

Morgo The Mighty

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Chapter 1: She of the Three Heads

It all began that night in Darjeeling. Had I been anywhere else, I should never have seen Kanchenjunga's icy breasts nor her torrid heart; I should never have known Morgo nor the love of Nurri Kala – I should never have believed that an evil as great as Zorimi's existed in this world. Yet all this did come to pass because of one man's death and another's insatiable vanity.

We were in the Nepal Bar, Jim Craig and I. He was drunker than the proverbial lord, and myself, sitting across the hooker-rimmed table from him, enjoyed no less a degree of eminence.

"Boy!"

Craig bellowed like a bull.

"Set up another round for me and McRory! Be quick, you black scut!"

Haste is an unseemly mannerism in Darjeeling but the white-coated servant was galvanized into action by Craig's bull-elephant trumpeting. Two whiskey and sodas materialized between our fingers and we put them where they belonged.

"It's diamonds I'm telling you of, McRory!" Craig was saying in a lower tone. "Not diamonds like you think of them – pebbles and pips of stones – but mountains of the rock – a solid wall of it. I'll be as rich as that guy – Croesus – richer, I'll swear!"

"And where are they, Jim?" I asked for the hundredth time.

"That I'll not be telling the likes of you, Jerry McRory!" Craig snapped pettishly. "Drink with me – but don't pry into my secrets!"

"Secrets, is it!" I laughed. "Tell me the floor of the Sikkim is diamond-laid. Diamonds! It's the drink that's giving you fancies, Jim. If you had a genuine secret you'd not keep it, for you're not that kind of man, Jim Craig."

"Liar you call me!" Craig heaved his six feet of brawn from his chair and hung over me, closing his brutish fists. "You'd give the lie to a Craig!"

"Sure," I grinned up at him. "I don't believe a word of your prattlings!"

I was not afraid of any Craig out of Ireland, for I'm a McRory.

The big fellow thought better of rashness and smiled weakly. "Well, I can't be blaming you, Jerry. It does sound like a five pound trout out of a one-pound brook. But so help me – it's the truth that I speak."

"Sit down and have a drink on me," I said. "And we'll talk of something more sensible than mountains of diamonds."

He did sit down, and after a pause, in which he collected his wits, he began to talk. "I'll have you know, Jerry, that it's God's truth that I utter – there are diamonds – a solid wall of that ice."

"I suppose you've found a map?" I chided him. "Tell me the old-map story – how the beggar in Port Said sold it to you for a sou!"

"'Tis no map, McRory!" he said heatedly. He looked about him and, noting that the nearest drinker was two tables away, he fiddled with the buttons of his khaki shirt. "Look, Jerry – look!"

Caught tight to his hairy chest with adhesive tape was what the Egyptians call a pectoral – a sort of insignia worn by the old Pharaohs as a symbol of high rank and blood. But what Jim Craig wore was not of Egyptian design but something cruder, a thinnish piece of crystal shaped like a heart out of which protruded three heads – a woman's and on either side of it, a lizard's and a bat's.

"Looks like crystal," I commented, "Ancient stuff, too."

"Crystal me eye!" Craig chuckled, buttoning up his shirt. "It's diamond. The biggest flat diamond you ever laid eyes on!"

I winked at him, incredulously. "Where did you steal it?"

"I found it, you red-headed baboon!" he replied, his gaze never flinching. "It's the key to the place that's lousy with its like." For a moment the liquor clouded his thoughts and he muttered, "I heard it from his own lips when he was asleep – and God knows he never lies – asleep or awake."

"So a sleepwalker gave it to you, Jim?"

"Mind your tongue, McRory! But wait a month here, my fine fellow, and when I come back the eyes'll pop out of your head. I'll be showing you diamonds then!"

"If I waited here a month, Jim," I said, waving my hand to the bar, "My liver would be floating away. But tell me, do you walk to this diamond mine of your dreams?"

"Sure I don't. I'm flying – and in the morning at that." His drooping, drink-laden eyelids flashed wide open, the fierce look on his face startling me.

"What have I been telling you, McRory? I'm soused."

"I know that – and with diamonds!"

"Diamonds?" he muttered, sobriety coming into his eyes. "What nonsense was I mumbling?"

"You talked of bedazzling me with the shiny stuff."

His right paw clapped itself to his chest and a finger slipped beneath his shirt, touching that thing with the three heads. He felt reassured and grinned sheepishly.

"I'm daft with this stuff," he said, tapping his glass. "I'll be pushing off to my trundle bed."

"I'm to hear no more about the wall of diamond? Let me play with that toy under your shirt – she with the three heads!" I kidded him.

“Hush your mouth, McRory. Is there no sense beneath that red skull of yours? It was the liquor weaving dreams in my addled head. I know of no diamonds nor – ” His glance went to a shadow that fell across our table.

A tall aristocratic gentleman with the lean nose of a condor was standing just behind Craig’s chair. His hand fell upon my friend’s shoulder paternally. “Hello, Jim! I’ve been looking all over for you. I might have thought of the Nepal Bar sooner.”

“Kenvon,” Craig started perceptibly, but he did not look up. “Have a drink? Sit down. Meet an old friend, Jerry McRory. He flies too.” He presented the newcomer as his boss, Mr. Kenvon.

The condor-nose bowed with clicking heels. I got up and gave my own worn heels a snap together, inclining from the hips as formally as he had. Could this be Edgar B. Kenvon, the millionaire man of mystery from New York? He didn’t look like thirty cents in his baggy tweeds. Hadn’t I heard why he was in Darjeeling? To be sure! I remembered when the fumes settled in my pate: he was planning a flight over Kanchenjunga, that glittering crown of the Himalayas only a thousand feet lower than haughty Everest. So my pal Jim Craig was hooked up with him – as pilot probably.

What Jim Craig’s business was in Darjeeling I didn’t know. I hadn’t troubled to ask. The sight of him there in the Nepal Bar, his fingers wrapped around a glass, was too good – after seven long years – so we had talked of those seven years until he got onto the line about his diamonds.

“I’m pleased to meet a fellow airman,” Kenvon said, loftily. “And a friend of Jim’s. Are you flying in these parts, Mr. McRory?”

“I was. I came up from Bombay with a party of tourists in a De Haviland,” I explained. “One of them, a fellow named Jespersen, took the bus up yesterday and God knows where he landed. He was no flyer. So I’m waiting here – and comfortably – for word from the search party.”

Kenvon nodded. He had heard of my passenger’s ill-advised solo. Jespersen was probably tempting carrion by this time, dangling with the wreckage on some jungle treetop, he added.

“By the way, Jim,” Kenvon said to Craig in a lower voice. “We’ve had a burglar at the hangar.”

“The saints protect us!”

“Some valuables of mine are gone. But the machine is untouched.”

“The saints be thanked!”

“I’ve lost something very precious. Did you notice any loiterers around the place today?”

“No – no, boss, I didn’t. Now what would anyone be wanting with your property, up here at the end of civilization?”

“I said it was something very precious, Jim.” There was a cold metallic ring in Kenvon’s voice. “It was an antiquity I picked up in Delhi. Something I prized.”

Craig shook his head dumbly, sadly. Kenvon watched him an instant and then regarded me with marked suspicion. My glass was empty – as usual – but I raised it to my lips and pretended to drink while I avoided Kenvon’s eyes. I could read in them that he was talking about the loss of that thing with three heads. I’ve hunches like that. His condor nose twitched as though scenting spore.

“I’m taking off at dawn, Jim,” Kenvon went on. “I’ll be needing you and your wits then, so you’d better knock off here. Call it a night and turn in. We have a long day ahead of us.”

“I know – I’m going home now, boss.”

Craig got up and shook hands with me, muttering a fond cheerio.

“Are you coming my way, boss?”

“No, I’ll stop for a drink with McRory. I’ll awaken you at sunup. Lacrosse and Harker are asleep in my shack. You take the hanger cot again. I’m worried about that theft. Someone might mean to harm the plane – to mess up our flight. All the world has its eyes on us, Jim. We’re tackling a big thing tomorrow.”

“Don’t I know it!”

Craig grinned and he lumbered out of the Nepal Bar. Kenvon watched his every step while I ordered two more whiskey-and-sodas.

The condor nose sat down opposite me, transfixed me with hawkish eyes and demanded bluntly enough: “What was Craig talking about with you, McRory?”

I met his inquisitive glance. “The war, of course. We were in the same American outfit in France. We swapped yarns and guzzled the stuff for old times’ sake. Hadn’t met in seven years til tonight.”

The man did not believe a word I uttered, I knew. “You’re in commercial flying now, I take it. I’m something of a flyer myself.” He spoke this last a trifle childishly, proudly.

“Somewhat – since the big scrap. And I’ve done some military flying, too.”

I proceeded to tell him what I had done in the air. Planes were my bread and butter. I knew them as a watchmaker knows his Swiss movements. All this I recounted to the condor nose. He nodded, pleased and understanding.

“Where do you stay in Darjeeling, Mr. McRory?”

I pointed to the ceiling beyond the punkahs that stirred the warm tobacco-filled air. “Always over a bar. Upstairs.”

Kenvon quizzed me about different types of planes, particularly the new Junkers G-38, that tailless model just out of Germany. Could it stand a high gale? Was it good on altitude? Was it easy to handle? I said “yes” to these questions, adding that I had piloted one over Munich for a German company. I assured him that I could fly anything that went up in the air, except certain women who were naturally intractable. We had another drink together and he left me.

I paid my score and, as usual, Craig’s, and before turning in, decided on a stroll for a lungful of outer night. Outside, I started down the street, life returning to my rebellious limbs. It was a starry night, cool and sweet, such as one can only find in the silences of India, that vast mysterious triangle jutting into tropical seas. A breeze was stirring the trees on the edge of town. The morrow promised to be a fine flying day. Jim Craig had fine weather ahead of him – for whatever he and Kenvon were up to.

I stopped on the edge of a clearing and looked up at Orion, that glorious huntsman of the heavens. What a sight for eyes tired of hot suns and parched greenery. A million diamonds hung on the underside of dark-blue velvet!

Orion vanished and I leaped upward into sudden darkness.

When I opened my eyes again, my head was throbbing, threatening to split itself open. Nimble fingers were scurrying through my pockets, under my shirt, over my money belt. We McRorys have hard heads as a matter of history, for none were broken on the Boyne, though many were cracked, and I was once more in full possession of my few wits.

The man who bent over me was a native with an unusually large head. His fetid breath fanned my cheeks. Without a second thought, my hands went up and closed around his bull neck. He choked and as I swung him on his back, the silvery flash of a knife darted across the starlit heavens.

It took all of my might to avoid that deadly blade. But I did. In another moment I was astride the man, crushing away the breath of him, watching his tongue and eyes pop at me. The knife hand went limp and the body stilled – though life stayed in it.

Three natives came down the road as I got to my feet, rubbing the back of my head. They took one look at the big-headed man and fled into town shrieking: *“Dakait! Dakait!”*

I guessed as much myself. The fellow was a dacoit – one of that skilled band of thuggee from Burma, an adept at thievery and murder. And I wondered on my way back to the Nepal Bar why he had beset me.

Then I remembered the burglary in Kenvon’s hangar. Something funny was up in Darjeeling. The hunch was in my bones. Jim Craig must be warned. Instead of turning into my hostelry, I went on to the hangar, the location of which I had a fair idea. It was at the other end of town on the edge of the flying field.

I hove in sight of the place after a ten minutes’ brisk walk.

The hangar was dark, but I was drawn to a window by a strange moving light. It was that of a torchlight seeking a goal. The window was dirty, but I managed to see inside – into a far corner beyond the bulk of a huge black bird.

A man – a native – was standing over a cot, a light in his hand full upon the sleeper. It was Jim Craig. My friend was supine, untroubled by the glare in his face. The native’s fingers ripped open Craig’s shirt and ripped the three-headed thing from the adhesive tapes that held it to his hairy chest.

He stepped back from the cot, studying the three-headed thing with the light. It glistened, I swear, with an unholy light.

I cried out. The light was doused.

I had seen a knife upright in Jim Craig’s heart.

Chapter 2: Kanchenjunga

By the time I aroused Kenvon, Harker and Lacrosse in the shack I found next to the hangar and got open the front gates, there was no sign of the murdering dacoit or his knife. A rear, unbolted door, showed us how he left. The ooze of blood from Craig’s mortal wound showed us what he had done. Jim Craig was dead.

There was nothing to be done but notify the police. Harker did this via the phone in the shack. I stayed on at the hangar and gave my story to the Indian officials who presently turned up in a flivver.

They were amazed that dacoitry dared to show its head in the face of the British government – but there was nothing they could do about it. The attack upon me equally bewildered them. It was suggested that I might have been mistaken – for my breath was heavy laden. But they could not deny the fact of poor Jim Craig's stark body.

I was driven back to the Nepal Bar in the flivver. Cheery good nights echoed under the starlight and I went up to my bed.

Sleep did not come easily, and I tossed, worried and wondering. Some weird devilry had touched me. Craig's having had that three-headed thing, Kenvon's obvious loss of it, the attack on me, and the murder, all of it had a significance that was beyond my humble fathomings. My locked door gave me no sense of security.

Lord knows what time it was went I finally dozed off. Nightmares rather than sleep were my lot. That big-headed dacoit haunted me. "She of the Three Heads" dazzled me with her unholy light. I could see that knife handle sticking out of Jim's breast – dacoits surrounded me, took to ramming in my door –

Someone was pounding on my door.

"Who's there?" I shouted, running to my bag and fishing out my old service automatic.

"It's I – Kenvon. Open up, please."

I bade him wait a moment while I slipped into a dressing gown and pocketed the gun.

Kenvon was pale and drawn. He shook my hand and pinched his condor nose, watching me thoughtfully.

"Wasn't that bad about poor Jim! I don't get it at all. First a burglary, then a murder in the hangar."

I said that I was just as puzzled. He met my searching gaze and sat me down on the bed beside him.

"It is very urgent that I make the flight I planned, at dawn," he said, clipping his words sharply. He was a man used to giving orders. "Craig was to have been my pilot. Will you take his place, McRory?"

I told him that other business held me in Darjeeling. Word about the missing De Haviland and its occupant, Harvey Jesperson, the New York, diamond buyer, was awaited. The company was sending a search plane up from Bombay. Jesperson was three kinds of a fool – but an important personage to boot.

"I can arrange things," he said. "We'll only be gone a day. I must have an experienced pilot. And I'll deposit ten thousand dollars to your credit in any New York bank you care to name."

Now I ask you – who am I to think twice about earning ten thousand dollars for a day's flying? The searchers mightn't report for another day or two. The plane from Bombay mightn't get to Darjeeling before evening or the following morning. This was the biggest money ever thrust upon me in all my thirty-two years of bread winning.

"Sure I'll take the job!" I said. "What time do you start?"

"I'll send over for you at five o'clock."

With that he bade me good night a third time and departed.

Kenvon's coming had relieved my fears somehow and, when I put my head to the pillow again, I slept the sleep of the conscienceless.

The first rosy tints of the dawn found me clambering over my monoplane, the weird-looking Junkers G-38, huge and of a one-hundred-and-ten-foot wing spread, without a tail and with the face of a square-eyed bat.

“Hell,” I muttered to myself while I inspected the control board for the last time, “if ever there was a wild-goose chase, I’m on it!”

Perhaps Jim Craig was luckier dead than faced with what I had before me. Kenvon was taking this tailless ship on a junket five miles above the earth – to what end? The advancement of science and aviation or the mere indulgence of a millionaire’s whim?

Of all the fool ideas, this was the prize winner – wanting to penetrate a cave in the southeastern face of the towering Kanchenjunga, the next highest peak to Everest, that “King of the Himalayas”. Kenvon assured me in hurried snatches of conversation that he wanted to wrest fame and glory from the Dyhrenfurth Expedition by not only dropping the flag on the summit but by going the very heart of of Kanchenjunga, that skyscraping majesty of rock and glacier, which like Everest, had flung puny man from its sides, keeping its glorious cloud-caressed pinnacle inviolate.

The hugeness of this four-motor Junkers gave a small sense of security that wavered only when I lifted my eyes above the jungle wall to the dimly veiled peaks of Helu and Timbila in the north. I knew these G-38s – but would this one stand those titanic gales that had been sharpening Kanchenjunga’s icy breast for dozens of centuries?

“Well, McRory,” I mused, “if Kenvon, Lacrosse, and Harker aren’t worrying about their necks, why should you? You’ve got but one neck to give for adventure and you might as well offer it up willingly – considering the ten thousand bucks you stand to win. The Germans didn’t break it in 1918, nor did the Riffians nor the Nicaraguans nor the Mexicans – nor Clancy’s safety-pin busses in his flying circus out of Omaha.

But somehow monkeying around a little known mountain peak between Nepal and Tibet at an altitude of twenty-nine thousand feet was still another matter. Men of old believed that mountains grew angry like humans when their sanctity was violated. I’m superstitious – but of Irish extraction – and I couldn’t help but think of the innumerable live high crests had claimed.

I worried about the tonnage of the petrol, the elaborate lighting system on the black wings, the powerful searchlight, the store of foodstuffs and firearms. We were only going for a day – and provisioned for a month’s stay. Was Kenvon keeping something from me?

Grant Harker, a pleasant-faced geologist from Harvard whose job it was to size up Kanchenjunga’s age-old clothing in notes and photographic plates, climbed into the plane through the trap door.

“Well, McRory, my boy,” he beamed, “I guess we’re about ready to push off.”

“How’s your neck?”

“Like Barkis, it’s willin’,” he laughed. “My insurance and Kenvon’s bonus cover this flight, so the wife and kiddies back home have nothing to worry about, except me.”

Through the ports I could see the mechanics going over my black bird inch by inch, testing the four wheels, the stays to the wings, the guides, the propellor blades, the struts. Their eyes missed not a detail of this G-38 and the three of them fondled the Diesels tenderly.

Kenvon of the condor nose came out of the hangar followed by dozens of well-wishers, Indian officials, newspaper correspondents and camera men. His aristocratic figure was clad in an all leather flying outfit and a padded helmet dangled from his arm. I, in a tweed golf suit, leather riding boots and a heavy fleece-lined wind breaker, envied him his swank.

Sam Lacrosse, cartographer and professor of natural history at Princeton – a gangling fellow – brought up Kenvon's wake. It was up to him to spot the flora and fauna of Kanchenjunga from the air and write the New York papers all about it.

On reaching the trapdoor, Kenvon turned and began addressing the assembled crowd, tanned faces still full of sleep in India's early light. "Folks, I'm off in ten minutes. The wind is just right, the pilot tells me – and it promises to be a blooming day in May. We've only got about fifty miles to go, as the crow flies, to reach the beautiful but cruel Kanchenjunga. We'll climb five miles toward God's ceiling to reach our objective – Kanchenjunga's brow and the Door of Surrilana."

The Door of Surrilana! That name was news to me. I took it he meant the cave he hoped to enter, if I was willing to risk it.

"First," he went on, "we'll circle the pinnacle at an altitude of about twenty-eight thousand one hundred and fifty feet and drop Old Glory upon it. What a surprise that will be for Professor Dyhrenfurth's party, if they ever reach the summit and behold our flag there! They passed through the Jongri and the Kang-La Passes and are making the ascent already, having left early in April. Yet in one day *I* will do what they are attempting to do in months."

Dyhrenfurth, I had heard, was trekking it with a party of internationally renowned Alpine climbers and an army of Sherpa-Nepalese, Tibetan and Lepcha porters. His way lay through the Sikkim to the glaciers where footwork was more feasible.

Out of the torrid jungles they would climb into arctic barrenness into a world of rock and ice – treacherous, relentless ice that had already taken a toll of six lives and repelled several other expeditions.

"After studying the summit," Kenvon was saying, "I will descend some eight thousand feet to seek the entrance to a vast chain of inner caverns about which I alone have information. That the Himalayas are honeycombed with caverns is the theory of the Royal Geographic Society in London. Elaborate tests have been conducted in planetaria demonstrating the hollow condition of the world's greatest range.

"I will make this flight without landing. If we are forced to such an extremity I am amply prepared to make a fight back to civilization on foot – having sufficient stores and arms to get through ice, rock and the jungles of the Sikkim." He stretched out his arms to his listeners.

"And now, gentlemen, au revoir till this evening."

Harker and I had to climb out of the plane, and with Kenvon and Lacrosse, pose for the cameraman before its black beauty – that the world a week later might behold our intrepid faces over the breakfast table in rotogravure sections and tabloids. Flash lights popped, as Indian officials made a short speech bidding us Godspeed and we all climbed up through the trap.

Kenvon seated himself beside me and adjusted his brand-new helmet. I pulled a pair of old automobile goggles over my head and was glad they were smoked. The sun on the ice would be dazzling.

"All set, McRory?" Kenvon asked with a smile. "I am."

"All set," I reported. "I've been over this bus and it's shipshape."

The mechanics were at the side cranks behind the propellers.

"Switch off, sir."

“Switch off,” I said. How like the old days behind the lines in France before going over to strafe! Curt efficiency! Keyed up nerves!

“Contact, sir.”

“Contact.”

There was a sputtering in the motors and then they belched forth a terrible roar, flaying the tall grass with a steady, cyclonic wind. While I warmed these, the B motors were started and at the end of five minutes, I signaled through an open port for gangway.

The Junkers swung over the field, lumbering with its heavy load of fuel and human beings. Faster – faster – faster, till the fuselage was horizontal with the floor of the field. We neared the edge of the jungle wall. Would she go up – over that wall?

I drew the stick back and slowly my black bird raised herself from mother earth, skimming the treetops of the forests. We met the May sun coming out from behind the hills in China. It was warm and bright and its light threw Helu and Timbila into a relief of silver glitter. “A good omen!” Kenvon shouted. “The sun is up with me!”

Phallukla’s grubby head shot past us in the west.

We hung over the Rathong Valley and the Great Rangit River, the early course of Dyhernfurth’s party. Fascinated by this glimpse of verdant Nepal beneath my feet, I made no effort to climb.

“I say,” Harker yelled to Kenvon, “now tell us about this map of yours.”

I saw Kenvon draw a leather wallet from his inner pocket and take from it a grimy, torn piece of parchment. On it was traced a crude topography of the Sikkim and Kanchenjunga. A cross marked on face of the mountain wall on its southeastern face.

“This was found by Professor Cartavan,” Kenvon explained, “in the Nepalese jungle in 1914. The map was in a chamois skin case. How it got there is a matter of conjecture, but it was drawn, undoubtedly, by one who had crawled up Kanchenjunga’s sides. In one corner in a barely legible handwriting is a description of a cavern accessible through the Door of Surrilana, a cavern described as vaster than the plains of Kansas.”

The map was in Kenvon’s lap close beside me. I could not help but see a portion of the writing and the name “Zorimi” stood out boldly. I asked what it meant.

“I don’t know,” Kenvon said. “I’d like to find out.”

This map annoyed me. Were we going on a wild-goose chase because of a mysterious map found in the jungle? Why, I had kidded poor Jim Craig only the night before about “the old map story”! All through the East beggars and derelicts are ever willing to sell you a map giving the whereabouts of buried treasure and the like. They concoct the topography themselves – and are hundreds of miles away when you reach your futile goal, if you are fool enough to believe in such maps.

I looked up into my mirror at Harker and Lacrosse behind me. Their tanned faces had paled. They, too, had become horribly skeptical of Kenvon’s source of information concerning what lay beyond the Door of Surrilana.

“You should have confided this to us before,” Harker snapped. “Surely you don’t believe in that map, Kenvon?”

“It’s a hoax!” Lacrosse cried. “Right now we vote to eliminate flying into any caves!”

“I see to reason why Cartavan should hoax me,” Kenvon said impetuously. “He is a man of repute. I paid well for this chart.”

My heart wanted to take a seat in my mouth. The millionaire had been hoaxed by an impecunious professor whose cleverly faked map had inflamed Kenvon’s adventurous imagination. Shades of Rider Haggard and King Solomon’s mines. I was dealing with a nut!

While they argued, I worked with my stick. The black bird glided by Long Jong and the Jongri Pass. The altimeter registered thirteen thousand one hundred forty feet – the height of Long Jong’s snowy crest. I turned on the electric heaters to warm up the cabin.

Kabru rushed at us through the mists the sun was dispelling. The Junkers went up – twenty – twenty-one – to twenty-four thousand feet – four miles above sea level. The blood teemed in my ears and a weakness assailed the pit of my stomach which I placated with effort. I could see that Lacrosse was bleeding through the nose. We expected that in such a rarified altitude.

The black bird slid between Kabru and The Dome and before us a still higher wall flung itself heavenward, its rock a sheen of icy whiteness, blinding me temporarily with a celestial glare that vied with the purity of the blue vault above us.

“There she is!” I cried, pointing through my port, “Dead ahead!”

“Kanchenjunga!” Kenvon screamed ecstatically. “Never before has man seen such a marvelous sight! I am the first to see her from the heavens!”

Breathless, with throbbing heads, we four were held spellbound by this world in the skies. Earth was now denied us by a fleecy sea of rippling, cream-white clouds.

“I wonder if heaven is as swell a sight?” Harker sighed.

“I wish I could paint it!” Lacrosse said. Thrusting Kenvon aside, he swung his camera close to the forward port and took several shots of Kanchenjunga’s majestic bosom.

One eye on the mountain, one on the altimeter, I climbed. Twenty-five thousand. Twenty-six! We were over the Talung Saddle. Shrieking winds flung their mighty breaths into our bird’s face and buffeted the Junkers as though it were a bobbing cork on a mill race.

We pitched – slid dangerously. I feared for our lack of tail as we dropped a thousand feet. Face with an imminent crash against Kanchenjunga’s thighs, the Junkers bucked and rolled and pitched like a tramp in a November sea on the north Atlantic.

The Talung glacier, spotless white, grinned with cruel, jagged and glimmering teeth, grinned up at us through a rift in the white foam.

I climbed as best I could – twenty-seven thousand – twenty-eight. We were flush with Kanchenjunga’s crown of icy cathedral spires – twenty-eight five hundred – I prayed the altimeter wouldn’t bust. In the distance was Everest’s higher coronet, lofty, proud, merciless.

“Go over it!”

Kenvon shrieked like one possessed. “Go over it, I say! I’m a conqueror – conquering a great mountain. I’ll subdue Everest another day!”

Nuts, that's what he was, I told myself. Twenty-nine thousand feet – my head swam – nausea gripped me and I fought to hold the stick in my frozen hands. Consciousness tried to leave me. My nose and ears were wet with running blood. The frigidity was intensely painful – the electric heaters were impotent against this chill that only Titans could withstand.

Kanchenjunga passed beneath us – beneath the first mortal men. We were speechless, not from fear or illness, but from sheer ecstasy. Beauty and conquest alone kept our blood from freezing.

I guided the plane through the gales above the Zemu Glacier. We circled Siniolchum, seven thousand feet below, a mere speck beneath our frost-bitten feet. We were five miles over God's terra firma.

"Now go back – to the highest peak in Kanchenjunga!" Kenvon gasped by way of command.

He busied himself with the weighted flag, the American colors fastened to a heavy balled spike. Lacrosse took picture after picture, his fingers bleeding when their cold skin touched the hard camera. Harker made copious notes with a trembling hand. Myself, I was content to drink in a beauty that only challenged that of Ireland's lakes in the springtime, and simultaneously, to curse the arctic weather.

We dropped to twenty-eight thousand two hundred feet, fifty feet above the highest pinnacle. Kenvon opened the trapdoor and the icy blasts surging into the cabin, swept us into a loop-the-loop. Only the gods who watch over me, guided my hand to righting my black bird. The millionaire was prepared for this moment, I later learned, by days of practice in launching the weighted flag on the Darjeeling flying field.

"Ready! Slower!" His voice was insanely shrill.

The longest finger of Kanchenjunga tore at us, ripping its way through the azure blue of the heavens. Kenvon, calculating the velocity of the plane and the distance to the glacier below, dropped his flag.

We watched the flag – its red-and-white stripes and the field of stars on blue – as it shot into the snow, resplendent in the morning sunlight. It struck at the base of the finger, quivered then standing upright, unfurled its colors to the mountain wind.

Kenvon muttered about the surprise that flag would be for Dyhrenfurth if he ever reached the summit. I doubted whether the flag would last the day. It would be in shreds before another sun saw it, so fierce were the gales.

The right B motor missed, spluttered and went dead.

I was startled but not frightened. We weren't in danger – but to a man who was brought up on tales of leprechauns and banshees, it was an ill omen. Was Kanchenjunga reaching out for us – now that we boasted of her conquest? Would she, though we were clear of its surface, still destroy us?

Continuing to circle in front of the southern face of the mountain, I diminished our altitude gradually to twenty-one thousand feet. Kenvon seemed pleased with these maneuvers. We were below the high wind belt, enjoying a well-earned respite.

"You're seeking Surrilana," he said to me and nodded with approval.

But my mind was made up. I alone knew how to handle this Junkers. The lives of all of us were in my hands. And I meant to return to Darjeeling when the others tired of feasting their eyes on Kanchenjunga's beauties. Kenvon had nothing to say about it – even if I was burning up his money in petrol!

We cruised east and west. The millionaire studied his grimy map and scrutinized the mountain's face with narrowed eyes, breathing hard, eagerly. When I went far to the east, he cried out and jammed a finger into the port.

I saw it, though at first I thought it was only a broad fissure in the glacial wall. But it was the Door of Surrilana, a black yawning maw. It was tremendous in size, at least three hundred feet high and five hundred feet wide. A plane could make an entry easily – if there was room to turn about inside.

“Well, there it is!” Lacrosse said, fear giving way to skepticism in his attitude. “You can come back another day, without me, Kenyon, and explore your caverns to your heart’s desire!”

“That goes for me, too,” Harker agreed. “You can’t drag me into a hole in the earth, because you’ve been hoaxed by a phony map.”

Kenyon shook his head determinedly. “I want to go in now.”

“You can go back to Darjeeling now and drop me and Harker,” Lacrosse snapped. “I said it’s thumbs down on this part of the trip as far as I’m concerned. Harker is with me.”

“We’re going in, McRory,” Kenyon said, ignoring the protests of the other two. “Switch on the searchlight and the bulbs on the wings to light our way. I haven’t come this far to be disappointed, my friends. It is tempting ill luck to turn back – considering our victory over Kanchenjunga.”

There was nothing I could say without starting an argument. Instead of replying, I moved my black bird away from the Door of Surrilana. I wasn’t afraid to attempt the entry. But who knew what lay beyond! Stalagmites and stalactites, stone fingers and teeth to tear our wings? A sudden turn in the channel – if there was any – and a crash? Possibly no room in which to turn and make a safe exit. We would then be bottled up with inevitable death.

Kenyon watched at his port, waiting for me to bring the Junkers about. This maneuver did not take place.

“Where are you going, McRory?” the millionaire demanded of me.

“To Darjeeling.”

“The hell you are!” Kenyon blazed. I shall never forget the gleam in his eyes, fanatic, mad. “I say you’re going through the Door! I’m the master of this plane!”

“But I’m the pilot,” I explained calmly enough. “It’s a foolhardy attempt, considering your information. I put no stock in your map. There may be all you say inside and then again there mayn’t. Lacrosse and Harker want to go back. Their lives are in my hands, and I won’t jeopardize them against their wishes.”

In my mirror, I saw the geologist and the naturalist flash me a look of gratitude. But Kenyon was implacable. His soaring over Kanchenjunga had made him drunk with power – and the passion of further conquests – Kanchenjunga’s heart.

“I say we’re going in – and now!” Kenyon said in a lower and less ugly tone.

“I’m running this ship,” I said. “We’re going back to Darjeeling. You can hunt another pilot there. Get one from Bombay. The world is full of fools.”

I felt something blunt jabbed into my side. Looking down, I saw the black glint of an automatic – in Kenyon’s hand. The man’s frozen finger curled over the trigger.

“We’ll die together, here and now,” he screamed at me, “if you refuse to obey my orders! Choose! Take your risk on going through the Door – or dropping here! To hell what the other cowards want! I say we’re going into Kanchenjunga!”

Chapter 3: Toward the Mountain's Heart

Terrified, Harker and Lacrosse fell back in their seats. They knew that if they leaped on Kenvon, he had but to press the trigger – and all of us would go hurtling to kingdom come. Miles of death hung below us.

“Well?” Kenvon demanded of me.

“Risk it!” Lacrosse shouted hoarsely. “We’ve no other choice!”

“Kenvon is insane!” Harker cried weakly. “We’re in the hands of a madman. Take a chance, McRory.”

Perforce, I bowed to the inevitable. There was still hope for my neck. A Chinaman’s chance. I prayed that my gods had a weather eye on me. So nodding to Kenvon, I brought the Junker about in a broad, swinging circle. I wanted to drink in one last sight of the outer world’s beauty.

And never, save in that moment when I face the Beyond, did it seem so sweetly glorious – never did I feel more full of life itself. This challenging the unknown powers was quite different from challenging an enemy to combat in the skies – for now I was coming to grip with natural elements the like of which I knew none.

We faced the Door of Surrilana.

I took aim with my black bird’s bat-faced nose. The motors hummed pleasantly, giving me a sense of thrilling life in the stick. Better Surrilana than a bullet! I’m that much of a gambler – when it’s force upon me.

Kenvon reached to the control board, still keeping me covered, and switched on the searchlight and the bulbs on top of the wings. He sat back then, unloosened his safety belt and, wary of me, watched the approaching hole in the glacier anxiously.

I saw the maw of ice and rock yawn wider and wider like a hoary mouth, the talons of icicles a brush mustache, a stumble beard beneath Kanchenjunga’s nose. There was something unclean about this orifice and the druid blood in me whispered of unholiness in violating a mountain in this manner. The blackness ahead grew larger and larger.

We shot through the gateway of ice. The vast arch encircled us – and then we were inside, our lights flooding a huge frost-encrusted cavern, its walls glittering like a palace out of “Grimm’s Fairy Tales.” It would be easy to believe we were in a diamond world if we did not know about the ice.

It was just as Kenvon had described to us – a great cave covering an as broad as the plains of Kansas with the heavens thrown in. I estimated that this mountain hollow as at least fifty miles square and two miles high. The roar of our engines reverberated deafeningly from the distant walls of ice and stone.

I circled, I swept close to the floor, I mounted to the dripping vault above. Strange winds sucked us this way and blew us that. The Junkers slipped, slid and banked dangerously in the grip of these mighty blasts despite my efforts.

Harker and Lacrosse lost their fears momentarily beholding the site no mortal man had ever seen before – at least, so I thought then. Tat Kanchenjunga could hold such a hollow was unbelievable. Yet our eyes were not lying to us.

“There is a darker space toward the north,” Kenvon said, “make for it, McRory.”

I did, fool that I was.

The dark patch on our new horizon proved to be more than a shadow, more than a fissure in the cavern's wall. It was another opening, a channel that dropped slowly downward. The beam of the searchlight told me that much.

"Be careful," Harker warned me. "We've seen enough."

"We're not going any deeper into this," Lacrosse shouted. "You've had and seen enough for one day, Kenvon!"

"Cowards!" the condor nose snapped. "Follow that channel, McRory!"

I was about to object when again I saw the muzzle of the millionaire's automatic peering up at me. What other choice had I? Where there's life, there's hope. And so long as I kept the Junkers afloat, I had life at my command.

This tunnel into which we dove was some three hundred feet high and four hundred feet wide. Not enough room in which to turn about. Twice it turned, each time to the east. I thanked my stars this G-38 had no tail or we would have scraped the walls – gone a-crash.

After flying two miles and a half, dropping in altitude to ten thousand feet – a considerable drop from twenty-one thousand feet – we debouched into another cavern still greater than the one next Surrilana's Door. I cannot calculate its size, but it must have been a hundred miles wide and three hundred miles long. Roof and floor were four or five miles apart and the air was appreciably warmer.

"For God's sake, McRory," Lacrosse cried out, "be careful."

I caught his eye in the mirror and peered upward through my port.

Stalactites – long, fierce fingers – hung from the vault above. They glistened in our passing light like angry canine teeth, lustful incisors, jagged molars.

Beneath was a sea of mammoth stalagmites, sharp, jagged, stumpy – all horrible beds of instant death if the Junkers failed me. Such were part of Kanchenjunga's digestion of the waters that seeped from her scales of glacier through her many pores.

"Say," Harker cried out, "there's light in this hole." Pointing toward our wake, he watched a strange eerie glow.

Kenvon nodded. Without a word, he took the light switch and doused our illumination.

I held my breath as we hung in mid-air. The fool, out of sheer curiosity, would wreck us for a glimpse of this inner phenomenon.

But the cavern was aglow with light like that of early dawn. The teeth that jutted from the floor and roof were awash with it and gleamed on their easterly sides.

Though I could not see it, there was apparently some source of light in this cavern and it did not come from above, or from any visible opening. Rather, it diffused itself evenly through this vast room of fierce, ghastly teeth.

Again Kenvon switched on the lights. I brought the stick back sharply and we zoomed upward, over three lank stalagmites that had reached out to rip us asunder.

"Continue east," Kenvon commanded.

It was mine not to reason why. The gun was still in his fist.

Down the five hundred mile stretch we went, and lower still we dropped. My altimeter stood at eight thousand feet when the cavern seemed to level again. My eyes were wary with watching floor and roof – their teeth, some longer than others, suddenly darting out of the gloom into the searchlight's path.

Lacrosse screamed incoherently. I saw in the mirror that something on the floor had attracted him and now a horrible curiosity enthralled him.

I took one look and called upon my gods again.

The floor was seething with strange beasts. They ran to the right and the left, from beneath the path of the Junkers, darting around the stalagmites with a remarkable agility, considering their size. The shock of the sight diminished and courage returned to me, so I dropped lower.

These beasts were rodents – rats the size of horses, at least eight feet long and four tall. Their whiskers sprouted from their long noses like claws, and as they looked up in their flight, I was aware of their evil red mouths opened in screeches of terror. There were hundreds of them.

When, presently, we left this herd of rats behind us, the cavern again dropped. I thought it high time to turn back. It was one of my usual hunches that it was high time to be letting well enough alone. The gods had preserved us this far – but why tempt them further? I suggested this much to Kenvon but he shook his head.

“We’ll go on,” he grinned. “I haven’t seen half enough yet.” And he showed me the automatic again. I offered no argument.

The channel took an upward turn, veered to the north and then dropped sharply. Down – down – down the Junkers raced. The tunnel narrowed and I slipped through. It widened and I breathed a trifle more normally. I was famished for a cigarette but there was no time for allaying frayed nerves.

The altimeter touched five thousand feet. We were less than a mile above sea level and three miles below the point we where we had entered these caverns.

A new room engulfed us, and it was still more brightly lighted than the upper cavern. Its floor and ceiling held less threatening teeth, but all was pervaded with a loathsome gray tint. Everything was neutral colored. And this room was infinite in size. It was a veritable inner world.

We cruised without speech for about fifty miles to the east. The reverberation was less deafening, but I still could feel its mighty throb.

I had seen so much in the past two hours I no longer believed my eyes. They were tired of new sights, strange incredible things in gray.

And when I beheld creatures walking up upright, running like men, across the floor below, I put it down to imagination. I shouldn’t have been surprised if I had seen pink elephants and yellow snakes having tea together.

“Men! Men!” Harker screamed. “The place is alive with them!”

What next would we be seeing – I asked myself.

But men they were – or something uncommonly like us. And like the rats in the cavern above, they fled from us.

I swooped closer to the floor and saw they were brown, shaggy, hairy creatures, huge-boned and well-thewed but small headed – like primitive man in the Pleistocene period; I'd read about such things.

There were scores of these creatures and they scrambled over crumbled mounds of rock and hid behind thick monoliths that stuck their blunt noses up at us.

"Trepid hearts would not have won such a sight," Kenvon smiled. "If Harker and Lacrosse had their way, we'd have missed all this and more."

"Hell," Harker snapped, "I'm ready to land and see more at close quarters. We'll never get out and I'd like to have the satisfaction now of seeing everything."

Lacrosse blessed himself and said nothing. He trembled with every nerve in his body.

I was thankful there were no landing spots. The floor remained a veritable sea of extant or broken stalagmites and peculiar dwarfed trees with gray trunks and leaves. I couldn't get on what they thrived.

Then terror, swift and merciless, smote us.

The gray glow we were conscious of disappeared. Our own lights seemed to yield nothing but darkness.

The air was filled, as if a sudden squall of inky snow had hit us, with gigantic black flying creatures that hurled themselves upon the plane.

They were bats, their long, black bodies and fan wings inundating the Junkers. They dropped from the stalactites in the roof in hordes, pouring their filthy screams upon us so that we could hear them above the roar of the motors. Their bodies brushing against the plane, sent us tilting, bucking. The propeller blades cut dozens to pieces and I marveled that we did not crash then and there.

A face was batted against the port in front of me.

My blood chilled. It was a human face – a deformed man's face.

These bats had the heads and faces of man – human eyes.

The face dropped away, the eyes closed by the stunning impact of the port glass against flesh and bone.

The left A-propeller blade snapped. The Junkers careened. And Kenvon screamed aloud with fright, appealing to me to save him, save his foolish life.

I fought with the stick to right my black bird. I wanted to climb, to turn about and flee. But the left wing was weighted with the bats' bodies. They hung fast. I banked to shake them off, but they clung with feet and wings, screeching like unholy demons out of Dante's Inferno.

The plane dropped, crippled bird that it was, and dropped slowly as I circled and circled. The darkness of a greater horde, turning out to meet a common enemy – our Junkers – descended from the vault above. They struck the plane with a terrible impact and my black bird staggered, quivering in every stay.

I was zooming over the stalagmites now. The weight of these human-headed bats on the wings grew greater. Was this a nightmare or reality? Hideous face replaced fiendish maw at my port – and the Junkers smashed them from my sight.

I managed to rise, to shoot upward, vertically. The mass of beating wings and screeching mouths was momentarily below us. Yet the horde was not through – nor beaten. I felt the wings turn leadend.

We dove into the midst of an awful tangle of wings, black bodies and half human faces with staring eyes. The Junkers plowed, cut, floundered.

Another squall of these flying mice-men struck the plane. Their high pitched, bloodthirsty screams rose in crescendo with pain, hate and fear. They were attacking us to save themselves from a monster.

I saw Harker and Lacrosse, white and haggard, unbuckling their safety belts.

Kenvon tried to stand up. He screamed advice to me, but I heard nothing in the din of motor and bat.

Crash! Darkness! The wind of a million wings!

I was hurled through the side of the fuselage into outer darkness. My eyes closed and consciousness left me.

Chapter 4: New Blood and Old

“Zorimi! Zorimi!”

With that word ringing in my ears, I opened my eyes and found myself – not in heaven, but on a mossy bed at the base of a twenty foot pillar of chalk – gray, dirty chalk. A forest of these pillars hemmed me in, but over them glowed that dull, ghastly early-morning light, now brighter but still livid. No bones were broken, but my wind-breaker sleeve was ripped off and my left arm a welter of bruises. I figured that I skidded down the stalagmite that broke my fall, to this bed of weird, gray moss.

“Zorimi!”

This shout grew louder, and was taken up by scores of guttural voices somewhere to my left.

The bats had vanished. Not a wing sound in the still, gray air. Yet I could distinctly hear the movement of many feet, walking, running, climbing, stumbling. All were moving to a point at my left.

Louder and more vociferous grew the cries of “Zorimi!” I was curious but also cautious. I, too, wanted to call out to Kenvon and Harker and Lacrosse. Yet something told me to be wary, to hold my tongue lest I attract attention to myself.

As I stood and steadied my groggy senses, I heard the din of voices suddenly silenced. The stillness of the great cavern was appalling – especially to myself who had been so recently accustomed to the roar of the Junkers’ motors, the reverberations, the screeching bats. For a moment, I thought that it would unnerve me.

Then a voice cracked the quiet like a musher’s whip. It was deep, guttural and to me, incomprehensible. Yet someone was talking and hundreds of ears were listening. That I knew, sensed.

