

Chapter I

There was a time, once, long ago, when man reeled when darkness set its foot on the land. He searched not for light, but for a way to walk through the night without being accompanied by the shadow. He looked to the stars in fear of the blackness beyond.

It is the year 123 CE. Caravans bring their silks and spices from the Far East to the luxury loving urban hordes of the Roman Empire. Elam, Media, Babylonia, Arabia, Assyria, Egypt, Armenia, Cappadocia and Sardis are thriving as silver and copper coins exchange hands for golden vases and silver ewers. Craftsmen carve subtle flourishes into the handicrafts from

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the Mediterranean. Rome's influence can be seen everywhere in Persepolis. The Achaemenids, hereditary lords and masters of this region south of Rome and stretching out to the Indian Ocean, get their fair share of transit fees across their empire. Every day, the wind brings vessels overflowing with goods.

Man, since he was created, tries to harness the wind. Endless days are spent pursuing this vanity. Like all prosperous ages, he believes he is at his zenith. The citizenry chase after wealth, fame and power. Humanity, in all its complexity, chases the vespers brought in by the sea.

The wind races along the seas. And

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runs through Persepolis and flows up over the hills and cliffs. From these rocks, one can see the hawks flying around Persepolis. Riding the wind, they circle effortlessly. Looking out at the beautiful barren wilderness below their aeries, they look for prey.

The wind circles. Racing here and there. Up. Down. And occasionally a funnel forms. The hawk spreads its wings to catch the air. She is in luck today. The vesper circles up. She will not have to fight gravity fully.

In the forests far from Persepolis, the hawk knows, a demon lurks. The animals know the demon. He occasionally takes their form and flies amongst them. Never the kind beasts.

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Often he would take the shape of the vilest creatures of the land. Snakes. Rats. Wolves. Alligators.

The demon, Mithra, came from an age long forgotten. Thousands of years had passed. Civilizations had passed laws against his worship. Mankind did not talk of Mithra. But his influence could be seen in Persepolis.

A crown of stars appeared where those who worshipped him dwelled. Many would draw stars around their houses, entryways, and chimneys. Others would tattoo stars on their arms or legs. Many would sew stars into their garments. This secret language, or symbology, was utilized to help them hide their murderous

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antics. The hawk knew the truth about humanity. Wherever Mithra was worshipped, devilry would rise. The animals knew what the stars meant. They knew that when stars were emblazoned on horses, human sacrifice would soon abound.

Without much effort the hawk rises to a higher altitude. From there she sees two men engaged in the hunt. How foolish man is, she thinks. Searching forever for identity in the hunt. The hawk knew the truth. There is only predator and prey. Those who cannot hunt successfully become prey.

Sekou looks at his brother. They grimace as they chase the wounded

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antelope. Air rushes by. His brother, Amiri, has a knife in his hand as he chases the wounded beast. Both look at the wounded game and hope that it will not damage its coat. The skin on this animal will fetch a high price as its auburn markings are highly prized by the caravans returning to the Indus Valley.

Verdant trees flowed one after the other. The wind races by their ears. Their eyes focus on the hunt. The competition between brothers is always there. Only one would have bragging rights to the kill. Amiri's thoughts were focused on the material rewards he would gain from securing the animal's hide.

The terrain was foreign to them. The antelope rushed into a stream that fed into a marsh. Suddenly a massive twenty foot alligator rushed out of the stream and bit the antelope right square in the neck.

"By Ahuramazda's beard," Sekou yelled.

Another came out and lunged at Amiri. He stumbled. Sekou jumped toward him with his knife fully extended. His blade went into its thick skull destroying its brain. It died instantly. "Ahuramazda has blessed me with the finest Ionian blade," yelled Amiri. They looked about and saw that scores of hungry alligators were swimming towards them.

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Sekou grabbed his brother. "Run!"

They retraced their steps and returned to the stream that led them to the marsh. Not hesitating, they ran toward the forest as fast as possible.

"Today, we will not be a feast for those monsters," laughed Amiri.

"We will rest, brother. Then we will try again, tomorrow," Sekou remarked.

As they rested, they heard wolves growling. Sounds of ferocious barking followed by a banshee whimpering resounded through the trees. They

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got up and walked toward a clearing. They stood agape at the awesome sight. A pack of gigantic wolves were attacking a soldier garbed in chain mail and armor. The man had a blue aura around him.

Two wolves had gotten hold of his legs. Another was lunging toward him from a rock outcropping. The soldier pulled out a short axe with a blue glow (it appeared out of thin air) and started hitting the two wolves at his legs. The wolves whimpered, but did not bleed. This fact got Sekou's attention. Black magic! The glowing man turned toward the lunging wolf and stabbed him with a shiny blue sword that materialized in his hand.

Sekou stared. Amiri stepped forward. He wanted the wolves' fur. "Stop. This is black magic. These are not wolves," said Sekou.

"Black magic? You have to be kidding. These are pack animals. I want their fur, Sekou," whispered Amiri as he slowly ambled closer to the battle.

The wolves glanced toward Amiri. The leader of the pack motioned to one of his weaker relatives to attack him. A lone grey wolf with glowing red eyes obliged the pack leader.

The demon leaped at Amiri. He drew his knife back and stabbed deep and hard into the neck of the grey wolf. No blood. No bone. Nothing came out

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of its neck. His blade came out black and brittle. The wolf opened its jaws wide open and bit into Amiri's knife wielding arm, ripping it off completely. Blood rushed out of Amiri's stump.

The alpha male, looked at the wounded human. He bayed "my kill" to his brethren. The smaller grey wolf fell back. It walked away from Sekou's brother. With ghost-like steps, the alpha-male lunged at Amiri and gouged his neck completely. Amiri's severed head rolled onto the grass. The ferocious black wolf looked around. Suddenly, the grey wolf ran back into the pack to attack the glowing man.

"Hunter," yelled the mystical soldier. He threw a glowing axe into Sekou's

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hand. Sekou grabbed it and attacked with berserker rage. He cut the grey wolf in half with one clean stroke. Subsequently, two brown wolves lost their heads to the blue axe.

The leader of the pack stared intently. He lunged at Sekou and bit him in his right arm. Blood poured out of his wound. Sekou dropped the glowing axe. He lunged forward and picked it up with his left hand.

The black wolf kept gnawing at Sekou's right arm. "Man blood, the sweetest of all." Every twitch the wolf made sent agonizing pain into Sekou's brain. He hacked at the black wolf's neck with the glowing axe. He kept hacking at the wolf. After five

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successful swings, the black wolf's head fell off. Sekou screamed at the carcass. He stood over his kill and spit at it. "Ahuramazda be praised."

The sun raced above. Everything blurred. He fell onto the wolf's corpse. Today he knew Amiri and he would feast at Ahuramazda's palace, surrounded by golden ewers filled with shiraz's of infinite sweetness. Veiled, bejeweled dancing girls would embrace him and love him as he communed with the divine force that created Darius the King.

The sun, moon and stars were moving about in their daily dance. Sekou's breath grew faint. The wind blew over his open wounds. He was going to

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die the way he had always dreamed as a boy, in the glory of the hunt.

Darkness.