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The Sword of Lankor

Howard L. Cory

Heed this voice from Outer Space—or else!



First Book Publication

Citizens of Lankor, the voice of Wabbis Ka'arbu commands you. It is time to announce the coming of my Son, the Promised One whom my priests await, the Victorious One who will lead your soldiers in righteous battle to fulfill the Sacred Quest. But—he knows not that he is the Son of Wabbis Ka'arbu! He will prove his godhead tomorrow in the stadium by defeating forty-nine of the strongest men in all Lankor.

As his voice floated out over the fields of citizens below, Wabbis Ka'arbu turned to his companions. "Well, how did I sound?" he asked.

"Convincing enough to fool even your High Priest."

"Let us hope it only convinces our Son and spurs him into action."

The three divinities clutched their sides and laughed silently as the Golden Sphere passed over Lankor.



THE SWORD OF LANKOR

by

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PROLOGUE

THE GOLDEN SPHERE was twice the size of a man's head and floated without apparent support a few inches above the worn cobblestones in the open courtyard of the Temple of Wabbis Ka'arbu, the two-faced God of Battle worshipped throughout most of the planet Lankor. It had appeared about an hour earlier high above its present position and had drifted lazily down through the clouds which enveloped the planet.

The Sphere's arrival had occasioned mixed reactions, for Taveeshe was a practical city as well as a God-fearing community, a bustling seaport and the business hub of the western shore of the continent. News of the Sphere's descent spread quickly along the waterfront, in the merchants' quarter, through the royal palace, in the shops of the city's notorious bazaar and, of course, within the Temple itself.

All manner of people converged quickly upon the Temple courtyard. There was, for instance, the fat merchant Boorill,

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who had made a small fortune from the sale of religious items, and who saw the possibilities inherent in the Golden Sphere immediately. He dispatched a runner to fetch the chief of the goldsmith's guild. The sooner he got a cost estimate the sooner he could begin taking orders. There was no doubt, Boorill assured himself, that for a reasonable percentage the High Priest would grant the Seal of Ka'arbu as he had done on the jeweled daggers in the past, thereby making them a Boorill exclusive.

Another whose day was appreciably brightened by the Golden Sphere's arrival was a furry, rotund little man from far-off Kendsahr, Gaar by name, Oracle by profession. If his luck were with him he would be kept quite profitably occupied for the next few days interpreting, in guarded verse, the True Meaning of the Visitation. Mentally, he began auditioning an assortment of True Meanings while staring thoughtfully at the Golden Sphere.

Captain Doark Rudn'l of the Royal Taveeshian Guards looked upon the Golden Sphere as a very good omen indeed, arriving as it had upon his birthday. With a ceremonial flourish designed as much to please the young man's vanity and impress the crowd as it was to propitiate the Battle God, he drew his sword and attempted to lay the end of it against the Golden Sphere. It never made contact, but stopped a hand's breadth away. Doark Rudn'l's face became rigid and his muscles twitched convulsively—a moment later the handsome young captain fell over dead.

Drangu, a professional thief who had been covetously eyeing the Golden Sphere for several minutes and plotting how best to make off with it, decided at that instant to abandon the project.

Froi, a priest who served the Battle God, emerged from the Temple and strode thoughtfully up to the curious globe. Curtly, he ordered the body of the dead guardsman re-

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moved. Tall and solemn in his blood-red robes, he gazed at the orb for several minutes. Then he sighed deeply, turned and disappeared into the darkness of the Temple.

A sound ran through the crowd, echoing the priest's sigh. A half-grown child tugged at his mother's skirt. "Perhaps it is a sign from Wabbis Ka'arbu," he whispered. She slapped at his hand but the whisper was repeated by a voice nearby, and a moment later it was an expanding echo which rippled through the crowd and, in the space of two days, through the entire kingdom.

CHAPTER ONE: THURON OF ULMEKOOR

THURON OF ULMEKOOR hurled the first blue-skinned guardsman against the tavern wall and turned to pluck another from the one-sided battle. Laughter rumbled in his chest as he ploughed once more into the center of the fray. He had been too many days on the Taveeshian freighter with no excuse for action. Joyously, he picked up the second man, swung him through the air and slammed him hard against the stone floor.

The other blue-skins were beginning to notice him now. Their vicious reputation had kept the rest of the tavern's patrons at a distance, but to Thuron it was a challenge he could not resist.

It was not his fight, anyway, which made the contest doubly delightful. He had never met the rotund little man from the jungles of Kendsahr who was the focus of the attack, but the sight of eight burly guardsmen ganging up on the lone, unarmed victim was all the excuse he needed.

The Kend screamed in terror as one of the soldiers lunged

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at him with a gleaming dagger. Thuron reached out, grasped the attacker's wrist with steely fingers and spun the man headfirst into a sturdy post. The dagger clattered to the floor and the fat, furry little Kend lifted his robes and skipped out of range, his magnificently plumed tail floating behind him.

Thuron's taste for adventure was something which had been with him since earliest boyhood, when he had roamed the ice-caves of Ulmekoor to his father's proud delight and his mother's ill-concealed terror. His love of danger was fortunate, for he was not the sort of man whom others will easily allow the sedentary life. Broad of shoulder, mighty of sinew, a full head taller than most of his race, Thuron had learned as a youth that other men expected him to accept every challenge and to excel in the arts of battle. Adventure followed him about like a friendly puppy, a circumstance which he thoroughly enjoyed and without which, indeed, he would have wondered if his life was entirely worthwhile.

There was no need for the Ulmekoorian to wonder now, however, for the guardsmen's wrath was guaranteed to keep him pleasantly occupied for the next several minutes. Five blades glittered in the torchlight as the five remaining blue-skins turned their attention to this tawny stranger who had spoiled their sport.

The Ulmekoorian brought *No'ondo'or* singing out of its scabbard and braced himself to meet the charge. His eyes flashed, his lips curled back from his teeth and a snarl of defiance boiled deep in his throat. There was a deathly stillness as all eyes watched the stranger who dared defy the Taveeshian guards. Two of them sprang forward, slicing at him with their sharp, two-sided blades. He parried a thrust, ducked under the sword and neatly skewered the first of his opponents, then laid the other flat with a smashing sword-blow against the side of the man's head.

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Thuron brandished *No'ondo'or* above his head. "There's steel enough here for a dozen more of you motherless curs!" he cried.

The remaining three blue-skins darted in, swords glinting wickedly. Thuron edged warily away, the wolfish grin still on his face. From the sidelines, a heavy stool caught him on the shoulder, knocking him momentarily off balance.

One of the three soldiers took advantage of the distraction to leap forward and swing his blade in a murderous arc which drew a line of cold fire along the Ulmekoorian's right arm. Ignoring the pain, Thuron circled the man, luring him away from his comrades. The other patrons scattered in panic as the two swordsmen faced each other, their flashing blades ringing sparks as each parried the other's attack. The tawny giant grinned as he realized the nameless guardsman's skill almost matched his own, but he could not have lived so long had he failed to learn every trick of swordplay ever used on Lankor. Slowly, he forced his opponent back, then with a sudden twist of his wrist disarmed the man and followed through with a vicious thrust which ended the Taveeshian's career forever.

Thuron jerked his weapon free and turned to face his remaining attackers. Instead of the two he had expected, however, there was only one, who presented no problem for he lay crumpled on the floor. The furry Kend knelt beside him, a large metal wine jug in his hands. The little man was methodically beating the unconscious guardsman's head with the jug. "*P'ort-unashveer!*" he panted, his whiskers quivering with rage. "That takes you out of the fight, *sloord!*"

Noticing Thuron, he scrambled to his feet and bowed deeply. "Command me, sire. My life, my worldly goods, my wits are yours. Command me."

"Then run, brother," chuckled the Ulmekoorian, wiping

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his blade on the prostrate soldier. "And may the Gods keep you."

"Perhaps we had best both run," the Kend ventured. "One of the motherless *sloords* slipped out—to get reinforcements, no doubt."

Sheathing his sword, Thuron saluted the little man and sprinted out the side door of the waterfront tavern into the green-lit darkness of Lankorian night. He fled down the street with a long easy lope that covered distance without robbing him of breath. Rounding the first corner he stopped to peer back around the building. There was little chance that more soldiers could have arrived so quickly, but Thuron had learned that caution can lengthen a swordsman's life. As he paused, the fat little Kend, robes held knee-high, dashed around the corner and collided violently with the Ulmekoorian. Thuron grabbed the Kend by his furry scruff and lifted him until they were face to face.

"Look you, brother," he growled, shaking the Kend, "I took leave of you at the tavern. Go your own way."

"I may not, lord," the little man sputtered. "By the laws of Kendsahr, I am yours for a year and a day to do with as your will commands. You have saved my life. I may not leave your side."

The tawny giant swore and shook the Kend until his teeth rattled. "Is that your reason," he demanded, "for flinging the stool at my head?"

"Can I help it if my aim was bad?" squealed the little man. "Believe me, sire, it was a most grievous error. I meant it for the head of one of those *sloords*." He drooped abjectedly in Thuron's grasp.

The Ulmekoorian roared with laughter and dropped the furry one to the ground. "Whether you belong to me or not is a question we will settle later. Do you know this area?"

Smiling blandly, the Kend smoothed his whiskers. "Lord,"

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he said modestly, "I could make my way through it blindfolded. Whatever you desire, I will help you find."

"Then find a way out of here," Thuron replied.

"Follow me, lord." He scuttled off into the green shadows and Thuron strode easily in his wake.

Overhead, Lankor's largest moon illuminated a patch of the perpetual cloud cover with a dull green glow. Bushes and small trees assumed eerie shapes and buildings loomed sinisterly. If one were easily subject to hysteria and feelings of persecution, it required no effort at all to let the imagination fill the shadows with deadly, soft-padding *xat* and packs of stealthy, swift-moving *sloords*. Either species could attack with such ferocity that even a trained swordsman stood little chance of survival against them. Thuron kept his senses sharply alert for possible signs of danger, but the only sounds were the scurrying footfalls of his new companion.

For nearly a quarter of an hour they traveled between dark buildings and along shadow-infested alleys, sticking to the back streets to avoid the busier thoroughfares where they might encounter guardsmen who by now might well have been alerted. Thuron spent a brief moment doubting the Kend and mentally cursing himself and the impulse that had made him follow the rotund one. He had only the Kend's word that they were headed for safety. Still, he seemed to know the way and the Ulmekoorian was a total stranger to the city. Although the tawny giant's senses were alert to all possible dangers, there seemed to be no dangers at all. The streets were quiet, aside from the distant night-sounds found in any city.

Presently, the Kend darted through a gate into an enclosed courtyard and motioned Thuron to follow. He did so warily, one hand on the familiar haft of *No'ondo'or*. The blade hissed from its scabbard the instant Thuron saw the

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giant *ork* which stood in the center of the garden. "Look out!" he cried warningly.

"Do not be alarmed, sire," the Kend replied calmly. "It is only shrubbery, tortured into a likeness of the giant bird." He dusted off a chair with his robe and bowed to Thuron.

"Sit down and rest, sire. We will be safe here. The house belongs to a friend of mine who has been called away on a journey. We can spend the night here if you wish. . . ."

"I'll not spend the night in hiding," Thuron replied curtly, sheathing his sword. "That fits me not at all. Tell me, man from Kendsahr, have you a name?"

"It is Gaar, sire. Gaar of the proud family of . . ."

"Enough!" bellowed the giant. "All I asked was your name, not your history. I am Thuron of Ulmekoor. Why were those guards trying to kill you?"

Gaar's head drooped. "Alas, lord, it was all a misunderstanding. A trifle, really. I am an Oracle by trade but it has not been too lucrative an occupation of late. I've been forced by cruel economic circumstances to turn to conjuring in order to exist. I was—er—performing a few wonders for the guards when they accused me of thievery." Gaar paused and spread his hands in a gesture of bewilderment. "All I did was make some worthless trinkets disappear."

As Thuron watched, Gaar made a flourish with one hand and seemed to pluck a guardsman's ring from midair. "I was going to give it back," he added in an injured tone of voice.

Thuron roared with laughter and slapped the little man on the back. "What else did you make vanish, my honest purloiner?"

Gaar grinned sheepishly and reached inside his robe, producing a jeweled dagger, a bracelet of the Captain's rank and a leather purse that jingled encouragingly. "Souvenirs, sire," he said apologetically.

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Thuron hefted the purse thoughtfully. "Since they have no further use for it," he mused, "it will buy us a fine dinner."

He turned as if to go and Gaar became instantly alarmed. "They will be watching for us, Lord Thuron," he warned. "An alarm has most certainly gone out for us."

"Let them watch," Thuron replied, slapping *No'ondo'or*. "I shall be watching for them, too."

"It would be wiser," Gaar persisted, "to remain out of sight for a few days."

The tawny Ulmekoorian threw back his head and laughed. "If I quivered with fear every time I made an enemy I would spend my life in hiding!" he snorted. "Life is too short for that. Tell me of a fine tavern where one may fill one's belly with good food."

Gaar sighed patiently and pulled at his whiskers. Then he shrugged. "I know an excellent place in the bazaar, lord. The walls are covered with the finest cloths and on them are many weapons—swords, maces, shields and spears. Between them are mounted the heads of the long-toothed *ptahr*, the striped *urreep* and the treacherous *xat*. Also, there are festoons of . . ."

"Spare me the decorations!" Thuron bellowed impatiently. "How is the food?"

"Plentiful, Lord Thuron. I have dined there many times and can personally vouch for its quality. I am sure you will find it to your liking."

"We will waste no more time here, then. Take me to this place you speak of. But I warn you, Gaar, the food had better be the finest!"

Keeping to the shadows, they hurried towards the center of the city, towards the fabled Taveeshian bazaar where any man with a fat purse could buy whatever he desired, be it animal, vegetable, mineral—or human. In the bazaar, cutthroats, thieves and sailors mingled freely with the high

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born, and no questions were asked. Color and nationality were ignored in the bazaar. Mercenaries, noblemen, priests and prostitutes were on an equal footing until their money ran out. A high wall with many arches surrounded the area.

Thuron and Gaar approached one of these entrances with senses sharply tuned for danger. It was not uncommon, Gaar whispered, for murderers and assassins to lurk in the shadows of the arches, for the unspoken immunity of the bazaar itself did not extend beyond the wall. Only fools and fugitives, he pointed out, dared venture near the gates alone.

"We have the best of friends with us," Thuron chided, slapping the hilt of *No'ondo'or*.

"I trust your eyes are as sharp as your sword, sire," the other muttered darkly.

"My eyes and my appetite both. Where is this place you spoke of?"

"Just inside the wall, lord," Gaar assured him.

The street was quiet and the archway seemed deserted as they drew closer. On the other side of the wall a thousand torches pushed back the night, but the archway itself remained in sinister shadow.

A slight noise caused Thuron to reach for his blade, but before he could draw it both he and his small companion were shrouded in a large, weighted net which tangled around them, its impact knocking them off their feet. As they struggled to free themselves they were set upon by a dozen ruffians swinging heavy lengths of chain.

"Aieeee!" squealed the terrified Kend. "I warned you it was dangerous, sire!"

Thuron grabbed the net in both hands as close to the ground as he could reach and jerked upwards just as the first of the attackers came within chain-swinging range. Their feet flew out from under them as the Ulmekoorian's powerful muscles pulled against the heavy mesh. Raising his arms over-

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head, he put his full weight into throwing the slack he'd gained back in the same direction, so it fell over his enemies.

Gaar had immediately curled into a furry ball so as to present as small a target as possible for the murderous links—now he suddenly felt the edge of the net slide over him. Cautiously, he opened his eyes and saw that indeed he was free, although the mighty Thuron was still enmeshed.

Gaar stood up and was about to scurry for cover when he was seized by an inspiration. He blinked twice, examining the idea for flaws, then bellowed at the top of his squeaky voice:

"Fall back, you fools! Fall back or feel the wrath of Wabbis Ka'arbu!"

The acoustics of the stone archway lent startling authority to the little Kend's voice—the effect of it stopped the attackers in their tracks.

"Wabbis Ka'arbu!" several of them murmured in awe.

"Aye!" shouted Gaar. *"You have attacked the Son of the Battle God himself! Free him at once!"*

There were sounds of confusion as the mob untangled itself and Thuron from the net. Then a voice challenged, "What proof have we that this is truly the Son of Wabbis Ka'arbu?"

Thuron, freed at last, quietly unsheathed *No'ondo'or* and waited in the darkness to see where this amazing conversation would lead.

"Zorm, y'heard the golden ball yourself. He's strong enough, ain't he?"

"And brave enough," another said.

"Maybe we better not, Zorm."

"Bloody cowards!" spat Zorm.

Gaar scuttled through the inky darkness toward the faint glint of Thuron's blade. "Do not interrupt, lord," he whispered. "No one will attack the Son of Wabbis Ka'arbu."

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"C'mon out where we can look y'over, Holy One," Zorm taunted.

"Aye," the mob agreed, pressing forward.

Thuron grinned in amusement, too curious now to object. "Into the street it is!" he boomed, his huge voice reverberating in the archway.

The mob of blue-skins, with Thuron and Gaar in its center, moved out of the shadows and into the green glow of the street, the Ulmekoorian towering above his attackers. His face wore an angry scowl and his dark green eyes blazed defiantly.

The ruffians regarded him with mingled fear and skepticism. Quickly, before their leader could undermine the effect, Gaar continued:

"My Master will prove his godhood in the arena tomorrow."

"Then what's he doin' here at this time o' night?" challenged Zorm.

"We were on our way to register for the Battle Games, dolt!" Gaar bellowed.

Zorm bowed mockingly. "Don't let us stop you, Holy One."

"Beware of how you speak to him," Gaar squeaked indignantly. *"This is the Chosen One, the one of whom the Golden Sphere has predicted. Know ye that those who disbelieve will die dishonored by the Battle God."*

The Kend closed his eyes and began to sway, murmuring under his breath. The murmur grew into a soft chant which increased in volume as the Oracle's voice hit melodic bell tones.

"Oh, Mighty One," he sang, *"Oh God of the Two Faces, Mighty Wabbis Ka'arbu, know ye that your Chosen One is being maligned by unbelievers, by infidels. Send us an omen that these fatherless ones will know how noble, how truly Holy is Thy Son."*

Thuron's awe was just as great as that of the bandits as

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the chant rang out loudly, then ceased. The round little body stopped swaying—after a spasmodic jerk it became a rigid. Slowly, Gaar began to speak:

“Born on Lankor, battle bred,
His destiny, ’tis truly said,
Will be to wear the victor’s robe
As foretold by the golden globel

Brave men will fall by this man’s sword
To prove on Lankor he is Lord!
Forever men will sing his deeds—
This Son of mine, whom battle feeds!”

Thuron, although no judge of such things and admittedly prejudiced in the little man’s favor, had to admit the poets of his native Ulmekoor were more to his liking. But Thuron was less concerned with esthetics than with the gratifying effect Gaar’s startling performance was having upon the blue-skins. They fell back in awe, shuffling their feet nervously and glancing at each other.

Thuron felt a shiver run up his spine. What manner of man had he rescued, who now rescued him with so fantastic an action as this? True, Gaar had introduced himself as an Oracle, but Thuron had refused until now to take him seriously. Was it a conjuror’s deception to distract the attention of his audience, or was the Kend really what he claimed to be? The thundering voice which emanated from the little man was unnerving in the extreme.

Gaar’s chant ended and he threw his arms up, swayed and collapsed in a small heap on the cobblestones. Thuron sprang forward. Recoiling from the sudden move, Zorm and his gang took to their heels. As if by magic, the night swallowed them up.

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Thuron took no notice. He cradled Gaar gently in his arms and strode purposefully towards the black archway. Inside the bazaar there would be someone to help, perhaps an alchemist who could bring the furry man back to consciousness.

The huge Ulmekoorian had taken no more than three steps, however, when Gaar's eyes flickered and he drew a deep breath. "Put me down, sirel" he squeaked indignantly. "I'm no infant to be carried. Indeed, an Oracle gets used to these seizures. The collapse at the end is nought but a momentary discomfort."

Thuron set him on his feet and the little man combed his ears with his fur-covered hands, stroked his whiskers and arranged his robes. The Ulmekoorian watched the little dandy in amused exasperation, but hunger pangs quickly reminded him of their original purpose.

"Come, my dapper friend," the tawny giant rumbled. "The hour grows late. Zorm and his friends may recover from their fear and return."

The Kend ceased stroking his ears immediately. "We must make haste," he agreed, "before the inn closes." So saying, he scuttled off. Shaking with silent laughter, Thuron followed at an easy pace.

Gaar went straight to the tavern he had described earlier. The Ulmekoorian was duly impressed, for the decorations were exotic, the food excellent and the wines fit for Wabbis Ka'arbu himself. Thuron ate steadily until his hunger had abated, then washed the first two courses down with a goblet of wine as large as a man's fist, wiped his hands on the cloth provided and glowered at Gaar.

"Now, my friend, you may explain a few things to me. I admit that you saved us both from serious injury at the hands of those ruffians, but I still don't understand how

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you did it. What is this fantastic invention of yours that I am the Son of the Battle God?"

Gaar stared at him, his eyes narrowing. "Where have you been, lord, that you know not of the Golden Sphere?"

"Aboard a ship," Thuron replied. "Traveling from Rahrnhu at the—ah—request of the Rahrn guards." The Ulmekoorian smiled, remembering the events which had led to his hasty departure, and refilled his wineglass. "There was a small disagreement about the reward for my services. Fortunately, I had collected it in advance, for it paid for a most luxurious passage." Thuron chuckled, recalling the expression on the face of the Lord High Commissioner of Rahrnhu. "In fact, the guards even tried to give me an escort to the ship, but I was too fleet for them." He wiped his lips and his eyes twinkled. "I did wave farewell from the rail as we sailed off, though."

Years of practicing his profession had sharpened to a fine edge Gaar's ability to judge character, estimate the degree of a client's gullibility and probe for more meanings than any man would volunteer. Now he scrambled to his feet, assuming an expression of hurt dignity.

"Know you, my Lord Thuron," he said sternly, "Oracles have certain standards, certain ethics. We do not work in the company of thieves. Were it not for the fact that you saved my life . . ."

"No man calls me thief!" Thuron bellowed, grabbing the front of Gaar's robe and dragging him across the table. "Many things I am but I am no thief! The money I took in Rahrnhu was for services performed for their King. I seek adventure, aye, but I give my full measure of service."

Disgustedly, he flung the Kend from him. Gaar slid across the tabletop, slick with meat drippings and spilled wine, and dropped from sight on the other side. Instantly, the Oracle was on his feet again.

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"Forgive me, sire! Mercyl!" he pleaded. "I meant no harm, but did not express myself clearly. Never did I think you thief. Oh, my stupid tongue! All I wish, sire, is to serve a man as noble as you."

Thuron's forgiveness was as quick as his rage. He picked up the Kend's overturned wine goblet and refilled it, then handed it to the little man. A waiter arrived with a steaming platter of meat and set it between the two of them. Thuron speared a morsel and popped it into his mouth, grinning all the while at his furry friend.

"You started to explain this Golden Sphere," he said calmly.

Gaar picked bits of food off the front of his robe, smoothed his whiskers and sat down. "My pleasure, Lord Thuron. It is a Golden Sphere—so big—which descended from the heavens and floats at this moment in the courtyard of Wabbis Ka'arbu. Had you been in Taveeshe more than a few hours you certainly would have heard of its arrival, and how after eight days a thin metal tendril grew from it and reached toward the heavens. The city boils with speculation over the message which then came from this mysterious golden orb. Are you sure you have not heard any of this?"

"Would I ask if I had?" Thuron demanded irritably.

"No-o-o-o," Gaar allowed, thoughtfully. "At any rate, the next morning the silver tendril went up again. This time the Golden Sphere spoke. I will try to recall the exact words." Gaar leaned forward and lowered his voice. "'Citizens of Lankor,' it said. 'The voice of Wabbis Ka'arbu commands you. Gather around. It is time to announce the coming of my Son, the Promised One whom my priests await, the Holy One who will bring honor to Lankor, the Mighty One who will defeat all enemies, the Brave One who will triumph over every trial, the Victorious One who will lead the soldiers of Taveeshe in righteous battle to fulfill the Sacred Quest.

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But hear me well. He knows not that he is the Son of Wabbis Ka'arbu. As a child, courage was in his blood, power in his arms, adventure in his heart. Full grown, he is the mightiest of men. His sword knows no defeat, nor shall it in his lifetime. The Promised One now is ready to learn his true identity, to prove his Godhood, to assume the victor's robe and lead the true believers into battle for the glory of Wabbis Ka'arbu.' "

Thuron licked his lips and put down the remains of a dripping joint of meat, then cleaned his hands on the wiping cloth. "I see," he said slowly. "That is why you name me the Son of the Battle God. You think that I . . . ?"

Gaar shrugged his shoulders and twiddled his whiskers. "Perhaps, lord. You well may be. But I sought only to impress the ruffians. The King has guaranteed immunity to all who claim that honor."

"And what was that you said about the Battle Games?" Thuron asked warily.

"The King again. Oh, 'tis true some say the High Priest requested it, but it has been my observation that the two of them are too much at each other's throats, like two cubs in a *xat* litter, for the King to honor such a request. For this reason I suspect it is the King's doing alone. Either way, the Battle Games were declared to be the quickest way to find the Mighty One. They will take place tomorrow at the Royal Taveeshian Arena. The King has offered to put up all the contestants at the Royal Adamar."

The Ulmekoorian whistled softly. "I have heard that's the finest lodging place in the city."

"Aye," Gaar agreed. "Great honor, much power and considerable wealth will fall to him who wears the victor's robe tomorrow."

A thoughtful silence fell between the two friends. Thuron dipped a chunk of bread in the rich meat juices and carried

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it skillfully to his mouth. Gaar nibbled daintily on a sweet-meat.

"I came to Taveeshe," Thuron mused, gazing into his wine, "to seek a diverting and perhaps profitable adventure. Where does my luck lead? To a fight not of my own choosing to rescue an ill-favored Oracle from a fate he probably well deserved. I am set upon by cutthroats and, finally, I am proclaimed the Son of Wabbis Ka'arbul! All this within a few hours of my arrival in this city, and before I have even had a chance to fill my belly." The Ulmekoorian grinned and drained the cup. "It seems I need not seek my fortune, brother Gaar. My fortune has gone to much trouble in order to seek *me!*"

"What do you mean, Lord Thuron?"

"This, my friend. By this time tomorrow I shall either be slain—or the most honored mortal in the kingdom."

Gaar blinked his large golden eyes. "You mean to enter the Battle Games, sire?"

