



Chapter Five

Kaspa was wary about leaving Ash and taking Bolu and Njah, but the prospect of finding and attracting some new lions to bring into the family was overwhelming. They needed good allies to battle the jumboi and

the only ones available were lions. The attitudes of Bolu and Njah were perfect to meet new lions, while Malapa and Fifi were particularly loyal to Ash, and would be good guards for a few days.

Kaspa set up rocks to roll down on any attackers, contrived some booby traps, made a number of long stout spears for Ash to use if needed. And there was that back door escape route, fortunately too narrow for any bulky jumbei to get through.

Ash assured Kaspa she had plenty to do with tending the garden and hide tanning work, but admonished him to be back in no more than three days.

Kaspa sharpened his knife, lightened his pouch of clutter, gathered a hand full of jerky and prepared for an exploratory jaunt further into the valley to find some lions. At dawn, he, Bolu and Njah started on a determined trot back to that steep cliff trail they had found some days earlier. Reaching it, they climbed and then descended into and through a remarkably dense jungle crammed with hundreds of tree trunks and finally stepped into a vast short grass bushy prairie, typical lion country.

The smell of lions was overwhelming. Everyone was nervous. The lions were watching Kaspa, who was very alert and cautious. They headed towards a large clump of thick trees at the edge of the prairie, and once there, Kaspa climbed a tall tree and spied the area.

Further out on the broad grassland was several more oases of trees, and the near one had several lions sleeping and lounging about. The trio of amigos moved to a closer clump of trees and watched. Finally, Bolu and Njah walked over to Kaspa, nudged his legs, turned, and ambled over to the group lounging lions. Most of them sat up and watched the two new lions approaching, but lay back down when Bolu and Njah stopped, lay down and stretched out luxuriously. Kaspa climbed a tree, made a seat of some branches

and watched his two lions mingle with a pair of lions at the edge of the gathering.

Bolu and Njah engaged them with some playful nosing and chasing about, but soon they all lay down. Eventually, all four lions got up and headed back towards Kaspa's tree, and he climbed down to be on the ground when they got there.

The two new lions were magnificent creatures, the male actually larger than Bolu, but with a bright orange sheen on his smooth hairy back. He had particularly large ears. His mate, only slightly smaller, was subtly striped with broad yellow and brown angular bands, though her other distinct marking was two hairy white ears. She was a special lioness.

Kaspa sat on the ground, moaned a low growl, and extended his hands fingers down to the two new lions. They sniffed at his outstretched paw, opened mouths wide and made a throat sound. Soon, they backed off, paced in a small circle, strolled over to Bolu and Njah where they all lay down together, head on paws, staring at Kaspa. It was a sunny day, it was hot and it was pretty quiet. Now and then, a slight breeze. Everybody lounged and stretched. Kaspa sharpened his knife and trimmed his beard.

Kaspa pulled some raw meat out of his pack, threw pieces to all four lions and proceeded to build a small cooking fire. As usual with fire, the lions moved and lounged about some distance away. That night the lions brought in two large antlered deer and soon they were belly full and sound asleep. Kaspa had just had one of the finest breakfast steaks of his life. The strange wood embers had added certain sweet oily flavor to the meat, and Kaspa thought to make a mental note of the bark of that tree so he could identify it and cook with it again.

Kaspa watched the new lions as they paced about nervously the next morning. Kaspa called out a "Catch me if you can" roar, leapt into the air and bolted across the

prairie edge back beyond the first clump of trees.

Bolu, always up for a chase, took the bait and bounded after Kasper who was running at full speed. Predictably, the other three lions jumped up and took off running. In old lion tradition, if something is running away from you, chase it. Kasper reached a low tree limb, climbed up, and danced and growled at the lions watching him from below. He ripped some loose bark and tossed it at the new lions. They snapped at it as it drifted by, flashed their tails, and finally sat down and licked a cheek or a haunch.

