The Curse of Ammon

Jay Penner

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##### To my readers, for the faith and support. I am eternally grateful.

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# CONVENTIONS

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The names largely follow Greek convention. In specific circumstances, I have used *(Old Persian and Egyptian names.)*

**PERSIANS**

Cambyses (*Khambujia)*—King of Kings, *Shahanshah* of Persia

Aberis (*Abrahasa)*—Nobleman in Cambyses’ court

Eribaeus—Greek Nobleman in service of Cambyses

Ritapates (*Ritapata)*—Advisor to Aberis

Babak—Advisor in Cambyses’ court

**EGYPTIANS**

Psamtik—Pharaoh of Egypt

Jabari—Advisor to Cambyses

Petubastis (the 3rd)—Pharaoh in Exile

Amunperre—Chief Priest of the Oracle of Ammon

# LOCATIONS

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Locations and *modern equivalents*. All are in modern Egypt.

Memphis—*Mit Rahina*

Thebes—*Luxor*

Aostris—*Kharga*

Horosis—*Dakhla*

Farrasis—*Farafra*

Ammon—*Siwa*

At the end of this book, in the notes section, you will find a link to a Google maps flyby that will take you to many of the locations in this book. It’s a must for history enthusiasts, give it a try!

# WATER AND THE DESERT

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Scientists estimate that an adult can survive for 3 to 5 days without water under moderate, unsupervised conditions—though some may last longer and others less. However, one would become incapacitated long before death. Adults need about 3 to 4 liters of water per day for healthy functioning under normal circumstances. Dehydration manifests in thirst, nausea, dry skin, headaches, cramps, lethargy, confusion, fever, and eventually coma and death due to organ failure. Documented cases exist of individuals dying within hours when lost in a desert under hot conditions without adequate water.

An army of fifty thousand planning for, say, a twenty-day trek through a desert would have to ensure the availability of at least **1.1 million gallons, or 4,000 tons of water**. This figure excludes the necessities of food, protection, and soldiers’ belongings. One can only imagine the immense and incredible undertaking of moving an army of fifty thousand through a hostile desert.

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“…That the Persians set forth from Oasis across the sand, and had reached about half way between that place and themselves when, as they were at their midday meal, a wind arose from the south, strong and deadly, bringing with it vast columns of whirling sand, which entirely covered up the troops and caused them wholly to disappear. Thus, according to the Ammonians, did it fare with this army.”

#### Herodotus, 440 B.C.

#### The Histories by Herodotus.

#### Translated by George Rawlinson

# PROLOGUE

## ESHANNA, 527 B.C.

### BABAK

##### 

Babak sat in his courtyard, drinking a strong herbal brew—water, salt, honey, and rose extract—that his wife had made. It rejuvenated him for the drudgery of the day: dealing with complainants, mediating disputes, auditing tax records, writing property deeds, managing requests for the governor and king, overseeing the town budget, adjudicating criminal mischief, taking stock of town granaries, and supervising military assignments. His duties as Eshanna’s administrator were many. The elders of the town appointed his position, which the governor ratified.

Babak had served as the administrator for the last ten years, widely respected for his acumen, cunning, and fairness. He had proved himself on the battlefield for The King of Kings Cyrus and had retired after an injury. He was proud of his job, protecting his town from the whims of the Royal Court and the greed of the governors.

“Where are the boys?” he asked his wife.

His two sons were ten and twelve. His lovely wife had borne him two boys of whom he was immensely proud. He hoped that one day they would grow to be magnificent warriors. They were the light of his life. While he loved his daughter as well, she would soon be gone as someone’s wife—hopefully to a good man. But his legacy would live on with his sons.

“Out in the northwest grain fields, helping their uncle,” Roxana said, wiping her lustrous black hair away from her forehead as she squatted by the fire pit, boiling grain. He watched her affectionately. She had grown older, of course, having given him three children, yet she still carried that gentle beauty and dignity. He remembered her in the initial days of their courtship—thin, with honey-smooth skin, dark and pretty eyes that shone, and curly hair that fell to her waist. She had a heart-skipping smile, which brought fond memories. *How shy she was!*

It took Babak a while to get used to her ways. Unlike the women of his province, who were deferential to their husbands and offered no opinions of their own, Roxana made sure to let him know what was on her mind. Her candidness had sometimes embarrassed him in front of the elders; however, over the years, they had found ways to make her acceptable in public while retaining her forthrightness in private.

Babak smiled. Helping their wealthy uncle in the fields earned the boys some barter, and they learned valuable farm skills. *I would rather they wield the wheat than hold the sword,* Babak thought. But the boys would be called to serve the empire when they reached twenty. They would soon learn to tame a horse and ride. He took a deep sip, letting the bittersweet taste spread through his mouth. Then he walked to his wife and tickled her waist. She giggled and swatted his hands.

“Where is Amastri?” she asked.

Babak returned to the courtyard and silently walked behind his daughter. There she was, his pretty little princess, her head bobbing up and down as she played with her makeshift clay doll. Amastri was five; she would soon need to help her mother around the house. Babak hoped that one day his daughter would catch the eye of a senior official and be wedded to their family. While Babak had greater comfort than most others in this town, it was still a far cry from the luxuries of those who received the King’s patronage. But that patronage came after years of servitude, backstabbing, sycophancy, and sometimes murderous conduct—something Babak had never mastered.

“What are you doing?” he asked gently. She looked up, her beautiful black eyes shining at the sight of her affectionate father. It was rare for him to hold or cuddle her—it was frowned upon, lest the girl grow without fear of her father. But sometimes, when no one looked, he hugged her tightly and smothered her with kisses. He knew she longed for those moments. Sometimes, when no one was around, she would intentionally come and stand by him.

And he knew why.

He smiled at her. “Is that a dog?” he asked, looking at the clay figurine she had fashioned.

She shook her head. “It is the King of Kings Cyrus!”

He threw his head back and laughed. “Well, you need more practice to make it look like a king,” he said, pinching her cheeks.

Just then, a figure peeked through the courtyard gate.

Angash.

The recently appointed town chief—a delegate of the governor and technically the man to whom Babak reported. Angash was a political animal—not from this town, and he held no love for its people. It was a punishment posting as far as he was concerned, and Babak knew that the unctuous man had set his sights on being transferred and getting into the good graces of the Royal Court.

But why was he here?

It was rare for Angash to come by Babak’s house. The Chief lived on the opposite side of the dusty citadel, and he would have to walk the dirty, cramped, dusty walkways to get here. *Not something his implied royalty usually did,* thought Babak.

“Angash! What brings you here? I would have come to you if you summoned me.”

Angash gestured for him to come out. Babak told Roxana that he would be back soon and stepped onto the busy street.

It was a calm and humid morning. Eshanna’s people went about their work—harvesting by the river, preparing meats, working in the metal shops, selling fruit, and cleaning houses—unaware of what the day would bring. Babak walked with Angash until they reached a small open area near the west of the citadel. The man looked nervous and fidgety, but there was sickly excitement in his eyes.

“You look anxious,” Babak said, eyeing Angash’s restless fingers.

“There is something important to discuss,” Angash said.

But Babak knew better.