"Why not? Did you not predict it?"

"I meant only to impress the ruffians," Gaar stammered, pulling at the ears set high on his head. "Might not discretion be wiser, my lord?"

Thuron smiled recklessly. "You named me Son of the Battle God, brother. What need have I for discretion? Come, we waste time. Show me to the place where I can register for these games."

CHAPTER TWO: SONG OF THE BATTLE GOD

WEARILY, the two friends sank down upon the beds in their rooms at the Royal Adamar. Registering for the games had been a simple yet time-consuming operation. Thuron had been assigned the number fifty, had listed Gaar as his only attendant, and had been given the imperial marker which entitled him to a suite at the Adamar, along with instructions to report to the arena an hour after redup.

Gaar broke the friendly silence. "I thought you a merchant, sire, until I saw you handle your sword."

Thuron smiled and caressed the blade. "*No'ondo'or* has been my friend for many years."

"*No'ondo'or*," Gaar translated. " 'Blade of Truth.' You'll have no trouble in the arena. Now get some sleep."

Thuron lay back on the luxurious bed. "And you?"

"My day is not quite finished. Have you any money left, sire?"

"A little. Why?"

"Let me have it," the Kend urged. "I will make some wagers around the city."

"Wagers on what?"

"Why, on your vanquishing all opponents, of course. There is no risk in betting, Lord Thuron. If you lose," the Oracle said reasonably, "you won't need the money. But if you win we'll both profit by it."

"If? For an Oracle, you don't sound very enthusiastic, brother."

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"No, no, you'll win. Have I not predicted it? Always trust an Oracle in matters of this sort, sire. I am so certain you'll win that I am willing to stake your entire fortune on it." The Kend grinned impishly.

Thuron laughed. Then he drew the leather purse from his belt and tossed it to the fat one. "Consider one part in ten your own. To be cautious, you might even use it to bet against me."

"Never, sire! How can you think me so unfaithful, so disloyal, so . . ."

"Enough, little one!" The tawny giant grinned. "You have named me the Son of Ka'arbu. If the Battle Games reveal me to be so, we will divide my winnings evenly."

"You are more than just, lord. However, to protect our investment, I must urge you to spend this night in sleep. Red-sun comes too early as it is."

Thuron shut his eyes, breathed deeply once, and was instantly so deeply asleep that he did not stir as Gaar gently eased his boots off.

Several hours later, his wagering accomplished, Gaar padded softly into the room, looked at the snoring giant and curled up on his own bed, tucking the tip of his magnificent tail carefully under his chin after the manner of his race. Soon he, too, was asleep.

When he awoke, it was to find Thuron already up. The mighty Ulmekoorian was seated at a table which fairly groaned under the weight of breakfast. Gaar's eyes blinked wide open and his tail began to quiver. "Sire!" he exclaimed. "Truly, do you think it—er—wise to break your fast quite so—ahem—thoroughly?"

Thuron surveyed the huge breakfast and grinned. "'Tis but an ordinary meal, brother."

"But this is not an ordinary morning, Lord Thuron," the

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Kend sputtered. "The games will be fought shortly and a bloated belly will be no advantage, I assure you."

"To most," the giant agreed. "But not to Thuron of Ulme-koor. As I told you last night, friend, I fight my best on a full stomach. Now furl your handsome plume and tell me how went the wagering."

Gaar indulged in an elaborate stretch. "Magnificently!" he reported. "You are unknown, and an outlander besides. 'Tis thought that none but a Taveeshian can have the might, valor and cunning to be the True Son. Most of the betting favors the sword arm of one Riis Murlik, who has proved his prowess in battle so often he is becoming a legend in his own time. I found the odds truly favorable, sire. When you win the day, our money will be increased more than tenfold."

"It is good," Thuron agreed, and finished his breakfast.

With only moments left before the Battle Games would begin, the seats on the perimeter of the huge circular stadium were packed with spectators, all in a festive mood. Ranged tier upon tier, thousands of blue Taveeshian faces looked towards the battle area where fifty gladiators would shortly commit murder, mayhem and a number of other violent acts in order to prove one of their number the True Son of Wabis Ka'arbu. The multi-hued robes of the citizens transformed the bleak seats into a random patchwork of color through which moved the ale vendors and souvenir sellers.

In the pit area beneath the seats waited the Royal Handlers with their murderous *urreeps* securely locked in specially built cages which could be rolled directly into a double gate enclosure at the mouth of the pit. None of the beasts had been fed since the previous morning, to guarantee that they would be at their voracious best. The five *urreeps*, each more than twice as tall as a man, had been captured at the cost of many lives in the upland swamps. Their hides were tough

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and leathery, equally impervious to tooth, claw, spar and sword. The beasts' two snapping heads and crab-like pincers assured it of survival in the savage swamps.

In a similar pit on the opposite side of the arena were the contestants and their attendants, numbering close to two hundred people in all. Each entrant's number, whether he was Taveeshian, Ulmekoorian, Rahrnhu or Kend, had already been painted on his back, and each now wore the brief official loincloth of the professional gladiator in lieu of street garb. Now that they were all assembled it was obvious why Gaar had experienced little difficulty finding gamblers willing to bet that the unknown Thuron would never win the Battle Games. Not only was his skin golden instead of blue, which branded him unmistakably Ulmekoorian and therefore clearly inferior to the warriors who boasted noble azure hides, but he had only one attendant, a furred Kend at that. Riis Murlik, the favorite, whose many previous victories had earned him several royal banners and the sponsorship of the priestly class, had fourteen in his party. According to Murlik's supporters, the Games were merely a formality. In fact, it was rumored that the High Priest, Yang T'or, had already ordered Murlik's name graven on the Temple arches, so confident was he that the famed warrior would triumph today. Gaar reported all this as he expertly pummeled, pounded and massaged the Ulmekoorian who lay stretched face down on the rough training table assigned to them.

"A pity," Thuron mused. "I would there were time to meet this famous warrior, to shake his hand before he dies."

"Know you that Riis Murlik is evil," Gaar assured him. "Else why would the High Priest sponsor him? It is fitting, though, that the great Lord Thuron has such confidence in himself."

"Should I not be confident? The finest Oracle in the land named me the True Son."

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Gaar was about to answer when a horn sounded and a messenger stood framed in the pit entrance. "Contenders for the Sonship of Wabbis Ka'arbu will report as their numbers are called to the center of the arena, where the judges of King Xandnur shall assign them their positions. The contenders will leave their weapons with their attendants and enter the field unarmed. Number One!" he roared.

A muscular blue-skin, clad in the official loinsloth but wearing in addition the scarlet-plumed headgear of the Guards, shouldered his way to the exit.

"Number Two!"

The first twelve contestants were blue-skins, their numbers painted in crimson dye across their broad backs. Then came a group of four Kends, huge specimens of their race, their magnificent tails proudly erect, their whiskers bristling, their body fur calmly unruffled except for the crimson numbers on their shoulderblades. Another handful of blue-skins came next, followed by a dull gray Rahrnhu barbarian. The procession continued as each contender vanished through the pit entrance. Thuron, as the last to register, bore the Taveeshian numerals for "50" on his own back.

"Forty-eight!" sang the messenger. A pale barbarian with skin the color of smoke started for the entrance.

"Forty-nine!" The last of the blue-skins.

"Fifty!"

Thuron handed *No'ondo'or* to Gaar. "Guard it well, my friend." Clapping the Kend on the back, the Ulmekoorian turned on his heel and strode firmly into the arena.

The officials had arranged the contestants in a series of concentric circles so that, except for the ones on the outside edge, each man stood in the center of a ring of six others. Once Thuron had taken his place the pattern was complete and the Royal Crier, who obviously had been chosen for the strength of his lungs, bellowed the rules at the contestants

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and hushed crowd alike. The object of the first contest was to eliminate forty of the fifty entries by means of hand-to-hand combat with no other weapons than the warrior's bare hands. A horn would sound to signify the beginning of battle; at such time that the judges determined only ten contestants remained who would be able to enter the second contest, another horn would sound and all fighting would cease. There would then be half an hour in which the victors could prepare themselves for the second trial and in which the spectators might seek refreshments, choose their new favorites and place wagers if they felt so inclined.

The Crier withdrew. The judges took their posts. The Chief Bugler lifted his horn to his lips.

The contest had begun!

Thuron took the nearest two blue-skins out of the melee before the echo of the starting horn had died out, through the simple expedient of smashing their heads together. Suddenly, he was knocked to the ground as a golden Kend tackled him from behind. Rolling with the impact, he lashed out with his feet and knocked the wind out of his attacker. Then his huge fists went into action, working on the face and neck of the furry opponent. The hapless Kend sank to his knees and pitched forward, unconscious.

A hulking Taveeshian who had similarly dispatched one of his blue brothers was next. There was no time for niceties and no referee to insist on clean fighting. The blue-skin launched a blow at Thuron's head which, had it landed, would have broken his jaw, but the tawny giant ducked aside, grabbed the wrist behind the flying fist and hurled his opponent head first into one of the Rahrnhu barbarians. The two men went down amidst cursing and blows.

Thuron did not have to look long for a new partner. Another victorious Taveeshian had just broken the arm of a fellow guardsman and polished him off with a knee to the

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face. In two strides Thuron was on top of him; the man snarled once as he was picked up, turned over and driven into the ground.

The grinning Ulmekoorian was hardly aware of the battle which raged around him or the bloodthirsty cries of the spectators in the stands. He was in his element—man after man closed with him and was defeated.

He fought with fists, feet, knees and elbows, hardly feeling the blows which rained on his mighty body. He saw one man's eyes gouged out and promptly broke the gouger's neck, stepping over the body to take on still another opponent. His fists were like rocks and his aim was deadly. Somehow, he picked up a cut over one eye but found time to keep blood wiped away before it could cloud his vision.

As the contest wore on, more and more of his opponents were reeling with fatigue—these Thuron eliminated swiftly, stepping inside their defenses and putting them out of the fray with piston-like blows to the jaw, turning even as they sank to the ground to meet his next foe.

Twice more was Thuron knocked to the ground, once by a Rahrnhuian who then tried to kick him in the head and had his knee wrenched out of joint for his efforts before Thuron laid him to rest; and once by a burly blue-skin who fell upon him and locked steely fingers around his throat. The two men grappled, rolling over and over until Thuron could get a good grip on the other's head. With a mighty wrench he broke the warrior's neck.

The mighty Ulmekoorian leaped to his feet and quickly surveyed the field of battle. Over half of the original fifty lay sprawled on the ground, dead, unconscious or brutally maimed. Of the remainder, many seemed on the verge of collapse. He saw one of the hawk-nosed barbarians fell three of the groggy ones in quick succession before a livelier foe took him on.

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A dozen feet away a huge blue Taveeshian was also surveying the scene. He, too, had emerged with only minor injuries as yet. Their eyes met and they gauged each other. "Are you ready to die, Outlander?" taunted the crimson-crested giant. Grinning, Thuron brushed the blood from over his eye and accepted the challenge.

The two closed cautiously, as each recognized in the other a deadly opponent. They were of equal size—the Taveeshian seemed as magnificently muscled as Thuron himself. They circled each other and then the blue-skin lunged.

Thuron stepped to one side and launched a powerful right at the warrior's head, catching him just behind the ear. The blue-skin shook his head and with a roar whirled to attack again. Thuron was ready for him, grabbing the guardsman's helmet and jerking it off, then seizing his head with both hands and shoving it towards the ground. The Taveeshian somersaulted and drove his heels into Thuron's midsection.

The tawny giant staggered backward and tripped over a body as the other scrambled to his feet. Thuron sprawled on his back—the guardsman leaped upon him, fingers curved like talons, reaching for the Ulmekoorian's eyes. Thuron brought his knee up defensively and threw the blue-skin to one side. In an instant both were on their feet, circling again, oblivious of the other contestants who still fought on either side.

Thuron saw an opening and rushed the other, unleashing a rain of body blows as he did so. The blue warrior brought his guard up quickly, warding him off with a strong forearm and driving his other fist into Thuron's belly, following it with a swift blow to the head and a murderous uppercut which missed his chin and grazed his cheek. Thuron, bent double with pain, reached blindly for the Taveeshian's legs and pulled them out from under him. Again, the two warriors

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crashed to the ground, rolling over on the dusty red floor of the arena.

The Taveeshian's fingers closed on Thuron's throat, shutting off his wind. The mighty Ulmekoorian fought to free himself but one arm was pinned under him. Blood pounded in his ears and he could faintly hear the roar of the crowd, and over it now the chilling note of the horn. His vision blurred.

The steely fingers of his foe relaxed and the warrior's weight was gone from his chest. Now, amazingly, the blue-skin helped Thuron to his feet. Gulping great lungfuls of air the Ulmekoorian realized that the first trial was over.

Aside from his opponent and himself, Thuron saw that only eight others were still standing: four more blue-skins, three Rahrnu barbarians and a single Kend. Of these ten, one would be acclaimed the Son of the Battle God before the day was over. The other nine would probably perish.

Thuron followed the blue-skin from the field, staring dully at the large number "1" painted on the man's back, not realizing until they reached the pits that this was the same warrior who had had such a large corps of attendants. Thuron grinned; the gods had granted him his wish to meet Riis Murlik. But it was obvious from the way the blue warrior strode off the field that he had little use for Ulmekoorians. It was good, however, Thuron reflected, that Murlik had had the grace to call him "outlander" instead of the hated diminutive "kurran."

Gaar had meat and ale waiting in the pit. Wordlessly, Thuron refreshed himself and stretched out on the training table. The furry Oracle poured oil on the warrior's golden flesh and began the rubdown. "You fought well, Lord Thuron. Eight foes I counted vanquished by your hand. The last you fought was Murlik himself."

"I know."

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Thuron closed his eyes and let Gaar's praise wash over him unheard, as the little man prattled on. At length he roused and let the Kend help him into his battle garb, for the next trial would be by sword. The warriors would face each other two by two, armed only with sword and shield.

Pairings for the second contest were accomplished by lot from markers representing the ten victors of the unarmed test. Of the original thirty Taveeshians registered for the games only five of the blue-skins remained—the first two were matched against barbarians, the next two against each other, the fifth pitted against a bristling, cream-colored Kend. Thuron's opponent was the smoke-hued Rahrnhu he'd noticed earlier in the pits.

The dead and disabled had been cleared from the arena, upon the clay surface of which had been inscribed five large circles. A games' official assigned each pair of combatants to a circle, instructed them to wait for the starting horn and withdrew to the edge of the field.

Warily, Thuron and the barbarian sized each other up. Thuron had crossed swords with a good many Rahrnhuans on the gray-skins' native soil and knew them to be as swift and treacherous with the blade as their craftsmen were in forging the heavy Rahrnhu steel. Thuron's own *No'ondo'or* had been made in that far-off place.

The horn sounded clear in the mid-morning air.

Well schooled in Rahrnhu swordplay, Thuron knew its peculiarities better than most. The gray-skins seldom cut or slashed, preferring a relentless thrusting game, usually at the face. At the sound of the horn the barbarian surged forward and feinted an under-thrust. Thuron laughed harshly and stood his ground—the gray-skin's face was implacable, only the eyes showed his contempt. Now the Rahrnhu blade thrust up at Thuron's face. The Ulmekoorian dodged lightly to one side and stepped in under the upraised sword, lifting

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it even higher with his shield. The gray-skin's eyes blazed with fury as he realized his mistake. He tried to twist away from Thuron's point but it was too late, his entire right side was exposed—in one deadly thrust *N'ondo'or* slipped unhampered between the alien ribs and found the warrior's heart. The barbarian was dead before he hit the ground.

Thuron wiped his blade on the gray-skin's chest and sheathed it before glancing up at the stands. The crowd was shouting wildly, bellowing encouragements to their chosen favorites. Eight warriors battled on, making the arena ring with the music of steel upon steel as sixteen swords met in merciless competition.

Thuron's eyes swept the stands and came to rest on the royal box where King Xandnur and his party sat, absorbed in the fray. At the monarch's right hand sat a girl whose face, even at this distance, was the most beautiful Thuron had ever seen. It seemed that her eyes were upon him. The Ulmekoorian grinned in triumph and bowed to the royal box. Then he strode from the field, to watch the rest of the contest from the mouth of the pit.

Of the two remaining gray-skinned barbarians, one was felled by the giant Taveeshian, Murluk, the other triumphed over his blue opponent. The Kend put up a valiant fight but was vanquished just as it looked as if he were gaining the upper hand. The remaining two blue-skins fought skillfully until one made a fatal error, bringing death to himself as quickly and as cleanly as Thuron had dealt it to the Rahrnhu.

Where there had been ten men standing, now there were five: one Rahrnhu barbarian, three Taveeshians and Thuron of Ulmekoor. The horn signalled the end of the contest. As the victors headed wearily back to the pit, stretcher boys trotted out to clear away the dead.

In the stands, the Prince of Murderers went to collect his winnings, which were considerable.

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"Ho, Zorm!" cried the betting agent. "All of it on Murlik again?"

Zorm shook his head. "What're the odds on Fifty?" he inquired.

The agent consulted a chart. "The kurrans? Eleven to one. You know those kurrans, Zorm. They show strong to start, but they never last. If it was my money I'd keep most of it on Murlik, maybe put a little on the Rahrnhu—they're pretty good in combat with animals."

"Put it all on Fifty."

The betting agent shrugged and entered the wager.

The first of the five to face his *urreep* was a long-limbed Taveeshian who stalked arrogantly to the center of the arena and stood with his feet planted wide, his straight guardsman's sword in his right hand, an exotic wavery dagger in his left. The two suns of Lankor blazed midway up the sky, visible as bright disks of red and green through the everlasting haze.

The warrior gazed insolently into the yawning mouth of the animal pit. Now there was a clatter of gates being lifted. With a snarl of rage, the first *urreep* lumbered into view. Clearing the overhanging lip of the pit, it reared on its hind legs, its two long, fierce-jawed heads swinging from side to side, the bulging eyes blinking in the light as it searched for its prey. The crab-like pincers opened and closed with ominous clicks. Spotting the motionless warrior it dropped again to all fours and moved with gathering speed across the arena.

The blue-skin did not move until the mighty beast was almost upon him. Then he leaped sideways to avoid its headlong rush. No sooner had it passed than he dashed at its flank, seized the base of one of the murderous pincers and drove his razor-sharp sword into the joint where the pincer-arm connected with the shoulder. The pincer drooped and the two heads roared. The beast had already begun to check

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its plunge the moment the blue-skin leaped out of the way; now it pivoted sharply and shot one head forward to snap at its attacker. The *urreep's* teeth gleamed momentarily, then the powerful jaws scissored shut on the warrior's left arm, severing it below the elbow. The blue-skin, grimacing with sudden pain, nevertheless managed to swing his sword in a mighty overhand arc and plunge it into one eye of the beast.

But he failed to take into account the remaining pincer, which closed with a bone-cracking grip upon his leg. An instant later it was all over. Methodically, the *urreep* devoured its prey while its handlers, equipped with ropes and heavy nets, crept up from behind. Thuron was sickened by the spectacle but intrigued with the techniques of the trainers.

The second warrior, a jungle-bred barbarian, although somewhat quicker on his feet, met a similar fate. Gaar covered his eyes with his hands, but Thuron's gaze remained riveted to the *urreep*, studying its strengths and searching for its potential weaknesses. He had precious little time to study, for Thuron of Ulmekoor was contestant number three!

"May the gods protect you," Gaar murmured as the tawny giant strode forth into the arena.

Like its two predecessors, the third *urreep* lumbered from under the dark lip of the pit and reared on its hind legs. It was in those first few seconds, Thuron knew, that he must make his move. He must strike while the fearsome monster was still getting its bearings. At this moment alone it would be confused by the noise and the riotous colors in the stands.

Accordingly, Thuron rushed at the beast, uttering a blood-chilling yell to attract its attention. One of the monster's heads dipped down to investigate this noisy newcomer, the powerful jaws gaped open revealing double rows of sabre-sharp teeth. Instead of stepping to one side, Thuron rushed straight at the horrid mouth, holding *No'ondo'or* before him,

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driving the tip of his splendid steel through the back of the throat and straight into the *urreep's* tiny brain.

Thuron tugged at his weapon to free it as the beast's other head was starting to swing around. To his dismay, the blade was stuck fast. There was no time to worry it loose. Reluctantly he released the handle of *No'ondo'or* and moved to place the fallen head between himself and its twin, which was now dangerously near. Seizing his opportunity, Thuron vaulted to the beast's neck and ran nimbly up to the spot where the two necks joined. As he turned to dash towards the living head, the beast reared under him, clawing with its pincer forelegs. Thuron hung on desperately, inching his way up the sinuous neck, knowing that the stiff pincers could not reach quite that far back.

The *urreep* tossed its head violently to loose the unwanted weight, but the giant held on, moving towards his target. In the stands the crowd hushed, awaiting the outcome. The deadly pincers flailed closer and closer. At last Thuron reached his objective, the place where he could sit astride the beast's neck and reach its eyes with his dagger. Once, twice, six times he plunged the slim blade home, but the *urreep* refused to die—its threshings became more wild, its rearings more violent until with a mighty spasm it flipped completely over in midair and fell crashing on its back. Thuron leaped to safety and the crowd went wild, six thousand voices joining in a mighty shout of approval.

Thuron strode to the first of the two heads, braced his foot against the open jaw and wrested *No'ondo'or* from the dead *urreep*. Grinning, he saluted the royal box and walked slowly back to the pits, the wild cries of the spectators loud in his ears.

If the remaining two contenders failed to vanquish their beasts, Thuron would be the proven True Son. But if either of the two succeeded, one or more further tests would have

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to be endured. Rivers of sweat ran down the Ulmekoorian's back and suddenly he realized that the oppressive heat of the Taveeshian day had arrived.

The pit was almost empty now, the fallen warriors' attendants having departed, leaving only those attached to Riis Murlik, the other blue-skin, and Gaar. Murlik himself came forward to greet Thuron as he reached the entrance. "Bravely done!" boomed the huge blue-skin.

"Thank you," Thuron acknowledged. "I know you'll do as well."

But it was not yet Riis Murlik's turn; the other guardsman was first. He tried to duplicate Thuron's tactic, but his courage faltered at the last moment and he checked his lunge for the *urreep's* mouth, giving the beast the advantage. With one snap of the giant pincers the warrior was dead.

Now it was Murlik's turn. There was a roar from the crowd as their favorite stepped into view. Murlik bowed curtly in all directions, then proceeded to the center of the arena. The gates clanked open and the last *urreep* was loose. Murlik pretended not to see it as it reared and searched for him; instead, he busied himself carving designs with the tip of his sword in the red clay at his feet. The beast lumbered toward him, beginning its relentless dash. Still, Riis Murlik feigned disinterest—the *urreep* was less than ten yards away when the warrior stooped and reached into the loosened earth. A moan of dismay rose from the stands. Suddenly Murlik whirled, flinging a handful of dirt at the nearest head and throwing himself sideways in the same motion.

Enraged, the monster wheeled without appreciably lessening its speed and dashed again at the blue-skin, its blinded head tossing jerkily back and forth. Murlik whirled his sword around and around over his head and launched it, spinning, at the gaping mouth. It sank to the hilt; half the beast was dead.

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Wasting not a moment, Murlik leaped upon the blind head and probed for the second brain with his dagger, riding the horrid head to the ground as the crowd burst into a full-throated ovation.

Now there was but one contest left to determine the True Son. Riis Murlik must meet Thuron of Ulmekoor in a duel to the death!

CHAPTER THREE: A GIFT FROM THE KING

THE TWO CHAMPIONS faced each other in the middle of the field. Six thousand ears waited for the bugler's signal—now it sounded ominously in the huge stadium. *No'ondo'or* slipped gently into view; the Taveeshian's blade had been out from the start. Thuron's first move was a feint to the left of his opponent's heart; the blue-skin parried neatly, countering with a slice which nicked Thuron's chest. Never in his long career had an opposing sword come so close so soon!

Was the mighty Thuron tiring? Becoming careless, perhaps, but certainly not exhausted, for he responded to the touch of Murlik's sword-tip with a fast attack of his own, *No'ondo'or* relentlessly carving intricate patterns in the air just previously occupied by the retreating Murlik. An awed hush fell over the spectators as the Taveeshian favorite continued to give ground. There was a high level of anti-kurran sentiment in the capitol city, anyway; to see their hero facing defeat at the hands of a kurran was more than many blue-skins could bear. Thuron drove Murlik at flashing sword-point nearly the full length of the arena before the blue-skin sorted out the pattern and learned to brush Thuron's attack aside.

Now the Taveeshian took the offensive and the two warriors danced in the other direction, Murlik's blade a blur of deadly beauty which left no opening for the retreating giant. Thuron bided his time, dancing backwards and waiting for time to dull the ferocity of Murlik's attack. The crowd, meanwhile, screamed encouragement.

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At last his opportunity arrived and Thuron was quick to take advantage of it. Deflecting Murlik's sword, he reached over the blue-skin's defense and flicked *No'ondo'or's* razor tip across the blue-skin's face, laying open cheek and lip alike. Murlik blanched as the Ulmekoorian pressed his advantage. With cold skill and alien cunning the tawny giant left mark after mark on the startled blue-skin.

As the two warriors fought for their lives, a slow change took place in the very air around them. The sky turned red! Scattered spectators directed their gaze from the bloody contest below to the crimson overcast and saw the mysterious sign in the heavens . . . something had begun to devour green-sun! The bright green disc was now only a crescent, growing perceptibly narrower as they watched.

No'ondo'or flashed in the reddish light and suddenly the Taveeshian's blade was wrenched from his grasp and went spinning away. Riis Murlik, bleeding profusely in a dozen places, stood swaying, waiting for the death thrust. Thuron grinned, saluted his erstwhile opponent and sheathed his blade. Murlik lifted an arm to answer the salute and staggered as his knees buckled. The Ulmekoorian leaped forward and caught the blue-skin, easing him against his shoulder, noting as he did so that Murlik's attendants were already on their way. He felt for the warrior's heartbeat and knew that he had an excellent chance of recovery. Murlik's eyelids fluttered and his lips moved.

"What?"

The blue-skin moistened his lips.

"Yang T'or," he whispered. "Beware Yang T'or." Then he lapsed into unconsciousness.

Thuron handed the wounded man over to his attendants and turned victoriously to the royal box. He frowned, puzzled that all eyes were on the sky. Only now was he aware of the blood-red cast the world had assumed, and as he

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looked skyward, himself, he saw why. Only red-sun remained in view—beside it was a faint green halo around a disc of blackness where green-sun once shone in full glory.

