

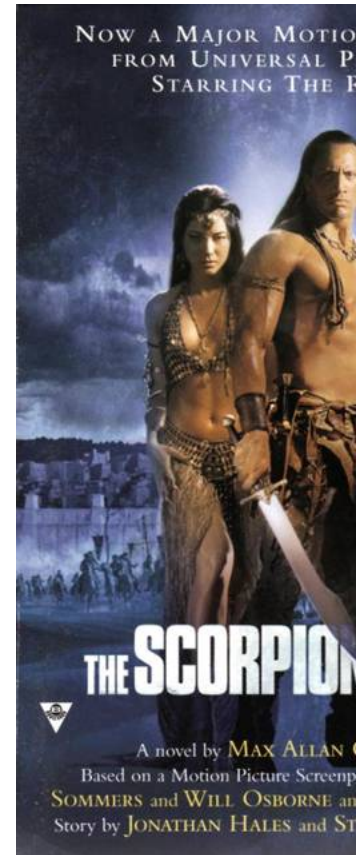
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# THE SCORPION KING

A novel by MAX ALLAN COLLINS

Based on a Motion Picture Screenplay by STEPHEN  
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Story by JONATHAN HALES and STEPHEN SOMMERS



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# THE SCORPION

A novel by MAX ALLAN COLLINS  
Based on a Motion Picture Screenplay by JAMES SOMMERS and WILL OSBORNE and  
Story by JONATHAN HALES and STANLEY PARRIS



*Across the deserts of the Middle East, Memnon expands his reign. With the foretelling the outcome of every battle, he marches undefeated, slaughtering those who oppose him. Memnon seeks to fulfill an ancient prophecy—to become the King of the gods...*

*But the gods favor another.*

His name is Mathayus. A warrior of a new breed, he will inspire the renegade desert tribes to unite against the tyranny of the gods. And he will ascend to a power of his own making...

## THE SCORPION



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# THE SCORPIO KING



A novel by  
**Max Allan Collins**

*Based on a Motion Picture Screenplay by*  
**Stephen Sommers and Will Osborne and David**

*Story by*  
**Jonathan Hales and Stephen Sommer**



**BERKLEY BOULEVARD BOOKS, NEW YORK**

"With the noble poise of his handsome head upon those broad shoulders, and the fire of life and intelligence of those fine, clear eyes, he might readily have typified some demi-god of a wild and warlike bygone people."

—EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS

# SNOW BEAST

L

ord Memnon's outposts stretched from the desert to the snowpacked mountain ranges that marked the edge of the known world. Along the periphery of that craggy border, where winter winds whistled and ice embraced the bare branches of trees, a log fortress played home to a tribe of fierce warriors aligned with the great warlord. These men would one day be known as Copts; in these ancient times they were known only as murderers.

Their stronghold—a formidable, ominous landmark of barbarian-style civilization in the stark landscape—was a windowless three floors where warriors plotted pillage, tortured the occasional prisoner and even, between atrocities, partook of savage revelries.

On this frigid afternoon, fires roared within the rustic walls and so did egos, as these bad men consumed good wine and pawed at the voluptuous harlots who traveled from camp to camp—hard, soft beauties used to such vile-smelling, rat's-nest-bearded warriors as these, furs flung aside to reveal battle-scarred cuirasses. Here and there, spears, swords, and scimitars rested against rough-hewn tables and log walls; now and then a fight broke out among the scruffy soldiers, over a woman or a spoil of war or just a he one of them had told that had gone down poorly, like a chunk of spoiled venison.

Outside, in the howling, ice-flecked wind, one unlucky warrior had been chosen to guard the only door on that side of the massive structure. Though he was only a single man, this was nonetheless a massive, intimidating guard,

wearing the red turban of Memnon's guards, his beard and furs caked with ice, his face seemingly frozen in a vicious, ill-tempered expression.

In reality, that expression had less to do with his temper than with his frustration at having been assigned guard duty during a spree like the one going on within those timber walls. Now and then—as the squeals of women and the bellows of men indicated everyone having a fine time (except, of course, a poor bastard assigned guard duty in the bitter cold), he would turn toward the building, gaze longingly if angrily at the door, and then turn his eyes back to the barren vista where (it seemed to him) no fool was likely to show himself.

Shrill feminine laughter pulled the guard's eyes toward that door once again, and he shook his head, cranky with the thought of three more hours of sentry duty to stand in this cold, returning his perhaps less than watchful gaze to where it belonged ...

... just in time to receive a metal throwing star, which had come whirring, whirling toward him, to slam deadly deep into his forehead, between his eyes. His last action was to cross those eyes, to try to see what bug had stung him; but death took him before any cognizance could form.

The guard keeled over and hands reached from a nearby snowbank to yank him to a waiting grave of white.

Inside the fortress, the partying warriors knew nothing of this intrusion; they knew only of wenches doing belly dances—sometimes on the laps of the warriors—and food being gobbled and wine guzzled, as the reflection of flames painted the brown walls a flickering orange.

Right now a fight had erupted at one table, and—in true fashion for warriors of such high ethics—three of them were attacking one. The argument seemed to be over a woman—or was it over that platter of mutton? Hard to tell, when such a fine time was being had by all.

Well, perhaps not by all: outside the fortress, another huge guard, also denied this party, traipsed through the snow, where no footprints or marks other than his own could be seen. Grumbling at pulling such duty during a feast, the bearded guard came to a stop—had he heard something, over the whistle of wind through dead vegetation?

That was as far as the guard got with his thought process, before a bear-like claw shot up out of the snowbank between the warrior's legs and yanked him down by his ... well, for decorum's sake, we will merely figure that he was

dragged down under the snow, where he vanished in a flurry of punches and exploding powdery white, bones snapping and cracking, before a deathly still ensued.

No one was around to see the huge, white creature rise up from out of the snow. Had anyone on the periphery witnessed this, however, the impression would have been that a Yeti had just snagged its prey. The Yeti—that half ape, half human creature some called the Abominable Snowman—was thought to be legendary by many; a few knew these creatures actually existed. One of those few was an Akkadian warrior called Mathayus, who had himself killed one.

In fact, the skin of that slain Yeti was the one Mathayus was wearing right now, a cape over his bare, bronzed chest, his massively muscled legs in leather breeches. Dark-eyed, with the heroic features of a carved statue, Mathayus breathed steam, muscles rippling; he might—for all his handsomeness—have been an evil beast. He was not; he is instead the hero of our tale.

And he had come to this terrible place to rescue a brother Akkadian; for though he was as fearsome as any warrior in those days, Mathayus had the heart of a king—noble, compassionate, yet resolute.

Within the fortress, the captain of this garrison—a monolith among these monstrous men—rose from the head of the main table and stepped in front of the massive stone fireplace whose flames licked as if they were as greedy as the reveling soldiers.

His voice was an arrogant growl. "We have killed Babylonians!"

Well-remembering, the crowd responded with drunken, enthusiastic glee.

"We have killed Mesopotamians!" their leader reminded them.

And again they responded with brutal gaiety.

"But.. . never before have we had the uncommon pleasure of killing an Akkadian."

The captain gestured to their "guest": an Akkadian—leanly muscular with a stoic, weathered face, his battle-scarred chest heaving—strapped spread-eagle on a cross beam. Almost smugly unflinching, the Akkadian—his name was Jesup—glared at his hosts with what might have been pity.

"Let me go," Jesup said, "or face a wrath from which none of you shall survive."



The disheveled warriors merely smiled at this, though the wenches—who had been around battle and strife as long as the soldiers—stared at the Akkadian with respectful fear.

"You face a ruthless fury," Jesup warned them, as stern as a displeased parent, "... relentless . . . merciless ... such as even the gods would dare not provoke."

The captain grunted a laugh. "For a man about to die ... slowly .. you're awfully damned full of yourself."

Now the drunken audience did dare to laugh— not the women, though, who were glancing about the chamber for a corner to hide in.

"Oh," Jesup said, apparently amused, looking the captain square in the eyes, "I wasn't talking about me."

The soldiers at the tables only laughed all the more, and even the women joined in, albeit nervously; but as their leader held the gaze of his prisoner, the captain felt a sudden chill that had nothing to do with winter.

Outside, another of the massive bearded sentries came up behind one of his brother soldiers, a fellow named Fydor, relieving himself, making yellow designs in the snow.

"Fydor! Why the hell have you left your post?"

The guard grabbed Fydor by a shoulder and spun him around—only it wasn't Fydor after all.

The Akkadian intruder had abandoned his Yeti cape for the furs of the sentry he'd killed—the late Fydor—and right now he was facing another of those guards, and rather rudely sending a stream of steaming urine at the man's legs.

The put-upon, peed-upon guard reflexively looked down at his breeches, giving Mathayus just the moment he needed to head-butt the bastard into unconsciousness. The crack of it echoed off the surrounding mountains like small thunder.

The guard dropped into the snow like the dead weight he was, and Mathayus returned to his current mission—that is, finishing the piss he was taking. A man could not go into battle, after all, with any distractions.

Within the log fortress, the captain was removing from the flames of the fireplace his scimitar, which he had heated up until the steel glowed a

pulsing red. Grasping the scimitar's hilt, the captain fought his growing discomfort with some braggadocio, slicing the air all around Jesup, tauntingly.

"Which limb do I take first?" the captain said, not so much to the Akkadian as to the crowd, like a musician soliciting requests.

"The right leg!" one drunken warrior cried.

"The left!" yelled another.

Others seemed to prefer the arms, with preferences running (not surprisingly) to the right or the left.

Throughout all of this, the prisoner remained unmoved. The captain, for all his boasting before his men, was wondering: What does the Akkadian know that we don't?

Outside, another guard wore a pensive expression, as if he too were pondering that question; this was, however, an illusion, as—despite his wide-open eyes—the man was quite dead, propped up to appear to still be on guard, despite the spear of an icicle stuck into the side of his turban, a little blood around the entry, frozen and black now.

The man who had accomplished this, of course, was Mathayus, in a hooded cloak, who at the moment was climbing an exterior wall of the timber citadel, two ropes dragging behind him tied to a huge boulder that the Akkadian towed behind him. The weight of the boulder made the warrior's feat all the more difficult, as—two floors up now—he grasped for purchase between logs.

At that moment, the spread-eagled Jesup was watching the captain approach him with that red-hot scimitar. Soon its sizzling blade was just under the prisoner's chin. The captain flashed rotten teeth in a sadistic smile, as if to say, "I don't fear you or your big talk."

Jesup merely returned the smile.

And said, "Maybe the gods will have pity on you ... because my brother will not."

The captain tried to laugh at that, through his fetid smile; but the laugh caught in his throat—there was something deadly serious in the Akkadian's words that told the warrior this was no boast. And it was not.

For on the roof, at that very moment, Mathayus sat on the lip of the black-billowing chimney; in his hands, the boulder was held high over his head, as if he were trying to impress small children with a strongman stunt.

But it was not children he sought to impress— however childish the minds of these enemy warriors might be.

Taking a deep breath, Mathayus scooted forward and dropped down into the chimney, still holding that massive stone over his head, so that as he disappeared down, the boulder stayed behind, and plugged up the chimney, blocking it until only the tiniest wips of smoke found escape.

Almost immediately within the chamber below, thick black smoke began to plume outward from the fireplace. The captain forgot his prisoner, for the moment, and with everyone else in the room turned his attention to the massive stone fireplace and the gathering fumes.

Despite the dark acrid clouds already swarming to engulf the room, the captain bravely stepped forward, toward the threat, and when the arrow came streaking out from the billowing smoke, it was as if the captain had sought the death that now hit him so hard he was hurled like a snowball across the room.

Jesup smiled; the smoke smelled wonderful to him. He enjoyed the view from his place of honor, as three more warriors—standing at a counter drinking wine—were thrust off their feet by arrows from the fireplace, the smoke consuming air like ink in water.

The other warriors were on their feet, drawing their swords—if they wore them—or scrambling for them, if the weapons had been resting somewhere. The women froze, all thought of finding hiding places banished out of fear.

A quartet of warriors bravely charged into the blackness of the smoke, screaming war cries that got cut off in the clattering clash of steel on steel. Then the warriors stumbled out of the dark fumes; Jesup smiled wider, the wenches screamed, as the four men—headless!—pitched to the rough floor where blood spilled from their necks like knocked-over wine bottles.

The other warriors—while brave—were understandably unnerved by this, and in their moment of hesitation, Mathayus—his muscular frame cloaked in soot—stepped out of the puffing blackness, a massive bow in one hand, scimitar in the other. With the orangeness of flames glowing through the dark smoke, he was wreathed in a hellish aura, his pant-legs on fire, hood too, a demonic vision for these superstitious fools to consider, along with the headless evidence of their fellow soldiers scattered on the floor before them.

Out of his soot-covered face came wide white eyes and a wider white smile—seemingly crazed—and he said, "I... am ... death!"

That was all it took.

The rest of the warriors, the wenches too, went running for the door, the effect almost comic as they crawled over each other, squeezing out the passage. Few of them bothered grabbing their furs, and ran willingly into the freezing wilderness.

"Hey!" Jesup said, struggling at his bindings. "Don't let them go!"

Mathayus, patting out the flames on his legs and hood, ignored this.

"I promised you'd kill them all," Jesup told him. "Don't make a damned liar out of me!"

Mathayus sighed, and snarled in mock disgust. "Lucky for you we share the same mother."

And the soot-covered Akkadian cut his brother's bonds.

Soon they were on horseback with the fortress in flames at their back—the logs burnt well. Jesup, poised to gallop to freedom, glanced at his brother, who had hesitated for some reason, those dark, piercing eyes studying the sky.

"What is it?" Jesup asked.

Slowly scanning the faded blue above, Mathayus said, softly, "I feel... like I am being ... watched."

"Well, if you are," Jesup said, "perhaps we should leave."

Mathayus shrugged, cracked the reins, and they pulled away, dragging behind them a wooden sleigh-like apparatus piled with dead warriors. They were mercenaries, after all, and had a bounty to collect.

And far away, in the fabled city of Gomorrah, a sorcerer in a winged collar, lost in a vision, indeed watched the Akkadian warrior called Mathayus.

Watched, and waited.

T

oday, many centuries after our tale was lived, the Middle East remains a cauldron of hate, fear and turmoil. How little has changed: before the civilizing time of the Pharaohs, centuries prior to Genghis Khan cutting his bloody swath, long preceding the conquests of Alexander, these barren lands somehow inspired conflict, a wasteland where a score of warring tribes sought dominion.

Imagine, then, a golden papyrus map of that region—at that ancient time, three thousand years before Christ, such a map would depict the entire known world—encompassing the fabulous storied kingdoms of Babylon, Mesopotamia and those most infamous of cities, Sodom and Gomorrah. Such realms seem the stuff of legend, yet ancient books of truth—the Bible is but one—say different; these were places as real as the world around us, and just as dangerous.

Picture now that map stained with blood, and follow a glistening red trail of destruction, whose path leaches out, soaking up everything in its way. Look deeper and imagine the hordes of charging horsemen, a horizon lined with archers sending arrows streaking into the sky, and multitudes of foot soldiers, marching inexorably onward.

The warlord who commanded these armies was called "Teacher of Men"—Memnon, in their ancient tongue—but the lessons he taught were strict indeed... how destruction could pave the way for conquest, how death could vanquish one people and make way for another, invading one. Memnon imparted his wisdom by taking male prisoners only to put them to death, to "liberate" females for purpose of ravishment and slavery... the sword and chains were his teaching tools.

The populace all across those bleak lands took these lessons to heart—men of every race and color and creed gathered their wives and children and fled their homes, running in panic, in terror, and sometimes escaping. Sometimes. Other men stayed to fight, as soldiers, in defense of their homes, their land... and were defeated.

And those soldiers who did not die in battle—and were not officers, earmarked for execution—would line the roadside beyond their burned, looted village, waiting under a scorching sun for the victors to pronounce sentence. Trembling, terrified, their bravery beaten out of them, they would stand weaponless, smoke and flames rising from the ruins to lick the sky, as if hungry for more conquest.

And among them would move a giant on a snorting steed, a human nightmare with a scarred battle-shield of a face, his red turban signaling his allegiance to the invading army.

His name was Thorak, and he had long since lost count of the men he had killed. And to the vanquished army he would bellow, "Kneel before Lord Memnon!"

As if presenting an actor on a stage, Thorak would gesture behind him as the warlord himself, astride a regal black Arabian, seemed to materialize among them, clip-clopping through the smoke of combat. Not the brute that his second-in-command was, Lord Memnon—glittering in gold chain mail—looked no less fearsome, a muscular man with carved handsome features, sides of his head shaved, a shock of dark hair riding a fine skull, a beautiful man, yet virile. Around him, some on horseback, some on foot, a phalanx of red-turbaned guards, each man a vicious exemplar of fighting prowess, provided protection; yet somehow Memnon seemed above them... as if he could fend for himself, and only put up with the armed guard for purposes of ceremony.

Inevitably, the defeated soldiers would drop to their knees—better to pay obeisance to Lord Memnon, better to join his fearsome ranks, than to stay here in the charred ruins of a home that was theirs no longer, and douse the land uselessly with their blood.

Memnon would stare at them, from horseback, as if considering whether their addition might be worth his trouble, weighing whether or not to simply slay them. And sometimes this would indeed be his decision. But more often the great teacher accepted these pupils into his school of slaughter; nodding to Thorak, then wheeling his horse around and thundering away through the sea of his own soldiers.

*In less than ten years, Memnon had conquered all but a few scattered tribes, and only one solitary kingdom remained—and if you will again picture that map, imagine only the tiniest corner remaining, free of blood, free of Memnon. . . a scrap of land near the Red Sea called the Kingdom of Ur.*

*This tiny corner, and a few brave men and women, were all that separated Memnon from the destiny he sought to claim: to be king of the known world, to fulfill the ancient prophecy:*

*By tolling bell and thunder's swell,  
a flaming star falls from the sky.  
By a full moon's glow, in House of Scorpio,  
Kneeling men bow to the King on High.*

THE SCORPION KING

# The Akkadian Assassins

F

lame shadows flickered in the night across the seven obelisks, giant rock shards embedded in the earth, ranging from ten to fifteen feet high, like spears of stone hurled down by giants or perhaps gods. And onto the obelisks had been carved faces, the images of gods chiseled there by primitive men long before the people of Ur had come here. These god faces seemed to stare at the village of tents nearby, hundreds of nomadic tarp-structures representing various clans—the last great tribes who had not fallen to the warlord Memnon—gathered on this dark night at this site of council.

Warriors in varying styles of helmet and leather cuirass, shields and swords at their sides, created a human circle around the assembly of their tribal leaders. Torches rode shafts, flames snapping at the coolness of the desert after dark, and a central fire pit threw orange and yellow at the blueness of the night.

Pheron of Ur, warrior king—a noble if grizzled figure, his white beard and a simple golden crown speaking volumes about his station—sat on a throne of stone, presiding over the council, gathered about the circle of fire. A debate was raging—and it was getting out of hand, reasoned discussion blazing into heated words and unruly outbursts.

"Silence!" King Pheron demanded.

The tide of quarreling did not roll back, however, and Takmet, a young, lightly bearded warrior, his breastplate unscarred, stepped forward. "My father calls for silence!"

The roar of rancor fell to a rumbling grumbling.

"Discord must cease!" Pheron said, putting as much force into his words as he could, war weary as he was. "We have come together in this sacred place to put our differences aside."

Deep breaths were let out, and men began to nod at this wisdom.

"There is still time for us, my brothers," Pheron said, "to unite against this tyrant—for without us . . . the last of the free tribes . . . the world is lost."

From the darkness stepped a Nubian woman of regal bearing and great physical beauty: Queen Isis. Her hair was long, well past her shoulders, and black as a raven's wing, her strong slender form bound in the leathers of war. Around Isis were a small army of dark female warriors, lovely, fierce. Like her.

"Memnon's soldiers," Isis said, "outnumber our own combined forces—ten to one... I am sorry, Pheron. Your heart is strong, your intentions noble . . . but warriors must choose their stands wisely. And we choose not to join you in this battle of futility."

"Will you flee, then?" King Pheron asked. "Like frightened females?"

The eyes of the dark queen flared.

But Pheron continued: "Because surely you know that Memnon will bring conquest to your door... You have only one choice, Isis. Stand and fight... or run."

The queen, her eyes tight, considered this.

The weathered king—he was an old man, past forty—looked at the gathering of tribal leaders, saw the struggle-hardened, often bearded faces, took in the helmets, the breastplates, the shields, the swords, and knew he faced warriors. "*The tribes must stand, and fight, together!*"

All eyes were on the king; the only sounds, other than his voice, were the night wind and the crackle of flames.

"Alone," Pheron said, "we will be like the rest of these human sheep . . . slaughtered. Memnon will continue his sweep to sea ... and he will destroy our tribes, one by one."

A *nomadic chieftain with a face as leathery as his cuirass* rose from his seat and stoically said, "Brave words, Pheron—but what of the sorcerer? The demon at Memnon's side, who sees with the eyes of gods . . . and foretells the outcome of every battle?"



Another tribal leader called out, "As long as that damned sorcerer is with him, no mortal can defeat Memnon!"

The king looked from face to face—soldier-rulers who wore the hard-earned scars of conflict, and the tribal markings of war. They were not cowards; they were brave fighting men, a relative handful, facing a merciless conqueror who seemingly had the supernatural on his side.

"And if this sorcerer," Pheron said, "were to die? What then?"

A deep voice from the darkness growled, "Another of your schemes, Pheron? Too late. Too little."

Seething, Takmet stood and shook a fist. "You will show my father respect!"

The man who had spoken also rose, and moved into the light of the fire. This was Balthazar—the warrior of warriors, in this or any group, a Nubian mountain of a man whose leathers barely concealed a seven-foot frame thick with muscle. Battle beads looping an impossibly thick neck, his face might have been a carved mask, with its slitted eyes and broad flat nose and snarl of mouth, cheeks bearing decorative scars, an otherwise shaved head topped by ropy braids.

"The truth respects no one," Balthazar said, his deep voice resonating. "It is only the truth ... and men who deny the truth deserve no respect."

Pheron said, "Nor do men who will not listen to reason."

"Listen to the *truth*, Pheron," Balthazar said, "if you are, as you claim, a man of reason. And the truth is this: My eyes have seen Memnon's army devour this land like hungry locusts. With the hordes at his command, facing Memnon with our meager numbers assures us of only one thing . . . defeat."

"Where would you run, Balthazar?" Pheron asked, with mock gentleness. "Where would you flee in a world ruled by Memnon?"

Eyes and nostrils flaring, the huge warrior said, "Balthazar and his people will *not* run.... I will continue to do as I have done these many months . . . raid the bastard's caravans, and weaken his supply chain. This I will do ... but what I will not do, for any man, for any men, is send my people to their certain death."

The king's son stepped forward, boldly, as he was much smaller than the looming Nubian. One hand on his sword hilt, the other holding a goblet of

wine (the possible source of his courage), Takmet faced the giant, saying defiantly, "*Your* people, Balthazar? You talk like a ruler."

"I am their king, little man."

Takmet laughed up at him. "You are king of nothing ... the ruler of a pile of sands and rocks."

Balthazar's hand barely blurred in firelight, so astonishingly fast did the big man move; his massive hand had clamped itself over the smaller man's hand, the one holding the golden goblet.

And Balthazar began to squeeze.

"If I am no king," the giant asked, as if genuinely curious, "why are you kneeling before me?"

By now Takmet was on his knees, howling in agony.

As the king's guards bolted to their feet, drawing their swords, the giant reached back—almost casually—for his sword, which rested against a tree trunk. The air crackled with not just the sound of flames, but with the promise of bloodshed....

An object flew from the darkness and slammed into the tree trunk above Balthazar's sword—an iron kama ... a hatchet-sized scythe ... quivering there menacingly, just above the sword hilt, between it and the fingers of the giant.

A voice—not as deep as Balthazar's, but deep enough, and quietly threatening, in a confident, almost low-key fashion—said, "So much talk ... Memnon may just wait for you fools to kill each other."

Through the guards, who reared away more in surprise than fear, came a trio of hooded figures, like gray ghosts floating through the night, all three of them tall but the center one the tallest, rivaling Balthazar himself. They even moved with a ghostly grace, though these were not phantoms but men—the swords and other weapons clanking at their cuirasses said as much.

They stood at the edge of the tribal council and flipped back their hoods—at left and right were warriors; the man in the middle ... who had hurled the kama...

This man was Mathayus, and he is the hero we have met. Massive yet supple, he presented a bearing at once regal and forceful, his skin a burnished copper, made even more bronze by the firelight, his dark eyes piercing, cheekbones high, chin cleft, brow furrowed ... and proud.

Balthazar drew away from the tree ... and his sword. His deep voice betrayed a certain awe. "Akkadians ... I thought they were wiped out long ago."

"They are the last of their kind," King Pheron said. "And by their hand, Memnon's sorcerer will die."

Balthazar frowned at the king. "You would put your faith in a clan of cutthroats? Men who kill not to defend their land and their people... but for money?"

Mathayus trained his eyes on the giant, fixing a cold glare on the man ... but he said nothing.

"They are more than simple 'cutthroats,' " the king said. "They are skilled assassins . . . trained for generations in the deadly arts."

Balthazar snorted. "Your words do not change the truth of it: these are men who kill for money. And such men are not to be trusted."

The king's son was on his feet, now, and—trying to regain some dignity—strode forward, to meet the cloaked trio. He stood before Mathayus and looked into his face.

"You," Takmet said to the tall Akkadian, and disrespect tinged his tone. "The others have faces marked for war. Why don't you wear your clan's markings?"

"Perhaps," Mathayus said, "I have not earned the right."

"Oh?"

Resting his hand on the pommel of his sword, Mathayus said, "Perhaps one must first kill enough men who ask stupid questions."

Takmet, noting the hand on the hilt, scrambled back to his father, addressing him with a distinct lack of the respect that the son had earlier demanded of others for this king. "And how much will these, these .. *mercenaries* cost?"

Quietly King Pheron stated, "Twenty blood rubies."

And the old man held out a leather pouch, at which his son stared, shocked, dismayed.

"Father!" Takmet gasped. "That... that's the last of our treasury!"

The king's frown exercised every deep line in his face. "Silence, boy!"

Takmet stood there staring at his father, for several long moments, as if he'd been slapped by the man; perhaps, in a sense, he had. The king's son was

trembling with embarrassment, and fighting to hold back his fury at what he considered to be his father's stupidity.

Then Takmet turned and stormed away, fuming, leaving the circle of fire.

Again, King Pheron addressed the tribal leaders, figures washed in the orange of firelight in the blue of night. "If the Akkadians kill the sorcerer ... then will you come together? Will you fight as one?"

It did not happen all at once. Murmured discussion followed; but then, slowly, gradually, heads began to nod, as one by one they agreed with Pheron's proposal... even the lovely Queen Isis. Only one tribal leader had not responded to the question ...

. . . Balthazar.

And finally all faces turned toward the Nubian giant, waiting. His eyes like cuts in his scarred visage, Balthazar released a deep sigh, and then... nodded.

King Pheron turned his gaze upon the Akkadian trio, nodding himself.

"So be it," the king said.

The eldest of the Akkadian trio, Jesup, stepped forward, going to the king, accepting the offered pouch of rubies. Half bowing to the monarch, Jesup pledged the Akkadian's blood oath.

"As long as one of us breathes," Jesup swore to the king, "the sorcerer will die."

Jesup rejoined his fellow Akkadians, and the cloaked trio began to take their leave, again moving through the armed guards, who stepped aside for them.

"Assassin!" a deep voice called out.

Mathayus spun and Balthazar hurled the kama back at him, the scythe whipping and whirring and whirling...

... until the unmarked Akkadian plucked it from the air, like a ball a boy had tossed him.

Mathayus raised a single eyebrow as he studied the giant Nubian, who did his best to hide his amazement.

To Pheron, Mathayus said, "If you should want *him* killed ... that we'll do for free."

And then the cloaked trio was swallowed by the night, leaving behind a circle of fire and an astonished tribal council.

## The Sorcerer's Secret

T

he desert location, where the encampment of Memnon's army was last known to be, meant a full day's ride through hill country. Starting at dawn, the Akkadians made their steady way across the rugged, rocky terrain, Jesup and Rama on horseback, Mathayus—a massive, intricately carved bow slung over his shoulder, five arrows attached to its side in a clip—astride an albino camel.

This mount—the bag of rubies had been tucked away into a hiding place of the saddle by Mathayus—was called Hanna by his master, who considered the camel a magnificent albeit stubborn creature. The elder Akkadian, the hard-bitten Jesup, deemed Hanna a filthy beast.

"When are you going to get rid of that moth-eaten bag of fleas?" Jesup had asked at daybreak, just as the broad-shouldered Akkadian was mounting her.

Hanna—who understood at least as many words as the average five-year-old child—turned toward Jesup with regal condescension and spat at him.

Mathayus laughed as the older Akkadian, on horseback, reared back; and the camel's master had no recriminations for the animal, whose neck he patted, settling her.

"Steady, girl," Mathayus said. "He doesn't mean anything by it."

But Jesup's expression had said, *Like hell!*

Still, even the veteran Akkadian warrior would have had to admit—if pressed—that the dromedary was far better suited for navigating the craggy, scraggy terrain than his and Rama's steeds.

As the morning turned to afternoon, the rocks gave way to sand and the sun seemed like a hole in the sky letting the fire of the gods blast through. The custom of the Akkadians was not to wear the peplum common for so many warriors in those days; rather they had shunned tunics for leather breeches ... though under so severe a sun, even a brawler like Mathayus could understand the appeal of a skirt for a man. On the other hand, when the sun fell, so did the temperature, and the wind had a startling bite, the night vivid with a moon-touched blueness that turned the desert a surreal, deceptively soothing shade of sapphire.

From the crest of a dune, they saw Memnon's city of tents, with campfires whose numbers rivaled the stars. And yet the three Akkadians advanced, a tiny assault force against an army. They performed reconnaissance, noting the positions of the various sentries ringing the encampment, perched on their individual dunes, warriors in breastplates and helmets and peplum, surrounded by torches on staffs stuck in the sand.

