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# The Valley Of Creation

BY EDMOND HAMILTON

Alien forces struggle for mastery in a forgotten land where beasts have more-than-human powers

Revised by the author for this first book publication



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# SWORDS, SORCERY... AND SCIENCE

*In the darkness, there came to Eric Nelson a summons and a warning—a summons to a forgotten land where beast and human walked and talked alike, a warning of a war that might end mankind as he knew it.*

The more science learns, the less it knows. As the frontiers of knowledge advance, scientists keep discovering new things they *don't* know.

This is a novel of the *unknown.* The purest kind of science fiction, it is at the same time a story of mystery, high adventure, and menace, the dark dreams that haunt men's deepest memories—and the lurking secrets of the distant past that may mold the far future!

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# THE VALLEY OF CREATION

Edmond Hamilton

LANCER BOOKS • NEW YORK

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# THE VALLEY OF CREATION

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# Chapter I

## *ALIEN DREAM*

It seemed to Eric Nelson that a strange voice spoke in his mind as he lay in drink-drugged sleep, here in the squalid inn of a Chinese frontier village.

"*Shall I kill, little sister?*"

The voice was mental, not physical. His brain recorded it, not through his ears but directly.

And it was not human. There was an alien quality in its vibration that set even his dreaming mind bristling.

"*No, Tark! You were to watch, not to kill! Not—yet!*"

To Nelson the answering mental voice seemed human enough. But though it lacked the uncannily alien quality of the first, it was chill, silvery, merciless.

He knew that he was dreaming. He knew that he lay here in the battle-wrecked frontier village of Yen Shi, that he had drunk too much to forget the doom that stared him and his companions in the face, that fatigue and too much liquor were doing this to him.

Yet it was creepily real, this swift, urgent dialogue of voices that only his mind could hear. And again his nerves crawled at the non-human strangeness of the first voice.

"*They should all die now, little sister! For he even now seeks them out, to hire them as our foes! Ei has brought me word!*"

"*Tark, no! Watch only till I order—*"

Nerve-tension snapped and Eric Nelson found himself



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scrambling up from his blankets, staring wildly around the dark room.

A black flying shadow leaped for the open window and was gone as his blurred eyes focused—a shadow that was not human!

With a strangled exclamation, Nelson lurched to the window, plucking the heavy pistol from his belt.

Great wings flapped suddenly out there in the night, rapidly receeding. He leveled the pistol but he could see nothing, and after a moment there were no more sounds.

Eric Nelson stood bewildered, his skin still creeping from the uncanny terror of the experience. His brain was fogged by sleep and by the sick aftertaste of the previous night's drinking.

Gradually his bristling nerves quieted. There was nothing out there in the dark—nothing but the few blinking lights of the wretched mud village, cowering underneath the silent stars, close beside the black wall of the great mountains that shouldered all the way to Tibet."

Dawn was coming. Nelson holstered his gun and ran his hands heavily over his unshaven face. Waves of pain surged up through his eyeballs as he turned from the window.

"Too much to drink," he muttered. "No wonder I'm hearing—and seeing—things."

He made a deliberate effort to thrust down the uncanny strangeness of his experience, to forget it. But he couldn't, quite.

It was not the mere fact of the voices that was so weird. The brain heard strange things in dreams. It was the alien, somehow *husky* quality of that first voice that still shook him.

Nelson lit a clay oil-lamp. Its flickering rays and the growing light of dawn showed nothing unusual in the bare, squalid little room. He put on his uniform-jacket and went through a door into the common-room of the

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deserted inn. Three of his four fellow-officers were in the room.

Two of them, the big Dutchman, Piet Van Voss, and Lefty Wister, the spidery little Cockney, were snoring in their bunks.

Nick Sloan, the third, stood shaving in front of a tiny steel mirror, his big body easily balanced on firm-set feet, his flat, hard brown face looking coolly over his shoulder at Nelson.

"I heard you yell in there," Sloan said. "Bad dream?"

Eric Nelson hesitated. "I don't know. There was something in the room. A shadow—"

"I'm not surprised," Sloan drawled unsympathetically. "You were pretty stiff last night."

Nelson was suddenly resentfully aware of the contrast of his disheveled figure and tumbled blond hair with Sloan's competent neatness.

"Yes, I was drunk last night," he said harshly. "And I'll be drunk again tonight and tomorrow night also."

A patient voice sighed from the doorway. "Not tomorrow night, Captain Nelson. No."

Nelson turned. It was Li Kin who stood in the doorway. He made an absurd figure, his scrawny little body swathed in a major's uniform far too big for him. His gentle, fine-planed face was sagging with weariness and behind his thick-lensed spectacles his black eyes held sadness.

"A full column of the Chinese Red Army is on its way here from Nun-Yan," he said. "It will be here by tomorrow noon."

Nick Sloan's tawny eyes narrowed slightly. "That's pretty fast action. But it's only what we expected."

Yes, Eric Nelson thought heavily. It was only what they had expected.

They five had been staff officers for Yu Chi, a one-time minor warlord in the old China who had fled the

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country when the Communists took over. For years, Yu Chi had made his base in the no-man's-land of wild mountains that thrust up like a fist between China, Burma and Tibet, a region where boundaries and sovereignties were shadowy things. Every so often the old warlord, posing as a liberator, had made a foray which pretended to be a guerrilla action against the Reds but which was really a looting raid.

Of the five of them, Li Kin was the only one with any patriotic motives. The others were frankly mercenaries, picking up whatever they could in the troubles of southeast Asia. Nelson had been such a mercenary for ten years, ever since the Korean War ended and he decided that he liked adventure too much to go home. Nick Sloan had been in Asia nearly as long. Van Voss and the little Cockney were fugitive criminals, but tough fighting-men.

But now the five were at the end of their rope. Yu Chi had gone on one "liberation" raid too many, and had walked into a tiger-trap of Red troops here. They had won the battle, and the town. But Yu Chi was dead, his motley army had broken up, and when Communist reinforcements reached the village, there would be short shrift for five mercenaries.

"We've got to get out of here by tomorrow morning or we're cooked," Nick Sloan said curtly.

Lefty Wister had awakened and stood, a cigarette drooping laxly from his thin lips. Van Voss was stretching hugely in his bunk, scratching his enormous paunch as he listened.

"Where can we go without running into the bloody Red troops?" whined the little Cockney.

Nelson shrugged. "North, east and south we'd walk right into their hands. West there's only the Kunlun Mountains, and without a guide we'd merely dodge around in there until the tribesmen got us."

Li Kin raised his tired head. "That reminds me. A

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tribesman from those mountains wanted to talk to me last night. Something about hiring us to fight for his people."

Van Voss grunted. "Some *verdommte* Trans-Tibetan tribe that wants a few machine-guns to crush their neighbors."

Sloan's hard face was thoughtful. "It might be an out, though. In those mountains, if we knew our way, we'd be safe. Where is the man?"

"Still waiting outside, I think," said the Chinese. "I'll get him." He went heavily toward the doorway.

Nelson looked after him without interest, simply because he was sick of looking at Sloan and Van Voss and Wister.

Through the open door he watched Li Kin cross the dusty compound to a crumbling mud wall, where another man sat—a bareheaded man in shapeless quilted garments, sitting motionless in the light of the rising sun. He did not sit with the patient immobility of peaceful things but with the tight-coiled watchfulness of a crouching tiger. He rose with a lithe quick movement when Li Kin spoke to him.

Li Kin and the stranger came back across the compound. As they entered the room Li Kin said, "This is Shan Kar."

Nelson glanced indifferently. Shan Kar was of his own age and stature but no more like himself than a wildcat is like a terrier. His bare black head was alertly erect as he studied the white men.

Here was no primitive tribesman The man's handsome olive face and dark eyes had the haughty strength and fire and pride of a prince of ancient blood.

Eric Nelson sat up.

"You're no Tibetan," he said sharply, in that language.

"No," answered Shan Kar quickly. His accent was slurred as though spoken in an obscure dialect of Tibetan.

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He pointed through the open door at the gray, sunlit mountains in the distance.

"My people dwell there, in a valley called L'Lan. And we men and woman of L'Lan have—enemies."

There was a flicker of emotion in his eyes as he spoke, fierce as a sword-flash. His eyes were, for that moment, fiery and intense, the eyes of a fanatic warrior, of a man with a cause.

"Enemies too powerful for us to conquer with our own forces! We have heard of the white men's new, powerful weapons. So I came to hire such men and weapons to help us in our struggle."

Nelson felt suddenly certain that Shan Kar referred to no mere petty tribal struggle. This man was not playing his game of war for horses, women or conquest, but for something bigger.

Shan Kar shrugged. "I heard of the warlord Yu Chi and came here to make an offer to him. But, before I arrived he was dead in the battle here. But you who remain know the use of such weapons. It you come with me to L'Lan and use them, we can pay you well."

"Pay us?" Nick Sloan's face showed his sharp interest. "Pay us with what?"

For answer, Shan Kar reached beneath his quilted cloak and brought forth a curious object which he handed to them.

"We have heard that this metal is valuable, to you of the outer world."

Eric Nelson puzzledly examined the thing. It was a thick hoop of dull gray metal, a ring several inches in diameter. Mounted on opposite sides of the metal hoop were two small disks of quartz. There was something odd about the little quartz disks. Each was only an inch across, but each had a carven pattern of interlocking spirals that baffled and blurred the vision.

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Lefty Wister whined scornfully, "The bloody beggar wants to hire us with a hoop of old iron!"

"Iron? No," grunted Van Voss. "I see that metal down in the Sumatra mines. It is platinum."

"Platinum? Let me see that!" exclaimed Sloan. He closely examined the gray metal hoop. "By heaven, it is!"

His tawny eyes narrowed as he looked up at the silent, watching stranger? "Where did this come from?"

"From L'Lan," answered Shan Kar. "There is more there—much more. All you can take away will be yours as pay."

Nick Sloan swung around on Nelson. "Nelson, this could be big. All the years you and I have been out here, we haven't had an opportunity like this."

The Cockney's eyes were already shining covetously. Van Voss merely stared sleepily at the metal hoop.

Eric Nelson fingered it again and asked, "Where exactly did it come from? It looks almost like a queer instrument of some kind rather than an ornament."

Shan Kar answered evasively, "It came from a cavern in L'Lan. And there is much more metal like it there."

Li Kin said slowly, "A cavern in L'Lan? That name sounds familiar, somehow. I think there was a legend once—"

Shan Kar interrupted. "Your answer, white men—will you come?"

Nelson hesitated. There was too much about this business that was unexplained. Yet they dared not stay here in Yen Shi.

He finally told Shan Kar, "I'll commit myself to no bargains in the dark. But I'm willing to go to your valley. If the setup is as you say, we'll fight your battle—for platinum."

Sloan planned swiftly. "We can get a few light machine-guns and what tommy-guns and grenades we need

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from old Yu's arsenal. But it'll take work to round up enough pack-ponies by tomorrow morning."

His face crisped in resolve. "We can do it, though. We'll be ready to start at dawn, Shan Kar."

When Shan Kar had gone Lefty Wister uttered a crow of laughter.

"The bloody fool! Don't he realize that with machine-guns and grenades we can just take his platinum and walk off with it?"

Nelson turned angrily on the evilly eager little Cockney. "We'll do nothing of the sort! If we do agree to fight for this man, we'll—"

Suddenly Nelson stopped short, startled and shaken by abrupt remembrance. Remembrance of his weird dream of only an hour before, the dream in which human and unhuman voices had spoken in his mind!

*"They should all die now, little sister! For he even now seeks them out to hire them as our foes!"*

That alien, unhuman mental voice—had it been real after all? For Shan Kar *had* just provisionally hired them to fight enemies of whom they knew nothing! Into what mysterious struggle were they entering?

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## Chapter II

## *STRANGE BEASTS*

The haunting memory of fantastic nightmare still oppressed Eric Nelson as he sat moodily late that night in the single drink-shop surviving in the battered village.

He was bone-weary from the long day's urgent work of rounding up pack-ponies. That and habit were why he had insisted to Li Kin that they stop at this mud-walled tavern whose fat Cantonese proprietor had somehow hoarded a few cases of imitation Scotch.

"Sloan and the others will need us to help pack," murmured Li Kin. He looked tired, his fine eyes blinking behind the thick spectacles. "We should go."

"In a little while," Nelson nodded. "They can get the stuff out of old Yu's arsenal and pack it without us anyway."

He tilted the square bottle, looking unseeingly at the wretched few tables whose grotesque shadows wavered on the crumbling mud walls as the oil-lamp flickered.

Why did that weird little experience stick in his mind like a burr? A dream of strange, coldly menacing voices in his mind, a shadow leaping across his room, a sound of great wings in the night—what was there in those to disturb him so?

"Yet it's cursed queer about Shan Kar," he muttered, half to himself.

Li Kin's head bobbed in earnest agreement. "Very queer. For today I have remembered about L'Lan."



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Nelson stared at him blankly. "L'Lan? Oh, that's the name of the fellow's valley back in the mountains. I wasn't thinking of that."

"I have been thinking of it very much," the little Chinese officer affirmed. He leaned across the rough table. "You've been in China a long time, Captain Nelson. Have you never heard the name?"

"No, I never—" Nelson began, then stopped.

He did remember something.

"*Magic valley of L'Lan! Long and long ago in L'Lan were born the Yang and Yin—life and death, good and evil, joy and sorrow!*"

It came dimly back into Nelson's mind across seven war-crowded years, the rapt talk of that blind old seer whom he'd saved from the murderous guerrillas.

"*Still, still lives L'Lan the golden, deep in the guarding mountains! Still lives in L'Lan the ancient Brotherhood, for that hidden heartland of the world was the valley of creation!*"

"I remember the story now," Nelson admitted. "A sort of Central Asian Garden-of-Eden myth."

"Yes, a myth, a legend," Li Kin said earnestly. "Yet this man Shan Kar says that he comes from L'Lan!"

Eric Nelson shrugged. "'Nature imitates Art,' said Wilde. The tribe out there in the mountains probably named their valley after the legend."

"Perhaps so," Li Kin said doubtfully. He got to his feet. "Should we not go now?"

"Go along and tell Sloan I'll be there soon," Nelson said carelessly.

Li Kin's eyes flickered to the emptied Scotch bottle, and he hesitated a moment. "Remember, we have to get away by morning."

"I'll be there," snapped Nelson and the little Chinese went silently out.

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Eric Nelson looked after the little man with a sympathy he felt neither for himself not his three other fellow-officers. Li Kin was a patriot, an absurdly impractical patriot whose fervent dreams had set his feet stumbling through the quagmire of China's civil wars to this blind-alley end.

The other three and he himself, Nelson thought with savage self-contempt, were not patriots, nor dreamers nor anything but soldiers of fortune.

Soldiers of fortune? The phrase lent an ironical twist to his lips. He and his fellow mercenaries were so far removed from the gay, gallant connotations of that name. Nick Sloan was a cool ruthless self-seeker, Van Voss a moronic sadist, Lefty Wister a spidery criminal.

And he, Eric Nelson? He, least of all, fitted that glamorous name. He was thirty years old, and the best years of his life had no other memorial than forgotten battles. Now he was a fugitive whose only out was to hire himself to Shan Kar's mountain people.

Nelson swept the empty Scotch bottle off the table to crash in splinters against the mud wall.

"Am I a dog to sit here untended?" he demanded of the fat Cantonese. "Bring another."

The liquor had lighted his somber mood by the time he went out into the night an hour later.

The few blinking lights along Yen Shi's wrecked and wretched streets danced in a cheerful rosy glow as he stalked along.

"I'm tired of Yen Shi anyway!" he thought as he elbowed between shadowy, shuffling peasants. "San Kar's mountains will be new, at least."

"*L'Lan, L'Lan the golden, where the ancient Brotherhood still lives—*"

Now what was this Brotherhood that the old seer had talked of so raptly? And if it was so important, why hadn't Shan Kar mentioned it?

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Eric Nelson stopped suddenly. Green eyes blazed at him from directly ahead in the gloom.

A huge tawny dog crouched there, staring at him. Only it wasn't a dog.

"A wolf," he told himself, as his hand went to the heavy pistol at his belt. "I'm not *that* drunk."

He was a little drunk, yes, but even so he could see that the beast was too big for a dog, its massive head too wide, its crouching tenseness too feral.

Its green eyes watched him with hypnotic intensity.

Nelson was deliberately raising his gun when a soft voice spoke from the darkness beyond the animal.

"He will not harm you," said a girl's voice in accented Tibetan dialect. "He is—mine."

She came toward him out of the shadows, past the crouching beast.

It was hard to see her clearly because Nelson's vision was obscured by the alcohol in his brain.

But he felt that this girl was special enough to justify the effort.

The way she moved, for one thing—she was light on her feet with a sort of gliding grace that belonged to an animal rather than to a town-bred human.

Nelson had never seen a woman move that way before and he wanted to see more of it—much more of it.

She wore the conventional dark jacket and trousers and at first he took it for granted that she was Chinese. Her hair was black enough, clustered around her shoulders as though she had brought part of the night with her into the lamplight. But it was soft wavy hair and the face it framed was the wrong color, a smooth, olive tan and the wrong shape.

Vaguely Nelson had a feeling that only recently he had somewhere seen an olive face like that, finely wrought and strong and just a little arrogant—only it had been a man's face.

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Her great, grave dark eyes were looking up at him provocatively. Yet there was something oddly childlike about the innocence of her red mouth, the delicate tanned planes of her face.

"I am Nsharra, white lord," she said softly, her glance tilting to meet his eyes. "I have seen you in the village before the battle."

Nelson laughed. "I haven't seen you before. Nor that wolf-dog, either. I'd remember you both."

She came a step closer.

Through the alcoholic haze that fogged his mind Nelson saw her dark eyes studying him.

"You look tired and sad, lord," Nsharra murmured. "You are—lonely?"

Nelson's first impulse was to toss her a coin and be on his way. In his ten years in China he hadn't sunk so low as to meddle with village street-girls.

But this girl was different. It might be the Scotch that made her seem so, but her smooth face and slumbrous eyes had a beauty that held him.

"My hut is very near," she was saying, looking up at him with an oddly shy little smile.

"And why not?" Nelson said suddenly in English. "What difference does it make now?"

Nsharra understood his tone if not his words.

Her small hand on his arm guided him softly through the shadows.

The mud hut was on the fringe of the village. In the starlight Nelson saw the looming bulk of a great black stallion standing outside it.

The horse was fire-eyed, its ears alertly erect, yet it stood quietly and there was neither rope nor halter upon it.

"Yours?" Nelson said to her, and then laughed. "Good thing Nick Sloan hasn't seen him. He likes fine horses."

He was not completely drunk, not drunk at all, he told

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himself He knew quite well the incongruity of a village singsong girl owning a wolf-dog and a stallion but in his rosy, reckless mood he didn't pause to wonder or care.

The interior of the hut was a squalid cubicle that wavered out of darkness when the girl lit a candle. As she straightened, Nelson took her into his arms.

For just a moment, Nsharra struggled, then relaxed. But her lips remained cool and unmoved under his.

"I have wine," she murmured, a little breathlessly. "Let me—"

The rice wine was a pungent fire in his throat and Nelson knew he should drink no more of it. But it was too easy to sit here on the soft mat and watch Nsharra's delicate, grave face as her slim hands refilled his cup.

"You will come again to see me, tomorrow or the next night, white lord?" she murmured, as she handed him the cup.

"The name is Eric Nelson and I won't be back tomorrow night for I won't be in Yen Shi," he laughed. "So tonight is all there is."

Her dark eyes fixed on his face, suddenly intent. "Then you and your comrades leave at once with Shan Kar?"

"Shan Kar?" The name brought a flash of memory to Nelson. "*Now* I remember who you remind me of! You've got the same olive complexion, the same features and the same accent—"

He broke off, staring at her. "What do you know of Shan Kar anyway?"

Nsharra shrugged slim shoulders. "All the village knows that he is a stranger from the mountains and that he seeks to hire you and your comrades to go back to his land with him."

Eric Nelson could believe that, for he had had past experience with the swiftness of gossip in an Oriental town. His fogged mind was still baffled, though, by the

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thing that didn't explain—the queer similarity between Shan Kar and Nsharra, as though they belonged to the same race.

All that didn't matter. What mattered was that this was the last night for him, that the girl's tapering fingers were light against his cheek, her breath warm in his ear.

Nelson gulped his wine and looked up from it to see the wolf-dog crouched in the open doorway of the hut, watching him with fixed, luminous green eyes.

And the great head and fiery eyes of the big stallion were watching too from out in the darkness. There was something perched on the stallion's back, something winged and rustling.

"Will you tell those two beasts to go away?" Nelson said thickly to the girl. "I don't like them. They look as though they were listening to every word."

The girl looked at the wolf-dog and horse. She did not speak. But wolf and stallion melted back into the darkness.

"Hatha and Tark mean no harm," Nsharra murmured soothingly. "They are my friends."

Deep in Nelson's mind, something in her words plucked another hidden string of memory, something that set up vaguely unpleasant vibrations in his brain.

But he couldn't think of that nor of the two queer beasts out there in the dark with his arm around Nsharra's pliant body and his lips on her soft mouth.

"*Tark, do not kill! You were to watch, not to kill yet!*"

The memory crashed suddenly through his mind, the memory of where he had heard that name before.

The weird dream of alien, menacing thought-voices, the flying shadow in his room and the sound of wings in the night—memory of them ripped the alcoholic fog from Eric Nelson's mind.

His hands suddenly gripped the girl's slim shoulders with bruising force.

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"You said 'Tark!'" he rasped. "You said it before when I thought I was dreaming. You were talking somehow to that wolf!"

The caution and suspicion that had kept him alive for ten years in China's wars were all on the alert at this moment, dominating Nelson.

He glared at the girl. "You got me here for a reason. You know Shan Kar, you're of his race. Why are you spying on him?"

Nsharra looked back into his accusing eyes, with a little hurt look on her delicate face. She spoke softly.

She said, "Kill now, Tark!"

The wolf-dog was a dark thunderbolt that leaped in from the doorway and knocked Nelson sprawling as Nsharra jerked swiftly back.

Nelson made one abortive gesture toward his gun and then knew that, before he could draw it, his throat would be cut. He wrapped his arms around his own neck as he rolled with the wolf-dog's hairy weight on top of him.

He felt needle-sharp fangs rip his forearm. The most horrible part of the moment was that the wolf-dog sought his life in complete silence, without growl or snarl.

Then the great stallion screamed outside the hut and a gun roared. Nelson heard Nsharra's flying feet and silvery cry.

"Tark! Hatha—Ei! We go!"

"*Nelson!*" yelled Li Kin's startled voice.

Nelson became aware that the wolf-dog was no longer atop him. He scrambled to his feet, dazed and shaken.

The hut was empty. He stumbled to the door, and caromed into Li Kin. The little Chinese officer had his automatic in his hand and wore a stunned look in his spectacled eyes.

"I followed you, Nelson!" he babbled. "I saw you

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come to this hut with the girl but when I came near the stallion attacked me! I shot at it and missed."

"The girl? Where's the girl now?" Nelson cried. He was cold sober now and his daze was dissolving in red anger.

"She and the wolf burst out, knocked me over and fled!" Li Kin cried. "See, there they go!"

Nelson got a shadowy glimpse of a stallion and rider and a slinking wolf-shape racing westward down the dusty road in the uncertain starlight.

Over stallion, rider and wolf, moving west with them against the stars, flew a winged black soaring thing.

"There was something on the stallion's back when I came!" Li Kin exclaimed. "An eagle or other great bird —it's queer!"

"It's more than queer," rasped Eric Nelson. He gripped the slashed forearm that was beginning to throb and burn. "Come on—I want to see this man Shan Kar!"

Li Kin kept recurring to the beasts as they slogged hastily through dark dusty streets toward the inn.

"She spoke to them, as though they were people! She was like a witch, a mistress of *kuei*, with her familiars!"

"Will you forget those animals?" Nelson snapped.

He was angry and he was angry because he was a little afraid. He had been afraid before, many times, but not of something as uncanny as this, not of a girl and three beasts and a dream.

The dark courtyard of the inn echoed with the stamping and trampling of scores of hoofs. Shaggy little ponies were squealing and biting in protest as Nick Sloan and Lefty and Van Voss loaded the heavy packs from the arsenal onto them.

Nelson found Shan Kar in the corner of the courtyard, a dark, tense figure impatiently watching the hurried preparations.

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"Just who is Nsharra?" Nelson asked him flatly.

Shan Kar turned like a goaded leopard. The light from the inn's window showed the narrowed gleam of the man's eyes.

"What do you know of Nsharra?" asked Shan Kar.

"She's one of your own people, isn't she?" Nelson pressed. "She comes from L'Lan too?"

Shan Kar's handsome face was taut and dark.

"What do you know of Nsharra?" he repeated dangerously.

Eric Nelson knew then that he had failed in his attempt to surprise full explanation from the other.

Li Kin broke in excitedly. "A girl with a stallion and a wolf and an eagle! They would have killed Nelson if I had not interrupted! But they got away!"

Shan Kar, staring beyond them, spoke softly between his teeth. "Nsharra here—and Tark and Hatha and Ei too! Then they have followed me and watched me."

"Who is she? What does it mean?" Nelson demanded.

Shan Kar answered with brooding slowness. "She is daughter of Kree, Guardian of the Brotherhood—the enemies of my people!"

He added tightly, "And it means that the Brotherhood is striking at us even before we reach L'Lan. We must go swiftly if we are ever to reach the valley!"

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## Chapter III

## *INTO MYSTERY*

They had gone swiftly. Two weeks and half a thousand miles of the wildest mountains on Earth lay behind them. They were still climbing as the fifteenth day gathered toward the explosive climax of sunset.

Eric Nelson looked back down the shoulder of the great gray mountain and saw the little line of heavily-laden pack-ponies crawling up the trail after him like a disjointed hairy snake.

Ahead of them the treeless slope they climbed went up to a ridge against the sky like a springboard into infinity. Against the glory of fusing colors that fired the western heavens, Shan Kar and his mount loomed bigger than life.

