

EMPIRE RISING

A NOVEL



SAM BARONE

AUTHOR OF *DAWN OF EMPIRE*

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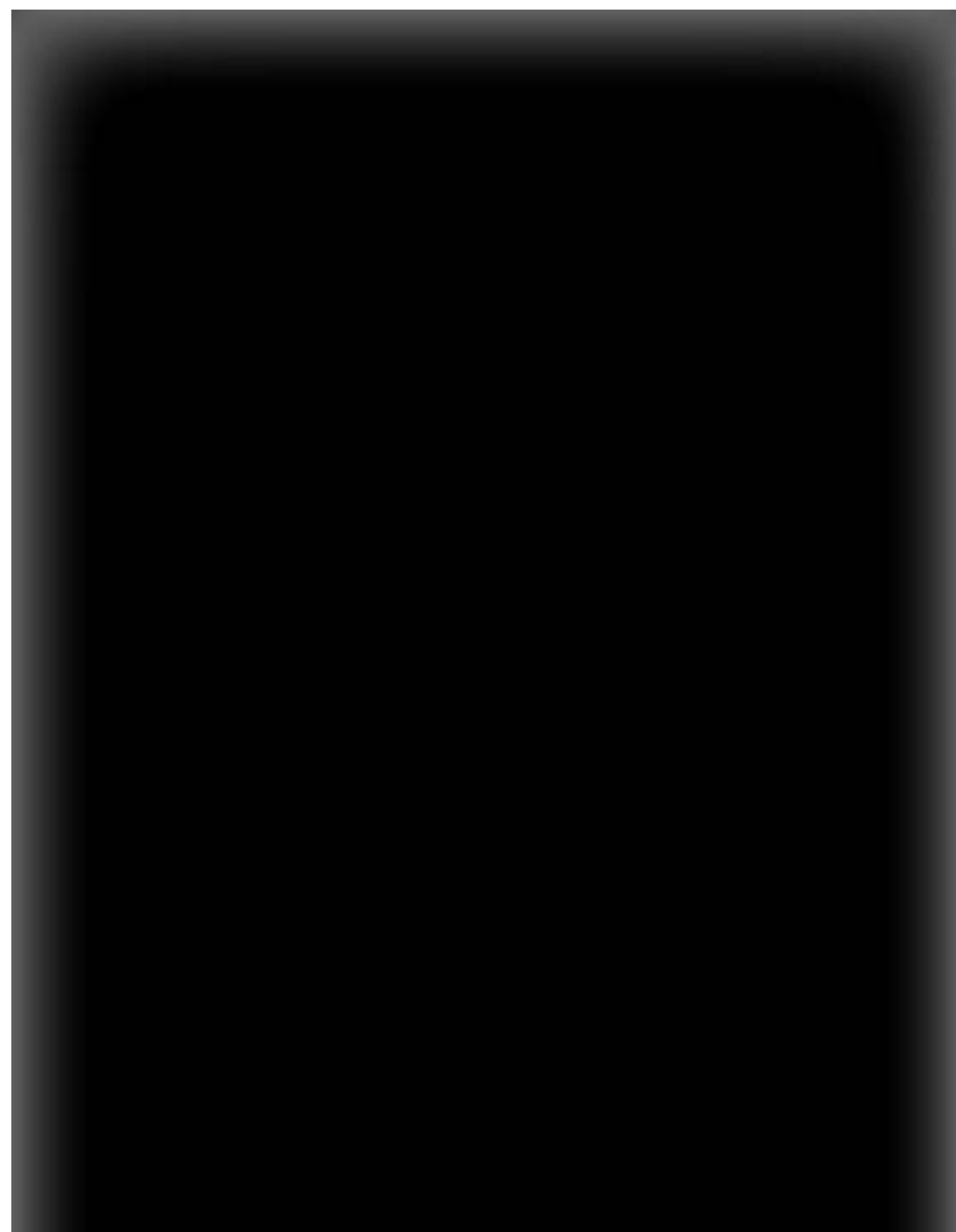


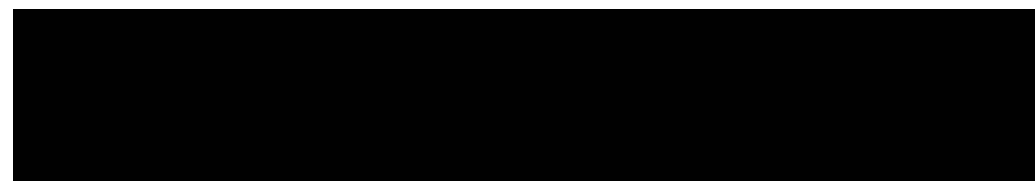
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in memoriam

This book is dedicated to the memory of Jim Jasper, who passed away in September 2006.

