

# **The Heroic Legend of Arslan**

*By*

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# **First Arc**

## **Book 1: The Capital Ablaze**

**Translator's Notes:** Summary is split up by chapters. Contents in square brackets [...] are background information or flashbacks

# Chapter I

**October, Pars Era 320.**

At the eve of a battle against the Lusitanian soldiers, spearheaded by King Innocentis VII and his younger brother Guiscard, King Andragoras III of Pars is furious at one of his most trusted, and youngest, Marzbans, Daryun. Named the “Warrior of the Warriors” for his bravery and fighting skills, Daryun tries to persuade Andragoras to order the troops to retreat because he’s certain that the fog that has come out of nowhere is a trap set up by the Lusitanians. Andragoras, who has never tasted defeat in his life, views retreat as a cowardly act, and reprimands Daryun by stripping away his respected title and demotes him into a mere knight.

Meanwhile, Andragoras’ only son and crowned prince, Arslan, prepares himself for his maiden battle at the age of fourteen; he’s concerned about the sudden influx of fog in the battlefield. Vahriz, the Great General, asks his nephew Daryun to swear his loyalty to Arslan alone – not the royal family, just Arslan – and Daryun complies.

On the field of Atropatene, under the guise of thick fog and with the ill advise of Kharlan, the Parsian troops fall victim into the Lusitanians’ trap. Pars troops suffer defeat, as soldiers, unable to see in the fog, fall into a deep pit filled with oil, which is then lit with flamed arrows fired from the Lusitanians. In the midst of battle, Daryun searches for Arslan and meets Kharlan instead, who’s leading a group of Lusitanian soldiers. He realizes that Kharlan has betrayed his country and king, and engages him in a duel despite Kharlan’s insistence that there’s a good reason that he’d decided to go against the current king. When Kharlan runs off, Daryun retrieves Arslan from the midst of battle and escape to safety.

When they realize just how bad the situation is, Vahriz successfully convinces Andragoras to retreat for now. However, with the news of the King’s retreat, Parsian soldiers’ spirits are dampened. Kubard questions Andragoras’ decision to withdraw, thinking the king has abandoned his men, and gets into a heated argument with Shapur, who believes that the king has his duties and soldiers such as themselves have theirs. They split ways to keep fighting off Lusitanians.

Silvermask kills Vahriz and captures Andragoras.

In the Battle of Atropatene, Lusitanians win. While half of Pars’ troops have been slaughtered, Lusitanian troops suffer quite a bit of damage as well.

## Chapter II

Daryun and Arslan arrive at Mt. Bashur, where Narsus, Daryun's trusted friend and well-known for his intelligence as much as his quirky personality, and his page boy Elam, reside.

### **[Pars Era 315.**

Narsus, the lord of Dailam who's a firm believer of slave abolishment, using only the power of rumours, successfully broke the alliance between Turan, Turk, and Sindura, the three eastern countries that were planning to attack Pars, and caused them to fight against each other. For two years, Narsus worked as a court secretary and advisor in Parsian palace under Andragoras, but due to his dislike for the stiff court rules, in addition to the fact that he'd collected enough evidence that many noblemen were unpunished for doing illegal matters that also had negative impacts for the citizens, Narsus returned to Dailam after some disgruntled noblemen failed to kill him off.]

### **[Pars Era 303.**

After taking over Badakhshan, Andragoras requested his elder brother, King Osroes, that he be given Queen Tahamine as a spoil of war. Yet after witnessing Tahamine's beauty, Osroes decided to take her for himself instead, and this caused a serious strife between the two brothers.]

Kharlan's men, upon seeing Daryun and Arslan entering Mt. Bashur, break into Narsus' villa and inquire about two things: the whereabouts of Daryun and Arslan, and an invitation for Narsus to work for Kharlan. Narsus refuses immediately and sends the men down a water-filled burrow with a trapdoor.

Arslan asks Narsus to help him in his quest to regain the kingdom. At first Narsus refuses, but he gladly consents after Arslan promises to grant him the title of Court Painter when he becomes king. He also warns that should Arslan follow Andragoras' footsteps in regards to handling the many problems in the country merely through shallow tactics or violence, he'll not hesitate to leave his post as Arslan's advisor.

Narsus plans to send Elam to his friend in Gilan, but Elam is resolute in following wherever Narsus goes, and so Elam joins the group. They hide in one of Narsus' emergency safe spots.

When the men finally manage to climb back out, Arslan's group is long gone.

## Chapter III

Outside the walled city of Ecbatana, Shapur is being tortured by Bodin, Lusitania's Archbishop and inquisitor. Shapur announces that he'd rather die by one of his countrymen's arrows than by the hands of the Lusitanians.

Gieve, a man who calls himself a travelling musician, fires an arrow to end Shapur's suffering. Queen Tahamine offers him an award for that and after he presents his musical skills.

For ten days, Lusitanians keep attacking from outside the wall but to no avail. Instead, they begin to use another tactic: they direct their words to the slaves inside Ecbatana, urging them to rebel against their masters in the name of Yaldabaoth, a god who believes all people are equal. With nothing to lose, the slaves within the capital start to revolt, setting fires to the temple and fighting against the soldiers.

Saam warns his fellow Marzban Garshasp not to be hasty and suggests that they should wait for backup from the east.

The next day, Saam attempts to persuade Tahamine to free the slaves in order to suppress the riots, but Tahamine doesn't want to unsettle the traditional status system in Pars, so she says she'll consider it.

Gieve has also been requested to take the queen through the underground waterways to escape from the capital. On their way out of the city, Gieve has long realized that the woman he's bringing along with is merely a substitute for the queen, and the real queen is hiding somewhere else; he's not impressed by the fact that he's been tricked and announces that that's as far as he'll take her. The girl runs off on her own and encounters Silvermask and Kharlan, who are sneaking into Ecbatana while Lusitanians are attacking the city from above. Silvermask kills the girl without a second thought once he knows she's not Tahamine. As Gieve chases after her, he runs directly into Silvermask's troops. Gieve kills the soldiers, and decides to stick around to steal some treasures from the palace before he goes.

When the fire within the palace starts, Saam, angered by Kharlan's betrayal, engages his old comrade in a swordfight, and just as Saam is about to win, Silvermask pierces him from back to chest with a spear. Even as seriously injured as Saam is, he appears to be alive. On the other hand, in an attempt to stop the Lusitanian soldiers, Garshasp dies under enemies' swords.

Silvermask locates Tahamine in a wine cellar by asking a petrified high priest and proceeds to capture her.

Innocentis is an exemplary devotee of Yaldabaoth, and follows everything the scripture says; he has killed many nonbelievers in the past, but when he meets the beautiful Tahamine, he's immediately attracted to the Parsian queen.

## Chapter IV

Innocentis wishes to marry Tahamine, which is distressing and annoying the Lustianian generals. Due to the king's unreasonable demand, many generals' dislike for the king and preference for the king's younger brother Guiscard are beginning to surface. In many of their past battles, Guiscard is the one who plans and executes everything; he's long been harboring the idea that he'd make a more capable king than his brother ever could.

Silvermask encourages Guiscard to vocally support Innocentis' marriage to Tahamine because the result will become an advantage for Guiscard in the end: the generals will be even more dissatisfied with their current monarch, and Bodin will anger Innocentis further if he insists on stopping the marriage.

After receiving the news that Arslan's group has escaped from his men's pursue, Kharlan decides to hunt them down personally.

Elam, dressed as a girl, infiltrates Ecbatana and finds out that Kharlan is leading a thousand cavalymen to hunt for Arslan.

Narsus estimates that Kharlan's plan is to burn down village after village in order to lure out Arslan. At that, Arslan decides to follow Kharlan's troops to stop them from harming innocent people.

On the road that leads away from the capital, Gieve encounters Farangis, a priestess who serves at the Temple of Mithra sent as an envoy on her way to Ecbatana. She's surrounded by a group of Lusitanian soldiers, but she effortlessly shoots them down with her arrows. After Gieve helps get rid of the last few strays, he tries to flirt with her, but Farangis deflects his advances easily. However, when Gieve admits that he has the same concerns over the Lusitanians' problematic behaviors as she did, and offers to help her locate Arslan's whereabouts, Farangis accepts his aid after listening to the spirits' voices. Seeing Kharlan's troops passing by, Farangis decides to follow them, hoping they'll lead her to Arslan; Gieve tags along.

Kharlan's troops burn 50 villagers, only sparing the women and children, though he threatens to do much worse if Arslan doesn't show himself.

A man shows up to tell them which direction Arslan's group went, but it's all part of Narsus' plan to lure Kharlan's troops into a mountainous area where it's difficult for the troops to move about.

Gieve and Farangis meet Narsus, and he asks them to help with his plan. During the battle at night, with Arslan standing atop a cliff, many soldiers try to capture him, only to be tripped down by the rocky terrain and shot or cut down by Arslan's companions. They can't tell the numbers

of Arslan's group, and those who aren't seriously injured get so frightened that they run off without Kharlan.

Daryun engages Kharlan in a one-on-one fight. When Kharlan loses his balance and starts to fall off his horse, his spear gets broken and he gets impaled by his own weapon, leaving him close to death. With his last breath, he tells Daryun that Andragoras is still alive, and mentions something about 'the rightful king'; however, before Daryun can probe further, Kharlan dies.

After brief introductions, Gieve notifies Arslan that Tahamine is safe the last time he's seen her. With the news that his parents are still alive, Arslan decides to secretly return to Ecbatana to investigate their locations.

## Chapter V

An old man residing in the underground of the royal capital informs Silvermask of Kharlan's death, and warns him to beware of engaging in a two-on-one fight with Arslan's men.

After Silvermask leaves, it's revealed that the old man is a sorcerer and the leader of Serpent King Zahhak's faction; he's the one who created the fog at Atropatene. Zahhak ruled the kingdom for thousands of years and was most known for the two serpents on his shoulders, which fed on human brains everyday. He was defeated and sealed within Mt. Damavand by Hero King Kai Khosrow and his sword Ruknabad. The faction's current goal is to resurrect Zahhak.

Bodin's passion for slaughtering nonbelievers doesn't decrease. Slaves who had been promised freedom by the Lusitanians find their situations remain unchanged.

Everyday, Innocentis visits Tahamine, who's placed under house arrest within the palace. He asks for her hand in marriage, but she only responds with silence.

Narsus and Daryun witness with disgust and rage as Bodin throws thousands of volumes of books from the royal library into the fire.

Within a maze of back alleys, Narsus and Daryun go their separate ways to collect more news concerning the king and queen's whereabouts. This is when Daryun encounters Silvermask, and they engage in a fierce swordfight when Silvermask reveals that he's the one who killed his uncle Vahriz. Daryun gains the upper hand when he breaks his opponent's mask, revealing Silvermask's face – half is of white, beautiful skin, and the other half is burned and scarred black and red. Narsus joins in the fight and together, they manage to overpower the lone swordsman.

When Narsus and Daryun return to Arslan and report what they've found, Arslan knows that it's his duty as prince of Pars to save his citizens from the Lusitanians' brutalities.

Locked inside an underground cell is Andragoras – beaten, battered, and chained, but still alive. Silvermask takes his mask off and reveals his true identity to the prisoner. He calls himself Hirmiz, Osroes V's only son and Andragoras' nephew, who is assumed to have been burned to death sixteen years ago due to an accident.



## **Book 2: The Two Princes**

# Chapter I

Arzhang, one of the seven students of the old sorcerer, is skilled in ghadaq – a kind of sorcery that allows the user to move through earth undetected; he's sent to kill one of the generals in the Lustianian camp to cause more chaos and bloodshed between the Lusitanians and Parsians.

While escaping from the Lustianian soldiers, Daryun returns to the group with help from Kashan Fortress' Parsian troops.

[Narsus' background: He's the son of Dailam's provincial governor (feudal lord), though his mother is a commoner and only one of the man's concubines. After Narsus was born, the mother and son were kicked out of the area and lived in Ecbatana until Narsus was ten years old, when his father took him back as he's his only son and heir.]

Hodir, governor of Kashan Fortress, enthusiastically welcomes Arslan and his group into the city. During dinner, Hodir proposes a marriage between his daughter and Arslan, revealing his ambition to climb up the social ladder and use Arslan as a puppet king.

Hodir separates Arslan from the rest of his subordinates, and asks Arslan to consider the two offers he's making: make his daughter the queen, and ease off on the plan of slave liberation as it would topple Pars' social system.

Narsus reckons Hodir is planning to attack them at night (Elam finds a sleep drug on the ceiling of their shared room), and asks Arslan and the others to prepare to leave that very night. While laying in wait, Narsus and Daryun discuss Arslan's origins; they eliminate the possibility that Arslan is the son of Osroes V (Andragoras' older brother).

Thinking Arslan's subordinates have submitted under the influence of the drug, Hodir leads an armed troop and enters Arslan's room, demanding the prince to give him the permission to get rid of Daryun and the others as they pose as threats and negative influences for Arslan, and promising that he's the only one capable of protecting the prince. Arslan refuses to listen to Hodir's irrational reasoning, and calling out for his subordinates, they make their way out of the castle.

Out in the courtyard, Hodir's men surround Arslan's group. When the archers begin to take aim, however, all their bows have been severed thanks to Elam and Narsus. At this point, Hodir orders his men to capture Arslan at all costs, but in the darkness of the night, it's more advantageous for Arslan's smaller group, which allows Daryun to easily slay Hodir.

After the brief combat, Arslan releases Hodir's slaves, except what he doesn't expect is the fact that after hearing their master's death, all the slaves turn around to attack him. They flee from Kashan Fortress, Arslan confused and saddened by the slaves' reaction. Narsus tells Arslan about his own experience five years ago: when he became the governor of Dailam, he released the

slaves his family owned and gave them a year's worth of spending money, thinking it was the right thing to do, only to find them returning to his castle after a short time because the slaves had no skills or desire to make their own living. When Arslan asks about the necessity of freedom in humanity, Narsus replies, "Humans are born free. The reason why slaves forsake freedom and willingly shackle themselves is due to a broken and corrupted society."

Arslan decides they should head east to Peshawar, where the largest army still under their control is located.

In the castle of Peshawar, Kishward, also known as "Double Blade General", receives news from Ecbatana that Andragoras and Arslan are still missing, and Tahamine is locked up by Innocentis in the palace. He feels that Bahman is hiding a secret from him.

Bahman, the oldest Marzban, receives a letter from his old friend Vahriz before the battle of Atropatene; he seems to be bearing a huge secret regarding the true heir of the Parsian throne.

## Chapter II

### **December, Pars Era 320.**

A Lusitanian general and several soldiers are slaughtered by a mysterious being, and witnesses claim they see a hand holding a sword sticking out from the ground.

While Bodin urges for Innocentis' permission to burn thousands of Parsians as vengeance, Guiscard suggests looking for the killer responsible for these murders. Meanwhile, Innocentis tells Guiscard that Tahamine won't marry him unless he sees Andragoras dead. Amongst this mess, Bodin has summoned the Knights Templar from Maryam and they march into Ecbatana, much to Guiscard's disgust.

Hirmiz reveals himself to the injured Saam as the previous king Osroes' only son, and asks him to reconsider where his loyalty should lie.

Xandes, late Karlan's son, offers his services to Hirmiz and swears his loyalty to him, promising that he'll bring back Arslan, Daryun, and Narsus' dead bodies. He also notifies Hirmiz of Arslan's group's whereabouts: how they killed Hodir and fled from Kashan Fortress. They also discuss the mysterious killings among the Lusitanians; Hirmiz knows that it's the work of the underground sorcerers but says nothing.

**[16 years ago. Pars Era 304.** Hirmiz, the promising young prince and beloved son of Osroes V, killed his very first bear and lion during a hunt; Osroes, sick and bedridden at the time, praised him and said he'd become a fine king one day. That very night, Osroes passed away. Andragoras claimed the throne and made his son Arslan the crown prince.]

Arzhang has been sent to kill innocent villagers outside of the capital to cause more chaos.

The old sorcerer now looks to be about a 40-50 year-old man.

## Chapter III

As they're being chased by multiple troops, including Hirmiz's men, for the last three days, Narsus decides they should split into three groups and meet up at Peshawar.

Daryun and Farangis encounter Xandes. Xandes attacks Daryun in a furious attempt to avenge his father's death; though Daryun is more experienced, Xandes is driven by hatred and enmity, and the two seem to be fighting on equal footing. Even so, with Farangis' arrow going straight into his horse's eye, Xandes falls off his ride and gives Daryun a chance to finish him off. However, in his hesitation, Daryun misses his target. Farangis and Daryun flee the scene, and the priestess comments about the knight's naiveté in letting Xandes go.

Gieve, Elam, and Arslan encounter Lusitanian soldiers. A flurry of arrows has pierced their horses and traveling on foot, they've been forced to the edge of a cliff, underneath which is a river with rushing waters. Without a second thought, Gieve, with Arslan under one arm and Elam under the other, jumps down. The captain of the Lusitanian troop orders his men to head down to look for their bodies, and just as he peeks down from the cliff once more, a sword shoots upward and pierces through the man's neck, killing him instantly. From a narrow gap between the rocks, Gieve, Elam, and Arslan climb back out and get back on the horses the soldiers have left behind.

About an hour later, the Lusitanians are on their tails again. Elam falls when his horse gets hit by enemies' arrows, and Arslan turns back to save the younger boy without hesitation. Gieve, pleasantly surprised by Arslan's action, begins to change his opinion of the crown prince when he also goes back to help them by throwing gold coins at their enemies to momentarily distract them while Gieve slays the captain. Witnessing Gieve's sword skills, all the remaining soldiers run away. Back on the road, Arslan asks Elam if he'd like to be his friend, but Elam remains distant and ambiguous, insisting that the son of liberated slaves should not befriend someone of such high status as Arslan. Arslan answers with a hint of sadness that if that were the case, he'll never be able to befriend anyone. Out of curiosity, Gieve asks Arslan whether the prince has spent some time outside of the palace. In fact, Arslan only started living in the palace two years ago; most of his childhood was spent with his foster parents, a family of knighted caste, living in a corner of Ecbatana and playing with commoner and gypsy children. His foster parents passed away from alcohol poisoning almost around the same time Arslan was summoned back to the palace; Gieve suspects that this was no accident at all but doesn't comment.

After escaping from enemies' pursuit, Narsus reaches a rock field, where he can hear sounds of swords clashing. He decides to stay and watch. Hirmiz and his men are engaging Zott, a band of nomad thieves infamous for raiding in the desert and mountainous areas. Hirmiz kills the leader of Zott, and Alfreed, the 16 year-old daughter of Zott's leader, attempts to avenge his father's death but finds herself surrounded by Hirmiz's men after fighting a few rounds with Hirmiz, the Zott people dead and her own sword knocked out of her hand. Just as Hirmiz is about to finish her off, Narsus comes in to interrupt them. Alfreed asks to borrow Narsus' sword, and as they bicker, large boulders begin to collapse around them: earlier, Narsus has used some planks,

leather strings, and rocks to create a trap that discharges rocks after a certain period of time. In the chaos, Narsus and Alfreed escape on horse.

As they enter a village in the hopes of buying another horse, they discover the entire village has been slaughtered, and the strange thing is that there're only injuries on the bottom half of their bodies. That night as they're getting ready to make dinner inside one of the deserted houses, Alfreed and Narsus see the murderer: a hand with a sword sticking out from the ground. Narsus immediately knows that a sorcerer is within their vicinity and sets up a trap. First, he tells Alfreed to climb up a tree to keep her safe. Next, he pours jujube oil all over the ground and set it on fire, causing the sorcerer to burst out from underground in flames; thus, Arzhang, one of the seven sorcerers from the Zahhak faction, is eliminated. Impressed by Narsus' intelligence and courage, Alfreed openly expresses her admiration for the man ten years her senior. Narsus isn't sure how to respond.

## Chapter IV

With the knowledge of Arzhang's death, the old sorcerer sends in another of his student – Sanieh – to assassinate another Lusitanian general.

Hirmiz heads north back to Ecbatana upon Guiscard's commands, while ordering Xandes to keep hunting down Arslan's group.

Daryun and Farangis are close to Peshawar when they once again engage in a fight with Xandes' troops. During the brief exchange, Xandes insists that he and his late father Kharlan are only on the side of the Lusitanians for now in order to aid the "rightful heir" of Pars. After Daryun easily defeats Xandes, leaving him injured, he and Farangis continue their journey.

Not too far off, Gieve, Elam, and Arslan are searching for food. During the last few days, Elam has begun to open up to Arslan little by little, telling the prince his wish of travelling to faraway places, and the two boys' friendship is growing steadily. This is when they run into Daryun and Farangis; Arslan voices out his worries for Narsus, who's the only one missing in their group. Daryun decides the best plan for now is for him and Elam to search for Narsus, while Gieve, Farangis and Arslan continue on to Peshawar; they all agree and go on their separate ways again. Arslan's group passes by Mt. Damavand, a place where Serpent King Zahhak was sealed underneath twenty layers of thick volcanic rocks by Hero King Kai Khosrow and his sword Ruknabad 300 years ago. When Khosrow died, the sword, buried in Mt. Damavand, was moved to the late king's grave.

Back in Ecbatana, angered by Innocentis' obsession with Tahamine and stirred up by Herdeg's – captain of the Knights Templar – words, Bodin's ambition to become the Pope – highest rank within the church – begins to surface.

Guiscard successfully bribes Herdeg with money and treasures; the next morning, the captain of the Knights Templar is found dead on his bed next to a corpse of a naked woman. Hearing the news and enraged by Guiscard's provocative comments, Bodin gathers up members of the Knights Templar for a rebellion. Guiscard orders ten of his men to retrieve the holy flag of Yaldabaoth, and when they reach the walls, they engage twenty members of Knights Templar. Just as Knights Templar is about to take the holy flag, Hirmiz appears and slays the remaining knights; thus, the holy flag remains in Guiscard's possession.

Monferrat's brother is among those who get slayed by Hirmiz, and with the claim that the man will betray Lusitania the first chance he gets, the Lusitanian general orders his men to kill Hirmiz. No one dares to do so, and this is when Guiscard commands Monferrat to put his sword away, reassuring him that Hirmiz is a comrade who's helped Lusitania a lot.

Bodin and the Knights Templar escape, but not before destroying the capital's northern water system.

After Hirmiz promises Saam that he'll get rid of the Lusitanians, Saam decides to follow Hirmiz as his loyal subordinate.

In the city square, Hirmiz observes a dark-skinned man writing a letter. Just as he's about to send the letter off with a hawk named Soroush, Hirmiz demands to know the receiver of the letter. He kills the man, who's kept his silence until the end; the letter intended for Kishward never reaches him.

West of Peshawar, an important wooden bridge that leads right into the city has been destroyed by Xandes. At the same time, Sindhura troops (Prince Gadhavi's men) have been spotted crossing Kaveri River and entering into Pars territory. Kishward and his men easily defeat them, and send them off back home with the head of their general as a warning.

Kishward sends Azrael and half of his cavalrymen off in search of Arslan's group.



## Chapter V

Narsus and Alfreed have been wandering around the same area in the mountains close to Peshawar, but they can't continue on to their destination because they see enemy troops everywhere. They finally run into Silvermask, and upon Narsus' educated guess, Silvermask admits that he's Hirmiz, Osroes' son and supposedly heir to the Parsian throne.

Hirmiz tries to invite Narsus to join his faction, but Narsus refuses without a second thought, claiming that Arslan, though much younger than Hirmiz is, already has a more tolerant and accepting attitude befitting of a ruler. His further comment – that Hirmiz's ignoring the wellbeing of Parsian citizens by letting Lusitanians invade the country in order to regain his throne is selfish and wrong – angers Hirmiz. Narsus knows it's no use talking sense into Hirmiz, so he's only using his glib tongue to distract him. When they both draw their swords, Narsus uses the glare from the sunlight reflected on his blade to momentarily blind Hirmiz, thus giving him and Alfreed the chance to escape.

Narsus makes Alfreed swear to keep Silvermask's identity a secret for now.

With Hirmiz's men still chasing after them, Daryun and Elam come just in time to fend them off. Daryun asks about Alfreed, and she happily tells them that she's Narsus' woman; Narsus insists that nothing inappropriate has happened between them. Elam looks on coldly. In four days, they meet up with Arslan, and the prince accepts Alfreed into their group.

Waiting by the east side of Peshawar, Xandes' troops swoop in to attack Arslan's group as they near. Before they can do any real damage, however, Azrael flies in to save Arslan, and Arslan knows that Kishward's troops must be near.

Kishward and his cavalymen arrive the scene and engage the enemy, sending Xandes fleeing in defeat. Kishward welcomes Arslan's group into Peshawar.

Arslan asks Kishward's opinion on the abolishment of slavery. While Kishward is surprised by Arslan's idea, he's also supportive of it, though he's equally wary of the possibility that the other governors who are slave owners will oppose Arslan's cause.

Alfreed and Elam are constantly bickering and they don't seem to be getting along at all. While Farangis understands Alfreed's affection for Narsus, she suggests that it's better to just stay on the sideline for the moment, since Narsus only has his attention trained on helping Arslan rebuild Pars' social system. Alfreed sullenly agrees.

In a meeting to discuss their next move, Bahman appears to be hesitant, and everyone present notice that the old marzban is hiding something though he refuses to admit it. When Bahman leaves the room, Kishward tells the others that Bahman has been behaving strangely ever since he received Vahriz' letter before the battle of Atropatene.

After briefly meeting Bahman and revealing his true identity as Osroes' son, Hirmiz is certain that he might have a chance to persuade Bahman to come to his side, and so decides to sneak into Peshawar.

