

*I shall never open that door again
I do not want to and cannot.
It was slammed against my will
And barred me from the only future I had longed for.
From now on, the dawn always bloodstained, always sorrowful,
And the sun is the messenger of suffering.
So let it stay there, on the other side,
For I shall never long to see it again.
Even if it stood still in the middle of the sky
And begged for a single moment of my attention,
I shall not even look its way.
Darkness is my destiny.
Let it take my hand,
Let it put me to sleep in the cool and silence,
Separate me from the days much too long and so lonely,
Stop my thoughts from rushing to what can never happen
So let there be darkness, dense and infinite.
I feel good in its embrace.*

The Day When Canaan Fell

1. The Pearl

2. The Qedesha

3. The Chosen

Rafał Kosowski

**THE
QEDESHA**



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1 *The Soldiers of Fortune*

*With no land and country today
The conquerors of the world tomorrow*

THERE was not even a slightest puff of breeze to cool the thick, hot air. The desert, sunken in the silence of late afternoon was preparing for the evening rest, so the trembling of the ground was felt very distinctly. The tremor was increasing, obtrusive and gloomy like the rumbling of a thousand blacksmiths' hammers. At last, a squadron of chariots emerged from behind a half-a-mile wide hill and rolled over the hill's edge. The vehicles were moving in a loose formation, not too fast, stretched like the pincers of an enormous scorpion. Their lightness seemed to mock the sleepy climate of the surroundings, like the horses proceeded in a royal parade instead of struggling with the thick and hot sand of the desert. Right after them ran the infantrymen, an entire company. They were like the scorpion's abdomen armed with the sting. Their shields moved rhythmically, like the oars on the royal galley, the striped kerchiefs that covered the heads from the heat whirred like banners. The spearheads hopped, as if waiting for an opportunity to penetrate the enemies' bodies. The scorpion was ready and impatient. The prey had been eluding it for much too long.

Only one element clearly didn't match the war-like character of the detachment. Three inelegant freight carts, heavy and crude, with perpendicular sides made of wooden planks, drawn by two pairs of horses each, were eyesores against the graceful chariots. Except the drivers they carried heavily armed crews to deter any would-be assailants.

The grim-faced soldiers sat two on each side, ready to fend off the attack if the escort somehow failed to do their job.

The commander noticed the scouts only after the half a dozen men emerged from behind a low dune. He raised his right hand and then his detachment stopped. The horses, thrown out of balance with the sudden stopover snorted angrily, they threw their heads, stamped the hooves and raised small clouds of smoke.

The ebony-black scouts stood motionless, like embedded in the sand, and only the whites of their eyes moved as they observed the Egyptians. The short spears and shields were fastened on their backs. At such tasks they didn't help much. Their main weapon was the knowledge of the desert trails and their almost superhuman stamina. The leader was taller than the others by the head and slim, but his finely sculpted muscles moved gracefully under his skin. It was hard to guess his age, like with almost all the inhabitants of the Black Land. Egyptians couldn't mask the signs of the old age approaching even with heavy makeup.

With an enigmatic smile on his lips, the scout walked up confidently to the first of the chariots and bowed lightly as he greeted Captain Fensu-An, who was just jumping down from the cart. Even with his feet on the ground he towered over the others. The helmet made of crocodile skin painted black mingled into one with the finely dressed hair and it additionally enlarged the captain's tallness. The armor made of lithorax, a very hard-wearing material produced from a few layers of linen sewn together and soaked with resin and covered with bronze scales shielded the copper-colored big chest and arms. But despite the strength and power emanating from the captain, he couldn't mask uncertainty lurking in his eyes.

The Egyptian driver was scrutinizing him with his squinted eyes. Every now and then, the eyes of the adjutant standing on the platform of the next chariot jumped from the scouts standing on the hill to their leader. In the officers' gazes there was soldier's professional suspiciousness towards the strangers. They didn't trust the people

from the tribe of the Massi-Kufa, which name meant the species of a dangerous and deceitful snake. The scouts pronounced that name like they shared the common language with the reptile.

The captain's tense face showed that he felt the same as his people. Though in the pharaoh's army there served many mercenaries from Nubia and Kush, and without them Egypt wouldn't have been able to win so many spectacular triumphs, no one doubted that, still the desert hunters seemed to belong not just to a different nation but to a different species, and it was never certain whose side they were on. Their attitude and glistening eyes seemed to be saying that they served the only true queen: the Desert, and even at the service of Egypt they would always remain faithful to her majesty only.

The soldiers would feel much better if the scouts were Egyptians, but only the sons of this and other few tribes were able to run all day long and find what they were looking for. And the task they had been hired to accomplish demanded nothing but that—fast and discreet exchange of information over great distances. Bemzi, that was the leader's name, had many a time done great favors to the captain. His information was always precise and timely. For someone responsible for maintaining the peace and order on the eastern frontier—where despite the pharaohs' domination there crossed and mingled influences and cultures of multiple minor and major nations—updated and precise knowledge about their actions and intentions was worth gold.

“Are they there yet?” the captain asked shortly, trying to guess the answer from the man's eyes before the first words were spoken.

“Yes, great Fensu-An” answered the scout in a broken Egyptian. “Even tonight the Sašu go to the trail.”

The captain winced in disgust. Sašu... Who were they? Numerous tales going round the frontier painted a grim, sickening picture. Those desert robbers seemed to be like half hyenas, half demons rather than people, and their wild faces and screams had aroused terror among

caravans travelling along the northern highway. Recently, even the soldiers began to lose their morale due to the feats of the bands. The robbers proved to be finely trained and almost uncatchable, and when it came to combat, they fought fiercely, like the best of the veterans in the armies of the pharaoh. Reports of more and more numerous incidents finally started to be noticed from the king's palace. Sašu, despite their little numbers posed a serious problem. Apparently, troubling convoys didn't satisfy them anymore and for a few months it had been necessary to send stronger and stronger detachments to protect the hamlets and towns near the frontier. But an attack was always launched at their advantage. They perfectly used the situation. The reports of very few surviving eye witnesses spread instantly over the eastern borders, fed by fear and vivid imagination. Sometimes a war didn't carry so much panic as the rumors of the Sašu and their chief called the "Wolf", who directly commanded almost each action and had already gained fame that many of the pharaoh's officers could only dream about.

