

CHAPTER XII - TO SAVE DUSAR

Thuvia of Ptarth, battling for more than life against the lust of Jav, cast a quick glance over her shoulder toward the forest from which had rumbled the fierce growl. Jav looked, too.

What they saw filled each with apprehension. It was Komal, the banth-god, rushing wide-jawed upon them!

Which had he chosen for his prey? Or was it to be both?

They had not long to wait, for though the Lotharian attempted to hold the girl between himself and the terrible fangs, the great beast found him at last.

Then, shrieking, he attempted to fly toward Lothar, after pushing Thuvia bodily into the face of the man-eater. But his flight was of short duration. In a moment Komal was upon him, rending his throat and chest with demoniacal fury.

The girl reached their side a moment later, but it was with difficulty that she tore the mad beast from its prey. Still growling and casting hungry glances back upon Jav, the banth at last permitted itself to be led away into the wood.

With her giant protector by her side Thuvia set forth to find the passage through the cliffs, that she might attempt the seemingly impossible feat of reaching far-distant Ptarth across the more than seventeen thousand haads of savage Barsoom.

She could not believe that Carthoris had deliberately deserted her, and so she kept a constant watch for him; but as she bore too far to the north in her search for the tunnel she passed the Heliumite as he was returning to Lothar in search of her.

Thuvia of Ptarth was having difficulty in determining the exact status of the Prince of Helium in her heart. She could not admit even to herself that she loved him, and yet she had permitted him to apply to her that term of endearment and possession to which a Barsoomian maid should turn deaf ears when voiced by other lips than those of her husband or fiance--"my princess."

Kulan Tith, Jeddak of Kaol, to whom she was affianced, commanded her respect and admiration. Had it been that she had surrendered to her

father's wishes because of pique that the handsome Heliumite had not taken advantage of his visits to her father's court to push the suit for her hand that she had been quite sure he had contemplated since that distant day the two had sat together upon the carved seat within the gorgeous Garden of the Jeddaks that graced the inner courtyard of the palace of Salensus Oll at Kadabra?

Did she love Kulan Tith? Bravely she tried to believe that she did; but all the while her eyes wandered through the coming darkness for the figure of a clean-limbed fighting man--black-haired and grey-eyed. Black was the hair of Kulan Tith; but his eyes were brown.

It was almost dark when she found the entrance to the tunnel. Safely she passed through to the hills beyond, and here, under the bright light of Mars' two moons, she halted to plan her future action.

Should she wait here in the hope that Carthoris would return in search of her? Or should she continue her way north-east toward Ptarth? Where, first, would Carthoris have gone after leaving the valley of Lothar?

Her parched throat and dry tongue gave her the answer--toward Aanthor and water. Well, she, too, would go first to Aanthor, where she might find more than the water she needed.

With Komal by her side she felt little fear, for he would protect her from all other savage beasts. Even the great white apes would flee the mighty banth in terror. Men only need she fear, but she must take this and many other chances before she could hope to reach her father's court again.

When at last Carthoris found her, only to be struck down by the long-sword of a green man, Thuvia prayed that the same fate might overtake her.

The sight of the red warriors leaping from their fliers had, for a moment, filled her with renewed hope--hope that Carthoris of Helium might be only stunned and that they would rescue him; but when she saw the Dusarian metal upon their harness, and that they sought only to escape with her alone from the charging Torquasians, she gave up.

Komal, too, was dead--dead across the body of the Heliumite. She was, indeed, alone now. There was none to protect her.

The Dusarian warriors dragged her to the deck of the nearest flier. All about them the green warriors surged in an attempt to wrest her from the red.

At last those who had not died in the conflict gained the decks of the two craft. The engines throbbed and purred--the propellers whirred. Quickly the swift boats shot heavenward.

Thuvia of Ptarth glanced about her. A man stood near, smiling down into her face. With a gasp of recognition she looked full into his eyes, and then with a little moan of terror and understanding she buried her face in her hands and sank to the polished skeel-wood deck. It was Astok, Prince of Dusar, who bent above her.

Swift were the fliers of Astok of Dusar, and great the need for reaching his father's court as quickly as possible, for the fleets of war of Helium and Ptarth and Kaol were scattered far and wide above Barsoom. Nor would it go well with Astok of Dusar should any one of them discover Thuvia of Ptarth a prisoner upon his own vessel.