As they discuss the situation in Sindhura on the east side of the continent, where Princes Gadhavi and Rajendra are fighting fiercely for the throne, Narsus explains that it's more advantageous for them in the long run if they help Rajendra gain the throne, though Kishward warns them that Rajendra is not exactly a trustworthy person, either, from the information he's gathered about the Sindhuran prince. Since Rajendra, as the second son, is in an unfavorable circumstance, even if he were able to succeed the throne, he'll need to spend quite some time unifying Sindhura before he has any time to think about invading other countries like Pars. Though most of them agree with Narsus' reasoning, Kishward is feeling uneasy about this.

## **Book 3: The Sunset Elegy**

# Chapter I

A few days ago, Hirmiz infiltrated into Peshawar wishing to hurt Arslan while he's caught alone, but has failed to do so; instead, Arslan's group beat him. He decides to head back to Ecbatana in the meantime.

Sindhuran King Karikala II is ill and bedridden, leaving his two sons – Gadhavi, the elder brother who boasts of having noble lineage and has the support of the nobles, and Rajendra, the younger brother whose mother is of a lower social class but has the support of the commoners – to fight fiercely for the throne.

Narsus explains to Arslan why defeating Sindhura troops will be simple and a necessary step to keep the eastern border peaceful for the next two to three years, based on three factors: climate (Sindhurans are used to the southern heat, so winter in Pars will be especially harsh for them), geography (attacking Peshawar while being unfamiliar with the physical geography is foolhardy), and people (it doesn't matter if Gadhavi or Rajendra is leading the invasion because the other party will always plan to attack from behind).

Narsus plans to use this opportunity to spread the news of Arslan's victory against Sindhura with as little manpower as possible in order to draw supporters to Peshawar from all over the country. Narsus asks Kishward for 500 cavalymen for Daryun and himself to use in countering Sindhura's attack. He also asks Farangis to keep an eye on Bahman, who seems willing to die to protect whatever secret he's been keeping. He further asks Alfreed and Elam to infiltrate into Rajendra's troops.

Gieve senses a strange presence within the citadel of Peshawar.

That night, Sindhuran troops, their order already in a disarray in an unfamiliar environment, fall right into Narsus' trap. First, they're attacked by a flurry of arrows, which initiates disorder; then, Elam and Alfreed begin to spread the rumor that Gadhavi has launched an attack against Rajendra, which escalates the chaos as Rajendra decides to retreat to Kaveri River. But before he's able to do so, Kishward is leading his troops to attack from the citadel, first with arrows from the top of the walls, then sending out cavalymen to draw them closer in combat. Narsus and Daryun engage Rajendra in a brief fight before the Sindhuran prince is captured as prisoner.

Arslan asks Rajendra to make an alliance with them, as well as promising him that they'll aid him in gaining the Sindhuran throne. At first, Rajendra refuses, claiming that Sindhura will gain nothing from this alliance with Pars, a country that's already falling apart under Lusitania's invasion, but Rajendra changes his mind when Narsus threatens to send him back to Gadhavi and informs him that he's already spread the news within Sindhura that Rajendra has decided to become Pars' ally and will soon enter and take over their capital city Uraiur.

With the discussion of the alliance settled, Rajendra is happy to join them for a banquet; both him and Gieve attempt to get Farangis drunk, but Farangis outdrinks both men.

Gadhavi and Mahendra, his father-in-law and the kingdom's Grand Vizier, plan to use their elephant troops to counter Arslan and Rajendra's invasion, though Gadhavi remains uncertain about their chances of winning against Parsian troops.

Narsus and Daryun feel reserved about Rajendra's trustworthiness, but the tactician assures his friend that, at least before Gadhavi's defeat, Rajendra is sure to be on their side.

After a brief conversation with Bahman, Farangis is certain that despite the old general's loyalty towards Arslan, it's definite that he still wishes to die to protect the secret he's been entrusted with. Narsus doesn't want to lose a talented man, so he decides to let Bahman come along on their quest to invade Uraiyr, Sindhura's capital city, while leaving Kishward back in Peshawar for defense.

## Chapter II

Once Arslan's Parsian troops and Rajendra's Sindhuran troops successfully cross Kaveri River, they immediately encounter Gadhavi's soldiers.

Pradalata, one of the strongest generals within Gadhavi's troops, is sent as vanguard to attack Rajendra's men, and being forced back, Rajendra wants to let Arslan's troops deal with the troublesome man. Daryun, though unwilling and suspicious of Rajendra's intentions, nevertheless follows Arslan's order and defeats Pradalata. Thus, the first victory in Sindhura goes to Arslan.

### **Pars Era 321.**

After Arslan has completed the New Year's ceremony, Rajendra pays him a visit, and suggests that they should attack Uraiur from two different directions. While everyone else disagrees with this plan, knowing that Rajendra merely wants to use Parsian troops as a distraction, Narsus tells Arslan that they should go ahead with Rajendra's plan, with the condition of having a detailed map, a trusted guide, and enough provisions for the journey. Narsus also plans to split up Gadhavi's military strength by telling Gadhavi which route Rajendra will take, assuming Rajendra will mislead them by telling them false information anyway.

Jaswant is the guide Rajendra sends them. Daryun observes that the man has good sword skills and suspects that he might be sent by Rajendra to assassinate Arslan.

Having received information from their enemies, Gadhavi's troops are confused, and they are not sure whether to concentrate their attack on Parsian troops or Rajendra's men. Mahendra reassures the prince that he's already sent in a trusted spy to infiltrate Rajendra's troops.

As Parsian troops reach the Fortress of Gujarat, they are met with resistance from the Sindhuran soldiers, but the enemies quickly retreat back inside the safety of their walls when Daryun defeats one of their generals. Narsus wants the troops to go through Gujarat without further bloodshed, and so sends Gieve and Jaswant as envoys to persuade the Generals Govind and Tara to let them through peacefully and to promise that should Rajendra become king, they will be rewarded accordingly.

While the two generals, both supporters of Gadhavi, discuss the pros and cons of letting Parsian troops pass through, Jaswant appears before them, reveals himself as Mahendra's man, and tells them about Arslan's actual plan: Parsian troops will travel at night to sneak by the fortress.

Jaswant suggests they attack the troops from behind, where they store provisions and is the least fortified.

That night while Parsian troops make their move, Jaswant sneaks to the back of the group and is about to signal the Sindhuran soldiers to attack when Gieve interrupts him. They engage in a brief but fierce fight before Gieve overtakes Jaswant. Though the Sindhurans didn't receive Jaswant's signal, they attack from the back nevertheless; where they expect victory, they instead face cart-loads of Parsian soldiers. Soon, the two generals are slaughtered by Daryun and Farangis, and without their leaders, Sindhuran soldiers fall apart; thus, the Fortress of Gujarat falls into the hands of Arslan.

Arslan decides to release Jaswant, though he isn't sure whether or not that's the right thing to do. Three days later, Jaswant is back at Uraiur, where he's met with Gadhavi's wrath and accusation of betrayal. At Mahendra's persuasion, Gadhavi spares Jaswant's life. They've also received the news that Rajendra's troops are in between Uraiur and Gadhavi's troops further south. Gadhavi decides to concentrate his attention and military power on defeating Rajendra using his 150 thousand troops.

Bahman promises to tell Arslan everything after they return from Sindhura, but Arslan can't forget Bahman's words: that Silvermask is of royal lineage. He questions his own origin; Daryun, understanding the prince's worries, assures him that to the knight, Arslan will always be his liege. Arslan thanks him in tears.

## Chapter III

Of the 10 thousand Parsian soldiers, the majority is under Bahman's leadership while 500 cavalymen are under Kishward's command. Narsus doesn't worry about Bahman's loyalty, though he's concerned about the fact that the old general would rather die with the secret than to reveal the truth.

Gadhavi sends 20 thousand soldiers to deal with the Parsians in Gujarat and the remaining 130 thousand men to go against Rajendra's 50 thousand troops.

### **February 5, Pars Era 321.**

Gadhavi and Rajendra's troops meet on the Fields of Chandigarh. Not long after the cavalry and infantry engage in battle, Gadhavi sends out 500 war elephants, spurred on by the medication they've been fed. Rajendra's men attempts to defend themselves by shooting arrows at the animals but it's of little use as soldiers continue to get trampled.

Just as Rajendra begins to panic, Arslan and his Parsian soldiers arrive on scene. He explains: Narsus has spread the rumor that Parsian troops have escaped the fortress, which leads Gadhavi's men to believe that the fortress is empty and easy to seize, but when Sindhuran troops venture close, they are met with a shower of arrows, killing and injuring many. Sindhuran troops regroup in the south, though the remaining Parsian soldiers have already sneaked out through the north gate and heading towards Fields of Chandigarh by an eastern route.

Under the brilliant leadership of Bahman, the 10 thousand Parsian cavalymen fight in perfect teamwork; since Gadhavi is unable to efficiently send out his orders, the advantage he has in numbers crumbles as his troops get defeated by Parsians.

Witnessing the strength of Parsian troops, Gadhavi sends his bloodthirsty war elephants with the hope of destroying the enemies. At the sight of the elephants, Parsian troops begin to retreat; however, this is all part of Narsus' plan. Due to the medication, the elephants have lost all reason and blindly rush forward, their handlers unable to control their movements. As they venture close enough, Narsus signals the catapults – improved so that they shoot out spears coated with poison – to be set in position, and the elephants fall in pain as the poisonous spears stab through them. As the war elephant troops fall apart, Daryun rides through the chaos and reaches Gadhavi, who's sitting atop an elephant. Before he can attack, however, his halberd is snatched out of his hands by the elephant's trunk. Further back, Gieve and Farangis aim their arrows at the elephant's eyes, causing it fall and allowing Daryun to climb up the animal's body and with a mere swing of his sword, he knocks Gadhavi down. Just as he's about to deal the deadly blow, Jaswant rescues the Sindhuran prince and flees on horseback.

Farangis is aiming her arrow at Jaswant and Gadhavi's receding backs, but Arslan stops her; he saves Jaswant for the second time. With Gadhavi's retreat, Rajendra and Arslan's troops take victory.



Back in Uraiyur, Gadhavi lashes out at Mahendra with insults in his frustration, and demands the Grand Vizier to come up with a new plan. After Jaswant admits that the prince didn't show a hint of appreciation for saving him, Mahendra laments that perhaps he's followed the wrong prince. Meanwhile, King Karikala II regains consciousness; he summons his two sons to his bedside, but all he gets is unfounded accusations thrown around. He announces that he'll let gods make the decision of the next Sindhuran king: Rajendra and Gadhavi will face each other in a duel before the gods.

Rajendra requests Arslan to let Daryun be his proxy and fights in his place during the duel. Arslan agrees after Narsus explains that though Karikala may have left the responsibility to the gods, at least this method will spare many innocent people's lives.

After hearing the news that Rajendra has picked Daryun as his proxy, Gadhavi unwillingly commands Bahadur, a monstrous figure locked up in prison, to be released so he can fight as his proxy.

On the day of the duel, which takes place within a plaza before the city gates that has a circular stage surrounded by a ditch that will be lit with flames once the duel begins, and hungry wolves chained on the outer ridge of the stage to ensure that any attempt to escape is impossible, Daryun, armed with armor, a shield, and his long sword, faces Bahadur, a giant being who's more like beast than man armed only with muscles and a battle axe. As they engage in a close fight, Bahadur breaks Daryun's sword and shield, and though the Black Knight manages to slash his sword across Bahadur's face, it doesn't seem to do him any damage. While Daryun can only dodge Bahadur's attacks, Arslan and his friends watch on with pale faces. At this moment, Rajendra finally admits that Bahadur is a creature that cannot feel any pain; Arslan, feeling the anger bubbling inside of him for putting his most trusted subordinate into such a dangerous situation, threatens to hang Rajendra's head and that of the monster's if Daryun gets killed. Back on the stage, Daryun lights his cape on fire, throws the burning fabric upon the giant, and with a short sword that he's hidden until now, he cuts Bahadur's head half off, effectively killing the giant and earning a victory for Rajendra.

Gadhavi refuses to acknowledge the result of the duel, and the two brothers, each leading their own men, begin to fight, and the plaza is filled with the roar of chaos. Arslan and his group retreat, not wanting to get caught up in Sindhura's internal disorder, but within the commotion, Bahman is pierced by Gadhavi's spear. His last words to Arslan is to ask him to become a great king, though Arslan won't know the secret that Bahman holds to his death. Meanwhile, Mahendra attempts to stop Gadhavi but is instead stabbed by his own lord. Rajendra announces that whoever sides with Gadhavi will be treated as traitors, and with that, soldiers from both sides cease the scuffles. When Jaswant gets to Mahendra, who's always treated him as his own son, he doesn't have time to ask whether or not Mahendra is really his father before he passes away.

## Chapter IV

Before he passes away, Karikala II writes the document to officially pass the throne to Rajendra, and makes Rajendra promise that he'll spare Gadhavi's life if he's willing to surrender. Rajendra has no real intention of letting Gadhavi go; he sends men to watch Salima – Gadhavi's wife who's now placed under house arrest. It turns out that for the past few days while she visits the temple to pray, Gadhavi is hiding within the internal structure of the building and she has been giving him food; however, she puts sleeping draught into his food, and by the time Gadhavi awakes, he's captured by Rajendra and is given one day to live before he's to be executed as the country's traitor. Salima tells Gadhavi with contempt that this is to avenge for her father's death. Rajendra pointedly invites Arslan over to oversee the execution. While eating his last meal, Gadhavi makes an attempt to kill Arslan with a broken piece of porcelain. Arslan manages to protect himself, and Gadhavi is held down before the executioner ends his life right there and then.

After giving Bahman and the 200 Parsian soldiers who died in previous battles a brief funeral, Parsian troops are getting ready to return to their own country. Daryun is given the position to lead the remaining soldiers who are previously under Bahman's command. Narsus and Gieve agree that it doesn't matter whether or not Arslan is of royal lineage, they will remain loyal to the prince – though not the royal family itself – no matter what.

On the other hand, Jaswant, who doesn't want to return to Gadhavi's troops and is forsaken by Rajendra's side because of his association with Mahendra, has nowhere to go or belong. Arslan kindly invites the Sindhuran man to join his group, but Jaswant is unsure and asks for time to consider.

Rajendra insists that Arslan accepts the 3000 cavalymen as token for helping him gain the throne instead of the mere 500 Arslan requests. So, joined by Rajendra's men, Parsian troops begin their journey back to Peshawar. As Narsus has anticipated, Rajendra's kindness is a trap: he plans to start a fire within the Parsian camp that night and use the chaos to hold Arslan captive. Instead, Rajendra falls victim to his own trap and is captured once more. Arslan, bearing no real hatred towards the Sindhuran prince, tells Narsus that he doesn't want to take Rajendra's life if at all possible. Instead, Narsus has Rajendra signs a contract with the following conditions: Pars and Sindhura will not initiate any aggression against each other for the next three years, and Sindhura will pay Pars 50 thousand gold coins as token of thanks.

Shortly after releasing Rajendra, Jaswant is found loitering at the back of Parsian troops. Arslan appears to be quite excited at the sight of Jaswant, and the Sindhuran youth kneels before the prince to make the following promise: to repay Arslan's kindness for saving him three times, he will follow and serve him, though when it comes to a time when Sindhura and Pars are engaged in a war, as a Sindhuran citizen, Jaswant has the duty to fight for his own people. Arslan reassures him that, at least for the next three years, he needs not worry about that; their common enemy now is the Lusitanians, and Jaswant seems satisfied with that.

## **March, Pars Era 321.**

Arslan's troops return to Peshawar. To Narsus, Kishward clarifies that even if Arslan is not of royal lineage, he'll follow the young prince no matter what. Narsus doesn't question his loyalty, but he does point out one thing: once Andragoras is freed, and there's no doubt that father and son will clash in terms of their political beliefs, who will Kishward follow then? Unlike the others, Kishward's family has served the royal family for generations, and he can't risk angering Andragoras. Kishward understands Narsus' concern, but he'll think about this once they've retrieved Ecbatana.

Kishward mentions that while Arslan's troops were gone, there was a shadowy figure flitting within the castle and three soldiers had been killed. Upon hearing this news, Narsus devises a plan to try to capture the culprit, whom the tactician figures must be after the secret letter that Vahriz sent to Bahman: he makes a fake copy of the letter and asks Elam to hide it in Bahman's room. Later that night, Elam receives the culprit's note saying that he's found the letter, but when Elam and Alfreed go to check, the letter is still there. When they notify Narsus, he and Gieve quickly rush into Bahman's room, only to see a strange sight: a human hand with the letter retreating back into the ceiling and the other arm waving a sword around. Narsus chops off the arm holding the sword, but the person manages to escape nevertheless. Sanjeh, one of the sorcerers working to revive the Serpent King Zahhak, now holds what he believes to be the actual copy of Bahman's letter.

## Chapter V

While Arslan and his friends are caught within Sindhura's internal affairs, the Lusitanians within Ecbatana have been split into three groups. Innocentis continues to woo Tahamine without much success. Bodin and his Templar Knights are staying in Zabol, a castle that houses 30 thousand soldiers, which effectively cuts off communication between Ecbatana and the west. Guiscard plans to send out Hirmiz and his troops to get rid of the Templar Knights; whether they win or lose, at least it'll do serious damages to both parties involved.

Hirmiz asks for Saam's opinion in regards to Guiscard's plan to destroy the Templar Knights. Though Saam can see through Guiscard's intention, he persuades Hirmiz to accept the plan for the future good: if Hirmiz succeeds, Parsian citizens will have a more positive view of him as a future king and more soldiers will be willing to follow him. With that decided, Hirmiz begins to gather Parsian soldiers and make preparations for the upcoming journey.

Saam visits Andragoras in the underground cell, and he asks about an event that happened 17 years ago: whether Andragoras had really killed his elder brother Osroes V and his son Prince Hirmiz in order to become the next king. Hirmiz, who's survived the fire, believes all this time that Andragoras is the one responsible for his father's death. Andragoras explains, though he also warns Saam that he might be lying after all: their father, Gotarzes II, had been known as a good king, but his one negative trait is that he was very superstitious, and this was especially true the older he got. When a prophet told him that the royal lineage will end with the son of Gotarzes, the king ensured that his two sons were named Osroes and Andragoras, since in previous instances, kings named Andragoras always became king after those named Osroes. But this was not enough to soothe the aging Gotarzes when another prophecy reached his ears: if his eldest son Osroes' wife has a son, the child might become the next king as well; however, the father must be Gotarzes himself. Saam makes the calculation in his head, and comes up with an unbelievable conclusion: if this story was true, then Hirmiz is actually Gotarzes' son and Osroes' younger brother. Andragoras calmly reminds his subordinate that the history and lineage of royal family has always been impure. Saam apologizes to the king for being unable to rescue him at this time.

Halfway on their journey to Zabol, they hear a rumor about a strong-looking man with only one eye who managed to slay 15 ex-Templar Knights who have been killing and robbing from villagers. Saam has a vague idea of who it may be, and sure enough, in a cave close to the village, he finds Kubard, one of the surviving Marzbans who has escaped unharmed during the battle of Atropatene. Saam tells him that he's now serving Prince Hirmiz, and though Kubard's a little surprised at the mention of that name, he refuses Saam's invitation at first, claiming that he enjoys his current carefree life. When Saam points out that Kubard can use his powers to drive away the Lusitanians, Kubard decides to give it a try, thinking that he can always leave if it becomes too troublesome.

### **March 10, Pars Era 321.**

Hirmiz's Parsian troops and Templar Knights engage in their first battle. Fortress of Zabol is located atop a volcanic rock mountain surrounded by nothing but sharp cliffs, which makes it easy to defend but almost impossible to attack from the outside. Hirmiz devises a plan to lure the Templar Knights out by burning a Yaldabaoth flag; driven by anger, the knights seem to have the advantage as they keep forcing the Parsian soldiers back. However, when Kubard joins in, bodies of Lusitanian knights begin to pile up around him, and they quickly scramble back inside the safety of the mountain and its iron gates. Kubard and Hirmiz meet, but neither is impressed by the other. After a brief conversation, during which Kubard, as per usual with his impervious and carefree personality, lightly teases Hirmiz about how he shouldn't feel ashamed of a scar on his face since one wouldn't judge a king's character by his looks, Zandeh gets irritated by Kubard's disrespectful way of speaking to the prince. Kubard apologizes to his old friend Saam, telling him that there's no way he'll get along with Hirmiz and so decides to leave. He begins to travel eastward.

### **March 28, Pars Era 321.**

Eastern Pars experiences the strongest earthquake recorded within the last 20 years. From reports, Mt. Damavand, a place where Serpent King Zakhak was locked up 300 years ago, is where the destruction is most serious. Back in the underground of Ecbatana, the sorcerer is gleefully telling his students that the time when Zakhak is released will not be long.

### **End of March, Pars Era 321.**

On behalf of Prince Arslan, two major announcements are made. The first is "Decree of Prosecution of Lusitanians"; this is to recruit more Parsians to serve under Arslan's command in the hopes of driving the Lusitanians away and recovering their homeland. The second is "Decree of Slavery Abolishment"; when Arslan ascends to the throne, slaves within the Parsian territory will be liberated, and human trafficking will be prohibited. With these announcements, Arslan has clearly stated his military and political position.

## **Book 4: Road of Sweat and Blood**

# Chapter I

## **April, Pars Era 321.**

Parsian commanders and soldiers who are interested in joining Arslan's faction after he's released the two announcements have gathered at Peshawar. Roshan (50 years old; lord of Ray Citadel), Zaravant (around 20 years old and physically well-built; grows his facial hair perhaps to make his boyish face more mature), Isfan (late Shapur's younger brother; around 20 years old; wishes to avenge his brother's death), and Tus (around 20-30 years old; carries iron chains on his left shoulder) are just a few of the many newcomers.

Daryun is surprised that so many of the nobles decide to join Arslan's faction despite of the Slavery Abolishment Act, while Narsus tells him that there's a reason why he wrote it the way he did: the Act will only be implemented after Arslan becomes Shah. Narsus presumes that nobles would be more willing to join their side if the Act is not immediately carried out, giving them the illusion that they may have a chance to change Arslan's mind once he takes the throne, even though Narsus has no intention of yielding to them in the first place.

With the increase of military strength and number of troops within Peshawar, Narsus, who's been officially appointed as the court minister [?] half a month ago, organizes them into administrative and military sectors. More newcomers also mean more conflicts among the old and new groups. Due to the fact that there are so many unfamiliar faces in the citadel, Arslan is always closely guarded – by Farangis during the day, and by Jaswant during the night. Jaswant and Zaravant almost break into a fistfight due to a misunderstanding if not for Kishward's interference.

The tension between those who were with him from the beginning and those who just recently joined them doesn't escape Arslan, and he asks Narsus for advice. His first suggestion is to demote himself, and promote Rushan, who's a capable man and is a respected figure amongst the nobility, to become the court minister while he becomes the military minister, a position that's slightly lower on the political ladder but is a significant advisory role during wartimes. Farangis' attitude remains accepting to any changes. Alfreed would occasionally bother Narsus and argue with Elam, but she's also been taking martial arts training from Farangis. Gieve, who's shown to be a competent commander in Sindhura but has always been content being a wanderer, feels uncomfortable within this systematized organization; he doesn't mind serving Arslan or carrying out Narsus' plans, but having to bow down to nobility is unbearable for him. During this time, Narsus invites Gieve into his room to discuss some matters, and when Gieve leaves, there's a strangely refreshing expression on his face.

Near the Zabol Citadel, which houses Bodin's Templar Knights, Hirmiz hears the news of Arslan's plan to retrieve Ecbatana. Hirmiz aims to capture Zabol as soon as possible and make it his own base. Saam creates a plan that will effectively force the Templar Knights to come out: he orders the soldiers to pour gasoline down the one of the three underground water pipelines and

light it on fire, and as the water runs into the citadel's water plant, constructed with wood and stones, flames begin to engulf from the inside of the castle. The knights are helpless against fire and smoke, and just as they begin to panic, Hirmiz's troops storm in from the other water pipelines. Parsian soldiers' ferocity pushes the Lusitanians out from the citadel, but Saam's troops situated outside are prepared with arrows. The Templar Knights suffer great defeat after being led forward until they're too tired to move: those who refuse to swear fealty to Guiscard are executed or left to their own devices in the desert, and those who promise to follow Guiscard are spared.

Bodin, leaving his followers behind, decides to flee to Maryam.

Back in Ecbatana, Guiscard is dealing with multiple problems: Innocentis' obsession with Tahamine, Arslan's army's plan to recapture the capital, and the reconstruction of Ecbatana's underground water pipes, which were destroyed by Bodin when he left months ago. The renovation has not been going as quickly as Guiscard intends, and soon the lack of water will become more of a problem as the season turns dryer in the summer. He receives news of Hirmiz's success in taking down Zabol.



## Chapter II

### End of April.

In the Dailam region, located in the northeast area of Pars and close to Darband Inland Sea, the local fishermen spot a war-torn battleship from Maryam. A middle-aged knight from the boat announces that they are Maryamians who have escaped from Lusitanians' grasp and demands to see the local government official.

Lusitanian troops, led by one of the underlings of Lusitanian nobleman Leuthold, arrive at Dailam and begin pillaging the area and slaughtering the residents. At this point, a few of the soldiers run into Kubard, who is initially heading west but ends up lost and finds himself in the midst of this mess; he doesn't hesitate to kill these soldiers. Close by, a red-haired youth is also slaying down a few Lusitanians.

