

MEN
OF
BRONZE

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In the blue predawn twilight, a mist rose from the Nile's surface, flowing up the reed-choked banks and into the ruined streets of Leontopolis. Remnants of monumental architecture floated like islands of stone on a calm morning sea. Streamers of moisture swirled around statues of long-dead pharaohs, flowed past stumps of columns broken off like rotted teeth, and coursed down sandstone steps worn paper-thin by the passage of years. As the sky above grew translucent, streaked with amber and gold, a funerary shroud settled over the City of Lions, a mantle that disguised the approach of armed men.

From the desert came two score and ten dark shapes clad Greek-fashion in leather cuirasses and studded kilts, Corinthian helmets perched atop their foreheads. Bowl-shaped shields hung from their shoulders by gripords of plaited hemp, freeing each man to wield a short, recurved bow. They moved in earnest, silent, a company of phantoms drifting through the fog.

The Medjay had come to Leontopolis.

Medjay. The soldiers bearing this appellation were the most savage of Pharaoh's mercenaries. They were a cadre of outcasts, criminals in their own lands, who banded together under Egypt's banner to dedicate their lives to the gods of violence. The emblem painted on their shield faces, the uadjet, the all-seeing Eye of Horus, symbolized their task as guardians of the eastern frontier. Pharaoh paid them to be vigilant, to crush any intruders before they could reach even an abandoned ruin such as Leontopolis, and he paid them well. This time, though, the Medjay had failed their royal paymaster.

To a man, they froze as the rasp of metal on stone drifted through the mist; instinctively, their eyes sought out the massive silhouette of their commander. Phoenician by birth, Hasdrabal Barca ruled the Medjay with the tigerish strength of a born killer. Spear, arrow, torch, and sword, all this and more had touched his flesh, leaving behind the indelible scars of a lifetime spent waging war. He disdained a helmet; long black hair, shot through with gray, fell over his face as he stood with head bowed, straining to hear.

The clatter came again, followed by sibilant cursing.

Barca looked up; his eyes turned to slits, like splinters hacked from the iron gates of Tartarus. He motioned, and a young soldier, a Libyan, edged up to his side. The Phoenician dragged his index finger across his throat in a chilling pantomime. Nodding, the soldier handed his bow and shield off to another, removed his helmet, and drew a curved knife from the small of his back. Beneath a thatch of sandy hair, plastered with sweat, the young Medjay's eyes shimmered with anticipation as he crept off to do Barca's bidding.

Raids like this were nothing new. The desert-folk of Sinai, the Bedouin, encroached on Egypt's borders every season, fleeing tribal feuds or seeking succor from generations of drought. The Medjay turned most back at the Walls of the Ruler, a line of ancient fortifications stretching from Pelusium on the coast, along the Bitter Lakes, to the Gulf of Suez. A few, though, slipped through the Medjay's nets to plunder the border villages. Such was the fate of Habu, south of the vale of Tumilat, on the shores of the Great Bitter Lake.

Habu lay on the patrol route between Sile and Dedun, on the Gulf; it was a small village of two dozen mud brick huts clustered around a brackish well whose inhabitants mined salt in the nearby hills. The Medjay, following the Bedouin's trail, found Habu in ruins. Barca recalled the mound of severed heads in the village square, the corpses left to rot in the merciless sun. The men were killed outright, the women raped and mutilated. Even the children . . .

Barca's scout returned as quietly as he had left. He made a show of wiping his knife on a Bedouin headscarf.

"You were right," the scout, Tjemu, whispered, "they are the Beni Harith."

"How many?" Barca's voice did not carry past the Medjay's ear.

Tjemu nodded back the way he had come. "Maybe twice our number, camped in a square

some hundred yards beyond a causeway of crouching stone lions. Their pickets are asleep. Careless bastards.”

“They’re not expecting us.” Barca’s jaw tightened; deep in his soul he felt the Beast stir, flexing its claws. Even the children. “Fan out!” he ordered, raising his fist. Sinew creaked as the Medjay bent their bows.



The Bedouin camp stirred and came alive. The younger men fetched water from the Nile’s bank while their elders sat in council before the camelhair tent of their shaykh, Ghazi ibn Ghazi. Four of his brothers, an uncle, and seven nephews reclined on their blankets, talking in low voices about this last stage of their journey. Spear butts and sheathed swords clattered on the cracked paving stones; tethered camels bawled, as unhappy about the claustrophobic mist as their masters were.

