

CHAPTER ONE

MANTIS OF TERROR!

“Khaaan!”

Professor Khan loped down the Grand Hallway to the sound of Bulls-Eye’s voice. There was a tremendous crash, a splintering of wood, the sound of shattering glass.

“Here,” the professor yelled. The adrenaline pumped through him, making him feel powerful, alive. The sound of jungle drums thundered in his ears.

The great ape covered the distance quickly, his massive knuckles slamming into the marble floor like hammers, jungle blood thrumming in his ears. He doubled his efforts as he heard another crash.

He sincerely hoped Bulls-Eye was all right. The Texan was a recent addition to the Century Club and seemed to have little regard for his own safety. Khan wondered sometimes if he was suicidal, but the cowboy always seemed to come out of his many scrapes with nothing but bruises.

And now it sounded as though he was in the thick of whatever was making a mess of the London chapter house.

Khan rounded a corner and skidded to a stop. Bulls-Eye, Stetson hat somehow miraculously still atop his head was riding an enormous... Khan stared, his educated brain ticking through family, genus and species. Mantidae. Mantis. *M. Religiosa*.

A giant praying mantis.

“Oh my.”

If anyone didn't belong in the London chapterhouse, with its sweeping English gardens, its majestic halls and exhibits, its history of erudite learning, it was Enrique “Bulls-Eye” Gutierrez. A lowly cowboy from Texas who nonetheless managed to impress the Centurion Benjamin Hu.

And when Bulls-Eye met Khan, the Texan didn't even bat an eyelash. As though a talking gorilla with an Oxford education was something he saw every day. If nothing else, that had won Khan over to the new arrival.

“Could use a hand here, Perfesser,” Bulls-Eye yelled, riding the mantis like a bucking bronco, his hands firmly tucked in a space behind the giant insect's head to keep from flying off. “I got my eight seconds in, but I don't think I'm gonna hang on much longer.”

“Yes, of course,” Khan said, shaking himself out of his momentary fugue. He cinched up his kilt, straightened the lapels of his houndstooth coat and launched his 400-pound frame toward the mantis.

“Look out for the—” Bulls-Eye began, but was cut short as the giant insect heaved, swinging a foreleg that swatted Khan out of the air. Khan slammed against the wall, shaking the hallway as though it were made of balsa wood. The mantis bucked and threw Bulls-Eye into a portrait of an English hunting scene.

Khan still felt strange to find himself with the Centurions. There was a time not long back where Khan's connection to the Century Club was as an advisor, using his immense intellect to solve the unsolvable, and plan the unplannable.

But never execute. He was always left behind in his Oxford rooms to pore over dusty tomes and moldering scrolls. Not that he didn't enjoy that, of course. It was his life's pursuit, his *raison d'être*. He was a genius and he could no more deny the workings of his mind than he could his animal nature.

Not that he didn't attempt to hide his animal nature, of course. Living in a world of men and trying to be one would do that to an ape. But try as he might he was still, as the saying goes, the 400-pound gorilla in the room.

It took a dinosaur invasion led by his genetic progenitor, Gorilla Khan, the Conqueror Ape, to change all that. And change it did.

Khan shook his head to clear it, the jungle drums in his mind blotting out all other sound. His rage took over. Khan let loose a mighty roar and took

another leap at the mantis. He grasped a foreleg, barely avoiding the spikes dotting the massive insect's hide, and yanked down with both hands.

A crack loud as a gunshot echoed through the hallway and the mantis screamed an unearthly shriek that shattered the nearby windows. It flailed its ruined foreleg about, its now useless claw hanging from pulpy meat that shone through the shattered chitin. He forced his rage down as the mantis shrieked. It had been a cruel move, he realized, and he immediately regretted it. Though he'd done damage, this was merely a mindless beast. Frightened and frustrated more than angry, no doubt.



After the fight against Gorilla Khan and his Psychosaurs had been won, Khan was back to his studies, back to his classes. And it was, well, there was no other way to put it, dull.

