

Empire

Midwinter 330/329 BCE. Aello, a young woman, is a skilled armorer with the army of Alexander the Great of Macedon. Alexander is moving his army of 50,000 soldiers and camp followers into southwestern Afghanistan near present-day Kandahar. Aello sees the rugged peaks of the Hindu Kush Mountains, far to the northeast, shrouded in dark storm clouds.

=====

Part 1



Empire

"It is an honor, gentlemen, but it will be very difficult," he says, "to leave the community where I grew up, had a family, and grew a thriving business."

I walk into the space we use for our design work and pause as my father continues to discuss the work of our metal shop with two men in battle dress typical of senior field officers. They are representing the man everyone calls Alexander the Great of Macedon. He is the man leading the army that has scared the despised Persians out of our beloved Egypt without a fight. The high priest even went so far as to name him the "Son of the Gods." Now, the word on the street is that Alexander is mounting a march to the east.

My father sees me and beckons. "Aello. Come here please and meet these two gentlemen."

My father indicates the taller and probably more senior officer.

"This is Captain Kallias, a staff officer in Alexander's army, and this is Lieutenant Petros, his

associate."

I shake hands with each man, the senior officer first. As I expect, he steps forward and bows slightly. His grip is steady without smashing my hand. He winks and smiles at me. The second man, Petros, is shorter and seems quieter and less assertive. He looks away from my eyes—out of shyness, I think.

My father has told me about this conversation. We have been expecting an invitation to join Alexander's campaign to the east in pursuit of Darius III. Two years ago, when Alexander first heard of the superior weapons the Persians had made for them by a Greek Jew in Memphis, he told his officers that he must get his hands on them. Through black market channels and battlefield scavenging, our swords, scythes, armor, and armaments made their way to the Macedonian troops. It is how Alexander gained Tyre, Gaza, and entry to Egypt. It is how his armies sent Darius III packing, much to our joy, and it is how Captain Kallias and Lieutenant Petros stand before us today.

Captain Kallias turns back to my father. "I can assure you that Alexander will make these things right for you, Barak. At the end of the campaign, you will be returned to your home, your family, and your business here. They will have prospered within the protections of the army we will leave behind, and the contracts for tools, equipment, and services that such an army always needs.

"Alexander has also suggested that you and some of your family join him on his trip to the seacoast, and then to the oasis at Siwah in the western desert. He wants to pay his respects to Ammon's oracle there. Can I assure him of your acceptance of his offer?"

My father holds up an indulgent hand. "I have no wish to keep you in suspense. Of course, I will accept the invitation to travel with your king. I would like to bring my oldest son, Nikola, and my daughter Aello—here with us now—along, if that meets Alexander's pleasure."

"We serve at the pleasure of our king," Kallias says, "but we will advise him of your interests in the trip, and that you have not rejected his offer to merge some part of your metalworking shop with our campaign."

"I think you can be more positive about my interest in your campaign than you indicate by your tone of voice," Father says. "I am very honored by Alexander's offer, and I can see much of benefit for myself and my family. Thank you. I'm sure I will have an answer for you and for your king by the time we return from Siwah. Will I hear from you soon about trip details?"

"Yes. One more question for your daughter, if you don't mind. Alexander will want to know." The captain turns to me. "Do you have a particular interest in coming with us, Aello? Do you like to travel? Do you have an interest in Persian culture? Where we are going, we will confront our enemy's culture at every turn. An interest and a willingness to learn their ways can be of great value to us."

I turned to my father for help in offering an answer. I am used to the hard work of the smithy, not to offering political niceties to superior officers of a foreign army.

"My daughter is very bright," Father says kindly, "and very curious. In addition to her studies she has been working with me in my shop since she was seven years old. She is very skilled in leatherwork and the making of shields. She has the design skills for flags and pennants. She seems to have a particular interest in understanding the strengths and weaknesses in the metals used in sword making, and in the practice of making tools and weapons out of iron."

"I cannot imagine going on such a war campaign as you describe, with such important responsibilities to the troops in your army, without having access to Aello's extensive practical knowledge and her skills at organizing our work."

"Oh, my dear sir. I am delighted with your answer," Kallias responds, "and I am sure my king will be as well. Our concern will be with her comfort and protection, I can assure you. Are you sure, Aello, that you will be comfortable enough in field conditions over a period of several months... even years?"

It is hard not to feel a growing passion in light of his question. Between our annual sandstorms, freezing desert nights, and the heat of the forge, I am no stranger to hard living conditions. I fold my arms over my breasts and say, "I am honored to come with you to Siwah, sir. What's more, if my job will be to help you destroy the Persian army, I will sleep on rocks without blankets in winter. I do not enjoy my own words used in this way, but the Persians have driven me to them by their rapacity and the harm they have rained down on my friends, my family, and myself."

My father grins at me before he speaks again. "I will discuss all that we have talked about today with my family. You will all have an opportunity to speak with Aello at length on the trip to Siwah. You can judge for yourself about her maturity and ability to be effective in the field. Until I hear from you, then?" he asks.

"Yes. Of course. We will talk to you again as soon as we have the details worked out. Thank you for hearing us out."

