



Rest on the Flight into Egypt, Luc Olivier Merson, 1879, MFA Boston

5th Gospel: A New Age Story of Jesus

Book I—Secret Youth

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Books II & III, Travels East & Dangerous Rabbi: Forthcoming

Chapter 1: Mary the Imp

Mary, small of waist, cheekbones high, skin light olive, heard her name called from up the slope of the mountain. She recently had come into her womanhood. She looked toward the top, past the fig and olive trees where two goldfinches were singing, and saw Judith, leader of the Mount Carmel Essenes, beckoning from the older woman's home near the top. *What, she thought, have I done now?*

"Just a minute!" she called. She bent and picked one more shoot of green onion from the community garden, holding the stem of the plant with one hand and cutting beneath it with her bone knife. She cut off a piece and popped it in her mouth. Then she laid the rest of it in her shoulder bag and ran up the path through a meadow of violets.

Judith, short, slender, and wiry, pushed her grey-flecked hair behind her ears and stood in the wood-framed doorway of her home, one hand on her hip, as she watched the girl come. Women in Israel in the time of King Herod were forbidden to lead worship—except among some of the Essenes. Here she was secretly the head rabbi.

What, she thought, are we going to do with Mary? Such a bright girl, but so free-spirited!

Mary was one of the twelve, all girls her age, who were in secret training to give birth to Israel's long-awaited messiah. Judith had taught them for ten years, starting soon after her husband died after falling into a deep ravine. He and she had read and studied scriptures together for many years and roamed the mountain freely. But she had been childless. Now the ten were her children. Their parents had dedicated them to the community, even as they visited them every weekend for Sabbath services, dinners, and fun.

Teaching the twelve had been the peak of Judith's life as a rabbi, she was born for it, and now she felt her heart rending as they were about to leave. It was an emotion she never would reveal in public. And Mary, whom she now was calling, was among the most gifted.

Judith smiled over the distance to the young woman, but privately she shook her own head ever so slightly. Another problem with the girl, thought Judith, was how she often got her own way just because she was so pretty. *Those startling dark-brown eyes she uses to pin her classmates to their seats, Judith thought. Then she hides behind that cascade of waist-long hair. And so impetuous!*

As Mary hurried up the mountainside, she furrowed her eyebrows. She determined to apologize for whatever trouble she might have caused. She just had

to keep her mouth still long enough from trying to explain why she had done it. She smiled. She did like being in Judith's home. It was a cave with a mud-brick front like many others on the slopes. And she enjoyed taking lessons in the big general assembly room further below, learning Torah, Prophets, and Wisdom in training with the others. Girls normally were never taught such things, but to the twelve of them—and the other children in the Community—that seemed just silly, as they had been given lessons since they were so young that some of them couldn't even remember when or how they first started.

As Mary neared Judith's home, she fondly recalled the warmth in winter inside Rabbi's cavern with its stuccoed front wall, even in occasional snows, with a charcoal brazier on the center table vented by a small, high window, and with sewn-together goatskins covering the main window and the door. Now, in spring, all the girls brought Rabbi blossoms to put in narrow glazed vases on the modest shelves and low stone slab in the middle of the single room as the sun streamed in.

Mary quickly cut several stalks of hyssop leaves for Judith as she passed one of the gardens, where the plants were grown for medicinal use—something different from everyone else's flowers that would look good as background to several of the floral bouquets. When she arrived before the older woman, Mary pushed the stalks before her. "Rabbi!" she exclaimed, nodding her head in respect.

"A good contrast for the flowers!" Judith replied. "Thank you, Mary." she ushered the girl inside and placed the small branches in three of the arrangements.

"Now, Child, we must talk."

Mary knew that tone. She set her jaw. She wasn't sure yet whether to apologize or to explain, or both.

"Let us sit," said Judith. She drew Mary down to two close, low divans with pillows at one corner of the two-foot-high table. It was the custom throughout the lands, even in the Roman Empire, to lie sideways, propped on one elbow, when eating or talking. When they needed to write, students could do it lying, or sit up and use their homemade ink on thin slats of rough wood cut for them by adults, then later burned. Most children elsewhere in Israel learned to read and recite the Torah scriptures, but not write, except for simple lessons outdoors in dirt.

Then she placed her hand on Mary's and said, "Why did you tell the other girls that you are the most likely to be chosen to have the child we are expecting?"

Mary looked away quickly, then back at Judith's calm stare. "I have displeased you, haven't I?"

The older woman sighed. "Why did you say it?"

Mary shrugged. "I have wider hips. Full breasts for feeding a child. And I know the scriptures better. A messiah will need all of these for a good birth and

upbringing.”

Judith said, “You forgot to mention how pretty and strong boned you are.”

Mary shook her head. “That would sound self-centered.”

Judith leaned forward. “How do you think the other girls felt when you talked about your hips and your scriptures?”

Mary paused. “I probably made them feel bad, didn’t I? Is that why you called me here?”

“Yes and no. You should apologize to them. If you said it to all, then apologize to all. None of us know what is required for the mother of a messiah. What if he needs a mother more typical in her education—who knows much less than you? What if he wants a thin-hipped woman so that he, too, will be narrow?”

Mary squirmed. Her face grew red. She nodded. “I’m sorry, Rabbi. I apologize. To you. And to the others. I’ll tell them at supper.”

“Did you think before speaking?”

Mary dropped her eyes to the floor. “No. I’m sorry, Prophetess.” Mary used Judith’s official title—the highest available—to show her great respect for the older woman. “I know; I must work to curb what you call my ‘imp.’”

Judith hid a smile. “You quote me back to myself. But yes. Thank you.”

Mary rose to go.

“There is something else,” Judith said. “It is momentous.”

Mary’s body suddenly grew rigid with expectation. “Is it the rumor, Rabbi? That we girls are getting too old to stay?”

Judith sighed. She took up a shawl beside her and laid it around her shoulders. “Relax. Am I not your leader here on Mount Carmel?”

“You are, for our whole community!”

Judith nodded. “I had a dream last week. I was sleeping in the sea, floating over a warm reef bed of sand. In the dream, I awoke, drifted upward, and smelled roses that were floating all around me. They gathered between my arms and my body, twelve little flowers, six on each side. Slowly I opened my limbs and they began drifting away. I used my hands to keep them separate and spread them out as they started their journeys. Then a bright light came from far above me. I looked directly into the sun, and I heard a voice saying, ‘Plant them well.’”

“And it meant us, the twelve?” Mary asked. She shivered.

Judith nodded. “You always have been quick to understand. All of us elders have talked about little else this past week. We all agree. We knew it was coming. You are becoming women, now. We told all of you this was the goal.”

Mary nodded. "And now it is time." Tears began brimming her eyelids.

Judith placed her hand on Mary's face. "Child. Daughter of our community. You have been trained for this moment. We still don't know with absolute certainty if any of you will bear the messiah. But we have found a home for each of you."

"Can we come back here sometimes?" Mary asked, wiping her cheek. "To see you, to see each other?"

"Certainly. We will always be here to help guide you. You are one of us and always will be as long as you wish it."

"And who will I be sent to?"

"We decided that we would like you, with all your education and able mind, to be near Sepphoris, the city by Nazareth that the Romans say they will rebuild. A rabbi there, an Essene like us, will continue your intellectual education."

"Will I live in his household?"

Judith shook her head. She put her hand on Mary's. "We need all twelve of you to be more invisible. You know how Israel treats women who are educated. And how could you possibly have a baby alone, whether in Sepphoris or Mount Carmel? Even some of the Essene brothers and sisters in the south—from Jerusalem to Hebron and the Dead Sea—tell us that we northern Essenes are crazy to plan the messiah's birth, and evil to let women read scripture and write!"

Judith cocked one hand against her hip, elbow out, and took a deep breath. "That argument is for another time. But if the ruling Sanhedrin in Jerusalem for all Jews were to hear we taught you girls your letters, they would declare us all heretics and send their Jewish soldiers to roust our community. No, Mary, you and the other eleven must disappear into society, at least to all appearances."

"I will keep all secrets!" Mary's brow furrowed. "I could hide in our caves forever!"

"I know, Child. But you have lived here ten years. You have no idea how hard it is for any woman, especially one who can read and write, in the world out there. Each of you must live in disguise as normal mothers. You all must have husbands."

"What?" Mary jumped up. "You're going to marry me!" She could feel her heart beating hard. Was it fear or excitement, she wondered?

"We've told you this for years," Judith said, watching her carefully.

"But now?" Mary turned her face away from Rabbi for a minute. She made her own shoulders relax. Then she took a deep breath and turned back. "I will obey. But please not too fast!"

"Mary, Child, you are already past your coming of age. Did you think to avoid this?"

"You aren't married!"

Judith nodded. "But I was. For many good years. I still would be, if he hadn't died."

"I'm sorry, Rabbi."

"We all live in the present, Mary. All twelve of you must be betrothed. The messiah, if he does come, will need a good Jewish family, not a community of scholars and lone practitioners of meditation like we are, here on Mount Carmel. We have families up here, too. But the twelve of you must disappear into the countryside."

Suddenly Mary looked so alone and forlorn. Judith felt her heart melting. She stood and went to the girl and embraced her. Mary responded by half collapsing onto Judith's shoulder, where she began quietly crying in earnest.

"You are a young woman, now." Judith patted and rubbed her back. "But still such an emotional one! If you are the messiah's mother, he's going to have all kinds of feelings, isn't he?"

Mary nodded. After a few minutes, she raised her head. "Have you told Josi, yet?" Josi was her best friend among the twelve girls. She was one of Mary's cousins, a small, bright, bird-like girl who was very dark, even for a Hebrew, with very tight curls.

"Not yet," said Judith. "Remain quiet until it is announced. I will speak to each of the twelve of you alone, as we are doing now."

"Am I the first to know?" Mary asked.

Judith lowered her head to one side and shook it at Mary. "That doesn't matter. Once you all know, we'll gather you together so you all may talk about it."

"I'm sorry I asked," Mary said. Then another thought popped into her head. She grabbed Judith's hands and shyly stepped back. "Whom will I be engaged to?" she asked.

"Your husband was an easy choice. Our community of elders has watched each of you twelve young women talking with other Essenes from the outer world when they return for our festivals and meetings here at Mount Carmel."

She paused and almost smiled. "We saw that you were drawn to Joseph of Nazareth."

Mary's face turned scarlet.

Judith smiled. "No, no, it's all right. Feel good that you like him. We want marriages of both law and soul."

"But he's so old!" Mary exclaimed.

"Nevertheless, you are attracted to him, aren't you."

Mary's lips twisted. Then she sighed. "Yes! I mean," she said more quietly, "yes?"

Now Judith did smile. "Enthusiasm for a husband is good. Do you think we elders on Mount Carmel expect you to be cold and rigid?"

"But everyone here is so cold" — Mary corrected herself — "I mean calm. Like nothing bothers any of you!"

Judith smiled. "We elders have deep feelings, too. If you only knew what we go through inside sometimes. Not just our own old emotions, returning to haunt us, but sometimes the emotions of all you girls and others around us."

Mary frowned. "You can read our minds!"

"No, no," said Judith. "Well, not usually. But feelings, yes. Sometimes, oh the emotional storms you girls go through. We get caught in them, too, when we come near you and talk with you."

Mary shifted uneasily. "You are accusing me of being silly and overwrought."

"Mary." Judith leaned forward. "What you feel is natural. You will learn to control it. And we elders do believe in deep feelings. Yahweh of Israel is not entirely a god of doom." A half smile came to her face. "Yahweh, blessed be his name, appreciates joy, love, and delight, even in elders, much more so in a new bride and groom."

Saying the name of God, "Yahweh," out loud was considered a sin by most Jews. So, when the Essenes did it, they sometimes added the blessing of his name afterward.

"Rabbi," she said, "I'll marry if you say so. But I thought the messiah is supposed to come from a virgin."

Judith did smile this time. "One scripture, just one, says the mother will be a virgin. But that word also can mean a young woman. So we're not sure. And you will be a virgin during your betrothal months, as is normal. You can remain betrothed for up to a year and no one will think it wrong or strange." She squeezed one of Mary's hands. "But even during that time, share your heart and soul with Joseph, for he will be your man, and you shall be his woman. If the temptation becomes too much, come back here for a while. Or go visit your cousin Elizabeth down by Bethlehem. But, Mary, whatever is to happen, the time is nigh. Our foretellers predict it. And once one of you among the twelve hopefully gives birth, then she — and all of you — will become a full wife in every way. We have chosen your partners with that in mind, as well."

"But Joseph's old! What if he dies before I am to know him?"

Judith laughed. She patted Mary's hand. "He's not going to die anytime soon. He's in the prime of his life with a good job, the carpenter and handyman for the

village of Nazareth. He has a very nice three-room home of stones that he quarried himself from the cliffs and hills in the village.”

“But,” Mary said, “one of the girls said he has two sons already!”

Judith looked out her window behind Mary, far away to the Jezreel Valley below, and beyond. “The Romans,” she said, “are rebuilding one of our small towns, making it a city for their citizens and for rich Jews who like Greek and Roman ways. Very cultured, art on the walls, and public bathhouses. They have renamed it Sepphoris. It is to be a modern example of architecture. Joseph’s sons, James and Jose, already work there and live with an aunt in the new city. Soon Joseph may find a job in Sepphoris, too. But you and he will continue to live in nearby Nazareth in the home he has built. Just the two of you, Mary. You will get to know his sons on weekends when they return for the Sabbath. They will like you.”

Mary firmed her chin. “But will they respect me? I am an educated woman.”

“You are,” Judith nodded. “And different. But so was their mother. And they are Essenes like us. We already talked with them.”

“You asked for their approval of my betrothal to their father?” Mary guessed.

