

THE PROLOGUE

500 B.C.

*There was a time
There was a people
There was a land
Filled with light*

There was a time when the people lived in that land filled with light. Light dancing and bouncing and tiptoeing across pristine snow-capped peaks, granite boulders, silver-tipped grasses, perpetually misty waters, feathery green trees.

In that time, the people spent their days in that land filled with sunshine and beauty in pleasant pursuits. Long, hot, summer afternoons playing under green-canopied fruit trees. Endless winter evenings snuggled deep in warm blankets with flames dancing in the brazier. Untold hours listening to stories of high adventure, mighty battles, fierce revenge, beautiful women and handsome men who conquered and survived and even thrived despite it all. There was such a time.

There was a time in that beautiful land when life was dark and terrifying. A time of betrayal from within, when brother betrayed brother and son his father, when friend and foe looked alike. A land, a time, a people filled with a black fear so deep that no light shone.

Smoke-thickened air
Meat sizzle on spit
Platter clatter
Clanking cups
Laughter
Voices - Men's, women's, children's.

The Head man lounged at the table, watching his people rejoice and celebrate, for a child had been born. In this land of light and

peace, he would follow his father as leader.

Leather slapping on cobblestones
Smashing wood doors
Clashing swords
Screaming
Blood
Fire.

A dark cloaked figure slipped through the shadows, clutching a bundle close to its chest. Bending, twisting, hiding. Running, hiding, it reached the edge of the lake and, now in the open, ran like the wind to the far shore. A wall and archway loomed out of the shadows – the temple! Safety!

Two sets of horses' hooves thudded across the turf, clattering up the marble steps. A man leapt from his saddle, snatching the bundle held so tightly.

“No! No! Not the child!”
Second rider slashed down with his scimitar.
Body falling lifeless
Sinking into shadow
Gold chain settling
Red light flashing
Blood
Fire
Smoke-thickened air
Silence.



35 B.C.

*There was a time
There was a people
There was a land
With no light*

Madjid sat on his camel, alone on the rise. Behind him a caravan wended its way along the road from Bactres, that ancient city whose walls spread across the desert hills to the south of the Oxus River. Before him, rolling sand dunes gave way to the first cliffs that swept up into the Hindu Kush. The cliffs were deeply cut by two of the River's tributaries. The clear mountain sunlight sparkled in the perpetual mist of the churning waters. High above, on a wedge of land that looked less substantial than the gossamer green fronds peeping over the walls of Bactres behind him, brooded the remains of a broken wall.

“That's it!”

“My Lord?” Josias, Madjid's servant had caught up with him.

“There! Above the mist, just as they said.”

“Do you think the legends are true?”

“We will find out. I am going on ahead. Tell the others to follow on up this road until it forks. Take the eastern road and then watch for a break in that ridge. The break should lead down toward that bluff.” He pointed at the wedge of land floating high above them.

“Very well my Lord. But, should you go alone?”

“Father! Let me come with you!” A camel came padding up beside the man. Its rider was a youth of about fourteen, eyes bright, cheeks flushed. Madjid smiled.

“All right, Balthazar, why not! But first, find your mother and bring her to me. I'm going on ahead.” He spurred his camel to an easy lope and disappeared over the rise. Balthazar turned his camel back to the

caravan. The servant shrugged and sat back in the saddle to wait for the caravan.

Madjid went at an easy pace, waiting for Balthazar and his mother to catch up with him. They reached him just as he came to a fork in the road. Without a word, they turned east and began looking for the pass. They found it and the boy urged his camel forward, taking the lead.

“No, Balthazar, let’s go this way up that ridge.” Madjid points to a ridge to the east of the pass.

At the crest of the ridge, they pulled their camels to a stop. To the northwest the land fell away in tawny grasslands, barren of trees except for a few copses nestled in gullies made by perennial streams. Behind them, toward the southeast, the dry, stony slopes of the windswept Hindu Kush disappeared in clouds.

Without a word, the riders urged their camels forward, moving down the slope, the camels picking their way over the stony ground until they found the easier going of an old trail. The trail ran into a gully cooled by the shade of squat trees and the sound of trickling water.

“Where did the trail go?” Balthazar.

His mother, Issaca dismounted and stooped to scoop water from the stream. She tethered her camel so that it could drink its fill, then sat on a boulder and pulled her shawl from off her head. She closed her eyes and turned her face up to the sun.

Madjid also dismounted, tethering his camel beside his wife’s. He crossed the stream and walked up the gully a way.

Balthazar shrugged, slid off his camel and began exploring the stream bed. His camel, unattended, moved away in search of grass.

“Up the gully on this side.” Issaca said without opening her eyes. Madjid abruptly re-crossed the stream and studied the ground.

“You are right, Issaca. Let’s keep going.”

“My camel!” Cried Balthazar.

