

An Excerpt From

Treasures of Dodrazeb: The Origin Key

Rasteem resisted sending the boy back to his tent. Another volley of fiery arrows whistled into the city. Restless Persian soldiers watched as flaming missiles from siege engines reduced sections of the city's wall to rubble while dawn crept slowly over the horizon.

"What're we waiting for?" Kamran bounced on his toes.

Rasteem glanced at the young soldier. "Light. We don't know this city." The view from their hillside vantage point was partially obscured by smoke and debris, but distant screams carried clearly on the cool breeze.

Kamran fidgeted inside his new armor. "Why is Uncle Zardegerd convinced the Viper is from here? Why won't he listen to you?" Two more missiles arced high over the massive wall and crashed into buildings.

"Because of the old merchant's tale. The only Chudreev we could discover, the only one anyone had ever heard of is the king of this valley."

"But... it was you... you're better...," Kamran stammered. "You tracked the attackers and found Dodrazeb. Don't you think the Viper is here?"

Rasteem blew out a long, slow breath and eyed a group of mounted soldiers, their eager horses pawing the ground. "*Zardegerd* commands the army now. We take our orders from him." He looked at Kamran with narrowed eyes. "He will be the King of Kings one day, sitting on the Throne of Light—I only offer advice. It is *our* place to be warriors always loyal to the rightful king."

"I know—I don't mean—it's just that—" Kamran shook his head. "He usually listens to you."

"He's right about one thing." Rasteem pulled his sword from its scabbard. "We must find and dispatch the murderers' leader. We can't tolerate incursions into the Empire that threaten the king's life."

Rasteem was ready to conquer this enigmatic kingdom, to find and put an end to the Viper. But he most wanted to keep Kamran safe. He wouldn't allow his nephew's death to fulfill

the bizarre prophecy that had brought them here. This must be a quick victory.

The eastern sky continued to brighten. "Stay close."

At a signal from the cavalry leader, Rasteem raised his sword and roared an order. He sprinted through a smoking breach in the wall, Kamran at his heels. The army poured inside on foot and on horseback. Rasteem veered left, leading the infantry in a flanking maneuver while the cavalry pushed straight through.

Daybreak revealed a bloody invasion where brave resistance was no match for the Persian army. Rasteem yanked his blade from an enemy's belly. When another came at him, he kicked away the man's weapon and drove a sword through his heart. If the fighting continued at this pace, it would be over in no time.

He looked over his shoulder for Kamran. Dead Dodrazebians, both soldiers and civilian men, littered the streets, but the boy was nowhere in sight. Rasteem spun around, cold dread sucking the air from his lungs. Frantic, he ignored the metallic stink of blood, filtered out tortured cries.

A familiar shout drew him to an alley. He found Kamran trapped, backed against a wall.

Kamran ducked behind his round shield to fend off a man attacking him with a short sword, his blows thudding against it like an axe chopping a log. When the shield broke apart, Kamran flung the pieces into the dirt next to his sword. He crouched and raised his fists, prepared to spring aside before the defender could finish him off.

Rasteem yelled as he came at Kamran's foe. The man turned toward the sound and was instantly impaled. With the tip of Rasteem's sword protruding from his back, surprise in the defender's eyes dimmed to lifelessness. Rasteem pushed the body off his blade, letting it crumple to the ground.

Kamran's face lit up. "Still haven't taken the palace?"

Rasteem grabbed him by his armor. "Can't lead an invasion if I'm searching for you!" He leaned down until they were nose-to-nose. "*Stay with me.*" Rasteem released him and stomped away.

Kamran snatched up his sword. Adjusting his helmet, he ran to catch up. "I would've killed him."

Rasteem snorted. “Be glad the only other witness to your failure is dead in the alley.” Red-faced, Kamran held his tongue.

Sweating, spattered with gore and dirt, Rasteem raced down the dusty street lined by two- and three-story homes, shops, and expansive gardens. Gusts of acrid smoke carried the smell of freshly spilled blood, giving the air a stench like raw iron on a hot forge. He caught up with a handful of his men engaged in fierce combat against more than a dozen desperate citizens defending a wooden footbridge arching across a canal. It was the last obstacle between the Persians and their goal.

* * *

“Stay calm, everyone. You know what to do.” The white-haired elder leaned on a tall staff. His young assistants directed throngs of people through the palace corridor.

“Master Narumeset!” An agitated young woman appeared at the old man’s elbow.

