

## CHAPTER IV - THUVIA

It was the sound of conflict that aroused me once more to the realities of life. For a moment I could neither place my surroundings nor locate the sounds which had aroused me. And then from beyond the blank wall beside which I lay I heard the shuffling of feet, the snarling of grim beasts, the clank of metal accoutrements, and the heavy breathing of a man.

As I rose to my feet I glanced hurriedly about the chamber in which I had just encountered such a warm reception. The prisoners and the savage brutes rested in their chains by the opposite wall eyeing me with varying expressions of curiosity, sullen rage, surprise, and hope.

The latter emotion seemed plainly evident upon the handsome and intelligent face of the young red Martian woman whose cry of warning had been instrumental in saving my life.

She was the perfect type of that remarkably beautiful race whose outward appearance is identical with the more god-like races of Earth men, except that this higher race of Martians is of a light reddish copper colour. As she was entirely unadorned I could not even guess her station in life, though it was evident that she was either a prisoner or slave in her present environment.

It was several seconds before the sounds upon the opposite side of the partition jolted my slowly returning faculties into a realization of their probable import, and then of a sudden I grasped the fact that they were caused by Tars Tarkas in what was evidently a desperate struggle with wild beasts or savage men.

With a cry of encouragement I threw my weight against the secret door, but as well have assayed the down-hurling of the cliffs themselves. Then I sought feverishly for the secret of the revolving panel, but my search was fruitless, and I was about to raise my longsword against the sullen gold when the young woman prisoner called out to me.

"Save thy sword, O Mighty Warrior, for thou shalt need it more where it will avail to some purpose--shatter it not against senseless metal which yields better to the lightest finger touch of one who knows its secret."

"Know you the secret of it then?" I asked.

"Yes; release me and I will give you entrance to the other horror chamber, if you wish. The keys to my fetters are upon the first dead of thy foemen. But why

would you return to face again the fierce banth, or whatever other form of destruction they have loosed within that awful trap?"

"Because my friend fights there alone," I answered, as I hastily sought and found the keys upon the carcass of the dead custodian of this grim chamber of horrors.

There were many keys upon the oval ring, but the fair Martian maid quickly selected that which sprung the great lock at her waist, and freed she hurried toward the secret panel.

Again she sought out a key upon the ring. This time a slender, needle-like affair which she inserted in an almost invisible hole in the wall. Instantly the door swung upon its pivot, and the contiguous section of the floor upon which I was standing carried me with it into the chamber where Tars Tarkas fought.

The great Thark stood with his back against an angle of the walls, while facing him in a semi-circle a half-dozen huge monsters crouched waiting for an opening. Their blood-streaked heads and shoulders testified to the cause of their wariness as well as to the swordsmanship of the green warrior whose glossy hide bore the same mute but eloquent witness to the ferocity of the attacks that he had so far withstood.

Sharp talons and cruel fangs had torn leg, arm, and breast literally to ribbons. So weak was he from continued exertion and loss of blood that but for the supporting wall I doubt that he even could have stood erect. But with the tenacity and indomitable courage of his kind he still faced his cruel and relentless foes--the personification of that ancient proverb of his tribe: "Leave to a Thark his head and one hand and he may yet conquer."

As he saw me enter, a grim smile touched those grim lips of his, but whether the smile signified relief or merely amusement at the sight of my own bloody and dishevelled condition I do not know.

As I was about to spring into the conflict with my sharp long-sword I felt a gentle hand upon my shoulder and turning found, to my surprise, that the young woman had followed me into the chamber.

"Wait," she whispered, "leave them to me," and pushing me advanced, all defenceless and unarmed, upon the snarling banths.

When quite close to them she spoke a single Martian word in low but peremptory tones. Like lightning the great beasts wheeled upon her, and I looked to see her torn to pieces before I could reach her side, but instead the creatures slunk to her feet like puppies that expect a merited whipping.

Again she spoke to them, but in tones so low I could not catch the words, and then she started toward the opposite side of the chamber with the six mighty monsters trailing at heel. One by one she sent them through the secret panel into the room beyond, and when the last had passed from the chamber where we stood in wide-eyed amazement she turned and smiled at us and then herself passed through, leaving us alone.

For a moment neither of us spoke. Then Tars Tarkas said:

"I heard the fighting beyond the partition through which you passed, but I did not fear for you, John Carter, until I heard the report of a revolver shot. I knew that there lived no man upon all Barsoom who could face you with naked steel and live, but the shot stripped the last vestige of hope from me, since you I knew to be without firearms. Tell me of it."

