

BABYLON - QUEST FOR LOVE

By Leo Berman

Chapter 1

It was almost dawn and a warm summer breeze was blowing in from the east. Birds of all kinds were chirping and cooing as they waited for the first warm rays of the sun to make their way over the rim of the horizon. Small pockets of fog remaining from the cool night before simply vanished as if by the magic of Hannuth. Mirages were already starting to glimmer and dance on the ground as the dry earth responded to the gradual warming of the sand. Zarko loved to witness the start of a new day. *Today is going to be a scorcher*, he thought. Summer was in the air.

From where he sat he had the most magnificent view of the city below him. Soon this slumbering giant would wake up and throb with activity. Life would go on as usual for most of the citizens; some oblivious to the happenings in others' lives – their own wealth their most important concern.

This was certainly the greatest city in all Chaldea. He had been born here just over 22 years before and he loved this place. Over the last couple of years this had become a city of note. Its army was unrivalled in the rest of the world; conquering smaller nations and swallowing them whole, it expanded its hold and influence. Those who refused to join the fold were either killed or brought to Babylon as slaves. Anyone lucky enough to survive as an exile was never returned to his native country. The spoils of war added to the nation's burgeoning wealth, providing ample finances for all the renovations and building work that Nebuchadnezzar had set his mind to. Bigger nations were wary to engage in battle, fearing that they too would cease to exist on the face of the earth, and they gave in to the sometimes unreasonable demands made by the king.

It is surely impregnable, Zarko thought as his gaze followed the city wall; an immense snake guarding its nest. The outer wall was about 10 paces wide and the inner wall about five, separated by about 20 paces of no man's land. No one dared to venture into this piece of forbidden territory. Anyone found there would become an easy target for the arrows of bored archers on the walls.

The river divided the city in two; the old part and the new part. Along the length of the western wall next to the river was a quay where ships docked. This time of the year was busier than usual with the traders coming in from the East, their ships heavily laden with produce to trade for gold, ivory and other precious materials. The port was alive with people of all nationalities trying to make a quick fortune.

Access to Babylon was through eight enormous, imposing city gates, which were well guarded and locked at sunset. Thereafter, entrance to the city could be obtained through a small door within each city gate.

Babylon had certainly gone from strength to strength. The king, Nebuchadnezzar, had made it his aim to adorn the city and had subsequently had the streets paved and a network of canals, aqueducts and reservoirs built. His best feat yet was the famous Hanging Gardens overlooking the river at his palatial estate. He had constructed an artificial mountain with rooftop gardens for his wife, Amyitis, who had pined for the mountains and green hills of her homeland, Media.

Nebuchadnezzar had ascended the throne seven years previously after the sudden death of his father, Nabopolassar. At that time he had been engaged in a military offensive against Egypt and had had to hasten back home, during which time his father had died and many days of mourning had followed.

Zarko's family had close ties with the royal family. His mother, Vivania, was the queen's half-sister; they had been born from the same mother, but had different fathers. So he guessed that made them almost royalty. *Big deal. But at least it has its advantages.*

Their home was next to the royal estate, towards the east.

As children they had loved playing in the Hanging Gardens and he still enjoyed going there to bask in the romance and majesty of the surroundings.

He just adored his aunt, Queen Amyitis, and always thought her to be the prettiest woman in all of Babylon; as did the rest of the city's male population. Her two daughters, his royal cousins the princesses Al'Yavi and Nitocris, definitely had their mother's looks; long, black hair, seductive, blue eyes and an unblemished, dark complexion. Their statuesque figures were the envy of all the other girls and he had seen many young men ogle them when they went by. They were twins, about the same age as Zarko, and their nicknames were Yavi and Crissy.

Zarko had a sister, Xonia, who was about one year younger than he was. Xonia's mother, who had been a close friend of his mother's, had died giving birth to her daughter. No one knew who the father was, so his mother had taken the baby home and cared for it as her own. She had named the baby Xonia, after her mother.

The four cousins grew up together and they had a very special connection. As kids they were always in each other's company, playing, fighting and maturing together – inseparable. As his childhood years had been spent mostly in the company of girls, Zarko's mother believed that was the reason for his softer nature.

Today was going to be an exciting day – the people were expecting the army to arrive home from their military campaign in the West. Zarko's father, Nutesh-Kuri, was Chief Army Commander. He had always hoped that his son would follow in his footsteps; but the life of a soldier was not for Zarko – he hated violence.

His thoughts were interrupted when the sun peeked over the horizon to announce the new day. He loved starting the morning on the roof of their house, two storeys up. They lived on a slight hill, which gave Zarko a beautiful view of the city and beyond. It afforded him some time to do his daily exercises, to meditate, to plan his day or just to daydream. Yes, he had some dreams. One was to see the world. What was out there, beyond the city walls and the distant horizon? He would love to meet people from different countries and cultures, see their architecture and taste their cuisine. *Who knows*, he thought, *maybe one day it might become a reality*.

As his eyes surveyed the wharf on the opposite side of the river he noticed a commotion on one of the ships at the quayside. It contained what looked like large cages with bars on one side; ideal for transporting wild animals. Some hunters and traders made a living from trapping wild animals and then selling them to wealthy sheiks or kings for their entertainment. He had seen ships with similar cargo pass through Babylon before. In this case it looked like they were planning to offload a particular cage onto the dock. He shaded his eyes against the morning glare to get a better look at what was going on.

There were four slaves struggling with one of the cages that was clearly too heavy for them. Even from this distance he could make out the proud mane of a full-grown male lion in the cage. It was clearly distraught, judging by the way it growled and pawed at the men around it. It was obviously not used to the human presence and it was helplessly trapped inside the cage, unable to vent its anger. Its massive paws beat against the sides and Zarko could just imagine the rasping sound coming from its claws scraping the bamboo supports. The lion was impressive in stature and Zarko could visualise the yellow eyes and ferocious teeth as its mouth parted in anger.

If only it could get past the barrier separating it from the prey easily within grasp. Its primitive, uncomprehending mind could not fathom the situation and it couldn't make sense of all the different and unfamiliar scents overwhelming its senses. It growled in frustration and hacked at the bars keeping it from the freedom it so desperately sought. Its saliva made silver streaks on its chin and coated the area around it as it shook its head from side to side.

The slaves doing the offloading were terrified of this scary, magnificent beast so close to them. It was only separated from them by thick bamboo bars and they secretly hoped the bamboo was strong enough to keep them out of harm's way. The lion grew more agitated and restless. At one point the cage tilted at a dangerous angle as the animal's weight shifted when the men tried to pick it up again.

Zarko watched transfixed, his gut feeling informing him of an impending disaster. Every time the lion growled the stench of its breath washed like a putrid wave over its captors. The mixed smell of urine and excrement hung in the air and made the men's stomachs turn. They tasted the bile that rose readily in their mouths. They

avoided looking into the ferocious, yellow eyes that stared right through them. The angry shouts of the load master spurred them on to action and they renewed their efforts to get the heavy cage lifted and moved.

And then it happened, exactly as Zarko had anticipated. The lion must have lurched forward and managed to hook one claw through the bars and into the arm of the nearest slave. Suddenly, pandemonium broke loose as he screamed in agony and immediately let go his grip on the load. With a sickening thud the cage came down hard on his leg and snapped the bone like a dry twig.

