



Two priests bore the girl's limp body up the pyramid stairs of the bull god



Adventure in Lemuria

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CHAPTER I - Battle in the Grove

KHOR strode easily along the broad highway, the sunlight gleaming on the bronze shield between his shoulders, the massive double headed axe dangling from his belt.

On either side of the highway lay pleasantly shady groves, nestling between the basalt cliffs. Clusters of trees, orange, pomegranate, banyan—flowers, trailing jasmine, brilliant hibiscus, and the sacred lotus, filling the air with a heavy breath-taking scent.

Glancing about, Khor nodded approvingly. A pleasant place, this land of Mu. One in which a man might readily make his home, live in content. Most men, that is. For Khor, whom they called the Wanderer, knew no rest; the promise of the horizon drew him on, endlessly, seeking he knew not what.

A small stream, gurgling noisily through a grove to the right, brought Khor to an abrupt halt. It had been a long walk from the little seacoast town where the galley landed. Perhaps a rest, and a taste of those tempting golden fruits. . . Leaving the highway, he entered the grove.

Khor was just bending over the brook when he heard it . . . shouts, the cries of warriors, and a clash of swords on armor. Tossing back his long, fair hair, he straightened up, the light of battle in his eyes. Hastily he slipped his left arm through the leathern thongs of his shield, gripped the heavy axe with his right, and raced in the direction of the clamor.

For just a moment, as Khor burst from the clump of trees, he hesitated, taking in the scene before him. On the grassy glade that lay between the frowning cliffs and the grove, a group of struggling figures was visible . . . one of them, a slender dark-haired young man clad in a blue mantle . . . and the other four, warriors in gleaming gilded armor, squat swarthy men, their faces aglow with fierce exultation.

Some half dozen sprawling forms stretched upon the ground attested to the bitterness of the fray, and it seemed that another must soon lie there, for the slender young man, already marked by a score of wounds, was weakening under the assault of the four warriors.

Khor marveled at the skill with which the youth, armed only with a light hunting sword, defended himself against the four flashing blades; yet it was evident that his was a losing battle, that the men in the golden armor were intent upon keeping him occupied until loss of blood and exhaustion would cause him to drop, an easy victim, at their feet.

It was this latter fact that decided Khor. Brave men, he felt, would fight to kill . . . but this wearing out of an opponent and then slitting his throat at one's leisure was the work of cowards. Grimly he raised the burnished bronze axe, and, with a shout of encouragement to the man in the blue mantle, sprang from the shadow of the trees.

At the sound of Khor's voice the little dark men whirled about, their faces blank with amazement. A god, he seemed to them, with his yellow hair, his white skin; and though not considered overly tall in his homeland of Crete, Khor's six-foot frame, lithe and clean-limbed, towered a full head above them.

God or man, however, the axe in his hand gleamed ominously, and, leaving one of their number to occupy the blue-clad youth, the three remaining warriors turned to face this new antagonist.

WITH a quick leap Khor was upon them, grinning recklessly over the top of his round bronze shield. As he closed in, two of his opponents' curiously twisted swords licked out toward his chest, forcing him to keep his shield high. The third, bending low, loosed a slashing stroke at Khor's unprotected legs.

"By Ishtar!" Khor cried, leaping backward to avoid the blow. "A cowardly trick!"

And before the crouching warrior could straighten up, the great bronze axe had descended, whistling, with all the strength of Khor's powerful arm behind it. Through golden

helm and bone the bronze blade sheared, splitting the man's head so that it fell apart like the two halves of a nut. Before Khor could raise the axe again, however, the other two were upon him, sunlight gleaming brightly on their lifted swords.

Acting instinctively, the Cretan swung his left arm wide. The heavy shield with its snarling lion's head in the center crashed into one of the gold-clad warriors, sent him sprawling, his face a bloody mask.

The last of the three Murians, seeing Khor thus unguarded, plunged forward, meaning to run him through with the point. As, arm extended, he hurled toward Khor, the Cretan swung the double headed axe once more, swung it upward from its resting place in the skull of the first warrior. In a slithering arc the keen-edged weapon whirled up, slicing through the Murian's forearm cleanly, lopping it off at the wrist. For just a moment the brown-skinned little man remained erect, staring at his own hand, still clutching the gold-embossed sword hilt, on the ground at his feet. Then, eyes glazed, he pitched face down to the grass.

