

The Prophet of Rain
By William Woodall

Chapter One
Beginnings

A long time ago, in a town beside a river, there lived a young boy named Jeremy, and he had red hair. Not like a carrot or an orange, but really the reddest you ever saw. . . red as apple peelings or rose petals, red as cherries in May. Now this might not have mattered much, after all, except for what came of it later, which I am just about to tell you.

On the day it all began, Jeremy would never have guessed that anything unusual was coming. He'd taken the cows down to drink from the river, as he usually did every evening when the sun had gone down a bit. It was a dull job most of the time. Now and then he had to prod one of the cows with a long stick to nudge her back onto the path, but that was all.

The distant shadow of the Cesmean Mountains lay ahead of him, and for a while Jeremy let his mind wander, imagining himself on the back of a wild stallion with a sword in his hand, tracking down and destroying the evil barbarians who were supposed to lurk there. He sighed, so quietly that he barely noticed it himself. There were so many things more exciting in the world than thirsty cows.

That sigh would have earned him a swift kick in the shins if his brother Melech had been with him that day. Melech was seventeen, and he didn't approve of daydreaming. Jeremy secretly thought it was because his brother was too stupid to imagine anything himself, but he would never have dared to say such a thing out loud. Melech would have smacked him for it.

The herd came to the top of the last rise in the path before it sloped steeply down to the nearly dry bed of the Murray River. The cool, heavy smell of water was in the air, and the cows trotted a little faster in their eagerness to reach it. Jeremy dawdled a while on the hilltop, shading his eyes from the low sun. The river trickled out of sight around a rocky outcrop not far to the west, and he knew that somewhere far away in that direction lay the sea, and the great city of Rustrum where King Joseph lived.

To the east, there was only the narrow valley climbing out of sight among the Eyre Hills. There was a gravelly sand bar at the foot of the path where useful things sometimes washed ashore, but no one knew where they came from. No one had ever gone that way to see.

He wondered what it might be like to start walking upstream, exploring the whole river until he found the place where it gushed out from the stone, or (it might be) flowed out from some deep and cold lake, high in the mountains. It might even be a magical lake that turned everything to gold, or contained an evil water dragon that nobody but he could ever kill. . . or maybe both! He smiled a little.

It is written, in the Book of the Prophets, that the Most High knows all the desires of our hearts, even the least wish of the most ignorant child. Such things are never passed by without answer, but the answer may often come in a form we never expected. So it was in this case.

Jeremy shook his head a little to collect his woolly thoughts. He noticed guiltily that several of the cows had finished drinking, and now they were drifting up and down the bank to graze. He hurried downstream to get ahead of the ones in that direction, a little annoyed with himself for not paying better attention. There might still be enough time to get them all home before anyone noticed it had taken him longer than it ought to. He hated the thought of seeing the smirk on Melech's face if anyone found out he'd let the cows wander off.

He ran carelessly in the gathering dusk, paying no attention to anything except the cows and what his brother would think of him for losing them. But greedy eyes watched him from the edge of the forest, and marked well that he was both young and alone. A caravan of Sohrab traders, passing by on business of their own, had decided to camp near the river for the night.

The Sohrab are an ancient people, and they had traded in rare and precious merchandise all up and down the Murray valley (and indeed, far beyond it), for time out of mind. They dealt in only the costliest and most difficult-to-find items. Jewels, spices, silks, the deep blue dye of Cerise, and, sometimes. . . slaves with flaming red hair. Anything unusual was always more valuable. Jeremy didn't realize his danger.

Just as he made it to the cow which had wandered farthest down the bank, he found himself quickly surrounded by tall men swathed in pale cotton robes. The Sohrab didn't come that way very often, but he recognized them at once. They looked unfriendly, with arms crossed silently and dark eyes that never blinked. He started to feel a little scared.

"Good evening, sirs. The village is that way," he said in a voice that he hoped sounded very polite and unafraid, and he raised his hand to point back upstream. One of the men nodded slightly, and Jeremy let himself relax a tiny bit. But when the man spoke, he felt real terror.

"You will come with us now, boy. You will fetch an excellent price in the mountains," the man said calmly, with a horrible smile.

Jeremy certainly didn't mean to give up without a fight, and he dashed for the riverbank as fast as he could go. It wasn't far to the edge of the water, and if he could swim to the opposite bank he might have enough time to hide among the trees that grew along the broken edge of the valley on that side. They would never find him there.

His speed caught them by surprise. He dodged easily through an opening in the circle of men, and hope surged through him as he saw the way open to the river. But luck was not with him that day (or maybe it was), and his foot caught on one of the bare roots trailing out from the edge of the forest. He stumbled, and even though he ran on for a little while, trying with all his might to regain his balance, he fell to the ground just at the water's edge. Before he could get back to his feet they were on him, pinning him to the ground harshly and crushing his face into the dirt. Someone kicked him in the ribs hard enough to knock the breath out of him, but the pain wasn't nearly so bad as the terror he felt.

They soon let him up, with a gag in his mouth to keep him from screaming for help, and from that moment on the traders made sure that at least two men held firmly to his arms at all times. He looked desperately for any chance to escape and hindered them as much as he was able, dragging his feet and going limp. He got a stinging slap in the face for that, and the men dragged him along the ground behind them anyway, not caring at all if the rocks tore his clothes and skin or if his arms got twisted.

They pulled him quickly to the Sohrab camp a little farther down the river, hidden carefully in the edge of the woods. The caravan was a small one, with six wagons drawn up in a rough circle against anyone who might be tempted to attack them. The Sohrab were known as vicious fighters when it came to protecting their merchandise, but there were still those who couldn't resist the lure of so much wealth. Jeremy was taken to one of the wagons, and put there alone in a sturdy cage of steel bars. He immediately examined every corner and crevice to see if there might be any way out, but the Sohrab had built carefully.

Jeremy sat down in one of the corners, farthest back in the shadows, pulled his knees up to his chest, and buried his head in his arms. His whole body hurt from being dragged across the river rocks, and his lip was bleeding a little. He might have cried then, if he hadn't been so afraid. He listened to the sounds of the camp outside, and guessed the Sohrab were getting ready to leave. Probably so no one from the village could attempt a rescue.

Soon he was brought food and a flask of water, passed to him through the bars by one of the women whose task that was. Jeremy chewed the bits of meat and cheese with no interest, hardly tasting them. He wished bitterly that he'd listened to Melech and not daydreamed so much. He wondered what had become of the cows, and how long it would be until someone came down to the river to look for him, and what they would

think when they found him missing. Would they wonder if a lion had killed him, or if he'd fallen in the river and drowned, or what? He wondered what Melech would say. Most of all, he wondered what these strange folk would do with him. He knew they meant to sell him for a slave, somewhere, sometime, but that could mean many different things.

Jeremy curled into a ball in the corner of the cage against the creeping chill of the night, and then he did cry for a while. The gentle swaying of the wagon bed was soothing, and eventually, in spite of his fear, he slept.

Chapter Two

The House of Amagon

For the next several weeks, Jeremy rode in the cage. The Sohrab were not really very cruel to him; he was too valuable for that. They simply made sure he had no chance to escape. The caravan moved like a snail, but no one came to challenge them or to look for a missing boy. Or if they did, Jeremy heard nothing about it. For a while they had followed the Murray downstream, but after that they struck out in another direction entirely, and Jeremy had no idea where he might be. He was never allowed to see anything outside the wagon, except for a patch of sky above the back doors. He was just as miserable as you might expect, even after he began to get used to the routine.

Sometimes one of the old women would sit in the wagon with him during the heat of the day, and out of loneliness he took to talking to her. Not "with" her, for she never answered him, but she also never told him to be quiet. So he told her about the village and the cows, and Melech and Papa, and his favorite dog, and playing ball on the village green with his friends. He told her about the lessons he remembered from the Book of the Prophets, and what he thought about them, and anything else that came to his mind. She was a good listener, and he started to feel that she was his friend, in a strange sort of way. For a while, he could almost forget he was locked in a steel cage on his way to a slave market, and then who knew what kind of horrors after that. But Jeremy decided he would be patient for now, and see what happened. There wasn't much else he could do until things changed.

After a few weeks, one of the Sohrab men came to his cage with a leather and steel collar for his neck, and a long steel chain attached to it. Jeremy was made to wear this, and no amount of pulling and stretching could get it off. From then on he was allowed to begin riding one of the smaller ponies during the day, with the end of his chain always attached to the belt of a man who rode beside him. They still put him in the cage at night, but it was a great improvement to be allowed outside even part of the time. He wasn't sure why the change was made. Jeremy could only guess at their reasons, for they

never explained anything to him and never answered questions. Indeed, they hardly ever talked to him at all except to give orders, and that wasn't often. Whatever their purposes may have been, he was glad of them.

At first it was nice to feel the wind and the sun against his face after being locked up inside the stuffy wagon for so long, but soon he began to feel lonely again. He never saw the old woman anymore, and the Sohrab men expected him to be quiet. They weren't above enforcing it with blows if necessary, and Jeremy learned very quickly to keep his mouth shut.

The caravan traveled now through a country which had once been well settled, for the old stones that marked the edges of fields and vineyards still lined the road in places. It was all desolate and empty now, and dry as dust. Lack of rain had long since destroyed whatever people had once lived in that place. Even Jeremy's own village had not suffered so much, yet. Here there was no river to bring life-giving water to the parched fields and paddocks.

The Sohrab spent the night sometimes in the empty houses and barns when it happened to be convenient, but normally they didn't linger in these places. Jeremy guessed they had a civilized destination in mind, for all the wagons and packs were full of things to sell. He wondered again where they were taking him. The land was so vast and all so much the same that it was impossible for him to keep track of the road.

After weeks and weeks of travel through the dead farm country, the caravan went down through a deep cutting in a cliff, and came out onto a well-kept road that ran along the banks of a river which, although low, still flowed strongly between banks of gray stone. They followed this road for some distance, and came eventually to a wide stone bridge that led across the river and into a great walled city, with blue pennants floating from the turrets on a soft warm breeze. The leader of the caravan halted at the gates, and after a whispered conversation with the gate guards, they were welcomed inside the city. The leader seemed to know exactly where to go, and soon the caravan came out into a wide stone plaza thronged with excited city folk. Within minutes, the Sohrab were set up to do business, with all their dazzling and costly merchandise displayed openly for the inspection of the city dwellers. Most turned away when they heard the prices, but there was still no shortage of those with plenty of gold to spend. By the end of the day, the Sohrab had raked in more money than Jeremy had ever dreamed existed in the world. Jeremy himself was put in a cage near the front of the Sohrab display, so customers could examine him better. Several did, even inspecting his teeth and looking at his feet and hands and feeling his muscles and asking how much he ate and whether he was good natured or not. This went on all day long, and still no one bought him. You can imagine what a nasty mood he was in by the time the market closed, after being poked and

prodded for hours on end. He felt like biting the next person who wanted to look at his teeth.

Jeremy hoped, a little forlornly, that maybe they would let him go sooner or later if no one wanted to buy him. But the Sohrab are a crafty race, and they had never had any intention of selling him to anyone in the marketplace. Jeremy's buyer was already waiting; indeed, had already paid for him. The purpose of displaying him in the market was only to attract curiosity-seekers who might then be enticed to buy other items. Part of Jeremy's sale price had been the agreement that he was to remain in the cage all day for others to see. Jeremy knew nothing of that until much later, though.

Late in the evening three men came to the marketplace just as the Sohrab were packing their caravan to depart (for they never spent the night within the walls of a city), and with a deep bow, the leader of the caravan turned over the key to Jeremy's cage. Without a backward glance, the traders departed. Jeremy had to resist a strong urge to spit on the ground at them as they walked away.

Two of the servants picked him up, cage and all, and followed the third man to a large stone house somewhere in the city. He couldn't have said where it was in relation to the marketplace, for the streets were narrow and full of people. Nor did he suppose that it mattered much. The man who had bought him owned a stupendous palace, larger than any building Jeremy had yet seen within the city. It rose five stories high from the street, built of dressed gray stone, and had several towers and turrets that rose higher yet. There were no windows on the ground floor, but he could see a few in the upper reaches of the House. To his amazement, he saw that some of the upper windows were even made of glass, instead of the usual dried sheep skin or oiled paper. He couldn't imagine how rich the owner of the house must be, to afford so much glass. The double front doors were of stout beams of oak wood, reinforced with hinges of wrought iron. Only one stood open, letting yellow lamplight spill out into the darkening street.

The door was so large that the servants easily carried Jeremy's cage through the opening. Inside was a grand atrium, paved with blue marble and with a stone fountain in the center. It was carved in the shape of a lion standing on a rock, and there had once been a pool of water all around the base of it, but that was dry now. Strange people dressed in blue silk and diamonds were moving to and fro across the room while he watched, but none of them seemed to pay any attention to him. Jeremy couldn't guess who they were or what they were doing.

He didn't have much time to look. The porters soon carried him to a grand staircase on the left side of the atrium, and then up several flights of stairs and along many lengthy passages until they came to a room inside one of the high stone towers that looked out over the rooftops of the city, with a glimpse of the dry land beyond. Here the servants set down the cage that held Jeremy, and all but one of them left the room. The

one who remained locked the door quite carefully behind him, and then swung open Jeremy's cage and beckoned for him to come out.

Jeremy didn't need to be asked twice. He climbed out of the small door, stood up, and stretched his cramped body. The room he found himself in was just as richly furnished as the rest of the House. The walls and the floor were of blue veined marble, the furniture built of the rarest woods, inlaid with silver and upholstered with blue velvet. He noticed a low table set with golden dishes full of food, and a suit of new clothes, just his size, laid out fresh upon the velvet couch. He didn't know quite what to make of all this. In spite of his hunger, he stood still and looked silently at the man who had brought him, determined not to be the one to speak first.

"Please eat and refresh yourself, young master," the man said, gesturing toward the table. Jeremy couldn't tell for sure, but it was possible that the ghost of a smile had passed across his face. All the bitter fury he felt about his captivity threatened to boil up and overwhelm him, at the sight of that faint smile. But Jeremy had learned quickly among the Sohrab that caution was necessary, and he didn't lose his temper. It wouldn't do, and it might be very dangerous, to show any hint of anger toward this man. Still, he was determined to get some information, even if it did cost him a beating.

"Where am I?" he demanded finally. The old man did smile then, a warm smile that was very hard not to return. Jeremy found his anger and humiliation fading away a little in spite of himself.

"You are in the city of Cerise, in the House of Lord Amagon, and all will be well now that you're here, young man. Fear nothing, and be glad that you have come, for there are no slaves and no bondservants in the house of Amagon; only those who serve our Master in love and respect. And there are many such, for he is a great man. I am one of them, and I pray that you'll choose to stay here with us also. But first you must eat and bathe and refresh yourself, and dress as befits one of the household, for our Master wishes to talk with you as soon as you're ready," the old man said.

Jeremy was astonished at the sudden change in his fortunes, and he couldn't quite believe it. For a long moment he stood there with his mouth half open.

"And if I don't choose to stay?" he asked, suspiciously. The old man shrugged his shoulders, moved slowly to the door and unlocked it.

"There's the door, young master; you're free to go, if that's what you truly wish. As I said, there are no slaves and no prisoners in this house. But if you will stay just a little while, and speak to Lord Amagon. . . well, that's only courtesy to the one who purchased your freedom out of slavery among the Sohrab. Will you at least remain long enough to thank him?" the old man asked. Jeremy felt a little ashamed of himself, when things were put that way. It would be very rude and ungrateful not to thank the Master of

the House, if that's the way things had happened. And if he could really leave whenever he wanted to, then maybe. . .

"I will speak to Lord Amagon," he said grudgingly. The old man smiled happily.

"Then please accept Lord Amagon's hospitality for this little while, young master. The bath is in the next chamber, and your clothes and various refreshments lie here before you. My name is Coreb, and I will await you in the hall outside. If you should require anything at all, simply call for me and I will do my best to provide it," he said.