Ghazi ibn Ghazi plucked a date from a wooden bowl and popped it into his mouth. Age, sand, and sun had left his face fleshless, seamed, an uncured hide stretched tight over a frame of bone. His eyebrows and beard were gray and sparse, his shoulders stooped, calling to mind a wizened shoemaker rather than a Bedouin war leader.

“This place is accursed!” the man on his right said, with all the frustrated weariness of one who had not slept soundly in days. He wore clothing similar to his Bedouin companions — robes of grimy brown wool and a once-white head scarf held in place by a leather band — but his accent and manners marked him as a Persian. “It is fit for jackals, perhaps, or Bedouin, but it is no place for a man of refinement.”

Ghazi grinned. “Where are your balls, Arsamenes? Have you Persians become so civilized that you can no longer stomach the hard road?”

The Persian, Arsamenes, leaned forward, helping himself to the dates. His eyes, small and dark, flickered up to the Bedouin’s face. “We could have been done with the hard road, and in Memphis already, had you not stopped to glut yourself on that flyspeck of a village.”

At this, the other Bedouin ceased their own conversations. This was not the first time the Persian had broached that topic.

“I told you before,” Ghazi said quietly, “Habu is none of your concern.”

“Will the Medjay not notice the slaughtered villagers? Will they ignore the spoor of a hundred camels leading in country from Sinai? You fool! Everything about this mission is my concern! You have jeopardized it, and I want to know why!”

The old shaykh sighed. From other tents, he heard voices, muffled laughter, and the slish of blades on oiled stone. “It was an old debt,” Ghazi said, finally. “In my youth, a man of Habu

shamed a girl of the Harith. We could not pass them by without exacting our vengeance.”

Arsamenes’ face darkened; his close-cropped beard bristled. “You put the honor of a two-shekel desert slut over the interests of the King of Kings?”

Ghazi’s lips curled into a sneer. “The Harith are not slaves to your king, not like the Medes or the Parsi. We paid Cyrus his due because we respected him, but you would do well to remember not even your great king could conquer the People of the Sands. I have given the son of Cyrus my word to escort you to Memphis. After that . . .” Quicker than his age belied, Ghazi drew his knife and put it to Arsamenes’ throat. The Persian gasped, his body going rigid. “After that, you live at my pleasure, understand?” Arsamenes’ eyes blazed. Without the slightest hesitation, he reached up and pushed Ghazi’s hand away. “Cambyses will have your head.”

“Finding it will not be difficult, eh?” Ghazi grinned, sheathing his blade. “Since it will be buried between the thighs of Pharaoh’s daughter!” Raucous laughter erupted from the Bedouin; even Arsamenes smiled, though his eyes lost none of their fire. The tension broken, Ghazi’s kinsmen stood and stretched, eager to be away from this desolate place, with its leonine statues and inhuman sphinxes. The shaykh gave orders for the tents to be struck, the small fires doused, and the sentries recalled.

Ghazi did not have the gall to call this gathering of his kin an army, though by Bedouin standards, it was a veritable host. He had seen true armies in his youth, armies drawn to the standards of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. In comparison, his five-score would have been as a single grain of sand in the desert. Yet, he doubted the Chaldeans were more loyal to their king than his Harith were to him. They would ride to the gates of Hell, if he asked it of them. Pride swelled Ghazi’s chest. With a thousand Bedouin, he could make Sinai a power to be reckoned with; with a hundred thousand, he could make the world an Arab playground. Someday, Ghazi told himself, someday . . .

Ghazi uncorked a skin of wine. He made to raise it to his lips, but stopped in mid-gesture, his head cocked to the side. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up as he sensed unseen eyes on him.

“What is it, shaykh?” Others, too, muttered their concern.

Ghazi’s frown deepened. “Quiet. Listen.”

Though he had seen no sign of it, Ghazi knew in his marrow the Medjay were in relentless pursuit, driven by that devil of a man, the Phoenician. If they were out there, this fog would work to their advantage. We should not have tarried here. Ghazi glanced around, his eyes coming to rest on his sister’s son, Tajik. An unspoken question passed between them.

