

CHAPTER IX - ADRIFT OVER STRANGE REGIONS

Presently Ghek pushed aside a door that opened from the stairway, and before them Tara saw the moonlight flooding the walled court where the headless rykors lay beside their feeding-troughs. She saw the perfect bodies, muscled as the best of her father's fighting men, and the females whose figures would have been the envy of many of Helium's most beautiful women. Ah, if she could but endow these with the power to act! Then indeed might the safety of the panthan be assured; but they were only poor lumps of clay, nor had she the power to quicken them to life. Ever must they lie thus until dominated by the cold, heartless brain of the kaldane. The girl sighed in pity even as she shuddered in disgust as she picked her way over and among the sprawled creatures toward the flier.

Quickly she and Ghek mounted to the deck after the latter had cast off the moorings. Tara tested the control, raising and lowering the ship a few feet within the walled space. It responded perfectly. Then she lowered it to the ground again and waited. From the open doorway came the sounds of conflict, now nearing them, now receding. The girl, having witnessed her champion's skill, had little fear of the outcome. Only a single antagonist could face him at a time upon the narrow stairway, he had the advantage of position and of the defensive, and he was a master of the sword while they were clumsy bunglers by comparison. Their sole advantage was in their numbers, unless they might find a way to come upon him from behind.

She paled at the thought. Could she have seen him she might have been further perturbed, for he took no advantage of many opportunities to win nearer the enclosure. He fought coolly, but with a savage persistence that bore little semblance to purely defensive action. Often he clambered over the body of a fallen foe to leap against the next behind, and once there lay five dead kaldanes behind him, so far had he pushed back his antagonists. They did not know it; these kaldanes that he fought, nor did the girl awaiting him upon the flier, but Gahan of Gathol was engaged in a more alluring sport than winning to freedom, for he was avenging the indignities that had been put upon the woman he loved; but presently he realized that he might be jeopardizing her safety uselessly, and so he struck down another before him and turning leaped quickly up the stairway, while the leading kaldanes slipped upon the brain-covered floor and stumbled in pursuit.

Gahan reached the enclosure twenty paces ahead of them and raced toward the flier. "Rise!" he shouted to the girl. "I will ascend the cable."

Slowly the small craft rose from the ground as Gahan leaped the inert bodies of the rykors lying in his path. The first of the pursuers sprang from the tower just as Gahan seized the trailing rope.

"Faster!" he shouted to the girl above, "or they will drag us down!" But the ship seemed scarcely to move, though in reality she was rising as rapidly as might have been expected of a one-man flier carrying a load of three. Gahan swung free above the top of the wall, but the end of the rope still dragged the ground as the kaldanes reached it. They were pouring in a steady stream from the tower into the enclosure. The leader seized the rope.

"Quick!" he cried. "Lay hold and we will drag them down."

It needed but the weight of a few to accomplish his design. The ship was stopped in its flight and then, to the horror of the girl, she felt it being dragged steadily downward. Gahan, too, realized the danger and the necessity for instant action. Clinging to the rope with his left hand, he had wound a leg about it, leaving his right hand free for his long-sword which he had not sheathed. A downward cut clove the soft head of a kaldane, and another severed the taut rope beneath the panthan's feet. The girl heard a sudden renewal of the shrill whistling of her foes, and at the same time she realized that the craft was rising again. Slowly it drifted upward, out of reach of the enemy, and a moment later she saw the figure of Turan clamber over the side. For the first time in many weeks her heart was filled with the joy of thanksgiving; but her first thought was of another.

"You are not wounded?" she asked.

"No, Tara of Helium," he replied. "They were scarce worth the effort of my blade, and never were they a menace to me because of their swords."

"They should have slain you easily," said Ghek. "So great and highly developed is the power of reason among us that they should have known before you struck just where, logically, you must seek to strike, and so they should have been able to parry your every thrust and easily find an opening to your heart."

"But they did not, Ghek," Gahan reminded him. "Their theory of development is wrong, for it does not tend toward a perfectly balanced whole. You have developed the brain and neglected the body and you can never do with the hands of another what you can do with your own hands. Mine are trained to the sword--every muscle responds instantly and accurately, and almost mechanically, to the need of the instant. I am scarcely objectively aware that I think when I fight, so quickly does my point take advantage of every opening, or spring to my defense if I am threatened that it is almost as though the cold steel had eyes and brains. You, with your kaldane brain and your rykor body, never could hope to achieve in the

same degree of perfection those things that I can achieve. Development of the brain should not be the sum total of human endeavor. The richest and happiest peoples will be those who attain closest to well-balanced perfection of both mind and body, and even these must always be short of perfection. In absolute and general perfection lies stifling monotony and death. Nature must have contrasts; she must have shadows as well as highlights; sorrow with happiness; both wrong and right; and sin as well as virtue."