I have worked in my father's metal and leather shop since I was a child. I like to think I am pretty in the face, but I have grown muscular through my work.

I like working with Tabu and the others in crafting the shop's products—even in the high heat of summer, when the furnaces cause the air to feel as though it were on fire.

My friend Tabu is Nubian. He is a giant of a man who was taken as a slave and emasculated by the occupying Persians as a youth. He is skilled in pounding heated ore into bronze and steel. Over the years, he has grown very fond of me and has become my protector.

He protects me from the other laborers who sometimes look toward me in ways that Tabu does not like.

Once, a Persian soldier sent to deliver an order for products to my father found me working alone in one of the storerooms. He was attempting to force himself on me when Tabu walked in. Tabu threw the soldier at the wall with such force that his head split open and he was immediately killed. Tabu admonished me to speak to no one about the incident. Afterward, he told anyone who was curious that the soldier had tried to steal some of the valuable materials from a high shelf, then had stumbled and fallen to the stone floor. The Persians were so corrupt in those days that my father was able to persuade the soldiers sent to investigate that Tabu was a humble and simple man who could not lie. The Persians were skeptical, but their attitudes shortly improved when Father offered them each a sizeable payment to forget the whole matter.

I have never forgotten my friend's kindness and protection, nor that he likened me to the valuable, strong metals we keep on our highest shelves. In many ways my life is one of repayment to this black giant of a man.

After our first meeting, Alexander again sends Kallias and Petros to inspect our forge.

The men stand in a corner of our crowded workshop in a large building on the Nile docks. Many workmen, sweating heavily, are busy hammering glowing pieces of metal. The heat is unbearable. The men are naked under the leather aprons we all wear to keep the sparks and hot flecks of metal off our bare skin as the hammers hit home. I am, too.

Father stands aside as my older brother, Nikola, hammers a glowing piece of bronze into a knife. Kallias and Petros look on.

"I believe you are generally familiar with the metalworking process," Father says, "but I want to make sure you have no illusions about the difficulties of creating a portable metalworking system. Such hot fires require several mature trees dried and rendered into charcoal. Charcoal is constantly fed into the fire, and the copper and tin ores that make up bronze are thrown in together in a clay vessel buried in the burning charcoal.

"If it becomes necessary to move, it will take us at least a day to have our wagons loaded and underway. It will take at least another day to set up again and fire our kilns at a new location. Add in whatever time it will take to move from the old site to the new. I believe the takedown and setup time will fall as we gain experience with the frequency of the demands for new weapons and armor, or the repair of the old ones."

Kallias nods. "I will carry that exact message back to Alexander. Now, I am going to have to leave this room. The heat is growing unbearable, and I feel the need to jump into a cold bath, lest I faint away."

Father grins knowingly. "We can accommodate you, if you wish. There is an outside pool filled with cool water near where my daughter and I keep our ledgers and do our design work. You and Petros are welcome to use it. Come with me." He turns to my corner of the shop. "Aello, come join us."

As I doff my leather apron and put on a light shoulder wrap to accompany my waistcloth, I hear him remind Captain Kallias that having me along with him is not negotiable. "She is not only one of

my best craftsmen, she is also my right hand in the operation my business, and in our experiments with the making of steel."

"Please excuse my immodesty, gentlemen," I say as I join them. "It is the heat today."

Kallias seems unmoved as he smiles and offers greeting, but Petros seems embarrassed and distraught. He quickly looks away. "I am very sorry, Miss," he says.

This amuses me greatly, and I smile in an attempt to put Petros at ease. I rise to shake hands with both men.

"We will use the pool," Kallias says. "Thank you for your hospitality, Barak. Before we return to our garrison, we would like to discuss two other matters of interest to our king."

"Of course," Father says. "Iva, my wife, may have some beer and bread to share. You are welcome to join us."

"Thank you. Petros and I will be very pleased to join you."

The two men rejoin us soon after, looking very much refreshed, and fall upon the tray of dates, olives, bread, and beer my mother has prepared.

"Our king asks me to inquire as to your skills with making steel," Kallias says to me as he inspects an olive. "Our experience with bronze weapons and armor is extensive, and our troops have learned many important lessons in their manufacture and use. We know that steel is lighter and will hold its edge much longer than bronze. Do you know of these things?"

"Another of my father's workers called Tabu and I have begun to explore the manufacture and use of steel," I say. "We have found much to recommend its use in the field over weapons made of bronze. However, it is somewhat more demanding in its manufacture. The iron ingots must be heated with coal, then hammered, cooled, then reheated, hammered, and cooled again. This process must be repeated several times to get rid of its impurities and refine its shape into a useable weapon."

"The process of shaping iron ingots into useful steel is physically demanding. We are trying to perfect ways to make high-quality steel in great quantities without killing ourselves with overwork. One of these methods involves quenching the steel in a saltwater bath rather than hammering, but we need more time and more experimentation."

I sit forward. "If you would like I can introduce you to Tabu. Once you see him and some of his work, I am sure you will understand something of the physical strength I think is required to make steel of weapons grade most efficiently."

