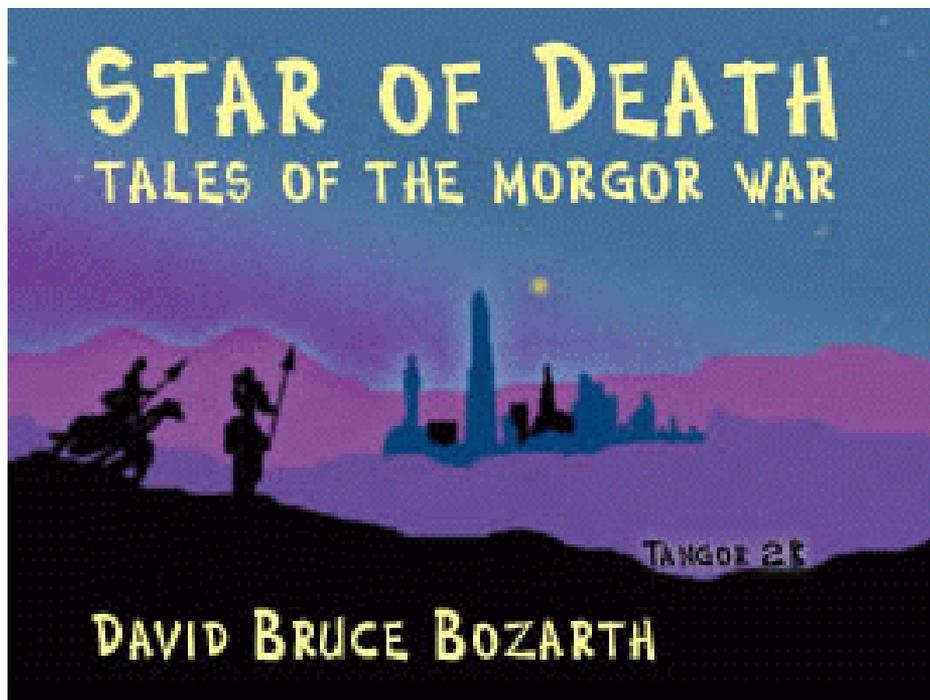


STAR OF DEATH - DAVID BRUCE BOZARTH
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Tales of the Morgor War

STAR OF DEATH

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The wind generated by the swift passage of near-silent thoats racing across the night-shrouded sward of the dead sea bottom was cool and refreshing. Dek Hajin followed the path of his clutch brother Jazak Tul, who led the way south to the last known holding of the northern Warhoons. These young Tharks—warriors in their prime—were greater than a double span of red men in height. Each carried the same message from Tars Tarkas, Jeddak of Thark, which was to be delivered to whoever was the current Jed of the fractious Warhoons of the North.

There was disputed territory between the Tharks and the Warhoons south of Thark held lands well below Polodona¹. A number of Warhoon tribes had recently occupied mantilla groves long considered Tharkian for the last two thousand years. The great Thark of all Tharks, Tars Tarkas, did not know who might be Jed of these intruding tribes—nor did the reigning Jeddak of Warhoon have a clue since the Warhoons themselves were in constant turmoil these days.

A fool's errand, thought Dek Hajin.

Dek Hajin, one of the new Tharks who was raised by his known mother and father at Walulan,

¹ Polodona - The Equator of Barsoom

rather than the community incubator contrary to traditional green man custom, peered at the tall shadow astride the galloping thoot before him with some exasperation. Jazak Tul, an egg of unknown parentage taken in by his parents and then named after the Eldest Thark of green man history, had hatched the year after him. Both were raised by Suji and Tajin Dek and given imbued with the warrior code and Tharkian traditions. Brothers by adoption—and brothers by tribe and training—Dek Hajin and Jazak Tul had enjoyed the Jasoomian family concept which Tars Tarkas decreed for all Tharks in his twenty-fifth year of rule.²

Pride in Family. Pride in Tribe. Pride in Self. And that list of pride had been a lifetime of competition between Dek Hajin and Jazak Tul. It seemed that Jazak Tul always had to be the best, the first, the foremost as the two young Tharks came of age.

Contests of skill and strength as newly-hatched six-limbed infants, and their ascent into manhood and acceptance of tribal responsibility, had pitted Dek Hajin and Jazak Tul against each other—to the betterment of both. These two young Tharks had risen in rank and had been personally recognized by Tars Tarkas for their achievements. Both had brought honor to their parents and the glory of the Walulan Tharks.