A part of him longed for adventure. Hoped for a disaster in which he could use his skills practically, in the field, again. Not that he wanted another dinosaur invasion, of course.

Well, maybe a little one.

He was a full member of the Century Club now, and though he knew that he was welcomed as colleague rather than consultant there were still times, with his heavy tomes and esoteric lore, where his adventuring companions seemed to not quite see him.

He felt, more often than not, as though he didn't quite fit.

Much like a certain trick-riding cowboy in a posh, English manor house currently picking himself from the floor, Stetson hat still somehow firmly in place.

Khan took a moment to examine the beast flailing wildly before him. It wasn't truly a praying mantis. More some kind of Mega-Mantis. The raptorial forelegs weren't spiked quite right, the head was longer and narrower and it was mottled the color of rust, giving it an almost mechanical appearance.

And then, of course, there was its size.

It filled the hall, a good fifteen feet long and twelve high on legs that could easily double that height. It whipped its body around, slamming its legs into the marble flooring and leaving craters from the impacts, as if it were trying to—

“That’s it,” Khan said. He dove out of the way of a striking foreleg toward Bulls-Eye, who was shaking his head and still trying to stand. The man had taken quite a beating. Khan scooped him up and dove back the direction he had come. The Mega-Mantis scuttled forward to follow.

“Can you rope it?” Khan asked.

“Huh?” Bulls-Eye said, his eyes slowly clearing.

“Can you rope it? Get a leash on that infernal beast?”

“Perfesser, ain’t nothin’ on God’s green earth I can’t rope I got a long enough lariat. But my ropes ain’t here. And why in tarnation you want to rope it, anyhow?”

“It can’t go backwards,” Khan said. “If we can lead it the way we want we can trap it.”

“Well, heck, Perfesser, I’m in. I ain’t never trapped a thing bigger’n a grizzly bear. Still ain’t got no ropes, though.”

“Leave that to me,” Khan said. “There’s a laboratory down here where Miss Slick has been experimenting with new forms of electricity,” he said. “There are no ropes, but there are many long, stout cables. Will that do?”

Bulls-Eye looked over Khan’s shoulder at the beast hot on their tails. “Thirty foot length oughtta do it. Let me off here and I’ll distract it while you grab me them cables.”

Khan paused. Perhaps the Texan had finally lost his sanity.

“Doc, I seen Miss Slick’s workspace. I’m likely to get myself electrified I start yankin’ on things.”

“True, but—”

“And I got on that thing’s head without so much as a bump on the noggin afore you came around. So go get me them cables. I’ll keep that thing hoppin’ around ’til it don’t know if it’s comin’ or goin’.” Without another word, Bulls-Eye flipped himself over Khan’s shoulder, and into the path of the oncoming monster.

“Try to lead it further down this hall!” Khan yelled after the bouncing cowboy and headed toward Sally Slick’s laboratory.

Sally Slick was a wizard with technology. There didn’t seem to be anything that woman couldn’t fix, jerry-rig or whip up out of whole cloth. She usually worked out of the New York chapter house, but after the dinosaur invasion had razed so much of it in their attack on the city, she had set up a new shop

here. She was back in New York now overseeing reconstruction, but some of her work was still in her London lab.

He hoped.

Khan allowed himself a quiet, if uncharacteristic swear as he searched for cables that would fit Bulls-Eye's needs. Perhaps the Texan's rough demeanor was rubbing off on him. He pulled sheets off of unused equipment, finding a pile of cables beneath a generator in the corner, grabbed a coil and headed back out.

True to his word Bulls-Eye was hopping around like a jackrabbit, staying just out of the Mega-Mantis' reach. Each strike of the forelegs left cracks in the floor and Khan hoped the Texan could keep it up until he could get to him.

"Toss me them cables, Doc, and come take my place," Bulls-Eye yelled over his shoulder. "Just gotta hop around like a jumpin' bean and you'll be right as rain."

