

《The Warlord of Mars》 Chapter 11 - The Pit of Plenty

I did not languish long within the prison of Salensus Oll. During the short time that I lay there, fettered and ordered as to the fate of Thuvan Dihn, Jeddak of Ptarth.

My brave companion had followed me into the garden as I attacked Thurid, and when Salensus Oll had his orders, leaving Thuvia of Ptarth behind, he, too, had remained in the garden with his daughter, apparently unnotably to the guards.

The last I had seen of him he stood waiting for the warriors who escorted me to close the gate behind the Thuvia. Could it be possible that they had escaped? I doubted it, and yet with all my heart I hoped that it might.

The third day of my incarceration brought a dozen warriors to escort me to the audience chamber, where they met me. A great number of nobles crowded the room, and among them I saw Thurid, but Matai Shang was not there.

Dejah Thoris, as radiantly beautiful as ever, sat upon a small throne beside Salensus Oll. The expression on her face cut deep into my heart.

Her position beside the Jeddak of Jeddaks boded ill for her and me, and on the instant that I saw her there I knew her firm intention never to leave that chamber alive if I must leave her in the clutches of this powerful tyrant.

I had killed better men than Salensus Oll, and killed them with my bare hands, and now I swore to myself that the only way to save the Princess of Helium was to kill him. That it would mean almost instant death for me I cared not. I would do it. I would do it for me from further efforts in behalf of Dejah Thoris, and for this reason alone I would have chosen another way. I would have killed Salensus Oll that act would not restore my beloved wife to her own people. I determined to wait the final outcome. I would earn all that I could of the Okarian ruler's intentions, and then act accordingly.

Scarcely had I come before him than Salensus Oll summoned Thurid also.

"Dator Thurid," he said, "you have made a strange request of me; but, in accordance with your wishes at the moment, it only to my interests, I have decided to accede."

"You tell me that a certain announcement will be the means of convicting this prisoner and, at the same time, the fulfillment of my dearest wish."

Thurid nodded.

"Then shall I make the announcement here before all my nobles," continued Salensus Oll. "For a year now I have been beside me, and now it suits me to take to wife one who is reputed the most beautiful woman upon Barsboom. I have truthfully deny."

"Nobles of Okar, unsheathe your swords and do homage to Dejah Thoris, Princess of Helium and future wife of Salensus Oll. Within the allotted ten days she shall become the wife of Salensus Oll."

As the nobles drew their blades and lifted them on high, in accordance with the ancient custom of Okar, in attention to wed, Dejah Thoris sprang to her feet and, raising her hand aloft, cried in a loud voice that they desist.

"I may not be the wife of Salensus Oll," she pleaded, "for already I be a wife and mother. John Carter, Promise me that it to be true, for I overheard Matai Shang tell his daughter Phaidor that he had seen him in Kaor, at the court. Okar does not wed a married woman, nor will Salensus Oll thus violate the bonds of matrimony."

Salensus Oll turned upon Thurid with an ugly look.

"Is this the surprise you held in store for me?" he cried. "You assured me that no obstacle which might intervene between me and this woman, and now I find that the one insuperable obstacle intervenes. What mean you, man?"

"And should I deliver John Carter into your hands, Salensus Oll, would you not feel that I had more than made good of you?" answered Thurid.

"Talk not like a fool," cried the enraged jeddak. "I am no child to be thus played with."

"I am talking only as a man who knows," replied Thurid. "Knows that he can do all that he claims."

"Then turn John Carter over to me within ten days or yourself suffer the end that I should mete out to him," said the Jeddak of Jeddaks, with an ugly scowl.

"You need not wait ten days, Salensus Oll," replied Thurid; and then, turning suddenly upon me as he extended: "There stands John Carter, Prince of Helium!"