Sometimes the voice broke and went shrill. Again it was a falsetto and then a deep bass. I could not make out whether a man or woman was talking but I was certain I was listening to one person.

The name “Morgo” was mentioned several times. Each mention evoked a dull hum, a wave of displeasure from the listeners. At length the speaker ceased his harangue and the cries of “Zorimi!” rose up to the vault miles above like a pagan paean. I couldn’t help the shudder the name sent up and down my spine.

The speaker uttered a piercing cry and then another, not unlike that of the human-faced bats who had brought disaster to my black bird. There was an instant flurry in the air, wings stirred that awful gray stillness, and two of the bats sailed over my head, moving quickly to the left.

“Zorimi! Zorimi!” The shouts were repeated to a crescendo. A people seemed to be pay unholy homage to some king, some diety. The air seemed permeated with feeling and I caught it.

The voice that I had been listening to now appeared to be higher up. Was the speaker climbing a rocky eminence? Was he flying?

The bats swam into view – something caught between the legs of one of them. I gasped. It was a man’s body – Harker’s; I recognized the man’s flying suit. Between the other bat’s feet was a head held like a football – a human head, white and bloodless.

And I closed my eyes to what I saw next.

A hand dangled from the body carried by the first bat man. In it, iridescent in that ghastly light, besplotched with red, was the three-headed thing I last saw being taken from Jim Craig’s lifeless form by the dacoit in the hangar at Darjeeling the night before. At least, it was something similar and of identical design. How could I ever forget that pectoral poor Jim Craig called a diamond, with its three heads – the bat’s, the woman’s and the lizard’s.

The two bats rose higher and higher, into the grayness and were soon lost to sight in what I took to be the west. Again I heard the movement of many feet, this time dispersing rather than coming together. The footfalls echoed loudly in the still air.

A group of them were coming toward me. I was unarmed, ill-equipped to put up a fight. Escape was the better part of valor for me. But where to?

Twenty yards away was a broken stalagmite, its crest no more than fifteen or twenty feet from the floor. I ran to it without hesitation, tore around to the far side and started climbing. Footholds were few, but my eager feet cut into the crumbling chalk, and up I went. On reaching the top, I threw myself prone on its scant surface and raised my eyes just over the edge, facing the mossy bed onto which the Junkers had flung me.

Forty or fifty men can throw the forest of chalk teeth, morose and silent. They were a good six feet tall and some of them seven. They were dressed as in the hour of their birth, but a shaggy, coarse gray hair was matted about their breasts, loins and limbs. Their heads were surprisingly small and, while suggesting the ape’s, were not apelike.

These were primitive men, the Pithecanthropus Erectus I read about in science books. How startlingly like the pictures I had seen of them, pictures conjured up from stray limb and jaw bones, for scientists had never found a complete skeleton of this type that roamed the earth six hundred thousand years ago, before the first glacial age. Were these men I was looking at their cousins, their direct descendants?

A dozen of them hesitated and sniffed the air over the bed of moss on which I had lain. They stooped and smelled it. They muttered, scanned the forest of monoliths about them and then slowly, dumbly shook their heads. The entire party presently moved on, passing directly beneath my lair.

I waited breathless. God knows what my fate would have been in the hands of those primitive beast men! Their footfalls grew fainter and died away. The awful silence once more fell upon the scene that I commanded.

Getting up and stretching my aching bones, I looked about. High in the air, in the direction from which the inhabitants of this cavern had come, I saw the remains of the Junkers G-38, festooned between two stalagmites. A broken aileron flapped slowly like the wing of a wounded bird, impaled on a fence picket.

I needed food and arms. I was in a strange world but life still flowed in my veins, and it was only natural that I make a fight to keep it coursing through me. It was up to me to pit my civilization and its knowledge and the resources of this wilderness of space, air and chalk of savage men and bats.

Clambering down from the broken mound of chalk, I pushed forward and, presently, came under the Junkers. It was a good thirty feet above me and about forty yards from the bed of moss into which I fell. I guessed that I was thrown clear of the fuselage the first time the plane struck a stalagmite and that the machine was carried forward by its great velocity to two peaks yards away.

How to reach the plane and its supplies was my problem. I was certain that it had not been looted, for what would the primitive men know of its stores? First I circled one pillar and found it unscalable; then I began to wend my way around the other.

My feet recoiled from what my eyes saw. Involuntarily, I leaped backward a pace.

There at the base of the stalagmite was a headless body – Kenvon's. But how had the head been severed? The decapitation seem to be a clean one. And I had seen no knives or weapons on the persons of the hoary men on this cavern.

Kenvon was beyond my help. I stepped over the torn leather flying outfit and found, a few feet farther on, footholds on the pillar of chalk. They had been freshly made. But by who? It was beyond me.

I started climbing. The stillness remained unbroken save by my breathing. The ascent was not an easy one – but it had to be made. And make it I did, those towering thirty feet with chalk crumbling beneath every touch.

The plane was safely caught, its wings resting on the tips of the gray monoliths. I crawled over one, hung over the cabin and swung through the hole my body made when I was ejected from the ship in the first crash. Lacrosse was not to be seen nor had I expected to see him. Probably the hoary men carried him off. Yet why should they behead Kenvon and send Harker aloft with a bat man?

I broke open a tank of water and drank my fill. The biscuits and canned beef were equally delicacies. Then I turned to the store of arms and found besides three rifles, four automatics and ammunition, a machine gun of all things and a box of Very lights. What on earth did Kenvon expect to do with a machine gun if we had fallen in the Nepalese jungle? Surely he didn't expect us to cart it on the trek back to Darjeeling, along with the rest of the arsenal and the food.

A blanket served me for a sling, and I filled it with all the rifle and pistol ammunition I could lay my hands on, besides the weapons themselves, of which I took a rifle and three automatics. I found two bowie knives and added them to a pile of canned beef, crackers and a water tank. The compass went in, too, together with four torchlights that weren't smashed in the crash.

Having done this, I suddenly wondered why. Where was I headed? What could I do to get out of the caverns? I was several hundred miles away from – and below – the Door of Surrilana. And if I ever reached the Door, what good would it do?

I sat down and began to laugh. My eyes fell upon a dozen cartons of cigarettes and, still laughing at my foolishness, I broke one open and was soon puffing away.

At length, I decided that the plane was not a safe place for me. I knew nothing about the winds in this cavern, but I figured a good breeze would shift the Junkers' weight and send it to the floor below. Dropping two slings of food and arms from the hole, I made my way back to the pillar of chalk and, trying to climb down, slid most of the last fifteen feet. Again no bones were busted.

"Well," I mused, "I'm worse off than Robinson Crusoe. He had a man Friday to tote his stuff and a sea to fish in. I've only the contents of the food sling. I don't fancy eating bats, mice or Pithecanthropus Erectus!"

I looked up suddenly, conscious that eyes were upon me.

A man – a white man – and one of the finest specimens it's been my lot to behold, stood a few yards behind me, covering my back with an arrow poised in a drawn bow. Behind him stood three bat men, but unlike the others that beset the Junkers, these had arms and long, crooked fingers on horny hands. I grabbed an automatic.

The white man addressed me in the guttural tongue I had heard coupled with the name "Zorimi."

I shook my head at him and grinned.

"What the hell?"

"You speak English?" he asked, dropping his bow and staring at me.

"They call it that where I've been," I said. "Who are you – who talks English and lives in this God-forsaken hole?"

"I am called Morgo," he said, and for all that meant to me at the time he might have been Isidore O'Reilly. Yet I was mighty glad to see him, to hear his human voice.

"Who're those guys with you?" I asked, pointing to the bat men.

He puzzled at my slang and then understood.

"They are Bakketes – men who fly. They are my friends. Do not harm them."

"It's O.K. with me if it's the same with you. Now, how do I get out of here, Morgo?"

He was still puzzled at my words.

"Get out of here? But where to? Where do you come from?"

I realized then that Morgo had no idea of the outer world. He could not conceive of it.

"How long have you been here? How old are you?" I asked him.

"By my sticks, I am twenty-six years old," he said. I later learned that he counted days by a system of notched sticks and set aside each three hundred and sixty-five for a year. "I have been here for sixteen years. But I was born in another place – where men like you lived. They even had red hair, some of them."

“Where is that?” I asked, thankful that my red mane had given me a distinguishing touch.

“I do not remember. I was very young. I even had another name and a mother and a father. I went to school with white-skinned boys like I once was. We talked English. But I forget much names and places, for I was in an accident down here. I fell from a rock and a lay in darkness a long time.”

Oh-ho, I said to myself, fancy finding an amnesia victim in the bowels of the Himalayas! Yet I believed the youth. One could not help but do that on looking into his dark, fearless eyes. He was a good six feet four in height, broad of shoulder and narrow of hip. His muscles were not bulky but rippled like titan strands beneath a weather beaten skin. The dark-brown hair of his was long and carefully knotted at the back. His loins were girded with a strange, fleecy pelt that was caught over one shoulder. And he was scrupulously clean.

“Are there any more white men like you in here?” I asked.

“No, I know of none. I have seen none but the beasts, the bats and the shamman.”

I took “shamman” to mean the primitive men and I was right.

“And just who is Zorimi?”

Morgo started and his eyes widened at the mention of the name. The bat men stirred and gazed balefully at me.

“Zorimi,” Morgo said, “is an evil one. I have never seen him – but all here fear him – beast and man. But I do not fear him because I have never seen him. He is a god that all worship and obey. He has but to reveal the Shining Stone, and all who would disobey him bow down and forget – so I am told.”

“The Shining Stone?” I had a hunch. “What is that?”

To my utter astonishment, despite my hunch, Morgo described Her of the Three Heads, the pectoral I had seen on poor Jim Craig. Here was mystery, and I couldn’t fathom the simplest phase of it.

Questions flew to my lips. I simplified them and stripped them of slang for this resident – a fellow white man – of this cavern world. How did he live? On the flesh of animals and herbs which came from the still lower caves. How did he move about? In the arms of the bat men he had behind him. They carried him on his hunts. He was a peaceful man and fought only when his life was endangered.

How did he amuse himself? By making drawings of this underworld and by perfecting himself with his bow and with his spear and with his sling shot. To demonstrate, he took a skinsling from his covering and sent a small stone through the Junkers’ wing thirty feet above us.

How did he get along without human companionship, having once had it? He fraternized with these peace loving bat men, hunted with them, and he was on friendly terms with a tribe of primitive men in the lower cave where he lived. And how did he get into the caverns?

“My father,” he said simply, “was a man who loved to climb mountains. He said that there was one mountain he would climb before all other men. With a party of friends, my mother and myself, he climbed high over ice into a cold world. There was a great door in the rock -”

“The Door of Surrilana?”

Morgo's face brightened. He remembered that name, probably having heard it before as a child. He tried to recall other names, but shaking his head sadly, gave it up. "I cannot say for sure. My father wanted to climb the mountain but my father urged him not to. But we did. My mother died of the cold. While waiting to return to wherever we came, we camped in a huge opening. Then one night there was a landslide, I think you call it. Ice came toppling down from the mountaintop. I remember seeing the tents crushed, and something struck me, wounding my head.

"When I came out of my sleep, I was in these caves. The bat men brought me here, and I have lived with them ever since, learning their language, teaching them a little of English. Baku," he added, indicating a wiry little Bakkete, "understand and speaks English a little."

I wondered what the Bakketes were doing in the neighborhood of Surrilana since this warmer climate seemed more indigenous to them. But then there many mysteries, I was to learn – and that was not one of them.

"Where does this Zorimi live?" I asked. "And where do you live that you do not see him?"

"I live in a lower cave – the Land of Kahli – where it is warmer. This is Zorimi's cavern here, the Cave of Shamman."

"And how did you happen to turn up here just now?"

I watched him suspiciously.

He sensed my attitude and smiled. "The Bakketes told me of the strange black bird that was in the caverns. I have not seen a bird in sixteen years. So I flew up here where I saw the fight between Zorimi's bat men and bird." He looked up at the Junkers. "The poor bird was killed."

Excusing himself, he spoke to the Bakkete named Baku. The creature stood behind Morgo and threw its arms over his, clasping the horny black hands over the youth's chest. Then the man and bat rose and soared over the Junkers. Morgo alighted and made his inspection of the plane. He was delighted, and I could hear his laughter while he chatted with the Bakkete. Presently he descended to my side.

"That is a wonderful bird," he marveled. "Men have lived in its bowels. I should like to own a bird like that."

"That's the bird that brought me here," I explained. Morgo was amazed, and I could see that his great respect for me and my red hair increased appreciably.

I told him of the food and arms I had, and he was only mildly interested. He said he had weapons of his own that sufficed in the caves. And he could get food easily. Yet he was interested in me, was curious about the world I came from. I could see that he craved my friendship and my companionship. It was a matter of one white man's soul crying out to another's for understanding, appreciation.

"Well," I said at length, "I'm in your hands, Morgo. I despair of ever seeing the light of God's day beyond Surrilana. I guess I'm here for keeps – and since I'm Irish, I might as well make the best of a bad deal. Take me to where you live and I'll try to learn your ways." And what else could I say, being in the hole I was?

"I shall be glad to call you a friend." Morgo smiled at me. "And I will take you to my home."

"Can I hoof it – walk there, I mean?"

He laughed and shook his head.

That meant I had to let a Bakkete hug me. It was not a thought to relish, but I soon conquered my distaste for such close contact with a bat. Morgo gave the orders in the strange guttural tongue. One of the Bakketes took my slings in his hands and flapped upward into the air. Another encircled me with his arms, catching his fists across my chest. I held my automatic in my hand suspiciously.

The bat man rose from the floor and I hung easily, my armpits over his forearms. And flying man that I was, used to every machine ever made, I got no greater kick out of any comparable to that of my first flight with a Bakkete. Morgo rose in Baku's arms.

The vast, fan wings cut the air silently above the gray world below. I recalled pictures of the mighty pteranodon-pterodactyls, those batlike reptiles that flew over the seas that covered Kansas and Missouri in Mesozoic time. Now I was living a bad dream turned good.

Chapter 5: Vestal of the Flame

We two humans and our three bat men flew for several hours over wastes of gray rock and chalk and stunted trees. Shamman moved about beneath us, but gave us no attention or barrages of rocks and missiles as I expected. Nor were we attacked by the other bats which I saw foraging eagerly for food.

The light that illuminated the cavern waned and darkness came swiftly afoot. Here and there on the floor beneath me I saw tiny fires, and out of the darkness a bat flitted across our path. I could not understand the peace that existed between the bats that attacked the Junkers so savagely and the Bakketes who carried us.

I felt the air grow warmer, and my aerial sense told me we were dropping to a still lower altitude – since I reckoned altitude in terms of the outer world's.

In the dark we penetrated a tunnel that tortuously downward. My Bakkete squealed every time his wing scraped on the jagged walls. These wings of theirs, I learned, were of flesh and blood and bone and were almost as sensitive as my own.

Then I felt that the darkness had grown bigger, that we were again in a cavern as large if not larger than that of the Shamman. The air was sweeter and more languid. I felt quit good and gave no thought to the strain of hanging from my Bakkete's arms.

We flew another hour, I should guess, and then alighted on a rocky ledge in front of a small cave, the interior of which gave out a dull-red glow.

"We are home," Morgo said to me, taking my arm. "Let us go in and have – what do you call it – supper?"

"Food is a good enough word for me tonight!"

Morgo's cave was a big one, and in its center blazed a good fire overhung with earthen dishes crudely shaped. I was astonished. It was hardly the place I expected to find in the heart of the Himalayas.

The whitish walls were covered with drawings – bats, rats, snakes, lizards, strange prehistoric beasts I'd never before seen. My tired eyes were aroused. True, the artistry was crude, childish, but there was faithfulness to form and design. I recognized each animal or reptile immediately and could not help think of those drawings found in Spain, the bison, the reindeer, Paleolithic man's attempts to reproduce life as he saw it in the Aurignacian Age. Morgo, born a child of civilization, was going through primitive man's struggles to find himself again – to unlock the secrets of identity held fast in a brain that played hide-and-seek with his efforts.

He lighted a lamp – fat tallow in a soapstone dish – and gave it to me that I might inspect his handicraft the better. I saw stone axes, pierced for the wooden handle, flint arrow points, small and large bows, dishes fashioned from soft stones and a few bowls, marked by way of decoration, to hold food and water.

He answered all of my questions eagerly. He was more interested in hunt than combat. That was why he cover his walls with animal pictures rather than scenes of warfare. He proudly displayed a bed that rested on four legs – a skin-covered frame piled with grass and more skins.

I noticed three Shamman moving about the cave, tending the fire and the cooking food. They were sluggish but docile. Morgo explained that they were his servants, men he spared from death at the hands of their fellows. I later learned that one was a murderer and the two thieves. But they revered the ground that Morgo trod, in their simple way.

Morgo bade me be seated, and I went close to the fire, for the night air was damp, and crossed my legs under me. He was content to squat upon his haunches while the shamman passed his dishes heaped with steaming savory food. I ate hungrily and with relish. There were meats, unusual vegetables and herbs I could not identify. Our meal was consumed without speech, but I could see that Morgo did not devour his share in the savage manner of the shamman. There was breeding in his behavior.

When I finally inquired about the delicious meat, Morgo said that it was mannizan flesh. And to my amazement, I gathered on questioning him, that the mannizan was the ratlike creature I saw in the upper cave. My stomach did not rebel and sleep stole upon me.

My primitive host insisted that I take his bed, while he made himself comfortable on a heap of pelts near the fire. His insistence was so bound up in fraternity, I agreed at once, announcing I would construct a bed of my own the next day.

I stretched out and closed my eyes. But sleep was slow in coming. Once I glanced over at Morgo and found him sitting up, staring fixedly at a small cross – two twigs tied together. This was suspended from a string which hung around his neck. He presently tucked it beneath his garment and curled up and soon began to snore.

Dreams made my night a living hell. I relived the attack of the human headed bats on the Junkers. I saw those two bats sailing silently through the air, one holding Harker with the Shining Stone in his hand, blood red in the gray light, and the other carrying Kenvon's head. I again recoiled from the dismembered body of the fanatic millionaire who was largely responsible for my plight, here, hundreds of miles inside the Himalayas. I found myself in mortal combat with those big-bodied, small-pated shamman in the forest of dirty-gray stalagmites.

The cave was flooded with a soft, yellow light when I was awakened by Morgo shaking my shoulder.

“We shall have breakfast, I thing the word is,” he grinned. “Come and eat.”

I did. And I didn't question the food or its nature, because it was suited to a king's palate.

On going outside and standing upon the rocky ledge before Morgo's home, I looked out over a new world – a cave lighted in yellow which had no apparent source. Morgo's nest was high up in the face of a gaunt granite precipice, the top of which was lost in a curtain of pinkish stalactites which were the most beautiful I'd ever seen. A broad plain cover with tall, fantastic greenish trees and plants, flora suggestive of the Carboniferous Age, stretched out as far as the eye could see. They reminded me of photos of *Sagillariae* and *Lepidodendra*, vegetation of that distant era.

Over this stillnes cruised the Bakketes, feeding on the vegetation, soaring high up in the stalagmites. I soon noticed a musical tinkling sound, the touching of many silver bells. Morgo came out and explained to me that the sound came from the pinkish

stalactites when the Bakketes' wings flitted against them. It was like a heavenly organ, distant and faint and, moreover, very pleasant to listen to.

I accepted life in the Cave of the Kahli as a man does the lotus flower and all its forgetfulness. A week slipped by – I counted on Morgo's sticks – and the seven days were fraught with minor adventures, my discoveries about this new life. I grew accustomed to flying in the arms of the Bakketes. Baku was assigned to me because of his brief understanding of English. Among the stalactites, I struck the long, musical fingers of chalk and stone and filled this miniature welkin welkin with sonorous peals. I even thought of working out a carillon, a fantastic idea I quickly forgot.

Morgo hunted mouselike creatures in the verdure, and I did not hesitate to eat the dishes concocted from them, remembering I was once fond of chop suey despite the proverbial joke about it. I got to know that a ten-foot dragon fly was called a dragah, that there were pythons in the Carboniferous forests, that ants similar to the Drivers of Africa were most feared by the peaceful primitives of Kahli, a people slightly smaller than the shamans and suggestive of the Chinese sloe eyes. I heard about the venomous chameleons with six-foot tongues which inhabited Zaan, who caught a man with this tongue and gulped him down before you could say Jack Robinson.

Morgo's world and Morgo's life was a veritable Paradise – with reservations, of course. But I soon grew to like it. The source of yellow light which came and went, much as outer day, was called the Shaft. Morgo promised to show it to me one day when we went to the Caves of Zaan. There were a people there, he said, that had a white skin and blond hair, who were peaceful, and their cave floor glittered.

I decided that life and adventure within the Himalayas was far more sensible for me than making a break for the outer world, fighting the cold, the ice and, if I was lucky enough to reach them, the jungles of the Sikkim between Kanchenjunga and Darjeeling. My fate I accepted with a resignation that had less stoicism and more pragmatism in it.

Yet there lurked in the back of my mind a concern for Harker and Lacrosse. Were they really dead? Had they met with Kenvon's fate? Or were they still inside this mortal coil, as Shakespeare once described the earth? I told Morgo of my feelings and suggested an expedition to Shamman.

"Shamman is a dangerous cavern," he said. "But I am ready to go into it, if you would seek your friends. I am ready to do what you say."

I dallied a week more and felt more confident of my power to cope with the constant surprises I met with. Then I suggested a trip to the upper cave in quest of the geologist and the naturalist of Kenvon's ill fated aerial expedition. My mind had to be satisfied that they were dead or safe and alive.

On the morning of our departure with an army of some three thousand Bakketes, I offered Morgo a gun. He had been taught how to use one but he preferred his bow and arrows, his sling and a bowie knife which he accepted as a gift from me. I armed myself with an automatic and several dozen rounds of ammunition.

The air before our ledge was swarming with Bakketes and, while there was no semblance of military organization, there was order among them. Baku uttered guttural commands, and small groups deployed to the right and the left, preparing for our advance into Shamman.

"Do you know where Zorimi lives?" I asked Morgo on a hunch. "Has he caves he lives in?"

"Yes; he lives close by The Flame." And he explained that The Flame, something whose smoke he had only seen, was akin to an eternal fire, that Zorimi, the ruler of this underworld, kept ablaze. That it had been blazing for centuries.

"Let us look near it for my friends," I said. "It is possible that they are held prisoners there."

Morgo's dark eyes met mine and flashed. "We will look there if you say so. But many Bakketes must die."

"You mean we'll have a fight on our hands for approaching so close to Zorimi's hangout?"

"It is inevitable, Derro!" Derro was a name he gave me because of my hair. He could not pronounce McRory easily. And derro is a "red bush," the fruit of which I'd tasted and gagged on.

I could see he was loath to sacrifice his Bakketes in combat with the bats of the other cavern. Yet I was determined on the expedition.

We took to the air, Baku holding me in his arms. Morgo followed close by. The ascent through the narrow tunnel was effected quietly, almost stealthily, by the three thousand flying creatures. Through Baku, who gave the orders which were passed from mouth to mouth, I was leader of this foray. Such was Morgo's wish.

Once more in the cool, gray Cave of Shamman, we rose to the roof and surveyed the land below. Far, far away, I thought I discerned smoke. Mindful of Morgo's concern about his army, I commanded the Bakketes to remain close to the channel while Morgo and I reconnoitered for our quarry. My greatest fear was for the human-headed armless bats that lurked in the stalactites overhead.

We swiftly approached the thin swirl of smoke.

Three bats dropped from the roof and Morgo cried a warning to me. We were attacked. The enemy bats, unable to seize us with their taloned feet, attempted to crush us to the ground by powerful beating wings. It was the same tactic that crashed the Junkers – smothering us to the cavern floor by raining wing blows upon us and clinging to us.

Morgo killed one creature with an arrow. I fumbled for my gun, got it out and shot another, crippling it, sending it down.

The third bat drew away, frightened. Yet we were enemies and, perforce, to be destroyed. He singled me out for the final assault. He rushed at me and Baku staggered in mid-air when our bodies met in a terrific impact. The bat encircled me with his legs and started to fly upward.

Morgo shot an arrow and it missed. My gun arm was wedged against my body in the bat's leg grip. I strained, I tugged, and up and up we sailed, Baku unable to cope with the stronger bat's strength that was pulling me from his grasp.

At last I freed my hand and fired again. The human face of the bat contorted with pain. He screeched and tumbled downward like an autumn leaf. I was surprised the pistol shots had not reverberated, had not filled Shamman with echoes. Nor did the clash bring down other bats.

Nearing the thread of ascending smoke, I saw that it came from a high plateau. From the center of this mound of rock a tongue of fire licked out occasionally. The flame below its surface was a mighty one, I judged.

We dropped into a sea of stalagmites at the base of the mound. My plan was to climb up on foot, with our Bakketes keeping an eye on us, ready to pick us up if danger threatened. Morgo agreed to this.

The ascent of the mound was difficult. The chalk crumbled in our hands at every step. At times we were held fast to the wall by our feet or only our fingers. But eventually we made a climb of about sixty feet, breathless and muscle sore. Use to flying, clambering taxed us.

The plateau was uneven, rocky and crags jutted up in the shapes of hands, noses, human heads and church steeples. Weird is hardly the word for this gray table of chalk and stone; unholy is better. I sensed it in the very air – for, as I've said, I'm Irish.

Moving forward toward the smoke, Morgo and I tread our way carefully. Once I crushed a small snake underfoot and was certain it was an adder. Morgo destroyed three more, being quicker of eye, with thrown stones. Zorimi's lair, I thought, was well protected.

Mounting a lofty crag to survey this plateau the better, we saw The Flame. It was gigantic – the light of a Titan. It licked upward from a hole in the floor of the deserted mound. The emptiness of the place appalled me, made me uneasy. Once always associated life with fire and here there were no signs of life. I wondered if The Flame was a natural phenomenon, of volcanic origin – but I was to learn the truth – in all too short a time.

Turning to climb down from the crag, I missed Morgo. He had vanished, utterly. I called to him and my voice was muffled by the mammoth silence. My heart pounded wildly. I was without an ally – save for my automatic. But what could have happened to him?

With the thought that he had possibly gone ahead without my hearing him, I move closer to The Flame and its pillar of slow smoke. I would see it plainly and then it would be hidden from view by intervening rock and monoliths.

A hidden fissure in the floor of the plateau yawned at my feet.

I leaped back. My finger touched the automatic's trigger.

Someone – someone on whom I had nearly stepped – was looking up at me, staring wildly, bewildered.

It was a girl with golden hair. The most beautiful girl these weary eyes have ever seen. She was fair and blue eyed, more gorgeous than Cytherea. And devil of devils! She was wearing a single silken tunic caught in the middle by a silver girdle. Did they weave silk in these caves? I was flabbergasted.

She spoke to me softly in the strange guttural tongue of this underworld. And she was a white girl, not of Shamman.

“I don't get you,” I said.

Her eyes grew larger. Her lips smiled rapturously.

“You speak a language I know,” she said. “Who are you?”

“Jerry McRory,” I said unabashed. “And who are you?”

“I am Nurri Kala,” she said. “But why are you here? There are none such as you in these caves.”

I tried to explain to her quickly, in words of one syllable, but she gathered little. And then I asked her what she was doing in Shamman.

“I am a vestal of The Flame,” she said softly, reverently. “I have been here for many years, but once I spoke as you do.”

“You're English or American?” I suggested.

“I cannot remember. Zorimi brought me here.”

H'm, another amnesia victim, I reflected, thinking of Morgo's strange tale. And Zorimi was involved in her fate.

“Zorimi?”

“He rules all of Shamman,” she said, darting a glance deeper into the fissure fearfully. “You must go away from here. It is dangerous to be found on this mound. Zorimi says it is the home of the gods – and no place for mortals to tread.”

Zorimi, whoever he was, I decided, was identifying himself with Zeus of the Greek mythology and had convinced the Shammans that his plateau was Olympus, the home of the old Greek gods, a place not to be spied upon.

“I should like to meet Zorimi,” I said. “I’ve lost two of my friends – three, I mean -” I thought of Morgo then “- and perhaps he can tell me where to find them.” I was confident that Zorimi had been at the scene of the Junkers’ crash, for hadn’t I heard the primitive men shout his name? Hadn’t he addressed them?

“Go away, please. Quickly!” the girl implored me.

“I’m not afraid of Zorimi,” I said. “Where does he lie?”

“You must not see him. It means death to any mortal who beholds his face!”

“But you see him – you know him!”

“I am an immortal,” Nurri Kala said naively, sincerely. “It is Zorimi’s will that I am such. I am a vestal of The Flame.”

“Lead me to him,” I said, growing impatient. “Then we can talk later on – about yourself. But I must see him about my friends!”

The girl screamed and her eyes stared over my shoulder. They were laden with a terror I’d never seen in a human before. I turned to see the object of her fear, but two arms were thrown about me, holding me with the grip of a vise.

I could not budge. I could not move in that embrace of steel thews.

“I am Zorimi,” a guttural voice said behind me – in English. “But it is ordained that you shall not see me with mortal eyes.”

“Who are you?” I cried out. “You’re not one of the Shammans. You’re from the outer world, too!”

“I am Zorimi!”

Zorimi! Could it be that? The thought was odious. I shrank from it. Yet it persisted in my mind. Was Zorimi my friend Morgo, too?”

“You have violated the sanctity of my temple!” Zorimi went on angrily. “You have laid eyes upon an immortal vestal. You have earned death!”

Good God! This sounded like a page out of mythology! His seeing the white goddess of the African jungles! But I was dealing with a golden white girl and a man who spoke the King’s English for all his invisibility! Here was mystery with a capital M, and I so wanted to live – to satiate a sudden curiosity. I wanted to know who Nurri Kala really was! Who Zorimi really was!

“Is it Morgo that speaks to me?” I demanded of the unseen speaker.

“Morgo?”

Fear was in the voice.

“You know of Morgo, too? Where is he?”

I was satisfied, somehow, that this was not Morgo. And relief surged through me, for I now knew that Morgo had not fallen captive to Zorimi. But I had no idea of his whereabouts or why he disappeared.

“White man,” Zorimi said eagerly, “if you will deliver Morgo to me, I will spare your life.”

“Nothing doing,” I said. “Morgo is my friend.”

“I will do more” – the voice purred – “I will restore you to the outer world whence you came, if you deliver Morgo to me!” Zorimi meant to be tempting but I knew the sinister timbre of his words. I would die in any event, and I had no intention of betraying Morgo.

“Nothing doing,” I said. “Besides, I’ve come to you on a friendly mission -” Zorimi laughed harshly. “I seek two friend of mine who were in an airplane with me – Grant Harker and Sam Lacrosse. Do you happen to know anything about them? Are they still alive? I saw Harker carried off by a bat.”

For some little time, Zorimi did not reply. Finally he said:

“I know of no other white men in Shamman. You and Morgo are the only people of such flesh. But consider my off: tell me where to take Morgo unawares and you shall live, shall go into the world whence you came.”

“I said nothing doing.:

“Fool!” Zorimi stormed, and muttered in his own tongue.

At length he said: “Then you shall serve another purpose on this holy mound, white man. I have long waited for such flesh as yours – or Morgo’s. The Flame craves it! The Flame must be fed! A living body, you shall be hurled into its white heat, to give your life to its Life!”

He uttered thunderous instructions to my captors who proceeded to push me forward and down the steps leading into the fissure of rock in which Nurri Kala was sitting. She heard these ominous words and cried out. But I saw by her eyes that Zorimi had transfixed her, had cautioned her to silence, and she covered her face with her slender ivory hands, sobbing as though she were losing a friend.

Downward I trudge, my feet tripping on the rough steps, into darkness, forced onward by two relentless iron hands that held my arms to my sides. A chill seeped into my very marrow.

The sound of crackling tongues of fire, rising from a mammoth pyre, reached my ears. The heat grew intense, foul smelling, and I thought of hell’s brimstone.

I was to be a human sacrifice to The Flame – to some pagan and perverse form of worship practiced by Zorimi – in the hidden recesses of this dank and dark mound of cavern chalk.

Chapter 6: The Pattern of Atropos

We descended roughly hewn steps in the rock for about forty feet when I found myself in a cavernous, smoky blue chamber. An opening at one end gave upon a sea of gray monoliths and outer Shamman. At the other end was a blasting pillar of flame – The Flame – and before it a bright shining slab, possibly marble. It was gory in the light of the fire.

For the first time I now saw my captors. They were men, like the primitive Shamman, equally as large and well-muscled, but their bodies glistened iridescently and purple. Instead of hair, scales like those of a fish covered their hulks. These creatures were not as well divorced from their reptilian ancestry as were the Shamman. Their heads were small and their mouths protruded, fishlike.

The grip on my arms was released, and I was permitted to stroll toward the opening that was farthest from The Flame. I wanted air, coolness. My blood was boiling, my mind reeling from the heat and odor of death that clung to the walls of this hollow mound.

I started.

A frieze of age-yellowed skulls ranged around the chamber a little higher than a man's reach. They were all alike – those of the Shamman – browless, brutish and of small brain capacity. Matted hair and crumbling teeth still adhered to many of them, and there were, I'd judge, a thousand or more.

I remembered Kenvon's decapitated head – the bat flying off with it after Zorimi's arrival at the scene of the crash. Was that part of the ritual? Decapitation? But Kenvon's body was not sacrificed to The Flame. And mine was to be committed to those tongues of crimson fire – alive.

Therefore, I reasoned, I would be allowed to keep my head. And keep it I must – before things began to happen.

One skull near the middle of the room attracted my attention. It was still covered with its human, fleshy sack. Though it was in a dimmish spot, I moved toward it and peered up, straining my eyes against the glare of the fire which was hot against my cheek.

My captors stared at me for the cry I uttered involuntarily.

The head I beheld was Harker's.

But what had they done with his body? I had seen the bats carrying that, too. And Kenvon's head. Where was that?

Screwing up my courage which was at lowest ebb, I walked around the chamber beneath the frieze of half human skulls. Each one I scrutinized, whether lighted or shadowed. I went closer to The Flame and far from the blistering heat toward the opening. I saw every skull that was visible.

But Kenvon's face I did not see. Nor that of Lacrosse. Harker's face was the only one recognizable, still holding its flesh.

The scale-skinned men withdrew and left me alone – with something not unlike Madame Tussaud's Chamber of Horrors to keep me company. The gray light over Shamman lightened at noon and then its diffused rays slowly dimmed. The dark hours were swiftly approaching.

My automatic! I clapped my hand to my belt. It was still in its holster. The Shamman had not know enough of such things to seize it – to disarm me. But could I shoot my way out that room? What chance had I? Those purple-scale-skinned men would overwhelm me by sheer numbers – like the Germans pouring through the French lines, feeding the poilus' machine guns – but ultimately taking the trenches attacked.

The chamber's faint light faded like a room in which a lamp's wick was turned low. Only the pillar of fire at the far end roared upward through the roof of the plateau, its crimson rays tinting those sections of rock and chalk nearest the orifice.

I wondered what had become of the eagle-eyed Baku – of Morgo – of the army of Bakketes hovering over the distant end of the Cave of Shamman. A shot would no attract no attention in the outer cave and might bring my captors upon me to disarm me. I remembered from the fight with the three bats of Shamman how the shots of my automatic were muffled.

“White man,” a small voice whispered, “speaker of English -”

I wheeled around and saw Nurri Kala who partially shrouded by the heavy shadows. Only the loveliness of her face and a glint of light on her golden hair were visible.

“Do not speak too loudly.” Her words were laden with great fear. “I may help you – but do not take too much hope to your heart.”

“Can you show me the way out of this hellhole?” I demanded, trying to forget her beauty in that hour of stress.

“The steps are well guarded. They lead to the plateau, where many Silurians are gathered.”

The word “Silurian” caught my attention. Wasn't that the name of a prehistoric reptilian monster? That was Zorimi's name for the scale-skinned men.

“But,” she added, “if you are brave, you can climb down from that door in the cliff's face to the floor of Shamman. There are little holes for hands and feet. It is unsafe, but your only hope.

I nodded, then thought further of my mission. “Nurri Kala, are they any other white men prisoners of Zorimi? Or were there any?”

She hesitated and met my eyes fully. “Yes, there was another. Zorimi brought him here – on his return from the Long Hunt.” She avoided my inquisitive gaze and shuddered. “He brought his head with him – but not his body.”

I started. “He brought his head? Does Zorimi dress in strange clothes – of leather?” A horrible thought had occurred to me.

“I do not know. I did not see him return from the Long Hunt. He was gone many, many days. I only went to him when he summoned me. Then I saw him as I always saw him – in his skins with hidden face and hidden eyes.”

“You've never seen his face?”

“No, never.”

“And the head he brought back?” My eyes darted to that of Harker in the frieze of skulls lining the walls. She understood the significance of my glance and nodded.

“And what was this Long Hunt?” I asked. “Where did Zorimi go?”

“I do not know. He often goes on them and is away for a long time. When he returns, he looks after his affairs here in Shamman – the ruling of his subjects – then he goes down to Zaan for the Shining Stones which many Shammans and Silurians gather for him. The stones he takes away with him on the Long Hunts – and, I think, buries them – for some reason I do not know. I should like to have more of the Shining Stones. They are so beautiful.”

“Does he take the stones toward the Door of Surrilana?”

She shook her head. “I do not know. But I think he take them down to still another cavern – one lower down.” She listened at the stairs and grew anxious. “Go now. Hurry please! Quickly.”

“Nurri Kala, why do you want to help me?”

“You are white, like I am.” She turned away. “Somehow, I cannot bear to see your life destroyed. I see so much of death.”

“What do you mean?”

She pointed toward The Flame and bit her lip.

“Please go.”

“You warn me, try to help me – yet you are Zorimi’s friend.”

“No, I am only his slave. You have little time. The light is dying.”

With that she vanished. Just a motion of her slender white hand toward the door to freedom, and she was gone.

Now I had looked over the possibilities of escaping through that opening, and I had seen none. Again I looked and, lying flat on my belly, I squirmed forward and peered far over the ledge which was a good hundred feet from the bottoms of Shamman. The gray light was changing to gloom. Darkness would not be long in arriving.

I saw a feeble foothold, accessible only by my hanging by my hands from the lip of the ledge and then trusting to luck. Yet I had no other choice. I saw to the reloading of the automatic and then swum myself over the ledge. My arm muscles, sore where the Silurian monster had held me fast in his titanic grip, were not too secure.

My feet touched the first foothold. The surface of the chalk cliff was damp and fetid. It was some time before I found a purchase for my hands. But so far my luck held out. Foot and hand found purchases. I lowered myself some ten feet.

My heart pounded in trip-hammer fashion.

There were no more footholds. I clung fast to the bit of life and security that seemingly endless face of cliff yielded me.

There was a flurry of wings. I dared not look over my shoulder, though I knew a bat was approaching me, for my strength was ebbing and I feared for my balance.

“Derro!” It was Baku’s voice. “I am here.”

I thanked my luck stars. I felt Baku’s talons on my back.

A screech rent the leaden, gray silence. Another and another!

Baku cried out in fright.

Wings beat against each other and the shrill voices of three huge bats were mingled in rage and terror and pain. Behind me Baku was fighting for his life, bravely, almost hopelessly. My light was excluded by shadows of many wings. Hundreds of bats of Shamman, armless and handless, were dropping from the stalactites above to home, Zorimi’s prisoner, from rescue.

“Baku! Baku!” I screamed. “Fly away! Bring the Bakketes! Bring the others!”

I could not see the fight. But presently I heard the fighting wings and the screeching move away from me. Either Baku had been destroyed or he took flight and escaped his killers.

A flambeau cut the gloom overhead with its yellowish glare. The Silurians were looking for me over the ledge. I was seen.

My first thought was to drop – to take death on the rocks below rather than perish in The Flame. I would cheat Zorimi. But the desire to fight for life persisted. Those three old crones who weave the fabric of our lives – Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos – might still have more threads for me to live on. It was not, I sensed, time for Atropos to end the pattern she had designed for me.

Two paws reached out of the darkness and clutched at my shoulders, took hold of my arms. One Silurian had lowered another by his legs and I was being lifted back to Zorimi’s chamber of horrors by a living rope.

Once more my two feet were planted firmly on solid flooring. The room was lighted by many flambeaux and I saw it literally packed with Silurians, their bulging black eyes devouring me, shining in the many points of light. The Flame seemed to crackle more loudly, more hungrily.

Was this the pattern spun for me by that hag Atropos?

I shut my eyes, opened them and blinked at what I saw beside the marble slab. My lips parted to utter a cry of horror, of revolting disgust – but no sound came from them.

Chapter 7: The Obsidian Knife

Morgo, on viewing the thread of smoke that slid out of the roof of the mound, slid down the crag noiselessly onto a soft bit of chalky ground. He was about to motion me to descend when the floor gave way beneath his feet.

His cry of surprise was strangled as he crashed through debris, wet chalk and slime, into a passage beneath the plateau. When he picked himself up and took his bearings, he saw that he had slid at least fifty feet from the surface and the hole he made was but a small patch of gray, seemingly far above him. He tried to clamber up the steep slopes, but failed, for the slime and wetness sent him sliding back to the bottom.

He decided to seek another exit from this passage and started on the up grade. He walked for some distance, winding, turning, moving up toward the surface and then down. Several corridors led into the passage, but he ignored them until he finally concluded he would be walking forever in this first passage unless he tried another.

This he did. He tried several, milling forward in inky darkness, dank gloom, and slime that oozed from the walls. At length, he decided that he was lost in a labyrinth that honeycombed the mound that was the home of The Flame.

His energy was great and he did not tire of seeking an outlet. He experimented with each new corridor. Hours were spent in this fruitless search. Silence, dampness and slime were his only companions. His footfalls were muffled and noiseless. Only his breathing assured him that he still lived.

Presently he felt the corridor he was traversing, grow warmer. That meant he was nearing the source of the smoke he saw on the plateau. He pressed forward. The warmth increased, the chalk walls were less damp, the slime decreased.

His progress was brought to a sudden halt by a sound ahead of him. He listened and made out the slow tread of another walker. This invisible person was moving away from him, pursuing his direction.

Again he went forward and turned a bend in the corridor.

Ahead of him, against a faint patch of light he saw a man, a scale covered Silurian. The man stopped, hesitated, and then disappeared.

Morgo was puzzled. Where had the creature gone? To the right, to the left? Or had the floor swallowed him up? He concluded that the Silurian had turned into another corridor, so he continued his march toward the patch of brightness at the far end of the corridor.

He was now conscious of greater warmth – of heat. The chalk was dry at touch. There was no slime underfoot.

His eyes were alert for the blackness on either side of him that would mark another corridor – the point at which the creature he saw had vanished from sight. He found none.

But when it was too late, he saw a niche in the wall. The Silurian was upon him, his eyes afire like those of a cat's in the night. Two fierce scaly hands fastened to his throat. He threw his strength against the man and his hands slid from the wet, scaly surface of the Silurian's body. He could get no hold on the man.

The two hands at his throat were pressing hard. His wind diminished and had no chance to recoup. Then, using his fists like hammers, he beat upon the face before him. The Silurian grunted and squealed with pain, his grip grew ruthless.

Morgo succeeded in slipping his fingers between the man's hands and his throat. They fell to the floor, fighting silently, struggling for breath. The white man eventually succeeded in breaking the other's hold and the Silurian sprang to his feet for another attack.

Morgo whipped out his bowie knife and scrambled up, too. The Silurian rushed him. The knife slid over his scaly body, but made no entry. Each time Morgo stabbed, the scales turned aside the blade, so invulnerable were they.

The creature used no weapons save his hands. He wanted to kill by strangling. For Morgo there was no opening at which to strike, since his knife glanced even from the hard face and neck of the Silurian. Yet he was not to be defeated and his passage to freedom was barred from this man. He had to kill him for his own life's sake.

There was one point of attack from which he had refrained. Now perforce, he must strike at it – the Silurian's glowing, bulging eyes, the gateway to his brain. Morgo struck out. The blade went home. The creature fell back and sank to the floor. Morgo watched him quiet and he felt the racing heart beneath the wet scales slow down and still itself.