Khan did as the cowboy said, throwing the coil of cables at him and leaping into his place to distract the beast. It was harder than it looked. Bulls-Eye was a born trick-rider with years of acrobatic experience. Khan had bulk on his side, strength, even speed. But maneuverability? He wasn't some annoying monkey hopping from branch to branch. His only advantage was that the Mega-Mantis had the same disadvantages. Moving that much mass took time.

"Boy, Doc, you couldn't a found me something more like rope? These things is stiffer than a polecat in heat."

"Sometimes we have to make do with what we have, my boy," Khan said, dodging another leg. One of the spikes on the femur caught his coat, ripping a gash along the back. "Please hurry. At this rate it will have me down to nothing but my bowtie in short order."

"Gotcha, Doc. Stand clear."

Khan leapt backward as Bulls-Eye threw his lariat expertly at the beast's head. The cowboy cinched it tight and held on as the Mega-Mantis yanked him up and almost off his feet.

"I gotcha yer bug, Doc. Now what? You wanna put it in a jar, or somethin'?"

"In a manner of speaking," Khan said, grabbing the cable from Bulls-Eye's grasp and heaving with all of his strength. Unable to leverage itself away from

the sudden shift in its center of gravity, the Mega-Mantis' head crashed down into the floor, the rest of its body quickly following.

"There's no room for it turn around in the hallway," Khan said. "And it can't back up. If we can lead it to the back of the house there is a cage for large game available."

"Heck, Perfesser, we could'a just had it follow us for that."

"And risk it running into someone else who looks more appetizing? That would hardly do."

Khan yanked on the lariat, his massive muscles bulging. He dragged the Mega-Mantis down the hallway, its legs flailing, ripping great gouges in the dark, oak wall panels. But it came. It had little choice.

By now some of the Chapter House's staff finally came out to see the carnage. Non-combatants, Khan knew. They had no business trying to help. They knew it was best to let the Centurions handle things.

And right now there were only three Centurions in the house, Khan, Bulls-Eye and Edison Thomas, an inventor who had been pulled backward in time and had been working feverishly in a lab in the Chapter House for months on a way to get back to his own future.

Where was he? Surely he had heard the commotion.

"Where do ya think this thing came from, Doc?"

"First things first," Khan said. "We have to secure the beast and then we can determine where—"

An explosion sounded from the other side of the building, cutting off Khan's words. Edison Thomas' lab.

"Nevermind," Bulls-Eye said. "I can guess."



Securing the Mega-Mantis ended up being easier than either of them had expected. By the time they had dragged it down the hallway to the cage it was as if all the fight had left it.

"You think the cage'll hold?" Bulls-Eye said, coiling his impromptu lariat and running to keep up with Khan as the gorilla loped down the hall toward Thomas' laboratory.

“It should,” Khan said. “It was designed to hold dinosaurs after Gorilla Khan was defeated. There was a certain amount of, how do you Americans say it, ‘batting clean-up’ to do. And, of course, the opportunity to study the psychosaurs was impossible to pass up.”

Khan felt sorry for the beast. Wherever it had come from it wasn't from Earth. It must be confused, disoriented, frightened. And now, it lay exhausted in a cage of steel bars designed to hold dinosaurs.

Ripped from its home. Out of its element. Khan understood that. He understood that very well.

He wondered if Bulls-Eye ever felt that. The Texan was a gregarious, if hot-headed young man, given to brawling and drinking. For all that, he rarely seemed angry, as though taking a round-house punch in a tavern was grand fun.

Khan shook himself out of his thoughts. There were greater priorities. That explosion had clearly come from Thomas's lab and there was no telling what sort of danger he might be in.

Khan had to admit a grudging respect for the young inventor. A genius, certainly, but a genius from the future. Decades of invention and knowledge that Khan could only guess at. He had somehow opened a portal into the past and fallen through and in the last several months had been trying to recreate the portal in order to return to his own time.

Khan had spoken with the man several times, but even with Khan's superb understanding of theoretical physics Thomas left the Professor firmly in his dust. Though Khan had been through portals to other worlds, even travelling to Atlantis to stop Doctor Methuselah and Gorilla Khan, there were aspects of the underlying science that were still a mystery, even to his advanced intellect. But Thomas could pick apart the math so seamlessly it made Khan feel like a graduate student.