“Sounds like locusts,” Tajik said. The young Bedouin craned his neck . . .

. . . and died as a bronze-tipped arrow split his skull.

A deadly hail rained down through the mist, punching through flesh and bone, shattering

on stone. Arsamenes twisted with an agonized scream, clawing at the black-fledged shafts that sprouted from his back. Ghazi's frayed robe flared out behind him like misshapen wings as he leapt the fallen Persian and took cover in the lee of a massive lion-headed statue. All around, his Bedouin crumpled and died.

"Move!" he shouted, drawing his sword. "Move, you bastards! The Medjay are upon us!"



Baying like human wolves, the Medjay charged into the Bedouin camp, Barca at the head of a loose wedge of fighters. They cast their bows aside, drew their swords, and unslung their shields; men grabbed the flared cheek pieces of their helmets and tugged them down, transforming flesh-and-blood soldiers into the faceless cogs of a bronze killing machine.

The Bedouin did not stand idle. Though disarrayed by the sudden arrow storm, Ghazi's cry rallied their spirits. "Move, you bastards! The Medjay are upon us!" Young men and old snatched their weapons up and answered the Medjay's threat with the undulating shriek of the desert folk.

Time grew hazy, indistinct. Seconds took on the aspect of hours. In this last elongated heartbeat between life and death, a man's senses became painfully acute. Hereditary enemies stared at one another across the shrinking interval, teeth bared in snarls of hate, grimaces of fear. Thoughts of distant homes, long-lost loves, and forgotten embraces vanished beneath the adrenalin-laced pulse of blood lust. Neither side called for terms; none sought guarantees of mercy. This fight would be as savage and brutal as it would be short.

Muscles tensed. Weapons glittered. Lips prayed. Shields balanced.
And suddenly . . .

Medjay and Bedouin collided in a grinding of flesh and bone, underscored by the crunch of chopping blades and the screams of the dying. Swords flickered like lightning, crashing on shield and helmet, rasping on enemy blades. Men strained breast-to-breast, helmet-to-turban, a vicious mob fighting for purchase on the blood-smearred stones. The wounded collapsed, shrieking as they were trampled underfoot, dragging the living down with them. Iron punched and shattered, and blood flowed like wine at Hell's banquet. No time to issue orders or ponder tactics, Barca plowed into the heart of the fight and trusted its outcome to the gods. The massive Phoenician roared and struck from side to side, dropping a man with each blow. A soldier of the Medjay stumbled against him, a spear buried in his neck. His killer's cry of triumph became a death rattle as Barca's scimitar licked out and sheared through his turbaned skull. The Bedouin called the captain of the Medjay al-Saffah, the Blood-letter; with each killing stroke, Barca demonstrated the truth of that sobriquet.

The Bedouin redoubled their attack. Bearded faces pressed in from all sides, visages radiating hatred and bloodlust. Frothing lips hurled curses as knotted fists hurled blows. Bedouin grew reckless, sacrificing their own lives in an effort to bring Barca down. A knife blade scored the flesh of his forearm; a sword rebounded from his shield. The Phoenician snarled. With a chilling cry, Hasdrabal Barca unleashed the Beast.

The Greeks called it *katalepsis* — demonic possession in the heat of battle, rendering a man insensate to the flesh, his own or his foes. A berserk fury boiled up from the depths of Barca's soul, from a place only he knew. A fury stoked by memories that had haunted him for more than twenty years . . .

Moonlight pierced the darkness, caressing her thigh, her breast. A night breeze ruffled the gauzy curtains as she crawled to where her lover sat, arching her back like a cat in heat. He was Greek, perfumed and pomaded, a soldier in name only. "Neferu," he whispered with a smile, stripping off his linen kilt and leading her eager mouth to him . . .

Faces welled and ebbed around Barca. Dark features half-glimpsed, hands that grasped and tore. In that press of humanity, the Phoenician's body itself became a weapon. The hard bones of his forehead sent a Bedouin reeling; his elbow crushed a man's throat like a mace; his sandaled heel shattered a kneecap. Blood sprayed as his scimitar wove a web about him — a silvery cocoon as beautiful as it was lethal. Still, the Beast howled and gibbered in his brain . . .

