

The Hunters of the Burab-Khai

Barbarians of the Red Planet

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When I was a young man, I ran with the hunters of the Burab-Khai. With seven-bladed spears blessed by the High Goddess Nurok, we hunted packs of barbhide and meltmaws in the caves of the eastern wastes and among the whistling pillars of the Gradolar Kyan. With bows and slings of bone and tendon, we challenged the glidewings of the sawtooth peaks which border the great, sweeping sandwastes of The-Sea-That-Was, and when the scouring storms would come in from the west to wear down mountains and the ruins of chrome cities alike, we would greet them with naked skin, test ourselves against their sands, their roaring winds.

And even then, I knew that days such as these would not last, would not be my domain forever.

I was rising to the crest of my nineteenth summer when the Northlords who dress in gold and silver, who ride in sweeping machine chariots that glitter in the sun, razed the dome-hills of my village to the burning sands and left my people for dead. Rarely were such savages seen outside of their own glistening lands in those days, and generally then only in timid packs of traders who would watch our daily work from a distance, point and gawk as if we were the backward ones. In earlier days, it is said that we would hunt them, snare the few who strayed too close to our village and make slaves of them, but in the last days before I left the Burab-Khai, we had learned to ignore them. Their men were too weak for working or hunting, their women too weak for breeding, and so we thought ourselves superior.

Much as the starving lion thinks it is superior to the corpse-fattened fly.

There is a weapon that the Northlords use which their people call the k'tan-l'kesh. It is long, wide at the head like the spears I learned to hunt with in the wastes of the Burab-Khai—but it is there that any similarity with our own hunting weapons ends. Instead of a blade, a point of sharpened bone or metal, the k'tan-l'kesh is tipped with an intricately woven nest of glittering gold, and in the centre of that nest, a shining gem the same shade of blue as the lost homeworld of our ancient ancestors turns steadily, slowly, as if rotated by some unseen spirit. The Northlords do not use the k'tan-l'kesh for hunting game, nor do they level them and charge as a hunter might in defending his land. Instead, they raise a hand, and somehow, with grand gestures and glowing, aquamarine eyes, they use their not-spears to call forth the very lightning from the sky.

When my village fell, I was with a small pack of young hunters in the dry gullies and sand-basins where the stone-fins hunt mud maggots and wait for geysers to come carving up from the depths, spurting the life-giving waters of the deep underground into the sky. It had been a promising day—it was only morning and already we had brought down a pair of stone-fins, one of them heavy and swollen with sweet and wriggling seed. There was talk of a great feast on our return to the village, of wild and frantic nights after such successful hunts in the past, and we were all grinning, hooting with excitement when we gathered the day's prizes for our return. The gods of the sands themselves seemed to be with us that day, and I remember that I felt a great stirring within me, finally decided that the time had come to begin the cleansing rituals, to learn the dances that are done when a young hunter desires to choose a mate, to lure one of the women of a neighbouring tribe to his village, make a pact and seed her with his children.

But all of that left me when we came close enough to the borders of the village to see the smoke rising, curling in the hot, thin air.

Kiriaq was the first to break from the pack, the first to rush across the sands toward the village. I don't fault him—he was young, younger than I, recently bound, with a beautiful wife already wide with child. Had I been in his place, had I been bound to one I loved as fiercely as he loved his mate, I would have run *harder*, shouted *louder*.

And had my skin been the same colour as his, I likely would have died sooner.

The sound of his scream as he was carved from within by the lightning of the Northlords was haunting, seemed to linger in the air even as it sizzled into silence. I remember the way his flesh glowed for an instant before it crisped, the way his meat turned to ash and fell away from blackened bones. I remember the shock, the way the other hunters broke for the village then, the way they crumpled as they too were struck down.

Only I survived. Only I was coward enough to flee that day.

For three days, I scrounged for dust mussels in the damp crevices between wide, sweeping dunes and the great, dry canals that once cut through the Burab-Khai on their way to The-Sea-That-Was. For three days, I gibbered in the shadows beyond the reach of the great burning sun, remembering my fallen brothers, my smoking village, the bolts of lightning that had descended from the sky like curses cast down by gods of rain so long absent that their names have been forgotten. In our approach, I hadn't seen the source, didn't know that the bolts were thrown by the Northlords, by silver-clad hunters wielding weapons like the k'tan-l'kesh. I knew then only what I had seen—*lightning* had felled my brothers. *Lightning* had cut apart my fellow hunters.