In a little while, Kasper descended, stroked chins and carefully petted all the lions. At dusk they all went hunting and caught a Zebra. Kasper was able to hack off a big steak before the four lions engaged in a most ferocious feast. He built a little fire and cooked it to perfection, as usual. It got dark, and everyone generally slept. Kasper was relieved that the new lions had stayed around and seemed content.

In the morning, Kasper arose with the light, called the lions into his space and tried to indicate his pleasure of being with them. He scratched their chins, smoothed fur and moaned lightly. They seemed amenable to hanging out with the big man, and soon they were all walking together, like old companions, back through the thick trees, up the cliff and finally towards the cliff campsite.

When they got close, Kasper knew it was too late. He hurried Bolu and Njah forward and the other two lions followed. At the bottom of the sandy hill of the camp site lay a dead and smelly jumbei, Kasper's spear stuck in the center of its gaping open eye. Bolu and Njah tore into the face of the stinking creature, ripping flesh from its skull, ears and its ankles. The remainder of the creature's body was covered with thick long hair, and virtually inaccessible from the outside. The two new lions joined in with ferocious growls, tearing flesh off the body

and flinging it about. It was a bloody scene, but it smelled worse!

The lower portion of the campsite had been nearly destroyed by the jumbei assault up the sand hill. In their effort to climb up, parts of the camp kitchen had become dislodged and had fallen to the ground below. But it was obvious that one of the creatures had reached the campsite itself.

Still there was no sign of Yashtar, or Malapa of Fifi, but their aroma lingered in the air ever so slightly. And that was good news.

There was no indication of where Ash and the lions were. He raced up to the camp ledge, sought out the escape hole and was quickly convinced Ash and the two lions had fled that way. There on the floor were small rocks arranged in the shape of an arrow, pointing back to the escape hole. She had made it this far, and no jumbei could follow her this way. She and the lions had escaped.

Quickly Kasper loaded up some useful items, climbed through the back door hole and made it up to the mesa top. The lions followed him and they all began a search for Ash, each one with some subdued growling and ground sniffing.

Bolu gave out with a mighty roar, Malapa and Fifi soon answered. Kasper and his four lions quickly found Ash. She had climbed into a large tree and built a platform. When Kasper saw her, she was sitting on the floor, spear in hand. Malapa and Fifi had worn a trail around the base of the tree, made from being on continuous patrol.

Ash explained that the jumbei had assaulted the campsite at night, but they could not get up the sandy slope with the lions hanging on their back legs. She was able to roll some rocks, but one of the jumbei finally got up to the campsite ledge. Just as it was about to grasp her, she charged forward and stuck that stout obsidian fashioned spear into its right eye. It screamed a pitiful screech of agony, and tumbled backwards howling in agony. Kasper was pleased, Ash was fearless

when cornered, his type of woman. Yes she was. "Stuck the spear in its eye, that's up close," he said quietly to himself.

"It was close," she said. "I heard them coming, and that horrid smell was in the air. I wonder what makes them so determined to capture me. It must be something more than hunger. They have some other purpose."

"I don't know," he said, "but they are very determined, and we must be wary. Thank the Gods you three were able to get away."

The night was spent quietly and nervously under the stars, Kasper, Ash, Bolu, Njah, Malapa, Fifi. The next morning the two new lions were named Melto and Sish. They didn't know that, but humans like to name their pets.

Evidently the jumbei could track Kasper and his friends with impunity. It was obvious that their next moves must be seriously thought out and made fool proof. An impregnable campsite must be found or built.

Kasper decided it was time to become the aggressor with the jumbei. A good defensive camp was not enough, the jumbei must be directly attacked and killed. They would strike again, and he had to be prepared.

Kasper sat on the edge of the platform Ash had built, looked out over the valley and quietly muttered, "Now that we have six lions with us, the next encounter will be to our advantage. I actually look forward to it."

The lions made an early evening hunt and returned to the base of the tree very late. With bloody faces and extended bellies, it was obvious that all was well.