These were not normal days. The town had defied the new King of Kings, who had imposed additional levies. In a frenzy, the people had killed the tax collector and hung his body on the city walls. The previous chief had sent emissaries to the Royal Court for reconsideration. Such acts rarely went unpunished, and while Babak had not supported the murder, he had supported the town’s resistance. No king in their history had impinged on their freedom like *Khambujia,* the one the Greeks called Cambyses. Cambyses, in his desire to show the empire that he was in charge, had made many unreasonable demands and sometimes met resistance with brutal force. They had not heard from the emissaries, and there was no news from Babylon about how their resistance was perceived. The only change was that the governor had demanded the dismissal of the previous chief and appointed a new man, Angash, in his place. Angash’s eyes darted to the people around them, going about their work. He resembled Babak—lean, of similar height and build, with a sharp, long face, and a generous mustache and beard. His fingers drummed incessantly.

“What is it, Angash?”

Angash’s voice began to crack. “They are coming,” he said.

“Who is coming?”

“Who do you think?” he said sharply. He was missing two teeth in the front, giving him an odd, clownish look.

“I do not know, Angash,” Babak said anxiously. “What have you done?”

“I have done what we should have done long ago!” he said. “How foolish were all of you to kill the tax collector, especially when the new King was flexing his muscles!”

“What have you done, Angash?” Babak shook the man’s shoulder.

Angash’s nervous demeanor morphed into a sly smile.

“Aberis is coming here with his Greek mercenaries.”

“Today?”

“Yes.”

“Why are they coming?” Babak’s voice rose an octave. A noble of the Royal Court never came to a town intending to deliver a lecture. *What had this scoundrel done?*

“They want those responsible for the murder, and then they want assurances that the town will pay what the King demands.”

Babak leaned back against the muddy wall. Angash had deliberately sold them out. On this day, three or four hundred of the most able-bodied men from the town, former and current soldiers, were on leave. They were away to partake in a ceremony organized by Angash.

*He deliberately sent them away to prevent organized resistance, leaving the town at the mercy of the forces.*

“We will be fine, Babak,” he said. “Only a few need to fear.”

*How wrong you are!*

The Empire rarely relented; it responded to resistance through ruthless suppression before pardoning or absorbing the best into its forces.

*What a stupid man,* Babak cursed inwardly, and now his own family—a wife, two sons, and a daughter—were in terrible danger.

He had to act quickly.

“Who else in the town knows?”

“No one,” he said proudly. “Only you.”

“With whom did you discuss the terms?”

“With two messengers from the court.”

“You have not met Aberis or any other commander from the siege force?”

Angash shot him an irritated look. “I used a messenger. He conveyed my words. And when Aberis sees that my words were true, and the town surrendered with not an arrow shot or a man dead, you and I will receive our rewards.”

“Where is the messenger?”

Angash sniggered. “At the bottom of the river. He knew too much. Keep your mouth shut and help me make arrangements.”

“Who greets His Excellency when he arrives?”

“I will.”

“You said you never met him.”

“Yes, but my name is known, and my messenger has conveyed whom to look for.”

Babak eyed Angash. *What a treasonous bastard.*

“This is foolish. We should warn the people and let them run,” Babak said, still pondering the situation.

“Are you mad? There is no running. Aberis’ men have already circled our citadel—we simply do not see them yet. They have us on three sides, and we have the river on the fourth. Why would you run when we have the chance for reward and peace?”

“You should have talked to us!”

“Talk to fools who thought it best to hang a King’s man on the walls?”

Babak sighed. His mind churned like angry waters—trying to foresee their fates.

He paused to think.

Then he decided what to do next.

“Come with me to the river; there is something I must share.”

Angash looked at him suspiciously. “Share what?”

“Not here, you fool. People are already eyeing us. Once they know what happened, do you think they will spare us? Do you think they will allow the town chief and the administrator to live among them peacefully?”

“Why would we live in this backwater? We will move to Babylon or Susa under the noble’s influence.”

“That is what you think. That is not what they plan. I want you to meet someone, but first, let us go away to someplace quiet.”

“Who is not planning what?” Angash asked, and this time his voice pitched higher.

*You are the one surprised now, aren’t you? You bastard.*

“You are not the only one in touch with them, idiot!” Babak said. “But we shall speak no more of it here!”

Angash was aghast. “What—”

“Not here!” Babak hissed. He then grabbed the man by the shoulder and pushed him. “Come with me.”

They walked the narrow, dusty paths of the town. The light-yellow mud-baked citadel wall loomed ahead. It was a pathetic wall, but good enough to keep bandits and casual robbers away from the town. The walls protected the town on three sides, with the river and its marshy banks forming a barrier on the fourth.

They had covered their faces with their turbans and looked like busy farmers on their way to something urgent. The few who recognized them paid no heed—after all, the new chief and the respected administrative officer often conferred with each other on official matters. Babak had served them since Cyrus’ time.

They walked out of a narrow opening and across a shallow bridge into the marshy area. It was a broad, dirty marsh, a mix of flowing rivers of open sewage from the town, thick mud, dry tree stumps, tall reed grass, thorny bushes, and rocky protrusions. The townspeople had access to a relatively clean section much further north than where they were now. At this time of the day, no one remained in this section—*for there was nothing to do here, except to fuck, get drunk, or fight*, thought Babak.

“His Excellency has other plans for the town,” Babak said. “Clearly, he was clever enough to shield your name from me, and likewise.”

Angash’s curiosity was piqued. He walked briskly with Babak—the men wore flimsy sandals and had to be careful here, lest they pierce their feet on the innumerable dry stumps that jutted from the ground. People had died when the wound suppurated and drew sickness from the air into the body.

They reached a thick, bushy area. Reeds grew abundant here, rising almost as tall as the men.

“We don’t need to go this far—” Angash began, now ahead of Babak, walking down a narrow path surrounded by bushes.

That was when Babak swiftly grabbed the greedy chief by his throat and stabbed him from behind, just below the rib cage. Angash grunted and gasped, but his voice died in his throat; this far away, there was no one to hear him shout.

Angash collapsed. Babak leaned forward and stabbed him in the heart. The chief struggled briefly before his eyes went cold and life left his body.

Babak took Angash’s sword and scabbard. Satisfied that no one was looking, he dragged the body to the edge of the watery area. He tied a large rock to the feet, fashioning Angash’s gown as rope, and then pushed him into the water.

Angash’s body sank into the marshy river.

When he rushed back to the citadel, people were already chattering and running around—the guards had spotted Aberis’ men converging from all sides. Some rushed to him, asking anxiously what was happening. Babak sent word: The King of Kings’ forces are here, and he has been summoned to talk. *Do not attempt to run*, he cautioned, *and do not exit the citadel with weapons in hand*. That would be a certain death sentence, unless the noble had already decided to storm the citadel, raze the town, and kill everyone inside it.

Soon, one of the soldiers from Aberis’ forces walked up to the gates. “Tell every villager within these walls to come out unarmed. All of them. Children included.”

Somehow, Babak knew that his world would be very different from that day as he watched the frightened villagers walk out, one by one.

