
Chapter One: The Death of Kings

words by Jeff, art by David

The distance between the twin cities of Helium was never greater for me than it was on the day of my brother's death.

As one hundred thoats carrying the highest ranking officers of my father's Navy paraded in single file toward the capital, the Scarlet Tower of Greater Helium grew on the horizon and the Yellow Tower of Lesser Helium shrank behind us. At the procession's head was a golden chariot, bearing the body of my brother. His mortal wounds remained undressed, as befit tradition. It fell to me, the ranking officer of his command, to bear Mors Kajak to his Reward.

Silently I rode, directly behind that chariot. As I stared at it, my mind replayed again and again the scene that had cost my empire its rightful heir and my father, Moros Tar, his eldest son.

It had been my fault.

A nudge at my arm, and I turned to see an odwar gesturing toward the Gate of Jeddaks. It was lined with faces, straining for a glimpse of the truth they had been told, but could not believe without the testimony of their own eyes.

A thousand times had I passed beneath that yawning portal into the city of my ancestors; but ever had it been at the head of a victorious army. Those same faces had shouted my name in unbridled passion as anthems were sung to Helium's honor. I often rode at the side of my brother in those happier days.

I wished now that it was he who was conducting this funeral march; that it was my corpse in the chariot.

The streets that day were a grim affair I can barely stand to recall, even these many years later. The journey through Lesser Helium, where my brother had ruled as Jed, had been even more difficult. All of Helium loved Mors Kajak.

As we passed beneath somber balconies, barely a sound could be heard -- save the soft padding of our thots.

Eventually, I knelt before my Jeddak in the Temple of Reward, surrounded by tapestries that bore images of my ancestors going back to the dawn of the Empire. After the brief moment that protocol demanded, my father bid me rise, and I spoke words that were old as the Empire:

"Mors Kajak, Jed of Lesser Helium, Defender of the Faith and son of Moros Tar, seeks his Reward," I intoned, according to tradition. "May he serve Issus in the proud manner he has served Helium."

My voice held. Barely.

Moros Tar looked down upon me from the Throne of Righteousness. He did not speak the ancient response.

Instead, he closed his eyes. When his lids fluttered open, there was an unmistakable redness.

"I am tired," said Moros Tar. "The war has taken an awful toll."

There was a heaviness in his voice I'd never heard before.

"My brother's victory was glorious, father," I said slowly, not reacting to the subtle stirring in the great chamber behind me. "The Seige of Flemster is ended."

Flemster is the Heliumetic city to the northeast of the capital that was the scene of my brother's triumph. It was also the place of my greatest shame.

Moros Tar gazed silently upon my upturned face, his own countenance a mask. It was then that I noticed, for the first time, that he'd begun to age. The realization stunned me, as if I'd been struck with the flat of a longsword in battle. There were lines about his eyes. The faintest streaks of gray were shot

through the jet-black hair I had always remembered. I detected the weight upon his shoulders that eight hundred years of rule had brought to bear.

I saw my father as none -- save my mother, perhaps -- had ever seen him before. Something of his loneliness was imparted to me in the still chamber that day.

"It was no victory," he said.

Then Moros Tar smiled. Under the circumstances, it shocked me more than the realization that he had become an old man.

"My jedwars have told me of my son's prowess in the field of battle," the Jeddak continued. "Of the honor he has brought to the House of Mor, and to all of Helium. I am proud."

"The name Mors Kajak will long be remembered," I said.

"Yes," agreed the Jeddak. "Remembered in Helium, and feared throughout the rest of Barsoom. But he was not the son I spoke of. "

I shook my head, knowing a thing that neither my father nor his jedwars knew.

"The Siege of Flemster shall ever bring great sorrow to my heart," Moros Tar continued. "The Empire has lost a promising Jeddak. And yet, it gained another whose likeness will do honor to these walls."

I said nothing, which shamed me even more.

The Jeddak stepped down from his throne and laid both hands upon my shoulders.

"I sail for Dor tomorrow," he said. "I leave this world knowing the Empire is safe in your care, Tardos Mors — Jeddak of Helium."

Without another word, my father retired to his private apartments at the back

of the Temple. At first, his posture was bent. But as he walked away from me, he regained his full height. There was dignity to his step, and purpose.

Moros Tar was about to make peace with his ancestors; and seek his own Reward.

I could only stare after him, my mind a jumble of conflicting emotion.

Dor! He could not embark upon the Final Pilgrimage now! Flemster had been relieved, but the war was far from won. The twin cities themselves were threatened from the east by Ptarthian forces.

Though his last words had been softly spoken, meant for my ears alone, it was clear that many of the nobles and officers in the chamber had heard, or guessed the Jeddak's intention. The stirring at my back rose, and soon hushed whispers became louder. Within moments, a buzz of confusion prevailed. One high-ranking officer hurriedly departed. There was a single shout from the rear -- "Nay!" -- and I felt a tug at my elbow. Questions I could not answer were asked.

I pulled away.

Turning, I faced the body of Mors Kajak. He lay there, on the dais, eyes open. The Jed sometimes slept with open eyes, a thing I chided him about as a child. The red stain upon his chest, however, proclaimed that my brother's sleep was one from which he would never awaken.

Dashing to the rear of the Temple, I tore open the door to my father's private sanctuary.

But the Jeddak was gone.

Chapter 2:
[Little Green Men](#)

The "POJ"

[Table of Contents](#)

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Chapter Two: Little Green Men

words by Jeff, art by Duane

The thought of my accession left me cold. □

There were many about the palace who shared their opinions with me, none of which I desired to hear. Scribes and historians, poets, astronomers, psychologists, educators, nobles of every rank, warlords and even slaves whispered their views on the subject. I shunned them all in favor of the companionship of my fellow soldiers. Among them, I was but a warrior of Helium — the only rank I desired, and the only position I'd ever been taught to endure.

The transfer of an heir to the throne is a reverant, tradition- bound process in Helium. Precise protocols have been observed throughout the ages. Moros Tar's sudden departure threw the Empire into chaos.

Though the the people were ready to immediately proclaim me Jeddak, it was not so simple a thing -- especially since Moros Tar made no formal declaration of his intent to step down from the throne. His grief must have been greater than I could have suspected. I heard murmurings that perhaps his mind had become unbalanced by the loss of his heir and Jeddara in so short a span. My mother had been killed the year before in a Ptharthian raid upon the capital.

Moros Tar's eyes had looked southward, to Dor. There were his Jeddara, my mother, and now his eldest son, my brother.

And there, too, was the Jeddak's weary heart.

Truth to tell, despite the reverence that still held in those days for the pilgrimage upon the bosom of Iss, I cared not to see my father take that final voyage. He was, after all, my father. And no man could ever return from Dor. Not even a jeddak.

I thought his act selfish. While my father had lost a princess and son, I had lost a mother and brother. Now, I had lost a father -- and Helium had lost its Jeddak. Who bore the greatest sorrow?

War still raged between Helium and Ptarth, and so concerns of the heart had to wait for later contemplation. I took command of the Navy, and left the details of accession to the nobles who cared much more about such things than I. To me, victory was what mattered. And vengeance for Mors Kajak's death. Silently, I thought to redeem myself for my failure at Flemster.

A Ptarthian fleet was massing to the east, and it was there that I cast my attention. Aboard my flagship, I took the battle directly to the enemy, as has ever been the way of Helium.

A week of uninterrupted naval warfare filled the skies over that barren stretch of land. Our ships coursed back and forth, north and south -- but never did the invaders approach closer than a thousand haads of the capital.

We had all but routed the enemy, when a small detachment of Ptarthian ships broke off from the main group. By their course, I determined that no good could come from this development, as it appeared they were attempting to bypass our fleet and make way for the twin cities. My flagship and several others of the task force pursued, leaving the balance of the Heliumetic fleet to mop up what was left of the battle.

From the bow of the lead enemy vessel broke the colors of the Prince of Ptarth, and almost immediately she began firing upon my flagship. I gave the order to hoist my own device and return fire.

And thus began a long, running battle. Eventually, my flagship and the Prince of Ptarth's vessel became isolated -- flying ever eastward, and firing almost constantly upon one another. We'd long ago lost contact with other ships of our respective fleets.

After one particularly horrific volley, I saw the enemy ship begin to list. Fire

broke out upon her deck, and men scrambled to repair what appeared to be massive damage. From the sides of the reeling behemoth were launched hundreds of one-man fliers. Once clear, the smaller ships raced headlong in our direction, firing all the way.

I could not help but admire their tenacity as we mowed them down with more powerful and precise guns.

But a few did get through our raking fire. I gave the order to launch several squads of one-man fliers, to engage them directly. I swung to a craft as well. A prince of Helium does not send his men into combat. He leads them.

My craft twisted and turned upon the enemy, and a score went down before my fire ere I was struck by an opposing projectile. But that one shot was enough to spell disaster.

It exploded on the low windshield that buffered the racing wind, and sent a strip of skeel crashing across my brow -- a glancing, yet effective blow. I was knocked backward, senseless, upon the speed lever of my machine.

When I woke, I found myself hurtling at incredible speed close to the bed of an unfamiliar sea bottom.

Pulling myself up, I could see no craft of either fleet. It had been morning when the battle began, but now it was late afternoon. That my craft avoided disaster during those long hours as it raced unguided is a matter of pure chance.

But now, a low structure suddenly loomed in my path. I barely had time to pull the nose of my flier up the fraction of a degree necessary to avoid calamity. As I shot past the structure's roof, I glanced over my shoulder to see what strange object it could be that lay out here in the desolate wastes of a dead sea bottom. The sight that met my eyes brought a chill to my soul.

On the far side of the low building were a thousand green men. The beasts and

chariots of a caravan were scattered about the encampment. Most of the barbaric warriors, shouting and pushing, seemed to be swarmed about a deep pit, not far from the structure I'd nearly run headlong into. As I shot by in my mad flight, the wind shrieking past the bow of my trim ship, their heads turned as one to follow my trajectory. A whoop of recognition went up from the savage horde, and as I jammed the speed lever to its final notch I heard their rifles belch at me.

The famed accuracy of the green man's rifle is no myth, and I was struck almost as soon as I recognized my peril. My buoyancy tanks ruptured in a dozen places and my motor was ripped nearly from the one-man flier's hull. Miraculously, but no doubt intentionally, I was not struck by their pellets. My craft plunged Barsoomward, and I crashed none too softly in one of those scattered pockets where the ochre moss is deep and plush — which saved me from being mangled in the wreckage.

Dazed, but not seriously hurt, I leaped to my feet as the green men bore down upon me. My sword flashed from its scabbard and I prepared to take on an entire horde, alone.

I hacked at the foremost, slicing an arm from the middle shoulder of one and disemboweling another. Incredibly, none of the towering green men raised a weapon against me. Instead, they overpowered me by sheer numbers and bore me to the ground, helpless beneath their great weight and size.

I'd accounted for a half-dozen before I was carried off in the direction from which they'd come.

Lofted above their heads, I was taken back toward the low building — which I recognized now in tumbling glimpses as an incubator used by the green hordes, larger than those I'd encountered elsewhere on Barsoom, but of essentially the same design. The savages had not confiscated my weapons, though I could make no use of them. A dozen rough hands clutched me tightly. Before I could guess their intent, I'd been tossed heavily into the pit and landed on my back on the hard clay at its bottom — a drop of about

twenty of your Jasoomian "feet."

As I rose slowly to my own feet, momentarily stunned by the impact, I saw that another red man already occupied this roughly-hewn arena. A roar went up from the green men encircled above as I looked over my fellow prisoner. He was resting on one knee, the point of his sword in the ground. He leaned on the pommel to steady himself. The red man was covered in blood, his flesh torn in a hundred places. He looked half-dead, breathing in great gasps.

"If they expect us to fight, warrior, they'll be disappointed," I said under my breath, glancing up at the contorted green faces. "I'll not raise my blade against one who so obviously has no power to harm me."

He shook his head, gesturing weakly about us. I noticed then the bodies piled about the pit. Young green ones, scarcely out of the shell; miniatures of the monsters above, hacked to pieces — presumably by the sword of this red man.

"Two days," the warrior grunted. "Possibly three. I've lost count. No sleep. No food or water. But they keep coming."

The sea of hideous faces above parted and others replaced them at the rim of the pit. Without preamble, a half-dozen green hatchlings were dumped over the side as precariously as I had been.

Four feet tall, the young were more head than body. But their scrawny appearance was deceiving.

Green Barsoomians emerge from the shell even more ferocious than their hideous sires, guided by a heredity instinct devoted to one thing: destruction of whatever they encounter. More often than not, the hatchlings use four of their six limbs for locomotion, and thus possess an uncanny, lightning-like speed. If they see a thing, their only thought is to attack it. I'd heard tell of hatchlings falling upon the green women assigned to rear them in their formative months and rending them limb from limb — an occurrence that is the height of hilarity among other members of the horde.

It was such as these that I faced — mindless, deadly things, visions of horror incarnate.

The infants, if one may call them that, landed all about me. I had no time for further discussion with my fellow captive. Nearly as soon as the hatchlings touched the red clay, they began looking wildly about with their large, protuding eyes. Spying one or the other of us, they leaped insanely in our direction with tearing fingers, goring tusks and distended jaws. It was madness, the way the little creatures swarmed about, tearing at my flesh! Fresh from the incubator, stark naked, the inhuman terrors had no speech or sentient thought — only a craving to wreak havoc with whatever lay in their path, whether myself, the red man or each other.

Drawing my blade, I slashed to left and right — wreaking an unholy havoc of my own amongst the hissing demons. Uproarious laughter descended from all sides of the pit. I clove the head clean off one of the hatchlings and it flew into the chest of another, knocking the thing backwards. The guffaws from above were like to have drowned me.

The red man, I could see, had barely the strength left to lift his sword, so I made my way to a position directly in front of him and did what I could to keep the tiny horde at bay. It was no easy task, for as soon as I dispatched a few of the things, more would be flung downward to take their places.

Madness!

The grim scene played itself out for zodes. When darkness fell, the green men brought torches to light the battle. I fought through the night, beneath that flickering glare, till morning broke. With each swing of my sword I felt more admiration for the red man behind me who had endured this insanity for three days without interlude. I had no time to wonder why the green men were throwing their young to a frightful slaughter. I was preoccupied with preventing my own slaughter and that of the man at my back.

In their haste, the green men sometimes tossed still- unhatched eggs along

with the squirming man-things; they burst on the ground in a purplish slime, which covered me from head to foot. Had I not been so preoccupied, the whole affair would have nauseated me.

A dozen creatures tumbled into the pit directly in front of me.

Shaking themselves momentarily, they soon discovered me and leaped in my direction. One of the monstrosities ripped at my jugular with its tusks; another clawed at my leg; and a third had managed to attach itself to my back.

More came at me, taking advantage of the opening created by their fellow hatchlings. Soon, the entire tiny horde was clinging and swarming about me.

I could make no use of my sword in those tight quarters. Stumbling blindly forward, I tore at the creatures' maddening grip.

Then I slipped in embryonic ooze, and went down on my knees in the hard-packed clay.

The balance of the dozen hatchlings swarmed over my crumpled form. I felt their tusks and teeth and claw-like fingers rending every part of my body. I sank lower, unable to stand, thinking:

"A horrible death..."

Chapter Three:

[Truce](#)

The "POJ"

[Table of Contents](#)

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Chapter Three: Truce

words by Jeff, art by Duane

As long as breath has moved in the breast of Tardos Mors, he has struggled to live. It has always been thus, and ever will be. It was so that day in that damnable pit of the Warhoons.

I thrashed, rolling across the ground, trying to dislodge the diminutive green things. I swung my arms like a madman and savagely kicked with my legs — braining at least one of the brainless hatchlings, but sending the others into even more of a frenzied bloodlust.

My own blood was up as well, however, and as I struggled that day with the frothing young of the green men, my blows were animated by no science taught me by Helium's finest warlords. I fought entirely by instinct; lashing and stabbing, rolling and biting, perhaps jabbering in the same unintelligible tongue that my attackers employed. I do not know, for I remember little of it — nor do I care to. All I know is that I fought in a way I had never fought before, or since: without regard to reason, or chivalry, or any other of the things that red men consider sacred in honorable combat.

I fought for survival.

And, by Issus, I survived.

When the last of my antagonists lay dead at my feet, I rose slowly and shook the hazy fog from my befuddled brain. I stumbled toward my red companion, through a maze of mangled flesh and broken shells. He still lived.

Barely.

He'd accounted for several of the ungodly hatchlings, despite his weakened condition.

"You fight like the green men themselves," whispered the red man. "A shame

they were not here to see it."

I looked up and saw that our captors had disappeared from their perches at the rim of our pit. The sound of a great battle raged somewhere above. The clank of metal upon metal, the green men's rifles and hoarse battle cries were unmistakable in the late morning still.

"The Tharks have discovered the Warhoons, Tardos Mors," said my companion. "And they are not pleased with this grim plan for slaying Thark young."

"So that's what this is all about," I mused, taking stock of our situation. Then I looked closer to the red man, remembering that he'd called me by name. But through the gore that covered him, I could not tell if I'd ever met this warrior before.

"Thuvan Dihn, Prince of Ptarth, occupies this hellish pit with you, Tardos Mors of Helium," said the bloodied warrior. "Though we be enemies, I suggest our predicament makes us temporary allies."

The Prince of Ptarth! Wrecker of my beloved Helium; a leader of the nation that had sent Mors Kajak to his death, and my father to the knee of Issus!

All my ancestors cried out for vengeance.

And yet --

Despite the bloodshed between Helium and Ptarth, I could not deny Thuvan Dihn's rationale that present circumstances demanded cooperation. Green savages had a way of turning the most bitter of enemies into allies.

"A truce, then," I agreed, not without difficulty.

We had spoken, and now turned our attention to escape.

The raging battle above grew loud at times, and then faded as it moved to and fro across the sea bottom. I knew that simply escaping the pit was the least of our worries — for when we emerged, likely as not we'd do so in the midst of two enraged green hordes. In the heat of battle, a green savage kills first, seldom pausing to examine the body afterward.

Unmolested by the constant deluge of hatchlings, I saw that the roughly hewn walls of our prison were jagged enough to provide a handhold. It would be possible, if precarious, to climb to the rim. Thuvan Dihn was so weak from his long days of battle that I decided to fasten his harness to mine by way of the grappling hooks all Barsoomian navy men carry.

Gingerly, I began the ascent. It was slow work, and I nearly fell back into the pit more than once as my grip loosened in the slippery clay, dragged down by the weight of a nearly unconscious Ptarthian.

Carefully drawing myself up over the rim of the pit, clutching softly at the ochre moss, I looked out across the dead sea bottom for sign of discovery. A short distance away, a small group had broken off from the main battle. Perhaps a dozen green savages fought there, for the moment oblivious to all but their own struggles for victory.

The main forces of fighting men were quite a long distance beyond that; scattered over several haads in the direction of the setting sun. I watched them a moment, appalled by the unprincipled ferocity of a green battle. Hundreds of dead and dying lay haphazardly everywhere that I looked. Even the hideously maimed were crawling or rolling in the direction of a foe, to plunge sword or dagger into scarred flesh. Those who had no arms left with which to wield a weapon gored at the belly of the closest enemy with their wicked tusks. Even the green women joined in the fighting -- a thing I'd never witnessed. They clawed at each other with a savagery that rivaled that of their lords.

The sight of this battle would forever be burned into my memory for its barbarity, and I am the veteran of a thousand bloody campaigns.

I'd fought at the head of Helium's army against the savage green hordes of Thark many times. Never before had I seen two hordes pitted against each other like this — though I knew it was a common enough occurrence in the wastelands they inhabit. Perhaps the cause of their fight — destruction of the Thark hatchlings — made it even more bloodthirsty than most.

It surprised me, somewhat, that the Thark incubator was so far from the hordes' usual stomping grounds, closer to Helium. But, at the time, little was known of their nomadic ways. In fact, little was known about the green men at all. Some scholars in Helium debated whether they had sentient thought.

The smaller group of combatants was close enough that I knew Thuvan Dihn and I could not simply get up and go our own way without being seen. Even if we could have, neither of us had the strength for much of a march. I cast about for some possible solution to our predicament.

My entire body ached from a score of wounds; my throat was parched and my stomach empty. I could hear the prince of Ptarth's labored breathing. He was barely conscious. Then I noticed the incubator.

