



Death stalked Darak of Werg at every step, but the Royal Bracelet and the Princess of Werg meant far more than one man's life.



The Empress of Mars

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CHAPTER I - In a Strange Land

FLAT on my stomach I lay, heart beating wildly, the mudflats of the Thasser Canal a veritable stench in my nostrils. Above me, on the sagging plankings of the rotting Jador wharf, I heard the ribald oath of the Captain of the Guards, as he feared that I had escaped his clutches and his thirsting dirk.

Scarce three feet distant lapped the foul waters of the Thasser, dark, evil, mysterious in the misty darkness of the Martian night. And out there, on the dark waters, rode at anchor a single houseboat, blunt-browed, three-cabined. Farther down the dock, whence went shipping to all the far-flung corners of the dangerous, mad, warlike world, were other more stately craft, chief amongst them the palace boat of the self-styled Empress of Mars.

Oaths rose on the night air, and I knew that not this easily would Miran Borg, Captain of the Royal City Guards, give up the search. Nay! My dead bleeding body he'd have, as warning to other uncertified foreigners. I cursed the moment I had, in my foolhardiness, exposed myself in the full glare of light for my typically angular Wergite features were no asset in the cruel, barbarous land of Crill.

Off to my right I heard a dull thud, as a harran bokka flung himself from the rotting wharf, landed with catlike feet on the Thasser mudflats. I saw his eyes flash in the gloom as they turned on my hiding place. Slowly, warily, he crept toward me. And I, weaponless, in very fear of death, waited.

Mad, warlike world! As I lay there, with death encircling me, creeping in on me with sure tread, my thoughts spun with nostalgia to that blue world which men called Earth. My mind spun back to the ancient civilizations three thousand years gone, when all the planets that rushed eternally about the Sun had been settled, colonized, united in a common bond of friendship. And then, fearsome thing, like some rash disease, interplanetary war had broken

out, ravaged up and down the length and depth of the solar system, decimated nine-tenths of the human race.

And as it faded away, there were left a dozen isolated planets, peopled with men of Earth, bereft greatly of all save a barbarous science, bereft of the manner of flight across the void. Worlds plunged back across thousands of years to a state of barbaric culture, of the cruel Empress! Wrong, it was. Wrong!

THE harran crept along toward me, crouched. Not yet had his eyes picked me out of the gloom, but I saw his short-sword, clutched to the ready in his hand. I drew my naked, freezing hands up under me, braced them on the stinking surface of the mudflats. The harran paused under the shadow of the wharf. And then, his eyes dilating, his breath coming hoarsely, he saw me, and made as if to give warning.

Too late! With the speed of a darak—indeed, my public name is Darak—I leaped from the noisome ground, flung myself full at him. Had he a moment's warning, some slight knowledge of my far-famed speed, I were dead, with the short of his sword piercing me through to the heart.

But ere he could utter a syllable, I grasped him about the throat. With a single motion I flung him across my bent knee, and the sound of his shattered vertebrae was a sharp crack in the night.

Then, crouching, hoping against hope that sounds of the conflict might not have reached the ears of my pursuers, I waited. Vain hope! Came a voice, harsh, rasping, from above me.

“What say you, Rinui? You've found him?”

Well knowing the need of action, my lips ground out the harsh gutturals of the Crillian tongue.

“A trice to these littered shores, Miran Borg! By Jaos, I've ruined my leg!”

“To the devil with your leg, then!” snarled Miran Borg. “You’ve seen a sign of the Wergite?”

“Gone,” I growled surlily. “Best we continue the search down to Cratlas Pier. And may I be the one to sever his guts from his body!”

“Five shabra to the man who does! But ’ware of him, for he is large of body and swift of mind!” snarled Miran Borg, and then came his voice, shouting orders. Feet pounding, down the wharf, away to the landing. I stilled the pound of my heart, and drew a heartfelt breath of relief.

Then, softly, exultantly, I crept down to the shores of the Thasser, and plunged silently into its polar-cooled waters.

I glided out from the shadow of the wharf, propelling myself with short, powerful strokes, my nose barely above water.

The shore fell behind, as I headed midstream, bound for that single, blunt-prowed house-boat.

To its starboard quarter I went, my flesh chilled not so much from the freezing waters as from the feel of obscene water creatures brushing against me, or coiling about my naked legs. Now the Jador wharf was hid from me by the uprising hulk of the apparently tenantless craft, and I threw one arm over the gunwale, and swiftly drew myself over the side.

Dripping water, I came to a wary crouch, my hand ready to my short-sword, which I had acquired from my assailant of a few moments gone, well aware that death lurked at every turn of a corner.

There was no sound on all the world now, save the far away scream of a yammir, from far on the other side of this monstrous Martian city.

I heard a sound. I wheeled, in a flash had my short-sword out and ready to action. And it were well that perceptions on that night were keened to the utmost, for bearing down on me, upraised sword glinting, bestial face cruel with the murder lust, came a very devil of a man!

“HAVE at you!” the giant roared, and his sword cut the air with a shriek, so narrowly missing me that I heard the singing of the metal as it flashed past my ear.

I leaped back, struck at his short sword savagely, and I imagine my own face was not a pretty thing to see, as we went at it hook and tongs. No amateur sword play here! Swifter than lightning he gave feint for feint, thrust for thrust, counterpoint for counterpoint.

“Die!” he cried, and his sword surely and vengefully pushed forward through a space I had occupied but a fraction of a second before. I laughed savagely, but wasted not my breath on idle words, for I was pitted against a swordsman of cunning and brawn.

Slowly but surely, using a time-honored trick, I allowed him to press me back against the cabin-wall. For a well-versed antagonist the rule is to build up his confidence—then, a flash of steel, a swift counterpoint, a thrust to the heart—and victory!

Thus I knew it would be, and thus it was. A final parry, a diabolical feigned weakness, and he rushed at me. Too late he saw my ruse! He gave vent to a single whimpering cry as he fairly hurled himself onto the point of my sharp blade. He sagged, and his life spurted from his mouth, staining his dirty beard crimson.

I braced my foot against his massive body, and drew out my weapon. Stooping, I wiped the bloody sword on his tunic, then again came to my feet.

Warily I lay my hand to a companionway door, the virus of excitement running like strong red wine in my body.

I stiffened. What was that? The sound of a weeping woman? A woman, imprisoned against her will?

Abruptly, I flung open the door, and stood on the threshold of a dimly lit room. Out came my sword, for since the day when first I had departed my beloved homeland with the commission to return my abducted princess to the land of her fathers, death had walked side by side with me, and it were a poor day that saw no battle to the death.

But Death in that room did not await me. For Death is not a woman, particularly a woman beautiful beyond belief, ravishing, even with the tears staining the perfect bloom of her oval, lovely cheeks. She was cowering in a corner of the room, a single short garment fastened about her shapeliness, her high breast rising and falling in her fear, her heavy black hair falling in lovely torrents over her shoulders.

CHAPTER II - Into Ancient Jador

NOW what I say here you will perhaps deride, for in one moment, you will inquire, how can the oldest, holiest of emotions come into the heart of a man, with a sureness that will brook no denial? Know you then, that one moment can, in the mind, become as a thousand years. I have heard men tell of how they had first looked deep into their loves' unscarred souls, and had seen in one moment—or a thousand years—all the virtues of woman since time immemorial, parading there, and, with scarce a conscious thought, knew that this was the woman for whom they would willingly fight a whole world!

Shall I continue to explain? Or shall I not attempt to explain a doubtless unexplainable mystery, whose roots lie at the very foundations of life itself? Good enough! Suffice to say, then, that as I gazed at her speechless, the rest of the world, and all the threatening dangers in it, receded from my thoughts. A burning emotion gripped me, my blood a pounding torrent in my body. I, Darak of Werg, knew that in this girl lay my destiny.

