

Lankar of Callisto - Jandar 06

Lin Carter

Chapter 1

THE CITY IN THE JUNGLE

It was early afternoon when we landed at the Siem Reap airport just north of the capital city. We had to wait in interminable lines to collect our luggage and to go through passport examination and customs inspection. Eventually we emerged under a darkening sky to be greeted by grinning pedicab-drivers who

shrilled out the names of hotels, vying with each other for our trade. We selected one cheerful little man from the line who greeted us in a comical mixture of French and Cambodian.

“Bonsoir, lok!”-which meant “good evening, mister”-he called. I think Noel was attracted to him because of his smile, which was gleaming and colorful. I mean that quite literally, by the way, for his teeth were inlaid with gold and plaques of red carnelian. The Cambodian natives, it seems, regard white teeth as bad luck, and while the poor peasants color them by chewing on betel nut, those who can afford to do so have their teeth set with gold fillings or with semiprecious stones like lapis or carnelian, or even with jewels.

Babbling merrily in at least three languages, our driver heaped the luggage on the rack and we climbed in and settled ourselves while he mounted the rear of the vehicle, taking a running start, and steered us smoothly into the flow of traffic. These pedicabs look like an odd hybrid of bicycle and the traditional rickshaw and most of the street traffic of the Cambodian capital is composed of them, since gasoline has recently become very expensive due to shortages and the cutoff of foreign imports. “Legs are cheaper than gas,” is the saying here.

For a time we were pedaled along a narrow country road beside a muddy yellow waterway. Naked brown boys scrubbing dusty elephants amid the stream waved and catcalled as we went clicking by; grimacing gibbons chattered from tall stands of bamboo that rattled and clattered in the spanking breeze; birds with red plumage screeched from immense banyans or fragrant lemon-groves. We saw entire families up to their knees in the muddy water, scooping up silver, wriggling fish in wicker buckets. Occasionally the waterway widened and we saw stately, if clumsy, wooden junks competing with all manner of rivercraft for right of way-everything from bamboo rafts to rusty packet boats, loud motorboats scooting by graceful crafts that looked for all the world like Venetian gondolas. Far off downstream a huge oil tanker stood at dock.

Before long we entered the city proper and moved through narrow streets lined with open-air shops which sold an amazing profusion of odd merchandise-wrought-silver elephants, gongs, bamboo flutes, paper good-luck flags, incense sticks, betelnuts, begging bowls of polished wood, dogmeat sausages (at which we shuddered), modern Chinese comic books. Buddhist monks strolled the sidewalks in their saffron robes under yellow parasols. Old women with shaven heads went by, wrapped from armpit to ankle in black sarongs called sampots, with spotless white blouses. Mobs of ragamuffin children were everywhere, chewing sugarcane-the local equivalent of lollipops-lugging shoeshine kits, begging for pennies, munching on sunflower seeds. Fortune-tellers squatted on the sidewalks, a jumble of mystic books, copper amulets and magical herbs spread out before them on pieces of oilcloth. Most of the traffic was composed of pedicabs similar to the one in which we rode, which are called cyclos; there were very few automobiles to be seen.

Noel had brought along a street map of Phnom Penh which she had been studying on the plane while I read Jandar’s manuscript; so we were able to follow our progress through the city easily enough. Phnom

Penh is a city of many waters, laid out so that it straddles the intersection of the Tonle Sap and the Bassac River, where they merge with an elbow of the mighty Mekong which empties into the ocean one hundred and thirty miles downstream. This intersection, called the quatre bras, the “four arms,” is like a great ‘X’ of water, and most of the local transportation is by means of the various rivers, canals and suchlike. The country itself is quite small, covering 66,000 square miles, about the size of the state of Washington back home. The capital is rather small, in keeping with about four hundred thousand inhabitants.

We entered the Boulevard Norodom, a broad tree-lined avenue. Here for the first time we saw

automobiles in number, mostly small foreign imports I could not name. Our driver, pedaling away behind us, called our attention to a local landmark, the famous Wat Phnom, a tapering, battered, weather-beaten, spire-topped shrine which rises atop a wooded hill near the approximate center of the city, gained by a wide flight of stone steps. We passed by it close enough to see the stone seven-headed cobras that adorned its roof. "Wat Phnom" means "Hill Temple," and the legend has it that six centuries ago when rainy season floodwaters arose, they washed the trunk of a great koki tree up this hill to the doorstep of a lady named Penh. Inside the tree were found four bronze images of the Buddha, and the omen was interpreted to mean the gods had withdrawn their favor from the old imperial capital, the famous jungle metropolis of Angkor, and were searching for a new home. Rumors of the miracle spread and a fair-sized town grew up rapidly around the central hill whereon lived Lady Penh, who built the spired temple to house the idols. Later, when an invasion from Thailand overran Angkor, the king of that day moved south, settling here, making this his capital. The city has been known as Phnom Penh, "the Hill of Lady Penh," ever since.

We reached the waterfront where we were supposed to meet Sir Malcolm's head boy, checked our luggage in a riverside passenger station, paid our cyclo-driver, tipping him handsomely, and, as we had plenty of time to spare, decided on an early dinner. The station manager, or dockmaster, or whatever he was, spoke a fair bit of English, recommending the center of the local nightlife, an establishment called le Bar Jean, where the local members of the French colony meet for cocktails, conversation and continental cuisine. Noel demurred, preferring something more Cambodian to French; the stationmaster told us how to find the Lotus d'Or, a floating restaurant serving traditional Vietnamese dishes, which had originally been built as a movie set.

We set out on our own. The steep golden yellow roofs of the Throne Hall, reserved for coronations, gleamed in the fires of sunset; paper lanterns bobbed from bamboo rods above open-air shops inwardly lit by kerosene lamps; colored paper good-luck flags fluttered from doorsills as we passed, displaying a bizarre bestiary—the half-human Garuda bird, the three-faced god Chak Kbon, fantastically colored elephants, and a green-faced giant named Piphek, borrowed from Hindu myth. Eager-faced urchins, who could spot a "wealthy" tourist ten miles off, vied to escort us to local monuments like the great Preah Morokoe pagoda with its famous floor of solid silver tiles. There was certainly a motley throng filling the lamplit streets, among them a surprising preponderance of terribly respectable-looking Chinese businessmen in neat, gray Western business suits, with narrow, black conservative ties. Since about a third of Phnom Penh's citizens are Chinese, and since they control most of the trade and own nearly all of the shops, I suppose this wasn't really surprising.

The city was crowded and colorful, a place where many different cultures meet and mingle. Along Rue Khemarak Phoumin—over which garish paper banners advertise soccer games and boxing matches to the sports-mad Cambodians—there is a restaurant serving a traditional Chinese menu, crossed, in a most unlikely fashion, with a French sidewalk cafe. But we finally settled on a seedy little eating-place which offered Cambodian dishes and even a headwaiter who spoke English. Shunning the dogmeat sausages, Noel asked about a dish called chong roet, which turned out to be live locusts or cicadas broiled over pans of charcoal.

We settled on roast trei chkowk, a local variety of lake chub roasted crisp and tender over a pot of charcoal, served up on a bed of steaming rice. It was tangy and delicious, topped off with heady Cambodian tea served in curious wooden pots, with ansamcheks for dessert—rice cakes with banana centers, wrapped in leaves and served piping hot. The restaurant was crowded and noisy, sawdust on the floor and odorous of fish-heads. Pretty girls in gorgeous sarongs twirled in the national folk dance, called the lamthon, in a kind of floor show; they were followed by musicians who played eight-stringed gares, a native orchestra of gongs and flutes and instruments called tros which look like one-stringed violins. We ate hugely, enjoyed ourselves enormously, and the bill came to a staggering thirty riels, which

was about ninety cents American.

After supper we went strolling among the shops. Noel wanted to pick up a few souvenirs to bring home as gifts for her sister, the Jellerette children across the street, and our next-door neighbors, the Roethers, who were usually kind enough to collect our mail and newspapers for us when we were off on trips. She also hoped to find something nice for Marie Cerut, a local antique dealer with whom she had struck up a close friendship.

“Keep your eyes open for something to bring back for Ron Stoloff,” she said, referring to the President of the Philadelphia Science Fiction Society, whose guests we would be at the annual Philcon the following month.

Everywhere we went we saw clear evidence that this was a country at war. Military vehicles were to be seen moving through the streets or parked at corners, and there were many Cambodians in uniform, some of them carrying weapons, mingling with the crowds along the street. The recent explosion of rebel action in the outlying provinces and the dangers of an attempted Communist take-over of the new Lon Nol government had caused our State Department to be more than a little reluctant to permit Noel and me to have passports for Cambodia. Obviously, Uncle didn't like the idea of U.S. citizens getting into a Southeast Asian country at war, for fear of American nationals getting mixed up in what might be an international incident. While we were in the capital, though, we didn't see any evidence of trouble, although once we got out on the river and down into the jungle regions, we might expect a little more danger.

Well, we had determined to take our chances on that, and hoped that everything turned out all right.

The streets were very crowded by now, and made a gorgeous and exotic sight, lit by swaying paper lanterns, colored lights shining on strange brown faces, gilded wood, signs in curious characters. I wished we had more time to sample the nightlife, but we did not.

Back on the dock we found our transportation awaiting us, in the form of a rusty, patched, decrepit little steam-launch that was a dead ringer for the dilapidated craft Humphrey Bogart captained in one of our favorite movies, *The African Queen*. Sir Malcolm's number-one boy, Charlie Phuong, had already located and loaded our luggage aboard. He was a short, cheerful, grinning, bowlegged boy of indeterminate age, who carried his life's savings around with him in the form of a wide grin bright with gold fillings. Sparkling black eyes greeted us under the bill of a battered old baseball cap, around which a scrap of fluttering red scarf had been knotted for good luck, or to keep the devils away, or maybe both. The rest of his costume consisted of muddy tennis shoes, a ragged pair of khaki shorts, and a cast-off olive drab army shirt.

The moon had risen while we were at dinner, and the river traffic was at its pitch as we cast off, chugging noisily, into the main channel. Brightly lit sampans and junks floated by us; boats of every description were loading at docks heaped with tins of pitch, bales of raw, unprocessed rubber from the great Chup plantations to the northeast of the capital. We saw workmen, naked to the waist, laboring under flaring torches at sacks of fragrant *yieng yieng* bark from which incense is made, shoving about baskets filled with garish peppercorns, stalks of green bananas, bundles of peacock feathers, cords of cut bamboo, bundles of turtle shells, anteater skins and kapok. Amusingly, one boat was unloading cases of Coca Cola bottles.

Our boat threaded its noisy path through an arrangement of mud dikes, canal locks, and waterways. Wooden cowbells went click-clack in fields beside the river; oil lamps gleamed in the waxed paper windows of farmhouses and huts as we sailed downriver under star-crowded skies. Peasants worked

late in flooded, shallow ricefields, bent double and looming like black cutouts against the moon. We sailed past bamboo forests, lemon groves, ungainly stands of banana trees, and thick banyans. In one hillside farm a clumsy Zadrugar tractor, imported from Yugoslavia, rumbled, belching black, oily smoke.

Noel and I struck up a conversation with our friendly pilot. Charlie Phuong, it turned out, was not a native of Phnom Penh but hailed from a hamlet with the delicious name of Battambang, which I gathered was the capital of the northwestern province. He had nothing but contempt and derision for the locals hereabouts, whom he considered city slickers, more interested in organized sports, movies from Hong Kong, and political squabbles, than in the traditional elements of Cambodian life. He was very uneducated and very superstitious, what with his crimson head scarf to frighten off night-wandering demons, and the copper bracelet he wore clasped about one muscular brown bicep which was a good-luck charm. He chattered in friendly, amiable fashion while we glided down the star-mirroring river, which widened. He had worked nearly a calendar year for Sir Malcolm, whom he held in good-humored veneration-his name for the British archaeologist was Lok Thom, which means something like "Mr. Big"-and, although uneducated, he had picked up a surprising vocabulary in English: pungent, earthy, shot through with French cuss-words and the names of Cambodian deities and demons, all mixed together in a patois so inimitable I will not even attempt to reproduce it in these pages.

We passed something like an enormous, densely black, floating island, around the edge of which Charlie Phuong maneuvered the laboring little steam-launch while purpling the night air with a torrent of profanity in at least three languages. This floating island turned out to be a logjam, drifting downstream from the forest around Kratie. Native lumberjacks, only their red, devil-frightening head-scarves visible in the gloom, scampered nimbly about this gigantic raft of logs, keeping careful eyes peeled to be certain the heavy hardwood logs of teak were buoyed up on hollow bamboo trunks.

I smoked cigarette after cigarette, sitting in the prow, staring dreamily out on the starry skies, the moonlit river, and the jungle thickets which lined the river to each side; Noel dozed in the rear, pillowed on our luggage. The trip would take hours.

Then I must have dozed off myself, for the next thing I knew was Charlie Phuong grinning down at me, gold fillings glittering in the torchlight, shaking me awake. I stretched and sat up and looked about me. We were pulled over to one shore of the river, where a crude little log-built dock thrust out on sunken pilings a few yards into the stream. The dock was crowded with small, nimble men passing our luggage ashore, each snatching a bag and tossing it into the waiting hands of the next.

Then a spry, sixtyish, little man with bright, inquisitive blue eyes and a goatee of silvery white, his scrawny form clad in filthy khaki shorts and a mud-besplattered T-shirt, popped up directly in front of me, squinted about, spotted me, and grinned-a grin which made his entire leather-tanned face dissolve into a mass of laughter-crinkles.

"Mr. Carter, I gather?" I nodded, still half-asleep. He rubbed bony hands together briskly.

"Excellent! Excellent! And your charming lady, I see. Well, hop out-hop out-you're here, you know! Welcome to the city of Arangkor; population twenty-six-now twenty-eight! It's a five minute stroll through the brush-watch your step, dear lady, or you'll go up to your waist in mud-the dock we built for a reason, you know! Come-Billy-Boy, my cook, has fresh tea brewing, or instant coffee, if you prefer . . . come along now. Careful with the gentleman's luggage, you clumsy monkeys!"

And he bustled into the line of laborers, vanishing in the dark.

So it was that at last I met Sir Malcolm Jerrolds, distinguished author of *Unsolved Mysteries of Asia*

(Macmillan, 1964), Excavating the Gobi (Cassels, 1966), and A Preliminary Report on the Arangkor Discoveries (unpublished).

And so it was, also, five or six minutes later, at the end of a muddy trail cut through some of the densest and least-explored jungles on this planet, that I came to Arangkor itself-mystery-city of the vanished Khymer-Kings, lost city of the ages.

Chapter 2

CONSEQUENCES OF TAKING A STROLL

“Not much to be seen by night, of course-great pity-splendid sight by daylight, I assure you-more tea, missus?” the little, gnomelike man chirped briskly. Noel accepted a tin cup of the steaming beverage with a smile; I nursed a similar container filled with a rank, bitter brew Billy-Boy mistakenly considered to be coffee, preoccupied with staring around me in a bemused fashion.

This tea party was being held, incongruously, on worn camp-chairs amidst a plaza of broken stony slabs where once, our spry little host assured us, the ancient God-Kings of fabulous Kambudja had held open-air court.

Stone buildings loomed to every side, heavily-carved, fantastic sculptures edged with moon-silver. Birds squawked in the jungle night; monkeys screeched; somewhere, far off, a water buffalo bellowed lustily.

Noel was interrogating Sir Malcolm on archaeological methods; I was too bone-weary, despite the bitter black coffee, sweetened with curdled, faintly soursmelling condensed milk, and too heavy-eyed, to do much but sip the stuff, smoke, and stare around me.

Great frowning stone masks glared down at us. They might represent Lokesvara, a future incarnation of the Buddha, or then again they might not, Sir Malcolm told us. The Khymer glyphs, yet undeciphered, would reveal much, he assured us, his white goatee wagging up and down in the light of the small campfire.

We had been served a late camp-supper of good oldfashioned K rations, which brought me back with a resounding bump to my army days, to snow-buried tents along the Korean hills, the faint rattle of machine gun fire in the frozen air. Talking a mile a minute all the while, the little archaeologist had whisked crackling glossy photographs of unknown carvings under our noses-whisked them away after a moment's glance to shove rattling wooden trays of small stone artifacts into our laps-then snatched these back to unfold a crisp, rustling palm-leaf codex scrawled with brightly-painted figures, crowned with nodding plumes, sporting birdfaces, waving many arms, and surrounded by unintelligible hieroglyphic dialogue like something from a comic book fallen from Mars.

It was impossible not to like Sir Malcolm Jerrolds from the first moment you met him. He was a small, spry wisp of a man, leathery-tanned, with peering, keen eyes and a nervous manner that made him jiggle and fidget around in the most amusing manner. For all his jittery manner and irresistible flow of

conversation, he was what I would call a perfect host. By this I mean that, within a few moments, he was treating you as if he had known you for years and felt free to relax and be comfortable with you, and he made you feel the same way about him. He was adorable, and Noel simply loved him from the start. She had always been enthusiastic about ancient history and archaeology, and her alert, sincere interest and intelligent, pointed questions touched a chord within the little capering Britisher. He beamed upon her fondly, for her enthusiasm matched his own lifelong passion to learn the secrets of our ancient ancestors. He danced attendance upon my wife and ransacked his files for curious and interesting objects and fragments, which he displayed tenderly, with touching confidence, as a shy child will show you her beloved dolls.

The work of the expedition was not so much to excavate Arangkor, he told us, as to clear away the rubbish. That is, the ancient Khymer metropolis was not buried under fathoms of earth as Babylon or Pompeii had been, but simply overgrown with jungle. Vines netted the towers carven with leering stone masks, bushes choked doorways or blocked passages, centuries of rotting leaves hid the streets under a carpet of squelching mold. Since arriving here, Sir Malcolm and his native boys had been, in a very real sense, performing the work of street cleaners. He showed us the mountain of leaf mulch piled outside the half-topped city wall; all of that his boys had removed in wicker baskets.

By this time, however, most of the underbrush and fallen leaves and branches had been cleared away. The work, from this point on in, was that of photographing and measuring and taking notes, making rubbings of temple carvings, and things like that.

“Much-much easier, dear lady, I assure you! than the digging-up of Amgash under a broilin’ Mesopotamy sun-or scratchin’ up tons of dried clay from the rubble of Timnash back in ‘58, with the bloody Arabs and the bloody Israelis bangin’ away at each other right over our bloody heads!” he said perkily.

Noel nodded and said something interestedly, smothering a slight yawn with one hand. Her eyes were sleepy, I noticed, and was about to interrupt Sir Malcolm and suggest we discuss it tomorrow, when the old fellow noticed my wife’s sleepiness himself and curtly bade one of his toothily grinning boys to get our tent ready.

“Talk here all night if I don’t pop th’ two o’ you into your cots show you around tomorrow, dear lady: some sights to be seen here that will astonish Europe when I send my first batch of pictures to the Journal of Asian Antiquity! And when I publish my Preliminary Report, well, dash it, I’ve data there will topple the prevailing theories of Khymer dating into the dungheaps, I assure you! Yes, my dear sir, theories will fall to every side like tree-trunks in monsoon weather! Must ask you to glance over my manuscript in first draft-advice of a genuine professional, very valuable-write too damned fast, that’s my trouble! Ideas all there in good enough order, quite, quite; but gettin’

it down in readable fashion-always been my problem. But, here, the both of you are yawning-off to bed now; up with first dawn, you know. Lots to be seen! We’ll talk more tomorrow”

And off he went, bawling out a scurry of native boys, leaving us to our friend with the colorful smile, Charlie Phuong, who would show us where we could wash up, and would then escort us to our beds.

The beds proved to be stiff, narrow cots set side by side in a tiny tent pitched on a side street off the plaza, with a wooden packing crate stood on its end between the cots to serve, obviously, as a night table. I put thereon my change, cigarettes, keys and sunglasses, arranging these in a half-circle around a spluttering oil lamp, by whose wavering, smoky light we undressed sleepily. So much had happened that day we were exhausted, and the voluble Sir Malcolm’s rapid-fire conversation had worn out our vocal

ords. We said goodnight and crawled-into the sleeping bags.

That night, as might have been expected, I just couldn't get to sleep. Although I was worn out after the excitement of the day, the clammy chill of the jungle night, combined with the hard cot and the discomforts of a sleeping bag, militated against my attaining that cozy serenity requisite to slipping off to slumberland. Also, I must confess, I was accustomed to the warm, breathing weight of one or another of our dogs sleeping at my feet.

Noel fell asleep without trouble-I could hear her breathing in the chilly darkness of the tent. But I tossed and turned, unable to get comfortable, unable to turn off my mind. After about an hour of this I decided to hell with it; I got up, slipped into my khakis, breeches, and boots and unzipped the tent, thinking to walk around a bit and view the marvels of Arangkor by moonlight while smoking a cigarette or two.

The full moon of Cambodia was an immense pallid orb of ghostly light silvering the carven faces on the stone gates and towers. The moonlight hid the scars of time's decay behind a veil of shimmering glamor. Almost, it seemed, the city lived untouched by the erosion of the ages. The cracks that zigzagged the worn stone facing of the temple were invisible in the silvery dimness; the rubble-choked streets were brimming with dense gloom. At any moment I half expected barbaric priests in feather headdresses to appear on the upper tiers and begin some primordial chant to the moon gods, or masked princelings of a lost age to be glimpsed amidst the shadows of the long arcade, bound for assignations with naked, barbaric courtesans.

It was all impossibly romantic.

For a time I smoked and dreamed, my imagination peopling the shadowy streets with ghostly processions

Then I saw the light.

It appeared suddenly, like an apparition. One moment the city was dark and dead and still, gilded by the jungle moon: in the next instant a dazzling shaft of amazing light sprang out of nowhere to thrust like a shining lance against the jeweled skies. It was like a huge searchlight, impossibly brilliant, very unexpected. Vague thoughts of air raids stirring in my mind, I headed towards it, impelled by devouring curiosity. I entered a curving street lined with frowning monoliths, then passed through a gloom-drenched arcade of partially-fallen pillars, and found myself on the edge of an immense stone-paved plaza.

Before me, in the center of a circle of huge stone idols, lay an opening in the stone floor, round as the mouth of a well. It was from deep in the subterranean shaft of this well that the beam of sparkling radiance soared skyward. And then, of course, I knew it . . . and the prickling of superstitious awe roughened the skin of my arms and stirred the nape-hairs on the back of my neck.

For it could be none other than that mysterious, jade-lined well Jandar had seen a year and a half ago . . . and the weird beam of sparkling force was, must be, the transdimensional gateway he had called "the

Gate Between the Worlds." . . .

Within me, my imagination awoke. I shivered slightly as to the cold breath of the Unknown. For the scene that lay before me now was in no detail different from the scene he had described in that first volume of his memoirs which I had titled Jandar of Callisto . . . there before me, bathed in the dim silver of the moonlight, the ring of stone colossi squatted, facing inwards to turn their enigmatic carven eyes upon the mystic Well that formed a magic pathway to other planets.

There they sat, the nameless gods of a primal and mysterious race, many arms brandishing aloft the emblems of their forgotten divinity, wheels and keys and stone flowers, stylized thunderbolts and odd-looking swords and skulls . . . and the restless, pulsing light of the Well cast ripples of luminance across their sculptured features. As wave on wave of sparkling force moved up the stationary beam, it seemed they frowned or smiled or grimaced; and the moving, throbbing heart beats of light lent the flicker of motion and the illusion of cold, watchful intelligence to their carven eyes.

It was an unforgettable scene of weird grandeur and strange majesty-as awesome and magical as anything in the pages of Haggard or Merritt-and it was really happening! Not on the written page; but in the real world of everyday life.

It was too strange, too fantastic, to be frightening. I was caught in the grip of a supernatural awe such as I have never before experienced. Without consciously thinking about it, I stepped forward, entering the plaza. The throbbing heartbeat of living radiance flickered before my eyes with mesmerizing force. I went forward between two of the stone gods to stand on the very brink of the Well, and all I could see before me was that soaring shaft of mysterious light that blazed up and up until it dimmed the stars and paled the ghostly glory of the Cambodian moon

And then my boots slid out from under me and I fell, sliding down a shallow incline towards the very edge of the Well!

Too late for caution, I remembered that the margin of the Well was fashioned of a slick, glassy stone like pale, smooth jade.

Too late to avoid the peril, I remembered that Jandar himself had made exactly the same mistake. He, too, had slipped and fallen on the glossy stone . . . but I, at least, had been forewarned!

The jade lip of the Well was slick as if oiled; ever so slightly concave, it sloped inward towards the mouth of the Well.

I slid down the depression helplessly, skinning the palms of my hands against the stone as I instinctively sought to arrest my progress. There was no handhold, nothing I could catch hold of, no way I could keep from falling into the Well

Then I slid over the brink, and the golden, throbbing splendor of the mystic light enveloped me, -and I lost all consciousness.

Was it a dream-a distorted fancy of my mind alone?

I seemed as unaware of my physical body as if I had been transformed into a dimly sentient thing of impalpable vapor.

Yet somehow my senses functioned: I was aware of the sensation of flight. It seemed to me that I was thrust upwards at an inconceivable velocity.

Only for a brief, flashing instant was I aware of hurtling through space at fantastic speed.

There was a moment when intense darkness closed about me, black as the cold gulf that yawns between the stars.

For a flashing instant I shuddered in the grip of intolerable, super-arctic cold.

I was hurled through space at frightful velocity.

Ahead of me, a dim radiance expanded with magical swiftness into an ochre, banded sphere.

Particles of frozen rock circled the width of the luminous giant.

One granule of parched, frigid rock swung up before me, unfolding like a magic flower.

For a blurred instant I saw needle-sharp peaks of black rock stabbing up at me as I fell downward now . . . and the valleys between the fanglike peaks were choked with smooth expanses of cold blue snow . . . frozen methane or ammonia . . .

Then the vision before me went hazy, as if I hurtled through an immaterial barrier of illusion . . .

I caught a brief, swift glimpse of what lay behind the mirage of a dead, frozen world.

I saw vast plains of weird scarlet, fantastic jungles of black trees with crimson foliage, glittering rivers and shining seas. Barbaric stone cities sprinkled the plains, stood beside the shores of river and sea, looking like wonderfully detailed toy metropolises designed by Frazetta or Hannes Bok.

Then black and crimson jungles swept up to engulf me.

And my consciousness went out like a blown candle.

Chapter 3

ON ANOTHER PLANET

My back was cold, as if I was laying on some hard, uncomfortable surface of glass.

I opened my eyes and looked into arching skies of crawling gold. It was as if the heavens had been domed over with auric glass, crawling with a film of liquid.

I rolled over on my side, levering myself up on one elbow, and became suddenly conscious of two things.

For one thing I was stark naked. My khaki shirt and jacket and whipcord riding-breeches were gone. So were my boots; even my undershorts and socks.

For another thing I was staring upon an incredible landscape. Before me lay a vista of smooth meadows, rising from a distant stream to the edge of a dense forest or jungle. The meadow grasses were the color of new-shed blood, impossible, pure scarlet. And the jungle, or as much of it as I could see from my recumbent position, was composed of weird trees, black as India ink, whose trunks and branches and

roots were fantastically gnarled and knotted, unlike those of any tree I had ever seen or heard of.

And the leaves of those black trees were an incredible shade of crimson.

Beyond meadow and forest, the landscape dwindled into dimness at the horizon; a horizon which seemed curiously near.

I looked down at myself. Every stitch of clothing I had worn was gone. So were my rings, the plain gold wedding band I wore on the fourth finger of my left hand and the carved brown carnelian seal-ring I wore on the middle finger of my right.

Gone, too, was the aluminum POW/MIA bracelet I had worn for months on my left wrist. As an example of the haziness that clouded my mind in those first few moments after my awakening, I will cite the thought which passed through my brain, that the Capt. Michael McCuiston-the missing-in-action American officer whose name was inscribed on the VIVA bracelet-had himself disappeared somewhere in Cambodia or Laos or Vietnam. And now I was lost or missing, although I knew, with a sinking feeling deep within me, that I was far more lost than he.

I knew where I was, of course.

The scarlet plain, those black, gnarled trees with crimson foliage, the dim skies of misted gold-I knew them, although I had never before seen them. I had read descriptions of this landscape in Jandar of Callisto.

I grinned, trying to find an element of ironic humor in the despair of my predicament.

For I was, must be, on the world of Callisto, moon of Jupiter! Like Jandar before me, I had slipped and fallen into that jade-lined Well that formed a transdimensional gateway between two worlds-the planet Earth on which I had been born and lived my forty years of life-and Thanator the Jungle Moon, that distant world of mystery and marvel where strange men battled for survival against weird beasts and savage foes.

I lay stark naked upon a disk of lucent, glassy jade amidst crimson meadows near the edge of black-and-scarlet jungles. In just such a scene had Jandar materialized after falling into the Gate Between the Worlds.

Many thoughts went whirling through my dizzy mind as I lay there, trying to come to grips with the fantastic truth of what had happened to me. Odd, irrelevant thoughts. For instance, I wondered what had become of my seal-ring. When my body had dematerialized in that pulsing glory of light, I understood what had happened well enough-from reading Jandar's own theories and speculations concerning the swift, miraculous fourth-dimensional transition he had experienced before me, I knew nonorganic materials such as my rings and bracelet had not accompanied me on my travels. When my body had dematerialized in that pulsing glory of light, they must have fallen into the Well, together with my clothes, which had been composed mostly of synthetic fibers.

But I regretted the loss of that ring keenly. It was an ancestral talisman to me, representing a link with my forefathers over generations. It had been a possession of the Carter family for perhaps longer than I could guess; my father had worn it, and my grandfather before him. I certainly hoped it had not been damaged or destroyed by the light ray. I wondered if someone in Sir Malcolm's camp would be thoughtful enough to search the bottom of the Well and find it.

Almost in the same instant it occurred to me, helplessly, to wonder about my wife. Surely, Noel would be worried sick when she awoke next morning and found my cot empty. She wouldn't have any way of knowing what had become of me-or would she? It wouldn't take her long before she noticed my clothes were missing, and the pack of Viceroy's I had put down beside my cot. She would know I had gone for a stroll: but would she guess I had fallen into the Gate Between the Worlds, or would she assume I had strayed into the jungles outside of Arangkor, perhaps to be slain or carried off by some wild beast or Rebel guerrilla?

She would be worried sick about me, I knew with a pang of guilt that made me curse myself for falling into the same trap as Jandar, after his own account should have warned me to be more cautious. There wasn't much I could do about it now: I was here, whether I liked it or not.

I got to my feet. I felt perfectly all right, although I was physically tired after the long day. But the excitement of what had transpired kept the adrenalin pumping through my system, and I was more alert and wide-awake than ever. I noticed that the Band-Aid I had put on my leg last night was also missing; it must be nonorganic like my rings. I was aware of a slight toothache which puzzled me, until I realized that every filling in my teeth must have vanished like my rings, when I dematerialized. That might be troublesome, if I was going to have to remain here on Callisto for very long. I was sure there were no dentists to be found on the Jungle Moon!

The breeze on my bare legs was uncomfortably chilly. I looked thoughtfully at the edge of the black-and-scarlet jungle; once behind that screen of trees and bushes I would be out of the wind, but there was no telling what savage beasts might be prowling the jungle aisles in search of dinner, who might regard a stringy and slightly underdone sciencefiction writer as an appetizing morsel.

The confusion of my thoughts was such that it was only with a firm, conscious effort of will that I calmed my agitation. It was perfectly true, I reasoned to myself, that my predicament was grim and my position not without peril. I was alone, naked and unarmed, on an alien world teeming with ferocious predators and savage warnors. And even fully clothed and with a pistol holstered on my hip, I would have been in a position of considerable danger, for I was certainly no steely-thewed man of action, no burly, two-fisted adventurer. I grinned again, rather wryly: for years now I have been writing stories about men in just my predicament-but I never expected to find myself in such a spot!

A writer's life is one of lazy, self-indulgent comfort interrupted by periodic episodes of furious activity-of a literary nature, that is. I've never been much interested in sports, nor in exercise, my idea of a hard day's work being writing a chapter of a new novel or maybe turning out a short story. It's been more years than I care to think of since I last came face to face with physical danger, unless you want to count the times I've gotten in between two of my dogs, in an attempt to stop a dogfight. And the only savage warrior a New York science-fiction writer ever expects to face is the ever-possible street-corner mugger or holdup man.

