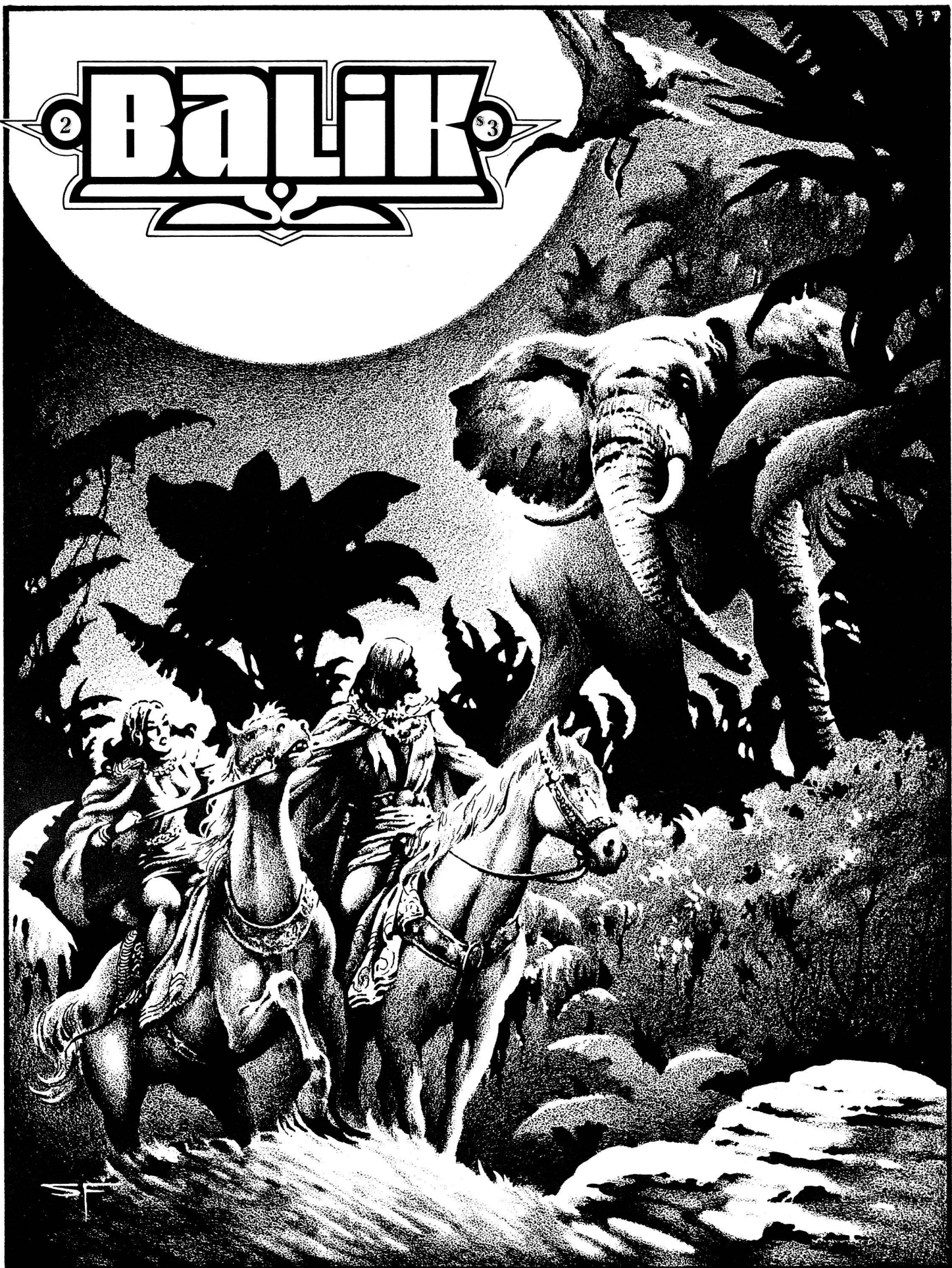


# BALIK









CLIFFORD W. BIRD'S  
**Balik**



Balik, Volume One, Number Two; February 1977. Special first edition printing limited to 500 signed and numbered copies. Published by C.W. Bird at Simba Reproductions, 616 Livingston, Hurst, Texas 76053. Contents within and without, unless otherwise stated, are copyrighted 1977 by Sheila Jayne Bird. All rights are reserved for the contributors. The title page illustration of Queen Lydia is taken from the illustrated fantasy story "Balik", soon to be featured in text format in this magazine. All single issue copies are \$3.00, post-paid.



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# Contents



Introduction	4
Epoch of Kush	6
Siren of Alcatraz	11
Mailing Comments	50
Acknowledgements	51
From The Editor	52



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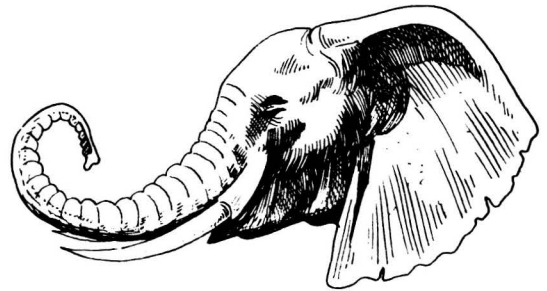
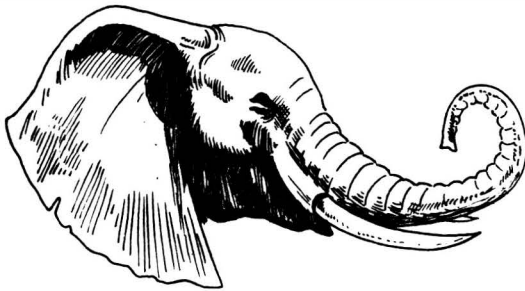
Cover: Balik and Shelomar by Steve Fabian  
 Inside front: Balik and Shelomar  
 Back cover: Myumba by Clyde Caldwell

## Illustrations

page

- 2: Balik and Shelomar by William Black
- 10: "...a strange and terrifying sight loomed before in the tall grass of the veld."
- 12: "...the Kenite lashed out to avoid capture or death."
- 22: "Balik is a prisoner within yonder walls.."
- 28: "He appeared as if mesmerized.."
- 31: "Balik was leading Shelomar and her mare.."
- 38: "He is my champion."
- 40: "...Balik and Shelomar rested.."
- 42: "With seeming little effort he tossed the chagrined Rabsaris.."
- 45: "...Melodie put flame to the lavender-hued incense in the golden censer before her."
- 48: "...Scarcely had she taken a place behind the rocks just inside the cave.."

# LOST CITIES AND STRANGE LANDS



## ADVENTURES IN AFRICA

At some stage in our lives, we all cracked the books for that inevitable quiz on Africa! As we sat there in class our minds wandered and attempted to recall those needed facts. If we were on the ball, we knew that man had lived in Africa since long before the dawn of history. In fact prehistoric men may have lived in Africa as long as 1,750,000 years ago! Why was Africa called the "dark continent"? said question four. Well, because much of it was unknown to Europeans less than a hundred years ago. Geography of most of Africa was not known until about 1910.

In between all these dates, names, and places we all smiled in silent mirth. Any kid worth his salt knew that the real Africa was something else indeed! A continent of fabulous lost cities, ancient civilizations, strange beasts, dark sorcery, a white-skinned lord of legendary status, and wonders beyond imagination. A world history books seemed in complete ignorance of!

Africa lent itself to fantasy by exploring man's lack of actual knowledge and firing his imagination of the unknown. It became the perfect vehicle for Edgar Rice Burroughs' Tarzan in the year 1914. The immortal ape-man spawned endless numbers of jungle heroes; in and out of Africa. After all, one jungle is as good as another! Following Lord Greystoke, we thrilled to Roy Rockwood's (Edward Stratemeyer) Bomba in 1926, C.T. Stoneham's Kaspia in 1931, Otis Kline's Jan in 1937, and "Bob Byrd's" Ka-Zar, also in 1937. And a hundred more reaching all the way to recent entrants such as Charles R. Saunders' Imaro or Maurice Gardner's Bantan. History be darned, Africa remains a fascinating subject for the fantasy author and fan. And, the jungle hero never fails to capture and fire our imagination. From Kipling to Burroughs, from Haggard to Howard, from now until forever no doubt... it is a proud tradition.

Cliff Bird is somewhat of a newcomer in writing circles, but clearly stems from the tradition outlined briefly above. However, in spite of his "influences" (which extend to motion pictures, literature, comic strips, comic books, etc., etc.), Cliff's work has a freshness about it. He does not write pseudo-Burroughs, or Brothers Of The Spear, or whatever! What he does do is write like Cliff Bird... whose literary background has absorbed much, and is still absorbing. It is true that much of Cliff's work has been done before, and done much better. So why bother? Once you have read Cliff's work, the answer to that question is obvious. Cliff Bird has got style, and much readability. The thrust of it all is that Cliff has a great deal of potential, and seldom fails to entertain. He has the raw talent, the awareness, the style, and the open-mindedness that should carry him on to bigger and better things.

As for "Balik and the Siren of Alcatheo"; it is a well built yarn, with strong characters, some predictability, and a page-turner pace. Even if you figure out what is coming next, it is fun to see just how Cliff is going to get you there! And, anyone with any perception at all can see that the "style" of this yarn overcomes any and all obstacles. In short; Cliff Bird is all right!!



Wayne Warfield  
January, 1977



Tarzan; created by Edgar Rice Burroughs. Also known as John Clayton, Lord Greystoke. He was the inspiration for numerous Jungle heroes. The ape-man appeared in twenty-four novels by Burroughs.



# THE EPOCH OF KUSH

BY  
CHARLES R. SAUNDERS



The Egypt of the Pharaohs is perhaps the most widely-known of ancient civilizations. But only a few scholars and enthusiasts of African history are aware of the existence of another nation of antiquity that co-existed with Egypt further south down the Nile. This second "gift of the Nile" has been variously characterized as a "sister", "rival", and even a "dark twin" of the land of the Pyramids and the Sphinx. To the Greeks it was known as Ethiopia, the land of men with "burnt faces". But the name "Ethiopia" has also been applied to several other African nations, most recently to the nation which has its capitol at Addis Ababa. Thus history refers to the ancient land south of the Pharaohs by the name given it by the Egyptians, Assyrians, and Israelites: Kush.

Even in the half-forgotten times before the uniting of its Upper and Lower Kingdoms (circa 3000 B.C.), Egypt had engaged in contact with its southern neighbor. Although trade was the motivation behind some of this contact, the primary aim of the early Pharaohs' southward push was conquest. In its earliest centuries, then, the history of Kush was a history of tribute and subjugation. During some periods the southern lands were indirectly-governed "satellites" of Egypt; at other times they were ruled as provinces of the Old Kingdom Pharaohs, including the famous Cheops.

Under Egyptian domination, the blacks of Kush endured...and learned. As they sent the Pharaohs their gold, their ivory, their incense, and their people as slaves, scribes, and soldiers, the Kushites integrated elements of the culture of their ancient homeland (located west of the Nile in what the Egyptians called the "Land of God") with the technological innovations of the civilization to the north. Their fields grew fertile, their population increased, and massive stone monuments reared from the capital they established at Napata. They defeated their less-ambitious neighbors to the south and east, and adopted the Egyptian system of divine monarchy to help consolidate their new territorial gains.

By 1525 B.C., the Kushites were ready to begin the long series of revolts and wars that would eventually start them along the road to empire. The earliest rebellions were ruthlessly crushed, but as the New Kingdom dynasties grew progressively weaker and more stagnant, the black nation grew stronger. By maintaining their African values and lifestyles, the Kushites escaped the social stratification that doomed their Pharaonic overlords. Steadily the Kushites pushed northward, annexing the Nubian provinces and marching to the threshold of the Upper Kingdom. Soon the sword of conquest would be wielded by a black hand, not a brown one.

In the 700's, Kashta, first "Great King" of Kush and Nubia, led his armies into Upper Egypt. By 725 B.C. his son, Piankhi, completed the conquest of Lower Egypt, thus winning for Kush an empire stretching from the Mediterranean to the northern frontiers of modern Uganda. The triumphant Piankhi erected many stelae (message-stones) along the Nile telling of the way his chariots routed the army of the Pharaoh. Though Piankhi and his successors ruled from the Kushite capital of Napata, Egyptian history records them as the 23rd Dynasty...the Black Pharaohs.

This imperial phase of Kushite history lasted only a single century. It was not through internal weakness that Kushite dominance was so brief, for the beginning of the end came under the rule of Taharqa, fifth and greatest of the Black Pharaohs. Taharqa is said to have sent military expeditions as far west as the Strait of Gibraltar. At the beginning of his reign, he could easily have laid claim to being the most powerful monarch in the ancient world.

But then a new enemy appeared in the east; an enemy against whom even the combined strength of Egypt and Kush could not prevail. The iron armies of Assyria were on the march, and the Old World would tremble beneath their mighty tread....

No longer could Taharqa dream of expanding his empire to the shores of Lake Chad. It was only through his own dynamic leadership that he was able to hold onto what he had. Fighting ferociously, his chariots and horsemen prevented the forces of the Assyrians under king Sennacherib from overrunning Egypt. Sennacherib did acquire enough territory to set up a rival Pharaoh at Sais. And for all their valor and determination, Taharqa's Kushites were doomed to fail. For the Assyrians were an Iron-Age people, while the Kushites and Egyptians still bore weapons of bronze. That he managed to hold his fledgling empire together against the Assyrian military machine is a tribute to the personal prowess of Taharqa, who under other circumstances might have united Africa from the Mediterranean to the Congo Basin...a feat that would have ranked alongside the achievements of Alexander the Great.

But Taharqa could not live forever. And the ill-fated 23rd Dynasty ended with the defeat of his son Tanuatamun by Ashurbanipal in 656 B.C. Although there would be other black Pharaohs, such as Ahmose and Aspelta, never again would Egypt be governed from the south.

Even Napata itself was not free from attack. Although the Assyrians never penetrated further south than Nubia, their Persian successors did, inflicting a devastating raid on Napata in the year 591 B.C. For this and other reasons, the Kushites moved their capitol two hundred miles south to a city named Meroe. It was here that Kush entered the second great phase of its history. The Kushites turned their energies from imperialism to internal cultural growth. Egyptian influences waned as purely Kushite ideas ascended.

Africans are adaptable people. If iron was to be the new basis for warfare and civilization, then the Kushites would become masters of its use. The hills around Meroe were rich in iron ore, and before long the city became one of the greatest smelting centers in the ancient world. The mountainous slag-heaps left by this smelting can still be seen. This emphasis on metal manufacture enabled the Kushites to defend themselves from invasion from the Middle East and Europe, freeing their society to embark upon a six-century span of unparalleled cultural achievement.

In their religion, the Meroitic Kushites turned from the worship of Osiris and Ammon to their own lion-headed god, Apedemak. In their writing they switched from Egyptian hieroglyphics to an alphabetic script they invented in the third century B.C. Unfortunately, this script has yet to be deciphered. Though they retained the pyramid as a funerary form, the Meroitics perfected a form of massive architecture fully as impressive as anything ever built by the peoples of the north. The delicate designs they painted on their pottery are an art form that has never been duplicated.

Meroe established a far-reaching trade that extended as far as India and China. Kush thus replaced Egypt as the center through which ideas and commerce traveled to and from Africa. Internal political stability was maintained through the joint rule of a secular king and a goddess-queen called the "Kandace". Like the Carthaginians, the Kushites domesticated the supposedly untamable African elephant for work and warfare. Unlike the Carthaginians, the Kushites successfully resisted Roman rule. Though they did suffer some setbacks, the Meroitics stalemated the Roman legions for three centuries. From Caesar Augustus to Diocletian, no Roman Emperor ever extended his rule south of the Nubian provinces, though old Napata was sacked more than once.

Yet for all these centuries of vigorous advancement, Kush was a barren, broken land by the fourth century A.D. Its splendid cities were either deserted or occupied by peasant farmers or nomadic herdsman. The fields of Kush were wasteland, and its people scattered to the south and west. The downfall of Meroitic Kush was precipitated not by the Romans but by another African nation. To the southeast of Kush, a vigorous new kingdom had arisen. Its name was Axum, and it was the predecessor of the modern nation of Ethiopia. Axum and Kush had a long history of trade relations, but the impetus for the hostility that led to the fall of Meroe came from neither of these two principals. It was a third group, the Noba, who instigated the war from which Kush would never recover.

In the third and early fourth centuries A.D., the Noba began to settle within the borders of Kush. Though the Kushites had no objection to the presence of these immigrants, the Axumites did. A feud dating back to the days when the Sahara was green existed between the Noba and Axum, and before long the Kushites became guilty by association. Finally, the Axumites, under the legendary King Ezana, cut off the vital trading links between Kush and the Red Sea. Then Ezana proceeded to invade Kushite territory and defeat the Noba. Inspired by that conquest, the Axumite armies succeeded where Assyrian and Roman failed. This time there was no Piankhi or Taharqa to save the day. Meroe fell to Ezana in 325 A.D.