Jeremy would really have liked to ask a lot more questions at that point, but Coreb vanished into the hallway with hardly more than a whisper of his shoes against the deep pile of the carpet, leaving Jeremy alone in the fancy room, with nothing for company but his own mightily confused thoughts.

He had been fully prepared to be surly and resistant to whatever he was ordered to do when he reached this place, and the courteous treatment he was getting left him befuddled and not sure how to act. He kept thinking there had to be a catch to all this, somewhere. But he was tired, and he was filthy, and caked in dirt and sweat, and he was ravenously hungry, and the means to correct all these things lay close at hand. He decided for the time being at least he would take things at face value.

Accordingly, he entered the next chamber, stripped off his dirty rags, and slipped gratefully into the marble basin of the bath. It was the first time in weeks that he'd had the luxury of a bath, and the simple pleasure of being truly clean again improved his mood immensely. There were various bath oils and soaps arranged around the tub, and a seemingly limitless supply of hot and cold water. Jeremy scrubbed himself thoroughly until his skin was pink and glowing, and his hair restored to its normal deep red. After drying himself with one of the thick white towels and combing his hair, he returned to the other room and put on the clothes laid out for him on the couch. There was a white linen shirt and pants, and a long blue robe of watered silk that came down to his ankles, hemmed and bordered with white gold and diamonds. The shoes were soft blue leather and curled up at the toes. Everything was wonderfully soft and comfortable, not at all as you might expect nice clothes to be. They were almost as nice to wear as they were to look at. Jeremy couldn't resist going to the large mirror on the wall to see himself, and couldn't help laughing at his reflection. He'd never looked so strange in all his life, he thought. Then he quickly returned to the table and attacked the food that had been left for him. At first he was too hungry to care much what it tasted like and he paid close attention to business, but as his hunger subsided a bit he realized he'd never tasted such a meal before. There were iced fruits, and fresh white bread with butter, and toasted bits of meat and cheese with tangy sauces. He began to eat more slowly, so as to savor it all more thoroughly. At that point he was feeling quite kindly toward his host, and well

disposed to listen to whatever he had to say. Coreb seemed to appear out of thin air, and stood by the door.

"Are you ready, young master?" he asked. Jeremy was, and together they left the room in the tower. Coreb led him through many other halls and passageways, full of tapestries and golden candle sconces and crystal and paintings, until he was dizzy with the size of the place. At last they arrived in a room somewhat plainer than the others; not very large, and containing only a wooden table and two chairs. In one of them sat a young man, tall and fair of face, with dark hair and bright blue eyes. He was dressed all in blue, with only a small handful of diamonds to adorn his clothes. Fewer than Jeremy wore, in fact. He was reading a book, and looked up when Coreb opened the door. He smiled at them both.

"I'm glad to see you looking so well, young man," he said to Jeremy, and waved a hand for him to sit down and for Coreb to leave them alone. Jeremy took the other chair and quietly watched Lord Amagon. Strangely, it was the book which impressed him more than the wealth. The wealth meant nothing to him, because he didn't really comprehend its value yet. But in the village, the only book that existed was a copy of the Book of the Prophets, and that was always kept in the church. Not many people could have read it, even if there had been a copy in every house. The priest could read, and maybe one or two others, but few took the time to learn more than the small amount that was necessary for everyday tasks. The fact that Amagon knew how to read raised him a good bit in Jeremy's respect. He wasn't at all the sort of fellow Jeremy had expected.

"So, tell me, young man, what's your name?" Lord Amagon asked.

"Jeremy," the boy said. Lord Amagon smiled and shook his hand.

"And do you know, Jeremy, why you're here, and why I purchased your freedom from the Sohrab?"

"No, sir, I don't," Jeremy admitted.

"Well, then, I'll tell you," Lord Amagon said, laying his book aside and sitting more comfortably in his chair.

"Perhaps, if you've noticed much of my home as you walked to and fro, you may have seen that I have been blessed with a great deal of wealth. Indeed, I am quite likely the wealthiest man in all the kingdom, if not the world. Perhaps you've heard of the blue dye of Cerise, which is the costliest and rarest in the world, and which is sold only to kings and noblemen. That dye comes from a mine in the hills nearby, and I am the owner of that mine. I have the means to do a great many things for my city, and for those who happen to cross my path from time to time. I keep on good terms with the Sohrab, for it is impossible to trade in any merchandise without taking them into account. Some of them I know quite well, and it happens that one of these I know is an old caravan leader and his wife, who trade on the eastern marches."

“It’s been useful for me to know them, for sometimes they come across items of great value, which they naturally wish to offer to me, first. You are one such item, though perhaps they never would have realized it, if you hadn’t been so talkative.” Here Amagon smiled.

“You may not know how much time you spent talking to the leader’s wife, but she was very impressed with you. As soon as the caravan drew near to Cerise, she and her husband came to me, and told me they had something special that might interest me. They had intended to sell you to one of the chieftains of the Lachishite barbarians in the mountains, for those are an ignorant and superstitious folk, and red is a sacred color to them. I’m not sure what they would have done with you. . . maybe kept you for a luck charm, or married you off to one of their girls, or they might have bled you now and then and drunk your blood because they thought it was specially holy, or some other barbaric and brutal thing like that. The Sohrab would not have cared what became of you, after cash was in hand. Make no mistake. . . they know I keep no slaves, but to them it matters not at all what a customer chooses to do with the things he buys, so long as they get their payment. In any case, the old lady told me you are both intelligent and good of heart, and these are things I have much need of, in my various dealings.”

Amagon paused for a moment, and looked at Jeremy frankly.

“And also. . . though some may consider it foolish, I couldn’t allow a child of my own people to be condemned to a lifetime of slavery (or worse) among the Lachishites. Not if I knew of it in time, and if it lay within my power to prevent it.”

"And so it is that I have purchased your freedom. You may take it and go, if you wish, but I must for the sake of mercy warn you that another Sohrab clan would be quite happy to recapture you and sell you again, perhaps to someone less considerate than myself. I’m not on such good terms with every caravan, and I can affect little that goes on beyond Cerise. However, if you wish, you may remain here in my house to serve me. You will be provided with clothes, and quarters, and all that you require, and I will pay you a good wage, as I do all my servants. What do you think of my offer?" Lord Amagon asked.

Jeremy saw at once that he had no real choice. The Sohrab awaited him outside the city walls, and that alone turned the offer of freedom into a mockery. But still. . . Lord Amagon didn’t have to offer him anything. In time something better might turn up, but for now he could think of no better plan for himself.

“I accept your offer, sir,” he said.

Chapter Three

Jonah

“Excellent,” Lord Amagon said. “For now, I will make you a page. It will be your duty to deliver messages to various places in the city or beyond, at such times as I or others in the house may require. I don’t think you will find the work difficult, after you have learned your way around the streets. However, you will also be expected to learn to read and write, and to speak certain useful languages, and to practice courtesy, and such other things as are needful for a noble and gentle person to know. When you are not occupied with these tasks, your time is your own, but you are expected to return to the House no later than sundown each day, unless you are told otherwise. If you don’t, you may find yourself locked outside for the night.”

Lord Amagon clapped his hands, and Coreb instantly appeared from outside the doorway.

“Coreb, take this boy to the pages’ barracks, and ensure that he has all things needful,” Amagon ordered.

“Of course, sir,” Coreb replied, with a deep bow. Before leaving the room with Coreb, Jeremy looked back at Amagon for a moment.

“Thank you, sir,” he said sincerely. Amagon smiled.

“Thank the Most High, and not His humble servant,” he said. Jeremy had never heard anyone but a priest say such a thing before, and his impression of Lord Amagon went up yet another notch.

Coreb led him back down into the main part of the House, all the way to the ground floor. They didn’t go by way of the grand staircase that would have brought them back to the front atrium, but somehow arrived at the rear of the House not far from what must have been the kitchen. Jeremy could hear pots and pans being washed up, and the lingering odor of bread and roast meat filled the air. He was hopelessly lost, but he supposed he would learn his way around soon enough. Some distance down the hall from the kitchen, they came to a smaller set of double doors that stood ajar, and Coreb led him into the barracks.

It was a long room, containing thirty bunks along the inside wall, with a wardrobe or cabinet of sorts beside each one. Across from the beds were large glass windows that looked out onto the herb-and-vegetable garden used by the kitchen. The entire House was built around a central courtyard, to which there was no access except by passing through the House itself. The ground floor rooms which faced the courtyard could safely have windows, for no enemy could approach from that direction anyway. Across the garden and the rest of the courtyard were other parts of the House, but Jeremy couldn’t tell what they might be in the semi-darkness.

There were about twenty other boys in the room when they arrived. . . resting on their bunks, reading, talking to each other, or playing games at one of the wooden tables by the windows. They were of various ages, from slightly younger than Jeremy all the

way up to tall youths with thin beards. They all looked up when Coreb appeared at the door.

“Boys, this is Jeremy, who will be joining you. Please make him feel welcome,” Coreb said. This was met with a loud chorus of greetings. Jeremy smiled, a little uncertainly.

Coreb took Jeremy to the bunk nearest the door and showed him the contents of his locker- five sets of uniforms, a nicer suit of clothes much like the ones he was wearing, to be used on feast days or for chapel services, and two sets of plain cotton jumpers for dirty or difficult work. There were also boots and caps and other necessary things. When all this was done, Coreb excused himself, reminded the boys that it would be time for lights-out soon, and shut the door.

There were in fact twenty-three other pages at the time Jeremy came to the House. They were friendly and seemed to like each other, but Jeremy never felt that he had much in common with them. They were mostly the younger sons of wealthy families in Cerise. Not one of them had ever set foot outside the city walls nor ever suffered a day of want. Jeremy couldn't help thinking of them as overgrown babies. . . even the older boys who shaved twice a week. This put up a subtle wall between them, so that Jeremy never made any real friends among the other pages. He worked well with them, and even played and talked with them, but he was close to no one.

Time passed, and life was not unkind to him. He did his work well and without complaint, as he'd always been taught to do, and he watched his pay accumulate in the bank downtown. He had nice things, and a respected place in the House. He was taught to read and cipher, and studied geography and music and many other things he could never have learned in the village of his birth. Cerise was a beautiful and interesting city, with many things to see and do. He liked to walk down to the stone-paved marketplace on Sunday afternoons and watch the jugglers and the bear tamers who gathered there, and it was sometimes possible to see traders who brought merchandise from the farthest corners of the world. He avoided the marketplace whenever a caravan of Sohrab came to trade, for he could never quite forget the horror of his captivity with them and he disliked being reminded of it. But they didn't come often, and there were many other traders besides them. Jeremy had no real complaints about his life, except for a vague sort of loneliness. He wasn't used to spending so much of his time alone. Melech had been hateful sometimes, but at least he was always there. Or if not, then Jeremy had always had friends to do things with. Here there was no one except the other pages, and try as he might, he found it awfully hard to take them seriously.

On a cold day in the winter, when he'd been in the House for several months, it happened that Jeremy found himself with nothing to do. No messages needed to be sent, and his studies were done for the day. All the other pages were busy, and it was much

too cold to think of going out. He hung around the kitchen for a while to see if he could scrounge something to eat, but eventually the cooks shooed him away. He soon got tired of sitting by the fountain. With nothing else to do, he decided to take a lamp and explore the House for a while. No matter how much he roamed the halls, there always seemed to be more of it to see.

On this day, he eventually came out in the stable where the horses were kept. This was a place he'd never had any reason to visit before, so he took some passing interest in it.

The stable boys were in the middle of grooming the horses when he arrived, for Amagon expected his mounts to look presentable at all times. Jeremy knew lots about cows, but the only horses in the village had been a couple of old draft animals that were used to plow the fields. No one rode, and certainly there were no such beautiful animals as these. Jeremy sat down on an upended water bucket and watched the stable boys work for a while.

The boy nearest him was younger than the others, working with a curry comb on a chestnut horse nearly twice his height. Even with a stool, he was having trouble reaching all the way up onto the horse's withers. He had the jet black hair and bright blue eyes of almost all the people of Cerise. . . a combination Jeremy was still not quite used to.

"Could I help?" Jeremy finally asked, after watching the boy for a while. The boy turned to him with a ready smile.

"It's not so easy as it looks, I'm afraid. But if you like, I'll teach you how," he said.

"Sure," Jeremy said, getting up from the bucket and walking into the stall.

Jonah (for that was the boy's name) turned out to be a fun and friendly person to talk to. He made himself old friends with Jeremy at once, as if they'd known each other for years instead of just met. He tried to show the older boy how to curry the horse, but it soon became obvious he was trying hard not to laugh as he watched.

"Here, you better let me finish her," Jonah finally said, smiling. Somehow Jeremy didn't mind being laughed at. It reminded him of playing with his friends in the village, when everybody knew the laughter was good-natured. So he laughed a little himself, and handed back the comb.

"You're right, it's harder than it looks," he admitted, "How did you learn how to do it so well?"

"Aw, I've been doing this since I was old enough to hold a comb in my hands," Jonah told him.

"You've been here that long?" Jeremy asked.

"No, no. . . I've only been here in the House about three months. But I grew up on a horse farm outside the city. All my family knows about horses," he said proudly.

“I wish I did, but we only had cows,” Jeremy said wistfully.

They went on talking for quite a while, and when he finished grooming the horse Jonah was done with work for the day. He carefully put away his brushes and tools, patted the horse on her flank, and then dusted his hands and looked at Jeremy.

“If you’re not doing anything, would you like to come up to the loft and play darts?” he asked, as if just thinking of it.

“Sure,” Jeremy said. He followed Jonah up a wooden ladder to the hay loft above the stable. The stable boys had cleared out a small area for a table and chairs, and there was a dart board against one wall. They were surrounded by walls of golden and sweet-smelling hay that reached right up to the roof.

“All this will be gone by springtime,” Jonah said, waving an arm at the hay. It didn’t seem possible to Jeremy that the horses could ever eat that much. . . but he supposed some of it was used for bedding and other things too.

“How do you get it all up here?” he asked, since he was sure it didn’t come up and down the ladder.

“Oh, there’s a big trap door way down at the far end. We use that for getting the hay in and out when we need to. The ladder is just for getting up here to our little dart place, mostly,” Jonah explained.

They played several games of darts, until the winter sun began to fade. Lamps or candles of any kind were strictly forbidden in the hay loft because of the danger of fire, and so the end of daylight also meant the end of their games. Jonah was a much better dart player, but Jeremy enjoyed himself anyway. After supper in the Great Hall, they agreed to meet in the hay loft and play some more the next afternoon.

The two of them soon became fast friends. Jonah had less free time than Jeremy did, but on Sundays and some evenings, when the weather was nice, they left the House together and explored Cerise. Jonah’s favorite activity was to go up on the city wall and flick peanut shells down onto the heads of people leaving the city through the gate. He was very skilled at this, and soon taught Jeremy to do it almost as well as he did. Sometimes the victims looked up at the battlements and laughed, and sometimes they scowled or cursed at the boys. Jonah had come to the wall many times and already had a fair idea who the sourpusses were, and generally they tried to aim for the ones who would laugh.

Jeremy took them to the marketplace to watch the dancing bears and the traders, and other times they just roamed the streets together, seeing whatever there was to see. Neither of them knew much about the city. Jeremy had arrived in a cage, and Jonah had never set foot within the walls until the day he came to Lord Amagon’s stables.

“Do you like it here, Jonah?” Jeremy asked his friend one day, as they sat on the wall. They were not flicking peanut shells today, just enjoying the cooler wind atop the

battlements. There were several picnickers and strollers with the same idea. It was high summer, and the heat rising from the pavement stones on the street was almost unbearable.

“It’s as good as may be,” Jonah shrugged. “I don’t want to do it for always, but I like the House and I like the City, and the other boys in the stable are nice fellows to work with.”

“Oh, I know. It’s a good place like that. But what do you want to do when you leave here?” Jeremy asked.

“Be King of Rustrum and do anything I please, of course,” Jonah laughed. He reached over and punched Jeremy’s arm in a friendly sort of way. “Why are you asking me all this, anyway?”

