

# Sirocco

A Changa Tale

By Milton Davis



Amenokal Sirocco watched the Bedouin guide lead the caravan towards the oasis from the cover of the dense date palms, his hand gripping the gilded reins of his white camel. This was a large caravan; five thousand camels stretching single file into the horizon, weighted down by loads of gold, cotton and carved goods from the south destined for the salt markets to the north. But there would be no such rendezvous.

Sirocco turned in his saddle to face the warriors waiting patiently behind him, raising his hand as he scanned their hard eyes. Some had ridden with him since the beginning, sharing in the spoils of his countless raids. Others were recent, men recruited from tribes across the Sabara hoping to be chosen to join his clan. The stories of his harshness were overcome by the promise of abundance under his rule. Many would die, but most would survive to reap the rewards of the raid. To the people of the desert, Sirocco was more than a man.

Sirocco jerked his hand across his veiled face and his warriors surged into the open sand. The caravan guard responded in confusion, some riding out to meet the charge, others fleeing for the safety of the surrounding dunes. Sirocco's vanguard, mounted on his swiftest camels, surged ahead, killing the fleeing guide as they charged. The caravan guards met them bravely, their furious defense devolving the charge into a swirling dance of sand, swords and blood. Sirocco plunged into the melee, circling his scimitar over his head. A foolish guard rushed him, his lance lowered for the opening. Sirocco slipped aside and slashed down with both hands gripping the hilt, cutting the man almost in half. His legendary speed was clearly evident as he hacked his way through the confused battle, blocking and parrying his way closer to the prize. As he neared the packed camels five mounted men draped in black emerged from the horde. Sirocco smiled under his shesh; the Askia of Songhai had sent his assassins again, sacrificing a fortune in men and goods to bring his raids to an end. It wasn't the first time the king's bounty hunters had hidden among the merchants, hoping to collect the enormous price on his head. He leaped off his camel and pulled out his second sword, the traditional weapon of the Iaggaren, the takouba. Swords in both hands he sauntered towards the assassins.

The assassins dismounted and rushed toward him. They circled him, swords raised high and attacked. Sirocco blocked a downward stroke as he sidestepped a thrust at his abdomen. He spun, swinging his takouba across the throat of the third man as his scimitar sliced the jaw of the fourth man. He faced the other three as the two wounded men howled in pain. The men attacked in unison, each aiming at a different spot on his body. Sirocco jumped away then dropped to his knees, cutting the three across the shins. He rose as they fell, their swords tumbling from their hands. With three strokes they were dead.

His arm stung and he turned to face the man with the ripped cheek. The man barely stood, his bloody sword held in both hands. Sirocco feinted with his tabouka, drawing the man's attention to an overhead blow then slashing his throat with his scimitar. The assassin collapsed to the ground with his comrades.

The battle was done; the caravan folk had been killed to a man. Sirocco strode to his camel, his servants and warriors gathering around him. Usually their eyes were cast down, but they stared at his wounded arm, their eyes wide with disbelief. Sirocco ignored their rudeness. There were others whose reaction concerned him more.

The tribal chiefs waited at the center of the caravan, each surrounded by his men. The insult was obvious; they remained on their camels as Sirocco and his warriors approach. The cut on his arm was more than a wound; it was a sign of weakness. Never in their life had they seen the blood of El Sirocco spilled in battle. Sirocco read their thoughts; he decided to get matters over with. He marched into the center of the circle, raised his wounded arm then took out his dagger and cut the sleeve free for everyone to see.

"It is a scratch," he announced.

Aljilani, chief of the Saday clan, urged his camel forward. "It seems more to me."

"Your eyes are weak, brother," Sirocco replied. "Come closer."

Aljilani attacked, his camel galloping at Sirocco. Sirocco sidestepped his charge then snatched an allarh, an iron spear, from one of his men. He threw the spear through Aljilani with his wounded arm. The chieftain tumbled from his camel, his dead eyes wide in shock. Aljilani's men gathered about him and dragged his body away, respectful fear in their eyes. The men would whisper among themselves that even when wounded El Sirocco was formidable. He was truly the Desert Wind.

