

The Light of The Magicians
By
Clinton Jarbeau

Chapters 1-3

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“Master, how will we know you?”

The seneschal’s softly spoken inquiry echoed the thought that was in every mind, the last question to be asked of the Most High. In this lifetime, his name was Tenzin, twenty-sixth of his line, the nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety eighth reincarnation of the soul whose name, correctly rendered, was *Mind of God*.

The Most High reclined on a well- worn yak fur robe fastened with pins over the same simple couch that had been his for eighty-one cycles of the seasons. He had ascended to the Jade Throne and obtained these humble quarters on the same day, and now, shortly before the eighty-second anniversary of that event, under the close guardianship of his spirit, his body waited for the moment of his transition. Tenzin’s smooth face showed no sign of the one hundred and eighteen winters through which he had passed. His clear brown eyes still glowed with awareness, an indigo luminosity that came from the depths of the soul. Those eyes were alive with light as the man gazed through the open temple window, west toward the snow-capped peaks towering over fertile green terraces where, even in summer, the strength of the sun was muted by the crystal quality of the air round about.

Tenzin might have been resting, meditating in his usual way and intent on living forever, he was so calm. Nine men seated on prayer mats waited in the chamber, in silence as perfect as the temple stones, and it seemed the Most High saw them not. A slight smile played upon his lips as he stared off into the mountains, so near, yet so far away.

The seneschal, whose name was Belchasir, had witnessed two similar departures, both individuals of high rank. In those cases, and this one also, it amazed him that death

should be so close, yet give so little sign. Though Belchasir was aware of the simple fact that the transition of the Most High was an event to be brought about by the conscious will of the man himself, still the process of it was occasion for wonderment.

Belchasir was himself quite accomplished at living forever, being nearly a hundred and fifty years of age, though most outsiders who met him - and unless the circumstances were quite extraordinary, most outsiders met no other – judged him to be nearly fifty. The seneschal was about speak again, fearing, though he knew better, that the Most High would depart before giving the assembled party their instructions.

Tenzin held up a hand that swayed like a stalk of tall mountain grass in the wind. “Draw near.” He looked at those present in his death chamber with great affection.

The nine, all clothed in full ceremonial costume, came to their feet with a slight flutter of fabric and tinkling of bells. The chamber itself was contained within a central area, set off from which were three alcoves. The place where the Most High waited was farthest away from the large open window which had the best view of the distant mountains. The nine had been waiting in the formal center of the chamber, and now, as if governed by a single thought, they moved forward into the death chamber, ranging themselves across the foot of the couch and along the right side of the Most High. Now that benevolent gaze sought one of the men, and when Tenzin spoke it seemed to all as if the voice that had so often buoyed them up came now not from the lips of the man, but from the very ether.

“Approach me, Josu, my good and faithful friend.” At this, a burly monk with a flat spade-like face, and ears like the handles of a wine-jug moved toward the supine Tenzin. The Most High regarded his friend with a calmness that might stop the world.

“I have cherished the memory of our time together, and have many hours in your company for which I will be grateful to the creator of all that is. Now, the time of which we have spoken is at hand. If you will permit it, thou shalt be my first teacher in my new life.”

“My lord, it is always an honor. May I consider again what you propose?”

The Most High nodded gently, his eyes closed as he viewed another reality in which he was shortly to travel. He held up his hand with the palm arched, thumb and fingers forming a crescent as clear as the moon. “Touch this hand for the last time.”

The monk knelt so as to place his forehead on Tenzins’ outstretched hand. There he remained for several minutes, as Tenzins’ thumb and forefinger held his temples pressed between them like the opened ends of a birthing tong. Josu’s body quivered slightly. There were tiny precious stones woven in the carmine robes he wore, and these reflected the light from the open window, their jeweled lights dancing on the tapestries which covered the chamber stones. Then it was finished. As both monk and master returned to themselves, the monk knelt beside the couch, overcome.

Tenzins' voice seemed for an instant to be weaker. “Do you see?”

The monk bowed. “I do, my lord. Thank you. It will be my honor, though I fear I am not worthy.” The monk held the palms of his hands together in the prayerful gesture by which one man recognizes the divinity of another.

Tenzin nodded and returned the greeting. “You have been my companion and my loyal friend. Do not fear. You are worthy, and I choose you. What say you?”

The monk’s head inclined in gentle acceptance.

“Go then, and wait for me.”

In silence, the monk left the room.

In the lull of Josu's departure, a boy in the robes of a novice moved quietly about the chamber, replenishing the incense which burned in sundry secret places, lighting fresh candles where there was need.

When he was finished, Tenzin spoke to him. As the boy knelt beside the man, swirling clouds of incense wreathed his head. He trembled gently, and the man placed his hand upon the tiny shoulder. "You are known in the upper world as Loves Learning," the Most High said quietly. "Who are you?"

"Just now, I am called Sere-na, Highness," the boy said.

"I have seen you, working about the temple," the master replied. "Are you true to your name?"

"My lord, I try to be." The boy was frightened, because it had never before been his fate to encounter one so exalted in the flesh.

"Sere-na, you are doubly fortunate, for you carry the records of Akasha within your self. Tell me truly. Do you seek adventure?"

"I seek only to learn and to serve, Highness."

"I have a role for you in another time and another place. Will you accept it?"

The boy trembled visibly. "I... I... don't know what to say, Highness." With some effort, the boy drew himself erect and bowed his head. "Not my will, but yours be done, honorable sir."

Tenzin laughed. "Well spoken, young man. But it is to God you must speak when those words are uttered." The boy did not answer.

"Will you look at what I offer?" Tenzin prompted.

Still, the boy did not speak.

“Perhaps, then,” the old monk said, his voice resonating through the chamber, “you might at least have a look.” A couple of the monks nearby suppressed smiles as they recalled being teased in precisely this gentle way.

Sere-na came near and knelt before the master, bowing his head as he did so. “If your Lordship pleases.”

The Most High took the boy’s head in his hands and closed his eyes. “Come,” the old monk said. “Enter the silence with me and let us travel toward the setting sun, through a pass where the snow falls every moon of the year, to an oasis along an inland sea guarded by two stones of a size beyond imagination.”

The old monk and the boy remained in their immovable embrace for several minutes, the boy’s body quivering with the force of an unseen energy. The boy’s face glowed with the inner light of revelation, eyes rolled back in his sockets, eyelids fluttering. Muffled exclamations of joy, and the keening of a terrible sorrow followed by a rapturous delight came from his entranced lips.

“Did you see?” the Most High asked softly, when their inner adventure had ceased.

“Oh, my Lord, thank you. It is truly a wondrous adventure. “Am I equal to such a task? My fear is great.”

“You have all the trust and courage you will need, in abundance, my son. In abundance.” The boy’s face was a portrait of doubt and disbelief, which caused the old man’s gentle smile to manifest more fully. “Such a great adventure places your feet on the final portion of the path that all must travel. There is no reason to worry. If you

accept, though all memory of the task be hidden from you, it may and will be recalled as you require it, for you carry the records within. Indeed, my son, could you but realize it, I am no closer to destiny than you.” The monk held out his hand. “I choose you. Will you follow me?”

The novice took a deep breath and hugged himself at his good fortune. “I will, my Lord.”

“Then, my son, go about your daily work until I call upon you. I believe Josu has need of you in the garden.” The boy rose, and as he turned to go, Tenzins’ voice appeared to speak from within the compass of his own mind. “You are truly blessed, Sere-na. Always remember this. Truly blessed.”

Belchasir suppressed a smile as the novice took his leave. “My Lord, you have made him very happy,” the seneschal remarked. “See how he walks, on air.”

Tenzin smiled a gentle smile. “How wonderful it would be, just once more to be where that young man is.” He sighed, and in the silence could be heard an infinite sadness. Then, in the rank of monks who stood near him, Tenzins’ attention settled on a tall, black skinned monk.

“Laniga, seeker of truth, stranger whose presence has gladdened our hearts. Old friend. Can your skills be used yet once more – to find another soul returning from beyond?”

Light from the window caressed the black man’s head, surrounding and molding it into a crescent moon, so complete was the blackness of the monk's face. He stepped forward to kneel beside the Most High, and spoke softly in a voice as deep as Tenzins'

own. “I pray it will be so, Lord,” Laninga said quietly, the accent of his native land a haunting memory on his lips.

“Truly,” Tenzin replied. “Though I go into the great void alone, can you discover and aid me when it is time for my return? Can you alter time?”

“My Lord, I can find you anywhere.”

Tenzin nodded gravely. “Then listen carefully, for by this sign you will know the time is near. When the planet of possibility nears the planet of limitation in the way described in the ancient books, you will travel west to a desert near an inland sea, which supports no life. In that country, cased in living rock, you will find me. Take guidance from our father’s light, which the I AM will uncap for only a short time. Be quick in pursuit of your duty.” Tenzin’s hand grasped the wrist of Laninga, whose hand took similar grip of the monk’s arm, a salute among warriors, a sign of trust and respect.

“Go with God, Highness,” the black man said, a slight huskiness apparent in his voice.

“Until I see you again, fare thee well,” Tenzin said softly, his hand brushing the forehead of the kneeling monk for just a brief instant before the black monk took his leave. Clouds of incense shifted in the breeze of his passing, the forms in the smoke dancing as if they were spirits of the upper world, temporarily revealed to men at this special time. A silken cloth of deep rich magenta was draped across the doorway, and when Laninga put the cloth quietly aside, the tiny bells interwoven in the fabric tinkled along the chamber.

Tenzin looked then at an unassuming moon-faced monk who seemed, even in this serious moment, to possess an inexhaustible well of joy that shone forth from his eyes.

“Eloa-Jaih, my brother, how fare you with your task?”

“I have brought fully five thousand lifetimes into my awareness, Lord.”

Tenzin smiled. “And have some of them surprised you?”

“Oh, certainly. Beyond the shadow of a doubt. And none more than the three females, and five males that currently occupy my attention.” His face glowed with embarrassment. “They were all so self-involved. So indulgent. Such rascals.”

“I have a task for you, involving us in another grand adventure. Perhaps it will be the means by which to accept the divinity of your own lifetimes.” There was a hint of admonition in the phrase. “All of them.”

“Serving you has always had its moments, Highness.” Eloa-Jaih moved gently, a twinge of feeling running along a birthmark, the temporal reminder of a death by dismemberment, inflicted with a great axe.

“Ah,” Tenzin said softly, sensing his friend’s discomfort. “Do you still bear that wound? Would you be rid of it?”

The cheerful monk laughed. “Oh, no, my Lord. I bear it willingly, and have chosen to keep it for yet another while. It is as comfortable as an old friend, a constant reminder of the perils of intrigue.”

Tenzin nodded his head. “Then, as you have agreed, so it shall be with you.”

The moon-faced monk grinned impishly. “And of the task ahead, what will you tell me of it, Highness?”

The sun had moved now to the place where its golden light shone through the open window, full upon the two men. The silent audience, viewing with their complete awareness, observed not men, but the subtle interplay of color, light and shadow, as if the voices they heard simply were, and had been, always.

The scene which played out upon the inner eyes of those present revealed a dry, hot land, where the desert flowered in *divers* places, and a bearded wild-man in a white robe who healed the afflicted, living on honey and locust bread. This scene caused a sudden intake of breath from those assembled, and each was overcome by a thrill of joy.

