat up and ran tanned fingers through his heavy shock of black hair. For a moment his eyes ran over the sleeping scores, picking out many whom he had learned to respect. There was Katon, head pillowed on the biceps of a strong right arm, a half smile discernible on his firm mouth; he was sleeping soundly. Near him lay Brutan, the red edges of his wound showing through black stubble covering his cheek. There was Rotark, his long face even more solemn in sleep; and next to him, Gorlat, blond hair unruffled, his tunic, still nearly immaculate, neatly folded and placed close beside him.

Tharn got to his feet and set about awakening the sleepers. Before Wotar arrived, he meant to speak once more to the prisoners; to go over for the last time, those few vital points which all must know perfectly if his plans were to be carried to a successful conclusion.

When all were assembled, he spoke briefly, asking questions again and again that none might fail to understand what was expected of him. The men listened intently, hanging on his every word and drinking deep of the inexhaustible fund of courage and surety possessed by the gray-eyed young man.

When he had finished he knew they were with him heart and soul, that every man present would charge, without hesitation, a hundred spear points if the need arose. If Vulcar could manage as well with the group across the hall, then Sephar could have a new ruler before nightfall.

He had no more than finished speaking, when the door opened, admitting Wotar and six guards. Quickly, ten prisoners were singled out and taken from the cell, among them Tharn and the golden haired Gorlat.

Upon reaching the arms-room, Wotar sent four prisoners, with as many guards, into the chamber, the others being forced to wait until the tiny room could be cleared. And of the four who entered, two were Tharn and Gorlat.

The door was closed and barred. The prisoners stood quietly, waiting for the attendant to parcel out weapons to them.

The crisis was at hand. Now that it had come, Tharn felt his muscles tense, his nerves grow taut, a deadly coolness steal through him. His eyes narrowed, as do the eyes of Tarlok preparing to leap upon unwary prey.

The air of the small chamber seemed suddenly charged with something electrical; a hushed breath of expectancy made the stillness strangely unbearable... .

A guard cleared his throat uneasily, sending a harsh rasping note against the silence. He said, "Give each man a bow, ten arrows and a spear."

Removing a stone-tipped spear from a pile in one corner, the attendant offered it, butt foremost, to the cave-man, who reached forth a steady hand to take it. As his fingers closed on the haft, and before anyone could guess his intention, Tharn drew back his arm and drove the triangle of flint into the man's throat, changing a scream of terror into a gasping whisper.

As the dying guard slumped forward, the other captives snatched weapons from the supply about them and leaped upon the dazed soldiers, three of whom went down before they could lift a hand in defense.

Tharn, farthest from the group, was forced to cross the entire room before he could lay hands on the fourth guard. That one, instead of standing his ground, was seeking to reach and unbar the corridor door.

As he fumbled with the heavy timber, iron fingers closed on one shoulder and tore him away. Up and back he swung, high above Tharn's head; then his thrown body struck head foremost against the far wall, crushing the skull like a blown egg.

Turning to his comrades, Tharn found two of the three remaining guards were already accounted for. The third, however, had killed one rebel, and using the dead body as a shield, was successfully standing off all efforts of the two men seeking to reach him. In one hand he grasped a long spear, its darting head having already inflicted slight wounds on the menacing pair.

A thunderous pounding warned Tharn that the sounds of combat had aroused Wotar and his two men. The entire rebellion was being threatened by one courageous man; and unless this delay was speedily ended, the break for freedom was destined to end here and now.

Stooping, Tharn grasped the dead body of the attendant, straightened, and hurled it with all his giant strength full against the lone defender's human shield. So terrific was that impact, that the guard was swept completely from his feet. Before he could recover, Gorlat had slipped a knife into his heart.

Bounding forward, Tharn unbarred and threw open the door, and sprang into the corridor, his two friends at his heels. He had a brief glimpse of Wotar's hanging jaw and stupefied expression before the two factions closed in battle.

Wotar was no coward. As Tharn leaped toward him he whipped a knife from his belt and swung it savagely at the Cro-Magnard's broad chest.

Like the striking head of an angry snake, Tharn's hand shot out and closed on Wotar's wrist. Mighty fingers contracted, and the knife dropped from his nerveless grasp to clatter against the stone floor. Tharn's free hand closed on the hapless leader's jaw, tightened, then wrenched the head in a vicious half-circle that left a broken neck in its wake.

