

# Chapter 1

## Betrayed

I think I felt it through my dreams. The deep, desperate strain of bones stretched beyond their capacity. The sway of a leaf whipped by Yahweh’s storm blasts. The spray of an angry sea.

That bitter day, my dreams borrowed from my world.

“Awake!” came an urgent call. “Do you wish death? Up! Now!”

Even in such torment, awareness did not come easy. I felt the chaotic pulse of the sea, the fading strength of the timber, drops of saltwater – and yet I slept.

“Come on, boy!” My shoulders shook with near-violent intent. “We need you! Awake!”

My head rattled against one of the ship’s massive ribs. It left me writhing, but I guess it was for the best, for it did rouse me. The captain swore a sailor’s curse and went to the slumbering Dove.

In a breath or two, I became aware. They had left us to rest at the back of the cargo hold, just above the ship’s wide, curved bottom. But for the oil lamp wavering in the grasp of a frightened, soaked sailor, we would have risen to night as black as ash. Then the sea bucked, the bow jumped, and we fell into darkness.

Thank the Lord the spilled lamp went out.

“Bellet!” shouted the captain. From the void came a “Here!” The faint gray outline of a square hole formed above us. Within a

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The Jonah Cycle,

burst of light appeared a blue-banded arm thrusting a new lamp down, where a dripping, rattled sailor took it. The captain shook Jonah, even as I heard voices on the deck above. Those men drew stones from a pouch to better understand their fate.

“Lots,” growled the captain.

“Been known to work,” said the sailor.

“Can’t stomach it on my ship.” The captain joggled the Dove again, rocking his head against a wooden spur.

“Careful!” I shouted, fearful he might go too far.

“I need him awake!” the Phoenician said. “I’ll not harm him!”

“Draw them again,” came the words of a sailor above us.

“Wake up!” demanded the captain.

“Again!” said the voice.

The wood groaned all around us, pressed inward by pounding waves. The captain hesitated, listening to his ship’s woeful strain, then nodded to the sailor and shouted once more for Jonah. The Dove quivered as in spasm, snorted. His eyes inched open.

“Three times,” said a decided voice.

“Yes... it must be true,” answered another.

Most times, the use of lots did not bother me. In my more dubious days, Hosea had told me once how the priests drew stones or threw ivory dice when the guidance of the Lord remained unclear. But in this setting, the lots frightened me. I do not know why, but they did.

“Ah,” moaned Jonah. His eyes quivered. “Why is it so dark?”

“A storm threatens us,” the captain informed him.

Footsteps echoed across the upper floor. The drenched head of a bald, dark-skinned Egyptian appeared in the hole.

“We have found cracks in the base timbers,” he said in tones unshaken by our travails. “Spurs have come loose fore and aft.”

“Understood,” answered the captain. “Return to station.” Then he twisted to face us, hard determination molding every facet of his being. “I will not lose my ship. Get up and pray to your god. Pray for our deliverance. Maybe he’ll take notice of us, so that we will not perish.”

Jonah stretched, listening all the while to the torment of the wood. His eyes twisted about in weary anguish. His brow sagged

in defeat.

“We will pray,” he allowed, his words low and drawn, “but I doubt it will help.”

“Why not?” came a brittle voice. Saln dropped into the shadows among us, spraying seawater from his soggy tunic. His drenched hair hung in thick strands over the stained cloth binding his forehead.

The captain frowned. “Who directs the fight?”

“Brans,” the First replied, even as two other sailors jumped down from the hold, one carrying the lots in a small brown bag of wet goatskin. “He prays to Melqart, Asherah, Resheph, even Baal, but the storm rages on. We have cast off as much cargo as possible, secured the oars, dropped sail, sealed our holds. Now we bail.”

The newcomers focused on the Dove.

“Tell us,” said the blonde-haired one cradling the lots. “Who is responsible for all this trouble?”

That angered me. He asked “who,” but his eyes said “you.” Still, the others were more direct.

