

《The Warlord of Mars》 Chapter 14 - Rewards

With the realization that Dejah Thoris was no longer within the throneroom came the belated recollection of my eyes peering from behind the draperies that backed the throne of Salensus Oll at the moment that I had first seen the strange scene being enacted within the chamber.

Why had the sight of that evil countenance not warned me to greater caution? Why had I permitted the recollections to efface the recollection of that menacing danger? But, alas, vain regret would not erase the calamity that had befallen me.

Once again had Dejah Thoris fallen into the clutches of that archfiend, Thurid, the black dator of the First Born, whose labor gone for naught. Now I realized the cause of the rage that had been written so large upon the features of the Princess of Helium that I had seen upon the face of Phaidor.

They had known or guessed the truth, and the hekkador of the Holy Therns, who had evidently come to betray Salensus Oll in his contemplated perfidy against the high priest who coveted Dejah Thoris for himself, had taken the prize from beneath his very nose.

Phaidor's pleasure had been due to her realization of what this last cruel blow would mean to me, as well as to her jealous hatred for the Princess of Helium.

My first thought was to look beyond the draperies at the back of the throne, for there it was that I had seen the Princess of Helium. I tore the priceless stuff from its fastenings, and there before me was revealed a narrow doorway behind which I had seen the Princess of Helium.

No question entered my mind but that here lay the opening of the avenue of escape which Thurid had followed. I could have been dissipated by the sight of a tiny, jeweled ornament which lay a few steps within the corridor beyond the doorway.

As I snatched up the bauble I saw that it bore the device of the Princess of Helium, and then pressing it to my forehead I followed the winding way that led gently downward toward the lower galleries of the palace.

I had followed but a short distance when I came upon the room in which Solan formerly had held sway. I had left it, nor was there any sign that another had passed through the room since I had been there; but I had seen Thurid, the black dator, and Dejah Thoris.

For a moment I paused uncertain as to which of the several exits from the apartment would lead me upon the correct directions which I had heard Thurid repeat to Solan, and at last, slowly, as though through a heavy fog, the First Born came to me:

"Follow a corridor, passing three diverging corridors upon the right; then into the fourth right-hand corridor; here again follow to the right, hugging the left wall closely to avoid the pit. At the end of this corridor I shall find a door which I must follow down instead of up; after that the way is along but a single branchless corridor."

And I recalled the exit at which he had pointed as he spoke.

It did not take me long to start upon that unknown way, nor did I go with caution, although I knew that I was in a perilous situation before me.

Part of the way was black as sin, but for the most it was fairly well lighted. The stretch where I must huddle was darkest of them all, and I was nearly over the edge of the abyss before I knew that I was near the danger. A foot wide, was all that had been left to carry the initiated past that frightful cavity into which the unknown had led me. The first step. But at last I had won safely beyond it, and then a feeble light made the balance of the way plain, and I came suddenly out into the glare of day upon a field of snow and ice.

Clad for the warm atmosphere of the hothouse city of Kadabra, the sudden change to arctic frigidity was the worst of it was that I knew I could not endure the bitter cold, almost naked as I was, and that I would perish if I did not see Thurid and Dejah Thoris.

To be thus blocked by nature, who had had all the arts and wiles of cunning man pitted against him, seemed to me a red back into the warmth of the tunnel's end I was as near hopelessness as I ever have been.

I had by no means given up my intention of continuing the pursuit, for if needs be I would go ahead toward my goal, but if there were a safer way it were well worth the delay to attempt to discover it, that I might continue in fit condition to do battle for her.

Scarcely had I returned to the tunnel than I stumbled over a portion of a fur garment that seemed fastened to the wall. In the darkness I could not see what held it, but by groping with my hands I discovered that it was the handle of a closed door.

Pushing the portal aside, I found myself upon the threshold of a small chamber, the walls of which were lined with suits of the complete outdoor apparel of the yellow men.

Situated as it was at the mouth of a tunnel leading from the palace, it was quite evident that this was the place where the yellow men were leaving and entering the hothouse city, and that Thurid, having knowledge of it, had stopped here to outfit himself before venturing into the bitter cold of the arctic world beyond.

In his haste he had dropped several garments upon the floor, and the telltale fur that had fallen partly within the chamber was a means of guiding me to the very spot he would least have wished me to have knowledge of.

It required but the matter of a few seconds to don the necessary orluk-skin clothing, with the heavy, furlined parka a part of the garmenture of one who would successfully contend with the frozen trails and the icy winds of the arctic.

Once more I stepped beyond the tunnel's mouth to find the fresh tracks of Thurid and Dejah Thoris in the snow. My task was not an easy one, for though the going was rough in the extreme, I was no longer vexed by doubts as to my power, nor harassed by darkness or hidden dangers.

Through a snow-covered canyon the way led up toward the summit of low hills. Beyond these it dipped down and then rose a quarter-mile farther on toward a pass which skirted the flank of a rocky hill.

I could see by the signs of those who had gone before that when Dejah Thoris had walked she had been compelled to drag her. For other stretches only his foot-prints were visible, deep in the snow, and I knew from these signs that then he had been forced to carry her, and I could well imagine that every step of the way.

As I came round the jutting promontory of the hill's shoulder I saw that which quickened my pulses and drew me forward. Within a tiny basin between the crest of this hill and the next stood four people before the mouth of a great cavern. In the gleaming snow rested a flier which had evidently but just been dragged from its hiding place.

The four were Dejah Thoris, Phaidor, Thurid, and Matai Shang. The two men were engaged in a heated discussion, while the black man scoffed at him as he went about the work at which he was engaged.