“Oh, Highness. It will be a great honor.” The monk would have spoken further, but Tenzin’s hand stilled the question.

“I leave the manner of your coming to the god of your understanding. Go now, to prepare the way for me.” And when the two had embraced once more, Eloa-Jaih entered a deep trance, then dis-appeared, like a wisp of smoke into the sunlight.

“Truly,” Tenzin said, “your work has not gone in vain.” And the six monks who remained bowed to him. A diminutive fellow whose name was Nur-om remarked, “Eloa-Jaih has always had a fine view of the law. You credit us, his teachers, too much.”

“It is well that I do so,” Tenzin answered, “for I shall have need of thy comfort and instruction.” In saying this, he was addressing the remaining six, whose names were Nur-om, Par-top, Os-pan, An-ek, Rigath and Tomathz. Each of these members of the inner circle had lived at least twenty lifetimes of which each man had complete and contiguous memory, though they had been re-born at least that many times, and Nur-om had experienced conscious re-birth and time in the womb no less than fifty-four times.

As the time of the Most High's departure approached, awareness of the truth of illusion and the inheritance of matters surrounding the fact of human existence filled the room, awareness as palpable as water in a spring.

For a time there was silence. The Most High closed his eyes and spoke. "The time has come for a turning of the wheel, a new phase in the life of man. The work of my final lifetime will be to set that new turning in motion. It is the task only of one for whom the outer reality and the inner dream are identical.

"When you see me again, I will be un-conscious, and know nothing. You must re-teach me God's laws at that time. Purged from my first attention will be even those things which I have known in my tenure in this place, those things which, without effort I should surely know again if I came once more to the throne of the Most High."

"Instead of the Jade Throne, I have chosen to seek my way, in a single lifetime, manifesting the Divine Expression of all that is for the instruction of souls and as a demonstration of the truth. I choose to claim the inheritance which belongs to us all." Tenzin beheld his teachers, his friends, with great love, seeing himself in them, and them in himself. As he did so, a great power moved in the chamber.

Partaking of that power, Belchasir sensed a disturbance in the hallway adjacent before it occurred. His eyes made contact with the eyes of the Most High. He stepped forward slightly, seeking silent permission to take his leave. Tenzin placed his palms together and bowed deeply to the seneschal.

"Go."

The thought appeared in Belchasir's mind. The seneschal placed his palms together and felt the power. "I salute you, Highness. Fare you well."

Tenzins' voice seemed again to appear in his mind. *“Until I see you again, dear friend.”*

In the passageway that led to the great hall, Belchasir was confronted by a party of three novices in a state of great distress. “Venerable sir, please.” they said, wringing their hands as if they three were one person, “Please. We seek the Most High on a matter of urgency, for the monk Josu has taken leave of this world in the lower terrace of the garden just now.”

As one, they took breath and continued.

“Then, as our brother Sere-na was attending to His Benevolent Presence, a flat stone, dislodged from higher up by some terrible force, fell upon him. Sere-na lies where he was struck. His skull is crushed, and without intercession we fear he will soon perish.”

Though the oldest had spoken the explanation most clearly, the other two maintained a patchy presence, speaking a few words here and there. One of the younger boys interrupted his narrative to sniffle conspicuously, and the other closed his eyes from time to time, concentrating with great effort, as though willing the event to dissipate as if it had never been.

“Are both gone then?” Belchasir asked, when the voices had ceased. Hearing this, all three broke into wails of distress that echoed against the stones in the high, vaulted hallway.

The seneschal was a large man, whose bulk served equally to intimidate small boys and disguise his great compassion. He clapped his hands twice, imperiously. “Shhhh! Sere-na has been selected by the Most High for a task involving his early transition. Shhhh, I say! Are you so selfish that you deny others their duty? Your cries

are enough to wake the dead.” He enfolded all three boys in his voluminous robe, where, except for an occasional sniff, they were silent.

Belchasir spoke more softly. “A new day is in the offing. How fortunate you are to see such a thing. Even now, the Most High awaits his transition, gathering energy and strength for his journey into the great void. Sere-na’s eternal self, in company with monk Josu, himself nobly born, but waits upon him.”

“From Tenzins’ chamber, welling along the corridor like floodwater, came the great sound which has always signaled the departure of an aware one. In alcoves along the passageway, candles flamed as if phantoms had breathed fire in the darkness. The flames, leaping up two hands-breadth, glowed with an intensity that seemed to come from out of the depths of eternity.

“AAAAAAUUUUUUUUUUUUUUHHHHHHHHHOOOOOMMMMMMM!

The sound vibrated along the enclosed way, for an instant threatening to separate reality from rock and fire and silk and flesh alike. In that sound, Belchasir felt every emotion of which imagination was capable, and because they were in his embrace, the three boys felt also as he did.

“See,” the seneschal said gently. “The task of Sere-na begins.” Belchasir held the novices more closely. Another wave of sound made it’s inexorable way toward them.

“AAAAAAAAAAUUUUUUUUUUUUUUOOOOOOOOOOHHHHHHHHMMMM
MMMM!

“Come,” the seneschal said gently, moving down the hallway toward the entrance to the lower garden. “Let us convey the bodies of our brothers to their rightful place.

The time of their waiting has ended.” With the three novices in tow, he went out into the garden. There he found the body of the monk Josu had already been transported.

Attendants worked purposefully, easing the last breaths of Sere-na. Though the young monks’ skull was soft, misshapen from the impact of the stone, which lay nearby, his face was composed in such an expression of joy that the oldest novice, whose name was Jast, remarked, “Doubtless the sight of that bliss put this look upon his face. Truly, our brother must be with the Most High in Paradise.”

“Never doubt, young one, that this is so.” The voice belonged to Nur-om, who arrived unbidden with two priests and a litter sheathed with beaten gold and studded with gemstones. With utmost tenderness, the body was placed on the litter and carried away for it’s final bathing and ritual adornment.

Even as the body of Tenzin was being readied for immolation, bathed and dressed in all the finery of his office, so the bodies of Josu and Sere-na received similar attention. When this was done, the bodies were arrayed on three separate funeral pyres erected in the public courtyard next to the great gates of the temple compound. The gates were composed of massive timbers that had been carried one at a time by the labor of many monks into the high mountain country from the hot land fifteen days march to the south. The funeral rites had begun.

Once all were in their final places, the bodies of all, still being attuned to the souls, which had occupied them in life received final instructions.

Two novices spoke into the ear of the departed boy as his body lay clothed in a silken shift of the purest white, on a pyre quickly constructed on the north flank of that which had been laid in place for The Most High.

“Thou, oh nobly-born Sere-na, give us your full attention. Having received the instruction and the state of the Clear Light, experiencing this as the Pure Reality, abide in that state and hear us.”

“Thou, having chosen to answer the call of Tenzin, The Most High, in his pursuit of the Sole Perfection, having chosen to record these things for the benefit of all and the ultimate achievement, in the course of time, of thine own Godhood, listen undistractedly.”

“Follow the soul Mind of God in his course, preserving the events of his final life on the eternal records which your consciousness carries within. We charge you to complete this task, though it should take all Eternity.”

These words were spoken into the ear of the young monk’s body continuously for six full days, with intervals for the provision of food, both for the chanters and for the departed spirit.

On the south flank of the body of the Most High, within a bier draped with crimson silk, the body of the monk Josu was addressed also. Three monks, one positioned on each side of the head and one at his feet spoke to him through his body, saying, “Oh nobly born and admired sir, listen with great attention. Remember that you depart this world in the spirit of service of another. Adore and take refuge in your priestly confessor, taking note of all the deities, both peaceful and full of wrath. Follow the soul Mind of God into the world again, sojourning with him in the final adventure for you both. May the Great Pitier forgive the accumulated sins and impurities of your former lives, guiding you back to the world in safety, secure in your own righteousness.” And for Josu also, the saying of this message was accomplished for six full days.

At the same time, teams of two composed of the six monks who attended him at the time of his transition spoke in relays for the remembrance of the soul of the departed Tenzin.

“Oh Divine and Immaculate Sir, listen with full attention. There are six states of Blissful Awareness: the natural state, while in the womb, the dreaming state, wherein thou knowest all things, the state of ecstatic equilibrium, wherein by controlled meditation one’s knowledge is complete, the state of at-one-ment, wherein all things contemplated become real, the state of entering Death, wherein one unites all of one’s experience and the state of awaiting rebirth. These are the six.”

“Already, thou hast experienced all of these states. We urge you, most Reverend Sir, we bid you, seek the final rebirth experience, wherein thou can wholly manifest the truth of man’s existence. We remind you of your task. Oh, heed us, for we remind you of your task.”

This too, was spoken continuously for a full six days. And before the darkness had fled on the seventh day, all the people gathered in their very finest. Torches were lit. The High Astrologer had constructed a death horoscope, the better to determine who would be entitled to touch the corpses, who would be better to view them from afar.

In the third watch of the night, four hundred twenty three souls gathered in silence, waiting for the first rays of the sun to cross over the ridge of high mountains. When those rays entered the temple gate, touching the twin pyres waiting in the courtyard, Jast, the novice, put his torch first into the base of the pyre on which lay the body of Josu. Then, he performed a similar office for the boy, Sere-na.

That was also the signal for the six monks who had attended Tenzin in his last moments to place their torches on the lightly woven coils of mountain grass, shaved bark and sweet oil which had been woven into the bier of the Most High. This was the only body to be laid out on a thin sheet of perfectly polished brass, which was hidden from view by extra wood and ceremonial silk hangings of blue, yellow, crimson and green.

With the lighting of the flames, three rainbow clouds appeared, hovering above the smoke. This appearance seized the somber gathering, which roared to enthusiastic life. Then, there came forth a banging of drums and plucking of strings and ringing of bells, all pitched to the vibration of the universe and, together with the living fire that consumed their remains, all intended to provide the departing souls with sufficient energy to take them to the very center of the clear light wherein man derives his ultimate existence.

The fires burned for a full day, stoked by extra wood soaked in oil. The rainbow clouds hovered in the air near the funeral pyres by day and were transformed by night into clouds of glowing luminosity. The drumming and playing of music continued from sunrise past sunrise to the suns' zenith on the following day, whereupon relays of monks chanted their way round the ashen heaps in endless cycles as the rainbow clouds hovered nearby.

After fourteen days, during the hour when the suns' light had given early announcement of the day, the rainbow clouds disappeared, fading in the clear, high mist of early morning. The death celebrations completed, only then did the monks remove the sheet of polished brass to the temple. In a chamber specially designated for these things, the sheet was carefully examined.

With goose down brushes, the monks swept away all the ash and dust that might easily be removed. Lines, bubbles and bits of charcoal adhered to the sheet in a thousand different patterns: here the head and neck of a swan, there a clump of willows, now a dragon's tooth, then a school of fish pursued by some unseen threat. The heat had warped the metal in many places. Lines and dips and valleys, produced by the heat, resolved themselves into the outline of Tenzins' body, and also, by the use of some small facility of imagination resolved again, into a map of an inland sea, some low mountains and a great rift in the earth. Finally, where the outline of the head gave form to an unfolding lotus, was the perfectly formed image of a baby's foot.