Poor strategy, Mathayus thought; for whatever warmth and close-by light those torches would provide, so too would the flames blind the sentries of advancing trespassers . . . like the Akkadians....

The mustached Rama, the lightest-skinned of the trio, had darkened his face with black war paint, to better blend into the night. Neither Jesup nor Mathayus bothered with this—their bronze complexions were a natural camouflage—but then Rama would have to get in closer, at first anyway.

The nearest dune-positioned sentry yawned—no doubt complacent in his duties . . . after all, what enemy remained to attack the horde that had conquered all but a tiny corner of the world? And he merely frowned and turned, curiously, at the strange whirring that flew out of the darkness like a desert bird.

This was no bird, however—the iron bola.. . flung by Rama ... came spinning out of the darkness to wrap its chain around the guard's head, with whiplash speed, the iron ball at either end knocking the man in either temple, *thwap!*, *thwap!*

The sentry tumbled to the sand—his leather armor made more noise than he did, and then very little—landing flat on his back, as if he were lounging there, to consider the night sky.

Within moments, Mathayus—who had edged in under cover of darkness to the bottom of the dune, prior to Rama's bola attack—scrambled up the hill of

sand and sat the sentry up, propping him in part by placing the man's spear back in his hand ... still on duty, if sitting down on the job.

The white camel came loping up the dune after her master, just as Mathayus was unwrapping the bola from around the sentry's skull. Hanna groaned and nose-nudged the assassin—it was as if the beast were saying, after its long day's journey, *No time for fun and games now... we should be setting camp for the night!*

"Easy, girl," the Akkadian whispered.

The camel's response was typically stubborn: she folded her spindly legs and sat down. Mathayus shook his head, knowing this was no time to try to reason with the beast... or discipline her, either. As with any woman, there were simply things a man had to put up with\_\_

Mathayus looked to the left, where—some distance away at the camp's perimeter—a crude wooden lookout platform bore a single sentry. To the right, a neighboring dune also sported a sentry ... again, a bored guard who stood at the center of torches speared into the sand, his vision bedimmed by the flames. This sentry would be next.

The Akkadian's long low whistle might have been a nocturnal bird ...

... and not a signal which spurred Rama to further action.

Again, a bola whirled through the night to whip around the head of a guard, who flopped backward onto the sand.

Another nocturnal bird seemed to issue its mournful cry: Rama signaling "all clear" to Mathayus.

But Hanna's displeasure with the activities of the evening manifested itself with a honking groan, and her master clasped a hand over the camel's mouth.

"Be good!" the Akkadian whispered, glaring at the beast, who frowned a pout in response, before flapping her gums and settling.

Hanna's action almost covered the soft hiss of movement just behind Mathayus, but the Akkadian's ears were finely tuned, honed to the night, and he spun around, hand on his scimitar hilt.

But it was only the elder warrior, Jesup, who asked, "Ready?"

Mathayus nodded, and gestured toward the sentry on the wooden platform. "That one's mine."

Jesup nodded back, reminding the younger man, "Wait for the signal."

"Yes."

"Live free," Jesup said, initiating the traditional Akkadian farewell.

Then the two men gripped forearms, the leather wristguards snapping against each other.

"Die well," Mathayus replied, completing the ritual.

As Jesup slipped away, vanishing into the darkness, Mathayus quickly unslung his magnificent bow and notched an arrow ... not just any arrow. This one bore an iron tip with no feathered tail—an eye-bolt through which was tied a catgut tether line.

Powerful as he was, Mathayus always felt the strain drawing back the taut bowstring—though the weapon was all but a part of him, its use remained a challenge. And when he finally released the bowstring, the arrow seemed to burn through the night, with an impossible power and swiftness ... trailing its catgut tether.

A good quarter mile away, the arrow struck deep, embedding itself firmly in the thickness of a wooden lodge pole. Mathayus's smile was tight as he gazed across the encampment, the tether now bisecting the tent city from this dune to that distant pole. It cut past the sentry platform, just above and to one side of it... but the bored guard had not noticed, at least not yet.

Soon the Akkadian was tying his end of the tether line onto the pommel of his saddle. Slipping the bola over the tied tether—making a decent handgrip of its two iron balls—he nudged the camel to attention. No argument this time, as Hanna pushed to her feet.

Mathayus tested the line, to see if the tether ... and the camel. .. could take his weight. Hanna groaned in protest, but he gave her a hard look— now and then, he had to remind the beast who was boss.

"Stay," he said, firmly, and the animal and the man locked eyes.

And the beast nodded, or seemed to ... and that was good enough for the Akkadian.

He backed up, and began to run and grabbed onto the iron bola balls and went gliding down the tether line, off the dune and over the sands and toward the encampment. Hanna was staying put, and this was easy ... almost fun ... and the Akkadian risked holding on *with one hand, to remove from his waistband* his hatchetlike kama.

When he swooped past that sentry platform, Mathayus wielded the nonlethal side of the kama, using it like a war club, whacking the guard across the



shoulders, knocking the man off his post, sending him spinning head over heels into the darkness, to either unconsciousness or death.

A few minutes prior, elsewhere in the encampment, two of Memnon's most lovingly sadistic torturers—a pair of fat, greasy, bearded, sweaty brutes as interchangeable as a right and left sandal—were heating up a poker in the coals of a campfire. Looking on with considerable interest was a skinny little weasel of a man, his leathers shabby, his face wis-pily bearded; his name was Arpid, and at the moment his world was turned upside down.

Literally.

For Arpid—a thief by trade, a horse thief by specialty—was suspended over the fire, his head so near the flames his scraggly hair was getting singed. Tied by the ankles and hanging from a post like an overripe fruit, Arpid watched from his upended perspective as one of the fat torturers withdrew the poker and displayed its glowing orange tip to his colleague.

Both of the fat brutes gazed lovingly at the fiery tip of the poker. To some men, work is but a job; to these two, imparting affliction was a calling.

They seemed a bit surprised, when a deep, imperial voice emanated from the dangling horse thief. "Stop! You must stop and heed my words—I am a high priest of Set!"

The torturers exchanged expressions of raised eyebrows and crinkled-chin consideration.

"Spare me," the suspended man intoned, "and the gods shall rain fortune upon thee, for all the rest of thy days!"

Now the torturers laughed, and the one with the poker began to raise its fiery tip toward the bare soles of the skinny man's bound-at-the-ankles feet.

Panic shook the skinny swinging frame, and an entirely different voice emerged from the victim, a reedy, whiny thing: "Please! No! Stop! Wait! I was *not* stealing that horse. I swear ... I was just doing the decent thing."

Now the torturers traded wide-eyed looks; "decent," was it?

"I was just moving that poor animal into the shade," the skinny prisoner avowed. "It was so very hot that day ..."

"Not as hot as tonight," the torturer with the poker pointed out.

As Arpid closed his eyes and waited for the searing pain, an Akkadian assassin—sliding down into the camp on a tether tied to a camel—was nearing this tableau of torture. And Mathayus would have glided on by, had

the camel called Hanna not decided, at that moment, that enough was enough. The strain of that tether and all that weight was simply too much stress to endure, even to please her master, and the albino camel sat down.

So did Mathayus—in a way. The tether suddenly slack, the Akkadian was tossed onto the sand, in a rude pile, landing—as an impish fate would have it—right alongside those two fat greasy torturers, who paused prior to burning Arpid's bare feet just long enough to look at Mathayus in amazement.

Their surprise quickly turned to fury, and now both torturers had red-hot pokers in their hands, raised and ready to charge the intruder.

The intruder was having none of that. Mathayus whipped his scimitar from its sheath and dispatched both brutes, who were dead and draining their blood into the sand with nary a cry of alarm from either set of slobbering lips.

The dangling horse thief—the slashing sounds had pried open his eyes—gazed at his upside-down savior with adoring appreciation.

"Thank you, kind sir!" he burred.

Mathayus glanced at the skinny creature hanging over the flames like a pig being roasted—a scrawny one.

Arpid thanked his rescuer profusely, babbling, "For the mercy you have shown me, the gods shall rain fortune on you for—"

"Quiet," Mathayus said, and elbowed the man in the face, knocking him out cold—or perhaps warm, considering the flames licking up at the thief's hair.

With the tether hopelessly slack, Mathayus abandoned it and slipped into the darkness, heading for the point of rendezvous; soon, deep within the encampment, he had hooked up with his two fellow Akkadians. The trio stood within the shadows and studied a corridor of sorts, between rows of tents.

"That one," Mathayus whispered, and pointed.

The other two saw immediately why Mathayus had singled out this particular tent—this shelter was unlike any other in this camp, and different from any these Akkadians had ever seen. A dome-shaped patchwork of hides, the good-size tent was decorated with symbols of astrology and ideograms of the occult.

Clearly the home of a sorcerer...

They moved stealthily across the open area between tent rows, the only sound the soft snick as they drew their knives, as they closed in quickly on the sorcerer's tent. As they dropped back into shadows, Mathayus's eyes were

everywhere, taking in even the rustle of a tent flap, stirred by the night breeze  
... .

... revealing the feet of dozens of guardsmen lying in wait!

"Back," Mathayus whispered, halting, arms spread, as he realized the trap they had walked into.

And the other Akkadians stopped short, as well; but it was too late to retreat.

A flap running the length of the domelike tent snapped suddenly open—exposing a dozen archers who instantly let fly their arrows. At almost the same moment, a similar flap along a tent on the opposite side of the corridor snapped open and yanked upward and a dozen more archers were sending arrows their way, catching the Akkadians in a deadly cross fire.

Mathayus had the reflexes of youth on his side, and he leaped up, grasping the overhang of a large tent, flipping onto its tarpaulin roof, arrows flying just beneath him, barely missing him ...

... but not missing his two brother Akkadians, cutting them down.

And Mathayus could only stare down in horror as his companions were overwhelmed by the arrows. No help he could give would save them now . . . they were lost... and he could only surge forward, scampering like a cub across the sagging top of the tent.

So swift had Mathayus's action been, taking himself up and out of harm's way, the soldiers below—moving out from their hiding place into that open area—had not seen his escape. It was as if the third Akkadian had simply disappeared; they searched among the tents, not realizing the tall assassin was high above them, clinging to the very crest of the sorcerer's dome.

With his knife Mathayus cut through the hides and created an opening, through which he dropped down, landing like a big cat, almost silently, on the hide-covered floor.

It was if he had entered another world, a strange, shadowy, yet golden tent-chamber where elaborate drapes and tapestries hung, ornate benches and furnishings lending a palatial feel, while a central fire created a smoky ground-level fog that added to an undeniable occult atmosphere.

Rising to a crouch, Mathayus unslung his formidable bow and notched an arrow. Clearing a hanging tapestry, he realized he was not alone. A figure with its back to him, in a long flowing cape with a high ornate stiff collar,

decorated with moon signs and other enigmatic symbols, began to swivel around to him, with an unnatural fluidity, as if floating.

The sorcerer.

Closing one eye, the master archer took aim, as the figure turned fully to him...

... and the sorcerer, it seemed, was a sorceress.

As fully concealed as this figure had been with its cloaked back to him, now was it fully revealed. Barely clad, much of her golden-hued skin exposed, her form was slender yet shapely, high firm breasts half-concealed by a glittering halter, loins also girded in gilt. An oval face of such breathtaking beauty he had never seen—wide-set almond eyes as large as they were dark, delicate nose, small perfect lips, all framed by shoulder-length obsidian hair topped by a golden headdress.

Her eyes held his, hypnotically—*was she a dream?*

Entranced, thunderstruck by such rare beauty, Mathayus allowed his grip on the bowstring to loosen, slightly; then he squeezed his eyes shut, trying to regain, and maintain, his concentration.

This was sorcery ... and he had, after all, come to kill a sorcerer. Who was to say this was not a man, an evil magician, casting a spell of feminine illusion?

"I am Cassandra," she said. Her voice was musical, and as she stepped forward, tiny toe-ring cymbals kept time, chiming as she moved. On her hands were gloves of gold . . . with silver claws.

He had come here to kill. Once again he aimed his arrow at her heart....

"You have been betrayed, Mathayus," she said.

*But her lips were not moving!*

The voice, the lovely, musical voice, was in his mind! He squeezed shut his eyes, opened them, and sighted down the drawn arrow as he spoke.

"You know my name?" he asked her.

She nodded. In his head, her voice said, "And I know why you're here... but I'm afraid you will not find me so easily slain."

As he stared at his beautiful target, Mathayus felt a strange, perhaps sorcery-induced sensation ... time seemed to slow, even while his mind raced.

"So kill me," she said, aloud this time. "If you can."

Her eyes seemed to delve deep within him, to his very soul; he felt weak, the strain on his arm, however massively muscular, was enormous.

He let the arrow fly ... but his target was not the sorceress.

A red-turbaned guard had stepped inside the tent, just behind Cassandra, and the arrow took him off his feet and out of this life.

As Mathayus—alert, himself again—notched another arrow, the sorceress viewed him with ineffable sadness.

"I am sorry, Akkadian," she said aloud, as if she meant the words. As if she had wanted to die. "You lost your chance."

Another guard in helmet and leathers came charging at him, sword swinging. Mathayus threw down the bow, and whipped his scimitar from its sheath, with his right hand, and with his left withdrew the kama. When the guard was upon him, Mathayus deflected the sword blow with the scimitar, and swung the kama into the man's midsection, dropping him to the smoky floor to bleed and die.

The next one came up from behind, and the Akkadian swiveled and traded blows of blades with the man, then slashing him across the chest and elbowing him to the ground. Two more were on him then, their swords flashing, and the assassin swung his blade around, killing one instantly, wounding the other, but dropping both men. He finished the surviving one—the sorceress was chilled by the ice-cold expression of the assassin hard at work—with a downward stabbing blow, and was catching his wind, when suddenly they were everywhere, red turbans streaming into the tent.

Like a machine designed for killing, he fought them with a skill and ferocity that astounded the sorceress, much as her beauty had taken his breath away.

But their numbers overwhelmed Mathayus, until they swarmed over him within the confined space, and he did not see Memnon himself enter, in the company of his second-in-command, the scarred human demon called Thorak, who—trident in hand—advanced toward the one-man army.

Surrounded by red-turbaned guards, who had fought him to a standstill, Mathayus was preparing for one last glorious assault, to carve a bloody breach through them on his way to dying well, when the trident thrust forward, and its three prongs pinned him to the central tent post.

And in his mind he heard the voice of the sorceress again, genuinely sorrowful: */ am sorry, Akkadian. I am sorry.*

## Desert Death

T

he sea of soldiers parted around Mathayus, who remained pinned by Thorak's trident to the tent post, allowing him to see his host approaching. No introduction was needed: the man in golden chain mail, whose regal bearing did not diminish the austere cruelty of his handsome features, could be no one but Memnon himself.

The Teacher of Men paused, appraising his brawny guest, saying, "A living, breathing Akkadian ... What a rarity ... what an uncommon pleasure."

And Memnon strode forward to Mathayus and planted himself before the warrior with a fearlessness that had nothing to do with the assassin's captive state.

"I have heard," Lord Memnon said, "that your kind trains itself to bear great pain." With a smile as small as it was nasty, Memnon nodded to his massive second-on-command, Thorak, gesturing for him to remove the trident. "Well, we'll put your capacity to withstand pain to the test. . ."

Mathayus spat in the warlord's face.

A tiny sneer preceded Memnon's response— which was to backhand the Akkadian, a blow of such power that blood spattered the tent wall nearby.

"You bleed like any other man," Memnon pointed out.

Mathayus sneered, too—not a tiny one, though ... a bloody snarl of defiance.

That look vanished, however, as the Akkadian heard a familiar voice: "What? No more cold, daring words from the heartless assassin?"

The sarcasm had come from a young, lightly bearded man in noble leathers, just entering the room, with a cowhide sack—large enough for a good-size water jug—gripped by its draw ties.

*Takmet!* The son of King Pheron of Ur ...

And Mathayus now understood why the sorceress had spoken of treachery.

"You, Takmet," Mathayus said, his eyes wide. "*You* are our betrayer?"

This seemed to amuse the king's son, who answered by way of a sarcastic half bow.

In the brutal world in which Mathayus had lived his life, a man's word, his honor, was all that separated him from the animals, even the human ones. "You would betray your own *father*?"

Takmet shrugged. "My father was a forgetful old fool."

The words chilled Mathayus ... one word, anyway: *was*.

"He deserved no better from the son he slighted." The slender heir to the throne of Ur turned to the warlord. "The old man paid for underestimating me ... he was terribly shocked. You can tell by the look on his face."

And Takmet dipped his hand into the leather pouch and withdrew the head of his father.

Indeed, the expression on King Pheron's face was one of surprise.

Sickened, Mathayus scowled at this excuse for a man, and the guards around, even Thorak himself, frowned; the sorceress turned away, not in womanly fright but in distaste. Only Lord Memnon seemed pleased . . . and darkly amused.

Brandishing the severed head high, clutching it by its gray hair, Takmet said, rather formally, "With my father's head, I pledge my allegiance!"

With a casual gesture, Memnon said, "Takmet, your loyalty is proven.... You shall command my left wing, and serve as governor over Ur, after its capture."

Thorak, at Mathayus's side, frowned a little.

Perhaps glimpsing this, Memnon turned toward his second-in-command, saying, "And with Thorak leading my right wing, we shall lay waste to all who dare challenge our might."

Mathayus despised this creature who was Memnon, but even he knew the man had a charismatic way about him—the red-turbaned guards were hanging on the warlord's every word.

"And by the rise of the demon moon," the Great Teacher was saying, "my armies will sweep to the sea... and I will ascend the throne as the king of ancient legend, favored ruler of the gods.... Just as the prophecy decrees."

Across the smoky floor of the canvas-and-animal-hide chamber, Cassandra nodded her confirmation.

Then, a tent flew back, and—in a clatter of leather armor and steel weaponry—a pair of guards dragged in a prisoner.

Jesup.

Within him, Mathayus felt a wave of despair rise, seeing his brother, his fellow warrior, held by either arm, hauled in like a sack of grain, more dead than alive, body pockmarked with the red wounds of arrows. Barely conscious, the elder Akkadian managed to raise his head and look across the tent at Mathayus.

One of the guards at Jesup's side spoke: "As you can see, my lord, this one still lives."

"How interesting," Memnon said, strolling across the fog-draped floor, stopping to pick up one of Mathayus's knives, dropped in combat. "For a race that has all but disappeared from the earth, these Akkadians seem surprisingly difficult to kill."

Mathayus, gripped on either side by a guard, watched ruefully as the warlord examined the small throwing blade, an exquisite example of the Akkadian art of weapon-making.

"Beautiful," Memnon said, his admiration sincere, flipping the blade in his palm. "Bring the warrior to me. I wish to honor him."

Rage bursting within him, Mathayus surged forward, but the soldiers managed to hold back the caged lion. He watched helplessly as his brother was dragged across the smoky ground and brought before Memnon. Jesup's half-lidded eyes locked with those of Mathayus .. . and the elder's eyes opened bright and strong.

"Live free," Jesup said.

"Die well," Mathayus said, resignedly. "My brother.

And in one vicious if fluid move, the Great Teacher swept forward and slashed with the captured blade.

Mathayus had lived with death every day of his life; but the pain he felt, as that blade sliced open the elder Akkadian's throat, sent a madness, in both senses ... rage, insanity .. . searing through his brain, his being.



The brave Mathayus—unknowingly mirroring the reaction of the sorceress—could only turn away from the sight, feeling in the pit of his stomach as though that blade had just been buried there.

He did not see the sorceress experience her own wave of psychic pain. Cassandra's eyes squeezed tight shut, and she raised a hand to her head, as if testing for a fever—she sensed a deep rumbling, experienced the sound as if it had come from without, a resonant thunder, like the plates of the earth were shifting.

But when she opened her eyes, she could clearly see that no one else in the tent had heard or sensed this aural sensation, even as its echo reverberated in her mind, blotting out the voices of the men around her.

Much as she wished to avoid the sight of bloodshed, her eyes suddenly flew to Lord Memnon, who held in his hand the dagger dripping liquid rubies. What she saw no one else in the room beheld: *Memnon's face was edged in silver—his head, ringed with a shimmering halo of light.*

"Never have I used a blade so sharp as this," Memnon was saying, studying the knife. "I wonder if using it has dulled its edge ... if it will hold that edge, a second time ..."

And the Great Teacher stepped forward, raising the dagger, his eyes on Mathayus's throat.

*Die well*, Mathayus thought, and he quickly but thoroughly shifted his gaze from one man to the next—Thorak, Takmet, finally Memnon—and said through a smile, "I will see all of you again... in the underworld."

Memnon returned the smile. "Oh, but not for a very long time, Akkadian."

Now the warlord brandished the knife, preparing for a sideways slash across the prisoner's throat.

*"Stop!"*

The sorceress's voice was as sharp as the blade itself; all eyes turned toward her.

*"Wait!"* Her voice carried authority, as did her stance, chin up, beautiful eyes narrowed yet hard, glittering like dark precious jewels. "Mathayus shall not die tonight."

"If *that* is your prophecy," Memnon said, poised to slash, "perhaps I need a new occult adviser. ..."

And yet the warlord stayed his blade.

"Change your future," she said coolly, "if you wish."

Memnon looked quickly toward her.

"Should Mathayus die by your hand," she said, "or by any hand you command . . . misfortune will fall upon you. The gods are watching, my king."

The red-turbaned guards—these mighty warriors who had slain so many, and spilled so much blood—were cowed by the musical voice of this witch. Mathayus was almost amused by the awe and even fear on their faces. Memnon noticed this, too . . . and the warlord knew, as his soldiers knew, that his battlefield successes had been advanced, in part at least, by the supernatural wisdom of this woman.

Memnon lowered the knife, but his eyes locked with those of his prisoner. "A puzzle, then . . . how to kill you, without using my hand . . . or any hand I command . . . What was it you said, Akkadian? Die well?"

Mathayus said nothing, but his gaze conveyed all the contempt he could muster.

The warlord responded with an air of mock concern. "Dying well, a noble death, that's important to you, eh? . . . I will do my best to serve you."

Mathayus watched as Memnon turned, moving toward the sorceress, and the Akkadian did not see the blow coming, when Thorak swung his fist into the prisoner's jaw, knocking him not into the next world, but a dark mind-chamber of this one.

When the assassin came to, the sun was bright above—Mathayus had been unconscious for many hours, because the night had been replaced not by morning, but day—and he knew at once he was immobilized. His vision, low to the ground, took in a view of a gully of sand and rocks and the occasional sun-bleached skull, sticking up out of the desert floor.

Those skulls, disconcerting though they might be, were not the worst of it: surrounding him in the shallow pitlike gully were at least a dozen earthen hills, cones ranging from three to six feet in height, with openings at the top. Into and out of these portals scurried large insects—fire ants—scampering with the intensity of their well-focused existence.

And by now the Akkadian realized he was buried in the sand—up to his neck.

A pair of red-turbaned guards sat on rocks along the lip of the gully. One of them rose from his boulder perch and made his way through the cones and

rocks, carrying some oily rags in one hand and bearing a torch, flaming like the sun, in the other. Methodically, the guard began setting fire to the rags ... and dropping them down into the cones.

A reedy voice to his right spoke to the Akkadian, almost casually: "Fascinating, isn't it?"

Turning his head slightly to one side was about the only movement Mathayus was capable of making, and he did so, taking in the sight of that horse thief, the one who'd been suspended over those flames last night, also buried up to his scrawny neck, beside the Akkadian.

"The smoke spooks the ants," the horse thief was saying, in a detached manner, "making 'em abandon their homes. You see?"

The guard was jumping back, as the huge insects, thousands of them, came boiling up out of the cones.

"All the sooner," the thief said, "to feast on our naked heads."

Mathayus had barely been listening to this, more intent on trying to free himself, though his struggling seemed in vain. "You find this funny, do you?"

"You're Akkadian, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"I heard the guards talking. I thought your kind was all dead."

"Not yet."

"Not till those ants get you, you mean?"

"Your humor eludes me."

"Name's Arpid. Honest man accused of theft. You are?"

"Mathayus ... Laugh at me, please. The anger may help me escape."

"I don't think so. You see, that's what I find funny. A pitiful specimen like me, and a brawny brute like you ... and yet *I* am about to escape ...

while you are about to die a horrible death, no doubt brought about by a dire destiny earned by you for leaving me to die last night!"

"You? *You're* about to escape."

"That's right. Men like you... all muscle, no brains ... poor man, you only see the surface, don't you?" The wispily bearded thief managed to nod toward the two guards seated on their rocks around the gully's edge. "They're just like you . . . While they were burying us, I was pretending to be a-sleep.. . only I was actually sucking air into my lungs, till they were the size of a camel's bladder."

The guard who'd been distributing the fiery rags to the anthills was now returning to his rock at the gully's edge. Mathayus watched as the man lifted a wineskin and drank. The other guard was examining the haul they'd made: a cache of weapons that had been Mathayus's ... including the massive bow, which the guard quickly discovered he couldn't begin to draw back.

A tiny smile etched itself on the Akkadian's lips, but it didn't last long: now, striding into the buried assassin's view, came rows of fire ants, an army marching from the surrounding cones with a single objective: Mathayus's head.

"If you're going to escape," Mathayus said to his fellow prisoner, as the ants moved toward him, "what are you waiting for?"

"You see that one?" Arpid asked, referring not to one of the oncoming ants, but to the nearer of the two guards, the fellow drinking wine from a skin.

"What about him?"

"Nothing. Just, he's been drinking that yak piss for about an hour now, and very soon nature's going to run its course and . . . *ah!* What did I tell you."

The guard was rising from his rock, heading over to another pile of boulders; soon, he was relieving himself, his back to the prisoners down in the sandy gully.

"Damned if you weren't right..." Mathayus began, turning toward his fellow prisoner ...

... but he was talking to an empty hole in the ground! Arpid was gone, slithered up and out of that hole that would seem only large enough for a man's head. But if that slender fellow had truly filled himself with air...

And now Mathayus was alone down in the gully—or almost alone: he still had his friends, the fire ants, less than twenty feet away.

The Akkadian was as brave as any man in his world, but nonetheless, panic consumed him, in advance of the ants doing the same, and he struggled madly within his prison of sand, to no success.

"Hey!" someone yelled.

It was the guard, on his way back from his piss, having noticed the absence of the horse thief, Arpid. The other guard was busy, sitting on the ground, using his feet to try to draw back Mathayus's bow, still without any luck.

The guard moved a few feet down the slope, eyes searching a landscape littered with stones, skulls, ants and one buried-to-his-head Akkadian.

"Where did that little turd go?" the guard asked Mathayus, as if the prisoner weren't already busy staring at a moving mound of fire ants, fifteen feet away, the insects closing the distance at a slow but determined pace.

In fact, Mathayus didn't see, at first, Arpid coming up behind the red-turbaned guard, hauling a thick tree branch, which the thief swung into the back of the man's head, as if hitting a ball. The guard dropped onto the rocks, face first, dead to the world.

The other guard, his attention finally drawn away from the massive bow with which he was struggling, abandoned the effort and scrambled to his feet. But he wasn't quick enough, as another swing of the tree branch sent him toppling down the incline, into the gully, colliding with ... and knocking over ..several of the massive anthills. Within moments the guard was blanketed with swarming insects, who seemed undeterred by the man's screaming and thrashing about.

Another tide of fire ants, however, was rolling in an inexorable black wave toward the Akkadian, steadily closing the distance ...

"Arpid!" Mathayus yelled. "Come on!"

The thief was now sitting on the same rock the knocked-cold guard had been, sipping from the fellow's wineskin, enjoying a long, slow pull. When he'd finished the drink, he wiped his skimpily bearded face with the back of a hand, and glanced down at Mathayus with an expression that said, *Oh—are you still here?*

"Get me the hell out of this!" the Akkadian yelled, ants marching toward him.

Arpid arched an eyebrow, perched casually on the rock. "And why should I do that?"

Stunned by this response, Mathayus stared up at him for a moment, then howled, furiously, "Because if you don't, I'll kill you!"

Two ants, real leaders among their species, had gone out on a scouting mission, and were climbing the Akkadian's head; he shook it violently, and they responded with stings and bites.

Arpid shook his head in mock sympathy. "You're going to have to survive those hideous bugs to do me any harm ... and that doesn't seem likely. You see, skeletons don't get up and walk around, much less kill someone."

And indeed that swarm of ants had devoured the flesh of the fallen guard, leaving him a pile of bones draped with precious few shreds of flesh.

"Isn't that disgusting?" Arpid said, and shivered.

"Get... me ... out... of... *here!*"

Arpid seemed to be considering that possibility. He plucked a torch from the sand, where one of the guards had embedded it, and took a few quick steps down into the pit. Then he paused.

"Mathayus ..."

"Yes!"

"What would you give me for helping you?"

"You'd bargain for my life! You little *weasel*..."

"Don't you know you get more with honey than vinegar? Ask your little friends ... they'll tell you— between bites."

Mathayus had managed to fling the two ants off himself, but the others were advancing, a grotesque battalion of antennae and bug eyes and pinchers. . . .

"Forget it," Arpid was saying, heading back up.

"Wait! Wait!"

Arpid stopped, turned, glanced back down the slope. Eyebrows lifted.

In the midst of a slow burn, Mathayus reached inside himself and found a smile. "Where are my manners?"

The swarm of flesh-eating death was less than three feet away, now. The Akkadian gritted his teeth and forced that smile onward....

"Good sir," the assassin said through his glazed smile. "If you please ... would you kindly *get me the hell out of here?*"

Arpid shrugged. "That was a little better.. . Promise not to kill me?"

"Yes! On my oath!"

"You're an Akkadian, remember—you make an oath, you always keep it, right? That's your way, your code, huh?"

"Yes. Yes. That's right."

Another scouting party of ants was climbing the Akkadian now, perhaps a dozen, or a baker's dozen, nibbling at him, just warming up. Blinking, shaking his head, Mathayus did his best to cast them off. One climbed his lips and he bit the thing in two and spat it out.

