

Opening extract from
The Pilot

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A lone man leading a shaggy brown horse came out from the dark mountain forest into the bright sunshine of the valley floor. His clothes were bloodstained and filthy. Dry blood and dirt streaked the exposed flesh of his face and arms, and drying blood had stiffened the tangled mass of his hair. Across the horse's back lay the carcass of a wild sheep and the man's weapons, and once through the cold shadow of the slopes he paused to adjust the precarious load with fingers still clumsy and numb from exposure. He removed the weathered skin blanket that had covered his shoulders against the bitter morning chill, adding it to the pile before continuing unhurriedly across the valley towards the bluff and sea. With the worst now over he breathed deeply and thankfully of the tangy salt air, revelling in restored life and the rejuvenating warmth of the sun.

The night had been the coldest he had ever suffered in the

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mountains. Low cloud and darkness had trapped him on an exposed peak at the end of the hunt. With his blanket still with the horse below he had sheltered in a narrow crevice away from the icy north wind, crawling into the tight space then dragging the carcass of the sheep on top, embalming himself in its long fleece with his bare hands and arms buried in the freshly opened stomach cavity amongst the steaming entrails.

He stopped near the top of the bluff to search the shimmering expanse of the Great Sea that stretched beyond. It remained empty. No sail had breached the horizon for all of the long winter past, and he was beginning to believe that none ever would.

Immediately below the bluff, but still out of view, lay the small harbour village of Lamos and home. A thread of smoke in the clear sky confirmed his father and older brother were already at work in the potting shed, and he suffered a moment of guilt as he coaxed the mare away from the main path to the village and led her down a steep track leading to a secluded cove. But the guilt was quickly subdued. Fresh meat, he reasoned, was a fair trade for one more day away from the drudgery of the potting shed and the unpleasant sensation of slimy clay oozing between his toes as he paddled it.

Protected from the wind, the tumble of boulders in the cove, many the size of small houses, trapped the sun and held its warmth. The ideal place to wash and catch up on some badly needed sleep. He tethered Piko at the base of the cliff in the shade of a boulder and relieved her of her load. He gave her a drink, pouring cold mountain water from his soft leather canteen into his bowl and scolding her gently as he held it firm under her impatiently thrusting muzzle.

At the water's edge he stripped off his filthy clothes and dropped them into the surging waves between the rocks. He first washed his weapons, scouring the blades of his knife and two javelins in the coarse sand and shell detritus of the beach until the bronze heads

gleamed. He laid them aside and picked up the smock, prolonging the pleasure of his own wash, even though his body now felt as if it had been infested by a thousand fleas and the smell of it was beginning to attract a growing number of flies.

Working quickly, he rinsed the smock and breeches then laid them over a rock to dry. He took his first step into the water for the long awaited swim, then a sound from behind made him pause. It had been a small, secretive sound, like that of an urgent whisper quickly stifled. He held his breath, listening carefully, then above the rising and falling rustle of the sea came the unmistakable crunch of a foot on broken shells. He turned quickly to glimpse a flash of blue in a gap between the boulders.

Years of hunting alone in the mountain forests had imbued Hallam with the reflexes and agility of the wild animals he hunted. He snatched up his two javelins and leaped towards the gap. If it was children again from the village he would give them a scare to remember, but it was not unknown for outcasts or thieves from other villages to scavenge around Lamos for easy pickings, and Piko, his most prized possession, was tethered out of sight with his other belongings a short distance away. Hallam bounded through the gap with one of the javelins raised and a fearsome yell on his lips. He skidded to a halt in the sand as he almost collided with two women.

Both women screeched and fell back against the boulder behind which they had been hiding. One held a hand forward, as if to ward off the raised javelin. The other cowered away, covering her face with her hands.

Hallam stared at them with the yell dying in his throat. They were strangers. Rich strangers, for their robes were finely embroidered and bracelets of gold and silver adorned their arms.

