

This is just a synopsis! I wanted to prepare those who read “Forging a Legend and Empire (Part 3)” for the background of the story.

I had written the two parts before, “A Challenge by the King of Kings” supposedly part of a wider spectrum. When I decided to focus my attention on that one part, the Persian expedition, I continued it in “The Legacy of Wolfshead”. The two stories were supposed to complement each other, but because they were several months apart, those who read one could not but help forget the other, or wonder what the background was.

So here is the synopsis of the two stories:

### **Book 1: A Challenge by the King of Kings**

Mithridates VI, whose namesake once threatened Rome by invading Asia and fighting famous Roman generals as Sulla, Lucullus and Pompey, began his life as a hostage of the Romans, after his father, Vologases III, during an invasion in Asia was suddenly and sizably defeated by a Roman commander (who wasn't even governor), named Marcus Fonteianus. As a token of goodwill of the Parthians, Mithridates was taken from his home and reared up by a Greek philosopher, Stipho, though from time to time the boy also spent time in the nearby gladiatorial school owned by a Lucius Cummeius.

His father did not stay long in power, and was soon toppled by his brother. This uncle became so intolerable that they asked the Romans for another ruler. Mithridates ascended the throne thus with Roman support, but he warred as fiercely against the rebellious nobles as his uncle. In time he earned the nickname “Wolfshead” for his blatant cruelty.

He had three sons: Phraates III, Vologases IV, and Mithradates VII. Phraates, who was the youngest, was also the most frustrating among his sons, because he acted more in philosophy and dialogues than in wrestling and the arts of war.

In his court presided Eumachus, a Greek minister, and his wife Thesea. He was also visited by his pet peeve, Artavasdes, whose gaudy nature always irked his sensibilities. When he came one day to the Parthian court, then, Mithridates was ready to have his soldiers kick him out. Then he learns that the invisible Marcus Fonteianus, whose legions defeated his father and uncle before, had died.

### **Rome**

... Apparently, the Julian family had begun to rise in prestige, with such eminent senators as Marcus Marcellus Orator, Marcus Fonteius (whose name after being adopted became Gaius Fonteianus), Sextus Julius and Gaius Antonius controlling the major arteries of the Senate and Plebeian Assembly. Against this rising group was the rest of the threatened Senate, led by Decius the Censor.

The Julian family wanted to prosecute another war against Persia, but the Decian faction hounded each of the four senators until the proposal was defeated in the Senate, Marcus Fonteius died of scandal, and many Julian governors who were allies recalled.

Meanwhile, as the power of the Julian family began to wane, racked by scandals unearthed by the zealous Decius, the Senate passed a resolution recalling a Sextus Cornelius from his headquarters in Narbo. Sextus was a Julian ally, and had grown fame with his campaign in Further Gaul and Italian Gaul. He would have been recalled, he would have been declared inimicus, or enemy, if only the Julian

tribunes Sextus Julius and Gaius Antonius not interposed their veto. When nothing could dislodge them from their vetoing the recalling of the governors (though the governors went home anyway), Decian senators hired armed bands to war with those whose sympathies lay with the Julians. When a gang war broke out, the Senate found an excuse to outlaw all Julians.

The two tribunes went to Sextus Cornelius in Italian Gaul, who had amassed with him four legions. To counter a threat to the health of Italy and Rome, the Republican Senators recalled several legions from Syria and Asia to place them at the borders of Italy...

### **Eastern Asia Minor**

Mithridates immediately assembled an army and gave Phraates III the duty of caring for Thesea and his train of wives (those he didn't take with him) and set off with Artavasdes, the Nabatean, as guide. At this time, a Jewish war had erupted in Palestine, between two rival claimants to the Jewish throne, Hyrcanus and Antipater. The latter called for the support of Rome, and Hyrcanus was obliged to call on the support of Parthia.

Mithridates assured him that Judaea would become independent if he had his way, and the Parthian army would help, if only for one thing: that Hyrcanus' only daughter Esther be married to his own son, Vologases. He thought that the Jewish war would tie up some legions of Rome away from Asia. The next he saw Hyrcanus, however, he not only was in retreat, but half of his army was destroyed! Furious, Mithridates nevertheless gave his blessing to a marriage with his son and the Jewish princess... and asked as dowry the kingdom of Judaea. Hyrcanus could only agree, as his Jewish generals were then surrounded by thousands of Parthian soldiers.

Mithridates continued north, entering Asia by way of Cilicia, defeating a Roman cohort and burning Tarsus as he went. As he passed the country of Cappadocia, he was given gifts and offerings of loyalties by other Asian kings. In Gordium, however, he had to face a hostile Galatian army, led by the King Biturges. After a cavalry-oriented victory which felled the Galatian king in battle, the crown passed to his son Attalus, who quickly made peace with the Parthian king.

As he set his sights on Asia Province, the Roman region, Artavasdes arrived with news of Pontus. Apparently, its king, Orodes, would have nothing to do with sending military arms and support to the Parthians, and Mithridates was forced to engage them in Cappadocia, where a badly-organized night raid nearly annihilated the Pontic armies. Mithridates then wheeled back west to fight a Roman army in the ancient battlefield of Issus, a symbol of the rising power of Parthia.

Artavasdes, meanwhile, had encouraged a Pontic Royal Guardsman, Tiridates, to conspire with one of Orodes' wives to poison the king, declare himself the successor, and execute the train of wives and mistresses the Pontian had, along with sons and even his co-conspirator. As for the Pontic soldiers, they were poisoned by mushrooms given to them by villagers where the army stopped.

Asia Province now lay open for invasion.

## **Book 2: The Legacy of Wolfshead**

### **Asia Minor**

The curtain rises, and it is Mithridates at the gates of Asia Province. As he turns north towards another ruin, that of Ilium, he is suddenly alerted to a presence of a Roman legion. Thinking this was just another of the many battles where he emerged victorious, he was outmaneuvered, forced into a hill, and then almost all of his army annihilated. The enemy general pursued those who retreated, and the rest of the Parthians fought despairingly under the Trojan hill.

It was then that Phraates arrived, a sudden streak of good fortune unexpected, along with the armies of the rest of the Parthian nobles. Trouncing the Romans, and slaughtering them to a man, he led a dejected and defeated father back to Cappadocia to nurse his wounds.

There, Mithridates learned of the story of how his son got to here. Mithridates VII, often called Mithradates, soon seized power and declared himself king, forcing the nobles to comply with his every demand. As with Mithridates, his grandfather and the latter's brother, he became intolerable, and during a banquet celebrating his marriage to a Median princess, he was poisoned. The nobles did not wait long to consolidate their power and execute every single relative or son of Mithridates. Only Phraates, who had escaped with the help of a still-loyal Surenas, managed to live in refuge among one of the Kushan (Indian) princes. There, he learned that the nobles continued to war with each other, and even the king they installed became intolerable. With the help of Artavasdes (who was there when he learned of the revolt), and those still loyal with Phraates, he led a Kushanas-Parthian army into Ecbatana and took the war to the nobles.

The loyal nobles who rallied to him followed him as he declared himself a "custodian" of the Empire and set to relieve his father in Asia. He also sent word to his brother, Vologases, who took with him part of his army and took the Persian Empire under his control while his father warred in Asia.

Meanwhile, a Galatian army met the Parthians near Cappadocia, with the new king, Bituriges, informing Mithridates that his predecessor Attalus, had written in his will giving Galatia to Rome. Unsigned, the paper was worthless, and Bituriges rallied his kingdom and army to Parthia. Mithridates was being shadowed: the new governor of Asia was Marcus Fimbria, of the famed "Fimbriani" legions. The Romans followed the Parthians to the borders of Galatia, where Mithridates and his army was trapped, forced in by an encirclement (circumvallation) engineered by the Romans.

Mithridates, with the help of the Galatians, found a route across nearby forestry through the Roman encirclement. There, partly out of confusion, partly out of improvisation, the Roman cavalry was piecemealed by the Parthians, and the Parthian main army met the Roman main army. The engagement between the two armies continued well into night, until Mithridates in a duel with the Roman governor, Marcus Fimbria, demoralized the Roman ranks and finally broke their lines.

The victorious army entered a city founded in the conqueror's name: Mithradata. It was a gift of Galatia to the king, and as soon as he entered, he basked in his glory. Out of fatigue and wounds sustained in battle, he was taken to the royal bedchamber, where he recuperated for months while his son continued the battle for him.

Phraates found a perfect ruse to defeat the Romans. Using captured Roman uniforms, he trained his soldiers to think Roman, act Roman and fight Roman. Then he went across Cappadocia and all across Asia Province to recruit Romans. So it was disheartening to the enemy to see fellow Romans advancing towards them. Phraates watched while his Roman recruits slaughtered the Roman army, then himself ordered the recruits slaughtered by his troops. It was in victory that Phraates reentered Mithradata to greet his father.