“Yes. We didn’t need to, of course. But we must have them keep our secret, too. They want to help us. And desire that their father find happiness with you. They think your youth will be just the thing for him.”

Mary’s cheeks reddened again. She put her fingers over her mouth. “But, so, I won’t have to care for two teenage boys?”

Judith laughed aloud. “I wouldn’t wish that even on myself! They are young men, already making a living. You won’t be an instant mother. Consider them weekend friends.”

Mary turned and looked out the front doorway of the cave. The great Valley of Jezreel spread far and wide below them. *A whole year for the messiah to be born*, she thought? *And would it be to her?* In the crystal-clear blue sky, eagles and hawks soared. She found herself already missing their mountain community, its caves and assembly rooms, her young sister-apprentices, most of them not of her blood but certainly all among the brightest and most earnest girls of their people in reading and writing.

This, she thought, was all that she had known, except for a few small memories from when she was a toddler. She wondered if she ever again would live in the rolling mountains and hills covered with forests in this far southwestern corner of Syria, where so many Jewish settlers lived on what all considered a part of Israel. Once all of this had been part of their Promised Land from Abraham and the twelve tribes two thousand years ago. Someday it would be theirs again, in spite of

the Romans. She suddenly realized her eyes and cheeks were glistening with tears. She wiped them with her fingertips. She set her shoulders and turned to face Rabbi.

“I am ready,” she said.

Judith gave her a long, respectful nod. “The betrothal contract,” she said, “will be drawn up for you and Joseph to sign next week. Then you will be legally married. As is usual, you are required to remain a virgin for a while. Other than that, we will send you off with our heartfelt wishes, and we hope you will continue your studies.”

“What if I had said ‘no’?” Mary asked.

Judith replied, “Then we would have released you from your duty and allowed you to either stay here and become an elder, or leave us.”

Mary paused. “I don’t think I want to be an elder!”

“You want to do something. To be more.”

“Is that wrong?” asked Mary.

“For many women your age, yes. But for you—for an Essene woman, especially one of the twelve—no.”

“Then I will try to have the messiah!” She gave Judith a quick up-from-under look. “That is, of course if the messiah chooses me.” She burst into tears again, even as she smiled. She asked permission to leave, then tripped down the mountainside, singing a love song from the Songs of Solomon that, normally, only married women dared utter, and then only in their own private homes or on feast days with other wives. As she passed an old, gnarled olive tree standing alone in the bright light, she jumped to grab a branch and plucked an early olive, which she ate. The whole mountainside bloomed with spring flowers.

Judith watched her strolling down and shook her head yet again. *And if the messiah does choose you, Judith thought, he will have a merry roller coaster of a childhood!*

A month later in late spring, Joseph, a widower, tall with wide-shoulders and crinkles around his eyes, stood in the front yard before the Essene assembly hall high on Mount Carmel. *Do I really belong here,* he wondered?

He looked over at the twelve young school maidens standing in the brisk wind, hoping to catch sight of Mary. She was holding her robes in the breeze. Around him were the other eleven men, most of them younger than he, all of whom had agreed to become engaged. In Mary’s group, some of the young women had tied their long hair together with entwined mountain blossoms or hillside

herbs. Joseph couldn't decide whether it was the fresh air that made him feel like dancing, or the thought of being married again. He wondered if Mary could cook. In the distance, a herd of sheep called and, nearby, a young man from the community played a lute. The day was cool, but Joseph thought his chest felt unusually warm.

He was a well-respected citizen of nearby Nazareth, one of the small town's few and highly valued craftsmen, a builder and repairman. He proudly wore the mark of his trade, a long, thin wood chip, behind his ear whenever he went about the village. But here, for this combined sacred ceremony and legal contract in the Essene community, he had put the chip in his pocket, just as he did for Sabbath services. Some Essenes like Joseph lived in Nazareth because it was so close to Mount Carmel.

As for this betrothal, he remembered, he had not asked for it. Judith and several of the Essene elders had interviewed him when they discovered he was open to marrying again. They all lay around Judith's central table. He'd told them, "As some of the community here on Carmel know, I am thirty-five. I have two just-grown sons from my wife, who died giving birth to the younger. My lineage is the House of David."

The interviewers nodded, for that was on their checklist of what the prophets long ago foretold.

"Most people in Nazareth," Joseph continued, "cannot read nor write, so the Essenes among us came here to the mountain to learn our Torah and write Hebrew letters. Other Jews in the village do not mind. They suspected my departed wife of having an education, but they did not ask, and we didn't tell them. The subject of religion, except as good Jews with a common history, does not come up with our non-Essene neighbors."

"We hear you are well respected in the village," said one of the interviewers.

"I'm just a simple man," said Joseph. "I try to make a fair bargain for my work and do the best job possible by honoring Yahweh with each measure and cut."

"Then," said Judith, rising from the center table, "do we agree?" She looked around. Most of the other elders nodded. A few shrugged, then agreed. Turning to Joseph, she said, "We will ask you to measure and cut as you always have done, in fairness and kindness, good health and ill, with our young Mary. Whether she has the messiah or not."

Joseph simply said, "Rabbi and Elders, thank you." He walked down the mountain for home, half-sure they would change their mind. He determined to graciously accept whatever their decision might be.

The process of becoming betrothed, *kiddushim*, had started several months

earlier when the girls were asked, *Will you accept this man we have chosen? This is the most important decision you may make in your life.* After one or two adjustments, the future brides agreed to their community's choices. A few of the future husbands, especially the younger ones who were members of Carmel's temple of worshippers, had asked for permission to marry a specific person. In most cases, like Mary's, the elders had chosen after watching both potential spouses, just as two sets of parents might do. Each future husband then offered a pride price, which eventually would revert to the bride herself after marriage.

Normally, the bride price would go to the father of the bride. But this time was different. The Essene community had raised these girls. Their families had pledged them to the community in service ten years earlier. The twelve future husbands gave the price to the Mount Carmel Essenes, who would hold it for the young women until needed. And all the brides and grooms promised to give their obeisance to the Carmel Essenes for the rest of their lives, and especially to follow all injunctions about raising a messiah, if this opportunity befell them. *"Kiddushim is a temple of marriage for the worship of the Lord,"* Judith had told them. *"Especially of the woman's body as an alter for birth. This is imperative for the one through whom the messiah may choose to come."*

Most observant Jews were very clean in normal times, as this was part of the Laws of Scripture. The Essenes were especially so. Water was life and spirit. As was normal in betrothals, all twelve brides and their grooms ritually cleansed themselves before coming to the ceremony.

Now, as Joseph stood with the other eleven men, looking upon their future wives, he wondered why he was among those being so honored. His age was not an issue: older men often married young women. *But how, he wondered, am I good enough to raise a messiah? Do the elders know something about me that I do not?* He'd met Mary at gatherings in recent years and enjoyed talking with her. She had a lot of emotions. *Are they marrying her off to me because I'm so boring that I'll calm her down?* In fact, he thought, being a father to a messiah sounded a little scary. If the remote possibility of it were to occur, he planned on asking for plenty of advice from Judith and the others. *And Mary, so young, she knows nothing about children. Can I encourage her to talk often with the older female relatives,* he wondered?

The twelve young girls, slightly out of breath, had just finished climbing the hillside from their quarters below. A few were frowning as if they were marching to their execution. One or two were wide-eyed and shaking a little. Mary and her best friend, Josi, climbed hand in hand. As they'd neared the top, they looked at each other, grinned, and then began giggling.

"Stop it!" Mary spoke low.

"No, you stop it!" Josi exclaimed. They frowned at each other, then laughed

and put their hands on their mouths.

“Shh!” said Mary. Our future husbands are right over there, waiting for us!”

“Yours is so handsome,” said Josi. “I wouldn’t mind going home to him!”

Mary slapped Josi’s wrist and then placed her hand on her own cheek as if embarrassed.

Josi grinned.

“Look at yours,” said Mary. “So beautiful and young with golden brown hair! Mine is so old!”

Josi bent forward and whispered in Mary’s ear. “I think you like men who are mature.”

Mary’s face grew red.

Then, suddenly, all the girls were there. Judith waved them toward the men. Each girl went to stand beside her future spouse. Shyly Mary stepped close to Joseph. Then she looked up, determined to gaze into his eyes. He looked down at her and gave her a smile that dazzled her. She swallowed and stepped closer.

Everyone in the community who could attend now stood, smiling or serious, some holding the hands of their own young children, who stood rapt, and some almost mature, studying the event for clues about their own future. Each adult’s face was calm, almost beatific, yet excited: this moment was the culmination of ten years of bringing up these young women.

Judith raised her arms, palms up. “Welcome, all of you!” she proclaimed across the temple grounds for all to hear. “Yahweh and Elohim are around us and within you. Today we betroth these twelve couples who are close to our community’s heart. We join them together, each in a binding contract.

“There was a time,” said Judith, sweeping her arm toward the top of the mountain just behind her, “when nothing was here except a few scars from watchfires burning to direct ships to our coasts. As you know, the western part of the top looks out to the Great Sea. Our temple began 800 years ago when one of Israel’s greatest prophets, Elijah, challenged the priests of the god Ba’al to the dual of the burning bulls. This is in our Nevi’im, our Scripture of the Prophets, in our Book of Kings.

“In those days,” she said, “this land, Samaria, a part of our Israel, was suffering a great drought. Ahab, King of Northern Israel, turned to the foreign god Ba’al to help us. He and his foreign wife, Jezebel, required us all to show our behinds to our Lord Yahweh, in spite of Abraham’s pact with the Lord over a thousand years before then.” Judith frowned. “In those days, the smell of blood spread throughout the land. King Ahab killed hundreds of Yahweh’s priests because they would not forsake our Lord. And the King grew especially tired of our most famous prophet

of all in that time, Elijah, who lived in the wilderness and endlessly delivered predictions, warnings, and what Ahab declared malicious advice against Ba'al. The King even sent his servants to every corner of the kingdom to capture and kill the prophet.

"But Elijah sent a message to Ahab. "Come find me near Mount Carmel," he said." Elijah had been hiding there in a cave. Ahab showed up quickly with his soldiers to execute this enemy of the state. But when they met, Elijah looked him in the eye and accused him. 'You may be King, but you have betrayed all our forefathers. You worship Ba'al! An alien god! You and your Phoenician queen, Jezebel—you have killed and driven away all the priests of Yahweh, almost every one! You and Jezebel bow your knee to Ba'al and kiss him on the lips. Both of you are a pox on Israel.'

"Ahab was taken aback. He had half-expected a change of heart, a plea for mercy, or some kind of deal. Now he stiffened, and angry words came to his mouth. He shouted, "You, you Troublemaker! You are a great millstone around my neck and my wife's and all of Israel! Snake of the wilderness, prepare to die.'

"Elijah waved his staff and said, 'Before you slay me, Ahab, I will give you a chance to prove which god, the Lord Yahweh or Ba'al, is Israel's. Bring your hundreds of priests of Ba'al—and the hundreds who worship Jezebel's northern goddess of the soil, Asherah. Meet me above on the top of Mount Carmel. You must do it: this is your chance to show all your subjects how wrong I am and how great is Ba'al! If you win, all of Israel will know you are right.

"'Tell your priests to bring two bulls,' said Elijah, 'one for them and the other for me. They will cut their beast into pieces and place it on an unlit wood fire. I will cut another bull myself and place it on my kindling. Then, Ahab, tell all your priests to raise their hundreds of voices and arms to Ba'al, and I will raise my own two hands to Yahweh. Whichever god strikes a fire to sacrifice the bull, that god will be Israel's. You say your beloved Ba'al is a storm god, a lord of the skies, so surely he will answer your priests with flames, will he not?

'And do not bring all your soldiers,' he said to Ahab. 'This is a sacred meeting of priests. You will be safe, no matter what, I swear to it. If I lose, your hundreds of priests can march me away.'

"Ahab, looking splendid in his carefully-chosen gold jewelry and robes of fine silk from far away, could not resist: even if neither bull burned, he knew he could proclaim that the great prophet had failed. So he agreed. Elijah told him, 'Soon in the coming days I will send a message that I am ready. I swear by the Lord to be there.'

"Now Elijah went to the mountain top and sent his assistant seven times to the nearby lookout point from which you could view the Great Sea. On the assistant's

seventh return, he told Elijah, 'I saw a cloud far away like a man's dark hand rising out of the ocean.' A west wind was in their faces. Elijah read the signs provided by the Lord. 'Send word to Ahab to join us tomorrow,' he told the servant. 'Also tell everyone you meet about the contest so that they may observe.'

"The next day, Ahab, his armed warriors, and hundreds of his and Jezebel's priests showed up at the peak of Mount Carmel. There, Elijah and his assistant waited. Word had spread, so a thousand fit men of Israel climbed the mountain to see the great battle of Israel's two best known men, for everyone knew the future of Israel hung in the balance. Everyone gathered just behind where we stand now," said Judith, gesturing behind her toward the height of the slope.

"At dawn, Ahab's priests of Ba'al and Asherah built a quick altar in a meadow where all could gather not far from the top. They laid their wood, cut up their bull, and placed the parts on the kindling. Throughout the morning they shouted with their hands, faces, and staves, looking up to the skies. 'God of Storms, answer us!' they called.

"At noon Elijah began to taunt them. 'Oh priests of Ba'al, yell louder! It's been hours. Where is your god? Is he now busy? Is he deep in thought. Is he traveling? Maybe he sleeps so hard that you must work harder to wake him up!'

"The priests began calling at the tops of their voices to wake Ba'al. They slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their ritual custom. Midday passed. No fire. The rest of the afternoon, frantic, they yelled until they were hoarse. Their blood flowed. No Ba'al.

"When the normal time for an evening sacrifice came, Elijah stopped them. 'My turn,' he said. 'I will begin praying tomorrow at dawn.'