##### PART I

## THREE YEARS LATER

## EGYPT

##### 

# CHAPTER 1

## THEBES, 524 B.C.

### ABERIS

##### 

Behind the magnificent temple of Amun-Re, on the eastern bank of the Great River in the city of Thebes, there once lay a vast empty field, stretching miles in every direction before the eastern deserts began. It was forbidden to occupy this land, reserved for the temple administration. However, it was now dotted with thousands and thousands of tents, men, and animals, all part of a vast invasion force under *Shahanshah* *Khambujia*, King of Kings Cambyses of Persia. On the southern edge of this hive of frenetic activity lay a ring of tents belonging to the senior men of the expedition, with the King of Kings’ tent at the center. It was no grand tent, and one might even be surprised by its modest size, for Cambyses was no stranger to a hard life or military living. He had governed rough areas in Babylonia and quelled many rebellions on behalf of his father, Cyrus. Cambyses had traveled far from Babylon to Thebes, shunning the Palace of Thebes and instead preferring to stay with his men as they prepared to travel south to invade the Ethiopian lands.

This afternoon, the King’s tent buzzed with activity. He sat in the sweltering heat, tolerating the fine dust that coated everything in sight. The servants swung the fans as hard as they could, but they only circulated the warm air and sprinkled sand on the sweaty men. Yet it was not the heat in the tent that worried those seated near the King of Kings—it was the news that a messenger had brought him.

Cambyses was livid. He sat on a simple high chair, wearing his customary gem-studded tiara and blue flowing robes. He rocked back and forth, rubbing his thick black beard. He massaged his temple and wiped the sweat from his eyelids. The messenger remained on the floor, prostrate and too afraid to look up. “Stand up,” he ordered.

The man scrambled to his feet and wiped his face to remove the dust.

“Tell it to me once more. You shall leave no detail,” the King of Kings said softly, though his barely contained rage was palpable. The court shivered, even in the heat.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” the messenger replied, his voice barely a whisper. The courtiers fell silent, terrified of what the King of Kings might do next. He had already had a minister of the court whipped for suggesting that they send a negotiating party.

“Everything.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. Where do I start?” he asked nervously, fidgeting.

“From the beginning!” Cambyses screamed, spittle flying from his mouth. The messenger flinched. The King of Kings had executed more than one man with unwelcome news in recent months.

“Forgive me, Your Majesty. Yes. I reached the—”

“What did you tell them? How many priests?”

“I conveyed your message to them, Your Majesty. There are three priests and a Sybil, but the head priest is Amunperre. He is the only one allowed to confer with the Oracle of Ammon.”

“What did you tell them?” Cambyses asked.

“That you, *Shahanshah Khambujia*, the King of Kings, mighty King, Ruler of the World, King of Akkad, Sumer, Babylon, and all four corners, beloved of all gods, brighter than the sun, light of the Achaemenids, now the ruler of all of Egypt, appointed by the priests of Memphis, blessed by Her Divine Majesty, Goddess Neith, must be proclaimed the legitimate heir to the Egyptian throne after the defeat of Psamtik.

“That you have preserved their temples, worshipped their gods, and allowed Egyptian nobles to continue in their posts and collect tax. And that it is time for them to accept His Majesty as Pharaoh.”

Cambyses grunted. “And?”

The messenger fidgeted again, earning a strike from the guard behind him. “But they say it is too early to proclaim you Pharaoh. And that the Egyptian spirit is not yet extinguished.”

Cambyses tugged on his beard. “Do these bastards not know that I have taken their Pharaoh captive? That by the grace of Ahuramazda and Marduk, I have defeated them, and most of their noblemen’s sons are dead?”

The messenger said nothing, haplessly looking to others for help.

“What else did they say?” asked Cambyses.

“They say that the role of the Pharaoh extends beyond the realm of the living, and that the Pharaoh must prove to be a great patron of the temples and the priests, beyond just praying to the gods of Egypt and making symbolic sacrifices.”

Cambyses slapped his hands together, causing the messenger to flinch. “What does that even mean?” he asked rhetorically, staring at the terrified man.

“I do not know—”

“What else did they say?”

The messenger began to dance on his feet, his nervousness and fear palpable. Finally, General Artapharnes spoke. “There was something else. Speak,” he ordered, his voice stern.

The messenger looked helplessly at those around him, and receiving no help, he continued. “They heaped curses on you, Your Majesty.”

Cambyses leaned forward, his eyes burning into the man. “What curses?”

“They say that the Oracle foretells that the curse of Ammon will bury your soldiers.”

“Bury us with what? Cow dung?” Cambyses shouted. His face turned ruddy. “Who do these Ammonians think they are?”

“I do not know, I—” the messenger stammered.

“What else?”

“Not much else, Your Majesty. They heaped insults on me for daring to bring the request, and they would not allow me an audience with the Oracle. I told them— I demanded—”

“Wretches. They will change their tune when blood flows from their bellies,” Cambyses retorted. “What does Amunperre really want?”

“I do not know—”

“Useless,” Cambyses shouted. “Get out of my sight before I have your head!”

The messenger scurried away, relieved at the dismissal. Cambyses turned to his trusted general, Artapharnes. “*Artapharna*, what do you make of it?”

Artapharnes bowed to the King of Kings. “They are stubborn. The priests have too much power and hold great sway over their people.”

“But do I not have a claim over the land after defeating the Pharaoh?” asked Cambyses.

Artapharnes nodded. “That may be so, Your Majesty. But the priests are driven by the same desire for power and pleasure as everyone else. They fear that you will end their influence and sever the heads of the corrupt.”

“What do you think, *Abrahasa*?” he said, turning to a nobleman by his side.

Aberis welcomed the moments when the *Shahanshah* sought his opinion. It elevated him in the court. He puffed up with pride. “They wish to protect their greed, and they see you as the wolf out to eat their meat, Your Majesty,” he said.

Cambyses shook his head, mollified by the thought that the resistance stemmed from fear. Aberis knew of the insidious rumors spread by the Egyptians about Cambyses.

That he was mad and losing his mind each day.

That he spoke ill of their gods and conspired to destroy every temple.

That he wished to kill the sacred Apis bull with his own hands and consume its flesh.

That he would enslave every Egyptian man and consign the women to brothels.

*Lies. All lies!*

Cambyses had done no such thing and had no desire to. He wished to bring Egypt under his dominion and was even willing to embrace their ways. His father, Cyrus, had brought many peoples under the Achaemenid empire and ruled them justly. Aberis recognized that *Shahanshah* Cambyses only sought to expand the empire to include Egypt. All they had to do was recognize his rule, pay him taxes and tributes, and accept certain administrative reforms.

The King of Kings rose from the wooden chair and walked outside the tent, followed by Artapharnes, Aberis, and other members of the court. All around them echoed the energy of a powerful force. The Persian army prepared for its invasion of Ethiopia. It was hot, and the fine dust kicked up by the hundreds of thousands of feet and wheels created a yellow haze. The air was thick with the smell of sweat, dirt, river water, palm trees, cow and pig manure, hay, rose and lilac perfumes, and running sewers. Cambyses relished the sights and smells—no Persian, not even his great father, had ever set foot in Egypt as a conqueror, and he had done it. He watched quietly for some time and then flicked his finger towards Aberis. The nobleman walked next to the King of Kings.

“Subduing the Ethiopian savages under the title of a Pharaoh would have been easier.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“The Priests of Ammon think they can dictate terms to the Shahanshah of Persia,” Cambyses said and spat on the ground. “They believe that the powers conferred upon them long ago by their Pharaohs grant them the authority to defy me, the one blessed by Ahuramazda.”

