

The Messenger's

Tale

Part Two

Miles Cameron

## **Daar as Salaam - Palabo Payam**

The Abode of Peace was the fairest city in the world, or so Palabo still thought many years later. It had problems – like heresy, vice, theft, riots and murder. A city with half a million souls did not escape the touch of evil. But Daar lay at the centre of the world – a magnificent city built atop the ashes of Rhuma’s ancient rival, Kartagho.

Daar as Salaam sat snug behind its two magnificent harbours on the northern coast of Ifriqu’ya, a vast land of desert and forest and steppe that stretched away to the south farther than most cartographers could imagine. The Abode of Peace – the richest city of trade in the known world – was protected from the vast and absolute sway of the Wild by a girdle of desert so wide that even the mighty Umbroth and the not-dead could not easily cross it. All the same, the Sherif maintained powerful armies and mighty sorcerers to deal with the trickle of fiends and monsters who survived the journey – a trickle, but a relentless trickle that sometimes became a torrent, as if their arrival were some natural event, like flooding in the great Nilus to the east, the border between the Ruined Lands and the lands still held by men.

Palabo Payam was one of the men who defended the city. He was tall and slim; his shoulders were broad and his waist was narrow, and the muscles of his arms and legs were like ebony: solid and hard. He was famous for his speed, his agility and his strength; his deep brown eyes sparkled with wit and he was a teacher of the Dance of the Sword. He had been taken by the *Devşirme* – the inspectors of children – when he was so young that his memory of his mother was a lost blur of warmth.

His master was not a swordsman. Palabo’s master was a great man – famous

throughout the world and revered in his city. He had written three great books – a monumental commentary on the law; a treatise on the foolishness of the study of ancient philosophy; and a second treatise on the foolishness of failing to study the ancient philosophy. All three books were internally coherent, and each of them conflicted at some level with the other two – a paradox which most educated men found delightful rather than heretical. He had a great name to go with his greatness: 'Abū l-Walīd Muḥammad bin 'Aḥmad bin Rušd. Men called him Rushid, and his followers, Rushidi.

He was a mighty worker of miracles, and some men thought he was a prophet. He also defended his mighty city from the assaults of the Wild, which he had studied throughout his life, and trained young men like Palabo Payam to go south, into the Wild, and return alive, or East, into the Ruined Lands—for manuscripts and artifacts from the ruins of many pasts.

But now he was dying. His lungs were gradually filling with fluid.

Rushid was a man of too much honour and too much strength of character to use his arts to prevent death. His mind was clear on this – that to rob death was to open himself to evil. He also knew there was another path open to those of immense power – a sort of transcendence that left death behind.

But Rushid loved Allah with the same gentle spirit of curiosity and respect that he loved Aristotle, and he didn't want to become a petty god. He turned his back on transcendence at the end of a long life, and began to compose himself for death. He used his medicine and the hermetical arts to make himself as well as he could manage,

and he made his preparations with the same resolution with which he had faced journeys to the ruins to the east or the south, or into the great Quen'ya, the highlands that he suspected hid some of the many secrets he had spent his life seeking.

He wrote a great many letters, and had a great many tearful conferences, not the least of which was with the Sherif, who had inherited the greatest magus in the world along with his great city and his mighty army and enormous fleet. The Sherif wept but left consoled, and with a list of excellent young men and women who could fill the master's slippers.

Palabo was aware of this, as he was aware of all the comings and goings of his master's house. He was two weeks returned from the east, deep in the desert on the banks of the Nilus where he had protected twenty men who had dug a tunnel into an ancient library.

He sat in the yard in a light cotton shalvar and a gomlek of the cheapest material, working his long, slightly curved sword against a stone held by a slave. He had faced six *ghulami* - the Necromancer's slave soldiers - who had begun the contest dead, and he had left them that way. But his magnificent sword - the only article of value that he owned, excepting his armour - an artifact of a bygone era, the joint creation of smiths and hermeticists, had taken a deep nick, and the blade seemed to be very slightly bent. A bend so very slight that Palabo only saw it the way a woman who lived on her beauty might sense the first signs of age under her eyes.