Silence gripped the huge stadium. Even Thuron was awed by the phenomenon—it could only have one meaning: Wab-bis Ka'arbu had chosen this way to acknowledge Thuron as his True Son! A feeling of exultation coursed through the mighty Ulmekoorian. As the Golden Sphere had predicted, today he had defeated all enemies, he had triumphed over every trial. Thuron felt a sudden strong desire to see this Golden Sphere for himself.

A sliver of green-sun reappeared and grew stronger. The breathless silence gave way to an excited murmuring as the disc of blackness moved steadily aside. Long moments later, when green-sun was completely restored, a great shout went up from the stadium. The King's judges came forward with the victor's robe and draped it around Thuron's shoulders and led him across the hard-packed clay to stand before the royal box. King Xandnur was on his feet as the victorious giant approached. Now the King and his entire party knelt in homage to the True Son.

Thuron's glance fell upon the girl at the monarch's side; her beauty, he could see, was not the illusion of distance. Her eyes were downcast, however.

Wishing for Gaar at his side to prompt him, for he was at a loss for the proper protocol, the Ulmekoorian lifted his hands as if in blessing, then turned and walked slowly back towards the pit. He could feel his strength slipping but realized that it would be most unseemly at this point for the Son of Battle to let his exhaustion show. Summoning his last reserves of energy he quickened his pace toward the pits.

"Lord Thuron!" Gaar exclaimed as the giant stumbled into the welcome shade. "How can this humble one serve you? Meat? Wine? You have earned a victory feast!"

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Thuron grinned. "The fighting has made me thirsty," he said. "A little ale—then just get me to bed, friend."

But it was not that simple. First Gaar had to collect their winnings. Then a palanquin arrived to carry the True Son in the victory parade back to the Royal Adamar where the most lavish suite of rooms in the house had been prepared for his enjoyment. It was mid-afternoon by the time the Ulmekoorian was allowed to indulge in the sleep he so ardently sought.

Thuron awoke as silently and as suddenly as a jungle *ptahr*. There had been no disturbing sound but unconsciously he had detected an alien presence. Now, through slitted eyes, he saw that it was the girl he'd observed at the Battle Games. She was standing at the foot of his bed, just beyond where Gaar was curled up in slumber. Abruptly, Thuron sat up, his gaze appreciative but wary.

Her iridescent hair made a shimmering cascade over smooth, pale blue shoulders to blend with the draperies of *simne* which clung to her slender figure. Her face was oval with a determined chin and soft, full mouth; from under smooth, dark blue eyebrows and long lashes she returned his gaze. Her eyes, he noted, were an unusual purple.

"Mighty Son of the Battle God," she murmured, bowing slightly, "I, Yllara of Xandnur of Taveeshe, greet you. The King sends gifts and begs you will honor him with your presence."

At the sound of her voice Gaar sprang awake and roared, "Who disturbs my lord's slumber?" Seeing the girl, he checked his rage as his eyes grew large. Grimacing, he smote himself smartly on the nose and bowed while Thuron watched in fascination. "Lady, will you seat yourself while I robe my lord?"

The girl nodded coolly. "I will wait in the outer room,"

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she said, gliding across the floor and pulling the bedroom door shut behind her. The fashions of Taveeshe became her, Thuron decided. The gown was slit high on one hip to show long legs. The fillet of jewels around her forehead revealed her to be of noble blood. The glowing red crystals holding the *simne* at her shoulder and waist spoke of fabulous wealth. Quickly, Gaar presented Thuron with his boots.

"What does she mean, the King sends gifts?" the Ulmekoorian grunted, struggling with his robes. "I want no gifts. Riches tie a man down. Thuron of Ulmekoor prefers to walk in freedom."

"Sire, you may not refuse them," wheezed the fat one, helping Thuron with his boots. "They come from the King. Such an insult from the True Son would dethrone His Majesty; he would have no recourse but to end his life." Gaar's eyes gleamed greedily. "Besides, they may be of great value."

"What day is this?" Thuron demanded suddenly. "I am hungry enough to eat a *xat*!"

"You have not eaten since before the Battle Games yesterday morning." With a quick movement Gaar adjusted the hang of Thuron's robe. "I will have a meal sent up immediately."

"Let us see what the girl has brought us, first."

Gaar scuttled forward and opened the door, then followed Thuron through it. The girl, who had been seated on a bench, stood up as he entered.

"Well?" the Ulmekoorian demanded.

"The King wishes audience with you and requests that you come to the palace at the earliest opportunity."

"Why?" Thuron asked irritably. "I have no desire to see the King."

"What my lord means," Gaar hastily interjected, "is that

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he needs rest after yesterday's exertions. Perhaps His Majesty might attend the True Son here?"

The girl's eyes narrowed. "I will have the King informed of this request," she said. "But first I must deliver his offering." She bowed deeply and went to the door, opening it. A procession of servants began to file in, bearing rich coffers, urns of precious metals filled with fragrant oils, robes of the rare *simne*, various items of jewel-studded armor and finally a golden sword set with precious gems. All these they heaped around the glowering giant, each returning to the corridor after depositing his burden. As the last one turned to leave, the girl stopped him and bade him run ahead to the palace to give the True Son's message to the King. The servant looked startled, threw a quick glance at Thuron and left the room at a trot.

When the man was gone, the girl bowed again and knelt in front of her host, eyes lowered, obviously placing herself among the other gifts. "Be pleased to accept us," she whispered and was silent.

Thuron gaped, then roared at Gaar. "A wench! He sends me a wench!"

The girl sprang to her feet, her skin flushing, her eyes two purple flames. "What did you call me?" she hissed.

Gaar hit himself on the nose twice and threw himself between the glowering Ulmekoorian and the outraged maid. "Lady, lady!" he implored. "Forgive him! He meant it not. Lord Thuron is still half asleep and overcome with your beauty. Sire! Wake up! 'Tis a great honor. The King sends his fairest daughter, the blossom of the land, to serve you. Never before has anything like this . . ."

Thuron grinned ruefully. "I meant no insult, lady. But I travel too fast to take along a maid—especially a royal one."

"It is my father's wish," insisted the girl, lowering her eyes again.

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"Sire, she dare not go back. The King's command brought her here. She is a gift from the King."

"And if I refuse to accept this gift?"

"I have a dagger," the girl said quickly. "By the laws of Taveeshe I must use it on myself."

Thuron lifted his fists high and shook them. "The laws of Taveeshel" he snorted. Then he studied the girl while Gaar fidgeted in the background. When the tawny giant spoke again his voice was oddly gentle. "Do you come willingly, lass?"

"It is my father's wish," she repeated.

"That is not what I asked you."

She glared at him. "I would rather serve a *sloord*," she spat. "But you are the True Son and my father's name will not be dishonored by me."

The giant rumbled with laughter. "You have spirit, girl, and that is pleasing. I will not send you back. What did you say your name is?"

"Yllara."

Thuron repeated it. "You are a lovely gift, Yllara, but I'm not quite sure what to do with you."

Her eyes were downcast again. "You may do with me as you wish. It is the law."

"Hang the law!" he exclaimed. "What do you desire most, Yllara?"

She shot him a startled glance. "Rest," she sighed. "I slept not last night."

"Gaar."

The furry Kend scuttled off to prepare the other bedroom. "Sleep as long as you wish," he said. "Have you eaten to-day?"

"An hour ago, sire," she replied. "Thank you."

Once Yllara's comfort had been seen to, Gaar smote his nose, bowed, and closed the door gently behind him. Pranc-

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ing over to Thuron he rubbed his furry hands together. "What an honor, sire! What good fortune!" he exclaimed. Then, dropping his voice, "And such a beauty, too. 'Twould please the King greatly if you honored him by giving him a grandson!"

Thuron backed away muttering. "I have no use for a girl servant," he stated flatly. "I have even less use for a wife."

"Of course, sire," soothed Gaar. "Let us forget all such talk. Now, lord, let me order your breakfast. We can examine the rest of the royal gifts while you dine."

In her room, Yllara wept silently, then dried her eyes, smiled oddly and went to sleep.

Thuron ate heartily, as was his habit, washing the viands down with great gulps of ale, while Gaar went into ecstasies over the wealth sent by the King. He cooed over the coffers of coins and jewels; he moaned with pleasure as he rubbed the fragrant oils over his hair, ears and tail and when he came to the jeweled sword he hugged it to him, squeezing his eyes tight shut.

Thuron licked his fingers and watched the performance with amusement. "Does the gaudy toy please you so, brother?"

Gaar opened one eye and heaved a great sigh. "Nothing has ever pleased me so before, lord!"

"Then take it," Thuron shrugged. "'Tis yours. I have *No'ondo'or*—no other sword do I carry."

Gaar flung himself at Thuron's feet. Still gripping the golden sword with one hand, he hit his nose with the other. "Oh mighty and generous Thuron, your humble slave revels in your magnifi . . ."

"Enough," begged the Ulmekoorian. "Your speech runs off with you again. Tell me—briefly—what means this smiting of your nose?"

"In Kendsahr it is a common form of greeting."

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"It seems a painful way to hail one's friends," Thuron observed.

"Most of us don't mind it at all. But, alas, I have a most sensitive nose. I had to leave Kendsahr and go where I would rarely meet my kind. To nobility, like Yllara, and to yourself, sire, I offer my native salute."

From without the open window came sounds of a great disturbance in the courtyard. Then they heard feet pounding up the stairs and somebody rapped on Thuron's door. Cautiously, Gaar opened it and was almost flung aside as two servants in the King's livery entered, unrolling a carpet as they came. They stood aside for two more who bore censurs of flaming, perfumed oils. Another liveried pair followed, lugging between them a heavy chair which they placed at the table, directly opposite Thuron's place. Then came two maidens, formally attired, holding a long length of woven metal cloth which they draped artfully around and over the chair.

When all the preparations were completed and each servant had taken his place, King Xandnur entered the room. Blue-skinned, lean, with piercing eyes deep-set in a face where strength and kindness mingled, he was an impressive sight. In his hands he carried a bejeweled, metal cloth. He approached the Ulmekoorian and bowed, then flung the cloth over the chair by which Thuron stood.

"This, Great One, I wished to bring to the True Son myself. I trust he will accept it."

"He will," Gaar agreed quickly, his eyes appraising the value of the gift. "The True Son is most appreciative of your Majesty's tributes, although of course they are no less than his due."

Protocol, Thuron was learning, had little to do with modesty. "Will the King join me at my breakfast?" he inquired, loath to interrupt his meal any longer. Xandnur sat and al-

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lowed the Kend to pour wine. After nibbling lightly, the monarch delicately drew his hand across his mouth and spoke:

"Know you it came as a surprise to all of Taveeshe when an Ulmekoorian proved himself the True Son. But the Golden Sphere itself was a surprise—as much so to the priests, I am told, as to anyone else. Know you also that Xandnur offers friendship to the True Son. I hope it will be returned."

Thuron made a non-committal sound.

"The girl pleased the man from Ulmekoor?"

Again Thuron growled deep in his chest, answering neither 'yes' nor 'no'.

"She is a pleasant child," Xandnur continued. "I sent her as a token of my friendship. But there are more important matters for us to discuss. The Golden Sphere spoke of one who would lead the soldiers of Taveeshe in righteous battle. For this reason, Thuron of Ulmekoor, I offer you the post of commander of the Royal Guards. They will be at your disposal at all times and will obey you without question."

The Ulmekoorian's brows drew together as he watched the King. He was tempted to reject the post, for the monarch's offer seemed a cowardly one, as if Xandnur were saying, "Since the Golden Sphere predicted your leading my troops in battle, I'd rather give them to you now than have you overthrow me to gain control of them."

Seeing the fury gather in the giant's face, Gaar quickly stepped into the breach. "I am sure the True Son is honored by this offer. But it is best that he give you his answer after due deliberation."

"Perhaps," the King murmured. "Perhaps the True Son would rest in apartments I have prepared for him in the Palace—just in case he would deign to grace my home."

"No!" Thuron thundered. Seeing the King's eyes narrow suspiciously, he tried to soften the refusal by repeating Gaar's

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reasoning about time in which to make up his mind. Instead of pacifying Xandnur, however, this seemed to upset the monarch.

Rising quickly, King Xandnur started to speak, hesitated, shot another glance at the tawny man, then repeated his invitation to occupy apartments at the Palace. Receiving no answer, he left the room, his servants exiting after him, each bearing the apparatus with which he or she had entered.

Gaar rubbed a nose which had received more than its normal quota of punishment during the regal visit. "Sire, sire, you must be more gentle, more—er—diplomatic when dealing with royalty. As the True Son, you of course may take more liberties than we of common blood, but still there must be a gentleness in your speech with them. They . . ."

There was an almost soundless rapping at the door.

"Enter!" bellowed Thuron, giving the day up for lost.

The door opened silently. Framed in it was an enormously fat blue-skin robed in rich crimson. His small, overly bright eyes dismissed Gaar with a glance and fastened on the giant Ulmekoorian. His thin, colorless mouth smiled genially as he waddled into the room but Thuron was conscious of a brief flicker of contempt—the contempt most Taveeshians held for their golden-skinned brothers from the south. His voice was thin and shrill, completely out of place coming from that ponderous frame:

"Great Son of Wabbis Ka'arbu, forgive this humble servant for arriving unannounced but I could not take my associates from their sacred duties. May I present myself. I am Yang T'or."

CHAPTER FOUR: CONFRONTING THE GOLDEN SPHERE

BEHIND HIM, Thuron heard Gaar draw in his breath with a sharp hiss. The fat man bowed deeply and held out an intricately carved coffer.

"Please to accept a small tribute from the priests of thy Father's Temple," he shrilled.

The Battle God, Thuron decided, had a most unpleasant acolyte. He signaled to Gaar, who reluctantly approached Yang T'or and took the box from him. He put the gift on the table and surreptitiously wiped his hands on his robe. Observing Gaar's rude performance, the visitor glared venomously at the Kend, then turned to Thuron.

"I would be most honored if the True Son would grace my humble quarters with his presence."

Thuron sighed. Apparently no one wanted him to stay peacefully at the Adamar. However, this monstrous blue-skin would be his last choice as host. Gaar's soft snarl in the background confirmed the tawny giant's estimate.

In oily tones, Yang T'or continued: "The Temple has spent considerable time preparing for the True Son, but my own quarters are only fit for a High Priest, not the Son of a God, although I have tried to make them appropriate for the Great One's visit."

Thuron's face remained impassive but inwardly he boiled. This tub of lard was his Father's High Priest? How could the god tolerate this living obscenity from whom evil oozed

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as freely as the sweat on his glistening moon-face? Then he recalled the warning of Riis Murlik, uttered the previous day while that warrior believed himself near death, "Beware of Yang T'or." It was the sort of challenge which, to Thuron, made life worth living.

"I'll not stay with you, Yang T'or," he growled, "but I do wish to see your Golden Sphere—today!"

He had already decided to take Gaar with him and leave Yllara behind. Chances were that he'd be back before the girl awakened in any event, but it was more than concern over her sleep that prompted his decision to leave her here. He sensed great peril. Even without Murlik's warning he'd have known the threat in the High Priest. He felt also that it might be wise for King Xandnur to know as little about this meeting with the Golden Sphere as possible. Flinging his cloak about him, Thuron signaled the High Priest to lead the way. Muttering curses under his breath, Gaar trotted after them.

Thuron's reluctance to travel by palanquin was to no avail; the palanquin was there and he was expected to use it. Indeed, the bearers would have been highly offended had he refused their services. A murmuring crowd had begun to gather the moment he emerged from the Adamar. Thuron was learning that there are a number of inconveniences firmly affixed to great honor; as the True Son he could no longer hope to go anywhere in private or unrecognized.

The palanquin carried him to the Temple Gates. Gaar was obliged to walk, a circumstance which made Thuron even less fond of the High Priest. Yang T'or traveled in his own palanquin, his overworked bearers straining under the weight.

The Temple loomed tall and black against the low, gaily-hued buildings which flanked it. Massive pillars extended the full height of its three storeys and a little beyond, capped

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with slotted stone turrets. The huge facade was windowless but not without distinguishing features; carved into the blood-red, black-veined rock was a giant bas-relief of a heroic warrior about to enter battle. His eyes were of glowing red jewels, his sword fashioned of hammered gold. Behind him fluttered the sacred pennant of the Battle God. It was a chilling and an inspiring sight.

Beneath the bas-relief lay the courtyard of Wabbis Ka'arbu where the mysterious Golden Sphere had descended to speak its words of prophecy. Without that perplexing event the tawny Ulmekoorian might at this moment be embroiled in an entirely different adventure, for adventure was as vital to him as breathing. But because Thuron had won in the arena he was honored as the True Son. Even now, as he alighted from the palanquin, Thuron found his exalted status a little hard to accept.

Yang T'or bowed ceremoniously and insisted that Thuron precede him into the courtyard. Still cursing, Gaar brought up the rear. Thuron glanced around but couldn't locate the object of his visit.

"Where is the Golden Sphere?" he growled suspiciously.

"I have had a wall built around it," Yang T'or said easily, his fat hands fluttering. "It is dangerous to approach. One man has already lost his life for touching it. Come, I will show you."

The enormous priest lumbered towards a corner of the courtyard, where a section of stonework looked newer than the rest. Taking a large key from a fold of his robes, he unlocked an ornately carved door set into the stone and swung it back.

In its newly created shrine rested the Golden Sphere. As Gaar had described it to Thuron earlier, it floated no more than a hand's breadth above the cobbled floor. In its polished surface Thuron could see himself, oddly distorted and

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upside down. Thuron wondered if the priests had another motive for walling it off from the curious, other than merely to protect themselves and the public from its lethal powers.

"The Golden Sphere speaks but three times each day. Always at the same hours. There is ample time for the True Son to look at the rest of his Temple."

Thuron glanced at the man sharply. Was there a note of sarcasm in the priest's high-pitched voice? The giant felt the back of his neck crawl with a chill. There was a sense of menace to this place, intensified by the blood-red rock it was built of and yet completely apart from it. Great evil dwelt in the Temple. Was it this fat creature alone? Thuron wished desperately for a few moments alone with his little friend from Kendsahr.

"Yes," he said. "Show us the Temple."

They went through the great iron studded double doors, into the flame-lit, smoky blackness inside the Temple, into a shallow room from which a twisting corridor branched off in two directions. Yang T'or led his charges down the left passageway. Flickering torches were thrust into the walls at regular intervals, creating pulsating pools of light. After about sixty paces the corridor turned sharply, emptying into a great room which was even more inadequately lit. Thuron could dimly see the outline of the huge stone idol of Ka'arbu. The shadows swallowed all else but the nearest of the stone benches.

"Sire," the High Priest stated unctuously, "there will be time later to view the chapel." Now he hurried them through to another corridor which penetrated deeper still into the fortress of the Battle God. They passed numerous doorways, looked briefly into Yang T'or's private apartment, noted the stairway which led to the living quarters of the half-hundred minor priests and acolytes housed within the Temple, and

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came finally to a second huge room which the High Priest identified as the banquet hall.

"The True Son will do us the great honor of joining us tonight for the feast prepared in his honor." It was not so much an invitation as a statement of fact. Gaar and Thuron exchanged glances.

"It will make me happy," the Ulmekoorian replied. "But right now I much desire to hear the voice of Ka'arbu."

"And so you shall, sire," the High Priest assured him. "It is almost time." As he spoke, a deep-throated gong reverberated through the corridors and Yang T'or smiled benignly at his guests. "Follow me, O True Son."

Wordlessly, they accompanied him back through the network of corridors to the courtyard. As they approached the Golden Sphere, Thuron was aware of a strange humming in the air, like a swarm of *ngorths* heard from far away, but emanating from the mysterious yellow orb itself.

The Priest stepped boldly up to within three feet of the Sphere and bowed.

"Greetings, Yang T'or," a hollow voice boomed. "I see he accompanies you. What name does he go by on Lankor?"

"Thuron of Ulmekoor," answered the giant. "And this is my friend, Gaar of Kendsahr."

"My Son! Step forward that I may see you."

Thuron's hand rested on the hilt of *No'ondo'or* as he cautiously approached the Sphere. The voice of Ka'arbu made no comment about it.

"Without your knowledge, my Son, for many years you have been in training for this day. There is a peak to the east of here which is known among you as Mount Thona. I command you now to climb it, alone, that you may meet with me and commune with me on its topmost summit. At that time you will receive the magic powers of godhood. Do you understand, my Son?"

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"I understand. Is this the Sacred Quest?"

"No, my Son. The Sacred Quest is yet to come. Do you know the mountain of which I speak?"

"I have heard of it."

"It is on Mt. Thona that I have built my invisible palace. No eye can see it . . . not even yours, my Son. But I will make the doorway visible to you, and to you alone. If any try to follow you, they will die. You must step through the doorway to be with me."

"When shall I meet you there, Father?"

"The mountain is a three day march to the east. You will make camp at the foot of the steep slope and the next morning will begin to climb alone, starting when the sun rises."

There was a silence. Thuron made no answer but stared at the Sphere. After a moment the voice continued:

"You will leave in two days. May fortune be with you, for I will not aid you. This you must perform for yourself."

Abruptly, the humming ceased. Thuron knew the interview with his Father was over.

Yang T'or cleared his throat. "I know the True Son understands that only the servants of Wabbis Ka'arbu are qualified to interpret the sayings of the Golden Sphere."

Gaar's tail bristled dangerously. "The meaning seemed perfectly clear to me," he said archly.

"When the gods speak, there may seem to be many meanings," Yang T'or intoned squeakily. "Only those of the priesthood, trained from childhood in the interpretation of divine proclamation, are fully qualified to find the True Meanings."

"Sire!" Gaar exploded. "This . . . this fat *sloord* who calls himself a priest will twist your Father's words to his own ends. I warn you sire . . ."

"*Sloord*? You dare call me *sloord*? What manner of . . ."

"Enough!" Thuron commanded. "Both of you. I have heard the words of my Father and I understand them. I am

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no child to be deceived. And I will have no further calling of names in my Father's house."

The Priest and the Oracle glared at each other.

"Friend Gaar," the Ulmekoorian said, "I want you to return now to the Adamar and keep watch over our belongings. You know my meaning."

"And leave you here, lord?"

"I wish to remain for a brief time and speak at length with my Father's High Priest."

"But, sire . . . !"

"Enough, brother. My patience is gone. I have spoken."

Gaar opened his mouth again but apparently thought better of it. Smartly saluting his master and ignoring Yang T'or, he turned and strode from the courtyard, his tail held high and twitching his opinion of them both.

"There have been many prophecies told concerning you, Lord Thuron," the High Priest said in the privacy of his chambers. "Some you have already fulfilled. The others, I am sure, will come to pass in due time. The conclusions that have been reached after long and prayerful consideration, however, merit your attention."

"What prophecies?"

"The sayings of the Golden Sphere. Specifically, that you will lead the troops of Taveeshe in glorious combat to accomplish the Sacred Quest. We do not know the nature of the Quest, but we do know the soldiers of Taveeshe, and King Xandnur. You will need many men to help you wrest the leadership from Xandnur, for he is a vain and foolish man who will not easily give up his army. Here, then, is my plan."

Thuron smiled and said nothing as Yang T'or outlined a scheme which would put the military strength of Taveeshe squarely in the hands of the Temple. As the obese cleric elaborated upon his idea it became obvious to Thuron that

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Yang T'or wanted him to function as a figurehead but to stay out of all tactical decisions. The Ulmekoorian let the priest commit himself fully to the plan before giving his answer. Finally, Yang T'or stopped speaking and waited with hooded eyes.

"No," Thuron said flatly. "I prefer the way of Wabbis Ka'arbu."

"But how . . . ?" sputtered the priest. "Xandnur has been obstructing the forces of Ka'arbu since his reign began. He is almost as bad as his father, Xandnur the Boneless, who outlawed battle and almost succeeded in driving the worship of your Father underground. I can see no other way of accomplishing our end than by the plan I have given you."

"It has been foretold by Ka'arbu himself that I will do it. Do not concern yourself with the manner in which it will come about."

"Tell me your plan," urged the obese one, "so that I may aid you."

"As far as you are concerned it is done. I wish now to see the others who reside here."

The blue-skin blinked in disbelief. Despite his barbarous upbringing, the True Son had assumed complete control of the Temple. It was a difficult concept for the Taveeshian priest to live with. He got heavily to his feet. "As you wish," he muttered.

The tour of inspection was lengthy and when it was over Thuron had worked up a mighty appetite. He was much relieved when Yang T'or announced that it was time for the banquet. If the High Priest's portly figure was any indication, it was the custom in the Temple to serve rich meals.

He was right in his estimate of the fare. As they sat down at the long tables, huge joints of meat were carried in, followed by enormous bowls of thick soup, platters heaped with the pungent vegetables from the farmlands to the south,

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tremendous baskets piled high with warm breads, an endless array of sweetmeats, spiced fruits and wine-soaked morsels of an unidentifiable but delicious nature. Great quantities of chilled ale completed the repast.

Thuron was amused at the reaction to his presence at the table. All fifty of the acolytes waited for him to begin, and for the next hour their hands mirrored the actions of his own. When he reached for meat, they did also. When he quaffed ale, fifty throats worked furiously to keep up with the True Son's rate of consumption. When he wiped the back of his hand across his mouth it looked as if they were returning a salute. Finally, when he gave the mighty belch which signified that he was well satisfied, fifty swollen stomachs churned in emulation.

"Now the True Son will join us at worship," announced Yang T'or, scooping up a plateful of sweetmeats and secret-ing them in the folds of his robe.

Thuron scowled. Still, it would not do for him to refuse to attend the service. Grudgingly, he nodded his assent.

A dozen of the acolytes had already absented themselves from the banquet hall to prepare the place of worship. By the time Thuron and Yang T'or arrived, the cavernous auditorium was well lit with torches which formed a flickering square about the figure of Ka'arbu, yet left the walls in relative darkness. The great stone idol loomed over all, dwarfing even Thuron's gigantic frame. The High Priest showed Thuron to a place of honor on a raised platform at one side of the assembly. From this position the True Son could survey not only the rank and file of worshippers but had an unequalled view of the idol as well.

The face of the icon was terrible indeed, leering with red-glowing eyes at the world around it, the muscular figure almost obscene under such a face. The idol occupied almost a third of the floor space in the chamber of worship. It stood

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in battle stance, its huge feet spread wide, its shield held out from the body, its sword raised high overhead. Between and in front of its widespread feet was a huge, shallow dish which was full of flaming oil. Just below the face was a shelf presumably designed to hold offerings of some sort, for a slender ramp arched in from either side of the room to that spot. Thuron's eyes followed the ramp along the walls as it curved behind the congregation, noting that it was actually a continuation of a sort of runway which began beneath the flaming bowl and went straight to the back of the room, where it split into the two curving ramps.

