

Thongor and the Wizard of Lemuria

Thongor of Valkarth, #1

by Lin Carter, 1930-1980

Published: 1965



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Dedicated to L. Sprague DeCamp, colleague, collaborator and friend.

A Word from the Author

This was my first book. That is, although it was the seventh novel I wrote, it was the first one to find a publisher. It appeared in March, 1965—which was not so very long ago, when you stop to think about it—and although there have been something like twenty-five books bearing my name since then, I retain a warm, affectionate nostalgia for this one, which was the first of them all.

It was also the first novel about Thongor the Mighty, barbarian warrior hero of Lost Lemuria. There have been many Thongor novels since then, and the intrepid Valkarthan has been lucky enough to make many friends and to find many enthusiastic readers. A considerable number of these good people came to the series rather late and have written to me asking where they could find copies of the first couple of novels in the saga of Thongor. All I could do was to refer them to the publisher.

But now it has been suggested that this first Thongor book be reprinted so that the many latecomers among Thongor's friends could read of his earliest adventures. I have heartily endorsed this suggestion, because many sharp-eyed Thongorian scholars have called to my attention certain errors which crept into the original edition through my own carelessness, and a second edition gives me the chance to correct these unfortunate mistakes.

I have taken the liberty of restoring to the text certain passages which the editor cut out of the first edition, and I have somewhat rewritten certain portions of the book so that it now conforms in every detail with particulars described in later books of the series. I have also added a few thousand words of new material by way of an afterthought.

It is not every author who gets a second chance at his first book, as it were: thus I am grateful for this opportunity to revise and touch up some of the rougher spots herein. I am also grateful for this opportunity to thank the many hundreds of readers who have been kind enough to write during these past five years, telling me how much they enjoy my Lemurian books. I cannot mention them all by name, but I take this opportunity to issue personal thanks to a few who were among the first Thongor fans. Thank you, George Heap, Frank Price, Lloyd Alexander, Gray Morrow, David Hull, Robert Magy, Miles Eaton, John Jakes, and "Argee."

I am happy to repeat the original dedication of this novel to L. Sprague de Camp. Years ago, when I was just another fan who wanted to be a writer, he had the extraordinary kindness to read this novel in manuscript and give me a copiously detailed critique of it. Thanks again, Sprague!

—LIN CARTER
Hollis, Long Island, New York

An Introduction

The Legend of Lost Lemuria.

Before Egypt and Babylon were, Sumer and Akkad rose in the Land Between the Rivers, and before these the secret of Man's beginnings are lost in the dim haze of prehistory whereof we know but little.

But for thousands of years now, the sages and philosophers, the wise men and the tellers-of-tales, have whispered of unknown and mythic realms which flourished in Time's Dawn. From the writings of the ancient Greeks the glittering name of Atlantis has come down to us, and in the mysterious books of the occult is whispered the legend of primal Mu, or Lemuria, which arose, they say, before even the glory of Atlantis was born.

Half a million years ago, the old legends say, the first civilizations of Man came into being on the lost and prehistoric continent of Lemuria somewhere in the vast waters of the Pacific. Up from the crimson murk of barbarism Mankind lifted the bright banners of its first kingdoms. Science calls this remote era the middle of the Pleistocene Epoch. In this period, between 1,000,000 and 25,000 B.C., which was

the Ice Age, mammals rose to dominate the world and the Age of the Reptiles was done. Mastodon and saber-toothed tiger, Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon Man, and a host of other forms of early life arose, and the Neolithic Age was born...

Perhaps this was true of prehistoric Europe during the middle Pleistocene, but among the tropic jungles and steaming swamps and thundering volcanoes of primal Lemuria, the Age of Reptiles lingered awhile. Still the mighty dinosaur shook the earth beneath his ponderous tread; still the fantastic pterodactyl winged through the misty skies of the Dawn Age.

The legend records that when the Gods created Man, the Lost Continent was still dominated by the mysterious Dragon Kings, fled hither from the destruction of Hyperborea. The warriors of Man's first kingdoms fought against the Dragon Kings in a titanic, age-long struggle known as The Thousand-Year War. By its end the Dragon Kings were destroyed or driven into hiding, and the Age of Men began.

The children of *Nemedis*, the First Kingdom, spread over the Lost Continent—over the vast, untamed jungles and across the huge mountains of elder Lemuria. Kingdoms were founded... and fought... and fell. But the march of civilization had begun, and ere long the Golden Empire of the Sun would arise to draw these first few warring kingdoms beneath one mighty banner.

It was an age of war, when brave men and beautiful women, savages and sages, wizards and warriors struggled to carve a red path that led to the Throne of the World. It was an age of heroic legends, too.

And this is one of them...

Chapter 1

Red Swords in Thurdis.

*All day our swords drank deep and long
Of blood wine-red, of blood wine-strong!
Tonight in the red halls of hell
We'll feast with foes and friends as well!*
—War Song of the Valkarthan Swordsmen

Thongor of Valkarath ducked as the heavy wine goblet hurled harmlessly over his head, ringing against the wall and splattering cold wine over his face and naked chest. He blinked the cold, stinging fluid from his eyes expressionlessly.

Jeled Malkh, the otar who had flung the goblet, threw back his head and laughed.

"That is how a noble of Thurdis treats a nameless dog of a mercenary!" he sneered to his companions. They echoed his laughter.

"Pity to waste good sarn-wine," one remarked wittily. "Cheap ale of the Northlands is more his drink!"

Jeled Malkh shrugged. "Imagine the lout daring to ask for the payment of his wager—and from the otar of his own hundred!"

The cold sarn-wine dripped down Thongor's mighty chest. He continued to regard the officer. His dark, tanned face was without expression, but those who knew him well could have read the cold glint in the strange golden eyes of the silent barbarian from the Northlands of Lemuria. With one hand he brushed the wine from his face, tossing back his long mane of black hair. He addressed Jeled Malkh quietly.

"You refuse, then, to pay the wager?"

"Yes, I refuse! The zamph with red trappings would have won easily enough, had not that fool Var Tajas ridden him so incompetently. I was cheated!"

Thongor nodded. "Very well then, Otar, I withdraw my claim. Moreover, I will even repay you for the goblet of wine you wasted upon this dog of a mercenary, who is indeed, as your friend said, more used to the thin ale of the Northlands than the scented puke you Thurdans call sarn."

While the group of officers gaped with astonishment, the giant Valkarthan moved. With one stride he stepped before the otar, picked him up, turned him head-down, and pushed his face up to the ears in the great bronze wine bowl. He held the noble's head under, ignoring his kicks and writhings. When he released him again, Jeled Malkh slumped over the table, white-faced beneath dripping wine, gasping for breath.

In the astounded silence, Thongor laughed.

"Aye, I hold no grudge, Otar. And I have even given you a bigger drink of wine than you gave me!"

Sobbing with rage, Jeled Malkh whipped out his blade and plunged it across the table at Thongor's naked breast.

The giant Northlander sprang backward lightly, his own great broadsword hissing from its scabbard. The officers scattered as the two blades flashed and rang. The combatants circled about the table, feeling out with delicate steel the firmness of each other's guard.

Although a grim smile played about his lips, Thongor was inwardly cursing. Gorm take his hot Valkarthan temper! He was a thrice-damned fool to pick a duel with his own captain. But he was in it now and could not easily get out.

Steel rang against steel as the barbarian mercenary and the jeweled scion of the noblest house in all Thurdis fought. Jeled Malkh was no mean swordsman. His education as only heir to the House of Malkh had brought him under the tutelage of the most famed sword masters in all the realm. But Thongor of Valkarthan had virtually been born with a broadsword in his hand. In the years of his wanderings and wars as a vagabond, hired assassin, thief, and now mercenary, he had learned every trick of swordplay with every type of weapon.

He toyed with Jeled Malkh for a while, just long enough to please the otar's self-esteem—then, with a clever twist of the wrist, disarmed him. The rapier rang on the stone flags of the barracks.

The otar's hand snaked for the hilt, but Thongor's booted foot came down on the blade of the weapon.

"Shall we not end it here, Otar? And cool our tempers while we drink a cup of wine? Come! I acknowledge my hot-headed temper—let us be friends."

Jeled Malkh's thin lips writhed back in a snarl.

"Dog of a Northlander bitch! I'll cut out your putrid heart and feed it to my zamph for this insult!"

The otar spat in his face and thudded one knee into Thongor's groin. The Valkarthan sagged against the table, clutching his gut. In a flash the otar snatched up his sword and sprang upon him. The table went over with a crash. The great bronze wine bowl clanged on the stone floor, splattering them all.

Now Thongor was angry. A familiar red haze thickened before his strange golden eyes, and his teeth were bared in a fighting smile. His mighty broadsword battered the slim Southland blade aside and he set his point against Jeled Malkh's panting breast.

"Enough, I say! An end, or I'll spit you on my steel!"

The heir of Malkh paled. He licked cold lips. The Valkarthan applied a slight pressure. The point broke skin and drew a scarlet thread down the otar's breast.

"P-peace, then," Jeled Malkh gasped.

"You swear it?"

"It is sworn!"

Thongor put up his sword and extended his hand for the grip of peace. But the proud noble could never accept defeat from one of his own swordsmen. He seized Thongor's wrist, set his foot behind his heel, and twisted suddenly. The giant barbarian crashed to the floor and Jeled Malkh's slim blade flashed toward his throat.

Thongor smashed the blade aside with one arm, ignoring the needle of cold fire that ripped his flesh. He sprang catlike to his feet, and before his opponent could regain his stance, the great Valkarthan broadsword had sunk to its hilt in his heart.

Jeled Malkh swayed, mouth open, gasping. His eyes goggled, glazing, staring blankly down at the sword hilt protruding from his chest. With one strengthless hand he plucked feebly at the hilt. Then his knees buckled. A gush of blood flooded from his open mouth, and he sprawled to the floor at Thongor's feet—dead.

The mercenary set his heel against the corpse's belly and tugged the sword free, wiping it dry on the dead man's cloak. Holding it, he glanced about the room at the white faces. No one dared to speak. He shrugged, and slid the weapon back in its scabbard.

A sandal rasped against the floor behind him. But before Thongor could turn, a heavy cudgel crashed against his skull. He fell face-forward into a sea of blackness.

Thongor awoke groggily with an ache in his skull. He was shackled to the wet stone wall of a dungeon cell, far below the citadel of Thurdis. Through a trap in the ceiling a lonely beam of sunlight fell slanting, and from its angle he estimated he had been unconscious somewhat less than an hour. It was now an hour before sunset, or thereabouts.

He examined his chains and found them too strong for even his giant strength to break. Then he simply shrugged, with the fatalistic philosophy of the North that wastes no time worrying over what cannot be helped. He was a trifle surprised to find himself still alive. Jeled Malkh's friends and co-officers could well have put an

end to him with one stroke of a dirk while he had been unconscious. A slight, grim smile touched his lips. Doubtless the prospect of seeing him chained to the oar benches of a Thurdan galley for the rest of his life, or watching him fed to the Sark's private garden of vampiric slith-flowers appealed more to their cultured cruelty and sadism than dispatching him cleanly with the stroke of a knife.

His scabbard, of course, was empty, and he became increasingly aware of another emptiness, that of his belly. About this time of the day he was used to a tankard of sour ale and a roast bouphar haunch, which he was accustomed to share with Ald Turmis and his other comrades at the Inn of the Drawn Sword. *Well, what you want in this life you must try to get*, he thought to himself.

He bellowed until the jailer came shuffling, fat-bellied and smelling of dream lotus, to the door of the cell. He peered in at the half-naked bronze giant chained to the wall.

"What do you want?"

"Something to eat," Thongor said. The fat jailer gaped, then snorted with laughter.

"Food, eh? Within the hour you go before the daotar to be judged for killing your commander—and all you can think of is something to fill your belly! Perhaps you would like a banquet served to you from the Sark's kitchens?"

Thongor grinned. "Why not? I did the city a service in ridding it of a cheat, a coward, and a bad officer. Both the daotar and Phal Thurid, Sark of Thurdis, should reward me for that."

The jailer snorted. "Aye, Northlander, they'll reward you all right—by feeding your heart to the slith! Know you not that the daotar of the guards, the noble Barand Thon, is the oldest friend of the father of the man you slew? Aye! We'll watch you wriggling while the vampire-flowers devour your flesh—that will be your reward!"

"That may be as it will," Thongor grunted. "But it does not change the fact that I am hungry. Before they feed me to the slith, at least let them feed me!"

The jailer grunted with annoyance, but shuffled off, to return a few moments later with a jug of sour, cheap wine and a meat stew. He let himself into the cell and set them down before the Valkarthan.

"Your chains are long enough to reach that," he wheezed. "Yell when you are through—and by the Gods, be certain you are through before the daotar's men come to drag you off for trial. I don't want my superiors to think I coddle scum like you!"

The chains were indeed long enough, and Thongor devoured the stew hungrily and tossed down the cheap wine in two huge gulps. He could always think better with a full belly, and now that his hunger was appeased he began to search his wits for a way out of this predicament. He had been in—and out—of the prisons of a dozen cities in his career, and he knew as many ways to escape. His first thought was to slump back against the stone wall as if asleep, and when the jailer came to collect the bowls, to seize him with his unchained legs and force him to surrender the keys.

He examined this plan for a time, and then discarded it in favor of another. If his chains were long enough to allow him to reach the food on the floor, they were long enough to gather a heavy length into one hand and smash the jailer over the

head with. At least it was worth a try. Thongor had served on the galleys of the sadistic Sark of Shembis at one time, and had no desire to slave thus again.

He yelled for the jailer, saying his meal was done, and gathered a long strand of the iron chain into one hand. The sun was setting now, and the long shaft of rosy light was almost gone. The cell was gradually filling up with darkness, and Thongor thought it likely the fat jailer would not see the handful of chains. He yelled out again...and then his alert senses detected swift, light footsteps approaching down the corridor. The clank of a key in the lock, and the door screeched open. The cell was so dark by now that Thongor could not even see the jailer's face as the man entered the cell; therefore his ruse would doubtless work.

He watched the dark figure as it glided near, and along his deep chest and broad shoulders, giant thews swelled and tensed, ready to crush the guard's skull to gory ruin with one terrific blow from the dangling length of heavy chain that hung in his hands.

"Thongor?"

The Valkarthan grunted in astonishment.

"Is that you, against the wall? Thongor? It is I—Aid Turmis."

The bronzed giant relaxed. "Gorm Almighty, I had broken your skull in another instant, had you not spoken when you did! What in the name of a thousand devils are *you* doing here?"

His friend chuckled softly. "Did you think I would let these Thurdan swine send you to the galleys without lifting a hand? Besides, it's far from being the first time we've helped one another break out of jail—remember Zangabal, and the house Athmar Phong? But here, we're wasting time with words. I took the key and brought along your sword. Quickly!"

Thongor grinned. Aid Turmis—although a thin-blooded Thurdan like all the rest and filled with Southlander sentiments about peace and comfort—was every inch a fighting man. He remembered their first meeting some eight months ago—also in a prison cell, in Zangabal across the Patangan Gulf from here. Down on his luck, Thongor had turned thief, and a scheming priest had cajoled him into robbing the house of a mighty Ptarthan sorcerer. What the priest had not told him was that he was not the first to enter the wizard's house on burglar's business. Thus had he come upon his woeful predecessor, Aid Turmis, languishing in chains. Together they had fled, after a night of horror and doom wherein the house of the Ptarthan sorcerer was transformed into a blazing inferno. And they had been together ever since, fighting comrades in the mercenary legions of Phal Thurid, Sark of Thurdis. And to think that Thongor had come within a hair's breadth of bashing in his best friend's skull with a length of chain!

These memories flashed through the giant barbarian's mind as the lithe young Thurdan busied himself with the lock. Now it occurred to him to ask, "How did you come by the key to my chains?"

Aid Turmis smiled—a flash of white teeth in the gloom. "The jailer, in his present condition, had no conceivable use for them, so I borrowed them for a time."

"Well, I hope it was not needful to slay the fat oaf. He fed me well; I'll give him that."

His friend laughed. “Just like a Northlander barbarian—always thinking of your belly! Nay, fear not; the fellow is merely enjoying an unexpected nap at the moment, from which he will awaken with a bad headache, I fear, but at least he will awaken. Damn lock... ah, there!”

He straightened up as the chains rang loosely on the stone-paved floor of the cell. Thongor felt his heart lift within him—*free!*—and he grinned tigerishly, exulting in his freedom. He stepped from the wall, flexing his mighty limbs appreciatively. Untamed savage that he was, he hated being caged and fettered as much as any other wild beast.

Aid Turmis handed him the great broadsword. “Here’s your uncouth Valkarthan blade, and a dark cloak to hide your ugly face in. Now hurry! Barand Thon’s men will be here in a moment to drag you off, and we must be gone.”

Thongor sheathed his sword and wrapped the cloak about his wide shoulders. It fell to his heels, covering his mercenary’s leather loincloth and harness, and its cowl hid his features.

They slipped from the cell, down the dark corridor and through the guardroom, where the fat jailer lay unconscious, and on through a maze of well-lit but empty corridors until Aid Turmis halted before a small, low door.

“You can get out into the side street this way,” he said.

Thongor nodded. “My thanks to you, Aid Turmis. I shall not forget your friendship.”

“Nor shall I, and I shall miss you at the Inn of the Drawn Sword hereafter. But now—hurry! You can steal a zamph from the prison stables and get out the Caravan Gate before the alarm spreads.”

“Aye.”

“Where shall you go, Thongor?”

Thongor shrugged. “Wherever they need a strong arm and a good sword. Kathool, perhaps, or far Cadorna to the east. I know not and care but little. A good swordsman seldom need starve for lack of employment.” A rare expression of seriousness made Aid Turmis look solemn—he who was usually laughing and merry.

“It has been a long road together, with many good tunes along the way, but I guess it ends here. Well... farewell, then, chanthar. Farewell, warrior. I doubt that we shall meet again, Thongor of Valkarh.”

Thongor set one great hand on his comrade’s shoulder and gripped in the hai-chantharya, the warriors’ salute.

“That lies in the lap of the Gods, Aid Turmis. Mayhap our paths will yet cross again. Farewell!” he growled.

He clapped the youth on one bare shoulder, then swung through the small door. His great black cloak bellowed behind him as he melted into the thick purple shadows of the cobbled street beyond and was gone.

Chapter 2

Black Wings Over Chush.

*The War Maids ride the iron sky—
Come, brothers, either slay or die!
A dark wing sank as each man fell,
To bear our spirits home to hell!*
—War Song of the Valkarthan Swordsmen

Beyond the door, Thongor found himself in a narrow alley between the citadel and a vast warehouse. At the end of the passageway, he could see the stables. Behind the huge pens the great dragon-like shapes of the zamphs stirred. Two bored guards lounged against the rail, watching the huge beasts. Their backs were to Thongor, and with a single stroke he could probably...

With a metallic scream the alarm gongs sounded. Thongor choked back a curse. The daotar's men had reached his cell and found it empty—or had seen the unconscious jailer. The alarm had sounded just a moment too soon, for in a few steps he would have been up to the guards and could have slain them. Now, however, they were alerted, and with drawn blades they stood on either side of the gate to the pens. Other guards hurried from the rear portal of the citadel to reinforce the stable guards. An escaped prisoner would, of course, seek to steal a mount the very first thing.

Thongor ground his teeth with a bitter Valkarthan oath. They could not see him here in the thick darkness of the alley, but how in the name of all the Nineteen Gods was he to get away? Desperately he cast his eyes from side to side—and then glanced up. A slim metal shape met his gaze, gleaming in the light of roof torches.

A malicious gleam danced in Thongor's golden eyes. The very thing! There on the roof of the citadel was moored the only prototype of the Sark's new "floater," the marvelous flying boat with which Phal Thurid planned to conquer the whole of Lemuria. The Sark's cunning alchemist, Oolim Phon, had devised the weird airboat out of urlium, the weightless metal. It was driven by simple rotors, and although the Valkarthan had not the dimmest notion how to pilot the strange craft, he would soon learn. And what a stroke of fortune! To escape by the Sark's prized airboat—the only one in existence as yet! It would fly him over the towers and walls of Thurdis and far beyond, faster than the swiftest zamph in Phal Thurid's pens.

With a keen eye he measured the citadel's wall. The fortress was built of great blocks of gray stone, half the height of a man, with an inch or so of space between them. Accustomed from boyhood to climb over the slippery ice-walls of the great glaciers of his polar homeland, hunting the savage snow apes for their precious furs, it would be far easier for him to scale this wall than for another man.

For Thongor, to conceive of a plan was to attempt it. Swiftly he removed his boots. Knotting the thongs together, he slung them over his shoulder, and tossing back the great cloak, he caught the upper ledge of the first stone and drew himself up hand over hand. His bare toes clinging to the small gap between the stones, he ascended, stone by stone.

The air was chill with the night wind from the southern sea, but luckily the great golden moon of old Lemuria was hidden behind a thick veil of clouds. There

were guards on the roof, and it would never do for them to sight him climbing. With hands and feet fully occupied, he was in a bad position to fight.

Up and up he went, like a great black spider on the gray stone wall. The streets of Thurdis were far beneath him now. One slip, and he would dash out his brains against the slimy cobbles far below. He breathed calmly and deeply, ignoring the pain in his slashed arm.

Then a loose bit of cement slipped beneath his foot, rattling down to the alleyway. For a long second he dangled, feet free, his entire weight supported by his fingertips. Then he clenched his teeth and drew himself up again, slowly, inch by inch, to a secure foothold.

He clung against the wall for a moment, catching his breath and resting his arms. Above, on the parapet, two roof guards leaned their elbows against the wall, idly looking out over the city. All they had to do was to glance downward and they could not fail to see him, a black-cloaked shadow against the gray stone. He held his breath as they talked idly, gazing out over the towers and spires of Thurdis. He dared climb no further while they were there, lest his sudden movement attract their attention. His arm and shoulder muscles ached from the strain. It was as if red-hot needles were slowly being thrust into his thews.

Still they leaned against their arms, just above him. He could even hear their conversation—as to which prisoner had escaped. The shorter one wagered it was the Northlander mercenary.

“You remember the great lout, the one who made a wager with Jeled Malkh that his racing zamph would not win in the arena yesterday? He struck the noble otar down with his great barbarian pigsticker when the otar refused to pay! I hear Jeled Malkh nearly stuck the pig himself, but the oaf threw wine in his face or something. *Hah!* It would be an otarship for us, Thulan Htor, if we captured the Northland wretch.”

“Aye,” his companion grunted. “But the street patrols will get him, not you and I. He will steal a zamph and make for the Caravan Gate, doubtless—unless he purchases a hideaway in the Thieves’ Quarter. I would like to come face to face with the mercenary pig myself, that I would. I’d show him what Thurdan steel can do with Northlander meat!”

Just as Thongor’s arms were about to give way, the two turned away, leaning their backs against the parapet. Silent as a shadow, the Northlander ascended the wall behind them, grinning wolfishly.

The two were still conversing when a deep voice spoke softly behind them:

“The Gods have granted your dearest wish, Thulan Htor. Here is your chance to show a mercenary pig what Thurdan steel can do.”

They whirled—to see a bronzed giant, naked save for leather clout and black cloak and warrior’s harness, standing atop the parapet, a mighty broadsword flashing in his hand. Golden eyes blazed in a clean-shaven face, and a long wild mane of thick black hair fell to the huge shoulders.

Paralyzed, they gasped at this phantom that had appeared out of thin air by some supernatural force. Thongor kicked one in the throat, knocked him sprawling. His broadsword flashed out to open the other’s throat from ear to ear. The black beard was drenched in a sudden flood of gore. He sprang over their sprawled forms to the roof.

But there were other guards. A shout rang up—swords flashed in the torchlight. Thongor ran across the roof of the fortress.

The Sark's floater was tethered to a mooring-mast in the center of the roof, drifting weightlessly some twenty feet from the rooftop. A thick cable was knotted about the middle of the mast, and its other end was fastened to a ring in the rail of the floater's small deck. Thrusting his sword in its scabbard, Thongor sprang up and seized the rope. He slung himself up the line hand over hand, swinging over the rail onto the deck before anyone could stop him.

One slash of the sword cut the cable, and the airboat drifted free, out over the street. Thongor went across the narrow deck, which wobbled beneath his feet, and slid into the small enclosed cabin. His eyes raked the few simple controls, while the alarm gongs roared behind him and men shouted.

The floater was rendered completely weightless by its urlium hull, a gleaming sheath of blue-white metal. The boat was about twenty feet long, from pointed prow to pointed stern. It was driven by spring-powered rotors. One set at the rear propelled it forward; a second set just beneath the prow pushed backward; other rotors in the center of the deck and beneath the keel forced the floater either up or down, as desired.

These engines were set into action by four levers, labeled with the directions which they governed. The levers now rested at the bottom of their curved slots. The higher the levers were pushed, the stronger the rotors drove the craft.

Before the floater had drifted more than a dozen yards from the citadel, Thongor had mastered the simple controls and had the rear rotors humming. The airboat flashed over the city, high above the towers. As he passed the mighty walls of Thurdis, Thongor elevated the floater so that they should be well beyond the reach of any arrow. The airboat purred on into the night.