“What did you do?” wondered a burly man, his long brown hair parted to reveal a deep scar across his left cheek.

“Nathan!” scolded the captain.

“Where are you from?” continued the sailor. “From what people are you?”

“Enough!” the captain declared.

“No,” said Jonah in submission to this budding catastrophe, “they are due such answers and have sought them from the right man. I am a Hebrew, and I worship the Lord.”

The Dove surprised me, treating this hostile group as friends. In my past I suffered sharp rebuke for explaining the Lord to outsiders, much less revealing our Hebrew words before them – and at that time I little cared, doubting His existence as I then did. Yet perhaps Jonah meant to turn aside their anger with honesty. If so, he failed.

“A Jew?” said the First, even as he tightened his girded tunic. The cloth gushed seawater from the strain. “I don’t believe it! What god of shepherds could do this?”

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The Jonah Cycle,

Jonah spoke words as hard as iron hammers. “God of heaven. The God. He who made the sea and the land. Sustainer of all that is... and will be.”

I would not have guessed it, since these Phoenicians worshipped the family of Baal over all things, but when Jonah proclaimed the realm of the Lord, they looked at each other in sheer terror!

“What have you done?” the First exclaimed.

“Brought his curse upon us, he did!” spat a bronze-skinned man.

“Quiet!” bellowed the captain, rising to his feet. The boat pitched, but he stood firm, twisting his beard between the thumb and fingers of his left hand as he pondered it all. His ship groaned once, then again, and once more, before he said, “Forgive me, but I know nothing else to do. Guess I should have foreseen this. I heard the signs and ignored them.”

In sadness our commander looked down to the Dove and said, “What should we do to you to calm the sea?”

“Do to him?” I exclaimed.

Jonah looked the captain square in the eye. A new sense of direction lined his brow.

“Throw me to the waters,” he said. “Only then will the sky and sea rest.”

The Dove had a way of stumping me – just surprising me so well that little made sense. But nothing he ever did stunned me as much as that.

“No!” I protested. I had not trailed Jonah all this way just to watch him die! Surely Hosea had not foreseen this!

The Dove met my challenge with kindness. “Now, Benjamin, these men are right. It is my fault this peril is upon us. It is as Ansephanti said: to save my people, I have given up the Lord.”

“You can’t mean that!”

“Do not be surprised. You have argued against me all this way. The vision was indeed of the Lord. You know it, I know it. It was arrogance, I guess. Pure arrogance. To grow up seeing these happenings in my head, all these possible outcomes, with God showing me just what strings to pull... what to do here, what

to say there, to shape things just the way He wanted. You live a lifetime doing this and you begin to think some of the control is yours. That's my sin, Benjamin. Believing I mattered in all of this. Believing He needed me to arrange His creation."

Jonah laughed at his folly, yet it rang hollow, with no joy. The ship quaked in desperation, but he was too consumed by his introspection to notice.

Even then, with all the chaos spinning around him, I witnessed the brilliance of his mind at work, seeking a solution in the darkness.

"Not once did I see any images of the sea. Not one! That's why we're here, Benjamin. I guess in my heart, I slipped into heathen blindness, thinking perhaps here I could escape even God."

Water fell across his face from the rafters. Jonah's gaze twisted in his dark judgment.

"I was wrong," he admitted. "I have sinned. But this is still my life! Not His! He may have outwitted me, and stopped me, but He cannot force me to go any further. It is my life, to do with what I choose! To ask me to betray my people... forgive me, I cannot! If our Lord demands my death for this choice, so be it. At least I will not have died a traitor."

Those words so horrified me, so consumed my soul, that for a moment, just drawing a breath caused me pain. In great fear I felt my mind turn, and I listened as the spirit of accusation moved me once more.

"A traitor to the Lord," I whispered.

His eyes sank in the dim light, casting cold, bitter reflections, like those of a corpse. His lips were still.

"Can you live with that?" I put to him.

