

PLANET STORIES



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In The Sphere of Time

By J. W. PELKIE



Illustrated by NAPOLI

ONCE UPON A TIME there was a world as bright and fair as youth. It spun its green and golden beauty in an envelope of blue sky while whirling around a blazing white sun. . . . But beneath the enchanting surface of this world, in a blackness as deep as the void of eternity, thirteen pairs of silvery eyes glowed at a great crystal sphere. The cold air was strung with a thin thrumming as twelve anciently quavering male voices rose and fell in echoing chant.

"Great Prince Toka comes—down the river of Brown of the Outer World. O let the fishes be told! O let the choral begin! For the time ordained is coming to pass!"

Proud Prince Toka had faced—and outwitted—death and disaster before. Yet in this wierdly glowing underworld of Kosanna, peopled by the soft, silvery-eyed ones, there waited a thing he could not defy—destruction of his soul!



With a fervent prayer Toka snatched at his great battle knife.

IN SUN-GOLD BRIEFS AND matching sandals, Toka's lean muscled maleness rippled as he swung the sweep pole of the racing raft. Ahead on each bow corner were balanced the rangy Rok and the youthfully gray Old Ledo, each with long pole ready to clear the swift raft through roiling brown water. In mid-raft, the exquisitely blonde Roya and the sultry dark Elees lounged carefreely on the great pelt of a saber-toothed Big Cat.

There was a sudden familiar roar from the far right shore. The colorfully flowered jungle spread away to rugged red hills that formed the north shoulder of this great valley. Midway bulged a large grassy butte, atop which was poised a colossal slick-skin dinosaur. Smiling, Toka raised an arm to the distant reptile. Red eyes beaming fiercely, the Big Snake yawned its cavernous maw and blasted away a mighty roar.

Roya laughed gayly. "All hail to Toka

—Prince of Sandcliff and King of the Dinosaurs!"

"Look smart ahead!" Old Ledo snapped suddenly.

The party's attention leaped back to the job of piloting the craft through roaring white rapids. Then ahead stretched smooth brown water again. To the left here, a long cliff towered up from the river.

The dark Elees seemed thrilled. "This is the way to travel!"

Roya breathed happily. "From now on—"

Toka stiffened as above the river's deep murmur came human voices in exquisite choralng.

Roya glanced to Toka. "But there isn't a sign of human habitation anywhere!"

Toka had already placed the direction. "In that cliff."

Roya wrinkled her nose. "Rubbish."

Then from that cliff came a strange wail. "Tooookaaaa!" It was repeated over and over. "Tooookaaaa! Tooookaaaa!"

The raft nosed around into a broad channel that curved lazily into a cavernous maw in the cliff. The walls and roof glowed with a soft light and the choralng of Toka's name came clear and stronger. Toka let the raft drift.

"The river is certainly slow enough in there," Roya mused.

"We could pole our way out easily enough," Elees reflected.

Old Ledo looked at these impetuous ones. "We could not come back another time—when Sandcliff would know where we were going!"

"But what can happen?" Rok protested. "We've got our battle-axes—even Elees and Roya have theirs!"

Old Ledo's unimpressed glance went to mid-raft. There were three great black battle-axes and two smaller ones.

In that instant Toka weighed the pro and con. "We'll go in a little way."

Roya and Elees swiftly placed each man's battle-ax handy then balanced easily in mid-raft with their own light weapons. The lazy current guiding the raft, the men shipped their poles.

Roya suddenly pointed over the side of the raft. "Look! glowing fish—in all colors!"

"But how vicious looking!" Elees exclaimed.

Roya reached into the party's food basket. "I'll toss them a porkchop!"

The chop plopped into the river. The water churned violently—and calmed. The fish had devoured the chop almost instantly! The river was swarming with the vicious creatures now. And the raft was moving faster than the river—a school of the fish adhering to the craft and driving it!

As Toka swiftly used the sweep, Rok and Old Ledo thrust their poles as brakes. But the water roiled violently and in instants the fish shredded sweep and poles off at the water line. Above the party's heads the choralng slowly rose in volume. As the raft rounded a huge bend, Toka felt his nerves tighten.

The luminous cavern and its river straightened and flowed between colossal green pillars set close together from wall to wall and from roof down into the river. The raft was only twenty paces from the colossal grill and being driven inexorably toward it. The choralng of Toka's name came through even clearer. . . .

"Look!" Roya exclaimed.

RISING SILENTLY, the massive columns hung from the roof like green fangs. The fish drove the raft on, and the columns descended with a watery whisper. The cavern widened. From the right bank, fields and forests stretched away. On the left bank was a city of spheroid structure. Massed along the banks and bridges, the choralers were human, their green attire but scantily adequate, their titian hair worn in a loop between the shoulders.

The raft scraped gently against a wharf and Toka led his party ashore. As the patriarchal dignitaries stepped forward, Toka noted another universal characteristic—all these strange people had pale silvery eyes.

But Roya was startled by something else. "Toka! Those figurines on their necklaces are perfect likenesses of you!"

The oldest patriarch was reverent. "Yes, fair Roya. All Kosanna wears Great Prince Toka's divine likeness."

Toka glanced a warning to his startled comrades—*accept this situation and play along.*

"Great Prince Toka," the patriarch bid,

"Your palanquins await your divine pleasure."

Toka lounged into the one bearing his likeness on its sides. Roya and the others occupied the rest. The procession wound through the city, into a great square packed with choraling Kosannans and toward a colossal statue that was Toka, even to his royally engraved weapons!

On the great white altar base black braziers were being lit by beautiful girls. As the procession came beside the altar, a girl with a jeweled wand stepped down to march on the right side of Toka's palanquin. The way led on across the square and to a great white-and-gold stairway that rose away to an immense domed palace. All choraling abruptly ceased and the bearers gently lowered the palanquins. Toka and party stepped out.

The old patriarch assumed a ceremonial pose. "O Great Prince Toka. No farther may we lowly ones travel." He bowed to the girl with the wand. "May you and the Princess Wanda now ascend to your divinely ordained tasks."

Aware of Roya's sarcastically raised eyebrow, Toka played on. "Lead up, good Princess Wanda."

Halfway up the long stairway, Rok frowned. "What gets me—"

A great gong throbbed urgently.

Wanda whirled. "O great Prince Toka! Your first test is at hand!" She raced away for the distant summit of the stairway.

In moments the square and city below were deserted. Toka and the men formed a V around Roya and Elees.

"What's that flapping sound?" Roya puzzled.

Toka trained his eyes on that distant cavern into which the river vanished after passing Kosanna. And from that black hole shot six huge dragons! Mottled a pale yellow and green and equipped with great wings, their sinuous lengths tapered to a series of blue rattles. Their triangular skulls were set with unwinking pink eyes. From their upper jaws great yellow fangs curved down to vicious pin-points.

As the dragons streaked for his party, Toka's powerful being sang for action and his great battle-ax was a whistling blur. His voice was cool. "Take their fangs first!"

The dragons' huge rattles began vibrating angrily. One dragon shot on for the top of the stairway. Hissing viciously, the remaining ones ganged in for Toka and company.

Toka's battle-ax cracked true and sent fangs spinning away. Clear venom dripping from the stumps, the dragon instantly recoiled in violent pain. But another came streaking in. Again Toka's battle-ax shot true in that one-two cracking and a second victim convulsed violently and collided with the angry others. All five were a wild melee over the square.

A scream slashed through the din. Toka glanced. Blue tail coiled about Wanda, the sixth dragon was winging away.

"Here they come again!" Rok warned.

Having untangled themselves, the five unburdened dragons were tearing back to the attack.

Toka's command was cool and taut. "Serve it straight!"

His whistling battle-ax struck between a set of those blazing eyes and tore through in a bloody shower. In violent death throes, the monster was piling onto the stairway. But another was hurtling in. Again Toka's vicious battle-ax tore home and another dragon was piling down.

A slimy scaliness whipped around Toka's legs. His battle-ax butchered huge coils but others replaced them with crushing power and great wings pounded him.

THEN he saw a coil whip around Roya and a terrible strength surged from his depths. His mighty ax was a screaming viciousness. He was free and leaping for Roya and slashing those coils from her. He snatched her clear and whirled to catalog the battle scene. The surviving dragons were retreating hurriedly into the down-river cavern.