"When you make an oath," Arpid said, in a rhetorical tone, "do you honor it, even if it's one you come to regret?"

"Yes! Yes!"

The little thief, torch in hand, was approaching. "Then promise to take me with you... as your trusted partner and companion . . . and share with me, equally, the spoils of battle."

"Fine! I swear! I promise!"

Arpid thrust the torch in the path of the ants, which sent them scurrying away. Then he knelt before the head sticking up out of the sand.

"All right, Akkadian ... hold still."

And the thief began carefully picking the ants off the assassin's face.

Within minutes, Mathayus was up the slope and gathering his weapons, while the surviving guard remained an unconscious sprawl on the rocks and sand. The scrawny horse thief was animated, filled with enthusiasm, though not helping the Akkadian in his recovery efforts.

"What a splendid turn of events," the thief was saying. "Wherever you go, there'll be death, and lots of it! I mean, look at you—strapping specimen. And where there's death, there's bodies, and where there are bodies, there are pockets, waiting to be emptied ... gold, silver, who knows what treasures we'll share! After all, we'll split everything straight down the middle, both money *and* work. I'll handle the stealing and you . . . well, you'll take care of the slaughter. Fair enough?"

Mathayus's intricately carved bow caught the eye of the bouncy little thief, who went over to it and picked up the massive weapon.

Then somebody was picking the thief up—by the scarf around his neck—and hauling him several feet off the ground.

Mathayus glared at the thief, nose to nose now, and plucked away the bow and said to him, "Don't touch this again. Not ever."

Arpid managed to speak, through the narrow hole of his choked-off windpipe. "Well... I think we're off to a very good start... don't you?"

Mathayus let loose of the thief, as if discarding him. Then the Akkadian whistled, loud, sharp. The thief glanced about.

"Who are you calling?" Arpid asked.

"My ride," Mathayus said.

Before long the albino camel came loping up over a nearby ridge. The assassin walked to his mount, stroked the beast's neck, and swung up into the saddle.

And rode off.

"So!" Arpid called. "Where are we headed?"

Mathayus said nothing; he nudged the camel to more speed, and the animal complied.

"Hey!" the thief yelled. "We struck a bargain!"

The little man on foot trotted after the bigger man astride the albino camel.

"All right," the thief chattered breathlessly as he ran after the Akkadian, "I'll tell *you* where we're going! You came to kill that woman—that witch! Only you failed ... You saw how comely she was, and your bread started to rise, and you *choked*!"

Mathayus glowered back, as he rode; then he spurred the camel to a full gallop.

Desperately, Arpid ran faster, too, yelling, "So now you have to save your honor! And kill the wench!... Only, you don't know where she is, where Memnon's taking her... and I do!"

Scowling to himself, Mathayus kept right on riding.

But slower.



## Sin City

T

hough its reputation was of sin and decadence, Gomorrah bespoke order and control, or at least its outward appearance did. At the heart of a rocky valley, as spectacular as it was imposing, this fortress city—heavily guarded by the red-turbaned minions of Memnon—was dominated by the battlements and turrets of the Great Teacher's palace.

The sandstone throne room of that palace was a magnificent space worthy of so renowned a warlord—gilded, pilastered, adorned with stark, muted (though colorful) designs that anticipated Egyptian culture of centuries to come; torch lamps—dark metal bowls of fire on spindly legs—threw a golden hue across the vast chamber, rife with lush drapes, intricate tapestries, oversize urns, and furnishings of strong simple design.

Along one wall slept two chained young beasts— a tiger and a lion—barely bigger than cubs, but not the pets of a commonplace man, not even a commonplace ruler. A huge, ornate golden throne, overseen by a shieldlike symbol, and bookended by ivory tusks pointing left and right, provided a looming perch fit for the king Memnon meant to be; along one side of the throne room, a spacious balcony looked out across the spires of the city ... the fabled city of sin that now belonged to Lord Memnon.

At a small round table near that balcony sat the sorceress, Cassandra, poring over a parchment map on which she arranged agates and jade and other smooth stones, in a manner, a pattern, flowing instinctively from an unearthly source within her. Clad in a diaphanous robe, her breasts and loins covered in glittering chain mail, regal in her golden headdress, she

was attended by two similarly underclad beauties with feathered fans, soothing her from the warmth of the desert clime. But their presence, like the heat itself, did not penetrate her preoccupied, almost trancelike state.

With delicate gold-and-jewel-bedecked fingers she ran her searching touch across the face of the map, and the rune stones she had arranged there . . .

... summoning a vision: *the warrior queen, Isis, on horseback, at full gallop, riding toward a forest, beyond which (Cassandra somehow knew) a settlement awaited. Then the queen drew up her steed, as smoke streamed into the sky from the decimated village. Around her, at her side, were her sister warriors, her tribal council; but coming toward her were more of the female fighters she ruled, and they showed the ragtag signs of battle, the blood, the soot, the despair. Slung across one saddle was a mortally wounded warrior; and on the queen's face anger and sadness fought for dominion.*

Cassandra opened her eyes. She could feel the anguish of Queen Isis, but she kept that shared sorrow within her: no tears fell. Like so many seers, Cassandra had erected defensive walls—otherwise, she would be a slave to her visions.

A familiar voice boomed across the throne room: "And what news from my sorceress, today?"

She turned, nodding to her attendants, who slipped away, even as Lord Memnon—a warrior king in black leathers—strode across his throne room with his right-hand man, Thorak, and left-hand man, Takmet, at his appropriate sides.

Remaining seated, she swiveled toward Memnon, regarding him with half-lidded eyes. "The forces of Queen Isis are scattered to the four winds."

Memnon grinned, like a greedy child, exchanging satisfied nods with both his chief advisers.

"The people of Ur," she said, "are reeling from the death of their king."

At this mention of the father he'd murdered, Takmet smiled a little. The sorceress did not reveal her repulsion, merely continued.

"Pheron's tribes are evacuating their villages," she said. "They are without direction... . Leaderless."

Memnon's eyes tightened. "And what of the Nubian?"

Cassandra shook her head, and her dangling earrings made small music. "Balthazar ... and his people ... remain hidden from my sight."

The warlord's eyes flared. "Do the gods shield them?"

She offered him a tiny shrug. "My gift does not reveal this, my lord."

Memnon drew in a deep breath, then let it out, before throwing a smiling glance at, first, Takmet, then Thorak. "Give our generals the news of this disarray in Ur. Have them make ready my armies."

"Yes, my lord," Takmet said.

Thorak said the same.

As the advisers made their exit, Memnon approached Cassandra and touched her shoulder, his smile surprisingly gentle. "You think me cruel?"

"I rarely think of you at all," she said, though her tone lacked the apparent contempt of her words.

He strolled to a table of food and ripped a shank of venison from a platter. "You sorely test my good nature, Cassandra."

"I am here only to fulfill a purpose."

He turned to her, holding the shank of meat like a club. "Yes? Perhaps you've forgotten what life is like, outside these palace walls."

The warlord tossed the venison across the room, and his young lion and tiger began to scuffle over it, until finally they were snarling and snapping at the meat and each other.

"*That* is what it is like out there, my pet," he said to her. "Heartless ... ignorant... savage ..."

What an apt description of Memnon himself, the sorceress thought; but she did not share this view with her host.

With a wave, Memnon summoned guards from the periphery who separated the two beasts, yanking them back on their chains; one guard cleaved the remainder of the shank of meat with his sword, and gave each animal its share.

Memnon returned to the seated woman's side. "That ignorance . . . that barbarism ... I can change it all. Am I not called the Teacher of Men? I can transmute savagery into civilization, in our lifetimes. Just as the prophecy says ..."

As if not even listening, Cassandra rose and wandered to that table of food and drink; she poured herself a goblet of wine. But her words indicated she had indeed paid attention to her lord: "I know the prophecy."

"You should," he said, going to her. "The vision, after all, was yours, Cassandra. ... Say it."

"Don't you know it, my lord? Don't the words ring in your mind at every moment?"

"Say it!"

She sighed. " 'By tolling bell, and thunder's swell... a flaming star falls from the sky. By a full moon's glow, in House of Scorpio ... kneeling men bow, to the king ... on high.' "

"Such lovely words," he said, and with the back of his hand he stroked her cheek. "Such a lovely woman ... what a queen you'll make. For *I* am that king of legend, my love ... celebrated by the gods themselves."

She looked at him, her lovely face blank, her eyes unblinking, and said nothing.

"When that time comes, when the prophecy is fulfilled," he said, "you shall take your place beside me.... On a throne, of course . . . and in my bed."

She smiled—a tiny smile. "Only a virgin can be blessed with second sight. My lord, in your bed of delight, I would lose my gift . . . and you would lose your advantage on the field of battle."

He returned the smile and studied her perfect features. "Ah, my beautiful sorceress ... When I am king of the world, I will no longer need your visions ... all I will require is the vision of loveliness that you are."

And Memnon ran his hand up the expanse of her bare arm, fingers gentle on her flesh; but even as he savored the thought of the ecstasies that awaited him . . . them ... the sorceress flinched, feeling a chill, and a wave of revulsion.

She drew away from the warlord, brushing the hilt of a knife on his belt, unaware that this weapon was the confiscated throwing knife that had belonged to the Akkadian, Mathayus.

And contact with a belonging of the assassin's sparked a psychic contact, and a new vision seized her mind, her being, took her at once to the desert, where she saw . . .

*... a scrawny, scruffily bearded man running alongside a strange, white camel on which rode the Akkadian—Mathayus!*

So the assassin lived! Was her life still threatened, then? she wondered.

But she did not share the vision—threat or not—with Memnon, even when—noting the surprise in her eyes, sensing another vision had come—he

asked, "What is it?"

Instead she merely informed her lord that she was tired from their journey.

Memnon searched the woman's face for deceit or trickery, but saw nothing, and suggested she rest.

"I will have need of you tomorrow," he told her, "when my generals come caning."

She bowed her head. "Thank you, my lord,"

When she turned and walked away from him, the *warlord called to her*. "*Cassandra*)"

She stopped, but she did not turn to him.

He said, quietly, "Your well-being is of the utmost importance to me. You know that, don't you?"

That was as close as this proud warlord could come to telling the woman that he loved her. Admitting his thirst for her—the lust in him—was far easier than acknowledging the tender emotions he felt, which shamed him.

"Yes, my lord," she said, hating him. "YOU are most generous."

And as she glided from the throne room, the mighty warlord watched her go, drinking in every supple curve of her body, relishing the bounce of her dark hair on her shoulders and the tinkle of her jewelry and the grace of her movements.

Like a drunk who has forsworn the bottle, this strong man wallowed in the weakness of loving her, and longed for the day her purity would no longer matter, when he could love and defile her.

At the crest of a rocky slope, Mathayus—leading his camel, tagged along after by the horse thief— paused to survey the valley below ... and the fortified, walled city whose structures, humble and grand, were lorded over by a castellated palace.

"So," the Akkadian said with dry bitterness, "this is the house of the hollow king."

"Gomorrah," Arpid said, taking in the view with wide, appreciative eyes. "Grandest city in the world."

To Mathayus there was nothing grand about it— not even the palace, which to the assassin was nothing more than a box for him to crack open and shake that rogue warlord out.

But the scruffy little horse thief was still rhapsodizing, sighing like a man remembering his kiss. "Let me tell you, partner—after a hard day of looting and pillaging, there's no better place to unwind than Gomorrah..." He frowned in thought. "... except for maybe Sodom."

Massive bow already over his shoulder, Mathayus turned to Hanna and began arming himself from the camel's backpacks—knives, arrows, kama, and more. The sight of this seemed to take some of the steam out of the thief.

"Yes, Gomorrah's something, all right," Arpid said, stepping away from the assassin. "And I really do wish I could join you ..."

The Akkadian was paying the man no heed; right now the assassin was withdrawing his long, hooded cloak. As Mathayus slipped into it, his companion plucked a knife from one of the packs and executed a few slashes at invisible adversaries.

"Believe me," Arpid was saying, "I'd like to even up the score with those red guards, myself. .. but with the price on my head, I'd never make it through the gates."

Mathayus turned and finally acknowledged the thief. "Oh, but I have faith in you ... partner."

"I'm afraid my notoriety would only bring you unwanted attention. You should sneak in the back way."

"We're going to Gomorrah, not Sodom."

"Really, Mathayus—I would not want to impede you...."

The Akkadian rested a massive hand on the little man's bony shoulder. "You'll get us in, thief. The front way."

Before long they were approaching the Gomorrah gate, the hooded cloak obscuring Mathayus's face as he walked the camel, the thief following along, hiding behind the Akkadian's bulk.

From beneath the hood, the assassin's eyes took it all in: the detachment of red-turbaned guards checking the people as they entered, searching carts, scrutinizing individuals and their baggage alike; and a line of archers on the ledge overlooking the gated entryway—with a nod from the guards below, these bowmen could turn any troublemaker into an instant pincushion.

"You see, Mathayus?" the horse thief whispered, from behind him. "Memnon has the city locked up tight as a blood-gorged tick. . . . We need to turn back."

"But I'm depending on you."

"I know, and I wish there was something I could do."

Mathayus turned to the thief and his smile was broad and terrible. "Oh, but there is."

And the Akkadian drew his arm back and punched Arpid in the face, knocking him instantly out.

Moments later, with the unconscious thief slung over Hanna's saddle, the cloaked Akkadian walked the camel by its reins up to the guards at their gate station. They viewed him with suspicion—but then they viewed everyone with suspicion, so that was to be expected.

"What business have you in Gomorrah?" the burlier of the guards demanded.

"I have come for a bounty," Mathayus said. He nodded toward the figure draped over the camel's saddle. "Arpid—the horse thief. He is a wanted man, I understand."

Another of the guards stepped forward and lifted up the thief's head by its hair, for inspection—Arpid didn't seem to mind, slumbering as he was.

"I know this dog," the guard said. He let out a single nasty laugh. "They'll behead the bastard for sure, this time!"

Mathayus patted the unconscious man's skull with mock affection. "And how much prettier he'll be, for the alteration."

The guards all laughed at that—the Akkadian had judged their sense of humor well—and they waved him on through the gate.

Soon the Akkadian found himself in a buzzing, bustling bazaar, leading his camel and his still-slumbering companion through an exotic array of belly dancers, flame blowers, snake charmers, fire walkers and sword swallows, an open-air market where vendors sold fruit and vegetables and woven baskets and fine carpets and every other commodity known to man, and perhaps a few previously unknown as well. Dens of iniquity offered sustenance, if one could survive the clientele, and outside one of these rough bars, Mathayus stopped at a horse trough.

The Akkadian dragged the dazed thief down off the camel and dunked his head into the water, bringing the man suddenly around.

"What... what," Arpid sputtered, "what happened?"

"Thanks to your wiles," Mathayus said, "we got past the guards. You got us in."

"Ah ... yes." Water trailed down his face from his sodden hair. "A man who lives by his wits is hard to defeat!"

"Such true words," Mathayus said, lifting the little thief by the scuff of the neck and hauling him over to a crude wooden stool outside the bar, depositing him there.

The Akkadian called out to the proprietor. "A jug of your finest wine for my road weary friend, here!"

Arpid just sat there, dripping wet, bleary-eyed, getting his bearings, as Mathayus tied up the albino camel at a nearby hitching post. Carefully the assassin removed the pouch of rubies from the hiding place beneath his saddle, and tied the precious bag securely to his belt.

"Watch Hanna for me," Mathayus told his groggy companion, who remained seated on that rough-wood stool.

"You can . . . can count on me," Arpid said, tenderly testing his jaw, which seemed to be sore, for some reason.

"Always," the Akkadian said with a smile, and slipped into the chaos of the crowd.

The little thief stayed at his stool, blinking his way back to a more or less alert state. "Wait a minute!" he said, calling to Mathayus, though the assassin had already disappeared into the flurry of activity that was the marketplace. "The last thing I remember was this enormous fist..."

From the bar, carrying a jug of wine, came a generously shapely, serviceably attractive serving girl overflowing her harem-like attire. She filled a glass for Arpid, who stared up at her appealing if slatternly countenance, already forgetting about the indignity of that Akkadian fist in his face.

"Please, sir," she said, with a sublimely false smile of little-girl innocence, "let me know if there's anything else you'd like."

The horse thief sighed and returned the smile; he seemed dazed again, but it was no longer the effects of Mathayus's fist.

"It is so good," he mused to her, "to be back in the big city again."

Elsewhere, the Akkadian was winding through the whirlpool of commerce, sin and decadence that was the bazaar, making his way toward the palace gates.

"Here they are," a seller of swords was saying, "the finest steel in the land . . . You can't get respect in Gomorrah without a quality blade on your hip!"



But Mathayus was already armed to the teeth, and ignored all such come-ons in the main square, where one could buy anything from damask to damsels; he strode single-mindedly toward the citadel that was Memnon's palace. Finally he stood, hands on his hips, looking up at the heavily armed red turbaned guards walking the ramparts, guarding the gates of this imposing structure, half castle, half fortress.

And just as he was studying the lay of the land, a brood of street urchins manifested itself out of nowhere—the youngest ragamuffin might have been six, the oldest no more than ten, a blur of dirty faces and nimble feet, swirling around him, stirring dust.

"Guide, sir?" one said.

"You need a guide, sir," said another.

"To find your way in Gomorrah, sir," yet another bleated.

Mathayus knelt and summoned the leader of the smudged-faced flock with a curl of a finger. "You, lad—are you a smart enough guide to show me a way into the palace?"

Dark eyes glittered in the dirty, dark face. "A smart guide wouldn't, sir—or *he'd* get a tour ... of Lord Memnon's dungeon!"

The little gaggle of urchins laughed like magpies, and Mathayus was smiling at them when one alongside him sneaked in and, in a flash of steel, cut the pouch of rubies from the Akkadian's belt!

The culprit sprinted off, and Mathayus raced right after him; but those urchins tagged along, laughing, running, catching up with the boy who'd snagged the pouch and—in a dazzling display of misdirection—began to hand the booty off between themselves, until it was impossible for the Akkadian to tell which boy had wound up with the rubies.

Half guessing, he pursued one of the little brigands, winding through stalls, upending carts and tables of fruit and vegetables, finally catching up with the lad. Taking him by the ankles, Mathayus hauled him in the air and held him upside down—was this how Arpid had started?—and shook the boy; a few coins spilled from the child's pockets, but no pouch.

Frightened, the dangling boy pointed to another, older urchin; this one looked about twelve, and was darting through the stalls with impressive dexterity. The Akkadian dropped his prisoner rudely to the ground, and took off after the older boy ... only to have another of the urchins dash by going in the opposite direction.

The Akkadian, twisted this way and that by the acrobatic street gang, stopped running and leaned against a cart, trying to focus. Out of the corner of his eye, he noted a flicker of movement, and his hand snapped out and caught a boy just darting from behind the stand. Latching onto the gamin's shirt, Mathayus yanked him off the ground and lifted him to his face and looked right into the boy's dark, jumping eyes.

The child smiled, sheepishly, and held out his hand... proffering the precious pouch.

Mathayus took his property back, and put the boy down, the Akkadian's hard gaze instructing him not to run. After Mathayus had again tied the pouch to his belt, he gripped the urchin's jaw in one hand, prying it open, and reached the fingers of his other hand in ... to withdraw a ruby.

The child shrugged and grinned. Couldn't blame a boy for trying, right?

Mathayus grinned back at him and held up the glittering jewel. "How would you like to keep this one?"

The boy nodded enthusiastically.

Mathayus glanced back tellingly at the looming palace. "Then I hope you're a better 'guide' than you are a thief...."

## Harem Fling

T

he elevated gardens of Memnon's palace were lush and beautiful, dappled golden by the setting sun, which protested its imminent death by sending swordlike shafts of brilliant light bouncing off the marble pathways leading to a small central arena, one edge of which provided a view of the city. Here Lord Memnon—regal, despite the simplicity of his dark leather battle garb—held court... not to dispense wisdom, chart the course of war, or otherwise deal with matters of state. Rather, he exercised his own considerable warrior skills, in full view of an array of soldiers and courtiers, unafraid to test his mettle in front of them, for he knew he would not fail.

Right now Memnon—a quarterstaff in either hand—was trading blows with a likewise-armed master of martial arts brought here from the East some months ago, part of an expedition designed to bring specific rare provisions to Memnon's court magician, Philos. The Oriental master, his head shaved, his lithe form a mystery in flowing robes, had instructed Memnon in the numerous arts of war, including the one in which they were currently engaged.

The time had come, however, for the Great Teacher to instruct the master.

Memnon charged the smaller man, spinning the staffs dizzily, a display of martial skill that widened the eyes of the courtiers and soldiers looking on. With brutal ease, the warlord disarmed and struck down the master.

The usual Oriental etiquette—bows and such, which Memnon found amusingly inappropriate—were dispensed with, as a pair of soldiers hauled away the injured "master," to the sound of the delighted courtiers' applause.

With a nod, Memnon signaled a bare-chested, red-turbaned bowman to begin the next test of the warlord's expertise. The muscular, trim-bearded archer withdrew a formidable bow from a large, ornately carved wooden weapons box, in which numerous arrows and bows resided.

Lord Memnon tossed away the two staffs, which were quickly retrieved and carried off by a pair of slaves, and walked to the center of the garden courtyard. He stretched his arms wide, as if welcoming a loved one. Then, slowly, he drew his hands together, arms stiff, until his open palms were separated by perhaps a foot, held out directly in front of his chest.

The warlord's gaze locked with that of the archer.

The courtiers were gasping, murmuring among themselves, marveling, and fearful. The Great Teacher's outstretched arms formed a virtual pathway for the archer's arrow! Could Lord Memnon possibly intend to...

He did so intend. The warlord held his position, just as his eyes held those of the archer, who drew back his bow.

As this tableau unfolded itself, a new guest—on a balcony overlooking the garden courtyard—was adding himself to the assemblage of spectators. Emerging from a small tower doorway onto the balcony, Mathayus smiled tightly as he handed his guide, the street urchin, the promised ruby, which the grinning gamin snatched in his fist, and disappeared back the way they'd come.

The Akkadian crept close to the edge of the balcony wall, one hand on the sandstone ledge, as he peered cautiously over at the unfolding scene below. At first the Akkadian did not comprehend the potentially deadly exercise that Memnon had arranged for himself; all the assassin saw was the warlord ... his quarry, finally within his reach.

Emotions leaped in Mathayus—joy at his success; rage at seeing the man who had butchered his brother Akkadians....

But then, as he fought back the almost uncontrollable fury, summoning the passionless, professional disposition a true assassin needed to practice his art, Mathayus finally noticed the bizarre game that seemed about to play itself out.

For brief moments, Mathayus wondered if Memnon was facing an executioner; had a palace revolt negated the assassin's own efforts at revenge? Then he realized the arrogant, proud Memnon was risking his life to impress

his people, to demonstrate his superhuman capabilities; and Mathayus could hardly believe the absurdity, the asininity of such ego ...

Below, the red-turbaned guards and the audience of courtiers were struck dumb, awed by the daring of their lord and master.

Memnon nodded ...

... and the archer let fly!

Mathayus reared back, startled as he saw the unblinking Memnon snap his hands shut and catch the arrow, inches from a breastplate that would not have sufficiently shielded the warlord's heart.

The Great Teacher nodded to the archer, who returned the gesture, but deeper, as the courtyard rang with applause.

As for Mathayus, he was not clapping; he was notching his own arrow into his mighty bow, his smile as taut as the bowstring, knowing even a man of such skills as Memnon could not catch an arrow he didn't see coming ... well, not catch it in his *hands*....

But as Mathayus aimed at his nemesis, sighting the man with precision and pleasure, a commotion below distracted him. The Akkadian ignored the disruption, regaining his concentration, steadying his aim, drawing a bead, pulling back the impossibly taut bowstring .. . *through the neck would be nice*....

And then a pair of red-turbaned guards dragged a struggling prisoner into full view below, to face Lord Memnon. Since his high angle on his target was not hindered, the Akkadian initially intended to go ahead and shoot.

But then he saw who the prisoner was—*the boy!*

The street urchin who had aided him, guided him through that rear doorway into just the right tower, providing him this perch ...

*Damn!*

Now the guards, hauling the boy, were periodically blocking the assassin's line of sight, and he paused, muscles straining as he held the tense bowstring in place, waiting to fire, ready to fire.

Right now, however, one of the guards was displaying to Memnon the ruby, which they'd obviously found on the boy.

"Why waste my time?" Memnon snapped, speaking to the guards but looking straight at the ragamuffin. "Why test my patience? You know the penalty for thievery."

The guards dragged the boy to a nearby table and forced him to stretch his small arm out, straight. From the back of the row of red-turbaned guards, a burly example of their brethren emerged, with a large ax in hand, its edge catching the dying sunlight and glinting, making the watching Akkadian blink.

The ax-wielding guard raised his implement high, and Mathayus—face darkening, frustrated—swore under his breath as he shifted his aim and let the arrow fly.

The power of the Akkadian's arm, the swiftness of the arrow's flight, the sturdiness of its shaft, its razor-keen point, all did their appointed tasks: the arrow hit the ax handle, hard, knocking it from the guard's grasp and sending it *whanging* into a tree, where the blade quivered and held.

Not a second passed before every eye was on that balcony (allowing the boy to scramble away), the presence of an intruder sparking an immediate alarm. With an impressive implementation of procedure, half the guards swarmed their lord and master, and swept him from the garden; the rest flew into pursuit.

Bow slung back over his shoulder, scimitar in hand, the Akkadian was racing down the balcony walkway, where he soon spotted a small entry in a tower at his path's dead end. In the corridor beyond, he hustled along, and the first door he came to, he shouldered open, and thrust himself inside.

He shut the door and lowered the wooden beam—which had thankfully not been in place—that secured it. Then, breathing hard, he turned and took in his surroundings, and strange surroundings they were indeed.

Mathayus had never seen the like of what he could not recognize as a primitive but prophetic laboratory, scattered with strange, imaginative inventions that centuries from now would have been worthy of da Vinci; the largest of these was a weapon Mathayus did not recognize, because it had only recently been invented (by the chamber's occupant): a large wooden catapult. On rough wood-slab tables bubbled and burbled various potions and mixtures, brewing colorfully over a series of oil lamps. The chemical smells that permeated the modest chamber were unknown to Mathayus, and sent his nose twitching like a rabbit's.

Then one of the vials cooking over a flame reacted, minorly but impressively, creating a *hisssss* that turned into a *pooof*, spewing acrid smoke.

As we have said, Mathayus was as brave a warrior as any; but such witchcraft spooked this exceptional man whose only schooling was in the ways of battle, and he was looking about him for a means of escape when someone—the smoke *was* getting thick—began to cough.

The Akkadian spun, and as a figure emerged from the chemical fog, the warrior thrust his scimitar and stopped the man's movement. Mathayus did not cut down the eccentric-looking creature, however, rather just stopped him there, touching the tip of the sword's blade to the man's throat.

Small, with unkempt white hair, his slight frame bound up in unprepossessing robes, the little man said, "Good lord . . . what a stench! Price of progress ... I am Philos! Can I help you, sir?"

Gazing into the odd little fellow's guileless eyes, Mathayus somehow how knew he'd blundered onto someone whom he could risk trusting. In any event, the magician ... for surely that was who this human curiosity was ... seemed no threat.

"I need a way to get of here," Mathayus said, frankly.

But before his host could answer, a banging at the barred door interrupted, and rough voices called, "Open up! Open up in there!"

The Akkadian swung around, scimitar poised, ready to fight.

"Oh my," Philos said.

"Go ahead," Mathayus said, always ready to die well. "Open it."

"No! No, no, no ... there'll be none of that here, no violence.... Here, come this way."

Moments later, Philos unbarred his door and graciously gestured for his callers to come in, which they did, in a rush, red-turbaned guards piling in, with the much-feared Thorak at their lead.

"Oh," Philos groaned. "Thorak ... must you be a brute in your every waking moment? Cannot you leave me in peace?"

"You'd rest in peace, if I had my way, magician," Thorak said, as his men began to search the cluttered laboratory, treating Philos's precious inventions with rough disdain.

"Please!" Philos said. "Take care with those."

"Guard your tongue," Thorak growled. "My patience is thin today."

"How unusual," Philos said under his breath.

The scarred-faced Thorak strode to a table of experiments and lifted up a dish of black powder, pinching some of the substance, sniffing it.

"Careful, there!" Philos cried. "That's extremely dangerous! Magic powder from China!"

Thorak smirked at the magician, blowing the powder onto the flame of a nearby candle; the action made a small, not particularly impressive *poof*. This summoned another smirk from the massive head of the guards.

Philos shrugged. "Well, I haven't quite ciphered the correct compound, as yet."

Contempt colored Thorak's expression as a forceful hand swept the dish of powder to the hard floor, where it shattered.

Then the scarred guard stepped up threateningly to the little magician until the former's breastplate brushed the nose of the latter. "You are fortunate that Lord Memnon has a taste for your magic."

"I prefer to call it science."

"Science, then. Call it what you will, little man ... it's all a sham."

The other guards were looking toward their leader, with shrugs; they had found no one. Thorak stalked the chamber, having one last look around, moving past the catapult, the launching spoon of which was covered by a tarpaulin.

Quickly Philos caught Thorak's attention. "Well, you and I must put our differences aside. We both serve our lord Memnon, each in his own way."

Thorak strode back to the magician... or was that scientist? "The day will come, little man, when the Great Teacher's patience for idiocy will run out... and I will see your bones bleach in the sun."

Philos swallowed. "And a good day to you, sir, as well."

Thorak strutted out and his fellow guards followed him, though their leader waited for them to exit so he could personally slam the door.

Which Philos again secured with the wooden beam. He listened as their footsteps faded away, and then he said, "We seem to be alone again. At last."

Mathayus peeled away the tarp and revealed himself nestled in the catapult's spoon. He did not move from this position, relishing a few moments of rest. He would be on the move again, soon enough.

"Thank you," the Akkadian said to the scientist.

The little man sighed and walked over to join his guest, shaking his head as he came, his kind face lined with sadness and, yes, fright.