He used the stone sparingly. When the call to prayer came, he walked away from his sword and went to the mosque whose minaret towered over his master's house. There

he knelt on a plain carpet and made his devotions, his mind clear.

On the way back to his master's gate, small boys followed him calling his name, and twice he stopped to duel with them – his bare hands against their sticks. In each case, grinning broadly, he'd slip in and slap them lightly on the back as he passed, and leave them smiling in childlike disbelief.

They called his name – Palabo, Palabo! – at his back.

When he came to the gate, the master's chamberlain, Boscar Effendi, was waiting under the awning. He'd worn the same offensive patchouli scent for all seventeen years that Palabo had known him and was, despite the smell, honest and gentle and fair. The man was a Christian, but was otherwise inoffensive and civilized.

Palabo, despite being a hero whose name was spoken with reverence throughout the city, was junior to the fat chamberlain who was unknown outside the gate. He bowed low.

Boscar returned his bow. 'The master asked me to send for you as soon as you returned from prayers.' He smiled. 'I hope that you are unscathed by the many small assassins in the streets.'

Palabo nodded. 'Only just,' he said. 'How is he today?'

Boscar was not trained to face the Umbroth without flinching. He turned his head away and his voice was choked. 'Fine,' he said. 'Dying. Oh, my boy – why will he not save himself?'

Palabo had no answer. 'I will go,' he said, and put a hand briefly on the Christian's shoulder. The fat man had taken a four-year-old boy from the *Devşirme* and had, in

many ways, raised him. It was hard for Palabo to see how old Boscar really was, and how afraid he was of their master's death. And his own.

Palabo had been trained to read men's faces and bodies the way scholars read books, and sometimes he learned things he did not wish to about the people he loved.

He settled himself, and went to the workroom, which they all called the Chamber of Secrets, some in awe, and some with the humour born of long experience. There were no secrets there for Palabo. His master lay on a couch surrounded by mechanisms and books and scrolls. The title - Chamber of Secrets - had once held great terror and great mystery, but Palabo had now spent so much time there - it was really a whole wing by the south end of the courtyard - that he didn't consider the title anymore. It was just a library.

His master was propped up on pillows, gazing through a glass window whose shutters were thrown wantonly back even though it was a hot summer day outside and all well-conducted houses were shut up like fortresses to protect what little cool air they had.

Rushidi watched the world, as he had all his life.

He smiled at the black swordsman when the younger man glided into the room.

'There is nothing more important for a human than to see what is, and not what we might suppose there is,' he said.

Palabo bowed. 'The Holy Koran?' he asked doubtfully.

Rushidi laughed. 'I think not.'

'Aristotle?' Palabo asked.

Rushidi shook his head. His mouth formed a smile that was almost a sneer – a firm negation.

‘Your own?’ Palabo asked.

‘Ah! What flattery,’ Rushidi said. ‘Thales of Miletus. Listen – the item you brought from Theves was worth—’ He paused to cough. ‘A great deal. Palabo—’ He looked at the younger man. ‘Ah, I cannot excuse myself to you. Listen. I have a mission for you – a message you must deliver.’

Palabo didn’t have to draw himself up to stand straight. But he loved his missions. He nodded agreeably.

‘You must take a message to a man who is, as far as my workings can see, dead.’

Palabo nodded. ‘Yes, Master.’ In five years of desperate and dangerous missions, his master had never sent him to do anything impossible – merely a series of things that would have appeared impossible to others.

‘Do you remember the Frank who came, when you were a boy? You found him in the market?’ Now the master’s eyes bored into him like the eyes of an enemy in a duel.

Palabo nodded. ‘Magister Harmodius?’ he said. He paused. ‘He is dead?’

Rushidi lay back and coughed. ‘One set of my arts tells me he is dead; another suggests he is not. I would say, if I didn’t have other evidence, that he worked in the *aether* less than twelve hours ago. But the link between us is severed – has been for many years.’ He pushed himself up. ‘Infidel and unbeliever as he is – if he lives – he must be told what we have learned.’