The mysterious gong of Kosanna was instantly exultant. The people began pouring from hiding. Princesses were gathering atop the stairway, and from all Kosannan throats came a great cheer.

But Toka was anxiously eyeing the gore-spattered Roya. "All right now?"

As she restored her sun-gold briefs to flattering modesty, Roya's blue eyes fondly held him. "How about yourself?"

Shifting his own gory briefs aright, Toka grinned. "Looking for a bath."

Elees joined them. "If this crazy place has a bath!"

Turning from the mess of heads, coils and wings strewn down the great stairway, Toka led the way on up.

"Hey!" Rok urged sardonically. "Listen to what those palace girls up yonder are yodeling!"

"Ascend, ascend, ascend!" Roya mimicked sarcastically. "Ascend, O Great Prince Toka! Ascend to your divine abode!" Roya's last remark was not in mimicry. "Blah, blah, blah!"

"Watch yourselves," Toka warned quietly as they neared the terrace.

The princesses formed a cortege about Toka and party. In the concave entry of the palace, a princess with a black wand waited alone.

An odd exaltation was in her voice. "O Great Prince Toka. Welcome to your divine palace. I am Princess Alota." With a bow, she turned and led them down an immense hall. "Great Prince Toka's Hall Of Life," Alota intoned.

BEGINNING on the inner sides of the great entry portals, art work progressively lined the walls and the many sets of huge doors. In exquisite execution it portrayed Toka's eventful life from birth in distant Sandcliff to his latest victory—exactly as it had all occurred! But ahead for fully a hundred paces the Hall stretched green and bare, except for a huge bas-relief of Toka on the set of doors at the far end.

"How can they know all this?" Elees puzzled softly.

"And why," Roya worried quietly, "don't they show the rest of the future?"

Toka was gentle but royally commanding. "Princess Alota, why has this not been finished?"

Alota answered humbly. "As Great Prince Toka knows all, so he knows his Hall Of Life cannot be extended until the divinely ordained times." Leading them to the pair of doors at which the Hall ended, Alota touched her wand to each, then stood obsequiously aside as the portals began swinging away. "O Great Prince Toka. Your personal rooms."

Old Ledo strolled in last and the great doors began swinging to.

"O Great Prince Toka," Alota bid.

"When you have refreshed yourself, we shall return to escort you to your banquet."

As the doors snugged together, Toka was to them, ear to the crevice where they joined.

"Well?" Rok urged impatiently.

"Gone back up the Hall." Toka pressed this side of the doors. No action.

"We could tune up our little axes on them," Rok suggested laconically. Toka hesitated.

Old Ledo was dry. "Perhaps we'll meet the so-called brains of this mad society at that banquet."

"Likely." Toka joined in cataloguing the room.

Widowless, and illumined by the softly glowing ceiling, it was a restful lounge room. Roya pushed open the plain green door at the rear. Battle-axes idling, Toka and the others followed. A short cross-corridor led into luxurious bedrooms. The left one had three large beds, the right two huge ones.

"Everything for every one of us," Roya mused.

"But no bath!" Elees complained.

"I've found it!" Rok shouted.

All followed him through the door opposite the lounge room. The newest room was all green. Around the pool ran a generous width of stone floor.

Dropping her ax, Elees ran for the white diving board. Her voice rang in merry challenge. "Last one in is a glue-foot!"

Rok raced after her. "Not me!"

Roya abruptly flung her arm around Toka's neck and tumbled them both in—and the water frolic was on.

Refreshed and clean again, the party split to the respective bedrooms. Toka faced Rok and Old Ledo. "Any ideas?"

"The Kosannans we've seen so far," Old Ledo offered, "are anything but combative."

"We could butcher them by the hundreds." Rok toyed with his battle-ax. "Only. . . ."

"Perhaps," Toka hoped as he led for the lounge room, "we'll learn something definite at that banquet."

Roya and Elees were waiting. At once a reverent knocking came on the great entry doors.

Assuming his role, Toka intoned royally, "Enter!" The great doors began swinging in.

As the procession moved up the Hall Of Life, Toka was startled by the addition to the reliefs on the wall—a perfect portrayal of the frolic in the bathing pool!

"I," Old Ledo mused dryly, "didn't see any of them in there with us."

Surfacely casual, Toka spoke ahead to their guide. "Kosanna's artisans are swift, O Princess Alota—as well as accurate."

Alota bowed her titian head in acknowledgment. "As Great Prince Toka knows all, so he knows the scene of his frolic in his pool was ready for installation even before he came to Kosanna."

Proceeding to a pair of doors on her right, Alota led them into a vast auditorium, beautifully scened of wall and softly glowing of vaulted ceiling. There was a tremendous black banquet table, its center gleaming and bare. Beside ornate black chairs down each side, hundreds of beautiful princesses stood expectantly. At the far end of the table was a great stage, its black curtain hanging in huge folds. An enchanting perfume filled the air.

Toka sauntered to the quintet of white chairs at the head of the table. Each chair back bore a small but perfect likeness of the member of the "divine" party who was to sit in it.

"Aren't there any men in this palace?" Elees wondered lowly.

"Maybe the whole place is a harem," Rok posed puckishly, "just waiting for Toka."

Toka was aware of Roya instantly stiffening. Comparing her sunny blonde and creamy-tan loveliness with the titian and milk-white beauty of the Kosanna princesses, Toka failed to see why Roya should be irritated.

Alota raised her wand. At once the curtain on the distant stage rustled aside to reveal a choir of sheerly gowned princesses who began a low choraling. With a swaying of diaphanous gown, the choir parted and a line of graceful girls danced out, bearing large trays.

"Brother!" Rok gaped.

Toka felt the warmth creeping into his face. If those dancing girls wore more than silver gilt it was not discernible. And

straight down to Toka the creatures danced. After passing each tray before him, as if for benediction, the girls danced away right and left, serving first the rest of Toka's party and then the princesses down each side of the table.

As the exotic banquet progressed, a thought occurred to Toka. "O Princess Alota."

"As Great Prince Toka wishes."

"Are here gathered all my ones of my palace?"

"As Great Prince Toka knows all, so he knows that tomorrow he shall meet the Council Of Kosanna's Old Ones."

"So," Roya mocked quietly, "the big brains aren't dining with us after all!"

"They'd probably pop an old blood vessel at sight of these dancing girls!" Elees mused sardonically.

AS HIS PARTY was escorted down the Hall Of Life, Toka was only mildly surprised at the newest scene—of the banquet from beginning to end. Escorted into the lounge room, Toka and party watched the great doors swing shut.

Elees yawned. "At least we seem to have *some* privacy."

Roya was drowsy. "Is it getting dark or am I just sleepy?"

"Hey," Rok affirmed lazily, "the ceilings are dimming."

Old Ledo now yawned. "Even have night and day in this crazy cave."

"Let's go to bed," Elees urged from her lethargy.

Old Ledo yawned again. "I guess they won't bother us."

"After all," Toka reasoned lazily. "why wear ourselves out tonight when we're going to meet those Old Ones tomorrow anyway?"

Rok yawned. "Sure! Let's grab some sleep."

Roya and Elees pulled down the silkily rustling covers of their beds.

Elees yawned. "I could go to bed with all my clothes on." She sat on her bed—and swayed backward.

The utter lethargy was pulling Roya into her own invitingly soft bed. "Who needs . . . clothes off. . . ."

Elees was beyond answering. Roya, too, relaxed into the dreamless depths.

Toka tossed down the rustling covers

of his bed. Sleep weighted his eyelids and pulled at his consciousness. Not even bothering to remove battle knives, Rok and Old Ledo were sprawling into their beds. Sandals, battle knife and all, Toka stretched out on his bed and sank into its wonderful softness. "Been a . . . big day. . . ."

Rok and Old Ledo could not answer. Toka let the restful void take him.

II

TOKA'S DREAMLESS SLUMBER seemed to have lasted but moments. The ceiling was just returning to its full light of day as Toka sat up. The beds of Rok and Old Ledo were empty. And Toka's weapons were nowhere to be found! He was into the girls' room. Nothing! He was to the pool. Nothing. He stepped to the lounge room. The emptiness mocked him. Why couldn't he have seen that drowsiness last night was abnormal! Hot anger spread through Toka. *If anyone had harmed Roya. . . .* Picking up a stone lounge, Toka slammed it to the doors. The heavy lounge shattered—the doors stood impervious. Why hadn't he and Rok used their battle-axes when they had the chance!