He will be missed.

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[Prologue](#)

3157 B.C.E., at the eastern edge of the great southern desert in Mesopotamia . . .

Head sagging, his face inches above the heated rubble of rock-hard dirt, Korthac struggled against the escarpment. The long ascent had scraped the skin from his hands and knees, and now every contact with the sun-seared stones burned his flesh, as he struggled another step up the slope. *Close your eyes just for a moment.* The inner voices grew more insistent, seductive, as another wave of dizziness swept over him. *Rest! Let another lead the way.*

Clenching his teeth, he crawled on, fighting against the voices as much as the steep hillside and the pitiless sun. Korthac could not show weakness in front of his men. The desert might kill him, but it would not defeat him.

He'd find water at the top, and live. Clinging to the thought, he dragged himself upward.

Water. Most of all he fought against the need for water, forced himself to ignore his swollen tongue and parched throat. *Water.* Korthac pictured streams of clear, bubbling water nestled under shady sycamore and willow trees. He forced the image from his thoughts and concentrated on wrenching himself up another arm's length. The vision and the voices kept returning. He must find water, or the desert would prevail over him, claim him and all his followers. That could not be.

The top of the ridge beckoned, just a few paces above. He moved with 2

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caution, making sure his trembling legs did not betray him. Twice in the last hour Korthac heard the death screams of men who had fallen back to the desert floor. If he lost his grip, started to slide back down, he didn't know if he had the strength to stop his fall.

His thirst drove him on. Fortune had saved him and his minions time and again in the last two months but even the gods couldn't keep a man alive in the desert with no water. He refused to believe his destiny meant for him to die like this, hunted and herded into this barren wasteland like some wretched slave, driven mad by thirst before the death gods claimed his body.

Last night, a few hours past sunset, Korthac and his men reached the base of the plateau they'd first glimpsed three days ago. The remnants of his once-mighty army fell on their faces and slept until dawn. When they awoke this morning, two men could not get to their feet.

Korthac ignored their pleading. "Kill them." He'd given the same order almost every morning for the last two weeks. Those closest drew their knives and thrust them deep into the chests of the helpless men. The rest needed no further urging. They crowded around the two dying men and cut their victims to pieces, every man shoving and pushing his way to seize a piece of moist flesh, valued as much for its thirst-quenching blood as for its nourishment. When the gory ritual ended, only the splintered bones, their marrow sucked dry, remained on the red-soaked sand. Even the skulls were cracked and the brains scooped out. Afterward, fewer than eighty men started the climb up the sheer and treacherous slope.

Korthac ate with the rest, on his knees and pushing the bloody flesh into his mouth as fast as he could. The act no longer shocked him or any of his men. The strong fed upon the weak to gain sustenance for another day.

But even a fresh-killed body didn't hold enough water to keep so many men going through the desert. They'd had no water for three days, not since a brief rainstorm sprinkled the sands and filled a few hollows in the rocks with its precious liquid. If they didn't find water atop this plateau, they'd all be dead by sunset.

His outstretched hand grabbed on to nothing, and Korthac realized he'd reached the end of his climb. Pulling himself over the crest, he rolled onto his back, breathing hard, oblivious of the blinding sun. When he heard the scraping of those following, he forced himself first to his knees, then to his feet. His men would not see him crawling about on the dirt.

Shading his eyes, he looked around. The landscape had changed. For Empire Rising

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the first time in weeks, he saw the endless sands replaced by a stony mixture of earth and clay, with scattered shrubs and bushes dotting the terrain. To the east his eyes picked out what he'd hoped to find, a line of green about two miles away that could only be trees. Where trees grew, water flowed. The gods had favored him once again. He would survive to find his destiny.