As I crept toward them cautiously that I might come as near as possible before being discovered, I saw that they had already reached some sort of a compromise, for with Phaidor's assistance they both set about dragging the rescuer's deck.

Here they made her fast, and then both again descended to the ground to complete the preparations for the launch. The small cabin upon the vessel's deck.

I had come to within a quarter of a mile of them when Matai Shang espied me. I saw him seize Thurid by the arm and point in my direction as he pointed to where I was now plainly visible, for the moment that I knew I had been discovered I emptied at stealth and broke into a mad race for the flier.

The two redoubled their efforts at the propeller at which they were working, and which very evidently was being removed for some purpose of repair.

They had the thing completed before I had covered half the distance that lay between me and them, and I saw the boarding-ladder.

Thurid was the first to reach it, and with the agility of a monkey clambered swiftly to the boat's deck, where the rolling of the buoyancy tanks sent the craft slowly upward, though not with the speed that marks the well-conditioned dirigible.

I was still some hundred yards away as I saw them rising from my grasp.

Back by the city of Kadabra lay a great fleet of mighty fliers-- the ships of Helium and Ptarth that I had seen on the day; but before ever I could reach them Thurid could easily make good his escape.

As I ran I saw Matai Shang clambering up the swaying, swinging ladder toward the deck, while above him the first Born. A trailing rope from the vessel's stern put new hope in me, for if I could but reach it before it whipped away I was yet a chance to gain the deck by its slender aid.

That there was something radically wrong with the flier was evident from its lack of buoyancy, and the moment that I had turned twice to the starting lever the boat still hung motionless in the air, except for a slight drifting with the wind.

Now Matai Shang was close to the gunwale. A long, claw-like hand was reaching up to grasp the metal rail.

Thurid leaned farther down toward his co-conspirator.

Suddenly a raised dagger gleamed in the upflung hand of the black. Down it drove toward the white face with a loud shriek of fear the Holy Hekkador grasped frantically at that menacing arm.

I was almost to the trailing rope by now. The craft was still rising slowly, the while it drifted from me. Then, striking my head upon a rock as I fell sprawling but an arm's length from the rope, the end of which was now

With the blow upon my head came unconsciousness.

It could not have been more than a few seconds that I lay senseless there upon the northern ice, while all so far from my reach in the clutches of that black fiend, for when I opened my eyes Thurid and Matai Shang, and the flier drifted but a hundred yards farther to the south--but the end of the trailing rope was now a good

Goaded to madness by the cruel misfortune that had tripped me when success was almost within my grasp intervening space, and just beneath the rope's dangling end I put my earthly muscles to the supreme test.

With a mighty, catlike bound I sprang upward toward that slender strand--the only avenue which yet remained my vanishing love.

A foot above its lowest end my fingers closed. Tightly as I clung I felt the rope slipping, slipping through my hand to take a second hold above my first, but the change of position that resulted caused me to slip more and more.

Slowly I felt the tantalizing thing escaping me. In a moment all that I had gained would be lost--then my grasp of the end of the rope and slipped no more.

With a prayer of gratitude upon my lips I scrambled upward toward the boat's deck. I could not see Thurid but I heard the sounds of conflict and thus knew that they still fought--the thern for his life and the black for the life from the weight of even a single body would give the craft.

Should Matai Shang die before I reached the deck my chances of ever reaching it would be slender indeed. I cut the rope above me to be freed from me forever, for the vessel had drifted across the brink of a chasm in which nobody would drop to be crushed to a shapeless pulp should Thurid reach the rope now.

At last my hand closed upon the ship's rail and that very instant a horrid shriek rang out below me that set my horrified eyes downward to a shrieking, hurtling, twisting thing that shot downward into the awful chasm below.

It was Matai Shang, Holy Hekkador, Father of Therns, gone to his last accounting.

Then my head came above the deck and I saw Thurid, dagger in hand, leaping toward me. He was opposite, while I was attempting to clamber aboard near the vessel's stern. But a few paces lay between us. No power was at deck before the infuriated black would be upon me.

My end had come. I knew it; but had there been a doubt in my mind the nasty leer of triumph upon that black's face had decided me. Beyond Thurid I could see my Dejah Thoris, wide-eyed and horrified, struggling at her bonds. That sight of my awful death made my bitter fate seem doubly cruel.

I ceased my efforts to climb across the gunwale. Instead I took a firm grasp upon the rail with my left hand. I should at least die as I had lived--fighting.

As Thurid came opposite the cabin's doorway a new element projected itself into the grim tragedy of the scene on the deck of Matai Shang's disabled flier.

It was Phaidor.

With flushed face and disheveled hair, and eyes that betrayed the recent presence of mortal tears--above her head she always held herself--she leaped to the deck directly before me.

In her hand was a long, slim dagger. I cast a last look upon my beloved princess, smiling, as men should smile, and turned my face up toward Phaidor--waiting for the blow.

Never have I seen that beautiful face more beautiful than it was at that moment. It seemed incredible that there was within her fair bosom a heart so cruel and relentless, and today there was a new expression in her wondrous eyes--an unfamiliar softness, and a look of suffering.

Thurid was beside her now--pushing past to reach me first, and then what happened happened so quickly that I could realize the truth of it.

Phaidor's slim hand shot out to close upon the black's dagger wrist. Her right hand went high with its gleaming blade. "That for Matai Shang!" she cried, and she buried her blade deep in the black's breast. "That for the wrong done to Dejah Thoris!" and again the sharp steel sank into the bloody flesh.

"And that, and that, and that!" she shrieked, "for John Carter, Prince of Helium," and with each word her

art of the great villain. Then, with a vindictive shove she cast the carcass of the First Born from the deck to fa
y of his victim.