So I was certainly not in any condition to hew my path through a jungle filled with ferocious monsters! True, Jandar had faced the same perils and gotten through them unscathed; but he had been a young, hard-muscled daredevil aviator and professional soldier, not a sedentary writer who begrudges the physical effort it takes to paint the front porch or mow the lawn

Then it occurred to me that, after all, I was in a way better equipped to face up to the hazards of this adventure than Jandar, when he had been, so to speak, in my shoes, for all that he was ten years younger than I and more the twofisted fighting-man. Because I had read his Callistan memoirs and had a pretty good idea of just where I was and of just what I was likely to be facing in the hours or days ahead of me. I knew, from the maps he had sketched, that the Callistan terminus of the Gate was along the

southernmost borders of the jungle region he called the Grand Kumala; and I knew that the nearest human settlement where I was likely to find a friendly welcome was Shondakor. And, remembering that map, I even knew where Shondakor was in reference to my present position. It lay on the eastern side of this southern tip of the Kumala jungles, on the shores of a river called the Ajand. It might take me a couple of days of foot-weary walking to get there, but at least I knew where I was and where I wanted to go, which is more than Jandar knew when he had stood on this same spot, a year and a half ago.

My mind was clearer now, my panic and confusion ended. True, I was in a tight spot, but the future was far from hopeless, and if I could just keep control of myself and think and plan ahead with a bit of practical common sense (never my strongest point, by the way), I could get through this unexpected adventure, hopefully, in one piece.

The first thing I needed was something in the way of clothing.

The urgency of this had nothing to do with modesty, but was simply due to the fact that civilized urban man feels peculiarly helpless and vulnerable standing around in the buff without so much as a Band-Aid on, especially when he's got a jungle to get through. Later on I was going to be needing food and water and a place to sleep. But first it seemed imperative to find something to cover myself with, and maybe something in the nature of a weapon, so that if anything with more teeth than I had came at me I would have something else than just a couple of bare hands to defend myself with.

The jungle seemed to be the only place I was likely to find clothing and weapons, so I went up the hill to the edge of the woods and entered them cautiously. Thorny-edged leaves scratched my bare chest and thighs and as my bare feet scrunched through thickmatted fallen leaves and squelched in gooey unseen muck I wondered if there were any snakes on Callisto, deciding, with justifiable uneasiness, that there probably were.

Once beyond the edge of the Kumala I found myself immersed in thick crimson gloom. The only illumination was the sourceless Callistan equivalent of daylight—a curious fluorescent effect among the gases in the upper atmosphere, which caused the entire heavens to glow with steady, sourceless, omnipresent luminance. Callisto, of course, was too distant from the sun to receive much light from that source, and Jandar had speculated that perhaps it was some unknown radiation from the planet Jupiter which bathed the upper surface of the Callistan atmosphere, exciting visible light just as electricity creates light among the inert vapors in a neon tube.

Anyway, when this rich gold light filtered down through the dense masses of red leaves which formed the roof of the Kumala jungles, everything took on the crimson murk of a photographer's darkroom. It was very difficult to see. In fact, it was so dark inside the wall of jungle at first, that I could hardly see where I was going, and blundered into treetrunks and spiny bushes, to the considerable detriment of my epidermis.

I had to feel my way along like a blind man, both arms stretched gingerly out in front of me, my bare feet slipping and sliding in the muck of rotting leaves.

To be candid, it was not the happiest hour I had ever spent. I was trembling with fatigue and could hardly keep my eyes open, for by this time, of course, I would long ago have been sound asleep back in the tent among the ruins, after a busy and tiring day. My mouth felt dry and parched, and I had a powerful yearning for a cigarette. And all about me I was horribly conscious of what might be lurking in the reddish gloom. I knew something of the dangerous beasts known to frequent these jungles, and I found that knowledge, however scanty, a lot more unsettling than blissful ignorance would have been.

Even armed with a cudgel, what could I do to defend myself against such brutes as the vastodon, the dreaded elephant-boar of the Callistan wild, from which Jandar had once rescued the Princess Darloona in these very jungles? Or the ferocious yathrib, the fearsome dragon-cat from which Koja the Yathoon had once saved Jandar himself? Yes, I soon proved to myself the truth of the age-old adage that “a little knowledge is a dangerous thing.” My imagination, teeming with ghastly images of slinking monstrous shapes, seized on every rustle in the leaves, every crack of a twig, and peopled the blind red gloom with hideous animals.

However, quite a time had passed by now, and nothing had sprung upon me in the interval, and my fears began to ebb, although I moved with no less caution. Also, by this time, my eyes had adjusted to the dim red murk and it became easier for me to negotiate the thorny thickets and to pass between the knotted black boles without stumbling into them. Almost it could be said I began to enjoy myself; after all, I was only the second man of my world to stand here on the surface of a weird and alien planet, and it was a peculiar experience to find myself in much the sort of predicament in which I am accustomed to place the heroes of my stories. It amused me to wonder if Edgar Rice Burroughs would have felt the same as I, had he suddenly by some inexplicable miracle found himself transported to the jungles wherein his apeman hero generally roamed, or to the dead sea-bottoms of Barsoom under the glory of the hurtling moons.

The experience of being upon a strange planet was endlessly fascinating to me. All about me to every side, unseen life muttered and rustled and crept. Tiny eyes peered at me from thick boughs arching above my head like the beams of a roof. Small, timid creatures fled squeaking and chattering from my approach, although I would very much have liked to have seen them. None of the larger and more dangerous beasts that Jandar had so chillingly described in the five volumes of his memoirs I had read had yet made an appearance. It was easy enough to guess that, during the hours of daylight, the greater predators slept in their lairs, emerging only when darkness fell to hunt and kill. It was this way, I believed, in the jungles of the distant Earth, and I hoped it was true here on Callisto, as well.

Before long I stumbled upon a weapon. I mean that quite literally, for the long length of black, gnarled wood lay directly in my path and I barked my bare shins against it and almost fell flat on my face. It was a heavy pole or staff, admirably straight, and half again as long as my arm. I suppose the cudgel wouldn't have been of much use against the yathrib or the vastodon, but, in a pinch, any weapon is probably better than none, and somehow, holding it, I felt far less naked than before.

I began to think about the problem of clothing. By now my legs and arms and torso were criss-crossed with red scratches from rough bark, thorny vines and sharp-edged leaves. One of these bushes with the sharp-edged leaves caught my eye. The leaves were rubbery and fibrous and about as large as dinner plates. Leaning my cudgel against a tree, I pulled off a half-dozen of the big, floppy leaves and found that their spiny edges could be peeled away neatly. With a bit of fussin' and cussin' I devised a rude sort of apron to shield my loins fore and aft, knotting the fibers together about my middle. Then, with a bit of ingenuity, I fashioned an abbreviated vest or elongated collar of these same leaves which I hung about my neck to protect my upper arms, chest and shoulders.

This attempt at do-it-yourself haberdashery worked so well (which is to say the garments actually held together and didn't fall apart after five minutes of use), that I was further inspired to attempt something in the nature of footwear. Sitting down on a fallen log I peeled away strips of fiber and tried to cover the soles of my feet with the tough, rubbery leaves, lacing them together over my instep with the long fibrous strands. I used a sharp twig to pierce holes along the upper edges of each leaf, through which with a bit of labor I managed to thread my “shoelaces.” I was somewhat less effective in my solo venture at the fine art of shoe-cobbling, but by pulling the laces tight and knotting them securely, the moccasins actually stayed on and I was convinced they would work, although I thought it wise to carry a generous supply of

leaves with me for repair and replacement purposes.

“Eat your heart out, Thom McAn!” I said aloud, chuckling.

The rustling jungle fell silent on the instant. Even to my ears, my voice sounded shockingly loud.

And then I heard the growl.

Chapter 4

I MEET AN OTHODE

The menacing sound reverberated through the long clearing, at one end of which I sat on the fallen log. At the sound, I started violently, sprang to my newly shod feet, and snatched up my heavy staff. Sweat popped out on my forehead and, suddenly, my mouth was drier than before.

However, the sound was not repeated and, as nothing came charging at me from the bushes or dropped snarling from an overhead branch, I relaxed a bit. Almost I managed to convince myself that the sound had only been in my head the result of an overactive imagination.

I was, as I have explained, at one end of a long glade or clearing among the trees. The other end of the clearing lay pretty much in the direction I wished to travel, and, since I could obviously make better time going through the clearing than through the thickly grown trees, I gathered up my bundle of leaves and moved across the grassy space with some haste, thinking to put as much distance between myself and the throat that had uttered that menacing growl as possible, just on the off-chance that the sound had not been a product of my own imagination.

The opposite end of the clearing lay in dense shadows.

From the depths of those shadows, two burning eyes glared at me like blazing coals.

I stopped in my tracks, let go of the leaves, and clenched my cudgel in both hands, like a baseball bat. I'm not ashamed to admit my hands were shaking violently, and that I urgently wished myself far away from this place.

I guess my mind doesn't function terribly well in moments of extreme stress or danger. I say this because of what popped into my head at that instant. All I could think of was an anecdote about W.C. Fields, probably apocryphal: they had asked him what he wanted carved upon his gravestone, and the actor had quipped “On the whole, I'd rather be in Philadelphia.”

On the whole, I'd rather be in Philadelphia. My sentiments exactly, as I stood there, clutching my flimsy little stick with trembling hands, staring into those eyes of flame!

They blinked, those eyes. Then I heard the growl again. Only this time it had a plaintive note to it—almost a note of entreaty.

I took a cautious step forward; two steps. Now I stood within the shadow myself. My eyes adjusted to the denser gloom . . . and I saw a strange sight.

Pinned against the thick meadow, grass at the far end of the clearing, lay an immense beast. It looked the size of a full-grown tiger, its burly-shouldered, broad-chested body covered with a supple, short-haired nap of soft fur colored an impossible purple.

It lay there helplessly pinned under a fallen treebranch, its hindquarters pressed into the matted grasses. The branch was as big around as my waist and looked to be extremely heavy. How long the beast had lain there, unable to defend itself against the approach of another predator I do not know, but from the torn condition of the grasses, the creature had been there for hours, at least. The grasses were ripped and torn out by the roots, exposing raw lavender soil, and apparently the helpless brute had struggled in vain for many hours to free itself from the crushing weight.

Relief gusted through me, for it was obvious that I was in no danger from the fantastic creature. Since this was the first specimen of animal life on Callisto I had yet seen. I lingered to take a good look at it.

As nearly as I could judge, the beast had six legs.

They were short and fat and crooked, like the legs of a bulldog, lending the monster an absurdly bowlegged appearance. Its head was a trifle bulldoggish, too. It was virtually neckless, with a remarkably ugly froglike face, all goggling eyes and wide, batrachian gash of mouth that seemed to stretch from ear to ear. It lay there looking up at me, mouth open, panting from exhaustion or pain, and again there sounded from deep in its chest that growl that was almost a whine of entreaty.

I could not help noticing that the wide, froglike mouth with the powerful, bulging cheeks and heavy, underslung jaw, was armed with plenty of blunt, strong-looking tusks. Jaws like that could make hamburger of a man's arm in seconds. I could picture my bones being crunched into powder by those heavy, grinding tusks . . . and it was not a pleasant picture. Luckily for me the big brute was helpless, pinned under that fallen log, and unable to spring upon me, as it would otherwise doubtless have done.

Taking up my extra supply of leaves, I prepared to inch my way around the beast and enter the jungle. As I did so, the brute craned his head around to look at me. The expression in his goggling eyes stopped me. There was suffering in them, and a mute, stoical pleading in the silent gaze the purple beast turned upon me. A pleading which I could not pretend I had not seen. A pleading I could not quite ignore, no matter how reasonable it might seem for me to do so. I stood there for a while, unable to make up my mind to leave.

"Well, you big bozo, you've gotten yourself in a tough spot, haven't you?" I said in a low voice. Almost as if he somehow understood the sympathy in my words, the creature stirred feebly under the crushing weight. His huge, blunt forepaws scratched at the bare soil, where he had torn up the grasses in an effort to pull his body out from under the weight which pressed his hindquarters into the ground. He made a little sound deep in his throat, like a whine or whimper, a questioning sound. And all the while he turned upon me those huge, helpless eyes. There was dignity in that '5 mute gaze, and pride. But the pleading was there, and I could not ignore it, being the sort of man I am.

Two things made me do the crazy thing I did next.

The first thing was that I knew, or supposed I knew, what kind of beast it was. It was an othode. Jandar had described these creatures in the manuscript I had read on the plane: purple, short-legged beasts

about the size of mastiffs, ferocious but sometimes domesticated for the purposes of hunting.

In other words, something remarkably like the Callistan equivalent of dogs.

Now, as anyone who knows me will certainly testify, I feel about dogs exactly as the late Will Rogers felt about people . . . to paraphrase his famous motto, "I've never met a dog I didn't like." Noel and I share our house on Long Island with five members of the species and have raised and found homes for litter after litter of puppies. My-wife, in fact, has the nice habit of finding stray dogs and bringing them home to fatten up. It is usually our avowed intention of finding people to adopt these homeless vagabond waifs, but as often as not, by the time we have coaxed back to healthy, plump, waggy-tailed condition the latest homeless mutt, we have fallen for its doggy charms ourselves.

And the othode who lay there begging me with its eyes for help looked an awful lot like a dog.

I just couldn't pass him by, pretending not to notice those begging eyes.

The other thing that made me stop and linger a while was connected to my first reason, you might say. And that was that the othode bore a striking resemblance to one of the dogs Noel and I had rescued from starvation on the streets. This was a dog we called The Mighty McGurk—a big, brown, goggleeyed, fat, bowlegged, cavorting, lovable sort of bullmastiff type to whom we had given our hearts, receiving the gift of his in return.

McGurk occupied a very special place in our affections, and especially in mine.

And the othode looked very much like McGurk. If you can imagine a McGurk grown to the size of an adult tiger, with six legs and bright purple fur.

I put down my cudgel and my bundle of leaves, and squatted on the turf, talking to the poor brute in a quiet voice.

"Well, now, you big bozo, what am I going to do about you, eh? Even if I could get that big log off you, ms's probably broken your back, you know. And, if it h. n't once you're free, you'd probably rip my arm off, wouldn't you? Hmm?"

The fat, wattled purple throat uttered a distinctly doggish whine, eager yet verging on a warning note.

He wasn't too sure of me, any more than I was sure of him. For all the big bozo knew, I was going to brain him with my cudgel in the next moment. Just as, for all I knew, he might go for my throat the moment I got him out from under that log.

Well, we had the grounds for some sort of a relationship in that, at least. We mutually distrusted each other.

I wondered if I was being stupidly sentimental. Quite probably I was, and anybody else in my homemade shoes would doubtless have had the good sense to tiptoe on past, thanking his lucky, stars the mower was pinned down and unable to get at him. But I knew, down deep inside, that if I did walk away from this scene, it would be a mighty long time before I could get the picture of those mute, pleading eyes out of my mind, and it would be pretty hard to live with myself. ii I did walk away from this.

So all the while talking in a quiet, low voice to him, I walked around behind the poor helpless creature

and gingerly teed to heft the log. It was even heavier than I had thought and for a sickening moment or two I was afraid that I wasn't going to be able to so much as budge it, much less lift it off the crushed body so the beast could die in peace.

I heaved and grunted and sweated, my hands straining w e the log, gritting my teeth with the thought that I was probably causing the poor fellow pain. But he did not utter a single complaint, and all the while turned upon me his sad, melancholy gaze that reminded me of McGurk.

The harsh bark was cutting and scratching the palms of my hands. Soon they were raw and bloody, but I had managed to slide the log off him, bracing the weight against my thigh. With a loud whoosh of pent breath being released, I let the log thump against the turf and sagged to my bruised knees wearily.

Bozo had taken it without complaint, although it must have hurt. Only one yelp escaped him, and that was when I swung the weight of the log off his hindquarters at last.

The log had not crushed his body as far as could be seen, for although his hindquarters were scratched and bruised and bloody it didn't look to me as if he was seriously hurt. What had probably saved him from a broken spine or a crushed pelvis was the thick, springy mat of coarse meadow-grasses which formed a pillowbeneath him. The weight had pushed his haunches into this mattresslike thickness; if he had been lying on bare or rocky soil-with no "give" to it-he would undoubtedly be in far worse shape than he was. Of course, he would be lame and limping for some time, and would be immobilized until his bruised and bloody rear legs recovered. But he was not paralyzed and had suffered far less injury than I had thought possible.

I wiped my hands on my bare thighs, leaving smears of blood and dirt, wishing I had a place to wash. Even on Callisto, you could still get blood poisoning, I thought. And just then I became conscious of a gushing, gurgling sound which had been part of the background noise of the jungle for a long time, but which only now did I recognize as the sound of running water.

Pushing through the brush at the end of the clearing I found a small streamlet gushing over stones and rotting logs. The water was clear and bitterly cold when I dabbled my bruised hands in the stream, and when I tasted it I found it was fresh enough, with a sort of piny or herbal taste to it. I drank deep, after washing my hands as clean as I could get them without having available such civilized amenities as a cake of soap or a hand towel. I was so dry and thirsty by this point in my adventures, that I drank and drank. Never had a drink of water tasted so good to me.

On the point of going back for my cudgel I paused. Unbidden, a vision arose before me, that of Bozo's dignified, accusing eyes, his mouth gaping open, tongue lolling. The poor brute must be even thirstier than I had been. I cursed my softheartedness for a while, staring around for something to carry water in. I certainly was not going to permit an unknown wild animal to lap water from my cupped palm; it might occur to him to take the hand for a tidbit.

Then my eye fell on what looked like the shell of a freshwater clam, only five times bigger. There .were quite a few of these empty shells littered about the grassy bank of the stream, and, peering into the rushing water, I saw several undisturbed clams clinging to mossy rocks. Obviously some species of jungle life was accustomed to cracking open the clamshells and sucking out the tender meat inside. At any rate, one of the empty shells would do to carry water in. I took the biggest one I could find, filled it brimful, and carried it back into the clearing, being careful not to spill.

As I came around in front of Bozo, he eyed me solemnly, uttering a warning rumble. But he-made no further menacing sign as I set the shell full of water down by his head. Neither did he take his eyes off me

for an instant until I had retreated to a safe distance. Then, and then only, did he deign Lo turn his attention to the water, which he lapped up thirstily. So thirstily that I had to make four more trips to the stream before he was satisfied. Then, his thirst appeased, he again gave me a solemn, dignified glance, whined once, softly, deep in his broad chest, obviously by way of thanks, and turned his attentions to his bruised and bloodied hindquarters, which he began to lick clean. The bruises were swelling almost visibly, and must have been tender, but he kept at it until he had cleaned himself up and looked presentable.

By this time night had fallen. It happened quite suddenly, just as Jandar has always described the magically swift transition from noonday brightness to the nocturnal dark. Helping free Bozo had taken so much time, I realized a trifle guiltily, that now I was going to be forced to stay here until dawn. Obviously, if I tried to make my way through the jungle by night, I was either going to lose my way hopelessly, or get eaten alive by one of the nocturnal predators-or both. I could have been miles away by this time, had it not been for Bozo. But, after all, what did it matter? I could sleep here as easily as anywhere.

And, come to think of it, this was a rather convenient place to spend the night.

“Not bad accommodations, eh, Bozo?” I quipped. He pricked up his ears and looked at me quizzically. “A soft bed for the night,” I said, patting the thick, springy turf, “with hot and cold running water-well, cold, anyway-and even a bedtime snack.” By this I referred to the freshwater clams I had discovered in the stream. I pried several of them off the stones of the stream with my bare hands, cracked them open against a flat rock, using the end of my cudgel. They did not look at all appetizing, even by the mystic glamor of moonrise (for by this time, from the many-colored brightening of the sky, a patch of which could be glimpsed above the open clearing where the branches did not quite meet, I guessed that at least two or three of the “moons” of Callisto must already have risen).*

Unappetizing or not, the clams were probably edible. and I was famished from my labors. I’ve never been particularly fond of clams, even when served on

ice in the finest restaurants, but I managed to get the slimy gobbets down and found them tastier than anticipated. Even Bozo lapped up two or three, although I could tell from the way he sniffed suspiciously at them, they were not a regular part of his diet.

He had dragged himself partway across the clearing with slow, painful movements, until his back was up against a huge tree. I understood his reasoning without the need for words: it was part of his instinct, when injured, to put his back up against something like a tree trunk, so that if any enemies came at him in the night, they would have to attack him from the front, which would bring them within reach of those powerful jaws filled with blunt, crushing tusks.

We bedded down for the night. I collected as much of the long, dry grasses as would cover us; we would need the grassy blanket, or at least I would, for already the chill of night was creeping into the air. I would have liked a fire, not only for warmth but also to keep prowling beasts at bay, but fire we had none, nor even the means to build one.

I was still a bit careful of getting too close to Bozo, fearing he might turn on me, being a wild beast, after all, and therefore unpredictable. So I curled myself up under the scratchy grasses some distance away. But Bozo made the first overtures of friendship: after a time I heard him dragging himself nearer and nearer.

Then I must finally have dozed off, despite the scratchy discomfort of sleeping naked on the lumpy turf and my various and assorted bruises, cuts, aches and pains.

When I woke with dawn the next morning, I discovered my face was pressed into a burly, soft-furred shoulder. He had crawled up against me during the night, probably for warmth, and we had slept cuddled together all night, my face against one soft, suedelike purple shoulder.

And I had, almost against my wishes, made my first friend on Callisto-Bozo the othode.

I grinned sleepily to myself. I had landed on Thanator naked and friendless and alone, just like John Carter of Mars. And already I had a friend, in the Callistan equivalent of “Woola, the faithful Martian hound”!

Chapter 5

WE FIGHT A VASTODON

Even back home I have never been fond of camping or sleeping outdoors. And when I awoke the next morning I had good cause to redouble my lack of enthusiasm for the outdoorsy life. For I was stiff and lame and sore in every limb, my head felt as though during the night a party of naughty gremlins had packed it full of cotton-battin’; and my mouth tasted like the bottom of a sewer-pipe.

After half-waking to find myself curled up against the warm, furry, breathing bulk of the othode, I dozed off again and did not awaken again until the glare of golden daylight upon my face made further slumber impossible. I lay without moving for a few moments; then, aware that I was no longer pressed cozily against Bozo’s back, I sat up and looked around.

My newfound friend was nowhere to be seen, for the clearing was empty in the wash of golden light. Well, it was probably just as well. One hesitates before making friends with a purple monster the size of a Bengal tiger, even under the most favorable of circumstances, of which these were not. Most likely Bozo had recovered the use of his hind set of legs during the early morning, and had slunk off into the brush to resume his savage mode of existence. I felt distinctly lucky that he had not reverted to his savage nature, and had not turned upon me as we lay side by side.

I got unsteadily to my feet, despite the twinges and throbs resultant from spending the night stretched out on knobby roots and itchy grasses stark naked. I drank fresh water from the gurgling stream, scrubbed my face in the cold fluid and tried to comb my hair out of my eyes. My stomach was growling and grumbling like a whole pack of hungry othodes, and I felt headachy and bleary-eyed. Just then I think I would gladly have gambled my immortal soul for a cup of hot, fragrant black coffee and a couple of cigarettes.

But I had come through my first night in the jungle unscathed, and that was cause for rejoicing. To this day I can’t explain why some jungle predator hadn’t leaped upon us during the night, but none had, and I was in no mood to question my luck. Just so long as my luck held out long enough for me to reach Shondakor and the safety which Jandar’s city afforded!

Returning to the clearing after my perfunctory ablutions, I received a surprise.

Crimson bushes rustled, and an immense, burly-shouldered brute slid his purple body through them and waddled limpingly into the midst of the clearing. It was Bozo. He had not deserted me with dawn after all, but had gone hunting for our breakfast. Clamped between his wide jaws were two plump, blood-splattered furry creatures that looked like an unlikely cross between rabbit and squirrel, if you could ignore the fact that their furry bodies were of an improbable bright pink. Bozo dropped one of these at my feet, gave me a long, solemn, eloquent look, and then retired to the other end of the clearing to make his breakfast of the second of the pair.

I have never been thanked for a kindness so eloquently without words before! I had no doubt that Bozo could easily have devoured both of the fat little “squirr-bits” (or “rabb-ells”?) himself, and still have had room for more. But the brute knew I had helped him, and deep in his primal, doggy heart, felt the stirrings of an inarticulate gratitude he knew no other way of expressing.

I had never had raw squirrel-rabbit for breakfast before, but from the noisy signals my midsection was telegraphing to my brain, this was no time to be picky. The furry outer-skin was only loosely attached to the still-warm little body, and most of it came off without too much trouble. I washed the blood away by immersing the creature in the stream, and made some sort of a meal on its warm, rather tough flesh, which tasted like raw chicken more than anything else. Or, rather, like I should imagine raw chicken to taste. I chewed down a few mouthfuls of stringy meat and left the rest for Bozo to gobble up. Once I got started on my way through the jungle, I thought it likely I would be able to find something edible in the way of berries or nuts or something.

Bozo had polished off the remnants of the second rabbit-squirrel, and had cleaned the blood off his forepaws, his broad chest and his own face. He licked his chops almost exactly as a dog does, I noticed. The big fellow moved with a pronounced limp, as if his hind legs still hurt him, which they doubtless did, but he could get around all right. In fact, with six legs at his disposal, he could manage to get about without much trouble, even without using the terminal pair.

I gathered up my belongings, such as they were, and was ready to depart. All the while Bozo lay there at the far end of the clearing, regarding me solemnly from; huge, goggling eyes. His rear end was still bruised and somewhat swollen, I could see, but functional. I would like to have said goodbye to him in genuine doggish manner, by scratching the loose folds behind his ears and thumping his burly shoulders, but I didn't quite dare approach him on such familiar terms.

“So long, now, Bozo. I guess you can get around by yourself now, hmm? Be a good boy, now, and don't get into any more trouble. Okay? Watch out for falling trees. Goodbye, Bozo!”

Having said this and grinning as he cocked his head on one side, listening carefully to the words as if he could almost sense their meaning, I resolutely turned about, entered the brush, jumped across the stream, and began making my way through -the jungle in the same general direction I had been traveling the night before.

I was certainly stiff and lame from spending a night on the cold bare ground, but as I worked my way through the jungle gradually my assorted aches and pains began to ease as my muscles limbered up. I still felt gummy-eyed and thick-headed; I still hungered for a good cup of coffee, and the dryness at the back of my throat told me I would certainly enjoy a cigarette, but I tried to keep my mind off these things, and in time I just about forgot them.

I collected a handful of dry, chewy nuts about the general size and shape of almonds, but tasting more like rather bitter walnuts. These I found littering the turf under a huge tree with amazing scarlet leaves,

long streamers of them, for all the world like red hair-ribbons. A bit further on I encountered another kind of tree which sported large, fleshy, bright yellow fruit. Once you managed to get through the tough skin, the insides were soft and wet and tasted rather like a gamy variety of mango. Munching on the dry, bitter nuts and sucking the stringy rind of the pulpy yellow fruit, I made my way through the jungle, feeling I had something inside me that could be quite accurately described as a decent breakfast.

“If Noel could only see me now!” I grinned to myself. My wife would hardly believe her eyes, for she has often complained that my habitual breakfast—three strips of well-done, crisp bacon, one slice of buttered toast and one-half cup of cold grapefruit juice—is fixed and unvarying, whatever the season. But here I was, striding along in quite a cheerful manner, on several mouthfuls of raw squirrel-rabbit, a handful of bitter walnuts, and two overripe mangoes!

Which reminded me to worry-about her worrying! I knew she would be sick with fear for me, thinking I had gotten myself lost or killed somehow. And, remembering the look on Bozo’s face when I left him behind in the clearing, made me think of our dogs, McGurk and Sir Dennis and Rowbazzle and Molly Brown. I was missing them as much as they were missing me by now, I knew. Maybe I shouldn’t have tried to cross the jungles and get to Shondakor—maybe I would have been wiser to just stay in the vicinity of the jade disk!

The trouble with that idea was that I didn’t know the rhythm of the dimensional gateway that linked this world of Callisto with my own world. It might be days—or weeks—before that sparkling beam of force formed itself between the two, far-distant planets, and I could get home safely. I had needed food and shelter, something to wear and something to drink, and something to defend myself with. And the only place to find those necessities had been the jungle; and—once I was actually in the jungle, it had seemed logical to simply keep on going, knowing in a rough manner that if I kept going’ long enough I would come out on the far side, probably within sight of the walls of Shondakor, or at least of the river Ajand on which the city of Jandar and Darloona was built.

“When in doubt, or lost, keep moving,” I said to myself, coining the adage on the spot. And then I grinned again: alone and friendless and half-naked, armed only with a piece of wood, wandering through an alien jungle, after a night spent curled up on the bare ground beside a fearsome beast—and I was still cheerful and could crack a joke, however feeble. I felt terrifically proud of myself and wished Noel could see me, fearlessly trekking through the wild like someone in a novel by H. Rider Haggard.

Just then, as I was happily complimenting myself on my ability to survive in the wild, one of my homemade shoes fell apart, worn through, and I stepped barefooted on a sharp twig.

I sat down on a convenient root, removed the tattered scraps of my leaf-shoe, and examined the cut on my foot. Then I began trying to put together another shoe out of the fibrous leaves I had been carrying with me for just that purpose. My foot ached where I had run the twig into it, and I was grimy and sweaty. My stomach still grumbled hungrily to itself; I still wanted a cigarette badly, and my teeth—were beginning to ache where the fillings had vanished out of them and I had unwisely crunched down on a mouthful of those dry, tough nuts. I began to wonder just how Robinson Crusoe had managed to do it, after all.

Then something came halfway through the bushes, stopped when it saw me sitting there fumbling to put together a new set of footwear. And it squealed angrily—deafeningly—and shot at me with the speed of an express train!

I caught a swift impression of something gray and leathery and built rather like a dwarf-elephant, but with a wrinkled, snarling snout, a sharp yellow tusk, and a ‘wicked little red eye full of bloody murder, as it

came hurtling at me.

I yelled, half stood up, and fell backwards over the root I had been sitting on the moment before.

I landed flat on my back, neatly managing to knock all the air out of my lungs, and lay there sucking and gasping for breath, my eyes watering.

The elephant-boar, for it must have been one of the savage vastodons, it looked like nothing else-made another lunge in my direction, but couldn't quite figure out how to get around the tree in order to get at me. If once it did get near enough, I somehow knew, it would disembowel me with one vicious, sidewise swipe of those curling, evil-looking tusks.

And against four hundred pounds of infuriated vastodori, my little cudgel would be only a flimsy toy

Dizzy, panting for breath, I struggled to my feet just in time to see Bozo the othode launch himself out of the bushes behind me. He whizzed through the air, a blurred form, like a purple thunderbolt. Straight at the nape of the vastodon he hurtled, for the enraged brute had its huge head down, swinging from side to side, fierce tusks glinting in the bright gold of daylight, pawing at the turf before flinging itself upon me.

Down on the back of the monstrous elephant-boar came the growling othode. Mighty as it was, the vastodon staggered under the impact as Bozo crashed down upon its shoulders. The big fellow was in a fury, growling deep in his chest, his hackles bristling down his back, his goggling eyes blazing with killer-madness. Crunch went those heavy, underslung jaws, blunt tusks sinking deep into the flabby, loose, leathery hide of the vastodon. Muscles bunched along Bozo's terrible jaws, went rock-hard as those crushing tusks sank deep into the nape of the vastodon's neck.

The elephant-boar shrieked ear-piercingly, like a steam whistle. Then the massive beast went into a whirling, bucking, rearing dance as it strove to dislodge the growling killer crouched upon its back. Slathering foam splattered from its working jaws as it chomped those curling yellow tusks in maddened fury. Bozo was unfooted in seconds, sliding about. But his terrible jaws locked grimly, tusks slicing deeper and deeper into the nape of the monster's neck. The vastodon had a huge, humped back like that of a buffalo, but those great tusks sank ever deeper, and the othode hung on, remorseless as death itself. Like the relentless and untiring bull-mastiff he so much resembled, Bozo would cling with those jaws until death claimed him, I knew. And I was doing nothing to help him!

I was horribly afraid, shaking with terror, but the thought of standing by, a mere spectator, while the great, faithful othode went to his death defending me was more terrible than the thought of facing that wriggling, hairy proboscis and those chomping, vicious tusks.

I sprang forward, snatching up the heavy, knotted length of my cudgel, and sprang directly in front of the infuriated vastodon. I swung the cudgel back over my shoulder and brought it down full in the face of the elephant-boar with every bit of strength I had in me. The first blow made him squeal in fury, one red eye glaring madly at me; the second broke one of those horrible tusks to splinters; the third smashed an eye into gory, dripping ruin. But then, in his whirling dance to dislodge the growling othode tearing at his spine, the vastodon swerved about, giving me only one sweatlathered side to hit at.