Shan Kar stopped suddenly, pointed skyward and uttered a yell.

"Now what?" exclaimed Nick Sloan, riding beside Nelson. "Do you suppose he's sighted his valley? He said we would tonight."

"No, something's wrong!" Eric Nelson said quickly. He spurred forward, his tired shaggy pony manfully responding.

They reached Shan Kar at the very crest of the ridge. From here they looked westward toward another and parallel gigantic mountain range. Its highest, northern peaks were snow-capped and beyond it was a dim stupendous vista of still other ranges.



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Between this next great rampart and the one on whose crest they stood yawned a deep gorge, wooded thickly with fir and poplar and larch. Shadows were already deepening in the forests down there.

This was the mountain wilderness that stretched between the southeastern Kunlun Ranges and Koko Nor. And it was still one of the least-known parts of Earth.

Warplanes had flown over this mountainous no-man's-land in the last few years. A few explorers like Hedin had, at great peril, toiled across sectors of it. But most of it was as little-known as when the French missionaries, Huc and Gabet, had trudged through it a hundred years before. There was little here to tempt exploration, and there were hostile Tibetan and Mongol tribes to discourage it.

"Your guns!" Shan Kar was shouting as Nelson and Sloan rode up. "Shoot them, quickly!"

He was pointing skyward. Bewildered, Eric Nelson looked up. There was nothing in the fire-shot heavens but two eagles planing down a thousand feet above the ridge.

"There's nothing up there—" Nelson began puzzledly, when Shan Kar interrupted.

"The eagles! Kill them or our danger is great!"

It hit Nelson in the face. It brought back all the uncanny memory of Nsharra and her weird animal companions—a memory he had deliberately sought to rationalize and forget during the two weeks' trek.

Shan Kar was in deadly earnest. His black eyes glared hatred and fear at the two black winged shapes swooping in smooth circles through the sunset.

"Cursed native superstitions!" Nick Sloan grunted. "But I suppose we have to humor him."

Sloan had unslung his rifle from his saddle. He aimed at the lowest of the two black-winged shapes and fired.

There was a horrid, shrill scream across the heavens. It ing earthward with crumpled wings.

did not come from the eagle that was suddenly plummet-

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It came from the other great bird and, as it screamed, it was swiftly hurtling upward and westward in flight.

"The other!" cried Shan Kar. "He must not get away!"

Sloan fired again, and again. But the second eagle was already a receding dot against the sunset.

Shan Kar clenched his fists, staring after it. "He'll take word to L'Lan. But maybe—"

He started in a run toward the spot farther down the ridge where the first eagle had fallen.

"What the—?" Sloan exclaimed, lowering his rifle. "Is he crazy?"

"Native superstition of some kind," Eric Nelson said but was coldly conscious that he did not believe it himself.

The two eagles, in their purposeful reconnoitering of the pack-train, had been too uncannily reminiscent of Nsharra's strangely purposeful horse and wolf and eagle.

Li Kin and the Cockney had come up. Lefty Wister's pinched red face was glistening with alarm.

"What happened? And what's the bloody native doing down there?"

They could see that Shan Kar, farther down the ridge, had reached the fallen eagle. Nelson and the others followed hastily.

The eagle was not dead. Its wing had been broken by Sloan's bullet and it had been flopping away across the rocky ridge in evident effort to escape when Shan Kar stopped it.

Shan Kar looped a hide thong about the great bird's legs, hobbling it. The eagle, a magnificent creature of glistening black plumage and white-crested head, glared at Shan Kar with wonderful golden eyes, trying to strike with its beak.

Shan Kar grasped the crippled wing of the eagle by

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the tip and deliberately twisted it, tormenting the great bird.

"What the devil!" flamed Nelson. "Put the thing out of its misery!"

The eagle glanced at him swiftly with a flash of golden eyes. It was as though the bird understood. It brought Nelson creepy memory of the intent, intelligent look in the eyes of Nsharra's beasts—of Tark, the wolf, and Hatha, the stallion!

"Let me alone," Shan Kar said tightly, without turning his gaze from the eagle's eyes. "This is necessary."

"Necessary—to torture a dumb animal?" Nelson snapped.

"He can tell me what I must know," Shan Kar retorted. "And he is no dumb animal. He is one of the Brotherhood, of our enemies."

"Blimey, the man's cracked!" exclaimed Lefty Wister.

Shan Kar disregarded them all. He was staring fixedly into the splendid eyes of the wounded bird.

Nelson almost thought he could hear question and answer, inside his mind. Telepathic questions put by Shan Kar—and stubborn, defiant answer by the crippled eagle!

Could man and beast talk telepathically? His weird dream flashed back into his memory. Shan Kar, eyes narrowing, suddenly twisted the crippled wing again. A spasm of agony shook the eagle.

It turned its head convulsively, looked up at Eric Nelson. In that look, Nelson read tortured pain—and appeal!

His pistol came into his hand and cracked. The head of the eagle became a bloody mess and its wings relaxed in death.

Shan Kar leaped to his feet, his eyes flaming as he faced Nelson. "You should not have done that! I would have made him tell me!"

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"Tell you what? What could an eagle tell you?" Sloan demanded incredulously.

Shan Kar made a visible effort to repress his anger. He spoke rapidly, his fierce eyes sweeping them.

"We can't camp here now. We must move on tonight, and move fast. The Brotherhood will be out after us now that the other winged one has taken back word of our coming."

His hands clenched. "I feared it would be so! Nsharra has reached L'Lan before us with warning and they have watchers out—like those two."

"What is this Brotherhood?" Eric Nelson demanded.

"I will explain that later, when we reach L'Lan," answered the other.

Nelson took a step forward. "You will explain now. It's time we got the truth about what faces us in L'Lan."

Nick Sloan, his flat brown face hard and suspicious, harshly seconded Nelson. "That's right, Shan Kar. It seems we're up against more than just a tribal war. Spill it or we'll backtrack out of here."

Shan Kar smiled thinly. "You want the platinum we can pay you. You won't go back to China to be shot."

"Not to China—but we can cross southward over the Kunlun," Sloan spat. "Don't think you have us in your hand. You need us worse than we need you. Talk or we walk out."

Shan Kar eyed them, his mind obviously busy behind the handsome olive mask of his face. Then he shrugged.

"There is not time to tell you everything. We *must* move fast or we are lost. Also—you would not believe all if I told you."

He hesitated. "This much I will tell you. There are two factions in L'Lan. One is the party of the Humanites, of which I am one of the leaders. The other party is the Brotherhood.

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"We Humanites are all men and women as our name implies. We believe in the superiority of humanity to all other forms of life and are ready to fight for it. But the Brotherhood, our enemies, *are not all men!*"

Sloan stared. "What do you mean? What are those of the Brotherhood who are not men?"

"*Beasts!*" hissed Shan Kar. "Beasts who assert their equality with men! Yes, in L'Lan the wolf and tiger and eagle claim themselves the equals of humans!"

His black eyes flashed. "And they'll not stop there! The winged ones and the hairy ones and the clawed ones —all the forest clans—will eventually aspire to dominance over man! Is it strange that we Humanites are preparing to crush them before that can happen?"

There was stunned silence for a moment, then Lefty Wister's shrill laughter crowed. "Didn't I tell you the man was cracked? We've come half into Tibet on a wild-goose chase with a crazy native for guide!"

Nick Sloan's face darkened and he started toward Shan Kar. Eric Nelson intervened hastily.

"Sloan, wait! That platinum was real enough!"

Sloan stopped. "So it was. And we're going to find its source. But we won't find it by listening to crazy talk of wild beasts plotting against men!"

"The beasts of the Brotherhood are not the brute beasts of your outer world!" flared Shan Kar. "They are intelligent, as intelligent as men."

He made a fierce gesture. "I knew you would not believe! It was why I dared not tell you! But *you* at least should know I speak truth!" He pointed to Nelson.

Nelson felt a queer chill. He *did* have an uncanny conviction that Shan Kar was speaking the truth. But the impossible couldn't be true. A witch-girl and her pets, a crippled eagle, a queer native's fantastic talk—was he for these to throw away his firm footing on the everyday earth?

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"'*L'Lan the golden where the ancient Brotherhood still lives,*'" whispered Li Kin, quoting. "So that is what it means?"

Nick Sloan snapped the spell. "This is all moonshine, but we can talk it out later! Right now I want to know what the danger is that you claim threatens us! How far are we now from L'Lan?"

Shan Kar pointed at the great wall of mountains that rose on the other side of the deep wooded gorge.

"The valley L'Lan lies on the other side of those mountains. We are that close! But getting into it will be perilous now."

He hurried on. "There is only one pass into the valley. It leads into it near the city Vruun which is the heart of the Brotherhood. Yet we must pass Vruun to reach Anshan, the city in the south which we Humanites hold.

"I hoped to creep through the pass and past Vruun without detection. But if the Brotherhood's scout gets word back of our coming they'll move to block us at the pass. That is why we must hurry!"

Nelson and Sloan and the other three grasped at least the urgency of the situation. They had, all of them, fought too many battles and made too many forced marches not to understand strategy.

Eric Nelson told Sloan, "We'd better move as he says. We can get him to explain his queer statements later."

Sloan nodded, frowning. "He's either a liar or a superstitious fool. We'll find out later. Right now I smell trouble."

The sun was setting. Darkness came with a swift rush as Shan Kar led their little caravan down into the wooded gorge.

The forest was a dark tangle of fir, scruboak and poplar. Beneath it, the brush was tindery and crackling from

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the long dry season. A mountain-stream brawled noisily along in the night somewhere nearby.

Shan Kar knew the trails. He turned southward and they moved after him, their ponies stumbling in the dark, Lefty Wister swearing in a monotonous whine each time his little steed staggered.

A cold wind whined down from the black mountains on their right. The trees stirred mournfully. Eric Nelson had a sudden strongly claustrophobic awareness of the huge ranges that shut them into this wild and forgotten pocket of the globe.

A wolf howled, a long swelling cry that came from somewhere up in the wooded slopes on the west side of the gorge.

Shan Kar turned in his saddle. "Faster!" he rasped.

Nelson was drawn by some instinct to look up and, through the tracery of branches overhead, saw a dark, winged shape plane swiftly above the gorge. It was high, moving in searching loops and curves.

It screamed, an eagle cry echoing thinly down from the night. Almost at once the distant wolf-cry came again.

Shan Kar abruptly reined in his pony. "They know we're coming! I must try to learn what faces us inside L'Lan!"

He had dismounted. Fumbling under his cloak, he brought out something that glinted oddly in the starlight.

Then Nelson glimpsed what it was—the hoop of platinum with the two quartz disks mounted on it, that odd ornament or instrument which had sparked the treasure-lure of their quest.

"What the—!" Sloan exploded harshly. "If there's danger, we've no time to waste here!"

"Wait!" commanded Shan Kar. "Wait and be silent! All depends on whether I can contact my friends!"

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He had put the platinum hoop upon his head like a crown. He crouched, his strange headgear glistening vaguely.

Nelson felt incredulous wonder. What was Shan Kar doing with the odd thing? What was it?

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## Chapter IV

## *HIDDEN LAND*

The moon was rising. As it gleamed above the mountains east of them, its lambent light poured down into the dark forest of the gorge like quicksilver trickling through a sieve.

Shan Kar remained crouched as a pool of the vague light widened around him. The little quartz disks on the headpiece of platinum he wore caught the light and shone brilliantly. The man's olive face was taut, his eyes stared, unseeing, into the darkness.

"What is it? What has happened now?" came Li Kin's anxious voice from the darkness.

Behind the little Chinese, Eric Nelson heard the rattle of the ponies' hoofs on stones and Lefty Wister cursing steadily.

"Cursed native mumbo-jumbo, that's all!" swore Nick Sloan. "Are we going to stand here all night?"

Nelson laid a hand on the other's sleeve. "Wait, Sloan. Shan Kar seems to know what he's doing."

Again a wolf howled, this time a lonely wailing single cry, echoing away, infinitely pregnant with menace.

Shan Kar finally broke his taut immobility, leaping to his feet and jerking the platinum circlet from his head.

"I have talked with my people in Anshan. They warn that a force of the Brotherhood is on its way to cut us off inside the pass, and that their own warriors can't reach us in time to help!"



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Talked? Talked how, Nelson wondered swiftly? Had mind somehow spoken to distant mind through the agency of the platinum crown? But how could a people who were desperate to obtain the ordinary weapons of the outer world possess such a super-scientific instrument as that implied?

Shan Kar was continuing urgently. "We must get up through the pass and into L'Lan before they block us! All depends on that!"

Nelson shared the bafflement of the others. In this outlandish situation, they couldn't estimate the true magnitude of perils.

"How many men have the Brotherhood, your enemies, sent out to cut us off?" he demanded.

"Perhaps not many *men*," answered Shan Kar. "But they have many who are not men. Too many for us."

"More superstition," spat Nick Sloan, disgustedly. "He's trying to tell us there are intelligent beasts coming against us."

Nelson hesitated. "This Brotherhood may use trained beasts as fighters at that. Such a fight would be plenty messy. Especially in a narrow pass."

Again, he was forced to make a quick decision based on information whose sources seemed too fantastic to be credited.

"Get the ponies moving!" he ordered. "Whatever danger may be ahead, we'd be better off to meet it inside the valley than up in that pass."

They started climbing out of the great gorge, Shan Kar leading them up a trail that twisted amid giant boulders and gaunt firs. Soon they glimpsed above them the crack of a pass that split the titanic moonlit wall of the range.

A pulse-quickening sense of expectation spurred Eric Nelson as he helped drag the ponies upward. What lay

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within that mighty wall of mountains, what guarded answer to the mysteries that seemed to deepen around them hour by hour?

They came up clear of the last trees onto naked rock and shingle with the last lofty rampart of the range looming before them. The pass was a mere narrow crack through that rampart.

It was a place of shadows and shivering cold. The ponies' hoofs clattered on the loose rock as they rode through.

They came out onto an open ledge of moonlight, and Shan Kar leaned in his saddle to gesture ahead.

"L'Lan!"

It looked like a valley of dreams to Eric Nelson. It looked like a place he had visited in some former life and had never quite forgotten.

It was a pear-shaped land fifty miles long, completely walled in by towering ranges that stepped up toward stupendous, snow-crowned peaks at the northern, narrow end of the pear.

The pass at whose outlet they sat their ponies was some twelve miles from the northern end of the valley and nearly a mile above its floor. They looked down into a land silvered by the rising moon.

"Where is the city of your own people?" Nick Sloan demanded brusquely of Shan Kar.

The other pointed southward. "That way—out of sight. But Vruun, the city of the Brotherhood, is *there!*"

He was pointing north of due west. Eric Nelson followed the direction of his finger.

Nelson had already noticed the big river that flowed down the valley, whose every sprawling loop caught the moon. Now he saw a little cluster of lights beside it near the north end of the valley.

Vruun, city of the mysterious Brotherhood? Nelson

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strained his eyes. He glimpsed around the lights a mass of vague, glimmering structures that were oddly enlaced by the surrounding forest.

Nelson caught his breath. Unless the light tricked him, Vruun could be like no Asiatic city he had ever seen.

"But what—" he began, turning to Shan Kar.

He didn't finish. The cry that came echoing faintly up out of the great moonlit valley struck him silent.

*Hai—ooo!*

No human cry was that but one he had heard before in the uplands. The hunting call of wolves, of many wolves.

*Hai—ooo! Hai—ooo!*

The ponies jumped nervously. Shan Kar's voice rang urgent above the clatter of their hoofs.

"Tark's clan race ahead to cut us off! We must ride fast for Anshan!"

"These pack-ponies can't *go* fast!" Nick Sloan started to object and was silenced by the grim reply.

"They will!"

They rode pellmell down slippery rock slopes, Shan Kar leading them southward. And forest came darkly up to meet them—black forest of fir and larch and cedar that seemed to clothe much of the great valley.

Each of them led one of the pack-ponies. Nelson noted that the heavily-burdened, shaggy little horse he led was nervously running with all its strength.

"The Hairy Ones can go faster than we, but we have a start!" rang Shan Kar's voice from ahead. "All depends upon which of the Brotherhood are out!"

A few minutes later, as though to answer him, a squalling cat-scream drifted from far behind them—a screech of feline anger.

"Quorr and his clawed ones, too!" cried Shan Kar. "And Ei's scouts wing ahead!"

Nelson had already glimpsed the dark shapes of great

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winged things sliding fast above the forest, only momentarily visible through the tangle of black foliage against the silvered sky.

Ei's folks—eagles of the Brotherhood! Nelson saw three of them sweeping overhead, then circling back.

Abruptly they emerged from the forest onto rolling moonlit plain.

"Those are the lights of Anshan!" Shan Kar called back over the rush of wind. "See!"

Nelson glimpsed a few closely grouped lights far ahead in the moonlit vagueness of the valley. Then they were lost to view as the party galloped down into a declivity of the plain.

*Hai—ooo!*

Wolf-clan of the Brotherhood shouted to each other as they raced down the valley in pursuit!

Nelson thought, "I should be wondering if all this isn't a crazy dream. Only I know it isn't!"

No dream—no! The great peaks that walled L'Lan loomed lofty and clear in the moonlight. The wind smacked his face with irritating persistence, a twisted stirrup-leather was rubbing his leg raw.

Again the lights of Anshan came into view as they topped another rise in the plain. At the same moment, Lefty Wister uttered a strangled yell.

"Blimy, they're—"

It was choked from his lips. Nelson, turning in the saddle, glimpsed the dark wolf-shape that was dragging the Cockney from his frantically bucking pony.

Black leaping forms were all about them, eyes and teeth gleaming in the moonlight. Eagle-wings threshed the night close overhead.

Nelson had his pistol out but his own pony was so frantic with fear that he could not fire. He heard a Dutch curse from Van Voss.

"Off saddle before they pull us down one by one!"

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Nelson yelled, making a split-second decision. "Stick together—*here!*"

He was sliding from the saddle as he spoke, holding his scared pony's reins. A black bulk came at him in soundless rush and he triggered his automatic.

The staccato bark of the gun seemed momentarily to startle the dark beast-forms that were now all around them. As the creatures wavered, Van Voss shot the wolf that had dragged Lefty down.

The Cockney staggered up, a forearm slashed and bleeding, mouthing curses. Nick Sloan and Li Kin were already dismounted and Shan Kar was leaping catlike with a short sword from beneath his cloak.

"Help me get the tommy-guns out!" Nick Sloan shouted.

"Look out!" came Li Kin's scared cry. "There are *men* with them!"

Eric Nelson was later to remember this as the moment in which he first realized the fantastic otherworldliness of this valley.

For with the dark beasts charging them now came mounted men—men and horses who companioned wolf and tiger and eagle, men who wore queer metal skull-cap helmets and breastplates and wielded swords.

"There is Tark with Barin!" yelled Shan Kar.

Tark? Nelson's heart jumped. The great wolf who had been Nsharra's comrade, who had nearly had his throat out at Yen Shi?

Then he saw the wolf. He glimpsed that massive hairy head plunging forward beside an iron-gray horse on which sat a yelling, sword-wielding young man in helmet and breastplate.

Nelson and Li Kin and the Cockney had their rifles off their saddles and fired at the dark forms charging through the moonlight.

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"Kill the men!" Nelson yelled. "The brutes will run off if we get their masters!"

He knew almost as he said it that it was not so, that his incredulity and accustomed habits of thinking were deceiving him.

For these beasts were intelligent. They showed it by the way in which wolf and tiger came on in irregular zigzag leaps to avoid the rifle-fire that was obviously new to them.

In one sense, it was like all the battles in which Eric Nelson had ever engaged. There was the same sense of crazy confusion, the lack of a clear pattern, the feeling of being caught in a random collision of forces in which personal effort counted for nothing.

Then, as always, the fight suddenly crystalized. The youth whom Shan Kar had called Barin was shouting in a high, ringing voice, the other horsemen and the great beasts gathering toward him.

"Stand clear!" yelled Sloan, from behind.

Nelson and the others jumped aside and Sloan and Van Voss let go with the submachine-guns they had hastily unpacked.

The chattering storm of lead broke full on the human and beast attackers massing for charge. Blood-chilling horse-screams and cat-squalls ripped the din as mounted men and beasts crashed.

"They are beaten—they cannot face your outland weapons!" cried Shan Kar. "See, they flee!"

The beasts and the few horsemen left were dropping back, retreating from that deadly fire. Tiger-squall and wolf-howl rose and fell swiftly. Hoofs drummed the plain. Then Nelson heard a long, clear eagle-scream from far up in the moonlit sky. There followed comparative silence. Shan Kar, sword in hand, was bounding out toward the dark bodies dotting the plain.

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"Nelson, what kind of place is this valley?" came Sloan's shaken voice. "Wolves, tigers, eagles—"

"*Kuei!*" exclaimed Li Kin tremulously. "Shan Kar spoke truth! Brute and men are equal here—at least, in the Brotherhood!"

They heard Shan Kar yell something and plunged forward after him. They were in time to witness an astounding spectacle. Shan Kar, sword in hand, was tensely approaching a mighty, crouching wolf that had been attempting to drag away a man's limp form.

"It's Tark!" cried Shan Kar. "He was trying to drag Barin away!"

Eric Nelson glimpsed the flaring green eyes of the great wolf as it turned its face toward them. It did not snarl, as an ordinary beast would have done. It merely crouched for an instant, seeming to choose its victim swiftly before it sprang.

Nelson, startled, raised his rifle as the wolf launched itself for his throat. Shan Kar yelled at the same instant.

"Don't kill him if you can help it! He's valuable to us alive!"

The wolf would have died despite that cry had Nelson been able to shoot in time. But the spring was too swift for that. Nelson, involuntarily stepping back from the blazing-eyed charge as he raised his gun, tripped and stumbled.

He just glimpsed the terrific swing of Sloan's heavy gun as the other batted with it at the plunging wolf.

He heard the thud of the blow, felt Tark's massive, hairy weight hit him—but limply. Then he scrambled hastily from beneath the motionless body of the stunned wolf.

"We've got Tark alive and Barin, Kree's son, too!" Shan Kar exclaimed. "And we've given the Brotherhood its first taste of our new weapons!"

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The man was ablaze with exultation and excitement. Nelson looked down at the two bodies. The wolf still lay senseless, and the youth Barin was bleeding from a crease-wound across the temple.

Nick Sloan looked more shaken than Nelson had ever seen him as he stared at the dead beasts that lay there on the moonlit plain.

"Nelson, these brutes are *intelligent!*" he panted. "Running with men, fighting as allies of men."

"*Kuei!*" repeated Li Kin, his saffron face pallid in the silver light. "A valley of witches and devils!"

Shan Kar interrupted. "More of the Brotherhood will be here swiftly. We must ride on fast for Anshan or die here on the plain!"

He was, as he spoke, kneeling to lash hide thongs securely about the feet of the stunned wolf.

Tark, the wolf, stirred as Shan Kar finished the task. The green eyes of the great beast flickered open. Then, seeing Shan Kar binding the youth, Barin, the wolf's lips writhed away back from great fangs in a soundless snarl.

Shan Kar finished binding the youth, turned and laughed full in the face of the wolf.

"Tark the mighty, trapped like a tame outland dog!" He jeered at the great beast. "Did Kree send you to guard his stripling son? A potent guardian!"

The wolf made no sound, but his green eyes blazed an intelligent hatred of his mocker that made Eric Nelson's skin crawl.

"Riders are coming from the south!" Nick Sloan shouted suddenly. "Get ready!"

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## Chapter V

## *WOLF HATRED*

Nelson and the others raised their weapons as a dull clatter of many hoofs grew swiftly louder.

"Wait!" cried Shan Kar. "They are my own people from Anshan! Do not shoot!"

In the moonlight, Nelson presently made out a band of horsemen galloping toward them from the south. They wore armor much like that of their recent attackers, skullcap helmets and breastplates of metal. Swords gleamed in the moon. For a moment, Nelson thought that the new-come horsemen would ride right onto them.

But they pulled up sharply. A burly, bearlike warrior tumbled from his steed and strode toward San Kar with noisy greetings. Shan Kar, after brief colloquy, called to Eric Nelson and the others.

"Holk and these warriors came out to escort us to Anshan. But we mustn't delay. The scouts of the Winged Ones will have the whole Brotherhood down on us if we do."

Nelson heard the warriors exchanging fierce exultant words. Their dialect was not Tibetan but so much akin to that ancient tongue that he could catch most of the phrases.

"—Kree's son himself and the Hairy One!" the bearlike Holk was shouting. "We'll make the Brotherhood squirm now!"



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Nelson found Lefty Wister bleeding from a slash in his forearm but not badly injured. The little Cockney was shaken.

"They weren't wolves!" he panted. "They were men that can change like the old stories! They must be that!"

The two prisoners—the bound, senseless youth and the wolf—had already been lifted and slung across horses by the warriors of Holk, two of whom were to ride double.

"Why don't you just kill them?" Lefty demanded viciously of Shan Kar.

The other shook his head peremptorily. "No, these two captives are worth much to us Humanites! We take them to Anshan! Mount quickly, for we ride!"

Nelson's thoughts drummed in unison with the thudding of hoofs as they galloped with Shan Kar and Holk's warriors across the rolling moonlit plain. His mind was bewildered, trying to reconcile this fantastic valley with the ordinary world.

L'Lan was not of that world. That was sure. This hidden pocket of Earth held a way of life of man and beast unheard of on the rest of the planet. Here reigned an ancient and unearthly way of life—one even now moving toward a climax of conflict within itself.

"Captain Nelson, to think it is all true!" came Li Kin's exclamation. "L'Lan, the legendary valley of the Brotherhood, unchanged!"

"Perish old legends!" Nelson thought. There was some normal explanation for all this. There must be.

The helmeted, sword-armed warriors who rode around him were like no ordinary Asiatic tribesmen, but Asia was vast and held queer racial survivals in its hidden places. The uncanny community of men and beasts here surely had other explanation than that the beasts were as intelligent as the men.

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"Anshan!" called Shan Kar, from where he rode at the head of the mounted band.

Nelson perceived that they were riding down a gentle slope of the moonlit plain toward a city whose lights glimmered near the shore of the valley L'Lan's big woods-bordered river.