"That evening, he and some of the onlookers staying on the mountain with him overnight, chose twelve tall stones, one for each tribe of Israel, dug holes to keep them upright, and then set them vertically in a high rectangle as a simple altar. Within the space they created, they piled wood to the top. "Let us dig a deep trench around it," he told them, and so they did. Then he killed and cut his bull into pieces. Carefully, he piled the meat on the tops of the stones so that the sacrifice hovered above even the tallest man there, and above the few straggly trees near the top. Then he slept while others watched over him and the sacrifice to protect both from wild predators and Ahab's soldiers.

"At dawn the next day, he arose, looked above him at the dark clouds streaming overhead, ate a small breakfast for strength, and then climbed to his rock altar at the highest point. He gestured to the onlookers who had slept on the ground and in the bushes, as he had, even as more of them came up the slope to see the second day of the contest. 'Help me again,' he said to them loudly for all to hear. 'Bring four large jars of water. Pour them on the offering and the wood.' They

went to a spring nearby and brought the jugs up, careful to spill very little. When they were done discharging the liquid, he said, 'Go, do it again with the same four jars.' His helpers obeyed. When they had finished, he said, 'A third time. Four more.' So much did they empty on the alter that when they had finished, the sacrifice, the wood, and the stones were soaked, with the trench around them filled. Elijah told everyone, 'Stand back, far away, for the Lord is mighty.'"

A raven settle on a tree near Judith as she continued. "Then Elijah began to pray. He looked at the sky and spoke loud for the onlookers to hear, 'God of Abraham and Israel, show us you are Israel's true god and that I have done all this at your command. Oh Lord of our people, answer me, so all who are gathered here today will know you are our god, and will turn their hearts back to you.' He repeated this many times, steeling himself to speak as long as needed. Gradually, the sky grew ever darker until it was difficult to tell friend or foe by their faces or clothes."

Judith nodded. "Then it happened. A great white flash much wider than the sacrifice fell down from the sky even as Elijah jumped back. The flames leapt high, so fierce were they that the bull and the wood were totally consumed. Even the stones and the water-filled trench were flaming.

"All the onlookers fell to the ground and cried out the name of the Lord, except for the King and his priests. Even as the heat burned against the faces of everyone near, Elijah cried out to his onlookers, 'Seize them all!' He pointed at the priests. 'Take them down to the valley, and slay each one of them to keep Israel safe!'

"As the priests of the foreign gods Ba'al and Asherah were marched away, Elijah turned to King Ahab and said, 'You are the King of Israel in the North. I say to you only this. Get in your chariot, for a heavy rain soon will fall. For now, go. Eat and drink.' And Elijah with his assistant went up to the lookout point and watched the downpour come from the Great Sea. Just before it arrived, they climbed down to a small hovel, where they took their lunch."

Judith paused. The entire meadow of people was still all around her. "What kind of person will the messiah be?" she asked everyone. "Another Elijah? A ruler of our lands like the shepherd boy who became King David? Will we raise a trueborn messiah of the heart, a healer, someone who knows Elohim and Yahweh inside and out? These grounds around us," she said, throwing her arms out, "are hallowed because this is where Elijah built his simple alter. The Lord rained fire to consume the sacrifice, and the fate of Israel was returned to Yahweh and the people. Since then, Jews have lived here, especially our order. Will the messiah rain down fire or peace? We hope it is the latter."

She took a breath and smiled. "And today we have the happiest task of sending these twelve maidens throughout the country to help a messiah be born.

All of our blessings and years of training go with them.”

She turned to the girls and told them for all to hear, “You are learned women. We have taught you just to memorize the Torah orally like many young Jewish women, but far more—to read and to write it like men and future scribes. Even more important, we showed you that you can think about it and argue its points, like scholars and rabbis. Other than us Essenes, few women in Israel are so educated. We are proud of you.”

Judith swiveled to the twelve men. “And you,” she said, “our soon-to-be husbands. She gazed at them. “Our community’s respect and delight in you is as wide as the Great Sea. You have accepted our trained young women in our Essene Way—as equals in marriage. And before the sign of the Lord, you have agreed to commit yourselves to your future wives and to our Carmel order, whatever may come, however long it may take, until you pass someday.

“Here on the front of the alter before you,” Judith continued, “are your twelve individual covenants of marriage for each couple to sign.”

Young Essene students came forward, took the documents, and went among the couples, giving each pair its specific legal document.

“Both of you,” said Judith, “as is custom, must record your full names.”

All the couples already had read their document. Joseph looked at Mary, thinking, *Are you sure you want an old man?* And she looked at him, wondering, *Do you really want to put up with an imp like me?* But what each saw in the eyes of the other was a smile and the hope of love.

“And now,” proclaimed Judith, “congratulations! You are married!” She began clapping, and so did everyone else in the crowd around them. An eagle soared overhead and, nearby, several lambs lifted their heads to see what the humans were up to now.

“You may not break this covenant,” said Judith. “In the Law of the people of Israel, only the groom may choose to annul it, and only for infidelity. But in our Way, either the husband or wife may do so for the same reason.

“And now,” she said, “Each of you as a couple is receiving one cup with good wine in it. I bless this wine with the Breath and Spirit that are holy, and in the name of Abraham, who first gave his own blood and flesh as a covenant with Yahweh. Now, you betrothed, intertwine your arms and give each other the cup of our Forefathers for the certainty of our communion with our God forever!”

Joseph offered Mary a sip first. She was so intent on looking into his eyes that she almost dribbled it down her chin, but firmed her lips. Then, hand trembling slightly, she gave him his.

“And now we celebrate!” Judith proclaimed. “Blow the horn! Drink our wine

Even the cheap wine is good today! We have food in the communal dining hall below!”

People began to proceed, laughing and smiling down the mountainside. A great ram’s horn sounded out from on top in joyous proclamation, echoing across the valley. Mary wrapped her arm around Joseph’s and nearly floated down the path. Just ahead of her, Josi briefly looked back and wiped one of her eyes. In response, Mary placed her free hand on her heart. Josi nodded.

The twenty-four betrotheds all lay on stone eating couches—usually reserved for the elders—around one large table Rabbi Judith at their head while others dined lying on narrow wood benches circling other benches fitted together to form makeshift tables. After people finished the meal, Judith welcomed everyone to gather in their patio grounds outside, some of it covered with flowering vines and part of it directly in the warm sun. There, they all began to sing and dance, men in one group, women in another.

Back and forth they stepped, beginning with humming and then full singing in a beautiful, lilting minor tone that declared their joy and pleasure in spite of the centuries of the nation’s oppressions. They chose a song from the Psalms that was popular in their time with Essenes who were marrying:

When Israel came out of Egypt,
we became the home of God.
The sea looked and fled,
the Jordan turned back,
mountains leapt like rams,
the hills like lambs.

Tremble, earth, at the presence of God,
who turns hard rock into water.
May you who are married flourish here,
both you and all your children.
The highest heavens belong to the Lord,
but the earth he has given to us.

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
his love endures forever.
Boughs in hand, join the procession
up to the horns of the altar.
Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his love endures forever.

It is not the dead who praise the LORD.
It is we who praise and extol him,
both now and forevermore,

both now and forevermore.

Three times they sang this song, faster with each set; then a final, fourth round slowly, emphasizing their steps. As the dancing ended, Joseph and Mary joined each other again. They came together so close their shoulders were brushing, making her blush a little, but she wasn't about to move even a hair away from the contact. She glanced at Joseph. Looking off in the distance, he was wearing a light, relaxed smile. Red in the face and slightly winded, she felt a rush of boldness. She put her hand in his. "Let's take a walk," she said.

She led him, side by side, on a path through the grass, higher up the mountain alongside a brook singing over rocks as birds trilled in the low trees around them. Up close she remembered how Joseph smelled of fresh-cut balsam and cedar and a mysterious hint of musk. She took a deep breath but couldn't find what to say.

Joseph asked, "Are you ready to live in Nazareth? I know you normally would continue to stay on the mountain for a time, during the early part of our betrothal. But the elders say that I already have a home ready for you, no waiting is needed, and they trust me to" —he paused— "keep you pure until they say we can" —and now he cleared his throat— "start our marital relationship."

Mary could feel his embarrassment. This just made her feel even more charmed by him. "I understand perfectly," she said. "Six months. Or a year." She shrugged. "But I have promised to wait."

"Nazareth is a boring town compared to your life here," he said. He raised his eyebrows.

Mary shook her head. "I'll be happy. I will travel to nearby Sepphoris once a week to see a rabbi, one of our own, who will secretly continue to teach me." She paused and peered at him. "You really don't mind it? My reading and writing?"

Joseph looked down at her and chuckled. "Of course not. I know how, too. You can teach me what the rabbi teaches you."

"We have to do it secretly," Mary said.

"I won't tell a soul," Joseph said, smiling.

Mary felt the imp, as Judith called it, rising a bit within her. She looked at him sideways. "Are you making fun of me?"

"As I am God's servant, no!" he exclaimed. "Smart women make their men better prepared for the world."

Mary paused, then nodded. "Good answer," she said. "You always impress me."

Joseph took a deep breath. "We're going to talk a lot, aren't we?"

"Is that a bad thing?"

"No!" Joseph told her. "Not at all. It will work out."

Mary suddenly stopped and faced him. "I'm not just going to be the little housewife," she said.

"I have already figured that out."

"I don't know much about cooking yet, but I'll learn."

"Fine with me," said Joseph. "I can eat grass if I get to talk with you."

"And there's this whole sex thing, which we can't have yet."

"Are you maidens from Mount Carmel always so blunt?" he asked.

"Yes!" She blushed.

"Probably a good thing. But I'm an old man now, doddering in my ancient bones."

"Oh no you're not!" exclaimed Mary. "That much I know." Then she grew red in the face. "I'm so forward. I'm sorry!" Tears sprang to her eyes. "Oh, Joseph. You've already had one wife who probably took care of you much better than I ever will, and we can't even sleep together in the same bed for God knows how long, and I, I just—all I know is how to read and write! And I know how to clean things!"

He took her in his arms. "Maybe you need a young man."

She leaned back. "No! I do not! Of course, yes, you're old..."

"Thanks," he said. The side of his mouth twitched.

"...but not *too* old." She stamped one foot, almost stepping on him. "I mean, I like you. I really do, and maybe I just like older men, and—." She gave up and started wiping her eyes, her face now scarlet.

Joseph took her hands. He bent down on one knee. "Mary," he said, "will you marry me?"

"Silly man. We just did that!"

"But I want you to say it."

"Her eyes looped to the sky. "Yes! Of course!"

He stood and took her deep in his arms. She found herself melting into him, couldn't help herself, even secretly nuzzling his chest just a little.

"Then," he said, "I will be betrothed to you. I like you. In time, we will come to love each other. Maybe we already do. I am yours, now. You are mine. I wanted a partner, a new one, a strong, smart, and independent friend. I think we'll get along fine."

Mary sank even further into him, put her arms all around his waist, inhaled deeply, and held tight.

Then, hand in hand, they walked to her small cubbyhole of a room, where he helped her pack. Next they went to Judith, who gave them her blessing, and to her best friend and cousin, Josi, for a tearful goodbye. In front of Mary's own room, the donkey Joseph had brought for her to ride brayed once when she approached it. Joseph handed her a ball of honeyed wax to feed it, and it let her climb on.

As she rode, she thought, *I hope he at least doesn't hate me.* Joseph, walking beside her, led the other donkey carrying her simple belongings. *What have I gotten myself into,* he wondered? Evening's dampness rose around them and a jackal cried in the distance as they descended from the mountain for Nazareth.

Chapter 2: Troubling Visions

Six months later Joseph burst into the ground-floor stable of their home in Nazareth, his mind whirling. Their two-story home was built against a hill. He ran upstairs to the living quarters, looked in the bedroom and pantry, then ran out the back door to the level area behind, where he had his shop and Mary had her summer kitchen.

"News from Sepphoris!" he said, taking a breath and wiping his face.

"You're home half an hour early," Mary said, licking her fingers and giving a steaming pot of lentils one more stir. "Did you run our poor donkey into the ground?"

"Mary," Joseph exclaimed, "your cousin Elizabeth is with child."

"What? That can't be. She's sixty years old!" Mary turned from the raised fire, raising her arms and shoulders in a shrug.

"She is six months with child."

"Six!" Mary seemed unable to keep her mouth closed.

"I heard it from an Essene in Sepphoris, who brought news of it from Mount Carmel. They say the child is special."

"Special! Do you mean, are they saying..."

"I'm afraid so," said Joseph. "Some of the Essenes wonder if this is the messiah. The time for it is right!"

"No!" she exclaimed. She promptly sat on the ground, dirtying her simple linen shift.

Joseph sat down before her, soiling his robe, as well. He bent toward her and took her hand.

"If she has the messiah, then I can't!" Mary said.

"We know nothing absolute, yet," he said.

"What did they say?"

"Just that her husband, Zechariah, had a vision from an angel when he was serving as the priest of the day in the Temple in Jerusalem, and he was struck blind. Permanently. At least for now. The angel told him something about Elizabeth having 'he who comes before.'"

"But I was so sure!" Mary exclaimed.

"Nothing is decided. We must wait for more news."

"I have to wait?" Mary exclaimed. She snorted, stood quickly, and clamped her

mouth shut. "Go clean up, Husband. Dinner will be ready soon."

When she served Joseph at the table, he was hungry, so he gladly ate the lentils and onions, deciding not to mention they were burnt, which he knew Mary easily could see.

Mary rose from the table, pinched her nose shut against her own equally blackened meal, and threw it into the trash. "I'm going to bed!" she exclaimed. Joseph almost asked her "Why?" but then thought better of it.