Vologases, meanwhile, had a different fortune. Hyrcanus, the Jewish king, was not willing to give Vologases his daughter. Antipater was dead, anyway, and there was no need for him to make pretense, so he took his daughter and escaped south of Palestine, away from Parthian or Roman troops. While Vologases pulled out the brunt of his Parthian army, Antipater meanwhile asked for the help of a third party: Egypt. Two groups of assassins were employed at this time: one by Hyrcanus, to assassinate the Sanhedrin, the Jewish High Priests who declared for Rome, and the other by Vologases, who hired them to kidnap Esther, the Jewish daughter promised to him. Both groups had connections with Artavasdes\*.

Finally, as for Mithridates, he lay recuperating in bed while his son, minister and Arab adviser visited him on a regular basis. In dreams he was visited by his wife Thesea, who had died following the death of their son Mithradates, but lived on as a spirit within the dreams of the king, to care for him until he recovered. After a few weeks the spirit finally departed, with a few words of endearment to the King and to her sons. Mithridates woke to the rousing of his minister, who said it was time to greet the victorious troops of Phraates.

It is here that Persia faces its final troubles- and destiny.

*\*In Legend and Empire I renamed him Abgarus*

## **BOOK 3: LEGEND AND EMPIRE**

### Chapter 1 Stirring the Hornet's Nest

The ruins of a magnificent palace stood amidst the chaos of the city of Delhi. Once rivaling cities across the north, they claimed as guests emperors and kings, generals and philosophers. They had humbled

fierce tribes, and at one time, held sway over all the provinces of the south. But with the legend of the Maurya, the power had faded, and the people fell in obscurity. The region was only one of the many pock-marked independent kingdoms held by bitter rivals, and though there was constant war from the barbarians from the north, and amongst themselves, at length the people came to the resigned conclusion that nothing interesting would ever happen again to their city.

Up till that time. Market vendors stared from their place of business as a great bustle erupted from the east. Children playing in the streets pointed to where the commotion had started and some ran to the roofs of houses (or climbed as the case may be). People started shouting all at once, mostly in different dialects and languages. But this was a normal day in the city. Commotions from a city area always came with the arrival of bands of nomads from the north, or merchants from the west. This was a major city, one that prided itself with an ancient culture. Though the commotion rose in intensity, those who were far from it took notice for only a moment, then turned back to their daily chores.

A man ran through the streets, wary of the eyes turned towards him or the curiosity at his haste. He reached the main square, where a large building, though adorned in the way of a palace, stood. He argued with the guards. They argued back, and were at the point of shoving him back when out from the doors burst an official, with the intent of scolding the man for interfering with affairs of state. He had prepared for a heated argument with the official, but the hubbub that had started from one end of the city now got nearer, and the minister went back in to inquire what was going on. Then, a guard burst to the square the same route the man did, and reported all that he saw.

Within minutes, the minister was summoning officers and guards from within the palace and shouting to other ministers. He reemerged from the door sweating profusely.

The man looked warily at the guards he had argued with, at the steady, rising sounds approaching his direction, and worried less of how to get these people to listen than to how to get out as quickly as possible. He turned to the minister, who reassured him everything possible was being done, went back to the streets and disappeared in the crowd.

The sounds that mingled with those of the crowd were now undeniable—the clinking of swords, the shouting of commands, the banging of drums, and the patter of hooves. The minister's heart beat almost in time with the nearing sounds.

Soldiers spilled to the square and from the streets and within the palace. Ministers and officials were outside now, shouting and scolding and demanding to know how such a vast number of men were let in from the city. People began to accumulate in the square, too, curious as to the haste in the amassing of the soldiers.

Almost simultaneously, all heads pointed east, to the sound of the clashing of gongs. From the crowd gathered outside the palace, ministers and now a prince ventured outside to see what had arrived. The Indian soldiers were numerous, but small from the amassing at short notice: fifty.

Slowly, the crowd felt the rising noise from behind them, and parted in the middle. Their eyes stayed riveted at the direction of the sounds, and they and the ministers soon faced an army four times as large as the one they had amassed. Horsemen, spearmen, swordsmen. This army continued marching, until a sword was raised, and orders were shouted from across the ranks. Five horsemen, three carrying banners of yellow and red, rode towards the scattered ministers. The latter hurried behind the protection of the Indian soldiers.

One of the horsemen that faced the Indian retinue, who they figured as the general, turned to another. It was then that they noticed that this one had Indian features, although he was regaled in an Eastern dress.

The Indians began to cower behind their soldiers as the Eastern-dressed Indian began to speak. "In the name of the Emperor, the Son of Heaven, this army wishes to address the rulers of this city."

He looked around. The Indians were rooted where they stood. "Is there no one with authority to address with us?"

The Indian prince stepped forth from the line of soldiers. He shook his head at the whispered pleas. "I am Prince Rhaksi, and I welcome you to Delhi. How may I..."

"Rhaksi of Delhi, by the order of the Emperor, your cities and all cities south of the mountains are forfeit to his rule. He has sent General Wu Xi to replace you as governor."

"How dare you!" Rhaksi flared up, oblivious of the growing tension between the two armies. The disregard to his person, the insolence to him and to his city, was too much for him, even as he faced a larger force. "By what authority do you seize this city?"

"This city is seized by order of the Emperor!" The messenger replied, equally indignant. "You will hand it to the general, or he will be ill wrought to raze this city to the ground!"

"We have no emperor here," Rhaksi replied, his tone grave. "Take your army and your foul mouth and leave this city!"

The Indians stared at each other, alarmed at the prospects of fighting in the middle of the square. They tried to dissuade the prince, but he shrugged them off with a curse. "Kali take you for your cowardice!" He sneered at the ministers. "You will hand the city over to such sniveling fiends!"

"Sniveling fiends!" The general roared, waving a hand to his interpreter. "I know enough of your petty dialects and language to understand your offenses!" He shouted at one of the horsemen. The soldier bowed, and brought forth a scroll.

"In the name of the Emperor," the scroll rolled downwards, a long paper that stretched to the ground and near the general's horse. To the Indians surprise the enemy army to a man made obeisance to the scroll and prostrated themselves to the ground. The general continued to recite from the scroll. "He has sent a message to the world: he has heard the grievous offenses by which the kings of the West debase themselves. Too long he stayed his hand, for he knew that the affairs of Men were undeserved of his stature. Too long he stayed his hand while the Men of the lesser realms slayed each other with the sword, and all the instruments of Death by which they create. For he was the Son of Heaven, and his hand would only touch that which is sacred to him. The Realm of Heaven, the subjects of his vast and mighty kingdom, and those who make tribute to his glory,"

"This is madness" Rhaksi interjected.

"Silence!" The general screamed, and everyone turned to him. "The Son of Heaven shall no longer keep from his throne! For he has seen the Despoiler of the Caravans, the Demon of the West, the Man who Calls Himself Vologases made light the deputations of the Emperor. He shall step forth from his Golden Throne, and trample this Heretic, this Profaner of the Sacred Person, to the ground and the dust from which he belongs!"

Vologases? Who was this "Despoiler of Caravans"? And why did he have anything to do with Delhi? "The Son of Heaven has reached forth with the Hand that Holds the Sword, and this Sword shall destroy that which he calls his Empire, his kingdom, for it is the true *and only* Emperor that gave him the authority by which he rules! By his Divine Mandate, all the cities south of the caravans is his by forfeit!

For they have harbored these Desert-Dung for so long, making business and trade with those whose very names should be scratched from the Annals of Time!"

From beyond Delhi, a hundred cities erupt in flames. There is a panorama of prisoners with their heads against in the ground, as enemy soldiers pronounce decrees and their sins to them. At the flicker of an eye, there is a simultaneous rising of swords,

"Vishnu, have mercy," one of the Indians muttered.

"And he stretches his hand, and by the Sea he will Destroy the life that holds this Desert Empire, and he will Despoil and make Anew that which he has Created!"

A great fleet had assembled from the coasts, with the blessing of the Emperor. It comprised the largest in record then, a thousand ships, twice as large as the ordinary junks, having the capacity to carry with it 7,000 soldiers, spear and sword.

The sky seemed to bleed with the setting of the sun as the ships sailed south towards the coasts of Annam, and south to the lands of the Mekong. By day's end hundreds of coasts would be in flames and a large host of slaves carried by ships meant to sail home while the rest of the fleet continued west. The nights trembled from the roar of the victorious, as one sounding as if they came from no man.