He hurried on toward the bit of light. Now he could see that it was yellow and that it flickered.

A moment later he found himself at a window high above a room, the wall of which was lined with skulls. At one end he saw a great living monolith of fire, many Silurians with flambeaux and at the other side, he saw me as I was lifted to the ledge from my perilous perch on the face of the cliff.

And then unbelieving eyes – his eyes that doubted – fell upon the sight that paralyzed me with stark horror.

Beside the marble slab near The Flame stood Nurri Kala, resplendent in the budding beauty of her youth, girdled with a band of great, sparkling diamonds. A strange flower of little diamonds was caught in her golden hair that streamed down her back, cascaded over her shoulders and defied the red of the fire to color it, to so much as tint its hallowed purity.

But in her hand, which drooped limply at her side, she held a knife of obsidian – a symbol of sacrifice.

There she stood, the high priestess of Zorimi's diabolical cult of fire and blood. There she stood, prepared to officiate a ritual of human sacrifice. The firelight played like a spotlight on the exquisite flower of diamonds, turning it a ruby red.

Two Silurians brought forward a screaming Shamman, one of the those who roved through the forests of stalagmites hunting the mice creatures for food. Undoubtedly he had dared to wander upon Zorimi's Mount Olympus, and this, death and sacrifice, was to be his fate.

The man, whose howls were heart-rending, was flung upon the marble slab – the altar of this satanic temple. His arms were thrown over his head and held taut by one Silurian while the other held fast to his legs. This was the position in which he would best receive the blow of that obsidian dagger in Nurri Kala's hand.

Zorimi's voice thundered in the guttural language of the caves from some hidden point. Nurri Kala shook her head.

"I cannot do this, Zorimi," she said listlessly.

"I have commanded it."

"But I cannot."

"You have refrained from taking part in the rituals these many years," Zorimi cried harshly. "Now do my bidding!"

"If I refuse –"

"Then you will take that man's place."

"Perhaps I will choose to that rather than kill him!"

"Nurri Kala!" Zorimi's voice broke plaintively. "He must die in any event. But you –"

"I will die rather than kill, Zorimi."

"So be it!" He barked his orders to the Silurians.

Nurri Kala stepped back from the sacrificial altar and dropped the obsidian knife. It clattered to the floor.

A Silurian woman, ugly, a Gargantuan-legged mermaid, detached herself from the others and, crossing the chamber, picked up the knife. Her eyes were a gleam with a lust for blood. She stared avariciously at the livid victim on the slab.

Zorimi uttered further commands. Nurri Kala turned away from the sight of the substitute priestess and closed her eyes.

The Silurian woman tested the blade with her finger and waited. Two men appeared carrying something wrapped in a silk, similar to the tunic Nurri Kala wore earlier in the day. I could swear it was silk from China. Holding this object over the victim whose moans were choking in his throat, they waited, too.

Then a tall man wrapped in thick, odd skins that covered even his head and face like a monk's cowl, walked swiftly to the altar. Zorimi!

Bony hands shot out from the bundle of skins and they whisked the covering from the object.

She of the Three Heads flashed in the firelight, unholy, unclean. This diamond emblem – this Shining Stone, as the Shamans called it – evoked a murmur of awe from the Silurians witnessing the pagan ritual. Zorimi held it to the victim's breast and throat. Then it was covered and it disappeared beneath the folds of his cowl in his bony grasp.

Zorimi muttered an incantation, and the Silurian woman sent the obsidian dagger into the victim's heart. I turned away, too, when she began to hack the head from the body.

When I dared look again – at something that was to be Nurri Kala's fate – I saw a Silurian place the skull with the others in the frieze. The two, holding up the decapitated body, at another command from Zorimi, flung it far out into the fingers of The Flame.

At a sign from this Master of Evil, Nurri Kala moved easily toward the altar – prepared to take her place for sacrifice. Zorimi ordered the Silurians to seize her.

No sooner had their hands touched her white body than they screamed in agony and fell to the floor, dead. An arrow protruded from an eye in each man's head.

Zorimi wheeled about and looked up. Still I could not see his face. He spoke quickly. The terrified Silurians sprang into action.

A moment later I heard a scuffle, the sounds of fighting, wild cries, shrieks of pain and mortal agony ringing out from the direction of a high window. Then silence, ominous and oppressive.

The Silurians returned to the chamber with Morgo fast in their arms, a struggling, snarling Morgo. It was he who for the moment saved Nurri Kala's life by his unerring aim from that distant window.

"Morgo!" Zorimi cried. "At last! At last! For years I have awaited this moment!"

"Zorimi!" Morgo tried to see the man's face but the cowl was lowered. "Who is this white girl?"

"Nurri Kala is not a white girl. She is an immortal."

"She is white – like I am. Who is she?"

"I have spoken, Morgo."

"You can kill me if you do not harm her."

"I intend to kill you anyway," Zorimi cackled, "that your secret will be the safer."

"Secret? What secret?"

"The secret of who you are. The secret of your identity."

"You know –"

"I have always known," Zorimi thundered. "I know all things of this world and of the other world."

"Then," I spoke up, "you know Nurri Kala's true identity, too."

Zorimi did not look in my direction. "I know all things, white man," he said to me. "Once I feared Morgo. But nevermore!"

He shouted orders to the Silurians, and Morgo was dragged, struggling, to the altar.

“I had no intention of killing Nurri Kala,” he said softly, with sinister implications. “My threat was merely a test of her courage. She is brave, very brave. But death is not for her this night. I have other plans for her – for she is consecrated to the Shining Stone. But you, Morgo, will take her place. Your head will decorate my temple. And the other white man’s body will follow yours into The Flame.”

Morgo was flung upon his back on the marble slab. The Silurian woman caressed the obsidian knife. The men stretched Morgo’s arms and legs.

Beyond the opening, I heard the beating, the whirring of wings – hundreds of them. The Bakketes were there. A sixth sense assured me. Baku had brought the army from the far end of the Cave of Shamman. Zorimi had heard. He was puzzled. There were no sounds of fighting. The Silurians drew back, obviously frightened by imminence of the Bakketes.

“Your rescuers are here, Morgo,” he said uneasily, “but it is too late.” He spoke to the wielder of the obsidian dagger.

The purple-scale-skinned woman made ready for the sacrifice of Morgo’s life to gods and beliefs unknown to me.

Morgo’s primitive weapons had failed to effect Nurri Kala’s delivery. They had resulted in his own capture. Now it was time for me to use my “ace in the hole”. Zorimi knew of the outer world – therefore, I reasoned, he had some knowledge of guns – but he had forgotten about my automatic. Perhaps he hadn’t seen it when I was made prisoner or had forgotten to disarm me.

The Silurian woman’s arm went up, a cobra’s head poised to strike. Zorimi bent low over Morgo’s taut body, drew the Shining Stone – She of the Three Heads – from his coverings and prepared to caress my friend’s breast with it. It was the sigh of death.

There was no time to waste. The Bakketes were on hand for our rescue.

I drew my gun and shot the knife from the woman’s paw. She fell to the floor, writhing and screaming. Zorimi sprang back, clutching the Shining Stone to him.

Again and again I fired, killing the two Silurians who held Morgo to the marble altar. The other scale-skinned creatures hissed with terror and pressed back from me. I was a man who spat death from his finger. To their primitive minds, I worked miracles greater than Zorimi’s. They saw me point my finger, heard a report and saw two men fall dead. They could understand no more. It was magic to them.

Baku’s voice sounded behind me on the lip of rock. “Derro! I come back. Bakketes come.”

Morgo slid from the altar and ran to my side. I shouted to Nurri Kala to join us and she did, though her eyes strayed to Zorimi. His head was bent and she took courage to escape from her master.

“Morgo,” I snapped, “have a Bakkete prepare to carry the girl with us.” I watched while he gave this direction and saw Nurri Kala safe in a flying man’s arms. She accepted my hasty smile by way of reassurance.

“Now, Zorimi – or Lacrosse!” I said and saw the ruler of the caverns start. “Tell us the names of Morgo and Nurri Kala – their secret.”

“I will choke the truth from him!” Morgo cried, advancing on the man.

Screeched outside the chamber told me that the Bakketes were being attacked. The Shamman bat hordes had spied our army. Zorimi heard the whirring of wings, the sounds of fighting and took heart.

“That I cannot do,” he laughed. “Better compromise and make your escape, if you can, or my bats will destroy your Bakketes. And I will hurl my Silurians upon you!”

Morgo was about to spring when I caught his arm. “Hold on! We had better accept his offer and get him another time!”

Morgo nodded. “Yes, the Bakketes cannot fight the fierce bats of Shamman – though they can defeat them in swift flight.”

We backed to the opening, and I committed myself to Baku’s arms after seeing Nurri Kala safely off. Morgo took wing and shouted for me to hurry.

Zorimi screamed with rage and uttered what I took to be a command, to the Silurians, to seize me. They rushed forward as one man.

I shot at Zorimi. My last vision of that smoky blue chamber of horrors was of Zorimi crumpling to the floor, his hand to his chest, coughing and choking. He was all too mortal where hot lead was concerned.

Chapter 8: The Jungle of Fungus

I kept track of Nurri Kala’s flight in that Cimmerian night by the whiteness of her body in the Bakketes arms. Baku heeded me faithfully and flew as close to her as possible despite the terrific onslaught of the Shamman bats which tried, as usual, to beat us to the floor of the vast cave.

The handless and armless bats, I gathered, far outnumbered our Bakketes. But the latter were fleet of wing and soon we left screeching legions behind us. An instinctive sense of direction on the part of the Bakketes was carrying us toward the tunnel which led to the lower Cave of Kahli where Morgo pursued his peaceful life.

But I shouted before I was out of the proverbial woods. I was too quick to accept safety and the outstripping of the Shamman bats.

The Bakkete holding Nurri Kala uttered a piercing cry and began to sink. Baku flew closer.

Twenty Shamman bats had quietly joined our flight, flying as fast as they could, deceiving us into thinking that we were rid of our enemy. Now they swung suddenly to attack the man carrying the girl.

I saw one bat encircle the girl with his talonesque legs and try to tear her from the Bakkete. The others attacked him with their teeth and clouted him with their powerful wings.

Nurri Kala screamed and her cries were suddenly silenced. Had she been killed? Had she fainted? She was in the thickest part of the aerial fray.

I could not use my gun for fear of shooting her. Morgo was engaged with one of the other Shamman bats. I saw him reach for the flying monster with his bare hands which closed about its throat. Life was hard to rout from the bat, but Morgo’s strength was mighty. The bat pounded Morgo with its leathery wings and tore him with its talons, but Morgo was relentless. The huge bat weakened, gasped and then fell limply out of sight.

The Bakketes were impotent in helping their stricken mate. They tore at the Shamman's wings with their long fingers, and other screeching creature, unable to fly with one wing ripped off, crashed downward.

Then the fighting mass of Bakketes and bats broke. I could not see Nurri Kala. My fear was that she had been dropped by the man who was beset so strongly. A Bakkete wavered, tried to keep aloft, and then he, too, drooped and fluttered downward, his wings shattered. The Shammans scattered and vanished in an upward rush of air and beating wings.

Morgo flew close to me.

"We have lost her," he cried. "We have lost that beautiful creature!"

"Did they make her prisoner?"

"I could not see, Derro. But we are not strong enough in numbers to fly higher and search the stalactites."

"Then let us make certain she did not fall to the rocks below. We will search there," I said.

And while the army of Bakketes, battered and bleeding from their combat, hovered over us, a protecting cloud of friendly wings in the gloom, Morgo and I descended to the sea of stalagmites. Sight was well-nigh impossible in the darkness, but we carefully flew low over the area which we thought was directly below that of the previous scene of attack. The gray hulks of the chalky fingers were visible but no whiteness – as that of the girl's body – gleamed in the shadows between those pillars.

The Bakketes took to screeching again. Wings beat on wings, two bodies fell close by us. Another fight was in progress in the gloom overhead. Zorimi had sent his bats back to annihilate us completely, or to make us prisoner, and they had fallen upon our forces noiselessly.

"Can those bats see us?" I asked Morgo.

"They can see anything in the dark." The Bakkete army fled. We listened, seeing nothing, till the silence of the cave was great and nerve-wracking and devoid of a single stirring wing. We had alighted on a mound, an overturned monolith of rock.

I decided it was best that we seek refuge beneath a pillar of chalk until we had some indication that the Shamman bats had passed overhead in returning to Zorimi's plateau. Morgo said it was likely that they would fly low in search of us and could be heard. He was confident that they would not follow the Bakketes into Kahli, for they were too great of wing to negotiate the descending tunnel safely.

And then we were attacked. We saw nothing coming. The sudden impact of wings upon us crushed us to the rock, bruising and cutting our bodies. Our Bakketes had been taken off guard again.

The Silurians appeared on every side of us. They dropped from between the legs of the war bats who so silently skimmed over us.

I fired at the nearest scale-skinned creature and darted through the opening, shouting to Morgo to follow me. There was no pursuit, the surprise of the shots momentarily holding the Silurians at bay.

How far we ran I cannot guess. Morgo's breath was hot on my cheek, our footfalls muffled, noiseless. It was like running on air.

A black hole loomed before us – a small cave – and into it my feet carried me. I found Baku with Morgo. The other Bakkete, Morgo's carrier, had evidently been destroyed.

The Silurians appeared in the haze of night. They saw the cave and hesitated before entering.

“Baku will lead us into this hole in the ground,” Morgo said. “Join hands with me. Eyes are good in the dark. It is our only hope of escaping them.”

Thirty Silurians, their scaly bodies now weirdly luminous, could be counted at the mouth of the cave. To fight meant defeat for us. Death or being taken prisoner and returned to the tortures that only the evil genius of Zorimi could devise. My ammunition was low, far too low for comfort.

One by one, the Silurians began to file into the hollow that held us. They feared my gun, I knew, but they were probably impelled by Zorimi’s orders to risk death in the hope of overpowering us ultimately. They were to bring us back to him dead or alive. They were to fight, girded with the assurance that their bodies were invulnerable – when my last round was fired.

I saw nothing. I merely took hold of Morgo’s sinewy wrist and moved forward, led by him, as if in a dream. The path twisted, declined, and we had to crawl in places where the ceiling was too low and narrow. The walls of this cave were repulsive to touch. At first I was puzzled and then I discovered the cause. They were not of chalk as were the other formations of Shamman but of something soft like the down on a baby’s head. Yes, they were hairy.

This soft growth, warm and loathsome when it brushed my fingers or face caused me to shudder involuntarily. And from it seeped a faint scent, like that of decay, indescribable decay, but nevertheless the decay of dying things. This odor grew stronger and permeated the air the farther we went.

We could hear the Silurians stumbling, scraping and groping their way after us. I even imagined I could hear their cautious, labored breathing. In actuality, I heard just that. For in a sudden burst of light from the very floor beneath our feet, a glow that threw Morgo and Baku into sharp silhouette, I looked back and saw the nearest Silurian within arm’s reach of me.

I had to shoot him. His falling body, the effect of his death and startling report of the automatic momentarily stayed the Silurians advance upon us as they hissed with fear.

Baku cried out shrilly, terrified. Morgo stepped back abruptly, almost upsetting me – but too late.

The floor of the cave gave way under us, and we fell through a fuzzy, malodorous substance that glowed with a greenish hue. My fingers fought for some support by the substance flew through them, ripped and tore. It was the sensation of being shot through a giant mushroom.

I struck something hard – rock or chalk formation. My body was spun around. Morgo and I became an interlocked mass for an instant, each holding to the other for support, to stay our terrific avalanche downward through this awful suffocating substance that breathed decay into our nostrils. Then we were whirled apart, and I rolled over and over. My head hit a sharp bit of hardness, and I forgot the rest of that descent into the bottoms of Shamman.

Morgo was holding my head in his lap, rubbing the brow, when I opened my eyes again. His features were dim and slowly they cleared. He became recognizable and so did Baku.

“What happened?” I tried to grin. “Who hit me?”

“We are in the forest of unclean growths,” Morgo informed me, a note of concern in his voice. “We cannot stay here too long or our breath will be stilled.”

Our breath? I was aware that my own breathing was impaired. There wasn’t enough oxygen in the air.

“Do not breathe too hard, Derro,” Morgo warned me. “I know of this place though I have avoided it. If you fight for air you will never get enough. Breathe slowly and you will last.”

My vision was better and I saw all. We were resting at the base of a slope of gelatinous matter cut by a deep furrow. That furrow was our path – made by our falling and rolling bodies. Above it was the hole through which we had dropped. The slope and its soft coating broke our fall.

The smell of decay was nauseating. My head reeled and I did my best to breathe slowly. We were in a cave, the walls, every part of which, were a quivering gelatinous mass, the substance coated with downy hair. All was greenish and livid white in spots.

Green mold! I had seen gray-green mold on stale, damp bread! This excrescence in which we were stranded, I now recognized.

Fungus! We were lost in a forest of fungus!

The cryptogamous growth fluttered over us, depending mostly from the roof of the cavern. It fed upon the Carboniferous-looking trees and shrubs in upper Shamman, upon the filth of that upper cave’s flooring. Of that I was certain though my knowledge of such putrescent life was exceedingly limited. Yet mold and fungus did thrive on dead, organic matter.

The bed of the cave was less thickly covered with the undulating growth. Here and there it was punctuated with a titanic mushroom or toadstool like an umbrella for giant leprechauns. I wondered if we could tread our way through it to some exit. The fear of dropping into a deep hole and suffocating to death in its decay made me cold and nervous. I was not afraid of death – but I must confess to a pronounced fear of the means of death.

“Is there a way out of this jungle of fungus, Morgo?”

“Baku says he knows a way, though he is not certain, Derro.”

“Let him seek it out then.”

“It is best that one of us go with him,” Morgo said. “He may find the opening to Shamman or Kahli and may not be able to return.”

“Why not?”

“I have heard strange tales of this unclean growth. It has hands. It feeds on living men and matter. Weapons cannot defeat it. Your gun and my knife are useless in fighting it. But Baku might save one of us – if he can get through to clean air.”

I got up, stretched my legs and felt life surge through me. My lungs, though respiration was shallow, were accustoming themselves to this dead air, perfumed with mold.

“You go first, Morgo. I’ll wait here for Baku.”

Morgo shook his head. “No, Derro, my mind is made up. You go with Baku. I will wait.”

Of course we argued. Neither would be the first to make his fight for life. At length, Morgo held up a quieting hand.

“We are wasting precious breath, Derro,” he said. “Please go.”

“We’ll toss for it.” I took his bowie knife and explained to him that the side bearing the manufacturer’s mark would be the head and plain side the tail. We would spin it in the air. He who called “heads” would stay.

Morgo nodded and, taking the knife in his hand, spun it, calling, “Heads!” The blade flopped on the quivering fungus at our feet. The manufacturer’s mark was uppermost.

“I stay,” he said proudly. “You go with Baku – and hurry.”

“What is the source of the light in here?” I asked, curious over the greenish pall and not too ready to leave my new friend. “It is night above in Shaman and yet here there is luminosity.”

“The Shaft does strange things, Derro. It is the source of all light in these caverns. I meant to show it to you one day.”

“You will. You’ll come through.”

“I will wait for Baku – and try – if he comes back for me.”

I clasped Morgo’s hand in mine. He took the little cross of twigs from beneath his skin covering and gaze fondly at it.

“I pray for a safe trip for you, Derro.” His eyes met mine and I saw them shining. “You saved my life when Zorimi would take it. I owe it to you, Derro, to save yours – to pray for it. There is a bond between us now that only death can break.”

“To whom do you pray?”

“To a god my father told me about. I remember nothing about him except that these twigs are his sign. He has been kind and merciful to me in the past. He will help you now when I ask him. I am sure.”

Morgo’s simple faith in the Supreme Being was truly moving. With the veils of amnesia upon him, with a primitive existence substituted for his civilized youth, he still held fast to a faith he undoubtedly learned at his mother’s knee.

“Baku,” Morgo cried. “Derro is ready. Take him.”

Before I could protest or say more, ask more, the Bakkete slipped his arms around me, under mine.

“Go!” Morgo commanded Baku. And I was swept from the fungus flooring, watching Morgo, a small figure, become smaller and smaller with distance until he vanished in the sinister green light.

“Have you been in here before, Baku?” I asked my carrier.

“No. But I hear about it. There is a way out.”

That information was small consolation. The cavern was far-flung and the fumes of dead matter seemed more asphyxiating in mid-air than when closer to the floor. I felt faint and fought to hold my consciousness. My mind was a cauldron of quivering green and white and unclean grayish spots. We had eluded the Silurians for something far worse than Zorimir’s Flame.

“Look!” Baku cried.

My eyes opened and I saw a darkish cloud ahead in the gelatinous roof of the fungus where the growth, unlike that of the other part of the cave, hung in long threads that flicked at each other like the tentacles of an octopus. Were these the fingers – the hands – that Morgo mentioned? I tried to doubt and could not.

The dark spot beyond the beyond the wavering threads seemed to be an opening. And though the putrid air was stronger than before, I could feel blasts of something cleaner coming from the direction of the darkness. A breeze seemed to stir the depending threads of fungus and I hoped it was air and not the life in them that gave them motion.

“Save breath!” Baku said. “Danger is here!”

He meant to wend his way between two lines of fungus – an avenue offering possible safety. In another moment we were in the divide, flying as low as feasible to avoid any contact with the slithering, green threads and their fuzzy surface.

I struck out with my fists. It was useless.

A thread of the stuff was flung around my middle. Firmly, with perceptible tugs, it slowly drew us off our course, upward and toward a reddish crust – lips!

Baku’s wings were snarled in the stuff and the thought of woman’s eternal fear – a bat caught in her hair, flapping and squealing – flashed through my mind. I was deposited on the red crust.

The Bakkete was whipped away from me out of sight.

The fumes from the parted lips, a stench from the entrails of a monster dragon, suffocated my senses. I fell against the crust.

Heat! Bursting lungs! Reddish crust, hard to touch!

Green pallor! Unclean white splotches! Gray decay!

Black oblivion.

Chapter 9: Zorimi’s Promise

When I lost Nurri Kala in the windmill of beating, fighting wings, I think I more sincerely hoped for her death than for her capture and return to Zorimi. Yet she was made prisoner. A Shamman bat had caught her with his taloned feet and, holding her tightly, ripped her away from the Bakkete’s grasp. She was well on her way back to the plateau before the combat ended.

Zorimi, the magician, was waiting for her on the lip of the rock outside the chamber of skulls. She was deposited at his feet.

“My magic is still good,” he laughed down at her. “White skin does not believe, but there is magic in Shamman. And I am its master!”

Nurri Kala opened her eyes.

“The white man can spit death from his finger – but he cannot kill Zorimi,” the skin-clad figure said, the sound of his voice apparently coming from the top of the headless mass of pelts. “I have sent the Silurians to destroy them or to return them to me for the death I designed for them.”

“You are very cruel,” Nurri Kala whispered. “I did not believe this of you until I saw with my own eyes. I thought you were a god.”

“I am that, Nurri Kala. But even gods can be moved to anger, when their domain is desecrated.”

“Their coming to this mound was innocent enough,” she replied. “They came to seek friends lost from a bird that brought the red one to Shamman.”

“You must not believe that, Nurri Kala. They came here to conquer The Flame – to which you are a consecrated vestal. They are my enemies.”

Nurri Kala shook her head doubtfully. “But what is this secret about me – and him who calls himself Morgo?”

“The day will come when I can tell you,” Zorimi said in a cunning tone. “And the day is nigh when I will take you from Shamman to the outer world.”

“The outer world? But why? My life is dedicated to these caverns. You told me that.”

Her eyes were incredulous, suspicious.

“I am a magician. I will change all that when the day comes. In the meantime, I must go to Zaan. But not until I am certain that the white men are dead.”

“Why do you so desire their deaths, Zorimi? You once called yourself the All Merciful.”

“They know of affairs of which they should have no knowledge.” Zorimi rubbed his shoulder and groaned. “The red one put a bullet through my flesh.”

“You attacked him – threatened his life,” Nurri Kala said. “Here in the caverns men must fight for their lives and kill to save themselves. You said that was as things should be.”

“They are my enemies. But my magic is greater than theirs.” His voice cackled. “My magic deflected the bullet from my heart and from the Shining Stone I held.”

“Yet you could not deflect it from your shoulder, Zorimi.” Nurri Kala was interested in this thought. The magician’s powers were not as great as he claimed – or Derro’s was stronger.

“I did not act in time!” Zorimi snapped. “I was taken unawares!”

That, Nurri Kala thought, was odd. Zorimi told her once that he knew all things, all that went on in other people’s minds. Yet he did not know Derro’s finger was going to spit at him. And in that instant, her first great doubt of Zorimi’s infallibility was born.

“You will go to your chamber now, Nurri,” the magician said. “I must wait for word from the expedition that set out to find my enemies.”

Nurri Kala rose wearily to her feet. Her body ached from the struggle to which it had been subjected – a Shamman bat tearing it from the hold of a lesser Bakkete. Zorimi’s voice halted her at the steps.

“There is more that I must tell you, Nurri Kala,” he said. “It is best that you know a little of my plans, my slave.”

The girl’s eyes flashed defiantly at the mass of skins. She was no longer his slave. And though he might hold great power over the Shamman and their world, she knew then that he was as much flesh and blood as other living creatures.

She considered this bent, huddled figure, tinted crimson by the rays of The Flame – that horrible pyre stoked with human flesh and bone. His face was a mystery to her since she had always been denied the privilege of seeing it. Only the voice she knew – and until now had obeyed. This man had been her mentor. He gave her life after that accident had robbed her of those other white people she knew as mother and father and who were so good to her. Of them and the accident that robbed her memory, she remembered nothing. Her life in the caves began with the ministrations of Zorimi who found her near the Door of Surrilana.

Through her growing years, the magician had been good to her. He taught her the ways of the Shammans and Silurians and made them her slaves. He gave her pretty bright stones and the reflecting glass in her chamber and indulged all her minor needs. The Flame, she was instructed, was the source of all life in Shamman, a holy thing, and to its burning eternally she must devote all her thought and prayers. This she had done faithfully.

Zorimi was amusing at times. He told her stories about the strange people and beasts in the other caverns. He delighted her with speculations about an outer world. And while she never felt any love for him such as the white man she once called her father, she liked Zorimi. He was her only friend, a man who spoke a language she knew without learning as she had had to learn the speech of the Shammans. She was dependent on him – and believed him when he told her she was an immortal and a sacred person, a vestal of The Flame.

Her slavery was a subtle relationship between them. It was her bowing to his will, her belief in all he told her, her captivity to the power of his awful eyes. And it hinged on his ability to prove himself greater than the people of Shamman. But now Derro had struck at Zorimi and his blow had been a telling one.

Moreover, Zorimi, a kindly man, had proven himself a destroyer of human life. Till that night, she had no knowledge of what went on at the rituals in the chamber of skulls. She had not been permitted to attend the other ceremonies. Yet now she knew, and Zorimi had commanded her to participate in it – to draw a man's blood and take his life with the obsidian dagger, all for some incomprehensible reason. She suspected, though, that these pagan rituals were Zorimi's method of demonstrating his power – a power built on the taking of human life.

She reflected. She might have killed a Shamman in the act of ritual. They were not really men but beasts. Zorimi might have induced her to believe in her godhood to that extent. But he erred in asking her to kill in the presence of a man with white skin, Derro, who was so brave.

Yes, she knew Zorimi better that night. He was a man of evil. He was not to be trusted. He planned her destruction in some way still obscure to her limited knowledge.

Zorimi was talking in high sounding words, many of which she did not understand. He was discoursing on her future, a glowing career in a world of great cities and vast seas of water that was salty to taste, of men and women who dressed strangely in suits and dresses of colors and who drove in things called motors and trains and airplanes, who went under water in boats. He was telling her incredible things and she smiled placidly to disarm him though she did not believe a word he uttered.

“And when I return from Zaan, the Cave of Diamonds -” Zorimi was saying.

“Diamonds? What are they?” Nurri Kala asked. “My mother had a diamond – I remember.”

“You shall have thousands, Nurri Kala. I promise it. You will look more beautiful than all the queens in the world.”

“Queens?”

“Rulers of men, women with great power in the outer world.” Zorimi grew ecstatic. “You shall be the greatest and richest woman in all the world. I promise it. And I shall be the richest man. Diamonds can buy anything?”

“But I do not want that,” Nurri Kala said seriously.

“No?” Zorimi was amused. “What do you want then? You shall have it.”

“I want to have Morgo and Derro for my friends – for they have a skin like mine. And Derro is very brave – and so is Morgo.” She spoke with the simplicity of a child.

Zorimi thundered. “That is something you cannot have! The friendship of those two! They must be destroyed – or they will destroy us! Morgo is a savage and the other seeks my life! Surely you would not be the friend of a savage and a murderer?”

Nurri Kala did not believe him, but she silenced her tongue. Instinct warned her not to betray to Zorimi her new attitude toward him.

“Nurri Kala,” Zorimi declaimed, taking her little hand in his grimy fist, “you are to be the Bride of the Shining Stone!”

She smiled at the sound of the words. They were pleasant. “Bride of the Shining Stone! My mother was a bride – I remember her saying it. And I shall be like her.”

“You shall be what I promise!”

“But who shall be like father to me? Like he was to mother?”

“I shall be that, Nurri Kala. I shall marry you!”

The girl did not understand this but an indefinable fear welled up inside her. She wanted to hurry to her chamber.

“I shall make you my bride before The Flame, Nurri Kala, and then again in a ceremony in the outer world. I promise you that.

She ran up the steps without further comment. She wanted to be alone.

Her chamber, a room off one of the higher corridors in the mound, was spacious though plainly furnished. There was a flambeau for light, stuck in a chalk hole, a pallet heaped with skins, a few dishes from which she ate her meals, a tiny window that fed her the air of Shamman and the reflecting glass – a tall mirror of polished silver.

She beheld her image in the silver and was pleased with it. What a relief from looking at the ugly, scale-skinned Silurians! And only she was permitted to look into it. The Silurian women were forbidden its secrets and she kept it covered when they cleaned her room.

Her hands ran languidly over her whiteness. The silver mirror showed her a pretty picture – the most beautiful she had ever seen. The girdle of shining stones winked and danced in the light of the flambeau. She removed it and the strange flower of diamonds in her hair and, combing her golden locks when they sprawled over her broad shoulders with skillful fingers, she thrilled to her splendor.

And later, lying on her couch in the darkness, stretching luxuriously with the grace of a sybarite, she hoped, in the moment before she fell asleep, that Derro, the red one, though she was good to look at.

The tramping of many feet in the corridor outside her door awakened her. The Silurians who went in search of Derro and Morgo, were returning to report to Zorimi. Perhaps the two men were prisoners again. She leaped to her feet with fast-beating heart and when the last man had passed her door, she crept out and made her way stealthily to the stairs leading to the chamber of skulls.

The leader of the Silurians addressed Zorimi. His voice sounded angry. A man had been killed by Derro, but the two white men were not captives. Her heart bounded with joy. They were free and she might see them again.

The Silurian's next words left her frozen with terror. Derro and Morgo had dropped into the cave of the unclean growths to be devoured by plants that thrived on human life. They were utterly lost. Zorimi clapped his hands gleefully and chuckled with fiendish laughter. She hated the magician more than ever in that hour for she knew what death in the jungle of fungus meant. It had been described to her by the Silurian women who lost their men in it while they were on the hunts.

Yet Nurri Kala refused to despair. One man, she had heard, came out of that livid green cave alive and told his companions about it. She was not so much concerned with his tale as with the fact that he did live to escape the creeping threads of growth that devoured flesh and blood.

And while Nurri Kala knew nothing of the God of the outer world, she raised her eyes and whispered: "If one man can escape, let the two – Derro and Morgo – free themselves from that death!"

Chapter 10: Jesperson!

In my delirium, evoked by the gases from the red lips on which I lay, I dreamed that Morgo was caught in the coils of fungus, fighting mightily to tear them asunder, to overcome their insidious strength and save me. I could see him, in Baku's arms, enmeshed in the drooping, swaying threads that held sinews of steel.

Vaguely he moved toward me. Baku's pterodactyl wings beat sturdily, cutting the threads, sending them in wafting spirals to the floor below. Nearer and nearer Morgo approached.

A lucid moment came over me and I cursed the tricks a dying man's brain play on him. I was doomed. I knew it. And all of Morgo's might could not avail me anything in this life.

Again my senses departed and I saw my friend through a haze. He cried out to me to take courage – I dreamed the words – and I could only see his lip moving without sound coming from them. Now he was caught tightly, the thread coiled many times around his body. His bowie knife flashed in the green glow and the thread was severed, the coils still hanging from him. He was urging Baku closer to the lip that were now sinking backward. At any moment I would slide into the heart of the giant red-mouth fungus, to perish, slowly suffocating in the odor of inner putrescence.

My fingers bit into the reddish crust for a hold. The stuff flaked off at each grasp. I was slipping. Only my feet had a small purchase. The lips tilted sharply inward. Another degree and I could hold on no longer.

Why did I fight for life? It was so foolish! I was doomed. The thought of my gun occurred to me. There was salvation. A death that held no qualms for me. It was quick and neat and my consciousness would not then be fodder for this relentless fungus. A bullet would send me sliding into the red maw, unaware of what would happen to my flesh.

I held fast to the flaking lip with one hand while the other struggled for the automatic in my belt. My fingers reached the holster. I got it out. It slipped into my hand and the trigger finger felt its mark.

Quickly, I brought the gun up to my temple. Just one shot! I would remember nothing else!

“Derro! Derro!” A hand touched my wrist, grasped it. “Are you alive?”

I guess I just groaned.

The automatic was knocked from my grasp. Two strong hands caught my wrists. I felt myself being drawn off the reddish lip, the flaky stuff sucking at my clothing.

The rest I don't remember – and don't want to.

When I came to my senses again, cool sweet air was being pumped in and out of my hungry lungs. Morgo was pressing my stomach to make me breathe harder. Without his aid, my respiration was dangerously close to stopping.

“Sleep, Derro, sleep,” Morgo whispered. “We are safe now, away from unclean growths.”

I sighed and knew that he and Baku had successfully made the fight from the jungle of fungus to upper Shamman. It was still dark and I feared sleep. Whenever I closed my eyes I saw those green threads whipping themselves around me, drawing me up to the red lips. I felt those lips turn inward to suck me into the bowels of the fungus itself. I was afraid of sleep now, but my body was sorely tired and its energy spent.

“Baku has gone for another Bakkete to carry us,” Morgo said. He spoke of other things but I dropped into a deep, exhausted coma so deep that even nightmares could not reach me there.

It was morning when I woke up. We were back in Morgo's cave in warm Kahli. The Bakketes had brought us there during the darkness, through I was sound asleep throughout the trip.

I ate ravenously, as did Morgo. Conversation was imminent but we had to feed our strength first. My flying clothes needed cleaning, being covered with the mold from the green world, and one of the Shamman servants saw to that. And I had to bathe my body to rid my mind of the thought that any part of the fungus still adhered to it.

Morgo was highly amused by my ablutions. He bathed in a river he spoke about but never in his cave. His laughter was merry and boyish while he watched the Shamman servants douche me with cold spring water that made me gasp. Bowl after bowl of the clear liquid was thrown over my head and body, and I scraped myself clean.

Presently Morgo slid out of his skin and submitted his massive proportions to a similar ceremony. He thought it swell and promised more such showers every day. His thews rippled like pythons under his white, gleaming skin as he squirmed under the cold splashes. I noted his strength and was thankful for it – for that, as well as his courage, had saved my life the night before. Then we went out on the rocks overlooking Kahli, to bask in the warm, yellow light and dry ourselves.

I broke open a carton of cigarettes and smoked. Morgo declined the invitation to join me in this luxury. He had tried a cigarette the week before – with dire results. Tobacco was not for this primitive son of the gods.

“I have been thinking,” I said, “about the girl, Nurri Kala.”

Morgo's eyes brightened and he looked at me. “She was very beautiful, Derro.”

“I do not believe her dead. The Shamman bats took her. And I'm positive Zorimi has her again.

“Zorimi must want her badly to have a bat take her prisoner instead of killing her.”

“He knows something about her – and you – that neither of us know. But she is white like we are, Morgo – and we cannot let her remain in his hands. I can’t fathom whether he’s a white man who knows the caves or a Shamman who has been in the outer world.”

“I only know that he is evil and must be destroyed. But the girl – we must save her, Derro. We must bring her back to live with us.”

That was in my mind all the while. And I wondered whether I wanted to rescue her from Zorimi because she was a white girl or because she was a woman for whom I felt love. She was beautiful. She was sweet and innocent. She was all a man could ask for. And I refused to admit to myself that I wanted her for a mate. Man are slow to recognizing their love for woman. For they can’t quite understand just how or when or where the process began. Yet I had seen Nurri Kala and had talked to her. I felt that I knew her a little – and wanted to know her better.

“In Nurri Kala,” I said, “we have cause for another expedition to Zorimi’s plateau. But this time we must be more cautious. As for my friends, Harker and Lacrosse, I guess they’re dead.”

But the word “Lacrosse” stuck in my throat a little. Hadn’t I seen Zorimi start when, on impulse, I called him by Lacrosse’s name? Could it be that Lacrosse escaped death in the Junkers crash and was now cast in the role of the magician?

I turned the thought over in my mind. Back in Darjeeling, Jim Craig had muttered about diamonds. He spoke of a mountain-high cache in the Himalayas. And he intimated that the pectoral was the key to the treasure. Now I knew that this key – She of the Three Heads – was called the Shining Stone and that Zorimi used it in his deadly rituals.

The pectoral was stolen from Jim Craig’s body by a dacoit. Was the dacoit in Lacrosse’s pay? Was Lacrosse a man who knew the secrets of these caverns and who went abroad in the outer world with some of the wealth supposedly hidden here? I had only his and Kenyon’s word for it that he was a naturalist from Princeton.

Kenyon was a little mad. It would have been easy for Lacrosse to arrange for the Door of Surrilana map to fall into the millionaire’s hands; for him to finance the flight over Kanchenjunga. Kenyon was gullible, I thought. And it was prearranged that he was to insist on the entrance to the Door. For some reason, Lacrosse might have wanted to hide his hand – even from Harker and me – knowing full well that death was always ahead for us.

The attack of the Shamman bats on the Junkers was unforeseen. But after the crash – from which I escaped with my usual Irish luck – Lacrosse produced the Shining Stone and returned to his cave identity of Zorimi. He put Kenyon to death. Hadn’t I seen the decapitated body? And then Harker was carried off to The Flame. Hadn’t I seen his head in frieze of skulls?

Of Lacrosse, there was no trace. And Zorimi betrayed fear when addressed as Lacrosse. My conclusion was not wholly lacking in logic.

Zorimi! In him, I was dealing with a man of flesh and blood like myself, I was confident. He was not a Silurian or a Shamman. His English was too good. And he knew the identities and stories of Morgo and Nurri Kala who came from my world. All this I related to Morgo as we dried and grew warm. He was impressed by the logic of it.

“But, man or magician,” Morgo said, “I am not afraid of Zorimi. And I feel we must do something to save the girl from him. He is evil. I feel that.”

“Since the Bakketes cannot withstand the strength of the Shamman bats,” I pointed out, “we must adopt other measures for her rescue – for ascertaining that she is Zorimi’s prisoner again.”

“I will send three Bakketes into Shamman when the darkness comes. They will be cautious and will seek news of her.”

“Good! But then how can we effect a rescue? Have you no people or beasts with which we can combat Zorimi?”

“There are the ants,” Morgo said thoughtfully, “but they cannot be trusted. Once I saved their leader, the Raba of the Hussha tribe who lives in a cave nearby. They are fearless but very destructive. They might turn on us – or if they kill Zorimi, they might devour Nurri Kala as well as those who try to hold her. Once they are started on warfare and forage, there is no stopping them.”

“We can hover over their advance with the Bakketes and take the girl into the air.”

“To do that we must also fight the Shamman bats. Our Bakketes are not strong enough, Derro. But the Shammans and the Silurians fear the ants. Zorimi’s magic is supposed to keep the Husshas out of Shamman. It is really the dearth of food there which sends them to other caverns.”

“Can you talk to this Raba?” I asked incredulously.

“Of course. These ants have life and manners like our own. They have a language and live in tribes. But they are treacherous.”

I decided without hesitation.

“Then let’s visit this Raba and try to enlist his aid. I’m sure if we can take enough Bakketes into Shamman we can win our point – even against the mightier Shamman bats.”

We went inside and dressed. My clothes no longer reeked with the stench of the fungus and I quickly forgot the experience, helped by events that rapidly piled themselves upon us.

“There is a great cave next to Kahli,” Morgo said, “that is called Verizon. It is much like Kahli but warmer, and there are more beasts and reptiles living in it – beasts such as the small mannizan, the snake you call the python, the dog-headed lizards and catbirds. They prey upon the men and women who live there much like the Shammans. But all flee the ants.”

“We shall see. Let us be off.”

Baku and another Bakkete were summoned from their aeries high above the cliff in which we dwelt by a shrill whistle Morgo gave. It was a weird call, not batlike but rather like a small boy giving a secret code call for a pal. I could not imitate it.

We flew over the luxurious greenery of Kahli, peopled with the Kahlis, foraging mice and insects whose wings hummed like a Sikorsky motor, steadily and monotonously. The saffron light fell on all things, the trees and the shrubs and the wilderness of vines that grew beneath the pink, titillating stalactites in which the Bakketes flitted, hordes descending suddenly upon the swarming dragon flies, gnats and needle insects feeding in the green leaves. Life in these caves was much as life outside – the stronger preyed on the weaker and thereby survived. I could not think but how futile civilization was – for it merely replaced on method of preying for sustenance with another.

Instead of flying lower or higher to another cave, the Bakketes turn to the south and approached a door hemmed with chalk formations – the inevitable teeth with which nature endowed this inner world through the age-long processes of moisture dripping from the Himalayas’ skin into their viscera.

We passed through the great stony gate and entered Verizon which greatly resembled Kahli in its flora. It was a replica of that Cainozoic world of forty million years ago when grass and land forests came into existence and the mammal began its life.

My eyes feasted on what was spread below and above – greener forests than in Kahli – stalactites that were glowing red embers in the bright yellow light. The source of that light was something I hoped to live to see. When our problem of Nurri Kala was solved, Morgo promised to reveal it to me. He called it The Shaft.

A cry escaped me. Morgo drew closer and pointed downward.

A black belt about thirty feet wide and apparently endless wound its way over the floor of the cave, uniformly covering what was beneath it. At no place in the belt could I see greenery on the cave's sandy floor.

And this belt moved ever so slowly. On command, Baku went lower.

Now I could see the life of this belt – black ants, ugly headed and at least five feet long with yard-long mandibles. These mandibles, projecting from the creatures' shoulders, worked like tongs, reaching out, ripping apart the desired food, crushing it and stuffing it into the head's mouth. A faint moan ascended to my ears. It was that of some one munching food, the sound of this army, several million strong, existing – eating its way through life.

I thought of stories I had heard of the Driver ants of Africa. They could destroy an elephant that fouled their path by swarming over it and picking its bones clean in three days. Men and smaller beasts met with the elephants' fate, too. My heart echoed in my breast. This sight of the Husshas was terrifying.

And like the Drivers, the Husshas were organized – one of nature's phenomena. Blacker ants, in columns of ten, formed two lines between which slightly smaller ants moved. These were the "soldier ants" and those in the middle column were the "workers". The latter pushed leaves and mannan flesh to the "soldiers", the latter pushed them back or devoured them.

What awful allies! These were to be our "friends" in attacking Zorimi in Shamman. God help us if we failed to get Nurri Kala out of their path!

Baku swung me around abruptly and I saw another Bakkete flying towards us slowly, weakly. Some sixth sense had told Baku of this other's approach. Morgo had sighted him, too.

The Bakkete tried to fly up to us. Now I saw that he was wounded. One arm was missing and a leg badly mangled.

