

GOREAN SAGA • BOOK FIVE

ASSASSIN OF GOR



JOHN NORMAN



Assassin of Gor

John Norman



1

Kuurus

Kuurus, of the Caste of Assassins, crouched on the crest of the small hill, leaning with both hands on the shaft of his spear, looking down into the shallow valley, waiting. He would not yet be welcome.

In the distance he could see the white walls, and some of the towers, of the city of Ko-ro-ba, which was being rebuilt. It is an old word in Gorean, Ko-ro-ba, meaning a village market, though few considered its archaic meaning. Kuurus looked on the city. It had once been destroyed by Priest-Kings, but now it was being rebuilt. Kuurus was not much interested in such matters. His was the Caste of Assassins. He had been called to this place. In the early part of the eighth Gorean hour the distant white walls took the sun and blazed like light in the green hills. The Towers of the Morning, thought Kuurus, the Towers of the Morning.

The Assassin shifted a bit and turned his attention again to the valley, where the men below were almost ready.

The logs had been prepared and carefully placed. There were hundreds of them, trimmed and squared, mostly of Ka-la-na wood, from the sweet-smelling wine trees of Gor. They crossed one another in the intricate traditional patterns, spaces between to permit the rush of air, forming a carefully structured, tiered, truncated pyramid.

Kuurus observed, curious, as the last log was placed by two men in the red of Warriors.

Then free women, veiled and in Robes of Concealment, each carrying a jar or canister, approached the structure. Even from where Kuurus waited he could smell the perfumed oils, the unguents and spices, which the women, climbing and moving about the pyramid slowly, as though on stairs, sprinkled about or poured over the wood.

Beyond the wood, toward the city, Kuurus could see the procession. He was surprised for, judging from the colors of the garments of those who marched, it contained men of many castes, perhaps all castes of the city, only that he did not see among them the white of the Caste of Initiates. That puzzled Kuurus, for normally men of the Initiates are prominent in such events.

These men of Ko-ro-ba, he knew, when their city had been destroyed by Priest-Kings, had been scattered to the ends of Gor but, when permitted by Priest-Kings, they had returned to their city to rebuild it, each bearing a stone to add to its walls. It was said, in the time of troubles, that the Home Stone had not been lost, and it had not. And even Kuurus, of the Caste of Assassins, knew that a city cannot die while its Home Stone survives. Kuurus, who would think little of men on the whole, yet could not despise such men as these, these of Ko-ro-ba.

The procession did not chant, nor sing, for this was not a time for such things, nor did it carry boughs of Ka-la-na, nor were the sounds of the sista or tambor heard in the sunlight that morning. At such a time as this Goreans do not sing nor speak. They are silent, for at such a time words mean nothing, and would demean or insult; in such a time there can be for Goreans only silence, memory and fire.

The procession was led by four Warriors, who supported on their shoulders a framework of crossed spears, lashed together, on which, wrapped in the scarlet leather

of a tarnsman, lay the body.

Kuurus watched, unmoved, as the four Warriors carried their scarlet burden to the height of the huge, sweet-smelling, oil-impregnated pyre.

Averting their eyes the Warriors threw back the scarlet leather that the body might lie free on the spears, open to the wind and sun.

He was a large man, Kuurus noted, in the leather of a Warrior. The hair, he remarked, was unusual.

The procession and those who had been earlier at the pyre now stood back from it, some fifty yards or so, for the oil-impregnated wood will take the torch quickly and fiercely. There were three who stood near the pyre; one wore the brown robes of the Administrator of a City, the humblest robes in the city, and was hooded; another wore the blue of the Caste of Scribes, a small man, almost tiny, bent now with pain and grief; the last was a very large man, broad of back and shoulder, bearded and with long blond hair, a Warrior; yet even the Warrior seemed in that moment shaken.

Kuurus saw the torch lit and then, with a cry of pain, thrown by the Warrior onto the small mountain of oiled wood. The wood leaped suddenly alive with a blaze that was almost a burst of fire and the three men staggered backward, their forearms thrown across their eyes.

Kuurus bent down and picked up a stalk of grass and chewed on it, watching. The reflection of the fire, even in the sunlight, could be seen on his face. His forehead began to sweat. He blinked his eyes against the heat.

The men and women of Ko-ro-ba stood circled about the pyre, neither moving nor speaking, for better than two Ahn. After about half an Ahn the pyre, still fearful with heat and light, had collapsed with a roar, forming a great, fiercely burning mound of oil-soaked wood. At last, when the wood burned only here and there, and what had been the pyre was mostly ashes and glowing wood, the men of a dozen castes, each carrying a jar of chilled wine, moved about, pouring the wine over the fire, quenching it. Other men sought in the ashes for what might be found of the Warrior. Some bones and some whitish ash they gathered in white linen and placed in an urn of red and yellow glass. Kuurus knew that such an urn would be decorated, probably, since the man had been a Warrior, with scenes of the hunt and war. The urn was given to him who wore the robes of the Administrator of the City, who took it and slowly, on foot, withdrew toward Ko-ro-ba, followed by the large blond Warrior and the small Scribe. The ashes, Kuurus judged, since the body had been wrapped in the scarlet leather of a tarnsman, would be scattered from tarnback, perhaps over distant Thassa, the sea.

Kuurus stood up and stretched. He picked up his short sword in its scabbard, his helmet and his shield. These he slung over his left shoulder. Then he picked up his spear, and stood there, against the sky, on the crest of the hill, in the black tunic.

Those who had come to the pyre had now withdrawn slowly toward the city. Only one man remained near the smoking wood. He wore a black robe with a stripe of white down the front and back. Kuurus knew that it would be this man, who wore the black, but not the full black, of the Assassin, who would deal with him. Kuurus smiled bitterly to himself. He laughed at the stripe of white. Their tunic, said Kuurus to himself, is as black as mine.

When the man near the smoking wood turned to face him, Kuurus descended the hill. He was now welcome. Kuurus smiled to himself.