"Fool!" shrieked Salensus Oll. "Fool! John Carter is a white man. This fellow be as yellow as myself. Jolai Shang has described him to me. This prisoner has a beard and mustache as large and black as any in Okar. I will give you a poor joke with the black maniac who wishes to throw his life away for a poor joke upon your ruler!"

"Hold!" cried Thurid, and springing forward before I could guess his intention, he had grasped my beard and hair from my face and head, revealing my smooth, tanned skin beneath and my close-cropped black hair.

Instantly pandemonium reigned in the audience chamber of Salensus Oll. Warriors pressed forward with eagerness to be contemplating the assassination of the Jeddak of Jeddaks; while others, out of curiosity to see one who had been brought to pole, crowded behind their fellows.

As my identity was revealed I saw Dejah Thoris spring to her feet-- amazement writ large upon her face-- and as the armed men she forced her way before any could prevent. A moment only and she was before me with outstretched arms in the light of her great love.

"John Carter! John Carter!" she cried as I folded her to my breast, and then of a sudden I knew why she had been brought beneath the tower.

What a fool I had been! Expecting that she would penetrate the marvelous disguise that had been wrought upon her countenance! She had not known me, that was all; and when she saw the sign of love from a stranger she was offended, but I had been a fool.

"And it was you," she cried, "who spoke to me from the tower! How could I dream that my beloved Virginian had that yellow skin?"

She had been wont to call me her Virginian as a term of endearment, for she knew that I loved the sound of her name a thousand times more beautiful and hallowed by her dear lips, and as I heard it again after all those long years with tears and my voice choked with emotion.

But an instant did I crush that dear form to me ere Salensus Oll, trembling with rage and jealousy, should

"Seize the man," he cried to his warriors, and a hundred ruthless hands tore us apart.

Well it was for the nobles of the court of Okar that John Carter had been disarmed. As it was, a dozen of the strongest men of Okar, armed with piked fists, and I had fought my way half up the steps before the throne to which Salensus Oll had carried Dejah Thoris to stop me.

Then I went down, fighting, beneath a half-hundred warriors; but before they had battered me into unconsciousness the lips of Dejah Thoris that made all my suffering well worth while.

Standing there beside the great tyrant, who clutched her by the arm, she pointed to where I fought alone.

"Think you, Salensus Oll, that the wife of such as he is," she cried, "would ever dishonor his memory, would she, by mating with a lesser mortal? Lives there upon any world such another as John Carter, Prince of Helium? No man could fight his way back and forth across a warlike planet, facing savage beasts and hordes of savage men, and win the love of a woman."

"I, Dejah Thoris, Princess of Helium, am his. He fought for me and won me. If you be a brave man you will spare his life, and you will not kill him. Make him a slave if you will, Salensus Oll; but spare his life. I would rather be a slave than the queen of Okar."

"Neither slave nor queen dictates to Salensus Oll," replied the Jeddak of Jeddaks. "John Carter shall die a free man, and the day he dies Dejah Thoris shall become my queen."

I did not hear her reply, for it was then that a blow upon my head brought unconsciousness, and when I awoke a number of guardsmen remained in the audience chamber with me. As I opened my eyes they goaded me with threats and I rose.

Then they led me through long corridors to a court far toward the center of the palace.

In the center of the court was a deep pit, near the edge of which stood half a dozen other guardsmen, and one held a long rope in his hands, which he commenced to make ready as we approached.

We had come to within fifty feet of these men when I felt a sudden strange and rapid pricking sensation.

For a moment I was nonplused by the odd feeling, and then there came to me recollection of that which I had entirely forgotten--the gift ring of Prince Talu of Marentina.

Instantly I looked toward the group we were nearing, at the same time raising my left hand to my forehead. I saw that I was alone to one who sought it. Simultaneously one of the waiting warriors raised his left hand, ostensibly to brush

s fingers I saw the duplicate of my own ring.

