

Howard Robert Ervin

A Witch Shall Be Born



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1 The Blood-Red Crescent

Taramis, queen of Khauran, awakened from a dream-haunted slumber to a silence that seemed more like the stillness of nighted catacombs than the normal quiet of a sleeping place. She lay staring into the darkness, wondering why the candles in their golden candelabra had gone out. A flecking of stars marked a gold-barred casement that lent no illumination to the interior of the chamber. But as Taramis lay there, she became aware of a spot of radiance glowing in the darkness before her. She watched, puzzled. It grew and its intensity deepened as it expanded, a widening disk of lurid light hovering against the dark velvet hangings of the opposite wall. Taramis caught her breath, starting up to a sitting position. A dark object was visible in that circle of light — *a human head*.

In a sudden panic the queen opened her lips to cry out for her maids; then she checked herself. The glow was more lurid, the head more vividly limned. It was a woman's head, small, delicately molded, superbly poised, with a high-piled mass of lustrous black hair. The face grew distinct as she stared — and it was the sight of this face which froze the cry in Taramis's throat. The features were her own! She might have been looking into a mirror which subtly altered her reflection, lending it a tigerish gleam of eye, a vindictive curl of lip.

'Ishtar!' gasped Taramis. 'I am bewitched!'

Appallingly, the apparition spoke, and its voice was like honeyed venom.

'Bewitched? No, sweet sister! Here is no sorcery.'

'Sister?' stammered the bewildered girl. 'I have no sister.'

'You never had a sister?' came the sweet, poisonously mocking voice. 'Never a twin sister whose flesh was as soft as yours to caress or hurt?'

'Why, once I had a sister,' answered Taramis, still convinced that she was in the grip of some sort of nightmare. 'But she died.'

The beautiful face in the disk was convulsed with the aspect of a fury; so hellish became its expression that Taramis, cowering back, half expected to see snaky locks writhe hissing about the ivory brow.

'You lie!' The accusation was spat from between the snarling red lips. 'She did not die! Fool! Oh, enough of this mummery! Look — and let your sight be blasted!'

Light ran suddenly along the hangings like flaming serpents, and incredibly the candles in the golden sticks flared up again. Taramis crouched on her velvet couch, her lithe legs flexed beneath her, staring wide-eyed at the pantherish figure which posed mockingly before her. It was as if she gazed upon another Taramis, identical with herself in every contour of feature and limb, yet animated by an alien and evil personality. The face of this stranger waif reflected the opposite of every characteristic the countenance of the queen denoted. Lust and mystery sparkled in her scintillant eyes, cruelty lurked in the curl of her full red lips. Each movement of her supple body was subtly suggestive. Her coiffure imitated that of the queen's, on her feet were gilded sandals such as Taramis wore in her boudoir. The sleeveless, low-necked silk tunic, girdled at the waist with a cloth-of-gold cincture, was a duplicate of the queen's night-garment.

'Who are you?' gasped Taramis, an icy chill she could not explain creeping along her spine. 'Explain your presence before I call my ladies-in-waiting to summon the guard!'

'Scream until the roof beams crack,' callously answered the stranger. 'Your sluts will not wake till dawn, though the palace spring into flames about them. Your guardsmen will not hear your squeals; they have been sent out of this wing of the palace.'

'What!' exclaimed Taramis, stiffening with outraged majesty. 'Who dared give my guardsmen such a command?'

'I did, sweet sister,' sneered the other girl. 'A little while ago, before I entered. They thought it was their darling adored queen. Ha! How beautifully I acted the part! With what imperious dignity, softened by womanly sweetness, did I address the great louts who knelt in their armor and plumed helmets!'

Taramis felt as if a stifling net of bewilderment were being drawn about her.

'Who are you?' she cried desperately. 'What madness is this? Why do you come here?'

'Who am I?' There was the spite of a she-cobra's hiss in the soft response. The girl stepped to the edge of the couch, grasped the queen's white shoulders with fierce fingers, and bent to glare full into the startled eyes of Taramis. And under the spell of that hypnotic glare, the queen forgot to resent the unprecedented outrage of violent hands laid on regal flesh.

