

THE COLORS OF FIRE

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CHAPTER 3

Years later, Kato would remember the bizarre outcome of this decisive battle. He knew of nothing like it ever recorded in the ancient archives. The leading force of chariots and cavalry slammed head-on into the enemy force near the bottom of the long river valley. A sound like the stampede of cattle was followed by the clash of sword on armor. From his vantage point on the hill overlooking the river valley, he watched as his father's troops pretended to withdraw under the Assyrian assault, luring the enemy back up the valley toward the citadel.

Then everything went horribly wrong. Later, he would learn that the flanking armies never appeared, that they never received the messenger pigeons, which were inexplicably lost. Within minutes, Kato was in the thick of combat. His own archer fired mercilessly into the onslaught and was soon out of arrows. He pulled a spear from its holder and fought on. Pinned in, Kato dropped the reins and seized a short sword. He had been schooled in its use from childhood and now he put that schooling to good use, slicing and stabbing at men who sometimes towered over him. He leaped from the chariot with his archer at his side and retreated up the hill, slippery with blood, toward the Citadel. Hundreds of dead and wounded men and horses, broken chariots, spears, stones, arrows, helmets, and abandoned swords covered the dry dusty ground.

The armies fought with vengeance well after the sun went down. Then, omens that Kato had never seen in his lifetime appeared in the darkness. When his sword slapped against a copper shield, it produced a bright spark, like lightning in a storm. More than once, he felt his hair stand on end. At one point, both armies paused in the fighting to stare in amazement at the sky. Bright green curtains of light shimmered and waved over the battlefield, omens of death and destruction from a wrathful god.

"Could this be Sapalu's storm?" Kato wondered aloud. To his dismay, the Assyrians took the sky display as an omen of victory and increased their efforts with a ferocity that was as unexpected as the omen itself.

Kato parried a thrust from a tall warrior who had lost his helmet. He parried again and sliced at the man's lower leg, bringing him down to his level where he dispatched him with a thrust to his throat. The eagerness of victory renewed his strength until four other swordsmen and two archers joined his foe to press the fight against the eighteen-year-old heir to the kingdom. If they had any idea he was of royal blood, they would have looked to capture rather than kill him. But they didn't and their intentions were brutally obvious.

Kato fell back, slashing and lunging effectively with his short sword, but with no hope of survival. His archer from the chariot, fighting at his side, took two arrows simultaneously, one in his chest and one in his throat. Kato watched as one of the archers notched another shaft in his curved horn bow and fired it directly at him. He closed his eyes in resignation of defeat and felt the copper tip smack hard into his chest. It bounced back, stopped by the gold tablet.

Suddenly Piyamaradu, the warrior Kato had feared since childhood, appeared beside him. Naked and red with blood from head to toe, he leapt in front of Kato and killed the two archers before they could recover from their astonishment. Even so, six more of the enemy threw themselves at Kato and his giant protector.

They were still no match for Piyamaradu. "Get inside the city," he shouted at Kato. "It's your only hope."

Kato instinctively obeyed the great warrior. He took advantage of an opening that Piya hacked for him and leaped over the dead and dying bodies. Through the dust and dim light he could see the twin lions, their jaws gaping wide to swallow the evil spirits. The gate was unprotected. As he ran through, he paused and turned to hazard a look. The last thing he remembered of the battle was the image of a hundred enemy warriors surrounding Piya like desert jackals on a wounded animal.

The cries and wailing of women filled the streets of the city. Kato snared a loose horse and scrambled onto its back. Calmed by the weight of a rider, the horse responded to his command and galloped toward the stony keep in the center of the city, the innermost fortified building where Kato felt he had a chance at defense. Years later he would wonder why he chose this particular building, for it had another use. It was the tomb of the Kings of Kanesh.

He felt for the leather bag hanging from a twisted strap inside his tunic. Through the soft leather, he felt the cold, golden tablet that the high priest had given him.

As the clamor and panic of men and beasts grew louder, he dismounted and entered the keep, pulling the tall bronze doors shut behind him. This is where his grandfather and great-grandfathers were buried, the ancient kings of Kanesh. This is where his father and someday he himself would lie, peacefully waiting the time of rebirth. Now he knew exactly what he must do.

To enter the tomb without the proper royal garb would incur the wrath the great god Teshub. He quickly found the secret cabinet with the ceremonial regalia of burial ceremonies, and slid the concealing tiles aside. There wasn't time to put on everything. It took him a few moments to don a tunic laced with gold threads and a golden helmet crested with eagle feathers. Outside, he could hear the fighting get closer. He slid the tile door closed and ran down the long corridor to the stairs that would take him down to the tombs.

Halfway down the stairs, he heard the ring of bronze on stone as the great doors at the front of the ancient building were slammed open. At the same moment, he realized that he no longer had his sword.

Moments later he was in the tomb. Behind the sepulcher that would someday hold his father he located a loose stone designed to conceal offerings. He dislodged the stone and pushed the gold tablet into a deep cavity behind it. He shoved the capstone back into place just as the Assyrian warriors appeared at the door to the room.

Kato backed against a wooden shield suspended from the wall. One of the warriors raised his curved bow and pointed a copper-tipped arrow straight at Kato's heart. At least death would be quick. From five feet away, the arrow would nail him to the shield like an animal in a slaughterhouse.

The warrior squinted in the dim light, lowered his bow and grinned. "Hold! Look at his garb. We've got ourselves some royal blood."

A gloating soldier on each side dragged Kato roughly up the steps and out into a

world that would never be the same.