I took a dazed step toward her, and she cowered back from me, her soft breasts rising and falling convulsively. She saw in my eyes what I felt, and interpreted it wrongly.

"Go away and leave me!" she whispered, her violet eyes flaming.

"You wrong me," I said huskily. "I am not your enemy."

She shrank back as I advanced another step. "How did you gain access to this boat?" she whispered. "How did you vanquish Deodum?"

"I killed him," I replied simply.

"I do not believe you could have killed him! He is too powerful."

I raised my sword to the light of the flickering tallow lamp. "The blood of Deodum has stained my weapon," I smiled, as I saw the hope in her eyes. Then I repeated, "I am your friend. I am a refugee, and but a few moments ago escaped death at the hands of the Royal City Guards."

A smile began to curve her lips, and she came toward me and lay her small, white hand on my bare arm. Once again under the spell of her violet eyes, the impulse which rose up in me would not be brooked. I swept her into my arms, her soft lips quivering, her body warm and vibrant against mine. And I could have sworn in that moment that she responded, before her own sweet innocence claimed possession of her.

She twisted savagely free of me, her eyes blazing. Then she struck me, harshly, with animal passion.

"You dare!" she hissed.

MY voice was a faraway thing in my ears, as I stepped back, stood straight, unmoving, white of face. I was not sorry for what I had done, yet I said, "Forgive me, wachin. I lost myself to your beauty."

There was some hot retort on her lips, but she never uttered the words. Instead, her violet eyes swept with intense study over my angular features.

"You are Wergite?" she questioned with unwonted eagerness, her lips parted. "You are a spy?"

"My business is none of yours," I responded coldly. "It was ill-luck alone which bade me seek this boat as refuge." Then I relented, and shoved my sword back into its scabbard.

"On the other hand, my mission is well-known in Jador, and the addition of another knowing ear will work no harm. Know then that scarce three score days ago the Princess of Werg, worshipped the length and breadth of my land, was set upon by a marauding band of Crillians, and brought to this country. My country is too small, too illy-armed to proceed against the mightiness of Crill—so, of all volunteers, I was chosen to restore her to her country."

Her look was suddenly very gentle. "You have much hope of succeeding?"

"I return with my princess," I replied, "or else I die. My princess first, and perhaps her bracelet."

"Her bracelet?"

"The talisman of her dynasty. The Royal Hinusian Bracelet, set with the fiery stones of life."

"I have heard much of this fabulous talisman," she said thoughtfully. "I have heard that the rays which radiate from it are as new life to the sick, the invalid, and the dying. I have heard rumor that in Werg all men are deathless." Her eyes were shining. "I have heard that though Werg is the smallest of all the countries on all Mars, still it is the greatest, the noblest. Its peoples are the deathless race! For the rays of the Hinusian Bracelet are powerless in all other countries. For from the very ground of Werg, and only Werg, do the rays that render the bracelet effective come. And you will know where this bracelet is secreted?" she asked gently.

I thrust up the short sleeve of my wet, skin jacket, and showed her the transparent small box strapped above my biceps. She leaned forward, her eyes widening. I turned my shoulder slightly, and she watched the lambent blue flame of the needle as it twisted on its universal joint.

"Where points the needle," I told her, "there is the princess' fabulous bracelet."

"You have seen the princess of Werg?" she questioned me.

"From afar," I made answer. "I could never forget the glorious masses of sun-golden hair which adorn her head. I have no fear I shall know her when she comes to my sight."

SHE nodded and smiled at me. "You need not fear that I will reveal you," she said in a voice that had turned low and thrilling. "I myself am not native to this land. I was a slave, serving in the palace of one of the lesser nobles. Deodum is a canal thief by profession, but in selling his stolen wares at the palace, he saw me and carried me off, unknown to all. His intentions," she flushed but her lovely eyes did not lower, "were not of the best."

I made bold to take her hands in mine.

Standing there, I realized that time, precious to me at this hour, was slipping. Before me stood the girl of my heart, but even more important to me was the welfare of my princess and her fateful bracelet. These I must attain at any cost, even the loss of my beloved.

"I must go," I said slowly. "It was the hand of fate that directed me to meet my destiny here. For you are my destiny. You must know that, ere I go." I smiled. "I should like to take your name with me, wachin."

"Thilna," she made answer, making no attempt to free her imprisoned hand. "Thilna of Jaray."

"And I am Darak, of Werg."

She nodded quickly, her eyes bright. "Yes. You are well-known, even in Jaray, Darak of Werg," she said quietly, and then the look in her eyes became urgent, supplicating. "You must return here with the dawn!"

"You ask me that?" I said slowly.

“Yes, for in the city the sun will only bring death upon you, and it will bring discovery of me, and no good to either of us. You will return, even though you find no trace of the Princess of Werg, or her bracelet.”

I drew her to me then and kissed her full on the lips. A moment we thus stood, while the cry of a yammir rose full upon the night from the desert waste.

I released Thilna with a heart pang that it might be for the last time that I held her thus.

“I will return with the dawn,” I promised, looking deep into her violet eyes. Then I turned, and without a word bounded up a companionway to the deck. There I stumbled over Deodum, and thinking that Thilna might perchance trip over him, I heaved him into the deep, chill waters of the Thasser.

followed after, but Deodum and I went in opposite directions, you may be sure! I swiftly sped across the broad bosom of the Thasser toward the city, and having dragged myself from the canal stood there, dripping, ever cautious. There was no wharf, nothing but the dank mudflats.

Some three hundred feet up the slope, the city of Jador commenced to come into being, and toward this I sped, following the direction in which the lambent needle pointed.

And the needle pointed toward the danger-ridden palace of the Empress of Mars!

CHAPTER III - Flight From Cammint

SKIRTING sidestreets, wending my way along through the dim underworld section, my path led me toward the royal palace.

What would be my entrance, what my method of serving my princess, of escaping with her, of bringing to fruition my plans, I was, in all truth, not aware. Yet I knew that these things must be done, if the glory of Werg were not to be swept from the face of Mars.

Without plan, without disguise, I, a Wergite, recognizable as such in sufficient light, stalked through the demimonde of Jador. Chance alone it would be, I knew, that would present to me a workable plan. And so it was!

INTO my sight came as abandoned and bloodthirsty a scene as can be imagined! A dozen harrans there were, full decked in their finery, swords glinting dully, faces wild with the joy of combat, and standing them off were a mere four men, giant in build, savage and bearded of face. In swordplay and numbers they were illy matched, yet were going at it with a courage and audacity that was little short of heroic!

Not long did I watch, but leaped forward into the thickest of the battle, my lips curled. Well enough I knew the tactics of these harrans. Cruel, bloodthirsty, conscienceless devils with hearts of iron. Well enough I knew their sport, parading up and down the sidestreets of Jador, for entertainment slaughtering needlessly all who stood in their way.

“Have at you then!” I cried, and threw myself into it with fervor. Now there were a dozen harrans against the five of us, but at that moment the odds turned. It was luck alone which enabled me to put the fear of their gods into them, those harrans, for in the first second of my entering, one of them succumbed to the bite of my blade, and, decapitated, lolled to the cobblestones in a pool of blood.

We pressed them, those four ruffians and I, and slaughtered them one by one. Blood lust rose up in me. Lunge, parry, lunge, counterpoint, feint—death!

Our feet scuffed the alley stones as we pressed them backward, though our breath was rasping. With the suddenness of thought, our assailants were cut down to one gasping, death-fearing harran, a colonel in the service to judge by the stars on his shoulder. But he asked no quarter, and would have expected none. With courage that was magnificent, his blade was like a web of sparkling light as it fended off our five bloodstained weapons.