The man did not greet him, nor did Kuurus lift his hand to the man, palm inward, saying "Tal."

The man was a strange man, thought Kuurus. His head was totally devoid of hair, even to the lack of eyebrows. Perhaps he is some sort of Initiate, thought Kuurus.

Without speaking the man took twenty pieces of gold, tarn disks of Ar, of double weight, and gave them to Kuurus, who placed them in the pockets of his belt. The Assassins, unlike most castes, do not carry pouches.

Kuurus looked curiously down at the remains of the pyre. Only a bit of wood now, here and there, missed by the chilled wine, clung to flame; some of the logs, however, still smoked, and others held as though within themselves the redness of the fire they remembered; but most were simply charred, now dead, stained with the oil, wet from the wine.

"Justice must be done," said the man.

Kuurus said nothing, but only looked at the man. Often, though not always, they spoke of justice. It pleases them to speak of justice, he said to himself. And of right. It eases them and gives them peace. There is no such thing as justice, said Kuurus, to himself. There is only gold and steel.

"Whom am I to kill?" asked Kuurus.

"I do not know," said the man.

Kuurus looked at him angrily. Yet he had in the pockets of his belt twenty gold tarn disks, and of double weight. There must be more.

"All we know is this," said the man, handing him a greenish patch.

Kuurus studied the patch. "It is a faction patch," said he. "It speaks to me of the tarn races of Ar."

"It is true," said the man.

The faction patches are worn in Ar by those who favor a given faction in the racing. There are several such factions, who control the racing and compete among themselves, the greens, the reds, the golds, the yellows, the silvers.

"I shall go to Ar," said Kuurus.

"If you are successful," said the man, "return and you will receive a hundred such pieces of gold."

Kuurus looked at him. "If it is not true," he said, "you will die."

"It is true," said the man.

"Who is it," asked Kuurus, "that was slain? Who is it that I am to avenge?"

"A Warrior," said the man.

"His name?" asked Kuurus.

"Tarl Cabot," said the man.

2 Ar

Kuurus, of the Caste of Assassins, entered the great gate of Ar.

Guardsmen did not detain him, for he wore on his forehead the mark of the black dagger.

Not for many years had the black tunic of the Assassins been seen within the walls of Ar, not since the siege of that city in 10,110 from its founding, in the days of Marlenus, who had been Ubar; of Pa-Kur, who had been Master of the Assassins; and of the Koroban Warrior, in the songs called Tarl of Bristol.

For years the black of the Assassins had been outlawed in the city. Pa-Kur, who had been Master of the Assassins, had led a league of tributary cities to attack Imperial Ar in the time when its Home Stone had been stolen and its Ubar forced to flee. The city had fallen and Pa-Kur, though of low caste, had aspired to inherit the imperial mantle of Marlenus, had dared to lift his eyes to the throne of Empire and place about his neck the golden medallion of a Ubar, a thing forbidden to such as he in the myths of the Counter-Earth. Pa-Kur's horde had been defeated by an alliance of free cities, led by Ko-ro-ba and Thentis, under the command of Matthew Cabot of Ko-ro-ba, the father of Tarl of Bristol, and Kazrak of Port Kar, sword brother of the same Warrior. Tarl of Bristol himself on the windy height of Ar's Cylinder of Justice had defeated Pa-Kur, Master of the Assassins. From that time the black of the Assassins had not been seen in the streets of Glorious Ar.

Yet none would stand in the way of Kuurus for he wore on his forehead, small and fine, the sign of the black dagger.

When he of the Caste of Assassins has been paid his gold and has received his charge he affixes on his forehead that sign, that he may enter whatever city he pleases, that none may interfere with his work.

There are few men who have done great wrong or who have powerful, rich enemies who do not tremble upon learning that one has been brought to their city who wears the dagger.

Kuurus stepped between the great gates and looked about himself.

A woman carrying a market basket moved to one side, watching him, that she might not touch him, holding a child to her.

A peasant moved away that the shadow of the Assassin might not fall across his own.

Kuurus pointed to a fruit on a flat-topped wagon with wooden wheels, drawn by a small four-legged, horned tharlarion.

The peddler pressed the fruit into his hands and hurried on, not meeting his eyes.

Her back against the bricks of a tower near the gate, a slender, slim-ankled slave girl stood, watching him. Her eyes were frightened. Kuurus was apparently the first of the Caste of Assassins she had seen. Her hair was dark, and fell to the small of her back; her eyes were dark; she wore the briefly skirted, sleeveless slave livery common in the northern cities of Gor; the livery was yellow and split to the cord that served her as belt; about her throat she wore a matching collar, yellow enameled over steel.

Biting into the fruit, the juice running at the side of his mouth, Kuurus studied the

girl. It seemed she would turn to leave but his eyes held her where she stood. He spit some seeds to the dust of the street within the gate. When he had finished he threw the core of the fruit to her feet and she looked down at it with horror. When she looked up, frightened, she felt his hand on her left arm.

He turned her about and thrust her down a side street, making her walk in front of him.

At a paga tavern, one near the great gate, cheap and crowded, dingy and smelling, a place frequented by strangers and small Merchants, the Assassin took the girl by the arm and thrust her within. Those in the tavern looked up from the low tables. There were three Musicians against one wall. They stopped playing. The slave girls in Pleasure Silk turned and stood stock still, the paga flasks cradled over their right forearms. Not even the bells locked to their left ankles made a sound. Not a paga bowl was lifted nor a hand moved. The men looked at the Assassin, who regarded them, one by one. Men turned white under that gaze. Some fled from the tables, lest, unknown to themselves, it be they for whom this man wore the mark of the black dagger.

The Assassin turned to the man in a black apron, a fat, grimy man, who wore a soiled tunic of white and gold, stained with sweat and spilled paga.

"Collar," said the Assassin.

The man took a key from a line of hooks on the wall behind him.