Mary lay uncomfortably on her separate platform, pretending to sleep when Joseph came into the room. Her mind was wrestling with her feelings, a frightened bird in a snare.

On the one hand, she resisted the idea of old Elizabeth—she respected and loved her like the grandmother she'd never had—but, thought Mary, *let's face it, Elizabeth is ancient*. She tried to imagine how an old woman could even carry a child. *Would it even survive?* she wondered. *What if it really was the messiah, but it died in childbirth? And just what, exactly, did "he who comes before" mean? Was it "comes before Israel" as its new leader? Or "comes before the kingdom of heaven on earth"?* She shifted her body back and forth, turning restlessly. *It could mean anything!* she thought. But another part of her, the trained Essene, kept telling her in her inner voice that used Rabbi Judith's voice, *Be kind, be patient, be at peace. Many paths may lead to your future.*

Slowly, using her Judith's-voice admonishments—and breathing deeply and slowly as she had been taught—she drifted off to sleep.

Soon after that was when it happened. A visitation. She'd heard of such things, even Joseph had experienced one, or at least a voice. But nothing like this. She wasn't even sure she was still asleep or awake. A sweet scent filled the air, perhaps, she thought, the new straw she'd stuffed into the bedding. Then suddenly, in the far corner of the bedroom near the ceiling—as Joseph snored blissfully—a young man was hovering. He wore bleached linens and had white hair and eyebrows. His arms and legs dreamily vanished and then would reappear as mist or wings. His lips didn't move, but his words were a clear, gentle bell in her head. *Blessed one*, he announced. *A joyful hello! Be happy, for God looks kindly upon you. You will have the messiah. Name him Jesus. He is the most high son, from the throne of King David.*

A thrill of awe and fear ran through Mary's body. So did a logical fact. *But I'm a virgin!* she thought. *You mean I should wait until Joseph and I consummate our vows?* Her face grew red, talking with an angel like this.

The figure in white replied, *Be still. Let it happen.*

Don't go! she exclaimed. *I have more questions!*

He drifted away, a dissolving fog in the night.

She closed her eyes and tried to do what he said, to clear herself within. She felt a kernel of calm grow, slowly it took over her whole being, and a great peace settled upon her, down to her very bones. Her heart, her belly, her limbs and head—all of her shimmered and vibrated, fountains of pure, clear water and sprays of fresh wind. Then something solid within her merged, clicked, wiggled a bit, and lay quiet again. That was when she knew. The angel had meant *Right now*.

She woke up fully. She murmured to herself, her lips twisting a bit to the side. “I suppose,” she said, “if Elizabeth can have a kid at sixty, anything’s possible.” But a dark cloud passed through her. *What if I’m imagining this?* she thought. *Am I crazy?* She frowned. *I will talk with Elizabeth. She will tell me what is true.*

The cloud lifted. An equal rush of thankfulness filled her, sending goosebumps down her spine. As a daughter of the Carmel Essenes, she rose from her pallet, turned, and kneeled. Putting her hands together before her lips, she said, “Elohim, God of gods, if this is what I think it is, thank you. You are so generous!”

Then, quickly, she reached out to Joseph’s bed, grabbed his arm, and shook him. “Husband. Wake up! We must go to Zechariah and Elizabeth’s.”

Joseph’s eyes popped open. “Right now?” he said.

“Okay, tomorrow morning!” she exclaimed.

“Why?” he asked.

“I had a dream. Or maybe I was awake. I don’t know. An angel came. Then I might have gotten pregnant.”

“You what?” Joseph exclaimed. He sat up, now fully awake.

“I mean, I think I did.”

“By the angel?”

“No, silly. The angel left. Then it just happened. Maybe. Anyway, Cousin Elizabeth and I have to talk!”

Joseph gave her a long look. He rubbed both eyes. Then he said, “Okay.” He stood. “Let’s go.”

“Are you making fun of me?” she asked. “Don’t you want to argue about it?”

Joseph gave her a strange look. “Why argue? Clearly we must go.”

Mary frowned. “But it’s still night. Don’t you need more sleep, first?”

Joseph tried not to smile too much. He gently laid his hand on her cheek.

“Are you going to sleep more?” he asked.

She shook her head.

He pointed out the window. “Look.” he said. In one corner of the night sky, above the flat roofs of the buildings across the street, dawn was scaling the dark

night with tints of blue and orange through thick, puffy clouds. He said, "I must send a note to Sepphoris for my son James. Our Roman boss claims he can't build a house without me, but James will be a good substitute for the next two weeks.

"We won't become poor because you stop working?"

"Would it matter if we did?"

"No. I must talk with her."

"We'll be fine," Joseph said. "We have money saved up, and you know Mount Carmel will help if we need it."

Mary nodded firmly, full of nervous energy though she'd slept little.

"Go," said Joseph. Pack your lentils."

"The burned ones? No way. Will we have fires for cooking?"

"Each night. It is March and still cold. Pack our woolens and rain covers, too. And plenty of food and the sour wine for two days. We will stay with friends the other nights. I will go now and get two donkeys ready." He paused. "Have you ever had to face off a bear or a robber?"

She looked sharply at him. He smiled in return. She hit him playfully on the shoulder.

In a few hours, after the sun had fully breached the now clear sapphire sky, the donkeys freshly fed and travel packs drooping over their backs, Joseph and Mary left.

They followed the village's dusty trail to the road in the Jordan River Valley, then let it guide them along the narrow river, through the valley wilderness of forested lands on both sides of the narrow trail. In the early morning they wore warm wool robes and, when cool spring rain fell, they donned their rain-skins—hides still smelling of tanning fluid and the resin that waterproofed them. Because of the steep sides of the valley, the road passed through ravines at some turns and high rises at others. You couldn't tell what was ahead—a storm, a meandering bear, or a shifty thief—until it was nearly upon you.

Mary rode one of the donkeys for half a day, then the other, so each could rest a little. She was too short to walk as quickly as they needed, especially if a group of robbers came upon them or the rare but occasional desert lion. They also might need to quickly get out of the way, off the trail, if a wild boar sow happened upon them with her piglets.

They decided to try for twenty miles a day. Joseph easily could walk it, so he led the donkeys. The one that Mary rode also bore bags of barley, wheat bread, and dried lentils; the other carried water bags in wineskins, olive oil, a few cooking implements, and a simple tent. Usually, wild animals and robbers kept to

themselves during the day, especially as the road occasionally was used by well-armed Roman soldiers or Jewish guards. The bears and hogs also disliked humans, who sometimes hunted them in groups. And thieves preferred stealing people's goods in the dark of night when travelers were asleep. Still, even in daytime you had to pay close attention.

The wilderness desert went by quickly. Then they dipped into the valley of the Jordan River, winding up and down the path beside the wide stream. The further south they journeyed, the higher the forests and hills rose all around them. Sometimes they would see, in the distance, a bear drinking water at the river's edge, or hear a wild boar crashing into the woods to avoid them.

Joseph walked the same wherever he went, whether in the fancy streets of Sepphoris, the village paths of Nazareth, or the deep forest. He moved forward steadily, breathed evenly as he had learned at Mount Carmel, and enjoyed the sights. Sometimes he hummed psalms of joy and sorrow quietly to himself. At times the two of them pointed out to each other the foxes and rabbits they saw, and the birds that were darker and more furtive in this wilderness than the usual Nazareth songbirds.

Mary, however, often looked left and right with worry. She had been brought up in the Carmel Temple. Her Essene community lived in a simple and natural terrain with a mix of buildings and cultivated land. This Jordan Valley was, to her, full of dark, wild hills, strange trees, and dangerous beasts, not to mention soldiers and thieves, few of which ever climbed her Carmel Mountain village. She kept herself wide awake because, she told herself, she had not just herself and her betrothed to protect, but more importantly, a tiny sprout within her who was growing to become possibly king of the world.

Mary and Joseph camped only two nights. The first place was a miserable little space between two great rocks in the desert where they were, at least, out of the wind and off the road. They took turns guarding the donkeys through the night.

As they travelled on the second day, beautiful, hilly meadows began to appear on their right, to the west, here and there. They were pastures high above them, where sheep carefully balanced themselves on the slope to graze on new spring grass.

For most such fields, there lay below them—close to a mountain spring—a small, roughly constructed log building of two stories beside several olive trees and a fig tree or two. The bottom room—the stable—often was built into the hill, especially where rock formations or shallow caves jutted out, with the back and part of the sides of the first floor made of roughly-hewn stone.

That lower portion always was for the animals at night and through much of the day in winter. Above it usually was a single, perhaps larger room where the

couple and their children lived and slept. You could tell the farmsteads that had a little more money: there might be a grove of olive trees, several goats climbing behind the home, and one or two donkeys lazing about in front, occasionally braying to each other or at strangers passing by. Donkeys, as cantankerous as they sometimes could be, also were good watch animals, ready at a moment's notice to sound their loud alarm.

The second night, they found a very sheltered, hidden ravine with a little cave at the end of it. Here, too, they switched sleeping and guard duties every few hours, but they were able to have a low fire burning, one that could not be seen from the road, and they had shaped a large club with Joseph's hatchet, an ugly piece of wood from an old, dry, and twisted tree limb, to brandish at wild animals. They did not expect to see any humans, so far off the road, but Mary was ready to wake Joseph in an instant at the first sight of a stranger, if necessary.

That second evening as they ate, Mary asked, "Who are those people on the hills by the road?"

She and Joseph were eating their last crusts of bread for that meal. For warmth they were lying on their sides close to each other, one in front of the other—in spite of their being betrothed—with Mary closer to their small fire. They moved their heads this way and that to avoid the smoke.

Joseph nodded. "Let me tell you a story. Once upon a time, a young rabbi and his bride, both Essenes like us, were deciding where they should settle after marrying. 'Take on some students; make a little money to build.' said the wife. 'A nice home in town. Flowers in front. Bread every day on the table.'

"But the rabbi felt close to God only in nature. 'No, Wife. I am like Elijah. I feel the call of the Wilderness.'

"But only the poorest of people live there,' she said. 'They take a cheap tent, set it up below a pasture on a hill, and put their two or three sheep on tethers while they build a poor person's hovel.'

"The wilderness is hard,' said the rabbi. "But we can afford a decent tent, and I will build us a home the first summer while you plant a garden, an olive tree, and a fig tree. No one will bother us there.'

"What about robbers?' his wife asked.

"We will buy a noisy goat,' he said. 'And the year after, a donkey so tough that it will defend us from anyone.'

"The wife laughed. 'And I will keep a big stick by the door.' She shook her head. 'Either God will chase us off the land with bad weather and worse luck, or we will survive.'

"Her husband smiled kindly upon her. 'And with each year, we will have

more: first, a home for us and our sheep. The next year, an upper room and some goats for milk to sell in town. And by the time our children are old enough to play beneath the trees, we will have many olives and figs.'

"I worry that you are crazy,' said the wife. 'But we will try.' She held up three fingers. 'This many years. If it doesn't work, then I want a home in town.'

"And so they made a deal."

Joseph reached behind him, grabbed a piece of wood, and gave it to Mary to add to the fire.

"Did they succeed?" asked Mary.

"They have lived there over forty years," he said. "The rabbi built the bottom floor—the stable—with stones. The back wall is built into the rock of the hill itself, partly a small cave. Then he made a second story with cedar and mud brick and added to it for several years. His wife now has a huge garden with grain and fruit trees, and so many olives that she goes to town on their donkeys each week to sell extra olive oil and goat milk."

"Who are they?" Mary asked.

"You know them," Joseph said. "You've met them on Mount Carmel."

"Hill people?" she asked. "Did they bring their children to the Temple there?"

Joseph sighed. "Unfortunately, they had no children. But he became a regular rabbi once a week in rotation at the main Temple in Jerusalem."

"Wait," said Mary, "you can't mean—are you talking about Cousin Elizabeth?"

"And her husband, Zechariah."

"But that's where we're going!"

Joseph smiled.

"But wasn't it illegal to just take the land?"

"No one wants it," said Joseph. They've earned the right to stay on it. The Romans and the Sanhedrin leave them alone."

Mary shuddered at the idea of living the wilderness life. *But, she thought, Elizabeth is so independent! I bet all the women out here feel free. No village small talk, no having to keep your mouth shut all the time just because you're female. No rabbis in fancy robes telling them they can't cook or pick food from their garden on sabbath days. Silly laws.*

"We live such a different life in Nazareth!" she said to Joseph.

He nodded. "A very good one."

"Thanks to you, Husband," she said. You are an admired and well-paid craftsman."

"It took me years," he interrupted.

"Let me finish," she declared. "Mostly, we are respected because you are well known for being generous and kind. I am lucky to be betrothed to you."

Joseph's eyebrows rose. "That is very good of you to say!"

Mary fidgeted, brushing against him more closely. "Honestly, you have taught me much in the short time we've lived together. I am trying to be more like you."

Over her shoulder, he looked at her face with a long gaze; then he smiled. "Don't try too hard," he said. "I'm an old man. You are young."

"You never expected to have a young wife again, did you?" Mary asked.

He breathed deeply. "I prepared myself for remaining single. I had no need for a wife to raise my three sons. They're already grown."

"Am I a pain for you, a ridiculous little wench of a girl who doesn't even know how to cook?"

Joseph stroked his beard. "Your meals become a little better each week. All else is enjoyable!"

"One of our neighbors told me last week that I must have a heart of gold."

"Why?" asked Joseph.

"I rocked her baby in my arms for two hours while she was grinding flour and cooking. We sat and talked. She asked me about you. I said you were a good man and I felt lucky."

"As am I," he said.

"Mary cocked her head. "Maybe," she suggested, "I'll become so bold as to bring our neighbor a pot of my lentils."

Joseph worked hard to suppress a chuckle. His face twisted a little.

Mary twisted her head to look back at him. "Are you laughing, my husband?"