"Perhaps not long," the Dove said, leaning against the broad timbers as the ship pitched left, then lifted right. "But could I have fulfilled His bidding, knowing what I do of the Assyrians? Never."

Never. Few words are so brutal, so hard... so often misused.

The hand of judgment settled upon me like a brash wind sweeping down the mountain.

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The Jonah Cycle,

“If it is the Lord’s will,” I declared, “it will be done.”

“Perhaps. But not by my hand.”

“Oh, yes. This will not stop Him.”

Cold, numbing shock claimed the Dove. He stared at me with eyes awakened to new possibilities – and it frightened him, if only for a moment.

A firm hand took my right arm. “Come forward,” said the captain. “Help us.”

I noticed then that we were alone. The other sailors had departed, bolting the door at our heads.

Looking me in the eyes with a fierce, independent spirit, I knew the captain had no mind to follow Jonah’s advice. To the Dove he spat, “Stay here. Bring your curse no closer to us.” Then he took the lamp in his left hand and led me to the center of the shadowy cargo deck.

“We should not have hit such a storm this time of year,” he told me, as if to answer a question I had asked. “We had a clear sky just an hour ago!”

Passing the thick mast root, its heart groaning in the grasp of the shrieking wind, we came to the central cargo hold, a broad portal that passed through every deck to the sky. Wood doors sealed access to the small cargo bay below and to the top deck, but the portal just above us remained open, bridged by a ladder of twisted reeds. The captain motioned me to the lashed steps, then grabbed my shoulder and whipped me about.

“You fainted this morning, didn’t you?” When I nodded, he cursed his fate. “What have you strength to do?”

I had no idea, so I said, “Anything.” I was willing to do anything, if it meant stopping Jonah.

Perhaps the captain sensed some indecision on my part, or maybe he thought I was not ready for the challenge. Whatever moved him, he scowled as might the fiercest wind, then motioned me up, mumbling curses all the way.

We emerged in the lower rowing deck, a dark hall filled with seven narrow benches along each side of the ship. A closed square portal looked out to the sea just below each seat; above them hung two rows of dormant oars. Thin streams of dark green

seawater rolled across the floor as the vessel pitched in the storm.

Two swaying oil lamps to the stern illuminated a large group of huddled, restless, worried sailors, most stripped down to their dripping white loincloths. Even wearied by the sea, they were the most imposing figures I had seen since King Jeroboam's bodyguard paraded in victory across the Hermon battlefield.

"What are you waiting for?" the captain snapped.

"The First suggested we would row," a balding Phoenician answered. "Here, out of the storm."

The boat lifted at port, twisting so that I fell headfirst to the starboard wall. The crew little moved, each member keeping his place by gripping holes in the wood I had not noticed.

The captain listened to the groans of the overstressed hull, laying his palm against the flat of a rib to better judge its pulse and strain. In exasperation he turned to me and spat, "Is your god so vengeful he would cause all this, just to doom one man?"

The fear in his voice shook me. Stumbling to grasp the hard truth of what he asked, this emergency reminded me just how little I knew of the Lord. In my emptiness, a myriad of words rushed through my mind, but the simplest, most straightforward answer seemed an honest nod. The captain responded with one of his own, a nod of submission.

"Break out the oars," he shouted to his men. "Prepare to get underway. All strength, men! Our lives are in our hands."

The crew separated into two groups, one unlatching the oar tethers, the other unbolting the square portals. The wet breath of the Great Sea soon washed over us, but the crew struggled against it, breaking into teams to secure their long oars against the overwhelming pull of the storm.

"Perhaps by our steadfastness, we can satisfy your god," the captain told me. "I will not commit murder; I can say that right now."

With the fourteen oars in place, the teams secured themselves on the damp benches, the First at their front. Saln called out a loud, monotone cadence as another wave swept over us. The rowers began their fight.

