

THE FALL OF THE NEW YEAR THRONE

A Novel by

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## Chapter 1

### Talismans of the Elamites

Kaveh gasped as stark naked men approached the jewelry stall where he had been shopping, their black skin streaked with perspiration, each wearing an alert snake around his neck.

The merchant of fine gems with whom he had been haggling watched him with cold amusement. She squatted next to him. "These are *shaten*, our priests."

Kaveh shuddered. "What are these witch doctors doing here? Get them away from me!"

She shrugged. "They are here for the same reason you are, in search of a gem." One man squatted next to the dealer, his long plaited hair nearly touching the ground, and whispered in her ear.

Kaveh had come to get a present for Roxanna at this stall because none of their family or friends would be caught dead here, and this merchant was known to have lower prices than the others. He would regret meeting her empty-handed. But serpents were the deadliest foes of the Persians, and Kaveh could not bear the sight of them. "Send them away and let me make my choice, then you can serve them later."

"*Shaten* do not take orders from shopkeepers, boy. Besides, we Elamites have asked them to read the omens for our trading mission here to Aratta. There is a famine back home in Susa and we must succeed somewhere if we are to return with resources to buy grain. The holy men say that the time is now propitious for a reading. That is why they have disrobed and wrapped themselves in serpents. Now they seek a kidenn stone, so as to attract the divine aura." She reached into her tunic and pulled up a large, radiant carnelian gem by its gold herringbone chain. It was oval

on one side, with a flat face, as though it was half of a single huge stone that had been severed in two.

He wondered how a man could bear to have a scaly reptile next to his skin. He had desperately wanted to make a good impression on Roxanna, whom he was chasing these days. But the smell of the snakes was too much for him to bear. "I'll be back later, then."

Abruptly, he felt himself being shoved brutally aside, and came face to face with a snarling, ferret-faced Aramean tribesman. The man grabbed the chain around the merchant's neck. She shrieked, her head snapping forward, and then the chain gave way.

Kaveh grabbed the Bedouin's wrist and growled in his weathered face. "Who the devil do you think you are? Give that back!"

"Back off, boy, " the man rasped in a thick desert accent. "Or I'll geld you like the ass you are."

"And I'll rearrange your ugly face on my anvil!" Kaveh thrust his right foot behind the tribesman's heel and took hold of his shoulders with his meaty hands, slamming him back as he swept his foot forward. The wiry Aramean landed hard, a look of surprised pain on his face. The gem, chain still attached, went flying.

Kaveh bent and seized the purloined kidenn stone, dropping it into his blacksmith's apron.

The tribesman howled and jumped to his feet, a keen bronze blade in his hand, his obsidian eyes wild with blood lust. Kaveh, unarmed, backed off.

He and Kaveh circled one another, as the jewelry and pottery dealers around them shouted in alarm. The agile Aramean sliced at Kaveh's flat abdomen, but the brawny apprentice leaped back in time.

"Come here! I understand ass hide brings a pretty penny in the bazaar." The wild man lunged, driving the blade toward the young blacksmith's heart.

Kaveh jumped to his right and the tribesman's thrust went under his left arm, slitting his tunic and grazing his ribs. The pain radiated throughout his chest. His foe danced back, wary of Kaveh's hammer fists, looking for an opening. Desperate, the blacksmith silently called on the god of artisans, Thwareshtar, for succor.

Out of the corner of his eye, he glimpsed Roxanna. His heart sank. She had come to their rendezvous and now was in danger. One eye on the wild man, he tried to wave her off, and then went back to the fray. He could not afford to let himself be distracted.

He ducked behind a huge alabaster vase that had loomed off to his right.

The Aramean moved in, circling. Kaveh could usually blindside an opponent with his unexpected speed and bull-like strength. He was a champion at his local House of Strength, where the young men wrestled. He could not catch this quarry however aggressively he charged, though. He felt uncharacteristically leaden.

Abruptly, the wild man put his shoulder against the vase and it came crashing down, shattering on striking the hard clay.

Kaveh swept up a jagged shard of alabaster, as he heard the merchants curse and call for the bazaar guards.

The Aramean leaped over the broken vase and advanced toward him, undeterred by the makeshift weapon he was waving.

"I hope your life was sweet, boy. Because it certainly was short!" His arm lashed out cobra-like.

Kaveh parried the man's thrust with his shard, but the impact forced the jagged edge back into his own palm, and he dropped it with a yelp. He wanted to taunt his torturer back, but his tongue felt heavy and he had trouble concentrating.

Relentlessly, the knife arced before his chest, forcing him back time and again.

Kaveh kicked at the hateful fist that grasped its haft, and connected, hard. The tribesman's wiry arm shot up to the right, but he managed to hold on to his weapon.

He slashed at Kaveh's bull neck, aiming at exposed tendons.

Kaveh leaped back and felt a breeze against his Adam's apple as he barely avoided the deadly blade. He had long heard the phrase, "white fear," and now he knew the thing itself. He stepped back again, hastily, and tripped over some merchant's wares, landing on his back. His stomach knotted.

The tribesman landed on his chest with both knees, his face split with a broad grin, his bronze knife held high and poised for the coup de grace. The blackness rushed into Kaveh's mind like waters through a burst canal. He made a supreme effort, and managed to regain consciousness. Time slowed or his thoughts quickened-- he did not know which. He did silent battle with paralyzing terror. What was the mantra Daena taught me? "The path is straight that leads to the truth. *Tyam rastam ma avarada. Stray not from that path. Stray not from that path.*"

The blacksmith's hand reached around and found a bronze urn. He threw it at his assailant's forehead with all the strength he could muster and it

crashed into his face, tolling like a bell. The Bedouin, stunned, fell back. The lithe Aramean, however, shook his head and snorted, rolling over onto his knees.

Kaveh was on his feet in an instant, grabbing back up the urn, which he saw was Elamite work, engraved with a king crossed by serpents victorious. He thrust his fist into it and used it to parry the Aramean's enraged but now unsteady jabs. Tortured metal screamed with each strike, but Kaveh was parrying with unerring aim. The Aramean's eyes were like Venus and Mars above a bloody sunset.

Kaveh knocked the man's arm away with the urn and again smashed it into his face. For the first time, the ebony irises dilated in fear as the wild man stumbled back, dazed. He wiped at his bloody visage with the sleeve of his camel hair robe.

Then his head swung to the left. Something had caught his eye. Gibbering he backed away, his hands warding off some unseen threat.

Kaveh, puzzled, looked in the direction on which the Aramean's eyes were fixed. Two unclothed holy men were swiftly approaching, chanting incantations loudly in their enigmatic language as the black snakes around their necks hissed, weaving back and forth. Roxanna was right behind them, urging them to intervene.

The Bedouin's tongue curled in his gaping mouth. He took too long steps back, then turned on his heel and ran like a gazelle that had glimpsed a caracal lynx. He merged into the bazaar crowd and vanished.

Kaveh shouted, "Stop him! Someone stop him!" But the gawkers paid him no heed. Some, now that the show appeared to be over, began melting away.

The Elamite dealer deftly relieved Kaveh of the urn, clicking her tongue at the scratches and dents on it. Kaveh looked at her sheepishly. "I will pay for the damage."

She shook her head. "You fought for the Elamites, regained the kidenn stone, and the *shaten* have blessed you. It is we who owe you."

Roxanna ran ahead of the *shaten* and braced his massive arms with her rough hands. "Kaveh! Are you all right?"

He showed her his bleeding hand, sliced by the alabaster shard. "Mostly, but this hurts like the son of a demon!" He noticed that she did not hug or kiss him, but understood that they were in public, and her reputation might have suffered enough just by being seen there with him.

"We'll get that wrapped up." She looked at him with affection, which almost made the stinging pain disappear.

"You are late," he leered.

Her hazel eyes twinkled. "Well, with so many suitors besieging my father, I find it hard to make time in my schedule."

"I would be glad to thin out the ranks of those pests for you . . ." He couldn't get his breath to continue, then his knees buckled and he saw constellations.

"Kaveh!"

The dealer and the holy men hurriedly approached and gently moved Roxanna aside. The gem merchant knelt beside him and lifted his tunic to examine his knife wounds. "Poison!" she shouted.

The *shatens'* gnarled hands curled around his arms and legs, and four of them lifted his brawny form as though moving a carpet by grasping its corners. They carried him to the caravansary, beyond the bronze work and gem stalls. Roxanna and the shopkeeper with whom he had been speaking when the Aramean attacked accompanied them.

Half conscious, Kaveh smelled something musty on top of their pungent sweat, and knew with a sinking feeling that it was the snakes, just inches from his skin. A conflagration consumed every vein in his body. They laid him on a straw mat. He squinted, adjusting his eyes to the somber light within the building, trying to clear his mind of the mud that had poured like an avalanche into it.

One of the priests lifted the apprentice's tunic and rubbed an emollient over the slight scratch across his ribs. The paste was like water to the fiery spider web of anguish that extended from the injury.

Roxanna, her cheeks streaked with tears, took the dealer's arm. "I'll run to the Persian bazaar and bring help."

The woman shook her head. "The boy's fate will be determined before you could get there and back. Besides, your artisans have no cure for cactus venom. If the *shatens'* palliative does not work, no one's will. Stay, and give him a will to live."

"Our people hold no truck with sorcery."

"A magician attempts to compel the gods. The *shaten* merely seek to attract their aura."

Roxanna stood undecided a moment, then knelt next to his head and used the sleeve of her tunic to wipe his brow. "Kaveh, can you hear me? Don't you dare expire on me!"

He winced and his mind cleared a little. He managed to whisper to her, "Tell them I appreciate the treatment, but to get those snakes away from me or I'll break their reptile necks!"

The dealer, kneeling on the other side of him, smiled. "You Persians have no appreciation of serpents because you have just come as nomads from the steppes. A hunter competes with other hunters. But we are cultivators in Elam, and serpents eat no grain but rather rodents and birds and vermin that devour our crops. Should we not reverence so sincere a benefactor?"

The *shaten* ignored them. Another priest bandaged his hand with a soft cloth that smelled of aloes.

The Elamite holy men then squatted on their haunches and looked at him expectantly.

He tried to sit up, but the effort started the fire searing into his ribs again.

The dealer smiled. "They do not want you to try to rise, young man. Even their physic will not work so fast, if it works at all. It is just that you have something they want."

He nodded and reached into his apron with his left hand, retrieving the kidenn stone. He handed it to one of the *shaten*. The nude priest reverently accepted the gem, which seemed to glow.

As the priests consulted over the stone, the merchant turned to them. "I am Rishapla."

"I am Roxanna dughdar Bahmard."

"Kaveh puthra Cyrus. Listen, that Bedouin didn't appear to my eyes a common thief. Do you have any notion who he was?" He managed something above a whisper. Roxanna smiled at him, obviously hoping that he was reviving.

Rishapla's thin lips stretched slightly. "Given that he came from the west, I would guess he was sent by Asharidu. He has long coveted the talismans of the Elamites."

"Asharidu?" Roxanna asked.

"A defrocked Babylonian priest who fancies himself a great wizard. He has insinuated himself into an Aramean tribe as its medicine man, and cultivates the chieftain's son, Zohak, as his disciple."

Kaveh frowned. "What did he want with the gem?"

Rishapla shrugged. "Asharidu seeks power. Enough of him, I doubt he is of much consequence. You, on the other hand, should feel very honored, for the *shaten* intervened in your fate."

He looked up at the nude figures out of the corner of his eye, and then modestly glanced away. "Why did they interfere? I was about to pulverize that camel rustler."

Rishapla paused. "That is not what I meant. They at first were reluctant to become involved in a bazaar fracas in a foreign land. Then they say they saw the kidenn, the nimbus of victory, around you as the fracas proceeded. Then your friend implored us to do something, and she had it too."

"Nimbus?"

"They want to divine your destinies."

Kaveh pointed at himself with his bandaged hand. "Our destinies? Well, first of all, I may not have much of a destiny if that desert poison does me in. What's more, I am just an apprentice blacksmith, and my friend here is a potter's daughter. Producer folk like us don't have destinies. We just do our work."

"They need to have your assent."

"There is no point in it." As he regained consciousness, Kaveh began to worry about how much time had passed. His father would expect him back at the workshop soon. Perhaps he would have to send word of his poisoning and have a rude palanquin sent for him. He could only imagine the catcalls at the Royal Craffthall if he could not return under his own steam. Then there would be his father's rage to face. The old blacksmith had forbidden his eldest son to go near the Elamite bazaar, branding them strangelings and warlocks. And that was if he lived. He did not want to think about what his mother would go through if she had to put his corpse up on a Tower of Silence before he had even reached his majority.

"Oh, Kaveh, I want to see what they'll say. Maybe it will help your healing." Roxanna touched his shoulder, imploring.

He shrugged his eyebrows. It was not as though he could get up and leave, anyway. Perhaps by the time the parlor trick was over he would feel well enough to stand. Or perhaps the antidote would fail and he would never leave this caravansary.

"What do we have to do?" His voice was becoming stronger.

Rishapla conferred with the shaten in sibilant tones. She nodded and turned to the youngsters.

"Put out your hands and cup them."

One priest squatted before them, blocking a shaft of sunlight that was entering through the building's doorway. The other brought a squawking cockerel and held it by its feet as it flapped its russet wings furiously. With an engraved silver goblet that he held by the handle, the first poured water over their hands while the others caught it in a basin. Kaveh awkwardly held his to the side, to avoid diluting the healing paste on his abdomen. Then they upended the basin water on the cockerel, letting it bead up on its



feathers. The snakes around the priests' necks took special interest in these proceedings but their stomachs apparently full, satisfied themselves with watching. Then the priests chanted theogonies in their eldritch tongue. One abruptly raised a small hatchet and struck the bird's head off, which set it thrashing more vigorously for a few moments. They sliced open its abdomen and plucked out its innards, placing them in silver bowl. They examined the black mess avidly, glancing excitedly at Kaveh and Roxanna from time to time. He heard them repeat the word "kidenn" several times.

He tried to sit up a little, trying to gauge if he was becoming stronger or fading away. It was still hard to tell. "What do they say?"

"To tell you the truth, they are speaking in priests' jargon. It is something about the prophecy from the time of the three unknown kings, before Peli the Terrible."

Roxanna frowned. "We know nothing of those alien rulers. When did they reign?"

Rishapla smiled condescendingly at what she obviously considered barbarian creatures of a moment, her face suffused by the fatigue of an ancient, failing civilization. "Nearly two solar millennia ago as you Persians reckon."

She abruptly got up and went to consult with the chattering priests. One of them looked up with annoyance, and then was prevailed upon to say a few words in explanation to the dealer. Then he went back to poking his finger in the other priest's chest, slightly alarming the snake around his neck, and arguing heatedly.

"They still cannot interpret the harbingers. They see four signs in the cockerel guts, but they are contradictory and ambiguous."

"What signs?" Kaveh demanded hoarsely. A blackness loomed behind his eyes and he wondered if death was coming for him.

"Sleep, dragon, death, demon."

"That doesn't sound like a nice destiny at all." Roxanna hugged her elbows as though suddenly cold.

At the sound of her voice, Kaveh fought his way back to consciousness. The lava in his veins was subsiding. He managed a grin and said weakly, "She was hoping there would be a prince for her in there somewhere."

She shot him a look.

Rishapla hushed them. "The *shaten* are saying that you will face the supreme evil. We believe that serpents are a source of good, but once in a cosmic age a serpent-god turns demon."

Kaveh sat up, strength in his limbs again. He could see now that the caravansary was quite large, with multiple chambers for visiting merchants like Rishapla. Commodities were piled up here and there in the main hall. Runners for the merchants were coming and going, replenishing stock that had sold.

"Your friends have a wonderful imagination, and apparently are skilled physicians. But I am suddenly feeling a lot better and I have to get back to the workshop or my father will tan my hide and hang it out to cure."

He stood up, as Roxanna rushed to take his arm. "Are you sure you can walk, Kaveh?"

By way of answer, he led her to the caravansary entrance and began to push the wooden door aside. He could not deny feeling a febrile weakness, but his legs were carrying him.

One priest barked what must have been an order and Kaveh froze.

"Wait. They want you to have this." Rishapla took from the priest the kidenn stone, and expertly looped a new chain through it. She held it out to them.

Roxanna backed away. "We couldn't. It must be valuable."

"Take it. One of you should wear it around the neck. If you can find its twin, it may save you from our fate."

Kaveh grasped the carmine jewel, holding it by its golden chain. He put it over Roxanna's head, letting it rest on her prominent collarbone.

In the half-light of the building, it began glowing ever so slightly. Kaveh beamed as Roxanna smiled and fingered it, for he knew she had never possessed so valuable a stone. Kaveh was too suspicious, too unsettled by all that had happened to be happy for long, though. Something Rishapla had just said worried him.

"Your fate?"

"Elam is dying. Our people in Susa are expiring of hunger, all ribs and bellies. I heard that a large group of artisans has abandoned the city altogether, heading here to the kingdom of Aratta where at least there is food. Many scores of chaos await us. I fear that the god of justice would punish us for our pride and effrontery when we were a great power, for our rape of Babylon and theft of its gods."

"If the stone can be a savior, why not keep it for yourselves?"

"The *shaten* believe you newcomers have a better chance of overcoming the approaching havoc. They say you and your friend have the aura about you bright as gods' eyes. Among the Elamites it has all but flickered out."

"Mistress Rishapla, I cannot thank you enough for the poultice that salved that poisoned wound, and for the gift of the lovely stone. I'll bring you some nice iron work from my forge in gratitude." Kaveh stretched, his legs less rubbery by the moment. He tapped Roxanna's shoulder with his good left hand and started out of the structure again.

Roxanna half-bowed. "You have been most kind, merchant."

Rishapla's walnut face was impassive.

They left hurriedly. The pall cast by the gloomy words and expressions of the Elamites did not last long, as they exited into the bright sunshine and threaded their way through the bazaar, their favorite place in the whole world.

"Kaveh, are you sure you can walk all the way to the Persian bazaar?"

He grunted.

Roxanna pointed, perhaps to take his mind off his health. "It's like a field of butterflies."

Indian long-distance agents touted outlandish spices that tickled the nostrils from a distance. Sealanders in white robes from Dilmun in the Gulf hawked pearls the size of hen eggs to local grandees. Hittite iron swords, finely crafted Babylonian silver bibelots, Siberian gold goods, Bactrian necklaces inset with lapis lazuli, Sheban frankincense and myrrh, Israeli cut gemstones, Mannean woodworking, Assyrian armor, all vied for the gaze. When they reached the metal goods, the insistent rhythms of the bronze smiths' mallets drummed deafeningly at their ears.

"Hey, you! I want my money for that broken vase! A ram, I want!" One of the Elamite potters gesticulated. Apparently he had stood in too much awe of the *shaten* to accost them in the caravansary, but had followed them.

Kaveh looked at Roxanna and wondered if he was capable of sprinting. He doubted it. He whispered through clenched teeth. "Run, get out of here! I'll handle this." When Roxanna just looked at him, he shoved her gently and stepped away into the crowd.

He rubbed at the sweat on his forehead, still hot in the face, and he limped as fast as he could, hoping the swirling mass of shoppers would mask him.

He felt a hand like a bear's paw pound into his shoulder, and went sprawling, taking a cursing Assyrian with him. He lifted his face from the dust, coughing and wheezing, and turned over. The sun nearly blinded him as it shone into his eyes over the shoulders of two towering nar warriors, backlighting their thatchy raven hair so that they looked like the sun coming out of a lunar eclipse. One was scowling, showing a mouthful of crooked

teeth dyed pink by years of drinking haoma, the drug that made warriors berserk. The blasted potter had called the bazaar guards.

One of them bent over and pushed his head back into the dirt. "What are you gaping at, yokel? If you producer trash don't keep your eyes to yourselves, you won't have them for long. Chishpish here collects them, don't you?" The other man's craggy face remained silent in assent.

Kaveh lay prostrate as beads of perspiration lined his brow, and kept his eyes on the ground. "Clemency, my lord," he brought himself to say.

"Do you hear that, Zavan? He wants us to go easy on him. Now, I'd say you usually ask for mercy when you have done something wrong, wouldn't you?"

Zavan stooped over, grabbed Kaveh's left hand, and jerked him to his feet, almost dislocating his arm. "What exactly have you done, producer, that you were fleeing like a thief?"

"Nothing, my lord. I was minding my own business when an Aramean from the desert lit into me. I defended myself." He inadvertently looked up and caught the guard's eye.

The man struck him in the face casually, and he staggered but did not fall. "Keep your eyes to yourself, producer, or Chishpish will be keeping them in his belt pouch."

Now the enraged Elamite potter caught up to them, his purple lips pulled back from his flashing white teeth. "That's the one! He broke the most expensive vase I had!"

"I did not! You are lying!"

Chishpish joined the interrogation, maybe hoping for new collectibles. "You defended yourself. Broke up a lot of other people's property in the process, didn't you, producer?"

He hesitated, tasting blood in his mouth and licking his split lip. Then decided he had nothing to lose but his eyes. "I beg to differ, my lord. I broke nothing. It was the other, the Bedouin, who shattered a large alabaster piece."

"If you did nothing wrong, why flee? Chishpish and me, we do not like having to hightail it after commoners. Hadn't been a crowd here, I'd just as soon have put an arrow in you to stop you."

"I acted foolishly. I was just afraid that word of this whole mess would reach my father."

"Should we string him up now and give him the hundred lashes?" Chishpish flexed his tree bough-sized wrist, and then twisted Kaveh's arms behind him.

Kaveh heard the blood thrashing in his ears. He could almost feel the whip hacking into his back.

Chishpish jerked Kaveh's hands again and took a lasso from the side of his sword belt, looping it twice around Kaveh's wrists. He pulled the knot so tight the ropes bit into his flesh. He pushed the young ironsmith roughly between the shoulder blades, forcing him to his knees. Then he ripped the boy's tunic away. Kaveh could barely get his breath. He forced himself to mouth the mantra. *The path is straight that leads to the truth. Stray not from that path. Tyam rastam ma avarada.*

The buffalo-hide whip split the air before it sliced into his exposed back. He clenched his teeth so hard he feared breaking them, but he was determined not so much as to whimper. The pain was greater than when he burned himself badly once on his anvil. After his encounter with the Aramean poison he was already weak and lightheaded, and felt near fainting. He knew he would never survive a hundred of these bites, as though by an enormous crocodile, between his shoulder blades.

He saw only one escape, and it carried the risk of making things worse. He summoned all his courage.

"My lord."

The crowd that had gathered gasped, whether at his ability to speak or his impudence he did not know. He intuited that the nar warrior hesitated. "According to the shah there has to be an inquiry before anyone is punished."

He stared at the packed earth of the bazaar aisle, half expecting the whing of the whip again.

"How dare you speak that way to the shah's own warriors, trash? You'll only make it harder on yourself."

He kept his head bowed, kneeling in the dust as he felt a stream of blood run down his spine. He decided he had no choice but to risk speaking once more, even if it led to a beheading rather than mere stripes. "I only repeated the true word that the shah has spoken. Shouldn't a Persian speak the truth?"

The silence seemed to last an epoch. He felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand in anticipation of the bronze blade.

"The producer wants an inquiry, Zavan. Should we hold an inquiry?" It was the stentorian voice of the one called Chishpish.

He could not tell if they were mocking him or beginning to take him seriously. He had not wanted to involve his father, but even with his mind

foggy from poison and pain, he realized that it was now inevitable that his father would learn of the day's events.

"My father is Ustad Cyrus Blacksmith, of the royal craft halls, my lord."

He heard Zavan laugh, "You see Chishpish, we have here a better class of producer. Got something to do with royalty."

"My father's in a position to petition the court if there is . . . a miscarriage of justice."

"Shut up, trash. You have got too big a mouth. Keep moving it and I'll have it sewn up."

## Chapter 2

### Black Demon

"The boy is innocent. Let him go." It was the voice of Rishapla, the gem merchant.

"By Vouruna! Now the cursed dahas are giving us orders!"

"Please. I want no trouble. I am a foreigner, as you say, and my Persian is poor. I meant no disrespect. But I and the others at the Elamite bazaar saw the fight, and we are grateful to this young man for saving us from the Aramean thief who broke the vase."

"Is that so?" It was the gravelly voice of Zavan. "Well why then does this man think our prisoner did it?"

Kaveh was astonished to hear Roxanna's sweet voice. "He had left his display and came back while the fight was in progress. They saw it too."

Kaveh risked a glance behind, and saw that Roxanna had brought the *shaten*, in all their nude glory, shoulder-serpents at attention. He could only imagine the horror on the nar warriors' faces. But his brows knit. Roxanna should not be here, anywhere near these brutes.

"Now producer shrews are being impudent! Why should we trust these buck naked warlocks?"

But Zavan pulled Kaveh up roughly by the arm, apparently beginning to decide that his case against the blacksmith was collapsing.

One of the *shaten* raised his arms in an arc, chanting weird verses, and the air in front of him began to shimmer, as it did close to the ground in the dog days of summer. Then it turned opaque and images formed. Kaveh caught a glimpse of himself battling the Bedouin, and his foe pulling down the vase.

Zavan shouted at Rishapla, "Make him stop that sorcery! It is forbidden in Aratta!"

The images flickered and vanished and the Elamite priests stood before them as before. Kaveh wondered if his fever and the poison were making him hallucinate. Had they really seen the past re-pictured?

Chishpish put his paw on Zavan's broad shoulder. "This thing is between a commoner and a *daha*, anyway. It's not worth our time."

Kaveh, a little dizzy and smarting mightily from the stripe on his back, managed a slight smile of triumph. They were afraid of inviting bad luck by tangling with Elamite warlocks. He suspected they also worried that his father, though a commoner, might have the shah's ear.

He felt the air split before the great knuckles, like rough hills, smashed into his jaw. This time he dropped to the dust. "You are most fortunate to get away with only a single lash, producer. I was looking forward to the hundred. But maybe it taught you some manners. If not, we'll no doubt get another chance at you."

He spit reddish sand and wiped his mouth, keeping his head bowed. "A thousand thanks, my lord. You are most gracious."

Chishpish walked over to his bay stallion and made it kneel, then easily swung his leg over its bare back. "We'll make a report of all this to the bazaar master at court. If we have more questions, we'll come get you, producer."

Zavan mounted up and the two moved off on their rounds. Kaveh waited a little longer than he had to before rising.

"Kaveh!" Roxanna was using her sleeve to wipe the blood from his face and worrying over his back. "You were so stupid to run. Commoners have been impaled for less!"

He was too much in pain to enjoy her attention, as he normally would have. The whipping and beating, moreover, hadn't hurt nearly as much as the idea of his father receiving an oral report of the day's events.

"It's nothing, just a scratch." He hated that she was seeing him bloodied and abject. His cheeks burned with shame. The shah was supposed to be the tent-pole of the universe, the source of justice. How could his own men jump to conclusions and punish the innocent?

As he looked beyond her at the receding horsemen, who had broken his faith in the order of things, he made out in the crowd the burning black eyes of the Aramean, monitoring them the way a cheetah watches a fallow deer.



He looked into Roxanna's eyes. "I have to get you home, to safety. The Bedouin is still around."

She handed him his torn tunic and he put it back on. "It's you I am worried about. Look at your back! And your lip and jaw. And I think you still have a fever from the poison."

Startled, he looked at her alabaster face and noticed her eyes were moist. His heart did handstands.

"Come on. We know the way to the Persian bazaar well enough to lose a stranger." They set out as fast as Kaveh's rubbery legs would allow, ducking into every nook and cranny that they knew led to a coiling path between the bustling stalls. Story-tellers regaled circles of listeners seated on straw mats, armorers displayed deadly sickle swords, socket axes, and round-pommeled dirks, clothiers put out netted dresses, saris, and skirts of knotted string.

As they reached habitations beyond the disreputable Elamite bazaar, they passed clusters of adobe buildings half-hidden by outcroppings of palm and other trees, often further obscured by mud walls. The streets wove between them drunkenly. It did not seem that they were in the middle of a bustling city, since it was impossible to see more than a few buildings at a time.

As they approached the Persian potter bazaar, Roxanna tugged on his elbow. "You'd better leave me here. Someone from my family might catch sight of us."

He nodded. "When can I see you again?"

"Kaveh, what if that awful Aramean comes after us?"

"You didn't answer my question."

"Come to the warehouse tomorrow during the afternoon nap."

She was already walking toward her house, as if she did not know him. He knew she feared for her good name, after their tryst became so public because of their unexpected noontime adventures.

Kaveh made his way home through the royal Craft halls, an enclosed quarter near the place where the artisans lived and worked iron, bronze, tin and zinc into the army's weaponry, armor and horse trappings. These were a trades elite, wealthier than some nar warriors. Poorer craftspeople without a royal commission lived in a different quarter, near the Persian bazaar.

Kaveh found his father, his uncles, his younger brothers, and the other journeymen and apprentices already back in the workshop after their siesta. His father silently motioned for him to take over working the blowpipe from his younger brother, saying nothing about his disheveled appearance. The old man's clear brown eyes betrayed no emotion. He carefully moved a

crucible full of iron into the white-hot charcoals in the center of the brazier. He had already set up a terracotta mold for an *akinakes* or short sword, in a box of sand next to the stove, and now placed a few glowing coals there to heat the mold up, lest it shatter when receiving the molten iron. The iron took a while to liquefy, glowing red and white in sympathy with the coals. They left it there a long time, to give it a chance to become strong. Iron melted for only short periods was weaker than bronze. They began working on other pieces, and Kaveh was grateful that the clanging of the hammer and iron precluded conversation. At length, however, came a lull.

"Do you want to tell me why a furious *daha* dealer came to our bazaar stall demanding a ram for broken merchandise?" Kaveh knew that he looked a mess, with a torn tunic streaked in blood down the back, a bandaged hand, and a bruised face.

"A Bedouin attacked me and broke a vase. He should pay for it."

The older man stood grimly, took off his oxblood leather apron and hung it on a peg. They went to the far adobe wall and poured cool water out of a rough, perspiring red clay pot onto their hands and faces. His father was glaring.

"And the report of the Nar warriors that the son of the royal blacksmith was brawling in the bazaar?"

Kaveh felt a cold fear as he watched the black water run off the packed dirt floor into its rut, and through a small hole to the dusty street beyond.

They filed out of the workshop into an alley, and walked from the royal crafthalls to their home. Once inside their red-painted dining room, they perched themselves cross-legged at the edge of a mat spread on the floor for a late-afternoon snack of pastry.

His mother, Argoste, came running to Kaveh as soon as she saw the bandages on his hand. Then she noticed the crimson line down the back of his torn tunic. "Kaveh! What have they done to you?"

She dragged him to another room and pulled off his tunic and had a servant pour water on his back.

"It is only a scratch, *mader-e man*. Don't be so upset."

She grimly applied a salve, and then brought some linen to dress the whip stripe. Then she examined his palm, washing it off and replacing the bandages. The salve burned, hurting worse than the whipping had. Finally she took a cloth to his bruised face. The servant brought a new tunic and he was again presentable.

"What is the matter with you? When did you become a rogue?" She slapped the top of his head. She brought him back out and sat him next to the others, then had a snack brought to him.

Kaveh's father was staring angrily at the boy's mother. She directed a serving-girl to bring him a cup of wine.

He was not mollified. "I cannot afford this boy!" Bits of sweet barley bread spewed from his mouth.

"Do not be so harsh, Cyrus. He has always been responsible before."

"I am the royal blacksmith and may tomorrow this time be leader of all the smithing trades in all of Aratta. Does a son who brawls in the bazaar, associates with Elamite witches, and destroys the merchandise of others bring me honor? Will it reach the ears of our sovereign that my own son was given stripes by his Immortals?"

"The Bedouin jumped me!"

Cyrus smacked him. "Do not speak until spoken to. What were you doing in the Elamite bazaar in the first place? Did you not know it is a haunt of knaves?"

Kaveh's ears burned even hotter. The old smith, impatient, raised his massive arm again.

"I was meeting a girl."

Cyrus drove the heel of his sticky hand into his own forehead, leaving some crumbs there. "A girl! Is there no honor left in our family that you must meet bazaar hussies?"

"She's not! Her father is chief potter in the royal crafthalls."

"By Vouruna and Mithra! A potter's daughter!" He shook his grey mane.

His mother had suddenly softened. "What is she called?"

"Roxanna, the daughter of Bahmard." He knew with regret that her name, which was music to him, was banal to them.

Cyrus exploded. "They are not even smiths! A bronze smith would have been bad enough. But no, he wants a potter girl, wants to drag us down into the clay they stick their fingers in all day. Doesn't know how to wear his leather apron with pride!"

"Maybe we could get some free house decorations, at least." Kaveh's younger brother Utana smirked.

"Humiliated for love! I never thought Kaveh would do anything so positively romantic." His younger sister Parmys fluttered her eyelashes.

Cyrus glowered at all three of them. They wisely fell silent.

Argoste persisted. "Are you serious about her? Do you want me to go see her mother?"

"Her mother died two months ago. But yes, I am serious."

Cyrus slammed his fist on the mat. "I need my brother Nefayan's support to be chosen leader of the smiths at the general meeting tomorrow. A man without the backing of his clan is nothing. You will marry his daughter Humai when the time comes, as I promised. For now, you are a child."

"I did pretty well for bare hands against a bronze knife, father. The Aramean didn't leave smiling."

"I never thought you a coward, son. But I also never thought you had a spot of common sense. You are not ready to make your own decisions, given the way you behaved today." Cyrus wiped his mouth with the back of his hairy hand.

Kaveh felt his world collapse at his father's words.

The next day Kaveh again planned to sneak out of the Crafthall during the afternoon siesta. He used an andiron to rake the larger remaining coals together in the center of the brazier and then grabbed a large handful of clay from a pile in the corner. He tipped a water jar over it, as he clenched and unclenched his hand. He turned the clay over and flattened it with some claps of his hands, then tossed it over the coals. They hissed as they dampened down, but continued to glow underneath. The charcoal would smolder on till he got back in the afternoon. Artisans mocked a smith who let his fire go out, and the Persians always regretted losing any manifestation of Atar, the fire god.

He went to the iron bazaar to check on the sale of family goods, so he'd have something to say to his father about why he went out. The workshop did commissions for the shah and his immortals, but also sold lesser goods on the side for extra income. Nobles were often more eager to order a piece than to pay for the final product.

His cousin Jamaspa was manning a huge stall, and winked at him when he told him the day's take, sharing the conspiracy of a contrived alibi.

"By the way, have you heard the news?"

Kaveh's ears pricked up. "What news?"

"Good King Jamshid is going to raise taxes. Again. The town criers announced it this morning."

Kaveh groaned. He did not relish any development that would worsen his father's mood.

Jamaspa shook his braided salt and pepper locks. "When he organized the trades, everyone said what a wonderful thing it was. But

apparently he wanted us to be well-ordered so he could tax us more efficiently."

"You are older than I am. They say Jamshid was once acclaimed as a great and generous monarch who brought prosperity to the people."

Jamaspa leaned over and whispered. "That's the problem with heroes. Their halos all dim and tarnish in the end."

Kaveh was taken aback. He knew such talk would be worth a beheading if the shah's eyes in the bazaar discovered it. But he was encouraged to share his own woes. "It's all the warriors and priests. Yesterday a couple of cowherds beat me up because I ran when they falsely accused me."

"You should watch yourself, Kaveh. You got off lightly. Well, they can have our dignity--we producers have precious little of that left, anyway. But I'll be cursed if they can have every pathuka we earn."

"Is there any talk of"-- he lowered his voice further-- "a holiday?" He used the artisans' code word for a bazaar strike.

Jamaspa grinned. "Yes, a good, long restful holiday."

"It is always the poor who suffer when the bazaar closes, though."

"Well, that is why your father wants to try petitioning the shah to reconsider, first."

"He hasn't said anything about it, just that he is trying to become the guild master of the whole of the metal-working trades."

"He doesn't want his family to worry. You mustn't tell him I let you know. Old Vivanhant Shah would have had a producer executed on the spot for such a thing. We do not know how Jamshid will respond. But it is very dangerous."

Kaveh looked Jamaspa in his green eyes, his heart suddenly full of apprehension. But he appreciated that his older cousin had treated him like an adult.

Kaveh took his leave, then wended through the stalls to the potters' bazaar, behind which stood the warehouse used by Roxanna's family. She often offered to keep the warehouse open while the rest of the family took their siesta, saying sleeping in the afternoon gave her a headache. She was alone there save for her little brother Darai and a rare visit from potters manning the clan stalls, seeking replacements for pieces that had sold. Some of the foreigners who came to the bazaar to shop hailed from inhospitable climes where the siesta was unknown.

Kaveh ducked into the entrance, finding her sitting on a mat amid the grey and black pottery, one leg beneath her and the other bent at the knee.

As he entered, she leapt up and drew him inside, away from the doorway, then let the hanging reed mat fall in front of it.

Kaveh offered a few copper danakas to Darai. "Here, go to the bazaar and get yourself some sweets."

The boy grinned and flew out of the warehouse.

"Kaveh, you cannot be here."

"You set the rendezvous."

"That was before my father erupted like a volcano. He was waiting for me in the reception room when I returned. Your legs didn't carry us very fast when we left the Elamite bazaar, and somehow word spread back to the royal Craft halls of what had happened."

"What did you tell him?"

"He wouldn't let me explain."

"He didn't beat you?" Kaveh drew himself up.

"Kaveh, it's worse than you can imagine. He said it was as if Ahriman the Evil One had possessed me. He accused me of running about the bazaar with boys and consorting with naked Elamites in their caravansary. I have never seen him so furious. He said that since mama died he couldn't keep an eye on me properly. He's talking of sending me to be a serving girl to Princess Yimak in the palace, where my mother worked."

"Words like these would torture even the heart of a demon! Producers are not allowed near the castle unless they serve there. How will I see you?"

"I am not sure I want to see you. It's my loved ones I want to see. It is partly your fault all this happened."

Kaveh felt the world falling away from him. "My fault?"

"It wasn't intentional, I know. But if I hadn't been meeting you at that bazaar I wouldn't have gotten caught up in all this. Go, Kaveh. I have got people to say goodbye to."

Roxanna's feet hurt. She and other servants walked behind the mounted Princess Yimak as they moved out from Aratta to the west, the direction from which news had come of a black demon scorching the earth. The shah had appointed his sister to head a scouting mission. The immortals and warriors at court had immediately mounted up, gathering their foot soldiers behind. Roxanna had barely arrived in court before leaving again for the wilderness.

They passed occasional villages embosomed in chalky dust. They descended a gentle slope of striped sandstone ridges, their rough red and grey faces occasionally enlivened by green chalcedony quartz and purple

feldspar. They entered flat terrain, and Roxanna found herself amid porcupines and foxes, trudging across plains dotted with occasional coppices of elm. Then the gorse turned browner, and shrubs became more rare as they proceeded. She caught sight of occasional scorpions sprinting across the sand, and lizards lurking behind obsidian rocks. Roxanna was frightened of the alien landscape. She missed her family, even her irascible father. She still wept when she thought of her young mother, lying atop a Tower of Silence, her flesh picked at by crows, lest her body pollute the pure earth below. At other times, she thought wistfully about Kaveh, sometimes not remembering to blame him for her plight.

They stopped occasionally for a rest. Roxanna was in charge of the water donkeys in the convoy of the princess, and she served her from light clay cups that she had fashioned in her own family workshop.

The party set out again. It mounted a small barren hill and began its descent into a parched valley when a heavy fog encompassed them. Roxanna coughed as it burned her windpipe. It was no ordinary fog. It began swirling around and then loomed above them, solidifying.

The black demon!

Princess Yimak, drunk on the haoma juice as were all her warriors, yelped a war cry and dug her heel into the ribs of her stallion, galloping forward and leaving the mobile city of foot soldiers and camp servants behind.

She had her bow out and her arrows unerringly found the gargantuan black form, but appeared to do no more than prick and enrage it. Persian warrior women had their right breast removed so as to be able to draw their bows without hindrance.

The black demon's eyes blazed like two jugs of blood and its massive forearm swept forward, knocking the princess and several of her immortals from their steeds.

She quickly regained her feet and ran to the demon's trunk-like legs, akinakes short sword out of its scabbard and at the ready. The demon drew in a chestful of mist and exhaled it at her and the others charging him. As though a solid, the mist drove them back willy-nilly.

Yimak at length tripped and was on her back.

Roxanna ran to her and knelt. "My lady, are you hurt?"

Yimak, berserk, leaped up. "Hurt? I am true queen of the Persians and this thing dares lift a hand to me? I am enraged!"

The black demon advanced toward them, snarling. Roxanna felt parched, as though all the moisture was gone from the air. All the plants in the valley had wilted.

The warriors charged again, this time on foot, since their horses had fled whinnying in terror. Yimak got close enough to slash at the thing's leg and this time it was visibly hurt. Her men saw the opening and gathered around the legs, wielding their swords as though they were axes and the nar had turned lumberjack.

The gargantuan *Div-e Siyak* roared and whirled in agony, around and around, until a great whirlwind scattered his tormenters. Princess Yimak flew through the air and landed on her back, her head striking a stone. She looked broken, and did not move.

The demon now advanced toward the foot soldiers and camp followers. Roxanna cringed. It was advancing too fast to hope they could outrun it. The air was so parched, she could barely breathe it in and it left her tongue and the roof of her mouth dry as a bone.

Roxanna felt death approach as the black form rapidly closed the distance between them. She wondered if she would be able to locate her mother in the next world.

Kaveh carefully moved a crucible full of iron onto the white-hot coals in the center of the brazier. He had already set up a terracotta mold for an akinakes, the short sword favored by Persian warriors, in a box of sand next to the stove. His rolling muscles glistened as he worked. He now placed a few glowing coals on the sand to heat the mold up, lest it shatter when receiving the molten iron. The iron took a while to liquefy, glowing red and then white in sympathy with the coals.

Work was good. The dangerous molten metals required concentration. Otherwise, he thought of Roxanna, now exiled to the palace, a thousand times a day. He tried not to remember how she had dismissed him from her life. He was beset by a giddy vertigo, a blade in his heart, an aching in his arms. Sleep had fled, and he sat up tending the hearth fires lest they go out and leave the household defenseless against the probing of the Awisruthrema demon. His family thought he had had an attack of piety. Persians had a duty to battle the night by staying up praying as long as possible, but old men were more likely to fulfill it than teenaged boys. Every time he looked into the sacred flames he tended, he saw Roxanna's brilliant smile, and his sighs were his prayers.

What was worse, he had heard that Princess Yimak went out to investigate reports of the advance of a black demon. He knew it was likely she took her serving girl with her. It would be worth his life, as a mere artisan, to attempt to join such a war party without being so ordered. He



longed, nevertheless, to shield Roxanna from whatever dangers the wilderness threw up.

He waited. Iron melted for only short periods is weaker than bronze. At length he took a pair of tongs and deftly grasped the heavy crucible, pouring out its contents into the waiting mold like a druggist concocting a potion. His hand still hurt from where the broken piece of vase had cut into his palm, and he winced from time to time. He pattered with other pieces for a while. After the iron had finally cooled, Kaveh carefully extracted the black sword from the mold. It had few imperfections, but Kaveh knew that his father Cyrus had a higher standard than that-- no imperfections at all.

In the afternoon when the family napped, Kaveh as usual went out to the market. Today he wanted to visit his teacher, Kavi Daena. He threaded his way through the gods' bazaar. The summer heat rippled in the dust kicked up by passing customers, asses, horses and hump-backed bulls. He kept looking behind, not able to shake the feeling that someone was spying on him. Had he come to the attention of the shah's eyes because of his encounter with the Nar? It seemed a small thing for a sovereign to concern himself with.

He glanced at the Indian bronzes of Indra and Kali, which only the wealthy warriors or priests could afford. Then he came to the inexpensive Persian deities, fashioned increasingly after the Babylonian manner. He wondered if the gods' potency increased as their price went up.

He knelt before the hut behind her stall where Daena received students. Over its entrance was affixed a clay seal depicting Zurvan, the god of time. The figure had two faces, that of a woman and that of a man, inside concentric circles, from which wings extended on either side.

"Glory be to you, Kavi."

"You make my eyes bright child."

He started to speak, then stuttered and reddened.

"What troubles you? Come along, we do not have a week!"

He collected himself and told her the whole story of what had happened in the previous week. "What does it all mean?"

Daena seemed white with fear or illness all at once. "Have you told anyone else of this prefiguration?"

Kaveh shook his head. "I tried to tell my father, but he would not listen."

"Do not speak of it again. You are in great danger."

"I think that Aramean may still be lurking about."

"No, that is not what I meant. The Elamite witch doctors said that they saw an aura around you and your friend, what we Persians call the divine *farr*."

"Yes?"

"Only royalty and heroes can have such a halo, and then only after they drink of the sacred haoma. If any of the Nar hear that a commoner is claiming to have a *farr*, he would be disemboweled on the spot."

Kaveh glanced at his midriff, his heart pulsing. It had not occurred to him that the kidenn of which the Elamites spoke was the *farr* of the Persians. "But we didn't claim anything! It was the daha."

"It won't matter to the warriors and priest where the claim originated. Keep your mouth shut about this."

She reached over and pulled his head down, running her bony finger through the hair at his crown. "I think I see it myself, this halo. It is passing strange. The discernment of the Elamites is uncanny."

She slapped his head and moved back, angry. "It flickered! Have you lied?"

Kaveh stared at her. "What do you mean?"

"Have you uttered a falsehood? Have you put one foot in the camp of Ahriman the father of evil?"

"I let my father think that I will marry my cousin, Humai. But I won't. It was easier not to keep quarreling with him."

"I do not know if that is the falsehood within you. You must begin training with me immediately to focus on the attainment of unequivocal probity!"

"Unequiv-- what?"

"The truth is a black and white matter. To live the truth is to enter an existence where one tells no lie, whether of great purport or little, whether excused by the circumstances or not. The universe is at war, and you must enlist either with the army of truth or the army of the falsehood. Make your choice."

He kept his silence for a bit. "I have another problem, more personal."

His teacher shook her head. "The problem you brought me is quite enough for today. We'll speak of the other later."

"But . . ."

The kavi dismissed him curtly.

On his way back to the royal crafthalls, Kaveh felt a pair of eyes on him. He tried to lose whoever was following him, but the hair on his neck kept crawling.

He turned into a space between stalls, and felt a heavy weight crash against his skull. Then there was complete oblivion.

## Chapter 3

### The New Year Throne

Roxanna's donkey was stubbornly backing away and braying at the approach of the sooty creature. She coughed uncontrollably as his dust clung to the back of her throat and his stench, like ripe manure, nearly overpowered her. She pressed the water bag on her donkey's back and filled a light clay cup then tossed back the clear fresh liquid.

She looked about her for succor, but everyone else seemed to have fallen asleep or gone mad with the demon dust. Some were walking stiffly in circles and cackling. Others were lying at unnatural angles.

Her mind raced, and she had an idea.

She grabbed up the water bag from the back of the retreating donkey and struggled to sling it over her shoulder. Then she summoned all her bravery and ran toward the ebony beast. She ducked under his clawed hand as it tried to sweep her up. At his right foot, she unleashed the contents of the water bag.

The thing's black lips opened, revealing a row of long daggers, and it howled and swatted at its huge ankle, nearly taking her head off with a claw. Then, as she had hoped, his foot began deforming and melting. As a potter, she knew clay, and had suspected that the creature was manifesting in this world through it. Until it is fired, clay is the most susceptible thing to the corrosion of water.

Then she threw the rest of the water in the bag on the other foot and ran like a winter gale. The black demon roared as it sank on its stumps, then toppled heavily over. It seemed not only injured by the liquid but also afraid of it.

Roxanna went to where Princess Yimak lay prostrate and leaned over her. The water bag over her shoulder was almost empty, but she coaxed out a gulp or two into the amazon's parched mouth.

The royal awoke with a yell and Roxanna had to leap back to avoid the sudden slashing of her short sword.

"My lady, the beast is down, for the moment."

Yimak, out of her mind with haoma and eyes blazing, regained her feet and looked around. Her unhorsed warriors were warily hugging the high ground behind her. They were passing around flasks of haoma juice and seeking their battle lust. She uttered the frightful war cry of the Persians, and they rallied to her. The Nar advanced swift as a pack of cheetahs toward the writhing black mass.

Yimak ran at its exposed neck, clearly hoping it could be beheaded.

The demon summoned to itself the clouds of dust it had earlier sent out as a smokescreen, and they swirled about his stumps. Roxanna's heart sank when she saw his feet reforming.

The warriors reached their target and began slashing at the exposed inky clay wherever they could get near. The thing's arm swept four nobles away, sending them sprawling.

Then it began rolling toward its tormenters, like a boulder loosed by an avalanche. It crushed several warriors, as Yimak danced out of the way. Roxanna realized with a fright that it was rolling right toward her. Too late, she tried to run, when a massive claw caught her and lifted her as the demon came to a halt.

Harried, it turned and fled on its half-formed feet, taking the screaming Roxanna with it.

The Nar had no hope of catching it on foot, but were content to let the deadly beast retreat. They sent up a victory shout, locking arms in exultation. Roxanna called for them to come rescue her, but she and her captor had already receded so far that her voice likely could not be heard in that vale.

As Kaveh came to consciousness he felt an ache at the back of his head, where his searching fingers told him a lump had been raised. He sat up gingerly and looked around the passageway between stalls. It was twilight and no one was there. Who had attacked him and why?

He stood up, hand to the back of his head as if the pressure would reduce the pain. He looked down at himself and saw that his leather apron

was gone, along with the tools in its sac! He was in trouble with his father again.

Back home, his mother parted his hair to see the bump on his noggin and wipe away the blood that had matted his hair.

"It's nothing."

"It's always nothing. You are to lie down."

"They'll need me over at the smithy."

"Not this afternoon. What if you faint into the forge?"

A wave of nausea washed over him, and he gave in. "I cannot understand why someone would want my ratty old apron."

"You said that when you confronted the Aramean you stuck the witchery stone in it."

"That was just during the fight. I gave it to Roxanna."

"The Bedouin won't have known that."

"But if you are right, it means that Roxanna is in danger now."

Her stare told him she had not forgiven him for getting in the middle of a dispute between two daha. "Get some rest, Kaveh. Tomorrow is the great assembly before the shah."

Despite the throbbing in his temples and the pain at the back of his head, he found no difficulty drifting off to sleep. His dreams, however, were troubled as he kept hearing the words of the mysterious Elamite prophecy rumbling in the sky, and from time to time glimpsed the maw of a snarling dragon.

Jamshid entered the great hall wearing long white robes with gold brocade. His sword-belt had a huge, escutcheon-like buckle that served to protect him in battle. In his right hand he grasped a gleaming silver scepter, embossed with lions triumphant, and in his left he held a white lotus blossom. Two attendants, also clothed in white, followed immediately behind him, one holding the royal umbrella over his head, the other wielding with both hands the broad fly-whisk, emblem of kingship. Then came a guard of immortals armed with long javelins and akinakes short swords. The attendants waited beside him as he sat on a makeshift wooden throne and the immortals fanned out behind it in a semi-circle. In front of him stood two fire altars, with braziers from which the sacred flames eternally reached upwards.

Kaveh glanced at the upper balcony looking for Princess Yimak and her entourage, seeking a glimpse of Roxanna, but saw no one he recognized. Perhaps the war party led by the princess had not yet returned. Then he looked at his father and shuddered. He had told no one what Jamaspa had

revealed to him. There was no point in his pleading with the stubborn old goat not to provoke the king. He just hoped the court was not in the mood for a beheading.

The shah looked out on the assembled warriors, priests, craftsmen, and the clan chiefs of his Elamite and Mannean subjects, each gathered in a different section of the hall. "Today I announce that henceforward the New Year will begin on the first day of spring. When our people trekked south to this new land, we suffered from privation, cold and snow. Only when the month of Aduka Naisha arrived did they begin to find some relief, and some shoots to eat."

The zoatar priests tending a small ceremonial hearth fire in the corner of the hall roved their patidans or mouth-bands and spoke animatedly to one another. Finally their leader, Vandid Khim, signaled for the shah's leave to speak. Vidranga, the unsmiling minister, nodded.

"But sire, the tradition is to celebrate the New Year at autumn equinox, for then is the harvest gotten in and the old year ushered out."

"I need not justify legislating the calendar. That is my prerogative as paramount ruler of the Persians. It is clear that the world's rebirth occurs in the spring. And that is when it is celebrated by ancient civilizations like Babylon. We are in a new land, and will have new festivals."

The priests had covered their faces again with patidanas, so as not to pollute the sacred fire as they revered it. Kaveh, despite his nervousness, managed a grin as he guessed that the mouth-bands had the further advantage of disguising the grimaces of the priests. Zaoatars hated nothing worse than tampering with tradition.

Jamshid surveyed the crowd. Young, virile, and the handsomest man any of them had ever seen, the shah's ability to inspire loyalty to the death in his warriors was no mystery. "I am commissioning a new throne, in silver-plaited iron with inlaid sapphires. It will be called "the New Year Throne" and must be completed by the new festival day."

