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Chapter 11 - When Hell Broke Loose

Early the next morning Xodar and I commenced work upon our plans for escape. First I had him sketch upon the stone floor of our cell as accurate a map of the south polar regions as was possible with the crude instruments at our disposal--a buckle from my harness, and the sharp edge of the wondrous gem I had taken from Sator Throg.

From this I computed the general direction of Helium and the distance at which it lay from the opening which led to Omean.

Then I had him draw a map of Omean, indicating plainly the position of Shador and of the opening in the dome which led to the outer world.

These I studied until they were indelibly imprinted in my memory. From Xodar I learned the duties and customs of the guards who patrolled Shador. It seemed that during the hours set aside for sleep only one man was on duty at a time. He paced a beat that passed around the prison, at a distance of about a hundred feet from the building.

The pace of the sentries, Xodar said, was very slow, requiring nearly ten minutes to make a single round. This meant that for practically five minutes at a time each side of the prison was unguarded as the sentry pursued his snail like pace upon the opposite side.

"This information you ask," said Xodar, "will be all very valuable AFTER we get out, but nothing that you have asked has any bearing on that first and most important consideration."

"We will get out all right," I replied, laughing. "Leave that to me."

"When shall we make the attempt?" he asked.

"The first night that finds a small craft moored near the shore of Shador," I replied.

"But how will you know that any craft is moored near Shador? The windows are far beyond our reach."

"Not so, friend Xodar; look!"

With a bound I sprang to the bars of the window opposite us, and took a quick survey of the scene without.

Several small craft and two large battleships lay within a hundred yards of Shador.

"To-night," I thought, and was just about to voice my decision to Xodar, when, without warning, the door of our prison opened and a guard stepped in.

If the fellow saw me there our chances of escape might quickly go glimmering, for I knew that they would put me in irons if they had the slightest conception of the wonderful agility which my earthly muscles gave me upon Mars.

The man had entered and was standing facing the centre of the room, so that his back was toward me. Five feet above me was the top of a partition wall separating our cell from the next.

There was my only chance to escape detection. If the fellow turned, I was lost; nor could I have dropped to the floor undetected, since he was no nearly below me that I would have struck him had I done so.

"Where is the white man?" cried the guard of Xodar. "Issus commands his presence." He started to turn to see if I were in another part of the cell.

I scrambled up the iron grating of the window until I could catch a good footing on the sill with one foot; then I let go my hold and sprang for the partition top.

"What was that?" I heard the deep voice of the black bellow as my metal grated against the stone wall as I slipped over. Then I dropped lightly to the floor of the cell beyond.

"Where is the white slave?" again cried the guard.

"I know not," replied Xodar. "He was here even as you entered. I am not his keeper--go find him."

The black grumbled something that I could not understand, and then I heard him unlocking the door into one of the other cells on the further side. Listening intently, I caught the sound as the door closed behind him. Then I sprang once more to the top of the partition and dropped into my own cell beside the astonished Xodar.

"Do you see now how we will escape?" I asked him in a whisper.

"I see how you may," he replied, "but I am no wiser than before as to how I am to pass these walls. Certain it is that I cannot bounce over them as you do."

We heard the guard moving about from cell to cell, and finally, his rounds completed, he again entered ours. When his eyes fell upon me they fairly bulged from his head.

"By the shell of my first ancestor!" he roared. "Where have you been?"

"I have been in prison since you put me here yesterday," I answered. "I was in this room when you entered. You had better look to your eyesight."

He glared at me in mingled rage and relief.

"Come," he said. "Issus commands your presence."

He conducted me outside the prison, leaving Xodar behind. There we found several other guards, and with them the red Martian youth who occupied another cell upon Shador.

The journey I had taken to the Temple of Issus on the preceding day was repeated. The guards kept the red boy and myself separated, so that we had no opportunity to continue the conversation that had been interrupted the previous night.