Jeremy chewed on his lip and thought about that a while.

“I don’t know. I’ve been trying to think about what I might do when I get too old to be a page anymore. The pagemaster always tells us to plan ahead like that, so I guess I’m just curious about what other people are thinking about,” he said at last. Jonah rolled his eyes.

“You’re too darned serious, Jeremy. That’s years and years away,” he said.

“True, but I just wonder sometimes,” Jeremy said.

“Well, I’ll tell you what I think, since it matters so much to you. I hope I can become a scholar at the university, and find out all kinds of things nobody ever knew before. And I hope I can do something for my family back in the village, maybe,” Jonah said, soberly.

Jeremy thought about this.

“I’m not sure what I want,” he said quietly. “I want to do something noble and grand, you know. Kill a dragon like they used to do in the old days, or explore a huge desert on foot, or swim across the sea and find out what’s on the other side of it. Something wild and awesome like that.”

Jonah looked at his friend for a second as if not sure what to say, then he laughed a little and punched his arm again.

“Now I know you’re crazy, boy,” he said, not unkindly. After a second Jeremy laughed too, and the serious topic was forgotten.

Jonah, when he wasn’t being a prankster, was generally a trustworthy and respectable boy. He knew lots of interesting things, and he didn’t mind sharing what he knew. He taught Jeremy how to ride the horses properly (his short experience of riding with the Sohrab caravan hardly counted), and sometimes they would ride out through the gates and around the countryside. It was good for the horses to get exercised regularly, and Lord Amagon didn’t mind if the stable boys left the city from time to time, provided they didn’t go too far and treated the horses well.

Most of the area close to Cerise was farm land watered by ditches dug from the Blue River, with patches of oak woods here and there. The main road led beside the riverbank- north to the dye mines, and far south to Rustrum. The old east road led up onto the High Plain and the Eyre Hills (and finally to Jeremy's village) but that way wasn't used much anymore. The boys generally stuck to the main road by the river, for there was more to see and do that way. They sometimes went to Jonah's village, three miles upstream. There was a deep, wide pool in the river at that place, with huge willow trees leaning far out over the water, and in the summertime they could tie up the horses and go swimming. Jeremy was as good a swimmer as Jonah was, for Melech had taught him to swim almost before he could walk. It was one of the few kind things he could ever remember his brother doing.

Jeremy wouldn't have wanted to go home now even if he could have. He had a much better life in Cerise than he could ever have hoped for in the village, and he knew he wasn't the first boy who ever had to find work in a distant city. If Papa had been able to find a tradesman to apprentice him to, he might have had to leave home soon anyway, Sohrab or not. He knew all this in his mind, but there were still times when he missed his old life more than he would have believed possible. He didn't say much about it, most of the time. Jonah usually knew what he was thinking at times like that, and for once didn't tease him about being too serious. He knew what it felt like to leave home, too.

Jonah could still go back and visit his family now and then, though. He asked Jeremy to come with him whenever he went, and Jeremy soon discovered that he enjoyed these visits very much. They were kindly folk, though not quite what he was used to. Jonah had at least twelve brothers and sisters, some older and some younger. They all lived in a three room wooden house surrounded by wide pastures for horses, and Jonah's two older brothers were expert horsemen. One of his sisters was already married, but she still lived nearby and even brought her own baby to the house as often as not. The place always seemed on the very verge of bursting with people. They were a family that joked and laughed a lot, and nothing ever seemed to annoy or upset them. They took Jeremy to heart like a long-lost son and brother, from the moment he first walked in the door, without even thinking about it. Jeremy might have been surprised by this, if he hadn't already seen it from Jonah himself. As it was, he sometimes felt more at home in that house than he ever had in the place he was born to. He felt a little disloyal for that, but he couldn't help it.

Jonah sometimes laughed and said he hadn't known he was getting another brother, but he meant it kindly.

Jeremy never did learn to be more than a decent rider, but he had lots of fun in the process. He was happier in those days than he could ever remember, and he thanked the Most High every day for bringing him to Cerise. He would certainly never have come

there without the Sohrab, and he could even be thankful for his captivity, when he thought about it.

One glad day followed another, until he began to believe those times would go on forever. But of happy days and golden years there is often little to say, while they last. Nor do they last forever, in a dark and fallen world.

For the rest of his life, Jeremy never forgot those years in Cerise, and the memory of joy stood him in good stead during the evil days that lay ahead.

Chapter Four

Eli

After three years, Jeremy was placed over all the pages in the household, so high had he risen in the favor of Lord Amagon. The position was an important one, for all of Amagon's messages and the smooth running of his day-to-day life depended on the pages. It was a high honor for one so young. Most of the time Jeremy loved his work, but as time went on he gradually began to feel unsatisfied again. There was little challenge to be faced, little to be done which seemed awesome or grand. He couldn't quite put his finger on what it was he wanted. . . it was just something that nagged him in the back of his mind, like an itch he couldn't quite scratch. There were times when he thought it might drive him crazy, and when he had these moods he became irritable and restless. No amount of honor and money could ever quite kill the desire for greatness that was written on his heart.

He took to walking the streets of the city alone, deep in thought. If he stayed in the House, there were always people who needed to see him about something or other, and he wanted time to think. His wanderings took him into places he'd never visited as a page boy, for there was little need to send messages to the poorer sections of town. Old clothes and a droopy hood over his head helped to make him less recognizable, for he knew it wouldn't do at all to be known as a servant of one of the great Houses. At best it would make people uneasy, and at worst it might earn him a cut throat in a dark alley. Parts of the city were very dangerous territory, and he couldn't have said why he felt compelled to visit such places. He didn't often do much except watch people, and sometimes talk to them. He knew Lord Amagon and even Jonah would have been horrified if they knew where he'd been. So he kept his roaming to himself, and said nothing about his restless thoughts.

It chanced that on one of these walks, he ended up near the River Gate on the east side of the city. . . not a very safe place to be, with night approaching. The narrow street was fronted with cheap taverns with names like *The Little Brown Jug* or *The Blood and Guts*. The muddy filth on the streets stuck to the bottom of his shoes, for the paving

stones were rarely washed in this neighborhood. He watched a barefoot old woman in a dirty skirt digging through a trash pile beside one of the taverns, and heard the not-too-distant sound of drunk men fighting. It was a sad place, and Jeremy had almost made up his mind to turn around and go home.

Almost, until he saw a young boy huddled against a trash pile, with a little cup in front of him to beg for coins. There were many like him in the back alleys of Cerise, but today Jeremy felt an impulse to talk to this one. The boy looked up at him as he approached. This was a little unusual, for most beggars kept their heads down and didn't dare look into the eyes of the city folk. The boy was thin and ragged and filthy, with the dull eyes that came from hunger and lack of love. Jeremy squatted down so as to speak to him more easily.

"What's your name, boy?" he asked.

"My name is Eli, may it please your grace," the boy said. That also was unusual, for the boy's speech was unlike that of an ignorant street urchin. Noblemen and cultured folk addressed one another in that fashion, if they were roughly equals, but it was unheard of to be called "your grace" by a child, much less a street beggar. Indeed it could even be taken as an insult, if the boy had only known it. He obviously did not, so Jeremy let it pass. He was curious enough to ask about it, though.

"Tell me, Eli, how is it that you speak to me as an equal?" he asked mildly. He didn't mean this in a harsh way, for he was simply curious. But his words struck terror into the child.

"I'm sorry, lord! I meant no offense!" he cried, cringing down on the filthy street and dropping his face as if he expected a blow. Jeremy hastily reached down and pulled the boy's face up to look at him again.

"I'm not offended, Eli. . . I'd just like to know why you called me 'your grace'," he explained, as calmly as he could. The boy couldn't answer him for few minutes until he had gotten over his fright.

"Lord, I found the words in a book of old tales. I meant only to do you honor," he said.

"You can read?" Jeremy asked, more than a little shocked.

"Yes, Lord, but only a little. The old priest at the church by the River Gate taught me a little, before he died," the boy said.

Jeremy thought about this for a long time. It must have been an awfully kind and devoted priest, to have taken the time to do such a thing. Jeremy wished for a minute that he knew the man's name. Then he looked at the child more carefully, for he had the beginnings of an idea.

"Do you have a family, Eli?" he asked.

“No, Lord. My sister died of the fever three months ago, and she was the last,” Eli said.

“And how old might you be?” Jeremy wanted to know.

“Thirteen years, Lord,” the boy replied promptly. Jeremy would never have guessed it, for the boy was very small for his age, but he saw no reason not to believe him.

Jeremy quickly made a decision.

“Eli, would you like to leave this place, and live in a great House, and work an honest job, and never beg again?” he asked. This was a calculated risk. He was pagemaster, and one of his duties was to choose and train the youngsters who did that job in the House, but it was unheard of for a great Lord to pick his servants from among the beggars on the street. Jeremy wasn’t entirely sure Lord Amagon would approve of what he was doing. Nor was he certain the boy himself would accept the offer. His heart would have to be still soft enough to trust that the chance was real, and that he must really try his best to make it work. Most boys who lived on the street wouldn’t have believed it, and would have tried only to steal as much from the House as they could before the chance slipped away. Jeremy honestly didn’t know what Eli would do.

The younger boy said nothing for a few minutes, then looked up at Jeremy with clear blue eyes.

“Lord, I would give anything to have a life like that,” he said.

“Then will you come with me to my master’s House, and always do your best?” Jeremy asked, and held his breath.

“Yes, Lord. I’ll come with you,” Eli agreed.

“Excellent!” Jeremy exclaimed. “Come with me.”

He reached down and took Eli’s hand, and led him back through the narrow streets to Lord Amagon’s House. Jeremy was soon sorry he’d taken the boy’s hand, for he stank like rotten garbage and old sweat. Long before they reached the House, Jeremy was breathing as shallowly as possible, trying not to gag and embarrass the boy. When they got within a few blocks of the House, he began to wonder how he could ever get Eli inside, filthy and stinking as he was. It was too late to find a public pump and wash him off, for the sun would soon be down, and Jeremy had no intention of being locked outside all night. After some thought, he went to the little kitchen door where vegetables and things were brought in, instead of going to the front doors that would have led into the grand atrium. He hoped they might attract less attention that way.

No such luck. Jeremy was the object of shocked glances and even a gasp or two when he entered the House with a street beggar, but none of the cooks dared question him about the matter. He took a fresh loaf from the cooling tray above the oven to give to Eli, after he noticed the boy looking hungrily at the food.

“Eat slowly,” Jeremy cautioned. He wasn’t sure when Eli had last eaten, and he didn’t want the boy to gorge on the food and then throw up because he ate too fast. Eli nibbled his bread obediently as they entered the quieter parts of the House, and Jeremy took him to the page barracks. It was deserted at that hour, for all the boys had gone to supper in the Great Hall.

Jeremy collected robes and shoes while Eli had a proper bath. It was a lengthy one, because he was so filthy the water had to be changed twice before he was done. Jeremy had to show him how to dress in the clothes of the House, and finally it was necessary to assign him a bunk.

Jeremy had changed things since the days when he himself had first come to the House. Now, only about six of the youngest boys lived together in the barracks. After a boy had been in the House for a year, and if he proved himself worthy of more responsibility, then he was given a private room nearby. Those whose work was less than pleasing were moved to a separate barracks hall for another year. If they failed to improve even after that, they were dismissed from the House and replaced. This system of rewards was very popular with the pages, especially with the ones who worked hard, and the messenger service had quickly become more efficient than ever before. Jeremy himself had an apartment of four rooms on the second floor, but still not far from the barracks. He liked to be close by in case he was needed.

“If you should need anything, or if you have questions, ask one of the other pages, or tell them to send for me. But for now, it will soon be time for bed, and tomorrow you’ll have many things to begin to learn. I’ll expect to see you, properly dressed and with your bunk made up, no later than eight o’clock. Understood?” Jeremy asked.

“Thank you, sir,” Eli said, and kissed Jeremy’s sapphire signet ring after the manner of the old-fashioned folk of Cerise. It was another custom that wasn’t exactly proper under the circumstances, this time because Jeremy didn’t rank high enough. It was the sort of thing one might do when giving honor to high nobles and royalty on ceremonious occasions. Eli had been reading too many fairy tales, and his idea of proper courtesy was imperfect to say the least. Jeremy was afraid the boy was going to get seriously laughed at until he learned better. But in the meantime, it was much better to have imperfect manners than none at all.

Over the next few weeks, Eli turned out to have been a good choice for the House. For the most part. He always kept a slightly scrappy temper from his time on the streets, and he soon earned a respectable reputation as a fighter, even against boys much bigger than himself. Those who were inclined to laugh at his rough accent or his strange manners quickly learned to keep such thoughts to themselves. Eli never fought in the House itself or under any circumstances that might embarrass Lord Amagon, and so Jeremy officially pretended not to notice. In time, the problem faded.

Jeremy was very pleased that Eli had worked out so well, and from that day forward, for as long as he remained in the House of Amagon, he continued the habit of giving a place in the House to such promising boys as he found on the streets.

This didn't always work out. Some of the boys were thieves or worse, but Jeremy didn't allow that to discourage him. A handful of the street boys became good and faithful servants, and he was willing to endure the problems the bad boys brought him, for the sake of the few good ones who had no other chance in the world. Lord Amagon was well pleased with Jeremy's project.

He didn't realize it at the time, but Jeremy's work among the street boys earned him a great deal of love from the common people, for no Lord had ever taken such an interest in them before. And that turned out well indeed for him, later on.

Soon after this, Jonah came to him and asked for a place in the messenger service, for the work was pleasanter and more interesting than stable boy, with more time to study. Jeremy was glad to help him, for Jonah was still his closest friend. Jonah needed little training to make the switch, since he'd already spent so much of his free time studying even while he worked in the stable. Still, Jeremy was obliged to send him to the beginner's barracks, so as not to unfairly favor him. Jonah didn't really like the idea of spending a whole year with boys two or three years younger than himself, but he was willing to accept the necessity if he had to.

As it happened, Jonah's sunny personality made him a popular leader among the younger boys, and he enjoyed his time there more than he had expected he would. He became friends with all the younglings, in fact, especially Eli and another boy named Daniel.

Daniel was the youngest boy in the House at the time, only twelve, and anyone more unlike Jonah could hardly be imagined. He was quiet, didn't laugh much, and was so soft hearted that Jeremy had once seen him stop in the middle of the street to pick up worms off the pavement to keep them from being stepped on. Aside from that, Jeremy could remember only that he was the middle son of a minor city official. Jeremy knew all the pages to some extent, but some he knew much better than others. Daniel was easy to overlook.

In a way, Jeremy wasn't surprised that Jonah had become so popular with the youngsters. He was like that with everybody. He had friends all over the city, both young and old, rich and poor, of every stripe and kind. Everyone loved him, and Jeremy sometimes envied him for the easy way he got along with people. He wondered if Jonah had ever taken Eli and Daniel to flick peanut shells off the city walls. The thought made him laugh.

Jeremy soon had no time to wonder what Jonah was doing, though. All during that spring and summer, Lord Amagon gradually began spending more and more time

away from the House, sometimes for long periods, and Jeremy was usually the one left in charge at those times. He was soon given his own key to the front doors, for the Master trusted no one else to manage things while he was gone. Jeremy would have appreciated the honor more, if he hadn't been so worried about the circumstances. Amagon would never say where he'd been or what he was doing, and he often had an anxious frown on his face when he thought no one was looking. There were even times when he slipped out the kitchen door late at night in disguise, and Jeremy was told to keep up the pretense that the Master was still in the House. This was very difficult, for there were always people who wanted to see Lord Amagon, and some of them were hard to turn away. Merchants and casual visitors were one thing, but what could he say to a messenger from the Satrap or the Captain of the Guard? Such people were not used to being refused. It became almost impossible to go on pretending when these periods went on for several days or even weeks at a time.