The great doors suddenly opened and the cortege was there.

Toka's voice was a whip. "Where are my comrades!"

Alota bowed servantly. "Only the Council Of Kosanna's Old Ones may now answer Toka's divine testing."

If only these princesses were men so a man could beat a straight answer out of them! "Then take me to the Old Ones at once!" Toka strode into the Hall Of Life and followed Alota.

Toka scarcely noted another pair of scenes—one showing him and his party asleep last night, the other portraying his quarters awry and him whaling that lounge against the doors.

Alota was touching her wand to a pair of great doors on her left, to reveal a golden stairway leading up in a broad spiral. Alert, Toka leaped up the long spiral to a pair of gigantic black doors. They swung away and Toka stepped through. He was on a broad black terrace that circled a vast court. A golden light diffused through the domed roof. In mid-

court a huge crystal sphere rested atop a black sculpture of nude maidens.

Seated in great chairs around the far half of the court were twelve men in voluminous black robes. Above flowing white beards their features displayed the withering of antiquity. Their silvery eyes never wavered from Toka.

"O Great Prince Toka," a mellow contralto intoned, "Queen Kolano and the Old Ones welcome your divine presence!"

In the huge black chair directly between the twelve Old Ones sat a woman surpassing in beauty all Kosanna's princesses. Her attire was the typical green scantiness—brilliantly jeweled.

"Where are my friends and weapons!" Toka's demand rang in the vaulted court.

Kolano's contralto echoed mellowly. "O Great Prince Toka—behold the Sphere Of All Time!"

Kolano and the Old Ones centered their silvery eyes on the huge Sphere. A faint thrumming sang through the court and a chill swept the air. The golden light faded swiftly. The Sphere seemed suspended in a black void.

"O Great Prince Toka!" Kolano intoned. "Behold the time of Present!"

The Sphere shone with a pale cold light and Toka saw his quarters. The rooms had been cleaned and straightened. Rok and Old Ledo were sprawled comfortably on their beds, their weapons beside them. The Sphere Of All Time abruptly dulled.

"O Great Prince Toka!" Once more Kolano's contralto echoed through the chill and thrumming air, "Behold the time of Past and Present!"

Again the Sphere shone with that pale cold light. Toka saw Kosanna's square as in moonlight and shadow. The door between the feet of that colossal statue of him swung in. Led by Alota, a procession of princesses marched out—each four carrying a black bier on which lay a girl. The first eight wore only small Toka figurines between their breasts. These eight girls were laid in a row on the fore edge of the altar.

Two more biers were carried out. Deprived only of weapons and consciousness, their occupants were Roya and Elees! They were added to the girls at altar's edge. At a wave of Alota's wand the princesses retired.

Toka wanted to cry out—but even in speech he was immobile! And ten dragons swept over the deserted city. Flapping above the altar, each monster whipped its tail about a girl and carried her away. Back over the city the dragons lined—and shot into that down-river cavern.

The Sphere Of All Time held to the route—through a dungeon gloom, on to a wierdly illumined area of slowly swirling steam and grotesque stalagmites, then through a black tunnel guarded by a dragon at coiled rest. Down into a vast red pit of stalagmites and stalactites, of yellow steam and slimy green moss hangings, the way led. And each dragon placed its prize in a green cage, latched the door, then flapped away into a great den of their own.

Regaining consciousness and beholding their position, the Kosanna girls began shuddering in abject fear. Of finer stuff, Roya and Elees fought to retain reason and hope—when a horde of the pit's inhabitants came into view!

Terror ripped through Toka. The things were half man and half dragon, their slimy scaliness a shiny black mottled through with a fiery red. From their flat reptilian heads lidless red eyes burned with an insatiable lust. From their mouths yellow fangs thrust down to vicious needle-points. Their hands and feet ended in ten long and sinuous digits. Their bodies continued on down beyond their pelvis to become a tail that ended in a restless coil of blue rattles.

The Sphere Of All Time toured that pit. Working abjectly at cutting and gathering moss, or hopeless slaves in the dens pocking the pit's perimeter, were hundreds of Kosanna girls.

Fear and rage tore through Toka. Yet even with the tremendous strength that came surging from his depths he could not move or speak!

The Sphere Of All Time dulled. The taut thrumming and chill faded. The blackness changed swiftly to golden light. Kolano and the Old Ones centered their silvery eyes on Toka. The spell dropped from him.

TOKA whirled to leave—but in that instant he could not move! The Old Ones' silvery eyes on him, Toka heard Kolano's contralto echo in the vast court.

"As divinely ordained, Great Prince Toka shall listen."

Though he strained mightily, he could not do otherwise.

"When the Dragon Women bore only males and so became extinct," Kolano's contralto echoed calmly, "the men of Ophid exacted tribute from Kosanna. Yet Kosanna girls gave birth only to Dragon Men. Thus, even though Kosanna grows ever less, ten girls still are sacrificed each night—lest Ophid come and destroy all Kosanna and take all our girls."

Toka's voice was his to make an angry demand. "Why were Roya and Elees included last night!"

Kolano smiled calmly. "As ordained by the Sphere Of All Time, Great Prince Toka must have that incentive to destroy Ophid."

Toka blazed his request. "Then restore my fellow warriors and me at once—that we may attack Ophid!"

"On one condition."

If only he could regain his weapons! The sweat of fear was on him now. "What is your condition!"

"Great Prince Toka must wed me first."

The woman was mad! Toka rang out his instant decision. "I refuse!"

Kolano shrugged. "Great Prince Toka is even now reconsidering—and seeing that certain things are ordained."

Held immobile and bathed in a cold sweat, Toka found his swift mind reconsidering. Roya and Elees—about to be—He dare not think it—his reason would shatter to insanity! The sweat dripped into his eyes as he fought his voice from shaking. "I accept!"

Kolano was smiling softly. "Great Prince Toka may now return to his rooms. The wedding shall then occur—after which Toka shall be given his weapons and sent to the realm of Ophid."

The Old Ones' silvery eyes lessened their hypnotic intensity and Toka whirled for the opening doors. A gong was joyous somewhere outside. An exultant choraling was beginning. The high portals at the bottom of the spiral stairway swung in as Toka neared the last step. The cortege ran to escorting position as Toka raced down the Hall Of Life. He spared a glance for the latest art work—a portrayal of his recent experiences up in that domed court.

Alota was flashing her wand to his doors. Toka was across the restored lounge room and into his bedroom—was shaking Rok violently, then Old Ledo.

"Holy lizards!" Rok snapped. "What's wrong?"

The distant gonging and choraling an affirming background, Toka tried to begin educating his friends.

But the angry Rok leaped for the lounge room. "I'll murder every blasted Kosannan and dragon in my way!"

The deadly angry Old Ledo's voice rasped more sanely. "We've got to get Toka's weapons first!"

Rok swung abruptly to Toka. "Where are they!"

"I get them after I marry Kolano!"

Rok and Old Ledo stared. But the portals were swinging. Alota and the cortege was waiting. Toka had to play his part out—it was the fastest way.

Toka sped back up the Hall Of Life. A new scene had been added—Toka awakening Rok and Old Ledo and his explanatory discussion with them. The great entry portals were swinging and Kosanna's exalted gonging and choraling flooded about Toka as he ran down the long stairway. The massed Kosannans in the square formed a lane to the altar where Kolano was waiting.

"I've never killed any woman," Rok offered loyally, "but—"

"Save it for the Dragon Men!" Toka leaped to the altar and strode for the edge. The gonging and choraling was so tremendous that the very stonework vibrated underfoot.

WITH a gaze of coming passion, Kolano turned. "O Great Prince Toka—it is the moment."

"Let's get on with it!" Toka snapped.

Kolano raised a jeweled arm to the Kosannans. The gonging and choraling abruptly silenced. The door between the feet of the colossal statue swung away and the black-robed Old Ones marched out in a double line to Toka and Kolano. The leading two ceremoniously carried deeply fringed black pillows, one goldenly embroidered GREAT PRINCE TOKA, the other GREAT QUEEN KOLANO. All twelve Old Ones began a sing-song chant in anciently quavering voices.