"Seven," he said, throwing the Assassin the key.

The Assassin caught the key and taking the girl by the arm led her to a dark wall, in a low-ceilinged corner of the sloping room. She moved woodenly, as though numb. Her eyes seemed frightened.

There were one or two other girls there, kneeling, who drew back, with a sound of chain.

He thrust the dark-haired girl to her knees by the seventh collar and snapped it about her neck, turning the key, locking it. It gave her about a two-foot length of chain, fastened to a slave ring bolted into the stone. Then he looked down on her. Her eyes were lifted to his, frightened. The yellow of her livery seemed dark in the shadows. From where she knelt she could see the low-hanging tharlarion oil lamps of the main portion of the paga tavern, the men, the girls in silk who, in a moment, belled, would move among them, replenishing the paga. In the center of the tables, under a hanging lamp, there was a square area, recessed, filled with sand, in which men might fight or girls dance. Beyond the area of the sand and the many tables there was a high wall, some twenty feet or so high, in which there were four levels, each containing seven small curtained alcoves, the entrances to which were circular, with a diameter of about twenty-four inches. Seven narrow ladders, each about eight inches in width, fixed into the wall, gave access to these alcoves.

She saw Kuurus go to the tables and sit cross-legged behind one, a table against the wall on her left, that there might be no tables behind him, but only the wall.

The men who had been at that table, or near it, silently rose and left the area.

Kuurus had placed his spear against the wall behind him, and he had taken from his left shoulder his shield, his helmet and the sheathed short sword, which blade he had placed at his right hand on the low table.

At a gesture from the proprietor, the grimy man in the tunic of white and gold, one of the serving slaves, with a flash of her ankle bells, hurried to the Assassin and set

before him a bowl, which she trembling filled from the flask held over her right forearm. Then, with a furtive glance at the girl chained at the side of the room, the serving slave hurried away.

Kuurus took the paga bowl in both hands and put his head down, looking into it.

Then, somberly, he lifted it to his lips and drank.

Putting the bowl down he wiped his mouth on his forearm and looked at the Musicians. "Play," he said.

The three Musicians bent to their instruments, and, in a moment, there were again the sounds of a paga tavern, the sounds of talk, of barbaric music, of pouring paga, the clink of bowls, the rustle of bells on the ankles of slave girls.

Scarcely a quarter of an Ahn had passed and the men who drank in that room had forgotten, as is the way of men, that a dark one sat with them in that room, one who wore the black tunic of the Caste of Assassins, who silently drank with them. It was enough for them that he who sat with them did not this time wear for them the mark of the black dagger on his forehead, that it was not they whom he sought.

Kuurus drank, watching them, his face showing no emotion.

Suddenly a small figure burst through the door of the tavern, stumbling and rolling down the stairs, crying out. It bounded to its feet, like a small, hunched animal, with a large head and wild brown hair. One eye was larger than the other. It could stand, even if it straightened, no higher than a man's waist. "Do not hurt Hup!" it cried. "Do not hurt Hup!"

"It is Hup the Fool," said someone.

The little thing, misshapen with its large head, scrambled limping and leaping like a broken-legged urt to the counter behind which stood the man in the grimy tunic, who was wiping out a paga bowl. "Hide Hup!" cried the thing. "Hide Hup! Please hide Hup!"

"Be off with you, Hup the Fool!" cried the man slapping at him with the back of his hand.

"No!" screamed Hup. "They want to kill Hup!"

"There is no place for beggars in Glorious Ar," growled one of the men at the tables.

Hup's rag might once have been of the Caste of Potters, but it was difficult to tell. His hands looked as though they might have been broken. Clearly one leg was shorter than the other. Hup wrung his tiny, misshapen hands, looking about. He tried foolishly to hide behind a group of men but they threw him to the center of the pit of sand in the tavern. He tried, like a frantic animal, to crawl under one of the low tables but he only spilled the paga and the men pulled him out from under the table and belabored his back with blows of their fists. He kept whimpering and screaming, and running one place or the other. Then, in spite of the angry shout of the proprietor, he scrambled over the counter, taking refuge behind it.

The men in the tavern, with the exception of Kuurus, laughed.

Then, a moment later, four men, armed, brawny men, with a streamer of blue and yellow silk sewn diagonally into their garments, burst through the door and entered the room.

"Where is Hup the Fool?" cried their leader, a large fellow with missing teeth and a scar over his right eye.

The men began to hunt about the room, angrily.

"Where is Hup the Fool?" demanded the leader of the four men of the proprietor.

"I shall have to look around for him," said the proprietor, winking at the fellow with missing teeth, who grinned. "No," said the proprietor, apparently looking about with great care behind the counter, "Hup the Fool does not seem to be here."

"It looks like we must search elsewhere," said the leader of the four men, attempting to sound disappointed.

"It appears so," said the proprietor. Then, after a cruel pause, the proprietor suddenly cried out. "No! Wait! Here is something!" And, reaching down to his feet behind the counter, picked up the small animal mass that was Hup the Fool, which shrieked with fear, and hurled it into the arms of the man with missing teeth, who laughed.

"Why," cried the man with missing teeth, "it is he! It is Hup the Fool!"

"Mercy, Masters!" cried Hup, squealing, struggling in the grasp of his captor.

The other three men, hired swords, perhaps once of the Caste of Warriors, laughed at the frantic efforts of the tiny, sniveling wad of flesh to free itself.

Many in the crowd laughed at the small fool's discomfort.

Hup was indeed an ugly thing, for he was small, and yet thick, almost bulbous, and under the dirty tunic, perhaps that of the potters, there bulged the hump of some grotesque growth. One of his legs was shorter than the other; his head was too large for his body, and swollen to the left; one eye was larger than the other. His tiny feet thrashed about, kicking at the man who held him.

"Are you truly going to kill him?" asked one of the patrons at the low table.

"This time he dies," said the man who held Hup. "He has dared to speak the name of Portus and beg a coin from him."