“Let that be a lesson, son! Go find him and catch up with us.” Madjid.

“How’d you do that, Mother?” Balthazar asked when he had caught up with them.

“You close your eyes and empty your mind of all thought. It will come to you.”

“You must learn the ways of your mother, Balthazar. If you prove to have the Sight it could be very helpful when you join the priesthood.”

“But, Father, I am your heir. Don’t you want me to produce heirs, also?”

“You have many brothers,” Madjid glanced at his wife. “We’ll discuss this at another time, Balthazar. We’re here!”

They had worked their way out of the gully and had come to a plateau. The westering sun caught the scene in bold relief: derelict ruins, earthen walls gently crumbling back to their natural state; massive rampart – that stone wall seen from the valley below – degenerated and broken.

They tethered their camels and began to explore. Issaca followed the stream up the gentle incline to its source: a muddy pool fouled with debris. Light flashed, blood red.

“Madjid!”

“I’m here, my sweet” He was used to her visions. He put his arms around her, but she was trembling so convulsively that it alarmed him. “What is it? What do you see?”

With a cry, she turned and burrowed into his chest, pulling his robes over her face.

“My love! What can it be?”

“The Vision!”

“The vision?” She nodded against him. After a moment: “You mean the dream that has haunted you all your life?” She nodded. He tightened his arms around her. “Here?” She nodded again.

Balthazar was poking around among the ruins. He had not noticed

the interchange between his parents.

“Hey! Look at this! These walls were made of marble! This must have been the temple!” His mother shuddered against her husband’s chest. “Father, they were right. This place is fantastic! It won’t take much cleaning up . . .” He stopped as he turned and saw his parents. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing,” Issaca tried to pull away from Madjid, but he tightened his arms.

“She’s seen the Vision again.”

“Here? You mean, it happened here? Wow!” He looked around at the crumbling walls.

Suddenly the slap of sandaled feet echoed on the cobblestones. He spun, crouching, his dagger drawn as the clash of iron against iron sounded close behind him. Wooden doors splintered. Screaming and crying filled the air. Smoke swirled as darkness engulfed him. A man in a dark blue shroud brushed past him, heading for the temple. Two men on horseback clattered by. Dismounting on the run, they grabbed the man. He screamed, clutching something to him. They yanked the bundle away, slashed him with swords, and threw his lifeless body into the lake. A red flash caught Balthazar’s attention as the man’s body hit the water. The boy dropped to the ground and retched.

“He’s seen it,” said Madjid. Issaca raised her head. He nodded to where Balthazar lay. Issaca pushed away from him and ran to her son.

“Balthazar!” She knelt by him, but did not touch him.

“I saw it, Mother! All of it!” He turned to stare at the stagnant water. “Who was he? And what was the bundle they took from him?”

“A child.” Their eyes met and held for a moment.

“The man?”

“A priest from the temple and head of his clan, so they say.” Madjid sat on a boulder close by. “His spirit still roams these hills. His wailing can still be heard in the winds from the Kush.”

As if to give the myth credence, the wind moaned through the temple ruins. Both Balthazar and Issaca shuddered.



It was the next morning. Madjid and his brothers stood a little distance from the fouled pool.

“How long has the place been abandoned?” Kasim, a brother of Madjid.

“About five-hundred years, so the Bactrians say.” Madjid.

“Why has no one attempted to re-build before now?” Hiram, another brother.

“He will not allow it!” A man dressed in flowing black robes with a blue cape draped over one shoulder joined them.

“Magus Darius, you honor us by joining us this morning,” Madjid bowed to the High Priest.

“Who is this “He”?” Hiram.

“The High Priest who was murdered on the steps of the temple.”

“What god was this temple built to?” Kasim.

“It’s irrelevant.” The Magus, dismissively. “We will destroy what’s here, cleanse the grounds and build to our One God whose name is too sacred to say. Nothing can stand in our way.”

“No.” Balthazar spoke from the edge of the pool. “First we will empty the pool. Then we will cleanse the grounds and build our temple.”

“Who are you to speak against me!” Demanded the Magus, whirling on the boy.

“The young prophet has spoken,” Issaca, clothed in her Prophetess robes, spoke from behind the men. “Hear him.”

“He’s but a lad! Unproven. No learning in the arts!”

“Hear him!” The Prophetess. The two faced each other. The Magus’ face was red with fury. His robes trembled with rage. The Prophetess stood calmly, her chin up, her eyes serene.

“He proved himself last night.” Madjid broke the tension. “We will

listen to him. Balthazar, how do you propose we empty the pool?" The brothers gathered around Balthazar to discuss the project. Issaca moved to the pool's edge where Balthazar had been standing the night before. Magus Darius joined her, bending close.

"I don't appreciate you attempting to usurp my authority!" A harsh whisper.

