

CASCA

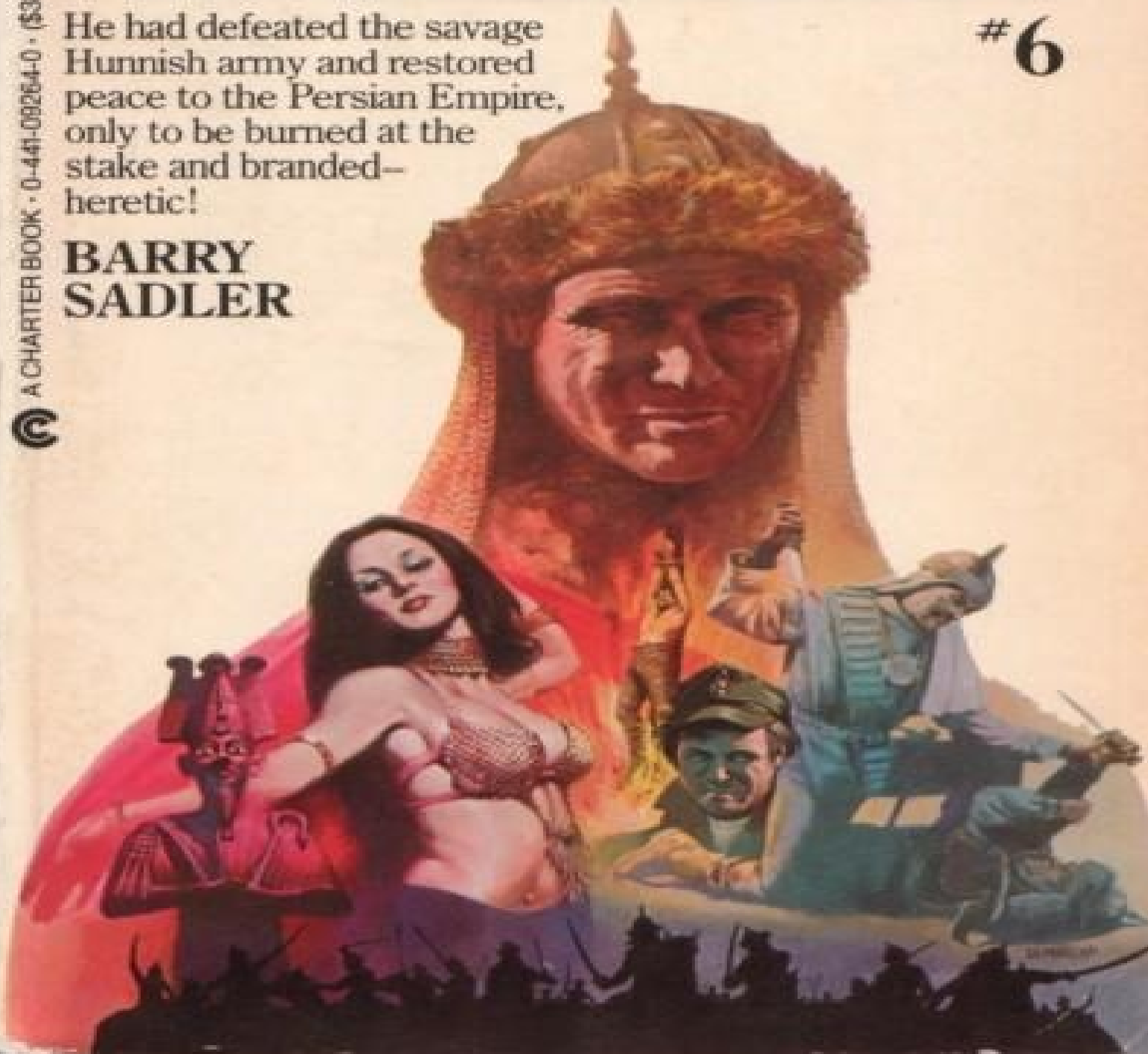
THE PERSIAN

#6

He had defeated the savage Hunnish army and restored peace to the Persian Empire, only to be burned at the stake and branded-heretic!

**BARRY
SADLER**

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The Persian

by Barry Sadler

PROLOGUE

Julius Goldman wandered among the booths and stands of the purveyors of medical supplies and goods. Stethoscopes and enema kits mingled with the latest in medical technology, while machines that could represent a three-dimensional scan of the human body were displayed alongside films demonstrating the use of laser beams to seal off tiny bleeders in the eyes.

This annual gathering of the American Medical Association was always interesting and exciting to him. He knew many of those present and a lot of them were close colleagues, but Goldman's eyes were searching for one face in particular.

He finally found him in the maze of booths and slick presentations. He was leaning over the counter of one of the booths talking to one of the bright-faced, pretty young girls, hired to attract the attentions of the doctors to a particular booth.

Goldman worked his way through the crowd and touched the man he'd been looking for on the shoulder.

"Doctor Landries?"

The former Army colonel, and Goldman's onetime commanding officer, turned around. He was still tanned and lean, extraordinarily healthy looking. His hair was thinner now and completely silver, but his eyes and manner were quick and sure as ever; so was his grasp of Goldman's hand in a sincere display of pleasure at seeing his old comrade again. He laughed pleasantly.

"Goldman! The Hebraic hero of the Eighth Field Hospital, and terror of all nurses. How in the hell are you, son?"

He took Goldman's arm, completely forgetting the sweet young thing he'd been talking to. She was pouting a bit now, Goldman could see, at losing the attention of Bob Landries, but another, younger neurosurgeon was moving in to replace him.

He guided Goldman out of the convention center and they boarded one of the buses that made regular runs to the hotels servicing the center.

Goldman was genuinely happy at seeing his friend again. It had been a long time. Landries ran his hand through his thinning hair and looked out the window of the bus, watching the streets of Atlanta pass by as they pulled on to Peach tree, heading to the downtown area.

"Have you heard any more about our mutual friend?"

Goldman knew who Landries was talking about. He smoothed down the vest of his conservative three-piece pinstripe suit, a little uncomfortable at the tightness of the vest at the midriff. He would have to lose some weight.

"Yes!" He started to continue but Landries stopped him.

"Wait until we get to the hotel. We'll settle down with a drink and talk. I always have a need for one when the name of Casey Romain comes up."

Goldman agreed and the two talked of things doctors talk about: new techniques, prices for services, and, naturally, the good old days when they were some years younger.

Landries was seven years Goldman's senior, but looked about the same age, with his tanned face and lean body. He'd always been an exercise nut, Goldman remembered, feeling a little guilty at letting himself go to pot over the past few years. After looking at his old boss he made himself a promise—knowing he more than likely would not keep it—that he would try and put himself back into shape. Taking their turn, they exited the bus and entered the air-conditioned enclosure of the hotel. It was a modern inn with elevators of glass chutes and an open-air restaurant and lounge in the lobby. They found a table with a degree of privacy beside an indoor pond where goldfish swam with studied unconcern.

Drinks were ordered. Landries, as usual, had a double Blackjack and water; Goldman ordered Scotch and soda. The two men waited until their drinks were served and their waitress with the airline smile had left them before they commenced talking about that which both knew was the main reason for their meeting.

Goldman began first, after taking a sip of his drink.

"Casca ... or Casey, as you and I knew him..."

The names called to Landries' memory the time they'd first met the man Romain, who'd been brought to them as a casualty in Vietnam. Goldman continued his story, and Bob Landries was slightly envious that Casca had chosen Goldman to tell his story to. But then Goldman had been the one who'd spotted the strange healing process of a wound that should have been fatal, and had heard the beginnings of the weird tale of the man who'd killed Jesus at Golgotha, and of the punishment that Jesus had given him. To wander the earth unable to die until the Second Coming, forever a soldier—condemned to a life of endless wandering and war. He smiled a little, recalling how he and Goldman had had the man's medical records destroyed after Casca, or Casey, had disappeared from the hospital. No one would have believed them.

A few years after the Vietnam debacle had ended, their patient had shown up at Goldman's house and begun telling him the full story of his odyssey through the ages. He had the power to take Goldman into his life and enable him to experience all that he had done. Since then, Goldman had developed a compulsion to put down the words and story of Casca Rufio Longinus, soldier of Imperial Rome, whose travels and adventures over the face of the earth made the journey of Ulysses seem no more than a mild weekend excursion in the country.

Landries half emptied his glass and called for another. He coughed, clearing his throat.

"I suppose the reason you came to this gathering of the entire medical world is that you've had another visit from our friend?"

Goldman nodded his head in the affirmative. "Yes, and I have the story in my room. Do you want to read it?"

Landries gave a short laugh, almost a snort.

"That is a dumb question, Goldman. You know that I would travel halfway around the world to read his story. But doesn't it exhaust you to be the sounding board for him? How can you stand living through all his pain, his suffering and disappointments?"