Aoshanara the goldsmith stepped forward on being recognized by the chamberlain. "Your majesty, I would like to suggest that a single master be put in charge of this project, which will require much coordination. I would be willing to serve, if that pleases your majesty."

Cyrus lifted a finger, and Vidranga grumpily indicated that he should speak. "Sire, surely if someone must be in charge of the work, it should be a blacksmith. We will do the basic labor, whereas the goldsmiths will simply add embellishments.

"Sire," Aoshnara was permitted to reply, "I can assure you of the reliability of my men. None of them has had to be horse-whipped in the Elamite bazaar by the Nar!"

The room broke into laughter, and Kaveh wished he could vanish from their leering eyes like a yatu wizard. Aoshnara's son Vivana, who also coveted Roxana, wore a grin of pure malice as he glanced appreciatively from Kaveh to his father.

Vidranga sternly brought the assembly to order. Jamshid's expression remained impassive. "I will take the matter under consideration. Now, I have said that I will accept petitions."

Cyrus straightened himself up, sucking in his gut and throwing his broad, muscular shoulders back. He had insisted on wearing his leather apron over his dress clothes. "Your highness, you know me to be your devoted servant. But I have also recently been asked to represent all the smiths in Aratta, and they have given me a petition to present to your majesty."

The shah nodded crabily.

"The smiths humbly beg your majesty to reconsider the rise in taxes just announced. They say that even the previous rates hardly left them with enough to feed their families. They have asked me to plead with you because they are secure in their knowledge of your majesty's compassion and justice."

A pall fell on the vast room. Kaveh was almost shivering with fright.

"The ungrateful louts! Do they not know that as we speak, my glorious sister Yimak and the Nar are battling a devouring black demon that has encroached on the villages of Aratta? He has cast a drought upon our fields and farms. Manneans and Elamites have turned to pillage. Who will pay to equip our Nar to keep them at bay? How many goods would they leave in the bazaar if they looted this city? Answer me, Ustad Cyrus Blacksmith, how many?"

Cyrus, his face flushed, inclined his head. "None, my lord. I seek to serve both the throne and the Crafhall. It would be a strange loyalty in me if I hid from you the anger of the people in the bazaar." Kaveh felt sick at stomach, wondering if the obvious rage of the shah would make him lash out. He had seen the Nar take a man's head off with a single blow.

Roxanna struggled in the black demon's rough claw but couldn't pry herself loose. The stench was nearly overpowering, and the cloud of dust that surrounded it made it hard for her to get her breath. It took giant strides



into the desert, which was more and more barren as they proceeded. Even the lizards and scorpions were no longer visible.

The div gained strength after night fell, as though he fed on the darkness as it congealed. He sped up. Roxanna was hungry and so thirsty she could have emptied the Caspian Sea. At length the creature reached an outcropping of boulders, limned in silver by the gibbous moon.

He seemed to join with the sand and the boulders as it sat, and held up his claw to examine her with his rubious orbs. She hoped it wasn't as hungry as she was. The thing was making some kind of keening sound and turning her from side to side. She realized with a start that it liked her and was wooing her. Fears of being devoured gave way to other terrors.

At length it put her down on the sand and curled up around her, making a wall of its massive body that she could not scale without it knowing. Her heart sank. There was no escape for her this night. She screamed as the rough sand that haloed the demon scraped against her flesh.

\* \* \*

Dawn broke in the desert with a blinding whiteness that jolted her awake. In the Hawani sunbeams she was dismayed to see the creature still encompassing her. She heard yipping in the background. Was it a hyena? The noises grew louder and then there were hoof beats. She dared not hope that Princess Yimak had come to rescue a mere producer. But perhaps the berserk Nar were too full of blood lust to give up the chase and had recovered their steeds.

The black demon stirred, and stared at her with his two suns. She blanched at the smell. She fought the fear that invaded her breast, still raw from the touch of his sandy hide. A calm daring descended on her from reserves she did not know she had. She unconsciously grasped the kidenn stone in her hand as a claw reached for her. Abruptly the creature's maw opened in a silent scream and it backed off from her. She looked down and saw that her hand was glowing almost as brightly as the stone it held; indeed her whole body was radiant. Was this the aura of which the Elamites had spoken?

The black demon turned and ran, whimpering.

Astonished, Roxanna rose and looked around. The shouting that she heard was coming from beyond a dune and she ran to the top of it. She knew that Bedouin marauders inhabited this desert, and peaked over the ridgeline timidly, not sure if she would see Arameans or a Persian rescue party.

Roxanna blinked at the sight of the horizon-crowding Persian cavalry speeding toward her, and croaked out a shout from her parched throat as she stood and waved. They headed toward her and she ran down the dune toward them.

Princess Yimak, slightly more sober, leaned over and pulled her up onto the back of her stallion with a wolfish grin. Roxanna had no choice but to put her arms around the royal's waist lest she bounce right back off. She had heard that riding a horse required letting your body learn how to relax and move with it, but could not seem to find the rhythm and knew if this went on she'd be sore for days.

The horsemen turned and galloped in the direction of Aratta, apparently uninterested in trying to pursue the black demon into his wasteland-- probably impossible in any case.

After an hour hard riding due east, they came to an oasis with a spring and stopped to water their horses and shimmied up to pick the fruit on the date palms.

Yimak swung her down, and Roxanna ran to the spring, immersing the whole upper half of her body in it as she slurped the cool liquid.

Yimak pulled her up. "You'll just puke it back out if you gorge yourself that way."

Roxanna, keeping her eyes carefully on the ground, nodded, her wet curls pasting themselves to her muddy cheeks. "Yes, my lady."

She felt the princess's gaze. "You are a rare potter girl, to cut the feet off a div and then survive his kidnapping attempt."

"I serve and obey, your Excellency."

"You are not a pairaka witch are you, girl?"

Roxanna's stomach flipped and she almost did throw up, feeling the water rise in her gullet. "No, my lady! No! I tell the truth."

Yimak took her jaws in rough warrior hands and lifted her face, looking into her pupils. "You have your mother's eyes. She served me well until her untimely death. But she had none of your courage. I might even say impudence."

Roxanna's knees were knocking. She had never looked into the eyes of a noblewoman before. It was forbidden. But this time the princess had forced her.

"Divs rather like human women. It is unheard of for one to abandon his captive willingly."

"Perhaps he heard the approach of the Nar, my lady, and feared your renowned bow."

"Maybe." She said the words without conviction. Then she turned Roxanna around and pointed her back to the well, for another drink.

While she was trying to drink more sensibly, on hands and knees on the other side of the spring from the horses, which seemed equally parched, she felt the sand vibrate beneath her and heard a faint drumming. Had the warriors split into two search parties that were now reuniting? The stallions looked up and whinnied.

The Nar sent up growls and taunts, and passed around a haoma skin, each taking a swig to get their berserker on. Then they leaped on the backs of their horses, whirled and rode like cheetahs on the hunt toward the plume of dust in the distance that marked the approach of a Bedouin force.

Roxanna sat at the foot of a palm tree and waited, alone at the oasis.

Prince Zohak dug his heels into the ribs of his black steed, shouting coarsely and urging his one hundred Utu tribesmen on toward the oasis, where the Persian war party was watering.

He could barely believe his eyes when he made out a woman at the head of the Nar, emptying her quiver into the less lucky of his men once she had gotten in range. One of her shafts went through the eye of the mare belonging to his cousin Zirai, and he went head over heels as it suddenly bit the dust.

In only moments, the two forces had collided, horses intermingling, warriors slashing at one another, the Bedouin with fiery bronze blades and the Persian with glittering iron akinakes. Sometimes one of the Nar could parry a bronze sword with such force as to warp it beyond further use.

Still, the Bedouin outnumbered their foes by ten to one, and, being superb horsemen, were able to dance to the side on their steeds and get under the guard of the Persians on their larger, Central Asian horses. As the minutes went by, fewer and fewer Nar were mounted, and three or four Utu harried them each.

Zohak sped toward the amazon, whose quiver was empty, and who was wielding her short sword like a butcher in a hurry, flaying the Arameans around her. While she fenced with two Bedouin attackers at once, Zohak came at her other side and swept her from her stallion with the flat of his sword as her attention was on her right.

He dismounted and caught her, dazed, with his boulder of a fist. She tried to rise, but was doubly disoriented, from the fall and the blow. He slapped the side of her head with his blade and she went down hard. He suspected she was something special and would be worth a mighty ransom, or he would have separated her lovely head from her shoulders right there.

He tied her hands and feet and tossed her over the back of a riderless horse, then mounted up again. The Bedouin had won a crushing victory, though not a particularly honorable one, given their numerical superiority. Poets like his cousin Zirai would sing it without mentioning any such coarse details.

The seven greatest of the Utu warriors, the Sibitti, had taken five male prisoners, who had been disarmed and trussed up, on their knees. Zohak rode over to them. The elder among these seven was also Zohak's cousin, Teral, a man with a hooked nose and a single black eyebrow nearly from ear to ear. He fenced in all the world's known styles and spoke six languages fluently, often serving as a spy for King Mirdas, the Utu paramount chief. The others had less refined talents, but deadly ones.

"My lord Zohak!" Teral grinned up at him. "Do you think they'll bring a ransom from that miser Jamshid?"

"I do not know. He doesn't let so much as water drip from his hands." Zohak surveyed the prisoners.

"Are any of you cow-lovers royal?" His father had had him tutored in Persian, along with Babylonian, Elamite and Sumerian.

They stared at him defiantly, apparently half drunk and squirming against their bonds.

"Very well. We cannot risk a prisoner rebellion out here. If you aren't beloved of your Jamshid, and won't fetch a bag of fine gems, we'll have to water the sands with your essences. Or maybe you have some useful intelligence for us?"

"Persians do not betray the contract with Lord Mithra, lizard-eater."

Zohak leaned over and casually lopped off his head. It rolled to a stop, still wearing the expression of defiance. The Bedouin leader was interested to see that the blood did not pump out of the neckless trunk. These men were fearless. He felt good about the clean sword blow he had struck against the Persian. His face still hurt from his last brawl with that boy in Aratta, when he had tried and failed to snatch the kidenn stone.

"Anyone else have anything to say?"

"I might know something." The man's olive skin was drenched in sweat.

Zohak rode over to him. "What is your name, son?"

"Bendva. There is unrest in Aratta. I can give you the details if you let me live."

"First, tell me who this woman is." Zohak started to dismount, but one of the other Persians had looped his tied hands under his ass and his feet, and threw himself at Bendva, strangling him with his bonds.

Teral tried to drag him off, but with a jerk the prisoner broke the coward's neck and he went limp. There was a stench of shit.

Teral pulled the prisoner off the corpse and sliced him up the abdomen. The man watched amazed as his black guts spilled forward and he sank to his knees, trying to gather them back in, then plopped onto his face in the sand.

"Any other heroes?" He asked the remaining two prisoners.

They spat pink juice of some sort at him, and it stained his fine brown robe. Zohak roared, throwing himself from horseback onto them and taking them down on their backs. He stuck his hands, steely fingers outstretched, into each of their breasts, pressing inexorably, until they bellowed and he came up with two beating hearts. He took a bite from each in turn, wiped his red lips with his sleeve, and tossed them down.

Zohak remounted. His prisoner, draped over the horse of a fallen Bedouin, was still unconscious. He surveyed the horizon. There seemed to be one remaining Persian at the oasis, a girl. He sent Teral to go fetch her. Probably a worthless servant or camp follower. She'd be too much trouble to transport, if so.

Kaveh and Jamaspa were talking at the bazaar stall after the meeting at the great hall. They passed a woman and her emaciated children, insistently begging. One of her eyes was clouded with a semi-opaque sheen. Kaveh put a copper coin in the grimy hands of one toddler, barely old enough to grasp it, and ignored the clamor of its siblings.

"I was petrified that the shah would just string my father up. "

"The old shah would have. But the bad news is that he turned down the petition flat."

The sound of criers interrupted them. They caught sight of one coming in their direction. The sleepy populace would mind being awoken during the afternoon nap. What could be so serious?

The crier had a huge tambourine he was thumping, while calling out a rhymed message. Aratta was being menaced from the west by a black demon spreading drought. Princess Yimak and some of her best warriors had not returned from the scouting mission, and another expedition would have to be mounted.

Jamaspa clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "A war, it seems. All too convenient, that a demonic challenge appears just when the shah needs to unite the kingdom behind him."

Kaveh looked at his cousin with horror. "Who cares about all that? Roxanna was with Yimak!" His stomach was moving like soft ground in an earthquake.

"What will you do?"

"I have to find a way to go out with the Nar. She won't be their priority."

"A producer on a campaign? They'll want you home making replacement weapons."

"I'll volunteer as an orderly. Come on, let's both go. I could use your help."

"Let me understand. You want me to risk my life for the royals? The same ones who feast on lamb and beef while we barely have enough lentils? I wouldn't advise them on the best way to pound sand!"

"No, I want you to support me. If we got into a brawl at a tavern, you'd have my back. Why would you abandon me to divs and tribesmen?"

"I am trying to keep you away from those sorts of creature, but you may be too stupid to save."

"You have failed. I am going. If you are afraid . . ."

Jamaspa glared at him, raised a fist, then dropped it in resignation and sighed. Kaveh felt guilty for dragooning him by invoking kinship solidarity, but also knew that no other argument would have succeeded.

"Maybe they won't accept you as an orderly. They surely have standards, and both ugly and dull should be disqualifications."

6.

Zohak stood over Roxanna after she was fetched from the oasis. She had sullenly given him her name and her father's humble profession.

"This is a wasteland, little girl. Food is hard to come by and mouths to feed are a burden if they are not attached to a hunter. Why should we share our small stock of supplies with you?"

"You are noble, master, and all nobles need servants." She kept her eyes on the ground before him in the way of the low caste Persians.

She barely suppressed a cry as he nearly pulled her hair out by its roots and brought her face up. His face had been battered, as though he had recently lost a fight. She did not like his hungry stare.

"Very well. Now that I see you, I can imagine uses for you. But if you try to run away, I will personally take that pretty head off your shoulders, and if you elude me, the desert will swallow you up. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Who is this woman you serve?"

"She must say. It's not my place."

He slapped her. She put her hand to her stinging cheek. "Be silent if you will not comply. Never again tell me 'No!' Do you understand?"

She nodded, eyes lowered.

"Go tend to your mistress and see if you can wake her. You are doing her no favors to deny me her name."

Roxanna ran over and knelt next to Yimak. She picked up the goatskin of water they had placed next to her and poured some of the precious liquid on the hem of her tunic, then laid the cloth on her forehead to cool her. Here there was no shade from the glowering eye of the sun. Then she tried to dribble some water into her mouth, cradling her head on her knee. Yimak's eyes fluttered open and she sat up so abruptly, that she nearly slammed her forehead into Roxanna's face.

She struggled against the ropes that bound her hands behind her and her ankles one to another, thrashing wildly on the ground.

"My lady, we are captives of the Utu."

Yimak looked, dazed, into her face. "Kill me now if that is true. Quickly. A sharp twist of the head will do it. Otherwise, an unpleasant fate awaits us."

The one called Teral pulled Roxanna up by her hair. He must have heard them talking despite the whispers. He tossed her behind him and put a bronze sword tip to Yimak's neck.

"Ah, the amazon awakes. That will make a good tale, won't it men?"

The Utu crowded around, laughing. Roxanna patted her scalp to make sure the barbarian hadn't left her with a bald spot. It hurt.

Zohak strode over, parting the men. He bowed mockingly and announced himself. "Shall we keep this one, Teral, or feed her to the lions?"

Yimak looked at him defiantly, Teral's weapon still at her neck.

"I am inclined to save myself trouble. But if you are worth something, you'd better say so."

She was silent.

Zohak gestured and a Babylonian stepped forward. His right cheek was disfigured by an old boil mark the size of a flower petal. He wore a red brimless hat beneath which flowed long greasy locks. His square beard was braided in two strands. "Asharidu. Compel her."

The man raised his hands to the sky and kept saying something that sounded like "Lamashtu". Then his face contorted and he began foaming at the mouth and shouting gibberish. He pointed at Yimak, and it was as though a heavy fog extruded from his fingers to the princess.

She writhed on the ground in the mist, and then looked up darkly. The quavering voice was that of an old woman. "I am Yimak dughdar Vivanhant, sister of Jamshid Shah."

"Well done, Asharidu." The Bedouin were murmuring what sounded like disapproval, but Zohak ignored them.

Then Yimak's eyes widened and she seemed to awaken from the trance. Her voice returned to normal. "If you release me immediately I may spare your life."

Zohak kicked her in the kidneys and she struggled for breath.

"We are returning to Bawri and I'll send two of my best men on our fastest colts to Aratta to demand your ransom. When it is received, you will be escorted by an Utu war party back home. Until then no harm will come to you if you do not inflict it on yourself."

Yimak, on her side, spat. "I know better than to believe your lies, Bedouin."

Zohak put a hand to his chest to show he was wounded. "Lies are the province of the city, princess. In a city, men do not know their lineage and can move like shadows without being recognized in a crowd. The desert tolerates no deceit. Were I to break my word to you, not a single of these men would, having witnessed it, again be willing to ride with me. Isn't that right, Asharidu?"

"Lamashtu bless your tongue, my lord."

"Persians are the masters of the truth, barbarian. For us to lie is to join the army of the devil."

"Very well, we have two honorable peoples here and a simple business transaction. You will be transported to our capital and released unharmed when the price named is received. That is assuming you make no effort to escape and do not force us to simply end you."

"The girl must also be unharmed. Dishonor to her is dishonor to her mistress."

Roxanna trembled as she awaited his answer. She had seen the way he looked at her.

"Perhaps. I shall have to consider that demand. But I assure you that if you defy me in any way, she will be lizard feed the next instant."



## Chapter 4

### Haoma, the Green-Eyed

Zohak directed his mare to sidle up to that of Asharidu. "What do the omens look like for the ransom?"

The Babylonian, riding sidesaddle, looked up with a frown beneath his brimless crimson hat. "A danger lurks that I cannot yet specify. When the stars come out I will be able to tell better."

Zohak rode to the front of the party, setting its pace. He enjoyed the ode his first cousin, Zirai, was chanting. He gave it the rhythm of the horses' canter, glorifying the exploits of their great grandfather. From childhood, Zohak had loved Zirai and his magnificent poetry.

The verses came to the end of the prologue and Zirai made them wait a bit for the battle scene. Zohak fell back, then reached over and clapped him on the arm approvingly. "You make the time fly. We have many days to go."

"I am looking forward to being home. I miss little Iabba." Zirai's eyes moistened.

"That rascal blackmailed me. My own nephew! Said I couldn't take you with me unless I brought him sweet dates!"

Zirai chuckled. "A chieftain's son has responsibilities, Zohak bar Mirdas." Then Zirai dropped back, signaling that he had to relieve himself and would catch up.

The sleek Arabians cantered steadily across the dunes. Zohak, his throat parched, took a swig from his small goatskin. The war party cast

long, bobbing shadows as it moved swiftly across the terraced sands that were unbroken save by an occasional tamarisk brush and varieties of cactus.

"Zohak!"

He looked around to see Teral looming above him, his single black eyebrow knit in concern.

"Zirai stopped to relieve himself a long time ago and still hasn't shown back up."

One of the tribesmen tittered. "At that rate we'll have to name it Mt. Zirai."

Zohak shot him a look, and then gave the order for his men to retrace their steps. The sand purpled with sunset as they rode quick time back the way they had come.

"By Atarate and Yarikh!" The tribesmen had followed Zirai's spore to a large black rock, against which he had done his business. The marks of a struggle scarred the desert's fragile face, in the midst of which a patch of sand glistened with blood in the gloaming.

Zohak bit his lip. He thought of Zirai's little boy Iabba, with the sweet tooth. He could not be an orphan, reduced within the tribe to the weakest status, his life ruined.

He called over Asharidu and nodded at the princess and her maid. "Watch those two while we search. They might be tempted to take advantage of this."

The war party, having halted, puzzled over who or what Zirai had fought and where they were now. They searched the desert's endless horizons by the fading light. Zohak noticed that his own steed kept looking south and whinnying. The rage upon him, he trotted alone in that direction, away from his men. His breath came hard as he ascended a sandy embankment and, though he lost his footing from time to time, he finally struggled to the top of the ridge. He looked down into the long gully, corroded by flash floods from rare winter cloudbursts. He saw nothing but his gut remained uneasy.

Teral, who must have been proceeding on a parallel path, approached the foot of the embankment. He caught Zohak's eye and gestured with his hands. *See anything?*

Zohak wagged his finger, meaning *No*. Then he tensed, as he observed terror in the man's eyes.

He whirled and came face to face with an immense spitting reptile.

Scheheranaz did not like it when her father and mother argued, as they were doing now. She liked it even less when her mother angrily pushed her

father's hands away and used bad language against him. It made all her beautiful thoughts fly away.

"You are drunk!" Her mother's voice hurt Scheheranaz's ears with its shrillness.

"Do not presume to judge me, Matroyao. Haoma, the green-eyed, the healer, has taken me on a quest. I beheld the world's seven climes in my silver chalice. I saw the great sea Vourukasha and the world-mountain. I saw the Arameans who captured my sister and discovered their location. You do not understand haoma-journeying." Scheheranaz usually liked her father's deep, mellow voice. But today he was raising it, and slurring his speech, and it made her feel uncomfortable.

"I do not understand? I hunted with my father, the greatest werewolf among all the warriors of the steppes. I fought with him, and we drank the haoma to change our forms and attain the battle frenzy."

"Then why do you reproach me?"

"What you are doing is something else, something wicked. You never come back from the haoma journey. You stay out there, somewhere beyond the stars, day in and day out. Meanwhile your kingdom is falling apart and you cannot see it."

Scheheranaz pushed her twin sister, Arnavaz, away. Arnavaz was always hanging on her, never wanted to play by herself. Scheheranaz had no time for her just now. She could not understand much of what her mother and father were saying, but she wanted to hear the argument. She wished her mother would not yell at her father. It made him stay away from them, sometimes weeks at a time. She hated always being cooped up in the palace chambers, and envied her aunt Yimak, who seemed always to be going out riding, dressed in the armor of a warrior.

"Most of the problems in my kingdom come from the drought spread by the plague of black demons in the west. I think there is sorcery out there. Are you going to be like that sour priest and blame me for that, too?"

"If you weren't off journeying among the gods all the time, you would be able to manage the effects of the drought."

"I am dealing with the drought! Under these conditions of scarcity, we cannot allow the zaotars to keep all the livestock they have accumulated. They will have to share it with the warriors and the tradesmen."

"You are going about everything with a heavy hand, Jamshid. You'll just drive the priests to rebel the same way you did the artisans."

Scheheranaz watched her father pace back and forth in his spotless white flowing robes.

"Careful. I'll not be instructed in statecraft by a woman."

“Or anyone else, it seems. You used to be so wise. Why are you destroying yourself, destroying us? No spring is clear, which is muddied at the fountainhead.”

“I am building a new kingdom, freeing the people from the shackle of their useless traditions.”

“You haven’t built anything but underworld sand castles. You just sit in your private chambers, drinking haoma and raving. You have no idea what is going on around you. Do you know that your new high priest plots for your throne?”

Scheheranaz saw her father freeze, his eyes wide with surprise and his open mouth a red ribbon in his beard.

“You are lying, you little lynx!”

“Make some investigations if you do not believe me. You have enough spies on your payroll! Much good it does you. They sit in taverns and drink your treasury away in wine.”

“Enough of your intrigues. I have Vidranga for that. I came here to relax with you.”

Her mother remained silent, glaring at her father. Scheheranaz did not think her mother would lie and did not like her father to say it.

“Your hair is silky tonight.”

“In your state, you wouldn’t know silk from sack cloth. Come back when you are sober.”

“Tell the attendants to take the children away. I have thought up some new games to play.”

Scheheranaz frowned. She did not want to be taken away. She wanted to stay with her father and mother and watch them kiss. They had not done it for a long time. Arnavaz kept trying to get hold of her wooden carved doll, but she jerked her hand away and pushed her shoulder.

Her mother was shouting. “Go find your tart of a sister! I am not a pony that you can ride when it pleases you!”

Scheheranaz watched in terror as her father got her mother around the neck.

Zohak's skin crawled in anticipation. The wilting sunlight glinted on the huge lizard's pebble-like scales. The length of a man, it held its head erect on its elongated neck, its forked, long blue ribbon tongue flicking in and out of its leathery mouth. Pink saliva dripped from its rows of teeth as it breathed out rank air. Its eyes glowed slightly.

The thing leaped at him with a hiss. It knocked the breath out of him. As they rolled down the embankment into the gully together he overcame

his revulsion and shock enough to get his hands around its maw, still slippery with Zirai's blood.

When they thumped into the pediment he managed to roll away from it and find his feet. In an instant, he whipped his sword from its scabbard. The other tribesmen now lining the crest of the embankment gasped as they watched the huge lizard leap to an outcropping of multi-colored rocks. The spectrum of colors eventually washed over it.

"*Taneenu!* Dragon!" some of the men exclaimed in horror.

Teral's baritone voice boomed out. "Get away from there, Zohak. To kill a desert spirit brings the worst sort of bad luck. Everyone mount up and let's be on our way. It won't dare attack as big a war party as this."

Zohak advanced on the giant glaucous monitor, transfixed by the rainbows playing over its glinting scales. He held his light bronze scimitar before him. A murmur grew in the ranks.

"No" shouted the leader of the Sibitti.

Zohak circled the beast warily, watching its haunches, studiously ignoring the experienced warrior. The monitor crackled, its mottled throat swelled out. It bent its legs periodically, as though doing push-ups, and waved its heavy tail like a scorpion.

The prince clenched his teeth, thinking of the lurid pool of Zirai's blood.

"Zohak! Remember your composure!"

"Do not slay it!" Asharidu's accented, reedy voice rang out. "If you rage with it, you risk becoming it!"

The young warrior shrugged them off and flashed his sword impetuously, but the great lizard bolted with dazzling swiftness for another outcrop of colorful crystals.

It gazed at him hungrily, its impossibly long blue tongue smelling him as it whipped through the air. *I am ancient, human, and bits of a hundred of you still cling to my bowels.*

A *shada* spirit! He shuddered at the evil of such bewitchment, for only a powerful spell could have summoned a being from the other realm into this cold-blooded form.

Horried, he lunged at it and his right arm descended like a hummingbird's wing. The reptile, a blurred patch of sickly color, evaded the scimitar and got under his guard. It just nipped his calf, barely drawing blood, as he bobbed away.

Zohak, in a cold sweat, sensed that his bronze blade was as puny as a toothpick before this preternatural creature.

He circled it, attempting to guess from the pitch of its hiss when it would launch its next onslaught. The forked blue tongue waved back and forth like a tiny war banner.

The heavy tail, deadly as an ox-hide whip, snapped, whacking him in the chest. He flew back, but leaped to his feet, his grip still secure on the haft of his sword.

He advanced on the creature again. It vaulted forward, its pallid fangs targeting his sword arm. He had no chance to thrust. All he could do was throw his arm up out of reach, twist his torso and sprint for the cover of some obsidian boulders on the floor of the dry riverbed.

With the speed of a desert gazelle the reptile came after him, its body and tail curving back and forth maniacally. Zohak, his back to the rocks, watched in terrified wonder as the beast stood on its hind legs, its head even with his above its long, baggy neck.

It took a step toward him, its clawed fingers outstretched. *It wants to wrestle! This fight is about dominance.* He knew now it could avoid his scimitar easily, and riposte with deadly fangs. Maybe the only way out lay in playing by its rules.

He rammed his head into its chest, attempting to knock it down. It used the long tail stretching between its legs for balance, however, and grasped his back with its right paw. He smelled its fetid odor and blanched. He braced his legs against the rock bottom as it tried to push him over. Every muscle in his body stood out as he sought leverage to toss the thing down on its side. He considered trying to skew it with his sword, but knew the claws at his back could rip through him at any moment.

Desperate, he hugged the rough, horny hide and jumped up, slapping his feet into the rock face behind him, then thrust mightily, straightening his knees and propelling both bodies forward. The lizard lost its balance and came hurtling down on its back beneath him. As it wriggled, unable to right itself, he rolled free.

Remembering Zirai's puddled blood, he drove furiously at its exposed belly with his scimitar. The beast stared at him and writhed like a man on the executioner's block, then swept its powerful tail at his feet. He went down hard.

By the time he jumped back up, the monitor had managed to flip over on all fours, and now it hissed, the skin-fold across its throat swollen. It rushed at him like a charging panther.

Zohak swung his scimitar at the long, narrow head but it ducked and got under his guard, sinking its rowed teeth into his exposed calf.

He suppressed a scream. The pain struck at his very marrow.

Scheheranaz shrieked. Her mother was choking, her tongue out. She kicked her father down there with her knee, and he let go, looking surprised and bellowing. Her mother suddenly had a poniard in her hand and was staring threateningly at her unsteady father.

A persistent, urgent rapping came at the chamber door. "Your majesty! It is urgent."

He turned, limping slightly, opening it. "You dare disturb me here?"

Vidranga, the long-faced, gloomy minister, kept his gaze averted. "Runners have brought news, your majesty. Bedouin are demanding a ransom for Princess Yimak."

He father's face drained of color. He turned, his face a mask of rancor.

"You barren shrew! Ten years and not a single son. And now my true beloved is imperiled! I am through with you." He wobbled out of the room.

Scheheranaz ran to her mother, and put her plump little arms around her neck. Arnavaz joined them, and soon all three were hugging and comforting one another. Her mother couldn't stop her plangent wailing.

Zohak, his leg caught in the visor of the monitor's jaws, desperately thrust down at the beast's back, his blade tearing through the chain-mail surface, then finding its way inside, as cold vermilion blood spurted, to lungs and heart. He hacked at it hysterically, ripping meat and skin from its back and neck, until suddenly he saw Zirai's puffy vacant face staring up at him through the gore.

He shrieked, then shrieked again and again, as his mind threatened to flee over the desert's horizon.

He fell a great distance through the twilight sky, his blood mixing with that of the reptile, until he felt Teral's hand cradle his head.

Teral pointed. "Alasharru! Take some men, cut Zirai out, and bury him."

Asharidu applied a compound to the jagged wound on Zohak's calf, and then wrapped it in linens, which were quickly soaked in blood.

Teral, standing next to his comrade Rasunnu, watched with concern. "There is a danger the wound will fester."

"I am confident he will live."

Rasunnu, a grizzled old warrior, scowled. "For my part, I am overwhelmed with dread that he will live."

Teral looked at him sharply, two squinting eyes beneath his bushy single eyebrow. "He is the son of your *nasiku*."

"He displayed the wildness of the desert against the wildness of the desert. He lost his composure, the only tool a prince possesses to rule his tribe."

Asharidu bowed. "Perhaps what has happened will teach him more self-restraint."

Rasunnu spat. "He has lizard venom in his veins."

Asharidu stepped back, clearly surprised at the sentiment.

Teral glared at Rasunnu, who knew he had spoken out of turn. Then the leader of the Sibbiti turned on the Babylonian. "As for you, I do not want you practicing any more spells out here. For all we know, that monitor was summoned by your dark arts. No wonder Babylon expelled you!"

"I am wounded by your accusation. As for the rest, Zohak is my master and I shall do as he instructs me. But be careful of dismissing the help I can give this tribe."

Teral grunted menacingly.

Then the warrior kept watch by Zohak's side, and was relieved when he awoke after about an hour. The Sibbiti all urged that they scratch camp and try to make some time by moonlight, lest there were other horrors in this haunted wasteland.

Teral assured himself that the prince was well enough to mount up, though judging from his grimace, the pain in his leg tested his manliness with each step his steed took.

Teral knew he was not looking forward to the scene in Bawri when Iabba and his mother learned of Zirai's gruesome demise.

\* \* \*

Kaveh and Jamaspa trudged with their donkeys behind Hugav. The warrior had always especially liked the arms made by Cyrus's smithy, and reluctantly took on the two young men, who promised he'd be first in line after the palace for the best weapons in future. They had passed an occasional nomadic tribe,

They marched over the parched terrain, which was at first sparsely dotted with sedges and tamarisk bushes, and an occasional colocynth vine with its fruit of bitter apricots. After a while the brush gave way to unadorned sparkling grains of sand and a taunting mirage of sky-lakes.

Jamshid Shah was at the head of the army, in full war gear astride Behzad, the largest, strongest horse in the kingdom. The Central Asian



breeds had the advantage of size and strength, but they deeply disliked heat, and died young in the warmer climes. The Nar rode after the shah in serried ranks, resplendent in their bright linens and gleaming chain mail.

The spore of the princess had been difficult to trace in the desert, where snaking winds built shifting terraces anew every few hours. They had found traces of her party at an oasis and then discovered the bodies of the Nar in her scouting party. The shah had torn his tunic and vowed a frightful revenge. They pursued the tracks of the Bedouin.

Now, the party halted and the shah dismounted and scratched at the white sand, finding a horse turd. He rolled it between his fingers to determine how moist it was, and signaled that the enemy was near. They resumed their progress.

"I am thirsty."

"You are always suffering from thirst, Jamaspa, and I don't think it is water that would slake it. Anyway, we just left the oasis."

"No wonder the western villagers have fled to Aratta. The wine grapes out here must come off the vine as raisins now."

"Some things are more important than a draft of wine."

Jamaspa snorted. "For example?"

Kaveh laughed despite himself. "I am afraid you are turning into a lush."

"And I am afraid you are becoming fatally serious. We are going to join this dust we are walking on soon enough. And your madcap schemes will likely get us there early. Let's at least enjoy ourselves on our way to that destination."

"You are a cynic."

"A thirsty man is a practical man."

"There certainly is a lot of dust out here. My father says the villages and farms of the west were once green and fertile."

"That's what I have been trying to tell you. Aratta is going downhill, has been for some time."

"The shah had always bound the demons before. It is a little odd that this one has spread such devastation. Or that it would be strong enough even to face Yimak, who has some of the shah's *farr*."

"The divine aura isn't like a nose, that you are born with and keep till you die. It depends on . . ."

Kaveh hushed him. Such a discussion would mean death if anyone overheard it. "The walls have mice, the mice have ears."

A shout went up from the Nar, and there was a rustling of quivers and scabbards. Kaveh craned his neck. He spied a plume of dust on the horizon. It must be the Bedouin!

He wondered if Roxanna was a prisoner among the tribesmen, and how he would reach her. Some of the scouts who survived had even said they believed the black demon had taken her.

Hugav turned and signaled to them that he was about to gallop off to the front, and that they should follow as quickly as possible. Kaveh felt uneasy. He had never been in the midst of a war, and had no weapon.

Jamaspa spat. "This is what you wanted, cousin. You know, there is a reason that the position of orderly keeps opening up and Hugav didn't have one presently."

It seemed like hours before they were close enough to the Bedouin for the Nar to engage them. The wily horsemen attempted to fade into the desert, but Jamshid's cavalry force conducted a pincer movement, trapping them with its left and right wings.

A fearsome battle was joined. Kaveh and Jamaspa got close and halted. Kaveh could not see anything but a mass of bay colts and men and heard nothing but shouts and screams. He wanted to glimpse Roxanna.

"You stay here."

"Are you mad? They'll shred you!"

Kaveh ran toward the battlefield, looking for any sign of Yimak or Roxanna. He skirted the mass of cavalymen and warriors, some unseated and on foot, others jousting on horseback. He was looking for Princess Yimak. They were fighting in a hollow to the left of a hillside. He clambered up the incline and circled out of sight to the enemy's rear, then peered down from his sandstone perch. He finally glimpsed the horse over which Yimak and Roxanna were draped, and joy cut his breast like a knife. Tribesmen on horseback were guarding the prisoner, fending off approaches by Persian cavalymen from Jamshid's right wing.

Kaveh ran along the ridge and dropped down behind the prisoners, unnoticed. He approached, crouching and moving slowly so as not to alarm the mare. A tribesman on foot was standing guard, looking out at the Persian charge. Kaveh reached into his leather apron and found his hammer. He pretended the man's dark crown was a piece of iron on his forge and struck a sure blow. The Aramean crumbled.

Kaveh stroked the nervous horse's neck and then helped Roxanna and Yimak down. He quickly undid their bonds. Roxanna frowned at him as though she weren't sure whether she was glad to see him or not. His heart fell.

Yimak barely acknowledge him. She strode over to the fallen guard and plucked his bronze scimitar from its scabbard, then jumped onto the back of the mare that had been transporting her and charged into the battle, her face leaning like an axe into the wind, laying about her with the honed blade.

He helped Roxanna up. She was stiff and dizzy. "Let's get out of here, sweetheart."

"We could not depart fast enough to suit me!"

He bent and picked her up and headed for the incline. His arms, which had ached for her, were finally satiated. He put her down as the path became steep, and pointed to a boulder above that would afford them cover until the unequal battle was brought to its obvious conclusion. The Utu were vastly outnumbered, and Jamshid was worth half of them all by himself.

They clambered up and found a spot behind the boulder where they could peak down at the action without being seen.

"Are you all right? I was sick with worry."

She nodded.

"How did they capture you?"

She told him the story of the black demon, and then the attack at the oasis.

"They didn't . . . hurt you?"

She blushed. "Being with the demon was . . . difficult. As for the Utu, the princess protected me as far as she could. But I don't know what would have happened if we had been kept prisoner much longer."

He flushed with rage at the *Div-e Siyak*.

"How in the world did you find me?"

"I just enlisted as an orderly and followed my new master. Jamshid Shah discovered the Arameans who captured you and the princess. They say he has a goblet in which he can see the whole world."

"You enlisted?" She was speechless.

"I am trying to make up for ruining your life."

She did not say anything.

They observed the battle from above. Jamshid spearheaded the central assault as the two wings of his cavalry closed in on the Bedouin, whose ranks had clearly been thinned out. Their leader seemed a little listless.

She pointed at the enemy forces. "Their leader, Zohak, is the son of the chieftain in a place called Bawri. He was wounded in a fight with a dragon. He looks a great deal like the one who attacked you in the Elamite bazaar—maybe he was under cover. That odd figure behind him is a

defrocked Babylonian priest, Asharidu. Remember? Rishapla the jewel merchant mentioned him to us. He fancies himself a sorcerer, and was expelled from the metropolis by his colleagues for worshiping a wild female *afreet*, Lamashtu."

The battle was turning into a rout, when the Babylonian raised his hands and the sands began swirling around him, faster and faster. The Persian horses reared as the particles slammed into their eyes and hide.

The dust darkened and then the black demon stood towering over the battlefield, advancing on the Persians.

The demon slapped horses away, knocking them down, their thin legs kicking in the air, their riders broken on the ground. He strode directly toward Jamshid, taking the shah by the neck in his right claw, and lifting him off his steed. The shah's bright halo flickered and faded.

Kaveh whispered to Roxanna. "You said the div ran away from your kidenn stone."

Roxanna frowned. "Do not even consider it."

"If the shah is lost, the Persians are lost. We don't want to be captured by this Zohak."

Roxanna hesitated, then sighed. She took off her necklace and handed him the gem. "I have been bound as a prisoner for so long that I can barely walk, or I'd do it myself."

He wrapped the chain around the handle of his hammer and stuck it back in the pouch of his leather apron. "You stay here, out of sight."

"Kaveh, be careful!"

He ran along the ridge to the front of the battlefield and then descended. The cavalymen on each side had paused their jousting, transfixed by the contest between the wriggling monarch and his otherworldly assailant. Kaveh, an unarmed commoner on foot, passed unnoticed as he crouched and ran toward the shah.

Persian cavalymen who charged the black demon were scattered when he casually swatted them away with his free claw or with a sweep of his towering leg.

Kaveh approached from behind, hiding behind a fallen horse and then leaping up, running, and falling next to another dead stallion. He got within striking distance.

Summoning all his bravery, and feeling rather than seeing how his aura was shining, he stood and sprinted forward, his hammer raised above

his head. He swung it with all his strength at the creature's bulging calf. The necklace with the kidenn stone was wrapped tightly around the handle, and the stone gleamed like meteor as it made its arc. The head of the hammer bit into the creature's clay hide, raising a cloud of dust and knocking much of the substance from the limb.

The black demon roared and tossed down the shah, wheeling to confront its new tormentor. Kaveh ducked under its claw and pounded on its other knee, severing its leg. It fell back like a sawed-through tree.

He ran up its abdomen and chest and struck a blow with every muscle in his torso at its snarling face. It exploded in scattered dust and grit. Kaveh had to close his eyes to the irritating particles and his nose to an overwhelming foul odor. He lost his balance and fell as the div's form disintegrated into sand and merged with the desert below it.

A puzzled and hesitant shout of triumph went up from the Nar. Inwardly, Kaveh smiled. The warriors did not know what to make of a producer who fights demons.

Kaveh got up, dusted himself off and looked toward the boulder on the hill from behind which he knew Roxanna had been watching him. He raised his hammer, draped with her necklace and the glowing gem. She showed half a grinning face, and then ducked behind the rock again.

Princess Yimak knelt next to her brother Jamshid and planted a desperate kiss on his lips. Kaveh was taken aback at the erotic energy of it. She cradled his head and helped him to his feet, then onto his loyal horse, which had remained nearby. She mounted up, as well.

The shah rode over to him, and he kneeled.

The monarch shouted, "What a people, the Persians. Even our smiths are heroes in the mold of their shah!" He tossed a bag of coins at Kaveh's knees. The young man bowed deeper, his eyes averted.

Then Jamshid's horse reared and he and Yimak led another charge at the Utu, now that no unearthly obstacle stood in their way. The Arameans, however, had taken advantage of the pause in fighting to fall back, and their swift horses, adapted to the desert, carried them beyond the reach of the shah's heavy horse cavalry. Yimak recovered and the div bested, the shah called them off.

When the horsemen returned, Roxanna limped down the hill and he ran toward her. She gave him a hero's hug. Kaveh thought he now knew a little of the reality of the paradise of which the elder books spoke. Then she whispered in his ear that she had to return to Yimak's service, and went off in search of the princess.

Kaveh looked for his master Hugav and his cousin Jamaspa, but couldn't descry them in the mass of cavalrymen.

He heard the clip clop of hooves behind him, and hoped it was Hugav. He whirled. Above him towered the two bazaar guards that had accosted him.

The rawboned man called Zavan leaned over. "That was not your place, smith!"

Chishpish stuck out his lower lip. "Jamshid Shah was binding demons before you were born. He did not need the help of a . . . what was that, a hammer?" The two guffawed.

"You are in big trouble. The shah doesn't like competition, and you have shamed him."

"Shamed him! I was trying to help. I didn't see you two taking on that creature."

"A shah who needs the help of a blacksmith is a laughingstock. I don't think you are long for this world. And a good riddance it will be. Watch out behind you, producer."

## Chapter Five

### The Bazaar will Strike

"Your majesty, the boy is a problem." Vidranga, his minister, was scowling.

One of the shah's brothers, Prince Tahmuras nodded vigorously. "He must be dealt with. He is a hero to the artisans now. They admire him more than they do their shah. He will foment revolt."

Spityura, another brother, older than Tahmuras, held his hand up. "We must exercise caution here. The producers are already up in arms about taxes, and we should not give them a martyr, around whom to rally."

Narsih, the youngest brother, nodded vigorously. "Spityura has the right. We need the arms they make for us, and they are already seething."

"There are . . . subtle ways of handling such a difficulty." Jamshid was pleased that Yimak's eyes were bright with the haoma.

Spityura looked at her with disgust. "Poison? Or sorcery? Neither befits a world-king such as my brother Jamshid."

Tahmuras held up his hand. "Squabbling among ourselves will not help. Brother, let us provoke the boy and his caste. When they overreact, that will be a perfect pretext for a beheading. No one will be able to complain."

Jamshid for the first time had heard something that interested him. "How do you mean?"

"The campaign against the Apaosha demon and the Bedouin was extremely costly. We shall need extra taxes in kind from the smiths so we can replace the weapons lost." Tahmuras grinned through pink haoma-dyed teeth.

The shah clapped his hands. "Capital! The boy's clan will lead any protest, and then we'll be shut of him."

Yimak nodded excitedly. "But the artisans do not have enough to repay the Nar for the latest campaign. We must tax the priests, too."

Jamshid toasted her words and laughed. "They have herds of cattle so vast they rumble like thunder when they are rounded up. Of course! We'll put them both in their place, the producers and the priests."

Spityura turned to leave. "Brother, you know my loyalty. But this step is fraught with danger. We Nar need the producers in order to remain strong, and we need the priests to keep the moral order."

Jamshid gulped from his flagon of haoma and grinned. "We have the cursed producers. I am feeding them by my husbanding of Aratta's resources. Let them go to Susa to starve, or apply for commissions from the *Div-e Siyak* if they are discontented here! As for the priests, they are parasites. Moral order? Kleptomania is more like it. What we need is the enthusiasm of the warriors. Yimak, as usual, is right."

Vidranga nodded approvingly. "Your majesty, tomorrow you proclaim the New Year. It is an auspicious occasion for these announcements."

Jamshid laughed. "Perfect!" Then he leaned over and kissed Yimak in a way that signaled to the brothers and his minister that he wanted some privacy.

Town criers had announced that everyone should come to the town square on the vernal equinox. After anointing themselves with oil and exchanging sugarloaves, Kaveh and his whole family went to the square at dawn, the traditional time for the Hawani prayer and celebration at which offerings were made of sandalwood and frankincense. As denizens of the royal crafthalls, they were allowed to stand near the dais.

Above the square towered the palace, on a rising hill above Aratta, its spires extending above massive triple walls. Colorful battlements surmounted each of the walls, and each was higher than its predecessor. The first battlements were white, the second red, and the third and last black. The palace itself, had told him, was constructed of baked brick covered with gypsum plaster, rather than of adobe. At one side an aqueduct fed into it, bringing milk from the villages of loyal cowherds. The artisans, most of them of the Germani tribe, prostrated themselves as they entered the square, in honor of the shah's unseen presence behind the gates. The Manneans, Elamites and other dahas seemed confused and nervous. The cultured, well-groomed ebony faces of the Elamite craftsmen contrasted with the barbarian



scruffiness of the Germani. The foreign craftsmen had come mainly since Jamshid's conquest of Aratta, in hopes of benefitting from the formation of a new empire. Now it looked as though their gamble had paid off.

Not long after they arrived, Jamshid emerged from the palace gates, accompanied by his queen, Matroyao, and surrounded by his three brothers and his sister, Yimak. His white robes billowed in the brisk breeze typical of the month of Aduka Naisha. He was ushered by men bearing the royal umbrella and the flywhisk, which no other Persians were privileged to use. Immortals, both men and women, presented their spears. The five siblings stood talking for a while, with one brother, Spityura, gesturing heatedly at the king. Kaveh thought he seemed to have the support of the youngest prince, Narsih.

Jamshid appeared to Kaveh to be leaner than the last time he had presided over such a festival. He had an odd look in his eyes, and the old decisiveness for which he was famed had given way to dreaminess. An image came into Kaveh's mind of the disheveled old beggar who used to live in their alley, who heard voices.

"I thank my clan and my subjects for this gift." On a dais was a large object over which was draped a grey felt cover. Jamshid strode purposefully up to it and pulled away the cloth, revealing a dazzling silver throne encrusted with rubies and sapphires.

Kaveh could not help wondering how many peasants had gone hungry to pay for it.

To the shouts of his immortals and the other warriors, the shah seated himself. The high back supported a projecting canopy from which was suspended a golden crown too heavy actually to wear, so that it hovered over his head. Spikes stuck out of the base of the crown like Mithra's sunrays. The fires burning in braziers atop altars on either side of the shah cast a flickering coralline light on Jamshid's sharp features. The salmon sun had almost risen. The attendant wielding the huge flywhisk kept it in gentle motion.

"I proclaim today Now-Ruz, the first day of the year. May it be celebrated forevermore when the sun enters Aries! I was inspired to this decree by my journeys among the gods in the underworld, where I had a great subterranean city built, thrice as large as Aratta."

Kaveh could not understand the last part of the shah's speech, and he shivered at the idea of visiting the underworld. He saw the priests' heads swing sharply when they hear those words. But the crowd caught only the triumphal tone, and went wild with shouting, singing, and dancing. When the chamberlain had managed to restore order, the shah heard good wishes

for the New Year from a variety of notables and ambassadors, who presented him with magnificent presents in hopes of receiving even more valuable gifts in return.

Then the high priest, Vandid Khim, stepped forward. The minister, Vidranga, reluctantly recognized him. His blue tunic was tied in a bow at his neck. Thin and lanky, he looked like a stick in front of his broad-chested monarch. Behind him stood five or six other zaotars, including his son and probable successor Zopyrus, their pointed hats bobbing like sails on a swift river.

"Your majesty, the zaotars are disturbed to hear of your underworld journeying."

Jamshid's eyes flashed. "You who have known me as a mere mortal have been misled by the illusory human form I adopted. In the elder tongue my name is foretold as Yima Kshaeta of the good herds. I am the nephew of Indra of the lightning bolts. My mother Saranyu was the daughter of the god Thwareshtar, the fashioner. I wield my grandfather's bludgeon with the same fury as he did. I am a god, the scion of gods!"

The crowd fell completely silent.

Vidranga, the minister, immediately kneeled. "How shall we worship you, your majesty?"

"I demand personal sacrifice! Defeating the black demon and routing the Aramean pillagers depleted the treasury. The smiths must replace our armory as a votive offering. The gods will repay them in good fortune."

"Jamshid, we have nothing left to sacrifice!" An anonymous voice shouted from among the bazaar artisans, and many were bold enough to second it. Kaveh was shocked to see even some of the warriors nodding in agreement.

The shah acted as though he had heard nothing. "Even a small sacrifice to me will bring great blessings. None of us is completely bereft of belongings. As a special boon to my subjects, I lift the requirement that sacrifices be through the zaotars. Rather, every person may sacrifice directly."

The artisans were murmuring. They recognized a raise in taxes when they heard one, and did not care whether the priests or the king dunned them.

Jamshid stood. He seemed so stupefied from the haoma that he was barely able to stand, and Vidranga grasped his elbow to keep him from weaving. "The miserly priests have accumulated vast herds through their prerogatives. I today liberate their cattle and will send beef to the bazaar this very day."

The bazaar shouted approval, but only half-heartedly. One good meal could not make up for increased levies. Kaveh could see that the smiths were especially upset at the idea of working for nothing.

Jamshid raised his hands and the throng quieted. "I have one last announcement on this blessed day. For a god, only one woman is suitable as a wife. And of all women in Aratta, only one woman is the daughter of gods. She is my lovely sister, the Princess Yimak, and I intend to wed her.

A gasp arose from the assembled masses.

The shah swung out his arm, his outstretched fingers pointing to Yimak. She stood at his side, decked out in full battle gear, with an iron helmet and chain mail, and an akinakes short sword hanging in a scabbard from the wide belt that encircled her wasp-like waist. The shah's queen, Matroyao, ripped her tunic, screaming, and then fled the square up the stairs to the still-ajar gate, heading for her chambers.

Vandid Khim drew himself up to his full, considerable height, his henna-dyed beard resembling a burning fire. "Your majesty, this goes too far!

The zoatars were whispering among one another.

"Am I to understand that you are giving the Nar permission to steal our livestock at will, and then to sacrifice it themselves to this new royal deity?"

"An admirably concise summation, priest!"

"The ancient laws forbid consecration except by priests. Any such sacrifices will feed the evil one, Ahriman, and his demons, not the gods. Any such meat will be unclean."

"Priest, your gloomy ramblings have tired me. I hereby remove you from your post. Is Thukhra here?"

A young zaotar stepped forward from among the sea of blue tunics and hats.

"You are high priest now."

Zopyrus, the son of Vandid Khim, jumped on the dais. "This is an outrage. Only zaotars can choose the high priest! And only infidel Egyptians marry their sisters!"

Jamshid threw himself at the seminarian like a rogue elephant. He lifted the young cleric over his enormous leg and broke his back with a sickening snap. The junior priest screamed pitifully, then went silent. The monarch discarded the cadaver like so much firewood. He looked around, florid with rage, seeking any further sounds of rebellion.

Kaveh felt a burning sense of power invade his limbs, so intense that he nearly screamed. *What is happening to me?*

The shah, crouching and moving back and forth like a panther on the hunt, glared at the crowd. "Does anyone else have any objections?"

Kaveh shouted, "The bazaar will strike! We will not pay!"

Cyrus tried to get his hands over his mouth, but it was too late. The artisans took up the chant.

The shah glowered at Kaveh. The young blacksmith braced himself.

Prince Zohak surveyed the returning war-party nervously, keeping watch for a Rapiqu assassin or raiding party from another old foe. The desert never smelled of death, but it was one vast sandy mausoleum. The four-day ride back to Bawri seemed likely to pass in silence, with Zirai's honeyed voice silenced and the defeat at the hands of the Persians weighing on the Utu. Still, they were Bedouin, accustomed to falling back in the face of a superior conventional army and living to fight another day. Zohak dreaded most of all his audience with his father Mirdas in Bawri.