Korthac turned back to the cliff's edge and in a hoarse voice called out the news to his men. As he did so, he looked down at the desert floor, surprised at how distant it seemed. They'd climbed more than two thousand feet to reach the top of this elevation.

Hand on his knife, he made sure the first four men to reach the crest still carried their burdens, small sacks tied to their backs. Only then did he relax, counting and appraising each of his fighters, to see if any looked too weak to carry on. But the sight of the distant tree line gave every man renewed vigor. Dirty, crusted with blood and sand, their skin burned nearly black from weeks under the unrelenting sun, they looked more like demons than men.

When the last one reached the top, Korthac finished his count. Seventy-four men had survived the desert passage, less than half the number who survived the battle and fled with their leader into the

wasteland. Nothing could stop them now. He led the way, his men stumbling along behind him.

They headed east, the same direction they'd run, walked, and crawled for the last two months.

Halfway to the trees, Korthac caught sight of a village and changed his course. As they reached the outskirts of the small cluster of mud huts, the ground gave way to a barley field that offered its heady scent to the wind. Forcing a path through the waist-high crops, his eyes picked out the mud-ridged channel carrying water to the growing plants.

Korthac lurched into a run, his men staggering behind as best they could. He reached the edge of the irrigation ditch and flung himself down, to gulp mouthfuls of the muddy stream. His men splashed about on either side, crawling and pushing until they, too, shoved their faces into the water.

Korthac drank until he needed to draw a breath, then let his face fall again into the muddy water. Only when his stomach protested did he stop.

Disgusted at showing such weakness, Korthac pushed himself to his feet, noted the flow of the water, and moved away from his men until he reached a part of the ditch still unsoiled by his followers. He knelt and drank again, but only a few mouthfuls, able to restrain himself once more.

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Then he washed his face and hands, and scooped the cool water over his body, rinsing away most of the dirt and blood that had crusted over him for days.

When Korthac stood up, he felt refreshed, even his hunger driven away by the fullness in his belly. He and his men would take what they needed from the village and rest there until they regained their strength.

He walked down the line of the canal, giving orders to his subcommanders, getting everyone out of the water before some fool drank himself to death. Splashing through the ditch, Korthac walked toward the huts.

It seemed strange that no one had noticed their approach, that no farmers worked the field. Just before he reached the first of the mud structures, he heard a scream, a piercing cry of agony that rose above background of laughter, the mixture of sounds close ahead. Passing into the village, he counted the dozen or so scattered huts and tents. Likely less than fifty people, all struggling to stay alive in this rocky place at the edge of the great desert.

The screams increased in intensity as they guided his steps. In the center of the huts he found a crowd gathered, their attention focused on something he could not see. A young boy dancing with excitement noticed Korthac's approach and gave a shout, pointing with his arm. Everyone turned, and Korthac saw fear and surprise on their faces as they saw his grim followers walking into their midst, hands on their weapons. A babble of sound arose at the sight of the ragged band, and the crowd parted.

Korthac strode through, until he reached the center and halted, his men bunching up behind him.

Five men lay on the ground, staked out naked in the dirt. Two had died, blood pooled around their necks, their agony ended with slit throats. Half a dozen men and women knelt around the three who lived, sticks, rocks, or knives in their hands. Korthac noticed that one captive, a big man with dark hair and a gray-flecked beard, had only scrapes and bruises on his face and chest. He would be the leader, Korthac decided, saved for last so that he could watch his followers die and better appreciate his coming torment.

“What is this place?” Korthac’s hoarse words silenced the crowd. He’d scarcely raised his voice, but everyone recognized the authority in his tone. “What is this place?”

One of the kneeling men stood and replied, but Korthac could make no sense of his gibberish. Korthac tried again, using all the tongues he knew, but with the same effect.

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“It’s called Magabad.”

Korthac could barely comprehend the words, and he glanced around to find the speaker. To his surprise, the words came from the bearded man spread-eagled on the ground, the captives’ leader. Lifting his bloody, sweat-soaked head from the ground, the man struggled to meet Korthac’s eyes.