The vastodon was like a whirling hill as he spun about, his great buffalo-hump looming above my head, all running with blood, the snarling purple othode still clinging to his back, those terrible jaws locked deep in its very spine by now. Bozo was flying through the air as the maddened brute whirled in his frenzy, and the great purple body slammed into branches and went smashing through thorny bushes, as the monster spun about, trying to dislodge him, to break his hold. But, once locked in killing fury on the body of a foe,

those mighty jaws would relax their hold only in death.

I got in another smashing blow as the bloody devilmask of a face whirled past me. A moment later I brought the club down a second time, crushing the other eye to scarlet slime. Blinded now, blood spurting out of its mouth with the bubbling foam, the vastodon was staggering, its knees jellylike. Then I saw an opening and sprang forward directly into its face. Hairy bristles and rubbery, wrinkled flesh rasped against my middle as that writhing, obscene proboscis closed about my hips, dragging me forward into the reach of those dripping jaws. But then. I brought the cudgel smashing down, directly atop the monster's blunt skull. There sounded a loud, sickening crack, like a coconut splitting in a vise.

The brute fell wobbling to his knees, dragging me down with it. Then the hairy proboscis went limp and slack, releasing me, and I wriggled free and lurched to my feet. My own knees felt soft and wobbling as jelly, and I staggered over to lean against a tree. Sweat was running down into my eyes, blinding them, and everything was a swimming blur.

I lost my breakfast into the nearest bush while Bozo broke the vastodon's back.

Something dry and rasping was licking -my face and somewhere very near something was whining deep in its throat. I opened my eyes groggily and looked into the worried face of Bozo the othode. It was streaked and splattered with blood, that ugly, purple face, but

the blood was that of the vastodon. Peering blearily past the immense wriggling purple body that was desperately trying to wag the tail he had been born without, I saw the corpse of the elephant-boar stretched out between the trees under a cloud of huge black glittering flies.

Bozo licked my bearded chin again with a huge pink tongue. I ached in every groaning muscle and sinew, and my head felt like a pressure cooker about to explode. Bright needles of pain went through my left knee every time I tried to move it, so I just lay still for a while, rubbing the wet, loose fur behind Bozo's ears, letting him lick my face, talking to him in hoarse, exhausted tones, saying the same thing over and over again, because there was nothing else to say.

“ . . . good boy, Bozo, that's a good boy, good old Bozo, he's a good boy . . . we got that vastodon, didn't we, good boy, yep, between the two of us, Bozo, old boy, that's one less vastodon . . . ”

I giggled at my own inane words, but I felt dizzy and lightheaded and filled with elation and kind of silly.

But-what the hell!-I felt entitled to a bit of silliness. After all, it isn't every day a sedentary science fiction writer pushing forty gets to fight a weird monster on an alien planet.

Book II

TARAN OF THE KU THAD

Chapter 6

THE BOY IN THE SPIDER-WEB

The result of this adventure was that we had elephantboar steak for lunch that afternoon. And it wasn't half bad!

As things turned out, neither Bozo nor I were half as bunged up as I had thought we were going to be. Bozo's thick hide covers a layer of healthy fat or gristle, drawn like a tough, rubbery sheath over steelspring muscles. Flying loose with his jaws locked in the vastodon's spinal cord, he had crashed through enough branches and bushes to have put you or me in a hospital for a month. But for Bozo it was all more or less in a day's work, and outside of the fact that he had to limp on at least three of his six legs, and had a black eye and a fine collection of cuts and bruises, he was in decent shape, considering the mountain of meat we had killed between the two of us.

As for me, well, I had scrapes and cuts and bruises, too, and one skinned knee and one knee that sent sharp pain lancing through _ me if I wasn't careful to walk just so. But nothing seemed to be broken and nothing was bruised that wouldn't heal in a few days, so I decided that I had acquitted myself well enough in the encounter and had come out of the battle in pretty good shape, considering.

Neither one of us was any too limber on his feet, so we made that little clearing between the trees our temporary base. My leaf-apron had been torn off in the battle, so I put together a new suit of Robinson Crusoe do-it-yourself while I was resting up from the combat. And then I seriously applied myself to the problem of making fire, since we had about half a ton of raw meat sitting there begging to be turned into sizzling steaks.

Even more than with the fact that I managed to come through that grunting, squealing, roaring, bloody battle with flying colors, and got in a few shrewd licks of my own, the last of which seemed to have broken the vastodon's skull, I am impressed with the fact that I actually made fire. This seems to me my greatest single accomplishment on Callisto, although opinions vary on this point, and both Taran and Glypto, to say nothing of Zantor, are more impressed by my almost impossible feat of making friends with a wild othode. The winning of Bozo does-not impress me as being such a feat as my friends think. My wife will tell you that I have a wonderful way with dogs, and can turn a waryeyed German shepherd with half-bared teeth into a wriggling bundle of eager friendliness by just speaking to it in a warm, low, confidential tone for a few moments; and all through my boyhood I was frightening my mother silly by walking up to strange dogs on the street and making friends of them before she could think to call me back.

No, winning over Bozo wasn't so hard. In fact it was easy. He gave his love to me, actually; I didn't even have to win it. But making fire in the wilderness was an accomplishment in which I take pardonable pride.

There were flinty-looking, jag-edged, broken stones protruding from a slope where rain water or general erosion had eaten away the topsoil, exposing shale. I tried knocking some of these together and occasionally struck sparks. Then, digging around under the trees for dry grasses and dead, crisp leaves, I made a pile of these and built a sort of wobbly teepee atop them with twigs and broken branches. Then it took patience to strike sparks again and again into the crisp leaves until at last one of the sparks caught. And when it did I nursed it along by the simple expedient of blowing upon it; finally the whole bonfire went up like a mass of tinder and for a few minutes there I thought we had a forest fire on our hands.

All the while Bozo sat there, regarding my actions curiously, head tipped first on one side and then on

the other, watching me make magic. I was half-afraid the fire would frighten him into retreat and that I was going to have to spend the rest of that day trying to coax him out of the woods, but such was not the case. Although he seemed to have a healthy respect for my fire, and treated it with caution, he did not seem particularly afraid of it.

Then, trimming off fallen branches, I finagled together a standing frame out of four lengths of wood whose ends were buried in holes dug in the ground with a pointed stick and then wedged in firmly, the raw earth patted down good and hard. Using the jagged pieces of broken stone, I sawed with considerable labor through the leathery hide of the vastodon, and hacked off some crude chunks of meat which came away in pieces rather than in nice steak-sized slabs. These I stuck on a long thin branch, making a sort of shishkebab out of them. Then all I had to do was balance this gobbet-laden stick atop my frame above the fire, and remember to turn it over once in a while until all the pieces were nicely done.

It was delicious, too. And as I relaxed, my back propped up against the slope, my belly full of tough, chewy, but crisp and juicy elephant-boar steak, I paid my compliments to the chef with a hearty and unembarrassed belch. Not bad (thought I) for an ex-Boy Scout who got pulled out of the corps in his first week, when he got hit in the eye by a football!

Bozo, who had filled his own belly in his own way, after one disdainful sniff at the blackened, dripping meat I pried off my cook-pole with gingerly fingers, relaxed beside me, urping a little from time to time, staring into the fire, blinking sleepily, lazily enjoying having the loose flesh behind his ears rubbed with greasy fingers.

The old rascal must have decided, when I had said goodbye to him back in the clearing where we had spent the night, that it was not yet time for farewells. He must have known somehow that this was one unathletic amateur Robinson Crusoe who genuinely needed a Dog Friday. And he must have followed my trail all that day, creeping through the brush behind me, alert for danger. Had it not been so, I would never have survived the charge of the elephant-boar, and I would not be alive now and writing these words. I owed a lot to Bozo-not that he wanted much of anything. It satisfied him just to be near me, just to have me talk to him in that low, warm voice, and it was enough for him to know that I was there when he wanted to have the loose folds of flesh behind his ears rubbed.

I guess there is a lot more pure unadulterated Dog in the genus othode than ever Jandar guessed. He wrote somewhere that they are occasionally domesticated for tracking purposes, just like hunting dogs, although they are not used as pets. Well, maybe so; and maybe the human natives of Callisto have yet to discover the pleasures of keeping pets. When they do, the othode will be ready.

I looked down into his sleepy eyes, wondering at the ease with which I had won his faithful heart. Was it possible he had been a hunting-othode, one already rudely half-domesticated, one already more or less accustomed to the presence and the smell of men? Possibly. I would never know his story, any more than I would ever know the story behind most of the stray dogs Noel or I had rescued from the wintry streets and adopted because they needed a home and ours was open to such as them.

McGurk himself had been a stray, I remembered with a smile. So perhaps Bozo, so McGurklike in many ways, was just another stray. He wore no collar; I would never know.

But we had found each other, and we had made friends. And I would not be alone in the jungle, ever again. Not so long as the loyal, fighting heart of Bozo still beat, strong and true, and those terrible jaws, that now chomped gently and wetly on my wrist because I was no longer petting him and he wanted more, could crush and maim and kill whatever challenged us in our jungle domain.

We spent our second night beside a roaring bonfire that was almost too warm for comfort. And rose, well rested at dawn, to feast on elephant-boar vastodon steak-his raw, mine cooked but cold.

All that third day we continued on our way through the jungles of the Grand Kumala.

Everywhere I looked, I was reminded of the fact that I was on a strange and alien world. If for a moment I forgot it, the next moment would remind me of the fact. I would turn and watch a strange red flower the size of an easychair ripping asunder an immense, ungainly dragonfly-thing the length of my arm with hairy muscular tendrils. Or a long, dragoncrested lizard-creature, green as jade, sunning its fantastic self upon a fallen log, like something -in a painting by Roy Krenkel.

Towards midday I turned into a long jungle aisle that stretched dimly before me-only to find Bozo pushing in front of me. I could not understand his curious behavior and admonished him sternly.

“What’s the matter with you? It will be a whole lot easier going down this way, than trying to squeeze through those thorny bushes. Get out of the way, now, Bozo, come on-movel”

Again the great brute interposed his body between me and the way that stretched before me, open and unencumbered. I tried to shove him aside; he turned huge liquid eyes upon me, filled with silent pleading. I began to get bad-tempered with him. Looking back in retrospect, I am ashamed of myself; but my back teeth were aching again, and my nerves were on edge, probably due to the fact that I had been going two days now without fresh coffee or cigarettes, to both of which I am heavily addicted.

Finally, snarling a cuss-word he certainly did not deserve, I got past him and -darted into the tunnelloid aisle that ran for some distance between regularlyspaced trees. It was dim and cool here in this tunnel of trees, and I enjoyed the relief from sweltering jungle sunlight and moist, humid air thick with the reek of rotting flowers.

Almost at once I ran into the spider-web.

I guess it was a spider-web, but if it was, then the spider who spun it must have been the size of a St. Bernard. Because the web was woven of sticky, glassy-looking strands as thick around as my little finger.

My knee was caught in the web, and, because it was my bad knee, the one I had hurt in the battle with the vastodon, I had to be careful about extricating it from the sticky meshes of the web. So I reached down and pried the web off my skin-or tried to. Because now my fingers were gummed shut, closed on the sticky web. Cursing and struggling a little, I tried to push myself away-and my elbow went through the web, which parted and then snapped back, imprisoning my arm. I kicked and fought to free myself, but to no avail. Finally, I hung there, panting and exhausted, in the grip of the monstrous web.

Bozo waddled forward on his six short bowlegs. He sniffed the sticky strands carefully, not touching them. Then he turned upon me a mournful, commiserating look which said, as plain as words, “If only you had listened to my warning.” He was right, of course; I felt like a fool.

Then the giant othode turned about and waddled into the brush without so much as a backwards glance. And I felt very much alone. I did not blame Bozo for deserting me, for, after all, what could he do to help me out of this predicament? Any attempt to get me free of the sticky embrace of the giant web would only serve to entrap Bozo, as well. But I missed him, and, after a while, growing angry with frustration, began to kick and struggle against the gooey stuff which now enmeshed me from head to foot.

Suddenly, without the slightest warning, a human voice spoke up from some place behind me!

‘S’ringa tuar d’ iorndt adara je ximchakadar.’

I started violently as the youthful voice said these words wearily. Craning my neck about painfully, I saw another web behind me, further up the tunnel of trees, deep in shadow. Therein hung imprisoned a young boy of eleven or twelve, helpless as was I. He was the first human being I had met on this strange world, and I was amazed to see how utterly prosaic, how perfectly ordinary he appeared. Put him in a pair of jeans and a T-shirt and he could walk down any street in America without attracting any special attention. He looked, as I have said, to be about eleven, perhaps twelve. He was slimly built, with long coltish legs, a bare chest and sturdy shoulders. His face was boyish, with wide, slightly slanting emerald green eyes under thick lashes, and a full-lipped mouth whose softness was belied by the resolute, manly set of his jaw. He had a thick mop of wild, tangled hair of pure reddish gold, and his skin was a dusky shade of golden tan, rather like a Korean or Vietnamese boy.

He didn’t have much on, a loincloth wound about his middle and hanging down fore and aft, leather thong sandals, and a baldric across his chest from shoulder to hip. From this hung an empty scabbard. Behind him, some feet away, a boy-sized long-sword lay fallen in the matted leaves. From the looks of him, the boy had been enmeshed in the web for many hours-perhaps even a day or two. His bare arms were grimy, and there were dark circles of exhaustion under his bright green eyes, and the stain of tears had dried on his cheeks. His lips looked parched and cracked with thirst.

In a listless, hoarse voice he again repeated the mysterious phrase with which he had first caught my attention.

‘S’ringa tuar d’ iorndt adara je ximchakadar.’

The language in which he spoke was unfamiliar to me-or was it? Among the sequence of incomprehensible sounds one word stood out that made sense to me -ximchak. Wasn’t that the Thanatorian word for a species of giant spider which infested the jungle country? Of course-then we were in the web of a ximchak!

I guessed, correctly as it turned out, that what the boy had said to me was “it is useless to struggle against the ximchak-web.”

“I’ve got a hunch I know pretty much what you mean, young fellow,” I said, “but I’m afraid I can’t reply in the same lingo.”

The emerald eyes widened to hear these incomprehensible words pour from my lips. Now the weary listlessness vanished, as he examined me with eyes filled with astonishment, noting my bare skin, paler and pinker than his own dusky golden tan, my blue gray eyes, which must also have been strange to him, and my brown hair and short beard, such an ordinary, unremarkable shade back on Earth, but so rare and unusual here on Callisto.

It came to him suddenly that I posed a real enigma. And a flow of excited language poured from his mouth, of which I understood not one single word. Laughingly, I shook my head, and said, “Boy, I can’t understand a word you’re saying! Let’s see, now, what’s the universal word of greeting here on Thanator? I think it is . . .” I fumbled, searching my memory; then “Saoma!”

The puzzled expression partially cleared from his brilliant eyes. He grinned, revealing white, even teeth,

and said “Saoma, chart!”* Then he indicated himself, by nodding his chin towards his chest, and uttered a short phrase.

“What was that? ‘Taran of the Ku Thad’?” I repeated. He nodded with another bright, eager grin. Although everyone on Callisto speaks the same language, and the very concept of another tongue is thoroughly alien to the Callistans’ experience, the quick-witted boy had taken my unfamiliarity with the language- in his stride.

Taran of the Ku Thad! Well, the Ku Thad were the Golden People, the warrior race of Shondakor where over Jandar and Darloona reigned. But . . . Taran? I grinned, thinking of my friend Lloyd Alexander, and how surprised he would be if I could tell him I had encountered a boy on a distant world with the precise same name as the hero of his Prydain novels. A questioning sound; I looked up to see that the boy was waiting for me to give my name in return. I pronounced it as clearly as I could, but he wrinkled up his little snub nose at the peculiar sound of it.

“H’llan . . . kar’t? . . .” he gave it a try.

I repeated my name again, and this time he caught the unfamiliar sound of it more clearly.

“Lan . . . kar? Lankar!” he said it over a few times to get it right. I shrugged, as much as I could in the grip of the sticky web. I suppose “Lankar” was close enough; I remember the passage in which Jandar describes the difficulty the Callistan natives had with his name, and how to their ears “Jon Dark” sounded like “Jandar.” This being the case, it was only natural that “Lin Carter” would come out sounding something like “Lankar.”

“Okay, Taran, Lankar it is.”

His eyes sparkled. “Saoma, Lankar!”

And Lankar I was to the boy from that moment on . . . Lankar of Callisto, I thought to myself with a grin!

And then things stopped being funny.

The bushes near the mouth of the tree-tunnel rustled suddenly. I froze, globules of cold sweat ‘popping out on my bare forearms and face. Behind me, the boy sucked in his breath sharply, eyes haunted with fear.

“Ximchaka, chan!” he whispered hollowly.*

Even if I hadn’t already guessed the meaning. of the word, I would have instinctively known it, from the cold horror in the boy’s voice. For that rustling in the bushes, which sounded like a large beast forcing its way through the branches, could have only one explanation!

The dreadful ximchak-the gigantic spiders of the jungle country-were coming to investigate their webs.

And they would find two helpless human beings enmeshed therein-two bound and defenseless captives on which to feed!

Chapter 7

I BEGIN TO LEARN THE LANGUAGE

The red-leafed bushes parted, revealing an immense shape. At the sight of the beast which emerged from the depths of the jungle, the boy cried out sharply in astonishment. I, too, was astonished, but in a different way and for a different reason.

“Bozo!” I exclaimed, delightedly.

For it was indeed the giant othode, and not one-of the dreadful spider-monsters. I had assumed, sadly, that Bozo had deserted me, unable to help me out of my predicament. Now I cursed myself for having such a low estimate of the loyalty and affection contained in that great heart. For, instead of leaving me to my own devices, the mighty othode had gone to fetch the means of setting me free!

Somewhere in the depths of the Kumala, Bozo had found a peculiar tree, known to his kind by its-smell, as wise old Zastro, the savant and sage of the Ku Thad, explained to me later. The tree is known to the Thanatorians as the yakadar, a name which may be interpreted as the “web-proof” tree. The wood of this tree is slick and smooth, under the bark, which peels off easily; and, once peeled, the wood exudes a quantity of oil which counteracts the adhesive qualities of the ximchak web.

Bozo had gone to find a yakadar tree; finding it, he had torn away one branch of the yakadar in his powerful jaws, and then he had ripped the bark away in long strips, baring one end of the greenish, wet-looking wood, which resembled that of an elm tree of my native world. This accomplished, the faithful brute had retraced his steps to where I hung in the monstrous web, and all the while he had held the branch in his mighty jaws.

I felt ashamed of myself for having dared to think he would desert me, and I told him so.

He looked up at me with adoring love eloquent in those solemn, goggling eyes, and again his hindquarters rippled with that indescribable movement that was the result of trying to wag a tail that wasn't there. Then he thrust the oily branch full against that portion of the ximchak web which held my arm in its toils.

I watched with fascination as the oily wood brushed against the web-strands. Within mere moments after contact with the oil of the yakadar tree, the strands dulled, blackened, shriveled, and fell away to dust. And my hand was free!

Behind me, Taran chattered out something. I later had reason to understand his astonishment and alarm. It was due to the presence of Bozo, of course. The giant othodes of the jungle country are terrible and dreaded predators in their own right, as mighty and as much to be feared as Bengal tigers. And the notion of a tame and friendly othode especially what was evidently a wild othode of the jungle country-was as amazing to Taran as the notion of a tame and friendly tiger of the wilderness would have been to a native of India.

Once my arm was free I carefully took the yakadar branch from Bozo's mouth and used it to free myself from the grip of the giant web. The miraculous oil that oozed from the slick, greenish wood performed its

work admirably, and before long I staggered away .from the web, free at last of its meshes. It was a mighty good feeling, I assure you!

While Bozo crouched watchfully at the mouth of the tunnel, I went further in the dimness to where Taran hung, helplessly spread-eagled in the grip of the second web. The boy watched me, wide-eyed with astonishment. I understood that he regarded me as a magician or some kind of a miracle worker, for who else could bend the savage beasts of the jungle to obey his will? I tried to reassure the wide-eyed boy with a smile and a few quiet words. He could not, of course, have understood the meaning of the words, but something in the tone of voice with which I spoke them must have reassured him, for he relaxed and the fear left his eyes. He regarded me trustfully as I approached and used the yakadar branch to free him.

When the last strand parted, shriveled into a mere vestige and fell away, and he was free, the boy collapsed weakly against me. I scooped him up in my arms and carried him out of the tunnel and set him down, stretched out on the grass in the warm daylight, with his back propped against a tree. He thanked me with a feeble grin and some jabber meaningless to me.

From the fact that the boy was unable to walk I felt pretty sure that he had hung there, crucified against the monster spider-web, for some days. I began rubbing his arms and legs, chafing them briskly, in an attempt to help restore his circulation, talking to him all the while in a low, reassuring voice. I knew my words were as much meaningless jabber to him as were his words to me, but I knew he recognized that I was trying to help him. The boy turned pale and bit his underlip at the pins-and-needles pain of returning circulation, but he was a plucky youngster, and not a sound of protest escaped from him as I kneaded and rubbed his stiff, lame legs.

Before long he was able to hobble about stiffly, with his arm around my waist and my arm around his shoulders. Then I let him rest again, once the numbness had worked out of his limbs, and went off to find water. Bozo, guessing my intent, led me to another gurgling brook, and followed as I carried water back and forth in one of the large, rubbery leaves I had with me from which to fashion new footwear when my old wore out. It took several trips to satisfy Taran's thirst, and I began to wish I had thought to bring along one of those capacious clamshells.

Once Taran had had his fill of water, I gave him some of the elephant-boar steak to chew on. Before leaving the scene that morning, I had cut off quite a few pieces of cooked vastodon from which to dine later when I grew hungry. It made me smile to see how eagerly Taran devoured the half-burnt, half-raw meat. Then, while I collected my bundle of leaves, found my cudgel and rewrapped what was left of the vastodon meat, the boy limped stiffly into the tunnel of trees again, found his fallen sword and also a light cloak or something like a cloak, which had fallen from him when he had blundered into the web days before.

He then did something charming and very thoughtful by way of thanking me for my assistance. Squatting on his heels, the boy tore open the seams of the cloak by drawing them along the edge of his sword, and quickly and neatly made a loin-cloth for me to use instead of the flimsy and rather useless apron of leaves (which I had lost in my struggles in the ximchak web, by the way). Grinning at my ignorance, the boy demonstrated how to wear this garment, which you wound about your hips and looped between your legs in such a manner as to leave a length of the cloth hanging down in back and in front. I soon got the hang of wearing the thing and thanked him with a word and a smile.

We made slow progress through the jungles during what was left of that day. Taran stuck very close to me, for he was still afraid of Bozo and shy of getting too near the great waddling brute. I believe Bozo was more than a little jealous of my newfound young friend; for he gave voice to a low, warning rumble deep in his heavy chest whenever Taran got too close to him. But the faithful beast made no move to

attack the boy, merely tended to avoid him with wary, suspicious glances from time to time.

Taran and I passed the time with language lessons. We threaded a path single file through the trees, with Bozo going first and Taran at my heels. The boy had given me his small sword with a confident grin and a burst of chatter I did not understand, taking my cudgel up for his weapon. Doubtless the boy assumed I was more competent to use the sword than he was-which was incorrect, of course, but he could not know that.

The sword was about three feet from pointed tip to hilt and looked more like a rapier than anything else to which I could assign a name. The blade was thin and sharp, honed to razor keenness on each edge, and made of good, springy steel. It was obviously tailored to the boy's proportions and looked rather small and unimpressive in my fist, but I bore it with a measure of confidence. It had been too many years since I had last practised with the sword for me to feel very confident of my ability to use it expertly; still, it was a slim, exquisitely balanced weapon of beautiful workmanship and a joy to have in your hand. I strode along the jungle path, feeling like John Carter of Barsoom in my loincloth, my naked sword by my side, thinking: If only Sprague could see me now!

To pass the time, as I have just mentioned, I let Taran tutor me in the universal language of Thanator (his name for the moon Callisto). I am not very good at picking up foreign languages, I'm afraid, but it was very important that Taran and I be able to communicate on a verbal level just as soon as possible, for I was going to need the boy's help. We spent some hours at it and by the end of the day I was quite surprised at how many Thanatorian words I was able to use. In all honesty it must be admitted that I already had quite a healthy headstart on learning the language of Callisto. Jandar's manuscripts had given me an acquaintance with something like forty or fifty words, so we had a sketchy but serviceable background on which to rear more complicated linguistic structures. And sign language helped a lot, of course. Even before the language lessons began, I apprised the youngster of my intentions by pointing ahead in the direction I wished to travel and repeating the name Shondakor. He wrinkled up his nose at my pronunciation* but he caught my meaning, and eagerly indicated the correct direction, which was a bit further to the south than I had thought. We headed off in that direction, since it was probable that the boy knew better than I where the city lay.

These language lessons with which we passed the hours of our weary trek, by the way, were pretty rudimentary. I learned the names of trees and flowers, and the Thanatorian words for "walking," "sword," and so on. The boy taught me the proper word for various parts of the body by simply pointing to his foot or knee or ear or whatever, and repeating in a clear voice the native word for each appropriate part. As I already knew some words, I picked up a very rough vocabulary surprisingly fast, although of course it was quite a while before I was able to make anything resembling a coherent sentence-and I'm sure I never did manage to get rid of a terribly "Earthian" accent.

Dinner that night consisted of the remnants of the vastodon meat, varied by a number of curious fruits, such as a deliciously sweet and meaty purple-fleshed berry that looked like a kind of prickly-skinned banana, and a large, succulent fruit that resembled a bright red pumpkin, but which tasted almost exactly like a very large and very overripe peach. We camped even before daylight ended and night fell, for I was still stiff and sore from all this unaccustomed exercise, and Taran was still pretty weak from his many hours of imprisonment in the ximchak web.

I tried to make fire again, having carried along in my bundle of leaves two of the flinty stones, but failed. The grasses were too damp and dry leaves were scarce in this part of the jungle. Taran took charge at that point; borrowing the sword he vanished into the depths of thicket, returning with an armful of thorny branches which he began to arrange around the trunk of a large tree in barricade-fashion. For some reason this reminded me of the "thorn-boma" people are always making in the Tarzan books, and I

couldn't help laughing at the sight. Between the two of us, Taran and I gathered enough of these sharp-spined branches to build a waist-high barrier around the base of the tree. There were no masses of dry grass to burrow under, so the youngster and I spent that night cuddled together for warmth while Bozo (still suspicious of the strange boy) kept guard outside the barricade.

Towards the middle of night, though, he must have joined us. For when day came, I awoke to find Taran sound asleep, his tousled head pillowed comfortably on the burly warm shoulder of the great othode, and his arms locked about the chest of the sleeping beast. I grinned at the sight, assuming that from now on, both of my friends would be friends. In this assumption I was right, for beginning' that night, Bozo displayed no further wariness or suspicion towards the little boy, and defended him as staunchly as he defended me.

The following day we discovered a .wide, shallow pool amidst a jungle clearing. Fed by subterranean springs, the water was crystal clear-and gaspingly cold, as I soon discovered. As I started to make my way around the pool, Taran grabbed my arm, halting me. He jabbered something in his bright, inquisitive voice, pointing at the pool. Then, impatient at my inability to understand his words, the boy illustrated them by kicking off his sandals, dropping his cudgel, stripping off his loincloth and diving in.

He bobbed to the surface, flinging the wet hair out of his eyes, grinning and chattering cheerfully, and began frisking in the shallow water like a hairless monkey. I stood watching him from the edge of the pool, sorely tempted. After days of tromping through the jungle, I was perfectly filthy, my hands muddy paws, my nails black half-moons of grime. And I itched all over! Well, why not, after all? So, while the boy frisked and splashed, I sat down on the bank, removed baldric, footgear and clout, and slid gingerly into the pool.

It was colder even than I had guessed, and clear as glass. For a while I stood there shivering, turning (I am sure) several shades of blue. Finally, summoning up my courage, I immersed myself and, before very long, found the temperature endurable.

Taran showed me how to take a bath in the wild, how to scoop up handfuls of clean white crystalline sand from the bottom of the pond and use the abrasive stuff in lieu of soap, to scrub away the more durable patches of grime. Feeling rather like one of the ancient Romans, who used the same method before the invention of soap, I scrubbed myself with rasping sand until I was fairly clean, if not actually raw in a few places. I found that once you got used to the positively breathtaking coldness of the water, taking a bath, even under such primitive conditions, was a blissful pleasure.

We splashed and scrubbed while Bozo crouched above us on the bank, watching with huge, solemn, slightly puzzled eyes, standing guard. The jungle scene-the naked boy frolicking in the pool-the faithful, guardian beast crouched on the bank above-the whole thing reminded me of an illustration from *The Jungle Book*, with Taran as Mowgli and Bozo making a passable substitute for Bagheera.

Once we were as clean as we were going to get, we emerged and let the humid air dry our bodies. We assumed our garments and gear and trudged off, feeling clean, refreshed and invigorated,-but not without a wistful backwards glance or two at the pool behind us.

Along towards nightfall we hastily took refuge in the upper branches of a huge tree Taran called a borath. The occasion for our precipitous ascent was a prowling yathrib-a monstrously huge, perfect horror of a thing -that looked like a gigantic, reptilian version of a tiger-if you can imagine a tiger covered with rippling, scaly hide, armed with a long, whiplike barbed tail, grown to the size of a Percheron and colored an incredible scarlet.

Bozo warned us of the approach of the monster with a rumbling growl which raised my nape-hairs and sent Taran scrambling up the nearest tree. I followed him with no less haste but considerably less agility and we crouched upon an upper branch for what seemed like hours while the tremendous yathrib-looking like something dreamed up by Alex Raymond-prowled about the foot of the tree, menacing us with thunderous roars. I held the shuddering boy tightly, his skinny arms locked around my neck, wishing with all my might for just one hand grenade. Eventually, long after nightfall, the yathrib departed with an audible slithering through the bushes after a more accessible dinner and Bozo, who had seen us safely up the tree before taking to his six heels in a very sensible manner, reappeared, searching for us anxiously.

We climbed out of our tree-top and left the vicinity at top speed, uncertain at every step whether we should have stayed aloft or not. Finally, quite exhausted, we sought refuge for the rest of the night under a thornleafed bush, since it was much too dark to hope to locate the makings of another “thorn-boma.” I confess to doubting whether or not such a scratchy barricade as the one we had slept behind the night before would even slow down a hungry yathrib, much less stop him in his tracks.

I also confess to getting very little sleep that night. I kept remembering those blazing, mindless eyes, filled with infinite ferocity. And those yawning jaws, lined with more fangs than it seemed could possibly be crammed into one mouth . . . thoughts hardly conducive to slumber, you will admit.

Taran slept like a log, however. But even Bozo got no sleep, and as I lay awake, pillowed on itchy leaves, shivering in the damp chill, I could hear the great othode padding in circles around us all that night, like a faithful dog, guarding our rest.

Chapter 8

BARIN OF THE JUNGLE LEGION

We managed to cover quite a distance during the next two days. And I must admit, with more than a little pride which seems to me only justifiable under the circumstances, that I was beginning to feel fit and hardy and well able to survive in the wilderness, after my first few miserable days.

I felt stronger and tougher than I had in years, and was able to stride through the underbrush for miles without needing rest. I no longer suffered quite as much as I had at first from the lack of such civilized luxuries as fresh hot coffee and cigarettes-although it took an effort of will to keep my mind off such tempting thoughts, and more than once I woke from dreams of tender, succulent filet mignon, dry martinis, or fresh, fragrant, steaming cups of fresh-brewed Maxwell House. And, as for thoughts of food, I learned that raw fruit, a handful of nuts and berries, and an occasional morsel of vastodon steak may sound like a Spartan diet, but they certainly satisfy the inner man and you can easily learn to get along on them-because you have to, especially when the nearest decent restaurant is something like four hundred million miles away.

Yes, for a lazy, self-indulgent, unathletic science-fiction writer nearing forty and of sedentary habits, I had come through the ordeal a whole lot better than even I could have imagined possible. My head was clear, my eyes were keen, my “wind” was better than it had been since my twenties, and I could keep

going for half a day before sitting down to rest.

“Lo saraj, Lankar-chan!”* chirped Taran, trudging along at my rear, pointing off to the left. I didn’t ask how the boy knew where water was, because I couldn’t yet phrase out the question. But Bozo sensed the nearness of the brook in almost the same instant. The big fellow had been forging along steadily for a couple of hours now, and, from the way his pink tongue was lolling between his frog-like jaws, he was beginning to get thirsty, as were we. Sniffing the air, he uttered a guttural sound that was an othode’s equivalent of a dog’s bark, and went waddling off to the left as fast as his six short, fat, bowed legs could carry him. When we arrived he was standing in the middle of the stream, lapping up cold, fresh water.