He introduces himself as Merlane, son of Zott Clan's late leader, and tells Kubard that he's looking for his sister, Alfreed. Alfreed is appointed as the leader after their father dies though Merlane is his only son. After he found his father and clan people's corpses, he sets out to search for Alfreed to bring her back home.

The two Parsian men are invited to get onto the Maryam battleship, where they start getting more information from Jovanna, a magistrate who serves in the Maryam palace. Maryam and Lusitania believe in the same god Yaldabaoth, but it had split into two main factions for the last 400 years. It took Guiscard's Lusitanian troops a mere month to seize Maryam due to the king's cowardice, and though he and the queen were promised to remain unharmed, Bodin set the palace on fire anyway, thus killing the ruler of Maryam. For two years, the two surviving princesses Militsa and Irina (blind due to illness) hid in one of the citadels along the coast of Darband Inland Sea, but finally the defense broke when traitors within the citadel, tempted by Lusitanians' offer of riches, set fires from the inside. After Militsa helped Irina escape, the elder sister committed suicide. Five days later, their ship arrives at Dailam. Though Merlane seems unwilling to help – as he always views nobles and royalties as those who abandon others in order to save themselves – Kubard agrees to help after drawing a contract of their rewards.

That night, in preparation for Lusitanians' attack, Merlane and Kubard set up traps: explosives on the street, so that when the 300 or so Lusitanian cavalymen get close enough, Merlane sets off the explosives, causing the enemies' horses to panic and the soldiers to lose their balance; ropes close to the ground so that horses are tripped; fishing nets so that while the enemies are trapped, fish oil are poured over them and they are set on fire; and glowworms are scattered on the enemies so that when they escape in the dark, the Parsians can still spot them. In the end, Merlane, who takes pride in being Pars' second best archer, kills the last of the fugitive attempting to retreat with an arrow.

After Kubard receives the reward he's been promised (Merlane refuses, stating that Zott people will not demand reward from people who need help), Irina asks whether or not Kubard knows Prince Hirmiz, and informs him that Hirmiz is an important person in her life. She knows that Hirmiz has a fierce personality, but he's always been gentle with her; Kubard doesn't agree with Hirmiz or Irina's view that there's only justice when Hirmiz becomes the "rightful" king of Pars, so he hesitates a little when the princess asks for his help to locate Hirmiz. After his conversation with Irina, Merlane tells him that he'll accept the task of helping the Maryamian princess. Kubard doesn't know that Hirmiz is the one who slaughtered Merlane's father and his clan people, so Kubard tells him to head towards Zabol where Hirmiz is most likely to be staying at.

## Chapter III

### May 8, Pars Era 321.

Arslan, Narsus, Daryun, Farangis, Gieve, Kishward, and Roshan have a meeting two days before Parsian troops begin to make their way towards Ecbatana. Narsus mentions Hirmiz's last appearance in Peshawar, and Arslan feels uneasy about this, thinking that there's the possibility that his father Andragoras might have killed his older brother Osroes in order to become king, thus stealing Hirmiz's chance to claim the throne. Narsus reiterates that though Hirmiz may be the rightful ruler of Pars under other circumstances, it doesn't excuse him from the fact that he employs Lusitanians' strength to gain the throne at the expense of Parsian citizens' lives. Arslan promises them that he'll deal with Hirmiz after they've regained Ecbatana from Lusitania's grasp.

Daryun questions Narsus' decision to tell Arslan about Hirmiz's origin, but Narsus is optimistic about the young prince, believing that he'll overcome this shadow if given enough time. Narsus also informs Daryun that for now, he's letting Tus, Zaravant, and Isfan be the vanguards; organizing the troops this way will let the newcomers have a chance to build up their military achievements and resolve the tension between new and old groups.

The granary is on fire, and soldiers claim to see a mysterious black shadow flitting about within the citadel. Daryun returns to Arslan's side while Narsus pursues the arsonist, and discovers, from the fact that the figure has no left hand, that it's the same man who attempts to steal Bahman's secret letter from a month ago. Gieve manages to cut off his other hand, but before he can do anything else, the figure jumps into the moat and out of sight. When Narsus examines the severed hand, he finds the fingernails have been tinted blue with poison – a proof that it's a cheap trick used by sorcerers. The next morning, soldiers found the corpse, the face somehow mauled beyond recognition, and so the mystery behind the person who might have appointed the sorcerer remains unsolved.

### May 9.

Parsian troops are having a grand festival to prepare for their upcoming journey. This is when Gieve comes up to Isfan and tells him about how he's saved Isfan's brother Shapur from Lusitanians' torture by the man's dying request. When he hears that Gieve is the one who ended his brother's life, Isfan's anger boils over as he brandishes his sword and attacks Gieve; they fight on almost equal footing, which surprises Gieve. Their brawl is interrupted by Farangis, who's brought in Arslan. Before the prince, Isfan kneels down in apology, but Gieve, after thanking Arslan for his kindness, announces that he never feels suitable to serve in court anyway, and decides to take his leave. Arslan pleads him to stay and talk it over, but with a last farewell, he hops over the banister of the balcony and disappears. Seeing Arslan's distressed expression, Daryun pulls him aside and tells him the truth: it's Narsus' plan to send Gieve off to get information about Ecbatana and Lusitanians' actions; it's also for the sake of Arslan, in that

Gieve is already unpopular with the newcomers, and if Arslan were to defend him, others may feel that the prince is biased and thus, causing more internal unrest and lowering morale within their own troops.

### **May 10.**

Arslan's troops leave Peshawar, their vanguard consisting of 10 thousand cavalymen, led by Tus, Zaravant, and Isfan. The news of Arslan's oncoming attack reaches Guiscard in five days, who, on top of having to deal with Innocent's irresponsibility, is also worried about Hirmiz's intention of staying in Zabol instead of returning to Ecbatana. In the end, he just sends for Hirmiz to return as soon as possible. In a meeting with his generals, he decides to send out 10 thousand troops in respond to Arslan's attack.

### **May 15.**

Arslan's troops are venturing near Chassum Fortress, a building hastily constructed by the Lusitanians for the purpose of surveillance of the Great Continental Road. Zaravant and Isfan request to be sent to take down the fortress, but Narsus rejects their idea immediately, claiming that it's futile to engage in a battle against a fortress that's difficult to take down at this point in time. Zaravant and Isfan are displeased with Narsus' orders. Despite Tus' warning, Isfan and Zaravant's vanguard troops rush ahead.

In Chassum, the lord of the Fortress General Clemence makes preparations for Parsian troops' arrival.

### **May 16.**

Zaravant and Isfan's troops run into the enemies, and Clemence's soldiers have set up ramparts to stop them from advancing. Unperturbed, Parsian troops go around the barricade. What they didn't expect is that the Lusitanians have also set up catapults so that when they pass by the barricade, large rocks rain upon them. Zaravant and Isfan want to order the rest of their men to retreat, but Lusitanian soldiers have blocked their way, and they engage in battle. Tus and his 4 thousand cavalymen arrive just in time to help, but even with the extra soldiers, Parsians are being forced back. Just then, Clemence receives the news that Chassum is being attacked by Parsian troops; shocked, he leads the rest of his soldiers back the way they came from. Since the enemies have stopped their assaults, Tus is able to reorganize the Parsian troops and begin to chase after the Lusitanians.

As Clemence and his men pass by the ramparts they've built, flurry of arrows rain down on them; since they have been too busy pursuing Tus' troops, the ramparts have been infiltrated by the other Parsian troops. Lusitanians fall into chaos as Daryun leads his men into battle. Clemence is killed by Daryun, and at the sight of their leader's decapitated head, the remaining Lusitanian soldiers fall apart. One soldier's life is spared so that he can send news back to Ecbatana about Arslan's victory.

## Chapter IV

Baudouin and Montferrat – two generals most trusted by Guiscard – hear that Arslan's group has passed by Chassum Fortress in one day's time, and they observe that their own soldiers are distracted by the desire to return to Lusitania. Guiscard, who has been content to be Innocentis' helpful little brother up until this point, has resolved to overthrow his older brother to become the emperor of Lusitania, Maryam, and Pars once he's defeated Arslan.

At Keep of Saint Emmanuel, the fortress' leader Count Barcacion is telling the soldiers the following news: their task is to fight and detain Arslan's troops for as long as possible until help from Ecbatana comes. He knows well that help will not come from the capital. After the meeting, a young knight-in-training named Etoile requests Barcacion to let him fight in the frontline, but the Count is hesitant in letting him go since Etoile's grandfather has entrusted the child in his care; Etoile is adamant about it, however, so Barcacion allows him to go.

### **May 20.**

Arslan's Parsian troops arrive at Field of Scharflistan (sp?), one of the five largest hunting grounds within Pars, to have a hunting festival at the eve of battle; this is also an act to demonstrate their determination to the nearby Lusitanians at St. Emmanuel. Nobody expects that about a thousand Lusitanian cavalymen from St. Emmanuel have wandered near Scharflistan for two tasks: hunt for food, and spy on the movements of Arslan's army. Since the Lusitanian troop is avoiding direct contact with Parsians on the Continental Road, this group and Arslan's group of two hundred cavalymen run into each other and immediately engage in a fight. Elam is sent to notify Narsus while Farangis and Kishward stay behind to protect Arslan. Amidst the chaos, Arslan finds himself alone, but succeeds in protecting himself until Jaswant and Daryun show up. With Daryun and Kishward in the battle, the number of Lusitanian corpses quickly increases.

Daryun captures a young, valiant female Lusitanian knight who attempts to kill him with an arrow; when he realizes that she's almost the same age as the prince, he orders his underlings to tie her up but not to mistreat her. Narsus arrives and hurriedly informs his friend that they are going to attack St. Emmanuel immediately, hoping this unplanned onslaught will take the Lusitanians by surprise.

The battle at St. Emmanuel begins in a way that nobody has expected; when the soldiers at the citadel notice the excessive smoke and dust, they see that both groups are already engaged in battle, and they can't tell friend from foe. Barcacion, who has no experience in warfare, hesitates to shut the gates when he sees his own men fighting outside, but it's exactly the moment of indecision that costs him. The soldier manning the gate is shot by an arrow fired by a man with blue eyes, so the gate remains wide open. Daryun takes the chance to lead the Parsian army into the citadel. Due to the huge difference in numbers, Parsian army quickly gains the upper-hand, and the battle within St. Emmanuel concludes in just one day.

Daryun orders his soldiers to spare the lives of women, children, and those who are unarmed and have surrendered. They are searching for the leader of the citadel when they all see a group of people – mostly women and children - standing atop a lookout tower; they jump down while screaming in sorrow and despair. When Arslan finally understands the situation, he attempts to get his men to stop them, but the entrance is locked and the Parsians can only watch helplessly as the remaining Lusitanian residents of St. Emmanuel, including Count Barcacion, give up their own lives.

Etoile, who's been previously captured by Daryun, runs to Barcacion's side, but he's beyond saving, and in her rage, she demands vengeance. Arslan allows her to be released but she insists on being tortured, even killed, and refuses to return to her homeland in her current state. When asked why, Etoile merely says that if she returns unscathed, others will only suspect that she's colluded with pagans. Since none of them know what to do with her, it's decided that she'll be locked up in a cell for the time being.

Arslan visits Etoile and offers her food, which she initially refuses out of stubbornness, but when he convinces her that by eating the food, she's actually depleting the enemies' resources, Etoile gladly eats her share. To give her thanks, Etoile introduces herself as a knight-in-training; her given name is Estelle but she's abandoned that name. She's the only daughter of a knight's family, and in joining this battle against Pars, she wishes to earn the status of a true knight to bring honor to her family back at home.

Arslan reveals his identity as the crowned prince of Pars, which gives Estelle quite a shock. She comments that Arslan is a very strange person, and that it's because Arslan doesn't act like a royalty that Ecbatana has been so easily stolen from him. Though she didn't mean to offend him, Arslan is trying to control his anger, clearly informing her that it's Lusitania that invaded Pars. Estelle tries to defend her country's actions by claiming that they're acting upon God's wishes, but when Arslan points out the flaws in her reasoning, that it's really the powerful clergymen who are at fault for using people's religious beliefs to manipulate them and justify their greed and violence, Estelle is unable to refute Arslan's words, so she asks him to leave. Before Arslan goes, he asks Estelle to say a prayer for the fallen Lusitanians tomorrow before the burial. She also notices that Arslan has left the cell door unlocked.

## Chapter V

After Farangis and Estelle say their prayers for the fallen soldiers and citizens in St. Emmanuel, they bury the bodies and burn the citadel so that it can't be used again. The troops continue their way towards Ecbatana.

Amongst the 20 Lusitanians who are still alive, most of them are elders, women, and children; Estelle has taken the duty of taking care of them with the help of Alfreed and Farangis. Though she's still cautious, she has to admit that the two young women are genuine in their care and she's truly thankful for that.

Just as the news of St. Emmanuel's battle reaches Guiscard in Ecbatana, Hirmiz returns from Zabol. He reveals his identity as Prince Hirmiz, the son of Osroes V, and proceeds to tell Guiscard the story of how Osroes and his younger brother Andragoras fought for Tahamine's affection in the past, and how Andragoras had supposedly killed his own brother to get the throne. He's trying to gain Guiscard's trust by saying that they share the same enemy, but Guiscard knows better; he thinks if Arslan and Hirmiz end up fighting each other, he'd gain the advantage in the end.

Hirmiz meets up with the sorcerer, who has regained his full power, youth, and beauty, and asks for his help in defeating Arslan. The sorcerer mentions the sword Ruknabad, a weapon that Hero King Kai Khosrow had used to seal Serpent King Zahhak in Mt. Damavand 300 years ago, and is an important symbol of the Pars kingdom's establishment. If he has possession of this sword, Hirmiz can prove himself to be the true descendent of Khosrow. The sorcerer and his five remaining disciples believe that once Hirmiz removes the seal of Ruknabad, Zahhak will regain his power and rule this kingdom once more. While Hirmiz is determined to get the Ruknabad to prove his royal lineage, Xandes feels uneasy about this entire ordeal.

Guiscard sends a knight named Olaberria (sp?) after Hirmiz to see what he's up to. The next day, Guiscard decides to pay Andragoras a visit to ask him about Hirmiz's true origin. What he and the guards didn't expect is that for the half year the king's been locked up, he's been actively getting the iron chains to erode by sweating, urinating, and pouring salted soup onto the same spot of the chain; Andragoras takes advantage of Guiscard carelessness and breaks free, easily eliminating his guards and taking the Lusitanian prince as his hostage.

On the other side of the mountains and also avoiding the Continental Road are Merlane and a small group of Maryamians; amongst them is Princess Irina who requests Merlane to help her search for Hirmiz. Currently they are travelling at a very slow pace, and Merlane constantly questions himself why he's decided to help out this woman after all.

When Kubard finally reaches Peshawar after leaving Dailam, Arslan and his army have already left. He decides to head west instead.

After Gieve shot the gatekeeper at St. Emmanuel, he continues his journey towards Mt. Damavand

Back in Ecbatana, due to the fact that Andragoras has Guiscard as his hostage, no one dares get close since they don't want to injure the prince. Tahamine volunteers to talk with her husband, though Baudouin and Montferrat tries to convince Innocentis that this is a terrible idea. Andragoras and Tahamine's reunion is not a happy one; the queen demands the king to give her child back, though when Andragoras mentions that Arslan is on his way, Tahamine is not content.

As Arslan's army continues marching towards Ecbatana, more allies join in. By the end of May, they've completed one-thirds of their journey.

To their north, war is tearing through Turan and is slowly spreading towards the south.



## **Book 5: Shadow of a Lone Rider**

# Chapter I

## **June 1, Pars Era 321.**

A messenger from Sindhuran King Rajendra arrives at Peshawar to deliver the news that Turanian troops are advancing south towards Sindhura and Pars. Rushan decides to send a messenger to notify Arslan, who's about one-third way to Ecbatana, and encourages his men to defend the citadel until Arslan and his troops return to help. On that same day, the Turan troops arrive. The messenger runs into Kubard and after telling him what's happening back in Peshawar, Kubard allows the man to borrow his horse so that he can continue his way to Arslan's group.

When the messenger delivers the news to Arslan, everyone is unable to remain calm, for Turan has always been Pars' enemy. A few years ago, King Tokhtamysh's brother was slayed by Daryun; thus, the Black Knight became that nation's most resented foe. When asked for his opinion, Narsus announces without hesitation that they should return to Peshawar at once; he then asks Farangis to take 500 men with her to head to Peshawar first to lift the troops' spirits.

Arslan apologizes to Estelle that he won't be able to accompany them all the way to Ecbatana. Estelle understands, and wishes him luck. Arslan leaves them with some food and medical supplies, and Estelle, though thankful, insists that they're only borrowing the supplies and she'll repay him later.

Lusitanian troops in Ecbatana, lost without their leader Guiscard, who's been held captive by Andragoras, don't dare to move even as Arslan's faction heads east.

[Turan, unlike Pars, is a nomadic nation; their country is rich, and to add to that, they impose taxes on other countries they've conquered and plunder from them. In Turan, plundering is not an illegal activity but an act of bravery.]

## **January, Pars Era 321.**

Tokhtamysh became king of Turan after a series of bloody power struggles. After they've received news that Pars has been invaded by Lusitania, they figured that now's the perfect time to defeat Pars once and for all.]

Ilerish, whose father has been slayed by Daryun four years ago, suggests that instead of wasting time and energy on the well-defended walls of Peshawar, they should take the chance to attack Sindhura. Tarkhan, revered as Turan's most valiant general, disagrees; he thinks they should lure the Parsians out from behind the walls first.

Farangis' group runs into Kubard, and after repaying him with a horse and some gold per Arslan's order, Kubard decides to join Farangis' journey to Peshawar. As they venture close to

the citadel in the dark, still surrounded by Turanian troops, Farangis carries out a plan: Kubard will act as bait and distracts the Turanian soldiers by engaging Ilterish in a sword fight while Farangis and the others slip through. It works for awhile until someone spots them. Farangis, Kubard, and about 100 Parsian soldiers barely make it into Peshawar while the others escape into the darkness to meet up with Arslan's troops. Farangis assures the men in Peshawar that Arslan's group is coming in three days, and the soldiers rejoice at the news.

Frustrated by how easily Farangis' group has slipped through their grasp, Tarkhan suggests they should cut off Arslan's group coming in from the west before they can make it to Peshawar. Ilterish reminds them that they should let the king take the credit for defeating Pars, meaning they should only do enough damage to allow the king to deal the deadly blow. With that thought, their 60 thousand men are split into two groups: one group concentrates their attention in weakening Peshawar's defenses, while the other group will guard the west route to take on Arslan's troops. What the Turanians didn't expect is that Arslan's troops, following Narsus' directions, have avoided the Great Continental Road and has travelled through Sindhura so that they arrive near Peshawar from the east instead. Now the Turanian troops are stuck fighting in between.

To the east of Peshawar, a battle between Parsians and Turanians begins. Kishward fights one-on-one against Boila, a Turanian knight with great lance skills, while Daryun exchanges blows with Ilterish. With the three Marzbans present, the soldiers fight with more bravado and the Turanian troops are forced to withdraw.

## **June 8.**

Just as Turanian troops gather before Peshawar to get ready for another round, a strong and lengthy earthquake causes both nations to become restless with unease. Farangis senses bad omen from the northwest direction, where Mt. Damavand is located.

## Chapter II

While Turanian troops continue to attack Peshawar to no avail, Rajendra's Sindhuran troops merely observe from the border. Narsus suspects that something must be happening in Ecbatana since there have been no movements from the Lusitanians.

Up on Mt. Damavand, infamous for being the location where Serpent King Zahhak had been sealed up by Hero King Kai Khosrow, Gieve runs into Hirmiz and his men who got lost in the mountains. After a few provocative jabs from Gieve, Hirmiz pulls out his sword in anger and he exchanges a few blows with the loud-mouthed musician; Gieve ends up escaping despite Hirmiz's pointed taunt.

Olaberria and the other eleven Lusitanian knights sent by Guiscard to follow Hirmiz observe Hirmiz and Gieve's conflict from afar. Don Ricardo, one of the Lusitanian knights present, is irked by the fact that Gieve at an unfair disadvantage while facing multiple opponents on his own, deeming it a dishonorable act on Hirmiz's part.

Hirmiz's group arrives at Kai Khosrow's tomb, located at the northern side of the mountain. Hirmiz prays to Kai Khosrow's spirit, knowing what he's about to do can be considered an act of transgression. His men bear fearful expressions, and Hirmiz assures them that digging through the tomb and reclaiming the legendary sword Ruknabad is a necessary means to prove his identity as the rightful ruler of Pars. Just as Hirmiz is admiring the beauty and power of the sword, Gieve shows up once more, and claims that Arslan should be the rightful owner of Ruknabad. Infuriated, Hirmiz pulls the sword out from its scabbard, but before he can do anything else, the earth shakes violently beneath their feet, and dark clouds, thunder, and wind swirl above them; the superstitious soldiers either believe that the Hero King is angered, or the Serpent King is revived. Either way, it's definitely supernatural activity beyond human comprehension.

Gieve deliberately offends Hirmiz by saying that his attitude makes him unable to control Ruknabad's powers and suggests him to put the sacred sword back into the tomb. Hirmiz refuses to listen, hands Ruknabad over to Xandes for safekeeping, and begins to fight Gieve head-on even with the earthquake happening; however, Xandes, after hesitating for a moment, tosses the sword into a fissure along the ground as Hirmiz watches on helplessly in horror. The earthquake ceases, and Hirmiz restrains his anger and forgives Xandes' rash action. In the meantime, Xandes attempts to kill Gieve to make up for his fault, but as Hirmiz's men chase down Gieve, they stop on the east side of the mountain at the sight of Turan troops, led by King Tokhtamysh, on their way to Peshawar.

Gieve immediately decides to return to Arslan's side while Hirmiz and his men head west.

Only two Lusitanians survive that earthquake: Olaberria returns to Ecbatana only to realize that Guiscard has become Andragoras' captive; Don Ricardo survives the fall and ends up buried in

the underground. He searches for a way out when he feels a breeze from an opening on the side, and ventures into the tunnel that seems to lead him deeper into the mountain. As he walks, he suddenly feels the pressure of darkness and he comes across an enormous slab of rock, as if it's been placed there to seal off some huge monstrosity. He then hears some kind of hissing noises and clanging of chains; upon closer inspection, he sees a shadow of a gigantic human-like creature, except there's a snake protruding from each of its shoulder. Stunned, Don Ricardo accidentally makes a small sound, causing the snakes to freeze and the figure to stand up. The Lusitanian knight lets out a horrified screech and runs as fast as his legs can carry him.

When he comes to his senses again, Don Ricardo finds himself back on the surface of the ground, and he staggers to a small creek to rest. He stares at his own reflection on the water; he's only 20 years of age, but his hair has prematurely turned white.

## Chapter III

Back in Ecbatana, the two Lusitanian generals Baudouin and Monferrat are trying to think of different ways to rescue Guiscard, who's been captured by Andragoras when he escaped from his cell. They've given up on Innocentis, whom they know will be of no help in this situation, and in their worries, they miss a grey-hooded figure sneaking into the king's room.

While Guiscard is locked up, he still relentlessly tries to figure a way out and he has plenty of time to ponder about what Tahamine meant when she pleads with Andragoras to give her back her child. He suddenly remembers what Hirmiz has revealed about his own identity, and asks Andragoras about Hirmiz. Andragoras admits that Hirmiz is his nephew and that Hirmiz believes Andragoras has murdered his father to get the crown; he refuses to acknowledge the validity of that statement, however.

When asked about Parsian army's whereabouts, Guiscard tells him that Arslan and his troops are on their way to Ecbatana from Peshawar; strangely, Andragoras doesn't look especially happy about that news.

Baudouin develops a plan: they will attack Andragoras when he's weak and tired from lack of sleep; the plan backfires, and many Lusitanian knights lose their lives under Andragoras' blade.

It's around this time when they receive a notice from Innocentis' servant: the Lusitanian king requests a duel with Andragoras. While this is a move that none of them have expected from the king who's known for hiding behind his prayers, they figure that having Andragoras get rid of the useless king might not be a terrible idea. When Monferrat converses with the king, he notices something strange about Innocentis: the king is often dependent on his younger brother but has never shown signs of jealousy over Guiscard's abilities or powers; however, as Innocentis puts on his armor, it's becoming clearer from his fuming words – that he notices everyone treating Guiscard as their actual leader and belittling the real king – that this is not the case anymore.

In a corridor within the palace, something odd is happening. Five patrolling soldiers spot a strange hooded figure and begin to pursue him; only nobody can see what the figure has done except that when he swishes his cloak back, five dead bodies have toppled onto the ground, dried as if aged for a century. This man's name is Gazhdaham, and is one of the followers of the sorcerer dwelling underground.

As the news of the duel spread in the palace, many soldiers have gathered outside the room that Andragoras, Guiscard, and Tahamine are in so that they can watch the comedy unfold. They do not have any hopes of Innocentis winning at all. As Innocentis hollers out careless terms that will endanger the Lusitanians' reputation, Baudouin makes a quick decision; he declares that Innocentis is ill and should be escorted out. Innocentis struggles but to no avail, only managing to slightly slice a knight's hand with his sword. But in a few seconds' time, the knight is dead,

and Monferrat realizes that Innocentis' sword is covered with poison; as a knight, he's not at all impressed by their king's dishonest tactic.