"By the Sacred Altar of Minos!" Khor panted. "These little brown devils can fight!"

Suddenly remembering the man in the blue mantle, he turned to go to his assistance. The slender youth was on one knee, defending himself desperately against his black-browed, hot-eyed opponent.

"But a moment!" Khor cried, racing toward him. "I . . ."

He broke off, staring in open-mouthed admiration. The man in the blue mantle, bleeding from a dozen wounds, panting with exhaustion, had surged once more to his feet and, by a supreme effort of will, struck the sword from his enemy's hand. Disarmed, frightened by the sight of Khor bearing down upon him, the last of the gold-clad warriors took to his heels.

"AIE!" The youth in the blue mantle leaned, panting, upon his sword, staring sadly at the sprawling figures that littered the grove. Then, glancing up at Khor, "I, myself, must have joined them had the gods not sent you, stranger, to succor me. Are you indeed earthborn?"

Khor, wiping the great axe with a tuft of grass, laughed. When he spoke, it was in the liquid tongue of Mu that the merchants aboard the galley had taught him during the long voyage from Sathan, on the shore of Ind.

"Khor the Wanderer, men call me," he said. "From the land of Crete in the Upper Sea, I come. For more than a hundred moons have I traveled east. And now I have reached this land of Mu, called by travelers the home of the gods. Are you of the people of Mu?"

"Aye!" The slender youth threw back his head. "Jador, I am called, ruler of Zac, which is part of the great nation of Lemuria . . . Mu."

"A prince!" Khor grinned ironically, glancing at the bodies of the gold-clad warriors. "And these . . . ?"

"Followers of my half-sister, Lalath." The youth's face darkened. "Five years since, when I was still a child, she seized the throne of Zac. Only through the loyalty of my guard was I able to escape. Five years in hiding, I spent, and now, having come of age, I seek to regain my throne, re-establish the worship of Narayama, the true god, in place of bloody Molech. Today, accompanied by a few loyal retainers, I came here to await the arrival of those who espouse my cause, peasants, merchants, nobles, all sworn to assemble here during the night, attack the city tomorrow. By mischance we encountered a patrol of Lalath's warriors . . . and the rest you know."

Khor nodded his blue eyes on the great city that lay in the valley below. Towers, white as ivory, thrust like lances at the sky; stately buildings, brilliant gardens, gleaming lakes, all encompassed by frowning grey walls which seemed to Khor wide enough for chariots to ride upon, two abreast.

"No handful of rebels will take that town against well-trained warriors," he muttered. "Mighty engines of war, aye, and twice ten thousand men would find it hard. Madness, lad, for you to dream of winning it."

The young man squared his shoulders, and in spite of his ragged, bloodstained garments, he seemed a strong, commanding figure.

"Narayama the true god shall aid us," he said proudly. "In these hills above us lies the secret tomb of my ancestors, mighty rulers of Zac. There I shall pray to the Eternal One for guidance." He stretched out his hand, touched the Cretan's right shoulder in the Murian gesture of greeting or farewell. "When I return to the throne of Zac, you will be rewarded. Thanks and may the gods keep you."

TURNING, Jador crossed the glade, commenced to ascend a rocky path cut into the dark, basalt cliffs. Khor watched him, swaying with weakness, clutching at projecting rocks, gnarled shrubs, in an effort to drag himself upward.

"Stay!" The Cretan ran lightly, sure-footed as a mountain goat, up the path. "You think to climb these cliffs with half your blood spilled in battle? Here, lad, take my arm!"

Gasping, Jador grasped Khor's muscular elbow.

"Surely you must have been sent by the true gods," he muttered. "The way to our mountain abode is not one for a wounded man . . . alone."

Upward, ever upward, the path wound, no more than a tiny ledge cut zig-zag in the face of the cliffs. Khor, all but carrying the youth, was panting now, his face damp with sweat.

At length, after what seemed hours of toil, the path widened to a small shelf, some ten feet square. Before them at the face of the cliff was a great disc of stone, higher than a man's head.

"Push it aside," Jador whispered.