Zarko gasped as the other three men also let go, causing the cage to fall and pin down the first slave. As it hit the ground another terrifying noise was clearly heard by all onlookers, spelling impending disaster – the sound of bamboo cracking.

The slave's screams of intense agony were muffled by a roar as the lion launched itself against the broken bars in a final attempt to get free. It struck with such force that the bamboo gave way, allowing the animal finally to escape. The trapped slave stared in disbelief and wide-eyed horror at the colossus bearing down on him. It landed with its heavy paws on his body, crushing him underneath like a rag doll. His cries of pain stopped abruptly, as if cut off by an invisible hand. His chest was ripped open by massive claws and his skull cracked under tremendous pressure as the lion closed its jaws around his head. Blood gushed from his wounds, staining the ground crimson.

Panic erupted and the seething throng of humanity on the quayside spilled outward like the churning red of boiling lentil soup. Everyone in close proximity suddenly realised that the beast was free from its enclosure and the masses turned in their tracks and ran for cover, their cries of anguish rising like the war cries of the Babylonian charioteers in the early morning dawn.

The lion wavered for a moment when it sensed its freedom and the smell of blood made it acutely aware of its hunger. It turned its attention back to the still warm but lifeless body under its paws and started an eating frenzy, tearing out gargantuan pieces of flesh from the dead slave. Its yellow eyes roamed around to test for threats and immediate signs of danger and when it didn't find any, it returned its attention to the meal at hand, slowly devouring chunks of meat ripped from the body.

Up on the roof Zarko saw the whole scene unfolding before him as if in slow motion. It took him a moment or two to react. He jumped up in alarm and ran to his suite to get dressed and retrieve his weapons. He grabbed the sword and a short spear.

He needed to act fast to kill this beast before it got into the city and attacked more people; that would only make it more difficult to track down. He was sure that no one down there had either the means or the courage to fight a superior animal like this. Speed was of the essence.

While he strapped on his sword he had a flashback to his very first experience in the wild – his father taking him out on his first hunt. That day he had learnt a few very important lessons.

A lion is a very cunning animal and it takes some skill to bring one down. Many inexperienced hunters have paid dearly with their lives. The lion they were tracking that day had a sly streak and doubled back, only to hide in the bushes where it waited patiently to ambush them, the unsuspecting hunters. He also learnt that it is the first shot that counts most. Wounding such an animal only makes it mad – and 10 times more dangerous. Now he remembered how they had practised the kill shot to the base of the head where the spine meets the skull. If a spear or arrow penetrates this area successfully it paralyses the beast for the close-up killing stroke; if it is still alive.

The spear was the more difficult weapon of choice for this specific job since it required a strong-armed thrust to reach the mark. He would need to be within easy reach of the animal. However, used effectively, it guaranteed a kill shot with the first strike. Today he had no choice. He had to remember to stay clear of those large paws and their sharp talons; just a single swipe could easily break an arm or a leg. Furthermore, a wound inflicted by those teeth would take long to heal and it could even cause death, making the flesh rot away to the bone. The end wouldn't come quickly and the preceding agony would not be easy to endure.

He took large strides out the door, rushing to the stables. There was no time to saddle up so he quickly put on the reins and without a saddle, raced Koyo to the docks.

He reached the docks in record time and quickly dismounted behind the first row of houses. He didn't tie the horse down in case the lion ventured in her direction – she needed to be free to get away if need be.

He sprinted in the direction of the screams of the petrified people in the lion's path. He just hoped the lion hadn't done more harm. Fortunately it was very early in the morning and most people were still indoors.

He ran past some dockworkers hiding in terror and they whistled at him and pointed in the direction the lion had gone. They all seemed very fearful and refused to leave their cover. Zarko could empathise with them as he had felt the same fear many years before when he'd encountered his first lion in the wild. It had been a terrifying experience and he remembered how his bladder had relieved itself when he saw the sheer size of the animal charging towards them. If it hadn't been for his father's quick reaction, he wouldn't have been here today. His father had gone down on one knee and taken aim. He'd waited for what had felt like an eternity before releasing the arrow, which had flown straight towards its target, embedding itself in the lion's throat. The tip had entered the base of the skull, rendering the beast paralysed. The huge body had dropped in mid-stride, as if forced down by a huge hand from above. The animal had come to a halt just in front of them, its yellow eyes staring accusingly. Raw hatred had flashed in them where the lion had lain looking at its hunters.

His father had waited for his shaking body to recover sufficiently before giving him the sign to kill his prey. He remembered looking into those large eyes staring up at him, the beast's breath stirring the dust in front of its nose as it exhaled, still alive and dangerous. He had drawn the bow as far as he could, the iron tip lightly touching his hand. He had taken aim at one of the eyes to get the angle right to penetrate the brain for the kill shot and after exhaling slowly, he had released the arrow. The weapon had embedded itself into the skull through the left eye. The lion's body had jerked and its eyes had clouded over as the life force had drained away in death. A deep sadness had come over him; to kill such a beautiful animal had just felt so wrong.

He recalled his father's firm hands on his shoulders and how proud he had sounded when he congratulated him on his first lion kill. Although he had relished the experience, he was still unable to get over the lingering feeling of dejection it had caused. In the years that followed he had sometimes needed to kill again, but he had only done so when there was no alternative, like now. He would never again kill such a magnificent creature for the sport of it.

At the quayside it had suddenly gone quiet. Zarko felt a growing uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. *What is the animal up to?* he wondered. He stopped and listened intently for any sound that might give away the lion's location. Stealthily he crept forward, his heart thumping in his chest. It is usually a bad sign if a hunted predator becomes quiet because it is so much more difficult to pinpoint its position.

But then the lion growled – this time somewhere to Zarko's left – and it sounded rather close by, maybe in the next lane. Suddenly he heard a blood-curdling scream. *It must have attacked again*, he thought. The lion would continue taking victims until it was back in the bush where it belonged. Now that it had tasted human flesh, it was even more dangerous; it would return time and again to kill people for food.

Zarko changed course and followed a narrow alley in the direction of the scream. He cursed the fact that he wasn't familiar with the layout of the area. His heart was beating faster as he approached the next lane. He slowly peeked around the corner and what he saw made his mouth go as dry as a riverbed in a drought. The lion had caught up with an old woman as she'd tried to enter her house. The blood against the wall and her mangled body next to it were evidence of the fact. She seemed dead. Her back was shredded and the marks of the lion's claws were embedded in the torn flesh.

The lion stood scraping its paws over the body, as if it were trying to turn it over. Zarko tested the wind and was relieved that it was blowing in his direction. He was safe from detection – for the moment, anyway.

He leaned back against the wall out of sight and took a few deep breaths to steady his nerves. Noticing that he was shaking, he suddenly realised the danger he was in stalking this vicious brute of an animal alone. Why was he putting himself in harm's way? To be a hero, or what? He had acted on a whim without thinking it through. He should rather have alerted the Royal Guard; they at least had the numbers to ensure a definite kill. If this beast made it past him, more would die today.

He peeked around the corner again and his heart jumped. The lion, walking in his direction, was about 10 paces away. "Remember to relax, son; you need to be in control." His father's sage advice rang in his head. "Don't be intimidated, otherwise he will beat you and probably kill you." Zarko would have to step out in front of the lion and spear it quickly and accurately. He'd only have one chance.