"It has gone well, Rigath," Laninga said, congratulating the chief instructor. "Truly, this is the measure of the man. There are several distinctive features, for which the I AM be praised. Note the unusual lines dividing the top from the bottom of the foot, and the outside from the inside. It is the very divine cross by which we preface prayer. Have you ever seen anything so singular?"

"I have not, though the records in the Akasha reveal that Zoroaster had such a foot."

"In my native land," Laninga said thoughtfully, "this foot would belong to the leader of a great tribe, for he would surely have great energy and unshakable determination."

Rigath chuckled. "Surely, that could be said of you, my friend. Have you such a foot?"

Laninga looked at the paving stones, polished smooth by thousands of leather sandals over eons of time. "If it were," he said softly, "Would I have fled the slaughter of

my family and the capture of my brothers by those barbarians from the Inland Sea? I thank you for the intent of your question, but it is misplaced.”

Now, Rigath, who had the sight of such things, smiled to himself. ‘If it were not, my brother,’ he thought, ‘your bones would be scattered to the four winds long before now.’

“Save and protect the revealed image of The Most High,” Laninga said formally, “keeping it safe until the time. Record these patterns so that we may have them for our reference.” He indicated the portion of the metal which had the appearance of a map, with the several small points on it which looked like twinkling black stars, where the brass had reacted in the fire with some element of the body of the Most High. The black man stepped back from the metal sheet. Rigath made a small motion with his hand, and a lesser monk marked with beeswax the portions of brass to be copied and saved, outlining the portion containing the image of the baby’s foot for special attention.

Lanunga continued: “I confer soon with the High Astrologer. Would you care to join us? We do not all see the way with your clarity. I’m sure your guidance would be beneficial.”

Rigath smiled, clapping his hands together with delight. “I’ve already sent word to him that I will serve tea in my chamber, and the great books are to be brought there from the library. Would that suit you?”

Lanunga’s face wreathed with a grin. “Of course. Though I confess, in my own country, I’d have had a man whipped for taking such a liberty.”

Rigath’s face wreathed with a crooked, whimsical grin. “Surely, such a display of ill temper would not apply to an old person, such as myself. Not even in your country,

which I might like to see with my own eyes. Such a place must be particularly blessed to have spawned such as yourself.” Whether he was chiding the black man was hard to tell.

“I was merely seeking to help.”

Laniga laughed. He touched the older man gently on the shoulder. “Of course. In those times, the responsibility I bore was great, and bound to make one peevish.”

Rigath’s face was a model of surprised innocence. “You? Frankly, I’m surprised. It cannot be so. You are the very example of calm good temper.”

Laniga kept a straight face when he answered. “I thought I was peevish by right,” he said. “Do you suppose I’ve changed since I got here?”

Rigath’s face was expressionless. “It’s the air,” he said, bowing slightly toward the chief seeker. “Until later, then.”

The condemned men were led to the killing ground in the forenoon, in the fifth hour, before the turning of the glass. They had been ceremonially flogged to decrease their stamina and resistance, thirty-nine strokes with a Roman whip. Most of them staggered because of it.

Except for ragged loincloths, they were naked. The dust of their final journey clung to them, sweat and dirt smeared with blood. The skin on their backs hung in shreds, for the Roman lashes were loaded with knucklebone and lead. The bloody, raw flesh gleamed wetly in the merciless heat.

The weakest man had a withered arm. He had soiled himself and lost his bowels, the excrement making a steady liquid stream down his legs, pooling occasionally in his footprints. He staggered constantly under the weight of the bar, a strong beam of wood thick as a roof timber, the length of a tall man stretching. His skin was fairer than his companions, and he was also built much more slightly. To the two-score or so onlookers, it appeared that death might waylay him here on the road, before he reached his destiny.

One of his fellows, a strapping bull of a man with a scar on his bearded face, slowed to walk beside him. The big man shifted his burden and caught the swaying end of the smaller man's bar with a powerful hand, easily twice as large as the smaller man's well-formed delicate own.

"Steady friend," the big man said. He didn't know the smaller man's name. "It won't be long."

"No talking!" A whip took the big man across the shoulders with a loud *crack*. Though the body of the live coil snaked along the timber, the lash curled round to open a gaping cut on the big man's head, the searching tendril of the lash stroking the left eye

into sightlessness. The blood ran down his nose, through his beard onto the broad expanse of his chest. The big man clenched his teeth and gripped both bars more tightly. Then, with a conscious effort, he relaxed and appeared to feel not the slightest discomfort.

Through the good eye, he caught a glimpse of the small man, pasty-faced from fear. The sick man's eyes closed and words 'thank you' hung like the dust from the path on the still air.

In all, six ill-fated men made their way out of the village, along the dusty track skirting the base of a steep hillside covered with brambles and thirsty, neglected olive trees. There were also twelve armed legionnaires in breastplate and tunic to escort them, and the very progressing of the party along that dry way covered bronze helmets and all with a film of fine, flour-like dust as they moved along. In the lead was a Centurion on a horse taken from the desert people, a gray, razor-backed beast with a rubbed tail.

On both sides of the road, groups of onlookers composed largely of family or friends of the condemned picked their way through the brambles and rocks. Wives, mothers, fathers, daughters, sons or friends of the condemned, most would have hastened ahead, the dust at the rear was so thick, but no one dared pass the mounted Centurion.

The killing ground was two Roman miles from the village, at the top of a small rise, a mere two thousand paces from the last tiny hovel on the outskirts. It overlooked a shallow valley and some low, tree-covered hills in the medium distance. Sheep grazed on the far-away grass, still green where springs ran near the surface and the trees provided some protection from the scorching sun. When the toiling mass reached the killing

ground, a breath of air was all that was left of the wind off the Dead Sea, scarcely enough to push the dust away.

A score of timbers each the thickness of a man's waist had been set in stones and mortar, five cubits apart along a single line parallel to the hillside. Notches had been cut near the tops of the timbers, about four cubits from the ground. There were some evenly spaced holes drilled in the center of the uprights, beginning down a cubit from the notch.

In front of the timbers, five of the six men collapsed with their burdens. As the scourging had been designed to do, loss of blood and lack of food had made them weak. The big man showed no such weakness, and placed his burden on the ground as easily as if he'd been placing a sheep back in the fold. At a respectful distance, the crowd gathered. Muffled sobs mingled with open weeping and moans from the lips of the doomed, wretched men.

An old woman in a hooded, brown robe of cheap linen poured liquid from a goatskin into a bull-horn cup and proffered it to the weakest of the six, the small man whose bowels had failed him. "To speed you on your journey," she said, quietly. "Drink. The pain will be less."

The man seemed to have taken leave of his senses, staring blankly about. Then, at last comprehending, he took the cup in both hands, gulping the mixture quickly. He pushed the cup back at her. Drops of the liquid pooled at the end of his beard. "More," he said, hoarsely.

The woman began to pour out another draught, but a soldier with a coiled whip pushed her away. She saw blood on the bones that had been woven into the lash. The soldier loomed over her. He was missing an eye. "This traitor's had all he needs, old

woman,” he said harshly. “And others have need of your service. Go on about your business.”

The two soldiers pulled the exhausted man to his feet as the woman re-filled her cup again, adding a measure of a dried herb that she stirred with a short copper rod. Thus prepared, she moved to along to the big man. The drink she poured was a mixture of wine, myrrh and laudanum, a distillate of the opium poppy. She thrust the cup out in front of her, and was obviously affected by the soldier who had moved her along.

“What’s this?” The big man asked. He was relaxed and at ease, sitting down between his guards, waiting.

“To speed you on your way,” the woman replied.

The big man’s lips curled slightly, the beginning of a sneer perhaps, though his voice stayed steady. “I’ll be in Paradise soon enough,” he said easily. “Death holds no terror for me. ‘Tis but the closing of a door. I’ll have a new body and a new life ‘ere the Sabbath.”

The woman’s lips pressed together. “Such talk is unseemly at this hour,” she scolded. “‘Tis blasphemy.”

The big man chuckled without bitterness. “Perhaps you will have it so, old woman. But there is no cause for alarm, for truly, we cannot be harmed. I will be born again, old woman, and so will you. And when next we meet, I will remember your kindness. Give my draught to yonder fellow. He is more in need of it.” He had seen the other soldier push her away, and turned to the youngest of his guards, a smooth-faced fellow of perhaps twenty, as yet all length and no substance. “Gaius,” he said. The

soldier looked surprised. “That’s your name, isn’t it? Take the draught this woman pours for me and give it to him.” He pointed at the man with the withered arm.

The young soldier looked to his comrade, a stocky man with white beard-stubs everywhere on his unshaven face. He was a veteran of many battles and cared little for garrison duty, less for executions. “You heard the Jew,” the older man said roughly. Gaius took the horn cup and went to do as he was bid.

“My name is Tertius,” the veteran said quietly to the big man. “You’re a brave man for a Jew. I salute you.”

“I was... I am an Essene,” the big man corrected himself as if he thought the distinction was important. “Before that, I was a Jew from the line of Jacob, who became Israel. I have changed my name to Z’vulon, for by my death I intend to honor the Lord.” The soldier seemed not to comprehend. “That is the meaning of my new name. My task is to hold off death by my own will, until I choose to accept it.”

“Truly,” Tertius said ironically, over the Centurion’s voice reading the charges, first in Latin, then bad Hebrew. “A brave, but foolish goal. Might you have survived in this way in the desert, sparing yourself much agony?” Tertius scratched beneath his helmet, which fitted him poorly as a result of a sword blow by a brawling Parthian.

“Truly, you are a brave man indeed.”

“There are braver men than I.”

The Jew was serious. Tertius was tempted to ask if there were bigger fools, but instead, he said, “If there are, I confess, among your people I have not seen them.” He adjusted his breastplate where the harness had been frayed and repaired, scratching

beneath it where pooled sweat made it sticky. “The boldest are the Zealots, but I think true courage is not found in madmen. You do not seem mad to me.”

In saying that, Tertius recognized there were times when even the sanest of men must pretend to more courage than they had, or deny an unpleasant truth staring them in the face. This he did not count as madness, or if it was, it was understandable.

The young soldier had given the small man his second draught, holding the cup to allow him to drink, as the unfortunate fellow’s hands were in the act of being tied to rings set in the wood at either end of the bar. Then the crossbar with the man suspended from it was set in the notch of the main timber. The guards stood on wide stools to do this.

The soldier with the whip produced a carved wooden horn the length of a hand. Standing below the crucified man, he reached up between the victims’ lifeless legs and inserted the horn into one of the drilled holes.

Gaius watched with fascination. “What’s that?” he asked Tertius. Though he was not a raw recruit, having served in several small campaigns, he’d never participated in any execution, nor been in any pitched battles. He came from the farming country near the Padus River, west of *Genua*, in the northern part of *Italia*.

“To support his body slightly, so death will not come so soon,” Tertius said, shaking his head slightly. “I confess, I’d rather die in the arena.” ‘Small wonder the Jews hate it so,’ Tertius thought.

Just then, with the soldier’s hand still between his legs, the cripple’s bowels again let go, and a torrent of feces poured down the timber, over the Legionnaire’s bare arm. With an angry roar, the soldier leapt back, unfurled his whip and lashed out at the dying man’s face. With the sound of the whiplash came a hollow, crunching sound, as the

knuckle braided into the lash took the dying man in the forehead, an echoed afterthought. The man on the cross gave one last keening sigh as the breath deserted him.

