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PROLOGUE

1180 B.C.

Katu pulled desperately on the reins but he'd already lost control of the panicked horses. Directly ahead, several thousand Assyrian warriors charged toward the Hittite army at a dead run, beating drums, blowing trumpets, and screaming ancient battle cries. Katu was already close enough to see the glint of sunlight on their spearheads and the fierce determination in their eyes. The chariot bounced over the stony battleground and he heard the splintering of a wooden wheel. A few yards in front of him the enemy line of brutish, shorter men with copper shields smacked into the taller Hittite warriors with an ugly, gut-

wrenching sound. That was the last sound he heard, just before the right wheel shattered and the ground came up and turned his world painfully sharp and then black.

"Katu! Katu!" The older man poured water over the face of his young son. Katu spit 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, fear in his eyes.

"I'm fine," Katu said, "I think." The fear in his father's eyes vanished, replaced with the dispassionate look of an experienced ruler. He helped Katu to his feet. Katu surveyed the ruins of his chariot and the two broken horses sprawled over red soil. The warriors would quickly dispatch 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, now that Katu was becoming a man.

"Did we hold them back?" Katu asked.

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

Katu 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 small 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. Katu noticed with great satisfaction that nearly all the bodies he saw were Assyrian.

Several hours later, 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 Katu had heard stories of an older, conquered city buried deep beneath this one.

Piyamaradu met them, the warrior Katu had feared and admired since childhood. Piyamaradu 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.

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

"Not to put to fine a point on it," Piyamaradu 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 Katu 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.

Katu'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." He spit on the ground.

"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.

Katu 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?"

"Yes," his father nodded approvingly. "You need to know this. 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 armies from Ninevah and Babylon join them. It is true we are outnumbered ten to one. But I have a plan. I have the birds of the air on our side."

"And Tarhunas," Katu added, reminding his father of the god of the weather. Rain would only make their chariots and horses slip on the rocky battleground and would give an advantage to the foot soldiers of the Assyrians.

"And your uncle." Katuzili stroked his braided beard, tinged with gray. "Your uncle sits with his army North of the Assyrians, near the

village Anulas. My general Arnuandas waits with an even bigger army in the Southwest, near the small city of Alyppa. We will still be outnumbered, but I intend to crush the Assyrian army between our three forces.”

“Those towns are really far away,” Katu replied.

“Necessary in order to avoid detection. I don’t want the Assyrian king to know of their presence until it is too late. The timing of the flanking movement is critical.”

Katu decided 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 of Anulas where these pigeons were raised,” his father explained, “and blue for Alyppa. These birds can make that flight in a couple of hours. I will release them when the Assyrian army has left the forest and entered 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.”

Katu 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.

Katu turned to face the high priest Sapalu. “The sun goddess? Why? This is the dry season.”

Sapalu’s ancient eyes looked like two watery potholes in a weathered landscape. His 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 lion's 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?" Katu 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."

Katu 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.

"Old woman'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. "The Assyrian forces are assembling and readying their battle formations. This will take the rest of the day. They won't attack at night so we expect the attack in the morning. After they march from the forest, it will take them about five hours to move up the river valley. We will send this message to our armies. I will order them to move out tonight. If I've timed this right, the Assyrians will fall right into our trap!"

The pigeons were released, fluttering into the blue sky. Katu 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 Arnu, 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 look on Sapalu's face nearly stopped Katu in his tracks. He decided to ignore it and strode on.

The sun rose the following morning and shined brightly on the fortified, crescent-shaped area in front of the ancient city. The entire field was alive with soldiers, horses, and the noisy machines of war.

The bow was the primary weapon of Katuzili's army and his bowmen were among the world's finest. 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. The new iron tips easily pierced the copper armor of the Assyrians. A quiver held fifty arrows and often some token of affection from a loved one – a small handkerchief or a talisman.

Each of the heavy wooden war chariots carried a driver and an archer. Some of the larger chariots carried a third man to protect the rear. Katu's chariot had a spare horse hitched behind it to ensure his escape if the chariot was disabled. Iron-clad wooden plates lashed to the sides of the chariot stopped the copper arrowheads of the Assyrians.

The cavalry outnumbered the chariots. Each horse carried two horsemen 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. The chariots could trample infantry in a straight run, but the cavalry was more effective on uneven ground.

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 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 iron plates over a thin cotton tunic and an iron 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 Katu 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 Katu, 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 horses' ears snapped forward.

"They're on the march," his father said.

"Father," Katu 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 Katu'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. Katu pushed the heavy 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.

"Katu, you will hold back and lead 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, Katu understood the logic of this. He would test his mettle in battle another day.

Years later, Katu would vividly remember the outcome of this

decisive battle. The leading force of chariots and cavalry slammed head-on into the enemy force near the bottom of the great ravine. A sound like the stampede of cattle was followed by the clash of sword on armor. From his vantage point on the hill overlooking the river valley, he watched as his father's troops pretended to withdraw under the Assyrian assault, luring the enemy back up the valley toward the citadel.