“Still here?” Worry creased his forehead. “Laneffri, you must hurry—”

“I can’t find Teslapir.” Chewing her lip, Laneffri searched the faces hurrying past.

A girl weaved through the crowd toward them. She stopped, struggled to catch her breath. “I have it.” Laneffri took a sketch from the girl’s hand. Breathing hard, Teslapir said, “The landmarks are easy to follow. But they won’t find us.”

The three looked up from the crude map when shouts and agonized screams carried through the broad balcony with its view of the courtyard below. Laneffri thrust the drawing back at Teslapir and raised her chin. “I’m not leaving. My place is here, in the palace. To confront them.”

Narumeset frowned. “No, Princess. If the king were here—”

“But he isn’t. It’s my duty—”

“Your duty is to stay safe!” The old man pounded his staff on the floor. He took a deep breath and forced a more soothing tone. “Let me try to reason with them. We cannot risk them taking you hostage.”

The crowd in the corridor thinned.

“They are barbarians, incapable of reason.” Laneffri slashed her hands through the air. “They responded to our message by battering down our walls.”

The old man's shoulders slumped. "Perhaps, but I must find out why they sought us, how much they know." He locked eyes with the princess. "Right now, that is most important."

Fighting to hide her fear, she whispered, "They were definitely searching for Dodrazeb? As described in the prophecy?"

"Yes. Prepared to attack as soon as they entered the valley."

The princess drew a shaky breath. "Still no sign from the summer moon?"

He shook his head. "I will send for you when it is safe."

Laneffri nodded. "Come, Teslapir." The pair rushed away.

Narumeset leaned on his staff and plodded down the deserted corridor.

* * *

Ordered to capture anyone trying to escape, Persian soldiers surrounded the square palace complex. The magnificent structure was built atop an earthen base elevated several feet above the natural valley floor. It was constructed from dark red, blue, and green cast stone and accented with lighter hues of natural marble. Despite straight lines and sharp angles, it gave the impression of flowing curves and rounded arches.

A splendid fountain in the courtyard sprayed cold water into a shallow pool. Droplets rained from delicate yellow and blue metal bouquets shaped like lotus blossoms. Persian soldiers pushed aside bodies resting on the sun-warmed pavement to splash their own faces and necks.

Rasteem spotted Mehیار pressing a hand against his injury and leaning on Kamran. They crossed green lawns, manicured gardens, and paving stones splotted with blood to join other wounded stragglers headed toward the palace where defenders had made a desperate last stand. Kamran guided Mehیار through the courtyard to a shady bower where dozens of wounded men sat or lay on the ground.

Noise swelled toward them. A wave of mounted invaders approached, fighting their way through and past Dodrazebians. When the two halves of the Persian army united, its commanders would lead a final attack inside the palace.

* * *

Sword raised in one hand above his head, Rasteem ordered his men. "On your feet! We

seize the palace and take prisoners. Let *no one* escape!”

The men leaped up, waving fists and weapons. Their war cries swelled to a wall of noise that would paralyze the enemy with fear. Soldiers battered down the gigantic double doors, ramming them again and again. Galvanized by the energy around them, Zardegerd and Rasteem were eager to inflict revenge on an enemy they had never seen.

“Kamran, victory is imminent. Show confidence and courage. Draw your sword—*and stay behind me.*”

The doors shattered open, moving the fighting to a different battleground. They expected to find the best-trained and most ferocious combatants here, determined to protect their king and his family. Though some destruction was inevitable, this would not be a crazed gang looting and pillaging. They were a disciplined army.

The soldiers’ harrowing cries swelled louder as they swept in, expecting ambushes. Rasteem and Zardegerd overtook them. They led the charge from the hot, dusty courtyard up the half-dozen steps spanning the front of the palace. Soldiers poured through the splintered doorway into cool silence. Kamran tore along behind his uncles.

They slowed and came to a stop in a huge chamber crowned with a vaulted ribbed ceiling, a great hall in the center of the palace one level below the top floor. Soldiers poured in behind them, halted, and waited for orders.

Bright morning sunlight streamed in through a wide balcony on the west side. Colorful tiles interspersed with elaborate murals covered the other walls. Lofty arched portals led to other parts of the palace. Three men stood together, quietly waiting for the onrushing invaders.

Ready to explode with murderous energy, Rasteem brandished his sword and planted himself in front of them. Eyes blazing, he surveyed the men. Zardegerd scrutinized them with suspicion. The brothers exchanged a questioning glance.

“Who are they?” Slack-jawed, Kamran pushed forward, fascinated by the men clothed in fine white linen robes that brushed the floor.