He held the spear ready with both hands and stepped out into the lane, directly into the path of the approaching animal. The lion stopped dead in its tracks as if it couldn't believe the audacity of this human. It opened its mouth in an angry growl and already Zarko could see the slight sag of the hind legs as it readied itself to jump. Zarko catapulted himself forward and at that precise moment, the animal reared up, claws exposed, ready to grab its prey, its face in an angry snarl.

Zarko ducked under the flailing paws and plunged the spear deep into the animal's exposed chest. He could feel the shock of the resistance reverberating down his arms as the weapon sliced through bone and flesh. It must have gone straight through the beast's heart, judging by the gush of crimson blood spurting out of the wound and drenching his arms. As his target collapsed to the ground, Zarko hastily stepped aside from under the falling body, leaving his spear still lodged in its chest.

He didn't quite make it out of the lion's reach; one of the heavy front paws scraped down his left arm, ripping through his skin and leaving a trail of blood. He cringed with pain and uttered words that would make a tradesman blush.

As the heavy body hit the ground the spear was pushed right through the beast's back, tearing apart its lungs in the process. The protruding weapon pointed straight up into the sky; a proud symbol of yet another successful kill.

A large puddle of blood formed around the body, staining the sand a dark red. The eyes had lost their lustre; the hatred had vanished as quickly as the life force had drained out. The animal's final breath came wheezing out of ruptured lungs as it gave in to death. The smell of blood was overwhelming, even in the early hours of the day. Before long the flies would start to accumulate as they took care of the decaying flesh.

The streets suddenly came alive as people realised the lion was dead. They emerged from all the doorways and alleys to have a look at the impressive animal that had instilled fear in their hearts. They looked on in awe as they realised the size of the creature up close, and the bravery it must have taken to face it with such a puny weapon.

Zarko wiped the sweat from his brow, glad that the danger was over. His arm was burning like fire where the lion's talons had left three deep gashes from his shoulder to his wrist. He knew it would soon become infected unless he got home quickly so that Helda could see to it. Helda was one of their slave women responsible for looking after the household's minor medical emergencies, among other duties. She was about six years Zarko's senior and they had grown up together.

The dock master came running up to him. "Thank you, my lord. I don't know what we would have done if it wasn't for you."

Zarko only nodded and smiled; he was too tensed up to talk. Fortunately it had all ended well. It could just as easily have gone terribly wrong with more loss of life. "Will you see to it that the carcass is removed?" he asked the man.

The dock master nodded vigorously. He wanted to have this trophy for himself. He could already see the envy of his friends when he told them how he had single-handedly killed this beast. "Thank you, my lord!" The excitement was evident in his voice.

Zarko already had the trophy of his first kill; he didn't need another. Let the man have his day. He could sense what he was thinking, claiming the kill for himself. His friends would soon realise that he was merely boasting. Zarko gently took the dock master by the arm and led him to one side where they could talk undisturbed.

"Are there any more of these animals on that ship to be offloaded?"

“Yes, my lord.”

“How many?”

“Um ... One female with two cubs, my lord. But why are you asking?”

Zarko ignored the question and asked, “For whom are they destined?”

The dock master was getting worried. *What is it to him?* he wondered. “They’re destined for king Nebuchadnezzar at the palace, my lord. It is a generous gift from the Pharaoh of Egypt. They are to be taken to a special camp near the palace where they will stay until a more permanent and suitable structure can be built.”

When Zarko didn’t respond, he continued, “The king is not going to be pleased that the only male had to be killed before it even arrived at the palace. What am I to say?”

Zarko looked at him half surprised. “The truth, of course. You saw what happened here; I had no choice. Besides, the king will not take it lightly if he were to find out that you lied.”

The dock master shuddered and nodded in agreement. He understood too well what the consequences would be – better to tell it as it had happened; they’d had no choice in the matter. Luckily the slave responsible for this disaster had been killed; otherwise the king would have had him strung up on a pole to die anyway. Maybe he’d even have thrown him to the lions as food. *How disgusting!*

“You’d better make sure that your men take extra care when they offload the rest,” Zarko interrupted his thoughts. “Don’t let this happen again.” He looked at the dock master in all seriousness.

“I will personally see to that, my lord. We all got a good fright and I’ll make sure that we are more careful.”

Zarko looked him in the eyes for a moment longer before shifting his gaze over to the dead carcass and remarking, “You have your work cut out here. I’ll leave you to finish off.”

He turned and gave a shrill whistle. Koyo came galloping around the corner and stopped next to him. Her eyes were wide as she picked up the scent of the lion. He quickly mounted her and turned her towards the city. He wanted to get out of there.

The dock master followed their progress for a while as they made their way through the growing crowd. Then he turned to take charge of the removal of the carcass, shouting orders to his slaves.

Back home, Zarko left Koyo with the stablehand before he walked over to the house. He quickly found Helda, who turned pale at the sight of him full of blood and dirt.

“Zarko!” she exclaimed as she hurried towards him. “What on earth happened to you?”

“Don’t worry, I’m fine. You should see the other guy!”

“Were you in a fight?”

“Yes, with a lion,” he replied dryly.

“Come on! Be serious now!” she reprimanded him.

“I *am* serious.” Then he related the gist of what had happened while Helda cleaned his wound and put some ointment on it. He couldn’t help but cry out when his arm burned like fire as she poured the cleansing liquid onto it.

“Oh, you big baby; you can fight lions, but you can’t take a little pain,” she mocked.

Zarko’s face contorted with anguish. It felt like a hot poker being pushed into his flesh.

“Come, let’s clean you up with a nice, hot bath,” she said and led him to the bathing suite. “You smell of sweat and blood.”

At about 20 by 15 paces in size, the bathing suite was more a hall than a room. In the middle was a large, oval bathing pool. It was not very deep; in the centre the water came up to just above his waist. The pool had two wide steps around the side so that one could sit or lie on them and still be in the water. At the top end was the washing cubicle; a round basin in the floor about two paces wide and as deep as one’s knee. There was a half-moon shaped wall around the cubicle, about shoulder height, to give some privacy when washing. One could wash either standing up or seated on the side.

At the far end of the room was the massaging cubicle. It contained a narrow table upholstered with soft leather. There was an opening on one end for one’s face when being massaged. Next to that was an area that Zarko had set up years before where he did his daily exercise. His father had designed and built a contraption using weights with which one could stay fit and keep one’s muscles toned.

Against one wall were a chest of drawers and a dressing table with a large mirror, and in a corner were two long recliners and two chairs. On the walls were lamps that burned olive oil. A few loose, thick rugs from Persia were scattered here and there on the baked clay tiles of the floor. One side of the room had windows with shutters. They were mostly kept open as it was quite warm in that part of the world. The main bath was drained at regular intervals and re-filled with water from the canal that ran through the estate.

Zarko recalled with fondness how bathing time at the end of the day had always been a fun family affair. When they were young, everyone used to gather after supper to bathe and relax. On many evenings after bathing they would sit or lie around on the plush Persian rugs and scatter-cushions until bedtime, playing games or enjoying the tales his father related about his travels to other countries.

