Dan Trex

by Michael E. Shea

It was hot. The smell of blood already hung heavy in the air. The white sands, imported from the far west mountains of limestone, sucked up the fire of the huge red sun. It was always hot in the south desert. Even in the deep of night the stones of Gazu Kadem kept the city warm. Now, at mid-day, it was at its hottest. A quarter of a million people at the arena didn't make it any cooler.

The merchants, nobles, and the slaves lucky enough to attend had waited outside Dan Trex's arena for days. They knew the value of entertainment in such a dark world. They wore cowls to protect themselves from the sun as they waited. Entire businesses thrived on the forced mercantile of the captive audience. Food went for thrice its cost to those waiting near the entrance. Water went for five times as much.

The arena was as old as the city, built in the days of the old empire for a king now long forgotten. The octagonal arena was a machine, an engine that built warriors out of the raw material of flesh, blood, and steel. Now, thousands of years later, it still served that purpose.

The machine had built Dan Trex's army, half a million of the most ruthless and well trained soldiers to ever walk the planet. While one hundred and fifty thousand civilians and slaves got drunk, gambled, shat, fucked, and slept on the stone steps; one hundred thousand of his men sat in silence wearing black and bronze and watching him as Trex walked out into the arena alone and unhelmed.

His soldiers watched the games in silence. They made not a sound when twelve of the most beautiful girls to walk on small bare feet were raped and flayed apart by dark priests in a ritual to Gazu Kadem's god-king, Danken Ovelde. They studied the three-horned desert bull as it gored five slaves. They watched the spear technique of four slave armies as they warred in a single great battle. They watched blades of silver spray fans of red blood into the air. They watched vital organs spill onto the white sands. They heard men and women

scream as life left them. They watched and they made no sound.

They watched now as their warlord stepped out onto the sand.

Dan Trex wore black plate armor with no rank or insignia. A deep red cloak flowed behind him. He wore no help over his cropped steel-gray hair. A deep scar ran across his face, tracing a line from his forehead to the bottom of his chin. The first man Dan Trex had ever killed gave him that scar with a sharpened piece of wood. It still itched after forty years but he never scratched it.

Dan Trex held Hellcleaver in his right hand. He felt the black leather grip in his palm. The hilt in his hand was as comforting as an old friend. Red sunlight gleamed off of the ragged black blade and silver pommel. The twisted skull of a demon screamed from the end of the hilt.

Dan Trex had almost had the blade destroyed when an old scholar had told him the name of the bastard sword from the three thousand year old script carved into the blade. It was a name known to Trex since the day he had first held the blade, a gift found deep within the earth under the city of Gazu Kadem. He had heard its name whispered to him in the dark of night a year before the scholar had translated it from the blade itself. That scared him at the time but he didn't care now.

The rest of the arena spectators grew as silent as his army as he stepped out. The large iron gate rose on the opposite side of the arena. Six men stepped through. They wore helms of animals, serpents, dragons, and beasts of legend. They carried swords, tridents, spears, and maces. Trex didn't see their weapons or armor. He saw through their eyes and into their hearts. They were afraid.

One stood at their lead, smaller than the rest but a powerful fighter. He was known to the audience and known to Trex. He was a champion.

Trex's second Left Tenant had met with the man earlier and betrayed Trex by telling the champion of Trex's first strike, a horizontal two-handed cut aimed to behead. His second Left Tenant had given the champion a reinforced shield to turn the blow. It was all a lie. The shield was weak. Trex's second Left Tenant had arranged the champion's folly.

He who controls the battlefield wins the war before the first blow strikes. Trex won his battles by controlling the environment. No fight was worth fighting without already knowing the outcome.

He knew the outcome now.

Trex planted his feet wide and gripped Hellcleaver in both hands. He swung hard. The champion raised his shield and aimed the tip of his short sword at the seam in Trex's armor below his right arm. He would never get a chance to strike.

Hellcleaver cracked the shield in half and broke the champion's arm above and below the elbow. The blade didn't slow until it hewed three quarters of the way through the man's skull. The man fell over in an explosion of blood and gore. A stream of red splashed across Trex's chest and face.

The crowd roared. Trex's men roared. It was the first time that day the entire arena grew loud enough to stop the voices in the city of Gazu Kadem nearly two miles away.

Two of the remaining five men dropped their weapons and fled. Another raised his mace to guard against Trex's next blow Trex grabbed the mace between the man's outstretched hands and impaled him on Hellcleaver's point. He ripped the mace from the man's grasp as the fell screaming.

Trex sidestepped a spear thrust from a third opponent and crushed in the side of the man's wolf helm with the mace. The crushing metal helm rang from the outer walls of the arena. Blood poured from the eyes and mouth of the grinning steel deformed wolf face.

The fourth attacker rushed in, blade held high. Trex parried and kicked the man in the chest. The attacker sprawled to the ground. Trex stood over him and dropped the mace to the blood-soaked sand. He raised Hellcleaver and struck as the man screamed. A jet of blood sprayed into the air.

The crowd's roar followed Trex as he turned and walked out of the arena. His men, one hundred thousand of them, stomped their feet in unison and shouted his name. The sound rumbled across the sands for miles. These men would kill for him. These men would die for him. And they would do it soon.

Dan Trex's Right Hand met him as he left the arena. Trex unbuckled his breastplate and let it fall to the stone floor. He handed his black leather gloves to his Right Hand.

"Enough games," said Trex. "Get them ready. We have war to wage."

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