Khor placed his shoulder against the rim of the disc, threw his weight upon it. Moving easily in a groove cut for that purpose, the disc rolled to one side.

The entrance, overlooking the vast city ruled by Jador's half-sister led to Jador's place of refuge. What mysteries lay beyond, what loyal forces remained there to restore Jador to his kingdom, Khor was not to discover. For Jador, extending his hand in the Lemurian gesture of thanks, bade farewell to his new-found friend.

After the ceremony of farewells, Jador stepped out onto the shelf of rock, stared at the marble spires of the city in the distance. "See, Khor, that rocky pinnacle in the heart of the city? Upon its summit Lalath has built an altar to Molech the Bull God, the Evil One. There, it is said, the breath of Molech drives men to madness, to death! We shall strike for it first tomorrow, destroy the temple! Thus with Molech overthrown, we shall, by Narayama's word, conquer!"

"Perhaps," Khor grunted, his composure restored by the sunlight, the clean air of the mountains. "Yet rather would I have a thousand bold warriors than your god's prophecy, for all his strength! It comes to me, Jador, that I, a stranger, and therefore not to be suspected, might enter the city and at the appointed hour fall upon the guards of some postern gate, open it to admit your armies."

"A cunning plan!" The young prince's face lit up. "But no . . . such an attempt must surely fail. Six warriors guard each of the lesser gates. Even one with your strength and courage . . ."

Khor grinned, shook the double headed axe in grim anticipation.

"You have but to name the gate," he said. "That little affair in the clearing just now has whetted my appetite for a real struggle. Heklos here" . . . he caressed the weapon lovingly . . . "grows dull from lack of use. Which gate, Jador, ruler of Zac?"

"You will do this, then?" The young prince's eyes turned searchingly to Khor's rugged, clean-cut face. "Why do you, an outlander from the west, risk your life for an unknown fugitive?"

Khor pondered a while in silence, frowning thoughtfully.

"Because I like you," he said at length. "Perhaps I do but follow my destiny." He glanced down the rocky path. "You can reach the bottom unassisted?"

Jador nodded.

"The north postern gate," he said. "At the hour of the rising sun. Narayama watch over you, Khor the Wanderer!"

"Aye," Khor grunted. "We shall be there—Heklos and I!"

CHAPTER II - Lalath

IT was close to sunset when Khor passed through the main gate of Zac. Towering above the throng of merchants, mendicants, and pilgrims who sought entrance to the city before nightfall, he made a powerful, imposing figure. On all sides there were curious glances, exclamations at his height, his fair yellow hair, his white skin. Oblivious, the Cretan strode on, intent only on reaching the northern gate studying its defenses for the morrow's assault.

The city, Khor noticed, far surpassed any other he had observed in his travels, even many-walled Ur, or the mighty capital of Chin. Everywhere were majestic buildings of black and white marble, gaily decorated with striped awnings, roof-gardens ablaze with flowers.

Khor had not proceeded far into the city before he became aware that it was a feast day of some sort. Merchants in the bazaars had their most priceless gifts displayed. The streets were thronged with priests, pompous merchants, and flower girls strewing the pavements with lotus blooms. On all sides were warriors of the witch-queen's guard,

resplendent in their golden armor, and nobles, dashing back and forth in brazen chariots, contemptuous of the commoners who fled to escape the thundering hoofs, the grinding wheels.

Yet in spite of all this panoply and pageant-like splendor, the Cretan detected another note. The muttered oaths that ran in the wake of a glittering guardsman, the dark looks, half-anger, half-fear, that followed the passage of a jewel-bedecked priest or noble. Khor smiled. Perhaps Jador would not have such hard work after all. . . . Turning to an ancient white-bearded man beside him, he nodded.

"Your pardon, father. I am a stranger from the west. What festival do you of Zac celebrate?"

"Festival?" The old man turned bitter eyes to the Cretan. "Lalath, the witch-queen, sacrifices tonight to Molech the Evil One. Twelve of our fairest youths to face the bulls of the temple. Yes, and those who survive are doomed to die from the poisonous breath of Molech at dawn."

"Eh?" Khor frowned. "As for facing bulls, we of Minos, in the land of Crete, know somewhat. Aye, none better. But these tales of a god whose breath alone can slay . . ."