Goldman shook his head. "I don't know, but I have to finish what we started. It's like being hooked on drugs. I have to complete it, and the worst of it is, I know that I never will. He has outlived the Roman Empire, the Persian and British Empires and I see no indicator that he will not outlive the both of us—that is, unless the Second Coming of Christ arrives sooner than we expect." Meeting Casca had left Goldman with a few questions. He was fast doubting the teachings of his faith about Jesus not being the Son of God. He continued.

"Let's finish these and go up to my room. I'll give you the manuscript to take back to your own room and read."

Landries agreed and paid their tab. They took one of the glass-cocooned elevators up to Goldman's room. Inside, Goldman handed the manuscript to Landries and they returned to the lobby. He escorted Landries to the doorway, where the heat of the Atlanta streets was being restrained outside.

Landries was anxious to get started on the reading of the next story of Casca and asked Goldman, "Where is he this time?"

Goldman smiled. "Be patient, Bob. After all, Casca has been patient for years, hasn't he?"

Landries agreed, and after he'd made Goldman promise to mail him all the manuscripts from there on they shook hands and said goodbye.

Landries exited the hotel into the midday heat, hailing a cab to return him to his own hotel. He didn't

feel like waiting for the buses that came by every thirty minutes. He had to get back, relax, and see what had happened to Casca.

In the cab, and in spite of himself, he opened the manuscript and peeked at the cover to see the title. Perhaps it would give him a clue as to Casca's location in this particular segment of his history. His eyes fell upon it—

CASCA, The Persian. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Hot, boiling, shimmering, the sun broke over the rim of the world, sending spears of flaming light across the clear skies of the high steppes. By midday it would be hot enough to cook a brain in its own pan. But for now there was still enough chill left over from the night air to make the breath of the horse and its rider visible in the small clouds of vapor that were whisked away by the freshening morning breeze.

That cool breeze would soon change into a moisture-sucking blast furnace. Before then, the man and his horse would have to find shelter, as had the snakes and lizards. Shelter from the killing rays of the life-giving and-taking sun of high Asia.

To the west, the lifeless, barren, sky-reaching peaks known as the roof of the world, with their eternal caps of ice and gale-swept snow, seemed terribly distant and aloof from the sufferings of those who ventured to cross the desolate wastes of the desert in its shadow.

The rider raised his eyes, red-rimmed and sore from the ever-present grains of sand that invaded every pore and opening of his body, and even the food he ate. He understood now why the men of this region's tribes nearly always had their teeth worn down to stubs before their beards turned gray. There was sand in everything they ate from the time of their birth to their death. Every day the grit ground their teeth down a little more until there was nothing left but smooth stubs resting against the gums. The thought of it made his own teeth ache.

His horse stumbled, then caught itself on wobbly legs. It scarcely resembled the fine-blooded, pampered animal it had been when Sung mi Hsiung, the commander of the garrison at the Jade Gate, had given it to him. Its rider was scarcely in any better condition. His posture told of the weary, lonely miles they had come. He doubted that if he tried to trade in the animal right now, he could receive even a couple of sick goats in exchange.

But they had come far from the wall that runs forever. He had chosen not to take the Suget pass trail back to the Capital of Kushan on the banks of the Indus. No, this time he followed the silk road, but now was the wrong time for such a crossing. The last two waterholes had been dry; even when he dug down a depth of several feet he could find no trace of moisture.

The rider raised his eyes to the sky, the pale blue of them almost washed out by the gray of the dawn. Deep lines crinkled at the edges of them gave him a slightly Oriental look. From a distance, he could have passed for a nomadic tribesman as the skin that was exposed was as dark as a mongol's.

Nowhere had he heard such silence as that of this region of the great wastes, where it was said, made on the winds was the howling of the lost souls, as dunes of sand were shifted from one spot to another one grain at a time. For months, that was the only sign of movement until the wind demons came in their full fury. The force of the wind, carrying the sand with it in sky-darkening clouds, would strip the flesh from a man's body in a few minutes and leave nothing but bare bones and rags as silent testimony to the vengeance of the wind demons.

The lands of Chin lay a thousand and more miles behind him. He had lived there longer than he had in any other place in his life and felt as if he were leaving a part of him behind. But his own personal demon was driving him, back to the land of his birth, back to Rome.

For all of his life, he had thought that Rome was the center of the world and the only real barrier against the hordes of barbarism. But in the lands behind the Great Wall, he had found out that in comparison to the culture and refinements of Chin, Rome itself was only a few steps ahead of the barbarians. Still, Rome was the place of his birth and sometimes, no matter how a man may have been treated, he has to go back to his source. He was still Casca Rufio Longinus, a soldier and sometimes even a slave of the Empire.

Ahead of him, he knew, still lay the lands of Sogdiana and Parthia, which he would have to pass through before reaching the first of the Roman dominions. Parthia! It still held a bitter taste for him. He had fought there under the Eagles of Avidius Cassius and participated in the sacking of the city of Cestiphon—where forty-five thousand had died in one day.

Pulling his horse to a stop, he dismounted, took the reins, and led the animal to a cluster of tall brush and withered, leafless trees. There he carefully doled out a slim measure of his precious water supply to wipe the muzzle and moisten the delicate membranes of the horse's nostrils to keep them from bleeding. A handful for the horse to taste, and he licked the remaining moisture from his own fingers careful to waste nothing. Taking what had once been a fine cloak of red silk, he spread it over the branches of the withered trees to make a sheltered spot to protect them from the sun that would soon be over them.

Placing the horse where he could have some benefit from their meager shelter, he stripped down to the skin in order to shake out his tunic and the loose trousers he wore. His body was crisscrossed with uncounted scars of various degrees of severity. Some he had received as a slave in the war galleys of Rome, others came from battles he now found hard to recall.

When he was satisfied that he had shaken out most of the sand that had managed to creep into every seam and wrinkle, he redressed himself, wincing at the raw spots in his groin and armpits. Lying down, he tried to make himself as comfortable as possible moving several rocks from under tender spots. But his leg had an ache in it. A dull, burning throb where a brass arrow head was imbedded deep in the muscles of his left thigh. A souvenir from a Parthian marksman at Cestiphon, Closing his eyes, he tried to rest, ignoring the labored breathing of his horse. If they didn't come to water soon the horse would die, and that meant he would walk, for Mithra only knew how many miles until he could steal or buy another one. As far as horses dying, that didn't particularly concern him. At least he'd have some fresh meat and the blood would give him strength. The Romans were practical people, not given to an excess of sentiment.

As he slept, the heat of the day grew in intensity. Hot and dry, it sucked the moisture from his skin as fast as it appeared, leaving only traces of his body salts behind to streak his tunic. Flies buzzed in frustration as they tried to beat the sun to the life-giving moisture that came from his pores. Flies, it seemed, were the only creatures in existence that could appear from nowhere, in a hellhole such as this where even the lizards buried themselves in the sand to escape the heat.

Semiconscious, he would sweep them away from his face and eyes, then turn and dream of places and people long dead, faces of those he had loved and of those he had killed. They came in a jumbled torrent until all merged together and he couldn't tell them apart.

His horse hung its head low and tried to sleep also, tail twitching from side to side, shivers running up its flanks. It too tried to shake off the nagging drone of the flies. As these two tossed and squirmed in their restless sleep, others were awake and moving. Two forces of men were converging on a waterhole some twenty miles in front. Each unaware of the other, they followed separate trails. Both parties had the look of hard men about them.

Those from the south were led by a slender warrior with his head shaved bald except for a long scalplock. He was the youngest of the warriors in whose bloodlines showed some trace of the west. Several had fair hair and light-colored eyes. The other party coming from the north was made up of short, stocky men whose faces had been seared with red hot irons at the moment of their birth, so that only mustaches grew on their lips and nothing at all on their chins. These riders' legs were twisted and deformed from the years they had spent on horseback. The bows they carried were made of laminated wood and horn, similar to those of the Parthians. One thing they had that was different from those coming from the south: they had not just the look of men who killed, but men who lusted after it.

Huns! Those nomadic tribesmen worshipped the primal spirits of the earth and sky and prayed before

a naked sword.

~~They would meet those from the south at the waterhole and when they did, men would die, for the Huns and the men of Kushan were blood enemies and had been so for five hundred years.~~

Casca, former Baron of Chin, used his saddlebags for a pillow. The fortune in gems, given to him by the Emperor Tzin as a parting gift, gave him small comfort. At that moment he would have traded them all for a full goatskin of rancid swamp water. Moving, he tried to find a more comfortable position as his purse dug into his groin. The irritating object inside the leather pouch was his seal of office. The Chuhou wang of a noble of the court of the Son of Heaven; a solid gold seal, with a rounded knob of tortoise shell. This seal was what he had needed to gain horses, food, and lodging while in the lands of Chin. But here it was just as useless as the gems in his saddlebags.

