

# CHAPTER 1

## On the River Iss

I was creeping in the shadows of the forest next to the Lost Sea of Korus. I was trailing a shadowy figure who hugged the darker places on the path, so I knew he was up to some kind of evil purpose.

For six long Martian months I had not left the area around the hateful Temple of the Sun. My beautiful princess was trapped inside, far beneath the surface of Mars. I did not know whether she was alive or dead. Had Phaidor's blade found the heart of the one I loved? Only time would reveal the truth.

One entire Martian year—six hundred and eighty-seven Martian days—must come and go before the cell's door would open again. Half of them had passed, but my last view into that cursed prison cell was still vivid. I saw the beautiful face of Phaidor, daughter of Matai Shang,

distorted with jealous rage and hatred as she leaped toward my beautiful wife and princess with that long, sharp dagger.

I saw the red girl, Thuvia of Ptarth, jump forward to prevent the hideous deed. But the smoke from the burning Temple of Issus blocked out the tragedy. My ears still rang with the single shriek as the knife fell. Then silence, and when the smoke cleared, the revolving temple had shut off all sight or sound from the chamber where the three beautiful women were imprisoned.

There had been much to occupy my attention since that terrible moment; but never for an instant had the memory faded. All the time that I could spare had been spent close to the grim shaft that held the mother of my boy, Carthoris of Helium.

The race of blacks, known as the First Born, that for ages had worshiped Issus, the false goddess of Mars, had been left in a state of chaos after I exposed her as nothing more than a wicked old woman, and our victorious forces had overwhelmed their army and navy.

Fierce green warriors from the sea bottoms of outer Mars had ridden their wild thoats across the sacred gardens of the Temple of Issus and conquered the First Born. The leader of the green men, Tars Tarkas, Jeddak of Thark, now sat on the throne of Issus and ruled the First Born,

while the allies decided the fate of the conquered nation.

I refused the invitation to sit on the ancient throne of the black men. At my suggestion Xodar became Jeddak of the First Born. He had been a dator, or prince—until Issus had degraded him—so his fitness for the high office was not questioned.

With the Valley Dor at peace, the green warriors returned to their desolate sea bottoms, while we of Helium returned to our own country. Here again a throne was offered to me, since no word had been received from Tardos Mors or his son Mors Kajak, the rulers of Helium. Over a year had passed since they set out to explore the northern hemisphere in search of Carthoris, and finally their disheartened people were beginning to accept the vague rumors of their death.

“Let one of their own blood rule you until they return,” I said to the assembled nobles of Helium as I laid my hand on the shoulder of Carthoris.

As one, the nobles and the people lifted their voices in a long cheer. Ten thousand swords sprang on high, and the glorious fighting men of ancient Helium hailed Carthoris as the new Jeddak of Helium. His tenure of office was to be for life or until his great-grandfather or grandfather, should return.

After the arrangements were completed, and

my son sat on the throne, I left for the Valley Dor so I would be close to the Temple of the Sun. I planned to wait there until the day that my lost love's prison cell would open. I left Hor Vastus, Kantos Kan, and my other faithful lieutenants with Carthoris so he would have the benefit of their wisdom and bravery. Only Woola, my Martian hound, went with me.

Tonight the faithful beast moved softly behind me. He was as large as a Shetland pony, with hideous head and frightful fangs—indeed an awesome spectacle, as he crept after me on his ten short, muscular legs. To me he was the perfect example of love and loyalty.

The sneaking figure in front of me was Thurid, a dator of the First Born, whose undying hostility I had earned the time I fought and beat him in the courtyard of the Temple of Issus.

Like most of the First Born, he had apparently accepted the new order of things with good grace and had sworn loyalty to Xodar, his new ruler. But I knew that he hated me, and I was sure that, in his heart, he envied and hated Xodar, so I kept watch on his comings and goings. Several times I had observed him leaving the walled city of the First Born after dark. Tonight he moved miles along the edge of the forest and then left the woods and went toward the shore of the Lost Sea of Korus.

The rays of the nearer moon, swinging low across the valley, touched his jewel-incrusted harness with a thousand changing lights and reflected off the glossy ebony of his smooth hide. Twice he turned his head back toward the forest, like some thief running from the law.

I did not dare follow him out there beneath the moonlight. I wanted him to reach his destination unaware that I was following him, so I could see what he was going to do. So I remained hidden until after Thurid disappeared over the edge of a steep bank. Then I ran across the open plain with Woola close behind.

The mysterious Valley Dor was as quiet as a tomb. Behind me was the forest, pruned and trimmed by the grazing of the plant men. In front was the Lost Sea of Korus, while farther on I saw the shimmering ribbon of Iss, the River of Mystery, where it wound out from beneath the Golden Cliffs to empty into Korus. For countless ages, this river had carried the deluded and unhappy Martians of the outer world on their pilgrimage to this false heaven.

There was no longer a Holy Thern up on the balcony in the Golden Cliffs above the Iss. Helium's navy and the hordes of green warriors had cleared the fortresses and the temples of the Therns when their false religion had been swept away from long-suffering Mars. In a few isolated

countries they still retained their age-old power, but Matai Shang, their hekkador, Father of Therns, had been driven from his temple. Despite our efforts he had escaped with a few of the faithful, and he was now in hiding.