The youth's face had haunted me. Where had I seen him before. There was something strangely familiar in every line of him; in his carriage, his manner of speaking, his gestures. I could have sworn that I knew him, and yet I knew too that I had never seen him before.

When we reached the gardens of Issus we were led away from the temple instead of toward it. The way wound through enchanted parks to a mighty wall that towered a hundred feet in air.

Massive gates gave egress upon a small plain, surrounded by the same gorgeous forests that I had seen at the foot of the Golden Cliffs.

Crowds of blacks were strolling in the same direction that our guards were leading us, and with them mingled my old friends the plant men and great white apes.

The brutal beasts moved among the crowd as pet dogs might. If they were in the way the blacks pushed them roughly to one side, or whacked them with the flat of a sword, and the animals slunk away as in great fear.

Presently we came upon our destination, a great amphitheatre situated at the further edge of the plain, and about half a mile beyond the garden walls.

Through a massive arched gateway the blacks poured in to take their seats, while our guards led us to a smaller entrance near one end of the structure.

Through this we passed into an enclosure beneath the seats, where we found a number of other prisoners herded together under guard. Some of them were in irons, but for the most part they seemed sufficiently awed by the presence of their guards to preclude any possibility of attempted escape.

During the trip from Shador I had had no opportunity to talk with my fellow-prisoner, but now that we were safely within the barred paddock our guards abated their watchfulness, with the result that I found myself able to approach the red Martian youth for whom I felt such a strange attraction.

"What is the object of this assembly?" I asked him. "Are we to fight for the edification of the First Born, or is it something worse than that?"

"It is a part of the monthly rites of Issus," he replied, "in which black men wash the sins from their souls in the blood of men from the outer world. If, perchance, the black is killed, it is evidence of his disloyalty to Issus-- the unpardonable sin. If he lives through the contest he is held acquitted of the charge that forced the sentence of the rites, as it is called, upon him.

"The forms of combat vary. A number of us may be pitted together against an equal number, or twice the number of blacks; or singly we may be sent forth to face wild beasts, or some famous black warrior."

"And if we are victorious," I asked, "what then--freedom?"

He laughed.

"Freedom, forsooth. The only freedom for us death. None who enters the domains of the First Born ever leave. If we prove able fighters we are permitted to fight often. If we are not mighty fighters--" He shrugged his shoulders. "Sooner or later we die in the arena."

"And you have fought often?" I asked.

"Very often," he replied. "It is my only pleasure. Some hundred black devils have I accounted for during nearly a year of the rites of Issus. My mother would be very proud could she only know how well I have maintained the traditions of my father's prowess."

"Your father must have been a mighty warrior!" I said. "I have known most of the warriors of Barsoom in my time; doubtless I knew him. Who was he?"

"My father was--"

"Come, calots!" cried the rough voice of a guard. "To the slaughter with you," and roughly we were hustled to the steep incline that led to the chambers far below which let out upon the arena.

The amphitheatre, like all I had ever seen upon Barsoom, was built in a large excavation. Only the highest seats, which formed the low wall surrounding the pit, were above the level of the ground. The arena itself was far below the surface.

Just beneath the lowest tier of seats was a series of barred cages on a level with the surface of the arena. Into these we were herded. But, unfortunately, my youthful friend was not of those who occupied a cage with me.

Directly opposite my cage was the throne of Issus. Here the horrid creature squatted, surrounded by a hundred slave maidens sparkling in jewelled trappings. Brilliant cloths of many hues and strange patterns formed the soft cushion covering of the dais upon which they reclined about her.

On four sides of the throne and several feet below it stood three solid ranks of heavily armed soldiery, elbow to elbow. In front of these were the high dignitaries of this mock heaven--gleaming blacks bedecked with precious stones, upon their foreheads the insignia of their rank set in circles of gold.

On both sides of the throne stretched a solid mass of humanity from top to bottom of the amphitheatre. There were as many women as men, and each was clothed in the wondrously wrought harness of his station and his house. With each black was from one to three slaves, drawn from the domains of the therns and from the outer world. The blacks are all "noble." There is no peasantry among the First Born. Even the lowest soldier is a god, and has his slaves to wait upon him.

