

When the Winged Lions Return

Chapter 3

Omdurman – City of Sorcerers and Chaos Singers

A colossal picture of Sula I on horseback hung above the royal throne. With his left hand he was shading eyes filled with hatred, looking back towards Salitula after his defeat and expulsion by his brother. Sula had commissioned this picture for his son, Sula II, and had bequeathed it to him together with a hatred for Abardagan. Over the years the picture had suffered from wear and tear and the colours had lost their vibrancy, but the desire to destroy Salitula and to raze it to the ground had gathered strength and had become the unwholesome aim of the sorcerers who were now the rulers of Omdurman, city of the Chaos Singers. Sula I had willed that all his heirs should call their first-born sons Sula. 'My soul will only find peace when all the rulers of Abardagan are my descendants, and all called Sula,' he had said. If this really was the case, his soul must have been in great turmoil since, after many years and many wars, Sula I's son, Sula – waiting for whose birth he had paced back and forth in the hall, looking up now and then at his expelled ancestor – was ruler of Omdurman and no more.

'It's a boy! A boy!' Sula heard his mother's voice. A tall, grey-haired woman rushed into the hall and embraced her son.

This woman was wearing a black satin dress, she had a red sash with long tassels wrapped several times around her waist, and on her forehead were painted two circles, the sorcerers' sign.

'One more Sula!' said the ruler of the Chaos Singers proudly, looking up with pride at the picture of his great ancestor.

'Thank you, son.'

'Why are you thanking me, mother?' Sula was surprised.

'For naming your child Sula,' the woman responded.

'Well, what should I have called him?'

'I was told your wife was going to give the child another name!' said the Queen Mother through clenched teeth.

'Asai is perfectly well aware I'm calling my first-born son Sula. She won't dare refuse. She simply asked me permission to call him by another name.'

'Simply asked you? Under no circumstances!'

'You are a mother and shouldn't find it hard to understand her. For several years now all my ancestors have been called Sula, all of them were defeated in the struggle for Abardagan, all killed on the battlefield. Asai thinks a second name might ward off such a fate from our son.'

'And have you allowed her to do this?'

'Not yet.'

'Take it from me: don't ever. It's enough that my grandson doesn't have a mother who's a sorceress.'

'So what? Even Sula the First didn't have a sorceress mother.'

'It would have served him better if he'd had, he wouldn't have made so many mistakes and you'd now be ruler of Abardagan.'

'I don't know what mistakes he made, but I'm confident I'm really going to be ruler of Abardagan! Now I'll go and have a look at my first-born, my little Sula!' Sula enunciated the baby's name with particular pride, he took leave of his mother and left the hall.

'Don't forget what I've told you!' the Queen Mother called after her son.

The Queen Mother stood motionless for some time, lost in thought. Then she scowled at the picture of Sula I and left the hall.

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No sound could be heard in the semi-dark cell other than the muffled buzzing of insects trapped in spiders' webs on the walls. Tiso found one such victim in the flickering light of the oil lamp and set it free, muttering discontentedly: 'How stupid you are. What brought you in here on your own wings? Are there so few places you could freely fly to? If I only had wings to get away from these accursed people.' Tiso followed the freed moth with his eyes. The insect looked in vain for a window and, tired and exhausted, it took several short rests on a small protuberance.

'It looks as if you'll get entangled in the web again, you poor thing!' muttered the prisoner, catching the butterfly in his closed fist and carefully letting it go out through the window. 'Hey, my butterfly, my butterfly,' Tiso heaved a sigh. 'If you could talk, wouldn't you tell me which of us is more to be pitied now: you or me?'

The sound of a key being inserted into the lock could be heard. Tiso came away from the window and sat down on the stone bench. The door opened and two armed guards entered the cell.