But in his sound hand he carried something whitish – a piece of cloth.

The Bakkete tried to reach us, holding out the white cloth. His wings, flapping in exhaustion, failed him and he dropped – straight into the black belt of voracious Husshas. He was lost as the living jet river slid over his body. But the white cloth fluttered in the upheld hand, a hand that quivered in death's agony.

Morgo shouted to his carrier. They swooped down upon the black line of ants. They were close enough for the Hussha soldiers to strike out at Morgo's white skin with their pointed black tongs.

Morgo reached the still visible hand, caught the wrist and flew upward. The hand came off the arm, eaten away by the worker ants. He tore the white cloth from it and dropped the lifeless paw.

We flew, at a signal from Morgo, to a mound a safe distance from the crawling black belt and alighted there. Morgo opened the cloth.

"Why, it's a piece of wing cloth!" I cried. "It might be from the Junkers. From my black bird!"

"There is writing on it," Morgo said.

I peered over his shoulder and read: "Jespersion is Zorimi." Below these cryptic words was the name "Lacrosse".

So Harvey Jespersion was in the cave. And this was a message from Lacrosse – who wanted to inter that Jespersion – the man who took my De Haviland on a solo from Darjeeling, was Zorimi the magician.

I refused to believe it.

Chapter 11: The Husshas Attack

Morgo listened to my story about Jespersion, who for some unknown reason, eloped with the De Haviland and for whom parties were searching the Nepalese jungles when I took off from Darjeeling for a day's trip to Kenchenjunga. What a day! I had no reason to suspect that Jespersion intended to assail the Door of Surrilana. There had been no talk, in our trip from Bombay to Darjeeling, of his even being in the mountain.

If Harvey Jespersion were Zorimi, what I could not understand was how he came by Her of the Three Heads – the Shining Stone. That was in Jim Craig's possession in Darjeeling on a night when Jespersion was supposedly lost in the jungles. Had Jespersion gotten the dacoit to steal it? Somehow, I doubted that. I couldn't believe it.

But if this message – this warning – was to be believed, Lacrosse was or had been alive somewhere. Probably in Shamman. He might have seen us in the arms of the Bakketes and enticed one of those bat men to bring us this message. Yet it was my hunch that Lacrosse was Zorimi himself. Was this a trick on Zorimi's part to confuse us? And did he know that we still lived after our descent into the cave of the green fungus?

Morgo listened to my spoken thoughts. At length he said:

"Derro, Zorimi knows all things. If we died in the unclean growth, he would have known. If we escaped, that, too, he would know. He has creatures in Kahli that tell him."

I laughed. The thought of spies in these caverns filled with primitive beings was amusing. But that was what Morgo meant to convey to me.

"Still, if Zorimi knows we live, I cannot see the point of this message," I said.

"Zorimi's ways are strange – mysterious I think you say. If life is spared to us, we may learn more."

Again we took off to seek the Raba of the Husshas. In the air, I could not shake off the idea that Jespersion might have entered the caves in the De Haviland. In view of what I had come to see and learn in the past fortnight, I believed anything was possible. Jespersion was presumably a prosperous jeweler from New York. I first laid eyes on him in Bombay and undertook the commission to pilot him into Nepal.

Harvey Jespersion, a jeweler! Diamonds in the Himalayas! Was that the tie-up? Did Jespersion get his diamonds from one of these caves and sell them in the outer world? As I've written, I'd come to believe that anything was possible now.

It was a clever trick of his, stealing the De Haviland after pretending to know nothing of aviation. His desire was to vanish from the face of the earth, penetrate the Door of Surrilana and make his way to his cache. Then he would leave the caves by some other and safer route. But I found all this hard to entertain. Jespersion with his round rosy cheeks and blue eyes and stubby figure was hardly the adventurous type for such an exploit. I refused to consider him in the role of Zorimi.

I noticed now that the Husshas, felling trees and gorging on the leaves and bark, revealed an open space in their ranks. In this traveled a larger ant than the others with fierce mandibles that tore tree fiber and bark apart and swallowed it, his sides heaving with the great gulps.

Morgo circled over this Hussha and I sensed that this was the Raba – or king of these ants. A mutter – a sibilant clicking sound – came from Morgo’s mouth as he hovered directly above the Raba. The big ant reared up on its hind legs and waved its mandibles slowly, a gesture of peace, I thought. The moan of munching in his vicinity ceased and soldiers and workers alike stopped eating and rested.

Baku brought me down to Morgo’s side. The parleying went on – a clicking language that reminded me of Hottentots I once heard talking the side show of a circus. The Hussha tongue was like the Hottentot. That the ant could talk I accepted as fact, though I only had Morgo’s word for it. Probably it was not speech as we know it but an exchange of word pictures in sound signs.

The Raba’s head was twice as large as a man’s and it glistened like a beady ball of malachite, punctuated near the throat by a wide blue slit, the mouth. It was the most monstrous insect head I had ever seen.

And there were no eyes in the Raba.

I looked at the other Husshas. Like the driver ants of Africa, this black, sinister horde, myriad in number, was blind – stone blind. How curious are the quirks and machinations of nature! They lived lustily and moved with military precision – nevertheless they could not see!

Morgo signaled to Baku and we rose high over the jet river of ant life and flew swiftly toward the door to Kahli. My friend had news for me and I was eager to hear it. We reached Morgo’s cave without mishap and, on landing, I went hungrily for my cigarettes to quiet nerves somewhat disturbed by the sight of the ugly ants. What if we had fallen in their midst? I remembered the messenger Bakkete’s fate!

“The Raba is our friend,” Morgo told me. “He will turn the army of Husshas into Shamman tonight. ”

“They will not pass through Kahli?” I cried aghast, thinking of what might happen in this pleasant land if the black ants marched through it.

“No, they do not come in here, Derro. It is an understanding I have with the Raba. Once I saved him from the river in a lower cavern, and in his strange way, he is my friend. No, the Husshas will enter Shamman through another opening that leads from Verizon.”

“How long will it take them?”

“A day and a night to reach the plateau, I think.” Morgo was fascinated with the idea of mustering such an army for the attack on Zorimi. “The Husshas can hide during the period of light. They will remain in the chalk and under the plant growth in Shaman, moving secretly.”

Again I thought of the Driver ants. They hide from the tropical sun of Africa during the daytime under leaves – often building tunnels across sunny patches – with leaves or the bodies of soldier who were destroyed by the sun. There was no heat to fear in Shamma; only the eyes of Zorimi’s people.

“By tomorrow night,” Morgo went on, “they will be able to swarm over the plateau. But there is another danger, Derro.”

“Surely not Zorimi’s magic?” I laughed.

“Worse than that. The red ants of Shamman. The Rortas. We never saw them. They live deep in the soft chalk, yet they are not unlike the Husshas in the way they live. They have an army life and while they are smaller and less strong, their bite is full of poison.”

“Poisonous to man?”

Morgo nodded. “To all creatures that breathe. Their bite stops the breathing.”

So these Rortas were capable of injecting a poison that, once in the blood, caused asphyxiations. I began to ply my friend with question. Were they enemies of the Husshas? Could Zorimi command them? Were they controllable?

“Yes, they are enemies of the Husshas – and Zorimi can speak to them as I spoke to the Raba. I think that if he knows the Husshas are in Shamman, he will turn loose the Rortas to combat them.”

“Then the Husshas will be destroyed!” I said, feeling that our plan was threatened with failure.

“Unless they kill the Rortas first. Their long killing teeth are not hurt by the Rorta poison – only their bodies. And the Husshas are clever fighters.”

I considered this doubtfully. Were we turning loose forces that might ultimately defeat our ends? Morgo said that the Husshas were treacherous. And now he spoke of venomous Rortas. I feared the more for Nurri Kala’s safety.

“If the Husshas take a day and a night to reach the plateau,” I said, “when will we have to be on hand?”

“Tomorrow night when the light begins to fail in Shamman. The Husshas will travel tonight and all tomorrow. I will send Bakketes to learn of the girl’s safety when it is dark. If she is dead, then I want Zorimi for a prisoner. I mean to learn from him the secret about me.”

This was my first inkling that Morgo was thinking about his identity too strongly. Zorimi’s betrayal of such knowledge had whetted my friend’s curiosity. Yet I wondered if Zorimi still lived. Hadn’t I seen him drop with my parting shot?

We spent the day resting and plotting. And when night came, Morgo went out on the ledge and summoned the Bakketes – four of them – to act as our scouts. I noted that Baku was one of them.

A little later, I missed Morgo and searched for him. He was not in or about the cave. The Shamman servants could tell me nothing when I made incomprehensible signs to them. But I understood. Baku’s presence among the scouting Bakketes was the key. Morgo had gone with him – to make certain that the information we wanted was correct.

But why had he refused to take me along, or tell me of his intention? I worried and tried to keep away and could not.

It was Morgo who aroused me from a heavy slumber the next morning. He had the shower baths ready and made me bathe with him before he would tell me a word of the previous night’s adventure. He parried my questions with laughter and splashed under the cold water the servants poured on us. I shivered and began to regret the introduction of such a custom into Kahli.

At breakfast he broke his silence. “I thought you needed rest, Derro. After what happened to you in the cave of the unclean growths, you were tired. You are not used to our life here – and tonight we will need your strength with mine – for Nurri Kala.”

“Then you did see her – alive?”

He nodded. “Yes, I had Baku carry me to Shamman. I knew if I told you I was going, you would have gone with me. But you needed sleep more than adventure – we were lucky – and went unobserved. None of the Shamman bats smelled us out.”

“But you did see her – Nurri Kala?”

“I did. At the opening to the room with the skulls. She was inside talking with Zorimi, her beauty glowing with the light of The Flame. I am sure she is not a priestess of Zorimi’s evil worship.”

“I know she isn’t.”

“Zorimi is said to know all things – all that happens in living creatures’ heads.” Morgo gave a little laugh. “He did not know that Baku held me at his window that I might spy upon him. When I saw that the white girl lived, I was happy. We flew back to Kahli immediately. Tonight we shall have her with us.”

“I hope so.”

“You fear the ants? But we have the Bakketes, Derro. They will carry us over the fighting.”

I shook my head, worried.

“If the Shamman bats attack us, we will be beaten to the ground. The ants – red or black – will have us then. And there will be little we can do. What are a few arrows or bullets against millions of onrushing ants bent on making a meal of you?”

“Have courage, Derro. And I have another plan. We must try to take Zorimi, too. I want to talk to him. Make him tell me the secrets he knows – and then remove his evil from this life.”

Morgo’s voice rang with a fierce intensity as he uttered these last few words. He was an avenger now – the scourge of evil things in cave life that had been good to him!

I spent the day cleaning two .38s, mending the torn-out sleeve in my wind-breaker and trying to prevail upon Morgo to use a gun. He would have none of that, however. His arrows, he said, were his weapons and he preferred a knife to all the guns in the world, for fighting in caves was at close grips. He was more accustomed to man-to-man combat and overpowering an enemy than quickly killing him. Decidedly, he was not a killer.

The yellow afternoon light began to wane. Morgo hurriedly gave instructions to Baku. And presently the legions of Bakketes were in the air before our dwelling. The prospect of meeting the Shamman bats held no fears for them. They, too, were fighters, when Morgo called upon them for aid.

I cautioned Morgo not to take off before darkness was well upon the caverns. We must run no risk of being seen. We must avoid the Shamman bats. But Morgo pointed out that the Husshas were undoubtedly close to the plateau – that there was little time to lose. We had, perforce, to be at Zorimi’s mound when the Husshas began their attack.

I committed myself to Baku. The feelings of a man about to go over the top surged through me. I wanted to take Morgo’s hand and thank him for saving my life in the cave of the green fungus.

“Do not let us grasp hands, Derro,” he said to me, his eyes apparently reading my thoughts. “We are not parting. We will meet again.”

“You’re an optimist.”

“Our cause is right. We will come through and see each other again.”

I thought of the ants, and the bludgeoning winged Shamman bats. “I hope so.”

I was filled with dire forebodings. Our luck could not hold out forever. We had tried it deeply, too, in escaping those fingers of decay that coiled about us in the jungle of fungus. My Irish pessimism put me in good spirits.

We went aloft and straight for the tunnel into Shamman. The light began to vanish quickly – the eternal wick being lowered in the rooms of those eternal caverns beneath the Himalayas.

I wondered how the Husshas could travel so rapidly. A day and night to cover at least two hundred miles. Their bodies were great in size, I remembered, and I speculated on their moving with the speed of a fast horse. Little did I know that they could move even faster.

The stalactites of gray Shamman were devoid of the bat men of that cave. Steadily, wary of attack from above, we moved on the plateau. I could barely make out the thread of smoke from The Flame.

The spiked floor was a sea of veiled grayness below us. It moved like a leaden, molten sea beneath us. All was still. There were no signs of a living creature in all Shamman.

Morgo cried out to me and I heard him urging his carrier Bakkete on the faster. Looking ahead, I saw a black line emerging from the gray sea of stalagmites.

The Husshas were leaving their cover. They were attacking. They were ready to swarm upon the plateau of The Flame!

Baku flew lower than the legions behind us. I drew my gun.

I knew that if the Shamman bats fell upon us and we were beaten down into the river of black ants, Shamman and Bakkete alike would perish.

Now the top of the mound was alive with men and women – the Silurians. They had seen the Husshas. They understood. They knew what death in the mandibles of the big warlike ants meant.

Nearer and nearer we moved in narrowing circles. Still not Shamman bats were in sight.

I saw Zorimi now, a puny figure, running hither and yon, exhorting the Silurians. But they move steadily away from him, clambering down the other side of the mound, fleeing into the darkening grayness of Shamman’s ugly floor. They did not mean to fight if they could help it.

A scream burst from my lips.

The Husshas were at the base of the plateau. Their hordes flooded around it. In a few minutes, all retreat from the mound would be cut off by a circle of mandible blades.

Where was Nurri Kala? That was my only thought. Probably within the mound.

The Husshas began to climb the sides of the plateau – their bodies wagging from side to side. They were like flies strolling up a high wall. The precipitous sides were no obstacle to them.

Shrill, pitiable shrieks came from the far side of the plateau to which the Silurians had retreated. The last to leave the mound had fallen into the black crushing tongs of the Husshas. Death was already loose in the home of The Flame.

Zorimi was now a lone figure, standing on high crag, looking up at us.

What was he waiting for? Where were his bats?

I wondered too easily.

The whirl of wings sounded overhead. The Bakketes screeched. The Shamman bats screeched more savagely. I could see their onslaught in the thickness of the descending gloom. Thousands met thousands fiercely. Bakkete and Shamman bat, bodies locking mortal combat, dropped into the pools of Husshas. The moan of munching began. The scores of fallen bats were like manna to the marching insects.

Above was the blackness of fighting wings. Below was the jet mass of ants in attacking phalanxes. Morgo and I hung between two brands of death. And Nurri Kala was still invisible.

Following Morgo's move, I dropped to the plateau.

Heedless of my friend's shouted warnings, the nature of which I couldn't make out because of the aerial melee, I ran to the steps I knew of. They led down to the chamber of skulls.

"Nurri Kala!" I shouted. "Nurri Kala!"

A moment later I heard Morgo's voice behind me, taking up the cry. We reached the smoky blue room of The Flame together. It was deserted on first sight.

Then I saw six Silurians standing guard over the white girl. She pressed her body against the chalk walls, crouching behind them, her eyes freighted with apprehension. She seemed to have some feeling of the danger that beset her. All of us now.

Morgo spoke gutturally to the scale-skinned men. They sprang at him.

I shot two of them. That stemmed their attack and they backed toward the opening that gave on Shamman.

Nurri Kala ran to me and threw herself into my arms.

"To the stairs!" Morgo cried. "We must get back to the Bakketes!"

Holding tightly to the girl, her sturdy grace beneath her silken tunic responding to my guidance, I piloted her toward the stairs we had descended.

The Silurians shrieked, terrified. They ran from the opening, but I saw one of them held fast there. The black ring of a Hussha's mandibles were about him. He was flicked over backward into the mass of ants below.

The Husshas – blind and hungry and bent on destruction – were about to enter the chamber of skulls. I could see the glint of The Flame's rays on their massive jet heads. We were all one to them – Silurian and white man – prey!

I stopped halfway up the step that I thought led to freedom.

Coming down, tumbling down, lighted by the fire of the ritual pyre, were the red ants – smaller than the Husshas but more loathsome. These Rortas with their crimson bodies glowed like bulbous balls of illuminated blood.

I drew Nurri Kala back to the floor of the chamber. The top of the plateau was alive with the Rortas. Zorimi had summoned them. Or they had been drawn from their underground borings by the scent of the Husshas, their eternal enemies?

Morgo was close to The Flame, his white body scarlet in its light. He had come to grips with a Hussha, his thews swelling and struggling like fiery snakes in that evil light. I saw him slash the ant's right mandible from its shoulder with his knife.

My legs were suddenly enclosed in a vise. A Hussha's mandibles held me fast. I poured lead from my .38 into its great body. Nurri Kala backed against the wall, watching the Rortas who continued slowly to move toward us. Her eyes were glazed with horror.

There were forty Husshas in the chamber of the skulls. Oddly enough, in that moment of peril, my eyes counted them. The Rortas still tumbled down the stairs.

The two tribes of ants met. I saw Husshas recoil. I saw their mandibles peck at the tails of the red bodies. I saw the black ants, bitten by the red, stop abruptly and curl up. Death was upon us all. I could hear the crunch of those huge black insect tongs upon the hard surface of the Rorta's bodies.

Still the Husshas approached us.

Morgo, Nurri Kala and I back toward The Flame. The heat of that pillar of blazing inferno scorched our white skins. The blistering pain was intense.

A Hussha, rearing awkwardly on its hind legs, threw itself upon Morgo, pinioning his arms to his sides helplessly against its mighty mandibles. He staggered and went down under the heavy black body. I ran to his assistance as his knife slithered impotently over the creature's sides, glancing off for lack of space in which to strike a blow that would bury the blade.

Nurri Kala screamed a warning to me.

I turned too late. The pressure of another black ant's tongs caught me at the sides above the hips. The wind was being squeezed out of me in spasmodic tightenings of the Hussha's grip. I could not turn around to send a bullet crashing into the ant's vital spots.

The girl, sensing my desire, reached out for the gun.

But instead of taking it, she recoiled with a mute shriek and tottered close to the brink of the fiery pit. I saw a Rorta crawling toward her. Unable to bear the fierce heat, Nurri Kala fought a faintness, induced by horror and physical pain, and then succumbed to it, sinking limply to the floor at the edge of The Flame, its awful heat searing her white flesh.

Morgo's white muscles quieted in their struggles. Hadn't he seen Nurri Kala? The Rorta was ready to inject its venom into her beauty, destroying it forever! I saw that his eyes were closed as if in sleep. Was he dead?

I clenched my teeth to fight the pain that flashed through me like liquid fire. My vision faded. The life was being crushed out of me.

Chapter 12: The Labyrinth of the Rortas

My automatic dropped from my numb fingers and clattered on the floor. The pain from the big mandibles forced open my eyes.

Morgo had slipped – in eel fashion – from the pressure of his enemy’s mandibles, freeing one arm. His knife ripped and hacked at the black tongue until he was free of it. The Hussha rose to its legs to hurl its weight upon him, to crush the life out of him before devouring him.

Nimble, he leaped back and the black ant, missing its quarry in its rush, toppled to the floor. Morgo’s bowie knife was driven far into its back as he leaned over the Hussha. A thick, sure stream of gore burst from the creature’s side and Morgo jumped aside to avoid the torrent. He slit the back of the Rorta that menaced Nurri Kala and his mighty arms swept her from the reach of the fire. She regained her strength, pushed Morgo from her and pointed to me.

In another moment, he had driven his knife into the body of the black ant that held me relentlessly. I felt the grip of the Hussha’s tongs slacken, but they still hung to me while the insect writhed in its dying agonies. Morgo quickly cut the mandibles that bound me to the Hussha and I sank to the floor.

A glance at Nurri Kala assured him that she was all right. Then he picked me up in his arms as if I were a two year old and ran toward the jagged frame of The Flame’s orifice.

“Can you climb that wall, Nurri Kala?” he cried breathlessly to her. She nodded. “Then go ahead of me. I will carry Derro.”

The girl sprang at the wall. Her hands and feet found holds that the sharp eyes of Morgo had spied. She moved with startling agility and was soon high above the frieze of skulls with the pyre of flames roaring at her side, scorching and blistering her fair skin.

Morgo slung me over his shoulder like a sack of meal and began his ascent. My weight slowed his progress but his might carried the two of us upward with ease.

With my head hanging down and the pain within me numbing my senses, I was aware only that my eyes gazed into a sea of struggling black and red ants. The Husshas that would have followed us – we were good fleshy prey – were forced to turn their attention to the venomous Rortas. The chamber of skulls was a shambles, its floor smeared with gore and the dotted bodies of the reds and the blacks fighting for supremacy.

Nurri Kala had reached a ledge. Morgo told her to follow it and we were presently in a dark gallery. This was one of the many corridors that honeycombed the plateau of The Flame that Morgo told me about – the one into which he had fallen the first day we met Zorimi.

For a time we watched the Husshas pore into the chamber below from Shamman through the far opening. And the red Rortas piled down the steps on the opposite side in a steady, cascading stream. The advance of the black ants was so formidable, there was no turning back or aside for them. Those that were not killed by the poison of the Rortas, marched straight into the hissing flames.

The Rortas, feeding this chamber without control, could not stem their own advance and mingling with the black ants, were swept in the procession of death into the pyre. At last, I thought, the strange forces of nature that sent the blind ants to destruction were in our favor.

But I hoped too soon.

Some sixth sense warned those insect that they were parading to their doom. They sought other means of escape. They moved toward the walls and presently, were climbing the sides like flies, reds and blacks alike, titanic monsters of the insect world.

“We must risk getting away from them by taking this tunnel,” Morgo said. “It is our only hope.”

I insisted on being set on my feet. A few steps convinced me that I could still walk. And I did not want to be a burden to Morgo in this flight for our lives. The pain subsided a little and I was able to stagger and stumble along with the support of Morgo’s supporting arms.

We plunged into the darkness of the tunnel, Nurri Kala just ahead of us.

“If we can find a path that goes higher,” the girl said, “I think that we can cross over the ceiling of the chamber and get into tunnels in which I know my way.”

“Then use your own judgement, Nurri Kala,” Morgo said to her. “Be our leader in this darkness.”

We moved forward as quickly as possible, despite my weakness. The ants were behind us. I could hear their scraping and scratching in the tunnel.

Nurri Kala got us to an ascending tunnel, and I felt the walls grow damp and the odor of decay assailed my nostrils. We were leaving the vicinity of The Flame. I was numb but my sense of direction told me that we were easily above the chamber, turning into a corridor over its roof. Still the sounds of the ants escaping death in the chamber and pursuing us, were audible.

“It is here,” Nurri Kala cried. “I know this path now.”

Morgo sighed and my energies seemed renewed as we pressed closer after her.

We wound to the right and to the left, we descended a sharp decline, passing many darker mouths of corridors from which foul breaths were exhaled in the chilled air. I prayed that the girl was taking us to the top or to an opening in the wall of the cliff that defined the mound. She seemed to know her way, turning into corridors that were only black holes to me.

“I know these walls by the feel of them,” Nurri Kala said. “Many times I have walked through them – playing at exploration. Zorimi forbade it – but I had no other diversion.”

I hoped her former diversions would profit us a little now.

“There is a room with a door, if I can find it,” she called back to us. “Zorimi used it to store his Shining Stones when he returned with them from Zaan.”

Ahead of us I heard a sudden scraping noise. The ants. Rortas or Husshas? Had we circled in our wanderings? Were we about to cross their paths? I listened, pausing for breath.

The scraping sound was still behind us.

And ahead of us now, too.

We were running into another horde of ants. Morgo pressed my hand, signifying that he, too, had heard, and he put a finger to my lips. He didn’t want me to startle the girl with our discovery.

The ants moving ahead of us were now more audible. My body turned cold and a sweat broke out. I was afraid.

We passed a tunnel, sensing it only by the air wafted at us. The ants were in that corridor. The path ahead was once more silent. We hurried on. Two streams of ants were flowing behind us, a molten river of venomous or crushing death.

“I have found it,” Nurri Kala shouted to us. Her voice was distant. “It is the door to the room.”

We ran in the direction of her voice.

She called again, more distantly. Morgo caught my wrist and turned me about and we retraced our steps. When every second counted, the darkness led us astray. We had entered the wrong tunnel.

Morgo shouted our location. The girl replied and in a few minutes we were touching her hands. I felt the panels of a huge thick door made of a wood unknown to me. It swung on heavy iron hinges.

I gasped with a new fright. Had we reached this supposed haven of safety, only to find the door locked?

“It opens,” Morgo said softly, happily. My relief was so great it weakened me and Morgo carried me into the room, the size of which was denied us by the gloom.

“There is a bar in here,” Nurri Kala said. “Zorimi used to lock himself in when he was counting his Shining Stones.”

She and Morgo searched for it with outstretched fingers. They ran along the walls and then crawled over the floor on their hands and knees.

Morgo muttered in pain several times. “These stones are sharp. They cut my flesh.”

The Shining Stones of Zorimi! I knew them for diamonds! No wonder Morgo’s skin was pierced if it scratched the hard brilliants. I imagined the room covered with a diamond dust that would shame a king’s ransom.

“I have it,” Morgo cried. “The bar. And it is heavy.”

I listened to him closing the door. The sound of the bolt dropping into the iron hafts was music to my terrified ears. For a time, the Rortas and the Husshas were barred from our flesh and blood.

“Derro,” Morgo said to me, “can you strike a fire with one of your — what do you call them — matches?”

Fool that I was, I hadn’t thought of my matches earlier. They might have helped us in our mad plunge through the dark corridors. I took out a pack and lighted a match.

We were in a small chamber about fifteen feet square. The door was at one end and in the wall opposite it there was a tiny hole. When the light went out, Morgo went to the hole and, gripping it, lifted himself until his chin was level with the bottom of it. I saw him thus when I struck a second match.

“I think this hole leads to the outer cave, and not another tunnel,” Morgo said. “The air is fresh and pure.”

But I was paying no heed to his words. My eyes were feasting on the sight of the floor. My guess was right. It was strewn with diamond dust, small particles that sang a glittering song in the light. So this was Zorimi’s treasure room. And Zaan was a cave of diamonds. My thoughts harked back to poor Jim Craig’s words — “a mountain of diamonds.” I wanted to visit Zaan.

Morgo was tearing at the hole with his bare hands. I made more light to aid him. Nurri Kala went to his side and began to work with him. The chalk, moist and soft, crumbled under their digging and pulling. The hole widened a little.

Silently, Morgo went about his task of tearing a hole in the side of the room. I saw the diameter grow. The chalk was like putty in the hands of those two children of these primitive caves.

When the hole was wide enough for a body to climb through and waist-high to the floor, Morgo leaned through it. He jumped back elated and rubbed his bloody hands on his sides.

“It is Shamman.” He said. “We are high up in the face of the cliff.”

“But we can’t climb up or down unless we make footholds,” I pointed out. “What good is your opening?”

In the light of a match I saw Morgo grin at me. “Listen to me, Derro.”

He leaned through the hole again and uttered a loud, shrill wail. It was the old schoolboy’s signal call I heard him use when he summoned Baku and the Bakketes.

Morgo’s ruse was a clever one. The Bakketes brought us to the plateau and they would effect our release from its bowels via the hole, if they still lived. Again Morgo called, and paused to strain his ears for an answering cry.

There was none.

The Bakketes were undoubtedly routed or vanquished by the Shamman bats. Zorimi had set a trap for us. He had waited until our forces were concentrated over the mound and then he released his hordes of human-headed bats upon us and had beat our army into the sea of monstrous black ants. And Morgo, with his bare hands, had prepared for us a door to freedom – which we might never use.

Something struck the barred door. Someone was pounding upon it.

“Open! Let me in!” a muffled voice cried. “Let me in!”

It was Zorimi.

He had fled from the Husshas swarming over the plateau to the safety of the secret tunnels. Now these very hiding places were filled with the creatures he sought to escape.

“The Rortas! The Husshas!” Zorimi wailed. “They are coming. The ants will destroy me!”

That voice, though it was Zorimi’s, was more familiar to me with its pitch of terror. Lacrosse? Jesperson? I had heard Lacrosse cry out in fear when Kenvon commanded us to enter the Door of Surrilana. I did not recognize this frightened voice as Lacrosse’s.

“Let me in, Morgo!” Zorimi cried. “I know you are in there.”

“Be careful, Morgo,” I said in a low voice. “It might be a trick – to overpower us.”

“Zorimi has a power over the Rortas,” Nurri Kala said. “He is a magician and does not fear them.” Yet I detected in her words a trace of doubt for the magician’s powers.

We drew close to the door and listened. The man on the other side was breathing with labored efforts. And I could hear the approaching ants – scratching and scraping on the walls of the corridors beyond, moving upon us in their blindness.

“Morgo! Have pity on me!” Zorimi shrieked. “They are near. I can hear them.”

Morgo’s hands fell upon the bar and moved as if to lift it. I scrambled to my feet and laid a resisting hand on his.

“He’s a trickster,” I said.

Zorimi evidently heard me. “This is no trick, Morgo! I swear it! Let me in! Let me in!”

Morgo brushed my hand from his. “I cannot let even him die such a death, Derro. Draw your gun and be ready for trouble. Strike a light, too. I must let him in.”

“No! No!” Nurri Kala cried. “I am afraid. He is evil. It is a trick, as Derro says!”

My gun was in my hand. I knew I could not argue with Morgo. His voice forbade it. A match was lighted.

The bar slid out of place. The door swung inward.

Zorimi, hidden in his cowl of skins, tumbled into the room.

“I mean to learn my secret now,” Morgo said to me as he went to replace the bar, “if it is the last thing I do!”

The bar was whipped from his hand.

The door burst open. In the flickering of my match, I saw Husshas and Rortas coming in upon us – their bulks red and black in the momentary light. I fired into their midst.

Nurri Kala screamed. I felt Morgo dragging me backward to the opening in the cliff.

“We can hurl ourselves out,” he said. “That is a better death than this. I had no idea the ants were so close to Zorimi.”

The magician shrieked out in the darkness. I felt his mass of pelts brush against me as he staggered.

I struck another match to get our bearings.

The door was choked with the ant bodies, soldiers and workers trying to gain an entry. In their eagerness for our flesh – having undoubtedly followed our spore through the labyrinth – they made for us a temporary blockade against the thousands behind them.

Chapter 13: The Plague of the Mannizans

A wailing cry came through the hole widened by Morgo’s hands. It was the signal of a Bakkete.

Morgo shouted to them. I heard the flurry of wings against the cliffs, though my eyes saw nothing. Was this really delivery? Or would the ants reach us first – pick off the last man?

“I am here!” Baku’s welcome voice cried to us.

“Nurri Kala goes first,” Morgo said. She was given into the arms of a Bakkete. “To Kahli. We will join you there.”

“Zorimi goes next,” Morgo cried. “Hold him, Derro!”

I had no idea where the magician was, so I struck a match, my last. Zorimi had scurried to the far side of the cave. He did not mean to be made prisoner by Morgo.

“Zorimi!” Morgo commanded. “This is your only hope of life! Come!”

“No – no!” Zorimi said huskily. He started to climb the wall, moving upward, his hands and feet jabbing into little niches I hadn’t noticed. There was a hole near the ceiling toward which he moved.

Morgo sprang at him.

The ant-engorged door broke and Rortas and Husshas swarmed into the room. My light went out.

“Morgo!” I shouted. “They’re in the room!”

Morgo’s arms guided me to the hole. I felt a Bakkete’s arms take hold of me and I swung off the floor, crying to Morgo to follow me.

I caught my breath and felt easier when I saw the flash of his white body in the air beside me.

“I said we would come through, Derro,” Morgo laughed across the gulf of stillness that separated our flying Bakketes. “And we have the white girl.”

Little did I realize in that moment what the white girl would mean to us – do to us.

The flight into Kahli was made without signs of our enemies. The night of Shamman was empty of the huge bats. But from below came the incessant munch-munch of the Husshas still pouring out of Verizon, marching on the plateau, the goal set by the Raba at Morgo’s request. Shamman would be ravaged by these insects. I decided I wouldn’t give two cents for Zorimi’s chances of escaping the plateau alive. His world was infested with certain death.

On returning to Morgo’s cave, we received the reports of the aerial battle from Morgo. The ranks of the Bakketes were sadly depleted. The suddenness of the Shamman bats’ attack threw hundred of them into the mandibles of the black ants. And the Shammans perished, too, in those tongs.

When the tide of the battle turned against them, the Bakketes scattered in groups to hide in territory free of the ants, beneath stalagmites and the stunted trees and vegetable growths. Yet they were routed by the approach of the red ants which seemed to come out of the earth and move directly toward the plateau of The Flame.

Baku feared for his master’s and my life when he saw the Olympian mound inundated by the black and red creatures. The other bats urged a retreat to the Cave of Kahli but he insisted on waiting until the light came. He still hoped for a sign.

There was a growing restlessness, verging on mutiny in the Bakketes ranks, when the signal call came from Morgo. Then Baku had a hard time locating the source of the call. It was only when Morgo gave his schoolboy’s whistle a second time that the Bakketes spotted the hole in the wall of the cliff.

While this conference was in order, Nurri Kala took over the Shamman servants and directed them in the preparation of a meal I’ll never forget. She personally supervised the cooking of leg of mannizan – which to me was plain mouse – but what

mouse, when I ate it with the trimmings she concocted. Also, she had the fat of these huge rodents torn from the meat and gristle and this she applied to the burns on our three bodies, which had been scorched and seared by The Flame. It held some ingredient that soothed like an unguent.

We ate like – like Husshas, I'd say. We devoured and munched til we could eat no more. Never have I needed a meal so badly and never was one so well served up to me.

During this repast, Nurri Kala told us as much as she knew about Zorimi, which was very little. I have recounted that in an earlier chapter for the sake of chronological order. Morgo and I were aghast at the magician's proposal to make her his mate. The white youth was fiercely moved and left us hunched over our dishes to walk out on the ledge over which the yellow light was just spreading its early morning color.

I was keenly interested in all the girl could tell me about Zorimi's excursions to the Cavern of Zaan where he amassed the diamonds. After these trips, he periodically disappeared from the caves – sometimes months on end. Where he went, Nurri Kala had no idea. But of one thing she was certain: he always took the Shining Stone – She of the Three Heads – with him, as well as packs of diamonds.

"Jespersion, the jeweler! Jespersion, the jeweler!" the words kept whispering themselves to me. The logic fitted nicely – too nicely, I concluded. If Zorimi was Jespersion in the outer world, why did he so greatly fear my knowing his identity? He alone knew there as a way out of these Himalayan caverns other than the Door of Surrilana. I was a prisoner here until my dying day. He could come and go as he pleased. Or did he fear that I might discover this other exit? Was it so easy to find? That set me to thinking.

But thoughts of Jespersion and Lacrosse and of Zorimi's true identity were dispelled by the lovely sight of Nurri Kala's golden beauty. Enigmatically, she studied me with those soft blue and mysterious eyes of hers. Those childlike eyes that I adored – and in a flash, realized that I was adoring.

"Why do you stare at me, Nurri Kala?" I asked. "Are you trying to read my thoughts?"

"I am thinking of what a brave man you are, Derro with the red head. And I have never seen such fiery hair before." She smiled and dropped her eyes to steal shy glances at me.

"We owe our lives to Morgo," I said impulsively. "It was his courage and his strength that brought us through all our troubles."

"He is very brave, too – but he is of the caves. You come from beyond the caverns. I did not think men from that world were so daring."

"What makes you think that?"

"From what little I remember of it – and that not too clearly. The men did not do the things you and Morgo do. But I expect fine deeds of Morgo. He makes his life here. You have made yourself learn our ways. You have done more than he, Derro."

"You're giving me the blarney," I laughed. "But I always love to hear it from the lips of a pretty woman."

She drew herself up and tossed her head proudly. "Pretty? Do you think I am pretty, Derro?"

"I think you are beautiful, Nurri Kala."

"Beautiful? I have heard that word before."

“And you’ll hear it again, whenever I’m around. Why, I’ll fall in love with you if I’m not careful.”

“Love?” Her eyes kindled with glorious light. The word seemed to awaken some deeply hidden response within her. “I have heard that word. My father used to say it to my mother.”

“I’ll bet he did – if she was anything like you.”

“She was more beautiful, Derro.”

“I don’t believe it!” My Irish gallantry wouldn’t stand for that! Nurri Kala was the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen or, I suppose, will ever see again.

Morgo returned to the fireside. “Let us sleep, Derro. We are all weary.” His eyes watched Nurri Kala as she got up. I frowned. The thought crossed my mind and was lost: was he falling in love with her?

I gave up my pallet to the girl and made myself comfortable on a pile of skins near the fire beside Morgo. The embers winked and glowed and a coolness stole into the cave. Sleep did not come to me, though I was exhausted and sore inside from the Hussha’s terrible grip; and I tossed restlessly.

My eyes fell upon Nurri Kala’s white shoulders peeping out from beneath her blanketing pelts. She would catch her death of cold, my civilized mind told me. So I got up and going to her side, drew the covers up over her, pressing them to her throat. Her alabaster skin was soft and warm to my touch.

“Thank you, Derro,” she murmured sleepily.

A little later, back on my pelts, I noticed that Nurri Kala had moved and thrown off the covers. I was about to get up when Morgo stirred and got to his feet. He crossed to the girl’s bed and did as I had done – drew the covers tighter about her throat. She did not speak to him. And as I dozed off, I wondered if he had been watching me.

It was late the next day when I opened my eyes. I had slept the sleep of the dead and awoke refreshed though my insides still hurt. My fears that I was injured internally were soon forgotten in the business afoot.

Nurri Kala was laughingly fixing the cave up, cleaning it cleaner than was the wont of the captive Shamman. She was fastidious, and Morgo obeyed her every wish, arranging dishes here and piling the sleeping skins there, sweeping the dust and ashes over the ledge instead of back into the fireplace. She was demonstrating that feminine touch in a bachelor’s diggings.

“Get up, lazy Derro!” Morgo boomed at me. “Take your shower bath!”

I demurred. Nurri Kala was insistent.

Morgo ordered the bowls filled with water and when I retreated to the ledge he followed me, pounced upon me and started to disrobe me.

“You must take your shower,” Nurri Kala said. “Morgo has been telling me all about it. I must have one, too.”

Breathlessly, with Morgo sitting astride my recumbent form, I explained that where I came from, men and women did not participate in the same bathing facilities. Though I tried to couch my thoughts as delicately as possible, the girl was suddenly seized with an understanding that caused her to blush.

“Oh?” was all she said. When Morgo dragged me back into the cave and stripped me, she refused to come in and witness the ceremony. He doused me with the icy water and I returned the compliment while he choked and sputtered and roared with mirth, calling all the while to Nurri Kala to watch “Derro’s funny custom.” Later when we went off on the hunt, I learned, Nurri Kala had one of the Shamman duplicate the shower for her. She was still shivering from the chill bath when we returned.

Morgo explained that our larder was low and that we needed flesh and greens to eat. A hunt in the forests of Kahli was necessary.

Baku and a Bakkete were summoned and Morgo and I took off, armed with bows and arrows. It was to be my first experience at archery.

We dropped into a thickly wooded spot where Morgo bent close to the ground, studying the earth and looking at the leaves. He pointed out large footprints, oddly fingered, and leaves that had been nibbled.

“Mannizans have been here,” he said. “We shall have Mannizan for food.”

I followed him through the brush and jungle growths while, overhead, the two Bakketes traced our path in the air. Morgo walked with a noiseless, springy step, shoulders thrown back and head cocked to one side. His eyes darted along the ground where the Mannizans had passed.

He stopped and held up a warning finger for me.

“Be careful, Derro,” he said. “They are very dangerous.”

We moved forward noiselessly. I could hear sounds of animals moving behind the forest screen ahead of me. They were gentle sounds and I could not connect them with a ferocious rodent.

Through a rift in the wall of green, we saw them.

Five Mannizans were browsing on the leaves, their noses close to the earth. I was excited. These gray, furry creatures were rats the size of Fords. I had expected to see unusually large mice – not these beasts out of delirium tremens.

Morgo frowned. “This is bad. They are not the Mannizans from Kahli. They are of Shamman.”

“Could Zorimi have sent them here?”

“It is possible. Or perhaps they fled from the Husshas. When one predatory beast raids a cave in large numbers, the less strong flee to another cave – a safer place. But these Mannizans are destructive. They kill the herbs and green we eat.”

“Well, let’s kill a few of them,” I said.

Morgo fitted his arrow to the bow string and took aim. *Twang!* The arrow, a curve of silver in the yellow light, sang through the air. It went into the beast’s soft skin between the head and shoulders.

The Mannizan reared and squeaked lustily, exposing a red, deep mouth lined with fine sharp teeth. Its white whiskers bristled and then it sank on its side and its breathing diminished into death.

The other Mannizans were startled and they looked at their dead mate with curious eyes – eyes curiously human, too. They regarded one another and scrutinized the surrounding trees.

Morgo gripped my wrist lest I speak. He even held his breath. The four huge Mannizans took to staring in our direction. Then they spread out and began to advance upon us.

“Shoot now,” Morgo whispered fiercely. “Shoot between the head and shoulder. It is a vital spot.”

Morgo sent three arrows at the Mannizans. Only one took effect.

I shot at three. None of mine found their mark.

With a loud squealing, a horrible, bloodcurdling cry of rage, they charged us, burrowing through the green undergrowths straight for our feet. I could see their bristling whiskers flat against their heads, their parted lips with the gleaming white teeth ready to rip.

Bow and arrow were not meant for me! I drew my gun and shot two of the rat creatures. They screamed with the pain of the bullet and dropped in their tracks. Another took fright and turned tail.

The third was upon Morgo, its legs pummeling him as it tried to stand erect. Morgo slipped and fell heavily and, as I went to help him, firing at the beastial rodent, its ponderous body struck at me, hurling me aside.

Morgo was beneath the Mannizan, pinned to the earth by its weight – but beyond the reach of its mouth. I got up and took aim and then could not fire as Morgo and the rodent became as one, a whirling, thrashing mass. He kept his head well away from the gnashing jaws. He was fumbling for his knife. If I fired, I might hit him.

Morgo’s fingers clenched the creature’s furry sides, holding himself close. It was his most advantageous position – for if he jumped clear, the beast could rush him – with set jaws. Then with a mighty effort, the Mannizan shook Morgo from it and my friend sprawled on his back, his arms outstretched, the knife glittering in one hand.

I shot at the beast, but it had pounced, avoiding my bullet. Morgo looked up at the descending rodent, at the red tongue hanging from the foamy mouth – calmly, I thought. The Mannizan fell full upon Morgo and drew its jaw back to sink its teeth into the man’s white flesh. The knife cut through the air, touched the furry coat and disappeared. The jaws quivered and the teeth not touching my friend, locked like a bear trap, severing the extended tongue at once.

Again I fired, directly into the Mannizan’s body and, as it rolled over, Morgo leaped to his feet and drove the knife into the vital spot below the throat.

“Now,” he said with a grin for me, “we have plenty of food. Four Mannizans. But I do not like their presence in Kahli. These creatures from Shamman will drive out all the other good meat and plague us. It will make the hunt unsafe. Besides, only a small portion of their meat is good to eat. We must kill many Mannizans of Shamman to kill our hunger.”

He called to Baku who went off in search of other Bakketes. They would carry our kill back to the cave dwelling. Morgo did not permit all the necessary carriers to follow his progress in the jungle, for the bat men frightened the creatures and sent them to cover.

When the four Mannizans were taken aloft and we were in the arms of our carriers, I had Baku skim the treetops. Birds were routed and in their fright a few flew in my face. Yet I was curious about this invasion of Kahli by the Shamman rats.

I learned what I sought. The jungles were virtually filled with these beastial rodents. The men of Kahli, usually peaceful, were fleeing toward the higher ground from the forests in which they lived. I saw whole families on the march. And, too, I saw men and small parties devoured by herds of Mannizans.