"I wasn't." Issaca, without looking at him. "You would do well to pay attention to young Balthazar. If you are smart, you will get him into the Priesthood as soon as possible. He will be the next Magus of the tribe of Madjid."

"The Prophetess speaks?" Sneered the Magus.

"I know you do not approve of women, Magus Darius, but that cannot be helped. I have been given the Sight and that is all there is to it." She turned to leave him.

"What's this about the tribe of Madjid? Since when? This is still considered the tribe of Jenghiz," he shouted after her.

"Jenghiz is dead," Issaca, over her shoulder. "Madjid rules!"

"Pah!" The Magus spat in the dust and strode down the hill, muttering to himself.



They had drained the pool. A thick layer of silt and slime covered the debris on the bottom. Balthazar stood close to the spot where he had seen the vision and studied the mounds.

"What next?" Madjid stopped beside him.

"We must clean this out." Balthazar. Madjid made a face.

"You know how nasty that stuff is?"

"Uhuh." Balthazar answered absently. "I'll do this part right here." He began to pull his robes off.

"Oh, no!" Madjid grabbed his arm. "The Prophet does not do this kind of work!"

"I must." Balthazar searched his father's face, a puzzled look on his own. "I must do it. It must be done very carefully. There is something here ..."

"Very well. If you insist. What can I do to help?" Madjid took his son's robes and folded them, placing them on a boulder close by. Balthazar shook his head and stepped into the slime. Immediately he slipped and Madjid caught him.

"I guess you can try and keep me on my feet!" Grinned Balthazar.

"Yah! Sure!" Madjid gripped his arm. "How far out are you going?"

"Not far. I think about here. All right, let me go." He squatted in the muck and began scooping up the stuff. "Get me something to put this in. – Please, Father."

Madjid nodded. A few minutes later he brought Balthazar leather buckets. Madjid's brothers gathered to watch the slow process. Balthazar passed Madjid the first full bucket.

"Don't throw that very far away," Balthazar. "It will do wonders for our first crops." Madjid held his breath and passed it to a brother.

"You heard him," grinning at his brother's expression.

By the end of the day Balthazar had cleared much of the muck and slime from a three by five-foot area. He got to his feet gingerly and put his hand out to his father.

"You expect me to touch that?"

"C'mon, Father! Or I'll give you a nice big hug when I get out of here!"

"All right! All right! I was just teasing!" He grasped Balthazar's hand, pulling him out of the slime. His eyebrows rose as Balthazar gripped his hand.

"When did you get so strong?"

"What did you find, Balthazar?" It was Issaca.

"Mother! I was coming to you. It's him!"

"I know that. What else?" Impatient.

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Balthazar hesitated, looking around at his uncles.

“I’m not sure. It needs to be cleaned up.” He handed something to her. She cupped it in her hands and stared at it.

“Get me some water.”

A bucket of clean water was brought, and she gently submerged the item, rocking it back and forth. The slime and dirt from hundreds of years slipped away. She lifted the object into the light. From a heavy gold chain hung a cage of gold filigree. Inside it, moisture still dripping off it, was a faceted stone.

The setting sun caught in the facets of the gem, flashing red.

Red danced up the broken walls of the old temple.

Red flowed across the muck and slime of the empty pool.

Red filled the bucket.

Red flowed into her eyes, filling her.

Becoming her.

Issaca gasped and dropped the bucket, the water sloshing over Balthazar’s muddy feet.

Red flowed, spreading out in a fan, surrounding Balthazar and running up the muck on his legs.

She let go of the chain as she clapped her hands over her eyes with a cry of anguish.

Balthazar caught the golden cage and gathered its chain in his hands, raising it once more to the light.

“Dear God in heaven!” He breathed in awe.

Issaca dropped her hands and opened her eyes to look at what lay in Balthazar’s hand.

A large, intricately faceted, deep red ruby, its shape similar to that of a human heart.



BOOK 1 CHAPTER 3

The Rite of Passage came later that summer, but it left no profound impact on me. The pain of the circumcision seemed as nothing compared to the pain of the loss of Demetres.

Now we were men. We put off the yellow robes of youthful students and donned instead the robes of our calling. I had a choice: the purple robes of royalty or the blue robe of the Magi. I chose the blue.

“Basilikos, my Lord,” The servant bowed to the room. A brazier stood in the middle of the floor, the flames guttering in the draft from the open door, created shadows that leapt up the walls and deepened in the corners.

“Come in and shut the door.” The beloved voice came from those shadows. I stepped forward and the servant shut the door behind me. Pausing just inside, I took a deep breath, savoring the odors of dusty books and musty old manuscripts.

“You did well,” he said. I nodded. “You showed yourself to be a man.”