"Are they suspecting something?" The Egyptian's voice trembled slightly. He still wasn't sure whether his plan would work. It would all be decided in the hours to come.

"No, greed bends their minds" the black man smiled mischievously. "They want gold much. My people watching... When things change, we tell you right away, dignified captain."

"Perfect." Fensu-An was slowly beginning to relax. His movements again showed decisiveness and his eyes shone like he'd already seen the victorious outcome. "Spy on the Sašu. We are arriving at the trail at dawn. You've done well, Bemzi. Move now."

The black man joined the others, then they all disappeared among the dunes as suddenly as they'd arrived. Only the traces in the sand disappearing towards the east testified of their recent presence. The captain didn't devote much attention to them anymore.

"We are moving to Esjon-Geber" he addressed his adjutant. "We'll organize a camp in Arabah, two miles outside

the city. You move quickly and tell the leaders of the squadrons and the bearers of the banners that I want to meet them right there. But their detachments must remain hidden on the other side and wait in full readiness, right according to the plan.”

And the plan was simple. The Sašu were supposed to find out that a rich convoy is travelling to Damascus along the King’s Tract. And by what Bemzi had said, the tidings had already reached their ears and evoked the right reaction. But that was a trap, as the convoy carried nothing precious. After getting to the territory controlled by the bands, the freight carts were supposed to just look like they were heavily loaded and tightly guarded just to attract attention. The escort was very strong, fifty chariots and two hundred infantrymen, which made the stratagem credible but couldn’t deter the assailants. Their forces were estimated at half a thousand swords so they could feel tempted to launch an effective attack and snatch the load. The Sašu scouts were surely informed of the detachment’s movements west of the Arabah lowland but they couldn’t possibly know that just before the last whole of the Moon Fensu-An had also deployed forces in the east, near the highway to Tema, a locality near Tell Al Amarna but across the gulf. Another three squadrons of chariots and two companies of infantry were just arriving at the place of the encounter. So far they must have been unnoticed, as the desert robbers had decided to attack.

“This time you won’t escape, Wolf.” The captain still remembered the slim silhouette of the robbers’ chief disappearing behind the horizon together with the others, before his detachment had managed to rescue the attacked ones.

*

After the exceptionally warm, spring day, no one expected the night to be so chilly. Even predators remained in their hideaways, at least the four-legged ones. The whites of someone’s eyes shone in the darkness. Bemzi walked silently. He knew that when the men arrived, they’d be

equally soundless. He felt the arrival of his principals with the perfectly trained sixth sense even before the ear had caught the silent rustle of the feet on the sand. Soon, in the pale light of the crescent moon he saw their vague silhouettes. A man walked out from behind a rock. Dark robes and a kerchief covering the face made him almost invisible. Soon, two other shadows appeared behind him.

“Very late you are” Bemzi growled in the language resembling some Canaanite dialect. He was able to communicate in a few languages but never cared for accuracy. He got by relatively effective communication. The newcomers didn’t answer. His annoyance didn’t impress them whatsoever. As they arrived late, they must have had reasons for that and they had no intention of explaining them to anyone.

They were standing like sculptures, tall, seemingly indifferent, though any other man would have his nerves tense to the limit. Their self-confidence appeased the scout. He turned around and moved the direction from which he’d come. The Khetu followed him in total silence. Having done a few hundred steps the scout stopped.

“The strangers are behind the hill.”

“Are they suspecting something?”

“No, Wolf, but they distrust. They looked bad at us. They afraid.”

“Good, Bemzi. Take your men and follow us. You’ll rejoin the Egyptians just before you get on the highway.”

Massi-Kufa looked at the chief respectfully. Eventually he hissed into his clasped hands. His people appeared around like ghosts. Together they followed the soldiers.

*

Six officers turned up in the tent. The atmosphere was thick and the tense faces were the proof how serious the situation had become. Fensu-An was to chair the briefing, his title was ‘Commander of his Majesty’s Chariot Corps’, with four squadrons of chariots under his command and three companies of infantry, he had a thousand warriors under his command.

“The Sašu had taken the bait.” He observed their reactions. “Massi-Kufa had been watching them for a few days and are sure the robbers shall attack tomorrow. They let themselves be deceived that the convoy is carrying precious load. They expect my detachment but know nothing about yours.”

“If the information about the location of their base is to be believed, why are we resorting to the ploy?” asked skeptically the leader of the infantry, who enjoyed the prestigious title of the ‘Standard-bearer’.

“The information is credible” Fensu-An emphasized, “but we must surprise them with full force and precisely. It’s a great area. If we show hesitance, the attack may prove ineffective, and if we don’t manage to destroy them today, tomorrow they’ll be elsewhere. That tactics of yours has proved hellishly effective so far. Surely they’ve been watching us since we left Paran and they know our forces. We may expect strong resistance.”

“Can they outnumber us?” spoke Retep, the leader of the squadron “Bolts”. He took the command over the detachment after captain Mephre went missing the previous summer. For the last months the reputation of the unit had deteriorated a lot, not just due to the change of the leader. During those maneuvers the desert storm killed a lot of soldiers and half of the horses were unfit for combat. The losses were filled out, but to restore the morale and the well-tuned co-operation of the detachment was much more difficult a task. The new commander had long waited for the opportunity to practically test the level of skill and at the same time he knew that any unnecessary risk could bring about the reverse effect. As he guessed from the faces and opinions of the other officers, his worries were not isolated. That mission could have an unfortunate result, which would surely mean the end of the unit.

“Separate bands had no more than a hundred men.” Fensu-An tried to cool down the emotions of his subordinates. “They always appeared in a few places at the same time. Thus we conclude that there are no more than five

hundred of them, out of which less than a hundred are riders. This time we must strike with full force but we shall handle them well. So far they have attacked out of surprise and thus they have won, but in an open battle they shall not stand a chance. We have an opportunity to free the frontiers from that pestilence. The pharaoh himself will learn about this victory. Remember about that during the chase and the battle.”

