

The Golden City

Barbarians of the Red Planet

by Mark Slade, 1939–

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There have been tall tales told about my exploits with the fair-haired maiden Tamara the wild. I never lay claim of truth or dispel any of them, but I do lay claim that they never bore. I am J'mor, and I am a man of the dark spells. I learnt them from my father, who learnt them from his father. We are not the scum the rest of Mars say we are. I am from the house of Decca, and yes, they did birth us from a vat of Lifeblood. But I am not as evil as the rest of the house. The Decca house that swore vengeance upon the Kalla House in the west of Golden City.

You see, as the world does not know, my talents of the dark spell are limited. My desire to drink the blood of my fellow house brothers and sisters is the reason I am no longer welcomed there. It all started innocently enough, feeding on servant girls. Gradually, my taste for them grew beyond the blue blood and I formed a habit for the green blood.

Ahh... yes, it is wonderful to drink the blood of those that were hatched from the same latex womb as you.

I was placed on trial. Sentenced to exile.

I have been in touch with my dark eyed sister, Lenore. She is a full blooded Necromancer, and I long to be with her, not just as a brother, but as husband, too. Her powers lie not only in her memory of the darkspells, but in spirits of the red men which she drinks every night. In order for us to join in such a manner the laws forbid, I am to steal the Crystal Necklace of Shera, the all-powerful goddess of the Golden City, who watches over all of us.

Which is why I find myself in the Golden City of Zygol.

I have learned the craft of thievery. I have discovered that I am very good at this, having ridden with the Marauders of the canyons and travelled the North desert. These Marauders are a cutthroat group who never remove their bandages to reveal their true identity. For if they are found out, they are bled to death by the racks that hold spikes, and the crown of thorns is given in sacrifice to Shera.

Here in the Golden City, an enclosed city of rock walls and a sea of salt pebbles that melt flesh, are men and women who barely reached the zenith of their barbarism. The great dialogue of theology and philosophy of life and death is merely grunts. Anyone can enter the city. No one can exit her, unless you have mastered the power of transgressive winds, which I have. I come and go as I please.

I am in one of a thousand taverns that are in this city. I overhear a drunkard brag he had knowledge of the Crystal Necklace's whereabouts. It was near closing time, so only a few customers were left, maybe five at the most, as well as a barmaid and the tavern owner. I was in a corner, enjoying a glass of rainwine. He was slumped over the table, slurring every word spoken. A friend of his in a cloak, sat across from him, barely said a word, but when prompted, it was only in whispers.

"I know the object... of course," the drunkard said, waved his hand. "It will cost you two flank coins to hear of its whereabouts."

The stranger in the cloak groaned. A slim hand reached inside a pocket on the cloak, produced two dried-out animal hide coins. The coins were slid to the drunkard, who picked them up and smelled them. "Ahh... these were just created last year... last year's currency is only carried by military. You must be a guardsman for the Imperial army of the city."

"Only a fool assumes and acts on such trifling information," the stranger whispered. "Could I not have worked in the kitchen of the castle and washed floors?"

The drunkard laughed, then belched. "Only women wash floors. No respectable man would ever work in a kitchen... unless he also wears silks and dons a ribbon in his hair."

"Just tell me where the Crystal Necklace is, you shit-pig," the stranger demanded.

"I could just lop off your nose and have it for supper." The drunkard tried to move, but just fell over the table, rested his head. "But I'm too tired."

"Where is it? I have already paid you," the stranger said.

"If I wasn't too tired, I would... peel your skin... on the western wall..." His head began to swivel as if it were just on a stick in the winds of the mightiest Gods. "I feel like I can sleep for a thousand years..."

The stranger took hold of what little hair the drunkard had and shook him violently. "Wake up, shit-pig! Where is the Crystal Necklace?"

"On the western wall... there is a tower... the tower appears only for an hour between the rising sun and the setting moon. When it appears, a blue light surrounds it... In order to get in... you have to utter the words... the words... the words..." The drunkard passed out. The stranger pounded the table with their hands and cursed.