'Fool!' gritted the girl between her teeth. 'Can you ask? Can you wonder? I am Salome!'

'Salome!' Taramis breathed the word, and the hairs prickled on her scalp as she realized the incredible, numbing truth of the statement. 'I thought you died within the hour of your birth,' she said feebly.

'So thought many,' answered the woman who called herself Salome. 'They carried me into the desert to die, damn them! I, a mewling, puling babe whose life was so young it was scarcely the flicker of a candle. And do you know why they bore me forth to die?'

'I – I have heard the story – ' faltered Taramis.

Salome laughed fiercely, and slapped her bosom. The low-necked tunic left the upper parts of her firm breasts bare, and between them there shone a curious mark – a crescent, red as blood.

'The mark of the witch!' cried Taramis, recoiling.

'Aye!' Salome's laughter was dagger-edged with hate. 'The curse of the kings of Khauran! Aye, they tell the tale in the market-places, with wagging beards and rolling eyes, the pious fools! They tell how the first queen of our line had traffic with a fiend of darkness and bore him a daughter who lives in foul legendry to this day. And thereafter in each century a girl baby was born into the Askhaurian dynasty, with a scarlet half-moon between her breasts, that signified her destiny.

'"Every century a witch shall be born." So ran the ancient curse. And so it has come to pass. Some were slain at birth, as they sought to slay me. Some walked the earth as witches, proud daughters of Khauran, with the moon of hell burning upon their ivory bosoms. Each was named Salome. I too am Salome. It was always Salome, the witch. It will always be Salome, the witch, even when the mountains of ice have roared down from the pole and ground the civilizations to ruin, and a new world has risen from the ashes and dust – even then there shall be Salomes to walk the earth, to trap men's hearts by their sorcery, to dance before the kings of the world, to see the heads of the wise men fall at their pleasure.'

'But – but you – ' stammered Taramis.

'I?' The scintillant eyes burned like dark fires of mystery. 'They carried me into the desert far from the city, and laid me naked on the hot sand, under the flaming sun. And then they rode away and left me for the jackals and the vultures and the desert wolves.

'But the life in me was stronger than the life in common folk, for it partakes of the essence of the forces that seethe in the black gulfs beyond mortal ken. The hours passed, and the sun slashed down like the molten flames of hell, but I did not die – aye, something of that torment I remember, faintly and far away, as one remembers a dim, formless dream. Then there were camels, and yellow-skinned men who wore silk robes and spoke in a weird tongue. Strayed from the caravan road, they passed close by, and their leader saw me, and recognized the scarlet crescent on my bosom. He took me up and gave me life.

'He was a magician from far Khitai, returning to his native kingdom after a journey to Stygia. He took me with him to purple-towering Paikang, its minarets rising amid the vine-festooned jungles

of bamboo, and there I grew to womanhood under his teaching. Age had steeped him deep in black wisdom, not weakened his powers of evil. Many things he taught me –'

She paused, smiling enigmatically, with wicked mystery gleaming in her dark eyes. Then she tossed her head.

'He drove me from him at last, saying that I was but a common witch in spite of his teachings, and not fit to command the mighty sorcery he would have taught me. He would have made me queen of the world and ruled the nations through me, he said, but I was only a harlot of darkness. But what of it? I could never endure to seclude myself in a golden tower, and spend the long hours staring into a crystal globe, mumbling over incantations written on serpent's skin in the blood of virgins, poring over musty volumes in forgotten languages.

'He said I was but an earthly sprite, knowing naught of the deeper gulfs of cosmic sorcery. Well, this world contains all I desire – power, and pomp, and glittering pageantry, handsome men and soft women for my paramours and my slaves. He had told me who I was, of the curse and my heritage. I have returned to take that to which I have as much right as you. Now it is mine by right of possession.'