A small oil lamp sealed in a glass ball provided light for the tiny cabin. Locking the controls, Thongor swiftly examined the contents of the ship's chest. He found a day's supply of dried fish, a flask of water, and some medicinal salve, which he smeared over his slashed arm. Jeled Malkh's blade had merely laid the skin open.

Clamped to the wall above the floater's single bunk was a powerful war bow, such as those used by the beast-men and the Blue Nomads of the far western plains of Lemuria. Phal Thurid planned to mount a fleet of such air-boats manned by crews of archers trained with such weapons, famed throughout Lemuria for the incredible distance over which they could cast an arrow. Despite his fatigue, Thongor examined the weapon curiously. It was the first time he had seen one this close, for his wanderings had never carried him into the western plains where the monstrous and savage Blue Nomads reigned unchallenged among the crumbling ruins of Lemuria's most ancient kingdom, *Nemedis*, dead now for thousands of years.

The weapon was fully six feet in length, a bow fashioned of layer upon layer of horn. The extreme toughness of the horn made it difficult to draw such a bow; however, it also gave greater force to the arrow's flight. From veterans of the western cities, Thongor had often heard tales of the fabled prowess of the blue-skinned Rmoahal Giants, who could reputedly hurl an arrow five hundred yards with fantastic accuracy.

The string of the bow was of dragongut, and the arrows themselves were at least half as large as a good-sized spear, tipped with wickedly barbed points of razor-edged steel. Thongor looked forward to trying out the weapon.

The floater hummed through the night skies of Lemuria. Now the golden moon broke free of her net of clouds and lit the landscape below him. Checking the controls to make doubly certain they were locked in place, Thongor went out on the deck and gazed over the low rail at the ground that rushed by beneath him. Far below him the farms surrounding the walled city of Thurdis rushed past—crossed, occasionally, by great roads paved with stone. He could see the farmhouses and outbuildings, plain in the bright moonshine. From this height, they were no larger than the slow wains in which the farmers carried their harvest to the bazaars of the city.

It was a fantastic, thrilling experience to fly like a great bird far above the earth. Only a couple of men, including Oolim Phon the Alchemist and the Sark himself, had ever flown before. Thongor felt like the hero Phondath the Firstborn, flying through the night astride his winged dragon in the myths. He grinned, feeling the cold wind lift his black mane. Thus the War Maids rode, bearing the spirits of valiant warriors to Father Gorm, so they might dwell in the Hall of Heroes until vast Lemuria sank beneath the blue waters of the mighty seas!

He gazed above, reading the starry hieroglyphs of the constellations. His father, years past and gone, had taught the boy Thongor to read his direction in the stars—taught him how the two stars of the constellation of the Chariot pointed over to the Boreal Star. According to star lore, then, the floater was headed almost exactly northwest. Were he to continue on this course, he considered, he would pass directly over Patanga, and Kathool farther on. Patanga he had no desire to visit. The city was virtually dominated by the yellow-robed Druids who worshipped Yamath, God of Fire, by burning women alive on his red-hot altars of fiery bronze. Barracks rumor had it that the young Princess Sumia of Patanga was virtually a prisoner in her great palace, under the command of the Yellow Druid Vaspas Ptol, who had seized power in the land upon the death of Sumia's father, the late Sark. Phal Thurid, Sark of Thurdis, hoped to wed this young Princess, thus gaining the fabulous wealth of Patanga without battle—if he could wrest her from her captors.

Thongor shook his head. The City of Fire sounded too chancy—best that he continue on to the farther city of Kathool, whose Sark needed warriors to protect his jungled borders from the savages of Chush.

He re-entered the cabin to examine the dial that reported the remaining amount of rotor power in the great coiled springs that ran beneath the deck. A rough estimate gave him five or six hours of flight before he must crank up the springs again. It would be dawn then. He stretched out on the small bunk and was asleep in a moment.

The farmlands of Thurdis gave out into wilderness below the floater's gleaming keel, and soon it was passing over the waters of the Ysar, silvered by the round lamp of the moon. While Thongor slept the deep and refreshing slumber of one whose strength has been exhausted, the airboat began to cross far above the dense jungles of Chush, and soon the Eternal Fires on the domed roofs of the temples of Patanga passed beneath. As Thongor slept, the floater hummed beyond the City of Fire, where, unknown to him, his destiny lay, and headed for the

distant realm of Kathool, flying through the night skies of Lemuria like a great bird.

Chapter 3

Attacked by the Lizard-Hawks.

*Below him, dwark with dragon-fang,
Above, hawk-talons stretched to crush!
Strange battle there, 'tween earth and air,
Above the deadly deeps of Chush.
—Thongor's Saga, Stave IV*

Thongor was awakened by two things. First, the silence and motionlessness of the floater, and second, the harsh scream that ripped through the stillness of the dawn. He sprang from the bunk, wide awake in an instant. The springs had wound down, and the airboat drifted without power. But what had made that raucous screech?

He went out on the deck, and stood amazed at the unexpected sight. It was the sixth hour, and the sun of morning lit the sky with rose and gold. But beneath him gleamed not the long quays of Kathool on the Saan, nor even the wide swath of cultivated lands that stretched for miles around it. Beneath him lay the deepest jungles of Chush.

He rubbed one hand over his jaw in puzzlement. He should have left these jungles behind many hours ago. How could his estimate have gone wrong? Then he noticed how the floater drifted beneath the strong and steady wind that blew out of the east. With a muffled curse to Gorm, it came to him in an instant. When the rotor power had failed, the weightless airboat had not simply hovered above the regions of Kathool, but had moved slowly west, driven by the strong winds. He was now hours away from where he had wanted to be, above the darkest, most impenetrable jungles of Chush. Nothing to do, however, but crank up the springs again and head east to Kathool.

But before he could do so, there came again that harsh, metallic cry that had helped to awaken him. Scanning the morning skies, Thongor felt his blood chill as he saw a terrible sight.

Winging down at his floater out of the upper regions was a monstrous and fantastic flying thing. Its scaled and writhing body was fully the length of the floater, and its gigantic leathery wings spread bat-like fully forty feet from tip to tip. Above the body reared a head upon a snaky neck—a head hideous almost beyond belief, with a monstrous hooked beak and cruel scarlet eyes beneath a blue crest of bristling spines. A long snakelike tail floated behind, tipped with a barb the shape of an arrowhead, and cruel-taloned bird-claws reached from beneath the creature's yellow belly.

Thongor had heard of the great grakks, the lizard-hawks of Chush, before but had never seen one till now. They were the fiercest and most deadly fighters of all Lemuria—rivaled only by the mighty dwark, the jungle dragon itself. And now one was descending with the speed of a lightning bolt toward his head.

He threw himself flat as the vast shadow of the grakk's wing fell over the deck. The monster struck the floater a glancing blow and swooped off, climbing for another attack. As the airboat wobbled beneath the first blow, Thongor was nearly thrown off and only saved himself by seizing the rail with one iron hand. He drew himself up as the weird flying reptile came at the floater again. This time it hovered, wings thundering, while it groped for the floater with an outstretched claw. The foot-long talons closed over the needle prow, and even the strong urlium with which the prow was sheathed was not tough enough to withstand the terrific strength of the lizard-hawk's grip. It crumpled like paper.

Thongor sprang to his feet and dove into the cabin, coming out with a length of cord and the great war bow he had found clamped to the cabin wall the night before. While the monster shrieked deafeningly and battered at the sleek hull of the floater, he threaded the cord through his belt and fastened it around the rail to hold himself securely even if the lizard-hawk succeeded in tipping over the airboat. Then he notched the bowstring with a mighty effort, almost cracking his shoulder muscles, and laid the long shaft of a war arrow across the string.

The first arrow caught the grakk squarely in the chest. It sank halfway to the feather between the tough scales, and a dribble of green blood ran slimily down the monster's heaving flank.

It shrieked like a sheet of steel being torn in half by a giant. Releasing the prow, it fluttered away—but not for long. Tracing a wide circle through the sky, the deadly thing came arrowing back toward the floater, which drifted helplessly above the jungle.

True to Thongor's expectations, the second blow hurled the airboat spinning end over end through the morning sky. Tightly gripping the war bow, the Valkarthan swung dizzily at the end of his rope. As the floater drifted back into a horizontal position, the flying reptile hovered beside it with booming wings, smashing the sides in with its cruel beak. Dangling at the end of his rope, Thongor sent a shaft winging for the head. It missed the weaving, snakelike neck and hissed on by. But the second shaft caught the lizard-hawk in the throat, just below its powerful jaw. It screeched furiously, mad with the pain of the keen-barbed arrow, thrashing wildly with its wings.

One wing caught under the rail of the floater's deck, overturning it. As it spun through the air, Thongor was hurled with stunning impact against the hull. He dangled at the rope's end, unconscious.

The bow and quiver dropped from his hands, falling into the jungle far below.

Hissing with fury, the winged reptile now settled on the upturned keel of the airboat, much as a bird settles on a branch. Its claws tightened about the long rib of the keel, crunching on the smooth blue-white urlium.

Beneath its heavy weight the floater lost much of its buoyancy and sagged down toward the treetops.

Thongor still dangled head-downward, unconscious.

And now a new danger threatened him. Up from among the trees came the hideous horned snout of the dreaded dwark, the jungle dragon. It snuffled at the sinking floater. Leaning its forepaws against the trunk of a gigantic lotifer tree, it extended its enormous length of mailed neck into the sky.

Lower and lower sank the floater, borne down by the massive weight of the grakk.

As it sank, Thongor's helpless body dangled nearer and nearer to the opening jaws of the giant dragon. Still stunned from his collision with the floater's hull, he was not even conscious of the approaching head of the monster saurian.

The dwark's entire existence was one unending and continuous quest for food, to fill its monstrous belly. It was literally capable of eating all day long. Vast quantities of meat were needed to drive the gigantic muscles in its lumbering body.

The limp form that swung helplessly at the end of the rope smelled like food.

The huge saurian opened wide its cavernous jaws. Two rows of needle-pointed fangs lined each jaw, and the largest teeth were longer than the Northlander sword that hung at Thongor's thigh.

The yawning jaws came closer as the jungle dragon strained its neck to the fullest length. Slimy saliva, reeking like an opened grave, slid down its scaled jaws. The scarlet eyes flamed with the lust of hunger.

Then another screech rang out. Down from the sky came a second and a third lizard-hawk. As the dwark paused, scanning the sky above, observing the weird shapes that hovered above, the first winged reptile at last felt the deathly power of the war bow's mighty shaft. It slid drunkenly from its perch atop the crippled airboat and fell flopping down into the jungle, virtually at the jungle dragon's feet.

Released from its burden, the weightless ship bobbed upward again, bearing Thongor out of the dwark's reach—and into the view of the two lizard-hawks.

While the tiny, dim brain of the giant saurian was striving to understand why its dangling prey was suddenly wafted aloft, far beyond its reach, the scent of the dead lizard-hawk at its feet reached its senses. Abandoning Thongor, it bent to feast ravenously on the body of the winged reptile.

Thongor came to his senses, taking in the grim situation. Not one, but two lizard-hawks to contend with—the war bow gone, leaving him armed only with his broadsword.

And the monster dwark directly below.

He pulled himself up the rope hand by hand and clambered aboard the floater once again, which had returned to its normal horizontal position. If he could crank up the springs that powered the rotors before the two lizard-hawks attacked, he might yet escape. He opened the trap in the deck and began turning the wheel. Gradually the long springs wound tight.

Meanwhile the two grakks circled the floating craft warily. Their tiny reptilian intelligences dimly comprehended the fact that this weird invader of their skies had in some unknown manner slaughtered one of their kind, whose half-eaten corpse lay far below, under the great jaws of the ravenous dwark.

Red murder blazed in their hideous eyes.

Wings folded, they struck the floater simultaneously.

Still securely fastened to the deck at the end of his rope, Thongor was hurled from his feet by the impact. The ship was batted from the skies as by some monster hand. It crashed prow first into the thick branches of an enormous lotifer—and there it lodged, tightly wedged between bent branches.

The rail crumpled and the rope snapped. Thongor fell, down through whipping branches, to land groggily on the springy moss that carpeted the jungle.

A hundred yards away the jungle dragon lifted its dripping head at the sound of the floater's crash.

The lizard-hawks, clamorously screaming in their triumph, circled and flew off.

Thongor unfastened the rope from his harness and examined himself. Despite a number of bruises and small cuts, he was unharmed. He crept out of the dwark's view and was lost in the thick jungle gloom within moments.

Lost, he thought grimly, *is the correct word*. He was marooned in the deepest, most dangerous and impenetrable jungles on all Lemuria. Fully one hundred leagues of impassable, dwark-haunted jungle stood between him and the nearest city.

The great war bow, which alone might have made it barely possible for him to stand against the terrific monsters of the jungle, was hopelessly lost.

Perhaps even worse, the trees grew so thickly here that he could not see the sky. He therefore had not the vaguest notion in which direction he must travel to reach Kathool or Patanga.

Marooned alone, hundreds of miles from the nearest haunts of men, with only his broadsword to protect him against the jungle terrors whose least member weighed a dozen tons, is it any wonder that even Thongor of Valkarth felt his spirits sag?

He set out doggedly through the thick underbrush, hacking his way with the great Valkarthan broadsword. Along toward midmorning he stopped to break his fast on ripe sarnberries and a handful of waterfruit. He jogged along, hoping he was going the correct way, but completely unable to ascertain his direction by observing the position of the sun.

Several times he thought of climbing one of the giant lotifers that grew so thickly in Chush, their tall boles towering as much as two hundred yards above the mossy turf. But each tree was thickly grown with the dreaded slith, the bloodsucking vampire-blossoms that were the horror of Lemurian jungles. Grimly he decided not to attempt the trees. He had narrowly escaped death from the slith which the Sark of Thurdis kept in his arena. He would not go out of his way to court their attention now.

And was it, he wondered, humanly possible for one man to cross a hundred vom of jungle on foot? What would he do during the long watches of the night, still many hours away, when every mighty predator of the jungles would be out roaming for food? His situation by night would be doubly dangerous, for due to the prevalence of slith in the trees, he would not be able to take to the upper world of branches to avoid the larger brutes.

Still he slogged on. The dense, humid heat of the rank jungle underbrush bathed his naked body in sweat. Time and again he paused to pluck from his flesh the huge tree leeches that clung loathsomely to his arms and legs, sucking his blood painlessly through their hundred microscopic mouths. Once he sank

unexpectedly to his waist in a bog and only saved himself from the sucking embrace of the yellow mud by tying one end of the floater's rope to the hilt of his sword and hurling it into the nearest tree trunk, then drawing himself slowly through the slimy muck hand over hand.

At first he paused to rest only every hour, but gradually, as even his iron strength ebbed under the oppressive heat, his pauses grew longer and the intervals between them shorter.

As the first touches of darkness fell over the jungles of Chush from the late afternoon sky, he sagged down to the bed of moss beneath a tremendous lotifer, completely exhausted.

He did not know how far he had come, for he had been forced to detour from a straight path many times in order to avoid one beast or another, or a group of trees too thickly intergrown for him to penetrate. At a rough guess, he would estimate that he had covered fifteen miles, perhaps more.

And he did not know if he had been going in the correct direction. If he had been aimed away from Kathool, he was a doomed man, for the first city that lay due west was Cadoma, more than a thousand vorn distant, and his bones would rot beneath the sucking fangs of the slith before he could reach its walls.

Then he became aware of a danger far closer—the tread of mighty feet crushing the underbrush flat not far behind him. From the way the ground shook, he knew with a deadly certainty that it could only mean one thing—*the jungle dragon was stalking him.*

Chapter 4

Dream Lotus.

Aye, it was an age of magic, when the might of wizards strove against the tides of darkness that hovered over the lands of men like threatening wings. And the world shall not again see such wizardry as reigned of old when proud Lemuria was young...

—The Lemurian Chronicles, Book Four, Chapter One

The great Valkarthan broadsword sang from its leathern scabbard into the mighty hand of Thongor. His jaw tightened grimly, and beneath his black and scowling brows, his eyes glared with gold fires like the eyes of lions.

The earth shook about him beneath the massive tread of the lumbering saurian. He could hear the rustle and crack of breaking boughs as the giant reptile shouldered a path through the thick jungle. There was no question that it was a jungle dragon, but whether the same one that had threatened him before when he had dangled limp and senseless from the airboat—this the Valkarthan could not know.

Nor did it greatly matter. The dwark was hungry—and it had caught his scent.

Now the young barbarian was no soft, city-bred weakling. The cruel and frozen wilderness of the Northlands had been his boyhood home, and among those weird glaciers and snowy hills no weakling long survives. He had faced and fought a thousand foes ere now. His mighty broadsword had cut a crimson path through a hundred perils. Men, beasts, and demons howling from the scarlet mouth of hell had he been set against, and never had he winced or fled from danger.

But a mere man alone, however brave, however mighty in battle, had little hope against the titanic reptiles of Earth's Dawn Age. Against those moving mountains of muscle, the swords of a score of warriors would prove futile. Thus Thongor chose the way of discretion, although it wrung his heart to turn and flee in the face of danger. Yet the warriors of his magnificent race knew there was no taint of cowardice in seeking to avoid combat with the lumbering saurians of their prehistoric age.

Thus he turned to seek a haven. The nearness of peril drove new strength surging through his weary thews and limbs. He hurled himself through the jungle at the utmost speed possible, seeking the thickest-grown places wherethrough the jungle dragon might be slowed in seeking to crush passage.

Thom vines slashed his shoulders with needle-sharp barbs as he plunged through their dangling loops. Wiry branches whipped his naked legs. He struggled on, for the thundering tread of the saurian was nearer now. It was gaining on him. Earth shook beneath its massive pads as it crashed through the age-old trees, shouldering a path through the brush and toppling those patriarchs of the Chushan wild that had stood unshaken for centuries ere this hour.

Panting for breath, he halted by one such tree, and a soft weight fell over his arms. A sweet odor drifted to him and his senses swam. With horror he saw he was in the grip of a slith. The swaying blossom spread soft petals to bare rows of hollow fangs that could drain the blood of a full-grown boughar in a single hour.

The vampire-flower emitted a narcotic cloud of perfume that rendered its victims insensible. Senses blurring, Thongor strove to peel the thick, soft petals from his flesh. He felt a numbness spread up his arm as the slith sucked his hot blood. His knees gave way and he sagged to the springy moss, his arm held aloft in the fleshy jaws of the loathsome flower.

As Thongor watched groggily, a faint crimson blush filled the waxen petals. It was his blood, soaking up into the spongy blossom.

At that moment the great saurian came upon him.

Thongor summoned his uttermost reserves of energy. The broadsword flashed through the ropy stem of the slith, severing the blossom from its stem. It continued to cling to his flesh until he tore it off, trampling it underfoot with revulsion.

Still dazed from the vampire-flower's narcotic fumes, Thongor turned to meet the dwark. Seizing the initiative, he sprang forward, swinging the sword. Keen steel bit into the monster's slavering jaws.

He tugged the blade loose and swung again. The red sword slashed into the thick folds of flesh at the hinge of the jungle dragon's jaws. Blood spurted in hot jets, washing Thongor's arm with crimson.

With a thunderous snort, the monster swung its head from side to side to free it of the stinging pain. The scaled snout struck Thongor with the impact of a

battering ram, hurling him a dozen feet away. He sprawled on his back, the broadsword spinning from his hand.

Before he could rise to regain it, the dripping jaws opened before him. He could see the curved white sabers of the saurian's mighty fangs as the crimson maw gaped to gulp him down...

"Hold your breath, swordsman."

A tall, robed figure stepped in front of him. In one hand he held a small metal chest. Who—or what—he was, Thongor did not know, but he obeyed.

As the jaws came down, the old man opened the chest and hurled its contents into them. A thick cloud of blue powder whirled about the jungle dragon. It swung its head away as the swirling veil of blue mist entered its nostrils. The fires of ravening hunger died in the scarlet eyes, and as Thongor staggered to his feet, the enormous length of the saurian came thundering to the ground, shaking the earth as it fell. The beast was either dead or unconscious.

Thongor retrieved his blade and eyed the older man expressionlessly.

"My thanks for your aid, grandsire," he said.

The stranger combed his long gray beard with slim fingers, smiling faintly.

"The dust of the dream lotus," he said in a deep, resonant voice. "One grain will transport a man to the dreamworlds of fantastic pleasure within his own mind for many hours. The dragon has inhaled enough to render a fair-sized city unconscious. It is unwise and dangerous to wander these jungles armed with the sword alone. But let me introduce myself. I am an enchanter, dwelling nearby. I am Sharajsha of Zaar."

Thongor touched the back of his hand to his brows in courteous salute to the old man.

"I am Thongor, the son of Thumithar of the House of Valkh," he growled, "come hither from Valkarth in the Northlands, and till but recently a mercenary sword in the legions of Thurdis, the Dragon City."

Unobtrusively, he kept the broadsword free of its scabbard, dangling from his hand. He was no friend to wizards, and until this hour he had found few of the sorcerous breed worthy of trust. The name of Zaar, that weird City of the Magicians far and far to the east, aroused his suspicions as well, for the Black Druids of Zaar were reputed to be devil-worshippers and devotees of the Dark Forces.

"Belarba, warrior!" the old magician smiled. "You are far from home, and far even from Thurdis... but come, we shall have time to converse later. You are wounded and fatigued, and my home is near. Let me offer you what small hospitality I can before you continue on your journey. My zamph is near, and you need food and drink and rest."

Thongor eyed the old man expressionlessly. While every drop of his clean, healthy Northlander blood distrusted those who dealt with the devilish arts of warlockry and magic, he would be a fool to refuse this offer of a haven. After all, one lost and alone in the jungled wilds of this savage land many leagues from the nearest outpost of man did not hesitate before accepting the offer of assistance, even if that offer came from a sorcerer. So with a philosophical shrug, Thongor bowed slightly, and gruffly thanked the wizard for his aid.

And besides, it occurred to him that he had heard the name of this Sharajsha before. Aye, the fame of this particular magician had penetrated even into his remote homeland beyond the Mountains of Mommur. Sharajsha the Great, they called him, and by repute he was one of the most powerful of all the enchanters of this age of magic. Some called him the Wizard of Lemuria, and Thongor did not ever recall having heard anything dubious or evil concerning him.

At any rate, Thongor had no fear of magic. The man was old, and Thongor resolved to keep one hand near his swordhilt and a wary eye cocked for treachery, and to leave the rest to the Nineteen Gods.

“I will go with you, Wizard,” he growled.

“This way, then.”

They went down a jungle aisle, and as they walked, Thongor took a good long look at the stranger who had come to his aid so unexpectedly. The wizard was old—how old, he did not venture to guess. But the stamp of centuries lay in the deep lines of his face. He was tall and lean, and there was an air of majesty and power about him as he strode through the brush. He wore a long and widesleeved robe of neutral gray, bound in about his waist by a broad girdle of serpent skin. From this hung a short rod or baton of peculiar design, and a pouch of scarlet photh-hide.

His eyes were what held Thongor’s attention. They were black as night, and wise and cool and thoughtful. Magnetic fires burned therein, and depth on depth of darkness. A great mane of iron-gray hair crowned his high and noble brow and fell to his shoulders. A patriarchal beard of the same hue clothed his firm jaw and poured like a cataract of shadows to his lean waist. This was no frail, bent, mumbling oldster, for all his years. He strode like one of the kings of the earth, clothed in majesty and power, and wisdom blazed in his great deep-sunken eyes.

Sharajsha lifted one arm to brush aside the bushes, and the young barbarian saw that his long fingers bore many sigils and talismanic rings of power. One was a hoop of iron, embossed with a curious glyph. Another was carved of red jade, engraved with wedge-shapen runes in some unknown tongue. Other rings flashed upon his long, sensitive hands—the hands of an artist or a thinker. Each ring was fashioned from a different substance: crystal, metal, stone, or wood. With the power locked in these talismanic rings, Thongor grimly surmised, the wizard could invoke and command spirits and elemental forces.

Tethered in a clearing nearby, a mighty zamph stood placidly munching the long, succulent grasses that sprang up in the shadows of a towering lotifer.

The peoples of the cities of the South used the slim, swift-pacing kroter for steeds. The slower, more massive zamph served as beast of burden to draw their wains or to drag their plows.

The zamph was a great, slow-footed reptile, heavy with armor-plate, stumpy-legged, enormous of girth. Its hide was thick and leathery, tough with plates of horn, dull blue in color and fading to a muddy yellow on the belly plates. Its bowed legs were hoofed with thick pads of horn. Untiring strength slumbered in those short legs, strength which could carry zamph and rider for days without rest, if need be.

The zamph had a beaklike snout, and between its mild little pig-like eyes a thick, straight horn grew, which tapered to a needlepoint. Its neck was covered with a curved, saddle-shaped natural shield of bone. A zamph's rider sat in this bony saddle and guided his mount with reins attached to rings that pierced the zamph's small and tender ears—virtually the only exposed portion of its anatomy which was sensitive to pain. Sharajsha's zamph was a great bull, a giant of the breed weighing perhaps several tons. Its bony saddle was wide enough to seat two men.