"Always have I been taught differently," replied Ghek; "but since I have known this woman and you, of another race, I have come to believe that there may be other standards fully as high and desirable as those of the kaldanes. At least I have had a glimpse of the thing you call happiness and I realize that it may be good even though I have no means of expressing it. I cannot laugh nor smile, and yet within me is a sense of contentment when this woman sings--a sense that seems to open before me wondrous vistas of beauty and unguessed pleasure that far transcend the cold joys of a perfectly functioning brain. I would that I had been born of thy race."

Caught by a gentle current of air the flier was drifting slowly toward the northeast across the valley of Bantoom. Below them lay the cultivated fields, and one after another they passed over the strange towers of Moak and Nolach and the other kings of the swarms that inhabited this weird and terrible land. Within each enclosure surrounding the towers grovelled the rykors, repellent, headless things, beautiful yet hideous.

"A lesson, those," remarked Gahan, indicating the rykors in an enclosure above which they were drifting at the time, "to that fortunately small minority of our race which worships the flesh and makes a god of appetite. You know them, Tara of Helium; they can tell you exactly what they had at the midday meal two weeks ago, and how the loin of the thoat should be prepared, and what drink should be served with the rump of the zitidar."

Tara of Helium laughed. "But not one of them could tell you the name of the man whose painting took the Jeddak's Award in The Temple of Beauty this year," she said. "Like the rykors, their development has not been balanced."

"Fortunate indeed are those in which there is combined a little good and a little bad, a little knowledge of many things outside their own callings, a capacity for love and a capacity for hate, for such as these can look with tolerance upon all, unbiased by the egotism of him whose head is so heavy on one side that all his brains run to that point."

As Gahan ceased speaking Ghek made a little noise in his throat as one does who would attract attention. "You speak as one who has thought much upon many subjects. Is it, then, possible that you of the red race have pleasure in thought? Do you know aught of the joys of introspection? Do reason and logic form any part of your lives?"

"Most assuredly," replied Gahan, "but not to the extent of occupying all our time-- at least not objectively. You, Ghek, are an example of the egotism of which I spoke. Because you and your kind devote your lives to the worship of mind, you believe that no other created beings think. And possibly we do not in the sense that you do, who think only of yourselves and your great brains. We think of many things that concern the welfare of a world. Had it not been for the red men of Barsoom even the kaldanes had perished from the planet, for while you may live without air the things upon which you depend for existence cannot, and there had been no air in sufficient quantities upon Barsoom these many ages had not a red man planned and built the great atmosphere plant which gave new life to a dying world.

"What have all the brains of all the kaldanes that have ever lived done to compare with that single idea of a single red man?"

Ghek was stumped. Being a kaldane he knew that brains spelled the sum total of universal achievement, but it had never occurred to him that they should be put to use in practical and profitable ways. He turned away and looked down upon the valley of his ancestors across which he was slowly drifting, into what unknown world? He should be a veritable god among the underlings, he knew; but somehow a doubt assailed him. It was evident that these two from that other world were ready to question his preeminence. Even through his great egotism was filtering a suspicion that they patronized him; perhaps even pitied him. Then he began to wonder what was to become of him. No longer would he have many rykors to do his bidding. Only this single one and when it died there could not be another. When it tired, Ghek must lie almost helpless while it rested. He wished that he had never seen this red woman. She had brought him only discontent and dishonor and now exile. Presently Tara of Helium commenced to hum a tune and Ghek, the kaldane, was content.

Gently they drifted beneath the hurtling moons above the mad shadows of a Martian night. The roaring of the banths came in diminishing volume to their ears as their craft passed on beyond the boundaries of Bantoom, leaving behind the terrors of that unhappy land. But to what were they being borne? The girl looked at the man sitting cross-legged upon the deck of the tiny flier, gazing off into the night ahead, apparently absorbed in thought.

"Where are we?" she asked. "Toward what are we drifting?"

Turan shrugged his broad shoulders. "The stars tell me that we are drifting toward the northeast," he replied, "but where we are, or what lies in our path I cannot even guess. A week since I could have sworn that I knew what lay behind each succeeding ridge that I approached; but now I admit in all humility that I have no conception of what lies a mile in any direction. Tara of Helium, I am lost, and that is all that I can tell you."