'What do you mean?' Taramis sprang up and faced her sister, stung out of her bewilderment and fright. 'Do you imagine that by drugging a few of my maids and tricking a few of my guardsmen you have established a claim to the throne of Khauran? Do not forget that I am Queen of Khauran! I shall give you a place of honor, as my sister, but –'

Salome laughed hatefully.

'How generous of you, dear, sweet sister! But before you begin putting me in my place – perhaps you will tell me whose soldiers camp in the plain outside the city walls?'

'They are the Shemitish mercenaries of Constantius, the Kothic *voivode* of the Free Companies.'

'And what do they in Khauran?' cooed Salome.

Taramis felt that she was being subtly mocked, but she answered with an assumption of dignity which she scarcely felt.

'Constantius asked permission to pass along the borders of Khauran on his way to Turan. He himself is hostage for their good behavior as long as they are within my domains.'

'And Constantius,' pursued Salome. 'Did he not ask your hand today?'

Taramis shot her a clouded glance of suspicion.

'How did you know that?'

An insolent shrug of the slim naked shoulders was the only reply.

'You refused, dear sister?'

'Certainly I refused!' exclaimed Taramis angrily. 'Do you, an Askhaurian princess yourself, suppose that the Queen of Khauran could treat such a proposal with anything but disdain? Wed a bloody-handed adventurer, a man exiled from his own kingdom because of his crimes, and the leader of organized plunderers and hired murderers?'

'I should never have allowed him to bring his black-bearded slayers into Khauran. But he is virtually a prisoner in the south tower, guarded by my soldiers. Tomorrow I shall bid him order his troops to leave the kingdom. He himself shall be kept captive until they are over the border. Meantime, my soldiers man the walls of the city, and I have warned him that he will answer for any outrages perpetrated on the villagers or shepherds by his mercenaries.'

'He is confined in the south tower?' asked Salome.

'That is what I said. Why do you ask?'

For answer Salome clapped her hands, and lifting her voice, with a gurgle of cruel mirth in it, called: 'The queen grants you an audience, Falcon!'

A gold-arabesqued door opened and a tall figure entered the chamber, at the sight of which Taramis cried out in amazement and anger.

'Constantius! You dare enter my chamber!'

'As you see, Your Majesty!' He bent his dark, hawk-like head in mock humility.

Constantius, whom men called Falcon, was tall, broad-shouldered, slim-waisted, lithe and strong as pliant steel. He was handsome in an aquiline, ruthless way. His face was burnt dark by the sun, and his hair, which grew far back from his high, narrow forehead, was black as a raven. His dark eyes were penetrating and alert, the hardness of his thin lips not softened by his thin black mustache. His boots were of Kordavan leather, his hose and doublet of plain, dark silk, tarnished with the wear of the camps and the stains of armor rust.

Twisting his mustache, he let his gaze travel up and down the shrinking queen with an effrontery that made her wince.

'By Ishtar, Taramis,' he said silkily, 'I find you more alluring in your night-tunic than in your queenly robes. Truly, this is an auspicious night!'

Fear grew in the queen's dark eyes. She was no fool; she knew that Constantius would never dare this outrage unless he was sure of himself.

'You are mad!' she said. 'If I am in your power in this chamber, you are no less in the power of my subjects, who will rend you to pieces if you touch me. Go at once, if you would live.'

Both laughed mockingly, and Salome made an impatient gesture.

'Enough of this farce; let us on to the next act in the comedy. Listen, dear sister: it was I who sent Constantius here. When I decided to take the throne of Khauran, I cast about for a man to aid me, and chose the Falcon, because of his utter lack of all characteristics men call good.'

'I am overwhelmed, princess,' murmured Constantius sardonically, with a profound bow.

'I sent him to Khauran, and, once his men were camped in the plain outside, and he was in the palace, I entered the city by that small gate in the west wall – the fools guarding it thought it was you returning from some nocturnal adventure –'

'You hell-cat!' Taramis's cheeks flamed and her resentment got the better of her regal reserve. Salome smiled hardly.

