

BOOK ONE

FIRST CATAclysm -
INNOCENCE LOST

Chapter Four

Autumn gave way to the early winter rains. The temperatures began to drop with the shortened days. Early morning frost glistened on the trees. Snow would come soon.

Word had arrived from Jerusalem telling of the miseries of the Jews who had survived the city's destruction by the Romans. It had been eight years since that had happened and the wars seemed quite irrelevant to me. I heard Father and Grandfather talking about the distress the news had caused their wives as they both came from that part of the world. Their concerns were for family members who might have survived. I paid little attention as a group of us young men were going hunting that day.



We rode all morning and were soon high up in the Hindu Kush, that great range of mountains to the southeast of Madjid. The path was narrow, barely wide enough for our horses. A cliff loomed on one side and a canyon on the other. My horse stumbled, throwing me off balance. The girth holding my saddle gave way. I slid sideways, landing close to the rim. I was winded but relieved that I had not fallen over the edge. As the thought registered, the cliff edge gave way, and I slid with the scree, tumbling head over heels into the ravine below, taking a blow to the head that knocked me unconscious.

When I came to, I was disoriented. The silence of the ravine was so complete that I thought I must have lost my hearing until an eagle cried high above me. I searched the cliff for the track from which I fell. There was not a horse or a man in sight.

They must be on the way down to help me, I thought and settled back in the scree and rocks to wait. And waited.

"Hello!" I yelled. "What's taking you so long? Where are you?"

"...so long...long...where...where...you...you...you" the echoes receded into the silence.

Perhaps they could not get down the cliff and have gone to get help.

But after what seemed like an age, I began to think differently.

"Did you think I was dead and just give up on me?" I asked aloud. "But surely you would have retrieved my body for proper burial, wouldn't you?"

I lay back on the hot rocks and looked at the blue sky.

What to do? Well, I cannot stay here until nightfall. I am a good way up on the mountain, and the temperatures will drop past freezing quickly. Without my cloak, I will die from the cold. And these parts are wild, teeming with animals that would make short work of me if I even managed to stay alive!

Gingerly I began to check my body. My legs and arms moved well enough, and I felt no broken bones, so I attempted to get to my feet. I groaned as pain shot through my hips and knees. When I attempted to put weight on my right ankle hurt abominably, and my knees and hips were severely bruised, it hurt to put weight on them, and climbing proved almost impossible. I sank back to the gravel.

But time was fleeing and I needed to find shelter. Attempting to stand again, I lost my footing in the scree, and with heart pounding, I slithered the rest of the way down the slope, landing bottom first in the sandy stream bed below.

"Well, that's one way of getting to the bottom," I chuckled as my heart rate returned to normal.

Once more on my feet I began to limp down the gully already soft from the early winter rains. It made walking easier as I could avoid most of the sharp rocks, but my feet soon turned numb from the cold.

The mountainside was treeless, and there was little shelter from the boulders strewn along the way. The afternoon sun beamed down on my face, shedding warmth, for which I was grateful.

"I am so thankful for you, Sun," I mumbled. "Not only are you keeping me warm, but you show me the way to go. I just hope I can

find my way home before you go down!”

The stream bed was long and winding, the going in places rough with slippery shale and fallen rocks, even boulders to navigate. As I stumbled, slipping in the shale, I tripped over something.

“Cobra!” I gasped and jumped, the shale giving me little traction. With my heart racing crazily, I looked down at the unmoving shape.

“Now, don’t I feel stupid! It’s only a big stick.” Carefully, I stepped over it and began to move on.

“Wait a minute!” I shouted and turned back to the stick. Picking it up and standing it next to me, I realized it was straight with two stumps at one end which fit perfectly into my armpit. Washed smooth by the winter rains, it was the perfect staff. Brandishing it in the air, I turned my face to the heavens and yelled, “Thank you, Oh Most High!”



I made better time now and arrived at the gates of New Madjid just before the sun dropped behind the mountains. The guards were in the process of shutting the gates. I made a mad dash for him, arm outstretched and pleading for help.

“Halt!” He yelled as he stepped in front of me arms spread.

“It’s me, Josias, Son of Joshua,” I said. “Please, let me pass.” Exhausted, my legs gave out under me and he automatically reached out to stop my fall.

“Josias? My God, what happened to you?” He pulled my arm up around his neck and supported me as he led me inside the gate, sitting me on a bale of straw. I heard the gates shut, the massive bars dropping in place. I heard urgent voices calling and responding. I felt the roughness of a horse blanket as it was thrown around my shoulders, and I hugged it to my shaking body. I felt arms gather me against a broad chest and the motion of hurried steps as my head sank against a shoulder.