Rhaksi looked from behind the general. The messenger was in terror, but at the message. The soldiers, he noticed, were still head against the ground. "...And the Son of Heaven Shall Stir the Beasts of the Desert, for they shall be the New Rulers of the Desert Carrion that dare Befoul the name of the Emperor! The name of the Emperor shall be held Sacred in all Lands!"

A series of tents, amidst a blowing sandstorm. Three horsemen riding from the direction of the storm, the sands blowing in their face. They enter one of the tents, and look at those around them. Scarred from the temples, an ornament of skulls round their necks or adorning their heads. One of them approached a nearby warrior, who looked with murdering gaze at the others. He heard the whispers and walked towards someone from the corner.

The three horsemen looked at each other, as the warrior continued to speak with a cloaked stranger. The stranger stood up suddenly, the glass in his hand. He walked towards the three and seized one by the throat. "Why do you dare?"

"The Emperor knows your intentions to move west," the horseman smiled, taking a bag of coins from under his clothing. "He deems this enough to hasten your journey."

The warrior guffawed. "This is nothing."

"Look inside."

The warrior opened it, saw the glittering gems from within. His mouth was almost agape with awe. "The Emperor will give two more bags if you bring him a hundred heads of the slain enemy. Will you accede?"

His cloak fell back, revealing a face that bore a left socket where an eye had been. "Four more bags, messenger, and your Emperor will see us drink from the fountain of Persian blood!"

A great terror seized the Indian prince, and he shuddered.

"Thus is his will," the general said with finality. "And those who oppose it will be ground to the dust as the Desert Carrion." The scroll was slowly rolled back, and by a great shout the vast army stood up, in attention. "What is your decision, Rhaksi of Delhi?"

The prince was confused with conflicting emotions of outrage and terror. He wanted to save his city, but could he spare the populace from the horrors this army was going to inflict? "Can you spare my city the wrath of... of the Emperor?"

The general smiled, about to reply, when one of the Indian ministers seized a spear from a soldier and threw it towards the general, missing and instead impaling the messenger in the eye. The general turned red, howled at the top of his voice, "For that, I will make an example of your city! They and all the rest of the cities shall know the fury of the Son of Heaven!" He screamed an order, and this was followed by other orders, and Rhaksi soon found himself and the soldiers behind him rained by arrows from above...

And the slaughter began.

## Chapter 2 The Ten Thousand

A great terror seized Mithridates and he grasped at his breast. For a moment that seemed an eternity to him, he beheld an army of Roman soldiers, all in perfect rank, organized, as would any Roman cohort or legion he might have encountered in battle. Were it not for his son riding to the front of the group, were it not for his dismounting and dispelling the sudden tension of that single moment, were it not for his son's careless throwing of his helmet to run to his father and embrace him as a conqueror would his kingdom, he would have died at the sight of Rome facing him. Almost immediately as they embraced, the Parthian soldiers cried as one, their cheers repeating and rising in tempo.

"Father! It is a great, great day for us."

"Yes" Mithridates could barely contain himself. "Your mother would have been proud."

"My..." Phraates looked at him questioningly. Recognition, and sadness took over him. He brushed tears aside, and led his father to the porch overlooking the square. "Father, I would like to show you the conquerors of Asia!"

"Hail the King of Kings!" They cried in unison.

"All hail the conquerors!" Mithridates replied.

"And my father was suddenly afraid of us," there was light laughter. "Don't worry, Father, there's nothing to fear from us," a few chuckles. He cupped his hands and addressed the soldiers. "Except for the Romans, wouldn't you say?"

"All hail the Emperor!" Only after uttering the words did the soldiers realize how disconcerted the King was from the remark, and all laughed from the awkwardness.

Mithridates stepped forward to address the army. "You all have done well, and better than I would have hoped for. You have surpassed yourselves! You have surpassed the Romans!" He swept his hand at them. "And you have gained honor in the eyes of Zoroaster!"

The soldiers cheered him again, and Mithridates led his son inside what he hoped was a court. He ended up in the banquet hall. Servants and cooks were busy preparing food for the nobles, bowed embarrassingly at King and prince. "You have surpassed my expectations. I don't... I don't know what to say."

"What," Phraates muttered. "What did she say?"

Mithridates seized him in his arms, and embraced him tightly. "I am so sorry, son. So sorry that I took you for granted, and never appreciated you for the treasure that you are."

Phraates sobbed then, and if it had not been the most difficult of times, Mithridates would have been obliged to have those who saw them killed. He hadn't felt as naked as King as he was then. Yet he was rooted to the spot, and would not break free.

Marcus Crus looked at the map for the longest time. Not out of necessity, but from pure boredom. It had been like this every day. The staff was summoned to the command tent, and each day the general moved armies this way and that while the staff officers argued or agreed with the placings. Scouts were sent to watch a "potential enemy" from across the river, and report the daily movements of enemy troops, and another meeting would commence as to how to answer the present repositioning of the enemy.

Then came the moment when the enemy stopped moving their troops. At all. They stopped building forts, they stopped raiding parties, they stopped anything untoward the Romans opposite them. It was as if they were simply rivaling forage parties, beyond even the guise of competition. The general, however, did not heed advice to march now, march across the river and force a decision. Yes, they outnumbered the enemy, had defeated the enemy once near the Tiber, and crushed them twice at Samnium. But the general still felt that the Senate remained independent of his control, *which was something he wanted*, and refused to enter Rome, instead heading south to Capua, where the enemy generals were assembling or reassembling their troops, unsure whether to give up Italy altogether for Spain or Greece or North Africa *or* to meet the general here and decide the battle once and for all.

Marcus Crus took a deep breath, and sighed. He looked at the other staff officers, and was almost tempted to tap and gesture at the map with invisible lines and circles, in line with his fantasies of Hannibal and Sulla and those who marched on the Great City. He did not notice the general enter and the rest of the staff stand to attention.

"Ave," the commander gestured at the other officers, then turned to Marcus. "Marcus Lentulus,"

Today he was Hannibal Barca. Marcus traced the lines from Spain to the Alps, how the Carthaginians found a route across almost impassable mountains, made allies with the Gauls, and the cities who hated Rome. He traced the battles leading to Cannae, where a clever Carthaginian trap decimated Roman legions.

"Honestly, I would have marched on Rome. Stupid fellow. He lost, because he lost initiative. We won, because we weren't afraid for the sensibilities of the other side," the general mused.

Marcus widened his eyes, stood up quickly to attention and beat a fist to his left breast. "Ave, general."

"Oh, do go on. Your musing interests me."

Was it worth foregoing another discussion on troop relocations? He was almost tempted to agree, but bit his lip. "Forgive me, domine. I have been remiss."

"As we are all." Sextus Cornelius turned to the other officers. "Gentlemen, I have with me a scroll from the Senate in Rome." He opened it, and passed it to the others. "The Senate has summoned me before them in the Curia."

"Do they honestly believe you will let yourself fall before the trap?" One of the tribunes asked.

"Actually, I planned on going."

The officers looked at him, stunned.

"Domine, you are *hostis* and *inimicus* before the Senate of Rome." Another tribune pointed out. "You have crossed the pomerium, the ancient boundary of the city with *legions*. You have gone the way of Lucius Cornelius Sulla."

"But I haven't entered the city."

"You are a Cornelius. You might as well have." Marcus Crus pleaded him. "Domine, these are not the best of times to seek humor with the Senate. They fear you. Fear your power. You represent Sulla and those they see as having attempted to circumvent the power of the Senate and the Republic."

"*Gerrae!* The Senate do not know a better servant of Rome than I am. I will enter the city loved by the people, and they will see who is the enemy of the Republic."

The tribunes were silent. Finally, Marcus spoke. "Domine, you have killed Roman soldiers. Roman blood has spilt in Samnium and the Tiber. They cannot forgive you such loss. They fear your power."

"They fear something else." He pointed to the scroll. "Read more."

Marcus Crus pored over the contents while Sextus Cornelius waited. Then the general explained. "Our Roman armies have been annihilated in Asia and Syria. There are no governors in the East. All of Greece acts independently of Roman law. This new Parthian king is making satrapies of Roman provinces and kingdoms with Friend and Ally Status. The prices have skyrocketed!" Cornelius traced the map from Italy, to Greece, to Asia, to Palestine. "Egypt has refused to give any more grain to us until we agree to withdraw from Judaea. Our friends in Numidia are leaning towards alliance with the Egyptians. Word has reached me that the Egyptians might even be making a move in Africa Province."

"Hasn't the Senate done anything? Surely it has generals."

"Generals facing me! They're all afraid I would trounce them, which I've done already. Now it doesn't hurt anymore, and they understand what I'm capable of."