“Shall we catch the Wolf?” Retep asked. Fensu-An sent him an angry look, He hated that nickname. He’d sometimes heard from his subordinates talk respectfully about the leader of the desert rats like he was a great general. And in reality he was nothing than a hyena, a hyena in the human body, with no integrity or dignity!

“He’s too greedy to let his people do the robbery. He’ll surely arrive. Give the command to set off.”

*

That night a nightmare got him. They were galloping to catch the escaping enemy. They just heard their laughter disappearing behind the dunes. Then, in the back, a few miles away, something hit the sand hard. Something enormous and from a great height. The sound it made was like Sphinx himself threw himself down from a sky-touching rock, got bogged in the ground and cracked up with a rumble. Right after the sound, initially silently like the buzz of beetles, then more forcefully resounded a kind of unearthly whisper or hiss, like a million corpses tried to breathe the air into their punctured lungs, and then they exhaled it slowly, throatily... The sound was coming from another space, from hellish vaults. And it went on increasing, closer and closer. All his soldiers turned back, the scared horses didn’t keep the array, they threw their heads wildly, goggled their eyes. Soon, vision joined the sound: strangely-shaped smudges of sand were darting towards them from afar, they covered the entire horizon. Chamsin wasn’t able to sculpt such forms. Near the ground, in perfect array moved demonic shadows, weaved out of black sand.

All the Egyptian squadrons were running away from that horror, fleeing like crazy, spanning dunes and desert plains like they were just sandpits, and still the living black sand was catching up with the soldiers. The enormous bats were already flashing among the chariots like falcons among quails, they outstripped them, leaving the smudges of black sand, which didn't fall down; it stank, burned, stopped them from breathing.

Then Fensu-An looked to the side. One of the demons was just flying past him. His head, prolonged in the flight, suddenly turned towards him and grinned repulsively as it looked at its prey, then it opened the mouth as big as the gate to the pharaoh's palace, armed with rows of sharp fangs, as long as the pointed obelisks in the Valley of the Kings, and it roared so powerfully that the very force of that roar wiped all the chariots away like they were chaff from the threshing floor.

Then he woke up. And he didn't remember a thing.

*

Bemzi told his men to accelerate. From the opposite direction he saw vague silhouettes of horses and chariots of the Khetu. The figures seemed cut in two by the ribbons of the mirror images of the sky reflected in the humid morning air. It disturbed the observation. When they approached at less than half a mile, Massi-Kuffa could more precisely see how big the detachment was. Graceful chariots drawn by finely-built steeds moved in a perfect array, like at a parade visited by the pharaoh himself. At first sight it was clear that their size and strength outdid the horses used by the Egyptians. They even looked too big for the chariots, which didn't seem to burden them at all. Bemzi was sure that each of the steeds individually would be able to draw a chariot in the battle without much effort. He looked at that with admiration. Although his main assets were scouting and the ability to survive in any desert conditions and he wasn't very knowledgeable in military matters, even that little knowledge allowed him to precisely

predict the outcome of the battle. For he was sure there would be one, he had no illusions as to the final purpose of his task, for which he had been hired for all those long months. The two little armies couldn't just run near each other in the desert like playing puppies.

He hoped that in the lack of more orders he would be able to see it all very well. Soon he noticed the leopard-like silhouette of Murtekh, who led the expedition. He was riding upright, stretched like a string on the platform of a chariot marked with blue and orange. The other vehicles had no embellishments. On the contrary, they looked like each element was made of rocks and sand of the desert. They blended with the background almost perfectly. The welcome was short. The Amalekite never liked to speak too much.

"Are they still keeping the distance?"

"Yes, master. Two miles from here. When they move out of the valley, you'll see clearly. Chariots first, then infantry. They know you're coming."

"I thought they would. They want to take us with one onslaught and then finish us off. You'll be on that dune." He pointed south-west where there was a sand hill high enough to offer a few-mile view from the top. "When something strange happens, like unexpected reinforcement arrive or the infantry try to escape, immediately make a fire. Then one of my men will arrive and you give him the message. After the battle I want to see you all back with me, understood?"

"As you wish" Bemzi replied, glad with the situation. "Listen carefully, dignified lord" he looked at Murtekh with a serious face. "They are hunting for you, they are afraid of your name."

"Fensu-An has reasons to hate me. He's a great commander."

Bemzi reacted to those words with a fearful glimmer in his black eyes.

"Don't be afraid" Murtekh appeased him. "In an hour they'll all be dead. You can go now."

Over the past months the young Amalekite had changed beyond recognition. Blind hatred and love for adventure

over common sense were replaced by responsibility and scrupulous execution of his duties. For he was appointed a leader, and was now able to focus on a task and leave his own ambitions or youthful zeal aside for the sake of a greater cause. Even his face had grown more solemn and the eyes took on the expression worn by experienced warriors and commanders that were able to look beyond the external layer of the problem and see the implications hidden deeper.

When the scouts went the direction he told showed them, Murtekh gave the final orders. The chariots were arranged in a single line at a long distance each. A hundred vehicles took over a mile of space. But they were on a plain large enough to develop a linear array. From each side they could see the line of hills at the distance of a few miles, which surrounded the low of Arabah.

Bemzi looked back for the last time to see the infantry, in the number comparable with the Egyptians, standing in groups of five or six and at the distance similar to the gaps between the chariots. They were armed with powerful composite bows, rather difficult to use in the open space, some held spears, he also saw flingers carrying bags full of stone or lead bullets, able to fracture a horse's skull. He also found it surprising that in each of the subunits he saw just two or three shields, also different from the ones normally used in combat. They were big enough to let a kneeling warrior hide behind them. They were all wearing similar clothes, like they'd just emerged from the sand of the desert, barely visible against its background. He didn't understand a thing. Against chariots, such arrangement of infantry was suicidal. Only tight and deep rows, phalanxes bristled with a fence of spears, like an enormous porcupine, were able to effectively resist a charge of chariots. In the array he just saw, they'd be eliminated within seconds. Confused, he shook his head and went to the hill. He started to wonder how to escape from the area in case the battle had an unfortunate outcome, if Fensu-An realized he was misled. From the top he saw the western horizon start to move. The Egyptians arrived.