Chapter Six

Once again, Kasper and Ash gathered their essentials: water, hides, tools, weapons and food from the recent campsite — now stinking from the dead jumbei — and packed

up. They found some dried fruit, a fair amount of jerky, Kasper's sharpening stone, needles for sewing, and little bags of spices. They loaded up their packs and pouches and began to trek away from the cliff side camp site. There was no trail, they just headed out.

It was quite a caravan. A big blonde man, a golden haired girl, and six lions in a loose group moving through a knee high bright green grassy meadow sprinkled with large bushes highlighted with blue flowers. It was a fine day, much like old Africa.

They strode up the mesa where it jutted from the mountains, walking along a faint trail on the South edge and watching for cracks and paths that might lead down the side to shade and water. None proved useful, and they began to pay attention to the other cliffside across the way. The valley between was still wide and deep, but was beginning to narrow as they walked up the slope. There was bound to be a sheltering cave ahead.

Several potential overhangs could be seen in the cliff on the other side of the void, and one was particularly interesting. There seemed to be a climbable crack that led down to the side of it and there was a small waterfall spilling from the opening. But it was on the other side, close but far. There was a large dead tree stump that Kasper marked in his mind for a location.

They came to a small meadow with a stream, and witnessed hundreds of small antelopes that were so calm Ash could walk among them. The lions were perturbed until Kasper walked up to one of the animals on the edge of the herd, and without a sound, slit its throat. After a gutting and skinning it, Kasper sliced off some steaks and gave the remainder to the lions. Presently, Kasper carefully killed some additional antelopes, which the lions dragged back into the forest. Kasper built his standard small fire and they had their steak dinner. Ash looked for a fruit bush, or even a nut tree, but none were found.

After a supper, sleeping nests were made, and Kaspia and Ash sat and talked about the events of the last few weeks. These jumboi were relentless, cunning and strong. They would be back, and establishing an impregnable defensible campsite was going to be necessary. Kaspia wrestled with the situation as he went to sleep, but there was nothing to do but keep moving up slope and see what nature might provide.

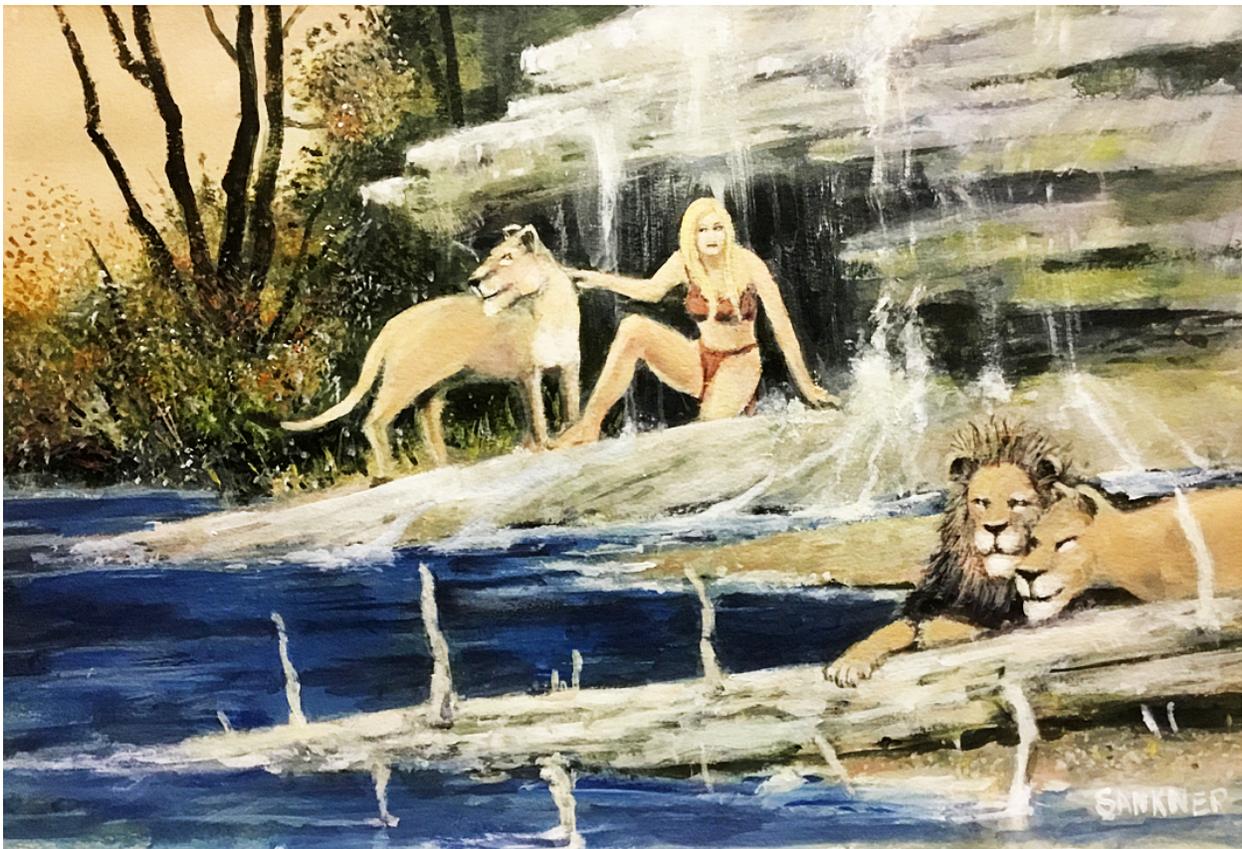
The lions gathered up and began yawning and lounging around.