The spoils were divided among the clans, the largest portion going to Sirocco. They rode back singing to their kel in the hills, another successful raid to enrich their families. Sirocco was not in a singing mood. He stared at the wound on his arm, a chance occurrence that was changing his life. Once they neared the city the mood shifted to one of morbid anticipation. Aljilani was dead; all that he possessed was forfeit to his slayer. Sirocco's followers gathered about him, one hand holding the reins of their camels, the other their allarhs. With a simple wave of his hand they rushed the cluster of tents, quickly striking down the servants left to protect the chieftain's family. The response was immediate; Aljilani's wife, Leila, charged from her tent to confront them.

"What is the meaning of this?" she demanded, "Why are you doing this?"

Sirocco guided his mount to the woman. "Your husband is dead,"

Leila fell to her knees, her eyes glistening. "Who killed him?"

Sirocco smiled. "I did. He challenged me and lost. I've come to claim what is mine and see to his sons."

The women wailed in a morbid chorus as Sirocco's men tore them away from their sons. Sirocco watched, a shred of emotion attempting to break free from deep inside. He remembered the day his father died. The chieftain that slew him rode into

camp the same way, intent on claiming his father's wealth and eliminating any chance of revenge. Word had preceded him and the boys were urged to flee. His brothers were too afraid, clinging to their mothers in hopes that the chieftain would accept their allegiance. Sirocco held no such illusions. He took his father's takouba, allarh and avar, fleeing on his own into the desert. It was then he learned of the pain of losing a family. Two days later the camel riders appeared on his trail, warriors sent by the chieftain to kill the last remaining heir. But they had underestimated him. At the age of twelve Sirocco's fighting skills was superior to most men twice his age. The men caught up to him, to their misfortune. On that day Sirocco killed his first men and gained their possessions. Five years later he returned at the head of his own warriors, killing the man who slew his father and claiming the clan as his own. He knew more than anyone else how important it was to deal with the sons of his adversaries.

He stood over the wailing women, waiting patiently for their sobbing to subside.

"You are my wives now," he declared. "All that was once his is mine."

He turned to the gathering crowd, ignoring the glares and whispers.

"Such is our way," he spoke. "You all have witnessed."

El Sirocco marched back to his tent, his bodyguards following him inside the large enclosure. The interior was bare for a man of his status. Besides his pillows and a few chests holding his clothing and weapons there was little else. The possessions he gained meant nothing to him. Eventually he would let Aljilani's wives find other husbands and begin new families. He had no wives of his own though he never slept alone; the women of his kel frequently slipped into his tent under the stars, eager to pleasure him in hopes of giving birth to a child of his talents. Sirocco cared nothing for any of it. To him it was like the sand, coming and going on at the whim of the winds. The only thing of value to him was his life. He surrounded himself with others

for a man could not live in the desert alone. He draped himself with charms and talisman to protect him from threats unseen. The cut on his arms told him his charms had failed him.

"Bring me the witch now!" he ordered. He sat cross-legged on his silk pillows, waiting restlessly for the men to return. They entered the tent minutes later with an old woman wearing a patterned dress and black burka signifying her profession. They shoved the woman to the ground.

The woman spoke in a weak voice without looking up. "What have I done to offend you, master?"

Sirocco snatched the talisman bag from his neck and threw it at the woman.

"You cheated me, Akuji!" he yelled. "This gris-gris is useless!"

Akuji slowly raised her head to look at the bag before her.

"I use the strongest nyama for you, master. The ceremonies of preparation lasted well into the night. The spirits I called upon do not come easily or cheaply."

"So how do you explain this?" Sirocco showed the woman his wound.

"The talisman was prepared to keep you alive," Akuji explained. "The fact that you sit here before me proves its worth. Without it we might not be having this conversation."

Sirocco leaped to his feet, sword in hand. The woman yelled and tried to flee, but he was too fast. He beat her with the flat of his blade until the woman barely moved. Sirocco stood over her for a moment then returned to his pillows.

"Dump her in the desert with the bodies of the boys," he said. "Maybe there is enough magic left in her pouch to keep her alive."

He threw the men a pouch of gold. "Go to the city and find me another witch."