Goreans do not generally favor begging, and some regard it as an insult that there should be such, an insult to them and their city. When charity is in order, as when a man cannot work or a woman is alone, usually such is arranged through the caste organization, but sometimes through the clan, which is not specifically caste oriented but depends on ties of blood through the fifth degree. If one, of course, finds oneself in effect without caste or clan, as was perhaps the case with the small fool named Hup, and one cannot work, one's life is likely to be miserable and not of great length. Moreover, Goreans are extremely sensitive about names, and who may speak them. Indeed, some, particularly those of low caste, even have use names, concealing their true names, lest they be discovered by enemies and used to conjure spells against them. Similarly, slaves, on the whole, do not address free men by their names. Kuurus surmised that Portus, doubtless a man of importance, had been troubled by the little fool Hup on more than one occasion, and had now decided to do away with him.

The man who held the sniveling Hup held him with one hand and struck him with the other, and then threw him to one of his three fellows, who similarly abused him. The crowd in the tavern reacted with amusement as the small, animal-like body was buffeted and thrown about, sometimes flung against the wall or on the tables. At last, bleeding and scarcely able to whine, Hup curled himself into a small, trembling ball, his head between his legs, his hands holding his ankles. The four men, then having him between them in the pit of sand, kicked him again and again.

Then the large man with missing teeth seized Hup's hair and pulled up the head, to expose the throat, holding in his right hand a small, thick, curved blade, the hook knife of Ar, used sheathed in the sport of that name, but the knife was not now sheathed.

The eyes of tiny Hup were screwed shut, his body shivering like that of an urchin clenched in the teeth of a scorpion.

"Keep him on the sand!" warned the proprietor of the tavern.

He with the missing teeth laughed and looked about the crowd, his eyes bright, seeing that they waited with eagerness for his stroke.

But his laugh died in his throat as he looked into the eyes of Kuurus, he of the Caste of Assassins.

Kuurus, with his left hand, pushed to one side his bowl of paga.

Hup opened his eyes, startled at not yet having felt the deep, cruel movement of the steel.

He too looked into the eyes of Kuurus, who sat in the darkness, the wall behind him, cross-legged, looking at him, no emotion on his face.

"You are a beggar?" asked Kuurus.

"Yes, Master," said Hup.

"Was the begging good today?" asked Kuurus.

Hup looked at him in fear. "Yes, Master," he said, "yes!"

"Then you have money," said Kuurus, and stood up behind the table, slinging the sheath of the short sword about his shoulder.

Hup wildly thrust a small, stubby, knobby hand into his pouch and hurled a coin, a copper tarn disk, to Kuurus, who caught it and placed it in one of the pockets of his belt.

"Do not interfere," snarled the man who held the hook knife.

"There are four of us," said another, putting his hand on his sword.

"I have taken money," said Kuurus.

The men in the tavern, and the girls, began to move away from the tables.

"We are Warriors," said another.

Then a coin of gold struck the table before the Assassin, ringing on the wood.

All eyes turned to face a paunchy man, in a robe of blue and yellow silk. "I am Portus," he said. "Do not interfere, Assassin."

Kuurus picked up the coin and fingered it, and then he looked at Portus. "I have already taken money," he said.

Portus gasped.

The four Warriors rose to their feet. Five blades leaped from the sheath with but one sound. Hup, whining, crawled away from the sand on his hands and knees.

The first Warrior lunged toward the Assassin but in the darkness of the side of the room, in the dim light of the tharlarion lamps, it was difficult to tell what happened. No one heard the striking of sword steel, but all saw the turning body of the man with the missing teeth falling sprawled over the low table. Then the dark shape of the Assassin seemed to move like a swift shadow in the room, and each of the three Warriors leaped toward him, but seemed to fail to find him, and another man, without even the flash of sword steel, dropped to his knees and fell forward in the pit of sand; the other two men struck as well, but their blades did not even meet that of the Assassin, who did not seem to deign to cross steel with them; the third man, soundlessly, turned away from the blade of the Assassin, seeming surprised, took two steps and fell; the fourth man lunged but failed to meet the shadow that seemed to move to one side, and now, before the fourth man had fallen, the shadow had

resheathed its blade. Now the Assassin picked up the coin of gold and looked at the startled and sweating Portus. Then the Assassin threw the coin to the feet of Hup the Fool. "A gift to Hup the Fool," said the Assassin, "from Portus, who is kind." Hup seized up the coin of gold and scrambled from the room, like an urt running through the open gate of a trap.

Kuurus returned to his table, and sat down cross-legged as before. Once more the short sword lay at his right hand on the table. He lifted his paga bowl and drank.

Kuurus had not finished the bowl of paga when he sensed a man approaching. The right hand of Kuurus now lay on the hilt of the short sword.

The man was Portus, heavy, paunchy, in blue and yellow silk. He approached gingerly, his hands open, held from his body, ingratiatingly, smiling.

He sat down, wheezing, across from Kuurus, and placed his hands deliberately on his knees.

Kuurus said nothing but observed him.

The man smiled, but Kuurus did not smile.

"Welcome, Killer," said the man, addressing the Assassin by what, for that caste, is a title of respect.

Kuurus did not move.

"I see you wear on your forehead," said the man, "the dagger."

Kuurus examined him, the paunchy flesh beneath the blue and yellow silken robe. He noted the hang of the garment on the man's right arm.

The short sword moved from the sheath.

"I must protect myself," said the man, smiling, as the blade of Kuurus lifted itself through the sleeve, parting the silk, revealing the sheath strapped to his forearm.

Not taking his eyes from the man, Kuurus cut the straps on the sheath from the man's forearm, and with a small movement of his blade, threw the sheath and its dagger some feet to the side.

"I am of the opinion," said the man, "that it is a good thing we have those in the black tunic back amongst us."

Kuurus nodded, accepting the judgment.