The elder of the two recovered first. With her hand still protectively outstretched, she spoke in a voice made hoarse and

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breathless with fear. 'Please... do not harm us.'

But Hallam's attention was fixed on the other, much younger woman. She had partly lowered her hands to reveal a face so strange he could only gape in awe. Wide, frightened eyes pleaded with his. Eyes that were painted around with blue; the brilliant iridescent blue of a kingfisher's wing, the paint extending in a sensual curve to her temples, ending there in points to give her the look of yet another exotic bird. The nails of her fingers that she held to her face were also painted blue. Hair the colour of glowing embers cascaded in fiery curls behind her back.

After several moments of shocked silence, the old woman drew herself haughtily erect. 'Who are you?' she demanded in a croaking voice. 'Why do you threaten us in such a rude manner?' She tugged a square of white silk from the sleeve of her robe and held it to her nose, turning aside with deliberate disdain.

Hallam ignored her, continuing to stare into the wide eyes of the young woman as if in a trance. He had heard that in Egypt and Tyre there were women who painted their faces, but had never imagined the effect would be so enchanting. No woman in Lamos had ever dared such a thing, or had ever exposed so much of their breasts. Lustrous as giant pearls, they heaved rapidly to the rhythm of her breathing. She was wondrous in every way; as enchanting as the figures of the goddess Astarte his mother painted on the vases and urns. Hallam realised suddenly that she may even *be* the goddess Astarte, and his already racing pulse quickened.

Transfixed by his thoughts and her astonishing beauty, Hallam was slow to respond when her eyes suddenly darkened and shifted to look over his shoulder. He spun around, but not soon enough. A jarring blow on the shaft of the still raised javelin sent it flying from his grasp, then a heavy blow between the shoulders sent him stumbling across the ground. He fell, sprawling, managing to flip

onto his back, but with his second javelin trapped beneath him. Stunned by the unexpected assault, Hallam looked up at his attacker, a soldier, who now stood looking down at him, a triumphant grin on his face, and the thick shaft of a battle spear in his hands.

It was a face far different to the one that had so recently entranced him. This was a dark, bearded face, and the eyes were fixed on the centre of Hallam's chest, the mouth cruelly contorting as the soldier raised the spear and gathered strength for the downward plunge.

With a shock Hallam realised he was only moments away from death. He steeled himself and yet needed, desperately, to protest, not ready yet to contemplate dying. A sound escaped his frozen lips. A husky, choking from deep within his throat.

The young woman screamed.

Her scream was short and sharp, and cut through the silence with a suddenness that caused the soldier to hesitate. He turned his head to glance at the women, perhaps thinking there was more than one attacker to deal with, and Hallam did not waste the opportunity. He lashed out with both feet at the man's legs, sending him stumbling back.

Hallam rolled and sprang to his feet, scooping up the javelin in a single fluid motion, spinning to face the soldier and drawing back his arm for the throw, and the woman screamed again. 'No!'

Hallam stopped, but remained with arm drawn back and his legs braced, poised in readiness, watching the soldier recovering from his stumble, and realising with a surge of elation and relief that he now had the advantage, their positions reversed in a few thudding heartbeats. Time to think. He had no idea who they were or why they were there, but they were certainly not thieves or gods. The soldier was obviously there to protect them.

And it was a responsibility the man took seriously. He had

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recovered and was drawing a short sword from his belt.

Now the dark face was bloated with anger and humiliation, and Hallam tensed, feeling a stab of uncertainty replace the giddiness of relief. The man was a trained killer. Killing had been on his face and in his eyes as he had stood above with the spear raised in both hands. No question of mercy. Had the woman not screamed the soldier would certainly have killed him. And he still may, Hallam realised, for the short leather skirt and sleeveless jerkin revealed muscular limbs matted with dark hair, the shoulders hunching and the rugged face hardening into resolve.