Palabo was not a mindless servant. He was deep in his master’s councils, and he

paused. He remembered the Frank with pleasure – the man had lived with them for months, and left a houseful of friends. Which was odd, as the Frank had tried to kill him when first they met.

‘Why Master Harmodius?’ he asked bluntly.

Rushidi sniffed delicately, took a difficult breath and snapped a working into the alembic by his head, and the glittering globe of filigree and crystal over his head began to turn – and to emit, rather than reflect, light. That was the only effect Palabo could see.

‘Listen, boy,’ Rushidi said. His voice was low. Palabo had the notion that the rotating globe was some sort of shield or protection, but he was not attuned to the hermetical world – indeed, several of the master’s apprentices had said that he was unusually blind to it.

‘You know that I suspect that the world is not entirely as it appears,’ he said.

Palabo smiled. The statement might have been his master’s true signature.

‘We study the world. A few of others – workers like me – use their observations to refine our knowledge of the natural world. Do you remember the phrase “*Natural phenomena must have natural causes*”?’

Palabo nodded. ‘I do,’ he said. He didn’t add, *I’ve only heard you say it every day of my young life.*

‘I lead a group that studies these things.’ His master met his eye. ‘You know all this. You went to Cervilla for me, to Master Mamonades.’

‘Yes, Master.’ Palabo knew that his master was a lecturer. Everything had to be traced to first causes.

‘Master Mamonades was killed by assassins. Two years ago.’ Rushidi stroked his beard.

Palabo knew a moment’s fear. ‘The same assassins as came for you?’

Rushidi shrugged. ‘Friends of mine in Cervilla began inquiries, and most of them are now dead or have simply disappeared. While this is germane to the larger problem, it is not essential to your mission. Merely that Master Mamonades is dead, and thus he cannot receive the information I have learned. Only Master Harmodius seems available – only he is strong enough and wise enough to receive this. If he is indeed dead—’  
Rushidi shrugged. ‘Well I do not believe it. I believe he is hiding.’ He held up a scroll tube of plain cedar, and a ring with a marvelous faceted yellow stone.

‘The ring will take you to Master Harmodius,’ he said. ‘Look into it.’

Palabo stared into the ring, and saw the merest flicker of *aethereal* light in one tiny facet. He nodded. ‘I go in the direction of the light,’ he assayed.

The old magister nodded. ‘I made it as bright as I could, seeing as you are so blind,’ he said. He smiled. ‘The scroll is the most important of the documents you brought from Theves. For what it is worth: the Necromancer does not know of it, but if he found out he would stop at nothing – nothing, you hear me? – to obtain it.’ His voice took on a grim note. ‘Nor would any other magister, great or small. The information on it—’  
Rushidi coughed.

And coughed. The coughing went on and on. At first the old man held up a hand for his listener’s patience, but eventually the hand went to his stomach.

Palabo broke his reserve and went to his master’s side, but that only embarrassed

the old man, who shook his head violently. Eventually, the coughing subsided. Palabo poured lemon-scented water, and Ali Rashid drank greedily.

He raised his hand. 'It is odd—and marvelous. I've had everything I've ever believed confirmed, and then discovered that this confirmation was not devoutly to be wished after all. Is it not strange? I have been guilty of hubris all my life, and look – my arrogance is justified.' He coughed again and managed a smile. 'Listen, boy. This is more important than me or you. It is, like many things, nothing – or it is everything. Take it to Harmodius. If for any reason you cannot . . .' He shrugged. 'Destroy it. Pressing three times, rapidly, on the lead bead in the cap here, will reduce this scroll to ash.' He looked up. 'Understand, boy?'

Palabo nodded. 'Yes, Master. I will not allow the Wild to stop me.'

Rushidi sighed. 'You know what, my young friend? It is not the Wild. It has never been the Wild.' He looked out the window. 'All my life, I have fought the Wild. And now . . .' He shrugged.