The trail to Thomas' lab was strewn with shattered glass, destroyed walls, cratered flooring. Clearly the Mega-Mantis originated there. But how?

As they approached the room Khan could hear strange noises. Sounds of electrical equipment, strange buzzings, an occasional loud pop. And when he and Bulls-Eye rounded the corner he saw it.

The lab was a disaster. Where there had once been a door, the entire front of the room was missing. It had exploded outward in a shower of splinters.

Only bits of framing remained. Inside was worse. Equipment overturned, holes punched through walls. Sparks burst from generators and blown fuses.

In the middle of the room was a large, gleaming device, all steel and brass with a strange green crystal glowing inside a glass container at its top and a nozzle that looked somewhere between a cannon barrel and the front of a vacuum cleaner. It buzzed in loud pulses in time to the pulsing of the crystal, the sound getting louder with each one.

“You see Doc Thomas, Perfesser?” Bulls-Eye said.

Khan leapt up and grabbed a pipe jutting high out of the blown-out wall to get a better view of the room. “There,” he said. “Next to the device. He’s unconscious, I think. Yes. Yes, he’s breathing.”

Khan swung from the pipe to another hanging from the ruined ceiling until he was just over the device. “Watch your step. There’s quite a lot of broken equipment with sharp edges here. And chemicals. Some of this may be toxic.”

Bulls-Eye picked his way through the debris. “Doc, I been wading through cow-patties since I was in diapers. Ain’t nothin’ more toxic than stepping in the leavings of a colicky steer, let me tell ya.”

Khan dropped from the pipe and knelt next to Thomas. “I’m not sure if we should move him,” Khan said. “I can’t tell the extent of his injuries.”

“Well, if another one of them bugs comes poppin’ by we don’t want him lying there to get snacked on.”

“Excellent point,” Khan said, eyeing the humming device. Was this the machine that Thomas had been working on to open a new portal through time?

“Let’s get him moved and then—” Khan stopped as the device’s pitch suddenly changed from a lowly pulsing buzz to a high-pitched wail. It was then that he realized that Bulls-Eye was standing right in front of the device’s nozzle.

“Bulls-Eye, move!” Khan yelled, but it was too late. A jet of bright green light burst from the nozzle. Bulls-Eye was quicker than Khan had expected, jumping to one side as a portal onto an alien landscape opened up just past him.

A fierce wind blew through the opening, pulling papers and debris in through the hole. And Bulls-Eye. The cowboy was pulled off his feet and

yanked through the hole. Khan leapt to the opening as Bulls-Eye's lariat snaked out, wrapping around Khan's massive forearm. Khan heaved against the pull of the portal. A few more feet and he'd have the man out.

He heard the device's pitch change again. It started to shake, rattling as though it were about to fly to pieces. Just another foot and he'd have the cowboy out. Just another foot and they could get away from this infernal device.

But before he could get so much as another inch, a terrible explosion rent through the lab. The device shattered into a dozen smoking pieces. Khan lost his footing as the blast propelled him through the portal.

The portal shimmered, destabilized, and with a crash of thunder ceased to exist.

With Khan and Bulls-Eye on the wrong side of it.

CHAPTER TWO

CAPTURED BY THE CYCLONE PRINCESS!

Khan woke with a spinning head and a mouth full of metallic tasting dirt. His body felt as though it had been stuffed into a taffy-pulling machine, stretched and yanked. He brought himself up onto his elbows with a groan.

The landscape was like nothing he had ever seen. A desert of red dirt and a hazy, yellowing sky. The sun was an emaciated blur above the horizon. In the distance he could see the wisps of dust devils as they churned up the endless sea of sand.

Bulls-Eye sat up beside him and spit out a clod of rust-colored dirt. Khan marveled again at how his hat seemed to never leave his head.

