

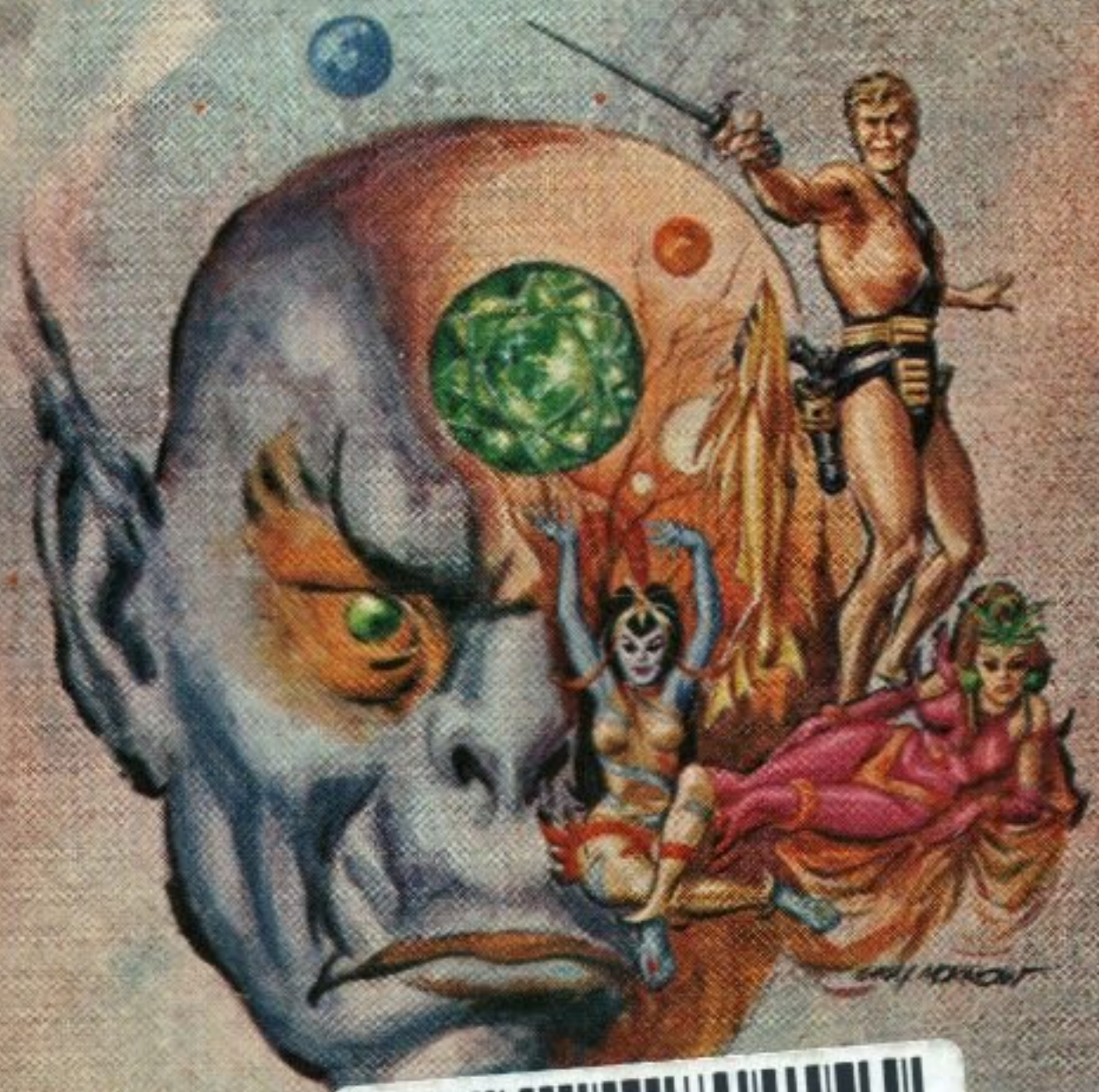
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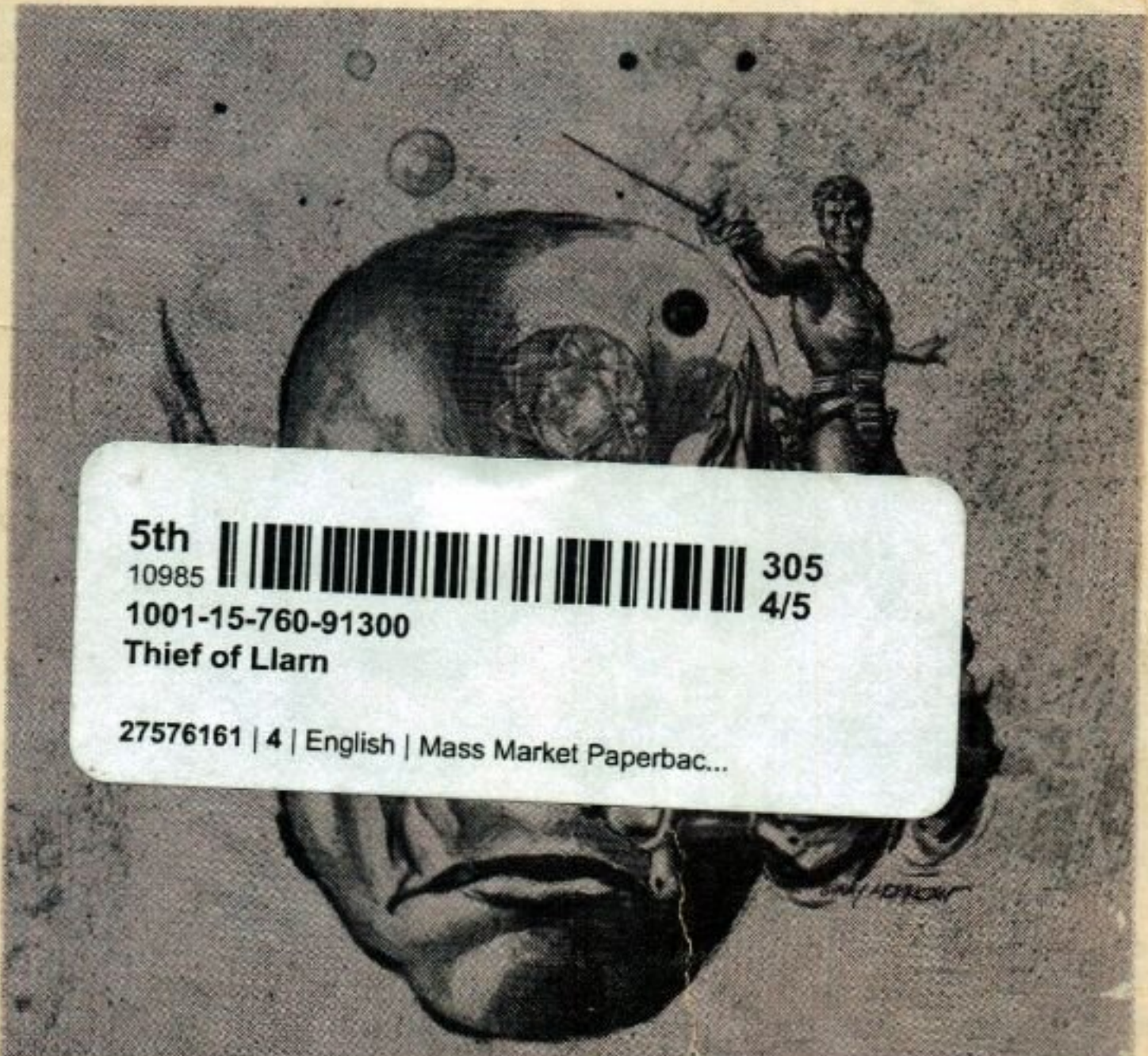
Thief of Llarn

Gardner F. Fox

Alan Morgan, Earthman, swordsman, adventurer extraordinary, finds his most amazing challenge on Llarn, distant world of a far red star.

Among the ruins of fabulous cities and fallen empires, Alan Morgan becomes a prime piece in a time-spanning game of planetary chess. His prize - the incredible jewel of Zaxeron, held in an impenetrable light shaft guarded by all-destroying fires.

And always at stake - the life of Tuarra, crown princess of Kharthol and wife of Alan Morgan. For this was more than a mere game of living chess. It was war for a world!



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Thief of Llarn

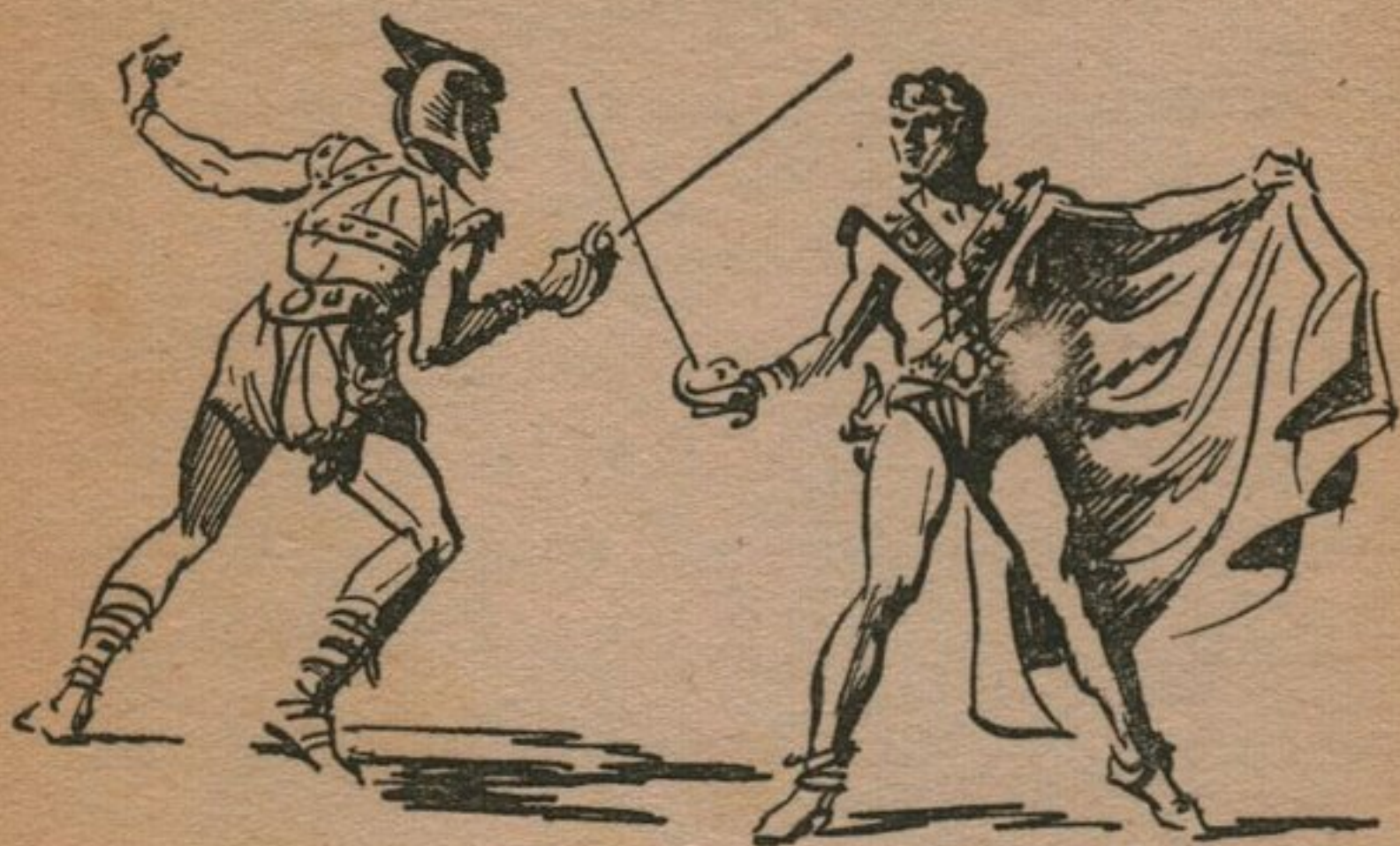
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SECRET WEAPON OF A FORGOTTEN GOD

Alan Morgan, Earthman, was now a true citizen of the planet Llarn. Through his master swordsmanship and quick wits, he had risked his life at great odds to finally win the beautiful Tuarra, *daganna* of Kharthol, as his wife.

And he would do it again . . . for now even more was at stake. The world of Llarn itself was threatened with a disaster even greater than the atomic war of eons ago, which had dried up the oceans and shredded the land to desert and desolation and peopled it with monstrous mutated beings.

On a curious chess board that crossed the barriers of time, Alan Morgan was moved from adventure to adventure by the powers of a godlike master, and his swift sword was his only means of staving off the enemies of the planet and saving the life of his loved princess.



**THIEF
OF LLARN**

by

GARDNER F. FOX

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Gardner F. Fox has also written :

THE ARSENAL OF MIRACLES (F-299)

WARRIOR OF LLARN (F-307)

Printed in U.S.A.

FOREWORD

I AM AN EARTHMAN, living on the planet Llarn. My name is Alan Morgan. From childhood on Earth, I was conscious of a strange voice, an entity, taking over my life and training me, as it were, for some mysterious mission which lay in my future. I now know this contact was made by a being called an ephelos, summoning me to do what no native of Llarn could: bring him the red metal ball and the green rod which would permit the ephelos who had been Vann Tar before The War to go on to his next stage of existence.

Before I could bring the elathin and the rod of taliforr to the ephelos, I had met and fallen in love with Tuarra, dagananna or princess of Kharthol, a great city of Llarn, and saved her from the blue men of Azorra with the help of a khorl, Kav Mork. After I delivered the red metal ball and the taliforr rod to Vann Tar, I watched the change come upon him, and his disappearance. In his place he left a verdal, a gem closely resembling an earth emerald. The verdal, I was to learn later, was a rare and precious jewel of the planet.

As my story is told in *Warrior of Llarn*, I shall not bore you with repetitions. I helped restore Drakol Tu, dagan of Kharthol and father of Tuarra, to his throne. I married Tuarra. I became a citizen of the great city of Kharthol.

The planet Llarn is a strange world. Perhaps one of the strangest things about it is its powerful Thieves' Guild. This story is about these thieves, and of the part which I, Alan Morgan, played as the most famous master thief in all its long history!

I

THE SHADOW moved silently, as all shadows move. I lay tangled in my sleeping silks, half asleep, half awake, not certain even that I was seeing anything. The night air of Llarn is always cold; my sleeping silks had slipped and a freezing wind was blowing across my chest. I half rose on an elbow, staring. And the shadow disappeared. I lay back and slept.

Beside me, Tuarra moaned and shivered. She gave a faint cry. Even in my dreams I heard her voice and came upward out of the coverlets, crouched and wakeful.

A dark figure stood tensed above her, holding her hand, lifting off the green ring that has glinted on her finger since the day I married Tuarra of Kharthol in the temple of Astarra. The dark figure was removing the priceless jewel, but at my sudden movement his head came up and I found myself staring into cold black eyes rimmed in white.

I lunged forward, falling over my silks. Even though I was off balance, I felt the impact of the blow as my fist rammed into the side of his jaw. He went backward as if

THIEF OF LLARN

shot, stumbling and flailing his arms at the air. I freed my feet. I dove forward. I rocked him with a left hook and then a right to his belly. I drove my knuckles into his nose, mashing it.

He gave a harsh cry. The pain of my last blow must have been numbing. The thieves of Llarn are trained to endure pain, taught never to be surprised; but flesh is flesh. The thief was only human. My fist rammed him under the jaw, snapping his head sideways. I had no mercy for this visitor in the night. He had put his hands on Tuarra.

Through lips drawn back against the agony of his mashed nose he hurled a curse at me and whipped out his blade. Sight of that bared steel was like a spur. Men and women sleep on the planet Llarn wrapped only in their sleeping silks, when they are in the privacy of their own homes. As a result I was unarmed, defenseless against the sidewise slash he aimed at my middle. I leaped backward and dove sideways.

My own sword is never far from my hand, even in this city of Kharthol, which is the oldest of Llarn and the only one to survive The War. It came out of the scabbard humming, parrying a thrust, settling into the rhythm of dip and dart.

A blade is a part of me. Always it has been so; I enjoy the flash and clanging of the steel, the quick eruption of the blades into parry and thrust, remise and riposte. I had been born with this fever for the sword. My hand always itched to grip and use one. On Llarn, I was given many opportunities to indulge myself.

With one or another of the thin blades of the fighting men of Llarn, I had fought my way across a quarter of a planet, and this constant battling had honed the edge of my swordsmanship to a magnificent sharpness. As I drove forward, point darting in and out, the thief fell back before my onslaught.

He was a good swordsman, but I was fighting for my beloved Tuarra. Back and back I drove him, not wanting to kill but to disarm and question him. I needed to know

THIEF OF LLARN

why the thieves of Llarn would send a man to rob the Dagganna of Kharthol. Fear began to dawn in his eyes.

The Thieves' Guild on Llarn is a very old one. It has existed since The War, that Armageddon by which men measure time on this planet, when the great powers of Loth and Meradion allied themselves against Karthol and Pallavamar in a nuclear war that came close to destroying all life on Llarn. From the radioactivity that bombarded the planet then and in the years which were the aftermath of The War, men changed and evolved. The blue apes became the blue men—the Azunn. Men themselves became khorls or here and there in rare instances, the epheloin.

Life had become a gamble. Men stole food; they stole weapons; they stole women. From those early thefts which were a necessary part of staying alive, was evolved the Thieves' Guild, that powerful organization which continued to steal for profit and for wealth when the necessity of stealing for life itself was at an end.

The professional thief wears black as his working uniform. A black kilt, a broad black leather belt, black scabbards that hold black swords, black sandals, these are the insignia of the thief. To him, it is a sacred costume.

And sometimes, to avoid detection, the thief will smear himself with a black pigment so that only his eyes show any color. It enables him to move among the dark shadows of the city streets with ease and almost perfect safety.

The man who fell back before my darting blade was covered with that ebony pigmentation. He was like a shadow as he moved with feline ease. His eyes alone showed color, and these were wide and white now with fear.

Tuarra was sitting up and staring with wide eyes as I drove the black-clad thief before me, my point winking and shifting past his guard to draw blood in half a dozen places. A sword is a part of my physical body when I fight. I do not explain it; it is as if I own a sixth finger, a long metal finger that goes where I point it, and swiftly.

The corlth—a master thief—was panting now, weakening visibly. He might have been a good swordsman, but I was

THIEF OF LLARN

fighting for Tuarra, and before her eyes. Because of this I was the greatest swordsman who ever lived. Twice more I drove my metal into his hide before he turned with a wail and leaped for the balcony doors. They burst open before his lunge.

Then he dove over the balcony rail to fall headfirst for several hundred feet to the stones of the palace courtyard, far below. He was a brave man, even if he was a thief. I was sorry that he had to end that way.

Tuarra was at my elbow, trailing silks and furs behind her. Her lovely face was flushed with recent sleep, her thick black hair fell like a perfumed veil over her shoulders and down her back. Her green eyes seemed enormous above her heavy red mouth.

"A thief," she breathed. "Never has a corlth attempted to rob me or any of my family!"

"Well, this one did," I told her, sliding my arm about her bare shoulders.

Her thin brows wrinkled in puzzlement. "I don't understand. He was trying to steal my wedding ring, the verdal." She held out her hand with fingers spread apart as women do when they want the light to catch a jewel. I took advantage of her bemusement to press my lips to her perfumed hair.

"What would a thief want with a verdal?" she asked.

On Llarn, a verdal is a most precious jewel. It is not a gem, strictly speaking, since only an ephelos can form one from the transmutation which takes place within its golden helix. The ephelos, Vann Tar, had formed the emerald-like gem Tuarra wore. To my knowledge, there were only three verdals on all Llarn. Not even the powerful Thieves' Guild could dispose of a stone that rare.

"It's a puzzle," I admitted.

It was close to dawn. The great band of shattered stones and debris, which looked for all the world like jewels themselves as they circled the planet and made the Llarn nights so magnificent a spectacle, was fading with the rising sun. During the daytime the great moon-band appears like silver mist high above the clouds. It is only at night that it comes

THIEF OF LLARN

into its true glory, and is just as romantic as our own moon.

Standing on the balcony, I kissed Tuarra, holding her gently. I never cease to marvel at her beauty, at the fortune which brought us together across the six hundred odd light-years between Earth and the little sun Alfan which is three light-years from giant red Canopus. She made her purring sound deep in her throat which indicated either pleasure or applause, and put her arms about my neck.

I told her how much I loved her; I explained that if anything happened to her, I would die. I was quite serious about it, and her green eyes were wide and intent, but after a moment I discovered their gleeful brightness and knew that I was wasting time.

I swung her up into my arms and carried her from the balcony to the sleeping silks from which we had been so rudely roused. I lowered her to the sleeping dais.

There was a knock on the door.

Tuarra said something under her breath, and scowled. I would have ignored the knock, but she reminded me that she was a princess of Kharthol and that I was the prince-consort. People such as these do not ignore knocks on their chamber doors. Sighing, I slipped on a robe.

An officer was standing there when I opened the door. He saluted crisply, declaring it was his pleasure to inform me that Drakol Tu wanted speech with the daganna and myself, in the council room.

"Now?" I growled. It was dawn on Llarn and a red light was touching the walls of our bedchamber with crimson fire. I thought of Tuarra, warm and lovely. "Must it be now?"

"The dagan has commanded," the officer said.

When the door closed, Tuarra sighed, rolled out of bed, and moved toward her bath. When the dagan commands, even the daganna obeys. It was an old adage. I gathered that Tuarra and I were not to be exceptions to the rule.

We found Drakol Tu in the council room with half a dozen of his highest officers, together with two strangers and the priest of the Temple of Astarra who had married Tuarra and

THIEF OF LLARN

me here in Kharthol. The others I did not know. The emblems on the broad belts of their harnesses were strange to my eyes.

Drakol Tu said heavily, "The temple verdal has been stolen."

Tuarra gasped and sank into a chair. "Just moments ago a corlth tried to take my ring," she announced.

She held out her hand. Against her golden silk the verdal glittered with brilliant fire. The strangers hissed in their throats at sight of it, and their eyes went from the ring, to the girl, to me. "Private individuals on Llarn do not own verdals; they are so precious, they are always state or temple property.

"Then there is something more at stake here than a sneak thief in the night," the dagan said heavily.

He introduced the two strangers. One was an alkar, supreme commander from the distant city of Kavadar. The other, Dal Kamm, was a prince of the house of Kamm Dor, who ruled in Moorn, a city many thousand of miles southeast of Kharthol and renowned for the sciences.

Dal Kamm said, "The verdal which is the pride of Moorn was taken from its golden chest two days ago."

The alkar muttered, "A week before, someone stole the green jewel from its palace setting in Kavadar."

The old priest who had married Tuarra and me explained, "The people of Astarra have ways of communicating with one another. We in Kharthol learned of these thefts, and asked the representatives of those governments to visit us. Now our own verdal had been stolen."

"And a corlth tried to make off with your ring," the alkar of Kavadar said softly to Tuarra. "Everywhere on Llarn, thieves are taking verdals. But why?"

"I didn't know there were more than three verdals," I said.

Dal Kamm chuckled. "Evidently they are in the nature of a state secret. We in Moorn kept ours so securely guarded, no one but the royal family knew of it."

The priest of Astarra nodded. "It is so. Always they are kept a secret. And this will help the thieves."

THIEF OF LLARN

He made sense. If no one knows what valuables a man has, the search for them becomes almost an impossibility. By the time the theft is discovered, the thief is far away.

"They can't sell them for profit," I protested.

Drakol Tu scowled at his hands. "I have been in communication with several of the Vrann cities. I have reported these thefts. I have also been informed that all over Llarn, verdals are being stolen."

He paused, then went on. "And from Dal Kamm I have learned shocking news. As you know, Moorn is renowned for the genius of its scientists. Dal Kamm tells me the verdals are something more than jewels. They have—a queer power."

"What power?" Tuarra asked.

Her father shook his head. "The scientists do not know. They were only beginning their research with a fragment of a verdal brought up from the Sea of Okyl by a diver—when it was stolen. It was no more than a sliver, yet a thief took it."

His eyes seemed to glow as they studied his daughter and me. "I have spoken to Evdon Thul who is the chief scientist of Moorn. I have offered your verdal, Tuarra—for the Moorn researchers to study, to learn what it is about the verdals that makes them so valuable to thieves."

Tuarra cried out in protest. Her wedding ring was dearer to her than anything else she possessed. She would not give it up.

Dal Kamm smiled. "It is only a loan, Highness."

The old priest of Astarra nodded sympathetically. "We understand and sympathize with your reluctance. Yet what you do will be for the good of all Llarn."

She looked at me, helplessly. Her eyes begged for my support. The value of the verdal meant nothing to her except as it was her wedding band. It was not its worth that concerned her, but its sentimental value. Yet she was too fine a person to put sentiment before security.

"When shall you take it?" she asked tonelessly.

"You yourself will deliver it to Moorn," Drakol Tu told her. "Alan will go with you. The prince of Moorn is not un-

THIEF OF LLARN

appreciative of your cooperation. He has planned entertainments and fêtes to pass the time while his people make their tests."

Tuarra turned to me and shrugged. "It is no use to argue, Alan Morgan. We both know we would not have it any other way. I shall deliver the verdal to Moorn as my father asks."

Everyone at the table looked relieved. I rose to my feet and we made our farewells. Dal Kamm was to remain in Kharthol to sign certain treaties regarding a mutual exchange of information about scientific discoveries, and also to lay out a plan to break the back of the Thieves' Guild.

Our own flier had been readied for departure, and rested now on the landing roof above the palace. As Alfan crept higher in the heavens, Tuarra and I made our farewells to the royal family and ascended to the roof. Our gear was already stowed away in the two-man flier's little storage compartment.

Moorn lay in the southern hemisphere of Llarn, roughly five thousand erns—an ern is a unit of distance slightly more than an earth mile—from Kharthol. Between us and our destination lay part of that great red desert on which I had landed on Llarn. It stretched for a thousand erns east and west, and for roughly three hundred, north and south. Much of our time would be spent flying over it.

As we approached the flier, I saw a man in the uniform of a Khartholian panar move away from the motor suddenly, with an almost guilty air. His attitude made me think of the thief who had tried to steal the verdal last night, but there was nothing on the flier worth the attentions of a corlth. I told myself I was imagining things.

The storage space was filled with the clothes Tuarra had packed: state kilts and belts, her jewels, her perfume vials. On state missions, she would have traveled in a mighty aerial battleship, with all the pomp and ceremony due her rank. This was an emergency trip, however. There was neither the time nor the room to take all she might want. This

THIEF OF LLARN

added to her wretchedness, so that she said little or nothing as I helped her into the craft.

The two-man flier has small seats, being different from the one-man craft in this regard, which is little more than a flying surfboard. Naturally the single ship is faster, but this was a sleek little vessel, curved to eliminate drag and air friction. By tomorrow at noon we would be settling down at our destination.

A gun signaled clearance. I took the ship up into the third lane above the city, circled once, and set the automatic controls for Moorn. From now on, our time was our own.

I tried to tease Tuarra into her normal spirits, but she would only look at her ring and sigh. So I gave my eyes to the landscape far below. It moved swiftly. We were traveling at about four hundred erns for every kor of time, but we were high enough so that I could make out a few houses here and there, and see the vast beef herds that ranged the grassy Khartholian plains in a mass of color.

At last the great meadowlands fell away, and a line of low hills extended southward in a westerly direction. These were a spur of the Palnarrs, which ranged north and east of Kharthol. And then they too were gone as we fled south and east above a vast lowland where high grasses blew in the winds.

We ate cold meat and lakk, a beverage not unlike coffee laced with brandy. Tuarra apologized for her moodiness. I told her I understood. Not every bride is asked to part with her wedding ring so soon after having it slipped on a finger.

"They'll give it back," I promised.

"Unharméd, I hope?"

I nodded, though I was none too sure of this, and kissed her. She came into my arms and nestled her head on my shoulder. The hours went fast enough. Time always moves swiftly when I am with Tuarra. Dusk crept up into the sky behind us, on wings of air that moved even more rapidly than our flier. Soon it overtook and passed us. Alfan was a

THIEF OF LLARN

red ball in the lower half of the sky behind us. Then this too was gone, and night was with us.

We stretched out in the open space between the seats and our storage compartments. There was little or no vibration to the progress of the flier, so that it was almost like sleeping on air. We fell asleep holding hands.

The trouble came when I opened my eyes an hour past sunup. The flier was moving slowly through a heavy mist and the alarm beeps were a cacophony in my ears. I scrambled to my feet, staring through the transparent cowling.

According to every Llarn map I had ever seen, we should be over Moorn at this time. Instead of Moorn, there was only heavy mist—and the flier was laboring heavily! I leaped for the controls, my hands gripping the levers, my fingertips punching power studs. The flier did not respond.

“What is it, Alan?” Tuarra asked, throwing back her coverlets and coming to stand beside me.

I waved a hand at the mists and at the controls. Tuarra took her seat before the twin panels and repeated what I had done. The flier did not respond to her manipulations, either. Once she shivered and bit down her lower lip, but went on working desperately.

“What is this mist?” I asked.

She shook her head, not speaking. She seemed frightened. At last her hands fell away from the small levers and she took a deep breath.

“The motors haven’t enough fuel,” she said softly. “Somehow it’s been drained out. And automatic controls were tampered with. If we hadn’t thrown them on manual just now, they’d have carried us over the south polar region—where, when the fuel ran out, we’d have crashed.”

I had been over those polar snows before, when I had brought the red metal ball and the green rod to Vann Tar, the ephelos. I still remembered the utter cold of that icy waste and the winds which swept it. Even in the flier we would have frozen to death within hours.

I remembered the panar I had seen peering at the flier motor. I told Tuarra about him and she nodded grimly.

THIEF OF LLARN

"The Thieves' Guild doesn't want us to take the verdal to Moorn, obviously," she said. "But why, Alan Morgan? What can be so unusual about the verdals?"

"They might have told us at Moorn. I can't."

We drifted through the mists for another hour before they broke. These were the Clouds of Comoron, Tuarra told me. They had not existed, as so many things on Llarn had not, before The War. They were not dangerous, but they lay far out of the path of most commercial airships, and were generally given a wide berth. No one had ever come back from a venture into those mists to tell about them.

They were presumed to have been created by the nuclear blasts that had torn Llarn in those ancient days when Meradion and Loth had fought on Kharthol and Pullavamar. No man could explain them, but then neither could anyone explain the ephelos or the khorl who also resulted from The War.

Through the break in the Clouds of Comoron I spotted open land. From our height it seemed that I stared down at lush pasturelands. When I told Tuarra I was going to land, she only shrugged her smooth golden shoulders.

"It will be an easier death than freezing," she said.

We lost altitude steadily until we were below the vast bank of clouds that must have hidden close to several thousand square erns. A whole new world stretched before us.