The First Born do no work. The men fight--that is a sacred privilege and duty; to fight and die for Issus. The women do nothing, absolutely nothing. Slaves wash them, slaves dress them, slaves feed them. There are some, even, who have slaves that talk for them, and I saw one who sat during the rites with closed eyes while a slave narrated to her the events that were transpiring within the arena.

The first event of the day was the Tribute to Issus. It marked the end of those poor unfortunates who had looked upon the divine glory of the goddess a full year before. There were ten of them--splendid beauties from the proud courts of mighty Jeddaks and from the temples of the Holy Therns. For a year they had served in the retinue of Issus; to-day they were to pay the price of this divine preferment with their lives; tomorrow they would grace the tables of the court functionaries.

A huge black entered the arena with the young women. Carefully he inspected them, felt of their limbs and poked them in the ribs. Presently he selected one of their number whom he led before the throne of Issus. He addressed some words to the goddess which I could not hear. Issus nodded her head. The black raised his hands above his head in token of salute, grasped the girl by the wrist, and dragged her from the arena through a small doorway below the throne.

"Issus will dine well to-night," said a prisoner beside me.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"That was her dinner that old Thabis is taking to the kitchens. Didst not note how carefully he selected the plumpest and tenderest of the lot?"

I growled out my curses on the monster sitting opposite us on the gorgeous throne.

"Fume not," admonished my companion; "you will see far worse than that if you live even a month among the First Born."

I turned again in time to see the gate of a nearby cage thrown open and three monstrous white apes spring into the arena. The girls shrank in a frightened group in the centre of the enclosure.

One was on her knees with imploring hands outstretched toward Issus; but the hideous deity only leaned further forward in keener anticipation of the entertainment to come. At length the apes spied the huddled knot of terror-stricken maidens and with demoniacal shrieks of bestial frenzy, charged upon them.

A wave of mad fury surged over me. The cruel cowardliness of the power-drunk creature whose malignant mind conceived such frightful forms of torture stirred to their uttermost depths my resentment and my manhood. The blood-red haze that presaged death to my foes swam before my eyes.

The guard lolled before the unbarred gate of the cage which confined me. What need of bars, indeed, to keep those poor victims from rushing into the arena which the edict of the gods had appointed as their death place!

A single blow sent the black unconscious to the ground. Snatching up his long-sword, I sprang into the arena. The apes were almost upon the maidens, but a couple of mighty bounds were all my earthly muscles required to carry me to the centre of the sand-strewn floor.

For an instant silence reigned in the great amphitheatre, then a wild shout arose from the cages of the doomed. My long-sword circled whirring through the air, and a great ape sprawled, headless, at the feet of the fainting girls.

The other apes turned now upon me, and as I stood facing them a sullen roar from the audience answered the wild cheers from the cages. From the tail of my eye I saw a score of guards rushing across the glistening sand toward me. Then a figure broke from one of the cages behind them. It was the youth whose personality so fascinated me.

He paused a moment before the cages, with upraised sword.

"Come, men of the outer world!" he shouted. "Let us make our deaths worth while, and at the back of this unknown warrior turn this day's Tribute to Issus into an orgy of revenge that will echo through the ages and cause black skins to blanch at each repetition of the rites of Issus. Come! The racks without your cages are filled with blades."

Without waiting to note the outcome of his plea, he turned and bounded toward me. From every cage that harboured red men a thunderous shout went up in answer to his exhortation. The inner guards went down beneath howling mobs, and the cages vomited forth their inmates hot with the lust to kill.

The racks that stood without were stripped of the swords with which the prisoners were to have been armed to enter their allotted combats, and a swarm of determined warriors sped to our support.