Little in life prepares one for such a struggle. Behind me,

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across the central portal, were six teams of men putting every thought, every effort, into the rhythm of their oars. Before me, around the root of the mast, were eight more teams of three, spreading across the deck from one side to the other, their spirits bound in every stroke. As one they lifted, swung their oars forward and pulled against the very grain of the sea. There was power in their unity, their passion. I felt it in the core of my being. Yet the ship rolled and bounced as if their strain meant nothing.

An infantile gesture sprang from my heart. “Lord,” I prayed, “if it is within Your plans, please let us live!”

The captain stared at me as if I spoke a garbled tongue.

“Come,” he said. Between strokes we slipped to the stern, where a ladder led to closed doors above and below us. As I stood fast, halted by a lurch of the sea just beneath the bow, the captain tied a long rope about his waist. He then handed me one.

“What are we doing?” I called against the storm. But he chose with a sigh to ignore me, taking the other end of my rope and tying it about my stomach.

“When we get topside,” he warned, “tie your line to the ship or you will be washed over.”

Without another thought he bolted up the ladder. The door flew open in his grasp, and he was gone.

Even as I stood at the base of the entwined steps, I felt the maelstrom strain to lift me. I looked past the ladder to see lightning blaze across a black sky. A keg’s hold of angry water poured through the portal, soaking me to my toes.

“Captain!” I shouted. “Captain!”

Thunder rocked the heavens. At once every element within the winds, every fiber in the wood, every bone within me, all trembled with the bellows of the storm. Lightning flooded the world with a blaze of brilliant white. The burst echoed through my mind. The sea washed over me.

“Captain!” I wailed.

Shadows closed around me. I stood in mist at the back of the narrow deck, watching some twenty-eight men I little knew putting every last muscle to their harrowing task. The sight



bewildered me.

Oh, Lord, in all my life have I ever endured such isolation? I look back upon all my years in chains, my bound servitude, and recall no time more desperate than I felt then. I know it was wrong! I know You never left me! But Lord, if You Yourself could experience Your wrath, as I did... if You could feel the terror of such utter domination, of total surrender, as I did... perhaps You could understand me. Oh, but even such thoughts are sins! Of course You understand! You made this storm, this sea! You created all this!

Dear Lord, forgive me!

Even now I recall the dread that almost stole my soul. I stared into the darkness of the portal, into the churning heart of the violent storm, and had no idea what to do. My every thought abandoned me as if tossed from my mind by the gales. Then You spurred me as a rider would his paralyzed horse – the bow ripped high, throwing all sorts of loose items my way – and so, to avoid them, I spurred up the wall, into the holocaust.

Before I had even left the ladder, the wind lifted me clear of the portal and sent me rolling across the soaked deck. My back collided against the ledge wall. I screamed, but the howls of the storm drowned my voice. Streams from the sea sloshed over my lips.

A surge of force pummeled me, bending my chin to my knees as if they belonged together. Only when it passed did I realize the force was water. Water! I watched the last ebbs of that wave roll down the deck, then felt the brash wind cast me back hard against the ledge.

Through the bones in my seat I felt something strike the beams of the stern. As lightning crashed near the mast, I bounced through the black sky, past four men bound to the steering oar, past the captain at the steersman's post. My heart surged in seeing him. I reached for him, stretched every muscle in my being. It was not enough.

I feared the sea itself awaited me. The wind took me in its arms, a toy for its amusement, then snapped me back onto a deck straining under pitching waves. The ship rocked starboard,

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sending me tumbling, then yanking me back. I thought my spine would snap.

Only then did I remember the rope about my waist. I grasped it, praising God, and in a flash of lightning followed its taut strands with my eyes. Thus, once more I found the captain, his face as stern as granite as he hung onto the frayed ends of my tether. Hand over hand he pulled me forward, even as I struggled to reach him. Together we overcame the power of the waves and wind.

He tried speaking, but the force of the storm squelched every phrase. He pointed in the flashing lightning to the twisting clouds above us, the ripples of the torn sail, the wash of sea between the deck benches. In time I understood. The ship was caught in a vortex of power, a ripping hole of wind, rain, and surf that circled the vessel with no remorse. No power of earth could have freed us.

