

*The Heart
of a
Stranger*

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Chapter One



At noontime the Damascus sun smoldered in a white-hot sky, scorching everything in its path. Not even an insect's hum disturbed the heavy stillness.

Ailea climbed up onto the rooftop and looked about cautiously. No one was in sight. Good. She could expect to be alone for at least another hour or so. At this time of day her family and the servants would be seeking whatever relief they could find around the courtyard pool.

Only when the sun sank lower in the sky would the giant cedars and date palms that encircled the spacious stone house provide enough shade to dispel the blistering heat. Then the entire household would gravitate to the roof to relax on the couches and catch any breath of breeze that might be stirring. Reclining in the cool shade of the ancient trees, they would enjoy the evening meal as the last light of evening danced on the edges of the palm fronds. But right now one of those trees would serve a more useful function.

Ailea untied her sandals and removed her outer robe. Clad only in a knee-length linen undertunic, she ran nimbly across the roof, the hot tiles burning underfoot. She shimmied up the ancient date palm that grew on the north side of the house and

towered over sixty feet into the air. She hoped no one below would look up to see her doing such an unheard-of thing. For a female of any age to climb a tree was scandalous—but doubly so for one nearly nineteen years old and already a grown woman. But she and her brother, Rezon, had spent many hours as children playing in the leafy fronds of the huge tree, and now her climbing ability was being put to good use.

From her vantage point Ailea could see over the city wall to the confluence of the Abanah and Pharpar Rivers, which made this large city an oasis on the high desert plateau south of the Euphrates. With several trade routes converging on Damascus, caravans entered the main gate in a steady stream. Ailea was proud to be a citizen of this strategic city just as she was proud to be the daughter of Eliada, one of King Hadadezer's generals.

Even now the king's army was gathering out in the desert to the northeast. Her father, commander of the city's troops and mercenaries, would be in charge of thousands in this campaign designed to extend the boundaries of Aram-Zobah, an alliance of city-states that made up Hadadezer's kingdom. Damascus was a vital part of the alliance.

Rezon was accompanying her father into battle. Not quite two years her senior, Rezon had been Ailea's constant companion until three years ago when he joined his father in the military. Ailea missed her brother very much now that he was frequently away fighting. Her brother, who had taught her so many things that most girls didn't know—the game of chess, climbing trees, and the use of bow and arrow and sling—hardly had any time to spare for her anymore. His mind was always on military matters.

Rezon was furious that Hadadezer had drawn troops from Damascus, leaving the city vulnerable. Ailea had listened to the two men discussing the danger of this strategy, but unlike his son, Eliada was the consummate military man. If his superior—in this case it was Shobach, commander-in-chief of Zobah's armies—issued an order, Eliada would obey without question.

Rezon had warned his father that taking troops out of Damascus was a tactical error and made no attempt to hide his disdain for the plan or for Shobach himself. Rezon also believed that Eliada, not Shobach, should have been given the leadership of Hadadezer's army and claimed that Shobach was too arrogant by far. Ailea could barely suppress a smile at these words. In her opinion, it was her older brother who had more than his own share of arrogance.

For the moment Ailea left off her musing and turned her attention to the northeast. Scanning the horizon, she caught a glint of sunlight reflecting off something in the distance. There it was again. Could it be spears? Shields? Maybe the shiny gold helmets worn by Eliada and other officers in Hadadezer's army? She thought the troops were to have been deployed farther north—if it wasn't Zobah's army out there, then whose could it be?

The reflections were coming from the desert—nowhere near the trade routes. Perhaps Toi, the king of Hamath, a minor kingdom northwest of Damascus, had decided to challenge Hadadezer. It was no secret that the two leaders hated each other. But despite his animosity, Toi was no fool. He could not field an army even a quarter of the size of Zobah's.

Could they be troops from Israel? Surely not. King David must know that he, too, was vastly outnumbered by a superior force.

Ailea descended carefully from her vantage point in the palm tree and ran to the other corner of the rooftop where she climbed another tall date palm, but she could make out nothing to the north. In the streets below, however, she saw a number of soldiers who had been left to guard the city, and she felt a renewed sense of security. No one could take Damascus—especially not that low-born king of the Hebrews!

She climbed back down to the roof and donned her robe and sandals, wishing for the thousandth time that she had been born a male. She felt no lack of familial love, and she knew that her mother and father took pride in her beauty, hoping to marry her

to a man who would add to their wealth and prestige. But other than a commodity for barter, what good was a daughter? It was Rezon who would inherit the beautiful home she loved; it was her brother who would carry the honor of the family into battle and later into the marketplace.

Men had all the power, she fumed inwardly. They could go wherever they pleased, do whatever they pleased, while women were hidden away at home to cook, bear children, and wait for the return of their men!

Ailea loved her mother dearly. Nariah was kind and beautiful, but she was weak, capable of being reduced to tears by nothing more than a stern look from her husband. And she was a lonely woman, for Eliada's responsibilities with the army kept him away from home for long periods of time.

For that reason Ailea had determined never to marry a military man. No, she would marry an older man who adored her, one whom she could wrap around her smallest finger. If the gods smiled on her, perhaps she could even cajole him into giving her more freedom than most wives even dreamed of. Or better still—and her conscience winced a little at the cold calculation of her thought—perhaps he would leave her a wealthy widow. Only such women had any power at all.

Shrugging aside her dismal mood, Ailea descended the stairs that led to the inner courtyard. Perhaps she could talk Malik into taking her out to the bazaar where she could learn for herself what was happening on the field of battle and whose troops she had sighted from the rooftop.

She found Nariah napping on one of the couches by the pool, her personal servant, Shua, on another couch nearby. Her mother often rested here in the heat of the day for the gurgling of the fountain lulled her to sleep.

Moving quietly to the opposite side of the pool, Ailea removed her sandals once again and dangled her feet in the cool water. She would have enjoyed a refreshing bath, but her splashing would be sure to awaken Nariah.

Restless, Ailea determined to go in search of Malik at once. He would grumble, no doubt. But after twenty years of service to the family, the head steward could be depended upon to do her bidding. She had only to charm him a little before he would consent to take her into the streets of Damascus—a ploy she had used on countless occasions in the past.

Malik believed her to be spoiled, she smiled to herself, but what did it matter? Or that the old servant considered her to be lacking in the feminine graces, that she should be more like her mother? Never! Ailea hoped never to be like her mother whose whole life had been lived in the shadow of her husband, who made herself ill with worry when he was away on a military mission. Ailea would rather be dead than submit herself to such a fate!

Her thoughts shifted again to the army. She could not dismiss the sense of growing uneasiness she felt whenever she thought of her father and brother. Nothing she could do would influence the outcome of this campaign, but—there! She was acting just like her mother, and she gave her head a quick, defiant toss that shook the loose wisps of hair back from her face. Just then she saw Malik enter the courtyard, and she motioned him over with a quick gesture.

“What are you scheming, Cricket?” he asked in a low tone, one brow lifted in a blend of caution and curiosity.

Ailea gave him a wounded look. “I’m not scheming anything, Malik. I merely need to buy some thread in the market, and I want you to take me.”

He chuckled softly. “You don’t need any thread, Cricket. You wish only to go running about, getting into mischief and asking irritating questions. I call you ‘Cricket’ not only because of your size, you know. You hop around just as endlessly and make just as much noise.”

Ailea knew that Malik was jesting with her for the most part. The loyal retainer still had trouble accepting the fact that she was grown up, even though he knew very well that she had been responsible for the running of the household since her mother’s

melancholy so frequently incapacitated her. But one thing Eliada had absolutely insisted on was that Malik always accompany her to the marketplace. The last time she had ignored this rule, Eliada had found out and had confined her to her room for a week. Although usually too busy to bother disciplining her, he had a few unbreakable rules, and this was one of them. So Malik knew that Ailea was at his mercy when it came to trips outside the house, and he often used this last bit of authority to get the best of her. But she knew that down deep, Malik was devoted to her as he was to the rest of the family, so she persisted with a little pout. “Please!”

“Come now, you just want to learn news of the battle. Thread, indeed!”

“Well, yes, I just might overhear some news from a trader,” she answered, looking off in no particular direction. “You know that Mother and I are worried so about Rezon and Father—just as you are, Malik, aren’t you?” Tilting her head upwards and lowering her voice to a conspiratorial whisper, she took a more direct tactic. “Let’s do go and talk to some of the soldiers and find out what they’ve heard.”

Malik repressed a laugh at the predictable ploy of his little Cricket and signaled his surrender with a practiced shrug of his rather stooped shoulders. “I suppose I could take you, Cricket—but later, when the sun is not so high.” He raised a hand in admonishment. “But you must let me ask the questions. And you must not ask me to take you into the more dangerous sections of the city.” He eyed her with a respectful appraisal. “You don’t realize the—uh—attention you draw to yourself.”

“But I don’t try to draw attention to myself!” she argued with a sudden flush of color in her face.

He stroked his graying beard and studied the exceptional features of his master’s daughter. “I know, child. I know. But you have grown into a beautiful young woman. You must accept the restrictions that such blessings from the gods bring. Now go and get ready. I will take you in another hour. And, Cricket—don’t forget to wear a veil.”

Ailea rose and gave the burly servant a hug. "I won't forget, Malik. I promise."

Malik watched the mistress of the house as she left the enclosed courtyard, her hip-length ebony braid swinging behind her. She was small, almost boyish in stature but perfectly formed. And that face—especially the unusual green eyes—he would have to guard her very closely. Malik wished her father would hurry and find a suitable husband for her so that he could be free of the burden of protecting her. But that wasn't likely to happen soon although it was long past time for Ailea to be wed. Eliada had always pleaded that he was much too busy with military affairs to attend to matters of marriage, but Malik suspected that the general was more than a little reluctant to relinquish the beautiful desert flower that had bloomed in his home. With the current skirmish in the desert, he had one more excuse for postponing negotiations. The suitors would have to be patient, Malik thought. As would he.

Besides, her mother did not have the strength to insist on a marriage. If the truth be known, the woman needed to keep her daughter with her, what with Rezon and the master away most of the time. Ailea had taken over most of the responsibility for running the household some time ago, and Malik had to admit that she did it very effectively. She had no concept of her limitations as a woman, however, and Malik felt increasingly ill-suited in his role as head steward and handmaid to the young mistress. Maybe it was time to secure a female servant for Ailea.