Taran knelt at my side and drank noisily from cupped palms, again and again, before settling back with a sigh of repletion. He cast me a bright-eyed glance and said something untranslatably colloquial, which might be rendered as “That’s mighty good!” or “Nothing like a bellyful of water on a hot day!” All I can say for certain is that the remark terminated in “Lankar-chan,” which he had recently taken to calling me. The term was a respectful one, such as a youngster might politely use towards an older man, serving for the nonce, as was I, in loco parentis. The word chan meant “sir.” Therefore I suppose Lankar-chan would translate to something like “Mr. Carter.”

My acquaintance with the Thanatorian language was still a crude thing, merely a matter of a few verbs and nouns. So I had not yet learned anything of the youngster’s story, of who he was and how he had come to be caught in that ximchak-web. A long time after our jungle journey I elicited from him the fact that he had been born and raised in a small Ku Thad hunters’ settlement deep in the Grand Kumala. The Ku Thad had once lived amidst the vast tract of black-and-crimson jungle, driven into hiding in those regions by the Chac Yuul who had invaded and conquered their homeland. Even after Jandar’s arrival on Thanator, and the subsequent destruction of the bandit legion, which the Ku Thad had driven out of Shondakor, many of the Ku Thad preferred the rough, hardy, outdoors life of hunting in the dense jungles; Taran’s father had been one of these.

But his father had died under the fangs of a yathrib, leaving the boy a homeless orphan. Well, not exactly homeless, I suppose, for the hunters of the village would have opened their hearts to him and raised him among them as one of their own. But the boy yearned for strange scenes, unfamiliar vistas, curious adventures. Thus, when the Xaxar returned from her epic voyage to the other side of the world and began enlisting warriors for a second journey into the unknown, and word of this penetrated even to the little colony of Ku Thad huntsmen, the heart of the boy had thrilled to the lure of far-off lands among weird, uncanny peoples, and he had run away from home to enlist in the Second Armada, as it would be called.

However, the journey across the breadth of the jungle country is difficult enough for a full-grown man such as I, even with the full-hearted aid of a mighty othode like Bozo. For a small boy like Taran, all alone in the world, it could easily have proven impossible. Prowling predators had chased him; he had flung aside his weapons and gear and provisions, with the sole exception of the small rapier his father had given him. Striving to elude the jungle beasts, he had sought to hide in the tunnel of trees, only to become caught and entangled within the web of the ximchak. Even the hunting beasts who had been close on his trail were wary of falling into the power of the horrible ximchak, and thus they had turned aside, not daring to enter the tunnel trap.

In time the ximchak had returned to its lair, spinning a new web at the very mouth of the tunnel-the very one into which I had blundered, when I had foolishly ignored the warnings of Bozo. Had I not done so, Taran might well be dead by now. For, while the ximchak do not feed very often, when hunger does arise in their hideous little bodies, the ghastly treedwelling arachnidae can strip the flesh from a fullgrown man, leaving a white skeleton to bleach in the jungle shadows.

This, then, was the tale of Taran, although I did not learn it until much later. I understood the basic situation, for I had read of the loss of the First Armada and of the disappearance of Jandar himself, believed a captive of the mysterious Mind Wizards. These things had all been in the manuscript I read on the plane which bore Noel and me to Cambodia. Like Taran, I too had worried and wondered over the unknown fate of Jandar of Callisto. .

It was then we heard the voices.

We had just turned from the streamlet and were heading back to the trail we had been following. Suddenly there came the murmur of voices not far ahead, mixed with a curious harsh, grating cry that I soon came to know was the squawk of riding-thaptors.

Taran and I stopped short, exchanging a startled glance. Bozo froze, ears pricking, sounding a low growl of warning. Together we cautiously crept forward until we could look out on the trail from the dense shadow of the trees that bordered it.

We saw a party of about a dozen men, mounted on fantastic beaked and clawed and feathered steeds. These creatures were four-legged riding-beasts about the size of horses, but there all resemblance to the terrene quadrupeds ceased. For thaptors are bird-horses, like the hippogriffs of myth and legend-four-legged, befeathered birds, with cruel hooked beaks and mad, round, glaring eyes like parrots. I stared upon them with awe and amazement, for all that I had read their description before and knew what they were.

As for the men, they were a lean, hard-faced, rangy-looking lot who had the military bearing of soldiers. They were golden-skinned, green-eyed, redhaired men of the same race as Taran, and wore leather helmets and open-throated, supple tunics and high boots, with scarlet loincloths under their short tunics and loose-sleeved blouses covering their upper torso and arms. All of them wore swords slung across their shoulders on broad brass-studded baldrics, and a few carried long, leaf-bladed spears and small, round, leather-stretched-across-wicker-frame shields or targes. Over his heart, each man carried a peculiar yellow hieroglyph worked into the leather of his tunic, and the foremost spearman had a regimental guidon which flapped from his spearhead.

Recognizing the golden symbol emblazoned on the breast of each soldier, Taran uttered a gleeful cry, jabbered something at me brightly, then jumped out into the trail before the men before I had a chance to stop him.

The foremost soldier uttered an exclamation and jerked back on the reins, drawing his steed up short. He fired off a volley of sharp questions at Taran, to which the boy eagerly replied in a stream of similarly incomprehensible volubility. Other men slid down from their steeds and strode forward to question the excited boy. Taran gestured in my direction, and my heart sunk, knowing there was no further point in trying to conceal myself. So, signaling to Bozo, I climbed through the brush fringing the edge of the trail and stepped out in full view of the soldiers.

They stared at me in surprise which rapidly changed into slack-jawed amazement. It was the color of my hair and of my eyes which most impressed them-at least until Bozo timidly emerged from the brush to stand trembling, pressed up against my thigh. The sight of a man accompanied by a tame othode was incredible to them-that much I could read in their expressions.

One of them, a tall, broad-shouldered, young man with a firm jaw and clear, steady eyes-I later discovered him to be the captain of this troop-addressed me in a polite, but grimly questioning, manner.

There wasn't much I could do-I didn't even understand what it was he had asked me. So, getting my wits together, and marshaling what little I knew of the language, I took a deep breath and attempted to make my first sentence in Thanatorian:

“E - Lankar-chan! Kandol a Jandar a Shondakor Saoma!”

It wasn't a bad sentence at all, considering. In fact, I felt mighty proud of myself.

My pronunciation of the words was probably a bit off-but, what the hell, they understood me! I could tell that from the bright gleam that flashed into the eyes of their leader, who repeated my phrases, halfwonderingly to himself. Then he fired off another phrase of his own, in which the only word I could recognize was Thanator, the native name for this world.

I shook my head and pointed into the sky.

They got my meaning again, and stared at one another in utter and dumbfounded amazement.*

For the captain, noting my racial resemblance to Jandar-who also had grayish eyes and a fair skin, although his hair was yellow and not brown like mine, sprang to the conclusion that I was, like Jandar, a visitor from another world. (The existence of the Gate is, of course, no secret to the Thanatorians; and Jandar has never sought to conceal his extra-Thanatorian origin, which is widely known.) When I shook my head in answer to his startled query and pointed aloft, he understood me to say that I, too, like Jandar, had come from a distant world.

The captain looked me over with awe and wonder written in his face. I could read the thoughts traveling through his brain as if by telepathy: to him I was a mysterious being from a distant world, doubtless a personage of vast importance. He mumbled some remark I did not catch; then he whipped off his scarlet cloak and gave it to me to cover my nakedness with, making a little bow of respect. He did not dare approach too closely because of Bozo. The great othode stood between me and the troop of soldiers, his burly shoulders firmly pressed against my thighs, watching with alert, wary eyes every motion made by these strangers. From time to time a warning rumble came from his mighty chest.

I quieted him with a word and a touch and slung the cloak about me, sheathing the toy sword Taran had given me. The boy was trembling with excitement, his bright green eyes sparkling as he drank in the splendid vision of the mounted warriors, their gleaming weapons and splendid accouterments, the restless thaptors pawing at the dust, arching their proud necks restlessly, the brilliant bannerol snapping in a brisk breeze. This was the sort of thing he had dreamed of: and now it was actually happening!

It seems that the Shondakorians maintained a patrol to keep watch over the edge of the Kumala jungles, for there are bands of nomadic savages therein, as well as outlaws, bandits and savage beasts. This patrol is called the Kumala Yuul, which is to say, the “Jungle Legion.” And the tall, broad-shouldered young officer who had accosted me was the captain of the troop. His name was Barin.

It would not have been polite to laugh out loud, but I couldn't keep back a grin. Barin gave me a baffled, but respectful, glance and managed to refrain from asking me what was so funny. It was just as well he did! How could I possibly have conveyed to him that I had only just gotten used to the fact that my young companion bore the name of the hero of Lloyd Alexander's Prydain books, while he, himself, bore the name of the Prince of Mongo in Alex Raymond's old Flash Gordon strip!

I chuckled, resolving to myself that if I ever got back home and wrote up my adventures into a book I

was going to have to do quite a bit of name-changing!

The courteous young captain, all the while calling me kytar or “lord,” obviously on the premise that I was far too important to be a mere chan or “sir,” dismounted and helped me into the saddle of his thaptor. The bird eyed me suspiciously over one feathery shoulder and clacked his sharp beak as if to say “As soon as the captain looks the other way, I think I’ll take a chunk out of this bloke’s leg.”

While I usually enjoy riding, it had been years since I was last in the saddle, and then, of course, the saddle was on a horse. Riding around on the back of a giant bird was somewhat new to my experience, but I resolved to make the best of it. Captain Barin had given me his scarlet cloak and I slung it about me and mounted the thaptor. I was grinning again, again reminded of the befeathered steeds in Jane Gaskell’s Atlan trilogy, and of the ornithohippus in one of my own novels about Ganelon Silvermane.

Bozo would not leave my side, even after I bestrode the thaptor. My gryphonlike steed was in a nervous flap due to the presence of the giant othode, which may have distracted its attention from me; at any rate it did not even attempt to remove a piece of my leg en route. The troop mounted up and one of the legionnaires, grinning hugely, scooped up Taran and set the boy before him on the saddlebow. The lad kicked his heels delightedly and crowed something at me in a breathless rush of words, of which I caught only the bit about “Lankar-chan.” I smiled and waved at him. Then the captain gave an order and we moved out.

Since the other thaptors were made restive by the mighty othode who would not leave me, Barin bid me take the lead. And so it was that, cloaked in scarlet, at the head of a troop of warriors, the great othode pacing at my side, I rode for the gates of golden Shondakor like a visiting emperor.

Chapter 9

THE EMPTY THRONE

We rode first to an encampment of the Jungle Legion, built on the outskirts of the Grand Kumala. It was a collection of log cabins, surrounded by a tall palisade, with a spindle-legged watchtower looming over all, from which the gold flag of Shondakor unrolled its rich fires on the wind. It looked like something left over from F Troop.

There we rested, and Taran and I were given a civilized meal while Barin went in to report the news of my arrival to the komor, as the commandant of the Legion was called. The meal was a simple one, a crockery bowl of meat stew and a fist-sized lump of coarse brown bread, topped off with a mug of cheap red wine. The meat of the stew was unfamiliar to me, and the spices wherewith it was seasoned were curious and alien, but rarely have I downed a meal with such gusto. After nearly a week of munching nuts and sucking raw fruit, a decent meal was a luxury to be savored with relish.

The komor, a heavy-faced man with frank and honest eyes, under close-cropped, grizzled hair, came out to inspect me. His eyes widened at the gray-touched brown of my hair and beard, and the blue gray of my eyes, and my pale, un-Thanatorian complexion. Evidently he had not accepted Barin’s account and had to see the man from Jandar’s world with his own eyes. One look convinced him.

He made me a profound salute whose significance I did not understand until later, when I saw it used at the Shondakorian court and came to realize it was usually given to royalty. I'm afraid I just took it in my stride, giving him a pleasant smile and a nod in return (which must also have impressed him, and, if anything, tended to convince him of my immense aristocratic rank). He backed out of the room respectfully and later sent in the regimental barber, a fat, fussy little man, to comb and trim my hair and beard and shave my cheeks.

Afternoon was upon us; still under escort by Captain Barin, we departed camp and rode straight for Shondakor, not far distant. The city rose beyond a broad river, spanned by an ancient stone bridge. I must confess I thrilled at the sight of it, for it was like some magnificent capital out of fabled antiquity, somehow survived the ages intact. A mighty stone wall surrounded the city proper, and guards strolled about the circumference of this barrier, daylight flashing from their polished helms and spear blades. The gates were open and we rode through, the gate-captain tossing a salute at Barin, gaping at me, and turning a look of sheer disbelief at the huge purple othode who trotted at my heels.

We paused first at the military headquarters, a low, rambling structure like a fortress, built just within the circuit of the city wall by the main or Ajand Gate, and, in fact, leaning up against the fabric of the wall. There while Barin conferred with various mystified and terribly impressed officers, and courtiers sped further into the city to inform the palace of my arrival, they rapidly outfitted me in something more suitable to wear at court than a ragged loincloth and a captain's red cloak.

The garment they selected for me was a sort of long-sleeved gown of stiff, crinkly, shiny stuff like silk, darkly gold in color, with a high stiff collar like that worn by Ming the Merciless in the old "Flash Gordon" serials. This outfit seemed to me a trifle effeminate, and I felt a bit uncomfortable in it, but the people here ought to know what was worn at court, so I went along with it without protest. They returned my plain leather baldric and boy-sized sword to Taran, lending me a slim basket-hilted rapier twinkling with topazes, scabbarded on a light baldric adorned with badges and ornaments of precious metals, and shod my feet in buskins of fine, supple leather, dyed imperial purple.

This and a huge purple velvet cloak completed my costume. In the privacy of the robing chamber I tried a few passes with the rapier, swirled my cloak about in high good humor, and felt ready to walk into the costume ball of any world science-fiction convention and carry off first prize.

Taran they crammed into a loose-sleeved white blouse and trim leather jerkin, belted at the waist and extending down a few inches below the hips, with a bright red loincloth and a pair of ankle-high, soft leather boots, complete with boysized spurs. The boy, who shared my dressing room, crowed with delight over such finery and envied my gold silk gown and purple cloak with glistening eyes. Bozo stuck to the like a shadow all the while: the poor beast was bewildered and highly upset by the strange confinement of rooms and walls, but just to be by my side and hear my voice comforted him, and he behaved himself splendidly. It was amusing to see how the soldiers regarded him with fearful caution, and me with immense awe and respect as his master.

Then we set out for the palace, which rose in the center of the city, facing upon a broad, octagonal stone-paved plaza which was reached by a superb boulevard known as the Processional Way. We rode with banners snapping, daylight sparkling from gems and helms, a man in a gilt cuirass brandishing a slender trumpet clearing the way before us. I assumed him to be the Callistan equivalent of a herald.

The city was built largely of stone and brick, and most of the buildings were of one or two storeys, three at most, which were covered either with plaster or whitewash, it was hard to tell which. They were generally painted a pale shade of gold, with roofs of red tile. Most of the buildings we passed on our way

to the heart of the metropolis were constructed in something of the Mediterranean style, which is to say, the structures faced inward on tiled courts and private gardens, with a railing around the gallery of the second storey. But everything was gay and barbaric, with gorgeous carpets hung from balconies and banners unfolding from the tops of spires, and veiled palanquins borne through the streets by slaves in livery.

Stone bridges arched above the streets between the third storeys. Circular windows, closed with greenpainted shutters or barred with iron grilles, broke the smooth monotony of walls. And somehow the whole scene reminded me inescapably of the walled stone city in Roy Krenkel's cover-painting for King Kull, the original of which hangs framed in my home.

I rode through the streets of ancient Shondakor in gold and purple, under tawny afternoon skies, dreamily, smiling to myself, thinking that if only Roy were here beside me, his pencil would be flying over his sketch pad at this moment.

The palace was a rambling, many-tiered, immense structure of such complexity that I could not at first look take it all in, and am left with only the haziest impression of its external appearance. I got the impression that it had been added to over years and generations and centuries in a haphazard fashion, new wings tacked on as needed, and so forth. This may not be too far wide of the mark, actually.

We passed through guard-post after guard-post; left our steeds in an outer courtyard, and marched through what seemed miles of corridor and stairways before reaching the throne room. Bozo waddled gamely at my side, sneaking wary looks at flapping tapestries and bead curtains and frowning stone faces cut into the entablature over archways. More than ever he reminded me of my dog McGurk, who entertains much the same suspicions of anything above his head, like chandeliers, or marble busts atop bookcases.

The throne room itself was built on Babylonian proportions and looked like something out of a Cecil B. De Mille movie. We ascended a very broad stone staircase of at least a hundred steps, each level lined by motionless guards in glittering armor ranked to either side. At the top spread a broad tier, carpeted in crimson, which bore two huge stone chairs whose backs were sculpted with curious heraldic emblems. Only one of these thrones was occupied, the other stood empty.

The woman in the first throne-I knew her at once-was Darloona, warrior princess of the Ku Thad. She could be no other, with that magnificent, rippling mane of glorious red gold hair, that flawless creamy cameo of a face, full-upped, passionate, with strong cheekbones, and superb eyes of liquid emerald under arched, winging brows. I must confess I drew in my breath at the very sight of her; she was an incredible beauty-spirited, majestic, proud and fiery as a thoroughbred. With her flaming red hair and vivacious eyes, she reminded me a little of Maureen O'Hara . . . but a Maureen O'Hara raised to the nth degree.

She was, quite simply, one of the most gorgeously beautiful women I have ever seen. Every inch a woman; and every inch a queen!

About her throne a group of courtiers and officials stood in a cluster. Foremost among these was a tall, slender old man with wise, smiling eyes. His gaunt form was wrapped in a narrow robe of lavender silk. I guessed him at a glance to be a councillor to the throne, and I was soon proven correct, for he was none other than Zastro, the wise man of the Ku Thad.

Others stood near him. One, from his massive shoulders, bowed legs and truculent visage I took to be the exgladiator, Ergon, from descriptions given in Jandar's manuscripts. Beside him stood a towering

warrior with arms folded upon his mighty chest, his grim eyes studying me from a strong-boned, impassive face. This impressive figure turned out to be Zantor of Zanadar, the captain of the sky-ship Xaxar, who had been lucky enough to bring back his own ship, at least, from the ill-fated first expedition to shadowy Kuur. The identity of the others I did not know.

The military courier who had ridden ahead to apprise the queen of my coming was, all the while I looked about, introducing me and explaining my presence here, and that of my odd companions, the boy and the monster othode. When he was finished, the Princess turned her great eyes upon me with a warm smile of greeting. Royalty is something new in my experience, although I was very slightly acquainted with the Crown Prince of Japan, then attending the same university as I, and I have met a baron in my time, and a knight or two. The protocol of the Shondakorian court was a subject upon which I was completely uninformed, but I assumed correctly- enough that such ignorance was only to be expected of a visitor from a distant world and any errors in regal etiquette would be forgiven me. So, deciding that a simple, dignified bow should do the trick, I rapidly ran through my memory similar scenes from all the Errol Flynn movies I could recall, and attempted the polite obeisance and, from the murmur which arose from the clustered courtiers, in which I thought I heard the note of approval, I gathered I had pulled it off competently.

The Princess had been staring at me with wonder in her eyes-at the color of my skin, my eyes, my hair. Now she did me, as I later learned, a very great honor by rising to her feet and stepping forward, extending her hand, which I kissed. Then she surprised me by addressing me in English!

“Please be welcome, sir, to our realm -in my husband’s name.”

I was taken aback at being addressed in my native tongue. Her grammar was quite correct, if her pronunciation was a trifle unorthodox. Fumbling for an appropriate response, I murmured an awkward reply which I have since forgotten.

She nodded regally, resuming her throne. The old man in the lavender robe interrogated the courier and then addressed a rapid stream of questions to Captain Barin, who all this while had knelt a step or two lower down than I, with little Taran, all eyes, beside him. Bozo sat by my feet, pressing his furry shoulder against my knee, peering around with solemn, wary gaze. The Princess, I noticed, looked pale, weary, a trifle distraught, although composed and regal on the surface. One slim hand fidgeted with the bejeweled tassel of her girdle-I have neglected to mention that she wore breast-plates of intricately-worked silvery metal, a jewel-studded girdle about her slim waist, and gauzy overskirts which did not conceal the slim grace of her long legs. That and silver-gilt sandals and a flashing tiara of many jewels unfamiliar to me completed her costume. She looked like the heroine of a Leigh Brackett novel, I must confess; but the air of serene and majestic poise she wore like a cloak lent her the dignity of an empress.

As the exchange of question and answer seemed interminable, I noticed she paled and bit her lip. There were small lines of strain or fatigue about her magnificent eyes. From time to time she seemed to forget herself, and when this occurred, her head would droop wearily and she would heave a deep sigh. At such times her sad gaze would stray to the empty throne beside her.

I knew the cause of her sorrow. It was that the throne was empty. For the second throne was-must have been-the seat of Jandar of Callisto, her husband and Prince, missing now for months, lost on the far side of the planet.

When the interrogations turned to me, my slight acquaintance with the universal language of Thanator was soon discovered too inadequate to the task; neither did my hosts have enough English to conduct the session appropriately. It became obvious that we should have to adjourn to other, less formal quarters, to

converse slowly and haltingly in both tongues until we could piece together the answers to all the questions that needed answering.

So Barin and the boy and I, with Bozo pacing nervously and watchfully at my side, were led from the Hall of Thrones (as I later learned it to be called) by Zastro. With us went the ugly, bowlegged little man with the broad, heavily muscled shoulders, who was introduced to me as Ergon, and two or three of the other notables I did not at once recognize.

At the exit, I lingered for a last look on the splendid scene.

Darloona sat in her great chair amidst her attendants and courtiers. She sat straight and regal, her face composed, if pale, her glorious eyes serene but troubled.

Her gaze was fixed upon the empty throne by her side, and her thoughts (I knew) were upon her beloved Jandar whose fate was still unknown.

Chapter 10

THE THIEF OF THARKOL

Zastro led us into a spacious suite of apartments that was probably his own private quarters, or so I guessed from the Spartan simplicity of the decor, and the crowded but neatly ordered profusion of books, tablets and scrolls which stood about to either hand. A servant drew the curtains shut while another fetched a crystal decanter of a pale golden wine unfamiliar to my taste but delicious enough, and a tray of goblets.

We settled ourselves comfortably in chairs of rather medieval design, which were arranged by the servants into a halfcircle about a fireplace of carven blue stone upon whose hearth a cheery blaze flickered and crackled.

I sipped the pale wine cautiously, and found it superb. A light, delicious beverage which reminded me of sparkling Burgundy, but with a honeyed aftertaste like mead. After the stiff formality of the throne room, we relaxed comfortably and I was introduced to the notables I had not yet met.

Bluff, homely Ergon had already been known to me, but I was slightly puzzled as to the identity of the tall, dark-haired girl with warm golden skin, sad dark eyes, and a vivid, full-upped mouth. This turned out to be Ylana of the Jungle Country, the daughter of Jugrid the chieftain, of whom I had read much in Jandar's latest manuscript. I would probably have guessed who she was in time, but it would have taken a bit of thought before I might have identified her, for she looked very different from the descriptions I had read. That is, Jandar described her as a wild jungle maid with an abbreviated garment of catskin, long bare legs, and a rude, primitive necklace of ivory fangs about her throat.

From this, I guess I must have mentally pictured a sort of younger version of "Sheena, Queen of the Jungle." But the shy, demure young lady in the voluminous green kaf tanlike robes, her long dark hair neatly brushed, in no wise resembled the wild, scornful young hoyden of Jandar's text! She greeted me

quietly with downcast eyes.

At this time I was also introduced to Dr. Abziz, the famous geographer from the great Academy of Soraba, and to Zantor, formerly one of the Sky Pirates of Zanadar, now a loyal and trusted friend of Jandar and Darloona, and a captain in the new Sky Navy.

I could have guessed either of their identities at a glance, for Dr. Abziz was exactly as Jandar has described him-fat, fussy, self-important and peevisish, with a round, plump face, scarlet as tomato puree and bald as an egg, save, of course, for his waxed and ridiculous little billy-goat's beard, a heritage of his mixed Soraban and Ganatolian ancestry. He greeted me with cool reserve, which was only to be expected from a savant so self-important.

Zantor was a mighty man of glum, solemn mien and few words. His handshake-which he must have learned from Jandar, for it is not a Thanatorian custom at all-was gentle but firm, and I have no doubt he could have crushed my hand if he had wished to. His eyes were friendly, for all his solemnity, and his tone of voice warm and welcoming.

And thus we observed the social amenities, while passing the wine around and getting to know each other a little. The slight champagnelike effervescence of the honey wine tickled Taran's nose and before long one of Zastro's servants led the boy off to watch the changing of the palace guard, as the conversation would doubtless prove, a bore to him.

Bozo was treated with enormous respect; in fact, no one dared come near him, much less touch the great brute, who insisted on crouching by my chair, pressed up against me for whatever comfort my presence afforded him among all these strangers. But he behaved himself like a gentleman, I am glad to say:

Barin sat stiffly, seeming rather awkward and self-conscious. I suppose the Legionnaire was unused to mingling with the famous and the celebrated of the court. His forehead glistened with perspiration and he sipped only a little of his wine, replying in monosyllables to the questions which were addressed to him. I could tell that he wished for nothing more than to be permitted to return to the rough, comfortable life of his camp, and would be glad to get out of here. Well, Zastro did not keep him long, as the gentlemanly old philosopher could read his nervousness as well as I could and philosopher the poor fellow was extremely uncomfortable.

"Now, Lord Lankar," Zastro began, once we had all relaxed, "perhaps you will be good enough to tell us how you came here to Thanator and what your arrival on our world portends--"

"Aye! And do inquire about that great beastie, and how in the name of the Red Moon the noble lord comes by such a fearsome creature, as poor Glypto had always heard were wild and savage!"

The man who had chirped out this remark had slunk furtively into the room at our heels, much to Zastro's discomfiture, although the old philosopher was far too polite to evince any disapproval. He was a stooped, spindlyshanked little fellow, spry and nimble, wrapped in a rusty old black cloak, tattered and disreputable, which lent him a villainous appearance. This unwholesome aspect was augmented when you looked into his astonishingly homely, face, with its hollow, famished cheeks, bestubbled and ill-shaven, his bright, inquisitive eye and his great ungainly beak of a nose. The sort of a face that made you feel nervously to make sure you still had your wallet.

In answer to Zastro's question I said haltingly that my presence on this world was entirely due to accident-the same identical sort of accident which had brought Jandar here himself.

“I understand,” Zastro nodded. “But, now, you speak of Jandar. How is it that you are acquainted with our Prince? True, you hail from the same far world, but always I have been given-to understand that on his native planet the Prince was a personage of little or no importance. I am puzzled, therefore, that you know him at all. Are you a relative, or, perchance, a friend?”

“Well, I certainly consider myself his friend, although to be truthful we have never actually met,” I replied. “You see, back on Earth I am a writer of books-“

“Aha!” Glypto yelped, his sharp black eye glinting with satisfaction. “Your words do prove me right, sir! Aye, poor old Glypto guessed as much, from one glance at his lordship’s face! That broad, noble brow, now-those thoughtful, sensitive eyes! ‘A poet!’ quoth I, will the gentlemen be calling me a liar? ‘An artist!’”

“If you please, Master Glypto,” admonished Zastro with a patient groan. “If you must interrupt every other word out of our mouths, we shall all of us spend the night here without learning anything. Now if you insist on being present, you may listen and observe all, but kindly keep your comments to yourself. Is that understood?”

Glypto capered in an obsequious bow, tugging at his forelock-or where a forelock would be, if he had had one, which he didn’t, being mostly bald in front, and whined in his hoarse, beggar’s voice: “Pray pardon old Glypto, sir, for intruding upon the councils of the high and the mighty! ‘Tis only that I be nigh consumed with curiosity, as you will understand, I’m sure!” And with that, the odd little scarecrow of a man, whose clowning caperings concealed a first-rate intelligence, and who was a shrewd and astute diplomat in the service of Soraba (for all that he delighted in playing the rascally guttersnipe), flopped into a chair and lapsed into cowed but attentive silence.

“Neither a poet, an artist, nor much of an intellectual, Master Glypto,” I laughed. “Merely a teller of tales, ‘a spinner of sagas, if you will. But the manuscript journals of his adventures here which your Prince has been sending back to Earth -by means of the Gate Between The Worlds-these have come into my hands and I have assumed the task of editing them for ...for...’

(There is no such word, apparently, in Thanatorian for “publication,” as the Thanatorians have yet to invent the printing, much less the wholesale marketing, of books.)

“I believe I understand . . . then you will have read of the loss of our Prince, and of the mysterious foundering or destruction of the First Armada-if the journals describing our first, ill-fated expedition against the Mind Wizards* have survived the transition?” asked Zastro. I nodded eagerly.

“The manuscript arrived safely at the Earth-terminus of the Gate, and I have read it with considerable interest and suspense. And I am awfully anxious to learn what has been happening here since the Xaxar returned to Shondakor.”

“Alas, my dear sir,” Dr. Abziz puffed. “Very little has transpired-the shipyards of Tharkol have labored mightily to complete the new vessels from which the Second Armada will, it is to be hoped, ere long be assembled. But the story has been one of frequent breakdown, continuous frustration, and thorough wastage of time-the one, indispensable commodity! First the supply caravan dispatched to the Black Mountains to procure a sufficiency of the .lifting-gas fell afoul of an ambush by Yathoon nomads and was wiped out; the needed stores of levitant vapor were eventually procured by a second caravan, under heavy guard by a full regiment. But then the caulking compound proved inadequate to the task of cementing the seams of the new ships, permitting the vapors to dissipate uselessly into the empty

air-which required the dispatching of yet a third caravan-and so it has been going, day after day, week after week! Delays! Delays, and more delays! Lords of Gordrinator, the poor Prince and the others, Zamara of Tharkol, Prince Valkar, and that ruffian, Lukor, may well be stark dead by this time, and still the idle fools stumble and fumble and jumble . . .”

“Dr. Abziz, if you please!” sighed Zastro patiently. “If we all talk at once, we shall never learn the answers to the many questions . . .”

“Oh, very well, get on with it, then,” Abziz grumbled, pouring himself another goblet of wine.

I could not resist a sly dig at this point.

“From the fact that the distinguished and learned Dr. Abziz was still present in Shondakor, I had already guessed that the new sky-ships had not yet sailed, for a scholar of such dedication and repute could not have been restrained from joining the second expedition, if only for the advancement of scientific knowledge,” I said.

Abziz’s frosty manner thawed before this application of ego-salve. He cast a beaming eye upon me with unaccustomed warmth, while wriggling in his chair as if barely able to contain his delight.

“Oh, come now! My dear sir-really! Such praise, for one of my poor accomplishments-too much!” he virtually giggled.

“Aye, too much, indeed, your lordship,” Glypto cackled from his corner. “Too much, that is, for one as couldn’t even find the haunt of the dastardly Mind Wizards with a man stuck to the end of his nose!”

The pudgy Soraban fixed the grinning thief of Tharkol with a piercing glare of indignation.

“If this-ah, this-person-is going to be permitted to give utterance to such slanderous and slighting remarks against the scholarly attainments of a distinguished guest in your excellent city, sage Zastro, well-words fail me! They fail me, sir!” he huffed.

Zastro smothered a groan and turned a mildly accusing glance on the impudent little man from Tharkol.

“Now, Master Glypto, I have asked you and I have warned you, and if I have to disturb the Princess to come and admonish you to keep your tongue, well. . .”

“Oh, aye, aye!” Glypto whined in a servile fashion (while tipping me a roguish wink in the process). “I beg your honors’ pardon, I am sure!”

“Oh, get on with it, can’t I you?” grumbled Ergon. “If, yonder sniveling rascal speaks up again I’ll squelch him with this,” he said, -holding up one immense red fist. Glypto yelped and shrank back in his place: he had felt the weight of Ergon’s hand before, on a previous adventure, and held the burly, homely exgladiator in a degree of respect which bordered upon awe.

“You were saying,- Lord Lankar?” Zastro inquired by way of prompting me.

“Oh, just that since so many of you were still here at court, I had already guessed. that the new armada had not sailed-or whatever the word should be, with flying ships. In a way, I’m glad to learn this. Because when the armada does depart for the other side of the world, on an attempt to find the country of the Mind Wizards and to set Jandar free, if he is indeed being held captive in Kuur . . . well, I’d like a

place aboard it!”

Approval flashed in huge Zantor’s somber eyes.

“Well said, man!” he boomed. “I like your spirit, and there’s a berth for you aboard the Xaxar, by the Moons-or any other ship I shall command!”