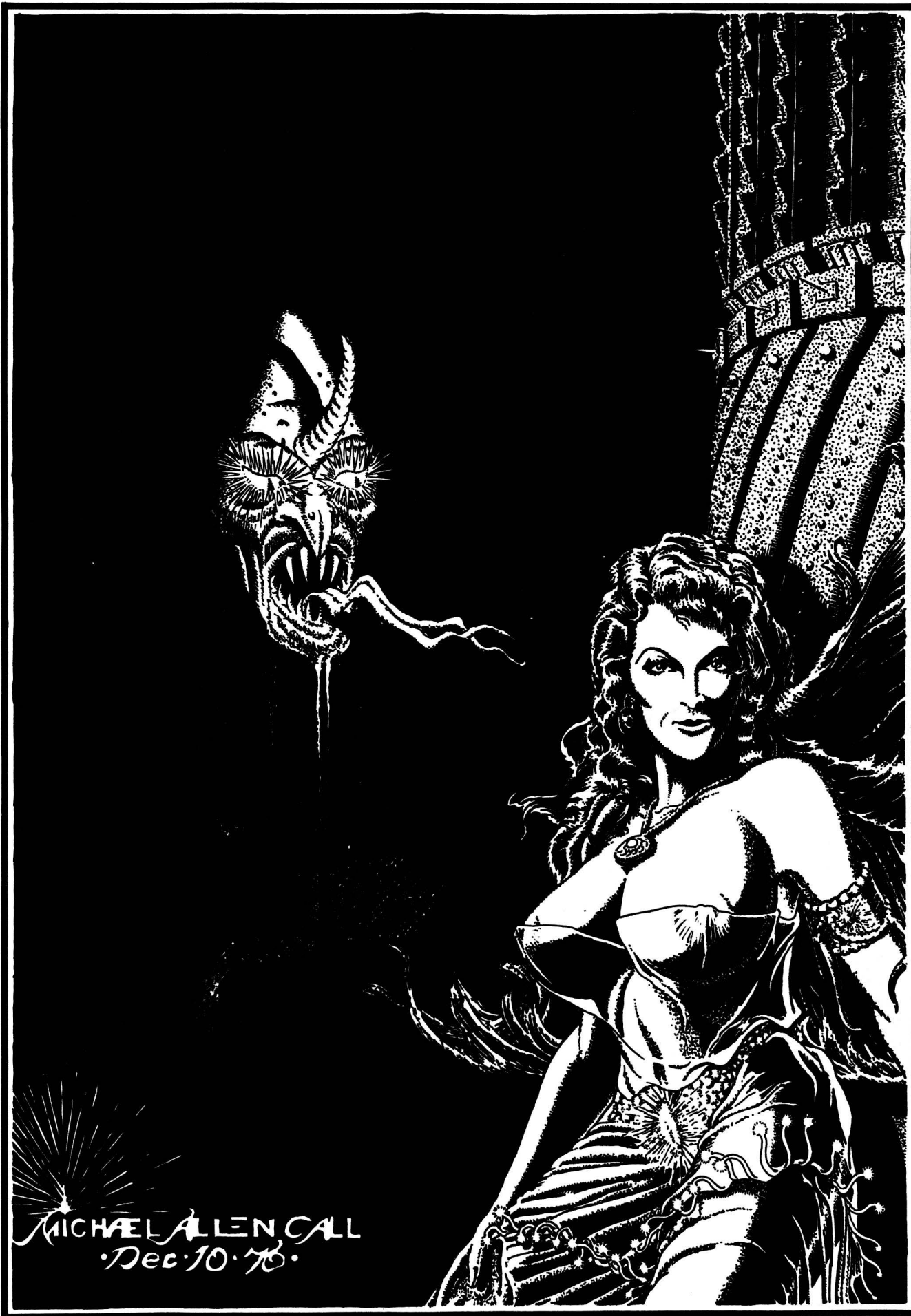


Though their records show that a few more Kandaces were buried under minor pyramids, from that time onward Kushite influence disappears from the stage of history.

In the modern Republic of Sudan, remnants of the Kushite epoch can still be seen. Narrow, spire-like pyramids stand in crumbling grandeur in a desert that was once Meroe. Stone rams and python-inscribed obelisks endure the erosion of eternal sandstorms at the site of Naga, an urban center once second only to Meroe itself. The mighty walls of the Lion Temple of Apedemak still soar skyward at Musarawat as-Safra. Statues, jewelry, and painted pots of Kushite origin rest in museums around the world, usually in a shadowy corner near the more prestigious Egyptian displays. These and the great ruins in Sudan are all that is left of the people the Greek historian Herodotus called the "blameless Ethiopians". Africa and the world are poorer for their passing.







MICHAEL ALLEN CALL  
Dec 10 '76



# Balik and the Siren of Alcathe by C. M. Bird

## Book One

Edited by Andrew J. Offutt

The two riders suddenly paused on the verdant knoll overlooking the vast plain to their right, for a strange and terrifying sight loomed before them in the tall grass of the veld. It was a huge, frightful creature whose great grey body balked at the scent of the man and woman upwind from its sensitive nostrils. If nostrils it had, for between the somber eyes of the beast stretched a sinuous, serpentine elongation that rose in the air, seemingly to sniff the gentle breeze. On either side of its head was a large mass of grey flesh that had abruptly fanned out as if straining to hear. Most ominous of all its features were the two long, teeth-like, ivory protrusions beneath the snout.

The woman leaned close to her companion, clutching his arm with trembling hands. Her widened eyes stared in silent, frightened confusion at the ponderous vision.

"Have courage, Shelomar," the man reassured her. "The beast is not advancing. Perhaps it does not see us as yet."

Never before had their eyes beheld such a precipitous creature. The two travelers had but recently ventured beyond the borders of Kush to explore the mysterious jungle lands of the Dark Continent. They had seen many strange sights on their journey, but none to equal that which held them in silent wonder at this moment. The man, Balik, was a battle hardened warrior, not given to moments of indecision. Yet like all mortals, he possessed a subconscious fear of the unknown. He was confident, in any event, that the apparition was but an animal, and not some nameless demon of the nether world. The beast was tangible enough, of that he was certain. Shelomar, wife of Balik, was a doughty individual, yet she well nigh swooned when first she had seen the leviathan beast.

To the left of the riders was a dense forest flanked by flora of diverse shape, size, and color. It was a foreboding place of tangled limbs, liana, thick intertwined greenery, and sylvan dreams. Red, orange, purple, blue, and white blossoms hung in colorful testament to the beauty of the tropical jungle. Through the towering trees darted many small, dark shapes, chattering wildly and scolding the outsiders who had disturbed their daily routine. Birds of various size and description took to flight at the pandemonious commotion.





Abruptly, without warning, several dusky men sallied from the underbrush, wielding short clubs and heavy spears. They rushed forward with truculent mien while shouting in some ancient dialect. Their intentions were obviously not friendly. On the instant, Balik reached out and gave Shelomar's horse a swat on the backside. The startled mount neighed in alarm and bounded headlong down the green hillock. The sudden lurch as the animal reared and rushed off nearly dislodged the petite girl. But she had been trained to ride expertly and immediately regained her balance. Meanwhile, the grey monstrosity, frightened by this unexpected turn of events, spun on its haunches and fled off in the opposite direction. Balik withdrew his sword as the dark men came running to the attack. Two of the fearsome assailants felt its sting as the Kenite lashed out to avoid capture or death. Yet before the gleaming blade could sing its song of destruction it was knocked from Balik's hand by the blunt end of a war spear. Even weaponless the savage men found the barbarian a fierce opponent. With smoldering eyes he kicked and struck first one man and then another. Finally he was so sorely set upon that he was forced from his steed.

In an attempt to protect its master, Balik's white stallion kicked wildly at the sullen assailants, knocking many of them to the ground. Balik was no less engaged in the fray, swinging one of the dark men in a semi-circle by his heels. Although the Kenite proved to be a man of remarkable strength and fighting ability the combined force of his tireless attackers soon took its toll. At length a sinewy black struck the formidable outlander a stunning blow with his knob stick. For Balik, the fight was at an end.

In the aftermath of the struggle two of the skulking savages were lying unconscious, prey to their exquisitely muscled opponent. While three of the men bound Balik's arms, the remaining two roused their fellows. The warriors awoke rather reluctantly. Battered and bruised, they were astonished at the ferocity of their captive. Often in the past they had way-laid barbarian and prince alike, and though some were hard fighters, never had one lone man nearly managed to best eight of their number.

All the dark, sparsely clad men were much alike and appeared to be members of the same band or tribe. Balik would not have known in either case. He had never been to the Dark Continent but had heard tales of the black men that inhabit these strange and savage lands. Some, it was rumored, ate the flesh of men in the belief that the spirit of the dead warrior would increase their own strength and courage.

These men wore tan or tawny loin cloths, and ornaments of animal teeth and claws about their necks, wrists, and ankles. Some wore brightly colored feathers or beads. The hair of their heads was short cropped, curly, and black as pitch. Their skin was much like that of the dark-hued Kushites. Most prominent were their eyes, which bore a feral appearance that seemed to emphasize their savage countenance.

One of the dark men was spouting orders to the others. With a grunt he ceased overseeing Balik's capture just long enough to glance in the direction Shelomar's horse had taken her. The escape of the girl served to annoy the sullen black. Already the horse and rider were beyond his sight. Still, he mused, the warrior was captured, and that was all that mattered. The girl would only have been sport for the men, who may have slain her once they had satiated their lusts.

The still unconscious Balik was laid across the back of his horse by the black men. Presently the small band of captors disappeared into the dense jungle growth at the command of their scowling leader.

Moments after their departure the birds and small monkeys began their respective song and chatter, as all returned to normal. Sudden, violent incidents were common in these primal lands, and the creatures who inhabited them were blessed with the ability to forget such occurrences and carry on as though nothing had happened. Indeed, any who looked upon the tranquil veld would hardly suspect the drama that had transpired only moments ago. The whispering breeze set the trees of the forest to swaying and their leaves to murmuring. With the absence of man nature returned once more to order.

## 2

The lithe maiden had ceased in her attempt to halt the flight of her startled mare. From the small hillock the animal had bolted, running tirelessly through the knee-high grass of the veld.

The horse was no less frightened than the girl herself. Yet, though she was concerned about her present predicament, she feared for the safety of her mate.

Within twenty minutes of the incident on the knoll, the horse began to slow its forward pace and ere long came to a stop beneath the sheltering shade of tall forest trees, miles from the green hill. At last the girl could gather her thoughts. As she looked in bewilderment about her she came to a frightening conclusion. She was lost.

Summoning her courage, Shelomar suppressed the inclination to panic, trying as best she could to regain her composure. Still breathless from the experience, she had decided for the moment at least, to wait where she was. She hoped that Balik had managed to escape the dark warriors who had attacked them. If he had, surely he would follow in the direction that her mount had taken her. Well she knew that he would seek her if he were able.

Cautiously slipping from the back of the mare to the ground, she led the animal to a spot beneath a massive tree. Tangled vines dangled from its heights, and to one of them she tethered her mount. After having secured the reins, she sat down on a large rock beside the beast. It was a vantage point from which she could see the open country about her. A somnolent quiet lay over the region.

As she waited there she took note of the awesome landscape. The vast plain had the appearance of a great tawny sea. Tall grass moved restlessly in the wind like waves over the surface of water. Rainbow colored birds glided overhead with seeming indifference to the plight of the solitary girl below. In the dreamy haze of distance, against the horizon, a long line of purple peaks rose to meet the billowed clouds. To her back lay the brooding jungle, a place very alien to one who was raised in the hills of Palestine.

Silently she prayed that Balik would find her, for if he did not she surely could not survive. She was not accustomed to this wilderness, and would no doubt starve for want of food. She had no bow for hunting nor knowledge of edible fruit or plants. Still, Balik was all that mattered to her, even now that her own future was uncertain.

The thoughts that assailed her confused mind soon brought to bear the futile aspects of her situation, and she gave way to tears. Sobbing uncontrollably, she took her eyes off the plain before her.

She had wept but a few moments when suddenly a sound assuited her ears; the snorting of a horse. Instantly her heart was filled with expectation--surely it was Balik! Brushing aside her ebony hair, which flowed like cascading water over her slim shoulders, she could see a rider approaching.

To her dismay, it was not her man. The stranger had seen her, of that she was certain. Now he moved slowly in her direction. The man bestrode a huge black steed that trotted relentlessly forward. Quickly her hand moved toward the nine-inch dagger that hung from her shapely, rounded hips. With the gold-hilted weapon, a gift from Balik, she would defend her honor and her life.

As the rider approached she was able to make out his features more clearly. He was a big man with a great white beard that hid his neck and nestled on his massive chest. He did not appear to be aged, yet the beard was as white as ever she had seen; with the look of fine wool. The stranger's eyes were hidden beneath his white burnoose, leaving the soul they mirrored hidden as well. Shelomar imagined him to be of Arabian descent. Not because of his manner of dress alone, though across his shoulders was a flowing robe of arabesque design and upon his feet were black curved-toed boots gilded with Eastern threadwork. He wore crimson pants of silk that completely covered his legs from the sash at his waist, to where they were tucked into the ornate boots. His mount was a magnificent black Arabian stallion; a war horse in appearance.

A sudden fear gripped the girl as she thought of the swarms of bandits and nomadic highwaymen who roamed the East. These aimless wanderers were constantly in search of plunder, large or small. Women who fell into their clutches suffered the most ignominious fate or were sold to jaded sultans to wile away their lives in royal harems. If this man were one such wanderer she would receive no help from him in finding Balik.

Shelomar found there was little time for musing. The rider drew ever closer. As he brought his horse to a halt a short distance from her, she brandished the dagger. Though frightened, she stared boldly at him. Neither spoke as the mighty black steed stood motionless.



Balik's senses reeled as consciousness began to ebb back. His mind seemed to spin through a vast abyss, spiraling past eons-old stars that sparkled with an unearthly brilliance. At once he became aware of his surroundings, and of a throbbing ache in his head. His first thoughts after recalling his being attacked and knocked out, were of Shelomar. He remembered that the girl had escaped on her frightened mare and that she had not been followed. At least not while he fought with his abductors...

Balik was concerned for his woman's safety. These were savage lands, dangerous enough for hearty warriors, but more so for frail maidens. Shelomar knew something of warfare, for she had been taught the use of sword and bow by Balik's father, Barak. Balik himself had taught her to use the dagger he had given her, and Criton, who had grown up with Balik, taught her to handle a sling. Still, a lone maid was in peril from the fierce predators of the Dark Continent, animal and human alike.

The Kenite remained slumped face down over the back of his horse. He chose to let his dusky captors think him yet unconscious, giving himself the option of surprise when he made his bid for freedom. Why he had been attacked he did not know. It was sufficient to know that he was now bound and being taken somewhere unknown against his will. The retinue of dark men were following a newly cut path through the dense jungle. It was most likely made by these very tribesmen, who were now backtracking on it, returning whence they came.

Dusk was nigh when the band's chieftain called a halt. He had shouted in some unknown tongue and the men had stopped short. The white stallion was tethered to a nearby tree and Balik was lifted off its back and placed on the ground at its feet. Some of the savages were cutting a circular clearing with their short swords while others were constructing a thorny brush boma to keep out the carnivora. These were preparations for encampment; evidently their destination was some distance away if they required food and rest before they could journey on. In view of this situation Balik decided not to continue feigning unconsciousness. As he stirred, one of the blacks took notice and called to his superior. With baleful countenance the tall warrior leader walked up to the barbarian.

"Well, outlander, it seems you have returned from the shadow lands." The Kenite was astonished to hear the man speak a variation of the Kushite tongue. It was more a mystery that the husky commander spoke it fluently. Balik had learned the dialect while a mercenary with the once powerful Hittites.

"Can you speak, barbarian?" the dark warrior lord questioned.

"Aye," replied Balik. "I can speak as well as any man. Tell me why you attacked me, and why I am in bonds. I have done you no injustice."

"You are our prisoner. As a prisoner you are not entitled to answers. Resign yourself to your fate. You have been chosen by our queen. There is nothing you can do to redeem yourself."

Contention was pointless. Balik knew well enough that he would get no answers from these men. He wondered though, how isolated tribesmen such as these came to speak the Kushite tongue, and further who they were. To add to the mystery, they had changed from their native dress and now bore a more civilized appearance. They had donned sandals that laced about the ankle. Each man was armed with a short sword of iron that hung from a leather belt about the hip. Some carried short clubs and knives of polished bone. Dressed in black tunics, they wore various types of brass bands on their wrists and arms. Their leader wore a leather helmet overlaid with metal studs and ornate gold inserts. His head covering was not unlike those worn by the rest of the party, except that it was topped by the long, sweeping plumes of some emerald bird.

As Balik watched the warriors prepare the campsite, he wondered who the queen of these people could be. Most puzzling was how she could have "chosen" him, and for what purpose.

Soon the encampment was completed. In the center of the clearing made by the warriors danced a newly lit fire. Night had fallen and the bonfire flung flaming streamers of scarlet and gold toward the star-sprinkled sky. Some of the dark men had left to hunt and had returned with a

wild boar. Skewered now, the pork was roasting in the flaming pennants of the fire. The brightness of the flames and the thorn boma, Balik knew, were precautions against wild animals. Yet he wondered if the fire might not attract the most dangerous of the beasts; man. Seeing the flames, another tribe of warriors might fall on the small band. Firmly bound, Balik dreaded that dire possibility, for he would be slain without the chance to defend himself.

When the men began to eat, the leader ordered one of them to bring Balik meat. A gaunt, wiry black cut a section from the boar and brought it to the outlander. His hands were then untied so that he could feed himself. Balik chafed; there was yet no opportunity for action, and when he had finished his repast the lean warrior once more secured his hands with leather straps. This occasion, however, the straps were not tied as tightly. With this in mind Balik began to work at freeing himself.

He struggled against the leather more fervently after the dark warriors were asleep. One man stood guard while the others slept, but he had to make regular rounds about the campsite. Thus Balik was able to work at the straps on his hands without fear of being detected. The wood for the fire had been used, and now the flames were no more than smoldering coals. Soon the keen ears of both Balik and the guard detected the stealthy movement of padded feet beyond the boma. The night creatures close to the camp had ceased their noise making, no doubt due to the prowling carnivore. That would make matters somewhat more risky for Balik, but he intended to carry out his plans regardless of this new unforeseen danger. The leather straps were stretched almost to the point that he could pull one hand free. Soon he would be loose to make a dash for his horse. Yet now he knew that it was possible that some fierce predator lurked outside the protective thorn barrier. He would be able to gain the back of his steed and leap over the boma, but without a weapon he might well meet unkindly death. To be free was his immediate concern, and once free he would seek Shelomar.

The only course open to him was to await the guard's passage and jump him before he could give the alarm. With the sentinel's sword and spear he would be able to meet any beast on equal ground. In the mountains and steppes of his homeland Balik was renowned as a great hunter. As a youth, with his friend Criton, he had slain many beasts; far more than one lion, with spear, bow, sword, or knife. Three of the great cats he had killed by hand.

The hours of straining against his bonds had come nigh to fruition. Once again the guard walked along the boma close to where Balik lay. The sentry was on the alert, as he had been since the jungle life about the camp had grown quiet. As the man passed by but a few feet from the barbarian, a savage bestial scream rent the night. It was the fierce growl of a leopard, hurled from the beast as it leaped from the overhanging limb of a tree. The big cat caught the sentinel by surprise and the man was not quick enough to defend himself.