"Why not?" I whispered.

In the distance, I could see many hatchlings darting in and out amongst the battling green warriors, savagely attacking members of either side. The little monsters seemed to be quite enjoying themselves in the thick of the melee. I didn't begrudge them their child's game, so long as I was no longer a playmate. It seemed likely that all the newly hatched Tharks had escaped the incubator and were now running wild, savoring their first taste of the only joy their humorless lives had in store. I hoped the incubator was deserted, for it meant a temporary means of shelter and nourishment for Thuvan Dihn and me. If nothing else, there would be water. And its walls would protect us from the uncanny eyesight of the green men while we rested.

Creeping stealthily, Thuvan Dihn and I managed to make our way into the incubator without being discovered by its savage builders. We found no

hatchlings within, for which I breathed a silent sigh of relief. My companion settled heavily against a wall, while I sought out the nutrient and water supplies that fed the eggs during their five-year gestation. But for size, green Barsoomian incubators differ little from our own — the design of which has not varied for ten thousand generations. I quickly found what I was looking for and returned to Thuvan Dihn's side.

Having eaten, and quenched intolerable thirst, we slept as the din of battle raged about the ancient structure's walls.

Chapter Four:

[Princes of Mars](#)

The "POJ"

[Table of Contents](#)

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Chapter Four: Princes of Mars

words by Jeff, art by Duane

Night was about to fall when we entered the incubator. When I opened my eyes, thoroughly refreshed, I saw through the glass roof that the sun was high in the morning sky. I could hear no sound from without our sanctuary. Touching Thuvan Dihn's arm, I rose to my feet. He stirred, following as I cautiously stepped through the door. □

There wasn't a living green man or woman in sight. The mangled bodies were heaped in piles about the trackless sea bottom. Already, scavengers were prowling amongst the feast of dead flesh.

"The green ones make the red man's attempts at warfare seem like child's play," commented the Prince of Ptarth. "Barsoom will soon be rid of their savage kind, without any help from us."

Seeing the evidence all about me, I had to agree.

"The only good savage is a dead savage," he said. "There are many good savages about today."

"Can you walk?" I asked.

"What choice have I?" Thuvan Dihn answered.

A horrid scream from the pit stopped us cold.

Peering over the side, I saw that one of the hatchlings had survived the blades of Thuvan Dihn and I. The creature lay gasping amongst its brothers, half-dead yet still deadly. Portions of snowy-white shell clung to its green hide, and I wondered if it had been one of the eggs thrown into the pit, now hatched.

It scrambled and clawed from beneath a mound of torn bodies -- a pitiful, haunting sight. Once free, it hobbled for a moment, as if dazed, and then

rushed headlong into the wall.

Again and again it charged, screaming like the grinding of mishappen gears; some mindless machine, berserk with rage, fear or both. The thing had no conception of where or what it was. And it had no enemy to fight.

Thuvan Dihn pulled away, but I lingered, unable to take my eyes from the horrible scene. The hatchling was badly wounded. Deep bruises mottled the green hide, which was spotted with blood and mucous.

It sank to the ground, utterly spent, closing its eyes. Flaring nostrils quivered as the creature panted uncontrollably. Cup-like antennae lolled back and forth. Miniature tusks were flecked with white foam.

Shaking off Thuvan Dihn's attempt to stop me, I descended into the pit.

At first, it had been my intention to put the suffering hatchling out of its misery. Had one of its savage sires witnessed the scene, no doubt the humorous anecdote would have been told 'round campfires for days to come. But I, who had unwillingly contributed to the sad creature's plight, could only be sickened.

When I reached the hatchling's side, my heart changed. I called to Thuvan Dihn to bring water, and nutrients from the incubator. Though I carefully cleansed its wounds with the medicinal balms I carried, I knew the task was probably for naught. There was little hope it could live.

But it did.

"Are you going to carry it with you all the way to Helium?" asked Thuvan Dihn, when we'd clambored from the pit. "Because it is young, does not mean that it is innocent."

"We'll leave it here, in the incubator," I replied. "Perhaps one of its people survived, and will return."

"Better to dash its head against the wall and be done with it," Thuvan Dihn said. "The creature will die, anyway, Tardos Mors."

I would not allow the murder. After setting it near water and food, we turned our attention to the trek ahead.

I was only vaguely familiar with this hemisphere of Barsoom. But I knew that our likeliest hope of finding transportation was in Tonool, which my recollection told me lay somewhere to the northeast. "Likely" is a relative term, however — the green hordes had no fliers; Tonool did. But both would be enemies of Tardos Mors and Thuvan Dihn. We would be strangers in a strange land, and all such are suspect upon Barsoom.

"Panthans?" asked Thuvan Dihn, smiling.

"Have you played the role before?" I returned.

"Who hasn't?"

I have often wondered how true panthans ever find work, since that disguise had been used by most wanderers at one time or another — and usually with ulterior motive. But we had no better plan, and so set off in the direction we thought Tonool to lie, entering an area of Barsoom that was quite different from any terrain I knew in my own hemisphere of the planet. The River Iss and its tributaries fed vast areas here, making possible the Great Tonoolian Marsh and the famed Kaolian Forest.

In midafternoon, Thuvan Dihn bid me look behind us.

Following doggedly along our trail was the green hatchling.

"That killer wants our blood," the Prince of Ptarth said, chuckling.

The name stuck. The Killer followed us the rest of the day, making no attack. He seemed curious -- an odd thing for the spawn of a green man.

Eventually, The Killer traveled alongside us.

Well, what of it? Neither Thuvan Dihn nor I had any real idea where we were or where we were going. Perhaps the green child did, by virtue of some uncanny instinct. He was alone in the world, and, for the moment, so were the Prince of Ptarth and I.

The march was a sullen one at times, as we three unlikely companions made our way across an unfamiliar landscape.

I nursed a dull ache over the death of my elder brother. That I was now Jeddak-apparent of Helium made the hurt all the more unbearable, for I was far from home, and lost, while my empire was at war.

I'd have gladly traded the throne for my brother's life.

Thuvan Dihn kept whatever thoughts he was thinking to himself, which suited my mood.

As for The Killer -- I couldn't be sure he even possessed the ability to think.

Hatred is not a thing the warriors of Helium feel for their enemies. I couldn't hate Thuvan Dihn, or his people, any more than I could call him friend; and that I'd no more do than I would peacefully lay my hand upon the shoulder The Killer after he'd grown to savage adulthood.

But even the green men, we do not hate. For the loveless barbarians we reserve our deepest pity.

Thuvan Dihn was my enemy. No more, no less. If it had occurred to me to ask him, he'd have said the same of me.

It's true that when one discovered a few precious drops of water to drink, or a desert lizard to eat, he shared it with the other. I also shared my medicinal balms with Thuvan Dihn, to speed the healing of the grievous wounds that the

green hatchlings had dealt him. Once, he saved me from the charge of a banth, stepping with upraised sword between my turned back and the snarling beast.

The Killer stayed with us, and we made no effort to dissuade him. He hunted alone, however -- a manifestation of the trait that marks all of his breed. Despite their communal lifestyle, the green men endure a uniquely solitary existence.

Upon the third day of our march, Thuvan Dihn and I found a sompus grove on the outskirts of the Great Marsh. Since it provided more water and food than any we'd encountered thus far, the Prince of Ptarth and I decided to make camp for a day or two before continuing. I judged there to be a half-zode of daylight left when we paused for our rest.

Thuvan Dihn sat rubbing the last of my balm upon his shoulder. I tended the fire we'd made to roast an ulsio discovered earlier in the day. Scarcely a dozen words had passed between us during the entire march.

"There may yet be Warhoon savages nearby," Thuvan Dihn said, casting about the camp with suspicious eyes.

"What were they doing so far from their normal haunts?" I asked. "Do you know, Thuvan Dihn?"

He nodded, vaguely.

"Searching for an escaped slave," he said.

It seemed odd to both of us that the Warhoons would devote so much energy to the recapture of a single slave.

"From snatches of conversation I heard, this slave was valuable indeed," the Prince of Ptarth said. "They called it a wraith — supposedly possessing uncanny, supernatural powers. Scouting parties were combing the sea bottoms in all directions for the thing. I never understood if it was supposed to be

human or green savage, or possibly some other strange beast. But the Warhoon jed was quite anxious to recapture it."

We fell silent for a time, slicing charred pieces of meat. The Killer stalked some small game just outside the perimeter of the glade.

Thuvan Dihn's next words were as much to himself as me.

"The war with Helium has left Ptarth severely weakened," he said.

"As it has my own father's empire," I commented, cautiously.

Some wars make nations strong, especially those that are fought for an honorable cause. Others tended to suffocate, as did the years-long struggle with Ptarth, the reasons for which had become obscure in the minds of both people.

"The entire resources of a prosperous nation have been poured, year after year, into that winless conflict," Thuvan Dihn continued. "Ptarth found itself in the throes of a gripping recession. The economy was in upheaval. A year ago, many of her citizens began grumbling openly. Food stores had been depleted by the needs of a vast army. Just maintaining the supply lines to feed that army on a distant front had taxed our resources to the limit. While there was still a strong core of support for my father, Nal Thuvio, there was also growing opposition — fostered by the Jeddak's own brother, my uncle, Dihntar Mas."

Thuvan Dihn paused, turning the ulsio with a stick. I was struck by how deeply the war had undermined Ptarth, bringing her to the brink of civil unrest — which occurs often enough upon Barsoom, but usually among nations of far less stability than Ptarth, whose ancient royal lineage is almost as old as Helium's.

My father's empire had suffered the privations any war brings. But, as always, we had borne the burdens well. Victory we could not claim. But neither had

defeat claimed us. In that sense, the Empire had prevailed.

"Then came the attempted Liberation of Flemster," Thuvan Dihn remarked.

"The Seige of Flemster, you mean," I said, anger rising within me. For centuries, Flemster been a loyal city of the Heliumetic Empire. That it had once been a distant Ptarthian outpost was little more than a footnote to history.

"By whatever name it is called, the battle there was a turning point for Ptarth," Thuvan Dihn said.

For Helium, too, I thought. My brother died there. And so did I, in a way.

"Resources were strained to the breaking point, and outright Civil War was imminent in Ptarth," the prince continued. "As Nal Thuvio eloquently put his case before the Senate, I took the Jeddak's cause directly to the people in an appeal for unity. When we least expected it, Dihntar Mas struck. An assassin's blade cut short my father's reign. He died in my arms as the torch was set to the Ptarthian capital. When Dihntar Mas took the crown, I escaped -- vowing to return and claim my rightful place upon the throne."

He sighed.

"All Ptarth thinks me dead. I should have remained to face certain execution at the hands of the usurper," Thuvan Dihn said. "The captain of a warship will leap from the bow of his lost command to satisfy honor. The ruler of a lost empire can do no less."

A pained look overcame Thuvan Dihn, and I was struck by the image his face conjured in my mind: Moros Tar, that day in the Temple of Reward.

"What happened next?" I asked, to break the illusion.

"The Warhoons captured me," he said. "I cannot imagine what has befallen my beloved Ptarth in the weeks since."

"Weeks!" I ejaculated. "But the flagship of the Ptarthian fleet east of Helium bore your device! That was days ago -- not weeks."

"If a Ptarthian ship bore my device, it did so without the Prince of Ptarth aboard her," said Thuvan Dihn. "Do you believe me, Tardos Mors?"

I contemplated the fire without answering.

Nothing made sense.

Thuvan Dihn's story made me wonder for the hundredth time what had transpired in Helium since my departure. Moros Tar was well upon the Pilgrimage by now, perhaps bowing to Issus herself. My Empire had no ruler upon the throne; and that of Thuvan Dihn was occupied by a pretender.

"What started the war?" Thuvan Dihn asked.

"I know not," I said. "Does it matter any more?"

"I have been thinking about that often these past weeks," the Prince of Ptarth slowly mused. "I think it does matter, Tardos Mors. I believe the war was orchestrated by forces outside either Ptarth or Helium."

It was a shocking suggestion, nearly outrageous. But the more I thought on it, the less outrageous it seemed.

"The Seige of Flemster was ordered, and directly overseen, by none less than your own sire," I reminded Thuvan Dihn.

The Prince of Ptarth shook his head. "The Heliumetic fleet build-up at Flemster was reason enough to prompt Nal Thuvio's quick action," he said.

"What fleet?" I demanded. "No build-up took place before the seige."

A sudden snarl from the brush signified that The Killer had lived up to his

name. Thuvan Dihn and I turned in the direction of the sound, momentarily distracted. Whatever answer was upon Thuvan Dihn's lips never came.

A great buzzing, as if produced by the propellers of a thousand fliers, became overpoweringly loud. For the past several xats I had been conscious of the far-off noise. But now it had grown to such proportions to be impossible to ignore.

A flash of yellow and black swooped down upon our camp. And then another, and another. The hum had grown to an unbearable roar all about us.

"Siths!" shouted Thuvan Dihn. "If you value your life, Tardos Mors, take cover beneath the trees!"

Chapter Five:

[Girl of the Woods](#)

The "POJ"

[Table of Contents](#)

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Chapter Five: Girl of the Woods

words by Jeff, art by Duane

The warning came too late. □

I was sent sprawling to the soft sward by what felt like a small flier crashing into my back. I rolled instinctively to fend off the airborne attacker. What I saw sent a shudder down my aching spine.

A sith hovered above me, its bulbous body held impossibly aloft by tiny, whirring wings of gossamer. It had not struck with its powerful stinger, else I'd have been dead. More likely, I had simply been an obstacle in its path, and the thing crashed into me with its hideous head. It floated there, shaking that head as if to clear it, and then darted upward and was gone.

John Carter has told me the closest earthly equivalent to this Barsoomian creature is miniscule: no larger than a man's thumb. "Hornet," he called it. Imagine, if you can, a hornet grown to the size of yonder writing desk, with ferocious jaws and myriad facet eyes that cover three-quarters of its head. And behind is the poisonous stinger, powerful enough to impale a thotat. Bloodthirsty things, these siths were in days gone by. I knew of entire cities that had been laid to waste by sith swarms.

□ Now, I was at the center of one such swarm. There were hundreds of the flying beasts; dodging amongst the trees and about the small clearing. The roar of their madly buzzing wings was overpowering. Their jaws opened and shut incessantly, with an unnerving click-click-click.

I saw no sign of Thuvan Dihh. Perhaps he'd made it to safety beneath a tree. Or, more probably, he'd been carried off to his doom. The sky was black, a plague of the ungodly huge insects. I held out little hope that my companion could have survived the assault; nor did I delude myself about my own fate.

The last I saw of The Killer, he was clinging to the monstrous head of a sith,

tusks gouging the bloody mass as the beast ascended higher and higher above the trees.

I drew my sword and managed to stumble to my feet — only to be nearly beheaded by another flashing monster.

But as I spun to the side, I saw it was no sith that had shot past my head. It was a man, on some strangely designed flier. The sleek machine tore past so quickly that I caught barely a glimpse of it. Then it was gone, in hot pursuit of a fleeing sith that had raced between the boles of two trees at the other end of the clearing.

More of the flying machines were engaged in battle with the swarm. The armor-clad riders straddled their narrow craft like they would a thout, bent forward against the wind as they grasped the low-slung handlebars with which they apparently controlled the odd fliers. As others darted into the clearing, I saw that from the prow of the vehicles protuded 10-foot lances, which could be extended or retracted at the will of the operator. The fliers maneuvered uncannily among the trees, and, diving upon their prey, extended a poison-tipped lance and drove it unmercifully into flesh. For a moment, the machine would be wrenched violently as the dying beast shuddered in its death throes. Then the operator would retract the lance and be off in pursuit of another sith — that is, if he hadn't been thrown from his mount by the initial jolt.

The fliers were also equipped with radium rifles. Exploding pellets peppered the clearing. Here, a tree would burst into flame. There, a crater would be exposed in a shower of soil.

I dove for cover.

The guns seemed not as accurate against the siths as the lances, which I later learned were dipped in the sith's own poison; the only concoction deadly enough to be effective against the beasts. It was these that the flying hunters used most often to devastating effect.

Nor were the siths ineffective against their attackers. I saw one of the beasts dive unerringly upon a hapless hunter, driving its stinger through his armored back so that it protuded from a lifeless chest. Lifting the body from the flier, the sith rose above the trees and was gone. The riderless flier crashed into a tree and exploded.

I had little time to observe the unusual tactics of this strange battle, for I was occupied with battles of my own. I'd never before fought a sith, but it soon became apparent that disabling the stinger was the first rule of such combat. As one of the beasts dove toward me, its midsection bent forward so that the deadly organ was poised to strike, I swung a mighty cut and managed to sever the menace near its base.

The creature screamed in rage and pain, but did not appear mortally wounded. It altered its course, looping above me. Then it bolted downward again, clutching my shoulders in pawlike appendages on a pair of its legs. I was lofted high above the glade, dangling helplessly in the clutches of the fearsome beast. It pummeled my body with the stump where its stinger had been; I was like to have been turned to jelly by the merciless pounding if it continued for much longer.

The ride itself was a dizzying, stomach-churning spectacle, as we darted amongst the trees and raced crazily this way and that. At one point, a flying warrior charged my sith, intent on lancing it. I think it mattered little to him that I was wriggling in the creature's grasp. The warrior must have given me up for dead -- or else he just didn't care, figuring my own death a fair price if the world was rid of one more sith. It seemed, to me, a rather high price for another to pay.

But a sideways dash by the monster sent the warrior crashing into the trunk of a mighty tree.

Then the beast darted upward, carrying me off to some fate I could not imagine. We were airborne for at least a zode.

The blows from the stump became less frequent. I let my body go limp in the beast's grasp, to make it believe I had succumbed to its attack. Then the beating stopped and we began to sink lower in the thin air.

It was becoming obvious that the sith was badly wounded, either from my own blows or as a result of its battle with the strange fliers. By its haphazard pattern, I guessed that the creature was off its course -- lost.

Eventually, the sith faltered, swooping ever lower to the ground. We were entering a jungle-like area that could only be the Great Toonolian Marsh.

With a heaving convulsion, the sith crashed down through the thick foliage. I leapt clear of its body, and turned hastily to defend myself against its death throes. But the beast was no more. I turned away from it, and decided to continue on, alone, toward Toonol — wherever that might be.

Neither Thuria nor Cluros had yet risen, though I knew they both would ere many more xats passed. For now, the forest was blanketed in Koradian darkness. Monstrous shapes grew all around me in this dismal wood. The dank smell of rotting vegetation permeated everything.

As I clawed my way through the clinging undergrowth, cutting a path through the hanging vines with upraised sword, a rhythmic sound, from afar, came softly to my ears. At first, it was barely audible above the buzzing insects, hissing serpents and roaring night-carnivores that surrounded me — whose constant din I had become accustomed to as I slashed my way through blackness.

But this new sound was like none other I'd heard in the Great Marsh, for it was unmistakably produced by a human; as weird and otherworldly as the sound itself was to my ears, my intellect told me no savage beast could make it. There was a cadence to the sound; a beat that suggested purpose, and hypnotic in its way. Its faint, yet steady tone in that eerily black night might have unnerved me, had I been other than a prince of Helium. Even so, I lent more caution to my advance through the wood, straining every sense forward in an

attempt to discern the sound's exact location.

Soon, a dull glow became apparent in the distance, as if cast by a campfire. And to the beating-drum sound was added a sing-song chant, mournful and primitive — a single voice, that of a woman. It spoke to a primal instinct inside me; I felt stirrings that reached back into my being to ancestors who danced by firelight, naked and painted, when the world was young — before the Orovars; perhaps in the shadow of the Tree of Life itself.

I crept forward through that black wood, expecting nothing because my mind could conjure no possible scene to accompany that alluring, yet somehow disturbing sound. As I drew closer, ever silent, the firelight cast weird and flickering shadows upon the trees all about me. The growls and moans of predators seemed to have subsided, and the chant grew more pressing in my ears.

Silently pulling back a rotted branch, I saw an open glade, bathed in the glow of a roaring fire at its center. Around the fire danced a naked red girl, as beautiful as any I'd ever laid eyes upon. And yet, she was strange to my eyes. Her jet-black hair was straight as the edge of a sword — unlike the flowing, soft curls of other red women — and tied back by a leather strip across her brow. She wore knee-high boots, made of the same material. Attached to a single thong about her slim waist was a small pouch, covered in beads which were arranged in a mysterious pattern. As she chanted her mournful song, the girl tapped softly on the hide of a banth, stretched tautly upon a wooden hoop.