“You understand the language of Egypt?”

“A few words, lord . . . learned from men I commanded.”

“And you are . . . ?” Korthac strained to discern the man’s words.

“My name is Ariamus. I was . . .” The man’s voice broke, and he couldn’t get the words out.

Korthac turned to his subcommanders. “Cut that one loose.”

With none of them understanding the foreign tongue, the villagers stood speechless during this exchange. But when Korthac’s men pushed forward and started to free Ariamus, the crowd protested with a jabber of incomprehensible sounds that meant nothing to Korthac. One of the farmers stepped in front of Korthac, raising his voice and gesturing. Anger showed on the villager’s face as he waved his hands in excitement, and the rest joined in to support their leader, everyone shouting at the same time.

The knife flashed from Korthac’s belt and buried itself in the villager’s stomach. Almost as quickly, Korthac withdrew it, then pushed the man to the ground with his other hand. The dying man clutched his belly and bled into the dirt, his face showing as much surprise as pain.

Korthac’s fighters moved among the now-silent crowd, shoving them back with their hands. The dozen or so adult men, surrounded by their women and children, had no chance against Korthac’s seventy, even weakened by their ordeal in the arid wasteland. The few knives his followers still possessed made the crowd step back. None of Korthac’s men possessed a sword. Even he had discarded his fine blade weeks ago, its weight magnified by the desert heat.

A handful of villagers turned and fled. Korthac frowned at the sight.

If they kept running, they would get away. His men had no stamina to pursue.

The subcommander finished cutting Ariamus free, then pushed him to his knees at Korthac's feet.

"Water, lord," Ariamus gasped, lowering his forehead to the ground.

"Why should I give you water? Are you the leader of these captives?"

"Yes, lord. Please, lord, we've had no food or water since yesterday."

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Korthac thought of his own hunger and the harsh passage just completed. "You will serve me . . . Ariamus? If I give you your life, you and your men will swear to obey my commands?" His voice rang out over the village, and Korthac felt his power and purpose returning. "Serve me faithfully, or you die."

"Whatever you say . . . lord. Just give me water."

Korthac gazed at those surrounding him. Only fear or obedience showed on their faces, the first of those in this new land to submit to his rule. He turned to his subcommanders. "Round up the villagers. Have them bring food and water." He walked toward the largest of the nearby huts, unable to resist the shady interior any longer. "And bring that one to me." He pointed to Ariamus, still crouching in the dirt. "We have much to discuss."

Fifteen days later, the horror of the desert trek had almost faded from memory. Korthac had gained back much of the weight he'd lost and almost all of his strength. The bloody scabs on his hands and knees had closed, then healed. Belted around his waist hung a well-made bronze sword, taken from one of the villagers who had in turn captured it from Ariamus. Korthac's dark hair hung neatly around his shoulders, trimmed and combed by one of the village women.

A slight man with the wiry muscles and the endurance of a runner, Korthac knew he had to stay fit, had to be stronger and more skillful with every weapon than the men he commanded. They must fear his anger as much as they respected his cunning. It must always be so.

The day after they reached the village, Korthac set up a regimen for himself. Each morning he trained with the wooden swords the sullen villagers carved for him and his men. Then he spent three hours with Ariamus, learning the main dialects of the Land Between the Rivers, as the inhabitants called the farmlands they occupied.

Afterward, Korthac rode for two hours, hardening his thighs and back as he forced the village's only horse up and down the steep and rocky hills until his mastery of the animal had returned. While he rode, his subcommanders kept Ariamus busy; they took charge of their newest recruit, forcing him to learn the dialect of northern Egypt. Their wooden swords served another function: to make sure their pupil applied himself diligently.

sons with Ariamus. They talked long into the night. Korthac learned not only the language and its nuances, but also the customs and beliefs of the people in this new land. This night, an hour before sunset, Korthac relaxed on a small mat under a poplar tree, his back leaning against the slim trunk.

Six feet away, Ariamus sat cross-legged in the dirt. Two of Korthac's men squatted a few paces behind Ariamus.