The short double-edged sword close to his hand was infinitely more valuable than either the gems or the seal, at least until he reached lands civilized enough to appreciate the value of the small collection of rainbows that rested under his brown shaggy-haired head.

Several times he would wake for a few heat-drugged moments, then drop back off into his uneasy slumber. Not until the sun began its decline did he finally stir himself to rising. Taking a double handful of dried mare's milk curds, he mixed them with enough water to soften them and give the illusion of wetness. He ate one handful and fed the rest to his horse as he watched the heat waves dance and shimmer over the floor of the desert.

That night, as he led his horse over the sands, he looked to the skies and the twinkling, distant stars. It was said in Chin that the astronomers there had charted the courses of over eleven thousand of the sparkling lights. To what purpose, he really didn't understand, but those distant lights were as important to them as were their gods. It was said that they could tell the future from them. But if they could, he couldn't see how man could keep screwing things up—especially if he knew beforehand what was going to happen.

As the constellation known as The Hunter passed overhead, he came across the mummified remains of a camel and its rider, lying side by side on the trail. The skin of the man was drawn tight in a perpetual leathery sneer, the lips pulled back from the teeth. Here, not even the vultures ventured to clean up. The packs on the camel had already been opened and picked over so Casca didn't bother. Others had come this way since the unknown traveler had died. It could have been a month or even several years ago. It didn't matter to him and certainly not to the desiccated husk lying there.

The warriors of Kushan had reached the water-hole as Casca passed the dead man and the camel. They were lying now, drinking, face down in the murky waters of the spring-fed refuge. From a nearby hill a lone horseman watched them. The Hun disappeared back into the darkness to rejoin his gnomish comrades.

There was not room for both groups at the oasis and the Huns were not known for sharing anything, even if the Kushanites would have been so inclined, which was not likely.

A hundred times since passing through the Jade Gate, Casca had cursed himself for leaving behind him the silken pavilions and comforts of Chin. He could have waited a little longer before leaving, but smartass that he was, he had to try a crossing at this time. Before dawn he made camp once more, this time in a cluster of boulders. The ground had become rougher, but at least he knew that he was leaving the sands behind him. From his map he knew that the waterhole was not far ahead. He would rest a little while in the shade of the rocks and then move on and try to reach it before the next nightfall. He didn't want to take a chance on passing it in the dark.

The Huns had moved in closer to the waterhole and were preparing for the slaughter. They took strips of leather to cover their horses' hooves, to muffle even more the slight sounds made by their unshod hooves as they crossed over the rocky ground leading to the oasis in the rocks.

Half their number had dismounted and now moved on twisted legs to vantage points in the rocks,

where they would take easy shots with their bows at the targets below them.

Exhausted, the Kushanites slept. The four sentries on watch at the entrance to the spring also fell into a deep, deep sleep, heads nodding. It was to be a sleep from which they would never wake. The young leader of the Kushanites would have had their heads if he had known of their dereliction. He was of the tribe of the Yueh Chih and had more of the blood of Asia in his veins. But this night he slept deeply, wrapped in his horse blanket and unaware of the death that was slowly approaching.

The Hunnish bowmen waited until the two Kushanite sentries were taken out, their throats slit with skinning knives, then they drew back the strings and targeted the sleeping bodies below. Their targets were easy to mark in the glow of the campfire by the dark waters of the spring.

A half-dozen arrows found their way into the backs and stomachs of the sleeping warriors before one managed a scream of agony. The rest leapt to their feet, weapons at the ready, only to be trod down under the muffled hooves of the Huns' war horses. Heads fell to the ground to lie grinning obscenely by the rocks, as the bodies they had just recently been so attached to jerked and twitched, heels drumming against the hard earth.

The young warrior of the Yuen Chih managed to sink his sword into the chest of one Hun's horse, sending it and its rider crashing to the ground, where he dispatched the seared face of the barbarian with a well-aimed stroke of his yatagai. His victory yell was short-lived as a thrown ax struck with the flat of its blade, sending him back into the darkness he had so recently come out of. The rest of his band died where they stood, no survivors. Prisoners were a luxury the Huns could ill afford at this time. They had been ordered to make all haste to the felt yurts of the tribes gathering far to the east, where there was to be a great killing. They had been driven far from the Great Wall by the armies of Chin, but now they were coming back in greater numbers than ever before and the wall would not long stand between them and riches of Chin.

Their only survivor was spared for the moment. The Hun leader wished to question him as to the reason warriors of Kushan were so far from their borders. But until the young warrior regained consciousness, he was of little use. Meanwhile, his captors helped themselves to whatever they liked from the packs and bodies of the dead. They slit the throat of one of the Kushan horses and soon had the rich red flesh sizzling over hot coals.

Casca raised his face and sniffed the wind. Meat, freshly cooking meat! His mouth tried to salivate and failed; there was too little moisture in his system to waste for such luxuries. Tying his animal's reins to a bush, he readied himself to see just who it was that was having a hot meal. In this region, it was not probable that he would be made welcome. Loosening his blade in its scabbard, he then strung his bow, grunting from the effort to bend it down to where he could slip the gut string on it. The bow was a gift from Sung Ti the Baron of Chung Wei, made years ago when they had fought the Mongols and Huns together in the service of the Son of Heaven. Less than four feet long when strung, the bow made in Hunnish manner, could drive an arrow through the side of a horse and still have enough power to kill a man on the other side.

Making his way cautiously through the boulders and scrub brush, he came upon the signs left by the Huns. There were at least ten of them, maybe more. Snaking his way closer to the smell of roasting meat, he crested a small rise and looked down on the spring.

Whistling between his teeth, he counted them. Eleven Huns lay about the hole in various states of stupor. They had gorged themselves on red meat and fermented mare's milk. The bodies of the Kushanites had been dragged off to the side and piled in a heap. There, they served to keep the flies off the Huns and on the dead, where even now the insects clustered in black, moving clots on the still draining bodies.

Casca started to move back and away, content to leave them the waterhole until they finished and moved on. The odds were they wouldn't stay there very long. As he started to crawl back on his belly

a movement in the pile of bodies caught his attention. One wasn't dead. He watched as the figure twisted and tried to sit up, arms and feet bound with strips of rawhide. Something about the man stopped him from retreating. The way he held his head, the set of the jaw, something? Then it came to him. Jugotai! Jugotai, the youngster who had been his guide when he first came to the east from across the mountains. From this distance it was hard to be certain but it damned sure looked like him, and those were Kushanite dead stacked up down there. It bothered him, because the young man down there could not be old enough to have been his guide. That had been nearly thirty years ago. Sighing deeply he grunted. "Well, if that's the way of it, I might as well get started."

He laid his quiver of arrows beside him and looked over the situation again. Not so good; there were still a lot of Huns down there, and while he might get three or four before the rest got up and moving it was still risky.

No, he'd have to do something really dirty to get the boy free. Alright, first off I have to reduce the odds a bit, he thought. From where he was perched, there was only one exit for the Huns to take on horseback. All the horses were tied in a line near some dry brush they had been feeding on. There's only one thing that Huns really hate to do, and that is to walk. There were sixteen horses, counting those of the Kushanites. Casca doubted that he would have time to kill them and handle the Huns too. Besides, he wasn't an expert marksman. He could hit the broad side of the target usually, but nothing fancy. The Huns were heavy into sleep. When they awoke, they would have some bad heads from the fermented mare's milk. He knew from personal experience the aftereffects of a night of drinking Kvass. Taking a thatch of dry grass, he pulled some threads from his tunic, tied the grass around the shafts of two arrows, and then laid out the rest of the shafts on the ground, close at hand. The horses were only about one hundred feet away so he wouldn't have any trouble hitting the brush beside them and, as dry as it was, it should catch on fire pretty fast and still leave him enough time to shoot down at least a couple from the back while they were still sleeping. He struck off a spark from his flint and tinder, blowing it into a small smokeless flame, and touched off the fire arrows. Quickly he sighted, rose to his knees, and drew the cord almost to his ear, letting fly first one, then the other. The twanging of the bow wasn't loud enough to be heard.

The arrows smoked their way into the brush where the horses were tied. As he expected, it didn't take but a few seconds before the brush burst into a rapidly burning flame. The horses shied away from the licking flames and Casca picked new targets. A snoring, sleeping Hun. This time he drew the string all the way back to his ear and the arrow pinned the sleeping man to the earth. He got off two more shots before the whinnying of the horses, combined with the screaming of one of the Huns he had shot, roused the rest of the sleepers. They stumbled to their feet, red-eyed and hung over, reaching for their weapons in confusion. He shot another in the groin, the flat-bladed arrow taking off one testicle. "Shit," he cursed. He had been aiming at the man's stomach. The horses broke and began to shy away from the flames, but they weren't running. So he took the time to send a couple of shafts into the nearest of the animals' rear ends. This served to give the rest of them the needed impetus to break and run, as did the Huns on their twisted legs, looking for cover and trying to locate their enemy. Casca took one more out with a lucky shot that hit the man squarely between the shoulder blades and exited at hands-length out the front of his chest. By then, he'd had to dodge a couple of arrows himself. He had the advantage of being on the high ground or they probably would have nailed him right off. They were, he admitted, all damned better bowmen than he was.