He snarled as he fought, backed into a cul-de-sac. Now, abruptly, my companions in the fight stood back and left me to finish him off, but ere I could beat down his guard, a sudden thought came to me.

I redoubled my efforts on him, leaped in under his weapon, and with a final stroke struck it singing away into the night. Then I stepped forward, pressing my blade to his midriff. He dropped his arms, and stood rigid, face a mask.

Abruptly I faced the men at my back.

“Be gone with you!” I cried. “Here’s my prisoner, my sport, and what purpose I put him is no concern of yours.

As one man, they muttered “Aye,” and melted away into the foul night.

I TURNED back to my man, and pressed my weapon harder. “I have no desire to kill you,” I snarled. “But suppose I spare you—what profit in it for me?”

He said stiffly, “On the other hand, what profit in the body of a dead man? What’s the price of my life?”

I told him outright, and he looked at me sharply.

“Truly,” he said angrily, “treachery to my Empress is too much to ask! Run me through, but I’ll not let an assassin into the Royal Palace!”

“I promise you that no harm will come to the Empress Flavia,” I told him patiently. “Nor shall I seek to destroy the palace. My sole intention is primarily to rescue the Princess of Werg, secondly to take back the Royal Hinusian Bracelet.”

I looked him square in the eyes, and finally he nodded. Harran or not, beast or not, there’s honor in the soul of most men, and there was a promise in this man’s eyes that would be kept.

I dropped my weapon, and explained my desires more fully.

He frowned in thought. "A small request, hoepx," he said carelessly. "I think the trick can be turned. I have a friend doing penal duty in the menial's wing. You'll remain here, and within the hour I'll return."

He disappeared without more ado into the noisome night. I sheathed my sword, and sank down upon the cobble-stones, exultation running strong in my veins. Victory in sight, the princess once more restored to her homeland, with luck!

I waited, shivering in the chill Martian night, drawing my jacket tighter around me.

Later, came quick military footsteps out of the hemming darkness. It was the colonel. Without a word, he commenced to disrobe, and I struggled into the gold braid and leather finery of his rare Uxillian silk habiliments. I clapped his fur broad-cap to my head, and stood to attention with gauntleted hand clasping the hilt of my jewel-shot sword. He nodded grimly.

"You'll pass, hoepx," he said grimly. "The casque rounds out your face somewhat, so that you may be assumed to be a Crillian." He stooped, began to strip from one of his dead comrades, accouterments somewhat spattered with blood. "A like enough story for me," he said musingly. "Struck down in an alley-way, after I had received the special permit; stripped and left naked. . . The aeroplane you'll find ready to fly at Cammint Field. My credentials, my authorization for entrance to the Royal Palace, all there, in an inner pocket. But may you be shot down within the hour. I've performed my half of the bargain."

"May you continue to perform it, by saying nothing." With this final word, I strode off into the night.

WITH quickening pace, for the tiny moons of Mars were rising ever higher, swallowing the night, I went forth on Jharath Way, with the bright light of street-glows lighting my Wergite features all too strongly.

About me swarmed the higher classes of Crillians. No woman, for such would be dangerous; but men, great, full-chested giants, with jet black hair, swinging easily along, saw-

tooth capes billowing out behind them, fine, jewel-encrusted swords clanking at their booted hips. And men with the stripes of the Royal Guards, and the Royal City Guards, as well harrans from the polar wastes and outlying districts.

Through all this I wended my way, feeling that the eyes of every harran who passed were fastened upon me in suspicion. Truly I, Darak of Werg, was in a hornet's nest.

I had all but reached my destination, and was crossing the square into the quieter section of the town opposite the beginnings of Upper Jador, the palace of the Empress rising into sight a scant five miles distant, Cammint Field across the block, when a hearty voice bellowed, in the Crillian tongue.

"Viel, by the gods!" and a heavy hand clapped me on the shoulder. For the moment my blood froze, and almost I was of a mind to whip out my blade and have at the man on the spot. But that were folly, indeed, so that I turned, and beheld the fierce eyes of a 'brother' colonel.

The hearty look on his bearded face fell away, and he blinked in confusion.

"Your pardon," he muttered, surveying me narrowly. "Almost I could swear that no other harran in the service wears such a cocky, ice-white ostrich plume in his casque as Viel. But no matter!" He laughed. "A silly mistake!" A final clap to the shoulder and he was off, albeit turning his head back puzzledly.

A narrow escape, if escape it was, and the blood was again tingling in my veins. Pray God that harran's suspicions did not remain, else I were dead in all truth.

But no time for useless fears! I quickened my step across the square, swung through the portals of Cammint Field past the gateman, who thought my uniform voucher enough for my right to enter. I went straight across the field, across the red-grassed tarmac.

There was a sleepy mechanic in a booth. I hailed him angrily.

"You've attended to my bee-wing, rogue?" I shouted menacingly. He scrambled to his feet, a lanky lad, anxious to please a man with stars on his shoulder.

He beckoned and crossed the field toward a bee-wing, I following.

In a moment I was in possession of the craft, and no hand to stay me. I leaped aboard, stood before the control panel, and worked the levers. The elliptical wings of my craft began to beat the air rapidly, until they were a blur to my sight; until they made such deep, roaring buzz that sound of the outside world was gone entirely.

Exultantly, I strained my eyes out over Cammint. Empty, no staying hand! Good enough! But wait, what was that?

FAR across at the entrance, a harran officer came running through, waving his arms.

The game was up? No, by God! and I rammed home the final plunger, and the bee-wing took off flapping up into the thin air and forward with such speed that in a matter of seconds Cammint was a dot of light in the darkness, and the city of Jador was sprawled in fantastic shadows below.

I went blind, without lights, never knowing when some similar craft might blunder out of the encircling darkness full tilt into me.

I set my course for the Royal Palace, and had my forward needle guns set for any who dared offer me hindrance.

The palace loomed out of the starry night like a gaunt finger pointing out my doom, and I drove for it, speculating on my destiny. Did death for me and my princess lie there, or were the gods of my fathers to give me carte blanche to walk through all the monstrous dangers ahead unscathed?

Tight-lipped, I muttered, "For my princess, and all else must be forgot!" Yet, I persisted in forgetting my princess, whom I had never seen face to face. The face of Thilna, that delicate, serene, divinely lovely face of the girl in the houseboat on the Thasser, rose insistently before my mind's eye. Would I ever see her again, hear her low, thrilling voice? Pray the Gods I did!

For I had spent such short, swift-slipping moments with her—I, who hoped with the devil's own optimism to spend the rest of my days in the sunshine of her smile.

The Royal Landing Stage, on the palace roof! My hand steady on the helm, yet trembling withal, I dropped the bee-wing, brought the craft to rest on the composition roof. The wings flapped down to a nothingness of motion. With huge bravado, but unease in my heart, I dropped to the roof, and stood waiting.

CHAPTER IV - Paran Leeah

THREE harrans came striding toward me, faces grim, gauntleted hands to sword. Two were merely bokkas, without rating; the other, to judge by the gold and bronze of his caparison, was a captain in the service. But scant respect did I, in my disguise as a superior officer, expect from the captain, for in one regiment even a bokka owes neither fealty nor obedience to any officer in another.

“Your business?” rasped out the harran captain without preliminaries. “Quick about it!”

“Too much mouth and too little ear is often a guarantee of a short life,” I responded coldly, striding up to him. “I come from Cammint, with a special permit and order from Lieutenant-General Groton Loj of the Ruirri battalions. My regiment is leaving for the Hahillian front tomorrow—forced march, you understand, and I have a debt which I must extract from a—friend.” I put a wry significance on the last words.

