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[Authors](#)
[Contact](#)

[The Gods of Mars](#)

[Edgar Rice Burroughs](#)

This Book:
[Contents](#)
[Previous Chapter](#)
[Next Chapter](#)

Chapter 13 - A Break for Liberty

Xodar listened in incredulous astonishment to my narration of the events which had transpired within the arena at the rites of Issus. He could scarce conceive, even though he had already professed his doubt as to the deity of Issus, that one could threaten her with sword in hand and not be blasted into a thousand fragments by the mere fury of her divine wrath.

"It is the final proof," he said, at last. "No more is needed to completely shatter the last remnant of my superstitious belief in the divinity of Issus. She is only a wicked old woman, wielding a mighty power for evil through machinations that have kept her own people and all Barsoom in religious ignorance for ages."

"She is still all-powerful here, however," I replied. "So it behooves us to leave at the first moment that appears at all propitious."

"I hope that you may find a propitious moment," he said, with a laugh, "for it is certain that in all my life I have never seen one in which a prisoner of the First Born might escape."

"To-night will do as well as any," I replied.

"It will soon be night," said Xodar. "How may I aid in the adventure?"

"Can you swim?" I asked him.

"No slimy silian that haunts the depths of Korus is more at home in water than is Xodar," he replied.

"Good. The red one in all probability cannot swim," I said, "since there is scarce enough water in all their domains to float the tiniest craft. One of us therefore will have to support him through the sea to the craft we select. I had hoped that we might make the entire distance below the surface, but I fear that the red youth could not thus perform the trip. Even the bravest of the brave among them are terrorized at the mere thought of deep water, for it has been ages since their forebears saw a lake, a river or a sea."

"The red one is to accompany us?" asked Xodar.

"Yes."

"It is well. Three swords are better than two. Especially when the third is as mighty as this fellow's. I have seen him battle in the arena at the rites of Issus many times. Never, until I saw you fight, had I seen one who seemed unconquerable even in the face of great odds. One might think you two master and pupil, or father and son. Come to recall his face there is a resemblance between you. It is very marked when you fight--there is the same grim smile, the same maddening contempt for your adversary apparent in every movement of your bodies and in every changing expression of your faces."

"Be that as it may, Xodar, he is a great fighter. I think that we will make a trio difficult to overcome, and if my friend Tars Tarkas, Jeddak of Thark, were but one of us we could fight our way from one end of Barsoom to the other even though the whole world were pitted against us."

"It will be," said Xodar, "when they find from whence you have come. That is but one of the superstitions which Issus has foisted upon a credulous humanity. She works through the Holy Therns who are as ignorant of her real self as are the Barsoomians of the outer world. Her decrees are borne to the therns written in blood upon a strange parchment. The poor deluded fools think that they are receiving the revelations of a goddess through some supernatural agency, since they find these messages upon their guarded altars to which none could have access without detection. I myself have borne these messages for Issus for many years. There is a long tunnel from the temple of Issus to the principal temple of Matai Shang. It was dug ages ago by the slaves of the First Born in such utter secrecy that no thern ever guessed its existence."

"The therns for their part have temples dotted about the entire civilized world. Here priests whom the people never see communicate the doctrine of the Mysterious River Iss, the Valley Dor, and the Lost Sea of Korus to persuade the poor deluded creatures to take the voluntary pilgrimage that swells the wealth of the Holy Therns and adds to the numbers of their slaves."

"Thus the therns are used as the principal means for collecting the wealth and labour that the First Born wrest from them as they need it. Occasionally the First Born themselves make raids upon the outer world. It is then that they capture many females of the royal houses of the red men, and take the newest in battleships and the trained artisans who build them, that they may copy what they cannot create."

"We are a non-productive race, priding ourselves upon our non-productiveness. It is criminal for a First Born to labour or invent. That is the work of the lower orders, who live merely that the First Born may enjoy long lives of luxury and idleness. With us fighting is all that counts; were it not for that there would be more of the First Born than all the creatures of Barsoom could support, for in so far as I know none of us ever dies a natural death. Our females would live for ever but for the fact that we tire of them and remove them to make place for others. Issus alone of all is protected against death. She has lived for countless ages."