Staring into the small fire, Kaspia said

looking for ways to descend but finding none.

They did find a warm hot spring, and everybody enjoyed a welcome bath. Kaspia eagerly watched his woman wash her hair, marveling how long and golden it was. While he was accustomed to the scene of lions sitting calmly in a pool of warm water, watching them splash and play with Ash was an extra treat.

The forest was not too thick and hummed with subtle sounds. It was a fine day, Kaspia felt a complete satisfaction being with Ash and his lions in a beautiful wild jungle.



"I have to make more spears and arrows. We must be ready with good weapons for a surprise attack. Keep an eye out for some stones I can chip into points." I need more spears. Ash nodded and said she would double her stone searching gaze.

The next day was spent scrambling along the forested but steep edge of the mesa,

They spent a day at these hot springs, then packed up and hit the non-trail up the mesa. Often, two lions would sneak back down from where they had come and check for danger. Soon, they came upon a large crack in the rock cliff that was full of very tall, large dead long burnt trees, some leaning precariously on one another. It was a jumble

of leafless dead wood trunks and branches, all the limbs were brittle, twisted and charred from an old fire.

The ground was covered with berry bushes, harboring a sweet to sour bulging red balls that could be chewed or squeezed into a cupped leaf, and sipped without the skin, which was bland. There were lots of rock rabbits, and Kasper pinged a few for supper. At dusk, a huge flock of birds flew into the middle of the dead tree valley, squawked for a while, and then settled into silence.

Kasper was intrigued by this valley of dead trees. An idea began to grow in his mind, and by midnight he began to develop it. Why not a really large deadfall trap? One of those large leaning trees would be a mighty weight to drop on a jumboi, if it could be enticed into the right position. The next morning, he scoured the valley of dead trees, climbed around and explored the tangled trunks like a tree squirrel on a mission. He was good at that.

There was one really large tree that was leaning on the limb of another tree and actually looked like it was about to fall. Problem was there was a series of smaller limbs that would impair the final smash of the tree, and render it an ineffective trap. Some smaller limbs were in the way and must be removed. It was impractical to use a knife or a sledge axe, one was too tedious, the other too crude. What was needed was a saw, a long fine toothed blade to rake across the branches and cut them out of the way. Maybe he could make a saw of stone.

Kasper remembered the obsidian rock pile he had seen some days back, and he decided to reinvestigate it. He quickly found it and began to pry off large chunks. For an afternoon he broke them into little points to be worked into a wood saw blade of some sort. He filled his pouches with chunks and returned to the dead tree camp site.