Bathing was a happy ritual that the family had perfected over the years. First they’d wash and rinse in the basin, then they’d put on a loincloth or bathing shift and get into the large pool to relax with the rest of the group. Adults went first. Back then their slave woman, Helda’s mother, used to assist with their bathing.

When Helda had turned 16, Zarko’s mother had assigned her to do bathing duty in place of her aging mother. Zarko remembered how embarrassed Helda had been the first few times she did bathing duty. All that display of naked flesh must have overwhelmed her in the beginning, because she was as red as a tomato for a few evenings in a row. When children reached puberty they were considered to be young adults and boys would start wearing loincloths and girls, bathing shifts. Helda always wore a short, sleeveless shift when doing bathing duty.

Now Zarko took off his soiled garments and stepped into the warm water. He closed his eyes as Helda gently soaped and washed his tired body – it felt good.

She softly hummed a soothing tune as she went about her duty, feeling his body relax under her skilled hands. She smiled. With Zarko bathing duty always had its rewards. Just the sight of his muscular, naked body always caused shivers of excitement down her spine.

Chapter 2

After breakfast Zarko went down to the stables to saddle up his horse, Koyo – a pitch-black mare that adored him. They took a leisurely ride down to the plain of Dura, just outside the city. It was here that the army was to assemble today upon arrival from the military campaign in the West. Already the crowd was starting to gather on the perimeter of the plain, eagerly awaiting the return of loved ones or merely curious to see the spoils of war and share in the excitement.

A few, of course, had more sinister motives; they wanted to get their paws on some of the loot to sell on the black market to satisfy their already bloated lust for money. Today they were openly gathering with the rest, hoping to avoid being recognised by irate customers who paid exorbitant prices for their goods. Their disguises were poorly applied, but they would pass the casual scrutiny of the majority; the excitement in the crowd was too much to pay any close attention to small detail. The dust of the moving throng filled the air as people milled around, waiting for any sign of the army's approach.

They didn't have long to wait. Towards the middle of the morning a messenger appeared to announce the army's imminent arrival. There was an atmosphere of excitement in the air. Soon they heard the sound of trumpets coming ever closer. A while later the cavalry came riding in, led by Chief Army Commander Nutesh-Kuri and his high-ranking army officers. This group was followed by the marching foot soldiers, while the chariots brought up the rear. The crowd cheered. A cloud of dust followed the riders onto the plain, covering everything with fine, powdery soot. It would still be another six months before the rains would clean the air and in the meantime, the dust got in everywhere. It turned into a hard crust in the scorching sun, which made for smooth surfaces for the wagons and chariots.

The commander led the procession on his magnificent black stallion – proud and formidable. Apart from the king, he was the next most powerful man in Babylon.

The Royal Guard formed a line around the perimeter of the plain to keep the crowds at bay.

The military procession came to a halt and remained in formation. There must have been close to 20 000 soldiers on the plain, standing to attention. One by one the platoons were given permission to take their leave, causing even more dust clouds as the crowd milled around looking for loved ones.

Zarko watched his father as he dismounted. He noticed how thin he had become due to the ravages of battle. Some could mistake this for weakness, but he knew by the vicelike grip of his father's hands that he was far from being declared as such. He moved with a purpose, almost like a leopard stalking its prey, as he approached Zarko. After the customary greeting, his father turned and gestured to the rear of the plain. "We have some company in the two prison wagons at the rear."

Zarko followed his father's gaze and he noticed the well-guarded wagons with their reinforced cages. From this distance they looked filled to capacity. He shielded his eyes against the glaring sun, but he couldn't make out more detail.

"Please see to it that the exiles are escorted to the admin house and report to Ashpenaz – he's expecting them." Ashpenaz was the king's chief court official.

Zarko nodded and asked plainly, "Prisoners of war?" His father always returned with some interesting spoil. Once he had brought along a tiger that they had captured during one of his eastern campaigns. He remembered how it had nearly taken off the arm of one of the guards who'd ventured too close to the cage. He wondered what had happened to the animal eventually.

The commander turned his attention to his son. "Don't worry," he said, a slight smile on his lips. "They're not prisoners as such. Before we left, the king's court approved Ashpenaz's plan to bring back some youths from the cities we conquered. Ashpenaz plans to train them in our ways, language, religion and culture. Those who pass will serve at the king's court. That is why we had the old royal stables renovated while I was away. The building will serve as their accommodation while in training."

At last Zarko was able to bring together the loose ends – he had noticed the building going on at the old royal stables over the last few months, but had been unable to find out why. It had all been kept very hush-hush.

Nutesh-Kuri turned and started towards his horse for the last leg of his trip home. He looked forward to a nice, warm bath and a massage to soothe away his aches and pains. He was getting on in years and before long he would have to think about retiring to enjoy the fruit of his spoils. But for now, here today, it was still in the distant future. He had much to accomplish before then.

Zarko untied Koyo and slowly rode her to the edge of the plain where the wagons had come to a halt earlier. He was very curious to see the exiles.

As he approached he noticed the drivers lazing under the trees at the edge of the clearing. The wagons were in full sun. It was almost midday and the heat must have been unbearable inside there. The contraptions were actually used to transport dangerous criminals and prisoners of war, so they weren't built for comfort. *These poor people must be tired, thirsty and very hot by now*, Zarko thought. The sooner they were processed the better for them. As he drew closer he noticed their unkempt appearance and the almost hopeless look in their eyes. The journey must have taken a lot out of them, considering the cages in which they'd been transported and the heat of the sun bearing down on them. They were all covered with a film of fine desert dust. *What a sorry bunch*, he thought as he slowly circled the wagons, their weary eyes following his progress.

Zarko summoned the drivers to follow him into the city to the administration house. He jabbed his heels into Koyo's sides and took the lead in front of the procession. There was a big commotion as the convoy slowly entered the city, the curious townsfolk coming out from everywhere to gawk at the exiles. This was the most excitement they'd had for months. The crowd grew larger with every city block they covered. Some of the children pulled faces at the exiles; others ran alongside, shouting and poking fun. The accompanying six soldiers had their hands full to control the crowd and keep anyone from getting trampled to death underfoot.

At last they reached the city administration headquarters. As Zarko began to dismount, Ashpenaz and two officials came out to process the exiles, aroused no doubt by the loud noise coming from outside the building.

They unbolted the first wagon's tailgate and six young people slowly clambered out, one by one. Zarko casually strode over and stood next to the driver as the exiles disembarked. *How inhumane*, he thought.

As if he were reading Zarko's thoughts the driver remarked, "These guys gave us grief all the way home. They refused to co-operate when we camped at night and kept on abusing us verbally. One or two even attempted to escape. We had to publicly whip some of them to deter the others from trying the same stunt. Thereafter we were able to control them. We then tied them together just to ensure their co-operation."

As the exiles filed past, Zarko saw emotions ranging from despair and brokenness to hatred and anger in their eyes. *You people may be royalty at home, but here you are lower than slaves*, he thought.

He was surprised when the last one to emerge was a young woman. She looked haggard; her dirty, long hair was caked and dishevelled. Her once royal garment was soiled and torn to such an extent that it couldn't cover her nakedness anymore. She really looked worn out, as if she'd resigned herself to her lot. Yet there was something about her that held his attention. When their eyes met he saw daggers of defiance deep within her soul. Didn't someone once say 'the eyes are the windows to one's soul'?