Ergon grinned cheerily, and you’d be surprised to see how his glum, homely, bullet-headed face lit up when he smiled. He said nothing, but the gleam in his eyes said more than words could say. Even the sad-faced jungle maid brightened at my inadvertent volunteering. I suddenly realized why the jungle girl was so subdued and downcast, so unlike the bright, sharptongued, vivacious girl Jandar had described in his manuscript. It was because the young officer, Tomar, was among those members lost from the First Armada. Something had come into being between the vivid jungle girl and the awkward, shy young fellow something which Jandar had noticed with amusement, putting it down to a spasm of puppy love.

But, of the entire company, it was Glypto who evinced the greatest enthusiasm towards my words. The cunning little master spy from Soraba, who had lived the part of a scrawny thief from the gutters of Tharkol so long that he seemed to feel more comfortable in the part of that imaginary character than in being himself, sprang to his feet with a croak of glee.

He made a lunge towards me as if to clap me on the shoulder with approval-which brought Bozo’s head up with a goggling glare and a warning growl that made him blench and snatch his fingers back as if from the mouth of a furnace.

“Er . . . ah . . . your beast, me lord! . . . mind the great brute . . . there’s a sweet creature, the lovely fellow! . . . he wouldn’t be wantin’ to snatch a -gulp out of scrawny old Glypto, now, would he!”

I sternly bade Bozo to be silent and lie down again. And to my surprise the great othode obeyed me.

“Ah! That’s better, now,” the little rogue crooned. “And it’s like wine. to me gullet to learn that your lordship will be flying with us to the other side o’ the world!”

“With us?” repeated Dr. Abziz, huffily. “Do you mean to tell me, sir,” he demanded of Zantor fiercely, “that this-this person-will be permitted to join the expedition?”

The Zanadarian sky-captain shrugged good-humoredly. “We shall need every man with sky-ship experience we can find,” he said. “And Master Glypto is not only the official representative of our good friend and ally, the Seraan of Soraba, but a former member of Queen Zamara’s crew aboard the Conqueress, I be lieve. We can hardly afford to deny him a place amongst us, sir.”

“Aye, thanks to yourself, Captain!” the little thief chortled gaily. “And soon enough, if the Lords of Gordrimator are willing, we shall all be setting forth in the great ships, bound for the world’s far edge itself, and the unknown lands beyond . . .”

And thus it was that I talked myself into volunteering for yet another adventure.

GLYPTO OF THARKOL

Chapter 11

THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

By orders of Princess Darloona, a suite in the rear wing of the palace was assigned to my uses, and two servants were designated to care for my needs. These accommodations seemed to me princely. The furniture was of elaborately carved woods, the walls hung with silken tapestries, the carafes of wine and water exquisitely cut crystal. I ate from bowls and platters of beaten gold, on a long, low table bright with fresh-cut flowers drawn up before a fireplace of noble, even baronial proportions, and was attended by two servants in handsome livery. I felt like a character in one of the Conan stories Sprague and I have been writing; and, after a week of rough and exhausting journeys through the jungles, I enjoyed these civilized luxuries immensely.

The suite had been set aside for my uses because it opened upon a small, enclosed garden or courtyard where it was easy to walk and exercise Bozo without terrorizing half the palace staff. The great faithful othode refused to leave my side (not that I wanted him to go, having by this time become very attached to him). He slept the first night or two by the side of my bed, a huge affair with carved wood pillars supporting a sumptuous canopy; but thereafter, uncomfortable in small, confined places, he sought the relative openness and freedom of the walled garden, where he slept under the bushes, secure in the knowledge that I was only a step or two away.

Young Taran had quarters of his own in the servants wing, among the pages and serving-boys of his own age. But regularly, about breakfast time, the boy would seek me out and cling to my side the remainder of the day. I believe he felt shy and lonely in such a crowded, busy, splendid place, and felt happier by my side, since Bozo and I were the only people he knew in all this grand complex of buildings.

I spent most of my daylight hours with old Zastro, for the savant of the Ku Thad had been assigned the task of increasing my familiarity with the Thanatorian language. During these sessions, Glypto tactfully drew young Taran aside, so that Zastro and I could concentrate on linguistic problems unencumbered by a fidgety youngster. The little thief had developed a strong affection for the bright-eyed, inquisitive lad, and during the hours we spent in language instruction, the scrawny guttersnipe occupied his time in teaching Taran some of the dirtier tricks of knife-fighting. Officially, Taran was considered as a sort of squire or body-servant in my entourage.

Over the next few days, with remarkable ease and speed, I acquired considerable familiarity with the Thanatorian language. I had come to Callisto with a rough, working vocabulary of some forty or so words; Taran had given me a crude tutoring in sentence structure and verbs, and it was left to Zastro to polish my knowledge of the tongue, correct my accent, and extend my vocabulary. This was easier than it might have been, for his own knowledge of English was quite admirable, although he was better at writing the language than at speaking it. In this department, the many hours he had spent learning my tongue from Jandar proved valuable. Thus, in very little time, I was able to make myself understood to the Shondakorians, and to understand much of what was said to me.

I was a guest at the royal table for dinner every night, and met and soon came to know most of the

officials and notables of the kingdom. Princess Darloona was unfailingly kind and gracious to me, and went so far as to invite me to the royal apartments where I had the rare privilege of meeting the infant prince and heir of the kingdom, Kaldar, a handsome, intelligent, happy child with the red gold hair of his mother and the bright blue eyes of his sire. I call this privilege a rare one, because it is the Thanatorian custom to keep the children of royalty in an almost monastic seclusion until they have achieved the age of a boy like Taran.

I spent most of my evenings drinking wine and conversing with a small circle of gentlemen of the court, among which were Zastro himself and Glypto, together with the acerbic, touchy, ill-tempered little Soraban geographer, Dr. Abziz. As my familiarity with the language broadened and deepened, our conversations became far-ranging. Abziz and Zastro were fascinated to learn everything I could tell them about my native world, and I spent many an hour describing our literature and religion and customs, our methods of government, politics and modes of conducting warfare.

Glypto, on the other hand, was primarily interested in playing pranks, and his curiosity on these scientific subjects was virtually nil. He found Zastro a patient, pedantic bore, and delighted in teasing poor Dr. Abziz to the point of apoplectic fury. I can see him now, the old rascal, stretching out his long, thin shanks before a roaring hearth, downing quantities of a fiery native brandy called quarra, chortling and cackling and very pleased with himself, having by some absurd quip or practical joke punctured Dr. Abziz's self-esteem, reducing the fussy little geographer to spluttering, inarticulate fury.

I don't know if I can explain exactly why I found the little thief from Tharkol such delightful company. But, then again, it was almost impossible not to like him, he was so merry and comical. He even looked comical, with his hollow cheeks and enormous proboscis, strutting and swaggering like a gamecock. He was a perfect mimic, and a born clown, and he belonged in that gallant and glorious company that ranged from Shakespeare's Ancient Pistol, in Henry V, to Falstaff himself. Vain, preening, cowardly, obsequious, irrepressible he was the jolliest, most entertaining comrade I have ever known.

Taran adored him from the first; even Bozo came to tolerate the capering little clown, who treated him with gingerly respect and never came near the beast except when Taran or I were nearby. By his side, I explored the stews and wineshops and gambling halls of Shondakor, where he was known to all, and loved by all, I think. He seemed to know every cutpurse and fence in every low dive he took me to, and he delighted in showing me off to his disreputable, thievish friends. It was "me friend, his noble lordship" this and "me friend, his noble lordship" that, whenever we dipped into one or another dismal, lowly dive for a quick drink of some cheap brandy. Oh, he was inimitable, was Glypto, and the scrapes he nearly got me into during these nightly escapes into the seamier side of Shondakorian society would fill another chapter the size of this one.

But it was impossible to resist his rollicking good humor and the zest and gusto with which he plunged into each adventure. On more than one occasion, faced with what would otherwise have been another interminable evening of dull, scholarly conversation, I was secretly delighted when the spry little Tharkolian appeared at the door of my chambers in black cloak and silken vizor to entice me into the stews of the city for a brisk ramble through the wineshops and gaming houses. We would stride off into the night-having sent Taran scampering to Zastro's apartments with a note of apology-and off we would go, cloaked and masked, to stroll and swagger through the dark alleys of Shondakor incognito, like two characters out of a Rafael Sabatini romance, off for a night of adventure. To be frank, I'm forced to admit it was the infectious pleasure of Glypto's company that I enjoyed on the nightly ventures, more than what we did and where we went, for I'm afraid I was not too interested in these nightly ventures, for I am not much of a drinking man, and, since I had arrived here penniless, my purse was kept full by the graciousness of Princess Darloona. For this reason I did not care to gamble; then again, gambling has always seemed to me a completely foolish way to waste time and throw away good money.

We did go to the theatre on occasion, for Glypto was a considerate host and sensed my inattention at dice and my rather slender capacity to take aboard voluminous quantities of liquid refreshments. The theatres were regal and splendid, all gilt and plush and bedizened, but the plays were verse tragedies composed in an antique diction too difficult for me to follow, or musical entertainments which I found somewhat less than pleasurable-more like interminable Chinese operas than anything in the repertoire of the Messrs. Gilbert and Sullivan.

But I enjoyed strolling the broad, tree-lined avenues of Shondakor under the glorious light of the many moons, or riding through fairyland gardens on unearthly gryphonlike steeds, past magnificent palaces and mansions ablaze with light. The crowded spectacle of the streets never failed to enthrall me, and I stared at weird and brilliant scenes, feeling like a visitor whisked by some magician to Helium or Tarantia or some of the fabled cities in Clark Ashton Smith or Lord Dunsany.

And then there were court balls and social functions to which I must come, since I was an honored guest of the throne and the lords and notables of the realm were curious to meet me. These affairs were sumptuous and magnificent: they were also unendurable bores. I could not perform the stately, ritualistic dances enjoyed by most of the courtiers, nor was my facility with the language easy enough for me to respond to the graceful compliments bestowed upon me, nor to hold up my end of the witty exchange of sparkling epigrams which passed for idle conversation among the Thanatorian aristocrats. I'm afraid I would have seemed very much the awkward, tongue-tied country bumpkin, had it not been for the romantic mystery of my origin, which caused me to be regarded with awe and a degree of veneration; also, when out of my depth-or bored silly-I maintain a slight enigmatic smile and tend to lift one brow ironically. This has caused me to be thought a mysterious deep-thinking intellectual, so ultrasophisticated as to find ironic amusement in those around me. This trait of mine has enabled me to survive many stuffy social occasions back on Earth with an unimpaired reputation, and it served me here in the same manner.

Another thing which helped me to get through the intricate formal functions of Shondakorian high society without being put down as a fumbling simpleton and a barbarian foreigner was my rank in Shondakor, which was too high for almost anyone to be able to slight me. The social hierarchy of Shondakor is rigidly structured, and my movements would have been severely constricted without a title before my name. That is, while a kytar, or lord, may unbend sufficiently to be friendly with a chan, or knight, or even with a chanthan, or member of the landless but wellborn gentry, his rank precludes any such familiarity with a lowly commoner, except under unusual circumstances.

Now, Taran had instinctively attached the honorific of chan to my name when we first began traveling together. In itself this didn't mean much. It was sort of like a child calling a grown-up "mister"-merely a polite token of respect. Captain Barin of the Jungle Legion and his superiors had, I think automatically, hailed me as a kytar, not knowing my social rank, but taking no chances. This label had stuck to me during my first days at the Shondakorian court, although I made certain that Darloona and her chief advisors were apprised of the fact that back on Earth I am not a member of the aristocracy. Darloona, however, with the gracious thoughtfulness of one to the royalty born, realized I would be placed in the uncomfortable position of a social inferior at her court, and surprised me one day by elevating me to the highest degree of the nobility, that of jan, or Prince of the Throne.

This bestowal was made at a private ceremony in the royal apartments, with only Darloona's closest friends and courtiers in attendance, probably because the Princess wished to spare me the grueling ritual and tiresome ceremony of a full court function.

My new title, incidentally, did not mean I was in line to inherit the throne or anything like that. There are two kinds of princes in the Shondakorian system of

aristocracy: the first is a royal title held by the reigning monarch, his male heirs, and certain male members of his immediate family. The second variety of princship is held by the males of one or two very ancient noble houses of quite superior rank. On one or another occasion in the past, their ancestors, then lords, had been created Princes of the Throne by royal decree, in recognition of some valiant feat of loyal service to the throne. In theory, as Sir Jastar the court herald explained it to me, the monarch of Shondakor may thus ennoble with a princely title any individual, whatever his or her rank, on whim-rather in the same way the British royalty might reward a great service to the crown with a dukedom, as Marlborough and Wellington were rewarded.

So it was that, as Prince Lankar of Shondakor, my rank in society was superior to that of almost anyone I met, which was Darloona's tactful way of insulating me against embarrassment. As Lankar-jan, I was entitled to select my own livery (I chose silver and emerald green, in fond memory of the Oz Books), and a blazon was assigned to me by the herald. The human inhabitants of Thanator do not employ beasts, either actual or fabulous, in their heraldry, but symbolic designs. My new "coat of arms" then consisted of a green shield charged with a complicated, rather Mayan-looking sigil or hieroglyph which looked like this  This symbol was promptly affixed to the breast of the leathern tunics, robes and gowns in my wardrobe, worn above the heart, and, in the form of enamel and silver badges, was attached to ornaments on my baldric and warrior's harness and to the hilt of my dagger and sword, both of which had been gifts to me from the Princess in commemoration of my ennoblement.*

These were happy days, comfortable, lazy, and luxurious. But they were only the calm before the storm.

While my newfound friends were wining and dining and entertaining and honoring me, the clouds of war were, as you might say, thickening on the horizon. For, while I explored the byways of golden Shondakor in the company of Glypto and the others, the shipyards of Tharkol were laboring night and day completing work on the vessels of the Second Armada, which would soon be ready to depart.

Only the Xaxar had come back unscathed from the historic voyage into the unknown far side of the planet. And, since it had limped home with the news of the mysterious disaster that had overwhelmed the rest of the armada, work had been pressed on the two new ships which had long been under construction by Zamara's shipwrights. These galleons of the sky were the Avenger and the Zarkoon, and they would by now have long since been ready for launching had it not been for the unhappy sequence of accidents Lukor had described to me.

All the while I was at the court of Shondakor, the Xaxar floated above the city, moored to a spar on one of the upper tiers of the palace. It was a breathtaking sight, floating against the skies of glowing gold, looking for all the world like a mighty galleon from the Spanish Main. Every day the sky-ship went on a training flight of some hours, in order to break in the new members of the crew to the performance of their duties. I had gone aloft several times, and it was a marvelous experience and one I shall never forget. Standing at the deck rail, the wind billowing out my cloak behind me as we navigated the golden skies, I felt like a warrior of Barsoom aloft in a great flier, or like someone in a Lemurian airboat from my own Thongor stories.

There was never the slightest question but that the armada would sail someday soon over the edge of the world into that unknown world of mystery which lay on the far side of Thanator. Not until Jandar's body was actually found-if such a dire and grim event must indeed come to pass-then, and only then, would any of his staunch and loyal friends give over the search and become convinced that he was actually dead.

For it was-only as he himself had predicted. -

The words came back into my memory unbidden . . . the words he had set down with his own hand in the final pages of the bulky manuscript I had read with such absorption and fascination on the plane trip to Cambodia.

They were virtually the last words he had set down before vanishing into the unknown. And there sounded within them the grim music of a funeral knell

“Never give up hope until you have proof of my death.”

Chapter 12

SAILORS OF THE SKY

As before, the crew of the Second Armada would be made up chiefly of the warrior nobles of Shondakor and Tharkol, and the provisions for the expedition would be paid for by the Sorabans, who were not in particular a warlike or adventuresome people.

Perhaps they had been slain by their captors, the gallant survivors of the First Armada. But perhaps they still lived. It was that hope which kept us going. Soon we would embark upon a voyage of vengeance, seeking the hidden citadel of the Mind Wizards on the other side of Thanator. There we hoped to rescue Jandar and the others, if they yet lived; if not, we determined to destroy the Mind Wizards for all time, if indeed the mysterious race of mental supermen could be defeated by ordinary men.

Before very long, the hoped-for day was come. Winged motes against the golden sky, the Avenger and the Zarkoon soared above the city of the Ku Thad. Oh, they were a brave spectacle, the great galleons of the clouds, as they circled above the towers on throbbing wings, richly painted banners flying. They moored to an upper tier of the palace beside the Xaxar and their officers descended for the final council. I was summoned from the gardens where I strolled with Bozo; when I reached the council chamber it was filled with officers and officials, talking, gesticulating, unrolling maps, consulting bound volumes of navigational lore or wind tables. Pages scampered about, bearing notes and documents sealed by important-looking ribbons. I felt very much out of place at this council of naval commanders and high courtiers.

Glypto popped up behind me and steered me to a secluded alcove with a window seat. Under one scrawny arm he clutched a cobwebbed bottle of vintage quarra. This he opened with a practised twist of the wrist and sloshed two portions into goblets of cut crystal, winking and beaming, his clever black eye sparkling with excitement and mischief, his long nose fairly quivering with glee.

Just then little Taran came squirming through the crowd. Spotting me, the boy worked his way across the room to where we sat. His cheeks were flushed and his green eyes glistened.

“Oh, Lankar-jan, they sent me to find you-and I looked everywhere but her(! Do you know what has happened? The airships from Tharkol have come at last-“

Glypto drank off his brandy with lip-smacking gusto, then clapped me on the shoulder and tousled the boy's hair affectionately.

"Aye, friend Prince! We're off on a mission of daring-do arid adventure! And you, small one, are you going with us on this voyage?"

The boy's bright eyes shone; he gulped and nodded eagerly.

"Then with dawn tomorrow we sail for the world's edge, and beyond," the little thief crowed. "We'll ride the great winds into an unknown world, aye, and fight like heroes, it well may be, to free Jandar o' Callisto from captivity!"

My heart swelled within me at his words; my breath quickened. I was as thrilled of the prospect as was the lad at my side!

Cabin space was at a premium aboard the Xaxar, so I shared a tiny room with three others, and later, as you will read, with four. One of these was young Taran who was my squire, as you might say. The other sharers of our cabin turned out to be the dignified and pompous Dr. Abziz, the geographer whose knowledge of the other side of the world would serve greatly to facilitate our discovery of the country of the Mind Wizards.

And then there was Glypto! At the news that the villainous little guttersnipe would have the bunk beneath his own, Dr. Abziz groaned and rolled his eyes heavenwards as if entreating mercy of the gods. He was convinced that Glypto had applied to share our quarters only to torment him, for Abziz detested the thievish little Tharkolian, who delighted in making fun of him. I really think that Glypto wanted to share the voyage with Taran and me, for whom he had conceived a genuine affection, at least as much as he wanted to have Abziz at the mercy of his stinging jibes.

For Glypto took a merry, mischievous glee in puncturing the pretenses of the pompous, self-important little Soraban. There was something about Abziz that made you want to ruffle his temper and prick him in the overinflated ego. He was so vain and fussy, and held himself in such high esteem that the urge to deflate his pomposity was nigh irresistible.

Jandar has described how the gallant old swordmaster of Ganatol, Lukor, delighted in tormenting Dr. Abziz by calling him "cousin;" since the Doctor had a strain of Ganatolian blood in his ancestry which was like a thorn in his side (since Sorabans pride themselves on pure lineage, unmixed with the blood of "lesser" races) and a -constant annoyance to him. Well, Glypto found, in the peevish little savant's overweening vanity and sense of dignified selfimportance, a perfect target for his pranks and quips. The Doctor hailed from an ancient line, his house being one of the oldest and noblest in the Seraanship of Soraba. He treated Glypto with frosty disdain and shuddered at being forced to associate with such a disreputable and villainous-looking spawn of the back-alleys. Now, Tharkol and Soraba are neighboring cities, both inhabited by the red men or Perushtarians, so Glypto pounced upon this fact and delighted in tormenting the caste-conscious doctor by hailing him, with rough familiarity, as "neighbor." It was all very amusing, and there was no real spite in it, but Abziz could hardly endure the company of the little prankster.

Our cabin, incidentally, had four bunks, two built one-atop-the-other on either facing wall, with a small low table running the length of the room between the rows of double-decked bunks, and a tiny desk at the further end, beneath a square porthole. This porthole, by the way, afforded us a rather cramped and narrow view of the terrain over which we were to fly. It was small enough, and pretty crowded, but snug and shipshape. I was quite looking forward to the voyage, and, as for little Taran, the boy was in ecstasy.

I had bade my servants rouse me an hour before dawn. My gear was all packed, but I wanted to feed Bozo myself and take the big fellow for one last uninterrupted walk, before bidding him goodbye. Bozo would miss me, I knew, but no more than I would miss his constant companionship.

I tried on my ship-clothes. These consisted of long, close-fitting sky-blue trousers and a pair of so-called "skyboots" which rose to mid-leg and folded over, like boots worn in a pirate movie. They had soles of some elastic, ripplesurfaced substance like crepe rubber, designed to cling to the slippery decks during a rain or sleet. A wide leather belt cinched in my waist, and a loose, full-sleeved white blouse was worn on the upper torso, with a baldric-and-scabbard. There was also a long woolen hooded cloak with armholes and wriststraps, to be worn against the chill winds of the great heights at which we would travel. Regarding my image in a long mirror, I felt rather like an extra in an Errol Flynn epic.

We went -aboard the Xaxar just as dawn lit up the sky with a vast, soundless explosion of golden glory. Princess Darloona and Lord Yarrak, her uncle, were at the boarding tier to greet us and bid us farewell and lucky voyage individually, as we trooped aboard one by one by means of a long, cross-ribbed gangplank. The deck-level of the skyship had been brought even with the palace tier for greater convenience in boarding the vessel.

Below us in the streets and in the great plaza upon which the palace fronted, and from atop the roofs of the nearer buildings, most of the inhabitants of Shondakor were gathered to watch the armada depart and to cheer us on, our way. The plaza was carpeted with faces staring up and waving at us; there must have been nearly two hundred thousand in that mighty throng.

One by one we filed aboard, stored our gear away in our quarters, and assembled at our duty stations. The last aboard was Zantor, the grim, towering giant. He had been one of the feared Sky Pirates of Zanadar, the City in the Clouds. Later, fallen from favor and humbled by Prince Thuton, his monarch, he had fought among the gladiators of the sky city; it was there that he had first met and become a staunch friend of Jandar. Later, as captain of the Xaxar, and a trusted senior officer of the Sky Navy, he had sailed in quest of Kuur, and he was the only one of the captains of the First Armada who had brought back his ship safely to Shondakor.

Now, Princess Darloona had elevated him to the rank of Admiral and he would command the Second Armada, taking up the quest again. He had yielded the captaincy of the Xaxar to his first officer, a gruff and grizzled former Sky Pirate named Thuron who had served under him for many years.

By this time the last of the ship's company was aboard, and we were ready to point our prows for the world's edge. Captain Thuron gave the order upon a nod from his Admiral-sky-sailors stepped forward smartly to raise and stow away the gangplank-but then there came an unexpected interruption, as an unanticipated volunteer joined our crew.

They had just raised the gangplank and were drawing it aboard when there was a stir among the courtiers and notables crowded together on the palace tier to bid us farewell. Suddenly a burly-shouldered shape burst into view, loping on short fat legs across the rooftop. Waddling furiously, squirming through the crowd, which shrank aside to make room, it came to the edge of the tier and stared up at us as we stood in a row along the deck-rail.

Tongue lolling from froggish jaws agape, eyes goggling, searching the throng for one face in particular my own-the faithful creature spotted me, tensed on the brink-and launched itself through space!

It was a tremendous leap, and he barely made it, landing with forepaws scrabbling, hooked over the rail.

Kicking furiously with his second and third pairs of legs, the last, uninvited member of the expedition teetered and floundered and came blundering over the rail, fell to the deck with a thud that shook the craft, and scrambled over to where I stood dumbfounded, and hurled himself against me, licking my face frantically.

It was Bozo the othode, of course, who had determined not to be left behind! The others laughed at my discomfiture, for I was scarlet with embarrassment. But I could not bring myself to chastise the faithful creature. I will admit that tears filled my eyes at this display of simple loyalty and affection. I bent down and scratched his ears while he goggled up at me, love in his great bulging eyes.

“Really, captain!” Dr. Abziz said fussily, “we cannot have this great clumsy beast aboard! It simply will not do—he will be jamming his way into the cabin I share with Prince Lankar—he will be underfoot during the entire voyage—and what are we to feed the brute?”

Thuron turned to Admiral Zantor who stood watching, arms folded on his mighty chest, a slight smile lightening his somber visage.

“What shall we do, Admiral?”

Zantor caught my eye and grinned.

Then he said: “As much as I feel a ship’s deck is no place to keep an animal, I prize loyalty highly, and the manly love between comrades. It is obvious to me that the othode would suffer if parted from his friend for long. If Prince Lankar will tend to the beast’s needs, and keep him from getting underfoot, it shall not be said that Zantor came between our visitor from Earth and his first friend upon Thanator!”

And my shipmates cheered!

And so it was that Bozo became the unofficial mascot of the good ship Xaxar despite Dr. Abziz. We drew up our mooring lines and floated free a moment later, while the throng cheered lustily, and soared into a golden dawn with the Avenger flying to our portside and the Zarkoon to starboard.

It did not take my shipmates very long to adjust to having a wild beast aboard the sky-ship. At first they were timid of him and treated him gingerly, with enormous respect, giving us a very wide berth whenever I exercised him on deck. But before very long it became noticed that young Taran was completely fearless of Bozo and petted him, hugged him and ordered him around without trepidation. Well, full-grown men (and warriors to boot) were not going to be timid of Bozo if a twelve-year-old boy wasn’t! As for Bozo, he was obedient and trustworthy and, while a bit wary of strangers, he never so much as growled; it was obvious that he knew he was here on sufferance, and that the faithful fellow was anxious to be as little trouble as possible. Before very long the men were vying with one another to make friends with the solemn great othode, smuggling choice tidbits from the galley to tempt him with, even competing for the privilege of taking him for his walks on deck. I was enormously relieved that Bozo was behaving himself like a gentleman, and happy to have his companionship.

The great ship cruised through the skies of Thanator, and every hour miles of empty plain flashed by underneath our keel. The magnificent sky-ship was an endless source of wonder to me. It reminded me inescapably of the Albatross, that prodigious airship flown by the sinister and enigmatic Robur the Conqueror in Jules Verne’s famous science-fiction novels, *Master of the World* and *Clipper of the Clouds*.

I loved to stride the deck in my swashbuckling skyboots, a voluminous blue cloak flapping about me, the

brisk wind of our passage tousling my long hair and ruffling my beard, feeling on the whole rather like a character from one of my own books. It was an exhilarating experience in every way and I enjoyed myself hugely. After all, it is not often that a writer of fantastic adventure stories is given the opportunity to share in a fantastic adventure himself.

I already knew a goodly number of my fellow crewmen-Admiral Zantor and Glypto and Abziz and young Taran, of course. Burly, glowering Ergon was aboard as well, and so was the girl Ylana whom I had met when first presented at court. I found her very different now, for gone were the long court robes: she strode about the deck, long hair flying, long legs bare in sandals, looking like a boyish, adolescent Amazon in her abbreviated catskin garment. The jungle maid had even resumed wearing her barbaric bracelet of woven copper wire and her necklace of ivory fangs threaded on a leathern thong. She was Ylana of the Jungle Country once again, and I must say I heartily approved of the transformation.

There were so many faces missing from the crewheroes and companions of Jandar's earlier adventures-who should have been here to share the perils and excitements of this voyage of discovery with us. But so many of Jandar's comrades and friends had vanished with him in the mysterious wilderness that Jay on the other side of Thanator. Young Tomar, who had saved the Jalathadar from destruction at the hands of the traitorous Ulthar, during the second voyage to rescue Darloona from the clutches of the Sky Pirates of Zanadar; and the mighty Yathoon warrior, Koja the arthropod, and his friend, the elegant and daring masterswordsman, Lukor of Ganatol. And Zamara of Tharkol, the mad empress of Callisto herself who had flown against Kuur in her own ship, the Conqueress; to say nothing of Prince Valkar of Shondakor, the valiant son of Lord Yarrak who had once been betrothed to Princess Darloona, but who had graciously yielded his claim to her hand when he learned that she had come to love Jandar.

All these brave and gallant people had been lost when the First Armada so inexplicably vanished, save only for the crew of the Xaxar. We're they long since slain by the cunning Mind Wizards? Or were they, together with the lost Prince of Shondakor himself, still prisoners in shadowy Kuur? We did not know-dared not even hope. But the thoughts of my companions were often with their lost friends

Chapter 13

OVER THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

From Shondakor, the Armada sailed through the skies of Callisto into the northeast over endless leagues of scarlet meadowland. These, I knew, were the northernmost portions of the Great Plains, the Plains of Haratha, which covered most of the southern hemisphere of the Jungle Moon from the borders of the Kumala to the South Pole, and which extended from the shores of the Lesser Sea of Sanmur Laj in the ultimate west to the foothills of the Black Mountains of Rhador in the east.

The walls of Tharkol appeared before us on the horizon, and we descended to cruise above the sister-city of the Shondakorians, to circle it thrice, saluting the colors of imperial Zamara which flew from the spires of her palace. As had been the case at our departure from the Golden City of the Ku Thad, the citizenry of Tharkol turned out in all their numberless thousands to see the splendid spectacle we made as our mighty galleons of the skies soared above the city against the blaze of heaven.

From Tharkol we directed our flight due east towards the Edge of the World. This term, incidentally, may represent a survival from earlier, more superstitious ages when the geographical knowledge of the Thanatorians was but rudimentary. I suppose the inhabitants of this hemisphere of Callisto at one time regarded their world as a flat, edged disc, much as did the Earthmen of antiquity. At any rate, the phrase has survived into the present age and today it is used to refer to the margin of the known world, for, as has elsewhere been explained, the further side of the Jungle Moon has gone completely unexplored until very recently.

East of Tharkol the scarlet plains extend, broken here and there by low foothills which gradually become more thickly forested. It took us a day or two before we reached the borders of the known world.

The mysterious vapor with which the sealed holds and double hulls of the mighty ornithopters are filled renders the great sky-ships virtually weightless, but the motive power of flight is provided by the huge jointed wings which thrust out from either side of the ship's hull, and these in turn are driven by a complex system of huge gears and wheels in the capacious interior. It is the strength of human arms alone that drives those great wheels. During the time when only the cruel and rapacious Sky Pirates of Zanadar possessed the skills and secrets of constructing the fabulous ornithopters, and therefore ruled the skies of Callisto in unchallenged supremacy, it was slaves taken in war or raids who worked the wheels. But Jandar has ended that practice, and the ships of the Armada were manned entirely by eager volunteers, composed for the most part of some of the noblest and most princely sons of the aristocracy, who vied for a place in our crews and for the honor of partaking in our adventure.

In a way, I suppose it was amusingly incongruous to see the noblest scions of some of the most ancient and blueblooded houses of the Three Cities toiling at the wheels where once labored nameless slaves doomed to toil without ceasing until death. But aboard the Armada every member of the expedition took his turn at the wheel-gangs, from the Admiral himself down to the lowliest ship-boy. I, of course, took my turn at the wheels with everyone else, discovering in the process muscles I had not known I possessed-when they began to ache, that is! It was my misfortune to be sharing this adventure on a world whose pharmacists had yet to discover the uses of liniment; but I had strengthened and toughened myself during that long jungle trek and was in better physical condition than I had been in years, and soon my muscles limbered up and a turn at the wheels became only a brief and on the whole fairly pleasant period of exertion.

The wheel-gang to which Captain Thuron had assigned me by roster served its turn twice daily, the second of these duties falling after the evening meal. A couple of days after our departure from Shondakor, after night had fallen across the world, and the great, many-colored moons of Callisto soared one by one to illuminate the nocturnal skies, I was just leaving the wheel-deck bound for my cabin and blissful slumber when Taran came running in search of me.

Bright-eyed with excitement the boy grabbed my elbow, urging me to ascend to the mid-deck. This is the deck of the Xaxar which extends between the forecastle and the poop, and from whose railing you can look down on the landscape flowing by beneath the keel. It was cold and windy at this altitude, and I wrapped my blue cloak about me, shivering a little at the chilly bite of the wind, for I was damp with perspiration from my labor.

"Well, what is it, Taran?" I demanded.

The boy touched my shoulder and pointed to the moonlit terrain over which we were passing at that moment.

“The Edge of the World, Lankar-jan!” he breathed, his green eyes glistening.

