

Chapter 1

Carnage

1, Asvina, Sanivara, Shalivahana Shake 604
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The vultures. Always the vultures. “Messengers of the Gods,” the Persians of the old religion called them, purifiers of the soul. But here they were, doing what they had done since before the age of man— feasting on the carrion of the dead.

The glare of the noon sun reflected off the dry earth. The hard ground was cracked and wrinkled. A fog of rotting smells choked the air. The broad plain lay covered in corpses. Soldiers, camp followers, generals, and pack animals lay prostrate on the ground. Bodies lay in mangled heaps, mutilated beyond recognition. Stuck into those heaps were the battle standards of the fallen army. This was all that remained of the army lead by Amir¹ Hayat-Al-Khorasani, carrying out the wishes of his master, the Khalifah² Muwaiyah. This vast horde was provisioned by the Governor of Basra, Ubayd-Allah-ibn-Ziyad.

The battlefield lay somewhere between Zaranj and Kandahar in Afghanistan, a dry hell where invading armies since the time of Cyrus had perished from thirst. On one side, the towering mountains of the Pariyatra³ range blocked it off and on the other, the waters of Harahvaiti cut the plain into two.

A host of kites and vultures soared overhead, hovering around the corpses. Here a kite feasted on a human hand still clutching a Khanjar⁴ while elsewhere a group of vultures were busy feasting on a disemboweled corpse. His headgear and the battle standard across his chest identified him as an Amir. The battle standards of the Khalifah and that of their prophet Mohammed lay scattered and torn on the battlefield.

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As day turned to dusk, a soft breeze blew through the valley. The thunderous sound of earth being broken under horses’ hooves pierced the curtain of

silence. Sensing the approach of humans, in the blink of an eye, the feasting scavengers took to the skies.

Two riders dashed to the center of the battlefield. The smooth, silky coats of their horses glistened in the sunlight. One horse was a chestnut with a copper red tint, and the other horse was jet black with a silky black mane. The chestnut horse was shorter in stature, an offspring of the hardy Bharatiya⁵ breeds. The black horse had a bigger girth, typical of a Persian warhorse. Both riders were attired in full battle armor, albeit of differing natures.

One of them wore a helmet, indented in the center by a mace blow. His throat and neck were covered by chain mail fixed to the helmet. A thin vest of finely hammered chain mail protected his chest and back. Visible underneath the armor was the standard of the house of Kapisa— Lord Hanuman carrying Mt.Dronagiri through the sky. Around his waist was strapped a leather belt and to the side of the belt hung a goshirsha⁶. Another strap of leather ran diagonally around his chest, crossing the left shoulder and joining the rear part of the belt. At the back of this leather belt was a scabbard in which hung a nishangi⁷. A composite bow made of sandalwood and bull horn hung on the right side of the saddle. On the other side of the saddle was a quiver full of wooden arrows.

The rider of the black horse was a giant, reaching nearly seven feet. Towering over his companion, he was a unique sight, a true Rustom of the fallen Sassanid Empire. His size dwarfed even the formidable Persian war horse he rode. More heavily armored than his companion, his entire body was enclosed in glittering chain mail. Only his face was uncovered, his helmet being made of toughened leather, with a protruding strip to protect his nose. His horse was covered in lightweight armor made of leather strips. In his right hand, he held a lance, whose tip was colored a muddy red. Like his companion, he too wore the standard of the house of Kamboja.

The two riders made their way among the carpet of carcasses. The giant had his gaze firmly on the ground, carefully looking through the carnage. His companion scanned the ridges of the surrounding mountains and the mouth of the valley.

“Recognize any of your old friends, Rustom?” said the rider of the brown horse. The rider had a sharp nose and parted eyebrows. He was of a medium build with an athletic body. Long arms that reached nearly to his knees were a distinctive feature of his body.

“Not yet, Indrajit. Shave a man’s head, grow a beard and everyone looks the same,” Rustom replied with a grim smile.

