

STRONGER TOGETHER

BY BRANDON S. PILCHER

The emissary drummed his bony fingers on a low table while watching the sundial. The shadow its black granite arrow cast had drifted down half an hour's angle since his arrival at the Agyptian tavern, and his correspondent still had yet to appear.

Even accounting for the palm-thatched awning that was supposed to shade him on the establishment's rear veranda, the southern sun had tanned his leathery skin to a darker shade of olive, and sweat from the heat plastered the tunic under his toga. If he had to wait a full hour, he would be almost as brown as the locals blabbering around him.

A man of Agyptian stock approached him at last, dressed in a fine white robe of pleated linen beneath a bejeweled collar and a wig of curled black locks. The emissary puffed out a sigh of relief through his nose and straightened himself up on his stool.

The correspondent addressed him in Ellenic, the language of commerce, with a melodic Agyptian accent. "Apologies for the delay, my Valerian brother. I've been working harder than usual."

"Being the Pharaoh's physician must be taxing work, Khaheru," the emissary said. "Call me Claudio, representing the *triumvir* Actavio Kesare. But don't call me 'brother'."

Khaheru chortled with a full-lipped grin. "We Agyptians call every man 'brother'. But what's a 'triumvir'?"

"Allow me to provide some context," Claudio said before clearing his throat. "You might know that the Valerian republic has suffered a civil war of late. As a resolution, we've split its dominion into pieces of three, or what we call a *triumvirate*. Kesare is the *triumvir* who governs the central third where the city of Valerium itself lies. Marco Lepido is *triumvir* of the west, and the *triumvir* of the east is none other than Julio Antonio. I assume you recognize the last one."

Khaheru nodded with widened eyes. "I know Julio Antonio, alright. Pharaoh's been courting him for over a year now. I swear by Ma'at's feather, I don't know what she sees in that pale-arsed barbarian, or what use he could be to her."

"You're not the only one who disapproves, believe me. I daresay the majority of our citizens find the affair outrageous, most of all Kesare. Not only did he take offense to Antonio's divorcing his sister to be with that Pharaoh of yours, but he has reason to fear that their alliance will come ramming down Valerium's door itself."

"You Valerians can't resist cutting each other up, can you? So much for your republic's stability! Now, I assume you have some proposition for me?"

Claudio dipped his head toward Khaheru's ear and spoke in a whisper. "We believe Antonio must be eliminated."

"You want me to poison him? I must warn you, Pharaoh has many tasters at her employ."

"Poison can't be your only means to dispose of the man. As the finest physician in all Agyptos, you ought to know every form of magic. Say, you know how to manipulate animals? Antonio is a distinguished fighter of men, but beasts not so much."

A light sparked in the royal physician's eye. "Oh, I know not only how to control beasts, but to create them as if I were the creator Ptah himself. The Pharaoh's menagerie supplies me with all manner of animal parts for my medicines. By mixing together the pieces of different creatures, I can bring to life a monster of my own design."

"Impressive. Are you able to have it track down and attack a particular man?"

"That I can do too. It won't even be difficult. Our barber can provide the hair cuttings I need to train the monster's nose on."

"Excellent to hear, my Agyptian *amico*."

Claudio took out his purse and poured out a shimmering pile of gold coins. Khaheru pinched one up and let its yellow gleam reflect in his kohl-framed eyes.

"I've one more question before I do this for you, brother," Khaheru asked. "Say our scheme fails, and my Pharaoh suspects me. What should I tell her?"

"Why, you should have a whole court's worth of suspects to redirect the blame! I assume at least some of them share your distaste for the Pharaoh's dalliance with a 'barbarian'."

Khaheru stroked the braided beard on his chin and scooped the pile of coins with his arm toward himself. "I know fewer who don't."

Julio Antonio leaned onto the balcony's alabaster parapet and inhaled the fresh fragrance of palm fronds with a contented hum. All of Khumet, or what he had once called Agyptos like all his compatriots, glowed before him under a golden sunset. The happy songs of farmers retiring to their huts beside the Iteru River provided lyrics to the rumble of street musicians' drums, as did the whooping cries of ibises and the bellows of wading hippos.