This uneasy situation continued for many months, and Lord Amagon's mood and strange behavior began to cast a dark cloud over the House. Even the youngest kitchen girl began to notice that something wasn't quite right. By the time summer was ending, Jeremy was very nearly running the House all the time, for Amagon didn't seem interested in such things anymore even when he was home. It was a heavy burden for Jeremy, especially since he couldn't discuss it with anybody.

There was worse to come. As head of the messenger service he began to hear frightening rumors about treachery against the King and secret plans to overthrow him. Such talk was being whispered in the great Houses of Cerise, and sooner or later all rumors of that kind made their way to the ears of the King. Then death would come swiftly to anyone whose name was mentioned in connection with such a rumor, whether guilty or not. The King was known to be cruelly harsh with anyone who threatened his power, or even seemed to.

Jeremy was afraid serious trouble was coming, and he dearly hoped Lord Amagon wasn't involved with any such scheme. Especially not one with such careless conspirators. He felt in his bones that things were getting dangerous, and he decided to speak to the Master at the very first opportunity.

Chapter Five *Treachery*

There were other reasons to have a serious talk with the Master as well, and chief among them was the continuing drought. It had been twenty-three years since the rain last fell on Cerise, and even longer than that in some places. All across the length and breadth of the land people and beasts were dying of thirst. Only the deepest wells

continued to give any water to the desolate land. Even the Blue River and the Murray were at last beginning to run dry, and soon there would be nothing left to drink or grow crops. The members of Lord Amagon's House had not suffered very much yet, for their Master had the money to pay for water and food, but Jeremy knew that couldn't go on forever. All the money in the world couldn't buy what didn't exist, and it was getting dangerously near that point. Others were not so fortunate, and the Satrap had put the entire city on a daily water ration of only a gallon per family, except for those who could pay a steep price for extra. News came from Rustrum that the King had ordered a gathering of all his wisest councilors, to advise him on how the drought might be ended.

Now Joseph had been a wicked King, from all that Jeremy had ever heard of him. The doings and the people of Rustrum had never had much effect on the herders of the upper valleys, except when the tax collectors came. Jeremy's village had always paid one cow every year, which had never seemed like much. It was possible to lose more than that to wild dogs or thieves every year. So the people had paid little attention to the King, but even in the village gossip had been heard sometimes. Of how the King had accepted bribes when he dealt with those who came to him for justice, and of his greed and cruelty with the people of the lowlands.

Since coming to Cerise, Jeremy had heard even worse things. It was whispered that the King had gone to worship in the groves of Marithe and Cesme as the drought continued, and drunk sacred blood after the manner of the Lachishite barbarians, and thus blasphemed the name of the Most High. Jeremy was amazed that the King had not already been struck dead by fire from heaven, if such things were true. But who could tell? Whispers were just that- whispers, and only a fool would listen to what he hadn't seen with his own eyes.

Still, Jeremy had studied the Book of the Prophets, and he knew full well that a wicked King could cause the whole earth to be cursed because of his evil. Jeremy was very anxious about any careless plot to get rid of the King, but he also wanted to know if the King really did need to be removed. If he did, then Jeremy himself was ready to help throw him down, much as the idea scared him.

So, on a time when Amagon had recently returned to the House from a journey, and there was little else to do, Jeremy went quietly to the master suite. He had seen no one in that part of the House as he came along the passage, but he spoke quietly nevertheless. It wouldn't do at all to be overheard. He began only by mentioning the wicked things he'd heard about the King, for he thought that would be the safest way to bring up the subject.

"Yes, everything you've heard about the King is true," Lord Amagon told him when Jeremy finished, his face setting into hard lines of disgust, "and it may be that soon we shall have to raise up a wiser man to take his place. But don't speak of these things,

boy, for the walls have ears. . . even in Cerise. Yes, even in my own house there are spies, and Joseph would not hesitate to imprison or kill me, or you, or anyone else if even the whisper of such words ever reached his ears. Be careful what you say!"

Jeremy obediently nodded his head, but didn't fail to notice the comment about finding a wiser man to be King. He wondered exactly who Amagon meant by "we", and whether his secretive journeys and strange mood lately might possibly mean anything. He was almost afraid to ask, but he had to know.

"Sir, I have heard. . . tales, that some kind of plot to overthrow the King is already going on," he said. It wasn't exactly a question; he just wanted to see what Amagon would say. If he hadn't known the Master of the House better, he would have sworn he saw a glint of fear in Lord Amagon's eyes.

"Never say such a thing again, not even to me. You would have earned certain death for both of us with those words, if any spy had overheard you," Lord Amagon whispered.

"But sir, is it not very dangerous that such rumors are being passed along in the city, and that even I have heard them?" Jeremy persisted, also whispering.

"It's more dangerous than you can possibly imagine. Which is why I warn you to say nothing! Attract no suspicion! Don't admit you've even heard such things, and above all never repeat them to others. If you value your life, then hold your tongue!" Amagon said sharply.

Jeremy noticed that Lord Amagon hadn't exactly denied that a conspiracy was in the air. That alone was alarming. Amagon was normally one of the most open and truthful men Jeremy had ever known; not at all the kind of man who kept secrets without good reason. If he had believed the rumors were false then he would certainly have said so, or maybe told Jeremy not to repeat lies. Instead, he'd said nothing except to warn Jeremy to keep his mouth shut about anything he might hear. Therefore Jeremy felt certain something *was* going on, and that Lord Amagon was either involved with it in some way, or at least knew about it. That was exactly the sort of thing Jeremy had been dreading to hear, for whatever it was that the plotters might have had in mind, their scheme was already doomed. If Jeremy knew, then the King almost certainly also knew, and he would react with brutal force. Probably sooner rather than later. All this went through Jeremy's mind in only a few seconds. Then he immediately had to face the dangerous question of what he should do about it.

Lord Amagon was completely right about the danger of a careless tongue. Jeremy quickly decided that for now he would say nothing more about the subject. He also decided to keep an extremely close ear to the ground about what was being said in the city. He was afraid to be caught unprepared. There was one more thing he needed to say to the Master of the House, though.

“Sir, I fear the King has already heard the whispers in the city. Please, be careful,” Jeremy asked earnestly. He could do nothing to help Lord Amagon except to plead caution. Whether or not it would do any good, he didn’t know. Amagon only nodded without speaking, and so the interview ended.

Jeremy left the Master’s suite and immediately went to his office above the pages’ barracks. He locked the door behind him and began thinking hard about which boys he could trust. If a conspiracy was really afoot then Jeremy knew nothing about it for certain, but he also knew that even to be a trusted servant in the House of a man arrested for treason was very unsafe. Suspicion alone could mean a death sentence, as anyone who had dealt with King Joseph knew all too well. He would have to look into the matter at once, because it might well be that his own life was in danger, also.

Jeremy thought carefully. If the King’s Guard came to arrest Amagon or anyone else in the House, they would likely do it late at night or just before dawn, so as to catch people asleep. Jeremy had more privacy than most others in the House, but everyone in the building knew where his rooms were located. He decided it would be unwise to spend any more time there.

The House was one of the largest in Cerise, and there were many parts of it which had lain empty for longer than anyone could remember. Several sections of the upper floors were not used, and so also was part of the south wing that butted up against the city wall. Any of these places might do very well as a hiding place in a pinch. Jeremy left his office and quietly climbed the back stairs to the fifth floor. He was very careful that no one should see him headed up there, for it was the kind of thing that might seem odd enough for someone to remember later on. At all costs, he mustn’t do anything to attract attention.

It was silent as a cave in the upstairs hall. Jeremy could hear his own heart beating. The hall was long and wide, and rather dim. A little light came from a window at the very end of the passage, but only just enough to see his way. There was less dust than you might expect. Jeremy walked past door after door, all very much the same. He wanted to find a spare bedroom.

He reached for a door and opened the latch. Inside was a four poster bed bright with sunlight, and that wouldn’t do. He needed a room with no window, for he dared not use a lamp in a windowed room. Someone outside might notice the light and come to investigate.

Such a room turned out to be difficult to find. Most of the rooms on the upper floors did have windows, and those which didn’t were usually storage closets or other places unsuitable for sleeping. Jeremy did at last find a bedroom with no window; a small one at the back of the House, and if there had been a window there it would have looked out only at the stone wall of the city, ten feet away. This hadn’t kept other rooms

nearby from having windows (though covered with parchment instead of glass), and Jeremy could only guess that the room had been too small to deserve a window of its own.

However that might be, it suited Jeremy's purposes very nicely. He spent a good deal of the rest of the evening bringing up lamps, and extra oil, and food that wouldn't spoil, and some of his clothes, and a long rope, and things of that kind. He couldn't hurry, for he had to wait until he was certain no one was watching.

From then on he avoided his own rooms, and spent as little time in his office as possible. Jonah knew where he really was at all times, in case there should be an emergency he had to deal with right away, but Jonah could be trusted to tell no one else.

All this was done just in time. Two mornings later Jeremy awoke to find the household in an uproar, for soldiers had come in the early hours before dawn and taken Lord Amagon away, on a charge of plotting treason against the King.

The servants were trying to go about their work as if nothing had happened. Amagon didn't like disruption and chaos in his House no matter what the reason, and all knew it. Everyone was trying to live by his wishes. A casual visitor to the House would have noticed nothing unusual. But for anyone used to the daily atmosphere of the place, there was a subtle undercurrent of tension. No one was really paying proper attention to anything, so preoccupied were they with fear and uncertainty about the Master and what would become of the House (and of them).

Jeremy was in a better position to collect information than most of the others were, though. With a little thought, he was able to send boys on various errands to all of the great Houses in the city, and each of them reported directly to him anything they heard. He had no choice at this point but to choose the boys he considered most loyal, and pray that none of them were spies. He told them not to waste any time, and while they foraged for scraps of information, he quietly began to make preparations to flee the House, should it become necessary to depart immediately. He had no intention of allowing himself to be carried off to the King's dungeons. Very few ever came out again.

The distraction and general unease in the House helped him accomplish what he needed to do. People were too worried about themselves to pay much attention to anything he did. He was able to collect a good supply of ordinary clothes, dried food, some money, and other useful things, and hide them in a dark corner of the hay loft.

It was shortly before noon that his messengers began returning from all over Cerise, and very soon after that he heard the first rumor of his own arrest, from his friend Jonah, as it happened.

"Yes, sir, the captain of the guard said 'the boy with red hair in the house of Amagon', and there's no other such person in all of Cerise. They'll be here within an

hour," the boy told him, breathless from running. Jeremy was alarmed, but he didn't lose his head. He'd half expected this very thing.

"Jonah, go quickly to the stable and saddle my pony, and be sure to pack the clothes and things you'll find in the northwest corner of the hay loft. Then come around to the back of the House as quickly as you can. At all costs I can't let them find me here," Jeremy ordered. He didn't wait to see if he were obeyed, for he knew Jonah was trustworthy. Jeremy left his office at once, hurrying back upstairs until he came to his hideout. He wasted little time there, just long enough to take the things he needed most. Then he went next door to one of the rooms with a window, and silently begged Amagon to forgive him before he tore the oilskin parchment off the window frame. No one must see him leaving the House. There were no exits except the front hall, the kitchen, and the stable, and there would be no way to avoid prying eyes if he went any of those places.

He stuck his head out the opening and looked down. It was at least forty or fifty feet to the ground, and Jeremy had to swallow a couple of times to gather his courage. A narrow alley ran between the back of the House and the city wall, with trash heaped up against both sides. After tossing out the sack of things he meant to bring, he tied his rope to one of the legs of the bed and pulled on it as hard as he could, to make sure it wouldn't give way. Then he put the other end out the window, and started to climb down. This didn't take much time, but the rope turned out not to be as strong as he thought. When he was still fifteen feet from the ground it snapped, sending him crashing to the ground. He landed on one of the piles of trash (he could hardly have avoided it), scattering rotten food and other nasty things everywhere. The trash broke his fall so it didn't hurt quite as much as it might have, but it knocked the breath out of him and twisted his elbow.

By the time he struggled to his feet, nursing his sore arm and brushing bits of garbage off his clothes, he saw Jonah coming up the alley, leading not just his own pony, but three others. There were two other boys behind him. Jeremy looked at him and raised his eyebrows.

"Why are Eli and Daniel with you?" he asked. It came out sounding nastier than he really meant it to, but he was desperate to get away from the House as fast as possible, and the unexpected change in plans put him out of temper.

"They already heard that you're to be arrested, sir, and they're not willing to let you flee into the wilderness alone. You wouldn't be able to survive. So, they brought their own ponies to go with you. . . and so have I," said Jonah. There was no time at all to argue about it just then, and Jeremy was touched that they cared so much as to put themselves in danger for his sake. He could only smile tiredly.

"Then come, my friends. I can never be grateful enough to repay your loyalty to me, so let's get out of the city before you suffer for it," he told them. With that there was no more talking.

Chapter Six

Flight

The four boys set out at once down the alley. Jeremy pulled his cap down low so no one could see his startling red hair, following Jonah's lead. He led them quickly into one of the slums on the east side of the city, and as soon as possible ducked into an empty warehouse. There was no telling how long the building had been abandoned. Judging by the holes in the roof and the rotten floor, it must have been a long time indeed. Hopefully, that meant nobody was likely to notice or care about their presence there.

Once inside, Jonah immediately began stripping off his diamond-encrusted livery and stuffing it into the saddle bags of his little pony. The others wasted no time doing the same. Jonah had brought some of the plain leather which the stable boys wore when they cleaned out the ponies' stalls, and they all dressed in this. It was at least clean, Jeremy thought, wrinkling his nose at the faint smell of horse manure that still reached his nose.

"I thought we might sell the livery in another town, to make up for the fact that we didn't have time to gather much food and supplies," Jonah said when they finished dressing.

Jeremy was impressed with such quick thinking. He felt strangely dependent on these other boys, and discovered he wasn't used to that. He'd become much too used to being in charge, he thought to himself. They all still expected him to lead them, but he knew he was going to have to lean heavily on their skills right now, just to survive the night.

"Boys, we need to find a way out of the city, as soon as we possibly can. The captain of the guard has probably already been to the House and found me gone. It might be a little longer before anybody notices you three missing too, but you can be sure it won't take longer than a few hours before somebody does. The King's Guard will hear about it, and they'll almost surely think you're with me. Then all our lives will be in danger. You may not have known what you were getting into at first, but I want to give you this one last chance to go back home," Jeremy told them.

None of the others said anything at first, and finally the silence became uncomfortable. Eli was the first one to break it.

"Sir, you found me starving on the streets when I had nothing. You gave me a place in the greatest House in the city, and all I have I owe to you. I refuse to abandon you now, just because the hour has become evil," he said. Jeremy turned a little red, but said nothing to this. Then Jonah spoke.

"Jeremy, for all these years I've been proud to call you my friend. When you were made pagemaster, I was glad because I knew you'd be a fair and kind leader. I

haven't been wrong. You never forgot our friendship, and I won't forget it now. I won't leave you any sooner than Eli," he said.

"Nor I, sir," said Daniel, "I'm the newest of all the pages, and I don't know you well, but these are my friends, and it would be cowardly to run away from danger."

Jeremy didn't know what to say to all this praise, so he wisely said nothing at all. He could see there was no point in trying to convince the others to stay behind. The best thing he could do was accept their loyalty gracefully, and try to lead them as best he could. They were young, though. . . . Jonah was sixteen, a year younger than Jeremy, but Eli was still only fifteen and Daniel not even that much. Jeremy didn't know him well enough to be sure of his age anymore.

"How old are you, Daniel?" he asked.

"Thirteen, sir," he replied promptly. Jeremy didn't like this, but decided he would be specially careful of Daniel. He was big for a thirteen-year-old. . . . Jeremy could only hope he was wiser than his years, too.

"All right then, let's decide what to do. We need to leave the city at once, but that may not be easy. If we head for the gates I'll be recognized and most likely arrested. Even if we did get through, the guards would remember me. It would be much better to keep our departure a secret for as long as possible, because then the King's Guard will be hunting me inside the city, and may not think to look for us outside Cerise. At least not for a while. Do any of you have any ideas?" Jeremy asked.