But her dance! That was the strangest aspect of the bizzare scene. She leaped high into the air with every bound, twenty feet or more, landing gracefully in the soft soil of the marsh. Again and again she made the great leaps, gently keeping time upon the primitive drum and by the unintelligible words of her song.

I crouched, spellbound, behind the trees. I had never seen the like of it. The twin moons of Barsoom rose now, casting their light upon the spectacle. The

girl's leaps grew even greater, and she shuddered in a kind of ecstasy that seemed almost religious.

I had little time to marvel. From the brush at the opposite end of the glade, three towering green men rushed upon the tableau as the girl was at the apex of one of her mighty bounds. She saw them from the height of her leap and, dropping the drum, withdrew a slim dagger from the thong at her hip. She landed full on the chest of the leader, plunging her blade deep into his eye.

By the next moment, I, too, had leaped into the clearing with drawn sword.

Chapter Six:

[Being Human](#)

The "POJ"

[Table of Contents](#)

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Chapter Six: Being Human

words by Jeff, art by Duane and David

I was upon the closest savage ere he knew I was within a haad of him. □
Retracting my stout Barsoomian blade from his belly, I spun on the second, who was attempting to pull the girl from his companion.

But the fellow may as well have tried to deflect a feeding banth from its prey, for the girl clung to her victim with all the tenacity of a predator. Her knife plunged again and again into the bloody mass that had been a head. The green man crumpled to the turf, the girl still on top of him.

That gave me all the opening I required to dispatch the other, after a brief crossing of swords.

I approached the naked woman with a friendly smile of greeting upon my lips. But I stopped short when she dropped to one knee and, with a quick cut, sliced the scalp from the head of her victim. When she looked up from the mutilated body, the expression upon her face was one of utter shock at the sight of me. It was as if she had seen a ghost. But the reaction was quickly shunted away, and she leaped to her feet, facing me with outstretched blade in one hand and the dripping green scalp in the other.

I raised a hand, to calm her. Then, slowly, I unbuckled my sword and tossed it softly at her feet. She never took her eyes from my own, ignoring the gesture.

Still watching me, she fastened the scalp to the thong at her hip. Blood trickled down her bare thigh.

"I am a friend," I said, pointing to the two savages I had killed in her service.

She snarled, flashing white teeth.

"I have no friends in this strange land that is so far from The World," she said, in an accent that was tinged with the voice of the green men. There was

something else, something undefinable and utterly foreign in her quiet tones. I'd never heard an inflection quite like hers before.

"You do have a friend here," I said. "I, too, am far from home. Allow me the honor of serving you."

She looked intently at me, searching my face. I could see the hesitation, the caution, that consumed her. Her knife remained pointed at my breast.

"You almost look like a Human Being," she said at last. "And yet...you are no Human Being. Your skin has not quite the same hue, and your eyes seem distant — as do the pindah of all who dwell here. There are no Human Beings in this place. Only the Green Ones. They are even worse than the Men With Metal Heads."

As she crept backward, I assured her that I was quite human, which seemed an odd thing to have to do. As odd as the thought of a man with a metal head.

"What tribe?" she demanded. "You are not Be-don-ko-he or Cho-kon-en or Ned-ni. You bear weapons similar to those of the Men With Metal Heads. And yet, you are not one of them, either."

Her eyes pierced me, then. Her brow furrowed.

"What manner of man are you?" the girl asked.

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

Surely, anywhere upon Barsoom, that revelation would draw some response. But she gave no sign that it meant anything at all to her.

The girl stood there, more beautiful than any creature under the moons of Mars; and seemingly as savage as the savages who inhabit the sea bottoms. She cast a sly glance at the dead green men.

Then she turned, banth-like, and leaped into the woods with scarce a sound.

I hesitated a fraction of an instant, pausing only to retrieve my sword, then plunged into the darkness after her. It wasn't just the fascination she held that drew me, but the suspicion that she may have information that could lead me home, to Helium. If nothing else, she might know a safe path out of this damnable wood.

I'd have sworn on my brother's grave that I knew exactly the point at which she entered the jungle vegetation. The vines and creepers encircled the glade so thickly that I should have had little trouble picking up her trail. But search as I might, it was as if no one had passed this way in a year — much less a few moments before.

I found where the green men had been hiding prior to their attack on the girl. Their spoor was unmistakable by the light of Thuria and Cluros. Of the girl herself I could find no trace.

Nevertheless, I pushed forward in the general direction I knew she must have taken. If this was the "wraith" that Thuvan Dihn had said the Warhoons were seeking, perhaps she did have some mystical ability to conceal her whereabouts. Nor could I forget her uncanny leaps.

She had accused me of not being human. I began to wonder if it was she who was not of this world.

The girl certainly held a spell over me.

Though both of Barsoom's moons were in the sky, their light barely penetrated the thick canopy above me. Strange creatures moved in this primeval forest. I could hear their breathing, and the brush of tawny limbs on bushes to left and right.

A scream rang out from directly ahead. There could be little doubt it was the girl. I practically threw myself forward in an effort to reach her side.

As I broke into another small glade, I saw her slender form in the grip of what I first took to be some gigantic carnivore that stood upright, clutching her in what appeared to be billowing arms.

I soon realized, however, that I was mistaken about the nature of her attacker. It was no creature of flesh and blood; rather, a sinuous man-eating plant that held her. Razor-like thorns reached toward her from a gaping maw at the top of a thick stalk. The girl struggled, but in vain.

I hastily swung at the carnivorous thing, hacking through woody limbs and pulpy vines that spewed syrupy liquid with every blow. A needle-like thistle pricked the girl in the chest, and she screamed again. As I continued my attack, the plant shuddered, its grip loosening. The girl was thrown clear. She reeled backward, and crumpled to the ground.

The plant, which seemed to come alive during my encounter with it, was now inert. It appeared as motionless as any tree. I knew not whether I had injured it, somehow, or if this was its natural state, to lure unsuspecting prey. With the girl free from its menace, I gave it no more thought.

I rushed to her side. Her wounds did not appear mortal. There was a nasty welt where the thistle had stuck her. I did my best to cleanse her wounds with a cloth, though I had no water to do a proper job. My medicinal balms were gone.

Her eyelids fluttered open, and she looked up at me. The suspicion had begun to leave her, though I could see it still flitted below the surface.

“Maybe you are a Human Being,” she said weakly. “You fight like one.”

A soft, feminine smile disarmed me as I stooped to assist the girl to her feet.

"My Tats-ah-das-ay-go," she whispered, caressing my cheek. She seemed almost to purr, like a contented bath-cub. The sound intoxicated me.

That's when she slipped the dagger between my ribs.

I never did understand women.

Chapter Seven:

[Klego-na-ay's Crazy Cousins](#)

The "POJ"

[Table of Contents](#)

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Chapter Seven: Klego-na-ay's Crazy Cousins

words by Jeff, art by David

The sun shone brightly through the foliage overhead. My body ached. □

The girl was gone.

Standing over me was a man -- at least, I first took him to be a man. He was entirely naked, his body smeared with that fat. A tangled mass of hair topped an angular head. He spat upon me, then began to sing; it was meaningless gibber.

It was then that I saw he had long, powerful legs, the knees of which were flexed, as if he was ready to spring at a moment's notice. An ample tail provide support for his tilted posture.

I attempted to rise, but the wound in my chest permitted little motion. I sank back, in agony. I could tell, however, that I suffered no fatal wound. I would recover, in time.

For now, I was simply at the mercy of this odd creature.

"Who are you?" I asked, wondering if it had speech.

The lunatic cackled insanely.

"I am Tur!" he shouted, then began hopping about on those mighty legs. Did every creature in this forest sak so prodigiously?

Ripping a branch from a tree, he dealt me a terrific blow to the head.

"Tur the Malevolent!" he screamed, and struck again.

"Tur the Kind!" he added; another blow missed as I rolled to the left.

"Tur the Blasphemer!" That one got me in the neck.

"Tur is Tur is Tur!" he cried, underscoring each point with the thick of the branch.

I couldn't argue with his reasoning, though the blows he used for emphasis left me wanting.

A dozen fellows of similar appearance and disposition emerged from the woods and bundled me in heavy rope. They carted me off through the undergrowth, each arguing loudly that he, in fact, was Tur. At one point they dropped me and a general melee ensued, presumably to determine the true Tur.

After one man had been brained and another crippled, the matter still could not be settled.

But the lunatics eventually resumed their march. I was alternately dragged by my feet or hair, and sometimes carried aloft. We traveled some short distance to the shore of a lake. Entering a wooden boat, we crossed the short distance to an island, where there stood a village comprised of simple huts made from mud and straw.

At the center of the village I was subjected to the most minute of examinations by the inhabitants.

"Good cranial development," said one man, flatulating loudly as he quite somberly measured the circumference of my head.

They picked at my harness, and weapons, and hair. A haggard old woman pinched my nose.

One simpleton hefted my short-sword and proceeded to lop off his own toe. No one paid any attention to his screams, except a man who picked up the stub and flung it into the trees. A mangy calot, half-starved, bounded after the morsel.

They hustled me into a hut, heaving me to the ground. I lay there, testing the strength of the rope that bound me. I could not break free.

As my eyes became accustomed to the dim interior, I saw that I was not alone. The girl of the woods lay in a corner, similarly bound. I maneuvered close to her, and saw that she was barely conscious.

In fact, she was quite ill, drenched in sweat. She gasped for breath in quick gulps. An area of her chest was enflamed -- and I recalled the plant-creature's darting thistle.

"Poison," I thought.

Recognizing me, she made no effort to keep her distance. The ropes bound her quite as securely as I; she couldn't have moved far had she wanted to.

It was also clear that the sickness made her too miserable to care whether I was near.

"I know you think of me as an enemy," I said. "I assure you again that I am a friend. It matters not that you believe me. But know, red woman, that I will do whatever I can to make your lot easier. We will escape this asylum. Tardos Mors, Prince of Helium, swears it."

There was a weak sound in her throat. The girl burned with fever. I wasn't sure that she'd even heard my pledge.

As darkness fell upon the village, the howling of predators sounded all about us. A zitidar squeeled, quite distant and eerie. I thought that it had perhaps become mired in some marshy swamp of this evil wood.

The scream of a banth seemed close, though, which caused a commotion among our captors for a short time. One entered the hut and asked if it had been I that growled. I told him that it was my stomach.

"I am hungry," I said.

"Stop it immediately," ordered the lunatic. "Tur demands it."

I recognized him as the one who'd originally discovered me. He backed slowly from the hut, watching me warily.

The intervals of silence were as unnerving as the great roars of the night-stalkers. During those lulls, the lunatics wept and cried, shouted and sang, laughed and screamed in terror. The sounds within the village were more terrible than those without.

A fire was built in the village center. The light that reached us cast dancing shadows upon the walls of the hut.

My heart went out to the girl, who listened keenly to the macabre chorus when she wasn't in the clutches of delirium. I wrestled with guilt for being unable to comfort her in any way.

So what that she had tried to kill me? I was a prince of Helium, and this was a red girl -- alone, and feverish, in a land of enemies.

She strained a bit to reach the pouch at her side, but was unsuccessful. I crept closer, gently so as not to frighten her, and managed to work it free from its thong. I placed the pouch in her hand, which seemed to soothe her, somehow.

Rocking back and forth, she tossed puffs of white powder from the pouch toward north, south, east and west. In low tones she chanted strange words:

"Gun-ju-le, chil-jilt; si-chi-zi, gun-ju-le; inzayu, ijanale!"

She was quiet then, very still. After a time, I worried that she had succumbed. I leaned close. To my relief, her breathing seemed more regular, though shallow.

"I still live," she whispered.

Then she rested.

At some point during the night, Tur brought us water and a half-roasted piece of meat. He eyed me suspiciously, not without a little apprehension. We remained bound, however, and availing ourselves of the fare proved difficult. In my case, it must have proved comical. I heard the girl chuckle weakly as I attempted to drink from the roughly molded bowl, face down, lying in the dirt.

I smiled, exaggerating my efforts to drink. It was a spectacle quite unbecoming a prince. But if it helped ease her suffering, no matter how briefly, my courtiers in Helium, at least, would be none the wiser.

With dripping chin, I propped myself up against a wall.

"You spoke earlier in a tongue I did not understand," I said to the girl. "What did it mean?"

She looked at me as if I was some unfathomable creature, distant and unheard of. Then she shrugged, as if realizing something she had forgotten.

"I asked Night to be good to me," she said in a tone that sounded of resignation. "To not let me die."

I looked around, listening to the jungle sounds and the murmurings of the villagers outside our hut. It seemed they planned not to sleep at all. I wondered if it was because they were mad, or afraid.

Sometimes they banged drums and blew primitive horns, presumably to keep the beasts at bay -- and I realized that fear alone kept them alert.

They, too, were asking the night to protect them.

"Your prayer must have been answered," I said. "You will not die."

"Perhaps. But I am still weak. Raven is not afraid of Night."

The comment made little more sense than the actions of our captors.

"Are your people near?" I asked.

She was quiet a long time.

"No," she finally said.

"Where are they?" I pressed.

"I often ask that question of Kliji-litzogue, the yellow lizard," said the girl.

"Yellow lizard?" Her words were beyond comprehension.

"My Spirit Guide," she answered, without answering. "Kliji- Litzogue says I am no longer in The World, that Usen, or perhaps an enemy of Usen, has sent me to one of the points of light in the sky. How this can be, Kliji-Litzogue will not say. He does say it will take much medicine for me ever to return to The World. But there are no izze-nantan here with the Power needed for the proper medicine. So how can it ever be made?"

She looked at me as if expecting an explanation. Of course, I had none.

"I have begun to collect the ingredients," she said, nodding to the scalp of the green man she'd killed. "But I am an izze-nantan with the Power of Water -- not Direction. I am lost. A Human Being -- and lost!"

She eyed me carefully, and a thought seemed to strike her. Eagerness welled within her. Hope reached out to me.

"Are you an izze-nantan?" she asked. "Do the Directions listen to you? Perhaps you know of The World. In which Direction does it now make its home?"

"I know not what an 'izze-nantan' might be," I answered slowly. "But there are

many worlds. I have seen them myself through the astronomers' instruments in my father's palace. Barsoom is but one. If you are from one of these, which is it?"

She shrugged her shapely shoulders, as if my question had no meaning. A spasm of coughing wracked her body before she could answer.

"The World is the land of my ancestors, and all their ancestors before them," she said, peaceful now. "The World is where Chigo-na-ay beats his merciless rays upon a scorched waste of sand, and yet which is more beautiful than words can describe, for all its emptiness. The World stretches from the cool rivers and snowy frost of the north, where majestic mountains touch the face of Yandestan, to endless plains and hot desert in the south, and encompasses all that is sacred in Usen's universe. It is the land of the Shis-Inday; the Human Beings, the Men of the Woods. It is my home and the home of my mother, Light-in-Eyes, and my father, Yellow Bear. It is the home that I know I shall never see again, and for which I weep every night beneath the eyes of Klego-na-ay's crazy cousins."

Somehow, I knew that she meant Thuria and Cluros -- the "cousins" of "Klego-na-ay." Poets have sometimes called those orbs of the night crazy. But never had their words imparted to me the ache that lived in the heart of this lone girl.

I moved closer.

"I am Tardos Mors, son of Moros Tar," I said gently. "By what name do Yellow Bear and Light-in-Eyes call you?"

Her shoulders sank, and she strained against her bonds to move imperceptibly nearer me. She looked to the scar that her knife had carved in my chest, and turned away. Had my arm been free, I'd have slipped it about her.

"The Green Ones called me Shis-Inday," she said. "It is the name of my people, in The World. That name will serve as well as any other; for I am the only Human Being in this place."

Chapter Eight:

[The Jeddak of Phundahl](#)

The "POJ"

[Table of Contents](#)

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Chapter Eight: The Jeddak of Phundahl

words by Jeff, art by Duane

Tur and a score of the other Turs entered our hut when dawn broke. □

"We will perform the brain transplants now," he announced, clutching my short-sword in one hand.

As several of the madmen reached for me, I struggled again to break free. But it was pointless. I could not budge. We were carried from the hut, helpless, to the center of the clearing.

Tur motioned for the villagers to gather about, and we were set upon altars made from roughly hewn logs.

"The experiment is a simple one," Tur said. "I will take the brain from this red man, and place it in the skull of this woman."

"Why?" asked someone at the back of crowd.

The question seemed to startle the demented "surgeon," who was busy sharpening my blade upon a rock. I feared that he was blunting it more than anything else. Not that it would matter.

"It might do some good in the world," Tur finally answered.

"What will you do with the brain of the woman?" asked someone else.

"I hadn't thought of that," Tur admitted.

"Can I have it?" the questioner wondered. "I'd like to keep it as a souvenir."

"I suppose," Tur said. "But I must say, the request reeks of sentimentality."

As the madman hefted my short-sword in what looked to be a blow that would

sever my head, a small flier landed in the clearing. A red man in leather harness and a half-dozen similarly garbed assistants descended from its deck and approached.

Meanwhile, three naked lunatics were unceremoniously thrust from the deck of the ship. Others from the village swarmed about, putting them through the same detailed examination I had undergone the day before.

"What have we here?" the red leader asked of those gathered about me and Shis-Inday. "What are you people doing now?"

"Ras Thavas!" exclaimed Tur. "You are in time to witness an experiment of great scientific importance."

"Indeed," commented the one called Ras Thavas. His tone was that of a parent humoring a child. He pushed his way through the crowd and looked upon us. "And what experiment is that?"

"I am about to place this red man's brain in his mate's cranium," Tur explained.

"Without benefit of anesthesia?" Ras Thavas asked. He seemed amused.

"Well, we don't have any..." Tur stammered. "The technique is still sound, however."

"Enough!" Ras Thavas roared. The lunatics scattered. Tur himself dropped my blade and scampered for the trees.

Ras Thavas looked at me in a clinical sort of appraisal. He was a typical red man: well-proportioned, black hair, a sword at his hip. He wore the weapon, however, as if it was seldom put to the use that Issus intended. Such men exist on Barsoom -- but they are rare.

His expression was one of scientific curiosity. If he wondered what circumstances had brought me to this rather ignoble predicament, he did not

ask.

When the gaze of Ras Thavas turned to Shis-Inday, an intense interest immediately consumed him. He touched her forehead, examined her teeth, and then probed her with a small instrument.

Still gravely ill, the girl swooned in and out of delerium.

"Remarkable!" the scientist remarked, looking at his instrument.

He ordered his assistants to carry her to the flier, including me in his gesture as an afterthought.

We were soon underway, flying low above the marsh in a northerly direction. Once clear of the trees, I could see the outline of a city on the horizon.

"Phundahl," said a padwar near me. He seemed to spit the word out, as if its taste was unpleasant in his mouth.

"Your home?" I asked.

The warrior grunted.

"We are of Toonol, and Phundahl is our enemy," said the padwar, who was called Bal Zak. "Ras Thavas, however, is not particular about politics. He is making use of facilities that Xax, the Jeddak of Phundahl, has provided."

"And what of the village -- the lunatics who were about to brain me?"

"Experiments gone awry," said Bal Zak. "That village is one reason I, for one, am not too disturbed by Ras Thavas's allegiance with Phundahl. Xax permits the scientist to test his theories upon Phundahlian subjects. It's about the best use of Phundahlions that I can think of. When the mastermind is done with them, they are brought to Gooli, in the Great Marsh, and abandoned. We deposited a new batch today. It's lucky for you that we did. Or, perhaps, not so lucky."

The young padwar leaned close, and in a low voice added, "If you ask me, Xax himself is madder than any of those we just left in the village. And on that score, Ras Thavas is not far behind the Jeddak."

The spired city grew in the path of our plodding flier. It brought exotic images to my mind. "Phundahl" and "Toonol" had always been but names on a map. To an American of Jasoom, similar images might be conjured of places that John Carter has told me he visited in his long years of wandering and fighting upon your planet -- Khatmandu atop the tall Himalayas, or Xuja in the heart of darkest Africa. Opar is another distant place of danger I recall the Warlord describing.