"Not yet," he answered.

Mary began to giggle. Then Joseph let go and chuckled.

"It's okay!" she said. "I will learn!"

Each day of travel was long and hard. Their donkeys could go twenty miles, even carrying packs and one small human, but the owners themselves become sore, sitting on an animal for so long or walking so many hours on uneven terrain. And even the most interesting countryside with its piney scent and their occasional snack of dried figs as they travelled helped little. They had been travelling beside the Jordan River because it was a safer route than others, but soon they would begin working their way west toward Jerusalem to pass above and around it, on their way to Ein Karem, where Elizabeth and Zechariah lived in the hills west of

the capitol city.

Sometimes Mary sang to pass the time, especially songs of King David when he was a young shepherd boy. Joseph occasionally joined her, which she liked a lot—men and women in villages usually sang, but they did it only with their own sex.

But she also found herself thinking. Endlessly. And one memory still blazed throughout her head: the visit a few days earlier from the angel and the news about Cousin Elizabeth.

Why had she felt such a great peace immediately after, coupled with a host of new and intense physical sensations? Why had her lower belly a flowing fountain of water? Then there'd been a gentle tapping like a very brief, soft turn of a wheel, and knowing immediately with her whole mind and body that somehow, inexplicably, everything had changed. Forever.

With each day she became more convinced that the angel probably was right. Who, she thought, in the history of Israel, would ever question an angel? But she couldn't resist. *Who had visited her? Am I pregnant? Could I be having the messiah?* She felt like jumping off the poor beast carrying her and dance for joy.

But *No!*, she cautioned herself. *Wait until you talk with Elizabeth. She will know.* What if it was a nightmare? Then this whole bizarre enterprise was a ridiculous impossibility, and she was crazy.

For the final three nights as they passed through a more inhabited region of wilderness farms, Mary and Joseph had been lucky enough to stay with Joseph's friends, who were Essenes, too.

On the third night, Joseph had his own dream. He and Mary were lying on the far side of their friends' upper room, each on their own low divan of straw and rough wool, separated from each other, as was proper during betrothal. He fell asleep with the taste of the host's unusually sour wine in his mouth, listening to Mary's light snoring.

Before the dream, Joseph had been struggling for several days with his own doubts. He had not told Mary. He was wrestling within himself about what was right and wrong. Both laws and customs dictated that a betrothed woman should not become pregnant, especially by someone else. If she did, she was breaking the law.

Sure, he thought, but an angel got her pregnant. Was that even possible, though? Was she blaming an angel when she really had some kind of lover? He was away from home in Sepphoris most days. He was sure she had been true to him, but what if he were wrong? He didn't claim to understand women in general or this special live wire who now was in his home.

He had been thinking he must let Judith and the other elders at Mount Carmel know right away that Mary thought she was pregnant. He enjoyed her company, but if her belly did start showing, he would have to end their betrothal. She could go back to the Mountain and Judith. The other alternative—to report her to the usual priests in Jerusalem—would mean by law that she should be stoned to death. He was not going to do that. Even if they didn't have her killed, she would be disgraced forever.

Mary deserves so much more, he decided. He determined to wait until their trip to Elizabeth's was done; then he would talk with her and inform the Mount Carmel elders.

But as he slept, he began dreaming that a stranger with a dark face, light-gold hair, and a flowing white-linen robe and beard stood before him in a great cloud surrounding both of them. When Joseph woke up, this was what he remembered.

"Hail, Joseph!" said the figure—a very formal way to say hello, one indicating the speaker was a person of importance. Then, in Joseph's dream, they stepped forward, embraced, and gave each other the kiss of peace on each other's cheek. Joseph then stepped back, saying nothing, for he didn't know what was going on.

"I have come to tell you," said the man, "all is well with you and your betrothed, Mary of Mount Carmel.

"Do not put her aside. She is still a virgin. Take her home as your wife. Her conception? It is from the Realm of the Spirit. She will give birth to that very son that all of you have hoped for on the Mountain, in Jerusalem, and beyond."

But how can this be? Joseph thought in his dream.

The bearded man answered. "Her child will be made from her own bone and flesh, as was Eve from Adam. He will save many from their trouble and imperfection. He will be one who is with God. It's just as the prophet Elijah told us long ago. Name him 'Jesus.'"

Such a common name, Joseph asked?

"It means 'rescuer,'" the apparition said, "'he who delivers.' Raise him as your very own son."

Then in the dream, Joseph felt a tremendous uplifting force: he was drawn up from the bottom of a deep well toward light and a small room far above. When the whirling stopped, he opened his eyes. He felt the wool bedding beneath him, heard the wind outside, smelled the donkeys in the stable below. He lay there a long while, remembering each detail of his dream. He would tell Mary. But not just yet.

As they arrived at Elizabeth and Zechariah's homestead, swallows darted before them, catching bugs in the fading light. The waters of the Jordan River

danced freshly close by. Joseph saw that the older couple's home was a little bit larger since he'd last visited. The upper room still was small, especially as they had no children. But the lower level had grown to twice the size since they'd started in decades earlier. It was big enough to fit two donkeys, several goats, and even a small herd of sheep with their thick woolen coats if the temperature dropped really low. But now as usual, as Mary and Joseph approached, the sheep and goats were wandering about outside, having been brought down from the hill by Eliabeth to the safety of the stable where even outside of it, predators would be attacked by the donkeys. A pale-eyed goat was standing on a large rock, peering at the two visitors. When they turned their heads toward it, it bleated three times, a sentry announcing their approach.

A cold, sharp wind from the north was coming up, and Mary saw Elizabeth start herding the sheep inside. Mary felt joy bubbling up from what she wanted to share with her older cousin. As she watched Elizabeth shoo the animals inside, Mary thought of some of her favorite songs that King David had written as a shepherd boy and sung to his own flock of sheep hundreds of years earlier.

She looked around for Zechariah, but he was out of sight; holy day was starting, so, she thought, perhaps he was taking his turn at the Temple a half day's travel away in Jerusalem. As they got closer, she called out, "Cousin! It is Mary and Joseph, come from Nazareth!"

Elizabeth turned, looked up, and her face beamed pure surprise and pleasure. "Mary! And Joseph! Such visitors! You have come at a wonderful time!" She patted her rounded belly. "Six months, now, three to go. The Forerunner arrives soon!"

As they rode into the small front yard, suddenly Mary felt tears of relief welling in her eyes. It wasn't just seeing her cousin for the first time in almost a year. It was that word, "Forerunner." *Maybe this is what they meant, all the predictions, "The one who comes before," she thought. Not a messiah. But his Forerunner.*

Elizabeth suddenly got an intense look on her face. "Oh, child, I swear, he is leaping in my womb at your coming! Mary, come here, hurry—feel him move!"

Mary dropped quickly off her donkey and ran to her cousin.

Elizabeth took both of Mary's hands and placed them on her own belly.

Mary's eyes and mouth opened wide. Never, ever, had she felt a baby in the womb, much less one that was moving and turning like this! Her eyes glowed with more tears.

"My goodness," said Elizabeth. "I feel so heavenly with you here. It is like being married to Zechariah, again, a white day indeed. That day of our joining, I was in a cloud of wonderful peace. And now you are making me feel that way, too."

Through her tears, Mary looked in Cousin Elizabeth's eyes and saw it was true. She suddenly wanted to sing, just burst forth with a song like she used to as a young girl on the side of the Carmel Mountain. Which psalm should I offer to Elizabeth and to my Joseph, she wondered? But then a strange dart of bliss pierced her heart, and new words began bubbling up from within her throat.

She started with low, quiet notes, as she imagined Hannah, the childless mother, sang to God a thousand years earlier in order to have children. Then she had Samuel, who became one of the greatest of Israel's prophets.

"With all my heart," she started, "I glorify the Lord."

Elizabeth smiled and placed her hands together over Mary's on her stomach. If not common, it was not unusual, either, for women suddenly to burst out in song to express their emotions.

Mary continued. "Yahweh, the 'I Am-Was-Will Be!'"

This the Essenes had taught her: the almost impossible to translate verb that Moses' gave to all Jews for name of the God.

Elizabeth nodded, still holding Mary's hands on her leaping child.

Then Mary's voice began to soar softly, lilting, chanting, in a minor key like so many other songs of her people.

From my depths, my own I-Am is Your Presence,

I glorify You with my Breath of Spirit.

Oh Cousin, I rejoice as we stand in the Presence of God,

Who releases us from imperfect paths.

I am so blessed!

Yahweh has looked with favor upon me, a lowly servant.

See this! From now on all will think servants well favored

because God's Mystery made a great deed through me!

Holy is the Presence that each of us may grasp

from one generation to the next

if we but honor the One.

Yahweh has shown great strength by arm,

scattering the arrogance of self-satisfied pride,

throwing the powerful from their thrones,

then lifting those who are low.

God has filled the hungry with deeper food,

while the rich he leaves empty-handed.

Yahweh comes to the need of the servant, Israel,
 which remembers God's mercy,
 as promised to our founders,
 to Abraham and to Moses long ago,
 forever."

When she was finished, she felt exhilarated and exhausted. Descending from her own inner skies, she gave Elizabeth a quick look to see if the older woman was bothered by this pouring forth. She'd said the name of God, Yahweh, out loud. You weren't supposed to do that. But Essenes sometimes called to him when others like them were around.

Elizabeth had nothing but a great warm smile. She put both of her hands on Mary's cheeks. "That was extraordinary," she said. "You must write it down after supper. Maybe someday others will want to read and sing it. Come inside right now; I will give you quill and parchment. You will record it while I start supper."

Then she walked to Joseph and gave him a big hug and a peace kiss on each cheek. He returned the kisses. She smelled of warm dough and tea. Though she was the smaller of the two of them, he felt lost in her arms, a young child again, so substantial was her warmth.

"Come, children, both of you now. Mary to write, Joseph to unpack your donkeys. Zechariah won't be home tonight; he's serving in the Temple."

Joseph and Mary soon joined Elizabeth at her outdoor cooking hearth behind the upper room. The house was partly built against a shallow cave: the stable was halfway in the cave itself, and the upper room rose above the cavern with a flat, grassy area in the rear. Here was where Elizabeth did most of the cooking and cleaning.

"Do you need to take a nap before we eat?" she asked. She stirred a pot of lentils and put the wooden spoon to her lips to see if they were done.

Mary raised her eyes to the skies, then quickly down. "Do you think me so frail I must rest after a simple donkey ride?" she asked.

Joseph smiled. "No, she wonders whether I am so old that my bones fall apart from walking."

Elizabeth raised her arms high and shook her head. "Both of you are such imps! But good children nonetheless. Here. Take this and drink it. Roasted barley tea with goat milk and honey." She set two cups before them.

Then she turned to Joseph. "It is grand to see you, Mr. Builder in Nazareth and fancy Sepphoris! And isn't your betrothed something?"

He sat down on the low rock wall around the outdoor kitchen. "You don't know the half of it," he said, a slight grin on his lips.

Elizabeth's forehead wrinkled. Mary immediately jumped in. "I made him come here. At night. Well, dawn. Joseph is my rock who puts up with me. I want to be more like him. We need to talk. Oh! I am dizzy!" She quickly sat down.

"Goodness, Child, take a breath!" exclaimed Elizabeth.

"But Cousin, you haven't asked why we're here! I had a dream. Or a visit. From an angel. Maybe I'm pregnant. Not from Joseph—we're still only betrothed! From the angel. Not *from* the angel, but when it visited."

Elizabeth began to laugh. "I think I might know what the visit was about. But it can wait until after supper."

Joseph looked steadily at Mary. She caught his gaze. He told her, "We're going to name him Jesus."

"Our baby?" She frowned. "But that's what everyone's called!"

He nodded. "I know. But I had a dream, too. We will talk."

"You two!" Elizabeth said. "Let's serve the food. Mary, grab that big serving plate over there. Joseph, hold the other one while I put the meat on it. The bread is inside. We'll eat there where it's warmer!"

They lay down on their sides around a small, low table, as was customary, and dipped their wheat bread into the large, shallow bowls of food, one of lamb, a second of well-cooked barley, and a third of spring greens mixed with onions. And they drank a special skin of good wine, not the everyday sour table version but rather a sweet one that Elizabeth saved for special occasions. They talked of news at first from far and near, especially from Mount Carmel and Jerusalem.

Then, as they began to feel full, each of them shared their dreams.

Elizabeth and Mary were excited about each other's vision. After hearing Mary's, Elizabeth nodded firmly. "Yes!" she exclaimed. "Bless Yahweh, I will have the Forerunner. *Not* the messiah. I believe your dream," she said. "You will have the king of our people. But you must write it down, as have I. Send it to Rabbi Judith and the elders at Carmel. Let them figure out all the details! They'll hem and haw and examine the prophecies and the songs. Then they will finally say, 'Well, yes, I guess her dream makes sense; so maybe we better prepare!'"

Mary laughed. "You're wonderful," she told Elizabeth. "Coming from your mouth, it all sounds so true!"

Then she turned to Joseph. "Husband, you had a dream, too? "We're to call our son Jesus?"

Joseph started telling the two women what he remembered after awakening.

Mary's face grew red. She interrupted him. "Of course I'm still a virgin! The angel said to not put me aside? What were you planning?"

Elizabeth reached across the space between them, took the young woman's hand, and squeezed it. "Ssh, Child, it's okay. Let him finish."

But Joseph said, "Mary, I have come to love you in this short time we have lived together. Put you aside? It's the law, if you're pregnant. But I won't do it." He shook his head. "Not unless Judith insists on it."