The service began with a chant led by the number one sub-priest, a liturgy which glorified the warrior's life and death and the rewards which awaited he who died honorably by the sword. As Thuron had never been notably religious—like all Ulmekoorians, he'd paid his dues to the Temple but beyond that had largely ignored it—this was the first time he had given much attention to the Ka'arbuian promises concerning the afterlife. As he listened he was much impressed, although he still clung to his former conviction that it was better to win in battle so that one might enjoy the worldly rewards.

After the liturgy came a brief speech by Yang T'or himself, a chronicle of the Coming of the True Son. At appropriate intervals during this recital the congregation cheered lustily. Then, without warning, Thuron realized he was being introduced and was expected to say a few words.

Somehow, he struggled through it, telling them that both he and his Father were pleased with their reception of him, and promising that he would give a good report of the Temple when he met with Wabbis Ka'arbu in the Battle God's invisible palace atop Mt. Thona. Then he sat down and turned the meeting over to Yang T'or once again.

The fat priest heaved himself up from his ornate chair

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and waddled to the rostrum. "Ka'arbu, Ka'arbu," he intoned, raising his meaty forearm and placing it across his eyes. The worshippers did likewise.

"Ka'arbu, Ka'arbu, we give thanks to thee,
And exalt thy name above all others,
And glory in thy terrible countenance
Which puts valor into the hearts of believers.
We revel in the Mystic Truths, revealed
To us by thy Golden Sphere.
We honor thy True Son, Thuron,
Son of Ka'arbu, who vanquished all foes
By fire and sword, who proved his might
In the eyes of men that in thine
He might be worthy of thy name.
We thank thee for sending us thy Son,
To lead the forces of Ka'arbu in glorious victory.
We beseech thee now to accept our gift in return."

Yang T'or lumbered back to his seat and a low, moaning chant rose from the throats of the congregation. It was a wordless chant which spoke of death and glory, of blood and sacrifice, of valor and reward. It was a chilling sound to accompany a chilling sight.

Emerging now from under the flaming bowl were two figures bearing in their arms an assortment of swords, knives, axes, and other instruments of battle. They walked with a firm yet dreamlike tread, their eyes fixed before them, exaltation on their uplifted faces. Thuron watched in fascination as they traveled the ramp all the way to the back of the auditorium, their naked bodies glistening in the torchlight, the weight of their heavy burdens seemingly unnoticed in their arms.

The man turned to the left; the woman to the right. They climbed the curving ramps along the sides of the room and followed the slim pathway out over the heads of the wor-

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shippers, drawing ever nearer the terrible face of the icon. The chant grew louder.

The two supplicants met below the icon's chin, laid their burdens in the place intended for such offerings, then turned to face the congregation. Now the acolytes and priests alike rose to their feet. "Ka'arbul!" they wailed. "Ka'arbul!"

The man and woman leaped into the dish of fire below.

"Ka'arbul! Ka'arbul!" shouted the congregation, the noise of their chant muffling the thin scream which came from the flames. A ball of thick white smoke formed on the surface of the flames and rose straight up, obscuring the icon for a moment. As it cleared, Thuron saw with horror that the face of the idol had changed into that of a grinning skull!

Exhausted, the congregation dropped to the floor. Thuron's fingers slowly uncurled, loosening the iron grip he had taken on the arms of his chair. He felt like retching. So this was the god he claimed as Father! The glowering giant stood up and gazed down at the blackening figures in the flames, then turned on his heel and strode from the room, outrage burning like a fire in his chest. He found his way through the twisting corridors to the great double doors of the Temple. Shouldering them open, he walked into the Taveeshian night, heedless of the calls of Yang T'or behind him.

CHAPTER FIVE: DOORWAY TO NOWHERE

XANDNUR, WHEN HE HEARD the task set by the Father for the Son, insisted on outfitting a royal caravan for the journey and on providing a detachment of guards to accompany it to the base of the mountain. This Thuron readily accepted. As for his becoming Commander of all the Guards, he hinted that his return from the mountaintop would be ample time for that to take place.

The monarch grinned. "I have heard that the True Son and Yang T'or do not see eye to eye on certain matters. Is this true?"

Thuron, who had spent the time since his angry exit from the Temple examining his reactions to all that he'd encountered there, chose his words carefully.

"The fat one is one of the many reasons my Father awakened me."

Xandnur's smile was one of approval. "May the True Son triumph in all that he undertakes. My daughter—she continues to please you?"

"Beauty is always a welcome companion," Thuron replied. Then, before more complex matters could be entered, he ended the interview and returned to his rooms at the Adamar.

For two days Taveeshe and its citizens worked furiously preparing for the Pilgrimage.

Gaar, for his part, began by making a detailed list of everything their party would need on the journey; Thuron

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read it over and vetoed over half of it. "It is my nature to travel as lightly as possible."

Yllara presented herself demurely. "May this one accompany you also?" she asked hopefully. The change in her attitude towards him was pronounced. And, Thuron observed uneasily, each time he looked at her she seemed more beautiful.

"You may," he said.

To the Ulmekoorian's vast amusement, her immediate reaction was concern over what to wear. She spent most of the day trying on various gowns, frequently asking both Thuron and Gaar for their opinions. Thuron was well satisfied with whatever she wore, for no matter how elaborate or voluminous, each costume had the effect of being very little at all. And to Thuron's barbaric taste, there was little point in concealing such natural beauty as Yllara possessed. He cautioned her to restrict herself to five or six gowns, as they were not setting sail around the world, but only for a two day journey to Mt. Thona.

"But a most important journey," she reminded him.

He compromised by letting her pack eight gowns.

When the morning of the eventful day arrived, the city and its people sparkled. The streets through which the caravan would wind were strewn with flowers. Many of the merchants had ribboned their buildings so that nothing was seen of the original structures. The nobility strutted about in their finest robes and glittered with jewelry. During the night, priests of the Temple had set up braziers of perfumed oils along the march route. King Xandnur, hearing of this, immediately provided ribbons and blooms for the poor of the city to wear, emptying his pockets dangerously in the process.

All wore their best; scarves and veils floated in the breeze; perfumes of fresh blossoms tangled with the more earthy perfumes of the crowds; children laughed and sang. Yang

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Tor, hearing of the King's gift to the poor, ordered barrels of ale taken to the needy sections of town to toast the health of the True Son. Xandnur swore mightily when informed of this and, borrowing money from several courtiers, sent tons of sweetmeats to join the ale.

As the eighteen royal buglers announced the onset of the caravan, Thuron allowed Gaar to fasten a cloak around him. Yllara handed him his helmet and they descended to their waiting mounts, gaily painted *seproveens*, huge beasts of remarkable intelligence whose placid dispositions made them ideal for the job. Big enough to be let alone by most predators and strong enough to defend themselves against the rest, herds of *seproveens* sauntered relatively unmolested over large areas of Lankor. When captured young and raised in captivity, they made excellent beasts of burden. Unfortunately, they were too large to be transported by boat, and, so far, anyway, had proved quite inefficient in battle. They moved with ponderous dignity, however, which made them impressive in processions.

The minute Thuron and his two companions appeared at the doorway, the waiting crowd burst into cheers. Awkwardly, Thuron acknowledged their adulation; Yllara waved demurely; Gaar squinched his eyes, unfurled his magnificent tail and indulged in a sweeping bow.

Surprisingly, King Xandnur was waiting alongside Thuron's *seproveen*—on foot. As the Ulmekoorian approached, the monarch intoned loudly, "To the True Son, a salute—may all good fortune attend the meeting on the mountaintop. And may the sons of men forever sing the deeds of Thuron." With that, the King knelt before Thuron and spread his cloak for the True Son to walk upon.

Blushing furiously, the giant clambered atop the flower-decked *seproveen*, settling into the gilded, padded chair strapped to the beast's shoulders. Behind him, Xandnur,

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Yllara and Gaar assumed similar seats and the procession was ready to begin.

First were the eighteen heralds, blowing lustily. Then, ten drummers beating time for the phalanges of Guards marching behind them. Beautiful girls in transparent robes followed, leading small *ceeanos* laden with huge baskets of flowers which the girls threw to the crowd and onto the street. Then, mounted on *ceeanos*, came the children of the court, singing the bloodthirsty *Hymn of Wabbis Ka'arbu*. Behind them, in single file, rode Thuron, Xandnur, Gaar and Yllara, followed by courtiers, city officials and assorted important citizens. Around and between the slowly shambling *seproveens* pranced the jesters, each attempting to outdo the others in entertaining the True Son. A small batallion of dancing girls glided along behind, followed by a string of carts and wagons, the largest of which bore the gorgeous tent Xandnur had provided for the True Son and his party. On another huge conveyance rode the Royal Chefs with the cook tent and all the provisions for the entourage. Behind it all walked the servants needed for such a pilgrimage. In all, it was a procession the likes of which Taveeshe had seldom seen, and the citizens who lined the parade route shouted themselves hoarse.

When they reached the Temple the procession was stopped by priests who came forward to pay homage to Thuron. Yang T'or led the group. "Nothing," he wheezed, "has ever been so great an honor as the privilege of accompanying the True Son on this momentous journey."

Fighting the urge to plant his hand against the fat face, Thuron nodded curtly.

Yang T'or clapped his hands. Twelve priests, thick pads on their shoulders, emerged from the Temple with a huge palanquin. They approached and knelt; Yang T'or turned to mount.

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"Nay!" commanded Thuron. "You will not be on the shoulders of men. Your girth is too monstrous a weight."

"They are sturdy acolytes," the High Priest protested. "They wish to show their devotion to Wabbis Ka'arbu in this manner."

Thuron's voice rang out for all to hear. "What greater devotion can Yang T'or show my Father than to pace alongside the *seproveens* of the nobles! Wabbis Ka'arbu will indeed be pleased!"

The obese blue-skin paled with fury, but dismissed his bearers and waddled to his place in the procession. Grinning, Thuron gave the signal to proceed, and could hear the shout repeated at the head of the column.

At the end of an hour's march, the caravan commander called a rest. When the procession was underway again, only those who were official members of it continued eastward. The heat of the Taveeshian day had begun.

At midday was an hour's break. Cold meats and chilled ale were served to all the company, including the exhausted Yang T'or, who attempted to eat, then became ill and fell in a stupor at the roadside. Thuron ordered him loaded onto a supply wagon.

By mid-afternoon the towering slopes of Mt. Thona loomed in the distance, with Lankor's ever present haze shrouding its summit. At sundown, the caravan made camp. Yang T'or put away a goodly amount of the food prepared by the Royal Chefs, but Thuron discouraged the High Priest's attempts to organize a night-long prayer meeting. Instead, he ordered the entire company to bed early, as the balance of the trip would require a full day's march, from sunsup to sundown. Thoughtfully, the Ulmekoorian watched the green moons chase each other over Thona's crest. Then, with the quiet breathing of Yllara and the snuffling snores of

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Gaar in the background, Thuron allowed himself to fall deeply asleep.

He was awake half an hour before dawn. The caravan master had already alerted the drovers to prepare their beasts, and the Royal Chefs were outdoing themselves in the mass-production of a hearty breakfast. By torchlight, gangs of servants were busy striking the auxiliary tents and loading them into their wagons. Thuron, from the front of his own ornate tent, watched these preparations with approval.

At the other end of the tent Yllara sat up and rubbed sleep-filled eyes. She yawned and stretched, then began to comb her long, iridescent hair. Thuron turned and gazed at her for a moment. Even before breakfast she was breathtaking. With a sigh, he buckled on his sword and strode from the tent.

Within the hour, the entire caravan was on its way again, plodding eastward. It reached the foot of Mt. Thona just after sundown.

Exhausted as they were, the travelers indulged in a celebration, toasting the True Son with vast amounts of warm ale, staging sham duels and singing battle songs far into the night. Thuron retired early; Yllara excused herself shortly after to watch beside him as he slept. Gaar, observing everything, smiled enigmatically.

Next morning the man from Ulmekoor was gone by the time the girl and the furry Oracle awoke. Although the slope was steep the climb was relatively easy, for the face of Mt. Thona was dotted with vegetation, providing ready hand-holds and stirrups for the climber's convenience. For more than two hours Thuron ascended at a steady, easy rate, until the brush became more sparse. Still, he knew, the difficult part would come much further up.

Lankor's twin suns were midway up the sky when the Ulmekoorian came to a crevasse which gave him the alter-

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natives of backtracking half a mile to bypass it, or trying to vault across it. Impatiently, Thuron chose the latter course, backing up a bit to make full use of his momentum. Rushing at the edge of the pit, he launched himself out over the yawning abyss and flexed his knees for the landing. But his feet, instead of meeting solid rock, slipped on a patch of loose gravel and immediately flew out from under him. Thuron's steely fingers clutched at the edge and found it. For several seconds he hung by his fingertips, then slowly pulled himself up over the treacherous lip of rock.

Sobered by the experience, he proceeded with greater caution for the rest of the climb. By midday he had covered better than half of the vertical course.

He was impatient to go on, but the suns were now high overhead and his stomach reminded him that many hours had passed since he broke his fast, so he unpacked the lunch and wolfed it down. Finishing the cold lunch, he re-shouldered the lightened pack, adjusted the straps and started climbing again.

Presently he came to another ledge, wider than the first. Before his eyes, as he hauled himself over the lip, was a huge feather, dull gray in color and almost as long as Thuron was tall. Behind the feather was a mottled gray egg, the largest egg the Ulmekoorian had ever seen. Thuron approached it with caution—it rested in a rough nest made of tree branches. Standing alongside it, he could just see over its top. There was only one bird this large on all of Lankor—the dreaded *ork*, the huge bird with three heads. Fortunately for the citizenry, *orks* nested in high places and hunted for food in the wild, high, inland forests, seldom venturing near the haunts of man. But in bad seasons, when their normal prey was scarce, they had been known to ravage coastal villages, feasting on unwary citizens. Thuron had always discounted the reputed size of the giant predatory

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birds as an exaggeration of excited villagers but now, standing by the immense egg, he knew that the stories contained little exaggeration at all. Cautiously, he circled the nest and resumed his climb, grateful that Mama *ork* was away.

The slope was steeper than it had been in the first half of the ascent, and there were fewer footholds. Time and again Thuron came to chasms and crevasses which made him back-track and seek another way up, but up he went, inexorably higher, foot by torturous foot. The face of the mountain was a test far more taxing than his morning in the arena.

Finally he inched himself painfully over the topmost ledge and lay gasping in the thin air. He had reached the summit. New strength flowed into his tortured muscles and he stood up. The mists swirled more thickly now. Behind that damp curtain, Thuron knew, lurked the invisible palace of Wabbis Ka'arbu. He took a faltering step forward, then stopped abruptly, alerted by the faint, familiar sound of swarming *ngorths*. He turned his steps toward the humming and was relieved as it grew perceptibly louder.

An icy gust chilled Thuron to the bone but cleared the mists for a moment. He ignored the cold, for in that instant he could see his objective clearly, directly ahead, an archway of shimmering light. The Doorway to the Invisible Palace! With a yell of triumph, Thuron hurried towards it.

"Father!" he called. "I am here!"

"Welcome, my Son," boomed the god-voice. "Approach the doorway."

Thuron stood before the arch. It looked like a flickering, brightly glowing rainbow as large as a man—its multi-colored edges seemed to pulse and shimmer with internal life. Had Thuron ever doubted the reality of Ka'arbu, this sight would have been enough to assure his belief. But the man from Ulmekoor entertained no doubts, only a lack of comprehension. The mists swirled in around him once again

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but could not obscure the brilliance of Ka'arbu's doorway.

"My Son, lay aside your fears and step through the Doorway. I have waited a long time for you."

His hand firmly on *No'ondo'or*, the Ulmekoorian did as his Father commanded.

When Thuron awoke he was conscious of two things—the hunger in his belly and the dull pain behind his right ear. Gingerly, he fingered the spot and discovered it to be exceedingly tender. Whoever had clouted him from behind had hit hard, it seemed.

Blinking, he stared around him, not comprehending. He was still on the mountaintop with the mists swirling around him. The shimmering doorway was gone. Automatically, Thuron felt for his sword and found it still in its scabbard.

Time had passed, he knew. Just how much time was uncertain. The fog shrouding Thona's top made time measurement impossible.

Then he heard the voice.

"Thuron."

He whirled around but there was nothing to see save the omnipresent mist. Had Ka'arbu denied him access to the invisible palace?

"Thuron," the voice repeated. It seemed to be right on top of him, whispering in his ear. "My Son, do you hear me?"

"I hear you," Thuron growled uncertainly.

"Good. I am well pleased with you. Know you now, since we have dined together and I have conferred upon you the magic powers of godhood, that you shall be called, henceforth, Thuron Ka'arbu."

"Dined together?"

"Do you not remember, my Son? Yet, you carry proof of my statement with you—on the middle finger of your right hand."

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Thuron examined his hand. There, as the voice said, he discovered a finely wrought ring of some metal the Ulmekoorian had never encountered before. In it was set a large jewel which seemed to smolder with an inner flame.

"Never remove the ring, my Son, for anyone or for any reason. As long as you wear it you have the power of twenty ordinary men. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Thuron replied, not understanding at all; his eyes searched the mists, seeking a source for Ka'arbu's voice.

"Take up *No'ondo'or*, my Son, your Blade of Truth."

Cautiously, Thuron unsheathed *No'ondo'or*. At once his fingers felt the difference. He turned the weapon over. Imbedded in its hilt was another of the glowing jewels. And the blade!—it held a higher polish than before, and the edge seemed truer, sharper than any blade on all of Lankor. Along the flat of the blade his wondering eyes found many strange and alien symbols. Thuron gazed at it with awe. The exotic inscription had surely been scribed there by the hand of Wabbis Ka'arbu himself!

"There is a rock near you. Plunge your sword deep into the heart of the rock."

As if in a trance, Thuron picked up the sword. It had a new feel, too. There was a faint vibration as he tightened his grip on the handle. Obediently, he thrust it at the rock, and was amazed when *No'ondo'or's* point sank effortlessly into it.

"You have made my blade invincible!" the giant exulted, pulling it from the rock. "No shield exists that can withstand it!"

"A fitting weapon for the son of Wabbis Ka'arbu," the voice in Thuron's ear chuckled ironically. "Go, my Son, return to the caravan. I will speak with you on the morrow."

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"Magnificent," chuckled one. "One of the finest specimens we've come across."

"Interesting," another commented. "The complete and immediate belief in his own godhood. But what happens if the sword is removed from the ring and he tries to test the overwhelming might of the ring?"

"By that time," put in a third, "he'll be so thoroughly convinced that he's invincible that there'll be nothing that can stop him."

The smallest of the four chuckled, his eyestalks quivering. "He thinks he's pretty invincible right now."

"Is the girl a complication?" asked the voice of the Battle God.

"Perhaps."

"And what of the furry one—Gaar, I believe he's called." The Navigator enjoyed adding to his Captain's discomfort.

"Ah, yes, the furry one."

CHAPTER SIX: THE CHALLENGE OF YANG T'OR

THURON FOUND the edge over which he had inched in getting up, and peered over it into the thick mists below. The cliff was almost vertical and he could spot no footholds. Impatiently, he searched for an easier way down but found none. At last he drew *No'ondo'or* and, encouraged by the magic vibration which began the moment he tightened his grip, sliced a narrow passageway into the rock. Now he could begin his descent.

The trip down proved every bit as difficult as the journey up, despite the advantage of a sword which cut through rock with no effort—there were many spots where the terrain made it impossible for him to use the sword and still maintain his grip. He was forced to grope blindly, clinging there with his fingertips, balancing here where the slightest breath might spell disaster. But the Ulmekoorian felt as invincible as the weapon he carried, and so his spirits were high and he sang lustily as he scrambled down the face of Mt. Thona.

In an hour's time he had left the heavy mists behind and could better see where he was going. Below him was the place where he'd found the *ork's* egg; below that was the ledge from which he had last seen the caravan. In the far distance he could just make out the hills surrounding the Taveeshian seaport, two full days' march to the west. Suddenly he was aware that the suns of Lankor were high overhead; it had been late in the afternoon when he had stepped

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through the shimmering rainbow doorway. So he had spent the night with Wabbis Ka'arbul. He searched his mind for details of it, but could remember none at all.

Thuron did not see the *ork* until the giant bird was almost on top of him, until he heard its chilling scream of attack. Looking up, he glimpsed the great wings booming to slow its plunge, the sharp talons extended towards him and the three scaly heads with their tremendous hooked beaks opened wide. Instantly, he released his hold on the face of the cliff and dropped to the narrow ledge below. The infuriated bird clawed at the barren rock, its wings beating so powerfully that great gusts of wind tore at the man from Ulmekoor. Warily, he slipped *No'ondo'or* from its scabbard.

As the fearsome talons reached down for him, Thuron swung his blade in a swift overhead arc. For an instant he thought he'd missed, for he felt no resistance to the blow, but then he saw the entire foot of the *ork* fall away, neatly severed by *No'ondo'or*. The bird floundered, splashing its blood on the rocks, its throats shrilling a protest. Thrusting and slashing at the furiously threshing bird. Thuron sliced through feathers and tough, leathery hide with effortless ease but without seeming to do any good. Twisting away from the flashing beaks and the remaining claw, he searched for a vital target for his point. At last one of the tremendous necks was extended in front of him and he chopped with the blade, severing the *ork's* hideous middle head. Great gouts of blood spurted onto the ledge. The other two heads screamed in mindless agony as the creature tumbled down the mountain.

The Ulmekoorian turned and almost bumped into the huge egg. With a snort of disgust he braced his shoulder against it, planted his feet on the sheer face of the cliff and rocked it out of the nest, then rolled it to the edge and sent

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it crashing after Mama. Feeling much better for the encounter, Thuron resumed his descent.

Meanwhile, Gaar was having problems of his own. For most of the day, tall, saturnine King Xandnur had been beleaguering the Kend with a stream of questions, most of them amounting to, "When is Lord Thuron returning?" Now Yang Tor had added to Gaar's troubles by claiming that it had been given the High Priest to know that Thuron would not come back at all, reminding everyone that the Golden Sphere had made no mention of the True Son's return. Yllara sat sobbing in the tent, protesting vehemently that she didn't care whether Thuron came back or not.

Inaction gnawed at everyone's nerves; Gaar was no more immune to it than the other members of the caravan. His duty, however, seemed clear. Indeed, even if it had not been his duty, he would have welcomed the opportunity anyway. Resolutely, he climbed to the top of the largest wagon. After smoothing his whiskers he threw back his head, rolled his eyes up into their sockets and uttered a shrill, ululating yowl. Heads turned in the camp as the wavering note floated out over the breezeless air. As a crowd began to gather, the Oracle's voice hit melodic bell tones and he began to sway.

Oh, Mighty One! Oh God of the Two Faces, Mighty Wabbis Ka'arbu, know ye that your followers are weak and blind and have strayed from the path of faith," he chanted. *Know ye that there are among us those who doubt, those who refuse to believe in your Son or in his Glorious Destiny. Even the highest of the high have failed to trust your word and have said that the True Son will not return to lead us in the Sacred Quest. Send us an omen that the doubters among us will find their faith again.*

Abruptly, the chant ceased. Gaar's body became rigid.

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Then, breaking the bated silence, came his voice, deeper by far than anyone would expect from such a little man:

“Lord Thuron climbed to Thona’s peak,
His Sire to meet, his Fate to seek;
Up through the mists to Ka’arbu’s place,
To gaze at Mighty Ka’arbu’s face!

The gifts of Godhood now he shares,
Just like the Victor’s Robe he wears!
Of all on Lankor, He is best!
He’ll lead us in the Sacred Quest!”

Gaar’s thundering came to an end, his arms shot up convulsively and the furry Kend collapsed on top of the wagon. The crowd gaped in awe, murmuring hushed comments about Gaar’s oracling. “The highest of the high,”—did he mean Yang T’or or King Xandnur? Or both, perhaps? Servants and titled nobles alike speculated on the Oracle’s words. Xandnur, who had caught only the last half of the event, was sorely puzzled. Yang T’or, listening to an acolyte quote the Kend, seethed with rage. Yllara had seen the whole thing; now she knelt by the small one, chafing his wrists, grateful that the god had chosen to speak with the Kend’s mouth instead of through the High Priest.

Thuron walked the last sloping mile at a pace which would have exhausted an ordinary man but merely left the Ulmekoorian feeling hungry. The living tents, including the elaborate one Xandnur had presented to Thuron, were ringed about the perimeter of the camp with the cook tent and provision wagons in the center. As all entrances faced inwards, it was relatively easy for Thuron to approach the rear of his own quarters unobserved. He covered the dis-

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tance in quick strides, then paused outside the tent. From within came the sound of weeping, and then a wail.

"If you did not believe, why did you say those things?" The voice was Yllara's.

"It has been three days since he started up the mountain. Perhaps he needs me. But he forbade me to follow him!"

"You think he's dead," she said accusingly. "You think he's dead and still you predicted his return. How can I believe you at all? You're nothing but a fraud!" The sobbing began again.

Thuron had heard enough. Stooping, he lifted the rear edge of the tent and slipped inside. Sprawled on one bed was Yllara, weeping bitterly, her tangled hair flowing over her arms and face. On a pile of pillows slumped the fat little Kend, whiskers drooping, tail bedraggled.

"Ho!" boomed the giant. "This is a sad sight!"

Gaar gave a strangled yowl and leaped up. The girl's head lifted and she stared wildly at Thuron before covering her eyes and screaming shrilly.

"What ails the two of you? I am ravenous for food and you act as though a *xat* had wandered in!"

"Sire, sire," stammered Gaar, as tears trickled down his furry face. "I thought . . . we . . . you . . . you . . . sire, you've been gone three days! We thought you had gone to dwell with Ka'arbu f-f-forever!"

"Glad to get rid of me, eh, fat one?" growled Thuron, tweaking a furry ear with affection. "Nay, that would please you too much. Now run and get me a meal."

Rubbing his ear and grinning happily, Gaar scampered off. The giant turned back to the girl who stared pallidly at him. They looked at each other in silence.

At last she whispered, "I thought you dead. I knew Ka'arbu would not let it happen and yet I feared you would not return."

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"Would that have made you unhappy?"

Yllara flushed a deep blue. "I care not whether you come or go, Lord Thuron. I merely disliked seeing the furry one mourn."

"Does his sadness make you weep, Yllara? Or can I think those tears were for me?"

Yllara's lashes covered her eyes. Her mouth opened, the lips quivered in the start of an answer but before she could speak Gaar puffed into the room.