There were pasturelands, with winds scented by growing things roaming like lost spirits about the tall grasses. It was a peaceful world, resembling a vast Siberian steppe that went on and on to all points of the compass as far as the eye could see. These grasses were not as the other grasses with which Llarn is covered. These grasses were a pale green, like a pastel shade. The sunlight was filtered by the Clouds of Comoron so that it was like walking through indirect lighting, all pallor and no brightness. It was a nightmare world.

Tuarra glanced around her, shivering again. She tried to smile bravely, looking at me. "Had we fuel in the flier, I

THIEF OF LLARN

might enjoy this adventure, Alan. As it is, I feel I'm in a dream."

Well, this place had a dreamlike quality. The wind was hushed; there was only the white puffy clouds high above, glittering like spun gold where the rays of Alfan caught them, and the air was sweet and cool. Tuarra in her golden skin and thick black hair, blowing freely now as the wind caressed it, her harness of deep maroon kilt and broad leather belt, afforded a loveliness that tugged at my heart.

I could not let her die, here. Somehow, somewhere, I would find an escape.

"Come, Tuarra. We shall search this hidden land in the flier. Perhaps we shall find people who are friendly."

"On Llarn?" she asked wryly. "Where strangers are killed for no other reason than that they are strangers?"

The War had made men suspicious of one another on this planet. Before The War, there had been the great empires of Meradion, Loth, Pullavamar, Kharthol. Today, of these only Kharthol existed; the rest were names in fables. And the heritage of The War had been a struggle for survival which took thousands of years during which time men fought to stay alive.

Men had changed in that time of nuclear aftermath, with radioactive gales sweeping the great land masses which occupied all but eight percent of the planet's surface. They had to battle the evolving blue apes, the Khorls, the many and varied manifestations of atomic change and mutation in man and animal. The wonder of it was that any survived at all.

Three races inhabited my adopted world now: the golden Vrann, the blue Azunn, and the white dolthoin who lived in the deeps of the twin oceans, Okyl and Ytal. Each was desperately suspicious of the other; each kept to itself, and even within its own group there were bitter rivalries and occasional wars.

No, Tuarra was right. No strangers would find welcome in the land of the cloud cover. Yet we had no other choice.

I guided Tuarra back into the flier. I worked the controls

THIEF OF LLARN

to take us slowly and at a level of fifty feet above the pallid grasslands. It might not help us, but it was better than walking.

We cruised for seven hours. Beyond the Clouds of Comoron, the sun was lowering. The puffy clouds turned red from gold, slowly, gradually. At any other time I might have delighted in the beauty of that puffy barrier high above. My esthetic sense was not working too well, however.

I was getting worried. We had enough fuel for another few hours flight. Then we had no other choice but to walk. Tuarra had discovered another peculiar facet of the Clouds of Comoron: They distorted our compasses, sending the needle whirling wildly at times, or at other moments making it hang quivering, unmoving, at almost any point on the dial beneath it.

And then—I saw the city!

II

IT LOOMED like Ys or Avalon, its towers slim and graceful, its walls high, but not high enough to hide the red rooftops of the buildings behind it, out of which a citadel towered in crimson glory. As we neared, it changed color as the crimson in the clouds and altered to an angry red. It was as if the city flushed with rage at sight of us.

Tuarra shivered and drew closer. "What is it? Where are the people?" she whispered.

There were no people. The city was empty, abandoned. It towered in magnificence—not in ruins, but as in the full bloom of its early splendor. All it needed was a population. The flier edged closer, and now I saw that the corners and the edges of the walls were rounded with the slow erosion of the years and by the winds that swept across these grasslands. The buildings too, had that massy look, as if they were half melted in the cauldron of eternity.

The flier slipped above the wall. The streets lay empty below us. There was not a single sign of human habitation. Ruins I could have understood: Men had lived in them before. This deserted city was something else again.

For there was life here! I could sense it, as you are sometimes uneasy when you are being stared at. It was as if someone—or something—were questing at the edges of my brain.

I lowered the flier. It bumped when it hit the stone street. Tuarra made a queer sound, deep in her throat. I whirled.

She was staring straight ahead, eyes wide and fearful. I caught her arm, but it was as if she did not feel my grip.

"Tuarra! What is it?"

She did not hear me. Her eyelids never blinked. Then, suddenly, she collapsed. I caught her, held her warm and

THIEF OF LLARN

fragrant body against me. She was alive; she breathed. I was content with that, for the moment.

When she stirred, I loosed my arms and wrapped my fingers around the handle of my grawn, easing it from the tight clasp of its holster. The grawn is like an earth revolver, but it fires red energy from a pellet of a specially treated radioactive alloy. Each bullet is harmless in itself, yet it can trigger a destructive beam that will blow a man to powder.

Every fighting man on Llarn wears a round medallion around his neck, a kranth, that protects him from this red beam. The kranth draws the beam toward it, absorbs its lethal energies without harm to the wearer. Tuarra wore such a medallion, as did I.

Her head moved. "Alan Morgan? There is something living in this place—something terribly powerful. It—it was in my mind, searching it."

"Did it harm you?"

"No-no. It only seemed—elated."

"It didn't tell you where there's any water, did it?" I asked wryly. I was beginning to develop a powerful thirst. We had finished our food and the last of the lakk. I was not hungry yet, but my throat felt dry.

"Why, maybe it did," she said slowly, letting me help her to her feet. "At least, I know where to go."

She set off along a street away from the flier, walking with supreme confidence. I went after her, keeping my hand on the grawn.

Less than half a mile away a trickle of water flowed from a bronze spout carved to represent an animal which Tuarra assured me had never been seen on Llarn, at least since The War.

We bent and drank.

When we were done, the bronze animal whispered, "Sentos Sun will see you now."

I am afraid my mouth dropped open in utter disbelief. Though I am aware that the khorls and epheloin of Llarn possess powers which might be termed magical, I had not suspected the presence of a khorl in this abandoned city.

THIEF OF LLARN

In reality, of course, that magic is no more than the telekinetic powers of their minds applied in a form of energy. Or to put it more simply—they possess the power of mind over matter.

Tuarra put her hands to her temples while her head went down as if very heavy. She whispered, "The—the one who calls himself Sentos Sun is in the citadel. We must hurry, Alan Morgan."

She turned and began walking away from me. I remained some distance behind her, with the grawn naked in my fist. If there was to be a surprise attack, I wanted the attackers to be the ones surprised.

Seemingly, we were the only ones alive in this ancient city. No one else appeared, and our footfalls echoed with hollow loneliness as we mounted the great staircase leading to the citadel. Huge bronze doors stood open before us.

We walked into a great hall lined with gray wood. From the walls hung strange weapons and even stranger banners and shields. I had not seen swords like these since I had been a prisoner in the museum which the Azunn called the Hall of Dead Things. I would have paused to examine those weapons, for I am a fighting man and am always interested in the tools of my trade, especially when they are unusual. But Tuarra was moving on through another doorway, so I had to limit my inspection to a casual glance before hurrying after her.

The chamber into which we now stepped was huge. Its high ceiling towered so far above us it seemed lost in shadows.

At the far end of the vast chamber was a great throne of gold, encrusted with jewels glittering in the pale light. The throne was on a dais of gold and bordered by an area where the floor tiles themselves were thick with gems. It was a display of barbaric wealth, of riches beyond count. Some of the jewels on the throne were as big as tomatoes.

From the golden apex of the room, a floor spread outward toward slim pillars arching upward into delicate groins below walls hung with forgotten battle standards, with shields

THIEF OF LLARN

and armaments not seen in Llarn in ten thousand years. This was the audience hall of a line of conquerors, of rulers proud and noble.

A fat man sat upon the throne staring at us. He was bald, gross. He wore a thin jacket with wide half-sleeves that came down to the middle of his thighs. He reminded me of a Japanese wrestler, though his skin was as white as my own.

His pig eyes widened in disbelief at sight of us. Then he began to chuckle. His fat body rippled; it shook; it quivered like pale jelly to his giant mirth. He threw back his bald moon-head and roared his laughter to the high ceiling and its shadows.

"I'm going mad," he said at last, wiping the tears of bitter mirth from his eyes. "I have been alone so long on Llarn that I dream I am being visited by a Vrann girl and a Lothian. And Astarra knows, I am the only living thing on Llarn!"

"There are millions of people alive on Llarn," I said.

The fat man stared at me. "Strange, very strange. I did not make up that speech for you to say, as I have done with others whom I have materialized to share the eons of my loneliness."

He leaned forward, staring. "I shall make you both disappear. That will prove you are only figments of my imagination."

Nothing happened to us, and the fat man sat back, perplexed. He spoke as if to himself. "It cannot be! There is no life but me. I am the last ruler of forgotten Xuxu! I am Sentos Sun. And yet—you are here."

There is no ruler in Xuxu but Xuxu its god!

It was a thought, powerful, throbbing, that filled my mind. I saw the fat man rise to his feet, staring about him, ashen of face and fearful. He began to shiver so that the skin ran in waves on his big body. Sweat oozed out on his flabby face until it was bathed in moisture.

You are the materialization, Sentos Sun!

The fat man sat down, abruptly. He shook in the grip of

THIEF OF LLARN

a terrible fear. His blubbery lips quivered as he said, "It is Xuxul! Prase to Xuxul the all powerfull! Praise to the Lord of the city of Xuxul!"

Other beings do exist on Llarn, Sentos Sun.

There was a little pause during which Tuarra pressed close against me so that I slipped my arm about her naked shoulders. She was shivering almost as badly as Sentos Sun. "Xuxu is a myth," she breathed. "Long ago Xuxu was supposed to have been the greatest mercantile city on the planet. Xuxu and Azorra—ages before The War, long before the blue men came to inhabit it—ruled the five great oceans. Only Okyl and Ytal, very much smaller, exist now out of the original five seas. And in Xuxu, Xuxul was its god.

"The ships of Xuxu went everywhere—to distant Loth, to Paloranis, even as far as fabled Ylavon. Its sailors were the greatest on Llarn; its vessels the swiftest to sail the mighty oceans. The wealth of Xuxu was a legend on Llarn, even today. It was Xuxu which boasted the great jewel called the Desire of the World, Xuxu which clad her palace guards in gold armor, Xuxu which feasted day and night, which danced and sang away time.

"Then the oceans began to dry up and fade away. Xuxu was stranded on a continental shelf of that ocean called the Xulthic Sea. But Xuxu did not despair. There were other seaports belonging to Xuxu, seaports easily reached by caravans. Xuxu lived on while the oceans which gave it wealth were dying of old age.

"For a thousand long centuries, Xuxu fought against the inroads of time. Now only dead sea bottoms lay around it, and even its once-great seaport cities like Zaxeron and Xull no longer shipped goods by water.

"Then came The War. Xuxu was not a part of it, yet it suffered. Its people died; its streets grew empty of life. There were a few who fled away to live out their lives in some dry, dead corner of their world. And the cloud banks came to stay above Xuxu and its dead seas. After The War, Llarn knew no more of Xuxu.

"It is also part of the fable," Tuarra breathed, moisten-

THIEF OF LLARN

ing her red lips with her tongue, "that in Xuxu there lived an immortal man, a scientist who created a liquid which bestowed eternal life on him. It also changed him in some way until he became—a monster."

She laughed, but her laughter quavered. "In Kharthol we use the name of Xuxul to make naughty children behave. I never thought he might be real."

Reality is relative, woman of Karthol. As you will learn!
Sentos Sun—fetch them!

The fat man rose to his feet, gesturing. "Follow me, both of you." He turned and walked away from the golden throne where the rulers of Xuxu had sat a million years before. He moved toward a great archway of gleaming red metal.

"Wait," I called.

Sentos Sun ignored me. So too, did Tuarra. She walked straight forward after the fat man as if I did not exist, just as she had done in the city itself. I still held my gawn. I lifted it and my fingers tightened about its grip as I went in her shadow after the fat man.

Sentos Sun led us down a ramp of gray stone and through a corridor decorated by faded works of art. We entered a round room surmounted by a dome that glowed with a pale blue light. In the exact center of the chamber was a huge, circular table on which rested—

The tabletop shimmered in the blue light. One moment I saw a miniature landscape with trees and mountains and a great body of water stretching on for miles. Then the pattern shifted and now there was a city there and tiny men and women moving about like animated toys. A third time the shimmer came and went and now a ship plowed on endless sea as naked oarsmen bent and straightened. The tabletop was a chessboard in dimensional depth!

This is the game of life and death. Play this game with me and win, and you may serve me, Lothian. Fail—and you and your woman die!

I growled, "And if I refuse?"

You cannot refuse!

I felt a coldness, a blackness, swirling about me. The room

THIEF OF LLARN

where I stood with Tuarra was gone, whisked away in an instant of disintegration. I seemed to hang in a darkness where nothing but my body existed. And then I heard Xuxul speaking once again.

You are a piece in a game of dimensional worlds, Lothian. I cannot read your mind because you do not come from Llarn. But I scanned the brain of your female companion when you landed your flier in Xuxu, and I know all she knows.

His thoughts flowed through my mind. There was a danger on Llarn which Xuxul could sense, a danger which might mean death to him and slavery to all the rest of Llarn. The danger had something to do with the thefts of the verdals from Moorn and from Kavadar, and from the temple of Astarra in Kharthol, but Xuxul was ignorant of their connection.

The power of Xuxul was great, but it was not limitless. It could range out across the Clouds of Comoron, and everything they covered or touched. But the danger came from beyond those clouds, like weak radio waves barely received on a crystal set.

When our flier had first touched the cloud barrier, Xuxul had become aware of us. It was his telekinetic energies that had drained our fuel, that had forced us to land, that had guided us to Xuxu. What the corlth had begun in Kharthol by locking the flier's automatic controls, Xuxul finished in the world he ruled.

Through the brain waves Xuxul poured upon me, I sensed its deep fright, its struggle to stay alive. It was afraid its very existence depended on its overcoming the threat that had been spawned beyond the clouds. Yet beyond these clouds Xuxul could not fight—except through a human being.

I need an agent, Lothian!

In the past ages of his loneliness Xuxul had played his little game with visitors to the cloudlands where he ruled. None had ever defeated the moves he made. And so—they had died. Not because Xuxul was cruel, but because he

THIEF OF LLARN

needed to remain secret, unknown, until he could grow and expand and reach the final strength which would be his heritage.

Now he was to play that game with me in deadly earnestness. For the first time he hoped he would be defeated, for it would mean I was worthy to carry out his orders in the lands beyond Xuxu. It was a test, a training ground, an initiation which would show whether I was a strong enough reed on which to lean.

The game itself was a many-dimensional board on which Xuxul could shape the worlds which were his battlegrounds. The telekinetic energies of his mind could shift a time and space axis, could create, could add to or subtract from the miniature world where he matched wits with his opponents.

It might not be enough, these worlds within a world, but it was his only way to test the bravery and fighting qualities of this man named Alan Morgan whom he had selected to be his agent against the threat which menaced his life and the lives of all the men and women on Llarn. A thought stirred in my mind.

"I came to Llarn to serve an ephelos," I breathed. "Now you ask me to serve you."

It was the fact that you served Vann Tar—this I learned from the brain of your companion—that gave me the idea of using you as my own champion. Otherwise, I might have let you die out there under the cloudlands. I sleep often of late, lost in my own dream worlds. I have not played my dimensional game for many, many years.

Now Xuxul had to strike out at the forces gathering beyond the Clouds of Comoron and must use me as a weapon. Well, this suited me well enough. My own task was to fight whatever it was that had stolen the verdals. If I could do it as champion of Xuxul, my purpose would be the same. In a sense, we were uncommon allies united against a common foe.

But to fight the verdal takers I must survive this game. I wanted to cry out that Xuxul was endangering the only man who might help him by allying him with Kharthol

THIEF OF LLARN

and the other cities on Llarn which also sought to fight the verdal takers. If I perished in some stupid game of chance, if I were never to see Tuarra again—

I tried to speak, but could not. My hand still held the grawn. I could feel the scabbard of my sword where it hung in chains from my weapon belt. And an anger was beating up inside me, making me quiver with a fury I had never know.

And then, suddenly, I was sprawled in a narrow alleyway!

It was night on Llarn in a city I have never seen. Overhead the great band of crushed moons was lazily circling, flooding the alley where I lay with silver light. Big round cobblestones were hard under my chest and against my cheek. I pushed to my knees and then stood, staring at the rotted shutters and broken windows of a building wall, and further off, the lights from a tavern doorway.

Oddly enough, I knew where I was—and *who* I was. Xuxul had planted the knowledge in my mind. After all, a pawn in a chess game has certain abilities. One of my abilities must be to know the task that has been set before me.

I was in the city of Loth as it had been just before The War. My mission was simple: I was to steal a jewel. The jewel was set in the royal staff of the emperor of Loth, and was kept in a tower that had no door.

I was Alan Morgan, though at the same time, I was—Uthian the Unmatched!

Uthian, the greatest thief ever known on Llarn! Uthian, who had stolen the rarest treasures of the world. Uthian, whose quick wits and wonderful swordarm had carried him from one end of his planet to the other, always stealing, always successful, rich beyond belief, engaging in his thefts to spice what might otherwise have been a humdrum existence.

I wore a black kilt with silver threadings, black sandals, and a broad black leather belt from which hung my weapons. I did not coat my body with the jet dye which thieves of later

THIEF OF LLARN

times used. Uthian depended on his wits and his sword for safety.

If anyone could steal the scepter jewel, it was Uthian. But how Uthian was to do it depended on Alan Morgan! I was a player on a stage, acting the part of a man who was a legend ten thousand years old. As Alan Morgan, I wished in vain for the nimble wits which had made The Unmatched so famous. But I had only myself to depend on.

Oh, I would do it—or make a good try. Otherwise, I knew instinctively I would never be released from the game board, never see Tuarra again. I would have stolen a dozen jeweled staffs to hold my beloved Tuarra in my arms again.

I began my walk along the alleyway. I was in a poorer part of town where thieves and worse liked to congregate. The night air was filled with the sounds of drunken voices and harsh cries. Once a woman screamed. I stared upward, knowing I was a piece in a game, striving to see past the confines of the board, to see Tuarra and Sentos Sun where they might be watching.

I could see only Loth and the great moon-band.

Something came running from an intersecting street, something warm and soft that bumped into and clung to me. It was a girl with dark hair and wide black eyes that stared up into my face as her mouth fell open. I was surprised to see that her skin was white, until I remembered that this was Loth in the days before its destruction during The War, the Loth of ten thousand years ago, when the people of Llarn possessed skins as pale as mine.

The girl was afraid. Two men were chasing her, big men in Lothian uniforms, men who sailed the five oceans in the ships of Loth. At sight of me one of them yanked out his sword.

“Don’t let them take me! Please!” she begged.

I found myself wondering if this were a part of the game, this girl and the two men and this chance meeting in an alleyway. Game or not, his sword looked real enough so I yanked out my own steel and met his first mad thrust.

The touch of the sword eased my mind. I was here; I was

THIEF OF LLARN

fighting. I need know no more. I drove into him, sent him backward crying out in surprise. His fellow came to join him but by the time his blade was in play, I was thrusting through the chest of my attacker.

I whirled to whip the second sword in a bind, slid out of that into the straight thrust. The girl had not run away. She was waiting to see what happened, leaning forward with both fists clenched in the anxiety that ate at her nerves.

The second man was frightened. He had never met a blade like mine—here and then there with but a flash of moonlight on metal to show its movement.

Far into him I finally ran my blade, then yanked it free as the man collapsed and lay unmoving at the foot of a building wall.

The girl laughed softly behind me. "You are no Lothian. No Lothian can fight the way you do. Who are you?"

"Uthian," I grinned. "Uthian—whom some men name the Unmatched."

Her eyes widened until they were enormous, while her cheeks turned pale. Instinctively she turned and looked up and down the alleyways which ran together here in the slums. Her hand came up to brush back her hair.

She was a pretty thing, with coarse black hair falling about her naked shoulders and her mouth large and very red beneath a tilted nose. Her kilt was worn and patched, spotted by lakk stains, and the broad belt that held it to her slim middle was mended in several places.

"Are you mad to say that?" she gasped.

"Why must I be mad to admit my own name?"

Her hand caught my wrist and drew me into the black shadows of a building. "Men say that Uthian has threatened to steal the great jewel which sits in the royal staff of Ventrol Voor," she whispered.

"Men speak the truth," I nodded.

"But—men say also that this is untrue, that what Uthian actually intends to steal are the battle plans of Ventrol Voor, who even now is readying for war against Meradion and Kharthol."

THIEF OF LLARN

"Then men lie," I said simply.

She pressed closer to me, smiling lazily. "In any event, it would be worthwhile to make sure I say nothing of your presence in Loth."

"It certainly would," I admitted honestly.

Stealing the scepter jewel was no less dangerous than being a spy in an enemy country in time of war, I thought.

With a little flush of guilt—I wondered if Tuarra was able to watch the game board—I put my arm about the girl and hugged her. I had need of a friend here in Loth. I drew her closer and began to walk slowly down the alleyway.

"What price for your silence?" I wondered.

She giggled, "I'm not very expensive. I'm a public house girl. A few copper anths. Perhaps a silver quinn, if you have one."

"Or a handful of golden torks?"

She gasped and tried to break free but I held her tightly in the crook of my arm, saying, "I am a thief, little one. I am Uthian, the greatest thief on Llarn. I am going to rob the royal scepter—so why shouldn't I also take along a few coins for you as well?"

"You're mad," she whispered fiercely. "I thought those sailors were bad, but they were sane, at least."

I am no great hand with women. Tuarra laughs at me sometimes, and teases me for my lack of gallantry when a visiting daganna comes to Kharthol. But I knew enough to realize that the poorer class of people do not have any great love for their rulers, and that gold will buy a loyalty that kingship will not.

"If you don't want a dozen torks or more," I said casually, "go tell them what you know."

She pulled away when I let her go, and stood there rubbing her arm where I had squeezed it. Her face scowled at me. "Steal the royal scepter!" she hissed. "Only Ventrol Voor can enter the Tower of Treasures. You are a fool!"

I shrugged. "If that's true, then you haven't lost anything. You can always go to the police with news that I'm a spy."

THIEF OF LLARN

They might give you a silver quinn to betray me. I'd make it richer for you to be my friend."

She hesitated, staring at me. Doubt and disbelief fought inside her—and greed. Oh, her greed was plain to see in her bright eyes.

"If I keep silence, you may kill me later."

"I could kill you now if such were my intentions."

She agreed grudgingly to the fact, nodding her head. Then she sighed, "'Alta is a fool,' my mother used to say of me. I'm still a fool. I'll take my gamble with you."

"Then show me this treasure tower."

She caught my hand in hers, pressing my fingers, flirting with me as we walked along. If we were seen, even by a trooper, he would assume I had hired her companionship, she explained. The tower was not a far walk. We would be there soon, she assured me, though what I would do once I saw the tower was beyond her.

It was beyond me as well, I felt.

We saw the tower from half a mile away. It was a tall, lean dark shape of black stone. From this distance, it seemed made of solid rock without a break, and my heart sank. Nobody could steal anything from that citadel except perhaps Ventrol Voor himself.

Yet as we came nearer, as the light from the moon-band circling overhead flooded the square, I saw there were dark recesses in those walls where barred windows had been placed. The lowest window was a good thirty feet above the street level.

It would be a simple matter to lay a ladder against the wall, climb up, unfasten the bars, and enter. When I spoke of this to Alta, she hooted.

"And what of the guards on the roof who patrol the tower day and night? Every few minutes they peer over the edge down at the street below. If anyone so much as lingers to stare up at the tower, a guard shoots."

Her hand drew me into a doorway recess. "See," she whispered. "Even now a man looks down from above."

I glanced where she pointed and caught the glint of moon-

THIEF OF LLARN

light on a metal helmet as a trooper walked along the rim of the roof, peering downward. After a few seconds, he disappeared.

"I don't suppose I can count on a few minutes while he makes his rounds?" I asked.

Alta shook her head. "No. He may come right back and peer down or wait a few minutes, or even stand there for an hour. There is no set pattern."

Whatever I do must be done swiftly, or not at all. I stared hard at the tower. Its stones were smooth. They afforded no handgrips by which to climb. With a hook and a rope I might catch the bars in the window and pull myself upward, but this would take time and one of the guards might come to the roof and see me.

I was honestly stumped. The black tower was impregnable. My shoulders rounded slightly in dejection. Again I scanned that tower. If I could jump that high—but I could not, even with the lesser gravity of Llarn. My earth muscles could lift me little more than half that distance.

I scowled, remembering Earth. A pole-vaulter could hit that height here on Llarn, aided by his earth muscles. A really good vaulter could probably do thirty feet or more. I was no pole-vaulter, however.

Then the thought touched me that there must exist a way to enter the tower, to take the royal scepter or the jewel it held. Otherwise, this was no game I played here in this created world. Each player must have a chance at victory, no matter how great the odds.

I considered. Xuxul was testing my wits as well as my fighting ability in this game of life and death. So far I had shown little wit. There was a path into that tower. There had to be, to make sense of this drama of which I was a part.

Alta moved suddenly, touching me with her elbow. "We can't stand here all night," she muttered.

I had no time limit, as far as I knew. Xuxul had not decreed how long I could take before I should have lost the contest.

I shrugged. I needed time to think. I moved back to let

THIEF OF LLARN

Alta slip out of the doorway recess. The butt of my grawn scraped the wall, and suddenly, I knew the way.

"Wait," I said softly, and lifted out the grawn. I aimed it at the stone wall and pressed the firing stud. A thin beam of red light ran from the handgun to the wall. And part of the stone wall disappeared.

Alta had a hand to her mouth, barely cutting off her cry of surprise. Above her hand, her eyes stared at me in terror. I was far back in time, here on this dimensional game board. The grawn was a very new weapon, with its energy beam able to cut matter into powder. Uthian would have stolen this black grawn I was using. Perhaps this was even the first time he had used it. Certainly the girl Alta had never seen one before. To her, it must have been like the wand of a wizard as it flared.

I fired three more times, cutting out a hole in the tower wall. Alta was crowding back into the doorway, whimpering faintly.

I said, "Keep thinking about the gold torks I'm going to get you." Apparently her greed was greater than her fear, for after a time she took her hand down from her mouth and began breathing more normally.

"What is that thing?" she asked, nodding at the grawn.

"A new tool," I grinned.

She sniffed, but she listened as I told her what I meant to do. Next time the guard came to the edge of the roof, I would wait until he turned away. Then I would race forward and dive through the opening I had made.

My trouble would come when I left the tower. If the guard came to the edge and peered over as I came running out, I was a dead man. This was where Alta would earn her golden fortune.

"Raise your arms above your head if the guard comes to the roof edge," I said. "If your arms are by your side, I'll know the way is clear."

She nodded, running her tongue around her lips as if she already tasted the things her share of the loot would bring. She shrank back further into the shadows and stared up-

THIEF OF LLARN

ward at the roof. We waited in silence for what seemed an hour or more.

The guard came into view. He stood a long time there, looking out across the city and the square. At last he turned his back and I lunged forward.

I can run fast on Llarn, yet never did I run faster than I did with that gaping opening in the Tower of Treasures luring me on. I hurtled across the cobblestones of the square and dove off my feet for that black hole. I was well aware that I might hit some object inside the tower and create an unholy racket which would bring the guards down around my head—but this was a risk I had to take.

I hit the tower floor with an impact that drove the air from my lungs. I lay there gasping, quivering with relief. The first part of my problem had been solved. I was inside the tower. But I had yet to find the royal scepter, and then escape as safely as I had entered.

I rose to my feet, slipping off the hide sandals which all Llarnians wear. My bare feet would make no sound upon the floor tiles. Silently I padded to the nearest display case and found myself staring down at coins that had ceased to exist ten thousand years before. I scooped up a dozen of them, slipped them into my belt pouch. At least Alta would have her wealth.

I moved on, vaguely aware that the royal scepter would not be displayed quite so publicly as the coins. Like a ghost I moved between the cases and the great dioramas which held the relics of Lothian history. Xuxul had made these things from his memory perhaps, or he might possess the secret of time travel and have hurled me back in all reality to the days when Loth had been a mighty power in its world.

None of that mattered. To me, this was reality! I sensed I could be killed just as dead here as I might be in the Llarn which I had left. Equally, I could kill—or steal—with the same amount of difficulty I would meet in my own time.

It took me over an hour to locate the scepter. It rested in a transparent crystal casket on a ledge ten feet above the floor on the second story of the tower. When Ventrol Voor wanted

THIEF OF LLARN

it for state occasions then a ladder was carried here and set up against the wall. But I made a running jump, caught the ledge with one hand and the chest with the other.

I landed catlike on my feet with the chest tucked under an arm. I put the chest on the floor, broke the lock with a red needle beam, and lifted out the scepter. Xuxul had not asked for the scepter; all he wanted was the jewel. I pried it loose with my dagger.

It was white as a diamond, that jewel, but where the moonlight caught it as it filtered in the tower windows, it turned blue and red and then a brilliant gold. I had never seen its like. I tucked it into my belt pouch along with the golden coins I had taken for Alta. Then I made my way back to my sandals, donned them, and moved toward the opening in the wall.

Alta was standing in the shadows, staring upward. When she glanced at the tower where I stood, I gestured to reassure her. She nodded her head, then motioned me to run for it.

I leaped forward.

Next moment Alta raised her arms high above her head! The guard was looking down. He had seen me! I dove for the ground and twisting in midair, landed on my back. I saw the guard as a dot leaning over the edge of the roof, a weapon in his hands. He was taking time to aim.

There is no need to aim with a grawn. The red needle beam holds steady when you trigger it. All a man need do is sweep it toward his target as he might move the beam from a flashlight.

I fired, hit the edge of the roof, turning it to powder, then swung the beam up and sideways. It caught the guard full in the face. His head disappeared.

I was up and running. Alta came out of the doorway sobbing with relief. I am sure she considered me a dead man when she raised her arms.

For three hundred yards we ran before I drew her toward the entrance to a tavern. I fumbled in my belt pouch, bring-

THIEF OF LLARN

ing out the golden coins I had stolen. They made a sweet sound as I dropped them into her cupped palms.

She giggled with delight. "I'm glad I gambled with you, Uthian. You've made me a rich woman, indeed."

Her arm reached up to hook my neck and pull my head down to her reaching lips. She never completed that kiss. I saw her eyes widen with disbelief and horror. . . .

I stood once again in the gameroom at Xuxu. I must have disappeared right in front of Alta. It was no wonder she had stared with such horror in her face.

I can almost believe that you are Uthian the Unmatched in truth, Alan Morgan. No man has ever before brought back the scepter jewel to me.

There was a little stillness in the room. I crossed to Tuarra, took her into my arms. She clung to me, but her chin did not quiver and her dark eyes were bright with anger.

"Alan, what happened to you? Where did you go? A moment you were here. A moment you were gone. Now you have reappeared again."

"I went to Loth."

Her eyebrows arched with incredulity. "Loth? Loth has not existed for more than ten thousand years! It was destroyed in The War."

"Nevertheless, that is where I went."

I told her of what had happened, how I was Alan Morgan and yet a thief named Uthian. At the word her red lips opened.