“Mister Gutierrez, how are you feeling?” Khan asked.

“Like I been passed through a rattlesnake’s bunghole sideways.” He groaned, and stood on wobbly legs.

Khan stood and brushed dust from his kilt and tweed. The tear in the fabric of his coat would need darning. He sighed. He had no skill with a needle. His fingers were simply too large for such delicate work.

“Colorful, but apt,” Khan said. “I believe we have fallen victim to Doctor Thomas’s experiment.” He stretched his back and felt vertebrae pop.

Bulls-Eye squinted into the distance. "Well, if this is where that giant bug came from, I don't see none of 'em now."

"A spot of good fortune, then."

"Good news don't never travel without bad news close on its tail. So what's the bad?"

"No, I suppose it does not," Khan said. "The bad news, it would appear, is that we are not at the Chapter House."

"Ya don't say," Bulls-Eye said. "Ain't much out here but scrub brush and chaparral. I see some plants over yonder look like saguaro. Some Joshua, Manzanita maybe. Only they's got purple leaves. Huh."

Khan squinted into the distance but aside from some rock outcroppings could only make out hazy shapes. The cowboy's eyes were remarkably sharp to be able to pick out such detail. He peered into the sky and frowned.

"There's something wrong with the sun," he said.

"It's awful small," Bulls-Eye said. "Perfesser, you ever seen one of them giant bugs before?"

"I have not."

"And I suppose you ain't never seen the sun lookin' so small before, neither?"

"I fear this may be worse than simply being teleported away from the Chapter House," Khan said. "Do you see any signs of civilization?" Khan said.

"Nope, but if there's any out here it's gonna be where there's water. And that's our first order of business. Even if that sun ain't so big this is still a desert and when it gets high in the sky we're gonna be in a world of hurt." He began walking.

"Ah, yes," Khan said. Bulls-Eye was right. Survival was the first priority. The question of where they were would wait. Khan had experienced more scientific and mystical portals in the last year than he cared to remember, having traveled through so much time and space at this point he felt himself a veteran.

The two trudged through the desert in silence. The land was loose-packed dirt in most places, and deep sand in others, making the going difficult. As they continued on, though, Khan began to realize that the going should actually be harder. They were covering surprising distance.

“Bulls-Eye,” Khan said. “How are you feeling?”

“Tired, thirsty, but— Hey Perfesser, do you feel, I dunno, lighter?”

Khan looked at their footsteps behind them and then checked his pocket watch. They had been travelling for almost three hours and had covered an incredible distance in that time. Though the desert heat was taking its toll Bulls-Eye was right. He did feel lighter.

“Interesting,” Khan said. “I believe the gravity here must be less than on Earth, making our stamina much—”

The rest of Khan’s words were cut off as a terrible thundering rose up from beneath their feet. The ground quaked and dirt and sand blew out in a ring around them. For a moment Khan feared they had stumbled onto a Mega-Mantis, or worse, a nest of them.

He readied himself for disaster as best he could, but the ground shook so hard and the dust blew so fast that he was blind, deaf and sprawled in the dust in moments. He covered his eyes with his arms, enveloped in the exploding dirt. When the cacophony ended and the air cleared enough for him to see, he was shocked. At least the Mega-Mantis was half expected, but not this.

Half a dozen massive spheres of brass and copper had burst out of the ground around them. Twice the size of any tank Khan had ever seen, the machines sported turrets with strange, spiked corkscrew devices sticking out in all directions, a fat central mast that towered a good twenty feet high with what appeared to be a giant cannon made of some glass-like material. Instead of tracks, giant screws dug deep into the sand.

“Well, leastwise they ain’t giant bugs,” Bulls-Eye said.

“Indeed,” Khan said. That was the good news, but as the cowboy had pointed out, bad news often followed.

Strange sounds burst from a loudspeaker. It took a moment for Khan to realize it was language.

“I don’t s’pose you caught any of that, Perfesser?”

“Not one whit,” Khan said. Were they being commanded? Questioned? Greeted?