“They are arrogant,” Aberis concurred. “And their hubris is intolerable.”

Cambyses walked along the rough-cut path as his guards cleared the way. He coughed as the dust irritated his lungs. “A lion does not negotiate with hyenas.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Do they realize what foe they make of me? Do they not know what I did to them at Memphis?”

After the Egyptians’ defeat at the battle of Pelusium and emerging victorious at the siege of Memphis, Cambyses had sent off two thousand young Egyptians, including the defeated Pharaoh Psamtik’s sons, to their deaths.

“They sit in their temple and think of themselves as invincible, Your Majesty,” said Aberis.

Cambyses remained silent for some time. He rubbed the scabbard of his long royal sword, tapping on the gold-inlaid luxurious leather to loosen the dust that stubbornly clung to it.

“How many men do we have here?” he asked, turning to General Artapharnes this time.

“About two hundred thousand, Your Majesty.”

“How many do you think the Ammonians have?”

“If I were to guess, Your Majesty, no more than a few thousand,” Artapharnes replied.

“And yet, they stand against me.”

“They rely on the desert between them and us, Your Majesty. They believe their land will protect them. They do not know the resolve of the King of Kings, nor do they understand the depth of his servant’s desire to prove his worth to the glorious Shahanshah,” Aberis said, referring to himself. Cambyses knew that Aberis saw an opportunity. The nobleman had waited patiently for years.

Cambyses nodded. He knelt on the ground and gently rubbed his palm on the coarse rock and sand. Then he stood and kicked the ground, raising a cloud. “Let us teach them that the sons of Ahuramazda do not fear a few grains of the earth!”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Cambyses turned to Aberis. “You are a faithful servant, Abrahasa.”

Aberis knelt in front of his *Shahanshah*. “And I will always be, Your Majesty.”

“Then I might have a mission for you,” Cambyses said as he slapped his palms together, creating a small cloud of fine yellow dust.

# CHAPTER 2

## THEBES

### BABAK

##### 

Babak gently lifted his daughter to a sitting position and placed a clay cup of water to her lips. She was frail, and her skin felt like aged leather. The sickness that had entered her a year ago, at the onset of his King’s invasion of Egypt, appeared to have strengthened in its destructive power. His beautiful girl, just eight years old, no longer exuded the energy and joy typical of children her age. Her hair fell out in clumps, her ribs and collarbones showed prominently, and there was no light in her eyes.

Babak wondered if his softness toward his daughter stemmed from his past, for it was certainly unusual, and his wife had often teased him about it. “She will get married and go away,” his wife had said. “Do not get too affectionate.”

“Amastri,” he told her gently. “You must drink.”

She turned her head away, protesting feebly. Just weeks ago, she would still engage in more boisterous arguments, but those days had ended. Now, all she did was grunt, say a few words, or cry silently. Babak’s heart hurt.

*I have prayed to Ahuramazda. I have prayed to Amun. To Isis. To Angramainyu*.

Nothing had worked. He wondered many times if the gods of Egypt were angry at the incursion of Persians—but why his daughter? She was innocent of any wrongdoing. Babak himself had never struck an Egyptian. His advice may have led to the death of the enemy, but such was the nature of war. Surely, if anyone deserved affliction, it should have been him—not an innocent child. *Not again.*

“You must drink,” he said, more firmly this time. His wife had gone to buy bread and vegetables, so it was Babak’s turn to care for their daughter. He reached around her face and pushed her cheeks toward him. This time, she did not protest, and he made her gulp the water infused with some herbs that the Royal Physician claimed could cure the illness. They had been doing this for two months, along with regular prayers to the many gods, but not much had changed. After she drank the medicated water, he laid her back on the reed bed and caressed her face. “You will be better soon,” he said, “and you will climb trees again like a monkey.” She smiled. Evil had taken away her strength but not her ability to smile.

Babak left her side and sat by the entrance of his humble home, leaning against the worn, muddy wall. For the last three weeks, he had struggled with a powerful conflict in his mind. The Royal Physician had told Babak that the cure to his daughter’s ailment could be found with the Oracle of Ammon. The physician claimed that Amastri’s illness was a type known to the temple priests, who possessed the concoctions and incantations to heal the suffering. The news infused some hope in him, and he desperately sought a way to convince the King’s Court to release him from duty. But that hope had been dashed once the King of Kings, *Shahanshah Khambujia*, Cambyses, declared the invasion of Ethiopia, and Babak was included in the expedition. There was no question of seeking exemption—such requests were treated harshly, especially for those in the employ of the King’s inner circle. The army was preparing for the march, and Babak, as one of the administrative advisors, would accompany the King deep into the perilous unknown filled with hostile tribes.

Babak felt a deep sadness—he wondered if it would be the last time he saw his daughter alive when he left for Ethiopia. Given her rate of deterioration, he had little hope that she would survive many more months. He had explored the idea of sending someone to the Ammonians and had engaged a man who promised to bring the cure. But the man had vanished with the money and never returned. Besides, there was little guarantee that the Egyptian priests would do anything to save a Persian advisor’s child, even if he chose to make the journey himself.

He heard the door open, and he quickly hardened his face, lest she see his glistening eyes.

It was his wife.

She rushed in, and there was a strange excitement on her face. “My husband! My husband!” she called out loudly, a rarity in her address. The strain of war and their daughter’s condition had sapped her vitality too.

“What is it?” Babak asked.

“Ahuramazda smiles on us! Perhaps he is watching over us, he the all-powerful,” she said as she knelt and placed her hands on his knee. Her deep black eyes blazed with an intensity that Babak had not seen in a long time. Roxana may have aged due to the hard life and as the mother of three, but her almond-shaped eyes and angular face still captivated him.

Babak scoffed with irritation. “Enough with the mystery, woman! Did he make me King of Kings? Is Cambyses dead in a Theban ditch?”

His wife glared at him. “Say no such thing. You never know who may be listening. It is something else.”

“Well, speak.”

She whispered urgently, and Babak’s eyes opened wide. He hugged his wife tightly, almost surprising her. Ahuramazda had given him an opening to save his daughter’s life and allowed him and his wife to pursue an ambition they had long harbored.

But he had to act now.

And be brave.

Very brave.

# CHAPTER 3

## THEBES

## ABERIS

##### 

The royal tent smelled of anger and impatience. The King of Kings sat in the middle, surrounded by his courtiers, advisors, and senior officers—ambitious men who trod hard ground and struck fear into the bellies of their enemies.

General Artapharnes sat by the King.

Next to Artapharnes was Aberis, the nobleman in the King of Kings’ inner circle and his companion on this journey.

Jabari, the Egyptian advisor, was also in the tent.

Cambyses clenched his jaw and turned to Aberis. The second messenger had returned with the same news. “And yet they refuse to heed my demand. They refuse to grant me what is mine.”

“I do not yet understand if it is their greed or hubris, or if other forces undermine your authority, Your Majesty,” Aberis said.

The King narrowed his eyes in contemplation. *He is a hawk with the heart of a lion*, Aberis thought. Cambyses was an intimidating man. He was taller than most, muscular, with a hooked nose like an eagle’s. When restless, his cheeks twitched, and he tapped his knuckles on any hard object nearby.

