

## CHAPTER XVIII - A TASK FOR LOYALTY

Long and loud was the applause that rose above the Field of Jetan at Manator, as The Keeper of the Towers summoned the two Princesses and the victorious Chief to the center of the field and presented to the latter the fruits of his prowess, and then, as custom demanded, the victorious players, headed by Gahan and the two Princesses, formed in procession behind The Keeper of the Towers and were conducted to the place of victory before the royal enclosure that they might receive the commendation of the jeddak. Those who were mounted gave up their thots to slaves as all must be on foot for this ceremony. Directly beneath the royal enclosure are the gates to one of the tunnels that, passing beneath the seats, give ingress or egress to or from the Field. Before this gate the party halted while O-Tar looked down upon them from above. Val Dor and Floran, passing quietly ahead of the others, went directly to the gates, where they were hidden from those who occupied the enclosure with O-Tar. The Keeper of the Towers may have noticed them, but so occupied was he with the formality of presenting the victorious Chief to the jeddak that he paid no attention to them.

"I bring you, O-Tar, Jeddak of Manator, U-Kal of Manataj," he cried in a loud voice that might be heard by as many as possible, "victor over the Orange in the second of the Jeddak's Games of the four hundred and thirty-third year of O-Tar, and the slave woman Tara and the slave woman Lan-O that you may bestow these, the stakes, upon U-Kal."

As he spoke, a little, wrinkled, old man peered over the rail of the enclosure down upon the three who stood directly behind The Keeper, and strained his weak and watery eyes in an effort to satisfy the curiosity of old age in a matter of no particular import, for what were two slaves and a common warrior from Manataj to any who sat with O-Tar the jeddak?

"U-Kal of Manataj," said O-Tar, "you have deserved the stakes. Seldom have we looked upon more noble swordplay. And you tire of Manataj there be always here in the city of Manator a place for you in The Jeddak's Guard."

While the jeddak was speaking the little, old man, failing clearly to discern the features of the Black Chief, reached into his pocket-pouch and drew forth a pair of thick-lensed spectacles, which he placed upon his nose. For a moment he scrutinized Gahan closely, then he leaped to his feet and addressing O-Tar pointed a shaking finger it Gahan. As he rose Tara of Helium clutched the Black Chief's arm.

"Turan!" she whispered. "It is I-Gos, whom I thought to have slain in the pits of O-Tar. It is I-Gos and he recognizes you and will--"

But what I-Gos would do was already transpiring. In his falsetto voice he fairly screamed: "It is the slave Turan who stole the woman Tara from your throne room, O-Tar. He desecrated the dead chief I-Mal and wears his harness now!"

Instantly all was pandemonium. Warriors drew their swords and leaped to their feet. Gahan's victorious players rushed forward in a body, sweeping The Keeper of the Towers from his feet. Val Dor and Floran threw open the gates beneath the royal enclosure, opening the tunnel that led to the avenue in the city beyond the Towers. Gahan, surrounded by his men, drew Tara and Lan-O into the passageway, and at a rapid pace the party sought to reach the opposite end of the tunnel before their escape could be cut off. They were successful and when they emerged into the city the sun had set and darkness had come, relieved only by an antiquated and ineffective lighting system, which cast but a pale glow over the shadowy streets.

Now it was that Tara of Helium guessed why the Black Chief had drawn out his duel with U-Dor and realized that he might have slain his man at almost any moment he had elected. The whole plan that Gahan had whispered to his players before the game was thoroughly understood. They were to make their way to The Gate of Enemies and there offer their services to U-Thor, the great Jed of Manatos. The fact that most of them were Gatholians and that Gahan could lead rescuers to the pit where A-Kor, the son of U-Thor's wife, was confined, convinced the Jed of Gathol that they would meet with no rebuff at the hands of U-Thor. But even should he refuse them, still were they bound together to go on toward freedom, if necessary cutting their way through the forces of U-Thor at The Gate of Enemies--twenty men against a small army; but of such stuff are the warriors of Barsoom.