Rising from a deep sleep, I began to stir. With a yelp, I was fully awake, looking at the ceiling of my room.

How’d I get here?

A fabric rustle drew my attention and I gingerly turned my head, ready for fight or flight if it was Zar.

“You are awake, Master!” My servant stated the obvious.

“What nightmare is this, Haziel?” I croaked.

“It is a mystery, Master,” he said. “You arrived – materialized, the guard said – at the City Gates just as the sun dropped behind the mountains. You were in rags, covered in blood and dirt, shivering until your teeth rattled and so battered that you were unrecognizable. He was about to beat you away when you cried out. They brought you up to me. What happened to you?”

“I went riding with the others,” I said. “I fell down a ravine.”

“You were with the others?” Haziel sounded doubtful. I nodded.

“But.... I saw them when they returned. You were not with them. Neither was your horse.”

“Of course, I wasn’t with them!” I growled because my throat hurt, and I could not yell. “I was at the bottom of a ravine!”

“Are you saying that they left you down there? Didn’t try to help you out?” Now he sounded incredulous.

“It would appear so,” I said bitterly. “But why? Why?”



It was still quite early the next morning when Grandfather Basil came to see me.

“Josias!” He cried as he leaned over me and laid his hand gently on my shoulder. “Thank God you are awake!” He studied my face with concern, then gently ran his fingers over my head, examining the swelling where I had hit a rock in the fall.

“Does your head hurt?”

“Abominably!”

“Follow my finger,” he said as he held one up and passed it back and forth in front of my eyes. After a few passes, I closed my eyes. He grunted.

“Let me look at the rest of you,” he said as he pulled the covers off me and began examining my body. I bit my tongue as he gently poked and prodded, moving an arm or leg, this way and that, until he was satisfied.

“Turn over. Let me look at your back.” I complied. I heard the hiss of his breath.

“It hurts. Does it look so bad?”

“There is a lot of bruising,” he said. “We will have to watch you carefully for the next few days to make sure there is no internal injury.”

I turned back, coughing and gasping.

“Bring me more pillows, Haziel!” He pulled me to a sitting position as Haziel stuffed several pillows behind me. They settled the covers over my chest as I began to cough, this time until I retched.

“I am going to prepare a draught for you, Josias. You have a fever, and that cough is quite alarming.” He turned toward the door. “Haziel, make sure he stays upright like this. Also, heat some water as hot as he can take it and let him sip it. That will help his throat and loosen the phlegm. He will cough more, but at least he will get it out of his lungs. I will be back shortly.”



Grandfather returned as he promised, bringing a full basket with him. He and Haziel discussed what to do for me; then Grandfather came back to me as I subsided from another coughing fit.

“Grandfather!” I moaned.

I felt the sweat running off my cheeks, drops sliding into my ears. I wiped my face with my sleeve, then kept my arm over my eyes. I did not want him to see I was crying.

I felt him sit on the bed, then he gently pulled me against his chest. I nestled against him like I did when a little boy, taking comfort from

his strength, his essence.

“Tell me what happened yesterday.”

I told him in a whisper and in much more detail than I had Haziel.

“His hatred has turned deadly, Grandfather. I am sure that he planned this and tampered with the cinch. That’s bad enough, but to leave me to die out there where wild animals would tear my body. To deprive me of a proper burial. It’s too much, Grandfather. Too much.”

He laid me back against the pillows and rose to take a turn around the room.

Standing by the window with his back to me, he spoke again.

“You are saying that Balthazar and the other young men left you in the ravine.”

“Yes.”

“I prepared you to defend yourself in a face to face encounter, but no one could have prepared you for this,” he said, returning to the bedside. “You are to rest today. I have given Haziel some potions to help cool the fever, clear your lungs and ease the pain. I will check on you again later.” And with that, he strode out of the room.

“Well, now I’ve put a hornet in the nest!” I muttered.

“That you have!” Haziel chuckled. “And it’s about time, too!” I gave him what I thought was a stern look.

“Sorry Master. I spoke out of turn.” But his grin belied his words.



The summons to my Father’s study came the next noonday. Haziel had taken time with my toilette, demanding that I wear a simple woolen tunic that exposed the cuts and bruises to the best effect. I had objected, but he was adamant.

As I was ushered into his study, Father was busy at his desk and did not acknowledge me. Grandfather stood by the window. He turned and looked me over carefully, giving a nod of approval.

“So, you are back on your feet, I see,” Father continued to write.

When he finished, he carefully cleaned his quill and put it away. Making sure the ink was dry with dusting powder, folded and sealed the letter, making a great production of melting the wax and applying his signet ring to it. Then he carefully laid it neatly in the tray on the edge of the desk.