Few could better Hallam in wrestling matches at the village, but against this man he knew he would be as a child. He could not allow him to get close. At this range Hallam was confident of his ability, and he still held the advantage, but with this adversary it could soon change. He had all but made up his mind to throw the javelin and be done with it when the young woman called out again.

‘Please! No killing! Parak, stop! Let the man speak.’ Her voice was unsteady, and although it was a plea, still there was authority in her tone.

‘It is a madman, Lady Philippa, and I doubt he can speak. He lives in his own filth and goes unclothed in front of noble women. He is a stinking animal that should be killed and thrown into the sea for the fish.’

It was not until then that Hallam became fully aware of his condition. It had all happened so fast. The blood still raced in his veins and beat urgently at his temples, demanding action, and he drew in a deep breath to calm himself. And with the breath came the stench of his own body. Moistened by fear and matured by three days of unwashed sweat and sheep gore, the smell in the hot airless cove enveloped him like a sulphurous cloud. He suffered a moment of confusion, unwilling to accept the smell as his own and not that

of some long dead sea creature rotting amongst the seaweed and rocks. That he could do nothing about his smell or his nakedness in front of the women only fuelled his frustration, and he vowed that if the ape moved he would kill him.

‘Who are you?’ the old woman demanded again. ‘Are you a madman?’

He did not take his eyes from the soldier. ‘Tell your pet ape to stop or I’ll spike him.’

‘You stinking animal,’ the soldier snarled, but in the face of the menacing javelin he made no move to come closer.

‘Parak is our guard. You should not have threatened us.’

‘You were hiding like thieves.’

‘*Thieves?*’ The old woman’s voice sharpened with indignation. ‘How dare you accuse us of such a thing! I am the sister of King Khiram and we are guests of Governor Nathan!’

‘I doubt the mad fool understands, My Lady. If you move to safety I will deal with him.’ He took another step forward. ‘Come,’ he challenged Hallam, ‘throw your puny stick.’

‘Parak, no!’ the young woman cried, but the soldier paid no attention, and began a strange ducking and weaving motion, prancing from side to side in a surprisingly dainty, almost dance-like movement that had the situation been different, would have caused Hallam to laugh out loud. But he was in enough trouble already and did not want to fight. The news that the old woman was a relative of King Khiram was sobering. No king, except perhaps Solomon, was more powerful. Governor Nathan would not look kindly on having such important guests threatened, no matter how innocent the circumstances. He wanted to do as she asked and leave, but he sensed the soldier did not. The man had lost face, and given the chance Hallam was sure he would try to reclaim it. Nevertheless, he lowered his javelin and partly turned away. ‘I meant no harm. I will

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leave now,' he said, loud enough for all to hear, and moved slowly to where his second javelin lay on the sand.

The soldier stopped his prancing, and for a moment Hallam believed his move towards conciliation had worked, but as he stooped to pick up the javelin the soldier charged. He came with the sword held high and the spear thrust forward, dancing around the rocks, and Hallam threw his javelin.

Facing the wrong way, and with no time for aiming, he threw instinctively, with a quick underhand flick of his wrist from his stooped over position. But with the second javelin now safely in his other hand he could afford to take the risk.

The slender hunting javelin flew like an arrow, too swift for his opponent's parry. It struck him in the fleshy upper part of his sword arm and stuck there, held by the single barb.

The soldier bellowed in shock and rage, but kept coming, the shaft of the javelin clattering amongst the rocks, and he would have continued had not the shaft caught between two boulders and jerked him to a halt. He bellowed again at the wrenching and dropped the heavy spear to clutch at the javelin, lifting the shaft and trying to pull it free, but it refused to come, and he cried out more sharply as the pain took hold against the cruel pulling and twisting.

But still the soldier was not about to submit, and Hallam felt a grudging respect when the man left the javelin to hang and, after wiping the perspiration from his face with a forearm, took the sword in his left hand. 'Now...' the soldier snarled, '... throw the other one.'