One party – men, women and children, their weapons and dishes and skins on their backs – were walking hurriedly from the path of the Mannizans. From above, I saw them moving directly into a herd of the beasts. My cries and shouts to them meant nothing. They feared even me.

The Mannizans got their scent. Their rush into the group of primitive humans was awful. The shrieks and moans of the stricken floated up to me. Men went down before they could put an arrow to bowstring. Mothers and babes in arms were crushed beneath the gray herd. My peppering shots availed little save to draw the baleful eyes of the Mannizan upward for a moment while they gorged themselves.

The laws of nature in these caves were cruel and relentless.

The Husshas drove the Mannizans out of Shamman and the rats were driving the people and creatures of Kahli out of their homes to other caves where they undoubtedly would have to put up a stiff struggle for their very existence.

I was thankful the security afforded by the Backetes placed me above this struggle for life on the floors of the great caves.

Yet I was to know just such a struggle one day. Those laws of nature were to operate against me – and rob me of all that was dear to me.

Chapter 14: Zorimi's Hand

When another day came, we three – Morgo, Nurri Kala and myself – sat on the ledge in front of our dwelling watching the cavern spread below us like a fanciful counterpane of green satin with yellow iridescent overtones. We were fascinated by all that we beheld – and our brows were creased in disturbed frowns.

The Mannizans were but forerunners of other things.

All of Shamman's living creatures seemed to be pouring across the floor of Kahli toward Verrizon and other caves the names of which I forget. This emigration from Zorimi's world was gargantuan in its proportions. The people of Shamman traveled as speedily as possible in something like military formation. Their fear was the Mannizan. But few of the latter were in sight and I figured that they had pressed ahead to some unknown destination.

There were Silurians, too, men, women and children. In groups of their own, or peaceably mingled with the primitive men, they, too, were on trek. Toward the middle of the day, we saw the Shamman bats. These made no attempt to engage the Backetes, who clung among their pinkish stalactites, in warfare. Straight as the crow, they passed over Kahli, spreading a black cloud over its luxuriant verdure.

Smaller Mannizans, more like mice, put in an appearance. The Shammans and Silurians fell upon these lesser rodents and slaughtered them for food. The small Mannizans put up no fight and fled from the hail of the Shammans' sling shots.

Insects, drab and grayish and foreign to Kahli, were next to be seen. They zoomed through the forests and over the treetops, hurrying, scarcely pausing to feed.

I saw unfamiliar snakes, long, sinuous pythons, and fat, yellow, speckled gray monsters. With surprising agility, they sped along with the other creatures, avoiding them, or attacking them when necessary.

All of Shamman was in flight. Its living life was engaged in the old battle of the survival of the fittest. And its creatures fought for life by running away from those forces that would destroy it – the Husshas and the Rortas.

The flood of ant life Morgo had released from Verrizon to effect Nurri Kala's rescue from Zorimi now plagued all of Shamman. The black ants drove from cover their hereditary enemies, the red ants, and that vast cavern was turned over to them. It was as in Africa, I remembered. There, when the Driver ants swept through the jungles in a village, the inhabitants fled. The ants swarmed over the houses, devouring the refuse and filth and when they had passed on, the owners returned to their homes – their cleaner homes. Such is sanitation in the heart of Africa.

But the Shammans knew only fear. They were putting as great a distance as possible between them and the Husshas, which moved faster than horses.

Of course, we three on the ledge were seen. No attempt was made to molest us. Our fortified coign of vantage – as far as menace from the four-footed beasts was concerned – was envied by the passing examples of Pithecanthropus Erectus – the two-footed primitives.

“Morgo,” I said with a new fear, “if the Shammans were running away from the black ants, isn't it likely that they're being pursued?”

He nodded. “I have been thinking of that, Derro. Tomorrow, when I am certain the Shamman bats are all out of their nests, I will send Bakketes into that cavern to see what is happening.”

“And if the Husshas are headed for Kahli?”

“We must move on – like the others – to a safer cave. This has never happened before in the caves, to my remembering,” Morgo explained. “The Rortas usually feed on the unclean growth under Shamman and do not bother the people on the surface. The black ants stay in Verrizon and other caves farther away.”

Nurri Kala sighed. “I hope they do not come into Kahli. It is too beautiful to be destroyed. Never have I seen such color – those glorious greens and yellows and pink teeth hanging over us. I should love” – she looked at me, remembering the word I introduced to her – “to stay here forever.”

“Would you really?” Morgo and I asked as one man. We looked at each other foolishly. He did not respond to my grin and the crease in his brow deepened. He was profoundly disturbed by the girl's friendliness toward me.

“Forever and ever,” the girl said, softly, happily.

“We may have to move,” Morgo said practically. “Tomorrow, we will know.”

We passed the evening light, watching the camp fires of the Shammans and the Silurians. They twinkled over the floor of Kahli like cheery villages. In the early yellow light of the next day, they would be gone – probably forever – with the people in flight for their lives. I wondered if we had done a wise thing in unleashing the Husshas on our single enemy, Zorimi and his few Silurians. The ants were beyond control – the Raba impossible to locate – and the likelihood of their deluging us was imminent.

In the morning, I insisted on going with Baku into Shamman as the head of a scouting party. Morgo objected a little and then accepted my desire with a shrug.

“Take care, Derro, my brother,” he said to me. “The ways of Shamman are different now, with the ants in possession of that cave.”

“I'm curious,” was my reply and I bid him and the girl au revoir and flew off in Baku's arms.

We negotiated the tunnel easily. There were no Shamman bats in it, nor any when we reached the higher, larger cavern. The light was full and Shamman was clearly visible in all its grayness. Silence pervaded everything and, though five other Bakketes flew behind me, when I looked back at them, I could hear nothing – not even the movement of a wing. I felt like a man in a neutral colored dream.

The thin spire of The Flame's cloudy smoke guided me for a goal. My Bakketes were alert, their eyes on the distant stalactites for trouble – and an instant retreat to Kahli.

Nearing the plateau that was Zorimi's, I saw six streams of jet black bodies moving toward it. The Husshas were still mobilizing in Verrizon and pouring into the Cavern of Shamman. Their legions were millions and for three days and nights they had been flooding this gray home of evil.

Over the plateau, I beheld desolation below – desolation and carnage. The red Rortas still held the mound where ant of one color was destroying ant of another. I could see the black mandibles crunching red bodies – and black bodies curling up at the lethal bite of the red ant. I wondered if the Husshas would continue to rush to their own destruction – or would ultimately outnumber the Rortas and eradicate them. There were plenty of both colors still hungry and still keen for combat.

Then I understood, in a glance, the cause of the great migration of the living creatures of Shamman – including its human-headed bats.

Some instinct told the Husshas that they could not vanquish the red ants. The latter were wily and more potently armed. Nature whispered to the ant mind and it understood.

Four streams of Husshas ran up the sides of the cave and looking overhead, when Baku took me higher, I saw them wending their way through the stalactites. In their flight from the Rortas, they had gone to Shamman's ceiling and routed the Shamman bats from their aeries.

I started. The direction the ants on the ceiling were taking was toward the tunnel to Kahli.

Descending closer to the mound where ant ate ant, I saw still another river of black, coursing far to one side, avoiding the territory held by the Rortas. This stream, the same black belt I first saw in Verrizon – a quarter of a mile wide – was moving toward Kahli – slowly to be sure – but inevitably. The moan of munching came to my ears. The Husshas were on the trail of the Shammans, Silurians, Mannizans and other beasts.

How like Napoleon's retreat from Moscow! The Husshas attacked the plateau, Moscow. Finding it destitute of food, and only a red death awaiting them there, they scattered and fled as did the *Grand Armee* – rushing pellmell toward the ceiling and safer terrain.

I followed the course of the black river of ants – since alighting on the plateau to seek Zorimi was impossible – and presently came to the head, where the workers were less numerous – where the soldiers surrounded the Raba. The great ant pressed on, and I thought of the Little Corporal, his hand tucked in his greatcoat, his head bowed, plowing through the snows that lead from Moscow, alone and dejected. You know the famous painting.

However, I could attribute no human sentiments to the Raba. He was an ant. He was after the spore of humans who were the denizens of these caverns. Kahli was his objective. Defeat was of no moment in his life. Food was his only concern – food for himself and his millions of followers.

I shouted to Baku to hurry back to Morgo's cave. Kahli was doomed. Its fairness would be ravaged. The black ants would swarm the floor and the walls of the cave. Even Morgo's dwelling would not be safe.

Baku got back to the cave dwelling without my seeing any sign of our common enemy. He dropped me on the ledge and instead of flying off to his nest higher up the face of the cliff, I noticed that he hesitated apprehensively.

“Morgo!” I called. “Nurri Kala.”

There was no answer.

I went into the cave. It was deserted. Our precious fire was out.

I am still ashamed of my first thought. Morgo, I knew, had a liking for the white girl of the caves. He had a human jealousy for my attentions to her. Now I thought he had carried her off. So great was my surprise at finding the place empty, I jumped at the conclusion that he took her and was leaving me to shift for myself.

But I was wrong. I wronged my friend.

I found the three Shamman servants. Their bodies, badly mutilated, were heaped in dark corner. The dishes were broken and Morgo’s crude decorations were desecrated. I could see that bats had torn the servants limb from limb, leaving their talon marks on the gory flesh. And the forearm of a scaly arm lay upon the ground. My supplies were tumbled about, cartridge cases opened and the rounds strewn, but nothing had been stolen. My guns and knives were there, even my cigarettes and matches.

Immediately I reconstructed what had happened. Morgo had been surprised by an attack of Shamman bats carrying Silurians between their feet. He put up a good fight, slashed an arm from one of the scale-skinned creatures and was subsequently overpowered when his servants were destroyed. He and Nurri Kala were made prisoners and carried off to Zorimi wherever he was hiding.

Perhaps it was clairvoyance, perhaps instinct – but I saw the hand of Zorimi in the fight that had taken place in Morgo’s home.

Chapter 15: The Chicken Fiends

When I took leave of Morgo to spy on conditions in Shamman, he sat talking on the ledge with Nurri Kala. Both of them watched my party become a speck in the distance.

“Would you stay here with me forever, Nurri Kala?” Morgo asked the girl at his side, looking at her shyly.

“Certainly. With you and Derro.”

“With me – alone?”

“But you do not like Derro then?”

She was amazed at Morgo’s suggestion.

“I like him as a brother. He saved my life when Zorimi meant to take it. Now I talk of something else.” He could not go on, could not clarify his train of thought concerning her.

“I do not want to see Derro go away, Morgo. He is a brave man.”

“I am brave, too, Nurri Kala.”

“I know that. You are of the caves, Morgo. You must be brave. It is your life here. But Derro comes from the outer world. There, I remember, men were not like him. He fights as you do and is as clever with his wits.”

“He uses different weapons.”

“Yes, and they save him time – when time means life. Why do you not use his weapons, Morgo? He would let you – and you could hunt and fight more easily. His guns are terrible things.”

The girl spoke with a fascination for the tools of civilization – which she had forgotten in her years under Zorimi’s domination.

“I fight as best I know how,” Morgo replied to her. “I have no feeling for Derro’s weapons. At best, my hands and my arms are my finest weapons.” He hesitated, and catching her eyes, he asked boldly, “Nurri Kala, do you like me?”

“Of course, Morgo – very much.”

“Do you like Derro more?” he added quickly.

She did not reply at once, lowering her eyes to think. “I cannot say, Morgo. I have only known the two of you a few days. But he tells me things that you never tell me.”

“What is that, Nurri Kala?”

“That I am beautiful.”

“That is unnecessary to say. You and I both know you are truly beautiful.”

“Oh,” she pouted, “is that all? You do not think I like to be told I am pretty?”

“I did not know you wanted to be told. In the future, I will remember it.”

“That is not the same as telling me – because you think so, and tell me because you want to.”

Morgo shook his head, bewildered. The art of love was a strange art to him. He had not learned it and instinct does not give it to man. There was much that he could tell Nurri Kala – but he was too shy.

“Derro knows many things that I do not know,” he added sadly. “And there are things that I cannot ask him.”

The white girl smiled, understanding him, and he got up and went into the cave. Letting her hair fall over her shoulders, Nurri Kala combed it with her fingers and longed for the reflecting glass in Zorimi’s caves. It would reveal her beauty to her. She longed to behold it again, to know its pleasure. A primitive child of the caves, she was likewise the woman eternal.

Morgo called out to her that there was food to be prepared. She shook her head and frowned. Derro would not do that. He would have prepared the food and brought it to her. He was like that, she thought. But it was woman’s place in the caves to serve man. She got up to do her duties while Morgo lounged in a corner, making new arrow shafts.

She was conscious that his eyes strayed often from his work to her. This pleased her immensely though she could not say why it did. Whenever their eyes met, he quickly turned away and pretended to be absorbed in his task.

Mannizan flesh was cut and she went about cooking it. The servants helped her clumsily and she ordered them about, chiding them for their stupidity and slovenly methods. Neatness and cleanliness were slogans she introduced into Morgo's dwelling.

Soon the meal was ready and Nurri Kala heaped Morgo's dish and set it in front of him. He began to eat, plucking the chunks of food with his fingers and tearing it to smaller bits with his teeth. The girl remembered how Derro used his knife to cut the meats in his dish, how he chewed with his teeth with his mouth shut – not smacking like Morgo's. She tried to imitate Derro but found that as in Morgo, habit was stronger than intention and that her lips automatically parted and she could hear herself smacking her own lips.

“Come, sit by me, Nurri Kala,” Morgo called to her. “Talk to me.”

The girl brought her dish over to his side and seated herself at his feet. She could think of nothing to say, and abashed by her silence, Morgo ventured not a word. These primitive children did not think in terms of conversation. Speech with them was ever a practical thing, to be used in emergencies rather than for diversion.

Wings beat against the outer wall of the cave.

Morgo looked up. Were Bakketes bringing him news?

Ten Silurians, sinewed giants, dashed into the room, followed by as many Shamman bat men.

Morgo sprang to his feet, spilling his dish on the floor, and drew his knife.

The Silurians kept their distance. Morgo called to his servants to arm themselves and saw them take up knives, too. Then he demanded that the Silurians leave. They informed him they had come to take him and the girl to their master, Zorimi.

Morgo shook his head slowly at them. He felt Nurri Kala draw behind him, accepting his protection. Her touch on his back made him feel he had the courage to take on ten times as many Silurians in combat.

The purple-scale-skinned creatures rushed at him. The bat men beleaguered the servants. The cave was thrown into pandemonium, the bats screeching as knives found their way into their black flesh, the Silurians grunting whenever Morgo's knife reached its mark through a vulnerable eye. The latter sought but one goal – the black bulging eye.

The fighting mass broke for an instant and Morgo was flung against the wall. His eyes flashed defiantly, fiercely. He was not fighting so much for himself as for Nurri Kala. She caught a glance from him and understood. He signed for her to keep well behind him.

Two Silurians lay dead upon the floor. Morgo's bowie knife had touched their brains.

They came at him a second time, more wary. Instead of fighting at close quarters, they sought to surround him, to pin his thewed arms to his sides. The first man to touch him received a crashing blow in the face, and went reeling backward, sprawled into the fire, scattering the embers. His screams of pain rang out piercingly in the confines of the room.

Another Silurian leaped upon Morgo. The white man's knife slid from the scaly body. Morgo felt himself encircled with arms of steel and lifted bodily from the floor. He kicked the man's knees and legs from under him and they fell hard upon the stones.

Morgo squirmed free of the moist purple body in time to be on his feet and meet the hurled body and grappling fingers of another Silurian. The knife flashed in the air and struck the man's forearm at the elbow – and Morgo's might severed the limb while the Silurian, gasping with pain, and inarticulate, collapsed to the floor, reddening the stone with his gore.

The others were puzzled. This mere man defied their strength, their invulnerable bodies. They had but one fear in the past – the ants. Now they feared this white man who fought like ten men – who could hold ten men at bay, armed only with a sharp piece of metal.

They shouted to the bat men. The latter demurred. A Silurian grabbed one of them and wrung its neck, flinging the limp body at Morgo, who staggered under the impact and narrowly averted being knocked from his feet. Again he commanded the Silurians to leave his cave.

They dared not. They were obeying Zorimi's mandates and their tiny brains were incapable of thinking up excuses with which to deceive the magician – to tell him how Morgo had fled or died. They were capable of doing only two things – getting their quarry or dying.

The five still in the fight exhorted the bat men to aid them, and the latter, fearing the fate of the strangled creature, hurled themselves upon Morgo. They proved a factor with which he could not contend. He found himself in a mass of screeching faces and beating wings – wings that gave blows harder than any man's. He drove his knife into the heart of one and flung it from him as though it were a stick of wood, but the bat tactics overpowered him. He could not withstand the hammer blows of the heavy, leathery wings.

They beat him unmercifully upon his head and shoulders and flattened him to the floor. He struggled to regain his footing, but they weighed down upon him, flattening him, until a Silurian stepped into their midst and threw his arms around Morgo's, embracing him from the back, rendering him helpless.

Then the others, elated at their success, broke the dishes, threw down the supplies and tossed their less fortunate mates over the ledge into the forest below, where a herd of marauding Mannizans were passing. They laughed while the rats consumed the dead.

Morgo was held in the arms of his captor while another scale-skinned creature took the girl. The bats prepared to take off, carrying the remaining Silurians between their legs.

Morgo struggled, and though he could not free his arms, he brought the Silurian to the floor, perilously near the edge of the ledge. Still he was helpless. He could not free himself from the arms of iron but he did retrieve his knife and slipped it into his belt.

He offer to compromise. He told his captor that if he could carry Nurri Kala in his arms, he would not put up further resistance. The Silurians debated a moment and, fearing a dangerous struggle with Morgo in the air, they consented to permit this flying arrangement.

The Silurian slipped his arms under Morgo's and locked his hands over the white man's chest. Nurri Kala then stepped in front of Morgo and he placed his arms about her waist, holding her fast to him. He told his captor that he was ready and the huge bat assigned them caught the latter between his legs. They swept from the ledge into space and the bat staggered in mid-air under his heavy load.

They flew swiftly toward the south and Morgo whispered into Nurri Kala's ear: "Be brave. This bat will tire and we will land. If the others fly ahead I can deal with the scaly beast and the bat. Save your breath – we may have to run for it if we can reach the ground.

The girl nodded. "You are very clever, Morgo. And you are as brave as a hundred men!"

She could not see the smile of pleasure that lighted his face. Nor the pain that was written there when she added: "But you might have saved yourself a lot of trouble if you had used Derro's gun. It could have killed all of them – without harm to you."

He did not speak after that. They went through the mouth of a cave into a tunnel, and, at length, were sailing over a warmer terrain more gorgeous than Kahli, a forest between whose leaves they saw rainbow colors in flowers and weird vines – colors that were dazzling in light that was white rather than yellow, and very warm. Bird, the first Nurri Kala remembered seeing in the caves, flew through the trees and cried out in terror of the bats. Their colors were gorgeous, crimsons, jade-greens and sea-blues – and the girl confused them with the orchids in the treetops, orchids that waved their long petals in the hot breeze. She had never heard of a bird of paradise. These birds were of that family.

“Where are we, Morgo?” she asked. “This cave is more beautiful than Kahli, and I loved Kahli.”

“This is the land of the Cicernas,” Morgo said. “It is beautiful to look at, but deadly to live in. The Cicernas are fiends. Not even the Mannizan will enter here.”

The bat that carried the three of them sank lower and lower in his flight. Morgo knew that it was weakening, that it could not hold out much longer. Their landing was inevitable. Ahead, he could see the end of the cave and a door to another, their probable destination. He hoped the bat would have the strength to carry them beyond the reach of the avaricious Cicernas.

Nurri Kala cried out and pointed down at large birdlike creatures who peered up at the bats and cackled viciously. The beasts were twice the size of a man. She saw long necks and sharp beaks, and mouths beneath beady eyes. They stood their bulky bodies on two yellow legs ending in claws. When they spread and flapped their short, stubby wings, which could not lift them from the ground, she saw that they were feathered in browns, corn-yellows and speckled whites. Some of these strange animals had bright-red growths on their heads and under their jaws.

“They are Cicernas,” Morgo told her. “They fight with their beaks and claw feet and a blow from their wings will kill a man.”

Neither Morgo nor Nurri Kala remembered seeing chickens, and the Cicernas which were giants of the chicken and ostrich families, thriving in this warm, fruitful land, evoked no memories in their stricken brains.

The other bats were now far ahead. The door for which they were aiming was still distant. And their carrier bat was growing weaker with every beat of its wings.

Without warning, it dropped like a plummet. Morgo and the girl fell through the air, a treetop breaking their fall. They clung there while the Silurian and the bat crashed with resounding thuds upon the mossy, grassy floor below. They lay there stunned.

Morgo watched the Cicernas approach. Their ill luck in the air had been witnessed by seven of the chicken fiends. The Cicernas ran to where the two stunned bodies lay and attacked them with their beaks. Nurri Kala closed her eyes and shuddered. The Silurian screamed and put up a fight before he died, but his purple, scaly armor was worthless under the rain of beak blows.

When she dared look down again from their safe hold on the uppermost branches of the tree, the bodies had disappeared. The Cicernas were looking up at them, stringy white tongues drooping from their mouths.

“They cannot fly,” Morgo said with a sigh of relief. “Their bodies are too fat and heavy. But they may be able to cut this tree down.”

The Cicernas cackled loudly, savagely and flapped their wings impotently, trying to fly up at the two white creatures who had fallen into their land. Their failure to shake the man and the girl from the tree only increased their rage and three of them set about gnawing at the thick base of the tree trunk.

Morgo surveyed his situation coolly. They were in a sea of tangled, interlocking branches of tall trees – trees high enough to preserve them from the chickens twice as big as men. He tested the branch of another tree that protruded beneath his feet, and traced its course to the upper reaches of the next mass of foliage, from which birds of paradise screamed and fled.

The gnawing at the base of the tree went on. Morgo, peering down, saw that the Cicernas were making short work of their job. He felt the tree sway and lean far to one side, fortunately toward the tree that extended a helping branch.

When the tree swayed perilously far to one side and the tearing of its fibers resounded above the gnawing beaks, Morgo led the girl down to the other tree limb on which he had his eye.

“We must jump to the next tree, Nurri Kala,” he said. “Hold fast to the branches and use this lime for your feet. The trees meet. You can cross to the other tree.”

“And you, Morgo?”

“I will follow you, Nurri Kala. But I cannot go with you. The limb is not strong enough for two. Go!”

The girl’s finely wrought hands went out to the supporting branches, revealing hidden sinews that in no way marred her beauty. She tested the limb under her foot and gauged the distance to the other trunk with shrewd eyes.

In another moment, she was making the crossing. Midway, she turned, and, testing the resiliency of the limb with her weight, called to Morgo: “It is strong enough. Hurry now!”

She clambered quickly into a mass of twigs and leaves and threw her arms about the central trunk, safe and secure for the moment. It suddenly occurred to her that when the other tree fell, it might pull this haven of refuge to earth, too. The branches seem inextricably intertwined.

She saw Morgo cautiously moving his weight across the limb. He was midway between the two trees.

Crash! There was a roar of flying, flipping, tearing leaves. Branches flew helter-skelter, whipping the foliage of Nurri Kala’s tree until its firmness trembled and it careened over its stricken mate. The air was filled with dust and falling leaves, great green petals and highly scented orchids, torn from resting places by the suddenly unlaced branches.

“Morgo! Morgo! Are you safe?”

She could not see the white man in the maelstrom of dust and greenery. Her fluttering hear stood still. The cackling of the Cicernas below was awful. She quickly covered her ears.

Chapter 16: The Secret River

I had but one course to take; to use the Bakketes in locating Morgo and Nurri Kala. My army training came to the fore, and I used Baku as intermediary.

He was instructed to organize scouting parties of six and as many as there were caves neighboring Kahli. These Bakketes were to go to the white man’s aid, if it was possible, and one of them was to return immediately and notify me. Under no circumstances were they to engage the Shamman bats in a fight, I said, unless such combat was unavoidable. I did not want to endanger the lives of my friends in any way. My guns, I told myself, would cope with the situation when I reached the scene.

Seven parties took off from the ravished cave while Baku flew among them, exhorting and commanding the designated leaders to do nothing that would imperil those they sought – if they lived.

When the Bakkete flights were out of sight, I busied myself with loading four automatics and stuffing into my pockets all the ammunition I could carry. I was likewise determined to prevail upon Morgo to use a gun hereafter. His primitive weapons were too inadequate to cope with the forces of evil in the caverns, that were apparently mustered against us.

Hours passed. Three of the search parties returned from short flights. Baku informed me that they had nothing to report. The caves they visited were destitute of all life, including the Shammans fleeing from their own homes.

Through those hours of vigil, I scoured the cave for any sign of Morgo's death. I could find none, and I was certain he still lived. Even when my eyes fell upon his bowie knife – and I knew he was among his enemies, unarmed – I persisted in optimism. The knife was lying behind a stone near the mouth of the dwelling. He had fought, I reasoned, even when he was dragged out upon the ledge.

At last, a lone Bakkete winged its way toward me.

I sent Baku to meet him, to hurry him along, to ascertain his information. Baku reported. Morgo and Nurri Kala had been sighted in the Land of the Cicernas. The name meant nothing to me at the time, for I was elated on hearing that the Bakketes had effected a rescue and were bringing my friends back to Kahli.

Another hour went by and the yellow light grew dim. Soon it would be dark. The rescuers were nowhere in sight.

Had something happened? I became uneasy.

Baku strained his sharper eyes but could not locate my friends in the air.

It was high time I made up my mind. In my hands existed the most effective death-dealing weapons made by man. In my hands rested the fate of the white youth and the girl.

“Baku,” I cried to him, “take me into the Land of the Cicernas. Something has delayed Morgo and the Bakketes carrying him.”

He nodded quickly and I caught an anxious light in his little eyes. “Cicerna – kills. Cicerna – bad.”

We went to the ledge and as I was scanning the darkening horizon of pinkish stalactites, now dimmed to terra-cotta red, there was a gret hue and cry in the air from the direction of Shamman. Bakketes flew out of the deepening gloom and screeched panicky words to Baku. I sensed impending danger – and again though at once of Zorimi. What new horror had he unloosed upon us?

But I was wrong. The horror that approached was of our own unleashing.

The Bakketes reported that the Husshas and Rortas had penetrated Kahli. They were swarming through the cave, clogging the tunnel linking the two caves. The Raba was no longer respecting the truce he made with Morgo, for Shamman was devoid of bountiful food and his hordes were hungry. Kahli represented the finest aspects of a meal – and the black ants were bringing the venomous reds with them.

My first thought was for instant flight. But I bethought myself of the supplies and ammunition in the cave. They must be preserved. The ants would climb the cliffs, scenting the Mannizan meat in our larder. They would wreck the cave more completely than even the depredations of Zorimi's henchmen.

Single-handed, for I could not explain myself clearly to Baku, I tumbled rocks into the mouth of the dwelling and piled it high, trusting to luck that the voracious ants would not break through this impromptu door of stone and chalk. My fingers bled but my conscience assured me I was doing a wise act.

Then I committed myself to Baku. By this time the air was filling with terrified Bakketes. They knew, as did the Shamman bats, that their aeries in the lofty stalactites were no longer safe from the insects that clambered everywhere in quest of edible flesh.

“To the Land of the Cicernas!” I cried to my Bakkete.

My feet left the stone ledge as we vaulted into the air, flying high over the panic-stricken denizens of the roof. I had the four guns with me and two knives – and I was ready for a squad of Uhlans or all the Silurians harbored in the Himalayas.

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Nurri Kala saw the dust of the flashing leaves subside. The trunk of the fallen tree was sprawled on the grassy floor of the cave and a Cicerna was cackling piteously, its cries coming from the dense foliage. She could not see Morgo.

Was he, too, caught in the foliage? Was he at grips with the giant chicken? Her eyes told her nothing.

The other Cicernas flapped their wings and stared up at her, toward the top of another tree. She wondered why they looked into the other tree and presently, she brought her eyes up and saw.

Morgo was struggling to gain his balance on a limb of the tree, dangling with one foot and hand caught about the slender branch. Then she understood what had happened. The whipping apart of the interlocked branches had catapulted the white man from his perch into the other tree where eager hands took hold. And the falling tree imprisoned one of the slow footed Cicernas in its mass of foliage.

Morgo was breathless. His body, hurled through the air, struck the limb to which he clung, and the wind was knocked out of him. He took deep gulps of air and quickly recovered himself with ease, and pulled himself into a sitting position on the branch.

“I am all right,” he shouted across the intervening gulf to the girl. “I still hold my luck.”

His eyes cast about for a passage in the branches to the girl’s tree. He wanted to be at her side in the face of this ugly danger. Yet there seemed to be no means of approach. A small avenue of trees separated them, and there were now no interlacing branches to help him.

The Cicernas, momentarily frustrated in the destruction of these strange white creatures, set to work once more, gnawing at the bases of the trees that held the man and girl. Their elemental minds told them that this was the one way to bring their prey to earth. The cries of the imprisoned Cicerna beneath the foliage had stopped, and Morgo sensed that death had visited it.

The vast cave was as still as a graveyard save for the sound of beak tearing wood – the gnawing at the trees. Morgo could not estimate the time nor could he think of a way to escape this new attack. Nor could he and the girl go on indefinitely, jumping from tree to tree, while the Cicernas gnawed down the forest.

His blood ran cold when his eyes told him that there were no branches strong enough to carry him across to a neighbor. He studied Nurri Kala’s plight and wondered.

The girl was aware of her own predicament. She, too, child of the caverns and used to emergencies, had sought a way out, to save her life. There were no branches that could bear her weight in escaping to another tree.

“I am trapped, Morgo,” she called to him. “What shall we do?”

He made no reply. If only the Shamman bats would return, he would gladly surrender to them with the girl, rather than face the death that waited for them in the beaks of the Cicernas. He cursed the fate that had deprived him of his knife. With only that, he would have dropped to the ground to take on the Cicernas.

Nurri Kala called again to him. She was looking up at the darkening roof, pointing. He glanced up.

Were they Bakketes or Shamman bats that were on the wing?

He gave his cry – the schoolboy’s signal. The bats were far to his right. They continued, a group of six, moving away from him. He gave the call again, straining his lungs and throat.

The Cicernas ceased their gnawing and looked up at Morgo, startled.

The bats wheeled indecisively. Morgo gave his cry.

The creatures in the air flew toward the captives in the trees. They were Bakketes.

Morgo watched them with a happy pounding heart. He and Nurri Kala would escape the Cicernas. The chicken fiends, suspecting the aerial rescue, renewed their efforts. The trees trembled. The foliage shielding Nurri Kala fell to one side and the trunk slide from its roots.

Morgo’s hand fell upon his hidden cross. He murmured a supplication to the deity of his childhood and his eyes watched the approaching Bakketes. He was surprised to see one of them turn away from the group and fly back toward Kahli.

The Cicernas tore at Nurri Kala’s tree, beat it with their wings and shoved it with their heavy bodies to bring the foliage closer to earth. Gently, like a foundering ship, the tree sank down.

Nurri Kala climbed higher and her movements only served to send the tree lower. She could see the monstrous heads of the chickens, the beady eyes and the gory red growth on the head of one cackling bird. Snapping beaks ripped at the leaves, trying to pull her body within their grasp.

A Bakkete, heeding Morgo’s commands, swooped over the girl and swept her out of the foliage. The Cicernas, baffled and raging, set up a hideous cry. For a second time, the white creatures had frustrated them.

Another Bakkete released Morgo from his perch and the party of five winged creatures started back towards Kahli. The cackling of the Cicernas ceased with a heavy suddenness. Morgo wondered at the silence. He could not see well in the dim light that was settling over the cave.

An odd call – he did not know it for the crowing of a rooster – rent the quiet. It was not a pleasant sound and it seemed to be a commanding call. Morgo could hear the Cicernas running over the floor of the cave below, their ponderous bodies crashing over the undergrowths.

He was startled by the sight of the leaves and flowers springing up at them. The air was instantly filled with hundreds of bits of streaming color and they hurled themselves upon the Bakketes, clawing at their faces and pecking at their faces and eyes.

More felt his carrier release one arm to shield its face and eyes while he dangled in the other. His own body was beset by these fluttering pieces of gorgeous color which he now knew were the small birds they had first seen – the cockatoos and birds of paradise. They would not be beaten off. They were taking the offensive again the invaders to the Land of the Cicernas on command of the chicken fiend that crowed lustily.

The little birds caught themselves to the wings of the Backetes and by their very weight, slowly bore the bat men downward. The cackling of the Cicernas was louder, closer at hand and directly below. Morgo and the girl were being dropped into their beaks again.

The feel of foliage was against Morgo's skin. He called to Nurri Kala to take refuge in the treetops again and he ordered the Backetes to do likewise and fight the birds with their hands. He set them an example by catching at the cockatoos and birds of paradise, clutching at their feathery brilliance and wringing their necks. The lifeless bodies were tossed to the Cicernas below and this turn in the tide of fighting caused the little birds to become wary – to draw off from the white and black creatures who had entrenched themselves in the trees.

It was into this scene that I dropped with Baku. From afar, I had seen the snowy flurry of little wings and heard the pained screeches of the assaulted Backetes. Without them, I should have had no guidance in the twilight gloom.

Our advent routed the little birds and they vanished into the leaves where their colors blended with the orchids and strange flowers and vine leaves. We had no desire to pursue or punish.

“Derro,” Morgo cried to me, slipping an arm in mine as I sat beside him on the limb of his tree, “I was afraid you would never come. You have saved me again – and Nurri Kala.”

I paid no attention to this display of gratitude and promptly embarked on an account of what was happening in Shamman – overrun by the ants – and of their appearance in Kahli. His face grew pained as he thought of the pillage of his beautiful country. To return there was futile and would only mean courting death with the Husshas and the Rortas.

“We cannot go back,” Nurri Kala whispered to me. “Let us find a new home, Derro.”

Morgo bridled at her manner toward me.

“Do you and Derro wish to leave me, Nurri Kala?”

Laughingly, I made the least of his interference. “Of course not, Morgo! We're like the ‘Three Musketeers’ – ever read it?” He shook his head. “All for one and one for all!”

“All for one and one for all!” Morgo murmured after me. His face brightened. “That is a good saying. I like it.”

The girl repeated the old battle cry of Dumas' “Musketeers” and nodded pointedly to Morgo. He took her hand in his and stroked it gently and she did not withdraw it. I prided myself on having poured oil on waters that might have grown troubled.

“We're in your hands, Morgo,” I said. “You know these caves. You've hunted in them – fought in them – heard tales about them. Where can we go and live peacefully? Where can we duplicate the beauty and bounty of Kahli?”

Morgo thought of several possibilities and, when he was about to speak, Nurri Kala interrupted him. “I want to see The Shaft,” she said. “Let us go there. We can find a home later on.”

The Shaft! That was the source of light for all the caverns buried beneath the Himalayan snowy peaks. Its mystery had always fascinated me – for my father was the most inquisitive man in Kilarney – and since Morgo could never give me an adequate

description of The Shaft, I always wanted to see it. In more peaceful hours, we planned an expedition to this unusual phenomenon of nature.

“Not a bad idea,” I ventured, speaking up after the girl. “We may see a likely dwelling on the way – and then we could return to it. Furthermore, I think it a good idea to roam through the caves a bit and locate Zorimi’s forces. You never can tell where they’ll strike next.”

Morgo nodded. “Very good. We will go into the Caves of Zaan. They are lower down and beyond them lies The Shaft – the source of all light.”

The thick and obscuring darkness was now temporary ruler of the Land of the Cicernas. The chicken fiends cackled below us, gathering in great numbers, I judged, and in the trees we could hear the small birds moving quietly.

The Backetes were summoned from their monotonous wheeling over our heads in the darkness. Baku hung in the air before us.

Morgo asked him if he knew of an entrance to the Caves of Zaan from the one we were in. The bat man reflected and then agreed to pilot us to a crag where we could spend the night while he and his mates sound the entry he remembered vaguely. The Backetes, Morgo added, knew little of this chicken world because they feared to enter it, but Baku was an intrepid fellow and had done much exploring on his own.

We flew away from the hubbub of Cicerna voices across a damp belt of coolness, to a lofty spire of rock quite unlike the stalagmite formations in the upper caverns. When I recalled the dampness to Morgo he said that it largely accounted for the luxurious verdure in this cave and that it was carried on the breezes from the river. But of the river he could tell me little, saying that he was tired and not certain of his bearings. His knowledge of the river appertained to another section of caves.

We slept until the bright white light of the new day awakened us with its blinding rays. I sought the point from which it came but could find none. As in the other caverns, the light was diffused, and spread over a tropical wealth of greens and colors, flowers and rare palpitating vines. The birds of paradise and cockatoos, that flitted in the trees, paid no attention to the Backetes mounting guard over our crag.

I was stunned by the exquisite beauty of this Land of the Cicernas. The cave was not as large as the others, for I could dimly see its walls that sloped gently up to the high ceiling, which was studded with thousands of little knobs – embryonic stalactites. Deep in the heart of the mountains, nature had not completed her chalk-and-lime formations.

Yet, I deduced, we were appreciably nearer The Shaft. While the light of distant Shamman was gray, Kahli’s was yellow and now this vast chamber’s was white. And for the first time I saw all the colors of the rainbow in multitudinous combination. My only explanation for the existence of the flourishing flora – for there was no dripping water from roof to floor here, as in the higher caves – was the strength of the dampness in the air.

I wished we could live in this cave. Nurri Kala seemed to divine my desires and we spoke of the beauty surrounding us until Baku flew to the crag. His parley with Morgo was unintelligible, but when it was over, Morgo turned to us.

“Baku,” he said, “has found a tunnel which he believes will take us into the Caves of Zaan. He did not explore very far because of the darkness and the high damp winds but he believes that we must cross the river to reach the place we seek.”

I asked about the inhabitants of Zaan, what sort of place it was.

“I was there when I was younger,” Morgo said. “But I flew in by another door and crossed the river nearer Kahli. Some of the tribes are friendly and some are not. The people are much like the Shammans but instead of being gray and hairy, they are fair

and smooth-skinned, like us, Derro. The trees and growth on the ground are white and the caverns are filled with a light brighter than this we now see. The Shaft is in the center of Zaan. It is dazzling, blinding. We cannot look at it by day. By night it glows like a red ember and to touch it will burn the skin.

I was mystified but Morgo could give me no better explanation or description.

He dropped into the jungle with Baku and returned with odd fruits and grasses. These we ate for breakfast, and I'll say they helped tremendously to stanch a pronounced hunger.

Then the Bakketes carried us to the northern wall of the cave and deposited us in front of a high corridor. Morgo said the bat men could not fly through with us but would follow us through on foot. I was thankful to have them near by – afoot or aloft – for they were our most invaluable allies.

Taking the lead, Morgo entered the tunnel. My old sixth sense cautioned me to draw a handy gun. Nurri Kala walked between us and the Bakketes brought up the rear.

We breasted the darkness of the corridor fearlessly. It was damp and a chill wind stirred through it from the river. The walls were beady with moisture and a fine drizzle fell upon us from the roof. It was cold and each drop sent shivers through us who were accustomed to the warmer air of the lower caves.

A dimness loomed ahead of us. It was the end of the tunnel we were traversing. We ran on and came out upon a rocky shore in a dimly lighted amphitheater of towering precipitous rocks which no man could scale. Near the vault, the light seeped in, but the openings were jagged, and hardly large enough for man or Bakkete to navigate.

In front of us was the river, a gray, cold, watered millrace that gushed from one black tunnel, across our vision, into another huge black tunnel. Faintly, I could make out the opposite side, a good half a mile away.

“There's – there's no shore on the other side!” I cried to Morgo, my heart sinking. ” I see nothing but cliff falling right into the waters.”

Morgo nodded. “You are right, Derro. We have seen the river we must cross – but we cannot cross it here. We must turn back and seek another door to Zaan.”

The little party started back to the tunnel through which we had come while I feasted my eyes on this secret river – this torrent unknown to the men of my world. It was an evil stream, the Druid in my blood whispered, and I nodded solemnly to myself. We were in a cul-de-sac with but one means of retreat. The way we had come.

My ears were strained. I had heard something above the rush of the roaring waters.

It was the cackling cry of the Cicernas. It came from the tunnel.

Morgo looked at me anxiously. The Bakketes huddled together, their blood turned colder by the sound of the chicken fiends than by the damp of the rocky amphitheater.

“They are in the tunnel. They have our spore,” Morgo said.

He need not have spoken. I could hear them clattering on the pebbles, cackling shrilly.

We retreated to the river's edge, our eyes scouring the rocky walls for a niche in which to hide. There was none. And we could not take to the river.

It dawned on me that it was here that the Cicernas came to drink. We were trespassing on their oasis. We were trapped in it.

The first chicken hopped into view from the maw of the tunnel. Five more piled out after it. The Cicernas saw us and were startled. They were as Morgo had described them to me earlier, huge brutish-looking creatures, half chicken, half ostrich, carnivorous monsters of the fowl kingdom.

These, I figured, I could easily shoot. But to what end? Already, the tunnel was reverberating with more cackling. It was filled with Cicernas. They were going to the river to drink.

Three of the birds spread their wings – wings that reminded me of a titanic Fokker – and charged us with widely opened beaks from which belched hideous screams. I took careful aim and shot the leader.

The big Cicerna toppled sidewise and rolled down the back into the river. I saw, out the corner of my eye, its brownish body swept by the racing waters into the black tunnel. I shot the other two beastish birds and killed them. They fell.

Terror seized me. I strode forward and pumped lead into the other Cicernas – those standing at the tunnel mouth – those pouring out of it. Cackled shrieks of horrible agony echoed from wall to wall in the vast rock amphitheater, and deafened us.

A gigantic rooster, its crimson crest bristling, hopped over the dead Cicernas and rushed me. My gun jammed. I threw it aside.

The creature struck at me with its coarsely feathered breast, and I bounded backward and fell heavily on my back, almost stunned. I saw its legs planted astride me. I could not get another gun from my pocket in time to aim at the breast.

The Cicerna drew back its beady-eyed head to dart a deadly peck at me. Its ghastly thin tongue was a white tendril of death. I heard myself scream like a man in the clutch of an excruciatingly awful nightmare.

Chapter 17: The Balancing Rock

Morgo threw himself at the long neck of the creature as I looked up into the descending mouth, seeing the red curled tongue and the saw edge of the beak that would tear me asunder. My eyes closed.

The death blow of the Cicerna was never struck. When I lifted my eyelids again, I saw Morgo struggling with the Cicerna, his bulging arms wrapped tightly about the thin neck. He held his head under the snapping jaws and swung his body away from the ponderous wings that tried to flick him off as though he were dust.

He pulled his knife from his belt and slashed beneath the mass of feathered neck to which he clung. The Cicerna's head toppled off the very thin neck. Morgo jumped from the dead body as it staggered to the water's edge and fell into the rushing water.

Again Morgo's might had saved my life. It was his strength and his daring rather than his weapon to which I was indebted.

My other gun was out now, and as the Cicernas once more charged over their fallen members by the tunnel, I riddled their ranks with hot lead, each shot sending a biting report bouncing from wall to wall in the amphitheater in which we were trapped.

Advancing, at Morgo's suggestion, I fired into the tunnel itself until seven of the chicken fiends clogged it up with their writhing bodies. The others in the tunnel were, for a time, imprisoned. The walls were not wide enough for them to turn about. Soon the barriers would break. And I hadn't sufficient rounds to slay all the Cicernas in the cavern.

"We must fly," Morgo said. "It is our only chance."

I stared at him incredulously. "Fly? Where?"

He pointed to the dark hole into which the river raced.

"Send a Bakkete first!" I suggested wildly. "We cannot fly into that black doom. The ceiling may drop – and we'll all pitch into the water."

"We have no time to waste." He pointed to the barrier of Cicerna bodies. It was giving way with the pressure of the cackling chickens fighting to escape from the tunnel.