At that moment Balik, spurred to greater effort by the incident, tore loose from his bonds and pounced to his feet. In the confusion of the moment he could have made good his escape, but he chose instead to aid the stricken black. By now all the sleeping men had awakened and were running toward the disturbance. As they reached the scene they were amazed to see the outlander leap onto the big cat. The swiftness and strength of the Kenite was phenomenal. With one mighty effort he jerked the beast off its feet, having grabbed it by the thick fur at the back of its neck. Before the enraged animal could adequately react, Balik thrust his arms under both forelegs and locked his hands behind the leopard's neck, forcing its head down against its breast. With savage fury the feline twisted and kicked as it tried to break the relentless hold of the hated man creature. Its talons raked empty air and within a heartbeat the creature ceased its snarls and struggles as its neck snapped with a loud crack. Dropping the lifeless form, Balik bent to offer the guard his hand.

The black warriors were in awe at having witnessed the courage and formidable strength of the outlander, though none showed the grateful feelings of the wounded sentry. The man was only hurt slightly, with minor scratches on his chest and left shoulder. Fortunately the beast had not had the time to use its powerful jaws and rending teeth.

The band's chieftain approached the two men as the guard was thanking Balik for his most welcomed intervention. "I thank you outlander," the sentry was saying. "I thank you for my life, and from this night onward I am at your service."

"You are a puzzle to me, barbarian," interrupted the sullen leader. "You managed to free yourself, yet you stayed to help Myumba here instead of fleeing into the darkness. Why did you brave death to succor one who had helped place you in bonds?"

"I thought little about it," replied Balik. "The man needed help; I helped him. It is as simple as that."

"You have my admiration as well as my appreciation," said the chieftain. "It is truly a great misfortune that I cannot give you your freedom. To do so would bring death on all of us here."

"I fail in understanding your reasoning, man," replied Balik. "You are more a prisoner than I to be subject to such fears."

"It is true enough, outlander. But you could not hope to understand as yet. When you reach with us the city of Alcatheo you will know why we could not set you free." Having said that the black man extended his hand to Balik. "In spite of what must be, I offer you my hand in friendship. I am Ramtul, chieftain of the Swahili peoples."

Balik accepted the gesture. "I am Balik, a Kenite by birth. I would ask a boon of you. Send two of your men to search for the woman who was with me earlier. She is my wife and I fear for her safety."

Ramtul shook his head sadly. "That is not possible, my friend. The queen would have your woman's head, and ours, if we brought her to Alcatheo. There is no place for her there. And we must all return together or chance the queen's anger. Perhaps the gods will lead your woman to those who will aid her, or to a merciful death. I cannot help you, for great is the power of our queen and fearful her wrath. We dare not even speak her name."

"Then if I should try to leave here now," queried Balik, "you would attempt to prevent me?"

"We would," answered Ramtul. "And we would bind you as before. You have done us a good turn in saving my man, and you have the friendship of all of us here. Come with us to the city. You are a formidable warrior. Perhaps you can escape the influence of the queen and break the yoke that enslaves my people. Then you can search for your woman, with our help."

"Come with us willingly, Balik," interjected Myumba. "I will help you once we have reached Alcatheo, and I will help you find your woman if we live."

Myumba's last statement caused the Kenite to wonder even more about the queen of Alcatheo. Balik thus gave the matter much thought. Although these men proclaimed loyalty to, and respect for him, they still surrounded him with drawn weapons. Their fear of their queen's wrath seemed extraordinary. As far as these men were concerned, Balik knew that he could not fight all of them and escape, nor could he hope to reach his horse without being wounded severely. He would have to concede for the moment and trust the safety of Shelomar to the God of all things.

"Very well," he said. "I will go with you to this city of Alcatheo. But I will not remain a bondsman. Nor will I suffer to let so wicked a woman as your queen continue to order the capture of wayfarers like myself. Such a thing is hideous and mirrors the black soul of the one who decrees it."

"So be it, outlander," replied Ramtul. "Three men will watch for the remainder of the night. One to guard against intruders and two to guard against your escape. For I believe that I can trust you in all things, except where your woman is concerned. You may yet decide to try to get away from us."

The conversation was ended. Ramtul appointed three sentries and ordered the other men to return to their rush pallets. One of the dark men saw to Myumba's wounds before retiring, while Balik went to his horse for his crimson cloak. He then returned to his place, with an armed guard on either side of him. Despite his deep concern for Shelomar, he knew that he must march on to Alcatheo on the morrow, and that he must retain his strength and wits if he hoped to gain his freedom. As he lay down his mind was filled with many thoughts. If only Criton had been with him, he mused. Together they could have defeated the dark tribesmen and he would never have been made a prisoner. Perhaps Shelomar would return to the emerald city of Yen, in the land of Kush. It was there that they had left Criton. In this alien land there was no one else that she could turn to for succor. Shelomar had a quick steed and she knew the way back to Yen; at least she knew the way there from the small hill on which she and Balik had been attacked. If she had not lost her sense of direction she should be able to find her way to Criton; the emerald city was but two days journey from the green hillock. Alas, she was in the hands of Providence, as all Balik could do was hope and pray that she would not come to harm.

# 4

Shelomar stood with her back against the huge rock on which she had been sitting. She was poised with a gleaming dagger in hand. But a few feet from her, the stranger had halted his war horse. Having dismounted, he stood watching her intently. At length he broke the pall of silence.

"You are wise to be wary of strangers, woman," he said. "But you have nothing to fear from me."

"I will be the judge of that," replied the girl. "Keep your distance and you shall keep your life, Arab."

"Your virtue is admirable," said the man. "But time is wasted where words are bandied about. Events have run their course and now it is required that I aid Balik once more. It is preordained that through you he will be redeemed."

Shelomar was speechless. She had not seen this man before! His words were more than puzzling. Yet the stranger's countenance was such that she felt compelled to trust him. His eyes were gentle in appearance and he had made no attempt to accost her. As big an individual as he was, her dagger would have had little or no effect against him. In a gesture of trust she replaced the twin-edged weapon in its gilt-rimmed sheath. "How do you know of Balik?" queried the distraught girl. "Where is he? What has happened to him?"

"It is given to me to know many things, fair maid. Question not. Cease your sorrow, and put your fears to rest. Together we shall journey to the place where Balik faces an ancient evil. Time is of the essence."

The girl was more confused now than ever. Yet an unexplainable feeling consoled her worried mind. She knew not why, but she was certain the Arab would take her in safety to her man.

The nameless stranger suggested they begin the trek and ride toward their destination during the few hours of light left to them. Shelomar agreed wholeheartedly and at once mounted her mare. As the riders made their silent way across the veld, Shelomar recalled something familiar about the Arab. He resembled a description Balik had given of a stranger he had met only weeks ago. It was in the mountain stronghold of Queen Lydia, where she and Balik had been reunited after a lapse of five long years. The stranger had appeared suddenly and had bidden Balik to take up a bundle and follow him to a high peak above the city where Shelomar was a captive. He then instructed her mate to assemble the contents of the bundle, fashioning a flying apparatus. After giving Balik a rope and operating instructions, the man vanished while Balik turned his back.

Shelomar wondered if this Arab could be the same beneficent stranger. On the other hand, the man could be in league with the dusky primitives who had attacked her and Balik earlier. That did seem unlikely; Balik's captors were aboriginal in appearance, while the Arab bore the mark of civilization. At any rate, time would tell. For the nonce she felt compelled to trust the tall stranger.

Their journey back across the veld was an uneventful one. Before long they had reached the small knoll where she and Balik had become separated. "This is the place where I last saw Balik," the girl said forlornly.

"Yes," said the Arab, studying the earth. "And here is a trail cut into the flora of the jungle. We shall follow it until darkness is near. Then we shall camp for the night."

Into the foreboding greenery they rode, along the narrow path, until dusk was upon them. The Arab decided on a spot to make camp. While Shelomar tethered the horses he cut out a small clearing with his sword. Soon he set up his short, multicolored tent. "You may sleep within this tent tonight," said the Arab. "I will take my rest beneath the sky."

Shelomar thanked the stranger and then helped him gather wood for a fire. Soon the two were sitting by the burning embers eating bread cakes. They ate in silence and at length Shelomar retired to the tent. As she drifted into sleep, she was unaware that less than four miles away, her Balik slumbered beneath the same sparkling mantle of stars.



When the girl awoke later, she lethargically pushed aside the flap of the tent and peered through the gossamer material that guarded against insects. Still drowsy, she saw the Arab seated on a rock a few feet away. He was stroking the black mane of a huge tawny lion with one hand, and with the other he petted the head of a small gazelle. Before the realization of what she had seen came to her, she had closed the flap and begun to lay back on the ornate rug beneath her. Suddenly she sat upright and pulled the flap open once more. A startled gasp escaped her lips as she beheld the Arab standing before the tent. There were no animals in sight.

"I see that you are awake at last," he said. "Make yourself ready to travel, for we journey on after we eat of the fruit I have gathered."

Presently Shelomar ate, all the while wondering at the strange tableau she had witnessed. Perhaps she had only imagined it, as she was not quite awake when she thought she had seen it. It was hardly probable that a lion and gazelle would be together, or that a man could get close enough to either one to caress them. It was then that she realized that the stranger had not taken measures to safeguard their encampment against wild animals.

More questions to ponder, she mused. It was more evident than ever that the Arab was indeed a most unusual man. Embarrassed by the absurdity of what she thought she had seen, she did not make mention of it. Instead she tried as best she could to concern herself with thoughts of her quest.

When they had eaten and then watered the horses, they set out on the narrow trail left by the primitives. In spite of the aura of mystery surrounding the Arab, Shelomar began to feel more at ease with him. She had not been ill treated or molested. Too, his interest in finding Balik did seem to be genuine.

## 5

The encampment of the Swahil raiders was astir before dawn. Ramtul had ordered the slain leopard to be carried with them to their city. Two of the ebon warriors cut down a small tree and fashioned it into a sturdy pole. To it they secured the legs of the big cat with leather straps. Then the party set out with Ramtul, Balik, and Myumba at the fore. The Kenite's horse was led by one of the warriors, while two more, one at each end of the makeshift pole, carried the dead leopard.

For hours they marched, through the thick forest land. The trees that encompassed them were filled with diverse monkeys and birds that filled the air with pandemonic sound. Baleful yellow feline eyes watched them from the dense interlacing of foliage.

Soon after midday the party reached the verge of the sullen jungle. Just beyond the towering trees sprawled a great reservoir. An elevated aqueduct led from the body of water, as far as the eye could see. On great columns of hewed stone rose the lofty waterway, carrying its life giving force to its ultimate destination. The band of men followed the stone channel, walking along its base. Balik marveled at the ingenuity responsible for the structure. Evidently these black men were further advanced than he had surmised. He had seen aqueducts in the past while visiting Assyrian cities, but he would never have expected to see such a thing so far from that land-spanning empire. Soon Ramtul halted the men. At his orders they rested briefly in the shade beneath an arch of the aqueduct. The man-made formation rose some forty feet into the air.

Balik took the opportunity to question the dark chieftain. "Who built this waterway, and to where does it lead?"

"The channel was built by my people, outlander," replied Ramtul. "Our Queen told our elders how to construct it. They in turn drew the plans on papyrus manuscripts. Headmen were appointed to lead teams of workers. Some worked the quarry, some mixed mortar, while others did the building. It took many men and many years to complete it."

"I did not think you so far advanced, Ramtul," said the Kenite. "How did you learn of paper or writing?"

"All these things were taught our forefathers long ago by our queen. Though she rules with an iron hand she gives us much knowledge. It makes life better for the Swahil, and it makes us more powerful than the other tribes around us."

"Is the queen of your people?" asked Balik.

"No, my friend," answered Ramtul. "She was in her black brooding palace long before my people came to this land. It was many years in the past that my father's father discovered her dark abode while leading the Swahil to a new home. They were part of a division of a larger nation. Our history does not tell us why my ancestor chose to settle in this land, but within the close proximity of the black palace the walls and buildings of Alcatheo were constructed. The city was named by the queen. We know not what it signifies.

"Over the years we have learned many things and have risen high above any level of advancement we could have hoped to reach on our own."

"But surely the same woman cannot dwell in the dark palace at Alcatheo," Balik said. "She would be well over a century old by this time."

"I dare not speak further of her," Ramtul told him. "It is not wise to do so. Come, we must continue our march if we are to reach the city before nightfall."

Balik respected the counsel of the Swahil chieftain, though his reluctance to speak further served to arouse the Kenite's curiosity. If nothing else, it gave Balik something to ponder as the journey continued.

That eve, the party reached Alcatheo. Balik was impressed with the majesty of the jungle city. The well-fortified metropolis rose atop a steep hill, which was surrounded by the high impenetrable jungle. The only sward in the region was that which lined the left side of the large aqueduct. It was on that side that Ramtul had led his followers. The sward of green ended where a wide stone slab avenue began, at the base of the hill. Up the inclined pave the party walked, toward the yawning gates of the city wall. Several dusky warriors stood about the entrance, each adorned in mail and leather. Spiked helmets covered their heads, and metal greaves covered their legs below the thigh. The guardsmen saluted Ramtul as he approached.

Once inside the wall Balik saw that forty feet away there was a second wall of equal size and height. Upon its face were huge bas-reliefs that depicted scenes from the history of the construction of Alcatheo. Between the walls were many stone dwellings. Among them men, women, and children went about their daily business. "These are the guardians of the wall," said Ramtul. "They live their entire lives here between the walls of Alcatheo."

Once through the second gateway, Balik at last saw the city itself. Most of the buildings visible were one to three stories in height. The architecture was unlike any the Kenite had seen. Yet none was so fantastic as the immense dark structure toward which he was heading. It stood at the far end of the city, like a brooding reminder of a bygone age. At its front a wide set of steps mounted to a colonnaded landing. When the group of men reached the base of the stairs, they stopped. Ramtul spoke. "You must go on alone from here," he told Balik. "Climb the stairs and enter through the ebony doors atop the landing. Once inside you must ascend the staircase to the second floor. Follow the corridor to your left at the top of the stairs to its end. There the queen's guards stand before her door. They will allow you ingress to her chamber."

Balik studied the lucent black stone that made up the stairs and walls of the strange edifice. Its shimmering surface seemed to shine with diaphanous light. The grim building had no visible windows from what Balik saw of it. There were two levels rising from the colonnade, topped by a great, gleaming dome. The latter appeared to be made of translucent black crystal.

Turning back to Ramtul, Balik questioned. "Am I to enter the palace alone then?"

"You must," came the reply. "We enter only when we are summoned. To do otherwise is to invite death. Go now, the queen awaits you. And may the gods go with you."

On that note Balik ascended the steps of the building and entered through the huge ebon doors. The twin portals, studded with engraved metal discs, swung inward at the Kenite's push. When he had stepped inside, the heavy doors closed behind him with an echoing crash. An uncanny, green luminous glow filled the interior of the dream-haunted palace. Noting that the strange brilliance pulsed with an unnatural life of its own, Balik boldly climbed the stairs that led to the upper level. With caution he set his teeth and entered the dimly lit corridor.

On the rightward side of the hallway was a solid wall, while on the left was a row of spiked columns that seemed to extend the length of the corridor. Balik could not see to its end, as it faded into darkness. With smoldering eyes he attempted to pierce the nightly gloom; though he was without success. While he made his wary way forward the only sound he heard was that of his own footfalls. To his knowledge he was alone. Yet he had an uncomfortable feeling that there was someone, or something, close by. As though a sentient entity watched him. A cold shiver ran up his spine and the hair at the nape of his neck bristled. As he moved along he surveyed the hall on either side. Involuntarily his hand reached for the hilt of his sword. It was not there; his weapons had been taken by Ramtul and his followers.

Suddenly, for a brief instant, Balik thought he saw a pair of green, incandescent eyes watching him from the tenebrous darkness between two columns. When he had blinked his own eyes and looked again, he saw only the blackness. The baleful, glowing orbs had gone just as quickly as they had seemed to come. So fast had it happened that Balik was not certain he had actually seen them at all.

Presently he came to the dark corridor's end. A great ornate door stood guarded by two gigantic albino sentinels. Each of the burly brutes was armed with a huge scimitar. Strangely enough, they were attired in garments of fabric rather than mail. Obviously they trusted their martial abilities to the extent that they felt no use for defensive covering. Neither of the guards spoke as the Kenite approached. One of them grasped the brass cobra handle of the door and swung it wide. The other white-haired giant motioned Balik to enter.

Inside, beneath a lapis lazulis ceiling, a fragrant incense filled the chamber. The aromatic mixture drifted mist-like from silver censers that stood here and there about the large room. Balik noticed that in the center of the ceiling the great dome rose high into the stygian abyss of the night sky. Through the dark crystal the stars winked like sparkling beacons in the dreamy distance. Inside the chamber flickering flames danced in bronze lamp stands, casting malevolent shadows on night-darkened walls. The sapphire-blue mosaics that covered the ceiling section that rimmed the dome glistened from the half light afforded by the lamps. Beneath his feet Balik felt the padded surface of plush oriental rugs. While his keen eyes scanned the dimly lit room, a feeling of apprehension weighed on his senses.

"Enter, warrior."

The voice was feminine and seductive. The unexpected command startled the Kenite. Instantly he looked in the direction from which the voice had come. There, stretched on a silken couch of a ruby hue, beneath a woven awning of purple, lay an ivory figure half hidden by hanging drapes. Upon first seeing the shapely form, Balik thought it molded of the same white marble that formed the statuary positioned about the room. Recovering his composure, and fighting the somnolence that he realized was seizing his senses, he approached the reclining figure. As he neared the couch he discovered that the one who lay upon it was not cast of stone.

