

An hour passed, and then half of another, while Tyron lounged in a sparse patch of grass at the base of the knoll and gazed upward at the higher elevations of the Miskanthians. Only once was his reverie disturbed, this by a low, distant murmur that seemed to come from the direction of Shaaf. But before he could concentrate fully upon it, the sound was gone, and his thoughts again turned to the mountains. In his mind he heard the hunting cry of the great mountain cat, saw the majestic aerie dwellers bearing huge rodents to feed their young, felt the coolness of a spring rain on his face as it brought life to the Malbash Valley. He wrestled with old friends, and made love to eager, long-haired beauties with crimson lips. Though the Miskanthians occupied his field of vision, it was the Yushans that dwelt within his thoughts, and his heart.

Concern over the tardiness of his friend soon displaced some of Tyron's yearnings, and after checking the position of the sun he rose to his feet and gazed toward the east, from where he expected to see the Berboran approaching. But Dehril was not as yet in sight; at least, not from within the immediate quarter of a mile, the distance afforded him from his less than advantageous position. He first considered setting off toward Shaaf, but then thought better of it. Instead, he began to ascend the knoll, hoping the elevation would provide him with a better vantage point.

Halfway up the slope, another sound pierced his thoughts, this one, though as yet unidentifiable, closer than the one he had heard earlier. He hastened his ascent where, less than five yards from the top, it was again repeated, this time much louder. Now there could be no doubt: the sound was that of a woman screaming.

The Kalkh topped the hillock, where he immediately absorbed the scene of horror unfolding on a boulder-strewn plain, this about thirty yards distant. Thoughts of his own safety were not a part of his mind as he raced headlong down the shorter northern slope, the reckless descent taking only seconds. He halted less than ten yards from the two figures he had observed from above, his pike poised for casting. But he could not hurl the weapon lest he injure the woman, who was being held tightly by her snarling, bestial assailant, the latter only now aware of the intruder.

In the few moments that he stood by helplessly, Tyron studied this incomprehensible paradox of life. The young woman, though shabbily attired and unadorned in any manner, was beautiful. She stood tall, barely half a head shorter than the Kalkh, with silken hair of yellow that cascaded far below her shoulders. The crudely woven garment that she wore failed to conceal her curves, nor could they withhold the full breasts that strained to break loose from their confinement in the midst of her struggles. Her trim, athletic legs tapered down to surprisingly thin ankles and proportionately small feet, these shod in plain working sandals. Her well-tanned skin appeared as smooth as the marble figurines of Berbora, without a flaw in evidence. A small, upturned nose sat atop a fiery slash of a mouth. The strong chin, the even rows of gleaming teeth visible between lips parted in terror, denoted a face so perfect as to seem illusory. Indeed, her own eyes might have been plucked from their sockets, to be replaced with a pair of well-matched flecks of jade. But her eyes were quite real; there was nothing false about this tormented beauty.

The grotesque bellow that emanated from the foul throat of her captor snapped Tyron from the momentary spell, and he gazed with loathing at the thing. It was ape-like, its height well over seven feet, its weight at least three times that of the Kalkh. Coarse, grayish hair covered nearly every inch of its body, save for the fleshy face and the pink appendages that contained seven digits each. Two lidless, black eyes peered out from amid the folds of skin, these sitting almost directly atop a red, bulbous nose. Its jaws displayed numerous rows of sharp, seemingly filed teeth, while its thick lips were curled in perpetual rage. Any neck that might have existed was hidden by layers of hair, though the contours of the broad, ovoid head were clearly evident. Tyron did not doubt for a moment that it was possessed of incredible strength, and it was this fact that caused him to shudder, for he knew that the thing could easily destroy the woman if it so desired. No, it did not wish to injure her, or devour her, at least not yet. Its wicked, tiny brain held other thoughts regarding the golden-haired beauty.

The woman became aware of Tyron's presence only an instant after her captor, and apparently her agile mind conceived of a desperate plan. Doubtless figuring that the stranger would not cast his weapon for fear of killing her, she resolved to separate herself from the thing. While it concentrated on the Kalkh, she bent down and sank her teeth into its wrist. The beast roared in pain and instinctively raised the injured member.

This momentary lapse enabled her to pull away, and before the creature could react, she had fallen to the ground and rolled more than five yards distant.

“The center of its chest! That’s where its heart is!” she shouted while still in motion. “Hurl the weapon, quickly!”

Tyron, though momentarily startled by her unexpected action, nonetheless responded in an instant. He raced toward the enraged beast, now confused by the turn of events. Before it could effect a charge the Kalkh threw the well-balanced pike, his skill placing it precisely where the woman had indicated. Because of their proximity to each other, as well as the power of the muscles behind the cast, the shaft re-emerged from the creature’s back, where it flew for another couple of yards before falling to the hard earth. The disbelieving thing clutched at the gaping wound, and for a few moments it watched its own life ebb. Then, silently, it crumpled to the ground.