In the days of which I speak, Phundahl and Tonool hinted of mystery and adventure to the men of Helium. We knew not their horrors and blasphemy firsthand.

I would soon discover the madness of Phundahl, though.

Upon our arrival, Ras Thavas led the way through a strange temple. Garishly colored tapestries and craven idols adorned the walls. Clouds of thick incense hung in the air. White-robed priests slunk through the corridors on errands I could not guess, while rhythmic chants came from a direction I was not sure of.

With a shudder, I realized this was no place of worship for the true goddess, Issus. It belonged to the pagan deity of a backward people.

We entered the pits. Traversing the ancient passages, we soon came upon a sprawling, well-lighted apartment that was filled with an array of scientific instruments. Medical examination tables lined one wall, and it was to one of these that the scientist took Shis-Inday.

An assistant hoisted the unconscious girl to one of the tables.

"Remarkable," Ras Thavas muttered again, as he examined the girl. "The

subject is unlike any other I've ever encountered."

"She is not of Barsoom," I offered.

Ras Thavas snorted.

"Of course not," the scientist said, derisively. "Any fool could determine that."

He turned on me then and asked why she was ill.

"Poisoned by a man-eating plant in the Great Marsh," I replied.

He stuck her with a needle, and a colorless liquid flowed into Shis-Inday's arm. He added other liquids to the mix, and seemed satisfied that the girl would recover.

"Where is she from?" he asked.

"I'd have thought any fool could have determined that," I answered.

If the jab carried any insult to the ears of Ras Thavas, he showed no sign of it.

"And where are you from, fool?"

"I am Tardos Mors, prince of Helium," I replied.

"And you do not know, prince of Helium, where the girl was born?"

"She is unable to say," I answered sullenly. "She calls the planet of her birth 'The World,' but appears to have been living among the green men of Warhoon for some time. How she came to be here is anyone's guess."

"She is not of Rasoom, or Cosoom -- that much is evident," Ras Thavas mused. "Thought waves from the inhabitants of those planets suggest extreme refinement, power and flexibility. Even in sleep, the brain patterns of this subject reflect a barbaric savagery that differs little from the green primitives

you say she has been among."

He turned from the table, consulting a worn book that I took to be a journal of sorts. He made a few notations in it. When he spoke, it was more to himself than to me or his assistants.

"Jasoom, perhaps," said the scientist. "Yes, that must be it. Jasoom -- a land that time forgot. Its people have advanced little beyond the white apes."

As the examination continued, Ras Thavas seemed less and less intrigued by the girl.

"The subject is of little use in my current experiments," he muttered to an assistant, who took copious notes. "She has even less ability to survive for long periods without water than the humans of Barsoom. That's to be expected, if she is of Jasoom, which is abundant in that respect. If only that incompetent Zodangan would finish his space ship, rather than playing with that other monstrosity! Then we could take all that we need..."

The thought struck some buried chord with the scientist. He turned abruptly back to me.

"How did she get here?" he demanded.

At that moment, three warriors entered the apartments.

"Xax demands the presence of Ras Thavas and his captives," ordered the leader.

"I am busy," replied the scientist.

"You will be dead, unless you comply, Toonolian," growled the warrior.

Bal Zak nudged me.

"The walls of Tur's temple have ears," the padwar said. "Even in the pits. It

will not go well for you, if the girl is truly of Jasoom. I find the notion hard to believe. But the Phundahlans will consider it blasphemous."

Shis-Inday slowly regained consciousness. Without waiting for any further comment from Ras Thavas, the Jeddak's guards hustled us from the chamber, and up through the pits to the temple. The scientist followed, cursing the interruption.

As we were ushered into a great hall, Bal Zak seemed to stiffen at the sight of a colossal statue -- a squatting, man-like figure. The eyes of the idol rolled ponderously about the massive room, coming to rest upon our party at the far end.

"Tur," the Toonolian whispered. "The god of Phundahl."

Prone before the figure was a man in jewel-encrusted harness, whom I took to be Xax, the Jeddak. It was a pitiful, ignoble position for the ruler of any Barsoomian nation. As a prince of Helium, the sight sickened me. As a Defender of the Faith -- that of the true deity, Issus -- I found the spectacle abhorrent in the extreme.

Standing to one side was a young woman, also ornately jeweled.

"Xaxa," Bal Zak said, following my gaze. "The princess -- daughter of the Jeddak."

She seemed rather homely, for a Barsoomian princess. But etiquette prohibited me from commenting upon that.

The man rose, his head still bent low before the stone god. He did not raise his eyes until he'd turned to face us. Then he stood, motionless, staring at us. The eyes of the giant idol were also transfixed upon Shis-Inday and me. Xaxa took up her father's position upon the cold floor.

The Jeddak did not speak. My heart leapt to my throat when the statue did.

"Blasphemers!" it bellowed, in a resonating tone that nearly shook the walls.

Xaxa leapt from the ground. Her body contorted. She bent toward us in a mocking pose of supplication.

"He worships a false goddess!" she screamed, pointing at me. Then the princess turned toward Shis-Inday.

"There are no worlds but Barsoom!" Xaxa cackled in a high-pitched wail. "Nothing exists but that which Tur created!"

The god in question continued to stare at us.

"Chain them in the pits," it said after a long moment. "Let them ponder not my judgement, for it is inevitable -- but the method by which it shall be carried out!"

"These two be guests of Ras Thavas!" shouted Bal Zak, who'd taken a liking to me and Shis-Inday for some reason. Perhaps it was simply because we had been deemed enemies of Phundahl. The Tonoolian had made it plain that he felt no love for Phundahl or its people.

"The girl could be important," added Ras Thavas.

"Tur has spoken," said Xax.

The Jeddak fell to the ground -- gibbering like the lunatics we'd left behind in the Great Marsh.

With that, we were led by the guards back into the pits.

Chapter Nine:

[Shis-Inday Tells Me Her Story](#)

The "POJ"

[Table of Contents](#)

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Chapter Nine: Shis-Inday Tells Me Her Story

words by Jeff, art by David

I would come to know Shis-Inday's story as well my own. □

She told it to me for the first time that night, in the pits of Phundahl, sitting in darkness amid mildewed bones and the stale smell of death, awaiting the judgement of Tur.

The eyes of hungry ulsios glared from the shadows as she spoke. At first, I listened with half my attention diverted, lest the vermin attack.

Soon, however, the ulsios were forgotten.

To the Men of the Woods, as with the red men of Barsoom, all women hold positions of reverence. Consider that among the Shis-Inday, a race that would one day become feared for their "barbarity" along the length of a Jasoomian continent, there is no more sacred rite than the Nah-ih-es -- the four-day Puberty Ceremony held when girls become women.

A mother knows when her daughter is about to become White Painted Woman. Thus, Light-in-Eyes knew when it was time to call their family's women together to plan the Nah-ih-es of Shoz- Litzogue's only child.

Shis-Inday, whose real name cannot be spoken aloud, made the journey to womanhood during the Summer of Cool Rains, which was appropriate because of the special standing she had among the Be-don-ko-he.

The Power of Water had called to the girl when she was but five rains. Her ability as an izze-nantan was unusual for one so young, and a female at that -- but it was not unheard of.

"You are an extraordinary girl, my daughter," Yellow Bear said to her on the eve of the Nah-ih-es. "No doubt you will become an exceptional woman, the

mother of many proud Be-don-ko-he warriors. Your strength will be our strength. White Painted Woman will glow within you. And us."

The Nah-ih-es of Shis-Inday promised to be one of the grandest in the memory of any Be-don-ko-he then living. Tribes from across The World would gather for the feast. Yellow Bear was a great chief, and so Shis-Inday was a princess among her people.

More than a celebration of Shis-Inday's transformation into White Painted Woman, the Nah-ih-es would signify the deep appreciation among the Men of the Woods for the blessings that Usen the Life-Giver had provided. The fruitfulness of a single woman is a symbol of the Shis-Inday's prosperity.

By all the means the Men of the Woods measured wealth, the Be-don-ko-he tribe was a wealthy one indeed. For they had clothes to wear, and food to eat; they knew where to find water in the barren wastes that encompassed their world -- often at the guidance of Shis-Inday. Some said she could conjure forth the precious liquid from rock.

They were brave hunters -- and mighty fighters, for even a peaceful people must defend themselves from enemies if they would remain free.

Most importantly, the Shis-Inday were at peace with themselves and their deity. Would that a similar relationship held between all men and whatever gods they hold dear. Or fear.

The beasts and the trees and air and the sun were put in The World to help the Human Beings survive in a place that was, in many respects, utterly inhospitable. They were brothers with the Directions and knew the twinkling lights in the night sky by name. Barsoom, I would one day learn, was called Gora-ban-Hinsu: "The Weeping Lover."

They were wary of the tricks played by Coyote; gave a respectfully wide berth to Snake; and avoided Raven completely.

All of these things made Usen happy, and He allowed the Men of the Woods to survive.

The Shis-Inday did more than survive. They thrived. They loved, they dreamed, they hunted, they prayed and they prospered.

Until the Men With the Metal Heads came.

Their leader was called Coronado, and he appeared from nowhere to destroy The World with the Evil men who followed him. They had heads of metal, and hair growing from their faces. They were horrible; murdering Be-don-ko-he warriors and ravaging Be-don-ko-he maidens. The Cho-kon-en and Ned-ni tribes suffered similar treatment.

The Men With Metal Heads hunted pesh-litzogue, the yellow stone that is buried underground. They believed it could be found in a place called Cibola, of which the Shis-Inday knew nothing. While searching for the fabled lost city, they burned the camps, the kunh-gan-hays, of the Human Beings and slaughtered their game.

It was on the second day of Shis-Inday's Nah-ih-es that the outsiders roared into The World and changed it forever.

Old Woman called from the darkness to Shis-Inday.

"Here, child," she whispered. "Your grandmother is dying."

Shis-Inday found her behind a bush, crumpled and still. Redness covered Old Woman's chest. By the moonlight, the girl could see blood pump forth with every beat of a tired heart.

"You have the Power of White Painted Woman, child," whispered the withered one. "You are White Painted Woman, for the Nah-ih-es had not ended before the outsiders came. Her Chidin entered you, girl. And there it still resides."

Shis-Inday felt fear, not Power. The things she'd witnessed haunted and sickened her. The strange men riding strange beasts had sticks that bellowed with the Power of Thunder. Whenever the Men With Metal Heads called to the heavens, many Be-don-ko-he warriors were killed. Sometimes, women and children were killed, too. Lightning and Thunder are greatly feared by the Shis-Inday, so this Power held by the Men With Metal Heads made them all the more terrible.

The daughter of Shoz-Litzogue had lain in tall grasses, hiding; her Nah-ih-es dress tattered and torn, the ceremonial make-up mussed and streaking. She watched Yellow Bear, brandishing a war club, chase three of the attackers into the hills and disappear.

It was the last Shis-Inday would ever see of her father.

Where was Light-in-Eyes? Did she, too, lie behind some bush in the dark, dying?

Shis-Inday looked at her grandmother.

"I do not know what you mean, Old Woman," said the trembling child. "I have no Power. The Sprit of White Painted Woman is not here. She has fled, with all the rest."

"Shhhhh!" Old Woman hissed, extending a bony finger toward Shis-Inday's quivering lip. "Call upon Killer of Enemies, and Child of the Water! The sons of Usen will slay the Men With Metal Heads, just as they slew the Monsters when The World was young. They will hear you, and come, White Painted Woman!"

Old Woman's spasm of coughing frightened Shis-Inday. The girl ran away, into the arms of Night, tears streaming down her painted face.

"The outsiders have slain the children of Usen!" she screamed at Night. "And

they have slain Usen, too -- else why would He have allowed them into The World?"

All around, she heard the sobs and shrieks of Be-don-ko-he women. The Be-don-ko-he warriors, though, were silent.

Shis-Inday ran until she could run no more.

Shis-Inday spent two years, alone, hunting and praying and watching the Men With Metal Heads. Her people, as was their way, had melted into The World's secret places to escape the enemy they could not drive out. But Shis-Inday knew they would return. That, also, was their way.

She made friends with Buu, the Owl, which was odd for a daughter of the Shis-Inday. The Men of the Woods believed Owl to be an incarnation of the Black Mountain Spirit, whose Medicine came from places best left undisturbed. Only her father had ever sung to the Black Mountain Spirit. But he was chief, and could do such things.

It was her spirit guide, Kliji-Litzogue, that Shis-Inday depended upon most during those days and nights.

The Yellow Lizard urged Shis-Inday to adopt the ways of the warrior: to see all, but remain unseen; to strike when there was little chance of being struck; to become feared among her enemies. He showed her the future, and she knew that these methods would become the only hope the Men of the Woods had to survive in a world that had changed into something terrible.

One day, while she spied from a mountaintop, Shis-Inday noticed a White Eye among the Men With Metal Heads.

During vision quests, Kliji-Litzogue had shown her how the White Eyes, or Pindah-Lickoyee, would come into The World after the way had been cleared by the Men With Metal Heads. Shis-Inday knew that they were to be shunned more than the Men With Metal Heads, who wanted only what lay buried

beneath The World: pesh-litzogue.

The Pindah-Lickoyee, when they came, would take The World itself from the Men of the Woods.

So it was a matter of great concern to the girl that there was a Pindah-Lickoyee among the outsiders.

The Yellow Lizard could not explain it. At least, his explanation made no sense to Shis-Inday. That is the way of Spirit Guides, sometimes.

"A wanderer," the Yellow Lizard surmised. "An adventurer, perhaps."

"He is one of them," Shis-Inday said.

"Yes," the Spirit Guide answered. "And no. He is alone among them."

For as long as any Be-don-ko-he could remember, the watering hole was a haven. The various tribes of Human Beings put aside whatever dispute they might have had when venturing to this place of safety. Even the animals did not hunt here. They came to drink, and lick salt -- never attacking others that sought the temporary sanctuary.

Shis-Inday often came to this place during her exile. Kliji- Litzogue counseled against it. But the girl felt safe here with her friends, Buu, the Owl, and Ka-Chu, the Jack Rabbit. Sometimes Coyote joined them.

On this day, she sat stroking the head of timid Ka-Chu, and wistfully listening to the hooting of Owl. Coyote wandered in and out of the clearing, probably up to mischief. Shis-Inday shook her head at the wiley creature. He was usually harmless. It was best to keep an eye on him, though.

Kliji-Litzogue sunned himself upon a rock, near the water. He grumbled, sometimes, about the danger of this open place. Mostly, he just picked mosquitos out of the air with his darting tongue. Once, he told Coyote to go play with Snake -- a formidable insult. Coyote growled, and Shis-Inday

laughed.

The attack came without warning.

Three of the Men With Metal Heads charged into the little glade and were on top of Shis-Inday before she knew they were within ten marches of her.

In later years, when she thought about the strange circumstances of her advent upon Barsoom, it was her failure to heed the advice of Kliji-Litzogue that pained her most. She would come to realize that the presence of Coyote had been an omen.

She struggled in vain against the marauders. But they were too large; the attack too sudden.

They wrestled with the girl, and then pulled her to her feet. One clutched her arms behind her back, while another, the apparent leader of the trio, disarmed her and stood back to look her over from head to foot. She could not understand the words he grunted, but his leering expression told her all that she needed to know.

She was afraid.

A brief argument ensued among the Men With Metal Heads. Eventually, she was dragged from the glade and marched in the direction the girl knew their main camp to be.

When they arrived, it was late afternoon. The camp was occupied by hundreds of the Men With Metal Heads. Fires were lit for the evening meal. Hunters drifted into camp with the day's kill. It was a loud place of shouts and gruff laughter. Here and there, a fight over some insult or perceived injustice broke out. Others circled around it, to watch and cheer, hurling insults and incentives.

The odors of the camp sickened Shis-Inday: leather and oil; spoiled meat and rotting vegetables; the musk of the strange beasts that the strangers rode into

battle, and the pungent smell of the Men With Metal Heads themselves.

As her three captors paraded Shis-Inday through the camp, they gathered quite a following. The girl could not have known how beautiful she'd grown in her two years of solitude. She was sixteen rains old, by now -- a flowering maiden of the Be-don-ko- he, and the object of much attention in this camp of enemy soldiers.

Soon, it became nearly impossible to proceed, so closely were they pressed upon all sides by leering men. They jostled and clawed at Shis-Inday. One attempted to get a hand around her waist. When pulled roughly away, he tore her leather tunic. Another clutched at her flowing hair, jerking her head painfully backward. She stumbled and went down on her back in the dirt.

It seemed nothing could stop the inevitable now. One of the hairy-faced men fell on top of the struggling girl, tearing at what remained of her tattered tunic, while fumbling with his own clothing. Shis-Inday spat in his face, and was slapped viscerously across the cheek. She kicked and screamed and scratched, to no avail.

Then she ceased her struggles, and prayed silently to Usen for deliverance.

It came in the form of the Pindah-Lickoyee.

He strode into the center of the jostling group, and roughly pulled the would-be rapist from Shis-Inday. He tossed the attacker back a half-dozen feet, and turned on the others who'd been waiting their turn with the frightened Be-don-ko-he girl. A sword flashed from his scabbard, and he spoke curtly in the alien tongue that Shis-Inday could not understand.

Grey eyes met the angry stares of the Men With Heads. When one reached for his own weapon, the Pindah-Lickoyee deftly disarmed him.

But it would not prove so easy as that.

Others pressed the warrior and maiden. Hands now free, the girl could assist in her own defense with all the ferocity that she'd brought to countless raids upon the outsiders during her two years of exile. She wrested a knife from one of her attackers, and cleanly gutted him with it. Then she turned on another, silently and efficiently slashing to left and right, leaving blood and screams in the wake of her blade.

With a grim smile upon his lips, the Pindah-Lickoyee wove a net of steel about them. His sword darted, tasting blood, as they retreated.

"El caballo," the warrior said.

Shis-Inday shook her head, unable to understand. The Pindah-Lickoyee gestured to one of the nearby riding beasts, and the girl knew that he meant for her to mount it.

She'd been fascinated by the animals since the arrival of the Men With Metal Heads. Now, Shis-Inday did not hesitate to leap to the back of the creature, grasping the lengths of leather as she'd seen her enemies do. She maneuvered the animal instinctively, speaking to it in the low but firm tones she'd often used with the woodland creatures that had been her friends since childhood.

"El Caballo," as the Pindah-Lickoyee had called the beast, moved through the swarming marauders at a fast trot.

It had been Shis-Inday's intent to ride close to the warrior who'd come to her rescue, and pull him to her side so that they could escape together. But as she approached, the Pindah-Lickoyee spun and slapped the animal's rump with the flat of his sword, sending it into a frenzied gallop toward the hills.

Try as she might to turn the animal, it was beyond Shis-Inday's power to do ought else than cling to its flowing mane and hope not to fall off. She caught glimpses of the white man's sword flashing beneath the eyes of Kleego-na-ay, the Moon, who had risen from his abode to parade majestically over Night.

For hours she rode, finally crossing a strange field filled with flowers that were thick with green pollen. The pounding hooves of El Caballo spit up the powdery substance until it covered her tattered clothing. Face and arms were also spattered green. By the time she'd reached the other side of the field, a drowsiness overcame Shis-Inday, and the animal.

The beast slowed, and eventually stopped, weaving back and forth in a daze. Shis-Inday slipped from its back, ready to fall to the ground herself from exhaustion.

The figure of a boy, silhouetted in the moonlight, roused her from the lethargy. Standing halfway up the slope of a mountain, he motioned for her to follow him.

"Child of the Water," Shis-Inday said aloud.

The Be-don-ko-he maiden looked for Kliji-Litzogue, her Spirit Guide, who should be near if this was truly a vision of the son of Usen. But the Yellow Lizard was not there. Calling upon a strength she did not know she possessed, Shis-Inday followed the boy upward, high into the mountains.

Child of the Water had always been an icon to Shis-Inday, whose Power among her people was drawn from his totem. She trusted this son of Usen more implicitly than she would her own father -- and Shis-Inday would have followed Yellow Bear into fire.

The way led to a dark cave. Before entering, Shis-Inday turned to look upon The World far below. It was bathed in moonlight, and the tears of countless bright stars. One among them stood out from the rest.

"Gora-ban-Hinsu," Shis-Inday said.