## 6

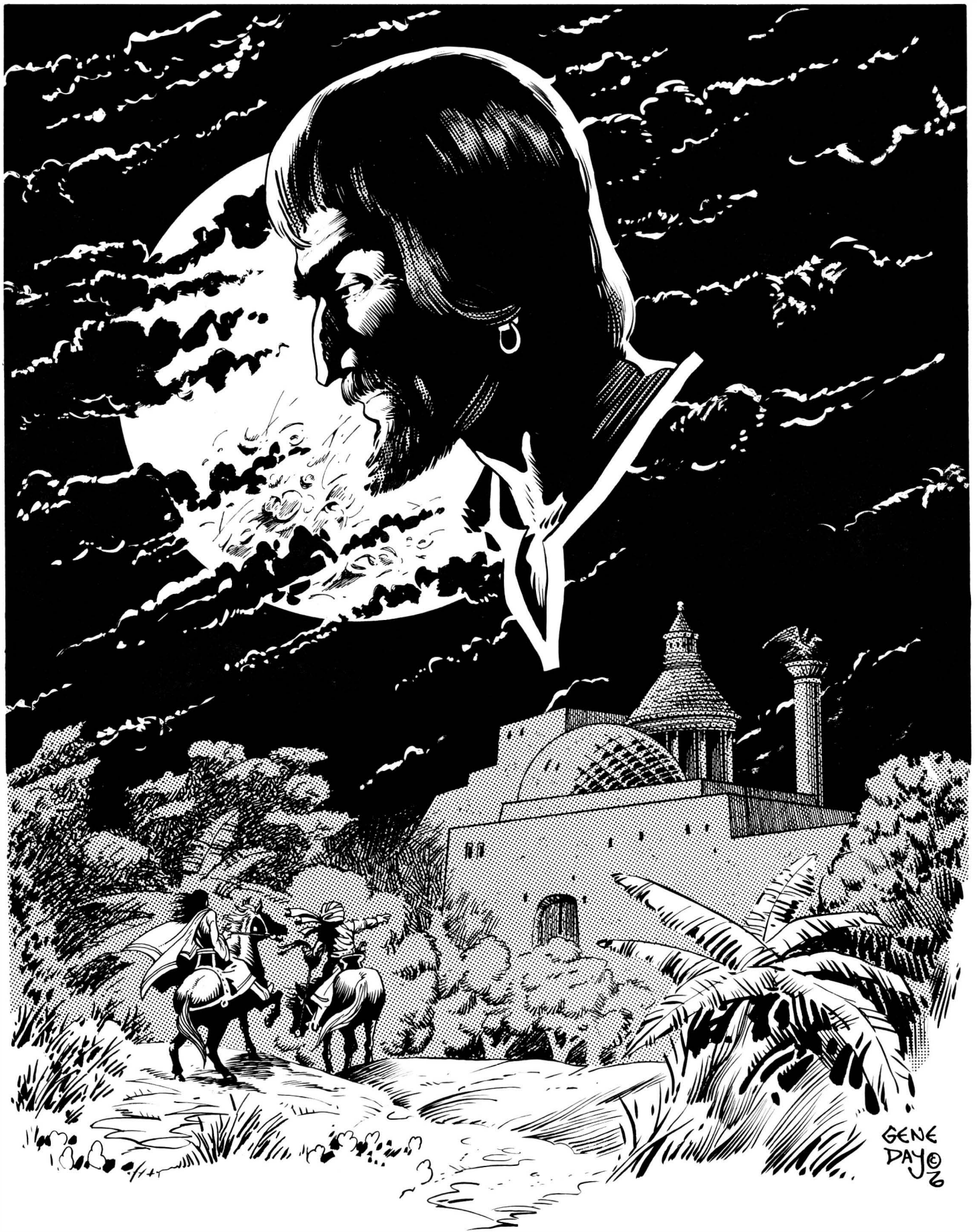
It was nigh midnight when Shelomar and the nameless Arab reached Alcatheo. Bathed in starlight, the city presented a tranquil setting. The moon-haunted metropolis lay quiet and grim atop the night shrouded hill. Things seemed peaceful enough, yet behind the walls, within the sullen black palace of the queen, there dwelt a malignant presence.

The riders had left the green sward that bordered the base of the aqueduct and were hidden by the sylvan foliage of the nearby jungle. Shelomar was fretful after having seen the city; it did indeed seem impossible that she and her companion could find Balik in such a stronghold, much less escape the place thereafter. Late as it was, the gates stood open. It was an unusual circumstance, particularly for a city located in a region inhabited by savage beasts.

"Balik is a prisoner within yonder walls," proclaimed the Arab in a whisper.

"But how shall we reach him?" questioned the girl. "There are guards at the entrance."

"Aye, and more along the top of the wall," added the Arab. "Yet sleeping men give no alarm." The stranger gestured with his hand. Then he urged his mount forward. "Come, let us enter the city now; the guardians of the wall will not awaken until morning."





Shelomar wondered at the prudence of the Arab. Could it be that he believed men slumbered at the movement of a hand? Magic and necromancy were common in these times; perhaps the stranger was a wizard. Either that or a fool. If he was the latter, they would most likely become fettered prisoners in the dungeons of Alcatheo.

From the shielding flora the riders approached the paved avenue that ascended to the wide opened city gates. Silence reigned as they made their easy way to the pave, then the unshod hoofs of their horses fell quietly on the stone slabs as they rode on. When they reached the entrance Shelomar saw that several sentinels lay about the ground or were slumped against the wall, as if in a deep sleep. The silvery radiance of the moon danced off their spired helmets. The slumbering guards were completely oblivious to the intruders of their garrison. The scene at the second gate was the same. An icy chill ran up Shelomar's back; she felt the cold tinge of fear, a fear of the supernatural.

Once inside the darkened city, lit only by an occasional lamp mounted atop a tall pole, the Arab issued a warning. "Be cautious, woman, for there are others afoot this night. Only those who guard the walls sleep the sleep."

"But where is Balik?" she implored. "I want only to find him and then leave this unholy place of sleeping guards and dark streets."

From where they were in the city, the dark palace was visible, gleaming like a monstrous ebony jewel. "Your husband is within that edifice," proclaimed the Arab, as he pointed in the direction of the queen's abode. "Time grows short. You must remember these words. From beyond the threshold an evil shall break forth. Beware the azure gem of death."

"What are you saying?" queried the girl. "You speak in riddles."

At that moment, before an answer could come, a sound broke the stillness of the nighted metropolis. A short distance ahead a closing door was heard. The Arab steered his mount into the dense shadows between two buildings. Shelomar followed the example and reined in behind him. The riders faded into the darkness of the alley as approaching footfalls came to their ears.

As the nocturnal wanderer passed their hiding place, Shelomar's horse emitted a startled neigh. With a celerity born of experience, the passerby drew his sword and stood his ground. Peering into the shadows with sharp eyes he saw the face of the white mare. "Come out where I can see you, intruder, or I shall cleave your skull."

The ultimatum was quite clear. Though frightened, Shelomar urged her horse out into the street to confront the armed warrior. She hoped that the Arab's presence was not detected, and that he would thus be able to take the city dweller by surprise. Once in the dimly-lit street, she could discern the man who had discovered her. He was a statuesque black warrior, handsome of face and frame, with a rounded tuft of ebony hair adorning his head. He was dressed in a leopard loincloth belted at the waist. From a second belt depended a leathern scabbard. His left shoulder was bandaged and across his chest were the scratch marks of a great cat. Incredulously the dark man eyed the woman and her horse. "A white woman!" exclaimed the warrior. "You are Balik's woman. I remember you from the hill." The man sheathed his blade and stepped toward the girl. "I know not how you came to be here, but I will not harm you," he assured her. "Balik saved my life and I have pledged my service to him. But you must not be found here; you would be killed, or delivered to the queen."

Shelomar gained heart at his words. "I am not alone," she said. "There is a friend in the alley."

The warrior nodded and paced to the entrance of the darkened alley. "Come forward," he called in a low voice. "You must come with me or chance being discovered."

There was no reply, nor did anyone venture forth. The black turned and looked at the girl a moment, then he stepped into the shadows. Soon he emerged, quite alone. "There is no one there," he said.

"Then he must have fled," reasoned the girl.

"He could not have done so, for there is no exit from the alley, only here, and no one has passed us."

Shelomar was stunned. The Arab must be there, for he had entered first. Then she remembered that the stranger who had helped Balik enter the mountain kingdom of Queen Lydia had disappeared in the same mysterious way. Truly the Arab must have been the same benefactor. The black warrior assumed that the girl had attempted a ruse, in order to escape. Yet she had not tried to run. Whatever the case, nothing more was said of it. "We must leave the streets," the black told her urgently.

The sound of his voice brought Shelomar back to her senses. Without question she handed the warrior the reins of her steed's hackamore. Taking the leather reins in his outstretched hand he led the pensive girl along nighted back streets and shadow-haunted alleyways. Soon they came to a large building surrounded by a high wall. They passed through a narrow gateway into a flowered courtyard, then went to the back of the house where a stable stood. The dusky warrior tethered the horse inside a squat enclosure where cows were kept. As they walked toward the house, the warrior spoke quietly to Shelomar. "I am Myumba, and this is the house of my father. He believes me a wise son, and abhors the yoke of the queen. He will help us free your man."

"Then you know where to find Balik? And you will help us leave the city?"

"I will do all that I am able," Myumba replied. "Even forfeit my life if need be. You should make no mistake. The danger is great, for all who have attempted to rise up against the queen have perished, save one."

"Nothing matters to me without Balik," said Shelomar. "Nor would I savor the sweetness of life any longer without him."

"What we lack in wisdom," said Myumba, "we atone for with courage and determination."

For the first time since the ordeal began, Shelomar smiled. She liked this young black warrior who had befriended Balik, and she believed him trustworthy. Presently she and Myumba entered the massive two-story house. At the door they were greeted by a gaunt black woman whose expression betrayed her astonishment upon seeing the white girl.

"Mother," said Myumba, "this is the wife of the outlander. I have promised to help rescue him from the Black Palace."

"No!" exclaimed the woman, anxiety in her voice. "After what has befallen this house, are you such a fool? Would you bring more sorrow to the one who bore you?"

"I owe the outlander my life," he told her. "It is a matter of honor. Trust your son."

Myumba's mother bowed her gray head, realizing that he was of age and must pursue his own destiny. "So be it," she said in resignation.

The trio then climbed a flight of stairs to the second floor. Walking along a narrow corridor, they stopped before a closed door. Myumba's mother tapped upon it lightly and then entered. A moment later she appeared at the entrance and summoned her son and Shelomar inside.

"You may leave us now, Natia," said a voice to the petite black woman.

The room was adequately furnished, like the other sections of the house seen by the girl. The skins of jungle beasts hung from the walls and woven rugs covered the stone floor. At a delicately carved wooden table sat a white haired black man. At their approach he rose from his chair to greet them. Shelomar noted that he had but one arm. "I am Bukwai," he said to the girl. "My son has told us of the courage of your man. You are welcome in my house."

"I thank you," she replied.

"Father," began Myumba, "I must help Balik now. You once vowed that you would not repeat the story of the ghostly apparition until the time arrived when one would attempt to destroy the dark queen's power. Now is the time and I am the one."

"Perhaps it is so, my son. Though I fear for your life I would not dissuade you from your oath to the outlander." Bukwai then indicated chairs. "Sit you down and listen well. Many years ago when you were but a boy, my son, I stealthily entered the Black Palace on an ill fated mission of vengeance. The queen had ordered the public execution of my brother because he resisted her will

and sought to leave Alcatheo to live as a free man. He died beneath the axe at the hand of one of Her Majesty's white giants.

"Later, under cover of darkness, I gained ingress to the dark palace. I made my way to the door of the queen's chamber and created a diversion that drew her guards away. Then I entered her room with a double edged blade in my hand. The witch was seated serenely on a silken couch. As I stepped into the chamber she spoke, saying that she had been awaiting my coming. Before I could raise my hand against her, the albinos returned and attacked me. Taken by surprise, and due to their great strength, I was quickly subdued. The queen approached me then and said that she regretted the death of my brother, but that order must be upheld. She said further that she understood my feelings and forgave my impetuosity. Then she placed a light chain about my neck, from which depended a deep blue gem. She told me that the gem was priceless and hoped that its value would serve to rectify the unfortunate incident. She then bade me leave. The white giants took me to the doors of the palace to be certain of my departure.

"While walking toward home, disheartened yet vowing to try again to rid our people of the dark queen's rule, I became aware of an acrid stench on the wind and a shuffling sound at my back. When I turned I saw a pair of glowing eyes of green in the darkness. With haste I withdrew my sword, but was dumbstruck by horror at the sight of the monstrosity that loomed in the shadows. The hulking entity defied description, and its ferocity was beyond belief. I was frozen as the Thing attacked. Instantly it closed the distance between us and grasped my right arm, tearing it from the shoulder. In my left hand I had been clutching the blue gem. Its chain broke as I jerked on it when attacked. I dropped it then upon the ground and it fell not far from where I had fallen. The creature ignored me and bent to retrieve the gem. When it had the stone it turned and disappeared into the night.

"I was attended and doctored by our people. Soon I recovered, though the fear of the experience had turned the hair of my head white. On the day following the incident the queen proclaimed that I was allowed to live as a reminder of the fate awaiting those who chose to resist her rule. If not for the love of your mother I would have become a broken man; one without the spirit of life.

"I believe that the queen's demon slays those who possess the blue gem, so long as it remains on their person. In that respect her power over the creature has its limits. The albino guards are her only other protection to my knowledge."

Both Shelomar and Myumba had been held spellbound as Bukwai spun his tale. At length Shelomar spoke. "The stranger who led me here...he warned me of a blue stone. He said that from beyond the threshold an evil shall come. Now I understand. Your queen summons the presence from beyond this world we know. Somehow it is attracted to the gem you spoke of, Bukwai."

Myumba was puzzled. "Do you mean the man whom you said was in the alley with you?"

"Yes," she replied. "Although I know that he was not there when you investigated."

"I thought you had sought to distract me in order to flee," Myumba said. "I was sure that you had simply followed our party to Alcatheo alone."

"I could not have reached the city alone, nor hoped to enter it unseen," Shelomar answered. "It was he who led me here."

"It matters little in any case," said Myumba. "We must concern ourselves with freeing Balik."

"That is wise, my son," interjected Bukwai. "Solve one mystery at a time, and dwell not on those that vex the mind."

"Aye, father. And if our suppositions are correct, we should have only the two albinos to contend with. Albeit we should be prepared to face the unexpected."

"We must needs make haste," Shelomar urged. "For if we can free Balik before dawn we can pass through the gates of the city without fear of being seen, for the guards there sleep." She then told them the story of her entrance into Alcatheo. Incredulous as Myumba was, old Bukwai readily believed her strange tale.

"There are more things in the earth than are dreamed of by man," philosophized Bukwai. "Go then, and may the gods go with you."

It had all happened as if it were a dream. Balik stood before the enchanting woman who had spoken to him. His first impression was one of astonishment, for he had not expected to see a white woman within the chamber of the queen. The incense that drifted on the air seemed to dull his senses and his head fairly spun as if he had consumed much wine.

"Come closer, oh man," enticed the queen. "Sit here at my feet."

The Kenite felt listless, and had begun to lose control of his will as the vapors overcame him. The scarlet tressed woman on the deep red couch was dominating his attention. Her oval face and exquisitely proportioned figure captivated him in a way beyond his comprehension. The woman was attired in a gossamer gown that was nigh transparent. Even in the soft light of the lamps her feminine charms were clearly evident. She held her head aloft and stared through cat-like eyes. Balik sat on the pillow pointed out by the queen.

"Do you ever dream, warrior?" she asked.

"I have more vivid nightmares while awake," replied the Kenite with a hint of sarcasm.

"You cannot fight my will, mortal," sneered the woman. "I am much stronger than you. My fathers held sway over these lands long before the dark men came. We have seen the earth boil, then cool, and then succumb to mountains of living ice that slowly moved across the face of the land to cover all the world. We have seen the sun and the years melt away the frost layer, and the green things grow anew. We have watched nations arise out of the dust of eons and then decay with the passing of time. Ours was the most mighty race to walk the ground of man. We held sway even over the terrible beings that dwell in the gulfs beyond the stars."

Her words seemed to echo in Balik's mind, as if he were hearing them resound within a long tunnel. "Who are you?" he asked.

"I am the queen, warrior. What are names?" she asked in turn. "I was named Melodie by my mother, though some call me Beautiful, some call me Deadly. I am the last of the Old Race, that which was here before the race of men. A vile pestilence brought death to all my people. Only I survived. I dwelt alone in this dark palace until the coming of the blacks. And with them I deigned to build a clandestine empire so that I may dwell within the opulence my powers entitle me to. I possess centuries of wisdom, while you have lived not a lifetime."

As the winsome vixen raved on Balik stood in silence. The Kenite thought her mad, though it was his own brain that spun. Yet Ramtul had alluded that the queen was ancient. At length Balik ceased to care. What little reason remained told him that he was becoming subject to a spell, although due more to the opiate effect of the wafting mist rather than the somber beauty of the dark queen. Her eyes fairly flamed as she spoke.

"What of the albino giants who watch your door?" Balik questioned. He sought to fill his mind with other thoughts in an attempt to ward off the queen's enchantment. "Are they not of the Old Race?"

"No!" came the reply, somewhat indignant. "They were formed by the Element Masters. They serve me as they did my mother before me and her mother from an epoch long forgotten."

"And what do you want of me?" he asked.

"You will be consort to me, until you are old and feeble and your time comes. Then you shall rest in high honor in the Hall of Kings with past suitors--and I shall find another companion."

Balik was hardly able to comprehend the words. He seemed to be slipping into a dark void wherein time did not exist.

"Your will has almost left you. The vapors enslave you. My magic is strong," taunted the queen. "The centuries have developed my mind far above the natural limits. I have ventured far beyond the boundaries of insipid human intellect. I have walked the hall of ages and transversed the rose-hued field of dreams. With my power I can see events afar off, even across the abyss of time itself. I saw you in a vision and knew that you would stop on the knoll where loyal Ramtul



and his followers captured you. I have chosen you alone above all other men. You should be flattered, warrior."

The Kenite had heard the words but was unable to reply. Nothing seemed to matter now. The drug mist had immobilized his body and mind. Now even his memory seemed to fade into oblivion. The last thing he was truly aware of was the queen reaching down to him and placing a light chain about his neck. Then all was dark. "The gem will not bring you harm as long as you remain within these walls," said the queen, to herself perhaps, for she knew that Balik was beyond comprehending her words. "If ever you overcome the mist of forgetfulness and attempt to leave the palace, you will be rent asunder."



Elsewhere in the city, having received from Bukwai the possible secret of the dark queen's power over the grim demon from beyond the threshold, Myumba and Shelomar had set out for the black palace.

"Myumba," whispered the girl, as they crept along the dark and deserted streets, "If what you have said is true, that the queen knows all things, will she not know of our plans?"

"I think not," he replied. "She will be preoccupied with the seduction of Balik. And it has been many years since any have sought to do her harm. Not since my father have any of the Swahil gone against her. She will not be expecting such a rash act."