It was too much for the women. Pulling and pushing each other they stumbled away to safety behind the boulders.

Hallam did not throw the second javelin. He leaped onto a rock, then onto another as the soldier raged after him, leaping from one to another with the sure-footed agility of a mountain ram, going

higher with each leap until finally he stood on a tall boulder well out of the soldier's reach.

'Get down and fight!' the soldier roared. He flung the sword in frustration, but it was with his left hand and against the painful restriction of the javelin. The sword spun harmlessly over Hallam's head and splashed into the sea behind.

Standing poised with the javelin raised, Hallam looked down at the fuming soldier. From where he stood he could kill him easily, but his anger had gone and the man was now unarmed. The full length of his arm glistened with blood. It trickled from his fingers in a steady stream, and the quantity of it made Hallam uneasy. If the fool died from the loss of his own blood it would be his own doing. He felt no sympathy, but he was the one they would hunt down. It was not his fault, and he did not want the responsibility for it. The soldier had stupidly forced him into defending himself.

The man was now showing signs of increasing distress. Ignoring the threat of the javelin from above, he kneeled on the sand and tried again to remove the head, gasping with the pain his futile actions were causing

Hallam looked for the women. They were standing near his horse, at the bottom of the path. 'Your soldier needs help!' he called to them.

They seemed reluctant, whispering to each other at length before the old woman answered. 'If you move your horse from the path and promise no harm we will call someone.'

Her foolish reply angered Hallam. 'Stupid woman! Order him to submit and I will remove the javelin myself.'

'Never!' the soldier roared. 'If you come down I will kill you!'

Hallam laughed scornfully. 'You have no weapon, and with no blood it is you who will soon die.'

The young woman left her mother and came towards them. She

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glanced up quickly at Hallam before looking away. 'What must we do?' she asked stiffly.

'Order him to submit,' He turned his back and clambered quickly down the boulder. It was not the soldier's welfare that concerned Hallam so much as retrieving his javelin. Going home was now out of the question. He would have to return to the mountains to avoid the governor's wrath, and would need all of his weapons.

The soldier was on his knees, pleading with the woman. 'Please, My Lady, if you will help... the shaft... I cannot lift...'

'Leave it alone,' Hallam advised, 'you will only make it worse. I will do it.'

'Stay away from me, you foul stinking animal!'

The young woman spoke sharply. 'Parak! Be quiet and do as he says'

'But My Lady, if you will...'

'I order you, Parak!' the demand was delivered with a stamped foot, and with such unfeminine vehemence and authority that Hallam could not help but give her a startled look. It had a similar effect on the soldier, for he lay back on the sand with a groan and with his head turned away so he did not have to look at his unwelcome benefactor.

'Stand there... on his arm,' Hallam directed her, pointing to the soldier's bloodied forearm. 'You have to keep it still.'

She gave him a sharp look, but said nothing and hoisted her robe to remove her sandals, revealing slim ankles and the promise of shapely legs beyond. 'I'm not sure...'

'It's only ape's blood and will easily wash off,' Hallam said. Perhaps it was because he was now in control of the situation, or it may have been the euphoria of having survived after staring at what he believed was certain death, but Hallam suddenly found he was enjoying himself.

She flushed. 'It is not what I mean. You have rude manners... whoever you are.'

Hallam placed his knee in the crook of the soldier's elbow, pressing it firmly into the sand as he lifted the shaft of the javelin. 'My name is Hallam.'

He studied her feet as she placed them cautiously on the arm. The toenails were painted blue, the toes wriggling as she struggled to hold her balance. Slender and unblemished, with a fine net of blue veins, they were feet clearly unaccustomed to carrying more than the slight weight of their owner and looked obscenely out of place on the blood matted coarse black hair of the soldier's arm.

Hallam gripped the base of the shaft and looked up to indicate he was ready.