Most of the girl's friends were wed by now, some already mothers, Malik fretted. Well, he could only do his best to keep his Cricket out of trouble. "I'm getting too old for this," he muttered to himself. "Just too old."



A light westerly breeze had begun to stir in the late afternoon as the old man and his young charge made their way through

the crowded bazaar. Here the stench of overheated human bodies, goats, camels, and the aroma of various foods cooked over the braziers of street vendors assailed their nostrils. The bleating of sheep, the haggling of shopkeepers, and the rumbling of wagon wheels combined to make thinking, much less conversation, difficult.

Malik had questioned several of the king's soldiers already with little success. The soldiers guarding the city were not privy to any information about maneuvers against the Hebrews. Furthermore, they were surly, resenting the fact that they had been given the boring duty of patrolling the city instead of the excitement of battle. None of them expected the fighting to reach Damascus, and Ailea had taken this as a good sign.

When they reached the city gate, however, Malik craned his neck, narrowing his gaze to scan the crowd. With an abrupt movement he began shouldering his way through the throng, dragging Ailea by the arm behind him. He came to an abrupt halt, and Ailea stood on tiptoe to peer around his bulk.

A small caravan of three camels and two donkeys had just entered the gate, and the leader was speaking in a loud voice to the sentinels. "I tell you, they are out there! Just five or six miles to the southeast! Their rear guard gave chase to us, but we were already too near the city when they sighted us!"

"Probably a troop from Helam," the tall sentinel told the agitated man.

"No, not soldiers of Aram-Zobah but the army of Israel! I'm telling you, their whole army is out there!"

The wild look of fear in the man's eyes made Ailea pull back against Malik's firm grip. The army of Israel—could that have been the reflections she had seen off in the distance?

"If you did indeed see Hebrew soldiers, it was probably just a scouting party. Now put a bridle on your tongue before you sow panic in the city," the captain of the guard ordered. With that, the soldiers pushed the trembling man toward his camels and mounted the steps that led to the lookout atop the city wall.

Chapter Two



Jonathan, son of Shageh, stirred the dying embers of his campfire, sending sparks spiraling upward into the thick desert darkness. There was only a small sliver of moon this night, but a myriad of stars glittered brightly from horizon to horizon. The fire was for warmth as well as for light since the temperature always dropped quickly after sunset.

Jonathan knew he should be in his small tent, wrapped in his cloak, getting a few hours of sleep, but his thoughts were troubled, and he feared he would face tomorrow unrested. Somehow the thrill that had once preceded the battle no longer came. He had been with David from the early days when David was reduced to being a renegade, chased by King Saul throughout the Judean wilderness. God had chosen David to be king. All the gibborim, David's chosen warriors, believed it. And they had stuck with David through all the hardships and the fighting. Jonathan had done his part as a loyal soldier, but he had seen too much bloodshed, too much death. He would do what had to be done, but unlike others, he no longer relished it.

After this campaign Jonathan planned to spend more time at home in the village of Ziph, located in the hills of southern Judah. It was time he married, had children to pass on his name, and

relieved his aging father of some of the burden of village leadership. He would still need to go to Jerusalem often to sit on the war council and train new recruits, but Israel's position would soon be secure enough to allow him to attend to other matters.

Jonathan stood and stretched. He was tall and magnificently muscled, as were most of the gibborim—the thirty mighty men who made up David's war council. These men were all proven in battle to be worthy of their command in Israel's army. Jonathan smiled to himself as he remembered the early days when David had gathered a band of four hundred or so discontented rebels in the mountain stronghold of Adullam.

From the beginning David had shown a particular fondness for Jonathan. Perhaps it was because Jonathan shared the same name as David's best friend, the son of the late King Saul. For whatever reason, David, then in his late twenties, had been kind and very patient with the fourteen-year-old recruit. That had been some fifteen years before.

In those days the men had been poorly equipped and often hungry, but they would have done anything for their leader, the "Sweet Singer of Israel." To this day Jonathan was amazed that a warrior of David's fierceness could possess the heart of a poet, the soul of a holy man. It was still true, although in recent years it seemed that David's spiritual fervor seemed to manifest a certain formality, a matter-of-factness that barely suppressed a discernible restlessness in his manner. Many of those who were closest to the king barely maintained a semblance of religious commitment at all.

Jonathan blamed much of this hardening of heart on Joab, David's nephew and second-in-command. It was Joab to whom Jonathan would report during this campaign although King David was personally leading his army as they camped this night between Hamath and Damascus, ready to bring down Hadadezer's kingdom. Still, Jonathan couldn't help but wish he answered directly to David as he had in the early days when the elite brotherhood of the gibborim had first been formed. Early

on, Jonathan had sensed Joab's jealousy as if Jonathan might be Joab's rival for the king's favor. Over the years it was obvious that Joab held no more fondness for Jonathan than did Jonathan for him. The two respected each other as fighting men, and each was assured of the other's loyalty to their master. But Jonathan made a point of never trusting his back to Joab in a battle.

Joab's ruthlessness had tainted them all, Jonathan thought, especially David. Of course at times it was necessary to be coolly detached, even heartless in battle. But Joab had shown an extraordinary penchant for killing from the moment he had slain the first Jebusite on Mount Zion and for that feat earning the leadership of the army. Under him were the Three Mighty Ones, David's generals Jashobeam, Eleazar, and Shammah. Compared to Joab, even that illustrious fighting trio paled in terms of cold-blooded killing power.

Jonathan shuddered as he recalled Joab's calculated assassination of Abner, commander of the army under Saul. Jonathan had been certain at the time that David would order the crime punished. Didn't the king have two men executed for no more than falsely claiming to have slain Saul? But for some reason, David had let Joab off—most likely because Joab was the son of David's half-sister, Zeruiah.

Or perhaps David accepted that Joab had some justification in killing Abner. After all, the man had slain Asahel, Joab's brother. But everyone knew that Abner had borne the young man no ill will. He had pleaded with Asahel to make peace with him, but the younger brother of Joab had pursued the older man, forcing the fight in which he was killed.

One could understand that Joab would want to avenge his brother's blood, however foolishly he had brought about his own death. But instead of an honorable fight, Joab had sought a meeting with Abner, pretending to seek peace, and assassinated the man by sticking a knife in his ribs. It was a cowardly way to kill, Jonathan thought with disgust. David decried the act, but he did nothing to punish his nephew. That episode had also

marked the beginning of the obvious distrust and animosity between Jonathan and Joab.

Maybe David's pragmatic side couldn't dismiss the military genius and courage of his nephew. For whatever reason, David had let the crime pass unpunished, and Jonathan's estimation of his hero had been somewhat tarnished ever since.

Jonathan had looked up to all three of David's nephews in those early days—Joab, Asahel, now dead, and Abishai. It had been Jonathan's ambition to become one of David's Mighty Thirty, and he had earned that privilege in battle before his eighteenth summer. And in those days, David had displayed a moral quality that Jonathan had never seen except in his own father, Shageh, the wise Rab of Ziph. Jonathan remembered David's weeping over the burned-out city of Ziklag, humbling himself before the men and accepting full responsibility for the kidnaping of their wives and children, including David's own. Jonathan remembered the determined look on David's face when he returned from prayer and led the men in recovering their loved ones.

He recalled the nights in their wilderness strongholds when David would play for them on his seven-stringed lyre, composing songs of praise to Adonai. Countless times David could have wrested the kingdom from Saul but refused to lift his hand against the Lord's anointed.

Instead, David had insisted that if God wished him to rule Israel, He would see to the matter in a way that would leave no doubt. And that was precisely what had happened. After Saul and his son Jonathan had been killed in battle, David had reigned for more than seven years over his fellow Judahites from the city of Hebron, not many miles from Jonathan's hometown of Ziph. When the great warrior was made king over Israel as well, David moved his capital to the more central location of Jerusalem.

The hair on Jonathan's arms still stood on end when he remembered the day the ark of the covenant was brought into the

new capital city with David leading the procession into Jerusalem, singing praises to God, dancing and leaping, flying through the air like one of the Lord's own seraphim! It was the closest Jonathan had ever felt to the presence of God.

The intervening years had brought David undreamed-of glory, and he had generously shared that glory with those who had remained loyal to him in the difficult times. In battle after battle they had won astounding military victories without horses and without chariots but by the courage that came from their faith in God.

And now they were on the brink of another great campaign. Jonathan was not afraid. He had no hesitation about fighting under David's banner nor any doubts about Joab's ability to wrest a victory from the Arameans. But he was battle-weary and burdened by the eroding soul of his monarch and those around him. And what of his own soul? he thought. How much longer before he succumbed to the heartless blood lust of Joab and the others? he wondered as he banked the fire. It was time to get out before he lost his own heart, but more importantly it was time to get a few short hours of sleep before sunrise. He stooped to enter his tent.

"My lord, what do you require?" The sleepy adolescent voice of Jonathan's armor-bearer reminded him of the lateness of the hour.

"I require nothing but sleep, Isaac, and so do you. You should not have waited up for me," Jonathan said charitably since the lad had long since dozed off.

"It is my pleasure to serve you, my lord."

Jonathan smiled at the fervor of the youngster's voice. The winsome seventeen-year-old was the only son of Ahiam, Jonathan's best friend, also one of the gibborim. It had taken a lot of persuasion before Judith, Ahiam's wife, had consented to allow her son the honor of joining Jonathan as his armor-bearer on this campaign. She thought the boy still too young for warfare; it was still a week before he would turn seventeen, she had

complained. In truth, Jonathan reflected with a smile, he himself had been almost three years younger when Ahiam had taken the green recruit under his wing and taught him to be a man of war.

“Why does Isaac have to become a soldier?” Judith had argued. “Why can’t my son be a shepherd or a vinedresser like most of the other boys in Hebron?”

“And miss out on all the glory?” Jonathan had teased Judith, who was closer to him than his own sister Ruth.

“Humph! Miss out on all the wounds and pain, you mean! All the time spent away from home and all the good food his mother could be preparing on his own hearth!”