Shelomar did not reply. The thought of another woman with Balik angered her far beyond words. So ardent was her contempt that she would have thrashed the queen herself could she have reached her. As the two bold rescuers advanced, twice Myumba motioned Shelomar into the dense shadows between buildings, for he noticed someone walking about. Each time they hid until the others passed by, then made their stealthy way to the palace. Presently they stood before the enchanting ebony edifice. Where it lay slumbering beneath the time-haunted stars the slick surface of the building reflected the lurid glow of the moon, while the tenebrous dome sparkled and gleamed like a great black jewel. Shelomar thought it a foreboding place and it chilled her blood to think of having to enter it. Yet the love she bore Balik gave her courage. To Myumba the dour building seemed the abode of Death itself. From his youth he had feared and shunned the dreaded place. Although Shelomar was unfamiliar with the sight of the Black Palace she sensed the evil that overshadowed the ancient structure. Yet they both deemed to enter it at all costs.

When Myumba was certain that there was no one about, he took the girl by the hand and together they raced across the open courtyard and up the steps of the building to the colonnaded landing. As always, the doors of the Black Palace were unlocked, a circumstance that unnerved Myumba a trifle. "The proud hussy trusts much in her power to leave the entrance unguarded," said the black warrior.

"Pride often goes before a fall," whispered Shelomar. "Her haughtiness may prove her undoing."

The intruders stood silent and motionless once they were inside the ominous building. The unnatural green brilliance that pulsed and pervaded the dark interior revealed the staircase that Myumba knew led to the upper rooms where the queen dwelled. The emerald glow shown hideously, as if it were a living thing. Both Myumba and Shelomar wondered at the source of the incandescent light. All the while a nameless dread oppressed them. "This place is more than strange," said the Swahilite. "I wonder what devil's lamp it is that lights the rooms within these ancient walls."

"It is beyond our understanding, Myumba."

"Seven curses take the place," snarled the black man. "Let us proceed."

Cautiously they mounted the marble stairs and soon entered the nighted corridor that led to the queen's chamber. Myumba had cautioned Shelomar to stay at a distance once they confronted the albino guardsmen. Although the Swahil warrior was in awe of the giants, he harbored a strong resentment toward them as the slayers of his uncle. Formidable as they may be, he had vowed to end their hated existence in the name of justice. As the bold couple neared the end of the gallery Myumba could faintly see the massive door before which the guards stood. Taking Shelomar aside behind a column, the Swahilite devised a plan.



"Step into the corridor and distract the guards," he told her. "When they approach you I will take them unawares."

The lithe girl squared her shoulders and ventured out into the hall. She walked slowly down the dream-haunted corridor toward the queen's door. Presently she was close enough to be seen and one of the fearsome guards noticed her. The scowling giant uttered not a word as he immediately began to walk toward her. Too, he was followed by his fellow. Upon reaching the girl the first to grab her released her suddenly, recoiling with a start, with mouth opened wide in a silent scream as Myumba drove his keen blade between his unprotected ribs. On silent feet the Swahilite had crept from the darkness to succor Balik's woman.

The black warrior stood in shocked wonder as he withdrew his shining blade, for the grotesque giant neither bled nor fell. Rather, a look of grim malevolence contorted his features while he pulled his huge scimitar from his sash. As the one guard engaged Myumba, the other grasped the girl by the arms and held her fast. Her dilated eyes betrayed her astonishment at the invincible sentinel, who appeared unharmed by Myumba's sword thrust. She fought furiously against the albino who held her but was unable to break free of the vise-like grip. Meanwhile, Myumba deftly parried the stunning blows of the striking scimitar. The somber giant was powerful and quick, but he was also clumsy. Twice Myumba was able to get in close enough to his silent antagonist to strike with his own gleaming weapon. Each time the twin-edged blade entered the flesh of the grim guardsman, and each time his facial expression bore mute witness to his pain and rage. Still, the pale devil did not falter, and not a drop of blood issued from the wounds.

The truculent combatants pressed one another back and forth along the wide darkened corridor. Soon the Swahilite began to tire, while his hulking opponent seemed unaffected by the exertion of battle. The black warrior knew that he could not withstand the onslaught of his large enemy forever. In a desperate attempt to end the fray, Myumba struck the wrist that wielded the deadly scimitar. The ponderous weapon spun into the air with the albino's severed hand still grasping the jeweled hilt. With alacrity born of the will to survive, Myumba leaped for the curved blade as it struck the polished basalt surface of the floor. Grasping the handle with both hands, the black warrior turned and swung it in a sweeping arc as the maimed giant rushed upon him. The blade clove the creature's neck, sending his silent, screaming head bouncing along the shadow-clustered hall.

As the body of the giant fell limp, his companion released Shelomar and drew his own weapon. With a blur of motion the blazing eyed demon attacked. Myumba tried in vain to use the same maneuver he had used against the first guard in dispatching his new adversary. But the albino had witnessed the effective technique that had brought destruction to his comrade and thus evaded the loss of his own sword hand. The black warrior was already tired from the first fight and the weight of the scimitar he now wielded. Too soon he began to lose his speed and agility and was forced back against one of the spiked pillars that lined the nighted hall. The powerful white brute was at the point of delivering a death blow when Shelomar struck him in the small of his back with her dagger. The blade did little harm, but it served to distract the giant for a brief instant. In that instant, when he turned his attention toward the girl, Myumba struck his neck from behind with the scimitar. As in the case of his fellow, his head was severed from his broad shoulders and sent flying. Neither of the albinos bled, yet they lay still upon the floor of the shadow-laden passage.

"They were not human," exclaimed Shelomar. "Not really alive."

"True," said Myumba. "But they are dead enough now to satisfy me."

"We must hurry then," ventured the girl. "I am certain the queen has heard the sounds of your sword play, and may even now be attempting to hide from us."

Shelomar's deduction was half correct. For when Myumba pushed open the door to the scented chamber, they found that the queen was prepared for them. She stood in the glow of a flaming lamp and at once appeared sinister, yet very beautiful. With piercing eyes she was glowering at the rash intruders. Between herself and them stood Balik, a blank expression on his face. He appeared as if mesmerized, with a gleaming sword in his right hand.

"Kill them," screamed the angered queen. "They seek our blood."

The Kenite reacted with great ferocity, his glazed eyes boring into those of Myumba, whom he did not recognize due to Melodie's magic.

"Balik!" exclaimed Shelomar. "It is Shelomar and Myumba! Balik!"

"He has been drugged," said the black man. "The incense in this room is the same as that used by the Swahil physicians. It appears that the queen combines science with her sorcery."

There was no time left for talking, as Balik leaped across the shining floor at Myumba. With his flashing blade he struck and swung like a man possessed of the devil himself. The black warrior simultaneously parried the first thrust and pushed Shelomar to one side. The girl fell over a group of stacked pillows while the two warriors fought on furiously. Myumba dreaded the prospect of such a battle since he knew how powerful an opponent Balik was. Aside from that, the outlander had saved his life and befriended him as well. The main purpose for entering the black palace was to rescue Balik and destroy the queen's power. And now it was Balik he must battle. Myumba tried as best he could to fight defensively. Yet more than once the Kenite's sword had drawn blood. Although his wounds were slight, the Swahil warrior knew that soon he would be forced either to slay the outlander, or be slain by him.

Meanwhile, her attention occupied by the struggle of the twin titans, the queen was taken off guard by Shelomar. Having worked her stealthy way around and behind the despotic vixen, the girl struck her a stunning blow with a heavy golden goblet. The dark empress cried out in pained surprise before she swooned. Distracted by the commotion, Balik hesitated and turned his gaze. In the instant he did, Myumba closed the distance between them and dealt the Kenite a blow to the head with the pommel of his sword. Balik fell forward in an unconscious heap. "Done," sighed Myumba.

Shelomar raced to her husband's side as the black warrior checked him over. "He is not hurt," declared the Swahilite. "But he will be out for a time."

While Shelomar embraced her mate, Myumba inspected the queen. Warily he approached the still form, descending to one knee for a closer look. A moment later he returned to where Balik lay.

"Help me lift him to my shoulder," he told Shelomar.

No doubt Myumba would not have needed aid, but for the soreness of the wounds inflicted by the leopard the night before; soreness that had been aggravated by the fighting within the palace.

"What about the queen?" questioned Shelomar.

"She will revive soon," came the reply. "But we shall be long gone by then."

Shelomar opened her mouth to speak, but Myumba silenced her. "Say no more," he urged. "Let us quit this evil place."

## 9

It was some time later that Melodie awoke from her stupor. She was in ire at the turn of events, and the throbbing pain in her head. A swift scan of the mist-haunted chamber told her that she was alone. Outside in the stygian corridor she discovered the slain guards. As she hurried along the nighted gallery, nearing two great spiked columns that were subtly different than the others, she detected the faint wail of a growing wind. It was before these pillars that she now paused, staring between them into the dark abyss beyond. This was the entrance, the threshold of the gulf through which the creature from beyond passed into this world.

While the dark queen watched intently, she saw a pulsing green light growing in the velvet darkness of the abyss. The howling of the other-worldly wind increased. Presently the emerald light became a spiraling luminescent coil. The brilliant, lucid glow moved inexorably toward her. The queen was amused at the coming of the demon. Surely Balik and the other two interlopers must have just moments ago left the palace. She smiled at the thought of the terror of the trio when the ethereal beast would come to claim the blue gem she had earlier placed about Balik's neck. Hastily she ran the length of the darkened corridor, descended to the main floor, and ventured out onto the landing. To her surprise there was no one in sight. This seemed quite impossible since the demon came forth only when one wearing the gem attempted to leave the Black Palace.

Unknown to her was the fact that the three intruders had been gone for almost twenty minutes. While the dark empress stood upon the steps of her abode, Balik was leading Shelomar and her mare through the quiet streets toward the city gate. Once free of the hypnotic eyes of the siren queen





and the drug mist, the Kenite had regained his senses. Myumba, meanwhile, had gone to retrieve Balik's horse. He planned to meet his new friends outside the walls of Alcathe. Had the queen been unoccupied, her powers would most likely have been sufficient to warn her of what was transpiring. Yet, in her cupidity and anger she was careless. She was certain that all the people of Alcathe feared her too much to ever try any form of rebellion. In her cunning she became proud, and as Shelomar had predicted, her pride was her undoing.

Suddenly Melodie became aware of a sulfurous stench in the air, and a shuffling sound at her back. She was hardly able to believe her horrified eyes when she turned to face her own familiar. The scream of fear and agony was smothered by the bulky hands of the demon as they gripped her slim throat.

Balik and Shelomar ceased their embrace upon hearing the approach of Myumba. He was leading Balik's white stallion, and a broad smile adorned the black warrior's face. "The guards at the wall still sleep," declared the Swahilite. "It is a wonder indeed."

"Many wonders have passed these last three days," proclaimed Balik. "But none greater than the sacrifice and courage of friends."

"We both thank you, Myumba," added Shelomar, "for all you have done. Our only regret is that the evil queen still enslaves your people."

"Worry not," he replied. "The fate she planned for Balik, should he have escaped her, has befallen her by this time. While in her chamber I removed the blue gem she had placed about Balik's neck and fastened it among the jewels she wore at her waist. We are all free of her enchantment now."

"You have proven yourself a man of honor," Balik said with a smile. "And a brave one in the bargain."

Myumba and Balik exchanged gestures of friendship, and the black warrior presented the Kenite with the teeth of the leopard he had slain, all strung on a leather cord. "I trust you will keep these as a reminder of the one whose life you saved."

"Aye, and of the man who saved mine," added Balik. "I will value them above gold, my friend."

"Go now then," Myumba urged, "before the city wakes. Many were loyal to the queen, those who were blinded by the little good she had done, and those made fat by her favors. I know not what their reaction will be upon finding her destroyed. But I am certain they will blame you."

"It is best that we go now then," said the Kenite with a nod. "Yet perhaps we shall meet again some day."

Having made their farewells, the outlanders departed.

As the orange glow of dawn painted the vast expanse of the eastern sky, Balik and Shelomar were more than a league distant from Alcathe. The dire events had passed, and the two lovers now thought only of the unsolicited aid of Myumba, and of the puzzling intervention of the nameless Arab. Side by side, they rode on in search of adventure.



# Book Two

## Edited by Charles R. Saunders



### 10

"Woe to ye workers of iniquity; ye who weary the Maker of all things. Ye who plunder the land as though there were no Avenger. Take heed, for days that have not come since the beginning of time are upon you and your houses. In His anger He shall stretch forth His mighty hand against your fortified walls. On that day men shall come with fearful weapons of war and the storm of battle; a great host to destroy the staff of your power!"

Thus did Mesha, the aged Israelite wanderer, shout in the crowded streets of Yen, obscure city-state of the land of Kush. Unfortunately for the strident-voiced Israelite, fate had chosen to deal harshly with him this morn. As the orange glow of the rising sun painted the eastern horizon three drunken soldiers staggered from the tavern wherein they had roistered away the night. Now finished with their nocturnal drinking and carousing, all three were of surly temperament. As luck would have it Mesha was within hearing distance of the besotted Assyrians.

"Listen to that old fool," said one of the trio. "Let us have some sport with him."

"Aye, Rabsaris," said another. "The madman is an Israelite who fled the occupation. I am told they value their beards. What say we give this one a clean face?"

His two companions broke out in boisterous laughter at the suggestion. "A fit gesture, Shamagth," said one. "Perhaps the wizened cur will do his raving in the dark hereafter."

With brandished daggers Rabsaris and his fellows stumbled toward their prey. Meanwhile, Mesha had ceased his heralding and seated himself on the steps of the prodigious ornate fountain within the open square. The inhabitants of the Emerald City paid little attention to the Israelite and of a truth had no knowledge of the God of Whom he spoke. Most of the Kushites thought him an outlander whose wits had long since failed him.

The Assyrians pushed their bullying way through the throng of early risers toward old Mesha. The self-proclaimed prophet sat with head bowed at the base of the pink-veined marble fountain. The ancient rose-hued stone gleamed in the new dawn.

"Old squeaking buzzard," taunted Rabsaris, "stand in the presence of your betters!"

Fearfully the diminutive Israelite gazed up at the contemptuous face of his tormentor. The grim visage of the armed soldier caused him to tremble with apprehension. Upon that first glance Mesha knew what was in store for him. The Assyrians had enslaved the people of his homeland and even though Yen was not under their dominion they walked its streets with the arrogance common to all conquerors.

"I said stand, you miserable dolt!"

Rabsaris grasped the old man's tunic and jerked him to his feet, simultaneously knocking his crooked staff from his trembling hands. Then with stunning force he threw the aged wanderer to the unyielding pave. As Mesha shakily strove to rise one of the Assyrians retrieved the fallen staff. Before the Israelite was erect the warrior hooked the curved end of the staff around one of his ankles. With a twist of the stout stick Mesha was sent spinning headlong to the ground again. A crowd had gathered about the scene; although not one of those who composed it shared the ill humor of the soldiers. The aristocracy and governing body of Yen welcomed the invaders out of fear yet the common people abhorred their presence. Of all those attracted to the fountain there

was one whose dour demeanor betrayed his disgust for the bullies. With a determined stride the ebon-haired outlander walked toward the decorative fount. For an instant he paused outside a black-smith shop to pick up a broken oxbow. The cedar "club" was half the length of a grown man.

A moment later Rabsaris was sent reeling into the frothing waters of the marble basin following a sturdy kick to the backside. Shamagth turned to face the intruder only to be struck in the midsection by a sweeping swing of the oxbow. The third soldier had drawn his sword but presently found it knocked from his hand by the broken yoke. A second blow sent the dazed Assyrian sprawling. By this time Rabsaris was scrambling from the fountain. Yet ere he had one leg over its polished rim the oxbow came crashing down on his helmeted head. As the soldiers lay unconscious the warrior dropped the makeshift weapon and hurried the old man away, amid the cheering crowd.

When they had put a respectable distance between themselves and the Assyrians Mesha spoke. "Who are you that aids a prophet of the living God?"

"I am Criton, a Palestinian," said the bronzed outlander. "I care little for soldiers who find sport in oppressing the weak."

"I thank you, Criton. It is good to meet a countryman in this alien city. I am called Mesha, the Old One."

"We are well met, Mesha. But if you will take the humble advice of one younger than yourself you will avoid the market places and public square for a few days. Those three may break your neck the next time they see you."

"I have more fear of the wrath of God than of man," reasoned Mesha. "He surrounds us always with great danger, it is our trial."

"Your courage is admirable but it will not save your neck. God also gives wisdom to overcome danger. Heed my words. The Assyrians will be moving on soon and then you can roam the streets at will. Now I must leave you. Salaam Aleikum, Mesha."

"Salaam Aleikum (peace be with you), Criton."

A short time later Criton entered the stables of Aram Hassan. "Hassan, you dusky horsethief, how is business this fine day?"

The mixed-breed stableman was grooming a majestic Arabian horse with minute care. "Business is slow, Criton. There is not enough traffic in Yen. Ah, but if rich laden caravans from the East would visit our emerald city I could live like a king."

"You veiled bandit," said Criton good-naturedly, "you have enough wealth to buy all the flying carpets in Bagdad."

Hasson laughed at Criton's remonstrance. It was true that he was a successful businessman; but there was always room for more. Aram's mother was a Kushite while his father was of Arabian descent. Where his Kushite cousins were ebon-hued, his skin tone was of a deep brown. It was common for Kushite hair to be kinky and black as pitch, but Aram Hassan's father had bequeathed him hair of a different sort. The wavy mahogany locks gleamed with a scarlet tinge in the bright sunlight. "What brings you to my humble stables so early?" questioned Hassan.

"I came to check Aire, my fine black steed. I trust you have been taking perfect care with him."

"There is never any question. I care more for these noble beasts than for most men I know. Of a truth the horse has no ambition and seldom disrupts the scheme of things."

"Perhaps you should have been a philosopher, Aram, instead of a stable keeper."

"Bah...check your steed and leave a man to his work."

Criton was amused at Hassan's lack of patience and walked away laughing quietly to himself. While Hassan muttered in soliloquy the Palestinian groomed Arie.

Later that day Criton was nearing the Inn of the Seven Suns. It was there that he ate; for

the food was good, the table girls fair, and the prices reasonable. At length he was approaching the bronzed doors of the inn just as several soldiers were leaving. "You...!" exclaimed one of the group upon seeing Criton.