Her attention had been elsewhere. Her eyes shifted quickly towards his at the question, then flicked away, her cheeks flushing, and Hallam smiled. A noble with the look of a goddess but with the mind of a common woman.

Gripping the shaft firmly in one hand, he found the notches cut into the base of the javelin that lined up with the barbed head. He turned the shaft quickly to match the notches with the gash in the arm and pulled the javelin free, unavoidably ripping out a strip of bloodied flesh and skin.

The soldier bellowed and jerked upright, lashing about in reflex at Hallam with his uninjured arm before falling back to clasp at his wound and squirm in agony.

Hallam leaped back instinctively, dodging the flying fist, but crashing into Lady Philippa. She fell back and Hallam reacted automatically, jumping to catch her. She clung to him as she regained her footing, for a brief moment looking close into his eyes, then she uttered a low cry and pushed away from him.

With the soft feel of her still on his hands, Hallam gathered his

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weapons, including the soldier's heavy spear, and started towards the sea.

'What of the blood?' she called out. 'Can you not stop the blood? I fear he will die if it is not stopped.'

Hallam paused to look. The soldier was unconscious, the arm bleeding freely. 'I will get my knife.'

He returned to cut a long strip from the hem of the soldier's tunic and wrap it around the wound several times, binding it firmly. Lady Philippa stood uncertainly, watching, until Hallam had finished, then moved aside hastily as he strode past her towards the sea. He could do no more. The luxury of a leisurely swim and lazy day was now out of the question. It would not take the women long to reach the village and report what had happened, and by then he intended to be well into the forest and safe from retribution.

Scooping up handfuls of the coarse sand from the bottom, Hallam scoured his body until it tingled, then he dived in search of the sword. He found the shiny blade easily in the clear water and carried it back, but left it and the spear concealed in an underwater crevice for collection at a later date. An iron sword was rare enough to fetch a good price, and would be some compensation for not being able to return home until the soldier and his noble employers left the island.

He need not have hurried. They were still where he had left them, the soldier conscious but unmoving. The old woman had joined her daughter. Hallam struggled into his wet and clinging breeches and gathered his weapons. 'I thought you would go for help,' he said as he approached.

'We cannot leave him here like this,' Lady Philippa replied. 'He may die before help arrives. Parak is not a bad man. He was only trying to protect us. You must take him to the village on your horse.'

'On my horse?' Hallam laughed. Despite being the most

wondrous creature, the arrogant assumption affronted him. ‘No... My Lady.’ The title came off his tongue with difficulty. ‘I am not one of your slaves, only a rude mannered fool who goes unclothed in front of noble women. But I am not so foolish as to return to the village to be arrested.’

‘No, I will explain to my husband what has happened and that the fault was not yours. If you help us I give my word you will not be arrested.’

The news that she had a husband triggered a sardonic laugh from Hallam, and suddenly he felt even less inclined to help. ‘I think not. Your ape tried to kill me. If he dies the fault will be his alone. And I wish him a slow and painful departure.’

She reproached him with silence and a look akin to disappointment, and Hallam instantly regretted his words. He opened his mouth to take them back, but was too late. She turned away and he stared after her. Even her walk was a thing of sensual beauty, and he sighed in resignation. No man could fail to be influenced by such a walk and still call himself a man. He called after her. ‘If you stay with him and give your word I will not be arrested I will go for help.’

She stopped and turned. ‘I give you my word, but can you not take him on your horse?’

‘No, he is much too heavy to lift.’ It was a lie. He had long ago taught Piko to kneel like a camel, or even prostrate herself to facilitate the loading of animal carcasses or logs for the kiln, as he was about to do with the sheep carcass once they were out of sight behind the boulder. To put the man who tried to kill him, and who still would if given the chance, on Piko’s back was unthinkable. And now not necessary. She had given her word he would not be arrested if he went for help, that was all that mattered. The soldier could take his chances. Live or die. It made no difference.