"They will be upon us in another minute!"

Morgo shouted instructions to the Bakketes. I saw Nurri Kala gathered up in one man's arms and borne toward the tunnel. Baku took me. Morgo was the last to leave the rocky shore, just as the Cicernas burst into the amphitheatre, screaming for our blood. They hopped down to the very edge of the bank, and hurled their imprecations aloft to us.

Nurri Kala's Bakkete approached the dark culvert, but he demurred at entering. He was afraid. The cackling of the Cicernas and the imminence of death had unnerved him. He screeched, and I saw by the glare in his eyes that he was verging on fear-insanity. What if he wheeled about and dropped the girl into the chicken fiends midst?

Morgo took the situation in a glance and flew over to the Bakkete. He cried out to another bat man and, catching Nurri Kala by the wrists, he swung her from the coward's arms into the arms of another Bakkete. Then, reassured that the girl was safe, he turned away from the craven bat man and plunged into the Cimmerian night of the tunnel. I held Baku back until Nurri Kala was ahead of me. My thoughts were only for her safety now. The other Bakketes followed us, the frightened man coming last.

The eternally roaring waters beneath us filled our path with a fierce, monotonous boom. It was faster than pulsebeat and sent our hearts racing. I could hear the river hissing as it swept over rocky protrusions. I could hear Bakketes cry out when their wings were nicked on the rocky walls, I heard myself shout involuntarily when my feet slipped into the icy flow. The force of the water was so great that, though we were following the course of the river, my whipped feet were flicked out of the water ahead of me.

The roof of the tunnel lowered, and we all went into the water up to our waists. Only the Bakketes managed to keep pretty well out of it. The river had a life and majestic fierceness of its own, and when it felt our bodies, it whipped them from side to side, trying to eject us from its sacred depth. I took that for a good omen.

The roof went higher and so did we. I thought the tunnel would never end. On and on we flew – until I began to imagine I saw an end to the darkness. But whenever I expected it to be around the next turn, I faced only deeper night.

Baku screeched. I heard him above the torrent's roar. We fell bodily into the river.

I went under, and turning, grabbed at the bat man. He never released his hold on me and fought to free himself of the water with beating wings. The icy douche gave me a heart shock, and I gasped to force the water from my mouth and nose.

We could not rise as we were whirled forward, spinning like a top on the surface of the river.

I was about to give up the ghost, when Baku ripped me from the river. The water smarted in my eyes, but as I tried to open them, I was conscious of light.

We found ourselves on the opposite bank of the river from the point where we took off. We were in another amphitheater, a replica of the first, but smaller. However, the roof was higher, and light streamed over the craggy crests of the precipitous walls which I saw could scale with the aid of the Bakketes.

All of us had been submerged in the thunderous waters of the secret river and we dripped rivulets on rocks where we lay panting, once more inhaling the ozone of the caves. The Bakketes suffered more from the cold bath than Morgo, the girl, or myself. Our showers back in Kahli, I told myself, had put us in training for that dark icy ordeal in the river's bosom.

"The roof of the tunnel dropped into the river," Morgo explained, "just before we reached this open space. That is why we all got wet. I was afraid the Bakketes would not be able to fight their way clear of the water. They are not used to it."

"I'm about ready to testify," I swore, "that a Bakkete can do anything! I bet they can make out income tax reports!"

That was a joke I had to explain to Morgo, that enviable son of the caves where there were no income taxes!

We rested by the side of the river while the Bakketes soared aloft on a reconnoitering expedition over the walls of the subterranean amphitheater. I watched them lazily, and my eyes soon fastened upon a huge rock balanced on the very brink of a cliff, directly over the culvert into which the rushing waters roared. The rock was balanced – perilously perched, I should say – on a small mound. It seemed to me that any sudden blow – such as a man's impelled weight – would send it hurling through space into the river, ripping like an avalanche where it cut into the face of the sloping cliff.

I questioned Morgo about the source of the river, but he could tell me little. He knew that its course was long and that it never rose or fell but flowed evenly at its high speed. He imagined it rose in hidden springs fed by the glaciers on the mountains, a source eternal and abundant.

"And I see," he added, "that you gaze upon the balancing rock. I know of it."

Nurri Kala curled herself closer to me, and I felt her tremble as she looked at the rock. "I am afraid," she murmured. "I have been in this state of mind before – and something always happens. That rock is evil."

I laughed and chidingly told her that inanimate objects cannot be evil, for that is only man's privilege. She persisted in saying that the rock was a dreadful force.

"Nurri Kala is right, Derro," Morgo said with profound earnestness. "The rock is an evil thing. I have heard of it from Bakketes who have flown past this place. And a native of Zaan once told me that if that balancing rock ever fell into the river, all life in the caves would come to an end."

"Why? What would happen?" I was curious.

Morgo shook his head doubtfully. "I do not know. But that is what I was told. No one in Zaan, which lies over the top of the cliffs, is allowed to go near that rock."

"Well, if they are so afraid of it," I said, "why don't they bolster it up? It could be made secure by heaping smaller stones around its base."

“No one is allowed to touch it,” Morgo insisted. “There are men up there – near the rock – who protect it. It is their sworn duty. We will see them soon, when we fly past the rock. They say the stone is sacred and that strange, destructive gods dwell within it, waiting to be released to feast upon all life in the caves. Even these guardians do not venture near the rock – and they will kill any one who attempts to do so.”

I reflected on these words. The stone, I figured, was delicately balanced, and had been so for ages. It was not likely that it would fall – if it hadn’t fallen by this day and age. Yet why was it feared and protected? Could only man dislodge it? I knew that while there were breezes – really strong currents of air without much directional force – there was no such thing as a wind or a rain storm in the caverns. No force of nature operated that could topple the stone into the river.

But why should a stone and its falling evoke so great a fear and belief? The end to all life in the caverns! It was beyond me. I put it down as one of those inexplicable superstitions that flowered in the dim days and that was still nursed by primitive minds.

What a noddy I was not to have understood, then and there, as I looked up at the great rock!

What havoc that stone could play was as obvious as the nose on my face – and I didn’t see it – until it was too late. That solitary, mysterious river, fed by a source of abundance, coursing its thunderous way through the dark tunnels! That river that apparently had but one outlet! That river that already knew the secrets of my future!

Instead of turning pagan and revering it, I knelt on its bank and drank from it, quenching my thirst.

Chapter 18: Into Zaan

We were well rested by the time Baku returned with his bat men. He reported to Morgo that our party could be carried easily over the cliffs, into the glaring white deserts that lay beyond. Preparations for our trip were made, and much to my chagrin, when I examined the three guns I carried, I found them water-soaked. But there was still some ammunition in my pockets that had escaped the moisture. I wished I had had the sense enough to bring along cleansing oils, for now, without my weapons of civilization, I was reduced to the fighting power that was Morgo’s – a knife and my hands.

We three committed ourselves to the arms of the Bakketes and shot upward toward the top of the towering black cliffs, into the warmer strata of air. I ordered Baku to fly over the balanced stone which so captivated my attention.

Morgo called to us to desist, but I was insistent. As we neared the giant boulder, I estimated that it was at least fifteen or eighteen feet in diameter, and that the shelf on which it rested was not of the strongest rock. Part of this balancing stone actually projected over the brink of the cliff, and far below I could see the black, snaky thread of the thunderous river.

There were no signs of human life near the stone, but Baku cried out sharply, and banking, veered to one side and flew higher. Four small stones flashed up at us, describing long parabolas in the bright light.

From behind miniature crags stepped whitish men, hairless, and quite like Morgo and myself in stature. They fitted new stones into their slingshots and let fly at us. They were the protectors of the balancing stone, a rock sacred to them – and they drove me away as a likely menace to its security. I could see that they were of the same primitive type as the Shammans and the people of Kahli, with smallish heads set on thick necks fastened to strong, heavy bodies. They wore no skins and their reason was obvious: this new cave into which we ventured was hot. It became torrid as the day wore on.

Rejoining Morgo and Nurri Kala, we flew over broad wastes of desert floor – hot flat rocks. The air between them and my eyes quivered as it does when one looks at a radiator or a fire on a warm day. The cavern was low ceilinged, and as vast as its great desolation. A whiteness was discernible everywhere. There was not the slightest trace of vegetation or animal life.

But one fact I noticed. I could not see a possible source of light. It came from the far end of the cave toward which were moving.

The Bakketes breathed with effort and I felt Baku's body grow moist. This was the first time I ever noticed that. His tongue hung out of his mouth and he reminded me of me sweltering in Wall Street in mid-August, helpless victims of a city's infernal heat.

Without a word, the Bakketes dropped to the floor of the cave, and I felt the heat rising up in swirling streams. When we alighted, Morgo and Nurri Kala cried out in pain, hopping about, first on one foot and then on another. The hot rocks were scorching the soles of their feet. I could feel the heat through my golf shoes.

Quickly I tore off my windbreaker and flung it to the ground. The man and girl jumped on it and stood there brushing the moisture from their foreheads with florid arms.

"The heat is great, Derro," Morgo said, "but we will get used to it. I have been here before. I know."

"I think these rocks are hot enough to dry my guns," I said, and I fished the automatics from my pockets. Laying them on a hot rock, I saw the beads of moisture rapidly disappear from the gun-metal sides.

Our landing had been forced. The Bakketes were exhausted by the sudden heat to which they were not accustomed. But they could not land and subject their feet to the heat of the stone floor, so they floated over our heads in circles trying to regain their breaths.

"Is it wise to go into Zaan?" Nurri Kala asked me.

"Why not?" I said. "We want to see The Shaft – the source of light in the caves."

"It is to Zaan that Zorimi goes," she said. "We are crossing his path, perhaps. He is evil."

"If Zorimi has escaped from Shamman, he will not bother us, I think. He has had enough of us – or he should have by this time. He must know that he cannot defeat us, Nurri Kala." These were Morgo's words and he spoke them proudly.

"It is to Zaan that Zorimi goes to gather the Shining Stones," the girl went on. "I seem to feel his presence again. It is an unclean feeling, like that I had when I looked at the balancing rock. There is evil in Zaan."

"We cannot get out of Zaan," Morgo explained to her, "except by going back up the river to the Land of the Cicernas – or taking the one other door I know of. Surely you do not want to risk the river again?"

She shook her golden head. "But I am still afraid. There are things that I feel now – that I cannot describe. But they are of evil, Morgo. Let us be careful."

"There is no great danger in Zaan," Morgo said kindly, soothingly. "I know of a friendly tribe. We will be safe with them until we start back. And now our main need is food. We are all hungry – after our bath in the cold water."

I was preoccupied with the guns. They were baked dry, and I had little fear of rust now. Gingerly picking them up with the air of my coat, I waited for them to cool and then I reloaded them with the dry rounds. I fired each gun and the staccato report

echoed from a thousand directions – a thousand walls from which nature sent them rebounding. Once more I was equipped with the weapons of civilization, and I felt more secure.

Morgo talked with the Bakketes and announced that they were ready to resume the journey to the more fruitful caves of Zaan. He promised us food and water and respite from the heat there – though he confessed, too, that he did not know into what part of Zaan our present course would take us.

We took to wings again, and flew steadily toward the brightness, where there seemed to be an exit from the low roofed cavern in which we were. I found myself becoming acclimated to the heat. Baku seemed to feel less strained.

A hole in the wall soon met our searching gaze, and the Bakketes swooped toward it. We entered this natural door of burning white rock, and traversing a short, dim tunnel, we found ourselves in a still smaller cave, lower than the other and studded with clumps of trees and bushes – all snowy white – bleached by the intense white light which was still greater.

The rocks between the clusters of vegetation seemed to move. At first I thought it was an obstacle illusion created by the heat. I was wrong.

Long, sinuous lizards were basking in the warmth of the light, crawling from tree to tree, feeding on the pure white leaves. My eyes blurred in focusing until they were more used to the absolute lack of color in this long, flat-floored, flat-roofed, flat-walled cavern.

The lizards paid no attention to us when we flew low. They were beautiful creatures, and every ripple of muscle in their graceful backs was a poem in rhythm. They fascinated me, until I was almost hypnotized by their whiteness, and when I closed my eyes to rest them, I still saw the flowing creatures, crawling as though in slow motion pictures.

We left this cave and entered a third through a low door. The Bakketes could not accomplish is on the wing, and we had to walk over the torrid stone. We all cried out in pain when our feet were burned, and quickly went aloft at the very first opportunity.

This new cavern was broad and long, and oddly cooler, though it was still lower than the others. A warm breeze fanned us from the end toward which we flew. It was more profuse with white trees and underbrush which were clustered like tiny islands on a sea of white stone. The ceiling over head was flat and colorless. Lizards were in greater number and larger. I estimated their length at five and seven feet.

The Bakketes descended again, tired and overheated. This time we found that we could stand on the stone floor without having our feet scorched. There was no accounting for these phenomena in my mind.

Morgo strode over to an island of vegetation where some of the white crawling-creatures were eating the leaves and grass. The lizards turned their heads slowly and gracefully, and looked at him, then drew away and continued to munch their food.

Morgo went into the clump of growing matter and pulling some leaves from a tree, tasted them. He signed for us to approach and eat. The leaves were edible, almost like wafers.

Nurri Kala and I started for the trees. I was watching a huge lizard backing away from the grass onto the rocks. Its actions became tense. Frightened, it recoiled sharply.

But not rapidly enough.

A long tongue shot out – a tongue of good ten feet in length – and whipping itself around the lizard, snapped it into the undergrowth. I screamed to Morgo.

The tongue was red and forked like a viper's. It was the first bit of color I had seen since we entered Zaan. It was a hideous, sinewy whip.

From what mouth had it come? What kind of creature lurked in the undergrowth and fed on the peaceful lizards?

Morgo continued to tear leaves and grass from their roots, gathering them in his arms for us. I called to him again and ran forward to drag him out of the underbrush. A Bakkete, sensing the danger, too, flew low to aid my friend.

The bat man was a few feet from the grassy spot when a tongue licked upward and caught him around the middle. He screeched and I saw a titanic chameleon rear on its hind legs. Its tongue lashed inward into a cavernous mouth and the Bakkete disappeared. As the chameleon's body slowly sank back to earth, I saw its bulging sides slowly contract, crushing the life out of the bat man that had been devoured.

Nurri Kala, who had witnessed this horror, was screaming.

Morgo, startled, turned and started from the white underbrush.

I saw the flash of red.

My cry was paralyzed on my lips.

The red whip coiled about Morgo's waist and whipped him around so that he faced the chameleon that attacked him.

He planted his feet firmly on the floor and leaned backward, throwing his weight away from the monster. The white chameleon tugged and sought to flick the man from the floor into its mouth.

Morgo drew his knife and slashed at the red tongue, the thin thread that bound him to death. There was a shriek in the trees and the chameleon, never loosing its hold on Morgo, struggled to its hind legs to spring.

And Morgo's knife hacked at the steel band of red. He could not cut it and I was amazed.

My gun was out. I threw an arm around Morgo to brace him, adding my weight to that which the chameleon was tugging towards its maw. The creature had a diabolical strength and its greenish eyes flashed furiously.

I fired. I emptied the automatic's clip of lead into the huge, white body. Morgo sliced at the red tongue.

The chameleon, a moment before a mass of thews, suddenly became flabby. It crumpled and lashed about in the brush, tearing Morgo from his foot purchase. We both fell heavily.

But the creature was dead. And Morgo was still a prisoner in the steel loop of its red tongue.

My fear was of another attack. There were other white chameleons in that cluster of trees. Our only hope was immediate flight.

I ripped my bowie from my belt and went to work with Morgo on the red tongue. It was like cutting through a tough wood fiber. The band of steel was made up of a thousand course sinews. But the two of us hacked off the length of red and ran into the open space, the loop of tongue still tight around Morgo's waist.

Without a word, I went to work cutting this horrible reminder from my friend. My eyes avoided the thankfulness in his. He wanted to talk, but I told him to save his breath.

When the red loop sloughed to the ground around Morgo's feet, I insisted that we continue to a safer place. Nurri Kala said that her hunger could wait. And we went into the air with the Bakketes. I remembered, as the scene of the chameleon attack was behind us, that I had dropped a gun in that glade of lurking death. Now I was armed with but two – and questionable ammunition saved from a dousing in the river.

We entered a fourth cave, higher up and cooler. Here the same white vegetation abounded. The floor of the cave was a jungle of it, and weird, colorless birds and bees sang and hummed in the air. What was hidden under the screening leaves I could not see – but I did guess correctly. Again I saw a beautiful, graceful lizard caught by a crimson tongue and whipped out of sight.

Coursing over this bleached world, we hurried to the far end in quest of a door. Bakketes would not attempt a landing where the red tongues lurked. Nor would I, for that matter.

There was a tunnel. It was navigable on the wing.

After entering it in single file, we found it uncommonly long. But in the caves we knew that tunnels always ended, especially when they were faint with light as this one was.

We flew for some time, covering many miles. I began to wonder if the corridor of warm white rock would never end. It twisted, veered upward, sloped downward to the right, and came a passage of zigzagging turns. After rounding each corner we were faced with another bend.

I grew impatient. Baku was uneasy. That was not hard to sense, for in my many hours of flying with him, I became used to the many moods manifested by the action of his body, his muscular contractions, the beat of his stout heart against my back.

Where did this tunnel end? Why was it so long?

I felt a blast of hot air in my face.

The heat swept over us in waves. Baku gasped.

The Bakketes wanted to descend. Morgo exhorted them to fly clear of the corridor first.

Still we zigzagged. First one sharp turn – a short flight, and then another sharp turn. I grew tired of counting these twistings of a corridor linking two caves together in the heart of the Himalayas.

The air grew fresher. The heat diminished. I wondered if we had passed over a furnace in the rock. The monotony of the white stone grew tedious. I longed for a sight of color and took to looking at my dirty hands. The blue veins beneath the skin color – a little relief for eyes tired by bleached whiteness.

We turned a sharp corner and shot out into clear space.

I screamed. Blades of fire dug into my eyes.

The others shrieked. The Bakketes screeching ended as abruptly as it had started.

I couldn't see a thing.

Darkness laid its fierce grip upon my brain.

I was stone blind. I knew that.

And then Baku's arms slipped from under mine.

I fell through space – in the darkness that only a blind man can know.

Leaves and branches scratched at my face. Strange bird voices filled the air. My body turned, hurtling in space.

In my darkened brain, I felt the ground smite me a mighty blow. My senses left me as a cry of pain tried to escape my terrified lips.

Chapter 19: Before the Source of Light

Morgo, blinded, dropped from the arms of his startled carrier into the jutting white treetops. As he went through space, he extended his arms straight out at his sides, and bent his legs. His arms kept his body from turning over and his legs were braced for impact with hard tree limbs, or the ground farther below.

He felt the puffs of foliage close about him and his hands clawed for something durable for support. A branch closed under his fingers and clung to it as would a sailor to a drifting spar in an inky sea.

The shock of the fall from the air subsided quickly and his breathing returned to normalcy. He was in full possession of his faculties – but he could not see.

Two swords of fiery, white-hot light had been flung into them as his Bakkete soared out of the tunnel. He understood what had happened. The party, entering the heart of Zaan from an unknown corner, had run full into the rays of The Shaft. Their mortal eyes were not made to stand such light. It was as great, if not greater, than the sun of the other world.

He pinched his eyelids and rubbed the fevered eyeballs behind the flesh. The pain persisted. Whenever he opened the lids, all he saw was darkness. Blindness was thrust upon him in the same moment that he had been flung by fate into a strange wilderness.

There were those darting red tongues to be feared – for he could not see them. There was Derro, who had saved his life a few hours before – what of his fate? There was Nurri Kala, whom he loved – what had become of her?

Giant that he was, he held on helplessly to his treetop, with hot tears of pain coursing from his eyes, and cried aloud for his friends. He wanted, not their help, but assurance that they were safe.

“Derro! Nurri Kala! Derro! Nurri Kala!”

From a distant wall, his echoes answered him. Then came a heavy, oppressive silence, broken only by the occasional call of a bird, by the humming of insect wings, by the stirring of the leaves in the trees. He realized that he was lost and alone, utterly alone and without the use of his most valuable possession – his eyes.

He recalled his previous visit to the Cave of the Shaft, years ago. At that time, he entered the great chamber of white rock from the usual door, and at a time when the light was gone from the caverns. To enter at such a time had been the warning of the Zaans he met in another place. He had not understood why the journey should be made at night.

Now he did understand. The Shaft hurled daggers of flaming white light into those who would look upon it while it lived. Only when it slept was it to be seen.

And when day came in the course of that first visit, he was provided with pieces of dark glass to hold over his eyes while he moved through the brilliant jungle, the floor of which sparked with millions of specks of shining light. He had not stayed long before the source of the light, and have retired to a cave where the light did not destroy the eyes. He had marveled, too, at the immunity of the Zaans. They could look straight into The Shaft – and not be blinded.

Morgo moistened his parched lips, and called again to Derro and Nurri Kala. But there was no reply.

Were they dead? Had they been killed in falling from the arms of the stricken Bakketes who released their human cargoes to shield their own eyes from the dazzling light? Or had the man and girl run afoul of the creatures with the steely red tongues?

For the first time since he came to the caves, Morgo realized what the bonds of friendship and love meant to him. Derro was his friend. Nurri Kala was the girl he loved – the woman he wanted for his mate.

He was sorry to lose Derro. The red-headed one had save his life. nd he had brought a lore to him of a world he vaguely remembered. Had Derro lived, Morgo's secret, known only to Zorimi, might still be learned. But now only darkness – and the decay of death – was his lot.

But of Nurri Kala! He could bear to lose Derro, who had but recently come into his life. For years he had lived without another white man's companionship. With Nurri Kala it was different. She was a woman and he felt a love for her that he could never have felt for Derro.

Now she, too, was gone from his existence. Had he never met her, he could have gone on living his tranquil life in the caverns. Love would have remained a stranger to him until Death gathered him to its cold bosom. But now that he had seen her golden beauty, now that he had beheld her smiling blue eyes peering into his, now that he had heard her words of encouragement and praise, he could not live without her.

Nurri Kala was of the caves, a lost child like himself. She was his natural mate – a mate of the world in which he lived. She was to have been his woman!

The veil of memory parted in the mists of his fevered brain. He remembered how the girl had preferred the man with the red hair to him. She hung on Derro's words, and laughed more readily at Derro's sallies. She had said that Derro was the greater man, since he came from a world where men were not brave and that he had acquired a fearlessness that was but natural to him, Morgo. He groaned in his blindness the treetop, and wondered if Nurri Kala were in love with Derro.

Derro, he recalled, was partial to Nurri Kala's company. He sought her out and sat by her, telling her stories of men and women Morgo knew of but hazily. Had Derro been in love with Nurri Kala? Had they fallen safely to earth and, being unable to find him, gone off – to be together forever after – mates?

"Nurri Kala! Nurri Kala!" Morgo cried out woefully. And then loyal to his other friend, he added: "Derro! Derro! Where are you?"

The mocking echoes were his only reply. His own voice murmured back at him. He was lost, and blind and alone, in a wilderness of black silence. He was a man bereaved of a dear friend and the girl who would have been his mate!

Somehow, he told himself, he would climb down to the floor of the cave. He still had his hands and feet. He still had the cunning of the huntsman. He would brave the red tongues of death and set about seeking Nurri Kala. He must find her!

He swung lower in the tree. His fingers found quick holds and his strength, which was still left to him, sent a surge of encouragement through him. He would live and learn the truth.

They had all been struck by the knives of The Shaft's light in about the same position. He was certain of that. If Derro and the girl were dead, he would find their bodies.

He paused in his descent of the tree, thinking of Nurri Kala's white body in the stillness of death. His hand went to his hip and closed over the haft of his knife. When he learned the truth, he, too, would die beside her. Life in the caverns would be unbearable without beautiful Nurri Kala to share it with him.

A happy thought occurred to him, and he called himself a fool for not having thought of it sooner. He gave his signal cry for Baku and the Backetes. Perhaps they had survived the debacle of the light with the aid of their soaring wings.

But the mockery of the echo came back to him.

He waited. There was no sound from the bat men. He understood and his head fell upon his check dejectedly. They, too, had perished.

He was about to continue to climb to the ground when he heard the murmur of far-off voices. Humans were in the neighborhood. He opened his mouth to cry out to them.

Yet he did not. Some sixth sense warned him.

He strained his ears to listen.

There were voices. And Morgo recognized them.

Silurians roaming on the floor of the white forest. By some means, their eyes were protected from the great white light. And they were his enemies. He move upward again, listening. The foliage would shield him.

The voices came nearer. The Silurians were passing under the very tree that sheltered him. Perhaps they heard his cries and were searching for him.

And he thought of the girl and Derro. What if they still lived? Were they the prisoners of Zorimi's creatures? Had these eye-destroying blades of light been the instruments of the magician to bring the three people he feared most back in his power? Morgo was worried and, for the first time in his life, frightened. He feared not for himself but for his friends.

For hours, the Silurians moved in the underbrush below, talking and calling to each other. Morgo understood their words. They had heard the voice of a white man and they were searching for him. But their quest had been fruitless. And they said nothing that would suggest whether or not Derro or Nurri Kala were their prisoners.

Evil pervaded Morgo's blindness. He knew that Zorimi was close by.

He waited patiently in the protecting garb of leaves, perched high on the tree, not daring to move, and breathing guardedly. Often the prowling scale-skinned men stopped beneath the tree. Each time he thought he had been discovered. Then the men below moved on.

Once he heard awful screams.

The Silurians shouted about a red tongue. Morgo knew that a chameleon had devoured one of their number.

The air became decidedly cooler. Cloudy visions danced before Morgo's eyes, and he wondered if the darkness of his blindness was unseating his reason. When he opened his eyes, the visions persisted – blurred, indistinct forms – and when he brought the lids together, a comforting darkness engulfed him.

The Silurians finally moved off, taking a direction which Morgo ascertained by the murmur of their voices. After a while, he could hear nothing but the buzzing of insects and low calls of small birds. He knew by these primeval sounds that night was entering the Cave of the Shaft.

He started.

His eyes had show him an object – a hazily defined leaf.

He saw!

His eyes could tell him where a white leaf fluttered in the breeze. They revealed to him the trunk of the tree to which he had hung for hours on end. He saw his hands. Moving his fingers, he saw them curl and grip the branch again.

Laughter, soft and happy, came from him. He could see. His blindness had gone.

Once more he had eyes with which to seek the woman he loved. Once more he had all his powers, all of the strength he needed to fight for her – if she still lived.

Swiftly, he clambered down the trunk and planted his feet on the rocky floor of the cave. The light had gone from the cave, but there was a dull red glow in the direction taken by the Silurians. He decided to seek his mate in opposite way, for the Silurians had scoured the underbrush in the vicinity of his hiding place and had found no one – no crushed bodies dropped from the air.

He stumbled along, pausing whenever he heard the undergrowth in motion. A lizard crossed his path and glanced lazily at him. Another time, as he pressed forward as cautiously as possible, he saw the hulk of a chameleon, its back heaving in the deep regular movements of sleep. He gave it a wide berth.

Hunger forced him to rest a while and eat of the leaves. They were warm and tasteless, but they satisfied him. His ears strained for the sound of voices he desired so much to hear. The silence that would have unnerved another lover in such a plight meant nothing to Morgo. He had lived in it and with it for years.

After long hours of ceaseless, vigilant marching, he grew weary. The voices he wanted to hear did not whisper to him. Yet he moved on, undaunted. He had been hurtled from a Bakkete's arms, he had been blinded, he had experienced the tortures of a man who had lost his loved one, he had hidden for hours from enemies, and he had plunged into a strange white jungle along a path on every side of which death was hidden. He gave it no thought.

Where another man would have gone under, Morgo carried on. He lived for but one object – knowledge of Nurri Kala – her life or her death. If she lived, he meant to have her, to tell her of the love pent up inside him. If she was dead – then he, too, would die.

His mind was made us as to what was going to be.

His consciousness was stirred. Was that a human voice? Or the call of an animal in the night?

He listened intently.

Vague words – English-sounding – broke the silence ahead of him.

His heart leaped with joyous abandon. He clasped the tiny cross beneath his pelt and murmured a word of thanks to the deity he knew from childhood.

He had made out Nurri Kala's laughing, silvery tones!

Instead of calling to his friends, he thought of surprising them. Derro always loved a joke. He would stalk them, and appear out of the white jungle at their side. They would jump and then there would be the gay laughter of reunited friends. The idea pleased Morgo and he walked forward stealthily.

Yes, there was Derro's Irish voice! He knew it of old. It was like meeting an old friend, that sound. Nurri Kala was laughing. He thrilled at the sound that was her – that was the woman he loved.

Now the voices were lowered. He could not hear them so distinctly, but he had their direction.

Presently he saw them. They were in a clearing, two whitish forms, whispering.

Morgo felt a chill creep down his spine.

Was he still blind? Were his eyes telling him the truth? Was all this – hearing and seeing his Nurri Kala – but a trick of a fevered brain?

He gripped the handle of his knife and slipped the blade from his belt as he advanced.

—

Nurri Kala revived me. It was into her eyes that I looked. They were the twin shining-blue stars that I saw when my temporary blindness left me.

Perhaps I was dreaming, I thought. So I spoke her name.

She smiled and I knew that my eyes were telling me no lies. My imagination was not capable of painting the rare beauty of that smile.

“Are you badly hurt, Derro?” she asked softly.

I ached in places but no bones were broken and I told her that I was all right. My fall into this cave had been broken by the branches of the white trees through which Baku had dropped me.

The light was gone and, though there was a dull red glow to the south and sweet coolness in the night air, I thought we were lost in a snow covered forest. The whiteness of the forests was gleaming and it reminded me of the snowfields over which I had piloted my planes in the moonlight. Save for the hush-hush of leaf rubbing against leaf in the trees, there were no other earthly signs of life.

“I fell into a tree,” Nurri Kala said. “I hung there and when my eyes could see again after the darkness that smote them, I climbed down. It was already dark. Oh, I called so many times to you and Morgo. I even tried to imitate Morgo's call for the Bakketes. But there were no answers.”

“So you took a stroll?” I laughed.

“No, I saw you not very far away. You were lying here and very still. I thought at first that you were dead, and I was afraid to come closer. But when you groaned and moved a little, I knew that you lived and that I must help you.”

“I’m glad I groaned. But where is Morgo? He can’t have fallen much farther away.”

Nurri Kala turned her head away and I caught her thought. Had our friend been devoured by one of the long-tongued chameleons? Surely his fall would have been as easily broken as ours.

There was sufficient light in which to see so I told Nurri Kala to remain where she was while I circled about. I beat my way through the undergrowth widening the circle of my search each time I passed a certain tree. The chameleons did not enter into my fears. I was thinking only of Morgo. If he still lived, we might help him, save his life.

I searched for nearly an hour, establishing my location by frequently calling to the girl when I lost sight of her. Morgo was not to be found.

We did not speak of my failure but moved into an open space, where the Bakketes might see us if they had survived the burst of white light into which the tunnel had ejected us. I remembered that Morgo had eaten of the forest leaves so I brought some to Nurri Kala and we chewed on them. I cannot recommend their taste, but their juice and bulk did allay our hungers.

Sitting down side by side, we stared at the glow of red, which slowly faded. I marveled that even when it had gone I still pictured myself in a snowy forest. The trees resembled something off a Christmas post card.

“I should hate to spend the rest of my life in this cave,” I said, thinking of our lost friend.

“So would I,” Nurri Kala answered. “It would make me think too much of Morgo. It was here that he – that he – ” There was a catch in her voice when I looked at her, and I saw that her cheeks were wet with tears.

“You loved Morgo?” I ventured after a tremendous pause.

“I think so – I do not know, Derro. I have not thought of love. Until you taught me the word, it meant nothing to me.”

“Think, Nurri Kala,” I said, “we are lost – without means of escape – in a strange cave. We cannot just lie down and die. We cannot but help fight for our lives.”

“I know.”

“I am not as strong as Morgo – nor can I fight as he did. But, Nurri Kala, I can fight for you – I have my weapons – and while they last, I will make a home for you.”

The girl filled the night with merry peals of laughter.

“You are – making love to me?” she said. “Is it true, Derro?”

“I do love you, Nurri Kala. I loved you from the first moment I laid eyes upon you.”

“I remember. You thought I was pretty.”

“And I’ve said you’re beautiful, Nurri Kala. You are the most beautiful woman in all of God’s worlds!”

She was pleased, but a pensiveness claimed her. We did not speak again for some time. I knew she was thinking of Morgo.

“Nurri Kala,” I said, breaking the tedious silence, “if Morgo had lived – if he still lives – he or I would take you for a wife.”

“That was what my father called my mother. And he loved her.”

“Yes, that’s so. Which one of us would you choose?”

“The one I love, of course.” I marveled at this daughter of the caverns. She was fencing with me coquettishly – like a flapper back in the States. She *was* the eternal woman.

“And which one of us is that?”

“I am afraid, Derro -” she looked deeply into my eyes – “that I love you both equally.”

“That’s impossible!” I laughed. “You must like one of us more than the other.”

“You are both strong, you are both brave,” she mused. “You both fought for me against Zorimi. How can I really answer your riddles – I think you call such hard things to figure out?”

“But I love you, Nurri Kala. I want you for my wife.”

“So does Zormi. You remember, he told me that, too.”

“But Zorimi will never have you.” I was suddenly beside myself with the desire for her promise. She was the woman that all men dream about. And here she was at my side in the flesh – more lovely, more beautiful than any dream. “Did Morgo tell you of his love for you, Nurri Kala?”

“No,” she said quietly, “he does not know of love as you do. But I have read his thoughts in his dark eyes.”

“Then you must consider me first,” I said eagerly. “I love you, Nurri Kala! I am the first to speak for you!”

“But if Morgo lives -”

She was filled with sudden apprehension.

“Beloved, consider him alive – and choose!”

Tenderly, her eyes met mine and she let fall her hands upon my clenched fists, I saw her face as a dream image floating in a mist. I forgot her flesh and blood at my side.

She smiled languidly and sighed.

I took her in my arms and kissed her. She did not shrink away from me. Her lips were responsive.

“Morgo!” she murmured and my heart went leaden. She should have spoken my name in that moment.

Springing to my feet, I turned my back upon her and walked a little distance from her. I had offered her love – such as I knew it – and some secret spring within her had betrayed her while she accepted my lips. She loved Morgo. With effort, I mastered my emotions and returned to where she was sitting.

A man was standing over her, great and mighty in the white glow of the darkened jungle. A knife blade was silvery in his hand.

It was Morgo.

Chapter 20: The Land of Canaan

My friend's behavior amazed me. He was hardly the lost man suddenly come upon by his friends. His body trembled and his nostrils were dilated in answer.

Nurri Kala and I greeted him. We told him how glad were to find him whole and alive. Separately, we told him what befell us when the great light blinded us and we dropped into the white treetops.

Morgo, silent and morose, nodded and slipped his knife back into his belt.

"What is wrong, Morgo?" I asked. "You look as though you've seen a ghost!"

"I have," he replied tersely. Then, relaxing his tensed body, he dropped down beside the girl and tried to smile. "I came upon you in the dark – and took you for enemies. There are Silurians in the forests. I heard them when I was hiding in the jungle during the day."

His words were not convincing. Nurri Kala and I hardly looked like the scale-skinned creatures in any light. And Morgo possessed sharp, shrewd eyes, trained in the hunt for food. He must have recognized us. Had he seen me kissing Nurri Kala? Was that what troubled him?

It dawned upon me in that moment. I had not given the fact any thought earlier, but as I recalled little scenes in which the three of us participated back in Kahli, I suddenly understood.

Morgo was in love with Nurri Kala, too.

And so was I!

Here in a strange, cruel jungle, we three were faced with the eternal triangle. I, alone, knew of the great harm that it could do. I came from the outer world where such relationships were common knowledge. My friendship with Morgo was at stake. And my love for the golden beauty of Nurri Kala, too.

I did not mean to lose the girl.

In that moment, the primitive being inside me cried down the civilized man. I was ready to fight Morgo for the love of Nurri Kala.

Possible sensing the electric charges of our emotions – mine and Morgo's – the girl stepped into the breach.

"What shall we do, Morgo?" she asked him. "We are lost. The Backetes have disappeared. We must find some safe shelter on foot."

The problem she presented appealed to Morgo. He seemed to forget the common thought we two shared.

"I know," he said. "The great light will soon return. We cannot face it. While it is still dark, we must find another cave – one where The Shaft does not give its full light."

I subscribed to this, and Morgo, leaving us, went to a tall tree and nimbly scaled its leafy height. From his high perch, he gazed over the snowy forest, seeking a path that would lead us to a haven of some security.

Presently he descended from the tree. He inquired if we were strong enough to walk several miles and we told him that we were.

“I think I have seen a darker spot,” he explained. “It may mean a tunnel to another cave. Let us try to reach it before the great light shines upon us – trying to blind us again.”

We were enthusiastic, and set off behind Morgo, on whose instinctive sense of direction I faithfully relied. Coursing through the underbrush, penetrating the thickest jungle glades, we plunged through the glowing white night in Morgo’s wake. Before us, trudging with a steady, even pace, he loomed like a Greek god delivering us from inevitable doom.

How long it took us to reach the spot selected by Morgo, I cannot guess. It was probably three or four hours. The girl and I were weary and footsore, spoiled by the flying Bakketes for such close grips with nature and our own physical endurance. Morgo was not a bit tired.

The dark spot in the wall of the cave, which threw up sheer white cliffs beyond our range of vision, proved to be a tunnel. We climbed to its door and started in.

I was surprised to find the narrow corridor filled with thin, fragile trees that cracked and fell over as soon as we pushed them aside. Leaves, soft and cool, showered down upon us like a gentle rain.

We had walked for about a mile without coming out the other end of the tunnel. I said it might be wiser for us to stop for the remainder of the night and get a bit of sleep. But Morgo pointed out the danger of bivouacking in a connecting corridor. Animals often preyed in one cave and slept in another. If we slept in the tunnel, we might be set upon in the morning when the day’s migration began, and that would be fatal.

So we pressed on, beating the trees away from our faces, and shielding our eyes with cupped hands from the snapping, whipping twigs and branches.

There was a flutter of wings and the brushing of wings on the leaves overhead.

Morgo grunted painfully.

I could hear his arms thrashing about over his head, beating against the tree limbs, cracking them and increasing the deluge of thin leaves upon us.

Nurri Kala screamed that something had scratched her.

And I felt sharp little claws digging into the back of my neck. I caught at the creature and my hand fell over a feathery bird, flinging it roughly to the ground. It chirped loudly and scurried into the underbrush.

In another moment, we were in a maelstrom of flying, clawing birds. We ran forward, and the flock seem to grow thicker. Eight, ten, twelve little birds clung to my body with hundreds of claws that bit into my flesh and I could only run, protecting my eyes and face with my hands. The sharp little bills pecked and dug into my flesh. The pain was excruciating.

“Roll on the ground!” Morgo bellowed back at us. “Crush them from you and then run!”

This expedient was temporarily effective. I flung myself on my sides and rolled as far the narrow tunnel would permit. The frightened birds jumped from me and winged their way to higher perches. But as we ran, they attacked us again.

It was the clearing of the cave into which we ran that saved us from a slow, tortured death. The birds did not pursue us into the open.

“What were they?” I asked Morgo as I regained my breath. My flesh was horribly lacerated with a thousand tiny scratches and wounds from the which the blood flowed freely.

“I do not know,” Morgo said. “but look upon your coat. One is caught there.”

I reached down and found a feathered bird, dead, caught by its claws in the leather of my windbreaker. It was the size of a small eagle, and the edges of its wings were lined with long cutting claws. What strange creature was this? Then I recalled pictures I had seen in the study of bird life at the flying school years before. This denizen of the tunnel was not unlike the Hoatzin of South America. That claw-winged bird was a descendant of the reptilian Archaeopteryx of the Jurassic Period – one of the first reptiles to rise above the ground in the quest for food.

Forthwith, I named the tunnel birds Hoatzins because of their resemblance to their prehistoric ancestors; because, like them, they were meat eaters.

Morgo and Nurri Kala, wearing scantier clothing than myself, were more badly injured. Their backs, legs and arms were a welter of crisscrossing lacerations. The girls moaned in her pain and Morgo offered to carry her. She wanted to refuse but she was forced by her wounds to give in.

As we penetrated the forests of this new cave, climbing to an eminence that Morgo had spied, I smelled sweeter air. There were fragrant flowers in this cave, and I longed to behold its beauty in the morning light. I could even see that the tree leaves were deep greens and yellows and that the trunks were browns and blues.

We reached a clearing on high ground as the dawn light spread over the cave. But we were too sleepy to wait for the full light.

When we woke up a few hours later, Morgo was cutting open a bees’ nest with his bowie. He had gone into the forest for food and found it. The hive was thick with sweet-smelling, yellow honey and we consumed it ravenously with our fingers.

The cave was the most beautiful in all the world I had seen beneath the Himalayas. Its jungle was a flaming mass of red and orange flowers, cascading over the tops of majestic green-leaved trees, mingled with blue and purple flowers, none of which I could possibly describe or name. They were weirdly gorgeous, something that one might see in pagan ritual – but never in the outer world.

Bees and other insects buzzed from flower to flower, drinking deeply of the nectar hidden in them. We were assured of honey as long as we stayed in this cave and fought free of the bees’ lancets.

“If we could only find a cow in here,” I said, “this would be the land of milk and honey – the promised land of Canaan.”

Morgo and Nurri Kala glanced up sharply at me.

“The Land of Canaan?” they whispered as one person and then stared at each other.

Morgo rubbed his brow in pensive reflection. “I have heard of that land before. My mother used to read to me about it from a big black book.”

“Yes,” the girl cried, “I remember the book, too. All our names were written in it.”

“Yes,” Morgo added, “my name was in it, too. My mother showed it to me. The names of all my people were written in it.”

I knew that the veils of amnesia were lifting slowly in the minds of these cave children. My chance reference to the Land of Canaan of Biblical origin had proved a key to unlock new memories in them. It is customary in many families to keep a history of relationships – of births and deaths – in the family Bible. Morgo and Nurri Kala had seen just such books in the hands of their parents.

And then I remembered Zorimi’s boast. He said he held the secret of their identities. Had he come upon the Bibles of these cave children? Did he find them in the possession of their parents? It was not an impossibility.

Whatever the fate of the parents was, I had a hunch that the Bibles had been among their effects. And Zorimi had found the books when he found the children. I explained my suspicions to the man and girl, and they were elated.

Nurri Kala caught my wrist. A flash of remembrance illuminated her eyes. “Derro, I remember something. Zorimi has books in his cave. I did not see them for so long, I forgot them. But when I was younger, I remember being in a room where there were books – and a black book like my mother and father used to read from. I wanted to open it to look at the pictures, but Zorimi put it on a high shelf and forbade me to enter the room again.”

“Where is this room?” Morgo demanded excitedly.

“In the plateau of The Flame,” she said.

Morgo shook his head sadly. The plateau in Shamman was far away – hundreds of miles. We could never reach it without the Bakketes. And they were lost.

Morgo went into the jungle again soon to return with an armful of juicy leaves. He explained that he had recognized them – for the same leaves were in Kahli. They had healing properties. Squeezing the juice from them onto Nurri Kala and his wounds, he allayed the smarting pain cause by the Hoatzin’s claw wings.

I sensed that two was company and three a crowd. Willing to bide my time in speaking again for Nurri Kala’s love, I left the pair alone. My footsteps carried me toward the tunnel by which we entered this veritable Land of Canaan. Somehow, I felt secure. I could not imagine the red-tongued chameleons living in so heavenly a world. They belonged to the great white places where the heat was more tropical.

My eyes, seeking a path free of entangling jade vines, fell upon the pebbles beneath. These little stones winked at me and blazed as the light caressed them.

I scooped up a handful and held my breath.

The floor of the Land of Canaan was paved with diamonds.