"Dark days, my friend," the scientist said. "More heads have rolled in this age of Memnon's 'peace' than I have seen in all my days .. even days of



war."

"I will not forget your goodwill, old man."

Philos sighed again, heavily, but mustered a smile. "How can we face ourselves, if we are to simply cast our fellowman to the winds?"

And then the scientist sat down on the catapult, leaning back against its release lever ...

... sending the mechanism's central arm flinging forward with a *whump!*, hurling Mathayus straight through the window and into the air.

"Oh dear," Philos said, standing, touching fingers to his lips. "Well... he did say he needed a way out of here ..."

The Akkadian, eyes wide, was flying; no bird could rival him, as he hurtled over the towers and minarets of the palace. But even as he enjoyed the view, he knew his landing could not rival that of the birds, unless he was very, very lucky.

And he was, though a less sturdy man might have suffered injuries, where Mathayus merely crashed into the large awning, on the far side of a high massive wall, the awning giving way, collapsing, but at an angle, sending him smashing through the exquisitely carved filigree-wooden shutters of a chamber whose purpose would soon be revealed to him.

Seated unceremoniously on the floor in a pile of splintered wood, the Akkadian—pleased that his bow had made the trip with him, intact—glanced about at the huge circular room, whose ceiling hung with satin drapes. The floor was marble, all but covered with loose cushions, around a small but elaborately fashioned central fountain. To one side a huge gong stood, as if at guard.

None of this impressed the Akkadian much, however—he was too riveted by the tenants of this simple yet somehow lavish den. Around him, seated on those pillows, lounging along the lip of the fountain, or just strolling aimlessly, were beautiful women, a dozen at least, in the delightfully skimpy attire of the harem girls they obviously were.

He gazed at them in wonderment—so much female beauty in one place, spread before him like a buffet of pulchritude. For a moment he wondered if he had died on impact and gone to some wonderful afterlife; or was he merely unconscious, perhaps dying, and dreaming one last sweet dream before the underworld claimed him?

"A man!" the damsel nearest him chirped.

Mathayus clamped a hand over her pretty mouth. "Quiet, now."

Then he realized they seemed to be staring at him much as he had at them—in wonderment. He had not the slightest idea why, having no sense of what a magnificent male specimen he must have seemed to the fetching young women.

He took his hand off the girl's mouth, and she remained silent. Good. Rising, drawing his scimitar, he looked all about. "What is this place?"

Another of the girls whispered, "Lord Memnon's harem, of course."

They were all around him now, a beautiful swarm.

"But you'd never know it was," another said. "Our lord so seldom visits...."

Another exquisite creature said, "He has better things to do, it would seem."

And another stroked the assassin's bare arm, saying, "Always off on his campaigns of war. No time for us ... we get so lonely."

The girl who had first spoken now said, "We long for a man's touch," and she gently took his free hand—the other held the scimitar—and brought his palm up to rest on a firm, full breast. Reflexively, he cupped it, as she covered her hand with his and held it there.

She was squealing with girlish delight, just as he pulled his hand away, saying to her, "You're wonderful, but... This isn't a good time."

"What better time," one of the them said, eyes sparkling over her veil, "could you imagine?"

"It could be a very good time," another said, and they were surging forward, crowding him, crying out to him, *Stay here! Stay with us! We will pleasure you! We know how to please a man!*

As they fawned over him, disrobing him he thought, he was drunk with the sight of them, the scents, the exotic delights that seemed to hover like shimmering dreams; and—great warrior that he was, he was a man after all, only a man—he did not realize they were in reality disarming him, plucking his knives, his metal, from his belt. Nor did he sense the mighty bow and its quiver leave his shoulders, as another wench slipped them off, behind his back.

"Stay with us," a green-eyed one was cooing,  
"and we will make your every fantasy come  
true\_\_"

Then one of them, in a sudden, almost savage move, yanked the scimitar from his grasp, while a few steps away one of her sisters pulled a large tassel and rang the huge gong, sending waves of sound radiating across, seemingly, the entire world.

And now these sweet harem girls became vicious creatures, no less lovely, but clawing now, scratching and biting, a multitude of ferocious cats attacking.

In one swift movement, swinging both his arms, Mathayus disentangled himself, flinging them here and there like rag dolls, and they tumbled pretty end over pretty end, landing awkwardly on the scattered pillows.

He had regained his scimitar and several daggers, but not his mighty bow, when half a dozen archers burst into the harem den ... and in their lead was the brutal Thorak.

Thorak's scar turned white as surprise and rage seized him. "It's the *Akkadian*] ... He *lives* ... but not for long—*kill him!*"

As the archers let fly with their arrows, the assassin dove toward that huge gong, tumbling behind it; with a sweep of his scimitar, he cut the ropes binding the golden sphere to its pedestal, from which he snatched the huge shieldlike object. Rolling the gong swiftly along, hiding behind it as arrows pinged and danced off its outer surface, Mathayus made his way to the harem doors, through which he sent the gong crashing, making an ungodly music.

When the guards followed into the corridor, Mathayus was again spiraling his golden shield along, making their arrows ineffectual. At the end of the hall, the Akkadian dove from behind the revolving orb, allowing it to clatter to a resounding stop as he pitched through waiting doors.

Again he found himself within a strange room of the palace, and he slammed the doors shut and barricaded them with an ornate chest.

He turned to get his bearings.

This was no magician's lair... and yet it was. This was a golden-hued sandstone chamber whose hieroglyph decorations seemed feminine, a sensation enhanced by delightful scents of oil and flowers and incense. He knew at once he was in Cassandra's quarters; not in her bedroom, or living chamber, no—this was an indoor bathing pool.

And he knew it belonged to the sorceress, because Cassandra herself lay within the huge bath, her lovely head and a shoulder looming above a surface covered with rose petals.

Her almond eyes grew large—she may have been a prophet, but she had clearly not anticipated his entry into her quarters, and was dumbstruck.

But, then, so was he.

The sorceress's handmaidens, who'd been tending her alongside the pool, which took up most of the floor space in the modest-sized chamber, were not struck dumb: they screamed like frightened children, and ran into the adjacent rooms of their mistress's quarters.

Quickly the regal Cassandra regained her poise, and she rose from the rose-cloaked water, throwing back the damp mane of her long dark hair, displaying every inch of her golden, well-formed flesh, perfect breasts, narrow waist, the flare of hips, flawless skin pearly with moisture, every female secret shared.

She stood with her arms at her sides and her chin, and her breasts, held high. No woman had ever been more at ease with her beauty as she said, "Well, assassin? Are you going to kill me, or just stare?"

Mathayus sighed; first the harem girls . . . now this. "Decisions," he said, "decisions."

Then someone knocked at the door—rammed at it, actually; guards beyond were yelling as they did their best to batter their way inside.

And now her voice called to him, the defiance, the pride gone; something sweet, something mystical, like a gentle wind drifting across the landscape of his soul. "Akkadian ... Akkadian ..."

He frowned, and he quietly, all but drowned out by the battering-ram sounds, said, "Oh no, witch ... Not this time."

And he dove into the pool, pulling her down under, sweeping them both below the rose-petaled skin of the water. The woman cried in surprise, but her scream was cut off abruptly, before it was much of anything really, just a yelp before she disappeared under the petals and water.

It took a while for the guards to butt through that door, and by the time they had, that rosy surface had settled, and the bath appeared empty.

Thorak strode in, sword in hand, looking around the room, frowning in frustration. Lord Memnon had joined the search, personally, and entered the bath chamber on his trusted adviser's heels.

Under the water, Mathayus slipped the tip of the scimitar under an iron grating at the base of pool, prying it open. At once, the bathwater began to rush down the narrow spillway below.

As the pool drained, the shadowy forms under the water began to reveal themselves, and Memnon cried, "Kill him!"

That spillway was not so narrow, though, that the Akkadian and the sorceress couldn't slide down in, and he didn't even have to convince the woman, as they were both carried by its flow.

And when Memnon's red-turbaned guards slashed at the draining water with their swords, they were too late.

Mathayus and Cassandra were gone, sliding, careening down a twisting drain, swept along with the tide.

## Valley of the Dead

F

rom his high window in the tower room where he kept his primitive but visionary laboratory, Philos—that self-proclaimed man of science—gazed down at the source of the noise that had attracted his attention.

A phalanx of guards had gathered below, and one of them pointed up at the scientist's window, and then dispatched several of the well-armed, red-turbaned brutes, obviously on their way to come calling.

"Oh my," Philos said to himself, blinking. "I'm going to have to assume my tenure here is over...."

And he went to the carpetbag he kept snugged under a nearby wooden table and began to quickly pack, taking time to include a certain Chinese parchment.

...

Elsewhere, in the open-air marketplace of Gomorrah, outside a wine merchant's tent, the scrawny thief Arpid sat on a bench, drinking. He was not quite drunk, but neither was he entirely sober; however, when the horns and trumpets of the palace guard began to blow their piercing alarm, the horse thief snapped to alertness.

Then Arpid sighed, thinking, *Well. .. I warned the fool.*

He rose and raised his glass to his fellow tavern-crawling reprobates and said, "A toast—to my friend the Akkadian... let him rest in peace. Or pieces, as would seem more likely."

The drunks and bandits and general lowlifes around him responded with a hoist of their goblets. This was a group that would drink to anyone, even a

member of the Akkadian tribe, who all men knew (except this idiot proposing the toast) had long since vanished from the earth.

The wine of his toast had barely passed Arpid's lips when a cluster of red-turbaned guards came clattering through the bazaar, brandishing their weapons. The thief shielded his face until the soldiers had rushed on; then he rose, bowed to his distinguished fellow scoundrels, saying, "Alas, gentle friends, I must now take my leave...."

And he left.

On a nearby street, just over from the marketplace, bedouin women were washing their clothes in a large, central fountain. Even when the soldiers of Memnon were on the march, a cry of alarm blaring through the city, life went on. The child of one of these women, tagging along with his mother, studied a tarnished coin that he'd found on the dusty street.

The hoy had never had a coin before, and didn't know what to do with it; but as he studied the fountain, he suddenly knew: *a wish!*

The boy tossed the coin, and—seemingly in cause-and-effect fashion—from beneath a floating linen garment, a beautiful naked woman burst from the water.

"Gods be praised!" the boy said, and for the rest of his life he would be a believer.

Cassandra leaned on the fountain, heaving for breath, as the wide-eyed boy took in the unclad delights of her lithe form. Then, from behind her, gasping for breath, came the Akkadian.

The boy frowned and shook his head, disappointed by this additional apparition. Then his mother covered the child's eyes and hustled him away. A crowd began to congregate, but at the same time gave this magnificent materialized god and goddess breathing room.

They stood panting for a while—the pair had had quite a ride down that drain, flying out a hole in a wall, splash-landing inside a dank water chamber, finally finding their way up and through to air and sunlight—and now it was as if they were living statues adorning the fountain.

Then the sorceress—her long hair streaming with water, her golden skin beaded with droplets—whirled at Mathayus, no longer in the grip of their shared predicament, her regal bearing returning in full force. Her long-nailed fingers turned to claws and her hands flew toward the assassin's face.

Mathayus gripped her wrists, tight, hard, even as she exploded in fury.

"How *dare* you touch me!" she snarled. "Your head will ride a post, your eyes will feed the birds, your entrails will be strung from the highest—"

He yanked her close, as if to kiss her; but instead he spoke softly, if firmly, his message for her, not the gathering crowd.

"Sorceress," he said sweetly, "I am an Akkadian engaged to kill you."

Her eyes flared, outrage wedded with fear.

"Now I find myself in a position where you are of more use to me alive," he said, "than dead.... Try not to give me cause to change my mind."

She said nothing, her chin high... but trembling, perhaps with the chill of the water ... perhaps from something else.

"I suggest we find you something to wear," he said. "You may catch cold in your bare skin ... and more unwanted attention."

A few coins bought bedouin robes and scarves from a washerwoman, and within minutes the Akkadian and his hostage were at the front gates of Gomorrah, which was conveniently understaffed at the moment. Apparently those horns peeling general alarm had summoned the bulk of the gate guards to other duty.

So it was that Mathayus the Akkadian and Cassandra the Sorceress—wrapped in the robes and scarves of simple desert people—departed from the city of Gomorrah, unimpeded, walking past the guards, seemingly lost in a lovers' embrace, made no less intimate by the dagger the assassin held to the witch's side.

As for the Akkadian's "partner," the little horse thief had already benefited from the slack attention of the guards at the undermanned gate. Leading a camel as he was, looking deceptively respectable, Arpid had tagged along with a wealthy fellow astride a horse.

Beyond the gates, Arpid attempted to turn the wealthy traveler into a customer, offering the vile creature Hanna to him for a mere forty duranas. It wasn't that the thief couldn't use a ride, even when provided by a beast like this; but the camel was uncooperative, would not allow him to mount her. Better to let someone else beat sense into the animal, while Arpid would buy a horse, a decent mode of transport, even if he would have to sneak back into the city to do it.

The wealthy rider, however, was ignoring him.

"Did I say forty duranas?" the thief asked humbly. "Sir, what I meant to say was thirty. Have you ever seen its like? These white camels are rare, good sir. .



.."

No response.

And Arpid could barely pull the stubborn creature any farther.

He yelled to his potential customer: "Why, at that price, this camel is practically stolen!"

No sale.

"Come on, you fleabag," Arpid said to Hanna, yanking on the camel's reins, doing his best to make her move.

But Hanna's only response was to bellow—a loud, indignant, honking cry

...

... that echoed across the harsh landscape to where the Akkadian and his beautiful hostage trudged along, in their bedouin garb.

"Stop," Mathayus told her, raising a hand.

She obeyed.

The assassin listened, and the wind carried him a familiar snort; then another....

He grinned. "That's my camel, all right."

"What?"

"Quiet..." And the Akkadian lifted two fingers to his lips and let go with a loud, firm, distinctive whistle.

And, a distance away, Hanna—paying the pleas and tugs of the horse thief no mind—snapped her head around, ears perking at the familiar sound-

"What... ?" Arpid shook his head. "What is it now, you mangy ... *hey!*"

The camel had tugged back on those reins, and now the little thief was yanked off his feet as the camel sprinted off, heeding her master's summons.

Before long, Mathayus—who had been waiting patiently, hands on his hips—grinned wide as his beloved camel came pounding over the nearest rise. The creature was dragging something, or—*someone* .. . Mathayus squinted, to see through the sand dust his camel was stirring... ah! The horse thief, Arpid, was being hauled rudely along by the reins.

The camel came to a stop at his master's side, and the Akkadian reached up and scratched the animal's neck.

"Good girl," the Akkadian said. He glanced back at Cassandra. "You see? *She* knows how to behave."

The sorceress folded her arms and glowered at him, then turned her gaze away, in disgust.

In the meantime, in a pile at Mathayus's feet, Arpid had come to his own sliding stop, and was busy coughing up dust. Finally the thief was able to speak, and he smiled up at the assassin, displaying what in more civilized days would come to be described as a shit-eating grin.

"Well! God be praised...." The thief coughed. "We were just looking for you...."

"You found me," the Akkadian said.

Arpid climbed painfully to his feet, the assassin offering no help. As he was brushing himself off, the thief finally noticed the beautiful woman in their midst.

"Well, well," he said. "Who's your comely friend?"

"That's the sorcerer," the Akkadian said flatly.

The thief's eyes widened. "What do you mean?"

"I mean what I said: that's Memnon's sorcerer. Sorceress." And now he turned to the woman, nodding toward Hanna. "Climb on."

With a sigh of resignation, the lovely woman stepped forward, the feminine shape of her playing wonderful tricks under the loose robes.

"Hurry up," the Akkadian said. "Night is coming."

She allowed him to lift her up on the camel.

Arpid was staring at the woman, agape. "Great gods ... You've stolen the warlord's sorcerer! I don't know whether to laugh or cry."

"Choke, for all I care," Mathayus said.

"Partner... why so cross with me?"

The Akkadian was examining his mount, checking to see if Hanna was all right. "You were running off with my camel, thief."

Brushing himself off some more, Arpid said, mildly miffed, "If you were paying any attention at all, my friend, you'll know that your *camel* was running off with me."

Mathayus swung up into the saddle, behind the sorceress; the nomadic affair was large enough to accommodate them both, if snugly.

Then the Akkadian nudged the camel to motion, and they trotted away, leaving the thief behind, yet again. He scrambled after them, crying, "So ... partner ... friend—where to now?"

"The Valley of the Dead," the Akkadian said casually.

Arpid frowned, slowed. "The ..."

"Valley."

"... of the..."

"Dead. Yes. Join us, if you like."

As the Akkadian and his lovely hostage rode off, Arpid stopped and yelled at them, and at the sky. "Are you a madman? Nobody enters the Valley of the Dead . . . that's why they call it the Valley of the Dead! You go in alive, you stay in there, dead! ... Even Memnon's army wouldn't dare go there!"

Mathayus, bouncing along, granted the thief a backward glance. "Not even to regain his sorceress? The source of his battle prowess?"

Arpid trotted after them, a few hesitant steps. "Well..."

"Of course he would! Memnon would send his men to the ends of the earth to get her back—to their deaths, if need be!"

Arpid swallowed, jogging along unenthusiastically. "It's not their deaths that trouble me, partner. . . . What about ours?"

But Mathayus had no answer for that, and rode along in silence. The sorceress said nothing either, and even Arpid had naught to say... though tag along he did.

Night had fallen on Gomorrah, and in the majestic throne room of Memnon, the warlord's two most trusted military advisers awaited his orders. That faithful servant, the scarred Thorak, stood by, waiting, hanging on his master's every word, every movement. That more recent addition to the inner circle, the patricidal Takmet, lounged at a table, sipping wine, as if disaster had not fallen.

But it had.

Troubled on his throne, the Great Teacher sat studying squirming scorpions in a glass bowl on the wide stone armrest beside him. He withdrew from his belt the dagger he'd appropriated from the Akkadian, and he sent it lancing down, spearing one of the wriggling arachnids. The deliberateness of that act now seemed at odds with his facial expression, as the warlord lifted the dagger with the writhing, dying scorpion impaled there, watching it with seemingly idle interest.

"Take a dozen of your best men," Memnon said suddenly, and Thorak snapped to attention and Takmet looked up, "track him down ... kill him ... and

bring Cassandra back to me."

Thorak nodded a curt bow. "Yes, my lord."

Memnon drew the thin sharp blade down the abdomen of the scorpion, splitting it open to the tail, ending its struggle.

"Send our fastest rider back to me, with word of his death," Memnon said. "And of her safety."

Memnon reached into a quiver next to the throne and withdrew an arrow, the tip of which he poked into the venom sac of the dead scorpion. He twisted the arrow's tip, turned it, thoroughly soaking it in the poison.

"My lord," Takmet said, rising finally, "rumors have spread to our armies that Cassandra has been taken."

Memnon turned sharply to Thorak. "Is that true? Do such rumors fly?"

The scarred commander glared at his fellow adviser, conveying his aggravation at Takmet's stirring up trouble; then his gaze returned to his master, and he said, "Yes, my lord. Of course, our generals, and our officers in the field, will need to know of her abduction ... in order to rescue her."

"*They* will not rescue her—you will. And the men you ride with need not know, until the sorceress has been restored to our custody."

"Yes, my lord."

The warlord frowned in thought. "Silence these rumors. Kill those with traitorous tongues, at your discretion. The people must believe the prophetess is here, even if we can only sustain the deception a short while."

Thorak nodded.

"And when you see the Akkadian," Memnon added, "give him this for me."

And the warlord handed his adviser the poison-tipped arrow, which Thorak handled judiciously, shielding the tip in a leather cover.

Within the hour, Thorak and his personal cadre of his toughest, most trusted men—chosen from among the red-turbaned royal guards—galloped from the fortress city, into the night. Into the underworld, if necessary.

And in his imperial chamber, the Teacher of Men stood ponderingly at a heavy stone tablet, displayed in a golden frame near his throne. This inscribed slab was ancient, even in these ancient times, and bore a crude form of hieroglyphics only the most learned scholars could decipher.

The warlord's fingers ran slowly across the symbols, his touch respectful, almost tender, his expression that of a man in a spell. His fingertips lingered on an etching of a man, whose arms were raised in triumph, seemingly mimicked by tongues of fire rising behind him.

Then Memnon's fingers came to rest upon a carved moon emblem, at the very bottom of the inscribed tablet.

A very short time now, he thought, and all would be his . . . starting with the woman, Cassandra, and ending with the world itself.

By the middle of the next day, the trio of travelers had crossed the nomadic plains and would soon enter the desert. The Akkadian had built some grudging respect for the little thief, who had managed to keep pace, as the camel loped along.

Of course Hanna—bearing both Mathayus and, seated in front of him, Cassandra—was slowed by the burden; and from time to time Mathayus had walked, himself, leading the camel bearing the sorceress along.

At the crest of a rugged hilltop, three twelve-foot poles awaited them—warning signs for those who would enter the forbidden land ahead, the Valley of the Dead of legend. Each wooden shaft bore various human skulls intertwined with small animal bones, snakes mostly, and the dried skins of men who had dared pass this way.

The little horse thief did not find this a tempting invitation, saying, "I'm guessing this means we've gone far enough."

From the ridge they could see the unforgiving landscape that awaited them—pockmarked earth scattered with mud hills, stretching to a desolate horizon. Beyond that, a devastating desert awaited, if the map Mathayus held could be trusted.

Rolling the lambskin back up, and replacing it in his saddlebag, the Akkadian said to the thief, "No, partner... We're just getting started. Consider this a welcome."

"A welcome," Arpid said, glancing from one pole of impaled skulls to another. "Well, why not push on? Your friend is a sorceress, and you're a trained assassin, not to mention a hulking barbarian. Who among us could get hurt, in the endeavor?"

Mathayus shrugged. "Who indeed?"

"Oh, I don't know ... the *skinny thief*, perhaps?"

"You're free to make your own way," the Akkadian reminded him, as he stood alongside the beautiful hostage stride the camel. He reached up and brushed her long hair away from the side of her face, and she looked sharply at him, startled, offended.

"Don't touch me," she said, and caught his wrist.

Firmly—but not roughly—he freed his hand, and he brushed her hair away, again, and slipped the golden hoop earring from her lobe.

Confused, she frowned at him, and grabbed for her belonging, unsuccessfully.

Now the Akkadian moved forward, to the nearest of the fetish poles, and reached up and deftly hooked the hook over the top of the shaft.

"You beast," she snapped. "What in the name of the gods are you doing?"

"Nothing, in the name of the gods." Mathayus gave her the slightest smile. "Just marking the way for your lord and master."

She reared back, almond eyes narrowed, chin crinkled in contempt. "No man is my master."

"Perhaps not," he said, as he slung himself up behind her, onto the generous nomadic saddle, "but your view is unimportant... How Memnon sees you is all I care about."

And the Akkadian jogged his camel into motion, heading down into the desolate valley. Rough as the ride was, it was not as blistering—literally—as the desert they soon found themselves in, where the sand blazed under the sun, and the skeletons of those who had tried to come this way before them had left their remains as grotesque sun-bleached markers.

Cassandra stiffened as she saw a scorpion crawl from the eye socket of one human skull, and Mathayus asked, amused, "Afraid of a little bug?"

She said nothing; and certainly did not reveal that a flash, a shard of a vision, had knifed through her consciousness. The man behind her was somehow tied to that scorpion; but she knew not how. ...

From time to time, Mathayus relented and walked as the thief rode. The little man had come this far; that much the Akkadian had to hand him. That Arpid would face the vast empty desert with them, trudge along at their side, rarely complaining, had made him one of them. Even the woman was no trouble. Only the sun, that burning sun, seemed his enemy.

Thorak and his band of a dozen good men were several hours behind the little party. A forward tracker reached the ridge of fetish poles by sunset, and

he snatched the sorceress's golden hoop from the skull atop one pole, and rode back to the line of red-turbaned men to deliver it to his commander.

The scar on Thorak's face stood out whitely in his flushed face, as rage crawled through him like an invader, the warrior well aware the Akkadian was baiting him, taunting him. ...

Normally they would have made camp now, but Thorak pushed his troops onward; they would ride until the sun was a memory.

In the cool night blueness of the desert dunes, under a sky glittering with more jewels than any warlord could secure, the Akkadian, the thief, the woman and the camel slept. Or at least the thief slept, on his side of the fire, his deafening snoring making slumber more difficult for the others.

Still, Mathayus managed to sleep—his scimitar crossed on his chest, ready for any attack—and so did Cassandra, at least until a particularly loud snort from the snoozing thief popped her eyes open.

Wide-awake, suddenly, she glanced over at Mathayus, who—despite the logs Arpid was noisily sawing in his sleep—did not stir. She rose as silent and graceful as a gentle wind, watching the Akkadian all the while, seeing that sleep continued....

At first she walked, looking back at the fire and the camp, the sand brushing her feet lightly; then she began to run. She knew Memnon would send his men looking for her; if she could get as far away as possible from the assassin, before daybreak, perhaps ...

... perhaps fifteen feet from camp, she fell face first into the sand, a silk line tied around her left ankle having pulled taut.

She turned over, breathing hard, and pulled at that line, as if a big fish might be at the other end; and she was right: Mathayus materialized out of the night, standing in front of her, the other end of the silk cord tied around his own left ankle.

"Where are you headed, sorceress?" he asked lightly. "You think you'll find your king out here in the desert, somewhere? Do you miss your beloved?"

Her eyes flared with anger, and she stood and swung a hard tiny fist at him; he caught the fist, but with her other hand she clawed at him, her nails long, sharp, her ferocity intense, almost overwhelming.

Surprised by the force, the frenzy of her attack, he lifted her off the ground, and hurled her up and over his shoulder, like a sack of grain. She

landed with a rolling thump.

Trying to straighten out the line that bound them, Mathayus walked to her, where she turned over—painfully—and, wincing with discomfort yet still prideful, she said, "Memnon is not my beloved .. . not my lover. I am a virgin."

He might have laughed at that, had she not been so obviously, indignantly sincere.

"My powers stem from my purity," she said. "Even that monster Memnon would not dare defile me."

Monster Memnon.... ?

"Apologize to me," she demanded. "Now!"

The Akkadian studied the beauty, asprawl on the sand, disheveled but no less fetching in the ivory-washed blue of the night. Her conviction was impressive, no denying.

"I am sorry," he said. "Truly."

She swallowed, her eyes searching his face for sarcasm, for insincerity, finding neither. Her head lowered. Her voice trembled when she spoke.

"I was eleven," she said, "when Memnon heard the stories of the child, the girl, with eyes like the gods. ... He rode into my village and lined up four of his soldiers, before me. He said, 'Tell me the names of these men. Each wrong answer means that man's death.' "

"His own men," Mathayus whispered, aghast.

"His own men," she said, with a nod. "I was terrified, but what could I do? I told him the names, all four."

"You saved their lives."

"Yes. And, afterward, those same four soldiers killed my family, as I was taken away."

The Akkadian felt stunned, as though he'd suffered a terrible physical blow; his heart ached for her—she had suffered Memnon's cruelty as much as any man, or woman.

Softly he said, "The 'Great Teacher' has taught his lessons to us all, has he not?"

And he bent to her, and untied the line from her ankle.

Then he walked back to the camp, the fire and his blankets; she returned, slowly, sitting where before she had slept, clutching her knees to herself.



He had turned his back to her. "Run, if you like— you're no longer my prisoner..." He glanced back at her, tellingly. "But keep in mind—there are worse dangers, out there, than me."

Then, his back still to her, he went to sleep, snoring a little, though the snort-snoring of the thief— who had dozed through all the fuss—drowned him out.

And for a long, long time, the sorceress sat and studied her captor, wondering what kind of man this was, after all. Who was he, this man who dared stand up to Lord Memnon?

Yet, for all her visions, for all her prophecies, Cassandra was unaware that she now loved the Akkadian. That her future was bound with his.

## Gathering Storm

B

y midmorning the next day, Thorak and those dozen red-turbaned warriors had all but caught up with their quarry; as they trudged up the slope of a large dune—a wind shifting the sands ominously, sun beating down without mercy—they were not aware of their seeming imminent success. Their prey, however, was aware of them: from a nearby dune, Mathayus—astride Hanna, the sorceress sharing his saddle, riding behind him now, her arms wrapped around his midsection, her standoff-fishness a memory—picked up on sounds, carried by wind. His keen senses were more finely honed than those of the thief, trudging along trying to ignore the blistering heat, while the woman seemed lost in her mystical musings. He wheeled the albino beast around and saw a cloud of dust—distant, but not so distant as to pose no threat.

Still, the Akkadian only smiled; in fact, he grinned. "Thorak ..."

The horse thief turned, saw the gathering cloud of dust, and shook his head, with the weary resignation of the put-upon. "What a surprise . . . however could he have found us? ... Oh, yes, you left him that *marker*. ..."

"Yes, and the fool is walking right into danger."

Arpid looked up at Mathayus as if questioning his fellow traveler's sanity. "Oh, he is, is he?"

"Certainly."

"How many men does he have, would you say?"

The assassin frowned at the distant dust cloud. "Only a dozen, I'd say."

"Ah. Only a dozen of the finest warriors of Memnon's Red Guard. And there are three of us, including one woman and a sniveling coward..."

Mathayus shook his head. "The fool is riding right into a storm."

The sorceress was studying him with childlike curiosity. "A storm?"

"Pardon me for saying," the thief said, "but, formidable as you are, partner... you're no storm. You're just one man. A man among many, I grant you . . . but one man."

The Akkadian grinned down at his scruffy companion, then he lifted his eyes away from the dust cloud Thorak and his men were raising, toward the opposite horizon.

Sighing, shaking his head, the thief muttered, "This is, without a doubt, the worst fix you've gotten me into yet!"

And now Arpid looked up, his attention drawn to the direction in which the Akkadian was gazing, and grinning; what was that fool so *happy* about, anyway?

The thief's eyes took in that horizon, where he saw a dark brown shimmering fine, like a living thing, moving inexorably toward them.