When Tharn released the clay that once had been Wotar, master of Sephar's Games, he found no other foe alive within the corridor. Dead on the floor were the two guards, torn and mangled from the savage fury of those who had snuffed out their lives. Eight men, eyes alight, stood before him, awaiting instructions.

The cave dweller singled out two of them.

"Go back and open both cells. First, free those in our own room; Vulcar may not have convinced the others to join us. If so, our men can help in convincing them!

"Tell them the way is open to this room. Caution all to silence, that none overhears us and warns those we hope to surprise."

Tharn then motioned the remaining six into the arms-room. There, each armed himself with a bow, arrows, knife and a spear.

Soon they heard sounds of naked feet within the corridor, and into view, three abreast, came the former prisoners. At their head was Katon; beside him strode Vulcar, once captain of Urim's guards.

Tharn halted them just short of the arsenal. He ran his eyes along the ranks, and what he saw brought a smile of satisfaction to his lips.

As far back as his eyes could make out in the dimly lighted passageway were men. There were at least a hundred and fifty—perhaps more; all eager for weapons and a chance to use them.

The Cro-Magnard held up one hand to gain their attention. "Remember," he said, "march into the arena quickly and in silence. Do not so much as glance at the spectators until I give the signal. And when that signal comes, seek to kill only priests and warriors. To attack the people of Sephar without cause would only make them hate and fear us. We cannot fight an entire city.

"Come forward now—three each time. Once within the arena, take the places I give you."

Three entered the arms-room. To each went a bow, quiver of arrows, complete with shoulder band; a knife and a spear. Tharn then opened the outer door and passed them through, then pulled it shut and aided in arming the next three.

In that fashion twenty-seven were sent into the amphitheater before Tharn called a halt. Dimly, he could hear the rustling murmur from the packed stands, and he knew that all was well—thus far, at least.

He summoned Vulcar and Katon, now, gave them weapons identical to those issued to the others, and went with them into the arena, Rotark acting as door-keeper.

In a wide semi-circle at the far end of the sandy field stood the twenty-seven who had gone before them. They made a thin line, their backs close to the retaining wall, one end of which was almost directly below the loges occupied by Pryak and the Council of Priests. It was toward this section that Tharn and his two companions bent their steps.

The cave lord took a position less than four paces from the stone barrier at his back. Above him sat Pryak, high priest and ruler of Sephar, deep in conversation with Orbar.

Now, the second contingent of warriors began to issue from the arms-room. In groups of three, seconds apart, they emerged and took up positions near the wall at the arena's opposite end.

When an equal number were at either end of the enclosure, the influx of armed men became heavier. In groups of five, now, they appeared and formed a second row a few feet in front of the others and facing in the same direction. There were fully four score in the open by this time—and still they came.

Tharn knew the moment was fast approaching when suspicion would become aroused by this unprecedented concentration of warriors. Already a few priests were peering down at them, puzzled expressions on their faces. The buzz of conversation began to fade; and here and there spectators were rising to their feet.

Pryak stood up, suddenly, and leaned over the railing.

"What means this?" he asked of Orbar. "Does Wotar mean to end the Games with one battle? There are too many men on the sands; send someone to investigate."

Tharn, overhearing, knew he dared wait no longer. Throwing back his head, he sent the hair-raising battle cry of his tribe reverberating throughout the entire structure. As the notes of that horrendous cry rose on the still air, he pivoted about and sent a slender arrow leaping from his bow full at the head of Pryak, king of Sephar!

It is no mean tribute to Pryak's nimbleness to tell that he dodged that arrow. And dodge it he did—falling back into the arms of his retinue as death passed a finger's breadth above his sparse locks to transfix an unfortunate under-priest.

The cave-man's cry was the awaited signal, releasing all the pent-up hate and fury within the hearts of those who acknowledged him as leader. As one man, a hundred warriors turned and loosed a shower of arrows at the thin line of guards and priests above them. The instant those flint-tipped messengers were released, those rebels nearest the walls knelt, braced themselves and became living ladders over which their comrades swarmed to gain the seats above.

A living wave of blood-hungry men swarmed into the stands and fell upon the already wavering ranks of defenders. The entire bowl was now a maelstrom of swirling bodies, legs and arms. Panic-stricken spectators, few of them armed, rose from their benches and rushed headlong for the exits, trammeling, pushing, fighting to gain the streets, to escape the raving horde of crazed demons.