“Beating the Ethiopians and controlling the god-fearing Egyptians require me to bear the mantle of Pharaoh—what say you, Jabari?” Cambyses asked, turning his attention to the Egyptian advisor. Jabari was a senior man, and the King had grown to value his words, for Jabari knew much about the practices of the people of this land. The Egyptian had once served as a priest in one of the prominent temples in Memphis, up north. He had provided valuable advice against his own countrymen during and after the battle of Pelusium. But Jabari and Aberis went back even further; the Egyptian had accompanied Aberis on some of his minor campaigns in the marshlands south of Babylonia.

“Your Majesty knows the ways of his new dominion,” Jabari said, bowing his oil-polished skull.

*Unctuous and servile traitor,* Aberis thought to himself. While they had known each other for years, he did not trust the Egyptian.

“The Ammonians will fare poorly against us, Your Majesty,” Aberis said. “Your angry breath will blow the sands away and expose their treacherous hearts to our arrows.”

Cambyses nodded approvingly. “But we must address the matter now. Bringing Egypt to heel quickly is necessary to prevent sparks of rebellion elsewhere in the empire. The Priests of Memphis have declared me Pharaoh, but that is not enough.”

The senior men of the court knew that Cambyses’ ways had drawn the ire of many other nobles back home, and the King always had to project strength and a desire for expansion. Aberis and the other advisors nodded in agreement. The Persian empire was vast—and any news of weakness would encourage many restless souls to raise their hands against the King.

“We cannot wait to deal with them, even as we prepare to launch ourselves against the foolhardy Ethiopians.”

Aberis frowned. “Should we not wait to subdue the Ethiopians first, Your Majesty? This land is hostile, and our forces—”

“Waiting will only exacerbate our troubles, Your Glorious Majesty, and most respected noble,” came a sudden voice.

Aberis shot an irritated glance at the man kneeling before the King. *The insolence of some of these advisors!*

“Did I ask you—” Aberis started, eager to put this man in his place. The King of Kings’ court was not a venue for any man to speak unless invited. *Cambyses has grown softer,* Aberis thought; otherwise, no one would dare speak out of turn in front of him. The King of Kings had even spared Psamtik, the disgraced and deposed Pharaoh, and sent him off to Babylon to live in luxury.

*Should have cut off his head and paraded it on the streets of Memphis.*

“Let him speak,” Cambyses said. Campaign discussions were almost the only time that the King of Kings listened to others, even if he rarely heeded their words.

The man—Aberis was vaguely familiar with him—had made valuable suggestions at Pelusium and before. He was an often-seen advisor and administrative officer who floated among the senior ranks. But his name eluded Aberis. “Tell His Majesty your name,” Aberis said. “Do not forget where you are.”

*The customs of the court are sometimes ignored in the heat and stench of battle tents,* Aberis thought, but such exceptions were reserved only for the inner circle of the King of Kings, and this man was no part of that circle.

The man prostrated himself before the King of Kings. “Babak, Your Majesty. I served you in Pelusium, and I will serve you until my breath becomes one with Ahuramazda.”

“Rise. Speak,” Cambyses ordered.

Babak rose to his feet. He was a wiry man; his limbs were sinewy like knotted rope, his face gaunt and the texture of worn, beaten leather. A thick silver-specked beard hung like a honeybee hive. But his dark eyes shone with clarity and peered from under bushy eyebrows. Aberis guessed that this man was surely of the stock of people from the marshes south of Babylon, and judging by the scar on his temple and the imprints of a blade on his neck, this man had either wielded a weapon at some point in his life or had been at the receiving end of punishment.

*Wise with the word but weak with the sword.*

“The Egyptian High Priest cares about three things, Your Majesty,” Babak said. His voice was soft, firm, and possessed a fine timbre, while his sunken cheeks and eyes gave him a grave and wise appearance. But his words caught the attention of the hard men.

“He cares for the preservation of his power. He cares for the sanctity of his ways to appease his gods. And he perennially conspires to enrich himself and those who derive power from him.”

Jabari cast a hostile look at Babak, who ignored him. Babak continued. “But his power is immense. There are many tales of misfortunes for the Pharaohs who confronted the power of their priests. When the priest refuses to acquiesce, then he is certainly conspiring for something greater than what he has or will soon have.”

“And what is that?” Cambyses asked, now curious.

Babak paused. He looked around the room, knowing that all eyes were upon him.

“Control of the Pharaoh,” Babak said, each word carrying the weight of a rock. “They may accept your patronage, Your Majesty. They may be showered with gold, silver, and grain from your vast coffers. They may even be accorded the same stature and respect as the temple masters of Ahuramazda. But they know they will never control the will of a foreign King, especially a *Shahanshah*.”

Cambyses tugged on his beard and looked at Aberis. The noble felt compelled to offer his words. “That has become clear. Let them sit on their cold stones and wait; so why not turn our attention to them and smite them when the time comes?” Aberis said, and he turned to Artapharnes, who was uncharacteristically quiet.

Babak leaned forward and spread his arms. His dusty and dirty gown spread loosely on his frame. *It is like having a beggar advise the King,* Aberis thought.

*We should give him some clothing befitting the court!*

Babak continued, “We have never set foot in Ethiopia. We know little of the land. But we know it is far removed from the River. And the further we go from the River, the freer the Egyptian feels. When we stalk the canyons and ridges far away, the Priests will have ample time to incite a rebellion. They stall us so they can rouse their people against us. The longer we wait and the farther we advance, the stronger the resistance will grow here in Thebes, in Memphis, in Ammon, in Pelusium—”

“Babak,” said Artapharnes, finally speaking, his voice firm but warm. “You lecture us as if we are children in the theater of war and politics.”

Babak bowed his head. “I meant no disrespect, Great General. It is only my duty.”

Aberis felt the need to assert himself. “And yet your voice—”

The King laid his hand on Aberis’ forearm. “He speaks for I have allowed him to.”

“Very well, Your Majesty.”

*He will pay for his insolence,* Aberis thought. Babak had managed to make him feel small. But on the other hand, going to Ammon had many benefits.

Cambyses reached for a bronze cup of water and took a long sip. He then wiped his hands on his shimmering gown. Aberis recognized this as the sign of the ruler prepared to rule. He understood he needed to show his obeisance and readiness to accept orders. Aberis stood and bowed to the King of Kings. Other courtiers followed his lead.

“I have decided,” Cambyses said. He turned to Aberis. “You will command a detachment of fifty thousand men and march to Ammon. Bring me every Ammonian—man, woman, and child—in chains. I shall teach them a lesson they will never forget. Burn their temple and raze their homes—may the city of the Ammonians cease to exist!”

Aberis feigned protest. “I long to be by the side of the King of Kings, Your Majesty. Why do you send me away? Let me fight by your side in Ethiopia!” Everyone knew by then that Cambyses had chosen Aberis—it had been known for days that the King viewed this expedition as an irritation that must be dealt with.

Cambyses touched his gold-studded scepter to Aberis’ head. “I know you wish to be at my side, *Abrahasa*, but I cannot have you in both places. *Artapharna* will accompany me to Ethiopia, for that will be a larger campaign. But you, my loyal servant, must put an end to a kingdom-wide rebellion or any other mischief before I return from Ethiopia. This will also be your first experience in leading a major campaign.”

“Your word is my guide, Your Majesty,” Aberis said. It was true—he had led small forces to quell rebellions and suppress revolts, but none with a large army.