Aaanthor lies in fifty south latitude, and forty east of Horz, the deserted seat of ancient Barsoomian culture and learning, while Dusar lies fifteen degrees north of the equator and twenty degrees east from Horz.

Great though the distance is, the fliers covered it without a stop. Long before they had reached their destination Thuvia of Ptarth had learned several things that cleared up the doubts that had assailed her mind for many days. Scarce had they risen above Aaanthor than she recognized one of the crew as a member of the crew of that other flier that had borne her from her father's gardens to Aaanthor. The presence of Astok upon the craft settled the whole question. She had been stolen by emissaries of the Dusarian prince--Carthoris of Helium had had nothing to do with it.

Nor did Astok deny the charge when she accused him. He only smiled and pleaded his love for her.

"I would sooner mate with a white ape!" she cried, when he would have urged his suit.

Astok glowered sullenly upon her.

"You shall mate with me, Thuvia of Ptarth," he growled, "or, by your first ancestor, you shall have your preference--and mate with a white ape."

The girl made no reply, nor could he draw her into conversation during the balance of the journey.

As a matter of fact Astok was a trifle awed by the proportions of the conflict which his abduction of the Ptarthian princess had induced, nor was he over

comfortable with the weight of responsibility which the possession of such a prisoner entailed.

His one thought was to get her to Dusar, and there let his father assume the responsibility. In the meantime he would be as careful as possible to do nothing to affront her, lest they all might be captured and he have to account for his treatment of the girl to one of the great jeddaks whose interest centred in her.

And so at last they came to Dusar, where Astok hid his prisoner in a secret room high in the east tower of his own palace. He had sworn his men to silence in the matter of the identity of the girl, for until he had seen his father, Nutus, Jeddak of Dusar, he dared not let any one know whom he had brought with him from the south.

But when he appeared in the great audience chamber before the cruel-lipped man who was his sire, he found his courage oozing, and he dared not speak of the princess hid within his palace. It occurred to him to test his father's sentiments upon the subject, and so he told a tale of capturing one who claimed to know the whereabouts of Thuvia of Ptarth.

"And if you command it, Sire," he said, "I will go and capture her--fetching her here to Dusar."

Nutus frowned and shook his head.

"You have done enough already to set Ptarth and Kaol and Helium all three upon us at once should they learn your part in the theft of the Ptarth princess. That you succeeded in shifting the guilt upon the Prince of Helium was fortunate, and a masterly move of strategy; but were the girl to know the truth and ever return to her father's court, all Dusar would have to pay the penalty, and to have her here a prisoner amongst us would be an admission of guilt from the consequences of which naught could save us. It would cost me my throne, Astok, and that I have no mind to lose.

"If we had her here--" the elder man suddenly commenced to muse, repeating the phrase again and again. "If we had her here, Astok," he exclaimed fiercely. "Ah, if we but had her here and none knew that she was here! Can you not guess, man? The guilt of Dusar might be for ever buried with her bones," he concluded in a low, savage whisper.

Astok, Prince of Dusar, shuddered.

Weak he was; yes, and wicked, too; but the suggestion that his father's words implied turned him cold with horror.

Cruel to their enemies are the men of Mars; but the word "enemies" is commonly interpreted to mean men only. Assassination runs riot in the great Barsoomian cities; yet to murder a woman is a crime so unthinkable that even the most hardened of the paid assassins would shrink from you in horror should you suggest such a thing to him.

Nutus was apparently oblivious to his son's all-too-potent terror at his suggestion. Presently he continued:

"You say that you know where the girl lies hid, since she was stolen from your people at Aanthor. Should she be found by any one of the three powers, her unsupported story would be sufficient to turn them all against us.

"There is but one way, Astok," cried the older man. "You must return at once to her hiding-place and fetch her hither in all secrecy. And, look you here! Return not to Dusar without her, upon pain of death!"

Astok, Prince of Dusar, well knew his royal father's temper. He knew that in the tyrant's heart there pulsed no single throb of love for any creature.

Astok's mother had been a slave woman. Nutus had never loved her. He had never loved another. In youth he had tried to find a bride at the courts of several of his powerful neighbours, but their women would have none of him.

After a dozen daughters of his own nobility had sought self-destruction rather than wed him he had given up. And then it had been that he had legally wed one of his slaves that he might have a son to stand among the jeds when Nutus died and a new jeddak was chosen.