"We could wait till after dark, then climb up on the walls and lower ourselves down by rope," Jonah suggested. Jeremy considered this.

"Too dangerous, I think. Someone might see us, even at night, and it would take a fool not to know something suspicious was going on. We'd have to leave the ponies behind, too. Worst of all, we'd have to wait inside the city all day. I'm afraid to give the Guard that many extra hours to look for us," Jeremy pointed out.

"If we need to get outside the walls without anybody seeing, then I might know a way," Eli told them, "Under the city, there's an aqueduct that flows down from the Blue River almost a mile upstream. It carries water to the main well in the central plaza, and to some of the wealthier houses and public pumps. It flows out of the city and back into the Blue River a little way downstream. Usually it would be impossible to enter it because of the force of the water, but since the river is so low. . . . who can tell?"

"But we could never get our ponies down there, even if all four of us could somehow climb down the well," Jeremy objected.

"Let me finish, sir. There's a tunnel that slopes down to the aqueduct from near the Builders Hall, which is for the purpose of allowing access to the aqueduct whenever the walls need to be repaired. I found it long ago because it's one of the few places in the city which is never locked, and many of those with no other place to go take shelter there

in the winter. No one will be there during the summertime, and it should be possible for us to escape without being noticed. I don't believe anyone would think to check that way," Eli said. Jeremy pondered this; he'd certainly never heard of the access tunnel before, and he doubted very much if the King's Guard would think to look there anytime soon, if they thought of it at all. It sounded promising.

"Let's go, then. Eli, you lead us," he decided.

The four boys led their ponies through the streets, trying not to attract attention. Jeremy couldn't go anywhere in Cerise without being instantly recognized, and that was the very last thing they wanted. He kept his cap pulled down low on his forehead and the collar of his jacket turned up, in spite of the summer heat. Sweat soon began to trickle down his back and his forehead, getting into his eyes and stinging. No doubt he smelled like a boar hog, he thought to himself. But if he did, Daniel and Jonah were pretending not to notice, and Eli was too far ahead to care. It was a considerable distance from the warehouse to the Builder's Hall. Eli avoided crowds whenever he could, choosing deserted alleys and little-used streets whenever possible. There were times when they had no choice but to cross a busy avenue, and they hurried through these places with hearts in their throats, expecting at any minute to feel the heavy hand of a guard from behind. But that didn't happen, and finally they came to the grounds of the Builders Hall. There they discovered a nasty surprise.

Eli led them directly to the tunnel mouth, which was, indeed, very rarely used to judge by its condition, but it was certainly being used now. A table had been set up to block access. Three men in the brown tunic of the Builder's Hall were sitting at the table. As the boys watched, they saw a young woman approach the table, hand the men several coins, and walk away with a pot of water. The men were selling water! For a moment, Jeremy was furious. They had to be stealing that water from the aqueduct, knowing full well how desperately low the supply was getting.

"What now? Those men will never let us into the tunnel," Jonah finally said.

Jeremy thought about it, and his anger slowly cooled into disgust. The men were no better than thieves, and it ought to be possible to bribe them without too much trouble. He reached into his saddle bag and carefully ripped loose four of the smaller diamonds from his livery, and showed them to the others.

"They'll let us through, in return for these. Four diamonds is more than they could earn in a whole month of selling water," he said.

"What if these scum have loose tongues? I don't doubt they would betray us to the Guard, if they thought any reward might be had," Eli said scornfully.

"I think that may be a chance we have to take," Jonah whispered. "We can't hide forever inside the city walls without being discovered, and if we don't soon find a way to escape, then we'll all be hung before the next sunset. The King takes no chances at all.

Amagon may be able to count on a long prison sentence, because he's a wealthy and important noble. We're only four boys that no one will ever hear of again."

"Is there any other way into the tunnel?" Jeremy asked, without much hope.

"There might be a way down from inside the Builder's Hall, but getting in there would attract even more attention than bribing these three," Eli said. Jeremy sighed.

"Let's go, then," he said.

"Sir?" Daniel spoke up. Jeremy looked around at the youngest boy in the group and waited for him to speak.

"When Jonah and Eli were with me in the stable, I thought it might be a good idea to bring these along, since we didn't have any weapons," he said, reaching into his pack and pulling out four of the dart guns used by Amagon's riders. There were lions in the desolate lands between Cerise and the dye mines, and they were known to attack careless men and horses now and then. Those whose business took them to the mines or the northern farms always carried a gun for protection. They were powerful enough to stun a full grown lion within seconds. They had to be, for sometimes a couple of seconds was the only warning a man got. Jeremy had never seen one used before, but he knew there were times when they had saved a rider's life.

"Excellent, Daniel!" he cried. The others were no less delighted, and there was a great deal of back slapping and silent cheers. Daniel handed one of the guns to each of them, but by that time Jeremy had had time to think of a problem.

"Does anybody know how to use these weapons?" he asked. None of them did. For a minute there was a dreadful pause.

Jonah looked at his gun and finally smiled.

"You know, it really couldn't be that hard. They never let the stable boys handle these very much when I worked there, but I did see them used a time or two. It always looked like all you had to do was aim and pull the trigger. How hard could that be? What I'm more interested in is how many darts they hold," he said.

They soon found that each gun held three darts. Daniel hadn't known where the extras were kept, but no one blamed him for that. They all agreed it ought to be easy enough to buy more of them, once they got away from Cerise.

Eli pointed his gun at the wall of a nearby building and pulled the trigger. There was barely a sound, and the dart was so small that at first they couldn't find it. But after some careful searching, they found the tiny sliver of wood embedded in one of the wall planks. Jeremy pulled it loose from the wood without too much trouble. It was barely as long as his little fingernail, and still wet with whatever drug the guns used. He wiped his fingers clean on the side of the building after handling the spent dart. He wasn't sure if the poison was strong enough to affect him just by touching it, but he didn't intend on taking any chances.

"This is the plan, then," he told the others, "What we'll do is wait until nobody else is close by, and then we'll go up to the table like we want to buy some water. That should keep all three of them busy at once. Whenever you get a chance, stun them. It's a crime to sell water that belongs to the city like that, so they won't dare report what happened."

"Just one thing, sir," Jonah said, "We all think you should stay here. You're too recognizable, and even if those men don't dare report us, we still don't want them to know who we are." Jeremy at once saw the sense in that, even though he didn't much like it.

"Go, then, and be quick!" he said.

Jonah, Eli, and Daniel left Jeremy in the alley and approached the table. Jeremy couldn't see what was happening very well at that distance, but in a few seconds he did see all three men drop like stones to the ground. He hurried up to the tunnel mouth to rejoin his friends. Eli was laughing.

"You should have seen the look on their faces! They didn't even have time to say a word before we dropped them like sheep. Come on," he urged the others, immediately heading into the tunnel.

"Wait!" Jeremy called to them.

"We can't just leave them like this. . . it might attract attention. If someone comes to buy water and finds them like that, the Guard might even hear about it. That's the last thing we want. We need to drag them a little way into the tunnel so no one will see them. They'll wake up in a few hours, but till then we want them out of sight. Jonah, I want you to take their moneybag. . . they earned that gold by cheating the people of the city, and I don't want them to profit by it. Then, too, I want them to think we were only robbers so maybe they won't suspect what our real reason was," he told them.

"Wouldn't that be stealing?" Jonah asked, uncertain. Jeremy wasn't completely sure about that himself, but he told them what he thought.

"This money didn't really belong to these thieves anyway, and we can't give it back to the people who really own it. If we just kept it and used it ourselves, then it might be stealing, but we aren't going to do that. Watch," Jeremy told them. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the four loose diamonds he'd torn off his livery.

"These diamonds are worth more than all the gold in this bag, and this is what I'm going to do. We're going to keep the gold coins, because they'll be easier to spend. But, I'm going to leave these diamonds here. This is a poor neighborhood, and whoever finds them, I wish him well." With that, Jeremy drew back his fist and threw the diamonds as far down the street as he could. They landed far away from the tunnel mouth, and Jeremy pronounced a blessing upon them, that they should be found by whoever needed them most. He turned to the others and smiled.

"There now! We can be sure we've done our part." The others accepted this and smiled also. They dragged the sleeping bodies of the Builder Hall men far enough into the tunnel mouth that no one could see them from the street outside, and then led their ponies deeper inside, following Eli once more.

It got cooler as they went down, and the stonework dripped with moisture. Slowly the bright tunnel mouth shrank to a pinprick behind them, then vanished completely around a curve. No one had thought to bring a lantern, and they were forced to walk in total darkness. None of them liked this at all, and at Eli's suggestion they took a coil of rope and tied themselves together, so they wouldn't get separated in the dark.

There was no sound except the drip, drip, drip of the wet walls, until with a cry of surprise Eli splashed into water. He stumbled and fell, soaking himself from head to toe, but he soon regained his footing, since the water was not, after all, very deep.

"Come on," he called to the others, who were waiting at the lip of the tunnel. His voice echoed weirdly in the enclosed space.

"We made it to the aqueduct, and the water is no more than two feet deep. The bottom is all gravel and stone, so don't worry about your footing," he added. The others gingerly waded out into the underground river, and moved slowly downstream. Jeremy thought it might be a good idea to keep track of how far they walked, and began counting his footsteps.

None of them said much during that long, cold, disagreeable journey. The tunnel was perfectly round, though it was hard to tell exactly how big around it might be. The bottom was layered with a thin bit of sand and gravel, which made footing a little bit better than if it had been plain stone. The water never got deeper than knee-height, and sometimes fell to no more than ankle depth. Jeremy had counted almost five thousand steps when they began to see the first glimmers of light ahead. Almost two miles. The light grew steadily brighter, until they stood blinking at the lip of a stone tube, from which a calf-high stream of water poured forth as a waterfall to rejoin what was left of the Blue River.

They could see the tunnel mouth was usually located far below the water line of the river. No one would ever find it unless he knew exactly where to look. The people of Cerise were careful about enemies.

They left the tunnel mouth, having to brace themselves against the current to keep from being knocked off their feet. The ponies gave them a hard time, and could only be forced to jump down when Jonah climbed back inside the tunnel and gave them a sharp sting with his whip. They all splashed across the shallow river and clambered up the bank as best they could. It was a ticklish task, but presently all four of them stood on the east bank of the Blue River with their ponies, none the worse for wear except for a little wetting.

Chapter Seven
The High Plain

Cerise lay almost a mile upstream, and all that could be seen of it through the woods were the upper turrets and a few of the towers of the greater houses. The South Road which led to Rustrum hugged the west bank of the river, never more than a stone's throw from the water. It suited Jeremy just fine for the road to be on the far bank, for there might be soldiers passing back and forth along that way, and they had no wish to meet any emissaries of the King.

They melted into the edge of the woods, far enough from the river bank that they couldn't be seen, and there they held a council of war.

"What are our choices, Jonah?" Jeremy asked. Jonah knew more about the countryside than any of the others, for he liked geography.

"None of the choices are very good ones, I'm afraid. If we keep going south, we'll soon run out of water. Not many miles downstream the river sinks into the dust. The empty riverbed keeps going on for almost a hundred miles until it comes to Rustrum, but none of those lands would be safe. Soldiers pass that way constantly. If by chance we did make it through, I don't see how it would help us to run right into the lion's den. There are more spies in Rustrum than there are here."

"To the west is the land of the Sohrab. They would enslave us or turn us over to the King without a second thought, if we encountered them."

"If we go north, we'd run into the garrison of soldiers who guard the dye mines, but even if we got past them it wouldn't do us any good. Beyond the mines are the Cesmean Mountains, full of the Lachishite barbarians who despise the Most High. Those people are drinkers of blood and killers of children, and only the King's army protects Cerise from them,"

"And the east?" Jeremy asked grimly.

"Just the High Plain. Dead, empty county for the most part. That was the first place the drought destroyed. But if you go on, then far across the empty lands you'd come to the Eyre Hills and the upper valley of the Murray. There might still be some life in that region, but I couldn't say for sure," Jonah finished. The boys digested this for a few moments.

"The Sohrab took me from a village in the Eyre Hills," Jeremy said quietly. "I don't know what kind of reception I'd get after all this time, and I don't know what the four of us would do there even if they welcomed us. They're simple folk who raise cows, mostly. Not much use there for reading or high courtesy or swordplay. But maybe. . . " Jeremy trailed off, deep in thought. Going home gave him all sorts of mixed feelings,

and he really wasn't sure yet what he thought about that idea. The others kept quiet and let him think.

"The High Plain sounds like our best bet, for now. I don't think anyone will look for us there," he finally said.

"If we want to get up onto the Plain, then we'll have to take the old east road from Cerise. It's the only way. The edge of the Plain is sheer, and thousands of feet high, all the way south to Rustrum," Jonah told them.

Jeremy nodded, encouraging him to go on.

"Once we reach the top of the Plain, the old road will finally take us to a place named Thaloth. That's a dead city about forty miles from the cliff's edge, or maybe sixty miles from Cerise. There *might* still be water there, or at least enough for the four of us and our ponies. I've never been that far, myself," Jonah admitted.

"And if there isn't?" Eli asked.

"Thaloth is the biggest city on the Plain, and it probably has the deepest well. If it's dry, then we'll have to either come back down here or else try to go on and reach the Hills," Jonah said, shrugging as if it didn't make much difference to him either way. Jeremy knew he was pretending not to care as a way to cover up his fear. He couldn't read the others well enough to know what they were thinking, but Jonah was an open book. He guessed they were just as scared as Jonah was.

Jeremy couldn't let them sit still much longer, in that condition. If they had time to think too much, they might do something stupid like try to return to Cerise. It was much too late for that now, for any of them.

"Let's get going, then," he said briskly, standing up and heading for his pony. His firmness got them moving again, which he knew was the very thing they needed most.

Jonah led them again now. They were about two miles from the east road, but he didn't want to reach the road too close to Cerise. What little traffic there was, farmers or woodcutters, was likely to be near the city. They much preferred that no one at all should see them. For that reason he meant to cut through the forest at a slant, and come to the road a few miles east of Cerise, where it was likely to be deserted.

This they did, and had no problems finding the road. The forest was thin and had little undergrowth, for the people of Cerise often came there to collect fallen limbs for firewood, which kept the forest clear. They stepped out onto the dusty highway after about two hours of walking, and found it, as they expected, deserted. The road had begun to sprout bits of grass and bracken here and there, though the lack of rain had kept the green things from attacking the highway as much as they might have done.

They made haste to ride eastward as quickly as they could go. The somber cliffs of the Plain loomed up before them, not quite fifteen miles away, and they knew they

would have to reach the top before resting. It wouldn't be safe to pitch camp so close to Cerise.

So they rode on, and both they and the ponies were very tired indeed before the task was done. They reached the base of the cliffs just as the moon rose, casting a deep pool of black shadow all around them. The east road climbed up onto the Plain through a straight cutting, with a steep, steady slope that the boys soon began to feel they would never be able to finish. At one time there had been rest stations in little buildings along the way, where a traveler could refresh himself with water and a comfortable spot to sit down for a few minutes. Only the buildings and the couches were still there. Each of the boys had a full waterskin, from which he drank as sparingly as he could. There was no chance of refilling them before Thaloth, and that was still two days journey away.

At last they reached the top of the cliff, exhausted by the long climb. They were met by a cold breeze blowing from the east, and the sight of the High Plain unfolding before them into the silver distance beneath the moon. Jeremy turned back to the west and stood in awe at the view. All the valley of the Blue lay spread out below him, and beyond that the lowlands stretched far into Sohrabia. Cerise was a tiny city built of blocks. Far, far to the south, so that he couldn't be quite sure he saw it, Jeremy noticed a silver glint that might have been the sea. The edge of the Plain at this point dropped almost five thousand feet to the river valley below him, and he was very glad indeed that they wouldn't have to climb it again.