Only then did he lean back in his massive chair, giving me a brief once-over, his lips pursing in distaste.

“Why have I wasted time and money on training you how to saddle a horse and how to ride properly if you are not going to pay attention to what you learn? You should have checked the girth before setting out!”

“Father, your money was not wasted on me,” I replied, fighting to respond respectfully, although his words stung. “I did check the girth when I saddled my horse – he likes to inflate his belly, so I use my knee to knock the breath out of him, as you taught me. And each time we stopped I did the same before getting back in the saddle.”

“You also know you should not ride out into the mountains on your own. You should have had a servant with you or one of the other young men.”

“I wasn’t alone!” I raised my voice in surprise and protest, which made me cough. “I was with a whole group of men, including Zar.”

“Keep a respectful tone when speaking to your Father!” His voice rose, too.

The outer door was flung open, hitting the wall and bouncing back to close behind Balthazar as he sauntered in and flopped into a chair. Stretching his legs out in front of him, head leaned back with an exaggeratedly big yawn.

“Hello, Zar!” A smile touched Father’s lips, his voice gentle, even affectionate.

“Hello, Father,” replied Zar, laconically. “What’s all this fuss about that you had to roust me out of my bed at this ungodly hour?”

Midday? Ungodly hour? Ye gods! And where is the respect for Father? I got yelled at for just raising my voice! If I had behaved

like this, Father would have verbally whipped me to shreds, at the least!

I glanced up at Grandfather. He was studiously looking out the window, but I saw his jaw clench and his lips thin.

“Tell me, Zar,” Father’s voice was conversational. “What did you do two days ago?”

“Two days ago?” Zar rubbed his face as if in thought. “You expect me to remember what I did two days ago?” He shook his head. “Oh! Yes, I remember. Some of the fellows and I went out riding up into the mountains. We thought we might kill some antelope, but there was nothing to be found.” He yawned again.

“Was Josias with you?” Father asked.

“Josias?” His lip curled on the word. “No, he wasn’t. He was sulking as usual and refused to go with us. He went off on his own somewhere else.”

“Why would that be?” Asked Grandfather without turning from the window.

“I don’t know!” The disdain dripped from Balthazar’s words. He did not even look at Grandfather. “He was probably cross because we didn’t want to go the direction he wanted. Or he was miffed at something I said. I can never please him, you know, no matter how hard I try!”

Ye gods, Zar, is that a real tear in your eye?! What an actor! How do you get away with it!

“That’s not what Josias says.” Grandfather turned from the window and stared at Balthazar.

“It wouldn’t be, would it?” Demanded Balthazar as he lurched out of his chair and paced the room, throwing up his hands in despair. “Honestly, Grandfather, I don’t know why you always take his part! Why can’t you see what he’s really like! He hates me and wants to make me look bad every chance he can get! He wants to discredit me so he can become the heir and rule this clan!”

“Rule this clan! Oh, hell -”

“Enough!” Father bellowed at me.

“Josias, repeat what you told me yesterday.” Grandfather.

“He has had his say!” Father. “Let us hear what Zar has to say!”

I ignored both of them, my attention zeroing in on Zar, anger roiling in my belly, my head pounding unbearably.

“I certainly do not want to rule this clan! You are more than welcome to that role!”

“Josias!” Grandfather spoke the warning as he stepped to my side, giving my arm a shake.

“Yes, Grandfather,” I said with respect. I swallowed and steadied myself before speaking again.

“I was on the ride with them. It was after the noonday stop. We were well up into the foothills working along a rather narrow trail when the girth on my saddle gave way. The saddle slipped sideways, and I fell, landing on the edge of the path. It broke with my weight and I fell into a ravine. I hit my head and lost consciousness, and when I came to, I was all alone. I managed to get down to the creek bed at the bottom of the ravine and followed it to the river. From there I was able to make my way to the gates just before it got dark.”

“You say the other men did not try to help you, Josias?” Father sounded incredulous, but I wondered if he questioned their actions or my story.

“That’s a lie!” Yelled Zar. “You’re just trying to make me look bad in front of Father, just like I said! You hate me, and I don’t know why!”

Tears? Really? Ye gods! Sorrow – for what?! Not for what you did to me, that’s for sure!

“Quite right!” Said Grandfather, with a nod. Father, Zar and I turned to stare at him. Grandfather never agreed with either of them on anything concerning me!

“I don’t hate him! It’s the other way around,” I said as calmly as I could to Grandfather. But I knew I was losing control as my voice shook and rose in pitch. I turned to Balthazar. “How many times have you told me to my face how much you hate me! You have reveled in

making my life just as miserable as you can! Always making me the brunt of your jokes, playing nasty tricks on me, telling lies about me to the other fellows – and Father!”