I watched the flames in the brazier as they curled around the embers, flickering and dancing to an unheard tune. My whole body ached. My groin throbbed. My penis burned as if it was on fire. No preparation for the Right of Passage could ever prepare you for the burning pain of the circumcision. And yet, the pain was welcome. It matched the pain of the loss of Demetres.

“Your Father has something he wishes to give you.”

“Mother?” I looked up, shaken from my thoughts. I shaded my eyes from the flames to better see her.

“I asked your mother to be here. I wanted her to share this moment.” He lit an oil lamp that stood amongst the clutter on his desk and in the warmth of its glow I could see them both clearly. He looked surprisingly young for his square jaw was clean-shaven. She was beautiful. Her auburn hair, loosed from the accustomed shawl, shimmered as if it had a life of its own.

“Well! Are you going to stand there all night?”

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“Forgive me, Father, I was thinking.” I squared my shoulders, took a deep breath and moved around the brazier to stand in front of the massive Mahogany desk.

“Manhood changes many things.” He said, lounging back in his great chair. “You will pursue your learning and take your place in the guidance of this tribe, both as leader and as High Magus. You will take a wife – or wives – and continue the legacy of this tribe. Our times together will become rare.”

Without looking at Mother, Father stretched his hand toward her. “It is time.”

She placed a small leather pouch in his open hand. I watched with fascination as he undid the ties of the pouch,

“You have seen this before. Many times. You played with it as a child. And you know the story well.” I smiled as I realized he spoke of the gemstone that usually hung around his neck on a heavy gold chain. Yes, I knew the story well: the destruction of the first village and the death of the High Priest; the ruins and how Grandfather found them; the fouled lake with the gemstone lying hidden deep in the mud.

“Your grandmother wore it for many years.” Father.

“I didn’t know that!” I was surprised. “Why would she have it?”

“She is the one who found it,” said Father.

“But I thought you did. You are the one who ordered the pool emptied. You dug out all the mud around the remains.”

“I did, that is true,” Father spoke reflectively. “But it was Issaca who was haunted by the vision. It was her passion that drove us to find the ruins.

“After we emptied the pool and found the bones of the high priest, our High Priest left us. Issaca became the High Priestess of the temple until she went into retirement. Then she gave me the stone.

“It’s a beautiful thing,” he added, tipping the pouch up, allowing its contents to drop into his palm.

Part 1 - Chapter 3

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

Red dancing in the flames of the brazier

Red coursing up the walls and over the ceiling

Red flowing all around me

Red filling my vision

Red swirling through me, becoming me.

I gasped and closed my eyes tightly. When I finally opened them, my vision steadied, and I could see what he held in his hand: a ruby shaped in the fashion of a human heart, its facets shimmering gently in the light of the flames.

Mother took the necklace from him and came around the desk to fasten the chain around my neck. The deep red jewel swung on its chain, then settled on my chest. The Ruby heart shimmered and pulsed with each beat of my own heart.

“This Ruby heart has a legacy,” Mother spoke gently from beside me. “It has no special powers. It will not protect you. It will not guide you. But wear it in honor of the one who gave his life for his child.” She kissed me on the forehead. I smiled into her eyes.

“What did you see, Basilikos?” Father’s voice drifted to me as if he was a long way away, much further than the shadows behind the desk.

“What?” I was still lost in the depths of Mother’s eyes, seeing questions, encouragement, sorrow.

“Just now. You saw something when I took the ruby out.”

“Yes. I did.” I turned away from mother and walked to the brazier, staring into the flames, my back to my parents. “It was red. Red as fire. Red as blood. It spilled over everything, filling the room. It flowed into me and became me.” The last words were little more than a whisper that echoed in the sigh of the coals in the brazier, and the rustle of the drapes as a gust of wind caught at the windows.

I heard the scrape of his chair as Father came around the desk to put an arm around Mother. Although my back was turned to them I

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could see them as plainly as if they stood before me. Mother looked up at him, a question in her eyes. He tightened his hand on her waist and she stilled beside him.

“There was more, wasn’t there.” It was a statement.

“Yes,” I said, trying to keep the vision of my parents before me, but the memories of the earlier specter demanded my attention.

“Glimpses. Impressions.” I shivered. “Voices. Raucous laughter. Shouting. Weeping. Agony. Intense agony.” I shook my head trying to dispel the memory, but it persisted.

“Oh, God!” I covered my face with my arms, pulling at my hair as if it would pull the visions out of my head. Sobbing, I fell to my knees in front of the brazier. Father tightened his arm around Mother’s waist and they waited in silence.

“What does it mean, Father?” I asked, when the tears finally stopped. I sniffed and wiped my eyes on my sleeve.

“I believe it was the vision that Issaca and I have seen: The destruction of the village that once stood here. The death of the High Priest and the abduction of the child.” His voice was deep with emotion.