My imagination stirred as he uttered this romantic and mysterious phrase. Unspeakingly I stood beside him, clutching the rail, staring down at the strange vista of hills and gullies, grassy plains and dark forests, which raced by underneath us. In no particular detail did the landscape differ from that above which we had been flying all that day; but now, by night, the scenery was transformed into one of weird grandeur by the light of the many moons. And a thrill passed through me at the knowledge that at that precise moment of time we were leaving the known world behind, and had entered the unknown world which lay beyond.

The days which followed saw us pass without molestation above a landscape which became rapidly more arid and desolate. Scarlet plains and dense forests gave way to plateaus of splintered rock and bleak deserts of parched sand. Nowhere did we discern the slightest signs of human habitation.

As the region over which we flew became increasingly more mountainous, and the peaks of the dreaded Zarkoon drew ever closer, sentries were mounted to keep watch against any repetition of the attack upon the Jalathadar which had befallen the First Armada during its flight over this very country. For these mountains were the hunting grounds of the terrible Zarkoon, as the winged, cannibalistic sub-men are called. In former times the Flying Men had been known only in myth, and a token of this could be seen in the fact that one of our sister-ships even now bore the name of the Zarkoon. But the creatures were now known to be dreadfully real and soon, as we flew over the mighty peaks and glimpsed the black crater that was the entrance which led into their cavernous and subterranean realm, all hands stood by under full arms against the ever-present possibility of attack.

Evidently the cannibal savages had learned their lesson from the dreadful toll the warriors of the First Armada had taken of their numbers on that earlier expedition, for the security of our vessels was not threatened this time, and if any Zarkoon yet lingered among the peaks and plateaus of the mountain country, none dared to show their beaked faces.

Before dawn we soared above the immense, jungleclad table-land discovered by the first expedition. The light of the many moons flashed in the waters of the great lake of Cor-Az as we ascended above the ring of mountains which encircled the plateau. No signs of life -or activity could be glimpsed from our height as we traversed the’ jungles from west to east, but Ylana, gazed wistfully down at her former home as we passed above it, and I know the melancholy thoughts that passed through her mind as she wondered as to the fate of her father, Jugrid, chief of her primitive people.

We flew far above the great waterfall where the River of the Groack emptied in a mighty cataract into the chasm which encircled the jungleland. And on we flew, into a desolate region of tremendous mountain ranges. Somewhere in all this trackless region- of terrific masses of shattered and cloven stone lay the mysterious country of the Mind Wizards, or so we assumed. And there, it was hoped, we might still find and set free from the captivity of the mental wizards the lost princes and heroes we had come so far to rescue

During the long months that had stretched between the return of the Xaxar from the other side of the world and the launching of the Second Armada, the little Soraban geographer, Dr. Abziz, had devoted his every waking hour to the consultation of ancient texts, the journals of exploration and adventure, and the speculations of the geographers. Compiling and collating and sifting every smallest scrap of information concerning the second hemisphere of Callisto, the savant had striven with all his powers to find the location of shadowy and hidden Kuur.

The most important clue to the location of the mystery realm lay in the symbols etched upon the back of

the silver medallion which had been taken from the corpse of Ang Chan. This personage, who had been the insidious secret power behind the Tharkolian throne and who had cunningly sought to influence Princess Zamara in her mad ambitions to conquer all of Thanator, was now known to have been one of the Mind Wizards. And it was deduced from this that the queer signs etched on the silver medallion which Ang Chan had worn concealed on his person were none other than the key to the location of that hidden kingdom.

It was Zastro, the wise old sage of the Ku Thad, who had first ventured upon this conclusion. For the signs scratched upon the reverse of the medallion seemed to bear at least a superficial relationship with what had already been discovered about the country wherever the mental supermen ruled. Jandar himself, on an earlier adventure, had learned from another Mind Wizard named Ool that shadowy Kuur was located "beyond Dragon River amid the Peaks of Harangzar, on the other side of Thanator."

Zastro had pointed out that the medallion showed a symbol shaped like a black pyramid-which might mark the location of the secret citadel of the Mind Wizards-on the further side of a line whose serpentine curves suggested the conventional shape of the mythical Thanatorian Quastozon, a fabulous creature very like the dragons of Chinese art. And this wriggling line itself was depicted as squirming and coiling among a series of jagged lines which could easily represent mountains.

The key to the discovery of Kuur lay not only in the configuration of this river, but also, it was now believed, in the peculiar shape of the mountain from which the river emerged. This particular peak was shown on Ang Chan's medallion to have a crest crowned with three jagged spires. It was the prevailing opinion that if we could locate such a mountain peak in conjunction with a river which curved in such a dragonish manner, we would be able to find the secret kingdom or city of the Mind Wizards.

Before very long the armada arrived above a section of the mountains in which it was now the opinion of Dr. Abziz we could expect to find this mountain. Before voyaging on to explore unknown further fastnesses of the hemisphere, the Soraban geographer strongly urged Zantor and his captains to deploy their sky-ships for the careful exploration of this region in particular. Zantor obligingly did so, and the Xaxar, the Zarkoon and the Avenger, dividing this part of the world into three equal divisions, each comprising about sixteen hundred square korads, began their search.

So immense was this tract of land that, had it been necessary to comb so much of the country by foot or even on thaptor-back, it would have taken us many months, if not indeed years. Fortunately, however, the ships of the Sky Navy, cruising at an average height of several thousand feet, could search many hundreds of square miles within the span of a single day, especially with the use of optical instruments akin to binoculars, with which the Soraban savants had equipped the expedition. Higher than this the ships could not safely ascend, or at least could not cruise for any extended length of time, because the atmosphere grew thin and painfully cold at such an altitude.

For three days we searched the terrain from the air. We saw hundreds of mountain peaks, but only a few whose peaks were crowned with a triple-spired peak, and of these, not one rose in the vicinity of a curving river.

The region Zantor had selected to be covered by the Xaxar was the central of the three divisions. While we cruised above this middle region, the Avenger explored the country to the south and the Zarkoon sailed the wintry skies of the north. It had been prearranged that, should either of the three vessels chance to come upon such a mountain in conjunction with such a river, the ship was to mark the location upon her charts and fly to a certain rendezvous point to await the arrival of her sister-ships. All three ships were instructed to converge at this central point by a certain designated hour on the fifth day. And should any ship actually discover Kuur during its search period, Zantor's orders sternly forbid any attack or the

landing of an invasion force on the part of one ship alone.

“When we stand before the Gates of Kuur,” that grim and mighty warrior had vowed, “we shall stand together, to do and die for our friends in one combined legion.”

It was about the hour of noon on the third day of our search when a sharp cry rang out from an officer stationed on the rear observation belvedere at the poop.

This little balustraded balcony thrust from the rear of the ship’s hull beside the great, rigid rudderlike van by which the Xaxar was steered. The ribbed air-surface, which closely resembled a Chinese paper fan, was designed to thrust against the air-currents and thus divert the forward path of the mighty galleon of the clouds.

I was stationed, as it chanced, on the rear deck atop the poop or sterncastle of the ship, searching the landscape to the ship’s rear with an optical instrument. When this excited cry rang out wildly, galvanizing us into action, I jumped, narrowly missed dropping the instrument overboard, and swore at my nervous clumsiness. And the next instant found me clattering down the winding, narrow stair within the sterncastle at the heels of several others, among whom were Ylana, the jungle maid, and an officer named Harkon of Tharkol.

The man who had cried out was one of the Shondakorians whose name, unfortunately, I have since forgotten, although I think it was something like Kolar or Volar. He turned eager eyes upon us as we burst out of the inner gallery to crowd the small balcony at whose rail he stood.

“Look!” he commanded, pointing below with a trembling finger.

And there, a korad or two to the west of our position, a mountain somewhat taller and more prominent than its neighbors thrust above a great valley veiled in gray patches of mist.

A mountain whose crest was cloven into a triple crown!

Even as we stared down, eyes watering in the wind, our hearts in our mouths, breathless and tingling with excitement, the winds tore a rent through the rapidly thickening mists which covered the valley, and through those rents we perceived the glint of daylight flashing from the dark, smooth waters of a nameless river which coiled and curved like the sinuous body of a mythical dragon.

Chapter 14

BOZO DISAPPEARS

By this time it was early in the afternoon. The Xaxar hovered aloft, waiting for her sister-ships to return to the rendezvous point, while Dr. Abziz, from the pilothouse, eagerly scanned the terrain beneath our keel, comparing the view below with the conjectural landscape inked-upon his charts.

“If once this accursed mist would part, perhaps I could ascertain our location by sighting a recognizable

landmark,” the little savant huffed And fumed, tugging at his tuft of a beard in an ecstasy of indecision.

“That is certainly the mountain with three peaks over there,” said the jungle maid impatiently. “Or, if it isn’t the right one, it certainly looks like the one on the medallion!”

“Looks can be deceiving at this altitude, my dear child-if you could just manage, all of you, to leave these geographical decisions in the hands of a scholar uniquely experienced in making them, we would all be a lot happier!”

Ylana sniffed and turned a pouting face on the fussy little savant, but did not deign to reply.

“We could bring the Xaxar down another hundred yards,” Zantor said thoughtfully, “but only at considerable risk to the safety of the vessel. The updrafts are unpredictable in this mountainous country, and the wind currents have never been charted, since the Zanadarians never explored this far.”

“Well, neighbor,” Glypto chirped, rubbing his skinny hands together briskly and grinning as the fat little Soraban winced at this familiarity, “we could get a mite lower in the four-man gigs, could we not? Aye, and mayhap in that manner we could pierce beneath yon blanket of fog and gain a truly clear view of the terrain. What say my noble lordships to that?”

Abziz preened his waxed spike of beard, his features glum and petulant. It went sorely against his grain to agree with anything suggested by his ruffianly tormentor, but the simple fact of the matter was that this was a good suggestion, and he knew it. You could read in his twitching features the internal struggle going on within him. At last he mumbled something by way of grudging assent.

“Aye, old Glypto thought as much!” chortled the wizened little Tharkolian. “Now, then, your lordships, it only remains to decide which of us shall have the honor of descending in the gig. Since ‘twere I as made the suggestion in the first place, I hope ‘twill not be thought impertinent of me to mention that, by rights, the honor belongs to poor Glypto?”

Zantor looked over at the brisk, bright-eyed little figure in black, a reluctant grin lightening his habitually gloomy expression. It was extremely difficult to keep a straight face around Glypto: he bubbled with good humor and exuded an aura of cheerful, impertinent merriment, and could be as enthusiastic and excited as a small boy.

“Very well, Master Glypto, the honor shall be yours. I suppose it is also up to you to designate the three others you wish to accompany you in the gig, as well. In this matter, the decision is up to you, but I must insist that Dr. Abziz be one of the three you select.”

Abziz groaned at this, for he hated to be exposed to Glypto’s company even under the best of circumstances, but he subsided after Zantor gave him a stern look. There was obviously no other choice but that the Soraban geographer must be one of those to descend below the fog-level in the gig.

“Aye, your Admiralship!” Glypto nodded cheerfully. “’Tis always a pleasure to assist me dear neighbor in his geographical researches, that it is! For the rest, then, Glypto will select Prince Lankar and the wee lad Taran.”

Bozo pricked up his ears and uttered a questioning rumble. He sat up, turned mournful eyes upon me, and laid one great paw upon my knee as if in entreaty. I stroked his brow and said something to the effect that he should mind his manners and behave himself while I was gone-which would not be long, perhaps half an hour at most. But Bozo would have none of this and began cavorting clumsily about the

cabin, setting the navigational instruments to shaking in their wall-brackets and nearly upsetting the chart-table.

Zantor cleared his throat. "May I suggest, Master Glypto, that you take the othode along with you, in the place of Taran, if only for the peace of the ship? You know how upset he becomes if parted from the Prince for long . . ."

Dr. Abziz threw up his pudgy hands in horror.

"Oh, no! No! Really, Admiral-that is too much to ask! Is it not bad enough that I must share a cabin with the malodorous wild brute-who detests the very sight of me, I assure you!-but to try to cram myself into the narrow confines of a flimsy gig with the savage creature is asking too much of a weary, overworked scholar, who requires peace and a measure of quiet in order to perform his important scientific duties adequately?"

Mischief twinkled in the eye of the little Tharkolian. He opened his mouth to insist upon his choice, but I forestalled him.

"Listen, Glypto, I don't mind staying here with Bozo; I know he upsets the Doctor and I don't want to cause trouble. Finding the entrance to the hideout of the Mind Wizards is the most important thing right now. And I don't mind being left behind."

"Nonsense, Prince, Glypto will not hear of it! Why, the dear beast will come in handy, I'll warrant, should any creature of the wild make bold enough to mistake the likes of us for tasty morsels . . . aye, the good Doctor here, well, he'll just have to put up with the creature, that's all there is to be said on it. We'll be gone only a wee short time, after all, and it be Glypto his Admiralship here has put in command of this wee venture. If poor old Glypto can't choose his own comrades, why, what be the purpose of it all?"

The savant from Soraba subsided, fuming, but even he could see that Glypto would not be swayed. So the end result was that we bundled our cloaks about us, saw to our weapons, and descended to the deck where several gigs were housed in small covered structures to protect them from the wind.

The deck-crew unlatched one gig from its housing, locked it into one of the hoists, and held it steady while we climbed aboard. Bozo was the last to scramble into the swaying craft, and it took a bit of persuasion before the big fellow reluctantly jumped into the seat next to mine. His weight made the small craft wobble from side to side sickeningly, and Dr. Abziz stifled a hollow groan and cuddled his precious instruments in his lap against damage.

"All secure aboard!" Glypto sang out cheerfully, with a brisk nod to the grinning deck-crew. "Hoist us over the sideaye, lively now, me lads!"

Wooden pulleys squeaked; lines drew taut. The hoist groaned. The little gig, wobbling from side to side, was elevated above the deck jerkily, then swung out over the side of the Xaxar. The wind caught the stiff wings of the little craft, which shuddered like a nervous horse at the starting-gate. Then at Glypto's signal the latch was released and we dropped like a stone for a moment, then caught the wind with a buffet, and slid away to one side on a long, steep curve, as the little Tharkolian, in the front seat beside the shivering Dr. Abziz, worked the ailerons and rudder.

My heart was in my mouth and I held on to Bozo who crouched low in the seat beside me, trembling and growling at the unfamiliar giddy sensation. The little gig looked like an outrigger canoe with wings. It rode on two gas-filled pontoons slung below the hull to either side, like the pontoons on a seaplane. The

craft was as flimsy as a kite, being made entirely of pressed paper. And the winds shrieked about us, tugging at our hair, making our eyes water, so that it seemed we were helpless in the impalpable grip of the gale-like a crude paper toy, whirled madly about in a howling tornado.

But in just a moment or two the little craft settled down as Glypto gained control. Now she rode the winds, rather than tumbling helplessly in -their grip. Buoyant as a cork in a stream; she floated through the fog-belt, which closed about us, smotheringly. Damp mist enveloped us, shutting the world away, wetting our garments, plastering our hair to our heads. We blinked through the clinging grayness, striving to penetrate the thick vapor with narrowed eyes.

A moment later and we dipped below the level of the fog and emerged into open air. The vista below us was much as we had imagined it would be. The valley sloped downwards towards a flat, circular plain, all crumbling clods of parched dead soil, littered with enormous boulders and heaped with broken rock. Nowhere could we discern the slightest sign of life, not even a growing bush or a patch of grass.

Through the center of the plain the river wound sluggishly, its black waters dead and lifeless. In the dull light, which bleached all colors into grayness under the gloomy, lowering clouds, the barren, desolate landscape looked like something from one of Gustave Dore's illustrations for Dante's Inferno

Abziz had his optical glass to his eye, peering about, taking quick glances at the chart in his lap from time to time, comparing the landscape towards which we descended to the detailwork in his chart. He was muttering to himself under his breath, but the wind of our flight whipped his words away so that I could not hear them. Bozo whimpered and trembled beside me, pressing his huge face into my shoulder.

"Well, neighbor, what d'you say?" Glypto inquired, circling the gig about in a descending spiral with practiced ease.

"The curvature of the river matches that etched upon Ang Chan's medallion closely enough," replied the Doctor, "but where is the pyramid-shaped structure which also appears thereon?"

We stared about us, but nowhere were any man-built structures to be seen, not even ruins. The landscape was as empty of human life as something on the far side of the Moon.

Glypto leaned over the side of the cockpit, pointing, the wind whipping his tattered cloak into my face.

"Yonder curved cliff below looks to be in about the place where the pyramid should be," he shouted. "Mayhap we'd be wise to bring the wee craft down, and poke about on foot!"

He swung the gig about, facing the craft into the wind, thus slowing our speed. The craft hovered, lurched, began to lose altitude.

"Prince Lankar, stand ready to belay yon mooringgrapple, if you please," he called back to me. I reached backwards, behind me, where a length of line was secured around a latch. To the end of the line a lightweight collapsible grappling-hook was fastened. I snapped the prongs of the grapple open and gathered the line into my hands, searching below me for something to catch the prongs on, thus anchoring us.

We floated down below the crest of the line of cliffy outcroppings that protruded from the dry sand along a curved beach of the river. Then I spied a stone jutting from the sand and yelled out to Glypto that it looked about right for our purposes. He kicked the foot-pedals, activating the rotors fore and aft. We had not as yet used these, for the winds had supplied motive power sufficient to our needs, the gig being

mostly designed as a sort of glider.

The craft angled down. I tried to belay the line about the jagged outcropping but it fell short. I tried twice again, missing each time. Finally, Glypto took the - line from me and snagged the grappling-hook neatly into the underside of the rock. He grinned apologetically.

“Takes practice, your lordship! Now, lads, assist me, if you will, to draw the wee craft down.”

The gig was so perfectly balanced-the thrust of the levitant gas contained in her twin pontoons poised exquisitely against the weight of the four of us-that she was as weightless as a balloon. We took in the line hand over hand, dragging the wobbling craft down until she hovered only a few feet above the stretch of sandy beach. Then Glypto hopped down nimbly, followed by myself and Bozo, who performed the feat in the clumsiest fashion conceivable. The gig pitched so far over as the great othode cleared the edge of the cockpit that I feared Dr. Abziz would be thrown from his seat. He squawked, clutching his gear with one hand, the rim of the cockpit with the other. Then Glypto, grinning slyly, loudly advising the poor scholar to be wary of breaking his neck, assisted the Doctor to descend. Stiff with affronted dignity, Abziz clambered out, dusting himself off, while eyeing Bozo frostily.

We looked about. The cliff rose behind us twenty or thirty feet above the surface of the beach, smooth and unbroken. There was still no sign of human habitation to be seen, and the cliff-wall itself was unbroken. No cave, not even a fissure, could we observe.

“Why don’t you take the dear beast for a stroll up the beach towards that end of the cliff, your lordship, whilst we explore in t’other direction,” Glypto suggested amiably. “Come along, neighbor-if there be anything to be found, we’ll be the ones to find it!”

“I don’t understand it,” the Doctor muttered, trudging off with Glypto. “The map on the medallion clearly indicates a pyramid-shapen mark at about this location. Whatever could the sign symbolize, if it does not represent a man-made structure?” He strode off after the Tharkolian, shaking his head bemusedly.

“Come on, boy, we’re going this way!” Snapping my fingers, I turned about in the opposite direction, with Bozo gallumphing and frisking at my side, and began to explore the further end of the clifflike wall of rock.

Dry, crystalline sand crunched and squealed under my boot-heels. Except for the sound of our feet in the dead sand, and the melancholy slosh and slither of the cold black water to our left, no slightest sound broke the sepulchral silence of this deserted place. Above us, a dome of gray mist coiled and uncoiled snakily, blotting away the daylight, and only a dim gray gloom penetrated the fog to shed its dour light over the bleak desolation.

Happy to set all six feet on solid land once again, Bozo clumsily frisked about me as if wanting to play. I was too tense and nervous to indulge him; the dead landscape, the brooding gray sky, and the ominous black river slithering between crumbling banks, all combined to cast a grim mood of depression over my spirits.

Then again I felt a curious uneasiness-a sensation of being watched. You know how it is when the skin creeps on the backs of your hands and tingles at the nape of your neck-a feeling of unseen eyes studying you from a place of concealment? Well, that’s exactly how I felt as I trudged up the beach that day. From time to time I looked over my shoulder, almost expecting to see a dim, mysterious figure lurking behind me. But I saw nothing at all suspicious-just the gig bobbling at the end of its line like a huge, ungainly kite, and the two figures of Glypto and Dr. Abziz further down the beach; strolling along; peering

up at the cliffs from time to time.

Suddenly Bozo stopped dead in his tracks.

His ears pricking, he stared directly behind us as at a smooth, flat stretch of rock. I followed the direction of his gaze in some bewilderment, unable to discover anything about the cliff-wall that had caught his attention.

“What’s the matter, boy? What is it?”.

The suedelike nap of his purple fur roughened along between his shoulders as his hackles rose bristling. His goggling eyes were fixed in an unwavering stare upon a smooth section of rock-wall. A heavy rumble of warning rose from deep in his broad chest.

I stared, first at the othode, then at the section of cliff, unable to see anything about a perfectly ordinary stretch of cliff that could have aroused his suspicions. There was simply nothing about the smooth area of dark gray rock that was in any way different from the dozen or so yards of exactly identical cliff we had just

walked past. But something had very definitely alerted Bozo to the presence of danger. The warning rumble deepened now into a guttural growl of menace. His froglike jaws gaped, baring blunt, powerful tusks. His glaring eyes blazed like coals as he stared unwaveringly at that innocent-seeming stretch of rock-wall.

And then-before I could think or move or speak-

Hind legs bunching beneath him-great bands of muscle standing out in his haunches, he crouched-and sprang!

Sprang directly into the solid wall of stone-

And disappeared as if by magic!

Chapter 15

THROUGH THE BARRIERS OF ILLUSION

I am not a superstitious man. In fact, I generally pride myself on possessing a cool, rational mind. I have never believed in any gods or ghosts or demons, and I have always thought myself immune to the mumbo jumbo of religion, mysticism, mythology and occultism. I don’t believe in the supernatural, or in the survival of the individual after death, nor in the existence of the human soul. In fact, I don’t believe in astrology or E.S.P.

But it is one thing to read of miracles and apparitions and faith-healing and phantoms-it is another thing entirely when you observe with your own eyes something your rational atheism cannot explain.

I blinked my eyes and stared at the blank wall of stone feeling a small, cold, uncanny wind blowing directly up my spine.

With my own eyes I had seen the giant purple othode leap up against a solid wall of rock and vanish into nothingness. I was wide-awake and in full possession of my faculties. I was neither drunk nor hypnotized nor sleepwalking, and I have never taken drugs in my life. Yet I had seen the inexplicable-the impossible-happen right before my very eyes. Suddenly I felt dizzy; I tried to pucker my lips in order to whistle for Bozo but they were numb and, anyway, my throat was suddenly too dry to utter a sound.

I looked down. There were the tracks of Bozo and myself in the dry, dead, crystalline sand. There were the scoop marks his rear set of legs had dug in the beach as he had launched himself into space. And nowhere were there any marks to indicate that he had ever completed that jump!

It was uncanny; simply- uncanny! And suddenly I was horribly frightened. Not for myself, exactly, but for Bozo. Where was he now, the great, powerful, loyal beast who loved and trusted me-the burly, doglike, affectionate creature who had followed at my side all this long way from that jungle glade in the Grand Kumala to the bleak, mysterious shores of Dragon River, beyond the Peaks of Harangzar in the land of Kuur?

He had vanished into thin air, as if snatched into another dimension, or transported in a twinkling to some distant spot by magic. It was terrifying-inexplicable!

I swallowed a lump in my throat that was about the general size and shape of my heart, and leaning forward, began gingerly patting the rock wall here and there, as if to reassure myself of the testimony of my eyesight by means of my sense of touch. Just then there came a distant call from down the beach some distance away.

“Eho, friend Lankar! Any sign of-anything?”

It was Glypto. Having reached the furthest extent of the cliffs, he and Dr. Abziz were trudging back to where we had left the gig.

“Come here quick!” I cried. Alarmed at my tone of voice, the scrawny little man drew his knife and sprinted towards where I stood. Behind him, clutching his maps and glasses against his bosom, the scarletfaced Soraban followed at a clumsy pace, puffing and blowing.

Glypto came up to where I stood and glanced about with a quick, keen eye.

“Now, Prince, whatever is wrong-and where has the dear beast gotten to?”

“That’s just it, Glypto. Bozo has disappeared!” I cried.

He regarded rime curiously, arching one brow.

“Eh? How’s that again? What do you mean ‘disappeared’?”

“Just that,” I said vaguely. “Disappeared. Jumped right into the cliff-wall somewhere about here, andand-vanished!”

“Vanished? But how could the dear brute have vanished? There’s naught here-not so much as a

crevice,” he muttered incredulously.

“I know it, but, well, that’s what happened,” I said helplessly. The little rogue stared at me for a long moment with one bright, inquisitive eye, fingering his great beak of a nose with one hand while toying nervously with his knife in the other.

“ . . . vanished, eh?” he muttered.

“Impossible. Quite impossible, sir,” wheezed the Doctor, glaring at me severely as if accusing me of having deliberately contrived the occurrence in order to embarrass him.

I was beginning to lose my temper. “I know that,” I said shortly. “But I saw it happen. Right about, um-here,” I said, turning to slap the side of the cliff with the palm of my hand.

But my hand passed through seemingly solid rock, vanishing to the wrist.

Glypto yelped, jumped a foot, and paled. Abziz rolled up his eyes and moaned faintly. I blinked, staring at my hand in amazement. My arm simply ended at the wrist, whose stump seemed to be pressed flat against the smooth, unbroken surface of stone. But my hand was still attached to the end of my wrist, I knew, because when I wagged my fingers I could feel them in motion, even though I could not see them.

A breath of the unknown blew over us, cold and chill. We stood and stared at one another in dead silence.

“Oh, my,” whispered Dr. Abziz in a faint voice. “Oh my!”

I withdrew my hand from the solid rock, and it was whole and perfectly normal looking. I wiggled my fingers again, staring down at them blankly, then turning my gaze on the gray, pitted stretch of rock into which my hand had been buried a moment before up to the wrist.

Suddenly, Glypto’s eyes sparkled. He darted forward, knife glittering. The point of his blade grated and squeaked along the surface of the cliff until it reached a spot near which my hand had so inexplicably vanished into the stone. At that point his wicked little blade sank into the stone, too, vanishing halfway to the hilt. He stretched on tiptoe, rasping the knife along the edges of an invisible entrance. His knife clinked to one side of an unseen opening, then the top, then the far side. Abziz and I watched in awe. To us it seemed he was dragging his knife through solid rock.

“Triangular!” he chirped brightly, eyes dancing. “An entrance pointed at the top, the sides widening to the base! An invisible, triangular doorway sunk in yon solid stone, by some weird magic. Aye, that, then, be the meaning of the pyramid-shapen mark on the medallion! We thought it were a pyramid-a buildin’, like, forgetting that a triangle be the selfsame shape as a pyramid! And that a doorway can be trianglelike in shape!”

He regarded me with curious respect in his eyes.

“My friend from another world,” he said softly, his manner suddenly formal, “to you has been given the privilege of discovering the very Gates of Kuur. . . : ‘

The Gates of Kuur . .

But actually, the credit belonged to Bozo.

The tension of the scene, tightly drawn, relaxed suddenly with the solution, or at least the partial solution, of the mystery of Bozo's disappearance. The emotional relief hit me suddenly, as an incongruous parallel suggested itself to me. It struck me as being terribly funny, and I'm afraid I giggled a trifle hysterically.

"What be the matter now?" asked Glypto.

"Dwellers in the Mirage," I laughed.

"Eh? Give me that one again?"

"Oh, sorry, that was in English, wasn't it? Let's see if I can translate-I don't think you have a word for 'mirage', or if you do I guess I haven't learned it yetwell, no matter!"

"Your lordship, what do you be talking about?"

"It's the title of one of my favorite books—a novel by A. Merritt, a writer of whom you could never have heard—well, anyway, in a book called *Dwellers in the Mirage*, Merritt has a mysterious race of beings living in a deep craterlike valley which is screened from discovery by anybody from the outer world because of a 'mirage'—a barrier of illusion, artificially 'maintained . don't you see?"

"Aye . . . aye!" crowed Glypto excitedly. "That be the secret all right!" Admiration shone in his glistening eyes, dawning comprehension on his homely face. "The yellow dogs of Kuur are mind-magicians, able by mystic power to read, and, aye, to influence the thoughts of other men"

"Ah! I see it now. Precisely, sir!" Dr. Abziz broke in, his high-pitched voice excited. "We are already aware that these Mind Wizards can in fact project their own thoughts and ideas into the minds of others; they did this with the Empress Zamara of Tharkol, we know, causing her to see, or to think she was seeing, miraculous visitations of the Lords of Gordrinator.* With their amazing powers over the human mind, it should be no great trick for them to impose a permanent illusion over this opening, convincing the eye of everyone who stands here that he is looking at a wall of solid rock, when actually there is an opening cut in the stone, invisible to him because it is covered by the illusion. Ingeniops! Remarkable!"

I'm afraid I giggled again.

"What is it now, my dear Prince?" demanded Abziz testily, bending a cool glance of reproof at me for my unseemly levity.

I grinned, unable to resist.

"In other words, they have 'a mysterious power to cloud the minds of men,' is that it? Sorry—excuse me—you people aren't likely to have heard of *The Shadow* either. . . ."

Glypto paid no heed to this exchange, which of course was incomprehensible to him. He was studying the seemingly solid wall of pitted gray stone with a narrowed eye.

"I wonder why the illusion did not blind your brute to the presence of the opening, as it did yourself?" Abziz mused, rubbing his jaw.

"Probably it did," I offered. "But the illusion was designed for eyesight alone, and the thought-picture projected into our brains was aimed at the vision centers of the brain only. There wasn't much point in

the Kuurians trying to make the opening smell like solid rock, because human beings have a very feeble sense of smell. Bozo, like all his kind, has an extremely sensitive nose, and a sense of smell that makes ours look vestigial by comparison. I assume the othodes of Thanator must have a highly developed sense of smell, just as dogs do on my native world, because, like earthly dogs, which they very much resemble, your people use them for hunting. And it is by the sense of smell, you know, that a hunting dog-or an othode-follows a trail.”

“In other words,” Abziz puffed, “the wall may have looked right to the creature but it certainly didn’t smell right.”

“Yes, that’s it, exactly! He probably smelled the presence of the Mind Wizards, or their cook-fires, or their refuse, or something like that-where his eyes told him there was nothing. So he went to investigate . . .”

“Well, then, me dear friends,” said Glypto, rubbing his hands together briskly. “There be only one thing to do now!”

“And what might that be?” inquired Dr. Abziz, warily.

“Aye, we’ll just have to see for ourselves what the dear beast discovered behind this barrier of illusion,” he decided.

Whereupon, waving one hand in a cocky salute, and grinning at us, the little Tharkolian strutted forwardwalking directly into the wall of rock before him

And vanished.

I shivered slightly, as if a cold wind blew about me.

Repetition of a miracle, I found, does not diminish its impact upon the nervous system. At least not upon a system as nervous as mine

We stood there on the dismal gray beach, the fat, scarlet little Soraban savant and I, feeling suddenly abandoned and lonely. Dr. Abziz wet his lips nervously, a strained expression tightening about his eyes. And it occurred to me then that the verbal rivalry between these two was more in the nature of a game they both enjoyed, than it was a matter of the tormentor and the tormented. For Abziz was worried by Glypto’s disappearance-too worried to bother trying to hide it.

“Impudent little rascal,” he sniffed, scowling in a most unconvincing manner. “Always swaggering about like an overgrown adolescent! Well, someday he’ll poke his huge nose into more trouble than he bargained for . . . oh, what can be keeping the villain!-does the idiot think to frighten us by lingering beyond the portal-?”

I was gathering my courage, about to attempt Glypto’s feat-although without the air of devil-may-care jauntiness, which would have been well beyond my acting abilities at that moment!-when suddenly the little thief reappeared. Part of him, that is.

A grinning head appeared as if by magic, halfway up the wall of illusion. It was Glypto thrusting his head through the barrier, looking for all the world like a beheaded malefactor, his severed pate stuck up on a spike as a warning to other criminals. Dr. Abziz stiffened and gasped at the grisly apparition, which winked and grimaced at us.

“Glypto, what-?”

“Come on-come on!” the bodiless head snorted gleefully. “Step right through yonder wall-there be nothin’ there, nothin’ at all, you know-come! We are wasting time.”

“What about. . . did you find Bozo?” I blurted.

He chuckled.

“Did I find Bozo?” he repeated, rolling his eyes comically. “Did I find Bozo! Just step in here, yer lordship, and feast yer eyes upon the havoc the dear, faithful beast has wrought-“

And with that enigmatic phrase, Glypto withdrew his head to the other side of the barrier of illusion.