Before dusk, Kasper and Ash climbed into the dead tree valley, made their way to

the far side and found a small rock overhang near a tiny remarkable cool stream of water. The lions followed, found some nesting spots nearby, and settled down. A fire was built, meat was cooked and many berries were squeezed and eaten. The stars came out on a very dark night, but were only partially visible through the dead branches all around the site. A cool wind sang through the trees.

The next day saw Ash scouring the entire area for more natural foods and she was again successful. A patch of mushrooms were discovered and hopes were up for something tasty. There were two types, one a subtle blue, the other a bright yellow color. She brought a few of each back to camp and showed them to Kasper. They decided she would take a very tiny bit of the yellow one, and he a tiny bite of the blue. Within a few minutes, Kasper was sick to his stomach and decided to eat a caterpillar to make himself throw up as soon as possible. That usually worked pretty good.

It did seem to work, though he wretched and vomited for a while, drank a lot of water, and then went to sleep. Ash stroked his forehead with some damp moss and purred into his ear. He eventually slept soundly and woke with the dawn as usual. He drank more water and ate a few berries, but what worked the best were a couple of raw eggs Ash found and some jerky.

Kasper killed more of the meadow antelopes, fed the lions and sliced off some steaks for later. Around noon he began to design and engineer the tree dead fall trap. It would not be easy, but he was confident it would work. The configuration of the approach to their campsite would force any jumboi to cross under the exact spot where the big tree would hit it when it fell.

With the old animal bone and a leather hide over his leg, he began the very delicate job of chipping off little obsidian chunks — dozens of sharp little hard triangles. Ash had carved an excellent wooden handle to hold the little chips. It took Kasper all day to mount

the sharp chips into something that looked like a crude saw that should work. He was confident, and not about to give up. It was tedious work and made his hands very tired.

The next day he started work on the opposing limbs, learning how to saw them the most efficient way and by evening he had cut most of them off. Many stone chips broke off, but he replaced them and continued to saw. That night he rested and mentally designed the trigger mechanism to drop that dead tree on a jumboi. He had to be sure of his design, and he refined it in his mind over and over nearly all night long.

By dawn it was obviously going to be a blue day. The animal sounds soon rose to the occasion as always, squawking, howling, mooing, screeching and hooting. At first it was irritating and disruptive to thinking. But Kaspas and Ash finally accepted the blue day animal sounds, and they became more curious and intrigued. For instance, one particular hoot seemed always to be answered by two similar hoots from the other side of the forest. Sometimes, in a rare moment of silence between the cacophony of vocal sounds, you could hear hundreds of wings flapping in the air of the deep blue sky. Blue days were simply extraordinary.

The next day, Kaspas climbed the tree with the old limb that was holding the leaning tree up. He studied it carefully, and determined to cut a small notch on the upper side, and promote that break point. Then he tied a stout but limber vine on the leaning tree, and strung it down to the ground where he could pull it. Ash and the lions were warned to avoid the kill spot, but he doubted the lions were aware of what he meant.

In anticipation of a successful battle with the next jumboi opportunity, the Kaspas family had a grand evening of cooking steak smoking jerky, distributing lots of raw meat to the lions, and eating some strange wild ground tubers. Ash actually voluntarily danced around the fire. Six very quiet lions

watched her carefully, and were startled by her performing a standing back flip. Kaspas was impressed also, not sure he could do that himself. Soon, it was very dark and quiet.

A few days later as anticipated, the stink of the Jumboi drifted into Kaspas's nostrils, and he turned with a start. He quickly called the lions, climbed out of the dead tree valley and soon located the two hairy creatures. Both were lumbering in their odd hopping fashion, stopping now and then to sniff and listen. He and the lions watched them move away downwind and Kaspas and the lions returned to the dead tree campsite.

The deadfall was only good for one hit, not two. He needed to split the Jumboi up and it seemed that six big lions attacking and distracting one just might be the method.