“Bring me favorable news, and I shall grant you one of Egypt’s nomes to rule. Perhaps Ammon.”

Aberis felt elated at this news. *A Governor!* He had long desired the chance to be a satrap. Like a shrub that never grows under the shade of a mighty tree, Aberis knew that to elevate his name and fortunes, he must have his own province. From there, he would forge his destiny. It was as if the gods had smiled upon him, bringing this opportunity—and he even begrudgingly acknowledged, in his mind, Babak’s contribution to this fortuitous change of events.

“Your generosity exceeds all men’s deeds, Your Majesty. I will bring them to you in chains, and Ammon will only be a footnote in history!” he declared, now excited by his prospects. *The destruction of Ammon is paramount.*

Cambyses turned to Babak. “I remember you now, Babak. Are you not the man who suggested we use cats to subdue the Egyptians in Pelusium without much bloodshed?”

“I am, Your Majesty,” Babak said.

“Very well. You will be a worthy companion during our campaign in Ethiopia.”

Aberis felt quietly pleased that he would not have to bear this man.

But Babak looked unhappy. He dropped to his knees again and raised his hands to the King of Kings. “I beg you to listen to me just once more, Your Majesty!”

Artapharnes laughed.

Aberis was flummoxed. *What now?*

Cambyses looked perplexed. “Speak,” he said.

# CHAPTER 4

## THEBES

### BABAK

##### 

Babak felt his heart fight against his ribs. What he had just done—asking the *Shahanshah* to listen to him again—could lead to his execution. Aberis had already expressed impatience with his behavior, but how far could he test the mercy of those greater than himself?

But it had to be done.

“I beg you to allow me to accompany the detachment to Ammon,” Babak said.

“Insolent swine! How dare you turn away the King’s patronage?” Eribaeus, the pale Greek nobleman who had accompanied the King of Kings to Egypt and had supplied many Greek mercenaries in service of the Persian Empire, responded. Eribaeus was another fixture in the court, serving the ruler and making a corrupt fortune along the way.

*The Greek dog curries favor at every given opportunity.*

Jabari, the Egyptian who shot piercing glances all this while, joined in. “How dare, and how shameful it is, for one to turn down the opportunity to go with the King!”

“Let him speak. He has something on his mind,” Cambyses said, smiling and once again displaying an unusual kindness. *Perhaps the King of Kings knows of my personal pain*, thought Babak. *The eyes and ears of the King are everywhere.*

Babak composed himself. He removed his turban and held it in his shaking hands. “The land far west of Thebes and north to the temple of Ammon is unkind to any living being, Your Majesty. They call it the Great Sand Sea. Many a caravan has been reduced to bones, and many a trader has vanished beneath the waves of sand.”

Cambyses nodded. “Go on.”

“They say deserters and exiled nobles vanish there, only to lay low and foment trouble, for they are so far from and so inaccessible to invasion by large armies.”

Jabari scoffed loudly. “Not every story that floats in the air is true, just as not every man with a crown is a King.”

Babak stood his ground. *I know you do not want me there.*

“Your words are wise, Your Excellency, but I beg you to listen to me,” said Babak, addressing Jabari. “If we must send an army of fifty thousand under the command of a noble favored by the King of Kings, I think it is better to hear the stories than to dismiss them all.”

Every man was intrigued by this debate, and Aberis recognized this. “I agree with Babak. Let us hear him.”

“And what is your interest then?” Cambyses asked.

“To bring you glory and to serve the noble ably where I am best able. I know the lands beyond Thebes and the oases on the way to Ammon.”

Cambyses looked surprised.

Aberis leaned forward. “You have walked those sands?”

“Years ago, Your Excellency. As a merchant, I have thrice traveled the paths with water sprouts and oases, from Thebes and Memphis all the way to the Ammonian lands.”

“Why would I not use Egyptian guides?” the King of Kings asked. “Besides, two of our messengers have traversed a road from Thebes to Ammon.”

Babak glanced at Jabari, and the Egyptian’s furrowed brows conveyed great displeasure, as if already reading Babak’s mind.

Babak continued. “The messenger path is completely unsuitable for an army, Your Majesty, and that will be established soon as we plan. Besides, you seek to enslave the Ammonians. The priests hold great sway over the people that dwell in the sands and many other Egyptians. And in their pursuit, there must be Persian guides, lest there be betrayal or abandonment of any sort, whether by design or by accident.”

Jabari protested loudly. “How dare this man question my loyalty? What right does he have!”

The Egyptian flexed his chest like a rude wrestler in the pits. *I am not intimidated by a bald peacock,* Babak thought.

Cambyses turned to Jabari. “You are a faithful servant, Jabari. But one must pay heed to the influence of your gods and shamans, for they may compel you in these hostile lands, even without your desire. Therefore, a Persian advisor who knows the lands just as well might not be imprudent.”

Jabari bowed and sulked.

Cambyses turned to Babak. “You will be another pair of watchful eyes.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. Along with His Excellency Jabari, of course.”

Aberis snorted. “It seems I must suffer you, Babak,” he said, but the yellow-toothed smile told Babak that the noble had accepted his company and was perhaps even relieved to have a Persian guide in unforgiving lands.

“My only desire is our victory and the service of the King.”

Cambyses raised his hand, and the tent fell silent. “It is decided then. *Abrahasa* will command a contingent of fifty thousand against the Ammonians. Prepare for your departure. Eribaeus, as previously decided, you will go with *Abrahasa*. Your Greeks will follow you more willingly than this gruff Persian,” he said, smiling at Aberis. “Babak, you will act as a guide and advisor along with Jabari. *Abrahasa*, choose your army after consultation with *Artapharna* and prepare to leave.”

The named men all prostrated before the King. A warm wind blew into the tent, bringing a thin veil of golden dust that blanketed them all. Aberis stood and shook his body. He said quietly, “The Ammonians welcome us.”

# CHAPTER 5

## THEBES

### BABAK

##### 

So began the preparation for the attack on Ammon. Aberis was no fool; he had sent discreet inquiries regarding Babak’s trustworthiness and the honesty of his experience. While it was true that Babak had traversed the vast plains of nothingness to the temple of the Ammonians, he had only done so once and not thrice as he bragged. But with no way to prove otherwise, and yet finding scattered affirmations of Babak’s experiences in Egypt, Aberis accepted that Babak could have a say in the expedition ahead. *What of fantastical tales of hands emerging from the sand and drawing soldiers underneath, and desert hawks as big as bulls descending from the skies to snatch men and asses alike?* Aberis had asked. *Nonsense,* Babak had said, assuring the noble that there were no more fantastical beasts and dangers lurking here than there were elsewhere. Jabari had agreed, albeit reluctantly, but he was petulant like a child since Aberis had sought Babak’s counsel rather than his own.