Lightning had smote my village.

In the night, in the in-between times lost at the edges of sleep and waking, I searched my mind for the words of rituals long since forgotten, for traces of names I might have heard breathed by the elders of my village in days long past. I racked my brain for the names of the rain gods, gods of weather and sky, cobbled together the closest sounds I could think of to what I might have half-remembered, then made meagre offerings to them with bits of ligament and the stony shells of dust mussels. On the third day, when the parched meat within a shell yielded a pair of dark pearls streaked with sediment as red as blood, I took it as an omen, a sign, and swore to return to my village.

I don't know what I expected to find; answers, perhaps. Blackened ruins, sprawling skeletons, the shards of dome-hills broken by the wrath of angry gods too long ignored—

Certainly not the shining, silver machines of the Northlords.

I heard the machines long before I saw them, heard the droning, heard the rise and fall of a metallic clattering like knives banging endlessly against stone. The sounds were unfamiliar to me then, evoked all kinds of strange images of beasts, gods, demons and weather, but as I crept to the edge of what remained of my village, I caught the first glint of the curving, beetle-like shell of the leading machine, saw the glister of the platinum helm, the golden-capped staff of the Northlord piloting it.

For a time, I crouched among the sands, watched with critical, studying eyes. The machines were huge, far larger than any pack-beast the traders of the brass empires to the far south had ever used to cross the wastes of the Burab-Khai. Without legs, without wheels, the machines seemed to move as if their shining undersides were capable of summoning the spirits of the wind to lift them, and as I watched, the Northlords directed them with simple movements, gestures offered softly in air.

When I realized what purpose the Northlords had bent their huge and shining machines to, I was struck by a feeling that was a mixture of both awe and anger.

Every last trace of my village, of my people, of the proud hunters of the wastes of the Burab-Khai, had been erased from the sands, ground down to nothing—and even the sands themselves were being stripped away. In their wake, other machines, larger machines, deposited moist soil they seemed to summon from the sky itself, their tiny, busy arms weaving an endless stream of dirt and mud that fell heavy and thick across bare stone.

I remember that as I watched, an army of nimble, winged constructs flashed from the sky, descended to the rich, freshly laid soil and split it with plough-tipped tendrils, injected smaller machines and seeds at regular intervals among furrowed rows. Their wings glittered like coloured glass in the light of the high sun, and in moments they were gone again, moving on as if to impregnate other fields with seeds of glass and steel.

True to my nature as a hunter born among the dunes of the Burab-Khai, I watched the Northlords until their machines moved on, until dusk fell and only a single silver-helmeted figure lingered in the newly-laid fields. Red washed in at the edges of my eyes, the red of rage, and as I slipped silently through a narrow valley between rolling dunes, I gripped my seven-bladed spear tighter, felt the heat of adrenaline wash through me. In moments, I was behind him, watching him, stalking him, my footsteps coming careful, quiet even in the wet and sucking mud of the fields. Like a priest at prayer, he seemed lost in the darkness of his own mind, his awareness consumed with gestures and the chanting repetition of strings of words breathed in a foreign tongue. *An old tongue*, I realized. *An ancient tongue, a tongue of the lost homeworld.*

The thought, the realization, almost broke the rage spreading through me, cloaking me, guiding tensing, eager muscles. A single step stalled, stopped uncertain in the thick mud, and then I was moving again, *hunting* again. The words, the history behind the syllables of that ancient tongue—none of it mattered. Vengeful gods had slaughtered my village, and somehow, even then, I knew within the very core of my being that the Northlords were ultimately responsible for the massacre, that they had appealed to some higher force, called down the wrath of the heavens upon my people.

And even if he was only a solitary priest lost in his prayers, I would bathe in the blood of the Northlord I hunted. I would slaughter him as his people had slaughtered mine. I would wear his bones as trophies and rise, born anew, the last of the hunters of the Burab-Khai, *alive*, the whole of the tribe living in my wide and fiery eyes. Possessed of the spirit of my people, I would drive the Northlords from the wastes and raze *their* lands with my stare, my bare hands. I would make fields of *their* villages, take *their* women—

Baring teeth, I raised my spear, ready, focused—

And then the solitary Northlord turned, his eyes meeting mine—

And he smiled.