“Oh, Lord, have mercy!” I shouted. “Have mercy!”

The captain tried to shove me left. I knew not why and so held my place, reaching out for support with my left arm. In that way I rediscovered the open portal. The captain did not need to push me again – I dove into the hole!

A wave of the sea followed me, but I did not pay it attention – the spray little mattered against the full fury of the storm. In precious peace I collapsed against the deck, my body aching from more aggravated muscles than I had ever imagined possible.

The captain fell to my side. “We stand no chance against it,” he spat, shaking the saltwater from his hair almost to the First’s cadence. “Had we a full crew, a fleet of ships, it would be nothing. No chance at all.”

“Then are you ready?” came a patient voice.

Coughing for breath, coughing to spew the Great Sea from my lungs and gut, I fought my own body to lift my stinging eyes and see this interloper. There, still somewhat dry, stood the Dove. A gracious understanding warmed his gaze.

“The sea grows even wilder,” he told us. “You must do as I say.”

“Must?” Though exhausted, the captain struggled to regain his

feet, only to rock against the Dove as the ship lurched about. Jonah tried to steady him, but with sharp, angry thrusts, the captain forced himself free. “Must? You dare tell me what to do?”

“It is the Lord who tells you,” implored Jonah. “Will you listen?”

Screams fought through the rushing gales. I heard the cadence stop, the rowing cease, even as the bones of the ship flexed under intolerable strain. The pressures behind the storm seemed to pause, as if awaiting all the terrors of Hell to break around us.

The bow rode a surge of water. Then the wave disappeared. The whole ship fell with a crashing thud we felt from our ankles to our jaws.

Words rang down the deck. “Cast out the broken shafts!” “Close up the shutters!” But their terror did not break my thoughts from the captain. Hunched on his knees, he spat out a mouthful of green fluid and turned to me. For the first time I saw indecision in his gaze, beseeching me for help. But I had none to give. My mind was awash, my soul silent. The Lord withheld His guidance.

A slow moan escaped the Phoenician’s lips. He rolled his forehead to the deck, his waterlogged beard slumping into the slosh of the sea.

The First rejoined us, with four or five others. “That last swell snapped our oars as twigs,” he stammered, winded and defeated. “We have sealed out the water, to what avail?”

“None,” the captain muttered. “Any injured?” When Saln nodded, the captain bid they be cared for, then told him to gather three others and accompany him. “I need witnesses.”

They met at the ladder, the First and his men struggling to catch up. The captain treated the Dove as a forsaken idol not to be touched. Binding themselves with ropes, the sailors took the dangling strands of the captain’s and my tethers, joining them in a chain to theirs. But none touched Jonah.

“Let it be written and remembered,” said the captain, “that by his own admission, this man has brought doom upon us. By his own judgment do we now act.” He twisted to climb the ladder,

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then with a change of heart he pivoted to face Jonah. “I know not what you have done to earn this. To be truthful, I do not care, though I am surprised. Your faith is honest; I can see that.”

The Dove nodded, his eyes contrite. “This is a matter of choice, of deliverance... salvation. I do not expect you to understand.”

“Certainly not from that!” the captain grunted. “But it little matters. In respect of your faith, I will not bind you. Now follow.”

The ship rocked to starboard, then port, then back to starboard, but we managed the climb without great difficulty. The wind attacked at once, but with the strength of our human chain, I held my place. As did Jonah.

Truly, no feat of strength has ever impressed me more, before or since, than that of the Dove that day. The maelstrom seemed to embrace him, shredding his tunic, his undergarments, even his sandals, yet Jonah came to no harm. Nor did he flinch under the assault. Indeed, it unnerved me to look upon him, standing at peace amid all that chaos, knowing his death drew near. I knew he was stubborn, but I could not have sustained myself under such distress!

The captain did not hesitate. Leading him to the steering oar, the Phoenician shouted above the wind: “Oh Lord, please do not let us die for taking this man’s life.”