And, seemingly everywhere at the same time, Tharn, Katon and Vulcar fought shoulder to shoulder, their knives rising and falling, their spears licking out to take lives and spread further the reign of terror they had fostered.

Twice, Tharn caught sight of Gorlat, blond hair finally disarranged, weaving among the tiers like a cat, his only weapon a long, thin knife. And as priest after priest sought futilely to keep that long blade from his throat, Tharn knew, now, why Vulcar had said few could equal that young man with such a weapon. How many died that day with throats slit by that knife, only Gorlat knew—and he was never to tell.

It had happened shortly after Tharn had caught his second glimpse of the steadily smiling youth. Gorlat had just made a kill, and as he stood erect, a thrown spear came from nowhere to catch him full in the chest.

Gorlat had staggered back to sink into a sitting position on an empty bench. Dazedly he had raised a hand to wipe away the red stains of his own blood from that once spotless tunic—then slumped back and moved no more.

There were other men of Tharn's force who fell, never to rise again; but for each who died, five enemies went to join him. Bodies of slain priests were everywhere—draped across seats, hanging over the arena wall, lying in the aisles. Warriors loyal to Pryak had died in droves and lay glaring at the sky with sightless eyes.

At last there was none within the amphitheater other than the dead, the wounded, and the blood-splashed figures of the rebels who stood panting from their efforts, their eyes on Tharn and his two lieutenants.

Of those three, Vulcar alone had been wounded. An arrow had creased his shoulder close to his neck, and blood from the cut had stained one side of his chest a fast-darkening crimson. But his eyes were bright with satisfaction and his lips were curled in grim content.

"Urim would have enjoyed this!" he said, and his smile widened. "Now, on to the palace and the temple to clean out the rest of Pryak's men. That done, the city is ours!"

Katon bent and took up a stray spear. "Come, then," he remarked; "if we wait, they will have gotten over their panic and will be that much harder to rout a second time."

Tharn nodded agreement. "First, the palace; then we can invade the temple and take Pryak and his men."

A warrior spoke from the ranks. "Dare we enter the temple?" he asked doubtfully. "If we offend the God, He may destroy us."

"He is right!" declared another. "Why should we chance angering our God. Once the city is ours, Pryak will have to do as we say. Let us not attack the House of the God."

"Pryak dies!" Vulcar roared, grinding the butt of his spear savagely against the stone flooring. "Let the God be offended—Pryak must die! If the rest of you brave warriors are afraid, I will go alone into the temple and drag out Urim's murderer by the few hairs left on his ugly head!"

"Did Pryak's God save these priests who lie about us, here, their bodies cut by our spears and knives? Did He, seeing Pryak in danger, hide him with His sky-fire? No; they were men like us; and since they deserved to die, they *did* die! Pryak is next!"

Tharn, listening with silent admiration and approval, thought of something that snatched the half-smile from his lips.

"Where *is* Pryak?" he asked. "He was here when the fighting started. How did he and those with him get away?"

The others could furnish nothing toward clearing up this minor mystery. Nor was there a single body of the missing group in the vicinity.

"Let us go on," suggested Tharn finally. "After the palace is taken, we can set about finding Vulcar's good friend Pryak!"

Still chuckling at the cave-man's sally, the insurgents formed into a column, three abreast, and marched toward a nearby exit that led from the shambles they had created.

Chapter 21

Conclusion

Upon reaching the street, they started for the palace, its white walls gleaming under the mid-morning sun. No citizen of Sephar was abroad; but the marching men were conscious of watching eyes at windows of the buildings on either side.

The palace grounds, too, were deserted as they swept across the palace grounds and dashed against the great double doors. They might as well have sought to force the palace walls so strongly barred were the heavy planks.

As they stood debating their next step, a shower of spears, arrows and clubs fell suddenly upon them from above, killing several before Tharn could give the order to withdraw.

At a safe distance from the windows, Tharn, Vulcar and Katon held a brief council of war, finally agreeing upon a strategic maneuver that held promise of being effective.

Eight warriors left the group, returning with a heavy log, free of branches. This was carried, four men to a side, to within a short distance from the barred entranceway. Now, eight replacements came forward, took up the massive tree trunk and started at a run toward the doors, the log's heavy base aimed at a point where the two rough-hewn sections joined.