"Sire! King Xandnur insists you dine with him at once! He has a feast spread out in his tent! I told him I would consult . . ."

"Know you not the needs of my belly by now?" rumbled Thuron. "Yllara, I would speak with you later." With *No'ondo'or* still swinging at his side, the giant strode from the tent.

Two hours passed before his return. Gaar was alone now, seemingly asleep, stretched full length on his bed with only the twitching tip of his tail betraying his wakeful impatience. His ears swiveled forward at the sound of Thuron's boots outside. He was on his feet by the time the Ulmekoorian entered.

"Friend Gaar, your kind is famous for its curiosity. I have many wonders to tell you—and some to show you." Thuron unsheathed his blade and laid it against a rough-hewn table. Gaar's eyes widened as the sword passed through the heavy wood as if the table were made of smoke.

"It's magic!" the Kend exclaimed.

"'Tis god-power," Thuron corrected.

"Might I try it, lord?"

The giant hesitated, then handed over *No'ondo'or*. Gaar hefted the blade in both hands and touched it gingerly to another edge of the table. Nothing happened.

"It works only for me. Attend, my curious one, and I will tell you all that happened while I was away."

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Gaar listened, spellbound, for a quarter of an hour. Thuron concluded his account of the events on the mountaintop and watched for Gaar's reaction. The furry one tugged thoughtfully at his ears and neatened his whiskers before saying anything. "Then, sire, you remember nothing of the meeting with Wabbis Ka'arbu?"

"Nothing. But I cannot deny the ring or the magic strength of *No'ondo'or*."

"Truly, one cannot. It is most puzzling. But it is a puzzle we can save for another time. Did you tell this to King Xandnur?"

"No. Nor shall I to the fat one, Yang T'or."

Gaar eyed the Ulmekoorian narrowly. Then his mouth curved into a slight smile. "You speak wisely, sire. It is best to speak of this only to those you trust—and not too much, even then."

Thuron stretched to loosen tired muscles, then sat wearily on the bed. Pushing aside the Kend's helping hands, he untied his boots, removed them and flung them across the tent. Gaar scurried to pick them up.

The giant rubbed his aching eyes. "I meant to ask my Father about Yang T'or."

"Perhaps you did, sire."

Thuron slammed his fist into his palm. "Then why do I not remember his answer?"

The Kend hurried over and eased Thuron gently back on the bed, then began massaging the massive shoulders and arms. "Rest, Lord Thuron," he soothed. "When you wake, you may find your memory of the visit restored. You have traveled far and fought valiantly, sire. Even the gods must rest."

Thuron chuckled sleepily. "Brother, you are a good friend and a true advisor—as well as an amusing companion. Now, one thing more I need. Find the girl, Yllara. I wish to talk

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with her. Stay! Tell me, do you consider the girl trustworthy?"

"Do you, Lord Thuron? Then I could not say I do not, for it would do no good to warn you of her at this late date. But rest assured—I think nothing would sway her loyalty to the Son."

Thuron wondered hazily if the little one was oracling or presenting a new riddle. "Find her," he repeated.

The girl was not far away. She was dressed once more in the robe of *simne* she had worn when first she appeared in Thuron's quarters at the Adamar. This time, however, the fillet of jewels was missing from her forehead and her iridescent hair was unbound, floating loose about her perfect shoulders. The *simne* clung to her figure in a provocative manner, revealing her long legs and accentuating the pale blueness of her skin and the smouldering purple of her eyes. She slipped quietly into the tent and, in response to Thuron's gesture, came to the edge of his bed. The purple eyes brooded over him.

"You look tired, milord," she said softly.

"I am most infernally tired," he admitted.

Yllara leaned forward and fanned the giant gently. "Sleep will restore your strength."

"I have need of it. It worried you when I was gone overlong?"

"I knew you would return. Gaar predicted it."

The Ulmekoorian grinned. "What think you of my furry friend?"

Yllara threw back her head and pealed silvery laughter. "He is vain beyond belief. His conceit is overwhelming and he loves to play the fool. But I like him very much."

"Do you trust him?"

"Where you are concerned, implicitly. With others, only as his fancy takes him."

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"And Yang T'or?"

Her face grew still. "Yang T'or is ambitious and without honor. As Gaar says, a *sloord*."

"You sound like Xandnur himself," Thuron laughed.

"He is an enemy to my father, and to you, too."

"Although he wears the robes of a priest, I feel he is the enemy of Wabbis Ka'arbu, also."

"Can you not remove him and name another as High Priest?"

Thuron closed his eyes. "Perhaps. But whom should I appoint? Friend Gaar?"

Yllara giggled. "No, fond as I am of the furry one I cannot see him as High Priest."

"Nor I. Yet he is the one I trust most. I am too tired to think." Thuron breathed deeply and was asleep. Yllara gazed upon him for a long time. Then she gently touched his hand and stood up. On silent feet she left the tent.

He was walking through a sea of redness which flowed and ebbed, glowed and shimmered . . . suddenly he knew it wasn't a sea at all but millions of tiny red-suns dancing about him. Then the motes of crimson light shifted, stabilized, refocused, and Thuron saw that he was marching past tall red cliffs of crystal. Transparent and mirror-smooth, they sparkled and coruscated with an inner light. He was drawn inexorably to a mammoth spear of crystal and saw deep inside it the figure of a woman. Moving closer, he recognized Yllara, crimson robed, her iridescent hair bound in huge red jewels, her neck and arms and waist festooned with ropes of gems.

He looked about him. In all directions he could see nothing but these gleaming, pulsating crystalline growths. No other living thing. He turned back to Yllara. As he gazed at her she stirred, her lips parted, she held out her arms to him and her smouldering purple eyes pleaded with the Ulme-

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koorian. Now *No'ondo'or* was in his hand and he was hewing large slices of crystal from around the girl. Her eyes never left his face. At last he had her free from her crystal prison. Thuron turned back to the shimmering rocks. With careful strokes he sliced them into neat rectangles, shining bricks, and began stacking them into piles. Slice, stack. Slice, trim, stack. Hew, trim, stack. Quickly he forgot the girl and turned his full efforts to slicing, trimming, stacking the crystal bricks.

Reflected in the smooth face of the crystal cliffs were dozens of Thurons, each busy slicing, trimming, stacking. Now some of them walked off, carrying loads of bricks, and the tawny giant realized they were Taveeshian guardsmen. Dozens of them. Thuron increased the speed of his efforts, striving to keep ahead of the blue-skins who kept taking the bricks to some distant place. Slice, trim, stack. A new cliff of crystal. *No'ondo'or* hewing huge slabs, slicing the slabs into long bars, chopping the bars into neat bricks.

Yllara's voice: "Enough, Lord Thuron. More would sink the boat."

A red sea, sparkling, coruscating, shimmering with colors . . . so much work to be done and so little time in which to do it. Slice, trim, stack . . .

"Well?" Thuron said.

"A most interesting dream, lord. It is rife with meaning." The Kend's whiskers quivered with emotion.

Yllara sat silently by, listening but saying nothing.

"I have heard of such a place, sire. 'Tis called the Isle of Crystals. Legend has it that it lies beyond the Forbidden Sea."

"Could the dream be an omen?" Yllara asked.

"Most certainly so!" the Kend assured her. "It is fortunate indeed that I am here to tell its meaning, for know you that

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Lord Thuron has dreamed the Sacred Quest. And a wealer—*worthy* quest it is! The Forbidden Sea has perils, dangers and challenges enough to test the mettle even of the heroic True Son. Pray to Ka'arbu that we do not encounter the Dreaming Mists on our way there, for the courageous and unflinching lord . . .”

“On *our* way?” Thuron queried.

“It is *your* dream, sire—I merely read its meaning. Yllara was on the Isle of Crystals. So were Xandnur’s guards. Certainly you will have need of the quick wits and oracling of such as I, even though the thought of travel by water repels me.”

“A Sacred Quest,” Thuron mused. “Let us break our fast while I think further upon it.” The glint of adventure, too long missing from the Ulmekoorian’s eye, had returned.

Scarcely an hour had passed before Yang T’or was outside Thuron’s tent, demanding audience. At Gaar’s fussy instigation, Thuron flung the Victor’s Cloak about his shoulders and seated himself in the ornate, royal chair the King had furnished. Then the furry one admitted the High Priest. Yang T’or lumbered forward until he faced Thuron and bowed.

“Son of Mighty Wabbis Ka’arbu,” the priest began, “I came to inquire . . .”

“What?” roared Thuron. “You dare insult the Son of Ka’arbu by not making full obeisance? Salute me properly if you wish audience!”

“But, sire . . .”

“Down! Or know my displeasure.”

The High Priest pursed his thin lips and laboriously eased his great bulk down to sprawl full length at Thuron’s feet. The giant and the Kend watched his performance with wide grins on their faces, thoroughly enjoying Yang T’or’s discomfort and rage. The Ulmekoorian let him stay in that position until the blue-skin’s face was mottled with indigo

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and his breath came in short gasps. Curtly, Thuron told him to rise.

"Well?" he snapped.

"Son of mighty Ka'arbu," Yang T'or wheezed, once he had regained his feet, "the servants of the Battle God have given their loyalty to Wabbis Ka'arbu and to no other for many generations. From one king to the next our loyalty has never faltered. Does not the True Son, then, owe a measure of loyalty to the Temple?"

"Was it loyalty when the Temple backed an imposter in the Battle Games?" Thuron inquired icily. "Was it loyalty to predict that I would not return from Thona's peak?"

"The imposter has been banished," Yang T'or replied, ignoring Thuron's second charge.

"You are loyal to the Temple and its wealth, not to Ka'arbu. As all can see, it feeds you well!"

It was obvious from his expression that the interview was not going the way Yang T'or wanted it to. "The Temple serves Ka'arbu only, as you well know," he continued doggedly.

"Then let it serve! Let not its priests command its god, or they may feel the wrath of Thuron Ka'arbu."

The High Priest's eyes narrowed. "Command? I? Sire, I merely suggested . . ."

"Spare me your suggestions, bloated one. I need them not. Begone, Yang T'or. I have my father's work to do."

"Ka'arbu's work is what the Temple has always done."

"Your words impress me not. Nor do your human sacrifices. I command you: waste no more lives in this manner."

The thin mouth drew into a snarl. "It is ordained . . .!"

Thuron smiled coldly. "The Sacred Quest needs ships, not sacrifices. Surely the Temple coffers are fat enough to purchase a ship?"

Yang T'or reeled as if from a physical blow. "I—we—the

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Temple has already spent great sums on the celebration in your honor. I doubt if enough remains . . .”

“I will talk to you again in the Temple,” Thuron said, cutting the High Priest off. “We return at once to Taveeshe.”

“As you command, lord,” mumbled Yang T’or, bowing perfunctorily and backing from the tent.

Thuron was dimly aware of a faint crackling in his right ear, and then the voice he had heard on the mountaintop whispered, *Well spoken, my Son. You will leave for the Isle of Crystals as soon as you can muster a force sufficient for the journey.*

“Did you not know? King Xandnur has offered to make me Commander of his Royal Guards.”

Excellent! Now all you need is a ship.

“I will not sail in Yang T’or’s even if he buys one for me,” the Ulmekoorian said quietly. Gaar and Yllara wore puzzled expressions; obviously, each thought Thuron had suddenly began talking to himself, but neither was rude enough to mention it.

You don’t have to, my Son. Ask King Xandnur to give you a ship, too. If he balks, promise to bring him some priceless trophies.

CHAPTER SEVEN: INTO THE FORBIDDEN SEA

THE SHIP, of course, was the Queen of the Taveeshian fleet. Although it further tried his patience, Thuron delayed the sailing to let Xandnur make a public presentation and declare a feast day in honor of the Sacred Quest. Gaar pointed out to the restless Ulmekoorian that not every day did a king have the opportunity to give such a gift to the son of a god. Thus it was that Thuron Ka'arbu somewhat curtly accepted the ship and its crew before a cheering throng. In the same stroke he became official Commander of the Royal Taveeshian Guards, taking twenty of the bravest for the voyage. Yang T'or did not attend the ceremony.

Thuron, Gaar and Yllara remained on board long after the crowd had dispersed. Admiral Amik Nerrd himself had elected to captain the voyage; proudly Nerrd guided them through the *Haughty Lass* while its crew and the twenty guardsmen stood at attention.

A full five *norkls* long and one and a half wide, the ship was of fairly deep draft for a Taveeshian craft, with high sides and a high prow upon which was the Admiral's bridge. She carried a crew of sixteen, counting Amik Nerrd, and had quarters for two dozen passengers.

"'Tis the finest, fleetest and most modern ship afloat," he boasted, showing them the intricate mechanism which propelled the twenty pairs of oars.

The ship also carried three young *seproveens*, two of which were harnessed to a vertical pole which turned and around

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which was wound a thick hawser, its ends disappearing through the forward bulkhead. The cables encircled the rims of great wheels to which were ganged five pairs of oars each. The Admiral's pride was great as he explained to Thuron how this system allowed five pairs of oars to remain in the water at all times, thus imparting a constant thrust to the ship. The beasts were employed in overlapping shifts, one always resting while the other two plodded their circular track. Thuron complimented the Admiral upon the ingenuity of the arrangement and on the strength and beauty of the beasts. Abovedecks, as in more conventional Taveeshian ships, were the tall, square-rigged masts, two of them, a crow's nest atop the taller of the two.

Next came an inspection of their quarters, which proved simple but pleasing. After satisfying himself that his belly would not be neglected during the voyage, the Ulmekoorian and his companions went ashore to spend their last night at the Adamar.

They were back at the crack of dawn. An hour later Admiral Nerred gave the signal to hoist anchor and cast off. Suddenly the lookout spotted a man running towards them, a large guardsman with sword, shield and battle pack. Operations suspended while everyone watched the sprinting guardsman pound along the pier.

"I must speak to Lord Thuron!" he shouted as he came alongside the ship.

Thuron went to the rail and gazed down at the blue-skin. "Riis Murlik!" he exclaimed.

The burly, sword-scarred warrior grinned broadly. "My sword is your sword, noble lord . . . if you but allow it!" he called. "Have you room for one who would gladly die at the side of Thuron Ka'arbu?"

"No!" hissed Gaar, now at the Ulmekoorian's elbow. "Trust him not, sire . . . he is Yang T'or's man."

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"I value your advice, brother, but this time I think you are wrong." Turning towards the bridge, Thuron called: "Make room for a warrior!" Then, to Murlik: "Your sword is welcome!"

The burly blue-skin clambered aboard and approached Thuron, arms outstretched. The two giants embraced warmly, then stood off from one another. "Brother, you look fit!" Thuron exclaimed.

"I mend quickly," Murlik laughed, touching the thin, purple scars on his face and arms. "The marks of your sacred sword—I wear them proudly."

"You earned them with honor. My thanks to you for the warning about Yang T'or."

The Taveeshian scowled. "He makes life unsafe for me within the city. Sire, when I heard the reception you gave him on the way to Mt. Thona I knew my place was in your service." Murlik lowered his voice. "He has sworn revenge against you. It would be wise for you to sleep with one eye open while Yang T'or lives."

Thuron laughed and slapped the other on the shoulder. "Have you taken breakfast yet? Then join us!"

Nerrd proved himself an excellent host. He had witnessed the Battle Games and was thrilled to have two such celebrated warriors at his table. The meal drew loud belches of appreciation from the men. Once the table was cleared, Nerrd poured rare liqueurs for his passengers and they sat back to converse.

"It is rumored that you intend to sail the Forbidden Sea," Riis Murlik said.

"Aye," confirmed the Admiral. "'Tis the only way to reach the Isle of Crystals."

"I have heard many tales," interspersed Gaar, "—tales of

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monsters and insurmountable dangers. I find some of these stories hard to believe."

Nerrd chuckled. "What is truth, my furry one? To you, one thing—dry land and a soft bed to sleep in. To me, the sea and a storm to ride. Each man sees truth in a different way and for him that way is so."

"Nay, no intricate thoughts, friend," rumbled Thuron. "The Kend told me those tales and I will know more of them."

Nerrd stretched, scratched his head and leaned further back in his chair. "The dangers of the Forbidden Sea," he mused. "There are many—according to the old legends. There are the Howling Rocks—they set up a deafening din and panic men so that they lose their minds forever. Then there is the Ocean Hag who scours the seas for the drowned and takes them to her castle, there to serve her as she sees fit. There are monsters of every form and description, and, I'd venture, a few formless ones. Some are said to lurk in the depths and devour hapless ships, men and all. Others, 'tis said, dwell atop the waters and spit flames or spew poison on vessels unlucky enough to cross their paths. And, of course, there are the Wind Maidens who ride the wake of certain storms and descend on ships to suck the crews bloodless."

Yllara shuddered and Gaar yowled dolorously.

"Enough," declared the Admiral, frowning. "My apologies for frightening you, well-born maid. We will speak no more of sea horrors."

The sea, on their second day out, became increasingly rough, and, as if marking the Admiral's warnings, tossed the valiant craft on swells which lifted it high then slammed it back into roiling troughs. The sky shifted from violet to gray, deepening to a murky hue which the crewmembers eyed with apprehension. With skill attesting his long experience at sea,

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Amik Nerdd kept the prow headed into the wind so it would slice each wave. Angry water crashed on the deck and washed over all in its way. Sailors clung to whatever was handy, some of them scrambling up into the rigging to escape the mighty waves. The guardsmen, less experienced at sea, tried to brave the storm with sheer determination; many were swept overboard before Thuron and Riis Murlik could order them below. Yllara huddled in her cabin, containing her terror. Thoroughly drenched, Gaar alternately yowled and swore in his native tongue, substituting outrage for panic.

Now the rain hit, driven in torrential sheets by the merciless wind. Thuron, standing on the bridge beside Admiral Nerdd, could barely see the rest of the ship. The boiling clouds spat lightning, the crash of thunder covered the creak of tortured timbers and the screams of men being tumbled to their deaths. A lightning bolt speared the tip of the forward mast, splitting it neatly from top to base.

Belowdecks, the beasts plodded on in their circular course, straining against a sea which fought the dipping oars. The two in harness were no problem, but the spare *seproveen* quaked in terror, oblivious of the soft, reassuring voice of its handler. Above, the splintered mast whipped in the howling wind, adding further dangers. The Admiral's face showed great strength and determination as he watched the storm raging about him and shouted crisp instructions to the next in command. The ship responded, leaping and plunging but always headed into the towering waves, bobbing to the surface after brief moments under tons of crashing water.

The storm lasted for almost an hour—then, with chilling suddenness, it was over, the sea was deadly calm. Thuron let a great sigh of relief escape his lips. Admiral Nerdd grinned at him. "You are brave, Lord Thuron, but you're not a sailor yet." Turning abruptly, Nerdd barked a series of

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sharp orders. Crewmembers scuttled along the decks, making fast everything which had broken loose, racing into the rigging to lash flapping sheets and tighten sagging lines. Gaar staggered up the companionway and stood for a moment on the bare deck, his magnificent tail a sodden mass trailing behind, his whiskers quivering with indignation.

"Get below!" shouted the Admiral. "We're not through it yet."

No sooner had he spoken than the wind began again, this time from the opposite direction. Ponderously, the ship turned to keep its prow to the wind. The glaze on the gray water was abruptly broken as ragged swells formed. Once more the rain pounded on the crippled craft, wind howled in the rigging and great walls of water loomed and crashed. Another sailor vanished before Thuron's eyes and Amik Nerrd's mouth was grim again. The sea and the gale sought mightily to destroy the sturdy craft, but Nerrd's skillful seamanship was a match for the worst the elements had to offer. Time ceased to have meaning—each moment overflowed with perils great enough to wash away the memory of earlier dangers.

At last it was over. A count of remaining hands showed that five crewmembers and eight guardsmen had been lost in the storm. Seeing Thuron safe, Yllara sobbed with relief. Ignoring his own bedraggled condition, Gaar tottered through the ship, inspecting everything, hissing sour comments as he went. After seeing that repairs were satisfactorily underway, the Kend retired to his quarters to dry himself and brush and oil his fur. Thuron and Murlik toiled with the sailors, using their great strength to speed the ship's recovery.

Two days later the *Haughty Lass* limped into the port of Kendsahr. At Gaar's suggestion, Thuron dispatched the furry one to recruit seamen to replace the drowned sailors and went to his cabin for a badly needed rest. But his thoughts

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kept him awake. They had reached Kendsahr, yes, but now where? The legends were little help. "Somewhere within the Forbidden Sea, off the southern coast of Kendsahr." But where, exactly, would they find the Isle of Crystals, the object of the Sacred Quest which had already cost the lives of thirteen good men? Only Wabbis Ka'arbu knew, but the Battle God had not spoken since before they'd left Taveeshe. Why had the God permitted such a vicious storm? They had not even been given warning. Why had there been no contact at all during these many days? He'd look like a fool to Yllara if they sailed again and he was still unable to tell them in which direction. Thuron was so angry that he ignored the faint crackling in his ear.

Patience, my Son, the whispering began. I have not forgotten you. But there has been other work for me as well.

Thuron sat up. "Forgive me, Father. To you who have wisdom and patience time means nothing, but to a half-mortal . . ."

You cannot build a city in a day, you must learn to wait and ponder, Thuron Ka'arbu.

"Aye, Father."

"Now listen closely, for I will give you directions and warn you of dangers. You must tell your Captain of them.

"Admiral, Father. The finest in the fleet."

Of course. Most appropriate. Now, take heed of all I tell you. . . .

Thuron followed the God's words closely. They spoke for many minutes, after which Thuron sent for Admiral Nerrd. Together, they went to the chart room and spent the better part of an hour poring over Nerrd's maps. Then, the giant having accomplished his task, went in search of Yllara.

He found her on deck. She was looking out over the sea, her face sad. He approached and leaned against the rail beside her.

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"What is troubling you, maid?" he asked gently.

Yllara veiled her eyes with long lashes and smiled wanly. "How much longer to the Isle, Lord Thuron?"

"We reach it soon."

"And then? When you have done as your Father bade you and we return to Taveeshe, what then, sire?"

Thuron frowned. He hadn't considered that far ahead. The adventure of the moment had sufficed. "Why—why—I'll go adventuring again."

"Will you not settle down and merely do as your father bids, lord?"

Thuron laughed. "Nay. I'm a man in my own right. Although I will run errands for Ka'arbu, I will go my own way when the errand is done."

Yllara's lips quivered. "Will you return to Taveeshe often?"

"Often." At the tone of the giant's voice, the girl glanced quickly up at him. Then her color deepened at the look in his eyes.

"Would you miss me, lady, were I not to return?"

"So much," whispered Yllara.

"I wanted you not when King Xandnur sent you. Now you are all that holds me to Taveeshe. Yllara, will you go roaming with me?"

She came into his arms and, standing on tiptoe, gave him such a kiss as most men only dream about. They stood lost in each other's eyes, whispering those foolish whispers that lovers everywhere imagine originated with them.

"Will Xandnur object?" Thuron finally managed a rational sentence.

Yllara, glowing, laughed breathlessly. "It is what he would wish for most, my Thuron. That one of his daughters should belong to the son of a god is indeed an honor."

"Not 'belong to', Yllara. I would wed you. But the idea

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of being wed to royalty and expected to dance attendance at court is galling."

"Nay, love. I'm not royalty. By the laws of Taveeshe only the children of the first wife, of the Queen, are royal. I'm King Xandnur's favorite, it's true, which is why he sent me to you, but being of my father's tenth wife, I'm a long way from royalty."

Thuron threw back his handsome head and hallooed joyously, then bent to her lips again. Locked in a kiss, they didn't hear Gaar's pattering footsteps. The Kend had to cough vehemently several times before they broke apart and turned, blushing, to him. Gaar was frowning and his tail swished nervously from side to side.

"I do not like it, Lord Thuron. Indeed I do not like it."

Thuron recovered his equilibrium.

"What is it you do not like, brother?"

"That keening. It is disturbing." Then as the Ulmekoorian and the girl gazed blankly at him, Gaar looked puzzled. "Do you not hear it, sire?"

"I hear nothing out of the usual."

"It is far off, lord, but already it hurts my ears. If it gets much louder, the din will become unbearable. I fear we are approaching the Howling Rocks."

By the time Thuron's ears picked up the distant noise, Gaar was curled up in the hold, hands over ears and tail draped over his head, his body quivering miserably. Here the Ulmekoorian found him and pulled him out of his corner.

"A solution must be found, friend, before—"

"What?"

"Attend, furry one! We must—"

"One moment, sire." Gaar unwrapped his handsome brush from about his head and lowered his hands, wincing at the noise. "Now I can hear you, but speak quickly, I beg!"

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Thuron looked at the Kend and grinned broadly. "You had your ears covered!" he exclaimed. "Of course!"

Gaar nodded; then each bellowed with laughter.

"What can we use?"

"Something soft and pliable, sire, to mold itself to the inside of the ear."

Searching the hold, they stumbled upon the mash used to feed the *seproveens*. Mixed with a little water it proved just the material they needed. They lugged a tubful out of the hold and showed their idea to the Admiral. Amik Nerrd was delighted, and immediately ordered his men to plug their ears with the stuff. Riis Murlik and the guardsmen followed suit. Finally, Thuron plugged Yllara's ears and his own. Gaar, with huge wads of the stuff in his ears, once more wore a blissful expression.

Soon, their attention was drawn to a red glow on the horizon. Another half hour's sailing showed tall, glittering red cliffs with huge breakers sending plumes of spray high up the crimson slopes. Thuron squeezed the girl until she was breathless; Gaar hopped up and down with the excitement.

Nerrd carefully piloted the *Haughty Lass* through a break in the reefs and anchored. Thuron motioned for a boat to be lowered. Pointing, Thuron picked his crew. At first Gaar and Yllara declined to go. But when the Ulmekoorian picked Gaar up and placed him in the boat the Oracle capitulated, wailing soundlessly, and Yllara followed.

They rowed around the island, at last choosing an inlet where the waves broke gently on a flat stretch of pink sand. Thuron signaled to the sailors and they beached the small boat in the shallows. The Ulmekoorian sprang out, followed by sailors and guardsmen. Wrinkling his nose with distaste and lifting his robes high, Gaar stepped gingerly into the shallow water. Thuron shook with unheard laughter as he watched the dignified Oracle taking step after step, shaking

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the drops from each foot before lowering it into the water again—all in outraged grandeur.

Then the True Son turned for a closer look at the island, the object of his Sacred Quest. It was subtly different from the way he'd dreamed it. On each side of the small beach rose tall, transparent cliffs of glittering blood-red crystals, glowing and sparkling under the twin suns. Deep into the island they went, one rising higher than the other. Even the air seemed to shimmer scarlet around the awe-struck exploration party. Then, abruptly, beings exploded from the carmine crystal cliffs. From a distance they seemed only blobs of colors, many colors, ever shifting and changing. They approached rapidly and as they did, Thuron realized that these beings had long, thin jointed legs, eight each, that covered ground at a tremendous rate. Atop these octets of legs were round, transparent bodies that glowed and were rainbowed with many hues.