They had covered a considerable distance along the almost deserted avenue before signs of pursuit developed and then there came upon them suddenly from behind a dozen warriors mounted on thoats--a detachment, evidently, from The Jeddak's Guard. Instantly the avenue was a pandemonium of clashing blades, cursing warriors, and squealing thoats. In the first onslaught life blood was spilled upon both sides. Two of Gahan's men went down, and upon the enemies' side three riderless thoats attested at least a portion of their casualties.

Gahan was engaged with a fellow who appeared to have been selected to account for him only, since he rode straight for him and sought to cut him down without giving the slightest heed to several who slashed at him as he passed them. The Gatholian, practiced in the art of combating a mounted warrior from the ground,

sought to reach the left side of the fellow's thout a little to the rider's rear, the only position in which he would have any advantage over his antagonist, or rather the position that would most greatly reduce the advantage of the mounted man, and, similarly, the Manatorian strove to thwart his design. And so the guardsman wheeled and turned his vicious, angry mount while Gahan leaped in and out in an effort to reach the coveted vantage point, but always seeking some other opening in his foe's defense.

And while they jockeyed for position a rider swept swiftly past them. As he passed behind Gahan the latter heard a cry of alarm.

"Turan, they have me!" came to his ears in the voice of Tara of Helium.

A quick glance across his shoulder showed him the galloping thoutman in the act of dragging Tara to the withers of the beast, and then, with the fury of a demon, Gahan of Gathol leaped for his own man, dragged him from his mount and as he fell smote his head from his shoulders with a single cut of his keen sword. Scarce had the body touched the pavement when the Gatholian was upon the back of the dead warrior's mount, and galloping swiftly down the avenue after the diminishing figures of Tara and her abductor, the sounds of the fight waning in the distance as he pursued his quarry along the avenue that passes the palace of O-Tar and leads to The Gate of Enemies.

Gahan's mount, carrying but a single rider, gained upon that of the Manatorian, so that as they neared the palace Gahan was scarce a hundred yards behind, and now, to his consternation, he saw the fellow turn into the great entrance-way. For a moment only was he halted by the guards and then he disappeared within. Gahan was almost upon him then, but evidently he had warned the guards, for they leaped out to intercept the Gatholian. But no! the fellow could not have known that he was pursued, since he had not seen Gahan seize a mount, nor would he have thought that pursuit would come so soon. If he had passed then, so could Gahan pass, for did he not wear the trappings of a Manatorian? The Gatholian thought quickly, and stopping his thout called to the guardsmen to let him pass, "In the name of O-Tar!" They hesitated a moment.

"Aside!" cried Gahan. "Must the jeddak's messenger parley for the right to deliver his message?"

"To whom would you deliver it?" asked the padwar of the guard.

"Saw you not him who just entered?" cried Gahan, and without waiting for a reply urged his thout straight past them into the palace, and while they were deliberating what was best to be done, it was too late to do anything--which is not unusual.

Along the marble corridors Gahan guided his thout, and because he had gone that way before, rather than because he knew which way Tara had been taken, he followed the runways and passed through the chambers that led to the throne room of O-Tar. On the second level he met a slave.

"Which way went he who carried the woman before him?" he asked.

The slave pointed toward a nearby runway that led to the third level and Gahan dashed rapidly on in pursuit. At the same moment a thoutman, riding at a furious pace, approached the palace and halted his mount at the gate.

"Saw you aught of a warrior pursuing one who carried a woman before him on his thout?" he shouted to the guard.

"He but just passed in," replied the padwar, "saying that he was O-Tar's messenger."

"He lied," cried the newcomer. "He was Turan, the slave, who stole the woman from the throne room two days since. Arouse the palace! He must be seized, and alive if possible. It is O-Tar's command."

Instantly warriors were dispatched to search for the Gatholian and warn the inmates of the palace to do likewise. Owing to the games there were comparatively few retainers in the great building, but those whom they found were immediately enlisted in the search, so that presently at least fifty warriors were seeking through the countless chambers and corridors of the palace of O-Tar.