He was smiling and the girl smiled back at him. There was a slightly puzzled expression on her face--there was something tantalizingly familiar about that smile of his. She had met many a panthan--they came and went, following the fighting of a world--but she could not place this one.

"From what country are you, Turan?" she asked suddenly.

"Know you not, Tara of Helium," he countered, "that a panthan has no country? Today he fights beneath the banner of one master, tomorrow beneath that of another."

"But you must own allegiance to some country when you are not fighting," she insisted. "What banner, then, owns you now?"

He rose and stood before her, then, bowing low. "And I am acceptable," he said, "I serve beneath the banner of the daughter of The Warlord now--and forever."

She reached forth and touched his arm with a slim brown hand. "Your services are accepted," she said; "and if ever we reach Helium I promise that your reward shall be all that your heart could desire."

"I shall serve faithfully, hoping for that reward," he said; but Tara of Helium did not guess what was in his mind, thinking rather that he was mercenary. For how could the proud daughter of The Warlord guess that a simple panthan aspired to her hand and heart?

The dawn found them moving rapidly over an unfamiliar landscape. The wind had increased during the night and had borne them far from Bantoom. The country below them was rough and inhospitable. No water was visible and the surface of the ground was cut by deep gorges, while nowhere was any but the most meager vegetation discernible. They saw no life of any nature, nor was there any indication that the country could support life. For two days they drifted over this horrid wasteland. They were without food or water and suffered accordingly. Ghek had temporarily abandoned his rykor after enlisting Turan's assistance in lashing it safely to the deck. The less he used it the less would its vitality be

spent. Already it was showing the effects of privation. Ghek crawled about the vessel like a great spider--over the side, down beneath the keel, and up over the opposite rail. He seemed equally at home one place as another. For his companions, however, the quarters were cramped, for the deck of a one-man flier is not intended for three.

Turan sought always ahead for signs of water. Water they must have, or that water-giving plant which makes life possible upon many of the seemingly arid areas of Mars; but there was neither the one nor the other for these two days and now the third night was upon them. The girl did not complain, but Turan knew that she must be suffering and his heart was heavy within him. Ghek suffered least of all, and he explained to them that his kind could exist for long periods without food or water. Turan almost cursed him as he saw the form of Tara of Helium slowly wasting away before his eyes, while the hideous kaldane seemed as full of vitality as ever.

"There are circumstances," remarked Ghek, "under which a gross and material body is less desirable than a highly developed brain."

Turan looked at him, but said nothing. Tara of Helium smiled faintly. "One cannot blame him," she said, "were we not a bit boastful in the pride of our superiority? When our stomachs were filled," she added.

"Perhaps there is something to be said for their system," Turan admitted. "If we could but lay aside our stomachs when they cried for food and water I have no doubt but that we should do so."

"I should never miss mine now," assented Tara; "it is mighty poor company."

A new day had dawned, revealing a less desolate country and renewing again the hope that had been low within them. Suddenly Turan leaned forward, pointing ahead.

"Look, Tara of Helium!" he cried. "A city! As I am Ga--as I am Turan the panthan, a city."

Far in the distance the domes and walls and slender towers of a city shone in the rising sun. Quickly the man seized the control and the ship dropped rapidly behind a low range of intervening hills, for well Turan knew that they must not be seen until they could discover whether friend or foe inhabited the strange city. Chances were that they were far from the abode of friends and so must the panthan move with the utmost caution; but there was a city and where a city was, was water, even though it were a deserted city, and food if it were inhabited.

To the red man food and water, even in the citadel of an enemy, meant food and drink for Tara of Helium. He would accept it from friends or he would take it from enemies. Just so long as it was there he would have it--and there was shown the egotism of the fighting man, though Turan did not see it, nor Tara who came from a long line of fighting men; but Ghek might have smiled had he known how.

Turan permitted the flier to drift closer behind the screening hills, and then when he could advance no farther without fear of discovery, he dropped the craft gently to ground in a little ravine, and leaping over the side made her fast to a stout tree. For several moments they discussed their plans--whether it would be best to wait where they were until darkness hid their movements and then approach the city in search of food and water, or approach it now, taking advantage of what cover they could, until they could glean something of the nature of its inhabitants.