“But what about the cross?” I looked up at him. “A man hanging on a cross. The blood was flowing from him. Who is he?”

“Oh, my son!” Father released Mother as she cried out, but it was he who crossed the room to me, lifting me to my feet and wrapping his arms around me, holding me tightly against his chest. After a moment, he spoke into the top of my head.

“You have seen more than either Issaca or me. I believe you have seen into the future. In time, we will know what this means. Somehow it is connected. Somehow it will all make sense, one day. We will know in time, my son. It is always revealed, in time.”



Part 2 - Chapter 5

The following morning was warm, with a soft breeze blowing up the valley, carrying with it the dissipating smoke from smoldering cooking fires. The servants were busy about their morning tasks, laughing and talking as they went.

Cheng Sherong, Gandophares and I lounged outside Father's tent. It was well into mid-morning before Father joined us. He was wearing a fresh tunic and robe and his step was brisk. Only the fine lines around his eyes and the crease in his brow betrayed the lack of sleep and the long hours studying.

"Good morning, Magus Balthazar," said Gandophares. "What conclusions did you reach last night?"

"It is amazing how quiet it is in the night watch," said Father. "I did a lot of thinking, trying to put things in order."

"All right," said Cheng Sherong. "Tell us what you've sorted out."

"I began with what we agreed is true - our own manuscripts and writings from our own prophets, then the prophets of Baal, Greece and Persia, then added to that what we've learned from the Hebrew scrolls. What puzzles me is why the religious men of this land were not aware and ready for their king, but that is also prophesied in their own writings. They say that the people will not recognize him, from his birth even to his death. They say that he won't dress as a king, live as a king, nor in any way behave as a king. In other words, his clothing will be simple, he will have nowhere to call his own and he will eat and drink with the commoners."

"It doesn't sound much like a king, to me," Cheng Sherong.

"The Israelites are plagued with rebels and zealots who plot to overthrow the current government. It seems to me that, if he dresses and behaves as you've described, he'll be mistaken for one of these," said Gandophares.

"In fact," continued Father. "That is what is going to happen. That is why we brought the gifts we did. The gold and frankincense for his kingship, but the myrrh for his burial. We talked about this before."

"Then, I must ask it again," I stated. "If he is going to be cut off in

his prime, before he even establishes his kingdom, why are we here?" There was no answer to this and we sat in silence.

"My Lords, forgive me for interrupting," it was Josias. Out of habit, he waited for permission to continue. "I have been thinking, my Lords. I believe that it would be wise for you to present yourselves to King Herod in all the state and pomp that we can muster."

"I trust you Josias, for you are one of these people. We will do as you suggest. But what is your reasoning?"

"My Lord, I am not sure I can explain it. Maybe just a feeling?"

"You've worked too long for Balthazar and Basilikos!" Chuckled Gandophares. "If we're going to put on our full regalia, we'd better get going!"

"Josias, can you find someone to help Basilikos? He didn't think to bring his personal servant with him. Then come to me as quickly as you can," said Father.

"Already done, my Lord," Josias turned to a young man standing behind him. "Master Basilikos, you know Jonathan well. Your clothes have already been laid out. He will help you to dress."

It was a little awkward, for, as Josias said, I knew Jonathan well. We had worked side by side on the long journey as menial servants. Neither of us spoke as he helped me put on the clothing assigned to me. It was my Father's and, although he was much larger than I, Jonathan quickly made it fit with a tuck here and a twist there.

"So," he said, finally. "You really are the son of Magus Balthazar."

"Yes."

"Why did you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Pretend to be one of us."

"I didn't pretend. I pulled my weight. No one can say I didn't."

"No. Of course not."

"Because I'm his son? That's not fair!"

"Hold still. You fidget worse than a girl."

"You should have more respect!"

"I should. There! That is the best I can do. But without a beard you look awfully young." He stood back to look me over. "Yes, you are the son of a Magus." He bowed and stood aside for me to leave the tent.



The camels were already saddled. It was obvious that Josias had more than a whimsical thought and, as we entered the streets of Jerusalem, the spectacular entourage quickly drew attention. The long black hair of the two-humped Bactrian camels had been brushed until it shone, flowing in the gentle breeze, making the ungainly stride of the huge beasts actually seem graceful. The saddle that straddled the double hump of each camel was a magnificent affair, looking more like a throne, with armrests and high back. From that high back a miniature tent rose, shading the rider from the fierce sun. At the apex of the tent the tribal banner flew, and from the corners fluttered streamers of matching colors. The bells on the harnesses were polished until they gleamed in the sun as they bounced and jangled with each step. The side flaps of the tents were tied back with gold braids allowing the people a view of the riders lounging against silk cushions. A servant led each beast. Horse-mounted guards road alongside.

By the time we reached Herod's Palace, we had drawn quite a crowd. The camels protested loudly as they were commanded to kneel to allow the riders to dismount.