As Gahan's thout bore him to the third Level the man glimpsed the hind quarters of another thout disappearing at the turn of a corridor far ahead. Urging his own animal forward he raced swiftly in pursuit and making the turn discovered only an empty corridor ahead. Along this he hurried to discover near its farther end a runway to the fourth level, which he followed upward. Here he saw that he had gained upon his quarry who was just turning through a doorway fifty yards ahead. As Gahan reached the opening he saw that the warrior had dismounted and was dragging Tara toward a small door on the opposite side of the chamber. At the same instant the clank of harness to his rear caused him to cast a glance behind where, along the corridor he had just traversed, he saw three warriors approaching on foot at a run. Leaping from his thout Gahan sprang into the chamber where Tara was struggling to free herself from the grasp of her captor, slammed the door behind him, shot the great bolt into its seat, and drawing his sword crossed the room at a run to engage the Manatorian. The fellow, thus menaced, called aloud to Gahan to halt, at the same time thrusting Tara at arm's length and threatening her heart with the point of his short-sword.

"Stay!" he cried, "or the woman dies, for such is the command of O-Tar, rather than that she again fall into your hands."

Gahan stopped. But a few feet separated him from Tara and her captor, yet he was helpless to aid her. Slowly the warrior backed toward the open doorway behind him, dragging Tara with him. The girl struggled and fought, but the warrior was a powerful man and having seized her by the harness from behind was able to hold her in a position of helplessness.

"Save me, Turan!" she cried. "Let them not drag me to a fate worse than death. Better that I die now while my eyes behold a brave friend than later, fighting alone among enemies in defense of my honor."

He took a step nearer. The warrior made a threatening gesture with his sword close to the soft, smooth skin of the princess, and Gahan halted.

"I cannot, Tara of Helium," he cried. "Think not ill of me that I am weak--that I cannot see you die. Too great is my love for you, daughter of Helium."

The Manatorian warrior, a derisive grin upon his lips, backed steadily away. He had almost reached the doorway when Gahan saw another warrior in the chamber toward which Tara was being borne--a fellow who moved silently, almost stealthily, across the marble floor as he approached Tara's captor from behind. In his right hand he grasped a long-sword.

"Two to one," thought Gahan, and a grim smile touched his lips, for he had no doubt that once they had Tara safely in the adjoining chamber the two would set upon him. If he could not save her, he could at least die for her.

And then, suddenly, Gahan's eyes fastened with amazement upon the figure of the warrior behind the grinning fellow who held Tara and was forcing her to the doorway. He saw the newcomer step almost within arm's reach of the other. He saw him stop, an expression of malevolent hatred upon his features. He saw the great sword swing through the arc of a great circle, gathering swift and terrific momentum from its own weight backed by the brawn of the steel thews that guided it; he saw it pass through the feathered skull of the Manatorian, splitting his sardonic grin in twain, and open him to the middle of his breast bone.

As the dead hand relaxed its grasp upon Tara's wrist the girl leaped forward, without a backward glance, to Gahan's side. His left arm encircled her, nor did she draw away, as with ready sword the Gatholian awaited Fate's next decree. Before them Tara's deliverer was wiping the blood from his sword upon the hair of his victim. He was evidently a Manatorian, his trappings those of the Jeddak's

Guard, and so his act was inexplicable to Gahan and to Tara. Presently he sheathed his sword and approached them.

"When a man chooses to hide his identity behind an assumed name," he said, looking straight into Gahan's eyes, "whatever friend pierces the deception were no friend if he divulged the other's secret."

He paused as though awaiting a reply.

"Your integrity has perceived and your lips voiced an unalterable truth," replied Gahan, whose mind was filled with wonder if the implication could by any possibility be true--that this Manatorian had guessed his identity.

"We are thus agreed," continued the other, "and I may tell you that though I am here known as A-Sor, my real name is Tasor." He paused and watched Gahan's face intently for any sign of the effect of this knowledge and was rewarded with a quick, though guarded expression of recognition.