When she turned toward the cave, Child of the Water had disappeared.

In his place stood the Black Mountain Spirit.

Chapter Ten:

[Blasphemy](#)

The "POJ"

[Table of Contents](#)

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Chapter Ten: Blasphemy

words by Jeff

In the pits of Phundahl, Shis-Inday sat silent and brooding, her tale ended in the faceless presence of a Spirit who was not Evil, but of which her people seldom spoke. They respected, and somewhat feared, the great Power that the Black Mountain Spirit wielded over The World's massive places.

"And then?" I gently prodded, after a long time had passed.

"I do not know," she answered. "I felt a moment of sickness, and then a sharp click, as of the snapping of a taut bowstring. There was an instant of extreme cold and utter darkness, and then --"

She shuddered.

I waited, loath to coax such painful memories from her.

"-- And then I woke to find myself here, in this place, staring up at the face of a Green One," Shis-Inday said. "Never had I seen anything so horrible in my most nightmarish visions. Not even Killer of Enemies and Child of the Water faced such a Monster. And they hunted Owl-Man Giant, in the before time."

"There are many red warriors who fear an encounter with the green men," I said softly.

"When the Green Ones learned of my Power, my ability to find water in this place that is even more dry than the most barren stretches of The World, I became a prized possession to them," Shis-Inday said.

"In some ways, I became a form of entertainment, as well," she continued. "For I had a new Power after coming here. I have great strength, and my ability to `sak,' is nothing short of uncanny. Ka-chu would be envious."

"I saw your marvelous leaps that night in the marsh," I said. "I have never

seen anything like it. I know something of Jasoom, the world which that old scientist, Ras Thavas, says you must be from. Perhaps the differences between it and Barsoom give you these new abilities."

"Perhaps," Shis-Inday said. "I would certainly trade them to return to Light-in-Eyes and Yellow Bear. It has been a long time. Five rains -- or more; I do not know. I have never seen rain here, so how can I be sure?"

She had been looking at the dirt floor of our prison, hands folded delicately in her lap. Now, Shis-Inday raised her eyes to meet mine.

"I did not really believe that Usen was yah-ik-tee; that the Men With Metal Heads had killed Him," she said. "But, sometimes, it is difficult to understand His purpose."

Heavy chains bound our feet and wrists as guards placed Shis-Inday and me upon a circular dais. Above us rose a long, dark tunnel.

"The judgement of Tur awaits you, infidel," grinned one of the guards. "We'll be waiting for the Word of the Great One with anticipation. I hope that it is fire. I'll make it hot."

We were in a large chamber somewhere in the pits far below Phundahl. It was lit with flickering torches. The radium bulbs that light even the most ancient of Barsoom's dark places seemed to be unknown here.

Chivalry and honor were also unknown. I witnessed barbaric sights in this temple of doom.

An agonized scream from one of the poor souls being tortured punctuated my thoughts. The guard pushed us roughly to the stone tablet.

After a jolt, the dais moved slowly upward, through the opening. The grating of stone upon stone accompanied our progress through the shaft. As my eyes became accustomed to the dimness, I noted the mechanism of our conveyance:

a series of pulleys attached to stone rollers, set in the sides of the shaft. I suspected that slaves powered the device.

We continued ponderously upward. One hundred feet. Two hundred. The smell of incense became thick about us.

A dull roar from above suggested the presence of a large crowd. Chants, and a few scattered shouts of passion, replaced the horrid sounds from the torture chamber below.

"Tur is Tur!"

"Death to the Blasphemers!"

"No worlds but Barsoom!"

We emerged in the center of the sweeping aisle that led to the throne of the statue-god, Tur. It sat in stony silence, surveying the chamber with its roving eyes. They rolled upon the crowd, which had been lulled into mesmerized silence. The assembled populace of Phundahl, thousands upon thousands, stared fearfully back at their god from the benches that ascended from the floor to nearly the ceiling of the hall.

The eyes of the people turned back to where we stood. A rumble built slowly from the center of the crowd, and soon the chanting and angered cries began again, hurled at Shis-Inday and me.

"Death!" screamed a woman.

The girl stood straight at my side, seemingly unconcerned by the wrath directed at us. Her gaze rested coolly upon Tur. She was more curious than afraid.

"Usen, slay this idol!" she defiantly whispered.

"Silence!" roared the idol in question.

Priests in white robes stood in front of Tur, facing us. Their entire bodies, including their heads, were wrapped in the cloth. Bowing, each swung a heavy chain with a ball of burning incense attached to it. The pendulums were perfectly synchronized.

Xax, the Jeddak, stood to one side of the huge statue, upon the other side was plain Xaxa.

Father and daughter were oblivious to the crowd, to Shis- Inday and me, and even to Tur. They seemed made of a stone more solid than that which comprised the false god. Blank looks of indifference masked their features as effectively as the shrouds that hid the emotions of the priests.

Despite Tur's vehement admonition, Shis-Inday spoke quietly in the strange language I'd heard her use before. I could tell that it was a prayer.

I listened for a moment, then turned my attention to Tur.

"I know not what science animates you," I cried at the obscenity. "Or where the workers of your mechanism hide -- but Issus will descend from the Lesser Moon and lay waste this blasphemy ere it continues much longer!"

That silenced the crowd. The poor deluded followers of a sacrilege were frozen in terror. Not by my words, but by the reaction they might bring from the stone god.

"And if She does not," I continued, "the soldiers of Helium surely will!"

Tur's reaction was immediate.

The lights in the temple were extinguished, plunging us all into inky blackness. For a moment, I was disoriented. But soon a greenish glow emanated from the direction of Tur. Whisps of smoke danced in the shadows that outlined the immense statue. Red points of lights glared from where I

judged its eyes to be. A low gurgle became a moan that seemed amplified and utterly inhuman. I reached a manacled hand through darkness to Shis-Inday, to calm her.

But she needed no reassurance from me. Shis-Inday squeezed my hand, and we waited for whatever would come.

"Usen will protect us, if your Issus cannot," she whispered.

As instantaneously as the light had been extinguished, it was restored. Scarcely ten tals had passed. When my eyes refocused, I saw that the countenance of Tur had changed.

The grinning face, heavily jeweled, had transformed into a wicked scowl of rage. A thick tongue undulated from the open mouth, and frothy droplets fell from it to the floor of the temple. One fleck landed upon a priest. He screamed, rolling to the ground and clawing at what must have been an acidic burn. His swinging ball of incense clattered across the floor, leaving a trail of noxious vapor. After a moment, his struggles slowed and finally ceased. He appeared to be dead.

The other priests remained frozen. Not a soul in the vast crowd stirred.

I hadn't noticed him at first, but now I saw that a newcomer stood at the front of the line of white-robed priests.

His ornamentation was even more resplendent than that of the Jeddak. A scintillating diadem was affixed to his brow. He bore a wicked grin that mimicked the statue-god behind him.

His skin was white and his head was bald. That seemed strange to me then, for the people of Phundahl are as red as the men of my own empire.

I'd never seen a Holy Thern before. And if I had, this would have been the last place I'd expect to find one.

"I am Hora San, High Priest of Tur," said the white man. "I speak for the god of Phundahl."

Hora San walked slowly toward Shis-Inday and me. The great chamber was absolutely silent, save for his echoing footsteps on the stone floor. When he was an arm's length from the girl at my side, the high priest stopped and glared intently into her unflinching eyes.

"Have you studied the Turgan?" he asked softly.

"Your words carry no meaning, Pindah-Lickoyee," Shis-Inday replied.

The crowd erupted. Hora San himself seemed gripped by an apoplexy that made it difficult for him to speak. When finally he was able, he motioned to one of the lesser priests. The man scurried forward, carrying a large book.

"It is The Book, penned by Tur himself -- one hundred thousand years ago," Hora San said.

The white-robed one knelt abjectly before Hora San, holding the book reverently. The high priest made a show of slowly opening the leather-bound volume, and turning to the appropriate page. With great flare, he quoted:

"I am Tur. Tur am I. My home is upon the sun. I fashion a disk of clay, and call it Barsoom, tossing it upon the ocean of space to watch it spin in a solitary existence that is absolute. It amuses me to create Man in various forms, and of two sexes. I also fashion animals, to be food for Man and each other. Vegetation will appear, and water, that Man and the animals might live. Know these things, and worship me in my many forms. And always fear me. I am Tur. Tur am I."

Hora San closed the book and looked expectantly at Shis- Inday.

"It is a lie," she said.

The statue groaned in a long, drawn-out wail that slowly increased in pitch and volume. I looked to the crowd, and saw that the Phundahlans had fallen on their faces, covering their ears and eyes with trembling hands. They rocked back and forth, chanting, "Tur is Tur. Tur is Tur."

Then the wailing stopped.

"You are a lie," Hora San said. "There are no worlds but Barsoom, and yet the ears of Tur heard it claimed that you come from another."

"There are many worlds!" I interrupted, straining against the thick chains that bound me. "Have you not seen them at night? Even Thuria and Cluros, who parade across the heavens in the Dance of Lovers, are populated by beings not completely unlike ourselves!"

"Silence!" screamed Xaxa from her place beside Tur.

Hora San ignored me, turning to Shis-Inday.

"Speak the name of the all-powerful!" the high priest demanded. "Speak the name of the true god!"

Shis-Inday didn't hesitate.

"In the beginning, Usen the Life-Giver created The Universe," she said. "Nobody knows just how he did it, but he did it and that is all."

A murmur ran through the crowd, as if no one could believe that such blasphemy could be uttered in the presence of Tur without the speaker having her eyes blasted from their sockets. Hora San made no comment, motioning for the girl to continue.

"You seal your own fate with every word you speak," he warned.

"When it came time to form The World, Usen told four power- spirits to do it for him," Shis-Inday said. "They were Black Water, Black Mountain, Black

Wind and Black Thunder. Together they fashioned The World, but when they were finished they saw it was no good. It was dead."

I was fascinated by the girl's words. She recited the catechism of her religion in a soft sing-song. It was pleasing to the ear, no matter how difficult for the mind to grasp. It was the simple faith of a simple mind. Or, so I thought at the time.

My own faith in the Goddess of Death and Eternal Life remained unshaken; and would for long years to come. My trust in Issus was as strong as the day I'd first set foot in her temple at the center of Greater Helium. It could not be otherwise. I was a Defender of the Faith -- the faith of my father, my brother, and all our ancestors.

I know now that I was as deluded as the fanatics who stared down upon me that day from their perches surrounding a stone idol. That is a bitter admission for any red man of Barsoom to make; perhaps more bitter than you of our sister planet can know.

In the years since John Carter and my granddaughter revealed the hideous truth, the sham that is Dor and the wickedness of Issus, there are times when I recall the beliefs of my Shis-Inday. And I wonder.

Late at night, in the solitude of my cavernous palace, I sometimes seek the wisdom of Shis-Inday's Usen. I can tell you honestly, nephew of John Carter, that I believe the Life-Giver hears me -- a thing Issus never did. Even when I believed, I never felt her presence.

Perhaps Man creates god in his own image. Or some perverted contortion of it. That does not change Man's need for a god that listens. For who else will?

Shis-Inday continued the story of her gods:

"To make The World live, Black Water gave it blood by causing the rivers to flow. Black Mountain gave it a skeleton of hills and mountains. This way it

was strong. Black Wind breathed life into The World by causing the wind to blow. The World was there in Usen's Universe, but it was cold. So Black Thunder clothed The World in trees and grass. This way it was made warm."

"And did it just lay there, in darkness?" asked the high priest.

"Of course not," answered Shis-Inday. The reply dripped from her tongue, scornfully.

"In the beginning, there was no darkness," she said. "Sun shone all the time. Night was kept prisoner in a sack, and Usen gave the sack to Badger to guard."

"Night was kept in a sack?" Hora San demanded. "That's preposterous! A land of eternal daylight?"

The high priest turned to the audience, spreading his arms wide.

"Preposterous!" he shouted, and the glaring crowd hissed its contempt. "If there was no night, how could Tur cause the eggs of our young to spring forth from His mouth?"

Shis-Inday was not deterred.

"One day Coyote saw Badger carrying the sack, and thought he had things to eat in there," she continued, ignoring the snickers of derision that still tittered from above. "Coyote started walking with Badger and said, 'Old man, you look pretty tired. Why don't you let me carry that sack for a while?'"

Hora San folded his arms, yawning.

"Badger knew that Coyote was playing tricks," Shis-Inday said. "But Badger was indeed an old man. And he was tired. So he trusted Coyote to hold the sack for a little while. Sometimes we all need to trust one who is not worthy of trust. That is the way of things. Badger lay down by a tree to sleep."

"This is a child's tale," Hora San said. "I assume this 'Coyote' fellow opened

the sack, and Night escaped."

"He couldn't help it," Shis-Inday said. "It is Coyote's nature to do wrong. Badger could not blame him. And neither could Usen, or the Human Beings. Coyote is misguided."

That stopped Hora San for a moment. He licked thin lips, eyeing the girl with suspicion.

"Nor do I blame you, or the people of this strange place," Shis- Inday said. "You know not what you do. But you are hungry, and will do what you please. It's in the nature of Man to fill his belly, no matter the cost."

The high priest stared at the girl, his emotions rocking between disbelief and rage.

Soon, he regained his composure. Or, some semblance of it.

"Preposterous," he said again. But it was with less conviction than before.

Hora San's white face had grown somber. He stepped closer, and spoke in a voice too low for anyone else in the chamber to hear, except for Shis-Inday and me.

"And you, red man," he said. "I suppose you'll tell me of Issus?"

I made no reply.

"And Dor?" he continued. "Your heaven? The peaceful afterlife to which every man, woman and child of your race aspires following a thousand years of bloodshed?"

I refused to say anything of my faith to this heathen. It surprised me when he chuckled in a tone that sounded almost sympathetic.

"Your heaven, Prince of Helium, is in truth a hell," he whispered. "You should

sink to your knees and thank me for preventing you from ever reaching it."

With that, he turned and walked back toward the statue god. When the high priest arrived at its base, Tur spoke our fate. "Death by fire," bellowed the stone god.

The only sound in the great hall was the hysterical laughter of Xaxa, princess of Phundahl.

No one noticed, or seemed to care, that Xax, the Jeddak, was gone.

Chapter Eleven:

[Hora San](#)

The "POJ"

[Table of Contents](#)

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Chapter Eleven: Hora San

words by Jeff, art by David

As we descended toward the waiting fiends who would carry out the order to burn us alive, I wrestled feverishly with the chains that bound my wrists. The dais seemed to move downward faster than it had risen. The stone rollers fairly shrieked in protest as they scraped the sides of the shaft, sparks flying in the dimness that enveloped us.

I placed a length of chain between one of the rollers and the wall. The links snapped, after a violent tug that nearly wrenched my arm from its socket. Shis-Inday watched intently as I repeated the procedure with the chains that bound my feet. Soon, the girl and I were both free.

I calmly gathered the excess chain and motioned for the girl to do likewise. But she needed no coaching from me. The Be-don-ko-he princess understood my plan perfectly, without a word having been spoken.

The suddenness of our attack caught the guards below wholly unprepared. We burst from the shaft as soon as the opening was wide enough to permit it. Arms swinging like windmills, we twirled the loosely hanging chains to deadly effect. I caved in the skull of the first of our jailers who was unlucky enough to approach.

Shis-Inday, meanwhile, delivered a blow that cut another entirely in half through the torso. She'd told me that her strength was incredible upon Barsoom. But this was the first evidence I'd seen of it. She leaped nimbly across the chamber to the next frantic guard, and rained blow after blow upon his head and chest with the heavy chains on her wrists in a blur of motion that was impossible to follow.

We were alone.

Spying a set of keys hanging upon the wall, I rushed to find the one that would unlock the dangling chains. Presently, I'd traded the encumbrances for a good

long-sword. After buckling a dagger and short-sword to my waist, I felt whole again.

Shis-Inday accepted a dagger, but preferred a length of chain to the other unfamiliar weapons I offered. Having seen her effectiveness with that improvised offense, I did not argue.

In the next room sat a line of prisoners, chained together. Taking the keys, I went to free them. The first that I saw was Bal Zak.

"One day I'll learn to mind my own business," he said grimly, as I hastily freed him.

"Perhaps you already have," I replied. "But the Prince of Helium will never forget that you spoke in his defense while surrounded by enemies."

An astonished cry from the far end of the line caused me to look to another of the prisoners. I felt my knees weaken as I recognized him, ignobly imprisoned like some common slave.

It was my father, Moros Tar.

"They come!" whispered Shis-Inday from her post at the door. "Many warriors."

The fighting light of old flickered in my father's eyes. Gone was the resignation and despair that clouded him when last we'd been together, in the Temple of Reward. He'd found purpose, somehow, in these thrice-cursed pits.

There was no time for explanations.

"A sword!" cried Moros Tar, as the chains fell from him.

From the racks on the wall, I quickly armed the dozen prisoners. I recognized several of them as members of my father's private Guard, who would have accompanied the Jeddak upon his Pilgrimage. I knew them to be the very

finest warriors Helium had to offer. Their sole purpose was to protect the Jeddak's life with their own. That they had failed caused me some little consternation, though I had scarcely the time to dwell upon such things.

My earliest tutelage in the art of swordplay came at the experienced hands of my father and brother. Almost before I could walk, those two practiced teachers imparted to me the thrill of steel upon steel and the satisfaction of thrust and parry against an equal or superior foe -- not that many could match the skill to be found in the House of Mor.

Later, I stood shoulder to shoulder with them in battle against the enemies of Helium.

How many times had we three faced incredible odds, and overcome them to the everlasting glory of the Empire? I could not begin to say.

That time in the Temple of Reward, when the Jeddak whispered his intent to seek Dor, I thought never again would we defend together a cause that was just.

But now Moros Tar and I rose once more to the task, here in the pits of Phundahl, half a world from home, as wave after wave of pagan zealots rushed madly upon the points of our swords. Had my brother been there, my joy would have been complete.

Another, however, stood ably in Mors Kajak's place.

My father's eye fell admiringly upon the slender form of Shis- Inday as she lithely feinted and powerfully smote the attacking guards with the heavy chains that had formerly bound her.

"By Issus! She's a devil in combat!" Moros Tar breathed.

"I know little of Issus," Shis-Inday returned, leaping over the head of a foe to strike another. "It is in Usen's name that I fight for life, his most precious gift."

We'd lost two men in the unequal battle -- a Phundahlian slave and one of my father's guard. Bal Zak maneuvered close to my side.

"We cannot stand much longer, Tardos Mors," he whispered. "I know a way to elude these calots through precincts of their own pits that they do not even dream exist."

I was loathe to give up the fight, but there was nothing to be gained by holding useless ground. I'd learned that much at Flemster. I nodded acknowledgement, and Bal Zak led the retreat. I covered the rear, while the Tonoolian and Shis-Inday darted forward at the head of our remaining force through unlit chambers of damp and black.

The warriors of Phundahl were not the only enemies we needed to defend against, as these remote corners were fairly overrun with ulsios and other carnivorous creatures of Barsoom's underworld.

When we'd secluded ourselves, I turned with questioning eyes upon the Jeddak.

"I do not understand, father," I said.

"And neither do I, fully," Moros Tar answered. "Foul intrigues are afoot in Helium and elsewhere. Thank our ancestors that we are reunited, Tardos Mors, to uncover them."

Moros Tar had never begun the Pilgrimage. Spies had been waiting in his innermost sanctuary that day in the Temple of Reward. With the swiftness of Thuria, and as silently, they whisked him and his Guard from Helium and brought them to distant Phundahl.

The Jeddak was questioned, under torture, by Xax and Hora San, the white-skinned High Priest of Tur. They sought information about the Empire's defenses and her ability to continue the war with Ptarth.

They may as well have questioned a rock, for all the information they'd get from Helium's Jeddak.

"That stone blasphemy, Tur, sentenced me to death," Moros Tar said.

"Fire?" I asked, with the grim humor of a fighting man.

"Decapitation," the Jeddak replied, also smiling. "Although it was to be my fate to witness the immolation of another prisoner -- you, I now presume."

He laid his hand upon my shoulder.

"I knew that you would come," he said.

I briefly narrated my adventures, including my encounter with Thuvan Dihn, who harbored suspicions himself about the war .

