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The Tower

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Extract

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Gilgamesh said, 'I have come to see Utapishtim, my elder, who was allowed to go beyond. I wish to know life and death.'

The scorpion man laughed and said, 'Never has a mortal done that, Gilgamesh. No one has ever gone beyond these mountains, travelled the remote path.'

The Epic of Gilgamesh, Tablet IX

PROLOGUE

THE COLUMN ADVANCED SLOWLY in the glare of the sky and the sand. The oasis of Cydamus, with its clear waters and fresh dates, was no more than a memory. It had been many days since they'd departed, wary about their mission from the very start, and the southern horizon continued to recede – empty, false, slipping away like the mirages that danced among the dunes.

Centurion Fulvius Longus rode at their head, back and shoulders straight, never removing his sun-scorched helmet, setting an example of discipline for his men.

Longus was from Ferentino in central Italy, from a family of small landowners. Before this mission, he and his men had been rotting away for months at a redoubt on the Syrtes coast near Tripolis, prey to malarial hallucinations, drinking spoiled wine and longing for the delights of Alexandria. Then the governor of the province had suddenly summoned him to Cyrene and given him new orders, orders that came from Caesar himself: Longus was to cross the desert with thirty legionaries, a Greek geographer, an Etruscan haruspex and two Mauritanian guides.

The emperor had learned, from an explorer who had been down the Nile years earlier with Cornelius Gallus, that – according to certain ivory traders – a fabulous kingdom existed at the southernmost confines of the great sea of sand, and that this kingdom was ruled by black queens, the descendants of those who had built the pyramids of Meroe, which had lain empty and hollow as an old man's teeth for all these centuries.

The centurion's instructions were to reach those remote lands,

establish trade relations with the reigning queen and perhaps even discuss a possible alliance. Longus was pleased at first that the governor had chosen him for the assignment, but his satisfaction was short-lived. As soon as he considered the itinerary on a map, he realized that the hellish trail crossed the most arid and desolate stretch of the desert, right through the middle. But that was the only route; there was no alternative.

The Mauritanian guides rode at the centurion's sides; they were untiring horsemen, with skin as dark and dry as leather. Close behind came Avile Vipinas, the haruspex, an Etruscan soothsayer from Tarquinia. It was said that he had lived for years at Caesar's palace in Rome, but had been sent away when the emperor grew weary of his dire prophecies. In banishing him, Caesar had called upon Homer's words from *The Iliad*:

> 'You visionary of hell!
> Never have I had fair play in your forecasts.
> Calamity is all you care about, or see.'

Maybe the whole mission had been devised so that the troublesome prophet would drown for ever under a sea of sand. That's what the soldiers muttered among themselves as they trudged behind him, heads lolling in the heat.

Vipinas had even foreseen this unseasonable heat: although they had left at the beginning of winter, he had predicted that the sun would grow as bold as during the dog days.

They were crossing an ever more desolate expanse of pebbles as black as coals, and wherever their gaze roamed they saw nothing but endless fields of stones and teasing, quivering mirages flitting here and there.

The Mauritanian guides had promised a well to break up their march that day, but something else stopped them before the time had come to pitch camp.

All at once, the haruspex jerked his horse's reins and urged him towards a spot alongside the trail. Vipinas jumped to the

ground to examine a rock on which he had seen the carving of a scorpion. His fingers hovered over the image, the only thing not made by nature in all that boundless solitude, and then, just then, he heard a lament. He turned towards the men, who were watching him. They were perfectly still and he could see nothing but silence. He turned then to the four corners of the horizon and the emptiness cut his breath short and made a shiver run down his spine.

The diviner stretched out his hand towards the carving again and the lament was deeper this time, sorrowful, dying off into a kind of rattling sigh. It was distinct, unmistakable. He turned again to find the centurion observing him with puzzlement in his eyes.

'Did you hear it as well?'

'What?'

'A sound, a moaning . . . the sound of infinite, cruel suffering.'

The centurion turned towards the men waiting on the trail; they were talking tranquilly among themselves now, drinking from their flasks. Only the Mauritanian guides seemed uneasy, eyes darting around as if danger threatened.

The centurion shook his head. 'I didn't hear anything.'

'But the animals did,' said the haruspex. 'Look at them.'

The horses were strangely restless: they pawed at the ground, snorted and shook their bits, jingling the metal bosses. The camels were agitated as well, spilling greenish drool onto the ground and raising their grating cries to the sky.

Vipinas's eye twitched: 'We must turn back. This place is inhabited by a demon.'