Khan stood, raised his arms in greeting. “Excuse me,” he said. “I am Professor Khan of Earth and—”

His words were cut short as a bolt of green lightning shot from the glass cannon, knocking him back into the dirt. His head spun like a Tilt-A-Whirl. He couldn't move. He couldn't hear. His vision was fading around the edges.

He could see Bulls-Eye as though he were standing miles away, but soon even that faded and blackness took him.



Khan awoke to the mother of all headaches. He twitched an eye open. Closed it as light stabbed into his head. He let out a groan that was one part whimper, one part whine, and one part prayer to the Alimighty that he'd died and this was purgatory and not his final reward.

"Oh, don't make such a godawful ruckus, Perfesser," Bulls-eye said nearby, his voice a rough whisper. "Bad enough I can hear ya breathin' over there. I ain't had pain this bad since I won that tequila drinkin' contest in Abilene."

"For someone who can't handle noise," Khan croaked, "you talk an impressive amount."

"Brevity ain't never been my strong suit, Perfesser."

"Agreed." Khan hazarded another glimpse, blinking back tears. His head throbbed, lessening to a dull pounding once his eyes got used to the light.

When he could finally see, the first thing he noticed was the strange shackle on his left wrist. Silver and stamped with a design of lightning bolts. It was snug, but not tight. Khan could see one like it on Bulls-Eye's wrist as well.

He tugged at it, but though he could spin it around his wrist with some effort, it wasn't possible to pull it over his hand. Odd that their captors should have a shackle that could actually fit him. His wrist was far wider than any human's.

He turned his attention to their prison. The chamber looked like the inside of a boiler. Circular, a good twenty feet high and ten across, the entire room was made of brass with rivets the breadth of Khan's hand set every few feet apart. Recessed lights in the ceiling shone down through a cage of wire mesh. A single, large hatch was set in the wall.

Bulls-Eye sat up, squinting at the chamber. "Well, looks like we found us some people," he said.

“Indeed.” Khan stood on wobbly legs and ambled to the hatch. His legs were more numb than sore, but feeling was beginning to return to them. Though shaped like a hatch on a ship, there didn’t appear to be any mechanism on this side holding it in place.

Khan puzzled at it a bit. Ran his fingers along the edges. Rapped at it with a knuckle. It gave a dull, metallic thud.

He leaned an ear against the metal, could hear the humming of steam engines, the thrum of generators. Were they inside one of the infernal cannons that had captured them?

As he strained to listen, another sound reached his ears. Footsteps. A lot of them. He jerked back, pressed himself against the wall to the right of the door, motioned Bulls-Eye to do the same on the other side.

A moment later there was a loud thunk of metal, a hiss of escaping air and the door swung to one side. The barrel of a gun poked through the door. It had the same glass-like texture as the cannon that had stunned them earlier. It stayed there a moment, wavered back and forth. The guard stepped inside nervously.

He wore a silver helmet with sculpted lightning bolts where the ears should be. The face was covered in dark glass. The uniform appeared to be silver lame and sported a large red cyclone stitched to the front with lightning bolts of gold radiating out in all directions. A black belt with a large silver pouch at its side completed the ensemble.

Khan found himself examining the gun, wondering what it was made of and how it worked. Bulls-Eye, however, took a more immediate approach to things, reached over, and yanked it out of the surprised guard’s hands.

“Not the face!” the guard cried just as Bulls-Eye slammed the butt of the rifle straight into his faceplate. The glass shattered and the guard dropped like a felled buffalo.

The two Centurions stared at him.

“Did he just say, ‘Not the face?’” Bulls-Eye said.

“Indeed, he did,” Khan said.

“I thought they were talkin’ gobbledey-gook at us out there afore they shot us.”

“They were. Interesting.” Khan knelt and picked away the broken pieces of glass from the guard’s face. Though humanoid, the guard clearly wasn’t

human. His skin was a light green with two stubby protrusions poking from either side of his forehead. Horns, perhaps, Khan thought. Or vestigial antennae?