I also made it clear that it was not by design that I'd found my way to Moros Tar's side. He shook his head, softly, and the wisdom of a Jeddak stared back at me.

"I knew that you would come," Moros Tar repeated. "And now that you are here, we must learn the intent of our enemies."

I haunted the temple of Tur for days, hiding in the rafters and other secret places that Bal Zak had discovered during his service with the conniving mastermind, Ras Thavas. I witnessed barbaric rituals that would turn the stomach of any who believed in the deity of Issus.

I also learned the secret of Tur.

On the third morning of my vigil, as I spied from a hidden recess at the back of the temple, I saw Hora San's furtive entrance. Save for we two secretive souls, no other occupied the vile shrine.

Hora San snuck, cowering, to the rear of the statue. He toggled a jewel at its

base, and a hidden door slid silently open. With a futile glance to assure himself that no one was watching, he slipped inside, and the door closed behind him.

I leapt from hiding my place, and bounded across the stone floor to the place where the white scoundrel had disappeared. It was the work of an instant to repeat the procedure, and soon I was inside the blasphemy.

In the gloomy interior, I heard whispers drift softly from above. I recognized the second speaker as Xax, puppet Jeddak of Phundahl.

"I tell you, the Heliumites must be found!" said Hora San, rage evident in his tone.

"And I tell you, they have escaped Phundahl!" rejoined Xax. "Slaughtering half my finest warriors in the process. By all the forms of Tur! One man was cut in half!"

A ladder rose to the platform where Hora San and his henchman plotted. I secreted myself behind it, to better hear their words.

"If my agents among Moros Tar's Guard still live, then perhaps they're waiting for the right moment to make their move," mused the High Priest.

More intrigue! Would it never end?

"Your daughter is still ignorant of our plans?" Hora San asked the Jeddak.

"My daughter is ignorant of everything," Xax replied, sadly. "She believes with the rest of Phundahl that this monstrosity is the living god, Tur."

"Then all is not lost," the high priest said. "We can use her to further our purpose."

"Have we not already used her enough?"

"Ignorant red man!" Hora San hissed. "We'll yet save Barsoom from the slow death that awaits it."

"Save it for whom?" questioned Xax. "A handful of slaves to do your bidding? My people -- my entire race -- deserve better."

There was the sound of a brief struggle. A body fell from the platform, landing with a dull thud a sword's length from where I hid.

Glancing at the contorted figure, I knew that the princess Xaxa now ruled this evil land.

"It is as you said," Bal Zak reported. "Xaxa has been crowned Jeddara of Phundahl."

I'd been waiting quietly in our secret apartments for the return of Moros Tar and the others of our party from their various missions of espionage. Shis-Inday stepped to my side as Bal Zak, my father, and the six remaining members of the Jeddak's Guard gathered about a rough table in this remote chamber of the pits.

The room was well-lighted by radium bulbs. A collection of highly advanced scientific instruments surrounded us. They belonged to Ras Thavas, and other scientists that Bal Zak told me had been gathered from the farthest reaches of Barsoom by Hora San -- Fal Sivas of Zodanga; Phor Tak of Jahar; even a yellow-skinned fellow, from some northern clime, named Solan.

"And Xax?" I asked.

"His body has been paraded through the streets," Bal Zak answered. "They say that you killed him."

"Would that it were true," I murmured.

"What is your plan, my son?" asked Moros Tar.

As I think on that comment, these many years later, it strikes me as the moment I became Jeddak. My coronation would come later, and then all of Barsoom would know that Tardos Mors ruled Helium. My father had given me his blessing in the Temple of Reward; but that had rung hollow. This was the instant when Moros Tar truly knew I was ready for the throne, even if I did not.

"First, it is time for the Test of Loyalty," I said casually, carefully observing the reaction of the Guard.

Without hesitation, and no flicker of emotion betraying their thoughts, three of that group rose immediately from the table, facing Moros Tar. A fraction of a moment later, the other three rose to join them. The delay was enough to tell me who the traitors among them were.

The Guard members each drew short-swords, and stood poised to plunge them into their own breasts at the command of Moros Tar or myself.

Seldom is the Test used by a Jeddak of Helium -- but any who would thus serve the House of Mor must be ready at a moment's notice to prove in this manner that they are loyal. It is the only way to insure the Jeddak's safety when there is the possibility of breached security.

Moros Tar had already drawn his own weapon. He knew that I would not call for the Test unless I had reason for my suspicions. The hesitation among the three he thought to be loyal was enough to raise suspicions of his own.

"You would betray me?" the Jeddak said. "I've known each of you since the day you broke your snowy white shells!"

For answer, the unfaithful three turned upon those who were loyal.

"It is for Barsoom that we act!" cried the leader, attacking.

Chapter Twelve:

[Bal Zak](#)

The "POJ"

[Table of Contents](#)

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Chapter Twelve: Bal Zak

words by Jeff, art by David

The loyal three expertly defended themselves. They did more than that -- carrying out the duty for which they had trained since childhood: To protect the life of Helium's Jeddak. It was a duty any subject of the Empire would gladly shoulder. Few, however, could do it so well as the Jeddak's Guard.

But the traitors had also been superbly trained -- by the same warlords as the three who were loyal. The display of swordsmanship that ensued would have drawn cheers from the throats of thousands, had thousands been there to witness it.

Love and loyalty might have been enough to bring victory to the Jeddak's faithful guards. But they had more than that -- there were Shis-Inday, Bal Zak and myself.

Two traitors were quickly dispatched; the third escaped through a hidden panel that none of us could re-open once it slammed shut behind him.

"Knife and awl!" cursed Shis-Inday, hurling her great strength against the immobile door.

"He'll make his way to Hora San," I said. "We're no longer safe here. If ever we were."

"We must know their plans!" insisted Moros Tar. "By the knee of Issus, I'll not sacrifice Helium because of some disparity in numbers."

"Disparity in numbers!" cried Bal Zak. "You men of Helium have a strange mathematics. It is four against a city!"

The Toonolian suggested we steal a flier, adjusting the mechanism in a way he knew that would improve the sluggish Phundahlian craft. We could return with reinforcements in a matter of days.

Neither Moros Tar nor I favored that plan, for who could know whether days were available to spare? But Shis-Inday counseled that there was wisdom in it.

Reluctantly, the Jeddak and his son were persuaded -- by two outsiders -- the best way to protect the Empire.

Bal Zak proved to be a wizard with machinery. He tuned the hulk of a Phundahlian flier we selected so that it hummed with the efficiency of the sleekest ship of the Heliumetic fleet. Not long after we'd been aloft, Moros Tar offered him a post in our Navy.

"No," the Tonoolian answered. "Ras Thavas may be an eccentric master, but I've served him my entire life. I suspect that I always will."

"Such loyalty makes you even more valuable," said the Jeddak. He was thinking, no doubt, of the three who'd betrayed him.

Moros Tar spoke no more of it, however. To those with honor, a Barsoomian's oath is more sacred than his life. And the number of those with honor is greater by millions than those without it.

That Bal Zak had thrown his sword at the feet of a mad scientist made the act no less significant. Any fealty to Xax and Hora San, by extension, had been broken by Bal Zak's sentence of death.

Shis-Inday leaned far over the side of our speeding craft, marveling at the new sensation of flight.

"The spirit of Black Wind must be a powerful ally among your people," she said. "He carries you upon his shoulders!"

"It's no ghost that lifts us," muttered Bal Zak. "Though I'll wager the Phundahlions who built this crate have long since gone to meet their ancestors."

"How long till we reach your camp?" Shis-Inday asked.

I'd never heard Helium referred to as a "camp," with all her millions. Smiling, I was about to answer, when the princess disappeared.

"Hair of Issus!" shouted Moros Tar, leaping to his feet. "She fell!"

Bal Zak, who manned the controls, needed no command from either the Jeddak or myself to plunge our ship in a mad descent toward the surface of Barsoom.

But we three knew it was a meaningless gesture. The Jasoomian girl's life upon our planet had ended as anonymously as it began. I felt sorrow and loss well within me, and I grieved for this unknown savage from another world. I sank to my knees, stunned by the loss.

I'd seen countless other lives senselessly snuffed out -- including my own brother and mother. Why did this girl's death affect me so profoundly? I barely knew her.

The answer came with the words I spoke after a faint cry for help rose from below our ship.

"Hold, my princess!" I shouted, staring over the gunwale at the dangling form of Shis-Inday. She clutched in one hand a rope that trailed in the wind, straining with with her great Jasoomian strength against the gravity that sought to drag her downward.

With Shis-Inday hanging by so slender a tether to life, I did not have time to think about the import of those words: "My princess."

I leapt to the rail, fastening a grappling hook to it, and began the perilous descent to Shis-Inday's side. Before I reached her, our craft was near enough the ground that she could drop lightly to the spongy floor of the Great Tonoolian Marsh.

I joined her, crushing her to me in an embrace that was more like that of a father than lover -- proper, for two who were not betrothed. She nestled contentedly.

"Raven nearly caught me," she said, as defiant as she'd been before Tur. "But Usen prevented it. Perhaps another day Old Man Death will win. But not this day."

Despite the brave words, I felt her tremble.

Then she stiffened, and a low growl of warning escaped her lips. Her dagger flashed from its sheath.

Hundreds of the Gooli lunatics surrounded us.

Perhaps it was Raven's day after all.

With drawn swords, Moros Tar and I kept Shis-Inday between us, circling slowly and menacing as best we could the lunatics that crept closer. Some carried rocks. Others had sharpened sticks. Their numbers alone were enough to overwhelm us.

Shis-Inday was annoyed by the positions my father and I had taken on either side of her. Though we'd both seen her fight, and thus knew her to be entirely capable, it was difficult to undue a lifetime of protective instinct toward the fairer sex.

Bal Zak had been tinkering with the controls of the flier when the lunatics appeared. That he was unaware of their presence seemed evident by the loud curses coming from his direction.

"Foul workmanship!" he shouted over the side, amidst clanking metal.

"Twisted drive shaft! The ship was unequal to the dive."

The lunatics were readying themselves for a mad charge when Bal Zak stuck his head up over the gunwale. The effect was electric.

"Ho!" cried the padwar of Ras Thavas. "Back, you unwashed pouch-breeders!"

They obeyed.

"You just have to hit 'em with the right voice," Bal Zak called to us. "The mastermind can do it in his sleep. I'm not bad at it, though."

For added emphasis, he pulled on the booming air-horn of the flier. The squeal sent our would-be attackers scurrying.

"Marsupials -- can you believe it?" Bal Zak said, climbing to the ground.

"Why Ras Thavas wanted to breed human marsupials, I'll never know. The idea itself is as insane as they are. But if he's not cross-breeding species, he's growing a new one in some reeking vat. Or hacking out a brain and...doing things to it. That one is never content with Nature's plan."

"I'm a fool, to have forgotten the wireless," said Bal Zak, as we made our way toward the village. "No need to go to Helium, when we can as easily dispatch a message through the ether."

Moros Tar looked at Shis-Inday.

"Your fall saved us a long journey," he said.

"Nevertheless," she answered, "I, too, feel like a fool."

We forced the door to the locked shed in Gooli where Ras Thavas kept his wireless. Soon, instructions had been delivered for a fleet of warships to meet us. The jedwar we contacted seemed confused, but as both Moros Tar and myself provided our personal codes, he obeyed without question.

Later, Shis-Inday and I scouted the forest around Gooli. I worried that we'd been followed from Phundahl, and wanted to assure myself otherwise.

We paddled across the lake, from the island of Ompt to the mainland. Over the

course of millenia, the Great Toonolian Marsh had alternated between watery swamp and jungle-like forest. During the time of which I speak, the waters had receded to a few scattered lakes and small creeks, seeping into the ground to permit the nearly riotous growth that surrounded Shis-Inday and me.

I marveled at the girl's woodcraft. She saw signs in the tangled vegetation that were invisible to me. None of them hinted at pursuit, she told me.

Feeling confident that we were secure, I was about to turn back to camp when Shis-Inday laid a hand upon my shoulder. Without words, she nodded toward the open sea bottom that lay beyond the edge of the Great Marsh.

"Green men," I said, cursing. "Thousands of them." Two great hordes were converging upon us -- no doubt from Thark and Warhoon.

Possibly they hunted Shis-Inday. Or it might have been a continuation of the war that began with the destruction of Thark hatchlings at the incubator.

Whatever the cause, it heralded no good for us.

Then, over the rim of the horizon, a monumental battle fleet appeared. I knew that it could not be from Helium, as sufficient time hadn't yet passed for the arrival of Moros Tar's Navy. When the flagship approached close enough for me to make out its lines, I recognized the design of Ptarthian craftsmen.

Shis-Inday pointed in the opposite direction. Another fleet was massing on that horizon.

Whatever scheme had been hatched by Hora San, it now seemed ready to play out. The opposing fleet was from Phundahl.

Would the two meet in battle?

Or were they joining forces, as allies?

Chapter Thirteen:
[The Angry Dance](#)

The "POJ"
[Table of Contents](#)

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Chapter Thirteen: The Angry Dance

Both fleets opened fire, but not upon each other. They bombarded the swarming green men. Several shots flew wide of their marks, exploding not far from where Shis-Inday and I stood.

It occurred to me that so great an armada could not have been assembled merely to wage war against the green men.

No, it must be that the fleets had come unexpectedly upon the savages. Before moving on to whatever their real purpose might be, they had decided to decimate the hordes. The huge Thark and Warhoon rifles turned from each other and focused upon the common foe -- not without effect. More than one ship's red captain plunged from the bow of his command as it hung, burning, in the sky.

Shis-Inday and I retraced our way to Gooli, the thunderous belch of rifle and canon echoing all about the sea bottom. Bal Zak, Moros Tar and the Jeddak's Guard had heard the explosions. When we reached the village, they gathered to hear my report.

"Perhaps the green men will gain us time," said Moros Tar. "A diversion, until our forces arrive."

"Unlikely allies," commented a Guard. "But they should keep the enemy fleets busy for a while."

"They're after our treasure," said one of the lunatics, as somberly as he'd once measured the circumference of my head.

"Treasure?" said Moros Tar, raising an eyebrow in a way that suggested he thought it possible, however doubtful.

"I think not," I commented, telling him of the chest of sea shells the Goolis had shown me earlier in the day. Then, so as not to offend our hosts, I added,

"Your treasure is too large for a foe to easily carry away."

"That is true," the lunatic noted. He wandered off to huddle with others of his kind.

Shis-Inday, I noticed, had left our group to enter the forest. I called for her to return, but she waved me off as if upon some errand that could not wait.

Shrugging, I continued to discuss plans with the others -- keeping an eye on the spot where the girl had gone into the underbrush. She returned some time later, burdened with stout poles that had been carved from trees, as well as various other items. A band of the Gooli lunatics followed her. Whooping and shouting, they dragged several dead banths behind them.

Shis-Inday set about skinning a banth, while the lunatics leaped and shouted all around her. My curiosity at its breaking point, I went over to see what she was doing.

"The female is a great hunter!" cried the lunatic who had once planned to behead me.

"A mighty fighter!" yelled another, unable to contain his excitement over Shis-Inday's accomplishment.

Shis-Inday motioned for the lunatics to gather 'round, including me and the others of our party in the gesture.

"We need weapons, if we are to survive this battle," she said, drawing forth a length of banth-gut "Rocks and branches alone will not help you, if the Green Ones attack."

She called it "The Angry Dance."

Four warriors, Shis-Inday among them, approached a great fire from the east -- an important Direction, one with Power, according to the Be-don-ko-he

princess.

She chanted:

"I am calling upon Sky and Earth.

"Bats will fly, and turn upside down with me in battle.

"Black Sky will enfold my body and give me protection,

"And Earth will do this also."

Shis-Inday was painted in the most auspicious manner. Many of the lunatics were similarly stained. Splashes of white speckled their faces, with a single stripe of red clay across the bridge of the nose.

I allowed the sacred symbols to adorn my face, though Moros Tar, Bal Zak and the Jeddak's Guard would not. Soon, however, my fellow red men had become intoxicated by the revelry led by my savage princess. A brew she called tizwin helped intoxicate them, too.

"Right here in the middle of this place

"I am becoming Mirage.

"Let them not see me,

"For I am of the Sun."

From the decorated pouch that Shis-Inday wore at her hip, she flung bits of pollen into the air and into the fire, chanting in her native, alluring tongue. Black feathers from some unknown species of bird that inhabited the Great Marsh hung from her leather loincloth.

Amulets -- tzi-daltai, she called them -- decorated her limbs. They were made from the treasure shells of Gooli. Shis-Inday said they contained much Power.

For each of us, she'd also made an ize-kloth, or medicine cord: a loosely braided sash of two banth-hide strands, twisted about each other. We wore them draped across our bodies, from right shoulder to left side.

"Be good, O, winds," she prayed. "Be good, O, ittindi! Make strong the medicine of Shis-Inday, that it may protect her and these warriors from their enemies!"

The weapons seemed primitive, yet effective. Bows were strung with banth-gut; arrows were tipped with carefully sharpened stones. Not since the legendary Bowmen of Lothar had such weapons been used in Barsoomian combat. Lances, stone knives, war clubs and slings completed the accouterments with which Shis-Inday fitted the lunatics.

I, of course, retained my long- and short-swords -- the weapons with which I had always been most proficient. Bal Zak packed a monstrous radium pistol, which he'd found in the disabled flier's cabin.

It was a night of sweaty, barbaric dancing beneath the watchful eyes of Klego-na-ay's crazy cousins. I should have felt exhaustion when red streaked the morning sky; but it was with exhilaration that I greeted the dawn.

Shis-Inday proclaimed us ready for whatever might come. "Usen watches, and smiles," she said. "Kliji-Litzogue says that our victory will be difficult. And magnificent."

I prayed to Issus for the Yellow Lizard's confidence.

My god did not answer. But my princess did.

As the mad dance continued all about us, I took the girl in my arms and kissed her upon the lips.

Most commanders in Helium's Navy will tell you that it is nearly impossible to remain aloft and conquer a green horde. Their rifles are too precise, while their ability to find cover in places that seem outwardly naked is remarkable. Shelling is virtually ineffective, while losses to an airborne fleet can be catastrophic.

The commanders under Hora San quickly discovered this to be true. Ground

fighting began in earnest shortly after the aerial warfare proved untenable. I would later learn that the High Priest's goal was nothing less than the conquest of all Barsoom. Although it seemed foolhardy to me at the time, this test of mettle against two hordes fit perfectly into Hora San's mad scheme.

Defeat a green horde upon the ground, and almost any force that a red nation can muster will fall before you. Defeat two, and you have proved your worth tenfold.

So, then, it was four armies that swarmed closer and closer to the position held by our relatively tiny and ill-equipped band. Warhoon and Thark seemed to fight as much amongst themselves as against the red armies led by Phundahlia and Ptarthian jedwars.

Even the civilized warriors, though, seemed ill at ease fighting shoulder to shoulder. Hora San had united them, under some ruse that had cost Ptarth its rightful Jeddak -- Thuvan Dihn's father. But the alliance was far from stable.

As the battle progressed, our small "army" waited under a cover that Shis-Inday had devised. Scattered to the four winds, we buried ourselves beneath the moss-like sea bottom. Only our eyes remained visible -- but even those could disappear, should a foe get too close.

A hooting that Shis-Inday said was the cry of Owl was our signal to attack. When it came, the great mass of fighting men was virtually on top of us. We emerged in the thick of battle, taking no quarter.

We were hopelessly outnumbered, but the surprise proved valuable. The red men were unnerved by our seemingly miraculous appearance and strange weapons. Hesitation cost them many lives.

Shis-Inday brandished a war club, her leaps even greater than those I'd seen her use to such terrifying purpose in the pits of Phundahl, which had been cramped and dimly lighted. Here, upon the broad plain, she jumped thirty and thirty-five feet at a time, delivering blows with a savage cry that was quite

effective. Arrows feathered the breasts of her opponents, when she found opportunity to loose them -- often from above.

Moros Tar, Bal Zak, the Jeddak's Guard and I all gave splendid accounts of ourselves, though in more traditional fashion. A dozen times I found myself cornered by pressing antagonists, but always did I maneuver with the skill taught by my father and brother, emerging victorious at every turn.

The Toonolian's pistol fired at those whose own weapon of choice was similar, seldom missing its mark. That Bal Zak never shot at a swordsman proved that he is a man of honor.