The great apes, towering in all their fifteen feet of height, had gone down before my sword while the charging guards were still some distance away. Close behind them pursued the youth. At my back were the young girls, and as it was in their service that I fought, I remained standing there to meet my inevitable death, but with the determination to give such an account of myself as would long be remembered in the land of the First Born.

I noted the marvellous speed of the young red man as he raced after the guards. Never had I seen such speed in any Martian. His leaps and bounds were little short of those which my earthly muscles had produced to create such awe and respect on the part of the green Martians into whose hands I had fallen on that long-gone day that had seen my first advent upon Mars.

The guards had not reached me when he fell upon them from the rear, and as they turned, thinking from the fierceness of his onslaught that a dozen were attacking them, I rushed them from my side.

In the rapid fighting that followed I had little chance to note aught else than the movements of my immediate adversaries, but now and again I caught a fleeting glimpse of a purring sword and a lightly springing figure of sinewy steel that filled my heart with a strange yearning and a mighty but unaccountable pride.

On the handsome face of the boy a grim smile played, and ever and anon he threw a taunting challenge to the foes that faced him. In this and other ways his manner of fighting was similar to that which had always marked me on the field of combat.

Perhaps it was this vague likeness which made me love the boy, while the awful havoc that his sword played amongst the blacks filled my soul with a tremendous respect for him.

For my part, I was fighting as I had fought a thousand times before--now sidestepping a wicked thrust, now stepping quickly in to let my sword's point drink deep in a foeman's heart, before it buried itself in the throat of his companion.

We were having a merry time of it, we two, when a great body of Issus' own guards were ordered into the arena. On they came with fierce cries, while from every side the

armed prisoners swarmed upon them.

For half an hour it was as though all hell had broken loose. In the walled confines of the arena we fought in an inextricable mass--howling, cursing, blood-streaked demons; and ever the sword of the young red man flashed beside me.

Slowly and by repeated commands I had succeeded in drawing the prisoners into a rough formation about us, so that at last we fought formed into a rude circle in the centre of which were the doomed maids.

Many had gone down on both sides, but by far the greater havoc had been wrought in the ranks of the guards of Issus. I could see messengers running swiftly through the audience, and as they passed the nobles there unsheathed their swords and sprang into the arena. They were going to annihilate us by force of numbers--that was quite evidently their plan.

I caught a glimpse of Issus leaning far forward upon her throne, her hideous countenance distorted in a horrid grimace of hate and rage, in which I thought I could distinguish an expression of fear. It was that face that inspired me to the thing that followed.

Quickly I ordered fifty of the prisoners to drop back behind us and form a new circle about the maidens.

"Remain and protect them until I return," I commanded.

Then, turning to those who formed the outer line, I cried, "Down with Issus! Follow me to the throne; we will reap vengeance where vengeance is deserved."

The youth at my side was the first to take up the cry of "Down with Issus!" and then at my back and from all sides rose a hoarse shout, "To the throne! To the throne!"

As one man we moved, an irresistible fighting mass, over the bodies of dead and dying foes toward the gorgeous throne of the Martian deity. Hordes of the doughtiest fighting-men of the First Born poured from the audience to check our progress. We mowed them down before us as they had been paper men.

"To the seats, some of you!" I cried as we approached the arena's barrier wall. "Ten of us can take the throne," for I had seen that Issus' guards had for the most part entered the fray within the arena.

On both sides of me the prisoners broke to left and right for the seats, vaulting the low wall with dripping swords lusting for the crowded victims who awaited them.

In another moment the entire amphitheatre was filled with the shrieks of the dying and the wounded, mingled with the clash of arms and triumphant shouts of the victors.

Side by side the young red man and I, with perhaps a dozen others, fought our way to the foot of the throne. The remaining guards, reinforced by the high dignitaries and nobles of the First Born, closed in between us and Issus, who sat leaning far forward upon her carved sorapus bench, now screaming high-pitched commands to her followers, now hurling blighting curses upon those who sought to desecrate her godhood.