Korthac had learned much from Ariamus, far more than the man intended to reveal. It hadn't taken long to discover his weaknesses—his lust for gold, women, and power. But Korthac trusted no one, and so his men remained nearby. He didn't want Ariamus to have any sudden change of heart, at least not until the man had given up every bit of useful information he possessed.

“So, Ariamus, tell me again about this great village of Orak.”

“I've already told you everything I know, lord. My head aches trying to remember more to tell you.” He looked up at Korthac, noted the frown that had suddenly formed, and quickly went on. “Lord, Orak is about two hundred miles from this place, across both the Euphrates and the Tigris rivers. A few weeks ago they drove off a mighty barbarian horde. Now Orak is the most powerful village in the land. They say that soon all villages in the countryside will defer to Orak.”

“And their leader, this . . . Eskkar?”

“An ignorant barbarian, lord. A stupid lout driven out by his own kind, no doubt for good reason. He could barely speak our language when he came to Orak, and he drank his pay as soon as he earned it. He was my least subcommander when I led Orak's guard. If it wasn't for his skill with a horse, he'd have been nothing more than a common soldier.”

“Yet now you say he commands three thousand people in Orak while you nearly died here in the dirt. Doesn't that seem . . . strange to you?”

Ariamus squirmed and clenched his fist, uncomfortable at being reminded how far he'd fallen. “Eskkar took a witch for a wife. Some slave girl from the south who belonged to one of Orak's ruling families. She bewitched him. They say she rules Orak through him.”

Korthac didn't believe in enchantments, but most of his men did, so he let the comment pass. The superstitions of Egypt had helped him there, and whatever foolish beliefs held sway in this land would do the same.

“Did she also put a spell on the men of Orak, to turn them into warriors? Or perhaps these barbarians you feared so much were such puny fighters they let a village of farmers and shopkeepers defeat them?”

“The barbarians are ferocious fighters, lord, and none can stand against them. But the villagers built a mud wall around Orak, and the barbarians could not overwhelm it. The wall saved them, not Eskkar.”

Korthac noted the flush that came over Ariamus’s face at the mention of barbarians, apparently wild tribes of nomadic horsemen from the distant steppes. Though Korthac had coaxed the whole story out of him more than a week ago, he kept probing Ariamus’s memory, searching for more details or any hint of deception. Each retelling yielded some new fact for Korthac to ponder.

Once again, Ariamus related how a small raiding party of these wandering horsemen had ambushed him and his band of rogues, killing most of them and seizing all their accumulated loot and horses. Ariamus and a handful of men managed to escape on foot, driven to the west. They’d run and walked for over a week until they reached this miserable collection of huts called Magabad. Ariamus had taken over the village, but he didn’t have enough men, and after two days of indignities, the villagers rose up in the night. They killed two of their oppressors as they slept and captured the rest, to put them to the torture. If Korthac had arrived an hour later, Ariamus would have died under the knife, along with all his men.

“You say this Eskkar was once one of these fierce barbarians, so hated by the people of Orak. Yet despite that, though you say he did nothing, Orak’s inhabitants made him their ruler. Your customs for selecting leaders are very different from those of Egypt.”

Ariamus bit his lip at the sarcasm, no doubt tempted to say something rash. “No, lord, not nothing. Eskkar can fight, and he has some skill with a sword.”

Korthac wondered what other skills this Eskkar possessed. Not that it mattered. “Since you knew him so well, describe him again, Ariamus. Let me see him through your words, before I meet him.”

Putting down his empty wine cup, Ariamus licked his lips. “He’s a common barbarian, lord, one of the horse people. They tend to be taller and stronger than those of us who grew up in these lands. Riding horse all day keeps any man fit and hard. Eskkar is taller even than most of his kind, taller than me by at least a hand’s breadth, and nearly as strong.”

His Egyptians considered the powerfully built Ariamus tall, so Eskkar must be of considerable size, which might make him a formidable fighter, at least to these people. “Go on. Show me his face.”

Ariamus closed his eyes for a moment. “He has straggly dark brown Empire Rising

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hair, almost black, that he usually forgets to tie back. Hides most of his face half the time. Brown eyes, and hardly any beard. A thin scar, probably from a knife, slants down his left cheek, from just below the eye. Still has all his teeth, or at least he did when I last saw him. Speaks slowly, and with a strong accent. I thought he was dull-witted when I first met him.”