His leg still hurt with every movement of his steed. He had torn some of the ugly, black scabs off, but the wounds had just oozed and reformed them in a dark greenish hue that alarmed him.

Teral rode up beside him. "We have spotted a camp of Rapiqu."

"The ones that raided the caravan to Ecbatana last month?"

Teral frowned, his single black brow furrowing. "They've pitched their tents haphazardly on a plain. There is no way to sneak up on them."

"Send a small party to feign an attack and draw away the men who are at the ready for a fight. The main body of our men can then fall on the tents."

"What if the Rapiqu do not take the bait?"

Zohak shrugged. "It's that or a pitched battle. A goodly number of our men would end up in the underworld. If the feint fails, we can still mount the frontal assault."

Teral nodded, then galloped off. He took a detachment of men and rode down toward the sheep and camel herds on the plain. The tribesmen on guard duty, thinking them mere rustlers, mounted their horses and attempted to head them off. Teral and the others turned tail, but the guards insisted on pursuing them.

Zohak, seeing that the way was clear, raised his right hand and let it fall. Zohak and the other men dug their heels into the horses' sides, slapped their necks, and put on a burst of speed as they approached the tents like a

whirlwind. More tribesmen issued from the dwellings, frantically strapping on their sabers and trying to mount up.

The Sibitti invested themselves in their grim work. Teral leaped off the back of his horse, crashing lion-like into his prey and fixing his teeth in his neck. His comrade, Alasharru, lay about him with his double-edged axe from his horse, and the scrape of bronze on bone filled the air. Atarbidi took on three swordsmen at once with his own beloved blade, with which he slept as though it were a woman.

The rest of the party, armed with spears, pulled down the camel hair tents on their sleeping enemies. In the midst of the melee, Zohak gave the order to fire the tents.

Zohak spotted the chieftain, who had donned his armor and mounted a mare too late to lead his men. He galloped for him, sword drawn.

The chieftain parried from horseback, but even a weak and wounded Zohak was faster. He sliced at an exposed rib and hit home. The man screamed and fell off his horse.

Supine, he looked up. "Quarter! I ask quarter."

Zohak dismounted and stood over him. "Call off your men, Rapiqu."

The greybeard winced as he shouted in their guttural dialect, and his tribesmen stood down, relaying the order.

The chieftain got up and dusted himself off, nursing his side. "I hear the Utu in your accent. Which sept?"

Zohak nodded. "Bar Ramanu."

"You want our starveling herds?"

"Call your eldest."

The chieftain did as he was instructed. "This is Dikla."

"That caravan you looted a moon ago in Diyala was under the protection of our *Nasiku*, Mirdas. We want the loot back, and we want an end to plunder. If you want to play games, steal sheep and camel from one another. The caravans are off-limits." He turned to the beardless youth. "Your father stole from me, Dikla."

The dark almond eyes glowed with hatred.

"That means you get a promotion."

The boy looked puzzled.

Zohak struck like a cobra, putting his scimitar into the chieftain's eye. The man bellowed, grabbing at the blade and slicing his hands on it as he tried to push it out. Zohak thrust further, then twisted, and the old Bedouin went limp. He wiped the goopy matter on the man's robe.

The boy, shouting "No!" threw himself at the motionless form, getting blood on his cheeks and loudly keening.

“You are *Nasiku* now, Dikla. I fancy your father’s mail shirt, his saber, his fine mare. I think I saw some white she-camels hobbled near the big tents. Those would make a fine gift from you to me. You have cost me a good deal of trouble.”

The boy, his face a mask of hatred, launched himself at Zohak, getting in a kick at his leg, which he could see was wounded. Zohak felt a pain like he had never experienced, which ran along every nerve in his body, blazing with agony. A blackness floated before his eyes. He saw that Dikla’s sure hand had a dagger in it, arcing toward him.

Kaveh half expected the shah to leap down from his dais and break him in half as he had Zopyrus. But then he felt himself being lifted off the ground by the other artisans and carried on their shoulders.

“Kaveh, demon-slayer!” They shouted.

Kaveh caught a glimpse of the royals hastily withdrawing into the palace in the face of the angry crowds.

As they spilled back into the bazaar, the artisans began new chants, branding the shah a liar and a *mithrodruj*, a betrayer of Mithra, the god of contracts. Kaveh was shocked. The shah was the pillar of the world, the upholder of all law. He could not imagine Jamshid being called such a name. The chanting grew in volume, spreading through the rally, till it seemed the whole market sang the refrain as a hymn. The crowd began to move, like a thousand-eyed, thousand-armed god. Kaveh was swept along, losing sight of his clan members.

“Strike the bazaar, strike the bazaar!” The blacksmiths and dyers, fuller and mirror polishers, stone sculptors and carpet weavers, carpenters and glass workers, bricklayers and alewives, gem-cutters and leather workers, masons and spice traders, all took up the shout as they moved toward their living quarters. The massive crowd sprouted a long thick neck as it entered the main street. They all went home, leaving the bazaar eerily deserted, as though it were the dark Aiwisruthrema watch instead of broad daylight.

\* \* \*

Kaveh banged on the outer wooden door of his house, and heard his brother Utana shout that he was coming. The doors swung heavily open, and he entered into the courtyard. The men of his clan sat in a circle on mats, staring angrily at Kaveh.

His uncle Nefayan rose and strode over to him, then backhanded him. “What were you thinking, little idiot? You have set us against the court!”

Kaveh trembled. He said his mantra silently. "I spoke the truth."

Nefayan spat. "The boy's a kavi, not a smith. He'll starve us for his precious truth!"

Cyrus paced. "The minister Vidranga sent a runner with the shah's threats. He says he will unleash the Nar on the craftsmen unless we call off the strike. And unless I arrange that, I'll lose the royal commission."

Nefayan broke in. "Quite right. They have to accept your counsel or there will be a massacre. What good is a leadership position if the artisans won't listen to you? The shah has always taken good care of us here in the royal Crafhalls."

Jamaspa rolled his hazel eyes. "The shah is in the starving business, not in the feeding business, uncle. After the taxes, how will we pay for food, which is dearer by the day?"

Nefayan grimaced at his nephew and shook his head slowly. "Son, those hypocrites in the bazaar would each of them give his eye teeth to get our commission. Do we really want to throw it away, only to see it awarded to one of them?"

Kaveh, his cheek still stinging, screwed up his courage. "I say we support the others. Only by sticking together can the craftsmen convince the shah to change his mind. If we allow ourselves to be split into bazaar and royal Crafhall factions, there will be no pressure on the palace. After all, the shah needs the weaponry our smithy produces for his campaigns."

Nefayan grimaced. "In neighboring cities our fellow craftsmen are starving or being looted blind by the Bedouin. Can we afford to throw away our livelihood for the sake of hotheaded bazaar rabble?"

Kaveh turned away from his uncle to his father. "You accepted the post of spokesman for the smiths of Aratta, and this strike is clearly their desire. That was a contract of Mithra, and for you to break the strike now would mean you were breaking your word."

Cyrus shifted, his right hand entangled his grey beard. He was still for a long time. Then he sighed with the force of a bellows in his workshop. "My son speaks truly, on both counts, and with a wisdom I'd never have suspected in him. Still, we must hold a grand assemblage of the artisans to announce the threats pronounced by the shah. They must know the peril in what they do."

\* \* \*

At the tradesmen's public meeting behind the bazaar, a wood carver Kaveh recognized as Masistes was haranguing the growing crowd, complaining bitterly of the new taxes and the newly-instituted New Year.

Some of the apprentices, already drunk, were shouting in approval, “Strike the bazaar! Oppose the Nar!” He finally wound up his rambling address.

Jamaspa dug his elbow into Kaveh’s ribs and pointed. Cyrus was walking to the front of the assemblage, his thumbs in the belt that held his leather apron. He held up one hand and the crowd quieted down.

“Friends, we are under threat of an attack by the warriors if we do not return to our workshops. You know I support this action, and indeed a member of my family first called for it. But we must also recognize the danger here.”

A murmur of “Kaveh, demon-slayer,” echoed through the bazaar.

“No king in history has trebled levies in a single month. He lies and attempts to deceive our Lord Mithra. The shah is *Mithrodruj*! He killed a holy zaotar with his bare hands!”

“The danger? The danger is starvation. Are you a toady, Cyrus? You work in the royal craft-halls and you’ll feast on plenty no matter what. Come live and toil in the bazaar for a while and see if you can afford more than grass to eat after you pay these levies!” Kaveh, strung by the criticism of his father, recognized the accuser as Faranak, the wife of Athwya the Aspigan, a village headman who sometimes oversaw a stall in the grain market. She was shaking her fists, her jet black hair conspiring with her moon-like complexion to produce a startling contrast. Kaveh felt the attraction of her beauty although she was a decade older than he.

The chants began again, of “Strike the bazaar,” and the tradesmen all began retiring to their homes or taverns, determined on their course despite the court’s menacing pronouncements.

Only the guild masters remained, consulting on defensive measures. Kaveh saw the goldsmith Aoshnara stride toward Cyrus, a black rage on his jowly face.

“You inarticulate buffoon! Couldn’t you deliver the shah’s message any more convincingly than that?” His elegant white robes, edged in red brocade, rippled with his agitation.

“If you thought you could do a better job, you were welcome to add your words. It was an open meeting.” Cyrus, a disgusted look on his broad face, turned away.

Aoshnara’s son Vivana twisted his lips. “He couldn’t get a word in edgewise, with all the hot air you were spewing!”

“An apprentice may not speak to a master in that manner, young Vivana. Even your father will tell you that.”

“Son, Ustad Cyrus is right for once. It was not your place to speak. I intend to take this matter straight to the shah himself.”



Kaveh, standing off to the side with other apprentices, watched as the guild masters broke up their consultation. Aoshnara signaled to his son that it was time to leave. Vivana argued, saying he wanted to stay a while and watch the strike unfold.

Kaveh followed him as he headed toward the crowd. They were both pushed toward the main alleyway by the jostling, swirling mass. Kaveh maneuvered through the press of bodies. He maneuvered next to Vivana and threw himself sideways, crashing into the boy. Both stumbled into an alleyway as the crowd surged past them.

Vivana turned, his face contorted. “What the hell—“

Kaveh’s meaty fist hit the goldsmith face with the force of a hammer. He landed on his back. Dazed, he propped himself up on his elbows and squinted.

“Kaveh!”

“Have any more insults for my family?”

Vivana surprised Kaveh by throwing back his head and laughing.

“I see I have knocked you sillier than you were.”

“You have just made the most important decision in my life easier for me.” Vivana sat up, then grabbed for the alley’s mud brick wall as he rose on wobbly legs.

Kaveh kept his eyes on his foe’s hands, half-expecting him to pull a knife.

“I just couldn’t resolve in my own mind whether I wanted Roxanna enough to marry her.” He shook his head, trying to clear it, as he leaned against the wall. “After all, she’s just a potter’s daughter. I had half decided I only wanted her as a playmate.”

Kaveh growled under his breath and raised his fist again.

“No, no, you are quite right. She’s too special for that. The returnees from that expedition are practically singing an epic about her taking on that black demon. My father has gotten interested in making a match between us as a way of gaining influence in the palace.”

Kaveh’s heart sank. “What makes you think her father will accept?”

“My father is Princess Yimak’s personal goldsmith, and I think she’d put her weight behind the match if he asked.”

His stomach knotting, Kaveh lowered his fist. “You are bluffing.”

“Pretty soon I’ll be doing to her all those things you are dreaming about, and more you haven’t the imagination to think of.”

Kaveh hit him again, then turned and left, hearing laughter behind him.

The defiant shouts of the striking craftsmen echoed in the narrow alley as hundreds of sandaled feet slapped the packed dirt of the broad street. Kaveh suddenly looked forward to the anonymity and insignificance he would assume on merging with the steady press of grimy bodies. He felt a solidarity with these strikers. All of a sudden, he could grasp the idea of being betrayed by reality, of seeing even the gods mocked.

\* \* \*

Faranak smoothed away the wrinkles from her husband Athwya's forehead. They stood in their field, surveying the hard, parched earth and the pitiful stalks of winter barley only two hands high, which they had just harvested. Nearby, their large herd of skinny oxen found only sparse, brown pasturage.

"We've had bad seasons before, dear. We'll get through somehow."

Athwya, ever the pessimist, shook his head, staring at the furrowed soil. "We'll plant before leaving in search of better pasture. But I'd wager that this year when we get back we'll find the crops parched. The oxen and cattle may die. The goats are our best bet. If the shah collects the usual taxes, our tribe will be in danger of starving."

"That horrid demon Apaosha is strong this year." She knew their tribal migration would be harsh this season, and her husband was right that the grain with which they usually supplemented their diet would be sparse. They could well be reduced to eating acorn paste, which, when unmixed with grain, gave its eaters a yellowish hue and often killed infants. She wished, however, that he would put aside his own ever-present doubts for the morale of the village.

"The irony is that there is plenty of water under the ground. Our wells are not that low. If only there was a way to tap it for the crops."

Faranak knelt down and inspected the loamy soil. "Athwya, come here."

He walked over.

"Look, it's a spring. Water is gushing out."

"You think we could dig some sort of canal and direct the ground water toward the crops for the fall harvest?"

He shrugged. "A little irrigation would help. But we are still probably facing famine."

Her heart sank. They walked back to the village, its gates ajar.

When they passed through the arched gateway of their large hut and entered the courtyard, their two young sons, Barmayun and Katayun, ran to them, crying. Each accused the other of having started the fight.

“He tried to eat my porridge!” Barmayun sniffled.

Athwiya gave each a smack. “We are going to have to learn to share food this year. I won’t have my own children fighting over it. There’ll be enough of that in the kingdom.”

Faranak took the boys in her arms and comforted them. He always said she spoiled them, but not every woman had two sons, and she felt an ache in her heart when she thought of them going hungry.

The voice of Siyak Tora boomed out from the watchtower. “Trouble, Athwiya Purtora. Imperial troops approaching from Aratta.”

“I was afraid of this—they’ve come for their blasted taxes. Go tell the rest of the village. If they’ve hoarded any grain, I hope they have it well hidden. Otherwise those cowherds will massacre us.”

It was not long before ten cavaliers rode up to their gate, poytrels protecting their steeds’ richly ornamented breasts. The leader dismounted and barged into their yard.

“I am Princess Yimak. I am looking for the village headman.”

It was the first time she had seen her up close, and Faranak did not like the look of the woman. Her dark hair was long and disheveled.

“I am that,” Athwya said.

“The village of Hyrba owes the shah oxen and grain.”

“There is a drought, and we want that taken into account.

“That is your dilemma. We will remit the traditional amounts.”

Faranak stepped forward. “My lady, we won’t be able to pay taxes at all next year if we’ve starved to death in the meantime.”

“Silence, woman! I was feoffed the revenues of Hyrba by the shah this season, and my word goes here. Just so I do not encounter this kind of wrangling every time, I am going to teach you a lesson. “

She looked around, wild with the haoma. “Men! Loot them!”

The warriors leaped down and began barging into huts, carrying off jars of grain, pouring it in bags, and having their servants load it on the backs of asses. Faranak saw one of her neighbors, a middle-aged woman with ten children, try to kiss a warrior’s foot and cling to his leg, begging him to leave them with a morsel. He kicked her hard in the mouth, spilling teeth and blood on the dust.

When they had taken away everything edible, Yimak wheeled on her horse. “Now put this village to the torch!”

## Chapter 6

### The World-Displaying Cup

Zohak leaped back. The boy, blind with fury, was flailing about, fighting foolishly. He lost his balance when his dagger thrust found no target. Zohak put his whole torso into a left hook with his free hand, not bothering with the scimitar. He found the boy's chin and decked him. He kicked the knife from his hand.

When the new chieftain groggily came to, Zohak put his sword to his chest. "Submit."

The eyes were empty, and he remained silent.

"I will end you if you do not acquiesce, boy."

He nodded. "I will comply."

Teral and the other Sibitti approached. "Zohak, are you well?"

"The Rapiqu have a new *Nasiku*, Dikla here, and they will never raid one of our caravans again. Isn't that right, boy?"

Dikla looked at the sword tip above his heaving heart, then at Zohak. "Yes."

"You have enough of a beard that I'd guess you have a child, Dikla."

The Rapiqu's eyes widened. Then he sighed the sigh of the wholly defeated.

"The boy will come with me as a hostage in Bawri, guaranteeing your good behavior. " He turned to Teral, "Go fetch the wife and children of *Nasiku* Dikla here."

The Bedouin, eyes downcast, yielded them up on threat of having all their women and children put to the sword. Zohak picked up the almond-eyed little boy and handed him to Teral. "Make sure he is well-treated. One day he will be commander of the Rapiqu, bred in my household for loyalty to me."

The small child's mother shrieked and wailed, as she was dragged back to her tent, reaching toward her son as though she thought her arms would somehow stretch and grab him away. Dikla stood and stared wordlessly.

\* \* \*

Zohak, accompanied by Asharidu, entered into the second-largest adobe structure in Bawri, which he shared with his younger half-brother Aikhali and his family.

"Peace!" His mouse-faced brother was lounging in the corner on a carpet, talking amorously to his young wife, Atar Zabadi. He despised his sister-in-law, with her moon-shaped face and her endless preening. Zakira and Lalli, Zohak's slave-girls, were in the kitchen recited poetry to one another. They all looked up with surprise, as though he had brought a ghoul with him from the desert.

Atar Zabadi stood, pointing at Asharidu. "I do not want that witch in my house."

Asharidu reddened and turned, his long curls swinging. "I am not welcome here, Zohak."

Zohak caught his elbow and shook his head. "You are my guest and this is my abode."

"You are bringing doom on our household with these dark arts!"

"Be still, wench, or I'll give you the beating my brother doesn't dare administer."

"Don't talk to my wife like that, brother." Aikhali's voice was squeaky.

"You should be ashamed of yourself, spoiling her that way and openly flaunting your love before the tribe. You never punish her even when she richly deserves it."

"That is my affair."

"It is the affair of the entire tribe when a warrior is too much in love with a woman. It ruins him."

"You do not have the right to speak to either of us like that!" Aikhali took a step toward Zohak, but he saw it coming and slapped his brother down. He landed on the pillows.

The new groom rubbed his jaw, then stuck his chin out. “Well I hope you are happy with yourself. I have been thinking about this for a long time and now its done.” He stood up, arms akimbo. “We are leaving and making our own household.”

“You are only hurting yourself. Our flocks will be divided, and you will be a lesser man in the tribe than you were. I am the eldest and can easily rebuild mine.”

“You have thrashed me for the last time, brother. Atar Zabadi, gather up our things. We will go to the guest mansion for now.”

Asharidu put a hand on his shoulder. “I really should go. We shall meet up this evening.” He was obviously hurt.

\* \* \*

Zohak stood before Mirdas in his Bawri palace, unbowed.

His father was raging. “You lost your composure and wrestled a desert lizard? You let the Persians defeat you? You allowed this, this warlock to summon a demon? You killed the Rapiqu chief? Are you stark raving mad?”

“Father, I—“

“Silence! In a time of marauding and catastrophe I have created a small island of prosperity by protecting the caravans between Babylon and Ecbatana. A feud with Rapiqu and the Persians endangers all that I have achieved. Had you left the old chieftain alive and taken this Dikla, we could have had a truce. Now his son must find a way to kill you, even if he has to wait twenty years.”

“They were impudent! They had our caravan goods stored up. They would have struck again.”

“Rapiqu is a desert creature, lacking all restraint, an agent of anarchy. Only the example of self-restraint can tame the tribes.”

“They will not dare lift a hand against our clients again, father. I have seen to it.”

“You surrendered! You gave in to wrath and it suborned you. The wilderness is all rancor and ire. Even now, the wasteland encroaches on canals and rivers, scorching towns and cities. Only one time in a thousand does the desert bring forth civilization. Only when a man of the badlands walks a line as thin as a sword edge, possessing composure like a second nature, can he create order out of mayhem. The tribes are an eternal puzzle. A chieftain of even temper can solve it with one move and make of them a world-conquering army!”

“I can be such a man.”

Mirdas spat. "You took Princess Yimak for ransom? Aratta is a middling kingdom and we are a small principality. Did you not know there would be a reprisal? Jamshid's own sister? Aratta can stop our caravans north to Ecbatana, and will, now."

"I kept her safe. Once the ransom was paid, we could have had peace again."

Mirdas looked away and gestured as though to push him away as he sank into his cushions. "I should never have taken a Persian to wife. They are a designing and guileful people."

Zohak was stung at the mention of his mother Vadak, who had died when he was only a child.

"Aikhali is threatening to divide our household."

"Brothers often split. That is up to you. I see no reason to interfere."

"A smaller herd will lessen both of us in the eyes of the tribe. Cannot you ever lend me your support? I am your heir apparent."

Mirdas looked up sharply. "We shall see about that."

\* \* \*

Atar Zabadi was still overseeing the servants pack up her things when Zohak returned. He glowered at her.

"Stay away, you are cursed." She stared with horror at the dragonwound on his calf, which was still oozing dark celadon liquid.

Zohak strode over and gave her the back of his hand. She recovered and came at him with her fingernails, sharp as claws. He grabbed her wrists and stared into her blazing eyes.

"You were ill-starred from childhood!"

He was taken aback by the horror with which she looked at him.

He let her arms go. "Keep your tongue in your mouth."

"Everyone laughs at you because you do not know!" She was like a temple priestess possessed by a divinity, speaking quickly and out of compulsion.

"I said be silent!"

"Why do you think your mother Vadak was exiled out here in the desert by Vivanhant Shah? She was found out in an affair and the priests demanded her head."

Zohak struck her. "Have a care, sister-in-law. My brother is young to be a widower."

She shrugged off the blow and wiped the blood from the corner of her mouth. "Vadak hated the desert life. She was as bitter toward her new

husband as an onion stalk. Mirdas was already old, and had other wives. He often beat her for insolence. Finally, she had another affair, with one of the Utu tribesmen.”

Zohak was going for his scimitar when Aikhali came back into the house.

“Atar Zabadi! What has he done to you?” He strode over to her and grabbed her hand, pulling her out of the house. He eyed Zohak with unadulterated hatred.

She was still talking as though she could not stop, as they went through the threshold. “She did not die a natural death!”

Scheheranaz was afraid of Vandid Khim and wished he would go away. His henna-dyed beard and long russet hair made him look to her like a fire demon. He was, in fact, always burning things in their hearth fire, incense and barsom twigs, even smelly clarified butter. The low, rhythmic repetition of his mantras beat against her ears unpleasantly, like a poorly-made drum. She could not fathom why her mama kept calling the zaotar to their rooms, and requesting him to perform his liturgies.

She crawled over to her mother, who was sitting cross-legged on the carpet in front of the altar.

“Make him leave.” She tried to whisper as quietly as possible in her mother’s ear, lest the priest hear her and put a hex on her.

“He is doing us a favor, dear. Now just be quiet.”

“What favor?”

“He is getting your father back for us, out of the clutches of that awful Yimak.”

“Aunt Yimak?”

“She is a very bad woman. She should find her own husband and leave her brother alone.”

“But I like Aunt Yimak. She is strong and can fight.”

“Silence! Go sit in the corner.”

The words stung like a wasp, and Scheheranaz broke into tears. She moved away from her mother as though she were wounded.

Vandid Khim’s steady drumbeat of a mantra made her head hurt all the more. She did not like the way the priest looked at her mother, either. Her sister Arnavaz saw that she was crying and came over to put her arm around her and comfort her. It made her feel better. She tried to stop sniffing.



Finally the zaotar completed his magic. Her mother looked at him expectantly. “Have you put a powerful enough spell on the incestuous tramp, this time?”

Vandid Khim winced. “Can we please not call it a spell? I fell bad enough about breaking my priestly vows never to use dark powers, as it is.”

“Call it what you please. Is it strong enough? I do not want anything to go amiss.”

“I think so.”

“The reward I promised you depends on results, not thinking.”

The zaotar blushed. “I have motives other than the pecuniary to succeed, my lady.” He bowed deeply, hand on his blue cap, and left.

Scheheranaz disentangled herself from Arnavaz’s sympathetic embrace and ran to her mother. “Will papa come back now?”

“He’ll either come back to us or he’ll remain in that underworld he has discovered.”

“But I don’t want him to stay in the underworld. I want him up here over the world.”

“Then say some prayers that Vandid Khim’s magic will work.”

Scheheranaz heard something at the door. Her mother nodded at a fair Mede slave-girl, who hurried to open it. She was glad to see her uncle, Spityura. He was the tallest, broadest man she had ever seen in her short life, with the biggest nose. He had to hunch over in her uncle Jamshid’s presence to avoid looking like he was trying to overshadow the king.

“Matroyao, I bear bad news, I fear.”

“How could the news be good when I have been demoted to the second rank of wives by my husband? When his new queen is my own sister-in-law? I am disgraced, unfit to live.”

Scheheranaz thought her uncle looked grim. She wished her mother would not be so sad all the time. She tugged at her uncle’s tunic.

“Did you bring anything for me?”

Spityura fished around beneath his belt, and brought out two dried apricots. “Here, one for you and one for your sister.”

Scheheranaz and Arnavaz sat down on a fluffy pillow and took tiny bites from their aromatic treats, making them last.

“The rumors I have heard may not be true, or may not result in anything. I have been talking to your cousins, the Sagarti clan leaders. They say that the entire tribe has been insulted by Jamshid’s treatment of you. They intend to make representations to him.”

“Ha! Representations to that haoma-drunk egotist. He’ll do whatever he wants. A god, you know.”

Scheheranaz thought her uncle looked more and more sad and angry. Everyone who came to their chambers these days did.

He shrugged. "I am doing what I can."

"When you are not whoring in brothels and brawling in taverns, you mean!"

He bowed his head. "A man needs some diversions when the pox is upon the land."

"I know, brother-in-law. There is no fault in you. I am not good company these days."

"Everyone in Aratta is out of sorts. Please sit down."

She looked up sharply, then lowered herself on pillows against the wall.

"You have to brace yourself in case what I have heard is true."

Her eyes widened. "The only thing worse than bad news is having to wait for it. What do the flapping mouths say?"

"My virago of a sister Yimak threw a tantrum, demanding that Jamshid divorce you. The servants whisper that at length he gave in. He may be sending Thukhra to you tomorrow to make the divorce official."

Scheheranaz was shocked to see her mother break down and weep uncontrollably. She and Arnavaz ran to her to comfort her, but she seemed angry at them, too, and pushed them away.

Scheheranaz tried to think of what bad thing she had done that might make her father angry at her mother. She decided that her fault lay in being a girl. If only she had been a boy, her father would have been happy with her mother, and would never have divorced her.

Spityura kneeled next to his sister-in-law. "Matroyao, you must be brave. You need to hurry the Sagarti delegation up, to forestall this catastrophe my brother has planned. I fear that the whole tribe will go into revolt on hearing this news."

The town criers were shouting the shah's threats as the sun set. Kaveh's heart sank as he sat with the others in the courtyard.

"Is it a bluff?" he asked his father.

Cyrus sat cross-legged on his outdoor carpet, brooding. "Jamshid has in the past been wise enough not to provoke a complete rupture with his people. But he is behaving strangely. Look at what he did to the priests."

Jamaspa rubbed his belly. "The zoatars have the best cattle. I hadn't had that much steak in my entire life."

Kaveh punched his shoulder lightly. "I think giving the artisans beef was meant as a bribe. You ate it and then went on strike."

Jamaspa shrugged. "He gave us beef once. He makes us pay taxes every month."

Cyrus stood, his joints creaky. "No, Kaveh, I do not believe it is a bluff. I think this day we may see a great slaughter in the bazaar if we do not call off the strike."

Kaveh stood as well. There was somewhere he needed to be. "I don't get a sense that anyone is willing to call it off."

Cyrus shook his head slowly, and then went to consult on defense plans with the guild masters.

"Jamaspa, I am going to see Kavi Daena. Come get me if there is more news."

"You and that pairaka. It's as though she feeds you sweetmeats."

"Just keep your ears cocked for news of an attack."

Kaveh hurried to Daena's hut behind the gods' bazaar. Despite the air of danger that hung over the city, he enjoyed breathing the late afternoon spring air deeply into his lungs, made capacious by working the blowpipe.

"You said you would come yesterday." Daena threw one grey ponytail over her shoulder and straightened the rows of gods in annoyance. "An appointment is like a word given. To break it is to lie."

"Everything is up in the air because of the strike."

"Then your mistake was to have promised to come, when that was not really in your control. You should fashion an offering for the god of contracts at your forge. It is a weighty thing to break your word."

Kaveh's ears burned. "I have been practicing the mantras you taught me. I have to admit, I don't understand the point of the breathing exercises."

"All my teaching is designed to allow you to overcome evil."

"But why does there have to be evil in the world?"

She slapped him.

"Ow, that hurt!"

"You have a choice. If you like, I'll tell you why I did that. But then I'll slap you again, harder. Or if you like, I can tell you how to avoid being slapped for good. Which would you rather know?"

"Oh, please tell me how to avoid your cruelty, teacher."

"You see? Knowing what practical action to take to avoid evil is much more important than speculating on its causes. Your task is to erase evil from the world."

"I am just an apprentice smith."

“You have already dispatched a black demon. This is because you have a higher spiritual self, who fights your moral battles for you if you nourish her.”

“My *fravashi*?”

Daena nodded, beaming. “Sometimes when you are between sleeping and waking you may get an inkling of your spiritual ego. She is like a spear-bearing, celestial amazon, a paladin of the will.”

“Why is it a she? I am a man.”

“When Vouruna fashioned human beings, first he created the spiritual form of each with his mother-nature. Then he endowed them with a material form with his father-nature.”

“If the *fravashi* is my real self, who is speaking now?”

“A child.”

Kaveh flushed.

“All who stumble are still children. The mature mind recognizes the borders of the shadows cast by the evil one. Even the shah is now faltering.”

“Why do the priests keep supplying him the haoma, since now he stays drunk on it all the time instead of just consuming it before battle?”

“Fear of death? The promise of a rich recompense?”

Kaveh wanted to change the subject. “So the mantras, the breathing, the focusing—all this is supposed to put me in contact with my *fravashi*?”

“For some reason I cannot divine, you and Roxanna have been chosen to intervene in the events about to unfold. A horror skulks toward the seven climes.”

“What will that be, teacher?” A feeling of icy cold swept into the pit of his stomach.

“I think evil intends to incarnate himself on earth.”

Kaveh was startled when city resounded with mournful conch-shell blasts, tambourines and drums as the gloaming time approached, and the Persians lamented the onslaught of nocturnal demons. He had not realized how late it was.

Jamaspa stuck his head inside the threshold and interrupted them. “They are coming! Help me arouse the artisans to the threat!”

Kaveh’s heart clenched. “Is it the Nar?”

“Cyrus sent me. Jamshid has decided that this is the moment to break the strike.”

Kaveh jumped to his feet, bowed hastily to Daena, and joined Jamaspa. “The city quarter doors haven’t been closed for a long time, but they probably still work.”

“Yes, that’s the plan. Jamshid insisted we keep them open. He said to close them was an insult to his ability to keep order.”

“He calls this order?”

Jamaspa grunted. “Order is what the upper class calls it when they eat well and are obeyed.”

Jamaspa, Utana and the other young artisans began banging at the entrances of other houses, spreading the alarm, and Kaveh arranged for them to meet him at the quarter gate nearest them. Kaveh arranged for them to meet him at the quarter gate nearest them. He arrived there at the head of a growing army of craftsmen, at one of the thresholds to the Germani precinct. The two huge cedar doors had been tied to iron rings protruding on metal pegs from the walls, to be left permanently open. Kaveh’s corpulent friend Artabanu clapped him on the shoulder.

“You rascal, what are you doing outdoors this time of night?”

Kaveh grinned. “I was bored, decided to take a walk.”

“I think your boredom is about to be cured.” Artabanu produced an enormous butcher knife from his belt and began hacking at the hemp rope, as big around as five fingers. Meanwhile, the oil dealers applied sesame oil to the encrusted hinges. In short order, they freed the doors and swung them shut, pulling down the heavy crossbar with a sense of relief.

Kaveh remembered the stories his father had told him about times when the Elamites or the Medes had looted Aratta. “I am going to head for the other quarter entrances. Artabanu, please stay here and organize the defense of this gate. Have bags of dirt brought up to the roofs of the houses on either side, to put out arrow-fires, and see if some big pots of water can be boiled up there, to throw down on attackers.”

Artabanu cocked an eyebrow. “I didn’t know you were a tactician.”

“My father’s instructions. It isn’t his first bazaar siege.”

“A lot of lives are riding on him being right.”

By now some of the older men were arriving, and they concurred with Kaveh’s plan, to his satisfaction. The closing of the second gate also went off without a hitch.

The third gate wouldn’t budge, no matter how much oil they applied. The artisans’ muscles strained and eyes bulged as they pushed on it. It had settled off kilter, so that it leaned into the earth and met resistance.

Kaveh called for ropes. They would have to try to pull the pole upright. Then he saw two warriors approaching. “Try again! Let’s close it! They are coming!”

Nothing they did would make the gate move more than a few inches.

The two Nar galloped through, whooping. Kaveh uttered a smith's profanity. He looked behind him, gratified that at least twenty more artisans were converging on the area, though he knew unarmed craftsmen unused to battle would be no match for seasoned warriors.

"There are only two of them! We can stop them!" he shouted as loudly as he could, and saw others relaying his message. He knew that more warriors inevitably followed these two, who would only wish to keep the gates open long enough for their fellows to flood into the quarter.

The warriors rode down on him, hailing the sight of easy prey. Kaveh grabbed for the hammer hanging from his leather apron and hastily extracted it. It slipped from his sweaty hands.

The first horseman was almost upon them, and he could hear some of the craftsmen running away. He quickly bent down and grasped the mallet's dirty, leather-sheathed handle. The savage rider raised his double-edged axe, measuring the distance to the blacksmith's neck.

Kaveh tossed the mallet instinctively at its target, as he used to when playing as a boy. The hammer flew straight at the horse's knee, and Kaveh could hear the crisp snap of bone shattering on impact. Kaveh leaped sideways as the tawny animal went ponderously down, neighing pitifully and spilling its rider, who landed headfirst on a brick porch. He tried to rise, then collapsed, his head a bloody mass.

A cheer went up, but Kaveh had no time for rejoicing, with yet another of the Nar fast bearing down on him.

The warrior let his lance fly from a distance. He felt its wake tickle his earlobe. He turned to see it in the belly of a wiry coppersmith not far behind him. The man writhed, wide-eyed and bellowing, pulling on the pole, then toppled over backwards.

Kaveh turned frantically, put his foot on the fallen man's chest, grasped the spear handle with both hands, and yanked as hard as he could. It came back up through the late coppersmith's abdomen, trailing his carmine entrails.

The pounding of horse hooves thundered worrisomely near. Kaveh turned to see a double-bladed axe bearing down on him. He pitched the spear with all his might at the warrior who had loosed it. The shaft looked as though it might fall short.

Kaveh had never regretted not being a warrior more than at this moment. He had misjudged. He wondered if the axe was from his own workshop. But then he realized that his misjudgment was of another sort. The warrior had sped up and was galloping forward so fast that his right

thigh met the descending, bloody spearhead. The Nar screamed and fell from his snorting black stallion.

Ten craftsmen rushed past Kaveh, some of them butchers, and practiced their skills on the fallen shrieking cavalier.

"Leave him! We have to get that gate closed immediately. There will be dozens more just like him on his tail."

The artisans lassoed the top of the beam from which the door hung down and formed a line, pulling it upright.

There was not much time. A band of warriors turned a corner and rode furiously at them. Kaveh ground his teeth as he watched some of the craftsmen turn tail and make a run for it. Grimacing, he pushed on the heavy cedar door, its obstreperous hinges ancient with grime. The mounted warriors' eyes gleamed in the moonlight. They yipped their war cries, drunk on the haoma. The door barely moved. The hooves sounded like a waterfall in his ears. Kaveh knew deep inside that he was too late, and would die here.

As he sat at the oval table in the shah's quarters, Spityura looked down into Jamshid's eyes, searching for any gleam of the old intelligence and farsightedness. All he saw was enormous dilated pupils nearly covering the brown irises.

"The caravan from Babylon approaches, on its way to the Medes in Ecbatana. Spityura, I want you to raid it."

"The warriors still have not been paid for the last raid on the Utu, to retrieve Yimak. They may not have a great deal of esprit de corps right now. Some will say that they have not been able to replace lost or damaged weapons because the smiths have been on strike." Spityura knew his objection was futile. His brother had long since stopped being interested in practical reality.

"As for the artisans, that problem will be solved tonight. Tahmuras is invading the bazaar. As for the warriors, promise them the loot of the caravan if they can wrest it from the Bedouin. Utu dared kidnap my sister for ransom. My sister, my queen!"

"We may also anger the trading partners, Babylon and the Medes. They are weaker than in the past, but still formidable."

Jamshid drank from his seven-ringed goblet. He slammed it down and peered into the foam on top. "Utu are guaranteeing Babylon delivery. If Mirdas cannot make good on his pledge, Babylon will turn on him. He is

nearby, not we. Babylon may even annex Bawri in retribution. That would be sweet, as sweet as the pillage itself."

Spityura suppressed a sigh. He bowed deeply and left. He descended through the palace gates into the royal craft halls and headed for his favorite tavern, at the back of which stood his favorite brothel.

"Wine, girl," he barked at the new saqi as he ducked through the threshold and lowered himself on the pillows piled up on carpets at the back.

The saqi winked at him lecherously, and Spityura tried to remember if he had seen her before.

He had summoned the Nar chieftains whom he had hand-picked for the expedition. The Marafi and Maspi tribes were the best warriors aside from the royal Pasargadae to which Spityura himself belonged. Erezav of Marafi and Hutana of Maspi, each a wall of a man though not as tall as the prince, joined him. The perky saqi made a show of pouring wine from its jar into their thirsty clay cups with a lascivious twist of her wrist. Spityura admired her, following her wriggle as she retreated.

Erezav, ever the jokester, dug his elbow into Spityura's rib. "My lord, you will have to try to avoid getting so drunk that you don't even remember them afterwards." He laughed uproariously.

Some Sagarti lower-level commanders came by for their orders but did not feel comfortable joining so elevated a drinking party. For Matroyao's sake, he wanted some Sagarti foot soldiers, just to remind the shah of their loyal service.

He also called up a contingent from the priestly Dropiki, who had been cowherds before specializing in the sacred. They were so angry at Jamshid these days, however, that he did not expect them to agree to go along.

The Dropiki chieftain, Gaomant, arrived at length, ushered in by the runner. By then Spityura and the other chieftains had half-naked odalisques in their laps, who were feeding the Nar fine tidbits and teasing them.

One of the dancing girls, the brunette beauty Mahin, had sat before them, singing lascivious poetry. "*None has returned from the grave's other side/ No one has seen their fabled paradise/ Drink wine, for time is fleet and life is hard!/ And enter earthly heaven twixt my thighs!*"

Spityura drank off his wine and switched to haoma, seeking its irascible energy and wolfish hunger. The crowd was laughing uproariously at Mahin's lascivious wit and frank blasphemy.

Gaomant looked about nervously. "My lord, I cannot be seen in an establishment of this sort."



Spityura laughed. "We are going to raid the Babylonian caravan. I'd like a band of Dropiki with me. The whole tribe, including the zaotars, will share in the booty."

Gaomant kneeled and touched the top of Spityura's extended foot. "The Dropiki are Prince Spityura's loyal servants."

Spityura was surprised. He had expected bitter recriminations for the way young Zopyrus had been summarily dispatched and for the confiscation of the cattle of the priestly castes, many of them sprung from Dropiki. "We ride later tonight, in hopes of catching them while they are camping and asleep."

Gaomant backed out of the room, facing Spityura, his recessed eyes down. "I will make some men ready, my lord. They will be pleased that it is you they follow."

Spityura was alarmed at this last supposed compliment and looked sharply at the other chieftains to see if they had noticed. It sounded like a hint at misprision. He knew that Jamshid was virtually omniscient, and if he suspected Spityura of treason, he would not hesitate to separate his brother's princely head from his royal neck.

## Chapter 7

### Sting of the Manticore

The moon cast the war party in silver as it headed toward the encampment Jamshid had seen in his ringed chalice. Spityura worried about their preparedness. Some of the men were disgruntled by arrears in pay. Others had armed themselves with daggers instead of short swords, because they had damaged their akinakes blades in the last raid and the smiths had refused to repair or replace them. Spityura scanned the horizon as they emerged from Aratta's valley, which was rich winter vegetation, to a more barren steppe.

They passed an occasional village constructed of reed screens with goat's hair roofing. Spityura considered that they were little more than stationary tents, and their inhabitants might well still migrate part of the year as herdsman. They passed groves of ash, poplar and hawthorn, their budding branches made crystalline by the faint ivory light.

The hours passed like days, the impatient warriors forced to keep their silence and to keep their wits about them. Predawn added its faint illumination to the moonlight. At length scouts returned to Spityura. Gaomant pointed to the west. "They are just over that ridge, my lord. The caravan night camp stretches like a sleeping snake across the plain."

Spityura clapped his shoulder appreciatively. "Tell the men to halt here so we can make preparations."

The Persians dismounted, passing around skins of haoma prepared by sullen priests before they had departed Aratta. The liquid, warm from being

carried on horseback, burned the throat and then scalded the belly as it went down. The warriors had ridden on raw beef beneath their saddle cloths, cooking it as well as could be arranged when they had no time to make camp and camp fires were out of the question. They downed it with their haoma, tearing at the bloody slices with pinkish fangs.

It was time. Spityura mounted up and let out the war cry of the lead wolf, hunching over the withers of his steed, his neck parallel to its neck, urging it forward at a gallop, alarming it with his howling. The band became mounted werewolves, snouts elongated, fur ruffled with fury, astride their long-tailed Iranian horses.

The Aramean watchmen spied their approach and rang heavy bronze bells to sound the alarm.

A party of the caravan guards in Utu burnouses, rags wrapped around their heads and faces, could be seen running to mount up. They headed for the attackers.

When the Arameans were in range, Spityura growled the call for the archers to let loose. Their short bows had set-back leather grips in the middle, from which upper and lower limbs extended like an angry shrew's eyebrows, first up sharply, then curving back down at length, only to recurve out again just before the nocks. The back of the bow, he knew, was reinforced with animal sinew and its belly laminated with horn. The Arameans only had long self-bows of light willow, shaped like a half-moon, which were not nearly as easy to wield from horseback and lacked the range and force of a recurve bow.

The cavalry archers fired a volley, and a fourth of the Arameans or their horses fell. Spityura knew that the arrowheads had been smeared with feces and blood to ensure death by infection of any warrior impaled by one. Practiced wolf hands reached back to their quivers and soon another volley arched over the plain like shooting stars.

Another mass of Arameans fell, writhing to the ground, some crushed beneath their deceased steeds. Now as the two forces closed, the Persians wielded maces, double-bladed axes and akinakes short swords, the Bedouin nimbly riposting with their bronze scimitars, which, however, often clattered uselessly against iron-bossed shields or broke against Persian akinakes. When they closed, the Persians would sometimes leap off their steeds, sinking their teeth into the necks of the hapless Utu and tearing out Adams apples and larynxes and thick arteries, the blood spewing over the battlefield like fountains.

Spityura fixed on the Utu leader who appeared to be directing his men and rode toward him. Behind the Bedouin chief on an ass was a Babylonian

holy man and Spityura realized it must be the one who had summoned the black demon before. Alarmed, he got behind the enemy's flank, now that so many horsemen had been felled, and sneaked up on the priest, felling him with a blow from his bull-horned mace.

His master, who must be the one called Zohak, wheeled on horseback and saw what had transpired, anger and dismay etched in his brow. "You will pay for that, Persian! He is holy!"

"From what I hear, he's a witch parching the land, and I hope the blow dispatched him."

They closed. Spityura, drunk on the haoma, howled the wolf death knell and swung his bludgeon at the Aramean. Zohak's steed nimbly danced just out of range, responding to his master's touch. Spityura was taken aback by his horsemanship and celerity.

Zohak's stallion caracoled and he thrust his scimitar at Spityura's head.

Roxanna had been running haoma and water to the princess and her warriors just before they entered Hyrba. She was terrified as warriors rode down on the first huts. Some had dismounted and used sticks and grass to start a fire, while others brought sticks from the village woodpile, which they used to make torches.

Some villagers were still inside their humble dwellings, especially infants, the infirm and the elderly. The first hut to catch fire went up in a hungry conflagration almost immediately, since it had been so dry for so long.

Some of the men of the village were daring to stand against the warriors, and one leaped at a horseman, knocking him off his steed and striking him with a massive peasant fist before he could stick his assailant with a sword. The Nar warrior toppled back, dazed.

Without warning another of the horsemen rode down on the victorious peasant, a *chakusha* or double-edge axe in his hand, and caught him in the mouth, severing his head in two as though he was splitting an apple with a butcher knife.

Roxanna recognized Faranak, Athwya's wife, from her vegetable stall in the bazaar every year after harvest season. She was standing in front of the hut of a pregnant woman with several children. The toddlers were running here and there in and out of the threshold, oblivious to the danger. Faranak was by her stance pleading with a berserk warrior to spare this dwelling, but there was also a hint of a threat in the steely resolve etched on her face.

Athwya came running forward and kneeled in front of the irate Princess Yimak, shouting in his loudest voice. “We are Pasargadae, your highness.”

The wolf-warriors who had been poised to fall upon the rest of the grass huts with torches hesitated, eyes fixed on their leader.

Clouded as the queen’s mind was, Roxanna could see that the information gave her pause. She knew that Jamshid and the royal family were originally from the Pasargadae.

Yimak shifted on her steed, nearly falling off in her inebriation. She seemed undecided.

Roxanna was surprised to detect a bright yellow halo about Faranak. Even as Yimak considered her next move, saliva dripping from pink teeth, her own aura winked, flickered and faded. Roxanna thought about what Kavi Daena had said, and realized that the future of Aratta might lie here.

She approached the queen and curtsied. “Your highness, Pasargadae are your own kith and kin. It would be a bad example to the other tribes to allow their blood to be spilled in the absence of open rebellion.”

Yimak’s eyes widened and she seemed to awaken into this world. “You dare to speak? You? A potter girl?”

Roxanna trembled like a poplar leaf in a gale.

“Still, you speak sensibly. Some amends, however, must be made for the impudence of this village.” She rode up to the prostrate Athwya. “I will allow you to depart to the forest if you leave immediately. No belongings, no grain. Your huts will be burnt.”

Athwya’s face showed a grimace despite himself and he rose, eyes cast down, to organize his people’s hasty exodus. “Your highness is gracious.”

He took the arm of his wife, Faranak, and hurried the villagers along, sending runners to alert everyone and make sure the children and elderly were not abandoned to the coming flames.

Yimak whirled on her steed and rode the few steps over to Roxanna, who had decided it was best to kneel and fix her eyes on the brown grass.

She was sure it was her last moment, that an akinakes short sword would sever vertebrae from vertebrae momentarily.

A spear butt rapped against the gate as excited wolf cries rained down on him. Kaveh jumped up and put all his weight on the stubborn crossbar. It abruptly fell, barely connecting with its latch.

Kaveh heard the lead horse on the other side of the gate rear up and strike the wood with its hooves, screaming a complaint. He hoped it threw its rider. A cheer went up from the craftsmen, who began issuing into the alley from the doorways where they had taken refuge.

The bazaar was secured from the warriors this night. But Kaveh knew that Jamshid's powers were still immense, and that the shah could not be denied indefinitely. Moreover, the artisans were now more or less under siege, and eventually their food stocks would run low. He tried to see a way forward other than surrender, and could not. Sweaty from his exertions, he shivered in the cool spring breeze as he returned home.

\* \* \*

Kaveh crouched on the rooftop overlooking the main square beyond the bazaar, as the sun, large and weak after its bout with the night, straggled from behind Mount Hara beneath the cobalt dome of the sky. A warm breeze touched his cheeks, carrying a vague promise of summer. Kaveh heard a bone-chilling war cry erupt below. A horde of haoma-drunk Persian warriors rode furiously into the square beyond the bazaar gates, swords and lances drawn, stuffed wolf-heads mutely snarling above their brows.

He heard his father mount the stairs to the adobe roof. Cyrus touched his arm. They had given the warriors a little time to cool down since the attack of the previous night, and now it was time to take a chance by confronting them.

They exited the now-walled bazaar by a secret tunnel of which only the guild masters were aware, and approached the shah's men.

The nar warriors excitedly rode up to them, their weapons drawn.

"Who goes there?" Kaveh recognized Zavan, the rough-hewn warrior who had almost given him a hundred lashes in the Elamite bazaar, and the shah's minister, Vidranga.

"Cyrus the royal ironsmith, master of the smithing trades in Aratta. This is my son, Kaveh."

"Ah yes, the producer Kaveh, I remember. A whole family full of troublemakers, it seems."

"My lord, I speak as a loyal servant of the crown. I know of the raid on the Babylonian caravan. I must beg to remind you that in past battles, you had artisans to make replacements for lost weapons. This time, they decline."

Vidranga rubbed his cheeks, as if he were washing his face. "What do the rabble want, as a price for their return to their work?"

"From the very beginning they have asked no more than just taxes that left them with enough food to eat and shelter over their families' heads."

Vidranga sighed wearily. "I must consult with the shah. Wait here."

When he had left, Kaveh looked at his father's haggard face. "What do you think they'll do?"

Cyrus nodded at the immortals milling about nearby, indicating that now was no time for conversation that might be overheard by the enemy.

Vidranga was gone half an hour. He returned at a gallop and pulled up before the two blacksmiths. "His royal majesty has concluded that these simple fools cannot conceive what peril they are in from his fury. It passes their understanding. They are like asses, who will carry an elephant carcass for the promise of an apple, but who will stubbornly plant themselves on their haunches if spoken to harshly. In his all-encompassing compassion, he proclaims an amnesty to all the striking artisans, should they return to their workshops within the day and open the quarter gates. And as a boon, he will revoke the most recent tax increase immediately. He has instructed that criers be given swift horses to take this message to the craftsmen this morning."

"His royal majesty is munificent beyond imagining." Cyrus bowed deeply to Vidranga, and Kaveh, unprepared, followed suit after a brief hesitation. Kaveh had been silently jumping up and down for joy in his thoughts.

"Ustad Cyrus, the palace is displeased with you."

Cyrus shifted uneasily from foot to foot, and Kaveh felt his own stomach tighten. "I desire only the good of the crown, my lord."

"His royal highness values your past services, and therefore will spare your life. But you are no longer the royal ironsmith. You chose to throw in with the bazaar, so let it be your home. The commission shall be given to another."

Kaveh and Cyrus left the square confused about the future. Cyrus, never a talkative man, brooded, keeping his own counsel. Kaveh was elated that the artisans had won their demands from the shah, and avoided being attacked by his troops. But his family smithy's loss of the royal commission weighed heavily on him, and he knew it was nearly a mortal blow for his father. This development threatened Kaveh not only economically but also socially. It was already hard for the young ironsmith to compete with Vivana. But he knew that Ustad Bahmard would certainly not send his daughter out of the palace to live with Kaveh if he were a mere bazaar smith.

They were careful to wend their way through back alleys and lose any of the shah's eyes that might be monitoring them, then they snuck back into

the bazaar through the concealed tunnel. Cyrus pounded on the doors of their house and yelled for the servant to open up. They went up the three worn stairs into the courtyard, and Cyrus immediately began pacing.

"Father, what are we going to do?"

"We'll have to leave this house, and find another close to the bazaar. We'll reestablish our workshop there, and depend on ordinary trade. We won't eat as well, but we probably won't starve, either."

Kaveh could not imagine an existence so different from the one he had known all his life. He had been born in this house, and had lived in no other. The new house would no doubt be more cramped, and in a dirtier part of the town. "At least your life was spared. We can bear all else."

Cyrus heaved a sigh. "We did what was right. We could hardly throw in with the lie, could we?"

The day passed slowly. Kaveh went to the quarter of the poor to tell the servants they should ready the humble house they maintained in the bazaar for the arrival disgraced clan. He returned for a late lunch. Cyrus, always taciturn, engaged in no real conversation during the meal. Then he disappeared downstairs for a nap. Kaveh knew he himself would not be able to sleep. He told the servants to lock up after him, and went out into the street, bustling with renewed commerce as the mid-afternoon sky's hot eye shone down on the east walls. He made his way to the main gate, not far from the city square that stood at the head of the bazaar. He remembered how, the previous night, the artisans had fought off the attack of Prince Tahmuras and his men.

He kept out of sight, pacing in a narrow side alley. Then, after what seemed like hours, he heard the buzz of a crowd, and looked around the corner to see the return of the artisans from their afternoon sleep. A mass of artisans, cheering and singing, poured into stalls and workshops. Hundreds of men, women and children, their faces shiny with hope and victory, began to fill up the main square. Kaveh saw a line of immortals form at the head of the square, behind Vidranga, who apparently intended to address the crowd. Finally, the straggling women and children who had brought up the rear arrived, and the entire body of strikers had returned to their work. Two immortals closed the gates, and pulled down the large wooden latch. Kaveh was a little alarmed. *Why did they do that?*

Vidranga began to speak, and the riotously happy throng queened down. "His royal majesty, the Great King, the King of Kings, the light of the World, Yima the Glorious, Jamshid of Aratta, welcomes his craftsmen back into service in the city of peace."