Elizabeth said to Mary, "Judith is *not* going to do that. She and the others have been planning this for years—it's exactly what they wanted. Elijah said the messiah would be born of a maiden like you." She looked into the distance toward Jerusalem, barely visible in the distance, then turned back to them. "No one expected a virgin birth. But that's no problem. I've heard stories of vultures, cobras in India, even Nile crocodiles that did it. They probably thought it would happen after the bethroths of the twelve of you on the mountaintop were complete, and you went to your marriage beds. Let's say they'll be" —Elizabeth put her finger to her lips—"surprised. But once they hear about your visions, they're not going to split you apart." Elizabeth shook her head. "Here's what I think," she said. "They probably will tell you to let everyone think Joseph is the father. Your marriage will be considered sealed."

Mary looked at Joseph with a big smile. He returned it.

Joseph chuckled. "I guess it wouldn't work to go around announcing to everyone that it'll be a virgin birth, and Yahweh is the pappa?"

Elizabeth frowned at him, then at Mary. "Don't even think about it! First the priests in Jerusalem would beat down your door, ready to put Mary on trial, maybe you, too, Joseph, for blasphemy. Then you'd have that crazy Roman ruler Herod wondering whether he should kill Mary or both of you."

Mary's face suddenly became drawn and pale. "The danger is that great?"

Joseph nodded. "Of course," he said, looking at Elizabeth. "You're always right about these things."

She smiled a little. "I've been around a long time. I also know Judith and the Carmel Essenes well." Then lifted her hands high. "But Zechariah, when he comes home, is going to be thrilled! He'll think just meet the messiah in the womb will the greatest event of his life!"

"He'll remain silent, even though he is a priest in rotation in the High Temple in Jerusalem?" Joseph asked. He knew Zechariah. He trusted him. But he wanted to be absolutely sure.

Elizabeth winked at him. "Essenes know how to keep a secret."

"Will you have a midwife?" asked Mary.

Elizabeth nodded. "Mount Carmel has promised to send one. She will arrive a few weeks before the birth."

"But not earlier?" asked Mary. Then she looked at Joseph. He read what her eyes were saying. He nodded. "Then, Cousin Elizabeth," said Mary, "if you will have me, I will stay with you to help you for the next several months."

Elizabeth's mouth opened. Her eyes rose. "But I couldn't take you away from Joseph! Who will look after him?"

Joseph smiled. "I did well enough before Mary came along, you know."

"He'd probably be better off without me," Mary said. "I'm a terrible cook."

"Not that bad," said Joseph.

"How many times have I burned the lentils?"

Joseph nodded. "They become more edible with each passing month."

Then they drank a small draft of wine and retired to bed. In hot weather, people often slept on their rooftops. But the night already was cool, so they settled themselves in the upper room. Elizabeth made a special pallet in one corner for them, on which they lay their own travel bedding with soft linen sheets on top that Elizabeth saved for guests. "Sleep on your side," Mary told Joseph, so your snoring does not wake me up."

He gave her a longing look for a second, then smiled gently at her. "You will be just fine here with Elizabeth," he said."

"Will you miss me?" she asked in a small voice.

"Very much," he told her.

The next morning bright and early, Joseph led one of the donkeys out the door, packed and ready to return to Nazareth. Elizabeth handed him two loaves of rye bread and a hunk of goat cheese. "For the road," she said. "Don't give it away and go hungry. I expect you to eat it!"

"Thank you," he said. They exchanged the kiss of peace.

He and Mary gave each other a long, hard hug.

Breathless, Mary exclaimed, "Come back for me!"

Joseph nodded. "Three months. I promise." Then he took her forehead in both his hands and kissed it gently.

Reluctantly, she let him go. He took the donkey's rope halter in hand and began the long journey, turning once to wave.

Mary lifted her hand high and fast in reply. *Will he really come back*, she wondered? *Am I pregnant? Could it really be the messiah?* Tears sprang to her eyes as

she watched her betrothed go out of sight. She wiped them away with her shawl and went back into Elizabeth's home to help her make breakfast.

As Joseph walked away, he, couldn't stop thinking of how angry some of the Pharisees would be. Maybe the Sadducee priests, too. And a shiver ran down his spine when he thought of Herod, the king who killed his own family. He snorted. Bringing a messiah into the world was no easy business. The politics! *Well*, he thought, *I signed up for this*. He said a short prayer to God, lifted his chin in the breeze, and strode on.

Chapter 3: Secret Birth

On a late-September afternoon—in the lazy, sunny street where Mary and Joseph's home stood—a young traveler came to their door and called out, "Mary?" The visitor was slender and bird-like but attractive beneath her travelling veil. A slightly older youth held two donkeys behind her in the street. One donkey held the girl's belongings, much more than needed for travel; the other donkey was for her to ride. She didn't look dangerous at all, but she would turn Mary's life upside down.

Mary had been home from Elizabeth's, now, for three months, and pregnant for six, swollen with child and with various fears a first-time mother has, especially one with no nearby doctor. She had left Elizabeth's home near Ein Karem just before Elizabeth had John the Forerunner: their house had been filled with a childbirth doula named Antiphony, sent from Mount Carmel to help Elizabeth through the birth, along with the doula's male travel companion who brought her.

Mary felt like a blimp, short and so very swollen like a giant grape. All of Nazareth, or at least its women, was excited about the new young mother's pregnancy. Next-door neighbors already were asking how they might help. Mary, who'd spent three months throwing up and then another three feeling great—except for being short of breath, bulgy, and fat—told her friends she might be going to some relatives on Mount Carmel to have the child. That, at least, was the plan: Judith and the Essenes were the only ones who knew who she was carrying, and they wanted the best possible outcome—which meant having Mary come back to them, at least for several months.

Meanwhile, Joseph had shown great patience, holding the large pottery bowl for her when she threw up, and bringing her strange herbs and foods she kept requesting from his workplace in Sepphoris—candied pears, salted pig's feet, and fish eggs were among them. He always bought the cheapest versions, but he did spoil her, as they could afford it from his own salary.

He also held her tight on many of the nights when she felt sick or upset from worry. He remembered from his previous children, many years earlier, what a woman with child went through. He had been poorer, then, just starting out working. His jaw tightened whenever he thought about this new child: one that especially needed health and education for a ministry the likes of which perhaps Israel had never seen. He was making more money; as he'd always done, everything extra would go to his children.

Mary heard a female voice call her name from the front of their home. The voice sounded very familiar. Feeling like a floating blob, she bounced her stomach

along to the door and looked out to see if another neighbor had come to visit and to get a quick look at her belly. Then she stared, threw her hands up to her mouth, and burst into a joyous cry. "Josi!"

The two young women hopped into each other's arms so hard that, squishing together, they lifted up on their toes. Mary's long hair went flying and Josi's tight curls floated.

"Mary!" yelled Josi. "My best friend! My cousin!" she exclaimed. They were related through their mothers.

Mary nodded and immediately found herself getting too emotional again, common in pregnancy, she'd been told, but something she was finding very tiresome. "Oh, Josi!" she exclaimed. "Look at me, I'm a mess, I'm crying!"

"I'm truly honored!" Josi exclaimed. She started wiping away tears, too.

"What are you doing here?" Mary asked.

Josi smiled and her hand flew up and away in a broad gesture. "I've come to help!"

"But what about the Essenes at Carmel?"

"They sent me!" said Josi, pulling off her head scarf.

"But weren't you betrothed to that Essene from Judea whose head looked like a lion? Oh, I'm sorry, what was his name? I can't remember! I'm sorry!"

"It's off!" Josi said. "Not his head. The betrothal! We didn't work out. Besides, when those old mountain Essenes found out you were the lucky one—now some are calling you 'that cute little mischief-maker who got the messiah'—they sent me to help you!"

"They aren't saying that!" exclaimed Mary. "Besides, you were as much trouble as I was!" said Mary, grinning.

Josi laughed. "Maybe more." She held up a finger. "You didn't mention I also am as cute as you!"

"But the Essenes never thought you were any trouble. You always looked so serious and so, so—"

"Normal? A girl any Jewish mother could love? I just learned to keep my mouth shut when you were blabbing all the time."

Mary laughed and grabbed her friend's hand. "Come in! We'll create more problems together! And who says I need any help from the likes of you?"

Josi briefly introduced her companion, smiling and waiting patiently by the donkeys. Mary waved her hand to the young man. "Welcome! Put the beasts in the stable behind our home, underneath it. Then come upstairs. Eat and stay with us tonight!"

The two young women hurried, hand in hand, into the house where they hugged again and danced in each other's arms.

"Seriously, why did they send you?" asked Mary.

"They decided you need a doula, a midwife," said Josi. "They've spent the last three months cramming me with training in doula duties and labor-aid practices for nearby villagers. Then they sent me to attend you." She breathed deeply. "Now I am the best young labor coach in Israel, or at least Galilee!"

"Is it still the plan that I will go back to Mount Carmel for the birth?" Mary asked.

Josi nodded. "A few weeks before. Just to be safe."

"Now," said Josi, "tell me all about your life here in Nazareth, and about Joseph!"

"Come outside, to our tree kitchen," said Mary. "We make and eat our food on top of the house, as usual, when the weather is cool. In warm weather, I cook beneath the tree out back."

"Ooh, a woman with two kitchens. You are doing well in life!"

Mary blushed. "Joseph does very well with his work in Sepphoris." She grabbed Josi's hand. "Come on! I promise to tell you everything."

As they talked and as Mary cooked, the birds nearby, even the cicadas, grew quiet, listening to the boisterous laughs and rapid words; then, finally, feeling the joy themselves, began to take up their own songs and their insect buzzing in the background

When Joseph came home, he laid his tools just inside the small tool shop on the main floor, smelled the meal, and found Mary rushing toward him faster than usual for her usual kiss in greeting. Then she launched into what an advantage it would be to have Josi living with them. "Josi?" he asked. "Your good friend on the mountain? Is she already here?" He smiled, nodded, and secretly felt relieved that someone else would be helping in the care of his beautiful, lively bride.

As he greeted Josi with Mary looking on joyfully, all three felt safe and secure with Josi's arrival, here in this obscure small village in the hills. Little did they know about the dangers to the unborn child that soon would engulf them.

A few weeks later on Mount Carmel, the twelve elders of the Essene community were reclining on their stone divans, straw cushions beneath them. They were gathered in their usual meeting place: a large, hollowed out cave with a mortared-wall front. The wick of an open-top oil lamp flickered at either end of their long, low table after a simple dinner of watered-down, sour wine, fish from

the nearby Mediterranean Sea, several garden greens, and unleavened bread. They could afford much fancier fare, but the elders ate what everyone did: all in common, simple, and healthy.

Then the dishes were cleared by two young postulants, male and female, except for the wine, and Judith, their prophet and leader stood. She announced, "We are nearing the time when our student and young friend Mary, vessel of the Lord, is supposed to come to us for the birth.

"But can we, now?" she asked.

The tiny fire in each lamp cast flickering shadows against the mortar and stone walls as the sun dipped below the horizon. The windows were covered with tightly woven rush mats to keep out the cold November air and, in a few months, the occasional snow on the mountain. In the fireplace at the head of the table near Judith, a larger blaze warmed the room. The smell of burning pinewood spread through the room, along with the scent of the olive oil.

"What is the problem, Judith?" asked one of the four women among the twelve present.

"The news is bad," said Judith. "Young Herod Antipas, our new King, has killed some of his relatives."

"Is this a sure fact?" asked another of the elders, a tall, slender man.

Judith nodded. "We don't know who, but court sources tell us he is securing his new throne."

"What has that to do with us on Carmel?" asked an old, bent, bald-headed elder. He was swathed in such thick robes that only his face showed.

"He's dangerous," said Judith. "And someone has told him we Essenes on Carmel might be a problem."

Everyone stared at her, their eyes widening. A few mouths dropped open.

Finally, Judith said, "The Pharisees and their Sanhedrin in Jerusalem never have trusted us. They may be manipulating our new King. In any case, we cannot bring Mary, Joseph, and their unborn baby here. What if Herod were to attack us? Worse yet, what if he hears a rumor of our expected young messiah? He might not just come to kill the child, but to scatter us."

"And kill you, maybe some of us," said the old elder.

Another of the women, who had a full head of long, curly black hair, said, "You're right. Mary and the child must disappear."

"How?" asked Judith.

"Send them anywhere. Even Nazareth may not be safe. Send them to Elizabeth's, if we must."

A short, thin elder with a bald pate said, "There's no room for them!"

"They'll make room," said the black-haired young woman. "We already have sent one of our doulas there to help Elizabeth with the birth. Josi will be with Mary, so Mary will have her own doula, too. They have a small stable. They have a guest room on the main floor above, and the usual flat roof for daytime living in good weather. Joseph is a builder and construct a temporary shelter on top and, for winter, in the stable itself. Neighbors can take some of the donkeys and sheep."

The young female elder with a full head of long hair said, "Yes, that all can happen. Even if it's crowded, it will be safer." She waved her hand in the air. "Ein Karem is in the middle of nowhere."

Judith looked around the room at everyone. "Do you agree?" she asked?

Slowly, all but one or two nodded.

"That is enough," said Judith. "I will go to Mary and Joseph."

"No, you should not!" said the ancient elder. "You are a woman! I mean no disrespect, Judith, but a woman of your stature and dignity on the road, even with a young male assistant with you, and in these times, would look out of place. What if Herod's informers and busybodies already have told them you lead us! You must stay here."

Judith rarely looked perturbed. Everyone knew that. Now she frowned and placed her hands on her hips. She shook her head. Then she stood tall again with her hands at her sides. "Then we will send young messengers to both houses, Joseph and Mary in Nazareth, and to Elizabeth and Zechariah near Ein Karem. Agreed?"

They all nodded. However, most of them knew that the young Herod was a jealous King. Some of them already were wondering if their messiah would be safe anywhere.

"We are ready to go to Mount Carmel!" exclaimed Mary when their messenger from Mount Carmel came to their door. Supper almost was ready, but she had heard a donkey stop at the front of their house, so she had come out to see who it was.