"Quiet, then, lest you discover for yourself." The old man, seeing a gold-armored warrior approach, disappeared into the crowd. Khor was about to follow when he heard a shout behind him.

"Mighty Molech!" A deep voice roared. "It is he! The white-skinned stranger who saved the life of that dog Jador! Hold him!"

KHOR whirled, found himself face to face with the black-browed warrior who had escaped the morning's fray. Leaping backward, the Cretan snatched his shield from between his shoulders, drew from his belt the double-headed axe.

The first blow from Khor's massive weapon split the guardsman's copper shield like a lath of wood. Casting aside the useless buckler, the Murian advanced warily, keeping beyond reach of the deadly axe, striving to get in a telling blow at the Cretan's exposed head and legs. The noise of the fray, the guardsman's shouts, quickly attracted others of his kind. Two, three, a dozen of the golden warriors were crowding about the tall stranger. Khor, his back against a stout marble wall, swung his axe in sweeping circles, keeping them back. One, advancing over-close for a thrust at Khor's side, stepped into the path of the blade. With a crunch the weapon bit through his ornamental armor, laid bare his thigh. Another warrior, taking advantage of his opening, leaped forward, only to retreat once more as a back-handed blow slashed a bloody furrow across his chest.

And still the Cretan, by skillful use of his brazen shield, remained untouched. Though not wounded, his breath was beginning to come in gasps, his face to gleam with sweat. Realizing that his strength must sooner or later fail, he sprang to the attack, hoping to cut his way through to freedom. Once, twice, three times the blood-stained axe descended, and three Murians toppled to the ground. The others, staring in amazement at this berzerk stranger, drew back, afraid.

"Slingers!" someone shouted. "Quickly! He must be taken alive for the queen's sacrifice! An offering to Molech!"

Hearing this, Khor pressed forward desperately, but the Murian warriors gave ground before him, yet keeping him occupied with their curved swords. The Cretan's heart was pumping heavily, now, his muscles aching. Dimly, through sweat-blinded eyes, he saw stocky, brown-skinned men approaching, whirling thongs of leather about their heads. With an instinctive gesture he flung up his shield, but it was too late. Something hard crashed against his temple and the world dissolved into mist.

THE great amphitheater of Zac, sprawling at the base of the crag upon which the black temple of Molech stood, was ablaze with a thousand cressets. Ruddy flame-light glittered upon tier after tier of tessellated marble. High at one end of the arena jeweled lamps marked the queen's dais, a raised platform of carved sandalwood hung with silken draperies, cloth of gold.

Suddenly the door at the end of the arena swung open and a stocky, swarthy youth stepped into the torches' glare. Clad only in a breech-clout, unarmed, he seemed pitifully small against the background of eager, grinning faces. As the youth advanced toward the center of the amphitheater, another door swung wide and a great black bull, one of those sacred to Molech, thundered into the arena. Scourged and goaded into fury, his nostrils dilated, his mouth dripping foam, the huge beast circled the field, snorting, pawing at the ground. All at once, catching sight of the swarthy youth, he lowered his head, charged.

In vain the young man tried to step aside, avoid the gilded horns. A quick toss of the bull's head, and the youth, a gored and bloody figure, was hurled across the field. Savagely the bull turned, trampled his opponent into a crimson pulp.

On her couch of purple ostrich feathers Lalath, queen of Zac, stifled a yawn. Her huge opalescent eyes were apathetic and she twisted her lithe, near-nude body restlessly.

"See, Hatan," she murmured to the resplendent captain who stood beside her. "Another victory for the sacred bull. Have we none among our captives who will give us sport?"

"Perhaps, majesty," the bedizened captain murmured. "There is one, an outlander from the west, whom we took but a few hours since. A man of great height, mighty strength. .
."

"Let him be brought into the arena, then." Lalath smiled eagerly. "At once, Hatan! My people cry for action, for one who will tax the strength of the sacred bull, before his entrails trail in the dust!"

Hatan bowed, spoke to a crouching Nubian slave. A few moments later the brazen doors at the end of the amphitheater again swung open and a tall powerful figure strode across the sanded field. The ruddy light of the cressets struck gold from his fair hair and as he walked, lithe muscles rippled like water beneath his white skin.