A cheer broke out, with cries of "Long live the king! We honor seal and diadem!"

Vidranga cleared his throat and continued. "As you know, his royal highness has decreed an amnesty for the craftsmen who struck the bazaar."

Kaveh, from his vantage point, could see more and more troops moving up through the street to the east of the square. He scratched his head, unable to think of a reason for this movement. Maybe after all that had happened, the shah was simply worried about security.

Vidranga began calling out some names. "The following crafts leaders will please step forward. Datuvahya, master of the bowyers. Masishta, master of the wood carvers. And Bagadata, master of the horse dealers."

The three came to the front of the square.

Vidranga looked at them severely. "You three had sworn a special oath of loyalty by Lord Mithra to his royal majesty the shah. In joining the strike and the desertion of the city, you profoundly endangered the security of Aratta and of your sovereign himself."

The three bowed their heads. Some of the artisans behind them, resenting the sudden change in tone, began jeering and booing.

"Since you have sinned against Mithra in breaking your contract, rather than against the shah, his amnesty cannot extend to you. Mithra's law must be executed. You three shall hang."

For a moment the vast crowd may as well have been made up of deaf-mutes, and an uncanny silence settled over the square. Six tall immortals in gleaming iron chain mail stepped forward and grabbed the masters by their arms, then began marching them toward three horses that stood in front of the courthouse. A large wooden pole stuck out from the second story of the courthouse, overhanging the main square. They began throwing ropes up over it, and tying slipknots in them, making them fast. The ropes already had nooses at their ends.

The crowd, shouting almost in unison, surged forward. The troops Kaveh had seen massing on the street next to the courtyard now issued forth, presenting their spears, and the mob fell back. Hundreds of troops poured into the square, nearly equaling the artisans in number. The craftspeople watched helplessly as the immortals lifted the three masters onto the waiting mares, and looped the ropes around their necks.

"For your sins against Mithra, you must die!" Vidranga raised his arm and let it drop.

The immortals had drawn their swords, and they slapped the rumps of the animals with the flat of the blades. The whinnying mares leapt forward,

leaving their riders twisting at the end of the ropes. Two had their necks broken, and their crotches went dark with the release of piss. The third struggled for a while, his face covered with blotches, until his swollen tongue stuck out and excrement fell through his leggings onto the dust below.

A cry went up from the throng of artisans, who swelled forward again. The immortals lowered their spears, upending the golden pomegranates at their butts, and charged into the mass of flesh. The mob backed away, shrieking, and when the square was clear, dozens lay dead with spear wounds or trampled to death. Kaveh looked away, sickened. Among the dead were little girls, pregnant mothers, and apprentices no more than eight years old.

Vidranga was shouting. "How dare you attempt to interfere with the enforcement of Mithra's own judgment? You filthy riffraff! A tax will be levied on you all from this day for the cult to Mithra, for the purchase of cattle to be sacrificed to him. Every time you pay it, remember how you abetted the lie!"

Kaveh understood. The shah had completely betrayed them. He had taken revenge on some of the more outspoken masters, and he had reimposed most of the tax he promised to revoke, in the guise of a temple contribution. Kaveh ran towards his house, hoping to find and help his mother and his brothers and sisters, praying they had not been trampled or hurt. He dreaded having to tell old Cyrus what had happened. He knew, too, that the strike was over. No one would now have the stomach for it. He marveled at the evil he had seen this day. The ignorant laborers who chanted at the beginning of the strike had been right. The shah himself was *Mithrodruj*, was a liar.

Kaveh edged along the alleyway, having decided to return home. He gradually encountered other artisans leaving the square, trapped now inside the city. He felt a heavy hand on his shoulder and whirled.

"Aren't you the son of that bastard Cyrus?"

"Ustad Cyrus saved the artisans from massacre yesterday morning. Why do you curse us?"

"I say he set us up for what just happened. Why wasn't he with us, why did he stay behind, except to plot with the shah? As for you, you can slay a demon but not stop our friends from being hanged?" He spat in Kaveh's face and walked irascibly away.

Kaveh wiped the spittle from his cheek, shocked. The man had deliberately polluted him, and he would have to bathe ritually now. His

heart sank as he realized that many of the artisans would feel the same way as this man did about his father, and he began to worry for Cyrus's safety.

The Persian prince parried with his mace, breaking Zohak's bronze blade in two. Then Spityura launched himself at his foe, and they fell struggling on the other side of his steed. The Aramean's wiry strength kept Spityura's fangs away from his neck. Zohak twisted away. Around them, hand to hand combat raged, though some on each side were still mounted and jousting with one another.

The Persian commander could see behind Zohak that the Babylonian sorcerer, Asharidu, had stirred awake, and then he vanished in a mist. A sense of dread invaded him. That was not a man to be trifled with, and he could yet twist his bewitchments against the force from Aratta.

Spityura shrugged, realizing he was helpless to recapture the absconding wizard. He noticed that Zohak was limping slightly, favoring his left leg, and then saw an oozing wound on his calf. He feinted high and when Zohak arched back to avoid the blow, Spityura brought the mace down on his lower leg. The Aramean's face contorted in agony and he bellowed like a bull being gelded. He fell, rolling on his back, both hands around his calf, which had gushed with green pus. Spityura aimed a blow to his head, and sent Zohak to the realm of dreams. He directed Gaomant to bind the fallen Bedouin. A susurrus of alarm spread among the Utu as they realized their prince was supine, and they began retreating beyond the caravan in a rout.

"The caravan is ours!" Spityura growled the command to advance on the beasts of burden, and the wolf warriors took the empty reins as the drivers took to their heels.

The Persians made camp with their vast booty inside serried rows of cavalrymen. The haoma frenzy was beginning to wear off, and they moved with leaden fatigue. Those designated for the morning watch drank of the haoma yet again, feeling its fury course through their veins and banishing exhaustion. Those inside the circle of vigilance pulled blankets over themselves and lay upon the brown grass, a blackness descending on them for a few hours despite the growing luminescence of the rising sun.

Spityura called the chieftains together to consult on whether any had seen where Asharidu had fled. None had.

He had a tent pitched for himself in the inner circle of the watch, and directed Gaomant to bring him Zohak, who had regained consciousness, along with the other chieftains.

“This is what you might call turnabout. Now we have a ransom from Bawri.”

Zohak glared at his captor. “I doubt you’ll find Mirdas very eager to redeem it.”

“Bawri is rent by hatred among its leaders? If so it won’t last out the year. Only a unified realm can stand in these days of famine and demons.”

“I understand that Aratta has its own divisions.” Zohak grinned at Spityura’s obvious surprise.

“All Persians are loyal to Jamshid Shah. Do not attempt to insinuate otherwise with your Bedouin guile.”

“Gaomant’s blue tunic tells me he is Dropiki, the tribe of your priests. I understand your Jamshid in one of his drunken rampages confiscated their cattle and fed the meat to the commoners—both actions contemptible among the zoatar.”

Gaomant’s face betrayed no emotion, but he stiffened.

“Still your tongue, Utu, or I’ll have it pulled out.”

“Then there is the unnatural desire the old lush has conceived for his own sister. How do the Sagarti, the tribe of his first queen, feel about that?” He winked at the Sagarti chieftain, Nijara.

Nijara’s hand went to the hilt of his sword.

Zohak stretched, unconcerned. “Though I have to admit, having met the lady in question, I cannot entirely blame her brother for his perverse avidity. She is feral when she lies with a man!”

Spityura reached out and slapped the spiteful visage. “I’ll have you gagged until we receive your ransom, barbarian, if you cannot show respect to the royal family.”

Zohak, his lip split, laughed uproariously. “When your sovereign must be rescued from a black demon by a humble smith, his star is on the descendant, whether I point it out or not.”

“Silence, I said!”

“Prince Spityura, please forgive me. I have been ill mannered. Rather, I meant to offer you my condolences on this tragic state of affairs and to suggest a partnership to rectify it.”

“Now you would speak treason?”

“Just remember, Jamshid has become a dilemma for all his neighbors. Now he is reduced to raiding caravans like a common highwayman. At some point you may need to move against him, and the Utu would be valuable allies for the Dropiki and Sagarti when you do. A prince needs to keep his course of action open.”

“I do not know whether you are courageous to a fault or simply a fool not long for this world. But these words you have spoken make me consider whether it is necessary to forgo the ransom and simply dispatch you on the spot.”

“And you Persians call us barbarians. No Bedouin would slay his own guest. Have you not heard the tale of Nahor, who crawled, a knife betwixt his teeth, toward the tent of his enemy, Hozai? When Hozai spied him, he issued from the tent in a frenzy, scimitar in hand, to dispatch him. Nahor got under his guard and dove into the tent of Hozai, who had prepared a feast. Hozai was forced to entertain his would-be assassin with succulent lamb on rice and raisins, since by penetrating his abode he had become an honored guest.”

“And Persians go wilding to hunt and kill reptiles, the living lie that infests creeks and woods. I hear that you have some admixture of the scaly ones in your own veins.”

Zohak managed to rise, his hands still tied behind his back. The warriors all crouched, weapons drawn. “Now you have maligned me, and I cannot remain here with honor. I shall depart.”

Spityura heard an excited cry go up from the watchmen of the outer circle and wondered if the Arameans were attacking. It would be rash. They were outnumbered and had already been forced to retreat once.

Zohak closed his eyes and stood straight. A wind started up and whirled around him, kicking up dust. Gaomant attempted to strike him on the head with the flat of his sword, but his thrust was stopped by the gale as though it were an adamantine wall. The keening wind took on the hues of the rainbow, beginning to obscure Zohak behind its shimmer. It blew stronger, and pushed the Nar back away from him. Spityura felt himself being carried by it despite attempting to dig in his heels. The clamor of the watchmen and the whinnying of their horses grew louder.

Spityura saw the wizard Asharidu riding straight into the middle of the camp on the back of a manticore, which had already devoured some of the warriors that had attempted to stop it, their ragged limbs still between its three rows of dagger teeth. The head was that of a savage man, with a pug nose, beady eyes, and a low sloping forehead, but the body was that of an enormous roan lion. Above his head hung the forked tail of a scorpion, with which he had stung to death a whole swathe of Persians.

Spityura fought the rainbow gale, which shimmered with unnatural tints, to advance on the thing. It struck out with the two telson stings, the caudal segments behind them clacking. Spityura mouthed a prayer. He

doubted he could parry both of those venomous spikes, which whipped toward him so fast that he had no hope of eluding them.

## Chapter 8

### Pari

Roxanna awaited her fate, kneeling in the brush. Instead of the swish of a blade, she heard the deep voice of the princess.

“You spoke for my enemies.”

“Your highness, I but wished to protect the name of your tribe.”

“It seems your tongue cannot be still. I did not ask you to speak. Your mother served me faithfully. Otherwise I would send you to hell now. But since you have thrown in with these peasants against me, I give you to them. Go and serve Athwya the Aspigan! Never darken the threshold of Aratta again!”

Roxanna’s eyes were scalded with tears. She would almost have preferred to be executed than to be exiled, forever alone, cut off from her family. She dreaded the moment when her father Bahmard heard the news. And Kaveh! Would she ever see him again?

“Run, join them quickly, lest the torches catch you girl! Take advantage of my clemency.”

Yimak pulled her horse up and whirled about, going to oversee the collection of loot from the village.

Roxanna took to her heels, spying the retreating Athwya and Faranak and making for them. They were still helping the elderly out of their huts, and Roxanna joined in, feeling the flames at her back of dwellings already set ablaze. Faranak noticed her with surprise, then nodded, appearing to understand the situation.

The livestock and horses of the village were forfeit, and so they had to walk as fast as they could into the pistachio and almond forest, hoping that the fire would not leap from the erstwhile settlement to the trees. They hurried, fearful that the Nar would change their minds and pursue them out of berserker bloodlust.

Deep in the forest, which hugged the steppe, the trees farther apart than in the lush north, they finally halted and listened for hoof beats, but heard none.

Faranak approached Roxanna, who was still weeping uncontrollably. “Is it exile?”

Roxanna nodded wordlessly, not trusting herself to speak.

“You saved our lives. We have not the wherewithal to be truly generous, but you shall not want as long as you be with us, and my life is a surety for your safety.” She hugged the inconsolable Roxanna, who wept more profusely at the kind words.

The villagers trudged on at a snail’s pace, held back by the children, elderly and infirm. Roxanna wondered if they had a plan.

“Where are we going?” she still sniffled when she spoke.

Faranak inclined her head, her face framed by ebony tresses. “We are only part-time villagers in any case, dear. We pick up and move with our flocks twice a year in search of pasturage, while the grains are growing.”

“But now you have no flocks. What will we eat?”

“Athwya is a great and generous chieftain, and many tribesmen of this land owe him for past boons. In these parts, authority and respect are better coin than specie. Each will donate some sheep and goats, in return for a pledge of some of the newborn lambs and kids. We shall rebuild our herds. In the meantime, the forest is rich in nuts, and its floor in yams and tubers, which we women of the village know how to discover. Many a night you will sleep hungry, as shall we all, but only the weak will expire.”

“No one should die! The palace didn’t need all your produce! They have emeralds and crystal, lapis lazuli and pearl. They have murdered some of your infants and aged this day.”

Faranak fell silent as they trudged on. From time to time the women would spy edible nuts, berries, stems, leaves or roots, and stop to gather them for a spare evening repast. At Aiwisruthrema the chariot of day descended into the trees and then plunged into the vale of twilight, to the accompaniment of the crooning of nightingales.

Roxanna had never been in a forest at night, and started at every unfamiliar sound and call.



Athwya quietly signaled to his villagers to make camp. They could not risk campfires or conversation, lest some of Yimak's men were detailed to watch for them and dispatch them in the dark of night. Roxanna could barely choke down the raw nuts and a piece of grimy root that the other women offered her. Even servants in the palace feasted on sumptuous meals, and she realized that she would now likely become a starveling, like the peasant children that sometimes came to beg in Aratta because of the drought. She was ashamed to consider that the girls lost their looks young that way, and that she would soon be a toothless hag. Some of the vulnerable of Hyrba, she knew, would face death itself in the coming days.

Having wolfed down their nondescript repast, the villagers lay themselves out on the forest floor, pricked by the hardy shrubs and remnants of last season's pistachio shells that dotted it.

Roxanna could not sleep. She kept thinking of Bahmard's home in the royal craft-halls where she had grown up, and of her chambers in the palace. Her family was already in a year-long period of mourning for her mother. Now they had lost Roxanna as well, for she was as good as dead to them. And Kaveh. She thought of his bull-like neck, his rippling biceps that had all too seldom dared embrace her, his generous lips and aquiline nose. Even if she managed to get word to him of her whereabouts and even if he dared sneak out to meet her, he would risk exile as well should it become known. She knew she could not selfishly impose that fate on him, and that her life was over before it had begun.

As she lay sleepless, staring at the spangled night through the furbelows of the budding pistachio boughs, she started.

An ethereal form had congealed on one of the branches, glowing with the faintness of starlight. It had the appearance of a woman.

It floated down and hovered above her. Roxanna realized that it must be a spirit of one who had died but been unable to find the path to paradise. She had heard them whispered of, as dwellers in wastelands and haunters of wayfarers or prisoners in the iron cages of demons, but had disbelieved the tales until now.

The translucent woman, fair to the eye but horrible to the heart, shrieked as it descended toward Roxanna.

“Die! Die!”

Jamshid lounged on his luxurious pillows of rare felt and silk, dyed in royal purple, Yimak in his arms.

“Hyrba's sheep were scrawny.”

She nibbled his ear. "The Apaosha demon has sucked the green out of even sweet grass, brother."

"You took care of the potter girl who dared embarrass you over that demon?"

"She is outlaw now. We shall not hear of her again. What of the blacksmith who was wooing her in the bazaar?"

"He was so popular with the accursed producers that I forbore to move too swiftly. He is very dangerous, and seeks to undermine me at every turn. Now, with the failure of the strike he called for, many voices have turned against him. I shall have him dispatched soon enough."

"How boring, to spend our time with the mention of these ants. Here, let me show you something even you have not seen before. Let us whirl like the wheels of two chariots!" She laughed, her voice like water cascading into crystal.

\* \* \*

When Kaveh arrived, Daena was performing her devotions at the small altar on which she kept a brazier lighted next to her display. Kaveh seated himself on the reed mat behind her wares, and waited impatiently. He picked up a clay image of an unknown god and toyed with it.

"My eyes are illumined, Kaveh. What can I do for you?"

Kaveh looked up startled on hearing Daena's husky voice. The figure of the anonymous deity fell from his hand, crashing onto an idol of Vouruna, which shattered, and knocking down figurines of Indra and Mithra.

"I am so sorry, Kavi Daena. I'll replace it."

Daena frowned, and stood staring at the damage. She seemed lost in thought.

"I did not mean to drop it."

"What? Oh, that's quite all right, it was an accident. I am afraid it may also have been an omen."

"How?"

"Look, Vouruna broke and Indra and Mithra are scattered, before this alien god whose name I do not even know. Vouruna is sovereign of the waters, who balances Mithra and Indra. For Indra is blood-frenzy and chaos, good in times of war but in need of restraint. Mithra is contract and order, but too much order is suffocating. Vouruna, as god of ethics, keeps both in check, lets them work together. Without him, the Mithra beloved by the priests would bind society too tightly, and the Indra of the warriors would give himself over to mayhem."

"I thought we worshipped all three."

"We do. The three together. I am horrified at the idea that we should be left with only world-shattering Indra and ritualistic Mithra, with no moderate, ethical core. Well, enough of omens."

Kaveh looked around. The bazaar was still nearly deserted, with most Persians still eating lunch, so no one was in hearing range of their conversation. "It is about the shah's decree that we sacrifice to him without the zaotars. I need to know what to do."

Daena froze. Then she sighed, and nodded. "Yes, you most certainly do. I do not want you endangering your farr by straying from the truth."

"So? How shall we sacrifice?"

"The shah is not a god and it would be wrong to sacrifice to a human being. It is also wrong to sacrifice without speaking the sacred word."

Kaveh sat stunned. "I have never known you to take the priests' side so strongly before."

Daena frowned. "We kavis are more seers than priests, and for us a ritual is merely a spiritual aid. But even we think it should be performed correctly. That does not mean the zaotars are right not to share their herds during the drought."

"There are dangers in not going along with the shah."

"Those are political dangers, mortal dangers. The threat from a people worshipping a man instead of the gods, and killing livestock indiscriminately with no proper ritual, is infinitely greater. It is a cosmic danger. It will strengthen the vessels of demon-mind everywhere."

"Then we should wholly reject the new worship?"

"I am afraid so."

Kaveh nodded thoughtfully. He thanked her for her advice and rose, then bent over to touch the hem of her light blue pantaloons. She bade him farewell and began sweeping up the bits of Vouruna, setting Mithra and Indra upright, and tidying her display.

Kaveh headed back home, where he found the mood grim. There had not been enough orders to keep the clan busy past mid-morning, so they faced an idle afternoon. Without the commissions of the royal Crafthall, they had to compete with all the other blacksmiths at a time when warriors were, as they put it, embarrassed.

Later that afternoon, Kaveh joined his friends at the house of strength for wrestling. When the smithy had needed him full time, he had only gone once a week, but now he had begun practicing every day. He met up with his cousin Jamaspa and friend Artabanu, who had proved so brave at the quarter gate when the Nar had tried to break the strike. Artabanu, a Persian butcher's son, already sported a potbelly like the udder of a cow, and seemed

to have three chins, two of which quivered when he walked. Ironically, given that he spent his days chopping bleeding meat with a huge, razor-sharp knife, he was the kindest, most compassionate soul Kaveh had ever met. They headed together for the house of strength.

Kaveh squinted at the sun, alarmed at how low it was in the sky. "We are late. Ustad Piltanu will let us have it."

The house of strength's arched gate, inlaid with flowery tiles, announced it from among the monotonous rows of two-story adobe dwellings. They came to the low archway, and ducked as they entered it. It had deliberately been constructed to force the wrestlers to bow as they approached the courtyard. In the center of the courtyard the mud bricks had been removed to create a sandy arena. Beyond it sat Piltanu, the master wrestler who maintained the house of strength.

"Hail Mithra!" the boys said in unison as they straightened up and called upon the god of righteousness to aid them in their attempt to achieve true chivalry. The other boys already limbering up in the courtyard answered with invocations of other gods. Kaveh tensed as he spotted Vivana, who was staring at them with a smirk on his narrow face.

"Hail Yima, Indra's nephew, Jamshid Shah!" The goldsmith's apprentice raised his hands to the heavens.

Kaveh stared back at him and refused to reply. As the three boys advanced toward him, Piltanu himself piously called on Mithra to make them into something other than miserable hooligans.

The master wrestler clapped his hands. "Time for push-ups, now that the tardy have finally shown up. Everybody does a hundred except these three. They do two hundred."

As Kaveh, Artabanu and Jamaspa groaned, all the boys and young men picked up sticks three ells long, with one hand grasping each side, and, still holding them, put their knuckles and palms to the courtyard. Then they spread their legs, their buttocks sticking up in the air like the humps of camels, and began bending their elbows, letting foreheads down so they touched the ground then coming back up. "*Aiva, dva, thri*," Piltanu counted fast, then slowed slightly as they neared fifty. Most of the boys collapsed on hearing the word "*satem*," one hundred. A few could have gone on a bit longer, but most had been taxed. Kaveh and his two friends, their teeth clenched and temples bulging, struggled on, more and more slowly. Artabanu's tummy began to rest frequently on the ground.

"No loafing in between. Come on, come on. One ninety-two, one ninety-three."

"All right," he said when the three had straggled to two hundred. "Now limber up. Let's go. Whirl a bit."

The three friends joined in the whirling with relief, bedraggled with sweat, their arms rubbery.

Piltanu seated himself at the head of the arena and clapped his hands once more. "Time for the first practice match. Any volunteers?"

Vivana raised his hand. "Ustad, I'll take on Kaveh, if he dares." The other boys laughed, some applauding, others jeering.

Kaveh rose and, his legs wobbly, stripped down to a G-string. He went over to a tall black vase in the corner of the courtyard, from which he ladled out sesame oil with which to cover his nearly naked body. He entered the arena and bowed to Piltanu. He knew Vivana was counting on his being exhausted by the extra push-ups.

They circled one another, shouting, and Vivana came in low and fast. Kaveh blocked him. Then he bent his knees and got his hip lower than his opponent's. He stuck out his leg, pushed his thigh against Vivana's, grabbed the other boy's wiry arms, and took him down easily. Kaveh threw himself on Vivana and pinned him definitively. He whispered in his ear, as the other squirmed uselessly. "Roxanna's heart is mine. You have lost there, too, cretin."

Vivana, his face red, smirked. "You need to keep your ear to the ground now that you are in the bazaar, boy. Roxanna's been exiled for impudence by Princess Yimak. None of us can ever so much as speak to her again without sharing her fate."

Kaveh's head spun. Piltanu ordered them to rise and return to their places. When Kaveh did not hear him, he shook the smith's bulging shoulder roughly.

"Now, we should see whether being late improved the skills of our other tardy friends. Artabanu, Jamaspa, get ready and into the sand with you."

The lanky blacksmith, Jamaspa, squared off against Artabanu, the stocky butcher. They pranced from one foot to the other, slapping their inner thighs menacingly, and calling on Mithra. Jamaspa, who had the reach on his friend, managed to grasp him behind the neck, then tried to slip into a half-nelson. Artabanu, his skin slippery with oil, ducked and turned, getting loose. They circled again, shouting and dancing, and whacking their legs above the knees. Jamaspa tried coming in low, getting both hands behind Artabanu's knees, and jerking hard. The butcher went down on his back, and Jamaspa threw himself down on his chest. Artabanu tried to bridge, but, the wind knocked out of him, could not summon the strength.

Piltanu looked searchingly at Artabanu. "You need to be more aggressive, son. Just because he had the reach on you was no reason to wait for him to make the move. Get in under his arms, or use them against him; if an arm is in a good hold, it doesn't help it to be long. You cannot afford to show compassion all the time."

Artabanu rubbed one of his three chins with his thumb and index finger. "But he's my friend."

"You are not doing your friend any favors by putting up a poor fight. When he goes in the ring against a truly tough opponent, he will be unprepared because you went easy on him."

Artabanu blushed, and nodded a jiggling assent. Other boys fought several other matches, until the sun dropped low in the sky. Piltanu carefully observed their technique, and offered suggestions for improvement.

Finally, he rose. "Will anyone accept my challenge today?"

Some of the older boys sometimes tested their mettle against the master, but were usually pinned rather easily. A few of the adults in Aratta could give Piltanu a close match, but none had yet pinned him. Piltanu usually ended the lesson at this point. Today, he kept staring at the ironsmith's son.

"Kaveh, front and center. I want to see if being late really did improve your skills."

Kaveh got up reluctantly, then bowed and stepped into the arena. His heart was so heavy over Roxanna's fate that he had no fight in him. It was all he could do to avoid weeping in front of the other boys.

The two huge opponents hopped ponderously from one foot to the other while circling, slapping their inner thighs and hooting. Kaveh kept his eyes on Piltanu's enormous hips, as the master had himself instructed him. The greased, glistening titan moved in, as the long afternoon sunbeams danced irreverently on his shaven scalp. Piltanu grasped Kaveh's bulging right biceps with his meaty hand and slipped his right arm behind the young ironsmith's narrow lower back. He thrust his right hip into Kaveh's lower abdomen and jerked the boy's arm down while pushing his back forward. He easily flipped the heavy apprentice over on his back. Kaveh had felt the move coming, however, and, prepared, managed to hit the ground with a roll and regain his feet before Piltanu could pin him.

The young ironsmith circled again, chagrined. Piltanu let out a piercing yell and caromed forward. He grasped Kaveh's left wrist and pulled it up behind him. The boy twisted, and reached behind him with his free right hand, but could not get hold of his master or break free. The bald

champion slowly forced the apprentice down on his knees. Then he leaped up and put a scissoring hold with his elephantine legs around the boy's waist, and they both fell back. Kaveh struggled, but knew his master had pinned him.

"Look at it this way." Artabanu clapped Kaveh's shoulder as he returned to the side of the arena and sat cross-legged next to his friends. "None of us dare get in the ring with him."

The bouts over, the boys bowed to their master and called down the blessings of the gods on him. Vivana stood forth, his long face still red from the ease with which he had been beaten.

"Ustad Piltanu, I have an important suggestion."

"What is that, Vivana?"

"Now that the shah has instituted the new worship, I think we should all invoke Yima, the shah's divine name, when we enter and leave. It would show our loyalty to the crown."

Piltanu sat unperturbed at the head of the arena. "Vivana, I urge you all to salute the gods on beginning and ending our sessions. But I have never dictated which gods any individual should honor, and I know that each trade has its patrons, each person a favorite. I won't impose a single worship, though all are, of course, welcome to call on the help of Yima Jamshid, when they like."

"Ustad, would it not be blasphemy if any of us greeted another with the name of a god, and our fellow refused to reply in kind. Wouldn't that imply a rejection of the god?" "Wouldn't it be worthy of death?"

A murmur worked its way through the crowd of perspiring wrestlers. They scrutinized Piltanu for his response.

Vivana stared maliciously at Kaveh, like a fox that had spied a limping bird.

Spityura swung his mace at the mantichore's first sting, deflecting it, but aware that he could not hope to avoid the second.

"*No, Asharidu, let him live. He may be an ally one day.*" Zohak's thoughts seemed to invade Spityura's mind, and he saw the defrocked priest freeze.

The Babylonian wizard made a gesture, and the scorpion tail abruptly halted its strike.

The whirlwind lifted Zohak to the back of the sphinx and abruptly it turned and loped away with the lithe fleetness of a mountain lion. None of the Nar managed to get a sword or spear into it, and the few archers with the wits to try to get off a volley at the retreating form were dismayed to see their arrowheads deflected by its impenetrable hide.

Spityura let out a wolf-growl, maddened by the escape of his prey. But then he surveyed the captured caravan, the camels, horses and asses piled high with finery, carnelian and pearl, dates and reeds, rare spices and salves, and ceremonial weaponry from Babylon, destined for the Medes in Ecbatana. Now they belonged to Aratta. The Bawri desert prince would have made a good captive, but they already had a king's ransom in their hands.

Spityura, his eyes gleaming, pulled himself up to his considerable height and let out a victory cry. The Persian warriors took it up, passing around skins of haoma.

The prince mounted up and rode up to the caravan master. "Prepare the beasts. We leave immediately for Aratta."

The sunburnt old merchant kept his eyes on the ground. "We were bound for Ecbatana, which has paid for these goods already."

Spityura laughed. "King Dioke should have spent something on better security, as well."

"I was promised a commission."

"You will find Persians as generous as Medes, or rather, more so."

The trader prostrated himself to Spityura, then went off to make preparations for setting out.

Spityura consulted with the chieftains, Gaomant, Hutana and Erezav. "The Arameans have retreated, but we cannot be sure they have given up. Escorting a caravan in the wilderness is tougher than attacking one."

Gaomant looked around at them. "Aye, we must defend from every direction, at every vulnerable point. An assault targets a single weak point in the enemy."

Hutana snarled. "You priestly tribes think too much. If Arameans appear, we shall drink from their jugulars, that is all!"

Spityura put his hand on the man's shoulder. "Let us be both wise and fierce, Hutana. That is the way to victory."

Hutana shook his head. "You cannot cross a lion with a fox, my lord." Then he snapped his teeth, imitating the bite to the neck he planned for the Utu.

Erezav, a head shorter than his colleague but all muscle, joined in the snapping, grinning broadly in between. "I don't know, Hutana. I am kind of



a cross between a lion and a fox. I'd like to trick them and then eat their livers!"

Despite the onset of spring, night had been frigid and hoar-frost still salted the ground as they set out. Aggressive clouds began to obscure the sun, making it difficult to tell where the grey mists ended and where the dull clay began on the horizon. From the necks of the caravan animals hung large bronze bells, which rang out the party's progress in a tuneless celebration of motion. From some of the asses chickens hung by one leg, occasionally flapping their russet wings and squawking their raucous duets with the bells.

Not long after they set out, the dark grey clouds began spraying them with mist. Slowly, the droplets turned into a downpour, a rare treat those days for the Nar, who boyishly galloped through it whooping, their arms raised to the sky.

Spityura, worried that they were being tracked by Zohak and his Bedouin, wished they would keep their wits about them. Slowly the torrent made the soil into treacherous mud. Then they came to a narrow, fast-flowing naphthaline stream that had sprung up suddenly with the rain storm. They began to ford the sulphurous water, though some of the horses were skittish and one lost its footing, with steed and rider washed away in the flash flood.

Spityura was up to his hips in the treacherous, chilly waters, his horse struggling against the swiftness of the flow. A brown face emerged from the water, knife between his teeth. He grabbed the haft of the dagger and angled himself in the current, allowing the stream to propel him at Spityura like an arrow.

The prince stood on his horse's back and launched himself at the hurtling assassin, catching his wrist in one meaty hand and banging his forehead into the man's nose. The impact almost sent his mind into the blackness, and a sharp pain shot through his head. But he heard the agony in the other's low. They tumbled under water, grappling. Spityura could not get his head above the water and was afraid of breathing in the deadly, icy water.

The Aramean struggled to bring his deadly blade ever closer to Spityura's body as they were tossed to the bed of the stream by the turbulent waters. The prince's foot found a raised rock and got a momentary purchase. He leaped to the surface and took a lungful of air, holding the Bedouin's wrist away from him. He squeezed hard, and the Aramean yelped and dropped his knife.

His foe twisted free and shouted, "Zohak will be pleased that I failed. But consider this a warning from Asharidu not to interfere with him again!" Then he slipped under the white froth and was gone.

Spityura a great crocodile in the water, swam with powerful strokes to the other bank, fighting the current, and pulled himself up. His horse, Frinaspa, had forded the stream alone and had been wandering up and down looking for his master. Now he whinnied and came galloping over, nuzzling the prince's cheek. The other men gathered round.

Hutana dismounted and helped Spityura up. "My lord, what transpired?"

"An assassination attempt. It seems the wizard begrudged us his caravan."

"I will personally use his balls in a spell of my own if I ever catch up with him!" Hutana snarled, angry as usual.

"Last I saw, he was running away in the company of a cripple and a monster. Give him no more thought."

Still, the faces of his boon companions were grim and a hope of vengeance lit their eyes.

The caravan and its escort resumed its journey. Although their horses' hooves sank deep in the mud for most of the morning, the terrain was passable. They entered thickets filigreed with wild vines and pomegranate, blackberry and other bushes. By mid-morning the caravan and the warriors who had captured it neared Aratta. Spityura glimpsed the walls of the city in the distance, nestling in a long, broad valley that, unlike virtually all the landscape through which they had passed, still retained a sheen of spring greenery.

The guards at the city gate saluted and opened it with alacrity, eager to please the victorious prince.

"All hail Prince Spityura, light of the World!"

As they rode into the center of the city, bringing the caravan to the bazaar docks to be unloaded, the half-starved artisans sent up cheer after cheer, dancing in the dusty streets.

Gaomant was on his way to oversee delivery of the Dropiki cut of the loot to his people, including the zaotars, who had fallen on hard times with the loss of so many of their cattle to the shah's exactions.

He stopped to talk to Spityura. "Beware, my lord, for you are a hero to your people."

Spityura eyed him in puzzlement. "Then why should I beware?"

"Your brother the shah can abide only one hero in Aratta, my lord."

## Chapter 9

### Bone Snake

*The enormous serpent sunned itself on an outcropping of rocks, its cavernous maw smelling humans. It had not fed for weeks, and the water buffalo it had gorged on over a month ago was now chalky bone dust and drying jerky on the desert floor. It was hungry, and could foresee that the humans would walk into its lair of their own accord. They smelled desperate. They reeked of disease and reptile venom, and it knew that like seeks like.*

Zohak, astride his black Arabian mare, lifted the hood from the falcon's head, as it perched on his gold-and-red leather glove, and with a flick of his wrist sent it soaring into the lapis lazuli sky. It quickly reached its hunting height, and with unblinking eyes surveyed the atmosphere's nether regions for game. For a moment the falcon ceased flapping its wings, gliding in the warm breeze like a spearhead.

It plummeted without warning, descending with outstretched claws on a dove. The white, plump bird veered, just escaping the tridents the falcon had aimed at it.

The russet predator checked its headlong descent, gaining altitude again as its prey put on speed, resuming its journey north, where there would be trees and cover. The hawk positioned itself once more above and ahead of the frantic ivory figure.

Then it dropped out of the sky and collided with its prey.

In a whirl of savage lust it pecked at its eyes, tore the feathers from its pinions and wings, grasped at its neck.

The dove, its battered head bright as Mars and one eye hanging out, struggled loose and plunged toward the beige sand. Just before impact, it spread its scruffy, pewter wings and sped along only feet above the grit, probing desperately for a crevice in the rare outcroppings of black rock where it could hide. The barren pebbles and smooth volcanic stones refused to shelter it. Frenzied, it soared north, hoping the edge of the desert was near.

The stalker descried it again and bolted after it with sure, rapid strokes of its auburn wings.

The dove espied its tormentor above it, and veered again.

The falcon, relentless, swerved as well, then swooped. Its eager claws found the delicate neck as it slammed into the smaller bird. The neck snapped, and the bundle of white energy and dread went limp and flaccid. The victor extended its dark bronze wings and flapped them robustly, to regain height and control with the added weight of its prey. Once it hit its stride, it beat the air easily with firm strokes, like an ethereal oarsman ferrying a soul to the netherworld.

The slack dove thumped into the sand in front of Zohak's horse, and the falcon proudly sought its perch on his shimmering glove. Zohak pulled the velvet hood over his bird's upright head, tying the drawstring with one hand.

"It was too easy," Zohak lamented. "The dove was injured early on."

"A swift, clean kill possesses its own sort of beauty." Asharidu squinted at the prince in the bright morning light.

Zohak's mount shifted on its hooves in the sand, and he grimaced.

"Your leg?"

"Yes. I have felt pain and weakness ever since that misbegotten demon bit me. A lightheadedness comes and goes. Your salves helped for a while, but even they never effected a cure. The long journey alongside the caravan to the land of the Medes, and the return on the back of the manticore was hard on my leg. "

"I have been meaning to suggest a remedy to you, but hesitated lest I be misunderstood." Asharidu leaped down and bagged the dead game, slinging it behind Zohak's saddle with the rest of the morning's catch.

"I could hardly misunderstand being healed." Zohak's eyes narrowed as he studied the Babylonian's fluid face beneath the fez. His small, dark eyes continually shifted their focus, darting here and there, as if on the lookout for an assailant. His beard was braided into separate rows. His

nostrils curved up on either side of his sharp nose. Short and slight, he stayed in motion, if only by tapping his thumb with his forefinger. Some of the Utu tribesmen, for whom the ability to remain completely still was the test of a hunter and warrior, disliked his tics and avoided him except when they fell ill.

"It is just that the treatment is, well, unorthodox." Asharidu remounted his steed with the awkwardness of the city bred.

"I am becoming impatient. It has been months, and I should be back to full strength. The accursed wound still leaks a bit, as well. It should have healed by now."

The Babylonian nodded. "You are already making a beginning. You recognize that something is not as it should be in your body."

They wheeled and headed for camp and breakfast. Inside Zohak's tent a slave-girl brought them broiled dove-breasts, then a drink made from yoghurt. Asharidu gazed appreciatively at the pert face and the bare breasts, round as pomegranates, of the serving girl, and watched her knee-length dark brown hair sway over her shapely buttocks as she left for the slaves' tent.

"You have good taste in slaves." The wizard smiled.

"She is yours." Zohak waved his hand absently.

Asharidu nodded his gratitude. He moved back from the large bronze tray, having eaten his fill, and wiped his greasy hands in his curled beard. "About your cure."

Zohak looked up sharply. "You have my attention."

"You may have to brace yourself for it."

"I do not have a reputation for a weak stomach." The prince sat up stiffly, feeling the blood in his cheeks.

"It involves the principle of fighting like with like." Asharidu grimaced apologetically.

Zohak's mouth dropped open for just a second, but he recovered as quickly as he could. He suspected the wizard had seen the reflex, since he had been trained to observe. "What do you mean?"

"We must go reptile-hunting. We need eyeballs and testicles in particular. And we shall also require some human hair." He jerked his thumb in the direction of the slave tent, a vulpine smile on his face. "Did you not think hers was getting a bit long?"

Zohak frowned. "This sounds more like the dark sciences than medicine."

Asharidu threw his head back and laughed with both lungs. "A common layman's misconception. There are no dark sciences. The sciences

are simply means of controlling nature and contrary spirits. Control can be exercised for good or ill, but no difference exists in the means, in either case."

"I will not have human material used! The daughters of God have forbidden it, Utu tribal custom forbids it."

The Babylonian pursed his dark amethyst lips petulantly. "Well, perhaps a substitute will work. A clipping from your horse's tail, for instance. But I can guarantee nothing in that case, for Lamashtu may not accept it. We shall simply be conducting a trial, with yourself as the subject."

Zohak, his face still burning with emotion, scowled as he put weight on his leg to stand. "A trial, then. We shall have to hunt the reptiles this morning, before Mirdas gets back, so we can avoid raising the old goat's suspicions. He, at least, is unlikely to appreciate the difference between white magic and black. And he will be in a rage over our losing the caravan."

The two men brought Zakira along for their trek into the desert. As they knelt behind an outcropping of rock on the sizzling sand, nearly blinded by the forenoon sun, Zohak suddenly spotted a sluggish lizard in a crevice. In one smooth motion he lifted his dagger from its leather scabbard and pitched it back-handed at the creature, which attempted to scurry, its bright green tail curving rapidly first to the left, then to the right. The dagger pierced its scaly hide and clanged against the rock face, then both fell to the sand, the reptile squirming on its back. Zohak's mind flashed back to the scene of the monitor thrashing on its back at twilight in the gully, but he shook his head and shuddered. He and Asharidu approached the foot-long dying beast. Zohak reached down toward it.

"No! This kind is poisonous!"

The thing wrenched its neck and struck at Zohak's outstretched hand, its teeth sinking into the flesh.

The wizard tossed his own dagger, the point pinning the writhing reptile's neck to the crusty sand below. Its scales glinted in the sun as it shuddered and began to yield to death.

Zakira took his hand. "Master, we need an antidote. The venom will not take long to paralyze you.

"Camp is not far. I have been snake-bitten before."

"Watch out!" Asharidu shoved his shoulder and Zohak rolled away from the rock, his warrior's instincts taking over.

As Zohak came up, dagger in hand, his wounded leg on fire, he heard a hiss, and came face to face with a glaucous snake whose head was as twice

as big as a man's. It glided over the rock against which he had been resting, and curled itself in front of him, its eye sockets rising to the level of his own.

Zohak's eyes bulged and he almost dropped his dagger. The serpent was skeletal. No scaly skin enveloped its form, no muscles or ligaments connected its endless vertebrae. Its pewter bones looked as if the sun had bleached the dead animal for years. And yet it slithered in the connected manner of the living. Its monstrously long fangs came right up to its upper jaw bone, and its deep, crow-black eye sockets stared blankly yet with a malign intelligence.

It lunged.

In leaving behind her sleeping children, Matroyao felt as though she were cutting off both of her legs at the knee, but she had no choice. Jamshid was too suspicious to leave her quarters unguarded for a moment, and she guessed that unseen spies lurked beyond the guards. There was no way for her to spirit her daughters out of the palace without being caught. She herself, however, might well succeed in her desperate attempt at escape.

She had dressed in the blue tunic and conical hat of the zaotars and was accompanying Vandid Khim through the corridors. One of his beardless neophyte priests had stayed behind, and would try to leave unnoticed later in the day.

The guards stopped them, looking into the eyes of each priest. Matroyao froze.

“Why are you leaving so soon?”

Vandid Khim stared at him with the authority of an elder. “We priests are not like the nobles, who conduct business at leisure, son. We cannot risk the sacred flames at the temple going out while we remain here.”

One of the guards came up to each priest, examining his features carefully. Matroyao knew that any hint of nervousness on her part could be fatal at this moment. She also knew that to feign being noncommittal was the most difficult act in the world.

He took her by the chin. “You should stay.”

Her heart thumped. Had he recognized her?

“What is the meaning of this?” Vandid Khim flashed his anger.

“His features are fine.” He looked down on her from a height. “Are you sure you do not want to stay the night, boy? The immortals could offer you a great deal of entertainment!”

The other guards guffawed. “He wouldn’t be able to sit down for a month afterwards!”

Vandid Khim harrumphed. “The zoatars uphold the order of the realm. They are not to be trifled with, especially when Apaosha roams beyond the walls of Aratta.”

The guards sourly motioned to them to pass.

Matroyao had been sure the man would recognize her. But she was well aware that clothing and occasion were powerful pieces of legerdemain. The eye only saw superficially and let the other things fill in the details.

Outside the gates, they descended into the bustling city, making their way to the temple. There, Matroyao changed into the clothing of a peasant woman. The coarse cloth scratched and made her itch on the back between the shoulder blades, where her hands could scarce reach. She picked up an empty straw basket, as though she had brought in vegetables to sell from her village and had unloaded her wares.

Vandid Khim brought her a donkey. “It is not the steed you deserve, my lady, but a peasant woman on horseback would never be allowed to pass the gates.”

“You are risking everything, old man. I fear for your life if Jamshid ever comes to suspect your role.”

“There is no reason for him to. Besides, a father who has already buried his eldest son has little reason to live.”

Matroyao felt tears sting her eyes. She had seen Jamshid’s brutal murder of Zopyrus with her own eyes, and felt ashamed that her own husband had committed such a crime. She knew it was the constant imbibing of haoma that had driven the shah mad.

“I am sorry, Vandid Khim.”

“It is a matter unrelated to you, my lady. It is between Nar and zoatar now. It is well that you will not be here when the two clash.”

“I’ll find a way to come back and stop it, old man. Do not despair. And who knows, perhaps Jamshid will sober up and experience some remorse.”

“My lady, when a die is cast, it cannot be rolled again. The shah has shaken the cup, and snake eyes have come up.”

She mounted the donkey with both legs hanging over its right side, and tried to accustom herself to its choppy gait. At the city gate, the guard waved her through without a second look. She was one of hundreds coming and going that day.

Vandid Khim had attempted to dissuade her from this perilous journey alone. But she had a premonition that first Jamshid would proclaim a divorce, and then he would announce an execution. Yimak would not want a divorced wife in the same city, lest the shah ever entertain regrets and



rekindle the old flame. She was ruthless and had gained an iron hold on her brother.

Matroyao struck out north toward Ecbatana and the palace of Dioke Shah. Her posterior already was sore from her steed's unfamiliar rhythm, but she dared not slow his pace. A gaited donkey, he had been trained by the priests to move faster than a trot, even though he appeared only to be walking. Her heart ached when she thought about Scheheranaz and Arnavez, her little girls. How horrified they would be to discover her gone! Would that fearsome Yimak take an interest in them, warping their souls?

She most feared being exposed at night, or meeting rogues on the highway. In one of the saddlebags she had stowed a bow and a quiver full of arrows, but did not know if she could get to them fast enough if she were waylaid. She could not sling them over her shoulder, for that would mark her as a warrior on the run. No peasant would be permitted to travel armed, and a soldier under orders would be on horseback and likely in the company of others.

More than the dangers of the road, she was apprehensive of Jamshid's seven-ringed goblet, in which he could see the world at will. If he knew of her departure while she was still so close to Aratta, he could easily discover her whereabouts and have his immortals ride out for her.

The topaz sun was slung by the revolving vault toward the west more rapidly than she had expected, and sunset was approaching without her having spied a village where she could seek refuge for the night. She had a bag of humble danaka coins with her to pay for lodging, since specie would have raised suspicions and invited larceny.

It was already twilight when she saw three horsemen approaching. The neared, then halted.

"What have we here, a widow traveling alone at night?"

"Widows miss it, mate. We should take pity on her."

Matroyao dismounted. "My lords, I can pay for passage." She began rummaging in the saddlebag as if looking for her bag of coins.

"We have no need of your copper, wench. We prefer to be paid in kind."

Before she could grasp her bow, the lean wiry one had leaped down and grabbed her wrist, his broad smile showing yellow, broken teeth through his straggly moustache. He stank, and his breath reeked like the sulfur in a dragon's maw.

Another dismounted as well and was running over, undoing the threads that held up his pantaloons.

Piltanu deflected Vivana's dangerous question. "I am not a priest or a judge, to decide such matters. Those who come to my house of strength simply desire to learn chivalry, and that is what I teach. Chivalry is one thing, theology another."

Vivana looked with disappointment at his teacher, then fixed Kaveh with a menacing stare. The other boys, seeing that no open conflict would break out that day, began to file out into the alley so they could reach home before the dread night fell.

Vivana was waiting for him outside. "I am going to report you to the bazaar guards, Kaveh. Do not get too comfortable in that hovel of yours."

Kaveh had beaten his rival before, but this time just stared at him. "Persians tell the truth, Vivana. They don't serve the lie. You cannot be one of us. Your mother must have enjoyed a Mannean manservant on the side."

Vivana knew better than to reply physically. "You might as well just climb atop a tower of silence and give your flesh to the vultures right now, blacksmith. You are a dead man."

Kaveh wended his way home through the dusty shortcuts he had begun to know well. The sight of the humble little hut always depressed him when he thought of their old home near the royal craft halls. It was almost night when he arrived, and his mother chided him for tempting the demons that way. Cyrus, Nefayan, Jamaspa and the other men of the clan were sitting in the courtyard sipping mugs of beer, their faces grim. The city rang with drums, flutes, tambourines, and trumpets as the populace marked the disappearance of the sun, their shield against the devils of gloom. Kaveh thought achingly of Roxanna. The experience of sharing the kidenn stone had strengthened the bond between them the way burning coals strengthened iron. He wondered if Vivana had been telling the truth. If she was in the wilderness, she had no such shield in the night.

Kaveh hated living in one room with his entire family behind the bazaar, and missed crafting fine swords and daggers for the royals and their guards. The new, cramped workshop occasionally produced weapons for tribesmen, but on nothing like the previous scale, and he now spent much of his time hammering out humble tools for workers and peasants, and simple anklets and bracelets for town women. His aspiration to create a completely perfect, major piece of work seemed farther away than ever.

His father was still master of the ironsmiths, but most of the men said that they could no longer afford dues after they paid their taxes, and the post brought in little more than promissory notes and nasty looks as income.

Some artisans half-blamed Cyrus and Kaveh for the executions of the striking guild masters, and Kaveh found himself having to defend his family honor with his fists. But he often did so guiltily, since he could not erase from his own mind the image of the dead women and children he had seen lying awkwardly in the main square after the shah's troops charged them. The apprentice felt weak from eating only one meal a day, all they could now afford, and some days he had little interest even in his one bowl of porridge. He wondered if the court would come after him after Vivana had reported him. And what if they came after his whole family? He did not sleep that night, his eyelids refusing to close.

The next day he and Jamaspa headed out to the bazaar to man their ironworks stall. They reached the main square in time to hear town criers delivering the latest decree.

"The shah has been generous with the loot of the caravan, liberated by Prince Spityura. But in the aftermath, prices in the market went up, and the court had no share in that prosperity. A tax will be levied of one half on all bazaar goods sold, to support the new cult of Yima!"

The other criers circulated into side streets and living quarters. "A tax of one half!" they proclaimed.

In the main square, the artisans reacted angrily.

"I could barely feed my family as it is. Now I have to give up half of it?" a tinsmith pushed the crier.

A crowd began assembling, chanting back against the message of the criers.

One of the smiths saw Kaveh and Jamaspa and came over to them. "Can you believe this cow manure? We were wrong to agree to end the last strike. Now the shah thinks we are weak and he can do to us what he pleases."

Jamaspa grinned. "Next they'll be saying they'll keep the bulls and we can have the bullshit to eat."

Kaveh was angry. He knew that his own household could not afford to give up half their modest earnings without going to bed even hungrier. He thought about how thin his little sister Parmys was getting.

The bazaar guards rode through the crowd, whipping the artisans and ordering them to disperse.

The one named Chishpish saw him. He rode over.

"Is it true, producer? A heretic?" Chishpish's gravelly voice was full of disgust.

Kaveh kept his eyes on the baked bricks of the square.

“Got nothing to say for yourself? Let’s try this. I greet you in the name of Yima, lord of the underworld. What say you?”

Kaveh’s gorge rose. “I affirm that Ahura Mazda is the wise creator.”

“I’d say that’s clear defiance of the shah.”

The other smiths had heard. A tinsmith’s face reddened. “The shah is starving us! I wouldn’t worship him if he was the last being on earth. Good on you, boy!”

“The shah is a lie to the lord of contracts!”

As had happened before, the angry artisans crowded around Kaveh, and some began murmuring, “Demonslayer!”

Then a leather worker shouted “Jamshid is the demon that needs slaying!”

Chishpish leaned over on his horse and gave Kaveh a slap. “This is rebellion. blacksmith, I’d advise you to support the king.” He raised his baritone voice above the chanting of the artisans. “Is the shah god? Will you pay the tax?”

Kaveh kept his eyes down and refused to answer.

“I bind you to answer me or it is death!” Chishpish raged, his short sword out of its scabbard.

A soft glow suffused the forest around Roxanna and she realized it was coming from her, not the pari descending menacingly from above.

She rolled to the side and gained her feet, then ducked behind a pistachio tree. The specter moved like the wind, and was suddenly before her again.

She aimed a blow at Roxanna’s face, but the potter girl ducked. She grabbed a handful of duff from the forest floor and cast it into the pari’s face. It grunted, briefly blinded, and rubbed her silver eyes with phantasmal fingers. Roxanna ran back toward camp, hoping some others had been woken and that there might be safety in numbers.

She saw Athwya, a large rock in his hand, and sprinted to him. The pari streamed after her.

“Begone, baleful spirit!” He cast the stone, and it knocked her against a tree trunk, falling on her foot. She strained, trapped by its weight, her white brows knitted in anguish. With an effort that caused her to stretch and elongate, she escaped the stone and flew at Athwya. She slapped him down. He was knocked over, groaning.

“Puny manling! I seek warm flesh, not dead rock.”

Roxanna considered. Despite her ethereal appearance, the pari had connected, hard, with Athwya's now-bleeding face. The stone had briefly trapped her foot. And she had been blinded by detritus. Roxanna had kept a small clay pot with her when she fled the village, to carry water in. She retrieved it and stuck the lid under her left arm.

Roxanna ran at the shade and grabbed its wrist with her right hand. The girl was astonished when the sprite screamed and tried to pull away.

"It burns! Release me!"

She pulled on the pari as hard as she could, stuffing her glowing fist, wrapped around its translucent wrist, into the vessel. Like fog drawn into a pit, the pari flowed into the pot with a whoosh. Roxanna quickly stuck the clay lid back on.