She knew him a little, a tall, lean young man who often worked in the gardens at the settlement—a nice boy barely older than her, whom she might have looked at more seriously if the Essenes had not chosen a husband for her. A thin layer of dust covered the young man's heavy wool robes. He dismounted, and his donkey brayed once tiredly.

Mary smiled. "Come in and eat! We have a clean bed for you tonight, too!"

Joseph strode forward and placed his hand on the youth's shoulder. "Welcome!" he said warmly. Josi, standing behind them, smiled.

"I'm not sure you'll want to invite me in," the youth said. "And I must return immediately to Carmel to avoid notice. The news is bad."

Mary, Joseph, and Josi looked at each other with raised eyebrows. "Have supper with us," said Joseph.

On the roof, dressed warmly, they reclined on mats around a low table for a simple meal of lentils, olive oil, and bread. As was custom, they talked not of business but of other parts of their lives while eating. When they were done, Joseph poured another glass of sour wine for everyone, then said, "Will we be going to the Mountain?"

The Essene traveler looked at the three of them, then shook his head. "There is trouble," he said. He explained the problem of Herod.

"Always the damn politics!" Mary exclaimed. Then she put her fingers to her mouth. "Forgive me," she said, "I become angry too easily during this phase of my pregnancy."

"I appreciate your honesty," the young man said. "Truly you were raised as an Essene on the Mountain to feel safe in saying such a thing.

"But what will we do?" asked Mary, feeling her child suddenly turning inside her belly. She put her hand there.

Josi next spoke up. "Should we stay here?"

The young man moved his head back and forth once. "Even this is too dangerous, say the elders. Too out in the open. Who knows where Herod may have spies. You must go to Elizabeth's."

Joseph's eyebrows rose. "Zechariah's house? People here in Nazareth will think we are crazy to go out in the wilderness to such a small home. They will talk. It won't make sense to them when we have a nice house here."

The traveler nodded. "Judith has thought of that. You are of the House of David. She and the elders ask that you tell everyone you have been called to Bethlehem nearby for tax matters."

"But there is no registration for taxes this year, or most years," said Joseph.

"The young man nodded again. "But Judith says no one will know much about that. Just tell everyone you have been called there on important tax business. You have a good income. Few will think twice about it. Tell them you don't want to talk about it."

Joseph nodded. "And then we become invisible."

Mary was tapping her chin as she thought about being with her Aunt Elizabeth

again. She loved her. They laughed together and worked well around each other. But this time there would be a doula—two doulas if you counted Josi!—two new babies, two mothers, and two fathers, all crammed into a one-bedroom hovel.

Joseph said, “If we can just get through winter, Zechariah and I can build another room.

Mary laughed. “Where will we stay until then? The stable underneath the house?”

“If we have to,” said Joseph. “I can build a wall around one of the stalls for the four of us when the baby comes.”

Josi sat beside Mary on her mat and put her hand on Mary’s shoulder. “We can all sleep in a row on mats on the floor! Joseph, then you, then the baby, then me!”

Joseph said, “I’ll build us a bedstand so we are off the floor.”

Mary raised her eyes to the ceiling. “I always wanted to give birth in a stable.”

Josi patted her on her arm. “It won’t be that bad,” she said. “It will be warm with the three of us and all those animals beside you.”

Mary shook her head and sighed.

They all felt on edge without saying so, which each person attributed to the change in plans. They had no idea how difficult the several-day journey itself would be, let alone the great danger, a gift of Herod, that would visit them not long after the birth.

They began their trip on donkeys to Elizabeth and Zechariah’s as before, east to the Jordan River, down its valley and the wilds, and then eastward to the hills of the Ein Karem area. This time, though, they had four donkeys—two for Josi and Mary to ride and two for supplies for several months. Joseph, as before, walked.

The weather was much colder, with sleet rain and wintry gusts. When the wind was gentle, they could smell the slight mustiness of the dead grasses and reeds along the riverbank as the plants froze each night and thawed every afternoon. The songbirds had scattered far south, and only hawks flew overhead, now, crying sharply, and vultures who prowled and flapped around carcasses, hissing with a rasp at each other. The donkeys and their humans moved very slowly this time: Mary was only a few weeks from term. Sometimes they travelled as little as half a day because they had to time their stops for Essene homes where they could escape the elements.

Previously, Joseph and Mary had turned westward from the Jordan on the major road to Jerusalem, as Ein Karem was just beyond the city in the high hills to its west. However, this time they needed secrecy, even stealth, in case Herod—or,

worse, collaborators of the ruling Jewish Sanhedrin in Jerusalem — might take notice of them. They decided to turn off the main road well north of the capital city and go west through the towns of Jericho and Emmaus, instead. They planned to stop at the turnoff from the Jordan at a certain inn. Usually, inns were rough and sometimes dangerous places, but this one was large and, more important, belonged to a family of secret Essenes.

At sundown, the tired travelers approached the inn. Their leather winter coverings were slick with moisture, their donkeys smelled from a long day of walking, and Josi and Joseph's stomachs could be heard growling. Mary had her chin and teeth set against the ache in her muscles and her swaying belly.

The inn was a wind-beaten, three-story building with a stable on the bottom, a main floor for guests, and a top floor plus its flat roof for the owners. Its walls were sturdy yellow brick, something of a surprise in this wilderness and a sign of a well-to-do place to stay.

While a helper — a son of the Essene owners — led the donkeys into the stable below to find room for them, Joseph entered the big wooden door higher up with Mary and Josi behind him. Mary's face drawn. They expected people of all kinds, perhaps even Roman soldiers. Mary was annoyed especially because the inn was public, so she would have to pretend to be a silent little wife, dumb and illiterate like most women then.

She also resented the Romans before even seeing them. They made whole nations drop whatever they were doing and act like they were gods and kings.

Worse yet, she felt ugly. Her faced was caked with the dust of the road. Her stomach was swollen and her breasts protruded. She looked, she thought to herself, like every girl married off who obviously now had been with her husband, and many of the males in the inn would be half drunk and leer at her. Worst of all, she was very irked at herself for not feeling and acting more confident. She just felt so tired! She frowned hard, then made her face relax so it showed nothing as they entered. She took a deep breath just inside.

As the three of them walked in, they saw that the general room, where people drank and ate, was crowded with at least two dozen people, all male except for the wife and daughters of the family who owned it. And every face and body seemed to freeze, drinks halfway to their mouths, and stare at them.

Mary made the mistake of looking around. She accidentally caught the eye of a towering and weak-chinned Roman soldier passing in front of them.

The soldier elbowed his companion, a fat Syrian merchant with an oily face. "Look at that soft little doe!" he said.

Both men's eyes traveled down her body. Mary looked at Joseph's feet in front

of her, gritted her teeth, and reminded herself angrily to not look anywhere.

"She's pregnant," the oily merchant said, wrinkling his nose. "Too bad. A waste of beauty. She must be fifteen, no more. Only, what, fourteen when it happened?" He turned away so he wouldn't have to look at her again. "Ill-used goods," he said a little too loudly to the soldier.

The soldier looked with disappointment at Mary's swollen belly. Then he finally noticed Joseph beside her.

"By Jove!" he laughed. "Here is the husband! Look how old he is! Grandfather!" he called. "Graybeard! How many times did you try before you could get it up?" He rocked his hips, and he and his companion dissolved in drunk laughter.

Joseph, as befitting an Essene and a kind man, thought he might clarify he wasn't really that old.

"Ignore them!" hissed Mary in a low voice at his back.

He nodded once, realizing it might be dangerous to reply.

Then he decided the better part of wisdom was to ignore them.

Mary felt her cheeks burning hot. As soon as they were past the drunken pair, she glanced at Josi. Josi met her eyes and grimaced in sympathy.

Joseph looked around cautiously and the two women stole brief looks. The whole floor was open as one large room. Though well-built and spacious, it had a low ceiling, and smoke from the large fireplace at one end drifted through the air, stinging their eyes. The front was filled with people standing and sitting or lying down on divans around several large tables for eating. The scent of lentils and onions rose from large shared plates on the tables. The wood furniture was sanded and smooth, rather than rough cut with splinters as at most inns. The back half of the room around the walls was more typical of smaller travelers' places: a series of stall-like rectangles, each a few feet high where several people could drop their belongings and slept on the floor at night.

They studied the room for the Essene innkeeper. Two wobbly Jewish men, tax collectors by the look of their fine robes and an inscribing pen sticking out from behind one's ear, passed by. One winked at them. The three of them drew back instinctively. Tax collectors were reviled as traitors by most Jews. Heavy-drinking ones were even worse.

Joseph, Mary, and Josi stood in the middle of the crowd with many eyes examining them—exactly the kind of public notice they so carefully had wanted to avoid.

Joseph turned to go back outside. But Mary, beginning to tremble from head to foot from humiliation, shame, and anger, felt her stomach convulse. Her knees

suddenly buckled. Joseph reached out to hold her.

A little Roman official stood and approached them. He was perfectly dressed in the finest white-wool toga. A hand-wrought gold medallion on a carefully worked gold chain circled his neck. His breath, when he reached the two of them, reeked of mingled stale mind and soured meat. His digestion, apparently, was suffering from too many rich foods.

He carefully looked Mary up and down while Joseph held her up and glared at him angrily. Without taking his eyes off her for even an instant, the rich Roman drawled two slow words at Joseph.

“Documents, please.”

He held out his carefully manicured fingertips, palm upwards. You do have them, don't you?” He sniffed.

Poor Jews often did not carry papers, nor did they try to stay in public inns. Most Jews throughout Israel used their own networks of friends and the guestrooms that many of them kept in their homes. But Joseph, stiff with dismay and anger, pulled out two worn leather parchments: one he used for work in Sepphoris; the other was their proof of betrothal. He slapped them into the Roman official's hand.

“My!” exclaimed the Roman, delicately. “What have we here? A Jew with leather documents!” He examined the top one. “It says here you are a master building and repairman licensed to work in Sepphoris.”

Joseph nodded his head, lowering his eyes respectfully.

The Roman looked at their clothing more carefully.

“Your robes are substantial,” he said. “Made for wet weather and long travel. Where are you going?”

“Tomorrow we will continue south to Jerusalem, then west to the village of my lineage, Bethlehem. I am of the House of David.”

The Roman frowned and shook his head. “David, Shmavid. All these ‘Houses’ and ‘Tribes.’ Your people are primitive.” He then glanced around him. Most in the room were listening. “And this other document. I see you have been betrothed.”

His eyes glittered. He turned to the room and raised the hand that was holding their papers. “Look!” he exclaimed to all. “He is not her grandfather. The old goat is married to her!”

Some laughed. Others elbowed the men beside them. The few women in the crowd, mostly Roman wives and mistresses who knew what was best for them, kept their heads down or even smiled with the men.

Before he could go on, a sudden commotion in the back of the room made

people step to the side. A large man in a thick leather apron pushed his way like a bull through the crowd. His face was ashen and crestfallen. He was the innkeeper, the Essene contact Joseph was looking for, and he knew that Joseph and Mary shouldn't be so noticeable—especially to Roman officials.

"There's no room!" he yelled. "There's no room in my inn! You must leave! We can't have extra people, especially a pregnant woman!"

Joseph stared. Mary's eyes grew wide. Josi's mouth dropped open.

"Excuse me, sir!" said the innkeeper to the little Roman official, "but I must get these poor Jews out of here before they try to settle down in the halls!" Though an Essene, the innkeeper was half Greek and looked fully so. Greeks were well-respected in the Roman Empire. They weren't thought of as Jewish.

The Roman said, snipping, "They're not poor." But he nodded, shrugged so everyone in the room could see it, and returned Joseph's documents. Then the little man went back to his divan, lay down on his side, and sipped his sweet wine as if nothing had happened.

"Out with you!" the innkeeper yelled. He grabbed Joseph by his arm and pulled him to the door. Mary and Josi followed.

Joseph whispered fiercely, "Last week I was told you'd have a place for—"

"Sshhh!" the innkeeper replied in a fierce undertone. "Outside!"

He pulled Joseph through the door and closed it behind them.

"Hfa!" he snorted when they all were outside. He took a great lungful of air and wiped his forehead with his hairy arm. "You are Joseph and Mary? I am sorry for this trouble!"

Joseph relaxed his shoulders. Mary and Josi were frowning. Joseph said, "But you really do have room for us, don't you?"

"Of course!" The innkeeper nodded. "Just a minute. Let me catch my breath." Then he said, "This way!" and led them around to the rear of the inn. Because it was inset into a rising hill, the back had a separate entrance one story higher than below. "This is our home," he said. "We have saved the guest room for you." He ushered them into a well-kept living and eating room. Several young children stopped their sewing, and cleaning; the two older ones, a boy and a girl, put down their scripture studies, and all stood to greet the visitors, staring at them. The innkeeper introduced each one. Then he said, "Come, come! I know you are tired. Here is your room! Where all of our personal guests stay! My younger children will bring you water to clean up, and my oldest daughter will heat food for you. Make yourselves welcome!"

Mary, Joseph, and Josi laid their packs near the clean sleeping mats on the floor, opened a packet of dried mint herbs from Mount Carmel for making tea, and

gracefully accepted the barley grits and large fish that the innkeeper's wife, sporting a bright red robe against the cool of the evening, served them, and relaxed for the first time in several days.

The next day they were on the hilly road early in a damp mist, headed for Bethlehem and beyond. The donkeys plodded on, and Mary wondered with each jolt if she would have her baby right then and there with her legs splayed on either side of her beast. But gradually the sky cleared, the sun came out, and they were well warmed. They rode and walked all day, especially with Mary worrying about how soon she might deliver. And shortly after nightfall, in the gloaming of the night, they saw the outline of Elizabeth and Zechariah's simple two-level cabin with its stable on the bottom almost hidden among rocks in the hillside, and its flat top encircled by a low wall barely poking over the short fig trees the old couple had cultivated in their front yard through the decades. The trees were starting to lose their leaves.