"Perhaps I spoke to soon," Arpid said, agape. "I believe you have managed to outdo yourself, Akkadian—*this* is without a doubt the worst fix I've ever been in!"

"The day is young, thief," Mathayus said, reining Hanna.

"Gods save us," Cassandra said, eyes huge as she took in the ominous, gathering darkness, as if an impatient night had decided to rush in, hours early. "It's a sandstorm!"

"And right on time," the assassin said.

The sound was growing, a hollow, eerie roaring, like a hoarse scream.

"Ah, yes!" the thief said, throwing his hands in the air. "Just what we needed! Who wouldn't want this? I was just thinking, if only we could have a sandstorm along about now...."

Mathayus looked pointedly at his partner. "Fend for yourself, thief." He glanced back at the sorceress, sharply. "I must leave you here."

The sorceress seemed struck by that thought. "Leave me . . . ?"

The Akkadian hopped down off Hanna, and helped the woman down, and from a saddlebag withdrew a blanket, which he handed her. His eyes held hers, speaking volumes; but the only words he gave her were: "Cover up."

Then he swung back up into the saddle and spurred Hanna down off the dune.

As he rode, the Akkadian reached down into another saddlebag and plucked out a narrow strip of leather, greased, odd looking—a slitted cut across it, making an eyehole. Though the sand guard's prime function was protection, it also served as a bizarre battle mask, providing the assassin a fearsome visage. He tied it on with one hand as he spurred Hanna, even harder, her hooves pounding the sand, stirring tiny storms of their own.

On a flat stretch of desert, the red-turbaned company of twelve had paused, when their leader held up a hand—he'd heard something ... someone'... fast approaching. Thorak knew it couldn't be the Akkadian—a man alone would not dare attack thirteen; it must be a courier from one of the armies, sent by Memnon.

A red-turbaned warrior pointed. "There!"

And coming down over a slope was one man—a leather-masked brute on a white camel... the Akkadian! Was he mad, charging them like a one-man army?

"He's attacking ... alone?" one warrior said to another.

"The sun has baked his brain," the other said, the tracker among them. "He's been seized by desert madness...."

And from their midst came Thorak's booming voice: "A thousand duranas to the man who brings me his head!"

Thorak's men were loyal, that was unquestioned; but the smell of money sparked these warriors to seek new heights of valor. Swords whipped from belts and the bare-chested, red-turbaned warriors spurred their horses and galloped toward the lunatic, soldiers bellowing war cries that would have chilled the blood of any normal man.

Mathayus, of course, was no normal man: he was the last of the Akkadians, on a blood mission, galloping at full speed. But he was not, as his foes surmised, a man alone—he rode at the head of an army of his own ... an army of sand.

As he came down over the rise, the sandstorm—the length of the horizon, a brown swirl of destruction—came up behind him, miles wide, as tall as Memnon's palace, a churning, burning wall of flying particles.

A thousand duranas or not, the riders panicked—the sight of the madman—featureless in the ghostly leather mask with the narrow eye slit, hunkered over, waving a scimitar, and racing toward them, with a sandstorm at his back—was a living nightmare, and they reined in their horses.

Then the sandstorm overtook the Akkadian, racing on ahead of him, and even as the brown swirl enveloped camel and rider, the two did not break stride.

Staggered by the man's audacity, realizing at once the assassin's bold plan, Thorak watched in helpless shock as the charging warrior disappeared into the storm, while Thorak's fabled Red Guard broke their own charge, their horses rearing, their ranks scattering as the whirlwind hit full force, swallowing them, the world a harsh vortex of sand, biting the flesh, blinding the eyes, the wind knocking men from saddles, onto the desert floor, and when they tried to stand, knocked them down again.

But Thorak did not succumb—he remained astride his fine steed, a battle-ax in one hand, reins in the other—and he screamed, "Akkadian bastard," and rode into the storm, searching in naught visibility for the object of his rage.

The world was a terrifying, blinding blur of falling bodies, whipping sand, and frightened, rearing horses. The supreme fighting men who were Thorak's red-turbaned warriors had been reduced to whimpering fools, wheeling about in isolation though the screams of others were all around them, only a few still on horseback.

And Mathayus—prepared for this hellish wind, relishing it—popped in and out of the pockets of isolation, looming over his disoriented adversaries like the personification of grim death itself. His blade flashed, splashing the brown world with red. He leaped from his saddle and tackled two of the soldiers, taking them down, scimitar slashing, flashing, the dagger in his other hand doing the same.

Then he disappeared, only to emerge here, and there, blades in both hands flashing, three warriors going down at once under the onslaught of steel, bodies dropping away into a wall of swallowing sand that offered the fresh corpses instant burial. The screams of slaughter were otherworldly as

Mathayus and the storm became one, delivering their brutal sentences of death with simultaneous dearth of mercy.

Thorak—for all his courage no less a victim of the stinging sand, all but blinded now—spun his horse in rage, his battle-ax in hand, his frustration unbearable as around him the bloodcurdling cries of his men melded with the shrieking wind. He spurred his steed and rode toward the screams.

*And then appearing before him, as if the sand* parted to reveal him just for Thorak, stood the Akkadian, scimitar slicing another brave man to an undignified death. Thorak bore down on him, charged him, swinging the battle-ax in a blow the assassin could surely not have seen coming.

But the Akkadian sensed him, and spun, answering steel with steel. They flailed away at each other, the warrior on horseback, the barbarian on the ground, Mathayus like a force of nature, cutting and ripping, rivaling the whirlwind around them.

Yet somehow the scarred-faced commander held his own—due in part to the advantage of horseback—and battle-ax clanged against scimitar, every blow met, every parry responded to with skill and precision. Worthy warriors, they might well have admired each other's skills, if they had not been so busy trying to kill each other.

Thorak saw an opening, took it, and Mathayus anticipated the move, knocking the battle-ax from the warrior's grasp, and thrust forward, with massive force that pierced the man's leather armor.

Pummeled by sand, lanced with pain, Thorak tumbled from his horse, and fell to the shifting ground, dying. The Akkadian turned away, looking for new victims; but Thorak still had seconds to live, and he used them....

Memnon's most trusted adviser of war took his last moments to withdraw an arrow, *a certain arrow*, from its quiver, removing the leather covering that shielded its tip. And using the arrow like a knife, he stabbed upward, catching the Akkadian in the thigh.

The assassin winced in pain, and dropped to his knees, as if in prayer. Around them the only sound was the screaming sand—the red-turbaned guard all lay dead, most of them already half-buried.

Thorak's last sight was that of the wounded Akkadian—perhaps they would continue this duel in the underworld—and then the sandstorm consumed them all.

Before long, the wind of sand had moved on, leaving the desert's tan skin to shift under a more gentle breeze, whose fingers drew meaningless pictures and patterns on the restless dunes. The field of battle lay still as the death the sands covered; it was as if no one had ever been here—that, minutes before, a furious clash had taken place at this site seemed an impossibility.

Nearby, where the Akkadian had left his companions to wait for the outcome, the sands seemed similarly empty of life. Then fingers began to protrude from the dune's surface, like a corpse rising from its grave. A single eye blinked open, the rest of the face it belonged to covered by the sand.

The horse thief sat up, amazed and delighted to be alive, and took some time brushing himself off, before giving any thought to either of his companions. He stood at the highest point of the dune and shielded his eyes from the sun with the side of his hand, surveying the battlefield.

A female voice said, "Arpid ..."

He turned toward the sound, suddenly remembering the sorceress, who was coughing, saying, "Help me ... please," half-buried in the sand, the blanket Mathayus had provided her having long since blown away.

Actually feeling a little guilty about forgetting her, the thief ran to the woman, helped her up; it took her a moment to get her feet steady under her.

Then, alarm and concern coloring her voice, she asked, "The Akkadian—what of the Akkadian?"

"The battlefield is deserted," Arpid said, with a shrug. "It's as if the sandstorm grabbed them up and cast them away, to some distant place."

"We must look," she said firmly. "We must search."

"Of course," he said, agreeing, feeling a strange emptiness at the pit of his stomach. Did he feel some emotion about that damned Akkadian? The bastard had treated him poorly, Arpid only hanging around him for protection's sake.

So why did he feel worried? Sad? Experiencing such emotions, where another person was concerned, was new to the thief, and as such the sensation was disconcerting.

The sorceress and the thief walked the battlefield, which on closer examination was not so empty, after all: half a dozen half-buried bodies presented themselves. They walked carefully, gingerly, through this instantaneous graveyard. Then, suddenly, the sand shifted before them!

A horse emerged from out of a small dune, and reared up, whinnying; this prompted another horse to do the same, and another, unburying themselves.

The men had perished, but their steeds, many of them, had survived.

"We'll have mounts, at least," the thief told the woman.

Another small dune dissolved itself as yet another beast rose out of the sand: *Hanna!*

Arpid ran to the mount; hard to believe he was actually pleased to see the fleabag ... but he was, he was\_\_

Cassandra, at Arpid's side as he held the camel by its reins, said, "No sign of her master."

"He has to be here somewhere," Arpid said. "At least, his body does. ..."

She frowned. "I don't sense him dead. Keep looking."

Arpid gazed up at the camel. "Why don't you help? Where is he, old girl? Where's your master?"

Hanna bellowed impatiently, and they realized, all at once, that the beast was standing next to a rounded hump of sand. They watched, astounded, as a shape rose, sand pouring off him, a battered, bloodied, bruised warrior emerging. ...

Mathayus.

Arpid and Cassandra exchanged wide-eyed, delighted expressions.

As the Akkadian stepped away from his burial site, another warrior revealed himself, interred below him: wide-eyed in death, Thorak himself.

"For an ugly brute," Arpid said, "he makes a pretty sight."

Mathayus had gone to the woman. "Are you all right? Are you hurt? Did they ... ?"

"No," she said. "I'm ... untouched."

And the sorceress was struck by his concern, the depth of feeling in the dark eyes of the assassin. Had he gone through all of this because of his mission? For gain, for vengeance?

Or simply to save her?

"I'm fine, thanks," Arpid said to the Akkadian, who had not spoken to him. "Really appreciate your concern."

Cassandra was looking at Mathayus carefully—he seemed unsteady. "Are you ... ?"

"I am well," he said.

Then she noticed the arrow, sticking out of the side of his leg—not terribly deep, but embedded there.



"You need help," she gasped.

The Akkadian reached down and gripped the arrow and, gritting his teeth, ripped it free from his flesh. Heroic as this effort was, the brawny barbarian nonetheless screamed in pain, a sound that echoed across the desert.

The woman, out of respect, looked away from this cry of anguish; the thief, out of squeamishness, did the same.

The Akkadian staggered over to the half-buried corpse of Thorak; an amulet around his adversary's neck bore the insignia of the red-turbaned troops. Ripping it from Thorak's cold throat, he said, "Help me find his horse."

"There it is," the thief said, pointing.

Thorak's black steed, a distinctive beast, was among those milling around the battle site. The Akkadian walked to the horse, and examined the area around the saddle.

"Another survivor," he said, with satisfaction.

As Arpid and Cassandra joined him, they saw what he was talking about: a falcon, its head covered by a cowl, was thonged to the saddle. Mathayus untied the bird and attached Thorak's insignia to the metal band around its foot.

The sorceress touched the assassin's arm. "What are you doing?"

"Sending Lord Memnon a message," he said; but his voice sounded weak, his eyes seemed cloudy.

Nonetheless, Mathayus managed to remove the bird's cowl and launch the falcon into the air; it wheeled, flapped regally, and flew away.

The Akkadian stood with his hands on hips, watching the bird wing toward Gomorrah, and he laughed a deep, hearty laugh that turned, startlingly, into a cough.

"Mathayus!" Cassandra cried.

The assassin, seized by a cramping of his abdominal muscles, doubled over.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

His fingers indicated the wound, from the arrow. "Poi... poisoned ..."

And the mighty warrior, legs buckling, pitched forward into the sand.

## Touch of Magic

As sunset painted the rocky landscape around the great city of Gomorrah a vivid orange, as if the earth itself had caught fire, a falcon flew over the fortified walls and to its familiar perch within the turreted palace of Memnon. The marketplace was closing down—excluding the dens of sin, of course—and soon all but the most dedicated lechers would have retired behind walls of stone, for time with friends and family, for food and rest.

Lord Memnon, however, did not rest—he had assembled his generals in the great throne room, where maps were spread out over a large table. Most pressing, of course, was Ur—the only unconquered land—and the warlord was sharing his latest strategies with his battle chiefs. As usual, his generals paid rapt attention; but one of them—Toran—seemed strangely quiet, even preoccupied. And this troubled the Great Teacher, who preferred his pupils hang on his every word.

Takmet, the heir to the empty throne of Ur, was present, but he too seemed to have his mind elsewhere, and did not crowd around the map table with the rest. Of course, Memnon had already informed Takmet of these strategies; even so, the man's nervous pacing was a distraction.

And of this assembly, of course, only Takmet knew the why of Cassandra's absence . . . that the Akkadian had stolen her away.

A falconer entered, with the regal, recently arrived bird on his arm. Approaching the warlord, then half bowing, he said, "A message from Thorak."

"Finally," Memnon said, with a sigh of satisfaction. "The Akkadian is dead. . . ."

But the warlord soon realized he was looking at Thorak's insignia – his blood-spattered insignia – and nothing else. Rage and even a kind of sadness

rose in him – the scarred warrior had been at his right hand for many years, and now the Akkadian had slain him, and sent this taunting message.

Crushing the bloody amulet in a powerful hand, Memnon stood lost in thought for long moments, before General Toran stepped forward.

“My lord,” he said. “Is something wrong?”

The warlord banished the emotions from himself, and glanced impassively at his generals; he even summoned a small smile. “No – quite the opposite. All is in order.”

The generals exchanged glances.

"And I think, gentlemen," Memnon said, "this meeting is at an end."

The generals half bowed and were making their way across the throne room, toward the doors, when Toran stopped and turned, the other men halting as well, though their expressions were tentative.

With a boldness none of them had ever before dared, General Toran said, "My lord, it is customary for the seer to attend these meetings. We all know how valuable her council has been."

Takmet paused in his pacing to look tellingly Memnon's way.

"Why," the general was brazenly asking, "is the sorceress not with us tonight?"

Around him, the other generals were nodding their heads.

Memnon, hiding his anger at this affront, said only, "She is indisposed."

The generals again exchanged anxious glances, and Toran asked, the suspicion obvious in his voice, "Nothing ... serious, I hope?"

Memnon smiled, though his eyes were hard. "If it was serious, you would be informed... .. Are you not my most trusted advisers of war?"

General Toran again half bowed. "Yes, my lord."

And the other generals did and said the same, and went out.

With a growl of fury, Memnon swept the maps from his table and hurled the wadded-up leather insignia at Takmet, who flinched.

The wispily bearded adviser said, "I said nothing! I revealed nothing!"

"Would that I could trade your worthless life for Thorak's," the warlord said bitterly. "Go! Leave me."

And Takmet, who for all his faults was no fool, did as he was told.

That night, in the surprising coolness of the sunless desert, under the purple star-tossed sky, the full moon touching the sands with a chalky ivory, the

horse thief Arpid found himself in the unusual position of taking charge of their little camp. He built a fire, as the Akkadian lay shaking under a blanket, lost in fever's labyrinthian halls, beads of perspiration jewelizing his copper-hued flesh.

Kneeling beside the assassin, the sorceress tended his wound, cleansing it with water from a goatskin pouch, bandaging it with cloth torn from the scarflike bedouin robes she wore. Mathayus mumbled in his delirium, with only the occasional word comprehensible—but among them were "Memnon" and "Cassandra."

Watching her as she patted a damp rag to the Akkadian's forehead, surprised by her tenderness, the thief settled himself down in his own blankets. He wondered if the woman knew that she loved this man....

Gently, Arpid asked, "Can you save him, sorceress?"

She glanced toward the little thief, her dark eyes leaping in the firelight. "Perhaps ... but his fever is strong. The poison is made from the venom of the scorpion."

He frowned in curiosity. "How could you identify the poison? What, from the signs of his sickness ... ?"

She shook her head. "I *know*, that is all.. .. This man is tied to the scorpion, in some mystical way even I cannot fathom. This may be a good thing— if he survives, that venom will always be within him."

"A poison in the blood is a good thing?"

She wrung out the cloth. "It may give him the strength of the scorpion ... and a resistance to any future poisoning."

"But will he survive?"

"Tonight will tell."

Arpid sat up. "Well, you better work your magic, woman. He's our only way out of this desert—he dies, we die."

Cassandra sat back, pausing in her ministering, as if considering the little thief's words; then she gazed up at the full moon, her lovely features bathed in its ivory glow. She might have been listening to words only she could hear—Arpid could not be sure. He knew only that she was lost in a near trance....

And then she seemed to relax, her shoulders settling, and her expression was tranquil as she turned to the thief and said, quietly, "He will not die."

Arpid frowned. "But he's poisoned, you said...."

"Hush now, little thief," she said, her voice both musical and kind. "Do not interrupt."

"Interrupt what... ?"

"Hush."

And Cassandra lay one hand over the Akkadian's heart and another over the nasty wound on his thigh; she closed her eyes, and drew within herself. The moonlight now seemed to provide an aura around her, her entire body haloed in its glow; or was the sorceress herself emanating that radiance ... no, surely, it was just the moon....

Yet Arpid knew, somehow, that the sorceress was healing the assassin—that she was calling upon all her powers, every particle of her very being, to use her magic as a cure.

Not far from their campsite, another figure trudged, a small figure with wild white hair and modest robes and an enormous pack on his back, the likes of which would half cripple a mule. And yet Philos the scientist had no means of transport beyond his sandaled feet, though he had a better sense of direction than most travelers.

Partly that was due to the detailed maps in his backpack; but also he was guided by one of his own inventions, an instrument that in slightly different form would one day be known as a compass. The scientist's strange instrument, fashioned of wood and glass, included a primitive dial, with a needle that pointed to magnetic north.

Right now, however, that needle wavered, strangely, pulled away, drawn to the east.

Under the purple sky and the ivory moon, the odd little figure halted. Philos turned toward the direction the needle of his invention indicated—something was happening out there, in the dark desert night, something big . . . something that *wasn't* science... .

At the small campsite, Arpid sat up, watching the sorceress do her mysterious work; suddenly the glowing aura disappeared, and the slender woman seemed almost to collapse, though really she only slumped, her shoulders slack, her head drooping, as she remained seated there on the sand. It was as if all of the energy in her, every ounce of air, had suddenly vanished, like the snuffing out of a candle's flame.

The little horse thief believed in magic, no question; but had never seen it so plainly at work, and he was wide-eyed with astonishment. He didn't speak for a while, afraid to, as she sat there, slouched, reeling from the intensity of her healing efforts.

Tentatively, Arpid spoke. "Is he ... cured?"

For long moments, the sorceress said nothing. She felt depleted, used up .. . and she had glimpsed into the assassin's soul, and memories and images from his violent past were spinning through her mind. Such a brutal being.. . and yet an innate goodness ... she had much to ponder.

Cassandra arose and went to her own bedroll, and lay down, preparing for sleep.

"Well?" Arpid asked. "Will he *live*?"

"It is in the hands of the gods," she said.

And she turned away from him.

But the little thief had seen whose touch had conveyed the magic to the feverish Akkadian, and it hadn't been the hands of gods ... had it?

Mathayus awoke at dawn.

It was a slow waking, blinking and bleary-eyed, and Arpid thought the Akkadian looked to be suffering the worst hangover since time began; but the man was, at least, alive.

When Mathayus's eyes came into focus, a scraggedy-bearded face was hovering over him, and gave him a start. "*Ahhh!*"

"She cured you," the owner of the face said. The horse thief. "I knew it! I could feel her magic ... I could *see* it!"

Slowly, falteringly, the Akkadian propped himself up on an elbow. He closed his eyes, then opened them again, fighting grogginess. "Cured me? She..."

"She's not just a pretty face, partner."

Mathayus looked across the now dwindled campfire at the still-slumbering Cassandra. She looked innocent, somehow, and if he had ever seen a lovelier creature, he couldn't recall it. Of course, he did have a blinding headache....

She seemed to feel his eyes on her, and came awake; her eyes went directly to his, and their gazes locked. Her relief at his survival was evident, as a tiny, tender smile flickered across her lips.

Feeling awkward, suddenly, the Akkadian said, "We should break camp."

And they did, without any talk of the remarkable events of the day previous. Perhaps an hour later— Mathayus astride Hanna, with Cassandra and Arpid riding horses bequeathed them by Thorak and his dead warriors—they were again under the desert sun, jogging along. Mathayus was still without focus—surprised to be alive, not yet forming his next move. For the first time in days, his mind was not filled with Memnon.

"I want to thank you," the Akkadian said to the sorceress.

She turned away, smiling to herself, happy for his gratitude, but not willing to let him know it. Then she looked at him, her face a beautiful blank mask, and said, "No thanks needed... It was self-preservation. If you had died, where would—"

But an explosion interrupted her—a loud roar that seemed to rock the desert floor.

The thief looked up at the clear sky, confused. "Thunder? Without clouds?"

Mathayus was noting a billowing of black smoke over a nearby dune. He sniffed the air and a familiar chemical scent tickled his nostrils. "That is *not* thunder ... but I think I know who caused it..."

A tiny fellow came running out of the black cloud, like a figure fleeing a burning house; only Philos the scientist was not terrified, rather he was ecstatic. "It *works!* ... It finally works!"

Running gleefully down the sandy slope, the soot-smudged little man saw the trio before him and his happiness only grew. As he ran up to them, he all but did a little dance.

"Ah, I knew it!" the scientist said. "I knew you were close, my lady—I felt it last night. . . and an invention of mine confirmed it... so I headed this way."

The scientist bowed, a low, respectful gesture, before Cassandra, saying, "My lady oracle . . . And you, barbarian—hello!... You see? I have perfected the Chinese compound! My magic powder *works!*"

The three travelers responded to this ball of enthusiastic energy with a stunned silence.

"By the way," the scientist said casually, "would any of you happen to have any water? I'm utterly out."

Their goatskin water pouch was near dry, too, but the scientist suggested they watch for birds, and follow them, for "our winged friends" would surely know the way to the nearest oasis.

And within an hour, they had reached an oasis so beautiful, so perfect, it should have been a mirage; but it was not, it was real, as the birds circling over its ring of palms confirmed. Just beyond the oasis, mountains rose steeply, and the desert seemed only part of the world, now, not its entirety.

Along the rock-bottomed pool, crystal waters shimmering under the sun, Cassandra knelt, cupping her hands with cool liquid. She glanced up at Mathayus, standing beside her, still moving on wobbly legs, but clearly on the mend.

She asked, "Do we dare drink? Or is it poisoned?"

Before the assassin could answer, the little thief came running by and hurled his fetid body into the water, making a huge splash, submerging himself.

"It is now," Mathayus said.

Nonetheless she drank the water down, and the Akkadian crouched beside her and filled his goatskin pouch and several water bottles.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," he admitted.

"Well... what will we do next? Where will go?"

"I feel as though I've returned from the underworld, prematurely ... and I admit... I can't think clearly, yet."

She touched his arm. Her smile was as glorious as this perfect oasis. "You will. Time. Just a little time..."

*Perfect oasis*, he thought. Too perfect?



She began to say something, and he said, "Quiet, woman," his eyes slowly scanning their surroundings. His hand moved toward his scimitar.. .

*... and around them, sand seemed to explode from the ground, ringing the water spot!*

Men in leathers and animal skins, hard and fierce, rose from the holes they'd hidden in, tossing off rattan sand-colored mats, and aiming crossbows and slings at the little party.

"Oh dear," said Philos, on his knees by the waterside.

"Bandits," Mathayus breathed. But he had seen their like before... he knew these markings, the bone-and-bead necklaces....

Cassandra held tight to his arm as the bandits closed in on them—no escape possible, no fighting a crossbow aimed at the throat, not even if Mathayus had been in his full fighting form.

"I'm alive!" Arpid said, bursting up out of the water, capering like a child.

Then he saw the bandits and stopped splashing.

"For the moment," Arpid said, as water streamed down his face like tears.

## Cave Men

M

athayus, Cassandra, Arpid and Philos—that unlikely quartet of desert travelers—were ushered from the oasis to the mountain range that rose from the idyllic water hole's edge. Here, massive rocks combined with the natural camouflage of hanging vines and the drapery of vegetation to shield a sizable entrance into a cavern. A caravan could spend the night at the oasis, and never suspect the nearness of the mountain lair of these bandits ... that is, the caravan lucky enough not to fall prey to their hidden hosts.

Their scruffy captors led the little party through a dark, dank passageway, lighted by torch, until—astonishingly—the cave opened into a natural open-air amphitheater, the late-afternoon sun dappling an incredible temple-size area playing home to a staggering network of tents and walkways, a sheltered world of bare timber, rope, twine, and canvas, encompassed by greenery climbing, then succumbing to, the cliffsides surrounding. Booty was stacked and stored here and there and everywhere—stolen, no doubt, from Memnon's caravans . . . which to the Akkadian seemed as noble a pursuit as any bandit might choose.

This shared enemy, however, made the assassin and his companions no less prisoners.

Mathayus and his improbable band were led by armed guards to a central place, around which scores of dwellers clustered ever nearer. The crowd consisted of warrior-bandits bearing shields and spears and wearing the war paint and leathers of numerous tribes, their women and children mixed in,

swarming for a closer, openly suspicious look. Surprisingly, some of the faces—the females and the offspring particularly—were filled with fear; no warrior among this lot could compare in size and physique with the Akkadian ... and no woman could compare with the exotic beauty of Cassandra.

On the other hand, few were as puny as Arpid and Philos.

Nearby was the largest of the tents, a central canvas-timber structure, the door flap of which drew back, revealing a figure all too familiar to Mathayus

...

... the Nubian giant, Balthazar, with whom the Akkadian had traded barbed badinage—and potentially deadly tosses of the kama—at the late King Pheron's tribal council.

Balthazar remained the same formidable figure—ropy dreadlock braids on an otherwise bald skull, massive muscles carved from ebony, ritualistic decorative scars on a face dominated by slitted eyes and a broad flat nose, battle beads looped around a tree-trunk neck, shoulders so broad you had to look at them one at a time.

For a moment the Nubian king froze, as dark anger rose through him like smoke through a burning building. Then the man mountain's upper lip curled in a sneer.

"Assassin," he said, his voice deep, resonant. "The gods are good to me. When last we met, you were so kind as to offer to kill me..." The giant sat heavily on a timber-and-twine throne. "And now I have the chance to repay your kindness."

Cassandra glanced at Mathayus, expecting him to respond; but the Akkadian said nothing, keeping his eyes focused straight and unblinkingly ahead.

"My scouts," Balthazar said, leaning forward, a hand on one knee, "tell me you have failed in your mission. It is said the sorcerer lives."

Mathayus did not reply. And Cassandra began to wonder if she would be in danger, should the Nubian discover her identity....

"My scouts also say your two brothers were slain... and yet you took the same oath—that as long as blood ran in the veins of any one of you, the magician would die. . . . How is it you survived?"

"Give me a sword," Mathayus said, "and I will do my best to explain."

"Bold words!" The Nubian king shifted in his wooden throne. "Brazen boasts from one who trespasses."

"We do not trespass—your people brought us here."

"Silence!" Balthazar shook a thick finger at the Akkadian. "Our survival depends on keeping this location a secret. So you present a problem, Akkadian—as long as you're alive, at least."

The little thief stepped forward, tentatively. "Pardon me, sir—just so you know, since I'm sure you mean to be fair ... I have no *idea* how we got here. I just wasn't paying attention, and, besides, I'm nearly blind...."

Balthazar scowled at the little man, his expression as hard as the rock walls surrounding.

The scientist now stepped forward, smiling nervously. "What my awkward friend is attempting to express is our embarrassment and regret for stumbling into your sanctum. Kind sir, if you would spare our lives, we would be perfectly delighted to forget we ever saw any of your, uh, charming little enclave. So ... if we're agreed ... we'll be on our way."

"That," the king said, "is not a prospect open to you."

And Balthazar rose, his face firmly set, as if a decision had been made....

From a corner of his eye, Mathayus noticed someone was pushing through the crowd—no, not someone: a group, perhaps half a dozen knifing through the mob, parting them rudely.

"Balthazar!" a strong female voice cried.

Queen Isis emerged—that dark regal beauty, un-derclad in leather armor; and around her were what remained of her woman warriors, fierce beauties whose numbers had dwindled since the Ur tribal council.

She stood proudly, hands on her hips, gazing up at the looming Nubian king. "You violate your own laws, if you slaughter these visitors. You know full well this is a place of sanctuary for the enemies of Memnon."

Balthazar, trembling with a quiet rage, said nothing; but his gaze remained locked with hers.

"The winds have carried the stories," Isis said, "of the Akkadian's brave stand against the men of Memnon.... Now, I know that there are those among us .. . yourself included, Balthazar... who have no great love for my tribe. Some men fear strong women."

"Isis," Balthazar said, "you try my good nature\_\_"

She went on, as if he had not spoken, her words more for those congregated, than for the king. "I am not fond of the people of the western mountains. ..." And she gestured toward a face-painted group among the crowd. "Yet we accept them, as we accept all of those who come here, for shelter, in this time of Memnon's atrocities ... whatever our personal feelings might be."

Balthazar shook his head. "The Akkadian is different," he said. "He is an assassin, whose loyalty is within reach of the highest bidder.... As such, he is dangerous."

But Isis was shaking her head, now. "Your judgment on this matter is clouded...."

The Nubian king threw his head back and roared, "It is my judgment that keeps all of you *alive!*"

And now Balthazar strode over to the prisoners; he planted himself before them and said, "Take the woman and the other two away."

The Akkadian stepped out in front of Cassandra and said, an ominous edge in his voice, "Fair warning, king—the first hand to touch her, I'm cutting off."

Cassandra looked at Mathayus anew: the caring, the passion, in his voice and eyes, were undeniable. Could this man . . . love her?

Balthazar withdrew his huge sword, grinning ruthlessly. "I could hope for no finer invitation, Akkadian."