I stiffened. This outlander prayed to our Lord? Spoke to him?

“Do not hold us accountable for killing this man,” continued the captain, stumbling at times over what to say, or the storm, “for you, Lord, have done as you pleased. You have proclaimed his guilt.”

Before his words could fade in the gale, the Dove was gone. The captain offered his hand to send Jonah forth, and the sailors made threats with their fists, but the Dove stepped of his own accord into the sea. Accepting death and desecration, he turned against the Lord, and yet Jonah gave his life in judgment.

What kind of man can do that – thrive under such conflicting convictions?

I stood there, stunned, waiting for him to emerge from this.

After all, he had seen the vision. The Lord had called him to minister to Nineveh – therefore Jonah had to come back. I firmly believed it!

Even as the storm broke and vanished, I waited. In the expanse of a breath the winds died, the sea turned to glass, and the sky awakened to the soothing light of the setting sun. But the Dove did not return.

The awe-struck sailors gathered at the boat's edge, whispering.

“He just stepped in!” remembered one.

“Sank like an anchor!” replied another.

A dark shape flowed beneath the waves, a shadow that dwarfed their ship, yet the sailors gave it but a passing thought. For in the instant the storm cleared, they were seized by faith little demonstrated even in Solomon's Temple!

“Truly, You are the Lord!” they cried to the heavens. “Praise be! All praise be given the Lord!”

Even in awe of His power, or of Jonah's sacrifice, nothing struck me so hard as to see these heathen Gentiles bowing in divine understanding – yes, even true and honest faith! The captain, the crew, all hovered about me, praising God and asking questions of His grace, His love. Even in full memory of His vengeance, they saw Yahweh as the Lord of love and light, and they sought instructions on how to praise Him.

I provided them.

No, I was and still am not trained for such things. But was Jonah? Was David? When the Lord says to go, you do not cast off His hand for lack of directions – they will come to you. So, though I knew little more of God than they did, in my own stumbling, naïve way I led them in sacrificing a milk goat they had stored below, burning it within an overturned shield of bronze. I shared with them what Hosea had taught me, from the evils of Jeroboam's misguided delving in false gods to the joys of the true faith – many of which I experienced for the first time at that moment, with them and through them. And one by one, they vowed their lives to the Lord.

I embraced these men, accepting their conversions, not realizing I did what the Dove most feared doing. But then, I had

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not beheld his visions.

Oh, Jonah... if only I could have upheld your heart!

Jonah!

# Chapter 2

## Faith at twilight

Blood-stained fingers tough as tree roots yanked me up by my beautiful hair. I cried out, angry and sore at this painful disgrace, but all that fled before the murderous gaze of one of your terrible master butchers. With his massive left hand, the soldier held me dangling above the shifting sands. With his right, he turned his blood-red dagger to my whimpering lips.

And that, my young students, was how I first came to know Jonah.

It seems many lifetimes ago... a dreadful age when time bore no life to speak of, and I, ever stalked by death, considered all talk of the Lord nothing but vicious lies. Much has happened since, more than any man should endure, and yet I have, as was my calling. For I was born to witness the dawn of a new age.

But you don't care about that, do you? Thrills, adventure, death! Yes, that's what you came to hear! The knife at my throat!

Oh, I have many such stories to share. Kings I have counseled, and warriors I've led. These hands drove a chariot surrounded by the enemy! These feet strolled the Nile shores! These eyes gazed upon the ruins of Jerusalem!

But all that pales before my witnessing the Jonah Cycle. For who would have dreamt a man could live beyond his death? Certainly not I! But with Jonah, our Lord had a special need, and it changed the world.

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Come closer now, as I tell the tale. I have little breath left to speak above these Nineveh winds.

I was barely a man then, scrambling just before daybreak up the rocky slope of Mount Hermon, my hair –

Oh, go ahead and laugh! I heard you before, struggling not to. Believe me; I truly had a full head of magnificent hair back then. Thick, shiny black strands so long, I could tie them about my chin and pretend I had a beard! Oh, but that's another story.