As they came into view, the zamph lifted its beaklike snout and sniffed the air. Catching the familiar scent of the wizard, it hooted and pawed the turf with one mighty foot. As Sharajsha came up to it, the zamph blinked mild little eyes and butted the wizard's shoulder affectionately. He slapped one burly shoulder and scratched behind the sensitive little ear, holding the beast's attention as the young Valkarthan climbed astride. Then Sharajsha untethered the zamph, mounted, and they set off. The zamph waddled heavily through the thick brush, reached a long aisle between rows of trees, and set off with a steady, lumbering stride.

"I have found the jungles of Chush inhospitable," the barbarian commented. "I am surprised that even a wizard cares to make his home in a land so wild and dangerous."

"I dwell not in the jungles, but in the Mountains of Mommur," the old man explained as they rode. "You are closer to the foothills of Mommur than you think. Wizards, as you can imagine, prefer to dwell in remote and inaccessible places so that they are free to pursue their studies and experiments unmolested and undisturbed. When I came hither out of Zaar many, many years ago, I chose the mountain country beyond the jungles of Chush for my home because that region is as far from the cities of men as one of my retiring habits could ask."

Thongor grunted. "I too have no fondness for cities. There is something about them which seems to bring out the worst elements in men: greed, jealousy, the thirst for power. But do you not find it difficult and demanding of your time, living without servants?"

Sharajsha laughed. "I have my servants, but they are not mortal men! Nay, I am served by the invisible hands of spirits sworn to obedience, thus I require little of cities. Many years ago when first I came hither into this realm, I commanded my spirits to construct for me a subterranean palace beneath the mountains. Thus am I doubly hidden from the eyes of men: first, that I dwell far from the nearest of the cities; and second, that my home is concealed beneath the surface of the earth's crust itself. Therein have I dwelled through all the long years from that dim day to this. And but rarely do I leave my subterranean abode to venture forth in the open air of the upper world. Far more seldom still do I ride forth into the trackless jungles of tropic Chush."

Thongor grunted. "Twas most fortunate for me that you chanced to do so at this particular time; else, I had most likely served as part of a dragon's dinner!"

The wizard looked at him with wise, dark eyes.

"It was not a matter of chance, Thongor of Valkarh. In my magic glass, which gives me vision of all that which takes place across the breadth of Lemuria, I spied your strange flying boat as it floated above the jungles of Chush. By the power of that magic mirror I watched your battle against the dragons of the earth and of the

sky. I saw your boat attacked and destroyed by the flying dragons. I saw you wandering lost and alone and on foot. I knew that no warrior, even so mighty a swordsman as yourself, could long survive against the perils of the jungle. So I came riding forth to lend you whatever aid lay within my powers.”

The wizard paused.

Then: “I have need of a warrior,” he said slowly.

Chapter 5

The Underground Palace.

Now in all this dark age, the wisest among the wise was the wizard Sharajsha, the Magician of Mommur. He alone had peered into the dim vistas of unborn futurity and glimpsed the terror to come...

—The Lemurian Chronicles, Book Three, Chapter Ten

Sharajsha would speak no more on this until a later time. There were many things whereof he would speak, but he suggested they leave those matters until after Thongor had rested and downed a good meal.

The great zamph continued on through the dense jungles. Row upon row of towering lotifer trees rose about them, their deep red boles the color of dried blood in the sunlight. But the trees were thinning out now that they were approaching the edges of the jungle. Soon the foothills of the mountains were about them and the thick jungle foliage fell away. Across the world in front of them strode a mighty range of mountains, a titanic wall of gray and purple. These were the Mountains of Mommur, Thongor knew. This towering range stretched from east to west across the full breadth of the continent of Lemuria like a mountainous spine. And Thongor realized with a grimace that he had indeed been traveling in exactly the wrong direction all those weary hours when he had fought through the thick jungles on foot. Aye, he had labored long—to cut a path in a direction exactly opposite to the one that would in time have led him to the gates of Kathool, the nearest of the cities of the Southland.

Now they rode between hills and over parched, rocky earth. They followed no path—at least, Thongor’s keen eyes could discern no path. But a level way seemed to wander at random, weaving through the hills.

The zamph followed this winding way without hesitation, and Thongor concluded that the road to the wizard’s subterranean abode was cleverly concealed from the eyes of men.

At length they entered the narrow mouth of a great canyon. It was long and thickly shadowed. Steep cliff-like walls of gray stone soared aloft on either hand. The canyon was cut deep through the hills. It seemed little more than a narrow, winding alley or cleft, which would abruptly end beyond the next turn.

Blank walls of rock lifted sheer about them as the sides of the canyon narrowed. For all that the barbarian’s sharp eyes could discern, no man or beast had ever

come this way. The rocky earth underfoot showed no tracks. Yet this was the entrance to the house of Sharajsha.

At length the canyon ended in a sheer cliff of stone. The zamph came to a halt and Sharajsha dismounted and strode forward while Thongor, still mounted, watched with curiosity. The light was dim, but he could see no slightest sign of a door cut in the rock.

The old wizard stepped before the cliff and reached out. His hand crept across the surface of stone until his sensitive fingertips found a minute depression. Into this he set the seal of one of his talismanic rings.

Thongor froze and the nape-hairs lifted along his neck. For without the slightest sound a huge slab of stone sank into the earth.

A black cavern yawned open before them. Sharajsha gestured.

“Enter!”

He tossed the reins over the zamph’s neck, and the beast ambled on before them into the darkness. Obviously Sharajsha kept his steed penned in some part of this cavern, and the zamph was trained to find its own way.

With a fatalistic half-grin, Thongor strode into the darkness with the wizard behind him. Sharajsha lifted one hand and from the depths of his capacious sleeve drew forth a short rod of translucent crystal. He lifted it and a flickering nimbus of pale blue light glowed forth about one end. It gradually strengthened to illuminate the cavern.

Soundlessly the wall of rock closed behind them.

Magic! Thongor snorted to himself with the warrior’s natural contempt for such sly trickery. It seemed foolhardy to enter the lair of the most powerful wizard of all Lemuria of his own free will; and yet...the old man had done him no harm, had, in fact, rescued him from the jaws of certain death. *What will happen will happen when it will, if it will,* he thought. And determinedly setting his fears aside with the careless philosophy of the Northlander, Thongor looked about him with interest.

Illuminated by the weird blue glow, the cavern spread before him a fantastic and unearthly panorama. Gigantic dripping stalactites hung from the arched roof overhead—spears of living stone as huge as the fangs of Baroumpfar, the Father of All Dragons, who devoured the moon in the ancient tale. And the cavern’s floor rose to meet them in glassy humps formed by centuries and aeons of those slow, calcareous drippings. Here and there amid the fantastic stone forest, pits of fire glowed, and occasionally Thongor saw a jet of the yellow flame which rose from the volcanic world of fire that burned far below Lemuria, and which, prophets claimed, would someday destroy the continent, sinking it beneath the sea.

“Come.”

Thongor followed the wizard, who led him through the stalagmites. Weird light from the firepits painted their rounded glassiness with flickering, fantastic colors. Alertly glancing around, and with one hand resting lightly on the pommel of his broadsword, Thongor strode after the wizard.

It was like a maze in which one who did not know his way would soon become lost and might well wander for many hours. Sharajsha led him through the stone forest and beyond, where a deep channel cut through the cavern floor. Through this channel a sluggish trickle of hot lava flowed like a river of liquid fire. The slow fluid was cherry-red, and tiny yellow flames flickered about its wrinkled, mud-like

surface. The heat rose to smothering temperatures and clouds of thick oily smoke made Thongor's eyes smart. A stone arch spanned the glowing stream, and by this natural bridge they crossed the river of fire. Beyond the lava river the cavern floor rose in a wall. It had been carved into a shallow flight of steps leading to a great iron door set into the wall and rust-red in color. Rude gryphons cut from the same rock as the floor flanked the stair. Thongor glimpsed strange yellow gems set like eyes within the rough stone heads. Was it his imagination, or did a weird spark of intelligence flicker within the jewels? With a prickling of his flesh, he sensed that at a word the wizard by his side could summon life into those monstrous stone bodies, calling them to his aid.

Sharajsha pressed an iron ring against the portal, and with a groan of giant hinges, the huge valves of the gate opened slowly.

Within, the solid mountain had been hewn into a long hall. At its further end, a dais of seven steps was set against the wall and bore a great throne-like chair of dead-black stone. A long wooden table stood in the center of the hall. Candelabra of pure gold flickered at either end. Benches were drawn before it. The walls were broken with curtained doorways leading off into other chambers of the subterranean palace, and here and there along the wall and between the doorways, cabinets and chests of wood bore strange secrets. A great circular pit of roaring fire stood before the dais.

"Be welcome in my home," the wizard said.

Hours later, Thongor and his host feasted at the table in the underground hall. Invisible servants had bathed Thongor's tired body in scented warm water. Soothing salves had cleansed and healed his cuts and wounds. He had slept away most of the afternoon and early nightfall on a soft bed, waking with a ravenous appetite.

Thongor's suspicions were relaxing. And the wizard spread a fine table. Roast boupfar swam in rich, steaming gravy, with succulent, although nameless, fish from subterranean streams. Bowls of weird jungle fruit and platters of sweetmeats were there, and he washed down all with fine wines of classic vintage.

As they feasted, they talked. The wizard listened to his adventures with a wry half-smile. He expressed great curiosity over the mechanism of the airboat, and strongly desired to see it.

"I am not unfamiliar with this Oolim Phon," he said thoughtfully. "His mastery of the alchemystical art has come to my knowledge. But he errs in lending his wisdom to the service of an ambitious, warlike Sark such as this Phal Thurid—whose reputation I am also aware of, and his plans to conquer the seacoast cities. Magic is knowledge. Knowledge possessed by ambition is power. And such power, placed in strong hands, could bring all of Lemuria beneath one bloody tyranny. But tell me more of your battle with the lizard-hawk. To my knowledge, never before has a single man slain the Terror of the Skies."

Their meal complete, they sat at ease before the pit of fire. The hard life of a mercenary warrior had but rarely afforded Thongor such cushioned ease, and with a full belly and a goodly supply of wine he stretched out like a great golden-eyed cat.

“Tell me of your plans,” Sharajsha urged, so Thongor briefly sketched out his intentions to seek service either with the legions of Hashab Chan, Sark of Kathool, or with those of another of the cities along the Gulf.

Sharajsha unrolled a mighty map drawn with colored inks on tanned leather. “Here is the site of my underground palace,” the old wizard mused, setting his thumb on a spot among the southern foothills of the Mountains of Mommur, “and here is Kathool of the Purple Towers on the River Saan to the north of Patanga. You have many vom of impenetrable jungle to cross ere you can come to Kathool.”

“So I see,” the barbarian grunted. “And on foot, as well, unless your generous hospitality extends to lending me a zamph.”

The magician nodded. “That will I do, and gladly, if need be. But there is a chance that your flying boat can be repaired, in which case you can traverse the distance between my palace and Kathool in ease and swiftness.”

“Know you aught of these flying ships?” the young barbarian inquired.

Sharajsha shrugged. “Something I know of the inventions of Oolim Phon, and still more I conjecture. But these matters must await our attentions till tomorrow, when we shall return to the jungle and seek out the wrecked air-boat. I will be able to say more when I have inspected the wreckage. As for tonight, at least, you are my guest.”

Thongor nodded. Then:

“You said you had need of a warrior,” he demanded bluntly. “But you have not mentioned anything more about it. What is it all about?”

The old Wizard of Lemuria pondered, staring deep into the roaring fire as one slim hand stroked his long beard thoughtfully.

“I do indeed; yet of this I would reserve speech until another time, if you will indulge me, swordsman. After we have found the ruin of your sky floater and have ascertained the full extent of its damage, I may very well make you an offer of employment for a time. Let us leave this question, too, until tomorrow. Now it is time for bed. Old bones grow weary, and young ones too, when they have striven as mightily as you have this day. Come, I will conduct you to your room.”

That night Thongor slept a deep and dreamless sleep. His first suspicions of the age-old Wizard of Lemuria were quieted, for it was obvious that the ancient sage meant him no harm.

And thus were they met at last, Thongor of Valkarth and Sharajsha of Zaar, and thus were the feet of the youthful warrior set on the first steps of that mighty road that would either lead him to the glory of a kingly throne—or to a black and terrible death.

Chapter 6

The Science of Sharajsha.

It was Sharajsha who read the dark schemes of the Druids, and against their stupendous plot he stood alone and set his hand against their dread

wisdom. And thus the world stood trembling on the brink of ultimate and conquering chaos in the days before the coming of Thongor the Mighty into the kingdoms of the West.

—The Lemurian Chronicles, Book Three, Chapter Ten

An hour past daybreak the warrior and the wizard arose from sleep and broke their fast with a hearty meal. The sage was eager to examine the wreckage of the airboat as soon as possible, that the mighty predators of the Chushan jungles might not damage it further; so they made their meal in haste and were ready to depart ere the sun was scarce risen into the blue vault of heaven.

They mounted two zamphs which the old wizard kept penned in one of the outer chambers of his cavernous home, beyond the gates of his underground palace. With Sharajsha in the lead, they made their way out of the gigantic cave, through the rocky foothills of the mountains, and into the jungles of savage Chush.

Alone and unaided, Thongor would have found it difficult if not impossible to retrace his steps to the place whereat the stolen floater had crashed into the treetops. But the old Wizard of Lemuria had watched the fall of the airboat and had carefully marked the spot in his mind; hence they found no great difficulty in making their way to the spot, although the journey consumed some hours of morning due to the dense growth of the jungles and the difficulties of making passage.

Most of the more dangerous meat-eaters that roamed the wild did their hunting at night and slept in secret lairs by day; hence the two had little fear of coming upon one of the mighty jungle dragons of Chush. But Sharajsha took special precautions to make doubly certain that their journey should not be interrupted by the saurian predators of the jungle. He bore with him at his waist a flacon of some peculiar drug which he had concocted in his laboratory. To the sight it was a dark, thick, sluggish oil. It had no odor, or at least none that even the keen nostrils of the youthful barbarian could detect. But Sharajsha assured him that the drug would frighten off any large brute that came within a certain distance and caught the scent. Thongor noticed that even the zamphs were uneasy in their proximity to the strange fluid, although they were not meat-eaters.

Whether or not the drug and its repellent powers were the cause, the fact was that no animal life came within view during the length of their journey through the jungle to the wreckage of the floater. They located the site without any particular difficulty. The airboat was still tightly wedged between the bent branches of a giant crimson lotifer tree, and it looked in sorry state.

The glistening urium plating of the hull was crumpled like a crisp sheet of parchment that had been crushed in the grip of giant hands. In many places seams had been ruptured so that the steel girders of the inner construction were exposed to view like portions of a skeleton glimpsed through torn flesh.

The problem looked hopeless to Thongor. But Sharajsha did not seem discouraged. With the aid of the giant barbarian, the old magician rigged strong cables and pulleys, and in an hour or two, with much labor, they succeeded in dislodging the airboat from the entangling branches. They pulled it down to ground level so the wizard could examine it more closely.

“It is the hull plates of weightless urlium that make the flying car buoyant,” the old wizard mused. “The motive power comes from the long, coiled springs that run from stem to stern beneath the deck. Although torn and bent and battered, the urlium hull still has power to resist the pull of the earth, and the rotors themselves do not seem to have suffered any damage.”

“You mean to say this wreckage can still fly?” Thongor demanded incredulously.

The old man nodded. “Yes. The dents in the hull can be hammered out again and the bent plates can be straightened. A little carpentry will soon repair the crushed cabin. Come—let us bring the flying car back to my workshops where I can begin the task.”

Thongor was amazed but kept his silence. The old wizard displayed astounding resources.

They fastened the airboat’s cable to the saddlebow of the wizard’s zamph and bore it back to the subterranean palace. It floated in midair behind the great beast.

Thongor helped maneuver the slim craft through the cavern and into Sharajsha’s laboratory. The proud, immaculate flying boat that had shimmered in all its sleek perfection above the citadel of Thurdis was now a battered hulk. It looked a hopeless wreck to the giant barbarian, but the wizard again expressed certainty that he could repair the craft.

“By the luck of the Nineteen Gods the floater lost none of her urlium plates. Those I could not easily replace. Everything else can be made like new again. And I am eager to examine the structure of the rotors and the control system. Yes, swordsman, in a few days you will be able to fly on to Kathool—or to anywhere else you might desire—as if the lizard-hawks had never driven you from the sky.”

Sharajsha put on a leather working-smock and began laying out his tools. Thongor gazed restlessly about the laboratory. Athanors and crucibles were ranged about on long benches, and tables were littered with odd-looking flasks and tubes of glass. Aludels, curcurbits, alembics, cupels, and other mysterious vessels and devices lined the walls of the long room.

“Can I help?”

“No. Amuse yourself by exploring my home.”

His offer of aid rejected, Thongor left the wizard to his task and wandered restlessly through the strange chambers, exploring the underground castle.

One great room was lined with books of magical science—books small and huge, some of them as tall as a full-grown man. Some were bound in bouphar leather. Others were bound between plates of worked metal or unfamiliar carved wood. They were written in a dozen tongues, and Thongor, idly opening one bound in the thick fur of a green wolf, was repelled by the weird hieroglyphics painted upon the vellum sheets in inks of scarlet, black, and gold.

Another chamber was the wizard’s chemical laboratory. Tanks of green-glowing phosphor fluids bubbled beneath magic fires. Earthen crocks and metal tubes bore seething liquids through the tortuous spirals and windings of some strange experiment beyond Thongor’s untutored comprehension. A wired human skeleton stood on a rack in one corner. A man’s brain hung suspended in a large globe filled with cloudy fluid. Bundles of dried herbs and canisters of colored powder filled the air with pungent, repellent fumes.

Thongor wrinkled his nose in disgust.

“Magic!” he growled.

Another room was more to his liking. The walls bore weapons from a hundred cities, clamped with iron to the stone. Swords, spears, bows, and javelins... the crooked dirks of the assassins of Dalakh and the leaf-bladed knives of Darundabar hung beside the feather-crested spears of Vozashpa and the giant war axes of lost, immemorial Yb. He spent a pleasant hour testing the weight and balance of the wizard’s armory.

These were all enchanted weapons with magical powers, the barbarian assumed. Some of the blades were scratched with Northlander runes; others bore the acid-etched sigils of Zaar, the Black City of the Magicians. On some he recognized the protective signs used by the gigantic Blue Nomads of the eastern plains. Magic weapons were not to his liking.

In one sword’s hilt an enormous ruby was set. It gleamed like a watchful eye. And like a living eye, it turned in its socket as if to observe him as he passed from the chamber.

That night after dinner, the old wizard and the barbarian warrior sat talking over goblets of chilled wine and bowls of fresh waterfruit while firelight cast huge shadows that leaped and capered over the stone walls.

The wizard reported on the day’s progress.

“I have softened the urlium prow by heating the plates in my furnaces. And I have hammered and bent them back into shape again. Now I must do the same for the keel and hull plates. But that task I shall leave for tomorrow. Let us discuss other matters. Tell me, Thongor of Valkarth, what are your plans? Where will you go once the floater is repaired and you may fly where you will?”

Thongor shrugged lazily. “Kathool, possibly. As I told you, I had thought to seek service under the Sark of that city. Or perhaps back into the Northlands again. I don’t really know, nor does it greatly matter.” With a grim smile, he quoted a maxim from *The Scarlet Edda*: “A good sword never goes far without finding hire.”

The old magician eyed him shrewdly. “Then you have not committed your sword to the service of the Sark of Kathool?”

“No. I shall go where Father Gorm guides me.”

“Very well, then. Let me tell you a story, Valkarthan. Perhaps there shall be an offer of employment at the end. As you may remember, I said I had need of a strong warrior.”

Thongor nodded impassively. “Yes. I wondered what you meant by that, old man. Why a wizard of your powers should need the steel of a warrior to fight his battles I cannot puzzle out. But go ahead with your tale, if you will.” The wizard stared for a long moment into the leaping flames while Thongor poured himself another goblet of chilled wine. Then:

“It is a strange story, and an old one, and the ending is not certain... I cannot clearly see it—even I, to whom the unwritten future is as an open book... but I fear me, Barbarian. Aye, I, Sharajsha, fear!”

Thongor glanced at him curiously.

“Fear?” he repeated. “Fear what?”

The old magician spoke five words in a slow, solemn voice. Five words that sent a chill down Thongor's spine and made his nape-hairs prickle as if with some obscure presentiment of unknown terrors to come.

"The destruction of the world."

Chapter 7

The Thousand-Year War.

With dawn we rode from Nemedis in all her pomp and pride.

The white road thundered beneath our tread and the white sea at our side.

The wild waves broke on the naked rocks and returned to break once more,

Where the grim black walls of the Dragon Keep loomed on the grim black shore.

—Diombar's Song of the Last Battle

Sharajsha began his tale in a low, somber voice. Thongor listened stolidly at first; then, as the emotional intensity of the old magician's words reached him, he listened more closely.

It was a strange story the Magician of Mommur told him there in the firelit hall of his subterranean palace. A strange tale, and an ancient one... in fact, it was the most ancient of all tales, and it told of the dim red aeon of Time's Dawn, long ages ere the coming of Man.

In the beginning, before men came forth upon the Earth, all of the world was under the dominance of the giant reptiles. The titanic dragons of the dawn battled and bellowed in the dim ages before man. The earth they trampled to slime beneath the thundering tread of their gigantic weight. In their numberless millions, the titanic reptiles roamed the misty swamps and steaming fens and seething jungles of the Dawn Age, and man's primal ancestors fled naked and helpless before their mailed and colossal might.

And then, from amongst the dragons of the Dawn, came one in whose cold and glittering eyes the glimmer of intelligence burned. No sage hath dared conjecture what dark god or demon of Chaos wedded the ferocity and strength of the great earth-shaking dragons with the cold light of reason and thought, but it was done... and a race of intelligent reptiles arose to dominate the aeon.

They were called the Dragon Kings. Theirs was a cold, cunning intelligence: malign, clever, and inhuman. No man could follow the tortuous and intricate pathways of their alien minds. No man could understand the weird and darkling emotions that seethed in their cool ophidian blood. Forever were they to be unintelligible to man, their lore strange and enigmatic, their science frightful and awesome, their ways repellent and evil.

Smaller were they than their lumbering and mindless brethren, manlike in shape and size was their form, and the cold, cruel intelligence of these serpentmen was perhaps as far beyond that of man as their lifespan was lengthier than the human.

All of the world went under the rule of the Dragon Kings of elder Hyperborea. They used the great strength of their reptilian brothers to raise monolithic cities of black stone wherein they studied strange arts and practiced grim sorceries.

And then it was that the Nineteen Gods created the First Men. The spark of life was struck in the breast of Phondath the Firstborn, and from his loins sprang a mighty line. Nemedis, the first city, was built on the shores of the ultimate East of Lemuria. But hither the Dragon Kings had come when the snows whelmed and conquered their mysterious realm at the pole.

And there was war...

The old wizard's slow, deep voice was hushed as he recounted the mighty saga of the Thousand-Year War, when the heroism of the First Kingdoms of Man stood against the overwhelming might and science of the Dragon Kings. For a thousand years the First Men strove magnificently against the reptilian hordes. And slowly, slowly, they beat back the Dragon Kings although death took a mighty toll of the warriors of the First Kingdoms.

Mighty were the heroes of Lemuria in the Dawn, and epic were their stupendous wars against the Dragons of Chaos!

But the serpentmen could command the titanic strength of numberless reptilian monsters—colossal saurians beside whose fighting fury even the mindless ferocity of the dwark seemed small—and men gradually lost heart. They clung to their walls, in the ancient cities of *Nemedis* and Althaar, Yb and Yaodar.

"Then their great leader, the Lord Thungarth, called upon the Father of the Gods," said Sharajsha. "In a storm of whirling clouds of lightning, Gorm descended on the heights above ancient and immemorial *Nemedis*. He gave unto Thungarth a weapon called the Sword of *Nemedis*, the Star Sword which the Gods had forged, and in whose steel heart the force of thunder was sealed by God-magic.

"Armed with this sword of power, the last heroes set forth. They broke the Dragon Kings in mighty battles and drove them back to the northern shores of Lemuria, to the Black Keep, the last fortress of the Dragon Kings. There Thungarth fell and the Star Sword slaughtered the last of the Dragons."

"I remember the story," Thongor said. And he chanted the lines of Diombar, the Singer of *Nemedis*:

*"And Khorbane fell and proud Konnar and gallant Yggrim too,
Yet still we strove with the Dragon Kings as the great war trumpets blew;
And for every hero of Phondath's breed who on that black shore fell,
We sent a dozen Dragons down the iron road to hell!"*

The crashing strains of the old war saga rang out in the flickering firelight, raising dim echoes from the shadowed rafters. Sharajsha raised one gaunt hand.

"Yes, with the strength of the Lords of *Nemedis* and the magical power of the Sword, the Dragon Kings were slain and their last fortress overthrown, and the five-thousand-year history of the first kingdoms of Lemuria began. But Diombar the Singer did not know the full story."

"What is the full story, then?"

The wizard's eyes burned strangely in the firelight.