We entered the mighty Hall of King Herod, Father leading the way. From his shoulders swung the blue cape of the Magus. Under this he wore a voluminous purple robe fringed with gold braid. Under the robe he wore a loose-fitting long sleeved white linen tunic that came to his knees. Beneath the tunic were full linen pantaloons tied at his ankles. On his feet were simple black silk slippers. On his head sat a gold silk skullcap with a tall golden spike. Around this a pure white turban was wound, intertwined with gold braids. On his fingers

and around his neck gold glittered and shimmered, encrusted with precious gems. His bearing was regal, his presence overwhelming.

To Father's right was Gandophares. The lines of his tunic and straight-legged trousers were simple, but elegant in their simplicity. Made of a royal blue silk embroidered with gold and silver, the fabric moved and breathed with him. Gold slippers covered his feet. A gold fez sat regally on his head. The heavy blue cape was thrown back over his shoulders and clasped with gold broaches. He also wore several rings and gold necklaces. His bearing was regal, but his presence only shimmered in Father's shadow.

Beside Gandophares strode Cheng Sherong in his splendid Chinese dress. He wore a full-length heavy robe of red and gold silk brocade. It hung open, allowing an expanse of black silk tunic to show. This was open to the waist, exposing his broad, tanned chest. His legs were draped in black silk to the knees. His calves were bare, his feet strapped in black sandals. His head was bare; his hair was slicked back in a braid wrapped with gold. Around his neck gold also glittered. He walked with his feet apart, his fists on his hips, spreading back the heavy silk robe to reveal his magnificent physique. The blue cape, clasped at his shoulders, swung majestically with each step.

I walked on the other side of Father, holding my head up and my shoulders back. I was dressed in tunic and pantaloons, my robe, a simpler affair to Father's, was of purple silk, trimmed with gold. The blue cape of the Magi also hung from my shoulders. My only piece of jewelry was the ruby heart. It shimmered on my young chest with every beat of my own heart.

Behind each of us walked two servants carrying gifts for King Herod.

At the other end of the great hall, Herod sat on his throne. Emulating the great Caesar in his posture, he leaned back to one side, his elbow on the armrest, his chin on his fist. His other arm dangled limply over the armrest. His knees were spread, his heels tucked back against the chair. Around him the Pharisees and the Sadducees huddled, behind them, a contingency from Rome stood in defense.

"Your Royal Highness, King Herod," Father said, stepping forward and bowing. We also bowed in obeisance to Herod. "We are honored

to be in your presence today.

"May I present to you Magus Cheng Sherong from China." Cheng Sherong took a step forward and bowed with a flourish, his cloak swirling around him.

"Magus Gandophares from India." Gandophares stepped forward and bowed.

"And Basilikos son of Balthazar." I stepped forward and bowed.

"And I am Magus Balthazar son of Madjid of the clan of his name from Bactria." Father bowed only from the waist.

"My Lords!" Herod's tone matched his posture, board and uninterested in life in general. I wondered if the boredom was put on for us, or if he really was that bored with life.

"Welcome to Jerusalem." He made a circular motion with the hand dangling over the arm of his chair, but still he did not move from his relaxed posture. Irritation prickled down my spine at his behavior, until I suddenly realized that he was intently studying us, taking in the magnificence of our robes and the chests the servants carried.

"I understand that you are astrologers, magicians and sorcerers and that you interpret dreams. What brings you to Jerusalem?"

"My Lord, King," said Father. "We do study the stars and on occasion, we have been able to interpret dreams. But we are not sorcerers or magicians. We are simply learned men, priests of the temple of our peoples. We have brought gifts for you from our countries as a token of honor and respect. If I may, my Lord," He clapped his hands and the servants brought forward the chests they carried.

"We present to you, rare spices from India," Gandophares.

"Fabrics made of the finest Chinese silks." Cheng Sherong.

"Persian rugs of a magnificence unrivaled anywhere." Father.

"Rare gems set in fine gold and silver to grace the necks of your fairest wives." Cheng Sherong.

"Perfumed oils to soften their skin and make their hair shine." Gandophares.

Herod bowed his head in acknowledgment.

The men around the throne tried hard to act as though they, too, were not in the least impressed, but as the gifts were set before the king, as the silks billowed down the steps, as the perfumes filled the air with their sweetness, they began to murmur among themselves. Herod held up his hand to silence them.

“Thank you, my Lords. I am sure my wives will appreciate your gifts,” He said languidly, once again gesticulating with the limp wrist dangling over the arm of his chair. “These are truly magnificent gifts. I accept them as a token of friendship between our countries.” He finally got up from the throne and walked toward us. “Now, let us enjoy some fine food and entertainment.” And he led us from the Hall to a Banqueting room.