The cries had woken some of the villagers, who crowded round.

"What kind of pairaka witch be you, girl, to capture a fierce pari that way?"

"She's glowing with the *farr*! That's not dark arts, imbecile. She's a person of destiny." Faranak came over and put her arms around her shivering shoulders.

"Thank you." Roxanna's teeth were chattering. The pari's touch had been like ice.

Athwya, still bleeding from his brow, motioned to the villagers to stop crowding her. "It is we who thank you. We were hapless before the fury of that lost wraith."

Roxanna felt his inner strength and was grateful. It reminded her of Kaveh. "What was that being? Why was she so malevolent?"

Faranak hugged her again. "Some people are neither good enough for paradise nor evil enough for the fire of *dozakh*. After death they wander, baleful, seeking vengeance on the living for their limbo."

The camp settled back into an uneasy quiet. Their inability to start a camp fire, lest they signal their position to the men Yimak had sent to search them out, left them vulnerable. Roxanna, despite her exhaustion, did not dare close her eyes.

The mocking call of hyenas, the growling of leopards, the rustling of foxes and other ominous sounds surrounded them in the forest. Roxanna feared the hyenas most of all. They would have been attracted by the pari, since they are grave robbers by nature, and the scent of the children would also have drawn them to the camp. In Aratta, the boisterous artisans made a din at sunset as the Awisruthrema watch began to frighten away such creatures, and then barricaded themselves in their huts until dawn. The displaced villagers had no shelter, and could not risk making a racket.

Roxanna could see at least four sets of eyes among the almond and pistachio trees, and she guessed they were hyenas.

She ran to get Athwya. “Hyenas have surrounded us!”

He and Faranak pulled on quivers and took up bows, and spread the word to others to do the same.

“Half the year, we hunt gazelle with these bows. Hyenas are not quicker.” Faranak, like many Persian women of the warrior tribes, had amputated her right breast so as to draw her bow without hindrance.

“We have hardly any arrows with us. And, gazelles don’t have massive jaws and they don’t bite back.” Roxanna did not think blithe optimism was called for in their situation.

She looked out again beyond the perimeter of the camp. The eyes had multiplied horrifically, and come in closer.

## Chapter 10

### Chariot of Crystal

Kaveh felt the kidenn stone glow in the pouch of his leather smith's apron and a calm came over him. He said in a weirding voice that penetrated the square. "I worship the elder gods and the great god. None other. And the new tax is a lie."

The artisans went wild. They lifted him to their shoulders and paraded him around the square. "Kaveh demonslayer!"

So many of them charged Chishpish and Zavan that the two guards cantered away rather than risk being pulled from their steeds. They rode out to alert the palace.

The bazaar took on the aspect of a carnival, with groups of artisans gathering in the streets to chant, taunt and threaten the court over its rapaciousness. Acrobats and dancers attracted crowds as it became clear that none of the artisans would return to their workshops that day.

Kaveh whirled around at the drumbeat of hooves, and gasped as he saw a team of four horses come trotting through the open palace gate, leading the most remarkable vehicle he had ever seen. It had the shape of a chariot, but appeared to be made of crystal. Silver scythes extended from the axle beams of the six-spoke wheels. Jamshid and his brother Tahmuras stood in the basket, and a man Kaveh recognized as Vidranga, his minister, had the reins in his hands, sitting before the prow.

The crowds fell silent in astonishment.

Prince Tahmuras began making a speech. "Behold the ensorcelled chariot, captured from Babylon, that bestows unimagined power on its rider. In honor of the return to his worldly duties of his royal highness, breaker of cities, Jamshid Shah, we, the nobles and priests of the realm, do surrender to him this prize in hopes of watching him ride with it into battle once more."

"Let him sell it and use the proceeds to reduce our taxes!" Jamaspa shouted.

The nobles, having cowed their artisans with this display of opulence and wizardry, ignored him.

Jamshid looked leaner than the last time Kaveh had seen him, but he was still a robust and muscular man. He had, however, an odd look in his dilated pupils, and the old decisiveness he remembered from earlier audiences at the palace had given way to an uncanny dreaminess. An image came into his mind of the disheveled old beggar who used to live in their alley, who heard voices.

Jamshid surveyed his rebellious subjects. "I have heard your cries of distress. But remember that we face the depredations of the Bedouin of the west, and impudent threats from the Medes of Ecbatana. The famine-stricken Elamites are streaming north, with larceny in their hearts. We must grow or die, must bring Ecbatana and Anshan within our orbit or risk being their slaves. Campaigns require sacrifice." His white robes billowed in the brisk Aduka Naisha breeze. The vehicle gleamed in the slanting spring sunlight, its many-faceted surface glinting in every direction, and reflecting shimmering figures onto the dust beside it.

At the shah's command, Vidranga started the brightly caparisoned horses, pulling hard to the right so that they turned in front of the huge square. Kaveh was never sure of what he saw next. Everyone swore that the singing chariot lifted off from the earth and flew behind the white stallions, which soared like eagles, for some distance before the felines of the wheels again touched the ground. He had no doubt of the potency of Babylonian sorcery, but with the practicality of an artisan he wondered whether perhaps the chariot wheels had hit a large rock, or maybe the way light reflected off its crystal car had created an illusion.

Jamshid made a show of looking up at the sky, staring into the sun in a way no mortal could do without being blinded.

The assembled nobles and their attendants let out a victory cry, cheering the shah. Kaveh knew they all thought his withdrawal as a holy man had given him the powers of levitation that the Persians associated with mystics. When Jamshid made another pass in front of the throng, his straight white teeth flashing a brilliant smile, he seemed a different person.



He had his hand on the pommel of his sword and looked spoiling for a fight. The dreaminess had dissipated.

Prince Tahmuras turned and bowed before the shah, holding his two hands together in a sign of profound respect. "The Great King, the King of Kings, has reclaimed his place at the head of Aratta's conquering armies. He has outdone the Magi of the Medes, causing his chariot to fly through the air higher than any has ever done before. He alone is the sun-gazer. Let the evil daha warlocks in Ecbatana tremble before the prowess and power of the Persian king! On to Ecbatana! On to Ecbatana! On to Ecbatana!"

The nobles and immortals took up the chant. They were clearly elated at the thought that Jamshid might lead them back into battle, and that they might have another chance to challenge Elam and expand into Anshan. Kaveh knew that the warrior caste was beginning to feel the pinch of the world's prolonged drought, and desperately wanted new raiding grounds from which they could build up their depleted stocks of cattle.

Jamshid surveyed his bedazzled subjects. "Who will donate to this campaign, for the prosperity of the Persians? Who fears and worships the lord of the underworld?"

The fickle artisans, who had been on the verge of revolt before the chariot flew, shouted martial slogans, either out of enthusiasm or in sudden fear of the shah's necromancy. "All praise Jamshid, master of flight!"

"Who will donate half to this campaign!"

"The Persians will! The people of truth will!"

Kaveh wondered what they thought they would eat while the military campaign was prosecuted. And what if it failed?

That night, Kaveh slept uneasily. He knew that his defiance had been noted by the Nar. Another bazaar strike and the solidarity of the artisans might have leant him some protection, but the shah had wowed the commoners with his soaring crystal chariot and the promise of military victory.

At dawn, as the sky painted everything in mother of pearl, he heard a loud rapping. It sounded like someone pounding on the front door with a blunt metal instrument. Kaveh heard his father, who was already awake, tramp toward the stairs. He leaped up and followed. Cyrus stopped and dutifully fed the hearth fire they kept burning in a corner of the courtyard. They crossed the courtyard and came to the large wooden gate.

"Who is it, this time of the morning?" Old Cyrus made no attempt to hide his irritation.

"Zavan, guard of the bazaar."

Cyrus nervously opened the door. Kaveh saw the bronze-helmeted warrior accompanied by five or six others. "How may I be of service, my lord?"

"Is this the residence of Cyrus Blacksmith and his son Kaveh?"

"It is." Cyrus's eyes widened as he looked around at his son in the pastel light of dawn. Behind them, Kaveh heard the rest of the clan descend noisily from the rooftop into the foyer, curious as to what was going on.

The low-browed titan in his gleaming chain-mail poked his finger in Cyrus's barrel chest. "So, you won't pay the new cult tax, eh? We shall see about that. I have been ordered to arrest you and make an object lesson of you."

"With all due respect, my lord, no tax collector has yet come to us with any demand, for us to refuse it. Moreover, we'd be within our rights to ask for an abatement. There is no work for my smithy because of the drought. When did you last buy a new sword or dagger? His royal majesty has never before begrudged his artisans a week or so in coming up with the tax."

"You could pay in kind, out of your inventory of metal goods."

"And then live on what for the remainder of the month?"

The warrior pushed Cyrus hard in his chest, and he stumbled back. "Watch your tongue, producer lizard. You are an artisan. Make more blasted daggers."

Cyrus regained his balance and stood silently, with the ponderous dignity of a man who creates with his hands.

"Or I'll bet this little filly would fetch a handsome dowry." Zavan pointed at Parmys, and the other soldiers sniggered.

"Father! It's all right, just a joke." Parmys was obviously afraid the brute would provoke Cyrus into doing something foolish. Utana, who usually had a childish wisecrack at the ready, looked mischievously at Zavan but held his tongue for once.

Another of the warriors stood forth. Kaveh recognized the craggy face and tiny eyes as belonging to Chishpish. "There is more than one charge against your household. This little delinquent here refuses to worship the shah in his aspect as Yima, Lord of the Underworld. When someone greets him by hailing Yima, he refuses to reply."

Kaveh's stomach dropped, and he clenched and unclenched his fist.

"Well? You always have such a galloping mouth, producer. Is the charge true, or not?" Chishpish's eyes, red from a binge the previous night, fixed themselves on Kaveh, who hung his head. He remembered his promise to Daena never to lie, and was tempted to break it. The warriors

confronting him, lanky and powerful, exuded hard reality. The idea that he could help defeat an imaginary evil being called Azhi Dahaka by always speaking the truth had never seemed sillier to him than at this instant, when a lie would have been so useful. In the end, he could not betray Daena.

"It is true, my lord." He heard the warriors gasp.

Zavan gestured to his men, who came forward and grabbed Cyrus, Argoste, Kaveh and Parmys, then pushed them brusquely into the alley and began marching them at spear point. "Come along. We are going for a short walk."

Matroyao felt the old wolfish impulses of her warrior days rising in her breast. She pulled sharply against the joined thumb and forefinger of the ruffian grasping her wrist, breaking his hold where it was weakest. She thrust her hand into the saddlebag, and came out with a bow. She struck the man across the teeth with it, with all her strength, hearing them splinter. Then she hit him on his low brow. He had time to look surprised before his bloodied face went blank and he dropped like a boulder in an avalanche.

Moving like leopard, she strung an arrow into her taut bow and felled the ne'er-do-well running toward her, the arrow piercing his neck. He gurgled and pulled at it, spitting blood, drowning in his own vital essence as he fell back. The third highwayman was still mounted, and attempted to whirl his steed around and flee. Her twanging arrow found his heart, and he bit the dust.

Matroyao, her chest heaving as she tried to get her breath, realized that she could not trust the roads, especially at night, and needed to find a village to shelter in. Now that the highway was deserted, she no longer needed the camouflage of the donkey, and she instead would benefit from the swiftness of the rogue's mare. She approached it with an apple she had been given as part of her provisions on the flat of her hand, clicking her tongue and speaking the language of a seasoned rider to a beloved animal. It let her approach it, and clearly enjoyed having its neck stroked, then bit hungrily into the apple. She let it have the whole thing, which it devoured, as she bent her fingers back out of the way. Likely the criminal element did not properly feed their livestock.

Matroyao transferred her bags to the mare and mounted it. She decided to head into the pistachio forest, expecting to find villages on the other side of it.

A double hour into her journey, she heard the derision of hyenas and the whimpering of children. She looked for a camp fire and saw none.

“I come in peace!” she shouted, lest the forest dwellers have watchmen in the trees ready to cut down strangers.

Matroyao thought it strange that no one replied. In the moonlight, she saw a striped hyena prowl nearer and nearer to a young woman who seemed to be holding rocks or pottery shards as her only weapon. The deposed queen got out her bow and dispatched the hyena, which yelped horribly as it died. She got off another three arrows in quick succession, piercing its barking compatriots. Their death throes scared off the others in the pack, which high-tailed it into the forest.

She approached the band of itinerants. They seemed defenseless and stared at her more in wonderment than menace.

She dismounted. “You need to make a campfire.”

The brave young woman put her finger to her lips. She whispered, “We cannot risk it. Rapacious Nar of the queen are seeking us.”

The queen! Matroyao on reflection realized they must be speaking of the avaricious Yimak, not of herself. “Without a fire, the predators of the forest will do worse things to you than the queen’s immortals.”

The young woman bowed to her. “I am Roxanna. Thank you for saving us.”

Matroyao recognized her--- she had been a serving girl to Yimak. Servants kept their eyes lowered in the palace, and she hoped the girl did not know her own features. “I am Hvovi, an amazon without a mistress.”

A tall, square-jawed man approached and introduced himself as Athwya. “I am chief of the village of Hyrba.”

“And a fine village it seems to be.”

He looked around ruefully. “We are in exile from it for the moment. I do not know your loyalties, noble lady. But we have been hard done by the Aratta court.”

“How many archers in your band?”

“Most of the able-bodied are good with a bow. We hunt much of the year. But we had to flee with few of our belongings and lack for arrows.”

“If you will give me refuge, I think I can help you.”

He laughed softly, clearly afraid of attracting attention but unable to contain himself. “It is the wretched indeed who would take refuge with such as ourselves.”

She strode into the midst of the camp and was greeted by the man’s wife, Faranak, who was missing a breast and therefore a warrior in her own right.

The villagers gathered around her as she explained her plan. Then, under her supervision, they brought dry branches from the forest floor,

cleared the detritus and made a dirt barrier around the wood pile. Then they rubbed sticks together, starting a fire.

Before long, they heard the hoof beats and wolf cries of approaching cavalrymen.

In a flash, Zohak shifted his dagger to his left hand and unsheathed his curved saber, keeping the cutting blade in front of him, and putting his weight on his good leg. Asharidu and the bald Zakira were huddled together over to his left. From the sounds Zakira was making, her mental balance could no longer be depended on. Asharidu, his eyes averted, was comforting her, and no doubt himself, with some mumbled formulae of protection. Zohak's saber arm trembled slightly with the fever, but the strength of a berserker was upon him and his grip remained firm. Beyond the skeletal reptile shimmered another apparition, which Zohak could barely make out, though he thought he descried a lion's maw, the curves of a woman's hips, and a pair of falcon's talons.

*So these are the exiguous mortals that would bind Lamashtu!* The osseous snake's rasping voice sounded in their minds. Zakira screamed, then collapsed into hysterical laughter. Zohak lunged heavily at the saurian, but, its vertebrae clicking, it slithered out of his reach. Turning, the great white skull hurtled itself at Zohak, fangs wide open. His saber clanged against its ear-hole, deflecting it. The Aramean prince hacked at the enormous alabaster fang as though it were another scimitar that he was seeking to break. His hand seized with agony as the blade bounced back with even more force than he had put into the blow.

The massive skeleton reared back, hissing, ready to strike.

In a blur Zohak could not make out, its fang penetrated his already-wounded leg. He screamed, and saw black descend over his eyes. He struggled to keep conscious, knowing it as death otherwise.

Zohak woodenly limped right at the monster, getting under its head and then entering its empty elongated rib cage. It abruptly writhed sidewise, attempting to crush him or impale him with the tips of its ivory ribs.

Zohak ducked the concatenation of rattling ribs, leaping back out of the bony frame.

The moon-like head loomed over him, rearing again for a deadly strike.

Zohak ran limping to behind the campfire, putting it between the serpent and himself. It pulled itself up in front of him again, as if to deride the protection a puny fire could offer the insolent human.

The Aramean prince, his arm a blur, lifted the handle of Asharidu's bronze pot with his saber blade and pitched it forward at the skeleton. It handily dodged the bronze vessel, but the boiling-hot potion drenched its neck and ribs. Zohak heard Asharidu gasp as the desiccated old reptile's bones melted or came apart. It dissolved in a hissing mass of cartilage, and the stench of sulfur filled the air.

Zohak surveyed the area to make sure the threat was gone. Then he limped briskly over to Asharidu and grabbed him by the collar of his brown robe.

"What in the name of all demons did you bring down on us?"

He saw fear in the Babylonian's eyes. "Something went wrong with the spell. I cannot imagine what--"

"Spell? I knew it! This was no medicine, but an exercise in the black arts!"

"I told you that a spell can be used for ill or good. Now let go of my tunic and let me think."

Zohak wearily released his grip and walked over to the campfire to arrange his bedding, his calf in agony from yet another puncture. "Just do not have any more thoughts that bring down on us apparitions."

Asharidu squatted, then suddenly leapt up. "I have it! It is the admixture in your veins of the chameleon's vital essences. Somehow the presence of dragon blood attracted that demoness Lamashtu here."

Zohak lay down and pulled a woolen blanket over his face. "I see. The whole affair was my fault, not yours. We shall have to discuss this in the morning." He heard Asharidu and Zakira bed down, and then fatigue took hold of him, driving out the fear and the exultation in triumph and the anger at Asharidu.

The prince started at the sounds of horse hooves thudding dully against the desert sand. He glanced at the sky, and saw the pale blood of dawn spilling over the horizon. He heard voices speaking Aramaic.

"Yes, it is they. Mirdas will be glad we have tracked them down."

A man gasped. "Look at those colossal bones. I knew it, they've been practicing the black arts out here."

"Mirdas told us to expect as much, remember? Let's tie them up and take them back for the trial."

Zohak ground his wrists sore and bleeding against the ropes that restrained him, vowing vengeance against the Bedouin scouts that had taken him prisoner and marched him, limping in agony, back to the camp. He seethed with shame, feeling the eyes of the curious on him, as he walked

through Bawri ahead of the horsemen. He half wondered what would happen to Asharidu, whom they had already put under house arrest. The sight of his father's mansion gave rise to mixed feelings for Zohak. He hoped he could reason with his father better than he could with these dim-witted tribesmen. On the other hand, he knew his father's wrath could be worse than that of the storm-god Adad.

One of Mirdas's men let them through the outer gate, then escorted them to the front door and pounded on it. The servant inside seemed not at all surprised to see a prince trussed up like a common horse thief, and he swung the door open to admit them to the large, open courtyard in the center of the mansion. Zohak started. Already assembled there, as if waiting for him, were the elders of the Utu tribe, sitting cross-legged on a mat in the shade. Zohak limped before them, staring Sinidri and the other elders in the eyes defiantly, but bowing his head before the gaze of Mirdas.

"We just want to know if the reports we have received are true. No excuses or tales. Yes or no." Zohak knew that tone of voice in his father. The old man seemed so calm, but he was in fact full of violence at that moment.

"I have enemies throughout the camp. My brother covets my birthright, and has spread damaging stories against me. I do not know what you have heard, but it is probably calumny." Zohak rambled, wishing he could sit down. His leg hurt, and he felt the stinging sweat of the fever beading on his brow in the forenoon sun.

"You know very well I have no desire to see you wronged. But I will not have witchcraft besmirching the honor of my household. Did you or did you not help Asharidu collect ingredients for a warlock's potion yesterday afternoon?"

Zohak had trouble concentrating, and wished he could wipe his forehead, which burned and itched with sweat. He felt them staring at him, waiting implacably. "We gathered herbs for medication--after all, you made him a client on grounds of his skill as a healer. When he attempts to heal me, why does he suddenly become a warlock? Because someone is afraid I shall indeed be healed."

Mirdas stroked his black and grey beard. "I understood you collected something other than herbs." The other elders nodded, murmuring.

"Whatever we gathered was for the purpose of composing a healing ointment."

"Let us come to the second charge." Sinidri now took over the questioning, his black eyes hard as basalt and unreadable. "Did you collect hair, human matter, from the slave girl for the purposes of witchcraft?"

"Asharidu did that. I forbade him, but he wouldn't listen. I was sick, weak, how could I stop him?"

"You are a prince of the Utu. I should have thought a simple command would have been sufficient if you really were opposed."

"He tricked me, said the medicine wouldn't work without the human matter. I was ill, confused."

Gabbar, the oldest man in the tribe, gnarled and bent, spoke next. The skin of his face, cured in the sun and blasted smooth by decades of sandstorms, was almost transparent. "Is it not true that you recited incantations last night, conjuring up a serpent-demon and endangering the entire tribe?"

"No."

"What of the monster's bones and spore the scouts found at your camp?"

"The genies sent it to prevent my being healed--they fear me whole, lest I bind them." Zohak spat. "Other tribes would be singing my heroism in defeating yet another dragon."

He saw Mirdas wince, and wondered why. He concluded it was because the old fool did not approve of boasting.

Mirdas held up the clay tablet they had confiscated from Asharidu. "What of this?" He waved the back of his hand over the cuneiform hex signs.

"A medical handbook." He knew they could not read it.

"Is it not true that knotted ropes were found at your camp?" Sinidri raised his voice in impatience.

Zohak shrugged as well as he could with his arms tied behind his back with thongs of leopard hide.

The elders looked around at one another, then at Mirdas. At the chieftain's signal, his guards led Zohak to a side room while they deliberated. He could hear them wrangling, but could not make out what they were saying. He wondered if they would impose the death penalty, and new sweat broke out on his forehead. Aikhali would like that. Maybe so would Mirdas. The old bastard had killed Vadak, now maybe he wanted to get rid of her son, too. How convenient for Mirdas that these superstitious dullards could not tell the difference between healing and black magic.

Kaveh resented the curious stares of passers-by as the warriors marched his family and himself down the main thoroughfare. At the head of the main square, he could see that a new altar had been set up, its brazier



casting ribbons of flame at the sky. He guessed it was intended for the worship of the shah as Yima. Next to it stood two atharvans, specialists in ritual sacrifice and fire-adoration. The warriors pushed them, so that they half-stumbled toward the open altar.

The priest recited a formula in an archaic Persian, then lifted his arms toward the sky. He compared Jamshid to the solar chariot driving across the sky-vault. He fed the brazier with barsom twigs. Finally, he turned toward them with his hand out. Embarrassed, Cyrus pulled his last silver pathuka from his tunic and pressed it in the priest's hand. The corpulent, middle-aged zaotar scrutinized it with his piercing eyes, then scowled wordlessly. Kaveh knew the pathuka more than paid their arrears in taxes, but wondered where their food would come from the following week.

A crowd had gathered around them in the square. Chishpish pointed to them with his short sword. "These miscreants have neglected to pay the temple tax and had until today woefully ignored the duty of Yima-worship. Now that they have been cleansed of the second offense, they shall make right the first. Know ye that Cyrus Blacksmith has had his iron goods and his workshop confiscated by imperial order. He and the adults in his immediate family are formally made slaves, to be sold in the bazaar to raise funds for the royal treasury."

The crowd gasped, as two brawny soldiers approached the four of them and placed chains on their ankles. Kaveh felt dizzy. Slaves! Persians did not usually enslave other Persians, with so many Medes and dahas captured in battle. He instinctively bent his head to hide his sublime disgrace from the onlookers. He gulped as he contemplated the dire possibilities, including separation from his family, drudgery, and his decisive loss of Roxanna. He struggled to postpone his feelings, lest he break down in public.

Abruptly, his mother Argoste, white as a pari in the moonlight, swooned.

Chishpish pushed Cyrus aside and turned to Kaveh. "Pick up the old bag, and let's get going. We don't have all day."

Kaveh squatted woodenly, putting one arm under his mother's knees and the other behind her neck, then easily lifted her. More warriors now gathered and marched them away as the crowd looked on. Cyrus caressed his unconscious wife's grey hair.

They had only taken a few halting steps, hobbled by the chains, when the crowd turned ugly. A stone struck Zavan's chain mail, and spectators shouted rudely at the warriors.

"We are artisans, not slaves! Never slaves!"

"Your turn is coming, warriors! The shah will tax you into slavery soon, too!"

"This is an affront to the noble Germani tribe!"

Chishpish confronted the wrathful mob. "Disperse! I command you by the authority of Jamshid Shah, Light of the Persians!"

"You mean blight of the Persians!" A voice floated from the crowd.

Chishpish turned to Zavan and conferred with him in whispers. Then he barked at a lower-ranking warrior, "Charge them!"

The warriors formed a line in front of the altars and lowered their spears. At Chishpish's order, they advanced double-time toward the milling throng in the square. Kaveh hoped that the artisans would have sense enough to disperse, after the last incident. His stomach fell through space as he realized that they were standing their ground. Many of them, he knew, were smiths loyal to Cyrus. Chishpish glared at the immobile mass, then irritably shouted a battle-cry. The warriors charged.

Initially the smiths held their ground, but they were virtually unarmed and untrained in battle save for wrestling in the House of Strength. Against the repeated charge of skilled spearmen, they had to fall back, despite their vast numerical superiority. Then some of the warriors, howling with blood thirst, took the wolf form and charged with berserk madness. The assembled craftsmen scattered in every direction, as screams echoed through the square.

Kaveh, grief-hearted, felt the prick of a spear-point in his back, and was forced to look away from the slaughter and half-stumble in the direction of the slave bazaar. Argoste was still unconscious in his arms, and he had begun to feel her weight. He stole a glance at Parmys, and saw that her sobbing had given way to a mute befuddlement. Cyrus walked with creaking knees, as though in a trance. The shouts and curses of the crowd and warriors grew fainter as they walked.

They passed beside the spice bazaar, then the iron bazaar. Kaveh realized with a start that Jamaspa was probably sitting at their stall, with no idea of what had happened. He wished they would go near the gods bazaar, to inform Daena of their plight. Then they left the Persian market behind, and walked past the Elamite displays. Kaveh remembered the musty smells in Rishapla's tent, the *shatens'* ominous prophecies. He thought about all the times he had met Roxanna there. He stumbled along with his mother in his arms, dazed at how fast his world had withered. He would never marry Roxanna now, even if she would forgive him for getting her exiled from her family. He would never regain the royal commission, and never succeed his father as head of the blacksmiths. He would probably never even kill

Daena's damned dragon. He would be some noble's menial for the rest of his life. He wondered if such a life was worth living. Roxanna. Vivana would find a way to have her now, if she survived being outlaw. Vivana had won. Kaveh alternated between wishing he had not taunted the goldsmith at the house of strength, and wishing he could get his hands around that thin, long neck. He repeated over and over again, *The path is straight that leads to the truth. Tyam rastam ma avarada. Stray not from that path. Stray not from that path.*

"These are the new slaves I told you about." They had arrived at the auction block, and Chishpish was jawing with the head slave dealer.

"I understand the proceeds go to the shah." The short, pot-bellied dealer had a pockmark on his right cheek, of the sort common on Babylonian faces. He must have done a great deal of trading in Mesopotamia, and contracted the boil there.

"Yes, they were seized for arrears in taxes."

"I want my usual commission."

Chishpish stiffened. "The shah is generous. You need not have brought it up."

The dealer smiled apologetically. He walked over, limping slightly, and examined Kaveh, Argoste still in his stiff, aching arms, and Parmys.

He passed Cyrus by. "On his last legs, that one."

He put his thumb and index finger around Kaveh's right biceps, and whistled when he saw they reached only a quarter of the way around. He fluttered his long eyelashes at Kaveh appreciatively.

"Now here's a valuable slave. Strapping and should last ten or twenty years of the hardest labor. His majesty will turn a pretty pathuka on this one. A blacksmith, is he?"

A wide grin split Zavan's massive lower face as he winked down at the ugly little man. "I am bidding on the girl. You can bid on the boy if you fancy him."

The dealer waved away the suggestion with a fluid gesture. "I, my lord, am a professional. I do not get involved with the commodities that pass through my establishment."

Kaveh could hear Parmys sobbing beside him. She turned to put her arm around him, but stumbled against the unfamiliar ankle chains and fell in the dust. The warriors laughed uproariously, craning their necks for a glimpse of bare flesh as she struggled to get back up off all fours. Kaveh, hobbled with his own chains, reached down and helped her up. She put her arms around him, bawling. Kaveh tried to comfort her, and heard Argoste

weeping, as well. Cyrus's face was contorted with anger, frustration and another emotion Kaveh reluctantly concluded was fear.

Zavan strode over to them. "That's enough." He pulled Parmys away from him. Then he put his hands on her slender, ivory shoulders and twirled a lock of her hair in his fingers.

"Like I said, I am going to bid on this one, myself." He grinned, his great yellow incisors, and drooled on his cleft chin.

"Misbegotten ass!" Cyrus said the words under his breath, but loud enough to be heard.

Zavan, his eyes pools of black rage, whipped out his sword.

## Chapter 11

### Walls in all the Colors of the Stars

The Nar left behind by Yimak to finish off the Hyrba refugees away from the light of day, so as not to openly dishonor members of the Pasargadae, approached the camp, their steeds singlefooting. Matroyao, perched in an old almond tree, signaled to Faranak by the light of the campfire.

A gaggle of the Hyrba girls and young women ran out before the approaching warriors, completely naked, and pursuing and beating a hapless young man.

“Oh, at last! Our heroes have arrived!” Chests proudly puffed out, they made the victory sign of Jamshid Shah with their hands above their heads, showing their loyalty.

Roxanna kicked the Hyrban young man, who had fallen to the blows of the women. “This one betrayed the shah and then he and his fellows stole everything from our camp, even our clothing, and ran away in the night.”

The Nar drew up their steeds and looked at one another. They warily put their bows down.

Another girl fell to her knees in front of one of the horses. “We are starving! The wretches took all the supplies. Have you any food?”

One of the warriors grinned. “Food can wait, sweetheart. You must be famished for other things too if those poltroons abandoned you here.”

“Be careful, Dangha, this could be a trap.” One of them was looking everywhere among the pistachio and almond trees, his sword out. Matroyao closed her eyes, lest they gleam in the moonlight.

Roxanna laughed, like water burbling into a vase. “The big bad Nar are afraid of us, girls!”

“They are no better than our craven husbands! Maybe the Babylonian men have some balls.” They did a little dance, their charms backlit by the campfire behind them.

The beleaguered young man from the village, seeing everyone distracted, took to his heels, crashing into the forest.

Roxanna, her lithe, nubile body glowing slightly and seeming to grow in stature, used the weirding voice that Kavi Daena had taught her, invoking her internal amazon, her *fravashi*. “Girls, they are Nar, not curs. They are not afraid.”

The warriors relaxed, nodding in agreement.

“Well, I am no yellowbelly. If their men show up, we’ll just kill them. They are blasted villagers.” A warrior leaped down and ran at one of the girls, who was wriggling at him with all her assets.

The others followed suit, and even the cautious one stuck his sword in its scabbard and dismounted, lest he be the last man out.

The women abruptly turned around and ran back toward the campfire, laughing and taunting, with the Nar in hot pursuit.

Matroyao gave the signal and the women archers in the trees fired their first volley, taking down the warriors at the rear of the lustful charge. Some of them screamed before dying, and their fellows skidded to a halt and looked around with bewilderment.

The Hyrbans had only a few arrows left. Matroyao gave the signal, and the second volley struck down all but ten of the remaining war party.

Now Athwya and his men emerged from the shadows, bearing makeshift lances fashioned from the sturdier fallen boughs they had found in the forest. The remaining warriors, swords out, charged. Athwya threw his lance powerfully and true, into the neck of the one in front, and he collapsed, gurgling. The others advanced, undeterred. Some of the other spear-throwers had missed, or their makeshift weapons bounced uselessly off iron habergeons.

Matroyao looked at the small band of armed, berserker warriors advancing on the now virtually unarmed villagers, and had a sinking feeling that they had failed. She clambered down her tree and ran to retrieve some arrows from the fallen Nar. She knew it would be too late.

A knock came at their door, and Zohak's captors paraded him back into the courtyard.

Mirdas stared right into his eyes, his dark brown pupils liquid with some sort of powerful feeling. Zohak looked away. "The council of elders is inclined to leniency given your youth and infirmity. You are fined a fifth of your remaining livestock, and put on probation. Should you ever practice the dark arts again, you will be stoned unto death."

Zohak could barely understand what was being said, and could not help looking around wildly. He knew by their faces that he would not be killed.

"The warlock Asharidu is ostracized from our territory. He has until sundown to leave. Should he step foot on Utu land again, he will be executed."

Zohak sucked in a deep breath. Tears invaded his eyes, but he fought them off. He felt the Bedouins untying the ropes that bound his wrists behind him.

"The elders are concerned about your health, and suggest you undertake a forty-day retreat of fasting and prayer. Until you are well, Aikhali becomes my second-in-command."

Zohak heard Mirdas out, then nodded and, favoring his left leg, half-hobbled from the courtyard. Free to do as he pleased, he first went to his own mansion and had his slave-girls anoint his body with oil and give him a massage. After, he glanced down at his calf, and noticed with satisfaction that the wound was closing again after the bone-snake bite, and that some of the persistent scab was receding in favor of a scaly patchiness.

He then rushed awkwardly to Asharidu's residence. He found a guard of grim tribesmen armed with spears in front of the entrance, but imperiously pushed his way through them. He found Asharidu leaning over his bags, carefully packing away small metal vessels containing herbs and nostrums. Asharidu looked up on hearing uneven footfalls.

"They are going to send you away! And Aikhali has succeeded in stealing my birthright."

"I know. They gave me until sundown to leave town on pain of death."

"What can we do?"

Asharidu sat on a lambskin on the floor and motioned to Zohak to join him. He propped his chin on his palm, elbow on knee, and thought awhile. "You have three courses of action open to you. You could, of course, acquiesce in the elders' decision, in hopes that your health will now return and you can regain your place in the tribe eventually."

Zohak shook his head. "I fear that my father has turned against me and now favors my younger brother. He can always find an excuse to exclude me from the succession."

Asharidu's brown triangular face showed no expression. "You could come with me. We can seek our fortune in some city, and I can continue the cure and teach you what I know. It would mean risking a new life."

Zohak shook his head. "I am destined to be chief of the tribes of the Middle Tigris. Nothing can deprive me of my destiny, which the goddess Manat wrote in the stars before my birth. I am master of ten thousand horse, and no chattering old men will stand between me and my kingdom."

Asharidu shrugged. "Then I suppose we must bid each other farewell. I saw greatness in you, that is why I was willing to tutor you. It is a shame."

Zakira entered the chamber from a back room, bearing a tray with two cups of a salty yoghurt drink. Her bald head, Zohak mused, detracted nothing from her beauty. She had regained her composure, after the nightmare of the previous night. Her eyes, however, seemed to lack focus, and a stiffness in her gestures struck him as odd. They took the proffered clay cups, but afterward she withdrew wordlessly. Zohak frowned. Had the ghoulish scenes of last night chased away her girlish vivaciousness? Surely, the mere experience of being shaved had not so deadened her soul? He had no time to waste now on a slave girl, he reminded himself.

"You said there were three courses of action."

Asharidu laughed smoothly, and sipped the yoghurt drink. "The last is something I cannot share with even a close friend, only with a disciple."

Zohak was stung. "You know how devoted I am to you. Look what risks I have taken for you."

Asharidu nodded. "And I for you. I mean no ingratitude. A disciple, however, swears things you have not sworn."

"What must I swear?"

Asharidu hesitated. "A healer seldom takes on disciples, you understand, especially from among his patients."

"What must I swear?" Zohak began to be annoyed at the wizard's coyness.

"To follow a spiritual discipline and to study wisdom under my guidance."

"I am neither a glutton nor a libertine. Discipline and study come easy to me, whatever my father may think." A thought occurred to Zohak, and he paused, embarrassed. "The discipline does not involve celibacy by any chance?"



Asharidu exploded with laughter. "The good gods no, man. But this path does require something that emphatically will come hard to a prince of the desert."

Zohak felt dizzy again, and wiped the sweat from his brow with his sleeve. Asharidu seemed to float before him, then to divide in two. He shook his head. "What does it require? I can do anything if I put my mind to it."

"The discipline necessitates obedience to the spiritual guide."

"Obedience?"

"Unquestioning, unflinching submission." Asharidu smiled apologetically, the boil mark on his cheek bunching up.

"A prince may give his obedience to no man in matters of statecraft." Zohak spoke without thinking, his clarity seeming to return momentarily.

Asharidu waved his hand impatiently. "We are not speaking of state policy here. The discipline has to do with matters of spiritual growth."

"Understood. I am willing to become your devotee, to follow your spiritual discipline, and learn your arts." The words tumbled out almost of their own accord.

Asharidu stood, and helped Zohak up. "The initiation ceremony is simple. I think we have time to perform it now."

"If it can be done before sunset, we do." Zohak smiled ruefully.

Asharidu clapped his hands for Zakira. She stuck her bald pate in the doorway, her lack of eyebrows giving her a blank look. Her master went over to her and whispered in her ear. She flinched at his approach, but seemed to find her courage and then listened with strained attention. Then she disappeared.

"There are some brief formulae to be pronounced. They are in a language you do not know, but you can repeat them after me."

Zakira appeared with a clay bowl filled with a bright red liquid. Asharidu took it and dismissed her.

"Repeat after me: '*Ana Sin tabarsu ilmi-ma ina libbishu izziz itti nakri ummani ikabbaal.*'"

Zohak said the words. Then they each drank from the bowl of warm animal blood. They repeated the ritual thrice, each time with different words. At the end, Asharidu indicated to Zohak that he should kneel and touch his new master's foot with his hand. The prince hesitated, then tried to genuflect despite his stiff leg. He finally put it out and bent his left knee, passing his hand over Asharidu's sandaled foot.

They sat again on the lambskin rug, Asharidu cross legged and Zohak with one leg outstretched. Zakira waited as they wiped their mouths with

the cloth she had brought, then took it away in the empty bowl. As usual, Asharidu watched admiringly as her behind swayed beneath her tight skirt, undressing her with his eyes. Zohak guessed that he had been too busy with necromancy to become intimate with her.

"Now, tell me." Zohak looked around distractedly, as if unable to stare continuously at his new spiritual master. "What is the third alternative?"

"I admire your determination."

Zohak waited, tapping his fingers on his good knee.

Asharidu conspiratorially surveyed the room, as if to reassure himself they were alone. He leaned over to his devotee and whispered in his ear.

Spityura's unnaturally long form lay sprawled among brocaded cushions in the tavern, a serving girl in each arm. He was dozing, half-asleep, vaguely aware that he was on the other side of an immense headache when he fully awoke, and attempting to avoid it. He could hear his brother, Narsih, snoring in another chamber. An annoying pounding was spoiling his mood.

The pounding became more frenetic, and crescendoed in a crash as the wooden doors broke inward. His eyes fluttered open, to see a band of immortals advancing on him.

He gently shook the wenches off his shoulders and stood, naked. "What is the meaning of this?"

Vidranga, the minister, was at the head of the contingent, squinting sourly. "The Sun-Gazer has discerned your treachery, Spityura."

He tensed, his hand going to his scabbard, but he realized his baldric was strewn somewhere amid the grey velvet cushions and purple satin sheets. The usually light-hearted Mahin and the other woman (*what was her name, again?*) had sat up, pulling the sheets above their nudity, rigid with fear. "I suppose you will enlighten me as to what in the world you are talking about."

"The shah's all-seeing, seven-ringed chalice displays the whole world, prince. I do not need to tell you that."

"Thank you for reminding me that even princes have no privacy in this realm."

"The Light of the World has seen you in it, conspiring with the traitor Matroyao."

"The ex-queen was divorced. I am not sure that is the same as treason."

“With your help, she is fleeing to King Dioke, he of the terraces in all the colors of the stars. Surely you are aware that the Medes gather for an invasion because of your unwise raid on the Babylonian caravan.”

Spityura’s head felt like a dam that had burst under pressure of a sudden torrent. He began to realize that there was no point in arguing with the dour Vidranga. He was being framed, the looming war with the Medes laid at his feet even though it had been Jamshid’s idea to raid the blasted caravan.

He caught the eye of Narsih, who had roused himself, his black curls tousled from a night of passion. Filling the doorways of the other chambers were Erezav the Marafi and Hutana the Maspi, his drinking companions and heroes of the caravan raid. Half-clothed, they stood at the ready, their musculature gleaming with morning sweat.

Spityura launched himself at the lead immortal, reaching down from a height to grab his head and twist it, hard. The guard went limp, and as the corpse fell Spityura deftly retrieved the man’s akinakes from its scabbard and in a single motion brought it up under the chin of the startled man behind him. The finely honed blade sliced through almost to the spine, creating a grotesque rictus beneath his chin.

He retrieved the second man’s sword and tossed it to Narsih, who attacked from his right. The immortals were fine warriors, but they had not expected frank rebellion from the shah’s own brother, and were bunched up at the entrance to the tavern, with no room to maneuver. Indeed, unless they wanted to retreat, they were in a sense trapped.

A sea of sword-tips reached toward Spityura, but he had the reach on all of them and spun an impenetrable web of steel before them. He slashed the guts out of another, catching the relinquished sword as the man slipped in his own bile, and tossing it to the enraged Hutana. The gallons of haoma they had imbibed the night before were not out of their systems, and the four revelers, faced with an unexpected threat, began turning berserker. Hutana moved like a charging bull, abruptly in the midst of the immortals, striking expertly from every direction, his face elongating into the wolf form and his fangs beginning to drip with pink haoma-juice, yearning to dye it red.

Soon Erezav had snatched up arms from the fallen and had a short sword in each hand, parrying and thrusting like a fiend, using his short stature to get under the guard of his opponents. "If you thought we slept in too late, mates, you could just have knocked!"

The four advanced relentlessly, pushing the immortals back out of the tavern or trampling the cadavers of those who tried to stand their ground.

Vidranga was the first to flee, screaming about treachery to the world-fashioneer and pillar of order.

The dwindling band of palace guards looked nervously at one another, and jointly made a break for it, going for help.

Spityura looked around. “Throw on some clothes and let’s go. The women, too. They’ll be executed as renegades if we leave them.”

Mahin had already tossed on some rough peasant robes, the ones she wore when coming to the tavern before sundown, so as not to attract attention. “There are women’s clothes and cloaks with hoods in the back. We’d best look neither like a royal procession nor a harlots’ parade if we are to escape.”

Hutana’s rubbery face had returned almost to human. “I am not dressing like a woman!”

Spityura put his hand on the furious warrior’s shoulder but he shook it off. “Hutana, we have no choice. They’ll be sending criers to alert the bazaar guards. I keep telling you to mix a little guile with your bull charges.”

Hutana sullenly assented and let his dancing girl dress him, apply kohl to his eyes, and pull down the hood.

Erezav bent over in laughter. “What a hag!”

Hutana growled at him, and Erezav thought better of continuing to tease the irascible warrior.

Spityura felt the press of time. The immortals would be back with reinforcements momentarily. “Let’s go, there will be time for levity later, if we live.”

They exited the tavern and favored winding alleyways among the humble adobe huts of the run-down district to which such disreputable establishments had been exiled. Spityura, hunching down as best he could, hurried them to one of the city’s little-used back gates, hoping that its guards would not have yet heard the alarm. Even then, he knew that his height made him an unlikely female, and it would be dull guards indeed who did not suspect this gaggle of stocky women trying to sneak out of the city.

As they approached the open gate, they kept their eyes averted.

A guard barked an order to halt. Spityura’s heart sank. Their best chance had been to pass unnoticed.

Zavan, holding his akinakes with both hands above his head, drove the blade down into Cyrus's left shoulder near the neck, cleaving his trunk

nearly in half. The blacksmith crumpled, dyeing the dust bright red all about him.

"Foul-mouthed producer." The warrior spat contemptuously on the surprised, immobile face. A collective gasp went up from the crowd on the square.

"No! Baba!" Parmys screamed and threw herself on the fragment of a body, kissing the frozen face. Kaveh also knelt in shock next to his father's corpse. He felt as though he were witnessing the whole scene from another world. Cyrus could not be dead. His family could not be slaves. Even the shah and his warriors were not this evil. He heard a loud thump, and wheeled to see that his mother, gentle, harmless Argoste, lay in a swoon.

Tears now came to Kaveh's eyes as the monumental loss sunk in. *That was an imbecilic thing to do, papa.* He remembered the look of fear in Cyrus's eyes. *But courageous, in a mad sort of way.*

Kaveh put his mother down, back against the wooden auction block, and tried to revive her. Parmys knelt next to him and fanned Argoste with the hem of her tunic. Kaveh felt her neck and found the pulse, which seemed slow and irregular. Kaveh let out his pent-up breath as he saw his mother's eyes twitch open.

"Are you all right, mama?"

"Cyrus! Cyrus!" She began screaming and rocking back and forth.

Kaveh put his arm around her shoulder. "He is walking the bridge to paradise, mama. For him, it will be broad and easy. He led a virtuous life." Kaveh could not repress a sob, and he wiped tears from his burning eyes.

One of the Nar brought a snarling black dog to gaze upon Cyrus's cadaver, so as to purify it and prevent demons from rushing into the soulless husk. Slaves came to grab its arms and legs and transport it to the Tower of Silence, atop which it would be picked clean to the bone by birds and insects, so as not to defile the pure earth.

A hard, heavy blow landed on Kaveh's back. He pitched forward, then looked behind angrily. Zavan had nudged him with his mace.

"Up on the auction block, producers. The royal treasurer will be anxious for his money, and I don't want to get on the wrong side of the Ganzabara."

Kaveh and Parmys helped Argoste, still wailing, up onto the wooden platform. The warriors now put chains about their necks and wrists. Kaveh mused that these iron links might well have been forged by his own workshop. A crowd of warriors and nobles gathered as the horrid little dealer began reciting the virtues of the new slaves in a high-pitched, singsong rhyme.

Zavan raised a pointed finger. "Twenty cows for the girl."

"Noble amata and warrior Nar, surely the shah deserves a better price than that for this maiden, strong, young, unmarried and unspoiled."

A nobleman began bidding, his teenaged son looking on anxiously. Sickened, Kaveh realized the noble probably wanted a slave-girl to initiate his son into the mysteries of sex. Though that was probably a better fate, it occurred to him, than being Zavan's maid. He stole a glance at Parmys, who stood wordlessly, her eyes blank, and he worried about her mental balance.

"Forty cows!" The dealer interpreted the noble's bid.

Zavan, red-faced, disgustedly moved to the sidelines. He turned and shouted spitefully behind him. "Make sure you give her a ritual bath! She was all over a corpse this morning."

The bidder showed no sign of changing his mind. Two of the dealer's helpers grasped Parmys roughly by the elbows and took her with them to the noble's mansion, where he would deliver the cattle to them. Nausea broke over Kaveh's midriff. His little sister, whom he had always loved and teased unbearably, had been sold for a herd of animals.

Argoste stood with her head bowed, refusing to watch. She mumbled something about hoodlums kidnapping her family, and Kaveh hoped she could not be heard. He tried to hush her, but she was too dazed to pay him any attention.

A tall noble with a long grey beard and a nervous tic that kept him winking bought Argoste for only fifteen cows. Kaveh hoped she had not lost her mind, or he knew she would be returned the next day to an entirely uncertain fate. Tears streamed down his cheeks despite his strivings to remain manly and impassive.

"Fifty cows for the boy!" A Mede merchant bid on Kaveh.

"But he's nearly a journeyman blacksmith. He'd produce that for you in a single month." The dealer's shifty eyebrows arched in entire disbelief.

Kaveh discovered that he was worth a hundred cows on the open market. The Mede had two bodyguards with him, and they marched Kaveh off past the bazaar through the city's east gate, toward the edge of an encampment where workers readied the caravan for a Hawani start. The porters yanked, towed, heaved, pulled, boosted and pressed the loads on the villainous pack animals, binding them with virtuoso knots, their masters laying about them with blows and cuffs for their encouragement. Dark-brown Bactrian camels, tarnished bronze bells about their necks, knelt with poor grace as bundles were placed between their two humps. One old camel threw his head back and gargled disgustedly, the tips of his tired humps nearly bent over.

Kaveh felt himself invaded by the stench of camels, horses and men. He tested his chains, desperately casting about for a means of escape, but it gradually bore in on him that he was destined to ride with this caravan out of the only city he had ever known. He eyed his new master, a great-bellied, bow-legged man with a face like a boar and a frizzy brown beard. He clearly owned several of the over-burdened camels, and supervised the last loading himself.

In all too short a time the caravan leader had the bells rung, alerting any stragglers that departure was imminent. Dozens of black-brown camels stood like nearly-capsized boats righting themselves. Horses whinnied, and their prancing began to raise dust. The merchant motioned his two guards toward a camel still kneeling toward the back of the caravan. They picked Kaveh up, straining, and swung him over the camel so that his stomach lay between the humps. The irritable beast stood, gargling, and they tied ropes around his wrists and secured them to his ankles hanging down on the other side.

Kaveh felt the blood rush to his head, and he saw black at the corners of his eyes. Slowly his body adjusted itself somewhat to its awkward position, though his nose did not soon get used to the reek of the beast's hide. Amidst a chorus of bells, the caravan lurched forward, and Kaveh could see dozens of humps plowing the sky. A warm spring breeze tickled his back, as the sounds of camels padding, and horse hooves striking stony soil, and men shouting whirled about him. Every other muscle in his body soon ached like demons from his unfamiliar position and the complex gait of the malodorous camel.

The scenes of the morning kept playing in his mind, despite his attempt to chant his mantra and keep his mind clear. His father's sundered frame and shocked expression, his mother's limp form in his arms, Parmys being led into the house of a noble as a plaything for his adolescent son, the images persecuted his thoughts relentlessly. He prayed to Thwareshtar, the fashioner-god of the artisans, for succor. Somehow he had to get back to Aratta and gather up the fractured remnants of his family and his life. It seemed like an eternity before they halted for an afternoon meal. His master's guards gave him a few sips of water and some bits of crusty unleavened bread, not bothering to take him down off his beast. He could barely swallow the bread in his upside-down condition, and coughed uncontrollably when some of it stuck in his throat. The guard, annoyed, grabbed his hair and pulled his head up, then gave him another gulp of water from a clay cup.

The caravan soon set off again. They had left behind the valley of Aratta, and now their road led through bleak, dusty terrain, into which the slow dong, dong of the great bronze bells around the pack animals' necks quickly vanished. Men joked and gabbed, and donkeys brayed huskily. Here and there a tulip or dwarf iris, tapping into some improbable source of groundwater, hung down timidly into the sky and relieved the brown monotony. He once glimpsed a scrawny black goat munching on a patch of silver-green wormwood. Were it not for the way the rare narcissus shone gold, the hazels displayed a few scarlet aments, or the dwarf-almonds shyly put out some pink catkins, it would be hard to guess from the gray conspiracy of the wasteland that spring had come. A roiling sea of high, white, barren clouds sprayed the wilderness with violet shadow-flecks.

They only once passed a caravan going the other way, which stubbornly refused to detour from the path into the rocky terrain on either side, so that the caravans interpenetrated one another rather than passing side by side. The resulting chaos wore an even more fearful mien from Kaveh's upside-down vantage point. He involuntarily flinched when he saw a pack camel coming straight at his own beast. Would they collide? Fight? At the last moment the other camel gave way. But now it was passing close by his animal's neck, coming straight at Kaveh. He braced himself for a collision, wondering desperately if he would be blindly crushed.

Dioke should have felt secure in his palace bedroom. Despite being vassal to Ninevah, Ecbatana was the capital of a realm in its own right. Seven high walls shielded it from a hostile world, each of a different stone and hue. The parapets of each towered over its predecessor. The cut stone walls had been finished with overlays or tiles. Red sandstone, pink marble, black obsidian, blue lapis lazuli, white mother of pearl, silver and gold announced an opulent and determined redoubt to any would-be marauders. Ninevah, he knew, would like direct control of the rich lands at the foot of Mt. Alvand. The Assyrians hungered for his vast herds of thoroughbred horses, the fleetest in the world, for the wildfowl that crowded his lakes and rivers, and for the congeries of ceramics workshops where the kingdom's famed beige and pink commonware, tempered with silver mica, was crafted. So too did Babylon covet his possessions, but it had grown feeble, barely able to fend off Ninevah. The hungry mountaineers of Mannea would eagerly come south if they smelled weakness. The Elamites of Susa, starving, would love to strike north and make slaves to harvest food for them. And now Jamshid of Aratta.



His favorite concubine, Aturdokht looked down at him her jet-black eyebrows like drawn bows. “Your majesty’s royal attention has flagged.”

“Jamshid looted my caravan, and my eyes say he now plots against my very person!”

“Leave statecraft to the morrow, dear. I have a flower to attend to here, and your gloom is wilting the stem.”

“I do not care if the Persians are our cousins! They are accursed marauders.”

Aturdokht gave up and lay beside him. “Media is mighty. Even the Assyrians forebear direct conquest.”

“Ninevah is full of fools. They, too, prepare another army against me. But Jamshid is formidable. My eyes say he has a bewitchment, that reveals to him the secrets in the breasts of men.”

“Mithra’s contract with the Medes is powerful, your majesty.”

“Gods are fickle, Aturdokht. Swords are not.”

“Mede swords are of the first water.” She gestured mischievously at his manhood.