"And this?" he asked the driver, pointing at the girl.

"Aah, her?" The driver shook his head. "She was a feisty one. She seduced one of the night guards and then stabbed the poor fellow. When the next guard came to relieve him he found him dead and her gone. The commander was mad. Early the next morning he sent out a search party to retrieve and execute her. They found her about half a day's walk away, hiding behind some bushes. Instead of executing her they brought her back for their private entertainment. She had a dagger strapped to her thigh – obviously the murder weapon. Thereafter the soldiers who guarded this wagon had their fun with her every night." He ended his tale with a sly grin on his face as he recalled the fun he had shared in.

"And the commander? What did he have to say?" Zarko asked, shocked.

"Oh no, he never knew. He was told that they had found her dead in the desert. They kept her well clear of the commander's tent and muffled her cries so as not to alert him. Let's face it; she brought this fate upon herself. She got what she deserved."

Zarko looked at the driver with a steely glint in his eyes, hardly able to hide the disgust on his face. He knew these men were savages and he shivered involuntarily as he thought about the ordeal that the young woman must have been put through.

It was then that the group from the second wagon caught Zarko's attention. One by one, six young men climbed out. They were calm and collected; you wouldn't say they were exiles in a foreign country. They were all well-clothed, one was clean-shaven, and they each wore a turban. What was more, as they disembarked each one looked Zarko in the eye and greeted him in the Babylonian tongue – unexpected to say the least, but quite a refreshing change from the previous lot. Zarko detected no arrogance or hatred at all, and no air of superiority. Even with their dirty attire and the long, tiring journey behind them they seemed different from the rest; almost serene in their manner.

The clean-shaven one had striking, green eyes and Zarko stared fleetingly, his heart missing a beat. *Holy Marduk, I hope no one noticed!* he reprimanded himself as he blushed. He could feel the blood rushing to his head and he quickly lowered his eyes and fumbled with his tunic as if it demanded his immediate attention. For a moment he felt a spark between them, something he couldn't explain at that instant. Maybe they knew each other from a previous life. Puzzled, he wondered who these men were and where they were from. He composed himself and brought his feelings under control before looking up to continue his scrutiny of the rest of the group. They filed past him and he followed them into the courtyard past the two soldiers at the entrance. The outer gates were closed and the noise abated as the thick wood muffled the sound outside. The sun was behind the parapet and it cast a shadow across the group, almost like a hand of protection stretching over them. Again he felt a shiver run down his spine. This group somehow seemed special.

Once inside the courtyard, away from the noisy crowd, the exiles huddled together in two groups, nervously looking around at their strange environment, not quite knowing what to expect at the hands of these men. They were clearly unaccustomed to this much attention. Ashpenaz gave the order to one of the guards to remove the shackles. As it was removed they rubbed the marks where the metal had chafed their skin. It was clear to them that escape was out of the question; they might as well cooperate and enjoy the experience of being shackle free again.

Zarko casually observed the special group out of the corner of his eye, making sure that his interest would not attract too much attention. He felt his pulse quicken again and frowned. "Why is this happening?" he muttered. One of the guards close by looked at him as if he had heard and Zarko indicated with a stiff wave of his hand that he was just thinking aloud. The guard turned away and continued his vigilance of the courtyard. *I must keep my thoughts to myself*, Zarko resolved. A slight smile crossed his face as he thought what others might say if they could read his mind right then. He sighed and tried to concentrate on the events in front of him.

A local interpreter was on hand to translate, accompanied by a scribe with a stylus and tablet. He spoke a handful of languages and ascertained each group's tongue. In the process he also obtained each person's name and relevant information, which the scribe deftly and painstakingly inscribed on his tablet. The scribe wore a robe that was long enough to reach all the way down to his ankles and loose enough to hide the bulge of his stomach; a clear sign of the good life in the city. The whole process was a laborious one and Zarko suppressed a yawn as he waited for the formalities to be completed. *I wish someone would invent an easier means of holding information than these cumbersome clay tablets*, he thought. *Like those leaf-like pieces my father brought from Egypt years ago; so much easier to store and carry around.*

Apparently the two groups were from different nations and thus spoke different tongues. The interpreter and the scribe finished their work and moved away towards the outer door.

"I was impressed by the last group. Where are they from?" Zarko asked the interpreter as he fell into stride next to them, his hands clasped behind his back.

"They are Hebrews from Jerusalem," the scribe said, pausing briefly to look back at the forlorn group. He consulted his tablet and volunteered some more information. "Their names are Darniil, Hannya, Mishaal, Azaria, Bahuri and Helez."

"They greeted me in our native tongue – how come?" Zarko asked with a slight frown on his face, looking over at the interpreter.

"During their journey from Jerusalem they learnt some Akkadian from the soldiers," the interpreter explained. "It is not uncommon for a group to learn the captors' language on such a long and arduous journey. You know

yourself that it could take months to travel back to the kingdom and boredom is a constant companion.” He made a gesture with his hand in the direction of the group and added, “This is especially true of the six youngsters over there. They seem to be adept at learning new languages.”

Zarko nodded understanding and thought *Good for them*; his respect for them had just moved up another notch. He bade his companions farewell with a wave of his hand and turned away, deep in thought over this new development. He didn't notice as the interpreter and scribe bowed in greeting and continued toward the outer gate, which was opened by the guards on their approach.

Zarko already knew quite a bit about the Hebrew people, their religion and their culture. His family's household servants, Sharmat and his wife, Jogthana – Helda's parents – were half Hebrew. They had worked for Zarko's family since he could remember. Originally they'd been slaves to a Hebrew family in Judea, but had fled to Chaldea when their Hebrew Master was murdered. Apparently the blame had fallen on them and the city elders had been about to hand them over to be stoned. Their Hebrew mistress, however, had believed in their innocence and helped them escape. Taking their little seven-year-old daughter and what belongings they could carry, they'd fled on foot under the cover of night. A caravan on its way to Babylon had found them in the desert; dehydrated, feverish and totally lost. They'd picked them up and brought them to Babylon where Zarko's mother had bought them as slaves at the slave market. And they had been with the household ever since. Zarko continued his walk with his hands behind his back and his eyes on the ground in front of him as he reviewed their history.

Over the years Zarko and his sister had learnt much from their servants about the Hebrew religion and customs. As children they had loved sitting at Sharmat's feet while he told them stories about his childhood days and life with the Hebrews. Through the years Sharmat and his family had tried to adhere to most of the Hebrew customs and religious laws. They followed a very strict diet and they only worshipped one God, Yahweh.

Zarko loved the colourful Hebrew legends Sharmat had related about the sea swallowing an army, water turning to blood, a city's walls falling over with the sound of trumpets, and many more. Sharmat and Jogthana had taught Zarko and Xonia to speak Hebrew fluently. Initially it had been their secret language, but now it could come in quite useful. Zarko stopped next to a stone bench and sat down. With his hand under his chin he stared at the group in the distance, wondering what new things they would bring to this city. He looked forward to the next couple of days.

Ashpenaz, who was also a good friend of the family's, tore Zarko from his daydreaming. “Zarko, I need someone to assist me during the training of these young people for the next year, or maybe even longer. Since you are already a prefect in the king's court and familiar with Hebrew and our protocol, I suggested to the court that you would be an excellent candidate for the task. Would you be willing?”