"Would not the other Barsoomians live for ever but for the doctrine of the voluntary pilgrimage which drags them to the bosom of Iss at or before their thousandth year?" I asked him.

"I feel now that there is no doubt but that they are precisely the same species of creature as the First Born, and I hope that I shall live to fight for them in atonement of the sins I have committed against them through the ignorance born of generations of false teaching."

As he ceased speaking a weird call rang out across the waters of Omean. I had heard it at the same time the previous evening and knew that it marked the ending of the day, when the men of Omean spread their silks upon the deck of battleship and cruiser and fall into the dreamless sleep of Mars.

Our guard entered to inspect us for the last time before the new day broke upon the world above. His duty was soon performed and the heavy door of our prison closed behind him --we were alone for the night.

I gave him time to return to his quarters, as Xodar said he probably would do, then I sprang to the grated window and surveyed the nearby waters. At a little distance from the island, a quarter of a mile perhaps, lay a monster battleship, while between her and the shore were a number of smaller cruisers and one-man scouts. Upon the battleship alone was there a watch. I could see him plainly in the upper works of the ship, and as I watched I saw him spread his sleeping silks upon the tiny platform in which he was stationed. Soon he threw himself at full length upon his couch. The discipline on Omean was lax indeed. But it is not to be wondered at since no enemy guessed the existence upon Barsoom of such a fleet, or even of the First Born, or the Sea of Omean. Why indeed should they maintain a watch?

Presently I dropped to the floor again and talked with Xodar, describing the various craft I had seen.

"There is one there," he said, "my personal property, built to carry five men, that is the swiftest of the swift. If we can board her we can at least make a memorable run for liberty," and then he went on to describe to me the equipment of the boat; her engines, and all that went to make her the flier that she was.

In his explanation I recognized a trick of gearing that Kantos Kan had taught me that time we sailed under false names in the navy of Zodanga beneath Sab Than, the Prince. And I knew then that the First Born had stolen it from the ships of Helium, for only they are thus geared. And I knew too that Xodar spoke the truth when he lauded the speed of his little craft, for nothing that cleaves the thin air of Mars can approximate the speed of the ships of Helium.

We decided to wait for an hour at least until all the stragglers had sought their silks. In the meantime I was to fetch the red youth to our cell so that we would be in readiness to make our rash break for freedom together.

I sprang to the top of our partition wall and pulled myself up on to it. There I found a flat surface about a foot in width and along this I walked until I came to the cell in which I saw the boy sitting upon his bench. He had been leaning back against the wall looking up at the glowing dome above Omean, and when he spied me balancing upon the partition wall above him his eyes opened wide in astonishment. Then a wide grin of appreciative understanding spread across his countenance.

As I stooped to drop to the floor beside him he motioned me to wait, and coming close below me whispered: "Catch my hand; I can almost leap to the top of that wall myself. I have tried it many times, and each day I come a little closer. Some day I should have been able to make it."

I lay upon my belly across the wall and reached my hand far down toward him. With a little run from the centre of the cell he sprang up until I grasped his outstretched hand, and thus I pulled him to the wall's top beside me.

"You are the first jumper I ever saw among the red men of Barsoom," I said.

He smiled. "It is not strange. I will tell you why when we have more time."

Together we returned to the cell in which Xodar sat; descending to talk with him until the hour had passed.

There we made our plans for the immediate future, binding ourselves by a solemn oath to fight to the death for one another against whatsoever enemies should confront us, for we knew that even should we succeed in escaping the First Born we might still have a whole world against us--the power of religious superstition is mighty.

It was agreed that I should navigate the craft after we had reached her, and that if we made the outer world in safety we should attempt to reach Helium without a stop.

"Why Helium?" asked the red youth.

"I am a prince of Helium," I replied.

He gave me a peculiar look, but said nothing further on the subject. I wondered at the time what the significance of his expression might be, but in the press of other matters it soon left my mind, nor did I have occasion to think of it again until later.

