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opening extract from

The Stone Light

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SON OF HORUS

Far below the great wings of the obsidian lion, the landscape stretched away like a sea of ashes. Vermithrax's black stone body could have been almost weightless, gliding beneath the thick cloud cover. The girl on his back felt that she had only to stretch out her arm to touch the cotton-wool underside of the clouds.

Merle clung to the winged lion's mane with both hands. Vermithrax's long coat was stone, like the rest of him, but for reasons that she did not understand his hair felt soft and supple – just one of the many marvels present in the great weight of the lion's obsidian body.

At this height the wind was keen and very chilly. It cut with ease through Merle's red cape and the coarsely woven calf-length dress that she wore under it. The hem of the dress had slipped up above her knees, exposing her legs to the wind. By now the goose pimples on her thighs seemed as natural to her as her rumbling stomach and the pain in

her ears from altitude and the cold air. At least her sturdy leather shoes protected her feet from the chill, which was not much comfort in this desperate situation as she watched the emply landscape moving away many metres below them.

Two days ago, Merle had escaped from her native city of Venice on the back of the winged lion Vermithrax. Together they had broken through the Empire's encircling ring of besiegers and set a course flying north. Since then they had seen nothing under them but a devastated wilderness. Empty, ruined cities with scorched walls rising as jagged outlines to the sky; abandoned farms, many destroyed by fire or crushed into dust beneath the feet of the Egyptian armies; villages inhabited only by stray dogs and cats; and of course those places where the earth seemed to have been turned upside down, churned up, devastated by powers a thousand times stronger than any ox-drawn plough.

Only nature opposed the brute force of the Empire, and many meadows were bright with springtime green, flowering lilacs rose above the remains of walls and the trees were putting out dense, lush foliage. Their strength and life were in stark contrast to the abandoned farms and settlements.

'How much longer?' asked Merle gloomily.

Vermithrax had a voice as deep as a well-shaft. 'Half a day less than at noon today.'

She didn't answer that, but waited for the spectral voice inside her to speak up, as it usually did when Merle needed comfort or just a few encouraging words.

But the Flowing Queen kept silent.

'Queen?' she asked hesitantly.

Vermithrax had become perfectly used to the way Merle occasionally talked to someone he could neither see nor hear. He soon realised when her remarks were not meant for him.

'Isn't she answering?' he asked after a while.

'She's thinking,' were the words that came through Merle's lips, but it wasn't Merle who spoke them. The Flowing Queen had taken over her voice again. By now Merle had learned to tolerate this bad habit, although at heart it annoyed her. For the moment, however, she was glad to get any sign of life at all out of the Queen.

'What are you thinking about?' asked Merle.

'You human beings,' said the Queen, and changed back to the thought-voice that only Merle could hear. *'How it could come to this. And what makes a man like the Pharaoh do*

. . . do such things as that?' She had no hand of her own to point to the desolation on the ground, but Merle knew exactly what she meant.

'But is he? I mean, is he a man? After all, he was dead until the priests brought him back to life.'

'*A man may rise from the dead. That doesn't mean he has to spread war worse than the world has seen for a long time over all the countries on earth.*'

'For a long time?' Merle was surprised. 'Do you mean there was once another war when someone almost conquered the whole world?' For with the exception of Venice, whose days were numbered, only the Tsarist Empire had withstood the attacking Empire of the Pharaoh for the last three decades. All other countries had long ago been overrun by armies of mummies and swarms of scarab beetles.

'*They tried. But that was thousands of years ago, in the age of the sub-oceanic civilisations.*'

The sub-oceanic civilisations. The words echoed on in Merle's mind long after the Queen's voice had died away. After freeing the Flowing Queen from the hands of an Egyptian spy, she had begun to suspect that the Queen herself, that strange creature, was a survivor of the

Sub-Oceanic Realms, which were said to have been unimaginably powerful. But the Queen had denied it and Merle believed her. It would have been too easy an answer.

No one could fully understand a being like the Queen, not even Merle, who had been closer to her than anyone since they fled from Venice together.

Merle shook off these ideas. Thinking of Venice meant thinking of Serafin and that hurt too much just now.

She gazed intently ahead over Vermithrax's black mane. The jagged rocks of high mountains rose before them. For some time the country below had been hilly and now it was rising ever more steeply. They would soon reach the mountain range, and their destination was supposed to be beyond them and not far away.

'There's snow!'

'What did you expect?' asked the obsidian lion, amused. 'You can see how high we're flying. It's going to get a good bit colder before we come down on the other side.'

'I've never seen snow before,' said Merle thoughtfully. 'People say there hasn't been a real winter for decades. And no real summer either. Spring and autumn just somehow seem to merge.'

'Looks as though nothing much has changed while I was

held prisoner in the Campanile.' Vermithrax laughed again. 'Human beings are always complaining about the weather from dawn to dusk. How can so many minds think so much about something they can't change anyway?'

Merle had no answer to that, and the Queen took over her voice again. 'Vermithrax! Down at the foot of this mountain . . . what is it?'

Merle gulped, as if she could simply swallow the unwelcome influence controlling her tongue. She immediately sensed the Queen leaving her mouth. For a split second, it felt as if all the blood were draining away from her tongue and cheeks.

'I can see it too,' she said. 'A flock of birds?'