Yelling down to them, he spoke in the language of Chin. One called back to him, "What is it that you want and who are you that hides from us like a pariah dog? Come down and fight."

Casca grinned, his eyes never leaving the Huns in the rocks. "I'm glad to see at least one of you has the ability to speak in more than grunts, grunts that are the natural tongue of your tribes. What I want is to make a deal."

The Hun leader yelled back. "I'm listening."

~~"Unless you bowlegged little bastards would be fond of walking out of this place and across the desert I would suggest that you give my offer careful consideration."~~

"Why should we listen to you? We have you outnumbered and it would be just a matter of time before you're laid out to be properly butchered."

"Normally, that would be true, you ugly little bastard, but not right now. If you won't deal with me, then I'm going to leave you here, take my horse, and go after yours and kill them all. That will guarantee that you will leave your bones on the trail with no one to sing your death song except the flies."

The Huns below realized that what he said was true. He would have the advantage and from what he had just done, there was no doubt that he would do exactly as he said. And it was a long way to the feyurts of their tribes.

"What is your offer?"

"Let the captive go. Give him a full skin of water and another of good food from his own supplies. Once he is in the clear, we'll leave. Your horses will return before long. They have to come back to drink sometime so you'll just have to wait a little while for them. By then I'll be long gone and you can continue your journey with more horses than you started with. Is that fair enough?"

The Hun below thought about it for a moment. He really had no other choice. "So be it. We'll let you have the Yueh Chih pup and the water and food. But no weapons for him. That would increase your advantage too much."

"I agree," called back Casca. "Send him on up."

Keeping a wary eye on the rocks, one of the Huns slid and waddled over to the Yueh Chih warrior and freed him from his bonds. The young man had heard all that had transpired between the Huns and his hidden ally in the rocks above. He wasted no time in getting a skin of water and a sack of food from the pile of looted goods. He looked longingly at his personal weapons but made no move towards them. Throwing his load on his shoulders, he rapidly began to climb up to his protector's perch. A scarred hand reached out to help and pulled him up to safety. A strong shove and he was clear of the ledge.

Casca gave a curt, "Get your ass to the back and down the ridge. I have a horse there. Give him some water and we'll get our butts out of here while we have the chance." He called back to the Huns, "Now you girls just be patient. If I see just one inch of your scabby hides away from the water-hole, I'll kill the horses."

He backed away, still careful not to give the Huns a bow shot. By the time he'd made his way back to his horse the young warrior had allowed the animal to sip a large measure of their water supply, and the fluid already had imparted a little life to his lackluster eyes. But it still lacked the strength to carry a double load, so they moved out on foot. Casca leading, they half-walked, half-trotted away from the hole, following the tracks of the panicked horses. After about an hour, and another dose of water followed with a handful of grain from the food sack, Casca's horse was ready to be ridden, but still only by one. The youngster held onto the tail and they were still moving in this manner when they came on the first of the horses resting in the shade of some boulders. The Yueh Chih warrior gave a low whistle and the beast stayed put until the young man gained its reins. It was his own horse. As the youngster swung up into his saddle, Casca asked him, "What is your name? It wouldn't be Jugotai by any chance?"

The youngster whipped his head around, the scalplock flying. "No, I am Shuvar, son of Jugotai. Do you know my father?"

Casca laughed a deep chuckle. "Aye, boy, I knew him when he was no older than you, many years ago. The two rode together, rounding up all the horses they could find. Two mounts evaded them but they

moved on, herding the horses before them. Shuvar questioned Casca, "Aren't you going to leave them for the Huns as you promised?"

Casca shook his shaggy head. "No way. We missed two and I hate to leave them behind. One thing you learn in life, if you live as long as I have, and that is to never give a barbarian an even break. If we let them get back their mounts they would come after us, or go and kill someone else. Besides, they still have a chance to survive."

When they made camp that night, Shuvar responded to Casca's questions about his reasons for being so far from Kushan's borders. Shuvar told him he was to deliver a message to Chin that they had won and the Huns were on the march again. The hordes were gathering together with new allies, including the Mongol tribes, for an all-out assault on Chin. For a while Casca thought about returning with Shuvar, but decided to go on his way. There would be little he could do now and the wheel of time had turned too far for him to go back. With the dawn he bid farewell to Shuvar, gave him his bow and his remaining arrows, three of the horses, and most of the supplies. He would be closer to a place to replenish them than would be the dashing young warrior, who would be crossing the hell that Casca had just traversed.

The youngster wheeled his animals around for the long journey to the first imperial outposts at HoTien. Before the youngster left he cried out, "I forgot to ask your name, to tell my father who it was that saved his son."

The scar-faced man smiled broadly. "Tell him it was the Roman, Casca, who still lives and walks the earth."

Shuvar's mouth dropped in astonishment. "Hail, Roman! My father told me of your journeys together. But I thought you would surely be a much older man."

The Roman laughed again. "I am young, Shuvar, I am."

"Ride fast and ride well."

Casca waved his sword arm in salute and turned to herd his share of the horses on down the trail leading to Sogdiana and Parthia.

CHAPTER TWO

A week after leaving Shuvar he crossed the Jaxartes river, still keeping to the north of Sogdiana's boundaries. Not until he reached the Oxus did he encounter patrols of armored men. These he gave a wide berth to, staying to himself.

From an occasional caravan he'd heard of the state of the world as they knew it. The Sassanids, he learned, had risen to new heights of power. Since they had replaced the Parthian Kings, their empire had made almost a complete return to a pure Persian influence, though they still made use of the Cataphracti and the heavy infantry of their predecessors.

Shuvar had not had time to tell him that even Kushan was under the sovereignty of the Sassanid King and though it was still ruled in his name, it yet paid tribute and recognized the Persians as its overlords.

It was necessary that Kushan have strong allies. The pressure of the Huns was becoming so great that they could not live long and survive without them, and it was better to bow to the Persians than to be beheaded by the Huns.

The Persian soldiery that he did meet had paid little attention to him. As a lone rider he posed no threat to them nor to the Empire. As far as they were concerned he was most obviously not a Hun, and dressed as poorly as he was, in rags, he could not be of much importance to anyone. They had ridden on, ignoring him.

When he reached the city of Nev-Shapur, named after the founder of the new Persian Empire, Shapur II, he hesitated a bit before entering through the protected gates and past the watchful eyes of the bearded sentries. It was the morning rush hour, when the workers of the fields and the merchants from surrounding villages brought their wares into the city proper for sale, or to be transhipped to other parts of the Persian Empire and even to Rome. As the city was located directly on what was known as the silk road, that in itself was enough to guarantee its success as a trading center, and today it was booming as such.

Casca had followed a caravan of double-humped camels, braying and spitting under the loads they carried swinging on their backs. The gates of the city closed at dusk and did not reopen until the first light, and at that time, as it was now, hundreds waited outside the city to gain entry. Most waited within a mile of the city gates, where a place was set aside for them to gather and wait for the coming of the light of Ahuramazda, the sun.

Wending his way through the throngs, he entered the gates without being challenged. The city was much the same as many others he'd been in; the myriad smells and the crying of the vendors to sell their wares, all in a dozen tongues. The city itself was clean, but architecturally was different from Rome.

Since the Sassanids had taken over, he could see that they'd done their best to bring back the ways of their age; the buildings and official structures showed the influence of centuries long past. Basrelief carvings were to be seen everywhere—scenes reflecting the great triumphs of Persia's past and, even more, of its new era.

Casca found his way to the street set aside for the jewelers and money lenders. He was careful not to use any language but Latin. From the friezes he had seen, representing Shapur accepting the surrender of the Roman emperor, Valerian, he figured Romans were not welcome. Valerian had died while still captive of the Persian who led him through the principal cities of his lands on a leash, crawling before his captors, the Persian hosts, on his belly. The descriptiveness of the friezes was explicit. In Rome Constantine was emperor, but from the vibrance of these Persians, Casca figured Rome had better watch its ass if they ever decided to move west.

A traveler pointed him in the direction of a brick building said to be the residence of a money lender and jeweler, but only after wrinkling his nose in distaste at the sour odor coming from the light-eyed stranger in the rags of a beggar. He did comment, however, on Casca's fine horse.