Finally, Andragoras breaks this stalemate by putting forward a negotiation, listing his terms: horses, horse-drawn carts, and the promise that Lusitanian troops won't attack them before they leave the city border. When Monferrat hesitates, Andragoras threatens to return one half of Guiscard's body, and this prompts the Lusitanian knight to agree to Andragoras' terms.

A few miles outside Ecbatana, Lusitanian soldiers begin to attack Andragoras' carts, but he discards Guiscard on the side of the road, momentarily distracting the troops. Guiscard orders his men to back down and let the Parsian king and queen go. In addition, he orders his generals to make preparations to leave Ecbatana as soon as possible, retreating back to Maryam if necessary. Guiscard is planning to use the rift between Andragoras and Arslan to further divide and weaken Pars.

Back in the palace, Innocentis, seemingly to have returned to his normal self after a long slumber, is upset to find that Tahamine is gone. Baudouin implies to Guiscard that the entire Lusitanian army sees him as the country's pillar. In a dark corner, Gazhdaham and Gurgin speculate that Guiscard will put Innocentis under house arrest while he takes over Lusitania.

## Chapter IV

**June 10.**

Turanian king Tokhtamysh (40 years old; a dependable leader for Turan and a formidable foe for Pars) invades Parsian land. Jimsa, sent by Ilterish, delivers the news that they haven't taken down Peshawar yet. The king is irritated, because in Turan, a king's value resides in his ability to plunder and his generosity to share the goods among his followers; if he's unable to do this much, he'll be treated as useless and will be quickly discarded. As such, he goes up to the gate of Peshawar and declares: should the Parsian army refuse to surrender, they will slaughter them without any hesitation.

Arslan ignores the Turanian king's taunt. Though he acknowledges Turanian army's power, Narsus plans to drag it out for as long as possible so that the Turanians will become impatient and susceptible to making mistakes; he orders the army to be prepared for battle as well, and he tells Daryun that, when the time comes, they should seize a strong Turanian general as their captive.

The next day, Tokhtamysh threatens to burn and pillage nearby villages if Parsian army continues to stand firm. As Narsus has expected, Arslan can't stand the possibility of innocent villagers getting slaughtered and orders his troops to follow him out of the walls of Peshawar.

Turanian army's change of formation cuts Arslan off from the rest of his men, and a Turanian soldier is about to take Arslan's life when Gieve swoops in just in time to protect the prince. As they make their way back into the citadel, Gieve, who's about to tell Narsus about the events on Mt. Damavand, is distracted by the closeness between Farangis and Kubard. Farangis continues to treat Gieve coldly.

Meanwhile, Alfreed and Elam get into an argument that even Narsus is unable to reconcile. Daryun interrupts the temporary joviality by informing them that Turanian troops have gathered before the gates of Peshawar, ready for another battle.

Jimsa (20 years old; skilled in both sword-fighting and the use of blowgun) has injured Zaravant with a poisonous dart, and while he's being transported back into the safety of the citadel, Kubard and Isfan defeat Jimsa, tie him up, and bring him back into Peshawar. Jimsa, who refuses to surrender and insults Arslan, is locked up in prison, but he's certain that he'll be able to escape.

Just as Narsus has hoped, Jimsa "escapes" back to the Turanian's camp and reports the following: on the night of the new moon, Parsian troops within Peshawar will join forces with the other 100 thousand Parsian soldiers located on the outskirts of the citadel. Tokhtamysh is surprised that a child like Arslan is able to control such military powers, and Jimsa reassures the king that the prince is merely a puppet being controlled by those around him. Cheered by Jimsa's



report, the king presents him with many gifts and a promise to make him the lord of Peshawar if they succeed.

The Turanian troops come up with this plan: they'll split into two groups to attack the Parsian army located on the outskirts from the front and back, and then pretend to be Parsian army in order to lure Arslan's group to open Peshawar's gate so that they can take the chance to storm in.

They've also sent in an advance party to observe, and finds fresh trails and camping traces, which validates Jimsa's report. What they didn't realize is that Tus, notified by Narsus' message, has set up those trails in advance to mislead the Turanians. On the night of the new moon, advancing towards the non-existent Parsian troops, the two groups of Turanian soldiers, fuelled by their earlier failures, slaughter each other in the dark.

Ilterish is the first to notice that something's wrong and realizes belatedly that they've fallen into enemy's trap. They cease the battle, though it has resulted in 5 thousand dead and 12 thousand injured. Jimsa knows that he'll be charged with treason and that his life is in danger because he's been the one who brought the wrong information, so he attempts to flee on horseback.

It's at this moment that Parsian soldiers rise up in full force to attack the disoriented Turanian troops. Boila and Kishward engage in a fight once more, which ends with Kishward's victory.

Ilterish wants to take vengeance by killing Arslan, but one of his men urges him to retreat for now. Tarkhan, in order to make time for Tokhtamysh to escape, fights against Daryun; though the man is hailed as Turan's strongest knight, his life ends under Daryun's sword.

Elam retrieves an unconscious Jimsa from the battlefield, his back pierced by two of his own people's arrows.

As Peshawar dwells in celebration over their victory, Narsus pays Jimsa a visit. The tactician has invited the Turanian knight to join Arslan's faction, but Jimsa still doesn't understand Arslan's merit as a ruler or why so many people are willing to follow a seemingly weak and vulnerable child. Narsus merely asks Jimsa to consider this: there are many different types of kings, and while some rulers appear to be physically strong, it doesn't mean that they are actually qualified to rule a country and its people.

Tokhtamysh, downtrodden from utter defeat, plans to return to their own country, but upon one of his follower's persuasion, he considers the possibility of joining forces with Lusitania.

# Chapter V

From Gieve's report pertaining to the events on Mt. Damavand, Narsus is suspicious of Hirmiz's sudden interest in Ruknabad and guesses that someone else must be prompting him to retrieve the sword.

Merlane, Princess Irina of Maryam, and her followers are slowly making their way towards Ecbatana as Irina wishes to locate Hirmiz. From the east behind them, a group of 40 Parsian cavalymen ride past, and Merlane catches sight of a man wearing a silver mask. He tries to stop them to inquire, but they keep going until Merlane shoots an arrow towards the group to get their attention. The man in the silver mask insists that he is not – and he doesn't know – Prince Hirmiz. Despite his words, he orders Xandes to warn Irina's group to stay away from Ecbatana if they value their lives.

[About a decade ago, when Irina was living in the deserted part of the Maryamian palace by herself where she was supposed to be recuperating from the eye disease that caused her blindness, she met the young Prince Hirmiz, who'd just escaped from Ecbatana and was temporarily taking refuge in Maryam. Upon knowing that she couldn't see, Hirmiz took the time to describe the flowers, trees, birds, and sky as best as he can. He wasn't allowed to reside in Maryam for long, but before he left, he picked all the flowers from the courtyard and placed them in her room as a departing gift.]

Turanians' plan to form an alliance with Lusitania keeps getting delayed due to Ilterish's remark that the Lusitanians will only look down on them if they approach them empty-handed.

## **June 15.**

Ilterish initiates a conference and challenges Tokhtamysh's status as Turan's leader. Before all the stunned generals, Ilterish stabs the Turanian king with his sword. He swears to be a better ruler than Tokhtamysh and promises to achieve what their previous king has failed to deliver.

On that same day, Estelle and her group of rescued Lusitanians from St. Emmanuel enter Ecbatana, and while she requests help from the local officials, it seems like everyone are too busy to lend her a hand. When she's refused entrance into the palace, Estelle tries her luck at the back and finds King Innocentis singing from a second-story window of a run-down building.

Estelle quickly tells the king her story, but before they can have a proper conversation, three Lusitanian soldiers spot Estelle, inform her that the king is ill and that Guiscard is the current leader, and kick her out. She understands that the court is undergoing a coup d'état, and decides to rescue Innocentis as well. At the same time, she's saddened by her own countrymen's refusal to help; just then, she remembers Arslan's parting words, and finds a bag of gold and silver coins hidden in the axis of one of the cart's wheels.

## June 16.

Andragoras and Tahamine arrive at Peshawar. It has been eight months since the battle at Atropatene when Arslan last saw his parents, but the king and queen of Pars show no signs of happiness during the reunion. After they have been settled down to rest, Daryun and the others begin to discuss amongst themselves. Daryun figures Andragoras will retake the military power from Arslan, but Gieve, who's always been impertinent and doesn't care for court etiquette, is unhappy about this because he's seen how hard Arslan has fought for his people during these long months. Daryun merely hopes that this struggle of power won't result in Pars being further divided.

Narsus is troubled; all this time, he's planned to let Arslan rescue his father so that the young prince's voice and influence can be increased in the future. Now that Andragoras has escaped by his own means, Narsus' underestimation of the king's power has led to this awkward political situation.

Arslan remains silent and perplexed. He hasn't expected to see his parents so soon and feels that he's not ready to face them quite yet. He knows he can avoid conflict within Pars if he returns military control to his father; yet, he also understands his father is not willing to abolish slavery and reform Parsian society, so in that way, Andragoras stands between Arslan and his goal.

Gieve, Farangis, and Jaswant state that they will remain loyal to Prince Arslan only. Jimsa and Zaravant are still injured and bedridden.

That afternoon, when Kishward has been summoned by Andragoras, the king asks the Marzban whether he's Arslan's private subordinate or the king's. Kishward, whose family has been serving the royal family for generations, is forced to submit to Andragoras, though in his confused heart, his loyalty for Arslan has grown over the months he's spent with the young prince.

That same evening, Andragoras gathers everyone in the citadel square, and before all the civil and military courtiers, the king orders Prince Arslan to go to the southern coastal area to recruit 50 thousand soldiers before he's allowed to return. Everyone's shocked, because they all know that this basically means Arslan has been exiled.

Narsus urges Arslan to accept the order. When Narsus requests the king for Daryun and himself to accompany the prince, however, his appeal is coldly rejected. Andragoras claims that the court has needs for Daryun and Narsus' skills, but everyone knows that the king is merely taking Arslan's only allies away from the prince. He also rejects Arslan's plea to see Tahamine.

Observing all this from afar, Gieve has decided to take on Narsus and Daryun's duties to protect Arslan, and he feels sorry for those who hold positions in court and are forced to follow a ruler they don't believe in. While Rushan, Isfan, and Tus remain on Arslan's side, the majority turns their loyalty to Andragoras.

As the sun sets, Arslan, with Azrael on his shoulder, begins his journey towards southwest. Narsus and Daryun remain in a room heavily guarded from the outside, and Narsus informs his friend that Andragoras is trying to get rid of them both by luring them into escaping, so that the king can punish them in the name of treason.

Late at night, Elam and Alfreed set fires to the feed storage, allowing Narsus and Daryun to escape amongst the chaos and smoke. Nearing the gates, Daryun is stopped by Kishward; though Kishward is unwilling to fight Daryun, he's unable to disobey Andragoras' direct order, and Daryun understands that. Just as they're about to engage in a fight, however, Farangis' arrow pierces through Kishward's horse, which allows the Black Knight to escape. On the other hand, Narsus, who has lost his horse and is being pursued by soldiers, is rescued by Alfreed, and so the two of them, along with Elam, successfully flee as well. Kubard merely watches the scene unfold from the window, thinking that he'll be able to leave at anytime he wants.

### **June 17.**

Arslan wakes up, and sees that Daryun, Narsus, Gieve, Farangis, Alfreed, Elam, and Jaswant have decided to follow him despite Andragoras' disapproval, and Daryun, representing everyone present, once again asks Arslan to accept them and their united decision to accompany the prince. And so, along with his trustworthy friends, they embark on a journey towards the southern coastal city of Gilan.

## **Book 6: A Frenzy of Dust**

# Chapter I

## **June 20, Pars Era 321.**

Gusicard and Hirmiz become unlikely allies in their shared desire to get to the top, but Guiscard feels trapped in his current situation: he fears Andragoras leading his Parsian army to retake Ecbatana, and the Lusitanian soldiers' wish to return to their homeland as soon as possible is not helping matters.

Seven days after Arslan has been exiled by Andragoras, the Parsian prince, Daryun, Narsus, Alfreed, Gieve, Farangis, Elam, and Jaswant are on their way south. It has been an uneventful trip so far until they run into a group of Zott thieves, but before they can do anything, Alfreed steps in to stop them. The men, after recognizing the young woman as Zott Clan's next leader, quickly bow down to her in respect, and update her about her brother Merlane's whereabouts. Alfreed tells them that she's willing to give up the clan leader position to Merlane, and that she'll stay with Narsus to serve under Arslan. While Narsus tries to protest, Farangis, with a serious and somber tone, warns the tactician to stop being so indecisive. After promising to keep in contact in case something goes wrong in Gilan, Zott Clan splits from Arslan's group as they continue their way.

## **June 26.**

Arslan and his group arrive at Gilan, the largest port city within Pars, which is located at the mouth of Oxus River. Due to its location, the weather is mild all year round, and one-third of its population is from other countries. The city's riches come from the sea – foreign merchants, products, and information are exchanged. Even though the wealthy merchants have their own private armies, they rarely coordinate with each other, and pirates often use this weakness to attack these groups one at a time.

The governor of Gilan is a man named Pelagius; over the last three years of working in this role, he has collected a large sum of money, but his military power is comparatively low: 600 cavalymen, 3000 infantrymen, and 5,400 marines. Narsus takes note of all this. According to the tactician, their first and most important step is to ensure there's enough money to fund 50 thousand soldiers for the next three years; the best way to go about this is to extract that money from those who are already rich.

When Pelagius meets Arslan and his group, the governor is shocked and fears that they're coming after him because he's been secretly hoarding the tax money he was supposed to send to Ecbatana for himself. He apologizes for the fact that he wasn't able to send his army to the capital because pirates had been threatening to destroy the port (which Narsus knows to be a lie and he tells Arslan so). As they are about to sit down to have a talk, they receive the news of pirates attacking a merchant ship from Serica.

## Chapter II

On the burning ship, its captain, a half-Serican, half-Parsian man of nearly 30 years of age with a muscular frame and tanned bronze skin named Gulaze, is trying to encourage his crew to fight against the pirates' incessant attacks. When more pirates board Gulaze's ship, however, he fears he may be overpowered by sheer numbers; even when he spots a fishing boat with four passengers coming near, the captain is not holding out too much hope. That is, until Daryun, Jaswant, and Gieve begin to slay down the pirates with their swords while Farangis attacks with her bow and arrows. Gulaze can only observe with shock. To Arslan's group, this incident is a miraculous chance for them to show their practical potential by rescuing the citizens of Gilan so that they can gain their trust and support in return.

Daryun introduces himself to Gulaze. Since Gulaze wishes to repay the debt of Daryun saving him and his crew, the captain asks the Black Knight if there are any ways he can be of help. So Daryun begins to explain their situation to Gulaze, and despite the captain trying his best to convince other merchants to join him in aiding the prince, the other merchants only promise to do so if the prince and his group are able to rescue Gilan from pirates' constant attacks. Narsus claims that this can be done in three days' time.

While Arslan meets with Gulaze, Narsus and Elam pay a visit to the tactician's old friend, Shaghad. They are very distant relatives; Narsus had saved him once when Shaghad got mixed into scandals and they used to share the same ideal about abolishment of slavery. It's clear to Narsus upon their reunion that Shaghad has changed a lot: he now not only owns lots of properties, but he also has over a hundred slaves working for his household and orchards. In their brief conversation that escalates to an outright argument, Narsus understands that he has lost a comrade to the materialistic world, and gives up on trying to persuade him to work for their side.

Pretending to be a "living gift" sent to the governor from Serican merchants, Farangis easily overtakes Pelagius and has Jaswant tie him up. Gieve, who has sweet-talked the governor's female slaves into telling him the location of the vault, shows up with the key to Pelagius' vault. Due to his unlawful deeds, Pelagius' funds are seized and the man himself is exiled. Narsus takes out some of that fund and give them away to the citizens of Gilan. Gulaze, who's begun to organize large bands of sea merchants into supportive forces for Arslan, announces a piece of interesting news: there's a hidden treasure located on an island southeast of Gilan; the rumored amount seems a little farfetched, however, so none of them take the news seriously.

Five days later, the pirates return to Gilan port with 30 armed ships, but as they sail near the coast, not one ship or a person can be seen; Gilan looks like an abandoned ghost town. They think that the citizens must have fled in fear, but when they begin to set the town buildings on fire near the mouth of Oxus River, one of the pirates sees the oncoming floodwater heading their direction.

Narsus' plan is this: first, he orders men to stack sandbags at the river's mouth to block the flow, and to break the sandbags when the pirates' ships enter the bay; next, he signals Gieve to release thirty rafts full of cotton bags filled with camphor and asphalt, which are set aflame by fiery arrows, and as the pirate ships are rendered useless by the flood's waves, the rafts that ram into these wrecked ships immediately set them on fire; lastly, Narsus has Gulaze leading his men to kill off or capture any of the pirates who survived the first two waves of attack. The tactician's plan is to ensure that Gilan will not be disturbed by pirates for a long, long time. Narsus also suggests to Arslan to appoint Gulaze as Gilan's acting governor; in this way, he's ensured Gulaze's loyalty to Arslan and has earned their group a worthy ally.

Daryun volunteers to interrogate one of the captured pirate leaders. But when he fails to get any answers out of the man, he threatens to have Narsus – whom Daryun claims to have studied sorcery in Serica – paint his portrait, which will suck out the subject's life force. This effectively scares the superstitious pirate into telling them some interesting and valuable information, though Narsus grumbles about Daryun's insults afterwards. They decide to look into this mysterious hidden treasure.



## Chapter III

While Andragoras wishes to lead his armies to recapture Ecbatana, standing in their way on the Great Continental Road is Ilterish and his Turanian soldiers. Kishward, who's having trouble coming up with a plan to defeat the Turanians, suddenly remembers that Narsus has left him a letter before his departure. Upon reading the tactician's letter, he gathers Kubard and Isfan to discuss their plans.

Ilterish feels the need to prove his worth as the new leader, so he's desperate for a sure and quick victory against Andragoras' Parsian army.

### **Evening of June 22.**

Ilterish and his troops approach Peshawar from the north. When they see Parsian soldiers filing out of the citadel, he leads his men straight towards them in battle. Kubard and Isfan's troops engage Ilterish's army briefly before retreating, and this lures the Turanians into Peshawar; what awaits them is a well-hidden pit and pieces of wood and piles of dirt thrown from the top of the walls, which efficiently stop the Turanian troops from advancing and retreating. Trapped, they are unable to block the scatter of arrows that fall upon them. In this manner, the Turanian troops are defeated and all of their well-known generals are killed. Ilterish, however, manages to escape. Andragoras praises Kishward for his brilliant plan, though the Marzban feels uneasy taking Narsus' credit, but he knows better than to reveal the identity of the one who ensures their victory.

Though Ilterish has escaped from the battle, he knows he won't be able to return home without being forced to commit suicide due to his incompetence. While resting, a suspicious man in a grey cloak appears before him and tries to persuade the Turanian warrior that he will be able to help him regain what he's lost. Ilterish is never fond of sorcerers or dark magic, and so when the man persists, he pulls out his sword in an attempt to kill the sorcerer. The sorcerer manages to knock Ilterish out with enchantments. It seems like the sorcerer back in Ecbatana is planning to use the Turanian warrior as Serpent King Zahhak's stand-in.

Back in Ecbatana, apprentice knight Etoile has two concerns: how to care for the people from St. Emanuel and how to rescue Innocentis, who's been locked up by his own brother Guiscard. The money that Arslan has lent her is great help; she doesn't have to worry about the living expenses for another three months.

Guiscard spends most of his days in utter frustration and impatience due to numerous issues. He's sent off 5 thousand of the fanatic soldiers who have suggested killing all of Ecbatana's citizens to the outskirts of the capital to keep guard. He feels that he's been too conscientious – with Innocentis, Andragoras, and Bodin – and it's precisely this attitude of his that becomes the root of all his current problems.

## **June 23.**

Etoile sneaks into the Parsian royal court, planning to rescue Innocentis.

Princess Irina of Maryam has been captured by the Lusitanian fanatic guards, though Guiscard hears that a young Parsian man has killed six of the soldiers with his archery and sword before escaping. Guiscard decides to use Irina to get rid of his older brother; it'll be less suspicious if Innocentis die by the hands of a Maryamian who holds severe hatred for Lustianians. At this moment, he's notified of the capture of a young apprentice knight who's sneaked in; Guiscard decides to meet her.

Upon Etoile's accusation of Guiscard locking up Innocentis in order to monopolize the regime, Guiscard defends his action by saying that he's protecting his brother from Maryamian survivors. Still, Etoile has an instinctive feeling that Guiscard is lying, and she tells him so. Angered by Etoile's impertinence, he orders her to be locked away in a cell.

A little while later finds Irina imprisoned in a room with Innocentis; when she realizes this, she uses the dagger she's hidden in her clothes (that Guiscard allows her to keep) and attempts to kill the man who's led the army that destroyed her homeland. Innocentis is only stabbed in the stomach, and so is not killed. Guiscard decides to condemn and behead Irina for assassination attempt and Etoile for bringing Irina into the palace as excuses to get rid of both women. At this moment, Merlane interrupts, and Hirmiz, in his desire to take this chance to cut ties with the Lusitanians as well as to rescue Irina, storms into the palace with his troops. This effectively distracts Guiscard and his men enough to allow Etoile and Merlane to escape, while Hirmiz successfully saves Irina.

Guiscard sends Viscount Zaljko to pursue Hirmiz. While Guiscard assumes that the Parsian prince will return to Zabol, Hirmiz plans to hide near Ecbatana and wait for the right timing – when Andragoras' troops and Guiscard's army fight to the death, Hirmiz will seize his chance and overtake the capital.

After exchanging information with Etoile, Merlane now knows that Alfreed is with Arslan's group. Despite their bickering, they both decide to travel south together.

## Chapter IV

This day, Arslan, Daryun, Narsus, Farangis, Gieve, Jaswant, and Azrael leave the port of Gilan on a ship borrowed from Gulaze; along with ten other ships, they set sail in search of the legendary pirate treasure, which leaves the governor's estate – now Prince Arslan's – only guarded by Gulaze, Elam, and Alfreed. Meanwhile, Shaghad and his league of pirates plan to seize the estate; their mistake is underestimating Narsus and his clever scheme. When Shaghad's group is on the verge of forcing through the estate's entrance, Zott Clan attacks from behind, and a hundred archers from atop the roof of the estate release a shower of arrows, efficiently trapping the pirates in between.

In the chaos, Shaghad sees Narsus and the rest of the group, and he knows instantly that he has fallen into the tactician's trap. Narsus already knows beforehand that the information about the legendary treasure is a rumor spread by Shaghad, so he makes use of this opportunity, pretending to leave Gilan but actually turning back in secret. The band of pirates are getting defeated, and Shaghad is growing impatient and frustrated.

Arslan fights off a few pirates on his own, but when Shaghad tries to fight him, Daryun interrupts. He's no match for the Black Knight, of course, and tries to escape. Azrael swoops in to injure his face, and Jaswant ties him up.

Narsus is not a cold person, but he's not the type to be blinded by emotions either; since he's witnessed Shaghad's change of heart, he's been carefully observing the man's every action. After Shaghad's capture, the man only reveals his animosity towards his old friend; Narsus is even more certain that there's no way to persuade him out of his current ways. Arslan announces Shaghad's punishment without having to consult any of his comrades for the first time: Shaghad will spend a year as a slave to get him to experience the suffering he's put other slaves through. Shaghad swears to have his vengeance once he regains his freedom.

After this event, all the rich merchants in Gilan decide to side with Prince Arslan and his comrades, and willingly give them materialistic support and monetary funds. Narsus plans to use these funds to hire soldiers. Under Gulaze's organization, Daryun, Gieve, and Farangis join a team of vessels to uproot the pirates' base. Children and women who are found in the base are sent to Shaghad's old estate and come under the protection of Arslan. Arslan also rewards the Zott Clan with money, as well as their very own banner made of black silk bordered with golden-yellow. Alfreed and her followers swear their allegiance to Prince Arslan, and though they will not be palace guardians, they will always be happy to offer their assistance as Arslan's comrades.

During the brief period of peace in Gilan, Arslan and Elam spend their days studying under Narsus and exploring the city. Gieve isn't seen for days, and is most likely found loitering in the numerous of brothels offered in Gilan. Narsus and Daryun spend some of their free time in brothels as well. While Jaswant is brought to a brothel once, he encounters a woman from

Sindhura, who coaxes him into giving her his money; when he realizes he's been tricked after all, Jaswant is only glad that he's been able to help out a fellow countryman.

Farangis, under the guidance of the Jinns that notify her of rare guests coming their way, sets out on a short journey, and meets Gieve on her way. Not far from where they are, Estelle and Merlane, who have been travelling from Ecbatana for about ten days at this point, are attempting to flee from a group of vicious bandits. Gieve and Farangis help out the two youngsters, and Merlane can only watch with admiration at the excellent archery skills that these two display.

## **July 2.**

When the four of them return to Gilan, Merlane and Alfreed have an avid discussion about the future of Zott Clan. Merlane wants Alfreed to return home to take the role of clan leader, but Alfreed insists that Merlane is the better choice. Merlane also informs them of the chaotic condition in Ecbatana, and Narsus feels like this is the right time to make preparations to return to the capital.

Around the same time, being closely pursued by Zaljko, Hirmiz and his troops, in collaboration with Saam's group that have travelled from Zabol, defeat Zaljko's Lusitanian army, with Saam killing the leading viscount. From the information Saam has collected, it seems like Bodin has ruled over Maryam and is planning to use the manpower there to confront Guiscard. For now, however, Hirmiz can only concentrate on dealing with Andragoras and Guiscard.

