



ILLUSTRATION BY CHRIS ARNESON

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BENEATH A SCARLET MOON

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*All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and
all turn to dust again*

— Ecclesiastes, Chapter 3, Verse 20

*When dust has drunk the blood of man, no res-
urrection comes to the dead*

— Aeschylus, the father of Tragedy

THE dying sun set. Twilight arrived. A scarlet moon rose. In splintered ruins, the barbican jutted from a barren landscape. For leagues around the devris stretched a poisoned wilderness. The badlands ran toward horizons of sawtoothed hills below the waxing, gibbous moon.

Arid breezes lifted grit off the waste and flung it into the air. Thermal drafts moaned in the distance like sleeping captives. Among the desiccated stalks and branches of desert scrub night predators slunk.

Across this desolation rode Auric, a marauder. Civilized men called him the dust viper, or worse. Bearded, he was lean, built for endurance, built for the desert. A plain headband held back dreadlocked hair. He wore a light jerkin the color of sandalwood over leather pants tucked into high boots.

He dripped plunder in the manner of barbaric warlords. Beads of topaz, amethyst, and turquoise decorated his beard. He wore a silver nose ring, a match to the silver hoops piercing his ears. Gold glinted at throat and wrists. His hands were garnished with rings once adorning the fingers of opium-princes and merchant-captains.

Yet the sword hanging at his cantle was a plain, wide-bladed falchion. A journeyman's tool. In his hand he gripped the haft of a calvary lance, though he served no army. He was a raider. Raiding was life.

Auric pulled his reins, easing the horse to a halt.

The black mare was an ill-tempered beast. The nomads he purchased her from called her the Hellbitch. She kicked or tried to bite if he grew complacent. The nomads, savvy horse traders, hadn't seemed sorry to lose her. Still, she was fast and did not tire.

Swinging from the saddle, he sheathed the lance in the gravel and examined the remains of a cookfire. Light was visible for a hundred miles across the waste. Yet, he'd seen nothing in the dark these last two nights.

Witchcraft.

A simple spell, a cantrip, no more, but effective enough. So, a conjurer then, the one he chased as they fled to their lair in the far ruins. As expected. He looked closer, eager to see some sign of the boy.

Squatting, he felt the embers. Soot stained the tips of his fingers. Holding them to his nose he rubbed thumb and finger, smelling. The ash held no heat. He was little closer this night than the one before.

He tightened the chase, but not enough.

Sensing motion, he reacted instantly. The Hellbitch's teeth snapped together where his backside had been. He whirled on the horse, scowling. The mare regarded him. Her tail flicked.

Auric made a disgusted grunt and continued inspecting the campsite, moving away from the malicious beast. She nickered gruffly. It sounded mocking.

Out of the twilight rose a howl. A chorus of yips from every direction answered the call. A hunting pack responding to the alpha. Desert wolves. Perhaps. Perhaps something worse.

"Mitra," he muttered.

The invocation could have been a curse, could have been a prayer. It was doubtful even he knew if it was one thing or the other. The gods ruled, but he did not trust them.

Deities created man, but made him weak, then seemed bent on feeding that weakness like freezing men fed a fire. His relationship to their pantheons remained tenuous. He'd seen too much. Done too much.

Devils now...*devils* he understood.

He discovered a glyph in the dust.

The charm was drawn no bigger than his palm. Another small magic. Frowning, he traced the shape with a finger, trying to discern if it was older than the fire. His skin tingled as the cuneiform etching released its curse.

A long black centipede burst from the dust, striking Auric's hand as he snatched it away. Moaning through clenched teeth he staggered. The bug scurried away. His hand burned. He well understood this searing kiss meant death.

Dizzy, he went to his knees, shivering as sweat drenched him. Irrational giddiness forced manic laughter from his lips. His jaw stiffened. Grasping his wrist he squeezed, trying to slow the blood flowing back toward his body, toward his heart. This was an act of desperation.

Death would come, he knew, but not for a while. He was strong, and well used to suffering. He calculated he had until dawn before collapsing. After this the end would arrive quickly. His mortality was as inevitable as the wind. As inevitable as the dust.

Struggling to his feet, he looked south. The stone fist of the barbican stood silhouetted in the scarlet sheen of the indifferent moon. He might reach it yet. He called to the Hellbitch.

The mare snorted, uneasy.

She quivered on stiffened legs, baring her teeth in a grimace. He staggered to her. Unconsciously, he reached for his sword. It was a futile effort. His sword hand was already swollen beyond use. The falchion hung from his saddle, how had he forgotten?