"So, Hatan!" Lalath leaned forward, wetting her scarlet lips in anticipation. "You have done well! Here, indeed, is one to give us sport!"

In the center of the arena Khor cast a quick glance at the tiers of expectant faces, wheeled about as hooves rumbled behind him. Head lowered, the grey-eyed bull bore down upon him.

A grim smile passed over the Cretan's features. Arms extended, knees flexed, he waited. Nearer and nearer the snorting black beast came. A choked silence fell over the crowd. Was this outlander mad? Did he hope to meet the charge of an infuriated bull head-on? Lalath stood up, with a sweep of silken robes.

"Fool!" she whispered. "Does he seek death, hoping to cheat us of our pleasure. . . ."

THE queen's voice trailed off in an indistinguishable murmur, drowned by the roar of the spectators. The Cretan, with a swift, unerring movement, had grasped the lowered horns with his two hands, vaulted lightly upward in a swinging somersault. His body described an arc through the air, his feet struck the bull's back lightly, and an instant later he had leaped to the ground. Breathing easily, hands on hips, he stood behind the onrushing bull.

"Mighty Molech!" Lalath stood like an ivory image, her hands pressed to her breasts. "Never has mortal eye beheld the like! See, the bull turns for a second charge!"

Wheeling, the black monster hurtled toward Khor, its hooves drumming the packed sand. Once more the Cretan seized those blood-stained horns, swung gracefully over the beast's back. Again the bull charged, and again . . . and always Khor's skill enabled him to avoid the deadly horns. Long moments passed and a tense silence fell over the crowd. The bull was growing exhausted now, yet in a frenzy of frustrated rage he kept up his attacks on the elusive Cretan.

At length there came a time when Khor did not leap from the beast's path. Crouching, he waited until the weary animal was upon him, seized the gory horns once more. Then, throwing his weight to one side, his great muscles standing out like taut ropes, he twisted the bull's head. Panting, utterly worn out, the beast rolled over in the dust, lay, tamed, at the Cretan's feet.

A roar of approbation shook the amphitheater. Priests, alarmed by the downfall of the sacred bull, dispatched messengers to the queen's dais, demanding the life of the stranger. These Lalath waved aside as she spoke to Hatan.

"Fetch me the stranger here," she commanded. "At once!" And a slow, sphinx-like smile upon her vivid face, she twined a lotus blossom in her dark, glossy hair.

Shoulders squared, head high, Khor followed the resplendent Hatan up the carpeted steps to the queen's dais. Lalath, lying back upon her silken couch, studied him from beneath veiled eyelids.

"Who are you?" she murmured. "Never have I seen a man of such strength and cunning, nor yet one whose hair was like gold, skin like unto polished marble, and eyes the color of distant mountains."

"Khor the Wanderer, men call me," he replied. "In my home at Minos, on the island of Crete, we joust with bulls for sport."

"Khor," Lalath repeated. "The name becomes you." She turned, whispered to the handmaidens who stood behind her couch.

At once they arose, left the dais. Heavy curtains fell from the carved sandalwood roof above, so that Lalath and Khor were shut off from the crowds about them, alone.

Khor, standing like a pale sculpture at the foot of the couch, stared narrowly at the witch-queen. Slender, she was, her sleek body glowing like old ivory in the light of the jeweled lamps. Her blue cloak lay in folds upon the floor, so that her only garment was a golden girdle clasped about her thighs. Her breasts, firm and up-tilted, rose and fell slowly with her deep breathing. Her scarlet lips were slightly parted and her fingers on Khor's arm as soft as rose petals.

Suddenly Lalath raised her eyes, black as a tropic night, to Khor's face. Like lodestone they drew him nearer and nearer. Now he could feel her body tense against his, her hot breath upon his cheek. And those huge dark eyes, twin pools of Lethe, bringing forgetfulness. . . .

All at once fear swept over Khor. Bottomless, the queen's eyes seemed, pits of evil, haunted by the demons of hell. Dim eldritch mysteries, unspeakable thoughts, monstrous, vampire-like longings, lurked in their depths. Revulsion, a feeling of uncleanness gripped the Cretan. Roughly he broke away from those clinging arms, sprang to his feet.

"Khor!" Lalath whispered. "What is it? See . . . am I not desirable? Do my caresses fail to please? Come. . . ."