'Come along, the Queen Mother is calling you,' one of them ordered him harshly. The guards placed manacles on the prisoner's hands, brought him down one on either side and took him from Omdurman prison to the Queen Mother by a secret tunnel. As soon as the sorceress caught sight of the hand manacles she yelled at the guards, enraged:

'How many times do I have to tell you to be careful with this man's hands. Remove the manacles at once!'

The guards quickly freed Tiso's hands.

'Leave us!' ordered the Queen Mother.

'How can we leave you alone, Madam?' one of them ventured.

'The best-known mask maker in Abardagan will never deviate from the teaching of the Book of the Judge and will do no harm to a woman. Isn't that so, maestro?'

Tiso broke into a bitter sweat, but he smiled at her in agreement. It was his third month in confinement. Throughout this time his nerves had not once failed him. The artisan retained

his composure. He believed that as long as he remained faithful to the Book of the Judge the sorceress could do no harm to his heart or mind. Raising a hand to an unarmed woman, even if an enemy, was a betrayal of the Book of the Judge. The wall of faith could no longer protect the traitor against the sorcerers.

'I sense you need me so badly that you no longer value your life. You have stayed with me without protection. You sorcerers claim to be wise, but you are ignorant. What did you think: that your life or death is more important than my composure?'

'Be quiet, old man, how dare you speak to the Queen Mother like that!' the woman yelled at him.

'You're not my queen, nor have you been, nor will you ever be!' responded Tiso calmly and he sat down on a chair without permission.

'All right, Tiso! What's the use in us fighting? It's better to help each other out. You've probably made a thousand masks, so why haven't you managed to carve one more, that of Sula the First? Am I asking something impossible of you? I only want to save your life, otherwise what does it take to find an artisan who will gladly fulfil our order. Don't forget, you're not the only one. Why, Sula has had your son Usumba here for a month already.'

Tiso was very upset on hearing this. The elderly artisan was not bothered about his own life. He had passed on all his knowledge to his son and the secret of the wet-eyed mask would not be buried with him. 'I must save Usumba,' thought Tiso, 'I must save him whatever the cost.'

'I know you're not telling me the main thing.' He turned towards the Queen Mother. 'You're not worried only about saving my life. Would you be satisfied if I were to agree to make an ordinary mask of Sula the First, such as are for sale in their thousands at Tualanu market?'

'I don't think an ordinary mask by an extraordinary artisan would please my son.'

'Well then, what do you need a wet-eyed mask for?'

'So people are telling the truth. You really can make a wet-eyed mask?'

'A mask maker must know the truth so as to produce a perfect piece of work. But you're telling me nothing.'

'You're right. My son is young and inexperienced. I'm very sorry he can't show you appropriate respect. I'll explain everything to you. I'm convinced that when you hear the truth you won't decline my son's request. What do you think, that we mothers from Omdurman are pleased when we leave our sons behind on the battlefield? Those who return to us are defeated and are humiliated publicly. What are we to do? We haven't been able to extinguish the hatred and the desire for fighting in our menfolk's hearts. They say that in his old age Sula the First very much regretted that he rebelled against Abardagan. I have read in old documents that it was actually one of your ancestors who discovered the secret of making wet-eyed masks and started carving them himself. Those who wore one of his masks on their face shared the thoughts, knowledge, pain and joy of that person whose mask it was. Thanks to the wet-eyed mask it is possible to become any person's double. I thought that if my son gets to know the thoughts of Sula the First perhaps a feeling of regret might enter his heart and he might abandon the endless struggle against Abardagan. Believe me, by making the mask you would bring great good to Abardagan.'

'You said you've got Usumba here. Show him to me first and then we can talk!' the old artisan stated his condition.

'I knew you'd ask to see him. Unfortunately I can't help you yet. I'll show you his handiwork to convince you I'm telling the truth.'

'You could have bought his handiwork at Tualanu market.'

'I'll show you a piece of work he could only have done here.'

'I can't believe it. My son would never become your court artisan.'