I could see him relenting, but he held out an imperious hand for the permit and my credentials. He scanned them sharply, handed them back, and then motioned the two bokkas forward. Quite impersonally, they divested me of my jeweled sword and of my other weapon, a single dirk. And I, weaponless in the midst of peril, could do little more than comply with grace.

“You’ll claim those when you return,” the captain growled. “And as for your friend, a poor class of friend he is, and a long descent you’ll make reaching him, doing detail work—in the servant’s wing!” He laughed harshly. “Get along, then!”

No need of a further invitation! I made for the sky-ramp. At the farther end I saw a staircase and made for it.

Still feeling deeply the loss of my weapons, I descended, emerged into another corridor, unused, apparently, save as a guardroom. The laughter of a dozen lounging harrans greeted me.

“Peacock!” jeered one, no doubt taking cognizance of the ostrich plume projecting upward from my casque. I paused, loathe to engage in combat at this time, yet resenting the jeer to the full. A repetition of the taunt, and a round of hoarse laughter decided me.

I wheeled to the harran who had spoken, a slim fellow with malicious devilry in his eye. “It’s safe to open your mouth against a man who’s lost his weapons. Is that your class of bravery?” I cried furiously. “Had I my sword, I’d stuff your words back into your throat with its point!”

THE harran I addressed leaped to his feet without more ado, uttering an oath fraught with insult. From one of his companions he borrowed a sword, and extended it to me by the blade; I grasped it, and without parley we were engaged.

In a trice, a space was cleared about us, and we went at it thick and heavy. No need to tell you more of that battle, save that the man was certainly no master of the sword. Tricks he had, but a blundering application of them that rendered useless his onslaught. I was scarce breathing hard, when he fell at my feet, inert.

I faced the others in silence, but none offered taunt or hand against me. I returned the borrowed sword, and then, without a moment’s hesitation unbuckled from my fallen adversary’s waist his glittering scabbard. I retrieved his sword, and in a moment’s time was equipped once more with the weapons I so sorely needed.

So I swung down the staircase from that corridor, and continuously downward, running softly, wary of passing harrans.

Never had I seen anything to compare with this fabulously adorned palace. In all the universe, there is nothing to compare with the wealth of jewel-set bas-reliefs, the inhumanly carved statuettes that range the walls, the rich tapestries, the solid gold and bronze staircases. But admiration for those beauties? Nay! Rather, a hot burning anger against the inhumane Empress of Crill, who had wrested from her many subjugated nations their traditional treasures, and an unbearable annual tribute to boot.

And now, thirteen levels below, the lambent needle pointed out my direction—straight ahead! Here on this very level was my beloved Princess, if I had interpreted facts aright.

At that I stopped dead. Ah, would they dare strip from her wrist that fabulous bracelet? Would they dare humiliate her as they had humiliated other royalty?

With an oath at these possibilities, I nonetheless determined that my path lay forward. And thus it was.

I crept down the lushly carpeted corridor, keeping in the half-shadows. Far down at the end of that corridor a light was burning, and there was one lone guard who patrolled with languid, disinterested step up and down before a heavily carved bronze door.

My best course of action, it seemed, was openhandedness, and thus with a bravado which is a misleading index to my bravery, since my heart thumped so that I waited for its bursting, I strode past that guard—almost, that is. Then, a quick glance up and down the corridor, and the scrape of good steel on gold as I drew my weapon. Our swords clanged twice—one fruitless lunge, a parry; and a final lunge which sent the harran to the cruel gods of his ancestors.

Quickly then, I gathered him in my arms, and dumped him without ceremony into the capacious interior of a gloriously inlaid vase.

THEN, for a moment, I patrolled up and down in front of the door, uneasy, distrusting my incredible luck. Miraculous, that I had descended this far, was so near my goal, yet so short of it! What lay beyond that door? The princess? Or—death!

In a fury of impatience, I put my hand to the knob. It turned, and I pushed the door open a crack. Darkness inside, save for a shimmering effulgence of light such as a woman—the Princess?—might keep burning in her sleep.

Another foot I pushed wide the door, so that I might slip through. I closed it behind me, and to my ears came the sound of soft breathing. Back against the door, hand to my sword, I melted into the silence. Danger here? Guards perhaps?

My eyes fitted themselves to the gloom and I saw a large chamber, thick-carpeted, flanked with exotically designed tapestries, simply furnished with silver mirror and toiletries—and a broad couch of darkest parwood, curtained against the impurities of the night air with light purple gauzes.

And it was none other than the Empress of Mars who lay there, immersed in slumber, her beautiful, dark-skinned features as innocent-seeming as a child's.

And the lambent needle of my compass pointed with unswerving steadiness toward that couch!

Almost I burst out with a groan. Where now to find the Princess of Werg?

Useless thoughts to plague me in this dangerous moment! I crossed the room, looked upon the perfect features. My hand tightened on my sword hilt, and slowly I withdrew it.

Assassination? Before the gods, I knew I could never play a part in such an act. Were she to rear up, dagger in hand, face contorted with her innate cruelty, and lunge at me in death passion, I could have struck, and thus in part have ridded my planet of her decadent influence. But murder a woman, or even a man, in sleep? Not I!

But the bracelet? For that I would go through fire.

Very quietly I withdrew the arm of the Empress from beneath the silken coverlet, and my breath caught in my throat as I thus revealed to my sight the Royal Hinusian Bracelet. Softly I withdrew it. In my palm I lay it, and seemingly there was a pool of light in my hand. A changing, shifting wonder of sparkles and prismatic brilliances, that well-nigh hid the deepest shadows in the room. I gazed with fascination at the ancient, precious liazzes set into the texture of a subtly wrought metal weave, for never had I beheld the Bracelet this close.

I deposited it quickly in the pocket of my skin-like inner garment, and in the same moment the Empress moaned and tossed in her sleep. Abruptly her eyes opened, and in the same moment I saw consciousness, full, sharp, enter them.

YET, with the miraculous poise and control of true royalty, she made no slightest motion, save that her face was swept with rage.

“What do you here, harran?” she whispered tensely.

“Quiet!” I hissed, and presented the point of my blade to the whiteness of her throat. “Else the land of Crill may lose its Empress!”

Poised thus, thinking out some means of wresting from her my princess’ location, I must have missed the sigh of the opening door.

“You’ll drop your weapon, Wergite,” said a soft, gentle voice with unmistakable meaning.

Resist? That were folly, if, as I suspected, the man held a weapon which could act devastatingly over a distance of twenty sword-lengths. With blind anger gripping me, I nonetheless turned and faced my captor.

He was not of great stature, nor yet of great strength, from his looks, yet here, I knew, stood a man of vast will and moral strength. No Crillian this, with hard round face and hook nose, but a man of some far country, to judge by the even lean cut of countenance. I was struck by his pale hazel eyes, and the sheen of skin stretched tight over his cheek-bones, so that a

magnetic aura of living force seemed to leap out at me. And it was that feeling of vast will in his eyes that made me sheath my sword, and not the threat of that fabulously scarce weapon in his hand whose lower-order rays can incinerate a man at twenty sword-lengths.

The Empress came upright on her couch, shielding her naked body with a silken coverlet. Her voice lashed out, “Well, Paran Leeah, why is it that you wait? You saw his intentions, to loot me of my bracelet, to murder me in my sleep! Have done with him!”

“Your bracelet, Flavia?” His brows went up as he eyed her through the gloom. He slowly shook his head, and his voice deepened tensely. “By the gods, Flavia, what is this empire lust that runs so strongly through your body? You’ve desecrated half of Mars, subjugated a dozen nations and a hundred free cities. Still not content with these riches, you must snatch from within her country’s borders the Princess of Werg and that bracelet which is so useless in Crill!”