The King of Kings was true to his word. A contingent of fifty thousand men, including a vast baggage train but no concubines or family, was assembled. While this was no ragtag army of the unwanted, it was forged hastily, and the logisticians made quick and hopeful calculations for water and food. General Artapharnes and the King himself were unwilling to part with experienced commanders. *This should be a quick and relatively uncontested expedition,* they had said. Arguments arose regarding how much they should carry. If they carried too much water, the exertion might cause the animals and men to consume more, thereby undermining the very argument to carry more. Even food became a point of contention—the Egyptians, mainly in the baggage train, complained about beef; the Persians, far larger in number, complained about pig. The commanders had to be scolded that this was not a leisurely jaunt to a friend’s marriage and that they must make do with what they had. Besides, little meat accompanied the detachment—most of the food consisted of hard bread clumps, salted fish, some quail, and preserved lentils. A very limited quantity of beer and wine was reserved for the senior men. *Heady drinks are dangerous in the desert,* the commanders were told to convey to their troops. The Greeks and Scythians made much ruckus about it, joined by the Syrians, until they were threatened with latrine duties.

Eribaeus had second thoughts about accompanying the detachment until Babak convinced Aberis that the Greek contingent would not behave without their noble, and that the Greeks were vital to the journey. Eribaeus cursed Babak, who feigned innocence. *I was only pointing out to the noble that the Greeks bring strength and wisdom to the journey,* he said, causing Eribaeus to curse him further.

Since almost the entire force consisted of infantry, they were ordered to travel light, which suited the march in dry and arid climes. *Leave your heavy shields, heavy armor, thick leather corsets, and any metal helmets behind. Travel light to the extent possible,* they were ordered. But Babak knew many paid no heed to these rules.

Babak paid little attention to these arguments, merely opining that the forces should carry as much as needed for the next supply station. The army comprised every element of the Persian force except the cavalry. *The horses will fare poorly,* Babak and Jabari counseled Aberis, and he acquiesced. The beasts were expensive to maintain, and there was no clarity on how they would fare in the desert with little water. There were archers, axemen, swordsmen, and spearmen. No battering rams or siege weaponry accompanied them, as it was considered impractical to drag heavy machinery through the sandy desert along a less-traveled path.

In the end, with counsel from Jabari, Babak, and Eribaeus, Aberis assembled seven thousand Syrians, five thousand Medians, five thousand Scythians, three thousand Indians, ten thousand Greeks, fifteen thousand Persians, and five thousand men in the baggage train. Aberis grumbled that he would have preferred more Persian troops, but Artapharnes was unwilling to part with more. Most of the men in this detachment were known to Aberis, who had utilized parts of them in past conquests. Babak played a significant role in identifying potential groups that could accompany Aberis.

Now, they were all cobbled together into this force. *Like putting hyenas, monkeys, peacocks, pigs, and cats together for an excursion under the leadership of a jackal,* thought Babak. He also recognized that Aberis had demonstrated a certain mindset. He had provisioned greater comfort, water, and bread rations for the Persians and the Greeks.

What Babak realized, which neither Aberis nor Eribaeus had yet appreciated, was how different the western deserts of Egypt and the Great Sand Sea were from anything they had ever experienced. No one in the empire had sent an army of even five thousand, let alone fifty thousand, through an inhospitable desert with barely a supply station for days. They had no idea what lay before them or what travails they might face. To them, this was a short campaign that would bring glory and pillage—and an unwavering belief that numerical superiority would ensure victory.

A thought and fear for the land between them and their enemy mattered not in the slightest.

A thought for the powerful gods and their anger at this sacrilegious mission mattered not in the slightest.

Then there was the matter of guides. Heated arguments flared over whom to employ and how many. Babak held firm to his view: *Few guides who know the area—if you have too many, it leads to confusion.* Ritapates, an advisor to Aberis, concurred. Eribaeus wanted more Egyptian guides, but Aberis distrusted Egyptians. They were going to burn Ammon and enslave its people—how could they possibly trust the locals to lead them there? Who would they even believe? As they continued to debate, it was finally decided that three Bedouins, Babak’s knowledge, a few maps provided by the Memphis temple guardians, along with some of Jabari’s wisdom, would suffice. Not many were happy with this decision, but Babak and others contended they could find more guides if necessary during the water stops in Aostris, Horosis, or Farrasis. In any case, they had little time to scout the city for more guides. Aberis had to rush with preparations. The King of Kings had ordered them to leave immediately.

Babak held his daughter close to his chest and inhaled her lily and cinnamon-scented hair. He turned to his wife. “We leave in six days.”

“It is a most unholy mission, my husband,” Roxana said fearfully. But they knew what they aimed to do. “You must stop it. You must stop the men from destroying what the Egyptians hold dear, from defiling the women and children. You must.”

“It is. I will. Which is why I must be there. And the gods have given us the perfect opportunity.”

Roxana’s eyes filled with concern and devotion. It was not just Babak who had suffered; they had lost two of their sons long ago, in greatly unjust ways, and yet they had persevered. “Do you think your idea to convince the Ammonians to help us will work?”

“Ahuramazda will guide me,” Babak said. “Have you not known me to find ways? The world is full of possibilities.”

Her eyes sparkled. “A mind as bright as the sun hides beneath that thinning hair and mottled skull.”

“And an elephant’s strength behind those lovely braids,” Babak replied. His wife had weathered hardships and losses, yet her resolve remained unbroken.

A fire burned in them that no man outside knew.

Babak cuddled his soporific daughter, caressing her hair. “I will be back in less than a month, my little cherub,” he said. Surely no gods would be cruel enough to take their only remaining child after many years of devotion to them and the land. Yet Babak knew that the mission was likely an idiot’s fancy. Great odds lay between him and his quest—they had to conquer the terrain, subdue the stubborn Ammonians, find those who possessed the cure, convince them to give it to him, and then make his way back. His daughter needed to remain alive, and the cure had to work. Lesser men would despair at the thought, for the task was akin to a village fool attempting to build a mountain by hand or drain a river by his mouth. Delivering the cure to his daughter was only one of the missions that he and his wife had resolved to accomplish. Babak had no doubt that every man in that detachment had his personal mission.

“Keep her breathing until I return,” he implored his wife. Roxana nodded and gently took possession of the child. Babak then discussed how they should live and survive. Then they spoke of the dangers, emphasizing that Jabari would be present, plotting, conspiring.

“Do not think that there are no scorpions around you,” Babak warned her. “Be wary of your surroundings. I am not well-liked, and there will be much interest in our lives. There will be those who seek to harm me through you, so remain on your guard.”

They prayed together one last time as he prepared to leave.

Babak bade them a tearful farewell. His daughter’s eyes remained downcast, and her limbs felt limp as he kissed her goodbye. Babak held his wife and sternly instructed her to conduct her duties and care for their child until his return. He then walked out into a blast of heat and an unknown future.

# CHAPTER 6

## THEBES

### JABARI

##### 

Jabari stood beside his wife, who held a small polished bronze lamp and moved it in a circular motion around the golden statuette of Amun. The little prayer room filled with smoke, the aroma of melting wax, and the heady fragrance of lotus and jasmine. It was an important occasion, one that could bring great fortune and power. They had sought the blessings of their gods, sacrificed two goats, and donated three bags of grain to the temple of Amun, visible from their courtyard and awe-inspiring every time they looked at it. In return, they nervously sought success in their mission. It was an anxiety-inducing situation—after all, Jabari, who had once been a priest, was now on an invasion whose entire purpose was to burn a sacred temple of none other than the all-powerful Amun. Did they really want this to be successful?