'They were properly surprised and shocked, but admitted me without question. I entered the palace the same way, and gave the order to the surprised guards that sent them marching away, as well as the men who guarded Constantius in the south tower. Then I came here, attending to the ladies-in-waiting on the way.'

Taramis's fingers clenched and she paled.

'Well, what next?' she asked in a shaky voice.

'Listen!' Salome inclined her head. Faintly through the casement there came the clank of marching men in armor; gruff voices shouted in an alien tongue, and cries of alarm mingled with the shouts.

'The people awaken and grow fearful,' said Constantius sardonically. 'You had better go and reassure them, Salome!'

'Call me Taramis,' answered Salome. 'We must become accustomed to it.'

'What have you done?' cried Taramis. 'What have you done?'

'I have gone to the gates and ordered the soldiers to open them,' answered Salome. 'They were astounded, but they obeyed. That is the Falcon's army you hear, marching into the city.'

'You devil!' cried Taramis. 'You have betrayed my people, in my guise! You have made me seem a traitor! Oh, I shall go to them –'

With a cruel laugh Salome caught her wrist and jerked her back. The magnificent suppleness of the queen was helpless against the vindictive strength that steeled Salome's slender limbs.

'You know how to reach the dungeons from the palace, Constantius?' said the witch-girl. 'Good. Take this spitfire and lock her into the strongest cell. The jailers are all sound in drugged sleep. I saw to that. Send a man to cut their throats before they can awaken. None must ever know what has occurred tonight. Thenceforward I am Taramis, and Taramis is a nameless prisoner in an unknown dungeon.'

Constantius smiled with a glint of strong white teeth under his thin mustache.

'Very good; but you would not deny me a little – ah – amusement first?'

'Not I! Tame the scornful hussy as you will.' With a wicked laugh Salome flung her sister into the Kothian's arms, and turned away through the door that opened into the outer corridor.

Fright widened Taramis's lovely eyes, her supple figure rigid and straining against Constantius's embrace. She forgot the men marching in the streets, forgot the outrage to her queenship, in the face of the menace to her womanhood. She forgot all sensations but terror and shame as she faced the complete cynicism of Constantius's burning, mocking eyes, felt his hard arms crushing her writhing body.

Salome, hurrying along the corridor outside, smiled spitefully as a scream of despair and agony rang shuddering through the palace.

2 The Tree of Death

The young soldier's hose and shirt were smeared with dried blood, wet with sweat and gray with dust. Blood oozed from the deep gash in his thigh, from the cuts on his breast and shoulder. Perspiration glistened on his livid face and his fingers were knotted in the cover of the divan on which he lay. Yet his words reflected mental suffering that outweighed physical pain.

'She must be mad!' he repeated again and again, like one still stunned by some monstrous and incredible happening. 'It's like a nightmare! Taramis, whom all Khauran loves, betraying her people to that devil from Koth! Oh, Ishtar, why was I not slain? Better die than live to see our queen turn traitor and harlot!'

'Lie still, Valerius,' begged the girl who was washing and bandaging his wounds with trembling hands. 'Oh, please lie still, darling! You will make your wounds worse. I dared not summon a leech –'

'No,' muttered the wounded youth. 'Constantius's blue-bearded devils will be searching the quarters for wounded Khaurani; they'll hang every man who has wounds to show he fought against them. Oh, Taramis, how could you betray the people who worshipped you?' In his fierce agony he writhed, weeping in rage and shame, and the terrified girl caught him in her arms, straining his tossing head against her bosom, imploring him to be quiet.

'Better death than the black shame that has come upon Khauran this day,' he groaned. 'Did you see it, Ivga?'

'No, Valerius.' Her soft, nimble fingers were again at work, gently cleansing and closing the gaping edges of his raw wounds. 'I was awakened by the noise of fighting in the streets – I looked out a casement and saw the Shemites cutting down people; then presently I heard you calling me faintly from the alley door.'