“How about the time you almost killed me?” Demanded Balthazar. “That’s proof of how much you hate me!”

“I did not almost kill you! I knocked you down! And only because you insisted on trying to hurt me – again and again!” I broke off coughing.

“When did you try to kill Zar?” Demanded Father.

“He’s learned some of that creepy Chinese stuff, Father. You know, where they stand like a chicken and spin around in circles.”

“That shows how ignorant you are, Zar!” I yelled and, of course, coughed again. I continued in a quieter voice. “It is a form of defense called Martial Arts. If you had any brains and weren’t so lazy, you would do well to learn it. But I doubt you are smart enough to figure it out!” I jeered at him.

“Enough, Josias!” Father was on his feet now, too. “If you cannot speak respectfully, you will not speak at all!”

“I have to speak respectfully?” I turned to face him. “What about him? He shows no respect for you or Grandfather, but you don’t . . . you don’t say . . .” I began coughing again, swaying on my feet, my body refusing to support me any longer. I felt Grandfather’s arms catch me as I crumpled.

“Josias, sit down and stay with me for a bit longer,” he said as he let me down into a chair. He pushed a glass of water into my hands. “Drink some water to soothe your throat and try not to speak anymore. I need you to pay attention. I am not finished yet.” He signaled to the servant to open the door. My three friends, Marzban, Arshad, and Farbod stepped inside. They astutely avoided looking at either Zar or me, but lined up in front of the desk facing Father, heads down. Grandfather went around the desk and stood behind Father.

“Thank you, gentlemen, for agreeing to speak to us,” he said. “Marzban, my Grandson by Salome. Please, introduce these other two men.”

“Grandfather, this is Arshad, son of Katana, whose father you knew well, Nicias. And this is Farbod, son of Vidrana, whose father you also knew well, Gaius.”

“Yes, indeed, I knew and loved your grandfathers. They were men of honor and valor. You do them proud today.”

“Please, gentlemen,” Father stood again, taking over the interview. “Sit down. We would like to hear what you have to say. I believe you were with Zar two days ago on a ride in the foothills?” All three responded with a nod of the head. “Was Josias with you?”

“Yes sir,” Marzban spoke up.

“He was?” He let disbelief sound in his voice. “Are you sure?!”

“And how did he behave that day?” Asked Grandfather, refusing to be pushed aside by his son.

“He was his normal, cheerful self, sir.” Said Marzban, with a nervous grin.

“How did he get along with Balthazar, Farbod?” Grandfather’s fierce blue eyes turned on him. Farbod fidgeted in his chair and kept his eyes on the floor.

“Well?” Grandfather urged.

“Pretty well as usual, sir,” Farbod gulped. He was the youngest of all of us and was often the brunt of Zar’s rages, too.

“They avoided each other,” Arshad spoke for him, as he often did. “Zar took the lead as usual. When we got to that ledge, Josias was about fourth in line.”

“I was in front of him,” Marzban. “I didn’t see what happened.”

“Sir,” Farbod looked up, sorrow and guilt lining his face. “I was right behind him, but I was looking at an eagle flying over the ravine. I heard him cry out and turned to see him on the edge of the ledge. I started to dismount, but the rocks broke away, and he went tumbling down the ravine.”

“And did you try to go after him?” Grandfather asked. Farbod hung his head. Grandfather looked to the other two, who also hung their heads. “You mean, none of you tried to help him!” Grandfather’s

voice boomed. The men cringed. Farbod, sweating and trembling, looked at Zar but quickly looked away.

“No, my Lord,” Marzban whispered.

“Why not?” A prolonged silence ensued. Grandfather waited it out. Arshad rose from his chair, squared his shoulders and looked straight at Balthazar.

War is declared!

“Zar would not let us go to him,” Arshad spoke clearly.

“Why?” The one word echoed around the room.

“He said he wanted him dead.”

“You lie!” Balthazar yelled. Jumping to his feet, he stepped in front of Arshad, nose only inches from his. But Arshad faced him without flinching. “You lying piece of donkey dung! You traitorous cur! Are you so afraid of my Grandfather you have to tell such lies? All of you! You stink like whore...!”

“Enough, Balthazar!” Father. “Gentlemen, thank you for your time. You may leave now.” All three gladly hurried to the door, and as it shut, Father whipped around to face Grandfather.