Dusk passed through into deepest night. I couldn't move, felt all of the strength and ire vanish from my muscles, my mind. My soul became a bright and burning ember smothered under the brilliant stars of the spinning heavens, and then in the final hours before dawn, I heard him speak—not with his mouth, but with his *mind*.

We have been looking for you, he said.

I blinked, and the movement seemed to take ages, seemed to crack a crust of dust as lids slid slow across eyes dry from too long staring. In the darkness between, I felt a stirring, a throbbing, as if reality were a womb wriggling with eager seed, with the hungry embryos of some utterly alien form of life—and then my eyes opened and I was in a chamber, clamped down with shining restraints on a cold bed beneath the curving dome of a platinum ceiling. Long, waxen faces cut with intricate lines of chrome stared down at me, stared *into* me, and I could hear their voices in my mind, crowding out my thoughts, crowding out my sense of self, everything I was.

You are one of us, they said as one, their minds pulsing lies into mine. *We have been looking for you.*

Like a wild beast of the wastes, I screamed, shouted, howled, fought my restraints, but still the Northlords stared down at me with placid eyes, filled me with their thoughts. Hours passed, hours that left me hoarse, bruised and bloody from struggling, but somehow, eventually, some part of me yielded, and the rest of my being fell away into the darkness of sleep.

And like hunters themselves, the minds of the Northlords pursued me into the depths of that spinning abyss.

When the dreams came, they fell like coloured rain on glass, spread slow, distant. Tendrils split hues, reached for me, and even as I tried to drift away, to hide in a deeper darkness, I found myself caught, dragged, pulled through some surreal, pulsing surface into the vibrant light and sound of an unfamiliar nightmare. All around me, I could feel the Northlords breathing, could feel the throbbing of their thoughts, their minds—

And then I opened my eyes, not eyes of flesh, but of some deeper form of *mind's eye*.

And I *saw*.

The willingness of the action, the surrender of opening myself to the Northlords, carried me into a sweet and drifting stillness between sleep and waking. All around me, I felt their thoughts, their minds, their words, but they no longer resonated or throbbed against the walls I had thrown up to try to block them. They came like breezes instead, passed through me easily, left only trace impressions in their wake—images, words, thoughts.

It was in these traces that I saw the history of my people—of *our people* as the Northlords remembered it. As diligent as the stonewasps of the caverns deep within the sands of The-Sea-That-Was, they assembled a hive of memories within me, a narrative of colour and light and sound and sense that captivated me, became one with the memories already crusting the inside of my simple mind. In their memories, I saw shining blue oceans, sweeping forests of green, felt the delicate touch, the cloying scent of plants called *flowers*. I saw men, a collection of upright hunters with different hues of skin bound up in different shades of uniform. I saw them working together, discussing something *important*, and as they discussed it, their anger rose, their faces twisting. Memories skipped, and then I saw fire, blood, heard the crack of lightning. Burnt corpses collapsed within me, and as I watched, I saw whole forests swept up in fire, reduced to fields of drifting ash.

And then I saw the rockets, the shining silver rockets, the uniformed hunters looking back, looking out of windows with sad eyes, eyes full of regret and pain. Like sleek young stone-fins passing through the membranous walls of their mother's water-swollen womb, the rockets rose, abandoned the world that had been our home, that had been the cradle of our people, and in the silence of space, I heard the name, felt it move across my tongue, carry on my breath.

Earth.

Our lost homeworld.

Other images came then, images of hunters in new uniforms building new cities on the sands of another world, raising towers and domes of glass and steel. A sense of awe, of discovery, of wonder, rippled through the memories, but the loss never left, never faded. New tribes formed, new important discussions divided people, divided hunters, and then there were cities sprouting up all over the wasteland world, cities full of angry faces eager to lead machines in raids against their distant kin.

War began. *War*. Raiding on a massive scale. Raiding meant to obliterate other tribes, slay their hunters, their women, their children. *War*. Fire and lightning fell from the heavens, laid all of the cities low. A few rose again, here and there in the north, in the south, but in the harsh, cruel lands between, the glitter and glass never sprouted anew from burning sands. Instead, a new kind of hunter arose from the survivors of those lost tribes. A simpler hunter. A hunter that built villages of dome-hills and stalked beasts in the wastes of the Burab-Khai.

You are one of us, the Northlords said again, and I knew that the words held no deceit, no malice. I knew that we came from the same homeworld, that we came from Earth—but there was something deeper to it, to the impressions in their words, something more, something I had yet to understand.