Within a dozen paces of their objective, they swerved sharply to their left and sent the great timber crashing through the slender stone columns of a large window.

Following the log came those who had carried it, pouring through to the hallway beyond. It was deserted; evidently the defenders were grouped at the upstairs windows, intending to stage their defense from that point.

A second later the palace doors were thrown wide and, notwithstanding a heavy barrage from overhead, the rebels soon over-ran the central hallway.

Halfway up the wide staircase they were met by a withering volley from the upper passageway and stairhead. But Tharn raised his voice once more in the awesome war challenge of his people, and which seemed to lift his followers bodily to the top of the steps.

Here, fighting was fast and furious. Although outnumbered at first by four to one, the insurgents made up that handicap by the intensity of their assault; and slowly but steadily Pryak's loyal troops were being pushed back.

Tharn was in his element! Knife and spear had been cast aside or lost; his only weapons were his mighty hands. Yet his was the most feared figure among the rebels, as was attested to by the mound of strangled and broken guards strewn about him.

Several times he saw Katon battling away close by, a long knife in either hand. Once, an enemy in a badly torn tunic was preparing to drive a knife into his unsuspecting back. Tharn had torn a spear from the fingers of a neighboring comrade and without pausing to judge distance, had thrown it across the hall to pass half its length into the side of Katon's would-be slayer. The man had fallen, while Katon, unaware of his narrow escape, was finishing the warrior with whom he had been engaged.

Of Vulcar, Brutan and Rotark, Tharn had seen nothing since the battle began. During momentary lulls he had time to wonder how they were faring—if, somewhere in this madhouse of fighting, bellowing men, they were managing to keep their skins whole.

Gradually the palace defenders were weakening, losing heart as their list of casualties grew. Already, the men of Tharn's party had sensed victory was slowly but surely passing into their hands.

And then came the unexpected, the one contingency which none of the rebel leaders had foreseen.

A ringing shout sounded from the open doorway, and through the gap came priests from the temple of Sephar's God. Instead of waiting for the freedom-hungry prisoners to take their first objective, then march against the House of God, the cunning arch priest had sent every man he could muster to reinforce the palace garrison.

There must have been a hundred of them, fresh and—for priests—eager for battle. They fell upon the revoltors from behind, spreading death and consternation in the thinning ranks of those from Sephar's pits.

Encouraged by aid from this wholly unexpected quarter, the palace defenders regained their fading morale and renewed the attack with reckless fury.

The end had come. Bitter was the realization to Tharn who, until now, had been certain nothing could prevent his men from taking Sephar. He smarted under the knowledge that wily old Pryak had outwitted them after all.

He might, under cover of the raging turmoil, have turned his back on friends and supporters to seek out Dylara's cell and escape with her from Sephar. But the thought was gone as it was born; and the Cro-Magnard sought to rally his shaken followers to the task of cutting a pathway back to the street. Once outside, some of them might manage to flee into the jungle—a far cry from their ambitious dream of taking Sephar!

It began to appear, however, that leaving the palace was to be infinitely more difficult than forcing an entrance had been. Again and again his men were repulsed by the white-faced but unflinching priests at the foot of the staircase. Steadily the number of rebels grew less; and while they took more lives than they gave, there were too many to outlast.

Suddenly there rose above the pandemonium within, a chorus of savage cries from outside the open doors. Tharn straightened as though struck by an unseen spear. His eyes went wide with incredulous astonishment bordering on disbelief; then from his powerful lungs broke an answering shout that paled to insignificance the tumult about him.

Swarming into the hall below, came a host of strange, warlike fighting-men, naked except for panther- and leopard-skins about their loins. Splendid, beautifully proportioned barbarians they were, heavy war-spears gripped in powerful right hands, sun-bronzed skins rippling under the play of corded muscles.

At their head was the stalwart figure of a man such as never before had been seen within Sephar's borders. Four inches above six feet he stood, slim of hip and broad of shoulder—a wealth of black hair held from his eyes by a strip of cured snakeskin.

"Father!" burst from Tharn's lips.

At sound of his cry, the leader of the newcomers looked sharply in his direction.

"Kill!" shouted young Tharn, bringing one hand out in a sweeping gesture toward the frozen ranks of priests.