In the end the two men’s arguments combined with the boy’s pleas had moved Judith to relent, but not before extracting a solemn promise from Jonathan that he would not let Isaac out of his sight.

Lying down near the boy, Jonathan drifted off into a light slumber, troubled first by visions of Shageh pleading with him to spend more time in Ziph and to take a wife and give him grandsons. Then Jonathan’s dreams became more violent. A battle was raging around him, and in the fight he lost sight of Isaac. He searched the battlefield frantically, dreading the moment when he would have to acknowledge to Judith that he had failed to keep his promise. On the edge of the fighting he could see a figure fallen face down in the sand. He fought his way to the body, afraid to turn it over and confirm his worst fears.

Jonathan suddenly awoke, startled to find himself in his own field tent with Isaac asleep beside him. A broad band of orange-gold light was spreading across the foothills to the east. It was time to prepare himself to join the battle. This day he would command a regiment of more than a thousand men, the elite troops who would be on the leading edge of the charge against Hadadezer’s charioteers.

“All right, lad,” he said, giving Isaac a firm shake that brought the young man bolt upright. “Let’s get about our business. The

sooner done here, the sooner you'll be back at your mother's table for breakfast!"



The well-trained force quickly formed into ranks, awaiting the order to march. The rumble of the Aramean chariots could now be heard distinctly from the other side of the low-lying sandy hills. Glancing to the side every now and then, Jonathan saw Isaac gulp as he valiantly strove to swallow his fear. He placed a steadying hand on the young man's shoulder, feeling the quivering bones on the lanky frame. It had been a long time since Jonathan's first battle. He had almost forgotten the feeling of fear, but Isaac's apprehension resurrected a sense of emotion that he had buried long ago

As he inspected his troops, moving man by man down the line, Jonathan saw evidence that the sounds of cavalry and chariots had unnerved them as well, although most were seasoned warriors and better able to hide their anxiety than the lad.

To boost morale, Jonathan began a chant written by David, one that had always summoned courage in himself. As soon as he gave the signal to march, he lifted his voice in cadence.

"Some trust in horses." The answer, in perfect rhythm, came back from his men. "We trust in the name of the Lord our God."

"Some trust in chariots."

"We trust in the name of the Lord our God."

When the troops topped the hill, the superior forces of their enemy came into view. Jonathan shouted above the sound of marching feet, "They will be brought down and fall!" The response was nearly deafening this time as it flew on the wind toward the Arameans.

"We trust in the name of the Lord our God!"

Jonathan gave the command to charge before the sight of Hadadezer's formidable chariot corps cause his men to falter. The Hebrews confidently swarmed down the hill to meet the

enemy, knowing that Joab and Abishai were sweeping around with their battalions in a flanking maneuver.

Outrunning even his best men, Jonathan focused on the lead chariot, dodging a javelin and circling low to the right of the horses. Before the driver could turn the chariot, Jonathan pivoted to the left, his shield held away from his body for balance and his bronze-handled iron sword held low on his right. Running at the chariot from the rear, he leaped onto the platform, catching the driver with a quick thrust that pierced the man's leather armor and pushed him down against the bowman who desperately twisted to his right, his legs tangled by the body of the driver. The arrow cocked in the man's bow shot wildly high of Jonathan's head as in one quick motion he withdrew the sword and followed with a shoulder-high swing. For the briefest of moments the men's eyes met, and then Jonathan's closed as he forced his right shoulder forward to follow through the sword's arc with all his strength. It met the narrow gap between the helmet and armor and expertly severed the head from the body which pitched lifelessly onto the ground.

Emboldened by the success of their captain and realizing that the charioteers could not control their teams and hold their shields at the same time, his men pressed the attack. In the first excitement of the battle, Jonathan had forgotten entirely about Isaac who alertly grabbed the reins of the horses and held them steady while Jonathan surveyed the battlefield. In minutes they had gained control of several of the chariots; the others were retreating. Jonathan barked orders for some of the men to secure the horses and chariots. He briefly considered leaving Isaac with them, but remembered his promise to Judith to keep the boy with him. He motioned Isaac to follow.

The lad held Jonathan's bow and quiver of arrows, as well as his spear, while Jonathan decided to continue the fight with the sword he had taken from a Philistine years before. The chariots regrouped in attack formation and began another charge toward the Hebrew line. This time Jonathan signaled for his men to

wait for the chariots which broke formation when they reached the site of the first engagement. In the dust which had just begun to settle from the first attack, the Arameans were soon hedged in by dead horses, bodies, and overturned chariots. Several times Jonathan was saved by Isaac's shouted warnings to watch his back. After one such shout, Jonathan turned in time to see the boy run a man through with Jonathan's spear which Isaac released as the Aramean fell to the ground.

Jonathan placed a foot against the body and extracted the shaft. Isaac's pale face, lathered with sweat and chalky dust, looked as lifeless as the corpses scattered around them. Jonathan recalled how sickened he had felt at his first sight of blood in battle.

"Let's finish this so we can go home," he said, handing the spear back to Isaac. Jonathan, with the sixth sense of a seasoned warrior, had known that the victory was theirs almost from the beginning. But Hadadezer's forces continued to fight bravely as the afternoon advanced. Time and again, his young armor-bearer proved himself a worthy assistant, anticipating his superior's needs without being told.

Jonathan was in a grueling sword fight with a foot soldier when Isaac spotted a large warrior with javelin flanking Jonathan to their right, away from Jonathan's shield. The man took aim at Jonathan. Jonathan had ended the sword play with a slashing cut to the opponent's sword hand and was about to finish the man. Realizing that a shouted warning would come too late, Isaac lunged forward knocking Jonathan to the side.

The javelin penetrated the boy's right shoulder from the rear, passing under the shoulder joint and emerging through the upper arm muscle. A fountain of bright red blood spurted from the wound, but Isaac felt no pain, only a strange sense of detachment as he watched the warm liquid flow down his arm. He struggled to stand up, but the weight of the shaft pulled him off center and then the ground rushed up to meet him.

Jonathan had rolled forward on his shield and quickly regained his balance, bringing his own sword up in time to meet an

off-hand thrust by the wounded opponent. Unable to handle his weapon in the left hand, Jonathan quickly parried a second thrust and ended the fight with a backhand swing.

Isaac! Where was Isaac? The boy's name choked in his throat when he saw him, face down with the polished wooden shaft protruding from his back. Just as Jonathan reached Isaac, a soldier wielding a battle-ax swung the weapon over his head and ran at Jonathan.

Jonathan reacted instinctively. He reached down to the fallen armor-bearer and jerked the javelin free. Twisting at the hips, he brought the point around and thrust forward just as the soldier began his downward swing. The bronze spear point met the man's throat just above his armor plate, and Jonathan pushed forward, knocking the man on his back and pinning him to the ground through the neck. The soldier grabbed at the shaft with both hands, but Jonathan leaned on it full weight until the sickening gurgle of blood in his throat stopped, and the man lay silent.

Oblivious to the fighting going on around him, Jonathan gathered up Isaac in his arms. He examined both the entrance and exit wounds which continued to seep blood, too much blood he feared. Jonathan quickly ripped the boy's cloak into swatches of cloth and placed one compress over the back wound. He wrapped another piece around the upper arm and pressed it against the side. Then he wrapped several long strips around the chest and back to hold the bandages in place. Calling for Isaac to be removed to the rear of the battle and tended well, Jonathan turned back to rally his men for another attack.

By nightfall, twenty thousand of Hadadezer's army had surrendered, the capture of some key officers accomplishing a rather easy victory. There were surprisingly few casualties on either side, Jonathan decided, considering the fierceness of the fighting.

Hadadezer and his superior general, Shobach, had both avoided capture. Scouts reported that Aramean units had struck out for Damascus, probably seeking reinforcements from the

city. No doubt Hadadezer's army would regroup. There would be other battles in this campaign.

Joab exuded satisfaction at the outcome of the battle as he stood before his large field tent, receiving reports from his commanders. To Jonathan it seemed more arrogance than satisfaction.

"General," Jonathan asked after he had finished his account of the battle, "if you still intend to place a garrison in Damascus, I would like to be a part of it."

Joab's eyebrows lifted in surprise. It was no secret that Jonathan preferred to avoid city life whenever possible. He waited for his captain to explain.

"My armor-bearer was injured in the battle. He will die without proper care. In Damascus he could get it. The lad is the son of Ahiam, General."

"Ah, I see. I suppose that would be suitable. If the boy has the potential of being half the fighter his father is, we wouldn't want to lose him. I have placed Benaiah in command. You will report to him."

Joab had already turned his attention to another officer when Jonathan stayed him by placing a hand on his arm. "Sir, would it be possible to send word to Ahiam concerning his son's condition and whereabouts?" Joab shrugged. "Yes, of course. I can send a messenger to find Ahiam's scouting party and let him know."

The
D*esires*
of the
H*ear***t**

Kathy Hawkins

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

Chapter One



KeZIAH made her way upward through the winding streets of Hebron past the simple whitewashed mud houses that were burnished gold by the afternoon sun. Her father would be angry if she was late, so she picked up her pace. Her home was in the upper city, where the more prosperous citizens of Hebron lived, not far from Machpelah, the grove and cave where Father Abraham and Jacob were buried at the northwest edge of the city.

She was returning from an errand at the fuller's, who had his business located at the edge of town, at the foot of the long, sloping incline on which her town was built. The odors caused by the substances he used to whiten or dye the fabrics that were brought to him—lye, putrid urine, and certain noxious desert plants—required that his business not be located in close proximity to the homes of Hebron.

Keziah spotted two familiar people coming down the path toward her, and she broke into a broad smile. It completely transformed her face from its usual somber aspect and brought an answering smile from her two friends, who were now drawing close to her.

“Ira, Haggadah. I’m so glad to see you. I wish I could stop

and visit, but I have been on an errand for my father, and I have to get this back to him." She indicated the bundle she carried.

The brother and sister were the only friends Keziah had of her own age. Although they lived near her, she seldom had a chance to visit with them. That Haggadah was younger than Keziah was evident by her shorter stature and plumper face. Her carefree nature evolved from being the youngest child and the darling of her parents. Now Haggadah poked out her bottom lip slightly in a hint of a pout.