The centurion shrugged. 'My orders come from Caesar, Vipinas, and I cannot disobey them. I'm sure we're almost there. In five or six days, we'll have reached the kingdom of the black queens, where we'll find immense treasures. Unimaginable wealth! I must deliver my message and establish the terms of a treaty. We'll have honours heaped upon us.' He paused. 'We can't turn back now. We're exhausted and tormented by this

heat, that's all, and the animals have been pushed to the limit as well. Come now, we must resume our march.'

The haruspex shook the dust from his white robes and returned to his horse, but there was a deep shadow in his eyes, like a dark premonition.

They continued their journey for several hours. Every now and then the Greek geographer dismounted from his camel, drove a stake into the ground, squinted at the sun on the horizon through his dioptre and noted their position on a sheet of papyrus and on a map.

The sun set that evening on a dim horizon and the sky darkened quickly. The soldiers were preparing to pitch camp and make dinner when a sudden gust of wind revealed a light glimmering in the distance, at the limits of that dark expanse. Just a single point of light, for as far as the eye could see.

The soldier who was first to notice it pointed it out to the commander. Longus scrutinized the beacon, throbbing like a star in the depths of the universe, then motioned to the guides. He called over the haruspex as well. 'Come along with us, Vipinas. It must be a campfire. There will be someone there who can give us some information. You'll be persuaded that we don't have much further to go and that your fears are unfounded.'

Vipinas did not answer, but dug his heels into his horse's belly and galloped off alongside the others.

Perhaps they had been deceived by the false light that follows the sunset, but the fire seemed to get further and further away as they rode towards it, despite the fast clip of the four horsemen and the compact terrain, covered by a mere veil of dust that the gusty wind blew around the horses' hooves.

They finally reached the solitary campfire. The centurion breathed a sigh of relief to see that there truly was a fire blazing there; not just a figment of his imagination, then. But as he drew nearer and was able to size up the situation, an expression of amazement and dismay came over his face. There was a man sitting alone in front of the fire and nothing else: not a horse, not

a water bottle, no supplies or gear of any kind. It was as though he had been disgorged by the dry earth. He wore a long robe and his face was covered by a cowl. He was tracing signs into the sand with his index finger, while his other hand clutched a stick.

At the very instant the centurion put his foot on the ground, the lone man stopped drawing and raised his skeletal arm, pointing in the direction from which the strangers had just come. Vipinas's gaze fell to the sand and the haruspex shuddered at what he saw, distinctly: a roughly sketched scorpion.

The man got to his feet and, gripping his curved stick, silently set off in the other direction. What remained was the scorpion, brought to life by the glow of the dying flames.

Panic turned the faces of the two guides ashen as they exchanged tense, whispered words in their native dialect. The wind picked up sharply and raised a dense cloud of dust in front of them, although the rest of the territory all around was clear and undisturbed at that tranquil hour of the evening.

The haruspex turned dread-filled eyes towards the centurion. 'Do you believe me now?'

The officer's response was to take off on foot after the old man, who amazingly managed to elude him at first, appearing and disappearing from sight in the cloud of sand that whirled about him. But Longus finally spotted him in the distance, a dark figure in the vortex, and had soon caught up with him.

Longus reached out to grab his shoulder. He meant to look him in the eye and force him to speak like a man, whatever language might come out of his mouth, but his fingers clutched at an empty cloak hanging from a stick driven into the ground. The remains of an unreal creature, cast off into the dust. Longus dropped the rag in horror, as though he had touched something repugnant, while the hiss of the wind began to sound more and more like a sigh of pain.

The centurion turned back, daunted, to where his companions awaited him. They rode west towards their camp, which

gradually came into sight. There they found the men lined up at the top of a dune, one alongside the other, silhouetted against a halo of reddish light. They were looking at something intently.

Longus dismounted and made his way to the top of the hill, pushing his men aside to discover the object of their attention. Before them stood a solitary monument: a cylindrical tower topped by a dome. The walls of the mysterious construction were as smooth as bronze: not an inscription, not an ornament, only that inexplicable reddish halo all around that cast its light onto the sand like a bloodstain. At the base of the tower was an archway, completely shrouded in darkness, that led inside.

The centurion observed it for some time, his confusion mounting, then said, 'It's too late to move now. We'll stay here. No one is to stray from camp without my permission. None of you, for any reason, is to go any closer to that . . . thing.'

The strange reddish glow died slowly away and the mystifying tower was nothing more than a shadowy black mass. The camp was plunged into darkness. The only light came from the fire that the two sentries had lit to ward off the chill of the desert night.