“What did you have to pay them to tell such lies about Zar? Why must you always make him out to be the bad one? He told you Josias was not with them. As for Josias being cheerful, I have yet to see him in such a frame of mind! As Zar says, he is always sullen and sulky, complaining that he’s being treated unfairly even when Zar has gone out of his way to be fair with him.”

“And who told you that, Joshua?” Demanded Grandfather. “Balthazar? I thought so!”

“Grandfather, please, it doesn’t matter,” I said, rising to attempt to part them. “Please don’t you and Father get into an argument over this. Please, let’s just let it pass.” But they ignored me. Blood boiled, anger giving way to something worse.

Father’s shouting; Grandfather’s face white with rage; Zar’s jeering, egging them on to fight, stepping in to poke a finger in Grandfather’s face.

“Grandfather...” I cried in warning, but the word turned to a cry of panic as pain seared through my body and exploded in my head.

Grabbing my head, I fell to the floor, the voices receding as I pressed my hands to my temples. As the pain receded, I moved my hands away from my ears. The room was silent – deafeningly silent.

I can't hear them! Am I deaf?

No, they were all silent, staring at me.

“Awe-a, poor baby!” Zar was the first to respond. “The chicken-lover can't take a little tumble off his horse without crying to Grandfather!” He scoffed into the silence.

Grandfather's hand shot out as a snake striking, the slap across Zar's face sounded like a bolder ricocheting off a cliff. Zar staggered back with his hand to his cheek, his mouth open in astonishment.

“If Josias must speak with respect, then you shall, too, Balthazar!” Grandfather growled, his blue eyes blazing. I covered my mouth as a giggle threatened to escape at the absurdity of his comment.

Of all the things you could have said, Grandfather. You chose that?!

“It fit!” Said Grandfather as he looked down at me, his eyes glittering. My mirth vanished quickly. I had never seen Grandfather Basil so angry, and it was terrifying. I cowered against the floor, thankful when his attention returned to Balthazar.

I held my breath, half expecting Zar to burst into flames – Grandfather had the gifts, he could do it. He had done it back when his own Father's brothers had killed their father, Madjid, and had taken over the city. Timaeus, the oldest of the brothers, had lunged at their Father, Balthazar. Grandfather Basil was across the room with no hope to protect his Father. The story differs as to what happened next, whatever the truth be, fire consumed Timaeus!

But today, nothing so horrifying happened. Grandfather turned away and pulled me up and urged, no, dragged me to the door which opened as we reached it.

“My lord, please forgive the interruption, but Josias' saddle was

found and brought in.” The man placed the saddle on a table and left. We all stared at it, and as we watched, the girth slid off the table and dangled free. It was intact.

My stomach churned.

Was Father right? Had I forgotten to cinch the girth tight?

Grandfather went to the table and raised the girth into the light. It was then that we could see that only a portion of the latigo was attached. The cut had been made well up under the stirrup, close to where it passed through the buckle so that it would not be obvious unless one were looking for it.

Father sat down heavily in his chair.

I straightened from leaning against the door, all the pain suddenly forgotten as white-hot rage seared through me. I faced Zar.

“This is the only way you could think to kill me? The thrashing I gave you in the Central Courtyard made more of an impression on you than I thought! You knew I could best you now in any hand-to-hand combat, so you chose a cowardly way to be rid of me. Shame on you, Balthazar. You have failed!”

“I'm no coward!” He screamed and lunged at me.

I did not play nice. With one swift blow to his chin, I put him down on the floor.

He did not move.

“Balthazar!” Cried Father, racing around the desk to kneel beside him. “Ye gods! You've killed him!” He straightened and turned, fists swinging with deadly force. I was so shaken by his response that I took two blows, one to the chest and one to the jaw, before staggering back against the wall, gasping for breath and retching. Father came after me, and I knew he intended to kill me.

Zar moaned, diverting Father's attention. Grandfather dragged me out of the room.



Chapter Five

Grandfather spent the rest of the day with me. At some point, I dozed off.

I stirred in my sleep, I could hear Grandfather calling me, but he seemed a very long way away. I opened my eyes to see that he was sitting, relaxed and quiet, watching me.

It must have been a dream.

Not a dream.

You're in my head? I looked at him, and he tilted his head in acknowledgment.

"I was testing your skills, Josias," he said aloud.

We have not worked on the telepathy yet. You are capable, but you have much to learn. We will work on this now.

"I can hear you! But your lips aren't moving!"

Quite right.

I mulled over the morning encounter.

"Grandfather," I said with sudden understanding. "There were a couple of times this morning that you spoke out of sequence in the conversation."

"Really?" He asked in amusement.

"Well, when you agreed with Balthazar that I hated him."

"I wasn't agreeing with him," Grandfather chuckled. "I was agreeing with your thoughts."