Mathayus darted to one side, and as deftly as picking an apple from a tree, plucked a sword from the belt of a guard. The crowd instantly drew away, creating a larger arena, as the Akkadian charged forward without fear toward the giant Nubian, who ran at the oncoming threat, his own sword raised high.

The swords collided with a shattering impact—literally, the powerful blades fragmenting like glass under the blows of these two powerful warriors.

Mathayus reeled backward, and his opponent did the same—each man startled to see the broken-at-the-hilt sword in his respective grasp.

In a moment of frozen time, the two stared at each other, as if wondering what to do; then they made a simultaneous decision, and again ran at each other, this round with fists raised. The massed onlookers thundered with pleasure—rough people always ready to watch and relish a fight-to-the-death between well-matched warriors.

The Akkadian was shorter than the Nubian, but not by much; and the Nubian's muscled frame was thicker than that of the Akkadian, who seemed damn near lithe in comparison. Bulk made the king's blows more powerful

than the assassin's, but the latter's grace and speed kept the hand-to-hand exchange even, the flurry of blows staggering both warriors, but neither falling, and no man gaining the upper hand.

Frustrated, Balthazar grabbed an iron pot from an open campfire and smashed it into the head of the Akkadian, on his next charge; stunned, Mathayus staggered backward into the side of a tent, taking the canvas structure down with him. In the meantime, one of Balthazar's men threw his king a staff, and the Nubian stepped forward with it, bearing down on Mathayus, who rolled back and forth across the fallen canvas, nimbly dodging the striking stick.

As he rolled, the Akkadian discovered, within the fallen tarp, the tent's pole, which he snatched up and used to parry the attacks of the Nubian and his staff. They seemed about to fight to yet another stalemate, as the two men expertly thrust and parried with their staffs, an exchange that only served to emphasize how evenly matched the warriors were.

Now it was the Akkadian's turn to feel frustration, and he summoned the fury within him to blot out the chivalrous give-and-take the duel had risen to, screaming in primal rage and laying into the Nubian, hacking away like a scythe at jungle grass, knocking the surprised giant backward, the Akkadian's ferocity trumping the superior strength of the king, and—with a blow that snapped his own make-do tent-pole staff in half—knocking the Nubian's staff out of his grasp and beyond his reach, driving Balthazar against a wall of timber ...

. . . and the ragged, jagged yet pointed half staff was poised at the Nubian's throat, dimpling the flesh.

Around them, the bandit amphitheater had gone dead silent. Every man there—including, and *especially*, Balthazar—knew that in an instant, with a simple thrust, the king would be dead.

But the Akkadian, while keeping that point pressed to the king's throat, chose instead to speak. "We are brothers, Balthazar, in the same cause."

"Brothers?" the defiant warrior said bitterly. "You have brought death to my people—as surely as night follows day, Memnon will follow you."

"I have killed those he has sent; their bones bleach in the desert sand."

The Nubian's eyes and nostrils flared. "Memnon will send more troops! He will not stop, until he has *her*... his sorceress."

Though pinned to the wall, the big man managed to point toward the aghast Cassandra.

"Yes, Akkadian ... I know who she is. She is no mere wench whose honor you defend—this is the oracle who Memnon will have back, at any cost."

"And once he has her," Mathayus said, "and her powers of vision... he will come here, more swiftly, more deadly, than ever before."

Mathayus withdrew the threat from the king's throat, turning to the crowd, addressing them in a loud, strong voice.

*"Memnon will stop at nothing!"* He prowled the open area, staff in hand. "Hide here as long as you can, but hear me when I say that he *will* find you . . . unless he is stopped. If not... he will sweep across this land like a terrible sickness, and wipe out all of you!"

A deep laugh rumbled from the Nubian king's chest. "And who will stop him, Akkadian?"

Mathayus turned to Balthazar, an eyebrow cocked.

"Will you stand alone before the fury of his armies?" the king asked, laughter replaced by a somber timbre.

Without hesitation, Mathayus gazed directly at Balthazar and said, "Yes."

The refugee camp around him looked on in awed silence. Cassandra felt a chill—a voice within her said she had just witnessed the birth of a king.

And even Balthazar seemed to regard the Akkadian in a new light; after all, no warrior had ever before fought the giant to a standstill.

The Nubian king heaved a sigh, having been granted his life, now granting a small concession. "One night's sanctuary ... and then pray to the gods, Akkadian, that our paths never cross again."

And the king disappeared back within his tent, as the guards fell away, and Mathayus and his party joined the rest of the assembled tribes. As bandits, these people had raided and stung Memnon; but now, among them, they knew . . . one braver than themselves had proclaimed himself ready to face the warlord and all his minions, alone if need be.

When night's purple star-studded cloak fell across the open-air cliffbound chamber, music echoed across the campfires, flutes and drums, percussive yet melodic, primitive yet civilized. An atmosphere of goodwill—or at least better will—accompanied nightfall, the enmity of the clash between their king and the Akkadian having muted into a truce, anyway, if not quite an alliance.

The visitors had been provided a tent, and Cassandra was strolling toward it, enjoying the music, the camaraderie; she paused at a cooking fire where a congenial group had gathered, roasting three pigs on one long skewer. The little horse thief was among them, having made friends, and currently was arm-wrestling one of Queen Isis's fierce yet beautiful woman warriors. The queen herself was looking on, rooting for her soldier, while the eccentric scientist sat cheering Arpid on. The camel, Hanna, was nearby, grazing at a feed bag, not terribly interested. No sign of Mathayus, though.

Philos was saying, "Leverage, my boy! Leverage! It's not just strength, it's science, too...."

And with that, Arpid's fist was slammed to the tabletop by the laughing female. Philos shook his head and chuckled, as the thief flexed his sore hand, saying, "A gentlemen always allows a lady to win." Then, to the lovely warrior, he asked optimistically, "Best two out of three?"

Smiling at the little thief's antics, Cassandra strolled on. She was perhaps halfway to the tent when a child of four or five scampered up to her, and tugged at her sleeve.

She looked down, where he was gazing up adoringly with big dark eyes, offering her dates from a bowl, and wondered if she had ever seen a more adorable child.

She smiled and accepted the gift, then tousled the boy's hair. For a moment, she was not a lady oracle, just a woman, a young woman, thinking about marriage and children of her own ... half Akkadian, perhaps...

But as she touched the boy, her fingers in his scalp, a vision seized her ...

*... and she found herself kneeling, at the very spot where she'd stood accepting the boy's gift, and her hand was again on the child's head, fingers in his hair, but now he lay cold and still with death. Around them in the bandit hideaway, the night was rent with screams and flames consumed the tents and walkways.*

*Her eyes turned skyward, to ask the gods why, and a full moon blazed mutely back at her. She turned her gaze to the camp around her, where men, women and children lay sprawled in death, blood everywhere. Nearby, the horse thief lay with his eyes wide in death, his small torso twisted.*

*At the pounding of hoofbeats, she turned as Memnon himself rode straight for her, red-turbaned warriors on his either side, their brethren*



*rampaging through the camp, killing anything that breathed.*

*And the warlord glared at her, furious with his sorceress, yet intent on her capture—racing toward her, to retrieve his oracle. She recoiled as he reached down from his galloping steed to snatch her up into his arms, and she turned away in horror ... .. and was back in the camp, where the only fires were cooking food or providing warmth, and the only shrieks were of laughter. The little boy looked up at her strangely, afraid now—her trance had spooked him, and he backed away.*

On quick but unsure feet, she found her way to the tent, perched by a campfire among some rocks, *and went in and sat on the ground, looking up through the open flap at the moon ... the almost full moon....*

Sometime later, Mathayus entered and sensed her discomfort, asking, "Is something wrong?"

She did not look at him, her eyes on the moon. "Memnon knows I'm here ... or at least, he will— soon." She pointed to the sky. "The moon is entering the House of Scorpio. Tomorrow is the night when what I saw in my vision will come to pass ... Memnon will release his armies, and they will ride into the heart of this camp . . . and rip it out."

Mathayus knelt beside her. "The moon is just... the moon. And Memnon will die, at these hands, prophecy be damned."

She turned her gaze upon him, admiring his bravery, but knowing his disbelief in the spiritual was foolish; without her magic, after all, he would not be alive....

"I must know," she said.

"Know what?"

And she lay her fingers gently against his cheek, closing her eyes, summoning a vision that, in a flash of white, filled her mind ...

*... Memnon stood atop an altar, erected in the elevated courtyard of his palace, the city of Gomorrah spread out before him like a banquet; his hands were raised to the night sky, where a huge moon. .. a full moon, ringed in silver... glowed so intensely, the sun was not its rival.*

*"Great gods above," Memnon cried, his voice ringing out above his city, "look down upon me!. .. And make me one with you."*

*Behind the warlord, Mathayus silently crept across the courtyard, sword in hand, approaching the steps that led up to the altar where Memnon, his*

*back to the Akkadian, stood.*

Cassandra shuddered, as the vision continued, but shifted, as now ...

*... a red-turbaned soldier, bow in hand, quiver of arrows on his back, ran through a palace hallway, lined with leaping flames, to burst out a doorway onto the courtyard, stepping on a small yellow flower, growing up between stones in the floor. The archer could see Mathayus, coming up behind the warlord, sword raised.*

*The archer notched an arrow, and let fly. ..*

*... and the arrow found purchase in the Akkadian's back! As Mathayus fell to the palace floor, Cassandra screamed, "No!"*

In the moonlight filtering through the tent flap, the Akkadian held the woman by her arms, but the sorceress turned away, eyes squeezed shut, a single jewel of tear trickling down her smooth cheek.

"What did you see?" the Akkadian demanded.

Swallowing, trembling, refusing to look at him, she said, "If you go up against Memnon ... you will fail. You will die. That, Akkadian, is your destiny."

He spoke her name, and turned her to him, cupping her chin, lifting her face to his, her eyes tortured, her lashes pearled with tears.

"Hear me," he said, and despite the dire prophecy, no fear was in his face—only a faint smile that seemed to challenge any vision that might try to master him. "I make my own destiny."

She winced at the words, shaking her head slowly—it was if he spoke a foreign language. How could he think such a thing, much less say the words? She had spent her life in the company of men who paid her prophecies the strictest heed—who feared her words, and everything they might portend.

Yet to this man, this special man, the words of the gods were subservient to his will—the future something that could be molded. *Was he right?* she wondered. *Could a person ... a mortal. . . change the course of destiny?*

"Haven't you had enough of visions?" he asked her, that small smile still on his lips, something else—something fervent—in his tone.

"What... what do you mean?"

The Akkadian swept her into his arms and kissed her, deeply, passionately ... and she responded, clutching him desperately, returning his kisses with the same hunger. As they embraced, he lowered her to the sandy floor and, as

firelight jumped and danced, as if in celebration, their souls, and much more, entwined.

As they lay in each other's arm, Cassandra watched this brave, foolish man as he slept, his slumber deep; for him to have battled Balthazar, in the wake of nearly dying the night before, was a feat few men could survive. All it seemed to mean for Mathayus, however, was the need for a good night's sleep.

She could not risk kissing him, not even his forehead or his cheek, for he might wake; instead, her heart aching and yet so full, she slipped from his slumbering embrace and out into the moonlight.

She felt different—more a woman, perhaps less a mystic. Still, she believed in the world beyond this one, and walked out to the edge of a precipice, where, washed in the moon's ivory, she lighted a candle, in ceremony, kneeling to place it on a rock. Supine before the flickering flame, she whispered a silent prayer.

*This man, she told the almost full moon, believes that the future you have shown me can be changed. Guide me, mother—though your daughter is a woman now. Guide me, still, and tell me what to do.*

She listened, and—within her mind—thoughts grew, whether from a mystic mother or herself, who can say? Yet she did pledge herself to a course of action, dictated by those thoughts, perilous though that might be, since she hoped now to change the future by her own means.

Cassandra blew out the candle, and smiled.

Before long she had found her way to the corral where the bandits kept their horses and camels. She of course went to the white beast, and stood beside Hanna, stroking the camel's snout, gently.

"You love him, too, don't you?" she asked the animal.

The camel shook its head—perhaps a reflex, or an answer.

"Then," the sorceress whispered into the camel's ear, "you must help me save him."

And, in an action heretofore reserved for Mathayus alone, Hanna bent down—any cantankerousness

gone, only the most docile response—and Cassandra climbed aboard.

Soon, the white camel—her lovely rider looking albino herself in the rays of the almost-full moon— was galloping away from the oasis, toward Gom-morah.

And the man she despised as much she loved the Akkadian.

## The Oracle's Return

B

althazar—snoring in a kingly cot the size of a boat, his arms around one of the two beautiful wenches with whom he slept—had trained himself to be stirred from his slumber, no matter how deep, by the slightest suspicious sound, no matter how small. At dawn, a rustling around a campfire, well across the amphitheater-like hideaway, was all it took to rouse the sleeping giant.

From a precipice near his tent, hands on his hips, the Nubian loomed over his camp, surveying the tranquil, unawakened world of the coalition of tribes, this ragtag crew upon whom rested the hopes of a future without Memnon. The only sign of life in the clear light of dawn was a single fire, around which the horse thief, the scientist and the Akkadian conferred.

And the latter seemed to be gathering his weapons, preparing for battle.

Balthazar quickly slung on his own sword, and headed down the pathway, prepared to deal with this problem, once and for all.

He strode up to the Akkadian, who was arranging his belt with daggers and kama, the massive scimitar already in place. "What strife are you stirring now, assassin?"

Mathayus did not respond; the huge warrior standing before him might not have existed.

Fury began to rise like steam within the Nubian, but suddenly Queen Isis was next to him, her fingers on his arm; it was as if she had materialized.

"The sorceress is gone," she said, in a hushed, somber tone. "Returned to Gomorrah."

Balthazar snorted a laugh. "Back to Memnon's bed, no doubt!"

The Akkadian whirled, fire in his eyes. "She is not his woman—she never has been, and never will!"

The Nubian frowned. "If she is *your* woman, Akkadian, where is she now? What sends her flying back to the safety of Gomorrah?"

"Safety is not what she seeks," the assassin said. "She is braver than any of us ... than all of us, combined. Hear me, king—she saw your people destroyed."

"What? How—"

"In a vision, last night. She saw Memnon here, in this place, slaughtering all around us, to find her, and gather her back to his snake's den ... and to stop that nightmare from coming true, she went back to him ... to her cage."

Balthazar tried to fathom this. "She ... sacrificed her freedom for us?"

Arpid raised an eyebrow. "At least."

Mathayus had returned to arming himself, preparing his things for departure. "I'm getting her back, before he ... I'm going after her."

The king snorted another laugh, though the derision was out of it. "I see—and you now expect me, and my people, to help you. Because some crazy woman saw a vision."

"I don't expect anything from you." The Akkadian paused and looked hard at the Nubian. "And yesterday she was not a 'crazy woman'—but the sorceress who you feared would lead Memnon to this hideout. Well, she's spared you ... so spare *me* your 'wisdom' ... O great king."

And the assassin strode away, to saddle up one of the horses inherited from the men of Memnon who'd been slaughtered in the sandstorm battle.

Balthazar felt a strange mix of emotions—annoyance at the Akkadian's sarcastic disrespect; and yet an admiration for his bravery. And, too, he did feel humbled by the lady oracle's sacrifice for the tribal people....

The Nubian shook his head, and said to Isis, "The fool. Would he face Memnon alone?"

But it was the thief who, matter-of-factly, replied: "He said he would."

And Philos added, gravely, "He is nothing if not a man of his word."

Balthazar felt the eyes of Isis on him, and he turned to her; their gazes locked. Then the Nubian sighed heavily, and nodded to her ... and the lovely

warrior queen smiled.

Within minutes, Mathayus was spurring his speed toward the opening in the rocks, which led to the dank cavern connecting with the oasis, and the desert beyond. From behind those rocks, in the eerie flickering of torches that lighted the way, Balthazar emerged, holding his hands up, in "stop" fashion.

Reining back, impatient, the Akkadian said, "Move aside. I have no time for our petty argument."

Then Queen Isis stepped out beside Balthazar, a united front. The assassin frowned—this woman had supported Mathayus before . . . was she now his enemy?

Taking advantage of the pause Isis provoked in the barbarian, Balthazar said firmly, "You are riding to your death, Akkadian. If I let you go alone . . ." And now the king smiled grimly. "... what glory will be left for me?"

Stunned, the Akkadian said, "You would join me in my fight?"

"As you have said, the fight is not yours—it is ours."

Still reining back his horse, frowning in thought, the Akkadian said, "I am trained to fight in small groups—I know nothing of leading an army"

"Ah—so now you proclaim yourself leader?"

No menace tightened the features of the assassin, as he gazed down from horseback at his adversary of the day before. "I do not mean offense. But we do not have the numbers to stand against Memnon's army. I suggest, instead, stealth—a band of us infiltrating his city ... his very palace . . . and when I have taken the head from his shoulders, his reign will end, and your people will need not ride to their slaughter."

"We have indeed inflicted more damage upon Memnon with our raids," Balthazar said, thoughtfully, "than any foolhardy head-on attack... I see the sense of it, Akkadian."

Queen Isis strode forward. "I suggest we make haste. On our journey, there will be sufficient time for planning our strategies."

Mathayus said, "Agreed."

Then the king nodded his own assent, and they returned to camp, to select their crew.

As the blazing orange ball of the sun went to its rest, and the blue shadows of encroaching night crept across Gomorrah, the elevated courtyard of Memnon's palace played host to a grand giddy party, tables arranged in a

square and laden with a literal king's banquet, an array of food and drink to stagger the imagination, and challenge the digestion. The courtiers groaned from this orgy of a repast, and the guests of honor—Memnon's generals—put aside their staid military manner to indulge in fine, ever-flowing wine, their eyes hungrily taking in the bevy of beautiful belly dancers performing before them. Flutes and cymbals joined in a percussive music that provided inspiration to the undulating female forms, which in turn inspired the generals to perspiration.

The son of the late King Pheron sat at Memnon's side, fiddling with various playthings—a pair of voluptuous wenches on loan from the king's personal stash of concubines, and a mammoth, intricately carved bow. The two women were fondling the slender prince, lavishing him with attention, but Takmet's own focus was on that bow—as he tried, unsuccessfully, to draw back its taut string.

The bow, of course, was the Akkadian's—left behind, when he'd been trapped in Memnon's harem.

Everyone seemed to be having a fine time, a memorable, remarkable time ... except for the bringer of the feast, himself. Lord Memnon had eaten little, and imbibed less, sitting at the center of the head table, on a throne of gold, lost in tense concentration and even anxiety.

Somewhere, beyond the city gates, across the desert, his sorceress remained in the clutches of the Akkadian. Had the bastard defiled her, ruined her as a seer, and robbed him of a pleasure of which he had long dreamed? Was she a prisoner, or a willing slave of that copper-skinned spawn of camel and goat?

As the dancing girls finished their performance, and applause rang across the stone courtyard, the Great Teacher rose from his chair of gold. The wenches ran off, in a tinkle of toe cymbals and chain-mail halters and loincloths; and the guests quieted, turning their attention to their host, clad in black leather armor.

"Tonight," Memnon said, his voice notched to a volume suited to public speaking, "is the first night of the House of Scorpio."

Above, a bright nearly full moon sent its ivory fingers down to touch the courtyard. Memnon gestured to the glowing orb.

"When the moon is at its peak," he said, his voice resonant, rolling across the guests, "I will stand on that very altar..."



And now the warlord pointed to the wide steps to the altar constructed in the courtyard.

"... and the gods will reach down to me... and appoint me, anoint me .. *the Scorpion King!*"

A hush fell across the assemblage. This had been a display of such megalomania, that the proper response was uncertain—to applaud might lessen the moment, to laugh would get one killed. And right now Memnon was casting a look of steel around the courtyard.

"And the very earth," he said, his voice low, but every ear hanging on each word, "shall crack at my feet."

Another respectful, cowed hush followed, only to be rudely—surprisingly—broken, as a chair scraped the stone floor. Eyes flew to General Toran, who was standing.

"My lord," the general said, "all of that is well and good. .. but there is something I must share with you—something that is troubling our troops."

The guests exchanged nervous glances. This was either foolhardy, or brave, of General Toran; whispered comments wondered if too much wine was involved....

"How distressing," Memnon said, in a normal tone of voice. "I am of course concerned—anything that troubles my men, troubles me. Please tell—what is it?"

Toran seemed uneasy by this seemingly offhanded response.

"My lord," the general said, "it has been said that the sorceress is no longer at your side."

Memnon shrugged. "Soldiers often fall prey to palace gossip .. . You have my word that she is safe."

"With all due respect, my lord—if our men are to fight, to die, they may need more than that."

The air seemed suddenly chill; a desert breeze ruffled the flames of torches and candles.

Memnon stepped down from his golden chair and walked, slowly, to the general; his expression seemed friendly, calm. When he reached the man, Memnon asked, "My word—is it not enough?"

And now the general seemed to know how dangerous these waters were, and he began to tread them... yet he could not back down. "It is not that—your word is unquestioned. It is just... the oracle is a symbol from which the

men derive courage ... and symbols are most effective, my lord, when they are in full view."

Memnon seemed to ponder that for a moment. Then he said, "It concerns me, general, that the men have so little faith that they—"

A voice cut him off—a feminine, familiar one: "My lord? My apologies."

All eyes turned, Memnon among them—he could not conceal his shock—as the lovely sorceress ... underclad in a sheer gown over shimmering golden halter and tiny skirt, long hair capped as usual with a gilt headdress ... strode regally across the courtyard.

When she reached Memnon's side, she said, "I am here, as you requested—forgive my lateness." She turned her placid, regal gaze to rest on the assembled generals. "And gentlemen, forgive my absence, of late, at our councils. I have not been well... but know that my spirit has been heartened by our impending victory."

The eyes of the generals were wide and locked upon her; Toran seemed almost to stumble back, at the sight of her.

To the generals, Memnon said lightly, "Is this sufficient to placate your men?" Then he turned to Cassandra. "Please tell my generals what you have seen, my sorceress."

Her eyes traveled slowly across the assembled guests; torchlight flickered, throwing dark shadows over a courtyard cloaked by the moon's ivory. "I see a great victory.... Your enemies will reveal themselves before you."

The slightly inebriated generals did not perceive the ambiguity of this statement, and shared confident smiles, and touched wine goblets.

General Toran still stood, but his head hung in chagrin. Sheepishly, he said, "My sincerest apologies, my lord."

Memnon lifted his left hand, waving that off magnanimously. "I understand, old friend. It is only human, to be fearful, weak...."

And with his other, the warlord thrust the Akkadian's dagger into the general's chest, piercing his heart. Toran had only a moment to be surprised before, dead, he pitched back onto the table, knocking a goblet of wine to bleed its contents on the courtyard floor.

"And anyone with such weak traits as that," Memnon said, "is of no use to me as a general." He casually looked from the face of one stunned commander to another, and said, "Consider this a symbol, in full view. I trust it's effective. ... Now—are there any others among you who doubt my word?"

Looking sideways at one another, the generals shook their heads, murmuring their loyalty, their belief in their lord.

"How reassuring," Memnon said. "And now . . . the feast is over. To your beds, my generals ... take a wench with you, if you like, but rest well. For tomorrow ... we conquer."

The guests—grandly entertained by all of this— clapped and applauded their drunken approval.

Memnon turned to Cassandra, and said so softly that only she heard: "Wait for me in my chambers."

"... My lord?"

"There is a subject I would discuss with you."

"Yes, my lord." She half bowed, and moved away, disappearing within the palace. Memnon, having watched her go with a cold, wary gaze, now turned to Takmet.

"Fortify the palace guard," the warlord said.

Takmet, still fiddling unsuccessfully with the Akkadian's bow, said, "It is done, my lord," and tossed the pair of wenchers off his lap.

Memnon did not bid his guests any further goodbye; lost in dark thought, he made his way into the palace, following the path of his sorceress.

Outside the fortified walls of Gomorrah—along the forward parapet of which four archers were positioned—a horse-drawn cart, covered by a tattered tarp, creaked and groaned up to the main gates. Half a dozen red-turbaned, heavily armed guards walked up to the small, skimpily bearded man holding the reins of the horses. Seated next to him was another slight, unthreatening-looking creature, with a thatch of unruly white hair.

"What's in the cart?" one of the guards asked.

Arpid glanced at the fearsome fellow. "What's in the cart?"

"You heard me!" And the guard's hand went to his sword hilt; the other red-turbaned sentries did the same.

Nervously, Arpid glanced behind him at the tarp. "You want to know what's in the cart... Truth be told, it's a kind of... surprise."

As the guards moved in closer, suspicion prickling the backs of their necks, the archers above noticed this confrontation in the making, and moved into position, watching the cart, ever vigilant.

Toward the end of the parapet, however, one of those guards thought he heard something—the clink of metal, on stone? As his three comrades trained their attention on the horse-drawn cart below, this archer moved into the dark shadows at the far side of the ledge, investigating alone.

Down by the gate, Arpid was hopping from the cart, where he now—unhesitatingly, his nervousness vanished—yanked back the tarp, revealing half a dozen women. These were (for the most part) raving beauties, in the haremlike, belly-dancer-style attire that drove the men of those times (and other times, as well) to distraction.

The red-turbaned guards had no inkling that these beauties were Queen Isis and her fierce female warriors—dressed, as they were, for the bedroom, not the battlefield.

"A royal gift for tonight's revelry," the horse thief said, with a pompous bow that made several of the sentries chuckle. "They are to be delivered to Prince Takmet."

"Lucky bastard," one of the guards said.

Arpid turned to the cart, which brimmed with pulchritude, the "girls" cooing and waving at the guards. "Ladies," he said, "come down and say hello to our brave soldiers—where would the kingdom be without them?"

The guards helped the girls down and they quickly paired off, talking, flirting, while above the archers looked down in envy.

In the meantime, in the shadows off to one side, that lone archer had discovered—clinging to the lip of the wall—a grappling hook. Looking down over the edge, he could see the rope swinging, as if someone had just let loose of it. Wheeling to warn his compatriots, the archer never got a word out—Mathayus, in the slitted leather mask, broke the man's neck from behind, the tiny crack lost in a night alive with the sound of the guards and "harem" beauties mingling.

The Akkadian tossed the man off the side of the ledge, where the corpse fell almost silently to the sand.

One of the sentries—his tastes running to larger women, these scrawny creatures so popular nowadays doing little for him—approached a broad-shouldered girl, saying, "Well, now, finally! A wench with some meat on her bones ... Let's see that pretty face, hah?"

The guard lifted the veil away and exposed the battle-scarred visage of Balthazar.

"Satisfied?" the Nubian "wench" asked.

And he drove a massive fist into the guard's belly, dropping him to the ground.

With this, the warrior women—each having sidled up to a guard—quickly, efficiently executed the fools, slitting throats, piercing hearts, taking no prisoners. Several died with smiles on their faces.

Above, the lead archer—startled by the sudden carnage—cried, "Attack!"

The three archers, lined up in an orderly row, notched arrows and aimed down. Before any arrows could fly, however, one dagger after another flew from the darkness, the first archer, and the second, catching blades in their backs, with deadly *thunks*. The leader whirled and fired off an arrow, but the Akkadian snatched up a wooden drain cover from the parapet floor, and used it as a shield, batting the projectile away.

The archer was notching a new arrow when the assassin's knife sank solidly into his heart, with such force it sent him toppling to the sand outside the city gates.

It had all happened so quickly—the gentle scientist, sitting on the horse cart, was stunned by this incredible display of skill... and death.

"By the gods," he said, amazed, wondering how it had come to pass that he would be riding into battle with such men.

From the parapet, Mathayus stood and surveyed the landscape on both sides of the wall, ascertaining whether their killing had been silent enough. Apparently it had. Then he raised two fingers to his lips and whistled.

Tied to a hitching post in the midst of the bazaar, the albino camel perked her ears at the shrill familiar sound. The beast promptly reared up on her hind legs, and brought her front hooves down, hard, on the hitching post, smashing it to splinters.

Then, dragging what little remained of the post, Hanna galloped off into the darkness, summoned by her master.

The Akkadian climbed down the rope, to join his friends just outside the gate. Hanna suddenly appeared beneath him, and he dropped onto her back; he stroked her neck—he felt complete again ... or as complete as he could, without the other female he loved.

"Well done," Mathayus told the little group. "Everyone know what to do? ... Balthazar?"

"Cripple the guard," the Nubian said.

"Isis?"

"Secure the door," the warrior queen replied.

"Philos?"

"Seal them in," the scientist said.

"Arpid?"

But the little thief was staring at his sandals.

"Something wrong, partner?" Mathayus asked, guiding the camel over to the little man.

"Nothing ... no." Arpid was shuffling his feet.

"Look at me."

Arpid raised his head, but still did not look directly at the Akkadian; his eyelashes were damp. "It's just... no one has ever trusted me, before— not with something this important."

"Partner."

Now Arpid's eyes met the assassin's.

With a simple and absolute confidence so typical of him, Mathayus said, "I trust you."

The thief seemed filled with a new confidence. "I won't let you down."

"I know." To the entire group of warriors—for even the thief and scientist were warriors now, a small army taking on a mighty fortress city—the Akkadian said, "All right, my friends—this is the time. Be careful. Keep your eyes sharp."

Balthazar said, "Akkadian . . ."

Mathayus turned toward the giant in the harem outfit. Would the Nubian protest his leadership, at this late stage?

But all the mountain of a man said was, "Watch yourself."

Mathayus could only smile. "Thank you for your concern, miss... . *Hyah!*"

And the camel took his master into the city.

"He's going to pay for that," Balthazar grunted, and reattached his veil.

Back up in the cart now, Queen Isis and her women did their best not to smile, and Arpid climbed up next to Philos, who slapped the reins, and the rig rumbled forward into Gomorrah.

## Daughter of the Furies

### I

nto the torchlit golden-hued sandstone throne room, Memnon—who had caught up with his sorceress in a corridor of the palace—escorted Cassandra, a hand firmly on her arm. She could not yet tell if she was a welcome guest or just another prisoner. But it did not take a psychic to sense the Great Teacher's suspicion.