Stickmen! thought the giant. *No! Not men of sticks. Giant spiders!*

And then the arachnoids were upon them! Not quite spiders, the creatures were weaponless but equipped with fierce mandibles which looked capable of crushing any foe who came too close. *No'ondo'or* and Murlik's blade slid from their scabbards at the same instant. Yllara recoiled in terror and dashed behind the two warriors.

Three of the arachnoids cantered out from the pack in a precise wedge while a fourth climbed agilely to the top of a crystal spear. The climber accomplished a rapid series of color changes once he gained the top. As though in response to a signal, the remaining arachnoids fanned out in a crescent and advanced slowly behind the first three. The top one flashed red-yellow-green-blue-orange and the trio halted, changing their body hue from crimson to soft violet.

By this time the Taveeshian guards had noticed the arach-

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noids and had drawn their swords in readiness. There was no way, with the plugs in their ears, for them to hear a command, so Thuron merely signaled with his sword, keeping his eyes on the spider-creatures. The six blue-skins joined Thuron and Riis.

When the spiders were almost upon them, the Ulmekoorian signaled for attack; eight blades went into action, chopping through legs, mandibles and soft transparent bodies alike. The three arachnoids perished.

The one sitting on the crystal sphere blinked red-blue-yellow-blue-green-and-pace; six more arachnoids skittered towards them on long spindly legs. With their advance party wiped out, the arachnoids made no further pretense at a mere skirmish—from the way the ends of the crescent formation grew, it was plain to Thuron that whatever followed would be all-out war. He geared himself accordingly, tapped Riis Murlik on the shoulder to point out the encircling maneuver, and sprinted towards the advancing group, holding *No'ondo'or* before him.

Obligingly, the creatures opened ranks to let him through, obviously planning to encircle him. *No'ondo'or* slashed out and down, cleaving the first of the beasts in two. Thuron whirled, sweeping his blade in a wide arc where it severed the front stalks of at least four more spider-shapes. The injured beasts flashed blue-pink-blue-pink.

On his crystal pedestal the leader blinked red-blue-orchid-yellow-red, and then slowly faded to a dull beige. Six more of the beings converged upon Thuron, three from each side. The Ulmekoorian spun with sword outstretched and killed two of them simultaneously. Another leaped at him, jumping high to drop on him from above. He slashed upwards, cutting the beast in half; a large quantity of reeking, colorless fluid spilled from its body and engulfed him.

Blinded by the hot deluge, Thuron wiped frantically at

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his eyes and nose—he could neither see nor breathe, yet he knew that he still must fight, for the arachnoids were close by, waiting to crush him in their powerful mandibles. Whirling *No'ondo'or's* singing death around him to keep the immediate area free of spiders, he managed to clear the sticky fluid from his face.

Murlik and the others were taking their toll of spider-shapes, too. Riis had discovered a technique which did not depend on a magic sword—after lopping off the front two legs he'd rush at the head of the beast, sidestep the deadly mandibles and plunge his blade through the multifaceted eye and into the brain beyond.

Within minutes the crystal plain was littered with dead arachnoids. The leader blinked lavender with flashes of yellow and the few survivors scampered away in enthusiastic retreat, disappearing into a hole in the cliff ahead.

Thuron signaled his party to follow him and led the way towards the cliff, and on into the cleft through which the spiders had made their hasty exit. Cautiously, they entered the crystal ravine, keeping alert for more of the spiders, but none showed themselves. The corridor was wierdly lit from reflections within the huge crystal itself, and extended for several hundred feet before emerging on the other side.

At the end of it, Thuron signaled for a halt. Everyone froze. The giant turned and beckoned to the Kend. Gaar trotted up and Thuron motioned him to look. The furry one did so and gasped. On a cardinal plain rose a city, a magnificent city built of vermilion crystal blocks. Turrets and spires reached into the roseate skies. The buildings had tall, arched doorways and round openings high in the walls. Arachnoids scuttled in and out of the buildings and along the streets which led between the structures.

A translucent spider-being flashed into view directly in front of the two hidden watchers. Another joined him. The

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first one flashed orange-lavendar-green; the other blinked yellow-pink-blue. Then they parted, each returning the way he had come.

Sentries? Thuron recalled the complex color shifts during his recent battle with the arachnoids and decided that it was indeed a form of communication.

The familiar crackle in his ear was startling in the ear-plugged silence of the island.

You have reached the Isle of Crystals.

"Yes, Father," Thuron whispered. "It is overrun with giant spiders, just as the legends say. They have built themselves a city of crystals. We will take the city if you command it."

No, Thuron. That is not your quest. The purpose of this expedition is to return with a shipload of the crimson crystals. Take your magic sword and hew large bricks, enough to fill the hold of your vessel and cover its decks. Then return at once to Taveeshe.

The crackling ceased. Signalling again, Thuron withdrew his party to the cliff-edged beach. Here he unsheathed *No'ondo'or* and did his Father's bidding, hewing, carving, slicing, handing over the gleaming blocks of crystal to strong-backed guardsmen who carried them to the skiff which shuttled the precious cargo out to the *Haughty Lass*. At last, Nerrd sent a message that all available space had been filled. In triumphant weariness, Thuron sheathed his magic blade, clambored aboard the skiff and watched as the fabled crystal cliffs receded.

The *Haughty Lass* set sail immediately. Thuron and his three companions stood at the rail for a long time, their eyes lingering on the red glow on the horizon. Some time later Thuron pulled the plugs from his ears and motioned the others to do likewise.

"It is good to be able to hear again, beloved," Yllara said softly.

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"Aye," Thuron agreed. "Too long a silence is almost as bad as the howling of the rocks. I wonder why they do not howl on board our ship?"

"I can hear them," Gaar said. "Faintly, it is true. It is like the distant crashing of the surf. Perhaps, the crystals do not make the noise themselves, but only reflect the sound of the surf as it beats against the island, like a thousand echoes all at once."

"Perhaps," the Ulmekoorian agreed.

Suddenly they heard the voice of the lookout, shouting:
"Pirate ships ahead! Ships of the pirate fleet of Sehre'ell"

CHAPTER EIGHT: PIRATES OF SEHRE'EL

AROUND AND BETWEEN the neat piles of crystal brick dashed the blue-skinned guardsmen, led by Thuron and Riis Murlik after the Ulmekoorian had ordered Gaar and Yllara below. Thuron ran to the bridge in response to Amik Nerrd's frantic signals.

"Sirel" exclaimed the Admiral. "There are three of them! Look!"

Thuron scanned the waters. The three pirate craft were deployed one behind the other, with about twelve to twenty men on each. Their ships were small, double prowed, highly maneuverable, with a single sail, which, like those on the *Haughty Lass*, hung limp in the breezeless air.

"The gods grant me a decent wind," declared Nerrd, "and I'll outrun them."

"There is no wind," Thuron pointed out. "It is not my nature to run from battle."

"But they outnumber us by at least three men to our one."

Thuron grinned. "True. But they also expect us to defend ourselves. I propose to attack. Bring us alongside their lead ship, quickly!"

Without waiting for Nerrd's response Thuron leaped to the deck and briefed his men. The Taveeshian force numbered but fourteen in all, counting Thuron and Riis—just over half the number they'd started with. The sailors, too, were armed, so Thuron's confidence was unshakable. There

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was barely time to explain his plan before the Admiral brought his ship alongside the first of the pirate craft.

A more gaudily costumed assortment of ruffians would be hard to imagine. They were clad in booty from countless raids, rich and costly fabrics mixed with expensive furs, jewels of every sort, shirts of *simne*, boots in all hues and shades. Some wore plumed hats. The crested Rahrns among them, of course, were bareheaded. Thuron noted three Ulmekoorians on the first pirate ship—the majority, however, were blue-skins. All bristled with weapons: dirks, longknives, daggers, swords, here and there an axe. It was a formidable company.

On signal, the guardsmen swarmed over the rail to land on the alien deck, Thuron in the lead. Steel clanged against steel and *No'ondo'or* hummed its battle song, slicing through pirate swords, shields and flesh, carving a wide swath in the enemy force. Riis fought skillfully, dispatching three of the pirates in quick succession, and Thuron swung his magic blade in ever larger arcs, doing more damage with each stroke than any six other men combined. Seeing the havoc he caused, several of the pirates leaped in panic into the comparative safety of the sea.

"Back to the *Haughty Lass!*" Thuron shouted, lopping off the pirate mast with a single stroke. Quickly, the guardsmen scrambled back aboard, leaving two of their number dead on the alien deck. Nerdd barked an order; the oars dipped and strained and the heavy ship moved in a slow circle to meet the second of the pirate craft.

Although astounded by Thuron's tactic, the pirates were no longer taken by surprise and were ready for him. Three guardsmen died before their feet hit the pirate's deck. *No'ondo'or* sang of death and five pirates toppled in response. Murlik's blade flashed and rang and found its target; the remaining helmeted blue-skins comported themselves

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bravely, striving to be worthy of their commander, Thuron Ka'arbu. Thuron skewered yet another enemy heart, then slashed quickly through the pirate mast. "Back to the ship!" he ordered.

Turning, he vaulted over the high side of the *Haughty Lass* and saw a chilling panorama. Pirates and Taveeshian sailors were locked in combat—the body of Amik Nerred hung limply over the rail, blood streaming from a ragged wound in his neck—a valiant Kend dropped from the rigging to the back of a swarthy invader and slit his throat—more pirates were scrambling over the far rail. With a yell of fury, the Ulmekoorian joined the fray.

Although they fought valiantly, Thuron's battle-weary survivors were no match for fresh pirate steel. Man after man poured his life in red pools on the crystal-strewn deck. The screams and groans of the dying were worse than the blank, accusing faces of the dead. At last only Thuron and Riis Murlik stood erect, swords ready. A yowl of protest came from below—then Gaar, his hands lashed behind him, stumbled up the companionway, prodded by a pirate's sword.

"Surrender, Holy One!" shouted the pirate leader, a huge gray barbarian whose pointed purple beard and flowing purple crest made his cruel features seem even more ferocious. Thuron stared at him and lowered his sword, for the pirate was holding Yllara, and pointing a dagger at her throat. Her gown was ripped half off, her hands bound behind her back. Thuron knew she would be dead before he could possibly cover the distance between them.

Snarling, Thuron handed over his sword. Gaar moaned in dismay; Yllara sobbed once, then was silent; Riis stood grim-faced, glowering at the pirate chief.

"If you think you're gonna die by the sword, Holy One," sneered the huge gray-skin, "you better think again. You're gonna die slow. Two of my ships got crippled with your

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lousy sword—you can have one of 'em. I hope your brains bake and your throat dries up before you die!"

"My Father's vengeance will strike you down!" Thuron rumbled, even as they lashed his hands behind his back.

The barbarian roared with laughter and ordered the two warriors prodded into the disabled pirate shell. Quickly, the gaudy renegades removed the oars and water casks. A moment later two of the pirates picked up the struggling Gaar and heaved him over the side. Spitting and swearing, he landed beside Thuron.

"We gonna keep the girl," shouted the pirate leader, leaning over the rail of his captured ship. "She'll be great sport for the crew!"

From the small ship, Thuron could no longer see Yllara. With long poles the ruffians were shoving the crippled craft away from the other.

"The Curse of Ka'arbu be upon you!" Thuron shouted, rage purpling his golden face.

"You cowardly *sloords!*" Gaar exploded.

Coarse laughter from the *Haughty Lass* was the only answer. Her sails had caught the wind and she was moving rapidly away.

Both warriors strained mightily at their bonds. Thuron's snapped. Quickly, he freed Riis and Gaar, then leaped to the rail. Gaar grabbed his ankles and held him.

"Lord Thuron!" Murlik shouted. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to swim after them!"

"Wait, sire," Gaar panted. "Their speed is far too great—even you cannot catch them that way. And if you did, the minute they saw you they would kill the girl."

The Ulmekoorian clenched his fists impotently. "I must do something! I cannot just sit here and drift aimlessly while those motherless curs have my Yllara!"

Gaar glared and hissed at the receding ship. The *Haughty*

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Lass seemed like a toy in the distance. Helplessly, the three castaways watched until it dropped over the horizon.

The two visible moons of Lankor floated like cats eyes in the emerald-glowing sky. Riis Murlik slept. Gaar attempted to, but could not because of the uneven motion the sea imparted to the small, rudderless craft. Thuron would not sleep. His rage had subsided, hardening into a burning determination to have revenge upon the pirates of Sehre'el. The two friends sat in silence, glaring at the open sea around them and the twin three-quarter moons above.

The god-crackling began in Thuron's ear, presaging Wab-bis Ka'arbu's fatherly voice.

I'm proud of you, my Son. Your ship is packed with crystals. Now I shall tell you where to deliver them . . .

"Father, how can you be so calm after what has happened?" Thuron's voice was full of surprise and outrage. Gaar's ears swiveled forward.

Tell me, quickly, what has happened?

"Know you not of the pirates' attack, or of how they slaughtered our crew and took the ship with my Yllara still on board, and set Riis Murlik, Gaar and me adrift in this miserable small boat?"

By the galaxies! Pirates! Surprisingly, the god seemed to chuckle.

"The Pirates of Sehre'el," the giant explained.

Where is their base? Do you know, Thuron?

"I know not, Father. I suspect Yang T'or is behind the attack."

Of course. You are quite right. What is your position, Thuron? How far from the Isle of Crystals?

"I cannot tell how far we have drifted since they abandoned us, Father. Or in which direction. We had barely left the island when the pirates came upon us."

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In that time you have traveled a good distance, my Son. Are you in control of your craft?

"We are without sails, oars or rudder."

Then you are riding an ocean current, and, it seems, a swift one. Unless it veers, you will reach land in two days, a high land with many mountains. I will speak with you again. Have courage.

Abruptly, the crackling in his ear ceased.

"Father, wait! I would ask you . . ." A muscle in the Ulmekoorian's jaw began to twitch and his fists clenched as he realized his conference with the god was over. Wearily, he related the conversation to Gaar.

"I know of but one land which is high, with many mountains," the Kend mused, eyes gleaming in the dark. "Kend-sahr."

CHAPTER NINE: THE RAIN FOREST OF KENDSAHR

FOR TWO DAYS and two nights the trio drifted without food or water. Thuron smouldered with rage, rehearsing in his thoughts the acts of vengeance he would perform upon Yang T'or and the pirate leader when next they met. Loyally, Gaar tried to oracle a happy outcome to the adventure but the attempt fell flat. Riis Murlik suffered the deprivation with soldierly self-control, urging the others to conserve their strength.

Murlik even managed to sleep. Gaar could not, because of the uneven motion the sea imparted to the rudderless craft. Thuron would not. Around midnight of the second night, Thuron was staring angrily at the dark waters, wishing there were a foe within reach and that he had *No'ondo'or* in his fist with which to reach him. First he would skewer the fat priest, running him through with an effortless thrust of the magic sword. He wondered if Yang T'or would shrink like a punctured wineskin. It would give him great pleasure to feel the sword vibrating hungrily as it sliced through the high priest's flesh as he carved the corpse into neat brick-sized chunks and fed them to Yang T'or's acolytes, who, if the gods were just, would then die of poisoning.

But for all Thuron knew, the gifted blade might even now be in Yang T'or's slimy hands, for he was convinced that the High Priest was responsible for the pirate attack. With the sword he was invincible, Thuron Ka'arbu, True Son of the Battle God; without it he was merely Thuron of Ulmekoor,

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an adventurer who had come upon evil days. The only proof which remained of his godhood was the ring Ka'arbu had placed upon his finger on the mountain top. In the darkness, its strange jewel glowed faintly. Thuron's fingers toyed with the ring, reassuring him of its reality.

Suddenly his full attention was on it, for the stone felt loose. Examining it, he found that it seemed to be on a pivot. Curiously, he turned the jewel and then jerked his hand away in surprise, for a thin beam of bright white light shot from its center, a shaft of light which extended far up into the sky above.

"Gaar!" he exclaimed. "Look at this!"

His words were unnecessary, for Gaar's attention had been caught by the brilliant ray the moment it had appeared. "Sire! Is it an omen, or another magic weapon of some sort?"

"I know not. But look!" He made a fist and directed the light in a wide arc about them, and then straight down into the water which reflected a large portion of it. Still, the two friends thought they could see the ocean's bottom.

"It is indeed wonderful, sire," the Oracle said in admiration. "But of what use is it?"

Thuron grinned, feeling once more like the Son of his Father. "Do not question its use, little one. Wabbis Ka'arbu in his wisdom does not give gifts for no purpose."

"You speak truly, sire. If I may say so, it looks most valuable. Perhaps we might trade it for food and drink?"

Smiling, Thuron manipulated the jewel back to its former position and was gratified to find that the light winked out, leaving only the familiar glow deep inside the stone.

Shortly after sunsup of the third day, Gaar spotted land on the horizon. Thuron thought it a mirage inspired by their ferocious hunger and thirst, for it seemed to rise straight up into the clouds, but as they drifted nearer he accepted it for reality. As the sides of the pirate craft were too high for

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them to reach the waterline and use their hands as paddles, they were forced to wait impatiently, unable to speed their progress in any manner, as the ship drifted lazily shoreward. The current had slowed to such an extent that it took them half the morning to get within a hundred yards of the high-rising cliff. Finally, in exasperation, Thuron snorted, "I'll not spend the rest of the day sitting here! Come, we'll swim the rest of the way!"

Riis Murluk nodded and stood up. Gaar wailed miserably.

"What ails you, furry one?"

"Sire, I cannot swim!"

"Then hold on to me, brother, once we're in the water." Before Gaar could protest further, Thuron and Murluk dove overboard.

The Kend balanced nervously on the side of the craft, watching the two warriors tread water below. His whiskers trembled, his magnificent tail stood straight out, bristling fiercely.

"Jump!" shouted Thuron.

Taking a deep breath, Gaar squinched his eyes shut, clapped one furry hand over his nose and leaped. The impact knocked the breath out of him and the waters closed over his head. For an agonizing lifetime he flailed in panic, his lungs burning, before a strong golden hand reached down and lifted him to the surface of the sea. Gasping for breath, he wrapped both arms about Thuron's neck and rolled his eyes in terror.

"Not my neck, friend!" Thuron warned. "Hang on to my waist or we'll both drown!"

Numbly Gaar obeyed, then shut his eyes, not to open them until he felt Thuron standing upright, wadding ashore. Wet, miserable, so terrified that he forgot to shake the water from his feet, he scurried ahead of the others to the safety

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of the rocky beach. Behind the narrow strip of beach was a river that ran inland, through high rising cliffs.

"We'll follow the stream and find food," Thuron said when they were well ashore. "Come."

"Now?" wailed Gaar.

"If we stay here we will only grow weaker. We must travel while we still have strength."

"While *who* still has strength, lord?" Gaar puffed, sinking in a heap of sodden fur on a relatively dry rock.

"Don't waste time arguing with him, lord," Murlik advised. "Leave the weakling behind."

Gaar's ears flattened against his skull as he glared at the burly Taveeshian. "Where my Lord Thuron goes, I go," he hissed. "Even unto death."

"Come, then, little one," Murlik said warmly. "Stay ahead of me. If you slip, I'll catch you."

Thuron had been examining the course of the river. "This way looks best," he announced. "Follow me." Without spending further energy on words, he started a zigzag course along the side of the river, the other two close behind. Bellies achingly empty, they followed the river steadily, without pause, only their will to survive giving them the strength they needed for the torturous task.

At last they were well inland, away from the sea and surrounded by a rich forest. The ground was wet underfoot; the vegetation was beaded with moisture; exotic fruits and berries were readily at hand. As if in a dream, the three gorged themselves, then fell in exhaustion by the bole of a huge tree. Sleep came instantly.

After an early breakfast the next morning, they spent several more hours following the stream, much encouraged that what beasts they encountered were small and relatively timid. Murlik and Thuron were pleased, that is. Gaar had cleaned and polished his dagger a dozen times since waking

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and was spoiling for a chance to prove his valor, after his cowardly performance in the water the day before. At mid-morning, Thuron heard the god-crackle in his ear. Halting, he waited for his Father's voice. It was not long in coming.

I am glad you survived the waters, my Son. How did your companions fare?

"They are both with me, Father."

Do you follow the stream the way the water flows?

"Aye, Father. We hope to find the river it feeds. Gaar says it will lead us to the city of Kendsahr."

He is correct. I must meet this Gaar one day. It would profit you to make a raft. The current should be swift, and will carry you quickly to your destination. But beware, my Son, when you reach the rapids just beyond where the river flows between two mountains.

"Aye, Father. Have you any word of Lady Yllara?"

Not as yet, my Son, but I will try to find out for you. If, as you think, the High Priest is behind the pirates' attack—and I find that an entirely reasonable assumption—it should not be too difficult to discover the fate of your Yllara. A little patience! I have been listening at the Temple but have heard nothing yet. I will speak with you again, tomorrow.

"But, Father, wait . . . !"

It was no use. The crackling was gone.

The three set to work making a raft, tying fallen logs together with the tough, elastic vines which garlanded many of the trees. The task took over an hour, as their tools were limited to sharp stones found along the river bank. The raft, when completed, was longer than Thuron might have wanted and barely wide enough, in Murlik's opinion, to keep from capsizing. Gaar eyed it askance, but voiced no objection to climbing aboard. He even volunteered to man a pole, but Thuron talked him out of it and appointed him lookout.

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Importantly, the valiant Kend rode at the front of the raft, his eyes sweeping the water for hidden perils.

Piloting the thing, even with the help of the poles, was tricky business, for the current was indeed swift and carried them at considerable speed through the rain forest. At times, the haze above became so thin that they could actually see the suns, red and green in their respective glory, as pale discs in the sky. Making soft sounds of contentment in his chest, Gaar preened himself, restoring his plume to its former magnificence, smoothing the mats and snarls from his fur. He was so engrossed that he hardly noticed when the rain forest gave way to majestic mountains.

Thuron and Riis noted it, however, and braced themselves for the rapids. Tersely, they debated abandoning the raft and walking around the white water, now visible in the distance, but night was approaching and it would mean a day's march, so they decided to stay with their makeshift craft.

"Hold tightly to the vines," Thuron instructed. "The river runs rough ahead, and I would not lose either of you."

Gaar smiled recklessly and flourished his plume. "No danger, sire. 'Tis only water."

The current quickened, and in a few moments they were hurtling over the surface at speeds none had before thought possible. Poling proved futile as the waters churned around them. With a sickening lurch the raft scraped a submerged rock and spun away from it. Now sideways, now backwards, once again facing the rapids, the raft seemed but a chip at the mercy of the river. The roar of the rapids was so deafening that Thuron's shouts of encouragement went unheard. Drenched by spume, the trio clung to the spinning, lurching, hurtling raft.

A huge rock loomed ahead. They felt the splintering impact as one of the logs was ripped away. Vines loosened,

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water spurted up between the remaining logs, and the current swirled them around rocks and into a rushing trough of water. One end lifted sharply and then the disintegrating raft plunged beneath the surface. The torrent tore Thuron's fingers from the useless vine and ripped the club from his other hand. He'd gulped a huge lungful of air just before being swept under—now with powerful strokes he fought his way upwards through the maelstrom, his temples pounding, his lungs threatening to burst, his senses giddy from the whirling punishment.

Emerging, he saw pieces of the raft shoot upwards, soar through the air and crash upon the jagged rocks downstream.

CHAPTER TEN: SH'GUNDELAH AND THE BATTLE MAIDENS

THURON QUICKLY RECOVERED and grabbed a rock. Murlik emerged from a boiling whirlpool and struck out for another rock—but for several moments there was no sign of Gaar. The giant's heart sank; was he to lose the fat little Kend as well as his lovely Yllara? Then a sodden lump bobbed to the surface just within his reach. With a quick tug, he plucked the Kend from the water and hoisted him onto a shoulder. The Oracle showed no sign of life. Motioning to Murlik to follow, he waded for the riverbank.

Both warriors reached the shore at the same time. Murlik helped Thuron lower the furry one to the ground.

"I know not what to do," murmured Thuron. "Can we help him, Riis? He must not die."

"I do not know, sire. I have seen men brought back from drowning by a certain method—but it does not always work."

"What is it? We must try!"

Riis straddled Gaar's body and placed his huge hands on the Kend's ribs, then brought his weight down for a moment and sharply released the pressure. He kept this up until water began to gush from the whiskered mouth. The burly guardsman slaved until his arms and shoulders knotted in agony, but finally he felt the fat little body quiver convulsively. Gaar coughed, spat, sneezed and peered over his shoulder. "Remove yourself, you overgrown *urreepl*! What

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a way to treat a respectable Kend, friend of Thuron Ka'arbu, mighty . . . !"

Thuron wiped sweat and tears from his face and cuffed the fat one gently. "Enough, you little bag of wind," he bellowed happily. "We have survived the rapids—do not drown us in words now."

"I beg of you, sire," wheezed Gaar, shaking water from an ear, and momentarily forgetting himself, "no more rivers. Can we not stay on nice, dry land for a while?"

"Yes, for certain we can, brother," laughed the giant. "But now, you and Riis must rest for a time and recover from the wetting. I will wake you before it is dark, so we can build our shelter for the night."

The two protested for a few minutes until the Kend, in the middle of a sentence, fell fast asleep. Sheepishly, Riis closed his eyes and joined him. Thuron leaned against a rock, watching them. He offered a brief thanks to the gods and then, wondering if Yllara were alive, drifted into a troubled sleep.

He woke up swinging, automatically striking out at the hands which held his arms and shoulders and hobbled his ankles. Then he gaped in astonishment as he saw that all of his assailants were female! The three he had flung from him in his waking reflex were shapely blue-skins of Yllara's age but clad in armor and battle helmets. Behind them, surrounding him and his two companions, were about twenty Rahrnhu and Ulmekoorian, plus a few admixtures, all brandishing spears. In addition, each girl was armed with a dagger and a slingshot, with a small pouch of pebbles at her waist.

Thuron leaped to his feet and stood there, uncertain as to what to do next, for once his instincts and his training pulling him in opposite directions. "What is this?" he demanded.

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Murlik was sitting up, blinking in confusion, a wry grin on his face. At the sound of Thuron's voice, Gaar sprang awake with a yowl of fury. Four girls converged on him, spears foremost.

"You are the prisoners of Sh'gundelah, Queen of the Battle Maidens," announced an attractive golden Ulmekoorian.