Now pushed even further toward unthinking rage by the man's premature death, the soldier sent the whip flashing at the body several more times in the space of a full breath, cursing incomprehensibly the while. By then, all the soldiers were laughing.

"Maneus," Tertius shouted. "It seems the Jew has had the last word. The Emperor won't get much satisfaction from him." The soldiers laughed. "You'll have to rethink your procedure," some wag shouted from up the line. The laughter increased. At that, the inflamed man paused, fixing Tertius with a look of intense resentment.

"I wouldn't be turning my back on that one," Z'vulon bar Jacob observed cheerfully.

The whipping of the crucified man had stirred the crowd, and several rocks flew near the Legionnaire Maneus, though none struck him. All twelve soldiers drew their swords.

"Never fear," Tertius said, though it was hard to say whether he was speaking to the soldiers or the victims.

Two dark men with cloaks tied up around their loins stalked to and fro in front of the crowd, speaking intently. Their words were lost in the general racket. "Maybe they'll try to rescue you," the veteran said. "Then, you'll be spared much pain." He brandished the sword meaningfully. "We're under orders to slay you before we arrest them."

"Don't do anything hasty on my account," the big man said easily.

“One of the stalking men turned suddenly, pulling a dagger from the cloth wound about his waist. Giving a loud battle shout, he charged Maneus, the dagger held high. Maneus stood his ground, whip in one hand, sword in the other.

The Zealot’s charge brought him finally to grips with the soldier, who brushed the outstretched dagger aside as a horse’s tail swishes a fly. The short Roman sword made one stroke, and the Zealot’s body fell soundless, his last, hoarse shout fading on the wind.

When he saw the crowd was not with them, the second Zealot ungirded his loins and tried to lose himself among them, but fearing Roman wrath, the crowds melted away, so he always stood alone. Maneas, now without a prisoner, beckoned to his comrade and together they moved to arrest the second troublemaker. That Zealot fled through brush and scree, the Legionaries on his heels and gaining all the way down the hill.

The Centurion wheeled the horse, trotting to and fro in front of the crowd, glaring at them until they were silent. Some were praying, though here and there hostile stares followed his every move. Finally, satisfied his work could proceed without further interruption, he rode to the top of the line of crosses and addressed the big man in a formal voice.

“You are the Jew, Z’vulon, bar Jacob? Without waiting for reply, he recited from a scroll taken from a bag tied to his saddle, though he knew the words by heart. “For the crimes of conspiracy and treason, you have been condemned to death. Two witnesses have been heard against you, as prescribed by your own law.” He’d rolled up the scroll before he finished speaking and turned his horse away with a parting wave of his hand that told the soldiers to proceed.

The big man's wrists were strapped to the cross bar with wide thongs of raw hide, there being no rings on this relatively older bar. There were two holes drilled where the rings once were, and the holes were showing white wood where they had recently been removed. As he was able to stand, and partly because of his size, the big man was required to walk to the base of the upright and climb up on the stool. Even then, young Gaius protested he could not lift his half of the man. Another came to help, and together the three soldiers could not lift him either.

It took four men to raise the timber to the notch, which amused the Essene greatly. When it came time to place the support between his legs, Tertius mocked him, saying softly, "By now, most Jews are begging for the sword."

"'Tis merely that separation from their Mother the Earth distresses them greatly," Z'vulon replied easily, though he knew well that was not the reason. "But, as I have the aid of my Father in this, it is nothing. The sight of you all sweating to lift me has provided much amusement. I have no doubt I will live longer because of it."

"No doubt," Tertius said dryly. "And in agony, too. You are heavier than you look. But the support is high enough to give you time to regret your own weight and wish you had taken the drink when it was offered. What do you say to that?"

"I say that with the drink, the agony would be unspeakable. Without it, I could linger here forever, if I chose. Did my Father not already make me very heavy?" He coughed slightly and shifted himself on the cross. "It is you who are lucky. My father could have made me much heavier." If there was an air of irony in the big man's speech, Tertius missed it.

The Roman veteran snorted at what he took to be a display of bravado. He'd seen it before, and truth to tell, it always made him sad. He pulled the platform away and helped move it along to the next victim, leaving Z'vulon, Bar Jacob suspended, gazing at the sheep on the distant hills.

When all six men had been crucified, the soldiers allowed their loved ones to approach. The young wife of the dead man came near with a small boy and a babe in arms. Accompanying her was an old man, the dead man's father. They prayed quietly, while up the line others still mourned and conversed with the men still suffering.

The Roman guards watched that no one came too close, for fear the death agonies of the condemned be interrupted. It had happened that relatives had slain their own kinsmen, granting mercy before an appropriate toll in suffering had been exacted. Of the original six, only four were possibly at risk from their relatives. One man was already dead, and no one waited at the foot of the big man's cross. With an expression of rapture on his tortured face, the big man gazed out over the valley for six turnings of the glass, and by that time his condition had not altered, nor had he remarked of any discomfort.

During that same time, two more men had died. Now the crowd had thinned to less than fifteen souls. Observing the big man's stoically cheerful manner, the young soldier took advantage of Tertius's absence. "What manner of man are you?" he asked the crucified man whose eyes were hidden by black, ragged hair and the crust of blood on his forehead. The young soldier's voice trembled, and he knew others would read this as weakness.

The tone of the answer was surprise. "Why, a man, just as you will be," Z'vulon replied kindly.

“Impossible,” Gaius stated flatly. “You do this through some enchantment.” He stepped away from the cross a couple of paces to Z’vulon more clearly. “I have heard of such men as you. You are evil. It is well that you will die.”

“Oh, but I won’t.” The same kind voice drifted over him, like a dove, gliding on the still air. “Not until I will it myself.”

“Nonsense,” the boy said, more firmly. “How can that be?”

The Essene looked down from the cross and smiled. “Why, Gaius,” he said easily. “When your work is done, you must come and ask me from time to time. I’ll be here until the Sabbath begins.”

“If you can stay that long,” an eavesdropping soldier guffawed, “Why not stay until the Messiah comes?”

Laughing heartily, another eavesdropper said, “But don’t hold your breath. You’ll be there forever.” Over the laughter, the same man told Gaius, “Don’t take him seriously, boy. I’ve seen strong ones like him before. I’ll give three *shekels* the Jew doesn’t last past the third watch tomorrow night.”

No one took the bet. The man fixed Gaius with a glare. “Well, boy, where’s your stomach?”

“I... I don’t have three *shekels*,” the young soldier stammered, “and you don’t either.”

That brought gales of laughter. “By Jupiter,” said the gambler, a Greek whose name was Philander. “I don’t need three *shekels*. I am going to win.”

“Still, if you were to lose, how would you pay?” Now, a couple of his fellows were holding their sides with amusement. All were smiling. As they spoke Latin, few of

those remaining could understand. For their part, the soldiers were so occupied with this merriment: they gave no thought to the anger and contempt directed at them by the remaining crowd.

“I’ll stand for him.” A tall, dark soldier with scars on his face from a whip rubbed the broad scar thoughtfully. Cassius Hortius, widely thought to still have the first coins the Empire ever gave him placed an arm protectively around the would-be gambler. “You will take a double wager, Philander,” he said, “And I will share it with you.” He grinned crookedly. “Now, boy, how will you pay?”

“With my help,” a Legionary shouted from the end of the line, raising his hand.

“And mine.”

“And mine.”

“I too, Cassius. You marked not how the fellow withstood the whipping, or how he carried two cross beams to this place. I will have some of your salt, with pleasure.” Tertius spoke from the road, where he had just obtained skins of drink, both water and wine.

Cassius looked at the gambler whose jesting eagerness brought this financial opportunity about. “Then it is agreed,” he laughed. “Six *shekels* worth the Jew makes it not past the third watch into the day after tomorrow.”

Then Gaius spoke. “By Diana’s wiles,” he said, “I’m feeling generous. I’ll be bound to offer you another day, Cassius, if you’ll double your wager.” His surprised comrades hooted in support of this daring increase, a couple of them blowing on their fingertips. At his own boldness, Gaius was as surprised as anyone, for truth to tell, the words sprang unbidden from his lips.

Cassius had not been aware the man on the cross above had carried two beams, for his own charge had walked right behind the centurion's horse. He knew Tertius was a very canny judge of men indeed. Now he was beset by second thoughts, though to lose the amount would have wounded him nowhere but in his pride. Seeking a way to cancel the wager, Cassius made as if he could not decide then pulled a squared piece of the knee-bone of an ox from a pocket in his belt. He held it aloft. "What do the Gods say?" he asked rhetorically.

"They say the count will be odd," Tertius said coldly.

"I prefer the even to increase my bet," Cassius said, with an ease he didn't feel.

"Then bet with someone else," Tertius replied with a growl. "Do as you will, but do not toy with us, Cassius, I advise you. Look, the man grows faint already. He may not last the night."

And indeed, the Essene had suddenly faded. Eyes closed, his breathing seemed labored and his body hung limp on the cross.

Cassius smiled to himself, as even the Gods, it seemed, were smiling. He clutched up the die and replaced it in his belt. "Then, truly the Gods have spoken," he cried. "Tis done!"

It was then that the two soldiers, all dust and blood, returned from chasing the second Zealot. He had, they said, hidden himself in a field below, behind a rock near a watering place, seeming for a time to have vanished into thin air. They had searched for him persistently, but he had been well hidden. Maneus laughed that they must have gone near him several times before the Jews' nerve failed. Finally, when they came at last too

close to his hiding place, the frightened man fled broke from his cover like a stag, and Maneus had stopped him with the whip.

They had strangled him then, and as a warning, hung his disemboweled body on a tree nearby. Maneus showed the three Jewish coins taken from the Zealot's purse as proof of the story, and pay for his trouble. When they discovered the wager in progress, Maneus added the three coins stamped with wheat sheaves and grapes to Cassius's position.

At first, nobody wanted the Jewish coins because, without the Emperor's visage stamped upon them, the coins were useless outside Judea. Still, when one of the soldiers remarked that the wine the coins would buy was every bit as good as any Augustus money would pay for, the coins were accepted.

In the half-hour before sunset, one more man died.

When the dead man's family and friends departed, the family of the other surviving man went with them. They wept as they went. Though they would have wished to be with their kinsman until he had given up the spirit, still they feared to be near the place during the dark hours, when evil spirits were abroad.

When they had gone, the soldiers cut the muscles along the man's ribs with a sword as an act of mercy. He was delirious then, too weak to cry out. Deprived of the power to inflate his lungs, the man soon expired. Then the soldiers left.

"Walk behind them," Tertius said softly to the boy. "I will abide here until you return with food. And cloaks."

The light from a quarter moon low in the sky shone full in the boy's face, revealing his astonishment. He opened his mouth to protest. The older man pushed him gently.

"Do as you are told, there is money at stake. We cannot leave until the man is dead, and we have wagered he will live past two days time. Use your head. There are evil spirits about, as well you have heard. What would stop such a spirit from dispatching our investment?" The boy's head nodded quickly. With a grin, he disappeared into the darkness.

"I offer you water," Tertius said to the man on the cross. He got no answer. "What, are you gone already?" he continued. "By Mars and Jupiter, this is a disappointment."