Memnon dismissed the guards and servants, saying, "Leave us!"

And they were alone.

She wandered to the small round table with her jars of runic stones, waiting in its usual position for her return... or had it been left there, in her absence, to suggest to others she still remained?

Memnon did not take his throne; rather he prowled the chamber, like an anxious panther. "I am relieved to see you unharmed," he said, the kindness of his words undercut by an edge in his tone. "I'm surprised the Akkadian did not kill you."

"What good could I have done him dead?" she asked. "It was you he sought—and I was his bait, his pawn."

An eyebrow arched. "And yet you escaped his grasp."

She turned to smile at the warlord, a tiny yet significant smile. "I am not without my own ways ... my own wiles."

The smile he gave her in return was a nasty one. "Oh yes ... of that I am well aware. You gained his confidence.; .."

"Yes—and slipped away in the desert night."

"Where did he take you? To an enemy camp?"

"No—some desert oasis, where palms and waters and my own sympathetic words lulled him into complacency."

Memnon walked to the balcony, his back to her. "Did you witness the slaying of my loyal adviser— Thorak?"

"I know of the tragedy, my lord—it took place during a sandstorm. The Akkadian attacked your brave soldiers under its cover; I was buried in sand, and could not run ... not until later."

For a long while Memnon said nothing. Then he turned to her and asked, "And the barbarian did not... soil you?"

Her eyes lowered. "No, my lord. My purity remains."

"As does your vision?"

"Yes, my lord—as I have said, I have seen your great victory."

"Ah yes ... ah yes. So you say."

Memnon went to the door and summoned a servant, and whispered words to him that Cassandra could not hear. Then the servant half bowed and hurried off, and the warlord marched past her, on his way to his throne.

"We shall see, my dear... . Take a seat at your mystic table. Relax yourself, and wait."

"Wait, my lord? For what?"

He was on his throne now, a hand on either formidable sandstone armrest. "Just wait, my dear.. . just wait."

And she sat at her round table, feeling a chill that had nothing to do either with the evening breeze or any clairvoyant sense.

In the main square of the city, near the palace, the horse-drawn cart with its lovely cargo and its scrawny drivers trundled past the shuttered stalls of the marketplace. Soon Philos pulled the wagon to a stop near the palace gates, where four of the Red Guard were on duty.

The scientist turned to speak, softly, to Queen Isis, who sat just behind him; the admirable posteriors of the female warriors were perched, as on pillows, on soft bags that might have contained flour but did not. The tarp concealed the supine Balthazar, his harem outfit gone, traded for a cloak under which was leather armor; the Nubian king was not about to go into battle femininely attired. Isis's warrior women had discarded their sheer veils and, though still underclad, their breasts and loins were garbed in the dark leathers that accompanied them into combat.



Philos said to Isis, "That's it—over there."

He was pointing to a large metal grate on the street, not far from the royal guards. The scientist had played a large role in their preparations for this invasion by the small raiding party—as Memnon's former court magician, Philos had knowledge of the palace that had proved invaluable.

The queen and her warrior women jumped down from the cart, and one of the red-turbaned guards—his attention already caught—strode over, calling, "You there! You wenches!"

Isis turned and regarded him with a steely stare; the guard drew his sword as he approached. Resting the tip of the weapon to the queen's slender throat, the guard growled, "And what are you up to, you women?"

"Remove your sword from my neck," the queen commanded.

He frowned. "No female tells me what to do!"

She leaned forward, causing the point of the sword to dimple her own flesh, her eyes flashing as she said, "There's always a first time."

Then she leaned away from the blade and, in a move as swift as it was graceful, a blur in the startled guard's eyes, Isis swung around her right leg and her foot caught the man's wrist, sending his sword flying end over end into the air.

And when the weapon came down, the queen snatched it into her grasp, as easy as picking a grape off a bunch, the pommel making a nice fit in her hand. The guard barely had time for any of this to register, before Isis returned his sword to him—driving it deep into his chest.

She regarded his startled expression, and the wide empty eyes, in the guard's face; then she said, "A first time, and a last," and pushed him to the ground.

The other guards regarded this with amazement for a few moments, then belatedly drew their swords and rushed over, as the warrior women—lithe and graceful as any harem-girl dancers—drew their own blades, dispatching the sentries quickly, all but silently. Blood tan and glistened in the moonlight, as Philos—shaken by such butchery, however noble its cause—helped Arpid unload the cart of the sacks the women had been seated upon ...

... sacks of black powder, that formula from China the scientist had finally mastered.

In the meantime, the cloaked Balthazar was gripping that metal grate in the street with both powerful hands, pulling it free with a creak, nothing more. For all that had happened in these fast minutes, the sounds had been minimal; their presence remained undetected ... by anyone still alive, at least.

Torch in hand, Arpid scrambled up beside the Nubian and they exchanged glances. Then the little man hopped down into the cavity provided by Balthazar's removal of that grating. He used his torch to get his bearings down there, then found a place to prop the flaming light. His face, reflected orange, looked up from beneath the street.

"All right," he said to Balthazar. "Let's go."

The broad-shouldered king directed the women warriors to pass along the bags of powder, one to the other from the cart. Arpid took the first of these bags, which was leaking the black substance. The thief took a pinch and flicked it at the torch, which flared brightly, delighting Arpid.

"Did you see that?" he asked.

Philos, nearer the cart, said, "Yes, wonderful... Keep lighting that powder for fun, and see if you can't kill us all, why don't you?"

Isis was handing down another bag of powder to the little thief, who responded with a pout, mumbling, "Just an experiment. .. Where would that fool be without experiments?"

But Philos didn't hear this remark. At the big Nubian's side, the scientist—frowning in concern—asked, "Do you think Mathayus will rescue her in time?"

Even as they spoke, the albino camel, Hanna, was standing next to a far wall of the palace, her head tilted to watch her master, a hundred feet above, climbing the stones of the palace, an impossible task a spider might envy.

"That depends on what unexpected dangers he may face," the Nubian replied. "And it depends, too, on the Akkadian's skills ... which are considerable. I speak from experience."

"Well, they best be 'considerable' indeed, or he'll be trapped inside, and he and his woman will ride the explosion to the next world."

Balthazar's eyes tightened in the scarred battle mask of his face. "That black dust is that powerful?"

Philos smiled. "With a wallop enough to shake the gates of Gomorrah—and create a confusion to cover our stealing the sorceress away."

Balthazar's eyes hardened. "And you, little magician—you are prepared for your mission?"

"In most battles, brawn like yours is a good thing. But, my friend, only pipsqueaks like Arpid and myself can sneak through those rat holes into Memnon's palace."

And soon the Nubian was helping lower the scientist into the grating passage; eight bags of powder had been handed down there. The two little men, their faces smudged, looked up at the brute king of the bandits, who nodded at them reassuringly.

"The Akkadian has an adage," the Nubian said. Isis was at his side, looking down at the two brave sewer rats. "Live free ..."

Isis completed the ritual: "Die well."

"If you don't mind," Arpid said, snatching his torch from its perch, "I'll work a little harder on the first part."

And then the two scrawny, unlikely heroes disappeared into the darkness below the street... and below the palace. Memnon sat on his throne, regarding his sorceress with searching eyes, as she sat at her table. Moments before, a servant had entered, whispered to his lord, and exited.

Fingers tented, smiling enigmatically, the Great Teacher said, "So . . . tomorrow my victory will be complete."

Cassandra did not meet his gaze, merely said, "As I have told you—that is what I saw."

"That is your ... vision."

Now she turned toward him. "Yes, my lord. I have seen it."

He studied her face. "Have you?"

Their eyes locked—both of these strong people gave nothing away in their expressions, sharing only blank visages with each other.

"And yet," Memnon said gently, "I sense a change in you. You seem, somehow . . . how should I put it? ... *Diminished*."

"I assure you, my lord... I am myself. Untainted. Unspoiled."

"How very pleased I am to hear it. Then a small demonstration should be no trouble for you."

The warlord stepped down from the throne and walked to a side wall, where a curtain concealed an alcove. He drew back the drape, and displayed another round table, much larger than the one at which she sat.

On the table were six substantial stone urns, each one lidded.

Memnon clapped once, a loud crack of a clap, and two copper-skinned slaves in square cloth headdresses entered, heavily leathered, bearing a big wicker cage within which wriggled and thrashed a host of deadly serpents—cobras, asps, vipers—slithering sinuously over each other, in a boiling deadly pile.

Using a stick with a small rope looped at its end, one of the slaves expertly reached in and plucked out a huge king cobra, who hissed its displeasure, its hood extended. The other slave removed the lid from one of the half-dozen identical urns, and the snake handler dropped the twisting, spitting reptile down into the pot, the other slave quickly slamming the lid on.

Cassandra stood now, watching in horror, though she tried not to reveal her feelings.

Memnon wasn't hiding his—he was grinning, mockingly nostalgic as he said, "Having you back... working your wonders ... it's like old times."

And she watched, with open eyes, as various venomous serpents were dropped, writhing with rage, into all but two of the pots.

Elsewhere in the palace, in the lower catacombl-like corridors, Arpid and Philos were even now scurrying, each little man lugging four stacked bags of powder. As they reached a fork in the passageway, Philos stopped, got his bearings for a moment, then pointed to the right. "This way," he said.

Arpid frowned, studying the scientist. "You're sure?"

"Of course I am," he said, mildly offended. "I used to live here!"

And down another corridor they scampered.

With a wave the Great Teacher dismissed the snake-handling slaves to wait along the periphery, and he went to his sorceress, taking her by the arm, walking her over to the alcove, as if escorting her to a dinner of state. But the big round table, with the half-dozen massive urns, was no banquet, unless one considered terror a suitable main course.

He moved away from her and gripped the edge of the table ... *and spun it!*

This was, it seemed, a meal of sorts, after all—a revolving serving table had been perverted by the warlord into a wheel of spinning doom.

Memnon's eyes flicked from her face to the rotating table and back again, as he said, "And so, my sorceress . . . my seer—let us see what *you* can see."

She watched, mesmerized, as the table slowly came to a halt.

"Which two, my oracle? Which two of these urns are empty?"

She drew a deep breath, exhaled, then stepped forward. Walking slowly around the table, appraising each urn, she stopped at one and lay her hands on the pottery.

Memnon watched intently, and when her eyes snapped open, he wondered—was something wrong?

Something was indeed wrong, though Cassandra strove not to show it. She closed her eyes and touched the urn once more—and her mind was a blank. The ancient myth had proved true: only a virgin could possess the gift of second sight; and she had given herself to the Akkadian. And thrown her gift to the winds ...

Glancing at Memnon, she knew one need not be a soothsayer to read his inquiring gaze. If she refused this test, that would be an admission, and she would surely die; perhaps the gods who had granted her vision were still with her, even if her gift had come to its end.

Cassandra prayed to them, silently—not to return her vision, but to guide her hand ... because there was no eluding this test.

She reached out and lifted the lid from the urn, and she gazed down into the unknown depths of its stygian interior, which seemed to stare back up at her.

Then she plunged her arm into the urn!

Memnon watched, an eyebrow arched, perspiration beading his forehead, his smile a conflicted one—who could say whether the Great Teacher hoped she would pass or fail his examination?

Her fingers scraped the bottom of the empty urn, and she withdrew her arm.

"Excellent," Memnon said, though she could not tell if he was truly pleased by her success.

The warlord removed the empty urn, pitching it to the floor in careless abandon, where it shattered.

The sound made her shudder, as did his strangely gleeful expression. Five pots remained—four containing poisonous snakes—and Memnon viewed them with apparent pleasure, saying, "Just one left."

And again he spun the table.

Why he did this a second time, other than to unnerve her further, she could not say; perhaps he thought she had managed to keep track of the pots with

snakes, when he first whirled the tabletop. But she had not—she had seen only a blur, and luck—or the gods—had been with her.

Now, as the table slowed and then stopped, Memnon led her back to the table, close by her side as she moved around it, studying her choices. Finally she hovered between two urns, listening for an inner voice or any instinct that might guide her. Her hand reached out—tremblingly.

The warlord seemed amused as he said, "I am no sorcerer—but I will tell you what *I* see ..."

Ignoring him, she placed a hand on one of the urn lids.

*"...fear."*

Had he not spoken, she might have heard the subtle shift of scales against hard clay ... but she did not.

And, with a defiant glare at Memnon, Cassandra reached her hand into the urn.

She froze.

Memnon, watching intently, took several steps back. *Had she been bitten?*

The sorceress withdrew her hand from the urn, and turned slowly, and displayed her arm to the warlord ...

*... Like an elaborate masterwork of the jeweler's art, a cobra coiled around her forearm, its hooded head near her hand, but ignoring it, instead spitting and hissing at the close-by Memnon.*

This turn of events catching him off balance, both literally and figuratively, Memnon staggered back several paces, and cried, "What magic is this?"

Cassandra, her chin high, unafraid, said, "My magic."

Moving away, circling around her, he sought safety.

Now she stalked the warlord, her eyes ablaze. "I am a daughter of the furies, foolish mortal. I see the world's fate in the stars!"

Memnon drew his sword, a defensive posture, as he continued to retreat; behind him, a few yards, was a shuttered window ...

*... and through that window, Cassandra could see the figure there, his eyes locking with hers: Mathayus!*

Outside, the Akkadian gripped the upper window ledge, and tensed the mighty muscles of his legs, and swung away from the wall, soles of his sandaled feet aimed at those shutters.

"I see your fate, O hollow king," a determined Cassandra was saying quietly. "And its time has come. . . ."

And Mathayus came smashing, thundering through the shutters, splintering them, and slamming into Memnon, feet first, sending the warlord careening, tumbling across the throne room, his sword flying from his fingers.

The snake-handler slaves, seeing the amazing arrival of the intruder, reacted at once; one of them ran out the door, the other going to a long hanging cord, yanking it, and alarm bells began to peal. Cassandra, her ears filled with the raised alarm, flung the cobra from her wrist, and it went slithering off, wanting nothing of these humans.

The Akkadian rolled to his feet, and yanked the scimitar from his belt, filling his hand with steel. Across the sumptuous throne room, the would-be king of the world staggered to his feet, and looked into the glare of his uninvited guest, whose great blade winked with reflected torchlight.

Then the Akkadian glanced toward Cassandra, and by the assassin's concerned gaze—she nodded to the assassin that she was all right—the

warlord was informed of the nature of their alliance, and knew he had been betrayed ... by lovers.

Mathayus was moving slowly toward him, brandishing the scimitar. "I've come for the woman," the Akkadian said. "And your head ..."

The warlord knew very well that a pair of ancient but serviceable swords hung nearby, where they decorated a sandstone wall.

"The assassin and the sorceress," Memnon said. "How sweet—how romantic ..."

And with reflexes worthy of those slithering snakes, he whirled and grabbed both swords from their pegs, and wheeled with warrior grace, a blade in either hand, spinning the two weapons expertly, not beaten yet, not hardly.

"I will be sure," Memnon said, "to inter you together."

And the the warriors ran at each other, their swords clashing and clanging, ringing throughout the chamber even as the alarm bells continued their own toll of death.



## Noble Effort

A

s the alarm bells echoed through the palace and beyond, the raiding party of Balthazar, Queen Isis and her warrior women—outside the walls, shrouded in night shadows, awaiting the explosion that would signal their attack—reacted with dismay.

"Oh no," Queen Isis said.

"Damn," Balthazar breathed, as he saw a phalanx of the red-turbaned guards come running at them from around the corner of the palace, in full battle array, swords high.

Shoulders arching with feline grace, the nearly unclad fighting females—looking as lovely as they did deadly in the light of the moon and the flicker of torch flame—positioned themselves on the steps of the palace, spears and swords poised, ready to take on attack from within and without the turreted edifice.

But it was Balthazar himself—flinging away his cloak to reveal his massive frame in black leather armor—who stepped forward to receive this well-armed welcome.

Though there were ten of them, the Red Guards staggered to a halt at the sight of the giant Nubian, who raised his sword and grinned at the soldiers, in eager anticipation.

"All right, then," he said pleasantly. "Which lucky one of you dies first?"

Even outnumbering him as they did, the guards froze for several long moments, as if hoping this apparition would disappear, a figment of their

imaginations and the night.

But Balthazar wasn't going anywhere, except through them, and the leader of the guards yelled, "Attack," and they did, rushing forward with swords waving.

Queen Isis had seen the Nubian in full battle form before; but even she could only be impressed by his frightening skills. A massively muscled right arm raised and lowered and swung and carved that blade with swift, spectacular precision; Balthazar's strategy was impeccable, using one body to block and unhinge another opponent, until they were literally falling over themselves, the living onto the dead.

And soon the elite red-turbaned guards lay scattered across the bottom of the palace steps like human refuse, while the Nubian king loomed above them like an unforgiving god.

Balthazar gave a solemn nod to his fallen foes, saying, "We will meet again in the underworld," and then he strode, two at a time, up the steps of the palace, to the golden doors at the top landing.

"Wait!" Isis called to him. "What are you doing? Where are you going?"

Balthazar turned; at the crest of those steps he looked more like a great guard than the invader he was. "The magician's powder should have worked its magic by now—we must modify our battle plan."

Eyes flaring, Isis asked, "In what way?"

"I am going inside," the Nubian said, "and aid the Akkadian."

The queen gestured to her warriors, the women here and there about the steps. "Shall we come, too?"

"No."

"You would do this alone?"

"Yes—just as the Akkadian said he would stand alone against Memnon and his armies."

"But..."

"Woman! Do I have a choice? ... Guard these doors!"

And Isis stood guard, as the Nubian king, unannounced, went calling on Lord Memnon.

When the alarm bells went off, Philos and Arpid were in the lower halls of the palace, stacking their bags of powder in a position deemed by the scientist as ideal for their destructive purposes.

Arpid had no opinions to express: he accepted his lot, and placed the powder sacks wherever he was

told. He had one of the sacks in hand when the echoing peal interrupted them. "What in the name of the gods is that?"

"That's the alarm for the Red Guard," Philos said. "We must hurry!"

Doing as he was told, Arpid spun quickly, and— thanks to a small hole in the bag, which he held like a baby—a spray of black powder freckled Philos's face.

"Be careful, you fool!" The scientist wiped the dangerous stuff from his cheeks. "There's a hole in that sack. We're not here to blow ourselves to nothing!"

"Well, maybe we should patch it." The thief grabbed a torch from the wall and used it to see where the rip might be, and in so doing twisted around—like a dog chasing its tail—leaking a black powder trail.

"No," Philos said, "don't—"

But somehow, in the process, a drop of burning oil fell from the torch onto the black line, lighting it. Arpid yelled and—still cradling the very bag leaking black—began to run away from the ever-following, sparking line of powder.

As Arpid ran screaming down the corridor—the alarm bells adding to the chaos—the scientist shook his head and raced after him, snatching the sack from the thief's grasp, and stomping out the sparking powder.

Arpid, breathing heavily, smiled sheepishly. "Sorry."

The scientist regarded the thief with rising irritation. "I should have teamed up with the Akkadian's smarter partner."

"What? Who?"

"The camel! ... Calm yourself."

Philos took the bag he'd confiscated from Arpid, and—as this was the last one—used a knife to slice the top of it off, and began to lay his own fuse trail ... back to the pile of sacks they'd arranged down the corridor.

Finished, Philos viewed his handiwork with some pride; but he was nonetheless anxious. "Come on, thief. I only hope we're not too late."

And Philos headed off, and Arpid hurried after him.

Neither of them noticed that the thief's sandal had cut through the powder trail, severing it.

In the throne room, the alarm bells had finally stopped, but the battle raged on.

Wielding his two swords, Lord Memnon pressed his attack on the Akkadian. Both men were skilled warriors, fueled by hatred of each other, and they traded the advantage regularly, their swords flying in expert onslaught, sparks flying from the colliding blades.

Cassandra, free of the snake—*where had it gone?*—surreptitiously helped the Akkadian's cause in two key ways, neither of which Memnon—busy with battle—noticed. First, she barred the throne-room doors, to keep this fight limited to just the two men. Second, she slipped a slender, filigree-adorned sword from a wall, and held it behind her, as she attempted to position herself behind Memnon ... though as energetic as the duel was, that position was ever changing.

But her hope was to drive that sword into the warlord's back, and change the future, defying her prophecy....

Outside the palace, Queen Isis knelt before two uncommon commoners, helping Philos and Arpid up out of the grate.

"It is finally done," the scientist told her. Looking around, at the warrior women posted on the palace steps, flame-lamps on the upper landing casting fluttering shadows in the cool breeze off the desert, the scientist noted the Nubian's absence.

"When your powder did not go off as planned," the queen said, "Balthazar entered the palace to help Mathayus."

"Why, that palace crawls with Red Guards!"

"Yes ... but do not underestimate our friend." And the queen nodded toward the shadowy area, along the outer wall, where the ten dead guards, slain by Balthazar, slept the sleep from which one never wakes.

Always taken aback by such carnage, nonetheless the scientist said, "Well, he is a remarkable fellow, at that." And Philos withdrew from under his robe a small hourglass, turning it over.

As the sand began to trickle down the narrow throat of the glass, Philos said, "When this runs out ... more or less ... we should have a considerable distraction."

Isis sighed, looking toward the palace. "They can use the help."

The scientist nodded. "Come on, boys," he said to himself, speaking to the absent Mathayus and Balthazar. "Time is running out...."

Which, in the hourglass, it was.

But in the halls where the bags of powder had been set, the fire was out. No rush at all.

Cassandra and her blade could not seem to get behind the the hated Memnon, but Mathayus likely would make her efforts immaterial. The Akkadian had the upper hand now, his mighty scimitar forcing Memnon back against a massive golden six-foot-tall statue of a ram, which regarded the contest with disinterest from the periphery.

Then something crashed against the doors to the throne room, a resounding *whump*, as men beyond tried to knock them open, possibly with a battering ram.

As they traded blows, Memnon—despite his inferior position at the moment, hearing his men at the door—grinned wolfishly at his opponent. "A noble effort, Akkadian... but my palace guards are the fiercest warriors alive."

"Oh I know," Mathayus grunted, over the clang of his blade against the warlord's. "I soaked the desert with your best soldiers' blood."

"Ah," Memnon said, parrying both words and swords, "but how will you fight them all?"

At that, the throne-room doors crashed open, and the battering ram revealed itself as Balthazar, locked in hand-to-hand combat with four guards *who* were hanging on to him, as if for dear life, when in reality they were doing their best to bring the mountain down. His sword was still in hand, but the guards had grabbed onto him, pinning his arms, and the Nubian was, if not helpless, severely hampered.

The big man yelled in rage and flung the four men off him, and they scattered around the throne-room floor, like toy soldiers discarded by a jaded child.

Balthazar—his sword in hand unencumbered now—moved into the throne room, getting his bearings, wheeling around, waiting for the next assault.

He did not have long to wait: more guards poured in from the corridor, and the ones he'd cast off were getting to their feet again, their own swords at the

ready. The Nubian smiled, as if in welcome, and charged them with his sword, cutting them down like weeds.

One of the guards who'd just entered moved past the Nubian battling his fellows, and marched menacingly toward Cassandra.

"You!" the guard said to her, his voice commanding, rising above the metallic clank of swords. "Sorceress! Get out of here, now! This is no place for a woman—it is not safe."

"I believe you're right, kind friend," Cassandra said, and in a fluid movement that hypnotized the guard with its swift grace, the sword came from behind her back, and made two silent swipes.

The guard, surprised, slipped to the floor, as if for a nap—albeit a permanent one.

The entrance of the huge Nubian—a one-man army cutting a swath of death through his best guards—shook Memnon's confidence—Mathayus had not come alone! How many invaders would there be... ?

Mathayus drove forward, hacking at Memnon, like he was a stubborn tree in his path, pressing him back again, as that golden ram looked on, diffident in the midst of so much mayhem.

And in front of the palace, where the reinforcements awaited an explosion, none had taken place... though the sand had indeed run out in the hourglass.

The thief regarded the device in the scientist's hand, asking him, "Doesn't that mean that our powder should have gone off?"

"I had to allow for the time we spent, moving through the passage, but..."

Queen Isis was looking on, disapprovingly.

Philos shook his head. "How can this be?"

"Could it be that you're a crazy old muttonhead?" Arpid asked, his patience worn thin playing second fiddle to this fraud. "A fool who doesn't know the first thing about magic powder?"

But the scientist seemed not to have heard, and only repeated, louder, "*How can this be?*"

Isis frowned. "What can be done?"

"We must go back," the scientist said, "and inspect the explosives."

Arpid's eyes grew huge. "What? And have them go off in our faces?"

Philos didn't seem to hear that, either. In fact, the thief had barely gotten his question out—much less had it answered—when Philos went running back

up the steps, into the palace, through the front doors this time, weaving in and around the positioned warrior women.

Arpid looked at Isis and shook his head. "Well, this is going well."

"Go in with him," the queen said.

"What? I don't want to get killed!"

Isis gestured with a dagger. "Exactly my ... *point*."

Arpid swallowed. "The old boy may need help, at that."

And the thief scurried up after him.

Isis sighed. "Men," she said, and her warriors rolled their eyes and nodded.

Within moments, Arpid had caught up with Philos, and—using a different route, but a more direct one, thanks to the scientist's knowledge of the palace—they were soon back in the lower recesses of the grand structure. It did not take long for Philos to locate where a footprint marked the spot where the line of fuse powder had been disrupted.

Quickly the scientist repaired the damage, and relighted it with a torch borrowed from the wall. The powder burst into flame and obediently raced away, toward its final destination.

"That was easy," Arpid said, relieved not to have been blown to smithereens.

"It was your stupid feet that did it!" Philos snapped.

"Look," the thief said, "casting blame won't solve—"

"Neither will talking. Unless you would like to wait to hear the explosion, from this closer vantage point."

"No!"

"Then go, fool—*go!*"

They went—Arpid running on ahead, the older man trailing after.

"Come on, old man!" Arpid yelled back. "If you don't want to get hurt, hurry up!"

At which point the thief ran headlong into a low-hanging rafter, knocking himself out.

The scientist jogged up and looked down at his sprawled cohort. "Unbelievable," he said, sighed, and bent down, to hoist the little thief up onto his own scrawny shoulders.



*Truly*, he thought, lugging his unconscious cargo down the passageway, *the camel would have been a better choice.*

In the throne room, the battle raged on, the sword fight between the Akkadian and the warlord continuing past a point where lesser men would have collapsed and likely died from such a colossal physical effort.

Theirs was not the only superhuman campaign undertaken in this room: Balthazar continued his solo slaughter of the palace guard, skilled red-turbaned swordsman falling in bloody shreds as the Nubian's deft skill, powered by superior strength, took down one after another.

Then, lost in his killing frenzy, Balthazar bumped into someone, a foe coming up behind him he surmised, and he whirled, ready to kill yet another guard. The Nubian was already swinging his sword when he realized the blade was slicing down toward the spine of the Akkadian, who had been driven back into Balthazar by Memnon.

But Mathayus—without even looking—raised his sword over his head, to swiftly block the blow; then returned to parry another of the warlord's thrusts.

Over the clang of blades, the assassin called out to the Nubian, "Try to just kill *them*, please!"

And now the two men were fighting, back-to-back, as several guards pressed forward, as Balthazar dueled two of them at once, and Memnon continued his attack.

"You bumped into *me*, Akkadian!" the Nubian said, between blows. "You are the clumsiest assassin I ever saw. ..."

Mathayus flicked a look at Balthazar, whose face clenched with something unusual for him: *fear*.

Then the Nubian blurted, "*Look out!*"

A guard was swinging a sword at the Akkadian's face, coming in to aid his lord, and Mathayus jumped back a step, at which time he heard the hissing, and realized what Balthazar had really been warning him about....

That king cobra was sitting up, near the Akkadian's feet, and it seemed very irritated to be caught in the middle of all this commotion.

Then two snakes struck at the same time—the cobra and Memnon. Mathayus deftly dodged them both; but now he found himself trading thrusts

and parries with the warlord even as the hissing snake slithered around, seemingly only attracted to the Akkadian's nearby calves.

This distraction cost Mathayus dearly—his counterblows were weakened, as he tried to avoid not only Memnon but the venomous serpent. The warlord had seen the snake, but it held little if any threat for him, as it was much closer to the Akkadian. At any rate, the warlord's battle leathers protected his calves. He took the advantage and delivered several slicing blows to the assassin's torso, nothing fatal, but wounds oozed blood, adding pain to the distractions already plaguing the barbarian.

Balthazar would have helped the Akkadian and cut that cobra to ribbons, if he could; but his attention was on the doorway, through which a steady stream of reinforcements came, even as he drove—and chopped down—the guards already in the chamber back toward that entry.

The great Nubian warrior was starting to feel the cost of the struggle—his arms aching, his wind heaving. How many of these bastards must he kill? Left and right, they fell—and still they kept coming!

The Akkadian, in the meantime, had worked his way to an oil lamp, both the snake and the warlord following him. He kicked the spindly legs out from under the lamp, sending the bowl of fire crashing to the floor, burning oil washing toward the snake, droplets stinging it, spitting back at the serpent.

And the cobra had had enough—it slithered away. Let the humans battle all they wanted.

There was no time, however, for Mathayus to feel any sense of relief, as Memnon—who seemed to have gotten a second wind—was bearing down on him again.

The lamp Mathayus had toppled, having done its work with the cobra, now sought new victories, as flames spread, tickling the bottom of a huge hanging wall tapestry. Within seconds the tapestry was a sheet of flame, and the fire spread to other wall hangings, until the very walls themselves seemed ablaze.

A barrier of fire separated Mathayus and Memnon now, and the Akkadian might have snatched up the sorceress, and left the final defeat of the warlord for later, if those flames hadn't separated him from his beloved, as well. Fire cracked and snapped and a hellish heat permeated the room, drenching the participants in glistening sweat.

Memnon seemed to relish the blaze, a demon at home, and he knocked the top off another oil lamp, and ran his blade in its boiling oil.