With surprising speed Gaar ducked under the spear tips and charged his captors, butting one of them in the stomach with his round, furry head. She went down gasping. The Kend launched himself at another, jammed her elaborate helmet over her eyes and pummeled her head. Then he looked at Riis and Thuron, who were still doing nothing.

"Sires!" he exclaimed. "Don't just stand there. Is a handful of females too much for you mighty warriors?"

"Thuron does not fight women," the Ulmekoorian replied with dignity.

Riis Murlik nodded sagely. "Aye, such a course is unthinkable."

"By all the gods!" snorted Gaar, sinking his strong right foot into the belly of a Battle Maiden. "You foreigners are a pack of fools! Take that, you mother of a *sloord!*" He jabbed his elbow into the throat of a smoke-skinned Rahrnhu. But his struggles were hopeless. Kicking, scratching, and biting, he was borne to the ground by six of the girls, who proceeded to bind him with strong vines while the others ringed the two gladiators with their spears.

One of the Battle Maidens bent over the furious Kend. "Sh'gundelah will be interested in this furry one. Never have I seen his like."

Gaar flattened his ears and snarled. The girl tickled his chin. The Kend moaned and closed his eyes.

The maiden in charge turned to Thuron. "The furry one belongs to you?" she inquired.

"Yes," he admitted.

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"You are wise not to resist us," she said. "It will be easier for him if he does the same."

"Sire!" Gaar protested. "Not to resist is foolish—even if they are females!"

"Enough!" growled Thuron. "You will do as they tell you."

Gaar glared but agreed, reluctantly.

Thuron and Riis allowed their hands to be bound behind them, and Gaar, similarly trussed, was lifted to his feet. Flanked by spear-carrying Battle Maidens, they followed the girl in charge as she set off for Sh'gundelah's camp.

"Sire," Gaar muttered darkly, "although I agreed to do as these insane females say, I still think it most unseemly for such as us to be marched off like this. It is most uncomfortable, too."

"Be patient, friend Gaar," the Ulmekoorian chuckled. "The march will not be long. See how our shadows lengthen? Sundown is not far off, nor, I'll guess, is the camp of this Queen of Battle Maidens, for they would not march at night."

"Still," grumbled the Kend, "it is unseemly."

Thuron's prediction proved accurate, for just as the twin suns of Lankor touched the horizon behind them, the bizarre party crested a small rise.

Visible in the shadowed valley beyond was a large compound of military appearance, consisting of five structures enclosed by a strong log fence. Four of them were arranged in a large square, with the fifth and largest in the center of the square. It was this last which interested the Ulmekoorian, for it seemed to contain several rooms and Thuron guessed one of them would be the Queen's audience chamber. At one side, against the fence, were a number of long, narrow boats.

Perhaps a dozen Battle Maidens were outside in the compound, lighting torches strategically placed about the area. Two of the girls from the patrol group were dispatched to

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run ahead and tell Queen Sh'gundelah the news. As Thuron guessed they would, they sprinted straight for the central structure. It was several minutes before the main scout party reached the compound, from which excited shouts could be heard as lithe figures ran from building to building. Thuron grinned broadly as they marched through the gates, for the girls who'd stayed behind peered curiously at the captives. Riis stared appraisingly back. There were, Thuron estimated, between forty and fifty Battle Maidens in all. They were escorted directly to the large structure and ushered inside.

Sh'gundelah sat, helmeted and armored, on a makeshift throne in the center of a circle of Battle Maidens. The three prisoners gazed at her in curiosity. She was a tall slender girl whose light green eyes and amber tresses proclaimed at least one parent to have come from Ulmekoor. She was fairly pretty despite a rather severe set to her mouth—and quite young.

"Where did you find these males?" she asked the girl who had led the platoon that had captured the Son and his friends.

"By the river, leader. They had obviously swum the river and were searching for our abode."

"Is this true?" Sh'gundelah queried of the captives.

"Nay, child," rumbled Thuron. "We had but tried to follow the river and had been capsized by the rapids. It was by the grace of the Gods that we were able to reach shore."

"What were you doing on the river and where were you hoping to land?"

"We were traveling by raft. Our final destination is Tavee-she."

"Why do you travel to that city of foulness and shame?"

"I go at the bidding of my father and in search of news of the most beautiful of Lankor." The mention of Yllara brought his loss back vividly and although his enormous hands

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were tied they clenched behind him as though he had the pirate leader's throat between them. "I will not rest until I find her again. She was stolen from me by the pirates of Sehre'el."

The girl on the throne paled slightly. "What have you to do with the pirates?" she snapped.

"We were set upon by them," Murlik answered. "In spite of Lord Thuron, who had fulfilled his Father's instructions, we were cast adrift. All others were slaughtered but for the Lady Yllara. The last he saw of her a dagger was at her throat. He wishes to return to Taveeshe—he is sure the pirates' orders came from there—to find his love. Meanwhile we have landed on these strange shores and must, for a short while at least, solicit your help."

Sh'gundelah studied Murlik narrowly. "Know you who I am?"

"Nay, have I seen you before?"

"I am the Prophet of the Future," she said. Seeing Murlik's puzzled expression, she continued. "No man should ask my help. The Gods have informed me that they are displeased with the men of Lankor and wish me and my Battle Maidens to repair all the injustices performed by the males." The girl rose, flaming with the fierce purpose of her mission. She stood tall, proud and gloriously knock-kneed—Riis Murlik gasped audibly in admiration. "Wabbis Ka'arbu himself has chosen me as his High Priestess. I must go to Taveeshe and fulfill my destiny."

"Blasphemy!" roared Thuron. He would have continued but for the sudden voice of the Battle God in his ear:

Hold, my Son! The girl is right. A change must be made in the Temple, and she seems an improvement over Yang T'or. Tell her she speaks the truth.

"Aye," said the giant. "You speak the truth. My—ah—friend Gaar, who is a great Oracle, has predicted it."

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The Kend shot Thuron a startled glance; Sh'gundelah turned her attention to the Oracle and began telling him that she had been conversing with the Gods for many years. Meanwhile, Ka'arbu continued speaking to Thuron.

Listen well my Son. Just east of where you are lies a river which will take you to the city of Ulmekoor. Sail with her, and proceed up the coast to Taveeshe. Take her entire fighting force with you for you may have to storm the city. You will find Yllara in the Temple where she is Yang T'or's prisoner. Do I make myself clear?

Ka'arbu withdrew. Thuron, overcome with emotion, stood to face the Battle Maiden. He spoke to her, although his thoughts were still with his Father.

"Then, we are together on the side of justice! You are appointed to be High Priestess in Ka'arbu's Temple, and I, who swam unwittingly into your camp, am none other than the Son of your Master."

It was Sh'gundelah's turn to cast suspicious glances at Thuron. "The Son of Wabbis Ka'arbu? This I cannot believe."

Whereupon Thuron, unsheathing *No'ondo'or*, sliced through a stone ledge which stood nearby. "Who but a God's Son could possess such a weapon?" And putting his ring finger before their eyes, he held all the maidens hypnotized by the sacred light.

At length, even Sh'gundelah was convinced and fell to her knees before Thuron. Many of the Battle Maidens, observing *No'ondo'or's* performance, had already dropped to the ground in recognition of the demigod before them.

"Truly you are the Son of Ka'arbu," the girl's eyes widened as she spoke.

At this point the leader of the Battle Maidens gave the order to provide the newcomers with nourishment and rest. Six strapping girls came forward to prepare a shelter in the

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front of the canoe so the Ulmekoorian could rest while his wonderful ring lighted the river ahead. While other maidens arrived with food and drink, Sh'gundelah pledged her support to Thuron's plan. "You would wrest your Father's Temple from the hands of the evil priest? This I will help you with. My canoe and my Warrior Maidens are at your command, as am I."

- "I will value your help greatly. Rest and restore your strength. For we sail at once for Ulmekoor."

Within an hour the entire fleet was underway as relays of Battle Maidens manned the paddles. Although Thuron dozed, his hand never moved—the light remained steady throughout the rest of the night.

"The Son of Ka'arbu can do great things," Sh'gundelah murmured as she kept watch by the giant that night.

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So that fat—what is it they call him?—ah, yes, sloord . . . thinks the golden one dead?

Hopes, rather. That band of cutthroats he hired didn't dare tell him they were afraid to kill a demi-god.

But what did they do with the crystals?

I don't know. But I'd be willing to bet that Yang T'or has them somewhere. I wish we had a way to put the Temple under constant surveillance.

Can't, as long as we're stuck with line-of-sight transmission. The High Priest didn't help any when he built that blasted wall around the Probe.

We still have ears, though.

And the girl is still alive.

So is Thuron, I hope.

He has developed amazingly. More than I had predicted.

What about the furry Oracle?

Ah, yes, the Oracle. Are we all agreed on him?

There was a chorus of ayes.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: UNMASKING THE BATTLE GOD

THE LANDS OF Kendsahr, Ulmekoor and Taveeshe formed a right triangle with Ulmekoor at the apex, Kendsahr to the south and Taveeshe on the western leg. Rahrn lay across the sea, twelve days sailing from west to east, a good twenty days from east to west, battling the steady westerly headwind. South and east of Rahrn was a chain of volcanic islands, uninhabited, stretching for hundreds of miles. From these came the Dreaming Mists which then drifted eastward and roamed the Forbidden Sea.

The city of Kendsahr lay in a protected cove and stretched upward to sprawl along the sunny slopes around the natural harbor, into which emptied a swift river, fed by the rain forests above. For a portion of each year, blizzards raged on the plateau, turning it into an ice forest. Between Kendsahr and Ulmekoor, its neighbor to the north, lay a huge mountain range, cut through by another river.

The party sailed away from that place, following the river as it penetrated deeper into Ulmekoor. This waterway, Ka'arbu assured the Son, would lead them eventually to Ulmekoor itself. For two days and three nights they followed it, first as it flowed swiftly through the valley between the mountains, later watching it become deeper and more sluggish as it was joined by rivers from the east, turning at last into the mighty, muddy river of Thuron's childhood as it moved majestically through the fine farm lands which heralded the approach to the capital city of Ulmekoor.

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"It is good that we approach the city by night," Murlik murmured, eyeing the fields and houses, green-lit by Lankor's moons.

"Aye," Thuron agreed softly. "My people would not take kindly to a fleet of war canoes if we came through during the busy time. There will be a challenge but not for a while, as the garrison protects only the mouth of the river. Entrance into Ulmekoor from this direction is not heard of."

"Garrison? Ulmekoor has an army?" Gaar's eyes rounded in surprise.

"Nay. Only once in their history have my people fought under the flag of Ulmekoor, and that was before my grandfather's time, when the gray barbarians attacked. Taveeshe sent a fleet and helped us drive the Rahrnhus into the sea. From that time we have lived in peace, under the blue-skin's protection. Most of my people are farmers, like my Lankor father. The rest are engaged in the manufacture of cloth and the exporting of goods and produce to Taveeshe. I have not the taste for commerce, and farming was too tame for my blood."

Murlik laughed. "That is why you wander Lankor in search of adventure!" he exclaimed.

Thuron nodded. "And you, my friend? How came you to join the Guards?"

"My father was a Captain before me. A sword was in my hand as soon as I could walk. I always knew I would be a guardsman."

The two looked at Gaar. "Fishing and hunting are the main occupations of my people," the Kend furnished. "We are the best on Lankor, but as in Lord Thuron's case, neither were to my taste. It was the will of the Gods that I leave Kendsahr and become an Oracle. How else was I to meet you, sire, or join your service?"

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Thuron touseled Gaar's furry head with affection. "It is enough that we are all alive," he said.

"Aye," agreed the Oracle. "If we could be but sure that Lady Yllara is alive, too." A tear stole down one furry cheek and Gaar quickly whisked it away.

"I am sure of it," Thuron consoled him.

"Of course! Did not Ka'arbu promise the Son that his lady was safe?" put in Riis.

The Kend pulled distractedly at his ears. "I know Ka'arbu told him so, but I wish—"

"Nay, brother, I *know* she is alive." The Ulmekoorian's dark green eyes were soft and his face glowed. "Whether she is well or not I'll not know until I hold her close again, but I am positive that she lives. Were she . . . dead . . . I would know it." He looked for a jibe from the guardsman but Riis was strangely silent. The furry one sighed and gazed at the water, then realized what he was contemplating and drew back with a grimace of distaste.

Soon the lush fields were left behind. The houses were more numerous and streets appeared. The riverbank became walled and steps led down to the landings. Looming high above them were warehouses built mostly of rock and giving an air of solid prosperity to the city. It was a city of hard working, frugal people; few citizens were up and about at this time of night. They proceeded unchallenged into the heart of the city. Sh'gundelah agreed to pretend that she was merely Riis Murlik's companion and that her Battle Maidens were no more than oarsmen hired for an expedition into the wild country. At Gaar's suggestion, Thuron took command of the tiny fleet, posing as the adopted son of a wealthy Taveeshian merchant who had sent him to explore the interior in search of treasure or trade.

"Know you," the Kend explained, "that merchants are

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respected in all countries, for they bring the possibility of profit to the natives."

Gaar's analysis proved valid, for when they tied up at docking, the initial coolness which greeted them gave way to warm friendship the minute Thuron gave his assumed identity. There wasn't even a polite request for payment in advance, either at the pier or at the inn to which the dockmaster directed them. Thuron left a pair of maidens to guard each canoe while the rest of the company sought accommodations for the night.

In the morning, Thuron sought the services of a shipfitter, and after three tries found one who agreed to rig the five canoes with slender masts and sails cut to Thuron's specifications, with which to take advantage of the offshore breezes that would hurry the tiny armada towards Taveeshe.

Gaar absented himself during most of the two days it took to outfit the canoes. When questioned, the Kend remained stubbornly silent, even at the urging of Thuron. When at last the fleet was ready, the oil had been placed near the fire-launchers, and all necessary provisions had been secured, the Oracle was still away on one of his mysterious errands.

"He will be back soon," Thuron assured the fretting Maidens.

"Perhaps we had better search for him," Murlik suggested. "Do you know where he might be, sire?"

Thuron shrugged. They were speculating upon Gaar's probable whereabouts when the furry Oracle appeared, robes held high, running towards the pier.

"Sires! Sires! Wait for me!"

Thuron held his hand out and helped the Kend aboard. "Are we free to depart, friend Gaar?"

"Aye, and quickly. Has Ka'arbu spoken yet today?"

"No. But he will before too long. Why?"

"There are many questions you should ask him, sire. I

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think it may be possible to strike a good bargain with the voice in your ear."

Thuron gave the order which caused the five canoes to move away from the dock at Ulmekoor. Then he and Gaar retired to a relatively private area. "Why say you 'bargain'?" the giant inquired.

"Forgive me if I speak bluntly, sire, but I have been thinking for many days that what we know about the gods and the Voice of Ka'arbu do not match too well. Too many times you have had to tell him things which he ought to know already."

Thuron scowled. "You doubt Ka'arbu?" he said incredulously. "How can you? You have seen the magic of *No'ondo-or* with your own eyes. You have witnessed Ka'arbu's light, here on my finger. Of all who might doubt my Father, you are the last I would expect. It was you who first told me I was the True Son of Ka'arbu!"

"Forgive me, sire, if my words offend you. If I err, I apologize. But I have spent many years dealing with men and with gods. I cannot explain the magic of the ring, or the voice in your ear, or the golden glove, or even the magic power of your sword. But I beg you, sire, help me test Ka'arbu without his knowing it."

Thuron looked at the Oracle for a long moment before answering. "Let me think on it. Is this what took you away these few days?"

"Nay, sire. I was upon the water front and in other places inquiring for news of Thuron Ka'arbu. I said the last we had heard of this illustrious person was that he had set sail from Taveeshe on the Sacred Quest just one day before we ourselves left that city. I was told there never was such a man as Thuron Ka'arbu."

"That smells of blasphemy."

"There is more, sire. I was told that a charlatan had

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posed as the True Son and had deceived King Xandnur and the High Priest. Some even say Xandnur was behind it all, in a move to discredit the priesthood. Others, but only a few, think that Yang T'or invented Thuron the False, as they call you now, sire, to wrest power from the King. But all are agreed that Ka'arbu became angry and caused the Quest Ship to vanish in the Forbidden Sea."

Thuron smiled grimly. "What, no mention of the Pirates of Sehre'el?"

"I suggested that, sire, but they liked the Ka'arbu version better. They did not want me to speak of the pirates too much . . ."

"I see. It is easy to tell whom they fear the most."

"But that is not all, lord. I was told that the Golden Sphere is no longer at the Temple in Taveeshel"

"Who says this?"

"The one who told me claims he heard it from Yang T'or himself. The High Priest noticed it was gone a few days ago. This is one reason why I wish you to question the Voice."

Thuron nodded. "What questions, little one?"

For many minutes the Oracle conferred with the tawny giant, outlining question after question. Thuron reluctantly agreed to do it. Then they joined the others.

Riis Murlik, who had learned something of sailing from Admiral Amik Nerred, was in his element, guiding, instructing, teaching the Battle Maidens the rudiments of the art while Sh'gundelah watched in thrilled fascination. Murlik seemed to have an instinct for the sea, so Thuron was happy to let him assume the captaincy. Gaar watched long enough to assure himself that the burly guardsman would not capsize them with his amateur seamanship, then busied himself finding the driest and most stable spot on the canoe.

The four other canoes were keeping pace with Sh'gunde-

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lah's as the girls on them imitated Murlik's sail-trimming. There was a festive air to the small flotilla as it skimmed the gentle swells of the sea. For the first time in weeks Thuron's heart was light and his blood sang of battle for he knew that soon he would rescue Yllara, slay Yang T'or and bring order to the Temple of Wabbis Ka'arbu.

The customary time for the god to speak approached, so Thuron and Gaar withdrew once again to the rear of the canoe where they could be alone. The giant started to speak, but Gaar, ever cautious, motioned him to silence.

While he waited, Thuron mused upon his Father's strict punctuality. The god had always spoken at one of three distinct times of day: midnight, early morning or late afternoon. Yang T'or had mentioned it first, but Thuron had paid little attention. Now he wondered. Was the god unable to be heard at any other time? This was a question Gaar had not included in his list, but Thuron decided to find out anyway.

Presently the god-crackle began. The giant motioned to Gaar, who, as they had agreed earlier, placed his ear against Thuron's.

My Son, it is good that you are on your way to Taveeshe.

Gaar nodded that he, too, could hear.

"Is Lady Yllara still a prisoner in the Temple?"

Yes, still alive. And I have more good news for you, Thuron. No'ondo'or is there, too, mounted on the face of the idol.

"Tell me, my Father, where is the headquarters of the Pirates of Sehre'el?" Thuron queried.

The crackling continued, but the Voice was silent for longer than usual. *That need not concern you*, it said at last.

"How large is Lankor?"

Vaster than you imagine, Thuron. It is a giant sphere, and it would take you about two years to sail completely around it.

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"Yet you go around it three times each day."

The silence from the god was profound. Even Gaar was surprised, and nodded his pleasure.

"What next, think you?" inquired Thuron. "After we destroy Yang T'or, then what?"

You will either find the crystals or prepare another voyage to collect more of them.

"You do not know for certain? Tell me, why are these howling crystals so important to you?"

It is your Sacred Quest! How dare you question me like this?

Gaar smirked and rubbed his hands together happily.

"As the chosen Son of Ka'arbu have I no right to know your plans?" Thuron countered reasonably. Then, before the god could reply, he continued: "Can you speak to Yang T'or?"

Certainly, my Son.

"Then the Golden Sphere is still in the Temple!"

Of course. Where else would it be?

"No matter, Father. Let the Golden Sphere predict flames shooting up from the sea to land on the shores of Taveeshe. Let the Golden Sphere foretell the return of No'ondo'or to its rightful owner. Let the Golden Sphere inform Yang T'or that the Son of the Battle God still lives and will conquer."

Would that be wise, my Son?

Gaar whispered hastily; the giant repeated his words aloud. "If the great Wabbis Ka'arbu expects to get any of those crystals, it would be most wise."

There was another silence, then the voice came back. *I see. You may consider it accomplished, Thuron. In addition to courage and endurance, man of Ulmekoor, you have more intelligence than I first thought. We will discuss this later tonight. I am growing . . . tired.*

The voice had begun to fade; in another minute even the

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crackling was gone. Thuron stared long at Gaar, who was thoughtfully preening himself.

"You knew, did you not, brother? I am *not* the Son of Wabbis Ka'arbu, am I?"

"Nay, friend," replied the Kend, twiddling his whiskers. "But neither are you the *pawn* of Wabbis Ka'arbu any longer."

CHAPTER TWELVE: REVOLT ON LANKOR

LANKOR'S SUNS were touching the horizon in a blaze of red and green. The five canoes turned shoreward as the Battle Maidens bent their backs to the paddles, making the outrigger shells skim the quiet waters. There was no breeze and the sails were gathered in to make the approaching craft less conspicuous from the shore, even though at this point they were hidden from the Bay of Taveeshe by a finger of land which jutted out to form the southern tip of the harbor. Within moments the lead canoe touched the sandy shore.

Thuron turned to Sh'gundelah and clasped her hand in his. "Wait for our signal," he instructed. "When you see the Light of Ka'arbu shining from the top of the Temple, shoot your fire arrows toward the city. But make sure they land on the beach."

The Warrior Queen nodded. "May your Father watch over you, sire. And I hope you find your lady."

Thuron's emotions prevented any reply. He squeezed her hand quickly, then snatched up the long, jointed pole and stepped ashore.

Murlik came to say his farewells. "When this is over . . ." he began, then abruptly swept the Battle Queen into his arms.

Gaar leaped to the beach. "Do not delay us, Riis. We have a long way to go."

Murlik released the girl and joined his companions, bringing with him a large coil of rope. The three watched for a

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moment as the Battle Maidens pulled away from shore and paddled swiftly out to sea again. Then they turned and plunged inland, making the most of the fading light.

Although Gaar and Riis both knew the area thoroughly, including several shortcuts, better than an hour went by before the trio reached the vicinity of the Temple.

They approached it cautiously, circling around behind it. As Thuron had anticipated, the back entrance was securely locked. He assembled the jointed pole and placed it against the side of the building, nodding to his two companions to hold it steady, then shinned up and pulled himself over the edge of the Temple's lower roof. As Thuron held the top of the pole, Murlik and Gaar followed him up. There was no need for speech now. They had gone over the plan repeatedly so that each knew his role. Twice more they used the pole to gain access to higher levels, until at last they stood at the highest point of the Temple.

From here they could see the broad sweep of the harbor where Sh'gundelah's tiny fleet lay hidden, fire-launchers poised; in another direction, the lights of the bazaar illumined the sky above the wall of many arches; beyond that was King Xandnur's palace, secure within its ring of guardsmen's barracks.

Thuron twisted the stone in his ring. Ka'arbu's Light shone forth, a thin beam of great intensity which split the Lankorian night like a beacon. The Ulmekoorian aimed it at the harbor and moved it three times in a slow arc before twisting the stone again.

In answer, a feeble glow showed in the distance, a flickering yellow dot which grew and multiplied but was still only a tiny spot of light beyond the harbor. Then five bolts of fire streaked up from that spot, arching up and in, flame-fingers reaching up from the bay to embrace the city, five

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fiery talons to fulfill the hard-bargained prophecy of the Golden Sphere.

Turning, he found the opening he sought, a large exhaust vent for the smoke and fumes of the torches within and for the stench of the sacrifices at the idol's feet. Peering through the hole, the Ulmekoorian was delighted to discover that the time he'd chosen for the attack was during one of Yang T'or's barbaric services.

As his eyes adjusted to the torchlit scene below, he saw *No'ondo'or* mounted on the face of the idol. Underneath, packed closely upon the stone benches, were the acolytes. Yang T'or's voice drifted up to the trio on the roof.

"Accept then, O Ka'arbu, that which we offer you tonight!"

The wordless chant began as the High Priest waddled back to his seat. Two naked figures emerged from beneath the fire bowl and started the long, slow procession up the ramp. As before, the sacrifices were a man and a woman, each laden with weapons. He couldn't see their faces, but he recalled the blank, drugged expression he'd seen before. For a terrible moment he saw Yllara as the girl and his hatred of Yang T'or surged through him in flame-hot fury.

Gripping the edge of the opening with both hands, he lowered himself until he was hanging completely inside, then started swinging back and forth to assure that he'd land on the idol instead of in the bowl of sacrificial fire below. The reeking fumes stung his eyes and choked his lungs. Now! Releasing his grip, he dropped to the head of the idol.

The sacrifices had reached the rear of the worship chamber, where the ramp split and began its curving ascent. The wordless chant continued.

No'ondo'or was fastened securely with metal straps to the forehead of the idol. Thuron grasped the haft and squeezed gently. The familiar vibration began and the magic blade cut through the straps as if they weren't there.

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Now Murlik dropped the rope through the opening above and swung the end of it over to Thuron. Quickly he made it fast around the idol's head. A moment later Murlik slid down the rope and joined the Ulmekoorian. Gaar, in his turn, did likewise.

Thuron motioned his friends each to a shoulder of the idol and himself dropped to the place where the ramps joined. The sacrificial chant grew louder, but no one had yet noticed the three invaders. All eyes, including Yang T'or's, were on the two who were marching slowly toward their deaths.

Thuron flattened himself against the chest of the idol and waited for the man and woman to approach. Only when they had reached a point directly in front of him did he make his move, which was to snatch the weapons from the man and hit him squarely on the jaw with his fist. As the man crumpled, Thuron thrust the woman at Gaar. The Kend brought a furry fist up sharply to her chin, then gently lowered the unconscious girl to the ramp. Meanwhile, Thuron twisted Ka'arbu's Light on and trained the brilliant beam on the High Priest.

A moan of horror came from the congregation; Yang T'or screamed shrilly and cowered back, shielding his face from the Light. The ramp passed directly over the platform on which Thuron had sat during his first visit to the Temple; now the Ulmekoorian raced along it and leaped to the platform just as Yang T'or threw himself through a door at the rear. Thuron started in pursuit but changed his mind. Turning, he called to Murlik.

"Bring those weapons and follow me!" Then he vaulted to the floor of the chamber.

A few of the acolytes had recovered from their initial shock and now converged upon him, brandishing knives and daggers. Thuron harvested them with wide sweeps of *No'on-*

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do'or. Seeing the carnage, the others thought better of it and fled.

The door under the fire bowl was a heavy one, securely locked. *No'ondo'or* removed it. Riis Murlik, laden with weapons, reached Thuron just as he was about to step through the gaping hole where the door had been. A nauseating stench came from within. This passage, Thuron guessed, led to the dungeons. Grimly, he beckoned Murlik to follow and stepped into the darkness, beaconing the god-light ahead.