A quick look of intelligence passed between us, after which I kept my eyes turned away from the warrior, for fear that I might arouse the suspicion of the Okarians. When we reached the edge of the pit I saw that by I realized I was soon to judge just how far it extended below the surface of the court, for he who held the rope such a way that it could be released from above at any time; and then, as all the warriors grasped it, he pushed the yawning abyss.

After the first jerk as I reached the end of the rope that had been paid out to let me fall below the pit's edge I fell smoothly. The moment before the plunge, while two or three of the men had been assisting in adjusting the rope, he brought his mouth close to my cheek, and in the brief interval before I was cast into the forbidding hole he whispered in my ear:

"Courage!"

The pit, which my imagination had pictured as bottomless, proved to be not more than a hundred feet in depth. Smoothly polished it might as well have been a thousand feet, for I could never hope to escape without outside assistance.

For a day I was left in darkness; and then, quite suddenly, a brilliant light illumined my strange cell. I was surprised by this time, not having tasted food or drink since the day prior to my incarceration.

To my amazement I found the sides of the pit, that I had thought smooth, lined with shelves, upon which stood various kinds of food and liquid refreshments that Okar afforded.

With an exclamation of delight I sprang forward to partake of some of the welcome food, but ere ever I reached it, and, though I groped my way about the chamber, my hands came in contact with nothing beside the smooth floor. On my first examination of my prison.

Immediately the pangs of hunger and thirst began to assail me. Where before I had had but a mild craving, I now actually suffered for want of it, and all because of the tantalizing sight that I had had of food almost within my grasp.

Once more darkness and silence enveloped me, a silence that was broken only by a single mocking laugh.

For another day nothing occurred to break the monotony of my imprisonment or relieve the suffering subject. Slowly the pangs became less keen, as suffering deadened the activity of certain nerves; and then the light flashed upon me an array of new and tempting dishes, with great bottles of clear water and flagons of refreshing wine. In the cold sweat of condensation stood.

Again, with the hunger madness of a wild beast, I sprang forward to seize those tempting dishes; but, as I reached them, I came to a sudden stop against a hard wall.

Then the mocking laugh rang out for a second time.

The Pit of Plenty!

Ah, what a cruel mind must have devised this exquisite, hellish torture! Day after day was the thing repeated; and then, as I had done in the pits of the Warhoons, I took a new, firm hold upon my reason and regained a measure of sanity.

By sheer will-power I regained control over my tottering mentality, and so successful was I that the next day I was quite still and looked indifferently at the fresh and tempting food almost within my reach. Glad I was that I had the opportunity to solve the seeming mystery of those vanishing banquets.

As I made no move to reach the food, the torturers left the light turned on in the hope that at last I could enjoy the delicious thrill of enjoyment that my former futile efforts to obtain it had caused.

And as I sat scrutinizing the laden shelves I presently saw how the thing was accomplished, and so simple it was that I did not guess it before. The wall of my prison was of clearest glass--behind the glass were the tantalizing viands.

After nearly an hour the light went out, but this time there was no mocking laughter--at least not upon that side. I, to be at quits with them, gave a low laugh that none might mistake for the cackle of a maniac.

Nine days passed, and I was weak from hunger and thirst, but no longer suffering--I was past that. Then, from above, a little parcel fell to the floor at my side.

Indifferently I groped for it, thinking it but some new invention of my jailers to add to my sufferings.

At last I found it--a tiny package wrapped in paper, at the end of a strong and slender cord. As I opened it, I discovered that it was a little package of pellets. As I gathered them up, feeling of them and smelling of them, I discovered that they were tablets of concen-

tration common in all parts of Barsoom.

Poison! I thought.

Well, what of it? Why not end my misery now rather than drag out a few more wretched days in this damned cell with these little pellets to my lips.

"Good-bye, my Dejah Thoris!" I breathed. "I have lived for you and fought for you, and now my next desire I shall die for you," and, taking the morsel in my mouth, I devoured it.

