

The Petal Throne

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A Word from the Typesetter: The following short story is probably the oldest existing written piece of Tékumelani history. This is not the first short story written by Professor Barker about Tékumel. There were several others being published in a small fanzine, but this may be the oldest survivor. The story line was known earlier, but it was finally put to paper towards the end of high school or at the beginning of the professor's college career, making up part of his correspondence with writer and editor Lin Carter. Professor Barker notes that even at this time Tékumel was fairly advanced – all the major nations and important personages were in place. Of course a great deal of additional material and details came later.

*Please note that this is official Tékumel. These events did transpire as set down. Note, however, that this account, like the events in *Man of Gold*, are not recorded anywhere, and are unknown to any on Tékumel. As he says. "It is among my earliest visualizations of Tékumel. Maybe not chronologically the earliest – that was really early, when I was a kid in high school."*

The typesetter would like to express his extreme gratitude to the Professor for sharing this valuable and rare glimpse behind the scenes. Mitlandälidälisajal warán ssíya tlatúsmi! J. Pizzirusso Oct. 18, 2001

The heat enveloped the city with a great white canopy of light, stifling and suffocating, seeping into the empty windows and crawling in dusty waves through the square. The city was dead, its war-mangled bones bare beneath the sun. Its houses were adobe shells, its fountains dry, its bazaar a littered plain beneath a bowl of sky bluer than the summer sea.

Only the men in the square lived, toiling with blistered brown arms in the deadly heat. They were raising a monument to the man who sat with folded arms upon a fallen statue in the shade. Endlessly they worked, and the monument grew higher. Kharsa of Tsamra-Laris nodded grimly and watched from drooping eyes. The copper backs labored, and the sweat dripped gleaming, and ever the pile of white and crimson grew. The white and crimson heads of the defenders.

Soon the pile would overtop the crumpled palace behind it, and the last survivors would surrender. The city would belong to Kharsa. Then there would be plunder and rich spoils and women and wine – and blessed coolness. Kharsa's thin lips drew back in a grin. Here was the secret of conquest; here was the lever which turned enemies into slaves – all embodied in a pile of skulls rising in a square beneath a cerulean blue sky. The grin became wider, like the skulls in the square....

Kharsa sat and dreamed of wines, cool and red and served from ewers of sea-foam jade. The coffers of this city were rich with half a thousand years of trade and commerce. And now they were Kharsa's. His alone.

The pile grew higher . . .

A courtier appeared at the gates of the palace, and Kharsa noted with approval that his face was half again as white as the dusty adobe. A flag of truce drooped from his outstretched hand, motionless and heavy in the airless heat. Kharsa signaled and the workmen clattered down from the grisly pyramid in the plaza.

Within the great hall it was cool and dim. In vain did the heat strive to penetrate the massive walls. Only here and there a beam of sunlight shattered the dimness where Kharsa's catapults had broken the stones of the roof. The light caressed tapestries raveled by the fingers of time, and tore the draperies of darkness from slender statuettes of green bronze. Kharsa's eyes were wet like the eyes of fish, and he licked his thin lips nervously. Indeed, half an empire could he buy with such plunder.

The one who came to meet him was tall and slender, an old man with the face of a boy. For half a moment they stood and surveyed each other, the thin ancient and the stocky conqueror. Then the old man proffered an arm in the northern style of greeting and bowed.

"You have taken my city and laid it waste. My people are heaped like so many stones in the square. What more would you of us?"

"Show me your gold and your women, and I shall consider the terms of surrender fair."

Together they passed from the great hall into still cooler regions, long labyrinths of private quarters, small anterooms ornamented in a style two hundred years past. Kharsa's sharp eyes dwelt on the bronzes, the tapestries, and the gems with the loving glance of a collector. Yet never did his shrewdness leave him, and half his attention was for hidden assassins among the draperies.

Now their path lay beside a screen of jade, carven in a fashion nigh a thousand years gone, and so delicately was it wrought that one could distinguish each separate leaf and bud and flower of the pattern it portrayed. Kharsa halted and peered closely at it, and his reeling mind knew that here lay the price of a province.

"What marvel is this?" he exclaimed. "Not so fast, old one, lest you lead me past this treasure."

"There is nothing there for you, barbarian. The gold for which you ask lies at the end of this passageway."

Yet Kharsa stood and thrust his torch through a carven chink in the screen, fearing lest soldiery be stationed within. Something delicate and translucent, smooth and silken-fine, something like the lip of a marvelous flower met his gaze. He stopped altogether.

"Come now, father of dogs, what lies behind this screen?" His tones were the hissing of serpents, and his heavy blade was quick to his hand. "I think you would deceive me from something of value."

"What lies there may not be tampered with, for it was a gift from the gods unto my ancestors as a sign of their royalty. My treasures and my daughters you have won, but meddle not with the affairs of priests and gods."

"The yammerings of priests are only a din in my ears," Kharsa laughed, "And as for gods, why, I've never encountered a single one. Now let us have a look at this emblem of power."

Strangely did the king look upon Kharsa, but he compressed his lips and said nothing.

Kharsa walked about the screen, his shrewd eyes caressing the lace-like tracery of jade. "How does one come past this screen. I see no door."

"Thus it was placed by the grandfather of my grandfather, and so it is today. There is no entrance."

"Then let us make one. One panel of this screen cannot detract from the value of the rest!" The curved blade flashed up and then down in a silvery arc, and a section of the screen tinkled to the flags in pale green shambles. He strode over the shattered flowers and into the chamber.