The Queen Mother picked up an object wrapped in a white cloth from the table and handed it to Tiso. His hand trembling, the old man opened the package and was flabbergasted. Before him was a mask of the Queen Mother. It really was Usumba's handiwork, since such carving on wood was their family secret.

'Do you recognize it? Now don't you believe that Usumba is here?'

'I recognize it! Alas, I do. But I also notice that his heart wasn't in his work. Here and there his hand was shaking.'

'Tiso, make a wet-eyed mask of Sula the First if you want to see your son alive.'

The old mask maker summoned all his strength and once again closely examined the eyes of the Queen Mother's mask. The choice of crystal from which to make the wet eyes was correct, the workmanship had been peerlessly executed, and no one could distinguish it from the real thing. The pupils clearly showed the wetness characteristic of a living human eye. Everything had apparently been done really well, yet a doubt still gnawed at the artisan's heart. He had only one way left to check the mask. He put the mask on his face, but not a single experience or thought of the Queen Mother's touched Tiso's consciousness. Now the artisan understood. The mask was a fake: with this mask you were still looking at the world with your own eyes. Usumba had used jet for the pupils instead of magical black ebony. 'My son has turned out to be brighter than me,' the idea flashed through the old man's mind. 'He's playing for time.'

'The handiwork is outstanding,' said Tiso when he had removed the mask. 'No one other than my son could have made it. But this still isn't a wet-eyed mask. Nor is this surprising. The eyes need to be wetted.'

'In other words, what you're saying is that your son has cheated us?'

'But I don't know what my son has told you.'

'Usumba said that the mask was done, but that he couldn't complete it himself. "The mask itself won't let me," he said,' the Queen Mother spelt it out.

'He was telling the truth.'

'I don't understand. Explain it to me.'

'You cannot spin thread from unripe loofah, and you cannot make wine from green grapes. Now do you understand? Usumba is still young.'

'I understand!' responded the Queen Mother nodding her head.

'If you set my son free this very day I shall make you a mask of Sula the First, but only on one condition.'

'I'm listening... What condition might that be?' A spark of hope swiftly excited the Queen Mother.

'Before I make a mask of Sula the First I'll redo your mask as a wet-eyed one so that you won't cheat me and you really will set my son free,' responded Tiso.

'Done!' the Queen Mother immediately agreed.

'I'll hold on to this mask!' Tiso wrapped the mask in the cloth again.

'You have it, you... Now tell me what you need to carve a wet-eyed mask!'

'A piece of taruto, a good wood chisel, a small hammer, a piece of clear blue mountain crystal, a picture of Sula the First, his writings and everything you have that's been written about him. And what's most important... two bowls, one filled with human tears and the other with the ashes of burnt human hair. When you bring me all this you'll get a wet-eyed mask of Sula the First.'

The Queen Mother called the guards and ordered them: 'Relocate Tiso to a warm, dry room, have him be treated respectfully, don't stint on his care, and have him supplied with all the tools necessary to make a mask.'

'Your word is your bond! Don't forget it, Tiso!' said the Queen Mother to the artisan as he left the room.

'You can take it easy, my word is as reliable as a deal at Tualanu. Only don't forget that you're also a party to this deal,' responded Tiso and followed the guards out.

'You have called us sorcerers ignorant, while you yourself immediately swallowed the bait like an inexperienced minnow,' tittered the Queen Mother as he shut the door. 'That's that done!' The sorceress rubbed her hands. 'It's time to tell my son the good news!' 'The ruler is seeing his son,' they told the Queen Mother. She used to avoid entering Asai's chamber, but now it gave her pleasure to gladden her son in her daughter-in-law's presence. Sula was sitting beside his wife, holding their child in his hands. The little one was sleeping contentedly. The Queen Mother nosily entered the room.