I did as he bade, and then together we sought the secret panel through which I had just entered the apartment--the one at the opposite end of the room from that through which the girl had led her savage companions.

To our disappointment the panel eluded our every effort to negotiate its secret lock. We felt that once beyond it we might look with some little hope of success for a passage to the outside world.

The fact that the prisoners within were securely chained led us to believe that surely there must be an avenue of escape from the terrible creatures which inhabited this unspeakable place.

Again and again we turned from one door to another, from the baffling golden panel at one end of the chamber to its mate at the other--equally baffling.

When we had about given up all hope one of the panels turned silently toward us, and the young woman who had led away the banths stood once more beside us.

"Who are you?" she asked, "and what your mission, that you have the temerity to attempt to escape from the Valley Dor and the death you have chosen?"

"I have chosen no death, maiden," I replied. "I am not of Barsoom, nor have I taken yet the voluntary pilgrimage upon the River Iss. My friend here is Jeddak of all the Tharks, and though he has not yet expressed a desire to return to the living world, I am taking him with me from the living lie that hath lured him to this frightful place.

"I am of another world. I am John Carter, Prince of the House of Tardos Mors, Jeddak of Helium. Perchance some faint rumour of me may have leaked within the confines of your hellish abode."

She smiled.

"Yes," she replied, "naught that passes in the world we have left is unknown here. I have heard of you, many years ago. The therns have oftentimes wondered whither you had flown, since you had neither taken the pilgrimage, nor could be found upon the face of Barsoom."

"Tell me," I said, "and who be you, and why a prisoner, yet with power over the ferocious beasts of the place that denotes familiarity and authority far beyond that which might be expected of a prisoner or a slave?"

"Slave I am," she answered. "For fifteen years a slave in this terrible place, and now that they have tired of me and become fearful of the power which my knowledge of their ways has given me I am but recently condemned to die the death."

She shuddered.

"What death?" I asked.

"The Holy Therns eat human flesh," she answered me; "but only that which has died beneath the sucking lips of a plant man--flesh from which the defiling blood of life has been drawn. And to this cruel end I have been condemned. It was to be within a few hours, had your advent not caused an interruption of their plans."

"Was it then Holy Therns who felt the weight of John Carter's hand?" I asked.

"Oh, no; those whom you laid low are lesser therns; but of the same cruel and hateful race. The Holy Therns abide upon the outer slopes of these grim hills, facing the broad world from which they harvest their victims and their spoils.

"Labyrinthine passages connect these caves with the luxurious palaces of the Holy Therns, and through them pass upon their many duties the lesser therns, and hordes of slaves, and prisoners, and fierce beasts; the grim inhabitants of this sunless world.

"There be within this vast network of winding passages and countless chambers men, women, and beasts who, born within its dim and gruesome underworld, have never seen the light of day--nor ever shall.

"They are kept to do the bidding of the race of therns; to furnish at once their sport and their sustenance.

"Now and again some hapless pilgrim, drifting out upon the silent sea from the cold Iss, escapes the plant men and the great white apes that guard the Temple of

Issus and falls into the remorseless clutches of the therns; or, as was my misfortune, is coveted by the Holy Thern who chances to be upon watch in the balcony above the river where it issues from the bowels of the mountains through the cliffs of gold to empty into the Lost Sea of Korus.

"All who reach the Valley Dor are, by custom, the rightful prey of the plant men and the apes, while their arms and ornaments become the portion of the therns; but if one escapes the terrible denizens of the valley for even a few hours the therns may claim such a one as their own. And again the Holy Thern on watch, should he see a victim he covets, often tramples upon the rights of the unreasoning brutes of the valley and takes his prize by foul means if he cannot gain it by fair.

"It is said that occasionally some deluded victim of Barsoomian superstition will so far escape the clutches of the countless enemies that beset his path from the moment that he emerges from the subterranean passage through which the Iss flows for a thousand miles before it enters the Valley Dor as to reach the very walls of the Temple of Issus; but what fate awaits one there not even the Holy Therns may guess, for who has passed within those gilded walls never has returned to unfold the mysteries they have held since the beginning of time.

"The Temple of Issus is to the therns what the Valley Dor is imagined by the peoples of the outer world to be to them; it is the ultimate haven of peace, refuge, and happiness to which they pass after this life and wherein an eternity of eternities is spent amidst the delights of the flesh which appeal most strongly to this race of mental giants and moral pygmies."