“Of course, I'd love to,” Zarko answered without hesitation. He felt a surge of excitement at the thought and looked at Ashpenaz to see if he'd noticed how eagerly he had volunteered to assist. “Just don't let on that I know Hebrew yet. It would give me an opportunity to hear what they have to say among themselves first.”

“Good. I will make the arrangements for your attendance,” he continued and turned to walk towards the outer gate, a slight smile on his lips. “Bye for now,” he said and waved over his shoulder.

Zarko acknowledged the greeting with a wave of his hand. “Sure, see you tomorrow.” His mind was struggling with this new sensation he felt for another man. He was confused and alarmed that he even contemplated the idea of being with a man; how repulsive! He had to make sense of this very quickly before somebody found out. Otherwise he would never hear the end of it. It could ruin his life! His thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of two carriages through the gates. The horses drawing them were excellent animals, beautifully kept and groomed, and they were stomping their hooves in eagerness to obey their driver.

The sun was well on its way towards the western horizon and cast long shadows on the ground. The exiles were ushered away to the waiting carriages that would take them to their living quarters. Zarko knew they were to be housed in the renovated old stables on the royal estate for the duration of their training. For the time being he decided not to let it slip that he spoke Hebrew. He didn't care too much about the other exiles,

but the Hebrews fascinated him. He wanted to find out more about them and now he would have a golden opportunity to get to know them better. He was actually quite excited. Smelling the aroma of food cooking on the open fires around the city, he became aware of how hungry he was. In all the excitement of the day he had forgotten to eat lunch and he was starving.

To transport the exiles to their accommodation, Ashpenaz had decided to use the state carriages rather than the ugly prisoner wagons. The carriages normally transported guests of the state, so they were built for comfort; padded leather seats, carpeted floors, and sides and ceilings covered in wood and leather. *That will make them feel more at home*, Zarko thought as he stood up, stretched and walked towards his horse. *Life is indeed beautiful*. The day was almost over for him. All that remained was to escort the exiles to their accommodation before he could retire for the evening.

Chapter 3

After threatening the exiles with banishment to the dungeons if they were caught trying to escape, they were all loaded into the state carriages. Two armed soldiers on horseback accompanied each carriage and along the way, sentries of the Royal Guard had been posted at regular intervals to keep an eye out. The party started towards the royal estate at the northern end of the city, accompanied by Ashpenaz and his interpreters.

Zarko was quite curious to see the renovated old stables before their 'guests' got there. Knowing the king's architect, he would not have approved a slap-dash construction job. To satisfy his own curiosity, Zarko rode on ahead to have a quick look around the exiles' quarters.

The guards at the big gates leading to the royal estate knew him well and opened without question. He nodded in acknowledgement and rode through. The royal estate was heavily guarded and surrounded by a high wall. It housed the king's palace and the royal stables. The Hanging Gardens were also within its perimeter. At the old stables Zarko dismounted and tied Koyo to a tree nearby.

He surveyed the renovated building and surrounding gardens. There was no indication at all that this place had once housed horses. The familiar stable doors had been replaced with neat, ornate wooden windows, shining with their newly applied coat of oil and varnish. He could smell the fine scent and closed his eyes momentarily to enjoy it. The walls were whitewashed and neatly closed up where the previous doors and windows had been. Even the gardens had been revamped. The bushes and long grass had been replaced with neatly laid out flowerbeds with rock paths inbetween. The edges were trimmed to precision and the ground raked up against the beds. He imagined that these gardens must be similar to the Oasis of the Cloud gardens in Egypt that his father had often described.

The main entrance now boasted a large, handcrafted wooden door guarded by two sentries. They knew Zarko as a prefect in the king's court and greeted him with a nod of the head as they allowed him through into the building. The inside was lit up with the light of a dozen oil lamps, casting shadows across the walls and floor as the wind from the open door made them sway and dance, almost like the belly dancers at the local pleasure house.

Inside, four slave women welcomed him with big smiles. They were dressed in simple, sleeveless shifts made of fine, white linen and their feet were shod with leather sandals. They were awaiting the arrival of their 'guests'. They'd been assigned to pamper their charges and see to their needs. They were keen to see the exiles with their own eyes, since they had never left the city at all and were totally oblivious to the world outside the massive walls.

Zarko mumbled a greeting as he looked the women over. They giggled and whispered between them, occasionally smiling in his direction. They were obviously not used to royalty paying any attention to them. His sandals made a slight squeaking sound as he crossed the polished surface. He could feel the eyes of the women on him as he walked past, knowing that he drew their attention. For a brief moment he wondered what they were whispering to each other; not that he really cared. They were not in his circle of friends and therefore, not really worthy of any further consideration from him. He turned his attention to the changes made as he continued further into the building.

The new quarters had a long, wide passage down the middle. The floor was covered with baked clay tiles that gave it a rich appearance. The roof had no ceiling; when Zarko looked up he had a view of the beautiful wooden beams that supported the top of the structure. The roof itself was covered with baked clay squares – all very impressive. Obviously no costs had been spared here.

The first door on his left led into the kitchen where there was a buzz of activity as the chef and his assistants prepared for supper. The aroma of ready-made food wafted into the hallway. The doors on the opposite side of the passage led to the sleeping quarters. Further down on his left he found the dining room. Inside were two long tables with benches alongside, as would be found in any dining room; except that the benches were covered in leather. On the one side was a sideboard – made of the same wood as the doors and windows – containing plates, mugs and other utensils. The room's décor matched the other rooms he had just seen. It made for a nice, homely atmosphere.

Two more doors opened into large rooms with tables and benches all facing the front – typical of those in a tablet house. The exiles' training was going to take place here.

He stopped and peeked into one of the rooms to be used as sleeping quarters; a large space that contained five beds. His eyes traversed the inside as he studied the layout. At one end was a large closet for clothes and personal belongings. Each room had windows with wooden shutters and heavy drapes that opened and closed by pulling a thick, braided cord. In the centre of the floor was a large, thick, oval rug. Next to each bed was a little table with a lamp and on the floor lay a rectangular rug. A wooden vanity table with a built-in mirror stood in the corner. *Very nice* – even he could live here. But then, he had never really cared too much for luxuries.

He continued on down the passage towards the far end where the ablution area was. In the middle of the room was a large, rectangular bath with wide steps at the two ends leading in. The crystal clear water reflected the image of the roof and the oil lamps. For now the water was as calm as a mirror, with only the occasional ripple visible as the air movement caused it to undulate. At the far end was a door that led off to the latrines. Each latrine was in its own cubicle, but had no door.

On the northern side of the bathing area stretching from one end of the wall to the other was a long, wooden bench. The bench was covered in the same fine leather as all the others. Above the backrest hung metal mirrors spaced evenly along the length of the wall. The lights from the oil lamps were magnified by the mirrors and this created the impression that there were more lamps than there actually were. The southern side of the bathing area contained four baths for washing. Zarko turned away towards the door and started his walk back to the entranceway, satisfied that everything was in order for the exiles. He was pleasantly impressed with the renovations and made a mental note to thank the overseer personally.