'I've brought you good news, son!' she greeted Sula as she came into the room. From early childhood Sula was accustomed to getting to his feet when his mother entered, and this habit stayed with him even after he became ruler. But now, he could hardly leap up holding the sleeping child, so he did not make a move. This behaviour of Sula's immediately caught the Queen Mother's eye, but she did not change tack, she approached her son and loudly repeated to him once again:

'I've brought you good news, son!'

The child grimaced at the noise and let out a sob.

'Have I woken the child on you,' the Queen Mother was upset.

'It's nothing. I had to waken him anyway, it's Gala-Gala's feeding time,' responded Asai taking the child from Sula. She took him to one side to feed him.

The Queen Mother was flabbergasted on hearing the child's name. Her grandson Sula was called Gala-Gala by his mother. Gala-Gala was an ancient sorcerers' name and meant 'kind heart'.

It was a long time since children had last been given this name.

'I'm very grateful to you, Asai, and especially to you, Sula, that you have given the child a sorcerer's name as a mark of respect for me. I wasn't aware. You have gladdened me greatly, very greatly!' With these words the Queen Mother brought up all the spite that had accumulated in her heart.

'What are you saying, mother!' Now Sula jumped to his feet and raised an eyebrow at his wife. 'My first born is called Sula, only Asai has given him the pet name Gala-Gala.' 'Sula, can't you see how this name has pleased the Queen Mother? Let's really call the little one Gala-Gala as a second name!' Asai asked her husband with marked respect. Sula did not lend an ear to his wife and he asked his mother:

'Aren't you going to tell us what the good news you've brought is?'

'Tiso has agreed, son, he will carve a wet-eyed mask of Sula the First!'

'So our plan has been successful, Tiso has fallen into the trap!' Sula put his hands on his hips as a sign of satisfaction and swung this way and that. If not for his wife, he would have hugged his mother close like a little child.

'But for this we shall need to fill two bowls, one with tears and the other with the ashes of burnt hair.'

'What could be easier than that? I'll give the order right now, I'll stir the whole of Omdurman into action. I'll give him not two, but a thousand bowls.'

Asai was suffocating beside the Queen Mother. The haughtiness and hatred that emanated from her mother-in-law made her calm life miserable. And now, when she had been left alone, it was as if a rope constricting her neck had been slackened and she could breathe freely.

'What can I do?' thought the miserable young woman. 'The Queen Mother will destroy both my husband and my son.' Sula loved his young wife deeply. He indulged her, but he did not let her get involved with the affairs of Omdurman. Only the Queen Mother could advise Sula. Asai behaved very carefully so as not to irritate the Queen Mother. Nor could she oppose her husband. On this occasion, too, she listened calmly as Sula told how in Omdurman they carve very robust soldiers from taruto wood who are not injured by either sword or arrow, nor consumed by fire, nor sink in water. The Queen Mother and other sorcerers would bring all of these to life using the wet-eyed mask of Sula I and, like him, their hearts would be filled with hatred towards Abardagan. Then they would destroy and raze to the ground the impregnable Salitula, those who survived would be bewitched and enslaved. Asai could not believe the news that the Queen Mother had brought, she was

convinced that Tiso would do all in his power not to agree to make a wet-eyed mask of Sula I. The matter of the two bowls seemed strange to her.

Asai clasped the child tightly to her chest. The little one began to squirm, he moved his lips and was about to cry.

'No, my darling, don't cry!' Asai calmed him. 'Even if it costs me my life, I'll take you away from this evil den of sorcerers and I'll not let your heart be tainted by hatred.' These were her thoughts when the door opened cautiously and her brother Tsebai entered the room. 'Have you heard the news, Tiso has agreed!' he greeted his sister.