"O Great Prince Toka! O Great Queen Kolano! Take up your ring! Take up your ring! . . ."

As did Kolano from hers, so Toka took up the fiery jeweled ring from his pillow.

"Face each other! Face each other!" the Old Ones chanted as all Kosanna listened.

Toka fought his features expressionless. ". . . Extend left hands! Extend left hands! . . ."

Kolano's silvery eyes smouldered possessively at Toka.

". . . Extend third fingers! Extend third fingers! . . ."

The cold sweat was bathing Toka again. But no immobility held him—only desire to get his great battle weapons and go for Roya!

". . . Place your rings! Place your rings! . . ."

Where was his ax and knife!

". . . On the other's finger! On the other's finger! . . ."

Toka thrust his ring on Kolano's marriage finger and received her brilliant band.

". . . You are one! You are one! . . ." The Old Ones paused. "It is done!"

At once all Kosanna was gonging and choraling to the heights of joy. The air beat with it. The stone trembled with it. Rok and Old Ledo were muttering savagely. Kolano was trying to embrace Toka.

He thrust her from him. "My weapons—where are they?"

Disappointment was momentarily hot in Kolano's eyes. "They are here, O Great Prince Toka! And your canoe awaits beside the wharf!"

From beneath the voluminous robes of the second pair of Old Ones appeared Toka's weapons. Snatching his battle knife and buckling it on, Toka grabbed his great battle-ax and leaped from the altar. The wildly joyous Kosannans parted. Rok and Old Ledo fleet at his flanks, Toka raced across the square and down to the wharf. Only a long black canoe was awaiting. In a split instant Toka was kneeling at the bow thwart with black paddle in hand. Rok was as ready amidstips, Old Ledo in the stern.

The men thrust free of the wharf and dug their paddles. The canoe leaped for the down-river cavern. Only dripping

gloom met straining eyes. Only the liquid swishing-of three paddles digging fast and deep came to the ears. And ever Toka's being strained ahead to that hell-hole where Roya was. . . .

III

THE CANOE SHOT ON LIKE A fleet black ghost. Suddenly the river ended in a great whirlpool just ahead and the cavern spread away on the right, its extent shrouded in shifting haze rising from pools of many colors. Slowing the canoe into a cluster of stalagma, Toka tied it secure and stepped ashore. Slithering dangerously on the warm muck, he ran between boiling pools and swallowing slime holes, Rok and Old Ledo at his heels.

The mucky way led uphill and the haze began eddying into thin strands to reveal a glistening black wall ridged with colorful columns. Peering from behind one that towered away into the shifting haze, Toka considered the huge opening at the summit of this mucky slope.

Old Ledo wrinkled his nose eloquently. "The thing's in there!"

"Rok and I will get behind those columns to each side of that opening," Toka decided swiftly. "When I wave my arm Old Ledo will tap this column with his ax."

The haze eddied back. Toka and Rok separated on their swift ways. Rok was quickly into position. Edging out, Toka peered warily into the tunnel. Midway back and dimly revealed by the weird light reflected in from out here was one of the huge dragons, fanged head resting atop mighty coils and wings, lidless pink eyes watchful.

Raising his arm and dropping it, Toka poised. Old Ledo tapped the column and a deep chime-tone shimmered on the warm air. There was a scaly sliding within the tunnel and that huge fanged head thrust out. That greenly mottled yellow body began following in long undulations. That rattlered tail finally flipped clear and Toka shot across the muck. His mighty battle-ax bit home and tore on through—and that tail could buzz no warning. The dragon convulsed with beating wings only to have Rok's great ax whistle into the base of its skull. Old Ledo came loping up the mucky

slope and in intense moments it was all over—the remains tossed into slime holes that gulped away all traces. Even the wildly churned muck of the slope was settling back into a tawny smoothness that told no tales.

Rok and Old Ledo at his heels, Toka raced the length of the tunnel. It opened onto a small red ledge overlooking a shifting haze shot through with varicolored light. Columns of brilliant shadings thrust massively from it only to vanish again into the yellow vapor. Pale green moss hangings swung lazily and the musky stench of reptiles was heavy on the steamy air.

Rok and Old Ledo following, Toka was fleeting down the narrow path that dropped from the ledge in a great curve. Hissing laughter and voices drifting thinly through the eddying haze now, Toka and comrades slipped behind a huge moss drape and peered carefully about.

The path spread away onto the floor of the pit. Through crusty cracks in the red rock, vapor spiraled up to form the shifting haze. Stretching away right and left, the pit's moss-hung walls towered from view.

Rok and Old Ledo with him, Toka stepped from the moss drape and strode swiftly for a mighty column. *Covered by the haze and taking advantage of these columns—*

Around that column darted a redly mottled black Dragon Boy. His snaky features gaped. Also startled, Toka flashed his battle-ax to kill him. But the boy scrambled too agilely and raced away into the haze—his tail vibrating the warning!

TOKA'S GAZE leaped to a nearby door. Battle-ax swinging, he stepped in. Old Ledo shut the door. In the pale green light given off by the low ceiling the storage den was unoccupied.

"To the back!" Toka was scrambling over the springy moss heaps, Rok and Old Ledo with him.

At the back the men burrowed from view. The den's door clanked open and the raucous sounds of the great search came clearer.

"How would they know where to hide!" a searcher hissed.

The moss transmitted the weights and movements of the searchers—directly over-

head now. Toka could even hear them breathing.

"King Ophid is right!" a disgruntled searcher hissed. "The boy has been drinking too much moss dew!"

The clamor in the pit suddenly sharpened.

"Now what!" an exasperated searcher hissed.

"The tunnel dragon is gone without trace!" another deciphered.

"The thing is probably only out looking around!" the exasperated searcher reasoned. "Why doesn't King Ophid call off this looking," he hissingly whispered, "so we can eat some of our moss and go to nest."

"Fool!" the disgruntled searcher hissed softly. "The moss supervisor is watching us!" He spoke in louder hiss, "Come on—there's nothing here!"

The searchers scrambled away, the door slammed and Toka rifled his gaze over the moss heaps. The den was deserted. Rok and Old Ledo with him, Toka was to the door. The search in the pit fast subsiding, Toka eased the door a crack. The hazy stalagmited scene deserted, Toka slipped out with battle-ax ready. Rok followed lightly. Old Ledo came along and closed the door cluelessly.

Rok and Old Ledo at his heels, Toka stole swiftly for the center of the silent pit—and the cages. But every one was empty!

The fear ripped through Toka. "Old Ledo, take the back third of the pit! Rok, take the right third! Listen at every door! Get Roya and Elees—or kill them." Toka spoke grimly on. "All doors open out—brace each one! We'll meet at the moss den!"

Rok and Old Ledo whirled away. At the first door of his own area, Toka heard only Dragon Men. Snatching up a shard from a column, he braced it against the door and was away. Den after den of Dragon Men was swiftly secured.

A den of slave girls was encountered. "Get out!" Toka commanded tersely. "Hide in the moss den by the path!" The pitiful girls fled away.

Toka was on—securing the massive double doors to the vast den of the huge dragons. But he must be near to the end of his sector—and no Roya!

Peering around a massive column, Toka saw the haze ahead abruptly thin—to reveal an ornate doorway above which was sculptured a spiked collar. To each side of this door a huge dragon lay coiled on guard. The yellow haze swirled back over the scene.

"Toka!" Roya's voice cried. "Tok—"

Fear ripping through him, Toka leaped for that door. In the yellow haze the first dragon reared its head and flexed its massive coils. Toka's knife arm whipped and his vicious blade was a black glitter. The dragon darted its head but Toka's battle knife sank to its hilt between those baleful pink eyes. The dragon hissed and shuddered. The second one slid from the haze. Toka's battle-ax whistled viciously and sent the ugly head toppling from its sinuous body.

Leaping over the dying dragons, Toka slammed his battle-ax to that door. It flapped out—and rage exploded through Toka!

THE hissing laughter of the Dragon Men threaded through the stark screaming of the Kosanna girls.