The crunch of wheels on gravel indicated that the party had arrived. He exited the building as the first carriage rolled to a halt nearby.

Ashpenaz was the first one to alight – he had been sitting next to the driver of the front carriage. Through the interpreter he asked his passengers, who happened to be the Hebrew group, to disembark and follow him into their new home. They alighted and stood huddled together until the last one got off the carriage. Together they moved towards the building in single file.

Zarko stood at the front door as the group filed past him into the building. He accidentally made eye contact with the young man with the girlish face and striking green eyes. Once again a jolt of emotion shot through his body. He quickly looked away. *By the breath of Bel!* He was sure everybody could see the redness spreading to his face and ears. He tried to act casual to avoid undue interest in his predicament. He just couldn't explain it. He had no control over it – it just happened! *Maybe in our previous lives we were friends or brothers,* Zarko reasoned. Only time would tell. He looked back at the group after they had passed, shaking his head.

Later, when he had caught up with Ashpenaz, the latter remarked, "The Hebrews seem a very nice group of youngsters. I think you'll enjoy teaching them, yes?"

‘Yes, I think it’s going to be an interesting assignment.’

‘I am glad to see that you are as eager as I am to help with this task,’ Ashpenaz continued. ‘The king will be pleased.’ He put his arm around Zarko’s shoulders to indicate his approval. ‘The king has asked that I take charge of the training and it would certainly help to have you on the team. It won’t be an easy task, though. We’ve never had something like this in the history of Babylon before and it will surely prove to be a notable challenge.’

Once they were all inside the building, Ashpenaz gathered them together and introduced Zarko to the Hebrew group, telling them that he would be their guardian for the duration of their training. Ashpenaz explained what was expected of them, pausing after every sentence to allow the interpreter to translate. They nodded to indicate that they understood.

Zarko listened with mild interest as Ashpenaz and the interpreter laid out the procedures to the exiles. He didn’t care for any of the details as most of it didn’t impact on his role in the training process; it merely covered the housekeeping rules and dress code.

Each trainee would receive six changes of clothing. They were to dress in clean garments every day. Dirty laundry would be collected by the slave girls, washed and returned daily. When they were ready for an audience with the king each would receive a special outfit suitable for the occasion. Each one’s garments would be marked for identification. They were to be neat and well-groomed at all times, befitting trainee officials of the king’s court. For the next year or so this was going to be their home and their training would also take place here. The first thing they were required to learn was the Babylonian language. In the process they would also learn about the Babylonian religion, customs and laws.

They would be provided with three meals a day. The kitchen was fully equipped and had a full-time chef, along with kitchen staff. They would train for five days, followed by two days off. They would even be remunerated a nominal amount per month. They were not captives, in the true sense of the word, and could move freely about the city. Initially it would be a good idea if their interpreter and guardian accompanied them on these outings. However, they were not allowed outside the city gates unless special approval was obtained beforehand and their guardian escorted them. The king’s tailor would arrive the following day to take their measurements for their new apparel and Zarko would take them on a tour of the city. They could use the state carriage. Next Ashpenaz introduced them to the female slaves who had been assigned to look after any needs they might have.

Zarko was about to stifle another yawn when he was brought back to reality with a jolt when Ashpenaz announced that he had decided to give the Hebrews Chaldean names. Darniil would from then on be known as Belteshazzar, Hannya as Shaedrak, Mishal as Micheq, Azaria as Abedniko, Bahuri as Barku and Helez as Hezinya.

Hezinya? But that’s a girl’s name! Then it suddenly dawned on him – *he* had been a *she* all along! How dumb of him! The fact that they were all dressed exactly the same and wore turbans made it difficult to distinguish male from female. But he should have known, considering the young ‘man’s’ smooth, unshaven skin. He felt elated now that he knew the truth. What a relief!

Ashpenaz ordered two of the slave girls and the Hebrew interpreter to show the Hebrews their quarters and have them get ready for supper. ‘Please, make yourselves comfortable. The gong will soon announce that supper is ready.’

He turned and walked towards Zarko. Looking at him, he smiled. ‘I bet you didn’t know that the clean-shaven one back there was actually a young woman, did you now?’

‘To be honest, I wasn’t sure... But I did think that ‘he’ was much too pretty to be a man!’ He glanced back at the group and caught Helez looking at him. They held each other’s gaze for a moment before she turned to follow the interpreter. He was half disappointed that it ended so abruptly. He knew one thing for sure – he’d like to get to know her better.

“Ok, call in the others,” Ashpenaz ordered the interpreter after having allocated rooms to the first group. Zarko remained standing at his side, purely because he wanted to take a closer look at the next lot of exiles. The five men and the woman entered the door and stopped a few paces from them. Some of their arrogance had gone. Maybe they had realised that there was nothing they could do about their situation. As with the Hebrews they were introduced to the female slaves and told the basic rules. At that moment the chef walked in, caught the attention of Ashpenaz and announced that supper was about to be served. In the passage was a gong against the wall, which he promptly struck using the attached wooden handle with a ball-shaped end.

Everyone began filing into the dining room. By now the exiles had started to accept their situation and they talked more openly and freely, not bothering to keep their voices to a whisper. It had been a long day and everyone was famished. The exiles hadn’t had a decent meal since their capture and they looked forward to their first dinner in captivity, strange as it might seem. Each group occupied a separate table, preferring to stick to their own.

Zarko decided to keep close to the Hebrews as he wanted to get better acquainted with them – especially the young woman. He chose the place opposite her, pulled the chair out and sat down. Ashpenaz took a seat next to him. The Hebrews had removed their turbans and he was made aware of how beautiful she actually was. Her loveliness was striking and took his breath away, and she had a shyness about her that just made her more desirable. Her large, green eyes were flanked by short, reddish-brown hair. She didn’t pluck her eyebrows like the Babylonian girls and it gave her an air of untamed wildness. He felt a strong attraction to her and it excited him. He realised that he might be smitten with her. He noticed the similarities between the girl and Darniil; they both had the same hair colour and skin texture and there was a strong resemblance in their features. *They might very well be brother and sister*, he concluded, determined to ask the scribe about their background. He tried catching her eye, but she didn’t look in his direction at all; she ignored him as if he weren’t there and it pained him. He wasn’t used to girls disregarding him. After all, he was very attractive and the son of the second most powerful man in Babylon. All girls wanted him.

Helez fumbled with her napkin, embarrassed that Zarko was watching her so closely. She could feel his gaze on her even though she was not making eye contact and it made her nervous. Maybe he also felt the attraction; that mystical bond that drew two people together.

He was certainly a very handsome young man, riding proudly on his magnificent horse. She had sensed the muscular frame hidden beneath his tunic. When she’d passed him into the building earlier on she’d been impressed by his manliness and she’d shuddered with delight at the thought of his arms enfolding her in a passionate embrace. His steely, grey eyes had bored into hers when they’d met the first time and it had most certainly eroded her resolve not to get involved with anyone who wasn’t from her own tribe. Her mind told her to nip this feeling in the bud; but her heart felt differently.

He had a kind face with a mouth that smiled easily, displaying rows of perfectly formed teeth. His tanned skin indicated that he spent much of his time outdoors and it appealed to her. She tried hard to convince her heart that such a relationship would be folly; they were forbidden to forge friendships with foreign nations and this was a Babylonian, after all. Why did this have to happen to her? She wanted to get married to a boy who served the same God as she did; someone who could take the lead in matters of faith, just as her father and mother had taught them from a tender age.