"There is still war here, general." Another tribune. "They won't just take their legions to Africa and Asia if they were afraid of you."

"Here's another interesting offer from the letter." Sextus pointed out. "I am allowed a cohort escort to Rome, and I'm no longer *hostis* or *inimicus*."

"Was that necessary, Conscript Fathers?" Decius rose in tempo, as he hammered the words before the Senate. "Was it necessary to debase ourselves and grovel at this Julian's feet? Shall we throw the Laws of the Republic down and make him king for his comfort?" He roared suddenly, right hand raised and curled up clawlike. "We have betrayed the principles of this Republic! We have fallen before another Sulla!"

"It was inevitable, Decius," a senator, Quintus Flavius, spoke from the back. "General Sextus has defeated the army of the Roman Senate thrice, yet not once did march on Rome!"

Decius grasped at his heart, wide-eyed at Quintus. "Oh! You dare utter the name of the enemy of Rome before this august body? He and the rest of the Julian brood spelled nothing more than trouble!"

"Trouble? It was Sextus that approached this body to conciliate, to make peace with the Senate. What, had you planned to condemn the Roman war hero to the pits of Tullianum, or the Tarpeian Rock?" Quintus had started to gain support among the benches, and cheers of approval followed.

"Oh, Jupiter save us! War hero, Quintus? He has slaughtered Romans in Roman lands!"

"Only because we allowed him to do so!" Another senator, emboldened by the retort of Quintus, interjected.

"And I would hurl him to Tartarus, were I to have strength to do it!" Decius looked at the rest of the Senate, with fiery eyes, while the rest of the senators began arguing with each other. "He is a menace, a danger to Rome! Why are we even debating the facts? He will destroy the foundations of this Republic!"

"He will do no such thing!" Marcus Marcellus Orator, consul holding the fasces, shouted in the din. All eyes turned to him. "He has always been a servant of the Senate and People of Rome, though all of you condemned him and all the Julians as enemies." He was immediately booed, but the strength had ebbed. He was gaining support. "But for what, Conscript Fathers? So they would no longer pose a threat? To what?" He turned to Decius. "To whom?"

"What are you insinuating?" Decius seethed. "I serve only Rome!"

"You've served nothing but yourselves!" Marcellus shouted. "You've been warned the dangers of a war in the East. You've been warned that Rome would stand to lose its allies—and value to the kingdoms across the Sea. Yet you did not listen. You outlawed good senators and good tribunes, and you've brought the Senate to a needless war with her own generals! While Asia and the rest of Rome's allies have fallen before the chaos of the Parthian horses!"

"You are a traitor, Marcus Marcellus!" Decius shouted back. "You should have been outlawed along with the rest of your Julian scum!"

"I am consul," Marcellus roared, "and you will address me as such! Do you think your foul mouth can keep control of this august body? You are nothing more than a sanctimonious fart!"

"And you are a Julian toady! I spit on you, and I spit on the Julii!"

"Lictors! Arrest this man!"

"Don't you lay a hand on me! My body is sacrosanct before the laws of this City!"

"You are a hindrance to the affairs of this State!"

"*Don't you dare!*" The lictors, still carrying the fasces, walked to the bench where Decius sat, and amidst boos and cheers from the other senators, lifted Decius from his feet. "You enemy of Rome! You plague upon the loyal servants of the Republic!"

"Throw him out of the Curia!"

"Throw him out on the streets!" A senator added.

"Conscript Fathers," Marcellus started to address the senators, while still keeping an eye on Decius who was carried off screaming and flailing at the senior consul. "It is time to salvage what we must with the time," he sighed for effect. "And the youth that shed his blood in a war we were ill prepared to fight, and ill willed to continue."

"I move," one of the senators said, "that Sextus Cornelius be reinstated to his position among this august body and as governor of Italian Gaul.

There was a loud tumult, but another senator stood up. "I move that all the exiled Julians be reinstated to their position in the august body pending reappointment to their governorships and other positions in the provinces."

"No! Don't you dare!" "We have gone with this madness long enough" "You will bring death to us all!"

"I move to declare this meeting void! I move to outlaw Sextus Cornelius! I move to hurl him to the Tarpeian Rock, the Tullianum, to Tartarus if we need to!"

"I will have order!" Marcellus shouted at the Curia, but the other senators were interposing their motions against each other. Finally, there came a lone voice, and soon the arguments began to subside.

"I veto! I veto!" Lucius Lutatius, a tribune of the Plebs, shouted from his corner. "I veto the war, I veto the confusion, and I MOVE TO REVERSE THE OUTLAWING OF ALL JULIANS, AND TO REINSTATE THEM IN THEIR PROPER POSITIONS AS SENATOR AND GOVERNOR!"

Before anyone else could react, two senators—Titus Flaminius and Gaius Aurelius simultaneously stood and began shouting their own motions. Flaminius shouted to "Reinstate all the Julians, along with return to their property and status, with reassurances that all that has been done wrong from them be reversed." Aurelius had moved that, "All Julians be returned to their posts as governors and as Senators and given chance to bring their case before this august body, WITHOUT DANGER OF being condemned as criminals!"

"Since the motion has been seconded by two senators," Marcellus declared, quickly before the confusion began again. "I will have a division of the House."

The senators in opposition raised a hue and cry, shouting to the others to join those who fought for the Republic, and for Rome. Though their numbers were still great, more than half of the Senate voted in favor of the motion. They began to shout and scream at the "traitors who have trounced liberty" while Marcellus urged the senators to silence.

"It's done, then." Marcus Marcellus masked the triumph in his face. "Quintus Flavius, you will take the lists of all the Julians declared outlaw, and inform them that they are reinstated as governors of the

province, and are no longer *inimicus* before Rome. The day has passed, Conscript Fathers," He said with finality. "This meeting is adjourned. Go home."

"There is a stirring in the West, Great King." Eumachus said as Mithridates walked to one of the towers in his palace. "Rome has finally awakened to the presence of our armies in Asia."

"They might as well have." The King glanced at the busts of Ares and Vulcan at the entrance to the steps. What if I invoked the war god? He thought to himself. Would he choose the Romans over him?

"He would choose the stronger," Mithridates muttered.

"Lord?"

"Ares would choose the stronger," Mithridates repeated. "Over us or the Romans, he would choose the stronger."

"But who is the stronger, Great King?" Eumachus asked, as they ascended the steps. The King gave him a suspicious look.

"Are you sure you don't side with the Romans, Greek?"

"My loyalty is to you King. Are mine the same as yours?"

What? Mithridates shook his head. "However Rome responds, I have Asia. I am a sea away from the insidious Greeks. How I long to crush them."

They were almost at the top now. Eumachus had kept silent as the King continued to talk of how Rome can no longer stop him from building the empires of Darius and Cyrus, greater than any of the Persian kings have made before them. How could he still keep talking? Was he breathing at all. "For..." The Greek minister bent down, panting and coughing. "Forgive me, Lord," He clutched at the sides of the tower.

Mithridates looked back at him. "Well hurry up, man! You're too slow!"

His heart felt like bursting for lack of air. "Forgive me Great King," he finally said between gasps. "But Greece *is* a sea away."

"Are you worried that the Sea will choose Rome over me?"

"Great King, the Sea takes no sides." Eumachus said, stopping one step to the tower. "Rome, nevertheless, has ships as leverage. We have barely begun constructing our fleet."

"Then we shall cross at the shortest distance." Mithridates reached the top, and looked down from the tower. "At the city of Byzantium. "

The Greek minister followed after him. "But, my lord, Byzantium is a Roman city. We will be facing Roman generals."

"Do you doubt the strength of Parthia?"

"No, but we have fallen before in the face of Roman..." Eumachus looked down, and went agape. A sea of red and green, large squares of soldiers, their shields leveled, their spears at the ready. They had Roman-type uniforms, except that they were fitted to have chain-mail from under their armor, and their helmets bore a metal crest, resembling the Spartan model. Were they before a siege? "...legions."

"Herodotus once described an army of disciplined Persian soldiers" The Parthian king said, the wind blowing at his face. "They were terrifying to behold, and they once destroyed an entire Spartan army at Thermopylae." He basked at the sight of his army. "Athanaoi."

"The Ten Thousand," Eumachus muttered.

"They shall be my new Immortals." Mithridates shouted, his voice growing fierce. "And they will forge a new Empire... a new Persia!"

### Chapter 3 The Dance of Desert Swords

The sands of the desert flew to the air as hooves and feet stomped at it. A thousand horses, thousands more of men, stood before the desert with their backs to the sun. There were many banners that flew amidst the throng. Green and white, symbols of the moon and the stars, and those that represented the gods of their cities. They were of different tribes, and distrusted each other. But the petty rivalries had been shunned away, to fight a common enemy.