He drank some water, called the lions together and pointed. The seven hunters grouped up and began following the jumboi trail as they moved down the mesa. Kaspas brought every arrow he had fashioned, both bows and a few spears. He always had his sling, but it was not much of a weapon against a long clawed hairy baboon.

Kaspas and his lions soon caught up to the two stinking jumboi, where both were sleeping under a tree, sprawled out like newborn babies. It took Kaspas less than a minute to place several arrows into their faces, ears and their exposed ankles. In about the same amount of time the creatures were infuriated beyond belief. Even the lions were startled at the thrashing about and angry howls that came from the throats of these stinking creatures. But the six lions had attacked immediately and forcefully, four leaping on one Jumboi, two on each side and the other two lions leaping up to bite its huge lips.

The roaring and howling was so loud it startled a flock of bush birds into flight. The screeching of the jumboi mixed with the roars of six lions and a wild man was ear punching. Kaspas danced around, launching arrows into fleshy areas. Standing tall on rocks and



available logs, Kaspia looked like a giant bowman from some ancient time. He leaped into the air and growled quite zestfully.

Both jumbei twisted and tried pulling the stinging barbs from their legs and loudly cursed their attackers with coughs and

squeals. Blood spurted from their ankles and faces, turning the ground red and slippery.

Kaspa's first strike was superb! And the second strike by six lions was ferocious. They came on very strong, six angry African lions crashing into creatures three times their size with arms that ended in large long claws — like a mutated Sloth paw. Melto was soon hooked by one of the creatures, and was sent sprawling to the ground, bleeding badly.

Three lions began to concentrate on the fleshy faces of one 'boon while the other two did some serious chewing on bleeding the other 'boons ankles and toes. This unmerciful ankle chewing generally prevented them from standing up, and that reduced their ability to rake the lions with their long claws.

Kaspa leaped up on a rock, screamed an ominous roar at the battle scene, and shook his weapons in the air with both hands. He taunted one of hairy 'boons with several arrows shot into its mouth from up close. The one struck by the first hail of arrows finally fell to the ground and was quickly assaulted by three angry lions, Malapa, Fifl and Sish. Soon it was thrashing like a big rat in the jaws of angry dogs, screaming a high pitched squeal, arms flailing about, and pounding on the ground in agony and anger. There were broken arrows everywhere, and some protruding from its body. It was a bloody mess.

The other Jumboi was being chased and harassed by Bolu and Njah as it hopped after Kaspa, who was easily out-running the somewhat clumsy hopping 'boon. He stayed way out front as he led the stinking creature into his trap in the valley of dead trees. The jumboi was easy to outpace, and as Kaspa approached his deadly trap, he made sure the creature could follow him. He ran under the fall and up to position himself at the pull rope.

Sure as gravity, the stinking jumboi stumbled into the dead tree valley, doggedly following Kaspa, started across the dead three ground and approached his doom. At the right moment, Kaspa jerked the rope, the huge tree fell and pinned the screaming stinking creature to the ground. Kaspa finished off the ugly beast with several arrows and a long spear. Ash came over and tried bury a another spear in its belly, but it was too hairy.

Five lions came up, without the new male. A jumboi claw had done serious internal damage and caused severe bleeding. Melto had been killed in the battle.

That night, Kaspa paid homage to his Spirit Star, built a smoky fire to hide the 'boons stink and tried to rest and get some sleep. The five lions wandered away to lick their wounds, but had returned by dawn.

Analyzing the battle, it was generally clear that to kill a jumboi a deep wound was required. Even a flurry of arrows were somewhat inconsequential, though they did provide serious bleeding Arrows to the eyes were very effective, but did not prevent frantic swinging arms ending in long claws. It was notable that arrows in jumboi noses seemed particularly effective in causing pain and serious bleeding.

But that was all a slow death method, it was obvious that a deep spear wound was the way to kill quickly, Yet the coarse jumboi hair blunted a spear tip unless you were very close.