"I need no water," said the Essene. His voice in the darkness seemed completely at ease.

'Amazing,' Tertius thought, 'the way this man toys with weakness.'

"But you need not worry," the Jew remarked. "Though your kindness is tainted, your wager is safe."

Tertius was surprised. *Was the man making fun of him? Chuckling?* By the God of battle! As he sat there in the darkness, waiting, he said finally, "Do you really expect to survive two days, Z'vulon son of Jacob?" A strange sound came from the man on the cross. *He was! The man really was chuckling!*

"I have told you," the Essene said, more patiently than one might have expected from someone in his position, "I will depart between the appearance of the first and third stars that herald the Sabbath. If you look for me after the trumpet calls the workers from

the fields, you will not find me. In truth, before the second trumpet signals the lighting on the lamps, that the Sabbath may begin to shine, I will be with my Father, in the bosom of Abraham. In Paradise.”

The Jew spoke with such calm assurance it was hard to believe he was where he was. Tertius said no more, but steeled himself against the night chill. He had never seen anyone survive crucifixion for more than two days, and that in terrible agony. Now, this man had assured him he could survive four with ease, and Tertius was beginning to believe him. That he had contributed a wager to this effect was simply his sporting blood. But this seemed more and more to be a certainty, not a bet of the kind he knew. It was a wonderment.

When Gaius returned, the two built a fire a few paces from the foot of the cross and ate. Then, under a display of falling stars wonderfully brilliant, they talked of many strange things, not the least of which was the crucified Jew above them. Tertius had been even more surprised when the Essene’s voice, floating through the earthbound blackness, bid them take their rest. He would keep watch, he said, because he was going to be awake anyway. *There was that chuckle again.* Finally, taking the suspended man at his word, they slept.

The shepherd Avnayr saw the birds while he was yet a long way off. He’d been entrusted with a written message from his uncle to a kinsman in Shechem, concerning a consignment of lambs for the temple. His uncle’s stock was particularly prized because they were well made and healthy.

A pernicious flux had rendered the flocks of the hill country near Y'rushalayim stunted and sickly in recent years. That was the reason good sacrificial stock for the Passover and other religious festivals was scarce. For the well-to-do in the city, to sacrifice a good lamb invited the envy of friends and the continued good will of the Deity. This unctuous rivalry meant the demand for his uncle's lambs was brisk, and prices good.

Barely sixteen, he had never been away from his home, a small village two days march from Shechem. It still lacked the first turn of the hourglass when the boy, returning from his errand, rounded a turn of the hillside to see birds of prey circling purposefully ahead.

As he traveled past them earlier, Avnayr had noted the uprights. Their occurrence was, as he thought, unnatural, but he asked no person about them, for he traveled alone and could not speak, being mute from a fall.

When he saw the crosses with their grisly burdens, and the birds, he was horrified. Though he had seen death before, of man and bird and animal, nothing prepared him for the sight of six suspended bodies being picked over by carrion birds, all quarreling and snatching the flesh from each other's very beaks before, with a dip and a whirl through the confusion, they were away.

He thought he must have surely been transported to Sheoul, where the dead await judgement. He closed his eyes tightly to banish this wizard's captivation, but the sound, the smell of rotting flesh and bird dung remained. He stood awhile, eyes agape.

Three soldiers stood conversing with a man suspended from the second cross in the line. Though the birds were all around, flocking thickly enough to obscure his view

from time to time, yet the crucified man was un-bothered in any way. The soldiers gave no sign of discomfort either, for no bird ventured near them, to within three lengths of a shepherd's crook.

'I am dreaming,' Avnayr told himself firmly, as a couple of the smaller buzzards swooped low over his head. 'There is the proof.' He marveled at the very lucid-ness of the dream, and searched his memory for the beginning of it. Yet try to recall as he would, reality stretched behind him in a seamless whole, including the taste of the dates, cheese and water with which, before the last star had fled the morning sky, he'd broken his fast. The rapid increase in the beating of his heart presaged, or so he thought, his waking from this terrible spectacle.

The young shepherd's horror stemmed from the Jewish need to treat their dead with respect, a requirement of faith. The remains even of those executed were tenderly wrapped, perfumed and properly disposed of. The Scriptures told of crimes heinous enough to warrant the criminal's body being consigned to a dung heap, but Avnayr could not conceive of such a thing. His heart beat faster, yet the dream showed no sign of relenting.

Finally, overcome by terror and revulsion at the scene, nearly tripping over himself in panic, he ran past the crosses toward the village. Nor did he slow until he had shaken the dust of that place from his feet, three full miles on the other side, where a dry stream-bed intersected the Roman road.

There, a goats-path veered away to the north, up into a narrow valley. The road itself continued on, up over the eastern ridgeline and east again, down to the permanent Legionary camp at Engedi.

Avnayr felt calmed as soon as he left the road. It lacked the forth hour, yet he was exhausted by panic and fear. The last leg of his journey would take him up the path to the far end of the valley, where for some distance, the path criss-crossed up a steep, rocky slope. His uncle's flocks were pastured on the heights.

Up the valley some two thousand paces, not more, a spring bubbled from beneath some rocks surrounded by willows and brambles. In these parts it was the custom for shepherds to rest themselves at mid-day, following the example of their flocks. Though the heat was not yet at it's worst, this was the last shaded place until he reached his uncle's tents.

As a young shepherd, he was constantly being warned of the dangers of idleness; even so, he reflected that God had brought him to this place early, so he might think about the strange and terrifying dream the *Ah-do-nai* had provided for his edification. Of the fact that his experience was the result of wizardry, he had no doubt.

What else could explain the five dead men, and the soldiers talking with the sixth man, untouched, as it would seem, by his exposure on the cross whilst a sea of birds roiled around him?

To ensure his safety, therefore, Avnayr ritually invoked the archangels and felt their protection descend upon him before he slept. A slight breeze stirred the leaves above him, and a flickering of the sunlight fell upon his eyelids. As he slept, he began to dream, and soon, his mind was full of wonder.

He was in a strange place, where he saw no one. Around him, the cliffs were black and shiny smooth, the reflected sunlight breaking into a thousand-thousand rays of

light. That light was everywhere, columns and rays intersecting in a most marvelous fashion. Suddenly, a temple, composed of pure light surrounded him.

And the rays that formed the temple also concentrated their essence ahead, at a single, solid point hanging in the air, a perfectly formed miniature sun. The sun glowed from within and pulsed with colors, now red, now orange, now yellow, now green, now sky blue, then purple then indigo and the light was all there was.

Avnayr could not take his eyes from the pulsing globe, though it was bright indeed. He went to his knees, but the voice of the power within the light that was all colors at once appeared in his mind, and said, *“You are welcome to this place, Avnayr. You are well come.”* Now hearing that voice which appeared, as he thought, in the center of his head, the young shepherd was afraid. Then the voice spoke more softly. *“Fear not, but come to me.”*

Avnayr obeyed, and as, with timid steps, he approached the Power, a feeling of bliss overcame him. He began to weep tears of great joy.

“Fear not, Avnayr. Long have I watched your courage in the world. Your life is truly a model of virtue, blessed in my sight. Behold, that which you sought is upon you.”

The gentleness and majesty of the voice as it was perceived by the young boy’s mind caused waves of energy to flow up and down his spine. He trembled. ‘Lord,’ he thought, ‘speak not to me, for I am but a twice dumb shepherd, unworthy of even the scraps from your table.’

“Even so, Avnayr, Candle of the Lord. I choose a speechless shepherd even as I chose Mosheh, another whose speech was affected.” The voice, which spoke without speaking, resounded in his head. *“You are well named, Candle of the Lord. By the*

divine fire in your loins will My Glory be spread among your children, and your children's children. Yea, by the will of your own family, it shall be even so."

Now the power coursing through the shepherd's body grew too great to bear. Again on his knees, he thought, 'use me as you will.'

"This covenant do I make with thee," said the Voice. "It shall come to pass that when the sign of the fish is nigh, and the rains are exceedingly plentiful, I will send my Spirit to be upon you, and you will consort with the spirit of a young woman in my Name. The young woman shall conceive a son, blessed in my sight."

The young man did not dare look again at the face of God. 'Lord,' he thought, 'Surely I am in the grip of some demon. This cannot be.' As he watched, the globe coursed with fire quite terrible to behold. Now Avnayr was full of despair. 'I shall die for this rapture,' he said to himself. 'Oh, doom! It is a dream of my death.'

Gentle, and loving, and kind, the Voice continued. *"Have faith and fear not. You are my truly begotten son, in whom the Father is well pleased. This shall be my covenant with you. When the child is born, you will regain your speech in naming the child. And mortal men shall praise Our son, and Mine, who will speak the truth unto the ages, even as you will speak wisely until the end of your days."*

Then, with a sound such as that of a mighty wind stirred up, the light expanded, so it seemed to be both outside and inside the young shepherd, Avnayr. At that, a hare moved in the thicket: the light, the temple... all were gone.

Now Avnayr smelled fire, though he felt no heat and the sun was bright upon his face as he curled up in the thicket. Heart pounding from the dream, he opened his eyes to find he was surrounded by the pentacles. They hung in the air above him, their forms

indicated by a flame that burned pure blue, just as in his imagination he had *seen* them as they were magically erected before his dreaming. He was astonished.

Never before had the forms been so real. As befitting a young man schooled in the hidden knowledge of *Aur Kasdeem*, the light of the magicians, he had spent much time practicing the rituals through which the I AM made it's wishes known to man. From time out of mind, these had been passed orally to the seed of Abram, recorded nowhere but in the awareness of practicing adepts.

With his third eye, he had seen the pentacles and other marvels many times, but never before had the flames been manifest. The impression was so very real, this time the leaves withered, curling at a touch from the blue flame.

As he stood outside the thicket, the pentacles hovering about him, his mind was full of wonder: a strange dream indeed. The leaves inside, where he had rested, did seem a little withered. He turned to go, and in the echoing of an instant the voice from within his dream spoke to him, as a far-off voice is sometimes abducted by the wind.

'You are well come, Avnayr. Well come.'

Though he had been tired before, and somewhat hungry, Avnayr realized those discomforts had disappeared without a trace. His belly felt full, as it usually did only on the Sabbath. He was not even slightly thirsty, though the day's reflected heat was still intense as, on his way up the valley, the shepherd boy passed by outcroppings of rock and sun-baked earth.

These occurred more frequently as he went, the pentacles fading about him as he walked along. They were visible only to his inner eye when he crested the last hill and

saw at last the tents of his family, and their livestock spread before him on the upland plain.

"You appear to feel no pain," Tertius said, the words coming with an ongoing sense of surprise. He took a small sip of water to wash the cheese and pomegranate fragments from his mouth, and continued his thought without a trace of sarcasm as he peered up at Z'vulon, bar Jacob. "Perhaps you could live forever." He shook his head. "Perhaps you could."

The Essene's demeanor had been unchanged now for a full day and more, best characterized by a profound sense of indifference, both to his fate and to the goings-on immediately about him. For long periods of time he stared out at the distant hills, where the fierce heat had driven even the sheep across the valley to shelter. Usually at this, the ninth hour, elements of a large flock could be seen watering at a spring near the base of the hill opposite. Today, there were none.