“The Dragon Kings fell at Grimstrand Firth, yes, but the Dragon wizards escaped. Transported by their magic arts through the air, they took to hiding far from *Nemedis*. In hidden castles they survived undiscovered, while the long ages passed by them—plotting vengeance with their cold and evil serpent brains. Ages passed and *Nemedis* fell, but the Children of *Nemedis* spread over Lemuria and built new cities, conquering new kingdoms: Valkarth in the North, and Thurdis in the South; Patanga and Tsargol. And still the Dragons hid, waiting for the moment of their revenge. That moment is very near. Like black phantoms from an age of myth, they live on yet, preserved by their curious sciences. And the hour of doom is coming down over Lemuria, doom not only for the lands of men, but for the very planet upon which we dwell, and the Universe itself!”

Thongor stared at the wizard. His words seemed fantastic, incredible... but they stirred the very roots of Thongor’s ancient heritage. For the old blood of Valkh of *Nemedis* flowed in his Northlander veins.

“Say on, Wizard!”

“The Dragons plot a terrible vengeance that shall not only destroy mankind but wreck the very fabric of the Cosmos. They have striven for long ages to establish contact with their Gods, the Lords of Darkness who opposed the Gods we worship, the Lords of Light. The Dark Lords ruled Chaos before the Universe was created. When the Moment of Creation came, they were expelled beyond the new-born Universe, to the thundering Chaos beyond. And ceaselessly from that moment to this, the Lords of Chaos have striven to reenter space and time, to begin anew their stupendous conflict with the Gods of men.”

“How can they reenter the Universe?” Thongor asked. Hot blood pounded in his veins. Ha—Gods! Here was meat and drink for a fighting man’s spirit! When Gods locked in immortal battle beyond the stars, and all earth shuddered at the far echoes of that conflict...

“By some art, the Dragons plot to open a portal to Beyond. Through that portal the Lords of Chaos may enter space. But the portal to Outside can only be opened in a certain time, when the cycles of the stars fall into a certain pattern. That dreaded time is drawing near. By my calculations it is very soon to come. It is now seven thousand and seven years since the day that Phondath the Firstborn was given life. In just weeks we shall be into the hour of doom. The old year will pass—the Festival of Year’s End will come and go. It is within the first week of the seven thousand and eighth year of man that the stars will be right for the Dragon Kings to reap their awful revenge upon the world that drove them into exile.”

“You know this for a certainty?”

Sharajsha nodded wearily.

“The *Scarlet Edda* warns of the day to come. And by my magic mirror I have sought out and found the hidden land where the last of the Dragon Kings yet dwell.”

He rose and went to a far wall. Opening a chest, he brought forth an old chart, drawn with scarlet inks upon fine papyrus. With one long-nailed finger he traced a path.

“Here is my subterranean palace below the Mountains of Mommur. And here, north and east, the great range crosses Lemuria to its heart. There the vast Inner Sea of Neol-Shendis lies, surrounded by walls of impenetrable mountains. Within

the center of this great inland sea are the isles where the grim black citadels of the Dragon Kings yet stand. And within those towers they work at their hellish craft, preparing to open the portal to Chaos. Only one thing can destroy them and their monstrous plans.”

“What is that?”

“The same Sword that destroyed their power six thousand years ago. The Sword of *Nemedis*.”

“But the song tells that the Star Sword was broken in the Last Battle!” said Thongor. “And even if its fragments were preserved, the Kingdom of *Nemedis* fell thousands of years ago, and its cities are now heaps of rotting stone.”

“True. But the ancient masters of wisdom who wrote the *Scarlet Edda* tell how the Star Sword was created. It will take a long journey, and will involve many dangers. But I know how to create the Star Sword anew.”

“Is that what you meant when you said you might offer me employment?”

“Yes. I can create the Sword, but not alone. I need the strong aid and courage of a man of many battles to stand by my side against the Dragon Kings.”

Thongor bared his white teeth in a fighting grin. Here was an adventure to make all others pale! Here was the raw stuff from which songs and sagas that men should sing for a thousand years might be made. To hellfire with the Sark of Kathool! Who wanted to be a mercenary when one might become a hero?

“If your words are indeed true, Wizard, and your intentions are as you say, then seek no further. My steel is at your service.”

The wizard smiled.

“I had hoped you would aid me in this task. When I watched you battling the lizard-hawks and the mighty dragon of the jungles, I wondered if you might not be the warrior for whom I sought. Very well, Thongor of Valkarth. It shall be so. But many dangers lie ahead of us!”

Thongor laughed.

“Danger and I are comrades from of old, and many is the hour we have stood together, he and I, measuring swords. Come, Wizard! Finish your work—repair the floater. Phal Thurid built it so that he might conquer all Lemuria—but we shall see that it serves a nobler cause!”

And so it came to pass that Thongor of Valkarth and Sharajsha of Zaar joined forces in the quest of the Star Sword, even as the Nineteen Gods decreed.

For the last of the Dragon Kings had not fallen when Thungarath Jaidor’s son whelmed and broke them in the last battle. Nay, some there were that flew from the black keep there on the shores of Grimstrand Firth and fled before the blazing glory of the Star Sword in the hands of the hero. To dim and secret isles within the Sea of Neol-Shendis they made their way; and there, for thousands of years, the last of the Dragons brooded in the cold mists, pondering a mighty plan, scheming a stupendous revenge that would break the very Earth itself asunder and shatter it to dust.

And against this plot, wherewith the awesome forces of Chaos and Old Night and aligned to the weird science and black sorcery of the last of the Dragon Kings, two men stood alone to do battle for the saving of the world.

And it is here that Thongor the Mighty set forth on the path of his destiny at last, and it is here that his saga truly begins...

Chapter 8

The Tower of Woman-Headed Serpents.

*The sliding hiss of scales on stone,
Weird green-flame eyes in shadows black,
When Thongor faced the slorgs alone
And cold steel drove the nightmares back!*
—Thongor's Saga, Stave IV

The floater drove through the cool air of morning, three thousand feet above the jungles of savage Chush. Sleek and perfect as on the day it had first emerged from the laboratories of Oolim Phon, it sped across Lemuria. In its cabin, Thongor of Valkarth and the Wizard of Lemuria sat. Thongor was at the controls of the airboat, while the aged sorcerer examined a map.

It had taken the wizard a full week to complete his repairs on the airboat, newly named the *Nemedis*. Seven precious days out of the small store of time were now spent, and all too soon the ancient stars would return to their foretold positions above Lemuria and exert the baleful astral influences needed by the Dragon Kings for their terrible plans. While Sharajsha had labored night and day, Thongor had restlessly prowled the rooms and halls of the subterranean palace, impatient to be away. The giant barbarian was unused to inactivity and chafed at delay. The repairs had taken somewhat longer than had been anticipated, as the wizard insisted on installing some devices of his own design, and making some slight improvements on the original floater. One of these was a sphere of glass securely clamped to the control panel before Thongor. Within it a wedge-shaped pendulum of silvery metal hovered at the end of a silken thread. This magnetic pendulum, fashioned of the finest lodestone, was drawn by some weird influence to the north, regardless of the position of the *Nemedis*. With its aid, one could never lose direction.

Sharajsha, completing his studies over the parchment scroll, handed the map to the Valkarthan.

"Here is our present position, marked with a red spot, and I have noted the pendulum bearings for the remainder of our journey. As you see, we must fly south and east for a thousand vom, down the Ysar, which splits Chush in two, beyond Patanga, the City of Fire, and on to the south coasts of Ptartha, where Tsargol fronts the Sea."

"Aye," Thongor grunted. "But you have not yet explained why Tsargol is our first goal."

"Thousands of years ago a strange object fell out of the sky over Tsargol. This object was at first considered a fragment fallen from the moon, but the Red Druids, priests of Slidith, the Lord of Blood, called it the *Star Stone* and claimed it

was the burnt-out heart of a fallen star, a talisman of great potency still venerated as sacred to the Blood God.”

“From this stone, then, the Star Sword was made?” Sharajsha nodded.

“So states the *Scarlet Edda*, which records the manner in which Gorm the Father of Stars created the enchanted weapon. We shall follow this formula. First we must penetrate Tsargol and cut from their holy relic a fragment to be forged into a sword blade.”

“If the Tsargolans worship this burnt-out star,” Thongor grunted, “they will doubtless have it well guarded.”

“Aye! It is preserved from desecration in the Scarlet Tower, which rises in the temple precincts near the center of the city and not far from the palace of Drugunda Thal, Sark of Tsargol.”

“Guarded?”

“That is the curious thing. No guards are stationed about the Scarlet Tower, nor are any guards—or even the Red Druids—allowed to enter the Tower. It is, insofar as my wizard-glass could see, completely deserted.”

“It sounds as though removing a portion of the Star Stone should be simplicity itself, then,” Thongor remarked.

“Perhaps. Entering will be no problem. We shall wait until nightfall and fly over the towers of Tsargol. I shall let you down by a cable into the Tower.”

For many hours the *Nemedis* rode the blue skies of Lemuria. The yellow walls of Patanga, City of Fire, fell past beneath them, where it stood at the mouths of the Ysar and the Saan, the Twin Rivers. The floater drove for a time above the great Gulf of Patanga and then entered Ptarcha, a vast land of forests and fields with few cities to mar its seemingly endless expanse of greenery.

By late afternoon they were within sight of the red walls of Tsargol, where it stood beside the thundering shores of Yashengzeb Chun, the Southern Sea. They ate the evening meal and Thongor slept awhile, waiting for the sun to set. As soon as night came down over Lemuria, the *Nemedis* drifted silently down over Tsargol. Fortunately, it was a cloudy night, with neither moon nor stars to betray them to a watchful eye.

Sharajsha guided the craft over the domed palace of the Sark and halted it above the Temple Quarter, where the Scarlet Tower rose from dark gardens. The *Nemedis* was moored to the crimson spire with the sky anchor, a barbed hook at the end of a long line, and by that line Thongor was to descend.

“Remember, now, although my glass revealed no Tower guard, it is hardly creditable that the Red Druids would leave their sacred treasure totally without protection. Therefore be wary! Much depends upon this venture... Indeed, the future of mankind may very well hang in the balance!” Sharajsha counseled.

“That may be as it will,” Thongor said grimly as he wrapped his tall form in a black-hooded cloak. “Perhaps the Druids presume it to be too difficult for any trespasser to penetrate the walled gardens of the Quarter, or rely upon religious superstition to protect the relic. However, I have not managed to live as long as this by cultivating carelessness. If there are guards, my steel will feast on their reeking guts!”

He swung himself over the floater's deck. Two hundred feet below his heels the dark garden stretched, a blur of gloom. The cool night wind from the sea sang about the taut anchor cable.

Hand by hand he lowered himself down. One slip and he was as dead as Phondath the Firstborn. The slippery cable was difficult to get a solid grip on, but he moved slowly down. The strain on his shoulders was terrific, but he kept a clear head, breathing calmly and deeply, and before long his booted heels scraped the tiled roof of the Scarlet Tower. This roof was peaked and its conical form forbade foothold. Holding the cable with one hand and the roof edge with the other, he felt with his feet for the window in which the anchor was hooked for a long, timeless moment...

And found it! He muscled down and slid into a black room. Balanced lightly on the balls of his feet, the broadsword sliding into his hand, he waited for a sound, a stir of movement. Nothing came and he breathed easier. He then gave the cable a single tug, by which Sharajsha was to understand that he entered the Tower without trouble. Now for the Star Stone!

This top room, he soon ascertained, was completely bare. He felt his way into the hall, equally dark, and down a flight of coiling steps to the next story. There, the rooms contained only books. Feeling his way from room to room in utter darkness, he wished impatiently for the wizard's crystal rod of light. They had decided that a light was too dangerous, as a passing Druid might see it through one of the Tower's many windows.

Thongor was moving down a hall when the sound first came to his notice. A slow, dragging rasp, dry and stealthy. He stopped cold, listening. The sound was repeated again. It was some distance from him, the full length of the hall. A soft rustle, a leathery slither.

Perplexed, Thongor wrinkled his brow. It was not a footstep... it sounded more like someone dragging himself along the floor...yet it was not that, for there came to his ears neither the soft thud of palms against the stone nor the heavy breathing such exertion would have demanded.

Green flames burned, phosphorescent spots of fire against the darkness.

Eyes!

They hung at knee level, questing the dark. Thongor felt his hackles rise on his neck. His primitive senses gave him uncanny warning...

Again the rasping slither, and the lambent eyes of weird green flame glided forward a few feet.

Serpents? Were the silent halls of the Tower guarded by clammy reptiles? That explained why the wizard's glass had not revealed tenants in the Tower: needing no light, and dwelling in the dark, they would be invisible.

Silently Thongor retreated back down the corridor, avoiding a patch of dim light where a window cast vague illumination on the floor. He waited as the dry rasp continued. And then—

His barbarian blood literally froze in his veins as the unknown guardian of the hall slid into the light and was revealed in all its repellent, loathly horror.

Imagine a pallid serpent as long as a man's body and thick about as his upper thigh, a serpent upon whose fluid and questing neck grew, not the blunt, wedge-shaped head of a snake—but *the dead-white, masklike face of a woman.*

Slanted eyes of lambent green flame glowed in a colorless face whose perfect feminine beauty clashed revoltingly with its snakelike body. Bald, the round skull gleamed naked in the dull light. Scarlet lips smiled seductively, revealing hideous fangs.

It was a slorg, one of the dread woman-headed serpents of the Lemurian deserts to the east. Thongor's skin crawled with revulsion as he looked upon it. Never before had he seen one of the slithering monsters, but he knew it well from shuddering legends of desert warriors who had awakened to find themselves in the clammy embrace of the slorg, crept upon them in the stillness of the star-gemmed night.

For a moment the slorg hovered motionless there in the dim luminance, its masklike face and blazing eyes swaying on the long neck as it quested for its prey. Then it moved, slithering and wriggling, from the shaft of light that fell from the square window. He heard its belly scrape along the stone of the floor and a surge of nausea gripped him. He fought the gut-twisting disgust down and drew forth his great Valkarthan broadsword with a faint rasp of steel against worn leather. The hilt of the sword felt wet against his sweating palms.

In the dim darkness he searched for the pallid gliding length of the slorg. It was not far away. If it came near him, perhaps he could kill it swiftly and without undue noise, which might attract others...

And then he heard them wriggling down the hall. He knew not how many they were. Their eyes of lambent phosphor burned with evil green fire through the gloom. And he heard for the first time the sibilant hiss of the slorg's hunting song. The sinister, throaty hissing made his blood congeal with loathing.

He hated serpents. His cold, windswept northern home knew them not. The slithering serpents that infested the rotting jungles of the Southland filled him with disgust and horror.

He could see the glowing eyes clearly now. Five, six, perhaps a dozen of them. They glided unerringly toward him. Perhaps they scented his hot blood with their cold reptilian senses. As the first slorg moved to confront him, he stepped forward and swung a vicious blow with his blade. The steel whipped through the elongated alabaster neck, and the horrible head thudded to the floor, tusks clashing against air, while the headless body writhed slowly in death agony.

Now the others were upon him, a phalanx of green-glittering eyes and undulant pale bodies. Thongor turned and raced up the flight of steps to another floor. He prowled swiftly through several rooms without finding the Star Stone. Then the slorgs poured through the doorway in a cold white tide. His mighty broadsword reaped a bloody harvest among them.

And then he steeled himself for a great heroic feat of courage such as few men are asked to attempt. He had now examined all the upper floors. It remained for him to go down through the lower levels, which meant he must make his way down the stairs covered with wriggling white serpents.

Luckily he wore high boots. He went down the steps at reckless speed, slashing the slorgs from his path as they snapped and hissed at his booted legs. Perhaps the most awful thing about them was that it took them so long to die. Long after his sword had cut through their cold flesh, the heads were sinking their tusks in his boot-heels.

He reached the lower floors drenched with cold sweat, and searched through many chambers, finding only heaps of ecclesiastic robes or sacrificial weapons, but not the great talisman he sought.

And then a flood of slorgs poured hissing into the room, a flood of slithering white serpents so deep he knew there was no chance of making a path through them. He retreated from room to room, his broadsword dripping with slime and gore...

In the last chamber his back pressed up against a rough and jagged surface. *The Star Stone!* It stood upon a low, unpretentious altar against the wall, a rough black mass of metal slag.

Thongor seized the globe of cold metal, secured it under one arm, and retreated on before the rushing snaky tide. Up the stairs and down another long hall he went, fighting both the slorgs who advanced from below and the creatures who came at him from the darkness of each room as he passed them.

He could move much faster than the sluggish, coldblooded nightmares. That alone had enabled him to preserve his life till now. He raced up the last flight of stairs before the oncoming tide, reaching at last the room to whose window the anchor of the *Nemedis* was hooked. Hurriedly he twisted the cable about the Star Stone and knotted it securely—but before he could climb out of the window, slithering coils closed about his legs. Sibilant voices sang death to him.

He turned, kicking loose, and as he did so the anchor was jarred free, and the cable which was his own path to freedom and the clean airy heights above slid from his grasp. The anchor fell across the dark garden and the *Nemedis* drifted away.

Slimy coils enfolded his body. But, although escape was now impossible, the Valkarthan's fighting heart swelled with vigor. One last mighty battle before the end! With a ringing verse of the war song of the Valkarthan swordsmen on his lips, the giant barbarian turned to fight. Steel rang on cloven bone and thick reptilian gore splattered the walls as Thongor fought on—joyously, recklessly, but without hope.

Chapter 9

Throne of Blood.

The Red Druids gradually attained to power in great Tsargol, until at last the agents of Chaos who worshipped their Triple God in his aspect as Slidith the Lord of Blood were all but supreme in the scarlet city that rose beside the thunderous shores of Yashengzeb Chun the Southern Sea...

—The Tablets of Yathlazon

Another dungeon, he thought with grim humor. I cannot seem to stay out of them!

This one was small and damp, and it stank. It stank of sewage, and man-filth, and fear. And it was as uncomfortable as most jails he had been in over the years. He lay on his back in a huddle of wet, mouldering, foul-smelling straw. But at least that was better than the cold, rough stone of the floor against his bare back. They had taken his broadsword from him, of course, but at least he was not chained. That was a small comfort, he thought, but it was something.

It would seem that the woman-headed serpents had been trained to seize, to hold, but not to kill. This, at least, had been his experience, and it was a grisly one. The clammy and smothering coils of the vile wriggling horde had finally pulled him down and imprisoned his struggling limbs. For all his giant young strength, the barbarian had found himself helpless as a babe in the embrace of those slimy coils. Their steely strength was incredible. They could easily have torn him to bits and devoured the bloody gobbets. But they did nothing.

In time the priests came and took him into captivity. The Red Druids in the scarlet-hooded robes had clamped steel shackles on his wrists and led him forth from the tower of horror into the dungeons of the priesthood. And there he had languished for the remainder of the night.

It must be dawn by now. He could not see the rising sun, buried as he was under a thousand tons of stone, but his keen barbarian senses could estimate the passage of time.

And then came the clank of spears and the shuffle of boots. Dark figures loomed before him and the barred door of his cell swung open.

“Come along, fellow,” the otar of the spearmen said. His voice was quiet, his accent cultured. Thongor glanced at him in surprise. He saw a tall, lean young man some years his own junior. The captain had an aristocratic, even a noble bearing, and his dark eyes were alert and intelligent. Thongor frowned. The man was obviously the son of a noble House. He wondered upon what evil days that House had fallen, that its young princeling was given such a servile and lowly task as captaining a squad of spearmen.

“It will do you no good to resist, *chanthar*,” the young otar said softly. Thongor glanced past him to see the squad he commanded. There were seven of them, and a surly-faced lot they were, with cold little eyes, unshaven jowls, wine-stained tunics. For a moment he measured the grim-faced and capable-looking men with steel-shod spears. Then, silently, he stepped from the cell. They formed a hollow square, with Thongor at the center, and marched down the arched hall. Thongor made no resistance—seven men was just the right number. A few less, and he would have fought. But against seven armed men, he had no chance. Besides, there was still Sharajsha!

They came into a great hall where many nobles in silks and furs lounged, talking softly. All fell silent as the spearmen led their prisoner to a marble platform where two thrones of gorgeously carved scarlet stone stood under a canopy of cloth-of-silver. The otar saluted twice and fell back with his men, leaving Thongor alone before the twin thrones, which were the color of blood.

“Bow to the Archdruid and the Sark, you worm!” one of the nobles said, a paunchy man with flabby jowls and jeweled, puffy hands—the Chamberlain, from his silver mace-of-office. Thongor made no reply, nor did he acknowledge the

other's remark in any way. He folded his naked arms before his chest and stood tall, feet spread.

"Such insolence!" the Chamberlain cried, and stepping forward, he struck Thongor with the mace. The young giant neither winced nor moved, but stood silently, glowering up at the occupants of the two thrones while red blood trickled down his cheek.

"That is enough, Hassib! Such pride is rare in Tsargol. Let us not try to break it," said one of the two enthroned men. He had a thin black beard, curled and perfumed, and a languid, bored face. His lusterless eyes surveyed the Valkarthan from head to foot, slowly.

From his diadem and intricately fashioned robes, this would be the Sark of Tsargol, Drugunda Thal by name. The other, then, in the scarlet robes, was the Red Archdruid, chief of the Red Brotherhood. He was a cold, thin man with shaven pate and colorless eyes. About his thin neck, the great disc of his priestly office hung by a golden chain. It was a medallion of priceless jazite metal, glowing with opal hues and worked into a tangled wreath of serpents with eyes of uncut rubies.

"Stubbornness rather than pride, my Lord Sark," the Archdruid murmured silkenly. "We have means to tame such stubbornness..."

The Sark smiled lazily. "Yes, my Lord Yelim Pelorvis. But look at those shoulders—that chest! Gods, but I should like to see that strength in the arena! What is your name, fellow?"

"Thongor of Valkarth."

"How did you enter the Scarlet Tower?"

Thongor made no reply.

The Druid leaned forward. "And where is the Star Stone? What have you done with the sacred talisman of Slidith?"

Thongor remained silent. But despite his expressionless face, his mind was working rapidly. He realized that what he faced was not just death, but torture. The Red Druids would try to torture him into revealing what had become of their sacred Stone. While he was not afraid of pain, or of death for that matter, his Northlander blood seethed at the notion of torture. When he had served Phal Thurid, Sark of Thurdis, he had seen what fiendish inventions a twisted mind could conceive to wring information from the human body. His soul writhed, sick with disgust at the thought.

"Answer the Lord Archdruid, man!" the Sark said. "Where have you hidden the talisman of Slidith, the Lord of Blood? Answer, or we shall have the truth wrung out of you slowly, drop by drop!"

Thongor was not afraid of revealing the truth. If, as he half expected, he had been betrayed by the wizard, who had flown off leaving him to die at the mercy of the slorgs, telling the truth would neither help nor harm Sharajsha. But he was determined he should not be put to the question. According to the simple, rude faith of his Northland home, Father Gorm's War Maids only carried home to the Hall of Heroes the spirits of those who had fallen cleanly in battle. Thongor knew only too well what the red-hot hooks and clever needles of the torturers would leave of his healthy body once they had begun their monstrous play upon him. Far better to die cleanly by a spearthrust, or in the arena with steel in his hands.

Therefore he sprang, taking the spearmen off guard. From complete immobility he flashed into action. Whirling on his heel, he leaped at the first spearman, felling him with a straight-armed blow to the jaw and wrenching the long spear from his slack hands. Whirling again, he charged at the dais. A guard interposed, but Thongor ran him through the belly and the man fell, clutching with numb hands at his tumbling guts. In a flash he was up the marble steps where Drugunda Thal was rising to his feet, features working with terror. Thongor swung the steel base of the spear at his head, knocking the Sark sprawling. The diadem fell tinkling down the steps.

“Seize him! Slay him!” the Sark squealed, frothing with panic. Guards came leaping up the steps, swords out. Thongor whirled to the Druid’s blood-red throne, but Yelim Pelorvis had melted into the shadows.

Laughing, Thongor whirled to face the guards. He had the advantage of superior height, standing as he did on the top platform of the dais, and he brought it into play. One booted foot crashed into the face of the foremost guard, sending him reeling back upon his comrades’ blades, his face a bloody ruin. The steel spearshaft caught another across the nape, snapping his spine with a *krak!* that could be heard even above the cries and shouts of the crowd. Then he whipped the spear around and caught a third across the throat with a slashing stroke. The man’s head was nearly severed from his trunk and he went down in a shower of gore. Above the clash of steel, Thongor roared out the harsh staves of his Valkarthan war song:

*“Hot blood is wine for Father Gorm!
The War Maids ride the wings of storm!
Our stout blades their red harvests reap
And thirsty steel at last drinks deep!”*

He had slain five of the spearmen when the flat of a blade caught him across the back of the skull and he fell, buried beneath a grunting mass of men, the bloody spear torn from his hands.

When they wrestled him to his feet, arms twisted up behind his back, he was laughing.

“I’ll wager your flap-jawed milksop of a Sark never saw a man fight before, from the way he squeals like a maiden at the sight!” he roared. “Put me in your arena with a good sword in my hand, you gutless, virgin-hearted snake, and I’ll show you fighting that will curdle the slimy blood of Slidith himself!”

The Sark was nearly raving with blind fury. To be hurled from his own throne by a naked and unarmed prisoner—sprawling on his back, feet waving helplessly before his own nobles, and ringed about with guards! Spitting curses, he staggered over to where the guards held Thongor and struck him in the face again and again with his hand, the many gaudy rings that adorned his fingers cutting into Thongor’s face. The barbarian laughed at him.