"Nay." Khor laughed harshly. "Sooner would I take an adder to my breast. They are right who call you the witch-queen!"

With these words a terrible change came upon Lalath. Face contorted, eyes blazing with fury, she leaped to her feet.

"Hatan!" she cried hoarsely. "Guards!"

Khor stared at her, stunned by the sight of her demoniacal, distorted features. Hatan, followed by three guards, brushed through the purple curtains.

"So, Hatan" . . . the queen spoke with cold menace, ice, where a moment before she had been fire . . . "this outlander finds my arms unwelcome! Perhaps the arms of Molech may console him. Tell the priests of the temple that I shall be present at the dawn sacrifice to see him die!"

"She-devil!" Khor lunged forward, seeking that soft throat with grasping fingers. Hatan and the three guards seized him, dragged him, struggling, from the pavilion. And as, stunned by their savage blows, Khor stumbled down the broad steps, he seemed to see the face of Lalath, smiling mockingly at him.

CHAPTER III -!The Bull God

THE rocky cell beneath the temple was dark, damp. Khor paced restlessly back and forth, straining at the leathern thongs which bound his wrists. Somehow it was impossible to drive the thought of Jador, gallant young prince of Zac, from his mind. Boastfully he had promised Jador that he would open the northern gate. And Jador, believing in him, would count upon that gate's being unbarred.

Had he, Khor, fulfilled his mission, it would have been easy. A sudden entrance through the undefended postern, taking the queen's guards by surprise, freeing, arming the people. But now . . . Khor shook his head drearily.

Finding the gate barred they would be forced to retreat, seek scaling ladders, ropes. And by the time these were collected, the city's garrison would be fully aroused, the walls strongly manned.

Khor glanced through the tiny grating of the window. False dawn paled the eastern sky. Already Jador and his followers would be assembled at the tomb of the kings, marching

toward the city. At any rate he, Khor, would not be alive to see their defeat. Death, on the altar of Molech. . . A sorry way for a warrior to die. Perhaps, had he not repulsed Lalath . . . Khor shook his head once more, at memory of the witch-queen's luminous, hypnotic eyes. Better the breath of Molech than . . .

Soft, shuffling footsteps in the hallway outside, the creaking of a drawn bolt. Slowly the ponderous door swung open. Three priests, lean, wrinkled vultures, stood on the threshold, their sable robes giving them the appearance of bodiless spectres in the gloom.

"Come." The leader of the three, he with the jade and silver headdress, motioned Khor forward with a wave of his long sacrificial knife.

Upward, along stone steps, they advanced. Cressets, set at regular intervals along the way, shone glassily upon wet, slimy walls. As they ascended, more groups joined them, those other unfortunates doomed to die upon Molech's altar, accompanied by their guard of black-robed priests. Here, a young girl, slim, lovely; here, an old man, grey, bent; a fat, quaking merchant, a weeping child . . . Impotent rage gripped the Cretan. If only he had not failed Jador. . .

Ahead they could hear the sound of music, a throbbing, ominous chant filled with tortured wails, the macabre cadence of death. Louder and louder, approaching a furious crescendo, a cry of blood-lust.

Instinctively the priests quickened their steps, eyes glowing. Jeweled curtains at the end of the corridor drew back as they approached. Urged forward at the point of the sacrificial knives, the captives stumbled through the entrance.

Rows of sable-clad worshippers lined the sides of the temple, chanting their fierce melody, exultant. In the center of the vast hall a pyramid rose, thrusting into the shadows of the ceiling. Atop the pyramid sat a figure, awe-inspiring, terrible. Thrice human size, it was, the body that of a man, the head, bloated, bestial, obscene, that of a bull. Ghastly, inhuman,

the face of Molech, its bovine lips half-parted, its eyes wild, lustful. At sight of the image, a wail of horror broke from the wretched captives.

SUDDENLY a figure kneeling at the foot of the pyramid arose, faced the line of human sacrifices. Lalath, clad in the sombre robes of high priestess, her blood-red lips set in a satanic smile. Cruel, deep, eyes swept the row of captives, resting a moment, mockingly, on Khor. Then her hand shot out indicating the slim girl beside him. Immediately two priests, braziers of burning incense in their hands, stepped forward, seized the girl, dragged her before Lalath. Laughing harshly, the queen lashed the girl's feet, motioned toward the grinning statue of Molech.