At that moment, the tavern door flew open and its doorway populated by ten soldiers of the Imperial army.

Scum. Nothing but tormentors of the weak and mindless. They act upon orders from the conjoined twin brothers, Prince B'jold and Prince G'mal. Tyrants who have seized control of the city government as their mother, Queen Nayer, lies on her death bed.

"You!" the imperial captain screamed as he broke down the door to the tavern. He unsheathed his long, curved blade. The rest of his men had their weapons in hand, axe, ball and chain with spike upon it, and staff with a blade on one end. "You are nothing but a common thief, you dog!"

Of course as soon as the stranger rose from the table, I ran to shield myself from harm. The stranger had an unusual weapon of choice. It was two flat blades fashioned to an axe handle on both sides. The stranger produced these from a pocket sheath that rested on the left side of revealing chainmail that looked rather suspect. Only garb like this is worn is by a Bohido. A Bohido makes a living by the sword. They come from a class of warrior that runs rogue without a master unless an amethyst appears on their forehead. Then, of course they have a master who is in the Senate. Another telling sign these days is if the Bohido is wanted by the Imperial army. The Senate is outlawed, and of late, most have found their heads upon poles at the front gate of the Golden City.

I might also mention that a Bohido is always a female.

When the stranger removed the hood of her cloak, Tamara the wild stood ready for battle with the Captain of the Imperial army and the nine other men in his command.

The Captain sent two of his men after her, one wielding a battle axe larger than his head. He swung and the blade split a table in half. The other soldier jabbed at her with his sword and Tamara spun around to avoid the point, caught him in his abdomen. She kicked the other half of the table in the face of the soldier with the axe. The wood hit him square in the face. Tamara used this moment of confusion and pain to take his arm off.

The next wave of men surrounded her, all three thrusting at her simultaneously, backing her into a corner of the tavern. Luck was on her side when a soldier lunged at her; she ducked and his friend stabbed him in the head. Tamara swung her sword, sliced that soldier across the chest and brought the sword back across his throat. Blood spilled from his jugular like Crimson River. The next soldier misunderstood the dance routine and fell on his own sword. How droll.

This angered the Captain to no end. He sent the next three, but something strange happened. They were disintegrated, made into a pile of ash. The Captain dropped his weapon. He backed away slowly, frightened. He ran out of the tavern, begging his gods to save him.

Tamara glanced around the tavern, looking for the one who cast the lightning bolt. She found me standing there, smirking.

She placed her blade at my jugular, intending to make a point.

"Ahh... fair sister," I said. "You can't take the life from me."

"And why not?" Tamara said.

"I know of what you seek and I know how to find it..."

Ahh...the journey to the tower of Shera was long and plenty of tales that took us elsewhere can be told... but not at this time. No, I believe this story needs to be continued. Tamara is a fierce warrior. A lone warrior if I hadn't already spoken of this. Conversation between us was near naught. That never bothered me. The idea that we could not be joined at night-time did, however. Beautiful she is, frigid as an icemonkey she is as well.

Her blade is sharp, and many times I tried to slip under the skins that covered her at nights. Once, just once, Tamara nearly melted with my kisses, but when she realized dreams had become reality, she pushed me off and the bruises around my neck still haunt me.

She would have killed me that night, if I had not pointed out the fact that we were at the tower's gates. Just over the hills yonder.

"How did we reach this point?" She removed her dagger from my chest.

I was left with my tongue wagging and drool running down my chin. Those lovely mounds were without clothing, and her pink points were hard. I had a desire to sink my fangs into them as I had done with my cousin Rasl. Ahh... she was a feast... She asked again and I was taken out of my temporary fantasy.

"Always, when the moons meet the sunrise, the tower appears. I can cast a feverspell upon the guards and we can enter, fair lady-warrior."

"Do so, worm!" She spoke harshly, but there was a slight smile on her lips. She dressed quickly, and we were on our path to cross those hills.