"But you are always on some errand for your father. Sometimes I wonder if Aaron thinks you are his slave instead of his daughter."

Even as Keziah reddened in embarrassment and tried to think of something to say in defense of her father, Ira rebuked his sister.

"Haggadah, if you don't learn to be more moderate in your speech, you will never find a husband, and no one will be left in Hebron who will speak to you. You will have offended all of them! Please excuse my sister, Keziah," Ira smiled at her and her embarrassment vanished. He was older than Keziah by a year, tall and gangly, as young men are wont to be at his age, and quite self-conscious.

"I looked for you at the New Moon feast last week. Almost everyone in Hebron was there."

Ira wasn't just trying to make conversation, Keziah knew. He had a genuine interest in her, and Keziah suspected that if her father were not such a stern and imposing figure, he would have asked for her in marriage already. After all, she was already past the age when most girls were betrothed.

Perhaps he would soon muster the courage to do so, or, more likely have his father do it. Keziah wished for Ira to be her brother more than she desired him as a suitor. Her father inspired respect but not friendship, and Keziah guessed that even Ira's father might hesitate to approach him. She retained flashes of memory of her father as a friendlier, happier man, but not since her mother's death.

But Keziah doubted that her father would entertain any offers for her as long as he remained unmarried himself. His second wife had died several years earlier, leaving him without a male heir, so it was essential that he find another wife—a young wife. The requirements for the wife of a priest were more stringent than for the rest of the population. Besides, Aaron was very particular. Keziah doubted there was a family in Hebron he would consider worthy of being united with his.

“I suppose your father has still not changed his mind about letting you attend.” Haggadah’s statement, which brought her a nudge from her brother’s elbow, brought Keziah’s wandering thoughts back to the conversation.

“No, Haggadah. He is sending me to Adoraim to stay with my aunt. I won’t even be in Hebron for the New Moon. Besides, Father never changes his mind about such things. He believes that the New Moon feasts should not be observed because it is not written in the Torah.”

“But it is not forbidden in the Torah, either. And sacrifices are always made to Adonai, and that is commanded in the Torah.”

Keziah just shrugged. She knew that most people did not understand her father’s strictness in matters of the Law of Moses. She didn’t understand it herself. She only knew there were dozens of things practiced in Aaron’s household that other families in Hebron never observed. Her thoughts about her father’s strictness reminded her that she was late, and he would not be happy about that.

“I have to go now. Perhaps I will bring you back some almonds from Adoraim when I return. I will be gone a month while Father is in Jerusalem, but I will try to come to your home for a visit when I get back.”

She addressed her words to the sister, but they were meant for Ira as well, and as she parted from the pair, she entertained the thought that someday it might be pleasant to be married to Ira. That would mean she would have Haggadah for a sister.

But so far Keziah's father had discouraged all suitors. He did not allow her to go to the New Moon feasts, where young people mingled and often chose their mates. Most people looked forward to these social occasions and even observed a spiritual rededication with a special offering.

Keziah knew her father would never change his opinion of these events. For one thing, he did not approve of young people mingling and forming their own opinions about who they wed. He believed that only fathers should decide who their children should marry—especially daughters. Keziah knew that when her father finally chose a husband for her, he would not ask her opinion of the match at all. So Keziah had very little social interaction and very few friends of her own age in Hebron, even though it was the city of her birth.

As she had tried to explain to Ira and Haggadah, Keziah's father also rejected the New Moon feasts because the Law of Moses had not specifically prescribed them. The only New Moon feast that Aaron observed was in the month of Tishri, the seventh month. This feast, commonly called the Feast of Trumpets, had been commanded by Moses, and Aaron had proudly declared that he would celebrate no other. Keziah looked forward to the festival each year.

One reason Keziah wanted to accompany her father on his journey to Jerusalem was so that she might see new things and meet new people. But she also wished to spend time with him, to demonstrate that she was worthy of his love and would bring him honor.

Her shoulders lifted as she heaved a sigh. So far, she had not been very successful. No matter how hard she tried, it seemed she always fell short of winning her father's approval.

Keziah possessed a pleasant nature and a wide smile that often prompted a smile in return from those who saw it, but since she had very little chance to interact with others, she did not realize this about herself. She only knew that her smile brought no answering smile to her father's face.

Her pleasant nature seemed to leave no impression on him either; in fact, it appeared to make his own more sour than ever. She still had vague memories of a mother's smiles and kisses, but her mother had been dead since Keziah was five years old, and those memories grew less clear as time passed.

Keziah had never thought to question her father's treatment of her. She had always known he rejected her, at least since her mother died, and had always assumed it was her fault that he did. But with a natural optimism and the resilience of youth, she continued to try to win her father over. So she quickened her pace as she neared her home, hopeful that Aaron would not be too angry that she was late and that this time he would take her with him.



Keziah's father stood in the doorway of his house with a scowl on his face. "I told you to go to the fuller's early today so that I might have my things ready early and be able to get enough rest. I leave at dawn tomorrow, Keziah. Can you never consider the welfare of your only parent? What have I done to have such an ungrateful daughter?"

Another daughter might have broken down into tears over such a scathing rebuke for such a small trespass. But Keziah was used to hearing such lectures from her father.

She knew that if she explained that she had stopped to talk to friends it would only make matters worse and possibly lead to his forbidding her to see them again. So she offered a simple apology. "I'm sorry, Father." She handed him the bundle and followed him into the house.

Aaron immediately went to his chamber, where a woven bag stood open on a chair. He carefully folded his freshly laundered ephod, the sleeveless vest that marked his position as a priest and a son of the tribe of Levi. He always looked forward to wearing it during his stay in Jerusalem.

As he placed the ephod with his other belongings for his trip

to Jerusalem, he smiled in anticipation. Always impressed with himself —after all, he had been named for Israel’s first high priest, the brother of Moses—he was never more proud than when his priestly duties called him to Jerusalem to take part in the rotation of priests that King David had set up for the worship in the tabernacle he had erected there.

Since the King had returned the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem after its hundred-year exile with the Philistines, worship in Israel no longer centered in Shiloh or Gibeon, where the brazen altar was housed, but in the capital itself. David had organized the worship, appointing musicians and bringing in priests from all over Israel to participate. Aaron would surely see the King on this trip, for David often came to the tabernacle.

“Father, won’t you take me with you this time? You promised me that one day I could go to Jerusalem with you.”

Aaron broke off his pleasant musings at the sound of his daughter’s voice. Keziah stood in the door of his chamber, holding a small cloth bag filled with bread and cheese that she had prepared for his journey. Her dark auburn hair curled riotously about her face, framing rich brown eyes that complemented her hair and a wide mouth that curved in a pleading smile.

Aaron suppressed a momentary pang of guilt. Since the death of her mother, he had never taken the girl, his only child, with him to Jerusalem, not even to the Passover Feast, which had become an annual pilgrimage since David had centered his people’s worship in Jerusalem. Most families made the trip together, enjoying the time away from mundane daily life.

But Aaron did not enjoy spending time with Keziah. To take her with him would remind him of her mother and the time they had taken Keziah with them to the feast. He did not want to be reminded of his first wife and those happy days before his life had turned to bitterness.

Such a disappointment Keziah was to Aaron. If only she had been a son; he gladly would have taken a son with him to Jerusalem. But Adonai had not smiled on him. He had lost two

wives trying to get sons. The first, Keziah's mother, had actually presented him with one before she died, but he was a weak thing who had survived his mother by only a few hours.

Why had his only son been too frail to live when Keziah had been born fat and healthy, with a lusty cry and that ridiculous red hair? Aaron knew that most Hebrews considered auburn hair to be beautiful, a rarity among a swarthy people who nearly always had black hair. And now that they had a king with hair the shade of a golden sunset, they admired it even more.

But Aaron did not want his daughter to be admired for her beauty. He wanted her to be known for her virtue, her piety, so that someday he might be able to arrange a marriage for her to one of the sons of the high priest. But that could wait. He had no wife to see to his household, and it was convenient to keep his daughter with him until he found another wife. Finally, he turned to Keziah to answer her question. "No, daughter. There is no one to look to your safety while I go to serve in the tabernacle. Jerusalem is a large city, and there are many dangers. I would have you go to your aunt and uncle in Adoraim. You'll be safe there. But I do intend to begin making inquiries to find you a suitable husband."

Aaron had repeated this promise often over the past few years. Most young women were betrothed by the time they reached puberty or soon after. But, of course, since the death of Keziah's mother and then her stepmother, she was the only one to keep house for her father. He had been in no hurry to see her married.

Besides, in his opinion no other Levite families living in Hebron had produced a son he would choose for his daughter. No, Aaron had dreams of giving his daughter in marriage to one of the offspring of Zadok or Abiathar, men appointed by David to share the office of high priest.

Perhaps on this trip to Jerusalem he would approach one of his friends in the priesthood to be an intermediary with one of them. If his daughter married into one of the high priestly families, Aaron might be able to move to Jerusalem and become

one of the inner circle of priests who served perpetually at the tabernacle. He could picture himself with bodyguards, living in a fine house with marble floors, and maybe even becoming a confidant of the court.

Aaron didn't think this was at all beyond his reach because he was of the tribe of Levi, which was accorded special honor in Israel. Having received no land in the division that was enacted under Joshua, they were to be given land by whichever tribe among whom they lived. And they were to receive a tithe in payment for their spiritual services to their brethren, services such as presiding over feasts, teaching the Law, offering blessings, and the rotation of service in the tabernacle of David.

As a priest, Aaron was actually more prosperous than many of his neighbors. The roomy home that he shared with Keziah was better than most. Its foundation had been laid with native quarried stone, and its ceiling was supported by heavy oak beams. He had no servants, not because he couldn't afford them, but because he was most ungenerous and preferred to allow Keziah to perform all the duties to which a servant would normally attend. He would never have admitted that he did so because of a vindictive anger toward a daughter who had failed to be born a son.



The next morning at dawn, Aaron and his daughter gathered up their things in preparation to depart, the priest to Jerusalem and Keziah to Adoraim some nine miles to the west of Hebron. As they prepared to leave, Aaron eyed his daughter critically. "Depart for Adoraim right away, Keziah. You want to arrive well before dark. And don't forget to cover your hair."