As I came to the edge of the low cliff overlooking the Lost Sea of Korus, I saw Thurid venturing out on the shimmering water in a small skiff. Several similar boats, each with its long paddle, were resting on the beach. As Thurid passed out of sight around some rocks, I shoved one of the boats into the water, and Woola and I followed.

We went along the edge of the sea toward the mouth of the river. The farther moon lay close to the horizon, casting a dense shadow beneath the cliffs that fringed the water. The nearer moon had set and would not rise again for four hours, so I was guaranteed darkness for quite a while.

On and on went the black warrior. Now he was opposite the mouth of the River Iss gushing out of a cavern in the face of the cliff. Without hesitation he turned into the cave, paddling hard against the strong current. We followed more closely now, for Thurid was so focused on forcing his craft up the river that he had no thought for what might be happening behind him.

It seemed hopeless to follow him into that dark cave where I could not see my hand in front of my face. I was ready to give up when a sudden

bend showed a faint glow of light ahead. My quarry was plainly visible again, and in the increasing light from the phosphorescent rock in the roughly arched roof of the cavern, I had no difficulty following him.

It was my first trip on the River Iss, and the things I saw there will live in my memory forever. Terrible as they were, they could not be close to the conditions here before my forces conquered this land. Since we took over, we have stopped the mad pilgrimages down this waterway. The millions who came before had an awful experience. Even now the low islands all along the stream were choked with the skeletons and carcasses of those who had almost completed their journey.

Thurid continued up the river for perhaps a mile and then crossed over to the left bank and pulled his craft up on a low ledge. I did not follow him across the stream. Instead, I stopped close to the opposite wall in the shadow of an overhanging rock. I saw him standing beside his boat, looking up the river, waiting for someone coming from that direction. I soon saw a long boat containing six men approaching.

The white skins, the flowing yellow wigs, and their gorgeous ornaments of gold marked them as Holy Therns. As they drew up beside Thurid, I saw that it was none other than Matai Shang, Father of Therns! The friendliness with which the

two men exchanged greetings filled me with wonder, for the Therns and the First Born were hereditary enemies—never before had I known of two meeting other than in combat.

Evidently the reverses that had recently overtaken both peoples had resulted in this unlikely alliance between these two individuals. I now understood why Thurid had been venturing out into the Valley Dor by night.

I wished that I had found a spot closer to the two men so I could hear their conversation, but it was out of the question for me to try to cross the river now. I'm sure they would have given much to have known how close I was and how easily they might have killed me with their superior force. Thurid and Matai Shang eventually got into the long boat, turned out into the river and forged steadily across in my direction.

I backed up and expected to crash against solid rock but soon saw that I was following another subterranean river that emptied into the Iss at the very point where I had hidden. The other boat was now quite close to me. The noise of their paddles drowned out the sound of mine, but in another instant they might see me in the growing light ahead. Swinging toward the right, I hid my boat on the river's rocky side, while Matai Shang and Thurid approached up the center of the stream.

As they came nearer I heard the voices of Thurid and the Father of Therns as they argued. The black dator was saying, "I tell you, Thern, that I only wish vengeance on John Carter, Prince of Helium. I am leading you into no trap. What could I gain by betraying you to those who have ruined my nation and my house?"

"Let us stop here a moment so I may hear your plans," replied the hekkador, "and then we can proceed with a better understanding of our duties and obligations."

"There are no obligations, Father of Therns," continued the First Born. "Thurid, Dator of Issus, has no price. When the thing has been accomplished, I only ask that you see that I am received at some court that is still loyal to our ancient faith. I cannot return to the Valley Dor or anywhere else within the power of the Prince of Helium."

"It shall be as you wish, Dator," replied Matai Shang, "and I will be even more pleased if you restore my daughter, Phaidor, to me and place within my power Dejah Thoris, Princess of Helium.

"Ah," he continued with a malicious snarl, "the Earth man shall suffer for the indignities he has forced on us. Nothing will be too vile to inflict upon his princess. I wish it were in my power to force him to watch what we do to the

red woman.”

“You shall have your way with her before another day has passed, Matai Shang,” said Thurid.

“I have heard of the Temple of the Sun,” replied Matai Shang, “but I never thought that its prisoners could be released before the allotted year of their incarceration. How can you accomplish the impossible?”

“Only Issus knew how, but it was never her way to divulge her secrets. By chance, after her death, I discovered an ancient plan of the temple, and there I found directions for reaching the cells,” Thurid replied.

“Let us proceed. I must trust you, yet at the same time you must trust me, for we are six to your one,” said Matai Shang.

“I do not fear you, and you need not fear me. Our hatred of the common enemy is enough of a bond to insure our loyalty to each other. And after we have defiled the Princess of Helium, there will be still greater reason to maintain our allegiance—unless I greatly mistake the temper and vengeance of her lord and husband.”

Matai Shang nodded in agreement and commanded the paddlers to move the boat upstream. I wanted to rush over and slay the two evil plotters, but I saw the rashness of such an act. It would cut down the only man who could lead

the way to the prison holding my Dejah Thoris. If Thurid took Matai Shang to that hallowed spot, then he would also take John Carter, Prince of Helium.

With silent paddle, I swung slowly into the wake of the larger craft.