"The Temple of Issus is, I take it, a heaven within a heaven," I said. "Let us hope that there it will be meted to the therns as they have meted it here unto others."

"Who knows?" the girl murmured.

"The therns, I judge from what you have said, are no less mortal than we; and yet have I always heard them spoken of with the utmost awe and reverence by the people of Barsoom, as one might speak of the gods themselves."

"The therns are mortal," she replied. "They die from the same causes as you or I might: those who do not live their allotted span of life, one thousand years, when by the authority of custom they may take their way in happiness through the long tunnel that leads to Issus.

"Those who die before are supposed to spend the balance of their allotted time in the image of a plant man, and it is for this reason that the plant men are held

sacred by the therns, since they believe that each of these hideous creatures was formerly a thern."

"And should a plant man die?" I asked.

"Should he die before the expiration of the thousand years from the birth of the thern whose immortality abides within him then the soul passes into a great white ape, but should the ape die short of the exact hour that terminates the thousand years the soul is for ever lost and passes for all eternity into the carcass of the slimy and fearsome silians whose wriggling thousands seethe the silent sea beneath the hurtling moons when the sun has gone and strange shapes walk through the Valley Dor."

"We sent several Holy Therns to the silians to-day, then," said Tars Tarkas, laughing.

"And so will your death be the more terrible when it comes," said the maiden.

"And come it will--you cannot escape."

"One has escaped, centuries ago," I reminded her, "and what has been done may be done again."

"It is useless even to try," she answered hopelessly.

"But try we shall," I cried, "and you shall go with us, if you wish."

"To be put to death by mine own people, and render my memory a disgrace to my family and my nation? A Prince of the House of Tardos Mors should know better than to suggest such a thing."

Tars Tarkas listened in silence, but I could feel his eyes riveted upon me and I knew that he awaited my answer as one might listen to the reading of his sentence by the foreman of a jury.

What I advised the girl to do would seal our fate as well, since if I bowed to the inevitable decree of age-old superstition we must all remain and meet our fate in some horrible form within this awful abode of horror and cruelty.

"We have the right to escape if we can," I answered. "Our own moral senses will not be offended if we succeed, for we know that the fabled life of love and peace in the blessed Valley of Dor is a rank and wicked deception. We know that the valley is not sacred; we know that the Holy Therns are not holy; that they are a race of cruel and heartless mortals, knowing no more of the real life to come than we do."

"Not only is it our right to bend every effort to escape--it is a solemn duty from which we should not shrink even though we know that we should be reviled and tortured by our own peoples when we returned to them.

"Only thus may we carry the truth to those without, and though the likelihood of our narrative being given credence is, I grant you, remote, so wedded are mortals to their stupid infatuation for impossible superstitions, we should be craven cowards indeed were we to shirk the plain duty which confronts us.

"Again there is a chance that with the weight of the testimony of several of us the truth of our statements may be accepted, and at least a compromise effected which will result in the dispatching of an expedition of investigation to this hideous mockery of heaven."

Both the girl and the green warrior stood silent in thought for some moments. The former it was who eventually broke the silence.

"Never had I considered the matter in that light before," she said. "Indeed would I give my life a thousand times if I could but save a single soul from the awful life that I have led in this cruel place. Yes, you are right, and I will go with you as far as we can go; but I doubt that we ever shall escape."

I turned an inquiring glance toward the Thark.

"To the gates of Issus, or to the bottom of Korus," spoke the green warrior; "to the snows to the north or to the snows to the south, Tars Tarkas follows where John Carter leads. I have spoken."

"Come, then," I cried, "we must make the start, for we could not be further from escape than we now are in the heart of this mountain and within the four walls of this chamber of death."

"Come, then," said the girl, "but do not flatter yourself that you can find no worse place than this within the territory of the therns."

So saying she swung the secret panel that separated us from the apartment in which I had found her, and we stepped through once more into the presence of the other prisoners.

There were in all ten red Martians, men and women, and when we had briefly explained our plan they decided to join forces with us, though it was evident that it was with some considerable misgivings that they thus tempted fate by opposing an ancient superstition, even though each knew through cruel experience the fallacy of its entire fabric.

Thuvia, the girl whom I had first freed, soon had the others at liberty. Tars Tarkas and I stripped the bodies of the two therns of their weapons, which included swords, daggers, and two revolvers of the curious and deadly type manufactured by the red Martians.

