

**THE HOUR OF THE DRAGON**  
by Robert E. Howard

**Words: 1058**

'He has long been dead,' answered Orastes. 'He is as one newly awakened. His mind is empty after the long sleep--nay, he was *dead*, not sleeping. We brought his spirit back over the voids and gulfs of night and oblivion. I will speak to him.'

He bent over the foot of the sarcophagus, and fixing his gaze on the wide dark eyes of the man within, he said, slowly: 'Awake, Xaltotun!'

The lips of the man moved mechanically. 'Xaltotun!' he repeated in a groping whisper.

'*You* are Xaltotun!' exclaimed Orastes, like a hypnotist driving home his suggestions. 'You are Xaltotun of Python, in Acheron.'

A dim flame flickered in the dark eyes.

'I was Xaltotun,' he whispered. 'I am dead.'

'*You are* Xaltotun!' cried Orastes. 'You are not dead! You live!'

'I am Xaltotun,' came the eery whisper. 'But I am dead. In my house in Khemi, in Stygia, there I died.'

'And the priests who poisoned you mummified your body with their dark arts, keeping all your organs intact!' exclaimed Orastes. 'But now you live again! The Heart of Ahriman has restored your life, drawn your spirit back from space and eternity.'

'The Heart of Ahriman!' The flame of remembrance grew stronger. 'The barbarians stole it from me!'

'He remembers,' muttered Orastes. 'Lift him from the case.'

The others obeyed hesitantly, as if reluctant to touch the man they had recreated, and they seemed not easier in their minds when they felt firm muscular flesh, vibrant with blood and life, beneath their fingers. But they lifted

him upon the table, and Orastes clothed him in a curious dark velvet robe, splashed with gold stars and crescent moons, and fastened a cloth-of-gold fillet about his temples, confining the black wavy locks that fell to his shoulders. He let them do as they would, saying nothing, not even when they set him in a carven throne-like chair with a high ebony back and wide silver arms, and feet like golden claws. He sat there motionless, and slowly intelligence grew in his dark eyes and made them deep and strange and luminous. It was as if long-sunken witchlights floated slowly up through midnight pools of darkness.

Orastes cast a furtive glance at his companions, who stood staring in morbid fascination at their strange guest. Their iron nerves had withstood an ordeal that might have driven weaker men mad. He knew it was with no weaklings that he conspired, but men whose courage was as profound as their lawless ambitions and capacity for evil. He turned his attention to the figure in the ebon-black chair. And this one spoke at last.

'I remember,' he said in a strong, resonant voice, speaking Nemedian with a curious, archaic accent. 'I am Xaltotun, who was high priest of Set in Python, which was in Acheron. The Heart of Ahriman--I dreamed I had found it again--where is it?'

Orastes placed it in his hand, and he drew breath deeply as he gazed into the depths of the terrible jewel burning in his grasp.

'They stole it from me, long ago,' he said. 'The red heart of the night it is, strong to save or to damn. It came from afar, and from long ago. While I held it, none could stand before me. But it was stolen from me, and Acheron fell, and I fled in exile into dark Stygia. Much I remember, but much I have forgotten. I have been in a far land, across misty voids and gulfs and unlit oceans. What is the year?'

Orastes answered him. 'It is the waning of the Year of the Lion, three thousand years after the fall of Acheron.'

'Three thousand years!' murmured the other. 'So long? Who are you?'

'I am Orastes, once a priest of Mitra. This man is Amalric, baron of Tor, in Nemedi; this other is Tarascus, younger brother of the king of Nemedi; and this tall man is Valerius, rightful heir of the throne of Aquilonia.'

'Why have you given me life?' demanded Xaltotun. 'What do you require of me?'

The man was now fully alive and awake, his keen eyes reflecting the working of an unclouded brain. There was no hesitation or uncertainty in his manner. He came directly to the point, as one who knows that no man gives something for nothing. Orastes met him with equal candor.

'We have opened the doors of hell this night to free your soul and return it to your body because we need your aid. We wish to place Tarascus on the throne of Nemedi, and to win for Valerius the crown of Aquilonia. With your necromancy you can aid us.'

Xaltotun's mind was devious and full of unexpected slants.

'You must be deep in the arts yourself, Orastes, to have been able to restore my life. How is it that a priest of Mitra knows of the Heart of Ahriman, and the incantations of Skelos?'

'I am no longer a priest of Mitra,' answered Orastes. 'I was cast forth from my order because of my delving in black magic. But for Amalric there I might have been burned as a magician.'

'But that left me free to pursue my studies. I journeyed in Zamora, in Vendhya, in Stygia, and among the haunted jungles of Khitai. I read the iron-bound books of Skelos, and talked with unseen creatures in deep wells, and faceless shapes in black reeking jungles. I obtained a glimpse of your sarcophagus in the demon-haunted crypts below the black giant-walled temple of Set in the hinterlands of Stygia, and I learned of the arts that would bring back

life to your shriveled corpse. From moldering manuscripts I learned of the Heart of Ahriman. Then for a year I sought its hiding-place, and at last I found it.'