"Uthian? Uthian the Unmatched was the greatest thief ever known on Llarn! It is said there was nothing he could not steal. He ran off with a dagan's sister. He lifted the pearl of Alfan from a pit of reptiles. He stole the formula for a fluid of immortality from Paloranis. Yes, the same city where we met, though when we went there it was in ruins."

Uthian is dead. The immortality fluid was utter nonsense. Actually it was a trap to catch Uthian, which he avoided. But now Uthian is dead. And yet he shall live again, Alan Morgan—through you.

THIEF OF LLARN

I said, "The farce is over, Xuxul." At the same time, I drew my grawn.

And also at the same time—Tuarra disappeared!

She was warm in my embrace with my arm about her—then she was gone. I stared about wildly. My weapon came up aimed at Sentos Sun, who blinked at me benevolently.

"No man can dispute the wishes of Xuxul. If you would see your woman alive again, you must obey," he said.

I have always considered myself a brave man. To save Tuarra I would leap into a pit of mad aporads armed only with my sword. Yet here—with a man who was not a man standing before me, and the being named Xuxul able to work miracles with the help of the Clouds of Comoron—I was like a babe.

"Tuarra must not die," I growled, "at any cost!"

Good. It is the answer I want. Go you to the game board, where you will see your Tuarra.

I stepped forward, heart hammering. Before my eyes the game board shimmered. Gone were the great buildings of Loth; gone was the tiny tower that had held the scepter of Ventrol Voor. Instead, I was staring at a jungle world and at a tiny woman no larger than my thumbnail—who was fleeing before an oncoming monster the like of which I had never seen.

III

I BENT ABOVE the board. I reached out to grasp the monster—later, I was to learn that it was a doplomorous and that it had existed two million years before the first man had walked upon the planet Llarn—but my fingers hit something smooth and hard. A force field? Or might it have been a time field? I did not know. I did not care.

My mouth was dry. The monster was coming closer, closer. Even in its miniature state it was terrible, with great white tusks protruding between bluish lips. Its scaled body hammered along, shaking the trees bordering the jungle path where Tuarra fled.

“Save her! Save her!” I cried.

Will you obey me?

“Yes! Yes! Only—”

Tuarra was in the room running, stumbling, sweat staining her dear face, twigs and leaves clinging to her body. She cried out, stared wildly at me, then collapsed in my arms. I held her tight, kissing her beautiful face.

You begin to understand my powers, Alan Morgan. You have given your word to help me. It is enough.

“I shouldn’t think anyone like you would need help!”

Not beneath the Clouds, no. Here I am a god.

Ah, but the Clouds did not cover the world of Llarn, and beyond the Clouds of Comoron there were men who schemed and planned, men whose actions might harm Xuxul, even destroy him. And so Xuxul was afraid.

On Llarn as you know, thieves are stealing verdals!

Though I am a god, I am also mortal. What is to be done with those verdals can and will destroy me. Long ago, I was a man, such as yourself.

His name had been Vool Pan. He was the greatest

THIEF OF LLARN

scientist in the seaport city of Xuxu. His inventions had made him famous all across the world of the five oceans. He was honored; he was rich; he had everything any man could need. Then he heard of Uthian and his attempt to steal the secret fluid of immortality from Paloranis.

Immortality! Yes, this is what Vool Pan wanted—the one thing on Llarn he did not have. With immortality he could enjoy his life for all eternity. And so he set his mind to trap Uthian the Unmatched by creating first a jewel such as had never been seen on Llarn. His creation emitted a tiny electronic note which reached the pleasure centers of the brain, affording the beholder such delights that no man could let it go.

And so the gem called the Desire of the World had to be placed behind a thick glass wall, on top of a black velvet cushion.

So dense were the throngs that came to see it and be thrilled by its endless electronic touching of their brains, the dagan of Xuxu had decreed that none might see the World's Desire, that it must be always kept in a locked room in the House of Treasures, and that a guard be maintained before its great bronze door.

Yet the fame of the jewel spread outward over the oceans, and eventually word of the World's Desire came to Uthian the Unmatched. Uthian was fascinated by what he heard. A jewel so lovely it had to be locked away from the sight of men! A jewel to make men forget wife and home and family, just by looking at its faceted depths. Incredible! Uthian did not believe such a gem existed; yet he decided he would steal it. It was the challenge to his wits which Uthian enjoyed.

Uthian came to Xuxu posing as a mercenary soldier, a man who sold his sword to the highest bidder. As a sell-sword, he sought service with the Dagan of Xuxu. So marvelous was his swordsmanship, so accurate his aim with a grawn, that he was hired almost as soon as his tests were over.

No man had ever seen the face of Uthian and recognized it as that of the master thief. On all his jobs he wore a

THIEF OF LLARN

plastic mask, a mask that fitted over his features and changed them subtly. He had many such masks, having stolen them from one shop or another in his long career.

Here in Xuxu, he would not need a mask. It was his plan to be assigned to guard the Desire of the World. All he need do would be to unlock the bronze door, slip inside and steal the gem, then relock the door and finish his guard duty. Time enough to flee when his replacement came.

All went as Uthian had imagined it—up to a point. He was assigned guard duty. He picked the lock. He came face to face with the blazing jewel he intended to steal. And he could do nothing except stand and stare.

Never had he felt such delight. Never had he imagined anything so glorious, so pleasurable as the sheer enjoyment of looking at the gem in its thick glass case. He froze motionless, entranced.

He would have been apprehended, of course, were it not for the scientist Vool Pan. Vool Pan did not know when Uthian would arrive, but he had reasoned out just such a plan as Uthian might use. To guard against Uthian actually stealing the jewel, Vool Pan had placed a spy device inside the glass case that held it. From his laboratory he saw Uthian staring in at the jewel, and understood that his trap had snapped shut.

Vool Pan hurried to the House of Treasures, protected by a device that countered the electronic beeps of the jewel so that they were warded off before they reached his brain. He dragged Uthian away from the jewel, and made him an offer.

He, Vool Pan, would help Uthian steal the jewel—for a price.

The price was the immortality formula which Uthian had stolen from the science laboratories of Paloranis.

Uthian laughed. He was a thief, but he had honor of a sort. He would steal but he would not lie. The formula was worthless. He had tried it, and it had not worked. Nevertheless, whether it worked or not, this was the price

THIEF OF LLARN

Vool Pan would take to help Uthian steal the jewel. And naturally, Uthian agreed.

He went back for the useless formula and returned with it. In exchange, Vool Pan gave him a device similar to the one he had worn to protect his brain from the pleasure beams of the jewel. At least, this would permit him to steal that man-made jewel—if he could.

Uthian was not at all sure he would be able to steal it. Even for the greatest thief in all the world, there are limitations. There was a huge, thick glass case about the jewel, wired to close the doors of the House of Treasures instantly if it were broken. A blow to shatter the case would do the master thief no good, even assuming he could crack that thick glass.

And the great metal base on which the glass case rested with the jewel on its pyramid inside it appeared to be absolutely solid.

Could you steal the World's Desire, Alan Morgan?

I was so deep in his story that I had to shake myself back to the moment. The mental voice of Xuxul was so hypnotic, so compelling, that I was held in a trance by the yarn he was spinning.

"I'm no thief," I protested.

Yet if you are to serve me, you must become a thief. A great thief, a corlth without an equal! I think I should test that ability again. You shall play my game once more with me, Alan Morgan of Earth.

And suddenly—

I stood before the bronze doors of the Room of the Desire of the World in ancient Xuxu. I knew now that I was no larger than a thumbnail; that I was somewhere on that dimensional game board fighting for my life and for the life of the woman I loved.

Vool Pan told Uthian how to steal the jewel. You must do it on your own—if you can!

The voice touched my mind, was gone. My bare back was pressed to the bronze door. The protective device Vool

THIEF OF LLARN

Pan had given me was in my belt pouch. Outside the House of Treasures it was night on Llarn. My replacement would not come for close to eight kors.

I wheeled and knelt. The tiny metal device which I used to pick locks was in my hand, being thrust inside the keyhole. A moment only I fumbled—the hands of Uthian are deft and powerful—and then the bolt went back and the bronze door yawned open to a push of my fingers.

Instantly I stepped inside the room, whipping out the protective device and slipping it over my forehead. There was a pale light flooding the chamber from the glowing metal strips at the base of the walls and the edges of the ceilings. This light rested on the great jewel so that it blazed and pulsed and shone with a blinding brilliance.

I was tempted to remove the protective device from around my head, but I knew I dared not. To do so would mean I would fall under the spell of the great gem and would become helpless as a child.

I ran to the metal base on which rested the thick glass case. I knelt and slid my hands all around that cold metal square. Here, beneath the glass case, was the answer to the secret. It had to be, since the glass was wired against breakage or tampering and since the jewel had been created only for one purpose: to be stolen.

Voof Pan had made the jewel to lure Uthian here. That meant that there must be a way to steal it. The way existed. It was up to me to find it.

I knelt and searched the metal base. I found nothing. I tried to budge it, and could not. Then I ran my fingertips over the smooth black metal. What the eyes could not see, the marvelous fingertips of Uthian might feel.

There was nothing. No—wait! Here! A flaw in the metal, a pocking.

I knelt and searched, turning my head to catch the light upon that flaw from an angle. There it was, a tiny marking. I, Uthian, settled back on my heels, hunkered down before that pockmark, and thought.

After a while I lifted out the leather pouch I always carry

THIEF OF LLARN

with me. Somewhere in my pouch there was a needle. Yes, this was it, thin and long. Thin enough to be pushed inside the pockmark and twisted. I inserted and turned it in the metal pockmark.

A section of the wall swung open. I was looking inside at a dark interior lighted only by the radiance that filtered through the thick glass case from the overhead illumination. And there was a small metal platform directly under the transparent glass pyramid that held the jewel.

I reached an arm into that opening and tried to reach up into the cone that held the jewel. My fingers would go no more than halfway up that glass shape. The Desire of the World was safe.

There seemed to be no way to extract the gem except by breaking the glass case and so setting off the alarm. And yet—there had to be. Vool Pan had made it so it might be stolen by Uthian, after Uthian turned over to him the immortality formula.

A memory tugged at my mind. The jewel and the glass cone reminded me of—of what? Some vague recollection, something of the past. . . .

I emptied my leather pouch on the floor. My tools were here, even a candle for melting the wax with which to take the impression of a key. A candle! I who was Uthian in this strange game of dimensional death began to laugh, silently.

I struck a flame and lighted the candle. The candle I placed on the platform directly under the glass cone which held the jewel. Clever Vool Pan! Oh, clever! To build a jewel and then its setting so that the one might serve to ease the theft of the other!

I closed the metal wall, forming a sealed container for the candle. The flame would burn; it would exhaust the air inside the metal base, forming a partial vacuum. And the jewel would slip through the opening in the cone tip on which it rested and fall into the metal base.

Long ago I had seen an egg perched on the mouth of a bottle. A candle had been lit inside the bottle. Seconds later

THIEF OF LLARN

the egg had plopped down through the narrow neck and into the bottle itself.

I watched the jewel.

Suddenly, it was gone, drawn down into the base. I grinned. I opened the metal base. I reached in and the World's Desire nestled in my fingers. I was tempted to yank off the protective device on my head in order to sample its delights, but I fought down that compulsion for my own safety. I closed the base wall. I ran to the bronze door and swung it shut. I took up my post once again.

I would look upon the jewel later, in my quarters. . . .

And so Uthian did, long ago. And ever since Uthian has stared upon the jewel, heeding only its constant beeping to the pleasure centers of his brain!

I took a deep breath, aware that Tuarra was close beside me in the chamber of the dimensional game board. Sentos Sun was at the doorway, lifting a hand and beckoning us to follow him.

"Come with me," the fat man said. "I am to show you Uthian."

Tuarra and I went after him down a corridor and a ramp that led into the bowels of this gigantic building that housed the huge game board. Here open doors revealed rooms that were freshly painted and newly furnished. Tuarra exclaimed over the excellence of the furnishings, saying there were a few pictures in the dusty books in the libraries of Kharthol which showed furniture like this, massive and yet graceful, which had been used before The War.

Here you shall live in luxury, Tuarra—while Alan Morgan goes upon the mission in my service.

Tuarra made a wry face. This was not to her liking, but she was daughter of Llarn enough to understand that a danger threatened not only Xuxul in Xuxu, but her own people in Kharthol, because of the stolen verdals. By serving Xuxul, I would serve also Drakol Tu, her father.

We came to a stop before an archway that lead into a groined vault where a man lay inside a glass casket. His

THIEF OF LLARN

body was perfect, strong and tanned, clad in the short maroon kilt and leather harness which had been the uniform of the palace guards of Xuxu, long ago. His yellow hair was cropped short like my own, and his eyes were wide open, staring. He looked upon the jewel of the World's Desire.

It was a magnificent gem about the size of an Earth plum, pure white and blazing where the light touched it. It hung in a golden net suspended from the top of the glass casket.

The fat man said, "The glass protects you from its influence, the influence which Uthian for all his skill as a thief could not deny himself. He died staring at the jewel, oblivious to everything but the bliss it brought him. Xuxul—or Vool Pan—has kept him here ever since."

Tuarra said, "There is no resemblance between you, Alan."

No man has ever seen the face of Uthian and known it, except for me! Uthian the Unmatched lived ten thousand years ago. Yet with your wits, Alan Morgan, you can make the thieves of Llarn believe you are that same Uthian!

"To what end?" I asked.

Listen—and learn!

Two months before, three thieves of Llarn had entered the land beneath the clouds on a dral. They had ridden for miles, searching for the dead city of Zaxeron. Xuxul had been surprised by their appearance; few men came to the land of radioactive clouds, it being far from the normal trade routes of the Vrann cities.

Xuxul had searched their brains as he had searched the brain of Tuarra when we landed on the plains beyond the city. From them—without the knowledge of the thieves—Xuxul had discovered that the thieves of Llarn served one man, the Dagan of the distant city of Korok. What Pthorok Tok wanted with the verdals the thieves were stealing for him, they did not know, only that he promised high rewards for every verdal brought to his palace.

You know how a verdal is formed, Alan Morgan!

I did know. In the subterranean vault below the arctic ice I had watched the golden helix which had been Vann

THIEF OF LLARN

Tar shape itself into another phase of existence. When the helix had disappeared, only the verdal remained. It was a by-product of that evolutionary step by which an ephelos went on to become—something else. It was not a jewel, strictly speaking, any more than the World's Desire was a jewel.

In my undisturbed meditations for the past hundred centuries here in Xuxu, I have realized the danger of the verdals. A hint—a shadow—no more. Yet I know that they may be deadly dangerous to all life on Llarn which is not protected in some manner by Pthorok Tok. As Uthian in the black thief's garb he wore, which I shall create for you, you must learn what that danger is—and prevent it!

My task was to pose as Uthian himself, to travel in the flier to the dead seaport city of Zaxeron and there to meet the thieves coming also to Zaxeron to steal a verdal that reposed somewhere within its walls. Tuarra would be safe, here in Xuxu.

She smiled wryly as I looked at her, lifting her smooth shoulders in a little shrug. She would utilize the time during which I would be gone to study rare and ancient manuscripts, she assured me. Then she might report back to the scientists of Kharthol about what life had been like here in Xuxu before The War.

"It is really a most unusual opportunity," she admitted as we walked with Sentos Sun from the room that held the crystal casket in which Uthian lay dead.

My arm hugged her waist. "I'll be back as fast as I can. Then we'll get on to Moorn, or if the danger's over—to Kharthol."

She kissed me a long time in the empty square before the deserted palace, then stood beside Sentos Sun as I climbed into the flier and activated its motor. The fuel tank was full. However Xuxul had drained it I did not know. But now the energy bars had been restored to their former strength.

The flier rose into the air. I waved to Tuarra, then turned the prow of the small ship toward the city of Zaxeron. Now that I knew something of the city of Xuxu, I found myself scanning the ancient wharfs that once had extended out into

THIEF OF LLARN

the shimmering Xulthic Sea, but which now protruded into what was just one more Llarn desert. Here had the great merchant and the war fleets gathered; here had come the nobility and the great of the planet. Now Xuxu was no more than another dead city, so many of which dotted the surface of this dying world.

I understood that Tuarra would be safe in Xuxu. Her only danger would come if anything happened to me. I would use my wits to prevent that, and my sword. I remembered that Uthian had been a master swordsman. In that, at least, we were alike.

The flier sped across the ancient sea bottom. High above, the clouds glowed with golden brilliance, since it was day on Llarn and Alfan bathed them with its rays. Visibility in this world where all the colors were so muted, was excellent.

The thieves I was to contact in Zaxeron would approach that city by dral, an animal not unlike an earth horse, but with horns on its head and silvery mane and tail. No motor would work beneath the Clouds of Comoron unless Xuxul willed it to work. I realized that I must hide my flier before I went into the city. To do otherwise would make the thieves suspicious of me.

In the distance was a smudge of darkness: Zaxeron. I dropped the flier lower until I was only ten feet above the dry bottom of the Xulthic Sea. I raced along that dusty sea floor stirring little whirls of sand behind me.

Nearer I came to the dead seaport, and still nearer. At last I dropped the flier down behind a row of rocks so that no one looking this way from the city would see it.

I went on by foot and entered Zaxeron toward evening. The dust of the dead sea bottom was thick and heavy on my black kilt, my weapon-belt, and on my black sandals. I had no way of knowing from whence the thieves would come. I walked on through the city, aware that hunger was a living thing inside my belly.

I shall feed you, Alan Morgan. Beneath the Clouds, I am supreme.

THIEF OF LLARN

Before my eyes, I saw the city change. The dusty thoroughfares were gone, the grime on the building walls disappeared. This was a young, new Zaxeron, where sailors walked the streets and ships swung on their anchors in its mighty harbor. I saw men and woman before me clad in the exotically lovely garb of a hundred centuries ago. I came to a stop and stared.

There are eating places all around you. Select one.

I began to understand the power of Xuxul. He was a god in truth beneath the silvery clouds that overlay his domain. He could brush aside the veils of space and time. He could create life of a sort, as witness Sentos Sun, perhaps as company for the human element which still remained in him.

Also, he could create food, I supposed. I wondered if that food would be as nourishing as the food I ate in Kharthol. Well, there was one way to find out. I turned in at a doorway over which hung an olanth-wood sign carved in the shape of a bowl of stew.

There were three dozen bare wooden tables in the public eating house. I sat at a small one, and became so absorbed in the ebb and flow of humanity about me that the pert little waitress had to touch my arm to rouse me from my dreamings.

I blessed the gods of Llarn for the fact that Xuxul had implanted in my mind an understanding of the language which had been spoken in Zaxeron so long ago. I ordered stew and a steak and a ewer of lakk. Then I settled back to wait and listen to the conversation at a nearby table.

“. . . caravan from Xuxu with robes as thin as gossamer! He'd have made a fortune if the raiders hadn't caught him."

"Something ought to be done about them. The raiders are everywhere! The rumor has it that they hide out in the rock hills. Think there's any truth in it?"

"Who knows? Who cares? I'm a sailor, not a caravan master. I'm here to see the great verdal."

"But not to steal it, I hope!"

There was laughter at the table. The sailor grinned, "Not likely! You ever see that barrier they have in front of it?"

THIEF OF LLARN

Dissolves human flesh! Brrr. Can you imagine melting to death? Lying there and screaming with your nerves all shredded—agony in every fiber—screaming for Thulun to come for your soul?”

The sweat stood out on my face. If the verdal were protected by such a barrier, what chance did I have to steal it? I brightened. In ten thousand years the power of the barrier would have lessened, even disappeared.

I turned to make friendly conversation. I said, “I come from Paloranis. Is there really such a barrier? We in Paloranis have always felt it was just a rumor to discourage thieves—somebody like Uthian, for instance.”

One of the men scowled. “Who’s Uthian? Never heard of him. Probably some local robber who’d be caught on his first venture here in Zaxeron.”

I told the man he was right. Uthian was the current bug-aboo in Paloranis. But if Uthian could only live a long time, he might steal the verdal. The barrier would fade with the centuries.

“Not likely. They built it to last forever. At least for a thousand million years!”

The men laughed at my expression, then turned back to chat more quietly by themselves. I bent over the bowl of stew and ate greedily.

So! This was just another game of wits and skill I had to play with my life as forfeit. As Uthian, I was supposed to be clever, tricky, full of guile. If any thief could steal the great verdal of Zaxeron, Uthian could do it.

Another thought made my blood run cold. The real Uthian had never stolen this verdal in Zaxeron. Maybe he had come here, looked at the barrier, and had given it up as a bad job. If the real Uthian couldn’t have done it, I didn’t stand a chance.

Discouragement might have taken the edge off my appetite, but I finished the stew and the bork steak easily enough, and felt somewhat more confident. I had already stolen two objects which the real Uthian had also stolen. Maybe I could figure out a third.

THIEF OF LLARN

I walked out into the street, jostling elbows with sailors from foreign lands and with the girls who sought to take their silver quinns. I had asked directions from the men at the next table who told me with wide grins—asking, at the same time, if I might be Uthian—that the great verdal of Zaxeron was housed in the Temple of Thulun, so that the dark god of the seas might protect it with his power.

My feet made solid thumps on the street even as the people and the seaport city began to vanish. First they thinned, then they shimmered so that I could see the dead, dusty buildings behind them, then they were gone back into the time out of which Xuxul had summoned them. I walked alone in ancient Zaxeron, the wind eddies sweeping the sea floor dust about its paving stones, the silvery light from the clouds high above, for it was night on Llarn.

It took me close to half a kor to find the Temple of Thulun. It was a tall, domed structure, with carvings to represent great waves and ships caught in those huge swells.

There were no doors on the temple entrance, only a dark and brooding emptiness. Nor were there any panes of crystal in the windows, which were deeply recessed but open to the sea winds that once swept between the fluted columns. I went up the wide treads, walking in the deep hollows formed by the millions of feet which once walked where I now strode.

I moved through the entranceway into a cool dimness. Here were statues to the great admirals, the renowned sailors who had made Zaxeron and Xuxu great in the years beyond recall. Ship models molded in deep niches and the walls were rotting into powder. A touch of the fingertips would make them crumble into dust. I looked; I marveled; I wished Tuarra were here to drink in this knowledge and report it back to her people in Kharthol.

“No, Ghan Karr! Wait. . . .”

It was a soft voice, the voice of a woman that floated out of the building from somewhere up ahead of me. I felt nerves crawl on icy feet along my spine. Was this another demonstration of the weird powers Xuxul boasted? Ah, but I

THIEF OF LLARN

was to meet some thieves here in Zaxeron. Perhaps they were already here—and stealing the verdal.

I tugged at the grawn in its holster at my belt and loosed my sword. I was Uthian the Unmatched, I told myself—no longer Alan Morgan. I was a thief who had lived for ten thousand years.

I moved forward toward the great chamber that lay beneath the temple dome. My heart thundered with nervous energy. I stepped between two statued pillars.

Two men and a woman stood before what looked to be a column of blazing colors rising upward out of a broad stone and metal base to the wide dome itself, high above. My eyes were caught and held by that awesome shaft of brilliance—and by the metal object one of the men was thrusting toward it.

It was a grappling hook he pushed toward the column of incandescent colors, a device with which to catch the golden links from which a basketwork of gold filigree hung. Inside the filigree was the great verdal of Zaxeron.

The jewel almost blinded the onlooker with its brilliant green fire. Perhaps this was the effect of the color shaft. Ordinarily a verdal does not glow with such fire, yet this gem flared and pulsed almost as if alive.

The grappling hook touched the shaft—and burned like flame!

The metal blazed with a red fury as if it were torn from the heart of the star-sun Alfan. No wonder a man melted when he tried to penetrate that barrier.

I swallowed. If I were to pose as Uthian the Unmatched, it might be my task—to prove my identity, as it were—to steal the verdal for these thieves.

Only in such manner would I show myself worthy of being taken along with them to distant Korok, to meet and serve its dagan, Pthorok Tok. From Pthorok Tok I would learn what use he meant to make of the stolen verdals—and stop him if I could.

The man who held what was left of the grappling hook's long handle cursed savagely and flung it away.

THIEF OF LLARN

"No one can steal that thing," he rasped.

The woman said, "Pthorok Tok does not like failure."

She had a voice like a fairy song, that woman. Her thick mane of red hair was piled high on her shapely head and her skin was a gold so pale it was almost white. In the black harness of the professional guild thief and with black sandals on her feet, she was breathtakingly lovely.

She began to walk about the stone and metal base of the light shaft and her every movement was a poem of motion. I could see her face now—the slanted eyes and thin brows and ripe red mouth which gave her such an exotic look. There was a hint of cruelty in those proud features.

"You can tell me how to steal it, then," the man who was Ghan Karr growled.

The thief who had remained silent thus far stirred. "It eats wood, it eats metal and it is supposed to melt human flesh," he said at last.

He was tall and slim, this last man. His head was bald and in the black kilt and belt he seemed like a grinning ghost. Later, I was to learn his name was Evran Dekk.

"If we could shut off the power source," the woman said thoughtfully, "we could do away with the shaft."

"And where's the power source located?" Ghan Karr snapped. "In the basement? We've already examined that—and found nothing. In the stone and metal base? Watch!"

He drew his grawn and triggered it. A thin red beam ran to the stone shaft, spread outward over it. Its scarlet energy did not even scorch the surface. The man holstered his handgun, saying, "The ancients knew how to build, I give them that. I've never met anything as tough as that stuff."

"It can't be stolen," the tall man sighed.

"Will you go back to Pthorok Tok and tell him that?" the woman asked. There was a touch of fear in her voice, I thought, and wondered what manner of man the Dagan of Korok might be.

They stood staring at the colored shaft and at the brilliant verdal in its golden filigree basket hanging so high above

THIEF OF LLARN

their heads. It dangled there like a tempting fruit, yet it was as if it were on an entirely different planet. The man who had created the color shaft had been a genius. I wondered to myself if it had been Vool Pan.

If it had been, then Xuxul knew its secret. I wondered also if Xuxul would tell me how to steal it. Or perhaps this was my final test. If I, as Uthian the Unmatched, could steal the verdal, then I would be acceptable as his agent and be permitted to go out beyond the Clouds of Comoron to Korok and discover there what Pthorok Tok intended to do with all his stolen verdals.

The woman sighed. "We have no other course open. We must go back—admit defeat. Let Pthorok Tok send whom he will. No man can steal that jewel."

I moved from the shadows. "I can steal it," I found myself saying.

The shorter thief yanked out his grawn even as he whirled around to stare at me with wide, disbelieving eyes. The woman was crouched tensely, her red mouth a little open. The tall man who seemed so much a living spirit merely smiled and waited. There was a deep cunning in his eyes as they studied my body, my white skin and the black garments I wore in my role of Uthian the thief.

"Who are you?" the woman asked.

"Where'd you come from?" the short man growled.

The tall thief said nothing. He waited quietly, but the thought touched my brain that he was far more dangerous than either of the others.

"My name is Uthian," I told them. "I have lived for the past ten thousand years in the city of Xuxu."

"You lie," Ghan Karr said. His grip on the handgun loosed, and he slipped it back inside his holster.

The woman said sweetly, "Uthian the Unmatched? Is this whom you claim to be? Uthian, who stole the immortality fluid of Paloranis?"

The tall man started at that, and now he scowled, for the first time seeing me as a threat. His eyes drifted sideways toward the woman.

THIEF OF LLARN

"What do you think, Marga?"

"His skin is white, as was the skin of Uthian long ago. His hair is golden, as was the hair of Uthian. His garments—" She broke off and shook her head.

The short man grinned. "Uthian was a master swordsman. Let this one prove his swordsmanship on me."

"Next to myself, Evran Dekk, Ghan Karr is the finest blade in all the guild," the tall man smiled coldly.

"No sword can match my own," I answered. "If Evran Dekk fights better than does Ghan Karr, then I shall prove myself with Evran Dekk."

"No," said Marga. "You shall fight Ghan Karr."

The short man laughed and leaped, his sword appearing in his hand as if by magic. There was no avoiding its point without drawing my own steel.

As Alan Morgan, I was never one to avoid a discussion with swords. As Uthian, I was just as willing to let the blades whisper back and forth. My steel came out and parried the blade stabbing for my vitals.

The ease with which I slid from the parry into the riposte made the shorter man gasp. Confidence is ever the foe of any fighting man. My point dipped into Ghan Karr's sword-arm and slashed a path through skin and sinew.

His sword clattered on the floor. With his left hand clapped over his bleeding wound, he stared at me, lips drawn into a snarl. "You tricked me! I wasn't ready for . . ." His voice trailed off when I laughed at him.

"Any man who comes at Uthian with a sword naked in his hand must be ready for anything—even death if it be the will of Uthian to slay him."

I shook my blade so the drops of blood on its point made scarlet spots on the tiles, and looked beyond those red flecks at Evran Dekk. There was challenge in my stare, and the pride which Uthian himself would feel if his ability with the steel were disputed.

"Well?" I asked. "Does Evran Dekk hide behind the word of a woman?"

Marga had forbidden Evran Dekk to test my swordplay,

THIEF OF LLARN

choosing Ghan Karr as her warrior. Ghan Karr had put up no fight at all. Did they think that the riposte with which I wounded him was luck?

The thin man flushed and his sword rasped from its scabbard. He did not fling himself upon me as Ghan Karr had done. His attack was a slow, deliberate one. Our blades touched, quivered and fell away to touch again. It was as if he would explore my ability before committing himself.

Laughter came into my throat. "Cold one, this is not the way of Uthian. To Thulun with your slowness!"

My blade blurred as I moved it. Evran Dekk skipped back but I was after him, laughing, taunting him, making my steel a web that twisted about his blade like a vine that clung. My wrist yanked—and the sword came upward out of Evran Dekk's hand to fly high through the air. It clattered almost at the feet of Marga.

Over the fallen sword her green eyes blazed. There was shock and disbelief on her beautiful features, and a faint hope. She bent and lifted the blade and when Evran Dekk would have taken it from her, she put it behind her back.

"No," she said. "You shall fight no more with him. Alive or dead, Uthian or another, I would speak with him."

"And I would fight again with him," Evran Dekk snarled.

Marga stamped her foot like a queen. Indeed, she was a queen of sorts among the thieves, I was to learn. Always the thieves of Llarn patterned their guild after the governments of their own cities. Among her kind, Marga was a daganna in all truth.

Evran Dekk shrugged, but the face he turned at me was dark with hate. I had made an enemy of him, I realized. Well, Uthian had made enemies before in his time. I let my sword ease back into its scabbard.

Marga said, "You will forgive our incredulity. Uthian is a legend these days in the guild. Men tell one another how he stole the jewel in the scepter of Ventrol Voor or the miniature paintings of Comon Gor, Dagan of Meradion."

THIEF OF LLARN

She smiled sweetly as she asked, "You can explain these thefts, of course?"

I grinned at her. "I can—when and if I choose to do so. But why should I? Uthian does nothing without a profit. I have lain in Xuxu a long time. And for those hundred centuries of my living entombment—every moment of which I spent staring at the Desire of the World, kept alive by the immortality fluid—I have done much thinking."

"What is the World's Desire?" Ghan Karr asked.