I trod upon wealth that would ransom all the world’s wealth. My feet crushed diamonds that would buy my heart’s desire – with the possible exception of Nurri Kala. For her, I must fight and hurt my friend to whom I owed so much. Diamonds meant nothing to a girl who flowered to womanhood amid the savagery of the caverns. They could neither buy nor offer her anything.

I suspected then that poor Jim Craig knew what he was talking about that night he was murdered by the dacoit in Darjeeling. She of the Three Heads – Zorimi’s Shining Stone – was the key to this cave of diamonds. And The Shaft – the source of light – was the mountain of diamond about which Craig had spoken in his cups!

No wonder we had been blinded when we suddenly darted out of the gloom of the other tunnel in the heart of Zaan. We had flown full into the light reflected by the wall of diamond.

But what source fed that great stone with light? Internal fires – or the sun of my world through a cleft in the skin of the Himalayas? I inclined to the latter view as I reasoned out this strange light phenomenon of the caves.

The peculiar properties of the great diamond mountain – which I meant to see one day – fed by the light of the sun itself, diffused its rays throughout all the caves. And the farther away a cave was, the poorer and weaker was its light. I remembered that inside the Door of Surrilana which we penetrated in the Junkers G-38, there was darkness. Next was the grayness of Shamman. In Kahli, nearer the source, the glow was yellow by day. The Land of the Cicernas had a bright white light and, in the Caves of Zaan, the light was truly diamond-bright.

Unconsciously, I began to plot and plan. With this wealth underfoot, and willing fates, I might get back to civilization. If I could persuade Nurri Kala to accept my love, I would make her a queen of women. Lord knows, she was already that in her perfection of beauty – but in the outer world, other values needs must contribute to queenliness. With her beauty, and the diamond wealth of Zaan, I could be the happiest and proudest of men.

Morgo I refused to admit into my thoughts. Him I must fight. My hunches, which were usually pretty good, told me that such was inevitable. And I did not shrink from the thought.

Nurri Kala said that it was to Zaan that Zorimi came to gather the shining stones. And I suspected Jesperson, the jeweler, who eloped with my De Haviland, or Lacrosse, the naturalist, of being the man who masqueraded as Zorimi and took the wealth of Zaan into the outer world, transmuting it into the power of money.

I was no longer interested in Zorimi, not in his identity. I wanted to know the path to freedom from the caves. I had every reason to seek it, and the life of my own world. Zaan had shown me riches greater than Monte Cristo ever dreamed of. Once more, my mind, easily adaptable to cave life, switched back to the dictates of the civilization in which I was bred.

I had to escape from the caves to enjoy this wealth – to give Nurri Kala her due in a world that would appreciate her.

A low mound of diamond pebbles attracted my eye and I ran toward it, feasting my ambitions on its flashing, dazzling majesty. Kneeling beside it, I scooped up the stones and let them pour through my fingers. I had no thought of filling my pockets. The plentifulness of the rare white stones in Zaan gave me the bounty of the spendthrift.

My fingers touched upon something soft – beneath the surface of hard, bright pebbles. I brushed the diamonds away.

A face with staring eyes challenged my curiosity. Instead of recoiling in horror, I peered closer.

I knew that face. It was a familiar one. The stubble of beard did not deceive me.

It was the death mask of Lacrosse that I beheld.

Lacrosse beneath a mantle of a kingly treasure! How ironical of Death! To take his life in the midst of splendor and wealth!

Uncovering the body, I sought the manner of his death. The pallid skin bore the clawings of the Hoatzins, the bruising and lacerations of excessive hardships, the tusk marks of a Mannizan on a leg. The body was wasted and emaciated, yet I could find no sign of a mortal wound. My companion in the Junkers had apparently died of natural causes and the soft breezes had buried him in diamond chips.

Yet how had he reached Zaan from the Cavern of Shamman? He was still wearing his flying togs, now ragged and moldy. Had he come under the wings of a bat man? I considered this: there was but one other white man that I knew of who used the bats for aerial transport.

His name was Zorimi.

Was this decaying corpse that of the magician?

Chapter 21: Man to Man

The movement of many heavy bodies plowing through the underbrush aroused me from my reveries. Animals? Men? Morgo and the girl? I had heard the incessant tramp of marching men going up to the front in France. I was hearing it again.

Cautiously, I raised my head, and scrutinized the fanciful jade screens of leaves and vines, and rainbow flowers behind which the marching feet were hidden. I could see nothing.

A voice thundered in commanding tones. It was guttural and deeply throaty.

And I had heard it before – that day when I fell into Shamman. It was Zorimi's. He still lived – and the body at my feet no longer solved the mysteries of the magician.

Slinking forms, bobbing heads and shining purple bodies glided into view and I dropped flat on my stomach, crawling into the tall green grass. I had seen Silurians. I had seen the atavistic men of Shamman in gray hordes. All were tramping from this Canaan into the tunnel of the Hoatzins.

When I turned from that column of prehistoric men, to retreat to the high ground where Morgo must be warned, I was forced to burrow into deeper grass. There were scale-skinned creatures on that side, too. There could be no retreat now – yet Morgo and the girl must be warned.

I crouched between two streams of enemies which converged into the tunnel. Zorimi came into view, carried in a litter suspended from a pole that rested on the shoulders of two giant Silurians. As ever, he was swathed in his furs, his head and face invisible. Behind him filed twenty-four more litters, laden with bulging sacks. I counted them. And I knew that the magician had been filling his bags with the shining treasures of this Canaan.

Unconsciously, my hand stole over the butt of an automatic stuck in my belt. I thought quickly. Zorimi could be destroyed with a fusillade. A rush to his side would place Her of the Three Heads – that talisman worshiped in Shamman – in my possession. With it, I would be supreme, the commander of the primitive peoples. Morgo would be my linguistic ally, and together we would establish a peace with the animal kingdom. Behind all this was my secret plot, to flee from the caves with Nurri Kala.

I raised myself, lifted the gun and calculated the range. I would empty the clip into the magician's body – thereby ending all that was evil in the caverns. My act was a justifiable one, my conscience assured me, for had I not seen Zorimi murder men in cold blood? I was but the instrument of his ultimate punishment – his executioner. An eye for an eye – a tooth for a tooth!

My finger pressed the trigger.

There was a click, but no spurt of flame, no report. The gun was jammed, useless. Throwing it away, well aware that the waters of the river had done their rusting work, I reached for my other gun – my last.

With bated breath, I aimed again. Zorimi was farther away now, close by the tunnel's mouth. The Hoatzins flew our and circled over him but did not molest his army of men.

The trigger snapped back. There was a click. This weapon, too, was impotent. I had been counting on the weapons of civilization and now I was utterly reduced to those of Morgo's primitive life – a knife and my bare hands. Helplessness ebbed within me, and I drew myself into the veiling grass, somehow glad that fate had not permitted me to take Zorimi's life despite the justification. What were those spinners weaving for me – Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos? What was my end to be? I glanced at Lacrosse's staring eyes and shuddered.

After some time had passed, the last of Zorimi's army disappeared into the tunnel. There were no other sounds of prowlers. I got to my feet and raced to high clearing only to find it deserted. To call to Morgo would be foolhardy. Silurians and Shamman, stragglers or a rear guard, might still be in the cave.

A low whistle drew my eyes to the top of a tree. Morgo was barely discernible from the emerald foliage. Another call gave me Nurri Kala's hiding place.

They climbed down and listen to my tale. Morgo was amazed that Zorimi would essay an entry of the cave in which The Shaft blazed white during the daytime hours. He was puzzled as to how they protected their eyes against the blinding glare of the diamond mountain, upon which my sun beat its golden rays.

"It is too bad you did not shoot him," he said finally. "As long as he lives, we must look forward to killing him."

"Do not say that, Morgo," the girl cried. "And I am glad Derro could not shoot him. It is better to avoid him – and keep your hands clean of the stain of blood."

"He would take you for his mate!" Morgo replied, his eyes meeting hers angrily. "Besides, Nurri Kala, you do not understand the business of life – nor man's rights in protecting himself and what he treasures. You are only a woman."

"A woman – to serve her lord and master?" she laughed. "Is that all that life offers me, Morgo?"

"It is the way of life in the caves – to which you belong," he said seriously.

"It is not a woman's lot in the outer world," I spoke up. "There, Nurri Kala, you could be a queen. All women would envy your beauty and all men would worship you."

Morgo glared at me from lowered eyes. "The outer world of which you speak, Derro, is only a word now – a dream to us in here. You must forget, nor think of ever returning. Content yourself with ending your days in these caverns."

"I mean to leave the caves, Morgo," I said. "I'm not cut out for this life. And I think escape can be managed."

Morgo's manner changed noticeably to secret elation. He was my friend but he wanted to be rid of me. But when his eyes fell upon the ecstatic smile on Nurri Kala's lips, he frowned with annoyance.

"Could you escape, Derro?" she asked. "Could you take us with you?"

"I think so," I told her. "If we can reach the Bakketes again – we can fly out through the Door of Surrilana."

“We shall never see the Backetes, Derro,” Morgo said firmly. “We are caught in this cave you call Canaan. It is best that we stay here, where food is plenty. With only our feet, we cannot get back to Kahli or Shamman.”

“There must be a way,” I said. “How will Zorimi get back – or out of the cave? He must know of another exit besides Surrilana. Let’s follow him.”

Morgo tossed his black mane as he shook his head. “No, we are of the caves now. We will stay here.”

I was on the verge of protesting sharply because I knew that Morgo was speaking for himself and the girl whom he wanted for his mate, when we heard a crash in the underbrush. This was followed by the squeals of the Mannizan.

Morgo turned away from us, saying that it was time to seek a safe dwelling and find meat to eat. He watched herd of small Mannizans coursing through the jungle below us, and finally, telling Nurri Kala to return to her treetop, he bade me to follow him.

We were off to attack the Mannizans – with only our knives.

“I’ve thrown my guns away,” I told Morgo. “They were rusted from the dousing in the river.”

“We have our knives and our hands and our heads, Derro,” he laughed. “We will not starve.”

By a devious course, we crept upon the Mannizans whose thrashings in the brush we could hear. Morgo selected the side where the soft breeze would not betray our scent to the creatures. And presently, pushing forward through walls of pale-green vines and riotous orchids in purple and yellow, we spied our quarry. These Mannizans were like those in Kahli, smaller than the Shammans of the same family, and more wholly edible.

The little black shoe-button eyes darted along the floor of the diamond dust cave as the sharp teeth bit into leaves and strange black roots. The gray creatures were totally unaware of our imminence and, from time to time, they paused in their forage to exchange words. I wondered why they never raised their eyes from the ground, even when they talked.

“They are not as strong as the Shamman mice,” Morgo whispered, “but they are quicker and their teeth are sharp. Follow me. Then move this way.”

Morgo scaled a low-limbed tree, pulling himself upward on the gnarled vines, hand over hand in sailor fashion. I shinnied up after him.

The leaves blotted out the ten small mice, but from time to time I could see their grayish hulks, the size of a St. Bernard dog, or snapping long teeth close to the ground, white in the reflection from the diamond flooring.

“Watch me,” Morgo said, “and you will learn the best way to hunt these Mannizans. The trick is to avoid their pretended fear and attack them suddenly, scattering them. When I say the word, jump from the tree and make a loud noise. Shout.”

The Mannizans burrowed through the brush until they were directly under our tree. I saw Morgo crawl out on a far-reaching limb and lie on his side. He seemed to be waiting for the fattest Mannizan to come into range. His knife was out and I waited for him to throw it. Then I remembered that I had never seen him use such a tactic, and I wondered if he was adept at knife throwing, too.

Without a cry, Morgo dropped from the tree and straddled the Mannizan. The creature did not move. The others, startled, were immobile, and as they stared at him they bared their fierce lean fangs.

Morgo's knife plunged into his victim's body between the shoulders and, as the Mannizan limply fell on its side, the man ran at another. The Mannizan sprang at the same moment, surprising Morgo midway in his rush, and the two collided with a thud, Morgo throwing his arms about the rodent's body, ducking his head from the raking teeth.

The other Mannizans bristled, their white whiskers flattened against their heads, their teeth bared. As if in a concerted effort, they started for the man who was now beneath the Mannizan, pinned to the ground.

"Jump, Derro!" Morgo called out calmly. "Jump and shout!"

I yelled like a Comanche and dropped feet foremost from my branch. The Mannizans bridled, and on hearing more bloodcurdling whoops from me, turned tail and scampered off into the forest in panic, squealing and jabbering.

"Shall I help you, Morgo?" I asked fearfully

He laughed at me and I saw a twinkle in his eyes. "No, Derro. I have done this before – many times. It is play to me."

His arm encircled the Mannizan's neck, and despite the tugging and lashing about of the creature, Morgo took his time about delivering the death blow. I saw that he was trying to trip the creature from its footing.

His knife slipped from his hand and I cried out fearfully. He continued to smile. His legs shot out and, catching the Mannizan off balance, he threw it on its side and sank his fingers in the furry throat. Unarmed, he was pitting his might against the great rat's. The whitish belly near the palpitating heart of the Mannizan ceased to heave in the rodent's gasps for breath. Morgo had strangled the beast.

When he got up, he showed me how to cut a suitable branch and lash the two Mannizans to it with vines. We were to sling this pole between us and carry the meat back to the high clearing. I tried to lift one mouse and found it mighty heavy. I staggered under the load of two which Morgo shared with me on the return march.

My admiration for the way in which he leaped into the midst of the ferocious Mannizans, selecting the fattest, slaying it and then attacking a second single-handed. He did not know the meaning of fear. Supposed his knife hand had slipped? But these emergencies, that only a civilized mind would consider, were foreign to the primitive notion of battle for survival.

On rejoining Nurri Kala, Morgo told us to fetch firewood, while he skinned and butchered the Mannizans. Unquestioningly, I turned from him to seek dead wood, calling to Nurri Kala to remain where she was. It was not a woman's job to gather wood.

"Nurri Kala will go with you, Derro," Morgo said firmly. I resented his tone.

"I can do the job," I said. "Besides, she's a woman."

"We all must work," Morgo retorted quietly. "Women share men's work in the caves."

Nurri Kala said she would like to gather wood and thereby averted a situation that was growing tense between my friend and me. The girl knew the proper wood for burning and pointed it out to me. We returned to the clearing with our arms filled, and I wondered how Morgo was going to make a fire.

The dark-haired youth had skinned one Mannizan and was busy searching among the diamond chips for fire stones. How silly of me not to have thought of the flints sooner? What a poor Boy Scout I'd make!

Morgo found the proper stones, set to work putting a spark to a kindling pile of leaves, and soon I saw the bluish smoke of burning wood climbing out of the pyre he had made. He put Nurri Kala to work holding spits laden with chunks of meat over the blaze. I was sent off for more wood.

Happening to look up at a gorgeous bird of paradise darting its crimson tail of streaming feathers through the tree tops, I saw a familiar black speck high up near the white roof of this Canaan. It was a Bakkete. And I made out several others. They were searching for us. They had not been destroyed in the debacle of the blinding light.

I ran back to the clearing. It was deserted. Morgo called to me from a covered glade of sprouting giant leaves.

“Bakketes!” I cried to him. “They’re in this cave!”

He beckoned to me and I ran toward the glade.

“They’ll see the fire,” I said. “But call to them, Morgo. Let them know where we are!”

He shook his head, and out of the corner of my eye I was surprised to see that the fire had been put out. Nurri Kala’s face was tense with anxiety.

“Call to them, Morgo!” I repeated. “The fire is out!”

I put it out,” he said in a low voice. “I do not want the Bakketes to find us.”

I was amazed. “Why not? They mean escape to Kahli – the outer world, perhaps!”

His eyes were smoldering but his voice remained even. “I do not want to leave Canaan, Derro. We are all staying here. It is the best cave. Come in here before the Bakketes see you.”

I understood. He did not want to risk the chance of losing Nurri Kala to me – and the possible success of my plan to leave the caves entirely. He knew I wanted the girl – wanted to take her with me to my own world.

“I don’t mean to stay here,” I said hotly. “If you won’t call the Bakketes, then I’ll do it.”

I ran back to the clearing and to the best of my ability, tried to imitated Morgo’s schoolboy cry. It was a dismal failure, but I made plenty of racket. The forests echoed with it.

Morgo darted from his cover, leaving Nurri Kala crouching behind the giant leaves. He came up to me and let a hand fall on my shoulder.

“Derro,” he said, “we have been friends. You have saved my life. I owe much to you. But now we must decide something.”

“I want the Bakketes!” I snapped. “You can stay here if you want to!” My temper was mounting.

“Will you go alone – with them – if I call them down?” His eyes were transfixing mine. There was pleading and determination in them.

For the first time he betrayed himself to me with words. I shook my head. “If Nurri Kala will come with me, I mean to make her my wife.”

“You cannot have her, Derro. I love her.” He spoke simply, with anger, like a child. And he spoke as a man who meant what he said, too.

“And I love her, Morgo!” I said firmly, adding, “but let her choose between us.”

Again he shook his head. “She is a woman, Derro, and she likes strange things. You are strange to her. You have told her of greater worlds – places she would like to see. I cannot let her go – because I need her. I belong to these caves – and so does she. We have gone too far in life to change our ways of living. We would be unhappy in your world, Derro. It is so different – so strange to us of the caves.”

I turned my back on him and, seeing a Bakkete wheeling lower in the air above us, I shouted to it. Morgo promptly clapped his hand over my mouth and pinned me to him with his other arm. He started to drag me backward to the hidden glade.

Struggling, I flung myself from him and met his blazing eyes. My hand went for my knife. I did not mean to die like Lacrosse in the midst of the wealth I’d found. I wanted to enjoy it – and to live the life I knew best – the life of the outer world. And I wanted Nurri Kala.

Morgo saw the knife flash in my hand, and he drew his own.

“I do not wish to kill you, Derro,” he whispered huskily, “but I will not let you have Nurri Kala. She belongs to me.”

“By what right?” I blazed at him.

“It is the law of the caves. Man selects his mate and takes her. Nurri Kala is to be my woman. I love her. She is my kind – not yours. Consider that, Derro, my friend, and do not let us fight.”

Nurri Kala was standing between us, gently pushing us apart. Her eyes were wet with tears and to each of us she shook her head, pleadingly.

“Do not fight! Do not fight!” she sobbed. “You, who are great friends!”

“Then choose one of us!” I commanded her.

Morgo watched her apprehensively. I could see his heart pummeling his breast with mighty, excited blows. My own was going like a trip hammer. The girl met our inquisitive gazes, shuddered at the sight of our bared knives and closed her eyes.

Which one of us would she choose?

Chapter 22: The Sacred Rock Falls

Nurri Kala’s beautiful face broke into a tender smile which she directed upon me. I was the chosen one! A strangled animal cry broke from Morgo’s lips, and he grasped her wrist.

“You cannot choose him!” he roared. “You belong to me, Nurri Kala! He cannot have you!”

Taking his fingers, she removed them from her hand and smiled at him. “I love you both – Derro – Morgo. And I know that sooner or later I must choose one of you. It is the law of the caves. But give me a little time. I cannot choose now.”

Morgo sighed with relief and avoided my angry glare. By what right did he presume possession of her? She was not a cave or a knife or a spring of drinking water to be claimed forthwith. She was a woman – a human being – with her own inalienable right to choose her man. To hell with the law of the caves! I meant to have her – to have her choose me.

“Put your knives away, my friends,” she said firmly. “You must not fight over me. I shall make a choice in a little while.” Her voice broke. She realized what her choice would mean to the unlucky one, and the woman’s heart in her took pity. She wanted to delay that blow for as long as possible.

We obeyed her, and eyed each other sheepishly. Morgo extended his hand to me, and I took it, clasping it sincerely. I was ashamed of myself, that my emotions and desires had run away with my reason. In my own way, I had been claiming the girl and presuming possession of her, just as Morgo had done.

“We will wait for Nurri Kala’s word,” he said simply, and went over to the fire to rekindle it. Nurri Kala listened to my apologies for my behavior – the drawing of my knife – and I saw that she was impressed. Morgo was right. I was strange to her, and therefore attracted to her, though she was not of my world or my ways.

The Bakketes had seen us – had heard my futile shouts – and Baku dropped into our midst, followed by a legion of five thousand batmen. Morgo paid them little attention, but he told me their story.

Blinded, they had fled from the cave of The Shaft after letting us fall from their arms. That action was purely impulsive. With both hands they had tried to shield their sensitive eye nerves, and we had suffered. There was not blaming them. Morgo and I were agreed.

Beating their way back into the tunnel, they had returned by another route to Kahli, and with their sight sufficiently restored, they recruited a large search party and returned to Zaan. Entering these caves by another and safer door, they skirted the cave of the great white light and hunted for us. They wanted the assurance of our deaths in the jungle or the sight of us alive. I marveled at the human impulses they displayed.

This Land of Canaan they discovered by coming through a tunnel higher in the face of the cliff over the haunts of the Hoatzins. My cries attracted their attention, and they soon located us.

They had seen Shamman bats in the other caves, but put this down to the general exodus from Shamman, where the black and red ants devastated the land. Kahli, they said, was inundated, but as yet the Husshas and the Rortas had not climbed to the stalactites in great numbers, and many of the Bakkete nests were still intact. We were all glad to hear that.

“Well,” I said to Morgo, “I still want to go back to Shamman – to try to reach the Door of Surrilana.”

“Will you go alone,” he smiled, “or will you wait for the girl to decide?”

I was surprised by his shrewdness. He had me checkmated. Of course, I had no intention of going without her – but I had hoped he would come with us.

“I’ll wait,” I murmured.

“And when Nurri Kala chooses me?” he asked confidently, looking up at her. I caught the glance they exchanged and saw it baffled the man. She was noncommittal in her smile.

“In that event, I’ll go alone,” I said.

The girl started. “You must not leave us, ever, Derro.”

I took hope from that remark, and Morgo placidly went out his business of cooking the meat over the fire he had started. He suggested that I look for more honey, and he set the Backetes to scouring the jungles for the leaves and herbs that we could eat.

I went into the forest and soon found a huge bee hive dangling from a vine encrusted tree. The bees were buzzing about it, crawling in and out. Not being much of a person to tackle such jobs, I filled my pockets with heavy stones and climbed a neighboring tree. From that point of vantage, I heaved away and dislodged the hive from its moorings, sending it tumbling to the ground. The bees fled in surprise, and, dropping to the floor, I grabbed the blackish mass and ran.

When I reached the clearing, Morgo sprang at me and took the hive from my hands. Jabbing a spit through it, he held it over the fire until it was enveloped with smoke. Turning, I saw a trail of bees behind me. They were rushing to the defense of their home out of sheer instinct.

The smoke did the trick. The bees turned back and did not attack us. Morgo explained that he had been attacked before in other caves where he stole honey, and that he found fire or water the best ways to foil the industrious bees.

We sat down to a hearty meal and ate our fill of meat, honey and herbs. My stomach swelled, and when I was through I rolled over and closed my eyes to welcome sleep. I dreamed of the wealth I'd sweep from the floor of Canaan into my pockets, and devised sacks of Mannizan skins in which to carry more. I saw myself strolling with Nurri Kala down the Rue de la Paix in Paris – I saw her the sensation of New York. And I saw myself the most envied man in the world – the possessor of great wealth, and the husband of its most beautiful woman.

Then Morgo came into the picture. He, too, had escaped the caves, and he wanted Nurri Kala. We met in Times Square – myself dressed in a suit I've longed for – Morgo in his skins. He demanded my wife as his lawful mate by virtue of cave law. I refused him, and he sprang at me. Never before did I realize the man's fierce strength. Taking me in his two hands, he lifted me from the sidewalk while a terrified crowd of New Yorkers fled from him, and he shook me in his effort to tear me asunder. My senses reeled in the terrible impulses of those shakings to which he subjected my body.

I saw Morgo's face close to mine. "Wake up, Derro. Hurry!"

He was shaking me out of my slumbers in the Land of Canaan. We were alone in the clearing, but beyond, in the forests, I saw the girl and the Backetes hiding.

My eyes strayed to the ceiling of the cave. It was darkening with many small shapes. Shamman bats! And they carried Silurians!

"Our hiding place has been found out," Morgo said. "They are ready to attack us in the air or on the ground."

"What are you going to do?"

"Hide in the jungles. We have not been seen down here yet."

We joined the others and watched the Shamman bats descend and drop their purple scale-skinned freight in the forests. The voices of the Silurians beating the underbrush reached us as the light began to fail. Nearer and nearer they came.

I saw the first Silurian glistening like a purple wraith, and when I turned to point him out to Morgo, my friend was gone. Crouching, I watched the creature plow knee-deep in the grass, looking to the right and left, scouring every inch of that portion of the forest for us. A neighbor called to him from some distance, and he replied, I gathered, that he still saw nothing.

He swung toward the high clearing and ran for it. He passed between Nurri Kala and me – within five feet of us, with our bodies pressed into the diamond dust. As he climbed to the high ground, his eyes fell upon the signs of the fire, the Mannizan meat, and our footprints.

Before he could call out his find, Morgo shot out of the screening foliage like a white bullet and, striking the Silurian between the shoulders, knocked him flat on his face. Then, kneeling on the creature's back, Morgo whispered to him to keep silent. He did not want to kill his enemy in cold blood.

The Silurian was obstinate. He struggled and, breaking away from Morgo's hold, sent a crushing blow into the white man's face. Morgo staggered, recovered himself, and again threw his body and weight upon the Silurian. They fell into the shining dust, legs and arms.

The Silurian's slimy body afforded no hold for Morgo's hands, and with the lugubrious grace of an eel, he started to squirm free of my friend's grasp. The man's eyes were afire with hatred and fear for Morgo's might. I crept forward, my knife in my hand, ready to spring.

A Silurian called from the forest close by. The man, one of the searchers, was invisible in the sea of verdure.

Morgo's enemy tried to reply, but each time he opened his mouth to shout he was struck full in the face by a lunge of Morgo's black-maned head, which effectively silenced the cry for help – the warning that would betray our refuge. The Silurian, unable to bear the cruel punishment on his lips, tore himself from Morgo's grasp with one supreme effort. Undaunted, Morgo flung himself on the man's back, muffling his mouth with one hand while with the other he caught the Silurian's windpipe.

The two again thudded to the diamond-pebble floor, and the Silurian, rolling on his back, brought his ten fingers to play on Morgo's unguarded throat. I saw my friend's eye bulge under the terrific pressure suddenly exerted on his own windpipe.

There was but one thing for Morgo to do, and he did it. Our lives were at stake – menaced by some fifty Silurians – and his humanitarian impulses were wasted on the creature who would crush the life from him. His knife cut through the failing light and found the mark in the man's vulnerable eye.

As the dead Silurian fell from Morgo's hands, the other searcher called from the forest. His voice was only thirty or so feet away.

Morgo's cunning in that moment was superb. Realizing that the hidden man must be answered, Morgo imitated the dead Silurian's voice and shouted that the white people were not in that part of the jungle. Satisfied, the other searcher moved on. I could hear his footsteps diminishing in the distance, and while we waited with bated breath, silence returned to the cave.

Morgo dragged the corpse into the brush and returned to our hiding place in the glade. We did not speak, but watched the light fade away into the darkness of night.

"He knows that we are here!" Nurri Kala whispered. "He know everything!"

"Zorimi?" Morgo grunted with contempt. "The Shamman bats followed the Bakketes. Perhaps Derro's cries to them were heard."

"It isn't safe in here any longer," I pointed out.

"No," the girl added. "Let us go far from here. I am afraid, Morgo. Zorimi will never give up seeking us – as long as he knows we live."

“I am not afraid of him – or his creatures!” Morgo laughed.

“But you cannot find an army, Morgo. You and Derro are but two men.” The girl was patently upset. Some instinctive dread of the magician possessed her. “What would I do without you two? You must not let me fall into Zorimi’s hands!”

This argument impressed Morgo, and it was then that he gave in to my entreaties for a retreat to a safer cave. I pointed out that we could always return to the Land of Canaan, though in my heart I didn’t want to. My mind was set on reaching Surrilana – or forcing Zorimi’s knowledge of another exit from the caves from him with the point of my bowie caressing his throat.

When the shadow light of the twilight that was Canaan’s period of darkness was full in the cave, Morgo summoned the silent batmen. He told them to carry us to the higher tunnel and to a place of safety.

We went aloft, and as we swung high, close to the white roof, I saw below the fires of the Silurians. They meant to give another day’s search for us in Canaan.

On reaching the tunnel, we plunged into its darkness and flew hard toward the opposite end. Midway, the Backetes hesitated. They were confronted with two roads, and they could not remember by which they had come. MOrgo insisted that they bear to the north, and we flew for another half an hour in cool gloom.

We emerged from the passage at the side of a glowing ruby wall miles wide and miles high. Our bat wings spread, we soared parallel to this warm face that was The Shaft itself, silhouetted sharply for any enemy below to see. But there was no turning to be made now – no retreat.

How right poor Jim Craig had been. This was the mountain of diamond he spoke of. It was colossal, and now, in the darkness, it glowed blood red from the heat poured into it by passing sun of the outer day.

Looking up, I saw a great hole in the ceiling of the cave. It was miles above our flying position.

My heart sang. Beyond the rim of the fissure were dotted, in a velvet sea of blue, the diamonds that men call stars. For the first time in may a day I beheld the world from whence I came.

I sent Baku close to Morgo in my delirium of joy.

“Let us climb to that hole above,” I shouted. “Let us leave the caves that way!”

“We cannot – dare not,” Morgo replied tersely. “The Backetes cannot make it. And the outer world up there is cold. We would freeze to death.”

There was no time for further parley. From the camp fires below came a hubbub of voices that grew. We had been spotted by our enemies – Zorimi’s forces. The snowy surface of the white jungle – a jungle with a diamond floor – was quickly overcast with the shadows of black wings. The Shamman bats were rising en masse.

We continued across the ruby light of The Shaft in full view of our enemy, headed for another tunnel the Backetes knew. It was a race of the fastest wings, and our five thousand Backetes were proverbially the swiftest winged creatures in the caverns. Our handicap was to our advantage, and with the horde of Shamman bats, twenty thousand strong, trailing after us, we swept through the red strata of light for a distant wall that I could not even see.

Slowly the Shamman bats gained – lessening the distance between us. Soon I heard their frantic warlike screeches, deafeningly. They did not mean to have us escape them this once, when we were literally bottled up in caves we knew little about.

The Bakketes, frightened by the proximity of their traditional foes, weakened in their rush. The Shammans gained. Now I could hear the beating of their leathery wings, striking one another's in their mad dash for us.

I cried out in astonishment. The Bakketes had stopped flying and were hanging in the air as though waiting for their inevitable destruction.

The Shamman bats darted for us headlong. I could see the glint of red in their eyes reflected from the ruby of The Shaft. In another moment, we would be beaten to the ground – prisoners or dead.

The higher Bakketes screamed an odd signal. As one man they shot upward, and I was almost jerked out of Baku's arms by the effort.

The Shamman bats, thousands quickly massed, passed under us in stampede. They could not stop their headlong rush in time to catch us. We veered to the right – a veritable Immelmann – and I saw ourselves being dashed full against a huge wall of white.

The Bakketes hesitated again, climbed the wall, and should into a tunnel hidden when viewed head on. This passage was a winding one, and not very long. We passed over a cave diffused with a pale light and quickly entered another passage.

We had not left it when I heard the volume of Shamman bats screeching behind us. They had found the hidden door, and were in the cavern we had just left. The chase was too close for comfort. And I was devoid of a gun.

Passing through two other caves, I suddenly realized where we were. The Bakketes, in their blind flight for safety, had blundered into the connecting caverns that led back to the amphitheater, where we emerged from the secret river – the amphitheater of the sacred hanging rock.

No sooner had the thought crossed my mind than I spied the huge rock below, surrounded by a semicircle of dotted fires – the camps of the guardians of the rock. This cave was a veritable cul-de-sac. There was no other escape from it save through the door by which we entered – or the course up the river to the Land of the Cicernas, which was an impossible one.

Morgo signaled for our descent, and we landed on the rim of the amphitheater. The river, a black ribbon far below, thundered and roared as it passed this open space on its mysterious way from a source of plenty to an unknown end.

The Shamman bats filled the cave, while the three of us climbed over the ledge of rocks and burrowed into hiding places behind projecting boulders. The Bakketes were ordered to deploy to the far side of the cave, as though we were with them, trying to escape through a door. This was ruse to throw the Shammans off our track – and if successful, the survivors among the Bakketes were to return for us.

But the Shammans were too numerous. The twenty thousand spread through the cave and met the retreating Bakketes. The clash of battle reached our ears, and from my niche over the river in the face of the amphitheater, I saw the old tactics repeated – the Bakketes using their hands and taloned feet – the Shammans their wings and teeth, beating their prey to the ground.

Hundreds of bats became knotted in an aerial death struggle over the sacred rock. They lurched upward and then downward, first one side giving way, then the other. Closer and closer, the Bakketes were pressed to the balancing rock. They fought doggedly, for more than life itself was at stake. They feared the sacred rock.

My blood ran cold. In that moment I knew what was inevitable if the rock ever fell.

The shouts of the guardians of the stone rang out, mingled with the furious screeching of the fighting bat hordes. They, too, saw the danger.

What happened was quicker than the eye could see. The rush of Shammans hurled the Bakketes into the stone and beat against them. A thousand leather wings smothered a few hundred – the Bakketes.

Small stones thudded down the face of the cliff over the tunnel into which the secret black river flowed. There was a rending crash, and I saw the sacred rock topple over, tearing a wide path down the face of the precipice. It plopped into the river in the very mouth of the gorge so essential to the course of the rushing waters.

This was not all. The disturbed cliff crumbled, and a landslide started. Boulders, shale and rocks of all sizes showered themselves upon the sacred stone that uprooted them. The walls of the amphitheatre trembled with the blast and launched deafening echoes.

When the clouds of dust subsided a little, I saw that the feared damage had been done. No wonder the peoples of the caves said that all life in them would cease when the sacred rock fell!

The river, choked off from its natural outlet, was rising with the speed of mercury in a thermometer to which a match had been applied. In a few minutes it would be bubbling over the very rim on which we were perched.

The caves were doomed by a flood!

Chapter 23: The End of a World

The Shamman bats understood. As though an orchestra conductor had brought his baton down for complete silence, their screechings ceased. They avoided the Bakketes and flew over the rising river. Their eyes convinced them of the holocaust to come. Legend had prepared them. “When the rock falls, all life in the caves must end!” It was a phrase known to all forms of life in this inner world.

Then with cries of fright and utter terror, their thousands turned tail and fled from the cave which grew lighter when the clouds of wings retreated. The startled Bakketes clustered over us and we climbed from our niches to the top of the amphitheater. The waters had risen twenty feet, and I could see it welling up foot by foot, blotting out long perpendicular stretches of stone markings.

“It is done,” Morgo said philosophically. “The caves are doomed. All of them will be filled with the river. It will flow from here and at points farther to the north.”

“We must hurry to the higher caverns,” I said, “before it is too late. If they fill, too, the tunnels will be waterfalls that we cannot pass through.”

He nodded. “I think that our path will be safe – for a little time. The Shammans that fled to Zaan from the ants will return to their own cave to escape these rising waters. They will be too busy to bother us, Derro.”

Nurri Kala stood apart watching the oncoming flood with horrified eyes. “It is his work – Zorimi’s evil! I was afraid before. I am more terrified now. We are faced with worse things than death – that is dying by torture. I saw a man drown, and it awful – awful, Derro!”

Her voice died in her throat as the picture of that terrible experience became fixed in her mind.

Morgo told us to wait while he flew over to the Zaans who were guardians of the rock that was. They were hastily preparing for flight and he meant to assist them by having the batmen carry them to safety. On his return, he had some fifty Zaans, odd blond creatures, with their primitive knives and slingshots, in the arms of the carrier Bakketes. They were frightened and remarkably submissive.

We all took off and retraced our way through the caves that had brought us to the scene of destruction. There were no lurking Shamman bats in sight.

Before penetrating the last passage that lead into the Cave of the Shaft, we rested. Morgo drew Nurri Kala and me to one side.

“How great the damage will be, I do not know,” he said. “If I am right, the river had but one outlet and that is dammed up. It may be good that we leave the caves entirely.” His eyes met mine and I knew he was waiting for Nurri Kala to make up her mind.

She was to choose between us for a mate. She had begged for time, but now we were faced with flight into my world. There I would have the advantage over Morgo. He meant for her to decide while we were still equals in her eyes.

“Nurri Kala,” he said, “you must speak now – decide. With which of us will you cast your lot in life?”

For several minutes, the girl bowed her head and did not utter a word. Then she said: “If I choose Morgo, Derro will go away. I shall lose him. If I choose Derro, what then?”

“You must try to leave the caves with Derro,” he said in a voice he fought to control, so great was his emotion. “It is his desire. I shall remain behind.”

“Then I shall lose you, Morgo,” Nurri Kala said sadly and moved away from us.

I had not anticipated this magnanimity on Morgo’s part. Taking him for a primitive child, I thought that in the event of my being the lucky man, he would fight me for the girl. But there was a spark of his early civilized training in him. He was a good sport – and would be a good loser.

“Nurri Kala,” he cried aloud, “you must decide.”

She shook her golden head. “Not yet, Morgo. Give me more time. Let us go to the upper caves first.”

“No, now!” he commanded.

“Give me a day, Morgo!” she pleaded.

He hesitated and then bowed out of deference to her wish. “Very well. It shall be a day. No longer, Nurri Kala.”

I could not help trembling, knowing that my fate in love was to be decided so soon. Each hour was to bring me closer to happiness or despair.

Again Morgo gave the orders to the Backetes and we went aloft, penetrated the long corridor and flew into the Cave of the Shaft. The red glow was turning white. The new day was entering Zaan, and its sunny beams were seeking out the colossal diamond wall that in a few hours, to light the world with the Himalayas, would throw off a light so great it blinded.

Yet if the waters rose and covered that diamond reflector, would darkness fill the caverns? I could not tell. I had no idea how great would be the flood.

Flying low, away from the others, I saw the columns of the Silurians and Shammans moving through the forest. There were no bats defending them.

Zorimi's procession of litters containing himself and his sacks of diamonds was easily spotted. They moved like a speckled python over the floor of the jungle, not in the direction our Backetes were taking but toward a depression in the floor.

Was Zorimi headed for his secret exit? I suspected as much. The bats had warned him of the flood and he was in full flight, using his creatures as long as was possible to get him and his treasure caravan out of the caves into Nepal or Tibet.

I directed Baku to Morgo and shouted my news to him. He was interested, and, going higher, we hung over the magician's train. It moved swiftly afoot and presently I saw the mouth of a cave partially overgrown with brush and giant leaves. Was this the secret door? I could not resist dropping down to be certain.

The Shammans kept me at my distance by hurling stones at me from their slingshots. Zorimi was in a panic. He climbed out of his litter and holding the Shining Stone aloft – She of the Three Heads – that the inner world world worshiped – he exhorted them to move faster. He counted each litter of diamond sacks as they passed by, descending into the cave I had seen.

The line disappeared steadily. I watched it, comparing it to the tail of a rat scurrying to cover.

The line halted. Zorimi screamed imprecations. The last litter carriers, hearing the cries from the cave, dropped their cargoes and retreated despite Zorimi's guttural commands. If he had a whip or a gun he would have killed the men on the spot so tremendous was his wrath.

Now I saw the cause of the panic in the cave. Little rivulets of water seeped from its mouth. They grew larger and formed a pool out of which terrified Shammans scrambled and splashed.

The flood was doing its work beneath this Cave of Zaan. The water was seeking the level of its source. Shortly, the entire cave would be submerged. And Zorimi's secret exit to the outer world was cut off.

I was tempted to drop down and take the man prisoner when his army deserted him in panic, leaving him a gesticulating mass of pelts beside his treasure sacks. But Morgo cried a warning to me. Shamman bats were in the air.

Zorimi saw them and set up a shrill call. They wheeled and swooped down upon him.

I rejoined Morgo and flew to the tunnel by which he first entered Zaan years before. It was the route that he knew and it led through the Land of the Cicernas, Verrizon and into Kahli and higher Shamman.

We flew hard and made the tunnel as the light fell full upon the diamond, lighting it up so that we could not look back upon it without shielding our eyes. Out of curiosity, I dared to peer over my shoulder to behold its glory. The whiteness of the diamond was not full yet, but it was of a glorious purity and bespoke the wonders to come when the outer sun, hurling its ray through the hole in the back of the Himalayas, set it afire, giving day to the caves.

In entering the tunnel which had a peculiar hollow ring, I was deafened by flapping of the Bakketes' wings. The monotony of the sound almost lulled me to sleep, as often did an airplane motor. Many a lucky dive I came out of, wakened just in time to avert disaster, over a German trench, or on the crest of a high ridge in the Argonne.

An affinity with the sound of the Bakketes' wings made me sensitive to other wing beats. I opened my eyes, startled. The reverberations that were lulling me into a doze had come from behind me. Now I could hear wing ahead in the passage. Was it merely an echo or -

We rounded a wide bend and found ourselves face to face with a horde of Shamman bats. Fright and panic seized the Bakketes. They could not turn about. The Shammans came at us, hundreds of them.

In a flash, we were a mass of colliding bodies, screeches and tangled wings and legs. The Bakketes tried to force a passage over or under the steady stream of Shammans. Morgo and I hacked away at the enemy with our knives, trying to keep close to Nurri Kala's carrier. We were clouted with wing, kicked with flying feet.

The melee broke as suddenly as it had started. The Shammans did not want to engage us for some reason. They were bent on reaching Zaan with every possible haste.

A little battered and breathless, we debouched into the luxurious Land of the Cicernas. The air was a pandemonium of shrill cacklings and shrieks from the chicken fiends.

I saw that the floor was partially inundated with water that poured through the tunnel through which we made our original entrance into Zaan – the tunnel that led to the river. From that culvert, the water gushed in a steady cascade as from a huge fire hydrant, hurling trees and rocks out of its path as it sought elbow room in the broad cave.

And I screamed to Morgo when I counted the Bakketes that came through the collision with the Shamman bats.

Nurri Kala was missing.

Her carrier was not in the depleted ranks of the batmen. Several of the Zaans which we were carrying were likewise gone.

Instinctively, Morgo and I ordered our bats to turn us about and return to the tunnel. We meant to give chase – to learn what fate befell the girl – to rescue her from Zorimi's power if there was still time. We were ready to do combat with a hundred Shamman bats – for the girl we loved was in danger.

Before we reached the opening, we saw its ceiling sag and crumble. A shower of rocks was followed by a deluging stream of water. The rising river had found some outlet in a higher level and its weight was bearing down upon the ceiling of the Land of the Cicernas.

In a moment, the tunnel walls collapsed before our eyes and we knew that access to Zaan was completely cut off. The pain on Morgo's face was intense, and I saw his eyes moisten with tears. He was frustrated rather than frightened – fearful for Nurri Kala rather than worried about the fate of this cavern.

The Bakketes added their warning screeches to the terrified cackles of the Cicernas, those huge beasts that hopped about in the waters below, seeking dry land. The roof of the cave was giving way. Three or four dribbles of water started high up and holes quickly widened to give the waters above their forced right of way.

We went back to the Bakketes and continued on to the door to Kahli. Below, the mottled feathers of the Cicernas mingled with those of the cockatoos and the birds of paradise. The latter sought refuge on the chickens' backs when their trees were swept down in the rush of the rising water.

As we neared the entrance to Kahli, we saw the Cicernas moving toward the same point. The air was thick with the insects and the winged creatures, their beautiful plumage bedraggled and wet from contact with the sudden flood.

The tunnel was not high enough to permit the bats and the tall Cicernas to share it. We had to reach it first. But the huge chickens were suddenly endowed with a supernatural speed and they raced for that goal of safety as speedily as we did.

Cicernas were in the tunnel when we reached it. They turned on us and tore at the Bakketes with their hideous cackling beaks, their beady eyes alight with fear. Morgo took the advance and flying low with his knife outstretched, he cut at heads and throats. Falling on on Cicerna's back, he severed the thin neck and flew to the chicken immediately ahead, decapitating that one, too. I followed suit, striking out blindly, my knife becoming a mass of blood-coated feathers.