Ariamus shrugged. “Just an ordinary barbarian, lord. I still can’t believe he survived the barbarians’ attack.”

Despite Ariamus’s dismissive words, Korthac knew better. It took more than a sword to command,

and ordinary men don't rule mighty villages.

"But now these barbarians are gone, the fields are ravaged, and bandits such as you roam the countryside." Korthac smiled at Ariamus. Once the man learned his place, Ariamus would make an excellent servant. More important, his brutish skills and crude desires matched Korthac's needs perfectly. The time had come to tell the man of his role in Korthac's plan.

"You are an experienced fighter, Ariamus, and I require one such as yourself, who knows the land and its people. You can help me, and at the same time take your revenge on Orak. And you can earn much gold and a place of honor in my city." Korthac noted the gleam of interest that widened Ariamus's eyes at the mention of gold.

Then a puzzled look came over Ariamus's face. "Your city, lord?"

"Yes, my city. Orak will be my city when I take charge of it. My men are powerful and experienced soldiers. They have fought many battles and survived passage through the great desert. I intend first to rule this Orak, and then all these lands, as I reigned over the cities and villages of Egypt.

You will help me, and as my servant, you will have more power than you've ever dreamed of. Or have you already forgotten your oath to me?"

Ariamus glanced toward the two men standing nearby, watching and listening in silence. "You do not have enough men to conquer Orak."

"Do not underestimate my desert fighters. They are the strongest of those who fought for me in Egypt and each one of them is worth two or three of your kind."

"Even so, Orak has hundreds of men to defend it, lord," Ariamus said, shaking his head. "You do not have enough men."

"No, not yet. But you will find them for me, and you will command them. Such men will prefer to follow one of their own kind, at least in the beginning. That is why I need someone from this land who knows how to fight and how to lead men. The treasure I carried across the desert will 10

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pay my new followers until all of Orak's wealth is mine. If this land is as troubled and unsettled as you claim, we will soon have more than enough men."

In the desert, Korthac's followers had taken turns carrying the four sturdy bags containing amethyst, cornelian, jasper, onyx, quartz crystal, emeralds, and other sacred stones stolen from rich merchants looted from the temples of the Egyptian gods. His men had thrown away their weapons, their gold, even their clothing, but Korthac refused to let them abandon the last part of the wealth he'd captured. They begged him to bury it, but Korthac killed one who refused the burden, and after that, they obeyed. He knew it would be needed if they made it across the desert.

Korthac recognized the doubt on Ariamus's face. "Don't think I will ride against the walls of Orak like those ignorant barbarians. No, I will take Orak from within. One night of blood will establish my rule. And you will help me."

~~“What can I do, lord?” Ariamus leaned forward, greed and the desire for revenge on Orak struggling with his usual caution. “I mean . . . lord . . .~~

how can I . . .”

“You can and will do as I command, Ariamus. You will help me fulfill my destiny, which is to rule this land. If the village is as rich and prosperous as you claim, its resources will supply me and my men with all that we need. Soon all the other villages up and down the two rivers will succumb to my will. I will build a mighty empire, starting with Orak.”

Sufficient light remained for Korthac to see the lingering doubt in the man’s eyes. He smiled at his newest follower.

“And you, Ariamus, you will have more wealth and power as my subcommander than you could ever attain on your own. In my name, you will command hundreds of fighters, and enjoy the choicest women in Orak and the surrounding countryside. Or are you not interested in what I offer?”

“I am interested, lord,” Ariamus said. “I will be your subcommander.”

Korthac smiled. As he expected, Ariamus’s greed had overcome any misgivings. For wealth and power, the man would do anything.

Unlike most men, Korthac had no interest in gold and gemstones, mere tools to bind men to him. Only power, the power to rule everyone, to command their lives or their deaths, meant anything to Korthac. That destiny had guided him even before he grew to manhood, and he would not turn away from it now.