The feasting and entertainment went on all through the afternoon and late into the evening. Nothing was said that would even hint at Herod’s knowing why we were here. We waited. It was a game that must be played, and, for now, time was on our side.

As the midnight hour drew near, Father glanced at me. I had been staring into the flames of a brazier for some time. Beads of perspiration had formed on my upper lip and my face had lost all color. Herod noticed me, too.

“Is he seeing visions?” He asked Father as he sucked greedily from his goblet.

“No, my Lord,” Father smiled as an indulgent father might. “Basilikos is young. He is not used to such magnificent celebrations. I believe that he is just very tired and about to fall asleep.” At his words, I closed my eyes and slipped down on my couch released into sleep. The older men laughed and reminisced about their youth.

Then Herod made his move.

“So,” he said. “You have come to pay homage to a new born king of the Jews.” A long silence followed. “I am well aware of the old prophecies of my people. And every few years a wild man will come out of the desert and claim to be the Messiah. He manages to raise a rabble of followers, but when they discover that his bag of tricks is

just that - tricks - they soon leave him, and he wanders back into the wilderness. Or he manages to make a nuisance of himself and gets arrested and crucified.” Still the Wise Men said nothing.

“What makes you think a king has been born here, now?”

“We have seen a Star in the heavens and have followed it here,” said Father.

“And what’s so special about this Star?” A slight sneer in his voice.

“The fact that it suddenly appeared and grew steadily for almost a year. Then it stopped. Unlike the other stars in the sky, which move with the seasons of the year, this one has stayed in the same place the whole time.”

“And where is this star tonight?” He got up from his couch and unsteadily walked toward a great arched window. He stumbled and lurched against my couch. Putting a hand out to keep from falling, he leaned heavily on me. My reaction was immediate and startling: I jumped to my feet, staring at Herod as if he was an apparition and with a cry of sheer horror, I turned and ran from the room. Josias followed me.

“My Lord, King, please forgive my son. He did not mean to insult you in any way!”

“Wa’s his problem!” Herod shouted, his sudden anger releasing his attempt to hide his inebriation.

Seeing the rage building in Herod’s face Father spoke quickly and soothingly. “He must have been dreaming my Lord, and when you touched him, you did not wake him all the way. The young are that way sometimes. They do not wake up all the way.”

After a moment, Herod turned with a shrug.

“What were we talking ‘bout?” He mumbled. “Oh, yes, the Star. Where’s it at?”

“There, my Lord,” Gandophares drew him to the window, guiding him past several inert bodies on the floor. “See, my Lord, how brightly it shines?”

“Yes,” Herod let out his breath slowly. And for a moment he sensed a deep peace, but it was illusive. “So,” he said. “This is s’posed to herald the birth of a Jewish king. Well, you’ll not find him in this palace,” he swung his arm wide to include everything. “Or any other in the land, for that matter.”

He turned away and, feeling his way along the wall, moved toward the throne room. The Magi followed.

“Cording to my scribes,” he continued. “This child’s to be born in Bethl’em of Judea. Your Star’s hangin’ in the sky pretty close to Bethle’m. So, Balth’ar, take your friends an’ go pay homage to this king. But!” He wagged his finger at Balthazar. “When you find him, come back and tell me where he is.”

“Very well, my Lord, King,” said Father. The Magi began to bow, taking this as a dismissal.

“Because,” added the King. “I wanna go and worship him, myself.” This last on a belch as he collapsed into his throne.



PART 2 - CHAPTER 7

Josias had sent Gaius ahead to locate the parents of the child. He met us as we dismounted, and the servants began setting up the camp.

“My Lord,” he said briefly. “We have located the parents of the child. As soon as you are ready, we can go.”

“Good work, Gaius! Let us change into simple clothes and leave at once,” Father spoke as he began disrobing. “Josias, gather several servants with baskets as though you were going to gather supplies. We will go in the gates openly, then wander through the market. Gaius will lead us from there.”



“It’s strange, isn’t it?” Mused Gandophares as we walked through the quiet streets of Bethlehem. “Yesterday we put on all our finery and in pomp and majesty and presented ourselves to a king.”

“And today we dress as simple travelers. No pomp, no ceremony,” Cheng Sherong added.

“The King doesn’t need it,” I said without realizing the truth of my words.

“We’re here, my Lords,” said Gaius as we turned into a small street. He pulled on a rope by a large wooden gate and a bell jangled just on the other side. After a moment, a small window in the gate opened and a man peered out.

“My Masters have come to visit with your master,” said Gaius in the native tongue. “And to bring gifts for the child.”

The servant looked past him at the four of us, hesitated, then mumbling something we couldn’t hear, shut the little window. Gaius looked back at us and shrugged.

In the distance, the sounds of the carpenter’s shop stopped and

a few minutes later the door opened, and we were ushered into a courtyard and led to the dais. A tall man dressed in a simple brown robe met us there.