"Come," I said at length, "now is as good a time as any. Let us go."

Another moment found me at the top of the partition wall again with the boy beside me. Unbuckling my harness I snapped it together with a single long strap which I lowered to the waiting Xodar below. He grasped the end and was soon sitting beside us.

"How simple," he laughed.

"The balance should be even simpler," I replied. Then I raised myself to the top of the outer wall of the prison, just so that I could peer over and locate the passing sentry. For a matter of five minutes I waited and then he came in sight on his slow and snail-like beat about the structure.

I watched him until he had made the turn at the end of the building which carried him out of sight of the side of the prison that was to witness our dash for freedom. The moment his form disappeared I grasped Xodar and drew him to the top of the wall. Placing one end of my harness strap in his hands I lowered him quickly to the ground below. Then the boy grasped the strap and slid down to Xodar's side.

In accordance with our arrangement they did not wait for me, but walked slowly toward the water, a matter of a hundred yards, directly past the guard-house filled with sleeping soldiers.

They had taken scarce a dozen steps when I too dropped to the ground and followed them leisurely toward the shore. As I passed the guard-house the thought of all the good blades lying there gave me pause, for if ever men were to have need of swords it was my companions and I on the perilous trip upon which we were about to embark.

I glanced toward Xodar and the youth and saw that they had slipped over the edge of the dock into the water. In accordance with our plan they were to remain there clinging to the metal rings which studded the concrete-like substance of the dock at the water's level, with only their mouths and noses above the surface of the sea, until I should join them.

The lure of the swords within the guard-house was strong upon me, and I hesitated a moment, half inclined to risk the attempt to take the few we needed. That he who hesitates is lost proved itself a true aphorism in this instance, for another moment saw me creeping stealthily toward the door of the guard-house.

Gently I pressed it open a crack; enough to discover a dozen blacks stretched upon their silks in profound slumber. At the far side of the room a rack held the swords and firearms of the men. Warily I pushed the door a trifle wider to admit my body. A hinge gave out a resentful groan. One of the men stirred, and my heart stood still. I cursed

myself for a fool to have thus jeopardized our chances for escape; but there was nothing for it now but to see the adventure through.

With a spring as swift and as noiseless as a tiger's I lit beside the guardsman who had moved. My hands hovered about his throat awaiting the moment that his eyes should open. For what seemed an eternity to my overwrought nerves I remained poised thus. Then the fellow turned again upon his side and resumed the even respiration of deep slumber.

Carefully I picked my way between and over the soldiers until I had gained the rack at the far side of the room. Here I turned to survey the sleeping men. All were quiet. Their regular breathing rose and fell in a soothing rhythm that seemed to me the sweetest music I ever had heard.

Gingerly I drew a long-sword from the rack. The scraping of the scabbard against its holder as I withdrew it sounded like the filing of cast iron with a great rasp, and I looked to see the room immediately filled with alarmed and attacking guardsmen. But none stirred.

The second sword I withdrew noiselessly, but the third clanked in its scabbard with a frightful din. I knew that it must awaken some of the men at least, and was on the point of forestalling their attack by a rapid charge for the doorway, when again, to my intense surprise, not a black moved. Either they were wondrous heavy sleepers or else the noises that I made were really much less than they seemed to me.

I was about to leave the rack when my attention was attracted by the revolvers. I knew that I could not carry more than one away with me, for I was already too heavily laden to move quietly with any degree of safety or speed. As I took one of them from its pin my eye fell for the first time on an open window beside the rack. Ah, here was a splendid means of escape, for it let directly upon the dock, not twenty feet from the water's edge.

And as I congratulated myself, I heard the door opposite me open, and there looking me full in the face stood the officer of the guard. He evidently took in the situation at a glance and appreciated the gravity of it as quickly as I, for our revolvers came up simultaneously and the sounds of the two reports were as one as we touched the buttons on the grips that exploded the cartridges.