Once they completed their prayers, they retired to their comfortable living room. They lived in a relatively luxurious house, much nicer than the huts and basic homes of peasants and soldiers. It had a spacious living room, three bedrooms, a courtyard, a small room for prayers, a bathroom, a granary room, and a guard room. The sunburnt brick villa was coated white with limestone, giving it a brilliant appearance. The plaster cracked in places, a source of argument between him and his wife. Nevertheless, Jabari had done well, and he felt he was now finally on the cusp of greatness. Rising from a lowly temple orderly, he had ascended to become a priest, an adviser to a Pharaoh, a trader, and even ingratiated himself with a Persian nobleman. All that led to his close involvement in Cambyses’ Egyptian incursion, where he had abandoned Pharaoh Psamtik, with whom he had a falling out. The victory in Pelusium and Jabari’s advice to Cambyses’ men helped strengthen the King of Kings’ hand as he moved south towards Thebes from Memphis.

But bowing to a Persian King, and a Persian noble, nagged at him like a fly in one’s ear or a worm in a wound. What came from becoming a high priest again? Was that the extent of what he could achieve?

Jabari wanted more.

A lot more.

He looked at his dutiful wife as she held his hand. She was a clever woman, one who understood Jabari’s ambitions, for she harbored much the same herself. But Sekhet was not just clever and ambitious; it was as if Amun had personally bestowed beauty upon her at birth. Sekhet possessed a beautiful oval face, almond eyes, full red lips like pomegranates that she made sure to color every day, a gentle broad nose, and the most supple skin that felt as if butter had been spread upon it. Her hair fell gently on her shoulders, and she often tied it with a luxurious ribbon. She was every bit a royal, even if not born as one. When she walked into a room, it was as if a full moon had lit the space, for such was her power over those around her. But he also knew she would discard him like aged papyrus if he abandoned their ambition. So far, she had brought light to his life, stayed by his side, and kept his blood flowing.

“Do you think you will succeed in your mission, husband?” she asked, her voice now laced with fear as the hour of departure approached. “Will our gods forgive us for what Cambyses is about to do?”

“All the signs from our gods are clear. No competent general leads this army. Aberis is no commander—the arrogant idiot is bound to make mistakes. God willing, we will never have to raze the temple.”

Sekhet looked unsure. Jabari knew she worried about the consequences of this sacrilege. “But you are marching through lands you have never seen. They say great dangers lurk far from the river.”

“Have I not served Amun all this time? Have we not made the necessary sacrifices? The god’s eyes will guide me.”

Sekhet nodded. They had discussed their strategy at length, and now was not the time to question or be indecisive. He pulled her closer. The rose-scented perfume on her bare arms and sensual torso distracted him. “We must act now, or your husband will forever kneel in front of a Persian. Is that what you want?”

She shook her head vigorously. “Do you think the senior men trust you?”

“You know that Aberis and Eribaeus have known us for years. Ritapates—I do not know him too well. He seems a dullard, a village idiot who has somehow made his way to the court, but Aberis trusts him.”

Jabari contemplated for a while. There was something he had thus far not shared with his wife. “But the one I worry about is Babak.”

Sekhet’s eyes widened. “Is that the Persian advisor you do not like?”

Sekhet was aware of the tension between Jabari and Babak; they had often clashed on matters of advice, and it irritated Jabari endlessly that Babak’s words received weight, even in the matters of Egypt, *his land!*

“Yes. He is the one I do not know well. He has inserted himself into the campaign for some reason. I know his wife is here,” he said.

“Yes, I have seen her. Roxana. She has a strange look for a Persian, that woman.”

“Perhaps you should strike up a friendship. Find out more about them. If you uncover anything alarming, then—” Jabari made a sign of slashing one’s throat. “But be cautious about what you do. Be guarded until the mission is complete and I return.”

Sekhet passed a beer cup to Jabari, who drank from it. He then inventoried the belongings he would take with him. It was unwise to leave it all behind with his wife while he was away. Despite their high status, crime had increased in Thebes, and one had to be careful. He would take most of the valuable ornaments and jewelry, and she would hold on to some, just in case of an emergency barter. Jabari was expected to return in no more than a month, or at most two.

When it was all done, he stood by the door and embraced her. She wished him safety. He brushed her curled hair and caressed her cheeks. She was gorgeous, and she deserved more than what they had. He whispered into her ear, “One day you will be queen.”

# CHAPTER 7

## THEBES

### ABERIS

##### 

Aberis admired himself in the reflection of his fine courtyard pool. The noble had finagled a spectacular villa by the river, a home that once belonged to an Egyptian highborn who had been led to his death after the defeat of Psamtik in Pelusium. But the place felt empty—for it was just him, a few whores and mistresses visiting once in a while, and many servants.

Finally, a commander of an entire army! It was a pity his family could not be here with him to revel in his glory. His wives and children were far away in Susa, and he had not seen them in over a year. Not that he missed them much—except, perhaps, his youngest wife. She was a fire in bed and outside. The children were annoying, and he hoped they would all stop sucking his wealth and bleeding him dry. Egypt was a chance to replenish those personal coffers. He had spent years in the service of King of Kings Cyrus and now his son, Cambyses. He had hinted to the kings that perhaps he deserved a fine province of his own, one where he could retire and profit from the produce of the land. But until now, no such benevolence was forthcoming. Either the kings were blind to his service, or perhaps they awaited the right opportunity.

And now, *finally!*

The order was to raze Ammon and enslave its citizens. He did worry about the mission—what if the Oracle was truly powerful? How would this act of impunity against a house of gods be seen by the gods and people of Egypt? Was the *Shahanshah* making a mistake? Aberis cast aside those seeds of doubt. He would have to find a way to avoid losing the entire population, for what would he have to govern otherwise? A desert? Mute rocks and sand? It all depended on how the town fought. If they gave up quietly and complied, he might choose to let them live and convince the king to spare them. He could make a handsome bounty by selling them as slaves to various needs of the empire. The women could resupply the homes and brothels, while the children could do delicate work in the mines, though, of course, they died quickly, which was a pity. In any case, towns could be built, and people would return. A few thousand dead or enslaved meant little in the greater purpose of the empire.

He would lord over all Northern Egypt. With luck, he would control the ports by the sea, the trading routes from the Levant and Babylonia, and even the western edges of the fertile delta. All he had to do was finish this pesky mission. He was aware that he was no general, and he hoped that even this hastily assembled detachment and the ragtag team of advisors would be more than enough. Many had warned him about the hostile nature of the desert—but he had seen deserts before and was not too worried. After all, there were supply points, and who would dare attack an army of fifty thousand? Where would they appear from? The Scythian archers were talented, even if they acted without their horses. The Syrians were proficient with the axe. He still had fifteen thousand Persians, better equipped and rationed, and no doubt they would handle anything that came their way. The Greeks could be annoying, but they were vicious and talented. Their leader, Eribaeus, had some influence with the king, but nothing Aberis could not manage.

On his journey, he would take with him some of his most prized possessions—a full cart with incredible treasures gathered since his departure for Susa. He could not risk leaving it here. But he would have to guard it during the expedition—no one would need to know of it.

He straightened his back and let his assistant fuss over him.

A nobleman today.

An influential governor and lord of an entire portion of Egypt in twenty days.

Aberis smiled to himself.

It would be a glorious campaign.

Once they dealt with the temple, they would compensate the priests in Memphis and elsewhere to pacify the gods.

# Thank You

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## THE END