The Greek rutted between her thighs, their sweat mingling, their cries of pleasure echoing in the darkness. Neither of them noticed the door opening. They did not see the anguished eyes of her young husband, nor did they see as that anguish turned to a white-hot rage. Wordless, he moved to where the Greek's sword lay . . .

Through the red haze of *katalepsis*, Barca caught sight of Ghazi ibn Ghazi. The old Arab hammered a Medjay shield aside and slashed at the soldier's exposed neck. The man fell, spewing crimson. With a moment's respite, Ghazi's eyes gauged his Bedouin's odds as the armored Medjay scythed through them. His casualties were mounting. He spotted al-Saffah and the look of pure hatred in the Phoenician's face struck Ghazi like a physical blow. He staggered, blood draining from his features and taking with it his courage. Ghazi ibn Ghazi spun and fled, leaving his kin to die beneath the blades of the Medjay.

Barca, with a bellow of rage, gave chase.



The battle became a rout; the rout, a slaughter. Memories of the burning huts of Habu, of the children left to rot in the sun, sealed the Bedouin's fate. Barca's soldiers ranged the field with vengeful purpose, mutilating the dead and slaying the wounded, despite their cries for succor. As

the rising sun crested the distant hills, searing away the mist, silence came again to the City of Lions.

Tjemu, his back against a crumbling obelisk, snatched a bloodied turban off the ground and knotted it around his punctured thigh. “Sand-fuckers!” he hissed. He had made it through the battle with only cuts and scrapes until the very end; until an injured Bedouin lurched up and rammed a broken spear through his leg. The blade missed the great artery, though a savage twist left him with a hole the size of a child’s fist. The Bedouin who speared him, a beardless boy barely out of his teens, lay crumpled at his feet, the Libyan’s sword still wedged in his skull. Tjemu spared him a single pitiless glance.

The ebb and flow of battle carried Tjemu to the edge of the square, its stones littered now with the detritus of war: broken and discarded weapons, hacked shields, bodies and parts of bodies, all of it stewing in pools of blood and bowel that gathered in the low places. He recognized friends among the slain. Gambling partners, drinking companions, and sword brothers lay supine now, staring at the azure sky with glazed eyes. The Libyan felt a pang of regret that lasted only a few heartbeats before he succumbed to the satisfaction of being alive. The Medjay, finished with their murderous rampage, saw to their wounded. Some bound their cuts; others sat very still, sipping water or wine. In the shadow of a leonine statue of the goddess Sekhmet, he saw the old Canaanite, Ithobaal, crouching over a corpse. Of Barca, he saw no sign.

Tjemu limped to Ithobaal’s side. “What did you find, old man? Loot, I hope.”

“Trouble,” Ithobaal said, gesturing to the body. Tjemu frowned at the corpse, trying to look past the waxen skin and skewed limbs, past the trio of arrows that ended the thread of his life, to see what Ithobaal saw. Tjemu toed aside the blood-grimed head scarf and looked more closely at the dead man’s face.

“Amon’s balls! A Persian!”

Ithobaal tugged a leather dispatch case from inside the dead man’s robe. “And a courier, to boot. We’d best find Barca.”

Tjemu looked around. An eerie silence gripped the battlefield, sending an involuntary shudder through the Libyan. In his gut he knew they would not find Barca until the devil in his soul had sated its lust.



Ghazi’s breath came in sharp gasps. His heart hammered in his chest as he flattened himself against a crumbling retaining wall and listened for sounds of pursuit. Nothing. The old shaykh exhaled. The swords of the Medjay left his robes in tatters, and he bled from a score of lacerations. Ghazi glanced down at the scimitar in his cramped fist, its crimson blade dull, notched from the

fighting. Sunlight shredded the morning mist. Before him, running parallel with the wall, lay a flat plain that sloped down to the Nile's edge, broken now and again by heaps of shattered stone, solitary palm trees, and scrubby acacias. Knee-high grasses swayed in the light breeze. He could see the reedy bank and the sluggish water beyond. Perhaps a boat lay near?