I stepped forward, hesitating just a little, poking at the wall gingerly. I discovered that it is more difficult than you might think to deliberately walk into a wall, even into one you know isn’t really there. As I approached the barrier, my eyes only an inch or two away from what seemed to be a solid surface of rock, I marveled at the realistic detail of the illusion. For I could see the very grain and texture of the imaginary stone, cracked and pitted, upper edges of protuberances littered with granules of frock dust, just as if it was real and solid.

Then, taking a deep breath, I stepped forward into the wall of mirage, and walked through the Gates of Kuur into an unknown world.

Book IV

JANDAR, OF CALLISTO

Chapter 16

DWELLERS IN THE MIRAGE

The moment I stepped into the wall I entered a zone of utter darkness. The transition was so abrupt as to be startling. One moment I stood in a barren vale illuminated by dull, gray light-the next moment the wall swung up before my nose, expanding into sharp detail-and then I found myself in a region of intense and absolute gloom.

For one giddy moment I became completely disoriented. I had forgotten from which direction I had come, and in which direction I had been heading. Just for an instant panic seized me at the frightful thought of how easily one could become lost in this zone of darkness, to wander forever in a blind world of unseen terrors

Then my groping fingers brushed the inner surface of the portal and the world rightened itself about me. I took another step forward and light glowed about me. Now I found myself at the mouth of a narrow tunnel, cut through the solid rock, and illuminated by a vague, sourceless glow. Beneath my boots the floor slanted sharply downwards; ahead, the tunnel angled steeply off to my right.

I walked forward, turned the corner, and found that the tunnel widened beyond this point into a sort of square antechamber, hewn from the solid rock-an antechamber with three occupants.

The first of these was Glypto himself; the spry little Tharkolian capered nimbly, chortling with wicked glee at the sight which lay before us. .

Stark dead in a pool of spreading crimson lay the body of a man whom I had never seen before. He was small, even dwarfish, clad in clinging gray robes of some material like jersey. He was bald as an egg, his skin a vile, oily yellow, and his eyes-which were open and staring glassily into nothingness-were black and cold and oblique, slightly slanted. Near one limp hand lay a curious instrument shaped like some sort of pistol fashioned from a bright, silvery metal, with a muzzle which widened like the mouth of a funnel.

Standing over the corpse, hackles bristling stiffly, crouched the immense form of my beloved Bozo!

Never had the faithful Callistan hound looked so terrifying as at that moment. He crouched, goggle eyes glaring, great tusks bared in grim menace, and his wrinkled snout was smeared with crimson gore.

He had sprung upon the unseen watcher in gray robes; obviously the yellow dwarf had observed us from his place of concealment, perhaps scheming to employ that lethal-looking pistollike weapon to slay us from behind. Somehow, the alert, primal senses of the great othode had detected the lurking menace. He had sprung through the mirage and torn out the throat of the Kuurian in defense of my life!

There were tears in my eyes as I dropped to my knees and called Bozo to me in low tones. At the sound of my voice the blood-lust faded from his glaring eyes, his hackles fell. Like a puppy, eager for my praise, the immense othode crawled on his belly to me, butting his great head against me and thrusting his gory muzzle into my lap. His bulging eyes goggled up into mine, eager for my praise. I talked to him softly, rubbing the loose, wrinkled fur behind his ears. (How was I ever going to part with Bozo? It would break his heart if I deserted him, and I had become so attached to him by this time, saying goodbye would be a painful wrench. I could get him back through the Gate, surely, for living creatures can make the transition . . . and Noel would understand; indeed, she'd soon love him as much as I had come to . . . but I could imagine the faces of the customs officials and the airlines people as

I tried to pass through with a six-legged purple beast from another planet . . .)

Abziz came wheezing and grumbling down the cavern to where we were, stopping short with a cry at the sight of the corpse.

"Oh, my!" he exclaimed feebly. He stooped to examine the body of the dead Mind Wizard, wrinkling his nose primly at the bloody mess Bozo's heavy tusks had wrought.

"Carefully with that weapon, neighbor," Glypto hissed as the Doctor bent to pick up the curious pistol. "We don't know what it be . . . deadly, though, I'll warrant!" Abziz cautiously decided not to touch the glittering thing.

I got up, stroking Bozo's shoulder, and looked back at them.

“Shouldn’t we get back to the Xaxar?” I suggested. “Exploring on our own like this could be dangerous. And it is important that we inform Zantor we (lave discovered the entrance to Kuur.”

“Oh; aye, your lordship,” Glypto mumbled vaguely, his keen black eye glistening with eager curiosity. “But it won’t hurt to see a wee bit more . . . just beyond yonder curve, is all . . . it’ll help to know what we’re getting into, when the lads come down in force.”

The temptation to explore was irresistible. And, now that my loyal Bozo had disposed of the watcher by the Gate, there didn’t seem to be any immediate danger. So, following the little Tharkolian, we went further into the tunnel. It turned at a second sharp angle, still sloping downward, and then continued on in one direction for a considerable distance.

I gathered that the citadel of the Mind Wizards was built underground, either in a natural cavern or in a sequence of chambers artificially hollowed out of the solid stone. This suggested that the Mind Wizards were nowhere near as numerous as we had originally thought, which also implied they were more vulnerable than we had even hoped.

The tunnel was illuminated by a dim radiance which glowed from square glassy bricks or ingots set into the roof. They seemed to be packed with a self-luminous powder, or what looked like powder, which reminded me of the eternally brilliant radium lamps in Burroughs’ Mars books. We saw no signs of life whatsoever.

“Really, I must insist we return to the ornithopter,” said Dr. Abziz tremulously. “What will we do if we are attacked? We should leave, ah, all this sort of thing to the warriors aboard the vessel”

“Keep your courage up, neighbor,” Glypto grinned wickedly. “If attacked, why, we’ll fight like forty fiends! His lordship here has a great sword by him, to say nothing of the beast, who’s worth a regiment of swordsmen all by himself; and, as for old Glypto, well

. . . he’s learnt a few tricks with this,” he said, showing us the vicious little hooked knife he was carrying in his hand under the rusty black cloak. Abziz subsided, grumbling.

The passage ended in a large open room, more rectangular than it was square, with doors leading off to side-tunnels, and stairways that coiled down into the depths. Here stood a great-stone table and bench, a stoppered jug which perhaps contained water for the dead guard at the surface entrance, and a long, ragged-edged parchment scrawled in hooked scribbles unintelligible to me-perhaps a guard roster or a duty schedule.

We had little opportunity to examine these articles, and no chance of exploring further. For suddenly Bozo whined urgently and swung in front of me, blocking my path, staring up into my face with urgency in his bulging eyes.

“What ails the brute?” Abziz asked nervously.

Before we could speak or move or think a loud hissing came to our ears. From vents cut in the walls near the floor a colorless vapor flooded into the chamber, visible only as it eddied in the air, rippling like steam. I inhaled a lungful of sharp chemical odor, suddenly found myself dizzy and giddy, and leaned against the stone table for support. Abziz gagged and went down as if struck with a hammer. Snarling and showing his straggly teeth, eyes bright and desperate as a cornered rat, Glypto flashed his knife about, then stumbled and fell. I stayed erect longer than my companions. but all strength and vigor ebbed from my legs. Now I wished I had picked up that odd-looking ray gun, or whatever it was

Bozo whirled about, retreating back up the passageway by which we had come. He cast me one long, lingering, worried look, and whined deep in his throat.

“ . . . go on, boy, get out . . . save yourself,” I croaked, and then my legs gave way and I sagged bonelessly to the floor, landing painfully on one shoulder, then rolling over onto my back so that I could no longer see the othode. He did not reenter the room; I hoped that he had gotten away before the vapors overcame him.

I was still completely conscious, but could scarcely feel my body. The gas we had breathed seemed to work like a local anaesthetic, paralyzing the motor nerves, but not causing loss of consciousness. I lay there, mentally cursing our rashness; we should have gone directly back to the gig and returned to the Xaxar with word of our discovery!

The hissing sound of gas escaping cut off sharply, and was replaced by the sound of a whirring fan. Above me the parchment stirred and rattled atop the stone table. I got the impression that powerful fans, creating a suction, were sucking the drugged vapor back through the vents.

Several interminable minutes later stone grated hollowly on stone. Within the angle of my vision an immense slab opened in the wall that had seemed solid a moment before, revealing a black doorway wherein stood three men virtually identical with the guard Bozo had slain in the outer passage. All the three were dwarf-like, standing no higher than children, the tallest of them no more than an inch or two above four feet.

They were dressed in identical fashion, loose gray robes with full sleeves, leathern girdles lined with snap-fastened pouches about their waists like cartridge belts. They had skins of sour lemon yellow, bald pates, and cold, slitted black eyes. Chattering among themselves in a language of their own they entered the room, prodding us curiously with their feet, jabbering comments back and forth to each other.

Then the tallest of the three put a metal tube in his mouth and blew a piercing note. A huge naked man, a gigantic Hercules, muscled like a weight lifter, lumbered ponderously into the room. His skin was dead white, his closecropped hair lank and colorless, his heavy face slack and witless. He turned dull, incurious eyes upon us and in obedience to a shrill command from the leader of the three, bent and picked up Glypto and Abziz. They dangled limply. He tossed them over his massive shoulders and shuffled off back into the secret entrance, from which a second naked slave emerged a moment later to pick me up. This second man had skin the incredible tomato puree red of a Perushtarian, such as Glypto or Dr. Abziz. His pate was hairless and he was as naked as the zombielike white man, but not as heroically built. He picked me up and held me cradled in his forearms without visible effort. It was as if I were a rag doll. Then he shuffled into the black entrance, followed by the Mind Wizards.

The immense slab closed behind us. For a moment we were in total darkness; then a weird gray light bloomed from the dwarves behind us. I could not see what made the light, but as my bearer shuffled about a sharp turn in the passage I caught a glimpse of the tallest dwarf, the leader, who was immediately behind me. A shimmering and vaporous globe of luminosity floated above his right shoulder, wobbling insubstantially, like a soap bubble, exuding the leprous, dirty light.

We were borne into another chamber where several more of the vacant-eyed nude colossi sat along a stone bench against the wall, neither moving nor speaking. They were for all the world like so many robots awaiting the turn of a switch to activate them. Also in this room a yellow dwarf sat in an oddly-carved chair, doing something with glass tubes filled with brilliant colored light. He exchanged a few words with those who had captured us, then touched a knob on the low stand beside his chair,

opening another rocky slablike door.

We were brought into a room outfitted like a laboratory in a movie about mad scientists. Fluids seethed and bubbled through coiling glass tubes, or simmered in fat-bellied flasks over glowing crystals that served as Bunsen burners. Long metal tables were crowded with complicated apparatus-metal cabinets faced with illuminated dials and studded with what looked like huge, old-fashioned vacuum tubes with red-hot filaments inside them. Whirling copper wheels spun in grooved blocks of milky glass; noisily spitting fierce orange sparks. I expected to see Bela Lugosi or Peter Cushing in a white smock come popping out of the adjoining room at any moment.

Instead there came into view a yellow dwarf, incredibly old, riding a few inches off the ground in a sleek metal car shaped like an ultramodern chair. The chair hummed, floating above the floor as if on an air cushion. The zombies set us down on long metal tables under luminous milky, spheres and the dwarf in the floating chair came over to peer down at us, one by one, with cold, deadly, cunning eyes.

He was the most horribly old human being I had ever seen, his sallow visage a gaunt skull on which the dry, withered skin hung in a thousand wrinkles. With a thrill of horror I saw he was plugged into the chair in several places: a coppery wire came from the back of the chair and entered into his heart through the dull gray robes that hung loosely upon his diminutive, dwarfish frame. From either side of his torso, just below the ribs, two rubbery, transparent tubes snaked away to either side, vanishing into the innards of the chair. One tube carried into his body a sluggish scarlet trickle of what looked to me like human blood thickened with some sugary sediment like glucose; the other tube carried out of his body a vile dribble of oily, yellow brown waste.

The sight was sickening. And suddenly I was horribly, horribly afraid. Afraid I would never get out of here; afraid I would never see my wife again, or my dogs, my books, my home

“Is it another of the sky-ships, then?” the old, old man asked in a high, thin voice.

“No, Yanthu,” the leader of the dwarves said in obsequious tones. “At least we do not think so. These are not Shondakorians.”

“Perushtarians, those two; this one . . . I don’t know. Odd color, the pigmentation of the iris; gray or blue gray. Notice the epidermis, Chune, the light, fair tint, pinkish bronze; bit of tan there, but the normal coloring very fair. A Zanadarian half-breed, I wonder? Pity the zorooson vapor renders telepathic probe difficult. Well, once the effects are counteracted, subject the captive to full depth probe. If there is another race on Thanator, we’d better know of it. Hand me the counteractive, slave!”

Another one of the naked zombies, this one an inhumanly tall, gaunt golden-skinned being with shaven pate-redhaired as a Shondakorian from the stubble-lumbered into view, clumsily picked up a cottony pad prickly with needlelike spines on the under surface, dipped it in a metal tray, and pressed it against the side of my neck. I felt a stinging cold wetness, but the sensation was oddly remote and detached from my immediate senses, like the memory of a touch. Whatever the anesthetic vapor was, it affected the nerves themselves; this may have explained why it was impossible to subject us to telepathic questioning until the effects of the gas had worn off.

My unfortunate companions were similarly treated and carried away. I did not see them again, for one of the naked zombies carried me through a warren of dark cells, finally depositing me on a stone bench. A metal door slammed shut, a lock clicked, and I was alone.

A tingle spread through my body, the return of sensation.

A tall man, younger than I, strikingly handsome, with a superbly lithe and sinewy physique, came over to where I lay and said something in a low voice, helping me to sit up. I could not see him very well in the darkness of the cell, but his words were comforting. He held a bowl to my lips, letting cold, fresh water trickle into my partially open mouth. I swallowed automatically: obviously, the zoroon vapor did not affect the involuntary functions of the body.

After a bit I found I could move and speak again, although clumsily, with numbness in my extremities and the beginning of a champion headache. My cellmate settled my limbs more comfortably and when he stepped back his face suddenly entered into a gleam of light that came from some source above my head. By this momentary light I caught a close-up glimpse of his features, which were unknown to me. Or were they? That fair, tanned skin, those piercing blue eyes, that shock of raw yellow hair

“Do you feel better now, friend?” he asked me in Thanatorian.

“Yes . . . much better,” I mumbled with stiff lips. Then, with excitement bubbling up within me, and a strange wild joy, I looked up at him and said, in English

“Captain Jonathan Andrew Dark, I presume?”

Chapter 17

MASTERS OF THE MIND

He began to answer me in Thanatorian, then started violently, realizing that I had addressed him in English.

“Great heavens!” he exclaimed in that language, “But-who are you?”

I told him my name, at which he exclaimed again, peering closely at my features through the dimness.

“But-this is amazing! Why, man-I’ve read your books!”

“I know,” I said, laughing. “Gary Hoyt told me all about it.”

That made him exclaim again.

“How do you know Gary Hoyt? And how did you get here?”

“There’s an awful lot to explain,” I said. “Before I begin-could I have some more of that water? I’ve got a cracking headache from inhaling that gas, and I feel pretty rotten . . .”

“Of course, Mr. Carter! Forgive me for being such a lousy host-but you really set me back on my heels,” he admitted ruefully. “You’re about the last person in the world-in two worlds, come to think of it-I expected to run into in this place. Here: drink this; the aches and pains will go away.-You’ve been to

Shondakor, I guess? My wife-?"

"Both the young prince and his mother are in excellent health . . . although they miss you terribly, of course. Everyone is fine, and working strenuously to find this country and free you, you and your friends. Ah, is this place bugged, do you know?"

"What?"

"Microphones, I mean. Or eavesdroppers hidden in the walls; that sort of thing."

"Oh, of course. Sorry, sir! It's been so long since I spoke English with anyone, I'm beginning to forget some of it. No, we can't be overheard here, I'm certain of that."

"Good. I came here in the Second Armada, you will, have already guessed. You must have known there would be a Second Armada: no one is going to give you up for dead before they have absolute proof of your demise. The ships are overhead now, anyway the Xaxar is: I came down in one of the gigs with Glypto and Dr. Abziz-"

"Glypto! The scrawny little rascal-bless him! But-there are so many questions! First of all, how do you come to be here on Cadisto, sir? In fact, how do you happen to know anything about me in the first place?"

I sighed; my mouth felt dry as cotton and my head ached with a sharp throbbing pain just behind the eyes. The only thing I wanted to do was to lie down and close my eyes and wait till the pain dulled and faded away. But I began talking. I told him that the first manuscript, addressed to his friend Gary Hoyt, an air force major stationed in Saigon, had been found by friendly Cambodians and had eventually been received by Hoyt. Not knowing what else to do with what he cautiously decided was a work of fantastic fiction, and remembering how he and Jon Dark had often chatted about the relative merits of Burroughs, Carter and Norton (Andre), Hoyt had mailed it to me with an apologetic covering letter, saying I could do with it anything I wished-keep it as a touching tribute from a devoted reader of my novels, throw it away, even publish it if I thought it deserving of print. Jandar regarded me dazedly as I told him that, of the four manuscripts I had thus far received from the other side of the world, three had been published by Dell just as he had written them, and had been eagerly received by hundreds of thousands of readers.

"Hundreds of thousands!" he repeated in a stunned tone. "I never dreamed-"

I told him next that a distinguished British expert in Asian archaeology, following the clues in that first manuscript, had found the Lost City and was exploring its mysteries for science. Finally I told him how Noel and I had flown to Cambodia to visit Sir Malcolm's dig, and how I had slipped and fallen into the Well just as he had done a year and a half before. I finished with a cursory account of my own modest adventures on Callisto, and the launching of the Second Armada.

"Mr. Carter, I don't know what to say," he muttered haltingly. "I certainly never wanted to drag anybody else into the middle of this mess . . ."

"Forget it," I grinned. "For an unadventurous man, I've got to admit I've been having the time of my life!"

"Since you read the last portion of the latest manuscript, then you'll have already guessed we were caught by Jugrid's jungle warriors while trying to scale the sides of the plateau," he said grimly. "At thirty to three, it wasn't much of a fight. We were not mistreated, just force-marched back to the caves where

the Mind Wizards carried us off to Kuur. They fly on the gigantic winged reptiles the Thanatorians call ghasozars-something like pterodactyls, only a lot larger which they control by telepathy. We've been treated decently enough so far, no torture or anything like that, although it's never been a secret that when they're through with us we'll end up like those flesh robots you saw. They do something to the brains of the poor chaps, with drugs or surgery, something that destroys their will completely."

"Flesh robots-I like that! From Doc Smith, right? I've been thinking of them as zombies . . ."

"Just like you, sir, I was surprised to find there are so few of the yellow devils. There were more when they came here I think they traveled here from another planet, or maybe from another one of Jupiter's moons. Their own world was dying, I gather. There must have been about fifty of them when they first got here, which was a dozen years ago. They found a snug hole in this uninhabited place to hide, and began plotting to conquer the world through the power of the mind alone."

His tones were serious, his eyes brooding and grim. "Intellect is all that matters to them. Their chief, they call him 'One', is virtually nothing but mind. If you saw old Yanthu, the one in the antigravity chair, hitched up to the lifesupport system . . . he's nearly a thousand years old, and he's only 'Three' in their book. 'Two', a cold-eyed devil they call Koom Yaa, is the one who's been interrogating me, over and over. They are fascinated to learn of Earth, and hungry for every tiniest scrap of information they can squeeze out of me about it. They want to go there, you see; they want to conquer it.

"They tried to take over Callisto, but a lot of things went wrong. They picked the Sky Pirates as the most perfect available tools-with their sky-ships, they were certainly the most technologically advanced civilization on Callisto, and, being a gang of cold-blooded murdering robbers, it didn't take much to pervert them and to nudge them into the right path of action. They had two or maybe three Kuurians at Zanadar all the time, although I never guessed it. They got rid of the old Prince-you can induce heart attacks by telepathy, I have discovered, and also suicides and faial selfinflicted 'accidents'-and elevated Thuton into his place. They had Thuton under their thumb all the while. Then something went wrong-one or two of the Kuurians were killed in an accident, maybe a sky-ship exploded-the gas is as explosive as hydrogen, you know. The one that was left turned renegade, got imperial dreams of his own, and pitted the Sky Pirates against Shondakor.

"The trouble was they were already running Shondakor by this time, having gotten the upper hand over Arkola, warlord of the Black Legion, who conquered the Golden City for them, forcing the Ku Thad out. The Kuurian at Zanadar, I don't know his name, declared war on the Kuurian who was running things in Shondakor as the power behind the throne-his name was Ool; I killed him in the pits below the palace, or rather, he slipped and fell and killed himself. Anyway, my chance arrival here mucked things up for them. I came along at just the right time to be instrumental in breaking the Black Legion, and restoring Shondakor to Darloona and her people, and together we smashed the Sky Pirates, killing most of them when we detonated the vapor mines-the Kuurian died in the holocaust, too. I never even knew he was there.

"They started all over again in Tharkol. But by this time, twelve years had gone by and their numbers were greatly reduced. There's only seventeen of them left alive-sixteen, by gosh, counting the one guarding the Secret Door, the one your othode jumped on. Well, you know what they-ried in Tharkol. With the Sky Pirates eliminated from the running, the only major world powers left were Shondakor and -the empire of the red men, the Perushtarians. They were going to manipulate Zamara into knocking over both countries, consolidating the new empire; then they would exterminate the Yathoon hordesmen and run the planet to suit themselves . . ."

"For what reason, just the lust for power?"

“To live forever,” he said somberly. “You see, they’re the last of their kind in the universe, and they can no longer reproduce, since the last of their females died back before they left their home-world. To live forever they need an endless supply of healthy bodies wherewith to stock the organ banks-whenver they wear out a liver or a heart or whatever, they replace it with a healthy one-and a large supply of living slaves, under their mental thumbs, you know, to do the work. To be able to do this in complete security they want the comfort of knowing the entire planet is under their control, and that nothing can go wrong. A pretty picture, isn’t it? No rebels, no dissident factions, no guerrillas in the hills-the whole planet a mass of brain-dead zombies, to dig the fields and mine the metals and to just be there when somebody needs a new pair of lungs or a spinal cord.”

“You paint a grisly picture,” I said. “But surely, even with an infinite supply of organ transplants, you can’t keep a body going forever. What about the arteries? You can’t replace the entire arterial system, surely . . .”

“I told you they revere intellect alone,” he said. “They live for the life of the mind: pure mind alone, that’s their ideal. The senses, the emotions, these mean nothing to them. When they have the whole planet thoroughly pacified and running like a machine, then they’ll all end up like Number One. His name is: Quorll. He is nothing but a brain, a huge, swollen brain floating in a crystal sphere full of nutrient foam, with wires leading to the sensory nerve centers, attached to artificial eyes and ears and voice box. Just one huge, naked, living brain. I told you that Three, the old mummy in the life-support chair, is about a thousand years old. Well, Quorll is something else: they’ve kept him alive for twenty-three thousand years now, and they say there’s no reason he can’t exist forever in that glass ball . . .”

He cleared-his throat as if something had left an ugly taste in his mouth. “What a vision of the future, eh? The Kuurians’ idea of Callisto is a mechanical paradise, staffed by living zombies controlled by telepathy, and the whole thing geared to perpetuating for eternity sixteen naked brains, floating in slime, living a life of pure thought . . . forever.”

I shuddered. It was loathsome, like one of the grimmer pages out of Lovecraft, or the section in Stapledon’s *The StarMaker* about “the Great Brains.” . . .

“You-you said they were eager when they learned about Earth?”

“Yes; they’ve about given up on Callisto; Earth holds greater promise. You see, with its very much smaller population, and given the fact that the human race will go sour and thin out here, once we’re all zombies, they figure they can only keep Callisto going for a million years or so. But Earth has thousands of times the natural resources and the population. Earth they could keep going until the death of the Sun. And they’re already working on that problem, too! They got tremendously excited when they learned from study of my memories that the Earth-terminus of the dimensional portal lies in a part of the world inhabited by yellow men such as themselves, and the most heavily populated portion of the Earth, at that, and a part politically dominated by an ironstrong one-man dictatorship-Red China, of course. My God, sir, think of it! Once they got into the jungles of Cambodia they could merge invisibly with the people, lose themselves entirely . . . and once -in China, of course, all they’d have to do is get within mental range of one man, Chairman Mao Tse-Tung, and it’s all over. One quarter of the world’s population would be their absolute slaves, and they’d be in charge of an immense modern army, navy, and air fleet, already armed with the hydrogen bomb.”

The vision was chilling. Horrible. But it was so lucid, so obvious, so easy! It was difficult to see how the Mind Wizards could possibly be stopped-especially since those few who knew the ultimate horror of their plans for mastery, were locked up here in these cells, completely helpless. Any time they wished

they could come through the door and finish us off, and Callisto might not for years know the doom being spun for it by insidious, coldly evil, age-old minds. Earth might never know. . . until it was too late!

And then Jandar broke off suddenly, touching my shoulder for silence. Was that a footstep in the stone corridor outside our cell? The footstep of a living man, or the flaccid mechanical shuffle of a zombie, a flesh robot, his will destroyed, his brain dominated by the most fiendishly cunning band of devils that ever menaced a world?

“They know the effects of the vapor have worn off by now,” he said heavily. “They are coming to interrogate you-to dig into your brain for details that will corroborate the information they’ve learned from me!”

I was horribly afraid again, but this time not for myself, but for all the helpless millions behind me there on a tired and worn but still green world nearer the sun, men and women who had not the slightest chance of guessing the hideous, the unspeakable doom that hung over them

“Jandar, quick! I’m not particularly brave when it comes to pain, but tell me-is there anything I can do to resist the questioning?”

He shook his head dully.

“It’s nothing like that, Mr. Carter. There’s no torture or mistreatment, I told you. It’s not a question-and-answer session at all. They inject you with a mild soporific that weakens your willpower and sends your conscious mind drifting off somewhere in a daze, and then they simply read your mind by that insidious telepathy, of which they are the masters. It’s impossible to resist yielding up to their mental probe the information they desire-you won’t even be aware of the fact that you’re doing it. You’ll just doze and daydream for a time, and when you wake up you’ll find they’ve learned hundreds of facts from your memory-paths. . . .”

He broke off as a key clicked, startlingly loud, in the lock.

“Ssshh! It’s too late for talking now-they’re here.”

“There’s no chance of fighting them, I suppose? Making a break for freedom, somehow? I know we’ve got no weapons, but they look as weak and puny as children-“

“There’s no hope for that,” he said heavily. “Damn it, man, don’t you think I would have tried it months ago, if there were? They’ll send in the flesh robots first, and believe me, you haven’t seen the worst of those babies yet! They’ve a few special ones they’ve either bred genetically or tinkered together with surgery-there’s one lumbering horror thirteen feet high, weighs half a ton, and has six arms. Christ, he makes Frankenstein’s monster look like Porky Pig! Ssshh-they’re coming in!”

Hinges squealed; the door swung inwards suddenly, flooding the darkness of the cell with light from the illuminated corridor beyond-light that seemed dazzling to eyes by now adjusted to the darkness.

I blinked painfully, squinting in the glare-then gasped at the incredible figure standing in the open door

Chapter 18

RED SWORDS IN KUUR

It had a massive chest and burly shoulders, six, fat waddling legs and a blunt, homely visage, all gogling eyes and grinning, froglike mouth filled with blunt, powerful tusks. And once again its purple jowls and muzzle were smeared with fresh crimson!

Bozo hurled himself across the cell, whining with eager joy at seeing me again, and nearly knocking me flat with the enthusiasm of his greeting. Behind him, still in the doorway, stood the boy Taran, his face flushed and happy; behind him, holding a heavy, long-handled war axe dyed crimson, stood Ergon. The boy-sized sword that Taran carried ready in one small, capable fist was also red with gore. And from further down the corridor I heard a tumult: shouts and screams and thundering war cries.

Ergon's gloomy visage lit up when he saw Jandar standing at my side. And Taran laughed happily.

"Hi, Lankar-jan!" he chirped (or the Thanatorian equivalent of the greeting). "I knew Bozo would find you first of all, so I let him go and we just followed."

My arms were full of several hundred pounds of wriggling, snorting, ecstatic othode, so all I could do was gasp a hasty hello. Jandar strode into the corridor and clapped the beaming Ergon on the shoulder affectionately. Prying myself loose from Bozo, I followed him, the great othode pacing at my side as if unwilling to let me out of his sight again.

"How did you find your way in?" I asked Ergon.

"Did you think, when the gig didn't return, we would let you stay down here forever, without coming after?" he growled. "We descended in two more gigs, found your craft abandoned by the cliff, and followed your footprints in the sand, finding they led smack into a wall of solid rock. Then your othode came bounding through the wall, proving it was not as solid as it had seemed. He caught Zantor's cloak in the grip of his jaws and half dragged the Admiral through the wall; we followed at his heels, saw the situation, and dispatched a gig back to the Xaxar for reinforcements. The ship is moored to the cliff now, and warriors are swarming down on rope ladders. We are cleaning out this warren of tunnels with about forty or fifty fighting-men . . ."

"Good old Ergon!" Jandar grinned. Then, soberly, "But do we have much of a chance with so few? The Mind Wizards are armed with weird and powerful weapons . . ."

"Oh, aye," Ergon shrugged without excitement. "They carry small glittering metal things that direct bright streams of sparks at you-sparks that paralyze your arms or legs-and glass tanks of sleep-inducing gas they spray from long nozzles-but, by the Red Moon, Jandar, they die easily enough, for all that. A sword through their black, putrid hearts or an axe laid along-side the head, and they be as mortal as any other men!"

"Bozo killed one," Taran said brightly. "When he was leading us here! We came through a room filled with glass bottles and metal benches. There was an old, old yellow man riding a magic chair--"

"That was Yanthu-the third in their mental hierarchy," Jandar said. "Quick, boy, what happened?"

The lad shrugged and laughed ruefully.

“He tried to make me go to sleep with his funny eyes on me, sucking out my spirit. But Bozo growled and sprang upon him, and tore out the wires and tubes that connected him to the chair he was riding in. And the old man just broke apart, like dusty bones wrapped in old parchment. He made a bad smell when he died, like something longdead and all rotten with decay”

“There’s another one we must be wary of—a living brain preserved in a crystal sphere,” Jandar said urgently, taking the extra sword Ergon had been carrying. The boy tugged at his arm, grinning.

“Oh, that thing? But it’s dead, too, Jandar-jan!”

“What?” Jandar cried, staring down at the boy in amazement.

“Sure! I came upon it in another big room—a naked, wrinkled thing in a glass case? I didn’t know it was part of a man. I thought it was part of some poor animal they were keeping alive and tormenting with their experiments. So I smashed in the case with a heavy bench and put it out of its misery with my sword.”

Jandar and I exchanged a long stare of sheer astonishment. Then he turned admiring, appraising eyes on the young boy who stood there, gesturing excitedly with his dripping sword.

“You . . . put him out of his misery?” the Prince of Shondakor repeated dazedly. “Quorll, Number One . . . lord and supreme master of the Mind Wizards

. . . cut down by a child’s sword . . . a child who acted out of mercy and compassion for what he thought was a poor, tortured thing! Well, perhaps it was no more than that, after all. But the incongruity of it! A cold, insidious creature of pure intellect . . . plotting and scheming for twenty-three thousand years to conquer worlds and subjugate whole civilizations . . . and a child crushes it in passing, out of simple compassion!”

“We’re having trouble with the big, dumb giants, the ones who walk like dead men,” Ergon growled urgently. “But they can be killed, too. It takes some doing, and you don’t want to—get within reach of their arms, but they be slow, clumsy swordsmen”

By now warriors in sky-boots and blue cloaks were crowding around us, trying rings of keys taken from the corpses of dead jailors, opening the other cell doors. Weary, dirty men with amazed expressions were emerging from their cells to be greeted by old friends and comrades. Among these were only two whose identities I could guess: a towering, gaunt, stiff-jointed insect creature who could only be Kojá the Yathoon, and a vivid, beautiful red woman with imperious eyes who must be Zamara, Princess of Tharkol. Jandar excused himself and went to greet his comrades.

“Lukor, you old rascal! Valkar, my friend! Tomar-Haakon!” he laughed. They crowded about us, talking excitedly, turning eyes friendly but curious on myself and Bozo and the boy.

“Time enough for explanations later,” Jandar’s voice rose above the joyous clamor. “Right now, our brave friends are fighting for their lives up the tunnel, and I am eager to join them. Lords of Gordrimator, it seems like ages since I last held a sword in my hand! Come, friends, we’ll find weapons for all of us on the way.”