To be continued in the 2019
Christmas Pulpdome #24

Ancestral memory was a concept that obviously fascinated Robert E. Howard, who wrote a number of stories with variations on that theme-- THE VALLEY OF THE WORM, THE GARDEN OF FEAR, MARCHERS OF VALHALLA, THE THUNDER RIDER, etc. What follows is a modest tribute to those tales.



By Mike Taylor

My experiments in the obscure field of retrogressive recall of former incarnations through electronically induced self-hypnosis have finally borne fruit. But now it scarcely matters, for I am dying and my work will never be completed. These final days must surely be some cosmic punishment for daring to intrude into Nature's most secret realms. I find myself obsessed by strange longings, memory fragments of a former life not my own yet somehow a part of me—a tantalizing link in that endless chain of selves dredged up by my relentless research which now plagues my restless dreams.

I can cast my mind back across the gulf of ages to a world so strange and ancient that scholars would scoff, a time when life was a madness of reaving and slaying and all men were warriors, baptized as babes in the blood of their enemies so that they grew to manhood with the slaying-lust. And as this life grows dimmer that other becomes stronger and in my dreams I live again, not in the frail, disease-ravaged body of John

Courtland, but in the savage thews and raging desires of another man. A warrior of that crimson, bygone era when Atlantis was but a village of thatch-roofed huts and the Americas no more than vast depressions on the floor of a turbulent ocean. Then I was called Kiron Wolfslayer, of the hill tribes of Zorthad. I lived in a time, I say, forgotten by modern man, a dim vista of the past all but obscured by the veils of passing millennia.

I boast not at all when I say that across the breadth of that savage world there lived no mightier fighters than the men of Zorthad. Thon! How my people loved battle. And none of them more than I. Hew of axe, slash of sword! The all-consuming battle fever that turns the world before your eyes to seething red mist. The hot shower of enemy blood that bathes you as with sword and axe you lay madly about, reaping a red harvest of carnage. The death-whisper of soaring arrows, the clash of gore-dipped axes, the last glint of daylight on a sea of blades. And the final delicious sensation, when the battle is at long

last won, and your bone-throbbing weariness can give way to sweet rest while the women bind your wounds and speak in awed voices of your courage and strength.

This was my heritage. I was still a youth, but already a giant in stature, and I reveled in the glory of my great strength and savage prowess. Already I had more kills to credit than I could count, for we warred unceasingly with the men of the lowlands.

In the tribes of Zorthad I stood unchallenged, save for one man. This was Baran, a great, hulking brute of a man, a freak even in those primordial times. He was a full head taller than I, with a girth I could not have encircled with my arms, as ugly as a glowering thundercloud. His face and arms were badly scarred, mutilated from countless battles; it was told how once he had slain a cave-lion with only a knife, and this encounter had cost him an ear plus three fingers from his left hand.

It was inevitable that one day we should clash. We both held reputations too great and cordially hated one another because of them. Only the fact that the lowlanders had been hurling themselves against our aerie with increasing frenzy during the past few years had kept us from each other's throats this long.

Life was primitive and, for the most part, good. Our villages were situated atop a wide plateau that opened on one side into the towering ramparts of the Mountains of the Shining Mist and on the other dropped away to the steaming tropic lowlands. The meadows were lush and game animals roamed in vast herds. Forest stands were plentiful, so that we lacked not in materials for our homes and the fortifications and barricades constantly being erected and repaired on the slopes to repel the upward surging forces of the lowlanders. Fresh cold streams born in the mountains rushed across our homeland and exited in shimmering waterfalls that plunged and roared into the

land below. The air was clear and clean; the stench of the stagnant morasses below seldom reached us.

The villages themselves were sturdy and practical—huts of timber and stone, usually fifty or so to a group, surrounded by staked palisades to discourage the giant predators and block our enemies should they manage to penetrate our first lines of defense. This last had never happened within the memory of the hill tribes, but as I have said, they were growing more desperate each year.

