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Chapter 21 - Through Flood and Flame

Yersted's information convinced me that there was no time to be lost. I must reach the Temple of Issus secretly before the forces under Tars Tarkas assaulted at dawn. Once within its hated walls I was positive that I could overcome the guards of Issus and bear away my Princess, for at my back I would have a force ample for the occasion.

No sooner had Carthoris and the others joined me than we commenced the transportation of our men through the submerged passage to the mouth of the gangways which lead from the submarine pool at the temple end of the watery tunnel to the pits of Issus.

Many trips were required, but at last all stood safely together again at the beginning of the end of our quest. Five thousand strong we were, all seasoned fighting-men of the most warlike race of the red men of Barsoom.

As Carthoris alone knew the hidden ways of the tunnels we could not divide the party and attack the temple at several points at once as would have been most desirable, and so it was decided that he lead us all as quickly as possible to a point near the temple's centre.

As we were about to leave the pool and enter the corridor, an officer called my attention to the waters upon which the submarine floated. At first they seemed to be merely agitated as from the movement of some great body beneath the surface, and I at once conjectured that another submarine was rising to the surface in pursuit of us; but presently it became apparent that the level of the waters was rising, not with extreme rapidity, but very surely, and that soon they would overflow the sides of the pool and submerge the floor of the chamber.

For a moment I did not fully grasp the terrible import of the slowly rising water. It was Carthoris who realized the full meaning of the thing--its cause and the reason for it.

"Haste!" he cried. "If we delay, we all are lost. The pumps of Omean have been stopped. They would drown us like rats in a trap. We must reach the upper levels of the pits in advance of the flood or we shall never reach them. Come."

"Lead the way, Carthoris," I cried. "We will follow."

At my command, the youth leaped into one of the corridors, and in column of twos the soldiers followed him in good order, each company entering the corridor only at the command of its dwarf, or captain.

Before the last company filed from the chamber the water was ankle deep, and that the men were nervous was quite evident. Entirely unaccustomed to water except in quantities sufficient for drinking and bathing purposes the red Martians instinctively shrank from it in such formidable depths and menacing activity. That they were undaunted while it swirled and eddied about their ankles, spoke well for their bravery and their discipline.

I was the last to leave the chamber of the submarine, and as I followed the rear of the column toward the corridor, I moved through water to my knees. The corridor, too, was flooded to the same depth, for its floor was on a level with the floor of the chamber from which it led, nor was there any perceptible rise for many yards.

The march of the troops through the corridor was as rapid as was consistent with the number of men that moved through so narrow a passage, but it was not ample to permit us to gain appreciably on the pursuing tide. As the level of the passage rose, so, too, did the waters rise until it soon became apparent to me, who brought up the rear, that they were gaining rapidly upon us. I could understand the reason for this, as with the narrowing expanse of Omean as the waters rose toward the apex of its dome, the rapidity of its rise would increase in inverse ratio to the ever-lessening space to be filled.

Long ere the last of the column could hope to reach the upper pits which lay above the danger point I was convinced that the waters would surge after us in overwhelming volume, and that fully half the expedition would be snuffed out.

As I cast about for some means of saving as many as possible of the doomed men, I saw a diverging corridor which seemed to rise at a steep angle at my right. The waters were now swirling about my waist. The men directly before me were quickly becoming panic-stricken. Something must be done at once or they would rush forward upon their fellows in a mad stampede that would result in trampling down hundreds beneath the flood and eventually clogging the passage beyond any hope of retreat for those in advance.

Raising my voice to its utmost, I shouted my command to the dwarfs ahead of me.

"Call back the last twenty-five utans," I shouted. "Here seems a way of escape. Turn back and follow me."

My orders were obeyed by nearer thirty utans, so that some three thousand men came about and hastened into the teeth of the flood to reach the corridor up which I directed them.

As the first dwarf passed in with his utan I cautioned him to listen closely for my commands, and under no circumstances to venture into the open, or leave the pits for the temple proper until I should have come up with him, "or you know that I died before I could reach you."