Yes, I clawed my way up Hermon's gravel face, my soft purple tunic girded, my sandals flopping, my heart racing. It had been a long jaunt from the royal tent. My toes stung from scrapping against the dark sands, and the cool morning air burned my lungs. But even so, I felt great! What courier wouldn't, running the battlefield when we yanked the plains of Damascus from those Assyrian dogs! It promised to be a momentous day for all of Israel – King Jeroboam would reclaim the lands of our legendary ancestors – and I, a lowly slave, would play a part!

Yes, my juvenile pride mastered me, making my pittance of a role in that great war seem consequential, but there was more to my jubilation. Dashing from boulder to boulder through the highland twilight, with this historic cause before me, for the first time in my young, wretched life I entertained a promise of freedom, a hint of greatness. It charged my every breath with a passion I'd never dared dream for myself. It intrigued and uplifted me, and for a moment at least, gave me hope I might escape my doom.

Such wonder mastered my every thought... until I topped a crest in the ripped earth and gazed for the first time upon our soldiers taking positions just below me. Working by shielded torchlight, the men struggled against the stubborn rock and their own weariness to carve a line of haphazard pits and ravines in the hardened dirt. Their somber display chilled my heart. These "warriors" numbered not more than three hundred; a pittance to put against the devil's own. They wore not the fine battle dress of the king's infantry, but the odds and ends of a riotous mob. And in their eyes, those cold, uncertain eyes, I beheld none of the grim determination of the palace guard, but the frightened obedience of



humbled commoners submitting to the call of death.

Staring into their empty faces, my mind grasped the truth in this approaching horror. These were not soldiers! The hands preparing for battle belonged to simple townspeople, undisciplined souls like those I had served since my youth. A few I recognized – tailors, carpenters, fishermen, and others who usually hawked their wares from ramshackle carts outside the palace at Samaria.

“This can’t be,” I muttered. These vagabonds had no place on the front lines. “Have we no one else?”

I must admit, my youthful heart stumbled in newfound fear. There was no hope here! The devil hounds would overrun these innocents in a second.

“And me too,” I realized in a moment of desperate clarity, my eyes pinned by the dust rising from the approaching Assyrian feet. They must have been giants to raise such a murky cloud of churning grit from Hermon’s distant foothills. With each breath the building storm drew nearer. Death rode in its winds.

Despite the heat, an icy sweat crawled down my trembling spine. Oh, how I wanted to flee!

“Calm yourself,” came a weary voice. “They might hear.”

Chastised, I knelt behind an overshadowing boulder under a brilliant crimson sky and searched the encroaching shadows for my unexpected comrade, whoever he might be. But headstrong as I have always been, I did not regret my outburst.

“Have you no eyes?” I spat. “We are going to die!”

My observer let this pass. “Have faith,” he told me. “The Lord has brought you here. Listen, and learn.”

The Lord? Those musty words pierced me like a shot of spoiled wine. I’d not heard anyone speak of that myth since my days at the Bethel temples, when as the heathen priests’ kitchen boy I’d thrown scraps to the old hermit charged to oversee those dusty treasures seized from the Jerusalem temple. That decrepit dirt rag of a man voiced beliefs similar to the Judean cult, outlandish tales of a mighty spirit working through Moses, David, and Elijah to lift up his “chosen people,” we Hebrews. I’d always thought such broken fables best fit a beggar. If there was such a

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god, why would he hide in shadows while his people suffered so? Why would he allow his treasured temple gold to collect dust in a corner, forgotten, guarded by the filthiest of paupers? Why would this so-called god not rise up and revel in his might before all the world?

I will tell you why. Because he was nothing but a myth, and all those stories of heroes and miracles were just that – stories.

That's how I felt at that time, filled with contempt toward any concept of God. But even then, though I loathe to admit it, I came to admire the earnestness of that hermit's madness. At least he believed in something. It gave him strength, and an enduring spirit. I knew only my misery, but that scabby, disease-pocked man took abuse from everyone, including me, and answered with prayers and a smile. He never relented in his faith.