He didn't like the way the city looked in the moonlight. It was not large, an oval stretching along the river less than a mile. But it looked so strange, too much like the disturbing impression he had obtained in his vague glimpse of distant Vruun.

It was a city interpenetrated by forest, by the low, dark woods that bordered the river. The forest came into Anshan as though by right, was woven into its design in wide windings of dense foliage.

"What kind of place is this?" demanded Nick Sloan, startled. "Those domes and towers are black glass!"

Black glass? It could not be that, surely. Yet every surface shimmered blackly and brilliantly in the moon, as though vitreous.

Like big bubbles of glittering jet, the spherical buildings loomed above the enlacing foliage. The round, slim towers, with queer openings and balconies at their tops, pointed skyward like ebony fingers.

Lights within the city were reflected by a thousand curving surfaces of glass, were splintered and shattered into broken beams and sparkles.

"This place doesn't belong on Earth at all!" Li Kin exclaimed.

Eric Nelson realized that this was what upset him so badly. It was not merely the presence of a big unknown city in this hidden corner of Asia. There were many such.

It was the fact that the city Anshan matched in strangeness the strange beast-and-human folk of the valley L'Lan, that it bulked and glittered here like a city fallen to earth from another, alien planet.

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They rode through the enlacing, whispering woods into the bubble-city. And Eric Nelson realized then that this city was old.

He had seen Angkor brooding in its jungles and the thousand towers of Pagan lonesome against the Burmese sky. But this place, though not a ruin, looked infinitely more ancient.

It was the weirdness of the wide windings of forest which interlaced the city that made Anshan seem older than human history. No completely human city had ever been so built. Even aside from the dark silent forest-ways within it, the city was too big for the number of its people. Few people were in its streets, few lights glimmered from the doorways of the bubble-buildings.

Yet men and women, clad alike in silken jackets and trousers, except for a few armed warriors like those they rode with, ran toward their clattering troop. Shan Kar gave them a proud wave of his hand.

"Shan Kar has returned with the outlanders and their weapons!" ran an excited cry.

"I don't get it!" Nick Sloan said, his harsh voice puzzled. "A big city like this—yet they're crazy over a few machine-guns!"

They rode up toward a complex of black, bubble-like buildings surrounded by a wide belt of tall trees, into which all the strange dark forest-windings of the city seemed to lead. The warrior Holk and his men, with their two captives, went on around the buildings. But Shan Kar drew rein and dismounted.

"You need not talk with me and the other Humanite leaders until morning," he told Nelson. "You must be tired."

Tired? Nelson had not realized the full depth of his weariness until he dismounted. Bone-crushing fatigue made him reel. But, as always, the responsibilities of leadership stiffened him.

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"You'll have our packs of weapons unloaded?" he said to Shan Kar. "They must remain with us, of course."

Shan Kar's face and voice were smooth. "There is no need. They will be well guarded."

"Yes," Nelson nodded stolidly. "By us. In unskilled hands they would be dangerous."

The other's eyes narrowed but he shrugged. He called, and armored warriors appeared and picked up the heavy packs. They carried them after Shan Kar and the five outlanders, into the building.

They went through a big open doorway, like that of a cathedral, into a great entrance hall. It was broad and high-arched, a dusky, empty immensity ill-lit by torches of resinous wood that flamed in rude sockets hacked in the walls.

Torches in this shimmering lofty hall of faery-like black glass? The sight of them startled Eric Nelson. It was like finding tallow candles in a modern New York apartment.

He noted other incongruities as they were led through corridors to a suite of small rooms. Dust clung to the floors everywhere. And in the rooms assigned them were wooden chairs and bedframes, clean in workmanship but primitive compared to the palace itself.

Shan Kar, as the grunting warriors piled up the heavy packs and left, told them, "Food will be brought soon. You will want to sleep. In the morning we will talk."

Nick Sloan's flat voice broke in. "Yes, in the morning we will talk—about platinum."

The other's face tightened a little, but he nodded. "That and other things." He went out, and Nick Sloan stared after him with suspicion hardening his flat brown face.

He muttered, "He's too cursed cagey to suit me. I've an idea there's a joker in his offer."

Eric Nelson almost envied Sloan's hard singleness of

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purpose. The increasingly disturbing mystery of this strange valley of men and beasts had not deviated the other a hair from his goal. Lack of imagination and of sympathy served Sloan well.

A frightened-looking olive-skinned girl in silk brought them food in earthenware bowls and platters—coarse wheaten cakes, a mush of cooked vegetables and a jar of yellow wine.

Nelson drank heavily. Then fatigue crushed him down like a giant, gentle hand onto one of the low beds.

Time unreeled backwards as his tired brain sank into darkness. L'Lan was a dream and ten years of Asia were a dream and he was back in his old slant-walled bedroom under the eaves of an Ohio farmhouse.

He did not awaken until sunlight splashed his face. The others were waking, rubbing bleared eyes and unshaven faces, looking wonderingly around the black, glassy rooms.

The bearlike warrior captain, Holk, came in as they finished breakfast. He said curtly, "If you're ready to come we'll talk now."

"Talk with whom?" Eric Nelson demanded. "Who, exactly, runs things here?"

Holk shrugged big shoulders. "We Humanites are not a government yet. We're a faction that seceded from the rest of L'Lan. Shan Kar and I and Diril and old Jurnak have been the leaders."

The two called Diril and Jurnak, a thoughtful-looking younger man and a bearded oldster, were waiting for them outside the room and went with them through the curving glass corridors.

The place was all of black glass. But not ordinary glass. That, Nelson knew, could not have supported such stresses and strains. This city was of an unknown material. A miracle-city, a city that might have come

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from another planet, hidden here in deepest Asia and inhabited by a semi-civilized people! It didn't make sense.

Holk paused, Nelson and the others with him, at the entrance of a spacious hall like the heart of a huge black pearl. But here too dust dimmed the gracious curves, the furniture was primitive.

"What's Shan Kar doing?" demanded Nick Sloan as they looked into the hall.

"He's still talking with Tark," said Holk.

Eric Nelson felt a shock of astonishment as he looked at the strange scene in the dusty glimmering glass hall.

Near the far wall of the room, secured by a heavy throat-chain to a massive staple in the wall, crouched the giant wolf Tark. Shan Kar sat in front of the wolf, looking silently down into the brooding, smoldering green eyes of the beast.

"Talking? But no one is *saying* anything!" exclaimed Lefty Wister, his thin face puckered puzzledly.

"It's supposed to be telepathy, I guess," said Sloan, jeering. "The same as he claimed to use with that eagle."

Shan Kar heard and got up and came toward them. He looked at them with a flash of impatience.

"You still don't believe? In spite of your powerful weapons you outlanders have things to learn."

He spoke to the younger Humanite leader. "Get thought-crowns for them, Diril."

Diril went out of the room and came back with five of the ancient-looking platinum circlets, each one mounted with two quartz disks.

Shan Kar handed them to Nelson and his comrades. "Put them on. Then you can hear."

Nelson hesitated and Li Kin handled his circlet in obvious nervous fright.

"They won't hurt you," said Shan Kar sardonically. "We of L'Lan do not need them for talk like this. Our minds and the beasts' can converse easily.

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"But at a distance these thought-crowns our forefathers made let us hear thought more loudly. They should enable your minds to hear."

They put on the platinum crowns, looking oddly like hard-faced saints in haloes.

"Well, can you hear now?" asked Shan Kar.

Eric Nelson was startled by realization that Shan Kar's lips had not moved, that he had not *spoken* that question.

"Blimy, it works!" whispered Lefty Wister, with awe. "You can hear the blighter think!"

"Only when the thought is projected by an effort of will," the Humanite assured. "You can't pick up a man's inner mental reverie."

"These crowns must be amplifiers—telepathic amplifiers," Nelson muttered. "The scientists say telepathy is a transmission of electric thought-waves and I suppose the right instrument could set up the power. But how did these people get such instruments?"

"The things are platinum!" said Nick Sloan avidly in English. "The first platinum we've seen here. Try to find out where they keep the stuff, Nelson!"

That Shan Kar heard Sloan's *thought* was proved by his quick answer. "We shall talk later of the metal you want. Now I want you to speak to Tark."

The great green eyes of the wolf had a cold flare in them as they steadily met Nelson's gaze. Here was no blind brute fury, but unmistakable intelligence, poise and hatred.

Yet this was a wolf. The white fangs behind those half-drawn lips had almost had his throat out that night in Yen Shi. The great body, crouched on the chain, was the hairy body of a wild beast.

"Tell him," said Shan Kar to Nelson, "how many guns you've brought. He knows their power. He saw them in action in the outworld."

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Again, it took Nelson a moment to realize that Shan Kar had spoken telepathically and not vocally.

The green wolf-eyes flashed from Nelson to Shan Kar, and back again. Then Nelson heard the oddly-fibred, oddly-husky mental voice of Tark, as he had heard it in sleep that first night weeks ago.

"I am your prisoner," was the wolf's thought. "You're going to kill me. Why try to impress me now?"

"Because," Shan Kar answered quickly, "we may not kill you, Tark."

"Mercy from a Humanite?" jeered Tark. "Ice from the sun, warmth from the snow, good hunting from the storm!"

Nelson's skin crawled, with an uncanny feeling that matched the horror in Li Kin's gasping exclamation behind him. The wolf was speaking, was jeering, even though those mighty jaws did not part. Brain speaking to brain, wolf brain to human brain, without need of the medium of vocal sound!

"We have you *and* Kree's son," Shan Kar reminded. "But you both might live. We could make a bargain, Tark."

"A bargain?" cried Tark's thought. "Such a bargain as you've offered these ignorant outlanders, promising them pay you can't give?"

"What's that?" cried Sloan, aloud. The man instantly forgot the incredulous amazement that had held him speechless till now and spoke directly to the wolf. "What do you mean he can't pay us?"

"Keep silent!" flared Shan Kar to the animal. "Holk, have the guard take Tark out!"

"Just a minute," said Eric Nelson sharply. "What he says concerns us. I intend to know what he means."

A soundless burst of snarling lupine mirth broke upon Nelson's mind. Tark's green eyes flared with pure pleasure.

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"You overreached yourself when you had them put the thought-crowns on, Shan Kar!" he taunted. "You forgot that then *I* could hear their meaning too—and overhear that you'd promised them the gray metal!"

Shan Kar's hand gripped the hilt of his sword as he rose and glared in rage at the wolf.

Nelson, all thought of the scene's strangeness swept away by sudden suspicion, spoke directly to Tark.

"You mean—there is no gray metal here?"

Tark's eyes flickered. "There is gray metal here. But it is all in one place where you can't reach it—the Cavern of Creation."

"What's that?" demanded Nick Sloan, eyes narrowed.

"It is a forbidden place of our Brotherhood," Tark answered. "It is the place whence intelligent life first issued onto the face of Earth, long ago. And it lies at the northern end of the valley L'Lan."

Eric Nelson instantly caught at the salient point in the answer. "At the *northern* end of the valley? Then it's beyond Vruun?"

The wolf's thought answered like a snap of jaws. "It is. Which means you can't reach it!"

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## Chapter VI

## *DARING PLAN*

Nick Sloan, his eyes flaring with suspicion, swung around on Shan Kar.

"Is that true?"

Shan Kar shrugged. "It's true that the platinum is all at the north end of L'Lan."

"You said you had platinum here, and would give us all we wanted for our help!" accused Sloan harshly.

"I said there was plenty of it in L'Lan and there is," retorted the Humanite. "But you can't get near it until the Brotherhood is conquered. When we win you'll get your pay."

"A nice neat little double-cross," raged Sloan.

"Only in case *you* planned to deceive *us*," answered Shan Kar pointedly.

Eric Nelson realized the other's cleverness. Shan Kar, obviously mistrusting their motives, had a foolproof defense. They had to win his fight before they could even reach the platinum reward.

Nelson spoke curtly. "Take it easy, Sloan. If the stuff is here we can get it after the job is done."

The oddly husky thought of the wolf Tark interrupted, startling them. The wolf had crouched, listening intently.

"You're still being deceived, outlanders! Not only the clans of the Brotherhood bar the way to the Cavern of Creation. Inside it is the terrible barrier of the cold fire, which you can never pass!"



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"Cold fire? What does he mean by that?" Nelson demanded.

"Do not listen to Tark!" Shan Kar flashed. He swung toward the warrior-guards. "Take the Hairy One back to his prison!"

Deftly one of the warriors looped another chain around Tark's throat. Then, with swords drawn, they led him out of the hall. The wolf went quietly but with a backward glance of blazing green eyes.

"It's time for a showdown," Eric Nelson said sharply to Shan Kar. "We've got to have the facts if we're to fight for you."

"You shall have them," Shan Kar answered coolly. "But you have been so incredulous that I had to prove to you first that the higher animals of this valley are intelligent races. You'll grant that now?"

Nelson reluctantly nodded. "There doesn't seem much doubt of that any more."

"But how *can* they be intelligent?" Nick Sloan demanded. "It just doesn't make sense."

Shan Kar motioned them to the massive chairs around the table. Holk and the other two Humanite leaders also sat but Shan Kar himself remained standing as he talked.

"Legend is all we have of the remote past here in L'Lan. Legend says that the ancients, our forefathers, were far greater than we, that we lost all their knowledge except for a few relics like the thought-crowns.

"Now we Humanites believe that our forefathers, the ancients, had such knowledge and power that they were able somehow to develop the animals of this valley into intelligent thinking beasts!"

"It does seem the only possible explanation, fantastic as it is," Nelson muttered.

"However it was done," Shan Kar went on, "the fact remains that in this valley the four higher beast-races, the wolf and tiger and horse and eagle, are in some ways the

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mental equals of man. And those four clans claim their intelligence entitles them to absolute equality with the human race.

"In fact, they even claim that their races and the human race were *created* equal in intelligence, that in the dawn of time they issued equally from the Cavern of Creation!"

Nick Sloan said sharply, "This Cavern of Creation is where the platinum is?"

Shan Kar nodded somberly. "It's in the extreme north end of the valley. We know it contains metal relics left by the ancients. But it's difficult to enter because of certain strange dangers. Only the hereditary Guardian of the Brotherhood knows how to enter it safely.

"All the past Guardians, like Kree, the present one, have woven myth around that cavern. They've claimed that in it, long ago, both the human and the higher beast-races were created equal. And they've claimed to be warders of terrible powers left there by the ancients.

The Humanite went on broodingly, his face dark with rankling memory.

"They've kept that myth of the primal Brotherhood of man and beast alive here for ages. But in time we learned that it is not so in the outer world, that there man rightfully rules the animals.

"So we tried to claim for us humans the rightful dominant position here too. We didn't want to tyrannize the intelligent beasts. But we did believe that the governing authority should be in human hands.

"A third of the people joined us. But the other two-thirds, besotted by old myths, adhered to the Brotherhood. Finally we Humanites seceded from the Brotherhood and seized this city, Anshan. *Here* man and beast are not equal as they are in Vruun!"

Eric Nelson felt the shock of astonishment from the picture of L'Lan that had just been unfolded to them.

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A hidden valley guarding the relics of a once-mighty civilization, a valley in which beast-races claimed equality with man and in which a human minority was trying to right that!

"It seems incredible," he said, frowning, "that men and women would concede animals, even intelligent animals, equality!"

"Of course it seems so to you of the normal outer world!" Shan Kar exclaimed. "But the people here who follow Kree and the Brotherhood persist in blind belief in the lying legends."

All the passion of the man flamed into his eyes and voice as he continued with fanatic intensity.

"The equality of the Brotherhood is a mere sham that won't endure. As the beast-races learn more they'll aspire to *rule* man here! And some victorious beast-clan will, unless we prevent it.

"That's why we Humanites seceded from the Brotherhood and have brought the threat of civil war to L'Lan! That's why, since we're so badly outnumbered, I went into the outer world for weapons and fighters who could restore the balance of power for us!"

Nelson felt a strong sympathy with Shan Kar's burning passion. There was something repellent in the possibility he depicted. Beast-races demanding equality with men, aspiring to dominance over men! All his instincts rebelled against the idea.

"It gives me the creeps!" muttered Lefty Wister. "You ought to kill all the brutes."

Shan Kar looked a little shocked at that. "We don't want to *destroy* the beast-clans. It's simply that they must learn the Brotherhood is a myth, that men are best fitted to govern."

Nick Sloan's hard practical mind swung them back to immediate problems. "We still don't know the strategic

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setup in this valley," he rapped. "How much of the valley do you Humanites hold?"

Holk rumbled answer. "Only the southern quarter of the valley, including this city Anshan and a few smaller places."

Shan Kar added, "Vruun is the great metropolis of the Brotherhood, humans and beast-clans alike. So far there's been armed truce between them and us Humanites. But the fight last night means war!

"Kree must have suspected my purpose in going to the outer world, and sent his daughter Nsharra with Tark and Hatha and Ei to block me. They failed and the Brotherhood failed again last night. But our capture of Tark and Kree's son begins open conflict now."

Eric Nelson asked quick questions. The answers of the Humanite leaders gave him a discouraging picture. The Humanites, with their fanatic desire to establish human authority, were a minority in the valley. They could not put more than two thousand warriors into the field.

"The Brotherhood has twice that many men and five times that many intelligent beasts of the clans," Shan Kar admitted.

"Pretty stiff odds—but we hold a joker in our machine-guns and grenades," said Nick Sloan.

Nelson nodded. "If there are only swords and bows and spears and the claws and fangs of the brutes against us we should be able to discount the advantage of numbers."

He continued decisively. "We ought to hit them with everything we've got before they get used to our new weapons—smash hard at the heart of this Brotherhood, at Vruun."

Sloan voiced agreement. But the big warrior Holk shook his head doubtfully.

"Our warriors might not follow you to a direct attack on Vruun. They're still afraid of Kree."

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"For heaven's sake, why?" demanded Nick Sloan disgustedly.

Shan Kar explained. "The Guardian of the Brotherhood, as I told you, is reputed to be warder of terrible powers left by the ancients in the Cavern of Creation. That's mostly myth put out by the Guardians during the ages, of course!"

The Humanite paused. "Yet the Guardian does have a few queer powers. He's known to have effected some terrible *transformations*, to punish those who transgressed the Brotherhood. That's left such a memory of horror in L'Lan that even our own fervent followers might hesitate to attack Kree's city directly."

Nelson exploded. "How can we lead a campaign for you when your own people are poisoned by superstition?"

"Let's pull out of this creepy place," snarled the Cockney.

"Take it easy, you two!" said Nick Sloan. "With a fortune here for the taking, we're not letting a few difficulties rob us of it."

Shan Kar interrupted. "There's one quick way to overcome that difficulty and that's to capture Kree and Nsharra! That would dismay the Brotherhood and remove our own people's lingering doubts."

"Capture them?" asked Van Voss, his colorless, expressionless eyes on the Humanite. "Why not just kill them?"

"That's out!" snapped Nelson. "We're not murderers."

"And killing them would so infuriate the Brotherhood that they'd never surrender," added Shan Kar.

Sloan nodded. "Besides, you said the old Guardian and his daughter know the safe way into that cavern where the platinum is. No, we don't want to kill them."

Shan Kar continued rapidly, "A few of us, only a handful, could penetrate Vruun secretly by night and

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seize Kree and Nsharra. We could make Tark himself lead us secretly and safely into the city!"

"You mean that the wolf will do that if we threaten to kill him?" Li Kin asked, his spectacled eyes wondering.

Shan Kar laughed mirthlessly. "The Hairy One isn't afraid of death. But he doesn't want us to kill Barin, the Guardian's son.

"We'll offer him Barin's life if he guides us into Vruun, supposedly to liberate a Humanite prisoner. Tark may accept."

"It sounds to me like a cursedly complicated and dangerous plan," Sloan commented bluntly.

"But if it succeeded, it would clear the way for a quick blitz against the whole Brotherhood," Nelson said thoughtfully. "I'll lead the attempt if the wolf can be talked into guiding us."

"Have the guards bring Tark back in," Shan Kar told Diril.

The great wolf stalked back into the black hall, his chains held carefully taut by the sword-armed guards who walked on either side of him.

Tark swept them with his gaze. Eric Nelson felt a chill, uncanny shock in meeting those eyes that were like pools of cold green fire.

Shan Kar and the Humanites apparently found nothing strange in the scene. They were too accustomed to contact and speech with the intelligent beasts of the Brotherhood.

"You must choose now whether young Barin is to live or die," Shan Kar told Tark.

His lips did not move, Nelson saw. He was *thinking* to the wolf again, and Nelson and his companions were picking up that thought through their thought-crowns. Tark's lips writhed back from great white fangs in a soundless snarl. His answering thought came fiercely.

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"A trick! You want nothing more than to kill both Barin and myself!"

"That is quite true," Shan Kar coolly agreed. "But even more than to kill you two we want something else."

His thought raced on. "Holk's brother, Jhanon, is a prisoner in Vrunn, as you know. We wish to rescue him. We'll give yours and Barin's lives for his freedom."

"*I* have not authority to release Jhanon," Tark retorted. "Only the Guardian can do that."

"But you *could* guide a few of us secretly into Vruun, so we could release Jhanon ourselves," pressed Shan Kar. "Do so, and Barin goes free."

Tark's thought came after a pause. "If I did that it would be a direct disobedience of the Guardian's orders."

"But if you don't, the Guardian's son will die!" Shan Kar threatened. "Nsharra sent you to watch over her brother, didn't she? And you failed, Tark! How will you face her and report your failure?"

Tark's green eyes narrowed. The wolf looked from one to the other of them, then back to Shan Kar.

"You are right," his telepathic answer came finally. "I will be committing a minor act of treachery against the Brotherhood, but I must do it to prevent a worse thing happening."

"Then this very night we go to Vruun!" Shan Kar said swiftly. He pointed to Nelson. "He and one of his comrades go with us, Tark."

Tark's eyes flickered back to Nelson's face, and the green orbs were inscrutable in expression.

"That is well," he answered. "I promise to get you secretly and safely into Vruun."

When the guards had taken the great wolf away Nelson expressed his satisfaction.

"So far, so good! With the wolf guiding us, we've a strong chance of getting hold of Kree and the girl."

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Shan Kar looked at him with an ironical smile. "You still underestimate Tark's resolution and cunning. He *knows* that it's Kree and Nsharra we're really going after. He figures to lead us inside Vruun and then suddenly turn on us and give the alarm."

"Then why are you going in there with him, if you think that?" exclaimed Sloan.

Shan Kar's smile hardened. "Because, if all goes well, we'll outguess Tark. Once inside Vruun, we'll overpower *him* before he can betray us!"

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## Chapter VII

## *SECRET MISSION*

Night brooded over Anshan, a velvety darkness that enwrapped the city's glassy towers and domes. Like glimmering ghost-bubbles the fairy spherical structures caught and imaged the thousand stars that burned in the blue-black sky.

Nelson turned from the open window out which he had been gazing and looked across the torchlit room at the others.

"The moon won't be up for hours, and that's good. With luck we can get in and out of Vrunn before it rises."

"I wish that you were not going," murmured Li Kin, his bespectacled face troubled.

Lefty Wister had elected to accompany Nelson. He sat checking the service automatics which Nelson had deemed more suitable than submachine-guns for this stealthy attempt. Van Voss sat watching with his pale, expressionless eyes.

Nelson shrugged. "It's risky but no more so than some of the things we pulled for old Yu Chi Chan. And if we can capture Kree and his daughter we have a chance to clean up this business pronto."

Nick Sloan nodded agreement. "But you watch yourself, Nelson. That cursed thinking wolf will have your heart out if he gets the jump on you."

"I want to be the one to kill that brute whenever the time comes!" Lefty said venomously.



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The little Cockney had chosen to be the one to accompany Nelson despite the fact that of them all he had the most superstitious horror of the intelligent animals. It was almost as though he was drawn on the dangerous mission by a fascination of hate.

Shan Kar and young Diril entered the room in full warrior dress of helmet, breastplate and sword-belt.

The Humanite's olive face was flushed with excitement, his black eyes eager. He held two of the thought-crowns in his hand.

"You're ready?" he said to Nelson. "Then we'll get Tark. But first put on the thought-crowns—you two must wear them constantly."

They went out and down the torchlit corridors with him, Li Kin looking mournfully after them from the doorway. Shan Kar led them through the vaulted ways of the building to a torchlit passage that had sentries posted in it. The doors here had massive wooden bars, set in crude, heavy metal hooks. This row of rooms had been converted thus into a prison-wing.

Eric Nelson was struck again by the contrast between the primitive ways of the present inhabitants of L'Lan and the marvelous, alien beauty and splendor of the ancient cities they inhabited. Truly these people had lost the knowledge of their ancient forebears!

Shan Kar unbarred and opened a door. The great wolf Tark rose soundlessly inside, and looked at them with inscrutable green eyes. Again, Nelson had the eery experience of *hearing* the wolf's projected thought through the instrument of ancient science that he wore upon his head.

"Before I go, I must see Barin," came Tark's thought.

"No!" said Shan Kar instantly.

"Then I do not go!" flashed the wolf. "For how am I to know but what you've killed him already?"

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Shan Kar hesitated. "Very well. You can see him. But you're not to plot with him, Tark!"

The wolf trotted soundlessly beside them as they went down the corridor to the farthest barred door. Nelson noticed that Lefty Wister never took his eyes off the beast. The Cockney's pinched face glared his fear and hatred.

Barin leaped up from his wooden cot when Shan Kar opened the door. The youth still had a raw wound in his forehead, but seemed to have otherwise recovered.

Nelson saw his likeness to Nsharra—the same high-bred, handsome features, the same intense passion flashing in his dark eyes.

"Betrayer of the Brotherhood!" Barin spat at Shan Kar. "Blasphemer against the law!"

He struck fire from Shan Kar. The latter's deep fanatic intensity of purpose boiled instantly to the surface.

"Your father's law—law of the lying Guardians of all the ages, who have told our people that beasts should rank with men!"

The wolf Tark was gazing fixedly at Barin and Nelson heard his thought. "Barin, if all goes well, you will soon be free. Wait quietly."

