

Chapter One

Briz

I haven't taken a bounty for one of these scorpion beasts in a while, and for good reason. They're a pain in the ass. Their exoskeletons are as hard as rock and resist even the newest bronze blades. Their tails pack as much punch as the fattest man's legs, but whip around at the speed of the thinnest woman's arms. And then there's the stinger and venom. Lethal. But life is lethal after all, and until the world takes me down I'll take my chances if the pay is right.

And it's not just the physical challenge these Scorpions present. They're smart, too. They strategize. They use the terrain to their advantage. The nests they build are sprawling, confusing labyrinths. They anticipate and exhibit patience. A fight with one of them is more than just dodging and ducking. A snap from one of their pincers, and whoops, there goes an arm. There's absolutely no room for error. I'd probably be long dead if bounties for these things came up more often. But they don't, and I can't help but take the risk when they do.

I still have the memento I took from the last Scorpion I had a bounty for—one of its leg bones, a huge femur type of bone. Almost twice as long as a human femur, I'd say. I've got some horns, tails, scales, and skulls from other jobs, but my scorpion leg bone has been the only one that's been of practical use to me. It serves as a pretty decent club, but it started to chip and splinter, so I get it dipped in bronze every so often to protect it. It adds a bit of weight from just above my hands up to the business end of the thing. It makes a mess when it smacks into something, but it's effective.

I've been ready for a tougher challenge for a while, which is why I had even considered going after another Scorpion. Egyptians think these huge creatures are an abomination and insult against the normal, smaller scorpions. So when a bounty comes out of Abydos or somewhere else for a Scorpion, they usually come with a pretty hefty sum to guarantee they're taken care of sooner rather than later.

For the past ten months I've been forced to take a bunch of small bounties that barely kept me interested. The herd of titanodons I had to take care of a while back—with their characteristic, massive single tooth flanked by rows of smaller teeth—were dangerous, but not challenging. They only really become bothersome when they clash with villages over water sources, or if they're encountered out in the bush. This herd kept running people off from their water and gored a few villagers before someone sent for me.

Some of my bounties aren't dangerous at all or even challenging. I'm more or less a zookeeper a lot of times. The cynohippus bounty was a perfect example. No one was being harmed or killed by the dog-like horses, but they were snuggling up to farmers, and slowing down their harvesting process. The cynohippus is as docile as either half of their name implies, so again, just a nuisance.

This latest Scorpion I'm after is a gatherer—a title and role assigned by their own. Gatherers are part of the elite in a particular nest, and are responsible for coordinating raiding parties, hunting parties, or any other effort meant to bring resources into to the nest. This one led an attack through a village that robbed its citizens of most of their valuables, and a large portion of its men. The Scorpions are malicious, merciless, and devastating. They've never been known to assemble in groups larger than their specific nest, but if it ever came to that, no major city would stand a chance.

When they attack caravans or villages, they're virtually silent, scampering along quickly and

quietly. And once the slaughter begins, their prey have very little chance. Each Scorpiron has two pincers, a massive tail, a stinger, and can stand on two legs, a few feet higher than the average man. They leave grotesque carnage in their wake, and leave more questions than answers on how their victims might have properly defended themselves if given any kind of warning.

See, that's the kind of mess I have to avoid every time I take a Scorpiron bounty. I don't stand a chance against a nest, or even just a few on my own. I have to stalk the nest and the area where they live for weeks. I need to watch, and learn their habits. And when they travel, I need to figure out what size groups they travel in, anything I can use to my benefit. I have no desire to fight a whole nest. I need to give myself every opportunity to achieve an element of surprise, attack, make my kill, collect proof of death, and escape.

I think I've got just about all I need for this bounty.

This nest lives along the Nile, just south of Kerma. There's a thick grove of sycamore and cyperus off by itself that gives the nest the cover necessary to properly watch the area around them, but also to conceal unfriendly eyes from seeing their activities. It will be hard to approach and infiltrate, but I'm just one man in the dark. I should be able to get in and out without much fuss. I'm confident in my plan, and my backup plan.

Their patrols are easy to monitor during the day, and I can do so from an inconspicuous distance. Their dark exoskeletons stick out against the bleached sand and faded vegetation. And their natural armor will occasionally reflect a nice flash of light, some spots shinier than others. At night, their fires and torches help create similar circumstances. The light and dancing shadows keep me apprised as to their movements. Where the challenge comes in, day or night, is trying to monitor movement even just a few feet into the trees and bushes because it's so thick.

