

THE SWORD OF TYRON

CHAPTER ONE: THE KALKHS

The cattle had been restless the night before as the first frost covered the camp. It had come early this year, just as it had the previous year. The least hint of dawn revealed the premeditated activity occurring in front of every tent as Kalkh men, women and children made ready for the evacuation that would take place that day. No word had been spoken, no order given, but the Kalkhs knew. For farther back than even Meltan, the eldest of the Kalkhs, could remember, they had left their fields in the high elevations of the Yushan Mountains on the day following the initial frost. No one had ever questioned this logic, for in years gone by all had witnessed the beautiful, foreboding white crown worn by the highest peaks just days after descending to the safety of the lower plateaus. The Yushans represented everything to the Kalkhs, but the people knew the foolhardiness of challenging them unwisely.

By mid-morning the herdsman had begun the descent with the cattle along the less dangerous of the two trails. The main body of Kalkhs traditionally followed behind the herd by an hour or two, in this way assuring that no stragglers would be lost. Hours before dark they would stop and rest for the night, resuming their trek early the next morning. This too was part of their routine, their tradition, and by adhering closely to it they normally reached their destination by late afternoon of the third day. This year it was the Malbash Valley, but in past years it had been the Fields of Kharg, or Satkha Canyon, or one of many other sites where they would spend the bulk of the upcoming year.

The nomadic Kalkhs were a peace-loving but restless people. For many centuries they had roamed the Yushan Mountains, always keeping to themselves, never—save for the adventurer or two—wandering far from the place they called home. Although non-aggressive, the Kalkhs were more than capable of defending themselves against their enemies. And be assured that there were enemies to be found. Foremost were the Kerkals, the small brown devils who dwelt in the Gergan Desert, a few days' ride to the south. It was they who kept the Kalkhs ever on the alert. Ten years before, a large Kerkal raiding party had taken the Kalkhs by surprise in the Belyab Valley. Kalkh men were killed, women and cattle stolen. An avenging band of Kalkhs caught up with the party hours later, destroying all but three of the hated Kerkals. Since then, little blood had been spilled, for the Kalkhs never ventured to the Gergan Desert, while the Kerkals feared to attack the now wary mountain people on their own ground.

What the Kerkals could not do to the Kalkhs with sword and dagger they accomplished by rumor and innuendo, for it was they who started the tale of the Yushan Treasure. For over three years the Kalkhs had been plagued with fortune seekers, ranging from the lone adventurer to large, well-armed bands of brigands. All sought the Kalkhs, for it was said that they alone knew the location of the treasure. To ensure their self-preservation, the Kalkhs spent much time hiding in concealed canyons and inaccessible valleys. For a brief time they lived within large, dank caves, but this was contrary to their way of life, and they soon abandoned it.

The Yushan Treasure, so the story went, had been brought there by one Thanto, a ruthless villain who ruled a small kingdom far to the east, over a century before. The people had revolted and nearly killed Thanto, but he managed to escape. With the help of three faithful retainers he carried off two chests filled with jewels and gold, the fruits of his years of plunder and heavy taxation. After months of travel fraught with dangers and hardships he reached the Yushan Mountains, where the treasure was concealed. As a reward for

their loyalty the three servants were slain in their sleep by Thanto, making him the sole possessor of the treasure as well as the only one with knowledge of its whereabouts.

For a year he lived with his treasure, counted it, reveled in it. At times he nearly starved to death, but he cared for little else. Eventually he became a madman, frustrated by his inability to drag either of the two chests more than a few feet. By murdering his servants he had destroyed any chance of returning to a more civilized part of the world and making use of it. It was thus that the Kalkhs found him. Almost skeletal in appearance, he gibbered insanely as he rushed at the large group waving a long dagger. They were forced to kill the poor creature in self-defense. After discovering the three moldering corpses, the Kalkhs were able to reconstruct in part some of what had occurred there. They were disgusted by what they found, for greed was unknown to them. Without hesitation they buried the treasure, along with Thanto and the other corpses, and hastily vacated the spot. To this day the treasure remains there untouched, still guarded by the grisly foursome.

Or so the story went.

Meltan, the old one, had lived for nearly ninety years. "Never did my father relate such a story to me about Thanto and the Yushan Treasure," he would say. "Secrets are not usually kept amongst the Kalkhs, and I am sure that I would have heard of such an incident."

He felt sure that it was merely a tale, as did all of the Kalkhs. The outsiders were not convinced, however, and for years after the tale was spread they came. By the third year the mountains were inundated with strangers. Many obliged the Kalkhs by murdering one another, but the tide never abated. The Kerkals reveled in the peril of the mountain people.

There were those unfortunates who stumbled across whatever place of concealment the Kalkhs had chosen at the time, and although loath to do it, the Kalkhs were forced to destroy these intruders in order to protect themselves. It was only after scores had been dispatched that Chapkha, the Wise One, brought forth the idea that would eventually dispel the rumors of the Yushan Treasure and all but halt the flow of outsiders to the mountains. In talking with some of the condemned prisoners before their execution, Chapkha discovered that many were unlike what he and the other Kalkhs thought them to be. True, there were brigands, mercenaries, and other assorted hard-core villains, and these types Chapkha ignored. It was with the merchants, the artisans, yes, even a nobleman or two, that Chapkha established relationships. He found that their reasons for coming to the Yushans were different from the others. Most were bored with their humdrum existence in the large cities and sought adventure, excitement, mystery. Some had an archaeological interest in discovering the site of the treasure. To most, the actual riches were secondary. It was to these types that Chapkha explained the rumors of the Kerkals, advising them that they were false. He told them why the Kerkals would wish to cause these problems for the Kalkhs. He showed them their simple, rudimentary way of life, explaining both their customs and traditions. When he was done, Chapkha knew that these men believed him. They felt humbled and were ashamed that they had intruded on the Kalkhs.

