

《The Warlord of Mars》 Chapter 13 - The Tide of Battle

But solan's last loud cry had not been without effect, for a moment later a dozen guardsmen burst into the room and bent and demolished the great switch that it could not be again used to turn the powerful current in the direction it controlled.

The result of the sudden coming of the guardsmen had been to compel me to seek seclusion in the first room that to my disappointment proved to be not the one with which I was familiar, but another upon its left.

They must have either heard or guessed which way I went, for I had proceeded but a short distance when I had no mind to stop and fight these men here when there was fighting aplenty elsewhere in the city of Kassar. I had much more avail to me and mine than useless life-taking far below the palace.

But the fellows were pressing me; and as I did not know the way at all, I soon saw that they would overtake me unless I could conceal myself until they had passed, which would then give me an opportunity to return the way I had come and possibly find a way to reach the city streets.

The passageway had risen rapidly since leaving the apartment of the switch, and now ran level and well lit as far as I could see. The moment that my pursuers reached this straight stretch I would be in plain sight of them from the corridor undetected.

Presently I saw a series of doors opening from either side of the corridor, and as they all looked alike I reached the first. It opened into a small chamber, luxuriously furnished, and was evidently an ante-chamber off some of the rooms of the palace.

On the far side was a heavily curtained doorway beyond which I heard the hum of voices. Instantly I crossed the curtains, looked within the larger apartment.

Before me were a party of perhaps fifty gorgeously clad nobles of the court, standing before a throne upon which the Jeddak of Jeddaks was addressing them.

"The allotted hour has come," he was saying as I entered the apartment; "and though the enemies of Okar may stay the will of Salensus Oll. The great ceremony must be omitted that no single man may be kept from his duty. In the fifty that custom demands shall witness the creation of a new queen in Okar.

"In a moment the thing shall have been done and we may return to the battle, while she who is now the Princess from the queen's tower upon the annihilation of her former countrymen and witnesses the greatness which she has done for Okar."

Then, turning to a courtier, he issued some command in a low voice.

The courtier hastened to a small door at the far end of the chamber and, swinging it wide, cried: "Way is made for the Princess of Okar!"

Immediately two guardsmen appeared dragging the unwilling bride toward the altar. Her hands were still free, but they were held out to prevent suicide.

Her disheveled hair and panting bosom betokened that, chained though she was, still had she fought against her captors.

At sight of her Salensus Oll rose and drew his sword, and the sword of each of the fifty nobles was raised in oath which the poor, beautiful creature was dragged toward her doom.

A grim smile forced itself to my lips as I thought of the rude awakening that lay in store for the ruler of Okar when he should find the hilt of my bloody sword.

As I watched the procession that moved slowly toward the throne-- a procession which consisted of but the Princess of Okar, her attendant Dejah Thoris and the two guardsmen--I caught a fleeting glimpse of a black face peering from behind the door at the back of the dais upon which stood Salensus Oll awaiting his bride.

Now the guardsmen were forcing the Princess of Helium up the few steps to the side of the tyrant of Okar.

oughts for aught else. A priest opened a book and, raising his hand, commenced to drone out a sing-song rite in the hand of his bride.

I had intended waiting until some circumstance should give me a reasonable hope of success; for, even if it could be completed, there could be no valid marriage while I lived. What I was most concerned in, of course, was--I wished to take her from the palace of Salensus Oll, if such a thing were possible; but whether it were a mere mock marriage was a matter of secondary import.

When, however, I saw the vile hand of Salensus Oll reach out for the hand of my beloved princess I could not stand before the nobles of Okar knew that aught had happened I had leaped through their thin line and was upon the hand of Salensus Oll.

With the flat of my sword I struck down his polluting hand; and grasping Dejah Thoris round the waist, with my back against the draperies of the dais, I faced the tyrant of the north and his roomful of noble warriors.

The Jeddak of Jeddaks was a great mountain of a man--a coarse, brutal beast of a man--and as he towered over me, his black whiskers and mustache bristling in rage, I can well imagine that a less seasoned warrior might have trembled.

With a snarl he sprang toward me with naked sword, but whether Salensus Oll was a good swordsman or not, with Dejah Thoris at my back I was no longer human--I was a superman, and no man could have withstood me.

With a single, low: "For the Princess of Helium!" I ran my blade straight through the rotten heart of Okar. The white, drawn faces of his nobles Salensus Oll rolled, grinning in horrible death, to the foot of the steps below.

For a moment tense silence reigned in the nuptial-room. Then the fifty nobles rushed upon me. Furious they were mine, for I stood upon a raised platform above them, and I fought for the most glorious woman of a great race and for the mother of my boy.

And from behind my shoulder, in the silvery cadence of that dear voice, rose the brave battle anthem of Helium as their men march out to victory.