“My lords!” He bowed. We bowed. “My servant said that you have come to see our child. He has gone to tell my wife to get him ready.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Father. “Forgive me, but you do not seem surprised to see us.”

“We have gotten used to visitors for the child, my Lord,” said the man. “Many people have come to see him. Nothing has been the same since he was born.”

Just then a woman came through the door, carrying the child. She was dressed simply with a shawl over her head, but not covering her face. She bowed her head in recognition of us, and placed the child on a rug on the floor. The baby looked at the wall of feet around him, then tipped his head back until he looked up into our faces. His mother moved quickly to catch him as he started to topple over. We all, including Josias, immediately sat down on the floor around him. The baby laughed and got up to toddle toward Father. Father put out his hands to him, but the baby ignored them and climbed into his lap and sitting with his back against Father’s chest, reached for Father’s hands, drawing them around himself. He kicked his feet in the air and laughed again. Then he twisted around to look up into Father’s face and reached up to stroke his beard. Father bent his head to him and the baby kissed Father’s cheek.

He pushed Father’s arms away and slipped off his lap. As Father steadied him, I saw a tear slide down Father’s cheek. The child toddled to Gandophares. Gandophares put his arms out as Father had and again the child ignored them and climbed into his lap. Again, he leaned against the man’s chest for a moment or two, then he stood and, reaching up, held Gandophares’ face between his hands. He looked long into the man’s eyes, then smiled and kissed his cheek.

Next came Cheng Sherong. The baby stood looking into his face. Cheng Sherong was openly weeping. The baby wiped the tears from his cheek, then stood on tiptoe and kissed Cheng Sherong full on the lips. Cheng Sherong wrapped his arms around the child and held him, burying his face in the folds of the child’s tunic. After a very long time, he let the child go. He had stopped crying and was smiling into the child’s face. The child smiled back. Then he moved on to Josias. Josias held his arms out and, with a chortle of delight, the child ran into them, throwing his arms around Josias’ neck. They played together as long-lost brothers.

“Forgive us for coming without announcing ourselves,” Father spoke quietly as Josias and the baby continued to play. “My name is Balthazar, and this is Gandophares and Cheng Sherong and my son, Basilikos. My servant, Josias, is one of your people. We have come a long way to see this child and to bring gifts to him. We are Magi. We are High Priests of the Temples of our people in Persia, China and India. We have been studying the stars, for we are also Astrologers. A Star appeared about two and a half years ago in the southwestern sky. It grew and grew until it was so large that it outshone the moon. Then it stopped growing and stayed still. That was when we began our journey, for we believed that a king had been born. More than a king - The King, the Savior, the Messiah.”

“Many have come to see him,” whispered his mother.

“My wife’s name is Mary and I am Joseph,” said the father. “And the baby’s name is Yeshua, or, as the Greeks would say, Jesus.” They continued to talk together. Yeshua toddled back to his mother and leaned against her as the Wise Men presented their gifts to him. Mary watched, bemused by the magnificence of the gifts. Yeshua patted the crown of gold and silver and rubbed the small chest containing the frankincense. For a moment, he studied the flask of myrrh, then reached out and touched it with his finger and then drew his little fists to his chest, still studying the flask. Then he lifted his head and looked at me. I had moved a little apart from

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the others, standing in the shadows. The child toddled to me and held up his arms to be picked up. I dropped to my knees and put my arms lightly around him.

“I am sorry,” I said. “I don’t have a gift for you. I was not even supposed to be here. I only found out the day before my father planned to leave that you might even exist. My father said I couldn’t come, that I needed to stay and take care of my mother and grandfather and our people. But I disobeyed my father and I stowed away on his camel caravan so that I could be here. I’m glad I did.” Yeshua leaned back against my arms and looked into my eyes with big brown, not the innocent eyes of a baby two years old, but those of an ancient soul. I saw sorrow, joy, peace, love and understanding. He could not speak - at least not so we could understand him, yet he could say so much.

Tears welled up from deep within me and began to run down my cheeks. He noticed them and watched with interest, but did not brush them away. After a moment, he put his hands on my chest and feeling the necklace beneath my robe, he reached inside and pulled out the Ruby heart. It had become so much a part of me that I had forgotten it was there.

The Ruby sparkled and flashed in the late afternoon sun. The prismatic effect flashed across the walls and across the floor.

Red swirled around us, blocking from sight everything else in the room.

Red - a deep crimson flowed into him and through him. Crimson, like blood flowed from him and entered me and became me.

I trembled with the shock of it and, as my vision cleared, I from the Ruby cupped in his tiny hands into his eyes. There was a question in those ancient eyes. After a moment, the child nodded to me and I reached up and unclasped the chain holding the Ruby and gave my heart to Yeshua.

