

THE COLORS OF FIRE

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CHAPTER 2

The sun rose the following morning and burned brightly on the fortified, crescent-shaped field in front of the ancient city. Kato surveyed the bone dry ground, now martialing with soldiers, horses, and the noisy machines of war. A shiver of panic ran through him. This was his first real battle and raw, primal fear was slowly gnawing away at his confidence. To silence the panic he considered their options.

The chariot was the primary weapon of Katuzili's army but his bowmen would be the first line of offense, firing into the approaching army. Archers would be used in groups with non-combatant slaves carrying shields to protect them. The bows required great strength to fire, but had a range of two hundred meters or more. Kato remembered his father's comment that their new bronze tips easily pierced the copper armor of the Assyrians. He hoped it would significantly change the odds. A quiver held fifty arrows and often some token of affection from a loved one – a small handkerchief or a talisman.

After the archers had fired, the chariots would take the field. Each of the heavy wooden war chariots carried a driver and an archer. Most of the larger chariots carried a third man with a shield to protect the other two. Kato's chariot had a spare horse hitched behind it to ensure his escape if the chariot was disabled. Metal-clad wooden plates lashed to the sides of the chariot stopped the copper arrowheads of the Assyrians.

Chariots could trample infantry in a straight run. Cavalry was reserved for uneven ground, where it was more effective than chariots. Each horse carried two riders bareback, one to maneuver and control the horse in the chaos of close battle and one with a bow to kill and a short sword for backup. Chariots and infantry always took precedence over cavalry. For most battles on flat terrain, the cavalry was relegated to carrying messages.

Each of Katuzili's legion captains was chosen for experience in battle. Each had one hundred bowmen with one hundred shield-bearing slaves under his command. Each legion could operate as an independent army, although most of the time Katuzili and his military advisors would coordinate attacks and defense.

Long lines of foot warriors with spear and short sword formed up behind another long line of archers. In front of them all, the cavalry and chariots maneuvered for position. The horses neighed quietly and pawed nervously at the ground. They knew instinctively what was coming.

Katuzili conferred with his advisors at the rear, before taking his position at the head of the army. He wore a sleeveless hauberk made from bronze plates over a thin cotton tunic and a bronze helmet. No part of his armor would distinguish him as king, though every one of his warrior's knew their ruler on sight.

He caught site of Kato and motioned him over to join the group of advisors.

“What did my high priest say to you last night? Is he still going on about that tablet?”

“That and his dark crystals. I'm surprised he hasn't gone blind from staring at the

sun. He actually gave me one of his gold tablets and asked me to place it in your tomb.” He pulled a leather sack from beneath his tunic, hanging on a cord tied around his neck.

Katuzili’s expression grew somber. “So he already has me dead in battle? He may not be far from the truth. My column will be taking the worst in this battle. We face the enemy head on. You know Kato, I believe in the gods, of course, any sane man would. But I think the old tablets can be interpreted any number of ways. I’m not sure I trust Sapalu’s predictions in this case. A storm you can’t see? What does that mean?”

“He’s been right about most other things.”

Before his father could reply, the long, wailing alarm of a trumpet echoed in the river valley below. The ears of one hundred horses snapped forward.

“They’re on the march,” his father said.

“Father,” Kato said, pointing to a bird on a nearby fence rail. A red ribbon dangled from the bird’s leg. “Isn’t that one of your messenger pigeons?”

His father’s gaze followed Kato’s thin arm. “They get sick or lost sometimes,” he said, “or killed by hawks. That’s why we send out several.”

All four columns of fifteen thousand men began to move forward. Kato pushed the stiff leather bag with the gold tablet back inside his tunic. It was heavy and he wished he hadn’t agreed to take it from Sapalu. It definitely felt like an ill omen.

“Kato, you will hold back and command the rear guard.”

“But father...”

“If I am killed, you succeed me as king. We cannot both seek the heat of battle. At some point, as my flanking armies close in, we will retreat as if fleeing. The pursuing Assyrians will think only of the looting and spoils of victory. They will break ranks and can then be overcome by our hidden armies on both sides. I want you in the safety of the Citadel. The royal line of Khattasulis must continue.”

Though disappointed, Kato understood the logic of this. He would test his mettle in battle another day.