Dek Hajin secretly admired his clutch brother's

² Prior to innovations suggested by John Carter, Warlord of Barsoom, green tribes operated on a communal basis, ie. all fertile eggs were incubated and hatched in batch, with members of the tribe taking new hatchlings at random.

ambition and spirit. At the same time he also nursed a closely contained animosity toward Jazak Tul. Though Dek Hajin was the elder in their family it seemed that Jazak Tul was always first in any competition. To always be second best galled Dek Hajin immensely.

Gazing at the multiple shadows cast by the twin moons Cluros and Thuria by the figure of his egg brother, Dek Hajin clamped down upon his riotous anger and spurred his mount to greater speed. Drawing even with Jazak Tul, Dek Hajin voiced a question. "How far?"

Jazak Tul, his ivory tusks gleaming brightly under the light of the moons, turned his dark face to Dek Hajin. "We are almost there," he replied. "We are 350 haads from Walulan and... *What is that?*"

The "what" was so startling that Jazak Tul commanded his thout to stop.

Dek Hajin circled back, his thout breathing hard, until the shoulder of his gigantic mount brushed against that of Jazak Tul's. Both Tharks turned their red irised eyes to the strange star above the horizon. A chill passed down the spine of Dek Hajin.

"The star moves!" Dek Hajin whispered.

"No star," Jazak Tul replied. "A *ship!* A ship like none we have ever seen before."

"That is the city of Narz." Dek Hajin nodded to the tattered silhouette of tumbled and jagged buildings perhaps seven haads³ away to the east of their travel. "The very last of the port cities abandoned

³Haad - 1,949.05 earth feet

when the seas disappeared."

Jazak Tul ignored the history lesson. Barsoom had been dying a million years before his birth. He lived only in the here and now and his attention was fully focused upon the shifting glimmer of light in the heavens.

"That ship is not of Helium or Hastor or Gathol. We should investigate."

"We have a mission, Jazak Tul. The will of Tars Tarkas comes first."

Jazak Tul laughed, brandishing his forty foot spear. "First we are *Tharks*—*no one* invades our territory!"

As swift as a projectile from a radium rifle Jazak Tul raced toward Narz. Dek Hajin fumed for an instant, torn between duty and his brother. "*Phaugh!* I smell trouble. I should let you reap the reward..."

But I cannot! Dek Hajin swiftly rode in pursuit of Jazak Tul's flying thcoat.

Entering the dead city by stealth—as only a Thark may accomplish—Jazak Tul quietly led the way through the tumbled concrete of the outlying buildings of Narz. The pair watched the shimmering light above, which slowly descended until it hovered over the central square.

Jazak Tul dismounted, taking his radium rifle in his third hand. "Wait here. Hold the thcoats."

Angered that once again Jazak Tul's eternal contest put his clutch brother in the lead, Dek Hajin telepathically controlled the thcoats. At the same time he stroked the creatures' necks, he watched Jazak Tul melt from one shadow of crumbled masonry to the next. Dek Hajin watched the strange

airship descend until it landed in the southwest quadrant of the inner city square.

Upon landing the craft lost some of its luminosity. A moment later a hatch opened and eight nightmarish creatures disembarked. These beings were unknown to Dek Hajin—and their appearance was such that he knew immediately they were not from Barsoom. Each was half a green man's height, about that of a red man, but all seemed little more than animated bags of bones!

Morgors!

Dek Hajin inched forward, exerting all of his mental abilities to keep the distraught thoats silent. Morgors—*it must be true!*

The Warlord had warned of these beings from Sasoom⁴ and their intent to invade Barsoom. None of the Thirty One Jeddaks had believed John Carter—none, including Tars Tarkas—and yet, here were Morgors walking the soil of Barsoom!

A wild sorak, hunting smaller prey, bleated as Jazak Tul continued to creep forward. The animal's sharp cry alerted the strangers. Before Dek Hajin could shout a warning to Jazak Tul, his egg brother was fired upon. Jazak Tul, standing tall, returned the strangers' fire, killing two. A hail of weapon fire was returned. Jazak Tul's body jerked and exploded from multiple hits. It was all Dek Hajin could do to restrain himself.

The telepathic link between Dek Hajin and his adopted brother faded. "...*revenge. Kill these...*"

"*I will!*" Dek Hajin instantly replied, but he

⁴Sasoom - Jupiter

knew his childhood friend did not hear the promise.

Raising his rifle Dek Hajin fired, not upon the strangers, but their ship. A half dozen powerful projectiles tore into the fabric of the vehicle from nose to stern. Dek Hajin released control of the thots, which then bolted in panic— and thus drew the strangers' fire.

