

BLOOD
ON
BRONZE

~BOOK ONE~

ANTHONY GILLIS

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By Anthony Gillis

First Print Edition

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This work is dedicated to the great authors of the sword and sorcery tradition, in particular Robert E. Howard and Michael Moorcock, to my friends Jason, Mark, and Eric – who long ago played a part in the creation of Zakran and its world, and to my amazing wife and editor, Alexandria.



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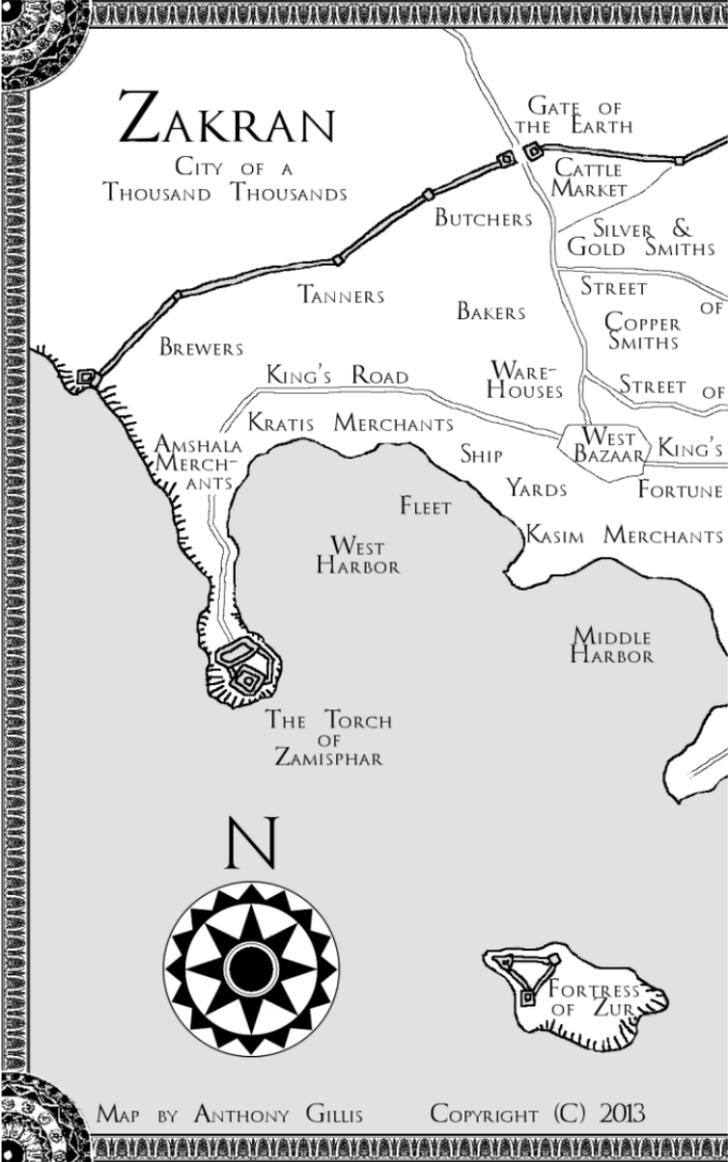
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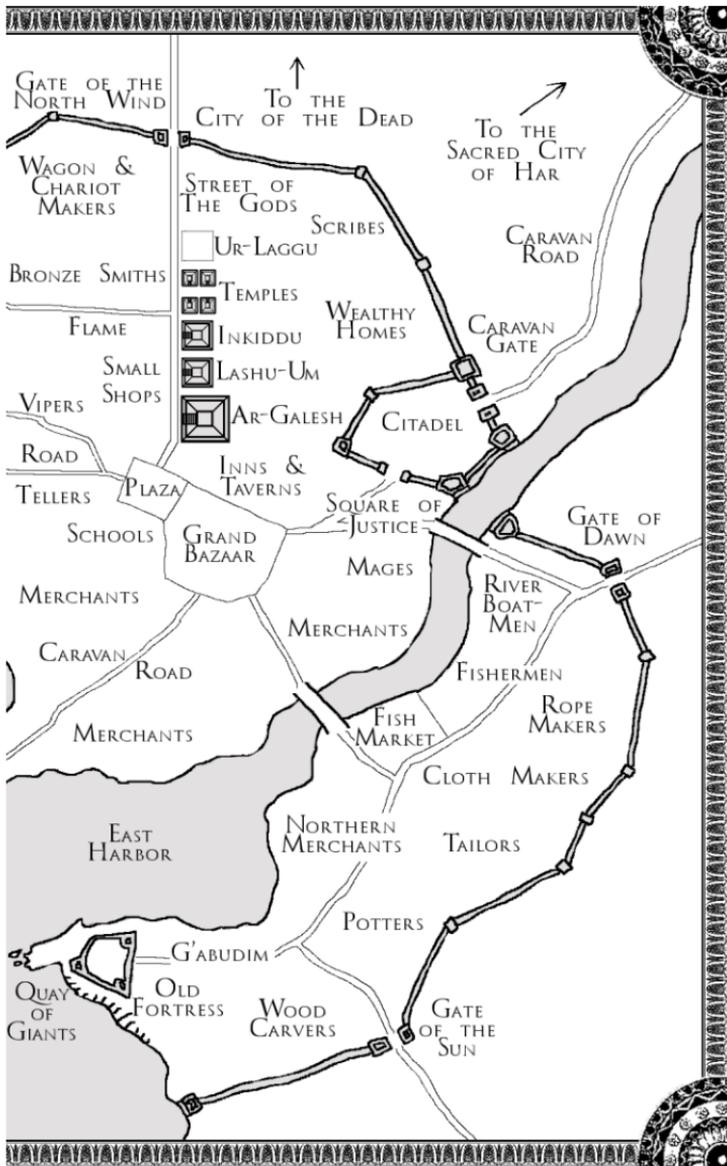
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I.