They decided it was worthwhile to go on a little farther that night, in the hope of coming to a deserted farm where they would have shelter. It was cold on the High Plain at night, even in the summer. There was already a shiver in the air as they came up out of the cutting, and they soon had to stop and unpack some of the warmer things in their saddlebags. That took a certain amount of doing, because everything had been thrown together hastily when they fled the city. Clothes were jumbled up with food and tools and everything else. But it was done at last, and they went on.

After a while, they grew tired of talking. The cold air made their mouths dry and left an unpleasant dusty taste on their tongues. For a while they looked around them at the passing countryside. The moon lit up the gray and silver landscape with a ghostly glow, showing many farms and orchards dotted across the rolling plateau. The High Plain had been a pretty sort of place, before the drought came.

The boys didn't have to ride very far before they found a little house set amidst a grove of dead and withered peach trees. By then the night had grown shockingly cold, and all four of them halted in front of the farmstead without even any need to discuss the matter. It was built of whitewashed slate, like most of the houses they had seen, and turned out to contain just two rooms. One of the rooms had a stone fireplace which seemed to still be in working order.

Jonah saw to settling the ponies in for the night while the other three ventured back outside with hatchets to cut and split some wood for a fire. They soon found that dead wood is hard to chop, and Jeremy wished more than once for a proper axe, instead of a little hatchet. It didn't take long before they gave up on cutting down a whole tree. There were a few pieces of wood already lying scattered on the ground, and they discovered it was possible to hack off some of the smaller branches without too much difficulty. They stacked a large pile of this inside the house, but not too near the hearth, lest it catch fire during the night.

There was soon a bright fire of peach wood burning in the old grate. The stone walls held the warmth, and the boys were soon quite snug. There were two beds in the other room, with straw tick mattresses. They dragged these into the living room near the fire. Jeremy shared a mattress with Eli, lying back to back and covering themselves with both their blankets to stay warm. Jonah and Daniel did the same on the other mattress.

The other three fell asleep right away, but Jeremy found himself too full of thoughts. Now that he had time to think, without the constant need to simply survive from minute to minute, he was beginning to wonder what he planned to do with himself, and where he would lead these boys who had staked their lives to follow him. Getting to Thaloht was one thing, and it was a workable goal for the moment. They might even find enough food and water there to stay in the old city for a long time, but then what? Jeremy didn't find the idea of hiding out in a dead city for the rest of his life very appealing, and he didn't think the others would like it any better. He didn't relish the idea of crossing the whole Plain and going up into the Eyre Hills, either. The best they could hope for in that region was a life of cow herding, and in the end that really wasn't much different than hiding in Thaloht. There had to be a better plan, if he could only think of one.

Jeremy shivered a little as the fire began to die down, pulling the blankets closer around him. He was too tired to think and too anxious not to.

He spent a moment in prayer about it, committing himself and all of them to the care of the Most High, and afterwards he felt reassured, as he always had.

Jeremy had no doubt that things would work out as they should, for he had studied the Book of the Prophets for a long time. The first verse he had ever learned, long ago, was that the Most High would never forsake those who trusted Him.

He remembered, a little wistfully, that he'd been a very little boy when he learned that verse. . . no more than five or six years old, on a gray afternoon in midwinter, when it was too cold to play outside. On days like that, the priest would sometimes gather up the village children and teach them things. Letters and numbers, old songs, verses from the Book of the Prophets, or tales of the wide world. The priest was very old, but he had a good voice for things like that. Jeremy hadn't thought about him in years, and now, on

the drowsy edge of sleep in a cold and forsaken place, he could almost hear the words of the priest as he read the verses.

Although Jeremy didn't know it, the priest had noticed his quick mind and his interest in the lessons, and had taken it upon himself to ensure that the strange red-haired boy was given more time and attention than any of his other students. This was partly the reason for Melech's jealousy, and for his parents' coolness, for they all knew that this boy was not meant for the herder's life. For his parents, that had meant that sooner or later they would have to let him leave the village. It was likely they'd never see him again after that, and so they had made an effort for a long time not to become too attached to what they must certainly lose. Melech was the one they loved best, for they knew (and Melech knew), that he would never be more than a shepherd of cows.

Jeremy knew none of these things, of course, and wouldn't have believed it even if anyone had told him. All he knew was that the distant memory of learning the Book was a comfort to him now, when he had most reason to be afraid. He fell asleep with that thought in his mind.

Chapter Eight

Prophet

The next morning dawned cool and breezy, as most days did on the High Plain. The boys found their fire burned to ashes in the grate, and the room was chilled. Eli went to the saddlebags to fetch something for breakfast while the others explored the house a little more thoroughly. Jonah found several extra blankets on an upper shelf, and they gladly wrapped themselves in these. There was a well behind the house which turned out to be dry as dust. It gave them all the most gloomy thoughts about what might be waiting for them at Thaloth, but none of them wanted to say so.

They ate a very meager breakfast of dried meat jerky, and packed up quickly. The sun had just risen above the edge of the Plain, a red ball of molten gold. All was silent as only the very early morning can be. No birds sang. For a while they wrapped in blankets to keep off the chill, but soon the sun warmed the air to the point that they didn't need them anymore.

They traveled that day through what seemed like endless miles of withered orchards and farmland, now and then passing through little villages built of gray and white stone. Each of these places had a well in the village square, and they checked all of them for water, just in case. All were empty. The High Plain had been dead for a long time.

Jeremy could almost imagine he recognized occasional places and things as they went along. An oddly shaped tree beside the ditch, or a particularly big house. They

teased his memory. He guessed the Sohrab caravan that brought him to Cerise must surely have used that same road, all those years ago, but one part of the Plain looked so much like any other part, he could never be quite sure.

A little before noon they stopped in one of the larger villages to eat a bit and drink some water. They had expected it would become hot as the day went on, but that turned out not to be the case. The high country was quite comfortable, except that the sun was fiercely bright that day, glaring off the pale ground and hurting their eyes. They all pulled their caps down lower to shut out the light as much as possible.

They saw no one all day, and spent a second night in an empty farmstead. This one wasn't nearly as comfortable as the first one. It had no mattresses they could use, and they discovered (too late) that the top of the chimney had collapsed and blocked the opening. That meant no fire. There were also cracks in the wall where the wind blew whistling through all night long, slipping its cold fingers into every blanket and cloak. None of them slept very well.

They woke very early the next morning, still tired after a sleepless night. Jeremy thought about going on just as far as the next usable house and then resting all day, but a look at his near-empty waterskin soon convinced him otherwise.

They came to the outer walls of Thalothe just as the sun sank slowly behind the western rim of the Plain. The old iron gates stood open, and the boys passed inside without saying much, too tired to be excited. They headed immediately for the central square, to see if the main well still had water or not. Their waterskins were almost empty. If they found the well dry, they would have to make some serious decisions at once. They could either head back to Cerise, or try to make a desperate forced march to cross the rest of the Plain and reach the Murray river as it came down out of the hills. Both choices would be dangerous.

In spite of such gloomy thoughts, they couldn't help noticing that Thalothe was a rather nice city. The avenues were broad and straight, radiating from the center like spokes on a wheel. The buildings were carved with pictures of animals and humans, with exquisite attention to detail. Most of it was built of a silvery-white stone, sometimes painted, sometimes not.

Jonah told them various things about the city as they rode along, to pass the time. It had once been the largest city on the High Plain and the seat of the governor, and a place which had always been considered specially holy to the Most High. The others listened to all this with half an ear, only mildly interested. Jonah had always liked knowing things like that.

Everything they saw gave the impression of people who had enjoyed life and been happy in their high city. Jeremy wondered where all of them had gone. Probably not many people had actually starved to death when the drought came. Most of them must

simply have gone elsewhere. He could imagine them streaming down into the valley of the Blue or the Murray, and rebuilding their farms in the still-fertile lowlands. Some of them might even still live in Cerise, and that made him curious if he'd ever known any of them. Who could tell?

Occupied with these thoughts, Jeremy almost didn't notice when they emerged into the central plaza. There was indeed a well there, very deep, and it took a long time to lower the bucket all the way down on its rusty chain. This time they were rewarded with a faint splash almost beyond hearing. Daniel smiled and began to draw the water up from deep inside the earth.

Soon the ponies were drinking thirstily at the troughs nearby, and all the skins were refilled. Jeremy felt much better about things now. With water, they could survive in Thaloth a long time, and that would give him a while to think of what to do next.

The old palace of the Governor of the High Plain faced the square from the west, and the boys decided to set up living quarters in that building while they remained in the city. They explored it a little bit with lanterns, not liking to sleep in a place so full of shadowy corners and dark rooms. The silence and the emptiness made them ill at ease. They spoke in whispers and tip-toed through the cavernous halls, as if someone might hear them. No one wanted to mention ghosts, but it was the kind of place that made you think about them whether you wanted to or not.

They found bedrooms and feasting halls and armories full of swords and axes. There were still tapestries on the walls and even tablecloths in the dining room. A thick layer of dust had settled on everything, with not a single footprint except their own. After looking at several of the rooms, they gave up the expedition. It would have taken days and days to see the whole palace. None of them really wanted to explore too much of that cold, dead place by night. Much better to wait for the sun.

In the meantime, they claimed the guardhouse for their own. It was only a single room, not too large, and it suited their purposes very well.

Over the next few days they did explore the palace (which looked amazingly ordinary in daylight), and much of the rest of the city and the lands nearby.

One thing they didn't find was any food. Jeremy started to worry about that until Jonah reminded him they would have to find the city granary where all the corn and wheat would have been kept safe from pests. Anything edible that might have been left behind in the palace or elsewhere would have long since been eaten by rats. The granary itself probably didn't contain more than a little corn, but what there was ought to still be good. The dry air would have kept it from rotting, even after many years. So they hoped, at least.

None of them knew how to do much with dry corn. Jeremy guessed they could probably grind it up in a pestle and make some kind of mush out of it, or maybe bread if they could figure out how to bake it.

"Bread and water," Eli grumbled, with a disgusted look on his face.

"Stop whining, Eli. . . what if we had no food at all?" Jonah scolded him. Eli subsided, but he still didn't look happy.

They knew it was unlikely anyone would come looking for them, but they still didn't want to advertise their presence in the city any more than necessary. One could never be completely certain who might pass that way. Sohrab caravans crossed the Plain once in a while, and there were criminals and outlaws in the wild lands, too. It wasn't impossible that any of these people might visit the city at times, for water or shelter or other reasons. Therefore the boys went quietly through the city, not singing or talking too loud, and they never went alone.

The main reason for these expeditions was to look for the granary. They were also a good way to pass the time, though. Besides exploring, there wasn't much else to do in Thalo. Jeremy had never imagined how boring a city could be, with no people in it.

It was on one of these trips through the city that Jeremy found the direction he'd been looking and praying for ever since they first fled Cerise.

He was with Jonah that time, talking about nothing in particular. They were riding down a dusty street somewhere on the north side of the city, when they passed a building unlike anything they had yet seen. It was taller than most, built of the same silver-white stone as the rest of the city. What made it remarkable was the color. It had been painted with the blue dye of Cerise. Jeremy couldn't imagine how much money it must have cost to color an entire building blue. Both of them stood there in awe.

"Should we go find Daniel and Eli?" Jonah asked in a hushed voice.

"Let's see what's inside first; it might not be anything much," Jeremy said. They got down off their ponies and went to look at the building more closely.

It had wide front doors like the entrance to a church, and four huge pillars on the front which supported a kind of porch with steps that led up to the doors. When they came to the top of the seventh step, the boys found the big doors locked, as they had halfway expected. There was a keyhole which could have swallowed an entire hand, but whoever had been in charge of the building was long gone, and the keys with him. Jonah rattled the latch, but it was firmly shut.

"There has to be a way in," he said, looking around the porch as if he expected to find the key lying somewhere by his feet.

"Maybe," Jeremy said absently, running his fingers across the golden latch.

"I think-" Jonah began.

"I still have the keys to Lord Amagon's house," Jeremy mentioned, without much hope. It was the only thing he could think of. He felt a little guilty for running off with Master Amagon's keys. He was the only other person besides Amagon himself who was entrusted with a copy of the key to the front doors of the House, since there was no telling when or for how long the Master might be away from home these past few months. Amagon's copy was no doubt locked up in prison with him, and the other servants of the House were probably finding it difficult to lock the doors at night. Jeremy hoped nobody had tried to break in, but then he dismissed that thought. There was nothing he could do about it now.

"Go ahead and try them, I guess," Jonah said, looking skeptical. Jeremy pulled out his key ring and brought it up to the door, and quickly saw that all the keys were too small, except possibly the key to Lord Amagon's front doors. Jeremy took that one and inserted it into the keyhole, and to his surprise the key turned. He looked at Jonah before taking his key back and putting it in his pocket.

"Now who would have thought we'd be so lucky as that?" he said. He thought nothing more of it, yet.

"With you, nothing is ever luck," Jonah replied cryptically, with a mysterious smile on his face. It was a strange remark, and Jeremy glanced at him with furrowed brows for a second, wondering what it was supposed to mean. Jonah didn't seem disposed to clarify things, so Jeremy finally shrugged and let it go. There were more important things to think about.

He reached up and grasped the latch. The door swung outward slowly on silent hinges, bringing with it the stale odor of dry air that has stood still too long. It wasn't quite dark inside, for there were small windows high up on the walls, cleverly hidden so they weren't visible from outside. There was also a thick layer of dust on the floor, as if the building hadn't been opened for a very long time. That was all they could see from the outside.

Jeremy took a step forward into the building, and Jonah followed, kicking up a cloud of dust that made them want to sneeze. It was much easier to see in the dim light once they moved indoors. They saw now that the building was utterly empty, except for a short column of stone about four feet high in the exact middle, with some small thing that glittered gold sitting on top of it. Jeremy strode forward to examine the object more closely. Jonah followed more slowly, trying not to stir up the dust.

"There's an inscription on here!" Jeremy called back to Jonah, fully interested now. He peered at the small letters, trying to read them in the dim light. The stone seemed to be blue malachite or maybe some other kind of material he didn't recognize, and the dark color made it hard to read the letters. It took him some time to piece together all the writing, therefore, but after some effort this is what he read:

*Welcome, o long awaited Prophet!
And be glad, o longed-for King!
The land shall laugh with the falling rain,
And the righteous no more be ashamed.
Oh, taste and see, ye chosen one,
And take up the power of the Lord.*

Jeremy fell back in shock, sure they had intruded on a holy place not meant for them. Jonah had come up behind him while he was standing by the column, and was reading over his shoulder. He pulled at Jonah's arm as he headed hastily for the door.

"Where are you going?" the other boy asked him, not seeming the least bit rattled by the inscription.

"We have to get out of this place!" Jeremy hissed, pulling at his arm again. But Jonah resisted.

"Don't you see this message was left for you?" Jonah said calmly. At that idea Jeremy was even more afraid. . . whether because it might be true or because it might not be, he hadn't the faintest idea. He couldn't decide whether the feeling that welled up in his heart was wild hope or abject terror. . . or maybe both.

"Don't talk like that, Jonah; now be quiet and let's get out of here! Please!" Jeremy pleaded. Jonah shrugged a little bit and walked slowly to the door behind Jeremy, who had bolted from the room as if it contained a thousand poisonous snakes. He was trembling and couldn't speak when Jonah approached him.

"It has to be you, Jeremy," Jonah said firmly. "No one else would have had a key to that door today."

"Lord Amagon has a key," Jeremy protested, still not wanting to believe, "It must be talking about him!"

Jonah shook his head mildly, but with no doubt involved.

"Lord Amagon wasn't here today. You were. Do you believe the Most High leaves such things to chance?" Jonah demanded, "No, Jeremy; you know better than that. You've been chosen as a prophet, and that's a high and holy calling. Now get back in there and find out what you're supposed to do!"

Jeremy looked at him with eyes that showed his doubt, but Jonah wasn't disappointed in the boy he already admired more than anyone else in the world. Jeremy took a deep breath to calm himself, and then walked slowly back into the temple. He would pray, and perhaps the Most High would tell him what to do. Jonah shut the doors behind him, for who was he to intrude upon the prophet of the Most High? He stood guard outside, patiently waiting for Jeremy to emerge.