"And later, after you said Balthazar should speak with respect, too, you said 'it fit.' What fit?"

"That was what made me so angry from the first: that he had no remorse for what he did to you. As well as his disrespect for his father

and for me. I understand his disrespect for you – brothers fight all the time – that's one reason why I am very glad I did not have brothers!"

"But why did you say that it fit?"

"In the heat of battle, it is sometimes hard to discern what is spoken for all to hear and what are thoughts. I answered your question."

"So, you read my thoughts?" I asked.

"I heard what you thought," he corrected me. "I did not read your thoughts. Subtle difference. That's for another time."

We chatted off and on after that, sometimes aloud, sometimes in thought. The topics seeming to take random turns at will. It was not until Grandfather asked a question aloud that I realized the direction was not random.

"You know you cannot stay here, don't you, Josias?" He asked. I nodded. "Where will you go?"

"Jerusalem!" I did not hesitate, although I had completely forgotten until that moment the letter that had come - was it only two days ago?

"Mother received a letter the morning of our ride that told of the miseries of the Jews after Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans. I shall go to Jerusalem and help these people. Surely my medical skills will be of great use – much needed, I believe."

Grandfather smiled, then his face took on a troubled expression. "Josias, I need to make sure of something before you go."

"What is it, Grandfather?"

"You have often heard me speak of Jesus of Nazareth." I nodded. "Do you understand who He is?" I thought carefully before I attempted to answer.

"You have often said that He was the Son of God. That Mary conceived before she was married to Joseph and bore a son – that was Jesus. You witnessed His death on the cross and saw, spoke to and touched Him after He rose from the dead. You said He declared Himself as the final Sacrifice for our salvation, and that if we believed in Him and His Resurrection Power, we should be saved and receive everlasting life."

“You are correct. I have often told you about our visit to see the baby King who would change the world forever. And, yes, you have repeated what Jesus told us before He ascended into Heaven.”

“I don’t understand the importance of living forever. Or how that relates to us in this life.”

“Living forever in the presence of our Lord Jesus and our Father God is the reward promised to those who believe that God is our Father and that Jesus is our Lord and Savior. Those who act on this belief in faith, share the Good News of Jesus’ Resurrection Power to all, that they, too, may know of the Hope of Salvation.”

“That’s a lot of words, Grandfather, and confusing.”

“Then let this be enough for your right now: Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God? Do you believe and accept Him as your Lord and Savior?”

“I - I guess so,” I said, doubtfully. “I mean, I have always accepted the stories you have told me and believed that Jesus died and rose again, then ascended into heaven. You have shown me by the way you live and behave what it is to be His follower, and I have always tried to do the same.”

Grandfather sighed.

“You have the head knowledge, Josias. I pray Father God that you will soon have the heart knowledge, too.”

Changing the subject once again, Grandfather addressed the subject of getting away from Madjid.

“So, you wish to go to Jerusalem. Very well. You will need a servant. You may take Haziel with you. He will not be safe here, either.”

Haziel looked up and met Grandfather’s eyes. If I did not know better, I would have said a whole conversation was carried out in that look.

“Haziel is Father’s slave,” I said.

“I will pay your father handsomely for him,” he said. Haziel grinned broadly.

“Grandfather,” I hesitated. “Does that mean he will legally be

mine?” Grandfather nodded. “Then I want to make him a freedman! I hate slavery of any kind!”

“So be it!” He turned to Haziel. “You heard your new master, Haziel. You are now a freedman!”

Haziel had already started sorting things to pack. He stopped in the middle of the room with an armful of clothes. With a whoop of joy, he threw them in the air and began to dance. Grandfather and I cheered him on.

“Well now,” said Grandfather when we had settled down. “Haziel, would you do us the honor of bringing up something to drink from the kitchens? That is,” he added, grinning, “if it’s not beneath your new status!”

“It would be my honor, sir!” He said as he left the room chuckling.

When he returned, all mirth was gone.

“What is it, Haziel?” Grandfather asked.

“There is talk already, my Lord.” Grandfather nodded. “Balthazar has sworn vengeance against both of you, listing all the things he can think of to do to you with great zeal. He is already drunk and picking fights with anyone who gets in his way. I pity the whores tonight!”

I looked from one to the other and back, then it suddenly dawned on me: “You sent Haziel on a reconnaissance didn’t you!” I accused. “You weren’t thirsty, were you?”

“You are learning, young Josias!” Chuckled Grandfather. Turning back to Haziel he asked, “And what of Joshua?”

“I heard from one of his men that he intends to have Josias put in the dungeons, that he is disturbed, wild and dangerous with uncontrollable rage, and ... and that you have trained him to be a killer.”

