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The Gods of Mars

By EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS

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CHAPTER XIII.

Death of the Holy Thern.

WE were close behind him, and all saw the figure of a man run quickly across a little piece of sward and disappear in the shrubbery beyond.

"He was on the balcony when I first saw him!" cried Hor Vastus. "Quick! Let us follow him!"

Together we ran to the gardens, but even though we scoured the grounds with the entire guard for hours no trace could we find of the night raider.

"What do you make of it, Kantos Kan?" asked Tars Tarkas.

"A spy sent by Zat Arras," he replied. "It was ever his way."

"He will have something interesting to report to his master, then," laughed Hor Vastus.

"I hope he heard only our references to a new jeddak," I said. "If he overheard our plans to rescue Dejah Thoris

green warriors whom it was our plan to send in transports directly to the valley Dor and the temple of Isis while the fleet entered Omean and destroyed the vessels of the Black Pirates.

Upon Hor Vastus devolved the delicate mission of organizing a secret force of fighting men sworn to follow John Carter wherever he might lead. As we estimated that it would require over a million men to man the thousand great battleships we intend-



Nothing Shall Stay Me Now Short of Death.

ed to use on Omean and the transports for the green men as well as the ships that were to convoy the transports it was no trifling job that Hor Vastus had before him.

After they had left I bid Carthoris good night, for I was very tired, and, going to my own apartments, bathed and lay down upon my sleeping silks and furs for the first good night's sleep I had had an opportunity to look forward to since I had returned to Barsoom.

Six months later Kantos Kan, Tars Tarkas, Hor Vastus, Carthoris and myself met quietly in a room in my palace, and I questioned them regarding the preparations for the rescue of Dejah Thoris.

"It has been even more difficult than we had expected," said Kantos Kan. "The fact that we were compelled to maintain utter secrecy has handicapped us terribly. Zat Arras' spies are everywhere. Yet, to the best of my knowledge, no word of our real plans has reached the villain's ear."

"Tonight there lies about the great docks at Hastor a fleet of a thousand of the mightiest battleships that ever sailed above Barsoom and each equipped to navigate the air to Omean and the waters of Omean itself. Upon each battleship there are five ten-man cruisers and ten five-man scouts and a hundred one-man scouts, in all 116,000 craft fitted with both air and water propellers."

"At Thark lie the transports for the green warriors of Tars Tarkas, 600 large troopships, and with them their convoys. Seven days ago all was in readiness, but we waited in the hope that by so doing the rescue of Dejah Thoris might be attempted at a time when the Black Pirates could be taken at a disadvantage."

"How is it, Tars Tarkas," I asked, "that the men of Thark take not the accustomed action against one who returns from the bosom of Iss?"

"They sent a council of fifty chief tains to talk with me here," replied the Thark. "We are a just people, and when I had told them the entire story they were as one man in agreeing that their action toward me should be guided by the action of Helium toward John Carter."

"In the meantime at their request I was to resume my throne as jeddak of Thark that I might negotiate with neighboring hordes for warriors to compose the land forces of the expedition. I have done that which I agreed."

"Two hundred and fifty thousand fighting men gathered from the ice cap at the north to the ice cap at the south and, representing a thousand different communities from a hundred wild and warlike hordes, fill the great city of Thark tonight. They are ready to sail for the land of the Black Pirates when I give the word and fight there until I bid them stop."

"All they ask is the loot they take and transportation to their own territories when the fighting and the looting are over. I am done."

"And thou, Hor Vastus," I asked, "what has been thy success?"

"A million veteran fighting men from Helium's thin waterways man the battleships, the transports and the convoys," he replied. "Each is sworn to loyalty and secrecy, nor were enough recruited from a single district to cause suspicion."

"Good!" I cried. "Each has done his duty, and now, Kantos Kan, may we not repair at once to Hastor and get under way before tomorrow's sun?"

"We should lose no time, prince," replied Kantos Kan. "Already the people of Hastor are questioning the purpose of so great a fleet fully manned with fighting men. I wonder much that word of it has not before reached Zat Arras. A cruiser awaits above at

your own dock. Let us leave at—"
A fusillade of shots from the palace gardens just without cut short his further words.