Moros Tar had always been grim in battle. But this day he'd taken up the war cry of Shis-Inday, equaling the girl's whoops with a passion that nearly cost me my life, as I paused to watch his grinning abandon.

Some say the men of Gooli are cowards. That may be true. But they fought with us that day like no cowards I've ever seen. With less agility, but still to great heights, the powerfully legged marsupials also leaped and fought in a manner that confounded the enemy's best defense. As much to them as ourselves goes the credit for victory. When Shis-Inday had reverently told them of the mystical Power contained within their treasured shells, they became imbued with a confidence that made them unstoppable.

There was method to our attack, even if it seemed haphazard to our foes. We fought only against the warriors of Phundahl -- defending ourselves against green men when they attacked us, which was often, but not carrying the offensive toward them.

Bar Comas, Jeddak of Warhoon, savagely pressed me. I left him frightfully scarred -- but did not kill him. There was strange thrill in such sport. Later, Shis-Inday told me that among The Men of the Woods, it is often enough to display superior skill over an enemy. A tap on the shoulder, or a blow to the chest, is as significant to them as the fatal thrust of spear or hatchet.

The Ptarthian forces we also left unmolested -- a difficult thing for Moros Tar and myself, who had lost many loved ones and friends in our long war with that nation.

Our intent was to divide the red armies against each other. Slowly, just that began to happen. More than one Ptarthian recognized myself or Moros Tar. That we failed to attack them obviously planted seeds of doubt about their cause.

During a lull in the fighting, I whispered to some that Thuvan Dihn might still live; that I had been with him not many days since -- long after all Ptarth thought him dead.

When the battle resumed, I heard shouts from several points across the field:

"For the prince!"

"For Thuvan Dihn! True Jeddak of Ptarth!"

By the end of that first day, the alliances had shifted. The Jeddak of Helium and his son, with their savage allies, fought on the side of Ptarth against Hora San's blaspheming followers.

I took up another cry -- "For Issus!" -- and it echoed in my ears from all directions.

The green men we could never turn, nor did we attempt to. But the separate hordes were too busy fighting each other -- and Phundahl, and Ptarth, and our Gooli lunatics -- to make any real progress. In a way, I felt sorry for the green jeds who attempted to coordinate the battle, which was as strange as any that Barsoom had ever seen, with all the leaping and whooping and general chaos amongst allies.

It was about to grow stranger.

As I sliced at a foe, a familiar buzz rang in my ears. Turning, I saw a swarm of

siths hovering over half the field. And with them were the strange fliers that had routed them on that other occasion.

But now the fliers did not attack the monsters. Instead, they seemed to be herding them toward the battle. Siths picked off red Phundahlian and green Thark or Warhoon, never touching the forces of Ptarth -- thanks to the precise maneuvering of our armor-clad and as-yet anonymous allies.

My own hesitation nearly cost me dearly. As I watched the siths in amazement, a Phundahlian sword plunged toward my breast. A flash of green darted past me, attaching itself to the breast of my enemy.

The Killer had returned.

The hatchling ripped wide the man's throat, not pausing to acknowledge me before he was off upon another frenzied attack.

The green hordes had had enough. They withdrew from the field in opposite directions, melting into the dead sea bottoms from which they had come.

The Killer chased after the retreating Thanks, having repaid his debt to me. I would not see him again for many years. When I did, the debt I owed would be greater than a Jeddak's ransom. But that is a story you have already been told.

"The Iss is near," said Moros Tar, as we sat eating the meager fare that is the staple in any camp of soldiers.

Thuvan Dihn and a stranger had joined us.

"Moros Tar and Tardos Mors of Helium," said the Prince of Ptarth, "I present Jeddak Kulan Tith, of Kaol."

"The River of Mystery runs through my kingdom, Moros Tar," said Kulan Tith. "But her waters are strangely low, for this time of year. It's a condition

that baffles the scholars of my court."

"I would like to see it," said Moros Tar. The tiredness in his voice had returned, now that the battle seemed to be won.

I knew, sadly, that my father wanted more than to see the Iss. He wished to voyage upon her sacred waters, however diminished they might be.

The Phundahlans had retreated to a safe distance. We could see their fires, and the lights from their grounded ships. They seemed to be waiting for something.

They dared not attack us now. The men of Ptarth and Kaol and Gooli had been joined by the fleet from Helium, which arrived with two hundred thousand soldiers upon five hundred ships. Although we could have used them a day earlier, the fleet made good time across the face of Barsoom. I could not fault her jedwar, Ross Billen. He'd done his best to bring succor at all possible speed.

As we plotted the siege of Phundahl and the capture of Hora San, a noise came to our ears that was unlike any I'd ever heard before: the grinding of gears, or the gnashing of teeth; mechanical, gigantic -- ominous in the extreme.

Thuria and Cluros bathed the nighttime sea bottom in flickering shadows. I joined Shis-Inday, who stood watch because of her keen eyes. Bal Zak followed groggily. We strained to see what it was that lumbered across the ochre moss.

"A mountain approaches," said the girl, shaking her head at the impossible notion.

I could now make out the monstrous shape. It blotted out the stars as it rolled toward us on gargantuan treads.

"Consort of Issus!" I breathed.

My astonished lethargy lasted only a moment. I rushed to sound the alarm. Soon, the entire camp was alert and ready for battle.

But what kind of thing was it we faced?

Bal Zak knew the answer.

"As I told you, Hora San assembled scientists from around the globe," he explained. "One of them was Fal Sivas, a whisp of a man from Zodanga. Another was Solan, of a race I never dreamed existed. Ras Thavas did not care much for either, or their theories."

"Theories be damned!" cried Thuvan Dihn. "Out with it, man! What is it?"

The sound grew louder, overpowering in its weighty roar. I felt heavier by a stone, just listening to its approach.

"The Juggernaut," said Bal Zak, his voice trembling. "In fact, I helped somewhat with the gearing. It's a mechanized war machine. Shis-Inday's assessment is nearly true. It's the size of a small mountain, and armed to the teeth. I never thought Fal Sivas would get it operational, though. None of us did, or we'd have torn him to pieces before the job was complete."

When the thing struck our camp, I knew pure terror for the first and only time in a long and war-filled life.

Chapter Fourteen:

[The Juggernaut](#)

The "POJ"

[Table of Contents](#)

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Chapter Fourteen: The Juggernaut

Bal Zak had gone insane.

The Toonlian tore off his harness, and pitched all of his weapons in the direction of the approaching behemoth.

I was about to suggest that he be taken to a medical transport, when a tremendous wrenching of wood and steel erupted behind us. I turned in time to see the Thoris, a ten-thousand man warship named for my great grandsire, ripped from its moorings. It tumbled end over end in the direction of the Juggernaut, the outlines of which were becoming visible in the glow of dawn.

The mighty ship of Helium crashed into the Juggernaut's side and hung there, a heap of wreckage and men too horrible to comprehend.

"The magnet!" cried Bal Zak, his voice small before the roar of the machine.
"It will draw any steel to it!"

I quickly grasped the Toonolian's meaning as more ships, large and small, were pulled irresistibly forward. Men, too, had begun to be dragged through space by their swords, grappling hooks and other metal objects attached to their bodies. I saw them crushed against the titanic bulk of the Juggernaut.

Divesting myself of all steel, I clutched at a Ptarthian warrior who'd not been quick enough to follow Bal Zak's example. Hovan Du slipped through my grasp and was lost in a whirlwind of hurtling debris.

The Juggernaut plowed forward at a maddeningly slow pace -- a swift man could run faster. It towered far above us, ten- thousand feet tall, a shapeless bulk that was quickly becoming buried in the warships of Helium and Ptarth.

Yet it still moved.

Pedantic.

Lumbering.

Deadly beyond belief.

The green men had retreated. It was our turn to do likewise. There is no shame in it, for to live another day is to fight another day.

We ran for the Great Marsh.

Slowly, the Juggernaut turned to follow -- now firing upon the fleeing red men before it. Shells burst all about us as the sun rose to detonate them. Circular blades, razor sharp, shot forth from canons in the monstrosity's hull, mowing down men in a bloody slaughter that could not rightly be called war.

After the blades traveled as far as the force that expelled them could push, they were caught up in the magnetic force and returned to the Juggernaut -- to be belched forth again. And again. And again.

"Will it get mired in the bogs of the marsh?" I called to Bal Zak.

"Nothing will slow it, or turn it from its path," the Toonolian answered. His face was nearly as white as Hora San's.

Incredibly, Kaolian fliers were whizzing past we men of Helium and Ptharth. Sometimes, they paused long enough to pick up passengers. But the machines were strained to carry more than two riders.

Kulan Tith paused his machine at my side.

"No metal parts," he cried. "The rubber trees of Kaol are unusually versatile. And so are my draftsmen. Come! I've already carried thy father to safety."

I looked for Shis-Inday, but did not see her. Able to run faster by far than any man on that field of death, she was likely safe. But not knowing for certain her fate worried me.

I was about to clamber to Kulan Tith's side, when a thought struck me.

"Is there a way inside?" I asked Bal Zak, gesturing at the Juggernaut.

The Toonolian pondered that a moment.

"Quickly!" I hissed.

"Yes," he said. "I can get you inside."

"Kulan Tith," I said. "My kingdom for your flier."

"If you are successful, the gratitude of my own kingdom shall be yours, Tardos Mors," the Jeddak returned.

Bal Zak guided us to a hatch in the the Juggernaut's expansive roof. He crouched there, atop the moving mountain of steel, as I slipped through to the interior and made my way to the engine room, following the Toonloian's directions as best I could.

I expected resistance -- such a vehicle could carry thousands of men.

But I found no one.

A voice rang in my ears, however, carried by speakers that were situated all about the Juggernaut.

"My ship is impregnable, Prince of Helium," said the voice. "Think you to disable it? I saw your approach, and allowed you to enter."

Hora San.

But where did he hide?

I knew the answer before the question had been fully formed in my mind: The

High Priest was in Phundahl. The ship was remotely controlled; the voice I heard carried by radio wave. Photostatic devices probably recorded my every move, within and without the ship.

"You are killing Barsoom," said Hora San.

"How do you, who plan genocide with this obscenity, figure that?" I muttered, continuing in the direction that Bal Zak had plotted for me.

"Because you are trying to stop me from saving her," said Hora San.

I ignored him.

"Matai Shang did not listen to reason, either. Perhaps you, a red man of some limited resourcefulness, will understand the logic of our situation."

Logic? From a mad man?

I'd found the room where the great engines that powered the Juggernaut were housed. But every instrument, every control panel, every device that appeared to have any import at all was encased in a seamless alloy that I could not open or smash. I was powerless to do ought but listen to the ravings of Hora San.

"The Great Toonolian Marsh is shriveling away," he said. "Perhaps not in your eyes, accustomed as they are to less fertile portions of Barsoom. But it disappears more rapidly than you can imagine. The River Iss recedes into herself more and more each year. The Valley Dor, of which you know nothing -- nothing! -- is parched. Omean, of which even Matai Shang is ignorant, is a shallow pool. The northern ice caps are melting. In time, the rot of the Carrion Caves will wash down upon the burnt hulk of a dead planet. But even that mositure will quickly disappear into the dry dust of our forgotten world."

He was indeed mad.

"Only I can save her," said the white priest of Tur. "Only I can foresee her doom. If it means wiping out nine-tenths of Barsoom's population to provide

for the rest, by Issus, that's what I'll do!"

"By Issus?" I repeated. "A strange oath, coming from one who quotes the scripture of Tur so eloquently."

"If you knew her, you'd swear in that old hag's name as well," said the High Priest. "Tur is smoke and mirrors, nothing more. I quote the Turgan so well because I wrote it. But Issus lives -- to the everlasting horror of us all."

He cackled, nearly choking on his insanity.

Nearly mad myself with rage and frustration, I spun looking for some tool to use.

Nothing.

I slid to my knees, pounding the polished floor with clenched fists. A panel opened in front of me and a viewscreen appeared. It displayed the path that lay in front of the Juggernaut. I watched as more ships of my beloved Navy were drawn toward the irresistible magnet. Some, who still had crews aboard them, fired shots that apparently had no effect. Deep within the bowels of the massive ship, I could not even feel their impact.

"I'll conquer Barsoom," said Hora San, when he'd regained some germ of coherent thought. "And then Dor. After that, I'll rid our planet of that diseased tyrant, Issus, and take her place upon the Throne of Eternal Life!"

A hissing sound was my first warning of the gas. It seeped into the engine room, and I lost consciousness.

When I woke, I was inside the statue of Tur, bound to a chair on the top platform. I could tell from the configuration that I sat inside the hollow head of Phundahl's hollow god.

Hora San stood beside me, gazing through an eyepiece. When he saw that I

was conscious, he bid me lean forward and look into the great hall.

Shis-Inday stood in the place where we'd both been before, chained in the manner as that other time.

And, as that other time, she stared defiantly into the face of the malevolent god. Also as before, the temple was filled with a jeering crowd, who heaped foul curses and vile epithets at my princess.

Hora San put a mouthpiece to his lips, and spoke in a voice that was amplified throughout the temple.

"Witness the death of a blasphemer!" he cried. "Witness the fate any who defies Tur!"

A tremendous explosion rocked the entire building. I could tell from Hora San's expression that it was not the fate he planned. Another explosion. And another.

I knew from the first that shells were falling upon Phundahl. Besides the detonations near the temple, which brought great stones from its walls crashing to the floor, I could hear others in the distance. The entire city was under attack!

But the fire seemed concentrated upon the temple, and the place shook so much that I expected the walls to cave inward momentarily.

Apparently, the assembled crowd felt likewise. I could hear their terrified screams as they rushed for the doors.

"Hold!" Hora San shouted into the mouthpiece. "Tur will destroy those who defile his sacred places! And he will destroy those of his people who flee from him!"

Although I could not see what was happening, it was clear from the High Priest's expression that his subjects were too terrified by the current onslaught

to worry about one that was threatened. They continued to flee, as the bombs continued to fall.

One of those bombs must have fallen directly on the roof, for the balst seemed nearly to topple the statue-god. I felt us sway horribly to the left, as I ground my feet into the platform to retain my balance. We rocked back to the right, and then bobbed and back and forth.

Hora San lost his precarious balance, and tumbled five stories to the stone floor below. I looked over the edge of the platform, and saw him lying motionless, a red pool encircling his crumpled and twisted form.

"The death of a blasphemer," I said.

Shis-Inday remained chained to the dais, staring up at the statue. It's not every day one sees a god nearly fall on his side. But she was the only one to see it, for the temple was empty.

"Quite a sight, eh, my princess?" I said through the mouthpiece.

Her eyes went wide.

"I have the feeling your Usen never wobbles," I added.

"Tardos Mors?"

"None other. Now, how the devil do we get out of these chains again?"

Thuvan Dihn loosed the chains.

As the Juggernaut crawled back toward Phundahl, with me captive aboard her, the men of Helium, Ptarth and Kaol had regrouped. It took three days for repairs and plans to be made, and then the assault was carried out. I'd witnessed, from my limited vantage point, the first wave. At the behest of Moros Tar, Thuvan Dihn came in search of me and Shis-Inday.

"And the Juggernaut?" I asked the Prince of Ptarth, as he cut the chains from my wrists with his sword.

"Inert, standing before the gates of Phundahl," he replied. "The magnetic force is deactivated. Our ships are unaffected. But, teeth of Issus! It's an ominous sight."

Shis-Inday and Thuvan Dihn stood with me upon the upper platform inside Tur.

"Is that this Hora San I've been hearing so much about from thy sire?" asked the Prince, pointing at the corpse below.

"It was," I said.

More bombs began to fall, shattering the silence of the temple.

The sensitive device that transmitted every sound within the Great Hall of Tur told us that someone had entered through the door at the opposite end. We heard the approach of faltering footsteps, shaken by the unremitting fusillade from above.

Through the eyepiece, I saw that it was Xaxa. She was alone.

I was tempted to speak in the voice of Tur, but something in her hesitant approach kept me from it. I watched, curious. For a long moment, she stared up at the face of the statue. Her gaze seemed to bore into my own hidden eyes.

"Speak, Tur!" the woman cried, her voice on the verge of breaking. "Your people and your Jeddara are afraid. We need the guidance of Tur's wisdom."

Silence.

Dashing to the foot of the immobile statue, Xaxa pounded upon its base with tiny hands. I strained forward, trying to see through the eyepiece the scene

taking place directly below. Xaxa's heaving sobs echoed across the cavernous chamber. Stony idols, hanging from the walls and half-hidden by clouds of incense, looked upon the pathetic figure with indifference.

"Speak!" she begged the living god. "O, Tur, what shall we do?"

Xaxa collapsed upon the floor, kicking and thrashing at first. But then her struggles slowed. Finally, they stopped. She lay very still. But the piercing wail of a lost soul continued.

We departed the statue without another thought for the Jeddara of Phundahl and her silent deity.

Chapter Fifteen:

[On the Banks of the Iss](#)

The "POJ"

[Table of Contents](#)

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Chapter Fifteen: On the Banks of the Iss

Bal Zak found Ras Thavas in the pits, cursing every Phundahlia back to the Tree of Life. It seems the Toonolian scientist had fallen from Tur's favor.

"And those two fakes, Fal Sivas and Solan, were given free reign over The Project!" Ras Thavas cried. "War machines indeed! Nothing but sentimentalist drivel! The only answer is a superior breed of human, resistant to drought and the other vagaries of Barsoom's fragile ecosystem. Why, given time, I could make it so even air is unnecessary. Then our race would not be so dependent upon that ancient atmosphere plant."

"So the drought is real?" I asked. "It's coming?"

"Where have you been, Prince of Helium?" he shot back, using my title in a tone that made it seem small. "Does it take no brains at all to become a royal? It has been upon us for millennia. Barsoom has been spiraling toward death for ages. You do realize that the dead sea bottoms were not always dead? They once had oceans on top of them. Of course the drought is coming. It's here."

"But when will it finally claim us?" I persisted. "The death from which there is no resurrection?"

Ras Thavas shrugged off the question, as if it had no importance.

"I'm a doctor, not a meteorologist," he said. "Death claims all men."

As he turned to lead Bal Zak up out of the pits, Ras Thavas added, softly:

"Nearly all men."

Thuvan Dihn's expression was urgent.

"The Juggernaut is moving," he said. "And the magnetic field is active again. We cannot approach."

"Heading?" I asked.

"Southwest," he answered. "If it does not waver from its present course, it will miss the Ptarthian capital by less than a dozen haads."

"That's much too close to be coincidence, my friend," I said solemnly. "We'll stop it before it gets a thousand haads from Ptarth. I swear it."

Thuvan Dihn sighed heavily, laying a hand upon my shoulder.

"I swear, too, Tardos Mors," he said, "that we will stop the obscenity. My cartographers tell me that if its course is true, it heads for Greater Helium."

Neither Fal Sivas nor this Solan fellow could be found. Searchers did discover the room from which the Juggernaut was apparently controlled. But the instruments there were wrecked beyond usefulness.

The Juggernaut moved forward, on a direct course for the city of my ancestors, half a world away. At its ponderous pace, the monstrous machine would take months to get there. But when it did, it could easily lay waste the age-old birthplace of ten thousand jeddaks. What matter that we evacuate long before the dreadful event? Nothing could replace the priceless treasures, the history, the tradition that would be gone.

I knew that many would choose to remain and die, rather than watch helplessly as the soul was torn from our Empire. I would be among them.

Breathless thousands watched from the walled city of Ptarth as the Juggernaut tread past. Its bulk was clearly visible, some ten haads to the south. No ship could approach without being destroyed.

"We'll stop it," Thuvan Dihn said, as the Juggernaut disappeared below the horizon.

Shis-Inday had been watching silently.

"My father told me how Rain often bragged that it could split mountains," she said, after the Juggernaut had gone. "One day, the Black Mountain Spirit got tired of the boast. `Yes, yes,' he muttered, unimpressed by Rain. `But it takes a thousand of you and your brothers. By then, everyone has forgotten that you set out to do it. Watch this.' Black Mountain reached down inside himself, and The World rumbled. A new mountain thrust itself up - - right through another mountain."

She looked at us in a way that said the task was too great for mere mortals.

"They say only a mountain can humble another mountain."