In response, the Cro-Magnards threw themselves at the white-clad enemy. At the same time Tharn, the younger, leaped into action, shouting words of instruction and encouragement to his friends.

The end came quickly. Torn at from two sides, the priests broke and fled in all directions, the cave-men in hot pursuit. At sight of this, the original defenders threw down their weapons and surrendered on the spot.

Now came Tharn, the elder, striding forward to greet his son. Behind him crowded others of the tribe, wide smiles on their lips.

"We have searched long for you, my son," said the chief. "At times we were close to giving up; it was not until yesterday that one of us found where you and a girl had followed a game trail leading to this place."

"You could not have arrived at a better time!"

The chief smiled. Katon, watching from the background, marveled at the striking resemblance of father to son when both smiled.

"At first," said the Cro-Magnard leader, "we were almost afraid to leave the jungle's edge. But no one was about the openings in the walls, and as your trail led straight toward one of them, we decided to follow it. Then, too, all of us were curious to see what manner of people lived in such strange caves.

"No one tried to stop us. In fact, we saw no one at all. I was beginning to wonder if we were the only ones here until we heard sounds of fighting coming from here. The rest you know."

His son nodded. "Soon I shall tell you what I have gone through since I last saw you. But first I have something to do."

He hesitated. How should he go about telling his father? He hoped Dylara would not exhibit that temper of hers the first time she met the chief.

"What must you do?" the chief asked, glancing sharply at the face of his son.

"I have taken a mate!" There—it was out!

His father never batted an eye.

"Where is she?"

"Somewhere in this place. A prisoner, I suppose. Katon, here, may be able to find her. She—she may not seem pleased that I have come for her."

Those last words came out with an effort. But sooner or later his father was bound to learn he had taken a mate by force.

The elder man pursed his lips to keep from smiling. He was shrewd enough to come very close to the true state of affairs. But what of it? His

own courtship had been none too easy. Afterward, Nada and he had been closer than words could express. He had never, nor would ever, lose the pain that had come when she had been taken captive by some strange tribe so many years ago.

Katon, at mention of his name, had stepped forward.

"This," Tharn said, "is Katon—my friend."

There was immediate approval in the eyes of both the blue-eyed Sepharian and the Cro-Magnard chief.

"Dylara probably is in the slave quarters," Katon said. "If you will come with me, I will lead you there."

And shortly thereafter, father and son stood before a great door while Katon removed its heavy bar.

They entered a huge, sunlit room crowded with women, young and old, who shrank away from them in alarm.

There was one, however, who did not draw away. Her lovely face was registering astonishment and disbelief—and hope. One hand lifted slowly to her throat as she stared into the eyes of Tharn's father.

Nor was she alone in displaying tangled emotions. Tharn, the elder, was gazing at the woman as though unable to credit the evidence of his own eyes.

And then the man found his voice.

"Nada!" It was more gasp than a word.

"Tharn—my mate!"

An instant later she was caught up in his arms.

Young Tharn looked on in bewilderment, not grasping, at first, the significance of that single word his father had uttered. Then, as the chief turned toward him, an arm about the woman's shoulders, he understood.

Then his arm, too, was about her: and after twelve long years, father, son, and mother were reunited.

None of the three had much to say during the next few minutes. There was an enormous lump in Nada's throat, making speech impossible. She could not take her eyes from the splendid young man who, until a few days ago, she had thought to be dead. He was everything Dylara had said he was. She remembered him as she had last seen him—a straight-backed, sturdy-legged youngster, whose inquisitive nature and complete lack of fear had given her so many anxious moments. Even at that early age he had shown promise of the extraordinary physical development he now possessed.

But her greatest pride and satisfaction came from what she could see in those frank, compelling gray eyes—eyes mirroring a fine, sensitive soul and an equally fine mind.

"Tell me," Nada said at last, "how did you know I was here?"

"I did not know," admitted her mate. "Did you, Tharn?"

Their son shook his head. "I never dreamed you were in Sephar. As a matter of fact, we came here to find a girl—Dylara, my—my mate. We thought she would be with the slaves."

Then it was that he saw a shadow come into Nada's eyes—a shadow which wiped away his smile and closed a cold hand about his heart.

"Nada!" he exclaimed. "What is wrong? Has something happened to her?"

"She is ... gone," his mother said dully.

"Gone?"

