

Mission to Asno

Sojan Saga

by Michael Moorcock, 1939-

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But before Elric there was Sojan, first in the fanzines and then professionals. Here is the second appearance of Sojan, my first serial fantasy hero, in Tarzan Weekly. I make no apologies for its shortcomings or failures of prescience, etc. I was young, largely oblivious to my good fortune and thoroughly enjoying myself. But not quite as sophisticated as I liked to think...

MOTORS PURRING, CAPTAINS shouting orders, the rustle of the canvas gun-covers being drawn back, gay flags, flashing steel, flying cloaks of many hues; a Hatnorian war-fleet rose rapidly into the sky.

On the deck of the flagship stood a tall, strong figure—that of Sojan, nicknamed „Shieldbearer“, second in command to the great War Lord of Hatnor himself—Nornos Kad.

At his side was a long broadsword, upon his back his round shield; his right hand rested on the butt of his heavy air-pistol—an incredibly powerful weapon. Clad in a jerkin of sky-blue, a divided kilt of deep crimson and boots of dark leather, over his shoulder his leathern war-harness, he was the typical example of a Zylorian mercenary, whose love of bright garb was legendary.

The great war-fleet was destined for Asno—a country far to the north of Hatnor where the king, so the spies told, was raising an army of mercenaries to attack Yundrot—a colony of the Hatnorian Empire.

To stop a major war, Nornos Kad decided to send a mighty fleet to crush the attack before it started. Having other business, he assigned Sojan to take his place and instructed him to completely wipe out any signs of an attack.

Only too pleased at the chance of battle, Sojan had readily assented and was now on his way—the entire fleet under his command.

Soon the fleet was winging its way over Asno—a land of snow and ice, fierce beasts, great tracts of uninhabited ice-fields—uninhabited, that is, by civilized beings.

In another hour it would be over Boitil, the capital city.

„Gunners, take your positions!“ Sojan roared through cupped hands and picking up a megaphone—for there was no radio on Zylor—shouted the same orders, which went from ship to ship until every gunner was seated in his seat, guns loaded and ready for firing.

„Drop two hundred feet!“ Sojan roared again to the steersman, and repeated these orders to the other captains, who in turn shouted them to their own steersmen.

„Prepare hand weapons and fasten down loose fixtures, check gas-bag coverings, every man to position!“ Sojan shouted when the ships had all dropped two hundred feet.

„Slow speed!“ The ships slowed into „second-speed“.⁽¹⁾

Now they were over the outskirts of the city, dropping lower and lower until Sojan thought that they would touch the very towers of Boitil, scanning the squares and flying-fields for signs of the army. Halfway over the city a message was passed to Sojan that a great army camp had been spotted—just on the outskirts of the city. At the same time someone yelled for him to look, and doing so he saw that a fleet almost as large as his own was rising from flying-fields all over the vast city.

„Prepare for battle!“ he shouted.

As one, the safety catches of the guns were pushed off.

„Shoot as you will!“ Sojan ordered.

There was a muffled „pop“ and the hiss of escaping air as the explosive shells of the Hatnorian craft were sent on their mission of destruction. Almost at once the enemy retaliated.

Two Hatnorian ships, one only slightly damaged, the other a mass of roaring yellow and blue flame, dropped earthwards.

For twelve hours the great air-battle was fought, developing into ship-to-ship duels as the opposing sides became mixed. Bit by bit the battle moved southwards until it was over the great ice wastes.

But expert handling of their craft, superior marksmanship and a slightly superior weight of numbers on the part of the Hatnorian fleet was slowly but surely weakening the Asnogian fleet. Sojan, now with a gun mounted on the officer's platform, was taking an active part in the battle. His uncanny ability to hit almost whatever he aimed at was taking great toll. Everywhere ships were hurtling earthwards, crashing in an inferno of flame, or merely bouncing gently when a gas-bag was only slightly punctured.

At last, one by one, the enemy began to flee. The other ships, seeing their companions escape, disengaged and followed them. The hired ships, manned mainly by mercenaries, flew in every direction but that of Asno, while the Asnogian craft turned and headed for their home base. In this direction went the Hatnorian fleet, re-forming to a close formation and turning to No. 1 speed. If they overtook a ship it was ruthlessly shot down; but half a dozen or so were lucky and escaped them. In three hours they were back over Asno and bombing the troop encampment with incendiaries until nothing remained of the great camp but smouldering fabric and twisted steel. Through the south gate of the city streamed forth ragged bands of hired soldiers, bent on escaping while they could. The planned attack on a Hatnorian colony had not even begun. A just reprisal on Nornos Kad's part. A reprisal carried out in full by Sojan. But his business was not finished and, landing on part of an undamaged airfield, Sojan ordered the frightened commanding officer to take him to King Tremorn of Asno.

„I bring a message from my Emperor!“ he cried when he was in the vast chamber which housed the king's court. All around him stood courtiers and servants, worried and anxious to hear his terms. Great pillars supported the roof and brilliant tapestries hung from the ceiling. Murals on the walls depicted scenes of battles, on land, water and in the air.

„Speak your message,“ ordered the king. „What are your terms? I admit that I am beaten! For the present!“ he added.

„For all time, sir, while a member of the Nornos family sits on the throne of Hatnor!“ Sojan replied. „Now, do you wish to hear my terms?“

„Speak!“

„The first is that you acknowledge allegiance to Hatnor and pay a tribute of five hundred young men to train in our armies every tenth year. The second is that you disband any army you still have, save for policing your city. On signs of attack, you will notify the Empire, who will come to your aid. As a member of the Empire you will be subject to all laws and trading terms of the Empire and in times of major war shall enlist two-thirds of your fighting strength in the armies of Hatnor and the remaining third if called upon. You will not make warships or weapons of war, save hand weapons, for your own use, but all warships and arms shall be sent direct to the capital. Do you recognize these terms?“

The king paused and, turning to his major domo, whispered a few words to him. The man nodded.

„Yes, I recognize your terms,“ he sighed.

„Then sign your name and oath to this document and seal it with your royal seal. Upon the breaking of your word, the lapse shall be punished according to the magnitude.“

Sojan handed the paper to a courtier who carried it to the king. The act of bowing to a king is unknown upon the planet Zylor, instead the subject places his right hand upon his heart to signify complete allegiance.

So it was that Sojan achieved his purpose. But more adventures were yet to come before he could return to his palace at Hatnor.



⁽¹⁾ In Zylorian naval terms there are five speeds: „Speed No. 1“ is fastest possible, „Speed No. 2“ is a fifth of this slower, and so on. When a commander gives the order to slow when traveling at Speed No. 1, the ship automatically adjusts to Speed No. 2; if going at No. 2 and told to slow, it changes to No. 3.