Rasteem grunted and extended an arm toward the boy. He placed his palm on Kamran’s breastplate and nudged him back. Kamran took the hint and retreated a few steps.

A calm old man with wrinkled face and gnarled hands waited with two younger men

behind him. He leaned on a tall black staff topped by a blue orb encased in silver. His white hair reached his shoulders. Thick as a rope, his beard was braided and fell below his waist. He displayed no unease, no anger.

“Where is Chudreev?” Rasteem stepped between the old man and his brother. He would protect Zardegerd, but he was prepared to intervene if his brother’s temper got out of hand.

The white-haired elder executed a stiff bow. He gave Rasteem a slight, sad smile. “Why have you attacked Dodrazeb? We are a peaceful people.” The elder’s luxurious white linen robe was edged in a broad band of blue silk at the hem and around the cuffs of its long, wide sleeves. The robe covered white cotton trousers and a long matching tunic.

Zardegerd stormed past Rasteem and swept his sword down toward the speaker, bringing it to rest at the last instant against his ear. The old man didn’t blink. The two younger men both gasped, tensing.

Rasteem cut his eyes toward Zardegerd, hoping he would not let anger dictate his actions.

“If you value your life, you will tell us where Chudreev is.” Zardegerd’s voice was cold as the marble floor. “Take us to him or all three of you will die.”

The old man brought his eyes up to meet the prince’s. “We will tell you the truth. I am Narumeset. We do not know where King Chudreev is, only that he has been absent from Dodrazeb for weeks.”

Zardegerd snarled and knocked Narumeset’s hat onto the floor with the flat of his blade. The younger men blanched. Kamran flinched.

Rasteem exhaled and studied the three men as the white hat came to rest several paces away. He addressed his brother in a measured voice. “They are valuable hostages. We can question them later.” He snatched the staff from the old man. No match for the prince’s strength, Narumeset was the only one who noticed a bright, silvery light flare over the blue stone. The elder’s eyes filled with panic as his two young companions each grasped an elbow to steady him.

Rasteem held the ebony stick over his head. “We accept your surrender. Dodrazeb now belongs to Ferhad, Shahanshah of the Persian Empire!” Amid wild cheers, Rasteem ordered that the three be taken away. “Search them. Careful with the old man—we need to find out

what he knows.”

Runners appeared, all reporting the same message: soldiers had entered every chamber, scoured every corner. The palace was deserted. “Search again. Tear this place apart if necessary. I want Chudreev in chains!” His face flushed, Zardegerd asked Rasteem, “You still doubt this Chudreev is the one responsible for the attack on Father? Where do you think the coward is hiding?”

Mehyar was stretched out on the grass, hands behind his head. He grimaced while a healer made large stitches to close the laceration in his side. Kamran was on his knees next to him, reporting what he had seen.

“... surrounded the palace to capture anyone trying to escape. Where did they all go? There were only the three—we think they are priests—no one else!” Breathless, Kamran waved the staff about as he described the storming of the palace to Mehyar.

“They said the king has been absent for weeks.” Rasteem joined them. He retrieved the unusual staff and gave it a closer look while Kamran told Mehyar about the palace.

The shaft was a single piece of polished ebony almost as tall as a man. It tapered, narrowing a bit before growing a little larger in diameter near the top. A thin copper wire embedded in a deep, continuous groove ran the entire length, coiling with mathematical precision several times around the shaft. A series of thick parallel silver bands emerged from the top of the wooden rod. They spiraled outward forming a bulbous cage, coming together again at its apex. The shining silver ribbons contained a round, fist-sized, polished blue stone. It was as if each wide strand of silver grew out of the shaft, like fingers on a hand.

Silver sparkling in the sunlight, Rasteem held out the staff at arm’s length. The copper wire wound around it like the staircase wound around the circular tower rising into the sky. The tower was like nothing else in Dodrazeb. It protruded from the valley floor on the east side of the palace, dominating the city as if it had sprouted there from roots deep below the ground. Unlike the city’s colorful buildings, the tower was a drab, uniform brown. Like a relic from the beginning of time, its interlocking bricks fit together without mortar. A wide staircase spiraled upward to a domed rotunda.

The healer finished tending Mehyar and saw Rasteem's injury. Sitting on the grass in the shade by Mehyar, Rasteem let the healer probe the bloody gash.

Mehyar said, "Another wound, another scar, a remembrance of yet another victory?" Rasteem glared. Mehyar hid a smile, asking Kamran, "You have no wound, no souvenir of your first battle?"