"There is no need to meet Tabu now," the captain says. "If he is as good at steelmaking as you say, I'm sure you will want him to go with you on our campaign."

"Yes. There is another factor," I add, "perhaps most important of all. Iron ore is usually plentiful, but not always easy to find, or to remove from the earth, or to move from the site of a mine to the site of a smelting furnace. I have no knowledge of Alexander's proposed route, nor do I have any idea of the kinds or qualities of ores we might find."

"What I do know is that while we are advancing, your king must constantly judge our need for raw copper, tin, and iron ore with which to meet his demands for weapons. I am certain he will maintain reconnaissance looking for the enemy, and for safe routes through difficult areas. This reconnaissance must also include a rigorous search for the ore needed to make weapons." I punch a firm fist into the table to make my point. "This has to be an essential factor in all of his battle planning and campaign logistics. If he already has such a unit that he has confidence in, then I need say no more about it. If not, please advise me of what he thinks he may need, and I will prepare

a proposal.”

“My daughter speaks important truths,” my father says in support of all that I have presented.

Kallias nods to my father. “I will pass your concerns to Alexander. For now, perhaps I can suggest that your man craft a steel sword suitable for inspection by a warrior king. Bring Tabu and the sword along on our trip to the Mediterranean coast, and to Ammon’s oracle at Siwah.”

“It will be my pleasure to so instruct Tabu,” Barak replies.

“We will depart to the north by ship within the week,” Kallias says. “Alexander has a great interest in building Greek shipping interests up to the point where we can displace the Phoenicians. For that he will need a major seaport on the Mediterranean Sea, and a strong navy to secure the commerce.

“We will spend time along the coast looking for a site to develop this port.” He smiles fondly. “In addition to his many talents for wartime strategy and tactics, Alexander also has many skills in city planning and architecture. We will have an opportunity to see all of these played out as we work with him and think about a city and seaport of a size sufficient to handle the maritime commerce that we foresee.”

I look at our guests and smile at the possibility of having so many things to learn from their king. Petros’ look lingers for a moment. Then he smiles at me and looks back toward Kallias.

“You and your party should consider yourselves to be very fortunate,” Kallias asserts. “Once Alexander is satisfied with his planning work for the new city of Alexandria, most of the army will return to Memphis.

Some will remain to provide security for our planners and surveyors at the site of our King’s proposed new City of Alexandria. Our King will move by overland caravan to the west accompanied only by a small group of us. We think the trip to Siwah might take as long as ten days. We will be a fairly small group, though Alexander will have some of his best men, discretely armed, ahead, behind, and among us.

“The journey to Siwah and back means we could be away from Memphis for about two months. Can you make your preparations for joining us, and begin to arrange your affairs in Memphis for a possibly longer absence of two or three years? When my king asks for your statement on this, he will be very alert to any ambiguity or your lack of full confidence in what you tell us.”

“Yes. We can be prepared enough to sound very confident of ourselves,” Father replies.

“Good. My King, Petros, and I look forward to many conversations with you and your workmen...”

“...and my daughter,” Father asserts.

I bite my tongue. If it was not clear from the way that Kallias entertained my worries about forging steel on the warpath, then I don’t know when it will be.

“Of course,” Kallias says. “My King has already expressed his willingness to include whomever you think must go with us, and certainly the King understands that your daughter is very important to your work. Actually, it was he who took particular interest in her knowledge of making steel. She will be welcome. We know how important it is that we have a good working relationship with you and all your craftsmen.”

He bends closer to us and speaks just above a whisper. “Our campaign will be hot, difficult, and dangerous. We have enjoyed great success in our battles so far, but I feel the success of our future campaigns may well depend on our adaptability to our surroundings as we get farther from our home territories. Our success will depend absolutely on the level of commitment to our cause by you, by each of your craftsmen, by your daughter, and by all who are both loyal to my King and

technically skilled in the strategy, tactics, war-making details, and day-to-day minutiae in support of conquest.

"All will be challenged at our weakest points by our very capable enemies with their large and very well-equipped armies." Kallias pauses. "My King also believes this. You may trust my word."

Part 2

In January, we depart Memphis, down the westernmost tributary of the Nile, on two quinqueremes, the largest and fastest ships of Alexander's navy. Because of my country's warm welcome, Alexander feels no need to beef up security on the way to the small port of Rhakotis on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea.

The existing port is adequate for the level of commerce and shipping now moving through the eastern Mediterranean, but Alexander has shared with us, through Kallias and Petros, that he has bigger plans. A talented city planner and architect in his own right, he brings with him a delegation of planners, architects, and engineers familiar with building large structures on soft ground.

Tabu has come along with Father, Nikola, and me. He has completed his work on the steel sword that Kallias suggested back in Memphis. The sword is to be presented to Alexander for inspection—a ceremony also suggested by Kallias.