'I had reached the limits of my strength,' he muttered. 'I fell in the alley and could not rise. I knew they'd find me soon if I lay there – I killed three of the blue-bearded beasts, by Ishtar! They'll never swagger through Khauran's streets, by the gods! The fiends are tearing their hearts in hell!'

The trembling girl crooned soothingly to him, as to a wounded child, and closed his panting lips with her own cool sweet mouth. But the fire that raged in his soul would not allow him to lie silent.

'I was not on the wall when the Shemites entered,' he burst out. 'I was asleep in the barracks, with the others not on duty. It was just before dawn when our captain entered, and his face was pale under his helmet. "The Shemites are in the city," he said. "The queen came to the southern gate and gave orders that they should be admitted. She made the men come down from the walls, where they've been on guard since Constantius entered the kingdom. I don't understand it, and neither does anyone else, but I heard her give the order, and we obeyed as we always do. We are ordered to assemble in the square before the palace. Form ranks outside the barracks and march – leave your arms and armor here. Ishtar knows what this means, but it is the queen's order."

'Well, when we came to the square the Shemites were drawn up on foot opposite the palace, ten thousand of the blue-bearded devils, fully armed, and people's heads were thrust out of every window and door on the square. The streets leading into the square were thronged by bewildered folk. Taramis was standing on the steps of the palace, alone except for Constantius, who stood stroking his mustache like a great lean cat who has just devoured a sparrow. But fifty Shemites with bows in their hands were ranged below them.

'That's where the queen's guard should have been, but they were drawn up at the foot of the palace stair, as puzzled as we, though they had come fully armed, in spite of the queen's order.

'Taramis spoke to us then, and told us that she had reconsidered the proposal made her by Constantius – why, only yesterday she threw it in his teeth in open court – and that she had decided to make him her royal consort. She did not explain why she had brought the Shemites into the city so treacherously. But she said that, as Constantius had control of a body of professional fighting-men,

the army of Khauran would no longer be needed, and therefore she disbanded it, and ordered us to go quietly to our homes.

'Why, obedience to our queen is second nature to us, but we were struck dumb and found no word to answer. We broke ranks almost before we knew what we were doing, like men in a daze.

'But when the palace guard was ordered to disarm likewise and disband, the captain of the guard, Conan, interrupted. Men said he was off duty the night before, and drunk. But he was wide awake now. He shouted to the guardsmen to stand as they were until they received an order from him – and such is his dominance of his men, that they obeyed in spite of the queen. He strode up to the palace steps and glared at Taramis – and then he roared: "'This is not the queen! This isn't Taramis! It's some devil in masquerade!'"

'Then hell was to pay! I don't know just what happened. I think a Shemite struck Conan, and Conan killed him. The next instant the square was a battleground. The Shemites fell on the guardsmen, and their spears and arrows struck down many soldiers who had already disbanded.

'Some of us grabbed up such weapons as we could and fought back. We hardly knew what we were fighting for, but it was against Constantius and his devils – not against Taramis, I swear it! Constantius shouted to cut the traitors down. We were not traitors!' Despair and bewilderment shook his voice. The girl murmured pityingly, not understanding it all, but aching in sympathy with her lover's suffering.

'The people did not know which side to take. It was a madhouse of confusion and bewilderment. We who fought didn't have a chance, in no formation, without armor and only half armed. The guards were fully armed and drawn up in a square, but there were only five hundred of them. They took a heavy toll before they were cut down, but there could be only one conclusion to such a battle. And while her people were being slaughtered before her, Taramis stood on the palace steps, with Constantius's arm about her waist, and laughed like a heartless, beautiful fiend! Gods, it's all mad – mad!

'I never saw a man fight as Conan fought. He put his back to the courtyard wall, and before they overpowered him the dead men were strewn in heaps thigh-deep about him. But at last they dragged him down, a hundred against one. When I saw him fall I dragged myself away feeling as if the world had burst under my very fingers. I heard Constantius call to his dogs to take the captain alive – stroking his mustache, with that hateful smile on his lips!'

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