It was Turan's plan which finally prevailed. They would approach as close as safety dictated in the hope of finding water outside the city; food, too, perhaps. If they did not they could at least reconnoiter the ground by daylight, and then when night came Turan could quickly come close to the city and in comparative safety prosecute his search for food and drink.

Following the ravine upward they finally topped the summit of the ridge, from which they had an excellent view of that part of the city which lay nearest them, though themselves hidden by the brush behind which they crouched. Ghek had resumed his rykor, which had suffered less than either Tara or Turan through their enforced fast.

The first glance at the city, now much closer than when they had first discovered it, revealed the fact that it was inhabited. Banners and pennons broke from many a staff. People were moving about the gate before them. The high white walls were paced by sentinels at far intervals. Upon the roofs of higher buildings the women could be seen airing the sleeping silks and furs. Turan watched it all in silence for some time.

"I do not know them," he said at last. "I cannot guess what city this may be. But it is an ancient city. Its people have no fliers and no firearms. It must be old indeed."

"How do you know they have not these things?" asked the girl.

"There are no landing-stages upon the roofs--not one that can be seen from here; while were we looking similarly at Helium we would see hundreds. And they have no firearms because their defenses are all built to withstand the attack of spear and arrow, with spear and arrow. They are an ancient people."

"If they are ancient perhaps they are friendly," suggested the girl. "Did we not learn as children in the history of our planet that it was once peopled by a friendly, peace-loving race?"

"But I fear they are not as ancient as that," replied Turan, laughing. "It has been long ages since the men of Barsoom loved peace."

"My father loves peace," returned the girl.

"And yet he is always at war," said the man.

She laughed. "But he says he likes peace."

"We all like peace," he rejoined; "peace with honor; but our neighbors will not let us have it, and so we must fight."

"And to fight well men must like to fight," she added.

"And to like to fight they must know how to fight," he said, "for no man likes to do the thing that he does not know how to do well."

"Or that some other man can do better than he."

"And so always there will be wars and men will fight," he concluded, "for always the men with hot blood in their veins will practice the art of war."

"We have settled a great question," said the girl, smiling; "but our stomachs are still empty."

"Your panthan is neglecting his duty," replied Turan; "and how can he with the great reward always before his eyes!"

She did not guess in what literal a sense he spoke.

"I go forthwith," he continued, "to wrest food and drink from the ancients."

"No," she cried, laying a hand upon his arm, "not yet. They would slay you or make you prisoner. You are a brave panthan and a mighty one, but you cannot overcome a city singlehanded."

She smiled up into his face and her hand still lay upon his arm. He felt the thrill of hot blood coursing through his veins. He could have seized her in his arms and crushed her to him. There was only Ghek the kaldane there, but there was something stronger within him that restrained his hand. Who may define it--that inherent chivalry that renders certain men the natural protectors of women?

From their vantage point they saw a body of armed warriors ride forth from the gate, and winding along a well-beaten road pass from sight about the foot of the hill from which they watched. The men were red, like themselves, and they rode the small saddle thoats of the red race. Their trappings were barbaric and magnificent, and in their head-dress were many feathers as had been the custom of ancients. They were armed with swords and long spears and they rode almost naked, their bodies being painted in ochre and blue and white. There were, perhaps, a score of them in the party and as they galloped away on their tireless mounts they presented a picture at once savage and beautiful.

"They have the appearance of splendid warriors," said Turan. "I have a great mind to walk boldly into their city and seek service."

Tara shook her head. "Wait," she admonished. "What would I do without you, and if you were captured how could you collect your reward?"

"I should escape," he said. "At any rate I shall try it," and he started to rise.

"You shall not," said the girl, her tone all authority.

The man looked at her quickly--questioningly.

"You have entered my service," she said, a trifle haughtily.

"You have entered my service for hire and you shall do as I bid you."

Turan sank down beside her again with a half smile upon his lips. "It is yours to command, Princess," he said.

The day passed. Ghek, tiring of the sunlight, had deserted his rykor and crawled down a hole he had discovered close by. Tara and Turan reclined beneath the scant shade of a small tree. They watched the people coming and going through the gate. The party of horsemen did not return. A small herd of zitidars was driven into the city during the day, and once a caravan of broad-wheeled carts drawn by these huge animals wound out of the distant horizon and came down to the city. It, too, passed from their sight within the gateway. Then darkness came and Tara of Helium bid her panthan search for food and drink; but she cautioned him against attempting to enter the city. Before he left her he bent and kissed her hand as a warrior may kiss the hand of his queen.