Tabu's presentation sword is simple. We agreed, in the forge, that Alexander is sophisticated enough in his choice of weapon that he does not need to be distracted by decoration or by extra, unnecessary weight. The steel sword is straight, and the blade is narrow, unlike the curved blade of the kopis Alexander once favored, which widens toward the tip. Tabu fought in the tribal wars of his homeland at the headwaters of the Nile. He has experience with weaponry, and with the death and disfigurement that a warrior could bring with a good weapon, but he intimated to me that he had never held a weapon that he felt to be such a part and extension of his body, that has such an instinctive flow as he swings it toward an imagined foe, as this sword. He is very proud of his work. We all are.

I have always wanted to learn all I can about making steel. As such, I helped Tabu with his work in any way that I could. At the end of the process, he asked my advice on some kind of message to be engraved onto the blade, a message that will be pleasing to Alexander. I was delighted that Tabu placed such confidence in me.

As we waited to embark from Memphis, I kept company with the shy Lieutenant Petros, at least on those days when he was not otherwise occupied with the business of Alexander. Together, we conferred with one of my most trusted and talented scribes about languages, phrases, and writing styles that would be appropriate for the newly named Pharaoh of Egypt. The scribe suggested a phrase and a style for a script to be written in Greek, along with a Greek engraver who will do the work on the finished steel.

Tabu was very pleased with the results of my recruitment work, and we scheduled the engraving to be completed before our ships set sail.

The trip to Rhakotis on Alexander's flagship is short and uneventful. The trip takes less than a day, and I spend those hours with Petros. I am growing increasingly fond of him. Even though we have spent time together and have allowed ourselves some intimacy, I understand his shyness and reticence. I do all I can to put him at ease.

At Kallias' urging, Alexander allows me to accompany his planning group on their two-day trek around Lake Mareotis, the natural harbor upon which the Pharaoh plans to build his city. Kallias tells me that I am to listen more than I speak, a demand that I am nervous I may not be able to honor.

"My King," Kallias says, "may I introduce to you, Aello, daughter of Barak?"

I bow low. "It is an honor, sir."

The Pharaoh Alexander is younger than I imagined, but his youth belies a formidable confidence that I find enthralling and intimidating; even a little tactile. Beyond being introduced to each other, we do not get to speak, but I know that this face-to-face meeting is the greatest opportunity of my life. I decide to spend as much time as I can trying to comprehend all the things that are being discussed among these skilled and dedicated men.

There are so many new ideas that the architects and planners share, and I have so many questions, but I worry that interrupting their deliberations could ruin the welcome that Kallias has prepared for me.

It seems that Alexander envisions several permanent structures for his new city, including government buildings, a temple for worship of Greek and Egyptian gods, and even a giant library. "And naturally," I overhear a planner state, "the roads will connect the island of Pharos to the docks, starting with the shops."

I wince. It is my experience, working as we do near the docks of the Nile, that visitors to Memphis go directly to the buildings that are connected to them. Do they really want visitors to this grand city to visit its markets and government buildings before anything else? I am suddenly overcome with an intense desire to ask one of the planners about this.

Alexander's architect, Dinocrates, is huddled a few steps away with one of the other architects over a sketch of the city proper. I blurt out a little louder than I should have: "But the road connecting to the breakwater should go straight to the library and then to the government offices! It is a mistake to make the road connect the docks first with the shops."

The planner is suddenly embarrassed. He turns his eyes to the west. I see Kallias look at me with those piercing eyes raised to the sky.

Dinocrates turns to find the source of this disturbance. Thankfully, he recognizes me as a guest of Alexander and motions for me to come to him. He points to the layout. "Show us here on our sketch where the road should go."

I approach and bend to look. Once again I speak with more intensity than I intend: "Alexander has said that the library to be erected here will be the greatest in the known world. In their passion for knowledge people will come from all over the empire to see the vast arrays of papyrus and parchment, and the many scrolls to be stored here. He speaks of his dreams of the great poet Homer and all of his works in particular." I trace a new path on the sketch. "The road must go here. The people coming here by ship will not want to be taken to shops or government buildings. They will want to be taken to the place of learning first — before anything else!"

"But the road must also serve the interests of shippers of grains from the Nile, and the shippers of many goods from all around the Mediterranean Sea who wish to trade with the people of Egypt," Dinocrates replies patiently.

"The grains will not care how long it takes to arrive at their warehouses, but the seekers of knowledge will care very much if they are delayed in their quest," I answer. "Build a separate road for the grain shippers here." I trace another path on the sketch.

Dinocrates examines my two suggestions and turns to his counterpart to confer. "Your suggestions are very wise, girl. I will take them to Alexander and urge him to give consideration to your proposed roadways."

I rock back on my heels as he departs. Kallias catches my eye and gives me a gesture of approval. I'm thrilled by the fact that Dinocrates has listened to me. I want to tell my father, Nikola, and Tabu, of

course, of all I have seen on this wonderful day.

"How was your time with the great man in the new City of Alexandria, my daughter?" Father asks as, breathless, I rejoin him two days later.

"He is a beautiful man, Father. He is not a tall man. Tabu would tower over him, but he walks as though he contains all the fires of your many forges, all throwing sparks with the sounds of all the hammers all at once," I reply.

"That is high praise. Will you be able to work effectively with him? It sounds like your first view of him has caused you to swoon," Father teases me.