It would take far more pages than the few allotted to me here, were I to describe all that happened

during the hours which followed. But I saw such sights of gallantry and heroism as my eyes have never beheld, before or since. I saw Jandar of Callisto holding at bay three vicious swordsmen, his red blade flickering like a lethal shaft of light, his superb chest and naked arms scored with wounds and streaming blood, a grim smile touching his lips as the greatest hero of two worlds cut through his ancient enemies like an avenging god.

I saw that mightiest of warriors, Koja of the Yathoon horde, battling against the lumbering, deadeyed flesh robots. His terrible whip-sword, found in the armory of the Mind Wizards, whistled through the air as he- cut a crimson path through the rank of giant zombies to the cowering yellow dwarfs who hid behind their mindless slaves.

I saw brave men fight and die that day, men whose names I knew and men whom I had never met, but whose deeds would not be forgotten while the world lasted and a single warrior of Thanator lived in freedom to venerate the memory of those who fought and fell in the Battle of Kuur.

And I fought too, as best I could, being untutored in the art of the sword, and no warrior. But I found a great wooden staff shod in bronze, not unlike the cudgel wherewith I had brained the savage vastodon in the jungle so many long days before; and armed with this I struck and struck until my muscles ached with weariness, and more than one of the Kuurians succumbed to my clumsy strokes. And ever at my side fought the mighty othode, defending me while I defended him. And that day the great, faithful, fearless beast slew and slew like a ferocious tiger. He sprang upon the greatest of the flesh robots and tore with terrible claws and crushed and mangled with those massive tusks, until he wrung a word of praise from even the noblest of the champions of Shondakor.

It was three hours later. We rested on the beach of Dragon River, some of us, weary and bloody but victorious at last. Bozo lay panting heavily at my side, while Glypto and Dr. Abziz and I shared between us a flask of quarra brandy fetched down from the Xaxar which hung above us like a stationary cloud, anchored to the crest of the cliffs. A hundred men were upon the beach, war parties venturing down into the warrens of conquered Kurr, others emerging with their wounded and their dead. I was bone-weary and battered and I ached from head to foot, but it was all over now but for the final mopping up, and I had come out of it. in one piece somehow, and I basked in a warm glow of satisfaction.

Beyond me, Jandar stood talking with Zantor and Thuron and the captains of the Zarkoon and the Avenger. The sisterships of the expedition had gathered at the prearranged rendezvous-point, found no Xaxar there, and had come searching for her. They were in time to join in the last fury of the battle, and to earn their share in the glory of our splendid victory.

“About over now, I think,” Zantor was saying. “How did so few manage to seize the Jalathadar and the Conqueress in the first place, my Prince? To say nothing of the Arkonna?”

“They had been forewarned of our coming, and maintained sentries on the mountain peak,” Jandar said. “Then they boarded the two ships, Princess Zamara explained, taking them by surprise in the darkness just -before moonrise. Nobody suspected the Mind Wizards had a means of boarding a ship when it was aloft, you see; but they flew aboard on saddled ghasozars, controlling the winged monsters by telepathy. Seizing temporary command of the minds of the lookouts on the ships, they gained quick ascendancy through the advantage of surprise. Those flesh robots of theirs are formidable opponents. Luckily, however, the ships were captured with very little loss of life. They are still skyworthy, incidentally: the Wizards moored them in a huge cavern in the side of the triplepeaked mountain over there. The entrance is masked by another of those mentally induced illusions. We can all return home in one voyage, the six ships together. However, I think we had better leave a fair-sized force here to occupy Kuur on a temporary basis, until we are certain we have cleaned out this nest of vipers for all time.”

“Here comes Lukor with the death roster,” Zantor observed as the spry and elegant old swordmaster of Ganatol came up with a scrap of parchment in one hand and a gore-smearred rapier in the other. “How goes the count now, Master Lukor?”

“Fair enough, my Admiral,” the Ganatolian smiled cheerfully. “I have myself examined the corpses, and no fewer than thirteen of the yellow devils are accounted for.”

“I gather your total does not include the naked brain in the case, slain by the boy Taran, or the one in the floating chair struck down by Prince Lankar’s othode,” Zantor rumbled in his deep tones.

“Quite right,” the silver-haired master swordsman nodded. “That raises the total of dead Mind Wizards to fifteen. You said there were only seventeen of the fiends in all, lad?”

“Sixteen,” corrected Jandar thoughtfully. “Bozo the othode slew one at the Gates of Kuur just before Lankar was captured. That means there is only one Kuurian left alive”

“Well, lad, he’s down there in that nasty warren somewhere, and our men will smoke him out ere long,” Lukor said.

“Let’s hope so,” Jandar said wearily. “We’ll not be able to rest easy until the last of them is dead and the entire race has been exterminated. What about the flesh robots? Are all of them dead?”

“A half-dozen were taken alive, the poor creatures! Better if they had gone down fighting, for I doubt their minds can ever be restored to them. Mayhap we had best put the miserable creatures out of their misery”

“Well, we can decide on that later.”

A tall warrior of noble mien approached the command post where they stood. He was accompanied by Koja the Yathoon, Princess Zamara of Tharkol and two young officers, survivors of the capture of the First Armada, whose names were Sojan of Shondakor and Karan of Tharkol.

“Greetings; Valkar! What’s the word?” Jandar hailed the young noble, who was thus identified as Lord Yarrak’s son.

“What’s to be done with all the Kuurian weapons and instruments we have taken? We have thus far discovered an entire armory of the hand-weapons and the gas-receptacles.”

“I want them all destroyed,” Jandar ordered. “And all of the equipment in the laboratories, as well. The devilish science of the Mind Wizards must die with the last of their race. Never again must these devices be used against our kingdoms.”

“I agree,” Zamara said warmly. “The warriors of Thanator need no devil-magic to defend their cities against whatever foes shall rise to threaten us in the future. Our gallant fighting men have proved here this day that simple courage, armed with simple steel, can whelm even the evil science of Kuur. Let everything be destroyed!”

“Yes, but not until we have all left the caverns,” Jandar advised. “Some of the laboratories may contain deadly poisons or acids or powerful explosives. See to this, will you Lukor?”

“With great pleasure, lad!” the elegant old Ganatolian nodded. “Some of us had best remain here for a time, to see to the disposition of these matters, while the remainder of the Armada voyages home.”

“Zantor and I were just discussing this very point,” Jandar agreed. “Zantor, if the Jalathadar is still as skyworthy as I believe she is, let’s leave her here under Haakon, with Lukor in charge of the occupation force.”

Zantor nodded his agreement to this, and Koja and Ergon spoke up, requesting to remain at Kuur to assist Lukor in his task. It was soon decided.

By this time hundreds of warriors had emerged from the door in the cliff and stood about exchanging weary jests, binding each other’s wounds, cleansing the bloody blades. The men from the Second Armada had brought down wine and packaged field rations so that thirsty, hungry men might refresh themselves at leisure after the hard day’s work. Valkar flew in one of the gigs to the triple-crested mountain, and returned to announce the Jalathadar, the Arkonna and the Conqueress were safely moored, in a condition of fair skyworthiness, and ready to be reprovisioned for the return flight.

“Good news, but no more than I had expected,” Jandar said. “Are all of our people accounted for, Lukor?” The Ganatolian shook his head.

“Two parties are still missing,” he recounted. “They were assigned to tracing the extent of the tunnels and have not yet returned. Also one of the ex-prisoners and one crew member of the Second Armada are missing. Neither had been assigned to the two search parties and I am unable to account for their whereabouts, unless they met and joined with one or another of the searching parties.”

“Oh? Who are these?”

“Ylana the jungle maid, and young Tomar,” Lukor said. “I last laid eyes on the boy when we were all mingling in the corridor, having just been released from our cells. As for the jungle girl, she was fighting near me when we cut our path through the second complex of laboratories and storerooms. She may have sought out young Tomar after we crushed that pocket of resistance, for I believe there exists, ahem, a certain fondness between the young people?”

“Well, doubtless they will turn up soon enough,” said Jandar. “Let me know when the missing search parties return. Zantor, let us begin getting the men back to their ships—the wounded and the former prisoners first. The men need rest badly. Lukor, take Sojan and Karan here and notify those who will remain behind as part of your occupation force. We must get their gear down from the ships. Zantor, will you assign crews to the Conqueress, the Arkonna and the Jalathadar? We need to get them out of their moorings in the cavern, test them for airworthiness, and see them fully reprovisioned. Then, once these matters are attended to, I see no reason why the combined fleets cannot begin the long voyage home . . . home to Shondakor and Tharkol, with the good news of victory and of the destruction of the greatest menace that has ever threatened our world!”

Chapter 19

RETURN TO SHONDAKOR

Before very long it was time to depart. We bade farewell to Lukor and Koja and Ergon and the others who would remain here for a time to make certain the armories and laboratory facilities of the Mind Wizards were destroyed, and to ascertain that no hidden pockets of resistance lingered undiscovered. For me, of course, these farewells were final, for I must be getting back to Earth to take up the affairs of my own private life which for so long had hung in abeyance.

I would be missing these new friends and the marvels of their strange and exciting world. But everything ends, including my adventure on Callisto, and I made the best of it. My chief regret was that Tomar and the jungle maid had not yet been found, for I would like to have made my last goodbyes to them as well. At least their bodies were not among the slain, thank heaven, so the worst that could have happened to them was that they had become lost in this interminable warren of subterranean tunnels and chambers, and it was expected that Lukor's search parties would soon find them and bring them in.

The Jalathadar, under Captain Haakon, would remain here at Kuur until the occupation force was ready to depart for home. The other two surviving ships of the First Armada, the Tharkolian ornithopters Conqueress and Arkonna, somewhat battered during their capture by the Mind Wizards, but still skyworthy, were reprovisioned from the stores found in Kuur, and loaded with fighting men.

And so, the following dawn, we prepared to depart on the long voyage back to the known hemisphere of

Callisto. Led by the Xaxar, the Avenger, the Zarkoon, the Arkonna and the Conqueress made what must have been the mightiest aerial fleet ever to sail the golden skies of the Jungle Moon. What a grand and impressive sight the five stately galleons of the clouds must have made to the eyes of those who had gathered below to bid us farewell and safe voyage home! The skies of my native world have witnessed many a tremendous gathering of aircraft, but never, I feel certain, a spectacle more wondrous and superb than that we made as we spread our gigantic wings and soared over the valley and beyond the Peaks of Harangzar, dwindling to motes in the western skies.

Living conditions aboard the Xaxar were considerably more crowded on the voyage home than they had been on the expedition to Kuur. This, of course, was due to our having taken aboard a portion of the former prisoners whose release we had effected. Supplies of food and water would have been severely rationed, too, had it not been for the storerooms of Kuur from which we had appropriated according to our needs.

As before, I shared my small, crowded cabin with Dr. Abziz, young Taran, Glypto of Tharkol, and the faithful othode who would not leave my side. Our mood was greatly changed on this second voyage. During the flight into the unknown east an atmosphere of tension had existed: worries as to the nameless fate of our lost friends had exacerbated this suspenseful mood, and tempers had been short and easily frayed. The voyage home, however, was endured in a relaxed and jubilant mood, for we were victorious and all hazards and perils lay behind us now.

Even the vile-tempered little Soraban geographer and the rascally Tharkolian thief hit it off more comfortably. They had been more or less continually at each other's throats during the first voyage, but now that they had shared a bold adventure and an heroic battle together, something in the nature of a bond of comradeship could be discerned between them. Or perhaps I exaggerate; but anyhow, there was less sniping and arguing, and a feeling of mutual tolerance of the other's ways, however tenuous and temporary it might prove to be, could be observed.

With so many more hands aboard to share the various tasks and turn the great wheels that lent our vessel its motive power, there was less for all of us to do, and we had considerable leisure in which to become firmer friends. I spent many interesting and pleasurable hours getting to know Jandar and the other warriors who had been only names in a book to me. My fellow Earthling and I talked often together while the great wings of the Xaxar bore us effortlessly through the midnight skies of Thanator. We talked of our native world and of all the many exciting events which had occurred on Earth since Jandar had left it behind him forever to assume his adventurous career upon Callisto. And we discussed for hours the marvels and mysteries of this weird and strange and beautiful jungle world.

There were many things I did not know about Thanator, and I had many questions to ask. For while his narratives had revealed much about life on this planet in the recounting of his exploits and explorations and adventures, there still remained events he had not fully detailed and questions raised in the manuscripts which he had neglected to answer.*

Our homeward flight across the desolate wasteland was almost completely uneventful. We crossed the deserts and the mountains and soared above the great, jungle-girt plateau that was the homeland of Ylana's primitive tribe without so much as a single adventure to mar the peaceful serenity of the voyage, which, in fact, had begun to verge on boredom.

We flew past the Mountains of the Zarkoon for the second time, and again without so much as a single glimpse of the savage and monstrous winged cannibals which infested these peaks in such multitudes. As we approached the borders which separated the two hemispheres without incident, the bleak and barren landscape became gradually forested with weird black and scarlet trees, the hills and plains became carpeted with crimson sward again. It was almost with a feeling of anticlimax that we sighted the red stone walls of Tharkol on the misty horizon, and spied from afar the distant shores of the Corund Laj, the greater of the two land-locked seas of Callisto.

We moored above the swelling domes and soaring spires of the Scarlet City, remaining in Tharkol for the better portion of one entire day while the Tharkolian warriors and nobles gathered up their gear, made their farewells to their Shondakorian comrades, and descended in gigs to their homeland.

Dr. Abziz, clutching his precious instruments and charts and notes to his bosom, made his goodbyes. He retained a stiff and formal dignity in bidding me farewell, but he unbent just a trifle in saying goodbye to Taran and even tousled the grinning boy's hair with something approaching an avuncular affection. And I noticed with an inward smile that he ventured a tentative and gingerly pat on the head as he passed Bozo on his way out of the cabin. The great othode, who had long since become accustomed to the presence of the little man, seemed puzzled by his departure and whined a little, deep in his throat, as the Soraban left. I was thinking how unbearable would be the wrench of taking my own farewell of the faithful big fellow, and wondering if I could do it. I am unable to report what passed between Glypto and Abziz when they parted, for this scene took place on deck when I was not present. I'd like to think they parted as friends, but somehow I feel certain there was a final exchange of insults between them, if only just for old time's sake.

That evening we were guests of Queen Zamara at a feast given in our honor in her palace. I could fill this chapter with a description of the sumptuous and splendid hall in which we feasted among furnishings and hangings and appointments of gorgeous and barbaric magnificence, but I know that my words would fall far short of adequacy. Suffice it to say that I gorged myself on succulently spiced, delicious delicacies to a degree which more than made up for the rather rough and unappetizing cuisine the Xaxar's galley had been serving us. And I drained so many goblets of rare and exquisite wine in response to a succession of toasts in honor of our triumphs and victories that my memories of the last phases of this spectacular evening are, to say the very least, somewhat hazy.

We flew on later that evening, leaving two ships behind. Leagues of scarlet meadow-sward glided beneath our keels as the Xaxar and the Avenger and the Zarkoon floated through the night skies wondrously lit by the many colored moons.

Of our arrival, just before dawn, at Shondakor I shall say little here. The entire populace of the stone metropolis awoke to the exultant cry of golden trumpets as palace watchmen saw us winging through the night under the glorious moons. The streets became thronged with magical swiftness, and a mood of hilarity and joy filled the ancient city as thousands poured through the broad, tree-lined boulevard as if for some triumphant and long-awaited festival.

Darloona, radiant with tremulous joy, awaited us on the landing tier of the palace, which was crowded with happy faces. And a great cheer went ringing up against the stars from the throats of thousands when the lithe, bronzed, familiar figure of Prince Jandar appeared to their view. Still clad in warrior's tunic, his long sword at his side, the Prince of Shondakor crossed the marble rooftop to sweep the slender form of his thrice-beloved Princess into his embrace and to erase her tears and to seal her eager, laughing lips with his own.

It was well after dawn before any of us sought our couches. Each lost hero of the ill-fated first voyage had to be displayed to the throng from a great balcony which overlooked the great plaza, and loud and long the cheers rang out for Prince Valkar and his companions in captivity. No less full-throated was the acclaim with which the people of Shondakor welcomed home again those who had effected their rescue and thus put an end forever to the shadowy menace of the Mind Wizards-and grim Zantor and grizzled Thuron and the rest were hailed with that enthusiasm and love which nations reserve for their conquering heroes. Even little Glypto was vociferously acclaimed, for the villainous Tharkolian had come with us rather than lingering behind in Tharkol, where he and Abziz might have made their way by overland caravan to Soraba to make their reports to the Seraan.

Somewhat to my discomfort, I, too, received a share in the acclaim, and was greeted with an enthusiasm which seemed to me immoderate, since I had taken so small and unheroic a role in the destruction of Kuur.

At last the greetings were done and we sought our couches where peaceful slumber claimed us. And it seems to me that all adventure stories should end as happily as had ours, in homecoming and festival and heart-felt welcome. My two servants proudly escorted me into my apartments, and yawning, heavy-eyed Taran took Bozo for an early morning stroll through the walled gardens which adjoined my suite, while I relaxed, wearily letting my valet remove my warrior's gear, hang my weapons on their pegs, and help me into a sleeping robe. I sampled some of the refreshments which they had hastily laid out against whatever appetite the returning adventurer might have, but I was too sleepy to do more than nibble at them and drink a bit of wine, and even then it was more from politeness than hunger.

The morning skies were brilliant with the gold of day by now. When Taran returned with Bozo I could see the boy could hardly keep his eyes open any longer, so, rather than make him find his way through the maze of corridors to his own quarters, I bid my servant prepare a bed for him. And before long I stretched out under the coverlets myself with a huge yawn. Bozo threw himself down by the side of my couch with a deep sigh of contentment and I reached down to scratch the loose folds of purple fur behind his ears, where he liked to be petted, but before the caress was half completed I was asleep.

Chapter 20

FAREWELLS AND GREETINGS

We set out the next day on thaptor-back, skirting the borders of the Kumala, and rode for the jade slab amidst the scarlet sward. The expedition had returned in triumph and the adventure had come to a happy ending. There was no reason to prolong my return to Earth any further, and I was anxious to get home. I knew my wife would be worried about me and that my agent would be getting anxious, too. Business decisions would be piling up, contracts were waiting my signature, and there were books I wanted to write—this one in particular. I wanted to set down my memories of these people and my impressions of their strange and wonderful world while they were still fresh in my mind.

Zastro consulted the ephemeris, if I may call it that, whereby the old sage was able to predict when the golden ray of force would appear next and the Gate Between the Worlds would be open. Studying the complicated tables wherein the history of the phenomenon was recorded, he announced a date two days hence.

I suppose my departure from Shondakor may have seemed a bit precipitous—after all, the Armada had only arrived a few hours before I made my farewells—but sometimes it's best to do it thus. But to postpone my return to Earth until a later date would not make the farewell any easier.

And so we rode through cheering crowds and out the gates of Shondakor and across the stone bridge which spanned the gliding waters of the Ajand, and west across the grassy plains under the golden skies. Glypto and Taran and Zantor rode with me, and Jandar and Zastro and many more, and we were escorted by a contingent of the Jungle Legion, led by the stalwart young captain, Barin, who had first escorted me to Shondakor so many days before. Bozo loped along at my side, his short legs pumping furiously, looking up into my face from time to time with an unreadable expression in his bulging eyes.

“It will be hard saying goodbye to you, Taran, after all the adventures we have shared together,” I said to the boy who rode silently at my side, his face glum and downcast. He nodded mutely.

Jandar, who rode on my right, smiled understandingly.

“Taran has a home in Shondakor now,” the Prince said warmly, “and we will take care of him. He is old enough to become a cadet in the legions, and Lukor has promised to tutor him in swordsmanship. In no time at all he will be a brave and gallant young officer in command of many warriors. And we shall see to it that he has a man-sized sword from then on!”

The boy brightened at this exciting news. At his age it is almost impossible to stay sad or gloomy for very long—life is too filled with excitements and surprises.

“Really, Jandar-jan?” he chirped, “A sword of my own—and a place among the warriors?” Jandar solemnly assured him the promise would be faithfully kept. Thereafter, the boy rode along more cheerfully.

“I think you have one more goodbye to make, sir, which will be even harder,” Jandar said to me quietly, nodding his head at the great beast who waddled along beside my mount. I acknowledged the truth of his words with a sigh. It was going to hurt, parting with Bozo. I knew the poor othode could not understand

why I had to leave him behind; my departure would hurt him and he would mourn. It might even break his great, loyal heart, for the faithful fellow loved and trusted me completely. It wasn't going to make my heart comfortable, either, for I had grown very attached to him over all this time. But I had to leave him behind; I had no choice in the matter.

We rode along at an easy pace, talking little between us, and then only on inconsequential small matters. I felt downcast and morose-adventures ought not to end like this, I thought to myself sadly. But then I always hate goodbyes; anyway. Partings depress me. I love making new friends, but I hate saying farewell to them.

I was in such a glum, downbeat mood that I didn't really notice Bozo's peculiar behavior until it was pointed out to me later. The beast had been waddling along beside me during the beginning of our journey, but before long he began hanging back, staring into the jungle with intent interest and snuffling the air as if he sensed the presence of something which alerted his attention. The warriors of the Jungle Legion who rode behind our party as an escort said that while the othode seemed disturbed, he did not react as he would have to the presence of a dangerous predator. Had his sharp senses detected a danger he would have growled deep in his broad chest and his hackles would have risen.

He would linger behind, goggling eyes fixed on something in the underbrush, and he evinced a peculiar reluctance to turn aside from whatever it was in the jungle that had caught his attention. Many times Barin's men had to call back to him in order not to leave him behind.

We halted for a brief rest and a meal and it was during this rest stop that Bozo vanished entirely. He stood near me, staring fixedly into the thick bushes, ears at the alert, his whole body tense with strange excitement. I spoke to him absently and at the familiar sound- of my voice he turned mournful, pleading eyes upon me, and uttered a curious, eager whine. The next moment and he had gone. One leap carried him from the perimeter of our temporary camp into the underbrush at the edge of the Grand Kumala. The jungle swallowed him up. I called, but there came no answer.

When the time came for us to mount up and continue our journey, Bozo still had not returned. I lingered, turning a backwards glance toward the margin of the jungle, expecting at any moment to see that familiar burly body, those goggling eyes, and that froglike gash of mouth set with blunt, powerful tusks. But he did not appear.

"Perhaps it's better this way," Jandar said. "It's easier, at any rate. Maybe Bozo knew you two must part; maybe he couldn't bear it any better than you could."

"Maybe you're right," I said. "But I hate to go this way, without even saying goodbye. . ."

And so we rode on. There was nothing else to do.

That night we made camp at the jungle's edge and ate our rations by firelight. Bozo did not return by the time we lay down, rolled into our cloaks, and slept. By dawn, when we arose to ride on, he still had not returned.

Towards nightfall of the second day after leaving Shondakor, we made our last camp. It was near the edge of the Kumala, just within sight of the jade slab. We ate a cursory meal of cooked meat, dried fruit, black bread and yellow wine. By the flickering light of the campfire we dozed, waiting for the hour of the appearance of the ray, when the Gate would open.

"Another hour, perhaps two," Zastro said somberly. "A little after the rising of Ramavad."

“I wish I could take my gear with me,” I said as I regretfully set aside my tunic and weapons, and my long sword in its scabbard, emblazoned with the weird hieroglyph that was my Shondakorian coat-of-arms. “Still, I suppose it’s better that I don’t.”

Jandar took up my sword, the one Darloona had presented to me after my investiture. “We shall keep these safe for you, sir. Perhaps you will come back another day. . .”

“Perhaps,” I smiled.

Suddenly Taran plucked at my arm.

“Look there, Lankar-jan! There, by the jungle’s edge-“

Jandar peered, shielding his eyes against the glare of the campfire. “I can’t quite-“

“Why, it’s Bozo!” cried Barin in surprise.

And so it was! The great beast stood, hesitating at the edge of the jungle, watching us.

“Aye, ‘tis the dear beast himself,” little Glypto croaked. “But what be that other with him?”

We looked. Beyond Bozo, where he stood a little ways down the slope, staring at us with goggling eyes, sad yet oddly happy, too, and oddly shamefaced, was another. A second othode, purple-furred and rotund, eyes goggling at us warily, lingered just within the margin of the underbrush. The second beast looked much like Bozo, but there were a few differences; for one, -it was a bit smaller and more slenderly built, less broad in the chest, less burly in the shoulder. And for another-

“Why, it’s a female!” Jandar laughed. And so it was: and suddenly the glum, melancholy mood that had gripped us all this time broke in delighted laughter. Bozo had not fled because he could not endure to be parted from me; he had sensed a female othode in the woods, and had gone to her, obeying the age-old call of blood to blood, of male to female.

“ ‘The call of the wild,’ I guess,” Jandar chuckled.

“Yes! Or maybe ‘springtime for Bozo’ says it best,” I laughed. I went towards the place where Bozo stood, and called him. He came waddling to me, growling over his shoulder to the female, who lurked timidly just beyond the brush, watching us. I got down on my knees and embraced him. The great brute sighed and rubbed his wrinkled brow against me, burrowing into my chest, and licked my face.

“Well, then, big boy; well, then! You’ve found a lady othode for yourself, have you? I guess she needs you more than I do, you old Bozo, you! Goodbye, now, old fellow. Be a good boy. . . .”

I rubbed the place behind his ears and he closed his great eyes in bliss and grumbled deep in his throat. Then his lady-friend whined from the edge of the shrubbery and, reluctantly, he pulled himself out of my arms and went trotting into the woods, but with many a backwards glance. He paused for a long moment on the edge of the jungle. Then the forest swallowed him up.

Behind me the night lit up with golden glory, and I turned away from my last sight of Bozo and said my farewells.

“It is time, Prince Lankar,” said Zastro.

I nodded, and began removing my garments.

The bottom of the jade-lined well was matted with fallen leaves which were crisp and sharp against my bare hide. Above me, the circular opening was filled with brilliant stars. Soon, when my calls had roused the camp, it was ringed with staring faces which soon broke into delighted grins. The Cambodian native boys had seldom seen a naked white man at the bottom of a well, and I suppose it was an absurd spectacle.

They got me out of the well and Sir Malcolm tossed an old army blanket about my shoulders, wrapping it about me against the chill of the jungle night. And then Noel was there, laughing and weeping at the same time, hugging and kissing me, her cheeks wet against my face.

“About time you got back!” she smiled through happy tears. “I’d begun to think you’d settled down with some Callistan princess! Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” I said, “and the Callistan princesses are all spoken for already, so you didn’t have to worry. I’m sorry it took me so long to get back home, but I couldn’t manage it any quicker. Honey, I hope you didn’t worry about me too much”

Sir Malcolm broke up the circle of grinning natives with a roar, and sent them scurrying about their business. Noel and I went off to our tent, arms about each other’s waist, talking happily.

“We found your rings at the bottom of the well,” she said. “I have them safe. Your clothes, too.”

“So you guessed what happened to me, then?”

“Of course! And if that beam of light had come on again, maybe I would have come after you. I don’t know why you should have all the exciting things happen to you—I’d like an adventure or two, all to myself! You’ve got to tell me everything that happened”

“I will,” I said. We entered the tent and I exchanged the old army blanket for the clothing I had left behind me so many days before.

“You certainly look in fine shape,” my wife observed seriously, examining me with thoughtful eyes. “You’ve put on a few pounds; and you’ve even gotten a tan. How did you manage to stand it all that time with no cigarettes?”

“It wasn’t easy,” I laughed. “But when you’re three hundred and ninety million miles away from the nearest cigarette machine, you damn well get accustomed to doing without! Ahh—and here’s something else I missed!” Sir Malcolm’s native cook had thrust open our tent flap to grin his hello and to offer me a steaming tin cup of coffee. It smelled indescribably delicious, the aroma suddenly stimulating my taste buds, filling my mouth with saliva. I took a long swallow of the hot beverage, and it seemed to me that I had never drunk anything more delicious in my life.

My wife watched as I downed the coffee with gusto, relishing every drop. Her head was tilted a little on one side, so that her dark blonde hair fell over one cheek. She smiled fondly.

“The cigarettes are in the duffel bag,” she said, “if you want some.”

I was tempted powerfully; but the urge to smoke had died out many days ago, and I had long since ceased to miss the taste.

“I’ve gone without them for weeks, now, and I’ve gotten used to it. Guess I’ll keep it up for a while; you always wanted me to stop smoking, anyway, remember?”

She marveled at this display of willpower. Then she threw back her head and laughed, long hair tousling on her shoulders.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing . . . nothing at all! I was just thinking- the way you smoke, it would take something as unprecedented as a surprise trip to the fifth moon of Jupiter, to get you to give ‘em up!”

Our return tickets had been bought and paid for before we had left New York, but we hadn’t made return reservations, not knowing just when we would want to leave. So we hadn’t forfeited the tickets or missed our flight. And when at last we did get home to take up the orderly confusion of our everyday lives, it was to be greeted by several hysterical dogs who had been wondering where we were and why the familiar routine of their lives had been so thoroughly disrupted, and by my sister-in-law who was grateful to be able to turn the care and feeding of the mutts back into our hands again, and by my agent who had been fretting over my prolonged absence while frantically stalling publishers whose contracts were sitting on his desk unsigned, awaiting my signature.

“Some vacation that was,” my wife grumbled one evening, sprawled wearily on the living room couch in front of the tv, after a day of housekeeping. “I’ll never be able to understand how I can work myself to the bone before we go away, getting the house cleaned up so we can leave it-then come back and work myself to the bone getting it cleaned up all over again. Mysterious stuff!”

“I guess so,” I said. “But it was fun, wasn’t it? The mysterious East-exotic Phnom Penh-the Lost City of Arangkor,”

“Sure,” she grinned. “There I was, stuck in the middle of the jungle, eating canned soup and fighting off mosquitos as big as horses, and looking my best in a set of baggy khakis splashed up to here with mud-and there you were, gallivanting around Callisto, fighting Mind Wizards and rescuing people, with a bunch of Callistan princesses giving you the eye!”

“I told you before, there weren’t -any princesses,” I reminded her.

“Maybe! But when you get to talking about the trip, sometimes you get all musty-eyed and tendervoiced

“I guess I do,” I admitted. “I can explain that, though. Remind me to tell you about Bozo, sometime.”

“ ‘Bozo’? Well, that’s more like it. I can’t imagine a princess named Bozo. Is it this mysterious Bozo you miss so badly?”

“Yep.” And I began to tell her the whole story. And when I was finished her suspicions were allayed. After all, even wives can’t very well feel jealous of sixlegged, purple-furred othodes.

A POSTSCRIPT

This book was written over the next few months after we returned to Hollis. The typescript was all finished, handcorrected, and about ready to be handed in to my editor at Dell when the letter arrived with the Phnom Penh postmark. It had appeared in the well and Sir Malcolm had forwarded it along to me.

The letter was written in a familiar hand with a thaptor quill pen in watery ink on dun-colored parchment. It read like this:

Shondakor,

9thxapac, 20thchore, fifth day of third zome. Dear Mr. Carter,

We hope you arrived in Cambodia safely and that Mrs. Carter was not too distraught at your lengthy absence. By now you must be back in New York working on new books.

Your friends here all ask to be remembered to you. That rascal Glypto has been making life miserable for poor old Abziz. Lukor and the others have returned, the missing Mind Wizard is dead, and Ylana and Tomar are back safely-I'll tell you all about it when I have a chance to write you at length. Taran is a cadet in training with the legions, and is having the time of his life.

Just the other day we were out hunting along the edges of the Kumala, and who should appear but Bozo! He wouldn't let anybody else near him, but seemed glad to see me. And took my sleeve in his mouth and drew me over to the edge of the woods. Then he growled and before long Mrs. Bozo came out of the brush, still very timid of people.

She was shy, but the pups were anything but! Yes, the pups (there is no other word for them, if you can imagine fat miniature Bozos about eleven inches long, scarcely able to toddle). There are eight of them in all, four little boy-pups and four little girl-pups, and the cutest fat little fellows imaginable!

They came waddling right up to be petted and licked my hands and sniffed at my ankles and in general behaved with complete fearlessness-under the proud eyes of Bozo, who sat with tongue lolling, grinning froggishly all the while, and under the more-than-slightly-nervous eyes of their mother, who doesn't hold with human beings at all and seemed convinced I would kidnap her babies on the spot. She didn't relax until a whuff! from their father sent them waddling back to her side.

Just thought you'd like to know how things turned out. So the Bozo mystery is solved, and there's another story with a happy ending for you.

Very best wishes, JANDAR OF CALLISTO