The officer saluted and left me. The men filed rapidly past me and entered the diverging corridor which I hoped would lead to safety. The water rose breast high. Men stumbled, floundered, and went down. Many I grasped and set upon their feet again, but alone the work was greater than I could cope with. Soldiers were being swept beneath the boiling torrent, never to rise. At length the dwarf of the 10th utan took a stand beside me. He was a valorous soldier, Gur Tus by name, and together we kept the now thoroughly frightened troops in the semblance of order and rescued many that would have drowned otherwise.

Djor Kantos, son of Kantos Kan, and a padwar of the fifth utan joined us when his utan reached the opening through which the men were fleeing. Thereafter not a man was lost of all the hundreds that remained to pass from the main corridor to the branch.

As the last utan was filling past us the waters had risen until they surged about our necks, but we clasped hands and stood our ground until the last man had passed to the comparative safety of the new passageway. Here we found an immediate and steep ascent, so that within a hundred yards we had reached a point above the waters.

For a few minutes we continued rapidly up the steep grade, which I hoped would soon bring us quickly to the upper pits that let into the Temple of Issus. But I was to meet with a cruel disappointment.

Suddenly I heard a cry of "fire" far ahead, followed almost at once by cries of terror and the loud commands of dwarfs and padwars who were evidently attempting to direct their men away from some grave danger. At last the report came back to us. "They have fired the pits ahead." "We are hemmed in by flames in front and flood behind." "Help, John Carter; we are suffocating," and then there swept back upon us at the rear a wave of dense smoke that sent us, stumbling and blinded, into a choking retreat.

There was naught to do other than seek a new avenue of escape. The fire and smoke were to be feared a thousand times over the water, and so I seized upon the first gallery which led out of and up from the suffocating smoke that was engulfing us.

Again I stood to one side while the soldiers hastened through on the new way. Some two thousand must have passed at a rapid run, when the stream ceased, but I was not sure that all had been rescued who had not passed the point of origin of the flames, and so to assure myself that no poor devil was left behind to die a horrible death, unscoured, I ran quickly up the gallery in the direction of the flames which I could now see burning with a dull glow far ahead.

It was hot and stifling work, but at last I reached a point where the fire lit up the corridor sufficiently for me to see that no soldier of Helium lay between me and the conflagration--what was in it or upon the far side I could not know, nor could any man have passed through that seething hell of chemicals and lived to learn.

Having satisfied my sense of duty, I turned and ran rapidly back to the corridor through which my men had passed. To my horror, however, I found that my retreat in this direction had been blocked--across the mouth of the corridor stood a massive steel grating that had evidently been lowered from its resting-place above for the purpose of effectually cutting off my escape.

That our principal movements were known to the First Born I could not have doubted, in view of the attack of the fleet upon us the day before, nor could the stopping of the pumps of Omean at the psychological moment have been due to chance, nor the starting of a chemical combustion within the one corridor through which we were advancing upon the Temple of Issus been due to aught than well-calculated design.

And now the dropping of the steel gate to pen me effectually between fire and flood seemed to indicate that invisible eyes were upon us at every moment. What chance had I, then, to rescue Dejah Thoris were I to be compelled to fight foes who never showed themselves. A thousand times I berated myself for being drawn into such a trap as I might have known these pits easily could be. Now I saw that it would have been much better to have kept our force intact and made a concerted attack upon the temple from the valley side, trusting to chance and our great fighting ability to have overwhelmed the First Born and compelled the safe delivery of Dejah Thoris to me.

The smoke from the fire was forcing me further and further back down the corridor toward the waters which I could hear surging through the darkness. With my men gone the last torch, nor was this corridor lighted by the radiance of phosphorescent rock as were those of the lower levels. It was this fact that assured me that I was not far from the upper pits which lie directly beneath the temple.