## Chapter V

### **Beginning of July.**

Andragoras is planning to lead his troops and head towards Ecbatana from their base in Peshawar. While most of the nobles are on the Parsian king's side, Kishward, whose family has served the royal family for generations, has the greatest pressure and stress out of all the generals. Kubard and Rushan are not fully trusted by Andragoras, and so they are not always included in meetings and are only given miscellaneous tasks. Tous and Isfan are not satisfied with the current situation either; they want to remain on Arslan's side and tell Kishward so, but the Marzban merely tells them to concentrate on the task at hand first – that is, to rescue Parsian citizens in Ecbatana from the Lusitanian invaders – before worrying about royal court affairs. Kishward also warns the injured Turanian warrior Jimsa, who has been locked up in a tower as a prisoner, to take his chance to escape before next day's blood sacrifice ritual that Andragoras has planned before their departure.

That night, while Jimsa manages to get out of the prison, he runs into Zaravant, who's been previously injured by Jimsa's poisonous darts and has been resting in bed these days. Zaravant, unhappy about Andragoras' decision to banish Arslan, decides to leave Peshawar in the dark to rejoin with Arslan's troops, and he chooses this night to do so. The two men have a mutual understanding then, and promise to put their previous hostility for each other behind them in order to escape together. It doesn't take long for the soldiers within Peshawar to realize that the Turanian prisoner has escaped with the help of a Parsian knight.

Kishward chases after them and attempts to persuade Zaravant to return, but before they can get any further, Andragoras himself shows up and threatens to kill Zaravant if he doesn't capture Jimsa. Zaravant lets Jimsa leave first, and is ready to face Andragoras' sword head-on, but with Kishward's plea, Andragoras only throws a spear at Zaravant, injuring the knight but not enough to kill him off. Grateful for the kindness he's received from Arslan and Zaravant, Jimsa resolves to travel with the Parsian knight in search of Arslan's troops and joins the prince's army.

In his private chamber, Kishward has the secret letter that Vahriz wrote to Bahman months ago in his hand. Everyone has assumed that the letter contains Arslan's origins but none of them have read it yet. At this moment, Tahamine and Andragoras appear and demand that Kishward give them the letter; Andragoras burns the letter, and Kishward feels relieved.

In Ecbatana, lack of water remains a serious issue, especially when Guiscard is preparing to defend against Andragoras' troops. Olaberria returns from Mt. Damavand but Guiscard is not concerned with what Hirmiz has been doing anymore, so the Lusitanian has no chance to tell Guiscard about the legendary sword Ruknabad.

## **July 25.**

Estelle makes a request: when Arslan's troops enter Ecbatana, perhaps they can help rescue King Innocentis. Most of them obviously disagree with this, but Arslan does think that it's unnecessary to kill all Lusitanians if they choose to surrender and leave the capital; he wants Estelle to understand that it's fanaticism and prejudices that harm a country and its peoples the most. Narsus agrees to make their plans with Estelle's request in mind.

## **End of July.**

Andragoras' 100 thousand soldiers arrive at Ecbatana's east and are about to engage Lusitanians' 250 thousand men. Tous, leading 3 thousand cavalrymen, acts as the vanguard; their aim is to confuse the Lusitanian army's formation and destroy their command system. Parsian army releases a shower of arrows as the battle begins, and as Lusitanian soldiers advance, Parsian soldiers continue to retreat bit by bit; after awhile, Lusitanians break through Parsian army with an long and narrow formation.

Baudouin wants to regroup his men, but before he can even voice out his command, the right side of the formation has been broken through by Andragoras' troops. The left wing is destroyed by the army led by Kubard. Despite his bravery, Baudouin is killed by Kishward's twin blades, and thus, one of Lusitania's greatest generals is defeated. At the news of their general's death, Lusitanian soldiers fall into utter chaos, and Parsian troops take this opportunity to exterminate the rest of the Lusitanian soldiers who are trying to flee.

## **July 30.**

Guiscard receives the news of their troops' defeat. Monferrat reorganizes the leftover troops to prepare for further attacks. At this time, Arslan's 25 thousand men are situated 50 farsang south of Ecbatana while Hirmiz's 30 thousand men are located 16 farsang west of the capital. History is about to be rewritten.

## **Book 7: The Capital Retaken**

# Chapter I

## **August 5, Pars Era 321.**

While Lusitanians set up their main forces on the east side of Ecbatana in preparation for Andragoras' Parsian troops, they don't know that Arslan's troops from the south and Hirmiz's troops from the west are on their way to the capital. That night at the eve of battle, Guiscard, who's frustrated about their current situation, meets Pulad, one of the sorcerers and followers of Serpent King Zahhak who tries to persuade him to join Zahhak. When Guiscard refuses, Pulad attacks him with a kind of magic that allows the user to manipulate air into a "snake" and using it to crush an enemy. Just then, Isfan's Parsian troops arrive on scene and causes sudden chaos.

Isfan doesn't know Guiscard by name but can tell that he's the leader from the expensive attires he dons, so he engages Guiscard in a sword fight. However, just as Isfan's about to attack Guiscard a second time after he's been thrown off his horse, something invisible winds around his lower body, immobilizing him; Guiscard fails to take advantage of this, however. When Isfan spots the sorcerer nearby, he understands what's happened; he throws out his sword, which cleanly cuts through Pulad's neck and ends his life.

Isfan immediately retreats with his group; this is all part of Narsus' plan, though it's currently being carried out by Kishward. As Lusitanian troops blindly follow Isfan's group, they have unknowingly fallen into Parsian army's trap. This opening battle lasts until the next morning. Of the 4,000 dead bodies, only 600 belong to the Parsian side. Everyone knows that the Parsian army is the one in lead this entire time.

In order to ensure that their soldiers are willing to risk their lives to fight harder, Guiscard decides to organize an "Operation Supervision Force"; its purpose is to kill any one in their own army who's trying to escape during a battle. Montferrat has a bad feeling about this, but follows Guiscard's instructions regardless.

Within Andragoras' troops, Kishward tries to convince the king that Narsus, though a follower of Arslan's, is in the same manner loyal to the king, but since Kharlan's betrayal, Andragoras has refused to trust anyone but himself. Meanwhile, Kubard is still doubtful about Andragoras since the battle at Atropatene.

## **August 6.**

In this battle, Parsian army has 100 thousand soldiers while Lusitanian army has almost double that number at 210 thousand soldiers. The first part involves a battle of arrows; when the two armies get close enough, true bloodshed begins. Kubard, leading the right wing, is the quickest to dash into the midst of the enemy's left wing and swiftly crushing their line of defense. He has no intention to fight on Andragoras' behalf, but he does want to kick Lusitanians out of their territories. Guiscard adds more men to their left wing.



At the sound of signal horns, Kubard's army retreats, luring the Lusitanian army forward, where they are ambushed by Isfan's troop from the side and Tus' troop from the back. Trapped on all sides, Lusitanian's left wing is unable to escape.

On the opposite side, Kishward is leading the left wing and gradually but surely crushing their enemies by isolating them into small groups and attacking them. Shortly, he can see black smoke from the back of the Lusitanian's troops: their provisions have been set on fire. This is all thanks to Arslan's men, as Kishward soon discovers. Daryun and Narsus come to greet Kishward and notify him of their presence, as per Arslan's suggestion. Since they still have yet to gather 50 thousand soldiers, it'd be going against the king's direct order if they return to Andragoras' troops, so all they can do for now is act independently.

After a thorough discussion with Narsus back in Gilan, Arslan has made up his mind: in order to realize his ideal of a better Pars, he will try his hardest to gather his military and financial power and retake Ecbatana before his father does in order to show his capabilities and absolute resolve. He's ready for the confrontation with Andragoras but he hopes he can avoid any bloodshed.

After they've split up from Kishward, Daryun and Narsus watch the battle between Andragoras' army and the Lusitanians. They are both troubled and confused by the Lusitanian troops' movements: it's foolish of them to keep sending small groups out only to be destroyed because they can easily overcome the Parsian army with their sheer number.

In the west and blocking Lusitanian army's path of retreat, Hirmiz's troops are waiting. As they panic and start to flee, Guiscard sends in the Operation Supervision Force, the soldiers of which aim and shoot arrows at their own comrades attempting to escape. Driven by a sense of dread and desperation to avoid being killed by their own people, the remaining Lusitanian soldiers turn back to fight. Their crazed energy and motivation doesn't last, and the Parsian army destroys what's left of the Lusitanian troops as they escape in defeat towards the west and heading back towards Ecbatana. Guiscard, however, is going northwest; his plan is to take advantage of the situation when Andragoras, Arslan, and Hirmiz's troops undoubtedly fight against each other over the ownership of Ecbatana and thus, weakening them all. In addition, he'll also be able to get rid of his brother Innocentis, who's still imprisoned in Ecbatana, by Parsians' hands instead of dirtying his own reputation.

## Chapter II

### August 6.

Hirmiz's troops, numbering at 30 thousand and have been setting camp on the west side of Ecbatana, wind to the north as they approach the capital. Hirmiz is certain that, after hearing about the battle between Guiscard and Andragoras' forces, Guiscard will not return to Ecbatana in fear of Andragoras' pursue. Hirmiz sends Xandes through the underground aqueducts, eliminating the guards there and then opening up the north gate for Hirmiz and Saam's troops to storm inside the capital.

Saam is hesitant about returning to Ecbatana in this manner; after all, he's betrayed Andragoras in order to join Hirmiz's fleet, but he is clear about one thing: he will free Parsian citizens from the suffering they have endured in the hands of the Lusitanians. As the troops encourage the capital's citizens to rise up and let the anger and desperation from the last ten months to explode, the citizens pick up whatever they can – sticks, rocks, axes – and begin to surround Lusitanian soldiers and attack them without remorse. Hirmiz decides to make his presence known and identity revealed to the public at the palace's terrace after the chaos in the streets has passed. Hirmiz briefly meets with Innocentis, who's been abandoned by his guards, but it doesn't satisfy the prince; he merely orders Xandes to keep him alive for now.

At noon that day, a big crowd has gathered before the palace's terrace, where Hirmiz takes off his mask and reveals his identity as Osroes V's son and true ruler of Pars. At first, the citizens are shocked into silence, but they soon cheer; yet still some people are already questioning Hirmiz's intention when they realize the gates of Ecbatana have been closed off once more. Saam predicts that, though Hirmiz now has ownership of the capital, this situation may not last long. The Marzban notes that the only reason why Hirmiz is welcomed right now is because he's freed the citizens from Guiscard's grasp, but because Osroes wasn't a beloved king during his era of ruling, there's no reason for the citizens to support Hirmiz if the prince does not rule well.

When Hirmiz checks the treasury, he realizes that Guiscard has taken everything. It seems like Guiscard doesn't intend to come back. The fact that Guiscard left Ectabana so weakly defended is suspicious as well. Hirmiz is also now worried about Andragoras' oncoming army, and the constant problem of water and food shortage within the capital.

### August 8.

Arslan's troops is currently situated 2 farsang to Ecbatana's east. Elam reports that Hirmiz's army has successfully reclaimed Ecbatana and that all gates into the capital are closed off. Narsus knows that Hirmiz's first priority is not the citizens' needs but the dominion over the kingdom. Jaswant reports that Andragoras' army is moving to the west, and Guiscard's army – carrying a heavy load – is escaping in the northwest direction. Narsus concludes that now is the perfect timing to enter Ecbatana; they will not use force, however, but will urge the people from

within the capital to open the gates willingly when they announce that Parsian army has brought in food and water. Narsus understands Guiscard's plan: Guiscard flees Ecbatana on purpose so that all three of the Parsian forces will fight over the capital. The tactician decides they will pursue Guiscard's army that night. Alfreed talks Estelle out of risking her life to sneak back into Ecbatana to rescue Innocentis.

### **August 9.**

Hirmiz accepts a meeting with a man who claims to be the prime minister working under Andragoras, but Saam knows he's a fraud. The man turns out to be Ghundi, a sorcerer and follower of Zahhak's faction, who claims to know some secrets concerning Hirmiz's past. Hirmiz, influenced by Ghundi's jab about Saam's loyalty, ignores the Marzban's warning and decides to send him out of the room to hear Ghundi out.

Back in Andragoras' army's camp, Kishward and Kubard are both unwilling to fight against Saam. Knowing their king's personality, they are certain that Saam is now a traitor in Andragoras' eyes, and the Marzbans will be ordered to kill their comrade. They deduce that since the battle at Atropatene, Saam has always had a death wish because he feels guilty having survived that battle.

Andragoras promises Tahamine to retake Ecbatana from the Lusitanians and the traitors, but the queen merely replies with cold indifference.

## Chapter III

### August 9.

Since their escape from Peshawar, Zaravant and Jimsa, despite their constant but mostly harmless quarrelling, have been travelling in search of Arslan's group but have not yet succeeded. This day, they run into Guiscard's army heading northwest. The troops look as if they have just been recently defeated in a large-scale battle; half of the soldiers are starving and have no weapons, but the other half – still led by Guiscard and Montferrat – seems to be more orderly. Zaravant decides to tail them and gather information.

At Atropatene, Guiscard decides to set camp and reorganize his troops; he plans to wait out the internal conflict between Andragoras, Arslan, and Hirmiz's troops before he goes back for another attempt. This is his last resort; should he fail, Guiscard will be forced to return to Maryam where Bodin is likely to capture and eliminate him. Zaravant sneaks into Guiscard's camp but is discovered; as he and Jimsa flee the scene, they finally reunite with Arslan's troops.

Guiscard has entirely forgotten about Arslan until now, but he knows he needs to defeat Arslan's troops before they can advance any further. So he orders 20 thousand of his 100 thousand men to guard provisions and the valuables they've taken from Ecbatana, and organizes his remaining troops in preparation for a second battle at Atropatene.

Back in Arslan's camp, the crown prince welcomes Zaravant and Jimsa with open arms. Zaravant apologizes to and reconciles with Jaswant, while Jimsa, a Turan warrior who has nowhere else to return to, decides to become part of Arslan's team. Because he has no affiliation with or compassion for the Parsian royal family, Jimsa subtly suggests that should Arslan wishes for it, he will carry any of the prince's commands, including assassinating Andragoras. Though Jimsa understands from how the prince treats him that Arslan is not the kind to use such dirty and dishonorable tricks, he's still not used to how Parsian politics work.

On the other hand, Narsus acknowledges two significant consequences of the upcoming battle: destroying of Guiscard's army and driving Pars' enemies out of their homeland, and using that victory to strengthen Arslan's political power.

### August 11.

The second battle of Atropatene begins. Guiscard sends in 4,000 cavalymen, but Parsian army just continues to retreat backwards. When the Lusitanian troops finally realize the strangeness of this movement, it's already too late: they've been isolated from the main forces and are now surrounded by Parsian soldiers, led by Farangis, as they rush in to attack from all sides. Attempting to rescue the vanguard troops, Guiscard sends in 76 thousand men to the battlefield, but they are momentarily stopped by the rocks and sand propelled at them by the Parsian forces led by Daryun from atop the hills.

As she observes the battle, Estelle feels conflicted; after all, many of her countrymen are being slaughtered, though she feels equally disturbed by the deaths of her supposed enemies. Meanwhile, Jimsa fights the Lusitanians with no remorse; he has to prove his worth and creates a place for himself within Arslan's troops. Merlane is at the forefront of Arslan's personal troop; despite his distaste of his current situation, he's not a weakling and is willing to fight. When Arslan grants Jaswant the permission to go into battle to establish his own merit, the Sindhuran warrior only replies that his merit and responsibility is to ensure Arslan's safety.

On the battlefield, Lusitanian's main forces continue forward, and Daryun and his army engage them in a fierce and bloody combat. Many Lusitanian soldiers die by Daryun's hands; not only is he a great warrior, but he's also a remarkable leader as he commands his troops to retreat skillfully, distancing themselves from the enemy to reorganize their own formations, as soon as more Lusitanians join the battle.

Montferrat urges Guiscard to discard the valuables and send in the remaining 20 thousand soldiers to the battlefield, yet by the time Guiscard finally decides to do so, it's already too late because another surprising event has thrown them off track. A group of Parsian soldiers, dressed as Lusitanian soldiers and sneaked into their camp, begin to attack the Lusitanians from within and spread rumor about Guiscard fleeing and abandoning his men. Shaken by this "news", the Lusitanian troops fall into utter chaos as they start to flee. Seeing this, Narsus asks Arslan to give the last command: he sends Zaravant and his 3,000 cavalrymen to deal the last deadly blow.

Daryun's troops approach Guiscard's main camp. Guiscard clearly knows that he's nowhere near as skillful a swordsman as Daryun, so he attempts to escape. Montferrat tries to protect Guiscard but is interrupted by Gieve, who engages him in a duel and successfully kills the knight who has been the Lusitanian military's second-in-command. Gieve also ensures that the valuables that Guiscard has taken is back in Parsian hands.

Daryun captures Guiscard and brings him before Arslan, who reassures him that he'll be kept alive; in fact, he'll be given a horse and enough provisions for him to return to Maryam. Though Narsus claims that this is to force Bodin and Guiscard to eliminate each other, Guiscard notices that Arslan might genuinely hope Guiscard can make it to Maryam safely. When Estelle asks Guiscard of Innocentis' whereabouts and informs him that if the Lusitanian king is still well, the Parsian government would like to establish and ratify treaties to ensure future peace for both countries, Guiscard is uncooperative. In this manner, ten months after their victory, Guiscard, who still believes that he can overtake Bodin, and his defeated Lusitanian troops are on their way to Maryam.

## Chapter IV

Post-battle, Arslan's troops receive reports from spies who have been observing the events in Ecbatana, and they find out that Andragoras' army has the capital surrounded but there haven't been any large-scale battles yet. Narsus plans to have their own army take a well-deserved break before advancing to Ecbatana. In the mean time, Arslan equally splits up the treasures they've retaken from Guiscard and gives them to his companions and the soldiers as rewards for their victory. Narsus is happy to see that Arslan has both idealistic intent and understanding of practicality – the two elements that make one a good ruler.

Arslan wishes to go back to Ecbatana to meet with Hirmiz and Andragoras. After hearing Narsus' explanation, Daryun, who initially worries about the danger Arslan will be in if he gets close to his father, agrees to the plan.

Thus, Arslan, Daryun, Narsus, Gieve, Farangis, Elam, Alfreed, Jaswant, Estelle, and Azrael are set to head back to the capital. The rest of the army, led by Merlane and including Jimsa and Zaravant, will head south to meet up with Gulaze at Oxus River to make preparations before returning to Ecbatana.

Back in Ecbatana, Xandes tries to soothe the restlessness of the soldiers guarding the closed gates and suggests Hirmiz to watch out for Andragoras and Arslan; however, Hirmiz pointedly disregards Xandes' well-meaning warning. In addition to the constant worry about invaders and the lack of food and water within the city, Hirmiz never did get to hear Ghundi's secret because the sorcerer left right when Andragoras begin to attack. He's also avoiding Irina, swearing that he'll not see her before his confrontation with Andragoras.

### **August 14.**

Andragoras sends in 1,000 soldiers into the underground aqueduct, but under Saam's command, the canals are set on fire, effectively stopping Andragoras' advances. Kishward, who's leading a troop in, meets Saam, and he attempts to persuade Saam to swear fealty to Andragoras again. But Saam merely says that if he does so, he'll only once again become a traitor. Kishward is now certain that Kubard is right: Saam is wishing for death. The two Marzbans and old friends engage in a swordfight, but are soon interrupted by Andragoras himself, who commands Saam to move aside so that he can meet with Hirmiz for a talk.

In the assembly chamber, where Hirmiz remains seated in the throne, Andragoras enters and greets him with a call of "little brother" instead of "nephew". This confuses Hirmiz and Andragoras begins to tell him the history of Hirmiz's identity.

While Gotarzes (Andragoras and Osroes' father) was ruling, he was a respected figure until he became overly superstitious in his old age. According to a conjurer's words, in order to ensure the royal lineage to continue and since Osroes didn't have the ability to bear a child, Gotarzes

must take his son's wife to bed. Osroes despised his father's superstitious nature, but he couldn't refuse Gotarzes' request either, and so he gave up his wife to his own father. The brothers decided to assassinate their father to keep this entire affair a secret and to maintain the royal family's reputation.

This revelation shocks and angers Hirmiz; these conflicting emotions immobilizes him.

Andragoras also reveals the following: he didn't kill Osroes but had let his brother died gradually from a disease; Osroes was the one who begged Andragoras to have Hirmiz killed because he's "cursed" and not Osroes' own child. Remembering Vahriz's last words, Hirmiz asks about Arslan's identity, but Andragoras refuses to answer, and instead pulls out his sword and engages Hirmiz in a fight.

The conflict is interrupted by the appearance of the sorcerer, whom Andragoras recognizes from years ago; it was the same sorcerer who his father Gotarzes had believed in and depended upon. The sorcerer tells Hirmiz that Arslan has no royal lineage at all. When Andragoras attempts to stab him, the sorcerer reminds him that he's the only one who knows of Andragoras' daughter's whereabouts; the king disregards his blackmail and tries again, but they can hear Xandes and his men approaching.

Meanwhile, with Isfan and Tus' help, Arslan's group manages to sneak into Andragoras' camp and meets up with Kishward. After reporting their recent victory over Guiscard's army, Arslan asks to talk with Tahamine. The queen agrees, and the two are left alone to talk in privacy.

At first, there's only a wall of heavy silence; it's broken by Tahamine's confession, "Arslan, you are not my child." Arslan has expected this, and so he asks about his real parents and the wet nurse who took care of him, to which Tahamine gives the following answers: his mother was from a family of knight-caste and died a few days after Arslan's birth; his father then accepted money from a visiting royal messenger and gave his son away but was never heard from again; his wet nurse and her husband were killed to make sure there'd be no future disputes. Tahamine admits that Andragoras was the one who traded their own child – a baby girl – for Arslan because women have no rights to the throne. Arslan can clearly sense Tahamine's hatred towards Andragoras in this conversation. After this exchange with Tahamine, Arslan is even more driven and determined than before – now that all his insecurities and uncertainty have been washed away – to become the true ruler of Pars even though he's now sure that he has no royal blood within his body.

When he meets up with his companions, Arslan declares that they will head to Mt. Damavand to retrieve the legendary sword Ruknabad – a symbol and proof of the true heir of Pars' throne. Gieve volunteers to be the guide.

Narsus' judgment has been sound, though he admits to Daryun that he was taking a risk when he agrees to Arslan coming to Ecbatana to meet with Andragoras and Tahamine. After verifying his own identity, Arslan has two choices: he can either prove his worth and qualification by retrieving the Raknabad, or he can discard everything and hide away. The fact that he's chosen the former proves that Narsus has been right to believe in Arslan's integrity as a future king.

After hearing his teacher's explanation, Elam goes up to Arslan and promises to remain by his side and help him fulfill his ambition as best as he can; Arslan clasps Elam's hand in reply and tells him that he's happy to hear that.



## Chapter V

Arslan's group stops by a village close to Mt. Damavand – the same village that Gieve visited a few months ago when he ventured into the mountain by himself and ran into Hirmiz and Xandes. It's in that village that they meet a Lusitanian man nicknamed "Parafuda" (?), which also means "White Ghost" possibly due to his white hair despite his youthful face and the fact that he has little memories of what happened before the villagers found him injured soon after the big earthquake months before.

Parafuda is happy to meet Estelle who speaks his language, and he's invited to sit with Arslan's party as he tries to tell them what happened at Mt. Damavand; however, a small green snake scares the man into hysterics. Estelle then translates what Parafuda has been muttering before he fainted: in the mountain, he saw a giant being with two snakes on its shoulders. All the Parsians present immediately knows the dire significance of this news: the Serpent King Zahhak has been revived. Before they leave the village, Arslan gives some money to the village chief and asks him to take good care of Parafuda. In truth, Parafuda is Don Ricardo, the Lusitanian knight who was working under Guiscard.

Soon after they hike up the mountain, the climate changes drastically; summer heat transforms to a cold rainstorm. They're forced to take shelter in a cave until the next day. Two days later, they've entered Kai Khosrow's sanctuary and soon they arrive at the Hero King's grave. The rain and wind is still strong, and Arslan knows that he must use his own powers to summon the sword into his possession. So assuring his companions that he'll handle this on his own, he begins to say a genuine prayer to Kai Khosrow's spirit and promises that he'll implement fair policies within the country and be a good ruler.

The earth shakes beneath his feet and the ground opens up in a flood of bright light; for a brief second, everyone can see a shadow of a massive figure wrapped in a giant serpent, but when the light subsides, Ruknabad is in Arslan's hands. At the sight of Arslan holding Ruknabad, all of the prince's companions swear their fealty to him once more. Estelle, however, remains silent as she gazes at Arslan.

Within the ten-day period in which Arslan's group travelled to and back from Mt. Damavand, nothing much happened in Ecbatana. When Xandes entered the assembly chamber, only Hirmiz remained there with his sword drawn. The sorcerer had disappeared, and Andragoras escaped through the underground and continued to lead his troops to surround the walls of the capital. Hirmiz didn't tell Xandes about what Andragoras had told him. Before, as Osroes' son and heir, he had the right to "retake" the crown from Andragoras; but if what Andragoras had said is true, then Hirmiz is Andragoras' younger brother and is thus not next in line to take the throne.