“Tomorrow we will leave this place and begin our journey east. We’ll Empire Rising

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take a few villagers with us as slaves, to carry food and water. I will allow you and your men to kill the rest, as revenge for capturing you. Besides, it’s best that no one know from whence we came. As we travel, I will tell you how I will capture this Orak.” Korthac changed the subject with a wave of his hand. “But now, tell me more about Eskkar, this wanderer turned mighty ruler. I must learn the ways of my enemy.”

“Lord, I’ve told you everything I can remember.”

“I am sure you can remember much more, Ariamus. Or do you need some encouragement?” Korthac smiled once again and leaned back against the tree. “Take your time and start at the beginning. Tell me of when you came to Orak, what you did, how you became captain of the guard.”

Korthac had heard the story several times already, but each reiteration added some new insight, some further detail that helped him better understand this land and its people. He called out for ale, all this miserable village could provide in the way of strong spirits. A woman appeared with a jar and two wooden cups. Kneeling, she filled his cup, then did the same for Ariamus before returning to the shadows.

He watched Ariamus staring into his ale cup. The man wanted to drink, but he'd learned his place and his manners in the last few weeks.

Only after his new master had taken a sip would the man drink from his own cup. Korthac drank a mouthful of the bitter barley brew, then waited until Ariamus drank, gulping loudly until he lowered his empty cup.

“Now, Ariamus, tell me again of this barbarian and the slave girl who bewitched him. They stand in my way . . . our way now. So tell me everything, every little story you can remember, about Eskkar and his witch-wife.”

[1](#)

3157 B.C.E.—The City of Akkad (Orak), on the eastern bank of the Tigris River . . .

Lord Eskkar of Akkad pulled down hard on the restive horse, as impatient as its master to begin the long-awaited campaign. He had planned to be on his way soon after sunup. Instead a missing horse, then a broken pack strap, and finally two soldiers still befuddled from too much drinking the night before prevented the early departure. At last his embarrassed subcommanders signaled their readiness.

Eskkar gritted his teeth as he yanked on the halter, turned the horse around, and took the first steps to reclaim the countryside from roving bands of marauders. A few cheers came from the small crowd of Akkadians who bothered to watch his departure, but most just stared in silence.

Less than two months ago every one of them had praised his name to the gods, acclaiming him ruler of Akkad for saving their lives and their homes. But already many chafed at the very restrictions he established to protect them.

As he led his soldiers through the city's gates and out onto the plain, Eskkar knew that, at this moment, he cared more about getting out of Akkad than pacifying the surrounding farmlands. With each step away from the city he felt his responsibilities lessen and he longed to put his horse to the gallop. That would have been unfair to the seventy soldiers, only twenty of them mounted, who marched behind him. Eskkar restrained both himself and the eager horse until he reached the first of the low hills about a mile away from Akkad.

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He turned his mount aside from the trail and urged the animal up the steepest part of the slope. At the crest, the horse snorted from the climb, then restlessly pawed the earth, as if to say it wanted to race across the soft grassland, not scramble up rocky and slippery inclines. Eskkar first studied the ragged column of soldiers moving beneath him. A small force for what needed to be done, but all that could be spared to drive off the marauders and bandits who had plagued the land for almost a year, thriving in the chaos caused by the barbarian invasion. The dreaded Alur Meriki horsemen had passed on, but

turmoil and anarchy marked their passage throughout the land.

Eskkar shifted his gaze to the river, only a few hundred paces away.

The midmorning sun reflected off the slow-moving waters of the Tigris, giving the wide waterway a rare pale blue tint. He took a deep breath, filling his lungs with the clean air that blew across the water, glad to be rid of the city-smell of too many men and animals living too close together. Eskkar looked back toward Akkad nestling against the great curve of the river. The tall wooden gates remained open, and rising from one of the towers that guarded them, a large banner floated in the breeze. Eskkar could just make out the stalking lion embroidered on it. The lion spirit now protected the new city, the city that had changed him from a mere soldier to captain of the guard to a fighting leader, and nearly killed him in the process.

Another horse scampered up to the hilltop and his bodyguard halted beside him. “Do you miss it already, Captain?” Grond used the old title for his commander.

“Akkad? Do I miss the stink and the noise? Or the whining and scheming? No, the place can fall to the ground for all I care. But I haven’t gone a mile yet and already I’m worrying about Trella.”