Tasor! Friend of his youth. The son of that great Gatholian noble who had given his life so gloriously, however futilely, in an attempt to defend Gahan's sire from the daggers of the assassins. Tasor an under-padwar in the guard of O-Tar, Jeddak of Manator! It was inconceivable--and yet it was he; there could be no doubt of it. "Tasor," Gahan repeated aloud. "But it is no Manatorian name." The statement was half interrogatory, for Gahan's curiosity was aroused. He would know how his friend and loyal subject had become a Manatorian. Long years had passed since Tasor had disappeared as mysteriously as the Princess Haja and many other of Gahan's subjects. The Jed of Gathol had long supposed him dead.

"No," replied Tasor, "nor is it a Manatorian name. Come, while I search for a hiding place for you in some forgotten chamber in one of the untenanted portions of the palace, and as we go I will tell you briefly how Tasor the Gatholian became A-Sor the Manatorian.

"It befell that as I rode with a dozen of my warriors along the western border of Gathol searching for zitidars that had strayed from my herds, we were set upon and surrounded by a great company of Manatorians. They overpowered us, though not before half our number was slain and the balance helpless from wounds. And so I was brought a prisoner to Manataj, a distant city of Manator, and there sold into slavery. A woman bought me--a princess of Manataj whose wealth and position were unequaled in the city of her birth. She loved me and when her husband discovered her infatuation she beseeched me to slay him, and when I refused she hired another to do it. Then she married me; but none would have aught to do with her in Manataj, for they suspected her guilty knowledge of her husband's murder. And so we set out from Manataj for Manatos accompanied

by a great caravan bearing all her worldly goods and jewels and precious metals, and on the way she caused the rumor to be spread that she and I had died. Then we came to Manator instead, she taking a new name and I the name A-Sor, that we might not be traced through our names. With her great wealth she bought me a post in The Jeddak's Guard and none knows that I am not a Manatorian, for she is dead. She was beautiful, but she was a devil."

"And you never sought to return to your native city?" asked Gahan.

"Never has the hope been absent from my heart, or my mind empty of a plan," replied Tasor. "I dream of it by day and by night, but always must I return to the same conclusion--that there can be but a single means for escape. I must wait until Fortune favors me with a place in a raiding party to Gathol. Then, once within the boundaries of my own country, they shall see me no more."

"Perhaps your opportunity lies already within your grasp," said Gahan, "has not your fealty to your own Jed been undermined by years of association with the men of Manator." The statement was half challenge.

"And my Jed stood before me now," cried Tasor, "and my avowal could be made without violating his confidence, I should cast my sword at his feet and beg the high privilege of dying for him as my sire died for his sire."

There could be no doubt of his sincerity nor any that he was cognizant of Gahan's identity. The Jed of Gathol smiled. "And if your Jed were here there is little doubt but that he would command you to devote your talents and your prowess to the rescue of the Princess Tara of Helium," he said, meaningly. "And he possessed the knowledge I have gained during my captivity he would say to you, 'Go, Tasor, to the pit where A-kor, son of Haja of Gathol, is confined and set him free and with him arouse the slaves from Gathol and march to The Gate of Enemies and offer your services to U-Thor of Manataj, who is wed to Haja of Gathol, and ask of him in return that he attack the palace of O-Tar and rescue Tara of Helium and when that thing is accomplished that he free the slaves of Gathol and furnish them with the arms and the means to return to their own country.' That, Tasor of Gathol, is what Gahan your Jed would demand of you."

"And that, Turan the slave, is what I shall bend my every effort to accomplish after I have found a safe refuge for Tara of Helium and her panthan," replied Tasor.

Gahan's glance carried to Tasor an intimation of his Jed's gratification and filled him with a chivalrous determination to do the thing required of him, or die, for he considered that he had received from the lips of his beloved ruler a commission that placed upon his shoulders a responsibility that encompassed not alone the

life of Gahan and Tara but the welfare, perhaps the whole future, of Gathol. And so he hastened them onward through the musty corridors of the old palace where the dust of ages lay undisturbed upon the marble tiles. Now and again he tried a door until he found one that was unlocked. Opening it he ushered them into a chamber, heavy with dust. Crumbling silks and furs adorned the walls, with ancient weapons, and great paintings whose colors were toned by age to wondrous softness.