"No, of course not. I think I know exactly what I am feeling — respect, though I admit I am less sure of myself in working closely with him. I know that anyone who gets close to Alexander can easily be consumed by him. That person could end up with no more value to herself or to others than the slag hammered off a piece of hot iron ore."

It is by Father's side. "On the other hand, the intensity and heat of his personality are not all there is to the man himself. He is an intelligent and capable man of great vision. If I learned nothing else during the time we spent walking around the hot sands of Lake Mareotis, it is the fullness of his vision for his new city by the sea. On seeing the secure harbor and the safety of the approach from the sea through natural breakwaters, from that moment forward he literally carried an image of the docks and the whole city in his head. When he paused to consult this mental image, he only did so to instruct the architects and surveyors where each street center-line and foundation corner must be placed.

"I can assure you, though, that I did worry about my ability to think clearly when I stood close enough to hear his voice as he directed someone to move a pointer a little forward or a little backward. One of the architects was standing on the rocks overlooking the waves splashing onto the shore below while writing notes in his book. I'm sure it was an accident, but he suddenly dropped the book into the water several body lengths below, too far down to retrieve." Father's eyes widen, and I nod. "Yes, the architect feared the worst. He sat down and put his head in his arms.

"I was nearby and saw a look of pure fury fly cross Alexander's eyes. I shook with fear for the note keeper. Even so, Alexander walked over to the man and put his arm around his shoulders to calm him down and get him back to work with a new book. After a few minutes, both stood up, the architect began making notes once again, and Alexander walked back toward us. As he passed by me, he winked then sent one of his warriors down to retrieve the planner's dropped book."

Father seems to consider this more deeply than I anticipated. "Perhaps he calmed down only because he knew you were watching him."

I shrug. "I am sure that is a possibility. He is the leader of one of the largest armies on the earth, and there are many stories of the terrible violence, beheadings, and disembowelments he has done to the opposing armies, even to his own soldiers who have become disloyal. Those stories do not reflect the character of a gentle or kindly man. I'm sure he will not be so forgiving with those he engages in battle, even those on his own staff if he knows he must make an example of them in order to avoid very ugly consequences."

"I am glad you told me these things, my daughter," Father says. "They make me all the more certain that we should join the Pharaoh on his visit across the desert to the oracle of Ammon. It will be important to our final decision on who will go east with his campaign. For now, let us prepare for the presentation of Tabu's sword. After that we must finish preparing for the trip to Siwah."

I step forward to hug my father. He is a good man, and I am glad to return to his side. "Thank you for taking the time to listen to me and for bringing me along on this journey. I wish I could capture

your words as you speak them. I would paste them to my body so I would always have them where I can always see them.”

On the night before our departure, Kallias finally manages to get everyone together for the presentation of the sword. It will be a fairly small, fairly quiet gathering among some trees in a shadowed copse next to a stream. The presentation of a new sword hammered for a Pharaoh requires dignified simplicity rather than excess.

Petros has told me there will be no speeches, no formal introductions. The Pharaoh walks up to a small stage under a tent and takes his seat. He is dressed casually, though he does wear a bronze cuirass and his belt holds a short sword. His sun-darkened skin contrasts sharply with his curly, sun-blond hair. He is a handsome man, very sure of himself, though he sits as though he may need to jump into action at the slightest provocation. He is very young, as I observed on the cliffs of Lake Mareotis — only twenty-four years old. Petros and Kallias walk behind the Pharaoh, and to his right. A four-man detail of soldiers in full armor and weaponry spread themselves along the rear of the small audience of favored officers and senior staff.

We stand in front of the short platform that Alexander has now ascended. Barak, Nikola, and I are in clean white robes, with jewelry and headresses suitable for an audience with the Pharaoh. Tabu stands at the center of the gathering, his forearms extended in front, his two huge hands cradling the sword waist high, a piece of white cloth draped over it.

Kallias whispers something in Tabu's ear, and Tabu, clearly overwhelmed with the dignity of the ceremony and his place in it, steps forward, approaches the Pharaoh, and kneels with his head bowed down, the sword extended toward the Pharaoh in presentation.

Alexander rises from his seat. “Please stand, Tabu. I am told you are a maker of fine steel swords. To a soldier like me, such a man deserves to stand eye to eye, even though your height puts your eyes a ways above mine. What do you have for me?”

Tabu seems afraid to open his mouth in response. He cradles the sword with his left arm and takes the cloth away from the sheathed sword with his right. He drops the cloth, but keeps his head bowed while he extends the sword to the Pharaoh. Alexander clutches the hilt with his right hand and pulls the sword from its sheath. Tabu drops his arms to his side. His eyes remain downcast as he backs away.

Alexander puts the sheath aside and turns to his left away from Kallias and Petros, swinging and twirling the sword with his wrist as he steps off the platform and moves away from the gathering. Suddenly, he swings the sword hard, first left, then right. He walks to a tree as big around as his forearm. He swings the edge of the sword, hard, at the trunk. The tree top falls. Before anybody can react, he continues in the same motion by swinging at the tree again backhanded. Another piece of the trunk falls.