Entering the confines of the cool building, his eyes went blank for a second before adjusting themselves to the darkness inside. A figure emerged from behind a multicolored curtain and looked questioningly at him. He inquired first in Aramaic, which Casca didn't speak, then looked closer at the square-muscle frame with the light eyes and sun-bleached hair. Could he be a Circassian? No, there was something about this stranger in his shop that made him think not.

"Vale, Roman. What do you here in the city of Shapur? Perhaps you seek your death? If so, it will be easy to find, if those outside see you as I do."

A larger figure loomed behind the shopkeeper; a massive man with shaven head and huge arms that looked long enough to reach to his knees. Casca sized up what he assumed was the shopkeeper's bodyguard. He appeared big enough to mate with one of the sculptures of bulls he'd seen that appeared life-sized in glazed bricks on the city walls.

The bodyguard looked Casca over, too, while Casca was deciding that the merchant was not of the race of the Aryan Persians. He gave the gray-haired, full-bearded shopkeeper a shock, then, speaking in the man's native tongue.

"Shalom, son of David. We are both a long way from our homelands, so it seems."

Shopkeeper Samuel Ben Ezra hesitated in surprise. Not many in these lands spoke the tongue of Solomon. He looked again at his guest with suspicion.

"Shalom, and peace unto you, Roman. How may I serve you in my humble establishment?"

Casca removed his pouch from the waistband and took out two large yellow sapphires. He placed them softly into the hand of the Jew.

"Give me what is fair in silver and gold for these stones."

Samuel held the stones to the light, moving closer to the door of his shop to take best advantage of the sun. He turned them over and over.

"What do you want for these?"

Casca smiled. "I said give me what is fair. Surely you would not cheat a fellow stranger who is as far from his home as you are. I know your people and know that their word is their bond. Tell me what you will give. It shall be fair and I will accept it."

Samuel pursed his lips in wonder. This was a strange one. But, he was right. The Jewish merchants of the world survived only because their word was good, and all who traded with them knew it. A letter from one merchant to another promising payment in gold or silver to the bearer would be honored by any of his race as far away as the limits of the known world, and without question.

The Jewish merchants of the world survived because of this fact, and though the nations of the world might be enemies, the business of commerce had to go on. Even though the Jews had been persecuted and driven from their homelands, they were the only ones who could fill this gap and this everyone knew. Commerce was the key to survival for the sons of David and if they were to ever break their word, the blood of their people would flow again and they would have no place left on this earth. So, by necessity, they had become the bankers of the world. With no nation to call their own, they were bound only by their loyalty to one another and the oaths to their trade.

"I will give you twenty silver coins of Darius and one-half gold denarius of Rome."

Casca extended his hand to shake. "It is done." The business settled, the two men went to Samuel's private quarters. Drinks of mint were served by his bodyguard, who watched over the old man like a mother hen, reluctant to leave his master even when Samuel dismissed him with instructions to return to the front of the shop to keep an eye on his goods.

The two men sat across from each other, Casca commenting on the softness of the cushions they sat on.

as compared to his saddle. Their drinks sat on a low table of inlaid teak and enamel mosaic. Samuel served bread and salt. The two tasted as one and the bond was made.

"Welcome to my house and the blessing of The Lord be with you. Forgive me now if I repeat myself, but in this land you are in more danger than myself. Rome and its people are not loved here. I would suggest that you go on your way and leave the nation of Shapur behind as swiftly as your legs, or those of your horse, will carry you. If you have need of transport, I can arrange for you to join a caravan whose master owes me a personal favor." Casca nodded, sipped his hot mint, and replied: "I am not in as much danger as you may believe. I bear letters from the Son of Heaven, the Emperor of Chin. As you surely know, messengers are given favored status by all civilized nations and must be treated with courtesy. There is really no danger for me here. I do plan to return to my lands soon, but the trail over the silk road is long and I am tired and would rest here a while before continuing my journey. Speaking of rest, could you recommend an inn? One that is outside the gates for the timebeing. I wish to prepare myself before presenting my documents to the court."

Samuel thought a moment before replying.

"Yes, there is one. When you entered the city you had to pass through the old town outside the walls. Return there and ask directions for the Inn of Beshar; he is a thief but at least he is a cowardly one. He would think twice before robbing one with your scars of battle."

Casca thanked him for his hospitality and his advice. He rose from the cushions, smiling. "I hope to see you again, Samuel Ben Ezra."

The old man shook his head in the negative.

"I do not think that would be wise. My people are only barely tolerated here and if one such as yourself were seen here doing dealings with us it might lead to trouble. We Jews of the world must walk a careful line. I wish you good fortune but please, do not come here again. It could lead to disaster for us both. I am too old to move and start again..."

He escorted Casca to the door, remaining carefully in the shadows, whispering.

"Remember what I have told you. Do not linger in this land or you will live to regret it, messenger or not. I can feel something that gives the aura of pain. Go home, Roman, while you still can."

Casca bid the old Jew farewell and made his way back outside the gates of the city. On his way, he bumped into a man whose face was hidden, knocking the smaller man to the ground. Reaching to help him up, his left hand grasped the sleeve of the other's robe, jostling the hood somewhat.

He quickly pulled the hood back into place, hiding his face in its shadows, and brushed off Casca's attempted apologies. He stopped in mid-speech when he saw the scar encircling Casca's wrist. Looking up at the scarred face of this foreigner, the man quickly slipped from Casca's grip and fled down the street without further word. He moved with a feeling of urgency, disappearing into the throng.

Casca shook his head, thinking that the man was sure a queer bird. No matter, he had to find shelter for the night. He went to reclaim his horse from the hostler and asked directions to the inn that Samuel had recommended.

The feeling of being watched stayed with him as he made his way to the inn. Twice he'd turned around quickly to see if he could catch the hidden eyes that were eerily scratching at the nape of his neck, but there was nothing.

He grumbled to himself. Maybe he was just tired and a little edgy. He knew for damned sure that he needed a drink, a bath, and a woman. Not necessarily in that order.

It didn't take him long to find the inn. It was located in what was left of the onetime great city of Asack, before Nev-Shapur had been built. Now, there were only a few buildings remaining to serve the caravans and itinerant travelers that arrived too late to find lodging inside the walls of Nev-Shapur. The inn was typical—two stories of sunbaked brick with shuttered windows to let in the cool night air.

and a small fenced enclosure that served as a stable for the camels and horses of the travelers. After turning his horse over to a house slave, he entered the large main room and was greeted by the lumbering form of the master of the inn. Beshar, in his usual foul mood, advanced to meet the ragged man in his doorway. He had no time for tramps. His belly swayed with each heavy step, face shining from the rich food he consumed almost nonstop from rising to sleep.

He was stopped from ordering the stranger off his premises when the squarely-built figure in the doorway opened his palm and tossed Beshar three small silver coins of Chin. Beshar's hostile attitude made a complete turnaround to one of fawning subservience. For what the man had given was that which he loved most next to food, money. Casca had sized him up quickly; he had seen the type time and again. The only things that men like the innkeeper understood were money and fear.

Casca locked an eye on him and affected his sternest voice and manner.

"I have come a long way, landlord, and will have your best room and a bath readied for me. When I have cleansed myself and changed into more appropriate clothing, I will dine. Try to find something in this hovel that won't poison me."

Beshar fairly groveled. "Yes, lord, forgive me for not seeing instantly that you are a man of quality. But with the light behind you, your soiled clothes confused me for a moment. I can see clearly now that you are indeed a man of substance. Rest assured that I am honored that you would select my poor establishment for your stay." He snapped out an order and a serving wench came over. She was as thin as her master was obese. "Throw the man from the caravan out of his room and prepare for the foreign lord." The girl started to protest against evicting the current tenant, but was stopped by a quick backhand from Beshar. "Obey wench! If you like the camel herder that much, I'll see about having you travel with him when he heads to Bactria. Perhaps he could trade you to the Hephthalites for a couple of good dogs."

The girl quailed at the thought of the Hephthalites. The Persians called them the Huns. She left in a fearful rush to obey and send the caravan master on his way, regretting only that she would lose the two copper coins he had been giving her each night she slept with him. But nothing was worse than even the remote possibility of ending up in the felt yurts of the Hunnish tribes.

After sending the tavern wench off to do her duty, Beshar addressed himself again to the sunburned, travel-stained foreigner.

"Now, lord, will you take a seat while the room is being prepared? And perhaps some of the red wine of Shiraz would please you?"

Casca nodded in the affirmative. "Yea, and landlord, have my horse rubbed and curried and give him a full measure of grain. I want him to be presentable when I enter the city on the business of the Emperor of Chin." Casca knew that landlords were usually in the pay of whoever controlled the nearest city and that it wouldn't take long for word of his arrival to reach someone in authority. Settling his body on one of the wooden benches that served as seats for the plank tables, he put his pack beside him and adjusted his sword to a more comfortable position. Sighing deeply, he scratched a sore spot on his ass and grunted contentedly. It was good not to have to climb on the back of that four-legged torture chamber any more. After a bath and a shave he knew he would sleep deeply until cock crow, and then ... a new day, a new life for a while. The pouch of gems given him by Tzin would last long time if he didn't do something stupid. He sipped the wine, enjoying the sharp, slightly resinous aftertaste, and was content to wait until his rooms were ready. It wouldn't be long, judging from the yelling going on upstairs as the camel driver was evicted.