It was as if they were facing a sandstorm; the spears were leveled, swords were raised, and cries went scattered on the armies. Their faces were covered in their shawls, some covering the entire face. Others let a part of the temple to show. They were uttering curses, spitting on the ground. There was something sacred in the desert. And the enemy they would face did not comprehend how the sands represented life among the tribes. Every grain was precious, for it was the gods that had made them, and it was the fate of every man to search for his water, the water that was his destiny.

No, this was a heathen enemy. He could not understand the unity of the desert. He thought that he could bring down the cities without bringing the wrath of a united nation? The Arab tribes, Semitic or not, were prepared to punish and humble him. Let him try to cross swords with the servants of the desert.

All eyes shifted to the east, where the army of the heathens had appeared. They were a paltry lot, with their horses and the mails draped at the "important warriors". Don't they know that it was the mail that dragged the horse? That killed him before the scorching desert? No, the heathen could not know. The enemy began to grow in number, until the warriors peered that there were more beyond the horizon.

"We are outnumbered, Hillel," one of the Arabs spoke to a companion.

"The Patriarchs of the Caravans will take a stand now." Hillel ben Ali turned to his companion. "Or will you let Hatra share the fate of the other caravan cities?"

The enemy shouted their own cheers, guttural to the ears of the nomads. "What evil words do they utter?"

"They have used our swords against the backs of their enemies," an Arab seethed. "Now we shall bury the blades on them."

They could see now that a group of enemy horse archers rode to the left flank. One of the Patriarchs, looking at the others, nodded, and turned his horse towards the archers. The rest of his warriors followed.

Another group of horse archers went to the right flank, and at once, rained arrows at the main Arab army. Another Patriarch went after the group of horse archers.

The enemy army began to divide.

"They are trying to pick us off piece by piece," a Patriarch said. "We are outnumbered, and they will divide us."

"Not this time." Hillel ben Ali saw the chain-mailed horses, the cataphracts, emerging from the parting army ranks. He raised his sword towards it. "The Gods of the Desert bring us glory!" He screamed, and spurred his horse forward.

The Arabs cried as one, and rode to the direction of the cataphracts. The sands flew at their faces, and at their eyes. Arrows started to pour from the sky, catching horses and warriors. An Arab cried out at one that hit his right eye, pulling at the reins of his horse and forcing it to stop abruptly. But those behind him surged forward, throwing him and his horse forward. He fell to the ground and was trampled by the hooves of horses. The shouts grew louder, as another barrage of arrows rained down on the warriors. Another saw his beast hit at the head, tried to pull it upwards with the reins, saw it stumble with its forelegs, then thrown forward. He tried to catch at another horse, but fell short and was cut down by passing swords.

Hillel ben Ali shouted, and the wave of horsemen went forward towards the cataphracts, the clinking of the mail undeniable. Horse and man battered against the ranks of the enemy, flinging themselves at the sword with reckless abandon. The sword of the Patriarch swooped down and quickly found the weak part of the armor of one of the enemy soldiers, thrusting at the arms and then slashing to the neck. His warriors soon spearheaded a wedge deep at the ranks of the enemy, his blade seemingly having a life of its own, flinging itself this way and that. Hillel stabbed at the roof of an enemy's head, then slashed to the right as he pulled the sword out.

Another rain of arrows. Wasn't the enemy killing theirs as well? "Forward! Drive them back!" A horn was sounded, and the Arabs pushed on with renewed vigor. Hillel was deep in the ranks now, many of the dismounted enemy trying to stab at his horse. He slashed and hacked, felt sand enter his eyes, tears forming. "The desert take you!" His sword swooped down at an enemy, splitting his forehead. "And swallow you whole!" The blade flew, this time to cut an enemy arm. Another horn was sounded, and other Arab warriors plunged towards the sea of battle. Following this, the enemy shouted their rallying cry, and with another rain of arrows, charged forward.

Hillel's sword swung at an enemy blade, then watched in horror as the scimitar broke into several pieces. He was frozen with fear, as the shards scattered to the sands and one cut his face. There had been a prophecy at his birth: he would not die, "unless the *Breath of God* shatters in battle." Now his sword lay in shards before his feet.

For the briefest of moments, Hillel muttered a short prayer. Then, "I will die in this field, *but I will slay many men before I do so!*" He seized the arm of the enemy soldier before the sword could descend on him, twisted it, and caught the blade before it fell. He slashed forward, and left a huge gash on the enemy's throat.

"More have come! The Patriarch of Petra brings arms!" The rain of arrows was endless, as another wave of Arab warriors swept towards the field. Enemy soldiers charged at Hillel, and then impaled his horse with their swords. The beast fought off the attackers, stumbled, and threw down his master. Hillel felt a searing pain in his left shoulder, but continued to fling his sword menacingly at those surrounding him. There were too many, he saw. A sea of enemy faces. We are too few. His hand felt blade hack at it, and he dropped his sword. He dived to it, felt pain at his back as flesh and cloth tore from the edges of a blade.

He fell on his knees. He looked at the soldiers around him. His hand could no longer move. It had parted from his arm. Blood gushed from the stump, and he turned to the soldier raising a sword at him.

"The Desert take you," he cursed, spat on the ground. "The Desert swallow you whole,"

The sword cut through his neck.

"A battle deservedly won," a Parthian general turned to his king.

"A people deservedly slaughtered," Vologases replied.

He still seethed over their betrayal. He had given them gold. Enough to buy ten cities! He had promised them huge lands to hold in his mighty realm. All they needed to do was bring *her*. Bring her unharmed, and untouched.

And they should have the insolence to betray him? To hand her over to the Romans, over smaller, *scantier* amounts of gold? Did they seek to test *Vologases*? "I am the Scourge of their Tribes!" He had said when he learned of it. "I will bury them in their Desert Filth! *I will slaughter the whole lot of them!*"

He had seized the throne right after his brother Phraates had gone with the rest of the nobles to fight with his father in Asia. While he was left tending to the affairs of home and Judaea. He had longed for the Jewish princess Esther. He was promised her hand and *her bed* for his saving the Jewish cause! He fought the Romans so viciously and agreed to make Hyrcanus king for her sake! Then on the night before their wedding, he had learned that Jewish soldiers had seized Esther and taken her back to her father, who would fight Rome and Parthia to preserve his people and his daughter's honor. *Daughter's honor*? What was he, a brigand to be feared?

"I am a Royal Prince of Parthia!" He had screamed then. "How in Ormazd's name do you dare *you sycophantic traitor*?"

For endless nights he marched his armies in pursuit of the Jewish king. He ordered the slaughter of entire villages and cities that had harbored the retreating Jewish force. Be damned the Romans, and be damned the country of Judaea. He learned while he was in Sidon, that home had become a mess. So he had reluctantly gone back to Ecbatana, spared a few words with his brother, and entertained new plans to conquer Judaea.

For he had left the country that was still in ruins. Romans and Jews were still fighting on the coasts, Jerusalem had again revolted and toppled the Romans, and the Jews had divided to those who supported

Hyrchanus and those who supported the Sanhedrin. And Hyrchanus had called for the employ of Egypt. As if the forces of Parthia were not enough. Vologases plotted, from afar in Ecbatana. He longed to seize Esther and despoil her as he vowed to despoil Judaea.

He used the employ of Arab assassins. Again and again. But Esther was nowhere to be found, and he learned from his own spies she was with the Romans. He had raged, and vowed to burn the city of the Arab assassins. As his armies marched to the caravan city, he learned that the failure of his assassins amounted to no less than conspiracy among other Arab tribes, and then to the Caravan Cities. So Vologases, in his fury and obsession to have Esther, summoned his troops to a war with the Caravan Cities. Never mind that he had to also engage in war with the Kushanas, who were allies in trade of the Arabs.

He looked before the dead of the field outside Hatra, and stroked his horse in triumph. "There were many tribes that faced you here, Lord." The Parthian general said to him. "There is war with you and all the Arab tribes now. From here to the ends of the desert."

"Let them come." Vologases replied. "That I may sooner kill them."

His horse trotted across Arab and Parthian dead, a hoof tapping lightly at something shining from the sands. Vologases looked down, to shards of a golden sword, bearing several reflections of the Parthian prince.

"Get the rest of the shards of this blade," he pointed down. "And bring them to me."

He was almost blinded by a sudden shaft of light from the setting sun.

Abgarus squinted at the rays of the noon sun.

At the other end of the desert, a hundred miles west of Arshamur, he and twelve companions rode on a solitary hill. The roads here had been forgotten, since the days of Babylon and Persia. Darius had used it when his army marched to the coasts where they were to land in Greece. But men have since forgotten the road, as well as the city that made it.