The mortals of Helium and Ptarth attempted it, with help from their new allies in Kaol.

Flying high in the atmosphere, beyond the reach of the Juggernaut's deadly pull, we dropped bomb after bomb against its unyielding bulk. For months, night and day, the carnage continued, blasting craters all about the machine, but not turning it, or even slowing it.

A fleet of great warships was constructed of Kaolian rubber. Able to maneuver close to the behemoth, they nevertheless proved equally impotent. Raiding parties entered through the topside hatch. They were slaughtered by automated guns.

A trench was dug in its path, twenty miles wide and nearly as deep. The Juggernaut plunged over the side, and chewed through the crust of Barsoom, eventually emerging to continue on toward Helium.

I was mad with despair, and cursed the foul memory of Hora San. My father, too, was numb with rage.

One night, when the Juggernaut was a week from the walls of Greater Helium, Moros Tar took a light Kaolian flier and raced toward the approaching

apocalypse. He wore only the simple leather of a fighting man.

I had tried to stop him; so did Shis-Inday.

But he was still Jeddak. And no man commands the Jeddak.

Through powerful scopes, I watched his suicidal charge until the small ship disappeared from my view, swallowed by the towering mass of of the Juggernaut and the wreckage that covered it.

Later that night, Shis-Inday and I sat with Thuvan Dihn and Kulan Tith in a sunken garden within an inner courtyard of the palace. My friends planned to leave for their homelands on the morrow. They urged Shis-Inday and me to come with them, bringing as many from the doomed city as would follow. But they knew their petition was lost ere they made it.

A guard announced the arrival of a Heliumetic scientist named Pohl Huck, who sought an immediate audience with me. Nodding vaguely, I bid the man enter.

The fellow seemed nervous. Excited. Some news was itching to escape his lips.

My mind with my father, I barely followed his hurried words. I stared blankly, not responding to whatever it was he attempted to explain. Finally, the scientist pulled two blocks of metal from a pouch on his harness. He slammed them to the table at my side, with some force to assure my attention.

"Magnets," he said.

I nodded, stroking Shis-Inday's cheek.

"Watch," he said.

Pohl Huck pushed one magnet toward the other, which scooted out of the way without being touched.

I lept from my couch. The others followed suit.

"They repel," said the scientist.

"Another mountain," commented Shis-Inday. "They're often in plain sight, but seldom do we really see them."

The Juggernaut was half a day from my capital when Pohl Huck's great magnetic slab was hoisted into place before it. For a moment, no change in the destroyer's inexorable trek was discernable.

But then a cheer went up from the throats of watching thousands. The Juggernaut had stopped.

And then, slowly, as if some monumental duel of wills was being waged, the Juggernaut turned. With deft guidance, Pohl Huck's magnet deflected the one buried inside the Juggernaut.

We watched until the mountain became a speck and disappeared.

To the north.

"It traveled halfway around Barsoom, from Phundahl," said Thuvan Dihn. "Will it not circumnavigate the globe? We can hardly equip every city with giant... `Gaurdian' magnets...and repel the Juggernaut back and forth at each other throughout eternity."

"I see no other means of defense, Thuvan Dihn," I said.

But the Juggernaut disappeared in the snowbound wastes of the north, never to be seen again.

Well, never to be seen in that horrible form. It would take on another, just as horrible.

"Iss," sighed Moros Tar. "Take me to Iss."

He lay upon the dry sea bottom, wounded. I'd gone to search for some sign of him, after the defeat of the Juggernaut. I thought to find no trace, or his mangled mangled body. But he still lived.

Not for long, I knew.

The fastest flier of the Empire bore us toward Kaol, the nearest point at which a Pilgrim can begin the voyage to Dor.

"Father, Ras Thavas can heal you yet," I said as we neared our destination. "Don't leave me."

"It is your time, Tardos Mors," he answered weakly. "I have had mine. A thousand years' worth. You are ready."

I looked at him through red eyes.

"Mors Kajak was ready to rule," I said. "But I failed him. And you."

"I know all that happened at Flemster -- " he began.

"Not all," I interrupted.

"All. In time, you'll learn just how much a Jeddak can know."

He coughed, bringing up blood.

"The failure belonged to Mors Kajak," said Moros Tar. "He did not lead. He chose to follow."

"Yes!" I cried. "He followed me into a winless battle against insurmountable odds. One from which only I returned."

"That is why he failed," said the former Jeddak of Helium. "Remember that, my son. Always."

Moros Tar died with the fading waters of the River of Mystery lapping at his feet.

Chapter Sixteen:

[The Jeddak of Helium](#)

The "POJ"

[Table of Contents](#)

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Chapter Sixteen: The Jeddak of Helium

The golden harnesses of matrimony were placed about the necks of Shis-Inday and me by Thuvan Dihn.

Today, I cherish the pomp and circumstance of royal life. Courtly affairs come easily to me now -- the formal state dinners, diplomatic negotiation, receiving foreign dignitaries in the halls of Barsoom's most ancient and majestic palace. Perhaps those duties take the place of an empty longing in my heart.

But on the night of my wedding, it was still an alien sort of existence. My brother had been born to it, as my father had been before him. To me, it was a tedious chore.

It would always be such to Shis-Inday, whose savage sire practiced diplomacy at the point of a wooden spear.

We slipped away to the Royal Observatory during the Dance of Barsoom.

Shis-Inday sat in the front row of the darkened theater. I worked the controls at the back of the large room, casting images upon the ground glass before the girl.

Without telling her my intent, I maneuvered the dials so that a refraction of Jasoom appeared. First, the view was from space. She was fascinated, but did not understand what she saw.

"A brother of Kleego-na-ay," she marveled. "But so large! And blue."

Without a word, I shifted the focus so that we descended through the atmosphere of Jasoom, a realistic experience for the viewer. Shis-Inday swayed, dizzied by the illusion of movement. I saw her clutch the armrests upon her chair. But she made no sound, and appeared captivated by the effect.

When the tumbling picture slowed, we had a perfectly clear birds-eye view of

rolling ocean.

It was my turn to marvel. Such a sight had not been seen upon Barsoom for ages. Whenever I gaze upon your abundant planet, the sight of an ocean never fails to amaze me. I feel small before such titanic depths. How do you of Jasoom stand to be always reminded of your insignificance?

With the turn of a dial, our perspective shifted to land -- a green valley.

Another twist, and we saw a primitive city on the continent I believe is called Europe.

"El Caballo!" Shis-Inday cried. It was a four-legged thooat, diminutive and covered with hair, pulling a wooden cart through the dirt streets of the settlement. The man who held the beast's reins also elicited comment: "A Pindah-Lickoyee," the girl murmured.

Again the view changed, to an open plain of rock and sparse grasses. Massive mountains ringed the horizon, more imposing than any Barsoomian landscape. Forests were also visible in the mist of distance.

Shis-Inday leaped to her feet, rushing to touch the screen. She'd have crawled inside, if she could.

"The World!" she breathed, reverently.

Wisps of smoke curled from another settlement -- which was very different from the first we had seen. Simple shelters, made from wooden poles and brush, housed people who looked like my princess.

"The Men of the Woods," she said quietly. "The Shis-Inday."

Night was falling upon The World. I rotated the view upward, toward the sky, which stirred as much emotion in the girl as had the sight of her people. The face of Night was a familiar companion to her.

I pointed out Barsoom.

"The Weeping Lover," she said softly.

Without another word, she left the room.

In all the years that Shis-Inday spent in the royal palace of Helium, she never returned to the observatory. If she could not pass through that tantalizing viewscreen, Shis-Inday wanted no part of it. The Jasoomian princess believed it better to dream of The World, and visit it with her Spirit Guide, than to be teased by ghostly reflections of it.

Selfishly, I hoped that The World was beginning to lose some of its hold upon her.

And yet, I knew how alone I'd feel had I been cut off forever from my beloved Barsoom.

Ceremony is prized among the people of Helium. On a dying planet, tradition is all. It helps us remember our past, and keeps us focused upon the future.

My coronation was elaborate.

I rose to the throne of Helium with the grace and wisdom that I'd learned by watching my father. Would that he'd been there to witness the solemn spectacle. I felt his presence, and that of my brother.

Shis-Inday stood at my side, and I was content in the moment.

A year later, we stood upon the roof of the palace, embraced by Night. Neither Thuria nor Cluros had risen.

"Do you still miss it so terribly, my princess?" I asked.

Without the diluting influence of the light from Kleego-na-ay's crazy cousins,

the stars stood out in brilliant glory. Among them, we picked out the blue-green orb of The World.

"At times," Shis-Inday said softly, "I wonder about The Men of the Woods. About my mother, and father. Do they weep for me? Do they still live, to weep?"

"Would you return to Jasoom, if you could?"

It was a difficult question for me to ask. I was surprised, and gratified, by the quick answer.

"Not without you, my nantan," she said.

I took her in my arms. The Barsoomian endearment always thrilled me, when spoken by my Jasoomian princess in her own language.

"The ways of Usen are mysterious," she purred. "But He is truly the Life-Giver. I know that now more surely than ever I have before. He has given me life, by sending me here. If I was transported to The World tonight, I'd spend the rest of my days attempting to return to you."

Construction of the Palace of Peace began in Ptarth shortly after the war with Helium ended. The task was completed two years later.

It was a grand gesture by my friend, Thuvan Dihn, Jeddak of that proud nation.

But we both knew it was little more than a gesture.

Peace upon Barsoom?

Unlikely.

Nevertheless, our two nations made quite a spectacle of its dedication. I and my Jeddara attended the opening with a retinue of thousands. And the millions

who populated the Ptarthian capital seemed all to be there, crowding the streets and showing their visitors from Helium the finer things that Thuvan Dihn's empire had to offer in the way of culture and entertainment.

Sporting events, parades and exhibitions filled the days. Thuvan Dihn and I treated the crowds to a duel; the gamblers of Ptarth lost quite a sum that day.

Ballroom dancing, theater and sumptuous dining occupied our nights.

It was a week that I will long remember.

On the day of the symbolic structure's dedication, I stood upon a balcony on its top floor, watching from above as Thuvan Dihn spoke to the assembled crowds from a platform in the court yard far below. His daughter, who'd hatched shortly after hostilities ceased, stood between Shis-Inday and me, holding our hands.

Our son, Mors Kajak, nestled at my wife's breast. He had not been hatched. I do not fully understand the genetics of it, but Ras Thavas made it possible for Shis-Inday to bear my heir.

Barsoomians do not nurse their young. The sight of my son's mother providing him nourishment in this way is indescribable. It made me feel a bond with them both that no other of my race can know.

"Your father is a great man, Thuvia," I told the girl.

"Yes," she said.

"Do you think he can see you all the way up here?" asked Shis-Inday, playfully.

"I am sure of it," the girl said confidently, waving to the speck that was Thuvan Dihn. "If he ever lost sight of me, my father would travel to the ends of Barsoom to find me again."

Chapter Seventeen:
[The House of Spirits](#)

The "POJ"
[Table of Contents](#)

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Chapter Seventeen: The House of Spirits

words by Jeff, art by Duane

Each thing in The World -- the animals, the plants, the sky and stars and lightning -- has a Power behind it that makes it do what it does. What you can see is only a little of the whole thing. The Power is in the spirit part. Some people can learn to reach the spirit part of something, and they become its izze-nantan, its shaman-chief. There is Power in everything! □

-- The teachings of Yellow Bear.

When Shis-Inday learned of the zoo at Amhor, she decided that we must visit it.

I did not protest, although I knew that she would not like what she saw. Shis-Inday had always felt an affinity for nature; her wild side never drifted far from the surface -- even during the most stately of functions. She could be elegant, when the situation demanded. But she could also be savage. In fact, the untamed side of her needed no prompting to rise to the surface.

The Human Beings could no more cage another living thing than they could cage themselves. Perhaps it was the oddness of the concept that made Shis-Inday want to see a Barsoomian zoo.

When we arrived, even I was aghast by the horrid conditions. The animals were gaunt, and seemed nearly dead of thirst. Shis-Inday fled to our apartments in disgust, after clawing our guide, Jal Had.

The jed of Amhor sputtered in rage, stemming the flow of blood from his face with a silk cloth.

I turned angrily upon him, ready to strangle him for the distress that conditions here had caused my princess.

"Tardos Mors!" he cried. "My beasts are watered more frequently than my

people. Has the drought not yet reached distant Helium?"

For the first time in many years, I thought of Hora San.

Many more years would pass before I came to know the prophecy of that megalomaniac.

"But what is wrong with her?" I demanded of the scientist. "What terrible disease afflicts her?"

"She is old," Ras Thavas answered, without feeling, without sentiment. "She will die soon."

"Old!" I nearly shouted. "She left Jasoom as little more than a child. And that was only twenty years ago, by Barsoomian reckoning."

"Nearly fifty years, by the reckoning of her own planet," Ras Thavas retorted.

"Twenty years, or fifty! What of it? It is nothing. It is a fraction of a moment."

"On Barsoom, perhaps," the scientist said.

The drought worsened with every passing year.

And with every passing month, more rapidly than seemed possible, my princess grew old and frail.

She also grew wiser, more tender, and sometimes mysterious.

She still danced by moonlight. And I danced with her, when she would allow. But often my princess made solitary journeys of communion with the Directions, and Usen, and the spirits that meant as much to her as life itself. Kliji-Litzogue, the Yellow Lizard, was her companion at such times. I never saw her Spirit Guide, though she spoke to me of him as she would a thing of flesh and blood. Perhaps he was, in a sense I will never fully understand.

My reign during those years was marked by a wisdom and compassion that was due in large part to my Jeddara. It was a time of great uncertainty, because of the drought. Men have tried, but it is impossible to conquer thirst with a sword. Under such conditions, an iron will is more important than the strongest steel at your hip.

Shis-Inday sometimes fretted about her inability to string a bow so tautly, or hunt so keenly, or leap so marvelously in her dance beneath the eyes of Kleego-na-ay's crazy cousins. And often she stared placidly into my eyes, wondering that they had not yet begun to grow dim, as had her own.

"My chieftain, I do not understand it," she said. "You look the same as the day we first met, while I have become my grandmother, Old Woman."

In my eyes, she had grown more beautiful. A part of me grieved that I had remained unchanged in hers.

The people of Helium were enchanted by the mere sight of Shis-Inday's white hair and crinkled skin. They loved my aging princess more dearly than I can explain.

And so did I.

The steady cadence of her deliberate walk brought calmness and reflection to the most anxious of young warriors. They, and Helium, were stronger for it.

Only now, since the coming of John Carter and the fall of Issus, has age begun to show in the population of our ancient planet. But in those days, it was virtually unheard of. If we did not die young, in war, we journeyed to Dor just before the change overtook our strong bodies.

It is perhaps the greatest of ironies that John Carter himself appears to possess eternal youth.

Will his princess age, while the Warlord remains unchanged? Only time will divulge.

It is not a fate I would wish upon anyone.

Thuvan Dihn's face told me ere he spoke how grave the situation was in Ptarth. He'd come to Helium to discuss possible solutions to the planet-wide drought, which had grown worse -- impossible as that seemed.

Dozens of full-scale wars raged over great portions of Barsoom. Helium itself fought battles on several fronts, against red men and green who would have raided what precious stores of water we'd been able to horde.

Scattered pockets of water throughout the empire and beyond had been located at the guidance of Shis-Inday, whose Power was more valuable upon Barsoom, now, than it had ever been in the relatively fruitful deserts of The World.

After prayers and consultations with Kliji-Litzogue, Shis-Inday would fly over some foresaken stretch of dead sea bottom. When a familiar scent or other vague sign became known to her by some means no one but she could fathom, the Be-don-ko-he princess would lean forward, wind whipping her hair straight back from her brow. Then she'd point from the deck of the flier to the area where water could be found.

At first, engineers assigned to these reconaissance missions doubted the accuracy of my Shis-Inday's uncanny sense. But in time, they came to trust her instincts more readily than the most precise mechanisms of science they could devise.

Shis-Inday, meanwhile, seemed increasingly worried by the growing dryness of the dying planet she'd adopted as her own. It became difficult for her to locate even the smallest of reservoirs.

She was upon one such errand when Thuvan Dihn appeared at my court. I

would be glad of that, for Shis-Inday had come to love the princess of Ptarth as a daughter.

"Thousands have departed upon the Final Pilgrimage," said Thuvan Dihn, stroking the head of young Sovan, his son. "And thousands more would follow, did they not fear dying alone upon the parched wastelands before reaching Dor."

His voice trembled, and I could tell there was more.

"Thuvia has gone," Thuvan Dihn said. "She thought to inspire hope among those who feared the Pilgrimage. Hundreds followed her; and I believe many more will within the week."

"I'm thirsty," said the boy, weakly, in a voice that spoke for an entire world.

The Jeddak of Ptarth looked at me, blankly. Thuvan Dihn was among the greatest warriors I'd ever known on a planet of great warriors. But now he was forlorn.

Alone.

On the verge of dry tears.

"My daughter is gone, Tardos Mors," he said. "She seeks the knee of Issus. Her love for our people must be greater than her love, even, for me. She leads them to salvation."

"We are saved, father!"

The urgency in the voice of Mors Kajak made me turn from the balcony, where Thuvan Dihn and I stood in contemplation of a subdued, silent Helium.

"Saved?" I said quietly, turning to face my son.

"Mother has saved us!" he cried.

The reports came in by wireless. Rain was falling throughout Barsoom. Canals that had been dry for years were filling to capacity. New reservoirs had been located. Even the Iss, whose waters were sacred, had regained something of its former majesty.

Battle fleets stopped fighting, as their crews marveled at the unimagined sight of water from the sky.

My world was saved.

To you, of Jasoom, the precipitation that fell upon Barsoom that day would be barely a drop in those depthless oceans of yours. But to us, it was life. Give a Barsoomian one grasping chance at that, and he'll cling to it with the tenacity of a white ape.

With Thuvan Dihn and Mors Kajak, I hastily outfitted an expedition to join Shis-Inday at the site of her greatest triumph.

When we arrived, my Be-don-ko-he princess was dancing at the edge of the Great Canal, leaping like the Girl of the Woods that she'd been when first I'd laid eyes upon her that long-ago night in the marsh. With a whoop unbecoming a jeddak, I joined her.

She fell into my arms, laughing as I held her close.

"The Spirits heard!" she cried. "Usen was pleased with my dance, and He granted my prayer!"

The deluge soaked us both. I could hear the shouts of those all about us, who'd taken up the wild dance begun by my princess.

Shis-Inday kissed me tenderly, and then walked peacefully to the edge of the canal. The rain slowed to a light mist, but the rushing water before us had not diminished.

On tired legs, she clambered to the top of the concrete wall, contentedly studying the miracle.

As I climbed to join her, a section of the wall gave way. The loose mortar had not yet settled where craftsmen had worked to shore it against the oncoming water.

Shis-Inday plunged downward, just as I reached the top of the crumbling block.

"No!" I screamed.

She struggled for a moment in that raging torrent and then went under. I raced along the wall, frantic, straining for a glimpse of my princess. I was on the brink of leaping into the swirling water, when strong arms pulled me back.

I have lived my life on a world where water is among the most prized of possessions; there is none to spare for more than drinking or bathing.

I never learned to swim.

And yet, I'd have plunged headlong into that furious maelstrom, had Thuvan Dihn and Mors Kajak not been there to stop me.

"Would you drown yourself in a suicidal effort to reach her side, Tardos Mors?" the Jeddak of Ptarth asked.

"Yes!" I cried, straining against his hold. "A thousand times, yes!"

An engineer on the other side of the canal shouted for our attention.

"There!" came the cry, barely audible above the roar of the flood.

My eyes followed his pointing finger, and I saw Shis-Inday's head bob to the surface of the churning water.

She looked at me, calm, almost smiling. Her head tilted, looking to something I could not see -- something none of us upon either side of the canal could see. I had the distinct impression that she was listening to someone at her side, who soothed fears that needed no soothing. She was at peace, even as chaos raged about her.

Roiling waves washed over her, bathing her in a spiritual kind of bliss. I saw her lips move. She spoke to that unseen presence in her native tongue.

No one but I could make out the words:

"Child of the Water."

Then Shis-Inday went under for the last time.

Her body has never been found.

And neither has my heart.

Afterward:

[Gora-ban-Hinsu](#)

The "POJ"

[Table of Contents](#)

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