The Tale of Terror in the Night

Arjun woke to the sound of Keda's screams as the doors were smashed in.

He grabbed the bronze sword at his bedside, his father's work and his eighteenth birthday gift, and ran for the cloth door of his room. The geometric patterns of his sleeping robe gleamed in the dull light of the hallway lamp. The inlaid tile of the floor was cool in the night air against his bare feet as he ran. There was no time to change into something more practical, no time to think. He hoped there was still time to act.





There were loud noises coming from below, angry voices of men and sounds of struggle. His father was speaking in a strong calm voice, as was his way. Keda's screams turned to angry shrieks, and he heard a sound like a pot smashing against something as a harsh male voice roared in anger and pain.

Robbers? If so, they must be many and bold to strike at the house of Ashur dra Artashad!

The steps were just ahead now. He leapt down them two or three at a time. The scene that met his eyes was not what he'd expected. Arjun came to a sudden, skittering stop at the base of the stairs, and all eyes turned momentarily to him.

There was the tall form of his father, still in daytime kilt and cloak, with sword drawn, the black plaits of his beard glinting with bronze rings in the flickering light, and bands of bronze on his powerful arms. There too was Naram-Enki, the night guard, but he was sprawled against the urn by the smashed front door, blood pouring from wounds at his neck above his bronze breastplate, and his waist below. Good loyal old Eb-Sim stood by Arjun's father, sword drawn and facing the foe. Off to a side stood Keda, wizened and thin, her gray hair flying loose. Her arms were raised, a pot in her hands. From the lower hallway came Madu the day guard in only his kilt, with a bronze axe ready.





But they who had entered the house were not robbers!