Fensu-An was straining his eyes. He didn't have to wait for another report of the scouts. He sensed the presence of the enemy with the instinct trained in numerous battles and expeditions. First he saw the characteristic silhouettes of horses. The predictions proved true. There were about a hundred of them. Probably again they wanted to attack in the same style as before. They would beset the caravan, stop the camels or horses, then infantry horde would arrive and slaughter would begin.

"Not this time" he growled angrily. He swore that personally he would get the leader and with his sword he would wipe that shrewd grin off his mouth. His heart beat faster. Many times before he relived that moment in his thoughts, and lately each night his mind had showed him a thousand variants of the encounter. Soon it would turn out whether the honorable title he was given—'Commander of the Chariot Hosts', that made him the youngest officer of that rank in Nebmaatre's entire army—would prove the final trap and end of his career. When Egypt bestowed with trust and power, it expected results and wasn't very patient. It was due to his idea that Fensu-An had become head of such a strong unit. When he presented the plan enthusiastically during the meeting, even the generals looked at one another meaningfully, openly showing their interest. Then he understood that this recognition would raise him to the heights only if the expedition was successful. When he made a mistake or was unlucky, a month from then no one would remember his face or name.

And now the outcome was drawing near. Once again he looked at his forces. The other squadrons were already in positions. They were moving a little in the rear, enough not to be noticed, but close enough to join the battle immediately. A tremendous sight! The heart grew and ran towards the victory. Though the darkness of the night often made the captain face fear and uncertainty, the sight stretching far behind him and on the sides made him

optimistic. What forces could the bandits present? He felt ashamed that it took as many as two hundred chariots and three companies of infantry to chase human hyenas prowling so far in the desert in an unpunished manner. And would anyone on the pharaoh's court deem it as victory? He already saw the expression of disrespect on the faces of the dignitaries and their wives: Fensu-An—the “tamer of Hyenas”.

Down with the gloomy visions. He had to focus on the task. As soon as the enemy became visible, the matters would go fast and routinely. The robbers would feel the whole force of four squadrons of chariots, the hail of thousands of arrows would arouse panic among them, then infantry would arrive and flank them, cut off their retreat, and before they realized, they'd be slaughtered each and every one of them. Those unlucky survivors would be tied to the chariots and dragged so long as only be bloodied shreds were left on the ropes. Then the real hyenas, jackals and vultures would feast on them. It would happen as a warning, so that no one dared to disturb the frontiers of divine pharaohs' land.

*

He cast the last glance at the surrounding area. Over a space of a few miles the sand was hard and there were no stones on it, just perfect for such a charge. Murtekh ordered the driver to gallop. The others did the same. Months of training hadn't been wasted. There was not a chariot which got near the one next to him by as little as a cubit or moved forward even half of a horse's head. They were like a shadow of an eagle moving across the desert. The Egyptians were barely half a mile from them and were drawing near fast. The Amalekite was wondering what the opponent was thinking now. The commander of the Egyptians surely had no idea that instead of half-savage horde fleeing from him eastwards to the safe border of Edom, he'd see a hundred chariots facing him. He assessed the distance. The Egyptians would enter the zone of an effective shot much later than his men. It

would give them precious time for a risky maneuver, the most important element of the plan.

*

“For Horus!” The captain’s shout made the crews riding nearby look at him surprisingly. “Haptehu, can you see what I see?” The driver shielded his eyes with a hand and jerked nervously.

“I can see chariots. Two squadrons, I guess.” He looked at the captain awaiting some decision. Fensu-An saw the eyes of the other crews. There was no time to think from where the desert robbers had got chariots, they may have hired some of the khazanuti from the mountainous lands of Djahi. But it was impossible, as Canaanite chariots were much bigger and heavier, while he clearly saw the characteristic shapes of the Egyptian combat vehicles. On one of them he saw the characteristic silhouette of the Wolf. He was standing upright, and the wind was streaming his hair, like he was rushing to meet death with joy.

“You’ll find death, that’s for sure” the captain murmured. The horses had already taken full speed and communication became difficult. A short and decisive command was what they needed right now. He soon felt a rush of battle euphoria in his veins. If the enemy wanted a real battle, they’d get it! Fensu-An, despite his age of over thirty, was an experienced commander and knew how to lead his formation.

“Attack” his voice broke through the noise of the hooves. He took a khopesh sword out of his scabbard and with an energetic move he pointed the blade towards the enemy. It worked. The soldiers instinctively took on the trained pose. They stood on their feet stronger, their eyes focused on the silhouettes of the enemy chariots. The hundreds of throats roared with a thunderous battle cry.

*

Murtekh stretched the heavy composite bow. The crews rarely used them, as despite hellish force and long range

they were awkward to use in the small platform of the chariot. They were the most effective in the hands of infantrymen hiding behind fortifications. But now it was just about one single shot. The Egyptian chariots grew in sight. It took him a second to select the target. The arrow darted forward with tremendous force. The enemy couldn't possibly expect a shot from such a distance to be effective. But its momentum was determined by the power of the bowstring and the speed of the horse. Their big horses were able to run like the wind. A few seconds later one of the chariots, in the middle of the array, turned violently and hit the one next to it. The same moment, a hundred strings moaned and the messengers of death darted towards the Egyptians, who were still too far to shoot their arrows effectively. And running against the sun they didn't know what would await them in the seconds to come.

It was time to change the rules. Murtekh whistled loudly. All drivers unanimously reacted to the signal.

*

Fensu-An was confused. First he noticed commotion on his right. He looked around to see what had happened. There must have been an accident.

Control your nerves, for Horus! he thought with annoyance. Such incidents were the last thing they needed now. Soon, from the opposite direction he heard a prolonged whistle, after which the whole line of the chariots swiftly turned left in the full sight of the stunned Egyptian soldiers and then turned back without breaking the array. Immediately they accelerated and disappeared behind the gentle elevation of the terrain.