"They're coming for us now!" Elees gasped.

A group of the Dragon Men gathered about the cage. One was unlatching the trap door.

As the Dragon Man advanced, Roya command, "We are not of Kosanna! Take us to your master!"

The Dragon Man grinned mockingly. "You, fair one, are for our King Ophid! But you, dark one—" Leaping with startling speed, he bowled Roya and Elees to the scummy floor.

Elees fought to escape the slimy creature. Roya battled to help. But that rattled tail uncoiled with blinding speed to smash her back and the Dragon Man was carrying the frantically struggling Elees from the cage. Roya leaped to follow—only to have gleeful Dragon Men clang the door in her face. Instantly backing from the snaky fingers clawing through the bars, Roya watched Elees born away into the eddying haze and stench.

Then there was an imperious vibration of rattlers. The mob about Roya's cage instantly backed away and from out of

the shifting haze swaggered a giant Dragon Man wearing a spiked collar set with flashing gems.

Flinging the cage door wide, he strode in with his voice hissing, "Ah, the new Queen of King Ophid's realm!"

Roya fought to control her terror. "My friend and I are not of Kosanna! Release us or our people shall destroy you!"

The King of the Dragon Men only reached for her. Roya ducked and leaped. Ophid's claws grazed her back, then she was past him and the door yawned ahead. But with blinding swiftness Ophid's tail whipped around Roya's ankle and crashed her to the floor. Then his sinuous arms wrapped about her and he was carrying her away through the eddying haze and stench to a door above which was sculptured a spiked collar. Two dragons were coiled on guard beside the door.

"Toka!" Roya cried in stark desperation. "Toka!"

There was only hissing laughter, mocking her.

Thrusting Roya free, Ophid fingered the small masonries of the latch area. In the sickly green light cast by the interior stonework, the den was low and huge. As Ophid moved slowly toward her, Roya dodged around the table and grasped the back of a chair. Red eyes staring hypnotically, Ophid slowly rounded the table and came toward her.

His snaky arms and hands began reaching slowly for her. Her flesh cringed as though she were already naked. But she could not move—could not utter a sound!

Held by Ophid's red eyes, Roya felt her legs quivering. She sensed those snaky fingers reaching closer and closer. In but a moment those hands would—

A frantic buzzing sounded from the pit and a pounding came on the door.

Snaky features scowling, Ophid flung the portal wide. "What's all this nonsense!"

"But, sire," a Dragon Man hissed, "a boy swears he just saw the three warriors from the Outer World!"

. . . *the three warriors from the Outer World* cut through Roya's hypnotized mind. Toka had come!

"The boy's mad!" Ophid hissed angrily. "No one could get past the tunnel dragon!"

"But, sire!" the alarmed Dragon Man

furthered. "The boy swears the three warriors are those who bested your six dragons sent to Kosanna!"

"All right, all right!" Ophid accepted impatiently. "We'll search the place and see! And if any—" The door slammed shut.

ROYA was to it. It was locked. Racing her hands to find the releasing mechanism, she listened to the commotion outside. Every Dragon Man and Boy and winged reptile must be searching the pit!

The door abruptly gave out from Roya's desperately searching hands! But she shocked back as the King of the Dragon Men strode in. His adroit tail flicked the door shut. Roya was behind a nearby chair. Ophid turned to finger the latch. With strength born of new hope, Roya grasped the chair and leaped. Ophid whirled and tried to convulse away. The chair missed his head but slammed down on his arms and staggered him.

Glimpsing success, Roya flailed the chair again. But Ophid whipped his tail around her ankle and threw her off balance as he tore the chair from her hands.

Roya contorted to sink her teeth into that tail coiled around her ankle. Ophid hissed with pain. Leaping free, Roya snatched the other chair as she dodged around the table. Ophid only stood before the door—his red eyes burning unwinkingly. Roya knew he was trying to hypnotize her again. But if she didn't let herself watch him. . . .

Roya centered her gaze on his redly mottled black torso. But Ophid was swaying in a slow sinuous rhythm. Roya felt herself begin swaying with him. In violent desperation Roya hurled her chair. Ophid only caught it and set it down softly. There were no more this side of the table.

Ophid began moving slowly toward Roya. His hissing voice was like his eyes—impelling. "There are no warriors from your Outer World. There is no one. . . ."

In desperation Roya upended the table and darted for the door. Only reaching out, Ophid eased the table to the floor. Roya fumbled frantically at the latch—but couldn't release it! Feeling Ophid's eyes burning over her, she whirled. Rippling sinuously, tail swaying in rhythm, Ophid was moving slowly backward.

His hissing voice was an opiate. "It is useless, fair one. You cannot resist what is to be. . . ."

Had Toka and the others not really come!

Ophid was standing by his filthy nest now. "Come, fair one," he bid softly. "Come, fair one . . . come. . . ."

Those eyes—that voice. . . . Flesh chilled and crawling, Roya took a slow step—another. . . .

". . . And another step, fair one . . . one more . . . just one more. . . ."

Roya took another slow step—into those arms.

". . . Relax, fair one . . . relax . . . relax. . . ."

His scaly arms tightened about her. His fingers moved over her. His scaly chest pressed against her breast. His slimy legs touched against her. His facile tail coiled up around her flesh. Her legs quivered. . . .

Roya's senses reeled. If only she could speak . . . one word. . . .

"Toka!" Roya heard her scream as from a distance. "Tok—" Ophid's slimy lips were on her mouth. . . .

Ophid glanced up as his den door slammed out. Battle-ax swinging and rage flaming through him, Toka leaped the overturned table. With one convulsion Ophid hurled Roya at Toka, kicked aside the mossy nest and plunged through the floor. Fast as thought Toka dropped his ax and caught Roya.

She met his anxious gaze. "I'm all right now, Toka."

Snatching up his ax, Toka hurried Roya for the doorway. As he braced Ophid's den, the haze momentarily thinned, revealing the next door, a considerable distance beyond, had been braced—by Rok as he had begun on that sector. Taking Roya's arm, Toka hurried through the shifting haze and stalagma.

"But Elees!" Roya protested.

The haze swirled away ahead, revealing Rok and an unharmed Elees and Old Ledo.

"Let's get out!" Toka ran for the path.

Old Ledo ran to the moss den. "All right, come on!" The pitiful slave girls fell in behind the old warrior as he joined Toka on the narrow path.

The ledge came into sight. Toka eased

to the tunnel's maw. Midway back, a dragon was coiled on guard. Drawing back, Toka held up one finger. Rok and Old Ledo joined him.

Toka breathed, "Take it as it comes!" He skipped a rock across the ledge.

There was a heavy sliding within the tunnel and the dragon's head thrust out. Rok and Old Ledo with him, Toka leaped with battle-ax flashing. The three blades tore true and the dragon's head toppled over the ledge. Aided by butchering blows of great axes, the violently convulsing body plunged after.

The tunnel's stinking gloom was traversed and the escapees crowded the mucky shore of the underground river. Old Ledo came back, "No canoe."

But that dilemma was instantly flung into the background as a murmur suddenly swept through the hopeless slave girls. Even as Toka glanced to ascertain the reason, the pitiful creatures began walking into the river. Instantly the vicious fish swarmed. The first slaves went down like mown blades of grass. The ones behind came on—hopeless, impassive, unstoppable!

Placing an arm about Roya's shoulders as she covered her face with her hands, Toka turned sickly away.

The river was finally quiet but for the empty swallowing of its whirlpool.

"Look!" Roya exclaimed.

IV

TOKA FOLLOWED ROYA'S GAZE up river. As if guided by an invisible pilot, an empty black canoe was drifting straight toward Toka. The party was swiftly in. Thrusting his paddle into the mucky bank, Toka shoved the canoe into the current. The paddles dipped, the canoe shot upstream into the gloom of the wind-ing cavern.

Roya's voice echoed musically. "Isn't that a ring you're wearing, Toka?"

A miracle she hadn't noticed the damnable thing sooner!

"Let me see it!" Roya laughed.

"No time to stop paddling."

"But where did you get it?"

"Kosanna." Better he had stayed in the pit of Ophid!

Roya sensed something in Toka's quiet

terseness, in the odd silence of Rok and Old Ledo. "Toka, what does it mean?"