The lion growled. 'Rather large for a flock of birds. And much too dense.'

The dark shadow hovering like a cloud above part of the mountainside was sharply outlined. It was still several thousand paces away and, by comparison with the gigantic rock formations in the background, its dark shape standing out against the slopes didn't look particularly impressive. But Merle already guessed that it would not seem the same once they came closer to it. Or once the thing came closer to them.

'Watch out!' called Vermithrax.

He lost height so abruptly that Merle felt as if her guts were being pressed up and out through her ears. For a moment she thought she would be sick. She was about to say something sharp to the obsidian lion when she saw why he had made the manoeuvre.

A handful of tiny dots was swirling around the large outline: bright specks glowing in the light of the setting sun as if someone had scattered gold dust over a landscape painting.

'*Barques of the Sun*,' said the Queen inside Merle's mind.

They've caught us now, thought Merle. They've barred our way ahead. Who'd have guessed we were still so important to them? Yes, she was the bearer of the Flowing Queen, the guardian spirit who had lived in the waters of the lagoon and protected Venice from the Egyptian conquerors. But that was all over now, and the city was doomed to fall into the power of the tyrants for good.

'*This meeting must be a coincidence*,' said the Flowing Queen's voice in Merle's thoughts. '*It doesn't look as if they've noticed us*.'

Merle had to agree. The Egyptians couldn't have caught up with them so fast. And even if they had succeeded in

alerting some of their fighting forces in this region, Egyptian vessels would certainly not have been waiting for the fugitives in front of a snowfield, clearly visible from afar.

'What are they doing here?' asked Merle.

'The large ship must be a Gatherer. One of their flying mummy factories.'

Vermithrax was now flying just above the treetops of a dense forest. Occasionally he had to swerve to avoid the tallest of the pines and firs but apart from that he was making straight for their adversaries.

'Perhaps we ought to change course,' said Merle, trying not to sound too terrified. But her heart was racing. It felt as if her legs belonged to a rag doll.

A Gatherer. A real, genuine Gatherer. She had never before seen one of those Egyptian airships with her own eyes, and she could have done without the experience. She knew what the Gatherers did, she even knew *how* they did it, and moreover she was only too painfully aware that every Gatherer was captained by one of the Pharaoh's much-feared sphinx commanders.

Not a cheerful prospect.

And there was worse to come.

'There's a whole squadron of Barques of the Sun flying around it,' said Vermithrax tonelessly.

Merle too could see now that the golden dots were the smallest flying units of the imperial fleet. Each of the crescent-shaped Barques of the Sun had room for a troop of mummy warriors and the high priest whose magic kept the barque moving and airborne. If the Egyptians noticed Vermithrax and his rider, sunset was their only hope. The darker it grew, the more slowly the barques moved through the air, and once night fell they couldn't be flown at all.

But blood-red light was still flooding the slopes of the mountain range and the sun had only half sunk behind the summits in the west.

'Let's change course,' Merle repeated, more urgently this time. 'Why don't we swerve aside and fly round them?'

'If I'm not much mistaken,' said the Queen through Merle's mouth, for her words were meant for the lion too, 'then this Gatherer is on its way to Venice to take part in the great battle there.'

'Always supposing there is one,' said Merle.

'The Venetians will surrender,' said Vermithrax. 'They were never particularly brave. Present company excepted.'

'Thank you kindly.'

'Vermithrax is right. There probably won't be any fighting. But who knows how the imperial armies will treat the city and its people? Venice has defied the Pharaoh for over thirty years.'

'But that was your doing!'

'To save you all.'

They were now only a few hundred metres from the Gatherer. The Barques of the Sun were patrolling at a great height above them. Their golden armour-plating reflected the light of the setting sun, making them glow red in the evening light. Merle could only hope that from above the obsidian lion was invisible in the shadows among the treetops.

The Gatherer was a mighty construction, shaped like a three-sided pyramid with its tip flattened. At the top of the pyramid, and surrounded by battlements, was a wide observation platform with several structures on it. These structures in turn rose towards the centre and thus themselves formed a kind of spire. Merle could see tiny figures behind the battlements.

The woods thinned out as the terrain rose slightly. Deep furrows in the forest floor were clearly visible, a labyrinth of trenches still not entirely overgrown after all these years. Bitter battles had once been fought in this place.

'*There are people buried here*,' said the Queen suddenly.

'What?'

'*The land below the Gatherer – a great many dead must have been buried there during the war, or it wouldn't be hovering on the spot over a single place.*'

And indeed the mighty hull of the mummy factory was hanging absolutely motionless above a meadow of tall grass bending in the evening wind. At any other time it could have been an idyllic picture, a calm and peaceful place. But now the Gatherer cast a menacing shadow. It was hovering no more than the height of a Venetian palazzo above the meadow.

'I'm going to land,' said Vermithrax. 'They'll see us without the shelter of the trees.'

No one contradicted him. The obsidian lion came down on the outskirts of the forest. A jolt ran through Merle as his paws touched the ground. Only now did she realise how her bottom was aching after such a long ride on the stone lion's back. She tried to move, but it was almost impossible.

'*Don't dismount*,' said the Queen. '*We may have to take off again in rather a hurry.*'

And there's another cheerful prospect, thought Merle.