

CHAPTER IX - ISSUS, GODDESS OF LIFE ETERNAL

The confession of love which the girl's fright had wrung from her touched me deeply; but it humiliated me as well, since I felt that in some thoughtless word or act I had given her reason to believe that I reciprocated her affection.

Never have I been much of a ladies' man, being more concerned with fighting and kindred arts which have ever seemed to me more befitting a man than mooning over a scented glove four sizes too small for him, or kissing a dead flower that has begun to smell like a cabbage. So I was quite at a loss as to what to do or say. A thousand times rather face the wild hordes of the dead sea bottoms than meet the eyes of this beautiful young girl and tell her the thing that I must tell her.

But there was nothing else to be done, and so I did it. Very clumsily too, I fear.

Gently I unclasped her hands from about my neck, and still holding them in mine I told her the story of my love for Dejah Thoris. That of all the women of two worlds that I had known and admired during my long life she alone had I loved.

The tale did not seem to please her. Like a tigress she sprang, panting, to her feet. Her beautiful face was distorted in an expression of horrible malevolence. Her eyes fairly blazed into mine.

"Dog," she hissed. "Dog of a blasphemer! Think you that Phaidor, daughter of Matai Shang, supplicates? She commands. What to her is your puny outer world passion for the vile creature you chose in your other life?"

"Phaidor has glorified you with her love, and you have spurned her. Ten thousand unthinkably atrocious deaths could not atone for the affront that you have put upon me. The thing that you call Dejah Thoris shall die the most horrible of them all. You have sealed the warrant for her doom.

"And you! You shall be the meanest slave in the service of the goddess you have attempted to humiliate. Tortures and ignominies shall be heaped upon you until you grovel at my feet asking the boon of death.

"In my gracious generosity I shall at length grant your prayer, and from the high balcony of the Golden Cliffs I shall watch the great white apes tear you asunder."

She had it all fixed up. The whole lovely programme from start to finish. It amazed me to think that one so divinely beautiful could at the same time be so fiendishly vindictive. It occurred to me, however, that she had overlooked one little factor in her revenge, and so, without any intent to add to her discomfiture,

but rather to permit her to rearrange her plans along more practical lines, I pointed to the nearest port-hole.

Evidently she had entirely forgotten her surroundings and her present circumstances, for a single glance at the dark, swirling waters without sent her crumpled upon a low bench, where with her face buried in her arms she sobbed more like a very unhappy little girl than a proud and all-powerful goddess.

Down, down we continued to sink until the heavy glass of the port-holes became noticeably warm from the heat of the water without. Evidently we were very far beneath the surface crust of Mars.

Presently our downward motion ceased, and I could hear the propellers swirling through the water at our stern and forcing us ahead at high speed. It was very dark down there, but the light from our port-holes, and the reflection from what must have been a powerful searchlight on the submarine's nose showed that we were forging through a narrow passage, rock-lined, and tube-like.

After a few minutes the propellers ceased their whirring. We came to a full stop, and then commenced to rise swiftly toward the surface. Soon the light from without increased and we came to a stop.

Xodar entered the cabin with his men.

"Come," he said, and we followed him through the hatchway which had been opened by one of the seamen.

We found ourselves in a small subterranean vault, in the centre of which was the pool in which lay our submarine, floating as we had first seen her with only her black backshowing.

Around the edge of the pool was a level platform, and then the walls of the cave rose perpendicularly for a few feet to arch toward the centre of the low roof. The walls about the ledge were pierced with a number of entrances to dimly lighted passageways.

Toward one of these our captors led us, and after a short walk halted before a steel cage which lay at the bottom of a shaft rising above us as far as one could see.

The cage proved to be one of the common types of elevator cars that I had seen in other parts of Barsoom. They are operated by means of enormous magnets which are suspended at the top of the shaft. By an electrical device the volume of magnetism generated is regulated and the speed of the car varied.

In long stretches they move at a sickening speed, especially on the upward trip, since the small force of gravity inherent to Mars results in very little opposition to the powerful force above.

Scarcely had the door of the car closed behind us than we were slowing up to stop at the landing above, so rapid was our ascent of the long shaft.

When we emerged from the little building which houses the upper terminus of the elevator, we found ourselves in the midst of a veritable fairyland of beauty. The combined languages of Earth men hold no words to convey to the mind the gorgeous beauties of the scene.

One may speak of scarlet sward and ivory-stemmed trees decked with brilliant purple blooms; of winding walks paved with crushed rubies, with emerald, with turquoise, even with diamonds themselves; of a magnificent temple of burnished gold, hand-wrought with marvellous designs; but where are the words to describe the glorious colours that are unknown to earthly eyes? where the mind or the imagination that can grasp the gorgeous scintillations of unheard-of rays as they emanate from the thousand nameless jewels of Barsoom?