The young woman tossed her head as she felt a surge of resentment. Uncovered hair was a sign of availability. Until a girl married, she was allowed to go with her head uncovered. After all, a young woman's uncovered head served to attract the attention of would-be suitors.

But Keziah knew that her father was ashamed of her hair. He believed it drew attention to his daughter and made her appear immodest. He also felt a deep distrust of human nature. He was constantly on the lookout for improper behavior either on her part or by others.

Her father was a difficult man to love, Keziah admitted to herself. But he was all she had. She kissed him good-bye, and they headed their separate ways, he to the north, she to the west.

Chapter Two



Talmon of Gibeah impatiently made his way along the road that led to Hebron, calculating that it would take at least one more full day of travel before he reached Jerusalem, especially since his manservant, Ishobeam, puffed, panted, and constantly complained about the pace Talmon set for them.

Joab, commander of all Israel's armies, had sent him on this mission to Philistia, a trip that had proved futile as well as exhausting. Talmon had been slowly ingratiating himself with the general. He had finally been appointed one of several bodyguards, honorary armor bearers who did the general's bidding. Up to this time, Talmon had never failed to fulfill an assignment, but the futile trip to Philistia had left him in a nasty frame of mind. He couldn't wait to be back in Jerusalem, indulging in the vices that entertained him.

Of course, he would not have long to enjoy himself. He would soon have to report back to Joab at Rabbah. Talmon had detested waiting outside the city gates to starve the rebellious Ammonites into submission. Violent by nature, he always looked forward to the cruelty and slaughter of the battle.

But this was a siege, not a battle, so Talmon had volunteered to take a message to Ziklag. The general had thought to pressure

the Philistines into sending a contingent of soldiers to assist in the siege, but the wily king of Ziklag had been well aware that Joab was too busy subduing the Ammonites to retaliate for a lack of cooperation. Not only had he not been cooperative but also he had provided Talmon with the poorest of accommodations and had granted him only a brief audience. Talmon had expected to be feasted and entertained but had been rudely ignored. There had been nothing he could do but return, his mission unaccomplished.

Still, Joab did not like to be denied, and Talmon knew that the general would not forget his failure to gain the Philistines' cooperation. Just as Talmon's father had always publicly humiliated him as a child for any infraction, Joab would almost certainly ridicule him in the presence of the other aides.

Talmon's mind replayed an incident that had happened in his fourteenth summer, when his father had sent him to deliver two donkeys that he had sold to a neighbor. Bandits had accosted him and beaten him on the road, taking the animals. When Talmon reached home, he received no sympathy. Instead he had been beaten again by his father and humiliated in front of the entire household. He imagined Joab doing the same thing to him in front of the troops.

As his mood grew darker with these thoughts, he felt a need to vent his ire on someone. Talmon's appearance utterly belied what was inside. His finely chiseled, handsome features, and ready smile served him well in deceiving those he met. But his true nature was anything but pleasant. From childhood he had despised most other people, convinced no one could match his superior intelligence and cunning. For the most part, that opinion had turned out to be accurate. Talmon lived for self-gratification and ambition, and he felt not a moment of empathy for any other human being.

Attaining what he wanted was Talmon's only goal in life. Most of the time that could be accomplished best with charm and manipulation. For that reason, most people never saw his baser, cruel nature. Those who did see it never forgot the experience.

Ishobeam was one of the few who knew the true extent of Talmon's evil, but since he was a man equally as wicked, for the most part he enjoyed his association with the young man he had served these past ten years. At this moment, though, Ishobeam was the only person near enough to serve as the focus of Talmon's anger. He drew his sword from its sheath and whacked the flat of it against the older man's backside.

"Move your lazy carcass, old man, or we will be another week getting to Jerusalem." The older man grunted his protest but picked up the pace, and they moved quickly along the deserted road.

They were some two miles from Hebron when they spotted the child. She was singing as she moved among the trees that lined the road, picking some of the plants and placing them in a basket.

Talmon paused for a moment to watch her. Here was a diversion, someone he could dominate in order to lessen the shame of his failed mission. And Ishobeam would forget to sulk over his recent harsh treatment if his thoughts were diverted by the little girl. The old man always found satisfaction in tormenting any creature smaller and weaker than he. Ishobeam was used to his master's frequent changes of mood and action, so he wasn't surprised when Talmon put his finger to his lips and motioned him to silently approach the girl. Evidently his master was now willing to pause in the journey long enough to make sport of the child.



Keziah sauntered along the road that led to Adoraim. It was the month of Iyar, and she was enjoying the pleasant spring day. The day was cloudless and beautiful, and Keziah turned her face up to the sun as the breeze feathered her hair back from her face.

The road was a winding one, with rocky outcroppings and an occasional stand of oak or cedar trees. It transversed an area of

undulating hills that sometimes dropped off into deep ravines. There were still many hours of daylight left in which to reach Adoraim.

Keziah was in no hurry to arrive at the home of her aunt and uncle. They were not expecting her at any particular time, though she usually stayed with them when her father went to Jerusalem. Her father's sister, Milcah, was just as dour as Aaron. Although Uncle Benjamin was more pleasant, he was too cowed by his wife to offer any assistance in persuading her to give Keziah freedom to mingle with the other young people in the village. Instead, she would spend her time doing chores for her aunt.

Keziah doubted her father would keep his promise to look for a husband for her, but he might look for a wife for himself. At his age, if he were ever to have sons, it must happen soon. By law he was not allowed to wed a divorced woman, nor one whose virtue had been questioned. Not that her father would consider such a woman for his wife anyway.

Keziah hoped that Aaron wouldn't choose a woman like Aunt Milcah, or like Hannah, her deceased stepmother. Keziah remembered the conflicting feelings of guilt and relief she had when Hannah had died. It was a pity that a woman so young had to die, but Hannah had been so cruel toward twelve-year-old Keziah that she could not grieve her loss.

Perhaps Father would find a woman with a better disposition this time. Besides, once he remarried, Aaron might seriously seek a husband for Keziah. Then she would have a home of her own, a family, and a child to hold and love.

What would it be like, she wondered, to have another human being love and trust her completely? She couldn't imagine, but it was a goal she looked forward to reaching, as did every Hebrew girl.

Her hopes did not include having a husband's love. From what she had seen in her own home, Keziah believed that duty was the primary bond between husband and wife. The husband provided shelter and protection, and the wife gave him sons.

Her musings were interrupted by a sound coming from a grove that stood some distance from the road. It was a high-pitched sound such as might be made by a small, frightened animal. Keziah stopped and listened. It came again. A child's treble tones—clearly upset, though Keziah could not distinguish the words. And the answering deep voice of a man. *Probably just a small child unwilling to do his father's bidding*, she thought as she started to walk again. But then the high voice raised to a plaintive wail once again.

Alarmed, Keziah crept through the rugged boulders between the road and the trees toward the sound. If nothing was amiss, then whoever was in the woods would not need to know she was there. But if the child needed help. . . .

"Please don't take my basket. It holds only herbs for a salve my mother makes."

Keziah saw that the plea came from a little girl who appeared to be about eight years of age. A large, rather ugly man in his middle years held the basket over the child's head, just out of reach. A younger man, dressed in military uniform with leather mail covering his upper body, and a large broadsword strapped to his left side for easy access, leaned against a large oak a short distance away. His hair was thick and black, his features patrician.

"See whether she's telling the truth, Ishobeam."

"Good idea, my lord," the older man replied, and opened the lid, tilting it so that his master could see, and in the process dumping some of the contents on the ground. With a cry of outrage, the child kicked the older man in the shin. He dropped the basket and hopped on one foot, swearing. The child grabbed the basket and started to run, but the young man reached out his arm and snared her around the waist.

"You shouldn't have done that, brat. Ishobeam doesn't like it when people kick him. You'll have to be punished. What shall we do to her, Ishobeam?"

The older man grinned, showing a couple of missing teeth, one on either side of his two front ones. As he started toward his

master and the child, the little girl screamed in terror and squirmed helplessly in the young man's strong grasp. Keziah was so incensed that she forgot her own fear and stepped from her hiding place.

"Leave her alone!" she commanded indignantly.

Three heads swung in unison toward the sound of her voice. The servant's eyes narrowed suspiciously. The little girl's face lit with hope. The younger man looked her over with a hungry expression that made Keziah's heart clinch in fear. But she held her ground, determined to stare him down.

The soldier, whose countenance had seemed so comely from a distance, now made chills run down Keziah's spine. The look in his eyes was cruel and predatory, and Keziah sensed that she had now become the prey.

"Do as she says, Ishobeam," he said without taking his eyes from Keziah.

"But, Master . . ."

"Let the child go," Talmon ordered. "What need do we have of a little lamb when this sleek gazelle has appeared?"

As he continued to stare at her, his gaze came to rest on her hair. Keziah instantly regretted having disobeyed her father's instruction to keep her head covered.

The servant released the child, who stood for a moment, looking questioningly at Keziah.

"Go along now. Run home, little one," she told the child, who raced away. While the men's attention was on the child, Keziah seized her chance to escape as well. She ran faster than she ever imagined she could, back to the road, then in the direction of Adoraim.

At first, Keziah thought she might outdistance them, for when she glanced back, she did not see the men. Where were they? They must be somewhere among the boulders. Her side had a terrible catch in it, but she did not slow down, nor did she dare to look back again.

She came to a curve in the road that skirted a huge boulder.

As she rounded it, she was suddenly knocked to the ground. Her breath left her body in a whoosh. She was stunned for what seemed an eternity, then she heard the mocking laughter of her two tormentors. They had stationed themselves on a boulder and waited for the opportunity to pounce. They had merely been making sport of her!

Keziah became so angry at the thought that again she forgot to be afraid. She struggled against her captor's hold and screamed at the top of her voice until he silenced her with a stunning blow to her face. With the help of the older man, he dragged her off the road into another stand of trees. Keziah, though dazed by the blow, still fought valiantly. She managed to scratch the young soldier's face.

"Ishobeam, hold her arms. No, over her head."