After an hour or so Jeremy did come out, looking very tired and dusty, and seemingly not much more at peace with his role than he'd been to begin with. Jonah noticed that he wore a golden amulet upon a chain around his neck.

"I don't know what this is for," he said quietly, pointing toward the necklace, "but I'm supposed to wear it all the time. It was sitting on top of the pillar where the inscription was. I won't say any more till we all four are together again."

Jonah accepted this agreeably, and together the two of them rode off toward the palace. It was almost nightfall, and Daniel and Eli would be arriving soon. Jeremy didn't look forward to that.

When the two younger boys arrived at the palace, it was Jonah who told them eagerly about the great blue building, and the inscription, and the command of the Most High. In the meantime Jeremy sat quiet and withdrawn in the corner, making no comment. Daniel and Eli were electrified by the news, and when the story was over they sat looking at Jeremy with shining and worshipful eyes. He hated it.

"This is the word of the Most High. He is angry with the wickedness of the King of Rustrum, for his unrighteousness has reached even unto Heaven. That is why the drought has come to destroy the land, for the earth itself cannot abide his evil, and the people have followed their King. To me has been given power over the clouds of the air, to make rain or not, until the King of Rustrum is destroyed, and all his works, and the people have returned to the righteousness of their youth. We will go to Rustrum and demand the repentance of the people. I have spoken," Jeremy said, in a voice of more authority and power than he would have believed possible. When he was finished, the other boys were nodding solemnly, as if that were exactly what they had expected.

"My friends," he began in his own voice, "I'm glad you three are with me in this, because I don't know if I could face it all alone." The others nodded as if they understood. They didn't, of course, and never would, but Jeremy was content.

Chapter Nine

War

The next morning, rain fell on the High Plain for the first time in thirty years, a long, soaking rain of the kind that would sink deep into the parched earth. None of the boys had seen rain before, and couldn't get enough of looking at it, and walking in it, and talking about it. They didn't travel in it, but the thunder and wind that came with it were wonderful things just to bask in for a while.

Within a week, the High Plain had turned green with new shoots of grass, and the dark fields were full of sprouting bits of barley seed that had lain undisturbed for decades. The brooks and rills roared with unaccustomed flow, chattering toward the valley of the

Murray far away. None of the water would ever reach that far, of course, and none but the occasional Sohrab trader would even notice what had been done on the High Plain, but the land would not soon forget.

The next day the boys rode south with a purpose, passing quickly through Beloth and Techirath, and several smaller cities on the road. Jonah didn't know the names of any others. It was almost a hundred miles from Thaloth to the southeastern edge of the Plain, where they hoped to strike the valley of the Murray. The well in Techirath still contained some water, and they gladly refilled their bottles there. It was never a bad idea to carry extra. A shower bath in the rain was a fine thing, but it was hard to satisfy thirst by standing still and waiting for drops to fall on one's tongue. The parched ground sucked up any moisture that fell on it almost instantly, leaving no puddles.

After about a week of steady riding they drew near to the valley of the Murray. The river itself was nothing but a wide ditch of gravel and dust, as they had expected. There was a small trickle of water in the very bottom, hardly noticeable among the shale and scree. Not far to the east Jeremy could glimpse the gentle folds of the Eyre Hills where he had been born.

He stood for a little while and wondered wistfully what had ever become of Melech and the rest of his family. Most likely they were still there, herding cows as they had always done. It might be that Melech was married by now, and living in his own house. Probably he was. He was old enough that Papa and Mama would have arranged something like that for him. Jeremy found the idea of anybody living with Melech hard to imagine, but he sighed and turned away.

At that point the road veered south to follow the riverbank, and the hills went out of sight behind them. Jeremy thought it was just as well, for he didn't want to be thinking of his family right then. He still had a mission to carry out.

It was no more than five miles before they came suddenly to the end of the road. The Murray plunged down from the High Plain in a fall of almost four thousand feet, or at least it would have, had there been any water to fall. The road went on as barely more than a footpath, looping back and forth down the face of the cliff until it reached the lowlands. It had been cut by hand out of the solid rock, at great cost, and it was a narrow and breathless way to take, with no rail to keep a traveller from plunging to his death if he made a careless step or if the wind gusted too hard. More than one of the boys shivered as he looked down the face of that horrible drop. They decided it would be far safer to walk down and lead the ponies, than it would be to try to ride them.

"Well, let's get going, boys," Jeremy said, trying to sound cheerful about it. The others took a little longer to gather their courage. Jeremy led the way, with his heart in his mouth as he stepped down onto the trail. It felt almost exactly like walking right off the edge of the cliff.

Then he met an obstacle. His pony came up to the very edge of the precipice, and there dug in her heels and refused to go any farther. Jeremy scrambled back up onto the cliff top with the others, secretly relieved to be on more solid ground again.

“What’s wrong with her, Jonah?” he asked. Jonah looked glum.

“She doesn’t like that narrow trail, and I can’t say I blame her. She’s not a goat. Neither am I, for that matter,” Jonah said. Jeremy and the others laughed a little, but it was a nervous laugh of the kind that isn’t really funny.

“Yes, but this is the only way down, isn’t it?” Jeremy asked.

“As far as I’ve ever known or heard of, yes,” Jonah shrugged.

“Except for the road from Cerise, that is,” he added.

“That’s no good. We can’t go all the way back there. We don’t have enough food, and it would waste weeks worth of time. We could be down in the valley before nightfall, if we go this way,” Jeremy said.

“Yes, but not if the animals won’t cooperate,” Jonah pointed out. The other two had said nothing up till this point, but now Eli spoke up.

“Do we really need the ponies anyway? We can carry enough food and water and things for a day or two on our backs, and once we get down into the valley there will be people and villages where we can get more. Can’t we just leave the ponies here and go on ourselves?” he asked. The others thought about that for a minute.

“But what would happen to them, if we leave them here?” Daniel objected. Eli looked a little uncomfortable about that himself, but didn’t know what to say.

“The hills are close by, and there’s still green things there. You can see it even from here. And the river still has a little water in it for them. I don’t think anything lives up here anymore that would hurt them,” Jeremy said.

“So you think we should leave them, and go on anyway?” Jonah asked.

“Yes. I don’t see any other choice, Jonah. I grudge every minute the King is still in power to go on with his wickedness,” Jeremy said firmly.

“All right, then,” Jonah said. He began opening his saddlebags and taking out all the things packed inside. They would have to leave quite a lot of things behind, for a boy can’t carry nearly so much as a horse.

As it turned out, they had to leave almost everything. They each took a large waterskin, enough food for about three days, and not much else. Each of them had a little bag of diamonds torn loose from the livery he had worn in Cerise, but the livery itself had to be abandoned. Also left behind were most of the warmer and thicker clothes they had brought. Tinderboxes they kept, and knives, and a few other items. Anything not strictly necessary they hid behind a large boulder near the road, just in case they should ever come back for any of it.

When all the sorting and repacking was done, they unsaddled the ponies and removed their bridles, and set them free with such blessing as they could give them. They hid the saddles and things with the other items behind the boulder, and prepared to tackle the cliff.

Jeremy went first, then Jonah, then Daniel, and finally Eli. The path was no more than four feet wide, and the cliff bulged out above them so they seemed to be walking inside a giant crack in the cliffside. At no point was it possible to get far enough from the edge not to be able to see how very high up they were. They hated to keep their eyes open and didn't dare close them. The wind scared them, for it was strong and gusty at times, so that if you were careless it might even sweep you off balance. One strong blast from behind did knock Eli off his feet, and if Daniel hadn't been close by to catch his arm, he would have rolled right off the edge of the cliff. He stood up pale and shaking, and it was a long time before the others trusted him to go on.

From time to time they came to a switchback, where the road bent back upon itself before continuing downward. In these spots there was a deeper cutout in the rock, and they had a little breathing space to rest.

All told, it took about seven hours to reach the bottom of the cliff. When at last they reached the flat ground and stood beside the wide and empty pool at the foot of the falls, Eli fell to the earth like a dead thing and kissed it three times before getting back up. No one laughed.

There was an empty village beside the pool, and from that point the road opened out again and ran on straight and sure, bound directly for Rustrum. They spent the night in the empty village, and early the next morning set out walking.

As they got closer to Rustrum, they found some of the villages along the riverbank still occupied. In each of these places Jeremy went directly to the town center and began to preach, demanding repentance from evil, and calling for the overthrow of the wicked King of Rustrum. At first people laughed, or didn't listen at all, but when he raised his hands to the empty sky and brought the rain pouring down, then no one laughed anymore. Everything was dropped so that people could hear him, and his words filled them with shame. Many repented of the wickedness they had committed, but those who didn't repent became only the angrier. King Joseph's spies didn't fail to report this story to the King at once, and he was filled with fury that anyone should dare to openly call for his downfall. He sent loyal members of his Guard to arrest all four boys immediately, but Jeremy never stayed in one place long enough to be trapped.

He soon reappeared, however, a little closer to Rustrum each time, and the tale of his doings followed him like wildfire. The people were eager to hear what he would say, for there had been no prophet in the land since the days of King Joseph's grandfather. Jeremy preached, and brought down rain upon the parched and dying land, and wherever

he went, by the power of his words and the life-giving water at his command, the people were set free of the King. Soon, he marched at the head of an army of five thousand men from the freed villages, headed sternly toward Rustrum.

Now King Joseph was not by any means a coward, nor did he have any intention of giving up his throne to a red-haired boy who had come out of nowhere and commanded the rain. The King would have liked nothing better than to send an army to crush and kill the upstart, but he soon found that even his soldiers held the prophet in awe, and he dared not trust his own servants any longer.

Whatever villages repented of the wickedness of their fathers and returned to the path of righteousness received rain in abundance, while those who hardened their hearts and remained loyal to the King lay parched and dying beneath the blazing sun. Therefore the King determined to pretend to give up the fight, and to lure Jeremy to his palace in Rustrum, alone if possible, and then to kill the boy with his own hands. When the rebels saw the body of their great leader, dead at the hands of the King, they would be filled with even greater fear than ever before. Indeed, it might yet turn out that the entire episode only hardened and solidified his power over Rustrum and all the land besides. And the King laughed in the wickedness of his heart, for he had forgotten the Most High.

Thus it was that the King recalled his soldiers, and a new message was sent out, begging for pardon and a chance to speak with the prophet. The messengers reached him in the town of Xanthus, on the bank of the Murray, about twenty miles north of Rustrum. The people there had given Jeremy the largest house in the town, refusing to lodge him in any lesser place. The King's messenger was deeply polite and even worshipful, but Jeremy gave him no answer at that time. He wanted to talk with his friends first and consider what the King's intentions might be, under their fair cloak. He hadn't by any means forgotten the King's reputation.

Jonah was suspicious at once.

"The King hasn't repented. If he had, he would have come here himself and not sent a messenger. He still has some plan to twist things for his own benefit- wait and see!" he insisted. Jeremy thought about this, but said nothing just yet.

"What do you others think?" he asked quietly.

"I think Jonah is right. . . the King has no intention of giving up so easily. It's never been his way to act like that. I think he wants to use you for his own purposes, by whatever means necessary. He might try to force you to support him by threatening your life, or ours. He may put us in prison, or even kill us. Don't trust him!" said Eli.

Daniel had said nothing up till now, and he spoke hesitantly.

"It may be that the King hasn't repented, but we can't afford to scorn him. That would only let him brand us as hypocrites and liars, and maybe gain him sympathy among the people. That won't do, either."

“The King is crafty, and I don’t doubt he set up this situation very carefully. We can’t allow him to get credit for hypocrisy, but on the other hand we shouldn’t despise him, either. I think we should tell him to come here publicly, quite alone, and answer for himself. I will give him my personal guarantee for his safety. Then we’ll see what he chooses to do. If he refuses to come, it won’t be because he didn’t have a chance,” said Jeremy.

They called for the King’s messenger and gave him their answer, telling him to return to the King immediately. For a minute Jeremy was reminded of sending messengers from his office in Lord Amagon’s house, and he was briefly filled with regret for the simplicity of his life in those days. He had learned some time ago that his old master had died in prison in the dungeons of Rustrum, and he wondered what had become of the House in Cerise, and all his friends there. He knew that Amagon had been a young man, with no children yet. It would be sad, if all his good work should fall apart and come to nothing. Jeremy decided that the fate of Cerise would be one of the things he demanded an accounting for, when the King should appear.

That did not happen immediately, however. Several days passed with no word from the King, and Jonah especially began to suspect some devilry was brewing. But even in the midst of their suspicion, when the trap was sprung it managed to catch all of them by surprise. On the tenth day since the King’s messenger had been sent back to Rustrum, the King made his answer.

In the middle of the night, the boys were wakened by shouts and sounds of fighting outside the house. Jeremy had dreaded this very thing since giving the King his choice. He leaped from his bed and shouted for the others to get up as he threw on yesterday’s clothes. Then he rushed to the bedroom window to find out what was going on, rubbing the sleep from his eyes and trying to wake up. He didn’t need to look behind him to know the others were there.

There was no one else in the house at night except the four of them. They had agreed from the very beginning not to have any servants in the house, partly because of the danger of spies and traitors, and partly because they didn’t think themselves above caring for their own needs. The old house was a sturdy one, with no windows on the ground floor and other features designed to make it highly defensible. The boys had made it a point to lock and barricade the doors every night, just in case of such an attack.

They looked down on the street outside to find hordes of soldiers surrounding the house. Several of them had cut down a tree and lopped off the branches to make a crude battering ram, which they were smashing against the front door. The door was strong, and it would take the King’s men some time to break in, but their eventual success was beyond doubt. From the screams and sounds of fighting that could be heard through the walls, the army was brutally crushing all resistance in the town outside. It would be a

matter of minutes before they broke into the house and either captured or killed all of them. Jeremy knew there was no time to waste.

“Come up to the roof,” he told them urgently. All four of the boys ran up the main staircase to the third floor of the big house. The small door leading up onto the roof was locked, of course, but Jonah had the keys. Once everyone was through, he locked it again behind them.

“Maybe that will slow them down a little,” he said, without much hope.

They scrambled up a narrow flight of steps and burst out onto the flat rooftop, breathless from running. They were hidden from the street by the false front of the house, but that wouldn't save them for long. There was no way down except for the steps they had just come up, and the two houses on either side were much too far away to reach by jumping. Fires were burning all over the town, filling the air with the acrid smell of smoke. The sound of fighting came from near and far. Jeremy looked sad.

“I never meant it to come to this,” he murmured. None of them knew anything to say to that. Daniel, the least skilled in words but also the softest of heart, put an arm around his friend's shoulders. Jeremy smiled.

“Thank you all, for standing here with me till the end. I don't think it's quite time to despair just yet, but it may well be that not all of us survive till the morning. If that be so, then I want you all to know how dear you've been to me,” he said. The others could only nod.

“We're not maggot food yet,” Eli said fiercely, and Jeremy actually laughed.

“No, not yet, Eli. I have one thing yet to try, before it comes to that. I suggest you all lie down, or at least sit,” he advised them. Then he sighed, almost too quietly to hear, stepped closer to the false front of the house, turned his face up to the sky full of stars, and raised his hands to pray.

Almost instantly, it seemed, the night sky was filled with dark clouds, and rain began to stream down upon the city, lightly at first, and then more and more heavily. At first the others wondered at this, because it seemed to them that hardened soldiers might curse the rain, but would certainly not be stopped by it. However, as the rain thickened into a torrent pouring down upon them, filling every street with deep water and making the very timbers of the house shake beneath them with the violence of the flood, they began to believe. The storm became so powerful, they couldn't bear to lift their heads from the rooftop. The drops came down stinging like needles, and they were amazed that Jeremy could continue to stand at all. None of them slept that night, and it seemed a very long time till the sun rose.