I picked a particularly windy night to infiltrate the nest. There was a thick sandstorm blowing through, and while it made it difficult to track the patrol's movements, I still had a great view of their path and speed. The darkness plus the sand would make it harder for them to see me. I could be quicker and more abrupt with my movements as well, since the sound of the storm would cover that up.

I knelt behind a tree and peered around at the nest long enough for the patrol to circle their large home four times. The tree I was at was the closest object of cover before a long, flat expanse leading to the nest. I wanted to judge the final timing of how long it took them to complete the circuit. The pattern they traced took a while to cover, and I was worried the storm would pass before I felt good about making my final approach. But after the patrol passed the fourth time, I waited for their torchlight to disappear around the side, and sprinted out.

The light from the nearest fire outside the nest allowed me to keep my bearing. I stayed low to the ground but slowed to a jog as I approached the fire. Before I felt its light would possibly spoil my approach, I cut off diagonally for a darker edge of the nest.

In one movement I flipped my bow over my back and came back with my club. I had kept one eye closed to keep it accustomed to the darkness as I approached so that I could see better once I was away from the fire. I snuggled up to the outside of the edge of the nest even more and knelt down on a knee. While closing my other eye for a moment to help it catch up to the other, I listened.

The loudest noises were the wind and the sand scratching through the brush. Occasionally, the closest fire would pop and crackle. No sounds of the Scorpiron yet.

I opened my eyes and blinked quickly before setting off along the edge of the nest again. By design, paths into and out of the nests were infrequent and not easily noticeable—to try and deter would-be attackers from doing exactly what I was trying to do. I had no other choice but to follow the edge of the nest until I found an opening, but I did so following the direction the patrol took, to maximize the time I had.

From the previous Scorpiron bounties I've taken, I learned that as a species, all these humanoid

scorpions construct and refine their nests in similar manners. The younger warriors, without families, live and work towards the outside of the nest. What I would call officers and leaders live and work in the next ring of the nest, with the females and young being protected and living in the center. From all I could gather, my target would be located in the middle of the ring. Again, I had absolutely no desire to deal with, or kill, anyone but my bounty. There's no money in extra kills.

I had to trace around the edge of the nest longer than I had anticipated—so much so that I caught up to the faintest hints of the patrol's torchlight. But just as I saw them, I slowed down and came across a trail cutting into the bushes. While waiting for the patrol to move on again, I closed my eyes a final time and focused on all sound before entering the nest. The wind continued to howl, but there was no nearby fire. This time, I was able to make out faint sounds of hissing and clicking, and the odd hint of broken, human-sounding syllables. There wasn't anything I could understand, but that wasn't important right then. All I knew is that I wanted to steer clear of those noises.

I squeezed my club and entered the nest.

My surroundings became easier to see with each step as the area became increasingly protected from the sandstorm. My eyes had adjusted as much as they were going to and were making the most of the bit of moonlight persisting through the storm overhead. I felt good as I crept deeper into the nest. The wide paths that accommodated the bipedal Scorpions resembled well-beaten game trails and allowed me to move quickly and confidently.

Like the outside of the nest, entries to sections other than new corridors were few and far between, but I had to remain vigilant to not accidentally step into an area of restless warriors rather than the next branch of a path. There were no fires internal to the nest for obvious reasons, so I relied completely on sound—of which, I heard none. I kept walking and listening. No sound. I passed by a break in the path and leaned in to peer around and through the edges of the brush. Light played and reflected off numerous bits of different Scorpion shells. My adrenaline spiked and shocked my nerves. I ducked away from the opening in the path almost as quickly as I leaned in. I gently took a giant step past the opening and continued on.

I stayed low to the ground while taking steps as deep as I could without making sound. As I progressed, the high, short chirps of their sleeping young started to register in my ears, so I knew the center of the nest wasn't far away. I was in the thick of the ring of the nest where my target should be. I slowed and started looking for the next opening in the brush.

One finally came up and I slowed even more. The light had improved and I didn't have to pass through the threshold as much as I had previously. I looked in and inspected the tails of the Scorpions in the room. I was looking for a tail with two stingers. My bounty was apparently the only one in his nest with a rare, double stinger at the end of his tail, and should make it easy to pick him out. No double stingers that I could see.

I continued around the trail of the nest's interior rings. An empty space came next, followed quickly by another room with another group of Scorpions. Normal tails and stingers, again. The sound of the families at the center of the nest grew louder. Worry started to trickle into my mind. I had been in the nest longer than I had wanted, and my odds of being caught before killing this thing were increasing rapidly. I ducked into the next entryway.