## **August 25.**

In the middle of Hirmiz's coronation ceremony as Pars' 18th Shah, which is only attended by a few of Hirmiz's own subordinates including Xandes and Saam, Hirmiz declares that he'll offer Innocentis to the gods by killing him in the North Tower. Before he can carry out the act, however, Arslan and his group appear. When Hirmiz sees that Arslan has Ruknabad, he lashes out with his explosive anger and frustration and challenges Arslan to a duel. At the same time, Xandes, still blaming his father Kharlan's death on Daryun, is ready to engage the Black Knight in a fight. All this is interrupted by a soldier rushing in to report that the north gate has been opened from the inside.

As it turns out, the citizens of Ecbatana are tired of Hirmiz and his men, who have done nothing to solve the food and water shortage, and so decide to overthrow them. Merlane's group, as well as Kishward and Kubard's troops, flood into the city in an instant. Gulaze's troops bring in what the people of Ecbatana have been praying for all these months: food and water. As the people happily receive the provisions, Gulaze and Zaravant remind them that Arslan is the one who orders the provisions to be sent here from Gilan. Narsus' plan is to hope that the citizens' will remember Arslan's name and that he's the ruler who takes people's needs before his own, unlike Andragoras and Hirmiz.

Meanwhile, Estelle rushes to where she has sheltered the injured Lusitanians before, only to find that they have all been killed during the chaos when Hirmiz's army first entered the capital. She cries for them, but she also knows that as long as those who survived work hard to prevent anything like that from happening again, these people's deaths serve as a valuable lesson to all.

Back in the North Tower, Daryun has easily defeated Xandes, and Hirmiz's sword is knocked out of his hand. It's thanks to Ruknabad's tremendous power that Arslan can defeat a skilled swordsman such as Hirmiz, and both of them know that. At this moment, Andragoras arrives on scene; he asks Arslan to hand him Ruknabad. With a firm and unshakable attitude, Arslan refuses.

As the father and son confront each other, nobody notices that Innocentis – weakened and half-dead from sickness – has gradually made his way towards Andragoras; he startles everyone by grappling Andragoras' neck from behind. During their scuffle, Innocentis refuses to release the Parsian king even when his face is bashed bloody and broken by the other's elbow. In the end, Innocentis, with a last prayer to his god, drags Andragoras along as they both fall out and down from the window of the tower; thus, the lives of the two countries' rulers are lost.

Andragoras' death by Innocentis' hands can be considered a fortunate accident, since it means that they have avoided more unneeded bloodshed between Andragoras and Arslan's supporters; it also means that Arslan can become the next ruler of Pars without much trouble.

Xandes is temporarily locked up in prison; Hirmiz is in no shape to retaliate in his current exhausted state; and Saam orders his troops to lay down their weapons. The remaining gates of Ecbatana open up to let in more provisions and resources; the news of Arslan defeating Guiscard's Lusitanian troops travel far and wide, and soon Arslan becomes the country's hero.

In the palace hallway, Kubard, Kishward, and Daryun are chatting when they hear screams. They rush to the source of the noise to find that a giant grey serpent has wrapped its upper body around the Ruknabad and is attempting to escape. Saam tries to stop the serpent, but the reptile has wrapped his remaining body around the Marzban's neck; it's clear from the way his hair gradually turning grey that the serpent is sucking his life force. Kubard and Daryun's attacks cannot hurt the serpent. Arslan, with a dagger stopping the reptile's fangs, manages to pull the Ruknabad from its sheath.

Plan failed, the serpent tries to slither away, but with Farangis and Gieve's arrows hitting its eye and jaw, the serpent is restrained enough for Arslan to chop its head off with Ruknabad. As the carcass of the serpent transforms into a headless body – that of the lead sorcerer's – Farangis orders it to be burned and its ashes to be scattered.

With his last breath, Saam tells Arslan to become a great king and that he's sorry he couldn't be around to aide him, but he hopes Arslan will be able to bring peace to Pars.

As the citizens of Ecbatana celebrates late into the night, Hirmiz and Irina leave the capital behind. Though he still has some attachment to the Parsian throne, he had to admit his defeat; perhaps one day his ambition will return but for now, he's content to travel and be with the woman he loves. Tahamine requests to be settled in the southwestern part of the country, where her old homeland used to be.

## **September 2.**

Estelle, with the bones of the Lusitanian king in her possession and Parafuda in tow, is ready to journey back to her home country. Although they are reluctant to say farewell, Arslan and Estelle can only convey those complicated emotions in a few simple words. Arslan will welcome Estelle to visit Ecbatana again, while the Lusitanian knight-in-training, with flushed cheeks, invites the Parsian prince to visit Lusitania. As Estelle leaves, she tells him one last thing, "No matter how much you change in the future, I'll always see through you because I know your true nature." Only when Estelle joins the rest of the guards, who will travel with her through Misr to reach Lusitania, does Arslan turns back.

Arslan has many things to deal with: the rebuilding of the city, burials of Andragoras, Arslan's parents and his wet nurse, the coronation ceremony, and the implementation of the slavery abolishment. At this point in time, 15 of the 16 men and women who are known as "The 16 Guardian Warriors of Liberation King Arslan" later on have gathered here.

Deep in the underground of Ecbatana, only 4 of the 8 followers of Zahhak remain alive. Gurgin encourages his comrades by saying that as long as they're patient for three more years, they will be able to make use of Ilterish's body and revive the Turanian warrior.

# **Second Arc**

## **Book 8: The Masked Army**

# Chapter I

Pars and Misr had a history of conflict in the past, but with Kishward and his troops acting as a shield, Misr had long given up trying to invade Parsian territories. During his reign of eight years and while Pars was under Lusitania's rule, the king of Misr Hossain III concentrated on strengthening his own country. The flourishing of Pars' economy in the past three years, in addition to the severance of international slave trade due to Pars' slave abolition, all contribute to Hossain's desire to finally make his move against Pars towards the end of Pars Era 324.

## **September 29, Pars Era 324.**

During this battle, Hossain has a "guest general": a 30-year-old man bearing a scar (a claw or teeth mark from an animal) on the right side of his face. He feels utter hatred towards the Pars empire and especially Narsus; at the same time, he constantly warns Hossain and his Misrian generals about Narsus' ingenious tactics, which the Misrian army seems to underestimate.

Throughout the majority of the battle, it appears Misr's camel-cavalry is doing well as they keep pushing the Parsian army back steadily. Hossain is glad that everything's going according to plan, but the guest general warns him of Narsus' traps and recommends them pulling back for now. Masinissa, a trusted general of Hossain's, merely mocks the other man's cowardice. As the sun sets, 30 thousand Parsian soldiers, facing towards the west from which the Misrian army attack, put up their shields, and like a gigantic mirror, they reflect the bright light of the sunset and effectively blind their enemies, causing chaos as camels, horses, and riders lose their balance. Masinissa briefly engages the Black Knight, but before Daryun can finish him, an arrow from the man with the scarred face stops him. Farangis, in turn, aims for the man with the scar and breaks his bow; this distraction allows Masinissa to escape. Misr ends up losing one-quarter of their troops.

Back in camp, the man with the scar suggests a plan to Hossain: he'll gather all of Narsus' enemies and work together with them to take Pars down. Hossain agrees to support him when he has a more solid plan. The Court Secretary of Misr suspects that the man with the scar might actually be Prince Hirmiz, who's known to wear a Silver Mask to hide the scar on his face. Though none of them is certain of the man's identity, Hossain plans to make use of him either way. Masinissa voices out his distrust for the man with the scar again, but Hossain is disappointed about his general's intolerance of others' talents.

On his 18th birthday, King Arslan finds himself at the border of Misr. Three years ago during Arslan's coronation, over 90% of the aristocrats and nobles were present for the ceremony; on the surface, it seemed that most of them supported the new Shah. Arslan's identity – the fact that he's not of royal lineage – had also been revealed to the public. Narsus assured them that this was the best course of action. This way, Arslan has nothing to hide, and if many people who claimed to be Tahamine's daughter kept showing up, it just meant that none of these people were trustworthy.

Currently, Arslan's court composes of the following people: Rushan (Lucian) as the prime minister, Narsus as court painter and vice prime minister, Kishward as eran (commander-in-chief of the military), Farangis as court consultant and inspector, and Gieve as an inspector who travels around.

Back in camp after the battle against Hossain's army, Farangis voices out her suspicion of the man with the scar on his face. Pars' victory against Misr spreads to the capital in half a day's time, and the citizens cheer when they are told that Arslan will return in ten days.

In an inn in Ecbatana, a group of nobles who have lost their status and power are sitting around a table complaining about Arslan's new policies when a man wearing a grey cloak interrupts their conversation. The stranger convinces them to steal the Ruknabad, a symbol of Khasrow's approval to be the true ruler of Pars. The innkeeper is suspicious of the group muttering secretly amongst themselves and is about to report it to the authorities, but he faints when the last patron leaves. The next day, the innkeeper can't remember why he's been lying on the ground.

## Chapter II

### October 6.

Gieve encounters a mysterious tomb raider at Andragoras' mausoleum, on a hill about five farsang north of Ecbatana, while travelling back to the capital for the hunting festival. In the dark, the tomb raider digs into the ground where the coffin is buried even though according to the grave keeper, all the treasures are kept in a temple nearby. The tomb raider attacks Gieve with a striking snake when he reveals himself; as it turns out, the "snake" is just a sliver of fabric. Gieve remembers the sorcerer he fought with in Peshawar three years ago, and thinks that the tomb raider is probably related to the same organization.

### October 9.

In order to welcome King Rajendra of Sindura in a hunting festival, Arslan and his troops set out for the Field of Scharflistan (sp?), the hunting ground close to Keep of St. Emmanuel where they had defeated Lusitanians in a bloody battle three years prior. For Parsians, hunting is a significant event; it is also an important tool for diplomatic purposes. This time, the hunting festival is held in the hopes of prolonging their alliance with Sindura.

Arslan earns the title "Lion-Hunter" after he single-handedly takes down a lion during the hunt. A group of assassins attempt to attack the Shah but are subdued by Arslan and his subordinates. They think nothing of it at the time. Later, when Rajendra is riding on his elephant about to go on his hunt, the usually mild animal suddenly bolts off. Isfan is ordered to save him; however, after they have safely gotten Rajendra off the elephant, one of the Parsian soldiers, his eyes glazed, places his sword against Rajendra's neck, threatening to kill the King of Sindura if they don't hand over the Ruknabad. Arslan distracts the assassin by throwing his sword towards him while Gieve pierces the man with an arrow. Daryun recognizes the man as one of the nobles who was dissatisfied with the new policies, but Narsus suspects that someone else is behind this.

A messenger from Sindura's capital reports that Turk is invading from the upstream of Kaveri River and have poisoned the waters. Arslan decides to lead his troops to help out.

### October 15.

Rajendra and Arslan's troops arrive at "Iron Gate", giant rock formations blackened by the iron to form 100 gaz-tall cliffs on both sides of the river; it's located at the junction point of Pars, Sindura, and Turk. The Iron Gate has no bridges, so crossing the river is close to impossible. However, Turkic troops cast boulders attached with leather cords to the other side of the river using catapults, and soldiers glide across by holding onto hooks hanging from small wheels that slide along the cords. Turkic troops also use chains to cross the rapidly flowing river on boats.

Narsus ensures that the battle is a quick one. He orders Elam, Alfreed, Jaswant, and Isfan's troops to burn the leather cords, which efficiently cuts off the Turks' routes. The 3,000 Turkic soldiers stranded on the other side of Iron Gate, who refuse to surrender, face Parsian and Sinduran troops' attack. Working together, Farangis, Isfan, and Daryun take down the Turkic general Gurab, who is then held captive. When Arslan asks him about the Turkic king's intention of initiating this attack, Gurab only replies that he doesn't know and that they should ask the king himself. Narsus finds it odd that Misr in the west and Turk in the east are attacking around the same time and wonders if somehow the two countries have become allies; to do so, however, requires the messengers to pass through Pars, which is a very difficult task.



## Chapter III

### **[Autumn, Pars Era 321.**

After the defeated Guiscard managed to cross the border of Maryam, he was immediately captured and imprisoned in an isolated citadel in a valley away from the capital, where Bodin, in order to strengthen his own political power, announced to the citizens that their Prince Guiscard had died while fighting in Pars and that the man who claimed to be Guiscard now was just an impostor. Bodin planned to kill off Guiscard away from the public's eye. Within the kingdom, there were many who were against Bodin's cruel ruling and wanted Guiscard to lead; those who were caught with such intention were immediately executed.

### **April, Pars Era 322.**

With the lord of the citadel's help, Guiscard escaped from prison. In June, Guiscard took over a citadel by Maryam's west coast with 3,000 supporters in tow. He sent twelve trustworthy knights back to Lusitania in an attempt to request rescue forces. However, it took the small group 4 months just to get to Lusitania, and when they arrived, they discovered that their country had fallen into utter chaos: after Innocentis and Guiscard left the country back in 320, the temporary government dissolved, leaving numerous of factions fighting over land ownership.

### **June, Pars Era 323.**

A year after Guiscard had sent his small group to his home country, only half the number returned without the troops Guiscard had been hoping for and the news that Lusitania was in an anarchic state. Still, he used the Lusitanian citizens' dissatisfaction that had been accumulating over the years against Bodin and his clergymen; Guiscard convinced many of them to fight for him in the name of being Lusitania's legitimate ruler. He promised them status, land, and money if they won. Within two months, Guiscard's men raided hundreds of churches and gathered money. Guiscard's message to the Lusitanians was this: Bodin's authority is not absolute. At this point, Bodin decided to fight Guiscard head-on. Maryamian citizens merely observe from the sideline.

### **Autumn, Pars Era 323.**

The Battle of Zechariah (sp?) began. The Field of Zechariah is a wasteland; it was raining very hard the night before the battle, which made it into a mud field. Bodin's troops had 40 thousand soldiers and Guiscard had 18 thousand. Bodin failed to make good use of the numerical advantage; his men were burdened with heavy armour, and the horses refused to move in the mud. On the other hand, Guiscard's soldiers, who were lightly dressed and moving on foot, easily maneuvered on the muddy field. Amongst the disorder, Bodin let slip that the Guiscard they were fighting against was the actual Lusitanian prince. Immediately, one of his followers, who only became Bodin's underling because of circumstances, called for his soldiers to turn

against Bodin; this betrayal spread throughout the army, causing more chaos. Bodin escaped to the north. Due to this battle, many of the aristocratic Lusitanians who had only been watching from afar turned to Guiscard, and he steadily regained his political significance in Maryam.

**By Pars Era 324**, Maryam has been split into two factions: Bodin rules the north, and Guiscard, who crowned himself king earlier, owns the south, which comprises of 70% of the country's land.]

### **Autumn, Pars Era 324.**

Bodin sent a messenger to Misrian king Hossain asking for his help; he promises to give him Guiscard's lands if Hossain can defeat Guiscard. Hossain ignores Bodin's request as he considers the many disadvantages of working with Bodin; instead, he sees multiple benefits if Misr were to ally with Guiscard, and so he decides to send Bodin's messenger to Guiscard as a diplomatic hostage.

### **November.**

Misr sends a messenger – a man with a scar on the right side of his face – to Sindura; he presents Rajendra with extravagant gifts and a request to form an alliance with Sindura to wage war against Pars. After considering all the disadvantages, including geographic (crossing Pars' vast territories to communicate is difficult) and political (should Turk attack again, Sindura will need Pars' military power to back them up) aspects, Rajendra rejects the messenger's invitation. The messenger threatens to head to Pars to stir up trouble between Sindura and Pars' alliance, but Rajendra calmly orders his soldiers to take him down; however, the messenger still manages to escape.

Around the same time, in Herat, the capital of Turk located in between valleys and surrounded by snow and glacial mountains, Hirmiz and the Turkic king Kalhana are conversing. It's revealed that Hirmiz's wife Irina and their unborn child have just passed away. Noticing Hirmiz's potential, Kalhana invites him to become his "guest general" and welcomes his input. Kalhana tells him that he plans to extend Turk's territories and that he appreciates Hirmiz's aide. After thanking Kalhana, Hirmiz is determined to return to Pars, even if he's now working for Turk.

## Chapter IV

Despite being attacked almost simultaneously by Misr from the west and Turk from the east, Narsus concludes that these are merely coincidences and that there is very little chance the two countries are working together. Narsus also receives two conflicting rumors: Hirmiz is working as an aide to Misr's king, and that a foreign man with the right half of his face covered and a lady by his side has been seen with and trusted by Turk's king. Narsus decides to make use of this: he sends Gieve, Elam, and Jaswant as envoys to take Gurab, who's been imprisoned in Ecbatana since his capture at Iron Gate, back to Turk.

While Rushan continues trying to rush Arslan to get married, Daryun and Narsus suspect that Arslan may still be thinking about Estelle, the apprentice knight from Lusitania. Narsus and Arslan also discuss the possibility of marrying Tahamine's daughter (when they locate her) as a political tactic to merge the old and new dynasties, though Narsus also understands that Arslan has the right to choose his own partner as well. Narsus tells him that being single at this time is also a political advantage as, being as strong as Pars is, other kingdoms might want to make peace and offer marriage proposals to ensure harmony between the two countries.

Regarding the mysterious tomb raider that Gieve has reported, there's little they can do but wait for the enemy's movements. On November 20, Gieve's envoy troops start their journey to Turk.

### **November 23.**

A festival is being held by the reservoir just on the outskirts of Ecbatana to celebrate the completion of repair and the winter harvest. Through communicating with the Jinns, Farangis reports that there will be people stirring up trouble tonight, so Arslan sends her and a troop out to investigate. Soon, one of the boats on the lake flips over and people fall into panic. Kubard joins Farangis in pursuit of the instigator. Farangis temporarily stops the man with her arrows, but even Kubard's sword cannot stop him from escaping, though not before his identity is revealed by Farangis. His name is Gurgin; when asked, Farangis merely replies that she knows Gurgin's brother. The slight disturbance didn't bother the citizens too much since no one is seriously injured, and the festival lasts until late into the night.

Back in the capital of Misr, Hossain is disappointed about the messenger's news that Rajendra refuses his proposal to join forces. Half in frustration and half in curiosity, Hossain asks the man with the scar whether he's Prince Hirmiz. When the man replies in the affirmative, Hossain comments that the real Hirmiz has burnt marks on his face. The man insists again that he's Hirmiz, and Hossain gives him a choice: become "Hirmiz" by having half of his face burned or leave the country. Hossain adds that if he decides to take on the role, he'd make sure to get rid of Arslan so that that he can take the throne; Hossain would also let him take one of his daughters as queen. In this manner, Hossain will be able to expand Misr's power and territories. After slight hesitation, the man agrees to the plan; he drinks a cup of medicine with opium to numb his senses and lets the soldiers hold him down as they smolder the right half of his face with the

burning torch. In the end, when Hossain once again try to ask his real name, the man mutters, “Sha... Shagh...” before he resolutely declares himself as Prince Hirmiz.

## Chapter V

### December 1.

Gieve, Elam, Jaswant, Gurab, and the 300 soldiers arrive at Herat, and the envoys have a meeting with Kalhana. Kalhana sneers at Gieve's attempt at peace talk; he's more interested in the "gift" that the Parsians have brought with them: his military general Gurab. Before the Parsian envoys' eyes, Kalhana deals out Gurab's punishment: eight youngsters holding swords – all children of the dead soldiers that Gurab led in the Battle of Iron Gate – surround the general and cut and stab him repeatedly until he bleeds to his death. Kalhana threatens the Parsians that he can always kill them to send a message to Arslan, but Gieve, with an unperturbed tone, claims that the King of Turk won't stoop that low to hurt unarmed guests. When Gieve further adds that Pars and Sindura are allies, Kalhana merely smiles and says they have plans to counter that. The expression he shows is disturbing, and sends chills up Gieve's spine, who can tell immediately that the Turkic king is a cruel and heartless man.

Returning from the northern border, Hirmiz suggests to Kalhana that they should take Turan first – not for their territories but for the manpower, which can easily amount to 10 to 20 thousand soldiers. Since Turanians are poor, if Turk can offer them remuneration in return, Turanian soldiers will not hesitate to become their mercenaries. Hirmiz offers to be the commander of the Turanian forces, and he requests Kalhana to make 100 silver masks for the officers to wear to cause confusion for the Parsians. In addition, Hirmiz plans to use the masked army to invade Sindura at the beginning of next year using the winter climate to their advantage.

### December 19.

One thousand Turanian warriors – mostly in the older age range since almost all the younger soldiers had perished in the battle against Pars three years ago – arrive to meet with Hirmiz. Hirmiz promises that once they've gathered 10 thousand men, Turk will send food and clothing over to Turan, all soldiers will receive 50 silver coins, and they will get half of what they have plundered. He assures them that he doesn't expect them to be fighting for Turk, but that they should fight for themselves and for Turan. That day, Hirmiz distributes the silver masks for the officers; other soldiers are given cotton masks to cover their faces. Thus, the eccentric masked army is completed: composed of Turanians, commanded by a Parsian, and paid by the Turkic king.

On the other hand, Gieve and his group have not been able to find any useful information before they are ordered by Kalhana to leave the capital. Sensing Kalhana's evil intentions, the Parsian envoy group hurriedly makes their preparations to leave. Under Kalhana's orders, Hirmiz commands his masked army to prepare to attack the Parsians once they're on their way; Hirmiz also wants to test the strength of this newly-formed army through an actual combat.

As they travel along the snow-covered mountain road, Jaswant notices a strange group of horsemen riding on the other side of the valley, a few of which are wearing silver masks. The rest of the men are wearing black face masks. With such strange attires, the Parsians figure they are not part of the official Turkic army. As the width of the valley decreases, the masked army constructs a temporary bridge using tree trunks and begin to cross. Parsians' arrows do little damage in the strong wind, and so a messy clash between the two armies start. Earlier, Gieve has seen black smoke swirling from afar, and as Gieve encounters a second man with a silver mask, the sound of horn echoes through the valley, followed by a group of horsemen led by a black flag, and Gieve realizes that Narsus has sent the Zott Clan to their rescue as part of his plan.

Merlane, who still argues that he's only a temporary leader of Zott until his sister Alfreed takes over, rushes in to confront the man in silver mask, who had killed his father a few years ago. Before his sword can touch the man, however, another man wearing the same mask intervenes. In the confused chaos, the masked army withdraws to the other side of the valley and disappears. Merlane explains that he's working under Narsus' order because the tactician wants to avoid using the official military due to political concerns; if they had used Parsian army, it would have been an act of invading borders and many issues will surely arise. As a result of this battle, thankfully only 21 Parsian soldiers have died while some have been lightly injured; with the addition of the Zott group, the 500-men troop quickly make their retreat.

Amongst the masked army, Hirmiz thanks the young Turanian warrior who had saved him from Merlane. His name is Burhan; his brother is Jimsa, who, from what he's heard, is working for Arslan. He claims that he wants to help Hirmiz defeat the Parsian king in order to wash away the shame his brother has brought upon his country. Hirmiz appreciates Burhan's honesty and enthusiasm, and warns the other Turanian soldiers not to place Jimsa's disgrace upon Burhan. Burhan is grateful for Hirmiz's gesture.

Back in Misr, the man who has his face burned, now claiming to be "Prince Hirmiz", is given a golden mask by Hossain; the Misrian king is certain that the man is now entirely under his manipulation. At the same time, Xandes, who had been travelling through different countries for the past few years, recently heard that Hirmiz is working as a guest general for Hossain, and so he decides to come meet him and hopes to aid him once more. Hossain can sense Xandes' loyalty towards Hirmiz, and he's planning to make use of that. He tells Xandes that Hirmiz has been injured and needs about ten days to recover; until then, he's welcome to stay in the guest residence. He plans to kill Xandes if he should find out that the Hirmiz by his side is a fraud.

In Ecbatana, Narsus is still bothered by the mysterious tomb raider; the pieces just don't fit. Finally, he remembers something he and Alfreed had both encountered in the past: ghadaq – a type of sorcery that allows the user to travel through underground undetected. After telling Arslan of his suspicions, the Shah sends Narsus, Daryun, and Alfreed to the royal mausoleum, where they dig up Andragoras' casket and discover that the body of the previous king has been stolen. All that's left is a giant hole at the bottom which leads underground into the darkness.

Arslan also receives the news from Gulaze's messenger that Rajendra had turned down Misr's invitation to join alliance. When he hears Narsus' report about the disappearance of Andragoras'

body and the possibility that it might be related to sorcery, Arslan plans to have a talk with Farangis to set up a strategy in response to it.

Beneath the busy streets of Ecbatana, four sorcerers have gathered in the shadows. One of them, a man by the name of Gurgin, is being questioned by his comrades because of his brother's relationship with Farangis. Gurgin reassures them that he's a loyal follower of Zakhak's and that he'll never betray them. Their next step is to revive their teacher, and plan to get rid of Arslan and his men once and for all. From a room, one of the sorcerers pulls out a bed; on it is the Turanian king Ilterish, who has supposedly disappeared three years ago.

## **Book 9: A Rotation of Banners**



# Chapter I

## Pars Era 325

Earlier that year, after crossing through the extreme climate of ice and snow for 15 days, the Masked Army, led by Hirmiz, begins to wreck havoc within Sinduran territories: they slaughter civilians and soldiers alike, and they plunder and burn down what's left. The three soldiers who survive the first wave of attack head to the nearest city to report what'd happened, but even as Sinduran troops prepare their defenses and plan their approach, the Masked Army has already rushed in like a whirlwind, striking down Sinduran troops with horrifying speed and efficiency. One general reports that, as the Masked warriors, fueled by their greed, begin to fight amongst themselves, the leader steps in and beheads one of them, thus immediately sobering the soldiers into absolute obedience again. As more news of defeat reach Rajendra in Uraiyr, he decides to send a letter asking the Parsian king, who he considers to be his best friend, for help.