The more time Julio spent in Khumet, the more he thought of it as his own. Those pyramidal tombs that reared high as mountains beyond the Iteru's far bank were already ancient when Valerium was young, and yet they dazzled of white limestone and gold summits as if anew. The kingdom's power may have swelled and receded over the centuries, but never would it lose the splendor it had cultivated since the beginning of time.

That assumed, of course, that Actavio Kesare did not get his clutches of bloodstained iron on it.

Julio's heart sank in his chest beneath the burden of guilt. He too had come to Khumet in the name of his ambitions. His hope had been that, with the wealth and manpower of humankind's oldest civilization backing him, he could claim the entire republic of Valerium for himself and then expand over the entire world. To realize such a dream, he would have to spill an ocean of blood and smear the heavens gray with smoke from innumerable razed cities.

Were Kesare in that position instead, he would inflict the very same iniquity on Khumet and its people. That was what made Julio shiver the most. Sometimes a man's worst rival could be his own reflection.

Slender fingers caressed Julio's shoulders from behind. Neferkaret, Pharaoh of Khumet, had taken off her crown for the evening, letting the long coils of her black hair catch the sunset's light like her jewelry of gold, malachite, and lapis lazuli. The linen of her kalasiris gown was thin enough for the curves of her dark-skinned figure to show through. As she slid her arms around Julio, she pressed warm and moist lips against his cheek.

"Is something troubling you tonight, my love?" Neferkaret asked.

Julio pressed his lips together into a thin line. "My queen...if you don't mind me asking, why are we here?"

The Pharaoh furrowed her brow. "What do you mean?"

"I mean...it couldn't have been only my dashing Valerian comeliness that brought you to me. You had something more on the agenda, didn't you?"

"If you want an honest answer, I came to you for protection. Your republic may have split into three now, but it is only a matter of time before one of your strongmen welds it back into one blade aimed at Khumet. Who better to help defend against Valerium than one of its own?"

Julio sighed. "I can see that. However, if I am to be honest in turn, I came to you as one of those aspiring strongmen. I thought we could conquer Valerium together and bring the world under our mantle. Is that not what you want?"

"Why, no, not at all! Khumet does not need to rule the world. A lioness is better off defending her own pride than taking over others."

"Indeed, I have come to think that too. Painful as it is to cast my ambitions aside, they are not worth the carnage. Still, doesn't it worry you that my rival Actavio Kesare might come after me here? Our relationship would give him all the pretext he needs to put your people to the sword."

Neferkaret paused. "It would, but remember why we came to one another in the first place. Together, we are stronger than we are apart. And it will be us together that will face him."

Their puckered lips sailed toward one another until there rang the screaming of men. On the pavement far below the balcony lay a spatter of blood, severed human parts, and discarded guards' weapons. The scraping of claws against stone announced the enormous creature bounding upward between the obelisks and colossi outside the palace. With a crash through the parapet and the cracking of tiles beneath its knuckles, the beast landed onto the balcony.

Julio Antonio and Neferkaret screamed their hearts out in unison.

Above gaping crocodilian jaws, the monster's bright green eyes locked on Julio. He and his lover sprinted toward the doorway with their inhuman attacker's hand grasping at their heels. Once they were back in the Pharaoh's bedchamber, Julio threw the door to the balcony shut and pressed his body against it.

"I don't think you can hold it," Neferkaret said. "That thing is as big as an elephant!"

"Which is why it can't get through," Julio said.

The door burst open with a splinter of wood, letting the beast's long and brawny arm thrust through while shoving Julio across the room. Neferkaret yanked him away from the sweep of its claws and handed him his trusty *gladius*. The chop of the blade in his hand tasted not the creature's scaly hide but empty air when the giant arm withdrew as fast as it had lunged in.

The bedchamber quaked with a thunderous smash. A web of cracks spread across the outer wall's surface with each subsequent ramming until it crumbled into rubble at the monster's feet.