The guards dragged the woman from his tent. Sirocco leaned back on his pillows, glancing at the wound on his arm. He would not be weak before anyone again.

Sirocco tightened his grip on the clan as the days past. Aljilani had been well liked and his family extremely loyal. Two of his wives fled into the desert and had to be tracked down; one fought so hard his men were forced to kill her. The slaves were equally rebellious which was especially surprising. The iklan were usually fatalistic about such transitions for no matter who they answered to their status remained the same. Sirocco was forced to sell them. His mood darkened with each defiant event, his blame directed towards the witch and her failed talisman.

Three weeks later his men returned from the Sabel accompanied by a new priestess. The woman rode on a camel draped with fine silks and ornaments, her face covered in the custom of the people inhabiting the Sabel. The richness of her camel and clothing turned the eyes of everyone, including Sirocco. She resembled a bride as she was led to his tent. Her camel kneeled without a gesture and she stepped gingerly into the sand. She sauntered up to the chieftain, her dark eyes intense and alluring.

"El Sirocco," she said. Her voice was sweet like dates. "I am Baramouso of Rano. Your men insisted that I visit you. It seems you are in need of a reliable priestess."

Sirocco said nothing, mesmerized by the woman's enchanting grey eyes.

"El Sirocco?"

The repeat of his name broke his trance. "Yes, I am in need."

The woman closed her eyes and nodded. "I understand your former priestess did not live up to your expectations."

The thought of the old woman focused his thoughts. "She was useless and now she is dead."

"I assure you I am far from useless, my chieftain. I possess many talents. Magic is only one of them."

There was no doubt to the meaning of her words.

"Leave us," he ordered.

Sirocco and Baramouso stood alone regarding each other. The priestess surprised him, removing her veil to reveal a face as lovely as her eyes. Her flawless ebony skin contrasted with her mysterious eyes, her full lips inviting his attention as she smiled. She reached her hand into the bag hanging off her shoulders and extracted a talisman bag.

"I think this is what you need?" she said.

Sirocco reached out to take the bag from her and their hands touched. Heat flashed throughout his body, sparking desire beyond any he ever experienced. He draped the bag over his head and immediately felt the effect. This was powerful magic, much more intense than that of the old woman.

"You have skills," he said. He grasped her around the waist, pulling her to him. The priestess didn't struggle.

"And what will you pay for this pleasure?" she whispered.

"I am an Amenokal," he replied. "What I offer to you is a privilege."

"To some, but not to me," the priestess replied. "I have found myself in this...position with men much more powerful than you. You may see yourself as great, but I see a bandit in the desert."

Sirocco's desire overwhelmed her insults. "Ask and it is yours."

The priestess smiled victoriously. "Make me your first wife and I will make you a king. You feel my power now. It will be ten fold when we consummate this union. No one will be able to stand before you. You will have no one to fear."

Sirocco pushed down his shesh and kissed her hard, reveling in the taste of the lips that had taunted him since she entered his tent. Their tongues laced together like amorous vines, her breath thick and sweet like honey.

"You are my wife," he said, gasping. "You are my queen."

Baramouso removed his shesh completely. "You are mine now, Sirocco."

They removed each others clothes and tumbled onto the pillows.

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It was dark when he awoke. The voices around him were urgent and fearful. Sirocco attempted to rise, his arms and legs would not move. Something wet touched his face and he opened his eyes. His bodyguards lay on the ground near him, blood pouring from the slits across their throats. Again he tried to rise but could not. He felt as if a stone had been set upon him.

"He's awake," a voice exclaimed.

"It doesn't matter," the priestess replied. "The potion paralyzed him. You have nothing to fear."

Hands grabbed his clothes and rolled him onto his back. Baramouso stared down on him, contempt in her eyes. She spat in his face.

"Tuareg dog!" she hissed. "Did you really believe you were important enough to possess me? I can't wait to return to Djenne to wash your stink off me."

She kicked him hard in the ribcage. "You should be careful who you kill. Akuji was well respected among us. True, her skills had diminished, but she deserved your respect. She saw promise in you, but she was wrong."

A man appeared beside her. Sirocco recognized him immediately; he was a Songhai cavalryman.