It stood high, and nearly touched the clouds up above. If one tried to climb the tower of Shera, they would never reach the top. At a quick glance, there were no windows or doors. The tower was not made of stone, as we found out. It was made of the bodies of all of the thieves that have tried to take the Crystal Necklace from Shera. I seemed to have lost my nerve once we discovered that. Not Tamara. She was raring to go. Also it was strange, but there were no guards. So the feverspell was not needed.

"I'll not let fear come between my treasure and my desire. What about you, worm?"

"Fair lady... I have to admit to some ability that is lacking in my spells..."

"Are you saying you know naught of the black arts?" That twinkle in her eyes had been replaced by blood red anger.

"Oh, no, no." I waved my hands. "I know... a little... it's... my execution—"

Her blade once again found its way to my jugular. "Then it must be your execution, worm..."

"I... suppose... I could help out in some small way... I know a teleportation spell..."

"Enough talk! Do it!"

I sighed, bowed my head. I mumbled a few words and to my surprise, it worked!

There we were, inside Shera's tower. The room was plush, made of pure silk. As a matter of fact, yarns of silk covered the floors.

"Silk?" I asked.

"I don't have a good feeling about this," Tamara quipped.

At that moment, I felt something crawling on my shoulder. It was a mudspider. A very small ten-legged oval shaped creature. Before I brushed it off, I felt a sting. Then I felt all of my muscles tighten up. I could barely move my lips to wail. In seconds, thousands of those tiny creatures covered my body from head to toe.

Tamara gasped.

I fought to move my eyes to where her gaze had wandered.

If one would stop to think, if there are baby mudspiders, then there must be a mother to care for them. The mother was where Tamara's eyes had been directed. Up on the ceiling lay a huge black oval with ten legs and tusks. The creature lay on its web of silk, many bodies wrapped tight in cocoons, ready for her children's meals.

Tamara drew her blade. The mudspider lowered itself from its web and hissed at Tamara.

"Visitors. How lovely," we heard a voice say. There was a soft glowing light, as if it were a bubble around a woman in a white silk gown. Her hair was white, even her eyes held some sort of white light. Around her neck was the Crystal Necklace.

"Shera...?" Tamara whispered.

"Of course. Who else would inhabit a tower to look upon the petty city dwellers? I'm afraid it's too late to turn back."

"Who said anything about turning back?" Tamara growled and sliced through the silken threads of my cocoon. I was free, but my muscles were so tight, I could do nothing but lie on the floor and groan.

Tamara stepped forward, grasping her sword tight, ready to pounce on the goddess.

"You'll never take the Crystal Necklace," Shera said. She hovered above Tamara; a wicked laugh echoed inside the hollow tower walls. "Besides, raising the dead is a crime against nature, and when all of Mars finds out what you've done, my sweet, they'll bleed you to death on their racks!"

So that's why Tamara wanted the necklace, I thought. In her possession, it would bring life back to her dead family.

She was ready to swing her blade, when a massive fireball struck Shera and her bubble melted away. Shera was stunned, caught in an electrical current which faded away in mere seconds. The mudspider too was enveloped in electricity, then melted away into nothing. Her babies were gone, and my muscles relaxed. I was able to move.

But the situation worsened.

The twin tyrants of the Golden City stood behind a dying goddess. They were not just twins of likeness, but conjoined twins at the hips. Prince B'jold and Prince G'mal had their sickly bony hands around the Crystal Necklace. The necklace was torn from Shera's neck. B'jold held it up and laughed, his blackened, broken teeth showing from under a curved, scarred top lip.

"I want to thank you two for keeping the goddess' attentions at bay," G'mal said. "Now we have what we came for—oh! That's why you were here, as well? I apologize for my brother's actions. Don't shed a tear for Shera. She was only a forgotten goddess whose worshippers lost interest..."

With that, the Princes were gone; a wave of green sparkles had taken them elsewhere.

I sighed. "Well, fair one," I chuckled. "I suppose that tears it."

Tamara turned to me, venom in her voice, and fire in her eyes. "Not in the least, worm! I'll have their heads on my belt and the Crystal Necklace around my neck!"

All I could do was agree with her and follow her to the depths of hell and back to ends of the world to retrieve the Crystal Necklace.