The aroused Palestinean struck the mailed Assyrian captain full in the face with a lightning fist. A moment later Criton was fighting like a mad wolf beset by a pack of jackals. The angry warriors had fallen on him when he hit Rabsaris. Though the outlander's fists smashed several noses and teeth, the soldiers outnumbered him and he was soon overwhelmed. Following the uneven battle Criton lay limp and unconscious in the street. "That is the barbarian who attacked me and my men this morning," declared the stunned Rabsaris while rubbing his aching jaw.

"What would you have us do with him, Assyrian?" The question came from Ebedmelech, the Kushite commander.

"Give him to me."

Ebedmelech disliked the Assyrians and knew that the outlander would doubtless die at the grim hands of Rabsaris and his henchmen. Yet to avoid unfriendly relations with the black-bearded conquerors the Kushite made Criton his prisoner. Once in the jails of Salifam, the venerated ruler of the Emerald City, he would be safe from Rabsaris. Ebedmelech knew his sovereign tolerated the Assyrians but would never hand over to them a prisoner of his dungeons. It was a matter of pride. "I think not, Rabsaris," said Ebedmelech. "This is a Kushite city and this man is a Kushite prisoner. He will thus be confined in a Kushite jail."

Ebedmelech ordered his men to disarm Criton and carry him away. Silently, and with eyes that mirrored the malice of the man, Rabsaris watched the retinue depart.

## 11

Myumba stood beneath the stars long after Balik and Shelomar had disappeared in the velvet darkness of the jungle. For the first time in his life the Swahil warrior felt truly free. He believed the dark queen destroyed and his people no longer under her sway. Presently he made his carefree way up the inclined pave to the city gates. The sleeping guards were as yet undiscovered and Myumba marveled at the somnolent sentinels who had been induced to sleep preternaturally by the nameless Arab who had aided Shelomar. According to the girl the silent sentries would awaken with the dawn. Although Myumba had previously doubted her story he no longer discounted it. His experience within the dream-haunted Black Palace had taught him the reality of the supernatural. Not wishing to become distracted the ebon warrior directed his thoughts to the problems that may well arise in the wake of the queen's destruction. He expected some trouble since many of the Swahilites were content under her dominion.

Once past the second gate Myumba's reverie was broken by the resonant sounding of the gong of assembly. Three times the great metal plate rang the call to arms. Myumba felt a sudden twinge of cold apprehension; for the gong rested atop the first level of the Black Palace. In the past it was the albino servants of the dark empress who sounded the call. Yet he knew he had destroyed the only two known to exist. Perhaps it was possible the queen had somehow escaped death at the hand of the evil entity from beyond the threshold, but he found it hard to believe the guardsmen still walked.

With haste born of dread Myumba went to the house of his father. Outside the chalcedony walls of the courtyard he paused. When he was certain there was no one about he entered through the narrow gateway. Moments later he was standing before his father. When the young warrior had finished relating the events that had transpired since leaving his sire earlier the old man spoke. "Something has gone amiss, my son. The queen no doubt lives, for no Swahilite would enter her dark abode nor sound the ancient gong."

"Then it is as I feared," sighed Myumba.

"It is worse than you feared. The queen saw you and will command your arrest. You must flee this cursed city immediately."

"No! I will not leave you to face the consequences of my deed."

"Your mother and I will not be harmed. You must go while there is still time. Seek out your



friend, the Kenite, Balik. Perhaps together you can discover a method to free our people of the dark empress."

Abruptly there came a rap at the front door. "Go now, Myumba. Out the back way."

At Bukwai's command Myumba raced for the door at the rear of the great house. On silent feet he sped across the yard and bounded over the wall. Luck was with the fleet warrior for the streets were deserted. The guards at the city gates still slumbered in the pre-dawn mists. Once out of Alcatheo the Swahilite entered the brooding jungle. As it would be impossible to catch Balik without a mount, he felt it imperative to acquire one as soon as he could. Deep into the sylvan regions he trekked toward the land of the Buzari. The savage painted men domesticated and rode the zebras of their homeland. With the gold Myumba carried in the leather pouch that depended from his belt he planned to purchase one of the striped steeds.

## 12

The detachment of guardsmen sent to arrest Myumba reluctantly returned to the Black Palace. Within the open square before the archaic ebon edifice stood the people of Alcatheo. Grim and pensive they were as they gazed at their beautiful and deadly empress.

"Myumba cannot be found, my queen," reported the commander in charge of the detachment.

"Then search the city. Form a party to scout the jungle around our walls. The rest of you return to your homes."

The commands were direct. While the Swahil guards hurried to carry out her wishes the winsome enchantress entered her dark palace. As she walked she pondered all that had followed the escape of Balik. Most notable was her having been attacked by the very demon-beast that served her. It was fortunate that her uncanny powers had revealed to her that the azure gem was secured to her waist chain. The revelation had come none too soon for the demon had grasped her slim neck. Simultaneously she had pulled the gem from the golden chain and cast it down the mammoth steps of the palace. Instantly the creature had released her and moved toward the mystic jewel. Having retrieved it the ethereal beast mounted the stairs and entered the Black Palace. Melodie had raced after it only to see it cross the threshold and disappear in a swirling eddy of emerald translucence. A moment later the "doorway" of the nighted abyss between the twin pillars faded in turn. With the gem gone the queen could no longer summon the entity from beyond. She had used her magic to mend the albino giants, however, and was thus not without protection. It was they who had sounded the gong of assembly.

There was one incident of major import that troubled Melodie. A troop of her warriors had reported that the soldiers who guarded the gates of the city slept an unnatural sleep. Although they had awakened with the coming of dawn they had no idea what had befallen them. The queen's preternatural instinct warned her that an awesome Power was responsible; yet she was not able to determine its origin or design. That enchantment protected Balik and his friends caused her much concern. By the time she reached her chamber she vowed to exact a greater revenge on the Kenite, Shelomar, and Myumba. So vile and all-encompassing would be her plan that any who were with the trio would suffer the same dire fate.

It was five hours since Myumba had left Alcatheo. At last he had reached the region said to be inhabited by the Buzari. The flora differed greatly from that of his home. The Swahilite marveled at the prodigious bushes crowned by purple, violet, and crimson blossoms. Colossal white flowers graced the verdant liana vines that made much of the jungle impassable. Through the towering trees passed the most remarkably beautiful multi-colored birds the warrior had ever beheld. Also within those arboreal heights he detected the shadowy, hairy figures of the fearful "tree men"; apes who stood as tall as a man yet weighed nigh as much as four warriors. For the most part the apes avoided contact with men yet their appearance and silent coming and going was a source of awe.

Presently Myumba stopped short, for the sight that met his eyes snapped him out of his reverie. On the trail ahead of him stood several of the painted warriors of the Buzari. No sooner had he halted than he felt the sharp point of a spear at his back. Turning cautiously he saw five more of the painted men behind him. All the warriors present were dressed in lion pelts. Upon their heads rested the dark manes of the great cats. Their faces and upper bodies were streaked with brilliant yellow, blue, and green dye. At their sides they wore daggers and each carried a heavy

hunting spear. At the harsh-spoken command of one of the Buzari Myumba and the small party moved ahead. Within the hour they reached the secluded village of the painted men. At the opposite end of a tawny veld it rested, surrounded on three sides by majestic plateaus. As they neared the palisade gate a company of mounted Buzari warriors emerged. From the yawning entrance they came and took positions on either side of the silent procession. Once inside the fenced hamlet Myumba was taken before the chief. Upon a great bamboo chair outside a huge thatch building sat the revered leader. With booming voice he addressed the Swahilite. "Who are you, stranger?"

"I am Myumba, son of Bukwai. I am from the city of Alcatheo."

A hush fell over the crowd assembled, and the chieftain started. The Buzari, like most of the neighboring tribes, feared the mystic city and its fierce inhabitants. Many were the fearful tales whispered of the city of the Black Palace. Gathering his somewhat shaken dignity, the chief continued his interrogation. "What business have you in our land?"

"I come as a friend of the noble Buzari," said Myumba. "I wish to buy a striped animal from you."

"The sacred zebras...? You dare make such a request?" Having placated his gods with that outburst of rage, the chief added, "What do you offer in return?"

"All the gold in this bag." Myumba loosed the pouch from his belt and handed it to the dour chief. The leader gestured and a painted warrior snatched the leather bag from the Swahilite and placed it before the bamboo chair. The chief emptied the contents onto the buffalo hide beneath his feet.

"There is much gold here but it is not enough to buy one of our striped steeds. Are you a fighter, Myumba?"

"Some say that I am. What does it matter?"

"It matters much, my young friend," said the chief. "For if you wish to buy a zebra from us you must not only forfeit this gold but defeat my champion in battle."

"Your price is high, chief of the Buzari, but I shall endeavor to pay it."

With another gesture from the chief an ebon giant stepped forward. At nigh seven feet the warrior towered above Myumba. Great muscles rolled beneath the dark skin of the warrior. "This is Tanum," declared the chief. "He is my champion. He is undefeated."

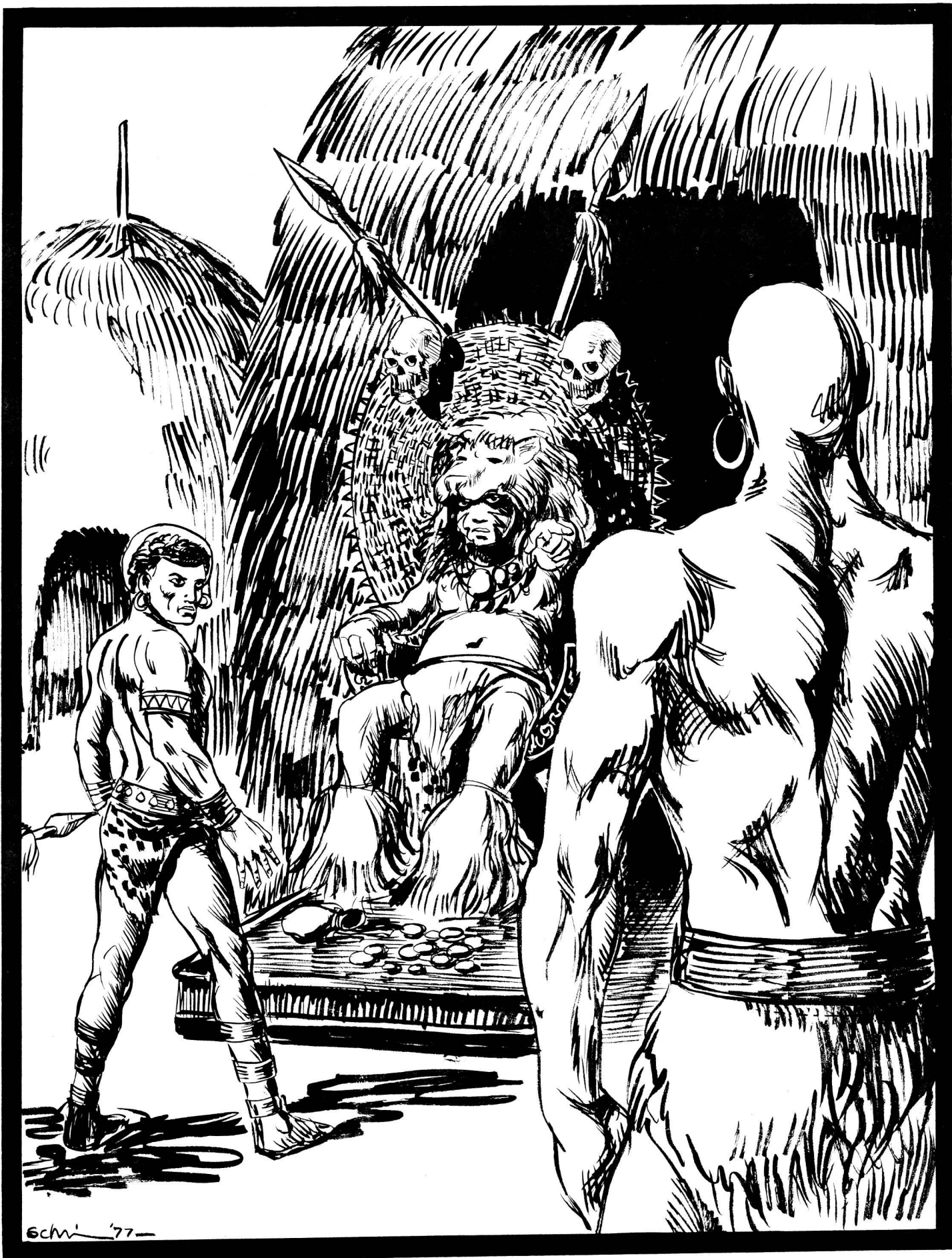
The Swahilite stared wide-eyed at the baleful black. Suddenly walking did not seem such a bad alternative....

## 13

The first thing Criton beheld when he opened his eyes were the iron bars of the arched doorway of the small room in which he lay. Peering through the opening he found that it led to a wide hall flanked by numerous barred cells. There were no guards that he could see but the door to his room was locked securely. Criton tested the strength of the bars and found them more than adequate. "Here I am, in trouble again," he soliloquized.

With silent resignation the Palestinian seated himself on the straw covered metal bunk against the wall opposite the door. At length he heard the sound of approaching steps. Quickly he moved to the arched door where presently a black guardsman stopped. The Kushite was taken aback as he stared into the face of the barbarian. He had expected to find the outlander asleep but instead he found him at the door. The Palestinian's long black hair was tied behind his head, secured by a silver band. Although Criton was not a tall man he was powerfully thewed. His shoulders and chest were of massive girth and his arms were knots of steely sinew. His years spent footracing as a youth had chiseled his legs to sculptured perfection. He was quite able to appear menacing when the mood struck him.

With startling swiftness the prisoner reached through the bars and grabbed the surprised guard. The Kushite reacted with like celerity and laid his short stick across Criton's knuckles. A second blow to the head left the outlander dazed as he dropped heavily to his knees.



"I have been a guard in these dungeons for more than thirty years, fellow," the black sentry sneered. "It will be a cold day in the desert before a prisoner gets the better of me."

The jailer walked off with a bellowing laugh. Criton chided himself for his naive act. He should have realized that he would not have been able to escape so easily, nor have been the first to attempt grabbing a guard through the barred door of a cell. There was nothing for him to do now but rest and conserve his strength. At least the room was clean and there was an earthen jug of water nearby; an accommodation of which he took immediate advantage. When he had quenched his thirst he laid once more on the metal cot. At length he called out to anyone who may be within hearing distance. He had hoped that there would be someone in a cell close by but there was no reply, save the mocking echo of his own voice. As he lay in the semi-darkness he sought to devise a means of escape.

Myumba gazed warily at the giant black warrior. Presently the Buzari champion advanced toward him. Tanum was weaponless and wore only a leather loin clout. Myumba was also without weapons; they had been taken from him by the painted men. The thought had entered his mind to use the iron studded belt at his waist as a whip against the giant but such a tactic was unbecoming a warrior. It was true that Tanum was a bigger man than he, but he was unarmed. Aside from that, the Swahilite considered the gleaming spears of the Buzari warriors about him. To attempt any such unscrupulous act was to invite death.

Suddenly the bulky black attacked the smaller Myumba. With uncommon speed the Swahilite fell backward to the earth and caught Tanum's midsection with both feet. He had planned to lift and toss the giant with aid of his own momentum, but to his consternation the Buzari warrior stooped over his out-thrust legs and grasped him by the neck. Lifting him as though he were a mere child, Tanum began to choke the life out of him. On a desperate venture, Myumba grabbed his foe's wrists and swung his feet upward. Doubling his knees to his chest he pushed against the torso of the ebon giant. Using all the might of his sinewy legs he was able to catapult free of the fingers crushing his throat. Quickly Myumba scrambled to his feet. Angered by his prey's escape Tanum neglected caution. In a blind frenzy he charged the Swahilite, but Myumba ducked and sprang head first into the giant's abdomen. Breathless from the blow the Buzari warrior doubled over. Myumba grabbed the man's arms and swung his own body upward, catching Tanum's chin with the back of his head. The giant staggered backward half unconscious. Before his foe could regain his senses, Myumba leaped up and kicked him square in the nose. To the amazement of all, the big warrior reeled senseless to the ground. Blood poured from his nose as he lay sprawled and unmoving.

"You are a great fighter, Myumba," said the chief, a bit awestruck. "You have earned the zebra of your choice."

Some of the warriors administered to their fallen champion, while Myumba picked his mount at the stables. Much later, after a feast given by Ruffa, the chief, Myumba departed the Buzari village. During the festivities prior to his leaving, he and Tanum had become friends. Now the ebon warrior of Alcathe thought only of his quest, as he left the land of the Buzari wearing the lion-hair anklets of a champion wrestler. As he journeyed he recalled that Shelomar had talked of a friend she and Balik had left in the Kushite city of Yen. Myumba was in hopes that she and Balik had gone there after leaving his jungle metropolis. With that thought in mind he urged his striped mount onward. There was much desert to cross once he left the verdant forest lands and he knew that he must find a way to destroy the dark queen before she destroyed him.

## 14

Far to the south of the Buzari village Balik and Shelomar rested beneath a verdant bower. The soft sward and musical birds of the forest lulled them after many hours of tedious riding. Too, the afternoon had been spent with the N'Gonwe river people. The dusky tribe had accepted them despite their fair skin. Balik was honored by a ride in one of their great war canoes and learned the art of spearing the swift fish of the river. Meanwhile Shelomar was watching the making of medicine by the N'Gonwe women. Now the lovers savored a few moments of solitude before the burning crimson ball left its place in the somnolent sky. The setting sun appeared to sink into the rose-hued mountains on the horizon.

"Balik, do you miss the desert lands?"

Stirred by her gentle voice, the Kenite looked into the mystical brown eyes of his woman.





"Aye, my love. This is a land of marvels and great beauty but I often long for the sands of Kush and the mountains of Palestine."

"Can we return to Yen?" said Shelomar. "I so love its emerald walls and jeweled statues."

"We can leave in the morning if you wish. Perhaps Criton is still there and we can tell him of our adventures."

Still nestled in his strong arms, Shelomar turned and kissed him tenderly. "I love you, my husband. More than life itself."

"And I you," said Balik. Then he kissed her soft lips once more.

The following morning Balik and Shelomar bade farewell to their N'Gonwe friends. Since the river people dwelt on a small island within a natural harbor near the river, the riders and their horses had to be rowed to the mainland. A great raft carried them. The waters of the languid body of azure across which they floated were crystal clear. As they neared the bank the depths became shallow. Beneath the surface they could see many varieties of fish and large turtles. Once they had reached land they thanked the warriors who had ferried them across and took their leave. Yen was many miles distant and they planned to ride slowly so as to see more of the beautiful sights of the Dark Continent.