City guardsmen, the sun disc and twin crescent moons of Zakran carved on the bronze plates at their chests and on their round shields, stood in the hall with swords drawn! One of their number was staggering back toward the door, stumbling over broken potsherds, wiping clay dust and a trickle of blood from his face. Another lay on the ground near Naram-Enki in a growing pool of blood. They were led by a captain with gold armbands and a gold-fringed kilt. With them was a high ranking scribe in purple cloth, and also was a figure he knew...

Bal-Shim! No close friend perhaps, but still a bronze maker and brother of the order of Zamisphar of the Flame. What was HE doing here? Bal-Shim's heavy face looked surprised, then turned to a snarl. The thick plaits of his beard moved as if he was going to speak.

His father was faster, "My son, I command you, remember now the tale of Ur-Namash!"

Arjun's blood ran cold at the signal they had long prearranged. He wanted more than life itself to stay and stand by his father. But they were of the old families - his father had commanded and he must obey. He ran fast back up the stairs. There was yelling behind him.





A deep voice, likely the captain's, growled, "Get back here boy! Surrender, and no harm will come to you!"

He ran on.

Arjun could hear sounds as the guards must be trying to force their way past his father and the servants. There were more yells and noises of fighting. He raced to the small shrine of Zamisphar at the far end of the hall, a bowl shaped like a hand with a small flame burning. He placed the amulet at his neck to the bronze disc at its base, and waited. There was a faint glow of magic, and the shrine pulled aside revealing the hidden alcove behind it. Sweat ran down his forehead and collected in the loose curls of his black hair as awful thoughts raced through his mind. Inside the alcove, all was it should be. The painted leather bags were there on the little wooden hatch. He hesitated for a brief moment. He knew what father would want him to do, but could he? Could he really leave him now?

There was an agonized scream behind him, the voice gurgling with something liquid, and a large crash. He heard his father's voice shout amidst the din, followed by the clash of metal. Keda's voice shrieked in fury, and then suddenly went silent. Arjun clenched the sword and considered turning back to help.

His father's voice appeared in his mind, in memory. There was no ambiguity in what





he'd commanded. Arjun slung both bags over his shoulder and hoped that his father could rejoin him somewhere, somehow. He pulled up the little panel of floor, started down the ladder in the shaft, and pulled both the shrine and the trap door closed behind him.

Everything went black.

Idiot! He cursed himself, and remembered he'd brought no light. The lamp of the shrine was there for that very purpose. No time now. His father had made him practice this many times. Fearfully more dangerous as it was in the darkness, he could do this, and did. He climbed down the ladder as quickly as he dared, expecting at any moment to see the light appear above him, and with it the end of any escape.

He passed the level of the first floor, and then that of the cellars. He would soon reach that of the vaults, and was tempted to use the second secret door down there to get out, grab a lamp, and perhaps try to equip himself a little better. But no, the guards might come while he delayed. He steeled his mind, and accepted that he would not stop until he reached the bottom, the level of the old sewers, and even there his journey would but begin.

As he descended, he could feel moisture growing in the air, the copper rungs of the ladder felt slick in his hands and slippery under his feet, but he did not stop. His mind did not stop either. Why had this happened?





Arjun's father was not the sort to make enemies, so far as he knew; but a rich man might have them nonetheless. Zakran, city of a thousand thousands, was the crossroads of the world and a dangerous place. All the good and all the evil that men and the other thinking folk could do made its way there one way or another.

His father had made certain, that should that evil come to them, they knew a way out. Yet Arjun had never imagined it taking such a form. The hidden shaft had been built with the house itself centuries ago, but must have been long forgotten. When his father and grandfather had bought the place, it had been bricked up and plastered over. They'd found it only by noticing that in that spot, the interior and exterior walls of the great house didn't line up as they ought.

Arjun had been born in the house and grown up there. His father had made certain he'd learned the way down the shaft and through the sewers, should it ever be needed. Arjun himself had thought it unlikely that, short of an invasion by the Empire of Sarsa, anyone would dare attack them in their own house. And if such an invasion came, where in the end would they hide from the Great King's armies?