“Humph!” Grunted Grandfather. “He is attempting to set the stage to have me removed as monarch.”

“What will you do, Grandfather? Perhaps you should come with us.”

“I am not giving in to that little upstart!” Growled Grandfather. “No. He has yet to feel my wrath, as does his son!” His face brightened. “But I am thirsty!” He turned to the now cooled tea. “We need to talk business.”

For the next hour, we talked about the trip to Jerusalem. Haziel slipped out and brought back maps from Grandfather’s study, reporting on his return about the uproar in the banquet hall.

“Winter is not a good time to be traveling,” Grandfather returned to the subject of my departure. “The mountains are covered with snow and the rivers high with the rains. Some of the valleys will be impossible to pass through. Best to go through the deserts. Your route will have to be from oasis to oasis. You will face bad sandstorms, the difference being the blown sand will be wet, making it heavier and the grains sharper. You will have to protect yourselves and your camel’s heads. Their long fur coats will keep their bodies from the cutting sands, but if it builds up on them, it could even crush them. You must check them occasionally. Tether them securely, for their instinct is to run before the storm.”

“I will pack warm clothing and extra cloaks, too.”

“Well, that’s about all I can give you now,” Grandfather said, straightening from the table sometime later. “We’ve discussed the different routes in case an oasis is dry. Remember, the desert is a selfish mistress, and greedy. Be careful, be considerate of your camel’s needs, and don’t push too hard. You will wait until Balthazar and your Father have satiated their anger on the whores and drunk themselves into oblivion. At the start of the Death Watch, just after midnight, you will slip out of the gates and be on your way. Once past the mountains to the west, while it is still dark, ride as fast as you can. When the sun rises and the heat sets in, slow to a reasonable pace for the camels. You will have a good head start that way.”

As he rose to leave, a light tapping sounded at the door. Haziel opened the door only enough to see who it was, then threw it wide to admit Sifu Cheng Hee.

Grandfather immediately rose and bowed to him.

“Forgive me coming at such a late time. I hear that young Josias has taken a bad fall down a cliff and has many bruises and an injury to the head. I have prepared medicine to rub on the bruises and a potion that will take down the swelling in the brain.” He gave Haziel two packages. “I also believe that you will be taking a long journey, soon. I have prepared a medicine bag for you to take along. It has many of your Grandfather’s remedies and also some of my own.” He gave me a large satchel. I looked inside to see packets, small boxes and bottles of all sorts, secured so that nothing would break or leak. There were also rolls of stripped fabric for bandages, packets of needles and spools of gut thread.

“You have thought of everything possible, Sifu Chen Hee!” I looked up at him. His eyes spoke sorrow.

“You have been a good student and have already made me proud. You will continue to do so!” He bowed to me, then to father, and left the room.

“Well now, you are all set, Josias. Haziel, take care of him, please!” Said Grandfather. He turned and strode out of the room.

And that was that, so I thought.



Haziel and I waited for the guard’s call for the Midnight Watch before we slipped through the now silent hallways and down the back alleys to the stables. We fed and watered the camels first, hoping that would keep their grumbling down to a minimum and not rouse the night watch. Bactrian camels are unlike the Dromedary camels which have only one hump and short hair. Bactrian camels, named for the region of Bactria in which we live, have two humps and long, thick hair. They are well protected from the freezing temperatures of the mountainous region.

We were fastening the stays of the howdah I had designed and created when I heard Grandfather’s voice.

Have you left yet?

“No!” I said. “We’re right here, aren’t we?”

But I'm not right there.

"What?" I turned and looked around the stables. He was not there.

"What is the matter, Master?" Haziel looked frightened.

"Sorry, Haziel, Grandfather is teaching me to use telepathy. He just caught me off guard."

Haziel studied me, then returned to the task at hand, muttering, "not sure which is more frightening, a drunk Balthazar or a Magus in training!"

I chuckled.

"What's this contraption, Josias?" Grandfather asked a few minutes later. I leaned my head against the howdah.

"Are you in my head, or behind me?" He put his hand on my shoulder. I whipped around into a stance Sifu had taught me. He stepped back, raising his hands.

"Good. Your senses are alert and your actions quick and true. Now, do tell me what this is." He was examining the contraption mounted on the back of the camel.

"He designed and made it himself," Haziel said with pride. "It is a howdah, a bed-chair that sits across the two humps of the Bactrian camel and has a canopy with flaps to protect from the cold wind, rain, and snow."

"I know what a howdah is!" Gruffly. "The weight is going to slow you down too much."