He delicately pried one eyelid open. The eye was completely red. No iris, no pupil. Curiouser and curiouser.

The excitement of discovery began to hum in his brain. An alien species never before encountered. The possibilities of a new race of beings, contact with aliens!

“If you’re done examinin’ the patient, Perfesser, could ya maybe rifle his pockets and see if he’s got anything useful could get us out of here? I don’t think we got much time afore another one of them comes by, do you?”

“Hmm? Oh, yes. Yes, of course.” The uniform had no pockets, but the belt pouch contained a series of metal cards with indentations drilled into them, keys, perhaps, and an identification card with the guard’s photo.

Khan blinked. There was something odd about the card. The letters were all harsh slashes and blotches, totally unlike any language Khan had ever seen. And then, suddenly, they weren’t.

“Can you read this?” Khan asked, handing the card to Bulls-Eye.

“It’s all a buncha— Holy Jehosaphat, Perfesser, it’s trick paper. And it says here his name’s Willie.”

“Probably the closest approximation to his name for us. No, I don’t think it’s trick paper.” He fingered the bracelet around his wrist. “I think it might have something to do with these. But we can explore that at a more fortuitous time.”

Khan closed the cell on the unconscious guard, the door clicking as the magnetic locks engaged. The hall outside was much like the cell, brass walls with rivets set at intervals, doors spaced every ten feet, with a grated floor and lights shining down from the ceiling through wire mesh cages.

“Which way, Perfesser?” Bulls-Eye said.

The sounds of marching footsteps echoed down the hall. “Away from that,” Khan said, and headed in the opposite direction, Bulls-Eye close at his heels.

They passed closed doors and branching hallways, but avoided them when they heard conversations or approaching footfalls. A couple of tense moments passed as they hid in an alcove when uniformed guards marched past.

After passing through a series of open doorways, the hallway changed from merely utilitarian to a much more elegant design. Grated floors gave way to carpet, lighting became less harsh, the rivets disappeared behind wall panels decorated in the same cyclone and lightning motif that had been on the guard's uniform.

The hallway stopped at a carpeted staircase leading up to a pair of enormous brass doors also decorated with the cyclone and lightning motif. They had so far avoided closed doors, but there didn't seem to be anywhere else to go but up.

"Slow and sneaky or fast and hard?" Bulls-Eye said.

"I honestly don't know," Khan said. "I'm tempted to say stealth is the better option, but we won't know until we open that door."

"All this sneakin' around's makin' my head hurt," Bulls-Eye said. "So you know my vote."

"Noted." Khan climbed the steps to the door. The doors were too thick to hear anything through when he pressed an ear against them. Whatever they did, they would be going in blind.

Only one thing for it. He motioned Bulls-Eye to stand ready, and then pushed on one of the giant doors.

The door swung open smoothly, sending light stabbing into a darkened room. There was something wrong with the blackness that greeted them. Khan stood silently a moment to let his eyes adjust to the darkness, but they simply wouldn't. And there was no sound inside the room. No hum of machinery, no sounds of footsteps.

Whatever this was, it wasn't a simple lack of light.

He stepped forward gingerly, motioning Bulls-Eye to follow him and realized too late that it was a trap.

Sound and light burst in on them like an artillery shell and they found themselves in a room out of an Alphonse Mucha nightmare. Art deco panels covered the walls with the ever present cyclone and lightning bolts, couches lined the walls in garish colors clashing with the blood-red, marble floor.

The room was filled with all manner of beings. The green-skinned aliens, humanoid frogs, centaur-like creatures, men and women who Khan would mistake for human except for the giant bird wings sweeping behind them. Each decked out in clothing of the finest quality.

And the guards. Thirty at least, each armed with a raygun and wearing silver lamé uniforms, swarmed in from the sides to surround the two Centurions. They kept their distance, but every gun was carefully aimed.

Khan could feel Bulls-Eye tense behind him and hoped the brash young man wouldn't do anything stupid. He let out a breath as he heard Bulls-Eye put the weapon down.