Only the swift thrusting of the paddles and the swush of the river against the canoe's shell filled the next moments. Roya's patient waiting for an answer was inescapable.

"It means," Toka replied quietly, "that I . . . shall not be leaving Kosanna."

Roya took it surprisingly well. "And the rest of us?"

"Free to go, I guess."

"Why can't you come too?" Roya wouldn't give up till she knew.

Toka tried to keep it factual. "I married Queen Kolano."

"And who is Queen Kolano?"

Toka tried to explain. "Lives in the palace—up in the domè or some place. I met her—" Why explain his crazy trance! "So. . . ."

"Toka, I hope you and Queen Kolano will be very happy." Roya quivered with the hurt.

The dank cavern curved—to reveal the distant glow of Kosanna. Joyous choraling came on the air.

The singing was a mockery to Toka. "Roya, look. I only—"

"I understand perfectly." Roya dismissed him.

Rok cut in. "See here, Roya—"

"Let it go!" Toka ordered edgily. *He'd gotten what he'd paid for.*

The canoe shot into the full light of Kosanna and closed to the wharf. Toka led his party ashore. The joyous choraling filled the air and trembled the stone underfoot.

Flanked by the impassive Old Ones, Kolano stepped forward. "We hail Great Prince Toka's triumphant return!" Flinging her arms around Toka's neck, she searched her eager lips for his.

Toka thrust free. "These others may now return to the Outer World?"

"In that very canoe," Kolano assured freely.

Rok was loyal. "I'll stay."

"Double it," Old Ledo added.

Elees glanced to Roya.

Toka spared them. "Thanks. But Kolano and I shall make out all right."

Toka watched Roya and his friends paddle away into that upstream cavern. Rok, Old Ledo and Elees glanced back and

waved. Roya only faced straight ahead. The canoe turned the bend and was gone.

Shrugging hopelessly, Toka turned away.

Thirteen ornate palanquins awaited. Toka joined Kolano in the double one. The Old Ones sat into the others.

As the procession moved through Kosanna, Toka drilled his gaze into Kolano's silvery eyes. "My vow is not binding unless your promise is fulfilled."

"Toka has no cause for suspicion—as he shall see."

The great square was near now. Toka narrowly eyed Kolano. "Why didn't Kosanna migrate to the Outer World to escape tribute to Ophid?"

"Kosannans," Kolano educated, "would perish instantly in the elements of the Outer World."

"If you and the Old Ones are so capable," Toka mocked. "why wasn't a spell cast over Ophid and his realm?"

"The present Old Ones are the greatest mentalities Kosanna ever had—but they have their limitations."

The palanquins were born to the foot of the altar, and Kolano bid softly, "I shall rejoin you soon, Toka." She led the Old Ones for the door between the feet of the colossal statue.

Going down the Hall Of Life, Toka noted the scene of his marriage to Kolano had been added to the continuity; his expedition to Ophid and his deeds there; his return to Kosanna; and Roya and the others departing for the Outer World. Yet a good length of the Hall remained bare.

Alota did not lead to his rooms at the end of the Hall, but stopped before a pair of unscened panels on the left. Caring little, Toka sauntered in. There was this luxurious lounge room. Then, through a door scened with entwined hearts and embracing lovers, there was a teasingly scented boudoir.

V

From out of the darkness, thirteen pairs of silvery eyes stared at the Sphere Of All Time. The air was cold and sang with a thin thrumming. The Sphere shone with a pale cold light—the scene was the pit of Ophid. . . .

From a crevice in a massive stalagmite,

a giant Dragon Man was emerging warily. He wore a spiked collar studded with flashing jewels. Slipping away through the haze, he tugged the first door bracing loose and his fellows poured forth in an angry stream. . . .

In the court of the Sphere Of All Time, one pair of silvery eyes departed.

TOKA SAUNTERED BACK TO the lounge room of the bridal suite.

Another door on the right swung softly in and Kolano stepped from a dim passage. "Great Prince Toka finds these rooms satisfactory?"

"So far."

"After we dine, Toka shall be more satisfied."

The scent of her touched into his nostrils.

The main portals were swinging in for a cortege bearing trays of food and drink. The table serviced, Toka and Kolano were left alone. Slender green tapers gave off a delicate odor and the menu was exotic. But there was a platter of leaf-wrapped packs of Sandcliff's water berries, no doubt part of the stores from the raft. Toka felt little appetite but he tore open a pack's corner and spilled his hand full of the black fruit. There was a magic in these berries, a magic to heal all wounds—and to give renewed strength. . . .

He met Kolano's silvery gaze. "You and the Old Ones—unlike the common Kosannans—know I am not of divine origin."

Kolano shrugged. "For ages untold, your coming has been foreseen in the Sphere Of All Time."

"And you and the Old Ones?"

"The Old Ones were born of palace princesses and selected to study for the Council by the Old Ones of their time. I, too, am of a palace princess—and was selected by the present Old Ones to be the mother of your son."

Toka eyed her sardonically. "I don't know if the Sphere Of All Time reported this, but in my part of the Outer World we believe people should love each other first."

"I have loved you since first I saw you in the Sphere." Kolano's silvery eyes were alight for him.

Toka shifted his gaze away. "Perhaps it might be best to wait a while."

"Perhaps Toka needs only to know me better."

Toka stood up and sauntered away. At that moment the main portals swung in for the cortege to clear away the dining service.

As the portals swung shut again, Toka glanced cynically at Kolano. "Everybody knows just when to come and go."

"The Sphere has long told the times of all your needs and actions—past, present and future."

"All right," Toka challenged sardonically, "what am I going to do next?"

"You are going to bed. And I am returning to my private rooms." Touching open the passage door, Kolano departed with a soft smile for him.

He was alone and free—but for a vow. He opened the great portals. The Hall Of Life stretched away vast and deserted. To the continuity had been added the scene of his recent dinner with Kolano.

If he could find where they had those scene stored. . . . But another thought held him. If the future did show Kolano and him as she had intimated. . . .

Toka turned back into the bridal suite. If he was going to get free he would, and if he wasn't. . . .

It was a line of reasoning typically Kosannan!

The ceiling's glowing had dimmed. Toka turned down the silky covers of the great bed.

. . . the smooth whiteness of Kolano's skin . . . the Titian sheen of her hair . . . the deep smouldering in those silvery eyes . . . the curve of those carmine lips . . . the curvedness of—

This was the way he used to think of Roya! Used to think of Roya —

Toka tensed abruptly. Through the dimness he saw the boudoir door slowly move. Who could have gotten into this suite without toppling the chairs he had balanced against the doors? Hand on Battleax, Toka lay motionless—ready to leap. The door moved slowly in.

In the black court, the Sphere Of All Time shone on with a pale cold light. . . .

Ophid's men, boys and dragons were massed around him as he stood atop a huge stalagmite stump. His features were contorted with insane rage, his snaky body

quivering with it. His fanged mouth began to froth. His wild-eyed subjects snapped their heads up and down in approval. Ophid made a sweeping gesture and the fanatical Dragon Men began a frantic search for handy lengths of limestone shards—broken from the mighty columns . . .

THE Big Brown came into view. The flowery jungle spread away, blending into silent shadows as twilight neared.

Rok let his paddle trail. "Well, we're out—thanks to Toka."

The implication pricked Roya. "He didn't have to stay!"

"No," Rok considered sardonically, "Toka didn't have to marry Kolano—so we could get you and Elees out of that pit."

Roya was silent a long moment. "Rok," she commanded, "whistle for that big slick-skin we saw around here the other day!"

Rok's shrill blast cut away. A distant roar drifted back over the jungle. Rok whistled again. The distant roar answered—closer.

"Head for the opposite shore!" Roya commanded.

In moments the canoe was beached on the firm mud. Above the throbbing of the Big Brown came the distant crashing of trees and brush. Rok's whistle split again through the shadowy jungle. Roaring acknowledgement, The Big Snake was now so near the ground quaked with the rhythm of its coming.

Old Ledo was peering into the canoe. "Hey—how did all these packs of berries get under the thwarts?"

"Divide the packs among us," Roya commanded.

The Big Snake burst from a stand of fern trees and tore straight for Roya. With a happy roar it slewed to a ground-gouging stop. Then, missing Toka, it whined plaintively.