"A jewel so exquisite no man can look at it and turn away. Gazing into its depths, a man sees visions—his brain becomes numb with joy. If it were not for the immortality fluid I stole from Paloranis, I would have been dust long ago. But enough of Uthian. Why do you want to steal that verdal?"

Evrans Dekk opened his mouth as if to protest against Marga speaking any more to me. His eyes brooded coldly at me, seeing in me a rival for his rank among the thieves.

I shrugged when Marga remained silent. "It makes no difference to Uthian whether you take him into your confidence. Always I have worked alone, never with a confederate. When I steal the great verdal of Zaxeron—"

"You cannot steal it," Ghan Karr flared.

"No man can!" Marga echoed.

Only Evrans Dekk said nothing, though his eyes spoke for him with a cold, bright fury. His hate was alive inside his ribs. He would willingly have killed me, I know, but his brain was whispering that this Uthian might be of use to him. Let Uthian steal the verdal if he could, and Evrans Dekk would find a way to take it away from him.

"Uthian is more than a man," I laughed. "Uthian is an immortal. I have spent ten thousand years gazing upon the jewel called Desire, and planning ten times ten thousand perfect crimes."

Marga smiled on me suddenly. "Steal the great verdal of Zaxeron and come with us to Korok. Pthorok Tok will reward you as he will reward the other thieves in our guild."

"And how will Pthorok Tok reward us?" I asked.

THIEF OF LLARN

"He will share the wealth of all Llarn with us."

"You call that a reward? I can steal the wealth of Llarn. Nothing is safe from Uthian the Unmatched. Nothing!"

As Uthian, I bragged as I would never have done as Alan Morgan, but I understood that I must create an awe of Uthian in the minds of these thieves. Ghan Karr was staring at me with his mouth open. There was something deep in the eyes of Marga that told me she believed my story, or wanted to believe it. Only Evran Dekk seemed unimpressed, yet I realized that he, most of all, wanted me to lift the great verdal of Zaxeron from its filigree nest.

The tall man waved a hand at the green jewel where it hung in its golden network inside the shaft of destructive color. "Go ahead, then. Steal it."

"Uthian works alone. He does not share the secrets of his ways with ordinary thieves. You three shall ride out of Zaxeron to beyond the Clouds of Comoron. There you shall wait for me. I shall join you with the great verdal in my pouch."

Marga said, "No! You shall steal it before us all. That way, we shall know whether or not you are tricking us."

"Uthian works alone," I told her.

Evran Dekk shrugged. "What difference does it make if we see him steal the jewel—so long as we can take it to Pthorok Tok?"

"No difference," snapped Ghan Karr.

Marga bit her full lower lip. "I suppose it doesn't matter, really. I just wanted to learn what method Uthian would use that none of us had thought of."

"Perhaps some day I'll tell you," I grinned.

Ghan Karr picked up the sack of tools he had brought with him into Zaxeron. Marga sighed and turned her green eyes toward the verdal within the light shaft. Evran Dekk simply swung about and walked toward the shadowy archway that led to the open doorway.

I walked with them for awhile to the landward edge of the city. I chose Marga as a companion, letting Ghan Karr

THIEF OF LLARN

and Evran Dekk move on ahead. The woman was friendly enough, bubbling with curiosity, wanting to know if I were really Uthian, if I had swallowed the fluid of immortality—and if there were any of it left.

“Oh, yes,” I assured her. It was the simple truth I told. From Xuxul I understood that the so-called immortality fluid which the real Uthian had stolen from Paloranis was still locked away in the vaults of Xuxul.

Vool Pan had tested the immortality fluid, and had found the ingredient which, when added to the useless fluid, actually made it into an elixir of immortality. Or perhaps it was the effect of the radioactivity in the Clouds of Comoron plus the liquid which had given him an endless life. Vool Pan, who was now Xuxul, was not sure. All he knew was that he was a god with eerie powers in a world that belonged to him alone.

“I would like to be immortal,” she sighed.

“Who knows? Someday—you may be,” I smiled.

It would not hurt to make a friend out of Marga. I would need friends in Korok. I would especially need someone to guard my back when Evran Dekk tried to steal the great verdal from me. I hinted this to the Queen of Thieves.

“Evran Dekk is a dangerous man,” she admitted. “But I shall guard your back, Uthian. I would not want Evran Dekk to be the one who brought the great verdal before Pthorok Tok and claimed that he had stolen it.”

“He could not claim that, with you and Ghan Karr alive,” I pointed out, and was aware of her green eyes regarding me slyly.

“I know that,” she nodded.

We understood each other, and our mutual danger.

At the edge of the city I halted while Marga and the others walked toward the three hobbled drals they had ridden in to Zaxeron under the Clouds of Comoron. I watched them saddle the beasts and swing up into the kaks. Marga waved a hand at me. Then they cantered off into the night of Llarn, becoming smaller and smaller until they disappeared from view.

THIEF OF LLARN

I walked back alone into Zaxeron. All I had to do now was steal the great verdal. And I honestly admitted that I did not have the slightest idea how I was going to do it.

IV

I STOOD ONCE again in the temple chamber that held the great verdal. I walked twice around the column of blazing colors, which appeared to begin in the dome itself, studying that unusual shaft which had its foundation in a stone and metal base. I had picked up a pebble or two from the street outside and occupied myself by throwing those little stones at various spots of the colored column.

In every instance, no matter if I hurled those stones high or low, fast or slow, each of them winked out of existence in a flare of brilliant light. It was very discouraging.

I am Uthian the Unmatched, I reminded myself.

It was no help. Even Uthian would have boggled at finding a way to steal this verdal. It was guarded with devilish ingenuity. Nothing could penetrate that force barrier. Ah, but wait! I had seen the column destroy metal when Ghan Karr poked his grappling hook through the curtain in his attempt to steal the jewel. It also turned stone to powder, to judge by the way my pebbles became dust.

But—wood? And—human flesh? Would it destroy those as well? I felt it must, otherwise what sort of protection against theft would it be?

I went out into the hallway of the temple and attempted to lift down two of the ship models that had reposed in their niches for ten thousand years or more. At my touch they crumpled, falling into little drifts of dust. I would have to return to my flier, for only on my flier would I have the proper objects with which to test the shaft.

I strode from the temple, walked the streets of this long-dead city once again. Overhead the clouds cast their faint radiance that placed a pallid light all over these lands beneath the gray mists. There was no way of knowing night

THIEF OF LLARN

from day here where Xuxul ruled, yet I felt a sudden fatigue in my flesh that made me stumble once or twice.

I padded through the desert sands, found the dune behind which I had hidden the flier. As I stepped onto the flat deck I told myself that I would ride the flier in to Zaxeron now that Marga and the two thieves were gone. It would be easier than walking.

I was stretching out my hand to the controls of the ship when instinct made me turn my neck. I have lived all my life on Llarn up to my neck in danger. Even on Earth I was used to hunting wild animals. I think that my body sometimes senses danger as if the pores of my skin had eyes.

When I saw the thing that was galloping down on me the hairs lifted on the nape of my neck. My hand hit the lift lever and the little craft rose upward instantly. I craned over the moldboard and looked down on a creature which could have been created only out of nightmare.

The amdok was roughly the size of a Shetland pony. It looked like a kangaroo in general shape, except that its body was thickly scaled and the tail that the earth kangaroo uses mainly for balance, was on the amdok, a very deadly weapon. The three eyes that were set in the exact middle of its hairy head—the only part of its body not covered with scales—glowed as if with red fire. Its jaw was jutting, huge compared to the rest of its body. Those teeth could cut a man in half with one bite.

I touched the accelerator stud, and the flier picked up speed. The city grew larger before me as the amdok vanished to a tiny dot hidden by the sand. I steered the flier over the low rooftops of Zaxeron straight toward the great temple dome that glittered with a dull golden color in the pale light.

I harnessed two landing hooks to the ornate stonework of a temple post and let the flier drift a few feet above my head. Armed with a length of wood ripped from a loose deck plank together with a handful of sleeping silks, I entered the temple.

I pushed the wood at the shifting, restless colors of the

THIEF OF LLARN

verdal shaft. Instantly it went on fire, red flame leaping upward from it so that I dropped it and shook my hand. The silk I took no chances with; wadding it into a ball, I hurled it—and saw it flare once, briefly, before it became merely a wisp of curly blackness.

Nothing could get through that barrier! And yet—I had to find a way to do it. I, Alan Morgan who was now Uthian the thief, must discover the one weakness of the shaft. If indeed, it had a weakness.

I stumbled from weariness as I walked. How long ago had I slept? Not since Tuarra and I had fallen asleep in the flier just before it drifted over the Clouds of Comoron. There was no way of knowing how many hours had elapsed since then.

I turned my back on the tinted shaft and moved through the temple rotunda out into the street. I was reaching for the landing straps to release the hooks of my flier when I heard the sound of claws clicking on the street.

My eyes went up the street, straight toward the scaled figure of the amdok galloping down on me. It ran on its hind legs, its gait ungainly but its speed absolutely breathtaking. As it ran its tail was raised stiffly behind it. I yanked out my grawn, triggered its red beam full on the chest of that oncoming nightmare.

The red beam struck—and splashed. Its redness ran over the scaled body of the amdok without slowing it any more than a stream of water might have done. Indeed, I think it stung the beast so that it came at me even faster.

I slipped the grawn back into its holster and fled into the temple. I am not a coward, but neither am I a fool. Out in the open I had no chance against the amdok. Inside the temple of Thulun, where the creature would be limited in its ability to move about, I might find a way to stop it.

My sword came into my hand as I ran. Sometimes I believe I function better with a swordhilt to squeeze between my fingers. I turned to take my stand.

The amdok was coming fast through the rotunda, the

THIEF OF LLARN

slapping of its clawed paws on the tiled floor like the beating of hail upon a windowpane. I would have one thrust before the beast was on me. Already its long forelegs were outstretched to grip and rend me with their razor-sharp claws.

I lefted my longsword, aimed it at the hairy head out of which those three red eyes were glaring. I slashed downward.

The amdok lifted its foreleg. My blade scraped off that scaled limb with a screech. I almost died then. The huge paws were reaching for me; the great jaws were gaping to bite. They would have taken my head off had they closed on my flesh.

I dropped my sword. I drove my hands at the amdok's left foreleg. My fingers wrapped about it as I hurled myself floorward. Off balance, the creature stumbled, its paws sliding on the smooth tile as it fell sideways.

The beast landed heavily and scraped along the floor. I was up, holding my longsword, whirling to run. Ah, but there was no place left to flee, now. To go out into the open was even worse than being trapped inside the temple. The amdok was scrambling to right its heavy body. Its red eyes glowed at sight of me, its massive jaw opened to a loud bellow.

That outcry normally paralyzed whatever animals it preyed on. It spurred me to action. The round stone and metal collar of the color shaft was close by. I would put myself on the other side of the stone foundation. It was round. It would take the amdok time to come at me, time in which I would try and think of a way to escape.

The colors in the force field were transparent. I could see the amdok on the other side of the shaft, clumsily rising to its hind legs, shaking itself, turning to fix me with its three-eyed stare. Then it bellowed again and hurled itself at me.

To the amdok, the shaft was nothing more than tinted air. It saw no reason to run around the stone collar at me. It came straight, leaping high to pass over the stone and

THIEF OF LLARN

metal base. I saw it leave the floor in a leap that would have done credit to any earth kangaroo.

It hit the gorgeous colors of that transparent barrier and blazed into white-hot incandescence. It hung a moment in the air, all white, its body outlined in brilliance, before it disappeared.

I let the breath out of my lungs. I knew now for a certainty that the barrier destroyed living flesh. I had based all my hopes on the fact that somehow, in some manner, I might actually slip myself through those tinted coruscations and find a way to reach the verdal.

Tired, disappointed, I moved out of the temple to my flier. I would sleep. Perhaps in my sleep I would dream of a way to steal that jewel from its golden filigree basket.

I set the flier controls to drift at a height of fifty feet. Then I rolled up in my sleeping silks and lay like a dead man.

When I awoke, the flier was bumping its keel on a metal object. It took but a glance to see that I was directly above the great temple dome, that the flier had drifted slightly during the night. I told myself with a sigh that I had better go about my business of stealing the verdal.

I had no stomach for the task. I had tried everything I could think of to penetrate that color shaft. I had failed. All I could think of doing now was going down into the temple and staring up at the barrier and waiting for inspiration to come.

The keel bumped the dome again. It was almost as if my flier sought to attract my attention. The dome! Of course! I had been so concerned with the penetration of the barrier from below that I had forgotten I possessed a way to go over it.

No flier could navigate beneath the Clouds of Comoron except with permission from Xuxul. I alone possessed the one means of circumventing the color shaft. Excitedly I maneuvered the ship closer to the metal pinnacle that rose from the middle of the dome upward into the air, and fastened a hook to that upright point.

THIEF OF LLARN

I slid over the side of the flier. The dome was steeply curved here. I found it necessary to hook several leather straps together, using them as a rope by which to lower myself down the dome after placing a metal hoop over the pinnacle that also held my flier.

Halfway down the dome, I found the hatch through which the workmen or priests of Thulun had entered the temple in the long gone ages when Zaxeron had been a thriving city, to clean and polish the jewel and its filigree cradle. I lifted the latch and set it aside.

Crouched in that opening, I stared down at the verdal in its golden basket about twenty feet below me. It glittered with green fire, fire that was sparked by the outside light entering the shaft which fell straight downward toward the stone and metal collar that held it.

The jewel was so near, so close! Twenty feet away it lay, dangling in the delicate filigree that held it. I let out a little more of the leather straps that, linked together, served me as a rope. Now I dangled above the golden basket.

Hand over hand I went down the full length of the harness.

My feet spread, touched a brace from which hung the chains suspending the basket. Gently I released the straps. My weight on the brace might cause it to buckle, throwing me down inside the shaft toward the stonework foundation.

Should this happen, even if the fall did not kill me, I would remain a prisoner forever inside the shaft. There would be no escape from it.

I held my breath. My feet firmed on the brace. I stood crouched, waiting for the metal bar to give. It remained solid. I let my breath out slowly, in relief.

Now I knelt on the brace, bent to reach downward, to grip a part of the golden chains that supported the filigree. My fingers tightened on that cool metal. Slowly I began to draw the verdal upward.

Inch by inch I raised the basket. Nearer came the verdal. Now it was less than a foot away. To grasp it, I would have to lean far out over the brace. I could not draw the

THIEF OF LLARN

basketwork any higher. Gently I stretched myself out at full length on the narrow bar. With my free hand, I reached downward. The tips of my fingers brushed the jewel.

I emptied my lungs of air and strained. Between forefinger and third finger I caught the gem, paused to secure a firmer grip. If it slipped after I had it out of its nest and fell to the stonework foundation far below, it was gone forever.

I lifted my hand with the jewel held delicately between my fingers. It was not a secure grip. I could feel the cold jewel sliding free. I let go of the basketwork and slid my left hand under my right, just as the verdal fell.

With my left hand I caught the thing. My hand closed on it convulsively. I lay and shivered, taking deep breaths. Beneath me the filigree work hung empty. Uthian himself had never done a better job.

To scramble to my feet, to catch the linked straps and haul myself upward hand over hand through the hatch, was the work of a moment. The verdal was safe in my belt pouch. I was on my way to Korok—and to Pthorok Tok.

I raised the flier a hundred feet into the air and set its controls to follow after Marga, Ghan Karr and Evran Dekk. Then I lifted out the verdal and admired it. It was the largest jewel I had ever seen, perhaps twice the size of the one I had given Tuarra as her wedding ring. Pthorok Tok would be very happy to get his hands on it.

Realizing that I could not take the flier too near the three thieves, I reluctantly lowered it to the ground and hid it close by a hump of sand. I went forward on foot.

Marga had promised to wait for me. By using the flier for a little more than half the distance between Zaxeron and the edge of the Clouds, I had cut into that waiting time by many hours. In another day and a half, I should be beyond the Clouds.

The sand puffs kicked into little sprays as my feet moved, and settled down behind me, half obliterating my tracks. My legs were tired, yet I must walk on and on until I saw the face of Marga. Only the thieves knew the way to Korok. I must go with them, or not at all. I strode through the

THIEF OF LLARN

pale light until at last I saw the yellow glare of Alfán at the very edge of the Clouds of Comoron.

That sunlight was like a golden wall at first. It hid everything beyond it because of its glaring brightness. As I came closer I made out features of the landscape—stunted trees and dwarfed bushes ranging across the flatland. Thousands of years before, this lowland had been an ocean bottom.

I passed from the cloud cover out into the sunlight of Alfán. Its warmth touched my skin, made me aware of how cool it had been beneath the Clouds. Putting a hand to my eyes, I scanned the horizon. I could see no sign of Marga and her fellow thieves.

The winds that blew across this northern corner of the Clouds of Comoron had erased the dral tracks they made as they cantered. I had nothing to guide my feet as I followed after them. I had misgauged my point of entry into the world of men.

I had no stomach for it, but I began to walk along the edge of the Clouds, hunting for the thieves. All the rest of the afternoon I walked, until the sun Alfán sank below the horizon and I stood in darkness.

Then I saw the running lights of an aircraft and heard its motor throbbing. Cupping my hands to my lips, I shouted. If Marga and her companions were in that flier, they would never hear my voice above the sound of the engine. I ran forward, waving my arms.

A bright spotlight jumped to life on the deck of the flier. It went this way and that across the ground in a checkerboard pattern, sweeping in regular lines from the Clouds outward.

It would be only a matter of time until it caught me in its glare. I stopped running and began to wave my arms. Sure enough, the glare found me and fastened me in its beam as the flier lowered to the ground.

Marga came running through the night. "What luck?" she called. "Do you have the verdal?"

For answer I reached into my belt pouch, drew out the jewel and tossed it high in the air. The searchlight beam

THIEF OF LLARN

caught it, made its green bulk blaze brightly. I could hear Marga gasp as she saw it and slid to a stop before me.

Her eyes were enormous as she stared from the jewel to me. She whispered with awe in her voice, "You *are* Uthian! Uthian himself! For only Uthian might have stolen the verdal from behind that deadly shaft. How did you do it?"

I laughed and slipped the gem inside my belt pouch. "The secrets of Uthian are his own. Were he to shout them from the rooftops, then everyone would be a Uthian."

She said, "I did not believe you, you know. I mean—that you are Uthian as you claim to be. The waters of immortality, well—who believes old legends? But the verdal—if it is a verdal . . ."

Her voice trailed off. I took out the jewel and placed it in her hands. She stared down at it, eyes wide. She held it up to the white light of the electronic lantern and nodded slowly. "It is the same one. There is no doubt of it."

My hand was on my gawn. Marga saw the gesture, turned to look at Ghan Karr and Evran Dakk as they came striding toward us.

Marga said, "There is no need for that. We agreed among ourselves that if you brought the verdal to us, it would prove you to be Uthian and so—welcome."

Her face turned up to me, impish and lovely. Heavy red hair had fallen about her naked shoulders to frame the oval of a face in which the eyes gleamed like emerald fire and her red lips quivered as they smiled. Marga was an attractive, intelligent woman. There was an animal appeal to her good looks, her finely shaped body. I told myself that were it not for Tuarra, I could be drawn to this woman.

She smiled as the two thieves lifted their hands, palms forward to show they held no weapons.

"You see?" she asked. "There is nothing to fear."

I kept my hand on the gawn, despite her assurance. Marga held out the verdal as Ghan Karr and the taller Evran Dekk came up. They bent to stare at it. Evran Dekk took it in his hand, studying it closely. While he did so, Ghan Karr was regarding me.

THIEF OF LLARN

There was awe in his eyes. To him, suddenly, I had really become Uthian the Unmatched. All the stories they told of Uthian, of his matchless swordplay, of his ability to steal where there was no possibility of theft, came flooding into his mind. I was a walking myth come to life.

Even Evran Dekk looked stunned as he turned from the verdal toward me. "How could you have done it?" he breathed. "The thing was impossible."

"Not to Uthian," I smiled.

The tall man nodded. For the moment, at least, his hostility was gone before the miracle his eyes were seeing. Almost reverently he handed the verdal back to Marga who gave it to me in turn.

"Pthorok Tok will reward us greatly for such a jewel," she laughed. "There is no verdal anywhere on Llarn to match that one."

"But why does the Dagan of Korok want the verdals? To put in his crown? To boast that he is the wealthiest man on the planet?"

Ghan Karr shrugged his shoulders. "We do not know. We do not care, really. It is enough that he pays us for them."

"And what does he pay?" I pressed.

Evran Dekk answered. "For every verdal of any quality he offers ten thousand golden torks."

I whistled. Ten thousand golden torks is a veritable fortune. Not fifty men in wealthy Kharthol could boast such a fortune. The very magnitude of the reward made me suspicious.

"How many verdals have you turned over to Pthorok Tok?" I asked Marga.

"Three, so far. This one—the one you got—would make the fourth. I shall be a very rich woman. Perhaps the richest woman on all Llarn."

"And you?" I asked Ghan Karr.

He grinned, shrugging. "Just one."

Evran Dekk said, "I handed over two."

"Sixty thousand golden torks," I said, "for six verdals. I don't believe it."

THIEF OF LLARN

Ghan Karr growled, "It is the truth. I've spoken to master thieves to whom Pthorok Tok has paid these sums."

"As have I," Evran Dekk nodded, adding thoughtfully, "though none of us has received a copper durk, so far, for the verdals we turned over."

Marga was silent, staring at me. "You still don't believe it, Uthian. Why not?"

"Even the Dagan of Xuxu—and in my time the man who ruled Xuxu ruled the money coffers of the planet—could not give away such sums. There is something wrong here, something I do not like."

Marga bubbled laughter, tucking her arm in mine and drawing me toward the flier. "You are like a wild animal, Uthian. You don't trust anyone. I suppose that's what happens when you work alone all the time."

She had caught hold of my right arm, the arm with which I fired a grawn or wielded my sword. Surprise made her mouth fall open as I tugged my arm free and turned so that Ghan Karr and Evran Dekk were no longer behind me. Then she hooted gaily, pointing at me.

"Even us he does not trust. See him swing about against any attack from the rear?"

Ghan Karr chuckled. "A thief is honored among his own kind," he said. "You are one of us now, Uthian."

Evran Dekk nodded slowly. "It is so. You are our brother."

"I've known brothers who would kill for less than ten thousand gold torks. If you don't mind, I'll stay suspicious a little longer."

Ghan Karr spread his hands. "Do so, by all means. Just know that with us, you are safe. No thief will ever harm you. I swear it."

Marga caught my left hand in hers and drew me after her, walking backward before me. "Come, Uthian. You must be tired—and hungry."

"I could eat a dral," I admitted.

"Nothing so tough. We have bork steaks and frozen breads. We shall make a feast, we four."

While we ate, the big flier raced toward the great polar

THIEF OF LLARN

ice fields. Korok lay beyond those vast expanses of eternal snow, though less than half as far in that direction as Kharthol lay to the north of them. It was in a very remote corner of Llarn. Few maps in Kharthol even showed Korok.

I brooded over that fact while I ate the steak which Marga had grilled. A little city like Korok, able to pay ten thousand golden torks for every verdal the thieves of Llarn brought its dagan? It was an utter impossibility! Even Drakol Tu could not afford such sums, and the Dagan of Kharthol ruled a mighty empire.

I decided against speaking further of this. Marga was so happy to feed me, Ghan Karr was so pleased to sit and listen while I entertained him with stories of my past thefts on Llarn, that I had not the heart to disillusion them more than I had already. Even tall Evran Dekk listened with a smile on his lips as I explained the problems I had encountered in my quest for the crown of King Thuyxides of Meradion, which was carved from a single ruby.

After a while, we curled up in our sleeping silks. It did not take me long to fall asleep. Marga, as if sensing my fears, had placed herself between Ghan Karr and me, evidently to tell me that no one could get at me unless they first disturbed her slumber.

I slept, and slept well. When I awoke, Marga was in the galley, preparing a light meal. Ghan Karr was staring forward, with Evran Dekk at his side.

I came to stand beside the Queen of Thieves, glancing down at the eggs sizzling in the pan. "Rather a skimpy meal for four people," I commented.

She showed her fine white teeth in a smile. "We've run low. We're going to have to do some hunting."

I stared out the porthole at the polar fields below. "Down there?" I could see only the windswept wastes of snow and the jagged ice that towered skyward in fantastic shapes. Surely, no animal life could live on that barren icecap.

"There is the scargan, remember," she smiled.

My face must have looked blank, for she shook her finger at me and said, "You must have forgotten a lot when you

THIEF OF LLARN

were—asleep. The scargan is a polar animal covered in white fur. No one knows what it eats, yet it thrives in that wilderness.”

“And its meat tastes good?”

“A bork steak is dry leather compared to it. Wait, you’ll see.”

It was perhaps an hour later that Ghan Karr cried out, pointing. Below us he had sighted a scargan, its great white-furred body tipped at head and tail with black. With Marga at my side I stared down at my next meal as it raced across the icy surface of the polar world, its sharp claws giving it perfect footing. Once it lifted its shaggy head and bellowed defiance to those who had come hunting it.

In shape, it was round of body and short of leg, almost like a great white butterball. Marga assured me that it could fight, and fight well, once it had become aroused. A solitary hunter, if he missed his first shot, stood little chance against that half-ton of destructive fury.

“If it should come at you,” she said, putting a hand on my wrist, “drop down flat on the ice. In this way you give your fellow hunters a clear shot at him. We won’t need to worry about shooting you.”

The special poison used against the scargan was not harmful to human beings, Marga explained, when they ate its meat. But a needle dipped in that venom could kill a man should it enter his blood stream by way of the hunting needle. Her warm fingers closed on my wrist, shaking it gently.

“Remember, Uthian,” she smiled, “I wouldn’t want anything to happen to you.” She flushed a little and turned her head to one side. “You have become very—dear—to me.”

I came close to explaining to the Queen of Thieves that I loved Tuarra, Princess of Kharthol, who was my wife—but I remembered in time that I was Uthian the Unmatched, and Uthian, according to legend, had no wives. Even if he had, they would have turned to dust during the long centuries of his sleep. Uthian himself was supposedly immortal.

Evran Dekk was handling the flier controls in the tiny cubi-

THIEF OF LLARN

cle forward of this five-man flier. The craft dipped downward. Snow flurries driven by the polar winds pelted the porthole panes and it seemed that the air inside the cabin grew colder by the moment.

The flier poised a moment above the frozen lands, then touched its keel to the hardpacked snow. The ship veered, quivered, and settled into the long slide that indicated a successful landing. Evran Dekk turned from the control panel to a locker, from which he lifted several heavy garments.

These leather leggings and jackets were lined in fur. They insulated a man from wind and cold so he might retain his body heat against the chilling temperatures that swept this frigid world. I have seen them in Kharthol, though never before have I worn them.

Soon Marga, Ghan Karr and I were encased in the garments. We looked bulky, but the leggings and jackets were surprisingly easy to move about in. Then Evran Dekk handed us slim rods that worked on compressed air and shot thin needles tipped with a poison that acted almost instantaneously.

"Good hunting," the tall man nodded.

He stepped back away from me, a faint smile on his lips. I had lost some of my suspicions of Evran Dekk. He had been most considerate, helping me into the unfamiliar garb, fussing over me. Yet that odd smile brought back all my worries about him.

I told myself I was a fool. He had nothing to gain by running off and leaving us to a cold death on these wastelands. He needed food as we did. Besides, what was there to gain by leaving us? I had the verdal in my belt pouch.

I slid overside after Ghan Karr and turned to aid Marga down upon the solid snow. The scargan we had seen from the air was some distance away but moving slowly. Later I learned that the scargan becomes listless when it needs food. This was the best time to hunt the beast, for otherwise it could gallop over the ice fields like a maddened dral.

THIEF OF LLARN

I watched Ghan Karr slide the slender needle-rod into firing position and imitated him. In her short briefing, Marga had warned me to be careful of the scargan. I meant to follow her instructions with religious fervor.

The animal was trotting in a direction that was taking it away from us at a steady pace. Ghan Karr began to run, waving us to follow. The wind was cutting into our faces, the only part of our bodies not protected by our garments. The cold was making it difficult to breathe, freezing the moisture in our nostrils. Marga and I ran along behind Ghan Karr.

The beast ran to the crest of a great snow hill and posed a moment with the blue sky overhead unmarked by clouds. Around us was the great open space of the polar snows. It was an exciting moment. All my life I have enjoyed hunting. The thrill of the chase sent the blood pumping in my veins.

I ran faster, leaving Marga behind. The scargan was sliding down the far slope of the hill. When I stood beside Ghan Karr at its crown, we saw the beast round a huge stalagmite of ice. We went after him, sliding on the hard packed snow.

As we came around the edge of the stalagmite, the scargan was standing on a lip of ice jutting out into a stream of flowing water. Ghan Karr shouted in surprise.

"Look, Uthian! At last we know where the scargans get their food—from the fish in that river."

"River? That little stream?"

He laughed. "That little stream must be part of the underground river that flows across half the planet. Rumor says that the dolthoin live in palaces in such a river and that far beneath the surface it widens into a subterranean sea. It's called the Sylosthos."

Marga came up to us, then. Shading her eyes from the rays of Alfan, she nodded. "Yes, that would account for it. The fish that inhabit Sylosthos are all blind. There is little or no light under the surfaces, but the fish breed and multiply in great numbers to feed the dolthoin, that race of Llarn that lives in the waters of its twin oceans."

Ghan Karr was raising his rod-gun. The scargan turned at

THIEF OF LLARN

bay from those river waters. It opened its jaws and gave a deep bellow that echoed out across the ice barrens, and then it charged. Ghan Karr fired. The scargan came on, running as swiftly on the ice as a dral might gallop on dry land.

Marga gasped in sudden fright. If none of our needles hit it, it might well claw us all to ribbons. Even as fright touched her, she triggered her own rod. The scargan never stopped.

I lifted my own needle-gun, aimed and gently squeezed the trigger. The white fur across its neck quivered as the poisoned needle went deep into the beast. Three more feet the scargan traveled before its legs shot out from under it. It went down in a spray of snow and ice flakes to stop at our booted feet.

Ghan Karr exclaimed, "Yours was the only needle to hit it right. My own went into a fatty part of its chest and Marga missed her shot completely." His eyes were like those of a dog as they regarded me. "You saved our lives, Uthian."

"You give me too much credit," I told him.

Marga was unwinding a plaited leather rope from about her middle. Kneeling, she and Ghan Karr tied it about the beast. Ghan Karr put one end over his shoulder as Marga handed the other end to me.

The scargan was heavy, but it slid along quite easily once Ghan Karr and I dug our feet in and began the haul. Marga told me that when we had it near the flier, she could cut it into quarters and put what we did not need into a freeze unit below the galley floor. There was more than enough meat to see us safely into Korok.

As we trudged along a sloping snowface, we saw the flier. It was lifting upward, rising away from us, gathering speed and altitude. Marga gasped. Ghan Karr screamed thickly in disbelief and rage. I was the only one who stood mute. I was wondering what Evran Dekk hoped to accomplish by desertion other than condemning us to a slow, numbing death.