Barin glanced swiftly at the wolf, then suspiciously at Nelson and the Cockney.

"You plan something with these outlanders? Tark, I will not—"

"Wait quietly!" repeated the wolf, harshly commanding.

"No more!" cut in Shan Kar. The Humanite brusquely pushed them back, closed and barred the door.

It seemed to Eric Nelson that some swift glance of understanding had passed between Barin and Tark. A secret signal? Yet Tark went quietly enough with them back through the corridors. They emerged into the

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darkness of a court where warriors waited with a half-dozen horses.

"We take two extra horses for remounts," Shan Kar said.

The wolf ventured no comment. But Nelson wondered if he guessed that the extra mounts were intended for Kree and Nsharra.

The next instant it was swept from his mind by a disturbing shock. The horses tossed their heads excitedly against their cruel-bitted bridles and uttered eager thoughts that sounded in Nelson's brain.

"It's the Hairy One!" they cried. "Tark!"

It shook Nelson. And Lefty uttered a smothered oath.

"These horses of yours are *talking* to the bloody wolf!" cried the Cockney to Shan Kar.

Shan Kar answered curtly. "All the clans in this valley are intelligent. These Hoofed Ones are our prisoners of war."

"Slaves, say rather!" flashed the passionate thought of the golden mare in the forefront. "Slaves, beaten into beasts of burden by the Humanites! Tark, do they know this in Vruun?"

The thought of the wolf came pregnant with hate and menace. "We knew many of Hatha's clan were captured, but did not know the Humanites dared enslave you thus, brothers!"

A bay stallion, ears flattened and eyes rolling, reared up despite the saw-edged bit that cut his mouth.

"Tark, have you come to free us? By the Cavern, speak but a word and we fight and die here now!"

"My warriors can kill you all swiftly—and then Barin dies!" Shan Kar warned the wolf.

"Wait, brothers!" the wolf's thought ordered the rearing, excited horses. "Wait and go quietly with us now—it is for the good of the Brotherhood."

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Unearthly, that thought-colloquy of wolf and horses, to Eric Nelson! He was surely deluding himself, he thought—his mind could not actually be hearing that swift interchange of passionate thought—

But the rearing horses quieted, and from them came quick answer. "We obey, Tark! If it is for the Brotherhood!"

Shan Kar spoke to Nelson and the Cockney. "Mount now—and fear nothing. These Hoofed Ones have learned their masters!"

It gave Nelson a creepy feeling to swing into the rude saddle of the golden mare and to realize that his mount was intelligently aware of him, hating him, wanting to kill him.

They rode out of the court and on out through the dark silent windings of forest that enlaced Anshan. Tark ran silently, a black shadow, beside Shan Kar's steed.

Then they were out on the rolling plain, under a sky of magnificent stars against whose sparkling splendor the lofty peaks around L'Lan towered solemn and distant!

"Now lead the way, Tark, and remember that if you lead us wrongly Barin dies!"

The great wolf noiselessly slid ahead of their little mounted party. He trotted almost due north across the plain.

"Keep close behind me," his thought came back. "Obey instantly when I direct you."

Wind, cold from the distant peaks, buffeted Eric Nelson's face as the mare loped steadily. Lefty Wister bucketed along just behind, Diril bringing up the rear with the two spare horses.

The wolf veered constantly to keep always as near as possible to the clumps of trees that dotted the plain. Soon Nelson learned the reason.

Tark whirled, just ahead of them, and his eyes flashed green light as his sharp thought came back to them.

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"Into the trees! Quickly!"

There was a clump of birch close ahead. They spurred into the little grove. There Shan Kar turned in his saddle toward the wolf, his thought suspicious and menacing.

"Is this a trick? If it is, Tark—"

"Quiet!" commanded the wolf. "Scouts are coming."

They came as three gliding shadows up against the stars. Nelson saw they were eagles winging high in the darkness, soundless as flying clouds, sweeping on toward Anshan.

"Now we can go on," the wolf told them a minute later. "The Winged Ones have passed."

"What are they doing here?" Shan Kar asked harshly. "Going to watch Anshan," was the curt answer of Tark.

They rode on, veering to keep near the infrequent tree-clumps, until the solid wall of the forest loomed up before them.

The forest was like a dark maw gaping for them. The thought of the intelligent, hostile beasts that roamed its ways made it seem a black witch-wood to Nelson. He didn't want to go into it.

Neither did Lefty Wister. The Cockney's voice snarled in the dimness beside Nelson. "If that blasted wolf has got others waiting for us in there—"

It seemed pitch-dark beneath the trees at first. Then Nelson's eyes became more accustomed to the deeper obscurity. He looked up and saw tall trunks and graceful boughs against the stars, recognized the outlines of larch and cedar and fir.

The forest smelled dry. The rainless months had parched it so that each twig the horses stepped on snapped and broke. Tark was a darker shadow in the darkness, leading the way between the trees by occasional back-glances of luminous green eyes.

"Why don't we follow the river to Vruun?" Shan Kar demanded. "It would be the clearest way."

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"To discovery," Tark's thought retorted harshly. "Quorr's clan are the greatest danger. The Clawed Ones roam those river-brakes by night."

Clawed Ones? He meant the tigers, Nelson realized. His skin crawled at the thought of meeting those striped killers here.

"No more thoughts-speech unless I speak first!" Tark continued peremptorily. "Your danger deepens with each mile we traverse now."

The horses were jumpy as they went on through the forest, up ridges, through brushy valleys. The mare quivered under Nelson.

Excitement? He wondered They must know they were going toward Vruun. Was that why they were so jumpy? It made Nelson feel a sudden pity for them. These were not the dumb beasts of the outer world. These horses were intelligent as men. And to be captured, enslaved, broken from their complete freedom into beasts of burden—

He thrust such thoughts impatiently from his mind. He was letting the influences of this fantastic valley affect him. Animals were animals, no matter if they could speak telepathically and think—

They had been traveling for more than an hour when a yapping wolf-call from west of them was answered by a low coughing roar from the direction of the river. Tark stopped and came back to them. The wolf's eyes glared up at them.

"We must leave the Hoofed Ones here. We can't trust them not to betray us if we pass others of the Clans."

Instantly from the horses came thoughts of passionate protest. "Tark, we thought you took us to Vruun! Are you not going to free us?"

"Brothers, I cannot!" was the wolf's answer. "For the good of the Brotherhood you must remain captive a while longer."

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A moment of silence followed and then Eric Nelson heard the slow thought of their reply. "We trust you, Tark. We will obey."

Nelson dismounted. Shan Kar was speaking swiftly to young Diril.

"You'll wait here with the Hoofed Ones. Slit their throats if they try to send a single thought out."

"They will not!" the wolf flared. "Now follow me and move as silently as you can."

They were at the crest of a wooded ridge. The wolf led northward along this crest, pausing often to sniff the wind. Again, they heard wolf-cries from the west but there was no answer this time. Suddenly Tark whirled, his thought urgent.

"One of the Clawed Ones comes this way! Lie still and I will try to turn him back before he winds you!"

Nelson followed Shan Kar's example and crouched in high ferns. He pulled Lefty down after him as the bewildered Cockney drew his gun. Tark bounded ahead. Nelson glimpsed him stopping in a little patch of starlight between two dead trees ahead.

Tark uttered a low, barking call, looking toward the east. Instantly a coughing grunt answered. A minute later, a big striped beast glided into the patch of starlight —a tiger whose size dwarfed Tark. Nelson's mind clearly caught the swift interchange of thought between the two nearby beasts.

"Tark! Tark of the Hairy Ones, free in the forests! All the Clans have thought you dead or prisoner in Anshan!"

"I escaped, Grih! But Barin is still prisoner in Anshan."

"Not for long, Hairy One! The Guardian gathers the Clans! Word has flown through all the valley that war with the Humanites begins!"

The wolf's thoughts raced. "Grih, you can help me! Hasten you to the forest-edge above Anshan and watch if the Humanites trail me!"

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Fiercely throbbed the striped beast's answer. "I go at once! If they come I shall send word by Ei's folk! Speed you to Vruun, brother!"

Nelson saw the tiger whirl and melt away in the dark forest, heading southeastward down the wooded slope. He lowered the gun he'd kept leveled as Tark came loping back to them. "There can be no delay now! We must hurry!"

"So Kree gathers the Clans for war?" Shan Kar said fiercely. "So be it! They shall learn their masters when they come against men!"

The wolf made no answer but his eyes flared brilliantly as he turned to lead on.

Nelson, aware of the vital necessity of keeping the way back to the horses clearly in mind, estimated they went nearly a mile more along the forested ridge before Tark stopped. The wolf led them down the slope from the ridge a little. Here was a fire-scarred break in the trees that gave vision downward.

"Vruun!" exclaimed Shan Kar in a taut whisper.

Nelson, startled, perceived in his first glimpse that, in the level forest down below this ridge, there sprawled the big river. And beside the river, on their side of it, glimmered the lights and buildings of the city of the Brotherhood.

"Blimy!" choked Lefty Wister. "Look at that place!"

Nelson realized that he was looking upon a city whose strangeness had no counterpart on Earth.

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## Chapter VIII

## *WEIRD CITY*

Immeasurably ancient and alien looked Vruun, its glassy bubble-domes and towers brooding beneath the stars. Torchlight spilled from open doors and windows to illuminate vaguely its streets and enlacing forest-ways.

For Vruun, like Anshan, was a city into which the forest came. It was like a Venice, with winding ways of woods instead of canals—woods that were woven into the very texture of the city.

Eric Nelson, crouching with Shan Kar and the Cockney and the great wolf above the city, felt a cold shock of incredulity as he glimpsed the figures that came and went past lighted doorways down there. For those figures were not all human.

He had anticipated that. But anticipation had not tempered the shock of actually *seeing* it.

"It's a devil's city!" husked Lefty Wister. The little Cockney was shivering. "Look at those animals!"

"Now you understand why we Humanites rebelled and seceded from Vruun!" came Shan Kar's throbbing whisper.

Men and beasts came and went together across those torchlit doorways below. Men and women in silk or warrior dress. And beasts of the Brotherhood, mingling with the humans, jostling them.

Nelson glimpsed a little pack of gray wolves trotting into the city from the south. He saw two great tigers moving out of it that way. And across a shallow ford a



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half-dozen wild-maned horses came splashing over the river to Vruun.

Men and beasts of the Brotherhood—meeting and mingling in fantastic fraternity in this ancient, alien city! Wings swept across the sky and he saw great eagles gliding down toward the openings high in the glassy towers. He realized then that those towers had been built as eyries for the Winged Ones, that all Vruun, like Anshan, had been *built* to house this incredible fraternal mingling of species!

"There are too many abroad in Vruun—too many for this late!" Shan Kar was muttering.

"The coming of war has stirred all the Clans," came Tark's answering thought.

The wolf continued quickly. "Jhanon, the prisoner you seek to free, is held in the Hall of the Clans. But the Guardian and the Clan-leaders undoubtedly hold council there tonight."

Nelson glimpsed the distant building at which the wolf was gazing, an enormous pale bubble-structure, shimmering vaguely in the starlight near the center of the forest city.

"You've got to get us into the hall, so that we may liberate Jhanon," Shan Kar quickly told the wolf.

Nelson realized that everything was working their way. The fact of the Humanite prisoner being in that building made it possible to let Tark lead them right in there before they turned on him. Yet he had a dim suspicion that this fortunate coincidence was *too* fortunate! If Tark had really fathomed that their mission was to seize Kree and Nsharra—

The wolf's clear thought interrupted his uneasy speculations. "There's only one secret way to the Hall and that's by the drains of the ancients."

"We could too easily lose ourselves in that maze of tunnels," objected Shan Kar.

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"Not if *I* guide you," Tark assured. "But the decision is yours. You can see there is no other way for you to enter Vruun."

Nelson liked the prospect less and less. But it was obviously madness for them to try entering the city openly. Unless they took the wolf's way in they must give up the whole attempt.

He said as much to Shan Kar. "We'll try it. Lefty, you can wait here if you want to."

"I'm goin'," whispered the Cockney hoarsely.

"We will swing around to enter Vruun from the north side," Tark said, "Few of the Brotherhood ever go out that way from the city."

"Why not?" Nelson demanded suspiciously.

Shan Kar answered, pointing. "The Cavern of Creation, the forbidden place, lies up there."

Nelson stared with swift interest. He saw that, north of Vruun, the level forests that encompassed the city marched up to grassy hills that were the foothills of the great northern mountains. In the face of those dark hills he glimpsed a great cavernous opening. He could see it in the dark because light came from it—a vague, unreal, quivering white glow.

The light danced and wavered, throbbing like a heart. Witch-light, ghost-light, pulsing mysteriously from that great opening!

"Yes, that is the Cavern," Shan Kar answered his thought. "The glow is of the cold fire that forbids entrance to all except the few who know the secret way."

Cold fire? Nelson felt a sharp wonder. There must be something deadly there to have inspired such awe and fear. But what?

Shan Kar said savagely, "The Cavern is a curse to L'Lan! That unholy place started the Brotherhood's lying myth that our human and beast races were there created equal."

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They lost sight of that mysterious distant eye of light as they followed Tark down the forest slope. The wolf led them into the gully of a small stream-bed that ran past the north side of Vruun toward the river.

The stream-bed was empty in this dry season, its sands baked flat and hard. Its high banks hid the city from them as they approached. The wolf finally stopped and they heard his urgent thought-command. "This way—and quickly!"

They blundered after him toward a dark, mouth-like opening in the southern bank of the little gully. Tark led into the opening and Shan Kar, sword in hand, followed. Nelson and the Cockney gripped their pistols as they too stooped and went in.

They found themselves in absolute darkness. Nelson flashed his pocket-light, startling both Tark and Shan Kar.

"What is this place?" Nelson demanded.

It was a round tunnel of glassy substance. They could not have kept footing in it but for the dried sand and silt on its floor.

"These drains carry the waters from the ridges in the rainy season down beneath the city to the river," explained Shan Kar. "No man knows all their labyrinth."

"No man, but we of the Clans know," put in Tark. "I can lead you to an opening directly beneath the Hall."

Shan Kar surreptitiously pressed Nelson's wrist. It was the signal they had agreed upon and he knew what it meant. They were to stun the wolf as soon as he led them beneath the Hall of Clans. Then, swiftly and secretly, they must seize Kree and Nsharra and return.

Nsharra? Nelson felt an odd quickening of his pulse each time he thought of the witch-girl who had nearly had his life once. He hated that irrational throb of excitement.

"Still romantic," he told himself satirically. "Even ten years of Asia hasn't ground all that out of you."

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Shan Kar was telling Tark, "Lead the way. But, Tark, remember that if you try to go too fast you will die very quickly."

The wolf made no reply but trotted deliberately forward up the gently slanting tunnel. The three men, stooping, followed. Soon, the tunnel forked. Tark unhesitatingly took the left turn. They followed, their pistols and the light covering him.

The tense silent progress into these ramifying tubeways beneath Vruun began to get on Eric Nelson's nerves. He began to think he could hear a whispering echo of sound from behind them.

He told himself as he glanced swiftly backward, that he was letting his nerve slip, that he—

He *did* glimpse something back there in the tunnel! Blazing eyes in the gloom, eyes that were following them!

"It's a trap! We're being followed—" Nelson started to yell.

But the wolf caught his thought and acted even as the sound left his lips. Tark whirled and charged back on them with inconceivable swiftness. His hairy body was a living battering-ram that knocked the little light from Nelson's hand. The wolf crashed on through them.

"*Knew* it!" shrilled Lefty Wister, and triggered his automatic half-blindly as the light smashed out against the floor.

The thunderous echoes of the forty-five were deafening in the confined tunnel and Nelson heard ricochets screaming. Then Tark, who had crashed back through them to join those other eyes following them, sent his thought through the dark to them.

"We block your way to liberty! You cannot escape—lay down your weapons!"

"A trick!" raged Shan Kar. "Tark somehow managed to betray us without our knowing."

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"As you planned to betray *me* with your lie of coming for Jhanon!" rang the wolf's thought from the darkness. "Fools, not to know that when Grih went toward Anshan at my order, he'd strike our trail and backtrail it—follow us to Vruun!"

Nelson, in a flash, realized the wolf's cunning in sending that Clawed One they had met in the forest on a direction that would cross their trail and thus tell the tiger something was wrong.

"Lay down your weapons and we shall not kill!" Tark's thought continued swiftly. "You shall be our hostages for Barin!"

For answer, Lefty Wister mouthed a curse and emptied his gun into the darkness. But again the slugs ricocheted in whining shrieks off the curved walls of the tunnel.

"They're back around the fork where your weapons can't reach them!" Shan Kar cried. "They'll arouse all Vruun! No chance now to seize the Guardian. We must escape this trap!"

Nelson, scrambling back to the fork in the tunnel, had hastily pulled a bulbous object from his pocket. He ripped out its pin.

"This will clear the way out for us!" he rasped and leaned and hurled the deadly thing around the fork of the tunnel.

"Down!" he yelled, and at the same instant heard the swift warning thought of Tark.

"An outland weapon, Grih! Out of the tunnel, quick!"

Nelson had a second to remember that Tark had seen grenades in action in Yen Shi before his own grenade exploded.

The explosion in the confined tunnel felt titanic. A giant scorching hand smashed them down flatter against the silted floor. Nelson leaped up, still dazed and shaky from the explosion, and shouted to the others. "Now—back out of here!"

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They scrambled down through the tunnel, over broken shards of glass masonry the grenade had ripped from its walls. Now a dim circle of starlight ahead showed their exit.

They burst out of it into the starlit gully of the little dry stream, and tripped over a huge, striped, prostrate body. The tiger, Grih, had not escaped the tunnel quite in time and the outblast of the grenade had stunned or killed him.

"I hope it got that cursed wolf too!" raged Lefty. "I should have killed him when I wanted to first!"

Nelson, at that moment, heard a wolf-howl from nearby, and realized that Tark had escaped the blast in time.

"He rouses the city!" Shan Kar cried furiously. "But Barin shall pay the penalty for his trick! If we can reach our horses—"

They scrambled furiously up the gully of the dry streambed to the forested ridge. Nelson, gasping, turned and looked back. Out of torchlit Vruun, four-footed shapes were racing swiftly on their track. A terrific wolf-cry echoed up from that band of racing creatures, a heart-stopping sound.

Nelson seemed to himself in the next minutes, to be watching from another dimension as the three of them fled through the forest along the ridge. He was two men, and one of them was watching like a disembodied *ka* of himself while the other self expended every ounce of energy in flight.

"We're near the horses!" Shan Kar encouraged. "Diril will be waiting with them."

Again, from much closer behind them, came Tark's terrific hunting-cry. Lefty Wister stopped and whirled around, his pinched face a white blur, his voice hoarse and wild.

"I won't be hunted by that brute! I'll kill him!"

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He had his gun raised, was crouched, looking back.

"Lefty, keep your head!" cried Nelson, checking in mid-stride to turn back.

"Leave the man or you die with him!" cried Shan Kar from the darkness ahead.

He ought to, Nelson knew. It was sheer folly to try to save the Cockney, whose brain had given way to unreasoning hatred and horror.

He owed no more to Lefty than to the others. Mere fortune of war had thrown him into company of the hard-bitten, crime-stained little band and he had no loyalty due to any of them. But the ingrained tradition of supporting a comrade-in-arms was too much for Nelson.

He turned back, grabbed the Cockney's arm. "Lefty, come—"

It was as far as he got. That brief delay had been enough for those who followed to overtake Lefty and himself. Dark, leaping shadows of wolf and tiger came plunging through the dry brush. Tark's thought-cry leaped ahead of him.

"We will not kill if you—"

Lefty Wister's automatic poured a stream of fire at the vague shadow of the wolf. Nelson saw Tark dodge with inhuman swiftness an instant before the other fired, then saw the wolf at the Cockney's throat.

He heard Lefty's bubbling, horrible scream as he triggered his own pistol at the dim shapes rushing upon him.

He saw the blazing, awful eyes of a striped beast leaping toward him from the right. An upraised giant paw eclipsed everything as he tried to swing his gun around in time.

Then Nelson saw nothing.

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## Chapter IX

# *JUDGMENT OF THE GUARDIAN*

*"The man stirs, mistress! I told you that he was but stunned."*

Nelson heard that queer voice inside his mind, as he floated through infinities of aching darkness.

*"Tark, it might be better for him if he had died out there in the forest!"*

It seemed to Nelson that time had doubled back upon itself and that he lay again in the squalid inn in Yen Shi as he had lain that night he had first heard the thought-voices in his dreams.

But the throbbing pain in his head was no dream. He tried to raise his hand toward his temple and discovered by the attempt that his sitting body was bound in a chair.

Fear and memory pounced together upon Nelson's mind. He made a convulsive effort and opened his eyes. Brilliant sunlight from an open window caught his eye first and then the detail of the room focused slowly.

It was a high-ceilinged, long gallery with pale blue glassy walls. The sunlight danced and quivered and shimmered off those walls, sunbeams seeming to play around the room.

Nsharra sat in a chair six feet from him, and the great wolf, Tark, crouched like a dog beside her. Both were watching him. Subconsciously, he'd expected it. He'd remembered their disputing thought-voices as he had



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heard them at Yen Shi. He knew he'd heard them more clearly now because he still wore the thought-crown.

"Yes," said Nsharra quietly. "You are in Vruun, where you wished to come, Eric Nelson."

It was strange to hear his name from her lips and to remember that night in Yen Shi when he had told it to her between kisses. And it was stranger, to Nelson, to see her here sitting in her chair like a gray-eyed young princess in white silk and to realize that this was the sing-song girl of that faraway night.

"Lefty?" he said. He said it without hope and the girl nodded her dark head slightly.

"Tark was forced to kill him. It was courageous of you to turn back for him. If you had not you too might have—"

She stopped. But Nelson, every sense sharpened to acuteness by his situation, seized on the unfinished sentence.

"I too might have escaped, you were going to say? Then Shan Kar *did* escape?"

Nsharra said nothing but her lids had half-veiled her eyes for a moment and Nelson knew that he had guessed correctly. For a moment, he wondered what Nick Sloan and Shan Kar would do now. Sloan wouldn't give up the campaign to crush the Brotherhood—not with a fortune in platinum to win.

Then, mentally, Eric Nelson shrugged his shoulders. What difference did it make to him now?

"Are you going to kill me too?" he asked directly.

"Are you afraid of death?" Nsharra countered.

He answered levelly. "I don't want to die. But I think I can manage it if I have to."

Nsharra smiled faintly. "That is an honest answer, Eric Nelson." Then her face sobered swiftly. "But it is not mere death you have to fear."

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Tark looked up at the girl. The wolf's thought came clearly to Nelson.

"Mistress, I did what I could with the others of the Council. But your father is grimly resolved and Quorr and Hatha demand vengeance."

"And Ei?" questioned Nsharra's thought.

"Who knows the Winged One's mind?" countered the wolf. "They will all be here soon to judge the man."

Nelson had watched this silent discussion between the girl and wolf in a strange fascination that had undertones of horror. Witch-girl and her familiars! Mistress of *kuei*, Li Kin had called her! Not human, not wholly human—

Nsharra apparently read the thought behind his staring gaze. For a quick flush mantled her olive face.

"*You* are here for judgment, not I, outlander!" she flashed. "Do not look at me so!"

Witch-girl, maybe, but utterly feminine in that reaction, Nelson thought. The door opened suddenly and a man stood in the doorway looking in at them.

Nelson knew at once this was the Guardian of the Brotherhood—Kree, Nsharra's father. He had the stamp of authority on his face. He was old enough to have iron-gray hair but he stood sword-straight in the doorway. He wore a loose black silken tunic and trousers, and over them a long, gold-worked black cloak.

His piercing dark eyes were bent upon Nelson, but it was to Nsharra and Tark he spoke.

"So the outlander has regained his senses? That is well. The Clan leaders wish to see him."

He came into the room, and a great tiger stalked softly in after him. And with click of hoofs on the floor came too the big fire-eyed black stallion whom Nelson remembered also from Yen Shi.

Wings swished and through the broad open window swept an enormous eagle that perched lightly on the back of Nsharra's big chair.

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Clan-leaders of the Brotherhood! Beast-eyes and bird-eyes watching him, *judging* him! Nelson's stomach began to crawl. It wasn't just fear. It was the outer world tradition of man and beast as separate orders of being that put a horror of this unhuman panel of judges into his mind.

Tark rose to his feet and looked at Kree and at the stallion and tiger and eagle.

"Before you judge, brothers, remember that this outlander is the last thread by which we may still draw Barin out of danger!"

Kree looked somberly at the great wolf. "It is your love for my son and daughter that speaks, Tark. These outlanders and their weapons are our greatest peril."

The stallion, Hatha, looked at Nelson with fiery eyes and Nelson heard his savage thought.

"This man should die. He seeks to help Shan Kar make L'Lan like his outer world, a place where our races are driven, enslaved brutes."

The raging thought of the great tiger Quorr instantly supported Hatha.

"Blood of our dead calls for vengeance! These outlanders have brought death into our land and must taste death!"

Nsharra's thought interrupted, as she rose from her chair.

"Yet this man sinned in ignorance! He knew nothing of the Brotherhood in all his life till he came to L'Lan."

The great eagle turned his head to the others and Nelson barely caught the swift flash of Ei's thought.

"Nsharra speaks truth. The man may have blundered into killing without realizing his crime."

Nelson was astonished. Why should the Winged One, seemingly farthest of them all from humanity, speak for him?

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"Have you grown blind who boast sharpest sight, Ei?" raged the tiger. "Can you not see the deadly danger in these men?"

"Yet we could use him as hostage to free Barin!" Tark reminded them again anxiously. There was a silence in which they all looked at Kree. Nelson realized that, in this Council, the Guardian's decision would carry.

Kree spoke slowly. "We can do both things you wish. We can use this outlander as a hostage for Barin and at the same time we can punish him for what he has done. This man came into L'Lan to help shatter the Brotherhood. There is a penalty that we invoke on those who sin against the Brotherhood."