A few more moments passed and the previous occupant of the room was going out the door, leaving behind a stream of oaths and curses that left Casca open-mouthed in admiration. He especially liked the one about, "May the sores from a thousand diseased camels infest the face of thy first born."

Wearily, he picked up his gear and climbed the stairs. It was a basic room with a clean bed and a jar

for washing, also a strong bar to bolt the door from the inside. Well, if this was the best, he would have to see the worst. But it would do for now.

In a ravine twenty-five miles from Nev-Shapur, a light flickered, glowing in the moonless night. The sound of chanting came, low and strange, from the entrance to the cave, the source of the light. Inside were gathered a group of men. All kneeling, they prayed, their heads bowed. Hooded robes of rough, brown homespun wool covered their features, keeping their faces in constant shadow.

Torches danced in their iron brackets on the walls of the cavern, casting an eerie, quivering glow over the interior of the new refuge of the Brotherhood of The Lamb. The Elder stood before them, his face concealed in the folds of his hood. Only the members of the Inner Circle knew his true name. For the rest, it was enough that he was The Elder.

Behind him, illuminated by a row of bright burning torches, was the object of their adoration— "The Spear of Longinus," instrument of The Son of God's death.

The Elder raised his arm, showing delicate fingers without rings or other adornment. The Brotherhood was not given to opulent display of worldly goods. He spoke now, silencing the droning prayers of those on their knees. Though his body was slight in build and his robes seemingly too large for his frame, his voice rang out with the strength and authority of the righteous.

"Hear me, Brothers! The beast has returned from the lands beyond the wall. Praise be to The Lord, His Son, and to the thirteenth disciple, Izram, founder of our holy order. Some of you may have doubted that the beast truly lives. I say to you all now, he does live and he walks in the city of the idolater, Shapur.

And, so that we may know him, as it is written in the 'Book of The Beast,' he wears the mark of punishment from the Elder Dacort. The scar on his right wrist, although the hand is whole again now, shows where Dacort had the beast's hand severed from his body. He has yet another visible scar on his face, brothers, and I swear to you, he does live yet and may God in his mercy curse his name for eternity."

There was an amen to this speech from the brethren on their knees, and he continued.

"Praise be to God, for the road that leads to His Son, Jesus, has returned and is again in our sight." The Elder's voice rose, bouncing from the stone walls of the cavern that had served as their refuge since they'd been forced to flee the monastery in the desert due to the encroachment of barbarians and savage tribes of the heathenish Huns. Passion rode every word from the Elder's tongue, hatred and venom dripped from his mouth with every pronouncement. Pure, simple, burning hate beat at his followers. They wailed in anguish with their hatred of the animal, the spawn of evil, the beast that had driven his spear so cruelly into the side of their beloved and gentle Lamb on the Mount of Golgotha. Then, as Dacort had done many years past, The Elder cried out for the heavens to hear them.

"Brothers, pray with me. Curse the name of Longinus, the 'Killer of God.'"

The brethren moaned and wailed, their souls filled with delicious ecstasy and pain. Sobbing out the hated name from their unseen mouths, their bodies twitching and twisted, they acted out the reliving of the scourging of Jesus. Whips and flails, mounted on their tips by balls of lead, were removed from beneath their robes and they began to beat themselves, the small lead balls striking into their flesh. They all cried out in glorious pain, "Longinus, Longinus, Longinus!"

The Elder's whipping words rose over the sounds of their anguish. "Remember the beast! He must not escape us again. He must be punished for all the days of his life. We, the true followers of Izram, are entrusted with the sacred duty of watching the beast and giving what pain we may to him when the opportunity arises. And, Brothers, the time will not be long in coming when we shall be able to give him all that he deserves. There is no punishment too great, no suffering possible that he does not deserve. As Izram has bade us to do in his teachings, we must hate . . . hate. . . hate. Until the day of the resurrection, when we shall at last be one in the spirit and glory of Jesus." As one, all responded with

"Amen, Amen."

Like silent shadows, the members of the Brotherhood filtered out of the entrance to the cavern. It had been fortunate, they thought, that the beast had been found during the time that the Brotherhood gathered for their annual meeting. The word was taken back with them as they dispersed to their separate nations and cities, some going even to Rome or as far as the Isles of Brittania. All of the Brothers carried with them the identical message. "Casca lives, and is in Persia."

One of the members removed his rough garment of wool before climbing into his saddle, revealing below his own attire, richly flowing robes of state. He must hurry now back to his city of Nev-Shapur. It was he who had recognized the name of Casca Rufio Longinus when it had come to him from his spies in the city, and it was he who had brought the good news to the congregation of the Brotherhood. Now he must return in haste. There was much to do and prepare for before the sun rose tomorrow. He found his reins and mounted. Striking the animal's flanks, he raced over the stones and sand of the plains and deserts, robes whipping in the wind, his horse lathering at the mouth, its heartstraining with every stride. He cared not if the animal dies, as long as it got him back to Nev-Shapur before dawn. Rasheed, Vizier to Shapur II the King of Kings, was elated with his good fortune. He would find some way to punish the Roman. The time, as the Elder had said, was near. He was excited now, and determined to do even better than he had in the past, by taking some sort of direct action on his own that would bring his name to the attention of the Elder and enhance his stature in the Brotherhood. He rode long that night, without stopping, and was successful in reaching the city wall before first light. His thin hawk-nosed face was familiar to the guards and they granted him immediate entrance through the gates reserved for the nobility and members of Shapur's royal court. Rasheed was the Vizier, advisor to Shapur, and the second most powerful man in the Empire. His horse died of a ruptured heart before it could be led to the stables.

CHAPTER THREE

Casca slept until after cock's crow. Rested, he rose, washed, and finished dressing. Taking from his pack a robe of blue silk trimmed with gold thread, he placed it over a light shirt of chain mail. The robe reached to mid-thigh over the leather trousers he had traded for. They were soft and flexible, having been chewed to the suppleness of fine cloth by the teeth of the tribeswomen and then dyed a dark blue. He put a wide leather belt set with large brass rings around his waist and slung his sword from a leather halter, to hang by his right side in the Roman manner. His face was as tender as a baby's fanny after the scraping, cutting, and tugging required to get rid of the scruffy inch-long beard that had sprouted on his face. Fanning his hand over his jaw, he winced at the memory of the barber they had sent him. The man could have qualified for a position as a torturer with any of the better dungeons and slave camps.

Finally satisfied with his appearance, he went down the rickety wooden stairs to the main room. His new appearance of wealth, as represented by the robes of silk, properly awed his obese host. Beshar fawned over his new guest and tried to get him to eat at his establishment, but after testing the menu from the previous night, Casca decided to pass and try to get something better inside the city of Nev-Shapur. He knew it would be long before the local authorities rounded him up. He was thankful that he had the letters from Tzin in his pouch and his own decree of nobility. Those should serve to give him a good welcome. From what he had heard, those from Rome were less than welcome in the lands of the Sassanids and he had a long way to go before reaching the Mediterranean. It would be better if he could do that as a free man and not as a slave.

He didn't figure there would be too many problems finding someone to translate the letters he carried for Nev-Shapur sat directly on the silk road, and on his way he had seen many caravans with merchants from Chin carrying goods to the west. He wished he had been able to learn to decipher the wriggling block script that served as writing for the people of Chin, but it had been too much for him to figure out. He felt lucky to have even a knack for spoken languages. Stepping out into the full light of day, he entered into a throng of people lined up to enter the gates of the city. There were merchant farmers, tourists and pilgrims, and women carrying vases and packs on their heads who walked with long, graceful steps. The clothing styles were as varied as the people. Nomads from the steppes in their leather trousers blended among those in the almost universal peasant dress of a simple gray or brown homespun waist-length shirt, tied with a rope or piece of cloth about the waist.

Perfumed ladies, with elaborate headdresses and silken wear, reclined in their slave-borne litters beside the women of the fields. All waited quietly in line for their turn to be admitted through the walls of the city. There was no disorder or shoving, each awaited his turn, for such was the word of the King. The nobles of higher rank entered through one of the gates reserved for personages of noble lineage, but all others entered there passing through the inspection of the household guards, brilliantly dressed and armored warriors in the purple tunics of Persia that covered a scaled jazerant of armor, rippling in the morning sun like the scales of a carp.