Even my eyes, for long years accustomed to the barbaric splendours of a Martian Jeddak's court, were amazed at the glory of the scene.

Phaidor's eyes were wide in amazement.

"The Temple of Issus," she whispered, half to herself.

Xodar watched us with his grim smile, partly of amusement and partly malicious gloating.

The gardens swarmed with brilliantly trapped black men and women. Among them moved red and white females serving their every want. The places of the outer world and the temples of the therns had been robbed of their princesses and goddesses that the blacks might have their slaves.

Through this scene we moved toward the temple. At the main entrance we were halted by a cordon of armed guards. Xodar spoke a few words to an officer who came forward to question us. Together they entered the temple, where they remained for some time.

When they returned it was to announce that Issus desired to look upon the daughter of Matai Shang, and the strange creature from another world who had been a Prince of Helium.

Slowly we moved through endless corridors of unthinkable beauty; through magnificent apartments, and noble halls. At length we were halted in a spacious chamber in the centre of the temple. One of the officers who had accompanied us advanced to a large door in the further end of the chamber. Here he must have made some sort of signal for immediately the door opened and another richly trapped courtier emerged.

We were then led up to the door, where we were directed to get down on our hands and knees with our backs toward the room we were to enter. The doors were swung open and after being cautioned not to turn our heads under penalty of instant death we were commanded to back into the presence of Issus.

Never have I been in so humiliating a position in my life, and only my love for Dejah Thoris and the hope which still clung to me that I might again see her kept me from rising to face the goddess of the First Born and go down to my death like a gentleman, facing my foes and with their blood mingling with mine.

After we had crawled in this disgusting fashion for a matter of a couple of hundred feet we were halted by our escort.

"Let them rise," said a voice behind us; a thin, wavering voice, yet one that had evidently been accustomed to command for many years.

"Rise," said our escort, "but do not face toward Issus."

"The woman pleases me," said the thin, wavering voice again after a few moments of silence. "She shall serve me the allotted time. The man you may return to the Isle of Shador which lies against the northern shore of the Sea of Omean. Let the woman turn and look upon Issus, knowing that those of the lower orders who gaze upon the holy vision of her radiant face survive the blinding glory but a single year."

I watched Phaidor from the corner of my eye. She paled to a ghastly hue. Slowly, very slowly she turned, as though drawn by some invisible yet irresistible force. She was standing quite close to me, so close that her bare arm touched mine as she finally faced Issus, Goddess of Life Eternal.

I could not see the girl's face as her eyes rested for the first time on the Supreme Deity of Mars, but felt the shudder that ran through her in the trembling flesh of the arm that touched mine.

"It must be dazzling loveliness indeed," thought I, "to cause such emotion in the breast of so radiant a beauty as Phaidor, daughter of Matai Shang."

"Let the woman remain. Remove the man. Go." Thus spoke Issus, and the heavy hand of the officer fell upon my shoulder. In accordance with his instructions I dropped to my hands and knees once more and crawled from the Presence. It had been my first audience with deity, but I am free to confess that I was not greatly impressed--other than with the ridiculous figure I cut scrambling about on my marrow bones.

Once without the chamber the doors closed behind us and I was bid to rise. Xodar joined me and together we slowly retraced our steps toward the gardens.

"You spared my life when you easily might have taken it," he said after we had proceeded some little way in silence, "and I would aid you if I might. I can help to make your life here more bearable, but your fate is inevitable. You may never hope to return to the outer world."

"What will be my fate?" I asked.

"That will depend largely upon Issus. So long as she does not send for you and reveal her face to you, you may live on for years in as mild a form of bondage as I can arrange for you."

"Why should she send for me?" I asked.

"The men of the lower orders she often uses for various purposes of amusement. Such a fighter as you, for example, would render fine sport in the monthly rites of the temple. There are men pitted against men, and against beasts for the edification of Issus and the replenishment of her larder."

"She eats human flesh?" I asked. Not in horror, however, for since my recently acquired knowledge of the Holy Therns I was prepared for anything in this still less accessible heaven, where all was evidently dictated by a single omnipotence; where ages of narrow fanaticism and self-worship had eradicated all the broader humanitarian instincts that the race might once have possessed.

They were a people drunk with power and success, looking upon the other inhabitants of Mars as we look upon the beasts of the field and the forest. Why then should they not eat of the flesh of the lower orders whose lives and characters they no more understood than do we the inmost thoughts and sensibilities of the cattle we slaughter for our earthly tables.

"She eats only the flesh of the best bred of the Holy Therns and the red Barsoomians. The flesh of the others goes to our boards. The animals are eaten by the slaves. She also eats other dainties."