Keziah wanted to scream again, but found she could not. The warrior kept one hand over her mouth, and she felt she was suffocating. She tried to kick, to dislodge him with her legs, but his weight held her immobile. She attempted to jerk her arms from the servant's hold and almost succeeded, until he knelt on them.

As the brutal attack continued, the only sounds were the warrior's strident breathing, an occasional lewd laugh or comment from the servant, and the stifled moans coming from the helpless girl.

Keziah was mercifully near unconsciousness some time later when she felt herself being roughly dragged some distance. When the motion stopped, she managed to partially open one of her swollen eyes and saw that she was lying near the edge of a deep, rocky ravine dotted with scrub brush. She heard her attackers—they were talking about pushing her over the ravine. Keziah knew that she would soon die. At that moment she almost felt relief; perhaps her father would think only that she had fallen to her death, if she were ever found, and would never know of her shame.

The next instant Keziah felt the push of a foot, then sensed

herself falling through space, until a bone-jarring impact brought blessed blackness.



Adah was in sight of Hebron when she made up her mind to go back. At first she had only thought of escape, but she soon became worried about the stranger who had helped her. The kind lady who had helped her was in trouble. Those were mean men. They had laughed in a funny way and frightened her. The lady would be no match for the two men. Adah decided she would sneak back.

As she retraced her steps, she stopped several times to pick up rocks that were just the right size and weight to fit her hand nicely. She intended to be ready if those hateful men were still about. She would hide in the trees and throw rocks. Maybe the men would think travelers were nearby and leave the older girl alone.

She rounded a bend in the road where a huge rock jugged out. There were drops of red sprinkled across the road. Adah stooped down for a closer look and realized it was blood. Frightened, she was tempted to run away, but she remembered the young woman who had helped her and started to search the area. Then she saw the two men who had accosted her leave the cover of the trees that bordered the nearby ravine.

Quickly, Adah ducked behind the rock. When she could no longer hear their voices, she crept from her hiding place and ran toward the area from which the men had come. She had walked along the edge of the ravine for several moments when she heard a low moan.

She paused to listen, and in a moment another moan, this one louder than the first, alerted her that her rescuer was somewhere below her. Adah knelt and peered over the edge of the ravine. Her heart sank when she saw the distance to the bottom. Then something moved a few feet below and captured her attention.

Adah scrambled down the incline. Halfway down, on a ledge

that had broken her fall, lay the pretty lady. Only she wasn't pretty anymore. Her eyes were nearly swollen shut and her clothing was torn.

The little girl knelt down beside the battered, bleeding young woman and spoke soothingly. "My lady, did the bad men hurt you? Don't worry. They are gone now. I will help you." Adah untied the small skin of water she had tied at her waist. It wasn't much, but it would have to do. "Here is some water. Can you raise your head?"

Keziah moaned but lifted her head slightly when the little girl's hand slipped under her neck to help her. The water stung her bloodied lip. The little girl dampened the bottom of her tunic and tried to wash the bruises and cuts on Keziah's face.

Long moments passed before she regained the strength to sit up. She gasped and winced in pain, but for the sake of the child she bit back the groans that tried to escape her. Adah found Keziah's discarded cloak and brought it to her.

"Please, lady, can you walk? I will take you to my mother. She will know what to do. Come. Come. Those men might come back at any time."

That admonition registered with Keziah, even in her dazed state, and she stumbled painfully to her feet. It took a long time to climb back up to the road, and Keziah sprawled, panting and exhausted, when they reached it. The little girl wiped the beads of perspiration off Keziah's brow and once more gave her water to drink.

"Come now, lady, please get up again. We have to leave this place as soon as possible. My mother will help you as soon as we reach Hebron. That's the way, just lean on me."

Keziah wanted nothing more than just to lie there and die, but the child was so insistent and so persistent that, eventually, it was simply easier to allow herself to be helped to her feet and guided along.

They made their way very slowly back to Hebron. Keziah fell to her knees more than once before they reached the city.

When they were almost to Hebron, she covered her head with her cloak and insisted they not enter by the main road that led into the marketplace but by a small path that was not heavily traveled. Unlike any other town of its size, Hebron had no city walls, so it was approachable by numerous paths.

She allowed herself to be led to the little girl's house because she was afraid that if she returned to her own, a neighbor might see her and send word to Aaron. Although the thought of anyone learning of the humiliating attack horrified Keziah, the idea of her father knowing caused her limbs to tremble and her stomach to churn. Her father could never find out about this! Never! That was the foremost thought echoing through Keziah's mind.

*The
Heart
of a Lion*

Kathy Hawkins

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

Chapter One



SIX YEARS LATER

The Rab was dying. Everyone in the small village of Ziph waited in hushed expectation, anticipating the loss of their most venerated citizen. A large number had gathered in the courtyard of the Rab Shageh's house. Periodically, Ailea of Damascus, the Rab's daughter-in-law, brought news of his condition, which had steadily worsened over the last several days. The rest of the time she spent trying to comfort the other family members, who kept a silent vigil in the corridor outside the dying man's chamber, waiting to be called to his deathbed.

Ailea felt bereft at the thought of losing the Rab, who had been her only friend when she had first been brought to Ziph as a captive bride. Her father-in-law had been a buffer between her and his son, Jonathan, during the first tumultuous months of their marriage. He had taught her about Adonai, the God of Israel, whom she had come to embrace as a result of the Rab's patient teaching of the Torah.

She felt an almost uncontrollable urge to go to the Rab's side. But Jonathan, his only son, deserved these private moments with his father. Ailea knew that Jonathan would call the remainder of

the family to gather around the Rab when the end came. She waited patiently, fighting the urge to wail her grief as loudly as a child. Once in a while she would relate an amusing or touching story about her father-in-law. The others keeping watch seldom commented on her stories, but that wasn't important to Ailea. She just needed to talk about Shageh.

The Rab's daughter, Ruth, who was two years older than Jonathan, sat on a three-legged stool on Ailea's right, wiping an occasional tear from the corners of her eyes. When her father had taken ill, she had come from the nearby village where she lived in order to help. She was not a person of strong emotion or many words, but there was no doubt she was already grieving the loss of her father.

Jerusha, Jonathan and Ailea's young daughter, had certainly not taken after her aunt. She felt all her emotions strongly and was never hesitant to share them with others. Whether angry, happy, frightened, or sad, Jerusha never left any doubt as to how she felt. Now she sat on her brother's lap and sobbed brokenly.

"It isn't time for grandfather to leave us, Micah. He has hardly begun to teach me from the Torah. Oh, how I wish I had gone to the teaching rock with him last week instead of taking the sheep to feed in the hills. Now I may never have another chance to learn from him, and no one else would bother to teach it to a girl," she cried. Micah stroked her hair with his large hand and held her close, not denying her words, which he knew were true.

The Rab was truly a unique and irreplaceable teacher. Micah remembered his grandfather's response when one of the men of the village questioned him about his willingness to teach the girls of the village as well as the boys. "The Law of the Lord brings light into the life of the one who hears it. What man of reason would want his wife or his daughter to remain in darkness?" That had effectively silenced his critic.

No one would have guessed that Jerusha and Micah were siblings. She was delicate and her hair was black as pitch, while he was muscular, with brown hair streaked with golden highlights.

Though he was a dozen years older than his sister, even a casual observer would have noticed their deep affection as Micah comforted Jerusha, and her complete trust in him as she poured out her grief.



Inside the room where the sick man lay propped up on a mountain of pillows to ease his breathing, Jonathan held his father's bony, parchment-like hand and spoke in low, soothing tones. The gentleness he showed the old man was incongruous with his fierce countenance and huge stature. As one of the *Gibborim*, or mighty men of King David, Jonathan ben Shageh had earned his status as one of the greatest warriors of Israel. Though he had recently turned fifty, few men in the kingdom could equal his strength, cunning, or strategic grasp of war.

But at this moment Jonathan was not the feared warrior of Israel's victorious armies. He was the son of the most beloved and respected man in the hill country of southern Judah, and he was remembering the times his father had held him, taught him, gently reproved him, and judiciously praised him. As he remembered, his eyes misted with tears. Soon, he must call the remainder of the family in. The time had come for the Rab, the wise man of Ziph, beloved father and grandfather, to utter his last words and give his final blessings to those he would leave behind. But it was hard, so hard, to let him go.

"I will call the others, Father," Jonathan said softly as he leaned over the old man.

"Just Micah. I must talk to Micah first."

"But Ruth will want to . . ."

"I will say my good-byes to my daughter afterward, but I would see Micah before I grow any weaker. There is . . . much I . . . need to tell him." The Rab's chest wheezed with difficulty, and Jonathan worried that he didn't have enough breath left to talk to his grandson, much less his other loved ones who waited

in the hall. But he reluctantly went to fetch Micah. Few people failed to disregard the wishes of the Rab; certainly not his only son.

“I will be but a moment,” Jonathan promised before slipping from the room. As soon as he opened the door his older sister came to him. She was in her late fifties, but her excellent health had always made her appear much younger than her actual age. Not today. Jonathan noticed the dark circles under her eyes. The lines in her face were prominent. Ruth looked old and haggard. Jonathan heaved a sigh. He supposed he looked old as well. Why were they all so stricken when they had expected this for months now? After all, Shageh was ninety years old!

“He still lives?” Ruth’s eyes held a mixture of hope and anguish. When Jonathan nodded, Ruth started past him to the door of their father’s room. He stayed her with a hand on her shoulder.

“Wait a bit, Ruth dear. He has asked to speak to Micah first.”

“But I’m his daughter,” she wailed in an almost childlike voice.

With a glance down the hallway at the other family members, Jonathan lowered his voice to a whisper. “And he is asking for you, but he has something to say to Micah first. This will be harder on the boy than on any of the rest of us,” he reminded his sister, hoping her love for her nephew would allow her to put his interests first. She did not disappoint him.

“Yes. That is true. Of course, Micah must go in to him first. I will wait. But do you think he might die before . . .” She couldn’t finish the sentence, and Jonathan hastened to reassure her.

“You know the Rab, sister. He has willed himself to live until he has bid us all good-bye. He won’t disappoint us.” He gave her a sad smile, and Ruth returned a wobbly one. Then Jonathan motioned to his son and Micah joined him at the doorway.