He remembered how his father had described the magnificence of Arshamur, filled with "jewels from as far east as the sea. There were travelers who came from the lands beyond the Great Eastern Sea, beyond the Indus and beyond the desert. They were artisans, scholars, merchants and even philosophers." It had been made a refuge by the Persian King Darius II, far from the chaos of his own realm, and far from the reach of the Syrian cities, then under revolt from his rule. "He was not a great king, but he was remembered for Arshamur."

War came to this land, and the Greek Alexander saw Babylon as the only beautiful city in the Crescent. "Destroy all else that challenges its beauty" He had told his Macedonian generals. And so Arshamur was put to the sword. The Persians who were forced out of the city uttered a curse, that the city would no longer be a city of the living, but of the shadows. The Arabs believed the curse, and explained the deaths in their tribes as a curse of Arshamur, for the Persians then cursed them, reviled them, and blamed their betrayal for the fall of their empire.

Ironically, Arshamur became truly, the City of the Dead, for those who went here were dead to the cities that expelled them. Criminals, rebels and vagabonds now reside among the abandoned houses. Only the strong-willed resided in the city, and formed assassination cult-sects, worshipping many gods but praising only one—the god of the *dinar*. Kings went there to personally deliver bags of gold to the man

who served him well. But Arshamur was a curse also to the kings. For it is said, that those who enter the city with more than he is willing to lose, loses more than he is willing to give.

Abgarus had not planned to cross by way of Arshamur. His men held an important treasure, one mercenary would not pass up to trade. "Watch the rocks," he told his companions. "They will bring news of what we have."

The humid air caused him to loll his head above his horse. It had been an eighteen-day journey, one where they still ran from the horsemen of a Persian prince. He had learned from his spies that Vologases, "has declared a king's ransom—treasures that would keep a man rich for a lifetime—for the one who can bring back that which he seeks."

What was so important about this one? He looked back at the camel behind him, watched a figure veiled so heavily and trying to cover the face from the sifting sands. "Do not try to cloak yourself too heavily. The sun will burn you."

"That is what I'm trying to cover from."

"As the Desert wills."

Coming across two hills, Abgarus stopped his horsemen as a lone stranger emerged from one of the rocks. "You will go no further," he told them. "Until she is handed to us."

"She goes as my master wishes."

"This is Arshamur," the stranger grinned. "There are no masters here." He unsheathed a sword and from behind him emerged ten more men. From the west Abgarus turned to the sound of hooves. He saw from the horizon a horseman, screaming the name of the city, the City of the Shadows. "By the grace of the Desert, you shall give us what we seek." The stranger offered a hand.

"By the grace of the Desert, my sword shall cut you first!" Abgarus flailed his sword in the air and charged with the rest of his men towards the line of ambushers. Swords crashed against each other, and horsemen fought horsemen. Abgarus slashed and stabbed at the attackers, and ordered the rest of his companions forward. Three remained and pulled the camel where their hostage pleaded for a sword.

"Death is not a sport for a lady." One of them replied.

"I am no lady!" The hostage shouted, her veil lifting to show parts of her face. "I can slay any man who touches me!"

"As the Desert wills." He shrugged. "But you will have no sword."

The camel was pulled forward, as blades continued to find their way into flesh. The lone horseman from the horizon, crying praises to the Desert and the city of Arshamur, charged towards Abgarus' assassins, and he was followed by an emerging horde of Arshamur warriors.

"Here! Quickly!" Abgarus fought his way through, as his companions tried to screen the camel and the hostage as it made his way where he made inroads. "Hold them off for as long as possible!"

He turned his horse, then at the stranger that challenged them. "By the God most Gracious," he uttered as his blade parried an attack. "I am promised victory!" He hacked at the arm of the stranger, who

screamed but quickly pulled his sword from the severed hand. Abgarus pressed to his right, forcing him from his horse.

The ranks of running horsemen were almost upon them now, and Haroun, one of Abgarus' companions, turned to the camel. "You must run, speed away from this dark place," he hit the camel at the back. "Go! And God's will go with you!"

The camel raced forward, pursued by two Arshamur warriors. Abgarus glanced at the running beast, slashed at his enemy's blade, then turned his horse forward. "After her!" He called out to his companions. "Don't let them get to her!"

He spurred his horse forward, and shot through three assassins trying to block his path. Haroun and two others followed him closely, but they were also pursued by more of the enemy.

The road where the camel ran was suddenly filled with emerging horsemen, assassins from the City. Abgarus screamed a command to his horse, and the beast sped towards the two pursuers trailing behind the camel. He cut one of the enemy, then parried and stabbed at the other. He turned his horse towards the rope holding the camel, reached it in time before the camel was run through by the daggers leveled at it by the enemy in front of it.

Abgarus pulled the camel back, at the right, and sprang forward at the attackers. Haroun was followed by five of the company now, but the rest of the Arab horsemen pursued them. They drove a wedge towards the group of assassins fighting Abgarus, and formed a cordon round him.

"Abgarus," Haroun called. "There are too many of them. We've already lost five of our companions to the swords of these assassins."

"May God's mercy fall on them." Abgarus prayed. "We must break through. We must reach Syria by nightfall."

"But that is madness!" Haroun warned. "The Romans have most of Syria, they know who we bring, and all of the Desert searches for her!"

What was it with this woman that the entire Desert heaves and throes under her? "As God commands," he finally said. "But we shall take her to Syria, and to Tarsus if we can! Press forward!"

Haroun wondered at the zeal of his friend. Abgarus, under the guidance of his father, the Patriarch Hillel ben Ali, had been taught the religion of the Jews. "It is not because we need purpose in our lives, son," his friend once explained his father said to him. "But because God is the only purpose." In the harsh environment of the desert, where water was precious, and even a commodity among the assassins, it was hard to think of anything else but to live to survive. Haroun had seen and heard the beliefs of his ancestors, but he could not bring himself to be superstitious. The desert needed thinking men, and those whose heads were in the clouds did not live long to fulfill their dreams (if they could.)

He shrugged. "As God commands." He hacked at another enemy warrior, and pointed at the nearby elevation. "There! The Arshamur will not pursue us there!"

"Why do you say that?"

"It is said that, those accursed to be dead cannot suffer the light at its greatest."

Abgarus thought of something else, and smiled. "We go!"

His horse neighed, and followed Haroun's flight. The rest of the Nabateans continued to duel with a surging enemy, then fled towards the direction of their leader. Hooves beat mercilessly at the sand, and as the pursuit continued in earnest, one of the horses of the Nabateans slipped from sand, and struggled to stand. It fell to the left, as its master was flung left and was cut down by pursuing Arshamur assassins. Abgarus was about to reach Haroun, when he saw his friend turned to him through the glare of the sun. "Don't look forward!"

The horses of the Nabateans neighed uneasily as they made the last stretch to the top, followed closely by the Arshamur. Suddenly, Abgarus saw Haroun's plan, as a dozen Nabateans emerged from the rocks of the hills and drove their spears towards the enemy assassins. The enemy tried to go back, but those in front were driven in by the spears and those trying to press forward. Those in the back finally realized what was happening and tried to turn round, but there other Nabatean Arabs, who had hidden in the caves, surrounded them. Though they outnumbered Abgarus and those who helped, the Arshamur warriors could not fight at two directions, and were cut down to a man.

Abgarus greeted the leader of the Nabatean spearmen.

"God praise you for the deeds this day!" He shook his hand and hugged him. "Come! What news!"

"All of Judaea is crying for her return." The man looked at the camel, then at the figure on it. "It is not safe here. There is a nearby village where you can be safe. Until the time you will take to Tarsus."

"So you know."

"The Desert keeps no secret, even those of the dead she carries to her sands."

"Great King, we have found her."

Vologases jumped up from his reverie. The goblet he was holding fell to the floor, spilling the contents of wine kept from the Palace chambers. He looked intensely at the man, urged him to continue. "And?"

"My spies report she was last carried to the city of Arshamur."

"Arshamur? I thought that place was a myth!"

"Your Highness will understand, it was a well-conceived secret by the King Darius."

And how did you come about the secret? Vologases wanted to ask. "Have they gotten hold of her? What price do they seek?"

The captain did not expect the second question, hesitated. "No, sire. She eluded them, and was last seen in Arshamur."

"How far long was this? A day? Three days ago?"

"Four days, sire. They are searching all of Syria for her."

"Then find her! And don't report to me anything I can't be sure of!" His eyes riveted towards the cup, where the wine had spilled. The color was not the same as the wine... "Guard!"

"Yes, Great King."

"Summon the cupbearer to me."

He turned back at the captain; saw that he was still standing there. "What do you want?"