I fumbled under my jacket for the holstered grawn but by

THIEF OF LLARN

the time I had it out, the flier was a dot in the sky and moving fast. Marga whirled to face me, tears blurring her eyes a moment before freezing on her cheeks.

"You were right to be suspicious," she cried.

"What purpose can he have in mind?" I wondered.

Ghan Karr snarled, "He will turn the verdal over to Pthorok Tok, and claim he was the man who stole it!"

"But I have the verdal here in my—"

My voice broke off. My gloved fingers pressed the pouch for the telltale bulge of the great jewel. There was no bulge; the pouch was flat. Then I remembered with sinking heart how Evran Dekk had fussed over me, helping me into my garments. He had helped himself at the same time to the verdal.

Marga smiled wryly, as if reading my mind. "Yes, Evran Dekk is a thief, a master at the art of picking a belt pouch. I should have thought of it when I saw him hovering about you."

I squatted down in the ice and snow and began removing the leather cordings from about the scargan. "We'll eat here," I told them.

"Eat?" muttered Ghan Karr. "It will only delay our deaths to eat. Use your grawn on us, Uthian."

I was accepting a sharp knife from Marga and was bending to slash at the furry hide of the dead animal. Not looking up I said, "You two may die, if you wish. Uthian is going after Evran Dekk. Someday I'll come face to face with him. It's what I shall live for, now."

I was seeing, not the pale face of the master thief, but the face of Tuarra of Kharthol. I would live for Tuarra, but this I could not say to Marga and Ghan Karr. They would understand vengeance, however, even help me get it. Ghan Karr squatted, taking the knife from my fingers.

"Let me," he growled. "I used to hunt scargans for a living in my youth."

The dead scargan was of little use to us without fire. And the lonely icecap was built of snow and ice packed thousands of feet deep. It afforded nothing to burn, nothing with

THIEF OF LLARN

which to build a fire to cook the food that lay before us.

Marga wept silently as Ghan Karr rose to his feet and hurled the knife into the snow, saying, "I'm wasting my time."

Above our heads, the blue sky was darkening slightly. Fortunately, it was the summertime of the year, when day and night show little difference. The wind was colder now; it seemed to slash the furred jackets and leggings, slicing through flesh and into bone. Marga began to shiver.

"We can't stay here," I told them.

"Where is there to go?" asked Ghan Karr in surprise.

I did not know. The only thing I knew at the moment was that if we remained here, we would surely die. I caught Marga by an arm and beckoned Ghan Karr to follow. Walking would keep us warm, to some degree.

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WE 'BEGAN our walk across the icy flatland. Our breaths frosted in the air and the wind whipped us with the power of a gale, but we put our heads down and trudged steadily ahead. According to the last reading of the instruments on the flier, we were a few hundred miles north of the magnetic pole. So we continued in that northerly direction along a line of travel that might correspond roughly to 160° longitude.

We walked without speaking for what seemed a long time, each of us occupied with his thoughts. I thought of Tuarra, wondering if I would ever see her again. I was remembering our hours together—which seemed so short now, and so far away in another lifetime. I yearned to see her smile flash up at me, to feel the touch of her lips on mine.

The horizon was white and far away, across miles of frozen icecap. Here and there stretches of damp fog crept with silent feet across the snow barrens on which we were the only living things.

The cold ate into us. Our legs were moving now in plodding fashion. Fortunately, a Llarnian compass was standard equipment with each of the hooded jackets, so we were relieved of the danger of walking in a circle. Our course was more or less straight as far as we could determine, northward across the frozen wastes.

How long had we traveled? An hour? Ten hours? We did not know. How far had we walked? We did not know this, either. We moved like robots across the empty white flatlands and in our hearts we knew we were going to die.

After a time Marga stumbled and would have fallen except that I put an arm about her middle and held her up. Her face was very white. A faint coating of frost covered her lips and nostrils. Ghan Karr came up to lend his strength on her other side.

THIEF OF LLARN

"This can't go on," he said.

"We must go on. To stop is to die."

"I want to die," Marga whispered.

We staggered through the snow spray tossed into our faces by the arctic gales, past jagged ice carvings shaped by the winds, over stretches of ice so smooth they seemed polished by some giant hand. Ghan Karr fell once, lying quietly without moving, so that I had to drop Marga and go back and lift him to his feet.

"Keep walking. Keep walking!" I told him.

He stumbled on with Marga and myself at his heels. He was babbling, singing snatches of a nursery rhyme that was old when Llarn had been a young planet. After a time, Marga joined him.

I was delirious myself, I realized. Ahead of me, locked inside a great ice floe, was a city. I stared at streets, at buildings, at rooftops and tall spires. I giggled; I laughed. I was seeing visions. A city, here in the polar lands? A city locked in ice?

Forgetting the others, I ran up to the massive wall of ice that sheathed the dwellings. The ice was transparent, like clear water frozen solid. I could make out a man standing rigid before a doorway, hand extended toward the latch as if to open it. Beyond him a woman in a fur coat was in mid-stride, balanced to a nicety.

I called to them. I shouted. I waved.

Only the echoes of my own voice echoed across the wastes. Then I remembered my grawn. I fumbled off my glove, lifted the weapon in my hand, fired it. The red beam heated the ice to a melting point until it ran down all around the snow where I stood. After a few seconds, there was a tunnel open before me.

I walked into that strange city, stood beside the man about to enter his home. I looked at the woman, saw her face pale and white under a fur cap. They were dead, of course. Dead for uncounted centuries. I had never seen their type of garments before, not even in the ancient history books I had looked at in Kharthol.

THIEF OF LLARN

I turned and stared back through the tunnel. Marga and Ghan Karr lay where they had fallen. I ran to rouse them, to bring them into the warmer air of the ice city.

I shook Ghan Karr to a mumbling wakefulness. He sat up, staring at me like a man demented. "Go away, Uthian. Let me sleep." He fell over on his face and by sheer force I wrestled him to his feet.

"We're saved, Ghan Karr! There's a city—"

He began to laugh, looking where I pointed. "I am asleep, after all. My apologies, Prince of Thieves. I thought you were trying to wake me." He began to stumble toward the great ice sheath behind which he could see buildings now, and people.

I lifted Marga into my arms and carried her at a shuffling trot toward the warmer air not far ahead. She moaned as we went into the tunnel, and her arms came up about my neck. Her eyelashes were frozen to her cheeks, and as she woke, she wept softly.

"I'm dead—and locked in the dark pit of Chorakor!"

"Hush, Marga. You're as alive as I am."

I put my lips to her eyes, felt the tiny ice flakes moisten and fall away under their heat. Marga opened eyes that glistened tenderly as they regarded my anxious face. I squirmed uncomfortably, not daring to think what she might say. Quickly, to avoid speech, I set her on her booted feet and waved an arm at the city.

"Wha—what is this place, Uthian? A city all in ice? It's people—oh, I see a man and a woman and . . ."

She turned her pale face toward me. "They're dead! What killed them—so suddenly?"

My shoulders shrugged. "I do not know, Marga—but I do know that we must find food somewhere, or we too will die."

"I would not mind dying with you, Uthian," she said softly, and reached for my hand.

Fortunately, Ghan Karr came out of a building at that moment, waving what looked like a roast of bork steak in his hands. His voice came clearly to us in the warm air.

THIEF OF LLARN

"A food store, you two. Down here—come on. Plenty to eat; frozen stuff that's been kept in cold storage for Astarra knows how long!"

Marga and I ran into the shop. There were two men and a woman in the store, a man behind one of the counters. Marga sent a swift look about, then turned to me.

"There isn't much food here. I don't know what this place is—or what it was—but the people were having a hard time of it. There's very little to eat on the shelves. Thank the gods there are only three of us!"

She walked ahead of me to the door of a frozen food compartment, ducked to enter, and came out with a length of meat. She paused, glancing around until her gaze settled on two small tins of food. These she tossed to me, then beckoned me to follow.

Ghan Karr shouted to us from the upper window of a house.

"This is a house with a thermal unit. Bring up the food. We'll have a feast."

Marga nodded, then went back into the store for more cans. When she had my arms well filled, she led me up the stairs of the house where Ghan Karr was already thawing his own food.

"What is this city?" I asked while the meat was cooking.

Ghan Karr shrugged. "Who knows—or cares?"

Marga said wistfully, "I can't say, but I do feel sorry for its people. They had a hard time of it before they died. And they died suddenly, without warning, apparently."

"After we get to Korok, I'm coming back here and learn what its secret is." They looked at me as if I had lost my mind. Marga pointed out that we could live quite comfortably in the ice city. There was little food, but we were only three people and it would last us a long time. We could make a new life here.

"You'd die of boredom in a month," I laughed. "Master thieves—content to stagnate forever? No, no. We'll leave as soon as we've slept."

THIEF OF LLARN

"Without me," Ghan Karr muttered. "I won't walk another foot on that barren waste outside."

"I don't think we'll have to walk."

I explained that in a city with such an advanced technology there would be vehicles to carry its people across the icecap. We would find those sleds, use them as they had not been used in centuries. Marga frowned thoughtfully.

"What you say may be true, but to venture out again on that snow—" Her words broke off as she shivered.

The food was almost ready. She rose and fussed over it, finding wooden platters and filling them. The meat and the doughballs might be ages old, but they tasted sweet and filled my belly, giving me a warmth that seemed foreign to my chilled body.

Ghan Karr leaned back, smiling, patting his middle. "A few minutes ago I would have thought you mad, Uthian. Now I am not so sure. This place is filled with death, and the living have no liking for the dead as everyday companions. I'll go with you—if we can find a sled and some way to make it move."

Marga came around to sit on the arm of the massive wooden chair that was my seat, resting her arm about my shoulders. We had discarded our clumsy outer garments so that I now wore the black leather belt and woolen kilt, the black leather sandals of Uthian the Unmatched. Since the women upon Llarn wear little more than do the men, I found that the contact of her bare arm and side upon me reminded me that Marga was a woman, and an attractive woman, at that.

"Where Uthian goes, I go," she whispered.

She bent her head to press her warm, soft lips to mine. As Alan Morgan, I loved Tuarra of Kharthol; but I was not Alan Morgan at the moment—I was Uthian, the thief. And so I kissed Marga as she kissed me, and with honest enjoyment though I doubted that Tuarra would think very highly of my reasoning.

Still, I was playing a part. If by kissing Marga I could hasten my reunion with Tuarra, I was all for it. However,

THIEF OF LLARN

I decided to say nothing of this to Tuarra, should I ever see her again. Sometimes women fail to understand explanations which seem perfectly obvious to menfolk.

Ghan Karr rose to his feet, stretching. "I'm not tired. I think I'll go find one of those sleds you seem to think will be somewhere close at hand."

I said hurriedly, for Marga was still draped about me, "I *am* tired. While you two slept outside, I was busy!"

Marga nodded, eyes bright. "Yes, Uthian. Sleep! I too shall search for a sled with Ghan Karr." She whispered in my ear, "I am very anxious to reach Korok and get my reward from Pthorok Tok. As a rich woman I can give up my queenship and become a respectable woman. I might even—get married."

I held up a hand. "Uthian has never married," I said, hoping it was true.

Her mischievous face reassured me as she giggled, "Uthian has waited for Marga."

I could see a bedchamber through a partly opened door. The bed seemed newly made, its coverlet firm and smooth. I gave Marga a little pat, then moved through the doorway to fling myself on the covers. Instantly, I was asleep.

My body, for all its size and strength, was utterly exhausted. Later Marga told me I slept like a dead man for close to fifteen hours while she and Ghan Karr explored the city in the ice.

Its name, they learned from certain manuscripts they located in a library, was Jakanda. It had been built in the polar ice ages by a dagan who had ordered certain scientific polar experiments to be made. For safety, Jakanda had been located far from his home city. There was no record of these experiments kept in the library, and Marga had not had time to search for laboratories.

Naturally, there was no record of the tragedy which destroyed all life in the city. Yet the automatic machines still maintained the proper temperatures and kept the food fresh. In a large building on the outskirts of the city were more than a dozen sleds, each in excellent condition.

THIEF OF LLARN

We ate slowly, then packed food in containers to carry with us. I was amused to note that Marga assumed toward me that air of ownership which women always adopt toward the men they have selected to be theirs. It is the habit of Tuarra; it became the habit of the Queen of Thieves.

Carrying our sacks and once again wearing our outer garments, we hurried through the streets. Hope ran high in our veins. A sled to carry us to the edge of the ice field, and after that—well, at least we would be able to eat as we traveled, and Korok was not so far away that we might not reach it in due time.

The sled was a slim length of steel and wood, gently curved to reduce air drafts. It consisted of four seats, one behind the other, with a control panel and steering rod set before the foremost seat. A thin jet jutted out from its rear. I saw old flame marks on the circular exhaust mouth.

Ghan Karr settled himself as driver. Marga sprang to the next seat while I fetched up the rear, placing our sacks in the empty fourth seat. The sled was close to the ice sheath surrounding the city. Between that great ice barrier and the open doors of the sled hangar, there was a thin sheet of ice, kept perpetually frozen by lower temperatures.

The motor turned over, sputtered and died.

"It may be difficult to start," Ghan Karr growled, "after being idle so long. Maybe it won't even run."

He made three more attempts with the starter stud before the motor coughed—then kicked to throbbing life. Ghan Karr let it purr for a while, warming, before he ran it out onto the ice.

The ancient scientists who had lived in the ice city had built well. The jet sled was a slim length of lightning as it streaked through the tunnel my grawn made ahead of it.

We ran forward until we emerged from the frozen city. The frozen waste was smooth, with only a few snow dunes raised by the eternal winds that swept across its surface. The runners scraped softly; the air was a gale in our faces, and the sled ran without more than its motor hum and the slither of steel runners on ice to mark its passing. We

THIEF OF LLARN

had no idea how long this journey would take, nor where our departure point from the icecap would be, but with the aid of our compasses, we knew we were heading north.

Twice the dimness of the polar night descended on us, but we ignored it to travel on. Four times we ate, until our small supply of food had given out. To judge by outward appearances, we were no nearer the edge of the icecap than before we started.

Then Marga cried out, pointing into the sky where a wide-winged bird was gliding on the wind currents. It was a torgal, she said, one of those scavenger birds that preyed on the dead and rotting carcasses of such tundra animals as the hairy musk borks and the voldors. The tundra between the icecap and the great meadowlands of Llarn was not far away.

We came to the tundra as the star-sun Alfan was sinking to the west. Ghan Karr suggested we sleep the night here, because to meet a pack of hungry voldors while on foot in the thick grasses of the vast Llarnian tundra would be unpleasant. Though we were armed with swords and grawns, the voldors hunt in packs of fifty to a hundred at times. They were so ferocious they would hurl themselves upon us regardless of the deaths we caused. In the end we would go down as so many other wanderers on this savage planet have gone down, never to be seen again.

As the sky darkened far to the north, we could see the great band of crushed debris that forms a mighty belt high above the surfaces of the planet. Long ago, Llarn had possessed a score of moons. Khartholian scientists had informed me that they varied in size from that of a small asteroid to a great sphere, hundreds of miles wide. They had been drawn together, no man knew how, crashing in the upper atmosphere with a sound that echoed all across the planet.

Those fragments had been caught in perpetual orbit, battering together, breaking apart, until they had destroyed themselves into small chunks of matter that swept eternally around Llarn. By day the band gleamed a pale gold so that it was almost invisible. But when darkness lay upon the land,

THIEF OF LLARN

that bracelet of crushed moon fragments caught the sunlight and reflected it down upon all the other chunks of matter, making them glow silver. It was a magnificent sight.

Usually I never tire of seeing those tiny matter motes revolve slowly and brilliantly overhead, but I was exhausted from our struggles. I lay my head back against the seat top and was instantly asleep. It was morning when I woke.

Ghan Karr had been out, hunting. Two small tundra hares were cooking over a fire built from dried musk bork droppings. The smell of roasting meat snapped me wide awake. It was time to eat and then set off across the tundra—toward Korok.

I had no idea how far away that city was, nor did my companions. Ghan Karr had a rough notion, being a native of Larangg, which was not far from Korok. Perhaps a thousand erns, perhaps fifteen hundred; his answer was vague because he did not know just where on the edge of the polar icecap we were standing.

“It makes no difference. A thousand erns or ten thousand, someday we’ll come to Korok.” My fist tightened. “And when we do—Evrans Dekk dies.”

It was easy to say. Yet as we walked across the barren world that was the Llarnian tundra, doubt came to me. A thousand erns was a little more than a thousand earth miles, miles of rough ground filled with dangers at which I could only guess. The voldors and the hairy musk borks of the tundra, if we survived them, would give way to the sporads that roamed the meadowlands and the low mountains that comprised most parts of Llarn. Then too, there were the humans.

Llarn, though smaller than Earth, is a very large planet. Its oceans, except for Ytal and Okyl to the north, have dried up. Those ancient sea bottoms are meadowlands now or deserts. And these vast stretches of ground are inhabited by races of men made strange and altered by the radioactive results of The War.

Many of these humanoids are no longer men, as we know men. They are—different. The blue men of Azorra had evolved

THIEF OF LLARN

from the blue apes of Llarn; the yuul had been altered from no man knows what. There are others, I suppose, unknown even to the great cities of Kharthol and Moorn.

The immensity of the Llarnian tundras is breathtaking to a man who has never known them. The stretch across thousands of erns, flat and wide and covered over with sparse grasses. The sun is a hot ball in the sky in the middle of the day, and the nights are freezing. It was not a pleasant prospect which stretched before us.

Three days we walked before we shot our first food, a fat grass deer, and roasted it over a meager fire. Fortunately, there were water seeps here and there, for much of this section of the land was marshy, and the water is cold and sweet.

Even if we traveled close to thirty erns a day, it was slow going. Despair etched itself on Marga's face. Even Ghan Karr, buoyed as he was by hope of revenge on Evran Dekk, was glum.

"It will take us more than twice a Llarn month before we reach the end," he muttered as we settled down to sleep.

"What else is there to do?" I asked, and he was silent.

Next day, a little after noon, Marga cried out and pointed at something moving through the air. It looked like a flier at a distance, but the more I watched, the more confident I became it was just some great bird wheeling and dipping far away. Its movements were too erratic to be those of a mechanical machine.

"A bird? No, no," Ghan Karr said. "Look now! See, it comes straight toward us. It has seen us."

Behind the thing were others of its kind, perhaps twenty in all. As they neared us, I found that I was right. They were birds, giant oomfors, and each one carried a man riding on its back. Each man had a rope of some sort coiled over a shoulder. At sight of us, the bird riders uncoiled those ropes and began to swing them.

My grawn was in my hand. "Do we kill them? Or do we let them capture us and fly us across these miles of tundra?" I asked.

THIEF OF LLARN

"They may be friendly," Marga breathed.

She smiled wryly as she said it. There are few friendly races on Llarn. Ever since The War, its people have fought to live, to stay alive, until fighting has become their way of life. I do not mind fighting—in fact, I relish it when the odds are anywhere close to being even. Odds of twenty to three are not to my liking, especially when one of the three is a girl.

Even less to my liking, however, was the prospect of victory unless we could capture three of those birds. I would rather risk escape from the bird-men than face the thousand and more miles of barren tundra which lay before us. And so I made the peace sign.

The leading rider ignored it to hurl his noose at me. I dodged it easily enough, but two other ropes were in the air at the same time. One of them settled about my chest, yanking my arms to my sides. At the same time, Ghan Karr went down to be dragged a dozen feet. Marga lifted her hands helplessly.

The oomfors settled to the ground with a vast flapping of huge white wings. The foremost rider, who by his trappings I judged to be a korbar, or captain of troops, swung down and strode toward us.

He was thin and walked with a peculiar gliding gait I was later to learn is common to his kind, the Avokooms. He was handsome and tall, and apparently friendly, for he asked us politely where we were from and why we were violating the lands of his people.

"We had no intention of violating your territorial rights," I assured him. "We were abandoned on the icecap and are struggling to reach some city where we might hire a flier to return home."

"You will have to come with us," the officer told me.

We were drawn up onto the backs of two of the largest oomfors. A moment later we were in the air. Sitting a flying oomfor is not as easy as the Avokooms make it seem. I came close to sliding off three times before the korbar whose passenger I was, told me to clasp his middle and hang

THIEF OF LLARN

on. From babyhood, the Avokooms are trained to ride oomfors, and as a result the gripping muscles of their thighs are very powerfully developed.

I noted that the oomfors carrying Marga, Ghan Karr and myself were laboring heavily under their double burdens. When I commented on this, Avu Uvram, for such was the name of the officer, laughed lightly.

"Add to that the fact that our bones are hollow as are those of the birds, and you may understand it. I, for instance, with hollow bones and little flesh upon my body, weigh only about eighty puls. You must go close to two hundred."

I saw where the oomfor would get tired. As a matter of fact, the korbar ordered his troop to land and switch mounts three times before we came at last to his home city of Avuvava.

From our height and at a distance, the city looked like a pile of rocks, colored white and red in varying shades. From the cruising height of a flier, a man would judge that city to be no more than an accumulation of boulders, gigantic though some of them might be. In this manner, Avu Uvram assured me, his kind had remained in seclusion, safe from attack by enemies for more than a thousand years.

We landed and were marched to the nearest boulder, a section of which opened to admit us into a pleasant room with a polished marble floor in the exact center of which was set a large black circle rimmed with a high railing. Avu Uvram opened a section of the railing, invited us to step in with him.

The black circle began to sink. Past the floor level we went, down a shaft of smooth glass into a vast chamber where dozens of oomfors were stabled. The false boulders, I was given to understand, are no more than a disguise for many such elevators which lead into a vast system of caves or homes for the Avokooms.

We were escorted through an intricate system of cave-tunnels, past rooms fitted out luxuriously. I was hopelessly confused by the time we finally entered a cave larger and more richly furnished than any we had seen.

THIEF OF LLARN

An officer in white harness fitted with the device of Ulmu Avga, Dagan of Avuvava, accepted us into his charge. Courteously enough, he asked that we disarm ourselves, since it was forbidden to carry weapons into the presence of the dagan.

I hesitated. Without weapons on Llarn, a man is peculiarly helpless, since his sword and his grawn go everywhere a man goes. Nevertheless, there was little I could do about it. We disarmed ourselves meekly and followed the man in the white harness through a curtained doorway into a room hung from ceiling to floor along its walls by gossamer veils of varying colors. The floor itself was pearl, and the ceiling was hung with the same gossamer veiling that shrouded the walls. The room possessed the appearance of floating in air.

On a golden stool at the far end of the room sat a man whose white leather belt and white kilt were hung with jewels. Jewels flashed too on his sandals, and his scabbard was a veritable treasure house of scarlet rubies and blue-white diamonds. As Uthian, I would have thrilled to see that wealth. As Uthian, I would have laid plans to steal them.

And so, under my breath I said to Marga, "The scabbard! Queen of Thieves, I shall steal that thing before we leave for Korok."

"We shall never leave for Korok," she whispered dully.

The dagan lifted his arm, gestured us to approach. His eyes, as we came near, never left the shape of the girl who walked beside me. Disheveled she was, her thick red hair falling about her smooth white shoulders, her kilt ripped and stained, her boots torn. There was a smudge of dirt on her chin, and again on her arm. But I must admit she was lovely, and could well inspire the sudden brightness in the eyes of Ulmu Avga.

"The woman I shall accept," the dagan said suddenly, nodding. For the first time he looked at Ghan Karr and at me. "The men may go to the atmosphere cave."

Marga whirled and threw herself into my arms. "Uthian—no! Save me," she cried. Under her breath she added, "I shall

THIEF OF LLARN

get the scabbard for you, Uthian—if you can figure out how we can escape from this place!”

The officer was at my elbow, yanking us apart. It would have been a simple matter to fell him with a blow, but the instincts of the fighting man told me it would not, could not be that simple. The dagan sat alone and seemingly unprotected on his golden stool. There were no soldiers in view.

Fell the officer, grab Ulmu Avga as a hostage, and—

I read the eyes of the officer, and relaxed. He was too confident, too sure of the situation. Then my eyes fell on the lengths of gossamer that veiled much of the great throne room. An army might be hiding behind those curtains. I let Marga be pulled away, drawn toward the golden stool where Ulmu Avga sat.

Then the officer motioned Ghan Karr and me to follow him. At the doorway I cast a last glance back at Marga where she stood obediently before the Dagan of Avuvava. Then I looked at the gossamer veils. A trick of the light showed the shadows of armed men behind those draperies. Had I yielded to my first impulse and fought, I might now be a dead man.

Ghan Karr and I followed the officer meekly.

VI

TWO LEVELS below the throne room we were ushered into a system of interlocked caverns filled with machinery and the smell of chemicals. This was the atmosphere plant that kept the underground living quarters of the Avokoom filled with sweet, cool air. A low throb of pulsing engines indicated how smoothly the air was pumped from the surface, down through the filtering tanks and then upward into the dwelling caverns themselves.

The officer turned us over to a simple panar whose tour of duty made him supervisor of the great machines which hummed so steadily and so softly as they pumped and purified, drew in and exhaled air. It was like being inside a mechanical lung, far down in the depths of the planet.

"These are new slaves, assigned to the plant engines," announced the korbar. "Keep them busy."

The panar grumbled, "I could use ten times these two. *Keep them busy!* Have you any idea of the work we have down here?"

The officer laughed. It was no concern of his, what headaches the panar might have. He had brought him two slaves, and now he washed his hands of the matter. The panar glared after his retreating back before he turned to us.

"Come along, you two," he said. "I'll put you to work right away. Work, work, work. Saw you ever such a task for one man?"

I sympathized with him. I so admired his knowledge of the huge plant that he began to grow expansive and boast of his technical skills. He was the only man of all the Avokoom who was familiar with the great purifier tanks, with the intake valves and the exhalators. As a result, he was imposed upon, day and night.

THIEF OF LLARN

"If a break occurs, I'm the man they rouse out of bed. I'm the one who does without sleep. I'm the scapegoat when a leak occurs."

"It isn't fair," I nodded.

He smiled faintly. "We'll get on, you and I—if you can follow orders. Mostly the slaves I get are a sorry lot. They have no brains, no ability even to obey a command. I have to overlook everything they do."

"And yet you rule a world, down here," I told him. "You are more powerful even than your dagan."

He nodded. "I have thought of that, not that the knowledge does me any good. I am kept too busy to enjoy life."

"I may be able to help you. I am familiar with machinery. Explain to me how the plant works."

Instantly he was suspicious. "Why should you help me?"

I spread my hands. "I am a slave, true. But a slave can enjoy a few luxuries—good food, some wine, perhaps even a slavegirl to while away the night hours. You could see that I get these luxuries, Ovu Truv."

The man grinned. "I could, indeed. Down here I am like a dagan. Nobody comes here any oftener than can be helped." He put his thumb and forefinger to his nostrils. "The smell keeps them away."

Ghan Karr and I went to school for a few hours with the panar as our teacher. The atmosphere plant was simple enough. Huge fans sucked in fresh air from the surface, where the filters were set. This air was drawn through banks of purifiers and then fed, by a system of massive pipes, into the main artery, where giant fans forced it through the dwelling caves.

Fans built into the surface aided the circulation and drove the tainted air out above the surface. The speed of the fans could be regulated by massive switchboards placed in the plant walls. They could be set to full speed, which would replace air in the entire cavern in a matter of minutes, to a slow circling that would permit repairs to be made, or even be shut off entirely.

It was a simple enough operation. I suspected that Ovu

THIEF OF LLARN

Truv was put upon by his superiors not because the work was so difficult to understand, but because it was boring. I supposed a man could get used to the stink after a while, but I was determined to do something about it.

And so while Ghan Karr and I worked on the chemical tanks, I found a mixture of powders which, when put into tiny filters and placed in the nostrils, changed the smell to a pleasing fragrance. I showed what I had done to Ovu Truv, who was delighted.

I had made a set of filters for Ghan Karr, myself, and for the panar as well. I told him I was surprised that he had never thought of doing the same thing.

Ovu Truv looked embarrassed, and admitted that the idea had never occurred to him. "I think I have been feeling so sorry for myself, I never used my head except to smell the stinks."

"Perhaps Ghan Karr and I can make your life even easier," I told him.

"How can you? I have to be down here day and night." He sighed. "I have a girl in the dwelling caverns, but she won't come down here and I am rarely free to go up there and visit her."

I explained to him that my companion and I, given permission, were fully capable of caring for the atmosphere plant. Ovu Truv listened quietly, but said nothing. He shook his head, however, so I assumed that much as he would like to do so, he could not trust us with the massive machines that held the power of life and death over Avuvava.

When he was gone, Ghan Karr stared at me. "You have been fawning over that panar ever since we came down here, Uthian."

"I have been trying to gain his confidence, yes," I admitted, "but only that we may escape."

"Escape? We are half a mile down in the caverns with an entire nation between us and the surface. How can you even hope to escape?"

I merely pointed to the engines throbbing steadily. "They

THIEF OF LLARN

will set us free, if Ovu Truv will ever allow us to work them by ourselves."

I would tell him no more, lest inadvertently he betray what I had in mind. I asked him not to think about escape, for fear he reveal in some manner to the panar what we planned to do. Glumly, he accepted my plea.

"I would not betray you and Marga, you know that. But perhaps it is best you say nothing more to me. I do not understand machinery as you do, and if I knew what it was you intend to do, I might give you away unwittingly."

Two days went by, with Ovu Truv growing more confident of my ability to take over in his place. Once he tested me, telling me he intended to go visit the girl he loved, and returned within an hour. When he discovered that everything was functioning normally, he was quite obviously relieved to learn I had not betrayed him in some manner.

That night Ghan Karr and I feasted on bork steaks and berry tarts, with a small bottle of strimth to ease our thirst. For the first time also, Ovu Truv did not descend to make his nightly check.

Ghan Karr remonstrated with me. "Surely it is time to act, now that we have been left unguarded?"

"No, Ghan Karr. The time is not yet ripe. I have the feeling that we are being further tested in some manner by the panar."

The thief hooted. "You mean he left men down here to check on us—as the dagan was protected by armed men behind those curtains? Pah! Ovu Truv is only a panar. He cannot command men to come down here because of the stink."

"Not men, no. Perhaps—a device of some kind. I shall search for it in the morning."

I found the gadget attached to a ventilator grille just beyond the outflow fans. Any change in the quality of the air would instantly result in some sort of warning signal, a signal that would bring Ovu Truv on the run. I removed the device, studied it, discovered how it could be rendered inoperative and replaced it.

THIEF OF LLARN

The days went by. We had been in the atmosphere plant close to two Llarn weeks, or trods. I had hidden the sacks of chemicals I needed behind some spare parts where Ovu Truv, even when he conducted an inspection tour, would fail to see them. All we needed for our break to freedom was the right moment.

I had made inquiries of the panar about Marga, learning that she had become a favorite of Ulmu Avga. The women of the Avokoom are extremely attractive, the panar told me. Never having seen one, I had to take his word for it. But Marga could hold her own, even with the most beautiful of women, and so I understood that she had pleased the dagan very much.

Then one night, after Ovu Truv had made his rounds of inspection and confessed himself well pleased, I lifted out my sacks. Ghan Karr came to help me. Together we emptied the purifying tanks of the liquid they held and replaced them with our own chemicals.