Having obtained her traditional bow and quiver, Neferkaret shot an arrow into the beast's broad chest. It reared on its stumpy legs with a guttural roar and flung claws slashing across her torso. Julio rushed out of the bedchamber with his wounded lover in tow and raced down the columned hallway with the creature crashing close behind. So immense was the long-armed reptile that the mere

brushing of its shoulders and tail against the columns toppled them while bringing down hunks of the ceiling.

The monster picked up a chunk of shattered masonry and hurled it into Julio. His sword spun out of his grip across the floor as he fell. He scrambled toward it on all fours until a big scaly fist clenched onto his leg and plucked him up. While he dangled above the creature's gaping jaws like a fish on a hook, the fetid fumes of its hot breath drowned out his consciousness.

Another of Neferkaret's arrows pierced the beast's hide. Julio dropped out of its hold and hit the floor with a hard smack. Wrestling pain that racked to his bones, he watched his beloved Pharaoh dash around the ruined hallway and harry the pursuing creature with her bow. The monster's frustrated roar echoed between the walls and columns over the bowstring's twanging.

Rising onto its legs again, the brute slammed its fists onto the floor, releasing a tremor that knocked Neferkaret off her footing. Instead of picking her up to eat her like he expected, the horrific animal turned away from her to gyrate on its forelimbs after Julio. A desperate wave of terror launched him across the hall to where his gladius lay. When he bent over to pick his weapon up, the monster's talons grazed his back from above. Julio retaliated by transfixing the blade through its low knee.

The high-pitched roar that escaped the injured creature's maw hammered against Julio's eardrums. It tottered around with a limp until it collided with a standing column. As both beast and column collapsed to the floor, more hunks of the ceiling showered onto them. Bones cracked, and the metallic odor of blood effused from the creature's crushed body to mingle with the dust's earthier smell. After one last hoarse breath, the abominable animal was dead.

Julio helped Neferkaret back onto her feet and embraced her with a kiss. "What was that? It looked like a cross between a crocodile and a gorilla, and yet it was as big as an elephant like you said!"

"It cannot be a natural beast," Neferkaret said. "Only sorcery could bring such a being into existence!"

The clouds of dust thinned before a man's silhouette. It was Khaheru, the royal physician. The scowl on his face told everything.

Julio pointed his bloodied sword at him. "You must have done this! Who else would know how to make such a monster?"

Khaheru held up his hands. "I suppose my presence here incriminates me now that you've slain my proudest creation. What a fool I've been! I should've known better than to come to enjoy the show."

"Why did you do it, though?" Neferkaret asked. "And who else is involved?"

"I would prefer not to name them, Your Majesty. What I will tell you is that your affair with that Valerian barbarian is nothing less than an affront to our people and to all the gods themselves. As Pharaoh of Khumet, with the blood of the gods in your veins, you should know better."

"That explains why it went after me," Julio said. "But wait, if there are others involved..."

Neferkaret stormed toward her physician and pricked the skin on his neck with her bow's pointed tip. "We will hunt his co-conspirators down in due time. For now, Khaheru, I'll have you thrown to the crocodiles. Guards!"

"Please, my Pharaoh, spare me and I'll tell you everything you need to know," Khaheru whimpered.

"Then who was it?"

"Very well, it was a Valerian emissary named Claudio..."

"Claudio Marcello, I know the man!" Julio said. "He represents Actavio Kesare."

"Then that settles it," Neferkaret said. "Khaheru, whatever this Claudio Marcello offered you, you owe to the treasury now. Withhold even a single coin and I will throw you to the crocodiles. Begone!"

The disgraced physician scurried out of sight without saying another word.

"So, Kesare truly is after me," Julio said. "This can only mean war."

"At least we have each other," Neferkaret said. "Remember what I said? We are stronger together than we are apart. And together, we will face him."

"You're right, my queen. In the meantime, it's a shame your bedchamber is in ruins, as well as this hallway. Where will we sleep tonight?"

The Pharaoh batted her eyelashes with a swing of her hips. "We will resolve that later. For now, follow me to the garden. It's not the most private place, but nobody else should be watching this late at night, and the scent of certain flowers can make anyone amorous."

Julio smiled. "Daring, aren't we? But that's why I love you, Your Majesty."

Neferkaret pressed a kiss on his lips. "The same to you, Julio Antonio."