Roya held up her clenched left hand, raised its little finger and pointed to Elees. The Big Snake grunted. Roya raised the next finger and pointed to Old Ledo. The next finger was Rok, the next Roya herself. Each time the intently watching Big Snake understood. Roya raised her thumb. The Big Snake whined plaintively.

Roya pointed in the direction of the underground river and sang a snatch of the choral that had enticed them in there. The Big Snake frowned.

Roya held up her right hand and raised and lowered those fingers again and again and gestured that hand toward the underground area. Then she gripped her right hand, representing Kosanna, around her left thumb, representing Toka. She made Toka struggle against Kosanna. The big slick-skin began rumbling deep in its great belly. Its bulging red eyes began burning with rising anger. Its tail and colossal body rippled as it poised to race to Toka's help. Roya shook her head emphatically. The big slick-skin rumbled questioningly.

In the deepening twilight, Roya swiftly fingered a design in the smooth mud of the shore. The drawing crudely portrayed the big slick-skin and Roya and friends. It was also a map of the valley and the Big Brown on down to distant Sandcliff and the great dinosaur herd in that area. Roya pointed a finger to the character representing the big slick-skin, then pointed to the monster itself and raised her head and pretended to roar toward Sandcliff. She pointed to the herd around Sandcliff and wriggled her fingers to portray them running up valley to this spot.

The Big Snake instantly whipped its head aloft and faced down valley. It yawned its cavernous mouth and blasted the darkening twilight with a roaring that slammed away and back and away again in echo. Quickly there was an answering roar from far down valley. The big slick-skin instantly blasted away another series of mighty roars. At once the Big Snake far down valley acknowledged and relayed the imperative message on. And even farther down valley a third Big Snake began blasting the purple night with that peculiar series of mighty roars. And the call to the Big Snakes was flashing down the valley and summoning the colossal monsters to the rescue!

"Why not pile aboard old slicky here," Rok urged, "and start the fun now!"

"Those flesh-eating fish in that river would cut him down in moments," Roya explained.

"But the other Big Snakes can't get here till dawn!" Rok protested.

"We'll camp on that butte." Roya gestured the big slick-skin to kneel.

From atop that butte, the whole valley radiated away in starlit beauty. Sitting on the dewy grass, Roya ripped open a leaf-wrapped pack. The others joined in. The big slick-skin stood guard.

In the black court, the twelve pairs of silvery eyes stared on into the coldly shining Sphere Of All Time. . . .

Armed with great clubs of broken limestone, the hordes of Ophid were straddling aboard the multitude of dragons that had stretched out full length. Ophid leaped astride the neck of the largest. Flapping its many sets of great wings, the dragon rose its sinuous lengths up through the haze and shot for the tunnel. The other dragons and their wildly eager riders swarmed after. Into the gloom of the tunnel tore Ophid's lead dragon and burst into the weird outer area. Without pause Ophid swung his swarm over the river and tore up-stream. Into the gloom of that vast cavern the wild Dragon Men and their mad monsters poured. . . .

IN THE DIMNESS Toka watched the boudoir door ease slowly open. Framed by soft and loose titian hair, a white oval of features peered slowly around the door.

The low insinuation was Kolano's. "Toka is not sleeping, either?"

He was on his feet. "No."

Kolano's only jewelry was that wedding ring, her only attire a sheer silver gown that swirled provocatively about her sleek legginess as she idled toward Toka. She was smiling up at him, her silvery eyes smouldering with desire. The enticing scent of her stole into his nostrils.

He stood indecisively. "How did you get in?"

Her smooth white arms slipped around his neck. Her delicately scented breath was warm on his face. "Not all doors look like doors, Toka."

Her voluptuous softness and firmnesses were thrilling his own naked torso. His fingers spread onto the smooth nudity of her back.

Her deep contralto was intimately low. "Toka does not mind?"

"Not too much—yet." Her arms were tightening about his neck. Her sleek full-

ness was resting so closely to him he could feel her throbbing with expectancy. Her legginess pressed through her gossamer gowning to thrill his thighs. His own heart raced with the desire forming in him.

With a woman's want, Kolano's silvery eyes held his. "Toka is happy."

"Do you think so?"

Her lips brushed along his cheek to his ear. "I can feel it so."

Her warm lips found his mouth and the thrill raced through Toka. Kolano possessed him until his senses reeled as in a wild dream. Kolano's lips moved thrillingly on his and wanted more of him—in-satiably more! He felt his last resistance going down—until his deepest emotions were bursting free and beginning to clamor for more of Kolano—more!

A frantic gonging split through Toka's passionate senses. He broke free of Kolano and read the answer in her suddenly haggard features—the Dragon Men were winging for Kosanna! The vision of Roya flooded back into Toka's mind. But Roya was gone forever—was disgusted with him! And without Roya what was life! Toka whirled for his battle-ax.

Kolano's contralto rang low. "O Great Prince Toka! This is the hour—use it well!"

Great battle-ax swinging, Toka was into the lounge room. The ceilings were coming aglow. The new day of Kosanna was dawning—and the last day of Toka was setting. Racing up the deserted Hall Of Life, he spared a swift glance for the portrayal of that recent episode in the boudoir. They'd have another scene soon! Toka was slamming open the huge entry portals.

The gonging silenced. Kosanna spread away below—deserted. Toka was alone atop the sacred stairway. Fighting being surging with terrible power, he poised with his battle-ax a whistling blur around his head. And from that down-river cavern shot Ophid—astride the neck of a monstrous dragon. Out streaked more, at least half a hundred—lines of wild Dragon Men riding each one.

Ophid's lead dragon streaked in low over the city. The swarm behind spread out and the dragons landed in the avenues. Their riders leaped off and began flailing their wicked clubs to Kosanna's

buildings—cracking the spheroid structures and smashing in the doors. Hissing and rattling angrily, the dragons were taking to the air again to whip their tails around other buildings and tumble them down with terrible crashings to destroy their occupants.

But here and there the hitherto docile Kosannans were snatching up knives, sharp tools—anything to try to fight with! The rattlings and flappings, the hissings and shoutings, the yelling and screaming, the explosive crashing of stone on stone and the grinding agony of collapsing structures filled Kosanna and slammed into the ears.

But Ophid and a flight of ten dragons and their riders converged on Toka. The dragons raced to landings on the great stairway. Their insane riders leaped clear. The eleven dragons surged again to the air to come hurtling in for Toka as the horde of Dragon Men came flooding up the great stairway. Toka backed into the concavity of the palace entrance.

The first dragon shot in with great yellow fangs dripping with glistening venom. Toka's ax leaped and bit true to split that flat skull and send the horror crashing in wild convulsions onto the Dragon Men. It was no deterrent. More flying monsters were hurtling in with red tongues flicking and huge fangs dripping.

The Dragon Men had gained the stair top now and were rushing for Toka. With terrible strength and blinding speed Toka powered his mighty battle-ax in screaming drives. Again and again fangs cracked away and venom sprayed. Over and over skulls were split and brains showered wide. Reptilian bodies were cut twain and blood flew as in a rain. The terrace ran red and was slippery with warm gore.

Toka fought on with the increasing recklessness of a warrior who only wants to sell his life for the highest price! And Ophid was a crazed demon standing atop the massive balustrade and ranting for the destruction of Kosanna!

They came swarming up the gore-drenched stairway, came streaking through the sound-torn air and were an insane flood raging to inundate this lone warrior of the Outer World. In but gory split moments the price of Toka would soon be paid!

VI

DAWN BROKE GRAY AND RED in the east and grew to gold as the new sun soared free. But Roya's anxious eyes only stared away into the west.

"Hear it!" Rok cried suddenly.

It was like the rolling, rolling, rolling of distant thunder coming steadily out of the west. The big slick-skin whipped its huge head aloft to blast a mighty roar down the valley. Faint and clear the answer came—a chorus of roaring.

Standing on tiptoe and straining to see, Roya felt the tingles racing through her. "See them coming!"

Far down valley, the monsters were a river of colossal power. They were in many colorings and mottlings, in many forms and sizes—all tearing for this butte. Great trees were mown down like blades of grass before the powerfully racing leaders. Swamps and rivers were as nothing. There was no stopping them—no slowing them. They had heard their human master needed them! They were coming—to the last one!