"The Askia will pay a handsome ransom for this one," he commented.

"He belongs to me," the priestess argued. "Your king receives the loot from the kel and I get him. That was our agreement."

The cavalryman looked disappointed. "It is as you say; though I think the Askia would pay far more for him than the slave market, dead or alive."

"This has nothing to do with gold," the priestess snapped. "He killed my mother."

Sirocco listened to the discussion on his fate with a mixture of anger and despair. If he had his swords they both would be dead; if he had kept his wits he would be standing before them. The priestess looked at him as if she could hear his thoughts.

"Take him to my camels," she ordered.

Two cavalrymen lifted him and carried him into the night. Bodies lay strewn among burning tents, thick black smoke rising into the night sky obscuring the stars. Songhai soldiers gathered the possessions, using the camels that once belonged to him. The men draped him across a camel and tied him to the beast. After checking the ropes they look at his face and laughed.

"Too bad you're not going with us," one of them said. "Your death would be swift. You'll probably end up in someone's talisman bag."

The men laughed again and walked away. Minutes later the priestess appeared, shoving something bitter into his mouth. His eyes became heavy; he struggled to see but the substance dragged him into an empty darkness. As he slid into oblivion he heard priestess's voice.

"Death is too good for you, El Sirocco. I have something much better in mind."

Damp air touched his skin and he jumped. He opened his eyes and winched at the bright sun looming overhead. Shapes came into view, rugged mountains laced with green vegetation and crowned with whiteness. A sound like the rushing wind opened his ears, constant and unending. The smell that burned his nose was unknown to him as well. The weight that held him down was gone and his hands were free. He sat up and heard a loud crack followed by a burning sting the creased across his back.

"Good, you can walk now," a husky voice shouted. A boot met his ribs and he fell onto hard dark earth. He looked up into the rigid face of a bearded man with eyes as cold as a desert night. It was then that he realized his shesh was gone. His hands went to his face, attempting to protect his mouth from the evil spewing from the bearded man's gaze.

"What's wrong with him?" the man asked. "Did the woman sell us a crazy Tuareg?"

A robed man came shuffling up to him, his hands holding a length of soiled fabric. Sirocco recognized the type; he was Bedouin. He was also a slave.

"His face needs to be covered," the Bedouin explained. "It is the way of his people." The Bedouin halted a safe distance away, extending the cloth to Sirocco.

"I know you're people prefer blue, but it is all I have," the man whispered.

Sirocco took the cloth, wrapping it around his face and head. It stank, but the smell was worth the protection. He stood and looked about. He was not a part of a slave caravan; there was only him, the Bedouin and the evil man. The land was like nothing he'd ever seen, rich with water and greener than the most abundant oasis. To his people this would resemble a paradise but he suspected something much less pleasant. He sized up the man who apparently was his master and grinned under his homemade shesh.

"Try it, I dare you!" the man shouted. "The woman told me you would. She gave me something special in case you did."

The man removed a talisman bag from under his soiled shirt. "If I die, you die."

Sirocco did not doubt him. Baramouso had more than demonstrated her power. She had promised him power and taken it away, sentencing him to a life that to an Iaggaren was worse than death.

"Don't worry, you'll get your chance," the man said. "You Tuaregs are useless when it comes to labor, but you're damn good fighters. You'll make me rich in Mogadishu."

Sirocco said nothing. He looked away from the man, focusing his eyes on the clouds drifting among the mountaintops. He had no idea where he was; his power had been stripped from him, his people slaughtered. It was a fair punishment. He had put his faith in the wrong hands and paid for it.

"Praise to Allah we are still alive, brother," the Bedouin said. His words stirred something inside Sirocco, memories of a faith long dead inside of him, a path he had strayed from long ago. He decided he would accept this sentence, following it wherever it would lead. If it led one day back to his home he would make amends. If not, then that was his fate.

"Saster, you piles of camel shit!" the man exclaimed. "I don't want to be on this road after dark!"

Sirocco fell into step with the oxen. His old life was done; his new life, whatever it would be, lay ahead.

"Let's go, Tuareg," the man shouted.

The man once known as Sirocco nodded his head and followed.

End