"Perhaps boredom troubles you?" Tertius said to the hanging man. He found conversation with this rebel fascinating, and also wished the man had more to say during this unprecedented ordeal.

"I am quite content." The Essene's voice was soft, untroubled, one might have said lazy.

Tertius rubbed olive oil on his shoulder and bare chest, where the frayed strap of his breastplate had chafed him. The heat was so intense that wearing his armor without cause during the heat of the day was out of the question, so he waited out the time given for the wager in a *saq*, the linen loincloth that was the basic garment for men throughout

all the Eastern Empire.

As a shelter against heat and flying dung from the several hundred birds soaring over the killing ground from dawn until dusk, the legionnaires had improvised a lean-to from a measure of tenting canvas, tightly spun cotton rubbed with oil. One side was staked down near the cross, the high side stretched between two pikes directly in front of it. This rude shelter provided protection from the continuous bombardment of clinging waste, and was indeed its primary function, since the reeking product coated everything for several rods round about, including but half the improvised structure.

Even so, the cross on which Z'vulon, bar Jacob was suspended occurred in the very middle of an egg-shaped circle twelve cubits or more in radius that was entirely free of any contaminant. This fact had also evoked the interest of both Gaius and Tertius, even before they formulated the hypothesis that some unseen force, some charm connected to the Essene kept the birds, or at least their dung, away. The location of the shelter had been chosen with this fact in mind, and the high side in particular had been positioned in safe ground. There, Tertius's sword and *cuiraceus* hung from one pike, his chain mail tunic and undershirt from the other.

"By tomorrow evening the bet will be won," Tertius said loudly, as if volume was the key to conversation with this invincible Jew. "Frankly, I'm starting to like you, and wonder if there might be something I could do to show my gratitude. Have you kinsmen?"

"You are my kinsmen," Z'vulon replied. "You and the lad, Gaius. Everyone I know is my kinsman."

"By Jupiter, you are a strange one," Tertius said, squinting against the sun. "I wish you could live forever."

"That won't be necessary," the suspended man said easily. "Not this time. Until the Sabbath will be quite good enough."

Tertius wiped his brow. Even standing briefly in the sun made him sweat. "I don't know how you do it," he said. "I declare I don't." He scratched himself in frustration and squinted up again at the man on the cross.

It was certainly a trick of the mind, but for an instant Z'vulon's face seemed to glow, though still covered with the dried blood from the whip lash, and an increasing film of dust. "How many times must I remind you, it is not I who does this thing," the big man said, "but my Father, who dwells in me."

Tertius pressed chapped lips together with irritation. The man had been talking like this for two days and a half. It was utter nonsense, of course. Every civilized person knew the identity of the Gods, how they lived and frolicked together beyond the concern of ordinary mortals, and how, if the Gods were pleasantly disposed toward someone, they might lend assistance every now and then.

As a soldier, Tertius felt especially close to Mars, the God of War, whose help he had experienced in battle many times. Still, he recognized that whenever Mars filled him with courage, or new energy, the source was "out there", not some place back of the lungs, or in his right foot, or in the guts somewhere, above the *gluteus maximus*.

The Jew's courageous endurance seemed proof positive of an affinity with Mars

which, Tertius felt, gave them common ground. Part of the Roman's interest in the man, aside from curiosity, and the alleviation of his own boredom, was to discover more about the remarkable power of this Jew. "You'd have a hard time choosing to live until the Sabbath if I chose to run you through," Tertius said, just to find out what the Jew would say.

"Don't threaten me with that," the big man said, very confidently, given his situation. "Until tomorrow, you can't afford it." There was his infuriating chuckle again.

"Tomorrow still lacks a day to the Sabbath," Tertius pointed out curtly, frustration turning his voice flat. "After the bet is won, then what will stop me from running you through?"

Z'vulon seemed unconcerned, staring off into the sky. "My Father will think of something," he said, so softly Tertius thought the voice was in his mind. The Roman examined the Essene's face for some sign of feeling, but there was none, though in truth, what with the dried blood crusted across the face it was hard to tell.

"Trying to talk to you is very frustrating," the Roman remarked. "Do you realize that?" Without waiting for an answer, he went back into his shelter.

Dark eyes stared down at the lean-to, bird dung crusted white and solid across half of it. "You should be up here, Tertius," the big man said softly, "but all must eventually do this, or something similar. Don't worry. Your turn will come."

The Roman had not been in the shelter long when Gaius arrived, with Cassius close on his heels. Tertius heard their footsteps and came out to stand in wait where no bird

dung fell until they joined him.

"Unusual, is it not?" Tertius indicated the dung-marked circle on the surrounding grounds with a wave of his hand. "I have never seen the like of it," he added, quite unnecessarily.

Cassius rubbed a hand indifferently across the scar on his face and studied the condition of the crucified Essene, looking for some clue as to his endurance. "I fear 'tis sorcery," he muttered darkly, shaking his head. "Perhaps the Gods wish us to call the bet off."

"If the Gods wanted that, they would have permitted you to cast your altered dice when first you expressed your fear." Tertius laughed, but his eyes did not.

"Here's an insult to the Gods," Cassius said, his lips curling in a sneer. "Do you call the Gods *villanus*?" He took an aggressive quarter-step toward Tertius, whose sword, still in its scabbard, hung from the farthest pike.

"The Gods, being Gods, are honest always, Cassius." Tertius moved in closer to the tall man. "The biggest villains call upon them the most."

Cassius stepped back again and opened his mouth as if to speak. Tertius held up his hand. "Do not bandy words with us. You see the Jew still lives. We protect him from evil until he dies of his own accord."

"But I have brought wine," Cassius protested innocently. "In every wager there should be a sporting chance. As I am a fair-minded..."

"But if he will take nothing from us," Gaius said innocently, as he had just begun to

realize the miser's motives, "why would he accept wine from you?"

"You've seen how he is, Cassius. He wants nothing, for nothing.. Now surely, you have another errand." Tertius looked narrowly at the man. "Perhaps counting your money would occupy you until the matter is settled."

Cassius smiled craftily. "I will leave the wine..."

"Take it with you and drink it yourself, or feed it to these birds."

Cassius frowned. Heaving a sigh of ill-concealed frustration, he slung the strap of the wineskin more firmly across his shoulder and looked down at the determined Tertius. "Perhaps the day will come when you will regret this," he said, an implied threat hanging in the still air.

Gaius was shocked, for it was clear that the miser's concern for money drove out all thought of fairness, a truth he was seeing as if for the first time. The young man was ever willing to regard every man as a friend, and this innocence was a quality sorely threatened by this realization.

Tertius spat a small husk of pomegranate onto the ground. "Perhaps I will one day have Juno Herself as a mistress, though I consider it not at all likely." To Gaius, he said, "Did you bring water?"

"Here." Gaius held one of the two goatskin water bags toward Tertius, who nodded and took the skin, hanging it on one of the pikes as he collected his belted sword with one long arm.

"There is yet bread in the tent, with some dates and cheese." He jerked his thumb

over his shoulder. "Rest yourself, and watch carefully. I will keep Cassius company on his way back to the village." He slung the belted sword casually over his shoulder. He took up an empty goat-skin bag also, and clapped a broad hat of woven straw across his head, leaving his helmet and armor still hanging in the shade of the lean-to.

"Come, Cassius," he said evenly, fixing the man with an intense look, "on our way back, you can explain to me how the dice you throw always come up odd. It's a question I have long wanted to explore with you."

He put a burly arm around the man's waist, and together they strolled away, though after a few rods, Cassius pulled himself away from Tertius's arm and adjusted his harness haughtily.

On the cross, Z'vulon appeared to be dozing, eyes closed, mouth relaxed. Gaius caught himself thinking how normal it was for a man hung there so long to rest. He, too, had every confidence the Essene would live as he said, until sun-down of the sixth day of the week, the advent of the Jewish Sabbath. If he lived past today, into the third watch of the night, Philander would lose the bet, and Cassius would have to pay. Gaius smiled slightly, and shivered with delight at the thought of a full year's wages, not in salt, but ready money. Perhaps he could find some place to invest this windfall, he thought happily. He would discuss this with Tertius at the first opportunity.

The young soldier unbuckled his sword and hung it on the pike, removed his breastplate and sat at the foot of the cross. Though his bluntly-cropped blond hair was wet with sweat, a slight breeze played across his chest beneath his tunic, cooling him. After

two and a half days, the clamor of the birds was hardly noticeable, though from time to time a juicy *plop* served as a reminder of their presence. By this time, he hardly noted the smell.

Gaius sat at the foot of the cross looking out across the valley. The crosses had been positioned atop a steep rise that gave a commanding view of the land below. An indolent trickle of water indicated the lateness of the season as it searched for lower elevations along a stream-bed winding across the valley floor, now on one side, now on the other. A man-made dike followed the water for some distance to the right, where the bi-annual rains had been seen to cause flood damage. Clumps of trees sprang up at several points where underground water came near enough to the surface to nourish deep roots.

To the left, near the upstream bank, a single donkey trudged in an endless circle, powering a pump that directed water from a well through ditches to thirsty fields. Two small boys watched over the animal from the shade of some nearby trees.

This dryness of land and air was a new experience for Gaius. In his homeland, where the rivers ran constantly, the earth was black and even in days of intense summer heat, there was never the sense that the very air in search of moisture made the body thirsty and weak.

He had now been on two desert expeditions, one to the south, and one to the east that had changed him in several ways. For example, never more would he waste water, or drink it just to wet his mouth. Rather, he would chew something, or even suck on a stone. Like most everybody else who had experienced that terrible country, he'd developed the

habit of watering in the cool hours, and covering up in the warm ones, so that moisture, evaporating into his clothing, would keep him cooler.

Even here, in the high hills north of Hebron, where water was comparatively plentiful, the unnecessary consumption of that precious liquid bothered him, the memory of his recent desert experience was so vivid.

Therefore, when he became thirsty, he first looked for the little bag of dates in the shelter, then for fruit, of which all, despite Tertius's assurance, had been consumed. Finally, when the other alternatives had been exhausted, he sought the goatskin water bottle hanging from the pike.

He was removing the stopper when the Jew spoke to him. "The water is tainted," Z'vulon said. What stopped Gaius was the urgency in the voice of the hanging man.

"It cannot be," the young soldier said. "This is a new skin and the water is fresh from the village well this morning. I filled it myself, with my own hand."

"The water contains essence of hemlock." The words were spoken so softly Gaius had to strain to hear them. "Your first drink from that skin will be your last." It was then as if the Essene was in his mind, for Gaius heard without hearing, "Do you remember how you set the skins down and went aside to relieve yourself, after the passing of the young Idumean woman with her goats?" At this, Gaius stared in disbelief. The Essene continued. "You remember the woman who was clad in a carmine robe? Marked you how her speckled ram had but one horn."

Gaius was astonished. "Truly," he said, leaping to his feet, "this is wizardry.

How...?"

The Essene's gentle voice interrupted him. "Who was it handed back your water bags to you again?" The young soldier's mind fixed instantly upon the scarred face of Cassius, proffering the skins for him and grinning in a most ingratiating way. No sooner had that image been recalled to his mind when the Jew said again, "That skin is tainted. Do not drink of the water."

Gaius's mouth worked speechlessly. Finally, he stammered, "What proof...?"