But something else had happened. Someone with the power to send city guardsmen had sent them to arrest or kill his family. To strike at a man of his father's influence would mean it was no mere captain, or even one of the





watch commanders. It could only mean someone on the council of the city. But why?

Arjun's thoughts were interrupted as his bare feet hit the cold, slick stone of the bottom.

He turned around in the pitch darkness and touched the bronze door, felt its etched designs, traced the incantations and the wards engraved in the metal. But he was bound to those wards and safe. His grandfather had paid a lot of money to old Enlil iru Lagesh for the enchantments, and the legendary but now long-dead magus had done his work well. Arjun found the seal and pressed his amulet against it. He took momentary comfort in the brief flash of faint magical light.

The door opened, more noisily than he'd remembered it. But then when he'd last done so, it had been daytime, he'd had a lamp, and he hadn't been in fear for his life.

On the other side, the door was carefully disguised to appear as any other patch of the worked stone of the sewer walls, with a faint illusion to hide crevices around the edges from even careful inspection. Right now however, Arjun couldn't see anything. Terrible as the complete darkness was, any sign of light on the other side would have been no more than the portent of his capture.

He stopped, held perfectly still, and listened in the dark. Nothing above, and nothing in the sewers but the drip of water and the faint





scurrying of what he hoped was a rat and not a scorpion.

Or worse.

Stories had long been told of ghouls living in the ancient sewers under the city, and the even older tunnels that connected with them. The sewers led down to the level of the harbor and the sea, and according to rumor, the tunnels led by dark paths to other less pleasant places. The ghouls were supposed to be cold, slow, silent, patient things, something less than alive, but something more than dead. It was said they could dine for a very long time on the corpse of a victim, as they needed little and minded decay not at all.

Arjun dearly hoped the stories were false.

He traced his hand along the frame of the door, then took a deep breath and stepped onto the ledge of the sewer. He closed the door behind him. There was the faintest silver tracery of magic, too dim to see by, as it sealed again. He felt where the door had been, and there was nothing but smooth stone wall against his hand. He knew where he must go, even if he didn't relish it, turned to the right, and began.

Arjun had never walked the sewer path barefoot. It was not pleasant. Filthy stone, greasy damp, detritus, and small bones met his toes. He stepped on something sharp, felt it break the skin, and willed himself not to utter a sound.





Something else scurried past his toes, stopped for a moment, then bolted away

Ahead, he thought he could see dim and faint light. He tensed, gripped the sword in his hand, and readied himself for the lantern and the armed men.

But they did not come. Then he remembered that he was still under the family courtyard, and ahead was the deep shaft from the drain grating at the center. On a night like this, when the moons were both full and bright, enough light would reach down that shaft to be visible even from some distance.

Despite the horrible events of the night, that thought gave him some feeble hope.

He followed the sewer path as it advanced toward a small side passage and the niche on the right containing the shaft. It went straight up, and was small, too small for him to crawl through, but then it needed only to admit water. The light of the moons illuminated this section of sewer. The little path, as he remembered, was only two or three feet wide. Along its left ran a gully of foul water another three feet across. He was grateful it hadn't rained recently and the water ran a foot or so below the level of the path. Though Zakran was normally a dry place, after a storm this entire passage might be neck deep in water rushing its way to the sea.

Ahead of him, the passage ran off into darkness once more. He could dimly see the side





passage to the right, but that was not his way. Somewhere off in the blackness, his way came to a little footbridge crossing the gully to the left, and then a longer passage leading out from the district of the bronze makers, underneath the Street of Flame, to the seedy and dangerous area between the western bazaar and the district of the fortune tellers.

That seediness was helpful to his purpose. Of all the passages from the sewers to the surface, only a few were level enough to be traversable without special equipment, and most of those ended in locked grates or in areas where someone's emergence would be noticed. His father had found a long disused side passage with rubble at both ends, and an exit that at least seemed to be equally unused emerging between two shabby warehouses.