“I seek a sign. Shall I draw up my defenses or launch an assault? It is easier and less costly in men to defend. But then we risk a siege, perhaps starvation, and the tribes and peasants could switch sides. My vassals, the Cimmerians, are notoriously uncouth and mercurial, and I do not trust them. That goddamned Jamshid is said to have a hold on people.”

“I shall instruct the Magi in the temple to ask of the oracle, sire.”

“The oracle knows only recondite riddles. I need a clear strategy.”

“Yes, your majesty.”

“You know that in the bowels of my dungeons I hold a weapon which could level Aratta to the dust, should I unleash it.”

Aturdokht paled and then shivered. “That weapon, sire, has a mind of its own. What if it turned on Ecbatana itself?”

As if to forestall hearing an answer, she moved down the bed, and he at length put aside his anxieties.

## Chapter 12

### Caravansary of the Cursed

Asharidu straightened himself. "Your father is the problem here. He has acquiesced in branding our healing process nothing but sorcery, and he has begun favoring Aikhali as his right hand. He has exiled me and all but placed you under house arrest. A wise man isolates the problem and removes it, the way you cut a diseased animal out of the herd."

Zohak glanced nervously out a window and saw the guards gesturing and arguing. He knew they could not possibly hear, but nevertheless feared they might. His stomach churned, with the blood and anxiety. *I should not have sworn him obedience so hastily.*

"There is surely a less dishonorable solution than patricide. Aside from the feelings I still have for my father, I am not sure the tribesmen would follow me if they thought I had acted treacherously."

Asharidu shook his head, as if in disbelief. He scratched his chin through his stringy black goatee. "Treachery is to strike at a friend without legitimate cause. Rather, your father has betrayed you. He turned against you the night you showed your bravery by slaying the chameleon. You know he began to fear you then. Would not a loving father go to any lengths to see his son cured? Your father has banished your physician."

Zohak could not help but agree with his preceptor, but he flinched at the consequences. "As much as I hate the old buzzard, I could not do it."

"I have outlined the three options I see. I note that the first two were unpalatable to you. I am bound to say, as your spiritual guide, that I favor the third solution, as the most consistent with your dignity and destiny."

Zohak studied the mud-plaster walls, grasping for a straw. His leg, which had felt a bit better that morning, had begun to burn and itch, as the wound dried. He eyed the scaly growth around the scab warily, and his

earlier satisfaction with the retreating scab turned to worry. The scaly patches reminded him of something he did not want to think about. He felt Asharidu's black eyes boring into him, waiting, as the wizard fidgeted.

"Surely such a revolution would be a matter of statecraft?" Zohak cast the die with his best wrist.

Asharidu frowned. "The path to immortality passes through shadowy turnings. At some stage each wayfarer must make his own missteps. I have pointed you toward the straightest path, and you seemed eager, rather recently, to receive and follow my counsel."

Zohak's cheeks, burning with the fever, grew even hotter in embarrassment and perplexity. He had sworn a solemn oath. Did it befit a prince of the desert to resort to subterfuges in order to break it? *Mirdas humiliated me in front of the entire tribe. He put my younger brother before me, confiscated my best herds, and expelled the only physician who has been able to make inroads against my illness. He robbed me of the glory of my victory over the serpent of Lamashtu by branding it wizardry. And when I was very young, he made me an orphan by murdering my mother.* Zohak played with his dagger, tossing it up in the air and catching it by the hilt.

"Done. Old Mirdas will never be anything more than the pliant tool of Babylon, anyway. Manat has surely written something greater than that for us in her infinite stars."

Asharidu broke out in an elated smile, forcing the black moustache above his thin lips into a straight line. He rose and helped his new devotee up. "Remember this day, this moment. We are today two outcasts in a dusty frontier town. Someday we shall rule half the world." He embraced Zohak, patting him on his broad back.

"We need a plan. After the ending of Mirdas, the tribesmen may well follow me. On the other hand, we could easily be dead this time tomorrow, ourselves."

"Stop being so pessimistic. I can ready a plan. But I want to ask you for a boon, first."

"A boon?"

"Sinidri more or less plays the role of minister to Mirdas. In your reign, I would like to play a similar role."

Zohak thought. "The Utu do not really have ministers. You are obviously going to be one of my closest advisors, anyway."

"I'd like to be your minister."

"Oh, all right. If the tribe can get used to a new nasiku, they can get used to having a minister."

Asharidu rubbed his hands, his white teeth shimmering with a brilliant smile. "Tell me your father's routine. We must discover his weak point."

Zohak recounted each moment of Mirdas's activities when residing in town, from the moment he awoke.

"Does he always nap in the afternoon?"

"Yes, but he is extremely well-guarded at the mansion. We would have to strike when he is outside."

"Fair enough. But it should be a time when he is relaxing, when his guard is down."

Zohak considered. "He likes to take a walk around the oasis spring before retiring."

"Is there a trail there that he tends to follow?"

"Mirdas is a man of routine. Every evening he treads the same path around the pool and through the palm groves."

Asharidu had a distant look in his eyes. "Detail a work-crew of mute slaves to the oasis, on some pretext. This time of morning, no one will be there but serving-girls drawing water, and they are unlikely to challenge the workers. I will depart well before sunset toward Babylon to avoid raising suspicion. I do not want to travel heavy, though; I'll leave Zakira here with you. If things go well, send her with a messenger to retrieve me."

Zohak sweated and shivered with chills as he listened to Asharidu's plan. After they had agreed on the details, they embraced again, and Zohak left. He shouldered his way through the guards outside, who eyed him suspiciously as he receded down the dusty street. One spat.

Back at his quarters in his own mansion, Zohak gathered a work detail from among slaves who had for one reason or another had their tongues cut out, and explained to them their mission. Lalli came in to say that Zakira had arrived and been given her old quarters. She asked if he wanted lunch, but, his stomach still full of blood, he shouted at her to leave him alone. He paced restlessly the whole of the afternoon, limping back and forth, yearning for hand-to-hand combat. His limbs edgily protested the quiet biding of time that intrigue entailed. At last he glimpsed Ishtar, the evening star, from the open window of his room. He called Lalli.

"Go to my father and tell him I humbly request the honor of accompanying him on his evening promenade at the oasis." She bowed expressionlessly and vanished.

*It's not too late. I could reveal everything to father and say it was Asharidu's doing.* The sun set brilliantly over the desert, dyeing it purple. He heard the soft rasping of Lalli's sandals, then the girl appeared in the

threshold. He shifted from foot to foot, staring at the ceiling, and waited for permission to speak.

"Well?"

Lalli gulped. "Nasiku Mirdas replies, 'In view of the decisions of the tribal council this morning, it is premature for the nasiku to walk publicly with the prince.'"

Zohak grabbed the low collar of his gold-embroidered caftan with both hands and ripped the precious fabric down his muscular chest, then bent over in anguish, falling to his knees. The slave girl, alarmed, beat a spectacular retreat. Zohak, his eyes bulging, felt his tongue compulsively stick out, then withdraw into his mouth, then stick out again. His shoulder muscles cramped with agony, and he clasped his hands over them. Barely able to breathe in his fury, he hissed as he struggled to inhale. He rolled over and lay on his back. His chest heaved, desperate for air, and a blackness descended. Had the demon venom finally worked its way to his heart, stilling it forever?

Roxanna, the campfire playing across her nude musculature, was actually running toward the queen's immortals, a pot in her arms. She neared the lead swordsman, risking his blade, and abruptly pulled the lid off the pot.

It was as though a brilliant bolt of lightning had struck the clearing, casting it in luminous eggshell white. A wraith issued from the vessel with a shriek, and found before her only the advancing warriors.

The man in the lead, visibly shaken, nevertheless advanced on her, attempting to sever her in two with his akinakes. He may as well have tried to slice water.

She dove into him. He froze, emitting a deep, unnatural bellow, and then withered like a grape too long on the vine. She took his fellow, who was immobilized with astonishment and who straightened, muscles bulging and eyes round, shivering uncontrollably, before dropping into the duff like a piece of sugar cane sucked dry of its juice. The others began fleeing, but were as newborn gazelles to a wizened leopard. When the last was emaciated upon the ground, the pari turned. Matroyao, still in her tree, almost fell in surprise and consternation. Would the creature attack the Hyrbans?

It approached Roxanna, who was glowing yellow, more brightly than could be accounted for by either the campfire or the incandescence of the creature. The ethereal woman appeared to bow before the naked potter girl.

“You have freed me by giving me a noble task, of saving the innocent from the cruel. I need wander lost in this darkling forest no more.”

Roxanna reached out, her hand shimmering. But the creature was abruptly a whirlwind, stripping leaves and buds from the trees and making them bow. The villagers could barely stand, and Matroyao hugged her bough with all her strength as her own tree bent.

And then there was stillness.

Matroyao clambered down and approached Roxanna, who was throwing on her robes, as were the other women. The younger men groaned and said they preferred the new custom of going about unclothed. Faranak silenced them with a sharp glance.

“I have never seen such bravery and resourcefulness.”

“I wouldn’t have had time to act if you, Faranak and the other archers had not taken so many down.”

“Do not be too humble. Others will be happy to serve as detractors. I had heard rumors that you melted the black demon but had dismissed them as fantastic, thinking no producer could be so intrepid.”

“Danger is no respecter of social status, my lady.” She insisted on keeping her eyes on the ground despite Matroyao’s friendliness.

“You may as well look me in the eye, you know. I am more fugitive than noblewoman as things stand.”

Nothing she said could convince Roxanna to stop standing on ceremony.

Faranak and Athwya approached her. He whistled. “That was some fine archery, your lady.”

“I fear I’m not much of a lady anymore, Athwya. What are your plans now?”

“I think we need no longer fear to return to Hyrba. These were probably the only men Yimak left behind—we are not that important.”

At the sound of Yimak’s name, Matroyao spit. “The vicious harridan! How many good people will she destroy for her overweening ambition?”

Faranak nodded in assent. “What about you, my lady? Would you like to stay with us awhile?”

“Nothing would please me more. But no, I must continue my own journey. I have . . . plans to fulfill.”

They bedded down for the rest of the night, though most of the villagers could not sleep after what they had witnessed.

The chariot of the sun chased the demons of darkness from the heavens all too soon, and dappled the green-gold forest floor with harbingers

of day. Athwya detailed some men to carry the corpses of the increasingly inaccurately named immortals into the trees, where they would not pollute earth or water, and where insects, long-legged buzzards and golden eagles would swiftly ensure that the air, as well, was protected from their putrescence.

The villagers assembled and began walking back to Hyrba, to begin rebuilding. Athwya and some of the men were able to round up some of the warriors' horses, both stallions and mares, as the core of a new herd.

The village was still smoldering with the fires set at Yimak's orders. The fields were stripped as though by a locus horde, and the sheep and goats had been herded away.

Matroyao clicked her tongue. "How can you survive here? It is become a desert!"

Faranak shook her head. "We have found a spring in the village and I have an idea how it could be used to water our crops."

"I confess that I barely know where the food we Nar feast on comes from, whether shrubs or trees."

"The problem is that just digging a ditch to lead the spring water to the fields would not work, since so much of the water would be absorbed by the parched topsoil or evaporated by the warming sun that it would not be worthwhile."

"Then what?"

Athwya beamed. "My wife hit upon the idea of excavating an underground tunnel, since the hard earth a few feet below would not drain off much liquid."

"But what will you live on until the new crops come in?"

Faranak nodded. "The women of this village know where tubers, berries, buds and nuts can be found, and how to make edible foodstuff that less thorough gleaners might leave on the bush or in the ground. The men are the best hunters among the Persians, and now that we have some horses, can run down goitered gazelle and wild sheep. We know this parched land, and how to thrive on it, when royals do not steal from us."

Matroyao was taken aback by her vehemence.

Faranak's hand went to her mouth. "Your lady, I did not mean . . ."

The deposed queen interrupted her. "No, you spoke well. Rodents are less ravenous than kings. I, too, have been despoiled of everything by this palace."

The Hyrbans begged the mysterious noblewoman to stay for a few days and enjoy what threadbare hospitality they could offer. She thanked

them for their help, more especially for the men's clothes and the horse with which they provided her. They had so little, and yet were willing to share.

She leaned over the young man, left with only a loin cloth, who had volunteered his vestments, and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

"Thank you."

"My lady, for such a sign of your favor, I'd take an oath of nudity the rest of my days." He was cherry red and his loin cloth did a poor job of hiding his excitement. The other boys giggled.

"That won't be necessary. But if my plan succeeds, I may someday need a squire, and promise to call for you."

His blush went from cherry to beet.

"What is your name, son?"

"Ara, my lady."

"Until then, young Ara."

She had decided that she would try to pass as a man so as to travel faster, by horseback, than was possible on her donkey, which she left with the villagers. Openly wearing a quiver and bow, moreover, would signal to rogues like the ones she had run into before that she was no easy mark.

She kept the morning sun to her right and the afternoon and evening sun to her left, attempting to skirt the main highway to Ecbatana in favor of forest or village paths. She regretted the time, lost, but feared the shah's eyes. Her hair was chopped off by a villager for a copper coin, so she could pass for a beardless youth in her shapeless peasant clothes. Even so, a palace immortal who knew her on sight might not be fooled.

Days passed. At length the seven-walled city of Ecbatana loomed before her. She rode boldly up to the main gate and addressed the palace guards.

"I seek an audience with Dioke Shah." She tried to deepen her voice

They laughed. "Want to sell him some sheep, do you?"

She pulled away her hood and used her normal voice. "I am Matroyao, Queen of Aratta, and seek an alliance."

They had their swords out in an instant. The head guard strode over to her. "The king has warned us that Jamshid might try some trick. Dismount!"

"She wants to get close to our sovereign and poison him!"

"Jamshid is the very devil and she's been in his bed every day."

The ugliest and most hirsute of them, a big wart on his nose, growled. "I say we make sure she doesn't seduce our blessed shah. He'd reward us handsomely if we brought him just this lying head."



Kaveh's head felt like it would come off his shoulders when the other camel's right breast struck him, then pushed his face into the stinking, raggedy hide. His chin dueled his camel's hair for air. He worried the that heavy pack on the other beast would snap his spine if it crashed into his back.

Suddenly the pressure was gone, and he could breathe again. The other camel had changed course. He had a sore neck and his tunic had been torn, leaving his back slightly scratched. Gratefully, he took a deep breath, holding his mouth as far away from his steed's hide as he could. Gradually the journey sank back into an insufferable tedium. He occasionally glimpsed birds, crested larks, magpies, long-tailed thrushes, and over-curious kites, and for the first time envied their mobility. Kaveh felt as though it must have been days later that the Thura Vahara sun dropped low on the lapis horizon. His back ached as though it were broken, and his hands and feet had swollen somewhat as blood collected in them. The camel's pelt still stank in his nostrils.

The caravan bunched up as it halted, and dozens of workers scurried about pitching tents and kindling campfires with an unlikely combination of dew-dampened fagots, touchwood, manure paddies, and tamarisk brush. After setting up their own camp, his master's guards got him down, but his dizziness forced him to sit still for a while. They jerked him back up and marched him to their tent. Workers unloaded the camels and asses, and Kaveh blanched as he saw that many of their backs were raw, with scarlet sores and occasionally the naked pebbles of vertebrae where hair should have been. Kaveh did not sleep all night, beset by swarms of sand flies and by the awful images of what had happened to his family and himself. He thought of Roxanna. Had she heard of the catastrophe? The idea that he had lost her for good had him grinding his teeth until the squeaking menaced his sanity.

The next day passed even less eventfully than the first, though in the afternoon black flies crawled all over his face and set it to itching intolerably. His neck ached from shaking them off. The third day was remarkable for the clarity of the hard blue sky-stone, unobscured by even a single wispy cloud. Kaveh caught himself wondering what sorts of work his master had waiting for him in Ecbatana, and reprimanded himself for beginning to think like a slave. That evening, the Mede guards, well-built, taciturn men, prepared the bedding in the light of their campfire. Kaveh was glad to see his old friend, fire, again, especially in the gathering dusk. They gave him water and dry bread for supper, and Kaveh, ravenous, had ceased

having difficulty getting it down his gullet. The three of them bedded down wordlessly in one black felt tent, with the master snoring in a larger tent facing theirs.

Kaveh awoke in the unlit wee hours to the skittish neighing of horses, the braying of asses, and the gargling of alarmed camels. Persian and Mede curses echoed over the waste. He wondered for a moment where he was. Then the wretched memories of the past three days barged back into his mind. His heart dropped. Was his father really dead? His family enslaved? His gut ached with shame and melancholy, and he flexed his arms, wishing he could fight for his family's survival. A clangor assaulted his ears, and Kaveh sat up. The Mede guards were on their feet, then they rushed to the master's tent. Kaveh, his ankles still hobbled, followed them as best he could. In the undulating light of the diminished campfire he made out a desperate battle between raiders and the caravan guards. A torch came flying out of the gloom, landing on his tent. It lay there sputtering for a moment, then succeeded in proselytizing the black felt. Kaveh swallowed as he considered that he might easily have been trussed up, still inside the gathering conflagration.

The guards emerged from their master's tent with the corpulent merchant in tow, looking in his night clothes like nothing so much as a fat pigeon, with his white, flabby breasts and belly, and his thin naked legs. He cast a calculating glance at the burning tent, and Kaveh thought he must be toting up his potential losses. Then he turned to Kaveh and looked him in the eyes.

Kaveh decided to take a chance. "Master, please have my manacles removed. If, the gods forbid, anything should happen to our party, it would be cruel to have me unable to flee or defend myself."

"What will prevent you from running away from me? I paid a hefty sum for you this morning." The language was Mede, but it was close enough to Persian that Kaveh could make out what was being said.

"I give you my solemn word, sworn by the mallet of Thwareshtar, that as long as you are alive I will not try to escape from this camp. I fear Mithra and am no oath-breaker."

The obstreperous clamor of battle crept closer, and Kaveh felt himself sweating profusely. The pudgy dealer looked his slave in the eyes, sorting out his decision. "Very well. Perhaps I am crazy, but I believe you."

He gestured to the guards to remove his anklets and chains.

"But Master Bagavir, he'll run for it." The elder of the two guards hesitated, a small key in his hand.

"I have had a lifetime of experience in sizing up a man's honesty at first glance. I'd wager a good deal that the boy is scrupulously honest. In fact, the rumor I heard was that a kind of witless probity had something to do with his being enslaved in the first place. I'll take this chance on him, since I certainly do not want his death on my head if anything goes wrong."

Kaveh wanted to jump like a child when the manacles came off, then his spirits fell as he thought of his little brother Utana, who loved to jump. He had not been old enough to enslave. Was Nefayan looking after him? Where was he, now that the smithy had been confiscated? The guards stood on either side of the merchant, their swords at the ready, trying to espy any approaching enemy in the night, now lit up by the thirsty flames imbibing one of their tents. They carefully scrutinized the region from which the torch had come, but obviously could see nothing. Kaveh heard a strange bird-call, which sent shivers up his spine. Suddenly they were confronted by five Elamites wearing bronze cuirasses, who had snuck up on them from behind Bagavir's tent. Their ebony faces had been almost invisible before the tent fire highlighted them. One guard crossed swords with the Elamite warrior nearest him thrusting and parrying bravely, but the powerful Susan gladiator beat him back with a few blows and then skewered him. The other guard stepped recklessly in front of his employer, his short sword at the ready.

Without warning, a reed arrow merged with the dealer's shoulder. He grabbed at the shaft and broke it off, but fell backwards against his tent, then onto the ground. Kaveh watched with mixed feelings as he hit the ground and the shaft of the arrow came back up somewhat through his flab. He writhed, then fainted. Kaveh, mindful of the wording of his oath, scrutinized Bagavir carefully for signs of breathing, and felt somewhat ashamed of himself when he was disappointed to see his plump breast slowly heaving. The remaining guard could only spare a bird-like glance behind him. Enraged, he let out a scream and advanced nimbly toward the Elamites, holding his akinakes sword before him menacingly. Kaveh witnessed in horror the arrival of five more Elamites, so that they surrounded the Mede. The look of fear and frustration on his hard face betrayed his realization that he had been outflanked and out-numbered. Disgusted, he threw down his sword. Kaveh stood planted in the spot, wishing he could tell his conscience to jump in a river, and could summon the courage to make a run for it. He knew deep inside, however, that the moment had passed, and his oath, which he had originally thought cleverly worded, had not allowed him to seize it.

The Elamites took Kaveh, Bagavir the merchant, and the vanquished guard prisoner, then marched them back to their lines. A *shaten* cursorily

treated the still-unconscious Bagavir, pulling the reed shaft through and bandaging the shoulder. Their captors then trussed the three of them up and tossed them over the backs of asses. Under the radiant gaze of Mah, the moon-god, the war party withdrew with its booty to a safe position and pitched camp. The short journey was teeth-rattling for Kaveh, since his ass had a short, bumpy gait. By the time his captors let him stretch out next to the campfire, his wrists and ankles tied up again, he was exhausted. Yet sleep came only grudgingly, as he kept playing over and over in his mind his father's doom.

The next morning he awoke to the sound of chicken fat sizzling, and saw that the Elamites were roasting their ill-gotten fowl on spits. Two or three of the warriors came over to him and his Mede companions, examining their bodies and their teeth. Kaveh guessed they were estimating their value in the slave market, and inwardly groaned. He did not relish being sold again.

Suddenly one of the Elamites began jabbering, and he reached his long hand into Kaveh's tunic. Kaveh began to protest, but the man had a dagger at his throat. He saw the stranger bring out the kidenn stone. He thought he heard him say the word *shaten* under his breath. Kaveh squirmed as his captor lifted the chain from around his neck and admired the carnelian gem. An idea popped into his mind.

He looked into the man's inky pupils. "Kidenn!" He shouted, and made a fearful face.

The warrior started and dropped the stone. Then he raised his dagger, a look of savage loathing in his tenebrous eyes. Kaveh's heart pounded against his sternum. He had guessed wrong, they were going to kill him as an enemy warlock!

Spityura was on tenterhooks as Mahin approached the guard who had ordered them to stop, pulling her hood back and smiling.

"Brave Nar, we are but villagers returning home. I received word that my sister is ill and we bring a salve from the chemists' bazaar."

The guard relaxed and lifted her chin. "If she is as pretty as you, it would be a shame if anything happened to her."

One of his fellows pointed at the other women. "Careful, Hugav. She might be more like these hags, burly and hairy."

They dissolved into laughter and waved the party through. Hugav winked at Mahin, hinting that he'd welcome a visit when she came back to town. She winked back.

Spityura smiled to himself. Even seasoned warriors were fools when confronted by a gorgeous young woman. He knew from bitter experience the cost of such lapses of judgment. The Persians say that a flirtatious woman is like a shadow, fleeing when you approach her and pursuing you if you turn away.

They hurried away, taking back paths and setting out West. After a half-day's walk, they came to a larger village with a horse courser. Spityura was wary of spreading about silver coins, lest the courser alert his mates among the highwaymen. But horses for their whole party were expensive and he had no choice but to pull a handful of shining pathukas from his purse. The rogue's eyes widened.

They mounted up and struck out at a trot.

"Jamshid's chalice could locate us in an instant." Mahin's brows bunched up.

Spityura grunted. "Our only hope is that he stays too inebriated to operate it for a while."

Narsih sidled up to his older brother. "Are we off to Babylon, then?"

"The son of Mirdas once invited me to Bawri."

"But they are just Bedouin. We need the backing of a great sovereign if we are to withstand our brother Jamshid!"

"Bedouin fight in the desert, like foxes. In that terrain they have an advantage over a regular army used to green swales and rolling hills."

"But how will we come back with them then to verdant Aratta?"

"Jamshid's overweening pride is attracting the Apaosha demons, who are drying up the land. The desert will return with us."

Narsih snorted. "That old fool Mirdas cannot contend with Jamshid's legerdemain!"

"Bawri has its own sorcerer. I saw him in action. Who do you think summoned the black demon that mauled our sister Yimak?"

Narsih started. "Jamshid used his gifts to build Aratta up as a prosperous and orderly place. He's gone down a dark road now, but his fault is vainglory, not black magic."

"Black magic is sorcery put to the purposes of moral disorder. That describes our royal brother perfectly. Do I need to remind you of his perversions with our sister, his banishment of Matroyao, or his attempt this very morning to send us to his dungeon before lopping off our heads?"

Narsih shrugged, as though the point were hard for him to argue with. He fell back, not wanting to pursue the conversation.

A gale started up that blew sand in their faces, pricking like a thousand tiny scorpions, and the horses whinnied and tried to forge on, blinking unnaturally.

They forded a stream and then began ascending a hill, the side of which was mostly red sandstone. They had to dismount, since their steeds' hooves would have slipped on it. They descended the other side into a dell that once would have been verdant but now was sere and brindled with tamarisk. They crossed three of these ridges before their path opened out onto a wide basin. At the bottom of it stood a half-ruined caravansary and crumbling village. The alabaster walls stood in places, the crenellation above them extending out into empty air where entire stretches had fallen down. A cracked domed archway led into an open space, at the sides of which murky forms crouched about fires drinking hot herbal teas, in small structures roofed with twigs. Spityura was eager to put as much space between his little party and Aratta as possible, or it would have been an ideal place to stop for the night. The dirt road went through it, and they passed through its half-fallen arch.

Spityura's horse reared, as suddenly a mob of wretches surrounded them, deep-set eye sockets staring from under their hoods. "Come with me! Stay at my inn!" each demanded.

Spityura's heart sank when he looked down at the hands grasping his leglets, to see that they were skeletal. This was the Caravansary of the Cursed of which he had heard in tavern tales from drunken peddlers!

He feared that to accept the hospitality of these shades was to join their ranks, accounting for the mass of hapless wayfarers assisting the forlorn inn-keepers. He looked about, and similar crowds had hemmed in his brother, Mahin and the others. He tried to twist out of their grasp, urging his horse on, but the mass of them was pulling at his leg so hard he felt himself slipping.

## Chapter 13

### Lion Trap

Another idea circled Kaveh's mind. He hoped it worked better than the last one. He retrieved the fallen kidenn stone and slowly lifted his bound arms in an arc, as though he were polishing a huge bronze mirror, the way he had seen the *shaten* do when they saved him in the bazaar. He thought of the scene in Rishapla's caravansary, where the priest had performed the divination. The air shimmered before his hands, and joy filled his breast as he saw the scene materialize. The Elamite warrior's eyes widened, making his black pupils look like pinpoints. He lowered the dagger. His face contorted with dread, he backed away and fled. Kaveh, in his weakened condition, could not keep the image from abating.

The astonished warrior came back with two men and a woman. The man was elegantly dressed in a long, wide-sleeved tunic patterned with hollow squares, and wore a tightly-curved bow over his shoulder, beside the quiver. The other was a long-haired, naked *shaten* with a black snake around his neck. Kaveh did not know if this was a good or a bad development. The priest might not stand in much awe of a kidenn stone or parlor tricks like the one he had just mastered.

The woman lowered her veil, and Kaveh's heart jumped when he recognized Rishapla!

"Rishapla, you gave me the kidenn stone!"

As usual, her face was inscrutable, but he thought he saw a glimpse of recognition in her ebony eyes. "It was not I, but the holy men."

The great man knelt in front of Kaveh, apparently annoyed at being ignored. "Look at me. She is but a merchant and a weak one. My name is Indattu, and I am the second in command here. Who are you, boy?"

"Kaveh Blacksmith, a Persian of the Germani tribe and the city of Aratta."

The man pointed at the carnelian stone and fixed Rishapla with a hard stare. "Did you really give a Persian commoner a kidenn stone?"

Rishapla replied curtly. He thought he caught the names "Asharidu" and "Zohak."

When silence fell, Kaveh feared she had been overly concise. "Let me tell you the story." And he did.

The notable's dark face surrendered no sign of emotion as he listened, then turned to the aged *shaten* and translated for him. The Elamite priest, his straight, iron grey hair hanging in braids down his back, nodded thoughtfully and grunted. After a while he launched into a long peroration directed at the notable, the nervous Rishapla, and anyone else who happened to be listening.

The notable's nose was aquiline, his cheek bones high, and his curled black beard well-groomed. His eyes were round and seemed capable of infinite amazement, and he displayed a good-humored smile. "The *shaten* has explained that all things are made of light, yet most beings in this material world allow darkness to encompass them. The true hero is one who realizes his unity with the underlying light-stuff, and who shines in the darkness. He says that given Rishapla's account, you are such a hero. He sees the kidenn glow about your head, and agrees that the other priests who bestowed the stone on you were very wise men indeed."

"You are not going to sell me as a slave?" He looked pleadingly at Rishapla, then at his captor.

The notable frowned. Rishapla made some remark to him. He ignored her and turned to the old priest, apparently asking a question. The *shaten* made a sign with his hand that Kaveh could not interpret.

"No, the straitlaced old bugger won't let us sell you. Has no sense of the value of booty. Any your friend the merchant woman here has said all the right things on your behalf."

The man flashed his winning smile, and Kaveh had no idea if he was serious or not. Then he began giving commands to the warriors in staccato bursts.



Rishapla disappeared for a moment, then brought him a dish with a roast chicken leg on it. Ravenous, the blacksmith mumbled a short prayer and tore into it, even devouring the gristle. Then he licked his greasy hands.

"Thanks, and for your helpful intervention earlier. What are they going to do with me?"

She shrugged. "I cannot say for sure yet. Indattu is inclined simply to set you free, but he'll have to clear it with our chief."

"Is that what the *shaten* said to do?"

"Luckily for you, the *shaten* seems very much on your side. He's gone off to do a divination about you, and by the time we are ready to strike camp, some decision will have been made. But rest easy. At worst, we may like to bring you back to Susa as a guest in hopes that you are good luck."

"But I have to get back to Aratta! My family--"

"Just be patient, young man. Ten minutes ago the question was whether to sell you or kill you."

Kaveh fell silent. Rishapla was right, his fate had taken a happy turn and he should be grateful to the gods. He could not, however, still the frustration that seethed in his midriff, the compelling impulse to seek revenge for his family's fall to this low estate, and somehow to vindicate them all. He tried saying his mantra, and found that today it possessed some of its old potency and tranquilizing effect. As he settled into a trance-like state, he could hear soldiers and workmen cursing and wrangling with one another as they loaded the booty on their emaciated, wretched beasts, which winced at the return of the heavy cargo to their pink, skinless backs. It suddenly occurred to Kaveh that the Elamites had raided because they were weak and hungry, not simply out of aggrandizement.

Indattu and the priest finally returned. "The commander was very intrigued with you."

"He doesn't want to take me to Susa, does he?" Kaveh's heartbeat hammered in his ears.

"No. He didn't want an enemy warlock accompanying his expedition. He wants you to leave."

Kaveh expelled a lungful of cool morning air, and realized he had been holding his breath.

"I am grateful enough for my freedom. But tell your commander that if he really wants to appease this warlock, he'll treat the two men taken captive with me well."

Indattu raised a jet-black eyebrow. "Very well. I'll deliver the message. But one of them, the dealer named Bagavir, died last night."

Kaveh felt guilty at his elation.

Then Indattu nodded at the old gap-toothed *shaten*. "The holy man has some parting advice for you, as well."

Kaveh looked up in surprise. "He does?"

"He says that he once saw another stone shaped exactly like this one."

"Where?"

"It belonged to an elderly and once-powerful High Priest of Susa who had fallen on hard times, and came close to starving to death as the city entered the time of troubles. The desperate holy man, convinced that he had lost his aura of divine favor, sold the stone to a visiting Persian merchant."

"How long ago was this?"

"Twenty-five years."

Kaveh shrugged. "So it could be anywhere by now."

"He later encountered the merchant again, when he came to trade in Susa, and asked after the remarkable stone. It seems the Persian went trading in Mazandaran, and the treacherous people of that jungle set upon him and stole all his goods, taking him as a slave. He claimed to have seen with his own eyes how, one day the gigantic Saena bird swooped down on the village where he was enslaved, and carried off his master, who wore the kidenn stone about his neck. In the ensuing confusion, he escaped."

Kaveh thought for a moment. "I never used to put a lot of stock in the talk of kidenn stones and dragons, and I am still not sure there are any giant Saena birds. But the gem obviously did allow me to summon up a scene from the past. The other *shatens* thought it might be important to find the stone's mate, so this information may come in very handy someday. Please thank the priest for me."

Indattu winked his round eye, and translated, then listened to the raucous response. "He says that if you truly have the kidenn, we may end up being most beholden to you. He wishes you luck, but warns of unhappy harbingers."

Kaveh nodded, and put his hands together, bowing slightly to the *shaten*, then to Indattu. The notable had his men untie his bonds, and then they all marched off.

Rishapla, left behind to see him off, now piped up. "There is one more problem. I am sorry, Kaveh."

"What?"

"The commanders say we cannot spare any horses. You'll have to go on foot."

"In this unknown wilderness? This abode of demon mind, of abominable slithering or poisonous freaks? That is virtually a death sentence!"

She showed no expression. "It has been written."

Spityura realized that the throng of moldering bones replenished itself by waylaying unwary travelers such as themselves, playing on the element of surprise and horror to dispatch them quickly and claim them, as their flesh melted away under the hot desert sun, as their own. He grabbed up his haoma skin and drained it, observing the god juice stretch its fingers into every muscle of his brawny body. He felt his face elongate, as the wolf form came to predominate. He called upon his celestial inner amazon, his *fravashi*, and leaped from his horse even as the fur sprouted thickly at his neck and chest, into the boscage of naked skulls, sternums, ribs and femurs, laying about him with his royal mace. He felt more than saw Narsih at his side, also in the wolf form, severing the invisible bonds of the skeletal forms with his akinakes. Then Erezav of the Marafi and Hutana of the Maspi roared into action, tossing humerus and ulna, tibia and scapula into the starlit heavens with their pinkish fangs. The dead of this haunted caravansary appear to have remembered their old human fears, and recoiled as bright pink wolf eyes bore down on them with rage and the Persian berserkers howled with battle lust.

One of the osseous forms had apparently been a warrior in his own right, and stood up to Spityura, dressed in mail that hung ridiculously about his bony form, wielding a bronze scimitar. He spun a web of metal before him as he advanced on Spityura. The tall Persian prince, snarling wolf-threats, parried the curved sword with his mace, then smashed it into the nose-hole and eye-sockets of the bleached skull, shattering it.

The skeletal horde beat a hasty retreat into the crumbling buildings of their putrid abode. Spityura and his party for their part swiftly remounted and sought a pathway around the abandoned caravan town, careful to keep a lookout for any more supernatural assailants. But the creatures of the netherworld had only one real advantage over the living, that of horror, and when it failed they went back to skulking in shadows.

Narsih, his rubbery face returning to humanity, winked at him. "You never know who you'll meet on the road."

"Persian townsmen are wise to stay in at night. I only wish it had been safe for us to travel during the day. Who knows what other menaces lurk out here in the gloom?"

As they rode on, the after-effects of the haoma made Spityura inexorably drowsy, and he swayed on his horse, nearly falling off at one point before catching himself.

Mahin sidled up to him and shook his arm. “Have a care, Spityura. Without you, we are all doomed.”

“It would be a disgraced prince indeed who lost both his palace and his balance on the same day.” He tried to remember the shock and foreboding of the caravan of the dead, to get his heart beating and clear his mind. Soon they camped in a shallow cave for the day.

“Are you sure it is safe to stop here? We are barely out of Jamshid’s realm.” Hutana frowned.

“I risk falling from my steed if I don’t get some rest, and I suspect I am not the only one, Hutana. Moreover, it is dangerous to travel during daylight, lest Jamshid have eyes among the villagers in this borderland.”

Mahin and the other women assented. “We are better off hidden in this cave than on the road what with the sun up.”

The next night they made their way rapidly down the valley, ever descending toward the land between two rivers, far below. They traversed gravel, jasper, and agate of various hues, and once passed a nomadic tribe carrying its entire mobile village on donkey-back, cattle and horses. The black sheepskin of their tents was draped like a fine gown over the cattle, and asses carried the tent-poles as though prepared for jousting, chickens trussed atop them like russet knights. Men brought up the rear, with sheep and horses driven along behind them, curbed by half-starved dogs. Skinny women rode the horses sidesaddle, some of them with babes in their arms. The men of the tribe gestured in greeting in the moonlight, and Spityura warily returned it, but hurried away. One of them stared intently at them as he passed, and the disgraced prince feared he might be a spy. Thereafter he kept watch over his shoulder for the tribesman and could not shake a feeling of being watched.

At one point they entered a narrow defile with craggy cliffs encroaching on it from each side, following a dry riverbed that had left behind nearly impassable stones as it had fled into the sky. His party had to get down and walk for a while, leading their weary steeds, who warily picked a way among the rocks, dwarf oak, and hollyhock as best they could. At length the road opened out again and they mounted up, heading for a vertiginous gap in the distance. After they traversed the flume, the air was heavier and warmer as they descended. Spityura began sweating, so he took off his cloak and stowed it in a saddlebag. Sometimes they passed ruined villages, little distinguishable from the aftermath of an avalanche, but gave them wide berth after their dire experience at the Caravansary of the Cursed.

As dawn drew an orange veil over the faces of the stars, they made camp in an outcropping of boulders that afforded them privacy from any other wayfarers.

Spityura turned to the men. "I think we need a night watch. I have a feeling we are under surveillance."

Erezav, his square face alarmed, turned to the prince. "You think we are being followed?"

"It is just a premonition."

Hutana scowled. "I'll keep the first watch above on the rock face. It's beginning to be flat land around here, and I can easily see a war party coming, no matter what stealth they deploy."

They had been able to harvest a few green dates and figs as they came into the warmer climes below, and made a bitter and meager breakfast of them. Spityura drew his cloak over his eyes to shield them from the porphyry sky. He slept fitfully, his dreams invaded by skeletal forms grabbing at him with their bony fingers and grown-out nails, a thatch of long platinum hair clinging to their skulls as lichen does to a rock.

Spityura woke with a start, drenched in sweat from the heat of the day. A tribesman was standing over him with a dagger drawn, and had been about to strike amidst the prince's snores. Spityura rolled away and gained his feet. "Assassin in the camp!" He shouted.

The intruder darted forward, the deadly blade aimed at his gut. The lanky Spityura reached out urgently, palm flat against the man's forehead, and held him off briefly. The tribesman ducked under his guard, and Spityura feared he would not be able to back off fast enough to avoid the bronze tip. Abruptly, Mahin crashed a rock down on the man's skull from behind and he crumbled.

He looked down at his former assailant, then up at her slight form. "I am in your debt, Mahin."

"Very few princes come into a woman's life, my lord. I'll not have mine snatched by a man of low character."

Spityura knelt next to the awkward heap of a body as the others came running. There was no sign of breath. "Remind me never to anger you, Mahin. You have right dispatched the scapegrace."

Erezav knelt before Spityura. "I failed you my lord. I was supposed to have the watch after Hutana, but I never saw this one approach."

Spityura hauled him up. "If he's one of Jamshid's he may well have been cloaked by the shah's tricks. It is not your fault, and I need your loyalty far more than I need your guilt. But be vigilant. There are likely more spies where he came from."

Mahin's eyebrows recoiled. "But how then can we hope to reach our destination?"

Spityura seemed hunched over. "There is nothing to be gained from despair, girl. Ever. Aspiration is the catapult of success."

The Awisruthrema watch was beginning, the sun being swallowed by the ridge above them. The suffocating heat of the day was receding slightly. They struck camp and mounted up. They wended their way further down to the lowlands, across still-smoldering clay. They stopped at an oasis for water, and Hutana at first spit his out in disgust at how warm it was.

"That's piss, by the gods, not water!"

The moon had not yet come up, so they were traveling in almost complete darkness save for starlight. The stars, Spityura noticed, twinkled more and were less bright here at the bottom of the world than up on the Persian plateau.

Then the moon came up, and they hurried on, a great river to their left. Two days later, the adobe walls of Bawri loomed before them, nestled in palm groves.

As they approached the gate, a hail of arrows struck the ground before them.

The fit gradually passed, and Zohak was able hungrily to fill his lungs. He kept breathing in, barely able to satiate his yearning for the clean desert air. He reached for the staff propped up against the wall, which he had employed at times since his leg injury, and used it to climb back on his feet. He felt his strength returning, and the blaze of anger still searing his breast. He wanted to lash out. He held out the staff before him and lifted his right knee. Suddenly he brought the heavy gnarled wood down hard against his leg, snapping it like a twig. He hurled the pieces against the wall.

Zohak stormed out of his chamber, heading for the house of his cousin, Teral, one of the Seven, with whom he had always been close. The pleasant coolness of twilight, the stars twinkling on in the waste of the sky, the familiarity of Bawri's mud streets, would normally have a calming effect on him. Tonight they all enraged him. The surly doorman sitting at the entrance of his cousin's house asked the purpose of his visit and went in to inform his master. The old man, wearing nothing but a loincloth, was barely visible when he returned in the gathering darkness, and beckoned Zohak to follow. Inside, it became clear that Teral had been eating with his extended family, but had repaired to a reception room on hearing of his cousin's call.

As the young prince limped in, Teral was still wiping his greasy fingers in his beard. He embraced his cousin, his single bushy eyebrow raised quizzically.

"I apologize profoundly for interrupting your meal, Teral."

"Won't you please join us? It would be a source of shame for me to have you visit my house and not eat."

Zohak shook his head, enveloped in nausea. "This is too urgent for pleasantries, old friend. I came to warn you that I have intelligence of a Persian plot on my father's life."

Teral cocked his head. "Aratta?"

"My sources say it is Jamshid himself. He had hoped that his raid on our caravan to Media would cause Babylon to move against us. That has not happened, or not yet, and so the blight of the Persians has become impatient."

"That seems plausible. His looting of the caravan was a declaration of war. Why tell me?"

"I have to inform someone, and Mirdas won't listen to me. I am out of favor, you know." Zohak's eyes welled with genuine tears, and he turned his face away.

"But what can I do? Let's talk to my father."

Zohak wagged his finger no. "You heard what happened this morning. My stock is low with the elders right now. But I fear what a Persian success could mean for the unity of our confederation."

Teral considered. "Surely all this is premature?"

"Only a precaution. Jamshid blames Mirdas for the ransom attempt against their Queen Yimak—the pervert has married his own sister! I feel badly about putting my father in the Sun-Gazer's sights, but I am sure the old bandit would have taken advantage of the same opportunity if it had been presented to him. In any case, I know they will try to remove him and end our unity, playing tribe off against tribe. We must not allow that to happen."

"I agree. Very well. I am still in good standing, and I will attempt to spread the alarm.

"There is one other thing. I hope and pray we can forestall this ugly crime. But should an assassin succeed, it would be deadly for us to be divided, as we are now. We must pledge unity and repair the rift among ourselves. We must be prepared for anything."

"It is a thought too dark to entertain, but I take your point. Now please, let me order you some camel stew."

Zohak finally extracted himself from Teral's house without having to eat anything. He hurriedly paid similar visits to several other cousins and nephews, canvassing their support. When he felt he had done all he could, he marked the position of the moon and the stars in the night sky. It was time. He hastened by back alleys toward the oasis just outside the town, approaching it from the back. He sneaked into a grove of palm trees, and shimmied up a rough trunk, hiding in the broad leaves. He no longer felt the need to fidget, a strange calm having captured his heart. Finally, the *Nasiku* arrived, flanked by servants and a few courtiers. Mirdas proceeded at a leisurely gait, conversing with Aikhali, at the head of the party. Zohak noted with satisfaction that the servants carried no lanterns, depending on the half-moon for light. Aside from the royal party, no tribesmen loitered in the vicinity, all having retired to their tents for their evening repast.

Zohak hid carefully behind the palm tree's leaves as they approached, listening with baited breath to their footsteps. He fought off a sudden cloud of long-banished memories. His father teaching him archery and falconry. His father hugging him and comforting him when his mother had been killed. He remembered their terrible quarrels, the times he had beaten her black and blue. He saw in his mind the that awful day he had come into their tent while old Mirdas was forcing her, she sobbing and beating his chest, screaming, her bare milky breasts heaving. He was laughing and bearing down on her, slapping her with an open hand, like a snake swallowing a frog. Days before his death, he had heard old Mirdas cursing her, his face black. "*Persian bitch! Does she think she can besmirch the honor of my household with that sapling? I'll cut out her womanhood and feed it to the vultures!*"

A crash of leaves, screams, and swearing danced up from the oasis like disturbed water demons. *Nasiku Mirdas! Prince Aikhali!* Zohak heard the old servants shout in anguish. He stealthily peeked through the palm leaves at the scene below, a hundred cubits away.

Mirdas and Aikhali had plunged unwittingly into a lion pit, their sprawled forms impaled on the stakes covering its bottom. Mirdas seemed almost to be staring into his eyes with surprise, as if asking *Why?* His fine brown robes, embroidered with black falcons, were spattered with scarlet and a stake peeked incongruously up next to his breastbone. Aikhali had plunged forward, his neck transfixing by a sharp, gore-stained pole. Zohak remembered the instructions he had given itinerant tribesmen this morning, telling them a big cat had been molesting the herds at the oasis spring at night and that they should dig a pit just before the forked palm tree, place stakes in it, and cover it with palm leaves. *Do your work well and we shall*



*catch a lion tonight.* Then he had sent them off to the temple brothels of Babylon with bags of silver.

Zohak clambered down furtively, unnoticed in the commotion. He circled and approached the party slowly from behind, cultivating a look of innocent puzzlement. Sinidri caught sight of him out of the corner of his eye.

"Prince Zohak! Come quickly--a disaster!"

"Whatever has happened? I was coming to seek my father's forgiveness . . ."

"He is dead, old Mot has taken him! And your brother Aikhali, as well!" He tore at his hair.

Zohak made himself gasp, and he sat on a large stone at the foot of a palm tree. He shook his head slowly. "This is it."

"What?"

"This is the Persian plot of which I was warned. I tried to see father to tell him, but he wouldn't . . ." Zohak rubbed the sleeve of his caftan across his eyes. "We must remember our composure. Father would not want us sobbing like old women when the state is in danger."

"I know you are right, Zohak. But I cannot get the image of their dead bodies out of my mind. What do you think we should do?"

"We must gather both the elders and their eldest sons at the mansion immediately. You have the respect of the older men, whereas the new generation looks to me."

Sinidri looked at Zohak with what seemed to be sneaking admiration. "I always said you had more mettle than Mirdas gave you credit for. The old man could just never forgive you for being your mother's son."

"I know."

Sinidri quickly arranged for a meeting of the tribal elite at Mirdas's palace. They tried to keep the reason for it quiet so as to prevent panic from spreading among either townspeople or the tribes. Zohak had torches lighted and rugs thrown on the courtyard. Zakira organized the kitchen slaves to provide date wine for the guests. He watched them come in, one by one, puzzlement on their faces. Why this odd nighttime meeting, and where was Mirdas? Fear and consternation crept into their eyes when they learned what had happened. The death of a rare leader like Mirdas could easily lead to a return of constant feuding, of bloodshed and looting.

They sat around the courtyard. When Teral arrived, Sinidri called the meeting to order. Some of them did not like the idea of Zohak becoming the nasiku.

Sinidri turned to ancient Gabbar, who had fallen asleep. "Gabbar, we need your counsel."

The old man's tightly stretched face gleamed in the torchlight, barely obscuring the glowing orange skull beneath. His head jerked up at the sound of his name. "What is it?"

"Should Zohak succeed Mirdas, despite the verdict against him this morning?"

Gabbar gazed at Zohak as though seeing him for the first time. "The charge of sorcery is serious. He barely escaped execution."

Zohak ground his teeth. Were these old fools truly determined to deprive him of his prize? His grip tightened on the hilt of his scimitar.

Matroyao's bow was suddenly in her hand, an arrow aimed at the guard's breast, and her voice took on the deep timbre of command.

"That way lies certain death, oaf."

The one with the big nose stepped back, eyes wide. "It'll be your head, Persian bitch, if you harm the palace guard of Dioke Shah."

"You just said you wanted to take my head anyway. Then what is in it for me to let you live?"

"There are two of us. You cannot get off two arrows in close quarters. One of us will skewer you like the sow you are."

She put an arrow through his cloak, pinning him to the wooden gate, then another through that of his mate. They squirmed, pulling at the shafts that had sprouted sudden at their sides, like spring saplings not noticed the day before, as they waved their short swords, now more ridiculous than menacing.

"I had sent word to Dioke that I was coming, fools, and he is eager for our consultation. I am fugitive from the Aratta court and bear news of Jamshid's intentions. Dioke would have fed you to his pet lynx if you had attacked me. Put those small shafts away. I mean your swords, not your natural equipment. And take me to the shah. Now."

Embarrassed, they had to rip their cloaks away from the arrows that had burrowed deep into the wood. They sheathed their swords, hunched over in shame, and sullenly acquiesced in the voice of a noble, despite its accented tones.

Dioke was in his war room when she arrived, his ministers around the table. She bowed deeply. He rose and took her by the shoulders, raising her back up. "No need for such formalities, my lady. I am honored to have a queen in my hall."

The corner of her mouth turned down. “An ex-queen, I fear. I am divorced and hunted.”

“The husband who divorced a beauty like you is a fool. Who could he find to rival you?”

“Himself.”

“Himself? Is he a boy, to pleasure his own body?”

“He has married his sister. I believe this step was as close as he could get to nuptials with himself, who is his true and greatest love.”

“The pharaohs of Nubia do the same.”

“Decadent old dynasties have bad habits. We Iranians are young and virile, and we shall rule in their stead.”

“I like your ambition. You Persians would grab up the stars in the sky. But we Medes are attempting to avoid the domination of Assyria and the ravages of your rapacious ex-husband.”

“Go on the attack.”

Dioke’s minister gestured for them to be seated at the great oak table. He stroked his pigeon-hued beard. “My lady knows that defending is easier and more sure than attacking. I fear she may be still in Jamshid’s service and is attempting to draw us out from our fast fortress.”

Dioke looked up sharply. “Forgive my minister, Chamrav, for his frankness, Lady Matroyao. You will understand why some here in Ecbatana doubt your motives.”

“The precept that defending is easier than attacking is normally true. But it is because defenders know their own terrain best, and can set ambushes. Jamshid’s seven-ringed cup shows him the whole world, and he will see your positions. You cannot hide from him.”

The king of the Medes tilted his head. “It is hard to credit. And if he has such an ability, why has he not already conquered us?”

She did not like the way his eyes greedily drank her down. She steeled herself. There is, she thought, little difference between a fugitive queen and a desperate tart, and she would do whatever she needed to do. “Jamshid has spent decades establishing Aratta and ordering its economic life. He built grand alliances among its tribes and peoples. His strategy as he did so was defensive. His kingdom grew at the margins, as villagers petitioned to become his subjects and so to join in the obvious prosperity of his realm. But now Aratta is beset by Apaosha demons, by drought and want, and its peoples have fallen to struggling with one another. Jamshid has already set warrior against producer and producer against priest. But he knows that in the end the only way to unite his subjects is to create an

external enemy. And the only way to pay his Nar and feed his producers is to loot lands that are still green.”

“But why do the demons now have the upper hand in Aratta? According to you, he had always been able to bind them before.” Minister Chamrav’s fingers were tangled in his beard now, his gaze intent.

“Jamshid has been enervated by his own pride, and by his constant drunkenness on the haoma. Not so long ago, a black demon of the west was nearly able to best him on the field of battle, and he was only saved by a humble blacksmith.”

They looked at one another, clearly not able to believe her tale. Producers were too timid to so much as stand up to Nar bullying, much less to dispatch the *Div-e Siyak*.

Chamrav slammed his palm down on the table. “Your majesty! She brings us tall tales and false flags! Magical goblets and heroic smiths! Are we children? It were best if she is put in the dungeon with . . . the thing. Truth will out, and if she triumphs it will be easier to credit her.”

## Chapter 14

### A Joust of Queens

Gabbar rubbed his grizzled chin. "Still, the verdict against Zohak simply imposed a penalty. It did not imply a permanent disability. The gods only know what crimes Mirdas himself had committed in his youth before becoming *nasiku*."

The assembled great men of the tribe murmured, some unhappy but unwilling to go against the wisdom of the eldest man among them.

Teral grinned broadly. "I think we may proceed by acclamation. Long live Zohak, Nasiku of Utu, and Lord of the Tigris tribes!"

The tribesmen took up the chant, and began throwing back the date wine with enthusiasm. The gloom of Mirdas's loss did not entirely dissipate, but the threat of uncertainty and instability receded somewhat.

Zohak rose. "I pledge to do my utmost to preserve the unity of the tribal federation my father built. Remember that I stood at his right hand as he built it. How many times did I take his place in ruling Bawri during his absence? He even entrusted the Ecbatana caravan to me. He trusted me because he knew we saw eye to eye on policy, and I can promise you that I will implement his vision."

The elders shouted their approval, and more wine flowed. Sinidri, his grey mane disheveled, allowed himself the first smile of the evening.

Zohak raised his hand. "There is only one final matter. I had indications that Aratta was plotting against my father. I cannot absolutely prove this was Jamshid's handiwork, but in the deviousness of the plot surely a Persian hand can be seen. How shall we respond?"