The two priests set down their braziers of incense and, picking up the half-conscious girl, commenced to climb the pyramid. Khor, unable to tear his eyes away, followed their ascent with morbid fascination.

Now the priests were at the top of the pyramid, working in haste as though afraid. Upon the open hands of Molech, outstretched beneath his grinning lips, the girl's slender figure was placed. Quickly the priests descended.

Khor stared at the girl, her frightened, colorless face upturned to the parted lips of the idol. What was it they said about the breath of Molech? Yet the girl seemed in no way harmed, lying passively on the huge hands, her eyes on the distorted countenance above. All at once he saw her stir, restlessly.

Words issued from her lips, strange, incoherent words, spoken in a thick, unnatural voice. Babblings, the ravings of an empty mind. The girl was squirming, writhing about, now, eyes glazed, nostrils dilated. Suddenly she began to gasp, her face black. Panting, choking, she fought against the strange force that was tearing her soul from her body. Then, abruptly, the struggle ceased. Limp, motionless, she lay in the giant hands, her slender form drained of life. And above her the cruel bull-god, its stone lips set in savage ecstasy. . . .

Watching, Khor felt the hair at the back of his neck stiffen. Yet somewhere, he was sure, he had seen a similar occurrence. Somewhere . . . why did the explanation elude him? Was it in Syric . . . or Mayaban? . . .

Now the priests were ascending the steps of the pyramid, removing the girl's body from the clutching stone hands. Again Lalath's gold-flecked eyes swept the line of victims and this time her finger pointed to Khor. Two more dark figures advanced, swinging their glowing braziers. They seized Khor, dragged him before Lalath.

"So, my Khor." The queen's voice was like poisoned wine. "You may now know which is sweeter, my breath or that of Molech." Then, to the priests, "Bind his feet well, that he may not leap from the Arms of Death."

As they bent to lash his ankles, Khor tensed his muscles. Better a struggle, death from the sacrificial knives, then the foul breath of the Bull God. The Cretan tossed back his fair hair, laughed exultantly. Now . . .

A sound of trumpets, the shouts of warriors in the city below froze Khor to immobility. Jador, attacking! Believing that the northern gate was free! Not knowing of his... Khor's . . . failure!

SUDDEN tumult, cries of alarm, swept the great hall. Priests and captives alike turned to gaze between the black columns, view the spectacle below. From the slopes at the north of the city a small army was approaching, racing toward the postern gate. A rabble of peasants, for the most part, armed with scythes, knives, clubs. At their head was a slender figure in a blue cloak. Faint shouts of "Jador!" and "Narayama!" echoed from the plain.

Now Jador and his band were before the northern gate. Springing forward, the young prince threw his weight upon the bronze door, but it did not yield. A cry of dismay arose from his followers. Watching, Khor ground his teeth in helpless rage. Within the city gold-armored figures were streaming toward the walls, the morning sun flashing upon their helmets, their

shields. Arrows, spears, huge stones cast by mighty engines of war were cutting swaths in the ranks of the attackers.

In desperation Jador and his band hammered upon the gate with sword and axe, sought to scale the walls. Half their number had by now fallen before the rain of missiles from the walls, and the remainder were beginning to waver. Behind the gate the queen's charioteers waited, reining in their snorting horned steeds. Once the rebels commenced to retreat they would issue forth, cut down the fleeing remnants.

"Ah!" Lalath, watching with avid eyes, laughed. "None shall escape! The Cretan shall be a victory offering to mighty Molech."

Khor, straining at his bonds, gazed hopelessly at the struggle below. Brave, these furious assaults, but futile. So before the walls of Troy had the men of Hellas . . . Khor straightened up suddenly. Hellas! That was what he had been trying to think of! The temple at Delphi, where a strange invisible vapor issued from a cleft in the rocks, to drug the minds of the priestesses! And fire had been forbidden in the temple. . . What if there were such a cleft beneath the statue of Molech!

"Gods of Crete!" Khor muttered. "I have it! Give me strength!" And with one herculean effort he snapped the leather thongs that bound his wrists, his feet.