Chapter Ten

Decisions

When the watery light of morning came, they expected to look out on a scene of devastation, but instead, they found the city not much changed from the day before, except for a few puddles and bits of mud. There were no soldiers, no destroyed houses, nor anything else to suggest the violence of the night, except a few burned-out buildings. They looked at Jeremy, who only smiled tiredly.

“The Most High has blessed us with a miracle,” he said, answering the question they hadn’t asked.

“It won’t be long before word of all this gets back to the King, and to tell the truth, I’m too worn out to think about what he may do, then. We have at least a few hours before the next attack, whatever form it may take. Until then, I think I’ll sleep a while. I suggest you all do the same,” Jeremy said. With no more ado, he stumbled down the stairs and into the house, and collapsed onto the first bed he came to. (It was Eli’s, in fact, but the younger boy didn’t grudge it to him). The others found such resting places as they could, fully intending to sleep most of the day.

It was not to be.

Only a couple of hours later, they were awakened by pounding on the front door. Not soldiers this time, but leaders of the town. They had spent the night in terror of the King’s army and then of the flood, and now they had finally plucked up enough courage to leave their homes. They demanded to see the Prophet. The front doors of the house were wrecked and splintered from the attack, and it took all four boys to shove the twisted hinges open just enough to let the guests come in. The doors had been on the very verge of collapsing when the flood came. Another five minutes and the King’s men would have been inside the house. Jeremy knew the doors would have to be repaired immediately in case of another attack, but that was something he didn’t have the energy to think about right now.

He let Jonah handle most of the questions from the townsfolk, only speaking himself when there was something the other boy couldn’t answer. It took a long time to satisfy them, and when the last one was finally pushed out the door, it was getting close to evening again.

Jeremy gathered them all together in the kitchen soon afterward.

“We have to think of what’s best to do now,” he said, getting right to the point.

“The King has committed himself to fighting us, and he won’t change his mind now. In a way that’s more dangerous, because it lets him act openly against us, instead of having to pretend to think about what we say. On the other hand, he’s lost the chance to fool us about his intentions,” Jeremy said.

“I think we should go to Rustrum immediately and destroy him!” Eli said. “His treachery is proved beyond doubt, and a flood like the one last night will be the end of him.”

“Maybe. . . but the Most High doesn’t dispense miracles just because they might be helpful, Eli,” Jonah scolded him, “Prophets have been killed many times before, as I’m sure I don’t need to remind you.”

“That may be so, Jonah, but whatever might be ahead, I’m not afraid of it,” Eli said.

“Who said anything about being afraid?” Jonah snapped, beginning to scowl.

“Stop, please,” Jeremy pleaded with them. “It’s hard enough to think about these things, without the two of you fighting about it. Both of you have gone through so much for the sake of your friendship with me, so please, if you love me, keep peace between yourselves.” Eli and Jonah were abashed by his words, and immediately apologized to each other.

“What do you think, Daniel?” Jeremy asked, looking at the youngest boy. He bit his lip and glanced at Eli and Jonah before he reluctantly answered.

“I think we should make sure the whole country knows what happened here. The King showed us he’s no better than a criminal, attacking us in the middle of the night with no warning like that. He must have lost a good many of his best soldiers, too. The people in Rustrum know he isn’t their only hope of survival anymore. In fact, they know the only reason they don’t have rain is because of him. I think it cost the King a lot of support when his attack on us failed. People won’t fear him as much anymore. It may be if we simply wait, then the people will throw him down on their own,” he suggested hopefully. Jeremy smiled.

“You have a gentle heart, Daniel, and that’s a gift from the Most High, and a good way to be. Everything you say is true, but I think in this case we may need to act more forcefully. I’m afraid, if we give him time to recover from his loss, the King is well able to prepare another attack on us, and the next one might be successful. Even yesterday, if the door hadn’t been locked, or if the soldiers had been able to break into the house quietly, without waking us, they could have captured or killed us while we slept, and that would have been the end of it. As Jonah pointed out, prophets have been killed before,” Jeremy said. The others sat quietly, chewing on this.

“Are you saying we should march to Rustrum right away, and attack the King in his own palace?” Jonah asked.

“Maybe we should. I’m not sure, Jonah. If I only knew for sure,” Jeremy said, even more quietly than before. His grim words and sadness were beginning to worry the others.

“Are you all right, Jeremy?” Daniel finally asked.

“No, not really,” Jeremy admitted. “I always thought I wanted to do something awesome and grand, but I guess I never thought about what that might mean. Now the Most High has seen fit to lay on my shoulders a task which is beyond my strength and wisdom to accomplish. I’m tired, and I’m afraid, and I don’t know what the best thing to do might be, and so much depends on the choices I make. So my heart is heavy, and there are times when I wish I’d never been called to this path.” He looked at the others with sorrow in his eyes, which they could do nothing to soften.

“We would help you bear it, if we could,” Daniel said.

“I know you would, Daniel, and that’s a comfort to me, but sometimes there are things we can only do alone, if at all,” Jeremy replied. Then he seemed to bring his thoughts back to the task at hand.

“I think we need to do something big, and soon. The King’s attack yesterday can’t be allowed to go unanswered. It was wicked, and if we fail to do anything about it, then we become hypocrites also,” Jeremy said, drumming his fingers on the table.

“There’s always the possibility of marching in strength with the army to Rustrum, rallying the citizens there, and overthrowing the King. That might seem like the easiest way, but I’m not sure it would be the best. For one thing, there are many soldiers still loyal to the King, and Rustrum is not easily taken. Nor do I wish to harm the people there. Even if we succeeded, there’s still the problem of what comes next. We would be left with no King at all, and that’s dangerous. It might be that an even worse man could slip in and take Joseph’s place. I’ve been thinking and praying carefully about that,” Jeremy explained. Here he hesitated for a moment.

“The inscription inside the temple in Thaloth mentioned both a prophet and a King. You’re to replace King Joseph,” he said, looking at Jonah. He didn’t wait to see how his old friend would react to that bit of news before turning at once to the others.

“You other two are free to do as you like, of course. The Most High has his own plans for you, and he hasn’t shown them to me yet, as he has for Jonah. Cerise will need a leader also, and it may be that one of you is called to go back there. But whatever may happen, I know there are important things for you both to do, if you’ll wait a little while to see what those may be,” he told them.

“And what about you?” Daniel asked quietly.

“I make no plans for myself. I’ll go where I’m called, and I don’t know yet where that may be. I can only wait, and listen for the word of the Most High. As do we all,” Jeremy answered. Then he became brisk.

“Now that all that’s settled, I think it would be wise to tell the people at once, so there are no surprises. It will earn us the undying hatred of King Joseph and all who support him, of course, but that can’t be helped. He had his chance to repent, and rejected it. Now he’ll be replaced.”

Jeremy turned to Jonah (who for once was quite speechless) and studied him briefly.

“You’ll be a good King, I think. Have faith, old friend. From now on, I leave to you the conduct of the war. I’ll help you when I can, but I have work of my own to do, to bring life back to the land, and to call the people back to righteousness.”

“The people won’t follow anyone but you, Jeremy,” Jonah said, looking levelly at his friend.

“They’ll follow anyone I command them to follow. You’re the choice of the Most High, and if they reject you, they’ll face His wrath,” Jeremy said sternly.

There was nothing to be said to that, and Jeremy called an assembly of the people the very next afternoon, to be held in the largest square of Xanthus. In the meantime, clothes were chosen for Jonah, and a circlet of gold made for him, with a single diamond set on the forehead. That was the symbol of the King of Rustrum, who wore no crown.

At the assembly, Jeremy spoke powerfully against the wickedness of the King, and declared that the Most High had removed from him all authority, and replaced him with another more righteous man. He lifted up the circlet of gold for all to see, and a hush fell on the crowd. There were many people who expected him to set the circlet on his own head, and were surprised when he didn’t do so. He turned to Jonah, who walked slowly forward in the blue robes of the King, and knelt with bowed head at Jeremy’s feet. Jeremy put his right hand on Jonah’s head to bless him, and then rubbed a drop of sweet oil on his forehead with one thumb. At the last, he whispered a few words of encouragement in his friend’s ear, before he gently set the circlet of Rustrum on his head. Jeremy reached down to take Jonah’s hand to help him to stand, where he faced the people for the first time. The hush continued for a moment, until Jeremy cried “Behold your King!”, and the crowd erupted into wild cheers and applause.

Jonah’s first act in his new office was to speak to the people, of course. He declared that the time had come to march to Rustrum, and remove the wicked King Joseph forever. More cheers were heard at that. Jonah went on, for he could be a powerful speaker when he chose to be.

Jeremy, as quietly as possible, slipped away from the center of attention and returned to the house. It would be a long time, most likely, before Jonah and the others returned from the assembly, and for a little while Jeremy wanted some peace and silence. He still had doubts about how things might turn out, and what the future might bring.

The house was empty as always, though he knew that would soon have to change. It was one thing for a wandering prophet and his friends to live alone and take care of themselves— it was quite another thing for the King to live like that. At the least, there would be servants and councilors and messengers coming to and fro almost constantly, and that would destroy the peace they had enjoyed. Jeremy sighed.

He walked quietly up to the third floor, and opened the little door that led out onto the roof. He came out into the bright sunshine of an autumn day, and stood there in silence for a minute, to feel the breeze against his face. He couldn't be sure, but he thought he detected the faint scent of salt on the wind. It reminded him of Rustrum down by the sea, and the struggle ahead.

He went to the west side of the building and sat down there with crossed legs to pray and seek guidance. He wondered if his friends had any idea how little he knew, and how often he was at a loss. He doubted they did. He was certain that choosing Jonah to replace King Joseph was the right thing to do, but he wasn't so sure what the Most High might have in mind for the other two. Nor even for himself, for that matter.

He was still praying when, hours later, the others came back to the house. Jonah had many new problems and cares to occupy his mind, and so perhaps it wasn't surprising that he didn't think to come looking for Jeremy. Nor did Eli, for he had been asked to begin the difficult process of choosing a few trusted servants for the house.

It was Daniel who finally came up to the rooftop and found Jeremy sitting by the retaining wall. Usually he would have left Jeremy alone at such a time, but at that moment the older boy looked up at him and smiled.

"Come here, Daniel," he asked, waving an arm at him. Daniel crossed the rooftop easily enough, and sat down facing Jeremy, with his legs crossed under him much like his friend was sitting.

"Did you want to talk to me, Jeremy?" he asked, when nothing was said.

"Yes I did, Daniel. I've been praying to the Most High, and I've learned some things the rest of you need to know. You remember when I spoke to you earlier, I said that you and Eli might think about going back to Cerise, and leading that city? The Most High has given that work to Eli. He came from the streets, and he knows the needs of that people more clearly than any of us others do. He's been a good and faithful servant in little things. Therefore, the Most High has said that he is to be placed over all of Cerise, to be the guardian and protector and Father of that city," Jeremy said.

"I know he'll do well there," Daniel nodded.

"As for me, the Most High has directed that I go up into the Cesmean Mountains, to the Lachishite barbarians, and preach to them, and you're to come with me. I don't know why, but there's some part for you to play with those people. Our work in Rustrum is almost done for now. Jonah and Eli will care for the people and their needs very well, and the Most High will remove the curse of the drought which has laid the land in ruins. We need fear no further for the people here," Jeremy explained.

Daniel didn't find these words completely comforting. The Lachishites of the mountains were a tale of terror to every child in Cerise, with good reason. Their cruelty was legendary. The idea of going to such a place scared him, but he said nothing.

“Don’t worry. . .we won’t leave the others for some time yet. At least not until Rustrum is captured, and King Jonah is safely in control of the land. Until then, things will go on very much as they have been doing. Don’t say anything to the others about these things just yet, because I want to speak to them both together later this evening, when we can be alone,” Jeremy told him. Daniel nodded again.

Jeremy stood up, and the other boy did likewise.

“Let’s go down into the house and find something to eat and drink, Daniel. I’m exhausted and hungry after spending all day up here,” Jeremy suggested. With that, they both went down into the house.

Chapter Eleven

Parting

The rest of the war concerned Jeremy very little, for it was a matter handled for the most part by Jonah and the leaders of the army. Jeremy had his own problems to deal with during this time. By the time Jonah approached the city of Rustrum at the head of an army of ten thousand men of the outlands, the people of the city rose in revolt against the remainder of King Joseph’s guard, and slew both them and the King in the courtyard of the palace, and threw open the gates of the city to King Jonah with cheers and thanksgiving. For the most part. There were doubtless those who regretted the fall of the old king and hated his replacement, and Jonah would have his hands full for many years rooting out the last of these holdouts. But for now, the whole country was given up to rejoicing, and Jeremy pronounced an end to the drought, and for many days the blessed rain came down, until every river was full, and the grass began to grow thick and green in the fields. For many, it was the first sight of so much water that they had ever seen.

Eli eagerly accepted his task in Cerise, when he was told. He was sorry for the passing of Amagon, but even that couldn’t erase his enthusiasm for the work that was given to him. Cerise would be richly blessed, with such a leader. Indeed, he chafed at the need to remain in Rustrum until things could be set in order, so anxious was he to be gone.

All told, the four of them remained together in Rustrum in the palace of the King for almost six months. By then, Jonah had begun to feel secure in his position, and a little more comfortable with it. He was indeed, as Jeremy had known he would be, a wise and faithful King.

But as time went on, Jeremy felt more and more the call of his other work that wasn’t yet done. On a day when the first flowers of spring were blooming in the garden, he found Jonah in a moment of solitude, walking among the roses.

“You need to move on, don’t you?” Jonah asked him sadly.

“Yes, I do. There’s another task I’m called to do, and the Most High has allowed us a long while together, but now I know the time has come to begin my other work,” Jeremy said. There was no point in denying it. Jonah chewed on that for a minute.

“Where will you go?” he finally asked.

“To the Lachishites first, and then. . . I can’t say where, after that. But the Most High has revealed to me that there is a greater enemy abroad than Joseph who was King. He was the least of it, my friend. Indeed, it may be that we saved the land from one enemy, only to be destroyed by a worse one,” Jeremy replied. Jonah looked a bit pale at that, and gripped Jeremy’s hand.

“Tell me what you know, then! All these dark hints and suggestions cause me more fear than if I knew for certain that an army of ghouls stood outside the gates,” Jonah cried.

“I don’t know anything for certain,” Jeremy protested. “That information hasn’t been given to me yet. Be at ease! If it were necessary for us to know right now, then the Most High would have shown it to us. Since he hasn’t, then it must be that the knowledge wouldn’t serve our good, just now.”

“I know,” Jonah said, quite softly. Jeremy put a hand on his friend’s shoulder.

“Don’t be sad, Jonah. You’ll lead the people well, and be a beloved King. The great enemy, whoever he may be, is not for you to fight. At least not yet. For now, that task belongs to me, and maybe to Daniel. You still have great works to do, yourself. Be faithful in what is asked of you. It will never be more than you can do,” Jeremy told him.

Jonah looked unhappy.

“I know that, too,” he said, “but it doesn’t keep me from missing my friends. You don’t realize, maybe, how lonely this palace can be. I’m King to all who see me, but never just Jonah anymore. A man would have to be insane to wish for a task like this. Must I really do it all alone?” he asked.

Jeremy thought about this for a minute.

“It may be that someday, when all is said and done, that our four paths will lead us back here. It well may be. . . but I don’t know, Jonah. I keep the hope of it, but I can’t forsake the task of the Most High,” Jeremy said, heavily.

“No, you mustn’t do that. I know you have your own path, and I have mine, and it couldn’t be otherwise. But I never said I had to like it,” Jonah said, with an effort to be cheerful. He took a deep breath and went on.

“Take whatever things you need from the city stores, and from any town inside the kingdom along the way to. . . wherever you’re going. Go with my blessing, and be certain that the sooner you return, the better it will please me,” Jonah said seriously. He

kissed his friend's signet ring, as even a King might do with one he thought greater than himself, and they parted for that time.

It was a long while before they saw each other again.