"Al-Saffah!" he said, wringing the sweat from his eyes. "Al-Saffah! The gods take you!" At Kadesh, the oasis of the Beni Harith, Arsamenes had warned him about the Medjay and their implacable captain. Warned him, a child of Sinai, that no good could come from tweaking the devil's beard! Why didn't I listen? Five-score of his men, his kin, paid for his arrogance, his foolishness. They were dead and Ghazi was trapped, the breadth of Egypt between himself and safety. He could still reach Memphis. From there, he . . .

The crunch of a hobnailed sandal on stone shattered Ghazi's reverie. He glanced around, sword ready. The noise repeated itself. Fear-bile welled up in the shaykh's throat. Where? Dust trickled across his face, feathery light. Suddenly, a shadow stretched out before him.

They're above me!

Ghazi glanced up. Atop the wall, like one of the Furies in blood-splashed armor, crouched al-Saffah. His features were twisted into a mask of hate, and his slitted eyes burned with a baleful fire.

"Bastard!" Barca hissed, his jaw clenching spasmodically.

Ghazi paled. A high-pitched scream burst from his lips as he dropped his sword and bolted for the river. He thought of nothing save the promise of succor to be had in the Nile's muddy swirl. Terror lent his aging limbs speed. If only he could reach the river's edge . . .

Pain blossomed in Ghazi's left shoulder. A fist-sized chunk of masonry, hurled with all the strength of Barca's arm, splintered the bone. The force of the blow sent the Arab cartwheeling. He struck the ground hard. Breath whooshed from his lungs, and his agonized shriek choked off in a tide of vomit. Ghazi fought for breath. He fought to drag his body, one arm useless, to the Nile's dark breast. A long shadow fell across him. The Arab craned his neck, eyes wide with panic.

Al-Saffah leapt from the wall and stalked through the grass, a ribbon of blood drooling from the blade of his scimitar.

Ghazi wept. "M-Mercy! P-Please, al-Saffah! Please . . .!"

Barca's scimitar flashed down, crunching through the old man's shoulder and into his chest. "Did you bargain with the women and children of Habu?" he hissed, hacking at the flailing Bedouin. Again and again he struck until the thing under his blade grew unrecognizable even as human. With its hunger slaked, the Beast relinquished its grip on his body, leaving his limbs cold and trembling. Barca reeled away, his sword falling from his grasp. He stumbled backwards; leather scraped stone as he struck the wall and slid to the ground. He cradled his head in his hands

. . .

He struck as their moans reached a crescendo, driving the sword point-first between the Greek's shoulder blades. Vertebrae splintered as he leaned on the hilt. Beneath her lover, the young man's wife screamed, a piercing shriek that ended when the sword crunched through the Greek's body and into hers. Blood exploded from her nostrils. Cold, betrayed by his own rage, the young husband fled, leaving the lovers joined forever in death.

"Neferu," he whispered.



Tjemu spotted him first, walking through the windrows of the dead like a farmer in the wake of harvest. Barca paused beside knots of wounded Medjay, clapping their shoulders and laughing. In his presence groans ceased; grimaces of pain turned to triumphant smiles. The Libyan nodded to Ithobaal. "I cannot tell who loves him more, gods or men. Look at him. Barely a scratch. You've been with him longer than I have. What's his secret?"

Ithobaal, who could claim kinship with King Achish of conquered Gath, shaded his eyes with a spade-like hand. Blood spattered his graying beard. At sixty, he was the old man of the Medjay, the voice of temperance and reason, the wise old wolf in a pack of killers. Blood-grimed fingers toyed with an amulet around his neck, a lapis uadjet on a leather thong.

"Secret?" Ithobaal said, his voice like the tolling of a bell. "He has no secret. When death holds no terror for a man, little brother, what does he have left to fear?"

Ithobaal watched Barca's mood darken as he approached. In all his years of soldiering, he had never met a man quite like the Phoenician. He had seen his share of veterans humbled by the aftermath of battle. Champions who tearfully thanked the gods for the gift of another day; princes who puked their guts up as fear caught up with them; kings who needed a moment alone to compose themselves. He'd seen men become so overawed by the recognition of one's own mortality that came on the heels of violent confrontation that they would never fight again. But not Barca. Never Barca. Without fail, the captain of the Medjay assumed the air of a man who had been cheated, a man who had been guaranteed a rendezvous with Death only to have it denied him.