'Tsebai, something's come over you, you've become just the same as them. How can you be pleased if yet another great war becomes inevitable,' his sister reproached him. 'I didn't think of that. Tiso's agreement pleased me as it means they won't kill him. You haven't forgotten that he raised me? Admittedly, I've been bewitched and I can never do anything against the Chaos Singers, I obey them in everything, but no kind of bewitchment can make me forget that kindness Tiso showed me. He raised me like a son, he treated me the same as he did Usumba. He ungrudgingly taught me mask making, their great family treasure. But these accursed people will pester me,' Tsebai looked angrily towards the door as if he thought it was crowded with sorcerers on the other side. 'I left him when I realized that Tiso wanted to confide in me the secret of the wet eyes. It's a good thing that they know the old man is clever and he'll immediately realize that I've been bewitched. For this reason they'll never be able to introduce me to Tiso as his lost son.'

Asai was convinced that her brother was genuinely troubled by Tiso's fate, but it caused him no grief at all whether there would be a war or not, or whether or not the Queen Mother would cast a spell on the whole world. Nor could she blame Tsebai: compared to others who had been bewitched he had at least retained feelings of gratitude. Asai felt sorry for her brother, but she did not know how to help him. Many years after he was lost, she had found her missing brother by chance, admittedly already bewitched, but she was still grateful to fate. Nor was she offended that her brother did not enquire about her only son. In his bewitched state Tsebai could only recall old love, he was incapable of feeling new. 'Take a look at my little one, Tsebai,' Asai asked her brother.

Tsebai went across to the child and observed him closely. He recoiled terror-stricken when he caught sight of faint circles on his forehead.

'What's wrong with you? Asai was bewildered.

'Have a good look at his forehead, he's a sorcerer too!' The keen eye of the mask maker had not missed the three circles faintly imprinted on the child's forehead.

'What are you saying, Tsebai! You're imagining it. Gala is an ordinary child,' Tsebai's words touched Asai deeply.

'I don't know, Asai. I've had my say. Time will tell whether this little Sula is a sorcerer or...'

'It's not Sula, it's Gala-Gala...' Asai corrected him.

'Fine. You'll soon see whether Gala-Gala is a sorcerer or an ordinary child, and that will be without me. I'm off now. They let me out only for a very short time to visit you. All the best,

Asai dear. They snatched us both at the same time from our parents. I grew up among people and they bewitched me, while you were raised among the Chaos Singers, but were not bewitched. Now you reign as Queen over us, so don't be afraid. If Gala-Gala really is a sorcerer it's not at all inevitable that the grass will not grow in his footprints, that trees will shed their leaves as he passes by, that people will be turned into mute slaves. Be careful. Don't trust anyone here, not even me. Unfortunately, there's nothing I can do to help you.' Tsebai kissed his sister on the head. He barely touched the child's blankets, and that only to please his sister, and he left the room.

As Tsebai went out, Asai took the child to the window and had a close look at his forehead. She calmed down when she could make nothing out. Sunbeams were striking Gala-Gala on his face, the little one screwed up his eyes. He disliked the bright light.

'The sun is good, son, it brings light!' Asai told her child affectionately without intending to remove him from the window. But suddenly she felt she could not move her feet and she involuntarily took the child towards the bed. When she laid Gala-Gala on a soft pillow and looked down on his pink face, she could clearly see three circles on his forehead. These circles vanished very rapidly. Asai shrieked. The guards rushed in when they heard the screams.

'Is everything all right, Your Majesty?' asked one.

Confused and stunned, Asai only managed to nod her head slightly.

'Really?' The guard did not trust the Queen's response and he repeated his question.

'Everything's fine. I just twisted my ankle...' Asai barely managed to summon the strength to answer the guard calmly.

The guards had a look around the room and went out.

Now Asai believed her brother was correct in what he said: her child was a sorcerer, and such a powerful one that he had three circles on his forehead, and it was the new-born child himself who had forced his mother to take him away from the window.

'I can't leave you here!' said Asai decisively. 'If the Queen Mother heard who you are, she'd really take you away from me. And who knows what terrible things they'll make you do, small though you are. The sooner we steal away from here the better it will be for you, for me, and for all of Abardagan.'