We distributed the weapons as far as they would go among our followers, giving the firearms to two of the women; Thuvia being one so armed.

With the latter as our guide we set off rapidly but cautiously through a maze of passages, crossing great chambers hewn from the solid metal of the cliff, following winding corridors, ascending steep inclines, and now and again concealing ourselves in dark recesses at the sound of approaching footsteps.

Our destination, Thuvia said, was a distant storeroom where arms and ammunition in plenty might be found. From there she was to lead us to the summit of the cliffs, from where it would require both wondrous wit and mighty fighting to win our way through the very heart of the stronghold of the Holy Therns to the world without.

"And even then, O Prince," she cried, "the arm of the Holy Thern is long. It reaches to every nation of Barsoom. His secret temples are hidden in the heart of every community. Wherever we go should we escape we shall find that word of our coming has preceded us, and death awaits us before we may pollute the air with our blasphemies."

We had proceeded for possibly an hour without serious interruption, and Thuvia had just whispered to me that we were approaching our first destination, when on entering a great chamber we came upon a man, evidently a thern.

He wore in addition to his leathern trappings and jewelled ornaments a great circlet of gold about his brow in the exact centre of which was set an immense stone, the exact counterpart of that which I had seen upon the breast of the little old man at the atmosphere plant nearly twenty years before.

It is the one priceless jewel of Barsoom. Only two are known to exist, and these were worn as the insignia of their rank and position by the two old men in whose charge was placed the operation of the great engines which pump the artificial atmosphere to all parts of Mars from the huge atmosphere plant, the secret to whose mighty portals placed in my possession the ability to save from immediate extinction the life of a whole world.

The stone worn by the thern who confronted us was of about the same size as that which I had seen before; an inch in diameter I should say. It scintillated nine different and distinct rays; the seven primary colours of our earthly prism and the



two rays which are unknown upon Earth, but whose wondrous beauty is indescribable.

As the thern saw us his eyes narrowed to two nasty slits.

"Stop!" he cried. "What means this, Thuvia?"

For answer the girl raised her revolver and fired point-blank at him. Without a sound he sank to the earth, dead.

"Beast!" she hissed. "After all these years I am at last revenged."

Then as she turned toward me, evidently with a word of explanation on her lips, her eyes suddenly widened as they rested upon me, and with a little exclamation she started toward me.

"O Prince," she cried, "Fate is indeed kind to us. The way is still difficult, but through this vile thing upon the floor we may yet win to the outer world. Notest thou not the remarkable resemblance between this Holy Thern and thyself?"

The man was indeed of my precise stature, nor were his eyes and features unlike mine; but his hair was a mass of flowing yellow locks, like those of the two I had killed, while mine is black and close cropped.

"What of the resemblance?" I asked the girl Thuvia. "Do you wish me with my black, short hair to pose as a yellow-haired priest of this infernal cult?"

She smiled, and for answer approached the body of the man she had slain, and kneeling beside it removed the circlet of gold from the forehead, and then to my utter amazement lifted the entire scalp bodily from the corpse's head.

Rising, she advanced to my side and placing the yellow wig over my black hair, crowned me with the golden circlet set with the magnificent gem.

"Now don his harness, Prince," she said, "and you may pass where you will in the realms of the therns, for Sator Throg was a Holy Thern of the Tenth Cycle, and mighty among his kind."

As I stooped to the dead man to do her bidding I noted that not a hair grew upon his head, which was quite as bald as an egg.

"They are all thus from birth," explained Thuvia noting my surprise. "The race from which they sprang were crowned with a luxuriant growth of golden hair, but for many ages the present race has been entirely bald. The wig, however, has come to be a part of their apparel, and so important a part do they consider it

that it is cause for the deepest disgrace were a thern to appear in public without it."

In another moment I stood garbed in the habiliments of a Holy Thern.

At Thuvia's suggestion two of the released prisoners bore the body of the dead thern upon their shoulders with us as we continued our journey toward the storeroom, which we reached without further mishap.

Here the keys which Thuvia bore from the dead thern of the prison vault were the means of giving us immediate entrance to the chamber, and very quickly we were thoroughly outfitted with arms and ammunition.

By this time I was so thoroughly fagged out that I could go no further, so I threw myself upon the floor, bidding Tars Tarkas to do likewise, and cautioning two of the released prisoners to keep careful watch.

In an instant I was asleep.