"What will they do?" wondered Ghan Karr.

"Put everyone to sleep," I grinned.

"Not kill them?"

"Why should I kill them?"

"They are enemies," Ghan Karr said simply.

"Enemies can sometimes become friends," I said, remembering the manner in which I had won over the Azunn when I first came to Llarn.

He shrugged, content to escape.

I shut off the alarm devices beyond the outflow fans and waited. Ghan Karr and I already had placed tiny filters in our nostrils, so that the tainted air would not bother us.

It requires a little less than a full kor or hour to fill the caverns with a new supply of air. At the end of that kor, Ghan Karr and I walked out the door to the atmosphere plant and rode the lift upward to the main floor of the caverns. There was no one in sight except for a pretty girl slumped down and sleeping close by an opening which led into what would be the royal kitchens. A platter of food

THIEF OF LLARN

had fallen from her hands and lay in a pile close to her feet.

We found weapons in the royal armory and armed ourselves with longswords, daggers and grawns. Then we went to hunt for Marga.

She was asleep on a pile of puffy cushions before a large mirror. Three slavewomen were beside her, evidently interrupted while combing her hair. Marga wore the white leather of Avokoom royalty about her middle and on her tiny feet. I bent and lifted her into a fireman's hitch and followed Ghan Karr as he led the way to the throneroom.

Ulma Avga had fallen off the golden stool in his slumber. He lay breathing heavily, his handsome body and white leather harness oddly lifeless. I bent above him, unfastened the jeweled scabbard with the royal longsword in it, and while Ghan Karr fidgeted nervously, urging me in hoarse whispers to hurry, I drew out the blade and studied it.

I am considered an expert on swords in Kharthol. This steel thing the dagan carried at his hip was a toy, no more. It was clearly inferior to the simple sword already at my hip. I chained the jeweled scabbard to my side and slid the ordinary sword into it. I chained the cheap scabbard and royal sword beside Ulmu Avga.

Ghan Karr cried out, "Don't you want it?"

"It isn't any good," I told him.

"You won't mind if I take it?" he wondered.

I shrugged. "Suit yourself, but it'll betray you in a fight."

He bent and lifted the sword, eyes gleaming with unchecked greed. "But the jewels in its hilt. Look at them!"

"Take the gems but leave the blade."

"No," he exclaimed, shaking his head. "I shall take the whole thing." He slid the royal sword into the scabbard at his side. "At least I've made a profit from my experiences here."

He turned and trotted toward the royal kitchens where he filled a big sack with food. Then we moved on toward the stables where the oomfors were kept.

Ghan Karr selected three of the strongest birds to be our

THIEF OF LLARN

mounts. We drew them to the elevator and my finger pressed the up stud. Moments later we were on the surface, with the rocks all around us.

In the fresh clean air of Llarn, Marga recovered quickly. She moaned, stretched in my arms that held her, and opened her eyes. Her surprise was almost humorous. She gaped and shook her head and her red tongue ran around her lips.

"How did you do it?" she wondered.

I simply shrugged but Ghan Karr was profuse in his praise. "Uthian alone could have learned the secrets of the atmosphere plant and turned them to his advantage. He put everyone to sleep. We walked in and carried you out without a hitch."

Marga looked dubious. "Uthian should have brought along a few jewels as a reward for his own cleverness," she commented.

I laughed. "I brought my jewel," I told her, and put a finger between her breasts. Few women can resist flattery. Marga smiled brightly at my comment, and shrugged her smooth shoulders when I showed her the scabbard.

"I have enough jewels to make us all rich," she laughed, and gestured at her white harness which was heavy with pale diamonds and rich red rubies. In her pouch, against a possible escape, she had placed a handful of large emeralds.

She would have divided them between us, except that we had no time for such nonsense. I did not know how long my chemicals would last. We had to be away before the Avokooms woke and came searching for us.

We mounted and kicked the oomfors into motion. They ran along the ground with long strides, then spread their wings and took off. They were not carrying the light men of Avokoom but normal human beings, and their loads were almost too much for them. They flew low to the ground, and far too slowly to please me. Fast riders from Avuvava could overtake us in a matter of hours.

I called a halt after three hours of flying and we rested the birds for an entire kor. Then we flew again, toward a low line of hills that loomed blue in the distance.

THIEF OF LLARN

There was no pursuit, much to my surprise. Perhaps the Avokoom forgot that we were heavier than they and scanned only the upper reaches of the air forgetting to look close to the ground where we were flying. Or perhaps the chemicals lasted longer than I thought, and they were still sound asleep in their tiny world.

We flew over the mountains, seeing a vast flatland unroll before us between the hills. These were the ancient lands of Pathol, Marga told me while we rested the oomfors. In days gone by, Pathol had been a distant power, far from Kharthol, far from Meradion. Today little remains of its former glories except the ruined cities which had formed the bulwark of its might.

Twice we passed over such cities on our long flight toward Korok. Once we saw movement where creatures with red fur on their bodies growled and ran like apes among the buildings and jumped up and down on the rooftops.

Those were the red apes of Pathol, Ghan Karr called. Theory had it that they were once humans, long ago, and had reverted to savagery after The War, as the blue apes had evolved into the blue men of Azunn. I was glad we were riding the oomfors. I would not have liked to be on foot and at the mercy of those hideous things.

We flew on, and now the land began to change. No longer was it barren, but instead lush grasses grew below. We could make out the body of an occasional aporad that lifted its tawny feline head to snarl at us for interrupting its hunt and permitting its prey—always a spotted stang of the antelope family—to make its escape.

A dozen times had we rested the oomfors, and twice had we slept, when we came at last to a plateau rising upward from the surrounding grasslands. Its cliffsides were steep, rocky. There seemed to be no trails leading down onto the wide expanse of veld off that sheer escarpment.

Miles beyond its sheer southern boundary, the plateau leveled off into the lush grasslands which form much of the surface of Llarn. There was no cliff; apparently at some remote moment in time there had been a planetary crust slip-

THIEF OF LLARN

page along a fault which resulted in the great escarpment. To the north, where we flew, there was no such line of separation.

We rested the oomfors and slept, after eating the last of the food which Ghan Karr had brought from the royal kitchens in a cloth sack. From now on we would have to hunt for food.

It was dawn when we woke. The world was still around us, and a faint mist was rising from the ground. I would have given my share of the emeralds in Marga's pouch for a thick bork steak, but all I could do was tighten my belt and hope that we would soon come in sight of the walls of Korok.

We had been flying little more than a full kor when we sighted the yuuls. They were riding giant drals, drals especially bred for strength to hold the seven foot height and three hundred pul weight of each yuul. These legendary enemies of the blue men of Azunn possess smooth yellow skins which are almost completely hairless. Only a crest of black hair on the tops of their heads prevent the yuul from being absolutely bald.

They were out hunting the sporad, a beast like an earth tiger, the meat of which they considered a great delicacy. But they soon turned from their original pursuit to follow us. Their thin-barreled guns lifted and red lines stabbed outward, with us as their target.

Like most Llarnians, I possessed a kranth, a medallion which absorbs the destructive power of the red needle beams of the grawn and the longer ray-rifles. Marga and Ghan Karr also wore them but the oomfors did not. And so when the yuul saw their fire did not fell the riders, they turned their arms upon the mounts.

The oomfor carrying Marga was the first to be cut in half by the thin red rays. Marga screamed and fell. I dug toes into my own oomfor, reached out to catch the girl. At the same time, I uttered the soft cry which was its signal to land.

"Ghan Karr—flee if you can," I yelled.

THIEF OF LLARN

The brave fellow would not hear of it. He brought his own oomfor down close to mine and yanked out his long-sword, rushing between the oncoming yuuls and us.

I leaped from my mount and with my own sword in hand, raced to stand beside him. I remembered that day when I had rescued Ulazza of the Azunn from warriors such as these. The odds then had been less than those which faced us now, for more than twenty of the smooth-skinned giants were galloping toward us on their drals.

Three yuuls dropped to the ground and ran to meet us. I met two of them, turning them from Ghan Karr. My blade flew like a shuttlecock back and forth, flashing in the brightness of Alfan. One went down with his throat ripped away. Next moment the second was dying from a thrust through his chest. Almost at the same moment, Ghan Karr dispatched his own foe.

Marga was on her feet, dagger in hand and running to join us. I tried to push her behind me, but she would have none of it.

"I am your comrade, Uthian. It is an honor to stand beside you and help fight your foes—who are my foes, also!"

The women of Llarn are brave as well as beautiful. So too would my Tuarra have acted in a like situation. The yuuls were all around us now, coming from front and side and rear. They looked upon us as dead men—unless they meant to take us prisoners.

I fought them as I had fought but a few times before on this planet where fighting to the death is a way of life. My blade was a part of my body as it dipped and slashed. Covered with blood, it grew even redder as time became an eternity of parry and thrust, kill and be wounded.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Ghan Karr fighting desperately against the onslaught of three yuuls. His tanned skin was red with blood. He was laboring—and finding to his horror that the royal blade with all its jewels was not the weapon for a battle such as this. It bent; it remained in that position and it sang with warning. Then it snapped apart

THIEF OF LLARN

so that his hand remained about the hilt with only a few inches of blunt steel left to his blade.

He sought to defend himself, but it was a hopeless task. Three blades drove into his flesh so that he stood a moment, rigid and quivering, sighing softly as the life went out of him. He fell facedown and never moved again.

Poor Ghan Karr! His greed had cost his life.

To one side of me I heard Marga cry out as she drove her dagger deep into a yellow skin seconds before she was swung up into strong arms that crushed her against a massive chest.

I fought to reach her, but a hedge of blades stood between us. I parried those swords and where openings appeared, I drove in for the kill. Steel clanged in melody as I battled with untiring energy. I saw respect dawn in the eyes of these giants, respect that changed soon enough to fear as my longsword swept them before me, one after the other.

I might have rescued Marga even against the odds I faced except that one of the yuuls whom I had felled with a sword-slash on his thigh rose up on a leg behind me and brought the hilt of his blade down across the back of my head.

I staggered and collapsed as the world reeled wildly. I lay inert in the bloodied grasses, expecting the thrust which would end my life. I thought of Tuarra; I remembered the stolen verdals and knew that I had failed in my mission. Bitterness was a taste on my tongue.

Hands lifted me. In their whistling speech, the yuuls assured themselves that they had captured the greatest fighting man on Llarn. They surveyed me, after standing me on my feet, with obvious satisfaction.

I was bleeding from more than a score of wounds. None of them was mortal, but they were painful and blood streamed down my chest and arms in a steady flow. Marga moaned when she saw me and quivered with despair. I tried to grin at her.

The yuuls did not kill me. Instead they smeared my skin with a salve after wiping off the blood, and bandaged

THIEF OF LLARN

me. I was their living trophy, their whistling speech told me.

All Llarn speaks one tongue. This too, is a result of The War. Those remnants of humanity who were left alive found that they had to cooperate and speak the same language, in their battle for existence. Philologists have informed me that the Llarn language today is a hodgepodge of words from more than twenty different civilizations. It is a *lingua Franca* which has become the dominant speech of the planet after so many centuries of use.

Yet the yuul have found a way to speak that tongue which is almost foreign to the ear. Their speech is a series of whistles, shrill or soft, and it takes a keen ear to follow those gradations and read familiar words out of them.

Marga and I were led to striped drals and told to mount. More than fifteen dead yuuls lay in the grasslands beside the fallen body of Ghan Karr. The wounded had been salved and bandaged as had I. In a little while they would be none the worse for their encounter with my blade.

Tears ran down her cheeks as Marga looked back at her fellow thief. I had grown to like Ghan Karr myself. He was a thief, true, but he was also a man. He might have flown away on his oomfor. He chose to land with us and risk death.

The yuuls went rapidly across the grasslands. At first the motion of the galloping animals tortured my wounds, but as the salve took affect, only a mildly painful reminder was left. Soon I grew used to the movement and began taking an interest in my surroundings.

The city of Traklin was the homeland heart of the giant people. Long ago it had been part of the great empire of Pullavamar which had allied itself with Kharthol against Meradion and Loth. A fleet from Loth had destroyed Traklin. Now its ruins knew only the footsteps of the yellow yuul.

We were a full day's ride from Traklin. The yuul hunters had intended to camp out on the veld in their long hunt of the aporads, but their korbar considered us such notable captives that he had decided to ride on into Traklin itself and deliver us to the dagan who ruled the yellow giants.

As a result, it was after dark when we cantered through the great gate with its stone ornamentation. Statues stood in lifesize reproduction of the ancient horsemen who had been warriors of the Dagens of Pullavamar ages before The War. I stared at trappings in metal which any historian of Kharthol would have given years of his life to see.

Torches and metal lanterns gave the street an eerie glow. Kharthol itself is lighted by tall rods of that strange metal called thyssel which glows perpetually by day and night, but which at night comes into its full use as a means of illuminating the great cities of Llarn. Every home and public building is equipped with strips of this glowing metal. However in this city of Traklin there seemed to be no thyssel at all; I was to learn soon enough what had happened to it.

Marga and I were told to dismount before a great marble building with huge pillars. We were conducted between guards carrying lighted lanterns on poles, through a rotunda and into a huge ball lighted by hundreds of massive candles.

The dagan of the yuul was an eight foot giant. He sat on the edge of a golden throne which had held the rulers of Pullavamar long ago. As he watched us approach he toyed idly with a dagger at his waist. Yumm Lu was a handsome man, as the yellow people go. His crest of thick black hair had been permitted to grow until it fell down his back and across his shoulders like the mane of some wild beast. To add to his ferocious appearance he wore a large cloak of aporad skins.

He looked first at Marga, then at me. As the korbar who had captured us spoke of the long fight I had made against his hunters he listened intently, but I could not read what he was thinking for his face was smooth and bland.

At length the korbar was finished. There was a silence as Yumm Lu shifted position and drew his aporad skin closer about his body. His black eyes studied us closely.

"If these were Azunn," he said softly in an oddly melodious voice, "I would order our torturers to invent a new form of death so that we might punish them as they deserved."

THIEF OF LLARN

I recalled that Ulazza had told me how the yuuls tortured to death every blue man and woman who fell into their hands. They made spectacles of their hideous torments; public holidays were declared so all might watch the Azunn suffer for a day and a night of constant agony. Sometimes, when a particularly brave warrior was captured, his punishment took close to a week before he died.

I felt Marga shudder beside me. Apparently she also knew the customs of the yuuls. Then the dagan was speaking again.

"They are of the Vrann, the golden-skins. At least, the woman is. I do not know what the man with the white skin may be. Nor does it matter. He is a great warrior. He shall not pay the penalty of death by torture. Instead, we shall give the woman and the man—to the Great Yu!"

A low moan ran about the room as the people digested what their ruler had said. Marga looked at me with a question in her eyes. I shrugged, never having heard of this particular god.

The korbar who had captured us said loudly, "Hail to the Great Yu! Hail to Yumm Lu, Dagan of the world!"

And the people answered, "All hail!"

I cried out, "Are we to be sent to the Great Yu without food in our bellies? Without rest for our muscles?"

The korbar whirled on me, hand uplifted. But before the officer could strike, an old man with long, white beard and bald head tottered forward. His hand was raised to halt the blow before it landed.

"The man with the pale skin speaks truth! The Great Yu wants no starving sacrifices. Those who are doomed to die at his hands must be strong, in honor of the god. Is it not written in the Book of Yu-pul, that all who seek to honor Yu must do so with strong bodies and good minds? To ask less would be to demean Him who Lives Forever!"

The korbar glanced at his dagan. Yumm Lu looked uncomfortable, squirming on the edge of his golden throne. At last he nodded.

"It shall be as the High Priest says. We have no wish to do other than honor the Great Yu." He made a wry face, as if

THIEF OF LLARN

this whole matter were distasteful to him. His hand waved, and the korbar turned us away and marched us out the way we had come.

I saw the old priest following us at a slow walk, his pole tapping sharply at each step. When he called out in his shrill voice, the korbar ordered us to halt.

As he caught up to us, the old man glared hard at the officer. "You know the law, Il Tul. Those who are given to the Great Yu must be interrogated. A record of their names is kept in the Book of Yu-pul."

I was voicing my thanks to the old priest for agreeing to feed us, but he waved my thanks aside. "I do it not for you, who are a stranger, but for the greater honor and glory of Yu. Come, follow me. Korbar, come you also."

The old man brought us to a feasting hall where, at his direction, we were soon being fed bork steaks and berry tarts, with mugs of hot wine. Marga and I ate voraciously, watched all the time by the old priest and the korbar. When we were done and the platters had been cleared away, a lesser priest brought in a big tome and placed it upon the table.

The High Priest opened the book. Its first three pages were filled with names and information about the sacrifices that had been made to the Great Yu. As he stared down at the script, the old man made a wry face.

"Few indeed are the victims who have been given to Yu in the past hundred years," he said softly. "Mostly the captives of the yuul have been handed over to the torturers. Not that this is not a fine thing, and proof of the superiority of the yellow ones, but it is not good to neglect Him who Lives Forever."

This was evidently a sore point with the old man, who would have preferred prisoners to be shared and shared alike between public torture and sacrifice to the Great Yu. He pursed his lips quite primly, studying the names on the page before him.

"Who or what is the Great Yu?" I asked.

The old man stared at me coldly. "He is the beginning and

THIEF OF LLARN

the end, the Eternal One Who created Llarn, Who punishes and pleases, Who shall live beyond the end of time."

"Is he a man? A beast?"

A yellow palm slapped the tabletop. "You blaspheme, stranger! The Great Yu is All. He is Wisdom. He is Hate."

I realized suddenly that the old priest had no more notion of what the Great Yu really was than I did myself. I wondered if I felt reassured by this knowledge. Evidently no living yuul had ever seen the Great Yu. They only knew where he lived, and how to feed sacrifices to him.

The sweat came out on my forehead when I thought of Marga and myself stretched on a stone altar and being slashed by sacrificial knives. When I mentioned this to the old man, he chuckled.

"The death of the Great Yu is not such an easy one as that," he informed me. "But enough of your questions. It is time I asked my own. What are your names? Where are you from? Why did you invade the land of the yuul who are not at war with your kind?"

I explained that we were mercenaries in the service of the Dagan of Korok, sent to find rare jewels for his harness. We were on our way to Korok when the yuul hunters intercepted us and brought us here to Traklin.

"We are ready to let bygones be bygones," I told him graciously. "We realize that your men made a mistake when they captured us. I am sure the yuul want peace with Korok."

"The yuul are at war with those who are not yuul. The fact that we captured you is proof that the Dagan of Korok cannot protect those who serve him. This means he is weak. Why, then, should we not want war with a weak enemy?"

His logic was flawless. I looked at Marga who was nervously nibbling at her lip. We had been disarmed and the contents of our pouches taken from us. Without weapons, without the jewels we had taken from Avuvava, the world must have looked very hopeless to the Queen of Thieves.

"The Great Yu hasn't killed us yet," I told her.

THIEF OF LLARN

"But he shall," nodded the old man, rising to his feet. "Come, it is time."

We went after him like dumb beasts. Our sacrifice was to be a gala affair. Throngs of yuuls were on either side of the wide Avenue of Allies staring, waving the striped ribbons which were sacred to the god. We walked slowly because the High Priest himself limped before us, hobbling almost painfully. Besides, we were in no great hurry to rush to our deaths.

Marga pressed against me, shivers running down her body very often. Her gaze was on the people, those tall, almost hairless yellow beings who ruled this far-flung corner of my adopted planet. The yuul were the hereditary enemy of the azunn, the blue people; I almost wished that the azunn would make one of their rare attacks on this yuul stronghold, but it was not to be.

I turned my attention to the city of Traklin which once had been the pride of great Pullavamar, and a world power in the ages before The War. Its architecture was much like that of Kharthol, in the old city which had existed when the four great powers had ruled Llarn. Its slim towers and massy buildings, their sharp corners and ornamentations smoothed and curved by the winds that roamed the planet, closely resembled those of the other ancient cities that dotted the vast land surface of Llarn.

I saw balconies of carved metal similar to balconies I had seen in old Kharthol, in Xuxul, in Zaxeron. The windows—rounded near the rooftops, slim and elongated toward the street levels—were common to the older buildings in Kharthol. Some of the streets, too, those little alleyways thrusting off from the Avenue of Allies, were cobbled as were the streets of dead Paloranis and the ice-sheathed Jakanda.

There was one feature of its architecture that made Traklin different from any other city on Llarn, however. As we neared the square from which several paved roads radiated, I saw a low white building roofed with red tile. Carved into those pillars were representations of some alien being.

THIEF OF LLARN

I noted a scaled body with many legs, clawed and massive. A gigantic head with gaping jaw set with three rows of teeth, topped a thickly chested torso. This was the Great Yu. Without a grawn or a sword, we would be easy victims to such a monster.

And the High Priest had no intention of arming us. Instead, we were led into the dim quiet of the temple interior. A golden statue of the Great Yu stood before us. Around it were set metal tripods where incense burned. I stared at the monster, wondering how large it was in reality. The statue was perhaps eighty feet long and forty feet high at the shoulder. It looked unlike any beast I had ever seen.

I confess my skin crawled when I saw that statue. There could be no escape from such a colossus. Two acolytes came forward carrying narrow strips of glowing metal. I recognized the strips as being made of thyssel. I now understood why we had seen no ribbons of the blue metal in Traklin. All Llarn cities are lighted by this material. Once Traklin had been so lighted, but now its last remaining thyssel was intended only for a religious purpose. I recalled how such glowing strips lighted up Azorra, where the blue people lived, and how by their glow I had found the pits and the khorl, Kav Mork. I reflected glumly that besides their religious significance, the strips were going to let us see exactly how we were going to die.

The thyssel bands were fastened on our ankles and on our wrists. In ordinary light they are simply lengths of pale bluish metal but in darkness they glow with an intense blue light. Usually they are placed along the bases of walls in a building, in broad bands. The light the thyssel gives off creates a soft brightness very soothing to the eyes and which affords almost perfect vision.

We were ready for the god, apparently, for the High Priest made a motion and two young yuuls advanced upon a lever. They put their hands on its grip and tugged downward. Ancient gears creaked and groaned. As if to cover these defects, the other acolytes began a singsong chant.

Marga was sobbing softly, staring up at the grotesque

THIEF OF LLARN

statue towering so high above us. I put an arm about her soft, warm shoulders and drew her against me.

"Courage," I whispered. "The Great Yu hasn't killed us yet."

Then the hairs on the back of my neck stood up as Marga cried out. The statue was alive! It moved slowly, turning.

Ahh, but—the base of the statue moved also! The statue was not some metallic form of life as I first thought. It was part of the stone and metal base which covered up a black hole where I could see a few steps leading downward into darkness. A speartip touched the bronzed skin between my shoulderblades. Another stabbed at Marga, sending her forward.

I went first down into that hole, finding the metal steps of the staircase rusty, creaking with my weight. I held out my hand to Marga, grasped her fingers, drew her after me. One foot and then another we placed on those incredibly old treads, moving downward, ever downward, until all we could see of the temple high above was a faint circle of light where the steps began.

The two armed guards halted, pointed. The staircase gave way to the small mouth of a tunnel in which a man might walk if he were short. I am tall, so I would have to move along bent over. Marga was not tall, yet she would have to incline her head to cross that black passageway. To one side of the tunnel was a hinged door.

"Into the tunnel," a guard snapped.

There was no escape. Sharp spearpoints, which would kill just as surely as any monster, prodded at our backs. I did what the guards wanted me to do: I stepped into the tunnel mouth and drew Marga in after me.

"No," she whimpered. "No! I am afraid!"

Yet she struggled but little. I think her muscles were too weak to support her will. She staggered and slipped into my arms there at the entrance. Her body was softly curved. Life beat strongly in her veins. Marga did not want to die; she wanted to live and love.

Moist lips caught my mouth as the Queen of Thieves

THIEF OF LLARN

strained against me. Behind us, the metal door clanged shut. I heard a dozen bolts slip into place. I kissed Marga, holding her close. I loved Tuarra, yet if by showing Marga some affection I could strengthen her courage, I intended to do so.

She clung to me in a frenzy of desire, heightened and sharpened by our danger. "Love me, Uthian! Love me! We die soon and—"

I closed her lips with my own, hugging her until she quieted. Then I told her, "Uthian loves no one woman, Queen Marga. Oh, there have been a few beauties in my time—I am a man and—"

She lost her fear before her female fury, stamping her foot.

"I don't want to hear a list of your conquests!" she cried. "Spare me that, at least." She was silent a moment, then whispered, "Am I unattractive? Men have told me I am one of the most beautiful women on Llarn."

"As you are," I agreed. "In happier circumstances I would be glad to argue the merits of wedlock with you but right now—"

For answer, she kissed me again. Marga was a woman, with the faculty of women to ignore the obvious and settle upon emotion. We faced death but all she could think of was the seeming slight I did her pride by not falling to my knees before her. Then my attention was caught by an odd circumstance: The black tunnel was oddly red.

The reason became apparent soon enough. The yuul had heated the metal door in some manner so that it gave off an intense heat which made our position extremely uncomfortable. No one could hide here for long, seeking to escape the Great Yu. The red hot door forced us onward.

Leading Marga by the hand, I went on down the tunnel, head and shoulders bent, feeling utterly ridiculous. I could smell the odors of the place, now. The stink of rot and decaying flesh, the fetid smells of the further darkness grew more disgusting with each step we took.

Feeling a draft of air, I put my hand up and outward.

THIEF OF LLARN

We were beyond the tunnel—evidently it was but a few paces long—and were standing in some gigantic cavern without light of any sort. Now the presence of the arm-bands of thyssel made sense. They were to help us see the Great Yu when he came for us. They were delicate bits of psychological torture designed to make our last few moments agonizing ones. I tried to remove them but they were fastened so securely we could not displace them without tools or a great deal of time, neither of which we possessed. And then we heard it.

VII

IT WAS ONLY A faint rustle at first, the scrape of scales against scales, the slither of a massive body dragging over piles of bones and dried slime. Then there was a watery gurgle, the suction of a paw on oozing mud, the splash of a tail falling into a puddle. It was damp here in the cavern. Occasionally I could hear drops of water through the cracks in the limestone.

The thing was a long time coming. Marga and I would have fled, but where was there to flee? The tunnel door still glowed as redly as before. We could feel its heat even now at our backs. Before us the Great Yu was slithering along, his massive bulk flopping as it came.

And then—in the light of our thyssel bands, we could see it. The statue in the temple overhead was accurate, but the reality was far more terrifying. The thing must have been two hundred feet long, eighty feet high with its gigantic head, the jaws of which were gaping wide to swallow. Dark scales, eight claws, scaled legs to each side, a tail that must have been fifty feet long, and white eyes blazing brightly. This was—Yu!

Marga screamed and caught my arm. "Uthian! Oh, gods of Llarn—save me!"

"Run!" I said, and pushed her.

She went fast, slipping and sliding in the puddles and the oozing mud. I waited for the beast, made sure it saw me, then began my own race for life. I saw at once the Great Yu was slow. It moved sluggishly, belatedly turning its head to follow my progress, lazily shifting its body to pursue.

There was no need for speed, of course. In time Marga and I would weaken and fall easy victim to the thing. Yet it seemed that the beast was slower even than confidence

THIEF OF LLARN

might make it. I recalled how long unused the temple steps had been leading down into this cavern, how angry the High Priest had seemed that more captives of yuul had not been offered to its living god.

The Great Yu was old. Old! Its great age was no help. It still lived and moved, and in a few hours it would run down a weakened Marga and myself. As I fled I wondered how the real Uthian would have dealt with such a situation. I had great respect for the man I impersonated. His wits were quick, flawless. No problem ever seemed too hard for him to solve.

I slipped. I went down in soft mud and slid along. The cavern grew darker, almost black. I could not see the Great Yu any longer. I could see only the body of Marga in a distant corner of the cavern outlined by the strips of thyssel on her arms and ankles.

Fool! Fool that I was not to have seen it sooner!

"Drop, Margal I shouted. "Fall and roll around on the cave floor where it's muddy. Cover up the strips of metal that reveal your location."

My own hands were all but obliterated by the thick ooze. No longer did they glow and reveal me to the Great Yu. Yes, this was the reason for the thyssel strips! Their purpose was not to add mental torture to our already dangerous position! The glowing bands were only on our persons to let the Great Yu find us.

The Great Yu was incredibly old. Its eyes were failing. It could not see in the blackness of this pit as once it used to do. It needed the glowing metal bands to find its victims. With mud over the bright strips, it was as blind as we. I wondered if it were also deaf.

I called out softly, "This way, Marga. Take a few steps and listen. See if the monster comes toward the sound of my voice. If it does, we'll have to go it in silence."

I caught the faint footfalls of her feet as she advanced. The Great Yu did not move, and it could not shift its body without making a tremendous racket. I ran toward those footfalls.

THIEF OF LLARN

Within moments, Marga was pressing herself against me, crying and laughing at the same time. "Only Uthian could have done it, only Uthian the Unmatched! Oh, you are clever, clever!"

I did not disabuse her confidence by admitting I had fallen into the mud, and that if it were not for this happenstance the Great Yu might have caught us after all. Let her go on thinking me great. The belief might help me at some later date.

I slipped an arm about her slim waist. "Wait—and listen."

Once the beast moved, as if restless under the darkness and the silence of his ancient cave. I whispered, "I think the thing is dying. It moves slowly. It cannot see; it cannot hear. The gods alone know how long it has been here. Ever since the yuul came, at the least, which was a little after the time of The War."

"That would make it ten thousand years old," she breathed.

As we stood so quietly I grew aware once more of the slight breeze that swept the cavern. I had felt that wind when we first stood at the tunnel mouth, waiting for the beast. It seemed stronger here.

Where the wind blew there would be an opening to the upper world. Pray the gods it was not from some high ceiling, out of our reach. I gripped Marga tighter, drew her along beside me into the teeth of the breeze.

"Where are we going?" she wondered.

"To safety—and to Korok, I hope."

She gurgled disbelief, but she was silent. The Queen of Thieves had admitted the existence of a king thief and was obedient to him.

After a time, I bent above a pool and began to wash the mud off my bands of thyssel. Marga threw a worried glance behind her, then bent to do the same.

"We're far enough away now that even if the Great Yu sees us, we can outrun him," I told her. "Besides, we can always plaster more mud on our arms and legs."

The Great Yu was quiet. If he saw us, he did not or

THIEF OF LLARN

could not pursue. I am certain the beast was almost dead. Its attempt to devour us was perhaps its last physical movement. We had no more to fear from it.

With the help of the glowing metal we could see about us now. Gigantic stalagmites thrust upward from the floor, and slim stalactites studded the high ceiling. We had no idea how large the Yu caverns might be, we could only walk and walk and hope to find an opening somewhere ahead of us.

The cavern was filled with an unreal beauty. Even in our desperate situation I could admire the slimly fluted columns formed where stalagmite and stalactite had come together. Dripstone carvings formed a backdrop to frozen limestone waterfalls and great draperies of calcium caught forever in thick solidity, hung from ceiling cracks and extended to the cave floor. The hues of these formations, revealed in the light from our thyssel bands, were beautiful.