Rasteem scowled. The healer jabbed a large needle into his tender flesh.

"No." Kamran yanked off his helmet and ran a hand through his mop of black curls. "Not with all of this armor."

"Mehyar's armor couldn't protect him from your carelessness!" Rasteem sucked in a sharp breath when the healer's needle stabbed again.

Biting his bottom lip, Kamran stared at the ground. The healer finished stitching and wrapped a clean bandage around Rasteem's bicep.

The two warriors compared notes. They had expected a larger force of trained troops and more warlike people. Dodrazebbian soldiers were easy to identify. They wore beige, quilted linen tunics edged in bright blue over loose muslin shirts and thick wool trousers. Most had bronze helmets and corselets of hardened leather scales. They carried a spear or short sword and a shield. The small disciplined army looked nothing like the savage vandals the Persians had encountered in the wilderness.

Rasteem summed it up. "Most defenders weren't soldiers. They were citizens trying to protect their homes. Their king abandoned them, yet they still resisted our forces as best they could. Do they know of Chudreev's heinous crimes?"

"Are you convinced now that the king of Dodrazeb is Chudreev the Viper?" Mehyar asked.

Rasteem looked at the destruction his army had caused. "It's easier to believe, since he's hiding. Perhaps he went mad, recruited vandals to attack. But *why?*"

Healers brought a stretcher for Mehyar and took him back to the army camp. Rasteem strode across the courtyard, borrowed a horse, and rode into the conquered city.

The streets nearest the palace were wide, the buildings large. There were a surprising number of park-like areas among the stone and brick buildings creating a sense of graceful,

flowing harmony. Cool shade under tall trees invited passersby to enjoy lawns, flowers, and fountains.

The invasion had obliterated peacefulness. Houses and shops smoldered, bodies lay scattered among the ruins. A pair of young children struggled to climb over some rubble. They were covered in dirt and ashes, clutching bundles of belongings. Anguished cries cut through the air as the smell of death wafted on a feeble breeze.

Rasteem shook his head. So much chaos and ruin only to have failed in their mission to take Chudreev. *Was it worth it?*

Mounted troops rode into the valley and squads on foot went door to door inside the city's wall in a meticulous search. As comfortable in the saddle as he was leading infantry on foot, Rasteem sat astride Kurush, a glossy reddish-brown stallion with black mane and tail. Handlers from the king's stables had said he was too high-spirited to be a suitable war horse, just like army officers had believed Rasteem was too reckless and temperamental to become a good soldier. Rasteem and Kurush proved them all wrong.

Rasteem and Kamran slowed their horses to a walk as they neared the next deserted-looking cottage. The back of the dwelling and the dilapidated outbuilding next to it abutted a steep, rocky outcropping dotted with brambles and sparse tufts of vegetation. Its thatched roof needed repair. A crooked door dangled from a loose hinge.

A broad, shallow stream flowed past a cluster of trees near the house and meandered beyond it. The trees beckoned passersby to enjoy a respite from the heat and dust. Sunlight poured through the branches onto the cool water, making the ripples sparkle.

With a burst of speed, he hurtled toward the doorway. The boy followed, sword drawn, hanging back as ordered. Rasteem tore the rickety door from its one loose hinge and launched himself through it with a roar.

Rasteem surveyed the dark interior as his cry swelled. Trying to take in every detail at once, he missed one crucial item: a thin rope stretched across the doorway at ankle height. The trip wire sent Rasteem crashing toward the floor. While a shrill scream echoed inside his skull,

he twisted and tried to roll onto his back before hitting the dusty flagstones. Something heavy hit him, sending a jolt of pain through his right shoulder blade. The force knocked him forward onto his stomach and sent his sword flying out of his hand.

Angry at failing to anticipate the trap, Rasteem let loose another roar and flipped onto his back. He could just make out a dark, solid shadow framed in the open doorway. Fearing for Kamran's safety, he kicked out one foot and tripped his adversary. As the shadow started to fall, he sprang up and grabbed for its throat. When sharp teeth clamped onto his outstretched hand he roared again in pain. Something hard struck the back of his head with an explosive crack and enough force to make sparks dance before his eyes.

With deep pain radiating from his thumb and a throbbing lump on his head, Rasteem watched the shadow dissolve into sunlight streaming through the doorway. He shook his head to clear his vision and heard a gasp. Instinct advised him to duck and he avoided another wallop from a heavy weapon.