“The mlecchas⁸ have no fear of death, yet they show their backs at the first opportunity. Maharaja Vijayaditya and his army did a thorough job of sending them to their God,” Indrajit said.

“The ferocity of the Kirata highlanders is well known. The Arabs should have known better than try to come through their lands,” Rustom replied.

“They had no choice, Vijayaditya’s men blocked the passes leading into Kapisa. See any sign of the scrolls carrying the instructions from their master?” Indrajit asked Rustom with a questioning glance.

“Not yet. Usually their Amir has them on his person. Instructions from the Khalifah would be too important to be trusted to riff raff,” said Rustom.

“I think I see the Amir’s body,” Indrajit said and galloped off towards the body, shouting and waving his nishangi to chase the vultures away.

The vultures scattered at the noise, leaving the Amir’s disemboweled corpse in full view. The stench coming from the bodies was overwhelming, forcing Indrajit to cover his nose with a piece of cloth. Dismounting, Indrajit reached for a round leather pouch which hung at the Amir’s side.

Indrajit severed the pouch from the dead body with a swift stroke.

“Got it.” Rustom triumphantly held the pouch in his hands. The pouch was sealed with the seal of the Khalifah and an Arabic inscription ran around its circumference.

“The pretenders to the throne are many, but the true master is only one,” Rustom read the inscription and tucked the pouch into his saddlebag.

“One of the pretenders is dead. Less worry for their Khalipha,” Indrajit said.

Indrajit stared at Amir’s body, making a mental note of the battle standard on his vest and his attire. A deafening scream shattered his reverie. A giant vulture had landed a few meters from the Amir’s body and was rapidly making his way towards Rustom.

Where did he come from? Indrajit thought.

Its feathers were black as night and a stream of saliva dripped from its beak. As tall and as wide as a grown man, its razor sharp talons tore up the carcasses as it hurtled towards Rustom. The other vultures fled at his approach with screams of fear. Rustom stood rooted to the spot. Indrajit spurred his horse into a frontal charge, at the same time unsheathing his nishangi.

Moments before the creature could sink its talons into Rustom, Indrajit lashed out with his sword. With astonishing speed, the creature ducked and evaded the blow. Rustom snapped out of his daze and plunged his lance toward the vulture. With a bitter scream, the vulture took off into the air and landed a few hundred meters away from them, its beady eyes following their every move. The horses neighed nervously, stamping their feet and raising their front legs up in the air.

“We should leave,” said Indrajit.

“Don’t be scared my little friend. Vultures are the messengers of Ahura Mazda⁹. Besides it’s not their fault they look ugly,” Rustom guffawed with a smile on his face.

“This messenger of the Gods came close to ripping off your head, my overgrown friend. Look, the other vultures dare not approach him,” Indrajit’s eyes continually darted towards the vulture.

Rustom paused for a moment and studied the vulture. Rustom pointed his lance at the vulture and feigned a charge. In reply, the vulture shrieked a terrible cry which shook the heavens. Its large wings made a terrible din, as it disappeared over the ragged peaks, scattering other birds in its wake.

“Let us leave this hell on earth. Ride like the wind Marut and take us to Kapisa,” whispered Indrajit in his horse’s ear. Marut pricked his ears forward and broke into a run, with Rustom’s steed close on his heels.

“So where are we off to now? You know we could approach the Arab Governor of Sistan¹⁰ and ask him for a fat reward and his daughter for this pouch,” Rustom shouted over the din of the horses’ hooves.

“And be flogged to death in the public square in Sistan? I would rather take my chances going to Kapisa,” Indrajit said with a smile.

With the sun sinking fast, sounds of other predators filled the atmosphere. Jackals, foxes and even a mountain lion could be seen racing towards the corpses. A group of vultures fought a tug of war with a jackal for a carcass. Both the horses picked up speed as they crossed the narrow pass in the valley, beyond which lay the road to Kapisa.

Was the creature shadowing them? Most likely. Indrajit glanced towards the sky.