The frightened slaves about her trembled in wide-eyed expectancy, knowing not whether to pray for our victory or our defeat. Several among them, proud daughters no doubt of some of Barsoom's noblest warriors, snatched swords from the hands of the fallen and fell upon the guards of Issus, but they were soon cut down; glorious martyrs to a hopeless cause.

The men with us fought well, but never since Tars Tarkas and I fought out that long, hot afternoon shoulder to shoulder against the hordes of Warhoon in the dead sea-bottom before Thark, had I seen two men fight to such good purpose and with such unconquerable ferocity as the young red man and I fought that day before the throne of Issus, Goddess of Death, and of Life Eternal.

Man by man those who stood between us and the carved sorapus wood bench went down before our blades. Others swarmed in to fill the breach, but inch by inch, foot by foot we won nearer and nearer to our goal.

Presently a cry went up from a section of the stands near by--"Rise slaves!" "Rise slaves!" it rose and fell until it swelled to a mighty volume of sound that swept in great billows around the entire amphitheatre.

For an instant, as though by common assent, we ceased our fighting to look for the meaning of this new note nor did it take but a moment to translate its significance. In all parts of the structure the female slaves were falling upon their masters with whatever weapon came first to hand. A dagger snatched from the harness of her mistress was waved aloft by some fair slave, its shimmering blade crimson with the lifeblood of its owner; swords plucked from the bodies of the dead about them; heavy ornaments which could be turned into bludgeons--such were the implements with which these fair women wreaked the long-pent vengeance which at best could but partially recompense them for the unspeakable cruelties and indignities which their black masters had heaped upon them. And those who could find no other weapons used their strong fingers and their gleaming teeth.

It was at once a sight to make one shudder and to cheer; but in a brief second we were engaged once more in our own battle with only the unquenchable battle cry of the women to remind us that they still fought--"Rise slaves!" "Rise slaves!"

Only a single thin rank of men now stood between us and Issus. Her face was blue with terror. Foam flecked her lips. She seemed too paralysed with fear to move. Only the youth and I fought now. The others all had fallen, and I was like to have gone down too from a nasty long-sword cut had not a hand reached out from behind my adversary and clutched his elbow as the blade was falling upon me. The youth sprang to my side and ran his sword through the fellow before he could recover to deliver another blow.

I should have died even then but for that as my sword was tight wedged in the breastbone of a Dator of the First Born. As the fellow went down I snatched his sword from him and over his prostrate body looked into the eyes of the one whose quick hand had saved me from the first cut of his sword--it was Phaidor, daughter of Matai Shang.

"Fly, my Prince!" she cried. "It is useless to fight them longer. All within the arena are dead. All who charged the throne are dead but you and this youth. Only among the seats are there left any of your fighting-men, and they and the slave women are fast being cut down. Listen! You can scarce hear the battle-cry of the women now for nearly all are dead. For each one of you there are ten thousand blacks within the domains of the First Born. Break for the open and the sea of Korus. With your mighty sword arm you may yet win to the Golden Cliffs and the templed gardens of the Holy Therns. There tell your story to Matai Shang, my father. He will keep you, and together you may find a way to rescue me. Fly while there is yet a bare chance for flight."

But that was not my mission, nor could I see much to be preferred in the cruel hospitality of the Holy Therns to that of the First Born.

"Down with Issus!" I shouted, and together the boy and I took up the fight once more. Two blacks went down with our swords in their vitals, and we stood face to face with

Issus. As my sword went up to end her horrid career her paralysis left her, and with an ear-piercing shriek she turned to flee. Directly behind her a black gulf suddenly yawned in the flooring of the dais. She sprang for the opening with the youth and I close at her heels. Her scattered guard rallied at her cry and rushed for us. A blow fell upon the head of the youth. He staggered and would have fallen, but I caught him in my left arm and turned to face an infuriated mob of religious fanatics crazed by the affront I had put upon their goddess, just as Issus disappeared into the black depths beneath me.