Together we rushed to the balcony in time to see a dozen members of my palace guard disappear in the shadow of some distant shrubbery as in pursuit of one who fled. Directly beneath us upon the scarlet sward a handful of guardsmen were stooping above a stiff and prostrate form.

While we watched they lifted the figure in their arms and at my command bore it to the audience chamber where we had been in council. When they stretched the body at our feet we saw that it was that of a red man in the prime of life. His metal was plain, such as common soldiers wear or those who have a motive to conceal their identity.

"Another of Zat Arras' spies," said Hor Vastus.

"So it would seem," I replied, and then to the guard, "You may remove the body."

"Wait!" said Xodar. "If you will, prince, ask that a cloth and a little thot oil be brought."

I nodded to one of the soldiers, who left the chamber, returning presently with the things that Xodar had requested. The black knelt beside the body and, dipping a corner of the cloth in the thot oil, rubbed for a moment on the dead face before him.

Then he turned to me with a smile, pointing to his work. I looked and saw that where Xodar had applied the thot oil the face was white—as white as mine—and then Xodar seized the black hair of the corpse and with a sudden wrench tore it all away, revealing a hairless pate beneath.

Guardsmen and nobles pressed close about the silent witness upon the marble floor. Many were the exclamations of astonishment and questioning wonder as Xodar's acts confirmed the suspicion which he had held all the time.

"A thern!" whispered Tars Tarkas. "Worse than that, I fear," replied Xodar. "But let us see."

With that he drew his dagger and cut open a locked pouch which had dangled from the thern's harness, and from it he brought forth a circlet of gold set with a large gem. It was the mate to that which I had taken from Sator Throg.

"He was a holy thern," said Xodar. "Fortunate, indeed, it is for us that he did not escape."

The officer of the guard entered the chamber at this juncture.

"My prince," he said, "I have to report that this fellow's companion escaped us. I think that it was with the connivance of one or more of the men at the gate. I have ordered them all under arrest."

Xodar handed him the thot oil and cloth.

"With this you may discover the spy among you," he said.

I at once ordered a secret search within the city, for every Martian noble maintains a secret service of his own.

A half hour later the officer of the guard came to the chamber again to report. This time it was to confirm our worst fears—half the guards at the gate that night had been therns disguised as red men.

"Come!" I cried. "We must lose no time. On to Hastor at once! Should the therns attempt to check us at the southern verge of the ice cap it may result in the wrecking of all our plans and the total destruction of the expedition."

Ten minutes later we were speeding through the night toward Hastor, prepared to strike the first blow for the preservation of Dejah Thoris.

Two hours after leaving my palace in Helium, or about midnight, Kantos Kan and I arrived at Hastor. Carthoris, Tars Tarkas and Hor Vastus had gone directly to Thark upon another cruiser.

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I Took a Solemn Vow to Reach, Rescue and Revenge My Princess.

It will mean civil war, for he will attempt to thwart us, and in that I will not be thwarted. There would I turn against Tardos Mors himself were it necessary.

"If it throws all Helium into a bloody conflict I shall go on with these plans to save my princess. Nothing shall stay me now short of death, and should I die, my friends, will you take oath to prosecute the search for her and bring her back in safety to her grandfather's court?"

Upon the hit of his sword each of them swore to do as I had asked.

It was agreed that the battleships that were to be remodeled should be ordered to Hastor, another Heliumetic city, far to the southwest. Kantos Kan thought that the docks there, in addition to their regular work, would accommodate at least six battleships at a time.

As he was commander in chief of the navy, it would be a simple matter for him to order the vessels there as they could be handled and thereafter keep the remodeled fleet in remote parts of the empire until we should be ready to assemble it for the dash upon Omean.

It was late that night before our conference broke up, but each man there had his particular duties outlined, and the details of the entire plan had been mapped out.

Kantos Kan was to attend to the remodeling of the ships. Tars Tarkas was to get into communication with Thark and learn the sentiments of his people toward his return from Dor.

If favorable, he was to repair immediately to Thark and devote his time to the assembling of a great horde of

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