He tosses the sword in the air and catches it with his left hand. In one sweeping motion he aims at another tree. The top of the other tree falls. Again, he swings in a single backhanded motion, and another piece of the second trunk falls.

He turns and calls out to Kallias, standing among the troops there. “Come face me. Be ready to fight.”

Kallias does as he is bade by his King. He is an excellent swordsman, and I am told that Alexander often uses him as a sparring partner in swordplay. I imagine that these kinds of intense matches are how they keep themselves in fighting trim. They are also important in testing personal swords. The bronze, wide-bladed kopis held by Kallias is a personal killing sword, a standard design distributed among some of the infantry and all of the officers of the Greek army. By contrast there is this new sword hammered, personally, by Tabu into sharpened steel.

Alexander walks back toward the group, again lightly swinging and twirling the blue steel while he examines the length of it. He reads the engraving aloud: "Plato is dear to me, but dearer still is truth." He gives a smart grin. As he returns the sword to its sheath, he says, "A fine statement by my teaching master, Aristotle; a fine statement for a fine weapon. Thank you, Tabu. I hope you and your master will agree to join us on our campaign to the east."

As Alexander turns back to face the approaching Kallias, now armed and armored, Tabu speaks. "Thank you, my Pharaoh. It is my great honor to serve you."

Alexander's first thrust to the chest is easily parried by Kallias, who then moves to block Alexander's next killing thrust low toward his belly.

My breath is drained away. I sense my open mouth and think to myself that I must close it.

These two men are closely matched and well aware of the many practiced and usually successful thrusts and parries that they have had to both execute and also protect against. After a few minutes of intense swordplay, Alexander suddenly strikes, hard, at Kallias' kopis. The bronze blade breaks under the power of Alexander's stroke. The broken blade falls to the ground and lays there.

Alexander's theatrical nature breaks through as he thrusts his sword against Kallias' now undefended neck. He stops within a finger's width of raw flesh, and then lays the flat of the blade against the skin of Kallias' neck.

Alexander bends to pick up the broken blade of the kopis. I can see that there are several dents in the cutting edges, and, ultimately, a break where the cutting edge of the steel blade connected dents on the opposite sides of the bronze blade. I share an excited look with Tabu. Our weapon is clearly superior.

"An excellent test, my brother and friend," Alexander says. "This tells me all I need to know about this steel blade that our new friend Tabu has crafted for us." After thanking Tabu once more, Alexander departs quickly with his four bodyguards and Kallias.

Tabu seems embarrassed, but very pleased with Kallias' attention. He joins my family, and we walk back to our quarters feeling great pride in the fine piece of work Tabu has made.

The next day we arise early for the ten-day trip along the coast, then south to Siwah. The trip continues routinely along the seacoast, but the routine is not to last as we turn south away from the coast, and across the hot, dry desert.

While enroute Petros tells me that Alexander had given Tabu's sword to Kallias for safe-keeping with his other prize possessions after the presentation.

"When Kallias came into the tent where we were billeted, he let me hold the sword. He then stood aside and urged me to swing the sword. I did so and nearly slash the wall of our tent. Tabu has burnished the sword to a dull bluish glow that imbues the sword with a powerful life of its own. The engraving seems to give the living sword a voice.

Petros bends his head to mine and whispers into my ear. "I have never seen or felt or held a sword that comes to life in your hands and then speaks with such authority. Alexander will be very happy with it. He will be proud to have received it from your family.

Part 3.

Desert caravans are a wonder to behold. Though small with only 30 camels, Alexander's caravan on this first day is no exception to this wonderment. Our desert guides are nomadic Berber tribesmen. They wear long, colorful robes wrapped around their bodies with multi-colored cloths around their turbans to keep the blowing sand out of their faces. The Berbers can move across the desert without guideposts ahead and without leaving tracks behind. Alexander joins the Berber men walking more often than he rides. Not to be outdone, the men with Alexander, including my father and brother,

also walk. I also walk. By their hand gestures and the words “Biya! Biya!” the Berber women ask me to come ride with them, but I wave their invitations aside.

Those who ride are mostly the Berber women, their small children, and some very old men. Pack animals, mostly burros, loaded with gear, provisions, and weapons, sometimes with children, make up the bulk of the caravan. The camels, burros, and other livestock have bells and colorful pom-poms and woven, multicolored leads attached to their halters and pack saddles. The Berber men often break into their native songs, and Alexander, enjoying the spectacle, commands his men to join in with Greek drinking and marching songs.

Four days south of the coast, a sandstorm forms in the west and moves toward us. It shifts, in the distance, in high, roiling brown clouds. The Berber guides tell us to stop and secure the material in the caravan against the wind and blowing sand. They will put up tents, heavily anchored by long pegs hammered deep in the sand, for the people. The animals will all need to be hobbled. Petros tells me that the guides offered Alexander a separate tent. He declined.

“He said he’d stay in the tent with his soldiers and our guests,” Petros says proudly.

The wind and windborne sand blow strongly for more than a day. We can hear the sand blowing over the tents making a sound like an abrasive cloth. I fear the tent material will go weak from the abrasion and tear, but fortunately, they do not.