We walked on. Just when hunger was becoming a pain in our middles, we saw the light. It was a tiny glow at first which widened into a circle of brightness. Marga laughed and squeezed my hand and began to run. I followed at her heels.

We raced out into a patch of sunlight which showed a flowing stream of water—and more caverns far beyond it. Marga slid to a stop and shuddered. Above our heads was a large opening through which came the sweet smells of growing grass and fresh air. On either side, the river disappeared into tunnels that might run half the length of the planet. This was, in all probability, the same river we had seen in the polar ice before I had shot the scargan. The river was called Sylosthos, I remembered.

Tears stood in her eyes as Marga turned to me. "I—I thought surely we were safe. This—this is the la-last straw. I ca-can't go another step."

"You might not have to. Look!"

Half hidden in the grasses and the reeds that spanned this tiny section of the river, was a boat. It was slim and long, with two holes for oars on either side. I saw no oars,

THIEF OF LLARN

though I stepped forward to stare down inside the little craft.

Marga gasped, "You aren't thinking of going anywhere in that! Into that hole?" She pointed toward the black, forbidding entrance into which the waters of the Sylosthos swiftly poured.

I shrugged. "What other choice have we? Only the gods know how far the cavern continues on the other side. And we can't go back."

She shivered. "There may be a waterfall, deep underground."

"Then we'll have a quick death."

"I am not so brave as you, Uthian."

The craft was made of light wood, easy to maneuver. I pushed it off the shale until its prow was caught by the strong current. Then I turned to Marga, holding out my free hand.

"Come," I told her. "Here, you will surely die. On the river there is at least a chance for life."

She hesitated, then stepped forward, shrugging. Her eyes touched mine, she tried to smile. Her glance said clearly enough that she was terrified, but if Uthian the Unmatched declared that this was the way to life, then she would ride the boat through the blackness of a dozen rivers beside him.

As she seated herself on the thwart, I pushed the boat into the water. Instantly it was caught as by a wet hand, so swiftly that I was almost yanked free of my handgrip on its moldboard. Then I was swinging into the craft, reaching for the limestone pole I had broken off, fending the craft away from the rocky sides of the tunnel into which we were being swept.

The tunnel was black as pitch. The roaring of the waters was deafening. Faster, always faster went the boat. I stood erect in the prow, my length of limestone ready, but there was no need to use it. The current seemed strongest in the middle of the stream. It kept us away from the walls. There was no way to judge either time or distance. Blackness

THIEF OF LLARN

and the present were all we knew as the boat was swept along at a mad, careening pace.

Once the keel scraped solid rock and I froze, the limestone pole ready to plunge deep and free us. But the current lifted the craft and we went on at that headlong glide.

Far ahead we saw daylight, suddenly. Marga cried out in delight as the boat shot from the tunnel and out onto a broad waterway twisting through a lushly grassed meadowland. We were far away from Traklin, here. I labored with the limestone pole, thrusting deep until I drove the boat out of the fierce waters in the middle of the river and toward the shallows near the banks.

I leaped out, drew Marga after me. She was crying and laughing, all at once, throwing herself into my arms, kissing me and babbling that only Uthian could have done it. I did not want to discourage her pleasure, but we were far from being safe. We were unarmed, without a compass; we could be anywhere on the surface. And the surface of Llarn is not a pleasant place to be, at times.

Yet we were in sunlight, out of the blackness of the caves and tunnel.

We began walking toward what I assumed was the north. Perhaps half a mile we went, when Marga came to a stop.

"Uthian—in the air! A flier!"

The crew of a four man patrol ship had seen us, was turning in our direction. The device at its prow was not known to me, but Marga began to laugh and clap her hands.

"It's from Korok," she exclaimed, turning to me, her red hair blowing in the wind. Her lips were open in laughter, her green eyes sparkled with delight.

"Now we are truly safe, Uthian. Pthorok Tok will be glad to see us, to reward us when we have told our tale."

"I am more concerned with Evran Dekk than I am with the dagan of Korok," I growled.

The flier lowered to ten feet above the ground. A man in the rich uniform of an olkar—the commander of a flier—

THIEF OF LLARN

waved a hand. His voice carried clearly through the air.

"Evran Dekk said you were dead! He will be very surprised to see you."

"Indeed he will," I nodded grimly.

The flier settled with a bump. The korbar and his three troopers came out to stare at us. Their fighting kilts and leather harnesses were of delicate pastel shades, unlike the more martial colors of other Llarnian warriors. Under their awed gaze I felt ill at ease.

One of the troopers asked, "Are you really immortal? Are you truly Uthian?"

I grinned and nodded. Whatever doubts they may have had were dispelled by Marga who began singing my praises as the one who had actually stolen the great verdal of Zaxeron. The olkar nodded excitedly.

"Evran Dekk said it was so," he agreed, "but no one actually believed him."

Marga frowned. "Odd that he should give Uthian the credit. I should imagine he would have claimed the deed as his own."

The men grinned wildly. One of them said, "He did so—until our dagan began to question him as to how he had stolen it. Evran Dekk told so many lies, so many contradictory stories that Pthorok Tok soon realized he was not the actual thief. Then the real story came out."

The olkar added, "Pthorok Tok will be happy to see you. He wants to reward you for your prowess."

A common trooper snickered. It was such an odd sound that I glanced at him wonderingly. But I had no time to question his sly mirth. Marga was catching me by the hand and leading me toward the flier.

Later we were to learn that we had landed eleven hundred erns from Korok. The river Sylosthos travels along through the great Korok meadowland for close to five thousand earth miles before slanting downward and disappearing from view within the planet. Its waters fertilized these vast plains, making them among the most fruitful on all Llarn.

We circled over the river, then headed west and north-

THIEF OF LLARN

ward. Within an hour, the walls of Korok rose upward from the land. The buildings were arranged in pleasing checkered designs. The people of Korok vied with one another in the patterns their builders worked out with colored blocks, and the overall effect was extremely pleasing to the eye.

I noticed that one tower alone was built all of black basalt. The korbar noted my interest and said, "That is the Tower of Ten Thousand Deaths, where enemies of the dagan are executed." He hesitated, then added, "There are actually ten thousand ways to kill a man in that tower. It is Korok's pride."

Beyond the city wall, and forming a part of it, were lesser walls so that the city itself sprawled out over a vast tract of land. These newer walls held the expanding population of Korok, which was growing by leaps and bounds.

"The yuul to the south used to decimate our ranks quite regularly," one of the troopers informed me. "But in our last five battles we have smashed those savages so that they no longer send their armies against us. As a result, there are more and more people to house."

"You must have a fine weapon if you can defeat the yuul in battle," I told him, and he nodded with intense satisfaction.

"We do. We do, indeed—thanks to Pthorok Tok."

"What is this weapon?"

"It is a secret. Even I who am a soldier do not know how it works. Only the scientists of Pthorok Tok have used it as far as I know."

The flier was settling down on one of the large, flat landing decks raised close to the walls of the city. In Kharthol there are many such structures, but I noted that in Korok there were only four. From the landing strip we would be taken to the palaces by wheeled vehicles that resembled big carts with fat tires.

Marga was exultant. Pthorok Tok would make us rich. We would leave Korok with our wealth; she would return

THIEF OF LLARN

to the city of her birth, and I would come with her. She had it all worked out.

I had not the heart to tell her that I must remain in Korok and learn the secret of why Pthorok Tok was paying fortunes for the verdals the thieves of Llarn were stealing for him. She would learn it soon enough.

Korok was a gay city. Brightly colored ribbons fluttered from the metal balconies; festoons of flowers hung here and there, and everywhere women wore rainbow-tinted garments, light as gossamer, and showed the shapeliness of their bodies. The men were muscular and handsome and despite the pastel tints of their kilts and the tinted leather of their harnesses, they struck me as being good fighting men. If the yuul were the enemy, they would have to be good fighters or they would not have survived as a people.

The palace itself was built of black basalt and white sandstone blocks, some of which were studded with jewels so that as the sunlight caught them, its walls and towers gleamed with coruscating colors. Small gardens set with fountains and bedecked with huge flowers of many hues added to the festiveness of the great building. I found myself admiring the cultural tastes of these people.

Then the wheeled cart was braked to a halt. The korbar who had found us had made himself our guide. Probably he thought to wrest an award from his dagan for the service he had done all Korok. He took us on a tour of the gardens, pointing out the huge blossoms of the royal saith, and the blue petals of the rare efrath. The Korok were an agricultural people, based upon the extraordinary irrigation which nature had furnished their fields by way of the subterranean river and its myriad off-shoots. Those waterways flowed beneath their land, they fed it, they made it lush and fertile.

On Llarn, only a people with an almost inexhaustable water supply could waste the precious fluid on such flowers. Understanding came to me that in their very dress, in their mannerisms and by their almost carefree attitudes toward life and death, the people of Korok aped the flowers which they

THIEF OF LLARN

raised so carefully. The women wore thin silks tinted as the saith and the efrath, the yellow doy and the purple pakonna, through which the beauty of their own bodies might be glimpsed. The men too, in their kilts and leather gear, sought to emulate the plants which had come close to dominating their lives.

Marga whispered, "I feel so dowdy! I'm all stained and grimed with travel. My kilt is filthy; my skin is dirty. Compared to these women I'm like a coloonth weed alongside a royal saith."

I grinned at her. Eternal female! She was on her way to exact her vengeance on Evran Dekk; she was about to be made a rich woman, yet all she thought about was her own good looks. I hugged her.

"In my eyes you are far fairer than those others," I told her, nodding at three women who sat upon the edge of a marble bench and stared at us. They were exquisite creatures. Their hair was tinted many colors and coiffed high upon their heads, cunningly curled to represent petals of the various flowers which their beautifully dyed silks matched. Their bare arms were an alabaster white. I wondered if they ever let the rays of Alfon brown their hides.

"You really think so?" she asked, eyes wide.

She was a pert gamin, with a smudge of dirt at the tip of her nose and a streak of blackness at one side of her chin. If it were not for Tuarra, I might find it in me to love this woman.

"You are a person, those are only imitations of flowers."

The korbar—Nirth Kil—who had been listening to us attentively, shook his head. "Those women represent the very peak of beauty," he said. "Each one is turned out to represent a flower. You can tell what flower they are by merely glancing at them. This is perfection, according to the code of Hoolith Gul."

"And who is Hoolith Gul?"

"Hoolith Gul lived in the reign of Thoron Kor, ten thousand trotarns ago. It was he who created new flowers by interbreeding, and who fashioned the codex by which we

THIEF OF LLARN

of Korok govern our lives: Beauty is all. To imitate beauty is the supreme feat which makes our lives worth living."

Nirth Kil turned and pointed toward the great black Tower of Ten Thousand Deaths. "Oddly enough, it was also Hoolith Gul who built the death tower. For a man who was so much occupied with beauty, it seems strange he should have been interested in death."

"Not so strange. If he really was a genius, he would be interested in many things," I pointed out.

"Perhaps. At any rate, it was Dagan Thoron Kor—who is called The Cruel—who ordered him to bend his mind to such a creation. Thoron Kor liked to slay his enemies—and he had many. But Thoron Kor was also a great worshiper of women and sentencing a man to die and thinking up the manner of his death took too much of his free time. He asked Hoolith Gul to solve this problem for him.

"The Tower of Ten Thousand Deaths was the answer. From it, once a man is sentenced to it, there is no escape. Death comes no man knows how or when—but it always comes. And yet—the tale goes on to tell that Thoron Kor was so pleased with the tower that he decreed Hoolith Gul must never build another thing. He ordered the great genius to be the first victim of the tower."

"Poor devil!" I murmured.

Nirth Kil grinned. "Not so poor, at that. Hoolith Gul is said to have escaped from the tower and to have lived out the rest of his life in retirement—after paying servants to feed Thoron Kor rosebuds lightly sprinkled with an undetectable poison. The son of Thoron Kor was content with being dagan. He had no wish to punish Hoolith Gul. Besides—the great genius had gone into the black tower—and there is no escape from that, eh? Said I not he was a genius?"

"He was indeed. But do you carry this search for beauty over into every facet of your life?"

His hand gestured down at himself. "In our fighting togs, we ape that beauty so we will be reminded of it and fight the harder to return to it. You will have observed, of course, that the very flier upon which you came to Korok was ornate

THIEF OF LLARN

with carvings to simulate the stalks and flower leaves that bloom here in the royal gardens. Other than in war, however, the search for and study of floral beauty occupies all our time."

It was an odd way of life, but if it pleased the people of Korok, I was never one to object. We moved through the gardens and entered the palace by a side archway. Two soldiers in the golden leather of the doy flower were standing rigid on either side of the wide doorway.

Perfumes flooded the corridors and rooms of the palace. Only the delicate fragrance of the pakoona graced those chambers where the dominant color was purple. It was a pleasant conceit, and it did much to lend an ethereal air to the city and its people.

Pthorok Tok awaited us in a small antechamber just beyond his throneroom. The throneroom, Nirth Kil whispered hurriedly, was used only on state occasions. Yet I noted that the portals of the antechamber door were carved and painted to represent the flower called oorthoo which is the only black-petaled plant on Llarn. I thought of the black tower in the city outside, the Tower of Ten Thousand Deaths.

Pthorak Tok was a tall, lean man with sunken cheeks and brilliant black eyes. His thinning black hair was close-cropped so that he seemed almost bald beneath the thin golden circlet he wore on his head. His trappings were encrusted with diamonds, as were his sandals. For a weapon he wore a single dagger in a jeweled sheath.

"Marga," he said pleasantly, and rose to his feet.

He came down the three steps of the dais on which his small golden stool was placed, hands out to catch her fingers and lift them to his lips. From the Queen of Thieves, the Dagan of Korok turned to me.

"And you must be Uthian! Most amazing. Evran Dekk told me you claim to be ten thousand years old."

"The waters of immortality were powerful," I admitted.

His eyes brightened. "Somewhere on Llarn a little of those waters must exist. Were you to make me a present of them, I would not be ungrateful."

THIEF OF LLARN

I shrugged and spread my hands. "Had I any of the liquid, it would be yours. But when Paloranis was destroyed during The War, the formula and any such existing liquids made from it were destroyed along with it. I am sorry."

"It was only a dream I had," he said, and smiled.

He led us to twin chairs placed a little below his golden stool and bade us courteously be seated.

"I have sent for Evran Dekk, who will be most pleased to see you."

"I do not think he will be pleased at all," I said honestly.

Marga explained, as Pthorok Tok shot me a quick look. "Evran Dekk ran off and abandoned us on the polar ice, together with our companion, Ghan Karr."

The dagan goggled in disbelief. "On the polar ice? And you survived? This will make a tale! I must hear it. Ah, but—I forget. Evran Dekk will want to hear it also."

There was a sudden silkiness to his voice that made me look hard at the Dagan of Korok. Cruelty lay in those voice tones, in the abrupt narrowing of the sharp eyes and the quirking of his too-thin lips. I had not noticed those traits before, but I began to be uneasy about his man called Pthorok Tok.

"Yes," he went on softly, "we will want to see Evran Dekk when he lays eyes on you—if your tale is true. It should be most interesting."

We waited, and were served a cool wine in which flower petals floated. I was reminded of the medieval cookery on Earth, when men had eaten marigolds with their eggs. These petals had been pickled; they were crisp, tasty, and they added a certain tartness to the wine.

Then footsteps sounded; a voice called out. The doors opened.

For an instant, I thought Evran Dekk would faint. His face went white, his knees buckled, and he opened his mouth as if to cry out. I heard Pthorok Tok chuckle softly from his golden stool.

"Enter, Evran Dekk—enter and make welcome your lost

THIEF OF LLARN

fellows, whom my soldiers found wandering far from Korok. They have told me—how you lost them.”

He was playing with the man, cruelly. His thin lips were twisted and he leaned forward on the edge of his stool, long fingers opening and closing. Suddenly he beckoned the thief to step forward.

“Is your surprise so great you cannot speak? Come, come! Marga is anxious to see you closer, as is Uthian himself.”

Evran Dekk was like a dead man, walking forward. His eyes were enormous, his lips quivered, his body trembled. When he came to stand before the Queen of Thieves, he could not lift his head.

“I—I am happy to see you alive and well, Marga,” he whispered.

“Even thieves have honor, Evran Dekk,” she snapped.

He stammered, “It w-was a m-mistake. There w-was something wrong with the m-motor. It . . .”

“The only thing wrong with the motor was the man who operated it.” I told him. I saw him glance around, and added, “The death of Ghan Karr is upon your head, Evran Dekk. Marga and I won through. He did not.”

Pthorok Tok stirred on his golden stool, gesturing a man to bring a chair so Evram Dekk might also sit. Pleasantly, the dagan said, “I have waited to hear the story of how Queen Marga and Uthian the Unmatched escaped from the polar icecap, but I delayed in order that you too, might hear the tale. Sit you beside them, Evran Dekk.”

The man almost crumpled into the chair that was placed for him. His fingers worked nervously, his tongue came out to run around his quivering lips. From time to time he shivered as might the mouse with whom the cat toyed.

Marga began the tale, and where she faltered, I took it up, watching Evran Dekk all the while. He was ashen with despair. As our recital went on and on, his shoulders slumped until his head was hanging. Perhaps he sensed the fate which would be his.

As Marga related how Korbar Nirth Kil found us, Pthorok Tok clapped his hands. “A brave recital, an incredible

THIEF OF LLARN

story of high adventure. You are both to be congratulated."

"And rewarded," prompted Marga with a smile.

"And rewarded—oh, yes! The reward is perhaps the most important part of it," laughed the dagan. "Uthian stole the great verdal of Zaxeron. Evran Dekk brought it to me with a false tale. So interesting, you thieves."

His black eyes surveyed us as an entymologist might study butterflies impaled upon a needle. I felt a cold chill run down my spine. Suddenly I remembered the warning I had given Marga, long ago. Pthorok Tok would never give her the riches she expected. Not even the dagan of powerful Kharthol could afford to distribute such rewards.

The dagan was speaking again. "I am most interested in learning how you could steal the great verdal when these others failed, Uthian. Explain it to me."

"The ways of Uthian are the ways of Uthian," I told him. "They are secrets which are not to be shared with other men."

Pthorok Tok smiled coldly. "I could torture the knowledge from you—but such would not be the way of a grateful dagan. Keep your secrets, Uthian. I respect them."

From me he turned to Evran Dekk. "As for the traitor, be assured also that I respect the laws of the Thieves' Guild, which say treachery must be paid for by a loss of life. Your life, Evran Dekk. I hereby sentence you to die in the Tower of Ten Thousand Deaths on the third kor following sunrise tomorrow morning."

Evran Dekk nodded heavily.

The dagan of Korok turned his face toward us. "What recompense can I make that will sufficiently repay you for all you have done in the interests of Pthorok Tok? The hunger, the thirst, the cold, the dangers which beset you on every side almost every moment of your journey—there are no riches worthy of the deed!

"Yet we shall do what we may. Nirth Kill!"

The korbar entered the audience room from the hallway, saluting and standing rigid. His dagan nodded at him pleasantly.

THIEF OF LLARN

“You too shall be rewarded for your deed in bringing these guests safely to my palace, Korbar. For now, take them to the palace apartments that have been prepared for them.”

Pthorok Tok came to his feet, clapping his palms together. Our audience was at an end.

VIII

AS THE wood doors of our apartments swung wide, Marga uttered a cry of pure delight. The room into which she ran was large and its walls were hung with rare, heavy tapestries. The furniture was massive and highly polished, and the rug beneath her feet was costly. Yet it was none of these that brought that cry from her lips.

Facing us, arranged in a semi-circle almost in the center of the room, lay half a dozen wooden chests. The lids of each had been thrown back to reveal their contents. In one I saw great golden coins, newly minted to judge by their brightness; in another I saw huge diamonds; in a third there were red rubies; in the fourth and fifth, more golden coins. The sixth chest displayed ropes of golden filigree work carved and fitted together by master artisans. It was a fortune that might buy half of Kharthol.

I stared, not quite believing what I saw. Marga was on her knees, burying her hands deep in rubies and diamonds turning her laughing, flushed face to me, chiding me for my suspicions.

"You said he would not pay! You said he would not pay! Admit how wrong you were, Uthian. Yes, a great thief you are—the most famous of us all—but you do not know your dagans. Pthorok Tok is a man of his word. You see?"

I saw. I came to stand and look down into those chests that held the ransom of a dozen dagans. I brought out a diamond the size of an egg and studied it. It was a real jewel, fabulously perfect, blue-white and glistening in the light from the torches on the wall. This jewel alone would be almost enough reward for any deed.

"It cannot be," I whispered.

"Silly, silly Uthian," Marga laughed.

THIEF OF LLARN

She ran to a table where a silver ewer held chilled wine. She poured wine into two silver cups shaped to represent an open flower. Carrying them back to me, she put one into my fist and raised her own cup high.

"Drink to our success, Uthian! Drink deep!"

I shrugged and drank. Tomorrow would be time enough in which to learn how Pthorok Tok could be so generous. Perhaps his forebears had looted the ancient ruins of Loth and Pathol in forgotten forays some time after The War. Only the treasure of these fabled cities could account for such wealth. Then another thought struck me!

"If Pthorok Tok can be so generous—why does he want the verdals? Marga, why do you think he wants them?"

"I don't know! I don't care! We're rich, Uthian—rich, rich, rich!" She went dancing about the room, tossing rubies and diamonds and great golden coins high so that jewels and money rained down on her and then went rolling and bounding across the carpeted floor.

She sank to her knees and buried her hands in the chest that held the golden torks. She smoothed her cheek over the coins, crooning to herself, kneeling there. I stood and watched her, trying to imagine why those verdals were so important that the Dagan of Korok would give away such wealth to get them. I could find no answer to the riddle.

I leaned forward to ask Marga if she could not think of some reason why the verdals might be so necessary to Pthorok Tok. It was then I noticed Marga had not moved her cheek from the golden coins. She still knelt there, wrist deep in the treasure.

"Poor girl," I said softly.

Marga was sound asleep. Well, I was not surprised. She had been through a lot. I took a step to pick her up and carry her to the big bed. I lost my balance and fell down on the soft carpet.

When I sought to rise, I found that I could not move a muscle. Only my brain was working. It told me that the wine we had swallowed was drugged. Or poisoned. I tried

THIEF OF LLARN

to wiggle, to force my muscles to obey my brain. They would not. It was as if they did not exist.

After a while, even my brain slept.

I woke to the touch of fingers on my forehead. Marga was bent above me, tears running down her cheeks. My head was pillowed on her thighs. I propped myself on an elbow and stared around me. This was not the lavishly furnished bedchamber where the six chests of jewels and coins had rested. This room was starkly outfitted with a few plain chairs, a table, and several cots pushed against the white, unpainted walls.

Then I saw Evran Dekk. He sat on one of the chairs, slumped, head hanging. The breath caught in my throat as I sat up. I did not need to ask the question trembling on my lips. The tears staining Marga's cheeks were all the answer I needed.

We were locked in the Tower of Ten Thousand Deaths.

"You were right," Marga wailed. "It was a hoax—a big joke and I fell for it."

I got to my feet and walked around the room. There were no windows out of which a man might look for the last time on the world he knew. There were only the four stone walls and the plain furnishings of the room.

"Ten thousand ways for a man to die," I murmured. "Are there really so many?"

"Oh, yes," nodded Evran Dekk. "There are. I saw a list of them once. I never thought one of them might be—my own way to die."

I looked at him. "You seem to be the expert on death." When he flushed, I went on, "What are some of these ways?"

"By suffocation when the air is pumped out of the chamber." He pointed to small metal grilles set into the ceiling. "By a long list of different poisonous gases, some of which are painless, some of which are agonizing. By pressing, for the ceiling is geared to lower so as to touch the floor." He shivered. "That must be a particularly loathsome way to die."

THIEF OF LLARN

Evran Dekk shrugged. "There are many, many more. What good does it do to dwell on them?"

"How long a time do we have left?"

"It varies. An hour. Three days. No man knows."

"Pthorok Tok must know," I pointed out.

"No. Even the dagan, once the controls are set, cannot interfere with them. Somewhere in the basement of the tower is the machinery and the controls which govern which one of ten thousand deaths is to be ours. These controls are set, then the tower is untouched for a week. At the end of that time, the caretakers enter and—clean it up."

"They are very efficient," I commented.

"The walls slide back, here and there"—Evran Dekk continued as if compelled to speak about the manner of his passing—"to permit generators to shoot bolts of lightning back and forth, killing everyone in their path. Men can enter to strangle us, or slay us with swords or axes." He added glumly, "The genius who designed this tower thought of everything."

"Yes, Hoolith Gul was a great man," I nodded.

A thought touched my mind. Legend said that Hoolith Gul had escaped this death tower. Being a genius, and knowing the fickle ways of dagans, he might well have built into his tower a means of escape. Hoolith Gul had lived in the reign of Thoron Kor, a few hundred years before The War. Korok, like Kharthol, was a very ancient metropolis.

In parts of the Old City of Kharthol and in the palace itself, there are secret passageways built throughout every large building. In one such passageway, the khorl, Kav Mork had abducted Tuarra, I remembered. I had followed and slain him, but what had interested me at the moment was the fact of the secret passageway. Hoolith Gul may have placed such a hidden corridor adjacent to this death chamber.

My heart pounded excitedly as I walked around the stone walls, scanning them, running my fingertips over the rough surfaces of the stone blocks. Marga and Evran Dekk were too sunk in their misery to pay attention to me. Were the walls of wood, I could have tapped them for hollow sounds

THIEF OF LLARN

to indicate the location of the passageway; but they were of stone and hard.

I remembered the mark that had been on the secret door in the Khartholian palace out of which the khorl had stolen Tuarra. There would be a similar mark on these walls, surely. I looked hard at those blank stone blocks, carefully evaluating them.

At shoulder height, there were carved ornaments on the walls, a little scroll of tiny flowers, leaves and vines interwoven in a pattern that went around the room. The flowers were carved in the shape of the black oorthoo, that poisonous plant which is a symbol of death on Llarn. A most appropriate decoration for a chamber such as this! I walked slowly around the room, scanning each flower, each leaf, each twisted vine-stalk. I reasoned that Hoolith Gul would take no chances on escape, especially if his death were to be a fast one. He must be able to run to the flower that was the key to safety and know it instantly.

Ah, yes! Here. A flower was turned sideways. Only a man who hunted for it would recognize it for what it was, so cunningly was it carved to represent the others. Perhaps Hoolith Gul had carved it himself, or had employed a trusted artisan to do it. Or he might have known his secret would be safe, with Thoron Kor for a ruler—the dagan would have ordered the common man who built the tower and who knew its secrets, slain upon its completion.

I turned back to Marga and Evran Dekk.

“Once you doubted my identity, Evran Dekk,” I said.

He lifted his head and stared at me. I felt compassion for him, there was so much misery in his eyes. “Yes, I did doubt you. No man can live forever.”

“Suppose I were to tell you that I—Uthian the Unmatched—can save your life? Would you then doubt me?”

Marga gave a soft cry and leaped to her feet, hands clenched at her thighs as she stared wildly at me. Evran Dekk echoed her voice, coming off his bench.

“Can you—ah, but why ask?” he blurted. “There is no escape from the Tower of Ten Thousand Deaths!”

THIEF OF LLARN

I could not resist the temptation to taunt him. After all, I was playing the part of Uthian. This would be what Uthian himself would do, were he standing in my sandals.

"No man keeps Uthian against his will," I said haughtily.

He came off the bench now to stand fully erect as Marga ran to me and hurled herself against my front, clinging to me, pressing her softness to my body, staring up at me with wide, disbelieving eyes. Twice she tried to speak before words came to her lips.

"If you tease us, Uthian," she whispered, "you—"

I said, "Before we leave, you must promise Uthian one thing!"

Evran Dekk laughed harshly. "I would promise to die for you—after I slay Pthorok Tok."

"Good. It is what I would hear. I ask your loyalty—against the Dagan of Korok. I must learn the secret of the verdals. I want to know why he wants them, what they will do for him. Both of you must aid me in this matter, if you would live."

"Why are we wasting time?" Marga wailed.

"You have our promise," the man barked. "We are your slaves, the two of us. Slay Pthorok Tok, learn his secret—who cares? We will obey you to the death! Is it enough?"

My hand turned the carved flower. I was worried, I admit. For years, no man had sought escape by this secret route. The machinery which opened the hidden doorway might be rusted beyond use. In which case, I should appear a fool.

Ah, but my faith in Hoolith Gul was justified. The flower turned smoothly and a moment later a narrow section of the wall slid open. Marga screamed in her relief and ran past me into the dark passageway. Evran Dekk stood motionless, staring at that opening.

"I am your slave indeed, Uthian. Well do men name you the Unmatched! You have no peer on Llarn."

He advanced to the doorway and entered it. I followed him, seeking along the wall—which I noticed was illumined by thin bands of blue thyssel—until I found a tiny lever.

THIEF OF LLARN

I threw it over and the doorway slipped back into place.

When the caretakers came to clean the death chamber, they would find it empty. With a sigh of relief, I turned to my companions, both of whom were regarding me in awe.

"How did you know?" she breathed.

"Only Uthian knows the ways of Uthian," I grinned.

"You are no man," Everan Dekk said somberly. "You are a god. And as a god I shall obey you. What do you want me to do?"

"First, we must see where this passageway leads."

I went ahead, with Marga on my heels and Evran Dekk not far behind me. The thin strips of blue metal showed us the narrow stairs that circled the tower on the inside. We followed them all the way to the basement, where a sliding door similar to the one in the death chamber opened out onto a large room filled with relay systems and control panels built into the walls. It was these that set the time and manner of our deaths.

We traced the intricate arrangement of signs and levers until we came to the mechanism which selected the pattern of our own deaths. With a shudder, I realized that we were to have died by the entrance of a gigantic robot which was to have torn us to death, limb from limb, with its six gigantic metal hands. Marga moaned when I explained how she was to have died.

I searched the relay panel which showed the ten thousand deaths. There was one lever unknown to me. Evran Dekk explained that it stood for utter obliteration under a beam of intolerable heat. There would be nothing left but charred stone once that ray began its work. Bodies, furniture, everything but the walls, floor and ceiling would be wiped out of existence.

"Excellent," I nodded, and pulled the lever for the heat ray.

When Marga looked at me inquiringly, I explained, "When the caretakers come, they will find nothing. They will assume that the heat ray burned us to death, destroying all

THIEF OF LLARN

traces. Eh? They will never know we escaped until it's time to strike at Pthorok Tok."

Evran Dekk chuckled grimly, "By Kromm, you look ahead, Uthian!"

"How can we get out of the tower?" Marga wondered.

I hoped by the same way Hoolith Gul did when Thoron Kor had him imprisoned. Certainly Hoolith Gul could not have gone walking out upon the streets of Korok. There must be another secret passageway, maybe a tunnel leading under a sector of the city into the house which once had belonged to Hoolith Gul.

I searched the chamber and at last, close beside the street doorway, found a tiny twisted flower which was one of many that made an ornamentation around the door. I turned it and part of the wall slid back. Marga went through and after her, Evran Dekk. I paused to study the mechanism key so I could shut it behind us.