Of course, it was entirely likely that in a rough neighborhood, others did know of and use it, but they themselves would be the sort of people who were not eager to meet or alert city guardsmen.

Arjun realized he was walking too slowly. He was not eager to go back into that blackness, particularly knowing he'd have to feel along carefully to find the little footbridge. It had no rails and no marker. With light, seeing it would be easy enough, but in the dark he could easily pass it and then wander blindly and stupidly into the unknown. If that happened, it





would be morning before he'd have any way to find his way out.

If he was lucky.

He set his mind, and pressed forward into the looming darkness.

After several hundred feet, and a slow turn of the passage, he could again see no light at all. He thought the bridge was still at least four hundred feet ahead, but it would be more than disastrous to pass it. He knelt down, and started crawling forward, feeling along the edge of the gully with his left hand, feeling for the bridge. The edge was in some places crumbling, in others slimy and foul.

He found it difficult to crawl with his sword in his right hand. Even going slowly and carefully, it tended to clank on the stone, making noises that loomed very large in his dark quiet world. The last thing he needed to do now was attract the attention of pursuers, or of whoever or whatever might be down here.

Besides the ghouls, there were rumors of unsavory characters basing operations down here, of wandering madmen, and of feral animals. Somewhere to the east, in the higher ground nearer the citadel and the temples was the underground temple of Ur-Laggu the Embracer, he who judged the dead without pity. One could well imagine it connected with the sewers or the tunnels, and he had no desire to find it or to meet the devotees of that gloomy cryptic god here, in





the dark. The city slaves, on the occasions when they actually did their jobs and braved coming down here to clean or repair, moved in large groups, and with armed guards.

Grimly, Arjun tucked the sword on his back, amid the straps of his bags and the cloth belt of his robes. He hoped it would stay put. He crawled forward in slow silence. With nothing to see and no way to judge the passage of time, it seemed interminable, each inch forward on hands and knees an eon of pitiless darkness and uncertainty.

His mind wandered back to Bal-Shim iru Shulggi and his presence at the raid by the guardsmen. Arjun decided there was no honorable reason the bronze maker could have been there. Bal-Shim had never been a particularly good bronze smith himself, nor was he even an especially shrewd merchant, but he was a popular man with a lot of friends, including friends in high places. However undeservedly, he was considered something of a self-made common man, in contrast to aristocratic merchants like the house of Artashad. It was ironic, since however ancient the lineage of Artashad, it had been impoverished for generations until Arjun's grandfather had restored its fortunes with his superlative skill as a bronze-worker.

Bal-Shim had enjoyed backing from somewhere for a long time, and had used those





funds to hire people with the skills he lacked. Though never one to pick open battles, he was known to be a bit cool toward Arjun's father. Bal-Shim had worn a strange expression just before he'd noticed Arjun. One that looked almost... gloating.

Arjun's thoughts were interrupted by something. Not anything he heard, nor of course saw, but something he felt. He froze, and cursed himself for dwelling on problems he couldn't solve at the moment, to the detriment of those he must.

Something, something cold, touched his foot.

He couldn't panic now. He had to find that bridge. If he didn't, he would be spending the night, or forever, with whatever had just touched him. Arjun sped up, but willed himself to continue crawling, feeling for the bridge.

Whatever it was, it had fingers, long and lifelessly cold. They brushed his heel, and then vanished again. He continued to crawl forward, and heard not a sound. Something moved though, in the darkness. Arjun could feel the slightest shift in the air, as if something crept forward past him, and then stopped.

It stretched a chill hand to his shoulder, found the sword on his back, and recoiled suddenly at the touch of the bronze weapon. Still, it made no sound. Arjun's nerves were near their breaking point. He prepared to reach for his





sword and risk losing the path. But whatever it was, it could see him clearly, and could react as soon as he made any move, better and faster than he could blind in the dark.

Where was that bridge?