Slowly Astok withdrew from the presence of his father. With white face and shaking limbs he made his way to his own palace. As he crossed the courtyard his glance chanced to wander to the great east tower looming high against the azure of the sky.

At sight of it beads of sweat broke out upon his brow.

Issus! No other hand than his could be trusted to do the horrid thing. With his own fingers he must crush the life from that perfect throat, or plunge the silent blade into the red, red heart.

Her heart! The heart that he had hoped would brim with love for him!

But had it done so? He recalled the haughty contempt with which his protestations of love had been received. He went cold and then hot to the memory of it. His compunctions cooled as the self-satisfaction of a near revenge crowded out the finer instincts that had for a moment asserted themselves--the good that he had inherited from the slave woman was once again submerged in the bad blood that had come down to him from his royal sire; as, in the end, it always was.

A cold smile supplanted the terror that had dilated his eyes. He turned his steps toward the tower. He would see her before he set out upon the journey that was to blind his father to the fact that the girl was already in Dusar.

Quietly he passed in through the secret way, ascending a spiral runway to the apartment in which the Princess of Ptarth was immured.

As he entered the room he saw the girl leaning upon the sill of the east casement, gazing out across the roof tops of Dusar toward distant Ptarth. He hated Ptarth. The thought of it filled him with rage. Why not finish her now and have it done with?

At the sound of his step she turned quickly toward him. Ah, how beautiful she was! His sudden determination faded beneath the glorious light of her wondrous beauty. He would wait until he had returned from his little journey of deception--maybe there might be some other way then. Some other hand to strike the blow--with that face, with those eyes before him, he could never do it. Of that he was positive. He had always gloried in the cruelty of his nature, but, Issus! he was not that cruel. No, another must be found--one whom he could trust.

He was still looking at her as she stood there before him meeting his gaze steadily and unafraid. He felt the hot passion of his love mounting higher and higher.

Why not sue once more? If she would relent, all might yet be well. Even if his father could not be persuaded, they could fly to Ptarth, laying all the blame of the knavery and intrigue that had thrown four great nations into war, upon the shoulders of Nutus. And who was there that would doubt the justice of the charge?

"Thuvia," he said, "I come once again, for the last time, to lay my heart at your feet. Ptarth and Kaol and Dusar are battling with Helium because of you. Wed me, Thuvia, and all may yet be as it should be."

The girl shook her head.

"Wait!" he commanded, before she could speak. "Know the truth before you speak words that may seal, not only your own fate, but that of the thousands of warriors who battle because of you.

"Refuse to wed me willingly, and Dusar would be laid waste should ever the truth be known to Ptarth and Kaol and Helium. They would raze our cities, leaving not one stone upon another. They would scatter our peoples across the face of Barsoom from the frozen north to the frozen south, hunting them down and slaying them, until this great nation remained only as a hated memory in the minds of men.

"But while they are exterminating the Dusarians, countless thousands of their own warriors must perish--and all because of the stubbornness of a single woman who would not wed the prince who loves her.

"Refuse, Thuvia of Ptarth, and there remains but a single alternative--no man must ever know your fate. Only a handful of loyal servitors besides my royal father and myself know that you were stolen from the gardens of Thuvan Dihn by Astok, Prince of Dusar, or that to-day you be imprisoned in my palace.

"Refuse, Thuvia of Ptarth, and you must die to save Dusar--there is no other way. Nutus, the jeddak, has so decreed. I have spoken."

For a long moment the girl let her level gaze rest full upon the face of Astok of Dusar. Then she spoke, and though the words were few, the unimpassioned tone carried unfathomable depths of cold contempt.

"Better all that you have threatened," she said, "than you."

Then she turned her back upon him and went to stand once more before the east window, gazing with sad eyes toward distant Ptarth.

Astok wheeled and left the room, returning after a short interval of time with food and drink.

"Here," he said, "is sustenance until I return again. The next to enter this apartment will be your executioner. Commend yourself to your ancestors, Thuvia of Ptarth, for within a few days you shall be with them."

Then he was gone.

Half an hour later he was interviewing an officer high in the navy of Dusar.

"Whither went Vas Kor?" he asked. "He is not at his palace."

"South, to the great waterway that skirts Torquas," replied the other. "His son, Hal Vas, is Dwar of the Road there, and thither has Vas Kor gone to enlist recruits among the workers on the farms."

"Good," said Astok, and a half-hour more found him rising above Dusar in his swiftest flier.