I felt the wind of his bullet as it whizzed past my ear, and at the same instant I saw him crumple to the ground. Where I hit him I do not know, nor if I killed him, for scarce had he started to collapse when I was through the window at my rear. In another second the waters of Omean closed above my head, and the three of us were making for the little flier a hundred yards away.

Xodar was burdened with the boy, and I with the three long-swords. The revolver I had dropped, so that while we were both strong swimmers it seemed to me that we moved at a snail's pace through the water. I was swimming entirely beneath the surface, but Xodar was compelled to rise often to let the youth breathe, so it was a wonder that we were not discovered long before we were.

In fact we reached the boat's side and were all aboard before the watch upon the battleship, aroused by the shots, detected us. Then an alarm gun bellowed from a ship's bow, its deep boom reverberating in deafening tones beneath the rocky dome of Omean.

Instantly the sleeping thousands were awake. The decks of a thousand monster craft teemed with fighting-men, for an alarm on Omean was a thing of rare occurrence.

We cast away before the sound of the first gun had died, and another second saw us rising swiftly from the surface of the sea. I lay at full length along the deck with the levers and buttons of control before me. Xodar and the boy were stretched directly behind me, prone also that we might offer as little resistance to the air as possible.

"Rise high," whispered Xodar. "They dare not fire their heavy guns toward the dome--the fragments of the shells would drop back among their own craft. If we are high enough our keel plates will protect us from rifle fire."

I did as he bade. Below us we could see the men leaping into the water by hundreds, and striking out for the small cruisers and one-man fliers that lay moored about the big ships. The larger craft were getting under way, following us rapidly, but not rising from the water.

"A little to your right," cried Xodar, for there are no points of compass upon Omean where every direction is due north.

The pandemonium that had broken out below us was deafening. Rifles cracked, officers shouted orders, men yelled directions to one another from the water and from the decks of myriad boats, while through all ran the purr of countless propellers cutting water and air.

I had not dared pull my speed lever to the highest for fear of overrunning the mouth of the shaft that passed from Omean's dome to the world above, but even so we were hitting a clip that I doubt has ever been equalled on the windless sea.

The smaller fliers were commencing to rise toward us when Xodar shouted: "The shaft! The shaft! Dead ahead," and I saw the opening, black and yawning in the glowing dome of this underworld.

A ten-man cruiser was rising directly in front to cut off our escape. It was the only vessel that stood in our way, but at the rate that it was traveling it would come between us and the shaft in plenty of time to thwart our plans.

It was rising at an angle of about forty-five degrees dead ahead of us, with the evident intention of combing us with grappling hooks from above as it skimmed low over our deck.

There was but one forlorn hope for us, and I took it. It was useless to try to pass over her, for that would have allowed her to force us against the rocky dome above, and we were already too near that as it was. To have attempted to dive below her would have put us entirely at her mercy, and precisely where she wanted us. On either side a hundred other menacing craft were hastening toward us. The alternative was filled with risk--in fact it was all risk, with but a slender chance of success.

As we neared the cruiser I rose as though to pass above her, so that she would do just what she did do, rise at a steeper angle to force me still higher. Then as we were almost upon her I yelled to my companions to hold tight, and throwing the little vessel into her highest speed I deflected her bows at the same instant until we were running horizontally and at terrific velocity straight for the cruiser's keel.

Her commander may have seen my intentions then, but it was too late. Almost at the instant of impact I turned my bows upward, and then with a shattering jolt we were in collision. What I had hoped for happened. The cruiser, already tilted at a perilous angle, was carried completely over backward by the impact of my smaller vessel. Her crew fell twisting and screaming through the air to the water far below, while the cruiser, her propellers still madly churning, dived swiftly headforemost after them to the bottom of the Sea of Omean.

The collision crushed our steel bows, and notwithstanding every effort on our part came near to hurling us from the deck. As it was we landed in a wildly clutching heap at the very extremity of the flier, where Xodar and I succeeded in grasping the hand-rail, but the boy would have plunged overboard had I not fortunately grasped his ankle as

he was already partially over.