One by one I ate them all, nor ever did anything taste better than those tiny bits of nourishment, within weeks of death--possibly of some hideous, torturing death.

As I sat quietly upon the floor of my prison, waiting for the end, my fingers by accident came in contact with the things had been wrapped; and as I idly played with it, my mind roaming far back into the past, that I might have moments before I died some of the many happy moments of a long and happy life, I became aware of strange markings on the surface of the parchment-like substance in my hands.

For a time they carried no special significance to my mind--I merely was mildly wondrous that they were able to take form, and then I realized that there was but a single line of them, like writing.

Now, more interestedly, my fingers traced and retraced them. There were four separate and distinct combinations. Could it be that these were four words, and that they were intended to carry a message to me?

The more I thought of it the more excited I became, until my fingers raced madly back and forth over the markings upon that bit of paper.

But I could make nothing of them, and at last I decided that my very haste was preventing me from solving it more slowly. Again and again my forefinger traced the first of those four combinations.

Martian writing is rather difficult to explain to an Earth man-- it is something of a cross between shorthand and an entirely different language from the spoken language of Mars.

Upon Barsroom there is but a single oral language.

It is spoken today by every race and nation, just as it was at the beginning of human life upon Barsroom. In spite of the planet's learning and scientific achievements, but so ingenious a thing it is that new words to express new conditions or discoveries form themselves--no other word could explain the thing that a new word is required for. Usually falls to it, and so, no matter how far removed two nations or races, their spoken languages are identical.

Not so their written languages, however. No two nations have the same written language, and often cite their own language that differs greatly from that of the nation to which they belong.

Thus it was that the signs upon the paper, if in reality they were words, baffled me for some time; but at last I saw it. It was "courage," and it was written in the letters of Marentina.

Courage!

That was the word the yellow guardsman had whispered in my ear as I stood upon the verge of the Pit of Plenty. The message must be from him, and he I knew was a friend.

With renewed hope I bent my every energy to the deciphering of the balance of the message, and at last I saw it--I had read the four words:

"Courage! Follow the rope."

"FOLLOW THE ROPE"

What could it mean?

"Follow the rope." What rope?

Presently I recalled the cord that had been attached to the parcel when it fell at my side, and after a little I went up to get it with it again. It depended from above, and when I pulled upon it I discovered that it was rigidly fastened, probably to the ceiling.

Upon examination I found that the cord, though small, was amply able to sustain the weight of several men very-- there was a second message knotted in the rope at about the height of my head. This I deciphered more easily than the first.

"Bring the rope with you. Beyond the knots lies danger."

That was all there was to this message. It was evidently hastily formed--an afterthought.

I did not pause longer than to learn the contents of the second message, and, though I was none too sure of the meaning of the word "beyond," yet I was sure that here before me lay an avenue of escape, and that the more likely was I to win to liberty.

At least, I could be but little worse off than I had been in the Pit of Plenty.

I was to find, however, ere I was well out of that damnable hole that I might have been very much worse off had I remained there another two minutes.

It had taken me about that length of time to ascend some fifty feet above the bottom when a noise above me, which I at first thought was the sound of a chagrin I saw that the covering of the pit was being removed far above me, and in the light of the courtyard I saw a group of warriors.

Could it be that I was laboriously working my way into some new trap? Were the messages spurious, after peace and courage had ebbed to their lowest, I saw two things.

One was the body of a huge, struggling, snarling apt being lowered over the side of the pit toward me, and on the side of the shaft--an aperture larger than a man's body, into which my rope led.

Just as I scrambled into the dark hole before me the apt passed me, reaching out with his mighty hands twirling, and roaring in a most frightful manner.

Plainly now I saw the end for which Salensus Oll had destined me. After first torturing me with starvation, I was to be lowered into my prison to finish the work that the jeddak's hellish imagination had conceived.

And then another truth flashed upon me--I had lived nine days of the allotted ten which must intervene before the death of Dejah Thoris his queen. The purpose of the apt was to insure my death before the tenth day.