"Wine!" Barca snapped as he strode up to where the two men waited. Ithobaal tossed him a leather flask. He upended it, pouring as much in his mouth as what sluiced down his chin and armor. "How many dead?"

Ithobaal grimaced. "Twenty-two. Another eight may not make it."

"Send runners to the villages here about. We'll need supplies." Barca sat on the stump of a column. "These Bedouin were tougher than they looked. Wonder what drove them to strike this deep into Egypt?"

“Not what, who. Found a dead Persian among them.” Ithobaal handed the dispatch case to Barca. “He had this on him. I think the Bedouin might have been his escort.”

The case was a flat satchel of thick dark leather, stiffened with the messenger’s blood and battered from innumerable handlings. Thongs held the flap in place, and a bulla of clay, impressed with the dragon-seal of Babylon, insured that its contents remained inviolate. “Escort to where?” Barca said.

Tjemu peered over the Phoenician’s shoulder as he broke the seal. Frowning, Barca drew out a heavy sheet of vellum. Tjemu grunted. The Libyan could not read, but his eyes marveled at the delicate Aramaic script filling the page. “What does it say?”

Barca said nothing for a moment, his eyes sharpening to points. “It’s addressed to the commander of the garrison at Memphis. It acknowledges some prior communication and . . . those sons of whores . . . it offers terms for their defection to Persia!”

Tjemu whistled. “Amon’s balls!”

“Defection? You think it’s genuine?” Ithobaal said. The threat of mutiny proved a powerful weapon in the long-standing war between mercenary and paymaster. Soldiers, especially hired swords, were a petulant lot, and only trustworthy while a campaign netted them slaves and spoils. An unhappy mercenary attracted offers from rival generals as a lodestone attracted iron filings.

“The garrison is Greek,” Barca said, a snarl twisting his features. “Greeks are fed treachery with their mother’s milk!”

Ithobaal shook his head. “Think about it, little brother. A mutiny? In Memphis? Word of such a thing should have spread the length and breadth of the Nile. Rumors would have reached the ears of Pharaoh himself if there were discontent among his pet Greeks.”

“True,” Barca said. “But, some rumors can be silenced with promises, others with gold. The rest . . .” Barca trailed off, tapping the hilt of his sword. The Phoenician stood. All around the square, his Medjay cared for their dead. They stripped them of their armor, laid them out with reverence; their shields and personal effects would be taken back to Sile and enshrined in the temple of Horus Sopdu. The Bedouin dead, they ignored. Barca turned to face Ithobaal and Tjemu. “It will take at least three days for a rider to deliver this letter to Pharaoh at Sais. I want to be in Memphis by then, to see how things are for myself. How’s the leg, Tjemu?”

“A scratch,” the Libyan replied, grinning.

Barca nodded. “Good. Bury our dead, then shepherd the wounded to one of the nearby villages and make for Sais. Let no man dissuade you from giving the letter to Pharaoh directly. Ithobaal, you’re with me. Gather those men with the scantiest wounds . . .”

Ithobaal shook his head, then hawked and spat.

“What?” Barca folded his arms across his chest.

“Our place is guarding the border, not policing the Greeks.” The Canaanite was a careful

man, calculating and precise — a merchant in the guise of a soldier. “Don’t give in to impulse, little brother. In my heart I agree with you: traitors should be run to ground. But instinct tells me this is unwise. If anything, we should make for Sais ourselves, warn Pharaoh, and await his orders. Going off like this, on a whim —”

“Our place?” Barca checked his temper. “Our place is between Pharaoh and his enemies, wherever they may be. This is not an invasion. We’ll go quietly, poke our noses where they don’t belong, and be away before the Greeks know what happened.” Barca started to turn away, stopped. “But if you plan to second-guess me at every turn, Ithobaal, perhaps you should return to Sile. I need men for this, not old women!”

Ithobaal took a step toward his commander, his hand dropping to his sword hilt. “You son of a Tyrian whore! I was fighting Pharaoh’s enemies while you were still wallowing in your own shit!”

Barca grinned and tugged the old Canaanite’s beard. “There’s fire still in your belly, then, Ithobaal? Thank the gods! You had me worried.” The Phoenician turned away and held the diplomatic pouch aloft, using it to gesture at the scattered Medjay. “Gather round, brothers! We’re not going back to Sile, not yet!”