That alone was enough to inspire me to victory over even greater odds, and I verily believe that I should have led a host of yellow warriors that day in the nuptial chamber of the palace at Kadabra had not interruption come to my fight.

Fast and furious was the fighting as the nobles of Salensus Oll sprang, time and again, up the steps before me. I held a sword hand that seemed to have gained a new wizardry from its experience with the cunning Solan.

Two were pressing me so closely that I could not turn when I heard a movement behind me, and noted that the fight had ceased. Was Dejah Thoris preparing to take her place beside me?

Heroic daughter of a heroic world! It would not be unlike her to have seized a sword and fought at my side. For the women of Mars are not trained in the arts of war, the spirit is theirs, and they have been known to do that very thing under the stars.

But she did not come, and glad I was, for it would have doubled my burden in protecting her before I should have been able to turn my back again out of harm's way. She must be contemplating some cunning strategy, I thought, and so I fought on. The divine princess stood close behind me.

For half an hour at least I must have fought there against the nobles of Okar ere ever a one placed a foot upon the dais. Then of a sudden all that remained of them formed below me for a last, mad, desperate charge; but even as they were at the far end of the chamber swung wide and a wild-eyed messenger sprang into the room.

"The Jeddak of Jeddaks!" he cried. "Where is the Jeddak of Jeddaks? The city has fallen before the hordes of the north but now the great gate of the palace itself has been forced and the warriors of the south are pouring into its courtyard."

"Where is Salensus Oll? He alone may revive the flagging courage of our warriors. He alone may save the city of Helium?"

The nobles stepped back from about the dead body of their ruler, and one of them pointed to the grinning messenger who staggered back in horror as though from a blow in the face.

"Then fly, nobles of Okar!" he cried, "for naught can save you. Hark! They come!"

As he spoke we heard the deep roar of angry men from the corridor without, and the clank of metal and armor.

Without another glance toward me, who had stood a spectator of the tragic scene, the nobles wheeled and fled through another exit.

Almost immediately a force of yellow warriors appeared in the doorway through which the messenger had fled toward the apartment, stubbornly resisting the advance of a handful of red men who faced them and forced them back.

Above the heads of the contestants I could see from my elevated station upon the dais the face of my old friend the little party that had won its way into the very heart of the palace of Salensus Oll.

In an instant I saw that by attacking the Okarians from the rear I could so quickly disorganize them that they would be short-lived, and with this idea in mind I sprang from the dais, casting a word of explanation to Dejah Thoris.

d not turn to look at her.

With myself ever between her enemies and herself, and with Kantos Kan and his warriors winning to the anger to Dejah Thoris standing there alone beside the throne.

I wanted the men of Helium to see me and to know that their beloved princess was here, too, for I knew I could inspire them to even greater deeds of valor than they had performed in the past, though great indeed must have been the way into the almost impregnable palace of the tyrant of the north.

As I crossed the chamber to attack the Kadabrans from the rear a small doorway at my left opened, and, through it, the eyes of Matai Shang, Father of Therns and Phaidor, his daughter, peering into the room.

A quick glance about they took. Their eyes rested for a moment, wide in horror, upon the dead body of Surtax, which had crimsoned the floor, upon the corpses of the nobles who had fallen thick before the throne, upon me, and upon the other door.

They did not essay to enter the apartment, but scanned its every corner from where they stood, and then they looked over the entire area, a look of fierce rage overspread the features of Matai Shang, and a cold and cunning smile touched the lips of Phaidor.

Then they were gone, but not before a taunting laugh was thrown directly in my face by the woman.

I did not understand then the meaning of Matai Shang's rage or Phaidor's pleasure, but I knew that neither was good for me.

A moment later I was upon the backs of the yellow men, and as the red men of Helium saw me above them a great shout rang through the corridor, and for a moment drowned the noise of battle.

"For the Prince of Helium!" they cried. "For the Prince of Helium!" and, like hungry lions upon their prey, they rushed upon the weakening warriors of the north.

The yellow men, cornered between two enemies, fought with the desperation that utter hopelessness often inspires. I could have fought had I been in their stead, with the determination to take as many of my enemies with me when I fell as I could with my sword arm.

It was a glorious battle, but the end seemed inevitable, when presently from down the corridor behind them came a group of reinforcing yellow warriors.

Now were the tables turned, and it was the men of Helium who seemed doomed to be ground between two enemies. I was forced to turn to meet this new assault by a greatly superior force, so that to me was left the remnants of the yellow men.

They kept me busy, too; so busy that I began to wonder if indeed I should ever be done with them. Slowly I moved toward the room, and when they had all passed in after me, one of them closed and bolted the door, effectually barring