Eventually the storm abates. As we begin to crawl out from our tents, the guides confer with Alexander through Petros. Petros later tells me, as we continue our march, that they told Alexander that the landscape had entirely changed and that they may have lost some of the landmarks they rely on. Without landmarks they cannot guarantee that they can find the oasis at Siwah, and yet, we march on.

I watched as Alexander conferred with one of the Berber guides. I was exiting my tent, from the howling vacuum of fabric into a world of sand drifts. The Berber man’s eyes popped at what Alexander was saying, and it was clear that the Pharaoh’s youth and his belief in his own divinity gave him courage. I only pray, as we march on, that it is courage and not hubris. Petros says that we have food enough for another ten days, but that the supplies of water are poor. He guesses we have another five days under careful rationing.

Before we had our caravan packed to continue our travel south the Berber guide with Alexander had pointed in a direction, one that we are now following. Alexander nodded to him and then went to sit by himself for a time. Whether he was collecting himself or gathering the courage to lead in the face of a near certainty of failure, I’m not sure.

I took note of a flock of about a dozen ravens flying in circles far above the dunes ahead of him. They were pointing in the direction that the guide had indicated. I prayed that we might interpret this as an omen of good luck.

Four days later, just before dawn begins to lighten the sky, the first watering hole remains undiscovered. I wrap myself up in one of the Berber women’s colorful wool robes and join Alexander outside the tents as he, groggy and thirsty, seeks the rising sun. I can tell that he hears more than sees the ravens circling and gabbling nearby, just as they have since we began our journey. I pay them more heed; I think they may be our salvation.

“Good morning, my Pharaoh,” I say. “I have been watching the ravens. One of them flies outside the main group. It looks at me from time to time.” I pause, gauging the young King’s reaction. “I think I can communicate with him.”

Petros tells me that Alexander is not ignorant of such possibilities as ornithomancy. His mother, Olympias, told him he was destined for greatness, even divinity. Now that we have made him our

pharaoh, he seems to think of himself as godlike. Indeed, his near-godliness is the very reason he wants to speak with the Oracle of Ammon in Siwah, just as Zeus had done so long ago.

With all of this in mind, I'm grateful that he says, "If the raven speaks you must listen and learn. Come back to me when you are sure you know his message."

"Thank you, my Pharaoh." I rise and walk in the direction of the circling ravens. When I near them, I sit down at the top of a high dune with my head bowed low, my robe pulled close in the cool morning air. Shortly, I feel the presence of another being. The raven that has been flying outside the group is now on the ground a few paces away from me, looking at me, making soft vocalizations. After a pause, the raven turns away, extends his wings, and flies away. I see a single white feather on his right wing. As the bird ascends into the sky, he turns again to look at me, then rejoins the circling ravens.

The flock flies in one direction and then descends among the dunes, almost out of sight against the dark sky a few hundred paces away. I look at the sky above the descending ravens. At the southern horizon, I see four stars at the end points of what appears to be a small cross. A few more moments and the stars will fade in the gathering light of dawn.

I hasten to Alexander's side. "We must go in the direction of those four stars. We will find water there."

Alexander rubs his patchy, youthful beard in thought. "Those four stars are sometimes called the Southern Cross by my naval officers. That is a good omen. Thank you, Aello. I will direct my men and the guides to load their packs immediately and move toward those stars. You must remain here and search the horizon for landmarks under them that we can follow when the stars fade away in the dawn. I will instruct two of my men to stay a distance away from us on either side, on top of the dunes to look out for signs of water. You must concentrate on the location of the ravens. If they move in a new direction, you must find me and tell me immediately."

"Yes, my Pharaoh."

Later that day, the travelers discover water. The guides say that the storm has uncovered a new and plentiful watering hole on the route to Siwah. They are pleased to see fresh water still gathering in the bottom of a shallow depression.

Alexander orders a day for us to recover and regroup, and a few days after that, the caravan arrives at the oasis in Siwah. Alexander has his meeting with the Oracle. To no one's surprise he will not speak of his experience there. The only evidence of a change in his attitude following the meeting is the purchase of a translucent blue/violet stone about the size of a man's thumb. It is beautiful. At first, I thought the stone might be Lapis Lazuli, a stone found only in the eastern mountains of Afghanistan far beyond Mesopotamia. A stone much favored by the Egyptians. As I looked more closely, I saw that the blue/violet color was more translucent than the sky blue of most Lapis and there were no flecks of gold.

As he holds it up to show his closest advisors, his face transforms into the first broad smile that I have seen since we began our journey at the port of Rachiotis a few weeks ago.

Part 4

It has been nearly two years since our ordeal in the desert before Alexander's visit to the Oracle at Siwah. My pharaoh never speaks of his conversation with the Oracle... not with anybody.

In the intervening years, he caught up with the fleeing Darius III, finally, in a tough battle at the Caspian Gates. Darius was already dead, whether killed by his own people or by his own hand, we are not sure. All I know is that the battle was a rout worthy of the immortality of scrolls and legends. My father's tent was behind Parmenion's left flank, and we endured a small skirmish of our own to keep Persian forces out of our smithy. Alexander honored Darius as a valiant warrior and buried him with full military honors.