"This way leads to Yllara," he muttered. Ka'arbu's Light revealed a steep flight of stairs descending into further darkness. The stench grew stronger as they followed the stairway down to the dungeons beneath the Temple of Wabbis Ka'arbu.

Somewhere a woman was sobbing. From another direction a man's voice could be heard, dully cursing. Whimpers and moans of pain came from all about them. Thuron flashed the light in all directions. His eyes narrowed and he growled as he viewed the rows upon rows of thick stone pillars with their human burdens chained to them. The prisoners blinked in the unexpected glare; some of them cried out in alarm, some snarled with defiance, others cringed in fear. A few seemed unaware of anything at all. All were filthy, miserable specimens who had once been proud, free men and women.

"You look for Yllara down here?" Murlik's voice was thick as he fought to keep from retching.

"She is Yang T'or's prisoner."

"Would not he keep her separate from these . . . these others?"

"I would look here first." He strode over to a prisoner and shone his light in the man's face. "Know you of the Lady Yllara, daughter of King Xandnur?" he demanded.

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The man stared back contemptuously. "Perhaps," he said.

"Is she here?"

"Who knows?" the man shrugged. "There are many women here. You have paid your fee. Take one. They are all alike."

Thuron drew back his sword with fury, but Murlik grabbed his arm. "Wait, sire. He knows not who you are. Show him your face."

Thuron turned the light to shine on himself. "Do you know me now?"

The prisoner gasped, his eyes flaming with hope. "Thuron Ka'arbul Forgive me, sire. I have heard that Lady Yllara is here, but just where I cannot say. I would help you look for her, but . . ." He glanced up at his shackled wrists.

No'ondo'or severed the chains without effort and the man dropped to his knees.

"Can you use a sword?" Thuron asked quickly.

"Aye."

"Then guard the stairway. Riis, give him a blade."

Thuron and Riis went from man to man, choosing those they thought best able to fight, freeing them, issuing them weapons, sending them to the stairway where they milled nakedly about, lacking anyone to lead their charge against their oppressors. Twelve, fourteen, twenty men were released from their chains and given swords or knives, but still none was found who could lead them into battle.

At last Thuron came to Yllara. Her iridescent hair was matted and filthy, her lovely face streaked with dirt and tears, her emaciated body clothed only in the grime of the dungeon. Her hands hung limply in their shackles, dangling at shoulder height. She was slumped against the stone pillar in exhaustion. Even so her loveliness was overpowering.

"Yllara!" It was a hoarse whisper.

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Slowly, she opened her eyes, blinking in the glare of Ka'arbu's Light, seeming to cringe as if from an expected blow. He moved the light off her body and trained it on the floor between them.

"Yllara, it is Thuron."

Tears welled in her eyes; her mouth worked but no words came.

His hand trembling, he cut her down. He didn't trust his touch on the shackles about her wrists, so he severed the chains instead, then caught her in his arms as she fell. The giant held her gently against his chest and caressed her head, the light moving wildly as he moved his right hand.

"Sirel" cried another voice, vaguely familiar. "It's really you, ain't it?"

Thuron swung the light around. There, not ten feet from where he'd found Yllara, was a wiry, grinning blue-skin chained to another pillar. Thuron stared at him for a moment before exclaiming, "Zorm!"

"Yeah. Me, Prince of Murderers. Is Yang T'or still around?"

"Yes, but not for long."

"Lemme get a whack at him before you kill him, hey? I wanta carve him up some."

"Who is this man?" Riis Murlik demanded.

"A loyal friend," Thuron replied. "And one who fights well." Still holding Yllara to him, the Ulmekoorian crossed over to Zorm and slashed his chains, then told him, "Yang T'or is mine—but there are fifty priests above."

"Not all are loyal to Yang T'or," Zorm said. "Many would serve the Son."

"They shall have their chance. How long have you been a prisoner?"

"Perhaps a week. Your lady was here before me."

"What have they done to her?"

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"Nothing that I have seen. Before that, I know not. She is better now than she was when I came here."

In the Hall of Sacrifice, Gaar sat astride the idol's nose and surveyed the scene below. It puzzled him, for he had seen Thuron and Murlik vanish beneath the bowl of flames after Yang T'or had escaped through another exit. Still, there were countless priests below him, most of them fighting furiously. What puzzled him most was that they were battling each other. None so far had approached the door which Gaar knew must be beneath the sacrificial bowl so he had, for the most part, been content to be an observer. But he held his slingshot in readiness, to discourage any who might attempt to follow Thuron and Murlik into the dungeons.

Suddenly a naked blue-skin burst from beneath the bowl, sword in hand. He was followed by four others, severed links of chain dangling from the shackles at their wrists. The leader howled, "Death to the High Priest!"

Two cowed acolytes rushed at Zorm from opposite directions. Each brandished a dagger. The naked Prince of Murderers wheeled to bring his sword to bear on the first, leaving his back unprotected. Gaar drew back his sling, aimed and let fly. The second acolyte dropped as the pebble struck his head.

The next few minutes were frantic as the priests sorted themselves out into two factions, one side pro-Thuron, the other fanatically loyal to Yang T'or. Now that the battle lines had been drawn, Gaar lobbed stone after stone into the enemy heads. More naked ex-prisoners poured from under the sacrificial bowl and joined the melee.

The curving ramps were an ideal catwalk for the furry Kend, who scampered joyfully along from one vantage point to another, making each shot a work of art. The floor of the

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chamber was fast becoming littered with priestly bodies but few of the prisoners were slain.

At last Thuron and Murlik appeared below, the giant carrying Yllara. Murlik snatched a discarded cloak from the floor and threw it over the girl. Then Thuron carried her up the nearest ramp to where Gaar was.

"Tend to my love, furry one," he instructed. Proudly, Gaar accepted the charge, holding the unconscious girl so as to shield her from any stray knives. His one regret was that he would not be able to take part in the rest of the battle.

Thuron had located the door through which Yang T'or had fled; now he and Murlik followed the High Priest's escape route.

The Ulmekoorian remembered the layout of the Temple with its twisting corridors and had no trouble finding Yang T'or's private quarters. The door was locked. *No'ondo'or* hummed in his hand as the blade carved through the thick wooden portal.

"Look out!" Murlik shouted.

The golden giant stepped back as a heavy spear whizzed past him and clattered against the stone wall of the corridor. Quickly, Thuron stepped through the opening. The young priest, Froi, stood nervously in the outer room of the apartment, a sword in his hand.

"Where is he?" Thuron demanded.

Froi's head jerked in the direction of the next room. "But you will have to pass me first," he said menacingly, brandishing his weapon.

"That fat *sloord* is not worth dying for. Lay down your sword and get out of my sight."

Froi glared at the giant. Then all the fight oozed out of him. He threw the sword down on the floor and stepped aside. Murlik picked up the discarded blade and motioned

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the priest outside. When Froi reached the doorway he turned and ran towards the front of the Temple.

Thuron strode forward and threw open the door to the inner room.

The walls were hung with rich tapestries and festooned with obviously expensive objects of art and fine craftsmanship. A deep carpet was underfoot and the furniture was well made, covered with costly fabrics. A private altar to Wabbis Ka'arbu occupied the far end of the room, with miniature braziers flanking a small replica of the idol. The flames from these provided the only source of light in the room. At the altar stood Yang T'or, his back to Thuron.

"Defend yourself," the Ulmekoorian said quietly.

The High Priest whirled with surprising speed and hurled one of the flaming braziers. Thuron sidestepped and heard Riis yell behind him. Glancing quickly around, he saw the guardsman wrapped in a sheet of fire that covered the entire top half of his body. Leaping forward, Thuron ripped a tapestry from the wall and flung it around the writhing guardsman. Then, before Yang T'or could seize the second brazier, Thuron drove *No'ondo'or's* point through the fat priest. The blade hummed in triumph.

Now only the carpet was on fire. Thuron guided Riis out of the room and gently peeled the tapestry from him. Riis groaned but made no further outcry. "Let me kill him, lord," he begged through clenched teeth.

"The *sloord* already lies dead," Thuron said, wiping Yang T'or's blood from his sword. "Are you all right? Do you think yourself able to return to the hall?"

Murlik smiled tightly and nodded.

"Then come, brother." He helped Riis rise and they left the room.

Flames were spreading to the furniture in the High Priest's chamber. Now they licked toward the bloated, sprawled

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body on the floor. Without a backward glance the two gladiators worked their way along the stone corridor towards the Hall of Sacrifice.

The tide of battle had turned in favor of the pro-Thuron faction. The cowled Yang T'orites were now in full retreat, frantically seeking escape from the murderous swordsmanship of the prisoners, the treacherous knives of the priestly turncoats and the well-placed rocks from the furry devil's slingshot.

Now came a furious pounding at the front gate of the Temple as a contingent of helmeted guardsmen sought entrance. When the gates didn't open the guards applied a battering ram and entered uninvited, their hands on the hilts of their swords. Their first encounter was with the sub-priest, Froi, who made the grievous mistake of brandishing his dagger. He did not live to use it.

Thuron and Murlik, approaching the Hall of Sacrifices, found their way blocked by fleeing acolytes, some of whom promptly attacked the two. Murlik's sword was slowed by his injuries, but *No'ondo'or* sang of death for several before the rest of the cowled figures fled in panic.

As the two friends reached the entrance, the naked Prince of Murderers appeared in the doorway, holding a bloodied sword. "Yang T'or?" he asked.

"Slain."

Zorm grinned. "The rest of 'em in here are on our side!" he exclaimed triumphantly. Then he saw Murlik, whose flesh had turned a livid purple and who was leaning on Thuron for support. "What happened to him?"

"Flames. He needs help."

"There are some priests who know healing," the other said. "Unless we killed 'em all." Stepping back through the doorway, Zorm bellowed for a physician. A priest hurried forward and took charge of Murlik.

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Thuron found Yllara and Gaar; the girl was sleeping, her head cradled in Gaar's lap. "With good food and much rest," the Kend said quietly, "she will be well again. You found the misbegotten *sloord*?"

Briefly, Thuron related the slaying of Yang T'or. "Now I must free the rest of the prisoners."

"There are more?" the Kend said, surprised.

"I cut loose only the ones able to fight. There are many more, and only I can use *No'ondo'or* to free them."

Zorm questioned, "Where will we put them all?"

The Ulmekoorian had no opportunity to answer, for at that moment guardsmen entered the chamber. The captain spotted Thuron and saluted smartly. "Sire! King Xandnur would see you at once!"

"Where?" the giant asked impatiently.

"He awaits outside, sire!"

"We have been here but a short time. How did he know I was at the Temple?"

The guard captain did not answer. Thuron glanced at the scene of recent carnage all around him and decided to do as the King asked. Accordingly, he strode towards the front of the Temple, the knot of guardsmen in his wake. On the way they came to Yang T'or's apartments, now completely in flames. Fearing the conflagration might spread to other parts of the Temple, Thuron halted long enough to instruct the guards to make every effort to put out the fire, then continued on to meet the King.

A handful of attendants were with the monarch when Thuron emerged from the front entryway. Xandnur's face broke into a relieved smile as he saw the tawny giant.

"Thuron Ka'arbul!" he exclaimed warmly. "My spies were right! I could hardly believe it when they told me. So I came to see for myself."

"Spies?"

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"Three of Yang T'or's priests were mine, of course. When they spoke of the Golden Sphere's last message to Yang T'or, it seemed quite fantastic. But tonight, when "flames came from the sea to land on the shores of Taveeshe," I knew the reports to be accurate. And when I heard that you had appeared mysteriously within the Temple itself I could bide my time no longer. So—here I am." Xandnur glanced toward the bay. "The flames from out there—I assume they are the work of Admiral Nerdd?"

"Amik Nerdd is dead, the ship is gone," Thuron told him. "The fleet of the Warrior Queen, Sh'gundelah, lies offshore."

"Warrior Queen? Are we under attack?"

"Nay, sire. They follow my orders. Sh'gundelah and her Battle Maidens have earned a great reward. They should be honored with a fine celebration. There is much for me to do tonight, sire. With your permission I will confer with you tomorrow."

At the King's nod, Thuron saluted and vanished into the Temple again. A moment later he reappeared. "There are many sick and wounded inside who will need care, sire. Where can they be taken?"

"Use the Royal Adamar," Xandnur told him. "I will attend to the details."

Guardsmen and priests helped carry the remaining prisoners from the dungeon as *No'ondo'or* sliced through their shackles. When the last one was freed, Thuron sped to where the Oracle still guarded Yllara. Tenderly he lifted her and carried her outside where conveyances provided by the King awaited. Murlik had already been removed to the Adamar.

Gaar climbed in alongside Thuron and the vehicle, drawn by a young *seproveen*, moved off. After a moment the Kend stood up and protested, "This is not the way to the Adamar!"

The driver turned around and grinned at his passengers.

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"By order of King Xandnur, Thuron Ka'arbu and his party will spend the night at the palace!"

"Well!" Gaar snorted, sitting down again and preening.
"That is more like it."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: FAREWELL TO GAAR

THE NEXT DAY, after being informed by the Royal Physician that Yllara was sleeping and could be visited by nobody, Thuron and Gaar returned to the Temple for a tour of inspection. The Kend went immediately to the alcove which contained the Golden Sphere and locked himself in, leaving Thuron to examine the structure alone. Yang T'or's former quarters were completely gutted by the flames; the High Priest's remains had been removed earlier. No appreciable damage had been done to the rest of the building, however.

Using Ka'arbu's Light, the Ulmekoorian explored the dungeons. Satisfied that no prisoner had been overlooked during the previous night's operations, he ordered all entrances to the dungeons sealed permanently. Then he went into the Hall of Sacrifices and looked for a long time at the towering statue of the Battle God. The flames in the bowl had already been extinguished, but the torches which surrounded it still lit the great hall.

Thuron climbed the ramp which brought him face to face with the glowering idol. Unsheathing *No'ondo'or*, he carved the fierce visage into small pieces and dropped them into the bowl below. Its balance destroyed, the mutilated head began to revolve, bringing into view the grinning skull face. This, too, he chopped into small bits, drawing the invincible sword again and again through the hard black rock. When nothing was left of the head, he began on the idol's arms and shoulders, working with a cool deliberation which was rooted

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in righteous resolve. It took him a long time, but when he was finished the idol was reduced to a heap of rubble.

The Wrath of Ka'arbu did not strike him down. Thuron grinned, wondering how Gaar would have advised him if he had been aware of Thuron's intentions. But this was something Thuron felt he had to do alone, without counsel, and he felt much better for having done it. A new idol would be built, and Wabbis Ka'arbu, he suspected, would be the better for it.

He wondered if he should admit that he was, indeed, Thuron the False. False not through design, but because he had followed a false Ka'arbu. Whatever the true explanation for the voice in his ear, he knew it was not the real Battle God. Of all on Lankor, only he and Gaar knew that the entire adventure had been based upon falsehood. Apparently Gaar had guessed why.

Xandnur had welcomed Sh'gundelah and her Battle Maidens into the city that morning and had declared a Royal Holiday in their and Thuron's honor. Sh'gundelah's first question was about Riis Murlik. Upon being informed of his injuries, the Warrior Queen insisted upon being taken to his bedside.

Three days passed, during which Thuron pondered his relationship with, and his obligations to, the false Ka'arbu. He did not need Gaar to remind him that he had made a bargain with the voice, that he had agreed to deliver the crystals. And a bargain, despite the circumstances, was still a bargain.

As titular head of the Temple and Commander of the Royal Taveeshian Guards, Thuron had a special squad composed of acolytes and guardsmen search the Temple. Within hours they found the secret room in which Yang Tor had hidden the howling crystals stolen from the Quest Ship. Here,

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away from the sea, the shimmering, scarlet bricks murmured softly, musically. A portion of the cache Thuron ordered taken to the palace to enrich the royal coffers.

Although there were innumerable details which needed his attention, both at the Temple and at the palace, Thuron spent as much of his time as possible with Yllara, who was exhausted by her ordeal but showed every sign of making a quick recovery. During one of these visits, the Prince of Murderers arrived to inquire about her health. Yllara's purple eyes brightened and she held out her hand to him.

"I do not know what would have happened to me had you not been there in the dungeon," she said. Turning to Thuron, she explained, "I think I was losing my reason. Zorm shamed me. He taught me how Thuron's woman should behave."

"Wasn't nothin'," the blue-skin muttered sheepishly. "Just tried to help, that's all."

"What are your plans now, Zorm?" Thuron inquired.

"If it's all right with you, sire, I'd kinda like to serve the Son—maybe in the Temple."

"Gaar will need a good assistant," the Ulmekoorian mused. "I will speak with him about it."

Gaar, too, was a frequent visitor at Yllara's bedside, although he spent most of his time at the Temple, closeted with the Golden Sphere. When asked what he and the God were discussing, he would only stroke his whiskers and say, "We talk of many things. But let us not concern ourselves with that. Rather, I would remind you and Yllara that you must make plans for your nuptials."

"The plans are well made, furry one. 'Twill be a wedding twice over, for Riis and Sh'gundelah will wed at the same time."

"That slanderer of heroes? I don't see what she sees in him," Gaar grumbled.

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Thuron grinned. "Whatever it is, 'tis enough to make her prefer being a general's wife to being a queen."

"He advances from captain to general so quickly?" The Kend pursed his mouth. "Ah, well, being great-hearted I shall not begrudge him his glory. I suppose he deserves it. Now, before I forget, sire—will you order the guards to bring the rest of the crystals to the Temple roof?"

"Why?"

"I—ah—have oracled that Ka'arbu will soon build a doorway there, exactly like the one you found on Mt. Thona."

"It will be done immediately, brother."

The following day, Thuron and Gaar went alone to the roof top where the guardsmen had deposited a huge, scarlet-shimmering pile of brick-sized crystals.

"I see no doorway," Thuron grumbled.

"Have patience, sire. It will appear. But now I must speak quickly for we have little time left together. I beg a favor, Thuron, that you will continue as the Son of the Battle God, even though you know you are not."

"That is a strange request from you, friend!"

"It must be so, Thuron, for if you do not, some unscrupulous false priest may rise up and become another Yang T'or. The Temple needs one at its head who will not misuse his power."

"But I thought that *you* would be my High Priest. Why else have you spent so many hours alone with the Golden Sphere? Have you not been learning?"

The Kend smiled and squinted his eyes. "Aye, I have been learning. One thing I have learned is that my travels with you have given me a taste for adventure. Now stand back, Thuron—Ka'arbu builds his doorway!"

As Gaar spoke, the air before them shimmered and crackled, Thuron heard again the sound which was like a swarm

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of *gnorths*, and suddenly there appeared the rainbow-like doorway the Kend had predicted.

"Quickly, brother," Gaar instructed. "You and I must throw the crystals through the doorway, but take care not to let any part of you go through, too."

The two friends worked for several minutes, tossing brick after precious brick through the shimmering portal, where each seemed instantly to disappear. At last, all of the crystals had been delivered.

"What has been asked for is now fulfilled," Gaar proclaimed. "Your part of the bargain is kept. Now, sire, you must leave this place. Go below, and close the doors carefully behind you."

"And what of you?"

"Trust me, my friend. Tell Riis and Yllara not to forget me, for I will ever remember the three of you."

"Does this mean you are leaving?"

"For a while, sire. I have discovered many—er—other worlds to conquer. But I will be back, you can be sure of that." Briefly, he clasped the golden giant's hand. Then, vanished. Thuron moved as if to follow, but the voice suddenly spoke in his ear:

Stay, man of Ulmekoor! We leave you this for your trouble!

Through the doorway tumbled a small black box, and then the multi-colored arch winked out. Thuron strode over to the box and picked it up. One side of it had a number of knobs and dials, and a small cloudy surface.

Thuron, with this box you can control the Golden Sphere. You can send it anywhere on Lankor, to be your eyes and your ears. Use it to find the Pirates of Sehre'el.

The voice continued for several minutes, explaining each of the dials and knobs, until it was satisfied that Thuron could operate the device.

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Farewell, my Son! May happiness and success be yours!

"But what of Gaar?"

The furry one is with us, now. Farewell!

The voice was gone. Thuron stood alone on the roof top, gazing upwards. Very deliberately, he struck himself soundly on the nose.

EPILOGUE

GAAR'S WHISKERS TWITCHED. He felt giddy and curiously lightweight. He opened his golden eyes slowly and surveyed the room and the creatures in it.

There were four of them. Three were bipeds of various hues, with enough similarities to satisfy the esthetically squeamish but with subtle differences which indicated strikingly dissimilar origins. The first three each had two feet, two hands, two eyes, two ears; the black, shiny-scaled one, the largest of the four—almost as tall as Gaar himself, the Kend noted—boasted six fingers per hand; the pink-skinned, tufted one, next largest in size, bore a strong resemblance to the late Amik Nerdd; the one with the long green mane seemed on second glance relatively boneless, its tiny “fingers” a group of tentacles at the ends of jointless, flexible arms. Of the four, only the last, the smooth, pale, egg-shaped one, half Gaar’s size, could not be classed as humanoid, even if one were generous with the word. Its two eyestalks swung around to focus on the Kend, an orifice between and below them convoluted and a voice came out, deep and rumbling:

“So this is Gaar.”

“Yes, sir,” said the pink one in a voice Gaar recognized immediately as the same he’d heard from the Golden Sphere. “He’s still a little dazed after the matter transmitter.”

“He’ll recover quickly,” Egg-Shape said dryly, its speaking orifice stretching into an indulgent smile.

A twinkle crept into the Kend’s eyes and he sat up and

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preened his ears and whiskers. Physical movement in this place was dreamlike. Although he hadn't tried it, Gaar felt that he could leap all the way across the compartment with very little effort. With a start he realized that Egg-Shape had not been speaking Lankorian. Only the twitching tip of his tail betrayed this realization.

"He's a cool one," chuckled Pink Skin.

"Well, what do you have to say for yourself?" Egg-Shape rolled closer to the bunk on which Gaar sat.

Surprising himself, Gaar replied in the same language. "I *could* say, 'Who are you?' or, 'Where am I?' But since I think I know the answer to the first, I'll ask the second."

"Don't you know that curiosity killed the cat?" asked the black one.

Gaar eyed him sourly, then turned again to Egg-Shape. "Is he amusing himself at my cost? If he is, let him know I am a warrior, too, as well as an Oracle. I have fought bigger things than he with nothing more than . . ."

"We know, we know," Egg-Shape interrupted, forming a pseudopod and gesturing placatingly with it. "You are indeed courageous—but you are even more shrewd than you are brave. Which is why we brought you here."

"You haven't answered his question, Captain," said Pink-Skin. "Friend Gaar, you are aboard a sky-boat which travels through the space between the stars instead of on water."

Gaar blinked warily.

"Concepts of stars," cautioned Black-Skin, "do not come easily to people who live under a cloud cover such as we saw on Lankor."

"Above the clouds," amended the Voice of Ka'arbu. "We circle around Lankor, high above the clouds."

Gaar narrowed his eyes. "I wondered how you could be so well hidden. It is truly a marvel that I, Gaar of Kendsahr of Lankor . . ."

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Egg-Shape's eyestalks quivered. Although Gaar had never seen the gesture, he recognized it as a sign of impatience, so he stopped speaking. The orifice opened.

"Yes, my feline one, we all know this. We also know your brave deeds and your shrewdness."

"Thuron's ear was as your own," the Kend guessed.

"That's right," Pink-Skin confirmed. "When we took him from the mountaintop, while he was asleep we planted a small transceiver in the bone behind his ear. Whenever we passed overhead, we could hear whatever he heard, and could converse with him."

"But only three times a day," Gaar mused. "Why did you not stay above one spot?"

"Even with a low-gravity planet that would be difficult. With a high-G world like yours, it is impossible. But a parking orbit requires no energy at all, except for corrections. If you remain with us you will gradually learn these things."

Gaar smiled. "Lankor is a high-gravity planet? Then that is why you needed someone born on Lankor to collect the crystals, eh? So you picked the strongest man on Lankor!"

Gaar's hosts bellowed with laughter and slapped each other's backs. "Didn't I tell you he was a sharp one?" said Pink-Skin.

Gaar waited until the laughter died. "But why did you choose me instead of Thuron. He is the Lord, the brave one, the valiant one, even if I did save his life now and then. Surely he was the . . ."

"You," said Egg-Shape, "are the one who realized what we were. Tell me, Kend, how did we slip up?"

Gaar smirked. "When a god speaks with the tongue of a merchant, indeed 'tis time for an Oracle to start thinking."

"That's another thing in your favor. This Oracle thing. How real is it? A genuine precog would be quite an asset to an organization such as ours."

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"Surely, friend merchant, you do not expect me to answer that it is true or false. Each profession has its secrets, is that not so?"

"Sharp," repeated Pink-Skin. The others murmured in agreement.

"Now," said the Kend, sensing that his bargaining position, although strong, could be improved, "with your lordships' pleasure, I would like an answer to my first question. Who are you? And where do you come from?"

"We are like your friend Thuron," replied Egg-Shape, "adventurers, freebooters. Also as you guessed, merchants. We come from many planets, many worlds, recruiting as we go. And we have decided among us that it might be extremely profitable for all if we were to add a fat, furry and feline Kend to our company. If you join us, you will share equally the dangers, the pleasures and the profits. These crystals which you and Thuron gathered, for instance, will buy us a new propulsive system and allow each of us to live like a king on any of a dozen different worlds. What we will find on our next voyage out, we will not know until we get there—but let me assure you, Gaar, there are hundreds of worlds no more advanced than Lankor, where normal trade is not possible. There may be others, like you, who would recognize us as merchants instead of gods. We tend to think like merchants—but you—you have been in the god-business for a long time."

There was a silence while Gaar pulled on his forelock. 'Feline,' the round one had called him. From Egg-Shape's tone of voice Gaar decided that this was not a bad thing. He was among friends, friends who appreciated his guile as well as his powers. For the first time in his life he was the biggest, the strongest one of the group. And he had acquired a taste for travel during his adventures with Thuron.

"Will you join us, friend Gaar?" Egg-Shape asked. "If

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you decide against it, we will gladly re-open the force field and send you back."

Gaar looked at each of them in turn. "Will I be required to travel on watery worlds? Know you, I am not overly fond of water, except for drinking."

Egg-Shape rumbled with laughter. "No, my little catman, we'll ask nothing so unpleasant of you. Only your friendship, your loyalty, your special talents and perhaps your fighting arm—but not that you learn to swim."

The furry one smoothed his whiskers and leaned back in the bunk. "I'll go with you, friends," he said.

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