Sinidri worried his front teeth with his tongue. "For the moment, we must be cautious. We need more proof before we launch ourselves against so powerful a force."

Zohak could see that the Sibitti, the seven most ferocious warriors, were dissatisfied with that tepid response, but he decided that now was not the time to force the issue. Then the meeting began to break up. Zohak personally saw each man to the door, thanking him for his support and promising him prosperity and honor.

The courtyard was disturbingly silent. Zohak could hear the faint wailing of a young widow and an aging mother coming from Aikhali's nearby mansion. The screeching was like food to him, satiating him within in a way he never remembered before. He dismissed Lalli and headed toward his father's harem, with two recently-captured young concubines especially in mind. Then a thought split his mind like a clap of thunder. *Asharidu! I was to send a messenger after him to inform him that the plan worked. I forgot all about it in the rush of events. Asharidu. I promised him too much. Unflinching obedience, a ministership. It would almost be as bad as having Mirdas back. Why not let him go on his way? He'll assume that the plot went awry, and make a new life for himself somewhere.* Zohak glowed with resolve, sure that this was the very best course, and musing that it was his first executive decision as *nasiku*. He walked faster, thinking about his late father's young concubines. Other prospects beckoned, as well. He determined his tribe would not remain forever in this backwater of Diyala.

Spityura looked down from his considerable height at the Aramean prince, who had called off the tribal archers when he climbed the parapet and saw who was approaching.

"You may not remember it, but you once offered me an alliance, Zohak."

"I remember it well, Prince Spityura. The offer still stands. But as I recall, you were dismissive of my overture when I first proffered it." He touched his cheek where Spityura had slapped him. "May I know what changed your mind?"

"Jamshid was planning to blame the fall-out from our raid on your caravan on me and have me out of the way."

Zohak, in the way of the Bedouin, was a stranger to the belly-laugh or any overt display of strong emotion. A subdued smile played on his full lips, however. "In Aratta, no good deed goes unpunished."

"It would appear so. But I have been inconsiderate." He introduced the rest of the party, and noticed Zohak's pupils widen when his eyes fell on Mahin. Spityura determined to speak to her about being reserved in front of the Aramean's presence. He had just understood something about the Bedouin. In a land of tents and long journeys, people were in a sense always in public, and had to carry their privacy about with them through their demeanor.

Zohak gestured toward his mansion. "It is I who have been rude. You are fatigued from a difficult journey and surely will want to repose. The Nasiku's quarters possess a guest house, and my servants and tribesmen are at your service."

Spityura bowed in the way of the Persians. "We are grateful. The others will no doubt wish to retire. But you and I have urgent matters of estate to discuss."

Zohak nodded slightly. "Nothing would please me more. Perhaps it is not too early in the day for date wine and a small repast." He turned and shouted, "Zakira, we have a guest."

"The matter I wish to discuss is delicate. It would be as well if only you and I were present."

"Zakira is as my own soul. She may be trusted implicitly."

"I do not doubt it. Jamshid, however, has a chalice with fantastical properties, and can discern the words in the mouths of men. It is best if you and I speak, and speak obliquely. Perhaps some servants in another room could be given utensils to beat and make a racket to drown out our conversation."

Zohak acquiesced, as Zakira showed the rest of the bedraggled Persians their quarters.

"But what inducement can we offer the other Bedouin tribes to subordinate themselves to us, or even just to join us?" Sinidri scratched his hairy ear, piebald with age.

Zohak smiled indulgently as he glanced around at the tribal elders assembled in the courtyard of the chieftain's mansion. *These old men are as timid as sparrows.* The gypsum plaster on the west wall glinted in the morning sunlight, and he felt the stone courtyard warming up with the day. He drew in a breath. "Diyala and the middle Tigris support a dozen little tribal territories. After Mirdas's work of consolidation, we are in a position

to herd them together into a powerful confederation. We could finally escape the domination of the likes of Babylon and Aratta."

Rasunnu, a grizzled warrior in his sixties, snorted. "The means! We want to know how you think you can get them to unify that way. Your father could never do more than bribe or intimidate the various tribes into letting the caravans through. Even this he achieved with a large budget over twenty years."

"My father did not have the support of major Persian tribes. Spityura assures me that Sagarti, Dropiki, Maspi and Marafi are all ready to revolt. Jamshid disgraced his first wife, from the Sagarti, with her divorce. Their priestly caste largely hails from Dropiki, and Jamshid mulcted them of their cattle. Even some of the Pasargadae, the royal clan, are seething.

The eldest of the elders, Gabbar, pitched in with his squeaky voice. "Your plan nevertheless does seem impractical. The Bedouin and Persian tribes are too busy with their feuds and vendettas against one another to come together that way." The other elders grunted their agreement, their faces engulfed in the shade afforded by the east wall.

Sinidri put his hand gently on Zohak's forearm. "Why not continue with Mirdas's policies? They have made us respected and wealthy."

Zohak sucked in a deep breath. "First of all, Mirdas's policies were failing, and that is why Jamshid had him assassinated." The elders gasped disapprovingly at the matter-of-fact way in which Zohak had referred to such painful realities. Undeterred, he continued. "Second, we are wealthy only with reference to the poorest desert tribes. Now, with the drought, our herds are thinning out and we soon may have difficulty bartering for grain from the famished settled folk."

Alasharru clapped his hands. "By the gods, he speaks truly! My herds are half what they were, and the peasants are running away from their dusty fields like men divorcing barren women. How will my wives make bread next season, how will my twenty children eat, if no barley is raised?" The other members of the Seven also obviously hungered for battle but were too junior to count decisively in the debate. They shifted uneasily as they sat cross-legged on reed mats to Zohak's left. He knew he could rely on them.

Zohak still felt some of the elders staring at him with hostility, deep frowns threatening to break their sunbaked faces open. Gabbar's reedy voice floated over the courtyard again. "Wars, confederations, all that takes resources. We simply do not have them."

Iamania, half his face shaved away by an enemy battle axe, grimaced horribly. "Why should we stay here in Bawri like despicable weaklings? We should be burning the world like an irresistible torch!"



Sherilai tossed his head, sending his lush black mane flying around his bulging shoulders. "I, for one, have no taste for the women's bread that cowards eat, who fear to ride to the battlefield."

Zohak spread out his hand. "Gabbar, conquest can pay for itself. One simply shares out the loot equally amongst the tribesmen when a region is taken." The courtyard buzzed, and Zohak could see some of the elders nodding their assent, their noses suddenly filled with odors of past campaigns.

Rasunnu, though, reacted differently. His hairy nostrils flared and his blood, fouled with rage, rushed to his face, his whiskers glowing whiter with the contrast. "Yes, that will work one year. But if the area is despoiled, its crafts and husbandry destroyed, its inhabitants forced abroad, then the next year it will be barren. The more so in this time of plague and famine! Then your parasitical little federation will fall apart. Your father had nothing but contempt for that sort of mindless banditry."

Zohak, surprised by the man's vehemence, gripped the rage in his belly with his mind and held it in check. He knew that Bedouins spoke their piece without circumlocution, and that though he was now chief, Rasunnu was still much his senior. Zohak appraised his words carefully. "The next year we shall harvest elsewhere. The seven climes are vast, and our conquests can take us through them all. Why should we be condemned to pasture within the sandy perimeters of the Diyala for all eternity?"

Sinidri looked intrigued. "You are talking about perpetual conquest, feeding on itself, growing ever vaster, leaving a wasteland behind it." He rubbed his palms over his cheeks as though he were washing his face. "You have vision, I admit. I wonder where it will lead us."

Zohak felt a surge of pride that he had all but neutralized Rasunnu's violent objections. He felt a consensus growing in his favor by the tone of the elders' murmuring.

Atarbidi fingered his lion-skin vest. "I say we rush to the battlefield feast. If we stay in the city our bellies will never be satiated. The bread of the city is always moldy, and city beer tastes like piss compared to drinking from a cool water skin during a night raid."

Burramanu, who towered above all the rest of them, chimed in, in his mountain drawl. "What of the affront of Mirdas's murder? Do we want to risk being ridiculed by the other tribes as cowards and weaklings? They may assume that with Mirdas dead, we have been reduced to quiescence. Jamshid will be emboldened against us. Nasiku Zohak, I say we bend all men to your will, make them render tribute to Utu, and even bind up the gallu demons themselves!"

Zohak raised his hands. "My elders, my *Sibitti*. Your speeches have anointed my head like pleasing oil. Let us shake the dust from our bows, polish the tarnish from our swords, and straighten the shafts of our lances." A cheer went up from all those assembled save Sinidri, who broodingly nursed his reservations.

Zohak, elated, rose and saw the elders and senior warriors out of the front gate. He returned to his guest room where his cousin Teral, the diplomat among the Seven, awaited him, along with Spityura. "They went for the campaign the way a falcon drops on a titmouse. Did you send out the spies as I ordered?"

Teral nodded conspiratorially. "Yes, two days ago. They did the requisite surveillance. We captured two Persians, one an officer, the other a bearded one. I interrogated them. There was a statement in their mouths."

"What did they reveal?"

Siyak Tora emerged from the tunnel, caked in mud all over, looking for all the world like the black ox that was his namesake. "Sister Faranak. We have a devil of a problem."

"You have got more problems than a frog has warts, you old rogue."

"No, sister, this one's serious. We've hit a long patch of soft earth underneath. We could maybe brace the tunnel, but this spongy loam will drink up the water like a herd of thirsty elephants."

Faranak winced. This time the fretful old man was right. She had been surveying the excavation with the pulsing impatience of childbirth. They had dug down deeply to tap into the water, creating a large mound of earth where the spring had first sprouted on the slope. The downward-sloping tunnel, four feet high by two feet wide, was supposed to lead the water gradually to the fields below, intersecting other springs at intervals of forty-five to ninety cubits, and finally should release it at the crops. But the whole scheme would fail if porous soil drained off the canal water or the sides collapsed easily. And then, she knew, they would starve.

She sighed. "Let us cease work for today. We shall have to fix this problem before we can finish the job." She glared at the spring water rushing down the incline, swollen to a torrent by the excavations, regretting that it was wasted, serving to do no more than freshen the limp grass immediately around it. Athwya, out furrowing the fields before sowing for the fall harvest, would be disappointed.

She trudged crestfallen back to the village with Siyak Tora and the other mud-soaked tribes people, the Rapithwina sun beating down on them.

It was already the month of Thaigar Kish, and soon the summer heat would envelope them like a potter's kiln. So little snow had fallen the past winter that the stream beds were already nothing but cracked mud cakes, and the sun would soon crush them into arid dust. How would their thirsty barley and other crops then drink? There had to be a way to make the underground water canal work.

Roxanna was sitting on a stool in the kitchen shelling pecans and keeping one eye on the children.

"May your fire never go out, daughter."

Roxanna looked around, startled. "May we be one in power, mistress."

Without warning her stool moved and she spilled backward onto the earthen floor.

"What the--"

"Boys!" Faranak chased Barmayun and Katayun, who had played a prank on girl. She caught them and boxed their ears, then sent them, bawling, inside for the day.

"I am awfully sorry. My sons will be the death of me yet."

Roxanna grinned dolefully. "Do not be too hard on them. I have a little brother, Darai, that could give them a run for their money in mischief-making. I'll ritually bathe and change clothes later."

Faranak's cheeks still burned from the embarrassment of seeing a guest badly treated in her own house. Those boys were in for it. She pulled up short as she noticed that the girl's eyes glistened when she mentioned her brother.

"Have you heard nothing from your family as yet?"

"I am outlaw, mistress."

Athwya came from the fields, interrupting them. Faranak rushed out to greet him, giving him a passionate hug, and he gazed into her eyes inquisitively. His grey-green irises always stirred something in her, and she urgently wanted another son from this comely man.

On hearing from Siyak Tora, Athwiya convened the villagers before as the sun hung low in the sky.

"There is something we have to talk about."

"Like where our next meal is coming from?" The rough peasant who spoke up had progressively lost his manners as his family's meals had become less square.

"The tunnel canal we are building for irrigation has hit an mountain-sized snag. Siyak Tora ran into a long vein of soft earth. The water will just leach into it."

The men shook their heads in despair.

Roxanna perked up. "This sounds interesting. Would you fill me in on what exactly you are doing?"

Athwya sketched out the irrigation project and their hopes that it might be a way to defeat the drought.

Roxanna was still careful not to look Athwya or Faranak in the eye. "Well, up here on the surface, when we want to keep water from flowing away, we put it in clay vessels."

"Yes, go on." Athwya did not seem especially intrigued by this line of reasoning.

"Why not fire some ceramics to surface the tunnel with?"

Faranak clapped and whooped, and rushed over to hug Roxanna. "That's it! We can do it!"

Athwya's face always seemed sad, but now the sorrow lessened slightly. "Maybe, just maybe. There is one problem."

Roxanna's face fell. "What now?"

"This is a small village and we only have one potter." He pointed at an elderly man sitting in the circle of villagers, who was whispering under his breath.

"Vahuka? Of course. We've made some pieces together. He still talks to that dog of his, who died twenty years ago."

"We'd need more of the villagers to be trained in working kilns."

"My mother taught me. I can teach others." Then Roxanna broke into tears and sobbed despite herself.

Faranak comforted her. "There, there, that's all right. Whatever it is, it will be all right."

By the second day, Vahuka, Roxanna, and her new apprentices had produced enough fired clay to begin lining the light loam surface inside the tunnel. Faranak paced back and forth as the men dug below, and helped keep the diggers working in a straight line, by shouting directions and stamping on the ground in front of them. The tunnel took a month and a half to complete, and halfway into the scorching month of Garma Pada she began envying the way the diggers were able to keep cool beneath the earth. Normally the tribes people of this village migrated with their herds north in the summer, in search of pasture while their crops grew, but this year they stayed put because of the drought. They ran into several more soft patches underground, and had to line them with fired clay. She was amused to see that pigeons began nesting in the tunnel, and thought that a good harbinger, since birds warded off insects, reptiles and other loathsome creatures. The watered fields began throwing up shoots of sweet barley, and the soil

became so inviting that Faranak, Athwya and the other villagers had to spend a good deal of time just uprooting the greedy camel thorn, tamarisk and other shrubs that attempted to invade.

By the month of Baga Yadish in the fall, their previous stocks of grain had been completely depleted, and if the barley they had planted in late spring had failed they would have starved. As it was, the tunnel canal had allowed them to turn out a bumper crop. The whole village joined in the harvesting and threshing. The villagers celebrated the harvest with their annual day-long hunt for loathsome creatures in the vicinity, in which they killed all the scorpions, snakes, frogs, and beetles they could find, as a way of symbolizing their commitment to truth and beauty.

Athwya and Faranak received much praise from the villagers for the way the tunnel canal had saved them from starvation, and Faranak noted with pleasure that whenever she visited a friend she found the huge clay pot that served as a household granary full. Then the news spread to the surrounding countryside and the trouble began. Bands of beggars appeared at the village walls, demanding entrance and pleading for food, their bulging eyes and distended bellies speaking more eloquently than their parched tongues. Whole families, looking like skeletons just risen from the grave, thronged at the closed gate.

Siyak Tora reported on the situation to Athwya. "I say we beat them and send them away. We'll be hard put to survive till spring ourselves, and the shah's men haven't even been by yet to collect their half."

Athwya frowned, rubbing his light brown beard. "We do not have much to share, no denying it. It would be a hard thing, though, to send even the children away to their deaths."

Faranak's heart melted. "We've got to share at least something with them. Please, let me take out a little grain.

"Well, maybe a little wouldn't hurt."

Faranak stopped by the communal granary and scooped up some barley into a wicker basket. Then she went to the front gate and had Siyak Tora and his men let her out. They stood behind her, spears raised, to make sure the beggars gained no entrance to Hyrba.

The sight of the children, their hair reddish with lack of milk, fish or fowl, their skins pulled tightly around their skulls, their hollow eyes dull, their ribs like bird cages and their stomachs like full water bags, shattered her heart. The famished peasants began crowding around her as she poured a handful of grain into each outstretched hand. Then some sharp, bony hands began grabbing at her wicker basket, and she had to slap them. The crowd kept surging forward, and Faranak all of a sudden felt surrounded and

helpless, as the collective weight of their frail bodies pressed at her. She screamed. She felt the basket slip away as ten hands tugged on it at once, and it spilled. The beggars threw themselves down on it, piling up, threatening to engulf her as well. The gate behind her seemed to move, pushing her forward into the mass of scrawny bodies.

"Get back! Back you brutes!" Athwya, Siyak Tora and his men had issued from the gate and were advancing on the writhing, skeletal mob with sharpened wooden spears and other weapons. Faranak, with Roxanna, tried to move toward them, but they were trapped by the heaving crowd. She found it hard to breathe, and began to see black.

Yimak pushed him back down as he tried to rise. "Your majesty, you are too infirm to ride standing."

Jamshid sat in the crystal chariot, held up by Yimak. Vidranga skillfully guided the white stallions, which appeared to tread the air a few feet off the ground, at the head of a great army. Behind them trotted the cavalry of tribesmen, veins burning with the haoma and barely human as they began the transition into a wolf horde. Bringing up the rear was legions of infantry from all the villages that owed fealty to the Light of the Persians, some of them arch-browed Persians, others Manneans, yet others virtually naked Elamite mercenaries.

"What will Ecbatana think of me if I ride into battle sitting, like an old woman?"

"What will Ecbatana think of you if you fall out of your chariot?"

"Do not underestimate me, Yimak. I swim in the haoma and it makes a giant of me. I am not unsteady."

"You know of my passion for you, brother. Remember my tenderness last night. Humor my concern."

"I feel a need to see beyond the horizon. There was something dark and insensible in the realm of the Medes when I gazed into my seven-ringed grail. It gives me pause."

"The Medes are men, as we are. They have given refuge to the spiteful Matroyao, who knows the secrets of your court and who has betrayed you. Retribution must be visited upon them."

"There is black sorcery behind the walls of many colors. Dioke is a creature of the demons he worships. No wonder my ex-wife was a suitable addition to his court."

"You have bound countless *divs*, my life. Dioke is no match for you."

On the plain, they passed small villages, some of them with no walls. Squat mud-built houses clustered like crude bricks thrown here and there

around the headman's two-story edifice. The villagers ran for cover at the sight of the massive army, lest its troops be hungry for their barley and pulses, or for their day's take of pigeons and partridges, or for their daughters. As the army approached the land of the Medes, the grass and clover beds of the plains turned greener, some of it fed on by roving herds of cattle, horses and camels. The cavalymen occasionally detoured to feast on the raw blood and meat of this wild livestock. Then they traversed a country broken by hillocks and ravines, before the earth rose onto a plateau, where the terrain turned to stone and the soil seemed parched despite the occasional stand of barley. They descended into a brown, lifeless valley, struggled over a promontory, and finally glimpsed the valley in which the seven-walled city of Ecbatana nestled, surrounded by vineyards and fields of lavender thyme. Looming above it stood the snow-capped Alvand mountains. Streams plunged down their side like white lightning bolts wriggling down to the verdure at its foot.

Jamshid had expected Dioke to settle in for a long siege. The Persian world-conqueror had peered into his chalice and seen where the weaknesses were in the earthen sconces before the city and in each of the seven great walls. To his surprise, on the approach of the Aratta horde the great Susa Gate opened and Mede troops streamed across the moat, heading for the invaders.

Dioke Shah rode at the head of a pounding cavalry, the horsemen brandishing spears and reticulated bows. They pulled up in a line in front of the city, still within range of the archers lining the first wall's parapet and giving them cover.

Jamshid ordered his forces to halt.

Yimak put her mailed arm around him. "Why do we stop, my life?" Let us descend and smash the manlings."

"Their archers will wreak a great slaughter on our horsemen if we strike at them directly. We must draw them out onto the plain before the walled city if we are to have an even playing field."

"Let me provoke them."

"Yimak, your loss would hurt Persian morale. The men worship you after the defeat of the Arameans and their black demon."

"Their morale is even now ebbing away. They are near to the wolf-form, and need to go on the offensive to maintain themselves."

Jamshid sighed. Was he too attached to his sister to deploy her properly as an amazon? He remembered the intimacies of the previous night. He looked around, groggily, and through the haoma haze could see

that she was right. The cavalymen were jittery, their horses straining at the bit.

“Very well. But be careful, my sister, my love, my very self.”

Yimak let out a war cry, her nose beginning to elongate, taking on the aspect of the alpha bitch of the pack.

She led a band of Pasargadae tribesmen howling down at the massed defenders, who visibly tensed. As they approached, the tribesmen loosed a volley from their double bows, striking down dozens of the enemy. Persian bows, lacquered and crafted in the royal crafthalls of Aratta by skilled bowyers from the eastern steppes, had greater range than any other such weapons in the world, and Aratta’s fletchers were cunning in fashioning true vanes and in smearing the arrowheads with feces and distillations from poisonous herbs.

Instead of pressing the attack, Jamshid was relieved to observe, Yimak whirled at the last minute and returned with her men to the main force, daring Dioke to give chase.

A band of Medes, enraged by the loss of their fellows, broke ranks and came roaring after Yimak. At her signal, her own men split into a right and left flank, and turned, encompassing and trapping the enemy, then, as the Medes’ arrows fell short, made a great massacre of them with their powerful bolts.

Yimak, now full she-wolf, leaped down to tear at the throats of the fallen and gorge on their still-pumping blood. She turned to Dioke and barked in derision, her great row of teats jiggling. The Mede cavalry looked bewildered and their horses whinnied in alarm.

Dioke Shah, provoked, set out for Yimak’s band, his eyes combusting in hatred. Perhaps a favored courtier or sometime catamite had fallen to Yimak’s fangs. She and the other Pasargadae leaped back onto their steeds, which were scarcely less savage than the wolfish riders. They again formed two wings, but when Dioke realized he was being caught in a pincer, he hurried his right flank against hers and broke out of the trap. Still, he could not get close enough for his inferior archers to take a toll on the Pasargadae, and many of the Medes seemed afraid of the wolf-forms assumed by their berserker opponents.

Dioke dejectedly retreated to his front line, before the city walls, with the yipping of the triumphant Persians chasing him in shame. He had lost dozens of men, with no gain on his part.

Dioke Shah looked up and gave a signal, and the great Susa Gate was lowered once more. There was Matroyao, in Mede armor and mounted on a gargantuan beast, the Karkadann. Its small eyes glowed red near the bottom



its face and a single gargantuan horn arose from its snout, curving back toward its massive brow. It was shaking the earth as it ran, ungainly, up the hill toward the Persian army. Jamshid was astonished. None could mount the Karkadann save one who had defeated it in single combat. Matroyao was a more formidable foe than he had credited, and it was all the more imperative that she be vanquished.

Yimak's tribesmen, governed more by audacity than discretion, let out a cry of anger and ran at the rippling beast, brandishing their bows and lances. The ex-queen rode down some of them, smashing heads with her boar head mace. The beast caught a strapping young warrior in the chest with its one horn and tossed him high behind him, trailing a gush of crimson blood across the lapis lazuli sky. The Karkadann then sped up and trampled beneath its golden hooves other tribesmen who, having charged it, now attempted to flee but found they could not escape the juggernaut.

Yimak charged her rival, returning to human form and raining a cascade of arrows down on the gargantuan unicorn and its master. They bounced off the hide of the one and the mail of the other, ineffectually.

Matroyao drew herself up on the back of the brute. "You cunt! Today you die!"

Yimak screamed a blood-freezing war cry. "Today I shall either feast on your liver or feast with the gods!" She spurred her horse on, charging the colossus.

As Yimak's steed approached the Karkadann, it lowered its horn and charged, catching the horse beneath its breast, impaling it to pitiful whinnies and then tossing both mare and rider high into the air above him. Yimak twisted lithely, separating from her doomed horse, and landed on the beast's back with the aplomb of an acrobat, as her horse plummeted to the ground beside her, breaking its neck and falling quiet.

Matroyao, astonished and outraged, gained her own feet on the back of the Karkadann and turned to her rival, short sword drawn. The two fenced as the beast continued its triumphant charge toward the Persian army. The divorced queen slashed with vicious force, but Yimak eluded her or deftly parried her thrusts, forcing her toward the head of the beast. The hoof beats of the Karkadann drowned out the maledictions they pronounced on one another.

Matroyao voiced an imperious command to her monstrous steed and braced herself, turning sideways. It abruptly pulled up, ceasing its charge. Yimak, unprepared, was thrown toward her rival, who leaned over and lifted her in the air with her shoulders. She fell awkwardly to the ground, lying

still after a bone-crushing impact, her features returning entirely to the human. Matroyao's war-cries and taunts echoed through the valley.

"Pervert! Harlot of a brother-lover!"

Jamshid was tempted by despair. The fabled Karkadann was known to tear down castle walls with its angry spike, and to scatter armies before it. He was seized with panic that his crazed ex-wife would direct it to trample his beloved sister.

He took a deep breath and stood unsteadily.

"Vidranga! Advance the chariot! Have the other troops stand down."

"Your majesty!"

"Do as I say!"

The crystal carriage, its facets glinting in the sun, flew down into the valley, floating above the ground, charging at the massive animal and its glorious mistress.

Just before reaching the Karkadann, the chariot responded to Jamshid's touch and it and its horse team lifted above the enraged beast, avoiding its horn. Then he had the carriage descend right onto Matroyao's head, knocking her from her titanic steed. She lay at awkward angles in the grasses and did not move.

Jamshid knew that he should now press the advantage and scatter the city's defenders with his soaring chariot. But he turned and saw the Karkadann bearing down on the still unconscious form of Yimak, its dewlap flapping beneath its roaring jaws, clearly intent on crushing its tormentor.

"Turn about!" he shouted at Vidranga.

They went for her. He leaned low from the basket of the chariot, and scooped her up precariously into his arms.

The Karkadann was still charging the chariot, which was sideways to its trajectory.

"Stay!" He put his hand on Vidranga's shoulder.

"Your majesty, we shall be rammed and broken!"

"Do you fly and still doubt?"

The huge animal lowered its head and caught the basket of the crystal chariot under its horn, then tried to toss its head. But it was caught, unable to lift the ensorcelled vehicle. With a sickening crunch, its horn was shorn off by its strenuous exertion against an immovable carriage. The wounded animal, bleeding a river from its snout, emitted a plangent cry and warily backed away. A few crystal chips had showered on its face, glinting in the sun like sequins on a red gown. These grew, like living things, appearing to put down roots into its facial arteries and to flower over its hide. The beast

quickly turned crystal and in the end it stood, immobile and hornless, transformed into a pellucid glass sculpture.

Jamshid nodded triumphantly at the distant, astonished form of Dioke. Angered at Matroyao's vindictiveness, her attempt to destroy his heart's beloved, the Light of the Persians had the chariot whirl about again and lowered the felines of its wheels to the ground, heading for his ex-wife's limp form.

Abruptly he came face to face with a contingent of his own troops, swerving to avoid them. He recognized them as Sagarti, Matroyao's tribe. They had defected. They formed a solemn line before their fallen kinswoman.

"Stand down, Persians of the noble Sagarti. She is a traitor!" He used his weirding voice, whereby he commanded all creatures. But he heard the feebleness of his command, the syllables slurred by years of haoma inebriation.

They sat upon their steeds like hills of iron, unmoved, expressionless.

Nijara, the tribal chieftain of the Sagarti, who had given the shah Matroyao's hand in marriage, confronted him. "The shah has turned coward. He would trample a defenseless woman as she lay on the ground, the mother of his children, once his own bed mate! All for the sake of his own degenerate sister."

More Sagarti massed before him, while others rode down to stand with the Medes. Jamshid looked up the hill gauging his remaining support.

His heart heaved when he saw the Dropiki tribesmen, dressed in the blue tunics of their tribe, peel off to join the Sagarti. Their chieftain, the gaunt, fastidious Gaomant, rode down and joined Nijara.

Gaomant confronted Jamshid, his eyes sunken with too much fasting. "This chariot was fashioned in his youth by the defrocked wizard of Babylon, Asharidu. It is a creature of the dark arts, with which you sought to murder your true wife. You have become *mithrodruj*, have broken your contracts, and given the cattle of the holy zoatars to the commoners and the Nar. You have diverted the sacred offerings to yourself. You broke the young Zopyrus over your knee and disgraced the true high priest in favor of the impostor, Thukhra. Even the foreign Magi priests of the Medes are more pure than you, you black magician!"

Jamshid looked wildly down at the Medes, who were beginning to advance, spying the split in his own ranks. Behind him, he saw that even the Pasargadae and other tribes were wavering. Was this the plain on which he lost his head to his own commanders?

## Chapter 15

### A Dragon Slouches toward Persia

Out of nowhere, an itinerant young tradesman approached Hyrba and joined the fray. The village guards pricked the pile of desperate bodies with their spears, and screams issued from it. Athwya pulled the grasping hands off Faranak. The young stranger lay about him with his fists, and when once the mob pushed him back, he resorted to his heavy mallet. The beggars broke ranks, screaming in pain and fear, running away. Faranak felt the pressure on her chest lessen gradually. The guards jabbed, not hard enough to wound badly or kill, and advanced, pushing the mob back. Finally the mendicants were all on their feet, still eyeing the spilled grain wistfully, and the Hyrba villagers charged, turning the pauper retreat into a rout. Faranak still could not get her breath. Athwya caught her as she started to go limp.

"Are you all right, my life?"

"I'll be fine, I just need some air."

"That was foolish, sister Faranak. There's such a thing as doing too much good." Siyak Tora's bushy grey eyebrows attacked the center of his forehead like colliding caterpillars.

"If only they'd been patient, they each would have received some food." Faranak felt like having a good cry.

Athwya turned to the young man who had helped to turn the tide. "Thank you for your help, stranger."

“I am Kaveh.”

Faranak was sure she knew him from somewhere, but her vision was still blurry from her encounter with the press of the mob. He had an engaging manner, though the chiseled nose and cleft chin promised more obstinacy than intelligence or culture. His height was accentuated by his lankiness. He had not been eating well. Then it came to her. She had known a smaller, but more filled out boy with something of these features. “The son of Cyrus!”

“My father was murdered by one of the Immortals.” His voice broke and he paused, recovering himself. “I am outlaw. I say this not knowing your own loyalties.”

“I pray his path to the next world was broad and not narrow.” Faranak remembered Cyrus Blacksmith’s vitality, and his power when he had served as royal ironsmith. She had not much cared for him at first, but later admired his sacrifices for the artisans’ cause.

Athwya grinned. “We’d be a hard lot to betray someone who just helped save us from a mob. But have no fear, our loyalties are with those who defy the tax collectors.”

Faranak grabbed the massive arm of the smith. “There’s another outlaw here you’ll want to meet!”

She was amused by his consternation, which grew as they walked back to the house.

When they entered, Roxanna was playing with the boys. She looked down, but in their direction, ready to greet them with a smile. Then she followed Kaveh’s sandals and legs up to his face, involuntarily. Her eyes went wide as saucers and she shrieked, leaping up and throwing herself at Kaveh.

“You bastard! Where have you been? Do you know what I have been through?” She beat him on his broad, bare chest, weeping and wailing.

Kaveh, at first astonished, instinctively took her in his arms, and comforted her. “Can you forgive me?”

She sniffled and tried to compose herself. “If you behave yourself from now on, master. And stop disappearing.”

They told each other their stories, as Faranak brewed some herbal tea and Athwya went off to consult with the elders about improving the fortifications of the village.

By the time Athwya returned, the two lovers were sitting in the corner on pillows arms entangled and oblivious to the world.

Faranak greeted her husband and called them all to the rug in the center of the room around which they sat cross-legged to eat their spare

evening meal. She brought them the small portion of porridge Atossa had prepared. Kaveh ate his slowly, making it last. He put a bite of it on Roxanna's lips, feeding her like a mother bird does a chick. Faranak was glad he had not wolfed it down and asked for more. She realized on reflection that he probably knew more about dealing with hunger than she did, and when she gazed at the skin-folds around some of his muscles and the thicket of bones in his skinny neck, it occurred to her that she was looking at the future of her village's own men.

As they ate, Kaveh and Roxanna could not keep their eyes off one another.

Athwya sighed and looked at Faranak. "This problem of the paupers is getting out of hand. Soon they'll outnumber us, and they may eventually overwhelm us."

Kaveh turned serious. "I have found nothing but want and hunger as I journeyed this parched land. I know I only arrived here in your village today, but would you mind if I made an observation?"

Faranak raised one eyebrow.

"As I see it the problem is that you have food and the other villages do not. Why is that?"

Roxanna leaned over and whispered in his ear the story of Faranak's underground water tunnel.

Kaveh considered the issue. "Then you are becoming the cynosure of beggars because you know how to do something the other villagers do not. Why not just send out some teachers to surrounding villages to instruct them in how to make the water tunnels?"

Athwya shook his head. "They still wouldn't bring in a harvest till the spring."

Faranak clicked her tongue at his eternal pessimism. "My life, you are thinking of sour winter barley. But other crops would ripen sooner. They could plant fast-growing autumn vegetables such as kohlrabi, eggplant and courgettes."

Kaveh looked down. "I am city boy and don't know much about gardening, but I have spent the last few months with these famished villagers. Right now, they just need something to fill their bellies and get them through the winter." Kaveh's head, like Roxanna's, seemed to Faranak to give off an odd glow, and his plan warmed her insides. She regretted that neither of her boys had Kaveh's good qualities, and she longed again, as she had all spring and summer, for another son.

Athwya grunted his assent. "The idea is far-fetched, but perhaps not impossible of success. I will attempt to convince the tribal elders."

In the following days, the Hyrba teachers were greeted as saviors in the surrounding villages, which were spaced far away from one another because of the perennial scarcity of water. Where the villagers could find springs nearby, they began digging their tunnels, which had to be modest compared to that of Hyrba because of the need to plant something quickly. Roxanna and Kaveh went along on some of these teaching trips, and she explained to the local potters the need to fire ceramics to cover some of the more loamy dirt walls. Athwya also sent out to them pack animals loaded with seed, refusing payment this year in return for a portion of the harvest when the threat of starvation receded. Faranak noticed with relief that the number of beggars declined radically as soon as surrounding villagers began to have hope they could survive the winter through the sweat of their brows.

One morning Siyak Tora ran breathlessly into the yard. "Master Athwya, a large party of tribesmen is headed this way."

Faranak heard Athwya let loose an earthy, rustic expletive. Let it not be the minions of the accursed Yimak returning for what little they had left! She watched him pull on his autumn robe and walk out to greet the domain lord. She tagged along.

Siyak Tora admitted the horsemen, who rode swaggering up to their gate. Athwya put on his false smile and placed his hands together. "Welcome to Hyrba, my lord. What is the pleasure of Jamshid Shah, King of kings, Light of the Persians?"

The leader leapt down off his tall beige stallion and strode up with a incensed look on his rugged face. He stiff-armed Athwya, shoving him back into the dust. "Miserable producer snake! We are here to collect taxes for the rightful shah, Lord Spityura. How dare you take the name of that traitorous lush?"

Spityura consulted with Zohak about the strategy of attack. "Our eyes say that the bulk of Jamshid's army is before Ecbatana. We have already begun raising rebellion in the provinces among warriors loyal to my person."

Zohak's walnut face showed no emotion. "Then it is an excellent time to attack." He sat with one leg out straight before him, as though it were injured and unable to bend.

Spityura, sitting cross-legged and still towering over his host, nodded. "Even if the war with the Medes goes well, the Nar will be fatigued from the campaign."

Zohak stroked his black goatee. "With luck, they will be bloodied and vulnerable to fresh forces eager to harry them."

“Do not be over-confident, Zohak. Jamshid is still all-seeing, and can set traps for us. I had counted on your wizard to balance his abilities, but I see no sign of him.”

Zohak’s face darkened and he looked as though he might retort sharply. But then his composure won the inner struggle. “Do not mention to me that traitor. He sought to ensnare me in a bargain to which no king could assent.”

“Then we are throwing the naked valor of the desert against all the clever snares of civilization.”

“You said that half of the shah’s troops will defect to us as we approach.”

“I once saw Jamshid wrestle an elephant with his bare hands, and stun it with a great blow between the eyes. I have seen him set demons against one another and slay titanic monsters. Even without an army, he is formidable.”

“He is a man like other men. The black demon might well have bested him had not a lowly smith intervened.”

“There is no denying that his divine halo is diminishing. The gods despise self-indulgence. I merely suggest that overconfidence is hardly the order of the day.”

“I agree. But there are things you do not know about me, cousin. I have in my own right bested the great bone serpent and the blue-tongued dragon. We are all children of Vivanhant Shah.”

Spityura took a long draught of wine. “If I did not know of your exploits, Zohak, I would be in Babylon or Ninevah seeking a more conventional ally. I am counting on you performing some sleight of hand when we meet my brother.”

“I shall deliver. But our alliance has a price.”

“You know I shall be generous if we prevail.”

“The Persians know many things we do not, but two must be prized above all.”

“How not to speak falsehoods and how to please a woman?” Spityura grinned.

“You are too witty merely to be a prince. No, we want the secrets of making haoma and of forging iron.”

Spityura stiffened, his face darkening with outrage. “You presume too much, Utu! Those arts are among the fundamentals of Persian power. We cannot trust others with them.”

“As for iron, others know its workings than the Persians. Our conquests will bring us enough gold to buy the knowledge from any



blacksmith guild in any great city, or even to buy the blacksmiths themselves.”

Spityura could not deny the justice of the point. If the Arameans helped his disaffected Persians take Aratta, they would be partners in a wealthy kingdom and no longer confined to a dusty village. “Very well. I see the point of instructing your tradesmen in the firing of iron. But haoma is a mystery of the gods.”

Zohak almost never laughed. It was contrary to his Bedouin sense of decorum. He had explained that a man who laughed in public was thought a gullible fool by the tribesmen. But now he broke into a full-throated, deep laugh. “You brew it in vats like beer or wine. It is no more a matter of gods than my piss is!”

“There will be resistance from the zoatars, and we need the Dropiki tribe with us.”

“We Arameans will nevertheless become a wing of the cavalry in the new empire stretching from Aratta to Babylon, once my envoy Teral convinces the rest of the Tigris tribes to join us. If our opponents’ horsemen on the Persian plateau can take the wolf form and attack with the abandon of the berserker, we shall ever be at a disadvantage, Lord Spityura. Your success depends on ours.”

Spityura looked at the paramount chief with new respect. His point was inarguable. He sighed, regretting armoring the wild men of the desert with iron mail and shields and weaponry, and filling their arteries with the living fire of the Haoma god. What was he unleashing upon the civilized world? He nodded. “You are right. It must be done.”

Zohak called his attendants, who brought a grunting, fierce wild boar, lassoed about the neck from several directions to keep it from charging the nasiku and his guest. The one called Sinidri carried a huge bronze shield, the weight of which tattooed his craggy arms with branching indigo veins, holding it above the two potentates. Zohak grasped his scimitar, and Spityura whipped out his short sword. They nodded at each other beneath the shade of the great shield, the boar bucking and squealing at them, its great lower canines working beyond its lip. Both struck true and the boar’s legs crumpled, as it hit the dust with a thud. The pact was sealed.

Spityura sent messengers on swift ponies to prepare his allies in the provinces and agreed with Zohak that the bulk of the Arameans would join his campaign once the requisite deals had been made with the Tigris chieftains. The fourth day at dawn the advance party set out east for Aratta, across the flush steppe that slowly gave way to rising mounds of gravel and

pebbles, and finally to the sandstone foothills that beckoned them toward the Iranian plateau, and the prize.

The first night when they made camp, one of the Arameans, a great muscle-bound tribesman with a shaggy black mane named Sherilai, made overtures to Mahin.

"I have Babylonian shekels from our last raid. I'll make you happy, you make me happy."

Mahin slapped him.

He backhanded her, sending her sprawling in the dust.

Narsih was there, and threw himself at the Bedouin, breaking his nose with a sure blow to the face that, however, almost broke his own hand.

Spityura was summoned and the two were still brawling, weaker with each earth-shaking blow they landed on one another. He waded in and pulled Narsih away, and pushed Sherilai's great chest, sending him stumbling back.

"Stop it! A great enemy plots the deaths of us all, and if you are divided you are doomed."

Sherilai gazed at him angrily, clearly not understanding Persian. One of the other Arameans, who had been to Aratta, whispered in his ear. He wiped the blood from his upper lip and shouted angrily.

The interpreter looked from Spityura to Narsih. "He says that a woman who flounces about like that in such a state of undress is announcing her availability. He had heard that she was a tavern girl. If instead she is a person of honor, perhaps she should dress like it."

Spityura looked down at the man from a great height. "This tavern girl is under my protection. Let it be known in your camp. Nobility lies in the heart, not in a piece of fabric."

"He says he is sorry for any affront, but that it was not his fault."

"Tell him that I am only glad that Lady Mahin had mercy on him and did not make his life forfeit as she has with other rogues. I do not need a feud between our little Persian band and the Arameans over a dead rake."

The man's eyes widened and he blanched, looking from Spityura to the figure of Mahin, who was standing arms akimbo.

Spityura had a talk after that with Mahin and the other Persian dancing girls who had escaped with them from the tavern in Aratta, suggesting they buy some Bedouin clothing from the Aramean camp followers.

Mahin looked up at him, eyebrows knit. "Their fabric is heavy for this heat. I will bear it for this journey, but I wonder if it is good to bring these barbarians into the heart of Persia."

Jamshid made a snap decision. His army had splintered, and the campaign was lost. But a rout would be disastrous.

He called to Vidranga. "Return to the main body of the troops."

He held Yimak in his arms, kissing her face and her luscious lips, which had reverted to human form abruptly when she lost consciousness. He willed her to awake, and her eyes fluttered open.

"My heart! Thank the gods you are alive."

She seemed fatigued, but smiled weakly. "The monster?"

"It is no more. But we must rally the tribes—some have turned traitor."

Vidranga pulled up before the line of remaining Nar. Jamshid and Yimak, both enervated by their respective trials, stood unsteadily side by side as he addressed the Pasargadae and other loyal tribes. "I have punished Dioke by destroying his Karkadann and throwing Matroyao to the earth. We can engage in a fighting retreat and leave them all to the mercies of Assyria, which hungers for its vassal's lands and now has nothing to fear in Ecbatana."

Vidranga raised his arm and made the gestures for a fighting retreat, for those beyond the stentorian voice of the king.

They held their cavalry formation as they retreated, ready to whirl in an instant if the enemy charged them as they receded.

Gaomant, the dour and gaunt leader of the turncoat Dropiki, refused to accept the departure of the hated shah, leading a charge by his blue-garbed warrior priests. Howling with the haoma, they turned wolf and charged at the receding army. The zoatars riding among them chanted their most powerful incantation, attempting to enchant the heretic king-worshippers. A grey miasma engulfed the battlefield, carrying with it the buzz of damned voices ruing their eternity in hell for the falseness of their lives, the edge of which threatened the Aratta cavalry.

Jamshid's forces rounded on them, and the two werewolf armies joined battle, deftly wielding lance and sword until they unhorsed each other and then throwing themselves, sinews straining and jaws snapping, at each other's throats. A finger of fog sometimes wrapped itself about the neck of a Nar, strangling him to the accompaniment of a chorus of the damned.

Jamshid and Yimak watched in the chariot from the top of the hill, worried about more defections and wondering if the priestly spells would turn the tide against their berserkers. The shah was faint from the exertion of operating the chariot, which seemed to steal some of his vital essence away, the more he flew it.

Jamshid abruptly grabbed his head with both hands, knocking off his rubies-encrusted golden crown, and screamed.

Yimak took his chin in her hand and looked him in the eye. “What is it, my treasure? Tell me!”

“A dragon slouches toward Persia! A blackness so wicked it rends a hole in the fabric of this world. I feel evil mind approaching from the west. We must return to defend Aratta!”

Yimak’s face was resolute. “Dragons, my brother? We have a real world menace facing us. The Dropiki are pinning our troops down with this assault from our rear. We must fight them off or risk a mad scramble and the disorder of complete defeat.”

“We cannot risk delay! The chariot . . .”

“My love, you I do not have the strength to deploy the chariot again. It could kill you!”

“It is our only hope!” Jamshid put his hand on the shoulder of Vidranga, who was staring at him with concern, and gave the signal to advance. Jamshid and Yimak flew at Gaomant with the floating chariot, silver-shoed hooves striking him in the temple and casting him down from his mount. The Dropiki lost heart on seeing their brave chieftain prostrate, and broke ranks, riding or sprinting to the safety of the seven-walled city they had now adopted as their abode. Their having been forced back served as a warning to Dioke and his troops not to assume that the Persians were now easy prey. The shah of the Medes, who all along had obviously favored a defensive strategy, probably began fearing that Jamshid’s retreat was a trap, aimed at drawing him into an ambush. Jamshid knew that despite his diminished troop strength, his slaying of the Karkadann and defeat of Matroyao had given the Medes pause. They did not know what capabilities he retained, and were likely happy enough to see him return home, relieving them of a potentially hard and even fatal battle.

Jamshid, again seated in the basket and barely able to fight off the black fatigue that had descended behind his eyes

Yimak cradled his head in her arms and covered his lips, which looked so much like her own, with kisses, as though her passion might restore his vigor and reverse the ebb of his life force.

He strained to speak. “Vidranga must instruct them to resume the fighting retreat. But double time. Aratta has never before been in this much danger!”

Faranak rushed to Athwya and helped him up, brushing the dust off his back. She felt a spasm in her heart when she saw the look of terror and

bewilderment on her husband's face. He did not know what to do, for the first time in all the years she had known him.

The fierce warrior strutted and Faranak stepped back as she felt his savage eyes undress her. "I am Vidarna of the Maspi," he snarled. "Lord Spityura and my own chieftain Hutana sent me ahead to gather resources for the good war, giving me the tax-farm of this region."

Athwya bowed his head slightly. Faranak did not completely understand why he had become so taciturn, but decided to follow his example. Vidarna ordered his men and slaves to begin loading the meager summer harvest on to their pack asses. They took the customary half from the communal granary and from the family storage vessels, but these men were neither experienced nor thorough, and a great deal of hidden food escaped their notice. She saw Athwya inconspicuously chatting with a tribesman who had been detailed to guard the pack animals while his fellows searched the village, as if he knew the fellow. Then some of the warriors rode out to round up their share of the village livestock. Faranak could see the fields through the open village gate, and worried that the horses' hooves might do damage to the tunnel canals. She would have to ask Siyak Tora to inspect them thoroughly when these barbarians had departed.

Vidarna supervised the last of the exactions, glancing every so often in Faranak's direction. She decided to retreat into the yard. The new domain lord shouted at Athwya. "I fancy your woman. I think I'll add her to the tax bill this year. Bring her out."

Faranak fled from the yard into a side room, desperate. What would Athwya do? Nothing unwise, she hoped. She cocked her ear, and could hear her husband's fluid, resonant voice. "My lord, we have been joined at the fire-altar by a zoatar. Our contract is with Atar, god of flame, and Mithra, god of truth."

"A zoatar?"

"Yes, my lord."

Faranak shivered in the long silence. Would that brute really try to drag her away from her beloved husband and sons? The tax-collecting tribesmen had occasionally kidnapped or raped village girls in the past, but had usually been punished by Jamshid when Athwya complained, and major tribal leaders had never suffered in that way. Spityura had a reputation for drunken excess and violent outbursts, and she was not entirely sure he would grant the villagers redress so willingly.

"Well, if the union was solemnized by a zoatar, I guess it's inviolate. But let me know, producer, if you ever tire of her." Vidarna bellowed out a grotesque roar of laughter.

Athwya came back into the house after a short time, his expression glum. He hugged her. "I'd have found a way to kill him, I swear it."

She kissed his bearded cheek. "That's what I was afraid of. They'd have murdered you and torched the whole village again."

"We may still all die, of starvation."

She looked up into his grey eyes, startled. "By my count, they left us enough to get by on."

He shook his head ponderously. "Not after Jamshid sends Yimak back out to take his share."

"But I thought Jamshid was no longer shah."

"As far as I could tell, Lord Spityura has only launched a challenge. There is a sort of civil war going on in the provinces now between his partisans and the supporters of Jamshid. These men were Maspi, Dropiki an Sagarti. The latter are enraged about the way Jamshid treated our friend Matroyao, their kinswoman."

"We should have told them we rescued her."

He shook his head. "For all they know it would have been merely an empty boast."

"Perhaps the rebellion will keep those accursed cowherds busy with each other."

"No. To do battle you need to raise revenues. The shah still has enough authority to send out tax-collecting teams to outlying villages. As long as the struggle goes on, we are liable to be double-taxed."

"That's why you were so quiet, you were listening instead of talking."

He wagged his finger. "I was trying to keep from having to recognize their authority. Otherwise Jamshid's men could string me up as a traitor when they get around to making their appearance."

Faranak sighed. "Why do you think that oaf backed down when you told him we got married in front of a zaotar? He didn't strike me as the pious sort."

Athwya rubbed his chin with his palm. "From what I could gather, the zaotars are mostly backing Spityura. This man couldn't afford to risk irking the priests or their Dropiki tribesmen by committing sacrilege against a formal marriage."

Faranak helped her mother-in-law fix lunch. She eyed the man-sized clay vessel in which they stored the household barley, thinking upon the way the tax-collectors had left it only half empty. If the shah's men demanded their own payment, she doubted they could survive on that.

After lunch she sent Atossa to take the boys for a walk in the fields. She lay next to Athwya as he bedded down for an afternoon nap. She felt

light twinges in her chest and guiltily realized that the prospect of being abducted had excited her. She knew she had another, worthier motive, though. The threat of being separated from Athwya had only increased the urgency of her desire for another son from him. Exhausted by his ordeal that morning, he sighed and turned his back to her. She pursed her lips in annoyance. Then she stuck out the pink tip of her tongue and began licking his ear. He tried to ignore her for a while, but eventually gave in.

Later on, little Barmayun ducked his head in the door. "Ustad Kaveh and Roxanna are here."

They went out into the dusty yard to see what they wanted. Faranak was pleased to notice that the boy had gained a bit more weight, and looked healthier than ever. Handsome, too, with a chiseled nose and brilliant black eyes, though the face was perhaps too broad.

He seemed out of breath. "Athwya, we cannot thank you enough for taking us in. You saved our lives."

"But you have to be on your way." Athwya said the words matter-of-factly, with no bitterness.

"I got one of those tribesmen who paid us a visit to boasting, and he said the artisans in Aratta are debating whether to turn against the shah. I have to help my friends. If my father were alive, he would be leading the smiths, and I am bound to do what I can to persuade them to overthrow the ogre."

Athwya wore a grave mien. "From what we hear, Jamshid is still on the throne and Yimak is his commander in chief."

Roxanna, standing tall, nodded. "It's a risk we will have to take."

Kaveh put his arm around her shoulder. "It will matter to us producers who wins this fight." Faranak noticed that he was wearing his blacksmith's leather apron today.

"Are you sure Spityura's better than Jamshid?"

"Anything is better than Jamshid."

Athwya hugged him and bowed to Roxanna, who finally looked him in the eye. Faranak fixed Kaveh's hair with her fingers, maternally, and kissed Roxanna on the forehead. Roxanna was weeping and sniffing. The blacksmith's eyes glistened momentarily, then went dry, as though too desiccated by grief to weep. He took Roxanna's hand, turned and went out to the gate, where he leaned over and picked up his wooden toolbox. The two youngsters waved at them, then walked toward the village doors and the road to Aratta.

## Chapter 16

### Hammer on Crystal

Kaveh and Roxanna found Aratta city's gates virtually unguarded in the late afternoon when they arrived on foot. No one challenged them as they sauntered into their birthplace. Kaveh's beard had grown, he wore his hair long, and they had clothed themselves in the rough tunic and drab cloak of peasants. To be on the safe side, they both pulled the hoods of their mantles down nearly to their eyes. Kaveh fiercely hoped none of the shah's soldiers would recognize him and attempt to enslave him once more, but took courage from the thought that they probably had other problems on their minds at that moment.

They first made their way in back alleys to Daena's hut. They knew she would have closed up her stall by now and gone home. Kaveh banged on the ramshackle door, and Roxanna called out softly. It creaked open and a wizened face framed in grey pony-tails peered up at them.

"Roxanna! Kaveh! Praise be to Vouruna and all the gods! Where have you been? Never mind that, come in." She poked her head out and looked down the alleyway left and right. Then she ushered them into the humble courtyard, where she offered them stools. They sat gratefully, their feet smarting from the day-long march.

"I was banished to the village by Yimak," Roxanna explained, telling the story of the pari-infested pistachio forest.



Kaveh's face was stern as he gazed at Roxanna. "I was sold to a dealer from Ecbatana, but Elamites attacked the caravan and freed me."

"Elamites?"

"It was because of the kidenn stone--their *shaten* made them let me go. I wandered a long time, but have spent the past two weeks in Hyrba."

Roxanna nodded. "I was there for months. You know Athwya and Faranak."

"They used to come in to the capital to sell their grain and vegetables. They are noble Pasargadae and had something of the *farr* about them, as well."