“He wants to speak privately with you, but don’t take too long. He is very weak, and the others will be heartbroken if they don’t get their chance to visit him once more.” Micah nodded grimly and closed the door. Crossing the room to his grandfather’s bed, he noticed that the Rab’s eyes were closed. He

leaned over and kissed each of the old man's wrinkled cheeks. "I am here, Grandfather."

Shageh opened his eyes slowly, as if they were very heavy, but managed a smile for his grandson. "Sit," the old man commanded, motioning weakly for Micah to sit on the bed beside him.

"I would give you my blessing, Micah, before I leave this earth. You must not grieve long at my death. I will always be with you, Micah. You will remember the things I have taught you when you are tested. There is much of me in you, as well as much of your father, and you will learn to reconcile the two natures as you grow older." The dying man's voice had grown stronger as he spoke his last words to his grandson, as if he knew how important they were to Micah.

The long fingers of the dying Rab clasped his grandson's with surprising pressure, and Micah grasped at this false hope. "You will get better, Grandfather. It is not time yet for you to leave us. We need you too much."

The old man gazed directly into his grandson's eyes, which were the same clear amber as his own. "No, Micah, you do not need me any longer. You are a man now. You have been a man for several years, and you will be greatly used of Adonai, for you have a heart for him. I want to talk to you about the vow you made to me when you were a lad. You know the one of which I am speaking."

Micah nodded and clasped the old man's hand more tightly. "I vowed I would never strike or harm another person as long as I live."

"It was a good vow you made, in many ways, Micah. But it is not one that is possible to keep for all time in all circumstances, so I release you from it."

Micah's frown revealed his confusion. "Grandfather, I'm not sure I want to be released from my promise. It has served me very well for all these years."

"Micah, you are about to enter a new season in your life, and for that you need to be free of all that would hold you back. I

allowed you to make the vow to me, and not to Adonai, so I could release you from it when the time was right.”

“I remember you stopping my words with your hand over my mouth and telling me that I must never make a vow to Adonai in the heat of the moment, or out of guilt, or pride, or anything else. You said that a man must make vows to the Lord most sparingly, but that you would allow me to vow it to you, and you would hold me accountable to keep it.”

“That is right, Micah. A man should only vow to Adonai to serve only Him, to care for his wife and family, and very little else. Now you are at a crossroads, and need to decide the path your life will take. You must only follow the same path your father has chosen as a warrior if it is the right path for *you*. Speak honestly with Jonathan about your doubts. Never deny what you are, Micah.”

“But that is the problem, Grandfather. I don’t really know what I am—Hebrew or Aramean, warrior or teacher.”

Shageh opened his mouth as if to respond, but his words subsided into a low, rasping wheeze, as though the very breath of life had begun its final journey across his lips. He closed his eyes and rested his head on the pillows.

Alarmed, Micah pleaded with Shageh not to die, but the old man only shook his head weakly and told him to call his Aunt Ruth. As Micah went to summon his aunt, he knew he had spent his last hour with the Rab.

A few minutes later, after her special time with her father, Ruth motioned the entire family into the room. “Come near, Little One,” the old man rasped. His eyes were fastened not on Jerusha but on her mother. “Little One” had always been his pet name for Ailea.

As she leaned close to the dying man, Ailea could not keep the tears from flowing, and the Rab reached up with a shaking hand to brush them away. “Hush, Little One. I am tired, and it is time for me to join my fathers. You are strong and will continue to be. The God of Israel will be with you. Do you remember

your first prayer to him, and how amazed you were when he answered it?"

Ailea smiled through her tears. "I asked him for a friend and he sent me Judith. I remember how anxious I was to tell you about it. I thought it such a wondrous thing. But you weren't surprised at all when I told you."

The Rab's lips curved into a smile. "I am never surprised at the power and lovingkindness of Adonai, Little One. That is why I am happy to go to him. Do not grieve too much. You have given me great joy because you give joy to my son. And you have given me my heritage in Israel, my precious grandchildren. They may struggle, or falter, but be assured. . . ." He gathered his remaining strength. "Their righteousness will shine as the stars. . . ." The Rab's voice trailed off and he became very still.

Jonathan laid his hand over his father's heart, expecting to find it had ceased beating. But though faint, its pulse remained steady. A few minutes later, the old man opened his eyes once more and whispered his granddaughter's name. In her typical, impetuous way, Jerusha climbed up on the bed, cupped her grandfather's face in her small hands, and planted several kisses. "Your heart is brave and your spirit is free, precious one," he told her in a surprisingly clear voice. "Guard you heart carefully and commit your spirit to Adonai. Do not let it turn to rebellion. If you do these things, the Lord will reward you."

As Jerusha enveloped her grandfather in a warm embrace, the Rab's eyelids fluttered and he fell into a deep sleep. Sensing the time was near, the family slowly moved back into the outer rooms.

Several hours later, Jonathan made his way to the courtyard where most of the villagers were keeping a vigil, though darkness had fallen, necessitating the lighting of torches. His announcement that their beloved leader was dead started the process of mourning that would last for many days.

EIGHT MONTHS LATER

Micah awoke early. He had to make the journey to Jerusalem today. He didn't want to go back, but his father couldn't make the trip himself—or so he had claimed. He had insisted that Micah must go in his place.

It had come as somewhat of a surprise to Micah that Jonathan would choose him as his representative. After all, just a few weeks ago Micah had been sent back home to Ziph in disgrace—dismissed by Joab, the general of Israel's army, accused of cowardice and under suspicion of treason. It must have been a blow to Jonathan's pride as a military man that his son had failed as an army recruit.

Despite his grandfather's dying words instructing him to tell his father that his heart was not in it, Micah had enlisted in the army at twenty, the age the Law specified a young man to be eligible for the draft. In David's kingdom, however, there was no need for a draft; the volunteer army had won victory after victory during his reign, and now all the surrounding kingdoms had been brought under the domination of Israel.

Jonathan had pointed out to Micah that during peacetime it would not be unpatriotic to choose to stay home, gradually taking over the spiritual leadership of Ziph and the other small villages in the southern hill country, teaching young boys the Torah as Shageh the Rab had done.

But Micah was convinced that his father was wrong. He felt he had to prove himself first as a warrior before the people would accept him as leader. Despite Jonathan's stature among the most loyal and powerful warriors in the kingdom, Micah had never been completely trusted or accepted. After all, he was not a full-blooded Israelite. His mother was an Aramean from Damascus, and though the villagers had eventually accepted her, they still treated her and her children with the polite restraint that marked them as outsiders.

Micah felt he had something to prove, not only to the village, but also to his father, whom he admired above all men. He wanted to prove himself as a warrior to make his father proud, even

though his father assured him he would not be disappointed if Micah did not choose a military career. Besides, life in the village was not the same without the Rab, and Micah had felt that maybe a change would help him deal better with the grief of losing his grandfather.

Micah had gone to Jerusalem to train directly under Joab himself. His father had been uneasy about that. There was no love lost between the general and Jonathan. Never had been. Jonathan had warned Micah that the general would likely be more demanding, more critical of him because he was Jonathan's son. But in truth, the general had been scrupulously fair.

The accusation of cowardice had come from the ranks of Micah's unit, where he had been challenged from the first day. Certain other recruits had mocked and goaded him from the very beginning. Because of his size—he was taller and heavier than any man in his unit, perhaps in Israel's entire army of nearly one hundred thousand—he had been taunted almost daily to fight some fellow who wanted to prove himself. Because of his sanguine nature and tendency to negotiate rather than fight, some had branded him a coward, mistaking his peaceful nature for weakness. They secretly feared him, but covered their fear with animosity. When they saw that Micah had chosen to live a chaste life, they taunted him constantly about women.

A warrior in the standing army was guaranteed to be sought after by women, and most of the young men took full advantage, with little concern about impurity. They would chide Micah as they left the barracks for a night of debauchery. "When will you be old enough to go with us, son of Jonathan? Are you yet a lad?"

"Aye, he's a lad. Not full grown yet," someone else would respond. They would all laugh mockingly, but Micah laughed right along with them until they gave up goading him and went their way. Even when they made veiled hints that Micah was somehow unnatural because he wasn't licentious, he didn't retaliate.

Their fear and guilt remained a barrier to his acceptance. Still,

his ability with weapons of war, in which Jonathan had tutored him well, and his sheer size made Micah a candidate for leadership, and Joab had appointed him a squadron. The men followed his orders well enough until one day when their assignment was to chase a group of desert bandits during a training mission in the Transjordan.

Many of the men were anticipating their first taste of victory in battle, ready to spill the blood of the outlaws. Instead, when the robbers were surrounded, Micah did not allow his squadron to use their swords. He ordered his men to simply confiscate the stolen goods and let the bandits go.

Micah's show of mercy angered his men, and some complained directly to Joab. Micah was called before the commander and asked pointedly whether he had let the outlaws escape because they were Aramean, and thus had greater claim on his loyalty than the king. Micah flushed at the insult and clenched his fists in anger. He knew why the general had asked the question.

His parents had told him many times how Joab had opposed Jonathan's marriage to Ailea when he had brought her back to Israel as a captive. Joab had suspected her of spying for her brother, Rezon, who had become a raider and a guerrilla fighter against Israel after the defeat of the Aramean alliance more than twenty years ago. The general had never trusted Micah's father after his marriage to Ailea, and now he thought the worst of the son.

Micah patiently explained the incident to Joab. "Those raiders were not Aramean, though if they had been, I still would have let them go. They posed no threat to Israel. They were from a poor village near the Jordan and were only raiding to feed their families. I confiscated their booty and sent them home."

"Is it true that you sent your own unit's food rations with them as well?" Micah admitted he had sent enough bread to feed the tiny village for a week. Joab shook his head in disgust and mumbled something about it being a pity that a giant as big as Goliath should have a heart as soft as a woman's. He gruffly

ordered Micah to return home while he contemplated whether he was worthy to be trained as a soldier.

Micah groaned at the memory and rose from his bed. He stretched, able to flatten his hands on the ceiling of the room, so great was his height. Micah ben Jonathan certainly did not look like a man who was either soft or cowardly. The truth was, Micah did not fear anyone, but not everyone knew that—including, apparently, Joab.