Moving to a new location Dek Hajin swiftly concealed himself in a pocket of tumbled masonry. He grimly watched the skeletal-like creatures.

The strangers became highly agitated after one entered the ship and returned moments later, gesticulating wildly. In reply, several of the strangers randomly fired upon the buildings and shadows.

Satisfied the ship had been disabled, Dek Hajin, his heart as cold as the snows of Okar,⁵ maintained a quiet vigil.

A zode⁶ of time passed. The guards around the ship changed in number as the creatures attempted repairs to their vessel. When there are only two on guard Dek Hajin moved closer. He lined up both Morgors for a single shot from his rifle. Expending his round, which killed both and added further damage to the ship, Dek Hajin hugged the paving blocks of the square as return fire near his hiding place caused a portion of wall to fall upon him. Dek Hajin's upper left arm was broken as ancient masonry collapsed upon his position.

He did not cry out.

⁵Okar - the frozen northern pole of Barsoom

⁶Zode - approximately 2.5 earth hours

A Thark never admits pain.

Retrieving the dropped radium rifle, Dek Hajin relocated yet again, taking advantage of every shadow as he cradled his injured arm. A moment later Dek Hajin killed another of the gruesome strangers from a distance.

The three remaining Morgors took cover and angrily conversed amongst themselves in the lee of the ship.

Dawn comes, Dek Hajin thought. His shattered arm was painful, but was ignored as there were enemies and blood to take. The muzzle of the deadly radium rifle, cradled in his lower hands, tracked the Morgors in the plaza.

Dek Hajin knew that once sunlight flooded the plaza his coloration would give his position away amongst the grays and beige of the tumbled buildings. *This battle must end in darkness!*

For several moments silence reigned— then, in a sudden rush the remaining strangers attacked. Racing across the square faster than any humans Dek Hajin had yet encountered he managed one shot, blowing the hip from one who fell to the ground with a piercing wail.

Dek Hajin rose to his full height drawing both long and short swords wielded by his lower extremities. He used his swords—and luck!—to kill the others in a frenzied nightmare of glorious combat.

Then silence.

Dawn erupted, filling the square with a harsh light. The young Thark staggered slightly as he approached the one writhing figure on the ancient paving. Dek Hajin contemptuously kicked the

other's dropped weapon away from desperately grasping fingers. Laughing, enjoying the exquisite agony of the stranger, Dek Hajin squatted down, cradling his broken arm.

He howls, Jazak Tul!

Then he sadly remembered the impetuous brother of fierce competition and familial affections few Tharks had ever known was not there to enjoy this grand amusement of death.

The Morgor cursed and screamed, and whined, and screamed again as his thin blood seeped into the arid dust coating the time-eroded pavers in the plaza. Dek Hajin roughly set his arm and bound it tight with a thong from his harness pouch—while extracting all that was possible from the Morgor's tortured demise. Dek Hajin chuckled heartily again and again—until the ugly creature expired.

Disappointed the amusement did not last longer, Dek Hajin sighed. Rising, he looked through the disabled ship, understanding nothing he saw. Dek Hajin beheaded one of the bodies and wrapped the dripping trophy in his cloak.

Mounting a thout that responded to his telepathic call the suddenly weary Thark decided Tars Tarkas—and perhaps Helium itself—might be more interested in what he carried than any response the Jed of the North Warhoons might have regarding a border dispute.

It took only a moment to master the fractious thout. Dek Hajin paused beside his adopted brother's body. Looking down upon the horrible injuries he saw not the reality of death. He had the memory of a fellow who loved life and battle, had been his

best friend and competitor—and who always had to be first.

A sudden smile touched Dek Hajin's dark green face, lifting his thick lips around the twin tusks jutting upward from his lower jaw. The young Thark nodded a terse farewell to the bloodied corpse of his brother as he attempted to hold back a laugh—and failed.

The silence between the towers of the dead city echoed with Tharkian amusement. It was some moments before Dek Hajin regained control of himself.

"You always wanted to be first. Well, brother—my friend—*you are first to be dead!*"

Dek Hajin sobered. The weight of the severed skull resting upon his thigh reminded him of his duties.

"I will carry this little prize to Tars Tarkas and John Carter. The Warlord's warning now has proof. Considering this what matters now the minor squabbles of territory between Thark and Warhoon?"

"And, my friend, if what I fear is the near future, it will not be long before you and I can enjoy this joke *together.*"

The green man abruptly rode north, away from Narz.

And, some time later, the scavenger beetles came forth to feast upon the alien bodies beside the ship that was once a star in the Barsoomian sky.