All eyes were on the battle below, none watching him. Swiftly he snatched up one of the braziers of flaming incense, raced up the steps of the pyramid. Higher, ever higher, into the swirling shadows that cloaked the roof of the temple.

Now there were shouts from the priests, and a knife clattered against the stone beside him. Too late . . . the Cretan was already at the base of the huge image. Quickly drawing back his arm, Khor hurled the brazier of incense straight into the open, grinning mouth of Molech!

AS to what happened next, Khor was never quite certain. A sheet of flame blinded him and the temple rocked like a ship at sea. Sliding, rolling, he fell from the pyramid,

landed, half-stunned, on the marble floor below. On all sides the priests of Molech, mad with fear, were attempting to escape to the city below. Khor picked himself up, glanced about. Great sections of the roof were breaking loose, the black pillars beginning to crumble. The Bull God was enveloped in a roaring fountain of flame and vague rumblings sounded in the earth below.

As in a dream Khor saw Lalath, her lips parted in a bestial snarl, pluck a knife from her girdle, draw back a slender arm. Before she could hurl the weapon, another tremor shook the temple and the huge seated figure atop the pyramid rocked, toppled from its base. A scream of terror broke from Lalath's throat; instinctively, as though to ward off the tons of falling stone, she threw up an arm. One glimpse of that vivid diabolically beautiful face Khor had, before it was buried beneath the grinning bull-like idol.

Choking in the dust, the Cretan remembered stumbled from the temple, then raced down the steps cut in the rocky crag. Chaos gripped the city below. Buildings, monuments, shaken into heaps of rubble; great fissures, spouting smoke and flame, gaping in the streets. The earth shook. To the north where Jador and his men watched with awe-filled eyes, huge sections of the city wall collapsed in heaps of ruin.

Now Khor was in the streets of the town, fighting his way through the maddened crowds. Rocks, stones, fell everywhere; through the pall of smoke above the crag a pillar of fire thrust like a blazing brand at the heavens. Cries of terror arose on all sides. "Molech has fallen!" "Mighty Molech is no more!" Suddenly a roar of ear-splitting violence shook the streets, hurled the Cretan against the side of a house. Glancing back, he saw the dark pinnacle fly into fragments!

For seven awful minutes the earth heaved and tossed, cracked wide to belch molten stone, and then the pillar of flame was choked out by masses of shattered rock, the

subterranean rumbling ceased, and the ground was still. Khor rubbed the dust from his eyes. Ahead he could hear the triumphant shouts of Jador and his men.

“Narayama has spoken! The True Gods have destroyed Molech, breached the walls of the city! The prophecy of the tombs is fulfilled! Hail Jador, beloved of the Gods!” And in joyful answer the people took up the shout, “Hail Jador! Hail Narayama!”

The Cretan, pushing his way to the fore, grinned. Let Jador’s gods receive the credit for all that had occurred; it would increase the young king’s prestige. People preferred miracles to explanations anyhow. Still grinning, the Cretan advanced toward the king.

“Khor!” Jador’s eyes widened. “Now truly are you favored of the gods! They told me you died in Molech’s arms! See” . . . he pointed to a bronze axe and shield lying at his feet. “These we found among the trophies of the witch-queen’s guards. I had ordered them hung in the Hall of Heroes!”

“Nay!” Khor gripped the axe and shield joyously. “The Wanderer has yet to make his last journey!” Eyes aglow, he faced the rising sun. “Too long has the dust and dirt of city streets clogged my nostrils! The blue line of the horizon calls. . . .”

“You will not then remain?” Jador’s smile was sad. “No honors, no wealth, will hold you?”

“None.” Khor’s gaze was on dim distant hills. “Not even my love for you, lad!”

“Thus I gain a kingdom and lose a friend,” Jador murmured. “The gods watch over you, Khor the Wanderer!”

“Aye!” Khor gripped the boy’s shoulder. “Hail and farewell, Jador, King of Zac!”

Turning, he strode from the square. Already, although he had not yet reached the boundaries of the city, Zac, Jador, Lalath, were things of the past; his fierce blue eyes were bright with dreams of new lands, new people, new adventure. Breathing deeply of the cool morning air, Khor the Wanderer took the highway that led to the east.