“Yes! To the arena with this vomit of the North! We’ll see how this hero fares, pitted against our pets!” the Sark snarled.

From nowhere the Archdruid appeared, laying a slim, claw-like hand on Drugunda Thal’s arm.

“No, my Lord Sark! We must put him to the torment—we must find the Stone—”

“Who’s Sark of Tsargol, snake face?” Thongor grinned. “You—or that slime-eating old vulture? I’ll wager he tells you when to change your breeks as well!”

The Sark went livid with rage, spitting and snarling. He shook off the restraining hand of the Druid.

“Drugunda Thal rules in Tsargol, filth! And when you face my pets it is before *my* throne that you shall grovel, whimpering with terror!”

Thongor only laughed mockingly.

“Away to the pits with him! At noon he shall die in the arena—I swear it by all the Gods!”

Thongor was still chuckling when they dragged him away. His ruse had worked. He had not seriously hoped to escape from a roomful of armed men, armed only with a spear himself. His only chance to escape the humiliation and degradation of the Druid’s torture racks had been to enrage the Sark to the point of fury so that his thirst for revenge would goad him into overriding the objections of the Red Archdruid. Obviously, from the equal height of the twin thrones, the Archdruid was co-ruler with the Sark of Tsargol; at least he stood very near Drugunda Thal in authority, Thongor assumed. And with a barbarian’s instinctive understanding of human weaknesses, the young Valkarthan could see that Drugunda Thal—languid degenerate that he was—was usually kept well under the control of the Red Archdruid. Doubtless this was done by the simple method of pandering to and encouraging whatever passions were the peculiar weakness of the Sark. While busied with his pleasures, the Sark doubtless let the cold-blooded priest run the kingdom.

A fighting grin bared Thangor’s white teeth. He had certainly brought his scheme to success! Not only had he goaded the enraged and maddened Sark to the point of condemning him to death in the arena rather than torture under the knives of the priesthood, but it seemed as well that he had forced a breach between Druid and Sark. It was too soon to guess at the outcome of this, but it might well have repercussions which might be twisted to serve his own needs.

He was still chuckling over these matters when the guards thrust him into a cell in the pits below the arena. The spearmen had never before heard a condemned man laugh as he was locked into a cell, and they exchanged wondering glances.

But then they had never before encountered a warrior such as the giant young Valkarthan, either. And Thongor grimly vowed he would show them fighting such as they had never seen, when he was thrust forth into the blinding sun, sand crunching under his heel, the roar of thousands ringing in his ears, to face the snarling fangs of whatever monster he was destined to do battle against for his life.

These thoughts Thongor firmly put from him. The arena would come soon enough. In the meantime he was hungry. It had been many hours since he had last eaten. He resolved to face the death in the arena with a full belly, at least.

Shaking the bars and lifting his voice in a roar, he bellowed for the jailer as if calling for an innkeeper.

Chapter 10

The Arena of Death.

*White sands drank deep the reeking gore
As red steel ripped the scaly hide.
A thousand throats in one great roar
Saluted as the monster died.
—Thongor's Saga, Stave IV*

Thongor had hardly finished his rude meal of boupfar beef, bread, cheese, and sour red wine, which he had bullied out of the dim-witted old pit-keeper, before another troop of guards came up to his cell.

The barred door creaked open and the guard captain harshly commanded him to step forth.

"Gods, can't you even give a man time to digest his meal?" Thongor grumbled.

The otar—it was another man this time, a surly-faced lout with bristling stubble on his jowls—laughed harshly. "Twill be your last one, swine of a barbarian, so I hope you enjoyed it," he grunted with a leering smirk.

"Aye, 'twas good enough," Thongor said. "But the sight of your fat face may ruin my digestion." The captain's eyes went cold at these words, and a small ripple of laughter ran through the squadron. It stilled as the captain raked his men with mean, hard eyes.

"Come on out, you, or we'll drag you out," the otar growled. "Don't keep your betters waiting for the spectacle of your death!"

Thongor saw that this time there were *ten* guards sent to escort him to his doom. He smiled quietly. The warriors held drawn swords bare in their hands. Obviously the powers that be did not wish to see another example of Thongor in action, and the extra men were an additional precaution.

He smiled. He was acquiring a reputation here in Tsargol.

He stepped out of the cell and was surprised to see a familiar face among the warriors. It was the same lean, aristocratic young otar who had summoned him forth that very morning. He looked again and saw that the young noble this time was disarmed. The red sash of office was gone from his warrior's harness, and his wrists were bound with chains.

Thongor glanced over at the grinning face of the new otar. With one dirty hand he was fondling the red sash, now worn across his own chest. There had been something of a change in the ranks, Thongor surmised.

"Why are you here?" he asked as the spearmen led them out.

The former otar smiled quietly and said, "Because of you, Northlander. I was disgraced that my prisoner should break loose before the Sark—hurl the Sark on his royal face, in fact, while I and my men stood by gaping. So I have been stripped of rank and am to face the terrors of the arena beside you!"

"I am sorry for that. I only meant to get my hide out of the torturers' reach and into the arena where I could expect a clean death," Thongor muttered. "I did not mean to bring another man into trouble by my actions."

The otar shrugged.

"Ah, well. What matter? It would have happened sooner or later. The Sark hates my family, who are a minor branch of the former ruling dynasty. His father, Sanjar Thal, seized power when the last House died out. The Druids supported him because he was inclined to this bloody Slidith-worship, while my House, the Karvus, ignored the cult. The blood-drinkers did not dare to stamp us out because of the high esteem my father had won in the Vozashpan Wars. Instead they stripped us of power and humiliated us, reducing my father from Chamberlain to a mere archivist, and myself to an otar, the mere captain of a hundred."

Thongor absorbed this silently as they were marched through winding stone corridors.

"What of your father? Can he not help you now?"

The otar smiled sadly. "Nay. He died three years ago—poison, some say. I am the Prince of my House, and if I cannot help myself, there is no one who can. Well, we shall die together, then. It is perhaps better this way, with a good sword in my hand, facing an enemy that I can see, than being struck down in the dark by an assassin's dirk or a poisoned goblet, which would come in a year or two, when the mighty Sark thinks I am too powerful."

Thongor nodded, grimly. This was the kind of spirit his barbaric soul admired most! He liked the young otar's wolfish grin and tough-hewn spirit.

"If we are to die together, let me know your name," said the Valkarthan. "Mine is Thongor, Son of Thumithar, a mercenary out of Valkarth."

The youth smiled. "Well met, Thongor. I am Karm Karvus, Lord of Karvus... or I was. I shall be proud to fight beside such a warrior as yourself. I have never seen such work as you displayed there in the Hall of Two Thrones. Let us face death on the sands and go down in a battle that shall leave the snake-blooded lords of Tsargol shivering in their robes!"

"It is agreed," Thongor smiled.

"Quit whispering, you two!" the new otar snapped. "Here! Take swords! You, barbarian, take this!" And he handed Thongor his own Valkarthan broadsword, which he had not seen since it had served him so well in the Scarlet Tower. He hefted it in his hand, grinning at the guard.

"The Sark says you will fight better with your own blade in your hand." The guard sniggered. "I say you could be armed with thunderbolts, for all the good it will do you when the Gate of Death lifts!"

Beside him, Thongor heard Kann Karvus draw in his breath sharply.

"The Gate of Death? The Sark will pit us against—?"

"Yes!" the otar sneered. "You will face the Terror of the Arena, Karm Karvus!" Then to Thongor he said; "It is a great honor, Valkarthan, but one perhaps that a barbarian such as yourself could not appreciate. Only the worst criminals face the Terror of the Arena, and then only on days sacred to the Lord of Blood, the God Slidith." And turning back to Karm Karvus again, he grinned nastily. "It was a happy day for me, Karm Karvus, when you allowed your prisoner to insult the great Sark. Now I am otar in your place, instead of a mere spearman!"

Karm Karvus laughed. "Yes, Tole Phomor, and you may even become a daotar in time. Not being a noble such as I, but a baseborn cur, you will never arouse the jealousy of the Sark!"

Tole Phomor snarled a curse and thrust them forth.

"Go out and die!"

They went out the stone portal into the arena and stood blinking in the sun as the steel gate crashed shut behind them. Karm Karvus hefted his good Tsargolian rapier and glanced around. Smooth white sand, bakingly hot under the tropic noonday sun, stretched on either side. The arena was oval, walled with steep stone along whose upper edge down-pointing iron spikes were set. Above the row of spikes, tier upon tier of gaily dressed Tsargolians sat, applauding their presence with cheers and boos and laughter.

Thongor blinked against the sun's blaze and stared about him. Straight ahead was the royal box, where Drugunda Thal, Sark of Tsargol, and the Red Archdruid sat, apparently friends again. Directly beneath the box was a grim iron gate made in the likeness of a horned human skull, whose gaping jaws were set with heavy iron bars.

The Gate of Death.

Thongor spread his legs and stood waiting. He wondered what would emerge from the jaws of death, what possible beast the Sark would pit him against that could be so fierce as to earn the title of the Terror of the Arena. He had faced all manner of beasts in the past few days, from grakk and dwark to the fearful slorg. What would come out of the Gate of Death?

Above, in the shadow of the canopy-covered royal box, Drugunda Thal leaned forward expectantly as the two emerged from the pit's gate. Gloatingly, the Sark ran his eyes over the magnificent body of the Valkarthan, eyeing the smooth, tanned flesh that would so soon be torn to ribbons, dripping hot blood into the white arena sands.

"I still say this is a mistake, O Sark," the soft voice of the Red Archdruid came to him. "The man should be tortured, so that we may learn what he has done with the Star Stone."

"It is the arena for such scum, Yelim Pelorvis, as I have commanded. The Stone was not upon him when he was captured, but neither was it hurled from the windows of the Scarlet Tower into the temple grounds, for all that has been searched. No, the barbarian merely hid it in some corner of the Tower, where it shall doubtless soon be found."

"But what if—"

"Silence, I say! I am Sark over this city, not you, Druid!"

Yelim Pelorvis lapsed into silence, but his eyes were burning with a cold, acid fire and he glared venomously at the Sark. Drugunda Thal stood, magnificent in his gorgeous silken robes, the diadem of Tsargol sparkling upon his brows. He raised one thin arm imperiously.

"*Release the Terror!*" he cried shrilly.

Thongor tensed as the steel bars of the Gate of Death slowly, creakingly, rose into the wail, revealing a black pit. Then—

With a blood-freezing scream, a crimson thunderbolt launched itself across the arena straight at them. It was all snarling jaws and glittering fangs. Eyes the color

of yellow sulphur blazed with blood-lust. A wicked barbed tail lashed the sands as it charged with incredible speed.

Thongor froze, every sense alert. It was a zemadar, the most dreaded monster of all Lemuria. The ferocious zemadar was the most deadly killer of the jungles, possessed of an insane ferocity that often made it charge in the face of certain death, capable of outracing even a speed-bred zamph in the fury of its hurtling charge.

But it was more dangerous still because of its triple row of foot-long fangs, each tusk razor-keen and bearing a poisoned saliva that instantly paralyzed its foe. Like a crimson juggernaut it hurled across the sands at them.

Thongor flung himself to one side and plowed into the sand, the zemadar narrowly missing him. The beast spun instantly, snapping at the air over his head. He drove the broadsword into its throat.

But to no avail. The leathery flesh of the crimson monster was too tough for even his blade to pierce. He leaped backward as the twenty-foot horror sprang at him, batting the air with steel-hooked claws and growling ferociously.

Karm Karvus had also barely jumped clear of the charge. He brought his blade home against the monster's ribs, but the sword glanced off.

The zemadar whirled, its barbed tail lashing. It knocked Karm Karvus' feet out from under him, and he fell sprawling face-downward in the sand. The zemadar turned to gobble up its prey.

Then Thongor did a thing so foolhardy—or so brave, depending on one's outlook—that it brought the entire throng to its feet with a gasp. In the box, the Sark leaned forward—blood-lust visible in his pale, twitching face and glistening eyes.

Thongor sprang upon the beast's back.

Locking his iron-thewed legs about the base of the monster's neck, he clung to the arching neck, ignoring the ridge of spines that ran down its back. The zemadar had never felt a live weight on its back before, and it went mad with rage. It bucked and kicked with a snarling frenzy. But Thongor clung grimly to his precarious perch, and began inching upward.

"What is that mad fool doing?" the Sark gasped, craning forward to see through the blur of the struggling man and monster.

The cold, sardonic voice of Yelim Pelorvis rang clearly: "Climbing up to get at the zemadar's eyes, I believe. They are the only vulnerable portion of the beast's entire body, as he doubtless knows."

The Sark laughed harshly.

"He will never do it! Never!"

Yelim Pelorvis smiled a thin-lipped smile.

"We shall see. I have a feeling that you are about to lose your prize zemadar, O mighty Sark."

Sweat dripped down into Thongor's eyes and the naked sun blinded him. He clambered up the lithely twisting neck to the head, digging his feet into the ridges of the zemadar's crimson hide and ignoring its struggles to unseat him. He clamped one brown arm about the monster's upper neck and with his free hand drove the steel blade deep into the zemadar's eye. It screamed like a great sheet of canvas being ripped apart with one pull.

He dug the point deep, probing for the zemadar's tiny brain. On the sands below, Karm Karvus closed in, driving his steel at the monster's belly.

The zemadar, mad with pain, kicked the otar away again and fell backward, grinding Thongor into the sand. The enormous weight of the creature might have crushed him, but the sand was soft and loosely piled, so he merely sank into it. The crowd went mad with the heroic battle, screaming their throats raw under the blazing noontide sun.

The zemadar staggered to its feet and dragged itself over to the wall. Thongor, seeing that he was doing no good there, slid the sword out and reached for the second eye.

"What is my pet doing now?" the Sark quavered.

"Trying to scrape the barbarian off his back by rubbing against the arena wall," the Archdruid observed coolly.

Indeed it was. And it had rubbed Thongor's left thigh raw before the cold steel of the Valkarthan broadsword sank to its hilt in the monster's other eye.

The crowd held its breath.

Coughing blood, the zemadar staggered blindly away from the wall into the center of the arena. Thongor sprang from its back, landing lithely on his feet.

Twisting its gory head from side to side slowly, blindly seeking its foe, the zemadar lurched up to the Gate of Death. Thongor felt a chill run down his spine, like fingers of ice. Gorm! The thing took long enough to die...

It coughed a gush of blood and sank to the sands, twitching. The long spiked tail thumped the sands once or twice, raising a white cloud. And then it died.

Thongor, with Karm Karvus by his side, raced across the arena to stand beside the beast. Then he stared up at the astounded Sark.

"That is how a man fights, Sark of Tsargol. Now let us see how a man dies!"

And he flung the sword glittering through the air. The paralyzed throng watched as the blade completed its sparkling flight—and quenched its brightness in the breast of Drugunda Thal, last Sark of the Royal House of Thal.

The Sark came to his feet, seizing the sword hilt with both hands, staring at it with goggling eyes. His mouth gawked like that of a beached fish. Blood came out and dribbled down his thin beard. With a heave of unexpected strength he tore the blade out of his breast. Then he tottered and fell face-forward from the royal box, hurtling down to thud against the arena sands, almost at Thongor's feet.

The Valkarthan warrior bent down, picked up his sword, and wiped it clean against the blood-bed rabbled robes of the dead Sark.

Yelim Pelorvis stood alone in the royal box, a tall, lean figure wrapped in scarlet robes. Slowly he stooped, smiling, to pick up the diadem of Tsargol. It had fallen to the floor of the box when Drugunda Thal toppled over the ledge. Now he set it in place upon his own shaven brows.

Then the throng exploded into noise and action. Cursing guards came leaping down the tiers, brandishing glittering weapons. Groups of fantastically robed nobles, like panic-stricken flocks of gorgeous birds, poured to and fro, screaming and shouting. Women shrieked and fainted. Red-robed priests chanted droning psalms, unintelligible in the general uproar. From the pits across the arena, guards emerged and came pelting across the sands.

Thongor grinned at Karm Karvus.

“That was just a taste of battle, friend! But now, at least, we are pitted against men, not monsters.”

Karm Karvus laughed and tossed his sword up, sparkling in the sun, deftly catching it by the hilt.

“Now we shall show them what real fighting is, eh, barbarian?” he asked gaily.

Then the sun went dark.

Thongor looked up as a swift shadow moved across the blood-splashed sands. Aloft, he saw a glittering metal ovoid hovering against the sun. It glided toward them, cutting the air silently. A knotted rope dangled from the rail of the rear deck. The *Nemedis*!

Thongor grunted. So the old wizard had not abandoned him after all! Hope welled up within him. He felt like laughing or singing. But there was no time for either.

As Karm Karvus stood frozen, staring up at the weird flying craft in awe and amazement, Thongor seized the younger man, tossed him across his broad shoulders, thrust his broadsword into his girdle, and reached up to catch the rope as it swept past.

The *Nemedis* turned and climbed steeply, lifting the two warriors from the arena sands. They hurtled above the wildly milling crowd, soared above the towertops of Tsargol—and up and off, vanishing into the noonday skies of antique Lemuria, wherein they were soon lost to sight.

Chapter 11

Crypt of the Flame.

*From wild red dawn to wild red dawn we held our iron line
And fought till the blades broke in our hands and the sea ran red as wine.
With arrow, spear, and heavy mace we broke the Dragon's pride,
Thigh-deep in the roaring sea we fought, and crimson ran the tide.
—Diombar's Song of the Last Battle*

They clung to the line as the floater lifted. A few arrows hissed by them as they cleared the last tier of the arena, and then they were out over the streets of Tsargol, where news of the Sark's death had spread and townsmen fought with Druids till the gutters ran with blood.

“What is this—*thing*?” Karm Karvus asked.

Thongor lifted his voice above the roaring winds that sang about them. “A flying boat. It is driven by a friend—a powerful magician from Chush. Have no fear.” As the red walls of Tsargol drifted past below them, the two pulled themselves up the swaying line, hand over hand. They clambered over the low rail and Karm Karvus wiped his brow, staring down at the forests and fields, that rushed past beneath their keel.

“His magic must be powerful indeed, to fly like a bird without wings!”

The wizard was in the *Nemedis*' cabin. They went across the quivering deck to join him.

"Thank Pnoth you are safe, Thongor," Sharajsha said as they entered the cabin. "Who is your companion?"

"Karm Karvus, a noble of Tsargol, condemned with me to the arena. I could not leave him behind while I escaped alone." The wizard nodded, greeting Karm Karvus.

"Let me salve your wounds," he said, locking the controls on a northwestern course. From beneath the low bunk he drew medicines. As he applied a poultice to Thongor's thigh, which had been rubbed raw when the zemadar scraped him against the arena wall, he said; "I did not know what to do when the anchor became dislodged from the Tower's window. Before I could maneuver the *Nemedis* back and attempt to pick you up, the gongs were ringing and the temple gardens were filled with guards and priests with flaming torches. Did you think I had deserted you?"

"I did not know what to think," Thongor admitted.

"I saw that you had tied the Star Stone to the line, so I took the floater up beyond sight and waited for a chance to rescue you. Then I saw you and Karm Karvus fighting in the arena and came down to help you escape. I thank Pnoth, God of Wisdom, that you escaped with your lives!"

"Thank, rather, Tiandra, Goddess of Luck," Thongor grunted. "Have you anything to eat?"

All that afternoon the airboat flew above Ptartha, while Thongor and Karm Karvus ate and rested. Sharajsha told the Tsargolian of their quest for the Star Stone and of their plan to overcome the Dragon Kings, and the Prince of Karvus decided to join their adventures. Now that he was a homeless wanderer like Thongor, he said, he could do no better than to assist their cause in gratitude for his rescue.

"By evening we shall be over Patanga, the City of Fire," Sharajsha said. "I have cut a large fragment off the Star Stone, and in the Eternal Fire I must forge it into a sword blade."

"Where is this fire?" asked the Valkarthan.

"In the crypts below the High Altar of Yamath, Lord of Flame. I have a plan by which we can penetrate the city and, with luck, forge the Star Sword uninterrupted and undiscovered. But we must wait till darkness."

By nightfall they were high over Patanga. The red-roofed city rose on the Patangan Gulf, between the mouths of the Ysar and the Saan rivers. As darkness gathered over the sky, the floater sank silently to hover like a ghost-hawk over the spiked domes of the Fire Temple.

"One of us must remain in the *Nemedis*," Sharajsha said. "Karm Karvus, that one must be you."

"It is not my way to remain behind in safety when my friends face danger," the Tsargolian protested.

"I must forge the Sword and Thongor shall guard me. There is none to remain behind, holding the floater in readiness for flight, save you."

"Very well then."

Sharajsha gathered a black cloak about himself, drawing the hood over his features.

“When we are on the roof, take the *Nemedis* up a thousand feet and remain there. We shall signal with this mirror when we are ready to go,” the wizard said, showing Karm Karvus a small glittering disc. The Tsargolian nodded.

“Let us be gone,” Thongor said restlessly. “It is risky having the floater hang here like this, where anyone might glance up from the street below and see it.”

Karm Karvus touched the controls and the floater descended, brushing her keel along the temple roof. The two cloaked figures of his comrades slid over the rail and melted into the shadows of the dome. Then he touched the controls again and the silvery shape vanished upward into the cloudy darkness.

“This way. There should be a door here,” Sharajsha said, feeling along the curved dome. He found a secret catch and a door fell open, revealing a yawning square of blackness. They entered carefully, feeling their way.

“This stairway spirals down. Be careful and watch your footing—we dare not risk a light!”

They went down the well of complete darkness as silently as possible, the wizard carrying the Star Stone.

“How do you know of this way?” asked Thongor.

“Of old this was the palace of Zaffar, a wizard of ancient times. I have read in his scrolls of the network of secret panels and hidden stairways that he built into his castle. This stairwell leads us directly into the crypts below the entire Temple, where the Eternal Fire burns.”

“What is this Fire?”

“No man knows. The Yellow Druids of Yamath call it *The Ever-Burning Fire*. It is a jet of some unknown vapor that rises from the secret core of Lemuria—or perhaps even from the very bowels of the Earth. It has burned for countless ages with a flame that never goes out. The Cult of Yamath regards it as an oracle and reads the portents of the unborn future by its weird light. I feel it is a natural phenomenon of some sort.”

They were now within the very walls of the Fire Temple. These walls of massive blocks of stone were hollow, and between them the stair wound down into the secret crypts beneath. After some time they reached the last step, and Sharajsha felt about for the second catch while Thongor drew his great Valkarthan sword out, ready for danger.

A click and the door opened. They stepped out into a corridor of smooth stone, lit by flaring torches of oil-soaked wood, set along the wall in wrought-iron brackets.

“This way!” Sharajsha hissed.

They slunk along the corridor, standing close to the wall to gain as much protection from the shadows as was possible. They encountered no guards and came at length to a great brass door. It was carved and worked with the flame-edged symbols of Yamath.

“No guards?” Thongor grunted.

Sharajsha shrugged. The door was unbolted. He pushed it open and they looked down into a great cavern with rough-hewn walls. In the floor of the cavern was a

sunken well. From it a dancing flame of weird green could be seen emerging. It cast flickering shadows about the gloomy cave.

“You stand here and watch by the door. I shall go below and perform what is necessary.”

Thongor nodded and took his place as the wizard went down a stone flight of steps into the cavern of the Fire. He held the door open a slit so that he could see out and would detect anyone coming. This complete absence of guards both worried and puzzled him. He remembered the way the seemingly unguarded Scarlet Tower had contained the deathly slorgs. It was logical to assume that the cavern was similarly protected. Then he shrugged. Whatever might come, his stout sword or the wizard’s magic could certainly handle it.

Sharajsha reached the edge of the well. From beneath his cloak he drew out a fragment of the Star Stone, a hammer inscribed with runes and queer letters of magic writings, and a long-handled pair of tongs. He clamped the tongs about the fragment and held it within the dancing green cone of the Eternal Fire of Yamath. Whatever caused this mysterious green flame lent it far fiercer and more intense heat than any ordinary fire, for the fragment of star soon glowed cherry-red, then pale orange-yellow. The Stone hissed and crackled in the dancing green Fire.

A sudden noise! Thongor snapped instantly alert. Putting his eye to the crack of the door, he could see nothing. But he heard a soft scraping sound approaching down the torchlit corridor.

With a whispered call, he informed Sharajsha of this. The Stone now glowed pale yellow-white.

“Hold them off!” the wizard called. He withdrew the glowing fragment and held it over the iron edge of the well. He began to beat the glowing metal with his hammer, and as he did so his lips formed soundless words.

A fat, yellow-robed Druid approached down the hall, accompanied by a dozen guards with plumed helmets. Would they enter the brass door, or go by it to some other room? Thongor’s question was soon answered. They headed for the door of the cavern. A guard stepped forward ahead of the Yellow Druid to open the door for him. As he did so, stepping into the cavern, Thongor cut him down with a single stroke. The man’s body rolled down the flight of stone steps.

The guards yelled and their swords flashed into their hands. Thongor swung the gates wide and stood there in the entrance, smiling faintly, the long sword dripping crimson. Two guards sprang at him.