"Bring paga!" called the paunchy man imperiously, impatiently, to one of the girls, who hastened to obey him. Then he turned again to Kuurus, and smiled ingratiatingly. "It has been hard in Ar," said the man, "since the deposition of Kazrak of Port Kar as Administrator of the City, and since the murder of Om, the High Initiate of the City."

Kuurus had heard of these things. Kazrak, who had been Administrator of the City for several years, had finally been deposed, largely due to the agitations of certain factions among the Initiates and Merchants, who had had their various grievances against the Administrator. Kazrak had offended the Caste of Initiates primarily by levying taxes on their vast holdings throughout the city and upon occasion upholding the rulings of the administrative courts over the courts of the Initiates. The Initiates, in their interpretations of sacrifices and in their preachments, primarily to the low castes, had led many of the city to fear that Kazrak might not long enjoy the favor of the Priest-Kings. After the murder of Om, who had been on tolerable terms with the Administrator, the new High Initiate, Complicius Serenus, in studying the omens of the white bosk slain at the Harvest Feast had, to his apparent horror, discovered that they had stood against Kazrak. Other Initiates wished to examine these omens, being

read in the state of the bosk's liver, but Complicius Serenus, as though in terror, had cast the liver into the fire, presumably that such dark portents might be immediately destroyed. He had then collapsed weeping on the pillar of sacrifice, for it was well known that he had been a beloved friend of the Administrator. It was from this time that Kazrak might clearly have been said, particularly among the lower castes, to have lost the confidence of the city. He was further in danger by virtue of his controlling measures restricting certain monopolies important to certain factions among the Merchants, in particular those having to do with the manufacture of bricks, and the distribution of salt and tharlarion oil. He had further imposed restrictions on the games and contests of Ar, such that the loss of life had become infrequent, even among competing slaves. It was argued that the citizens of Ar could scarcely remain strong and fearless unless accustomed to the sight of blood, of danger and death. And since Kazrak was originally, perhaps surprisingly, of Port Kar, a city not on particularly good terms with Ar, or any other Gorean city, there was the hint of sedition in such matters. Moreover, Kazrak had been one of the leaders of the forces that had preserved Ar in the time of its troubles with Pa-Kur, master of the Assassins; as the tale was now told in the streets, the men of Ar themselves, alone, had overthrown the invader; Kazrak seemed a living reminder that Glorious Ar had once needed the aid of other cities, and men other than her own.

Whereas it is only the men of high caste who elect members to the Council of the City, the gold of merchants and the will of the general populace is seldom disregarded in their choices. Accordingly, Kazrak of Port Kar, for years Administrator of Ar, was by vote deposed and banished from the city, being publicly denied salt, bread and fire, as had been Marlenus, long years before him, once Ubar of Ar. Kazrak, with loyal followers, and the beautiful Sana of Thentis, his consort, had left the city months before. Their whereabouts were unknown, but it was thought they had hoped to found a colony on one of the islands of Thassa, farther north than even Cos and Tyros. The new Administrator of Ar was a man named Minus Tentius Hinrabi, an unimportant man except for being of the Hinrabian family, prominent among the Builders, having the major holdings in the vast, walled Hinrabian kilns, where much of Ar's brick is produced.

"It is hard in Ar," said the paunchy man, Portus, "since Kazrak has gone."

Kuurus said nothing.

"There seems little law now," said Portus. "When one goes out at night, even on the high bridges, one must have men with one. It is not well to walk among the cylinders after dark without torches and steel."

"Do the Warriors no longer guard the streets?" asked Kuurus.

"Some," said Portus. "But not enough. Many are engaged in the border disputes as far distant as the Cartius. Moreover, the caravans of Merchants are now given large and free guard."

"Surely there are many Warriors in the city," said Kuurus.

"Yes," said Portus, "but they do little—they are well paid, more than twice what was done before, but they spend the mornings in practices with arms, and the afternoons and evenings in the taverns, the gaming rooms and baths of the city."

"There are swords for hire?" asked Kuurus.

"Yes," said Portus, "and the rich Merchants, and the great houses, those on the Street

of Coins, and on the Street of Brands, hire their own men." He smiled. "Further," said he, "Merchants arm and train squads of such men and rent them, for high wages, to the citizens of given streets and cylinders."

Kuurus lifted his paga bowl and drank.

"What has this to do with me?" he asked.

"For whom do you wear on your forehead the mark of the black dagger?" queried Portus discreetly.

Kuurus said nothing.

"Perhaps I could tell you where to find him," proposed Portus.

"I will find him," said Kuurus.

"Of course," said Portus. "Of course." The heavy man, sitting cross-legged, opposite the Assassin, began to sweat, fiddled with the damp blue and yellow silk covering his knee, and then with a nervous hand lifted a shaking bowl of paga to his lips, spilling some down the side of his face. "I meant no harm," he said.

"You are alive," said Kuurus.

"May I ask, Killer," asked Portus, "if you come to make the first killing—or the second?"

"The second," said Kuurus.

"Ah!" said Portus.

"I hunt," said Kuurus.

"Of course," said Portus.

"I come to avenge," said Kuurus.

Portus smiled. "That is what I meant," he said, "that it is good those in the black tunic are once again amongst us, that justice can be done, order restored, right upheld."

Kuurus looked at him, the eyes not smiling. "There is only gold and steel," said he.

"Of course," hastily agreed Portus. "That is very true."

"Why did you come to speak with me?"

"I would hire a sword such as yours," said Portus.

"I hunt," said Kuurus.

"Ar is a vast city," said Portus. "Perhaps it will take you time to find he whom you seek."

Kuurus' eyes flickered.

Portus leaned forward. "And meanwhile," he said, "you might earn considerable sums. I have work for such men as you. And much of the time you would be free, to hunt as you wished. Matters might well work out to our mutual advantage."

"Who are you?" asked Kuurus.

"I am that Portus," said he, "who is Master of the House of Portus."