She half spat at him in her ire. “Truly, Prince Consort though you be, Paran Leeah, you go too far. I’ll have your head for this, if you persist!”

“You’d sign my death warrant tonight,” he said, with half-contempt, “and by the morning you’d be begging my forgiveness with lips of love.”

His eyes softened on her as she sank back on her couch, speechless, eyes blazing.

“Cruel, cruel,” he said, shaking his finely molded head, and he sighed. “And now I have news for you that will not sit well on your ears. You’ve been humiliating the Princess of Werg by allotting her menial tasks in the servants’ wing, and now you’ve paid for your folly.”

HER eyes widened. “Gone, then?”

“Gone,” said the gently voiced Prince. “How I do not know, save that tradesmen are daily admitted through the postern of the palace at the rear. Ere this, servant girls have thus been taken by lustful hucksters.”

As he spoke, a slow flush of disdain crept over her face. “What care I that she has gone then?” she cried. “I had no desire other than to humble her and her royal family, to demonstrate how pitifully short a time it shall be ere Werg is subjugated, enslaved even as was its princess.”

“Subjugate Werg, whose invulnerable fortresses are nature itself?” He shook his head, as his eyes swung back to me. “An impossible task, my Flavia. And now, Wergite,” and there was strange fire in his voice, “you will come with me.”

I was baffled, trying to fathom his purpose. But nothing loath, expecting anything from death to outright freedom, I moved toward the door, still under the compulsion of his flame pistol.

The Empress, she who owned one-half of Mars, and was bent on owning the other, flung herself in front of him “My bracelet!” she panted pleadingly. “Paran Leeah!”

He brushed past her, this little man. “A mere bauble in Crill,” he said without inflection, “but life itself in Werg!”

And the door closed on the Empress Flavia, into whose eyes I had seen leap a fury indescribable.

“For the moment I am your ally,” Paran Leeah murmured as we moved down the corridor, and came to the staircase. “But remember you are also my prisoner. Continue down the stairs, and move swiftly!”

A fantastic, meaningless situation! I could hold no hope and yet no fear.

But we moved swiftly, well-enough, down through level after level, for it was apparent that Paran Leeah, who surely seemed all-powerful, was in fear of some danger from behind.

Thus we reached ground level, past guards standing like death-laden shadows about this vast hall, turned right and trod a long, chill, lightless corridor, when behind us I heard the march of swift harran feet!

CHAPTER V - The Lock Beneath the Thasser

“CONTINUE at even pace,” said Paran Leeah.

Abruptly the harrans came through into the corridor behind us, and the figure of a captain of the guards stepped in front of us. True to Paran Leeah’s instructions, I continued to move forward, and consequently the Captain of the Guards was forced to move backward, though his sword was out.

“Excellency,” he said stiffly, “in the name of the Empress Flavia, I require you to give yourself into my care!”

“What is it you wish, then?” inquired Paran Leeah, regally, as if he had not heard aright.

“Her majesty requests your arrest, excellency!”

“Very well,” said Paran Leeah agreeably, never once instructing me to cease my stride.

“I command you to stop, excellency!” said the desperate harran, sweat beading his face.

“You and your prisoner are to be taken in arrest immediately, else I lose my head!”

Furiously he flung up his sword, presenting its point to my stomach. “You shall lose it anyway,” I snarled, as I was forced to a stop. I felt the flame pistol of Paran Leeah taken from my back, and his gentle voice murmured, “Wergite, prove your sword-arm!”

Joyously I leaped back, whipped out my blade, and with a single motion swept the harran’s away. His face puckered with a frightful rage. “Have at you, then!” he roared, and flung himself upon me.

Behind me I felt a terrific burst of heat. A wave of some fetid, noisome odor was borne to my nostrils. But so busy was I with my skilled adversary that not till many moments later did I realize that Paran Leeah’s flame pistol had sent eight good and true harrans to the understanding hands of their ancestors.

I was too busy with my man, for I quickly saw that he had earned his station. He had a lightning like lunge and parry that had me fighting like mad, and filled this narrow corridor with silver thunder.

He drove me back at first, his face hideous with triumph.

“Die!” he cried, lunging, but I brought my blade down across his with such force that I like to splinter them both.

“Die yourself, harran!” I panted, and pressed him back and back until he was braced against a heavily barred door, fighting for his head, which doubtless the Empress would have taken later anyway—so that I felt no compunction when I struck his blade up and away, stepped under it, and pierced him through to the heart.

Ere I had a chance to gain my breath, Paran Leeah had rolled the bloody figure away from the door and was working a series of tumblers. The heavy, metal door swung away and Paran Leeah motioned me through.

I put foot to the first of a flight of steps, the unmistakable odor of the dungeon drifting into my nostrils. I turned sharply, to meet the eyes of the Prince Consort. He looked me straight in the eye, then placed the flame pistol back in its holster. He stepped through after me, pulling the door close. I heard it click tight.

He took my arm then, for there was naught save darkness here, and thus led me forward, on a path which took us past cells filled with the whimpering and pleadings and idiocies of a hundred outraged felons.

FINALLY we stopped as I felt the hand of Paran Leeah drop to my shoulder. There was a soft laugh in his voice. “Whatever inimical thoughts you have of me, Wergite, dispel them at once. For now we are fugitives from the same power, fighting together, shoulder to shoulder. Agreed?”

“Agreed!” I cried, for there was something inexpressibly noble and courageous about this little, strong-willed man. “But why should you, Prince Consort to the Empress Flavia, flee from her?”

“Because,” he said somberly, “I am as much a prisoner in Jador as are those wretches in the dungeons behind us.” He was quiet for the moment. Then I heard him working at the damp wall before us. I heard rotten brick and mortar fall, then, after a moment a grating sound, as of a door swinging wide. A wave of rotten, cold air rushed at me. . . .

“A forgotten passageway,” murmured Paran Leeah, “of which none save myself know.” His tone turned bitter. “But come, my friend, we must away. Follow the walls of the tunnel,” and desperate for haste myself, I turned on my heel and plunged swiftly forward into the damp blackness of that tunnel, the tunnel door swinging shut behind.

And as we moved forward Paran Leeah briefly told me his story, one that was eloquently bound up with the turbulent events on Mars of the last few years.

Five Martian years ago, Crill had been but a single large country, existing in peace with all other nations. When the Empress Flavia came into power, however, the peace treaties were thrown overboard, and Crill began an active assault on those helpless, unprepared countries on her flanks. Scarce three years had passed ere Crill became a vast empire, embracing within its borders a dozen nations and a hundred small principalities, and was raging avidly for yet more territory.

These wars of aggression soon claimed Hioppi, a country of which Paran Leeah was king. It had been a bloodless conquest, for Hioppi was ever a peaceful nation; and when Paran Leeah had been presented at the court of the Empress Flavia, she had evidently been so impressed with his quiet, godlike mien, that she had commanded marriage, her excuse being that she wished to consolidate relations between the two countries.

“I married her,” Paran Leeah said bitterly, “with the hope of being able to influence her toward peace, but little I knew how tender, how pathetic, how utterly feminine she could be, at times. Falling in love with her has been my worse sin, and one for which I’ll doubtless pay with many moments of heartbreak.

“When I found that I could not influence her to give back to her plundered nations their freedom, I knew that I must return to my homeland, to array my people for battle. But that were sooner said than done! For I found that I was a prisoner, under open arrest, unable, hardly, to leave the palace, and definitely not the city. Were I a man of might—one who could wield a sword with effect, I would long since have used this tunnel. . . There is a step here, Darak of Werg.”

We pressed forward, I still at a loss to name our destination.