Steel rang on steel harshly, filling the hall with iron echoes. They were decent swordsmen, but Thongor had faced far better. He disarmed one with a practiced twist of the wrist and gutted him with a backhanded swipe across the middle. The man fell screaming, and his body blocked the other. The second stepped back to avoid the falling body, lowering his guard as he did so. Thongor’s point darted forward and sank into his breast.

The doorway was only wide enough for two, and now that the first two had fallen, two others came forward. For a time Thongor was hard-pressed. Behind him he heard the measured ringing of the magic hammer, beating the glowing lump of Stone into a sword blade. He fought on.

Two grim-faced guardsmen engaged his sword. Steel flashed and rang in the red glare of the torches. One guard fell with a cloven skull. Thongor’s dripping blade

sank into the second's chest. But the tough yellow leather of the guard's jerkin caught and held the steel, and as Thongor labored to withdraw the blade, two guards seized him. One held his arms and the other drove a dirk at his heart. Thongor kicked the guard in the face and wrenched free. They were all around him now. His fists drove like mallets, crushing flesh and smashing bone. Then they brought him up against the wall, pinning his arms and legs. The fat Druid came snarling toward him now that he was helpless. When he had been free, the priest had not ventured within reach of his arms.

"Blasphemer! Desecrated!" he hissed, baring his greasy teeth. "You dare spatter the sacred crypts with human blood!"

Thongor laughed and spat directly in the Druid's face.

The priest went scarlet to the lips, blazing with fury. He seized a sword and brought it up in a hissing arc toward's the Valkarthan's naked chest—

His hand faltered—stopped. The blade rang on the stone floor. The face that had flushed scarlet with fury now paled with sick terror. The Druid's eyeballs crawled to the left, staring at something beyond Thongor.

One by one the guards turned to stare at the thing Thongor could not see, beyond his shoulder. Their faces blanched white with pure fear. Trembling, afraid to turn and run, they backed away down the hall.

Now free, Thongor scooped up his sword and turned to face—*green ghosts!*

There were three of them—transparent as glass, dim as mist, a weird and sickly green. Their groping hands were bird-clawed. Fanged and dripping jaws grinned in dead mockery from skull-heads. In black eye sockets, sparks of evil green fire flickered.

Thongor felt his hackles rise, his neck-skin prickle. And the superstitious night-fears of the barbarian rose within him. He backed away, watching as the grisly phantoms advanced. One of them, whose terrible skull-head was veiled behind lank hair that grew long from a dirty patch of scalp still clinging to the naked bone, advanced with a hound-like lope. The second slid forward with a snaky grace. The third, whose head had been cut off and was carried beneath one bone-thin arm, shambled along as if crippled. From their hideous green bodies, filthy tatters of tomb shrouds flapped.

The Druid, his fat, quivering face the color of curds, made the sign of Yamath with a puffy hand. Neither it nor the stuttering ritual of exorcism he next tried halted the advance of the green ghosts.

Abandoning dignity, the priest turned and ran with the guards and Thongor faced the phantoms alone.

He kissed the red blade of the broadsword and muttered a quick prayer to Father Gorm. Then he sprang forward. The red steel hissed through the ghosts. They broke and crumbled like a patch of fog as the sword swished through them. Slack-jawed, he watched them fade and vanish.

From the doorway, Sharajsha smiled.

Thongor released his breath explosively.

"So it was you!"

"I thought you needed some help," the wizard said.

Thongor wiped the clammy sweat from his face.

"Aye, that I did—but did you have to scare the guts out of me in doing it?"

“They were not real—mere phantoms of the mind. Come, yon fat-bellied priest will raise the alarm. We must be gone, and quickly.”

“And the Sword?”

Sharajsha raised it from beneath his cloak. With his rune-enchanted hammer he had beaten the glowing-hot Stone into a long, rough blade. Along its jagged, uneven edges blue sparks crawled. The hard Star Steel shimmered with power, and the air about it quivered.

“It must be impregnated with the virtue of lightning next, and that we can only do upon Sharimba, the Mountain of Thunder, a thousand vom from here. Let us leave!”

They went down the curving stone corridor, Thongor leading. He padded like a jungle beast, every keen sense alert for danger. Surely the alarm would have spread by now! But no sound, no call, no tread of running feet could he detect.

They came to the secret door. Even as Sharajsha reached for the concealed catch that opened the panel, the vengeance of Yamath struck. The wizard gasped, clutched at his throat, and fell, sprawling on the cold stone.

Thongor, too, staggered. He braced himself erect, holding onto the wall with one hand while he struggled against the mysterious influence that threatened to overwhelm him. It was as if a sudden and irresistible sleep were coming over him.

Sharajsha struggled to speak. “Vapor... drugged... do not... breathe...”

Then the wizard was unconscious. Thongor held onto the edge of sleep with iron strength, fighting with every atom of strength his powerful body held against the dark tides that rose to engulf him. With swimming eyes he sought for the hidden catch, numb hand pawing the blank stone in vain. His lungs ached for air. His mighty heart labored within his panting, straining chest. Then, just as he had reached the farthest limits of his strength, his finger touched the hidden catch and the door swung open, striking him off balance.

He fell full-length on the floor, the impact driving the air from his lungs. Instinctively, he took a breath. The narcotic vapor entered his lungs, and Thongor lost consciousness, there in the sacred crypts of Yamath under the great Fire Temple of Patanga.

Chapter 12

On the Altars of Yamath.

*The naked virgins on thine altars plead
As scarlet flame on pallid flesh doth feed!
Lord of the Fire, drink down young lives like wine.
Hearts, limbs and breasts—their very souls—are thine!*
—The Rituals of Yamath

Sumia had known fear, but never before had she known despair. Was it days—or weeks—since they had come to drag her off to these dungeons in which

she had been chained ever since? She did not know. When the Yellow Druid Vaspas Ptol had first pressed upon her his suit of marriage, she had coldly and proudly refused. That had been at the death of her father, Orvath Chond, Sark of Patanga. For months afterward the oily Prince of the Druids of Yamath had continued to offer her marriage—and each time, his humility lessened and his arrogance increased, in direct proportion to the rise of his power over the city.

At last, believing his position secure, he had come into her bedchamber unannounced, to force himself upon her. The young Princess had resisted him with a drawn knife and threatened to slay him if he so much as laid one cold hand upon her. Vaspas Ptol had withdrawn, snarling threats, and that very hour his soldiers had seized her and brought her to the secret dungeons below the Fire Temple. Here had she languished since that time. At first she had feared that Vaspas Ptol would force himself upon her, bound and helpless as she was. But he had not come near. Nor had the guards offered her any discourtesy, only silence to her pleas and indifference to her commands.

She knew now that the Yellow Druid was waiting for the Festival of the Year's End, when living sacrifice would be offered up to the dread Lord of the Fires. That sacrifice, Sumia knew, would be herself.

And the festival would be this very night.

It was now about dawn. She had been unable to sleep all the night, and now in the first hours of morning, just as she was drifting off to sleep, the shuffle of footsteps and the clank of accouterments awakened her. Guards were coming down the hall.

The lock clanged and the iron door of her cell opened. Into the cell two men were dragged. They were both unconscious, hanging limply from the hands of their captors. Sumia watched in puzzlement as the guards chained them to the opposite wall. Neither of them was a Patangan. The taller and younger man wore the common leather clout and trappings of a mercenary soldier of fortune, and the old, bearded man wore the long robes of a sage.

"Who are these men you bring to my cell?" she demanded. The captain of the guards smiled thinly.

"Two fellow-sacrifices, destined for the altars of fire beside yourself, O Princess!"

"They are not Patangans... what have they done?"

The otar shrugged, "They were found in the sacred cavern of the Eternal Fire, which their presence desecrated. When they were discovered, the young one fought, slaying six guards and insulting a Druid. Vaspas Ptol has condemned them to the altars. He believes they were in the crypts attempting to steal the offerings and treasures, but were interrupted before they could get to them."

The guards locked Thongor and Sharajsha to the opposite wall of the cell and departed leaving Sumia to her silent vigil beside the two unconscious men.

Thongor awoke from the sleep vapor first and stared around. The first thing he saw was a slim young girl sitting on a wooden bench across the cell, looking at him. She appeared to be about eighteen, with hair of glossy blackness, which poured in thick waves of curls down her back. Her skin was of an almost marble whiteness, tinged with creamy color. Had she not moved, Thongor would have thought her a statue, for her features and limbs were so flawless they seemed to have been chiseled from pure marble. Her face was a slender oval under the glossy

mass of curling black hair. Beneath thin, curving black brows her eyes were dark wells of light.

Under his gaze her cheeks darkened from soft cream to the same rich color as her soft lips.

“Where are we?” Thongor asked.

“In the dungeons of Vaspas Ptol, Archdruid of Yamath, God of Fire,” the girl answered.

Thongor tested his chains. His wrists were riveted to the wall against which his back was pressed. The old wizard, still unconscious from the narcotic vapor, was similarly bound beside him. The girl wore a copper ring about her slim waist, fastened to a ring set in the wall with a slender copper chain.

Thongor told her his name.

“I am Sumia of Patanga,” she said.

He regarded her with surprise.

“The daughter of Orvath Chond, Sark of Patanga? Why is the Sarkaja of Patanga chained to the wall of the dungeons of Patanga?”

“Because I scorned to wed Vaspas Ptol,” the girl said proudly. “He approached me when the Sark, my father, died some seven months ago. I have refused him, not just once but many times. But his power has grown in Patanga, until at last he feels strong enough to dispose of the Sarkal office and rule the city himself.”

Thongor nodded sourly. The greed and lust for power of the Druids was familiar enough to him. If ever he managed to get out of this place and complete his task with Sharajsha, perhaps he could set about uprooting some of these depraved priesthoods.

“Tonight is the Festival of the Year’s End,” Sumia said. “We shall be sacrificed to Yamath tonight, while Vaspas Ptol watches.”

“That will be as it may,” Thongor growled. “The old man captured with me is a powerful magician. Doubtless he will have something to say about that—as will I, if I ever get my hands free and close them about the hilt of a sword. But tell me, will the people of Patanga really stand by and watch their rightful Sarkaja die on the altars of Yamath?”

“Yes. They are helpless before the might of the Druids. Vaspas Ptol has this city in the palm of his hand. The people fear his magic and his cruelty. And he has played so cunningly upon their superstitions that he rules them through their dread of Yamath, the false god he worships.”

“Is there no one, then? No relative... no lover?”

She colored again, lifting her head proudly. “I am the last member of the House of Chond. Nor have I any lover. I am here in this dark place because I scorn to marry any man whom my heart has not chosen!”

She fell silent then, nor could Thongor engage her in any further conversation, for she answered only briefly. Shrugging, he made himself as comfortable as possible against the wall and went to sleep. His recent exertions and lack of rest took their toll. He slept soundly for some hours, facing death with the healthy contempt he always displayed toward danger.

When he awoke again, Sharajsha had also come to his senses. Either the old man had breathed in a more powerful dose of the sleep vapor or else his advanced

years made him more susceptible to its influence, for he had out-slept Thongor by hours. Now he was conversing in low tones with the girl.

Thongor yawned and stretched and greeted his comrade.

“Use some of your magic, Wizard. Get us out of these chains and put a sword in my hands.”

Sharajsha sighed.

“They have fastened my hands apart,” he said. “I cannot touch my sigils to use them. We shall have to wait until the guards free my hands.”

“When will that be?”

“The noon hour, perchance, when they come to feed us.”

“They will not feed us,” Sumia interrupted. “Since we are the destined sacrifices of Yamath, we shall fast until the hour of the New Year, so that we may be pure for the burning.”

Thongor cursed.

“It is bad enough to sacrifice us to their filthy god—must they starve us as well?”

The girl stared at him and laughed. “Never before have I heard a man complain more about his empty belly than about his approaching death!” she said.

Thongor shrugged. “That I am a prisoner condemned to death is something I cannot help or change,” he said. “And I refuse to waste thought by worrying about that which I cannot change. But I cannot help feeling hunger!”

“Cease thinking of your belly, then, and think about our chances of escaping from this vile place,” the old wizard suggested.

“Karm Karvus is still free and aloft in the airboat,” Thongor observed. “Perhaps he will try to rescue us.”

Sharajsha thought about that for a time, then reluctantly shook his head.

“He cannot know where we are kept. And one man alone can hardly penetrate into the secret, closely guarded places of a city filled with enemies. No...he is now in the same position as I was when you were captured in the Scarlet Tower of Slidith. And he will doubtless do exactly what I did then: simply wait above the city for some sign.”

There seemed nothing else to say in answer to that.

The day passed slowly. But, gradually, it did pass. And after many hours of slow-paced time, the shadows of evening began to gather and the hour of the festival and sacrifice drew ever nearer.

Thongor had heard of this Lord of the Flame, but the cults of the Southlands were alien to him. He held a simple faith in Gorm the Father of Gods and Men and scorned the worship of lesser beings. Sharajsha, who had peered deeply into the mysteries, informed him that this Yamath was no god at all but a demon—in fact, he was another aspect of the Triple God of Chaos, and brother to Slidith the Lord of Blood. The Yellow Druids who ruled Patanga were doubtless allied to their crimson-robed brethren in Tsargol by the Sea. Thongor growled a curse. These iniquitous Druidical brotherhoods were devoted to evil and agony and fear, and they had attained very great power over the Nine Cities of the West. It was time their power was crushed underfoot, as a man crushes the head of a venomous serpent with a boot-heel...

Eventually the hour of sacrifice came. A troop of Patangan guards came to strike off their shackles and escort them to the great Fire Temple where they would die.

For lack of any better scheme, Thongor had planned to erupt into action the moment his hands were free. He had few hopes of fighting through a throng of armed and wary men, but it was better to fall in battle than through drawn-out torments. The guards, however, gave him no opportunity to resist. His wrists were manacled before the dungeon chains were loosed, and a heavy chain was set between his ankles.

Worst of all, Sharajsha's arms were bound in such a way that he could not employ the magical powers of his talismanic rings. He met Thongor's questioning gaze with a weary shake of the head.

Thongor released a deep breath. "Well, at least we shall die in the company of friends," he said grimly.

"That is something, at least," the old wizard smiled.

"Come!" the otar of the Patangan guards said with a leer of venomous mockery. "The flaming altars of Yamath await the three of you, the God's most honored guests. And the God is impatient."

There was nothing else to do. They went out of the cell, ringed about with naked blades. Up an endless flight of stone steps they climbed, and down corridors of polished yellow stone...into the great Hall of the God.

It was a gigantic circular room. Above their heads the enormous dome lifted for two hundred feet, its curved vastness broken by huge windows of colored glass. At the far end of the circular hall, Yamath stood in the form of a brazen idol ten times the height of a man. The bald head was horned and a great fanged mouth grinned beneath eyes in which small flames had been lit. The altars were held in the cupped hands, which rested on the idol's lap. They were also of brass, hollow, and beneath them furnaces raged. The victims would be chained nude upon these altars and roasted alive. Thongor set his jaw grimly as the guards marched them across the vast floor toward the towering idol.

They passed between rows of Druids in yellow robes, chanting praises to their obscene deity. Magnificently gowned nobles watched silently, behind the rows of Druids. Thongor saw pity on the faces of many of them as they watched their young Princess go toward death. But the nobles were unarmed, while each priest wore a long, curved sword and archers were ranged along the walls.

Sumia walked proudly, head high. Her small, slippered feet carried her without faltering to the base of the idol. There the Yellow Archdruid halted them. Vaspas Ptol was gorgeous in jeweled robes of yellow velvet, but the beauty of his apparel could not hide the vulture-like greed of his cold eyes, his hooked beak of a nose, nor the cruel twist of his lipless mouth.

"Here you make your choice, fair Sumia," the Yellow Druid rasped coldly. "Either accept my embrace and reign beside me on the throne of Patanga... or go into the fiery embrace of Yamath, from whence there is no return. Choose well!"

Sumia, from her small height, smiled up into his leering face and laughed lightly.

"I would rather die a thousand cruel deaths than marry a man I do not love," she said. "And for you, Vaspas Ptol, I feel no love. Only contempt—disgust—"

revulsion. You are not a man. You are a cold fire that scorches and slays everything that lives about you.”

The Druid’s cold eyes went ugly. He gestured to the priests and they bore her forward. Thongor and Sharajsha were brought along behind the Princess.

The idol of Yamath was fashioned so that it seemed to be sitting upon its crossed legs. The altars were contained in its lap, and the draperies of brass that clothed it in the likeness of a loincloth were formed into a flight of steps that led up to the altars. It was up these steps that the three prisoners were led. There they were turned about, facing out over the crowded hall and bound upright to metal poles that passed through their manacles. Here they would stand in full view of the celebrants while the altars were heated.

Drums boomed and trumpets rang out, echoing through the domed hall. The Archdruid ascended a platform beside the idol’s gigantic knee and began to singsong the rituals of preparation. Having chained the three sacrifices to the poles, the guards lifted a trap door that led into the interior of the idol, and went within to stoke the furnaces that would heat the brazen altars red-hot.

Thongor said nothing to his comrades as they gazed out over the audience. But the great muscles in his back and arms began to swell. The slim pole passed up his back through one link of his wrist-chains. He was pulling upon that link with his terrific strength, seeking to snap it.

Bowls of incense were set afire, sending swirling, pungent clouds of purple smoke through the room. Gongs and drums thundered. Lines of yellow-robed figures dipped and swayed in a barbaric dance.

“I cannot reach my sigils,” the wizard said softly. “If my wrists were not bound apart, I could touch my magic rings and free us in an instant.”

“We are bound too far apart for me to reach your hands, or perhaps I could remove one of your magic rings and you could tell me what to do,” Sumia said.

Thongor grunted; “Courage!” The great muscles of his broad shoulders were leaping and writhing like bronze serpents as he applied the terrific leverage of his arms against the unyielding iron pole.

He had built the strength of those shoulders with long years of exercise—swinging and hewing through a dozen wars, hefting the mighty broadsword of his homeland. Now he needed every atom of iron strength those muscles contained!

Behind them the altars were heating up. Thongor could feel the heat against the skin of his back. His muscles knotted and tensed with supreme effort. Droplets of sweat stood out upon his brow and slid wetly down his powerful arms.

Now three priests were coming up the steps to fasten them to the blazing altars, now red-hot behind them. As they gathered about Sumia, preparing to strip her naked, there was a sharp gasp from Sharajsha.

“Thongor—look! Upon the platform where the Archdruid stands! Your sword and the Sword of *Nemedis* as well. They must plan to hurl our possessions into the flames of Yamath along with us!”

The sight of his familiar, beloved Valkarthan broadsword lent extra strength to Thongor’s efforts. His face grew congested and purpled with the intensity of his straining muscles.

A priest took hold of the collar of Sumia’s gown and ripped it away. One pearly-white breast was laid bare. Sumia stared ahead of her, her dark eyes enormous in

her pale face. A shiver of anticipation ran over the faces of the priests. The Druid licked his thin lips and reached out—

A sharp metallic *twanggg* rang out, so loud that it was heard the length of the hall. The strained and weakened link had at last yielded to Thongor's barbarian thews!

His hands free, Thongor was upon the priests with one catlike bound. He tore the Druid's hands from Sumia, picked the kicking and squirming figure up with one hand to throat and one to crotch, and hurled him upon the altar! There was the sizzling, crackling sound of human flesh frying, and the shrill unearthly screech of the Druid filled the hall with terror.

Thongor hurled the other two priests from the platform, dashing them against the stone pavement far below. Then he was loosening the chains that bound Sumia's slim wrists. Using the iron hilt of a priest's dagger for a lever, he snapped the links of her manacles and freed her, then turned to do the same for Sharajsha.

Pandemonium raged. The temple became a madhouse of whirling, shouting people. Priests and guards rushed up the steps of the idol. On the platform near the God's knee, Vaspas Ptol called down the curses of Yamath upon the blasphemers who had dared fight free from the embrace of the Fire God.

Thongor put the dagger into Sumia's hands and shoved her toward Sharajsha so that she might free the old wizard while he turned to fight off the oncoming priests. He sprang to the head of the stair and kicked the first priest in the face, smashing his nose into a bloody ruin. The Druid fell back, knocking others from the stair.

Thongor snatched up a fallen sword and hewed down two guards. His savage war song thundered through the shrieking chaos of the hall as the red sword rose and fell. He slew four before the blade broke upon a steel helmet. He flung the broken hilt at a man's face and sprang back from the rush. Now his fists swung out, cracking heads and spilling bodies off the platform. Boiling with a berserk fury, he swept men off his back and hurled them upon the fiery altars. He seized one guard by the ankles and swung him around like a great living club of flesh, knocking a dozen men flat. He released the man and he whirled across the room, thudding into a knot of priests. The barbarian was in his element—a good fight!

Sumia had freed Sharajsha, and the wizard joined the battle. Bolts of white fire sprang from his lifted hands, setting yellow robes and guards' cloaks afire. Sharajsha took the head of the stair while Thongor retreated, and cast bolt after bolt of magic flame down, clearing away the guards.

Thongor poised at the edge of the idol's knee—and dove into space. He landed catlike upon the platform where Vaspas Ptol crouched, white with fear and outrage. From the platform Thongor took up the half-completed Star Sword and his own great blade. Before he could turn to slay the priest, the Yellow Druid had picked up his skirts and jumped off, landing in the milling crowd below. Thongor roared with laughter.

Then the great windows of colored glass far up in the dome above crashed in with a deafening music of splintering glass, and a thick rain of knife-sharp shards fell into the crowd. The gleaming silvery shape of the *Nemedis* floated over the hall, her weird form striking mad panic into the hearts of the people—priests, guards, and nobles alike. The airboat descended to the idol's knees, where Sharajsha, his

gray beard flying and lightning spewing from his upraised hands, had held the stair while Thongor went to recover the enchanted Sword.

As the hall rapidly emptied of its terror-stricken throng, who fully believed the very Gods had descended in transcendent wrath, Sharajsha helped Sumia aboard the floater and then they descended to floor level so that the giant barbarian could clamber aboard.

Thongor sprang onto the deck, magnificent in the fiery light, naked and grinning, smeared with blood, brandishing a sword in either hand.

“Karm Karvus!” he roared. “Never was I so glad to see your face! Now, for the love of the Gods, let us get out of this place before Sharajsha brings the roof down with his magic lightnings!”

He tossed the magic sword to Sharajsha and they clung to the rail as Karm Karvus set the Nemedis’ prow rising sharply into the air. Within a few seconds they were out through the shattered windows and over the crowded, panic-filled streets of Patanga.

“North and west, Karm Karvus.” Sharajsha commanded. “We must reach the Mountain of Thunder before dawn, for the old year has ended and the new year begins—and in a few days the Dragon Kings will summon the Lords of Chaos from their dark abode beyond the Universe, to trample all of Lemuria down into the slime from which it rose!”

The glittering craft rose steeply in the air and shot over the roofs and towers of Patanga, vanishing into the northern sides, bearing with her the hope of the world.

Chapter 13

The Mountain of Thunder.

*He beat them back with a broken blade, half drowned in the roaring tide,
But the great black spear drank deep as it sank in Thungarth’s naked side.
Yet ere the Son of Jaidor fell, and ere his strength should wane,
The broken Sword of Nemedis had clove the Dragon’s brain.*

—Diombar’s Song of the Last Battle

Sumia sank exhausted on the cabin’s small bunk, pale and trembling from the danger and exertion. Sharajsha brought her a cup of wine, and they rested as the floater drove through the midnight skies and Patanga gradually diminished behind them.

“Wizard!” said Thongor. “I’ll taste a goblet of that drink as well, and so, no doubt, will Karm Karvus.” The Tsargolian locked the controls and turned to join them.

“I feared I had looked my last upon both of you,” he said, relieved. “When you did not signal for me to descend and pick you up I became fearful for your safety. And as the hours passed, I became certain you were captured—or slain. And then I saw the excitement in the great Fire Temple, and even at my height some noise of

battle came to me... So on the chance that it might be Thongor of Valkarth behind this commotion, I descended and entered the Temple.”

“Well for us that you did, Karm Karvus,” the Valkarthan grinned, tossing aside his empty goblet. “And now, bid greetings to our guest, the Royal Sumia, rightful Sarkaja of the City of Fire. Her throne has been usurped by a Druid, even as was that of the late but not lamented Drugunda Thal!”

Karm Karvus bade Sumia welcome and turned to Sharajsha.

“Were you successful in forging the Star Sword before your capture?” he asked.

The wizard nodded. “Aye, or else why journey to Sharimba, the Mountain of Thunder?” He displayed the jagged blade proudly. The Princess, who had recovered from her exhaustion, and who now looked lovelier than ever with the warm rose coloring her creamy pallor, had been attempting to follow this conversation.

“Was it that you stole this sword?” she asked. “Was that why you were condemned to the altars beside me?”

Sharajsha explained to her the plot of the Dragon Kings and related something of their adventures until the present, while Thongor cleansed and bound his wounds.

As they ate an impromptu meal from the floater’s stores of dried meat and cheese, Sharajsha questioned her.

“Since it would be foolish in the extreme for you to return to Patanga, Princess, where shall you go? Has the House of Chond friends in nearby cities?”

“Nay,” she said warily. “Let me accompany you on your voyage. The Yellow Druids have driven into exile the Houses that might have welcomed the daughter of Orvath Chond.”

