



# To Balance the Books

A FORGOTTEN SECRET

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THE OLD MAN spoke between sips from the cup filled with a crude peasant wine. "John Carter—*hero* to millions, savior of Barsoom, the man who forged the friendship between red man and Thark—is *vilified* as the master of horror in Zodanga."

I listened with half-an-ear. I knew first hand the truth of the ancient one's story. Zodanga and Helium were once at war. My father, the commander of a 100 man cruiser, had perished above the gates of Helium. He had taken the fatal plunge over the bow wrapped in the ship's colors when the fleet commander surrendered. But before that—before Carter's Tharks and the armies of Helium had destroyed our forces besieging Helium—John Carter had led 150,000 green men into Zodanga. His ferocious warriors had decimated the royal houses. He murdered the Jeddak and his son. Then John Carter and 100,000 of the scourge of the dead sea bottoms had departed in fliers stolen from Zodangan military bases and merchants. They left behind 40,000 undisciplined barbarians to pillage, plunder, burn and destroy our defenseless city.

There were murders and torture and rape. My mother. My sisters. The women slaves in our house. My brother was hung and gutted and lived long enough to see his children bashed head first into the walls of our family home. My children were beheaded and their poor, small skulls stuffed into a booty bag. My wife was abused before me, though

she spit upon them and reviled them so harshly a callous green fist silenced her forever. I had been chained to a column in the courtyard, blinded in one eye, a hand severed, and a knee so smashed that it would never heal to support my weight. I had many reminders of John Carter's *greatness*.

"The green men terrorized the city for five days," the old man continued. "Half the city perished in the initial attack, but those who were left faced death as certain from the Thark looters."

One of the patrons, a merchant from Hastor by the look of his metal, scoffed loudly. "Surely it was valid retribution for the anguish the Zodangan army caused Helium."

The story teller turned a rheumy eye toward the voice. "*A book balancer?* Balance the loss of one million men and nearly one million women and children against an invasion that was conducted in a military manner!"

"But you admit the invasion. The looting of Zodanga was the consequence."

"The spoils of war?" the old man rasped. "Since when are the miseries of women and children 'the spoils of war'? The evil Jasoomian cared not what his barbarians did to Zodanga—his only thought was for that Heliumite slut he destroyed whole civilizations to obtain!"

The man from Hastor rose. He had gone to fat with prosperity, but was still an imposing figure. His hand rested on the hilt of a fancy sword. From out of the darkness another's hand touched his.

"Leave it. He's baiting you. The old man is crazy."

"He called the princess a foul name. He will retract it!"

The old man laughed hideously. "The Tharks called our women that and worse— as they defiled and mutilated and then murdered them! All because John Carter would stop at nothing to possess the prize bitch of Helium."

"If all Zodanga shares your attitude, old man, it is a disappointment the glorious victors did not wipe all trace of Zodanga from the face of Barsoom!"

A moment of silence filled the tavern. Then that cracked and hoarse voice said:

"We are a resilient people, man of Hastor. We are the land of assassins. We are hard to kill individually. We settle personal disputes personally. We do not bring in hordes of green savages to do our killing—all in the name of a royal *whore!*"

The merchant from Hastor would hear no more. He sprang forward to strike the old man, then looked stunned as a projectile from a pistol ruptured his paunch and severed his spine.

"You gave me no chance!" he gasped then died.

"No chance," the old man agreed. "Just as *we* had no chance after John Carter's hordes arrived."

There was silence in the inn for a span of heartbeats, then a rough voice called out, "Hajak's at it again! Come get that carcass out of here!"

The innkeeper stopped at the table where the old man sat. Scowling, he held out his hand. "Give it to me, Hajak."

The one-handed, one-eyed cripple reluctantly passed over a radium pistol. "The smug bastard had it coming."

"Perhaps," the inn keeper replied with heartfelt understanding, "but it's bad for business. Besides," he added, "you're exactly what you accused that poor idiot of being: a book balancer."

I looked up to my brother-in-law and scowled. "After 50 years of settling the score we're only close to covering her *littlest* finger!"

The innkeeper, my best friend, sat down to talk to me, not the grim old man I had become. Eagerly he whispered: "Tomorrow night, Hajak. *It happens tomorrow night!*"

An electric shock passed through what remained of my body. I took a deep breath, then released it slowly.

"The truth, brother? *It really happens?*"

He nodded. "Exactly as you planned it."

"A drink," I said. "I will behave," I promised.

*Why shouldn't I?*

After tomorrow night the first born grandchildren of John Carter would be banth fodder and each of their mothers would bear the mark of my house carved into their soft flesh. That I would most likely not live to see the following dawn mattered little. My family—at long last—would be avenged, and John Carter and his royal bitch would live to endure 800 years of grief!