“Lady Trella will be well protected by the soldiers,” Grond said patiently.

“I suppose she’ll be safe enough for a month or so.” All this had been discussed many times in the last few days. Gatus, Eskkar’s second in command and the oldest of the soldiers, doted on Trella as if she were his own daughter. Officially, Gatus would command during Eskkar’s absence, but everyone knew the real ruler of Akkad would be Lady Trella. Gatus, busy as ever with the training of new recruits, would do nothing without her approval.

Nevertheless, Eskkar stared at the city, with its hastily built walls that Empire Rising

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had withstood brutal attacks and still showed scars from the recent conflict. This very hilltop had served as a watching post for the five thousand barbarians who laid siege to Akkad for almost two months. A few hundred paces behind him lay the remains of the besiegers’ camp. He and his men would pass through it as they journeyed northward.

A tug on the halter, and Eskkar’s horse shifted to face northward. He’d seen the remnants of the onslaught, still visible everywhere around him, often enough in the last few weeks. Blackened circles of fire-split stones still contained scattered ashes marking the residue of hundreds of campfires. Animal bones lay everywhere, moved and displaced by dogs, birds, and carrion eaters. The scavengers had gorged themselves for many weeks on the battle-dead.

By now the easy pickings had disappeared, the bones gnawed clean.

Human and animal waste would provide less tasty tidbits for several more weeks or until the rains came. The city’s inhabitants had gathered anything of value weeks ago. They’d searched through whatever the barbarians left behind, looking for whatever they could use or sell. More than a dozen large mounds marked the burial places of the enemy dead. The common burial pits contained those

who had survived the battles but died from their wounds, or the dead deemed important enough to be carried back to the barbarian camp and interred in a mass grave before being covered over.

Those barbarians who died assaulting the wall suffered the final indignity—abandoned by their clan and dumped in the river by their enemies, to be carried wherever by the whim of the gods, assigned a bitter fate in the afterlife. Everyone knew that without a proper burial, the spirits of the unburied dead would wander beneath the earth for eternity, prey for the shades and demons who would live off their tormented souls.

“How many years before all this disappears,” Grond said, “before the grass covers everything?”

His bodyguard’s question echoed Eskkar’s own thoughts. “Probably two, maybe three years,” he said. “Farmers will be unearthing debris longer than that. You don’t fight battles like that and not leave traces everywhere.”

Eskkar turned his gaze back toward the city. His city. He could make out the scars on the walls from the thousands of arrows launched against them. Even today, almost two months after the barbarians had departed, men still labored on Akkad’s repairs. So much had been destroyed, but the 16

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city and its people had survived. Most of them, Eskkar remembered so-berly. Many good and brave men had died in its defense. He took comfort in knowing that the bodies of his soldiers had received the proper rites, and their phantoms would not be condemned to wander in the darkness.

Eskkar shook the black thoughts from his head. Better to think of the future than the past. “We’d best be on our way, Grond. Half the day’s passed, and we’ve a long way to travel.”

They wheeled their horses away from Akkad and rode down the slope.

The horses wanted to stretch their legs as much as their masters, and the two men soon caught up to the rear of the soldiers. Once there, however, Eskkar slowed his mount, to ride behind the column instead of at its head, as was the usual custom. From the rear, he could observe the men, see how they marched, even encourage them if need be. One lesson Eskkar had grasped very well in the last year’s training and fighting was that he needed his soldiers’ loyalty as much as their skill.

Aware of his gaze, the soldiers at the rear of the column straightened up and quickened their pace. Eskkar knew the new men thought him a legend, the fierce warrior who had defeated the mighty Alur Meriki.

The more experienced veterans knew better. They understood exactly how close they’d come to being overwhelmed by the barbarians. These recent recruits needed to master the trade of soldiering. They’d better learn quickly, Eskkar thought. They might be fighting for their lives in a week or two.

“What do you think of the men?” Eskkar said, glancing at his companion. Grond had been a slave in a distant land to the west before coming to Akkad. He’d fought well during the siege and earned the rank of subcommander, but now he filled the role of Eskkar’s bodyguard and friend. A big man, nearly as tall as his Captain, Grond stood even wider across the shoulders, with massive arms that, not too

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