This was due to a natural calamity which threatened the lowlands. To the west a great sea was swelling out of its bed, perhaps due to some cataclysmic upheaval of the earth's surface half a world away, gradually spilling its waters into the homeland of our hereditary enemies. Already half their land was under water and their war upon the hillfolk had become a matter of life or death. By the same token, we could not have shared our domain with them, even had we been so inclined, for the plateau could not have supported the combined tribes. The outcome of this struggle was uncertain but inevitable: one of our tribes would be slaughtered into extinction and to the victors would go the greatest spoils of all—survival.

It was a cruel, primitive war in which we were engaged, a conflict that neither asked nor gave quarter. We were evenly matched; the lowlanders outnumbered us, but on our side were geographical superiority and a fighting ferocity the like of which the world has not since witnessed. Often have I pondered upon the outcome of that titanic struggle.

(Here I must interject a word concerning the weapons of our tribes, the one thing that did not comport with the otherwise stone age atmosphere. I have spoken of swords and axes and the blow-and-arrow, all of which, along with spears and knives, comprised our armament. The bow-and-arrow and spear we were capable of manufacturing,

but not the others. Yet we possessed them, beautifully crafted weapons, swords of perfect balance and ax-heads of shining steel, fitted with our own crude helms. These were among the most highly prized of our possessions and were handed down from generation to generation with great ceremony. I can only surmise that they—and we—were the remnants of some long-sundered civilization that had gone the way of all societies. It is a fascinating aspect to consider but I have no real answer.)

Baran and I finally quarreled openly. It came about over a woman, which was not unusual, then as now. But to make matters worse she was a prisoner, a lowlander. Her name was Lian and she was fresh and delicate and beautiful, a rare blossom on the flower of womanhood.

Now the women of Zorthad's tribe were not uncomely, being sturdy, full-bodied creatures, but not one of them could compare with Lian. That she possessed considerable courage also was attested to be the fact that she was captured during a night assault on one of our barricades. She had stood shoulder to shoulder with her countrymen, wielding a light sword with bloody accuracy until her comrades were all dead or fled and she was knocked senseless and disarmed.

She was being confined in the village nearest the scene of the recent fighting, which happened to be temporarily under my command. Even in dejection and defeat she was a jewel of radiance. Her hair was a blue-black cascade falling to below the waist of a perfect form, lean and lithe. I marveled at her skin of alabaster, white as the snowfall which cloaked the distant peaks. Wide eyes of azure were set in a strong face that was frank and determined and—somehow in spite of her situation—trusting. My interest was captured after one look into those eyes and I felt a strange stirring in my young breast. I immediately wanted to possess her but, above all else, I wanted to be her protector—to

guard her against the suddenly recognized harshness of the world. I believe Baran also coveted her from the first, but only because he saw in her an opportunity to strike a blow against his enemy.

It was not the way of our warlike race to keep prisoners, even women, alive, but due to my high standing in the council I was able to force an exception in Lian's case. I declared her my property, to mate with or make slave as I chose. Baran was furious; he harangued me and demanded, since he could not have her, that she be promptly executed. I nearly killed him then, and would have had the elders of the council not intervened. They decried the foolishness for two seasoned warriors possibly maiming or slaying one another with the enemy pressing us so closely. We agreed to a sullen truce and I took Lian to my hut.

Gaining her trust and eventual friendship was like trying to win over a fierce creature of the wild; it was painstakingly slow and required infinite patience. Gradually I was succeeding, however, when Baran made his cowardly stroke and disrupted all that I had done.

It came about while I was out on the slopes, directing the defense of a hard besieged barricade. Night was falling and still the lowlanders hurled themselves upon our spear-points, moving up in constant waves over the bodies of their own dead and wounded. I had battled since shortly after dawn and every joint and muscle in my body ached with weariness. My palms were blistered and bloody from the wielding of battle-ax and sword. The sour reek of dried sweat and blood clung in my nostrils. At last I gave over command to the leader of a group of fresh reinforcements and made my way back to the village over the rocky escarpments.

The moment I arrived I sensed that something was amiss...

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