Nelson did not understand. But his brief flicker of relief vanished as he saw the horror that came into Nsharra's eyes.

"Let the man die rather than that!" she exclaimed. "He does not merit that penalty since he knew nothing of the Brotherhood!"

"He will learn and he will learn quickly," Kree said grimly.

"The Guardian is right! The punishment of the ancients for the outlander!" cried Quorr, tiger-eyes blazing.

"Tark, it shall be one of your clan," Kree told the wolf. "But that one must volunteer."

"There will be no lack to volunteer for the Brotherhood!" cried the wolf's thought. He raced swiftly out of the room.

Kree went out too. Tiger, eagle and stallion remained, watching Nelson.

Nsharra's face had an aching pity on it as she looked at Nelson. And that pity awakened true fear in him.

"Nsharra, what are they going to do to me?" he asked her.

"It is the penalty of the ancients," she answered.

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"Long ago, from the Cavern of Creation, a Guardian brought one of their subtle instruments that he had learned from their records to operate. It has been used rarely to punish those who transgress the Brotherhood."

"But what *is* it?" he asked thickly. "Torture?"

"Not torture nor death," she whispered. "But worse, a—"

She broke off to hasten across the room toward her father. Kree had returned, wheeling a bulky object in front of him. Nelson felt his fear increasing. He remembered what Shan Kar had said—that the Guardian possessed a queer power of the ancients to effect terrible *transformations*. A power that had been used only rarely against transgressors but that had left a memory of horror in all L'Lan.

He stared at the big object Kree had brought. It was an upright man-high platinum box mounted on wheels. The only clues to whatever strange apparatus was inside it were two levers upon its face.

From opposite sides of the top of the tall box branched two heavy platinum rods. Each ended in a queerly-grooved quartz disk three feet in diameter. Each of the two big disks was parallel to the floor.

Nsharra was appealing to her father. "He does not even know what you plan, father! He will go mad! Does he merit that?"

"Do the beasts of the outer world merit the slavery and death that this man and his kind deal them?" retorted Kree harshly.

Nelson tried to reassure himself. He tried to tell himself that the queer platinum apparatus could be only a meaningless relic, that this was mere primitive mumbo-jumbo.

He couldn't do it. He couldn't conquer the horror that was tightening across his chest like a steel band.

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Tark had come back into the room. And with him was another wolf, a young, rangy dog-wolf, lean of flank and bright of eye, big but dwarfed by the great leader of his Clan.

"This is Asha of my Clan," came Tark's thought. "He offers to be the one."

Kree looked at the young wolf. "You know the danger to you, Asha?"

"I know!" rang the dog-wolf's thought. "It is for the Brotherhood. I am willing."

"Then stand there, close to the outlander's chair," ordered Kree, pointing.

Nelson saw the dog-wolf walk over and stand a few feet from him, where the Guardian had indicated. The wolf looked over at him—strangely. Something in that bright unhuman gaze shook Nelson.

He wouldn't let all this flummery of superstitious rites shake his nerve—he wouldn't!

Kree wheeled the tall platinum machine between Nelson's chair and the young wolf. He adjusted it so that one of its branching quartz disks was over Nelson's head, the other over Asha the wolf.

"Let the ancients witness that I use their power not lightly but for the Brotherhood!" intoned the Guardian.

Superstition, traditional ritual—that was all it was, all it could be. But Nelson's heart had begun pounding hard as he saw the horror grow and grow on Nsharra's pale face.

Kree's hand fell. It thrust down both of the levers on the face of the platinum machine. From the two big quartz disks, white light sprang downward. One beam of blinding brilliance struck and bathed Nelson, the other struck the dog-wolf on the other side of the enigmatic machine.

Light? No, force! For Eric Nelson felt himself rocked

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by a terrific shock as the brilliant beam struck him. His brain shrieked to a nightmare *rending* sensation. He had a ghastly feeling that he, the real he, was being torn loose from something and dragged through nothingness.

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## Chapter X

# *DREAD METAMORPHOSIS*

Nelson felt that he was falling, swooping downward like a meteor into bottomless gulfs. It came to him that he was dead and he wondered where his soul was going and what would happen after it got there.

The abyss rushed by him with a soundless scream as he plunged down and down. And then he struck bottom. It seemed to him that the universe tipped over on him, smothering him in utter darkness.

Presently, very faintly, there was light again and sound —a dim, blurred web of it lacing around him. He was vaguely aware of something and, after a while, he realized that he was breathing.

He was breathing heavily. It had a strange hoarse sound in his ears but it was nice to be breathing again. It meant that he was not dead after all. He lay waiting for the terrible giddiness to leave him, so that he could see again.

*But he did not really need to see.*

Across the dark confusion of his mind, a pattern began to grow. It was woven of unfamiliar things. Rustlings, scratchings, clickings, the different tempos of breathing —noises that should have been almost sub-auditory but instead were clear and sharp.

They were the background of the pattern, the warp. The threads of the woof were brighter, stronger. They were—smells.

The rich dark smell of horse, strong gray wolf-taint,



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the sullen crimson reek of tiger, the bright sharp acridity of a great bird. And man-smell, in itself a tapestry of odors, more subtle and complex than those of the beasts.

Eric Nelson realized with incredulous horror that not only did he know each separate smell but he knew the particular individuality of each. They had names—Hatha, Tark, Quorr, Ei, Kree and Nsharra.

He leaped broad awake then, on a surging shock of fear, and opened his eyes on a world he had never seen before.

It was a world without color. A world of gray shadings, black and white. He could perceive objects clearly but he perceived them on a strange plane. His field of vision was low and horizontal and there was no perspective. The big shimmering glass gallery appeared as a flat picture painted on a gray wall.

But he could see. With terrible clarity he could see himself, Eric Nelson, sleeping in a wooden chair six feet away! Instinctively a cry of horror rose to Nelson's lips, and was voiced as a howl.

Wolf-cry—

His body slept, but he was not in it and he spoke with the voice of a wolf.

Eric Nelson hung for a moment on the brink of madness and then clutched desperately at an explanation. Drugs—Kree had given him some vicious drug and he was having hallucinations. Some of his fear turned to anger against Kree. It was a cursed eerie sensation to stand looking at your own body. He wanted to get back into it, quickly.

He started to move toward it but it did not seem like the motion of will or thought. It was like physical motion. *It was like walking on four feet!*

Sinuous play of ropy muscles, lithely springy joints, the cushioned step of padded paws, the light click of claws on the glassy floor—

Dimly reflected in the glassy wall he saw the whole

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picture. Eric Nelson slumped sleeping in the chair, Nsharra seated with the eagle perched behind her and Tark at her feet, the great black stallion Hatha, the crouching tiger and Kree—all of them watching. Watching the young dog-wolf Asha pad slowly toward the sleeping man.

Nelson stopped and the reflection of Asha stopped too. He could see the wolf-face looking back at him from the dim mirror of the wall and a cold certainty that was beyond fear grew in his heart.

He began to tremble. He felt his lips draw back, and the mirrored Asha bared white fangs at him. Again Nelson cried out in a wolf's voice and he saw the reflection of Asha lift its head and howl.

Nelson went on toward his sleeping body, tried to touch it. And the image in the wall showed him the young dog-wolf pawing at the chest of the sleeping man and whimpering.

Quorr laughed, a coughing, snarling burst of mockery.

Nsharra spoke, her urgent thought-voice ringing quite clear in Nelson's mind.

"Father, speak to him! Explain to him, before his heart breaks!"

Nelson crouched watching them. He did not stir except that his head moved from side to side in little nervous jerks. He could feel the slow light breathing of his *human* body as his paws touched it.

Kree's thought came slowly. "It is true, outlander. You now inhabit the body of the wolf, Asha."

The strong wild thought of the stallion interrupted. "The power of the ancients! The punishment of those who transgress the Brotherhood!"

Again Quorr, the tiger, looked at Nelson and laughed.

"You should be proud, outlander! For you, the Guardian has made an exception, giving you the useful body of a Clan-brother. If *we* sin, *we* are banished into the bodies

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of the little hunted things that are born only to be eaten."

Then, sharp and clear, Ei the great eagle called out to Nelson. "Courage, outlander!" And Nsharra's softer echo said, "Courage, Eric Nelson."

It was then that Nelson's anger began to creep warm across his icy fear. But still he could not believe.

Stunned, bewildered, his thought went out to Kree. "It isn't possible. No science could do that—my brain in a wolf's body—"

"Not your brain, but your *mind*," Kree said grimly. "The mind is immaterial, a tenuous web of force. So said the ancients. And they built the instrument that can transfer minds to other bodies. I merely used that instrument.

"It is Asha's body still and Asha's brain. Asha's instincts, memories, latent knowledges are still in that brain and you will have use of them. But the real *you*, your conscious mind, is now in Asha's body and Asha's conscious mind—sleeps."

Nelson felt his new body tense and rise. He cried out bewilderedly, "But why? Why didn't you just kill me?"

"You are hostage for my son Barin," Kree answered. "When Barin is returned to us you will be returned to your own body!"

The anger that had been growing and growing in Nelson burst suddenly into a flame of rage. Rage such as he had never known, the wild anger of the wolf.

*That they should have done this to him, Eric Nelson! That they should have dared!*

Nelson was dimly aware of a strange linking of his familiar mind to something dark and primal and alien. Man-rage drawing from the deep red wells of the beast. He bared his fangs and snarled. He felt his whole new wolf-body coil tensely tight as he crouched.

*Man-rage, beast-rage—memory, instinct, the loosing*

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*of the chain—not so alien after all, not so strange! Not so long ago man himself was a hunting beast!*

He sprang in a beautiful, deadly, arching leap, straight for Kree.

He heard Nsharra cry out, and then in mid-air he felt the shock of Tark's great leaping body. The wolf's broad breast struck his shoulder, bowled him over to crash on the glassy floor. He slashed out, felt hair and hide tear under his teeth, tasted blood on his tongue.

And then Tark's greater weight was smothering him, Tark's huge jaws had closed on the back of his neck, and Tark was shaking him as a wolf-cub shakes a rat. The leader of the Clan flung Nelson from him, rolling over and over, and stood contemptuous and lordly in his strength, laughing with his red tongue run out between his open jaws.

"You've yet to learn," came his thought, "that I, Tark, lead the pack of the Hairy Ones!"

And Nelson, gathering himself, sent back the raging thought, "But *I* am not of your Clan!"

He sprang again at Tark.

It was strange, how he knew the ways of fighting. To dart in low to snap the foreleg, to use the breast as a ram, to keep the throat always covered, to dodge and dance and whirl and give the long terrible slashing stroke where the hair thins on the side of the opponent's neck, over the vein.

All these things Nelson knew and knew well. He was young and powerful and he was fighting to kill. But it availed him nothing. Tark moved like a wraith before him so that his jaws rang shut on the empty air—and before he could recover himself the old pack lord would smash him off balance with his greater weight and his jaws would chop and slash and then he would be away again, out of reach, laughing.

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Nelson sprang and sprang again, and was beaten down, and would not quit. The hot sweet taint of blood reddened the air, and the great black stallion tossed his head and stamped his hoofs on the glassy floor. Quorr wrinkled his striped face in a snarling grin, and his claws ran in and out of their velvet sheaths and his tail twitched.

Only Ei perched motionless on the back of Nsharra's chair. The girl's face was white and full of pity and there was a sickness in her eyes. She looked pleadingly at her father, who sat watching with dark, somber eyes.

In answer to Nsharra's look Kree sighed and said, "Do not hurt him, Tark—more than you must."

And Tark answered, panting, "He must learn to obey!"

Once more his great jaws ripped, slashed and sent Nelson sprawling.

There came a time when Nelson tried to spring again and could not. Whipped to standstill, he stood trembling on legs braced far apart, his flanks heaving, his head hanging low. He left blood and sweat wetting his hairy wolf-body.

Tark's though asked, "Have you learned, cub?"

Nelson answered, "I have learned." But still the dulled fire of rage burned in him.

Tark's mind said grimly, "Do not forget!"

He trotted back to Nsharra's side and began to lick his fur, keeping one mocking eye on the creature that was Eric Nelson. Kree leaned forward, his deep-set gaze brooding somberly upon the wolf that was Nelson.

"Listen," he said. "Listen, Eric Nelson, to the price of your deliverance."

He waited, as though for Nelson's shaken mind to clear, before he went on.

"Go back to your comrades, Eric Nelson. Go back to the Humanites. Bring my son to me alive and safe and you shall be a man again."

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Nelson voiced a bitter, snarling laugh.

"Do you think they'll believe me?" he demanded. "Do you think they'll listen?"

"You must make them listen."

"They'll shoot me on sight."

"They are your comrades, Eric Nelson. They are your problem." Kree turned to the pack-leader and his grim thought ordered, "Tark, start him on his way."

Tark rose and shook himself. He took three soft padding steps toward Nelson and said, "Go."

Nelson faced him sullenly and would not move.

Quorr's thought said, "The cub is forgetful, Tark. You must teach him his lesson again."

And Hatha, eyes rolling, stamped. "Teach him!"

Ei rustled his wings in what sounded like a sigh.

"Remember, outlander," his thought said, "courage is a good quality only when one is wise enough to use it."

"All of you, leave him alone!" cried Nsharra. She put out her hands pleadingly and said, "Please go, Eric Nelson!"

Nelson saw that there were tears on her cheeks. He watched Tark padding toward him, his great body all one coiled and fluid motion. He watched the filtered sunlight gleam on Tark's teeth.

The smell of his own blood rose hot in his nostrils.

Quite suddenly Nelson turned and ran. As though that were a signal, a burst of sound broke from behind him —the stamp and squeal of Hatha, the tiger's echoing roar, a long wolf-howl. They were answered all through the Hall of Clans.

And Nelson, as he ran, heard with the noise the great ringing shout of Tark's mind.

"*Clans of the Brotherhood! Send Clan-call forth that Asha the wolf is outlaw!*"

Through the glittering corridors and dusty vaulted

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halls they drove him, out of the building, out into the forested streets of Vruun. With hoof and fang and claw they drove him and always the word ran ahead of him like wildfire:

"*Asha the wolf is outlaw—outlaw!*"

And he ran, he who was both wolf and man, both Asha and Eric Nelson. He ran along the broad forest ways between the bubble buildings, though the glittering city, and there was no shelter for him.

The eagles swooped and screamed above him. The gray pack loped behind him and, if he tried to dart aside, Hatha's Clan were there with plunging hoofs to bar the way. And everywhere the striped and silent bodies of the Clawed Ones flowed in the shadows, laughing at him.

The men and women of Vruun watched the driving of the outlaw with bitter eyes and they too barred his way. Nelson went the only way left open to him, out of Vruun and into the open forest. He ran belly-flat, choking on his own heart, and he knew how a dog feels when he is driven through a town.

The forest shade gathered him in. The earth was moist and soft under his paws. He fled onward between the trees and, after a time, he realized that the pursuit had drawn back and was dim and far away.

He slowed his pace to a trot and then to a dragging walk. Breathing was an agony, a tearing pain. Where Tark had slashed him the blood oozed and dripped and took his strength with it and his every joint and muscle was a separate ache and soreness.

He crossed a little stream and stopped to drink. Then he lay down in the running water. The icy touch of it burned in his raw flesh.

He rose and slunk on.

Instinct that was not his own but Asha's told him where

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to lair. He crept into a hollow between two great gnarled roots, where it was warm.

There he lay down and began, wolf-like, to lick his wounds.

Night darkened over the valley of L'Lan.

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## Chapter XI

## *FOREST DANGER*

He had slept for a time but he had dreamed and the dreams were full of terror. He woke suddenly as a man wakes from nightmare, with a start and a cry, and the howling sound of his own wolf-voice reminded him that the nightmare was reality.

He lay alone in the depths of the nighted forest and suffered as few men have suffered since the beginning of the world. Then, gradually, when he found that he was not going to die or go mad, the mind of Eric Nelson began to function again.

Nelson had lived a long time in the wild places of the world. He had spent years on the ragged edge of death and his inner fiber had been hammered into toughness. After the first black wave of horror passed it became a point of pride with him. He would not break. He would not give in and let himself be whipped by anything Kree and his people could do to him.

Again Nelson was conscious of the strange linking of his mind with another mind. Almost without his knowing it, the night and the forest had become familiar. He had spent many nights in the woods but never before had he had this intimate kinship with them. The forest was alive, teeming with its own secret business, and to the new Eric Nelson the secrets were all an open book, infinitely fascinating.

His keen ears told him of the motion of the grasses, the stirring of the trees, the rush of distant water in a stream-



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bed. Somewhere near him a mouse scuttered across a dry leaf and above him he could hear plainly the squeaking of a bat and the sound its leathery wings made on the air. Far away down the valley a deer went crashing through a deadfall and behind it rose the deep hunting cry of a tiger.

Eric Nelson felt the sweet taut thrill of excitement that passed through his borrowed body. He was hungry. The wind brought him news. He drew it in through quivering nostils, rich and tangled and throbbing scents, the breath of the forest that was his mother because it had been Asha's mother.

He rose and stretched himself, wincing and grunting because he was very sore. Then he stepped out into the moonlight and stood with his head up, turning it slowly to quarter the wind, his nose twitching.

Downwind it was all a blank, but upwind a small pack of wolves was driving a buck. They were going away from him, and he must remember to stay clear. The tiger had killed. Down by the stream a band of Hoofed Ones had come to drink, and there were deer with them.

He would not run a deer. The whole forest would know of it. He would be content with a rabbit. Grim determination steeled Nelson's mind. He was going to Anshan and somehow he would bring Barin back to Vruun. But in the meantime they had made him a wolf. Very well, he would be a wolf.

The distant hunting call of the pack moaned and wailed down the valley. His throat quivered to answer it but he kept silent. Then, like a lean gray wraith in the splashing silver moonlight, he loped away south, toward Anshan.

At first it was difficult to move, but as his stiff body warmed and loosened he forgot his hunger in the delight of going. His man-body had been a pretty good one. It was tough and lithe and quicker than most. But it was a dull, clumsy thing compared to the one he had now.

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The body of Asha was sensitively alive, from the bottoms of its padded paws to the tip of its nose. Every nerve and muscle worked to a hair-trigger reflex. It could thread its way like a lightning-flash through a thicket of brush and never so much as stir a leaf. It could stop stock-still without a quiver and it could soar over a deadfall like an arrow going home. And it could run. Gods of the forest, how it could run!

Nelson had known that when they drove him out of Vruun. But there had been no pleasure in running then. Now he sped down the open ridges for the sheer joy of it, rushing through the pools of moonlight, whirling and pouncing, playing delightedly with the shadows.

*Hysteria,* Nelson thought. *Bravado, reaction against fear. But why not? Why not?*

He crept upwind upon a little band of deer feeding by a pond. For a time he lay in the long grass and watched them, slender lovely things with their moist black noses and great eyes. A tall buck and two does and a fawn. The rich sweet odor of them made his mouth water.

Presently he rose and walked boldly out into the clearing. They lifted their heads and froze, staring at him—fleet-limbed children of flight and fear. Then they snorted the wolf-taint out of their nostrils and were gone.

He went to the pool and drank. His reflection looked up at him from the moonlit water, and he ran his tongue over his teeth and glared back wolf-eyed at himself.

He went southward again, ever southward toward Anshan, and he found no rabbits. He began to be aware that the game was moving. Time and again he crossed the new trails of deer and smaller beasts, all drifting westward. Word had gone through the forest that even the true beasts who were not of the Brotherhood could un-

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derstand, and they were moving on both sides of the river, back to the barrier cliffs, leaving the forest to the Clans.

The wind, which had been blowing steadily from the south, dropped and then died altogether. Nelson felt a strange muffling of his senses then. It was like being partly blind and deaf because he could no longer tell what was happening upwind. He moved with increased caution and he was hungry, very hungry.

He came down to the edge of a wide shallow stream and suddenly, with a flying clatter of hoofs, a dappled mare and her foal came splashing across the fiord and up the low bank beside him.

"Greetings, Hairy One," came the mare's thought. She stopped to blow and, through Asha's wolf-senses, Nelson could smell the fear on her. The little inky-black foal whickered and pushed his head against his mother's flanks, his long ridiculous legs planted far apart and trembling. Both of them were streaked with sweat.

"You have run far, oh Sister," said Nelson, through Asha's mind.

"North from Anshan," answered the mare, and shivered. She nosed the foal's thin neck tenderly and added, "I could not come before because of him."

"Anshan?" said Nelson. "I go toward there now."

"I know. The Clans are gathering for war." The rolling eyes of the mare showed white in the moonlight. "There is death in the forest, Hairy One! There is death in the valley of L'Lan!"

And the little black foal started. With lifted head and rolling eyes in imitation of his mother, he echoed, "Death! Death! Death!" His tiny hoofs made a rattling sound on the stones.

"Hush, little one," whispered the mare and stroked his quivering neck. "What do you know of death?"

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"I have smelled it," said the foal. "Red in the wind." His nostrils showed pink as they flared to his frightened breathing.

"I pastured on the slopes above Anshan," the mare told Nelson, "because my mate was taken by the Humanites and I wanted to be near him. The foal was born there. There was killing in the valley below us. The outlanders had come with their new fire-weapons and many of the Brotherhood were killed."

"Death," said the foal again, and whinnied like a child crying. "I am afraid."

Nelson reassured with his thought. "You're safe now, little one. There is no death here."

But there would be, Nelson knew. Sooner or later the fire-weapons would bring death to the gates of Vruun and the little foal, if he lived, would one day be bitted and shod and bridled, broken to bear the weight of man.

Looking at them there in the moonlight, Nelson was aware of a strange revulsion at that thought, as though they had been his own kind, enslaved and toiling in chains.

The mare's gentle thought came into his mind.

"Take care, Hairy One, if you go toward Anshan. Shan Kar and the outlanders have cleared the forest edges of our scouts, and their weapons guard the city well."

Then she turned to the foal. "Come, little fleet one. Only a little farther, and then you can rest."

He watched them go, the dappled mare with her flowing mane and tail, a graceful shape of silver in the moonlight, her ink-black foal rocking along beside her. Light feet that had never known the weight of iron shoes, proud high heads that had never bent to the curb and the cutting bit.

Nelson had always liked horses as a man likes them. Treat them well, take pride in them, feed and groom them and occasionally drop the old phrase, "That horse is almost human!"

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But these of Hatha's Clan were different. By whatever unholy alchemy the thing had been done, these horses *were* human in intelligence. He remembered the bitter pride of the captive Hoofed Ones in Anshan, when he had ridden out with Tark and Lefty and Shan Kar on their ill-starred mission.

He turned slowly to cross the stream but he did it mechanically, because he had been headed that way before. Nelson's mind had been jarred and some gate had opened between it and the subconscious mind of the wolf. He remembered Kree's words, "*Asha's instincts, memories, latent knowledges*—"

Memories.

He had been too occupied before with his own terror and his own rage and, after that, the miracle of new and alien sensation. But now a whole spate of memories stored away in Asha's mind broke loose and flooded into Nelson's. They were not the simple memories of an animal but, in their own strange way, as human as his own.

Cubs rolling in the sun-warmed grass, the newness of the world, the lessons, the first hunt, the first kill, the first sight of Vruun's glittering towers, the entering of the young wolf into the full rights of the pack. Little details, tastes and smells and thoughts and dreams. Yes, dreams, akin to those of the boy Eric Nelson lying under his green Ohio trees, half asleep in the summer stillness.

But these were only the ripples on the broad deep river of Asha's mind. Below them ran strong the currents that bound the individual to the Clan and the Clan to the Brotherhood. In the flashing glimpse of Asha's past Nelson saw a whole new way of life, where intelligent beings had adjusted themselves to a society that was at once as simple as Eden and as complex as modern New York.

A society in which the five great clans—man and wolf, horse and tiger and eagle—lived in perfect equality without even thinking about it, just as in Nelson's own world

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different races of men lived together and accepted it as natural. A society with its own laws, that forbade murder and theft and governed the rights of the hunt, and in which loyalty was freely given. A sort of freemasonry that was in very reality a brotherhood.

They were not perfect, these creatures of the Clans. Some of the memory-flashes gave Nelson a jolt of fear and others made him laugh at the spectacle of foolishness. Again he felt contempt because he had seen cowardice or the theft of another's kill. But their very imperfections made them the more human.

When he shut his mental eyes and looked only at their minds, Nelson was forced at last to realize the truth without reservation. The creatures of the Clans were no more beasts than he. Less, he was forced to admit, for he had killed for money, whereas the Brotherhood killed only for food. And he had killed men, whereas the Brotherhood killed only the deer and the rabbit.

Quite suddenly it did not seem strange at all to Nelson that he was trotting on four legs through the forest. The intimate contact with Asha's mind had dissolved that strangeness. It seemed no more to him now than if he had put on a foreign dress. He was at home.

Abruptly a hare bolted in front of him. He caught it in easy bounds and broke its back and fed.

It was then that the gray brothers of the pack came upon him, drifting silently between the trees from the east. He had no wind to warn him and his hunger had betrayed him into carelessness. He started up from his half-eaten kill and would have run, only that the leader, an old gray dog-wolf who lacked an eye, uttered a thought to him.

"Finish your kill, young one. There is not that much haste."

The old wolf sat down, his tongue lolling out. "Be-

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sides, we have run far, from the hills above Mreela. We would rest."

Through Asha's eyes, Nelson saw that these were lean and ragged wolves from an outlying tribe that ranged the upper levels. They did not know him, did not know that he was outlaw.

He finished his meal in gulps, crunching down the last sweet bones. Then he licked his lips and waited. The long wailing *Hai-oo!* of the Clan-call rose across the river and was answered and answered again.

The old wolf told him, "We go toward Anshan to watch."

"I, too."

"Then go with us, young one."

He could not get away from them without arousing suspicion. He must join them now, and later see what was best to do.

The lean gray shapes rose, ten of them, long-fanged hunters of the barren heights, full of a quivering excitement. Almost, Nelson felt as he ran that he was really Asha, running with his own kind.

But he was not. His kind, Nelson's kind, lay in wait at Ansham with machine-guns and grenades.