I almost laughed aloud as I thought how Salensus Oll's measure of safety was to aid in defeating the very thing he discovered that the apt was alone in the Pit of Plenty they could not know but that he had completely devoted himself to my escape would cause a search to be made for me.

Coiling the rope that had carried me thus far upon my strange journey, I sought for the other end, but found it extended always before me. So this was the meaning of the words: "Follow the rope."

The tunnel through which I crawled was low and dark. I had followed it for several hundred yards when I saw a light. "Beyond the knots lies danger."

Now I went with the utmost caution, and a moment later a sharp turn in the tunnel brought me to an open chamber.

The trend of the tunnel I had been traversing had been slightly upward, and from this I judged that the ceiling of the chamber must be either on the first floor of the palace or directly beneath the first floor.

Upon the opposite wall were many strange instruments and devices, and in the center of the room stood two men who were seated in earnest conversation.

He who faced me was a yellow man--a little, wizened-up, pasty-faced old fellow with great eyes that showed the white of the circumference of the iris.

His companion was a black man, and I did not need to see his face to know that it was Thurid, for there was a light in his eyes that I had seen in the north of the ice-barrier.

Thurid was speaking as I came within hearing of the men's voices.

"Solan," he was saying, "there is no risk and the reward is great. You know that you hate Salensus Oll and that you would do more than to thwart him in some cherished plan. There is nothing that he more cherishes today than the success of Helium; but I, too, want her, and with your help I may win her.

"You need not more than step from this room for an instant when I give you the signal. I will do the rest. You may come and throw the great switch back into its place, and all will be as before. I need but an hour's strength and the power that you control in this hidden chamber beneath the palace of your master. See how easy," and with a smile he rose from his seat and, crossing the room, laid his hand upon a large, burnished lever that protruded from the opposite wall.

"No! No!" cried the little old man, springing after him, with a wild shriek. "Not that one! Not that one! That one should you pull it too far down, all Kadabra would be consumed by heat before I could replace it. Come away from that lever with what mighty powers you play. This is the lever that you seek. Note well the symbol inlaid in white upon the wall.

Thurid approached and examined the handle of the lever.

"Ah, a magnet," he said. "I will remember. It is settled then I take it," he continued.

The old man hesitated. A look of combined greed and apprehension overspread his none too beautiful face.

"Double the figure," he said. "Even that were all too small an amount for the service you ask. Why, I risk my life here within the forbidden precincts of my station. Should Salensus Oll learn of it he would have me thrown out of the city."

"He dare not do that, and you know it full well, Solan," contradicted the black. "Too great a power of life and wealth is at stake for Salensus Oll ever to risk threatening you with death. Before ever his minions could lay their hands upon this very lever from which you have just warned me and wipe out the entire city."

"And myself into the bargain," said Solan, with a shudder.

"But if you were to die, anyway, you would find the nerve to do it," replied Thurid.

"Yes," muttered Solan, "I have often thought upon that very thing. Well, First Born, is your red princess safe, or will you go without her and see her in the arms of Salensus Oll tomorrow night?"

"Take your price, yellow man," replied Thurid, with an oath. "Half now and the balance when you have finished your work."

With that the dator threw a well-filled money-pouch upon the table.

Solan opened the pouch and with trembling fingers counted its contents. His weird eyes assumed a greedy beard and mustache twitched with the muscles of his mouth and chin. It was quite evident from his very manner that he guessed the man's weakness--even the clawlike, clutching movement of the fingers betokened the avaricious

Having satisfied himself that the amount was correct, Solan replaced the money in the pouch and rose from the table.

"Now," he said, "are you quite sure that you know the way to your destination? You must travel quickly and from thence beyond the Great Power, all within a brief hour, for no more dare I spare you."

"Let me repeat it to you," said Thurid, "that you may see if I be letter-perfect."