The surprise of our attack momentarily stayed the Cicernas and we got into the tunnel while the huge creatures had to climb over the bodies of their fallen brothers. The air was a whirl of darting birds but they gave us no trouble.

My last glimpse of the Land of the Cicernas was a burst of water from the ceiling. It roared down in a steady torrent as if some pagan god had turned on a giant spigot to water his garden, heedless of the destruction of living creatures. With the caving in of the roof, light was blotted out of the land that had been so beautiful.

We entered Kahli, a desecrated land, torn up by the marauding black and red ants with a symphony of splashing water and cackles ringing out pitifully behind us. The Kahli in which I had learned the ways of the caves from Morgo was gone. In its place was a drab desolation of nude trees and barren brush. The Hussas and the Rortas had fed well.

The usual yellow light was dim, and I knew that the day was well advanced. Was darkness inevitable as a result of the flood? Were the rising waters touching The Shaft that reflected the sun's light upon this hidden world?

I began to feel like the primitive men who wondered at the miracles of the heavens, and I understood in that hour how they came to worship the sun and the forces of nature that were fickle, now kindly and fertile and fruitful, now cruel and sterile and relentless in their toll of lives. This was what man experienced when the great glaciers moved down upon his home millions of years ago – inexplicable horror and futility. All his efforts went for naught in the face of merciless nature.

We flew to Morgo's former dwelling, and I was happy to see that the rocks I piled over the entrance were still in place. The ants had not broken in. But the decay of the Mannizan flesh we left there made the cave unlivable until the Bakketes cleaned it out. I saw a wealth of ammunition and a rifle I took from the Junkers. Again I was endowed with a weapon of my civilization and I felt stronger.

Morgo gave no thought to food though he was as hungry as the rest of us. We had many mouths to feed, too, counting the Zaans, who shivered in the cooler warmth of Kahli and the legion of Bakketes. He stood on the ledge watching the cave he had loved with sorrowful eyes.

His hand caressed the little cross of twigs that he always carried. Here in the midst of nature's impending destruction, this son of the caves was turning to the deity his parents had taught him in the days when he was a little boy of my world.

"Derro," he said at length, "I believe that we shall meet Nurri Kala again. She is not dead. I have faith in that belief. We had better go into Shamman and wait near the plateau of The Flame. She will return there – with Zorimi."

"But how do you know that she will, Morgo?"

He smiled at me. "I have what you call a hunch." He held the little cross of twigs up to my eyes and then tucked it away.

“Good,” I said, “and while we’re there, we can search for that room where Nurri Kala said the black books were kept. One of them may contain your name – a clue to your true identity.”

“I am no longer interested in learning that secret,” he said listlessly. “I want only Nurri Kala.”

And so did I, but what could I say in the face of his simple desire? Now was not the time to pit my will – my desire – against his. I, too, meant to make the girl my wife, if I ever laid eyes on her again.

The Bakketes flying over their ruined land came to us reporting that there was a leak in their field of stalactites. We had no reason to suspect that the river could send its flood over Kahli, but we remembered what had happened to the Land of the Cicernas.

Immediate flight was urgent. Other bat men reported the appearance of herds of Cicernas and Mannizans moving across the lower end of the cave where water trickled from the tunnels. Ants and snakes had been seen near Verrizon, entering Kahli in retreat of the welling waters.

I marveled at the catastrophe. A single rock falling into the mouth of a river’s solitary outlet was accomplishing the end of a world. The caves were doomed. All animal life and men were fleeing to higher ground for their lives.

The identities of individual cave life would be lost and creature would fight creature for the morsels of food that the ants had left behind them after they plagued Shamman – the ultimate destination of the refugees of the flood.

I remembered my readings on the end of the Carboniferous Age three hundred million years ago when the glaciers appeared and rising waters wiped out the ancient ancestry of man. Here beneath the Himalayas – with a few hundred miles of the outposts of twentieth century civilization – nature was repeating herself.

A cave world was being wiped out by water.

Chapter 24: The Black Books

The flood had laid its heavy fingers well across the once fair face of the Cave of Kahli by the time we left Morgo’s dwelling. The waters were not deep, and long lines of Shamman, Zaans, Silurians and animals, neither molesting the other save when their paths crossed, were wading their way toward the upper reaches of Shamman. As yet, no Shamman bats had put in an appearance.

I wondered if the bats we saw rushing pell-mell into Zaan were bottled up there with Zorimi and Nurri Kala. Yet I tried to assure myself that there were other exits – other means of escape than through the destroyed Land of the Cicernas.

As we made our way to the tunnel, reinforced by the Bakketes who had stayed on in their stalactites after the raids of the red and black ants, I saw the floor of Kahli streaked with veins of water holding living creatures. It looked as the seams of the cave leaked, that we were within a container the sides of which threatened to cave in upon us.

I saw a column of Silurians marching upon one of Cicernas. When the two met, there was a clash for the right of way. The scale-skinned men fought hard with their impregnable bodies, but the might of the powerful chicken wings hurled them heavily to the ground. The wings were a force the men could not overcome and they had to give way, the water gurgling about their ankles while the chickens marched by in great numbers.

At another point, we saw the Shammans beat off the small Mannizans, killing several in their efforts to reach the tunnel first. Later, they ran afoul of the large Mannizans, the rat breed, and met with rebuff. The rats were fierce in their insistence of the right of way and they swarmed over the column of Shammans, trampling men, women and children – terrified primitives whose one thought was for their lives.

The tunnel up to Shamman was dry and we took hope. On entering the great gray cavern, we found the light weak and waning. Either The Shaft was failing because of the rising waters in Zaan or the means of reflecting the sun's rays through other caves and corridors was being cut off by the crumbling of those chambers.

As yet there wasn't a living creature in all Shamman. We made our way over miles of bleak gray wastes and stunted trees on which the ants had found lean pickings, toward the plateau of The Flame. There was no thread of smoke to guide us. The pagan fire had died out, untended by its keepers, who fled from the plague of red and black ants.

Morgo proved himself an able general of his Bakkete army. He decided not to take possession of the Shamman stalactites but to press on into the higher and darker cave close to the Door of Surrilans. We flew over the plateau and continued on toward the distant opening, beyond which was a hazy darkness.

In that vast cavern that once was compared to the plains of Kansas, I saw Shammans and small Mannizans running in the gloom below. Some of Shamman's creatures had gone in this direction when the Husshas and the Rortas invaded their cave while the others went to warmer reaches of Zaan.

It was cold and I saw Morgo shivering when we landed. The Bakketes who went aloft to inspect the dripping chalk stalactites fed by the ice of Kanchenjunga kept in motion for the scant warmth activity gave them. The floods were driving us into a state comparable to the Ice Age of old. Wood was gathered from the weird trees that thrived in this cavern darkness, and Morgo made a fire in a depression – a veritable corral of towering stalagmites. He was anxious for secrecy even in this wilderness of chalky monoliths.

"Now let us return to the plateau," Morgo said. "When the Shammans and Silurians return, they will not be eager for fight. They are badly frightened by the flood. And it is to the plateau that Zorimi will come –"

"If he still lives," I put in pessimistically.

"He will. And he brings Nurri Kala, too. I know it, Derro."

Baku and four other Bakketes took us from our fire, tended by the remaining Bakketes, into Shamman. Morgo and I were landed on the mound of the dead flame while the other bat men were sent off to watch for the Silurians and Shammans.

I led the way down the roughly hewn chalk steps to the chamber of skulls. A chill draft swept through it and whistled up the shaft that was the former chimney of the sacred pagan fire that Zorimi kept burning. We climbed over Hussha and Rorta remains, most of which were nearly wholly devoured by the ants. An odor of death and decay pervaded the place.

Morgo was content to wait calmly for word of Zorimi's return. He meant to kill the magician and take Nurri Kala from him. And I think he hoped by that deed to wind favor in her eyes. But I insisted that we search for the room which Nurri Kala had described – the room where the Bibles were said to be hidden.

Reluctantly, Morgo accompanied me. We went back up the steps to a landing that gave upon a long corridor. In the dim light I saw several wooden doors, heavy and closed. We tried the first, and it swung open. The chamber was small with a little window. A pallet was in one corner and upon it I found a flying helmet. It was Harker's – that of the man whose drying skull graced the horrible bony frieze in the chamber below, the hall of human sacrifice.

“This is Zorimi’s room,” I said. “Somehow, I smell his evil in it.”

Morgo agreed. He pointed to a little book in a niche in the wall. It had been flung there hastily. I ran for it and opened it eagerly for the secrets it could tell me. It had been a diary but the pages were ripped out.

Still, on one page a fragment remained. It was in a curious, scrawling penmanship, barely legible. Somehow it was familiar to me. I tried to recall if I had ever seen the handwriting of Jesperson, whom I now suspected of being Zorimi. No luck.

But I read: ” – who is the prisoner Lacrosse. I shall take him to Zaan. He can evaluate the stones and – ” The fragment was brief, but it revealed to me that Zorimi had held Lacrosse a prisoner in the plateau, even while we faced him in the chamber of skulls.

It was the magician who brought the naturalist to the Caves of Zaan and for the stated purpose of putting a value on the treasure Zorimi was collecting there before his escape to the outer world. Harker, the geologist, the better judge of stones, was sacrificed by Zorimi, perhaps because he refused to deal with the evil one. And Lacrosse lived only to reach the torrid Zaan and die there with diamond dust heaped upon him, possibly as an ironic gesture, by Zorimi.

We went into another room, more attractive than Zorimi’s and I recognized in it Nurri Kala’s reflecting glass – a tall mirror of polished silver. On a ledge was the odd flower of diamonds that I saw in her yellow hair the night she was called to participate in human sacrifice. Before Morgo spotted it, I picked it up and stuck it into my blouse.

“Nurri Kala lived in this room,” Morgo said slowly. “I can feel her presence.”

He did not want to leave it. We stood long before the mirror looking at ourselves. Our faces were shaggy with ancient beards and our eyes were lighted with fierce determination. They met in challenge and then Morgo smiled at me. His arm slipped into mine and he patted my clenched hand. I feared his friendship in that instant, for on the morrow he might be my enemy because of the girl we both loved.

“We are friends, Derro,” he said. “I am black-haired and you are red-haired. There is fire in you. But we are friends. Do not let us quarrel over Nurri Kala – when she chooses me?” He laughed as he spoke this last sentence.

“Or when she chooses me?” I smiled at him. His face hardened, but I felt the sincerity in the pressure of his hand.

“I shall try to be brave – if she is that foolish,” he replied. We laughed again and went on to the next room. The door was tied with a cord of hard vines which we cut with our knives.

Within was a spacious well-lighted chamber. On a crude table before which a rock was set for a chair, there was a pile of diamonds. From this Zorimi had evidently been sorting out the different sized stones which were neatly arranged in four smaller heaps. On the floor I saw small bags in which they could be carried.

Morgo exclaimed in surprise. “There they are.”

Following the direction of his finger, I peered into a dim corner and saw a stack of black books. Quickly I drew them to the light of the window, a poor light at that, for the source seemed to be dying slowly, and I rummaged through them.

There were tomes on anthropology, the history of gems, studies of cave life in other parts of the world, textbooks on botany and zoology, and an account book from which the pages had been torn. There were no names of a possible owner on the fly leaves. And there were two small pocket Bibles, grimy, pages yellowed with age and wear.

I studied the larger Bible and found on the front and back covers the genealogy of the Graham family. It dated from 1832 and on the back cover was the entry of the wedding of Martin Graham, of New York City, to Helen Ferguson on May 10, 1902. It designated Martin Graham as a scientist and his bride as the daughter of the Fergusons of Chicago. Added to this entry was another: "Born to us on July 4, 1904, a son, who we named George, New York City."

I read on: "Helen died of pneumonia in the Door of Surrilana on August 9, 1914, where my ill-fated expedition seems doomed to failure. I buried her beneath a pile of stones and read the burial service. I pray that I can take George back to Darjeeling."

1914! That was sixteen years ago when Morgo said he came to the caves after knowing the outer world.

The last entry was blurred. "George and Nesta were hurt in the landslide. I pray that both live. Blake is strong enough to try with me to get down to the warmer climate."

That was the secret of Morgo's identity. He was George Graham, the son of an American scientist and explorer. The landslide explained the loss of his memory in his childhood. He had to told me of being struck on the head with a stone, and I had attributed his amnesia to that.

Nesta must be Nurri Kala!

I opened the other Bible. There were family tree entries in it beginning in 1866. Mention was made of an ancestor who was a major in the Civil War and of another who was a historian. The last read: "Jeremiah Blake, of New Orleans, married Lois Montgomery, of Atlanta, on October 22, 1905. A daughter, Nesta, blessed their union on November 6, 1906.

Beneath this was scrawled in a shaky hand: "May God preserve my daughter Nesta and little George Graham. Connors will try to take them down to the warmer air. They have been terribly shocked by the landslide and their injuries and seem to be dazed. Graham is dead."

What fate befell Connors, or who he was, I cannot guess. But it was certain that Zorimi found the children or at least the girl. Morgo – George Graham – somehow managed to enter the caves and establish a life of his own. The girl was brought up by Zorimi.

I explained all this to Morgo, but it revived no recollections in his veiled brain. That he was an American meant nothing to him. He remembered nothing of his father's expedition to the heights of Kanchenjunga, of the landslide, of how he came to live in Kahli.

Taking the Bibles with us, we returned to the chamber of the skulls, where Baku and another bat man were awaiting us. It had grown quite dark. I feared that light was forever lost to the cave world. The waters would blot out everything.

The other Bakketes presently winged their way in through the opening and informed Morgo that Shamman and Silurians and animals, including armies of Husshas and Rortas, were streaming into the far end of Shamman. They believed that the waters were welling up fast, covering most of Kahli, judging from the panic they witnessed among the refugees.

"Soon they will be here," Morgo said. "I know that Zorimi is not dead. I am fated to punish him."

He sat on the ledge and watched the air over Shamman – the gray gloom that was melting into early night. The Bakketes grew uneasy both at this diminution of their day and seeming to sense presences that we could not see with human eyes.

Morgo sprang to his feet and drew back from the ledge into the protecting shadows of the eerie chamber. I saw what prompted this move. Shamman bats, but shadows in the twilight, were gathering over the mound. And the air was filled with smaller birds, darting hither and yon, strangers in an empty world whence the flood drove them.

Two bats swooped from the roof and approached the opening. Morgo commanded absolute silence and we pressed ourselves flat against the shadowy walls, man and Bakkete.

Zorimi and Nurri Kala were deposited on the ledge. The magician turned and addressed the hovering bats, revealing to them Her of the Three Heads – that ugly symbol of his power, concentrated in a bloodstained slab of carved diamond. The three awful heads seemed alive – the lizard's, the woman's and the bat's.

The bats murmured contentedly and flew up to their haunts in the stalactites. They paid no attention to the panicky birds whose numbers grew steadily, pouring the darkness a dirge of terror.

Zorimi vanished into the darkness of the cavern and lighted a flambeau. We saw him pear into the yawning maw wherein The Flame once burned.

“Be patient, my children,” he crooned down into the pit. “You will never die. And I shall feed you soon. Be patient.”

“What do you talk to?” Nurri Kala asked listlessly, moving close to him. “There is no one here – nothing that lives.”

“In the pit! In the pit!” Zorimi laughed. “There are living things in the pit – creatures that live on water and fire. My Silurians are far away but I have my other army – in case an enemy shows a head.”

“You still fear Morgo and Derro?” the girl asked. “You could make peace with them.”

“Never! They would not have it – nor would I. There can be but one lord of Shamman and all the caverns – and his name must be Zorimi.”

I knew now that the man was mad. His voice was shrill and high-pitched. “But we go away – tonight, Nurri Kala. There is no time to be lost. This cave will fill with all living life from the other caverns. They will destroy each other in quest for food. The strong will devour the weak. And man must perish – for he is weak.”

“And what of you, Zorimi?” the girl asked. “You are a man, too.”

“I am not of this world, Nurri Kala. Zorimi is immortal. He commands all creatures, human or bestial. We are leaving the caves, my child. I will show you strange great cities and take you across vast seas. The world will adore you – as my wife!”

In his madness, Zorimi sounded like the villain in a badly made talking picture. He was exceedingly melodramatic and he meant to impress the girl, who no longer feared him. He seemed to sense her defiance of his powers.

“I am not going with you, Zorimi,” the girl said decisively. “I will stay here and seek my friends, Morgo and Derro.”

“They are dead, my child. They perished when the walls of the Cicernas country caved in. Now do not resist me, Nurri Kala – or I shall have to put you to sleep.”

“You mean – you mean make me look into your eyes again?” Her tone was one of revulsion.

“Ah, you have not forgotten. You saw these eyes once. And you did forget to obey me. You slept for many days.”

I wanted to spring at the man. It was obvious what he meant. He had the power of hypnosis, and it was with that he threatened the girl, hoping to bend her to his will.

“I will never look into your eyes again, Zorimi. And I am not going away with you.”

Zorimi caught her wrists and drew her face close to his. With a jerk of his head, he threw back the cowl that masked his face, but I could not identify him because his back was to me. Then the girl's face was contorted with horror and she closed her eyes.

"I see that I must make you sleep. I have no time for argument, my child." His voice then thundered: "Look into my eyes, Nurri Kala!"

Swiftly, silently, Morgo ran across the floor. He was within reach of the magician when his pattering footsteps reached the man's sensitive ears. Zorimi shrouded his face and leaped from Morgo's path to the edge of the pit where he uttered a loud wailing call.

Morgo took the girl in his arms and advanced toward Zorimi. I joined them with the intention of ripping off the magician's cowl.

A slithering, scratching noise echoed in the pit. Morgo instinctively hesitated, aware of danger. Zorimi laughed and drew the magic stone from his pelts, holding it high over his head.

A moment later, the rim of the pit was lined with faces, long lizard faces, in which luminous green eyes bulged and stared at us. These creatures leaped over the edge and flattened themselves to the stone floor, crawling slowly, with horrible motions, toward us. Zorimi spoke to them in a wailing voice, and they ran thick red tongues over their bluish lips.

They were salamanders – blue-skinned and huge, with spotted backs of the venomous breed. Their bodies were alive with a bluish light that phosphorescent as they entered the shadows into which we backed warily. These relations of the lizard, amphibians, thrived on the heat of high fires. They were denizens of the pit of The Flame. And they heeded Zorimi's commands.

"Give up the girl!" Zorimi called to us, at the same time speaking to the salamanders, "and I will call off my creatures!"

The slithering bodies halted and the bulging green eyes were so many points of hypnotizing fire in the gloom.

"Not to you, Zorimi!" Morgo cried. "If we die – we all die together."

"But I want the girl!" Zorimi insisted. He urged the bluish salamanders closer to us, still holding them in check with his orders.

We were beside the stairs. Morgo pushed the girl onto them and shouted to her to run. Zorimi unleashed his uncouth creatures and a score of phosphorescent slugs of blue light were launched at us. The Bakketes screeched and flew out the opening.

Morgo sidestepped the first creature to rush him, and it could not turn quick enough to set its jagged teeth in his flesh. He plunged his knife into its back above the heart and a fountain of luminous blood shot into the air. A weird cry came from the lips of the other salamanders. While several of them fell upon the dead, tearing the phosphorescent skin apart to reach the meat, the others continued to come at us.

We reached the stairs and started up after Nurri Kala. Morgo was behind me and cried out as I slipped, lost my balance and dropped feet foremost into the chamber again. A salamander marked me and slither across the floor in my direction.

Morgo turned to the creature trying to climb the stair under Zorimi's exhortations. He waited until the salamander was close enough, and then, leaning far over the inclined body, he fell upon it, burying his knife in its entrails. It writhed and nearly threw him into the jaws of the others below before his blade could find the heart.

I imitated Morgo in side stepping the lizard that rushed me but my knife missed its goal. It cut through a shoulder, and the tail of the creature lashed itself around my legs while it doubled to reach me with its fangs.

Morgo knelt on the steps and shouted for me to give him my hands. Unconsciously, so great was my terror, I reached upward and felt the grasp of his powerful hands over my wrists. I was jerked clear of the floor and then Morgo's mighty thews slowly lifted me and the salamander to the edge of the steps where I sat. Morgo then dropped on his stomach and, leaning over the edge, hacked the salamander's tail from my body.

We took to our heels, shooting up the steps, just as another speckled lizard, glowing like a pagan dragon, set its jaws for us. Nurri Kala was on the plateau with the Bakketes. They took us aloft and off to the fire we had prepared in the higher, colder cave.

Chapter 25: Survival of the Fittest

That night seemed eternal. It was arctic long, and blacker than the sins of man. We huddled close to the fire while the tireless Bakketes mounted guard in wide circles over our head. Hours went by and there was no sign of the return of light.

I knew that The Shaft had failed. It was in the grip of the flood. Beneath the waters of the river that spread until it was a lake and vast inner seas, there was a world of diamonds. I knew that I would never see it again – nor possess the wealth I dreamed of.

“You heard what Zorimi said,” Morgo ventured. “He was right. The caves will fill with men and beasts fighting for their lives. Man will go down. They will flee up here – and we will be driven through the Door of Surrilana into the freezing outer world that is encased in ice. I have been told about it.”

“But beyond the ice, Morgo,” I said, “there are warm jungles – and civilization. You are an American and so is Nurri Kala. You can return to your own land – to friends and relatives.”

“We are savages, Derro,” he laughed. “Who would ever believe I am the person you say?” I showed him the Bibles. “They are nothing. I cannot even remember my life before the caves. It is here that I belong – it is here that I must fight – or die!”

I looked across the flames at Nurri Kala. “It is time for you to decide. I am ready to try to escape with the Bakketes – to fly into the outer world.”

“No, Derro. Give me a little more time. I am very frightened.” She was suppliant, and neither Morgo nor I would insist on an answer to the question of our fate.

My thoughts were presently directed toward the imminence of a battle in the caves. Man would fight man. Animal would destroy animal. And then man and animal would seek supremacy for the little food these barren wastes in the high cold caves provided. I was determined not to leave before Nurri Kala's decision, for she might elect to go with me, and I did not want to go without her.

Weapons for the defense of our lives were essential. I asked Morgo about arming the Bakketes, who had arms and hands, but he said they had never profited by his lessons in the past with slingshot or knife. Their intelligence was limited. And I had only the rifle and ammunition that would be nothing in the face of a mass attack.

The machine gun in the plane! It flashed across my mind. That was just the thing to hold an army at bay! It was well oiled, and might have withstood the mild weather in Shamman, where it fell with the Junkers.

I told this to Morgo and he was skeptical of its value. But Nurri Kala respected the use of my weapons and insisted that we try to find it. Baku was summoned and he seemed to remember the location of the crashed plane.

I showed Nurri Kala how to use the rifle and when she demonstrated the ability to handle its simple mechanism, I took off with Baku, Morgo and a large number of Bakketes. The girl was left by the hidden fire, heavily guarded by bat men who were instructed to hide her in the stalactites above, at the slightest sign of trouble.

We entered Shamman, where there was no gray light of day. In seeking the location of the Junkers, we course far over the land dotted with the many fires of the primitive men who stayed close to them, wondering what blight had come upon them. I heard the snarls of foraging animals, attacking each other in the darkness, the cries of men and women caught unawares by the sudden appearance of a herd of squealing Mannizans, the peculiar cries of the Hoatzins in search of prey, and the fearful cacklings of the bewildered and vicious Cicernas. All, with their backs to the proverbial wall, were now more dangerous than in less troublous times.

My heart fell when we flew low, trying to find the monolith that marked the resting place of the plane. I had heard the hush-hush of the black ants – those carnivorous Husshas who now needs must feed on human flesh, for the vegetation was eaten away from Shamman. Below was a floor of horrible death – a floor the most primitive of men never had to tread in fighting for existence.

Morgo called to me. He should that something was happening in the end of Shamman near Kahli's tunnel. I looked toward the groups of fires there and saw them extinguished, one by one, as though some unseen hand was drawing a cover over the ground.

Curious, we flew toward that end to ascertain the trouble. Shrieks and cries of fear and pain rent the darkness. Shamman bats crossed our path and paid no attention to us.

Then I heard the gurgling sound of flowing water. The flood had reached Shamman. The nearer we flew toward it, the louder it became until it was the song of a tyrannical, hungry torrent gushing up from Kahli through the tunnel.

Shamman was doomed.

The flood was claiming its territory.

The exodus into the cave where Nurri Kala stayed was under way. We could hear the tramp of feet moving in its direction, the calls and screams of animals clashing with the men invisible to us. The air was again a flutter of birds' wings.

We despaired of finding the machine gun, and returned to the defense of the girl. I suddenly realized that it had been sheer folly to leave her while we went on this wild goose chase.

A flock of Hoatzins struck at us in the dark. They were flying blindly. Ravenously they fastened themselves upon our flesh to satisfy their hunger. I felt the bite of a hundred wing claws about my face and head and the Bakketes screeched while Morgo bellowed with the horrible little pains. Our knives were impotent against the hundreds of frightened flesh eaters, and only the wit of the Bakketes saved us from being pecked to death in the air.

They dropped to the ground and there beat off the Hoatzins with their wings while Morgo and I used our hands, wringing feathered necks and tearing claws from our shins. No sooner had the claw-winged creatures fled than we found ourselves hemmed in by Cicernas. The startled Bakketes rose without us.

I cursed the fate that sent me to die so far from Nurri Kala. God knows what would happen to her now! Morgo met the rush of the first chicken, catching it about the neck with his arm. This once he did not use his knife. Instead his hands twisted the long neck til it broke. He signaled loudly for Baku and, when I felt something touch my shoulders, I wheeled about with my knife and plunged it blindly into the breast of a Bakkete, thinking it a Cicerna.

Baku caught me and whirled me away from the reach of the beaks with Morgo. The chickens, cheated of human flesh, quickly turned to their own plentiful dead for a meal.

The pandemonium on the floor of Shaman increased as the word spread that the flood had reached that high level. We could hardly hear ourselves think in the uproar of voices, human and animal.

Baku, by some uncanny instinct, finally found the plane. It had been overrun and devoured by the ants, but the machine gun, a Vickers, was gone. And so were the cartridge cases and boxes that held the Very lights. Who had beaten us to the gun? There were fresh footprints in the chalky ground. Silurians! And undoubtedly under Zorimi's orders.

"Zorimi has the gun!" I cried to Morgo. "That means annihilation for all who oppose him now. He knows how to use it."

"So be it," he said philosophically. "Let us hurry back to Nurri Kala."

We had hardly gotten into the air when a burst of yellow light shattered the darkness. It hung in midair and then gently floated earthward, lighting the floor below. Someone had set off a Very light – one from the Junkers!

The shambles portrayed in the rays of the yellow light was awful. Men were at death's grip with men. The old fight for the right of way between the lofty stalagmites set up a new problem here in Shamman. And Mannizans and Husshas struggled with one another to satisfy hunger.

A python lashed itself about a Cicerna and was preparing to eat while the chicken pecked its coils to pieces.

The salamanders ran riot, their bodies moving through the shadows like slow tracer bullets from a Spandau. Silurians and Shamman and the blond men from Zaan looked up at the Very light in holy awe and then fell upon each other again, some fighting for a knife, a cut of meat, a bundle of herbs carried from the greener caves.

But was interested me most was a party of Shamman carrying the machine gun and its cartridge cases on their shoulders. Zorimi was with them and it was he who had set off the Very light to impress the primitive peoples of his power to bring light out of darkness. His guttural harange came up to us as the light struck the ground and sputtered out, leaving a heavier darkness behind.

I ordered Baku to drop upon the machine gun carriers. Morgo heard me and pleaded with me to stay with him but when he saw our headlong flight, he joined it.

We landed beside the man who had the gun on his shoulder. Our appearance out of the air, like evil spirits suddenly materialized, startled him. I caught the gun as it slid from his back and passed it to a Bakkete. I seized the cartridge cases and Morgo, understanding, told the other bat men to pick them up. Then I dashed in Zorimi's direction. I wanted very badly those Very lights.

I did not find the magician – but the box of lights were on the ground. These were consigned to another carrier. The Shamman, weary and hungry, put up no fight, but accepted our materialization with resignation. They stood dumbly aside while we robbed them of the most valuable weapon of the hour, a machine that could fire a hundred pieces of hot lead a minute – that could wipe out an army when one man pressed the trigger.

Zorimi, far off in the darkness, was calling for his bats and salamanders. Again we had outwitted him. But it for the last time.

With our loot in safe hands we returned to the fire where we found Nurri Kala waiting for us. She had killed a small Mannizan with the rifle, had skinned it and was roasting some meat over the blaze.

What I deemed was the day wore on. All was night for us. Bakketes reported the arrival of people in the far end of the cave, and we put out our fire. I busied myself with the machine gun, fitting the cartridge belts into place. The gun was thick with oil, and I cleaned it as best I knew how.

Morgo watched me use it on the shadowy spire of a monolith a hundred yards away. I pressed the trigger, the belt raced through the chamber and the mouth of the gun was a spitting torch of orange light. The spire crumbled and vanished. Morgo was astonished. I was happy, for the gun was still working.

Baku reported a miniature plateau, the top of a broken-off stalagmite. It could hold fifty men, he said, and Morgo decided that we would be safer up there than down on the floor. We repaired to the crag with our arsenal, the Very lights, meat and wood for a long fire. The Bakketes were kept hard at it replenishing the supply for the fire that meant warmth for us all.

The crag commanded on all sides of the cave and we had only Shamman bats to fear. The fire was built in a hollow where we could huddle when night came, and the Vickers gun was mounted on a natural rampart from which it could sweep and spray the three possible approaches from the mound.

Hours went by and we heard nothing. Bakketes reported that large numbers of men and beasts were in the cave but they were strangely silent. Shamman bats soared over us, betraying themselves by their wing beats, but nothing happened. The silence surprised me. Was this more of Zorimi's magic? I suspected as much.

Once in the flying forces, I had been sent up to the front line trenches for observation purposes. The stillness then was much like it was in this black hole in Kanchenjunga's bowels. The Germans were getting ready for a barrage. We had not been told, but the very idea of a mass attack was in the air then, as it was now.

Zorimi had lost his diamond treasure. His domain was underwater. The two white men he hated most were at large – and a menace to the secrets he labored to hold – the secret of the mountain and its wealth. Time and again they had tricked him, defied his magic. And now they held the girl he wanted, the girl whom he had called his slave.

I told Morgo that Zorimi was responsible for the peculiar quiet and he would not believe me. He had no explanation to offer, and he was worried, though unafraid. He eyed my machine gun hopefully while I showed the girl how it operated. He refused to take a quick lesson.

Nurri Kala agreed with me that Zorimi was concentrating his efforts on us. By the power of Her of the Three Heads, he had in some way organized the fugitives from the flood. In one last assault, they would try to accomplish his ends so that he might enjoy his triumph of evil and take the girl into my world under the wings of the Shamman bats.

“There is still time to escape through Surrilana,” I said to Morgo, hoping to convince him that his days in the caves were numbered. “It is futile to entrench ourselves here and attempt to fight.”

“Go – if you want to, Derro. No one will stop you. But here I must stay. I shall not run away from Zorimi. With his death, I am sure peace can be restored among the peoples and beasts of this world.

Chapter 26: Nurri Kala Decides

“All right, I’ll stay, Morgo, to try to save your proud hide.”

He laughed, and we moved toward the fire, when a cold wind blustered through the cave. A Bakkete came down to us to report that he had been in Shamman and that it was practically empty of life. The floor was rippling with the waters of the dammed river. Other scouts informed Morgo that the mound on which we were hiding was well surrounded.

His words were unnecessary.

A guttural order rang out to our right. It was taken up on the left. In a moment we were in a ring of signal calls. Zorimi’s forces had us hemmed in – in a death trap of our own making. Morgo’s pride and refusal to flee from the man he said he was fated to kill had placed the lives of the three white people in the cave in jeopardy.

The tramp of advancing feet sounded on every side. I could make out men and animals, but I could see nothing. A Very light was made read and I set it off. The rocket soared up to the vault of stalactites and burst, dousing the immediate vicinity with a pale yellow glare.

The Shammans, the Silurians, the Zaans, even our friends of Kahli – primitive beast men all – were moving toward the mound between flanks of massed Cicernas, Mannizans of the rat and mouse breeds, salamanders and the black and red ants. Zorimi’s peculiar magic had effected this seemingly impossible organization. In some way he had convinced them that our deaths might propitiate the gods that released the river upon their lands. With us out of the way, the river would recede. Morgo heard that from the lips of men who began to chant.

The incantations of the primitive men resounded in the cave, wave upon wave of chanting voices. It was weird, ungodly, pagan. The effect upon us was tremendous. We stared at each other and there was horror in our eyes.

Zorimi was hurling an army upon us in a holy war. He had in some manner convinced the peoples and animals of the caves that with our destruction, their world would be freed of the waters of the flood. Our death meant food and life for all of them. That was the substance of their incessant chant – paean of hate that was hurled at us from the darkness.

The Very light fell to the ground and died.

I waited until the advancing columns seemed nearer. Morgo then urged me to send up another light. We had but five left out of the seven originally in the box.

Another Very light was sent up and it shed its rays upon hordes wending their way through avenues of chalky monoliths, coming at us like the rising tide of the ocean. The volume of the chant was deafening, nerve-wracking. Behind it was the psychology of the Indian war whoop, the battle screams of the Chinese – to instill fear in the hearts of the enemy – to beg the gods for victory.

I could hold my fire no longer. The primitive men and cave creatures were well within range and ready to surge over the mound. They were thickly massed and desperate, and their bloodshot eyes gleamed up at us.

Rat-tat-tat-brrr-rup!

The machine gun sang its first song. The staccato of biting tongues of steel jackets was answered by the screams of the dying and a louder chanting.

“When the white man dies, the river goes to rest! When the white man is gone, the river will sleep! Death for the white man – for we must live! Death for the white man – for we must live!”

That was the marching song of the cave creatures. Morgo whispered it to me. I sent another burst into the hordes of bloodthirsty singers and sprayed the full sweep of the gun.

We sent up another Very light and I saw the havoc I’d done. The approaches to the mound were heaped with the dead – men, rodent, fowl and lizards. Bodies writhed in their last agonies.

But as the Germans climbed over their own dead and pushed through the cut wires into Frances, a gray molten stream of mechanical men eating machine gun lead, the armies of Zorimi, in one last desperate organization, pressed toward us.

Before the light died, I dragged the gun to the other side of the mound and fed the enemy burst after burst of hot lead. They were close to the plateau’s base there and the lead washed them away in piles. I could locate the Silurians by the faint glow of their phosphorescent scales. The butchery to which Zorimi subjected his defenseless unarmed men was brutal. Yet there was but one way to take us and that was with their hands and teeth and beaks – and by drowning us under their milling feet.

Zorimi’s strategy was simple. We were to be inundated with living creatures whipped up to the point of desiring our deaths despite their own. He would defeat us with solid numbers, not weapons. And he knew that our lead could not last forever – while his men and beasts cost him nothing.

Rat-tat-tat-brrr-rup!

Screams! Death cries! Trampling, advancing feet!

And the chanting! The incessant chanting!

“When the white man is gone, the river will sleep! Death for the white man – for we must live!”

Rat-tat-tat-brrr-rup!

The machine gun replied in all directions! The toll of the shambles mounted. Zorimi had unleashed two brands of death!

We conserved the lights. I fired my bursts into the darkness, having a pretty good idea of the range. Little lead was wasted.

Nurri Kala screamed.

A python sidled over the edge of the mound. In the black we had not seen or heard its approach.

Morgo was caught in its coils. Its red and white scales threw off a dull glint in the light of our dying fire embers. Three times it lashed itself around my friend. I saw its muscles constrict as it exerted its lethal pressure to crush Morgo.

“Look to your gun, Derro!” he cried to me. “I can take care of this!”

Nurri Kala beat upon the sides of the reptile whose shining eyes were fixed on Morgo’s. The white man’s face was tense with pain until his knife slashed at the coils that bound his legs and waist. Snake and man toppled over. The python lashed Morgo against the stones to crush him better – for the python does not devour until the prey is dead.

Morgo grew still and I called to Nurri Kala to take the gun. She sent a burst into the darkness and I heard the gun jam. Morgo was deathly still in the reptile's embrace. The creature, though badly hacked, still lived and breathed with convulsive effort. I sank my knife into its thick skin and it remained wedged there as I was flipped off my feet by the lashing of the long tail.

As I lay to one side, stunned, with Nurri Kala's strange diamond flower tumbled from my blouse at my feet, I saw Morgo with one mighty effort rip off the monster's head. The python's muscles in reaction of death, continued to contract in their steely grasp. Another slash and Morgo cut through one coil and he breathed more easily.

He was safe and I ran back to the gun. The jam was caused by a defect in the cartridge belt which I quickly adjusted. I was about to pump away again when I noticed that the advance had ceased as suddenly as it had started.

We sent up a Very light and I saw that the enemy had taken to hiding behind the monoliths of chalk. Some salamanders and Mannizans and ants were feeding among the dead. And as the light descended in a graceful arc over the ring of slaughter, my eyes caught sight of bat wings in the air. They did not belong to the Bakketes hidden higher in the stalactites.

"Shamman bats!" Baku cried. "Now they come!"

The Very light went out and it was followed by a hailstorm – a hailstorm of stones as big as a Shamman bat could carry between its feet. Zorimi was cunning! But the bats missed their range and the stones fell upon the hordes beyond the mound. Again there was a woeful cry and the sound of retreating creatures.

I pleaded with Morgo for the last time. "They'll come at us again. Don't be foolish. Let's get out while there's a living chance!"

Morgo shook his head and leaned against the parapet. He was exhausted from his fight with the python.

"But you can't ask Nurri Kala to do that too!" I blazed hotly. "You can't – if you love her!"

She had picked up the diamond flower I dropped and was holding it in her hand. Morgo, his eyes blood red, looked at her, pleading mutely. I stood as though ready for a blow.

"I love you both," she whispered. Her eyes were filled with tears. "And I must choose one of you – life or death!"

She kissed the little flower that I had first seen in her golden hair that night of the human sacrifices and handed it to me. Morgo gasped and a sob broke from his lips. I took Nurri Kala's hand. She had decided.

"I love you, Derro," she said, "but Morgo is right. I belong to the caves – not to your world. I should be strange to it and its ways. And I love Morgo, too. I will stay with him!"

From the depths of despair, Morgo was raised to the heights of ecstasy by a single word. "Him!" How he must have loved her! He knelt before her and she rumbled his tangled hair like a playful child.

"You have my flower, Derro," she smiled sadly. "Remember me by it – and kindly."

The tide of battle surged back upon us. Morgo shouted orders to Baku and setting off a Very light, I sprang to the gun. The ants alone were being unleashed upon us.

Blacks and reds – Husshas and Rortas – they ambled toward the mound. Zorimi was hurling his invincible shock troops upon us.

A gleam of pure white light shot from the top of a distant crag. Zorimi stood upon it displaying the Shining Stone – She of the Three Heads – to his army. It was a gesture of ultimate victory and one of benediction for the ants. They seemed to understand and those who had paused at the dead to dig their mandibles into the warm flesh turned toward us once more.

I seized the rifle and as the Very light floated over Zorimi, I took aim. There was a bark and finger of flame.

The Shining Stone was shattered and the magician staggered backward.

A cry of surprise went up from the primitive men who had seen the destruction of the magic symbol. The ants hesitated in their march.

The light was full upon Zorimi who was trying to clamber down the protected side of the monolith. I fired again and then emptied the clip at him. The bark of the gun banged back from the echoing walls.

Zorimi tottered and fell upon his back.

Morgo seized me. “You must go, Derro. You must save yourself. Baku will take you away before it is too late.”

“The fight isn’t over,” the Irish in me laughed. “Not by a damn sight!”

“Please, Derro!” Nurri Kala begged.

“I’ve got to spray the ants!” I cried, and I turned the Vickers’ mouth into the nearest group of blacks and reds. The waving, snapping colors of the long mandibles swam before my eyes like a sea of pikes and pitchforks as my finger crooked tightly on the trigger.

Rat-tat-tat-brrr-rup!

“Remember your promise!” Morgo shouted between bursts of fire. “Save yourself, Derro!”

I wasn’t interested in escape now. The ants fascinated me, challenged me to battling an entire army corps. My senses were reeling with strain and excitement. The leaden hail, spat from the gun, mowed the Husshas and the Rortas down.

Two arms were dexterously slipped under mine. I was shot from the mound into the upper darkness.

“Goodbye, Derro! Godspeed, my friend!” Morgo’s voice floated up to me. Nurri Kala was sobbing.

I cursed Baku and commanded him to return me to the mound. He resisted my kicks by catching my legs in his and I could not struggle. It was Morgo’s greatest gesture – the willingness to sacrifice himself and the woman he would call his mate in order that my desire to return to my own people would be realized. He could not bear to have me share the awful fate which awaited the defenders of the little plateau.

Shouting voices from the primitives! Beating bat wings overhead! *Rat-tat-tat-brrr-rup!* The leaden tongues spat upward.

The Shamman bats were trying to cut off Baku’s flight. Morgo was ripping them down in large numbers from the air.

A Very light – the last one – burst over me.

The cave was filled with bats and Hoatzins. Morgo was manning the machine gun, Nurri Kala the weapon. The children of the caves were using the weapons of civilization in their last stand.

The aerial enemy could not withstand the slaughter. Their attack was repelled and they fled. But the ants were thrusting their mandibles over the edge of the little fort.

Now Morgo was using his knife against black mandibles. The girl was swinging the rifle butt as a club.

The Bakketes rained from the stalactites where they were hidden.

The falling light was full upon Zorimi's body directly below me – the cowl thrown off the face.

The condor nose!

Zorimi was Kenvon – Edgar B. Kenvon who I piloted over Kanchenjunga's icy breasts – who forced me at the point of a gun to penetrate the Door of Surrilana. Beside his body was the shattered Shining Stone – the evil symbol, She of the Three Heads.

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How I reached Darjeeling I do not remember. They found me in the street in front of the Nepal Bar, a fever-wracked shell. When my mind cleared I told my story and pleaded for a party that would fly into Kanchenjunga to seek Morgo and Nurri Kala. The doctors spoke of the sun and how it had addled my brain. Not a soul believed a world I uttered. Nor was any stock placed on the Bibles I had in my pockets.

It was Baku who undoubtedly brought me as far as he could and dropped me in the jungle of the Sikkim. My feet did the rest. Whatever his fate was, I don't know – but I owe the remnants of my life to him.

Back in New York, I found Kenvon's deposit of ten thousand dollars to my credit in the bank I designated. I turned it over to charity. My hands are poor ones, but they'll not touch blood money.

Little was known of Kenvon, as I had suspected. He was regarded as a mysterious man of wealth who had frequently appeared in fashionable circles only to vanish again for months and years on end. I was told that he had died in an airplane accident in India.

His plot is obvious to me now. He organized the expedition that took us into Kanchenjunga to satisfy his vanity. He wanted men of science to see his world – to envy him – before he killed them – offering them up in sacrifice to the gods of his distorted mind. The crash spoiled his plans, for I had escaped him. So he killed Harker, put his flying togs on the body which I found, to deceive me should I chance upon it, and he took the geologist's head to grace his grim collection in the chamber of skulls.

Somehow, Jim Craig learned the secret of the sacred diamond talisman – and Kenvon's secret of the diamond caves. And he paid with his life for his knowledge – precipitating me into the great adventure of love and death.

As I sit here at my table concluding this take, I cannot believe that Morgo is dead. He was a mighty man and such men are immortal. He was too magnificent to die. But my heart is heavy and fearful.

Nurri Kala's little diamond flower lies before me. It has been the source of my inspiration. I want the world to know of her beauty and courage. And as I pen these last words, I am pressing those brilliant petals to my lips – petals that have tasted Nurri Kala's lips and their sweetness.

Nurri Kala, the Beautiful – Morgo, the Mighty – I pray that God is kind to you.

THE END