She tried to clear her mind and concentrate on having a meal. She hoped that she would not appear clumsy and spill her food or drop her cup – how embarrassing that would be! It took all her willpower to appear calm and composed. She didn’t want him to see how he made her feel. Her aunt had always said that a girl needed to keep a man guessing, uncertain of what to expect. Remembering her aunt’s advice made her think about home. Her mother had died when she herself was merely eight, giving birth to her youngest sister, Rebekah. She wondered what her two sisters were doing right now; probably worrying about her and Darniil out here in Babylon. Having both her and her brother taken at the same time was unfortunate and cruel. She wanted to cry out for them, but kept her emotions under control. There would be time later on to shed a tear for her family back in Jerusalem. Her thoughts were interrupted by the commotion coming from the kitchen as the chef gave the order to serve the food.

First they brought in a few decanters filled with wine and poured some into each one's wine cup. Thereafter they brought the food on large, silver platters and put these in the middle of the tables. The midday meal was the main meal in Babylonian culture, so supper was normally a simpler affair. Yet the platters were filled with cooked vegetables and fresh fruit. There were also pieces of bread in a basket. Before commencing the Hebrews bowed their heads and closed their eyes for a few moments – obviously to thank their deity for the provisions. Zarko's respect for them climbed another notch. He looked over to the other crowd and saw them merrily tucking in without giving any higher being a second thought. *Bloody barbarians*, he mused.

Ashpenaz took the opportunity to tell the Hebrews, by way of the interpreter, about Babylon's history and the king's construction programme. They all listened intently while enjoying the fruit and vegetables. They were clearly very hungry, given their ordeal and the long journey they had endured.

When supper was over, Zarko's group displayed their good manners again by each personally thanking Ashpenaz and the chef.

Holy Marduk! These people can teach us Babylonians a thing or two about good manners. They just never stopped amazing him! His thoughts were interrupted when Darniil stood up and addressed him through the interpreter.

"May we please retire to our quarters, my lord? We've had a long day and we would like to rest." Zarko waited for the interpreter to translate and looked expectantly at Ashpenaz, who nodded his head.

Zarko looked at Darniil and said, "I will be back in the morning to take you all on that tour of the city as promised." He stood up as he waited for the interpreter to finish.

Darniil nodded and replied, "We are looking forward to the excursion, my lord, and we will be ready when you arrive."

After that the rest of them rose and they filed out into the passage to retire to their living quarters. He caught Helez looking at him very discreetly as she walked away and when he smiled at her, she diverted her gaze, blushing. His heart skipped a beat. He quickly wiped the smile off his face before turning to Ashpenaz.

"Well, I suppose that's all for today? Shall we also retire? I'm bushed. Tomorrow is going to be a busy day indeed."

"Yes," Ashpenaz replied, "a busy day and many things to get organised. I still have to report to the king first thing in the morning to bring him up to date with all the developments. I'll see you during your tour." With that they embraced each other in a fond greeting and left, each going his own way.

Zarko felt like a man possessed. There was a slight spring in his step as he made his way home. He was going to sleep like a baby, dreaming of this young woman who seemed to have put a spell on his heart. He looked forward to the next day and could hardly wait to see her again; maybe they could even get better acquainted with each other. He would have to devise a plan to get her alone so that they could talk. After all, he'd seen the way she'd looked at him with those green, soulful eyes. He could easily drown in them.

Chapter 4

It was dusk by the time Zarko arrived home. He dismounted and after stroking Koyo behind the ear and whispering, "See you tomorrow, you foxy lady," he handed the reins to the stable boy who was eager to be of assistance.

He ambled towards the house, softly humming one of his favourite happy tunes. From a short distance away he saw the kitchen door open and was pleasantly surprised to see Xonia coming towards him. His pulse started racing as he imagined the intimate moments he knew they would share later. They'd been lovers since their late teens.

He recalled how Mother had badgered Xonia some years before to find a husband and start a family. "Most girls your age are already married and even have children," Mother had nagged. "Even Yavi is already married and Crissy is being courted as we speak."

But that was the last thing the two of them had wanted to hear. They were in love and would get married once they were a little older. Just a few more years of enjoying each other and their single lifestyle – why mess it all up with marriage and kids at that point in their lives? All those things would come in due course. But Mother had had plans of her own.

After some time she had broached the subject again. She couldn't believe that at her age Xonia had not yet shown any interest in men, so she had given her an ultimatum: either Xonia found a husband soon or she'd arrange one for her!

It was then that he and Xonia had decided to confront their mother and father with the truth. When they had bolstered up enough courage one evening, they had told their parents that they were in love and wanted to get married. Of course they never let it slip that they had been intimate for some years already.

Their parents had freaked out, worried about what the neighbours and the rest of the family would say. The fact that they weren't really related made no difference – everyone else believed they were brother and sister. No matter how they had tried to reason with their parents, they had been adamant that no such marriage was going to take place. The two had been ordered to forget the whole thing – subject closed.

Xonia had fled upstairs to her room, sobbing.

“She'll get over it,” Mother had said as he'd followed Xonia to her suite. He'd found her there lying on her bed, sobbing her heart out.

For a while he'd just lain there next to her and held her.

“I love you, Zarko, and I want to be your wife. Why must life be so complicated?”

The very next day Mother had started her horses into a gallop in initiating marriage arrangements for Xonia. She had secretly had her eye on a potential husband. He was a long-time friend of the family – a well-known local merchant by the name of Ghurum. Already 40 years old at the time, he had never married. Whenever he'd visited the family he had always hinted that Xonia would be his wife one day. Mother, of course, had thought very highly of the man, but Zarko had never liked him. He was just too feminine, and a real charmer. Not long thereafter the wedding arrangements had been made, with Xonia due to marry Ghurum the month she turned 19. The last few days before the wedding had been the worst; she'd finally realised that her love for Zarko was doomed. With no more tears to shed she had considered taking her own life, but that would have been too selfish. They would still see each other and maybe even continue their affair in secret. She'd been shocked by her own lustful thoughts; but the idea had excited her and given her renewed zest – all had not been lost yet.

But there was a surprising twist to the tale. Ghurum was a travelling merchant, which meant that he was often away for long periods at a time. During those periods Xonia would move back home, because she couldn't bear to live in Ghurum's house all alone.

The first time she'd moved back was about two months after her wedding.

Zarko had been excited to have her back at home. They had spent half of the first night in Xonia's suite, chatting away. Zarko had been shocked to hear that Ghurum had never consummated their marriage. They even slept in different bedrooms. Under those circumstances it hadn't taken long for their secret love affair to resume. They were still madly in love and could hardly keep their hands off each other whenever she came to visit. And needless to say, Zarko lived for those times.

“Ah, my luscious love! You're more beautiful than the last time I saw you,” he said when they met halfway between the house and the stables.

“Always the charmer,” she whispered as they embraced. Hand in hand they walked towards the house, but just before they entered she pulled him into the dark shadows and gave him a long, passionate kiss. Her hands were all over his body, igniting a very recognisable fire in his loins. It didn't take his body long to respond as nature intended.

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