You are one of us, sprung from the same seed, yes. The images again. *Earth*. Rising, colourful, suddenly washed away, scattered like sand in wind.

But you are also a Northlord.

Like the drawing of a bowstring, focus tightened, sharpened. The foundations of new memory hives gathered and rose, picked up the little intricacies of colour and sound. Sands whispered and shifted, and then I saw a family of Northlords clad in chrome, in capes of drifting gold—a man and a woman, their eyes full of love, two children scampering at their feet, a third still growing in the woman's heavy belly.

And then I saw my father, the man who had raised me, taught me the ways of the hunters of the Burab-Khai. Like a bolt of lightning, he shot from the sands, wild hair flying in dark knots, fire in his wide, hungry eyes. Muscles moved, and then the male Northlord was stumbling backward, chest gushing blood, crimson spraying from the point of my father's spear to the face of the woman, blurring her vision. Other hunters rose then, surged through the caravan of Northlords gathered there—and then I saw one of the children fall, slaughtered, left to bleed out in the sand. Like children themselves, the remaining Northlords scattered, leapt onto chrome machines that darted off like geyserflies fleeing a burst. In the midst of it all, I saw a child scooped up by a long pale arm, saw him look back with tears in his eyes as he was flown to safety, saw through his eyes—the woman heavy with an unborn son screaming, wild terror spreading across her shrieking features as she was dragged back into the sands, dragged by a familiar hand.

Dragged back to my village, dragged to the dome-hill my father had made his own.

Other images came then. I watched as the child that had seen his mother made a slave grew into a proud and strong hunter among the Northlords. With determination, with grace, he rose in social standing until he was a master of war, a leader of hunters who watched the Burab-Khai with a hungry eye, who planned, who pushed and prodded at political bodies until the path to the goal he had chosen came clear. In the midst of it all, I saw him watching, saw memories of memories cascading down from other leaders who had watched his mother give birth in the sands, who had watched her push forth a child that my father took as his own, raised as his own long after she had died.

A child that would become *me*.

Slowly, tentatively, I opened my eyes, and as the dreams faded from the edges of my mind, I found myself at peace, found myself bathed in a calm unlike anything I had ever felt during the course of my entire existence. All around me, the sweeping chrome curves of a massive crystal library spread out in every direction—and in the centre of it all, I saw my brother, saw the familiar eyes, the eyes that had watched me in shared memories, that had yearned to see me reunited with my true people, my true tribe, the Northlords from which I had been stolen.

You are one of us, my brother said as he reached out to touch my face, to trace the chrome lines already knitting into my skin, my freshly shaven scalp. *You have always been one of us*.

I have, I responded, and in the core of my being, I knew that he was right, knew that everything unfolding around me was right. I was a Northlord. I had always been a Northlord. *I am one with the people of the North*.

Can you hear our thoughts, brother? he asked, smiling, tracing a finger across the silver lines braided through his own features, his own face. *Are you one with the central mind?*

I am, I said, and as I rose, I felt them, heard them—all of the Northlords, some near, some very, very far away. I felt their minds, their voices. I felt their pasts, saw their memories as if they were my own—and somehow, it wasn't strange, wasn't overwhelming. It felt normal. It felt *right*.

Welcome home, brother, all of the voices seemed to say at once. I smiled, closed my eyes.

And when I opened them again, I was standing on the deck of one of our great chrome machines, my pale skin clad in shining garments of silver and gold. In one hand, I carried my k'tan-l'kesh, *knew it was mine*, knew intimately its every function, its deepest inner workings as if I had designed and built it myself. On the horizon, I could see the dome-hills of another wasteland village, another tribe of the Burab-Khai standing in the way of progress, in the way of the great fields our people were sowing as we worked to reclaim our dead world, and I felt nothing but pity, sorrow. Even as our first bolts of flung lightning carved sun-browned hunters into charred piles of smoking bone, even as our machines ground their empty, broken homes down to dust, erased them from existence, I felt nothing but pity.

For I had run with the hunters of the Burab-Khai as a young man. I had hunted the barbhides, the meltmaws and the glidewings of the wastes, and I had greeted the scouring storms of the west with naked skin bared to sand and sky.

But I was of the north now. I was one with the pale people. *My people.*

I was no longer the same young man.

I had become one with the Northlords.