"But this one is much lighter than most because I used bamboo for the frame. I designed it for faster travel with the thought of mother, if she should choose to go on a long journey."

"Josias is sick and weak," Haziel. "So, he will need to rest and stay warm, protected from the elements. This howdah will protect him. It is also collapsible and can be bundled onto the pack camel when he does not need it."

"Good thinking, Haziel," Grandfather patted the camel's rump, which elicited a loud grumble from the beast. We all hissed "shhhh!" - not the least bit of help!

"We are ready to start, my Lord." Haziel. "Camels are fed and watered. I've packed provisions for several days. Extra water skins. Warm clothing for the mountain passes. Several of our famous woven blankets to keep us warm and for trade."

"Excellent. You will also need to pay for what you cannot trade, or for lodging, and whatever else may happen." He handed several small bags to Haziel, and as he stowed them throughout the load, Grandfather drew me aside.

"I have something for you. I went hunting for it after I left your rooms. Found it in a box of junk in Balthazar's room. I'm afraid it is worse for the neglect."

As he opened his hand, flashes of red blinded me.

Red dancing in the flames of the torches

Red coursing up the walls and over the ceiling

Red all around me

Red filling my vision, filling me. Becoming me.

I gasped and squeezed my eyes shut. After several moments I opened them and looked at the object swinging on a gold chain. Grandfather let go of the chain and I caught it in my cupped hands.

"The Ruby Heart!" I whispered. "Father gave this to Balthazar on his tenth birthday, and you retold the story of how Great-Grandfather Balthazar found it in the bottom of a muddy pond. How he gave it to you on your tenth Birthday, how you gave it to Jesus at his birth, and He returned it to you after His resurrection from the dead. You gave it to Father, and Father to Balthazar." I looked up at him. "He hasn't been wearing it?"

"Obviously not for a very long time." He said. "Just now, what happened? What did you see?"

"There was a bright red flash from the stone that made the torches flare. The light became liquid and ran up the walls. But it was dark, like old, dead blood. It danced in the flames becoming lighter and lighter in color. It seemed to take on new life, swirling and running across the ceiling, then filling the room, flowing all around me. Then

it flowed into me. At first, I felt deep agony and sorrow. Then there was a surge of power, and I felt triumphant as if I had overcome a terrible foe at all odds. And finally, intense joy! It all happened so quickly that I thought I must have imagined it until you asked.”

“Humph!” He grunted. “It’s as I thought earlier today. The wrong son received the Heart!”

“I don’t understand.”

“The Ruby Heart itself has no special powers. This is not sorcery. But somehow it connects with special God-given gifts in people. These certain gifts are passed from generation to generation, sometimes skipping a generation. When I first learned of them, I assumed they were passed down the male line to the firstborn male child. Grandfather Madjid was a mighty warrior and good leader in his time, but he never showed signs of possessing special gifts. Grandmother, on the other hand, was blessed with many special gifts and she used them to become a healer, instinctively knowing what mixtures of herbs to use, what procedures were needed when. She also was telepathic, communicating with me long before we returned from Jerusalem the first time. Father Balthazar had many of the powers, but not telepathy. He never used them to the fullest and eventually lost what he had. I was blessed with - and am still blessed with - different gifts as they are needed. Your Father never showed interest or any desire to learn. And your brother. Well, obviously he had no regard for such things.

“But you do,” he continued. “Oh, I don’t mean just the telepathy and visions. Your thirst for knowledge. Your ability to remember what you have seen and heard. All are good, but you have an innate sense of other’s feelings, abilities, and needs. You put others before yourself - your concern for your servant, for example. This makes you a born leader; men will follow you because you care.” He paused. “There is more, but time is short. You will learn as you go, and God will be with you and guide you. He has just given me – and you that promise.”

“What about you, Grandfather?” I asked, not understanding what he meant and worrying for him. “Will you be safe? What if Balthazar

takes it out on you because I am gone?”

“Take no thought about that, Josias,” he chuckled. “As I told you, I still have enough of the gifts to take care of myself.”

“Like fire? Can you still call the fire?”

“That is a gift last to go. Now! Up you go, time is a-wasting!” He grabbed me in a bear hug and held me for a long moment. “I’ll miss you, grandson,” he whispered in my ear, then released me and pushed me toward Haziel and the camels.

We mounted and moved out of the stables quietly. Grandfather walked with us to the gates to speak to the guards. I saw him pass something to them which they tried to refuse, but he insisted. As the gates opened and we passed through, the guards stood to attention and saluted. I raised my hand in acknowledgment. I heard the gates quietly close. Hot tears suddenly filled my throat as the reality of the situation hit me with its full force.

I’ll miss you, too, Grandfather!