Chapkha managed to delay their execution long enough to discuss his idea with the elders. He proposed that these men be returned to their prospective lands so that they might spread the word that the stories of the Yushan Treasure were false. Just as it had been started with words, so might it be ended. The elders balked at first, but the proposition appealed to their humanity, and with Chapkha's promise that he would extract from these men their oath that they would indeed spread the word and would not reveal the location of any of the Kalkh strongholds, they approved the plan.

The following day nearly two dozen thankful men were sent out of the Yushans to their various homes. Each vowed to uphold the request of the elders, and Chapkha fell certain that these were men of honor. In the months that followed, this action was repeated numerous times. The black-hearted thieves and brigands were executed, the men of honor set free. The Kalkhs continually migrated to new campsites in case of treachery, but they need not have worried. Chapkha was a fine judge of character, and he chose his messengers well. Within a year the Yushan Mountains once again belonged to the Kalkhs, and aside from the occasional stray fortune seeker, it had remained so.

The Kalkhs learned much of the outside world from their prisoners. They heard of enormous rich, walled cities where people, as well as wares, were bought and sold in the public square. They learned of the vast sea, and of the immense leviathans of wood and steel that plied its waves. They were told about beasts heretofore unheard of: sleek, striped cats with sharp teeth and evil dispositions; tusked creatures that stood

larger than three men; limbless, powerful things that slithered along the ground. Yes, an unknown world of new hopes, new dreams, was suddenly opened to the Kalkhs. This knowledge worried the elders, for they feared the effect it might have on the younger men.

Their fears were not without foundation, for it was from one of the outsiders, an artisan named Bukro, that Tyron first learned about Berbora.

Tyron had been nearly twenty-two years of age when the last of the outsiders were released. Though unmarried he was a handsome man, and he had shared his sleeping furs with many a Kalkh maiden. He stood barely an inch above six feet in height, and the slimness of his body belied the steel-like strength offset by a great shock of jet black hair, from under which peered two steel-gray eyes. They were hard eyes, but ones that could be easily warmed. The permanent slant of his mouth gave him the appearance of one continually seeking answers to questions, and this look was not far from the truth.

Tyron, a restless young man, always wondered what lay beyond the Yushan Mountains, and the other side of the Gergan Desert. He was as skilled with the javelin as were the rest of the Kalkhs, but his skill with the sword and dagger, weapons considered a whimsical preoccupation at best by the elders, far surpassed the others. He served as both a sentry and a hunter, finding the hunting only slightly less dull than guard duty. He longed for the days when the Kerkals attacked more often, and he advocated a trek to the desert to destroy the brown people with a surprise ambush. For this suggestion he was often rebuked by the elders.

For all his faults, Tyron was a well-liked and hard-working man, and all were disappointed when he departed. Some blamed Bukro for filling his head full of tales, but realistically, they knew that one such as Tyron would have left at some time anyway, Bukro or not.

Tyron had guarded most of the outsiders during their internment with the Kalkhs. He absorbed everything that each one had to tell him, but he was especially enthralled by Bukro, a master storyteller. More than once was Bukro forced to repeat his tales of Berbora, reputedly the greatest and wealthiest of the ancient kingdoms before its demise a thousand years ago. Tyron would close his eyes and try to visualize the scene as Bukro spoke.

“See the great stone walls,” Bukro would say with much drama, “the tops of which stand so high that the morning fog hovers around them until hours after sunrise. See the rulers leading their triumphal processions into the main gate under the two huge silver cats that stand sentry above. Hear the crowds screaming and cheering as the returning heroes, astride huge horses and other strange beasts, lead a long line of variously colored and shaped people, captured slaves from far off, unimaginable lands.”

There was more, much more, to Berbora, and Tyron’s head swam as he tried to absorb all that Bukro had to tell him. Never for a moment did Tyron believe that Bukro embellished anything he said of Berbora, although Bukro was only repeating what he had heard in legends, and legends did tend to grow out of proportion in the retelling. Tyron swore that he would see Berbora in his lifetime, and no one, not even Bukro, could dissuade him from this goal.

Tyron continually hounded Bukro for information regarding the location of Berbora. Bukro finally admitted that Berbora, if such a place truly existed, lay countless miles to the west. Tyron ignored Bukro’s admission as he contemplated the journey. The countless hazards, the unmentionable obstacles, these meant nothing to the restless youth. Only one thought dominated his entire being: he must see Berbora! No matter if it were nothing more than ruins, a mere pile of rubble. He wanted to feel it, to touch it, to experience the ghosts of the past. Nothing else mattered to him.

The Kalkhs watched Tyron as he journeyed down the mountain that day alongside the freed artisan. Not until he rounded a curve and disappeared did they return to their chores. All were sorry to see him go, but none more so than Jhalar, Tyron’s mother. She grieved silently, for she, above all the others, understood her son’s needs. Her late husband had possessed the same unquenchable desire to see, to know.

“I will pray to Zeth, the god of the mountains, to keep you safe,” she had told him.

Tyron had given her a rare smile. “I will come back, Mother.”

She’d backed away from him as she uttered, “I fear that you will not.”