Kaveh was on tenterhooks. "I heard that there might be a vote on whether to turn against the shah, and that partisans of Jamshid and Spityura are openly feuding."

"Aye, the Nar warriors on both sides are fighting a major engagement as we speak, out in the valley three parsangs distant."

Kaveh nodded. "What about my mother and my sister? Do you know anything?"

She moved her grey head slowly from side to side. "I tried to trace them at first . . ."

"My uncle Nefayan and the household?"

"The warriors confiscated the tools and workshop, so the members of your clan have had to hire themselves out as workers for other masters. But as far as I know they are surviving."

Kaveh would have cursed had he not been in his teacher's presence. He urgently wanted the revolt against Jamshid to succeed. "Which tribes stand with Spityura?"

"Well, the Sagarti were infuriated when Jamshid shamefully divorced their kinswoman, Matroyao, and they turned against him. They are joined by the Dropiki, that is, by the zaotars. If those who want a craftsmen rebellion win out, then the Germani will also be ranged against Jamshid, so that he loses his artisans."

Roxanna hugged herself, smiling. "So a fair number of tribes have rebelled against the shah. Good! It means we have a chance of success."

Daena hesitated. "A chance, perhaps. The Pasargadae, Dahi, Derusi and others and are still with Jamshid. And the shah has his sorcery. It will be a close fight, and Spityura could lose."

Kavi bowed to her. "Daena, you have to help me. I want to lead the artisans against the king. After what his fiends did to my family, I'll never rest till I see him enslaved like we were."

She looked down, her creased face inscrutable. "I cannot offer you my aid in this fight, Kaveh."

"But Kavi Daena, the shah has clearly betrayed Lord Mithra and thrown in with the Lie! We must fight him if we are to remain true to ourselves."

"You have grown too distant from your true selves, from your *fravashis*. Listen. She is calling out to you."

Kaveh looked at Roxanna. "I cannot hear anything."

"You can only think of revenge, and the thought of it deafens you. Beware, for the lie subverts a person precisely at such points."

Roxanna knitted her brow. "We were hoping you would inspire us in our struggle."

"The kavis agree that the shah has departed from the straight path. But we see great evil hovering over Aratta, and fear that if he is overthrown now, chaos and mayhem may well ensue. The zaotars clearly desire to rule through Spityura, and the priests are ever the enemies of seers and visionaries."

Kaveh felt as though someone had punched him hard in the stomach. "So you are with the shah."

She looked up sharply. "No. We speak the truth to all. We take no sides."

"You are the one who advised me not to join in the new worship of Yima. My clan has suffered for my decision! How can you now declare neutrality?" He felt the blood rush to his cheeks.

She said nothing for a long while. "We kavis have not joined the new worship, either. My stall was closed, I was arrested and subjected to . . . abuse. That is why I could not help your family. My release came only a week ago, and I am barely surviving on the lessons I give children."

Roxanna took her teacher's hand. "We are sorry for what befell you. But we cannot accept what you say."

"I will not intervene in this struggle, for it has no winners."

Kaveh and Roxanna left, crestfallen.

Roxanna shook her head. "How could a seeress like Daena not recognize how evil Yimak and the shah are?"

They picked their way through the narrow lanes toward the small homes near the bazaar, their eyes full of fear each time another pedestrian turned a corner and came face to face with them. Finally they stood in front of the broken-down gate. Perspiring, his heart nearly bolting, Kaveh tried not to remember being led away from this place by the shah's warriors. He took a deep breath and rapped on the gate. A voice called from inside,

asking who it was. Finally the gate swung half-open and Utana stuck out his head. He was taller and his features were slightly more mature than the last time Kaveh had seen him. He had a short, sharp nose, brown eyes like his mother, jet hair, and the long earlobes of the Persians.

"Kaveh! Roxanna!"

"Hush, young fool!" Kaveh playfully pushed him inside, walking the three steps up from the street to the courtyard, and nearly hugged the life out of him. Both were weeping and sniffing.

"We thought you were dead!"

Nefayan, Humai, Jamaspa, and the rest of the clan came rushing into the courtyard from the house's one big room at the back, to see what all the commotion was about.

Nefayan clearly had mixed emotions. "Kaveh, what a surprise and a delight to see you. We were so worried." He hugged his nephew, but Kaveh felt its formality and falseness. His uncle was looking at Roxanna disapprovingly. He had always wanted Kaveh to marry his daughter, Humai. Humai for her part couldn't seem to decide whether to scowl or break out in smiles.

Jamaspa, on the other hand, clapped him on the shoulder so hard as nearly to dislocate it, his dark eyes twinkling beneath his crinkled brows. Humai, the homely cousin he had jilted in favor of Roxanna, gave them resentful glances.

In the privacy of their single room, the clan gathered around Kaveh and Roxanna.

He burned with curiosity. "What do you know about my mother and my sister?"

Utana piped up, somewhat to Kaveh's surprise, since his little brother had always before kept the silence of a child. "Mama and Parmys are all right. Both have to work hard, but their masters do not beat them constantly. Mama talks to herself a lot, about you and papa."

Roxanna arched a brow. "And the house Bahmard?"

Jamaspa winked at her. "After Yimak's announcement that you had been outlawed, your father took the whole clan to stay with his sister in the village of Nisanak."

"At least they are safe there." Roxanna burst into tears and Kaveh struggled to remain in control of himself. To distract them, the rest of the clan told them the story of how they had started over with no tools, as workers in the workshops of others. Then they demanded to hear the tale of the adventures beyond Aratta's city walls of Kaveh and Roxanna. They could sense that the blacksmiths remained apprehensive about the presence

of outlaws among them, and knew they were afraid that if the shah's forces won they would be punished for harboring fugitives.

"How likely is an uprising among the artisans?" Kaveh challenged their timidity, looking around wildly.

Jamaspa, as usual, was the most forthcoming. "The meeting is tomorrow. The shah has tried to bribe the masters of the various trades and merchant groups to side with him, and Spityura has attempted to counter his offers. Some masters are taking money from both. It is hard to know which way the vote will go."

"What is the consensus in this household?" Kaveh was half afraid to ask, lest he hear that his own kin were loyal to the king responsible for his father's death.

At length, Nefayan mumbled. "We are laborers in the smithies of others. We have no standing to vote, and no means to protect ourselves from the vengeance of the winner. We dare not speak."

Kaveh looked at Roxanna "Do as you wish, uncle. We shall reveal ourselves tomorrow. Roxanna has sway with the potters, and perhaps I still do with the smiths. We shall urge revolt."

"You must not. The shah still has eyes." Nefayan's eyes blazed.

Roxanna looked around at them. "We shall put them out."

Nefayan looked down, unable to face them. "You are outlaw. I cannot risk my children by offering you refuge this night."

Spityura sat mounted in the lurid twilight and surveyed his army, distinctive for the multitude of zaotars praying zealously for victory on the sidelines, led by Vandid Khim. Only a handful of wizened priests performed ministrations at a makeshift fire altar behind Jamshid's troops. He rued that his soldiers clearly lacked the wolf-frenzy that only haoma could bestow, since they had no access to the vats of it stored in the city. The tribesmen jostled all afternoon, and Spityura's warriors and amazons, though greatly outnumbered, fought with spirit despite their inability to counter the fangs of the city's defenders save with short swords and pluck. Jamshid's forces were winning by a slight edge. Eventually both sides retired before sundown to their tents, vowing to triumph on the morrow.

The tribes loyal to the shah retreated within the city walls, leaving Spityura's forces still camped out in the brown, stunted vineyards and gardens outside them. Spityura's breast was constricted with anxiety.

Narsih rode up to him. “We cannot go on like this, brother. We are running out of the rations Hutana requisitioned from the surrounding villages. It is the besieged city that is supposed to starve, not the besiegers.”

Gaomant, even more skeletal and gloomy than usual, nodded dourly. “Not only that, the heavy tax in kind on foodstuffs is driving some villagers to embrace the shah instead of us.”

Spityura whirled his steed about and pointed west. “You despair too soon. Our scouts have finally detected the advance of Teral’s Arameans. He and Zohak have managed to put together a grand desert alliance not seen for a millennium.”

Narsih grimaced. “I have lived to see the day when hordes of marauding Bedouin approaching our capital, led by a cursed cripple, is supposed to be good news.”

Gaomant, his blue zaotar hat bobbing, agreed. “There is something bad-omened about that man.”

Spityura, his blood up, barked at them. “We did not choose these circumstances! Our brother’s perfidy and descent into a damned underworld has imposed them on us.”

Narsih looked up sharply, but Gaomant’s face wore no expression. The Dropiki chieftain, imbued with the calm of the priestly caste, spoke in a soft voice. “No human beings make their circumstances, Prince Spityura. What we make are our moral choices in the face of them. I hope we are doing the right thing, allying with Zohak.”

The next day a vast stream of Aramean horsemen in their brown robes flooded into the valley and joined the rebel Persian contingents just outside the city walls. The sight mustered emotions of hope and glee within Spityura. He rode out with Zohak to Teral.

“You are late.”

“Bedouin do not take orders, friend,” he said in almost scriptural Old Persian. “They must be talked into a campaign, tribe by tribe, with promises of gold and women and sheep. It can take months to muster them.”

Spityura put a hand to his brow to shield his eyes from the glare of the sun. He did not approve of Teral having promised these wild men that they could loot Aratta and despoil its women. But he was in no position now to protest. “Never mind. Better late than never. Do you need time to bivouac, or may we plan an assault?”

Zohak permitted himself a fleeting grin. “Bivouac! Such words you use. We take stones for pillows and dunes for a bed after we have sated our blood thirst. These men are eager to have at it!”

They made a joint assault on Aratta city. The Arameans began sending flaming arrows against the huge wooden gates and against the watchtowers, though, since the Persian archery tackle had a much greater cast, they suffered a large number of cavalrymen downed in this assault. Jamshid's warriors on the ramparts atop the walls, enjoying superior cover, succeeded in dousing the fires. The proud tribesmen on the shah's side insisted on going out to combat the aggressors, and the city gates swung open to allow them to pour out into the valley.

A conch shell sounded from beside Jamshid's chariot announcing the beginning of the campaign. Before the defenders went a handful of young priests holding silver braziers from which burned the eternal flame, the god Atar, and behind them walked Thukhra and his handful of royalist zoatars, chanting the ancient hymns of the Persians. An empty chariot dedicated to Indra, covered in gold and silver and drawn by white stallions, followed. Behind it pranced a palomino consecrated to Mithra, in magnificent caparison, jewels glinting. Cavaliers and amazons, in casques and armor of iron, with small round bronze shields and iron-tipped spears or bronze two-edged axes, grouped themselves according to tribe, Pasargadae, Dahi, Derousi. Their roan horses wore bright red and gold show harnesses, their head-hair plumed, their manes standing up stiffly, cut short so as not to interfere with shooting a bow, and their tails were knotted.

Then came the one thousand "immortals," the shah's special guard, wearing golden breast-plates and white tunics. The fifteen hundred "relatives" of the shah, which simply meant Pasargadae tribal notables, appeared next, decked out in their finery. Behind them marched the imperial spearmen, in whose midst rode Jamshid in his crystal chariot. After the shah came several thousand infantrymen, peasants recruited from surrounding villages and nowadays billeted on the people of Aratta city. Most of these were Persians, but some regiments were made up of Elamite mercenaries. Musicians playing eagle-bone flutes brought up the rear.

The two armies clashed and interpenetrated, the heavens dense with arrows and lances, as Persian and Aramean curses and screams eerily floated away from the battlefield. Spityura, at the head of the charge, observed how Jamshid led his warriors expectantly forward, forcing back the rebels with the momentum of their charge. Spityura gave way reluctantly, followed by Zohak to his left. The insurgent prince bit his lip as he considered the awful possibility that Jamshid might win.

The camp women the Arameans had brought along stood on the sidelines shaming their men, threatening them with celibacy if they did not rally. Then the Persian amazons of Spityura's right flank, led by the berserk

Matroyao, who lay about her like a demoness with her double-edged axe, were forced back. At length the Aramean horsemen under Teral's command lost ground. The Pasargadae immediately saw the weakness, and pressed forward against the Spityura's left flank, succeeding in pushing it back, as well. Jamshid now rode his translucent chariot like a spearhead into the heart of Spityura's forces, who turned and ran before the shimmering juggernaut. In the gathering dusk, the field lay strewn with hacked-up bodies, stray arms or legs or heads nestling in the brown grasses and leafless shrubs.

Jamshid's chariot drove straight for Spityura. The silver-shoed stallions threw off sparks as their hooves struck stones and boulders on the battlefield, before they leaped into the sky and then descended toward the towering prince, who felt himself transfixed by the apparition menacing him. *Is this how it ends?* he wondered. *Trampled ignominiously by the phantom steeds of a drunken necromancer?*

Kaveh looked around at the assemblage of tinsmiths gathered in the caravansary on the edge of the bazaar. They squinted, eyes weakened by detail work, and their fingers were gnarled and back. The deputy guild master had called them here on false pretenses. It was his tenth meeting of the day, and his voice was hoarse with exhortation. Roxanna was with him, but was so nervous he wondered if she would be able to speak.

"Many of you here recognized the leadership of my father, Cyrus Blacksmith, less than a year ago. You all know that he was unjustly arrested and shamefully murdered by the agents of Jamshid, who styles himself the god Yima."

The tradespeople murmured uneasily. Although Kaveh was right to say they knew these facts, he was aware that such things were not discussed, especially not in public, for fear of the shah's ears. "Jamshid as shah has been a disaster. He was just defeated by the Medes in his campaign for Ecbatana putting the capital at risk from a counter-attack. For a year and a half, he has been drunk with haoma more often than he has been sober. His answer to the severe drought that is driving so many of our villages to starvation is higher taxes. He has blasphemously married his own sister and shamefully divorced his honorable wife, Matroyao. Spityura on the other hand held the kingdom together while Jamshid lay in his months-long torpor."

The undertone grew louder, as the crowd began to fear that it was being made complicit in out-and-out treason. He knew he had to conclude in a hurry, before he lost them. "Those of you who favor continuing

business as usual mistakenly believe that the shah will not treat you as he treated my family. You believe you will not be enslaved or casually executed. But know that all are at risk, as long as Jamshid's drunken caprice rules this land."

An older master spat through his straggly beard. "And his brother Spityura is a drunkard and a lecher in league with filthy Bedouin come to deflower our girls!"

"I fear the gods more than I do a few lizard-eaters from the dunes. Jamshid has offended our deities, has diverted their offerings to themselves, has dishonored the holy zoatars, and spends his days wandering a mind palace in an underworld he constructed from his haoma stupor. His evil ways have attracted the Apaosha demons, who have dried up the land and send our children to bed hungry every night. I had to kill one myself or it would have mown down the flower of Aratta's knights."

Some of the younger tinsmiths got a light in their eyes at this mention of his heroism, and mumbled beneath their breaths, "Kaveh, Demonslayer!"

"Better the devil you know!" the old smith grimaced.

Roxanna gathered herself and stood forth. "Friends, take it from a potter girl, the lowliest of the trades. The city's stocks of meat and grain are already low, and the warriors will have first claim on them. Soon the nar will come looting our homes looking for food. If the city cannot be resupplied from the villages, then we producers will end up with nothing to eat. And remember, since we do not fight we are now useless to the shah. The longer Jamshid holds out, the more we shall suffer."

A younger smith timidly put up a finger. "The shah has promised us food rations on the morrow."

Roxanna's eyes flashed with anger. "That is wind from a no-brother! At first, he might bother to do that. But in the end, if necessary he will feed the warriors and leave us to famish. It breaks my heart to think about all that misery, but we have to be realistic."

Kaveh stared into the eyes of each of the tinsmiths. "Let me ask you one question. Does your family have enough to eat after the shah takes his taxes? Can you even remember the beef he stole from the zoatars, with which he tried to bribe us?"

The men looked down, ashamed to admit that they could not fend for their wives and children.

"Lord Spityura has allied with Athwiya the Aspigan and Faranak Farhang, noble Pasargadae, who have developed a new technique of irrigation that has pushed the demons of drought back and brought in abundant crops. If he wins, the black divs will be exiled from this land."



"Why does he need us, then?" the irascible elder shouted through gaps in his teeth.

"Lord Spityura is evenly matched with his brother outside the city walls. But if the city itself rises and rallies to the zoatars, Jamshid will have lost his base. A commander without a base is like a man without an ass-- he cannot sit, and will run about until he exhausts himself."

Two of the young men rose to their feet, hardened hands clenched in the air. "Down with the shah! Down with the Mithrodrui!" Soon virtually all the tinsmiths had joined them.

Kaveh exulted. Roxanna hugged him, congratulating him through the din for a stirring and powerful speech. Kaveh was surprised to see everyone looking at them with new respect. He had not thought of himself nor of Roxanna as orators, but knew that his passion had given his tongue words. It was the same outcome as all the other meetings. The conspiracy was afoot.

As they walked back to their makeshift hut afterwards, they felt the eyes of the shah watching them. They tried to shake anyone tracking them by taking a circuitous route. Finally, they lay down on a patchwork bed of sack cloth and old linens.

Kaveh, having assured himself that Roxanna was asleep, sneaked behind Nefayan's house. He had begun thinking of it that way, as his uncle's residence. His little brother Utana furtively exited from the gate and smiled shyly, showing his dimples.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Kaveh. It will be . . . hard."

"I know, Utana. But no harder for me than for you."

As he had promised, Utana took him to see his mother, and his sister. They could not, of course, actually meet and talk with them. For one thing, the masters might report Kaveh as a runaway slave for fear that, if left at liberty, he would attempt to free his relatives. All they could do was secrete themselves in dark alleyways, shimmy up the walls around their masters' houses and peek down into the courtyard. His mother Argoste squatted, sweeping by the light of the hearth fire. She had drawn a scarf over her face to keep the dust away. Kaveh could faintly hear her mumbling in a desultory way, and thought he heard his own name. He could no longer stand the sight, and dropped down into the gloomy alley. His sister Parmys's master lived not far away, and they caught a glimpse of her preparing the evening meal. She had put on a great deal of weight, and the horrifying thought occurred to Kaveh that she might be with child. He remembered the pampered adolescent boy for whom the noble had seemed to be buying

Parmys. That night Kaveh could not sleep, his breast a volcano and his mind a whirlpool.

When Kaveh got back, crushed, to the hut, he went over to Roxanna and panicked when he did not find her.

He groped around the hut in the gloom. "Roxanna!" he whispered as loudly as he dared. He looked outside and in the moonlight saw the signs of a struggle in the dusty path. He knelt. The scuffmarks of two large men and those of a petite girl had made a mess of the path. His stomach sank. Yimak's spies had seen Roxanna at the trades meeting and taken her back for punishment! But why had they not waited and taken him unawares, as well? He knew the answer without thinking further. They knew that taking her would be the greatest punishment on him they could inflict. He did not sleep that night. His heart felt as though twin short swords were twisting in it.

When the day of the uprising came, the tradesmen had meticulously planned everything. Not being trained in the arts of war, they could not afford to have the warriors array themselves against them. They began by sneaking up on guards at their checkpoints and rapping them on the skull with a mallet or other tool of their trade, then dragging them into the shadows. When there was no one left trained to send up an alarm, they began picking off the unwary who came to the bazaar to replace broken swords or buy replacement arrows from the fletchers. Through the day there were fewer and fewer nar within the city, as a slow steady attrition was visited on the unsuspecting giants.

Finally, in the late afternoon, the city's teeming masses assembled and charged the unguarded palace gates, breaking them down with improvised siege machines fashioned quickly by the carpenters. They surged down the royal hallways, overwhelming and trampling the astonished warriors and noblemen and women within. Soon they had to slow their advance for the rivulets of blood that ran between the great stones of the floor, trying to avoid slipping and being themselves run over.

It was a day of great slaughter of the noble by those they deemed insignificant, of the fattened by the lean, of the cynical by true believers, of libertines by the industrious, of the cultured by the unlettered, of the beautiful by the misshapen, of courtiers by the commoners. It was a long-delayed reckoning at the hands of the downtrodden, who had built their resentments over decades as they watched the decline of their city and its neglect by their shah, who saw their children's bellies grow big with

malnutrition and their hair take on a sickly red sheen. And now they exterminated their tormentors

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Kaveh, in the midst of the uprising, tired of swinging his hammer against the surprised warriors, breaking knees and ribs and faces. He wiped his face with his leathern apron and looked around him at the mayhem, trying to do as Daena had instructed him, and listen for his fravashi, his true self. He could hear nothing. He saw Roxanna's face everywhere, and hoped every Nar warrior he beat had been the one who kidnapped her.

He had no way into the palace or into the midst of the royal war party, where they were likely keeping her. He knew, suddenly, exactly what he must do. Although he recognized its danger he was past caring. Almost as if in a trance, he made his way by the dim light of daybreak to the city's front gate. He remembered how, when the artisans who had fled returned through this gate, Jamshid's men had charged them and slaughtered tens of them. How ironic that this very gate where the shah's treachery first became manifest would now be his undoing.

Kaveh's heart leaped for joy when he saw that only two sentinels nervously guarded the city gates apparently afraid to leave their post to investigate the uproar inside the city. Jamshid had calculated that his men were better employed in the watchtowers and on the ramparts, since the inhabitants of the city feared the invaders and would not open the gates to them. Edging alongside the inner wall so that he could not easily be seen from the ramparts above, Kaveh approached the sentinels from behind. He eased his great hammer out of its holster and gave one of the guards a firm tap on his right temple. He fell over.

The other sentry's eyes widened. He opened his mouth to raise a cry. Kaveh called on Thwareshtar, the divine patron of smiths, to help him. He did not know if there were other nar about who could come running if the lookout alerted them. In that case his entire plan would collapse and he would be killed on the spot. Desperate, Kaveh dropped beside him and got his arm around his neck. He put his fist in his left hand and squeezed his forearm hard against the bulging Adam's apple. The man gasped, unable to release his scream, and struggled like a frog in a jar. He tried to jab his elbow into Kaveh's ribs, but could get no leverage. He pulled at the blacksmith's bulging forearm, but even a warrior's strength could not budge the iron-hardened arm. Finally his striving became fainter, and at length he went limp.

As quietly as he could, Kaveh dragged the two men by their feet away from the gate. Then he gingerly lifted the crossbar and pushed the doors

wide open. As he had hoped, the besieging warriors were vigilant, with lookouts seated about fires just beyond bow and arrow range. They stood and pointed excitedly, then shouted in a guttural tongue. An advance force charged at the open gates, and Kaveh made an end run around them, heading for Spityura's camp, his arms raised in surrender. Shouts began floating down from the watchtowers and ramparts, as Jamshid's warriors finally realized something was wrong. A shaft whizzed by Kaveh's ear and he put on more speed. Only when he had reached the campfire, which he knew to be out of arrow range, did he turn to see what had happened. He said a prayer of rejoicing as he made out that Aramean warriors on foot had secured the gates, and that a horde of cavalymen were already nearing the threshold. Although some fell to the cloud of arrows and spears that engulfed them as it descended from the ramparts, dozens rode right into the city. The rest of the besieging tribesmen leapt up from their bedding inside their tents, and, deftly unhobbling their sorrels, mounted them and made with alacrity for the city that now lay open to them. Kaveh knew that Jamshid's troops would still put up a great deal of resistance, but given that the attackers now had an element of surprise, he guessed that Spityura and his Aramean allies would win out in the end. Arameans, unlike the Persians, had no fear of fighting at night.

Kaveh exited the city gates, diving into the midst of the battle, dodging arrows and sword thrusts, sometimes parrying with his hammer, about which he had tied the kidenn stone. He knew he could be cut down at any moment, and prayed that if fate had death in store for him today, he could rescue Roxanna first. He approached the royal chariot, its crystal facets seeming to bleed with scarlet, crepuscular rays. He glimpsed Yimak and Jamshid in the carriage. Roxanna was chained before the queen as a human shield, forced to hand her arrows to feed her hungry bow.

"No!" Kaveh wove among the battling warriors, some of them twice his height, and rushed at the chariot from the side. He summoned his inner warrior, his Fravashi, and she inhabited his limbs with a ferocious power. He threw himself at the crystal siding, hammer raised high and glowing in the dusk. As he brought it down on the chariot with all his might and fury, the crystal shattered into thousands of shards and the basket collapsed, spilling Jamshid, Yima, their driver Vidranga, and Roxanna onto the field.

Roxanna, her chains now loose, looked around cannily and spied Kaveh, running to him. He caught her in his arms, nearly squeezing the breath out of her.

Jamshid, seeming bewildered and intoxicated, gained his feet and pulled Yimak up. He stared bewildered in Kaveh's direction but then spied

Spityura's onrushing legions. Yimak, too, fixed him with a wolfish gaze, but was aware she did not have the luxury, with Spityura's cavalry riding down on her, of revenge on a mere producer. The shah and his queen ran to the four-horse team that had been pulling them, still yoked, and released them from the ruined chariot, then leaped on the backs of the two lead horses. Jamshid summoned his Immortals, heading back to the open gates of Aratta, but then saw that the tower guards had been replaced by rebellious blacksmiths and the Bedouin were awaiting the two royals at the entrance to their own city.

"Treachery!" the drunken shah bellowed, slurring the words. They galloped to the north, skirting the enemy, immortals fending off attacks, and clearly hoping to escape into the woods.

Kaveh watched them recede with satisfaction. He had avenged his father, humble Cyrus Blacksmith, whose unbreakable swords and shields had formed the foundation of Jamshid's successes on the battlefield, and who had been repaid with casual death. And he had Roxanna in his arms.

The Arameans, with the one called Zohak at their head, gave a great shout of glee and headed unimpeded into Aratta. Kaveh was puzzled as to why Spityura let them in first. Had a deal been struck?

Kaveh felt a rough palm on his shoulder. "Who are you, and how did you shatter the chariot?" It was one of Spityura's generals.

"I am Kaveh, a blacksmith, and I just opened those gates for you." Kaveh looked into the scarred face of a Marafi warrior.

"Why in the world did you do that?"

"I hate Jamshid. He enslaved my family and had my father killed."

"Do you hate Aratta, as well?"

"No."

"Then you may have just made a big mistake."

Scheheranaz now regretted that her father had taken custody of her and her sister Arnavaz when he divorced their mother. At first she had been glad, since her mother had been irritable all the time and surrounded herself with creepy zaotars and scary warriors like Uncle Spityura. Mama used to indulge her and give her and her sister sweets when they fought over a wooden doll or an article of clothing. Then she began giving them both cuffs about the ears. It seemed to Scheheranaz a very long time ago when they had been horrendously spoiled little princesses, and she missed those days unbearably. And then, one day, mama had just disappeared. The thought made her eyes sting. *I'll never see her again*, she worried.

So when the shah had sent for them, claiming his right over his twin daughters, Scheheranaz had rejoiced. She expected that Aunt Yimak would take them riding and teach them how to raid cattle, and hoped her father would recover his fondness for them since mama was not there to nag him all the time. In reality, they found themselves bored and overlooked, and Scheheranaz guessed that papa had only demanded they stay with him at the palace because they were pawns in a game of chess with the mysteriously absent Matroyao. Papa mostly stayed in his chambers, in his cups, having a zaotar always present to strain haoma juice for him through a horse-hair sieve. He usually struck her as dreamy and distant, and he seldom grew aware enough of her presence to give her a kiss. When he did sober up, he spent all his time either on cattle raids or with Aunt Yimak, driving Scheheranaz almost deranged with jealousy. She wanted to get in bed with her father and snuggle, but he was seldom free for her.

One afternoon Scheheranaz and her sister Arnavaz had run out of games to play in their room, and having heard all their nannies' stories a thousand times, wanted a change. Scheheranaz looked into her twin's sapphire eyes and winked.

"Let's run away."

"Are you mad? Where would we run to?"

"Baba's been gone for ages. Let's go back to mama."

"She's not even in the city any more. I overheard one of the servants say she is in Ecbatana."

"Old news! She's back, with her Sagarti, outside the city walls. I heard the tongues wagging in the hallway. We are small, we can sneak out."

"I don't think so."

"We just have to get outside. I'll even bet the Immortals would let us through if we say we only want to visit our mother. A lot of them like her better than Aunt Yimak."

"Or they might take us back to baba, who would be furious with us and beat us black and blue. You are always getting me into trouble, Scheheranaz. I am stupid, but I am not this stupid."

"I'll give you all my dolls."

There was a long silence. "You will?"

"Every last one."

"Well, maybe I'll think about it. Tomorrow."

"No. The offer is only good for this afternoon."

"What if darkness falls?"

"Scared?"

Scheheranaz pursed her lips in satisfaction as she heard the sheets rustling, and knew Arnavaz had reluctantly taken up her challenge. The enticement of her dolls, which her sister had always preferred to her own collection, had proved irresistible.

Working by the dim, flickering light of the hearth fire, they changed into their outside clothes and packed a few belongings. Scheheranaz pointedly put her small wooden dolls in Arnavaz's bag. Out in the hallway, she felt a building anxiety, since the one small torch sticking out from its niche in the wall banished little of the gloom. As they reached the stairs, she felt Arnavaz's fingernails bite into her hand, but dared not tell her to stop. She pulled her hand away, but her sister would not let go.

Abruptly a great tumult broke out, shouts and clanging floating up from the main square beyond the palace gates. Scheheranaz instinctively hugged her sister, who hugged back, too hard.

"We have to hide. Whatever that noise is, it will bring back baba and we don't want him to find us out here." She risked a whisper, against the backdrop of the clamor engulfing the palace.

"For once you are right. He'll lock us in our rooms and throw away the key."

"We are not that far from the broom closet."

"It will be dark."

"Do you want baba to find us?"

They huddled together in the cramped storage space, desperately suppressing sneezes from the dust and listening with blazing curiosity to the uproar. It was as though the warriors were practicing their drills or something, but Persian tribesmen never train at night. Then Scheheranaz heard a strange, accented voice shouting their names. The sisters embraced each other harder when they heard the stranger curse and shout that they were not in their room.

Now the peals of iron on bronze rang louder and the curses grew more desperate. At length, amid groans and shouts, the noises tapered off.

"I think there is no one in the hall now."

"Good. We'll be able to escape more easily."

"But maybe we should try to find the Immortals and go with them to baba."

"I am mad at baba. I don't want to go with him. I want to find mama. Anyway, he'll be really cross with us for trying to run away."

Arnavaz seemed convinced, though the fervor with which she clutched her sister's arm suggested that her fears were hardly allayed. After a while, the din in the distance grew even fainter, though occasionally they

heard the jingle of mail shirts as warriors strode through the hall in front of their cubby. Scheheranaz thought things had quieted down enough for them to come back out. She wanted to be gone before baba and Aunt Yimak got back.

Arnavaz tightened her grip, and it hurt. "I am going to sneeze."

"Don't!"

"I can't help it. I have tried putting my finger under my nose, holding my nose, nothing works."

Arnavaz sneezed explosively, and Scheheranaz cringed. She knew dust would have flown around their little closet, and tried to hold her breath. When she could not, any more, she took a gulp of air. She sneezed, as well.

The door of the cubby swung open, and Scheheranaz shielded her eyes from the glare of the invading torchlight. A spade-bearded, walnut-colored warrior with long greasy hair grinned at them menacingly, his black eyes glittering.

Scheheranaz screamed and screamed, not able to tell which shrieks were hers and which those of her sister.



## Chapter 17

### Kavi Witch

Kaveh looked nervously about the great hall in the palace, waiting for the victors' audience to begin. The untidy aspect of the chamber shocked him, for it had always before been immaculate. The silver tiles had been pulled by main force out of the gypsum walls, leaving them scarred and repulsive. And Jamshid's new, bejeweled throne was altogether missing. He wondered where it could be.

Spityura came into the chamber, accompanied by attendants holding the umbrella and fly-whisk. The scene struck Kaveh as very strange, since he had never seen anyone but Jamshid enjoy those emblems of authority. He was followed by Vandid Khim, the former high priest, who stood with him on the raised platform. Kaveh also found it odd that a zoatar should be allowed such equality with a warrior. From the other side of the room, at the same time, entered a swarthy man in a walnut caftan whom he recognized as Zohak, the Aramean he had fought for the kidenn stone what seemed an eternity ago. Kaveh feared the man, grown powerful in Aratta, might seek revenge for being denied his prize. The three men embraced, and turned to the audience, who applauded warmly.

Spityura spoke. "I proclaim the overthrow of the evil Yima Jamshid, who unjustly overtaxed the people; who committed sacrilege against the honorable priestly class and against the gods themselves; who injured the

honor of the Sagarti, Dropiki and other warrior tribes; who committed the sins of incest and insobriety; and who practiced his oppression as far abroad as the land of the Arameans, assassinating our old ally Mirdas of the Utu tribe. Praise be to all the gods for the ruination of this beast!"

The hall erupted in approbation and rejoicing.

"How fitting it is, then, that Jamshid met his downfall at the hands of the very people he oppressed. The Dropiki and allied tribes revolted against his wicked rule. The priests whose herds he pillaged and whose ritual services he dismissed declined to provide the heartening haoma juice to his forces. The Arameans ascended from their arid plains to join in this noble effort at our side. And, finally, the humble artisans immiserated by Jamshid's levies, refused to fashion weapons for him and rose against his so-called Immortals."

"Indeed, we have here in our audience a young hero from among the craftsmen, who let the forces of justice into the capital and then helped ensure order in the bazaar. He is Kaveh, the son of Cyrus Blacksmith, whose father was shamefully murdered by the deposed shah. Although he was but an apprentice, we today recognize him as a master, and as the palace smith!"

Kaveh grinned and clasped his meaty hands together, raising them above his head in victory. The throng went wild with delight at seeing a commoner so honored, and the shouting made his ears ring.

Now it was apparently Vandid Khim's turn to make a statement. "In the name of all the gods, of Mithra and Atar, of Vouruna and Ardivi Sura, I greet you, my children as the restored High Priest. The toady and impostor Thukhra was captured and at dawn was executed by my order. The heretical rite of the so-called god of the underworld, Yima, has been abolished, and no more will sacrifice be made by anyone but qualified zaotars, no longer will the demons rejoice to receive offerings intended for the gods! The regime of witchcraft is vanquished, and we are free again to practice our hallowed traditions!"

The cheers had lost some of their volume and naturalness, but they filled the hall again. Kaveh thought Vandid Khim was not honest in running down sorcery, since he had been known secretly to dabble in it himself.

Now the Aramean prince stepped forward, limping, for his victory statement. "My friends, I come to you both as an ally and as a long-lost son. For most of you know that I am the son of Vadam dughdar Vivanhant, and am cousin to our noble Lord Spityura himself. I was pleased to lend the aid of my tribesmen, who for many years have been staunch allies of Aratta, to the noble effort to rid this kingdom of oppressive tyranny and demon

mind. I pledge our continual cooperation with Lord Spityura and the Dropiki nobles, and assure you all that the booty taken in the fighting will be distributed equally, as is Utu custom."

This time the applause struck Kaveh as a little more heartfelt.

"With Lord Spityura's permission, I wish now to make an important announcement. In order to cement the alliance between our two peoples, I had humbly sought a bride from the ruling family. I would even have been willing to redeem poor princess Yimak from the vile clutches of her own brother, but that was not to be. In order that this chance for political union not be missed, I have decided to consider a longer-term proposition."

"I have therefore accepted as my new brides the little nieces of Lord Spityura himself, Scheheranaz and Arnavaz. I shall raise them in my household as obedient and chaste wives, and shall cherish this unbreakable link with the people of Aratta." The audience ended with a city-wide celebration and much reveling. The alewives filled their coffers as they had not for years.

Kaveh began to build a new life for himself, despite the gnawing grief of his family's tragedy. The palace awarded him his father's old house in the royal Crafhalls, the spacious building in which he had grown up, and he moved there with Utana and his uncle's clan. He gave the guest room to Roxanna until her family returned to Aratta city. The nobles who owned his mother and sister had been close supporters of Jamshid, and were hanged by the victors. Normally their slaves would have been considered booty to be shared out among the tribesmen, but Kaveh was able to use his new influence with Lord Spityura to have Parmys and Argoste released to him. Parmys later gave birth to a daughter, who had been sired on her by her master's teenaged son. Kaveh did not like the idea, but could see his sister was attached to the baby and hesitated to inflict more suffering on her. His mother went about her old routines in the house of which she had been mistress for so many years, but her face was drawn and her eyes dull. Kaveh often overheard her talking to Cyrus, which reminded him, to his embarrassment, of old Vahuka and his phantom dog in Hyrba.

Although the wealthier parts of the town had suffered heavily from looting and arson, the bazaar had weathered the conquest of the city. Prince Narsih, Prince Tahmuras and Lady Matroyao now set out for Mazandaran in pursuit of Jamshid and his tribesmen. The Arameans eagerly volunteered to accompany them, ostensibly in quest of vengeance on the disgraced shah, but most in Aratta suspected that the Bedouin intended to loot the people of the northern sea.

Lord Spityura lowered taxes, and even though the drought caused a disappointing harvest in most villages, making it expensive to barter for food, the craftspeople felt that they were somewhat better off than they had been. Kaveh found himself treated as a hero by many of his fellow artisans. Aoshnara and Vivana argued that Kaveh was too young and inexperienced to succeed his father as master of the smithing crafts, but the rank and file chose the young blacksmith as their leader by acclamation. Kaveh had decided to forgive the goldsmiths for their perfidy rather than divide the metal smiths with a protracted feud. With Nefayan's help, he began forging a broadsword for Lord Spityura, which would be his masterpiece and formally allow him to advance from apprentice to journeyman, so that his position as master and royal smith would be less anomalous.

Kaveh, though busy, did return to Daena for lessons, but she complained that his halo was virtually invisible. He wondered why it should have faded, since he felt he had acted in the interests of truth, and fought the evil demon Ahriman by helping overthrow Jamshid. But he had never put much stock in the idea of producers as heroes with halos, and accepted the news stoically. He asked Daena when she would reopen her stall in the gods bazaar, but she grew taciturn and did not answer.

When the turmoil of transition had subsided, Roxanna's father and sisters returned to Aratta. Some of the craftsmen wanted Bahmard punished, since he had never shown opposition to Jamshid. Kaveh worked behind the scenes to protect him, and pointed out that leaving Aratta could be interpreted as the practical equivalent of going on strike. Kaveh, his mother and sister took Roxanna back to Bahmard and requested that he give her to Kaveh in marriage. He gladly accepted, as did his daughter. Kaveh remembered how embarrassed he had been, during his initiation into manhood, that the family could only afford a second-rate priest for the ceremony. He implored the palace to send a least one high-ranking zaotar to perform the marriage, and Vandid Khim agreed to dispatch a prominent *atharvan* or specialist in the fire-rituals.

Kaveh rose the morning of the wedding and put on his sacred shirt and thread, then his best woolen suit over that. Like his father, he insisted on tying on his blacksmith's apron even for formal events. Parmys helped pretty Kaveh up for the wedding, teasing him with something of her old bounciness.

"Well, your hair is naturally tousled and your beard hasn't come in all the way yet, and you insist on wearing that grimy apron, so you look like a mess. But I have made you as handsome as I could."

"Thank you, Parmys. It will be your turn, next."

Her cheeks turned pomegranate red, and he realized that marriage had become a touchy subject with her. He knew that she thought of herself as somehow impaired and polluted, and that she worried about how a stepfather would treat her bastard daughter, born in slavery. "I am happy to care for the family. I am not sure I want a grouchy bear of a man around me."

His mother ran her hands through his hair and mumbled prayers to Ardivi Sura, goddess of the undefiled waters and of true love.

Kaveh led his party out into the street, where they mounted white asses caparisoned in red velvet inlaid with small bronze mirrors. From the saddle blankets hung thick tassels crossing the velvet and gleaming against the white hide, ending in a bronze ornament shaped like a spinning top. Kaveh had requested that they be allowed to ride horses, but that was a privilege the warrior caste zealously guarded. He surveyed the assemblage, basking in the warmth of the bonds that bound him to these relatives and friends. He saw his mother and his sister Parmys, his brother Utana, his uncle Nefayan, his cousins Jamaspa and Humai, his friends, especially Artabanu, his wrestling master Piltanu, and his kavi teacher Daena, each mounted on a white ass he had provided. They headed down the street for Bahmard's house, and behind them walked a crowd of blacksmiths who had come up from the bazaar for the occasion.

Kaveh had not seen Roxanna for several days, and anticipation was maddening him. Although the short journey seemed to him like the distance to Babylon, they eventually came to Bahmard's gate, which opened for the guests. Kaveh remembered with a sense of wonder how he had played the Mannean milk vendor before this gate once. He dismounted, and Bahmard came out and warmly embraced him. The father of the bride was throwing a large reception in his courtyard for Kaveh and his guests, and food would be sent into the streets for the hangers-on from the bazaar. His gut gripped with longing, Kaveh walked up the three worn steps and through the wooden gates into the courtyard. He found Roxanna standing before him. He sucked in his breath, almost blinded by the image. She looked delectably alluring in her white woolen tunic and loose pantaloons of the same material, with a vest the hue of wine and a jasmine garland for a tiara. She kept her eyes on the ground demurely, her head bowed, so that he could not meet her gaze.

They mingled with the guests for what seemed to Kaveh the whole twelve millennia left to humankind. His mother and sister, his cousin Humai, and the other smith womenfolk kissed the bride on the cheek, and wished her every happiness. Kaveh desperately wanted to be alone with Roxanna, but practiced his breathing and calmed himself with a mantra.

Seething within, he made small talk and laughed with Bahmard and his friends, and patted his prospective brother-in-law, little Darai, on the head.

A handful of zaotars showed up at the gates, and the doormen admitted them. Their blue conical hats towered over the heads of the craftspeople like mountains over hills. Kaveh went over and greeted them warmly. They were led by Haomabaga, a pale man of medium build with a gaze like lightning, a large, looped nose, a thick brown beard, and a broad forehead that seemed to extend halfway up his head. The zaotars had been crucial to overthrowing Jamshid, and his respect for them had burgeoned.

He put his fingertips together and bowed before Sayuzdri, the eldest of the priests, the *atharvan* Vandid Khim had promised to dispatch. "We are ready, holy zaotar. We are blessed by your presence."

The priest nodded sternly, wordlessly, and led Kaveh and Roxanna toward the door of the reception room, along with a small party of close relatives and friends. The rest of the guests remained in the courtyard or in the street, sipping wine and eating and talking politics. Inside, the zaotars seated Roxanna on a couch of stiff brocaded pillows with tiny bronze mirrors sewn into them. Kaveh's brother and friends deposited him on the pillows facing her in the center of the hall. He felt as though he was sweating like a boar, and dabbed at the perspiration on his brow with a kerchief, then deposited the cloth in a leather bag for later disposal along with other polluted items. Kaveh caught Roxanna staring at him, and met her hazel eyes. She hastily looked back down, the barest trace of a smile lingering for seconds on her quivering carmine lips before she resumed the traditional woeful countenance of a bride about to leave her father's house.

Two priests held up a wide cloth between the couple, to shield them from the sight of one another and to symbolize the way the bride and groom had previously been separate persons. The zaotars gestured for the two to grasp each other's right hand under the curtain. Then the priests took another length of cloth and circled the lovers with it, tying up its ends carefully with a special knot. The head priest unwound some raw twist and played it out as he circumambulated the bride and groom seven times, then he wrapped it seven times about their wrists and finally joined it to the knot in the enwrapping cloth. The priest and his acolytes fed some barsom twigs and sandalwood incense to the smokeless fire burning on the nearby altar. Kaveh liked the sharp fragrance. At the zaotar's command, the two holy men holding up the separating curtain suddenly let it down. Her oval face, her pert nose, her cat-like eyes restored to him suddenly, Kaveh flared within. They tossed some grains of barley at one another, and the audience broke into a wild applause, with women trilling their tongues. A priest stood

in front of each of the betrothed, chanting blessings in the archaic tongue of the Persians. Kaveh squirmed restively, his simmering passion causing him to sweat profusely in the unaccustomed formal clothes, as the zaotars intoned their seemingly endless verses. He wanted it all to be over with, wanted Roxanna to be his wife. Suddenly complete quiet descended on the packed chamber.

The priest asked both of them some ritual questions. "Have you both agreed to behave according to your pledge as long as you shall live?"

They said in unison, "Yes, we have."

Sayuzdri then invoked the gods, one by one, and recommended their worship and emulation to Kaveh and Roxanna. He bade them be as honest as Mithra the lord of contracts, wise as the sovereign of waters Vouruna, faithful in love as Ardvi Sura, steadfast as the fire-god Atar, passionate as the berserker drug, Haoma.

When the priest finally fell silent, Kaveh leaned forward, kissing Roxanna tenderly on the lips, and the house rumbled with the ensuing cheers and shouts of joy. Utana and Kaveh's friends undid the restraining cords, then lifted him bodily and deposited him next to his bride on her couch of pillows. Servants scurried to remove the other pillows, allowing guests to pass in front of the newlyweds. Roxanna's nubile form radiated a burning heat next to him, and his chest ached.

Attendants brought a large, smooth bronze mirror before the couple, allowing them to see themselves together as man and wife for the first time. Then Roxanna's younger sisters Frya and Pari approached Kaveh, each with a mug of milk in her hands.

"How much will you give us for these cups of milk?" Frya laughed as she twisted bashfully.

"Are they bitter with salt or sweet with sugar?" Kaveh affected a tone of dire misgiving.

Pari spoke this time. She put her left hand on her waist and tapped her foot impatiently. "We are not telling. You have to taste it to find out. And we won't let you, unless you give us a really nice present."

"Very well, if I must buy a pig in a poke. I bid . . . these two silver pathukas." He reached into his belt and pulled out the two gleaming ingots, proffering them to the girls.

Frya stuck out her lower lip, and looked away, sending her hair flying. "Just one each?"

Kaveh crumbled and presented them each with another ingot. They placed their mugs of milk on the carpet in front of him, and he slapped the

twinkling pathukas in each of their palms. They ran away giggling, to thunderous applause.

Kaveh picked up the two mugs. He downed the first, and sputtered. "Salt!" Laughter rippled through the crowd.

He tried the other one.

"You have to drink it all at once." Frya wagged her finger, to the enormous merriment of the guests.

Kaveh shrugged, and tossed it back. "Ah, this time it's sugar." He wiped the liquid from his downy mustache, smiling broadly.

Now friends passed in front of the couple, displaying or announcing their presents. The party then moved back to the courtyard, Bahmard's servants served up sweet barley, chicken in walnut and pomegranate sauce and pigeon breast from large iron kettles in which they had been stewing all night. The smiths ate with enormous gusto, for they seldom had such a magnificent repast in these times of famine. They emptied the kettles at an alarming rate, washing it all down with mugs of beer.

Kaveh was delighted when, late in the afternoon, Utana brought a conveyance for Roxanna, so she could be taken to her new home. It was a compartment from which two long poles extended before and behind, meant to be carried by four men on their shoulders. It rested on four short legs. The wooden compartment was completely covered with red velvet inlaid with bronze mirrors, like the caparison of Kaveh's asses. It had four doors, each with a window opening, from which red velvet curtains hung. Utana helped Roxanna into the conveyance. Four men stepped forward from among her relatives, lifting the poles and carrying the heavy wooden compartment on their bulging shoulders.

Kaveh was about to descend the steps to mount his ass when he heard a commotion behind him. He whirled, to see the zaotars crowding around Daena.

"I had no idea a kavi witch was in this dwelling, or I would never have performed the ceremony!"

"Arrest her for practicing the dark arts! She probably worshipped the false god Yima."

Kaveh strode into their midst, anxiously trying to reassure Daena with his eyes. "Honored zaotars, there is some mistake. This is a pious old woman who suffered at the evil Jamshid's hands. She instructed me in truth-telling."

"The kavis recite hymns that they themselves make up, instead of hewing to the ancient scriptures. They practice sorcery in secret, and commit abominations like wife-swapping."



Kaveh was losing patience. "This is my wedding, and I summoned you here to officiate. You will take home a ram each as my offering to the gods through you. I plead with you as the groom not to further disrupt this joyous occasion."

The elder priest's face showed no emotion. "Justice has no occasion. The god of justice, Srausha, demands immediate homage. The *pairaka* witch must be arrested." He gestured for the other zoatars to grab Daena, who lowered her gaze and offered no resistance.

Kaveh looked at Bahmard, pleading with his eyes. His father-in-law nodded. "See here, I will not have a guest in my own house molested. Remove your hands from her or I will put the lot of you in the street."

The graybeard turned slowly toward Bahmard. "Were you not the royal potter under the wicked Jamshid? Perhaps your own past deserves examination."

Kaveh's stomach knotted. He felt increasingly helpless. He did not even know if Lord Spityura himself would oppose the zoatars, since their tribes had been key to defeating Jamshid.

"I will go with them." The determination in Daena's voice made Kaveh start.

He wanted to shake her. "Please, we can clear this misunderstanding up."

"If you have any loyalty to my teachings, you will cease this useless wrangling and let me depart. I am innocent of their charges and have no fear."

Kaveh wanted to argue with her, but her stern, navy blue eyes forbade him. His stomach flip-flopped as he watched the zoatars collect their rams and lead her away with them. He would send word to Spityura pleading for mercy for her. Then he suddenly remembered Roxanna. She would be hot and uncomfortable in that carriage.

Daena's arrest cast an eerie pall over the otherwise festive return journey to his house. Kaveh dispatched Utana with a message to the palace, then turned to Roxanna. When they entered the courtyard, Roxanna's bearers gingerly put the carriage down on its wooden legs. Kaveh helped her out and welcomed her to her new home, kissing her again, to general applause. His mother and sister wept, and Kaveh guessed that their tears were for their own bereavement as much as for his happiness. He himself missed his father, and wondered when it would be possible to marry Parmys off honorably. He warded off such thoughts, determined not to let old sorrows ruin the present festivities. His mother and sister, along with his weeping cousin Humai, led Roxanna to the open wooden door of their

bedroom. As the bride stepped over its raised wooden threshold, two serving maids on either side of her poured sesame oil on it from alabaster vases, symbolically easing her entry into a new life. When she had one foot inside the door, Kaveh gave the signal and the pigeon-keepers opened the cages they had set outside the entrance, freeing hundreds of birds, which fluttered over Roxanna's head before soaring toward the cobalt dome of the sky.

That night it seemed to Kaveh that his every aspiration had been fulfilled. He lay with Roxanna, his own bride, in the master bedroom of the large house. He wanted to talk, the way they used to when they met secretly at Bahmard's warehouse.

"Are you all right, darling? How's your leg?" He remembered she limped a little after the crystal chariot crashed.

She took a gulp of air and nodded. "I'll have a bruise, but it's nothing really. Kaveh, I am so glad you came. They were going to take me with them all the way to Mazandaran."

"Sounds like a snake-pit. I am glad I saved you from it."

"I am glad I helped you save me from it."

"I missed you when I was a slave, and then when I had to go wandering in the wilderness, before I found Hyrba."

"I am surprised none of the peasant girls got after you." She put her lips together and moved them back and forth teasingly.

"They did. I spent the whole six months running from them. That's how I lost all this weight."

She mock-pounded his shoulder with her balled fist. "You had better had."

He nodded obediently, and they laughed. He kissed her, and she worked her supple lips against his. They explored each others' firm young bodies, like the blind, seeking tactile pleasure and almost visual information with their creative fingers. They shaped each other, he creating an iron goddess and she a ceramic god. Her hazel eyes were half-closed in feline repose. When the moment came, he fumbled awkwardly out of inexperience, and she affectionately guided him. The next morning, they hung the bloodstained sheet up for the neighbors to see.

Only after they had breakfasted did Kaveh again remember their teacher and her plight.

Roxanna placed her warm, firm fingers on his shoulder. "We have to find Daena and ransom her somehow. Maybe Lord Spityura will help you if you ask him."

"I'll send a messenger to ask for an audience. Roxanna?"

"Yes, my life?"

"You don't blame me for what happened, do you?"

"What good does it do, to talk about blame? I am afraid for her life."

"I had to try to overthrow tyranny."

"Kavi Daena always said that the struggle against Ahriman is not something you do once, and it's over. It's a daily, lifetime, exertion. Perhaps tyranny is the same way."

"I hope not. I am exhausted." Kaveh kissed her on the forehead, tenderly, and grinned at her.

Utana strode into the room with twelve-year-old self-importance. "Kaveh! The criers are saying that Zohak's forces are returning to Aratta city!"

"So? We are allies."

"Lord Spityura fears that the Bedouin found little booty in the far north, and insist on making up their losses here. They are coming for plunder!"

Kaveh sat back against the wall. He thought about the mantra that his teacher had bestowed on him, "*Stray not from that path.*" He had always, before, been sure what the path was. Now it shimmered and divided and fell from beneath his feet. He hugged Roxanna with one arm, and pulled her close.

*So ends the first book of the Epic of the Persian Kings.*

*The further books treat of the reign in Persia of Zohak, son of Mirdas, of his horrible transfiguration as a dragon, the devouring of the brains of the youth of Aratta by his serpents and those of his acolytes, and the spell he lay upon Kaveh Blacksmith.*

THE END