Micah shook off his unpleasant thoughts as he walked to the window, opened the shutters, and gazed out on the prosperous village of Ziph. “Oh, Grandfather, I wish you were still here.” Micah’s grief over the loss of the Rab had hardly abated over the past months. In order to escape it, he had joined the army only one week after his grandfather’s funeral. But his homesickness in Jerusalem only made him sadder. His grief had been particularly acute when he had come home in disgrace and had to confess to Jonathan that he had been at least temporarily suspended from the army.

Though Jonathan had been angry on his son’s behalf, he showed no sign of being ashamed of him. Still, Micah couldn’t help but feel he had disappointed his father sorely. Grandfather would have understood how he felt.

Micah turned from the window to a small table nearby. He picked up a scroll tied with a scarlet cord. It was a copy of the Torah, a gift to the Rab from King David years ago. Upon Shageh’s death, it had passed to Micah, who had not once failed to follow his grandfather’s instruction to read it daily. After reading a passage, he prostrated himself in front of the window and began to praise and thank Adonai for life, for material blessings, for his family and health. He prayed for forgiveness of his sins, and finally, for wisdom. His devotions finished, he felt up to facing the unpleasant journey before him, and went to break his fast. It took a lot of food to fuel the massive frame he had inherited from Jonathan. But his other characteristics were the legacy of his grandfather, especially his height and his clear,

amber eyes. Shageh had towered six inches above his son's six-foot height. So did Micah.

Not only did Micah resemble his grandfather physically, but everyone said his personality was uncannily like the Rab's. Both of them had a great reverence for Adonai, and for all creatures that he had made. Each had a calm, contemplative nature, and a disconcerting way of assessing people that saw beyond their facades. They had been as one in spirit, and although he loved his parents dearly, he was convinced that no one would ever understand him like Shageh had.

As he left his room, Micah heard someone moving about in the courtyard. He knew it would be his mother, drawing water from the cistern for the day's needs. She had already fired up the oven, and he smelled the enticing aroma of baking bread. Micah smiled as he remembered all the times his father had insisted that his wife had no business tending to such mundane chores.

Jonathan was a wealthy man, after all, and had provided his wife with several household servants to see to such things. But Ailea always rose before anyone, even the servants, and had much of the household work underway before anyone else could help. Micah always suspected that Ailea did this to irritate his father. The tiny woman seemed to revel in any opportunity to stand up to the mighty warrior she had married. It was possible also that his mother wanted to prove to the other women of Ziph that though she had been raised in the privileged home of Eliada, a powerful general in the city of Damascus, she did not think herself above them. The respect they accorded her had been hard won.

Ailea smiled at her son as he entered the courtyard, craning her neck to look up at him. People often remarked how amazing it was that tiny Ailea had borne this giant of a son. After greeting him and motioning for him to sit, she brought him crusty bread and goat's milk and commanded him to eat. When he sat, she still wasn't quite at eye level with him.

"I baked early so you would have fresh bread to take on your journey."

His response was interrupted when his scrap of a sister appeared. The girl was the exact image of her mother and the apple of her father's eye. She was also a handful, as stubborn as a goat, shunning the attributes of a proper young lady for the freedom of the hills as a shepherd girl. This seemed to scandalize their provincial little village, but Habaz, the chief shepherd, could hardly protest. Jonathan had provided him with most of the stock for his herds.

She was barefoot, as usual, and in the process of wrapping her hair up in a haphazard turban. Somehow her green eyes looked twice as large without her hair framing her face. "Is that bread almost done, Ahmi? It smells wonderful! Do you mind if I take some for Reuben? And the cheese as well?"

Micah knew the answer before his mother spoke. She had a soft spot in her heart for old Habaz, raising his grandson alone. The boy's mother had died giving birth to him, and his father had died of a fever not long ago.

Micah brought his thoughts back to the moment at hand. "Thank you, Mother. You take good care of me—of all of us."

"You are the joy of my life," she answered simply.

He watched her bustling about, and thought with pride that she was as beautiful as a young girl, with her long black hair that had hardly a sprinkling of gray. Her form and energy were that of a much younger woman. She often drove her husband to distraction. Jonathan's father had warned him teasingly never to marry a woman a decade younger than himself, else she would run him ragged. Micah knew that his father's complaints were made affectionately. Jonathan loved his wife more than anything.

"Good morning," a voice boomed, and Micah looked up to see his father descending the steps that led to his parents' rooftop apartment. Over the years, Jonathan had improved and added to the compound until it was now twice the size of any other home in the village. "I see you are ready to travel," Jonathan commented as he accepted food and a kiss on the cheek from his wife.

“Are you certain you want me to go?” Micah asked again, as he had over the past several days.

“You know I do. I want to send you to the feast in my stead so everyone will know I am proud of you and count you worthy to receive this honor on my behalf. You have done nothing to be ashamed of, and the sooner you go back to Jerusalem to face these groundless accusations, the quicker everyone will know that.”

“Some of your friends in the army wouldn’t agree,” Micah commented as he bit into another piece of the fragrant, rich bread. He remembered the mumbled comments and sly remarks that had circulated in the barracks in Jerusalem, both from officers and recruits.

“Those who are my friends would agree. Those who don’t are no friends of mine. When you return, I will demand to know the names of any who would dare slight you.”

Jonathan’s eyes took on a hard, cold look, and his brows beetled together as he spoke. “Father, you can’t come to my rescue. It would only make matters worse. We’ve spoken of this before.”

Jonathan growled his reluctant agreement. “Just don’t forget that the king is our friend. Appeal to him directly.”

Micah shook his head. “I will appeal first to Joab. I know you don’t trust him, but he is giving me the benefit of the doubt, even though he thinks I acted foolishly. But I will compromise and ask that I present my case to Joab in the king’s presence. I am partially guilty of the accusations. I did allow the bandits to go free, but certainly not because I believed them to be Rezon’s men. Joab really had no recourse but to send me home after several men asked not to serve in my unit because they didn’t trust me.”

“But you know you are neither a traitor nor a coward, Son, and so do I.”

“No, but my reasons were just as bad in the eyes of some warriors. I’m afraid I don’t have the stomach for slaughter. I can

fight to defend myself, and I will gladly attack in battle for my king, and for Adonai, but even then the killing haunts me.”

“You are much like your grandfather, Micah, and that’s nothing to be ashamed of. Do not think that because I am one of the *Gibborim* you must follow in my steps. In truth, there are nights when the eyes of those I have slain haunt my dreams, and on some days, when your mother puts her soft hand in mine, I feel unworthy because these hands have shed blood. No, I would be just as happy if you decide that the military life is not for you.”

“But *look* at me, Father. Has not Adonai expressed his will in how he made me? You know that one such as I will never be accepted as anything but a warrior. Both my size and my Aramean blood proclaim that I must be a warrior to prove my worth. You don’t know how many times I have wished I were as short as Perez next door. He has more friends than he can count because no one either fears or envies him.”

“You will come to peace within yourself, Son. Do not worry. I am proud of you, no matter what you do. Go to Jerusalem and offer your services to the king. As peaceable as the kingdom has been in recent years, it is possible that David may send you as his emissary on a diplomatic mission.”

Jonathan often forgot to speak of the king in formal terms. After all, he had joined David’s band when Israel’s sweet singer had been a fugitive from King Saul, hiding in the caves of Adullam. Jonathan had earned the position of Mighty One when barely into manhood. Now, decades later, he still served on active duty as one of David’s war counselors, making trips to Jerusalem several times a year to train new recruits and lead forays to the border between Israel and the Philistines, to make sure they stayed close to their coastal cities of Ashdod and Ashkelon.

“Father, I wish you would at least come with me. You and Mother haven’t been to Jerusalem for some time, and you deserve the honor the king will bestow on you. I have done nothing to deserve recognition. Are you not afraid that your name as a great warrior will be sullied by bringing attention to a son deemed

unworthy?”

Jonathan's eyes flashed in anger. "You are not unworthy. I have instructed you to go in my stead so that all may know that I believe in you. I will not go with you. I will not embarrass you by intervening in these ridiculous accusations that have been made against you. I know I would not restrain myself if someone slighted you, and it would wound your pride if I came to your defense.

"And your mother! Well, you have not had as many occasions to have her fury unleashed on you, but believe me, if someone were to offer insult to her only son, she would attack immediately, whether in the streets of Jerusalem or inside the palace itself. Unless you wish to witness such a scene, I suggest you leave the two of us here and head to Jerusalem alone. Of course, you are welcome to take Jerusha with you."

The look of horror that crossed Micah's face caused Jonathan to double up in laughter. Micah soon joined in. Ailea, who had overheard the conversation, complained, "You two may think it's amusing, but you both have to help me do something about that child! She is running completely wild."

"I will help, Mother, I promise, as soon as I return from Jerusalem."

"It might not be such a bad idea to take her, Micah. She needs to see that there is more to life than these hills and the animals she loves so dearly."

Jonathan chuckled again at the look of dismay Micah gave his mother, and took pity on him. He patted Ailea's cheek. "Her love of animals she got from you. I remember sleeping with a smelly goat a few times when you thought the weather was too wet for your pet to stay outdoors. We will take Jerusha to the city for Passover, but Micah has too many distractions to look after her this time."

Ailea gave her husband a disgruntled look. "Amal wasn't just another goat, Jonathan, and you know it. I haven't had another pet since he died."

Jonathan laughed. “Well, I know he wasn’t just another goat. He was trouble. That’s why I named him ‘Trouble.’ And even though you haven’t had a pet of your own since he died, you have seen to it that Micah and Jerusha have always had one. Let me see if I can remember them all. There was the badger, the ferret, the owl, not to mention a handful of sheep and goats that avoided the oven by currying favor with either you or the children.”

“The sheep and goats provided us with milk and wool! And as for the other creatures, what was I to do when the children brought home abandoned or wounded animals—break their hearts by telling them the creatures had to die?”

“Father is only jesting, Mother. He was as fond of those pets as we were. He only feared it would make him appear less fierce if he showed it, and thus weaken his position as a warrior.” Micah took the last bite of bread, drained his cup of milk, and stood. “I had better start my journey, or else I’ll arrive in Jerusalem too late to find lodging.”