

Robert E. Howard



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By Robert E. Howard

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 mummary! 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!'