Rasteem pounced toward the sound at the same time Kamran shouted outside. Blaming himself for endangering the boy, unsteady on his feet, the warrior groped in the dark.

Rasteem made contact with a warm body. He closed his fingers around a hank of hair, twisted it, and pulled his assailant toward him. They struggled, high-pitched screams overlapping his grunts. Something heavy clanked against the flagstones. Holding tight to the flailing whirlwind, Rasteem pushed it toward the door. He wanted to continue the fight in sunlight so he could see what had happened to Kamran.

He crossed the threshold onto the hard-baked earth outside. He didn't see the boy. What he did see made him loosen his grip on his prisoner.

"A woman!"

She preyed on his surprise and wrenched free. She swung around to run away, her long, thick braid of black hair whipping. Rasteem seized the braid with one hand and jerked her to a stop. She screamed again. He grabbed her with his other hand and pulled her to his chest, pinning her hands at her sides. He wrapped the braid several times around his hand and forced her to face him. As she wrestled to escape, a mark on her skin behind her left ear resembling a coiled snake caught his attention. Putting the discovery aside for later, he began an

interrogation.

“Who are you? Why are you hiding?” He eyed his captive, trying to understand how a mere woman could have come so close to besting him.

Her long, loose plain muslin tunic and ill-fitting trousers were dirty, the embroidered slippers on her feet tattered and muddy. Under streaks of grime and soot, her face twisted into a snarl, exposing pearl-white teeth. Rasteem had no desire to feel how sharp they were.

“Barbarian devil!” she cried. The metal scales on Rasteem’s armor tore at the thin fabric of her tunic, pressing into her flesh as she writhed.

“Kamran!” He yelled, trying to look in all directions at once. He spotted the boy’s blade in the dirt between the hovel and its dilapidated shed. Cold dread returned.

“How many of you are there?” He jerked the braid still wound around his hand. She cried out again and stared at him with raw hatred, her dark eyes glistening. He felt her heart beating against her ribs, sure it was more from struggling against him than from fear. Rasteem had the feeling she was every bit as dangerous as any lion he had ever cornered in a hunt.

“What will you do with Dodrazeb now?” she demanded.

Astonished by her insolence, he scowled. “The same thing I’ll do with you—*whatever I please.*” Trying to spot Kamran, Rasteem spat out, “If he’s harmed, I swear I will—”

“You will *what?*” A sneer twisted her mouth.

Before Rasteem could decide her punishment, a loud groan came from somewhere near the small ramshackle outbuilding.

“Kamran!” Rasteem pulled the woman with him toward the sound. A helmet rose from behind a pile of debris crowned by a broken stool. Vulnerable without his sword—it still rested where he had dropped it in the hovel—Rasteem braced for another attack until Kamran’s face was visible beneath the helmet. Rubbing the back of his neck, the boy came to his feet.

Kamran took a halting step toward Rasteem and his prisoner. “I wasn’t expecting a wo—”

“Behind you!” Rasteem saw movement in the shed.

The second of distraction was all the prisoner needed. She yanked her braid from his hand and pushed against his chest to get away. As the woman made her move, a screaming girl in threadbare, dirty clothes burst out of the shed, hands clamped around a rusty pitchfork raised

over her head. Rasteem grabbed his prisoner's arm before she could escape. Avoiding the pitchfork's sharp tines at the last moment, Kamran sprang aside, tripped over an old bucket, and fell face-first on the ground.

Rasteem's prisoner pulled her right leg back and kicked hard, smashing her knee into his crotch. His face contorted, he let her go and grabbed his groin, reeling, unable to make a coherent sound. Eyes rolling up into his head, he dropped to his knees and fell over sideways.

The woman bolted toward the girl, shouting in a language the soldiers didn't understand. She dragged her accomplice into the shed. Kamran scrambled to his feet and recovered his sword, intending to give chase. Then he saw his uncle writhing in the dirt.

Rasteem screwed his eyes shut and managed a ragged breath. Incapacitated by the unbearable, radiating pain from the woman's blow, he tried not to whimper.

Kamran ran to his side. "Uncle! Where are you injured? What did she do to you?" The boy's alarm escalated when Rasteem moaned instead of answering.

"Was it a dagger?" Panicked, Kamran searched for an unseen wound. "Rasteem! What can I do? How can I help you?"

Rasteem managed a tortured whisper. "... let them get away."

Kamran dropped to his knees, his head tilted. "Why let them get away?"

"No!" Rasteem forced his words through agonizing pain. "Do *NOT!*"