"Yes. Pryak gave her to a man from a land far to the south of Sephar. He has taken her there with him."

Tharn's face was white beneath its layer of tan. "How long since?" he demanded hoarsely.

"This is the third day."

Without another word the young man wheeled and started for the door. Before he could reach it, however, strong fingers closed on his arm.

His father had stopped him. "Wait, Tharn. Where are you going?"

"After Dylara," said his son grimly.

"Of course; but do not leave so—so abruptly. Let us talk this over before you start. Some of our men will go with you, once we have eaten and slept."

"I am neither tired nor hungry," retorted his son. "I am going alone; others would only delay me."

Katon chose this moment to intervene. "Wait a few hours, Tharn. There is much left to be done here, and we need your help. A new king must be chosen and order restored to the palace and city. Once that is done there will be a feast for all of us; then, after a good sleep, you can set out after Dylara. You can overtake those who have her within two or three suns."

Nada ended the discussion. "Stay until morning, my son," she pleaded. "I have but found you; I cannot bear to let you go so soon."

The smile came back to Tharn's face. "As you will," he conceded. "But when Dyta comes again, I must leave you."

So it was decided, and the four went down to the lower floor to join the others.

That night, in the great dininghall of Sephar's palace, a happy throng sat about a long, wide table laden to its edges with an abundance of foods. At the head sat Katon; at his right hand was Tharn, the elder; and, on his left, was Tharn, the younger, his mother beside him.

Earlier that afternoon the former prisoners and those nobles who had not fallen in defense of Pryak's government, had assembled in the great central hallway to elect a new king. Tharn, to his honest surprise, had been their instant and unanimous choice. But he had declined the honor, saying:

"There is one among you who has every right to rule over you. He, himself, is the son of a king—one who understands all those things expected of a ruler. That man is Katon of Huxla!"

The roar of approval which followed his words reached far beyond Sephar's walls. Katon would have protested but he had no chance of making himself heard, and he accepted—hiding his pleasure as best he could. He did not dream what a pang that speech had cost his Cro-Magnard friend, for with those words Tharn had relinquished his hope of taking the Sepharian back with him to the caves of his father.

Later in the day an armed force had entered the temple of Sephar's God; and while the feet of those faint-hearted members in the group had dragged somewhat, none had turned back.

However, no resistance had materialized; instead, a horde of priests, arms held high, hands empty, had welled up from the subterranean maze below the temple and begged the new ruler to accept them as his own loyal followers.

Among them was the Council of Priests, intact to a man—except for one. But that one was he whom Katon—and Vulcar!—had desired most to see: Pryak, high priest and Sephar's former king.

It was then that the new king displayed his ability to make sensible decisions. Before leaving the temple he had appointed Cardon as high priest to the God-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken. Nor could he have made a wiser choice; for Cardon was possessor of a rugged honesty as well as a lack of ambition beyond his position. The long-standing feud between Church and State was ended.

Once these matters had been disposed of, Katon had sent his soldiery to assemble the residents of Sephar at the palace grounds. When a huge throng had filled not only the grassy expanse but the street as well, Katon, as ruler of Sephar, had proclaimed the new government and asked that they acknowledge, as their king, a warrior in place of a priest.

The thunderous, welcoming roar which greeted his words was all that was needed to make of Sephar a unified community. Katon had immediately proclaimed a two day holiday, to be given over to feasting and drinking; and, because he was a shrewd judge of human nature, he had announced that every citizen must sacrifice some valued article to the God, whose help had made the revolt a success.

And so it was that on this night all Sephar, from palace to city walls, was in a merry-making mood. Within the palace dininghall, there was only a single tiny cloud to mar the clear sky of happiness; a cloud fast losing the dark hue it at first had assumed.

This bit of gloom was caused by the absence of Dylara. But when young Tharn had had an opportunity to reflect, there had come the certainty that Dylara would be back with him before many suns. Tharn knew he could cover in one day three times the distance that the slow-moving men from Ammad could travel in that same period of time. And while they must camp while Dyta slept, Tharn could go on across nocturnal jungles and plains without being forced to slack his speed.

Vulcar, earthen goblet in hand, was bellowing out an anecdote of the days when he had been a young warrior, when the hangings behind Tharn's bench swayed as though touched by a random current of air.