## February

King Arslan plans to head toward Sindura to provide military aid to King Rajendra as they suffer invasion from the Masked Army. Narsus suggests they go north through Turanian territory first to avoid the possible attacks from the Turkian troops by the southern border; if the tactician's conjecture is correct – that the Masked Army is composed of Turanian soldiers – then Turan itself is basically defenseless, and Parsian troops can pass through the country to reach Sindura quicker. Narsus also sends Tus and Kubard to Peshawar to distract Turk's attention. Gieve, having recently returned from Turk, reports his suspicion that the leader of the Masked Army can very likely be Prince Hirmiz.

The 20 thousand soldiers meticulously chosen for this mission are led by Narsus, Daryun, Farangis, Elam, Alfreed, Jaswant, and Isfan, while Merlane and his Zott people serve as mobile forces. Gieve is only convinced to go when Arslan nonchalantly comments about how Farangis might feel lonely without Gieve coming along.

As Arslan's troops easily pass through Turan, the king sees for himself that the Turanians have been living in poverty; winter is especially harsh for them when there's a significant shortage of food. Arslan wants to help out, and following Narsus' suggestion, he orders his men to leave behind food and medications as "gifts" for allowing the Parsian troops to pass through their territories. Jimsa, a Turanian warrior now serving in Parsian court, doesn't comment, but has mixed feelings about Arslan's benevolent act.

The northern border of Turk is only defended by 3,000 soldiers. With Jimsa leading, he and his small band of soldiers effortlessly overtake the gate and without any bloodshed, Arslan's troops break through Turk's border. Back in the capital of Herat, Turkic king Kalhana is shocked by the news. In response to Pars' attack, Kalhana originally plans to have additional troops sent to each of the six routes that lead to the capital city; it's easy to defend when they are protected by the

high cliffs of the mountains. However, Kalhana changes his mind when he considers Narsus' presence in Arslan's court, remembering how the man had single-handedly destroyed the Turan-Turk-Sindura alliance years ago. The king's cousin and general, Kadphises, objects to Kalhana's order to send troops to the south to engage Parsian troops. Kalhana's reason is that he's promised Hirmiz he'd provide full support for him and his Masked Army; in truth, he's only using him as the first step to take over other countries.

Thus, the "Battle of Pass of Zalahriq" begins with Farangis and her troops of archers facing off with 50 thousand Turkic soldiers crowded along a very narrow route. The north wind becomes an advantage for Parsian troops as their arrows and smoke bombs fly easily into the tightly-packed crowd, where the enemies have no ways to back up or move to the sides. The first victory goes to Farangis' troops, which only bear 20 injured men while Turkic forces suffer over 5,000 casualties. That same night, Singh and the other Turkic generals decide to attack the enemies during the night, but before they can carry out any order, Parsian forces are already there, attacking them with a combination of flames, arrows, and swords. As dawn breaks, Turkic soldiers who survive the night scurry back to Sindura territory without their weapons and food.

Parsian troops continue their way south, and their vanguards have already reached Sindura territories. Meanwhile, Kalhana summons Kadphises and commands him to take lead of the Turkic troops stranded in Sindura. The king promises that if Kadphises succeeds in defeating the Parsians, he'll give his eldest daughter to him, thus ensuring his position as the next king. Kadphises, though unwilling to accept such dangerous mission, is forced to accept it.

## Chapter II

### March

The northwestern area of Sindura has been assaulted by the Masked Army; soon after, Singh's 35 thousand defeated Turkic soldiers arrive, but frustrated by the fact that the villages have already been raided by the Masked Army, they merely burn the villages and leave. Many of them escape in groups or are caught by Sinduran military; in that manner, their manpower decreases to only about 30 thousand. Then, Arslan's Parsian troops arrive, and they give away the rations they've taken from the defeated Turkic troops to Sinduran citizens. Arslan's fury continues to rise as he witnesses what the Masked Army has done to the Sinduran villages.

This desperate situation forces Singh to make a plan: in three days, they will take over Katamprad (sp?), one of the nearby walled cities, and use it as their base. On the third day, they succeed before Sindura can send in help and thus they have now secured a temporary base. Singh sends a messenger to Hirmiz, ordering his Masked Army to rendezvous with them in the city.

When Hirmiz receives Singh's message, he pointedly ignores his order because of various reasons. Firstly, Hirmiz works for Kalhana as a guest general so he has no duty to obey other Turkic generals. Secondly, the Masked Army's advantage lies in its speed and mobility; his troops are not meant to remain in one place for defense. In addition, Hirmiz still needs to deal with the troublesome military supervisor Yipam and his 50 Turkic soldiers, who, under Kalhana's order, is supposed to report the Masked Army's activities back to the king but has no commanding power over the Masked Army. However, as Bullahan informs Hirmiz, these men only take what the army has raided and their attitude has been nothing but condescending.

Rejecting Yipam's proposition to go join up with Singh's troops, Hirmiz decides to return to Turk instead; after all, they've completed what he had initially planned. There's no reason for them to remain in Sindura, and surely, Rajendra's men would have followed Singh's messenger and known of the Masked Army's whereabouts.

The older Turan general thinks it's better for them to have Yipam and his men alive for now and focus on collecting evidence of Yipam stealing the goods that are supposed to be given to the king; if they have the slightest hint of acting against them, they can use this to blackmail Yipam into obedience. Hirmiz agrees.

However, on that same day, as Bullahan and Yipam argue about having the Masked Army going to Katamprad to join the rest of the Turkic forces, exchange of furious insults turns into a physical brawl. In the process, Bullahan chops off one of Yipam's arm. Hirmiz is forced to change his initial plan, ordering his army to slaughter Yipam and every single one of the Turkic soldiers who are with them. He considers where he should go and where he should let his banner stand, now that they cannot return to Turk. Maryam – his deceased wife Princess Irina's home

country, which is now controlled by Bodin and Guiscard – is the first place that comes to his mind.

Rajendra and his 30 thousand soldiers set out to eliminate the Masked Army, but the group has already left. When he meets up with Arslan, Rajendra teases Narsus, saying that even though the tactic of attacking Turk from the north is a brilliant idea, he can only use it once. Narsus replies easily that since Kalhana will undoubtedly strengthen their defense along the northern border, they will have no military power to go south and invade Sindura. The two parties decide to have troops surround Katamprad and patiently wait it out; when the Turkic soldiers run out of rations within the city, they will have no choice or strength to fight back. Rajendra is worried about the Masked Army, and he wants to force them to go west and cross Kaveri River so that the Parsian troops in Peshawar can deal with them. Before Rajendra has a chance to voice out his plan, however, Elam and Alfreed report that they have captured a man named Kadphises, who claims to be a Turkic royalty.

Narsus uses his own method of interrogation to question Kadphises: the Turkic man is stripped to his waist and tied at the wrist while they take turns tickling him with a feathered fan until Kadphises tells them everything, including how he has been sent by Kalhana for an impossible mission, basically banishing him. Narsus plans to use him to their advantage, especially when Kadphises declares that when he becomes the next king of Turk, he can ensure peace between borders. Narsus has Kadphises promised that he'll take down the Masked Army. The tactician also shows Arslan that he has Kadphises wrote some letters; the purpose is to use his handwriting to fabricate letters for later use.

Whilst considering Hirmiz and his threat towards Pars, Narsus admits that Hirmiz is a capable man, but being trapped by his obsession with bloodlines, there is nothing but desperation and darkness in his path until he realizes that he can live a better life than this if he can just change his perspective.

### **March 20.**

From the walls of Katamprad, Turkic troops spot what looks to be the Masked Army being chased by Sinduran cavalry; at first they are merely observing until they see the rations that the Masked Army has brought with them. After hearing someone yelling outside the gates with heavy Turanian-accented Parsian, they are even more certain that the Masked Army has come to their aid. But when they open the gates, Jimsa, along with his Parsian soldiers, dash in. In the end, 5,000 Turkic soldiers die, and the remaining are forced to return to their country having accomplished nothing. All the Turkic generals in charge have been killed except for Singh, who is being sent back to Kalhana with a letter from the king's cousin Kadphises.

## Chapter III

At the end of Pars Era 324, Xandes is finally allowed to reunite with “Prince Hirmiz” in Misr. Xandes has no doubts that the man in the golden mask is his previous master, and Misrian king Hossain plans to make good use of Xandes’ loyalty for Hirmiz. As an aid to Hirmiz, Xandes is now also being treated by Hossain as a Misrian general, and is given two duties: to organize all the Parsians in Misr, which mostly consist of slave traders, nobles who’ve lost their financial and political status, and those who dislike Arslan’s statecrafts, as well as training the Misrian military.

One day in March, when Xandes returns to his living quarters to have dinner with his lover Parizad, the Parsian woman once again voices out her suspicion about the golden-masked Hirmiz. Though Xandes is unwilling to admit it, he feels there’s something amiss with the man with whom he’s only conversed with briefly three times after their reunion. Parizad proposes a plan to find out whether the man Xandes currently serves is the real Prince Hirmiz: Xandes can talk about something only he and the real Hirmiz know about, and if the man misspeaks, then the man is clearly a fraud.

To ease his mind, Xandes carries out Parizad’s plan the next time he sees golden-masked Hirmiz two days later. He talks about the incident when they were trying to take the Ruknabad from Kai Khosrow’s mausoleum, but he changes a few details to the story – saying that it happened in the winter instead of summer, and how Daryun came to stop them even though it was Gieve who did so – in order to test the golden-masked man. In the end, the golden-masked man replies in the affirmative to Xandes’ made-up story, and as Xandes makes his way back to his living quarters, he’s frustrated and furious that he’s been tricked by the Misrian king and this imposter. On the other hand, Parizad has gathered information from the marketplace, and she’s certain that Misrian army is preparing for an all-out invasion.

After Xandes tell Parizad about the fake Hirmiz and find that their house is surrounded by Misrian soldiers, Parizad suggests they run for it. Xandes agrees, and he tells Parizad to bring with her some money and jewelry before they leave. Among all the jewelry she owns, she only picks out a silver bracelet with the carving of a young man wearing a hat with a feather while he holds a blade stabbed into a bull’s back; this is a kind of design that can only be used by nobles of high status. There are only 50 soldiers outside since their only purpose is to guard Xandes, but Masinissa is planning to bring in 300 more men that same night.

Xandes’ living quarters burst into fire, and as the soldiers cautiously walk closer, Xandes comes out swinging his sword and a burning torch while Parizad brings in two horses. In the chaos of smoke and blood, the two Parsians escape. When Masinissa finds out, he reports the incident to Hossain; Hossain wants Xandes to be captured alive, and Masinissa begrudgingly complies.

That night finds Parizad and Xandes walking on foot by the Tigris River in a rock field, and Masinissa’s 400 men surrounding them. The Misrian general challenges the Parsian warrior on a

one-to-one combat; within a short while, it's clear that Xandes' skills are more superior than Masinissa's and the Misrian general soon finds himself under the mercy of Xandes' sword. In his desperation to distract Xandes, he tries to persuade the Parsian man that Hossain intends to make him into a general, but this is not enough to deter Xandes. Masinissa's last attempt is to ask Xandes whether or not he wants to know the true identity of the golden-masked man, and it's this precise moment of curiosity and hesitation that costs Xandes' his life. Masinissa, swiftly taking the dagger strapped to his boot, stabs deeply into Xandes' abdomen and twists the blade. Xandes tries to strangle Masinissa with his last bit of strength, but the Misrian soldiers around them finally spring into action, and in the end, Xandes is stabbed with three spears to the back.

Hossain is irritated that Masinissa killed Xandes, because the King truly sees the Parsian warrior as a valuable asset to their army. When asked about Parizad's whereabouts, Masinissa lies and says the woman has drowned in the river, though her body cannot be retrieved. At this time, an envoy from Maryam named Olaberria comes in to see Hossain. He tells the Misrian king that Guiscard has become the new king of Maryam and that he's in the process of hunting down Bodin and his men; he adds that Guiscard wishes to work together with Misr if Pars, and put the two countries' rough past behind them. After some small talks, Olaberria is sent back to his inn near the pier, where his men find and rescue Parizad from the water.

## Chapter IV

Hirmiz initial plan to quickly return to Turk has been shattered. In order to make up for their killing Yipam and his men and to ensure that they remain in good graces with Kalhana, Hirmiz is forced to bring his army to Katamprad to rescue Singh's Turkic forces; what he didn't know is that Arslan's troops have already taken over Katamprad.

A thunderstorm is about to break above Katamprad, which is currently occupied by Arslan's Parsian troops and surrounded by Rajendra's Sinduran troops as they await the Masked Army's arrival. Rajendra's plan is to lure the Masked Army into Katamprad and then let the Parsian troops handle the rest inside the city.

Within the castle of Katamprad, Narsus and Daryun discuss their tactics in response to Kalhana's plans; Narsus is sure that the forged letter using Kadphises' handwriting will be effective. Gieve continues to flirt with Farangis, to which the priestess merely responds with cold insults. Farangis compliments Alfreed's faithfulness towards Narsus. When Alfreed and Elam are about to start their verbal battle again, thunder rumbles outside and the rain starts to fall heavily.

The Masked Army, under Hirmiz' lead, storms through Rajendra's troops as quick as lightning and reaches the gate of Katamprad. However, instead of Turkic forces, they are met with Parsian troops' arrows from atop the walls. At that exact moment, Hirmiz realizes that he's fallen right into Narsus' trap. This doesn't deter Hirmiz, and he calls for his soldiers to keep going as they enter Katamprad through the gates, knowing well that this is a desperate battle of life and death.

Daryun seeks out Hirmiz within the chaos of blood and rain, knowing that even though Arslan would hate seeing his cousin killed, Hirmiz's death can only be a beneficial conclusion to their personal conflicts and the political threat Hirmiz poses to Pars. The fight seems endless, as both swordsmen's skills are on par with each other; but within these three years, it's clear that Daryun's skills have improved while Hirmiz's remains stunted; Hirmiz can see these tiny differences the longer they fight. One of the older Turanian generals wants to lend Hirmiz's some help because he wants Hirmiz to go back to commanding the remaining army; however, this only enrages Hirmiz and his pride, and so the Turanian general is killed by his own commander's sword.

Shocked by his own actions, Hirmiz only forces himself to fight harder, but after a few more heavy clashes, his blade breaks, and driven by his survival instinct, Hirmiz escapes. Outside the city, the Sinduran troops have successfully taken down the Turanian soldiers. As a Turanian, Jimsa doesn't want to participate in the battle inside the city and so he waits by the gates until the end. This is when Bullahan appears with a sword in hand as he swings it towards Jimsa to get his attention. As the two brothers argue, Jimsa trying to calmly persuade Bullahan to fight on Arslan's side while Bullahan is defending Hirmiz with heated shouting, they realize that they have chosen different paths that will only pull them apart even further. Bullahan turns around to

leave with the remaining of the Masked Army, and though Jimsa could have stopped him with his blow-darts, he doesn't have the heart to do so, and so he allows his brother to leave.

Rajendra requests that Kadphises be given to him to deal with. Narsus agrees, knowing well that Rajendra intends to help Kadphises become the next king of Turk. Even if his plan fails, he can still use Kadphises' life to gain Kalhana's favor.

Hirmiz and about 1,000 Turanian soldiers make it out of Katamprad alive, and they escape further southwest. However, Isfan, with his two wolf cubs and his 1,500 soldiers, are prepared to take down the Masked Army. First, the Parsian soldiers eliminate some of them with arrows from a distance, then they rush in with their swords for direct combat. In the end, only Hirmiz and barely over a hundred Turanian soldiers survive; the Masked Army has been completely destroyed.

They escape to Port Malabalu (sp?), the largest coastal city in Sindura. Hirmiz picks an armed merchant ship called Bandera and plans to overtake this ship under the veil of the night with 30 of his followers. Turanians live inland so they don't know how to swim or operate ships. Hirmiz orders his men to leave the sailors alone so that they can set sail, and he threatens the sailors and the captain to only use Parsian language when communicating since neither he nor the Turanian warriors can understand Sinduran. After the rest of the Turanian soldiers get on the ship, save for a few who get swept away by the strong waves, they begin to sail out of the port. However, sailing at night is prohibited, and Bandera is pursued by military vessels until the merchant ship uses their cannon and sets the military ships on fire as Bandera hurriedly heads west.

The news of the incident reaches Rajendra in Uraiyr the next morning. He orders his general to contact Pars for backup once Hirmiz's group reaches land, and sends ships to pursue them.

## **April**

After seven days of resting, Arslan's Parsian troops return victoriously to their home country. Meanwhile, Kadphises is transported to and put under house arrest in a fortress upon a mountain within Sinduran territory per his request.



# Chapter V

## May

In Ecbatana, Arslan and Elam meet up with Gulaze inside an inn that's famous for the gathering of many merchants from different countries. According to Gulaze's report, Hirmiz's Masked Army has overtaken a Sinduran merchant ship and hasn't been located yet. They try to surmise where Hirmiz is heading; the most likely place he'll go is Maryam through Misr, and in passing, Gulaze mentions a strange incident happening in Misr: a golden-masked man who's also named Hirmiz is working with Misrian king Hossain, and he has a group of Parsian followers. Arslan concludes that they should continue collecting intelligence and prepare their navy in Gilan just in case.

After he greets Kishward back in the palace to let him know he and Elam have returned safely from their brief trip in town, Arslan retires to his bedchamber, where he starts pondering again about Hirmiz. The thought of Estelle's whereabouts also crosses the young king's mind, and he knows that Estelle is the one who, all those years ago, greatly changed his perspectives: after understanding that Lusitanians are not mere nameless enemies but are humans with emotions and various thoughts, Arslan is more willing to forgive his enemies and to work towards peaceful solutions.

Azrael suddenly calls out a warning before the glass windows to Arslan's room shatter and in swoops a man-shaped monster with gigantic bat-like wings. Azrael takes the aerial battle outside, where Elam tries to distract the monster away from Arslan. After receiving Jaswant's report, Narsus, Farangis, Kishward, and Alfreed lead their troops to go help. Gieve pierces the monster with a spear when it flies dangerously close by, and after it falls to the ground, Elam cuts off its head. When everybody arrives on scene, they are shocked to discover the corpse of a winged ape – an evil creature infamous for being Serpent King Zahhak's underlings and are known to ingest human flesh. These creatures haven't been seen since Zahhak's disappearance, so their reemergence can only be a sign of bad omen. Kishward immediately leads a troop to search through the palace, but a disembodied voice suddenly spreads through the courtyard, threatening to haunt Arslan's dreams every night. With her crystal flute, Farangis locates the sorcerer behind some bushes. The sorcerer fights against Elam and Jaswant, but can't avoid Daryun's attack; the Black Knight slashes him from shoulder to waist.

Arslan remembers an incident from last year at the festival, and the worried expression on Farangis, and so the Shah chooses this moment ask her about it. Thus, the priestess begins to tell him her backstory: how she became a priestess, and how she encountered her lover Aghriras and his younger brother Gurgin, who later became a follower of Zahhak's. After hearing Farangis' story, Arslan's respect for the priestess increases. As they supervise the clean up of the winged ape and sorcerer's carcasses, Narsus and Daryun discuss the implication of these intruders. Narsus estimates that reviving the winged apes is only the beginning – an experiment to prepare

for something much bigger and more evil – and the one behind all this is most likely followers of Zahhak.

Meanwhile, only three sorcerers are still alive: Gurgin, Ghundi, and Gazhdaham.

In Port Banipal, located at the mouth of Tigris River in northern Misr, a ship is about to set sail to Maryam. Olaberria hasn't received a positive reply from Hossain about an alliance between Misr and Maryam. Parizad, who asks Olaberria to take her with him to Maryam, persuades the Lusitanian envoy that Hossain is untrustworthy; she tells him about the fake Hirmiz and how Xandes was murdered. Olaberria is convinced, and decides to take the Parsian woman with them on their journey back to Maryam. Parizad promises herself that she'd avenge Xandes' death before she finds happiness for herself.

Around the same time, Hirmiz's ship nears the coast of Misr from the east.

## **Book 10: A Gathering of Clouds**

# Chapter I

## June, Pars Era 325.

Heading east towards Peshawar, Merlane's Zott troop of 30 men encounter a swarm of winged apes. Kubard, who's leading a troop of 50 from Peshawar, joins in to help. Both groups form a circle in order to effectively take down the beasts; however, just as Kubard is about to get attacked, Tus, who's leading about 1000 men from Ecbatana, saves him by killing one of the winged apes with his iron chains. Together, they manage to fight off the apes until they disperse and fly away. Protecting Tus are three young female warriors (Patna – 18, Kura – 17, Yurin – 15). When Kubard, driven by curiosity as is usual when he sees beautiful women, asks about them, Tus replies that they are his wives.

When the three Parsian warriors return to Peshawar, they are warmly welcomed by the travelling traders who have been stranded within the citadel due to the fierce attacks of the winged apes. After getting settled in and upon Kubard's insistence, Tus tells them about how he ends up marrying the three young women. Tus has a good friend in the army named Banipal who's ten years his senior; he was badly injured during the last battle with the Lusitanians and he never recovered. When he passed away a month ago, his widow found Tus' letter in Banipal's belongings, saying that Tus is willing to help out in any way should they need it. The widow is most worried about her three daughters' futures, and she requests that Tus takes one of them as his wife. Tus is unable to choose one, so the widow has each girl place a different coloured glass bead in a pouch and let Tus pick; but when Tus pulls out a bead, it's black. He tells them humbly that he's willing to marry the three girls and promise to love them equally for the rest of their lives; it turns out it was the girls who placed the black bead in the pouch.

After the entertaining story, Tus returns to the topic at hand. The reason he's sent by Arslan is that the king wants Kubard to send troops from Peshawar to seal off Mt. Damavand. Narsus presumes that the winged apes reside on the mountain, but to blockage the entire area will require at least 50 thousand men, which will weaken the defense against the Sinduran king Rajendra just across the border. Narsus also mentions to Tus that it's better to prepare all the preventive measures now because it'll be useless once the Serpent King Zahhak is revived.

Merlane also reports an incident that happened in Ecbatana back in May, three days after Arslan got attacked by a lone winged ape. A bathhouse staff by the name of Khalid (sp?) seeks the aid of Arslan when he overhears a conversation that takes place in the steam room between what appears to be a group of judges of the high court, but are actually a bunch of bird-faced beasts in disguise. They are praising Zahhak and have been talking about a gathering at Mt. Damavand that will happen during the Midsummer Lent (a period of 40 days after late June). Khalid panics after hearing this, gets discovered, notices the bird beaks on their faces, and escapes until he ends up finding Arslan, who has been taking a stroll in the city with Elam at the time.

After hearing Khalid's account, Arslan immediately sends Zaravant after the bird-faced beasts, but they have already fled. He also calls Narsus over to discuss the implication of the beasts' appearances in the city. Narsus suspects that Zahhak's followers might have done that on purpose in order to distract and confuse them, and Arslan wonders if ignoring this distraction would be a good tactic. Narsus has Elam trying to answer, and Elam replies that it's always better to get the upper hand by taking pre-emptive measures instead of waiting around for the enemy to act. Zaravant knows Narsus wants to send in a troop to Mt. Damavand and the knight volunteers; however, Narsus has someone else in mind for the task.

## Chapter II

### June.

East of Ecbatana about 40 farsang away lies the Pass of Murtaza, where about a thousand travelers – including caravans, performers, and a small group of women returning to their hometowns – are gathered and resting as night falls. The reason why such a huge group has gathered is because many have heard about the beast sightings, and they believe the more people there are, the safer they'll be.

That night, a boy who is on watch comes across a man with a broadsword strapped to his back and two wolf cubs playing by his side. The man seems to be guarding the group of women, and he tells the boy that he's spotted a suspicious being amongst the group. Under his command, the wolf named Baharam ventures close to the black-cloaked figure but almost gets injured. The figure is a bird-faced beast in disguise. The man suspects that it's staying near the women in the hopes of getting its hands on infant flesh. The boy wakes up everyone in the vicinity, and in the chaos, the man orders the beast to be captured alive. Before anyone can act, however, another beast joins in, but the man easily overtakes both with the swipe of his sword and the help of his wolves.

The man reveals himself to be Isfan, and everyone's excited that one of the King's guardians is with them. He explains the situation at Ecbatana to the crowd and the reason why he's heading to Mt. Damavand; he also emphasizes the fact that he's currently on his own. Next, he tries to interrogate the two captured monsters about the gathering at Midsummer Lent, but they refuse to comply despite Isfan's threats so they are tied up to a boulder instead. Danger averted, the crowd calms down and rests for the remaining of the night. The next day, it's been discovered that about 50 people within the group have escaped in the dark, and those same people have been captured by Jaswant's troops in the surrounding area. This has all been a trap set up by Isfan and Jaswant in the hopes of finding more about Zahhak's followers. They sent 300 soldiers to escort the travelers to the closest city.

### June 15.

Kubard, Tus, his three wives, Merlane, Isfan, and a troop of 3,000 people, led by Jaswant, who is the only person there who's ever been on this mountain, have gathered at the foot of Mt. Damavand as they go on an expedition.