Then we moved along a narrow little tunnel lighted by thin ribbons of thyssel until we came to a staircase leading upward. I pushed past my companions to take the lead. Eventually the stairs ended, and I found myself staring at a blank wall. There should be a door here! Frantically my fingers fumbled across the stone walls.

Marga asked, "What's wrong?"

I was opening my lips to tell her when a thought stopped me. Of course! Hoolith Gul would not be so stupid as to put a door which anyone might open. Somewhere around the landing there must be a mechanism lever to open yet another sliding panel.

In time, I found it and pushed it sideways. Almost silently the wall swung inward and we stared out at a room thick with dust, with torn draperies, with carpets shredded where they had served as the nesting place of sleeths. A sleeth is a rat-like rodent of Llarn, about the size of an earth wild-cat, though I have known a few of them to grow as large as tigers. Usually in great cities these beasts are hunted down and slain without mercy. To my knowledge, there were no sleeths in Kharthol. Perhaps the inhabitants of Korok

THIEF OF LLARN

believed there were no sleeths in their city, either. Or perhaps the sleeths had nested here long, long ago, when this room had been the sleeping chamber of Hoolith Gul.

The great buildings on Llarn, especially the ancient ones, were often joined together in a sort of vast apartment house system. There are unexplored sections of the Khartholian palace, I know, for I have spent many fascinating hours charting them, adding to the knowledge of the city architects. We were in a portion of the palace which once had been the home of Hoolith Gul.

I did not learn this at once, only afterwards. At the moment I was mainly concerned with finding our way to the palace. We walked through the dusty room, out into a corridor hung with webbed streamers from a Llarnian spider. Pushing through the webs we came to a doorway thick with gossamer strands.

The door opened into another hall. Everywhere was dust and spidery webs. No one had set foot in these apartments for centuries. After walking about an hour, we came to a door that refused to open to our tugs.

We could break the door down, but this would mean making noise. And we did not know where we might be, by this time. We listened, holding our breaths, yet we heard no sounds by which to judge our location.

Evran Dekk pushed me aside. He opened his shirt, disclosing a bit of tape fastened to his middle. He grinned as he yanked it off. Fastened to the inside of the tape were a number of small tools. A jimmy, a bolt cutter, a hacksaw, a chisel, they were all fitted to his fingers.

"They didn't bother to search me thoroughly when they led me to the tower," he chuckled. "They went through my clothes and were content."

He knelt and worked on the door with a steel bar. A moment went by, then we heard the faint click. Evran Dekk turned the knob, yet still the door refused to open. He put his eye to the keyhole.

"I can't see a thing," he growled. "Apparently they boarded up this door a long time ago."

THIEF OF LLARN

Marga made a wry face. "To open it—assuming we can—means that we'll raise a racket to wake the dead."

"It can't be helped," Evran Dekk muttered.

"At least we can have a look," I said.

We removed the hinge-pins and let the door sag against the near wall. Evran Dekk was right. Long ago, someone had walled up this doorway, forever hiding it in a limbo of the unknown. I tapped on the boarding and found it thin.

Evran Dekk handed me the tiny drill. I used it to make a small opening. Peering through this tiny hole, small enough to remain unseen on the other side. I found myself staring into a laboratory.

There was no one there, as far as I could see. It might be safe to cut through the boarding. For this I used the hacksaw which had been under the tape. With a larger saw, the task would have been easier; with this small one, it took a long time, but at length the job was done. Side by side, Evran Dekk and I pushed the wooden wall back and caught it before it could fall.

We stepped into the chamber and replaced the panel behind us, fitting it back into place as best we could. While Evran Dekk and I were occupied, Marga examined the laboratory.

It was her exclamation of surprise that swung us both around. She stood before a glass case that held close to fifty small green objects of varying size. It needed but a glance to tell us that these were verdals. Here in this hidden laboratory was gathered the wealth of a planet. From Kharthol and from Moorn, from a dozen other cities of Llarn its thieves had looted these gems.

To one side of the glass case that held the verdals was an arrangement of rods and discs set upon a heavy metal base. In the center of the rods and discs, a small metal cup held a tiny sliver of a verdal, scarcely larger than the head of a pin. Understanding came to me slowly. This was a model of a machine—a weapon, in all probability—that functioned by some unknown energy which the machine drew from the green jewel. As a light wave passing through a ruby releases

radiation, so the verdal emitted some probably lethal radiation of its own.

Evran Dekk and Marga were more concerned with the verdals themselves than with this death machine. The thief was reaching into the case and bringing out a gem the size of an egg.

"From what vault did someone take this? It's larger even than the great verdal of Zaxeron."

Marga murmured, "Why does he want them? Why?"

I put my hand on the machine of the rods and discs. "Here is the reason. Whatever its function, it needs a verdal for its power source."

"But what does it do?" Marga wondered.

We would have to learn the answer from Pthorok Tok himself, or from one of his scientists. Since the laboratory was so important to his plans, the Dagan of Korok would have hidden it well. It explained why it was situated here, so close to the long-forgotten building that had been the property of Hoolith Gul ten thousand years ago. Probably this corner of the palace was equally as old, and equally as unknown to most Korokans.

We found the door of the laboratory locked, but to a thief such as Evran Dekk, opening its lock, complicated as it was, was child's play. In a moment the door slid wide on oiled hinges.

A glance out into the corridor beyond the door showed the same dusty, web-hung condition of the rest of Hoolith Gul's mansion. Only the laboratory had been cleaned and restored to its former use. True, the corridor floor showed where many feet had come and gone, but beyond the door it was just as dusty as any hall through which we had come.

"Wait," I said to Evran Dekk as he was about to go out into the corridor. "We must have a plan of action."

He looked at me inquiringly. I was the leader, his eyes told me.

I said thoughtfully, "If Pthorok Tok treated us so shamefully, he must also have treated the other thieves in Korok

THIEF OF LLARN

with that same ingratitude. He would not condemn them all to the tower death. The pits must be full of them."

Marga gasped, understanding coming to her. She whirled on Evran Dekk. "We must free them! There may be more than a hundred of them in the pits."

"Go you, Evran Dekk, to those pits," I told him. "I do not ask if you can find your way. With those tools of yours, you can go anywhere in Korok."

The tall man nodded. "I am a corlth, a master thief. No man or woman shall see me, this I promise. And when I reach the pits beneath the palace, I shall learn where the thieves are jailed and free them."

"Marga," I said to the girl. "Just in case Pthorok Tok has ordered the thieves into the Tower of Ten Thousand Deaths—go you there and make sure the mechanisms do not kill them."

"And you?" she asked.

"I shall remain here until the Dagan of Korok comes with his scientists. I shall observe what they do to the verdal machine. Once I learn how to work it—I shall slay them all."

Her white teeth nibbled at her lower lip. "There may be guards, many guards. In which case you would only be committing suicide by remaining here."

"I think not. Pthorok Tok would keep his secret to himself and to those few scientists whose aid he has enlisted. The less men who know a fact, the better are the chances of its remaining a secret."

Evran Dekk nodded, then moved off down the corridor. I shut the door, then drew Marga toward the loosened panel. "When and if you find any thieves in the many death chambers of the tower, release them and bring them here. With the thieves from the pits, we will make a good fighting force."

"We have no weapons," she pointed out.

"Then we shall have to find some."

I pushed her gently into the opening beyond the loosened panel, then turned my attention to the laboratory itself.

THIEF OF LLARN

The display case that held the verdals was along the far wall, hidden from casual sight by a bank of what appeared to be electronic relays. Unless a man went looking for them, he would not notice that the case was missing.

I bent, lifted the display case that held the verdals, and carried it into the great edifice which once had been the home of Hoolith Gul. I drew the panel behind me, hiding the existence of this forgotten corridor. Still carrying my precious burden, I hunted through what had been the home of the long dead genius of Korok. I found sleeping chambers, dusty and undisturbed for ages. I stumbled through eating rooms where tiny bits of powder showed where food had once been stored. Everywhere in this ancient building there were signs of decay and the tracework of time. And in one small chamber—I found an arsenal.

Long ago on Llarn, before The War, rich men kept armed servants to accompany them along the streets against possible attack by enemies. In the event of war, these small armies were banded together under a supreme commander, an alkar, loaned to the dagan. Following The War, when there were no more rich men, the custom died out. Yet when it had been popular, those merchant princes had maintained great arsenals of weapons with which to arm their followers.

Such an arsenal would contain a sword, if not a grawn. Amid clouds of dust I entered the moderately sized room and studied the scabbards hanging in chains from wall pegs. My fingers itched to wrap themselves about one of the insect-webbed hilts I saw, but most of the hilt-wrappings were too worn by time to withstand long use; they would crumble to powder within moments.

I was reaching for a longsword when my eye caught the glint of brightness made by a strip of thyssel on a length of metal.

Intrigued, I stepped closer to stare down at a long casket set atop an olanth wood chest. Curious, I knelt and put my hands to the lid, pushing up. The lock resisted my every effort, and I am a strong man. I hunted for a dagger, placed its hilt between lock and stud and pried. The metal

THIEF OF LLARN

was rusted almost to powder; after a few twists it flew apart.

I pried up the lid and saw only a roll of what seemed to be cotton batting. Disappointed—I do not know what it was I expected to see—I put a hand on the material and pushed. I felt something hard.

I unwrapped the cotton stuff and stared. A sword with a blade of bluish metal and a hilt fashioned of what appeared to be dull silver set with a red jewel lay inside that white sheathing. The hilt was wrapped with a velvet-like material, red to match the jewel, which seemed strong enough. I put my hand about it, lifting it out.

Two or three moves I made with this blade in my fist, and knew it was one of the most perfectly balanced swords I had ever held. It was light—and I do not know what the bluish metal might be; my own opinion is that it was an alloy of metals created by the Korok genius, Hoolith Gul—and it was strong. Beneath the cotton there was a scabbard to match the hilt, of red velvet and silver set with red jewels.

I chained the scabbard to my harness and slipped the blade inside. I was almost anxious for the troops of Pthorok Tok to find me, so eager was I to test my find in battle.

I was moving back through the corridor when I heard the sounds ahead of me. I froze for an instant, then slipped forward until I came to the doorway leading into the laboratory. Fortunately I had replaced that door after bringing the case of verdals into the house of Hoolith Gul; it was apparently closed from the laboratory, yet afforded me sufficient space to peer into the room itself.

Pthorok Tok was standing in the laboratory, placing a metallic band down over his forehead. Three men were with him, scientists, to judge by their actions as they turned dials and pulled at levers. One of them, the oldest, was patting the small machine with its network of rods and discs.

“We are now ready to attempt our attack, Pthorok Tok,” said the old man. “This model verdavan will demonstrate to you the recently improved power of the weapon your faithful scientists have created at your orders.”

THIEF OF LLARN

One of the younger men brought a metal band to the chief scientist who set it upon his forehead. The younger men also wore bands. The chief scientist put a hand on a long lever which apparently activated the model machine and nodded his head.

"Let the beast come in," he said quietly.

As the hallway door opened I heard the screech of hate even before I saw the black-furred aporad inside a cage, hurling itself at the bars. The cage rattled. The two warriors whose duty it was to draw the cage with that fanged and clawed monster inside it, were ashen with terror. The aporad is a feline—a furred beast between the size of an Earth panther and tiger. The thick fur of it is spotted as is the hide of leopard. A black aporad is an extreme rarity.

Mad hate glowed in the red eyes of the animal as it sought to get at the scientists in the room. It rose up on its hind legs and banged its forepaws against the thin bars that kept it from its prey. Pthorok Tok stood with his back pressed to the wall farthest from the beast. The young scientists were also backing away from that crazed fury in the cage.

Only the old man was calm. He said, "Release it."

A soldier leaned forward, yanked on a rope. One end of the cage, protruding through the doorway and into the room, rose upward. The black aporad came for the chief scientist like a bolt of lightning. The old man threw up a hand.

"Stop," he cried, and the aporad froze in mid-leap, sliding along the tiled floor. Beyond the beast I could see the soldier who had opened the cage also standing as if frozen in the middle of a motion.

Now I noticed the faint green haze in the room, and saw that the old man had thrown over the lever of the model machine. I must have been staring at the aporad when he did it.

"Lie down," the old man murmured.

I found myself squatting, then lying face down on the dusty corridor floor. My blood went cold. I could not help obeying that voice! Some corner of my brain was paralyzed. The model machine, though small, gave any man who knew

THIEF OF LLARN

the secret of the machine, and who wore the protective metal band on his forehead the ability to command not only animal life on Llarn, but human life as well.

I had only to see myself groveling on my belly along the floor and see the two guards lying on their sides, to understand its power. The man who owned the verdavan owned all Llarn!

No wonder Pthorok Tok had summoned the Thieves' Guild to help him. No wonder he had offered such fantastic rewards for the green verdals. The fact that he repaid the thieves with death made no difference to his ultimate plans. He was about to make himself ruler of the planet.

The chief scientist was smiling as he patted the little machine. "Long ago, by an accidental happenstance in my laboratory, I learned that the jewels called verdals possessed the property—when bombarded by a certain frequency of light and sound—of controlling those segments of the brain which govern the motor and sensory nerve cells allied to bodily activity.

"We had a mere chip from a verdal with which to work, as you know. It is that chip now which rests inside the power cup of the verdavan. It is sufficient to operate within certain close limits, as in this room. It cannot affect even the population of Korok, however. To create a verdavan on a planetary scale, which we have done, as you know, requires an almost incredible amount of the green jewels.

"Now we have those jewels—enough at least to enable us to conquer a hemisphere, if not the entire planet. We are able to send out a command from your brain across a territory within a radius of five thousand erns of Korok."

I had succeeded in my mission! I knew the danger to Kharthol, to Xuxul, to the people of Llarn. Ah, but what could I do about it? I was held in a hypnotic trance by the orders of the chief scientist. If he should order the aporad to kill itself, I would also have to obey such an order. I lay there sweating, waiting.

Pthorok Tok was exclaiming, "It is an incredible demon-

THIEF OF LLARN

stration! I have seen others—but to subdue a vicious aporad! Most amazing.”

“As the aporad obeys, so will a human. Observe your two warriors lying on the floor. If I should order them to throw down their weapons, they would obey. Were I to command them to stab themselves, that also would be impossible to refuse.”

As if he relished boasting of his own brilliance, the older man went on, “The green ray causes—as I understand it—my own mental command in the form of an electric ray from my brain to supercede the normal impulse from the brain of him who is overcome by the machine. Perhaps it is a form of telekinetic energy traveling along the beam patterns of the green ray. I do not know how it works—only that it does.”

“And you are quite convinced the verdavan in its larger size will work as well as the model?”

“Oh, yes. I am positive,” nodded the scientist.

I was positive, too. My skin crawled as I anticipated the old man's next command. If he ordered the aporad into the cage—could I be forced to crawl out of concealment and into full view? If so, I was a dead man. I put out my hands to the wall, pressing my palms flat against it. I would fight that order with every last bit of energy I possessed.

“Could I order the aporad to destroy a man?”

“Oh, yes—but make sure no one else is under the influence of your menta-band. Or he too will also obey that command, perhaps with odd results.”

Pthorok Tok waved a hand. “I have seen enough. Order it back to its cage.”

The old man nodded. I braced myself, as he said, “Aporad, you alone will obey me. Go into your cage and be docile.”

I relaxed, relief making my body quiver. Then reason took over and I told myself that had the scientist not singled out the aporad alone, the two warriors would also have crawled into the cage with the beast. With a few low words, the old man freed the warriors from the spell. His hand shoved over the verdavan lever.

THIEF OF LLARN

stand so many, even though his name be Uthian—or Alan Morgan. I leaped to stop him—and took the edge of a blade across my thigh.

I turned to defend myself, hoping to make an end to this conflict and catch Pthorok Tok before he got too far along the corridor. The younger man was a novice with the sword, but his companion—

The old man was an agile little monkey with a magic blade. He hopped, he skipped, he lunged and parried in a frenzy of activity that kept me fighting at the peak of my ability just to stay alive. And while the old man was keeping my blade in play, the younger one was circling behind me, seeking an opportunity to stab. I could hear Pthorok Tok racing down the hall.

Then there was just the sound of the blades banging together, and their ring and clang. I called on every trick of fence I knew. I riposted; I attempted the difficult thrusts of the Italian school.

The old man was cackling in delight. "Hai, hail! Whoever you are, you can fight. I have not enjoyed a bout like this since I was a young man. No blade on all Llarn is the equal of my own."

I saved my breath for fighting. After a moment the old man was panting, and then he too settled down to the savage, silent struggle for mastery that would mean life for one of us, death for the other. The young man I chose to ignore for a few seconds.

Then when the old man's eyes flicked past my shoulder, I dove sideways. The younger scientist was leaping, thrusting. His point would have gone into my back were I still facing the old man. As it was, I felt cold steel against my ribs when he went past. I thrust into his unprotected side, saw him drop.

The old man screamed shrilly. So confident of success had he been that he had drawn back a step to watch his companion run me through. Now as his assistant fell, he snarled and leaped.

Our blades rang savagely, parting to meet again in parry

THIEF OF LLARN

and riposte. Without concern for my naked back, I could concentrate on my opponent. Back and back I drove him, yielding ground. He was not cackling now, nor boasting of his swordplay. He was fighting to stay alive.

"Well, old one?" I panted.

Hate flared in his bright eyes as I added, "Perhaps you've met your match? Or even your better?"

"Were I younger . . ."

I nodded. If he had been my age, it might have made a difference. I shall never know whether, for the first time in my life, I faced a man who might have slain me with cold steel under different circumstances.

"You've fought well," I told him. "Let go your sword and take your life. I have no wish to slay you."

He shook his head just once. I admired him for his loyalty to Pthorok Tok, but not for his lack of wisdom. He knew he fought a losing battle, that my blade would sooner or later slip past his guard, yet he continued to fight. From the vicious, carefree assault he had launched on me earlier, he had changed his tactics to pure defense. He gave ground, he retreated, but always his steel was like a wall between us.

The Dagan of Korok would be safe by this time. He would have reached the walls of his palace, would have summoned his warriors, would have sent them to his laboratory. Once those soldiers came surging through the door, my life was finished.

Where was Evran Dekk? What kept Marga? The corlth should have reached the pits by this time, and with luck should have freed those thieves imprisoned below the palace. Marga should have saved the lives of the other thieves who had been given to the deadly embrace of the black tower. Without help, my mission to Korok was finished.

As if he sensed my helplessness, the old man chuckled sourly. "Aie, you may kill me—probably will. But I die knowing you also shall stand beside me in spirit minutes from now. We shall be friends then, I suppose, in our energy shapes which are all that remain to us after we are called to join the gods."

THIEF OF LLARN

He was talking to distract me. His hope was to hold me here long enough for others to do the job of killing me, which he could not. He was tiring; his age was a foe as deadly as myself. No longer did he skip and hop about. His movements were sluggish.

Ah, now I could hear feet pounding along the corridor. My blade flashed in and out and in again like a shuttlecock weaving its invisible pattern on the air. Then my blade went deep into his chest and he fell straight downward onto his skinny old knees. His eyes were wide open as if they stared on sights too grand for the human eye.

I leaped for the verda-ray machine, snatching a headband from my belt. I had one slim chance to face and defeat the men Pthorok Tok would send against me: Command them to drop their weapons! Order them and the men who might follow them along the corridor to surrender!

I almost made it.

A man burst through the doorway, followed by another. They came at me so swiftly I had no chance to put the band I had ripped from my belt to my head, no opportunity to go near the verdavan machine. My blade must leap to parry, to turn aside the points thirsting for my blood.

In this ancient laboratory of that old pile of stone which had belonged to Hoolith Gul long and long ago, I fought as I had not fought since the day I battled the yuul to save the life of Ulazza, Daganna of the Azunn. My steel flew, it sang; its length quivered with song as it darted and dipped. Three men went down, yet always there were others pressing inward, seeking to get at my flesh.

I was wounded in three, four, five places as I discovered that I could not parry every blade. Blood streamed from my thighs and arms and chest. My every sense was alert only to the danger before me.

It came as a surprise then, when I felt something cold at my back. The verdavan machine! Its handle was within arm's reach of my right hand, but my right hand held my blade. I could not reach it without endangering my body. And so with my back against the machine that might save my

THIEF OF LLARN

life, but unable to use it, I fought until the swordblades cut me down.

My sweat mixed with my blood as I battled, as I felt point and edge cut into me, slashing my skin, draining me of strength. Too late I saw the openings through which to thrust my blade. Two swords dug into me, and my knees became as rubber.

I was going down. My legs would hold me up no longer. I slid sideways, pressing my body against the verdavan machine. I fell against the lever, dragged it downward.

There was a green mist before my eyes, but it was growing steadily darker. I let go my sword, clawed the headband around my head. *Throw down your swords! Surrender!* my mind whispered.

And blackness engulfed me.

Evran Dekk looked down at me from an impossible height.

"Too late," I whispered. "Too late."

His face was glum with worry, and his eyes were sad. I think I knew then that I was dying. I had lost much blood; my wounds were deep and many, so that even the marvelous medicines of Korok could not heal me. Evran Dekk went away, and then Marga was there, kneeling by the edge of the bed, her hand soothing my moist forehead. Tears glistening in her eyes, ran down her cheeks.

I knew that I was lying in bed in some palace bed-chamber. So much my eyes told me. Somehow, in some manner, the thieves of Llarn had rallied to overcome the Dagan of Korok.

As if she saw a question in my eyes, Marga nodded, rubbed at her wet eyes with the back of a hand, and smiled. "Lie easy, Uthian. I shall tell you what you want to know.

"Your last mental command—oh, yes, we learned from Pthorok Tok how the verdavan machine worked—accomplished its purpose. A coward is the Dagan of Korok! He chose life rather than death, and explained the workings of

THIEF OF LLARN

his verdavan when Evran Dekk threatened him with his dagger."

The master thief had found the pits below the palace easily enough, but it took time to locate the jailer and slay him to get the keys of the dungeons in which the thieves of Llarn were being held prisoner. It took time too, to arm the thieves, to lead them along the old corridors that led into the palace of Hoolith Gul. The sound of my fighting in the laboratory alerted the thieves to what was ahead. They drew their swords and grawns they had looted from a palace arsenal and came charging in to battle.

Evran Dekk had sighted Pthorok Tok behind his soldiers, with his back to the oncoming thieves. Before he could shout the alarm, Evran Dekk put a daggerblade to his spine and ordered him to direct his warriors to drop their weapons.

With the dagan as a hostage, Evran Dekk forced his way into the laboratory. When he saw me stretched out as if dead, he came close to slaying Pthorok Tok. But the low cry of despair that the dagan uttered at sight of the headpiece glistening at my forehead told the quick-witted Evran Dekk that he might learn something from the dagan. He pressed the dagger point into his flesh, and Pthorok Tok babbled.

Marga, with the thieves she had freed from the Tower of Ten Thousand Deaths, entered from the tunnel in time to hear his words. Marga snatched up a spare headband from my belt, put it on her head, and commanded the dagan to obey her.

He ordered his troops from the laboratory, ordered them to remain silent—to which Marga added the compulsion of the verdavan—and to see that doctors tended my near-dead body. I had been brought into a palace bedchamber and salves put upon my frightful wounds.

I was dying. The salves and bandages could do only so much. The weeping eyes above me, the soft voice broken by occasional sobs, told me as much.

"How long?" I whispered.

She shook her head blindly. "Not—not long. A day, per-

THIEF OF LLARN

haps two. Your insides are bleeding. The doctors say it is a miracle you have lived so long."

I would never see Tuarra again, never hold her in my arms. I had saved her world and her life at the cost of my own. I did not regret it. I would willingly have died to save Tuarra of Kharthol a dozen times over.

I lay like a waxen image on the bed. Marga was sobbing, staring down at me. She whispered, "You have lived so long! Now to die of swordbites. . . when we might have had so much together . . ."

I was Uthian the Unmatched. Yes, the immortal one. Well, so much for immortality. Xuxul would never learn what the purpose of the verdals was, now. And Tuarra would live out the rest of her days in the city beneath the Clouds of Comoron. I hungered to see her, to hold and kiss her, but it was not to be. My eyes closed. I slept, with life but a fluttering flame deep inside my body.

I dreamed of Tuarra. She was seated in a vast round chamber the ceiling of which was like luminescent glass. There was no furniture in the room, only an iron tripod where a blue flame glowed. There was no wind in the room, yet the flame quivered and sank until it became a feeble glow. I saw now that Tuarra was weeping soundlessly and the thought came to me that the flame represented my life forces. I was dying, so was the flame.

Tuarra lifted her arms upward, as if she prayed to Astarra. "Save him, save him," she cried.

The ceiling began to grow brighter, more luminous, until it became as the sun, intense and blinding. From that brilliance a single beam stabbed downward toward the fire.

And as the light touched the flame—

The flame grew strong!

Higher and higher rose that blue fire until its brightness seemed almost to outshine the incandescence of the ceiling. Tuarra sat back on her heels and laughed, clapping her hands.

I woke up, beads of sweat on my face.

"Marga," I called hoarsely. "Marga!"

THIEF OF LLARN

She was at my side in a moment.

"The immortality fluid," I whispered. "It might save me. Take me to the Clouds of Comoron—and perhaps I shall live. And you, as well—forever if you so desire."

Her eyes widened. She did not waste my strength by questions; she nodded, and went away. A little while I waited, sleeping, then she was back and I was being lifted on to a stretcher that floated on air, and guided along the ramps and corridors of the palace to a flying strip. I was placed inside a five man flier.

The verdals were inside a weapons sack that held the sword of Hoolith Gul and a grawn. Without these jewels, the giant verdavan machine was useless. Marga had brought the model machine from the laboratory with her to the palace room where I was under the care of the doctors. Pthorok Tok had been kept with us, to prevent any coup by his warriors. Now that Marga and I were leaving Korok, he would be hostage for the safety of the thieves who were preparing for their own departure from the city.

Evran Dekk would direct that departure, insisting upon a certain payment for every thief who had come to Korok with a verdal. Pthorok Tok would pay, or he would die. The Dagan of Korok paid. After the thieves were gone, Pthorok Tok would be abandoned alive and well for his people to recover, far from their city.

Marga and I, by then, would be far away ourselves.

We rose upward from the landing strip with Marga at the controls. We circled and headed south swiftly. Knowing that I might die at any instant, she set the speed controls on full and remained at them as the flier shot like a bullet over the great meadowlands of Korok and the frozen tundra which we had crossed short days before.

I dozed from time to time and so lost track of the hours. I never knew just when we dipped beneath the Clouds of Comoron.

All I was aware of was—

Alan Morgan! You have returned. Ah, but—you are hurt!

THIEF OF LLARN

My mind was alive. I could hear, I could see, but I could not move. Marga was gasping, crying out in fright as Xuxul touched her mind with his, reading her thoughts even as her hands fluttered frantically and uselessly over the controls of the flier.

"I cannot move them! They are locked in position!" she wailed.

Xuxul had taken command of the situation. As I lay there I felt the play of energies across my flesh, telekinetic energies—the control of mind over matter—of which Xuxul was master. My flesh tingled as if with tiny electric shocks. Slowly, slowly, strength flooded back into my body.

Yes, I would live. Thanks to the powers of him who had been Vool Pan, I would be well again. I sat up; I began removing the bandages that were bound about me. Marga was crouched over the control panel, staring at it as if it had suddenly come alive. In a sense, I suppose it had.

Xuxul was flying the ship. He brought it down in a long glide over the grasslands of Xuxu, toward the city itself. Marga had left the controls; she was standing at the view windows, a hand lifted to her mouth in fright.

When I stood up without my bandages, Marga whirled, eyes wide and staring. For a moment she looked at me, and her mouth opened but no sound came out. Then she crumpled and lay unmoving on the floor.

She is unconscious, Alan Morgan. No more than that.

I went and touched the controls. Xuxul gave them into my hands and I brought the flier down in the square of the city of Xuxu, not far from the great citadel. As its keel bumped those cobbles, Marga stirred, moaning.

I went to her, lifted her into my arms and carried her from the flier. I carried her toward the great staircase and up it to the huge bronze doors open to the air.

Tuarra came running from inside the citadel, alerted to my arrival by Xuxul. She slowed at sight of Marga, then ran on to hurl herself against me when I put the Queen of Thieves on the staircase landing.

I held my love in my arms. I kissed her sweet, soft lips.

THIEF OF LLARN

I tasted her tears and felt her sobbing laughter as her strong young arms held me tight.

"You did it! You did it! Xuxul told me everything, having read your mind," she babbled between kisses.

She looked down at Marga, faintly frowning. "She loves you, Alan—as Uthian. What will you do with her? Poor thing! She's been through so much—and now when the victory is hers—we're about to snatch her prize away."

"Her prize?" I asked.

Tuarra glanced at me with her slanted green eyes. Tuarra always says I am a fool where women are concerned, not that she would have it any other way.

"You, darling," she said softly. "Xuxul scanned her mind as well as your own. He has told me—everything."

Her laughter rang out at sight of my face, and clapped her palms together. "Oh, yes—even how she kissed you, and how you kissed her. I ought to be jealous, I suppose, but I am not."

She came into my arms and clung while I feasted on her heavy red mouth. At last she stirred and whispered, "Marga may have Uthian. All I want is Alan Morgan."

Lift her, Alan Morgan. You promised her immortality. Immortality I shall give her.

I did as Xuxul ordered, and with Tuarra at my side, entered the citadel and found my way through the throne-room and the chamber of the game board to the groined vault where lay the body of Uthian the Unmatched. He looked young, his skin smooth and tanned. He still stared upon the Desire of the World with lifelike eyes. Now beside him, there rested another glass coffer.

Place Marga inside the empty case.

I did so, and stepped back while the cover rose by itself and fitted itself in place. Marga lay there with a smile upon her lips.

She thinks you are with her, Uthian. In her mind she lives and shall continue to live—immortal—with you as her lover, still the Queen of the Thieves Guild as you—in her dreamings—are its king.

THIEF OF LLARN

She would drink the immortality fluid, and mate with her dream, Uthian for all the years of her life. Marga would be happy. Are not some dreams like reality? Where is the borderline? She would enjoy what I had promised: immortality and the love of Uthian.

Tuarra leaned against me. I slipped an arm about her naked shoulders. There were tears in her eyes as she lifted her face to me.

"I am glad for her," she whispered.

You too can live as she lives, Tuarra.

Tuarra of Kharthol shook her head. "No, that is not for me. I prefer the reality."

She put her hand in mine, smiling through her tears.

"We shall return the verdals to their proper owners," I told the empty air, knowing Xuxul would hear.

Keep the great verdal of Zaxeron for your own, Alan Morgan. It is my farewell gift to Uthian the Unmatched—the greatest thief Llarn has ever known.

There was a pause. I could almost hear him who had been Vool Pan chuckle as he went on.

Sometimes I think you must be a thief yourself, to be so much like him.

Tuarra smiled, "I shall keep him honest, Xuxul."

Hand in hand we walked up into the sunlight where the flier waited to take us home to Kharthol.

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