“And for what reason did you choose the moment of my entrance into the palace for escape?”

He laughed. “My intentions were hardly thought out. Suffice to say, that I am of some official importance in the Royal Palace. Thus, almost in the same moment that I was informed of the abduction of the Princess of Werg, the roof guard was also informing me that news had come from Cammint of a Wergite, who, through some duplicity, had gained entrance to the palace.

“My first thought,” he acknowledged, “was for my wife, Flavia. And as for choosing that moment, Darak of Werg, it was because, for the first time since my stay here, I found a sword-arm that would willingly back me up in my fight for the border. I have a flame pistol, true, but it is not much good. One charge remains in it now, and I have determined to save that until it will do the most good. It is a long trail to Hioppi. It was a lucky thing which brought you to Crill, else I had made the attempt alone, finally—which, I make no doubt, would have

ended with my return to the palace, or at the least, would have spitted me on the end of some harran's sword."

A strange tale, this! I now saw myself with a double purpose—to rescue my princess, an impossible-seeming task, and to conduct Hioppi's king to the border safely.

AS we moved forward, I recollected my promise to the wondrous girl in the houseboat on the Thasser. Despair welled up in my heart. I'd promised to return ere dawn broke, and it must be that now the Sun was making ready to struggle up out of his ancient bed. Would she wait for me, even though I failed in my promise?

With such thoughts to plague me, we again came to a door, at the end of the dank tunnel. I paused, not knowing where it led, but Paran Leeah bade me help turn a long heavy bar. Thus, with him pulling down, and I pushing up, a grinding of rust-filled threads heralded the opening of the door, or valve, rather.

"It has not been opened these past thousand years," said Paran Leeah. "I have traversed as far as this valve, but my strength has not been great enough to open it. Doubtless it was once intended for escape by some remote ancestors of Flavia. At any rate," he added, as we fastened the valve behind us, "we shall have a good dousing in the Thasser!"

"The Thasser!" I echoed in amaze.

For answer he pulled on my arm, and we came to the blank, damp, absolute end of the tunnel. He bade me reach upward, and my fingers closed on a huge wheel. It was set into the side of the tunnel, and doubtless operated a trap-door above us, which, when opened, would let in the cold waters of the Thasser.

Our first certainty that the Thasser was actually above us came abruptly, as the wheel turned. A stream of water fairly drenched Paran Leeah, but his only exclamation was one of intense satisfaction. As we turned the wheel, with the air growing damper and chillier by the

second, the stream of water grew in size, driven down by immense pressure, to judge by its solid, thought-destroying roar.

The water first lapped at our ankles, gained our knees, inexorably crowded up around our hips. We stood shoulder to shoulder, wondering if, perchance, we were to die like rats in a trap. I took the opportunity of divesting myself of my harran's finery, for its weight would not help me in the waters. When I'd finished, my only caparison was my sword belt and sword, a tough skin jacket and breech clout.

Paran Leeah gripped my arm. The waters of the Thasser now swirled beneath our arm pits. Again we worked over the wheel, until the fall of water became an intolerable pounding shattering against my ear drums. The waters surged up past my chin, so that I had to look upward in order to breathe.

I felt the wheel strain under my hands, realized that Paran Leeah was already under water, and signaling that we open the trap above us to its widest. I put my strength against it once more. It gave, and from the sound I was certain that the entire Thasser had forced its way in upon us.

In a rush the rising level overwhelmed me, and I scarce had time to draw a breath ere I was completely immersed, indeed half drowning. For a moment I reached out for Paran Leeah, vainly!

I let go the wheel, and shot upward, my fingers clawing for the opening. It resisted my frantic search, and sightless, drowning, holding my breath was a monstrous torture. And through my brain lanced the thought of Paran Leeah! Had he escaped?

NO time for those thoughts, if I were not to die at this moment. I need not tell you how sheerly wonderful it was to grip the edge of that circular aperture, to shoot myself upward with every ounce of my dying strength.

What blessed relief it was when I broke through to the surface of the Thasser, gasping, eyes bulging, throat constricted! In another second my lungs would have burst, and that had been the end of Darak of Werg.

I opened my eyes, and flung away the hair matted wetly across my face.

Paran Leeah!" I called tensely. No answer! I looked wildly about me, but—for this I thank my gods—the Sun had not yet risen and the Thasser fog was on the water. Nowhere was Paran Leeah, and in desperation I made ready to dive, a foolish thought, for already the waters of the Thasser had borne me far downstream.

Sobbing in my anger at having lost my benefactor and friend, I tried to fight upstream. Small use! In remorse, I abandoned myself to the insistence of the current, meantime taking note of my surroundings. Little though I knew of the Thasser, or indeed of Jador, still I knew that I was above that point at which the houseboat of the hapless Deodum had been anchored, where I had met the girl of my heart such short, eventful hours before.

I waited with bated breath, scanning each pier sharply as it slipped back and away. All manner of sound, strange, muted, distant, entered my ears. The lightened almost imperceptibly, I saw a shadowy hulk form in the distance.

With joy, I redoubled my efforts, my sword, which I had dared not discard, dragging at me. The shadow grew, showing itself without doubt to be a houseboat, but whether it were that of Deodum or not I did not know.

I gained the gunwale, drew myself dripping to the deck. Thoroughly exhausted, I flung myself to the flooring, lay there panting. The warmth of life began to flow back into my body.

Abruptly, something hurled itself upon me. In a moment, I turned into a raging demon, fending off the creature, but I was too weak for combat. Something descended on my skull. The whole universe cracked, and consciousness faded away.

CHAPTER VI - Screams In The Night

WHEN I came to my senses, I was lying on a hard bench, the mournful lapping of the Thasser in my ears. As I opened my eyes I thought surely that I had ascended into the heaven gnawing scream of the double-headed wharf-rats, the cry of the hochin in the monstrous city whose towers and battlements loomed far up as ghostly shadows; the splash of some aquatic serpent rearing up out of the waters. And suddenly into sight came the pier opposite which Deodum's houseboat should be—but was not!

Now indeed, did I feel as if life were of no more moment, and in numb despair I drifted. I had failed to locate the Princess of Werg, had lost Thilna and Paran Leeah. Almost I abandoned myself to the freezing coldness of the Thasser. But then a flare of hope shook me. The houseboat, in common with others having no means of working its way upstream, must then have drifted downstream!

With this thought, I set my frozen body in motion, propelling myself through the waters with the slim hope that I could catch up with the craft, which surely must merely be drifting with the current.

After some time, during which the darkness had of my fathers, for it was no less than the face of an angel into which I looked.

The anxiety disappeared from her lovely eyes, and she smiled. "It must be a strong blow, I see, that could take the life of Darak of Werg!" she exclaimed. "But Paran Leeah—"

"Paran Leeah!" I muttered, struggling to my feet, and taking her hands in mine. "He escaped then!" Comprehension coursed through my mind simultaneous with a blinding pain through my head. Paran Leeah, of course, had thought me dead, and had thought me an intruder in the mist. He had drifted, even as I, had struggled aboard the houseboat, and convinced Thilna of his friendliness.

Then, without hindrance, I tenderly took her in my arms and kissed her—I, who had thought never to see her again. “I like to have died a thousand deaths in my fear of losing you,” I said huskily. “Every moment since then my thoughts have not been of the Princess of Werg, but of you, and always you!”

She smiled roguishly. “Does my warrior wear his heart upon his sleeve, that a mere maid of Jaray should steal it in a momentary meeting?”

“Momentary?” I cried, clasping her slim shoulders and holding her off at arm’s length. “Know you that that moment was as a thousand years, and all too short at that!”