Palabo thought of the undead *ghulami* and their whirlwind of blows – their smell, their alien motions. Their connection to death. 'Not the Wild?' he asked.

'The Necromancer is not *of* the Wild,' Rushidi said. 'What if I told you that men came from the Wild? What if I said we have allies in the Wild, as well as enemies? What if I told you that good and evil have nothing to do with Man and the Wild? What if I told you that, severally and together, none of us started here—in this place, in his sphere—not the Umbroth, not the winged assassins, and not men.'

Palabo shrugged. 'I would say I have had these thoughts before, and kept them

silent.'

The two men were silent for a long moment.

'Bring me your sword,' the master said.

Palabo went out into the yard, and reclaimed his sword from the rack on which he'd left it while he prayed. He brought it into the Chamber of Secrets, and found his master on his feet, wearing a robe.

'Artifacts of the Golden Age are too precious to waste,' he said. 'Listen, my boy. I will endeavor to stay alive until you return. The ring will allow me to trace you. Perhaps I will be able to help you.' He smiled to himself. 'It is seductive, to have a great mission that *requires* me to live.'

Palabo nodded. 'So all I need do to keep you alive is to stay away?' he asked.

Rushidi put a hand on his shoulder. 'The Necromancer was once like me - a great magus who loved god and served his people. And then his wife grew ill, and she was beautiful, and he saved her. In saving her, he learned something every great magus learns at a certain point; knowledge he did nothing with. But when the Umbroth War began, and his king begged him to help, he used his arts to prolong his own life. He turned the tide against the Umbroth, and saved Man. But in doing so, he became what he is.'

Palabo thought for as long as it took him to light six tapers. 'Yes,' he said finally. 'I understand.'

Rushidi nodded. 'Good. I need you to understand, and to help me be strong. I am only a man, after all. Now your sword. A Fell Sword,' he said. He took the sword and

held it aloft, then laid it on his workbench. 'One of the Six. I wish I could show you what I see,' he said. 'Ah. And it was a mighty curse that did this damage.' He raised his right hand, and even to Palabo's sight it became a ball of golden fire, perfectly spherical. And then it seemed to form the head of a mighty hammer which the master slammed down on the blade and made it ring like a bell.

The lights in the room flickered, even the actual candles. A Dervish juggling balls of fire in the Sherif's harem was suddenly left without fire, and the mage light burning over the Sherif's Holy Koran dimmed. Every practitioner in the city felt the surge of power and the consequent emptiness.

Rushidi looked grey but he held the sword aloft again and Palabo saw that it was once again straight and whole – the natural curve of the blade restored to its beautiful, wide point, and the blade sparkled with minute bolts of white lightning over its surface, as it sometimes did when he drew it from the scabbard.

'That took enough power to light every fire and candle in this city, every night for a year,' Rushidi said. His skin was pale, but his eyes sparkled. 'By the thousand names of Allah, how I love it.' He grinned boyishly, and cut with the sword – at the web of hermetical workings that hung like a dew-coated spider's web from the mage-lit ball in the ceiling. The sword slit the workings, and the severed half withered like delicate vines in the first hard frost and fell away, while sparks flew from the confounded ends that remained anchored, and then the whole complex working vanished. 'You may encounter other weapons that cut in the *aethereal* as well as the real,' the magister said. He seemed to shrink – his smile wavered. 'Ah, Allah be praised even in affliction. I am

old.'

He handed the sword to Palabo. 'Go now, and return quickly so that I may die before the temptation to live overcomes me,' he said.

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A day later, Palabo Payam stood on the deck of a great ship of Venike, one of the Etruscan traders who came to Dar under the treaties. His three horses were in the hold; his leather satchel held his clothes and his bow, wrapped securely, his armour was sealed inside leather and packed into a wicker basket. The yellow stone burned on his finger, the sword hung at his side and the scroll was in a small bag that he wore at his waist, attached to his belt by fine steel chains.