“It will be less dangerous for you to return to the arms of Yamath, God of Fire, than to venture with us, Princess,” Thongor said. “We voyage into unknown perils, for we know not what forces the last of the Dragon Kings can bring against us. In the long ages they have spent in their remote and hidden fastnesses, Gorm alone knows what terrors they have brewed.”

“I should rather remain with good and true friends,” she said firmly. And that was that. No arguments they could muster forth could sway her stubborn determination.

All were long since wearied, and with this matter resolved, they made ready for slumber. The only bunk was given to the Princess of Patanga, and the others stretched out on the cabin’s floor, rolled in their cloaks. They slept for hours as the floater hurtled ever northwards. Below its silvery keel the curving, silver ribbon of the river Saan traced a winding path through forest and field, past the walls of Kathool and on, ever farther and farther north, into the foothills of the Mountains of Mommur.

Thongor awoke after a time and took the controls, lifting the slim craft above the towering piles of rough black rock. These mighty ranges of mountain and cliff were at the very heart of Lemuria. They stretched from the marshes of Pasht in the West to the plains of the Blue Nomads in the East, a stupendous wall of rock thousands of vom in length. And therein were the dark waters of the Inner Sea of Neol-Shendis in which the Dragon Isles were known to lie.

Some hours after dawn the cloud-wreathed peak of Sharimba loomed before them. It was the mightiest mountain of all Lemuria, towering above its brothers like a black giant standing amid squat dwarfs. Thongor roused his companions and they broke their fast as the floater measured off the vom between them and the Mountain of Thunder.

Sharajsha bade Thongor guide the airboat to a landing somewhere near the crest of the black mountain.

“Only I, armed with powers of magic, may ascend the uttermost peak of the mountain,” he explained. “For when I call down the lightnings of heaven to imbue the Star Sword with power, those near me who are not protected by great craft and magic skill will be charred to ash... such are the powers I must invoke.”

The black wall of rock loomed sheer before them. Then the Princess cried; “Look!” Thongor followed her pointing hand and saw a gap in the rock, and suddenly a flat table of stone appeared, where some unimaginable convulsion of the earth’s crust had shattered off a portion of the peak. There he brought the *Nemedis* to rest. Sharajsha clambered out, his long, wide-sleeved robe of gray and his long gray mane of hair fluttering in the howling winds that swept the mountain. In one hand he grasped the Star Sword. In the other was a small pouch of scarlet photh-skin containing magical instruments. Standing there, the naked Sword in his hand, the wild landscape of cloven black rock and wind-torn sky behind him, he suddenly became a weird and mysterious figure, removed from the common range of mankind.

“Await me here,” he commanded. “From this point I must ascend to the peak unaccompanied, so do not come after me for any reason.”

“What will happen now?” Karm Karvus asked.

“Once I have reached the topmost pinnacle of the mountain, and have evoked the powers of the Throne of Thunders, the sky will darken. Clouds will gather, blackening the very sun. Then forth from the clouds, bolts of lightning will assail the peak, filling the sky with flame. But the Sword will drink the lightning even as the green things of the earth drink the sunlight, and with every bolt the power of the Sword will grow, until at last it has been charged to the final degree with energy. Fashioned from stone, forged in fire, drenched in the powers of the air—it shall command the elements of nature.”

“And—water?” Karm Karvus hazarded.

“For water it shall drink deep of the accursed blood of the Dragon Kings,” the wizard said, and he turned and slowly began his ascent of Sharimba. Standing in a row together, they watched his thin, bent figure until it dwindled above them and vanished among the jagged rocks of the mountain peak.

Thongor spat. “Sorcery! Give me a good blade and a strong arm. That’s all the sorcery one needs to fight an enemy!”

Sumia shivered, staring up at the cloud-wrapped peak.

“What will happen—when we face the Dragon Kings with the enchanted Sword?” she wondered aloud. Karm Karvus shrugged.

“I know not, Princess. Perhaps the Sword will disgorge the lightnings upon which Sharajsha will feed it. However, we shall soon see. For within mere hours now, the destined time will come when the monsters will seek to summon their

Dark Lords from the unknown realms that lie beyond the stars—beyond the very Universe itself!”

Silent, Thongor watched Karm Karvus talking to the girl. The slim, courtly noble and the lovely Princess could converse as equals—but he was a rude barbarian! Broodingly he observed her slender loveliness... the great, curling fleece of black hair, slim, pale limbs displayed in creamy glimpses through the rents of her tattered gown. Never in all his years had he seen such loveliness in a woman. Lemuria had not seen her like since the fabulous days of Queen Zandarla the Fair. He turned away and, setting his back to them, stared out over the fantastic gulf of broken stone and wind-torn vapor, illuminated by the level, ruddy shafts of the morning sun.

Ah, well! Such beauty was not for the likes of him, a rough warrior more used to trading jests with Death at the tip of a dancing blade than exchanging courteous phrases with high-born ladies.

Sumia screamed!

Thongor whirled, his broadsword flashing into his hand, his fierce golden eyes searching the rocks for an enemy. The shrill scream of the Princess was echoed by a metallic screech whose reverberations raised the hairs on Thongor’s nape—a *grakk!*

Down from the airy gulfs winged the terrible lizard-hawk, a very twin of the ones that had attacked him days ago over the jungles of Chush. Its wriggling, scaled, snakebody was mailed in fantastic yellow and brown. Its rustling, bat-like wings darkened the air. At the end of a long serpentine neck the hideous head reached for the girl. She was running toward the floater, slim legs flying. The head swooped toward her—grim, hooked beak clashing hungrily, cruel scarlet eyes blazing with insatiable hunger beneath the indigo-blue crest of wild, bristling spines.

Shouting, Karm Karvus whipped out his Tsargolian rapier and raced to aid the Princess. Roaring his deep-throated war cry, Thongor exploded into action. One lithe bound brought him to the side of Karm Karvus, and together they plunged their steel into the writhing body that hung in midair upon thunder-beating wings while the long neck quested after the fleeing girl. But even sharp steel could not penetrate the tough, leathery hide, and their blades slid harmlessly off the horny scales.

Sumia cried out again as the loose rocks twisted under her feet—and then she tumbled down, helpless beneath the darting beak.

Thongor sprang astride her, roaring. Clenching the sword double-handed, he swung the mighty blade with the full power of his iron thews. His edge met the clashing beak and batted it to one side with the impact. The lizard-hawk screeched deafeningly. He swung again, his blade shearing off the crest of blue bristles. Karm Karvus came up to join him.

“Get the Princess into the floater!” Thongor commanded.

“And leave you—!”

“Do as I say, man—quick, now!”

As Thongor battled with the monstrous flying reptile he was aware of the girl being taken from beneath his legs and glimpsed Karm Karvus bearing her in his arms to the safety of the Nemedis. But he was too busy to do anything but fight—and fight he did!

The grakk was gigantic—fully as large as the airboat. Its beaked head was almost as huge as Thongor’s entire body, and the tremendous muscles of its sinuous length could have torn him to ribbons in an instant, could it have seized him. But the giant Valkarthan danced over the mountainside, leaping away from each plunge of the hissing head, battering at it with great blows of his blade, never still for an instant. He roared and shouted at the hovering thing, holding its attention lest it should leave him and pursue the Princess and Karm Karvus.

Its great membraned wings beat the air like the booming sails of a ship, the wind buffeting Thongor. With great hewing strokes he tried to sever the armored neck, to extinguish one of the scarlet eyes that blazed into his, mad with fury. But the steely scales resisted his blows as might the granite mountain itself. Thongor knew it was only a matter of time until his feet would strike a loose rock, bringing him down sprawling—or before he should fail to dodge the swinging head and be caught in the viselike grip of that slavering yellow beak—but he fought on tirelessly.

And then one clawed foot seized him, dragging him down. Hooked claws the size of curved scimitars bit into his leather trappings. As the hovering monster dragged him, his skull hit a boulder and blackness enveloped him.

In the cabin of the floater, the Princess stifled a cry when Thongor fell. Breathlessly she watched as the lizard-hawk hovered on thundering wings above the helpless man. Beside her, Karm Karvus gave an oath.

“Stay here, Princess!”

The Tsargolian sprang from the floater’s deck to do what he could to save—or to revenge—his friend. But before he could reach Thongor’s side, the cruel, barbed claw closed about the barbarian’s waist and the winged monster rose slowly into the air with the unconscious man dangling from its powerful grasp.

Helpless, Karm Karvus stood beneath, watching as the monster lizard-hawk rose, knowing that at any moment he could expect to watch his mighty friend dashed in the gulf below—or devoured. As the lizard-hawk hovered, it bent its long neck and seemed to sniff at the dangling body.

From the safety of the floater, Sumia clasped her hands to her beating heart. Breathlessly she watched as the bold warrior who had saved her from death faced death himself.

And then the two watched as the lizard-hawk, seemingly satisfied that its prey was either helpless or dead, rose steeply on booming wings. It circled above them, and then slid away over the great gulf. Still bearing the unconscious Thongor, it vanished toward the east and was lost to their view among the thick vapors.

Karm Karvus slowly slid his rapier back into its scabbard. Bending, he picked up the fallen broadsword that Thongor had carried through a hundred battles. With the sword in his hands he returned to the floater.

“Can we not pursue the creature in the airboat?” Sumia asked.

“To what avail, Princess? How could we battle the lizard-hawk, even if we could find it again? And if we could somehow battle it, would it not drop Thongor in order to fight us?”

Sumia bowed her head silently, recognizing the wisdom in Karm Karvus’ words.

“Nay, there is nothing that we can do, Princess,” the Tsargolian said sadly. “Were Sharajsha here, perhaps his magic could save our friend—but he is far

above, where we dare not venture. I doubt not that Thongor has been slain—crushed in the grakk’s claws by now. Let us be brave and reconcile ourselves to the fact of his death.”

And then Karm Karvus fell silent, placing the great Valkarthan broadsword upon the bunk. Even in the arena, facing the grinning jaws of death, he had never known a more terrible moment than this—forced to stand by helplessly and watch his friend carried off to a lonely death in the wind-torn skies of Lemuria.

Far above them the skies darkened and the drums of thunder rolled. Sharajsha was preparing the Star Sword. But neither of them was listening. Each was deep in thought.

Chapter 14

The Dragon Kings.

*As one by one his brothers fell, he raised the great Sword high.
He sang the runes to the Lords of Light—and thunder broke the sky—
Red lightning flashed—drums of thunder crashed—a rain of fire fell
To sweep the Kings of the Dragons down to the smoking pits of hell!*
—Diombar’s Song of the Last Battle

It was the rush of cold wind over his naked body that roused Thongor to consciousness. When his eyes opened at last, he was staring straight down into a sheer gorge of black stone that lay two thousand feet beneath him. His long black mane flowed on the cold wind, obscuring his vision. For a moment he thought that he was dead and the War Maids were bearing his spirit to the Hall of Heroes beyond the world where the great Castle of the Gods lifted its mighty spires above paradisaical hills.

But then he realized that he was still alive. The warm blood leaked from his brow, where the boulder had struck his head, and his waist ached abominably, as if he was being crushed in a giant vise. Craning his neck about, he discovered his terrible predicament—and for a moment even Thongor of Valkarth felt his heart falter beneath the icy hand of fear.

The huge claw of the grakk held him about the middle, as its powerful wings bore him far above the Mountains of Mommur. His sword was gone—he was completely unarmed. Were the lizard-hawk to simply open its claws, he would hurl down helplessly two thousand feet to smash his life out in a bloody smear against the black rocks far below. Never in his long, adventure-filled life had the Valkarthan felt so alone—so completely helpless.

Yet he had the comforting knowledge that the Princess was safe, and that the battle against the Dragon Kings would still go on, even though he was not there to stand beside Sharajsha when he faced the Lords of Chaos.

Since there was absolutely nothing he could do to lessen his predicament, Thongor simply composed himself and lay still in the grakk’s clutches. Rather

than exhaust his strength in hopeless fighting, he resolved to await the turn of events and do nothing until some avenue of escape presented itself.

The lizard-hawk might have been flying for hours for all he knew. It was difficult to estimate the sun's height from his position, but it seemed near the zenith. After a long time, the creature suddenly slowed in its flight and hovered above the range of mountains. Then, sliding through the misty air in long, slow spirals, it began to descend.

Out of the murk a slim needle of rock emerged. The lizard-hawk swung down toward it in sweeping circles, hovered for a moment, great wings checking its flight—and dropped Thongor.

He fell helplessly, the landscape whirling madly about him for a terrifying moment or two, then landed with stunning impact upon a thick bed of something that crackled beneath his weight. Dazed, he lay still, not daring to move lest he dislodge himself. There seemed to be no broken bones. Overhead, the black shape wheeled to the left and began to spiral up, soon becoming lost to sight.

Thongor was lying in a shallow depression filled with dry branches and stiff leaves that rustled as he sat up. All about was sky—torn mist, driven by the whistling wind—and distant peaks ringing him in. He crawled to the edge of the matted branches and peered over. Below, a sheer wall of rock fell sickeningly straight down as far as the eye could see.

He turned to see if it was the same on the other side—and looked into a flaming red eye. Three snake-tailed little monsters, only slightly less than his own six and a half feet, were glaring at him a dozen feet away. Their hideous bodies were covered with small red and yellow scales, and from the humped shoulders at the base of the long snakelike necks, peculiar stumps protruded. They had curved beaks and four cruelly clawed limbs.

In a flash Thongor realized his terrible position. He had been dropped by the giant grakk, only to plunge into an even worse nightmare. *He was in the grakk's nest!* This tangled mat of dry branches and leaves was the nest of the mother grakk, and those three scaly horrors glaring at him were the offspring of that monstrous parent, who had borne him home to feed the babies!

They had not attacked him yet, probably because they were unused to food that still lived. But now one of the little monsters waddled across the nest toward him, beak clashing, hissing like a jet of escaping steam. Thongor clapped one hand to his side—the broadsword was gone, dropped on the slopes of Sharimba when the grakk seized him. He stared around swiftly, darting glances here and there about the nest, searching for a weapon. Almost at his feet lay a long white bone, scarred with beakmarks, one end broken off in a jagged, saw-toothed edge. He snatched it up and sprang to meet the infant monster.

Its beak snapped at him hungrily, but Thongor knocked the head aside with the flat of his arm and drove the sharp bone into the long snaky throat. The scaly armor of the grakklet was not as tough as that of the full-grown lizard-hawk, but it was tough enough, and the pointed bone merely ripped a long, shallow gash in its neck. The gash welled with thick, evil-smelling fluid.

Then its claws were upon him, its full weight bearing him down as the long neck snaked with distended beak to tear out his throat. Thongor protected his head and throat with crossed arms—doubled up his legs and kicked violently, hurling the

thing out of the nest. It went scrabbling over the edge, squalled piercingly, and vanished far below.

But now he faced two more hissing horrors. He drove his bone-sword straight into the open jaws of one and ducked while the other's beak snapped-to above his head, catching a few strands of his hair. Balled fists lashed out, smashing the chest of the first one. It raked his chest and belly with sharp claws, drawing thin scarlet furrows down the bronzed flesh. Then it gurgled and fell away, tail thrashing violently. The pointed bone had gone through the back of its throat and had penetrated what little brain it possessed, paralyzing it.

But Thongor had no time to observe the death-throes of the second, for the third was upon him with flashing claws, bearing him over backward beneath its squirming weight.

He fought his way to his feet, forcing the squalling grakklet back with smashing blows. Then his mighty hands locked upon its pulsing throat, just below the clacking beak. Muscles swelled and writhed like giant snakes in his broad shoulders. The grakk struggled violently, twisting its long neck, but slowly, remorselessly, his hands closed like iron bands, crushing the monster's throat. Its scrabbling forelimbs raked him from nipple to hip, razory talons slashing red lines through his flesh. Thongor gritted his teeth and bore the slashing pain.

Gradually, the grakk's struggles lessened in their intensity. Its scarlet eyes glazed. A bubbling froth of slimy blood oozed from its straining, gasping beak. With every atom of strength in his terrific back and shoulders, Thongor crushed the life out of the thing and cast its quivering corpse from him.

He stood, panting, recovering his breath, ignoring the blood that flowed down his chest and belly. Then he prowled the nest from side to side, seeking an exit. On no side did anything meet his probing gaze but sheer cliff-walls of black rock, wet from the hovering veils of mist.

He was marooned atop a steep pinnacle of smooth stone. *Unless—!*

On one side of the nest the wall was broken. A narrow ledge jutted from the needle of rock—but it was thirty feet below the place where he stood. Thongor examined the rock wall between himself and the ledge. It was as smooth as glass. To attempt to climb down it was pure madness—to try jumping to the ledge was completely impossible, for it jutted only a foot from the wall. If he missed, he would be smashed to jelly, thousands of feet below. And yet, to remain here was to die. Within hours, perhaps within mere minutes, the mother grakk would return to the nest.

The airboat soared through the skies above the Mountains of Mommur. Within its small cabin, Sharajsha, Karm Karvus, and the Princess Sumia sat, tensely watching the landscape flash past beneath them.

It was less than an hour since the wizard had come down from the Mountain of Thunder, bearing the great Star Sword. Now the weapon lay sheathed in black leather across his knees, its ice-blue blade quivering with leashed power. The electric tension of a storm cloud seemed to hum within its mysterious metal blade, and a faint halo of sparks appeared and vanished about the point. The Sword was ready.

Sharajsha had been shocked and saddened to hear of Thongor's terrible fate. But there was no time to waste on a fruitless, hopeless search for the giant barbarian. Only hours remained before the moment of conjuration. Already the afternoon sun was declining toward the west. And of what use to search out their dead friend? His broken body—or his clean-picked bones—lay in the bottom of some rocky gorge. They must speed to their desperate rendezvous with time!

Far below them the endless vom reeled past. Thanks to the wizard's improvement on the original design, the great coiled springs drove ceaselessly. The spinning blades of the rotors bit into the thin, cold air of the heights, thrusting the *Nemedis* ahead, her needle-sharp prow slashing through emptiness, pointed ever east into the gradually dimming sky.

Now the great mountains fell away and the silver ribbon of a river came into view, threading its winding way through the sheer black gorges. Ahead on the very horizon, like a dull iron shield, the glistening expanse of the Inner Sea could be glimpsed. Locked in by miles of mountains, walled with sheer cliffs of smooth, solid stone, the Sea of Neol-Shendis had not been seen by a human eye in ages. What secrets, what mysterious perils hid within her mist-shrouded depths?

The three adventurers ate, rested, waited out the time. Sumia sat upon the bunk, her pale face lifted to the forward window. Before her eyes drifted pictures, visions from her memory. She remembered the bold, laughing face of Thongor. She saw again his fighting grin and heard his thundered war cry as he had held the entire ranks of Patanga at bay, there on the brazen knees of the God of Fire. She saw again his mighty broadsword whirling in a glittering arc, cutting into the snarling faces of the Druids, a crimson spray of blood-droplets flying from its blurred path. She remembered the deep chest, the powerfully moulded arms and shoulders, and the long, quick legs of the young Valkarthan adventurer. It was hard to believe that such animal vitality, such inexhaustible strength could be extinguished.

"*Thongor...*" As she whispered his name, she felt again that strange, unfamiliar stirring within her blood.

Now the wet gray beaches of the Inner Sea of Neol-Shendis were beneath them. Long, slow waves of cold dark water washed against the lone sands. No sea birds called along these empty strands of shore which had never felt the foot of man. No small, scuttling creatures of the sea's edge marked the sallow, greasy foam that the sliding waves left behind as they retreated, gathering strength to assault the land again. The airboat flashed through the fog and out over the dull waters.

The westward skies were reddening between the black notches of the mountain-walls as they approached the Dragon Isles. There were four of them, bleak, wet clumps of jagged black rock, looming above the swilling waves. Clinging to the crest of the largest isle was a fantastic castle of black stone, towering into the thick mist like a giant from the Dawn Age.

The rotors died and the airboat sank silently, sliding like a ghost through the vapor, coming to rest upon a spur of glistening rock. The three clambered out, anchoring the floater securely to a sharp angle of rock. They made their way along the narrow crest of the spur and onto the main island. Hidden by the fog, they melted into the shadows below the walls of the black castle and vanished from sight.

Sumia clung to the wet rocks, stunned by the flying spray and the hollow, booming thunder of the surf. Karm Karvus set a strong hand beneath her slim arm and helped her up.

“We must be silent now,” Sharajsha cautioned, his gray robes making him almost invisible in the thick fog. They followed him along the black wall. Above them, looming to a stupendous height, the frowning wall towered. The castle was built of enormous cubes of rough-hewn black stone, each block taller than a man. This cyclopean work of masonry looked oddly *wrong*, as if its dizzy angles and queer curves had been designed according to some geometry of another world—the weird architecture of nightmare, curiously disquieting to the eye. A dozen yards below the ledge upon which they walked, the surf pounded, icy spray splashing about them, chilling them to the bone.

They came to a great gateway, open and unbarred, facing the eternal waves. It was unguarded—empty. Sharajsha unsheathed the magic Sword and gestured them forward. He went on first into the black maw of the portal, the naked Sword glowing in his hand.

And then—*madness!*

The fog suddenly writhed—boiled—congealed—and monstrous black forms loomed out of the mist toward them. Karm Karvus’ rapier sang as he whipped it from its scabbard. Sharajsha lifted the blazing blue length of the Star Sword—but out of the whirling fog a fantastic black figure appeared, eyes like sparks of living green flame burning coldly within its misshapen head. A glittering black hand clamped upon Sharajsha’s wrist with crushing force.

The Star Sword fell in a dazzling arc from his nerveless grasp. Sparkling with blue flame, it whirled out—down—and into the thundering waves. It vanished in the boiling chaos of black water and white foam.

Sharajsha, helpless in the iron grip, gave a thin, despairing cry. He raised the other hand, magic rings sparkling into life—but an uncanny force struck him and he sank unconscious.

Karm Karvus sprang, sword bared, straight at the weird black phantom figures, still veiled behind the swirling fog. From the lifted black hand of one a sizzling spark of white energy darted, seizing his sword. He stiffened at the thrilling electric shock, and crumpled unconscious on the wet stone floor.

An enormous black hand closed upon Sumia’s slim shoulder. It had seven fingers, each tipped with a black talon, and its cold hard flesh was covered with an intricate pattern of tiny, glittering scales.

From the black shadow that had struck Sharajsha down, a cold, hissing voice spoke with a weird mockery of laughter ringing in its sibilant tones:

“What fools, to think that our magic would not warn us of the approach of their flying ship! Their lives shall be spent upon the great altar amid the ring of monoliths in the hour when the stars come forth—to feed the growing power of the Lords of Chaos, Who will need such life-energy to cross the inter-cosmic gulfs. Imprison them until the appointed hour—and remove from the old sorcerer his sigils of power. We shall see their white faces again at the Hour of the Opening of Space!”

The cold, hissing voice ceased, and dark, lumbering figures stepped forth from the cold mist. But before her eyes could make out the details of those awful forms, Sumia’s proud spirit failed, and she sank into merciful unconsciousness.

Chapter 15

The Lords of Chaos.

*Lords of Chaos dark the sky:
All the Sons of Men shall die.
Dragon rune and blood of men:
Portals ope—to close again?
Naught can make the Portals fade,
Save the Sword by lightning made.
—The Scarlet Edda*

The only way down was—down! Thongor turned from the edge of the grakk nest and began the unpleasant task of skinning the two infant monsters. With their scaly hide he could fashion a rope, and with its aid perhaps he could reach the narrow ledge far below.

It was hot, filthy, difficult work. With no sword or dirk, he had to rely upon the strength of his hands and the sharp points of broken bones. He wore out many, but the grakk nest was littered with many years' accumulation of bones. He regretted the loss of his black cloak, which he could have torn into strips in a fraction of the time it took him to rip the hide from the lizard-hawks. But there was no use bemoaning what was lost.

He skinned them in long strips, pausing from time to time to break off another bone, giving him a sharp point to work with. The fresh hides stank, and he soon became beslimed with grakk blood from chest to knee; but he grimly tightened his jaw—ignoring the stench and filth—and labored on.

When the hides were removed from the carcasses, he knotted the long strips together and fastened one end of the makeshift line around a protruding knob of rock. He tested it for strength, and when he was satisfied the line would hold his weight without slipping or breaking, he swung himself out over the edge and started down the sheer wall of rock. Dangling thousands of feet over the abyss, he resolutely bent his mind on what he was doing and did not allow himself the luxury of being afraid.

The hide-strips were wet and slippery in his hands. His chest ached where the claws of the grakklets had razored it. Howling winds rising from the gulfs below buffeted him from side to side; but slowly, steadily, he descended the sheer rock-face until his toes touched the ledge. It was only inches wide. He looked to both sides—the ledge ran both ways, and he had no way of telling which direction would lead him to the easiest descent. So he simply chose blindly and started inching along the ledge to the left, still clinging to the line.

Just as he reached the point where he had to relinquish the line, the ledge widened. He let go of the knotted length of hides and, clinging with both hands

outstretched to the face of the cliff, felt his way along blindly. After a short but terrible distance, the ledge widened a bit and angled steeply downward.