Horses and pack animals were not permitted within the city walls. Only the warriors of the King rode through the streets; the rich and noble were carried on litters. Wheelbarrows and carts, pulled or pushed by human muscle, took care of such items as needed to be brought inside. The King disliked the odor of animal waste on the streets and it was also unsightly, therefore it was forbidden. When it was Casca's turn to pass before the inspection of the gate guards, he held out his packet of papers from the Son of Heaven Beyond the Wall That Runs Forever. The Guards inspected the sealed packet closely and questioned him as to its contents. Casca explained that it came from the Emperor of China to the King of the Persians and that he was its courier and a noble.

The guards conferred among themselves for a few moments and then took Casca inside a small room that served as a resting place for the different guard shifts. Inside he was told to wait. Their attitude was formal and correct. There was no sign of discourtesy, and if they were curious about why a man with blue eyes would be carrying a message from Chin, they didn't show it. He was told that he would be taken care of soon and was left alone under the watchful eye of one guard who had the look of Arabistan about him. Dark, piercing eyes over a hooked nose and thin lips were set in a face that was all angles, as weathered dark as aged leather. Casca had to cool his heels for about an hour before a court official showed up with his packet of papers in hand. Following him was a middle-aged Oriental who questioned Casca about his mission to the court. It satisfied the official's inquiry as to the validity of Casca's papers when Casca showed him his seal of office, the Chu Hou Wang of the Baron of Khitai, as ordained by the Son of Heaven, the Emperor Tzin. The official told him he would be given an audience with the King on the following day. Until that time he would be moved from his quarters at the inn and shown to facilities set aside for such purposes. When Casca asked about returning to get his gear and horse he was told that all things would be taken care of for him. He was to come now. Casca was smart enough not to argue, even though his stomach was starting to growl. He hadn't had a chance to get anything to eat, but maybe he could get something wherever they were taking him. Leaving the guards' shack, he found a military escort was waiting for him, and to his surprise, there was a slave-borne litter in which he was to be carried to whatever destination his host had in mind. "Why not? Might as well enjoy it." He settled himself in on soft padded cushions and drew the curtains partially closed to keep out the bright sun.

The slaves raised the litter off the cobble stoned street smoothly, with no jerking, and the escort formed up on both sides with a mounted horseman in front to break trail through the swarms of people crowding the morning streets. Casca reclined on one elbow and watched the passersby between the curtains.

At least he was off to an auspicious beginning.

At the horseman's command the streets emptied to either side of the litter and its escort, leaving a clear path for them to travel. This was a city that obeyed without hesitation. In due course, after many turnings and twistings, he and his bodyguard came to the inner city where the King and his court resided in opulent Oriental splendor reminiscent of Xerxes the Great. Tall columns and walls decorated with glazed bricks depicting hunting scenes and mythical animals brightened up the way. Once inside the walls of the inner city, the hubbub of the outside was effectively cut off and only came through as a distant murmuring. A light thump and the litter was set down. With some regret, Casca eased himself from his transport, and made a note to buy one for himself one day.

The Persian court official who had come for him showed him into a hallway lined with tall pillars of carved stone that held a massive roof painted with the glories of Persia's past. The Persians loved color almost as much as did the nobles of the court of Chin.

Only the Romans seemed to have an affection for sterile cold edifices. He supposed that it gave them the illusion of being firm and righteous, not giving in to frills. Passing numbers of the beautifully armored Warriors of Shapur, he admired the discipline in them, there was no sign of ass-grabbing at all. These were professionals who took pride in their profession. In short time he was completely lost in the maze of halls and passages that they passed through until they came at last to a halt. Casca's escort opened a door admitting him to a large, comfortable room with a sleeping cot made soft with down-stuffed cushions of red. On a table food waited; obviously his arrival had been anticipated. His host bade him take his ease, that he would be sent for in due time. The letters from Tzin were not returned. His host explained that a formal translation would have to be made of them and a copy entered in to the court records, at which time the King would look them over before deciding to receive the emissary from Chin.

Before leaving, Casca was requested to surrender his sword, though allowed to keep his knife. He was told that there was nothing personal in the disarming of him, it was just policy and his weapons would be returned afterwards. Backing his way out, Casca was left to attack with eagerness the rack of lamb cooked in mint and sage. There was nothing he could do now but wait for the King to send for him and who the hell could tell how long that would take. Kings moved in their own peculiar time-frames and the urgencies of lesser beings were seldom worthy of any consideration.

But then, kings, priests, and whores all wanted to do everything their own way. Kings, because no one else was really important to them; priests, because they wanted you to think they were important; and whores, because time was money. Casca appreciated the whores' reasons more than the others.

After about an hour, the door to his chambers opened and a slave girl entered to take out the dirty dishes. Not a bad-looking piece. He eyed her up and down; she smiled back shyly at the scar-faced, blue-eyed barbarian who was leering at her with such obvious interest. As his eyes moved down to her thinly covered breasts, she could feel the nipples harden. A little reluctantly she left with her dishes and wondered if the stranger would send for her this night. As she went out of the door Casca noted that two sentries had been assigned to his room, one on each side, and from the looks on their faces neither one had much of a sense of humor. Well, he knew the type. There would be no use in trying to get any information out of them. Their minds were so locked up with being what they thought was the epitome of the good soldier that they probably went to the crapper by the numbers.

He spent three days in his chamber with his meals being brought in by the same girl. He did manage once to talk her into a quickie, which, though fast, was still quite satisfying. The rest of his possessions had been brought to him the day after he had been taken to the palace. Since that time he had not been permitted to leave his rooms or even go out into the hallway. So like all men in forced isolation, he did the only thing one can do—he slept, waking for a time to eat and stretch, then, after a few hours, dozing off again. Anything to help use up the hours until he would be sent for.

On the morning of the fourth day an official, wearing a high-ridged plumed helmet of steel overlaid with bronze, came for him. The two sentries formed up, one on either side, with the officer leading. He was again taken through a labyrinth of hallways and corridors until he was admitted to an antechamber where a number of other visitors, diplomats, and emissaries were lined up, giving their names and their business to the court scribe who interviewed them. Casca waited his turn in line behind a Media governor who was trying to get a government subsidy to build some new public office buildings. Casca wore the best of his two silk robes he'd brought with him. He knew that they would give him some stature in the eyes of the court officials; they were worth their weight in gold. When his turn came he stated his business as being ordered by the Son of Heaven, the Emperor Tzin, to deliver his message of good will and affection to His Royal Highness, the King of Kings of Persia, Shapur II. Also, to advise his royal cousin of the new threat developing from the savage tribes who inhabited the great wastelands of the steppes. The Huns were on the move again. Casca made sure the scribe included in his notes that he was a noble of the court of the Peacock Throne.

After he and the others had waited for some time they were finally led through one last corridor of the massive carved stones that reached ten times the height of a tall man, passing even more of the palace guards until they were finally admitted to the presence.

The Magnificent Hall of the King of Kings outshone anything Imperial Rome had ever conceived and was only second to the Court of the Imperial City at Chang-an. Massive carved bas-reliefs of winged bulls combined with vividly painted frescoes of kings hunting lions from chariots. Others depicted the kings of Persia and their conquests over the barbarian tribes. One showed the Emperor Valerian being forced to kneel, head bowed before his captor, Shapur I, Shahan shah Eran ut an Eran, King of Kings of Persia and non-Persia, one of the greatest of the line of Aryan kings.

In the hall, a thousand nobles lay prostrate on their faces before the throne; Casca and the new

supplicants were made to do likewise. The feel of the stone floors was cool to his chin. Bronzed braziers gave off aromatic wisps of incense to be whisked away by the black slaves fanning the royal person, while his Vizier performed the ritual to open this day's hearings. In a high nasal voice, Rasheed cried out the glories of his master and called down from the sky the blessings of Ahuramazda upon this proceeding and all those herein. Shapur II waved his hand and permitted those prostrate before him to rise and set eyes upon him.

Shapur sat upon a throne of alabaster; on either side the winged bulls of Assyria guarded the royal person from evil spirits. Casca whistled under his breath—Shapur was one hell of a man by anyone's standards. Instead of a staff of office, he held a sword whose point rested between his gold-sandaled feet. His sword arm was bare and Casca had the feeling that it wasn't too unusual for the King to administer justice himself, as he kept his sword clear from the robes that covered him to the knees. His robes were of woven silver thread and purplesilk, fringed with tassels of braided gold. His legs were bare except for a set of boots similar to the Roman caligulae. Both arms and legs were strong and knotted with muscle. The face of Shapur rested not under a crown, but under a warrior's Helm of Iron set about with silver bands. A nasal guard raised to rest on the crest of the helmet.

Shapur's face was dark from years of campaigning: lean, with the muscles in his jaws constantly working; a thin, yet sensuous mouth with no humor in the lips. He watched everything and everyone with the gaze of a predatory bird. Unblinking, pitchblack eyes missed nothing. When he spoke his voice was not loud, but every word could be clearly heard to the farthest extremities of his court. It was the voice of one born to lead, the voice of Shapur II, King of Kings, and you could bet your ass on one who ever saw him would argue about it.