The arrows were half the distance away.

The captain's thoughts were running frantically. Why did the enemy change the direction? Their actions were unconventional and thus very inconvenient. The Egyptians crews were ready for the encounter, the archers were holding the bows ready, and suddenly they had to begin a chase instead. It was the second surprise that morning.

The soldier's instinct, though muted by fast calculations of possible variants of the tactics, now sent the commander a clear warning.

Then he heard that. Initially silently like the buzz of beetles, then with more force, resounded the kind of unearthly whisper or hiss, like a million corpses tried to breathe the air into their punctured lungs, and then they exhaled it slowly, throatily... How did he remember that?! There was no time to think as the next events made his hair bristle out of terror. As they focused on the enemy's unexpected maneuver, they couldn't possible expect a hundred arrows darting towards them from the direction of the sun. Their power was horrible. With a hiss they penetrated the steed's bodies, threw the soldiers off the platforms, they easily penetrated the scale armors. The Egyptian ranks trembled and swayed like a field of wheat torn with the wind. The hit horses tripped and fell down and undercut the legs of the others. The battle cry, loud like a thunder, now died out like cut with a knife. Soon there resounded the squeal of the horses, snapping of the breaking axels and shafts; the screams of the soldiers crushed with the chariots' wheels made the blood freeze.

Haptehu, Fensu-An's driver, master in his profession, only miraculously avoided a crash with the chariot running on the right. Others weren't so lucky. The captain looked in terror at half of his own chariots being once and for all eliminated from the combat. One look at the squadron going next to them was enough to see deadly harvest too. A great number of vehicles were forced to stop and find free space among the wrecks and the wounded before they could join the others and make up for the distance lost. It all happened before they'd been able to shoot a single arrow at the enemy! Fensu-An knew he had to react somehow, but he could only afford to make a scream, full of anger and fury. The other crews responded duly. The voice of instinct in his head kept sending him the same warning but he couldn't listen to it. Now it wasn't just about freeing the frontiers from the bandits or winning another victory. His pride of a commander had just received a painful blow.

If he didn't revenge that within the next hour, he'd never do it. And then the defeat would be complete. He clenched his jaws and cast a glance at both quivers fastened to the sides. They were full of arrows. One more moment and he'd use them.

*

The dashing chariots of the Khetu approached the infantrymen standing in groups. They rode among them and stopped there. The crews left the unnecessary bows on the platforms and swiftly jumped onto the horses, while the infantrymen quickly cut the harness off. Having freed the horses, they arranged the chariots towards the Egyptians so that the endings of the shafts made a straight line. Murtekh embraced that with one look and they all dashed east, still hidden from the enemy's sight thanks to the shape of the terrain. The sandy dunes were gently sloping down and a mile further on they rose before the range of short rocky hills that divided the desert of Paran east of Sinai from the lowland of Arabah that ran towards the Dead Sea. At a further distance there towered the rocks of Edom.

Having ridden half a mile, the detachment split. In-Kathenu led the other hundred of the riders.

"It's all or nothing now. There's no turning back!" Murtekh shouted at his soldiers and raised his hand in a salutation. "Remember, we spare no one!"

They accelerated. They had to arrive exactly at the time when the Egyptians would be engaged in combat.

*

"Chariots here?!" Retep didn't hide his astonishment. Quarter a mile away there was a line of the abandoned chariots, At least that's what it looked like. The silhouettes of the enemy horses were already getting smaller half a mile further away from there. Again there was no time to think.

“They’re escaping on horseback!” Fensu-An yelled, trying to find the Wolf. “Onwards, or they’ll escape. Don’t stop the charge.” He was trying to shout louder than the rattle of the wheels and the horses galloping. His head exploded with one question: “What are they planning?” They may have understood that the confrontation with Egyptian chariots would cost them a defeat. It crossed his mind that the Sašu had known about everything and now they are pulling them into a trap. The Wolf was a predator! He managed to chase the thoughts away. They brought too much of the unknown.

“We’re riding past them!” he shouted at the driver, praying that the other crews understood his intentions. The situation was changing quickly, but such maneuvers weren’t anything difficult for him. In a classic encounter the groups of chariots charging at each other often dashed past each other, and all the time the archers kept shooting arrows at the enemy, whether at a charge or when turning round. That was much more difficult than just riding past empty carts. The captain again threw his right hand onwards. The other commanders of the squadrons did the same. If they wanted to ride around the whole line, they’d waste precious time. Only two squadrons running on the sides of the array had mostly free space ahead—the “Bolts”, which seemed to be lucky now, and the “Claws”. They both had suffered hardly any losses at the first salvo. They’d lost no momentum and caught up with the first line. Fensu-An’s squadron, or rather what was left of it, and the other unit riding in the middle had to maneuver among the abandoned vehicles but there was no other way. A different maneuver might cause unimaginable commotion.

A hundred more steps and they’d cross the line. He held the sides of the chariot, in case they hung about the obstacle despite Hatephu’s skill. He lowered the bow. He’d use it later on.

Three more seconds and they’d get to the other side.

And again everything happened too fast to take it all in and arrange in a logical picture. At the last moment they saw the embodiment of a nightmare. Behind every

one of the chariots warriors were hiding. Only now was it possible to see them, for they were so well masked by the camouflage clothes and hidden behind the chariots. A few were protected by enormous shields, only helmets stuck out above them. The Egyptian's heart went to his throat. He felt like he was paddling his canoe towards the edge of a thousand-cubit high waterfall. What a devilish plan! He hardly kept from screaming. Despite the fright, together with the other soldiers he took his position. Like one man, they all made the trained movements. One! Bows up. Two! Arrows on the Springs. Three!...

“For Horus” he drawled as he let the arrow fly. “Shoot!”