My first thought was disappointment as the light shone on only one seemingly sleeping Scorpion, but as I traced the figure down from its head to its tail, my skin tingled with excitement and adrenaline. Two stingers! I took a quick, deep breath and calmed myself down. Time to get to work.

Before continuing further into the room, I stepped back and reviewed the path I had just been on. I needed to confirm my exit. I had no idea how the paths would fork or merge if I continued forward, so I decided I'd leave the way I came once I'd made the kill. I ran the layout through my head. *One entryway with sleeping scorps. An empty room. Another room with scorps, and then the*

exit. I stepped back into the room where my bounty slept and scanned the room. I squeezed my bone club and crept closer while pulling out my dagger as a backup. I had more of a chance of stunning it or killing it with a solid slam from my bronzed bone than I did with a first attempt at stabbing it, especially with its exoskeleton.

I inched closer and listened. The sound of the offspring chirping was still all I heard. The scorp's eyes were shut. It's tail with double stingers was still. I lifted my mallet and came up on the balls of my feet, ready to unleash all I could into its face.

My arm plummeted down towards my target.

The scorp's body jerked and whipped one of its huge pincers up to block my attack. I immediately swung my dagger around to try and stab it in the head, but was countered by its other arm as it scrambled to stand. My dagger was knocked free, but as it finished standing I spun and stood up to match it. As I came around, I brought the full force of my mallet around with both hands and cracked it in the side of the face. It stumbled back a step but returned swiftly with a kick to my gut. I tensed my abs just in time and absorbed some of the violent crunch, but less than I'd hoped. As the kick landed, I dropped my club and grabbed the scorp's leg before shoving the beast back and making it stumble. I reached down for my club, but was bashed in the side of the head by something that flashed into view just before it struck. My vision went dark, but I was still conscious.

I crashed to my side and rolled into a wall of scratchy brush. Thorny vines and prickly bark stung my skin. Sand whipped up into my mouth and grated my face. I came to a stop and raced to brush away the sand. The chirping of the offspring from before the fight had stopped. In its place, I heard numerous clicks and pops, and various waves of hissing. My vision started to return, and a slab of dread crushed my soul.

Looking up from the ground, I watched four warriors enter. Two held spears and stayed close to the chamber's threshold. Two others, bulkier, were closer to me. My target with the double stinger finished standing up and tapped itself with its arms and tail to rattle off its own sand.

I squinted then stretched my eyelids, searching in the dark for any light reflecting off my bronzed club. It was behind the two scorps closest to me. My dagger? Couldn't see it. My bounty clicked and popped some new sounds. The guards at the door responded. I didn't know what they were saying. They must have known I was coming, or had been listening to me infiltrate the nest for a while. They hadn't killed me yet, so that was good.

One of the two closest scorps walked towards me, clicking and hissing to the others as it did. Again, I wasn't dead yet, so I wasn't too worried. Besides, before I had time to really panic, the approaching scorp fell down on all fours and knocked me out with a bash to the head from one of its claws.

My awareness of life returned as my eyes opened to dawn's bruised blue sky far above me. My head throbbed while registering the added light. I was no longer in the nest, and before I could identify exactly where I was, smoke drifted into view above me, robbing my sight of the sky. The smell of burning brush overcame me. I rolled onto my side.

The nest was in flames, abandoned and set alight by its previous occupants after I, an outsider, infiltrated it. The caravan of scorp families, workers, and warriors trailed off up and over a dune in the distance in search of a new home. A few of the warriors had stayed back, clicking, popping, and hissing between each other, no doubt discussing what to do with me.

I tried to move, but my hands were tied behind my back. I wasn't surprised. I strained against my bonds. They were tight. I went to roll around to get up to my feet, but I was tied off at the ankles, too. A squeaking and creaking distracted me.

A few other scorps had returned from around the burning nest, pulling a cart by a few hefty lengths of rope with a cage on top of it. They rolled it up close to me and joined the other guards. As

one of the Scorpions gestured at another nearby human to get back into the cage, a different scorp pulled out my club and brandished it angrily at me through pops and hisses.

“Oh. Was that a cousin?” I asked.

The Scorpion sprinted at me and lifted my club, but one of the other scorps popped an order at him, bringing him to a halt. The remaining stragglers approached me, picked me up, and tossed me into the cage.

Well, I guess it's time for plan B.