Finally I felt the lapping waters about my feet. The smoke was thick behind me. My suffering was intense. There seemed but one thing to do, and that to choose the easier death which confronted me, and so I moved on down the corridor until the cold waters of Omean closed about me, and I swam on through utter blackness toward--what?

The instinct of self-preservation is strong even when one, unafraid and in the possession of his highest reasoning faculties, knows that death--positive and unalterable--lies just ahead. And so I swam slowly on, waiting for my head to touch the top of the corridor, which would mean that I had reached the limit of my flight and the point where I must sink for ever to an unmarked grave.

But to my surprise I ran against a blank wall before I reached a point where the waters came to the roof of the corridor. Could I be mistaken? I felt around. No, I had come to the main corridor, and still there was a breathing space between the surface of the water and the rocky ceiling above. And then I turned up the main corridor in the direction that Carthoris and the head of the column had passed a half-hour before. On and on I swam, my heart growing lighter at every stroke, for I knew that I was approaching closer and closer to the point where there would be no chance that the waters ahead could be deeper than they were about me. I was positive that I must soon feel the solid floor beneath my feet again and that once more my chance would come to reach the Temple of Issus and the side of the fair prisoner who languished there.

But even as hope was at its highest I felt the sudden shock of contact as my head struck the rocks above. The worst, then, had come to me. I had reached one of those rare places where a Martian tunnel dips suddenly to a lower level. Somewhere beyond I knew that it rose again, but of what value was that to me, since I did not know how great the distance that it maintained a level entirely beneath the surface of the water!

There was but a single forlorn hope, and I took it. Filling my lungs with air, I dived beneath the surface and swam through the inky, icy blackness on and on along the submerged gallery. Time and time again I rose with upstretched hand, only to feel the disappointing rocks close above me.

Not for much longer would my lungs withstand the strain upon them. I felt that I must soon succumb, nor was there any retreating now that I had gone this far. I knew positively that I could never endure to retrace my path now to the point from which I had felt the waters close above my head. Death stared me in the face, nor ever can I recall a time that I so distinctly felt the icy breath from his dead lips upon my brow.

One more frantic effort I made with my fast ebbing strength. Weakly I rose for the last time--my tortured lungs gasped for the breath that would fill them with a strange and numbing element, but instead I felt the revivifying breath of life-giving air surge through my starving nostrils into my dying lungs. I was saved.

A few more strokes brought me to a point where my feet touched the floor, and soon thereafter I was above the water level entirely, and racing like mad along the corridor searching for the first doorway that would lead me to Issus. If I could not have Dejah Thoris again I was at least determined to avenge her death, nor would any life satisfy me other than that of the fiend incarnate who was the cause of such immeasurable suffering upon Barsoom.

Sooner than I had expected I came to what appeared to me to be a sudden exit into the temple above. It was at the right side of the corridor, which ran on, probably, to other entrances to the pile above.

To me one point was as good as another. What knew I where any of them led! And so without waiting to be again discovered and thwarted, I ran quickly up the short, steep incline and pushed open the doorway at its end.

The portal swung slowly in, and before it could be slammed against me I sprang into the chamber beyond. Although not yet dawn, the room was brilliantly lighted. Its sole occupant lay prone upon a low couch at the further side, apparently in sleep. From the hangings and sumptuous furniture of the room I judged it to be a living-room of some priestess, possibly of Issus herself.

At the thought the blood tingled through my veins. What, indeed, if fortune had been kind enough to place the hideous creature alone and unguarded in my hands. With her as hostage I could force acquiescence to my every demand. Cautiously I approached the recumbent figure, on noiseless feet. Closer and closer I came to it, but I had crossed but little more than half the chamber when the figure stirred, and, as I sprang, rose and faced me.

At first an expression of terror overspread the features of the woman who confronted me--then startled incredulity-- hope--thanksgiving.

My heart pounded within my breast as I advanced toward her--tears came to my eyes--and the words that would have poured forth in a perfect torrent choked in my throat as I opened my arms and took into them once more the woman I loved--Dejah Thoris, Princess of Helium.