Foot by foot, yard by yard, Thongor descended. Here his barbarian heritage served him well. Where a city-bred man would have faltered, would have lost his balance and perhaps fallen, Thongor continued his descent with nerves of steel. A boyhood spent clambering over the glass-slick glaciers of his icy Northland home had given him a cool head for heights and a gift for feeling out minute toeholds with infinite patience.

Just the same, it took him an hour to descend two hundred feet. But from there he would move swiftly and surely, standing erect.

The mists were too thick for sunlight to penetrate, but from the position of the sun the last time he had seen it, he estimated the time was late afternoon. And that meant he had been traveling for hours. He was completely lost. An hour before, as he had been clambering along the skyline of the ridge of mountains, he had glimpsed the black, cloud-wrapped peak of Sharimba when the rushing winds had parted the mist-curtain. It had stood on the very horizon, many vom from where he was. The tireless wings of the mother grakk had indeed carried him far from his friends.

Sharimba was west of him, which placed the Dragon Isles somewhere east. He had turned east and continued along the skyline. Surely by now the Star Sword would have been completed and his comrades would have gone on to their rendezvous with the Dragon Kings, thinking him slain.

All afternoon he had moved swiftly over the plateau, and as the light began to wane he found an easy descent and came down into a river valley. Now he was racing with a long-legged, tireless stride along the rocky brink of the rushing stream. Thrice he had paused at the limit of his strength to bathe in the swift, cold water, drink his fill, and rest a few precious moments before continuing on toward the east. All he knew was that this river must eventually empty into the Inner Sea of Neol-Shendis, and so he followed it.

He was loping along a crumbling slope of broken stone when an ear-splitting hiss froze him into a crouch. Rising from the foaming water was a sleek saurian head with fanged jaws agape. Red eyes gleamed evilly into his.

Thongor's hand closed futilely on his naked hip where only an empty scabbard hung. Ah—what he would have given for a sword! But there was not even a stick to defend himself with, and the rocks were either too huge to lift or too small to harm the unknown monster of the river. It rose out of the seething waters, droplets running down its long snake-neck. Foreclaws crunched and squeaked on the wet stone shelf that was the river's brink, as it dragged its length up off the land.

Thongor ran.

Perhaps the thing could not run fast enough to follow him—but no, it had great hind legs like a gigantic hound. He did not know what the green-scaled and yellow-crested reptile was—some nameless monster of the mountain rivers—but it was hungry.

It followed him for about a vom, gradually nearing. Its size made it too big for the rocky shelf, and so it moved slower and more carefully than he. He ran. And just as he reached the black mouth of an unexpected cave, it caught up with him.

The blunt, arrow-shaped head came hissing down to him and the thick foreclaws moved toward his flesh. Thongor set his back against the smooth rock, bracing himself with his arms, and kicked out with all the strength of his legs. His feet caught the river reptile squarely in the chest—and because its heavy weight made it slip and scrabble insecurely in the loose rock, he bowled it over.

Hissing with fury, it fell into the river with a great splash of water. Thongor whirled and darted into the cave. Within seconds he was lost in pitch-blackness, but he stumbled on. He did not know what other creatures might challenge him for possession of this cave, but they could not be worse than the thing from the river.

The cavern dove steeply downward and Thongor followed it. For a time he could hear the river monster behind him, blundering into the stalagmites and squalling with rage and frustration, but eventually only silence came from behind him. Doubtless it was waiting for him to return—so he simply went on forward into the darkness.

After some hours the cavern floor slanted upward again and he began a long, slow ascent. It must be night by now, he thought grimly. The night of destiny. Every step might very well be carrying him farther and farther from his companions. But there was nothing to do but go on.

He came out of the cave so suddenly that he clung to the edge dizzily, staring down where cold black water exploded in a fine mist of white spray against fanged black rocks. *The sea—!*

And when he emerged fully from the cave to look about him, he found an even greater surprise. He was not on the shore, but on a steep black rock in the *center* of the Inner Sea! All around him stretched dull water under a dark, cloud-covered sky. He could see the dim black bulk of the shoreline behind him, stretching off until it faded into the distance.

The cavern had run under the floor of the sea, rising to the surface of this tiny islet. Letting the cold, wet air bathe his exhausted body, Thongor stood atop the small mound of stone and gazed around. These were the Dragon Isles, beyond a doubt, for there to his left, only a few dozen yards across the water, rose a larger isle, its black heights crowned with a fantastic castle of rude ebony stone. The luck of the Gods had directed his steps.

He descended to the edge of the water and clung there for a moment before plunging in to swim to the other island. Blinding sheets of spray drenched him.

Then the cold shock of icy water on his tired flesh was equaled by another shock. He stared down into the foaming madness of the exploding water.

A sword.

The dim light caught the glittering length of its blade. It was under several inches of water, wedged sideways in the grip of the rocks. His hand itched for the familiar shape of a sword hilt. He dove in and came up with the sword in his hands, and clambered back upon his rocky spire again, squatting in the narrow cave mouth while he examined his find. The light was very dim—it was hours into

the night, perhaps near midnight—but even by the faint light he could not fail to recognize that strange, jagged blade, glittering with power.

The Star Sword! The Sword of *Nemedis*!

“Gorm!” Thongor swore. He knew by this token that his friends had been either captured or slain, for only force could have made Sharajsha relinquish the magic blade for whose creation they had spent so much time and faced so many dangers. His face went bleak, his eyes cold. If Sharajsha was taken, what of Karm Karvus? What of... *Sumia*!

He stared up at the grim black castle whose weird turrets and battlements loomed far above him into the mist, rising from the nearby island that lay only a short swim across the cold, swirling water.

Within that dark fortress his friends lay, either helpless captives or murdered corpses. Cold fire flared within his strange golden eyes and his teeth flashed in a grin that had no humor in it. He slid the Star Sword into his empty scabbard and dove from the rock into the black, icy water.

If he were too late to rescue them, he would at least be there to avenge them. The Star Sword would reach its destined place upon the fated hour, whether man, monster, or even the Dark Lords of Chaos stood to bar his way!

For hours Sharajsha, Karm Karvus, and the Princess lay in the chill, dank darkness of a bare stone cell. Few words passed between them, for there was naught to say. Sharajsha was stripped of his magic implements and sigils, nor did any of them possess a weapon. The slow, weary hours marched past as the grim stars rose gradually to their long-awaited positions. Many times Sumia’s thoughts returned to Thongor, whom she believed slain. She could not define the strange emotion that rose within her breast when she thought of the brave young Valkarthan warrior who had saved her from a terrible death.

Karm Karvus and the old wizard talked together quietly for a time.

“What will they do with us?”

“Even as the chief of the Dragon Kings said, as you have reported his words to me. They will lay us upon the black stone altars of their three grim gods and there we shall die, our life-energies going to feed and strengthen the Lords of Chaos.”

“A savage death, fit for such fiends,” Karm Karvus said. “Ah, if I had a sword! Or if Thongor were here! Together we would fight, back to back, and show the Dragon Kings how men should die, standing upright and facing death, not bound to a stone table, whimpering under the knife!”

“Aye,” Sharajsha agreed soberly. “Or had I one sigil left—one talisman! But Sssaaa, the Lord of the Dragon Kings, stripped me bare.”

“Sssaaa? Was that the thing that seized you and made you drop the Sword?”

“Sssaaa is the Lord, or Arch-Priest, of the Dragon Kings. He is the one who led them here when the Black Citadel fell to the Sons of *Nemedis* thousands of years ago.”

As the fateful stars slowly returned to their appointed spheres, the time came. The three bade farewell to each other, quietly, with dignity. Then the great door clanged open.

Sumia gasped. It was the first time they had seen the Dragon Kings close and clearly. They stood half again the height of a man, erect upon great bent, hound-

like legs. From massive shoulders sprang short arms, clawed and powerful. Their necks were longer than those of men, and the heads were blunt-muzzled, expressionless. Slitted eyes of cold green flame blazed beneath brows whose misshapen and unserpentlike bulge denoted human, or perhaps more than human, intelligence. The Dragon Kings were scaled and black, torchlight glinting with minute points of light along the glassy armor of their hideous bodies. They had long, heavily muscled tails.

But somehow the chill gleam of malignant, intelligent fire that burned in their eyes made them more terrible and fearful than the beasts their bodies suggested. A beast slays from instinct, from the natural urge of hunger... but these creatures could be as cruel as a man.

And it was shuddersome to see beasts wearing manlike trappings. For the glittering black-scaled bodies were accoutered in thick belts and harnesses like men, with pouches and jeweled ornaments and weapons of monstrous and uncouth design. Sumia's proud spirit quailed, yet she held her head high and did not deign to let the things read fear either in her expression or in her bearing. The blood of a hundred Sarkas flowed in that small, graceful body, and never was good breeding displayed better than in that dark hour, by the last of the House of Chond.

"The hour is nigh; come forth, manlings," the cold, sibilant voice of Sssaaa commanded. Karm Karvus glanced at Sharajsha and read his tired nod, and so did not resist. Those massive arms and shoulders held strength before which even the giant thews of Thongor himself would seem puny.

They strode out of the cell and into a vast hall. The light that they had glimpsed from within the cell did not come from torches, but from strange spheres which hung by thin chains from the domed ceiling, shedding a sharp, unwavering red light. They had no time to examine this weird achievement of the Dragon Kings' science, for they were marched forth by their grim captors, down the giant hall and through a mighty rotunda where doubtless the Lords of the serpent folk held council.

Here too the strange red lights burned without flickering, and a great circular table of some unknown green-gray metal stood, with strange throne-like chairs spaced about it. The black stone walls were hung with peculiar tapestries of woven metal-thread, depicting scenes alien to a human eye: strange gardens of fleshly-shapen flowers and weird, fronded trees, whereunder the Dragon Kings of a bygone age disported in peculiar garments too complex to be noted merely in passing. A thrilling glimpse into a world lost millennia ago, when the black Dragons were the masters of the Earth, with all of this planet under their undisputed sway, before the coming of men.

They went out of that room and into a vast circular courtyard under the stars. The wall of the black fortress ringed them about, and in the center of the courtyard rose a vast ring of black pillars, nine in number. And beyond that, an outer ring of twenty-seven more. They were nineteen feet tall, carefully hewn of the same black stone—huge brooding menhirs, looming up into the thick mists that hid the skies. They stood like the legs of gaunt black giants whose upper bodies were hidden behind the clouds. Now and again a rent appeared within that heavy veil of evilly coiling mists and a faint star burned ominously through. The great

monoliths were carved with Dragon runes—odd, twisting arabesques worked in bold relief. Of the three humans, only the old wizard could read their terrible message, and he shuddered and dropped his eyes.

A score of Dragon Kings stood within the court, each bearing a light-sphere within its black claw and wearing a strange helm of red metal upon its misshapen brow. They had formed a wide column, and as the three humans were led down their ranks they burst into a hissing chant in their ancient tongue. The ceremony was beginning.

They were led into the center of the double ring. There a great circular slab of ebony stone lay like a vast table. Manacles of red metal were fastened to their wrists and ankles as they were forced to recline.

“Courage!” Sharajsha said.

The archaic, hissing chant roared around them, rising and falling like the waves of the sea. Above their heads the floating wreaths of mist twisted like vaporous tentacles about the uncouth pillars. Red stars winked through the tattered veils.

Now drums rumbled to the patter of clawed hands, sounding in an alien counterpoint to the sibilant chant, their muted thunder echoing Sumia’s pulsebeat with a slowly rising tempo. She shut her eyes.

Sssaaa strode forward into their vision. He ascended the altar-disc and walked to its center. The three humans were bound at equal distances from one another, their heads together near the center of the stone. Sssaaa took his place there, towering above them. He lifted his great glittering arms to the sky.

“*Iao-Thamungazoth!*”

The chanting rose toward full cadence, its surf-roar booming. The serpent drums sounded in long rolls, rising and falling. The mist coiled between the standing stones that seemed to hover giddily above them, no longer upright. Sumia felt as if the very dimensions of space were being bent awry before the flowing rhythm of the unearthly chant.

Sssaaa thundered another name, its other-earthly syllables echoing from the reeling monoliths. The chant rose behind him in sibilant music.

Suddenly the fog seemed to stream toward an area of the sky directly above the altar-stone. Long wisps and ghostlike wraiths of fog sped between the black fingers of the columns to meet in the center, coalescing into a thick ball of darkness. Sumia shuddered at the clammy caresses of the fog-fingers as they streamed over her body. She felt a strange vertigo, as if the Earth were spinning beneath her. The circular wall that ringed the courtyard seemed to be revolving about her like a vast black wheel.

Sssaaa called upon the third dreadful name, and with a sudden flash the skies were clear. Above them the stars burned in strange patterns—*slowly—one by one—turning red*. The center of darkness had by now absorbed all of the fog, but it still seemed to draw upon the surrounding air with a terrible, insatiable suction. A breeze quickened about them, chill winds plucking at their garments and lifting Sumia’s long raven tresses. The wind blew directly into the ball of darkness—as if the atmosphere of the Earth were being drawn through some unknown orifice into the endless, hungry vacuum of unknown space.

The drums rose into a wild, maddened cacophony and the clangor of metal bells sounded on all sides, where the Dragon Kings had formed into a loose circle,

dipping and weaving and swaying upon their great splayed hind paws. Dizziness poured over Sumia as the Earth seemed to sway in rhythm to the Dragon dance.

Above, the red stars of the destined hour blazed.

The wind arose to an icy gale, howling like a mad thing among the swaying monoliths. The circle of blackness grew, as if feeding upon the air and mist.

Now the carven hieroglyphs upon the menhirs glowed with a mysterious red luminance—and the curious helms of the Dragon Kings and the chains and manacles upon their helpless victims also glowed with the unknown radiation. Sumia felt a chill, icy tingling spreading through her body.

The sensation of vertigo rose and fell, even as the rhythm of the hissing chant, the drums, and the waxing and waning of the crimson star-fires.

Suddenly—all was silent.

Silence, complete and dead, as though they had been instantly stricken deaf. The Dragon Kings froze. The wind, the swaying vertigo—ceased! The very Universe seemed to hang suspended—to hold its breath, as if awaiting some terrible signal, some final act...

Sssaaa drew slowly from his harness a great black sword with a pronged blade. The Sword of Sacrifice. He bent over the Princess, and she stared upward, uncomprehending, frozen. The forked point descended toward her breast—and suddenly she knew that within seconds it would rip through her soft flesh and scoop out her living heart, hurling it aloft into the hovering heart of darkness above. She felt an icy paralysis clamp down upon every nerve, every muscle. She could not scream, although her mouth fell open. She could not tear away her terror-frozen eyes from the horrible sight as the blade descended to touch her motionless breast.

And behind them, Thongor laughed.

It was a rich, deep, full-throated laugh, warm and human. Its warmth seemed to crack the ice that bound them all. Sssaaa jerked uncontrollably, lifting his massive head to stare with wild green eyes. Sumia turned her head and saw Thongor across the courtyard, standing with spread legs atop the black wall. A cold hissing began among the Dragon Kings, and Sssaaa straightened.

From behind him, Thongor lifted the Sword into view.

Sssaaa screamed like a jet of escaping steam. The great circle of monsters broke and milled in a tangled confusion.

The Sword blazed with light, not the clotted scarlet of the Dragons' magic spheres or the glowing symbols on the black columns, but a clean blue fire that seemed to burn through the murk and blur about them, dazzling and cleansing as the light of high noon.

He pointed the Sword at the center of the altar-disc, where the Lord of the Dragon Kings stood, the Sword of Sacrifice raised high.

Thunder cracked!

A jagged, sizzling blast of lightning arched from the Star Sword to the black blade of death. The black sword spluttered, melting, searing the Dragon's cold black claws. He flung it from him, shrieking with maniacal fury.

The second bolt caught Sssaaa upon his weird helm of blood-red metal. It heated to the melting point instantly, and the great black body arched with the unbearable shock, tearing muscle from bone with the terrific impact of the

thunderbolt. His brains fried, his body blasted, the Lord of the Dragons fell twitching spasmodically to the black pave.

The Dragon Kings broke, screeching. Some fled with wild loping strides for the citadel. Others raced to pluck the giant barbarian from the walls. But the Star Sword was alive with fire now, like a stupendous blue-white torch. Bolts of crackling fire sprang from it, playing over their scattered ranks in a dazzling shower of electric fire.

A stream of thunderbolts landed among the columns, shattering some and toppling others. The black forest of stone fell, crushing many of the Dragon Kings beneath the weight of the monster monoliths.

Bolt after sizzling bolt poured into the motionless globe of darkness. The air quivered, exploding with thunder. The whirling chaos of the courtyard was lit with flashes of blinding white fire. The heavens cracked across, and cold rain and howling wind came drenching forth—as if, the evil paralysis of Dragon Magic broken, outraged Nature was striking back in all her raw, elemental fury. Blinding, stinging sheets of cold rain flooded down in a wild deluge, and the roaring song of the wind arose into a shrieking madness about them. Through its rage came the deep, ringing voice of Thongor, chanting the mighty, barbaric music of Diombar's ancient song:

*“...and thunder broke the sky—
Red lightning flashed—drums of thunder crashed—a rain of fire fell
To sweep the Kings of the Dragons down to the smoking pits of hell!”*

Before the terrific storm of blue-white lightning, the swirling center of darkness broke—shattered—crumbled into fragments that rapidly dispersed and were gone, as a thick black fog is dispersed and dissolved before the scorching beams of the noontide sun. The storm rose. The noise was deafening. Wind and rain, the thunder of falling columns, and above them all, the iron-throated song ringing out in brave verses of victory:

*“He beat them back with a broken blade, knee-deep in the roaring tide,
But the great black spear drank deep as it sank in Thungarth's naked side.
Yet ere the Son of Jaidor fell, and ere his strength should wane,
The broken Sword of Nemedis had clove the Dragon's brain.”*

The rain was falling so heavily that through its glassy curtains the blundering, stumbling forms of the Dragon Kings were but dark shadows against the blinding flashes of exploding lightning. The dazzling bolts caught at wall and turret, clung twisting for a few instants, then vanished as a rain of broken rubble slid down into the court. Now lightning blazed in the skies above them, lighting the entire heavens in terrific sheets of flame, almost as if Father Gorm, the Lord of Lightning Himself were partaking in this last epic battle against the Dragon hordes. And skybolt and Swordbolt flamed together, striking down the Dragon Kings one by one. The squealing, shrieking, panic of the stumbling, staggering black forms reeled in panic before the remorseless blast of the angry heavens and the incandescent Sword of *Nemedis*.

Before this whirling chaos Sumia swooned for a moment, or an hour, for when she next opened her eyes the storm was vanishing with the same swiftness as it had begun. Under the clean light of the stars that now burned red no more, the destined cycle passed, the black citadel lay in wet smoking ruins, the ringed monoliths either fallen or raising only broken stubs of seared, half-molten rock to the clear, calm sky, where now the full moon was emerging softly to wash the Earth and the sea with her pure, serene light.

At his lonely post on the ruined wall, Thongor stood as if exhausted, the no-longer-glowing Sword held in his hand. Through the calm stillness of the night, he sang softly the last verse of the ancient song:

*“Thunder rolled in the crimson sky; the War Maids rode the storm
To bear the soul of Thungarth home to the halls of Father Gorm.
The Age of the Dragons ended then, where the seas with scarlet ran.
Though the cost was high, the prize was great.
And the Age of Men began.”*

Then Thongor came down from the crumbling wall and across the rubble-choked courtyard to the broken disc of the altar. And the keen blade of the enchanted Sword bit through the links of their chains and they were free, and Sumia felt at last the strong, gentle arms of Thongor the Barbarian around her, bearing her up carefully, holding her against his naked chest, her head against his heart.

“You are not dead,” she said, and Thongor shook his head, wild black mane falling across his bronzed shoulders.

“Nay, Sumia, I live,” he said quietly. And his golden eyes looked down into her eyes, which glimmered like dark stars. She made no further answer, for a great weakness rose within her, but her perfect lips curved a very little in a faint smile... and then she sank exhausted into the darkness of a deep and healing sleep, cradled in the Valkarthan’s powerful arms.

And the Age of Men began...

Epilog

The Nemedis floated a few feet above the ground before the cavernous entrance to the subterranean castle of Sharajsha the Great. Standing beside the ladder, Karm Karvus of Tsargol, Princess Sumia of Patanga, and Thongor of Valkarath were making their last farewells to the old wizard ere flying on to the adventures that yet awaited them in the days to come.

“Since you will take no pay or reward for the time you spent in my service, Thongor, accept then this slight gift from a friend,” Sharajsha said, pressing into Thongor’s hand a small package. The Valkarthan examined it curiously.

“Tis a mere trinket, an armlet of gold, naught but a token of our adventures together. Yet keep it by you, for someday it may come in handy.”

Thongor nodded and thrust it within the pocket-pouch of his trappings.

“The time has come for us to say farewell,” Thongor said. For two weeks, since their return from the Dragon Isles, the three adventurers had been guests of the Wizard of Lemuria in his underground palace. There they had slept, rested, and feasted. Sharajsha had shown them his marvels, and they had talked through the long evenings, discussing their adventures and the perils through which they had safely passed. Again and again Thongor recounted how the waves had lodged the Sword of *Nemedis* below the mouth of the cavern where he emerged to find it beneath his eyes, and Sharajsha solemnly declared it was the work of the Gods... perhaps of Father Gorm Himself, for naught but an act of the Gods could have brought the sleeping powers of the Sword to life there in Thongor’s hand as he stood upon the wall of the black citadel. For Thongor knew not the runes and words of power with which the wizard had planned to set into action the enchanted blade.

“The Gods smiled upon our quest, and I feel within my old bones, Thongor, that they shall watch over you and that yours is a charmed life.”

Thongor smiled with the healthy skepticism of the barbarian, but made no comment.

But the Valkarthan was not made for leisure, and after some days he chafed to be away, finding adventures again. The others found him again and again fondling the hilt of his beloved broadsword, which Karm Karvus had preserved for him when he had lost it.

So at length the hour of farewells came around.

“Take the airboat, for it is yours,” the wizard said. “And I shall keep the Star Sword here, for vast powers are still slumbering within it, and in the hands of the unwary, or the greedy, should it fall into such hands, it could work terrible things out in the lands of men. Here I will keep it safe, for I see within the misty future a time when once again the powers of the Sword will be needed. When that far-off hour comes—whether to you, or to your children, or to your distant descendants a thousand years from this hour—when that far off time comes, when the Sword is again needed to lift against the Forces of Darkness, you shall take it from my hand.”

They nodded, not truly understanding, and Thongor stirred restlessly, anxious to be gone.

“Fare you well, Prince of Karvus. Where will you go?” Sharajsha asked.

The Tsargolian bowed. “For me, who have no home, I shall follow the trail of Thongor, for I know that wherever he is, there will be fighting aplenty!”

They laughed, and Sharajsha turned next to salute the Princess of Patanga.

“Farewell to you, my Lady,” he said. “And what road shall you take?”

She smiled and shrugged lightly. “For that I have no home either, I too shall follow Thongor. For where my brave warrior is, there is my home as well.” And her smiling gaze met the warm, golden eyes of the barbarian.

Sharajsha turned then to the Valkarthan.

“And fare you well, Thongor. Where do you plan to journey?”

The Valkarthan grinned the reckless, fighting grin that they had seen when he laughed in the teeth of danger. He slid his broadsword from its sheath and kissed the blade, saluting Sumia.

“I? Why, Wizard, I shall return to Patanga, where a vile Druid soils the throne of my Princess. And that throne I shall win back for her. Aye, and a place beside her for myself—unless my right arm and my Northlander steel have both lost their strength.”

And with that they entered the *Nemedis*, Thongor lifting Sumia over the low rail and bounding to the deck with one stride. The wizard withdrew to the mouth of his cavern as the airboat floated up into the morning sunlight, circled once, and sped out over the dense jungles of Chush, bound for Patanga the City of Fire, and a host of new adventures.

Appendix

Time Chart of Lemurian History.

1 to 1,000,000 B.C. (*approx.*): The destruction of Hyperborea. The Dragon Kings migrate to Lemuria.

Year 1 (*circa* 500,000 B.C.): The Gods give life to the first man, Phondath the Firstborn.

1 to 1000(*approx.*): The rise of the Seven Cities of the East.

1000 to about 2000: The Thousand-Year War is fought and the Dragon Kings are whelmed at the Battle of Grimstrand Firth, wherein the Black Keep falls to the Star Sword and Thungarth, Son of Jaidor, is slain.

2000 to about 4000: The Nine Cities of the West are founded and they prosper.

About 4500: The Era of the Gray Enchanters.

6982: Thongor the Mighty, Son of Thumithar of the Black Hawk people, is born at Valkarth in the Northlands.

About 6999: The coming of Thongor into the Southlands as a wandering adventurer.

7007-08: Thongor and Sharajsha foil the plot of the Dragon Kings, as described in *Thongor and the Wizard of Lemuria*.

7008: Thongor breaks the power of Thurdis, weds the Princess Sumia, and becomes Lord of the Three Cities, as described in *Thongor and the Dragon City*.

7008, tenth month: Prince Thar, the Son of Thongor, is born in Patanga.

7009: Events described in *Thongor Against the Gods*.

7014: Events described in *Thongor in the City of Magicians*.

7017: Events described in *Thongor at the End of Time*.