And now the thundering of their swift coming filled the air and shook the very earth till a person could scarcely stand erect. It swayed the mightiest trees as in a gale. The roaring for battle slammed into the sense, took the breath and beat upon the body. And the grassy butte was swarming with the terrible colossi. Towering above Roya, a mighty armor-plated spike-back rumbled for directions.

Gesturing to the big slick-skin she had been carefully educating during the night, Roya pointed to the black-back and worked her mouth as if talking. The slick-skin began rumbling to the black leader. Instantly facing his impatient fellows massed on the slopes, the black spike-back reared up and began gesturing his huge forelimbs as he roared at them. Anger mounting even higher, the Big Snakes roared to be off for Toka.

At that moment a frantic gonging came faint but clear from the direction of the entrance to Kosanna. Rok instantly deduced the cause. "The Dragon Men must be attacking Kosanna!"

Gesturing the black leader to kneel, Roya was aboard the massive back, one hand cluthing to a spike for support. Elees and the men were with her and Roya's

voice rang on the jungle air. "Go for Toka!"

The colossus heaved up running. Down the slope it tore with a battle roar. With a combined roaring that filled the air with deafening thunder the mass of Big Snakes swarmed in behind—all the armorplated ones first. Through the dense jungle as though it were grass the colossal black leader tore the way. He burst clear and shot across the Big Brown in a geysering spray to plunge into the luminous cavern.

The angrily roaring monster's huge head was stretched out low over the deep water—and Roya saw the vicious fish were not present! But the armored monster, as did the others close behind, beat the water to colored foam.

The monstrous spike-back raced around another bend and tore for that grill of green columns—but that massive structure was drawn into the vaulted roof! There was nothing to impede the way!

"Listen to the sounds from Kosanna!" Elees cried.

"The fight's on!" Rok yelled in helpless anxiety.

"Oh, Toka!" Roya prayed.

"Here we come!" Old Ledo chanted.

The cavern opened into Kosanna. The angrily roaring spikeback burst clear and the wild battling spread away in all its detail.

Roya's heart was in her cry. "There's Toka—fighting in the palace entry!"

With a roaring that blasted through the wild din of battle the black colossus was already tearing for Toka. The mass of following Big Snakes swept into the city with a vengeance.

SCREAMING Dragon Men and their hissing and rattling monsters were a flood trying to down Toka by sheer weight of numbers. The insane Ophid stood on the massive balustrade and urged his crazed subjects on. Toka stood in the concavity of the palace entry and drove his battle-ax with blinding speed. Jagged clubs were as little deterrent to his mighty weapon as were the slimy bodies of the frothing monstrosities that wielded them. But on they and their huge dragons came. And in but another moment. . . .

A mighty roaring suddenly cut through the battle din. Toka spared an instant's

glance. The familiar black bulk of an armorplated Big Snake burst from the upper cavern and tore into Kosanna!

Perched gracefully atop that spiked back was Roya!

Rok and the others were with her—battle-axes swinging. More Big Snakes thundered into Kosanna—more—roaring viciously and already battling the hordes of Ophid.

But Roya was coming—leading the attack! She still loved him! The exultation surged through Toka. And to his superb strength and speed was added this toxin to drive him to greater fury of a different nature.

Down in Kosanna, Ophid's men and dragons were locked in raging battle with the colossal Big Snakes. Those jagged clubs were as nothing. But those long yellow fangs of Ophid's men and their dragons—the venom they injected as they bit home on unarmored Big Snake anatomy! The ferociously fighting slick-skins dropped in their tracks and sprawled in utter limpness—then immediately began bloating till their colossal bodies burst in a gory explosion!

But the viciously battling armor-plates were impervious to those striking fangs. They trampled Ophid's men and slammed them to lifeless smears. They caught the flying dragons and ripped the writhing, hissing and striking things to shreds.

The terrace began heaving violently beneath Toka's feet and the colossal black leader with Roya aboard loomed up and exploded into this insane melee. Dragon Men and flying monsters and colossal armor-plated heads and tails whirled in wild battle. The ravenously screaming battle-axes of Rok and Old Ledo—of Roya and Elees—joined Toka's in this desperate finale.

But Toka's fighting heart was abruptly clutched in an icy grip as a club cracked to Roya's ax arm! She dropped her weapon. Red eyes blazing, Ophid leaped atop the black spike-back's neck and was scrambling recklessly up the viciously lashing length. Rok and Old Leo were desperately occupied with flying monsters. Elees did not see. Yellow fangs dripping venom, Ophid was nearly to Roya now. And she dare not jump—a sea of wildly fighting Dragon Men awaited.

With a fervent prayer Toka snatched at his waist. His arm whipped and his great battle knife streaked away.

But that moment had its price—a pair of fangs sank into Toka's leg. Even as his ravenous knife blade sang through the Dragon Man's neck Toka's scesnes reeled. His last memory was of Roya screaming, "Toka!"

TOKA'S mind fought harder and slowly made his weary body come alive, made it want to struggle back there—to Roya. The blackness slowly fell away and Toka looked up into Roya's deep blue eyes. Her lips were warm and sweet.

"Brother!" Rok was observing fervently. "Was that close!"

"One less berry," Old Ledro reflected sagely, "and that venom would have been too much." Indeed, the black fruit had once again demonstrated its healing power.

"No Roya and there would be no anything now," Elees was pointing evenly.

"The Sphere Of All Time," Kolano was assuring easily, "is never wrong."

As Roya drew up from him, Toka sat up. He was on the bed in the bridal suite. The gore-spattered Roya and Elees, Rok and Old Ledro, the sheerly clad Kolano and the black-robed Old Ones, were all circled about him.

Roya faced Kolano. "I don't know whether your Sphere Of All Time is ever wrong or not, but I know your marriage to Toka is not honest." She held her battle-ax ready.

Kolano smiled softly. "And so, Roya, you'll kill me if you can—to free your Toka."

Kolano's knowledge momentarily disconcerted Roya—and Toka.

"But I am freeing Toka." Kolano mused in intimate memory. "Now that the element of Toka is in me."

Touching a chair for support, Roya stared starkly at Toka.

Toka leaped from the bed and drilled his angry gaze at Kolano. "That isn't true and you know it!"

"Toka, Roya—please," Kolano smiled. "It is true—but not the way you think."

"I think," Toka warned levelly, "we'd better have a few explanations."

"When Toka and I kissed last night,"

Kolano explained sincerely, "his spirit—the spirit of a mighty warrior of the Outer World—mingled with my spirit and left something of that warrior spirit in me." She gazed frankly at Roya. "And that is all it was—purely spiritual."

Toka met Roya's relieved gaze.

"So," Kolano continued quietly, "when I next wed one of the men of Kosanna—one who found the spirit to do battle against the hordes of Ophid—our sons shall be worthy of becoming Kosanna's new leaders."

Toka held Kolano's eyes. "What about this marriage of ours?"

Kolano quietly held his gaze. "It is time to proceed to the altar—that our marriage may be dissolved."

The cortege forming the entire party marched for the Hall Of Life—where the final victory over the hordes of Ophid was portrayed in huge scenes. But there remained space there still for many more scenes.

Going down the sacred stairway, Toka glanced to Kolano. "How about the hordes of Ophid?"

"There are no men of Ophid or dragons left alive," Kolano assured.

All Kosanna looking on silently, Toka and Kolano stood on the fore edge of the altar below the gigantic statue of him and, to the anciently quavering chant of the Old Ones, removed each other's ring and placed the brilliant bands on the pillows.

Kolano's smile was unsteady, her silvery eyes misty. "Great Prince Toka and his friends shall be forever revered by Kosanna."

Toka quietly voiced his sincere wish. "May peace dwell forevermore in Kosanna."

As Kosanna broke into beautiful choral-
ing, Toka beckoned to his black spike-back. Mounting the great creature with Roya and the others of his party, Toka headed down the main avenue. The surviving Big Snakes fell in behind with happy eyes and peaceful features. Meeting Roya's eyes, Toka pressed her hand in gentle expression of his feeling. He thrilled as Roya returned the pressure.

The up-river cayern yawned to receive them and the Outer World waited.