"Sire, the Romans have also put a price on her head..."

"Then we shall find her before them!" Vologases turned to the guard, who reemerged dragging the cupbearer in front of the king. "Get him to that cup!"

The cupbearer wailed, shook in fear.

Vologases turned to the guard, and pulled out his sword. He studied the blade. "I want you to drink that," he told him. "Or I will stab this in your eye."

"No, please..."

"Drink it!"

"It's spilt" The cupbearer explained. "It's spilled on the floor."

"Then drink it from the floor!"

The cupbearer bent his head forwards, started to lap at the spilled wine with his tongue. Vologases watched without expression. The guard watched both king and cupbearer as the latter tried to get the contents of the wine to his mouth. Suddenly, he trembled. Then, he fell to a spasm of uncontrollable fits, foaming in the mouth and clutching at the floor. Within seconds, he was dead.

He turned to the guard. "Find out who was with the cupbearer. Get them to talk! By any means necessary. Most of all, I want to see them suffer."

The guard bowed, walked to the door where he commanded servants to pull out the dead body. The Parthian prince turned but the captain had gone.

She woke up with widened eyes, her hands still shaking. It had been a troubled night. A vision of the burning of Jerusalem, her brother impaled on a cross round the city, a warning to the rebels. Swords, many swords, covering her eyes, then parting to reveal a face; her father's face, cut in many angles. Blood was spilling from his mouth. There was murder in his eyes. He seemed to look at her with disgusted rage. "Foul harlot, you pollute the rivers of your forefathers. Go! Get thee hence from this land, for no man shall claim you, though all shall have you."

She still trembled at the vision, the fear of its coming to pass. Why, weren't they visions that gave voice to the prophets, the terrible word of the mighty God? Why had He condemned her to such a fate? Why condemn her for what she had not even done?

It was then that she saw her captor, eyes fixed on the moon. "Never a night such as this," she heard him whisper. "For all nights are unique, and apart from the other. Blessed by the Almighty God, I am but dust in the desert of life."

"You speak with a golden tongue." Abgarus looked at her. "Tell me, Arab, what God do you worship in the Desert?"

He smiled, without shifting position. "By my understanding, Lady, there is only one God, worthy of worship. One true God."

"What God?"

"You speak to know, or to test me?" The Arab turned his eyes back to the stars. "It is Yahweh, the Terrible Voice of the Desert."

"Terrible?" She stood now, walked towards him. "Do you see Yahweh as a terrible God?"

"We parry at words, but I see mine has missed the mark." His fingers tightened at the window that led outside. "He is terrible, one that is fearful to behold, let alone speak to." He closed his eyes, as if in memory. "It is true that the Great Patriarch Moses spoke to God the way I must have spoken to you now, but only because there was fear in his heart, and accepted that His God... Our God... is a fearsome deity that holds Humanity and the World in His hand."

"But," he continued, stifling a question forming on her lips. "that is not to say that God is not just, not merciful. He is the wisest, and the most knowing of all leaders. He raises all princes, but none can stand to his wisdom, and mercy."

"And love," she replied.

"Love? The Desert finds no place for love." Abgarus turned, away from her. "But yes, it is the center of His Being."

"Do you believe that?"

"More than you know, princess. I believe that God tests all of us in the desert of His making, until we have gained wisdom in experience and knowledge of our world, and He would come again, and lead the people back to Him."

"A Messiah?" She could not comprehend that this Arab would know of the teachings of her forefathers; yet hold a belief apart from her. Somehow. "You believe a Messiah for your brethren?"

"We are all God's brethren. It is only how we accept Him that we differ."

Vologases scanned the surroundings, hoping for a telltale sign of the path leading to the lost city. There was none. The sands here were the same as everywhere else. Hills and dunes that ran for miles and miles looked the same, and if one were not careful, one would find himself lost, or going in circles.

Only a few people knew of the road to Arshamur. Almost every one of them was an assassin.

"How is it that you know this place so much?" The Parthian prince asked of the captain.

"Long ago, Great King, there was a wandering traveler who stumbled on the road to the lost city." He remembered well. He was paid by a Roman curator to kill a local governor, yet did nothing when the Romans tracked the crime to him. Desolate, seeking for a place of refuge, he wandered to the desert,

where he found the city. Or the city found him. "I am not proud of what I had done, but I killed many men those days."

"The great captain, a brigand."

"My service is to you, Great King." He bowed deferentially at Vologases.

The prince waved it away. "If the City calls you to service once more, would you rally to it?"

"No."

"If I were to command you to burn the city, and kill all its inhabitants, would you do it?"

The captain looked at him strangely, battle raging from within. His left hand unconsciously grasped at something at his breast. "If..." he finally replied. "If the King asks."

"I ask it."

"Then Arshamur shall be no more," he stated. The Parthian prince smiled, and went ahead of his army.

It was a clear night. The stars dotted the sky, providing illumination to the marching Parthian army. Vologases tried to find a common thread in the stars, a constellation, a sign that would locate the city's whereabouts, but could not find one. He stroked his horse in frustration, not trusting his captain, who guided them to Arshamur, neither trusting his army, as they were like any army from Parthia. Weak, and ill organized. "Why do we venture the city in this place?"

"They say that the sun is hottest at this part of the world. Wandering travelers prefer the longer roads than this, for there was no sign of anything, only the endless desert."

"Then how are we to see the city in the dark?"

"We do not find Arshamur with our eyes, but in the sands." He pointed at the ground below them. "See? The sands are shifting."

"I do not see anything."

"Not the eyes, Great King, but one can feel the sands."

There was a sudden neighing of a horse, and Vologases turn to see one of the horses rear up and drop its rider. It stamped its legs on the sand, but could not keep a hold and slipped, crashing on all fours.

Other horses began following, neighing and stroking impatiently at the ground. "The beasts are not used to the sands of the city."

"They cannot stand the demons that lurk here," a soldier murmured.

Vologases turned to look for the soldier, but darted back as an arrow suddenly pierced a soldier. The others immediately stood alert, their shields covering their heads and bodies, but a volley of arrows pierced at men and horse. The animals became more violent now, thrashing at their riders and collapsing on the sands. "Hold your positions!" The Parthian prince bellowed from the train. He turned to the

captain. "I want those beasts calmed! If they continue that noise, I will have all their throats cut!" The captain saluted, then turned to the rest of the soldiers.

A second volley of arrows, and men began groaning and crying in terror. Some began to bend to their knees, keeping shelter in their shields. Others looked at the stars, and prayed to whatever god he seemed to worship then. Only a few strung their bows and studied the desert to who might have fired the arrows. A third volley, and they started firing everywhere.

"Stop everything! Form ranks!" Vologases could no longer control his army, saw it begin to disintegrate behind him. He turned his horse to face them, and stared them with the most terrifying face he could muster. He even held a blade at a soldier. "There is no demon here, but the demons of your imaginings! Now stand fast!"

The soldier with the blade on his neck widened his eyes in terror, but not at the king. He pointed a free hand behind the prince. Vologases turned to see a horseman riding towards him. A fool, he thought. Does he seem to intimidate me with his antics?

The rider seemed to carry a banner of black. The helmet reminded him of the Seleucian days, but remembered that later Persian kings had worn similar helms. Calling to the captain and two soldiers, they rode towards the rider. In the middle of the desert, the two parties stopped.

"So, this is the King of Persia." The rider looked at the prince, but Vologases could not see the face of the man covered in a black shawl. "You are very brave to have come to the city, or very stupid."

"I am the King of the Parthians, and the Master of the East! I am your rightful lord!"

"Forgive me, but Arshamur bears no king as master."

"Take me to the city, and I shall change all that!"

"Brave indeed. But stupid." He rode a small distance away, waved his banner, and suddenly a ring of torches from the distance flickered into light and surrounded the army and the king. The rider turned back to him. "You are in Arshamur, Prince. The city is not far from here."

"Take me there!" Vologases was tempted to raise his sword at the impudent man.

"Be warned, King. No prince has ever returned from the Lost City without them losing more than what they had planned."

"I have only one intention. You know that."

"Yes." The rider's gray eyes met his, challenging him. "We have but to reach our hand and she could be yours. But no king rules Arshamur."

"Then I shall put Arshamur to the *sword!*" Vologases unsheathed his sword, but was blocked by the sword of his captain. "You..." he seethed. "Traitor. I never trusted your lot."

"Arshamur is not the city, Prince." The torches that lit around the desert became thicker, and nearer the army. "We are Arshamur. We are the Desolate Few, that have lost ourselves to the Service of the Desert." The rider stroked his horse once, then rode nearer to the Parthian prince. He pulled a dagger from his robes, and flung it at one of the guards. Another unsheathed his sword. "Put that down! Or your king dies." Vologases looked at the guard. The latter sheathed it back.