Casca stood silently as one petitioner after another was led before the King, his case to be disposed of in short order. Casca quickly learned the King had no time for the long flowery greetings and blessings so common in the Chinese court. When the petitioner started to drone he was quickly cut short and made to move on to his case without any hesitations. Shapur gave his judgments in the same voice, and each man who stood before him could not help glancing repeatedly at the bared sword in his master's hand. Several were sentenced to death for one offense or another. These thanked their lord for his kindness and went off to an appointment with the headsman's ax.

One who had stolen from the taxes was given an unusual sentence. Shapur, eyes piercing through to the soul of the thieving tax official, spoke softly. "You, who I have trusted, love gold more than me. When you came to me and asked for my favor your words were like gold and that shall be your punishment." The thief was led off, sobbing, to the torture chambers, where the royal inquisitors melted down ingots of pure gold, forced open the man's mouth, and filled it with the molten metal...

Casca waited beneath the bas-relief friezes depicting the glories of the Persian kings, listening carefully to the dialogue taking place between the hawk-nosed ruler and a thin, mild-mannered man from the Nile.

Imhept stood, head bowed before the King of Kings. He wore his thin robes of linen with an unmistakable dignity that seemed out of place in one so slight and mild in manner. Imhept's eyes were deep brown and behind them lay a sparkle that belied his advanced years. Shapur's Vizier had sent for him to come to Nev-Shapur to advise them on the construction of new edifices and also to aid them in their new program of expanding the networks of irrigation systems that had fallen into disrepair. Shapur was somewhat puzzled by the Egyptian. He was used to overawing everyone about him, not only by the virtue of his throne, but also by his own strong personality. He was not just a king, but a warrior to be reckoned with.

But this calm, elderly man with his shaved head showed no sign of fear or apprehension. Shapur had known few that had not feared him and they were either mad or one of the holy hermits who lived in the trackless wastes of the desert. This man, like the holy ones, was at peace with himself. Shapur

knew that here was one who would speak the truth, though it may cost him his head. And that was a man to be valued or destroyed—there was no middle ground for such as the Egyptian standing before him.

Shapur stroked his square-cut beard with long, graceful fingers. "Egyptian, it is told me by my Vizier that you are a man of great learning and wisdom who has devoted his life to study. Now I would pose a question for you."

Imhept raised his face to look in the eyes of Shapur. "I will answer if able, Lord."

Shapur pursed his lips, thoughtful for a moment, phrasing the question properly in his mind before speaking. "Scholar, the question is this: Of all the achievements of mankind throughout the ages, from all the known races and lands, what has been the single most significant achievement of man since his beginnings?"

Imhept closed his eyes and nodded slowly—once, twice—then opened his dark eyes and smiled as a teacher would to a beloved but wayward child. Shapur shifted uneasily on his throne. A small smile played around the lips of Imhept. "Lord of Hosts, King of Kings. The single greatest achievement of man, that has permitted all else to come forth is—the plow."

Shapur shook his head as if throwing off a bothersome thought. "Do not take liberties with me, scholar."

Imhept bowed his head again. "I do not say this in jest, Lord."

Shapur was still confused. "The plow? But what of the great pyramids and temples of your own land? What of the libraries where the knowledge of man is accumulated that others may learn from the past? What of the great kings who brought prosperity and glory to their nations? Do you say these are of less importance than the common plow that peasants use to till their fields?"

Imhept nodded. "As you have said, Lord, so it is. One must not start at the end of a thought but at the beginning. All that you have said would not have come to pass without the lowly plow to till the fields. For with the plow man began to grow. With the plow man was able to plant more than he could eat and the threat of starvation was removed for the most part. This gave man time to organize, to build cities over which kings could rule. For with cities there had to come law and order."

"And from the plow came many of the other achievements of man. For example, if there is a surplus of grain to be stored, then there is need for containers to store it in—hence pottery. From storage there had to come a means to count and determine how much would be needed to last a village until the next season and how much would be available for trade. Hence, mathematics were needed. And writing, so that one could keep track of what went where and what agreements were reached between buyer and seller. This is naturally a simplification, as the actual total of arts and sciences that came from the plow would take days to enumerate. But suffice to say that the leisure time the plow afforded man gave rise to those sciences and arts by which the great temples and structures were built. For the early village beginnings, where leaders were needed to rule, did give rise to the great houses and empires. Lord, all this would not be if the ordinary plow had not been."

Shapur was impressed. The logic behind the thought progression was clear, the extrapolation easy to follow. The very simplicity of the idea made it complicated. Shapur was satisfied with the answer.

"Scholar you have pleased us. It is by my command that you are made advisor to the court and given jurisdiction over the fields and waters of my lands. I will call on you from time to time. Do as you have done now and always speak the truth and you will find your rewards will be great." He regretted instantly the automatic promise of reward and the next statement would have been the threat of punishment for failure or lying. He knew that neither would have any effect on the Egyptian. He was what he was, a man committed to the truth and to learning. He could not be induced to be other than that.

"You may go scholar. Travel where you will and return to me in three months, and tell of what you

have seen and what needs to be done to the plains and sands so that Persia may bear fruit again, as it did when Cyrus the Acemeanid ruled. The land has been too long barren. Go and help bring back the fields and orchards." The Egyptian was dismissed and left the hall. Casca watched the thin figure leave and wondered at the minds of men who saw things so clearly without emotion or pride.

It was his turn. The Vizier, reading from a scroll, called out his name and motioned for him to step forth in front of the throne and kneel. While on his knees, the Vizier read off his titles and honors accorded him by the Emperor of Chin.

Shapur snapped his fingers and motioned for Casca to rise. Casca stood at attention as Shapur looked him over. He felt as if the Persian king was eating into his soul with his dark eyes, and he knew something of what the thief had felt. This man would order you sliced into pieces without a second's hesitation.

Shapur spoke. "You are Casca Longinus, Baron of Khitai and warlord to the Emperor of Chin." A statement, not a question. "It is strange that one from Rome would have such honors. I welcome the Emperor's words and the warning about the resurgence of the Hephthalites. We will tend to them. But what of you, Roman?" The last word was spoken bitterly.

Casca knew he was walking on thin ice and picked his words carefully. "I am what the missive from the Peacock Throne says. A man who has served his master well with loyalty and the sword."

Shapur grinned thinly. "And what of Rome? Is not your first allegiance to the Caesars?"

Casca shook his head. "My first loyalty, Lord, is to those that show the same to me. True, I have served in the legions of Rome but have been ill-rewarded for it." With that he pulled his silk robes down over his shoulders and bared his back to the King.

Shapur wet his lips at the sight of the crisscrossing of scars on the muscled back, mixed with deep cuts from edged weapons. Casca turned back around to face the King. "Those, and my years on the slave bench of war galleys, have paid off any debt I have to Imperial Rome. I am my own man."

Shapur liked the scar-faced man's answers. That he was a warrior was obvious and as one fighting man to another, Shapur had to respect him. "Where would you go from here, Casca, Baron of Khitai?"

Casca shrugged. "I but follow the threads of my fate, Lord."

Shapur thought for a moment. "I would speak further with you. As a warlord it might prove of interest to learn how the warriors of Chin conduct their battles. You will dine with me this evening."

Casca was dismissed. Bowing, he backed away from the imperial presence and was taken back to his quarters, a feeling of relief surging over him. He knew that it had been close and perhaps wasn't over with yet. He would find out his fate tonight.

An hour after the sun had set, he was sent for and escorted once more through the winding labyrinth, then up several flights of stairs and finally out onto an open courtyard, set three stories above the main floor.

Shapur waited in loose robes of cool linen. Full-grown palm trees and other flowers and plants Casca couldn't name decorated the rooftop garden. He understood why the King preferred the rooftop garden to take his evening meal —the evening breeze cooled the air. Guards remained unobtrusive at their posts, just out of earshot. Slave girls came and went, setting the low table with sweetmeats and delicacies. Shapur motioned for Casca to join him on the couch opposite the table. Torches and lamps lit the scene and Shapur was at ease. "Sit down, warrior, and we'll talk of the things men do."

Casca obeyed and reclined on the couch. Shapur motioned toward the food. "Help yourself, Roman." Casca tried a couple of jellied plover's eggs, washing them down with a wine he hadn't tasted before, smacking his lips over the taste. "Good, damned good." Tearing off a piece of roasted antelope, he sunk his teeth into the meat and chewed slowly as Shapur looked on and ate nothing.

Shapur watched his guest eat, noting through veiled eyes, every detail about the man before him —the way he moved, the thick cords in his wrists, the scars. How could he use this man who came from

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