

THE COLORS OF FIRE

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CHAPTER 1

Kato pulled desperately on the reins but he'd already lost control of the panicked horses. On the dusty slope ahead of him several thousand Assyrian warriors charged toward the Hittite army, beating drums, blowing trumpets, and screaming ancient battle cries. Kato was already close enough to see the glint of sunlight on their spearheads and the fierce determination in their eyes. He tried to focus on this, his first battle, yet he was oddly aware of the sweet smell of the horses, of the sweaty white foam on their backs. The chariot bounced over the stony battleground, the chaotic sounds punctuated by the sudden splintering of a wooden wheel. A few yards in front of him the enemy line of brutish, shorter men with copper-clad shields smacked into the taller Hittite warriors with an ugly, gut-wrenching sound. That was the last sound he heard, just before his right wheel shattered and the ground came up and turned his world painfully sharp and then black.

“Kato! Kato!” The older man poured water over the face of his son. Kato spit, tasting mud and water and a little blood, and wiped the dust from his eyes. Above, the white clouds in the blue sky softly focused. Suddenly Arinna, the sun goddess, blinded him. He shielded his eyes and found the face of his father, Katuzili, King of Kings and Invincible Ruler of the Hittite Empire, hovering over him, his eyes wide with alarm.

“I’m fine,” Kato said, “I think.” The fear in his father’s eyes vanished, replaced with the dispassionate look of an experienced ruler. He helped Kato to his feet. Kato surveyed the ruins of his chariot and the two broken horses sprawled over red soil. The warriors quickly dispatched the animals, putting them beyond their pain. He tried not to betray the emotion he felt at the loss of his two favorite steeds. His father would expect no less from a son who would succeed him.

“Did we hold them back?” Kato asked.

“For now,” his father replied. “Our new iron spears went through their copper armor like parchment. But they fell back to the old forest and I fear that other armies from the East will join them. We need to regroup at the Citadel.”

Kato didn’t need to ask his father how he intended to defeat the Assyrians. He knew it would happen, though the cost in lives would be high. He climbed into his father’s chariot and gripped the wooden rails in his strong hands. On the other side of the great king, an archer, dressed in the military raiment of the personal bodyguard of Katuzili, stood proudly, his bow slung over his back. At his side a quiver, lashed to the chariot, still held a dozen arrows with iron tips.

The chariot lurched forward, over ground littered with weapons and bloodied men. Kato noticed with grim satisfaction that nearly all the bodies he saw were Assyrian.

Leaving the rocky battlefield, the chariot rolled over smoother ground on the approach to the Citadel with its huge stone lions on either side of the gate. A sculptor had captured the menacing expression of the beasts with frightening realism. The massive stone walls surrounded an older wall, two concentric gray circles around the ancient city.

When he was young Kato had heard stories of an older, conquered city buried deep beneath this one.

Piyamaradu met them, the warrior Kato had feared and admired since childhood. Piya had once been a renegade who attacked outlying Assyrian outposts without the authority or support of the king. Only his incredible strength and his knowledge of battle and military tactics saved him from the wrath of Katuzili. Now, in their most desperate hour, he served his king without question.

Kato stepped from the chariot with his father. Piya sat in front of a spinning stone wheel, sharpening a iron spearhead.

“Not to put to fine a point on it,” Piya said, smiling grimly,” but we are hopelessly outnumbered.”

Piya was not only taller than most of the king’s personal guard, he outweighed them by several stone. His skin was weathered and covered with battle scars, and reminded Kato of the elephants he had seen many summers ago in the far South. Piya was fearless and, some said, a little crazy. His favorite battle tactic was to run at the enemy naked, carrying only a shield and a short sword. When the enemy soldiers were confronted with this enormous naked warrior, his battle-scarred and leather-like skin glistening in the sun, they invariably scattered. Those who didn’t scatter didn’t live very long.

Kato’s father frowned at Piya’s negative attitude.

“We’ve had a carrier bird from your brother,” Piya said.

Katuzili took the note, which had been rolled and sent by homing pigeon. His face did not betray his emotions as he read the news from his brother on the other side of the great forest. “We’ve been outnumbered before.”