What spooked the mare? Wolves, or an adder maybe? A hill cat? Something worse? The desert was tainted by sorcerous curses. *Something worse* was a real fear. Grasping the lance with his good hand, he leaned against it, panting with the effort.

"Easy."

His voice croaked harshly, hardly soothing. The Hellbitch tossed her head and whinnied in distrust. Her eyes rolled, showing white. If she ran off he was dead.

I'll be dead sooner, he silently corrected. *Because, by Mitra's crotch, I am dead anyway.*

"Easy!"

He lunged for the reins.

Catching hold, he held tight as the mare reared in protest. Jerked from his feet, he fell to the ground. Blades of agony knifed through his hand. The hard earth clubbed his breath from his lungs as the sky spun.

Free, the Hellbitch reared once more, hooves gleaming in the red light of the moon. Auric rolled. Her hooves struck where his head had rested and grit peppered his face. He rolled again, coming to all fours.

Neighing, the mare lashed out and a glancing blow caught his chest. The impact flung him.

Hooves drumming the ground, the mare fled. She was nothing if not fleet, and in a heartbeat all that remained of her was the fading sound of her gallop. By tomorrow evening she'd likely reappear at the oasis camp he purchased her from. He wondered how many times the horse traders had played this trick.

How the bastards will laugh, he thought.

He smiled. It was a pretty good joke.

Auric knew only the desert. He'd taken a nomad wife in the old way, by raiding. She bore him a son who'd also known nothing but the desert, like Auric's father, and his father's father. Dying in the desert didn't surprise him. Death didn't surprise him.

The boy still needed him.

Dust choking his throat, he gasped, exhausted. His arm burned with thorns of pain. His chest ached. The back of his head was matted with blood from where he'd struck sharp rocks.

If you are a warrior then stand, man.

His eyes found the red moon. Stark against dry oceans of scarlet dust, black mountains turned the lunar sphere to a skull. This made sense.

Death filled his thoughts.

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AURIC shivered. Venom cooked his veins. Bile dripped from his mouth. His knotted joints ached. Vision blurring, he saw as through dirt-smeared glass. His breath made high pitched wheezes. Throat tightening, his lungs itched in his chest.

Near delirium, he called to the boy. In a moment of clarity he discovered he was crawling. He had no idea for how long. The

fugue returned. Mind elsewhere, he continued dragging himself over the shale and gravel. Later, as the moon reached its zenith, his awareness returned.

The sky was cloudless, offering no protection from the dying sun during the day, but also trapping none of its heat once it set. Now he found himself gripped by bitter chill. The moisture of his breath formed hoarfrost in his beard.

Clip-clop, clip-clop

A rider approached.

Emerging from darkness the noise reverberated, directionless. He tried concentrating. An instinct to stubbornness, bred through generations, pulled his hand to his knife. Fighting the venom's deadly lethargy, he unsheathed the blade.

He'd slit throats with it, honed its edge to take scalps as trophies. Having never given mercy, he expected none.

Clip-clop, clip-clop

The staccato repetition drubbed louder as the rider neared. Auric lifted his head, tight sinews stretched into cables beneath his clenched jaw. He brought the knife up. His hand trembled.

He was too weak to fight. Death was inevitable. Surrender unthinkable.

The woman was gone now, long swallowed by the desert, but there was the boy. If he didn't struggle to his last then he was failing the boy. He couldn't brook the thought.

Darkness took form.

An outline darker than night appeared, souring his stomach. The silhouette was massive; surely an armored warrior on a big horse, both black as ink. Black as witchcraft. His knuckles whitened on the knife hilt.

The rider advanced, approaching as inexorably as the rising of the skullish moon. Auric grinned as the figure loomed, impossibly tall. The shape formed from the night.

Auric gaped. He couldn't comprehend the sight. It was myth.

Clip-clop, clip-clop

The sound of hoof striking gravel swelled loud as thunder in desert canyons. Its crash shook the earth. What came was many things. It was a legend made real. It was a children's fright. A grandfather's story.

It was not a rider and mount.

The creature halted before Auric. Onyx hooves filled his eyes, flowing into colossal forelocks. He flinched backward, feebly raising the knife. Sweat beaded his pale skin.

The body rose in columns of muscle under pitchblack hide. The transformation from equine to demi-human began at the withers where the two forms merged seamlessly. The human torso had skin of near purple ebony.

A centaur, and a female.

Muscles stood etched like living obsidian. From the back great thews swept in thick wings to either side of a sinewy chest. Framed by a warrior's arms, an ankh of gleaming electrum hung between large curves of feminine cleavage. She was primordial.

Mute, he studied the savage beauty illuminating her face. Raven tresses trailed to the coarser hair of her mane. Pitiless eyes gleamed between prominent cheekbones.