The strings moaned and swished. The arrows snapped against the shields, penetrated the sides of the chariots, some hit the enemy. Dashing passed the vehicles the captain begged the gods for one more salvo. In vain. They'd lost the decisive moment. The Khetu had steel nerves and obeyed the orders strictly. They let all the vehicles through, and when the Egyptian archers pulled the bows after the mad maneuver, the Khetu infantrymen gushed at them with whatever they held in their hands. From a distance of barely dozen steps the lead bullets of the slingers, arrows and spears massacred most of the crews over the line of the charge. The rushing horses got out of control but kept galloping, chased by inhuman cries of the dying soldiers. A lot of soldiers got entangled in the harness and were dragged along behind the chariots. Fensu-An felt an arrow swish past his ear, the same moment a led bullet knocked the bow out of his hand. Behind him he heard the sound of a skull breaking into pieces. Driven by just adrenaline, somehow he managed to pull the reins from the dead soldier's hands and bent down in fear of another salvo he kept riding away as far from the hellish trap as possible. Over the battlefield silence fell once again.

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Murtekh observed the situation in the middle of the field. Little would change there, he thought. Few surviving

chariots were running helter-skelter around looking for the enemy. A lot of them rode without crews. The frightened horses stopped or ran east.

The Egyptian infantrymen were still standing in array a few hundred meters away. When they had realized the fate of the chariots, they'd surely try to get away. Bemzi still hadn't given any sign. Time was running out.

He assessed the headcount of the enemy. He knew that the Khetu riders running fast towards both the flanks would encounter not more than forty chariots. The others went through the field of death in the middle and were destroyed or heavily damaged.

He had to even out the forces. In the real battle there would be great numbers of the enemy and this test had to give him more answers he needed. He left half of the riders in reserve.

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Some force made him look left, where at a distance of an arrow's shoot he noticed the object of his fury and professional hatred. The Wolf surrounded by about a dozen of riders was observing the battlefield, giving orders and lively commenting the soldiers' actions.

He had to get the man. There would be no other chance! Within the radius of two hundred steps six chariots were moving helter-skelter, but he saw some more of them nearby. What they lacked were complete crews. The confused soldiers tried to get their weapons out of the wreckage.

A dozen chariots weren't much but they had to suffice. At his shout the soldiers got themselves organized and manned the platforms. Fensu-An shouted at a soldier with a bow, who was running towards an upset chariot. He was hobbling in one leg but besides that he looked alright.

"Can you drive?!" he shouted towards him, when another salvo of the infantrymen came swishing towards them. The soldier made it to the captain's chariot, bent down all the way, and swiftly grabbed the reins.

“What are the orders, dignified Fensu-An?” They all looked at him with expectation in their eyes.

“Form the array. We’ll get the bastards.” He stretched his arm towards the group of riders around the commander, who was pointing at some place on the left flank. “We’re approaching in teams of two, after the first shot we outflank them. We must improvise. Do what I do. The longer they don’t see us, the better. Shoot at the horses.”

The soldiers still failed to notice them, busy with talking to the commander. The commotion was at their advantage. Fensu-An was riding on the left, and right behind him there ran the other six teams. Hard sand appeared under the hooves, it muffled the rattle of the horses. A hundred steps from the target both archers from the first team shot their arrows and immediately split to opened the range for the others. The next two did the same a moment later. The group of the riders whirled. At least three of them, slid down from the horses with painful moans, one of the steeds squeaked sharply when an arrowhead pierced his neck. The arrows hit another three horses, though the riders managed to keep mounted. The Wolf looked furiously at the attackers, but the captain was astonished with the speed of his reaction.

Despite the surprise, the commander of the Sašu immediately raised his shield and turned the horse towards the attackers, while the other ten did the same. The Wolf bent in the saddle, almost touching the horse’s head. He held the shield flatly, to minimize the air resistance. His men often changed the direction to make the shooting difficult for the Egyptians, while they reached for the javelins. A chariot was a much easier target. Two animals joined by the shaft, two soldiers in a small platform... The riders took upright positions, rested on the stirrups and threw their javelins. The crews in the third and fourth team crashed a moment later, almost stopping the others.

A few dozen steps before they clashed Fensu-An saw another rider lowering his shield and reaching for the javelin. He made a perfect shot. The arrow scuffed the mane of the bay horse and hit the soldier in the armor.

But the head slipped over the curve and flew to the side. The Egyptian cast a swearword. Two more seconds and they'd pass by each other. He sent another arrow, aiming high. It passed over the shield and this time it pierced the rider's head where the nose joined the forehead. The man fell heavily onto the sand.

The two units clashed with a rumble. In the captain's eyes everything mingled into one smudge. Only the swish, moaning and his own imagination told him what was happening during the fight. The riders to the maximum took an advantage of the Egyptian's dead zone that disabled them from shooting. They didn't even try to attack the archers protected by the shields. Murtekh swung his long sword and ripped the horse's throat open like it was a ripe melon on a stick on the training ground. The vehicle running in the second row opposite Fensu-An made a semi-circle and stopped in a smoke of dust.

The other soldiers followed the commander's example. The pitiful gurgle and squeak of the animals being butchered broke through the noise of the fight. Two drivers turned abruptly, avoiding the blade by an inch. But it wasn't enough. The rider on the outside was just waiting for such an opportunity. He slowed down immediately and flung himself towards the chariot. The crew was busy keeping balance at the tight turn and the long blade fell upon the driver's neck before the shield had covered him. The chariot got out of control and the Khetu eliminated the other soldier with two blows.

The first part of the clash brought losses to both sides but the Egyptians lost more men. Both detachments moved away from each other, then, without losing their speed, they returned. Their forces were too small to organize any array and the fury took over the tactics. The fight turned into a series of duels. The drivers had their eyes around the heads. They were driving while covering the archer or themselves with the shields, depending on who needed that.

In an act of desperation, one of the chariots hit the Khetu steed with all its momentum. The rider didn't manage to

avoid it. The horse fell to the side with a wild squeal and pulled the rider underneath. The two Egyptian horses were bewildered. One of them was shaking its head all over after the concussion.

The Khetu hit the ground with the horrible sound of the leg and shoulder bones being crushed. The archer from the chariot was held by the safety straps but the driver got hurled out with the force of inertia and flew forward hitting the shaft. He got up with a shattered nose and with the sword in his hand furiously flung himself at the wounded Khetu, who was trying to free himself from under the steed. The Egyptian, blinded with his suffering and thirst for the enemy blood ignored the agonizing animal. It was a mistake. The horse kicked suddenly and crushed his hip. The wounded soldier howled inhumanly and slumped to the ground.