When the first light of dawn began to pale in the sky, he and the pack were miles southward. He started to drift away from the upland pack. He would be safer now alone. He must find some place to lie up until it was dark again before he made his attempt to enter Anshan. By night he had one chance in a hundred of succeeding without being shot on sight as a spy from Vruun. By day he had none.

Nelson would have slipped safely away as he planned had not the dawn wind risen and betrayed him.

He was lagging behind the others, watching his chance to slide off into the brush, when from downwind came a

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sudden barking cry and with it a mental call—"Ho, brothers! There is a stranger with you!"

The whole of the upland pack turned and faced Nelson, instantly suspicious. Before he could run, wolves were all about him, Wolves from Vruun, whose minds spoke in chorus like one great curse.

"*Asha!*"

Nelson wheeled and leaped clean over the old dog-wolf, breaking for the shelter of the brush.

Behind him, as it had in Vruun, the mental shout went baying through the trees.

"Asha is outlaw! Drive him, brothers! Drive him from the forest!"

Then the pack was after him in full cry and the call was echoing all across the valley, tossed from one pack to another and picked up and carried on until it burst from the hillsides in a wailing malediction.

"*Outlaw!*"

Once again Nelson ran, belly-down and straining. Ahead of him lay the open plains around Anshan, and in them lay death. Desperately he swerved and dodged and circled, but the wolves of the Clan drove and drove him without mercy. There was no escape.

The forest began to thin. In the distance between the trees he could see the open flatness of the plain. Far out upon it Anshan burned like a great jewel in its setting of green forest by the river.

He crouched, trapped and desperate, tried to think.

Abruptly, overhead, he heard the whistling thunder of great wings and leaped up snarling. Then he saw that it was Ei and he heard Ei's mind speaking to him with urgent swiftness.

"This way, outlander! You can dodge the pack if you do as I order."

He could do no worse than obey.

The eagle swooped skyward again, where he could see

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the movements of the whole pack, and sent his guarded thought down to Nelson.

"Run hard this way, outlander! Now. Into the pool. Swim, swim quickly, upstream. Stay in the water, the wind is with you. Now! Under the overhang of the bank there and crouch still—still!"

Nelson crouched, wet and shivering, half submerged, and heard the pack swing past him and go on. Presently Ei swooped down and perched on a nearby rock. Nelson crawled out where it was drier and lay panting.

"We will wait," the eagle told him, and composed himself.

Nelson studied the other. Finally he sent a questioning thought. "I don't understand. Why should *you* come to help me?"

And Ei answered, "Nsharra sent me."

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## Chapter XII

## *DEATH IN ANSHAN*

All through the long hot hours of the day they hid there, waiting—the great eagle and the man who was now a wolf. It was the dry season. Nelson could see how the stream had dropped in its rocky bed and the scent of pine needles lay heavy on the warm still air. All the forest seemed to sleep.

They talked, the two of them, with their thoughts.

Once Nelson said, "You seem friendly to me, Ei. You stood up for me in the Council Hall. I don't understand."

The eagle answered, "You saved one of my Clan from torture by Shan Kar. The other Winged One, who escaped, saw and told."

"I see." Nelson was silent for a time. Then he said, "I have learned many things in the forest, Ei. I have learned many things from the mind of Asha, which I share. I would like to learn also from yours if it is possible."

He caught the bright, sharp glance from Ei's golden eyes. A look that was wise and understanding.

"It is possible," Ei said. "Let your mind relax."

Nelson laid his rough wolf's head on his paws and let his eyes drop shut. The heat of the day made it easy to relax. Almost he dropped into a half doze.

And then his mind was touched by another. A wise mind, wiser far than Asha's because it was far older, a mind whetted and honed to razor sharpness by the upper air, keen as the eagle's curving beak and sharp as his talons



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—able to grip and tear and worry a thought until its inner bones lay bare and truthful.

Once again Nelson had the strange experience of seeing the world through the eyes of another being.

He saw the whole valley of L'Lan spread out below him, so far down that the great trees of the forest appeared as a mere roughness of texture, like a tapestry thrown over the knees of the mountains. He saw the high crags of the barrier cliffs, leaping and thrusting up into the sky, tossing the cold winds from their shoulders in flying clouds of snow, exulting in the sun.

In imagination his lungs were filled with air that was thin and pure and more intoxicating than wine. He felt the surging strength of mighty wings and flung himself headlong into the buffeting, swirling gales that swept among the high peaks and fought them joyously as a swimmer fights the surf. He knew the long whistling rush of the swoop, the exquisite precision of the tilting wing, the excitement of the strike and kill.

All this, and much more. The gossip and the quarrels of the eyries, the time of mating and the young. The first flight, when the young untried wings plunge out into the blue gulf and beat and stagger and hold. And the long silent times when Ei and the others like him would perch on the high crags and brood, thinking—thinking with minds like those of men, there among the vast upper reaches, where thought must be as broad as the heavens and as clean as the snow.

Here again, more clearly and strongly than before, in the older wisdom of Ei's thought, Nelson felt the power of the Clan law and the Brotherhood. L'Lan was a world unto itself. No matter how the social order ran between man and beast in the outer world, here the Brotherhood was right. The rough but obvious parallel of tyranny and democracy occurred to him.

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He began suddenly to detest Shan Kar. As for Sloan and Piet Van Voss and himself, he was filled with loathing. Not for the first time he thought back over the years of his life and was conscious of bitter regret.

He thought somberly, "The wolf and the tiger of the outer world, who have only the minds of beasts, are worthier than I."

Ei answered quietly, "Not one of us lives who is without shame at one time or another. It is not the end of the world."

There was silence for a time between their thoughts, and then Nelson asked, "Why did Nsharra send you?"

"She will tell you that herself," Ei answered. "Wait."

The long still hours of the afternoon wheeled over them. The drooping forest brooded and, beneath the trees, the watching scouts of the Clans slept with sheathed claw and covered fang, a light and uneasy sleep. At sunset Ei flew off and at dusk he returned, guiding Nsharra. She rode the black stallion, Hatha, and Tark loped beside her, his lolling tongue dripping in the heat.

At sight of Tark, Nelson sprang up, bristling. But Tark flung himself down in the cool water and rolled, luxuriating.

"A long run from Vruun, in the dry season," came his thought. He snapped the water between his jaws, biting it like a puppy.

Nelson watched Nsharra as she slid from Hatha's back. Even now, when with his wolf's vision all her exquisite coloring was dulled to a monotony of black and gray and the pure white of her skin, he thought that she was the loveliest thing he had ever seen.

He had no anger for her now. All that was long burned out of him and he knew that, in Kree's place, he would have done the same or worse. All he remembered was that Nsharra had pleaded for him and that there had been tears on her cheeks.

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The wild hope rose in him that she had come to take him back to Vruun to his own body.

She divined his thought and said, "Not yet, Eric Nelson."

Nelson's whole body drooped with the sickening shock of disappointment, and then he felt Nsharra's hand on his rough head and heard her thought.

"I am not without heart, outlander. My father has given you an impossible task. I have brought Tark and Hatha and Ei to help you."

"Without Kree's knowledge," growled Tark, who had obviously been persuaded against his will.

Hatha snorted and added, "The lightning will not equal his anger when he learns of it."

Nelson told the girl, "You're not doing this for me."

She looked at him steadily and answered, "The one goes with the other. If you fail, my brother Barin will die. My father would sacrifice him if necessary, as he would sacrifice me or himself for the good of the Clans. But I want to save him. Therefore I must save you."

"That's all clear," said Nelson grimly. "Well, I'm ready."

But they waited in silence until full dark.

Then Tark rose and shook himself. He ordered, "You will wait here, Nsharra."

When she started to protest they all three cried her down, Hatha refusing to carry her. She went to the very edge of the forest with them, sat down sulkily to wait. Then her face cleared.

"Good luck," came her thought and, for a second, Nelson had a queer feeling that she meant that for him too—for Eric Nelson, apart from Barin or anything else.

Then Ei's wings thundered as they beat up into the dark sky, and the three of them, Tark and Hatha and the wolf Asha who was Eric Nelson, slipped silently out across the plain toward Anshan.

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Ei soared over them, watching the Humanite outposts, sending down his thought-word of the movements of the guards. Nelson realized that, even with his keen wolf-senses, he could never have made it alone through the outer defenses. Sloan's military genius, long trained in guerrilla warfare, shone out in the way he had placed his sentinels so that almost every inch of the plain was under surveillance.

Hatha said, "We must make it before moonrise. I am not small enough to hide like a mouse in the grass with you Hairy Ones."

They went on silently, swiftly, following the direction of Ei's mind as he threaded them like a needle though the sentries, taking advantage of every blade of grass and every fold of the ground.

The stallion was black as the night itself and there was no skyline to show him against the background of the forest. His hoofs fell daintily as dry leaves on the turf. The two wolves were no more than two wisps of gray smoke blown on the wind.

Even so, twice they were almost discovered, lying flat until it was safe to creep on again. The first flooding silver of the moonlight touched the eastern peaks as they slipped into the shelter of the woods that bordered the river. Silent as shadows, they followed the winding forest ways into the city.

Night lay heavy on Anshan. The long forested avenues brooded, deserted and silent. Where for countless centuries the hoofed and padded feet of the Clans had walked, the dust and the dry leaves blew lonely on the wind and even the birds had gone.

The bubble-domes and the towers glistened cold as black ice under the rising moon and, where the buildings fronted on the forest ways, the empty doorways watched them pass and gaped in silent woe.

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*Where are they now, the children of the Brotherhood? Where have they gone, the tall hunters, and the Winged Ones, and the mothers with their cubs?*

The trees made a sound of weeping in the night wind, and they were answered by the hollow voices of the eyrie-towers high above, where the nests of the eagles had fallen into dust.

Where the Humanites lived, in the midst of this desertion, torches burned inside the walls, so that here and there a building would burst upon the darkness in a blaze of sullen light. But there was no sound of revelry or excitement. The Humanites hovered on the edge of war. They were tensely ready but they were not gay.

No one saw the four beasts who went swiftly and quietly down the dark forest avenues toward the palace of Anshan. Near it, Nelson heard the stallion's angry snort. The wind had brought him scent of his mates, those enslaved ones penned in the Humanite stables.

"Silence!" snapped Tark. "Do you want to rouse the city?"

"My Clan-brothers!" came Hatha's fierce thought. "Slaves of the Humanites. Should I rejoice?" His hoof-beats quickened. "By the Cavern, I'll free them!"

Tark sprang at his nose, his teeth clicking purposely just close enough to give the stallion pause.

"You'll ruin everything," Tark said furiously. "Our first task is to get Barin safely away. After that we'll see."

"He is right, Hatha," came Ei's thought.

Reluctantly, sullenly, Hatha consented.

"You and Ei must wait here," Tark said. "The outlander and I can move better inside. Keep watch and be ready if we meet trouble."

The two waited, the eagle perched high in a tree-top, the stallion sulking in the darkness below. Nelson and Tark were two slinking wolf-shadows as they went

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through the darkness toward the palace. They avoided the big open doorway through which they could glimpse the great torchlit entrance hall.

Instead they circled the palace until they found a side entrance, inside which they could scent no guards. They slipped into the building and paused, sniffing. Then on through the dusty deserted corridors of the sleeping pile they went and came at last to the rooms where Nelson and his comrades had been quartered.

*It is very strange,* thought Nelson, *that now I creep into these rooms on four feet and that, before I enter, I know that only Li Kin is here.*

One dim lamp burned in the room. The little Chinese lay on his cot, his face relaxed in sleep—the face, Nelson thought, of an unhappy child, hollowed with a long hunger of the soul. He felt a warm surge of affection for Li Kin.

"Wait," he told Tark. "I will wake him."

Tark waited, his nose wrinkling with disgust at the alien odors of the outlanders. Nelson padded over to the cot, wondering how to wake Li Kin without causing him to cry out in terror and bring the others running. He felt that he could talk to Li Kin alone of all these men he had fought and drunk with for so long.

He hesitated over the sleeping man and Li Kin stirred and moaned uneasily. Then Nelson saw the dull platinum circle of the thought-crown that lay with Li Kin's things beside the bed. He picked it up carefully in his jaws and laid it by Li Kin's head. At the touch of the cold metal the Chinese stirred again and sighed.

The thought-crown was not in place but Nelson hoped that the contact would enable him to get through a message to Li Kin's relaxed mind. He remembered how he had heard Nsharra and Tark all those centuries ago in Yen Shi.

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"Li Kin," he sent his urgent thought, "Wake, Li Kin, and do not fear. It is I, Eric Nelson."

Over and over, soothingly, and presently Li Kin opened his eyes and said aloud in a startled voice. "Who calls?"

Then he saw the gray wolf standing over him and Tark's eyes burning green in the shadows and his mouth opened for a scream.

Nelson leaped. He smothered the cry and crushed Li Kin's slight body with his own weight until he stopped struggling. Then he lifted the thought-crown again in his teeth and offered it. Staring wildly, Li Kin took the thing in shaking hands and put it on.

"Li, it is I—Eric Nelson!" he thought swiftly.

"Nelson?" came Li Kin's numb thought. His eyes dilated in horror. "It is a nightmare. I am dreaming."

Nelson's thoughts raced, telling the other what happened. Li Kin shook his head.

"Sorcery. The power of those who were before man." Then, heavily, "We did evil, Eric Nelson, to come to L'Lan with our weapons. For that evil we shall die."

"Very probably," Nelson answered, "but just now I need your hands to release Barin, so that I can get my own hands back. Will you help?"

Li Kin nodded. It was a dazed, queer sort of nod. Nelson knew what Li Kin was thinking. He was thinking that the heavy sword of Fate was weighing upon the woven strand of his years and would presently cut it through and that, in the woven strand, there were few bright strands, very few among the many that were strained and drab.

"Of course," nodded Li Kin. "I will help." He fumbled for his spectacles, put them on and rose, pulling his jacket straight. Then he went out with the two wolves trotting like two silent shadows at his heels.

The corridors were empty, the moonlight falling

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through the vaulted glass in a strange dusky light such as is seen only in dreams.

Li Kin's thought informed them, "The others hold council."

"Why aren't you with them?" Nelson asked.

Li Kin shrugged. "I can better spend my time in sleep. You know how much my word weighs with Sloan."

They came to the prison wing. Here as before the torches flared but now there were no guards. Nelson and Tark, who had slipped back into the shadows, rejoined the little Chinese.

Li Kin's thought was puzzled. "I can't understand it. Shan Kar keeps the boy under guard at all times."

Something came drifting to Nelson on the sluggish air. A little red whisper that made his nerve-ends ripple. He saw the hackles ridge up along Tark's spine and then the two of them ran ahead of Li Kin, going low to the ground with a slinking gait, up to the door of Barin's cell.

Before Li Kin unbarred the door, they knew what they would see.

Barin lay on the floor. The smell of death was on him, and the smell of blood. He had died only a short time before and he had not died easily. The reek of Piet Van Voss was strong in the little room.

Tark's sorrow burst from him in one wailing cry that was quickly checked. Nelson caught the wild, raging thought of the Clan-leader.

"*I will avenge!*"

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## Chapter XIII

## *THE FIGHT IN THE PALACE*

For a long moment they stood, the three of them, without movement or speech. The dead boy lay looking quietly into eternity, and there was no sound save the hissing of the torches as they burned. Nothing stirred but the flames, their light running ragged and uncertain over the gleaming walls.

Over and over, above his horror at the brutality of this thing, the thought tolled like a bell in Nelson's mind: *Barin is dead, and I shall never be a man again.*

It was a thought he could not face.

"I knew nothing of this," said Li Kin out of the depths of shame—shame that his own kind could have done such a thing. "I swear it."

Nelson realized then that Tark had swung around toward Li Kin and that there was death in his green eyes.

Nelson sprang, interposing his wolf body between them.

"Wait, Tark!" he thought swiftly. "Li Kin speaks the truth. He, of all of us, never wished to come here, never wished your people harm. Sloan was here and Van Voss. Not this one."

Tark's hairy body quivered. He did not seem to have heard.

Nelson told him, "Tark, listen to me! Barin was the price of my body. I want as much as you to punish those who did this. And for that we need Li Kin's help. Do you hear me?"



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Slowly, reluctantly, Tark answered, "I hear." He relaxed but not much. "Let us go and find the others."

The torchlight gleamed like blood upon his fangs. "No," said Nelson. "Li Kin and I will go. You'll wait."

Swiftly, over Tark's snarling protest, he pressed home the truth. "You know the outland weapons. You'd be dead before you could spring. You can better avenge Barin by staying alive to fight for the Brotherhood."

"Very well," came Tark's thought finally. Then, suspiciously, "What have *you* to say to these men, Eric Nelson?"

"I have much to say," answered Nelson grimly, looking at Barin. Then he added ironically, "Don't worry, Tark. Even if I would I can't betray you. You have the best hostage a man can give—his own body!"

Tark growled assent and lay down like a great dog beside the dead boy to wait.

Li Kin said with a terrible lack of emotion, "They are not men, those two. They are butchers. They are lower than the brutes."

He was a very tired man, Li Kin. Nelson could feel the overpowering weariness of his mind. Weary of war and bloodshed and suffering and the pointless days that wandered on to nowhere. Weary of tears that had long ago been shed, of memories that were fainter than forgotten dreams, of the very beating of his heart.

"Let us go," said Nelson and led the way out of the cell.

They found Sloan and Van Voss together in the vast gloomy Council Hall. They were alone. They had a jar of wine on the table between them and their faces in the flaring torchlight were the faces of happy men.

They glanced up as Li Kin entered and then, as they saw the wolf-shape that moved beside him, they sprang up, reaching for their guns.

Li Kin flung up his hand to stop them. He bent down, shielding Nelson's wolf-body with his own body, and

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said with a strange dreamy smile, "Put on the thought-crowns, my friends. You are about to learn something of the powers you fight against."

Nelson watched them as they picked up the platinum circles and put them on, frowning, their hands still ready on their gun butts.

He sent his thought out to them. "Haven't you a word of welcome for me—Eric Nelson?"

Van Voss swore and drew his gun. "A beast-spy from Vruun, who tries to trick us like children! Get out of the way, Li Kin."

But Sloan snapped, "Hold on, Piet." Nelson could feel his mind probing, testing.

Nelson told them, "You don't believe? Then listen."

Rapidly, he reminded them of things they had done together that only Eric Nelson could know. Gradually Van Voss' heavy jaw fell and his gun slid back into the holster. He sat down, staring.

Sloan let out a long harsh breath and swore softly. "How was this done and why?"

"The punishment of the Guardian!" said a voice from across the hall—a voice full of fear.

The voice was Shan Kar's. He came from a side door across the shadowy hall, his eyes drugged with sleep. Apparently the voices had awakened him and he had come in time to hear.

He looked at Nelson with fear-wide eyes. "Kree did this to you, didn't he?"

"Yes, he did." Nelson told them all that had happened.

Sloan's hard brown face was tight. "Then you have to take Barin back to get your own body back?"

"Yes," Nelson answered. "And I've just come from Barin."

"So you know, do you?" Sloan said calmly.

"Yes, I know," Nelson told him. He added, with all his hatred throbbing in his thought, "You murdering swine."

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Shan Kar looked bewildered. "What has happened to Barin?"

"Torture," Nelson answered. "Death."

He kept his wolf-gaze on Sloan and Van Voss, and Li Kin also regarded them with the eyes of a man sitting in judgment.

Shan Kar swung to Sloan. "It's not true, is it?"

Sloan shrugged. "I had Piet work the kid over. He could have talked. Was it our fault if he made it tough for himself?"

Sloan grinned. "You should have realized what I did, Nelson. If the Guardian of the Brotherhood holds the secret of the way into the Cavern as an hereditary trust, his son would know it too."

"And now you know it."

"That's right, Nelson. Now *I* know it."

Shan Kar said incredulously, "You tortured that secret out of him?"

"Come off it," Sloan answered disgustedly. "You'd have killed him yourself."

"A clean death, the fortunes of war—that's one thing," said Shan Kar. "But torture of a helpless prisoner, a boy—"

"Listen," said Nick Sloan harshly, "I came here for platinum and I'm going to get it. I have the secret of the Cavern now and in the morning we start our drive on Vrunn. If you're with me, Shan Kar, that's fine. If you're not, that's fine too, and the Brotherhood, what's left of it, can do what they want to you after I'm gone."

He grinned and added, "From what they did to Nelson, I don't think you'd like what they'd do to you."

Quorr's words came back to Nelson. *If we sin, we are banished into the bodies of the little hunted things that are born only to be eaten.*

He saw the look that came over Shan Kar's face and knew that he too was thinking of that.

But Shan Kar straightened his shoulders and told

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Sloan, "That is an empty boast. You can never take Vruun or the Cavern without us."

"He's right," Nelson put it edgedly. "I've been a day and night in the forest. The Clans are out in full force, waiting. They'll pull you down and tear you to pieces in the woods."

Sloan smiled and shook his head. "Oh, no," he said. "They won't, because there won't be any woods."

Nelson stiffened. He knew Sloan, and he knew that something particularly horrible and efficient had been planned. "What do you mean?"

"Simple," Sloan answered. "The prevailing wind blows north toward Vruun and in this dry season the woods are like tinder. All it needs is a few little matches."

"*Fire!*"

The mind of Eric Nelson, which was a human mind, recoiled in horror from the plan, so beautifully simple, so unutterably cruel. And his body, which was the body of a wolf, was shaken to its very core by a fear that was as old as the first four-footed creature who fled from a rush of burning lava.

"But you can't do that!" Shan Kar said unbelievingly. "The suffering, the destruction—"

Li Kin echoed, "Sloan, you can't!"

"Oh, lord!" said Sloan with the utter contempt of the professional for the amateur. "What are we fighting here, a war or a tea-party? Naturally there'll be suffering and destruction. There will also be a victory, and it won't cost us anything but the price of a few matches. What more do you want, Shan Kar? I'm handing you L'Lan on a platter!"

He slammed his hand down hard on the table. "Are you with me, Shan Kar, or aren't you?"

The Humanite leader looked sick. But after a while he nodded. "We'll be with you, Sloan. We have no other choice now."

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"I thought you'd understand that," Sloan said curtly. Then he turned and looked at the wolf that was Eric Nelson. "Nelson, you're in a cursed creepy jam. But we'll use that trick machine you told about to get you back into your own body, when we take Vruun."

Nelson sent him a level thought. "Sloan, I'm not helping you to take Vruun, or conquer the Brotherhood. Your murder of Barin and this plan to destroy the Clans—they mean that I'm through with you."

"You'd go back on the bargain that you made with me?" Shan Kar demanded.

"I made no bargain," Nelson reminded him swiftly. "I told you in Yen Shi that I would make no bargains in the dark. And you kept us in the dark, Shan Kar.

"You kept us in ignorance of what the Brotherhood you want to shatter is really like, of what you're really trying to do here. Now you're going to help Sloan bring fire and death to this valley. I tell you straight, from here on I'm against you!"

Sloan laughed harshly. "You're forgetting something, Nelson. You're forgetting that we're your only chance of getting your body back! You can't do a thing *but* string along with us."

"I can go back to Vruun," Nelson told him.

"Go back and tell them that Barin's dead?" jeered the other. "You'd not only be a wolf then, you'd be a dead wolf."

"I'd rather be that than an accomplice in what you plan to do!" flashed Nelson.

Sloan's eyes narrowed. "If that's so, I might as well make you a dead wolf right here and save you the trip."

His gun started to flash out. But Li Kin's voice stopped him. Out of the corner of his eye Nelson saw that Li Kin had already drawn his gun and that it was as steady as a rock in his hand.

"Drop it, Sloan," he said.

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Sloan dropped it.

Piet Van Voss sat perfectly still behind the table, his hands out of sight. His face appeared stupid with surprise.

"What is this?" Sloan demanded. "More mutiny in the ranks?"

Li Kin said, "I'm with Nelson."

Sloan's hard brown face cracked in a derisive smile. "That's fine," he said. "I hope you're more use to him—"

Van Voss fired from under the table. The shot thundered and rang from the high glassy walls in ricocheting echoes.

Li Kin dropped his weapon, put both hands over his stomach and sat down with an expression of surprise on his face. Then he slumped forward. Sloan's voice went calmly on, after that pause.

"—than you were to me," he finished. Then, jerking around, he yelled, "Watch him, Piet!"

Nelson was already in mid-leap, his wolf-body going like an arrow for the Dutchman's throat.

His teeth met in the flesh of the man's forearm, flung up to ward him off. They fell to the floor in a crashing tangle. Sloan stooped swiftly to pick up his gun.

Suddenly, from nowhere, Tark came like a leaping shadow. His charge knocked Sloan rolling. Shan Kar turned and ran from the room.

Above the yells and the curses and the worrying, growling sounds Nelson caught Tark's mental cry.

"There is no time now, outlander! Others come and Shan Kar is raising the alarm. The palace is a trap!"

He turned and raced for the door with Nelson after him. Behind them, Sloan and Van Voss, bleeding and half-stunned, were able to muster only one wild shot before the two darting wolf-shapes had vanished down the long dark corridor.

Tark's mind sent out a rallying cry. "Hatha! Ei! We are discovered!"

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They tore onward through the labyrinth of corridors, shoulder to shoulder. As they ran Nelson sent a swift thought.

"You saved my life. How—?"

"I did not trust you *completely*, outlander," Tark answered. "I crept close to the Council Hall and listened to your thoughts."

He checked suddenly. "They come. The way is blocked."

They had reached the head of the great entrance hall, a broad, high-arched, gloomy immensity, lighted by torches set along its glassy walls. Through the wide open doors at its far end Nelson could see the dark trees of the forest avenue outside.

Out there was safety and escape. But they were barred from it. The broad open doorway was full of torch-flames and running men as hastily-summoned Humanite warriors came pouring into the hall.

There was no other way out and no turning back. For they could hear Sloan and Van Voss coming fast behind them.

Tark eyed the Humanites and their naked swords and uttered a curt, sharp thought.

"Rush them!"

He shot off down the hall like a streak of gray lightning, with Nelson beside him.