Kuurus had heard of the House of Portus, one of the largest of the slave houses in the Street of Brands. He had known, of course, from the gown of blue and yellow silk that the man was a slaver.

"What is it you fear?" asked Kuurus.

"There is a house greater than mine, or any on the Street of Brands," said he.

"You fear this house?" asked Kuurus.

"Those of this house stand near the Administrator, and the High Initiate," said Portus.

"What do you mean?" asked Kuurus.

"The gold of this house is heavy in the councils of the city."

"The Administrator and the High Initiate," asked Kuurus, "owe their thrones to the gold of this house?"

Portus laughed bitterly. "Without the gold of this house, how could the Administrator and the High Initiate have sponsored the races and the games that won them the favor of the lower castes?"

"But the lower castes do not elect the Administrator or the High Initiate," said Kuurus. "The Administrator is appointed by the High Council of the City and the High Initiate by the High Council of the Initiates of the City."

"These councils," said Portus scornfully, "know well the way the lower castes yelp in the tiers." He snorted. "And there are many in the High Councils of the City who, if forced to decide between the steel of the hook knife and the feel of gold in their pouch, will choose gold to steel." Portus winked at Kuurus. "There is only gold and steel," he said.

Kuurus did not smile.

Portus hastily pushed his paga bowl up to his mouth, and swilled again, his eyes wary of the Assassin across from him.

"Where does this house obtain riches such that they may so easily outbid all other factions in Ar?"

"It is a rich house," said Portus, looking about himself. "It is a rich house."

"That rich?" asked Kuurus.

"I do not know where the gold comes from—all of it—" said Portus. "My own house could not begin to sponsor the games of even two days—we would be bankrupt."

"Of what interest is this house to you?" asked Kuurus.

"It wants to be the single slave house of Ar," whispered Portus.

Kuurus smiled.

"My house," said Portus, "is twenty generations old. We have bred, captured, trained, exchanged and sold slaves for half a millennium. The house of Portus is known on all Gor." Portus looked down. "Already six houses on the Street of Brands have been purchased or closed."

"There has never been a monopoly on slaves in Ar," said Kuurus.

"That is the wish, however, of the house of which I speak," said Portus. "Does it not offend you? Are you not outraged? Even in terms of merchandise and prices cannot you see what it would mean? Even now the lesser houses find it difficult to acquire premium slaves, and when we obtain them, we are undersold. Few go to the lesser houses to buy slaves this year in Ar."

"How can this house of which you speak," asked Kuurus, "undersell so consistently? Is it that the number of slaves is so great that the profit taken on each is less?"

"I have thought long on it," said Portus, "and that cannot be all of it. I know this business well, the costs of information, organization, planning, acquisition, transportation and security, the care and feeding and training of the animals, the guards, the costs of the auctions, the taxes on sales, the deliveries to distant cities—and the staff of the house I speak of is large, skilled and highly paid—and their facilities are unparalleled in the City, both in size and appointments. They have interior

baths which could rival the pools even of the Capacian Baths." Portus nodded in puzzlement. "No," said Portus, "they must have sources of gold other than the income on their merchandise." Portus pushed one finger around in a puddle of splashed paga on the low table. "I thought for a time," he said, "that they intended to sell at a radical loss until the other slave houses were forced to close, and then to recoup their losses with profit by setting their own prices—but then when I considered again the gold which sponsored the games and races honoring the men who were to become Administrator and High Initiate, I decided it could not be. I am convinced the house of which I speak has major sources of gold other than the income on their merchandise."

Kuurus did not speak.

"There is another strange thing about that house I do not understand," said Portus.

"What?" asked Kuurus.

"The number of barbarian women they place on the block," said Portus.

"There have always been barbarian women on Gor," said Kuurus, dismissing the remark of Portus.

"Not in such numbers," grumbled Portus. He looked at Kuurus. "Have you any idea of the expense of acquiring a barbarian woman from beyond the cities—the distances involved? Normally they can be brought in only one at a time, on tarnback. A caravan of common slave wagons would take a year to go beyond the cities and return."

"A hundred tarnsmen, well organized," said Kuurus, "could strike barbarian villages, bind a hundred wenches, and return in twenty days."

"True," said Portus, "but commonly such raids take place on cylinders in given cities—the distances beyond the cities are great, and the prices paid for mere barbarian girls are less."

Kuurus shrugged.

"Moreover," said Portus, "these are not common barbarian wenches."

Kuurus looked up.

"Few of them have even a smattering of Gorean," he said. "And they act strangely. They beg and weep and whine. One would think they had never seen a slave collar or slave chains before. They are beautiful, but they are stupid. The only thing they understand is the whip." Portus looked down, disgusted. "Men even go to see them sold, out of curiosity, for they either stand there, numb, not moving, or scream and fight, or cry out in their barbarian tongues." Portus looked up. "But the lash teaches them what is expected of them on the block, and they then present themselves well—and some bring fair prices—in spite of being barbarian."

"I gather," said Kuurus, "that you wish to hire my sword, that you may in some degree protect yourself from the men and the plans of the house of which you have spoken."

"It is true," said Portus. "When gold will not do, only steel can meet steel."

"You say that this house of which you speak is the largest and richest, the most powerful, on the Street of Brands?"

"Yes," said Portus.

"What is the name of this house?" asked Kuurus.

"The House of Cernus," said Portus.

"I shall permit my sword to be hired," said Kuurus.

"Good!" cried Portus, his hands on the table, his eyes gleaming. "Good!"

"By the House of Cernus," said the Assassin.

The eyes of Portus were wide, and his body trembled. He rose unsteadily to his feet, and staggered backwards, shaking his head, turned, and stumbled over one of the low tables, and fled from the room.

His drink finished Kuurus rose and went to the darkened corner of the room, where the wall sloped down. He looked into the eyes of the girl in the yellow slave livery, who knelt there. Then he turned the key in the lock of collar seven and released her. Thrusting her to her feet and forcing her to walk before him, he went to the counter, behind which stood the man in the grimy tunic of white and gold. Kuurus threw the key to him. "Use Twenty-seven," said the man, handing Kuurus a bit of silk, Pleasure Silk, wrapped about a set of slave chains.