Gently, she placed a finger to my lips. “And thus it was with me,” she said lowly, and placed her lips tenderly on mine. “And thus we plight our troth!” I caught her slim body once again in my arms, nor yet did I ever wish to let go.

A moment later, perhaps circumspectly, Paran Leeah descended to the cabin from the port companionway. He stood looking at me wryly.

“Truly, Darak of Werg,” he exclaimed, “it were well I did not see fit to use the one remaining charge in my flame pistol on the intruder who boarded us last night.”

Laughing, I forgave him, and was about to turn back to my beloved, when a chilling voice rang in our ears:

“Ho! Houseboat! To anchor, and make ready for inspection, upon order of Her Imperial Majesty, the Empress Flavia of Mars!”

WE looked at each other askance. Then, as one man, Paran Leeah and I ran up the starboard companionway, and peered out the small window of the door. Idling alongside our quarter beam, through the yellow waters of the Sunlit Thasser, I saw a low, red official cutter, manned by a dozen harrans gazing toward our craft.

It was daytime now, though the sun, a glorious blazing object, would set shortly. The blow Paran Leeah had dealt had rendered me unconscious for many hours, and during those

hours, the houseboat must have drifted many tens of lothala down the Thasser. Evidently, a general alarm for Paran Leeah and myself had gone out, and the soldiery was scouring the nation for us.

I grasped Paran Leeah's arm, and we quietly descended the companionway.

"Our best plan," I told Thilna and him, "is to say nothing at present." To Thilna I said, "You can swim?" She nodded briefly.

Urging them ahead of me, we ascended the port companionway, to the upper deck, and stood there huddled in the lee of the stern cabin. I looked around the corner of the cabin, saw the trim stern of the radium-powered cutter just as it edged past our quarter beam and ground against us amidships.

"Quickly!" I exclaimed, and motioned the two of them into the water. Puzzledly, but without questioning me, they obeyed, and Thilna lithely let herself over the gunwale, Paran Leeah following after.

In accordance with my instructions, they sank beneath the waters, Thilna throwing a smilingly reproachful look at me as the current bore her away.

At the same moment, came the grate of harran boots on the deck of the houseboat as they boarded it. My short sword still at my hip, I also let myself over the gunwale, just as a group of harrans came into view around the forward cabin.

I worked my way along in the shadow of the slanting hull until I was under the stern. The red cutter, a powerful craft, was now visible, manned, as I knew it would be, by a single harran at the tiller.

Swiftly, out of sight now, I worked my way, almost submerged, between the two craft, dragging at my sword meanwhile. The harrans had bound the two boats together with a bow line, a thick length of tough yamp. I could just see the helmsman, a lanky bearded fellow of

great strength, sitting idly in the stern, waiting for his fellows to complete their inspection of this apparently tenantless craft.

I drew my sword, and with a single, short motion severed the connecting rope.

In the same moment I forced the two craft apart, I drew myself swiftly aboard the cutter.

AT once, as if he had been intuitively warned of my coming, I was leaped upon by the single harran. Indeed, so surprising was his onslaught that I was forced to one knee as I fought. And it were truly death then had I not, in pure accident, lunged against the cutter's port gunwale, causing the craft to list.

My assailant lost his balance scarce long enough to enable me to gain a secure footing, so that he drove me backward until I had the feel of his style. In a trice I had driven him astern, the while he fought with a ferocity that was magnificent. He fought hard, fiercely, and well, and snarling with rage, again forced me back.

As might be expected, the harrans stranded aboard the houseboat soon gathered amidships, yelling encouragement to their fellow, at a loss for a course of action. Most Crillans are averse to water, for some reason, so that it was not until the tide of battle had swung my way that a few of them thought to plunge into the waters to my adversary's rescue.

Then indeed, I saw that I must haste. Should another harran board the cutter, I were dead in all truth.

"Die!" I shouted, and lunged forward. For a moment our blades sparkled in the westering Sun with prismatic brilliance, the face of my man a horrible thing to see, so full of rage was it. I pressed him back, mindful of the necessity of his death. A single lunge, and my blade came away running with good Martian blood. My man uttered a despairing shriek, and plunged overboard into the freezing waters of the Thasser.

One of the harrans in the water had reached the cutter, and was striving to lift himself into the vessel. With grim humor, I ground the heel of my naked foot down on his fingers. With a howl of anguish, he let go.

Exultantly, with a final taunting laugh at the stranded harrans, I sat down in the stern and pressed the starter of the radium motor. No noise at all, here, but immediately the powerful craft began to put on speed, until the fateful houseboat of dead Deodum was far astern.

Then I shouted out loud the names of Thilna and Paran Leeah. My heart almost filled to bursting when I heard a faint shout dead ahead. A few moments later, I held the cold body of my loved one clasped firm in my arms, and Paran Leeah was wringing the last ounce of power from the motor. We were cutting the waters of the Thasser swiftly, bound for Werg.

And now for the first time, I had an opportunity to talk with Thilna. She told me that sometime after I had left her, the docks had begun literally to swarm with harrans, and fearful that one would attempt to board the houseboat, she had, with some difficulty, to be sure, raised anchor, set the rudder, and drifted downstream, hoping I'd follow after. As Paran Leeah had boarded the cutter, she told me, she had almost pushed him back, until accident made him mention my name.

As we spoke, I noticed a peculiar expression on her face.

"Something is worrying you, Thilna?" I inquired. "There is scant need for it, you know. For three score lothala there is no human habitation."

"And after the three score lothala?" she queried, smiling.

I shrugged. "We shall have to abandon the cutter," I admitted. "For it is unlikely that we shall be allowed to use the Potah Locks, where the Thasser must needs drop to a lower level."

SHE dropped her eyes, frowning. Then she lifted them again. "I hope you will be able to forgive me," she said soberly.

“Forgive you?” I demanded. “And pray tell, for what? You speak in riddles, my sweet little one.”

But at that moment, she had no chance to make answer. The Sun had long since descended into his ancient bed, and fog was again drifting over the Thasser. In the last two hours, at varying intervals, barges, propelled upstream by slaves laboriously turning huge wheels, had been passing us.

Thus far, we had no difficulty. Our best move had been to act quite naturally, and openhandedly stand upright and salute the barge men. True, we possessed an official craft, propelled by one of the few radium motors on Mars, but, if given reason, most persons will assume much, and these that we saw assumed us to be in legal possession, since we certainly betrayed no appearance of any guilt.

Now I saw one of these barges plowing upstream toward us, a frightfully lengthy craft, as long as the canal was broad. Too well I knew how such a craft could block us if it so wished. If harrans were perchance aboard, I knew that peril certainly threatened us.

Now my worst fears were realized.

For, seen through fog of night as a long black shadow, the barge was hastily swinging about, presenting her quarter to us, and in a few moments more, our passage would be blocked completely. There were harrans aboard, for a fact!

Paran Leeah desperately played with the radium motor, but already the shaft was spinning at maximum. With a groan I saw that we'd not make it.

The thin air rushed with frightful force past our ears. That shadow in the fog grew. Paran Leeah was now heading the cutter inshore, toward the single, slim passageway that remained. Almost, by a hair's breadth, we made it in safety, but then the barge filled the gap. Paran Leeah swung the tiller, and I like to have gone overboard under the force of our swerve.

Straight for shore, at headlong velocity, we went, and the cutter hit the mudflats with such speed that it flung itself entirely clear of the Thasser before it stopped.

With Thilna in my arms, I literally leaped from the cutter, and fled into the night on the heels of Paran Leeah.

A score of savage voices rang out behind us, exhorting us to stop.

I set Thilna to her feet, and, her cheeks flushed with excitement, she ran like the wind beside me. Soon we had lost ourselves in the canal mists, beating our way across strange, soggy lands, known neither to me nor to my comrades.