Then everything went horribly wrong. Later, he would learn that the flanking armies never appeared, that they never received the messenger pigeons, which were inexplicably lost. Within minutes, Katu was in the thick of combat. His own archer fired mercilessly into the onslaught and was soon out of arrows. He pulled a spear from its holder and fought on. Pinned in, Katu dropped the reins and seized a short sword. He had been schooled in its use from childhood and now he put that schooling to good use, slicing and stabbing at men who sometimes towered over him. He leaped from the chariot with his archer at his side and retreated up the hill, slippery with blood, toward the Citadel. Hundreds of dead and wounded men and horses, broken chariots, spears, stones, arrows, helmets, and abandoned swords covered the dry dusty ground.

The armies fought with vengeance well after the sun went down. Then, omens that Katu had never seen in his lifetime appeared in the darkness. When his iron sword slapped against a copper shield, it produced a bright spark, like lightning in a storm. More than once, he felt his hair stand on end. At one point, both armies paused in the fighting to stare in amazement at the sky. Bright green curtains of light shimmered and waved over the battlefield, omens of death and destruction from a wrathful god.

"Could this be Sapalu's storm?" Katu wondered aloud. To his

dismay, the Assyrians took the sky display as an omen of victory and increased their efforts with a ferocity that was as unexpected as the omen itself.

Katu parried a thrust from a tall warrior who had lost his helmet. He parried again and sliced at the man's lower leg, bringing him down to his level where he dispatched him with a thrust to his throat. The eagerness of victory renewed his strength until four other swordsmen and two archers joined his foe to press the fight against the eighteen-year-old heir to the kingdom. If they had any idea he was of royal blood, they would have looked to capture rather than kill him. But they didn't and their intentions were brutally obvious.

Katu fell back, slashing and lunging effectively with his short sword, but with no hope of survival. His archer from the chariot, fighting at his side, took two arrows simultaneously, one in his chest and one in his throat. Katu watched as one of the archers notched another shaft in his curved horn bow and fired it directly at him. He closed his eyes in resignation of defeat and felt the copper tip smack hard into his chest. It bounced back, stopped by the gold tablet.

Suddenly Piyamaradu, the warrior Katu had feared since childhood, appeared beside him. Naked and red with blood from head to toe, he leapt in front of Katu and killed the two archers before they could recover from their astonishment. Even so, six more of the enemy threw themselves at Katu and his giant protector.

They were still no match for Piyamaradu. "Get inside the city," he shouted at Katu. "It's your only hope."

Katu instinctively obeyed the great warrior. He took advantage of an opening that Piya hacked for him and leaped over the dead and dying bodies. Within minutes, he was inside the gate. The last thing he remembered of the battle was the image of a hundred enemy warriors

surrounding Piya like desert jackals on a wounded animal.

The cries and wailing of women filled the streets of the city. Katu snared a loose horse and scrambled onto its back. Calmed by the weight of a rider, the horse responded to his command and galloped toward the stony keep in the center of the city, the innermost fortified building where Katu felt he had a chance at defense. Years later he would wonder why he chose this particular building, for it had another use. It was the tomb of the kings of Kanesh.

He felt for the leather bag hanging from a twisted strap inside his tunic. Through the soft leather, he felt the cold, golden tablet that the high priest had given him.

As the clamor and panic of men and beasts grew louder, he dismounted and entered the keep, pulling the tall iron doors shut behind him. This is where his grandfather and great-grandfathers were buried, the ancient kings of Kanesh. This is where his father and someday he himself would lie, peacefully waiting the time of rebirth. Now he knew exactly what he must do.

He quickly found the cabinet with the ceremonial regalia of burial ceremonies. It took him a few moments to don the tunic laced with gold threads and the golden helmet crested with eagle feathers. To enter the tomb without the garb would incur the wrath the great god Teshub. Outside, he could hear the fighting get closer. He ran down the long corridor to the stairs that would take him down to the tombs.

Halfway down the stairs, he heard the ring of iron on stone as the great doors at the front of the ancient building were slammed open. At the same moment, he realized that he no longer had his sword.

Moments later he was in the tomb. Behind the sepulcher that would someday hold his father he located a loose stone designed to conceal offerings. He dislodged the stone and pushed the gold tablet

into a deep cavity behind it. He shoved the capstone back into place just as the Assyrian warriors appeared at the door to the room.

Katu backed against a wooden shield suspended from the wall. One of the warriors raised his curved bow and pointed a copper-tipped arrow straight at Katu's heart. At least death would be quick. From five feet away, the arrow would nail him to the shield like an animal in the slaughterhouse.

The warrior squinted in the dim light, lowered his bow and grinned. "Hold! Look at his garb. We've got ourselves some royal blood."

With a soldier on each side, Katu was roughly dragged up the steps and out into a world that would never be the same.