After an uneventful journey Myumba had at last reached the cedar gates of Yen. The towering walls of the city gleamed emerald and gold in the desert sun. On either side of the entrance crouched mammoth sculptured lions of sea-green jadestone.

All along his route the Swahilite astride his striped steed inspired a sense of wonder. Never had anyone seen a man tame a wild zebra of the veld country. The reaction in the streets of Yen was no different. Although it was a cosmopolitan city whose people were accustomed to unusual sights, none had ever witnessed one such as this. Myumba himself, who bore the vestige of civilization yet in appearance was a man of battle, was equally enigmatic. At length he stopped at a water trough and dismounted. While his zebra drank the weary rider bent to splash the cool water over his dark face. When he had finished refreshing himself he turned his gaze to the curious crowd of onlookers. Presently two dour-faced soldiers stepped forward rudely pushing people aside. "From where do you hail, stranger?" queried a black-bearded Assyrian.

Myumba was not aware of the nationality of the swaggering mail-clad warrior. It was enough that he found his tone of voice offensive. "What business is it of yours?" said the Swahilite.

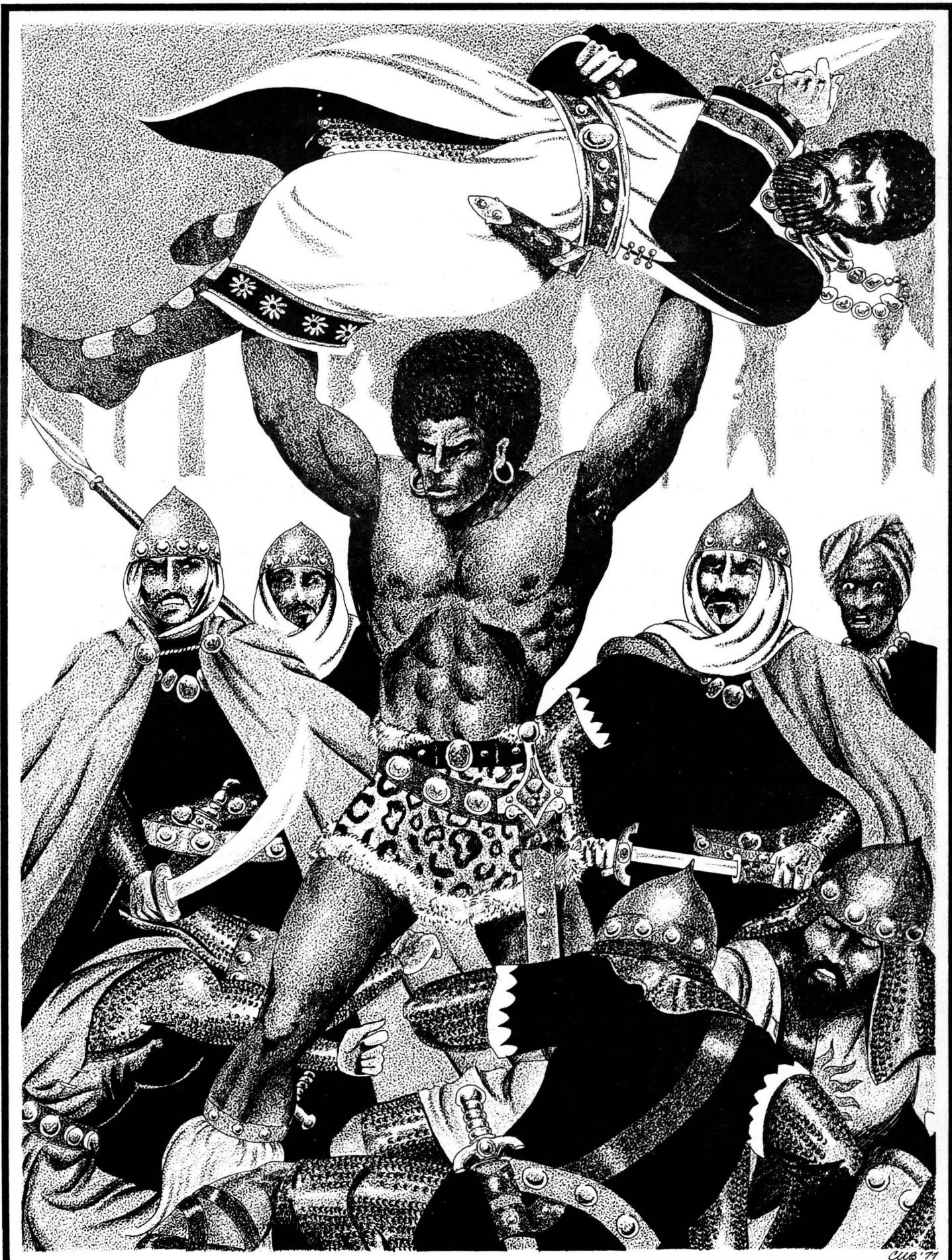
Rabsaris stiffened. "You surly black savage..."

The Assyrian's denunciatory exclamation was cut short as Myumba smashed a fist into the snarling, derisive face. Instantly the soldier's companion jumped the dark outlander and was rewarded with a kick to his midsection. Rabsaris gained his feet and struck Myumba a treacherous blow from behind. As the Swahilite dropped to the ground he turned, landing on his back and kicking upward with his legs. Both feet caught Rabsaris in the chest and sent him reeling. Myumba gained his footing, and towering above the soldiers, began knocking them left and right. With flailing limbs all three men were fighting furiously in a cloud of dust. Their private fray was short-lived however; for several Kushite guards arrived and joined in. During the scuffle Rabsaris withdrew a jeweled dagger and with it attempted to stab the outlander. With jungle-bred agility Myumba avoided the first thrust and, side stepping the lunge, grasped the Assyrian and lifted him overhead. With seeming little effort he tossed the chagrined Rabsaris into his scrambling fellows. Presently the Swahilite was overpowered by the combined weight of his antagonists. Needless to say, both the Assyrians and the Kushites knew they had battled this day.

All the way to the dungeon Myumba fought like a wild beast. "He is a fierce one, this outlander," said one of the guardsmen.

"Why not put him in with that white devil we arrested a few days ago?" suggested another. "Perhaps they will kill eachother."

"A fine idea. That should take the fight out of both of them," voiced a third, with characteristic Kushite understatement.



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The party halted before a massive door of brass at the front of a huge gray building. One of the Kushites pulled a bell cord that summoned the guards within. Soon the decorative door opened and the soldiers dragged Myumba inside.

"Craven jackals! Cowards! Honorless dregs..."

"Rave on you jungle-bred savage. You will sing a different tune in due time."

It was within an anteroom they stood. One of the three guards on duty pounded on a wooden door opposite the one through which they had entered. Presently a dark face peered through the small barred opening of the heavy door. Following a rattle of keys the structure swung outward. "What have you there?" queried the jailer as he entered the room. Beneath his turban-wrap helmet and dark eyes stretched a broad grin.

"Another outlander inciting a public disturbance and resisting arrest," replied the captain of the soldiers. "Put him in with the white barbarian."

The jailer nodded, then led the party down a lengthy set of winding stairs. Myumba's unrelenting struggles nearly sent one or more of the soldiers over the short stone balustrade. The narrow, alabaster steps ended far below the surface in a great chamber lit by golden cressets. Seven tenebrous corridors led from the oval hall. It was down one of these that the retinue proceeded. Widely-spaced torches depended from ancient iron chains mounted high on the walls. These afforded some light in the dank corridor. An air of gloom seemed to permeate the atmosphere of the shadow-haunted passage. Soon they reached Criton's cell. The jailer looked in and found the barbarian asleep on the metal cot. As quietly as possible the Kushite unlocked the door and the soldiers shoved Myumba in. Criton awoke abruptly as the iron-bound door slammed shut. "We bring you company, outlander," taunted the jailer. "You can fight for possession of the cot."

With roars of laughter the Kushites departed. Myumba stood tensed and defiant. His quest was paramount but because of a moment of pride he was now imprisoned. His chances of finding Balik and returning to Alcathe appeared nigh impossible now. Inwardly he promised the gods that he would control his temper in the future if they would but deliver him from his present predicament. "Relax," said Criton, "you will most likely be here for a long time."

The Swahilite turned about upon hearing the Palestinian speak. "Who are you?" he demanded.

"I am Criton, a Palestinian."

"Criton...!" exclaimed Myumba. "Can you be he who is the friend of Balik the Kenite?"

"One and the same," he answered. "But how is it you know Balik?"

Myumba told Criton all that had transpired since Balik's capture on the green hillock. When he had finished speaking the Palestinian was silent. Slowly he scrutinized the narrow cell. At length a gleam shown in his eyes. With a smile he declared that he had a plan for escape. Myumba was more than receptive....

Much later the jailer brought their scant victuals. When he reached the cell he was shocked to discover it empty save for Myumba. The Swahilite lay upon the rush-covered cot, whistling a merry tune. "Where is the white barbarian?" shouted the Kushite.

"He just stepped out for a stroll," replied Myumba nonchalantly.

The angry guard pulled his keys and quickly unlocked the door to the cell. Drawing his sword he sprang inside with threatening mien. As he crossed the threshold Criton leaped on him from where he had been hiding; a recess in the wall above the entrance to the room. At impact of the hurtling Palestinian the armed sentinel hit the floor face first. The luckless guard was knocked unconscious. Criton grabbed his dagger while tossing the sword to Myumba. The Swahilite had wanted to be the one to hide because he longed for the opportunity to deliver a beating to the simpering guard. But Criton had insisted that the black could not hide wearing a leopard skin. "Leopards themselves cannot hide well, because they are always spotted," Criton had said. Not quite understanding the humor of the smiling Palestinian, the black warrior conceded.

After binding the guard the two warriors departed. On silent feet they made their stealthy way

to the door atop the winding steps. To their dismay they found it secured; in their haste they had overlooked the jailer's keys. Beyond them now, on the other side of the door, sat the three Kushite guards at a table drinking wine. While Myumba crouched in the shadows against the curvature of the wall Criton tapped lightly on the door with the hilt of the dagger.

"What was that?" queried one of the sentries.

"What was what?" said another.

"I heard something beyond the dungeon door. A tapping sound."

"You're drunk, Saphaffa." With that evaluation his companions broke out laughing.

Undaunted by their derision Saphaffa staggered to the door with the extra keys he had taken from their place on the wall. "It takes one to know one," he snarled as he clumsily guided the proper key into its slot. The moment the door was unlocked Criton kicked it open, knocking the Kushite backwards. The two outlanders sprang into the room and made short work of the drunken men. After tossing them down the dungeon stairs and locking the iron-bound door behind them Criton and Myumba vanished in the nighted streets outside. Darkness had fallen and under cover of its velvet cloak they made their wary way to the stables of Aram Hassan. Hassan aided them because he resented the warlike Assyrians who sojourned in the Emerald City. Criton had his own horse and bought another for Myumba. There were just enough gold coins in Criton's pouch to pay for the mount and weapons. Provisions were a gift from Hassan for giving Rabsaris such a rough time. If Balik were in Yen he would have come to the stables of Hassan. Since he had not Criton was certain that he was not in the city. So after they bade farewell to the stable master the two adventurers rode at a hasty gallop for the city gates.

## 15

A host of sparkling stars shown on the weary riders. Beneath their celestial heights Balik and Shelomar neared the Emerald City. The desert night air was chill, so both travelers wore their heavy woolen cloaks. The landscape was a place of nocturnal beauty under the horned moon whose pale glow rendered the scene in gossamer translucence. At twilight they had reached the road to Yen and were but four hours from its gates. Balik had decided they should forego camping and keep riding until they gained the city and an inn. They had ridden nigh three hours when the Kenite heard the approach of horses. The sound was coming toward them from the direction of the somnolent city. Taking no chances, Balik and Shelomar hid behind a nearby dune and awaited the nightly riders. Nor did they have long to wait as two warriors passed on speeding mounts. Both men were known to the Kenite. "Ho! Criton! Myumba!"

Both men pulled rein and stopped in a cloud of dust. "Balik...gods be praised," said Myumba.

The four companions exchanged greetings and while riding away from Yen talked of the events of the last few weeks. Myumba and Criton explained why they wished not to return to the Emerald City. "When those four Kushites get out of that dungeon they will be looking hard and heavy for us," Criton declared with a smile. Myumba went on to reveal the purpose of his seeking Balik.

"You need never have wondered about my aiding you, Myumba. I dislike leaving a deed undone at any rate. Shelomar and I owe you much and I would not be at peace knowing that evil enchantress still enthralled your people."

"Dear old Bukwai..." said Shelomar. "I confess I fear for his safety, and that of your mother, Myumba."

"My father assured me of their safety. The queen seeks to punish only those who were bold enough to enter her dark abode."

"Then none of us are safe while she is free to go her malign way," said Balik. "We must go to Alcatheo for a final confrontation, and may God be with us."

The mist swirled and wafted in Melodie's chamber. The winsome empress sat brooding and sullen on a throne of pink-veined marble. Her long tresses of scarlet gleamed crimson and gold in the flickering flames of the ornate floor lamp beside her. The deep red of her silk gown enhanced the







ivory whiteness of her skin. Silent and still she sat; like a sculptured goddess. Through long ebony lashes stared her haunting dark eyes. Before her the mist had formed moving pictures. Within the cryptic vapors she saw four riders in the desert near the emerald city of Yen. Suddenly her mystic eyes widened and sparkled as a plan of vengeance formed in her insidious mind. "The book..." she said aloud. "I must have mother's book."

Moments later one of the albino guards entered with a massive leather-bound volume in his hands. The cryptic book was rimmed in brass with ornate corner clasps and sealed with a golden lock. "Place it on the crystal table and leave me," ordered Melodie.

When the white giant had left the chamber she opened the archaic tome and quickly scanned its pages. Therein were forbidden secrets too vile for the memory of man. Soon she found that which she sought. "That is the key..." she murmured. "Against this spell there is no protection."

Having closed the book she went to the basalt fountain located directly beneath the center of the transparent crystal dome. Under the placid heavens wherein winked a thousand stars, the enchantress lit the lamps about the fount. Following mystic incantations Melodie put flame to the lavender-hued incense in the golden censer before her. Thick, tenebrous vapors swirled and tufted amidst minute multi-colored sparks. The sorcerous mist spun in violet eddies as it sped suddenly downward into the chill water of the fountain. The dark surface of the pool became a raging whirlpool. From deep within its unplumbed depths issued a hideous wail. Like a great wind it rose in pitch as it neared the surface of the dark pool. Amid the chaotic cacophony there was sibilant hissing and demonic twittering. Suddenly from the fountain burst a whirling mass of violet vapor. An aura of evil and violence exuded from its ethereal substance. As the hyperphysical cyclone dissipated, its components became manifest. Before the queen's eyes cavorted a plethora of snarling, ravenous, fearsome creatures with man-like proportions. Hunched and crooked were the bulk of them with hideous features defying description. Monstrous mutations and scaled denizens of the deepest recesses of the pit they were; possessing a malignant hatred of all things living. Like a thundering gale the grim horde swept about in fearsome pandemonium. "Go!" commanded Melodie. "Destroy those to whom I send you."

With unholy purpose given them the screaming mass of deadly beings set forth; their derisive, maniacal laughter echoing after them as their cyclonic cloud swirled out into the night.

## 16

In the pre-dawn hours Balik and his party had reached the rocky region that bordered the jungle lands not far from Alcathe. To the dismay of the four riders the sky had suddenly turned black with great storm clouds that boiled and rolled in their swift flight across the heavens. Presently, amid violent gusts of wind and brilliant flashes of blue-hued lightning, the clouds released a deluge. "Quickly, make for that cave," shouted Balik.

The Kenite had pointed out a dark opening at the base of a low plateau. Up a rocky incline that was spotted with tamarisks scrambled the frightened horses. With grateful relief they entered the sheltering cavern. Once through the opening, the travelers found themselves within a gigantic chamber of rock. Great stalactites and stalagmites covered the ceiling and floor respectively. A brooding stillness hung like a pall in the shadow-haunted cavern. With smoldering eyes the three taciturn warriors sought to pierce the gloom. Suddenly Shelomar screamed. From the veil of darkness deep inside the cave stepped a lone figure. Three gleaming swords whispered from leather sheaths. Grasping their twin-edged blades with truculent determination Balik and his companions faced the dark form. Without pause the presence approached. It was but one man. Although he was attired in the raiment of an oriental prince the stranger was easily recognizable. "You!" exclaimed Balik.

"It is the Arab who led me to Alcathe," said Shelomar.

"Tell me, stranger, your name. Who are you?" asked the Kenite.

"One who marvels at your endless curiosity, son of man." Turning his eyes upward the white-bearded man spoke softly. "Hear ye that sound?"

"The rain has stopped," said Criton.

"I hear something else," added Myumba.

"Yes," said Shelomar. "I hear something too. It is uncanny. A thunderous wailing outside, growing louder, as if it is coming nearer."

"Indeed, lady," said the Prince. "It does approach. Gird yourselves with courage, for the cursed ones of the depths ride upon the winds of earth this night, and it is you they seek."

Shelomar pressed close to Balik. Trembling slightly she gazed with dilated eyes at the mouth of the cavern. Without speaking further the white-bearded Prince walked out into the open air. Leaving their horses inside the four adventurers followed. Making their wary way outside they stood in the velvet darkness of the jungle night. Here the ghostly sound was all the more discernible. The wailing increased as the sentient horde made its malevolent way toward them. Balik, Criton, and Myumba simultaneously readied their weapons. The Kenite eased Shelomar behind him and motioned her back into the cavern. As she opened her mouth to utter a protest Balik gripped her firmly. "There is only danger here," he said. "Stay behind the rocks."

Understanding his deep concern for her safety she nodded in silent agreement. Stepping outside once more Balik saw that all eyes were raised toward the blackness of the ethereal heights where a swirling violet mist of cyclonic shape and ferocity became visible. Sweeping across the turbulent heavens amid billows of black storm clouds the unearthly spawn appeared to be no more than a wind spout; albeit a prodigious one with its enigmatic hue. Presently, with a thunderous impact, the demon-haunted gale struck the ridge on which the onlookers stood. Like a leviathan wave it inundated the very air around them, exuding panic and utter chaos. A chilling coldness settled over the area in the wake of the vile creatures. With incredulity Balik and his friends stared at the leaping, squatting entities that frolicked and crouched about them. Baleful, diaphanous eyes glared back at the stalwart companions. The winds blew with high hurricane force, thereby drowning out all other sound. Abruptly the cursed host of hissing, screaming demons fell on the hapless warriors.