The Etruscan haruspex alone was wakeful, and staring at the point where he had seen the opening at the base of the monument. He had veiled his head and brow like a dying man and he was chanting a dirge under his breath and jingling his sistrum. Once everyone else had fallen asleep, the two Mauritanian guides waited until the sentries' backs were turned, then crept silently towards their horses and slipped off into the darkness.

The sentries were talking, looking at the dark bulk of the tower. 'Maybe we've already reached the land of the black queens,' said one.

'Maybe,' replied the other.

'You ever seen anything like that?'

'No, never. And I've seen plenty, believe me, marching behind the eagle of my legion.'

'What could it be?'

'I don't know.'

'I think it must be a tomb. What else could it be? A tomb full of treasures, like the ones the barbarians build. I'm sure of it. That's why the centurion doesn't want anyone going near it.'

The legionary fell silent, reluctant to go along with what his comrade was suggesting. The idea of profaning a tomb offended him, and he feared that it might be protected by a curse that would haunt them for the rest of their days.

But the other insisted. 'What are you afraid of? The centurion is sleeping, he won't find out. We'll just take a few precious stones, a golden jewel or two, stuff that's easy to hide in the folds of our cloaks. We can sell them as soon as we get back at the market of Lepcis or Ptolemais. Come on, don't tell me you're scared! That's it. You're afraid of some sort of magic spell, aren't you? What crap! What have we got an Etruscan wizard with us for? He knows all the antidotes, trust me. Hear him? That's him, with his rattle. He's keeping all the evil spirits away from the camp.'

'You've convinced me,' said the other sentry, 'but if we're found out and the centurion has us whipped, I'll say it was all your idea.'

'Say what you like, but let's get moving now. We'll be in and out in no time. No one will even notice.'

Both of them took a brand from the fire to use as a torch and cautiously approached the entrance to the tower. But just as they were about to cross the threshold, each holding out an arm to light up the interior, a low groan sounded in the hollow of the tower, rumbling hoarse and deep under the immense vault and then exploding into a thunderous roar.

Avile Vipinas trembled in the darkness so suddenly rent by the agonized screams of the two legionaries. Panic kept him rooted, cold and stiff, to the ground.

The soldiers sprang from their camp beds, grabbed their weapons and shot off in every direction, shadows running wild. Longus burst from his tent, sword in hand, shouting loudly to rally the men, but what he saw nailed him to the spot.

'By all the gods . . . what is it?' he barely had time to murmur as the screams of his soldiers rang in his ears, before the tremendous roar, which ripped the air all the way to the horizon and made the earth shake, exploded in his brain and destroyed him. His body was blown to pieces as if the jaws of a vicious beast had torn him to shreds and his blood was sprayed over a vast stretch of sand.

Avile Vipinas, frozen in horror, raised his spirit in the night against that monstrous voice. He rallied all the strength of his soul against the slaughterer, against the blind ferocity of the unknown aggressor, but he knew he had no chance. Unmoving, his eyes staring, he watched as his white tunic became spattered with blood, besmirched by scraps of flesh. The howl was getting stronger, drawing closer. He could feel the beast's boiling breath on his face. He knew that in a moment it would suck up his life's blood, but somehow he found the strength to start chanting his song, to shake the sacred sistrum in his numb fingers.

And the silvery jingling suddenly shattered the fury. The savage onslaught ended abruptly. Vipinas continued to shake the sistrum, his eyes wide and glassy from exertion, his ashen face dripping sweat, and the beast's roar faded into a hoarse rasp.

The camp all around him was plunged into the silence of death.

He got to his feet then and staggered across the ground, through the mangled limbs of the soldiers of Rome. No one had escaped death. The lifeless human bodies were mixed with the cadavers of animals – the horses and camels of the unfortunate expedition.

Vipinas approached the tower's yawning black arch. He stood at its threshold and peered in at the live, threatening presence he felt there. He continued to shake his sistrum steadily. 'Who are you?' he cried out. 'Who are you?'

The only sound to be heard from the opening was the weary, aching breathing of what seemed to be the tower's prisoner. The haruspex turned his back then to the mysterious mausoleum and

began walking north. He walked all night long. At the first glimmer of dawn, he made out a motionless shape at the top of one of the dunes: one of the expedition's camels, still laden with a skin of water and a bag of dates. Vipinas caught up with him, grasped his halter and hoisted himself onto the packsaddle. The jingling of his sistrum echoed at length in the dazed silence of the desert, fading finally into the pale light of dawn, into that endless expanse.