A gentle chuckle came down from the cross. "What proof do you need, young one? Did you not relieve yourself while a woman of the desert passed by with goats this morning? Are speckled rams with one horn that common? How think you I saw her? From here?" Though the Essene did not laugh, Gaius felt his amusement like a hot wind over his face.

He shook his head against this development. Truly, the man was a wizard, and a powerful one. That thought led directly to another. Why did the man not come down from the cross, if he had so much power? He felt something cool dribbling down his leg. "The skin leaks," he said, surprised. "But it is new."

"Truly." Z'vulon didn't seem surprised in the least. "Turn out the water and observe the birds. That will be your proof."

Gaius poured some of the water from the goatskin bag into his helmet and that of Tertius as well, setting both beyond the charmed circle. In a few moments, some three or four of the smaller birds had drunk from it. This attracted the attention of some larger

birds that came to drink. These upset both helmets in their squabbling for dominance. The water leaked quickly away.

"If I portion out more water, there will not be enough," the young Roman commented. "Now I will never know." Frankly, he felt silly.

The reply appeared in his mind. "Wait."

The young legionnaire sat at the foot of the cross again, thinking about how thirsty he was getting, but when he was about to complain aloud the reality of the situation struck him, and he held his piece.

In only a few moments, some of the smaller birds were coming to earth. Two of them, awkward on their feet as they were anyway, now staggered in a very suspicious way. Eventually some eight or ten birds were behaving in this manner, and three were on the verge of death.

By the Gods," the youth said softly to himself, "there may be something in what the fellow says after all."

No sooner had this thought escaped his lips but one of the larger vultures dropped out of the sky like a stone, dashing itself to death within the circle of unsullied ground. The Essene's voice seemed to float on the wind.

"The water is tainted."

"But for you, I would have drunk and died," Gaius said, now standing, to look first down, at the bird, then up, at the Essene. In his gratitude, his first thought was to free the man, if he could. The treasonous nature of the thought was interrupted by Z'vulon's voice.

"This occurrence which has come to pass was arranged for us before we were born," the Essene said. "Give no further thought to it, and feel no guilt on my account, but pray that you absorb the teaching it offers."

"Oh, would that you were going to live forever," the young Roman said.

"I AM." It was a strange thing for the Jew to say, and when he thought about it, Gaius realized... That voice hadn't sounded like Z'vulon at all.

"The boy is not himself."

Esther, mother of Avnayar, spoke to her daughter, whose name was Yawneenaw, which means Dove. The two women had come into the pastures bearing a mid-day portion of dates, almonds and cheese for the herdsman, five shepherds and several small boys.

By now, all who knew him had noticed. In some indefinable way Avnayar had changed. The change had left him, not disinterested in his work, for he cared for his animals in the same careful fashion he always had, but in a manner strangely distracted, as if he were waiting for something consequential to occur. Whatever he expected was not frightening however, for instead of moping about unhappily, his face wore the perpetual half-dreamlike smile of an unshared secret.

"It is almost as if he had been consecrated by air," Esther mused, as the two women stopped to pick blackberries on their way back to the encampment. "Your father's face bore such an expression for several weeks after his achievement of that rank. But that is impossible." She ate a blackberry, savoring the sweet taste of it, warmed by the sun.

Yawneenaw said. "Perhaps he has found himself a woman." That idea amused her, though there was nothing inherently funny about a woman finding her brother interesting. In some quarters, his inability to speak might be regarded as a bonus, and that was what amused her. She too, sampled a berry from the ones fresh-picked in the woven reed basket.

"Do not even joke about that, my little Dove," Esther replied. "In this land, where the pious give tongue and naught else to their faith, you'll have him stoned for some outrage or other."

Yawneenaw laughed. "Oh, Mother, be just a little charitable. This talk is just between us." She took a cluster of berries from the bush with a practiced hand and put most of the effort in her mouth.

"And for that, may *El Shadai* be thanked. Oh, how I wish your father had not been persuaded to bide in this place so alive with the self-righteous and devoutly ignorant."

"Now look to see who judges," Yawneenaw smiled, her mouth full of fruit. "Even the Romans are more tolerant."

"Tolerant, is it?" Esther said firmly. "And well might they be. Though they can build roads and baths and circuses, I fear their grasp of spiritual truth is as democratic as they are. Like reeds in the wind, they blow with the fashions of the time, as though choosing a God were like choosing a cloak from a tailor, or melons in the marketplace." She held a branch and expertly ran a cluster of berries into her basket with a pinching motion. "Still, I am grateful for them."

Yawneenaw's mouth curled disapprovingly. "Mother. How can you say that?"

A branch snapped in her mother's hand. "Why, with perfect ease," Esther replied. "With Roman soldiers stationed nearby, there is peace, and people in the countryside at least may conduct their affairs without fearing that Herod's spies will bring charges against them. But you are too young to remember how my brother and his family were executed on the word from perjured witnesses, all his goods and land forfeit to one of Herod's friends."

Yawneenaw's eyes widened. She stopped in the act of sorting some of the less ripe berries from the basket. "Truly," she said. "I do not remember hearing you speak of it."

"And with good reason," her mother said, wiping the juice of the berries from her hands with a bit of cloth. "Even at this distance from Y'rushalayim, Herod has many informants, and if some of those round about were to realize who your father is, even now, they might bring this to the King's attention." She stepped out of the bushes. "Come. The heat grows fierce, and there is bread yet to make."

The women walked together toward the tents, Yawneenaw growing increasingly more puzzled. "Who is my father, anyway, that the King might have business with him?"

This was really a rhetorical question, the sort calculated to keep her mother talking. Though she had seen things in her family's religious practice that quite astonished her, until that very moment Yawneenaw had not realized this information was dangerous at all.

Her assumption had been that the oral tradition of the hidden magical arts, which both her father and mother had been at pains to impart to their children was a part of every

family's experience, an invisible, unspoken thread alongside the written tenets of the Jewish faith, confidential by mutual accord. She knew the reason for silence about such things was to prevent the dilution of magical power, and this new implication was startling.

‘I refuse to believe it,’ she said to herself. Aloud, she said, "Father is not hiding, and nor are we."

The Dove knew this to be deliberately provocative, for she now realized that things hitherto unsuspected lay behind the issue frequently discussed by the women of the line of Dawvid, often heatedly. This was the difference between being merely passive keepers of the magical knowledge of *Ha-Quabala*, and being active proponents of this knowledge through open practice of the rituals and ready acceptance of the results.

The former course, which involved waiting until the knowledge was called for by some qualified person, was the path followed by her father, Eleehu. Though this chafed her at times, with age came increased understanding. Today, the reason for his discretion became clear.

However, the latter course was preferred by his children, and involved displays of naked power of the sort heard of in the stories, the sort Mosheh provided to Pharaoh on behalf of the Israelites in their storied time of Egyptian bondage, plagues, sticks turning into snakes, and similar prodigies. This preference doubtless gave him many anxious moments.

The current dispute had first been presented to Eleehu bar Dawvid for adjudication by Avnayr and Y'meenaw, which had been her childhood name, when the boy was but

eleven and the girl thirteen. Beyond the Rite of Protection, their first instruction in the magical arts involved the evocation of healing from the East Side of the Pentagram. Both children had been taught to call upon the flames of healing, both blue and green, gift of the Archangel Rafael.

Avnayr's first unstructured attempt to use this new power had healed the broken leg of a sheep. Though the perfect right use of the Archangel's power healed instantly, in this case the sheep's leg had been rendered whole within one night. To reach this level of achievement often took months, sometimes years, so the growing power of the boy was noted by all that knew of the case, and his teacher praised.

As for Y'meenaw, the healing of a Dove's wing was her first experience with the power hidden within. The incident occurred shortly after her brother, with the aid of his Father and the sanction of *El Shadai*, healed the sheep.

Though both children knew that such things were possible, having seen their parents work similar prodigies, the flowing of the power at their own request was occasion for much joy. They talked incessantly about this marvelous thing that had come to pass, eagerly awaiting their father's return from the wilderness to the south, whence he had gone to collect magical substances. The world, they felt, was about to change.

"Father, father," the young woman had shouted as she burst into their sleeping tent with Avnayr at her heels. The fruits of his venture, healing herbs, some crystalline rocks and sacks of earth, were still hanging from him, and he had not yet doffed his outer travelling robe, his *chalouk* of sky blue. "Father, Avnayr has healed a sheep, and I have

made a broken bird whole again!"

Eleehu bar Dawvid put his burdens on a low sleeping couch, taking considerable care not to break three fragile glass vials filled with a special salt that was pale blue in the dim light. He was a moderately sized man, with streaks of gray in his beard and a purple birthmark the shape of a goat's foot under his left eye. He hugged each of his children in turn. "Why, here's wonderful news," he said, in the calm, melodious voice they knew so well. He listened patiently while each recited his tale of accomplishment. When the inevitable question came, he was ready for it.

"Does this mean I am the Messiah, father?" Each one asked the question. "Am I? Am I? *Am I?*" until finally, wearied by the shrill of their youthful voices, Eleehu pretended exhaustion and lay back on a sleeping mat where his children pounced upon him, wriggling about until he had them firmly under his wings. "Children, have pity on an old man," he whined playfully. "Pray be silent a while as a test of your worthiness. When we have taken food, we will discuss these things again."

In honor of her husband's return, Esther had prepared a stew of kid's meat seasoned with fresh cumin, dill, ground coriander and cinnamon, with onions, leeks and garlic, poured into a round of locust-bread. This had been prepared with the edible parts of the locust, dried out and ground up to be included in the dough, like pepper, the resulting loaf being then hollowed out and placed in each person's bowl.

There were olives and goat's milk cheese, and also wine mixed with honey and water. Eleehu blessed the food gladly, and when the spirit of *El Shadai* had entered the

meal, the little family ate silently, each imagining how the body was nourished and made strong by this miracle.

Eleehu was doubly grateful for the meal, as the act of nourishing his body gave him time also to consider the implications of what Avnayr, and his daughter Y'meenaw, which means Right Hand, were telling him.

He knew that the first demonstrations of inner power often gave way to bickering between the generations. The conflict originated because the early rise of inner power without wisdom led directly to the misuse of that power, though always with the best of intentions.

With their growing power, the younger magicians found that an intense desire to do things with it came also: throw out the Romans, smash the Samaritans, subdue or convert the desert people who were known for their perfidious behavior. These were the manifestations of the desires burning in their souls, early harbingers of the second test of power. At length, he held up his hands to stop the flow of their enthusiasm.

"As to the question, which of you is the Messiah," Eleehu said finally, when the meal was finished and the wriggling pair had again found comfort in his arms, "the answer is, both of you, or neither of you. It will be as you wish."

"But Father," Avnayr protested. "I have healed a sheep."

"And I, a dove," his sister said, her words tumbling over the sound of her little brother's voice. "Surely, these things have some significance."

Eleehu smiled to himself and wondered what to say, for he was a learned man. He

first spoke to his daughter. "Because the Lord has aided, your healing of a dove, which is the symbol of the spirit, you shall now be known by that name. The Spirit is surely upon you, my good Right Hand. From now on, you are Yawneenaw, the Dove."

His daughter was unimpressed by the name change, preferring, in the way her mother did, to focus on more practical things. "But Father, answer please, which one of us is the Messiah?"

Eleehu hugged them both closely. "That is for you to decide," he said gently.