"Proceed," replied Solan.

"Through yonder door," he commenced, pointing to a door at the far end of the apartment, "I follow a long narrow corridor upon my right; then into the fourth right-hand corridor straight to where three corridors meet; then following the left wall closely to avoid the pit.

"At the end of this corridor I shall come to a spiral runway, which I must follow down instead of up; afterwards a long branchless corridor. Am I right?"

"Quite right, Dator," answered Solan; "and now begone. Already have you tempted fate too long within this chamber."

"Tonight, or tomorrow, then, you may expect the signal," said Thurid, rising to go.

"Tonight, or tomorrow," repeated Solan, and as the door closed behind his guest the old man continued to sit at the table, where he again dumped the contents of the money-pouch, running his fingers through the heap of silver and gold little towers; counting, recounting, and fondling the wealth the while he muttered on and on in a crooning undertone.

Presently his fingers ceased their play; his eyes popped wider than ever as they fastened upon the door that had just appeared. The croon changed to a querulous muttering, and finally to an ugly growl.

Then the old man rose from the table, shaking his fist at the closed door. Now he raised his voice, and his words were full of menace.

"Fool!" he muttered. "Think you that for your happiness Solan will give up his life? If you escaped, Saler would have been proud of your success. Through my connivance could you have succeeded. Then would he send for me. What would you have me do? Would you have me go to the ashes? No, fool, there is a better way--a better way for Solan to keep thy money and be revenged upon Sale."

He laughed in a nasty, cackling note.

"Poor fool! You may throw the great switch that will give you the freedom of the air of Okar, and then, when you have passed beyond this chamber in your flight, what will be the result? Will the switch be as it was before your vile hand touched it? Nothing; and then the Guardian of the North will claim you. He will never dream that the hand of Solan had ought to do with the thing."

Then his voice dropped once more into mutterings that I could not translate, but I had heard enough to be satisfied. I thanked the kind Providence that had led me to this chamber at a time so filled with importance for me.

But how to pass the old man now! The cord, almost invisible upon the floor, stretched straight across the chamber to the far side.

There was no other way of which I knew, nor could I afford to ignore the advice to "follow the rope." I had never before accomplished it undetected with that old man in the very center of it baffled me.

Of course I might have sprung in upon him and with my bare hands silenced him forever, but I had heard from him alive the knowledge that I had gained might serve me at some future moment, while should I kill him I should place Thurid would not come hither with Dejah Thoris, as was quite evidently his intention.

As I stood in the dark shadow of the tunnel's end racking my brain for a feasible plan the while I watched him move, he took up the money-pouch and crossed to one end of the apartment, where, bending to his knees, he hid it in a crevice of the wall.

Instantly I guessed that here was the hiding place in which he hoarded his wealth, and while he bent there I stepped into the chamber upon tiptoe, and with the utmost stealth essayed to reach the opposite side before he should come toward the room's center.

Scarcely thirty steps, all told, must I take, and yet it seemed to my overwrought imagination that that farthest I reached it, nor once had I taken my eyes from the back of the old miser's head.

He did not turn until my hand was upon the button that controlled the door through which my way led, and then he turned as I passed through and gently closed the door.

For an instant I paused, my ear close to the panel, to learn if he had suspected my eavesdropping, but as no sound of pursuit reached me I made my way along the new corridor, following the rope, which I coiled and brought with me as I

But a short distance farther on I came to the rope's end at a point where five corridors met. What was I to do? I was nonplused.

A careful examination of the end of the rope revealed the fact that it had been cleanly cut with some sharp words that had cautioned me that danger lay beyond the KNOTS convinced me that the rope had been severed as my guide, for I had but passed a single knot, whereas there had evidently been two or more in the entire length.

Now, indeed, was I in a pretty fix, for neither did I know which avenue to follow nor when danger lay did I see anything else to be done than follow one of the corridors, for I could gain nothing by remaining where I was.