Now, standing half a world away, I sensed that same honest belief in this interloper's speech. Paralyzed with fear though I was, I couldn't help but respect his faith, even though in all other ways, he seemed quite the same madman.

A sudden blow of dust stung my eyes. Rubbing them clear, I motioned towards our men and stammered, "These people, they can't match Assyrians." Oh, a handful managed to masquerade like soldiers, having somewhere found some haggard leather vests, leggings, even a few iron caps – but did that give them battle experience? A fighting chance?

"Look at them!" I insisted. "They're fat, clumsy halfwits, or half-broken dotards! Why, they stumble about no better than I do!"

"And what is wrong with that?"

Coming from the darkness, the playful innocence of that retort seemed a sarcastic taunt.

"Open your eyes!" I snapped. "They're nothing but cobblers, shepherds, merchants, tailors. They have no business fighting a war."

"You dismiss them so fast," the man countered. "Look again. Look!"

Fuming, I gazed once more down Hermon's torn slope. Wisps of peaty vapor crawled up from the warming earth, sparkling in

the rising sun like red hot campfire embers. It cast a strange shadow over the ground, making it look like rivers of mud flowed to the valley beyond.

“Even Hermon bleeds,” I mumbled.

Far down the slope, a new line of our soldiers entered the battlefield from the fleeing shadows prowling that mountain pass. To my untrained eye they seemed little different than the others – a tad better equipped perhaps, but no more effective.

My advisor disagreed. “See how they march? Their spears held high, swords ablaze at their hips? Shields swaying, rising and falling almost in unison? And their faces... ah, such serenity. I tell you this: give me a few hundred such believers and I could take Nineveh itself! For such determination only comes from faith in the Lord.”

I almost laughed then in my rankled terror, thinking how silly a couple hundred commoners would look assaulting the dreaded capital of our enemy. It was said Nineveh commanded a world unto itself, home to more than a hundred thousand of the worst Gentiles, the blood-hungry Assyrians. Each one trained to fight, taking pleasure inflicting torture and death.

No sane mind would contemplate a foolish attack on the evil one’s own citadel! But as Jonah spoke, I was intrigued by his sincerity. As he talked of faith, I recalled the legends of Jericho. And his idea no longer seemed so silly, if you accepted the legend. Which I could not.

You see, I had been born and abandoned in Jericho. I hated the place.

“You’re serious?” I wondered aloud.

“Have faith... and believe.”

“That’s impossible.”

“Nothing is impossible.”

Muffled echoes penetrated the wind song. Pausing to listen, I heard the steady pounding of a thousand determined footfalls, each round pulsing through hundreds of voices raised in a low, grumbling chant of our pending doom.

My heart shuddered.

It seemed beyond belief. The Assyrian locusts marched upon

***The Prophet and the Dove***

The Jonah Cycle,

Hermon, and this man spouted superstitions?

I almost laughed then. “Are all your plans built on what you choose to believe?”

“On faith, lad. There is nothing else.”

“That’s crazy. You can’t turn these people into soldiers just by wishing it! The Assyrians will slaughter them. They’re born killers! It’s all they know how to do.”

The interloper grunted, as if that alone dismissed my point. This gave me some strange satisfaction, assuring me I had scored a wound in this odd debate. I drove home my argument: “What makes you think these men won’t just run away when the fighting starts?”

“Because,” came a subdued reply, “they know the Lord will see them through. He has several times already.”

That provided my first hint of the Dove’s intricate mind as the architect of this battle. I settled on my quivering haunches, pondering his words, and saw a lean figure rise in the shadows of a nearby limestone slab.

Recognition brought a fearful chill at my insolence, and a deep, paralyzing awe.

There, gazing from the fleeing darkness, stood Jonah, whose name means Dove, the temperamental adviser to King Jeroboam the Second.