"This be as good as any place," he said. "No one comes here. Never have I been here before, so I know no more of the other chambers than you; but this one, at least, I can find again when I bring you food and drink. O-Mai the Cruel occupied this portion of the palace during his reign, five thousand years before O-Tar. In one of these apartments he was found dead, his face contorted in an expression of fear so horrible that it drove to madness those who looked upon it; yet there was no mark of violence upon him. Since then the quarters of O-Mai have been shunned for the legends have it that the ghosts of Corphals pursue the spirit of the wicked Jeddak nightly through these chambers, shrieking and moaning as they go. But," he added, as though to reassure himself as well as his companions, "such things may not be countenanced by the culture of Gathol or Helium."

Gahan laughed. "And if all who looked upon him were driven mad, who then was there to perform the last rites or prepare the body of the Jeddak for them?"

"There was none," replied Tasor. "Where they found him they left him and there to this very day his mouldering bones lie hid in some forgotten chamber of this forbidden suite."

Tasor left them then assuring them that he would seek the first opportunity to speak with A-Kor, and upon the following day he would bring them food and drink.\*

\* Those who have read John Carter's description of the Green Martians in *A Princess of Mars* will recall that these strange people could exist for considerable periods of time without food or water, and to a lesser degree is the same true of all Martians.

After Tasor had gone Tara turned to Gahan and approaching laid a hand upon his arm. "So swiftly have events transpired since I recognized you beneath your disguise," she said, "that I have had no opportunity to assure you of my gratitude and the high esteem that your valor has won for you in my consideration. Let me now acknowledge my indebtedness; and if promises be not vain from one whose life and liberty are in grave jeopardy, accept my assurance of the great reward that awaits you at the hand of my father in Helium."



"I desire no reward," he replied, "other than the happiness of knowing that the woman I love is happy."

For an instant the eyes of Tara of Helium blazed as she drew herself haughtily to her full height, and then they softened and her attitude relaxed as she shook her head sadly.

"I have it not in my heart to reprimand you, Turan," she said, "however great your fault, for you have been an honorable and a loyal friend to Tara of Helium; but you must not say what my ears must not hear."

"You mean," he asked, "that the ears of a Princess must not listen to words of love from a panthan?"

"It is not that, Turan," she replied; "but rather that I may not in honor listen to words of love from another than him to whom I am betrothed--a fellow countryman, Djor Kantos."

"You mean, Tara of Helium," he cried, "that were it not for that you would--"

"Stop!" she commanded. "You have no right to assume aught else than my lips testify."

"The eyes are oftentimes more eloquent than the lips, Tara," he replied; "and in yours I have read that which is neither hatred nor contempt for Turan the panthan, and my heart tells me that your lips bore false witness when they cried in anger: 'I hate you!'"

"I do not hate you, Turan, nor yet may I love you," said the girl, simply.

"When I broke my way out from the chamber of I-Gos I was indeed upon the verge of believing that you did hate me," he said, "for only hatred, it seemed to me, could account for the fact that you had gone without making an effort to liberate me; but presently both my heart and my judgment told me that Tara of Helium could not have deserted a companion in distress, and though I still am in ignorance of the facts I know that it was beyond your power to aid me."

"It was indeed," said the girl. "Scarce had I-Gos fallen at the bite of my dagger than I heard the approach of warriors. I ran then to hide until they had passed, thinking to return and liberate you; but in seeking to elude the party I had heard I ran full into the arms of another. They questioned me as to your whereabouts, and I told them that you had gone ahead and that I was following you and thus I led them from you."

"I knew," was Gahan's only comment, but his heart was glad with elation, as a lover's must be who has heard from the lips of his divinity an avowal of interest and loyalty, however little tinged by a suggestion of warmer regard it may be. To be abused, even, by the mistress of one's heart is better than to be ignored.

As the two conversed in the ill-lit chamber, the dim bulbs of which were encrusted with the accumulated dust of centuries, a bent and withered figure traversed slowly the gloomy corridors without, his weak and watery eyes peering through thick lenses at the signs of passage written upon the dusty floor.