Mathayus stared through the leaping flames— where was the bastard? And then Memnon came flying over the flames, in a somersaulting leap that only confirmed the warlord's warrior stature; and when he landed at the Akkadian's feet, Memnon swung his sword down and the two blades clanged and sparked!

Cassandra's eyes widened in terror and wonder, as she witnessed the two duelists parrying and thrusting with flaming blades now. But the arcing fire seemed to inspire Memnon, and perhaps unsettle Mathayus, because the warlord had the advantage now, driving the bigger man back, back....

A weary grunting caught her attention, despite the crack of flames and the clang of blades (and the crack and clang of flaming blades), and she turned toward the doorway, where the great Nubian was clearly tiring. Bodies were scattered carelessly at his feet, but Balthazar seemed all but overwhelmed, as more and more guards kept coming, driving him back into the burning throne room.

"Mathayus!" Cassandra cried. "He needs your help!"

The Akkadian dodged a swing of Memnon's flaming sword, and saw for himself—Balthazar fighting as hard as he could, but the numbers defeating him, or threatening to.

Then one of the guards slashed the Nubian's leg, a deep gaping gash, and Balthazar howled in fury, the wound spurring him to fight even harder, slashing blindly.

Mathayus knew if he didn't come to Balthazar's aid, the great warrior would soon be overrun, and cut to pieces....

With all the force he could muster, Mathayus swung his sword at Memnon, who could only fend off the blow by using both his swords. Distracted, Memnon was not prepared when the Akkadian kicked him, hard, in the chest, sending the warlord flying backward through the flames.

The horde of guards closing in on Balthazar would be too much even for Mathayus to take on, blade for blade; thinking fast, he ran to the six-foot ram's statue, and summoning all his strength, all his willpower, he lifted the huge statue and held it above his shoulders, like a tree trunk, and he charged toward the guards who were attacking his ally, and he hurled it into them, the massive object smashing into their midst, crushing some of them, scattering the rest.

Balthazar, catching his breath, nodded to Mathayus, who nodded back; this would be all the Nubian would need, to get his footing again.

Cassandra had watched this with amazement and admiration, and then she wondered if she could reach Memnon and surprise him with her blade.

But as she turned, Memnon surprised her, instead.

The warlord was running at her—*just as in her vision, though the location was different, and he was not on horseback, but his face, his teeth bared in a hateful grimace, was the same!*

In one continuous movement, he rammed a shoulder into her midsection, knocking the wind from her, her small sword flying, as he tossed her over his shoulder like a bag of wheat. Racing through the inferno of the throne room, the warlord swept the woman from the chamber.

Just as Mathayus was moving toward that doorway, a hanging tapestry above drooped down, creating a wall of flame, driving him back.

Almost colliding with Balthazar, Mathayus said, "Are you all right, my friend?"

The Nubian smiled grimly. "You go—friend. I'll hold these bastards off."

Here and there in the blazing throne room, the surviving guards were picking themselves up, regrouping.

"You save her, Akkadian," Balthazar ordered.

"Who am I to defy a king?" Mathayus asked.

And he ran through the flames, into the corridor.

## Time of the Prophecy

O

outside the palace, Isis again knelt to help Philos, the scientist's exasperated visage having appeared in the hole beneath where the grate in the street had been. But this time he required special aid: the little horse thief, dead to the world (thanks to a knot on his head), had to be hauled up out of the hole like another, if bigger, bag of powder.

The queen's creased brow posed a question, but the scientist, getting yanked up out of the sewer by the slender strong hand of Isis, said only, "Don't ask."

"But you were successful?"

"Oh yes . . . but the timing will be less precise. We must wait; we are at the whim of the gods, with just a touch of help from science."

And, in the lower recesses of the palace, the sparking fuse was racing through the corridors. In the courtyard, in the moonlight, Memnon emerged with Cassandra over his shoulder. He set her roughly down and paused to catch his breath— not so much from hauling the lightweight woman as recovering from the throne-room clash with Mathayus, as hard fought a contest as the Great Teacher had ever endured.

Cassandra was breathing hard too, clutching her stomach from the nasty blow she'd received from Memnon, when he tackled her up into his clutches.

Memnon himself leaned over in exhaustion, breath heaving, hands on his thighs. His upper lip curled into a caustic sneer. "All... all these years ... *lying* to me."

She shook her head, managed to speak. "I never ... never lied."

Around them in the windows of the palace, fire was raging, spreading from the throne room. A great tapestry suddenly dropped, slumping over the entrance from the palace, through which they had just come, blocking entry in a snapping, flapping, leaping wall of flame.

His breath was returning to normal. "And what of my great victory that you foresaw?"

"I saw that—I did see it." Now her lip curled into a sneer—a defiant one. "And I hoped to prevent it!"

The warlord moved toward her, and she backed up as he came. "Guarding your chastity like a precious stone—only the 'diamond' was nothing more than cheap glittering *glass*!"

"Don't touch me. ... Mathayus will kill you, if you touch me."

"He'll *try*, anyway." Memnon stopped, and looked into the sky, where the moon had nearly reached its apex, luminous in the purple shroud of the night—peaceful, lovely, in contrast to the raging flames consuming the palace, and the bitter battles waged there. "Well, my dear, your deception has come to naught."

Quick as a cobra, he lashed out and grabbed her by the arms and spun her around, holding her to him from behind, slipping his arm around her slender throat, his forearm pressed against her Adam's apple.

"The time has come, my love," he said tenderly, dragging her across the courtyard, as she struggled to no avail. "I will ascend these steps and become one with the gods."

Choking, Cassandra clawed at Memnon's arm, futilely, as he yanked her along, towing her toward the grand altar the Great Teacher had erected to himself, a dozen stone steps rising to a platform bordered by rams, overseen by a statue of a god resembling himself.

"Let your eyes bear witness," he said. "Perhaps they no longer are blessed with a sorcerer's vision, but they will soon be filled with *my* vision of the future—a world ruled by Memnon!"

The warlord had just hauled the squirming, resisting woman to the bottom of the altar steps when that burning tapestry, blocking entry from the palace, seemed to split itself in two!

The Akkadian's sword had, with one mighty slash, cut a passage for himself, and he burst through the blaze, a godlike vision emerging from

smoke and flame at a dead run, relentless, enraged, his eyes trained on Memnon in as sure and lethal a fashion as if he'd been sighting an arrow.

The warlord released Cassandra, roughly, hurting her to one side, and then Memnon was upon him. Cassandra hit the stone floor hard, skinning an arm, wind again knocked from her; but—even heaving for breath—she watched with hope and fear as Mathayus attacked.

Memnon withdrew a sword and blocked the Akkadian's first, crushing blow, but barely; and now, in the open air of the courtyard, rippling bodies highlighted by the moon's ivory and the fire's orange, the two men again clashed swords, the clang and clack ringing, echoing.

In the throne room, Balthazar had killed or at least wounded every opponent; but he could barely stand, his leg badly slashed, blood streaming, weakening him. Leaving behind a scarlet scattering of the dead and dying, the Nubian limped from the throne room and its spreading conflagration, into the safety of the corridor.

Only safety was not what awaited the king of the bandits: a long staff, hurled at him, walloped him alongside the head and sent him to the stone floor. Above the hoarse roar of flames came the sound of hoofbeats—*within the palace?*—which seemed to Balthazar a bizarre aural hallucination, until he pushed to one elbow and saw the all-too-real sight of that patricidal swine Takmet, riding toward him on a stallion no darker black than its rider's soul.

The horseman drew up, in the wide corridor, near the fallen Nubian, and grinned down at him, laughing madly, brandishing a lance with a curled-hook tip. Takmet jabbed it at the fallen Balthazar, who— at the last moment— managed to roll out of its reach.

The Nubian king climbed painfully to his knees, and the harsh, gloating voice of the vicious prince echoed off walls decorated with the reflection of orange-blue flame. "Why, Lord Balthazar—if I am no king ... why are you kneeling before me?"

This insult was a blessing from the gods, because it inspired the man mountain, sent rage-fueled energy surging through him, and—pushing off the wall with his free hand, his sword filling the other— he used his good leg to rise, and face the lance-wielding man on horseback.

In the courtyard, the battle between the barbarian and the would-be king raged on, while the sorceress who had served the latter and loved the former watched helplessly. Mathayus fought with a hammering fury, but Memnon made up for a comparative lack of strength with dexterity, grace and brutal speed—his ability to fight with a sword in either hand allowed him to fend off the Akkadian's every blow with one hand, and respond with the other.

They had fought to the bottom of the steps of the altar, Memnon pressing the attack, driving his antagonist back, until Mathayus knocked into a flaming blazier. While the assassin deftly sidestepped— with a grace rivaling that of the smaller man— Memnon took a precious second or two to reach down to the fallen lamp, where he again ran his blades through blazing oil.

Once more the warlord's swords danced with fire, and he charged Mathayus, the whirling swords spinning, the flames a dazzling, blinding array of skill as the warlord slashed forward, sending spitting oil spraying onto the Akkadian's arms.

The oil droplets jumped to flame, and now—as if dealing with a warrior of Memnon's skill weren't enough—the assassin was having to take time to shake flames from himself, as if throwing off biting insects, a distraction that aided the warlord in backing Memnon up to the edge of the precipice that lined one side of the elevated courtyard.

Mathayus glanced over his shoulder, at the Gomorrah street a very long way down; and a groggy Cassandra—just now able to get to her feet, from Memnon flinging her to the stone floor—cried out in despair, wishing there were some magic left in her to work in aid of her beloved, and help strike down that wretched villain.

In a corridor nearby, another deadly duel was under way, as the wounded Balthazar seemed outmatched by the fiendish man possessed, on horseback, Takmet's lance driving him back and back, with repeated jabs.

*And as these battles—and an ever-spreading fire—raged, a burning fuse deep in the bowels of the palace took its sweet time traveling toward those piled sacks of black powder.*

As Mathayus teetered on the literal brink, a long fall to death just behind him, Memnon struck hard with the flaming sword in his right hand, shouldering forward; but Mathayus countered, catching the hilt of the warlord's sword, and leaned his own weight in, spinning the man around, toward that ledge.



A decorative half wall of rock, supporting the altar, saved Memnon, who slammed into it. Mathayus had taken a step back, so that his opponent could not reach out at the last moment and pull him along on a plummeting death. And now Memnon, breathing hard, resting against the rocks for a few seconds, stole his own look at the long drop. His feral grin revealed to the Akkadian a grudging respect for how near the "immortal" warlord had been taken to the edge of dying....

Mathayus had no time for such niceties, and swung his sword in sidearm fashion, hoping to cut the bastard in two.

But the warlord ducked the blow, and swung his leg around, the toe of his boot sinking deep into the Akkadian's side, doubling him up in pain, just in time for that same foot to kick again, catching his jaw.

That straightened the Akkadian, only to send him staggering backward, until he crashed into a table alongside the altar steps, crushing it under his considerable weight. Though his scimitar remained in hand, Mathayus was dazed, barely conscious, and ready for finishing off by the warlord....

But even as the fog began to lift in the barbarian's mind, he could see his opponent, *not* bearing down on him, rather staring up at the moon.

If Mathayus had not been dazed, he would have taken this opportunity to charge at the warlord, and slash him to ribbons; instead, groggily, he turned his own eyes to the moon, and wondered if he was delirious—*the orb was ringed in silver, glowing all 'round. .. and the outline of a scorpion had become visible on its distant face.*

As for Memnon, he knew he would have to put off killing the barbarian, for a few moments anyway; because a moment was upon him that must be seized, a juxtaposition of man and the heavens, a moment when reality and destiny became one: *the time of the prophecy had arrived.*

His swords no longer aflame, Memnon strode up the wide stone steps, pausing midway to call out to the sky, in a voice both grim and determined: "*Great gods above—look down upon me!*"

Mathayus began to push to his feet. Did this madman think he could command the gods?

The warlord on the altar steps still spoke to the sky, to the moon, but now his voice was hushed: "Make me one with you."

And Cassandra, her wits gathered, stood aghast as her prophecy seemed to be coming true. They were in the courtyard, just as she had envisioned it in

the bandit's camp; and Memnon was on those altar steps, with Mathayus preparing to make an attack from the flank.

Frightened, she turned to one of several courtyard doors, trying to tap into her memory of the vision— an archer had emerged from a door onto this open area, but *which* door? She swung around, looking at another possibility, and another . . . any one of three doors....

*Even now, she thought, that archer was pounding down a palace corridor, no doubt drawing an arrow on the run. But which corridor? What door?*

Then, the door at the left held her gaze; no, she had not regained her mystical powers: she had merely spotted something growing up between stones, a flower struggling toward a sun that had long since set.

In her vision, the archer had stepped through a doorway, on the run, and crushed such a small, yellow flower.

And in moments, the sorceress knew, he would do it again.

A man on foot—a badly wounded one at that— meeting a horseman's lance with a sword was by all logic doomed to failure. And, as if proof of that wisdom, Takmet thrust his lance expertly and caught, with its hooked tip, the Nubian by his calf. Takmet jerked upward, taking Balthazar's leg out from under him; the bandit king's other foot went with it, and he went smashing backward into a stone wall, sliding down to sit awkwardly on the corridor floor.

On his backside now, bleeding, breathing hard, Balthazar was cornered, the smirking Takmet looming over him from his saddle.

As the prince's horse trotted almost casually up to him, Balthazar raised his hands in surrender.

Takmet's smirk disappeared and a smoldering rage turned into a blaze rivaling the one in the palace around them. "Force *me* to kneel before *you*? What gives you such gall, Nubian dog? What gives you the right to ask a *prince* to kneel before such *rabble*?"

And the furious Takmet drove the lance forward, aiming between those massive raised hands ...

... both of which caught the lance, and held it fast.

Takmet's eyes widened, his mouth dropped open.

Balthazar's eyes burned into whatever soul the wretch in the saddle still possessed. And he answered the prince's question: "What gives me the gall?"

... About two hundred pounds' advantage, traitor."

And with a might few men could match, Balthazar yanked that lance, lifting Takmet off the saddle as if he were weightless, sending the slender prince flying...

... straight into a stone wall, where—as one might predict—he hit hard, like an insect into the helmet of a charging warrior. He slid down the stones, as if every bone in his body had been crushed into a puree, and puddled there, waiting for Balthazar.

It was not a long wait.

The Nubian, with renewed strength, strode over, hardly limping now. Somehow the stunned prince managed to draw his sword, but even he knew the fight was over. A big hand reached out and squeezed the smaller man's wrist and fingers popped open, and steel clattered impotently on the floor.

"Go ahead, Nubian," Takmet said, not defiant, just weary. "End it! Use your sword."

The king shook his head.

And raised a fist, no larger than the average child's head, casting a shadow that blotted out the face of the only son of the late King Pheron of Ur.

"This," Balthazar said, "is for your father."

Then that fist came smashing straight into Takmet's wide eyes, and the last sound the prince heard was the sickening crunch of his own face, collapsing.

In the courtyard, Mathayus had recovered—he was on his feet, scimitar in hand, moving toward the steps, ready to charge up that altar and finish the madman Memnon.

*"Mathayus!"*

At the sound of Cassandra's voice, the Akkadian paused, turned, and saw her standing with her palms upraised—a wraith in the moonlight—her expression solemn.

And just past her, behind her, he saw an archer burst through a palace doorway onto the courtyard, a sandaled foot crushing a flower, an arrow already notched in the warrior's bow.

Mathayus winced. In a flash, he knew: he knew what Cassandra's vision had been—of his death in this courtyard—and he knew what she now intended; like him, she wanted to change the future, even if it meant sacrificing herself, fashioning her own doomed destiny.

She sent love to him with her eyes, and then resignation covered her face, as she turned toward that archer, who was about to let fly.

Then the sorceress dove in front of that projectile, which already winged toward Mathayus, who had anticipated her move, diving himself, snatching her out of harm's way and into the shelter of his arms, and he spun toward the threat, offering his back to the archer's arrow.

The tip found purchase in his back, between his shoulder blades, and the shaft quivered there, satisfied. Mathayus received this offering without a cry of pain, though his shudder was something Cassandra, folded in his arms, felt as if the reaction were her body's own.

"No," she said, agonized at the fulfillment of her vision, her emotions shattering into tears, "no ..."

Scimitar tumbling from his hand, Mathayus dropped to the ground, his arms slipping from around her, even as the archer—intent on ensuring the death of his lord's foe—ran toward the fallen Akkadian.

And Memnon—on the altar steps, aloof from all this—surveyed the scene, pleased that his enemy had finally been vanquished, a man big enough not to begrudge the archer for denying his warlord the pleasure of killing the barbarian himself. Memnon could afford to be generous—after all, the path to godly ascension was clear before him.

The archer was almost upon Mathayus, the man brandishing a sword, ready to apply a finishing touch, should his arrow have only done the job halfway. Cassandra, boiling with fury, snatched up the Akkadian's scimitar, and—when the archer arrived, bending toward his victim—she swung the scimitar upward, thrusting it deep into the startled archer's chest.

The archer glanced at her, his expression more apt for hurt feelings than a fatal blow, and he tumbled to the floor, as dead as the stones that received him.

Mathayus, however, was not dead, though he was badly wounded; and he summoned his strength, and strove for clarity, as he pushed himself up on one hand, looking at Memnon climbing the final steps to the altar landing.

Too far away for a dagger thrust, the Akkadian knew, even if his powers had been at full capacity.

That was when he noticed a familiar friend—not a person, but an object, a precious artifact of the Akkadian warrior's past. . .

. . . *his bow!*

The formidable weapon lay, where the (late) prince of Ur had discarded it after the recent party, unable to pull its mighty string. Of course Mathayus had no way of knowing just how the bow had managed to place itself at his disposal; but he was not about to question this blessing....

Pain racked his body, but his determination, his sense of purpose, overcame the agony, which was inconsequential, compared with the agony of a world over which Memnon ruled. So the Akkadian crawled to that table, while Cassandra wept, turned away from him, unaware of his survival.

The barbarian's survival was something the Great Teacher had not learned, either. He stood on his self-made altar, his eyes raised to the glowing silver circle that was the scorpion-faced moon.

A fist raised, challenging the sky, Memnon shouted his glory. *"Hear me, gods! I am Memnon— son of Osiris, ruler of the world! And you . . . even you . . . will obey!"*

Though fire snapped and sizzled in the palace nearby, Memnon nonetheless heard the movement behind him; his keen warrior's sense of self-preservation had edged out his self-absorption.

And the warlord saw Mathayus, the bow back in his hands.

But Memnon was not afraid. The Akkadian was wounded, probably dying. And Memnon was, after all, a god.

Still not on his feet, the Akkadian—pitiful fool!— was searching around that table, underneath it, like a dog seeking scraps, looking for arrows that were not there ... no quiver was attached to the powerful bow.

Memnon shook his head, chuckling.

The weakened Mathayus—getting to his feet now, but wobbly, with his bow in hand, if without arrows—stared up at the would-be master of the world. Their gazes met, and locked. The flames around them reflected in the warlord's eyes—it was as if those eyes danced with madness.

The Akkadian could not allow this bastard to live.

Gritting his teeth, Mathayus reached a hand over his shoulder, and in one fluid move, he tore that arrow from the flesh that held it, withdrawing it from between his shoulder blades as if his body itself had been the arrow's quiver.

A lesser man—almost any man—would have fainted from the pain. But the assassin felt a new energy throb through him, and with a flaunting spin of the arrow, he notched it, and ... using the pain itself as fuel... Mathayus somehow managed to draw back that Promethean bowstring.

Memnon grunted, almost impressed. But he was not afraid. Even before he was a god, snatching an arrow from the air had been his favorite trick. Hadn't he, in this very courtyard, proved that?

By now the sorceress had seen her beloved rise from the dead, and she was filled with hope, as she saw the remarkable barbarian facing his foe for one last try at changing the future.

But Cassandra's hope fell, as guards suddenly rushed into the courtyard. A captain ordered them to stand fast, and they did, frozen at the sight of their king atop the altar, poised against the purple night sky . . . with the Akkadian's arrow pointed at his chest.

The Akkadian's reinforcements, outside the palace, were a despondent group. Their plans had apparently gone awry; that fuse must have again been disrupted. Isis paced, her warriors anxious on the palace steps; and the scientist shook his head, berating himself under his breath.

Arpid staggered over to the little scientist. Woozy with disappointment, the thief put a conciliatory, consoling hand on Philos's shoulder, and said, "You have to face the truth, my friend. It is just not going to happen."

The scientist, eyes wide and haunted, shrugged in surrender. "Can the Chinese powder have failed us?"

This would have been an excellent moment for the powder sacks to explode; but instead, a huge contingent of Memnon's army came clanking around the corner, swords raised.

Arpid and Philos exchanged terrified glances.

And the brave queen of fighting female warriors raised her own sword, though despite her fierce expression, she knew—as did her brave women—that they would be slaughtered in seconds.

Up in the courtyard, Memnon had ordered his guards not to interfere.

He preferred to stand atop his altar, and invite that arrow. At first he stretched his arms wide, and then—as when he had demonstrated his prowess

earlier, in this very courtyard—he slowly drew them together until his palms were about a foot apart.

Finally the warlord spoke; his voice boomed as he addressed the wounded Akkadian, who aimed that secondhand arrow right at him: "You would dare interfere with the prophecies of the gods?"

"Let me tell you something I have learned, teacher," Mathayus said, drawing a bead *on the* man's chest, "about these 'prophecies'...."

With this the assassin somehow managed to draw that taut bowstring back yet another foot. Mathayus narrowed his eyes, his face set, his expression grim, as he carefully targeted the arrow, whose very tip was even now dappled with the Akkadian's own blood.

As he stood with his hands apart, Memnon watched his adversary closely... and a flicker of doubt passed across the warlord's face.

"Don't pin your hopes on them," Mathayus said.

And he let that arrow fly, straight and true....

Just as Memnon's hands were about to snap shut, clamping onto that arrow, a fuse far below him, in the recesses of the warlord's palace, touched the bags of black powder.

The massive explosion rocked the structure and all the people in it, including Memnon, who was shaken enough to allow that arrow to find a new home in his chest.

Soldiers who had charged forward, as Mathayus let the arrow fly, now were tossed like dolls as a plume of orange and red and blue, surrounded by mushrooming smoke, filling the sky itself with flame and dark clouds, blotting out the silver moon, blocking all other sound with its man-made thunder. The foundations of parapets were shaken so severely that a huge bell began to toll in one of them.

And in the midst of all this, the Great Teacher— Memnon, king of the world—was blown off his altar, as if that arrow had the power of the gods. Along the way, his robes caught fire, and when he went sailing over the wall, down toward the city street, the warlord was like a falling star his freed subjects might make a wish upon.

Below, Arpid and Philos—whose eyes were bright, faces wide with smiles, at their successful explosion—were not far away when Memnon's burning body hit with a sickening impact.

The soldiers who'd been advancing on Isis and her warriors—recognizing the burning form of their commander in chief—fell back, in horrified, leaderless disarray.

Though the thief and scientist were squeamishly turning away from the human funeral pyre that Memnon had become, Isis herself smiled at the sight of the bastard as he cooked in his own juices. She was amused—she and her women had helped win this war without ever being called to the battlefield!

In the courtyard, Mathayus—the pain subsiding in the wake of triumph—staggered to the edge of the precipice and stared down to view the broken, burning body below.

Arpid, Philos, Isis and her warriors, and even the former soldiers of Memnon, were witness to an image so impressive, so indelible, all would carry it to their graves. As they looked up, the broad-shouldered figure of the Akkadian stood amidst flames, framed by a huge, approving moon, the glowing orb seemingly emblazoned with a scorpion symbol, like the crest on a warrior's shield.

Then Cassandra was at his side, and Mathayus took her into his arms, held so tightly they were as one; her adoring gaze was matched by his own.

By this time, Balthazar had found his way to the courtyard, and as he limped toward his brother in battle, he watched with amazement and pride as the remaining soldiers of Memnon's army dropped their weapons and knelt before the Akkadian, staring up at him in awe—a legend was unfolding before their eyes, and they would spread the word.

Mathayus and Cassandra were still gazing down at the fallen, flame-torn remains of the warlord when the Nubian limped up to them, saying, "By tolling bell and thunder's swell..."

Cassandra smiled at the hobbling giant, then looked up at her own giant, and added, "A flaming star falls from the sky."

And on the palace steps, as Queen Isis, a thief, and a former court magician gazed up through smoke and fire, captivated by the image of the godlike figure of the Akkadian, framed against the glowing moon, the remainder of Memnon's soldiers also threw down their weapons and fell to their knees.

"By a full moon's glow," Isis said, "in House of Scorpio ..."

"Kneeling men bow to the king on high," Philos said, finishing the thought.



"I knew that," Arpid said, and then he grinned, jerking a thumb skyward, and yelled to the surrendering soldiers: "That's my partner!"

## Scorpion's Destiny

T

he next morning, smoke still streamed into the sky over the walls and streets of Gomorrah. The battle was over, and rebuilding would soon begin—the palace needed repairs, of course (and a certain pouch of rubies would help renovations along), but the kingdom itself needed a new vision. That vision would not belong to a sorceress; rather, to its new king.

Mathayus—his wounds bandaged, a warrior-king well rested, his strength restored—strode with his queen through the streets of Gomorrah. Cheers would come later; right now, eyes were adoring, awestruck—which, in all frankness, the Akkadian (as he had admitted to his beloved) found disconcerting, even embarrassing.

Cassandra assured him that he would overcome these feelings; and no sorcery had been required to make this prediction.

Outside the main gates of the city, the Akkadian and the late Memnon's former oracle said their good-byes to their fellow warriors. Queen Isis had rounded up horses for herself and her women, and Balthazar was preparing to ride back to their oasis retreat, himself.

Mathayus approached the big Nubian, just before the man had mounted his steed. "Stay, my friend," he said. "There is much to be done here."

A small smile creased the battle-scarred face. "I have a kingdom of my own to rule—my own people to look after. ... I'll leave you your white camel, the little thief, and the magician, to keep you out of mischief."

Mathayus returned the smile, nodding, then turned to Isis. "And will you stay, and command my soldiers? They could use a woman's touch."

"I'm sure," Isis said, and she too smiled, though it was fleeting. "But I too have a kingdom of my own."

Balthazar caught the Akkadian's eyes and locked onto them, hard. "You are a king now—an assassin no more. I think you will make a good one ... as long as you do not forget how you came to your throne ... and the people you came from."

With a grave nod, Mathayus said, "Balthazar, I am the last of the Akkadians—the people I came from will live on through me."

The Nubian glanced at Cassandra, a sparkle in his eyes. "And your descendants, I trust."

Mathayus laughed, once. "And my descendants ... And my friend, there will always be a place in my kingdom for you ... And you, noble queen."

Solemn nods were exchanged between these warrior rulers.

Then Mathayus returned his gaze to Balthazar. "Live free," he said.

They clasped forearms, in the Akkadian ritual.

"Rule well," the Nubian said.

Then the man mountain climbed up on his horse, and grinned down at his brother in battle, sizing him up. But the grin had disappeared when he said, "Nubian eyes will be watching you, Scorpion King."

Mathayus nodded, considering this advice—warning?—and he watched as the big man rode off. Queen Isis and her warriors followed, pausing to bestow surprisingly girlish waves of good-bye.

The Scorpion King turned to the woman he would soon marry, and he held her by her arms, gently, asking, "And what do you see ahead, my royal sorceress?"

Cassandra thought about that, knowing he was teasing, and yet taking the question seriously. "Peace," she said. "Prosperity."

"Good! And for how long?"

Her brow wrinkled. "Ah, well. Nothing lasts forever, my king.... That is the truth of all kingdoms. No mystical prophecy is needed to foretell as much."

Mathayus shrugged, as if to say he understood the validity of this view, and could do nothing about it. He looked toward the horizon, and saw black clouds gathering, looming, roiling... in the distance.

"A storm is coming, my queen," he said.

"Yes ... many storms will come. But those are new stories, and we are at the end of this one."

"And the beginning of another?"

She hugged him. "Yes, oh yes."

As he held her, his smile turned sly, and he whispered, "How is it that you have these gifts of prophecy? Don't the legends say, that if—"

"Perhaps a woman giving herself to the man she loves remains pure in the eyes of the gods." She stepped out of his embrace, her eyes a-twinkle. "Or maybe that was just a device, to hold a randy king at bay. Can you think of a better way to keep a lecher from taking advantage of a poor girl? .. Neither could my ancestors."

He had to grin at such a family tradition of deception. With the speed of the warrior he was, he snatched her back, by the arms. "Lucky for me," he said, "we'll make our own destiny."

Then the Akkadian assassin, who had become a king, swept the sorceress, who would become a queen—into his grasp, and kissed her, deeply, passionately.

She returned his kiss, but as they embraced outside the fabled evil city of Gomorrah, she chose not to tell him of a terrible vision that had just come to her.

Cassandra loved this man, and he was a king now—let him enjoy it, while he could.

Besides, whatever troubles, even tragedies, might lie ahead, they were part of—as she had told him— another tale.

## TIP OF THE SCIMITAR

### I

I am indebted to Stephen Sommers, the director (and co-screenwriter) of *The Mummy* and *The Mummy Returns*, for allowing me to play a small role on the ongoing team associated with these entertaining movies. The *Mummy* films are modern extensions of the Universal Studios legendary horror-movie cycle; having grown up on those classic pictures—like so many of my generation—I was thrilled to land the assignment of writing novels officially associated with that grand tradition.

*The Scorpion King*, on the other hand, grows out of another classic tradition, that of heroic adventures associated with such fictional characters as Conan and Tarzan, and the mythic likes of Hercules and Ulysses. Writing this novel was my way of paying homage to the creators of those first two great heroes—Robert E. Howard and Edgar Rice Burroughs (with a nod to a visionary filmmaker named Ray Harryhausen and a blind poet named Homer)—and I appreciate having been given this opportunity to do so.

I would like to acknowledge the screenwriters of *The Scorpion King*—Jonathan Hales, Stephen Sommers, David Hayter and Will Osborne—for providing such a fun, action-packed, well-crafted script. I had a wonderful time writing this, thanks to these gentlemen.

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