"We are doing you a favor, good prince. We are sparing your life." The rider pointed at the mass of torches charging towards the Parthian army from the west. A cry of an ancient dialect resounded through the desert, and the Parthian soldiers were frozen with fear. "In a few minutes, they shall be organized." The Parthians, left to their devices, their gaze turning to their king, who had blade in his throat, started to form the ranks west. "Then, the torches of Arshamur shall burn their courage, and ensure their defeat."

Vologases looked on as the wave of torches (it seemed like a sea of fire where he looked) charged towards his army. Volleys of arrows were exchanged, then the torches were thrown at the front ranks. The charging enemy smashed at the Parthian front, and immediately the lines began to break. Then, from the east, another wave of torches charged towards the Parthian rear. Another sea of fire, another resounding cry, and the Parthians shouted back with broken voices, and their volley of arrows.

"It is over." The rider turned back to the prince, before the battle ended. "We have enough warriors to overcome any army. Even yours, King of Persia."

"Who paid you?" Vologases' mind raced. His front ranks were decimated, but those from behind would see the trail of torches and run to the aid of his retreating soldiers. "Who sums the greater price? The Roman governor? Hyrcanus?"

"No, Prince. But we have been well paid, enough to refuse your gold." The rider turned back, and the captain beside Vologases took his sword with him. "Go home, Prince. You will not find anything here this day."

"I have my army! I will lay waste to your—" he looked back, but there were no more signs of the enemy. There was only litters and litters of bodies, burning under a steady fire of a hundred torches. He closed his eyes, cursed the desert, cursed Arshamur, and ordered his guard back with him to the remnants of his army.

He was even humbled. There was not even the captain to guide him back to Ecbatana.

"It is time."

She looked at Abgarus, and she changed from confessor-confidant to hostage. Her hand went through the folds of her dress, and clutched at the dagger hidden near her abdomen. "They will be looking for us soon. We shall go north."

The door swung open, and Haroun emerged with five other warriors. They were all covered in shawls, and started to cover their faces with the scarves. "We shall have to take the path that leads to the heart of the city, then to a maze of houses." Abgarus had started to arrange his shawl. "That's the only path less likely to be patrolled."

She did not notice Abgarus sneak behind her and pull her arms to her back. She felt the cords tighten on her wrists. "Do not move much." The swords were displayed for intimidating. "It will hurt more."

"Why are you still doing this? You know I don't mean to escape."

"You are a Jew." Haroun looked at her with contempt. "There is no love lost with Isaac and Ishmail."

"Haroun!" His friend glared at him. "Don't you dare twist the will of God!"

"And you," Haroun scowled back. "You should know better than dabble in the cults of these... city dwellers. They have forsaken the life of the Desert, they have forsaken us!"

"God has a purpose with everyone."

"Enough!" Both of them looked at another covered warrior. "Our purpose here is to take her north. We can deal with petty differences later."

The two exchanged cold stares, then proceeded out.

They wended through the streets of the city, with only the moon as light. Haroun sometimes led the party through patrolled squares; sometimes it was the warrior who interceded for him and Abgarus. Most of the time, their hostage found that at the wake of their escape there was always a body or two lying on the ground.

One in their company cursed. The clouds were moving to the moon. "We must hurry to the heart of the city" Haroun told them. "We will not be safe here."

Another corner, another house. Abgarus sensed something wrong; the city was too quiet. "Haroun, wait." He pulled him by the shoulder, then peered from the blind alley. It was quiet. Too quiet. He motioned three of the warriors to come with him.

He walked to the square, feet softly touching the ground, ears cocked to the surroundings.

The door of one of the houses opened, and a veiled warrior appeared. Abgarus looked back at the corner he had emerged from, and nodded. Haroun would take another path. Doors from the other houses opened, and twenty warriors soon surrounded his party.

"Arshamur," he muttered.

"No," his companion replied. "Sicarii."

The twenty warriors attacked. Abgarus unsheathed his sword and darted to a group of three, parrying their attacks quickly. His companions screened him while he tried to thrust and parry at his attackers, and soon heard the sounds of more enemies coming from the streets. He pressed the attack, and stabbed at the group, forcing them to part on the center. He stabbed at the center again, then slashed at the right while trying to force his way into the gap.

He heard a groan, and knew one of his companions had been hit. A sword had pierced into the man's throat, then the blood flowed as the sword was withdrawn and the man gurgled to death. "We shall not die amongst these vipers."

"Men of the Daggers," Abgarus silently pleaded. "Let us pass."

He hacked at an arm then seized the sword held by the arm's hand. "Have at you, fiends!" He slashed and parried with both swords, felt the growing power as he forced his way into one of the streets. "Here! Quickly!"

They ran through the streets as the Sicarii followed them, no cries or stomping of feet. Just the muffled running of a dozen or more men. Abgarus wound one street, eyes widened at a Sicarii aiming an arrow

at him, ducked in time to have the arrow hit another Sicarii from the arm. Curses poured out, and swords sprang to life.

One more of his companions cut down. He took to another street, and more of the Sicarii ran after him now. He was losing streets. They were going farther and farther away from the city center. Abgarus clutched at his sword, and let the blade prick at his finger. "By my blood," he prayed. "I will not fall in this city."

Abgarus and the last of his company ended up in another square. He could hear Sicarii pouring from the streets, their muffled steps no longer indistinguishable from the night's silence. Suddenly he heard a scream, and then the clashing of swords.

"Abgarus!"

He turned to Haroun, on one of the streets. Their hostage could not hide her terror from the night's work. He ran to them. "The Arshamur. We encountered them after we separated from you." He looked back at the hostage. "They are looking for her."

"So do the Sicarii." Her eyes lightened up at the mention of the name.

"My Father has come for me. You will not triumph in your deeds! I will be revenged!"

"You talk as if you were already slain." Haroun remarked.

One of the companions unsheathed his sword. "So be it! We have lost many brothers for this one, it seems trivial to have her throat now!" He was stopped only by Haroun's sword. "She will be the death of us, don't you understand!"

"We are already dead men. There is no home to return to now. Who knows what that Persian madman has already done with the rest of the Caravan Cities?"

*Father*, Abgarus thought.

"We were tasked to take her north, and that is what we shall do."

"North? *North?* Where north can she possibly go?"

"To the Wolf." Abgarus answered finally. "He can deal with her yet."

They sneaked into a nearby street, and Haroun pointed to a stable. "Be quick. The Arshamur will know where to find us, if they could."

The horses stirred, then neighed. Haroun and the rest mounted on their horses. One of them took the hostage in the other horse. "Follow me!" He spurred his horse, and went to one of the streets.

They were soon outside the city, when they heard cries from behind them. Abgarus turned, and saw three Arshamur warriors pursuing them. One was stringing his bow at Haroun. The arrow missed, but scared Haroun's horse, who began to stumble. "Haroun!" Abgarus turned his horse round and charged at the three attackers. He raised his sword and forced down one of his opponents, then slashed the sword at another. The archer strung his bow again and aimed at Abgarus. Though at close quarters the

Nabatean was forced to move his entire body right, to barely avoid the missile. He raised his sword at the Arshamur archer but the swords of the others blocked it.

“Let’s go!” The Arab looked back at the others, took a last parry at the attackers, and then turned his horse around again. The horse reared up, then charged forward to the others. The Arshamur archer strung his bow and aimed for the horse’s legs. The arrow hit the ground, inches from the horse. “Come on!” Abgarus shouted, and the beast forced itself on. Another arrow grazed the horse’s side. He turned, threw his sword towards his attackers. The sword flew in the midst of the Arshamur, then slashed haphazardly at the archer’s shoulder. The blow was enough to send him spinning down across the sands.

Abgarus joined the rest of the group as the two Arshamur warriors continued after them, the city almost a dot now, the signs of dawn emerging. He and Haroun turned round and faced the two remaining attackers, and drew their swords. Though eventually the rest of the company fought the Arshamur, it was as if the two “shadow servants” could not even be wounded.

Finally, one of the swords shattered in the hands of the attacker, and the fragments showered at all. Haroun felt a fragment hit his left eye and in rage hacked his sword at the center of an Arshamur’s forehead. “The Desert take you!” Spittle flying, blood flowing freely from the wounded eye, his blade continued to attack the last Arshamur, his horse trotting to the beat of his master’s attacks. “You cretin! You have taken my good eye! For that I will take your life!” His sword hit flesh, then hit again, and again, and again, and he fell as his hit drove the enemy from his horse.

Only when he realized that he was hacking at a corpse did he finally stop.