The Venike gentleman who commanded the great vessel was only too happy to have a famous warrior on board – even a pagan one – on their journey across the great ocean, bound for Nova Terra and Harndon.

### **Harndon – Palabo Payam[chapter heading]**

The ship – much battered, and with the port side of her bow crushed in by a floating log – made Harndon on the seventh of March, having been at sea without touching land for fifty-six days. They had sailed from Dar to Venike, and Venike to Gades, and lain there wind-bound for weeks. And when they'd finally put the bow out into the storm-tossed Outer Sea, an endless series of

storms had blown them south, and then north. They had seen the west coast of Ifriqu'ya and the east coast of Occitan and the ice even further south.

The Veniken captain complained to his passenger that it was as if the daemons of hell wanted to keep the ship from reaching its port. And after Christmas, when the days were dark and the seas towered above the poop and men went on deck damp and cold and came back soaked and frozen, there was exhausted, terrified talk of killing the passenger for his religion.

But the Doyen of Venike prized his relations with the Court of Daar as Salaam. The captain put on half-armor, and stood in the door of the main cabin with a long sword in his hand, and the sailors shrugged and went back to grousing and nibbling hardtack.

And so, bailing and pumping, with sailcloth so worn that gusts could rip the mainsail, they crawled into Harndon.

Palabo Payam liked to imagine, as he did his exercises every day on the pitching deck, that he had bought his master half a year of life. And when he saw a great leviathan rear up in the endless deep and vanish behind them – the ship ripping down a long wave faster than a galloping horse with a fifty-knot wind at her quarter – he suspected that forces far beyond the usual were attempting to prevent his passage.

He prayed to God, and was preserved. And a few days before the Christians celebrated the rising of their dead god, moments after the damaged ship made anchor, he gathered a few meagre possessions and some mighty ones, coated himself in oil, and slipped into the Albin River. He swam ashore in the coldest water he had ever known, regretfully abandoning the one beautiful horse who had survived the journey.

He had to crawl up freezing mud that stuck like glue. He laughed a little, in a mad way, to think that he could die here having survived a thousand supernatural horrors. Drowned in mud

flats.

*I'm a fool* he thought. *I should have faced the customs officers.*

But he mastered his shaking limbs and dragged himself ashore.

In late afternoon, a lighter man took pity on what he thought was a half-drowned sailor – got him into another waterman's riverside house. The two men and their wives scrubbed away at the mud-covered, frozen man. It took them time to decide that the mud had turned his skin black, which started a hundred rumours in the port.

But their intentions were good, and he left warmer and better dressed than he had arrived, and he left them several roundels of pure gold. Later that night, when the lighterman's wife found the gold under a candlestick on her kitchen table, she exclaimed aloud, and it rather added to the unsealy atmosphere of the whole.

Dressed in plain clothes and wearing a hood that hid his face, Payam slipped into Harndon. At the base of Cheapside, he withdrew his master's ring, and looked at the spark.

Which, to his complete mystification, went out briefly. And then flared like a candle at the last of its wick. And then pointed firmly north.

He smiled. A meal, a horse, and a night's sleep, and he would be away. He put a hand on the familiar weight of the Fell Sword at his side, and walked on. But the neighborhood was bad, and the light poor, and even as he walked he heard a riot come towards him. Riots were not so rare when the wheat crop failed around Daar, and he first put his hand to his sword, and then considered.

There was an alley to his right. A beggar—an armed beggar of some sort—lay dead, his boots protruding into the alley. The smell of urine was offensive.

Palabo had a second sense for such places. He looked past the dead man as the sound of

running and angry voices came closer. Someone was being hunted.

He reached up and found the place where the cheap roof joists of the last hut along the alley did not quite joint the wall where they overhung, and in one sinuous motion, he was up and crammed into the crack under the eaves. His sword refused his elegant solution and flapped against the wall and he had to fetch it in, balancing precariously on his hip—but he knew he was invisible to any but the most careful search.

He waited.

Continued in Traitorson Book 3 – Tournament of Fools