Nearby, two Khetu were catching up with a lonely vehicle. One of the riders was just taking a swing with a javelin, but an Egyptian arrow shot from a distance of a few steps hit his shield so hard that the man lost balance and the weapon fell out of his hand. The other rider got the enemy and attacked the driver. The man defended himself with the shield and so uncovered his comrade. Then the Khetu used his sword. The blade cut the bow and the neck of the Egyptian archer.

The captain managed to see two chariots rushing towards each other. They were running with great velocity but because of two Khetu horses standing between them the drivers couldn't possibly see each other. The riders between the chariots froze as they looked the danger in the eye, like convicts getting ready for the executor's axe. They only watched out for the arrows coming from both directions, which almost touched them. They didn't mind what target they hit. First they eliminated the driver of one of the opposite crews, a moment later they hit the horse of the other vehicle. The animal didn't slow down or fall, but it accelerated in the frenzy of pain, forcing the other animal to make even a greater effort. Suddenly, the Khetu ran sideways the opposite directions, while the two chariots

turned the same direction and despite the desperate efforts of the crews they hit each other with a tremendous force. The animals, vehicles and crews mingled into a bloody mass of tangled leather and muscles, straps and wood.

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Fensu-An was mad with rage, but he noticed the Wolf, who was staying away from the fight and was only watching. The red mist of fury covered the captain's vision. He shouted at the crew riding past him and they both attacked the lone commander. The Amalekite's attention was grabbed by a duel on the right. A young Khetu, with an original plume of hair protruding from his head, one of the best in his detachment, dashed straight towards the chariot coming from the opposite direction. In the last moment the Egyptians turned to avoid the crash. The Khetu horse, picked up by a sharp pull of the bit made a hazardous jump and with its hooves it rammed the soldiers, who were crouching in fear. The chariot got knocked over.

"He made it!" Murtekh shouted in excitement. "The damned kid! He rammed the chariot!" The young warrior named Tamur had often showed off in front of the commander with his skill, but Murtekh had never thought he'd be able to achieve this feat in real combat. He was wrong. The maneuver proved feasible.

Tamur turned the horse back. The commander saw an arrow protruding from the soldier's thigh. The blood dyed the saddle and dripped onto the mare's skin, but the youth seemingly didn't care about that. He raised the sword to finish the fight. That very moment, a small combat axe flung towards him like a lightning from the upset chariot. Murtekh held his breath, but Tamur bent down and dodged the blow, and next moment his blade flashed twice and each time the response was a cry of the dying man. Fensu-An watched that scene for a moment, feeling his heart filling with cold hatred. He looked at the weapon fastened to the side of the chariot. He picked the axe, same as the one that had missed the target a moment before.

“Kill the horse” he shouted at the archer riding next to him. “Leave the Wolf for me.”

Murtekh only now saw the captain. The sight of the tandem charging at him made his heart quicken. They were too close for him to do anything. He couldn't attack or run. Each of his movements was perfectly visible. The archer on one of the chariots was already taking aim at him, while the other one was waiting in readiness, holding a small axe in his hand.

“Don't let me down, Qadim” he whispered to her ear. The mare saw the arrow flying at them and even without his reaction she instinctively darted to the side.

“Now” he cried out in his own language like he'd been hit, at the same time he violently pulled the reins and hit the sides of the horse hard with his heels. He also had his tricks. Qadim perfectly understood those seemingly contradictory commands.

The horse fell to the left, giving the rider enough time to free his leg. The other arrow passed high above them. Murtekh lay still at Qadim's side with his hand on the hilt of the sword, which was still in the sheath. He watched the opponents carefully from behind semi-closed eyelids, concentrated and ready for action. Everything happened like he'd foreseen. The chariot from which both shots came was approaching to him at full speed, while the other one was slowing down. They wanted to check if he was still breathing, and if it was so, the men from the other chariot would take good care of him. When the speeding vehicle was a few steps away, Murtekh tumbled over to the other side of its track, taking their attention from Qadim, which was still lying motionless. The driver reacted correctly, but he was short by two inches, and the archer was completely unprepared, Murtekh jumped from the bent knees like on springs, jerked the sword out of the sheath, and with sadness in his heart he cut the Egyptian horse above the knees, then he jumped back to dodge the chariot turning abruptly.

It took him a short while to assess the situation. Still in a bent position he flung himself at the driver that had

fallen out of the chariot while still holding the reins. With one cut Murtekh took his life away and then he finished off the miserable animal, which was kicking about in agony and bleeding profusely from the cut limbs. He didn't pay attention to the archer. He'd stood no chance as he hit the ground. What was still dangerous was the other chariot.

With cold determination, Fensu-An told the driver to stop at a distance of a dozen steps away from Murtekh. He raised the axe as he eyed him up and down hatefully. He didn't care about the fame of the agile opponent, all he wanted was revenge. He took a fast swing. From that distance he couldn't possibly miss him. He didn't. The axe went dashing straight at the Wolfe's chest and even the silvery armor couldn't protect him. Murtekh held his breath, put all his strength and agility in that one desperate fender and deflected the deadly edge. The blow reverberated painfully from the elbow all the way down to the wrist but he dodged the hit. The whirring handle fell at his feet, while the edge, cut at the base, struck a bunch of sparks on a nearby stone.

Fensu-An was already reaching to get the bow, when he heard a horse's rattle. He wasted no time as he stretched the bowstring. But he was late by a split of a second. A hunter's knife thrown by Tamur got lodged between the left shoulder blade and the collar bone. The captain let go of the bow and with the healthy hand grabbed the side of the chariot. A strange chill started embracing all his left side. His knees grew soft and he slumped onto the floor in the sitting position. Like in slow motion he saw a young daredevil with a fancy hairstyle jump off the horse and bend to get the javelin. Murtekh walked up closer to the Egyptian, watching him carefully.

"Captain Fensu-An, I presume" he shouted in Egyptian. "The hunt for a wolf hasn't been fortunate."

