



THE GIANTS OF BLACK LAKE

CHAPTER ONE

An Unexpected Encounter

Doctor Francis Ardan carefully studied the massive cliffs this side of Black Lake. They were a sheer drop into a deep pool of water, the purity of which was uncanny.

“I think they must contain copper, and also iron and manganese, and possibly some coal as well,” he said. “If nothing else, this trip may not have been a waste of time. My father’s mining subsidiary will be interested in the results of my survey.”

Doc Ardan had undertaken the exploration of the source of the Yenisei River in Upper Mongolia. Several weeks before, he had encountered a company of Tartars whose leader, once apprised of the young man’s purpose for exploring the region, had suggested he look near Black Lake, or *Haa Nuur* in the local tongue, a dark and foreboding part of Upper Mongolia, in the Khangai Mountains, near the border of the newly-established Tuvan People’s Republic.

The young man’s interest in Black Lake was also piqued because it was rumored to be the burial site of the legendary Abuk Khan, a famous rebel chief of the Middle Ages, who had eventually been captured by his enemies and condemned to death.

The story said that, as he walked to his doom, Abuk Khan had uttered a most solemn curse on the spot where he was to die, and a large dolmen was afterwards erected to mark it.

When he came across this dolmen in the course of his travels in 1924, a Dr. Ossendowski had photographed it as a curiosity, but when he went to develop the plate that same evening, he was surprised to find it entirely blank.

Later on, returning by the same route, the doctor took another photograph of the dolmen and, to make certain of the result, repeated it on several plates. But even those precautions were useless. No sooner had the photographic apparatus been packed up and loaded on the horses than the animals suddenly took fright, and bolted, scattering their burden.

When it was picked up, the photographic equipment, including the newly exposed plates, had all been smashed.¹

In any event, the natives firmly believed that Abuk Khan’s curse was sufficiently potent to deal with any who dared intrude upon his peace.

Ardan wanted to locate the mythical dolmen and test if there was any truth to the legend.

¹ An allegedly authentic anecdote.

He had spent four months exploring the region when, thanks to the clues provided by the Tartar Chief, he had finally located the legendary dolmen of Abuk Khan near the banks of Black Lake.

The stone mausoleum was stark, made of blood-red blocks of granite, and the light of the sunset conferred upon it an evil glow. It was no surprise, thought Ardan, that it had generated so many superstitions.

There were carvings that categorically identified it as the tomb of Abuk Khan and warned the unwary traveler of all the curses that would befall him were he to disrespect the dead Khan.

Since it was almost dark, Ardan decided to set up camp at the foot of the sinister monument, despite the warnings. The masses of multicolored flowers, including bushes of truly magnificent Japanese irises, scattered around the banks of the lake, and made for an enchanting contrast with the grimness of the dark cliffs in the distance.

The honeyed perfume of the lilies wafted up to him and he expected to spend a good, restful night in the shade of the mythical dolmen.

Unfortunately, when he woke up, Ardan had the unhappy surprise of discovering that his feet had been shackled, and four Tartar warriors were looking at him with an evil, sardonic glint in their eyes.

He tried to free himself, but that only served to amuse the Tartars. His rifle, gun and knife had been taken away by his captors, so he was defenseless.

Ardan assumed that the men sought to ransom him, and were probably the real cause of the many local tales about strangers disappearing in the region, all conveniently credited to the spectre of Abuk Khan.

He tried talking to them and elicit some kind of response to his queries, but in vain.

Then, he smelled a particularly foul odor.

Not far from him, the Tartars were boiling a liquid in a pot, having relit his fire of the previous night. It was a local concoction made by boiling tarantulas with alcohol, then adding local herbs; it was a powerful sleeping drug that rendered men totally unconscious.

One of the Tartars brought a bowl of it to Ardan's mouth, and ordered him to drink it.

The young man squeezed his jaws together, but another Tartar pinched his nose while a third pried his teeth open with his knife.



He was forced to swallow the disgusting tarantula liquor and soon fell unconscious, oblivious to the world around him. This was a shame, because he might otherwise have learned that he had been successful, after a fashion, in his secret quest.

The four bandits tied his arms and legs together and threw him across the saddle of one of their horses.

Then, the one who seemed to be the leader said:

“Kyzyl Kaya will be pleased.”

Kyzyl Kaya! The mad scientist who had helped the dreaded air-pirate Captain Mendax build his Citadel on top of Mount Everest! He was the secret behind Doc Ardan's journey to the Black Lake.