Kuurus threw the silk and chain over his shoulder and motioned the girl to move ahead of him and, numbly, she did so, crossing the room, going between the tables, and stopping before the narrow ladder at the right side of the high wall, in which were found the ledges with their alcoves. Not speaking, but woodenly, she climbed the ladder and crawled onto the shelf near the tiny alcove marked with the Gorean equivalent of twenty-seven and entered, followed by Kuurus, who drew the curtains behind them.

The alcove, with its enclosing, curved walls, was only about four feet high and five feet wide. It was lit by one small lamp set in a niche in the wall. It was lined with red silk, and floored with love furs and cushions, the furs being better than some six to eight inches deep.

In the alcove the demeanor of the girl changed and she suddenly rolled onto her back and lifted one knee. She looked at him saucily.

"I have never been in one of these places before," she said.

Kuurus tossed the silk and the chain to one side of the alcove and grinned at her.

"I now understand," she said, "why it is that free women never enter paga taverns."

"But you are only a slave girl," said Kuurus.

"True," she said forlornly, turning her head to one side. Kuurus removed her slave livery.

The girl sat up, her eyes bright, holding her ankles with her hands.

"So this is what these places are like," she said, looking about her.

"Do you like them?" asked Kuurus.

"Well," she said, demurely, looking down, "they make a girl feel—rather—well—"

"Precisely," agreed Kuurus. "I see that I shall have to bring you here often."

"That might be pleasant," said she, "Master."

He fingered the collar on her throat, yellow enameled over steel. It bore the legend: I am the property of the House of Cernus.

"I would like," he said, "to remove the collar."

"Unfortunately," said she, "the key reposes in the House of Cernus."

"It is a dangerous thing you are doing, Elizabeth," said Kuurus.

"You had best call me Vella," said she, "for that is the name I am known by in the House of Cernus."

He gathered her in his arms, and she kissed him. "I have missed you," said she, "Tarl Cabot."

"And I have missed you, too," I said.

I kissed her.

"We must speak of our work," I mumbled, "our plans and purposes, and how we may achieve them."

"The business of Priest-Kings and such," said she, "is surely less important than our present activities."

I mumbled something, but she would hear nothing of it, and suddenly feeling her in my arms I laughed and held her to me, and she laughed, and whispered, "I love you, Tarl Cabot," and I said to her, "Kuurus, Kuurus—of the Caste of Assassins," and she said, "Yes, Kuurus—and poor Vella of the House of Cernus—picked up on the street and brought to this place, given no choice but to serve the pleasure of a man who is not even her master—cruel Kuurus!"

We fell to kissing and touching and loving, and after some time she whispered, eyes bright, "Ah, Kuurus, you well know how to use a wench."

"Be quiet," Kuurus told her, "Slave Girl."

"Yes, Master," she said.

I reached over and put the bit of Pleasure Silk under her, that it might be wrinkled and bear the stains of her sweat.

"Clever, Master," said she, smiling.

"Be silent, Slave Girl," I warned her, and she heeded my injunction, for she then, for better than an Ahn, served in a silence that was exquisite, broken only by our breathing, her small moans and cries.

3 The Game

When I deemed it wise to depart from Vella, I knotted her yellow slave livery about her neck and cried out, "Begone, Slave!" and then slapped my hands together at which juncture she let forth a howl as though she had been struck, and then, blubbering hysterically and crying out, she scrambled from the alcove, hastily and awkwardly, half falling, descended the narrow ladder and fled weeping from the paga tavern, much to the delight and amusement of the customers below.

A few moments later I emerged, descended the ladder and went to the proprietor of the shop, throwing the bit of soiled Pleasure Silk and the slave chains to the counter. I looked at him and he did not ask for pay, but looked away, and so I left the tavern and entered the street.

It was still light and in the early evening.

I was not much afraid of being recognized. I had dyed my hair black. I had not been in Ar in several years. I wore the habiliments of the Caste of Assassins.

I looked about myself.

I have always been impressed with Ar, for it is the largest, the most populous and the most luxurious city of all known Gor. Its walls, its countless cylinders, its spires and towers, its lights, its beacons, the high bridges, the lamps, the lanterns of the bridges, are unbelievably exciting and fantastic, particularly as seen from the more lofty bridges or the roofs of the higher cylinders. But perhaps they are the most marvelous when seen at night from tarnback. I remembered the night, so many years ago, when I had first streaked over the walls of Ar, on the Planting Feast, and had made the strike of a tarnsman for the Home Stone of Gor's greatest city, Glorious Ar. As I could I put these thoughts from my mind, but I could not fully escape them, for among them was the memory of a girl, she, Talena, the daughter of the Ubar of Ubars, Marlenus, who so many years before had been the Free Companion of a simple Warrior of Ko-ro-ba, he who had been torn from her at the will of Priest-Kings and returned to distant Earth, there to wait until he was needed again for another turn of play in the harsh games of Gor. When the city of Ko-ro-ba had been destroyed by Priest-Kings and its people scattered, no two to stand together, the girl had disappeared. The Warrior of Ko-ro-ba had never found her. He did not know whether she was alive or dead.

For those who passed in the street some might have been startled had they noted, standing in the shadows, one who wore the black of the Assassins, who wept.

"Game! Game!" I heard, and quickly shook my head, driving away the memories of Ar, and of the girl once known, always loved.