"Robbers will be robbers, even if they put on armors and mount steeds." The Egyptian put the remnants of his pride in his words.

"Don't call us robbers, officer. The bigger your infamy!" Tamur shouted and stopped the horse and then looked at Murtekh.

“You did very well” the Amalekite smiled. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it. I didn’t think that it was possible to deflect off that damned swishing axe so slickly. In sword fighting you’re fast as a demon, chief. You must teach me that.”

“You’ve deserved a promotion anyway.”

Fensu-An had an impression that he was being ignored. “Sooner or later they’ll throw you to the crocodiles’ pool” he panted, grimacing with pain. He found breathing more and more difficult. “No one will mock the divine pharaoh.”

“Your pharaoh will die soon. Just like you now” Murtekh said. Tamur clenched his hand on the javelin. “Your gods cannot change the destiny.”

Suddenly, the Egyptian’s vision was obscured by the demon’s open mouth, the sharp fangs were dripping with venom.

The Wolf gestured at Tamur to let him finish it off. The javelin hit like a bolt and stapled the captain to the side of the chariot. As he was dying, he saw the silhouettes of the riders dashing towards his infantrymen. The battle was still raging when the Sašu began tidying up the field. They checked each lying man, they methodically finished the wounded off, then raised their bodies and loaded them onto the chariots. They picked up each broken javelin, each arrow, they sprinkled the traces with a thick layer of sand. They got rid of any traces of the fight. High above there resounded angry twitter of the winged scavengers. The captain realized that there would be less than nothing left of his detachment. Their passage into non-existence would be utter.

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The destruction of the infantry proved easier than they presumed. First the riders clashed with the formation of the pherer, the infantry warriors armed in light shields and spears. They were the second line of attack. Their task was to finish off all the crews of the defeated enemy chariots. At the sight of the riders, two hundred dispersed

peherer tried to gather in bigger groups but they got slain in a dozen seconds.

The infantrymen already knew they were left alone. That time there were no kenyt-nesu with them, who would have stood a chance of standing on their feet for more than five minutes before they'd be eliminated.

Despite the desperate situation, the soldiers duly formed defensive rectangular units and stuck the spears out. Only their frightened eyes glistened from behind that palisade. The riders were running like the wind, brandishing their bloodied swords. Easily they jumped over the spears and fell into the middle of the formation like wolves into a herd of sheep, they crushed them with the very weight of the horses, minced them with the long blades... within less than a minute the infantrymen didn't stand the pressure and got scattered. Instantly they were surrounded and slain.

The Khetu losses were few. In all the attack no more than fifty had got killed, half of which were the infantrymen, while a thousand soldiers, the entire Egyptian hose had been eliminated within half an hour.

The Khetu deployed a mere tenth of their cavalry forces to fight the battle. In a year they'd increase them by a half. In the alliance with Bashan they'd be able to face any army of the world. Then they'd attack.

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Every now and then Hetammu discretely observed the man standing next to him. The hill offered a perfect panorama of the whole battle from the very beginning to the victorious end. And the guest found that end immensely impressive. He kept silent, but despite his self-control, the expression of his eyes and the faster breath were very telling.

The magus exchanged a glance with Hetammu and then he addressed the Chivvite with a seemingly cool tone.

"Dignified Mahkulpe, what advice, then, shall you give to Jabin the Great, the king of Hazor?"

Jabin's court advisor had to find proper words, which happened to him very rarely. Once again his eyes swept

the battlefield. Even the tidying up of the bodies was going as smoothly as they'd been training that for months. If all the army could boast such discipline and combat efficiency, was there anything impossible for them? The last hour had completely changed the negative attitude he had when he'd arrived south and which he hadn't even tried to mask when talking to Gemre and Ullisukmi. As the most trusted and experienced advisor of his lord, whose favor the representatives of Djahi had been trying to win for months, he could afford to be skeptical, moreover, he simply had to be guided by skepticism. Jabin would not risk an uncertain alliance, if Mahkupe decided that the venture could be harmful, and that's how he'd perceived it ever since the messengers of the south had arrived at the capital of Retenu and started talks. During that visit his opinions couldn't be changed by either reassuring statements by the king or the priest, while the plans, forecasts and analyses of the political situation in the region they'd presented had only evoked a polite and smile of pity he'd felt. And then he arrived at that a sandy hill, just to see completely unknown military units utterly destroy Egyptian elitist frontier squadrons. And then he trembled and found himself utterly amazed over his own lack of insight. Before he was too confident of his own reasons to listen to the representatives of Djahi soberly and without any prejudices . Now he had to swallow his pride and recognize the south to be a worthy partner for Retenu.

“King Jabin shall hear the report of your victory and shall show his favor towards the plans you have graciously presented to me.” He was looking straight into the magus' eyes in a manner so much different compared to that from an hour ago. “The King's venerable Daughter, Lady of the Eternal Sources Huldah, Sister of the Dawn, Hulet-At, with joy and pride shall offer you her hand to your king, venerable Gemre. I shall present this matter in detail and in all its profoundness. Tell King Gemre that even during this year's Spring Festival, Jabin with his daughter and all the entourage of his dignitaries shall come to the City of the Book for the wedding of the royal couple.”

“You have made a wise decision, dignified Mahkulpe” Ullisukmi said. “Let wisdom speak through your words like it is speaking this very moment. You shall always enjoy our favor. Before your departure I want to invite you to Kiriath-Sepher for a feast. King Gemre shall be overjoyed to hear the words of favor and friendship from your lips, with which—thanks to your wise advice and through the medium of your good self—King Jabin bestows on Djahi.”

“Let it be so, dignified priest Ullisukmi.”

The echo of the wind moaning was heard in the distance and the sky over the southern horizon began to be obscured by a grey veil of sand. The desert wind was coming. The men looked that direction.

“Here’s Chamsin” Ullisukmi said, like he was announcing the coming of a messenger. “Soon this place will change beyond recognition.”

“The sand will cover the remaining traces” Hetammu turned towards the path downhill. “I’ll go to urge the detachments so that the storm doesn’t get us.”