Not one of the fierce creatures neared the puzzling stranger. In point of fact, Shelomar would later reveal that she was certain she saw the nether beings shrink back at sight of the Prince. Although the three men fought with superhuman effort and skill, the hideous creatures parried and attacked unharmed by the shining swords. In silvery streaks the formidable blades of the brave trio cleaved through the beings as though they were without substance. Yet with fang and claw they bit and scratched the men who opposed them. With the enduring patience of the un-dead the demons taunted and toyed with the doughty protagonists. Yet, though they be fiends of the pit or abyss dwellers from the frozen gulfs beyond the stars, the warriors fought with a frenzy equal in ferocity to the dour creatures themselves. Like men possessed they struck out at the demons with sedulous sword strokes.

From where she huddled in fear against the wall of the cavern Shelomar stared in awed silence at the grim scene. Scarcely had she taken a place behind the rocks just inside the cave than the horrors attacked. Too frightened even to scream, her gentle features blanched, she watched the drama with hands clutched to her heart. Beneath her bosom it beat rapidly as she prayed for succor. At length she saw the stranger standing serene amid the chaos. The snarling, twisted night gaunts gave the opulent attired Prince a wide berth. They eyed him with evident caution and wary glances while cowering at the gaze of his now flaming eyes. Of a truth, his eyes blazed with a brilliance undreamed of in the wildest of imaginations. Presently, reaching into his golden belt he withdrew a shining white pearl. With a fluid motion of his arm he flung it upward. As it rose skyward the translucent gem glowed and pulsated. A golden nimbus encompassed the pearlescent center of the ever widening circle of light. Upward it rose and soon its intensity was greater than that of the sun. Beneath its preternatural brilliance the nether-spawned demons crouched and cowered, just as they had before the countenance of the Prince.

From the center of the glow a vague shadow appeared and slowly took shape. The brightness was blinding and a pensive silence began to settle over the gnarled beings that oppressed the warriors. "The winds are dying," declared a battle weary Myumba.

"The creatures ignore us," said Criton. "See. They stare at the light." Indeed, the full attention of the demons was on the light, and it was in awed fear that they watched the form within the nimbus. Inexorably it descended. As it neared the ground the gossamer shape became whole. It was a comely young man with golden locks and shining countenance. A supernatural radiance emanated from his eyes which shined with blinding intensity. The noble features of the youth were accentuated by the waves of hair that sparkled with tiny bursts of golden lights, framing his handsome face. He was dressed in white garments and about his waist coiled a snow-white sash. His feet were bare and shown like heated brass. In his right hand he held a sword of flame.



Following a gesture from the enigmatic Prince, Balik and his friends backed away from the cowering multitude. The full attention of the twittering horde was concentrated on the youthful newcomer, therefore they were incognizant of the absence of the men. Suddenly, with unimagined swiftness, the golden youth swung his flaming blade. Several of the cringing creatures howled in pain and slunk away. In an angry, cursing mob the others followed suit. With each sweep of the deadly flame sword scores of the foul beings fell. Bloodless creatures though they were, the blade of fire inflicted them with excruciating torment. Out of fear of the youth, what remained of the creatures joined once more in that whirling mass of sorcerous inhumanity. Within moments, enwrapped in eddies of violet vapors, the ineffable entities took to the sky. Issuing once more that hideous wail, they quickly disappeared in the heights. Silence returned to the rocky region with the absence of the howling demonic mass. Then, before the incredulous eyes of the four travelers the glowing youth faded into nothingness. The bright luminescence followed in his wake. While they had been observing the departing demons, they had forgotten the Prince. Shelomar was first to note that the white-haired stranger had also vanished.

"That one is a puzzle to me, Shelomar," declared Balik. "Yet I feel I know him somehow."

"I felt the same way," said the girl, "both times that I saw him."

"What do we do now, Balik?" said Criton.

The Kenite looked from his woman to his friend. Following a moment of thought he spoke. "We go to Alcatheo as planned. Those fearful beings were no doubt sent by Melodie. We cannot afford to waste time for she will stop at nothing to fulfill her plan to destroy us."

## 17

In the last hour before dawn the Swahil guardsmen upon the twin turrets of the inner wall of Alcatheo ceased their conversation. From above them came the sound of a great whirlwind. The men stood motionless as they perceived the tumult to be nearing the city. Soon a violet funnel was visible on the distant horizon. With undreamed of speed it moved overhead and sped toward the Black Palace. Once there, with bizarre undulations, the chaotic host of demon spawn passed through the dark surface of the crystalline dome. Presently the sky above the archaic structure became turbulent and began to thunder deafeningly. Great booming peals rocked the buildings and towers of the jungle city. Massive tufts of gray and black clouds came from the east and paused over Alcatheo. Suddenly a shaft of radiant lightning laced across the billowing clouds and struck the translucent dome of the Black Palace. A second gleaming shaft leveled the ancient edifice and a third reduced the building to dust. Then the thunder stilled, and the clouds dissipated into harmless mist. "By all the gods!" exclaimed one of the startled guards, "it is not possible. The Black Palace is no more!"

The stunned populace could only stare in shocked disbelief. Some swore that they heard the echoes of an inhuman, despairing cry...

The following day the four adventurers paused before the walls of Alcatheo. Shouts of jubilation rose from the city within. With Myumba leading they entered the unguarded gates. Warily the riders proceeded until they discovered throngs of exulting Swahilites. "The Black Palace is destroyed!" they shouted. "The queen is dead. We are free!"

The people cheered when they saw Myumba. The guards who had been sent by the queen earlier to arrest him were afraid to approach him now. In superstitious fear they avoided him whom they felt was somehow involved in the wonderment that ended the queen's reign. Meanwhile, with a great procession behind him Myumba and his three friends rode to the house of Bukwai. There the civic leaders and common people alike gathered to proclaim Myumba their king. Among those who supported the action was Ramtul, chief of the Swahil. "You have done that which none dared do, Myumba, son of Bukwai," said Ramtul. "You resisted the dark queen and her pale giants. You are an example of courage to all of us. From this day forward we will make honest achievements, without sacrificing our dignity or freedom."

"You are wise, Ramtul," said Balik. "You see that Melodie gave you secrets of advancements only so that you could serve her better."

"Let us all learn from yesterday, live for today, and hope for tomorrow," philosophized Bukwai.

Later, following a grand celebration, Balik, Shelomar, and Criton shared a quiet eve with Myumba and his parents. At the request of the latter the three outlanders had decided to sojourn in Alcatheo. Their recent experiences had, for the moment, satisfied their taste for adventure.





# Mailing Comments



Kaor;

Balik #1 is really beautiful, a real pro looking job and you are to be congratulated. The Frazetta, R.G.K., and Russ Manning illos all came out nice. Sam's illo is quite different from the rest of the artwork in Balik #1...the Steve Fabian cover (it is truly a great piece of cover art) and your Assyrian article are the best "new" features in the magazine. Sheila's photo is fine.

Sincerely; Caz Cazedessus, Jr., St. Francisville, Louisiana

For a first issue effort... It's a darn good magazine. I find it rather astounding that fan-zine editors and publishers have progressed so far in just the couple of years since Fantasy Crossroads began. The Fabian cover is really beautiful...and having seen the original artwork, I know how carefully your printer reproduced Steve's efforts. I wish you could make Balik's adventures more complete within each episode. Keep pluggin' away. You're doing a fine job as editor and artist.

Jonathan Bacon, Lamoni, Iowa

It is difficult for one to believe that Balik #1 was your initial publishing effort, the professional caliber of the zine, and your expertise in writing, editing, and artwork is usually found in others with many years of experience; rather than a novice such as is your case. I spent several hours reading #1 from cover to cover. It seems that all of the subject matter and artwork complimented one another. Balik himself is a most interesting character. With the warmest of personal regards, and wishes of great success for you,

Your friend; Ron J. Frantz, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

Frankly, I was pleasantly surprised at the quality of your first issue. Printing, design, and choice of paper stock are all top-notch. Fortunately, you've found a printer who cares about the end product rather than considering such a project as "just another job". A lucky star was gleaming over your shoulder for your first issue. If that's not a good omen, then such things just don't exist! You've got a good story-telling style and are able to provide the story with a swift pace that doesn't sacrifice characterization. Your prose has depth without being overly "wordy" and accents your illustrations. All in all, you've done a whale of a job---one that you can be readily proud of. Congratulations, Cliff!

Best Wishes; Arnie Fenner, Shawnee Mission, Kansas

Can't tell you how much I enjoyed Balik. Really great stuff, and a heck of a terrific package. My hat is tipped to you for one of the slickest mags in fandom today.

Best; Gene Day, Gananoque, Ontario, Canada

Balik is sensational. You have spared no talent, no cost to bring Fandom expertise to anyone who cares to make an investment in this publication. I'm hanging on to my copy for life because I know it will become a collectors' item as time goes by.

Robert Kennedy, Brampton, Ontario, Canada

Balik: a very beautiful cover by Fabian (of course, everything he does is beautiful). I look forward to the next issue of Balik to continue his adventures. I liked the fantasy art folio. The only real complaint I have is that you had "continued" stories - I hate having to wait for the next installment! I compliment you on your taste in running a photo of your very beautiful wife.

Brad W. Foster, San Antonio, Texas

I will try to find time to do a drawing of Balik (and the others) before your deadline, but in no way will I feel an obligation - I'll do it for fun or not at all. I certainly have no objection to your reminding me as your deadline approaches. Thanks for Balik.

Russ Manning, Orange, California

Kaor;

That is a sampling of letters received from other publishers, and the last from Tarzan artist Russ Manning. Unfortunately Russ was too busy to make the deadline for this issue; but perhaps by the next one Sheila and I will have an illustration by Russ Manning for you. Thanks to everyone who wrote us, we deeply appreciate it and your support.





# Acknowledgements



"Balik and the Siren of Alcatraz" is dedicated to Sheila Jayne Bird, my loving wife, without whom Balik would never have become a reality. She is wisdom and beauty combined.

The paper clipping below left is from the Milford Daily News, Milford, Massachusetts. Gratitude is given to Kathy Tosches, my aunt, for her part in publicizing our first issue of Balik in my father's home town.

Please welcome Michael Allen Call to our pages. Michael is a commercial art major at the Indiana State University. His work has appeared in ERBdom and the March 1977 Child Life magazine. You will see more of his art in our upcoming publications. Thanks from Sheila and I to the

## Former Milford Resident Publishes Comic Strip

A former Milford resident has had a comic strip published in a special edition magazine by a Texas firm.

Clifford Bird, son of Mr. and Mrs. William Bird of Hurst, Texas, the grandson of the late William and Mary Bird, who lived on Spruce Street, Milford, lived in Milford at the age of six and moved later with his family to Texas.

Bird has created a comic strip entitled "Balik" as a culmination of an interest he has in Greek and Roman history, mythology and ancient culture.

He draws upon the Koran, the Old Testament, the writings of Edgar Rice Burroughs and

Howard de Camp-Carter, and blends it all into one epic adventure that makes "Balik" the epitome of adventure.

"Balik is a hero who is fallible, yet strong, able to overcome his own weakness, and somehow survive in a savage, barbaric world," Bird says.

The publication, of which 500 copies have been printed, is dedicated to Bird's wife Sheila Jayne. Mr. and Mrs. Angelo Tosches of 57 Beach Street Milford, Bird's aunt and uncle have been given an autographed copy by the artist.

The 31-year-old artist's creation can be ordered through the Book and Platter Shop in Milford.

masterful Steve Fabian for a truly dedicated cover, and to Clyde for his fantastic back cover. We equally thank everyone who contributed to this issue of Balik; Andrew J. Offutt, Charles R. Saunders, Wayne Warfield, William Black, Ken Raney, Paul Schliesser, Caz (for use of the Frazetta-CWB illustration, rendered from a pencil sketch first printed in the Opar Press Burroughs-Frazetta art portfolio, now out of print). Special thanks go to printing masters Bob Carr and John Mustarde, of Bob's Printing, Arlington and Hurst, Texas. Also, thanks go to William Leo and Stephanie Bird for all those rides to Bob's Printing.

The photograph of Steve Reeves and Sylva Koscina from "Hercules Unchained" (52) is copyright 1960 Avco Embassy Pictures Corp. The photo of Steve Reeves on the inside back cover is from "The Avenger", a 1964 Medallion Pictures release.





## From The Editor

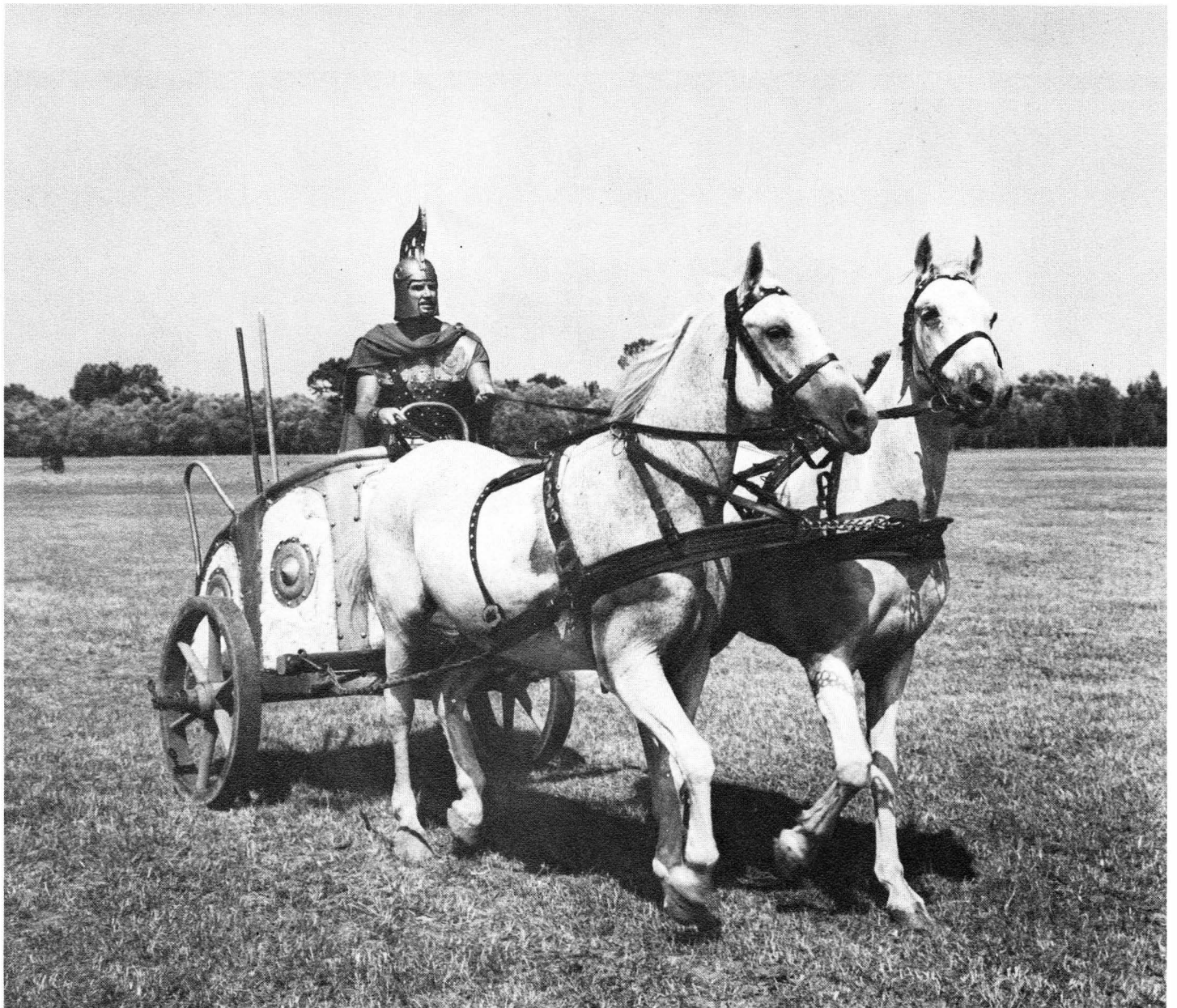


Sheila and I hope that you enjoy this copy of Balik number two. Once more we have tried our best to produce a balanced package of text and art. Unfortunately, due to the length of the Siren story, there was not enough room for the Balik strip which began last issue. However, it will be back in Balik number three, along with the fantasy tale "Balik and the Serpent of the Nile", which will be edited by Imaro author Charles R. Saunders. The masterful Steve Fabian will be back as our cover artist. At this writing we are not certain just what the rest of our contents will be, as they are still in the planning stage.

Our next publication will be Epic number one; an art-film magazine with art by Alex Raymond, Clyde Caldwell, Bill Black, Paul Schliesser, and myself, along with rare stills from the Flash Gordon serials. Following Epic will be Forbidden Worlds of Fantasy number one, with art by Steve Fabian, Roger Stine, Paul Schliesser, and myself. Featured will be the fantasy yarn "Katisa" by Charles R. Saunders, with prose by Robert E. Howard, L. Sprague de Camp, Poul Anderson, and again yours truly.

For those of you who are interested, we have copies of Balik number one left at \$2.50 each. We also have copies of Simba number one for \$3.00 each. Both are available, post paid, from us at Simba Reproductions, 616 Livingston, Hurst, Texas 76053. Balik number three and Simba number two will be published later this year. Thanks to all of you who support our efforts. Until next time.

Clifford Wm. Bird  
February 24, 1977



Hast thou given the horse strength? Hast  
thou clothed his neck with thunder?  
Canst thou make him afraid as a grasshopper?  
The glory of his nostrils is terrible.  
He paweth in the valley, and rejoiceth in his  
strength: he goeth on to meet the armed men.  
He mocketh at fear, and is not affrighted:  
neither turneth he back from the sword.  
The quiver rattleth against him, the glitter-  
ing spear and the shield.  
He swalloweth the ground with fierceness and  
rage; neither believeth he that it is the  
sound of the trumpet.

Excerpt from the ancient book of Job, chapter  
thirty-nine.