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## Chapter XIV

## *RETURN TO DOOM*

For Nelson, it was a strange, weird battle. More so even than his fight with Tark, because this time he was fighting men. There was something beautiful about it. To sweep in under the flash of a falling blade, leap and slash and twist away, then dodge and leap again. He had not realized that men were so slow and weak, their flesh so soft to tear, so naked. He felt contempt for them.

A savage joy in his own wolf-strength swept over him. He hurled himself high in the air, right over the striking sword that would have split him open, saw terror widen in the swordsman's eyes, heard him cry out. Then he felt his own jaws snap and crunch an arm, heard the yell of pain and the clatter of the sword falling to the floor.

But it was no use. Men might be soft and slow, but there were many of them. More came running into the doorway as word went forth that the wolves of Vruun were trapped. And their swords could bite, deep and deadly as fangs.

Nelson and Tark recoiled, panting, and for all their swiftness they had not come off unmarked. Ears flattened, bellies down, they crouched for one brief moment as doom closed in on them. For behind them, Sloan and Van Voss had entered the big hall. Their guns were ready, but they could not fire yet for fear of killing the Humanites.

Nelson licked his own blood off his lips, and said, "I go."

Tark's answer came. "I, too. Farewell, outlander."



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The two lean gray shapes gathered themselves for what they knew would be their last charge against that wall of swords.

Then, above the clamor, Nelson heard from outside the high shrill screams of Hatha's Clan rise like trumpets on the night and the rolling drumbeats of their hoofs.

Hatha had freed his imprisoned mates and his thought-cry rang out to the fighting wolves—"We come, brothers!"

And they came. Out of the darkness, through the wide door that long ago had been made for the clans to enter, into the big hall itself they came, their hoofbeats ringing on the glassy floor. They shook the torchlight from their gleaming hides and squealed and reared like giants under the high-arched roof as they trampled the Humanites down.

Hatha led them—a demon, a shape of darkness, a living hate. He stood on his hind legs and screamed, the terrible ripping cry of his kind. Nelson saw him, towering high, teeth bared and mane flying, the great muscles of his breast flecked with foam, his eyes flaming and his fore-hoofs striking out like slim instruments of death.

"It is *our* vengeance, gray brothers! Let be!"

Vengeance of the captive, of the slave. Nelson could see on their backs the marks of lash and club and on the necks the scars of the rope. They were fouled with stable dirt and dust and crusted blood, these who had bathed in mountain streams and combed their manes with the wind. And they were bitter for their vengeance.

The wolves were forgotten. They ran between the staggering legs of men, under the bellies of the horses and on outside, lest they themselves be trampled. They crouched out there in the shadows, watching.

The big hall was full of sounds of hoofs and running men and death. Nelson saw swords flash red in the torchlight, saw breastplates crumple and helmets battered in.

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Sloan was shouting for the Humanites to scatter so that he and Van Voss could use their guns but there was no place to scatter, no refuge from those terrible hoofs.

Sloan got in two careful shots, Van Voss one, and horses fell and kicked and killed as they died. The others plunged over their bodies and went on with flying heels. Blood crawled on the floor.

The Humanites fled along the only way that was open to them, back into the palace, and they swept Sloan and Van Voss with them.

Hatha and his Clan-brothers pressed them, trampling the stragglers. Then the black stallion wheeled with a neighing cry and came galloping on bloodstained hoofs back out the broad doorway with the others following him.

"Back to the forest, my brothers! Back to Vruun!"

The Hoofed Ones thundered down the dark winding forest-avenue. Nelson and Tark ran beside them and, overhead, the eagle soared, and where men of Anshan tried to stand against them they were trampled down. Out across the moonlit plain they went and up into the edge of the forest where Nsharra was waiting for them.

Before she could ask the question Tark told her.

"Barin is dead."

She said nothing, but Nelson saw that she stood quite fixed and still.

Tark's thought came roughly. "There is no time to mourn now! At dawn, our enemies come with fire for the forest!"

"Fire?" That struck Nsharra out of her frozen grief as no other thing could have done. "But that is death for the Clans?"

"Unless we warn them in time!" Tark thought swiftly. "Ei must spread the word, while we speed to Vruun."

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Nsharra looked at the wolf that was Eric Nelson, standing there rocking with exhaustion.

Nelson heard her swift question. "Tark, what of him?"

"He failed to save Barin and he goes back to Vruun as the Guardian ordered," Tark answered grimly. "With us."

"He fought the other outlanders—tried to kill them when he learned their crime!" Ei put in swiftly. "He is not one of them now."

"I think you speak truth, Winged One," retorted the wolf. "Yet the Guardian's word holds. He goes back to Vrunn for judgment."

"I am willing," Nelson told them dully. "I can go nowhere else than Vruun."

He had known that from the first. Had known that, even if he failed to redeem his own human body, he must go back to it because he would rather die in that body than live in another shape.

Nsharra leaped onto Hatha's back. "We go now and we will spread the warning as we go."

They started through the forest, Nelson loping with Tark behind the great stallion, Ei winging fast and far ahead of them. And all through the dark forest, Nelson heard the warning ahead of them, spreading, spreading, across the river, up the hills.

*Run! Run, Clan-brothers! At dawn the forest burns!*

Fear was in the valley this night. Nelson could smell it on the wind. Already, the Clans were beginning to move away from the shelter of the forest that had become a trap.

Northward to Vruun, eagles winging black against the stars, tigers running velvet-pawed, the packs of the Hairy Ones voicing the wailing cry of danger again and again, the horses crashing like driven bucks over the deadfalls.

*At dawn, the forest burns!*

Nelson felt even his rangy wolf-body sag with utter exhaustion by the time dawn came. They had reached

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the ridge above Vruun and the wind brought the first sharp taint of smoke over the forest to them now.

Hatha lifted his head and snuffed the air and, as he too breathed the faint cruel smell, Nelson again felt a primal terror.

Hatha said, "It has begun."

To Nelson it seemed half an eternity later before they had covered those last miles into Vruun. He saw the city through a red blur of utter weariness. He stumbled as he went with the others through the winding forest-ways whose green tide lapped the shimmering glass bubble-domes and towers.

Warning had come ahead of them to Vruun, eagle-winged. Fear seethed through the strange fraternity of men and beasts in the streets and woods-ways. And southward, a haze thickened and rose against the sun and turned it to a disk of ugly copper.

Nelson turned blindly with the others into the Hall of Clans. He followed them into the pale, shimmering hall where Kree was waiting. They were all there now, the Clan-leaders. And Eric Nelson, in the body of Asha the wolf, went heavily across the wide room to stand before the Guardian.

"Your son is dead," he told the Guardian.

Kree stood straight and tall in his dark mantle, his gaze somber as he looked down at Nelson.

"Then you have failed, outlander. But your judgment can come later for now the doom you helped bring here is sweeping toward us."

*Yes, I helped bring that doom to L'Lan and the Brotherhood,* he thought. *I helped bring it, the death that is coming.*

"Confine him until we judge him," Nelson heard Kree order. He heard the thought only vaguely, for his mind was too drunk with fatigue to function. He was hardly aware of walking unsteadily in the direction that guards

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pointed out with their swords, through corridors, through a door—

It was a green-glass walled chamber that they locked him into. Nelson, his mind darkening, stretched his wolf-body on the cool floor and sank into an abyss of sleep.

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## Chapter XV

# *THE WRATH OF THE CLANS*

Nelson dreamed strangely in his stuporous sleep, dreams of thought-voices that his mind could hear, of forms moving around him, of, finally, a stunning, thunderous wave of force that rolled upon him.

He was overwhelmed by it, carried by it over the sheer brink of the world. He was falling into an awesome, howling gulf that was outside space and time, was falling, falling—

A strange shock stopped his fall. And then he became dimly aware that sensation was returning to him, that he was awaking.

"Is all well with you, Asha?" Nelson heard a thought-voice ask.

"All is well—and I am glad to have awaked from my sleep!" He heard the eager answering thought. That was strange. The question had been answered by Asha, yet *he* was Asha the wolf—at least he dwelt in the wolf's body.

*Or did he?*

Nelson suddenly realized that half his sense-perceptions were gone, that he could no longer scent anything at all. His body felt different. Not the tight, compact wolf-body to which he'd grown accustomed, but a long, gangling, awkward body—

Nelson, with an inarticulate cry, wrenched his eyelids open. But he knew what he would see before he looked



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down at himself. His hoarse wordless cry had been no wolf's howl but a human cry.

He looked down at the length of his own body again, sprawling in its dusty khaki uniform on a padded cot, still wearing its thought-crown. He moved arms and legs and they responded.

"I'm back," he whispered thickly.

"Yes," said a breathless voice. "You are back, Eric Nelson!"

He knew it for Nsharra's voice and he turned to look for her and looked full into the face of Asha the wolf. They lay side by side on two narrow cots—the wolf whose mind had slept so that a man could occupy his body—and the man.

Asha's body was dusty now, his hair matted with dried blood from wounds, his feet sore and bleeding. But his bright green eyes looked intelligently into Nelson's face. Nelson turned and looked up. Kree stood behind the cots, beside the big platinum mind-transference machine of the ancients.

"You brought me back into my own body while I slept?" Nelson said hoarsely.

"Yes," said Kree. "The force of the ancients stunned you in sleep so that you did not wake."

Nelson sat up. He felt strong, rested, fresh—and realized it was because his human body had lain here in coma for so long. Yet his human body now felt *strange*. He felt blinded and deafened by his loss of scent, felt slow, clumsy, awkward.

He sat up and saw that Nsharra stood at the foot of his cot. And that the four leaders of the great Clans were here—Tark and Hatha, the tiger and Ei. They were watching him.

"Death and danger walk toward Vruun on swift feet of flame," Kree was saying somberly. "Little time was

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left to give Asha back his body and return you to *your* body for judgment."

For judgment? That was why they had returned him to his humanity as doom drew close to Vrunn? Then the time had come.

Nelson stood up and faced them all. "I am ready," he said heavily.

"Tark and Ei have told us how you fought to save Barin—how you fought your friends," said Kree.

"They were not my friends, save one who is dead now," Nelson answered heavily. "I did not know, though, they were butchers."

"It seems you have learned much you did not know, outlander," said Kree. "You know now what it will be like for the Clans if the Humanites break the Brotherhood."

"Yes, I know that now," answered Eric Nelson sickly.

Free children of the forest, hunted and slain and enslaved as in the outer world! Swift sentient folk of the Clans, crushed beneath a stupid human tyranny! He deserved what was coming—

"You are free to leave L'Lan," said Kree.

Nelson stared, incredulous. "You're not going to kill me for what I've helped to do?"

Kree shook his head. "By your work last night, you redeemed the crime that you committed in ignorance. You can go."

Nelson looked at the Guardian, then around the watching leaders of the Clans.

"But I want to *stay!*" he cried. "I want to help you save the Brotherhood, to undo what I helped do here!"

Nsharra cried eagerly to her father, "Give him the chance! He will be loyal to us, I know!"

"He will be loyal," Tark's thought agreed. "And he knows the ways and weapons of the outlanders."

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Kree's eyes searched Nelson's face, seemed to be searching his soul. Finally the Guardian spoke.

"So be it, outlander. Your help can be valuable in this hour of peril." He swung toward the others. "Clan-leaders, let the word run through all your Clans that *this* outlander fights on our side!"

"We shall see how he fights," growled the thought of Quorr the tiger.

Nelson felt the uplift of a queer buoyancy, as though an oppressive weight had been lifted from him. He knew, now. He knew that this Brotherhood that had at first seemed to his outer-world eyes so unnatural and alien was worth all sacrifices to preserve. He had learned that in the body of Asha the wolf.

And he felt strangely happy. For ten years he had fought the purposeless battles of warlords, first for adventure and then because he had no other profession. But this last battle was to be for a cause that he thought worth all he had to give.

Kree, as the Clan-leaders hurried out, led Nelson to a window that looked southward over Vruun.

"The hour comes fast upon us, outlander!"

Nelson was appalled by the spectacle. He realized now that hours had passed, for the sun was westering in a bloody, smoky murk. The whole southern sky was a wall of black smoke laced with livid flame—a wall that marched toward Vruun and was but a few miles distant. Only the forests west of the river were burning, but they were burning from the river to the western hills.

"That fire will be here in a few hours and Sloan and Van Voss and the Humanites will come after it!" Nelson exclaimed.

Kree nodded. "But we hope to stop it. The men of Vruun have labored all day to cut a fire-break from the river to the western hills."

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"No mere fire-break will stop that!" Nelson told him emphatically. "It will jump it. You've got to start a back-fire."

"Use fire as a defense against fire?" Kree looked worried. "The Clans would not like it. They hate all fire."

"Either that or the blaze will come into Vrunn tonight!" Nelson warned.

Kree said reluctantly, "I will go with you and give the order."

As they turned, Nelson found Nsharra handing two heavy service pistols to him. He recognized them as his own and Lefty's.

"Less than twenty shots," he muttered, as he belted on the guns. "And Sloan and Van Voss will have submachine-guns and will have trained some of the Humanites to use grenades."

"But your experience of war will be valuable to us," Kree told him. "We know little of war in L'Lan. Our swords have only been used at long intervals to repel outland tribes who sought to enter."

"I go with you, father!" cried Nsharra, her eyes dark and stormy with excitement.

Kree shook his head. "Nsharra, if aught befalls me, you alone remain to rally the Brotherhood. You must remain in Vruun."

Eric Nelson went out of the Hall of Clans with the Guardian into a thickening, ominous dusk. Smoke was rolling ever more densely from the south, blotting out the sunset. The air was bitter with it.

Tark ran up to them, the Hairy One's eyes blazing. "The fighters of the Clans are already on their way in the forest! Two of the Hoofed Ones wait for you!"

Nelson leaped on the back of one of the excited horses as Kree too mounted. They rode southward out of Vruun.

The sun had gone down behind smoke-veils as though

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afraid, and darkness was thickening westward. But southward it was like a dreadful new dawn over the forest, the whole sky there blood-red, immense.

Nelson, as he rode with Kree along a red-lit forest aisle beside the wide, dark-flowing river, heard the Clans moving through the forest with them, and heard their thought-cry.

*Gather, O ye of the Brotherhood! Gather to the south, my brothers, for soon we fight—and die!*

The woods were full of running shadows. Shaking red light fell on gray backs and striped backs and struck fire from eyes that were already like blown coals in the darkness and shone white on gleaming, snicking teeth.

The ground shook to the trampling thunder of hoofs as Hatha's Clan went by, great stallions, their loose manes whipped like banners on the wind of their going. Some of them bore men of Vruun, armed for battle. And above the treetops in the bloody glare, the wide-winged eagles looped and swung.

There rose the terrific call of Tark beside them and it was answered. A tiger roared and another, sending their deep rolling coughs to echo from the hillsides. And the sons of Hatha lifted their wild neighing on the night.

*Roll call! Roll call of the Clans!*

Nelson's throat contracted and the warrior in him was shaken by a strange emotion. He heard the thought-cry of a lithe gray wolf-shape that ran in close to Tark and Kree and himself.

"Outlander, we go together this time! Good hunting!"

With a weird feeling, Nelson recognized that running wolf-shape as the one which for a time had been his own.

"Good hunting, Asha!"

They came to the fire-break that the men of Vruun had labored all day to hew across the forest, and Nelson groaned inwardly.

This ragged hundred-foot lane, cut at such labor from

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the woods, would never stop the cyclone of flame raging up from the south.

"We must start our backfire going from the south side of this lane, and keep it from jumping back across!" he told Kree. "And there's little time!"

The whole night a few miles ahead was now a sky-high chaos of smoke and flame. The red glare lit the hosts of human and beast warriors now pouring here from the north.

"Fire to stop fire, my brothers!" Kree's thought called, from his steed. "It must be your task to prevent it from jumping back."

They did not like it, Nelson saw. The blood-mad excitement of the Clans checked briefly with something that was close to fear. But they had the courage to face what was to them the supremely dreaded thing.

"Fire to stop fire!" flared Tark. "Let it begin!"

Nelson had dismounted. Now he hastily supervised the men Kree deputed to the task of starting the backfire. Their torches kindled the dry brush like tinder all along the southern edge of their fire-lane. Dry cedar and fir blazed up and the edge of the lane became a new wall of fire moving back south toward that mightier oncoming wall.

But moving slowly, slowly! The wind was against them, Nelson realized. Blazing leaves and twigs began to whirl across the lane, to dance with joyous wickedness over the narrow gap.

"Stamp the fire-sparks out where they fall!" Hatha's thought called. "Help the man-Clan, Hoofed Ones!"

Nelson, half stifled by smoke, sweating, labored with the men of Vruun and the Hoofed Ones, beating out each dangerous spark. And Kree sat his mount in the shaking red glow, his mind reaching out to steady the excited, jumpy Clans.

"Wait, brothers! Soon our fire will have conquered

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the fire of our enemies and then we shall seek them out!"

Nelson, laboring with the men of Vruun to stamp out the sparks that came across, felt that the south wind was a living thing, a malignant demon that delighted in hurling fire across the gap.

Yet he saw, through smoke-stung, half-blinded eyes, that the backfire was steadily if slowly creeping south. Soon it would have scorched a belt across which the giant flame-storm could not leap.

And then with a harsh, screaming cry, Ei winged down through the rolling smoke and sparks.

"The Humanites and the two outlanders come down the river, floating upon rafts!" cried the eagle's thought. "They are swinging in to land behind you!"

Appalled, Eric Nelson suddenly realized that that *would* be Nick Sloan's strategy, that it was the only possible strategy for him. Rafts that would carry the Humanite warriors would have been simple to build and with them the river became a safe highway to Vruun for Sloan and his forces, a safe road behind and past the fire-storm.

And Sloan, seeing them setting their backfire here, would try to swing around and catch them from behind, trap them between his forces and their fire.

"To the river!" Nelson cried. "If they land behind us we're lost! Ei, lead the way!"

"This way, Clan-brothers!" flashed the eagle's thought as he soared up again on thunderous wings.

Nelson had leaped on Hatha's back. Riding beside Kree back through the red-lit forest toward the river-edge, he sensed the wild relief of the Clans pouring to the fight around him.

Fire they hated, inaction they hated, but now at last their chance to come to grips with the destroyers had come. Beasts and mounted men, they crashed through brush and trees to the edge of the red-lit river just as the first of a score of long crude rafts, loaded with war-

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riors, was poled ashore. Nelson saw that some of the Humanites carried webbing sacks of grenades.

He shouted, "Charge them! Rush them in the shallows! You Hoofed Ones—ride them down!"

Hatha laid his ears back and ran straight for the water. Nelson clung to his mane, his gun out, firing. Behind him, in a terrible resistless rush, the Clans swept into battle and even the red thundering flowers of the grenades could not stop them.

In the brush of the banks, on the rocky shore, in the water, men and beasts crashed together, screamed and died, and the river was the color of blood under the flame-lit sky.

Squealing, kicking, plunging, Hatha raged through the thick of the fight and took Nelson with him. Nelson caught a glimpse of Sloan and Van Voss, on rafts out in the river, willing to let Shan Kar's men bear the brunt of the fight. They fondled submachine-guns but could not use them, the two forces were so entangled.

The men of Vruun rode up and down the beaches, their swords flashing, and where their horses were killed under them they fought on foot, locked breast to breast with their erstwhile brothers of Anshan.

Great striped bodies leaped and rolled and clawed, and everywhere the gray wolves ran, slashing, slaying. Eagles swooped and struck their talons home. Bodies fell on the stones and lay heaped in the shallows and the clans and the men of Anshan fought on over them, the horses' hoofs ringing on the mail of the fallen men.

"*Hai-ooo!*" came the blood-chilling killing-cry of Tark, a gray demon gone mad with battle.

Nelson, clinging to Hatha's back as the stallion crashed and whirled in the crazy fight, glimpsed a white-faced Humanite warrior stabbing upward with his sword.

He shot, and glimpsed the man's face drive in. But another Humanite had seized the instant to rush in at him,

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sword gleaming— A gray thunderbolt flew from behind Nelson at the new attacker, aiming for the throat.

"Asha, look out!" Nelson sent his warning thought as he saw the dog-wolf's staggering opponent drop sword and whip out a dagger.

Even as he flung himself off Hatha into the shallow water to help he saw the dagger rip the dog-wolf's ribs. And then the Humanite sprawled in the water, his throat a pumping red gash.

Asha staggered, slipped. Fading flare of green eyes shone up at Nelson as he reached the wolf. He heard the dying thought.

"Good hunting, broth—"

"They flee!" came the wild, raging thought-cry of Quorr. "Kill, before they escape!"

The Humanites, what was left of those who had landed, were wildly pushing their rafts back into the river, back into the deeper water.

Nelson heard Nick Sloan's cool sharp voice cut in across the din, from the rafts farther out.

"Pull back! That's enough!"

The fighters of the Clans, blood-mad, were balked, could not follow into that deeper water. But as the fight momentarily slackened thus, past Nelson pushed Kree.

The Guardian stood outlined in the suddenly brighter glow of distant firelight, his hand raised as his voice rolled out onto the river.

"Men of Anshan, will you destroy all L'Lan in blood and fire? Wrath of the ancients, wrath of the Cavern, fall upon you if you follow this road farther!"

"Kree, get back!" yelled Nelson, leaping forward.

He was too late. The burst of submachine-gun fire that came from out there on the rafts was brutally, contemptuously short. Kree clutched his breast and went down in the water. And Nelson heard Nick Sloan's voice from out there.

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"Good shooting, Piet!"

A mad cry, a cry that was a thought and a howl and a scream of fury, went through the Clans.

"The Guardian is slain!"

Nelson, turning to drag Kree's body ashore, felt his heart check as he saw why the firelight was suddenly brighter now. The forest *between* them and their firebreak was a wall of flame, marching southward toward them.

"Our backfire has jumped the gap while we fought here!" he cried. "We can't stop it now—Vruun is doomed!"

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## Chapter XVI

## *THE CAVERN OF CREATION*

Nelson now realized with tragic clarity the simple and effective strategy that Nick Sloan had used. Seeing them building a defense against the sweep of fire, Sloan had callously sent Humanite warriors in to a landing he knew could not succeed to draw them away from their fight against the flames.

And the strategy had worked. The fire had overrun their line of defense and was now moving on the wings of the wind toward Vruun.

"We can't hold that fire now!" Nelson cried. "It will be into Vruun in an hour. Pull back!"

Retreat was a lesson the Clans had never learned. Wild with battle-excitement, they would have refused to retreat now had it not been for the wall of flame sweeping toward them.

Tark sent out his thought-cry. "Back to Vruun, Clan-brothers! We must get all out of the city before the fire reaches it!"

From out in the river a submachine-gun started hammering at them as they drew back from the water.

A stallion crashed down, a tiger screamed in rage and pain. Nelson, having lifted Kree's body across the back of Hatha, led the way through the forest.

Great scorching winds howled and whooped about them and flung blinding smoke to impede their way. The steady crackling of the sky-high wall of flame behind them had grown to an ominous roar.



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Nelson felt rage and hatred equal to those of the Clans about him as he stumbled with them through the smoke toward Vruun. He knew that Nick Sloan would coolly bring his forces on down the river just behind the fire, following it in complete safety. And Sloan could wait, smiling, while the people of Vruun died amid the flaming trees.

"Hurry!" cried Nelson. "Hurry!"

The southern edges of the city were crowded. All those who had been left behind had come there to watch the doom that rolled toward them down the reddened sky—the females, the old, the very young. The winding forest-avenues were choked with them.

As the returning Clans swept into Vruun, scorched and bloody and raging with defeat, from all sides the anxious question came.

"What word? Is the fire stopped?"

Then they saw Hatha and the burden he carried and it seemed to Nelson that the whole city gave one great cry of woe and was silent. Nsharra was waiting for them outside the Hall of Clans, and Nelson saw from her face that word of Kree's death had reached her.

She flung her mantle on the grass. She said to Nelson, "Lay my father here under the trees."

As he did so, he heard the thought of the Clan-leaders to Nsharra. "You inherit the Guardianship now!"

She took the weight of duty on her slim shoulders. "What is the word?"

Nelson told her rapidly. "You must get every living thing out of Vruun," he finished. "The fire will be in these forest-streets in less than an hour."

Nsharra showed no sign of fear. She turned to the leaders.

"Lead your Clans to the northern hills, up beneath the mountains!"

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Quorr growled. "Let the females and the young go. We stay to fight!"

"Fight what?" Nelson demanded. "The flames?"

He whirled and pointed to the southern sky. Crimson and cruel it lowered over them and already the flickering glare was lighting the streets of Vruun.

"Will your Clan pull that down with their claws, Quorr?"

Tark's thought was furious. "But to run away like cubs, with our tails between our legs—!"

"So that you'll live to fight later!" Nelson told him. "When the ashes cool the Clans can come down from the hills and attack the Humanites again!"

"He is right, Tark!" Nsharra supported. "Go now and spread the word!"

Nelson heard the cry go out by voice and thought. "North to the hills and tarry not, my brothers!"

And they went, out through the streets of the doomed city under the reddened sky.

Mothers drove their children ahead of them—wolf-cub and tiger-cub and human. Mares with their foals went by. Broad pinions of the Winged Ones beat northward through the fiery gloom. Moving out, moving out, even as the Clans had fled from the forest! And fear went with them on the bitter air and the eyries were empty save for the drifting smoke.

Watching this, Eric Nelson came to a desperate decision. He told Nsharra, "Sloan and Van Voss are the backbone of the whole Humanite campaign. If I could get those two and their weapons out of the way the Brotherhood would have a fighting chance later on!"

She looked at him, white-faced. "I know what you are thinking—that you must stop them because *you* helped bring them here!"

Nelson did not deny it.

"But it's impossible!" she cried. "You can't get near

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them. They won't come on until the fire has swept us out of Vruun and out of the forest!"

Nelson said swiftly, "But when the fire has cleared the way for him Sloan will make for the Cavern of Creation! I know him—it's the platinum there he's after, first and last."

He caught her arm. "You must show me how to get into the Cavern, Nsharra! I'll wait there for them—I've a few bullets left and those two won't get out again if I can help it!"