"Perfesser," Bulls-Eye said quietly, a tremor in his voice. "Them folks look like frogs."

"Yes," Khan said. "And there appear to be centaurs and bird people as well."

"Yeah, but there's frogs."

Khan glanced at the young man and saw that he was sweating slightly. Khan was about to ask him what he was on about but was interrupted by a voice yelling from beyond the horde of guards.

"You dare to enter my kingdom, attack my people and then invade my throne?"

The guards parted to let through a tall, green-skinned, red-haired woman wearing a dress of silver and gold, with black and red designs of lightning bolts woven throughout and a cape with a high arched collar that swept up behind her head. Two short, horn-like antennae sprouted from the sides of her forehead and her eyes were a glowing, dull red. And atop her head she wore an impressive crown of swirling, silver filigree that sparked with arcs of electricity like a hundred tiny Jacob's Ladders.

But what really caught Khan's eye were the two blue furred gorillas shackled and in chains following behind her. They were smaller than he was, and had clearly been abused. One of them had a severe limp and the other was missing an eye. Both of them looked beaten down and hopeless.

"Madame, I—" Khan began but was cut off with a rifle butt to the gut. It was more shock than pain that caught him off guard.

"Silence, barbarian assassin!" the woman cried. "I will not have treason and sedition within my kingdom." She grabbed a hank of fur from Khan's neck. "Your failed attempts at murder here, in my own throne room, and your cheap attempts to undermine my rule with your false prophecy will be met with swift justice."

Khan withstood this tirade with total confusion. He had no idea what she was talking about. Prophecy? Barbarian assassins? Were the blue-furred gorillas members of this “barbarian” race she was talking about?

Dignity impugned, Khan batted her hand away from him. “I beg your pardon, madam, but I will not be spoken to in that manner.”

The woman looked at him, stunned, and Khan realized that he had committed a major faux pas. She was clearly the ruler in this land and one does not simply swat away the hand of a reigning monarch.

“Oh, now you gone and done it, Perfesser,” Bulls-Eye muttered behind him.

“Indeed.”

The woman turned to the assemblage of alien races. “I, Princess Cyclone, Weather Witch and ruler of this world, pass judgment on these traitorous assassins. I condemn them to the Pits Of Despair beneath the palace!”

“That don’t sound so bad, Perfesser,” Bulls-Eye said.

“Where they shall be consumed by the Demon Dragon!”

“You were saying?” Khan asked.

“So is it declared,” Princess Cyclone said, “So shall it be.”

She turned on her heel and strode away, the two broken and battered gorillas in tow. Khan looked about for some indication of what had just happened, or some sign of help. In the back of the crowd he spied a younger, green-skinned woman looking aghast at the proceedings.

Well, at least not everyone agreed with the Princess. Cold comfort.

Fine. If they wanted a fight, then by God, he would give them one. The guards fidgeted. Yes, they had guns, but Khan was enormous. His massive simian muscles flexed beneath his houndstooth jacket. In the back of his mind he could hear distant jungle drums growing louder and louder.

Before he could do more, the floor shook beneath his feet and too late Khan realized the magnitude of their predicament. With a shuddering crash, the floor opened beneath them. Khan leapt for the edge of the trap-door, his fingers grasping the marble floor.

A guard slammed the butt of his rifle against Khan’s fingers. As the guard came in for a second strike, Khan reached up with his other hand, grabbed the gun, and shoved, throwing the guard back into the crowd.

With one mighty heave, Khan pulled himself out of the pit. His roar filled the room, echoed off the walls. He swung his tree-trunk arms, knocking over guards like bowling pins. He threw one clear across the room, where he crashed into a group of frog people. Two more followed him.

Khan beat his chest, bared monstrous fangs. The jungle drums beat in his mind in a mad hammering of rage. He was the Conqueror Ape. He was King of The Jungle, the Avatar of Vengeance. How dare these insignificant beasts think that they could possibly subdue him!

He reared up on his legs and bellowed a challenge to the remaining guards. And then they shot him.