“Not this badly,” Piya replied.

“Does it frighten you?”

Piya’s spit sizzled on the hot point of his spearhead. “I look forward to it. It’s no fun if the odds are even.”

“Ready the pigeons.” Katuzili ordered. An aide bowed and darted back inside the gate.

Kato steeled himself against the displeasure of his father. He needed to know what was going on and the only way to find that out was to ask. “Sir,” he said, dipping his head in a gesture of respect, “what will happen tomorrow?”

He felt the firm grip of his father’s hand on his shoulder. “You need to know this,” his father said. “The first assault was merely to test our strength and discover our defensive strategy. The Assyrian king is old, but he has thirty seasons of military experience. He is a formidable enemy. Even now, his numbers increase as reinforcements from Nineveh and Babylon join them. It’s true we are outnumbered ten to one. But I have a plan. Your uncle sits with his army North of the Assyrians. My general Arnuwandas waits with an even bigger army in the South. We will still be outnumbered, but I intend to crush the Assyrian army between our three forces.”

Kato needed to voice his uncertainty. “I don’t understand how you can coordinate the attack. If we dispatch riders to those armies, the enemy will see them. Surely they have scouts everywhere.”

“But not in the air,” Katuzili smiled. He waved to an aide and was shortly presented with a cage full of pigeons. Each bird had a different colored band tied to its

leg.

“Red for the town in the North where these pigeons were raised and my brother waits with his army,” his father explained, “and blue for General Arnuandas in the South. These birds can make that flight in a couple of hours. I will release them when the Assyrian’s reinforcements leave the forest and enter the river valley. They will have scouts on either side spread out for miles, watching for my couriers, but they won’t see the birds. By the time they detect the approaching armies it will be too late. My flanks will engulf and slaughter our trapped enemies.”

Kato smiled. His father never ceased to surprise him. “I will sacrifice a lamb to Sharruma, Son of Teshub.

“You had best sacrifice to Arinna,” a voice behind him said.

Kato turned to face the high priest Sapalu. “The sun goddess? Why? The sun is already at our back and in the enemy’s eyes.” He hoped the holy man wouldn’t consider the question insolent.

Sapalu’s ancient eyes sparkled like two watery potholes in a weathered landscape. His dusty white hair fell nearly to his knees. “I have consulted the tablets,” he said, displaying a shining gold tablet with both hands. “The battle must be delayed.”

“How long?” the king asked.

“At least three days.”

“Impossible. By then our foes will be here at the Lions Gate.”

Sapalu stroked his long white beard and returned Katuzili’s hard stare. “It is the time of the great sun-storm. I have used the dark crystal. The baleful eye of the sun is upon us.”

“What storm?” Kato asked. “The weather has never been better and all the signs favor us.”

“The old man thinks he can see the eyes of Arinna on the sun with his dark crystals,” Katuzili said. “The great sun-storm is a myth. Neither I nor my father nor my father’s fathers have ever known such a storm.”

“It exists,” Sapalu continued, “and it is upon us.”

Kato stared in wonder at the sky. “The sky is clear. The wind is from the East and smells dry. The trees are calm. I see no sign of a storm.”

“You won’t see this storm,” Sapalu replied.

“Fool’s tales,” Katuzili said. He dismissed the high priest with a wave of his hand.

A messenger rode up, his horse dark with sweat, and dismounted before Katuzili. He bowed slightly, then stepped close to the king and spoke quietly in his ear. Katuzili nodded and turned to his son. “Their reinforcements are assembling and readying their battle formations. This will take the rest of the day. They won’t march at night so we expect the attack in the morning. After they decamp from the forest, it will take them about five hours to move up the river valley and join the main army. We will send this message to our armies. I will order them to move out tonight. If I’ve timed this right, the Assyrians and their allies will fall right into our trap!”

The pigeons were released, fluttering into the blue sky. Kato ordered another chariot and a good pair of horses for the next morning. He was proud of his skills as a driver, and he would have Hamabi, one of the finest archers in the army, at his side. As he walked between the stone lions that crouched on each side of the city gate, the high priest looked his way. The grim, dark look on Sapalu’s face stopped Kato in his tracks.