Because all eyes were fixed on the speaker, and because the faint candle light failed to reach much beyond the table, none saw the half crouched figure that stealthily pushed aside the curtain and tip-toed into the room. The intruder's lips were curled in a crazed grimace of hate; in one hand was clutched a long blade of polished stone.

Nada, pausing in her eating from time to time to gaze fondly at her broad-shouldered son, caught a glimpse of something moving among the shadows directly behind the young man. What was it that lurked there?

Suddenly Nada screamed—a high-pitched, tearing sound that cut through the babble of voices about the table.

With the first notes of the scream, a figure behind Tharn bounded forward and drove a flint knife deep into the naked back of the surprised Cro-Magnard.

Nada's terrified cry was all that saved Tharn from instant death. For he was rising from his stool and turning as the scream left her lips. As a result, the knife point entered his back at an angle, ripping through the muscles there to enter the lower tip of one lung.

Tharn, despite his agony, reached for the would-be assassin. But another was there before him—Vulcar, the hawk-faced.

The one-time captain of Urim's guards had vaulted the table in a flying leap and with a powerful sweep of his arm, knocked away the knife. Then he caught the man about the neck and forced him into a kneeling position.

"So, Pryak," cried the hawk-faced one, "you would add another killing to your list! Long have I waited for this—now comes your reward for the death of Urim!"

Pryak opened his lips to plead for mercy, but before the words could come he was whirled up from the floor as though he were a figure of straw. Then, as the others watched in awe, Vulcar brought the screaming man down on the edge of the massive table.

There was a crunching sound from splintering bones, one last nerve-tearing cry of agony and fear—and Pryak, the ambitious, was gone to his reward.

As the guests stood staring down at the broken form, a thin trickle of blood appeared at one corner of Tharn's mouth and coursed to his chin. Dazedly he lifted a hand to wipe away the stain, then his knees gave way, and before the paralyzed company could prevent, Tharn, the son of Tharn, had pitched to the floor.

When complete consciousness first returned, he was aware of a great mound of soft skins beneath him; and he opened tired eyes to a sun-flooded room. For a little while he was content to remain so, staring at the stone ceiling.

Later, he slowly turned his head and looked into the eyes of Nada. For a few minutes mother and son did not speak; then she reached out to touch his hand.

"You have come back to us, Tharn," she said softly.

Tharn pondered over her remark. When he spoke he was startled by the feebleness of his voice.

"How long have I lain here?"

"Half a moon."

"Half a—!" He sought to sit up, but sank back as a stabbing pain shot through his chest.

"No, no, Tharn!" cried Nada. "You still are not well. The wound in your back is not completely healed, and the jungle fever left you only a little while ago."

Tharn frowned. He was so very tired. "But—Dylara ... I must go after her. I should have found her before this. I must not lie here while she—"

Then, as an unsupportable weariness flooded his body, he closed his eyes. In another moment he was sleeping soundly.

Another half moon had passed. Today had dawned bright and fair. Dyta, the sun, had pulled his blazing head above the eastern earth-line an hour before, tearing the jungle fog into rapidly dissolving streamers of mist.

A group of three—two men and a woman—walked through twin gates in Sephar's rock walls and moved slowly toward the somber shadows of the jungle south of the city. A few yards short of the green wall they came to a halt on a slight, grass-covered elevation.

"I must leave you here," said young Tharn. "Within a few suns—a moon, at most—I will return. Dylara will be with me."

The older man nodded. "Your mother and I leave for home before long. We shall wait there for you and your mate."

"You will not need to wait long," said the young man confidently.

He placed an arm about the man's wide shoulders, pressed the hand of his mother in silent farewell, then turned and strode toward the wall of verdure and towering forest giants to the south.

Together, Tharn, the elder, and Nada, his mate stood on the little green mound, watching the lithe figure of their only son until it disappeared into the forbidding jungle. Beyond that first rampart of lofty trees, of tangled vines and creepers, lay a mysterious land, never before trod by any known member of their world. What hidden dangers lurked there? What savage tribes? What unknown and terrible beasts?

A shudder passed through the woman's slender body. The man at her side slipped a strong arm about the trembling shoulders in unspoken understanding.

"He will come back?" she asked, her voice unsteady. It was half question, half statement; and in those words ran an undercurrent of mingled hope and fear.

"Yes," said the man, his own voice strong and very certain. "He will come back."

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