"Father, tell us." Avnayr squirmed out from beneath his sheltering arm and spoke with the earnestness of youth. "I vow that I will not speak again until the question is answered." Pouting, he folded his arms across his chest. At eleven, the boy's body was slight as a walking staff.

Quickly, Eleehu shook him vigorously until his teeth clacked together. "Beware! Do not threaten that which you do not truly want, lest *El Shadai* strike you dumb as you wait through an eternity. Young scamp! Already you have powers more than you dream possible, and the right use of that power must now be uppermost in your mind. Anything else means your doom."

"Father," Avnayr protested, squirming away from the older man's embrace, "Not so hard. I wanted only to know."

"To know is well, my son, but do not threaten me, or yourself, for the Lord will not be tried in vain."

His mother had listened without comment. Here she held out her arms. "Come to

me," she said, in sympathy with her son's age. "Let your desire for knowledge mature, then all will be made known to you."

Being shaken by his father left Avnayr surprised and hurt. Eleehu realized this, though the shaking had a more important purpose than the temporary discomfort of his son.

"It is not enough to wish for the anointing of *El Shadai*, my children," Eleehu told them. "The Lord is a hard master. Bringing forth the Father, that His glorious work may unfold within the Son requires courage, discipline and patience."

"We have courage." Yawneenaw looked up from her place safely cuddled under his right arm, and Eleehu saw in her eyes that this was so. "It is a good beginning," he told her gently.

Esther's voice intruded upon his thoughts. "Perhaps your prayers have been answered in this way, beloved. How often have we together wished for the means to bring *The Anointed One* to life."

A shiver ran up Eleehu's spine, originating in the Earth gate, energizing all five elemental gates on its way to heaven. Eleehu's body began to shake, partly with astonishment. Though he had called up power through those very energy centers many times, now the unbidden energy coursing through him was of a quantity to render any previous flow insignificant.

"Father, what does this mean?" The power had thrown his daughter Dove from her father's arms, and though she only felt a small part of that force, she was frightened. She

recognized it as the same power which had healed the broken bird, yet greatly magnified.

She was more frightened at the sight of a rainbow light pouring forth from her father's body, surrounding him and filling the dimness of the tent with sparkling light.

Young Avnayr cried out in surprise. For a time, all were transfixed.

When the light had faded, Eleehu said, "Truly, *El Shadai* has spoken, and you, my children, are blessed. Therefore, upon a mountain top which *El Shadai* will show us, when the moon now waxing in the sky has reached within a day of Her fullness, there shall we four unite our energies so that the prophecies concerning *The Anointed One* shall, in the fullness of time, be accomplished."

Suddenly, he was very tired, for the power had left him now. "Leave me, for it grows late," he said quietly. "Take to your beds, my blessed children, for there is much to be done."

Now when the children were fast asleep, Esther and Eleehu walked together to the well, sharing a cup of water and talking quietly of what had happened.

"Truly, the spirit was upon you, beloved," Esther remarked. "In manifestation the omen was so plain it was not necessary to use *the sight*. Even the children saw it. Can it be that *El Shadai* intends to use them? I confess, the event has me baffled."

Eleehu put his arm around his wife's shoulders as they looked at the sky above. "Baffled? Why, it cannot be. You, who have an explanation for everything."

Esther dug her elbow firmly into his ribs. "As surely as I came from *here*," and he groaned slightly at the impact, "a suitable explanation for this night's happening eludes

me." He clasped her to him more tightly, and one hand intercepted the elbow that again threatened his ribs.

This caused her to giggle. "Be quiet," he said sternly. "You'll wake the camp." He held the elbow firmly, one finger on the nerves which woke pained amusement and stimulated the third elemental gate.

This caused her to redouble her efforts. "What?" she whispered. "And I am your wife. Are you afraid to wake the camp with me?" She wriggled her other arm free and with the free hand felt through his robe to grasp his testicles.

"Whoops," he screeched, his hand intercepting hers.

"Be quiet," she giggled. "You'll wake the camp." Eleehu paused, so Esther took the chance to increase her grip, though she did not tighten it very much.

"You could be stoned for that," Eleehu warned, his energies returning.

"Never fear," she laughed. "There's only one witness. If you show damage, I'll say a goat kicked you. Now quickly, have you teased me enough?"

"I suppose enough," Eleehu said. His body shook with silent laughter. Her hand released him, and they nestled together affectionately.

"Though the sign seemed clear enough," Eleehu said finally, after she'd posed the question again, "I can scarcely believe *El Shadai* has chosen us. We are not worthy of this honor."

Esther grasped her husband's hand firmly. "In truth, your virtue and devotion are spoken of in many places. If *El Shadai* does not choose you, then who is more worthy?"

At this testimonial, Eleeahu sat quietly, staring at the sky as if a sign might be found there. As they watched, a star fell, bursting into tiny sparks as it came, like a pale reflection of the flaming powder peddlers brought with them over the silk road. The beauty of these lights against the larger vault of heaven caused both husband and wife to draw breath in wonder.

Eleeahu gently disengaged himself, the better to make contact with the elemental Earth. Arranging himself opposite her, so that he faced the point of sunrise, and she the point of sunset, he grasped his wife's hand, saying, "Dream with me." We must enter the Silence, the better to comprehend the Lord's wishes in this matter."

Together, they remained in the Silence all night.

On the seventh day after they had entered the Silence, Eleeahu took his wife and Avnayr and Yawneenaw away from their abode, travelling across country toward the Dead Sea. They took no food, nor any other supplies as they went upon their way, but were accosted from time to time by shepherds or fellow travelers who provided for them most generously.

Near evening of the second travelling day, they came to a mountain crowned with rock, from which they could see all the countryside round about. They carried wood up the rocky slope to a camp near the summit. A warm breeze blew, and they drank of water from a spring nearby as they fasted, waiting for guidance.

Finally, in the third watch of the night, clad in sky blue robes newly woven, with

the face of the moon full above them, the four stood within the corners of a magical square which Eleehu had marked out with salt.

As the children had not yet been initiated even to the first level, they occupied the corners to the north-east and south-east. Esther, an initiate into the mysteries of earth and fire, occupied the north-west. Eleehu, as the ranking adept, conducted the ritual from the south-west, beginning with the task of marshalling the power. First, he addressed himself to the creative forces, linking himself to them.

"*Ah Tah!*" Eleehu spoke in The Great Voice, and as he spoke, a ray of light stood over Eleehu's head, pulsing, flowing, *waiting*. *Sight* showed the ray extending into the trackless vastness above the moon. He touched this light with a wand, drawing it toward the earth at his feet. This act has, from ancient times, been a realization of the literal truth. "*For Thine is the Kingdom.*"

"*Mahl-Koot!*" As the light now flowed around him into the earth, the voice of Eleehu vibrated with the power and conviction of his task. Each time a word was spoken, the others within the square felt the sound vibrating through their own bodies.

The radiance now filled the magical square and the temperature inside increased considerably. Eleehu touched his right shoulder with the ceremonial wand.

"*Vi-G'Boo-Rah!*" "*And the power...*" A plume of light like unto an angel's wing sprang forth from the adept's shoulder.

"*Vi-G'Doo-Lah!*" "*And the glory...*" A second wing of light appeared opposite the first. The heat in the square increased again. Beads of sweat formed on the brows of both

children.

Now, when Eleehu clasped his hands together over his chest, the light pooled there, a soft white glow, tinged with gold.

"Li-Oh-Lahm, Aum-en!" 'Forever...Amen.'

For those at the other corners of the square, the power of this last utterance produced vibrations within the chest, throat and third eye.

Now Eleehu surrounded them with the flaming pentacles, naming them from East to South to West to North with the four names of God. With the inner square now secure, he made a second circuit, evoking the Archangels Rah-Fay-El of the East, Gahb-Ray-El of the West, Mi-Chai-El of the South and O-Ree-El of the North. His task concluded as his voice, vibrating with power, rang over the mountains.

"For about me flames the pentacle, and within me shines the six rayed star!"

Suddenly, the top of the mountain was alive with a light, issuing from the very center of the magical square, a visible light that shone as brightly as the sun. In the center of that light there shone a star, the center of which was the deep blue of the night sky. From the center of the blue, shone forth a single glowing point made up of many tinier points, each a tiny self-manifesting star in its own right. The star floated there, revolving slowly.

Then, from the star's inner brilliance, the vision of a walled town on a mountain-top appeared. Smoke poured from within the walls, hanging tenaciously overhead. The magicians watched as armed men put ladders to the wall, and the defenders pushed them

away, pouring down fire upon the attackers. The resulting greasy black smoke flared and danced, sometimes obscuring the entire scene.

When Eleehu, Esther, Avnayr and Yawneenaw had absorbed what the star revealed, a woman clothed in a simple shift of linen, dyed as yellow as the saffron crocus appeared, lolling in a lion's embrace. Her fingers twined the hair of the beast's mane, and from time to time she toyed with the beast's mouth, tickling the whiskers. Though the vision was so real that when the beast roared the sound shook the observers in the magic square, the expression on the woman's face was serene, her movements languid. The woman pointed toward a path, one of three leading from that place.

Suddenly, it seemed as if all within the magic square was hurtling down the indicated path, and the rush of passing wind was almost too much to bear. Avnayr thought he might fall over, the illusion was so complete. The star's breakneck pace slowed until it was no more than a stroll, and they then were in a valley bounded by rocky cliffs.

The same woman, now older, appeared sitting in a bower, draped in heavy cloth of the sort worn by pregnant women. Her face glowed with reflected light like the finest pearl, and round her head was a halo of the softest blue. In her hand she held a crown and scepter, the jewels of which flashed in a greater light. The matron smiled at each of them in turn, raising a hand toward a slender footpath which wound its way to an inn carved in the living rock.

Inside, among the merchants, soldiers, officials, mercenaries and other travelers sat a man wearing the white robe of the Essenes, whose head was surrounded by a halo that

was golden white. He was stoutly made, with green eyes and red hair, cut bluntly to his head. One eyelid drooped slightly, and his nose had once been broken.

Avnayr felt the power moving through him, up on the left side of his spine, down on the right, as though this man and he bore some intimate relationship. 'Perhaps,' Avnayr thought, 'this is a man such as I shall become.' As he thought that, the figure looked directly at him and smiled warmly.

Even as he looked at her brother, the spell of the man was upon Yawneenaw also. She felt power circling within her, a swirling vortex which threw off sparks of pure bliss. 'Oh, I would choose him if only he would choose me,' she thought. The man smiled at her also. 'Look! He hears. *He hears me!*'

Esther saw the man as pure *Aleph*, the pure masculine energy of creation. Unlike the vision of her children, which was concrete, and real as could be, she saw the man as an energy field, a living cloud. Her perception of him occurred in the belly, at the water portal, where suddenly his presence manifested as a point of warmth within her womb, a feeling of great pleasure.

Eleehu saw the figure first with his third eye, and then as the purest manifestation of elemental womanhood: *Beyt* energy, though the figure itself was androgynous. The energy flowed toward him from within a floating sphere, and as it settled around him, he was overcome by the rapture. His member expanded and his seed burst forth in a single convulsive shudder, though the echoes of it flowed through his body in waves.

As they watched, a voice spoke to them, saying, "I AM. Know this, and be joyful."