Several months earlier, the young man had overheard Mendax say: *“I have another in Upper Mongolia, near the source of the Yenisei... No one will ever find us there!”* and, suspecting that the

scientist had not perished in the destruction of the Citadel, which he had bombed from the air, he had decided to seek him there.

And he appeared to have succeeded—although not in the way he had envisioned!

“Yes,” replied the other Tartar. “The presence of this westerner in the region made him anxious.”

“Do you truly believe, Abanka,” said a third, “that one as young as he could frighten the likes of Kyzyl Kaya?”

“No, Spirak! I think the Red Wizard fears no one. His science makes him the equal of the gods. But I know that he said that this young man who lies there, bound and unconscious, is the deadliest foe he ever encountered.”

“Well then, he’ll be harmless when trapped in the lair of the Red Wizard,” concluded the leader.

The four Tartars rode away with their prisoner, first alongside the banks of Black Lake, provoking the flight of hundreds of birds, then towards the North, in the forest covered, mountain country.

The Tartars’ minds were not distracted by hunting opportunities; they rode hard for several miles through the dark woods, until they reached a certain spot that seemed no different from any other.

They tied their horses to the trees, and two of them grabbed Ardan while the other two cleared some of the vegetation, revealing a large metal trapdoor.

They opened it and went down a granite flight of stairs, which led to an underground corridor carved inside the rock. They reached a cell with a metal door, and dumped Ardan’s body inside, on a bed of dry grass, after untying him. He was still unconscious.

They then latched the door behind them and left.

Ardan remained unconscious for almost two days. When he woke up, haggard and almost amnesiac, because of the potion he had been forced to swallow, it took him several hours to sort out his thoughts and remember the sequence of events leading to his capture.

Fortunately, someone had left a jug of water and some black bread in the cell while he slept, so he was able to eat and drink a little, careful to not have so much that he became sick.

He tried to fathom the reasons that had led to his capture and suspected the hand of Kyzyl Kaya, but without evidence. He also thought that he might have been captured for ransom, as he had been the year before by Captain Mendax.

Eventually, the door opened and he saw the Tartar leader standing on the threshold, dressed in his boiled leather uniform, bearing his lance and shield.

“Follow me!” he ordered.

Having no choice, the young man complied and followed the Tartar through the underground tunnels.

They then entered an area where the walls were carved and polished like jade. They stopped in front of a door made of dark teak wood, decorated with exquisitely sculpted dragons.

“Enter!” ordered the Tartar.

Ardan obeyed and found himself in the strangest place he had ever seen.

The room he had just entered appeared to be made entirely of red marble, from the walls to the vases, which also contained arrangements of scarlet flowers.

As if the decor was not sufficient to convey the impression of setting foot in Hell itself, in the center of the room, sitting behind a desk of red wood, was a man who looked like the popular image of Mephistopheles from *Faust*: dressed entirely in red velvet, wearing a black toque with a feather in it, he was extremely tall and thin. His face was ageless, without lines. His nearly phosphorescent blue eyes gleamed in the hollow of their dark orbits. His skeletal face bore a thin, jet-black moustache and a short, pointed beard.

Ardan recognized him at once:

“Kyzyl Kaya!”

The diabolical scientist waved to the Tartar warrior, who left.

“I can’t say that I looked forward to meeting you again, Doctor Ardan,” said Kaya, “but since you were looking for me with such ardor, I had no choice but bring you here, although I apologize for the

methods my men employed. A man of science like you deserved better. Please, sit down for we have much to talk about,” he added, gesturing to an armchair also made of red wood.

Ardan did so, still flabbergasted by what was happening.

“Truth to tell,” continued Kaya, “since the demise of the late and lamented Captain Mendax—due entirely to you—I have not had the opportunity to converse with a like mind, so once I found you were in the area, I have been looking forward to this encounter.”

“Really?”

“I tell the truth—always, Doctor Ardan. Besides, I had to, er, remove you from the chessboard because there are, er, things in this section of Mongolia which, as I’m sure you have noticed, is abundantly rich in all kinds of minerals and rare metals, that I am not yet prepared for the world to learn about.”

“Things? What things?”

“All in due time, Doctor.”

At that point, Kyzyl Kaya took an 18th century snuff box from his desk, one decorated with Fragonard motifs reminiscent of the Court of King Louis XV, and delicately snuffed a pinch of tobacco.

“Tell me, Doctor,” he asked suddenly, “how old do you think I am? What age would you give me?”

Ardan was taken aback by the question, but saw no harm in answering it truthfully:

“Well, er, Mid-forties... Fifty perhaps?”

“Wrong, Doctor!” replied Kyzyl Kaya laughing. “I’m over two hundred fifty years old!”