Unguided, our vessel careened wildly in its mad flight, rising ever nearer the rocks above. It took but an instant, however, for me to regain the levers, and with the roof barely fifty feet above I turned her nose once more into the horizontal plane and headed her again for the black mouth of the shaft.

The collision had retarded our progress and now a hundred swift scouts were close upon us. Xodar had told me that ascending the shaft by virtue of our repulsive rays alone would give our enemies their best chance to overtake us, since our propellers would be idle and in rising we would be outclassed by many of our pursuers. The swifter craft are seldom equipped with large buoyancy tanks, since the added bulk of them tends to reduce a vessel's speed.

As many boats were now quite close to us it was inevitable that we would be quickly overhauled in the shaft, and captured or killed in short order.

To me there always seems a way to gain the opposite side of an obstacle. If one cannot pass over it, or below it, or around it, why then there is but a single alternative left, and that is to pass through it. I could not get around the fact that many of these other boats could rise faster than ours by the fact of their greater buoyancy, but I was none the less determined to reach the outer world far in advance of them or die a death of my own choosing in event of failure.

"Reverse?" screamed Xodar, behind me. "For the love of your first ancestor, reverse. We are at the shaft."

"Hold tight!" I screamed in reply. "Grasp the boy and hold tight--we are going straight up the shaft."

The words were scarce out of my mouth as we swept beneath the pitch-black opening. I threw the bow hard up, dragged the speed lever to its last notch, and clutching a stanchion with one hand and the steering-wheel with the other hung on like grim death and consigned my soul to its author.

I heard a little exclamation of surprise from Xodar, followed by a grim laugh. The boy laughed too and said something which I could not catch for the whistling of the wind of our awful speed.

I looked above my head, hoping to catch the gleam of stars by which I could direct our course and hold the hurtling thing that bore us true to the centre of the shaft. To have touched the side at the speed we were making would doubtless have resulted in instant death for us all. But not a star showed above--only utter and impenetrable darkness.

Then I glanced below me, and there I saw a rapidly diminishing circle of light--the mouth of the opening above the phosphorescent radiance of Omean. By this I steered, endeavouring to keep the circle of light below me ever perfect. At best it was but a slender cord that held us from destruction, and I think that I steered that night more by intuition and blind faith than by skill or reason.

We were not long in the shaft, and possibly the very fact of our enormous speed saved us, for evidently we started in the right direction and so quickly were we out again that we had no time to alter our course. Omean lies perhaps two miles below the surface crust of Mars. Our speed must have approximated two hundred miles an hour, for Martian fliers are swift, so that at most we were in the shaft not over forty seconds.

We must have been out of it for some seconds before I realised that we had accomplished the impossible. Black darkness enshrouded all about us. There were neither moons nor stars. Never before had I seen such a thing upon Mars, and for the moment I was nonplussed. Then the explanation came to me. It was summer at the south pole. The ice cap was melting and those meteoric phenomena, clouds, unknown upon the greater part of Barsoom, were shutting out the light of heaven from this portion of the planet.

Fortunate indeed it was for us, nor did it take me long to grasp the opportunity for escape which this happy condition offered us. Keeping the boat's nose at a stiff angle I raced her for the impenetrable curtain which Nature had hung above this dying world to shut us out from the sight of our pursuing enemies.

We plunged through the cold camp fog without diminishing our speed, and in a moment emerged into the glorious light of the two moons and the million stars. I dropped into a horizontal course and headed due north. Our enemies were a good half-hour behind us with no conception of our direction. We had performed the miraculous and come through a thousand dangers unscathed--we had escaped from the land of the First Born. No other prisoners in all the ages of Barsoom had done this thing, and now as I looked back upon it it did not seem to have been so difficult after all.

I said as much to Xodar, over my shoulder.

"It is very wonderful, nevertheless," he replied. "No one else could have accomplished it but John Carter."

At the sound of that name the boy jumped to his feet.

"John Carter!" he cried. "John Carter! Why, man, John Carter, Prince of Helium, has been dead for years. I am his son."