Nsharra looked at him with wide dark eyes. Then she said, "Come, I'll show you the way."

The streets, the forest-ways, were almost empty now. The last stragglers were disappearing northward through the trees. It was none too soon. Ash was falling like snow and the wind was hot. The Clan-leaders came racing back, their eyes burning with the anger and the shame of flight. Hatha had brought a mount for Nelson.

"Is the city cleared?" Nsharra cried.

Tark's quick thought answered. "It is cleared."

"Then it is time to go!"

She looked for a moment at her father, stretched out as though in sleep upon the dark mantle, his head pillowed on the grass.

"Leave him here in his city," she said.

She turned and sprang to Hatha's back. Nelson also mounted, and they galloped northward out of Vruun after the Clans. Smoke coiled thick among the trees, lit by the strange red glow. Ash fell more heavily and the wind brought burning showers of sparks.

Looking back minutes later, Nsharra cried, "The city burns!"

Nelson looked back also and saw the flames leaping triumphant behind them. They flared in great twisting banners from the treetops, turning the forest-ways into red rivers of fire that flowed northward. The crest

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of that fiery flood raced after the fugitives, roaring, dancing, eating the trees as it pursued.

"Faster or we'll be trapped!" Nelson shouted.

He saw how the glassy bubble-roofs back there had turned smoky red as the flames washed over them. They did not burn or crack but they glowed in the terrible heat, the minarets throwing back the crimson glare.

Choking, coughing, burned by flying sparks, Nelson and Nsharra and the Clan-leaders raced ahead of the leaping flames. Nelson clung desperately to his mount as the Hoofed One smashed through brush, leaped dry gullies, bucked and scrambled over fallen trees. He could barely see the others in the smoke.

They burst out of the woods onto the open plain that rose ahead of them to the barren foothills. Another spurt, another staggering burst of speed and they were safe. The fire flared to the edge of the woods and checked.

Now, close above them, Nelson saw the throbbing eye of the Cavern of Creation, pulsing with mysterious light. The Clans were moving up on either side of that coldly flaring orifice, on up into the higher bare hills.

On a flat ledge just outside the glowing mouth of the Cavern, Nelson stopped and dismounted. Nsharra did likewise.

She told the four leaders, "Nelson and I go into the Cavern! You lead your Clans on to safety."

Nelson cried, "No! You're not to stay in there with me, Nsharra—only to show me the way!"

"I am Guardian now," Nsharra said firmly. "It is my duty and my right to go with you."

He realized from her tone that argument would not sway her. And there was no time for argument. Time was running out.

"I go also!" Tark's thought cried and the other leaders echoed him.

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"No!" Nsharra denied. "You also have your duty—to lead your Clans to safety."

Wolf and tiger, horse and eagle, wavered, irresolute. Then, as Nsharra repeated her command, they unwillingly went on into the darkness of the upper slopes.

Nelson uttered an exclamation. He had turned to look back, and now he pointed downward. By the glaring light, they could see Nick Sloan's rafts coming down the blood-red river past the blazing city.

"They'll be up here soon," he said edgedly. "Nsharra, there's still time for you to get away!"

"I will show you the safe way into the Cavern, now," she answered. "But I am its Guardian and I will not leave it!"

He turned with her toward that great mouth of cold, quivering light. Deliberately, Nsharra led the way into it.

Just inside the entrance she paused. Nelson looked about. Where the light outside had been red and hot, here it was a cool glow like uncanny moonlight.

The cavity was huge and circular, running back into the hill. Nelson guessed it to be eighty feet high. A hundred feet from where they stood yawned a deep cleft that ran across the cavern floor, and it was from here that the cold light came—a terrific blaze of white radiation flung upward out of the cleft.

Nelson began to see things that astounded him even more than his first sight of Vruun and Anshan.

Great circular ribs of metal, massive girders dim in the lofty gloom, seemed to support the roof and sides of the Cavern. He made out the shapes of metal tubes, gigantic things, crumpled and twisted as though by blasting force, that ran along the walls into the unguessable shadowy spaces farther in.

His brain began to reel with impossible conjectures.

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Stepping forward toward the cleft, he glimpsed a glowing white mass that lay deep down at the bottom of the crevice.

Nsharra drew him back. "Do not go too close to the cold fire—its light can blast and kill!"

"Radioactive!" Nelson muttered incredulously. "A radioactive chemical mass of some sort that's eaten its way into the floor."

Very effectively, that moat of death had barred all entrance into the unguessable farther depths of the Cavern.

He looked up along the wall above the cleft and made out vast twisted cylinders, their metal sides burst and gaping. There was no mistaking what those cylinders were. They were huge tanks.

Had the radioactive mass spilled from those shattered tanks? It seemed obvious and yet—

Nsharra led him to the end of the mass of giant tubes that ran along the walls back to the farther depths of the Cavern. The tubes were all of six feet in diameter, made of unfamiliar metal, massive and thick. He tried to picture them as they must have been once and the picture staggered his mind with suggestions that were pure madness.

Nsharra said, "Most of these strange tunnels are broken. But one of them leads safely over the cleft of cold fire. It is the secret way, found long ago by a Guardian and told only to his successors."

She climbed into the flared ripped end of one of the giant tubes, motioning him to follow. He did so, using his pocket light. The inner wall of the tube was pitted and scored, the metal burned. Yes, *burned*, like a charred log. And yet it seemed amazingly tough metal. It acted as a shield against the deadly radiation they were crossing.

Numbly Nelson wondered what terrible force had ripped through these giant tubes to scar them so.

Ahead of him, Nsharra came to a place where the tube twisted upon itself. He scrambled with her around

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the turn. Then, suddenly, he snapped off his light and whispered quickly to her.

"Silence!"

They crouched and listened, and Nelson heard plainly this time the sound that had warned him—a sound of something slipping and scrambling behind them in the tube, something straining to overtake them.

He had his gun out and ready when Tark's thought came to them. "Where man can go wolf can go! And where Nsharra goes this wolf goes also!"

Nelson relaxed and swore. Tark scrambled toward them, digging his claws into the pitted metal.

"Too late for anger now," he thought to Nsharra. "The outlanders and Shan Kar's men have already landed." He added with a wolfish shrug, "And anyway my Clan is safe now."

Nsharra's hand briefly touched the massive hairy head, but she did not speak. They went on for what seemed a long time in the tube. Then it debouched into a round gigantic metal chamber that looked to Nelson very like part of a turbine—a turbine built by giants for some unguessable purpose.

"Giant tubes that *could* be jet-tubes!" he said half aloud in a stunned voice. "This colossal turbine—and the radioactive chemical from the tanks, that could be fuel—"

"Come," said Nsharra and he followed her, the wolf keeping close to them as though awed by this forbidden place.

As they stepped out of the shattered turbine, well beyond the deadly cleft, Nelson could look into the shadowy farther spaces of the Cavern that previously the cold radiance had hidden from him.

He was not really surprised at what he saw. Shocked, stunned, awed, but not really surprised. Before him stretched the Cavern, vast, incredible, shadows glooming thicker as the eye went back into it.

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And its half-seen, half-guessed shape was the shape of a torpedo, tapering from blunt stern to slender point. A sharp, clean point to cleave the air, to cleave, perhaps, the vast gulfs where there was no air, where only the stars rubbed shoulders with eternity!

He saw the great arching ribs, the looming platinum machinery that had no meaning for him because there had never been anything like it on Earth. Machines, and panels, that bore gauges and dials marked in strange symbols. And the alien but unmistakable assembly of jet-tubes, the great turbine-engines that once had driven thunderously—

Nelson spoke, and the sound of his own voice was echoing and strange in that vast dead vault of metal.

"A ship," he whispered. "The Cavern is a giant ship, that crashed here heaven alone knows how long ago. A *space* ship, that came to Earth and fell and was buried here by the silt of ages."

The deadly danger of the imminent crisis with Sloan was almost forgotten in Nelson's stupefied wonder. He moved slowly forward deeper into the shadowy ship, looking up at the huge broken machines.

Was this the colossal secret of the valley of L'Lan? Those ancients whose subtle science had made the thought-crowns and the mind-transferer—were they from another world, long, long ago? He stepped between two thick platinum pillars, on each of which was mounted a big quartz sphere. And suddenly, as though it came from the depthless gulfs of time, a cool, vast alien mind spoke to his.

The words, the thoughts, rang through his brain with a throbbing power that shook the whole fabric of his mind.

"*You who shall come after us, take warning!*"

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## Chapter XVII

# *THE DAY OF THE BROTHERHOOD*

Nelson stopped, stricken by a freezing awe that he had never felt before. It was not the mere fact of the thought-voice speaking in his mind that stupefied him. He was too accustomed to that, by now.

It was the power and the quality of this new mental voice. It had in it the vibrations of a mind of range and magnitude beyond his imagination. It was alien, yet had a tantalizing echo of familiarity.

"*Take warning!*"

Nsharra's voice broke the spell. She had stepped quickly with Tark to his side as he stood frozen between the platinum pillars.

"It is the voice of the ancients of the Cavern, Eric Nelson! Their voice, speaking from the dim past, from *those!*" She pointed at the great, glittering quartz spheres atop the two platinum pillars.

"Each time one steps between these pillars, their mind speaks—always the same. My father and all the Guardians before him knew it."

Nelson began dimly to understand. The mental voice he heard was a record—not a sonic record but a telepathic one imprinted somehow in those quartz spheres and reproduced to all who came between them.

How was it done? How could thought be recorded and reproduced? He did not know that, would never know. But that the ancients had been masters of telepathic



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science, his experience with the thought-crowns and the mind-transferer proved.

And now, after a pregnant pause, that cool passionless voice was speaking on in his mind.

"Take warning not lightly to unchain the forces and powers within this ship, should you learn to master them! Take warning to let no unscrupulous or ignorant ones even *know* of these powers! Take warning from our own tragic fate!

"We who speak to you were not like you in body. We were not of this world of yours. Upon a world far out in the starry universe we were born and developed in intelligence and grew to great knowledge and power.

"Our world was a world of beauty, our cities were cities of laughter and light. But we aspired too high, we dreamed too greatly of conquering all nature and, finally, we unloosed powers that we could not chain again and that began to destroy our world.

"So we built this starship, and in it the last remnants of our race went out from our dying planet into the stars to find another world. We searched star-system after star-system without finding a world that fitted us—until at last a disastrous accident in space crippled our starship as it neared this System.

"Our crippled ship crashed upon this planet, in this valley. It could never fly again. And we could not build another ship, for we were dying. This world was wrong for us, its atmosphere and chemical composition poisoned us and that poison in our bodies left us not long to live.

"We knew that we were doomed. Yet we could not let all the hard-won intelligence and knowledge of our race thus perish! Therefore we determined that, though our bodies were dying, our minds should continue to live upon this planet.

"They could only do so, if we transferred our minds

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into the bodies of creatures native to this world. Only the higher creatures could house our minds. So we picked five different species from among them, the ape and the tiger and the horse and the wolf and eagle.

"At least one of those differing species, we hoped, would survive even if the others perished. So we took members of those clans and we so altered their brain-structure as to give them the power of telepathic speech and so altered their genes as to make the change in them hereditary. Then we transferred our minds into their bodies.

"Now that has been done. We wear the new bodies of the five Clans and our old bodies are dead. We go out now from this wrecked ship to begin again the struggle against nature on this planet.

"We know that a dark time is coming! We know that the children of our new bodies will not inherit all our capacity of mind, that our knowledge and wisdom will slip from their memories and be largely forgotten.

"But some day, in ages to come, some at least of the five species will slowly develop to intelligence approximating our own. Then they will understand the relics of our power left in this ship.

"When that time comes, take warning! Take warning not to loose doom upon yourself as we did upon our world! Remember always the tragedy of us, your star-born ancestors of long ago!"

Eric Nelson, stunned and incredulous, felt the strong vibration of thought die away in his mind. He stepped back in awe from between the platinum pillars, with Tark and Nsharra.

"Good Lord!" Nelson husked. "That incredible story —it means that the myth of the Cavern of Creation is *true!*"

Yes, it was true, that fantastic legend to which he had

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not given even second thought, at which even the Humanites had scoffed!

Out of this cavern—this cavern that was a buried starship of long ago—*had* come the first intelligence on Earth! Intelligence that had embodied itself in the five great clans of which man was but one.

"The Clans and men were really equal, from the first!" he whispered. "In Brotherhood from the first! And then some of the human Clan, leaving this valley and spreading out over Earth—"

The riddle that had mystified anthropologists, the riddle of man's enigmatic origin in Central Asia, was solved at last. Long ago ancient and alien beings whose physical nature he might never know had transferred their minds into the bodies of the five species of Earthly animals. Had done that with machines which still survived, one of which Kree had used so weirdly upon himself!

And of the five Clans originally in this valley, it was the man-Clan that had gone out and subdued the rest of the wild earth and its animals, had made itself tyrannical master of the unthinking brutes outside the valley.

And this valley L'Lan, where the five Clans were still equal in intelligence and where the Brotherhood still held true, had been forgotten by the conquering human hosts in the outer world! Nelson felt shaken by the revelation. He looked with widened eyes around the vast gloom, the towering platinum machines.

"To think of the powers, the knowledge, that have been hidden here for ages!"

"It is why this cavern is a forbidden place," said Nsharra. "It is why my father could not let any enter here to hear these records that *prove* the origin of the Brotherhood is no myth!"

Of a sudden Tark whirled and his thought came swiftly

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to Nelson and the girl. "They come now from outside, into the Cavern!"

Nelson swung around, gripping his gun. He could not see the entrance of the Cavern—the shaking curtain of radiance from the cleft of cold fire barred his gaze.

Yet he trusted the wolf's instincts. He asked quickly, "How many, Tark?"

"But four," the wolf's thought answered. "The two outlanders, and Shan Kar and Holk of the Humanites."

"The other Humanites would fear to enter!" Nsharra exclaimed, her eyes blazing.

"It gives us a better chance," Nelson rasped. "Nsharra, stay back here in the shadows. I'm going to try to get them as they come through that tube."

He sprang forward and found Tark running beside him. "It was for this fight that I came with you, outlander! I owe a blood-debt!"

They hastened into the shadowy interior of the huge wrecked turbine, to the end of the giant tube. Nelson crouched there, gun in hand, his other hand restraining the tense hairy body of Tark.

He had only half a clip left in his gun, and he knew he must wait until Sloan and the others came past the twist in the tube. He had to make sure.

He heard the slipping, scrambling sounds of their progress through the tube, and he felt Tark tauten beside him.

"Not yet!" Nelson told himself, sweating. "Not yet—"

The scuffling of feet was louder, much louder. They had surely come around the twist in the tube by now.

But he had to be sure! He waited seconds longer, waited when he felt sure they were but yards away from him in the dark tube.

Then Nelson emptied his pistol straight down the tube.

"Piet, hold on!" yelled a muffled voice in the tube as the thunderous echoes died.

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Nelson had heard his bullets whining off metal. He knew then that he had failed, that the amplification of sound in the tube had tricked him into firing too soon.

A whisper came down the tube to him. "Give him—"

Then, a metallic something came bumping and rattling along the tube toward him.

"Grenade!" yelled Nelson. "Back, Tark!"

He and the wolf recoiled and leaped to escape from the turbine interior as the bumping, rattling thing came out of the tube. As they burst out of the turbine, a terrific explosion blammed behind them. Murderous bits of steel thudded into the turbine walls, and a few that found openings whizzed over their heads.

Then Nelson heard the sharp rattle of submachine-gun fire, heard bullets ricocheting inside the huge turbine.

"I will not flee without killing!" flared Tark's thought. The wolf had turned, his hair bristling, great fangs gleaming.

"You wouldn't have a chance, Tark! They're clearing the way ahead with guns now! We may be able to evade them back in the shadows."

Nelson knew with a cold and terrible certainty how small that chance was. Sloan and the Dutchman would methodically hunt them down, and he had not a shot left in his gun.

He and Tark ran between the platinum pillars of the thought-record, too swiftly to hear that mechanical epic message begin again. They reached Nsharra, back in the shadows.

"I failed," Nelson told her bitterly. "They will come on now. You should not have come here, Nsharra!"

She looked at him steadily, her face a white blur in the shadows. "I think L'Lan dies tonight and, if it does, I have no wish to live."

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He took her into his arms. And it was then, as he held her, that Nick Sloan's calm voice came out to them.

Sloan and the other three had issued from the tube into the turbine, but they had not come out of the turbine into the light of the cold fire. Nelson knew why. They were afraid he had more bullets.

"Nelson!" called the cool, hard voice. "Nelson, are you ready to quit making a fool of yourself and talk business?"

"Say what you have to say, Sloan," he called back.

The other's voice was almost a drawl. "Nelson, even though you got your body back, you joined the losing side and I guess now you know it. You're trapped, but I've no wish to rub you out. Give yourself up and I'll let you go free out of L'Lan."

Nelson thought swiftly. "You'd let the girl, and Tark, go with me?"

"Sure," came the quick answer. "Just toss your gun out and come out with hands raised."

Eric Nelson's mind was racing. He saw a vague possibility, a slender chance—

He put no faith whatever in Sloan's specious promise. He knew as completely as he could know anything that, when he walked out unarmed into the light, Sloan would give him a burst. But he had still one card in his hand that the others knew nothing of—a card that was a poor one, perhaps, but worth playing.

"I don't trust you, Sloan," he answered harshly. "But I'll give my gun to Shan Kar if *he* will guarantee our safety."

Instantly came Shan Kar's voice. "I will promise that, Nelson."

"Sure, and we'll stick by it," Sloan chimed in. "Won't we, Piet?"

"Then let Shan Kar come here and I'll surrender to him—but only to him," Nelson said.

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There was a pause, a silence from the huge wrecked turbine. Then came the Humanite leader's voice.

"I am coming, Eric Nelson. Remember that if you kill me it will only seal your own doom."

Shan Kar came out into the light. He had sword in hand and his head was high, his stride confident as he came back toward the shadows. He glimpsed Nelson, standing with Nsharra and Tark in the shadows beyond the platinum pillars. He came toward them, his hand extended for the pistol that Nelson was holding out butt-foremost.

And then, as he stepped between the two quartz spheres on the pillars, Shan Kar stopped. A bewildered look came upon his face.

"What—what—?" he faltered, amazed.

Nelson knew. He knew that in Shan Kar's mind was now sounding that thought-record, that solemn message of the ancients.

"*Take warning!*"

Shan Kar stood rooted, listening—listening to that tremendous voice of the dim past repeating its saga of the coming of intelligence to Earth. And the Humanite's face grew strange.

Nelson knew when the record had ended. For Shan Kar moved forward again, hand still reaching out to take the empty gun. But he moved now like a man in a dream. And his eyes stared at them unseeingly.

"The word of the ancients!" he whispered. "But then it is true that the Brotherhood of the Clans is as old as man! Then the myths that we Humanites thought were lies are *true!*"

"They are true, Shan Kar," said Nsharra. "You would not believe my father because you did not want to believe him. And he could not bring you in here to hear because the ancients themselves prohibited that unscru-

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pulous or ignorant men should enter here. But they are true!"

Shan Kar's olive, handsome face was pallid. "Then what we Humanites have believed, the natural dominance of man over the Clans—*that* is the lie!"

Nelson almost pitied the Humanite in this moment. Shan Kar had built a fanatic belief upon a basis that now was swept away.

He saw in the man's face the awful realization that he had brought fire and blood and death to L'Lan for a fanatic faith in human right to rule that had no warrant in reality.

"You can pass that gun over to me," said Nick Sloan.

He and Van Voss, with Holk behind them, had come out of the turbine, their submachine-guns held breast-high. They stood not a dozen feet behind Shan Kar.

Shan Kar, wild-eyed, swung around to them. His voice was a hoarse cry. "We have done wrong! The legend of the Brotherhood is true! This killing must stop."

"The thing I dislike about working with fanatics," said Nick Sloan boredly, "is that you can't depend on them."

He pressed trigger as he spoke, briefly. The little burst of slugs spun Shan Kar around and flung him into the dust between the pillars.

Sloan stepped forward, his eyes searching the shadows for Nelson and the girl. "Sorry it has to end this way, Nelson. You always were a fool in some ways. I hope—"

Nelson, almost dully, had watched him step forward. His last card, his hope of setting Shan Kar against Sloan by means of the thought-record, had failed him.

But had it? There was still a thin chance left if he could make it. Sloan stepped between the platinum pillars.

For a heartbeat, as the solemn thought-voice of the ancients automatically spoke to him, Sloan looked startled. That was the moment when Nelson charged him.

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The submachine-gun blasted over his head with a fiery breath and voice of thunder as he hit Sloan low and brought him down. They rolled together over the Cavern floor, toward the shaking curtain of cold light, Van Voss running after them to get in a burst that would not hit Sloan.

"*This for Barin!*" raged a wild wolf-thought and, as he rolled, Nelson glimpsed Tark's great body at the Dutchman's throat.

Sloan was battering him with his knee as he strove to tear loose his heavy gun and bang it against Nelson's skull. Abruptly then Sloan quit that and pulled the trigger. Flame and hot lead plowed along Nelson's forearm —and Sloan instantly wrenched free.

Sloan jumped to his feet, on the edge of the cleft of cold fire, standing magnified to giant proportions by the curtain of shaking light behind him as he swiftly leveled his gun at Nelson.

"*This* time there won't be any—"

A slim, flying thing of metal flashed past Nelson's head from behind him—a flung sword. It struck Sloan, not point foremost as had been intended, but flatly. The impact knocked him backward.

His foot clawed the edge of the cleft, he staggered and toppled backward still gripping the submachine-gun, then vanished into that blaze of radiant light.

A scream came out of that glory of cold fire—a scream that made Nelson feel sick.

He forced himself to turn around. Van Voss lay staring up with pale empty eyes at the Cavern roof, his throat torn out. Tark's fangs showed red in the shaking glare and there was madness in the wolf's eyes.

"Holk, listen!"

Shan Kar, sitting in the dust between the pillars with blood streaming from his breast, had uttered that whispered call.

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And Shan Kar, he knew now, was the one who, with dying strength, had flung the sword and toppled Nick Sloan into the most terrible of deaths. The Humanite's face was a gray mask. Holk, who had stood stunned by the swift turn of events, came toward him. Nelson, gripping his bleeding arm, went too.

"Holk, listen to the record of the ancients—then let the others listen too," Shan Kar whispered. "Let the war end, the Brotherhood be restored. I sinned when I tried to break it."

Holk looked up with sudden awe, as the man died. Nelson knew that he too now was hearing that solemn voice.

"*You who shall come after us, take warning!*"

It was dawn when Nelson came with Nsharra out of the Cavern. L'Lan lay before them in the rising sun, a valley half blackened and blasted by fire. The bubble-domes of Vruun glittered amid smoking ashes.

"But all the valley east of the river was untouched by fire," Nsharra said. "It is enough until the forests grow again."

The Humanites were gone—their warriors, led by Holk, had gone back to Anshan. And they had gone silently and heavily.

It was not only because their leader was dead, their outland mercenaries and weapons lost, their campaign a failure. It was because the whole basis of their ambition for human supremacy had been swept away by the revelation of the ancients.

For Holk had obeyed the dying command of Shan Kar and had brought the Humanites, one by one, into the Cavern to hear that mighty message of the ancients. And they had listened in sick silence.

"We know that we are guilty of wrong," Holk had

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said, in parting. "But we will strive to redress the wrong. Anshan shall be a city of the Brotherhood as of old."

"The past is done," Nsharra had answered. "Let there be peace now in L'Lan."

The Humanites had so gone—but the Clans were waiting. Down on the slopes below the Cavern they waited—the packs of the Hairy Ones, the hot-eyed tiger Clan, the wild-maned brothers of Hatha. And overhead against the sunrise swung the hosts of the Winged Ones.

Hatha and Tark, Quorr and Ei, were waiting on the ledge outside the Cavern. Nelson heard their thought-cry.

"Nsharra, you are Guardian of the Brotherhood now!"

The girl looked at Nelson. "You can go from L'Lan with clear conscience now, Eric Nelson. You redeemed any guilt that was yours in bringing death to our valley."

Nelson said slowly, "I don't want to go, Nsharra. I've found something here that I never found in the outer world."

Her eyes were doubtful and at the same time glad. "Could you, a man of the different outer world, be happy here where there is Brotherhood of man and beast?"

"Nsharra, I learned what that Brotherhood can be when I ran in the body of Asha!" he told her.

He had learned, yes! He knew now that the ancient way of life that held in L'Lan was not really strange, that it was the outer world of rigid caste, of men-masters and enslaved beasts, that was really strange.

He would never again, Nelson knew, be at home in that world. He would suffer and endure with every driven beast in it, and the magic of L'Lan would tug in memory at his heart until it broke.

"I want to stay, to help keep L'Lan as it is and prevent the outer world from ever breaking in upon it!" he told her. "And I want to stay with *you,* Nsharra!"

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Her eyes searched his face. "I want you to stay," she said.

Then, as incredulous hope and joy sang up in his heart, she turned and sent her thought and her voice ringing out.

"Clan-leaders, will you accept Eric Nelson into our Brotherhood?"

Tark's green eyes flashed bright as the great wolf strode forward. "He fought shoulder to shoulder with me! For the Clan of the Hairy Ones, I acclaim him brother!"

Up from the wolf-packs crashed the pack yell and the greeting thought.

"*Hai-ooo*, brother!"

Ei's thought came coolly, swiftly. "Tark says well. The Winged Ones accept him!"

"And *my* Clan," said Hatha. "I saw him fight in Anshan!"

Nsharra looked down at the tiger. Quorr wrinkled his terrible face.

"He nearly killed some of us once," growled Quorr's thought. "But he has bled for Vruun. Blood pays back blood! We accept him!"

Nsharra grasped Nelson's hand. "Now let us go down to Vruun, Clan-brothers!"

They went down the hill, in the rising sunlight, down toward the blackened forest and the forlorn city that would live again. And as they went the Brotherhood was all about them and over their heads was a thunder of wings.

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In that hidden valley, land of strangely forbidding beauty, Eric Nelson, soldier of fortune, faced a battle stranger than any he had ever encountered.

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