Now victorious, the older Macedonians in Alexander's army wanted to go home. In their minds, the war was over. In Alexander's mind, and in the minds of younger soldiers loyal to him, Darius' army was in total disarray. The way was now clear to roll up the rest of the Persian empire and take the Greek army all the way to India. In that way the Greeks would have an empire even greater than the Persians. I often wonder if this is what the oracle foretold, or if it is how Alexander interpreted it. Either way, we were on the move to the east again.

We approached the great capital at Persepolis that winter. The Persian capital lay abandoned before us. Our occupation of it and the resulting inaction over five cold months of winter was a terrible time. Alexander had taken on some of the attributes of a too-proud conqueror. Worse were his affectations of Persian habits and demeanor. He occasionally wore some of the flowery and colorful fashions worn by Darius III and his sycophants at court.

Though this time was difficult and troubling for Alexander, I will never regret it. It led to a more intimate relationship between me and Petros, and we quietly moved into the same tent near my father's forgery. The smithy kept us warm through that harsh winter.

When spring came, Alexander was ready to move on to India, but first he would have to secure Bactria and Gandhara—a place of high mountains and regional tribes led by strong warriors. In order to establish the influence of the Greek city-states, he would need to keep the Macedonians with him and willingly under arms with his leadership.

My father has remained closely attached to Alexander's army since we departed Memphis. He has found favor with Alexander and his closest military advisors. With daily forge operations under Nikola's supervision, Father has been free to work closely with Alexander's operations planning staff to find sources of ore and other materials necessary for the manufacture and maintenance of weapons, armor, and other battle gear.

Increasingly, Alexander seems to grow firm in his belief that he is the son of Zeus. This belief has been growing since the Egyptians named him pharaoh four years before and has intensified with the successful battles at Gaugamela and at the Caspian Gates.

As we followed Alexander's army closer to India, my bond with Petros deepened. I became pregnant and gave birth to our beautiful son, Balio. Together, as a new and loving family, Petros and I think about our future. We are not certain that it lies with this army for much longer.

As the ethnicity and language of the local armies drawn under Alexander's banner increases, though, Petros' work as an interpreter has become increasingly important. In the negotiations needed to persuade conquered armies to join us, Petros has become almost inseparable from his King.

Whenever he goes with Alexander or his staff on a diplomatic mission, Petros asks, usually through his friend and colleague, Kallias, to have me accompany them. Petros knows that Alexander will want me to evaluate weaponry problems, issues, and needs. We believe that he agrees to this because he is showing favor to two of his personal favorites. We are grateful for this. We have never weakened in our public support for his decisions and his policies, and never fail to tell him privately what he needs to know—no matter how uncomfortable the realities behind them might be.

It has been a long day for Alexander. I am conscious of this as I approach him in one of his all-too-frequent meetings. He must confer regularly with his senior staff regarding the establishment of a military garrison that would be at the economic heart of the new city of Alexandria in Arachosia. In his vision of empire these garrisons will permanently support his armies through expected growth that is to include all of India and much of the territory north of the Hindu Kush mountains. He has had no problem finding volunteers to settle in these garrisons. Many of his most loyal soldiers, weary now of the years of war over harsh terrain, welcome his offer of land and a significant share of the spoils of war.

We are among these volunteers.

"Petros and I have decided that our lives now belong to our son, my King," I say as we explain our plans to him. "There is no place for him on the long, hard trail over the mountains that you foresee over the coming months. My father, who began this journey with you four years ago in Memphis, is now, himself, old and tired from the effort to keep your soldiers well-armed. Even so, with the help of me, Petros, and Tabu, we believe we can continue to supply your army with significant quantities of weapons from the shops we will build, with your support, in this new city.

"Alexandria is rich with resources. Abundant fresh water from the mountains and from the river that flows through here from the foothills will enable a great agriculture. When your soldiers who agree to remain here turn their hard-won skills to these resources, they will create a paradise on earth. I and my family believe that our knowledge and skills with metalworking and our understanding of your vision will be important in helping guide this rough land into a new seat of power.

"We seek your support in this, my King. We are available to work with you and your city planners and architects to help make this shared goal into reality just as you and I did two years ago to layout the first City of Alexandria on the bright shores of the Mediterranean Sea. May we have your thoughts on this?"

At first Alexander seems taken aback by our bold proposal. I hope that it is clear that I, who have always been a relief from the intense and often destructive wrangling of his lieutenants over irrelevant details, have thought deeply of this and have discussed it fully with all who will be affected.

"Leave me now," Alexander says. "You have given me much to think about, and I am sure we will have more to discuss as I prepare for our expedition north. Our time for travel in the high mountains grows short as winter snows approach."

As the military commander of an army in the process of conquering much of the known world and, now, extending the limits of his empire to encompass all of India, Alexander knows that such considerations cannot be given much weight. As his mother always trained him, and as he has always done, our King and our friend seems to know the decisions must be made and the march north commenced without pausing to consider possible alternatives.

As Olympias always told him — as he is the son of Zeus — all errors of judgment will eventually be forgiven to a god.

END