Kharsa's breath went out in a long gasp, and the sword hung from numbed fingers as he saw what lay there, for more beautiful was this sight than any dream of power, more heady than the nectars of the gods. The trembling light of the torch danced from a great carven flower, a rose in full bloom, each petal outlined perfectly in the stone. Each veining of the stone corresponded with the actual veining of the flower, and the tints were of the faintest dawn, of the sunsets at sea, of the lips of a maiden just introduced to love. A great carven rose twelve full spans high.

Kharsa went all around it, and his footsteps were silent in very awe of the Flower. Here in front a petal was bent down, and behind it another, and the center of the calyx seemed shaped just to fit the curves of a human body. Suddenly its purpose was clear. It was a Throne!

Reverently Kharsa stepped upon the first petal, then the next, turned, and seated himself in the center of the flower in the spot so carven by the ancient sculptor. This was a Throne fit for a king indeed; from this throne a man felt worthy to rule an empire. A world.

"This shall be my seat of power, and this city my capital!" Kharsa clutched the carven petal-arms convulsively. "Who shall stand against Kharsa, the mighty warrior, when he sits upon this glorious Throne?"

Apprehensively the old man watched him, overcome with awe and fear. "Beware of what you do, rash barbarian, for you tamper with forces far beyond your power! Come away and leave this sacrilege – my city is yours and its treasures await your inspection."

"Inspection? This treasure is the greatest of them all! Indeed, I shall have it moved into the great hall and there shall a feast be held to celebrate my conquests. All the lords of the south shall come, and they will see me resplendent upon this throne!"

No longer was the great hall dim and musty. Half the roof lay open to the summer sky where Kharsa's architects had removed the time-weathered vaulting, and a new gallery of marble reared above the frowning towers and reached for the summer stars. Within the hall wine gurgled noisily from silver urns, and the torches played with the draperies of dancers and slaves alike.

Kharsa sat upon his Petal Throne, set squarely in the center of a polished dais of dove-white marble. White, too, was his costume beneath the thin point of his southern-styled beard. He glanced over the chamber and was well satisfied with what he saw. Here were the great men of half the continent come to pay homage to Kharsa of Tsamra-Laris. There was Daiggon of the rich lands of the southern seas, and here was Maristu of Jannu with a great goblet raised to his saturnine lips, Hagall the Iron-Bearded sat on his right, one arm carelessly around the shoulders of a slave girl. Kharsa grinned and sipped his wine. Now these great lords came to him, instead of he to them.

And all of them coveted the Petal Throne.

Still smiling, he caressed the smooth waxy stamens, which served for arms, and heaved himself upright in order to see over the petals. Now came the hour for entertainment – the entertainment he had specially planned for this evening. Kharsa motioned with a ringed hand, and silently the great room was cleared. At last only twelve of his most distinguished guests remained.

"And now, gentlemen, the feast is finished, and we must discuss the policies of business." His jeweled fingers toyed with a goblet of musky wine. "Sit and drink and let us speak of ways and means of making empires."

"We did not come here for this." Hagall spoke brusquely. "What speech would you have with us concerning empires? We came to a feast, not a council of war."

"Sit, friend, and drink." Kharsa's eyes were sardonic opals in the torchlight. "You will find we have much in common."

Some murmured, and Hagall glared, but nevertheless they sat.

"First a toast. A toast to our future good luck." Kharsa's voice was oiled steel, and his smiling lips shone pale in the light of the rising moon. "A toast, my lords." They drank.

For long eternities Kharsa sat there, watching, seeing the looks of faint surprise change through fear to terror – and then to the immobility of death. He watched the light go out forever from the angry eyes of Hagall, the steel fingers relax upon the goblets. The poison had worked well.

Now the continent was his from Jannu to the river Putuhenu; there were no leaders to stop his armies and oppose his sweeping power. Kharsa sat and dreamed of the treasures that would be his, the pearl cities of Jakalla, the slaves and riches of Mu'ugalavya, the copper-limbed maidens of Jannu. Kharsa dreamed, and perchance he slept.

When he woke, the two moons beamed full upon him from above. He stretched – and stopped. His hand met something smooth and waxy-warm. Hesitatingly, he put out his fingers again, and encountered the same obstruction. Then he realized that no longer could he see the long table and the twelve dead men who sat there. Frightened, he thrust out another hand in front of his face. It met the same barrier.

Wildly now he turned and pressed upon the obstruction with all his power. Did it seem to give? Where was he – what had happened? Mad theories crossed his mind – perhaps the retainers of those he had poisoned had wreaked a fearful revenge upon him and hurled him into a dungeon while he slept. Sweat poured from his brow and his muscles cracked with his efforts. Almost – almost it seemed to surrender to his pressure. Yet it did not. Now he looked up, still feeling the touch of moonlight upon his perspiring face. A serrated rim loomed black against the night-blue sky just out of his reach. Perhaps the conquered people of this city had drugged him and hurled him into some deep well to die. Kharsa began to shout.

Something touched him gently on the shoulder. He squirmed about and found that the barrier had moved in, imperceptibly, unnoticeably closer. Wildly he screamed and howled, throwing his weight this way and that, but always behind the barrier were closing in. The jagged circle of sky grew smaller -- smaller.

Disappeared!

It was crushing him—suffocating him. Kharsa gasped for breath and felt the gentle bonds closing in upon his life, slowly and effortlessly, inexorably . . .

Twelve men sat in a hall, their faces wreathed in moonlight. Their hands clasped goblets of gold and silver, and their robes proclaimed their proud power to the world. Twelve dead men, whose pale dead eyes could not see the delicate filament of red that oozed over the polished floor, whose ears could not hear the weakening screams coming from the marble dais. They did not even know when at last the screams were silent, and the great hall empty in the moonlight, nor when the great flower on the dais stood immobile against the shadowy tapestries. Immobile and closed-up, like all good flowers who fold up with the light of the moon.

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