I did not understand then that there lay any special significance in his reference to other dainties. I thought the limit of ghoulishness already had been reached in the recitation of Issus' menu. I still had much to learn as to the depths of cruelty and bestiality to which omnipotence may drag its possessor.

We had about reached the last of the many chambers and corridors which led to the gardens when an officer overtook us.

"Issus would look again upon this man," he said. "The girl has told her that he is of wondrous beauty and of such prowess that alone he slew seven of the First Born, and with his bare hands took Xodar captive, binding him with his own harness."

Xodar looked uncomfortable. Evidently he did not relish the thought that Issus had learned of his inglorious defeat.

Without a word he turned and we followed the officer once again to the closed doors before the audience chamber of Issus, Goddess of Life Eternal.

Here the ceremony of entrance was repeated. Again Issus bid me rise. For several minutes all was silent as the tomb. The eyes of deity were appraising me.

Presently the thin wavering voice broke the stillness, repeating in a singsong drone the words which for countless ages had sealed the doom of numberless victims.

"Let the man turn and look upon Issus, knowing that those of the lower orders who gaze upon the holy vision of her radiant face survive the blinding glory but a single year."

I turned as I had been bid, expecting such a treat as only the revelation of divine glory to mortal eyes might produce. What I saw was a solid phalanx of armed men between myself and a dais supporting a great bench of carved sorapus wood. On this bench, or throne, squatted a female black. She was evidently very old. Not a hair remained upon her wrinkled skull. With the exception of two yellow fangs she was entirely toothless. On either side of her thin, hawk-like nose her eyes burned from the depths of horribly sunken sockets. The skin of her face was seamed and creased with a million deepcut furrows. Her body was as wrinkled as her face, and as repulsive.

Emaciated arms and legs attached to a torso which seemed to be mostly distorted abdomen completed the "holy vision of her radiant beauty."

Surrounding her were a number of female slaves, among them Phaidor, white and trembling.

"This is the man who slew seven of the First Born and, bare-handed, bound Dator Xodar with his own harness?" asked Issus.

"Most glorious vision of divine loveliness, it is," replied the officer who stood at my side.

"Produce Dator Xodar," she commanded.

Xodar was brought from the adjoining room.

Issus glared at him, a baleful light in her hideous eyes.

"And such as you are a Dator of the First Born?" she squealed. "For the disgrace you have brought upon the Immortal Race you shall be degraded to a rank below the lowest. No longer be you a Dator, but for evermore a slave of slaves, to fetch and carry for the lower orders that serve in the gardens of Issus. Remove his harness. Cowards and slaves wear no trappings."

Xodar stood stiffly erect. Not a muscle twitched, nor a tremor shook his giant frame as a soldier of the guard roughly stripped his gorgeous trappings from him.

"Begone," screamed the infuriated little old woman. "Begone, but instead of the light of the gardens of Issus let you serve as a slave of this slave who conquered you in the prison on the Isle of Shador in the Sea of Omean. Take him away out of the sight of my divine eyes."

Slowly and with high held head the proud Xodar turned and stalked from the chamber. Issus rose and turned to leave the room by another exit.

Turning to me, she said: "You shall be returned to Shador for the present. Later Issus will see the manner of your fighting. Go." Then she disappeared, followed by her retinue. Only Phaidor lagged behind, and as I started to follow my guard toward the gardens, the girl came running after me.

"Oh, do not leave me in this terrible place," she begged. "Forgive the things I said to you, my Prince. I did not mean them. Only take me away with you. Let me share your imprisonment on Shador." Her words were an almost incoherent volley of thoughts, so rapidly she spoke. "You did not understand the honour that I did you. Among the therns there is no marriage or giving in marriage, as among the lower orders of the outer world. We might have lived together for ever in love and happiness. We have both looked upon Issus and in a year we die. Let us live that year at least together in what measure of joy remains for the doomed."

"If it was difficult for me to understand you, Phaidor," I replied, "can you not understand that possibly it is equally difficult for you to understand the motives,

the customs and the social laws that guide me? I do not wish to hurt you, nor to seem to undervalue the honour which you have done me, but the thing you desire may not be. Regardless of the foolish belief of the peoples of the outer world, or of Holy Thern, or ebon First Born, I am not dead. While I live my heart beats for but one woman--the incomparable Dejah Thoris, Princess of Helium. When death overtakes me my heart shall have ceased to beat; but what comes after that I know not. And in that I am as wise as Matai Shang, Master of Life and Death upon Barsoom; or Issus, Goddess of Life Eternal."

Phaidor stood looking at me intently for a moment. No anger showed in her eyes this time, only a pathetic expression of hopeless sorrow.

"I do not understand," she said, and turning walked slowly in the direction of the door through which Issus and her retinue had passed. A moment later she had passed from my sight.