On the same night in Ecbatana, Arslan invites Elam, Narsus, and Daryun to have dinner together. They discuss Hirmiz, who some presumes to have headed for Misr to seek Hossain's aid, as a possible threat to Pars, but Narsus thinks he's not a threat anymore because Parsian citizens no longer see him as their rightful ruler after they know he was the one who worked with the Lusitanians to invade their country all those years ago. They also talk about Zahhak's revival;

Narsus' only concern is how other nations might take advantage if Zahhak dominates or weakens Pars.

In Akhmim, the capital of Misr, Hossain receives a report from a fishing village located in the southeast coast. A foreign ship drops off a group of men; they speak a language that the villagers do not understand but is led by a Parsian man with a scar on his face. According to the report, they are headed towards the capital.

## Chapter III

### June.

Hirmiz, along with 92 Turanian warriors who survived the journey on the sea, reach a fishing village in Misr. Since Turanians are not used to traveling by water, many of them have been weakened physically; in addition to being defeated multiple times in the past weeks, their mental strength has been deteriorated as well, and they try to drown out their depression by drinking and inflicting violence on the innocent villagers.

Hirmiz rescues a Parsian merchant named Luban (sp?) from thieves, and hires him to become a translator. Luban informs him of recent news from Akhmim: a man who claims to be Prince Hirmiz of Pars receives support from Misrian king Hossain, and 1/3 of Parsian citizens living in Misr plan to join the prince to overthrow the current king of Pars, Arslan. Hirmiz tries not to let his shock and anger display on his face, and continues to ask about Xandes. From Luban's information, Hirmiz presumes that Xandes is currently working for the fake prince. Luban, who left Akhmim in March, doesn't know of Xandes' death.

Gathering a group of Turanian warriors, Hirmiz rouses up their will to fight for him by promising them that they will take the kingdom of Misr for their own, and those who choose to follow him will be given rank, money, and women. Hirmiz's determination and confidence is all the Turanians need, and they get ready to leave for the capital city. Alone with Burhan, Hirmiz emphasizes that he'll stop at nothing until he has Misr in his hands, even if he holds no personal grievances against this nation. He further comments that doing bad deeds like this makes his emotions run high and excited. Since he can't reveal his true identity in Misr yet, Hirmiz calls himself 'Quhyar', who was one of Kai Khosrow's sons but never became king. After a 15-day journey, they arrive at the capital of Misr, Akhmim.

From the intel that Luban gathers, Hirmiz now knows that Xandes is dead, most likely by the hands of Hossain because he'd found out about the fake Hirmiz. With Xandes gone, three Parsians are fighting to be the next leader. Hirmiz decides to avenge Xandes' death, and he asks Luban to enlist the three Parsians' help so that he may have a chance to talk with Hossain. After Luban leaves, Burhan voices out his distrust of the merchant, but Hirmiz chastises him, telling him that he must be more open-minded in order to become his right-hand man. Burhan's attitude becomes even more enthusiastic after Hirmiz encouragement.

### June 18.

After Hossain speaks with Hirmiz, who's under the disguise with the name 'Quhyar', Hossain decides that he'll hire 'Quhyar' as a guest general to assist his 'Prince Hirmiz'. To test his skills, Hossain orders 'Quhyar's troops to take down an organization of bandits in the west. Masinissa, who has lost the trust and patience of Hossain since the incident with Xandes, is ordered by the Misrian king to kill the current fake Hirmiz if necessary and make 'Quhyar' into the next new



Hirmiz. Masinissa thinks about the possibility of 'Quhyar' being the real Hirmiz, and he's afraid for his own life since he killed Xandes in such an underhanded manner.

#### **June 19.**

Hirmiz gathers the group of 3,000 Parsian men who had been training under Xandes before, and coldly kills one of them who has been loudly proclaiming his right to be the next leader due to his impressive family background. Ten more Parsians die by Turanian arrows when they attempt to fight back. Hirmiz announces that should anyone disobey him or show a hint of cowardice during battles, he'll not hesitate to kill them as well; however, if they perform well, he'll reward them accordingly.

#### **July 4.**

'Quhyar' and his troops of 3,000 Parsians and 90 Turanians return victorious; 2,000 bandits are killed (proven by the 4 bags of right ears that they cut off to show Masinissa, who doubts Hirmiz's report), about 1,000 captured, and the rest barely escaped. Hossain promises to have him meet with 'Hirmiz' soon.

## Chapter IV

### June.

Farangis and Alfreed are in Hormom Valley (sp?), located in the Oxus (sp?) region in the central area of Pars. They are currently on their way to see Munzir, the lord of this region and Zaravant's father, upon his request. Apparently, a suspicious figure has been observed near the Temple of Ashi, which houses 500 priestesses, and so Arslan sent Farangis and Alfreed to resolve the issue. While resting by a creek, they run into eight men, led by an obnoxious man called Namard, harassing a group of young women. Before the two of them can interfere, another young woman who looks about Alfreed's age steps in and fights seven of the men off by herself. Just as Namard is about to strike her from behind, Farangis saves her and assures her that, if she like, she can end the man's life right there and then. The woman mentions that Namard is Munzir's nephew and so they decide to let him go this time. The woman introduces herself as Layla; the three women share a drink and some pleasantries, and Layla asks that they return what seems to be a letter, which has fallen out of the man's pocket during their scuffle, to Namard when they see him again.

When they arrive at Munzir's mansion, Farangis and Alfreed read the letter addressed to Namard sent by a Parsian living in Misr. From the letter, they now know that Xandes is dead and that a group of Parsians, led by Prince Hirmiz and dissatisfied by Arslan's governing, are planning to overthrow the king; the writer of the letter seeks help from Namard. From the date of the letter, they determine that the 'Hirmiz' in Misr is an impostor since the real Hirmiz and the Masked Army had been wreaking havoc in Sindura at the time.

Soon, they are invited to a banquet organized by Munzir, and they meet Namard again. In the midst of the banquet, the drunken Namard starts to loudly criticize Arslan's new policies; in turn, Farangis points out that while Zaravant volunteered to fight during the recapture of Ecbatana, Namard was nowhere in sight. Alfreed laughs upon seeing Namard's helplessness against Farangis' verbal jabs, and Namard attacks her with a knife, which causes a ruckus at the dining table. The banquet ends early with apologies between Farangis, Alfreed and Munzir.

In the privacy of Munzir's office, he reveals to the two convoys that Namard is actually his second son; in addition, Zaravant left to join Arslan all those years ago was partly to show that he was willing to give up his inheritance rights to Namard. Returning to the topic at hand, Munzir tells them about the three beautiful priestess trainees who have gone missing within half a year.

The next day, Farangis and Alfreed go the temple to investigate. Alfreed reunites with Layla, who turns out to be a priestess trainee. The two girls get talking and Alfreed finds out a few things: Munzir and his older brother (who passed away a long time ago) didn't get along; it was after Zaravant left two years ago that Munzir seemed to start indulging and promoting Namard; and Munzir's wife hasn't been seen in public for a year. Alfreed also comments on Layla's silver

bracelet, which bears the carving that signifies royalty. Layla explains that two other orphaned infants who were abandoned and left at the door of the temple also have the same bracelet, but the other two girls left the temple when they were five years old.

That same night, Alfreed and Farangis are patrolling the hallways of the temple when they spot a man sneaking in through a hidden door behind the portrait of Ashi. It's Namard, and the two women mention the letter that Layla picked up when she was fighting him. Caught red-handed, Namard escapes through the same secret channel, and the two envoys follow him in the dark. On the way, they find another entrance into the tunnel that leads to Munzir's office, but they don't stop until they hear strange sounds at the end of the path. They find an old man who's locked up in chains, looking starved and tortured, and his eyes having been gouged out; he calls himself Munzir, and tells them that the old man they've met is his older brother.

## Chapter V

Before the real Munzir can continue, the old man whom Alfreed and Farangis thought was Munzir arrives, and he blatantly admits that he's actually Munzir's older brother, Kermine. Kermine doesn't bother to pretend anymore, and he reveals his vicious and arrogant nature, proceeding to tell them what happened: Kermine was appointed to be the next lord of Oxus, but Munzir set a trap for him, resulting in him being imprisoned underground for 20 years while Munzir inherited the land and title. He claims that this is not vengeance but an act of justice; he also admits that he's killed Munzir's wife, Zaravant's stepmother a year ago.

When Farangis asks him why he didn't ask Arslan for help, it's clear that Kermine despises the young king, and brags that he has a stronger ally though he hesitates to mention the name. By Farangis and Alfreed's subtly perceptive questioning, Kermine reveals more information than he realizes, which leads to Farangis concluding that involving Misr (as proven by Namard's letter) is just another means to create chaos within Pars, and the one that ends up taking advantage is Zahhak. When the realization that Kermine is a follower of Zahhak's hits, it's already too late; Kermine activates a trap that captures the two envoys with an iron cage. Kermine says he'll return in five days' time and leaves.

Soon after, Namard arrives with a set of keys on his waist. Seeing the two women locked up, he arrogantly insults them by offering to free them if they're willing to become his concubine and servant. Alfreed continues to rile him up until he gets close to the cage; she spits in his face, and in a fit of rage, Namard tries to seize her through the iron bars, but Farangis catches him by the arm. Alfreed retrieves the keys from Namard, frees themselves, and locks the man up instead. Kermine returns to find his son locked up; the two parties reach a negotiation: if the two envoys let his son go, Kermine promises to not harm them or Munzir.

After Namard and Kermine leave, the two women unlock Munzir's chains and they slowly make their way towards the exit. However, not too long after, an arrow shoots out from the dark and kills Munzir in an instant. Farangis hacks off the archer's – revealed to be Namard – left arm with her sword, and he flees into the darkness again. Since they can't take Munzir's body with them, Farangis asks Alfreed to cut off bits of his hair so that they can bring it back for Zaravant. As they continue their way, they start to smell smoke and realize that Namard is determined to kill them either by suffocation or burning. They follow the direction of the wind in search for an exit, and the flames chase closely after them as Namard not only sets fire but also pour oil into the slightly inclined tunnel. At the end of the channel, someone is singing, and both women recognize it as Gieve's voice. Farangis asks Gieve to help evacuate the temple with them.

In Ecbatana, Arslan has been having a relatively serene summer, but he has a premonition that this peace will not last long, so he takes every opportunity he has to enjoy his time with Narsus, Daryun, and Elam. During one of the meal times, they discuss about the possibility of Turk taking over Turanian lands and attack Pars from the north. However, Narsus is confident that the Turkish king Kalhana will not risk doing that since Sindura's Rajendra has Kadphises. If

Kalhana moves most of his troops out to invade Turan, Turk will be left undefended, and Rajendra can easily take over Turk with the help of Kadphises.

During their expedition on Mt. Damavand, Jaswant, who's been leading, suggests they take refuge from an oncoming storm. From a map drawn up by Kura, they manage to find a giant cave just in time as the storm hits hard. Tus notices that the bird-faced beasts that Isfan had injured and locked up in a cage have healed completely. At the same time, a boulder falls and blocks the entrance of the cave, and they feel the ground shake violently beneath their feet. Kubard thinks they've fallen into someone's trap.

## **Book 11: Assault of Demons**

# Chapter I

## **June, Pars Era 325.**

Guiscard, who's crowned himself the King of Maryam at the beginning of the year, has finally captured Bodin and kept him imprisoned. Pars requests that Bodin be sent back to be punished for his war crimes, but Guiscard finds more satisfaction in killing Bodin himself. He orders his underlings to cover Bodin's head with a sack and bash his skull with wooden clubs until the man dies.

Citizens of Maryam had suffered under Bodin's ruling, so when Guiscard rises up to claim the kingdom, there isn't too much disagreement amongst the Maryamians, and Guiscard tries to come up with ways to strengthen Maryam.

In Maryam's capital city, Olaberria, a trusted subordinate of Guiscard's, runs into his old friend Don Ricardo (now known to most as Parahuda) and Estelle; he invites them back to his home, where they meet Parizad. Parahuda doesn't remember Olaberria due to his memory loss from his encounter inside Mt. Damavand, but Olaberria tries to persuade him to stay and work under Guiscard, to which Parahuda refuses because he wants to accompany Estelle. Olaberria asks Estelle about the purpose of her journey to Maryam, and she tells him: Since her return to Lusitania in year 321, her home country has been in a state of chaos and anarchy; in the end, citizens decided to send out a small group to Maryam in the hopes that they can persuade Guiscard to rule Lusitania once more. However, amongst the small group, only Parahuda and Estelle make it to Maryam.

The next day, to everyone's surprise, Parahuda is found to have spent the night with Parizad. Olaberria is disappointed that he won't be able to give Parizad to Guiscard as a gift anymore. Estelle gets to meet with Guiscard and states her case, but Guiscard refuses to help; going back to Lusitania means he'll be demoted back to a prince's rank, whereas in Maryam he's already established himself as the new king. In addition to his rejection to Estelle's proposal, Guiscard plans to get rid of Estelle because she reminds him of his defeat in Pars; he plans to blame Bodin's death on her and her companions.

Disappointed, Estelle returns to Olaberria's residence and talks to Parahuda and Parizad. A moment later, they are attacked by the group of thieves that had harassed them on the street the day before; Parahuda quickly defeats them, and his memory returns as well. He tells the two women about the monster he met at Mt. Damavand four years ago, and Parizad, being the only Parsian in the company, immediately knows that it's the Serpent King Zahhak. At this time, Guiscard's soldiers have arrived to capture Estelle; the three manage to fight back, but they know they can't stay in Maryam any longer, so they decide to head for Lusitania by going through Pars.

## Chapter II

In Oxus, after Gieve, Farangis, and Alfreed successfully lead the priestesses and trainees to take refuge from the fire that Namard has started, the three envoys set out to confront Kermine. Around this time, a small Parsian troop from the capital has also arrived. Kermine refuses to admit that he's the fake lord despite the evidence presented in the form of the letter they have taken from Namard, so Alfreed is about to take him by force, except blocking her path is Layla. Kermine explains that Layla is under Zahhak's control because he's fed her the serpent king's blood when he mixed it into her drink a month ago after she'd won the local martial arts competition. As her friend, Alfreed is unable to fight Layla with her full strength, so Farangis takes over for her and asks Alfreed to handle Kermine instead. After a lengthy and difficult fight, Alfreed pierces her sword into Kermine's chest, but the sight that comes after shocks everyone present: Kermine's limbs twitch uncontrollably and his body disintegrates into ash. With her lord defeated and her wooden staff chopped in half by Farangis, Layla knows she's outnumbered and escapes.

During this time, Namard, who's in intense agony from his left arm being chopped off earlier and is delirious, drinks a liquid from a silver flask; he starts to transform into a creature bearing wings.

Alfreed and Farangis search for Namard; in a blood-stained room filled with a strange medicinal stench, they're attacked by a winged ape. They fight it off and the ape crashes out of the room through the windows to escape, but both women notice with dread that the winged ape is missing its left arm. Farangis appoints the captain of the Parsian troop as the temporary commander of the Oxus region until Arslan decides what to do.

On the other end, sorcerers Gurgin and Ghundi are talking about Kermine's death and Layla's potential partner, who's drunk Zahhak's blood and survived, and is currently under Gazhdaham's watch. Their conversation is interrupted by a commotion caused by a few caged winged apes; it looks as if one of them has been attacked and eaten by others, and standing in the corner with a sly expression on its face is a winged ape without its left arm.

During one evening at the summer lent festival, Arslan and Elam sneak out of the palace to walk around; it's a common occurrence for them since Arslan enjoys life among the civilians rather than staying cooped up in the palace. They chat about Rushan picking out a suitable bride for Arslan; they joke about how instead of fighting over political powers and control, in the Parsian government, they push the responsibility onto each other. In a dark alley, they encounter ghouls — servants of Zahhak and monsters known to devour carcasses, though they are rarely seen in the city and mostly roam along the countryside. Elam is barely fighting them off when Daryun joins in and kills the rest of it. He orders his subordinate to capture one alive so Narsus can examine it closely, and then the three of them head to Narsus' residence.



## Chapter III

Their discussion about the ghouls' sudden appearance is cut short when a group of winged apes crash into Narsus' home. Narsus and Elam protect Arslan while Daryun slays them down. He jumps out of the window and rides on one of them; he slits its throat when it tries to bring Daryun down with it, and they fall into a shallow pool below. When another ape tries to attack from above, Daryun is saved by Jimsa, who uses his blow-darts and successfully kills one of them while the last one escapes into the night.

Gathered at Kishward's residence, Jimsa, who's accompanied by a little girl, delivers the news to Arslan and his men that Ilterish is still alive. After having Kishward's wife Nasrin take care of the girl, the men sit down for Jimsa's report. Supposedly, Jimsa with his small group of 5 knights were heading to the northeast border of Pars to plan out the construction of beacon towers in case there's invasion from the north, but sensing an oncoming thunderstorm, they hurried to a nearby village they just passed by earlier. However, when they arrived, they discovered that all the villagers, as well as the sheep and cows, had been slaughtered; half of them had their brain and blood sucked dry, and the other half were beheaded. Amongst a pile of sheep carcasses, they found a sole survivor: a small girl of about 10 to 12 years old; she remained silent and terrified when Jimsa tried to ask her what'd happened.

Hidden in the long grass were winged apes and presumably another human being; before long, Jimsa was fighting against enemies by himself when the five soldiers who accompany him were killed. He managed to kill off most of the apes and was hiding with the girl among the grass until the remaining enemy revealed himself to be Ilterish, whom Jimsa presumed to have committed suicide sometime after the Turanian army had been defeated. However, although the man looked and sounded like Ilterish, Jimsa could sense a demonic aura around him that made him feel uneasy. When he was found, Jimsa tried to probe him with questions, and discovered that this Ilterish was not quite the same man he knew. When Jimsa mentioned reviving Turan, not only did Ilterish scoff at the idea, but he also said that serving King Zahhak was more important. He also mentioned that with a chosen woman, they would bear a child who'd act as the representative of Zahhak to rule the land. Jimsa had heard about Zahhak from his Parsian acquaintances and knew it to be a feared icon from the past, so he was confused as to why a Turanian general like Ilterish would care. Before he could go any further, Ilterish engaged him in an intense sword fight; Ilterish had been slashed and was bleeding but continued to move like it was nothing, yet Jimsa was getting more and more exhausted.

Their scuffle was stopped by the sorcerer Gazhdaham, who wanted to take Jimsa with them since he was such a strong warrior. Jimsa immediately realized that Gazhdaham was the one controlling Ilterish, and aimed to kill him so Ilterish could be free from his mind-control. Jimsa managed to take out the sorcerer's right eye with his dart, but before he could deal more damage, Gazhdaham was gone, and Ilterish, carried in a cage in the air by four winged apes, made his escape as well. Five days later, with the little girl in tow, Jimsa returns to Ecbatana.

Back in Kishward's home, Jimsa excuses himself from the company, and the rest of them discuss the strange event. They believe that Jimsa is speaking the truth, as he has no reason or tendency to lie. When Jimsa returns, Narsus tells them that they have to prepare to fight monsters that are capable of attacking in an organized manner; they also discuss about the possibility of allying with Rajendra from Sindhura in the war against Zahhak.

## Chapter IV

### July, Pars Era 325.

Working under Hossain III in Misr as a guest general, Hirmiz continues to request a meeting with the fake Prince Hirmiz but has been denied. He also hears that envoys from East Nabatae, a kingdom south of Misr, has come bearing gifts and information for the king, and that the old captain of the powerful southern army located in Akasha wants to retire. Akasha is a military base that's important in its role of southern border defense, as well as a business hub for trading. Since Hossain doesn't want the candidacy for the next captain to be inherited through familial link, the king decides to pick a few candidates instead.

In the market and sitting atop a high wall, a Parsian girl who calls herself Lady Peacock is staring at Hirmiz, and they start a conversation that ends with Hirmiz taking the young woman back to his residence. She explains to him that she was going to be sent into the Misrian palace to become Hossain's concubine, but before settling down, she wants to lie with a man of her choice. She sees Hirmiz as someone who's capable of and has the ambition to take the Misirian kingdom, and so has chosen him as her partner. Afterwards, when Hilmes asks, she tells him that her real name is Fitna; he also asks her about the silver bracelet she's wearing (the same bracelet that Layla and Parizad own), which is a signature of noble status, and Fitna replies that she doesn't know her actual family at all since she's brought up by foster parents. Fitna knows that she's influential and that Hirmiz can make good use of her if he wants to take the Misirian throne, so they make a promise by cutting the bracelet in half, each keeping one half in remembrance: Fitna will help Hirmiz become the captain of the southern army, and when Hirmiz successfully overthrows Hossain, Hirmiz will take Fitna as wife and queen. Hirmiz knows that Fitna will never be able to replace Irina in his heart, and so he allows his aspiration and his new partnership with Fitna to drive him forward.

The next day, after he's seen Fitna back to her residence, Hirmiz hears news regarding Zandeh's death from a Parsian merchant: it turns out that Zandeh is killed by Masinissa, one of Hossain's close generals, through underhanded means. Hirmiz is determined to kill Masinissa to avenge Zandeh's death.

Masinissa continues to voice out his suspicion of Hirmiz to Hossain, who ignores most of it knowing that Masinissa is a man who's easily jealous over someone else's achievements. On one hand, Hossain doesn't want to place too much trust on the Parsian guest general, but on the other, he wants to make the best use of Hirmiz's talents. That day, Hossain sleeps with Fitna, and Fitna considers killing him while he's asleep, but she immediately rids herself of that thought; after all, Hossain is still valuable to her and Hirmiz's plan.

Four days later and without warning, Hossain allows Hirmiz to meet the fake Prince Hirmiz, who dons a golden mask and seems to hold intense hatred for Narsus. Hirmiz proclaims that he'll help

the “prince” retake Pars no matter what. After the brief meeting, Hirmiz pledges his loyalty to Hossain; that’s because the fake Hirmiz has no use to him.

Without consulting anyone, Hossain announces that Hirmiz will become the new captain of the southern army. Masinissa is against the idea at first, but after Hirmiz’s tactfully-worded speech, Masinissa grudgingly agrees. They will hold a large celebration to commemorate Hirmiz’s promotion, and for the first time, Hirmiz feels the preciousness of the silver bracelet.

# Chapter V

## June, Pars Era 325.

Trapped within Mt. Damavand, Kubard, Jaswant, Isfan, Merlane, Tus, and Tus' three wives, plus 2,000 soldiers are trying to decide what to do next. They know that there are probably more monsters in the mountain, so they start burning rue and cover their weapons and armor with the anti-demon substance. While carefully observing the behaviors of the two captured bird-faced beasts, Kura, one of Tus' wives and the second oldest of the sisters, suggests a plan: they will pretend to let the beasts go free, and when one of them tries to get out of the unlocked cage, the two beasts start to fight amongst themselves until one is trapped under the cart, while the other escapes through the right passageway to call for its allies. Meanwhile, the Parsian troops know they must exit through the left passageway and begins to move. The one trapped beast attempts to attack them, but Isfan, who's at the back of the troops, cuts it in half.

Merlane and Jaswant are at the front; Merlane occasionally shoots fire arrows dabbled with rue into the dark, hoping that the scent will cause the beasts to stir if there were any. They haven't encountered anything until they reach a river, which they believe will lead to outside. From behind them, four-eyed canines start to attack in packs; above them, winged apes cast down stalactites, which the soldiers are able to block with their shields, but the apes also take this opportunity to venture closer and deal fatal damage on some men. Merlane shoots down a few apes with his arrows, which cheer the soldiers up as they bravely fight on. The battle is brief but intense; half of the monsters that attack them are left dead while only five soldiers are killed.

As they keep going, they've come to an area where the wall on the other side of the river bank breaks off suddenly into a flat field, on which thousands of demonic beasts are lying in wait. They also notice these monsters can use weapons and are organized like army troops. For three days, they combat against the seemingly endless waves of monsters. Kubard is saved by Kayvan; up at the front, Merlane, Tus, and his wives are also slaying the beasts. When the attacks cease, the troops take turns sleeping, eating, and taking watch. Jaswant tells the other generals about what he's witnessed four years ago when Arslan has been granted the sword Ruknabad; from this, Kubard is even more certain that Arslan is given the power to destroy Zahhak.

Due to their sharp senses, the two wolves and Isfan are leading the troops as the water get shallower. From the left flank, beasts start their attacks again, but the Parsian troops have ran out of rue. As soon as they think they're at wit's end, the soldiers can feel the breeze blowing from outside; they run towards the light as fast as they can, and the beasts shrink back into the darkness. Finally free and safe, they see a huge group of winged apes and bird-faced beasts flying like an ominous cloud across the sky in the distance. Merlane, who has better than average eyesight, claims that he sees someone being carried on a cage, but nobody can confirm. They make their way back to Peshawar in three days' time.

**June 28.**

The remaining Parsian troops arrive Peshawar, and exhausted from the journey, all of them fall asleep right away. The next day, Kubard prepares defensive measures within the citadel: evacuate all civilians into Peshawar, gather all the rue they can find, guard all wells in case of poison, and ensure there's enough food for everyone. Among the civilians, male volunteers are given weapons while children, women, and the elderly are kept indoors for protection. Kubard also sends out nine messengers to spread the news about the oncoming attack from Zahhak's followers. As the sun sets for the day, the three sisters, who have been standing atop the walls, notice the strange shadow lying alongside Peshawar's walls. They call for Tus, and he immediately sends his wives to call for the others when the general realizes in horror that the large shadow is moving and splitting into thousands of smaller shadows as they spring up from the ground. This is the beginning of the war of humans against demons, the start of the bloodshed in Peshawar.