We heard no sounds of pursuit, and felt justified in stopping to take council.

“And now,” said Paran Leeah in his gentle voice, “where go we now? The Wergite border is certainly no more than three score lothala distant, which distance we cannot make in the night that remains.”

Abruptly I tensed, blood racing in my veins. Out of the near distance, out of the night, came a scream to make the blood run cold. Again and again it came, a horrid, loathsome, bloodcurdling cacaphony beating nauseously out of the night.

“Jerais!” exclaimed Thilna and Paran Leeah, all in the same breath.

As one, we ran toward the creatures who thus filled the air with their hideous cries.

CHAPTER VII - Pursuit and Death

ABRUPTLY we came to a high wooden fence. It was not constructed to keep marauders out, but to keep jerais within.

With a single whispered word of reassurance, I climbed the fence, and disappeared from the sight of my companions. I dropped quietly to the hard packed ground, the shrieks of the otherwise gentle beasts filling the night.

I made a series of low, clicking sounds, almost a moan, and with elation I saw one of the tenuous-seeming beasts moving out of the fog toward me. It rubbed against me, its marvelously long, silken hair standing out from its transparent body as if, for all the world, it were immersed in some clear-water lake.

I gathered three of the triple-legged beasts about me, and made off toward the corral gate, congratulating myself on my luck. Valuable animals, these, and this was apparently the royal breeding grounds, on which we had inadvertently stumbled.

I quickened my stride, and thus had the ill-luck to stumble upon a feeding trough—a thin, metal affair which toppled with a fearful clanging.

I broke into a run, but ere I reached the gate, driving my beasts before me, a torch flared out wildly, illuminating me in its glare.

A cry of many voices, a clamor, broke out on the night, and now, fearing again for safety, I flung open the gate, and with fumbling fingers, swung it wide. In the single look I had behind me, I saw harrans! True, the royal breeding grounds, guarded against rascals by soldiery!

“PARAN LEEAH!” I shouted, and was rewarded with a quiet voice in my ear. Good! The jerais, intelligent animals, sat down when they saw what was wanted. I threw Thilna to the back of one, she being well-nigh buried in the airlight fluff of hair. The pound of harran feet nearing us, Paran Leeah and I hastily boarded our mounts, and with a single, stroking pressure, to the base of the jerais’ skulls, we were off, scarce able to see for the masses of hair in our faces. Those jerais will ever command my respect. Thin though their limbs, transparent their bodies beneath the fluff of hair, yet there is a speed and strength in them that surpasses comprehension!

We sped with hardly a sense of motion through the ghostly mist, the two tiny moons of Mars riding high above us, astride fairy creatures of silk and light.

For an hour, at what seemed accelerating pace, we were borne across land that had now become desert, fog gone, and safety, so we thought, ahead.

But then, from out of the distance, I heard the rhythm of pounding hoofs. My heart froze within me, as I realized that these jerais we strode were merely intended for the chariots of Crill, while those of the pursuing harrans were selected mounts, bred for speed.

Paran Leeah caught my attention. "Within the hour," he cried out, "they'll have us surrounded."

"And within the hour we'll cross the border into Werg," I made answer. "Onward!"

But though we coaxed our beasts to greater speed, and they seemed to comply, gentle animals, the sounds of pursuit grew.

Now, with Werg but five lothala distant, I could see our pursuers with the eye as I turned. We forged on, up and down the rise and fall of the desert, and once I caught the eyes of Thilna upon me. She murmured something I could not hear. I smiled, gestured an assurance I did not feel.

Abruptly, I saw mountains rising mistily out of the distance, and a choking emotion arose in my throat. Could we but make those mountains, the hilly country of my beloved Werg, all would be well. But I saw no escape, for within the moment, our pursuers would have us.

But a moment later, I noted with horror that Paran Leeah was not beside us. I twisted my head, and saw that his mount had come to a standstill. I saw Paran Leeah jump from the jerai, and calmly await the oncoming horde.

THEY bore down on him, shouting fiercely the war-cries of their ancient nation. Almost they were upon him, slight little prince of far Hioppi, but still he stood there.

Then a wonderous thing came about! The night turned into a hell of flame. The bulbous desert weeds reflected a vivid, leprous red. The stars, vivid though they were, were blotted out in that awful surge of brilliance.

I heard a horrible series of screams that quickly died out to a nothingness. A wave of fetid air struck my nostrils. All was quiet, now. I knew, then, that safety at last had claimed us.

A moment later Thilna, trembling from the reaction, was in my arms, and Paran Leeah's jerai gained our side. He leaped to the ground, smiling quietly.

He patted the flame pistol in his hand. "Useless now," he said. "But it served its best purpose. We are safe. I to wend my way to my distant, helpless country, you, with your mission fulfilled, and the girl of your heart in your arms," and he looked strangely at Thilna. He added, heavily, "But I—without my Empress."

"How say you?" I demanded, struck by that look he gave Thilna. "My mission," and my own heart was heavy as I spoke, "is not fulfilled. True, I have the bracelet, and the princess of my heart, but the Princess of Werg is yet a prisoner in the land of Crill!"

Thilna reached up a gentle white hand and stroked my face. "Darak of Werg," she whispered, glorious eyes alight, "in your arms at this moment you hold, all in one, the princess of your heart, and the elusive Princess of Werg!"

I leaped back from her. "What say you?" I cried in shocked consternation.

"It is true," she insisted. "Paran Leeah, who saw me in the royal palace ere we met again on the Thasser, can vouch for me. It was the Princess of Werg who was spirited from the royal palace by Deodum, for his own evil purposes, on the very night you found me."

"But your hair!" I gasped, feeling as if the very universe were cracking about me. "It is night-black, while that of the princess is golden as the Sun itself!"

Paran Leeah, smiling with amusement, broke in. "I knew Thilna was the princess, Darak of Werg, the moment I set eyes upon her on the Thasser. It was the palace barber, a spy of Deodum's who dyed her hair—and it made an effective disguise. For there are no golden haired women in Crill."

Now the meaning came clear and rage rose within me. “You sent me into Jador on a fool’s mission, then, when already I had attained my object!” I cried furiously. It hurt to be made a fool by her I loved.

“Your object was your princess,” she said, with a flash of her proud eyes. “But was not the Royal Hinusian Bracelet of more worth to Werg than a mere princess? Had I revealed my identity, you would not have dared leave me.”

At this, I could not nurture my fury further, and taking her white hand in my own, I dropped speechlessly to one knee, so overcome was I with emotion.

Paran Leeah suddenly spoke, and I raised my head. “I must go,” he said, his fine eyes shadowed. He had gained his freedom, but had lost his Empress. “A long, happy life, to you, Darak of Werg, and to you, whom I know best as Thilna. It may be that someday we shall meet again, and may that day not be long.”

“And may we meet again,” I murmured as our eyes met in a salute that tokened our eternal friendship, “as King, once more, of Hioppi!”

Then he wheeled, mounted his jerai, and in a moment was lost in the enveloping night.

And I knelt at the feet of my princess, until she knelt beside me.

“Why do you kneel, Darak of Werg?” she said gently, tears sparkling on the edge of her lashes. “A royal Princess of Werg would not disdain in marriage the lowest laborer in the field.”

She added, with a roguish quirk to her lips, “And my dear one, I hope that the mightiest warrior of Werg will not disdain in marriage the lowly maid of Jaray, whom he first met in the houseboat of Deodum on the Thasser.”

Slowly I drew her to her feet, and full upon the lips I kissed her, my beloved, my princess in all truth now. And the scream of my jerai rose into the night, drifted off across the

Martian wastes, as if to cement in fact a love which I felt the destruction of a world could not break asunder.