The word actually cried was "Kaissa," which is Gorean for "Game." It is a general term, but when used without qualification, it stands for only one game. The man who called out wore a robe of checkered red and yellow squares, and the game board, of similar squares, with ten ranks and ten files, giving a hundred squares, hung over his back; slung over his left shoulder, as a warrior wears a sword, was a leather bag containing the pieces, twenty to a side, red and yellow, representing Spearmen, Tarnsmen, the Riders of the High Tharlarion, and so on. The object of the game is the

capture of the opponent's Home Stone. Capturings of individual pieces and continuations take place much as in chess. The affinities of this game with chess are, I am confident, more than incidental. I recalled that men from many periods and cultures of Earth had been brought, from time to time, to Gor, our Counter-Earth. With them they would have brought their customs, their skills, their habits, their games, which, in time, would presumably have undergone considerable modification. I have suspected that chess, with its fascinating history and development, as played on Earth, may actually have derived from a common ancestor with the Gorean game, both of them perhaps tracing their lineage to some long-forgotten game, perhaps the draughts of Egypt or some primitive board game of India. It might be mentioned that the game, as I shall speak of it, for in Gorean it has no other designation, is extremely popular on Gor, and even children find among their playthings the pieces of the game; there are numerous clubs and competitions among various castes and cylinders; careful records of important games are kept and studied; lists of competitions and tournaments and their winners are filed in the Cylinder of Documents; there is even in most Gorean libraries a section containing an incredible number of scrolls pertaining to the techniques, tactics and strategy of the game. Almost all civilized Goreans, of whatever caste, play. It is not unusual to find even children of twelve or fourteen years who play with a depth and sophistication, a subtlety and a brilliance, that might be the envy of the chess masters of Earth.

But this man now approaching was not an amateur, nor an enthusiast. He was a man who would be respected by all the castes in Ar; he was a man who would be recognized, most likely, not only by every urchin wild in the streets of the city but by the Ubar as well; he was a Player, a professional, one who earned his living through the game.

The Players are not a caste, nor a clan, but they tend to be a group apart, living their own lives. They are made up of men from various castes who often have little in common but the game, but that is more than enough. They are men who commonly have an extraordinary aptitude for the game but beyond this men who have become drunk on it, men lost in the subtle, abstract liquors of variation, pattern and victory, men who live for the game, who want it and need it as other men might want gold, or others power and women, or others the rolled, narcotic strings of toxic kanda.

There are competitions of Players, with purses provided by amateur organizations, and sometimes by the city itself, and these purses are, upon occasion, enough to enrich a man, but most Players earn a miserable living by hawking their wares, a contest with a master, in the street. The odds are usually one to forty, one copper tarn disk against a forty-piece, sometimes against an eighty-piece, and sometimes the amateur who would play the master insists on further limitations, such as the option to three consecutive moves at a point in the game of his choice, or that the master must remove from the board, before the game begins, his two Tarnsmen, or his Riders of the High Tharlarion. Further, in order to gain Players, the master, if wise, occasionally loses a game, which is expensive at the normal odds; and the game must be lost subtly, that the amateur must believe he has won. I had once known a Warrior in Ko-ro-ba, a dull, watery-eyed fellow, who boasted of having beaten Quintus of Tor in a paga tavern in Thentis. Those who play the game for money have a hard lot, for the market is a buyer's market, and commonly men will play with them only on terms much to their

satisfaction. I myself, when Centius of Cos was in Ko-ro-ba, might have played him on the bridge near the Cylinder of Warriors for only a pair of copper tarn disks. It seemed sad to me, that I, who knew so little of the game, could have so cheaply purchased the privilege of sitting across the board from such a master. It seemed to me that men should pay a tarn disk of gold just to be permitted to watch such a master play, but such were not the economic realities of the game.

In spite of having the respect, even to some degree the adulation, of almost all Goreans, the Players lived poorly. On the Street of Coins they found it difficult even to arrange loans. They were not popular with innkeepers, who would not shelter them unless paid in advance. Many were the nights a master would be found rolled in robes in a paga tavern, where, for a bit of tarsk meat and a pot of paga, and an evening's free play with customers, he would be permitted to sleep. Many of the Players dreamed of the day they might be nominated for intercity competitions at the Fairs of the Sardar, for a victor in the Sardar Fairs earns enough to keep himself, and well, for years, which he then would devote to the deeper study of the game. There is also some money for the masters in the annotation of games, printed on large boards near the Central Cylinder, in the preparation or editing of scrolls on the game, and in the providing of instruction for those who would improve their skills. On the whole, however, the Players live extremely poorly. Further, there is a harsh competition among themselves, for positions in certain streets and on certain bridges. The most favorable locations for play are, of course, the higher bridges in the vicinity of the richer cylinders, the most expensive paga taverns, and so on. These positions, or territories, are allotted by the outcome of games among the Players themselves. In Ar, the high bridge near the Central Cylinder, housing the palace of the Ubar and the meeting place of the city's High Council, was held, and had been for four years, by the young and brilliant, fiery Scormus of Ar.

"Game!" I heard, an answering cry, and a fat fellow, of the Caste of Vintners, puffing and bright eyed, wearing a white tunic with a representation in green cloth of leaves about the collar and down the sleeves of the garment, stepped forth from a doorway.

Without speaking the Player sat down cross-legged at one side of the street, and placed the board in front of him. Opposite him sat the Vintner.

"Set the pieces," said the Player.

I was surprised, and looked more closely, as the Vintner took the wallet filled with game pieces from the man's shoulder and began, with his stubby fingers, to quickly arrange the pieces.

The Player was a rather old man, extremely unusual on Gor, where the stabilization serums were developed centuries ago by the Caste of Physicians in Ko-ro-ba and Ar, and transmitted to the Physicians of other cities at several of the Sardar Fairs. Age, on Gor, interestingly, was regarded, and still is, by the Castes of Physicians as a disease, not an inevitable natural phenomenon. The fact that it seemed to be a universal disease did not dissuade the caste from considering how it might be combated. Accordingly the research of centuries was turned to this end. Many other diseases, which presumably flourished centuries ago on Gor, tended to be neglected, as less dangerous and less universal than that of aging. A result tended to be that those susceptible to many diseases died and those less susceptible lived on, propagating their kind. One