As they approached, Mary's donkey brayed, and a small, short, female figure came out the front door. "My niece!" cried Elizabeth, throwing out her arms. "You're here now! We are so glad! Come in, come in!"

Zechariah appeared immediately behind her, taller, thinner, a smile on his craggy, white-bearded face. "Joseph, Mary, Josi, welcome!"

Behind him, peeking from behind, Elizabeth's midwife and nursemaid, Antiphany, came forth, holding six-month-old John in her arms.

Joseph stopped before them and clasped them to his bosom one at a time with the kiss of peace. Then he stepped back and looked at Zechariah. "Let us be serious," he said. "Are you really sure you have room for us?"

Meanwhile, Mary, Josi, and Antiphany hugged each other. They all had been friends on Mount Carmel. "Careful!" said Mary as they wrapped their arms around each other. "I now am wider than I am tall!"

"And I," said Antiphany, "always now have this fat little John guy in my arms!" She and Mary hugged sideways.

Zechariah, tall and thin, nodded his grey head several times. "Of course, oh yes," he said. "You absolutely must stay here, for it is foreordained. The Prophet Micah said, "But you, Fruitful Bethlehem, from you shall come the Ruler in Israel from ancient days!"

Joseph smiled. "We won't displace you," said Joseph. "We know you don't have room upstairs. Show me the wood. I will make us a stall in the stable."

"How much time do we have?" asked Zechariah. "Days?"

"Hours!" Mary exclaimed, looking at her belly. "Maybe."

“Maybe more.” Joseph shrugged. “Perhaps enough time for these builder hands of mine” —he held them up— “to make a small room for us.”

Mary said to Elizabeth, “Tell me about John. Do you think they will be friends?”

“I dearly hope so,” said Elizabeth, hugging Mary again. “Come here. Just look at him in Antiphany’s arms.”

“He is healthy looking!” Mary said.

Elizabeth chuckled. “Do you mean chubby? But I am not worried. Zechariah, bless him, now he is a rail of a man, but he claims that when he was tiny, he was even more round than John.

Mary asked, “May I touch him?”

“No,” said Elizabeth. “You may hold him.”

Before Mary could blink, Antiphany was placing John in Mary’s arms.

“But I might drop him!” she exclaimed.

“Get used to it!” Antiphany exclaimed, grinning. “Soon enough you’ll be doing this!”

Mary held John tight. He was bound in swaddling cloth, starting to wake up. “I want my Jesus to have as many friends as possible, with John first!”

“We will make it so,” said Elizabeth. “Is that what you will call him? Jesus?”

We will prepare food for you while you hold him.”

“But we must unpack,” said Mary, looking with love down at John’s face. John’s arms were free of his wrappings. He reached for her nose, then managed to grab a loose lock of Mary’s hair and pull it hard.

“Joseph, Josi!” said Elizabeth. “You must unpack Mary’s things. She is very busy holding the Forerunner!”

And so the three travelers settled in on the lower level of the small home, in the stable with the donkeys and the sheep, for early winter had started, and all the animals came inside every night. And in those first few days, Joseph built a small, separate stall for them, several feet high, that would keep the animals out. Mary, Josi, and Antiphany prepared for the birth of Jesus.

Then it began.

Mary was eating her morning porridge with the others upstairs in the main room, talking gaily with Josi on one side of her. Joseph leaned stolidly, her pillar of strength, on the other. Elizabeth, Zechariah, and Antiphany were on the opposite side of the table. And Mary felt her first real contraction, almost as if someone were running their hands up her stomach. But no one was touching her.

Startled at the strength of the ripples, still she said nothing. She'd felt the milder contractions of false labor a few times during the past several weeks—"a practice run," Elizabeth had told her, nodding.

But now she felt another one as they ate. And then another as they ended breakfast. Mary frowned, pressed her lips together, and leaned over to Josi, whispering to her. "I think it is time."

Josi flushed. "Really?" She jumped up, startling everyone. She clapped her hands together in front of her face like an excited child.

"Sshh!" said Mary. "Let's just prepare some water for boiling, and take the clean linens and bedding down to the stable."

"You mean you'll give birth down there?" Josi said with surprise. She looked at everyone else.

"Well of course," said Mary.

Joseph, and old hand at this now, drily commented, "That's where the manger is."

Mary added, "That's where the baby and I will sleep. I want to just lie back when it is done and relax."

Everyone stood. Antiphany and Josi went to the fire on the rooftop to boil water while Joseph and Zechariah were assigned the job of gathering old clean linens to carry downstairs. Elizabeth and Josi helped Mary out the front door, down the slope, and back into the stable underneath.

Mary grasped her stomach. It felt hard as another contraction almost took away her breath, closing on her like a fist. It was beginning to hurt.

"Elizabeth!" she exclaimed. Then she lowered her voice. "Is it normal to be scared?"

Elizabeth nodded. "Let your body take over. It is the way of life. They've told you, haven't they, how the contractions come increasingly closer?"

"About ten times a day." Mary glanced at Josi. "The Mount Carmel women trained her so well that she insists on sharing her knowledge with me often."

Josi looked up, and both she and Elizabeth smiled. Mary tried to smile back, but the contraction was not giving up just yet. Elizabeth stepped up to her and gave her a big hug sideways, avoiding pressing her stomach. "Oh, Mary!" she exclaimed.

Josi remarked, "You are pale. Take deep breaths."

In the stable, half cave and half building, they all were well protected from the wind because of how deeply the bottom of the home was imbedded into the rocky hill. Antiphany brought down a small charcoal brazier for a little more warmth in

the stall where Mary, Joseph, and Josi's bedding and belongings lay.

There in the stall was the same manger that baby John used upstairs; now it was ready for Jesus when Mary might finally need to lay him down, even if for a minute. It was shallow but held insulating straw. It was deep enough, though, that Jesus would not be able to accidentally wiggle out of it and onto the cold stable floor, especially in his tight swaddling clothes, as he might if she simply laid him on her and Joseph's bedding.

Because the weather was chilly, the animals were allowed to come and go through a hanging door of thick woven matting. A donkey came over, then two sheep, curious, looking into the small stall where all the humans were collecting. The animals at night were what kept the stable warm from their body heat, so they were more than welcome by everyone.

Antiphany brought a comfortable, sturdy stool with legs of wood and a top of leather downstairs and placed it in the stall. Mary looked at it. "What should I do?" she asked everyone. "Sit in it?"

Josi said, "Only if you want, between the pangs. When they come, then you should stand up or kneel."

"Kneel?!" said Mary. "But what if he suddenly drops out!"

Antiphany said, warmly, "Do not worry, Child. The timing is easy to see. I have done this scores of times. I will sit on the leather seat. And you will sit on my legs, facing Josi. Josi will have her hands ready to ease him out."

"This is normal?" Mary asked, her voice suddenly squeaky.

Josi move forward directly in front of Mary and put her hand on her friend's face. "Normal, Cousin. For a thousand years. It will be fine," she said. "Not just here, but in Egypt, too. When the time is right, your groin will become as cold as stone. That and the pains will come almost on top of each other. I will call out your breaths, as we have practiced. The breaths will give you energy and help numb your cradle, your pelvis."

Mary shook her head. "I just—I don't know, Josi. I just want it to be over. But I want to do it right!"

Josi stroked her shoulders. "You're in great shape. Strong, healthy. Mary, you even have a wide pelvis!"

"Hah!" Mary exclaimed. She blushed.

"And we're all here to help you," Josi soothed.

Elizabeth said, "Mary, my child, the three of us—Josi, Antiphony, and I—have been through this with other women. We will take care of you," she added, as she began spreading clean straw in front of the birthing stool and several feet in every

direction.

Mary nodded. And she began to pace. Back and forth, sometimes going outside to walk in the cool air in front of Elizabeth and Zechariah's house, then back inside again, occasionally sitting. But all three women made her rise to her feet whenever a birth pain struck.

"Breath, Mary; stand straight," Josi instructed when Mary bent over her stomach a little and froze at the beginning of one of her stomach's constrictions. At each contraction, Josi gently commanded her, "In, in, in, in. Out, out, out, out" in a steady voice. "Is it ending?" Mary nodded. "Then breathe deeply and hold it. Now let it out," said Josi.

"Can you imagine," said Mary, "if Herod's soldiers found us here now?" She looked dourly toward the mat door.

Josi grinned. "I doubt they'd even bother—a bunch of Jewish women in a stable. Country girls! With these animals around, they might not even notice you're pregnant!"

Mary said, "Maybe the smell would drive them away."

Josi laughed and the other two smiled.

"It is the scent of warmth," said Elizabeth. "And it's just their fur. As you well know, the animals are very clean and do their leavings outside by day."

And so the afternoon passed, into evening. Joseph stuck his head in at one point, sawdust in his hair and pine scent on his clothes. He looked directly at Mary and asked, "Are you well?"

Mary nodded. "I am, Husband, if wanting to double up and yell every five minutes is normal." She didn't feel much like smiling, but she nodded to him.

Joseph started to frown but then held his face steady. No one in the room, he thought, seemed worried.

"Does anyone want food?" he asked. "Zechariah and I are cooking lentils."

"You cooked?" Elizabeth exclaimed. "Oh, you good man. "Where did you learn how?"

"I had sons with no mother," said Joseph. "We got tired of eating cold, dry food."

"Yes, yes," said Elizabeth. "I will come upstairs and help you bring it down. Who wants some?" she asked.

Antiphony and Josi both nodded. Mary raised her eyes to the roof beams, grabbed her stomach, stuck her tongue out, and groaned. "Sorry for the melodrama," she said. "Bring me some wine, very sweet if you have it."

Elizabeth nodded. "We will mix it with water," she said. "No getting woozy

for you! You don't want lazy contractions."

When she and Joseph returned with the food, Mary was in the middle of another long spasm. Antiphony told Joseph, "Boil the water, now, and bring it."

Josi opened two pouches of salt and the ground garlic she had prepared a week before.

"What is that for?" asked Mary.

"Antiseptic," said Antiphony.

"So the king of the Jews will come into the world smelling of garlic?"

Antiphony smiled and nodded. "Just as our people were fed in Egypt to make us strong."

Mary sat on the birthing stool, the scent of garlic and warm animals rising around her. She closed her eyes and let her head fall forward in a brief moment of sleep. Suddenly her eyes popped wide open. She quickly stood. Josi started counting again, "In, in, in."

Joseph came downstairs with the boiling water. Josi and Antiphony added a mix of the hot with cold in a separate bowl and began washing Mary's legs and lower trunk with rose-scented soap. Mary drifted off again. They finished quickly by spreading Balm of Gilead, a healing lotion, on her, and, as an antiseptic, olive oil mixed with the salt and Egyptian garlic.

Antiphony, an older woman and long experienced as a doula, looked down on the sleeping girl, and she smiled. She noticed yet another sign of the birth soon to come in the young woman's face. *She looks beautiful and feminine*, thought Antiphony. It was sign among midwives that the child in the womb had drawn away all the masculine power from the pregnant mother's body, and into its own. This meant the child would be male.

Suddenly Mary awoke. She'd slept through the beginning flutters of her stomach, but then they clutched hard. "Josi!" she cried. She jumped to a standing position, except she was bending over, clutching her stomach.

Instantly, Josi was beside her.

"It won't stop!" Mary exclaimed.

"Breathe!" Josi commanded. "In, in, in! Stand up! Now out, out, out."

In pain, almost still in her dreams, Mary obeyed.

"It is time," said Antiphony.

"It better be!" Mary gritted her teeth. "I think I'm going to die!"

Josi's eyebrows rose. She looked with wide eyes at Antiphony, who said, "You're just fine, child. Young and healthy. Wide hips. As Josi said, this is normal."

But Mary had never seen a birth. The contractions kept going, now, one flowing into the next, wave upon wave.

“Sit on my lap, child,” said Antiphony. She now was sitting on the birthing stool, legs together.

Mary crouched and sat on her, spreading her legs. Then Antiphony, beneath her, spread her own. The result was a wide, supported space between their legs for the child to descend. Josi brought the clean linens to Elizabeth, who stood beside them. Then Josi massaged Mary’s cervix with olive oil and used both her hands to pull on it gently to enlarge it.

“I can see his head!” she exclaimed. She continued to massage and stretch.

Mary groaned. The contractions kept coming, they wouldn’t stop, they kept flowing over her, one after another, no rest, taking over.

Josi kept counting her breaths, in and out, into infinity, thought Mary. *What good, she asked herself in the small part of her mind still observing her travail, are hundreds of people and a bunch of angels expecting her baby when her whole body was out of control and her heart surely would stop from the strain? Oh this damn breathing, she wondered, why can’t I just scream until he comes out, yell and dance up and down to shake him out, why can’t I run around the house to get him loose!* At this image of herself racing before the building, robes pulled up around her waist, she began to laugh.

Josi looked up in surprise. “Mary, are you alright?”

“Yes! I’m fine!” yelled Mary, and laughed again, once. “Tell me to breathe! Let’s finish!”

Antiphony nodded firmly to Josi. Josi said to Elizabeth, “I better take the towels. I hold one in each hand? Single layer?”

“Yes,” said Antiphony. The child will be slippery. Don’t let him fall.”

Josi nodded vigorously and set her jaw. “In, in, in!” she told Mary. “Now a big breath all the way in, more, more, now hold it. Now—Push! Push!”

Mary grunted as she pushed. She wondered if she was splitting in two. *If this is what it takes to deliver a messiah, she thought, or any kid, count me out next time!* She heard herself beginning to squeal and closed her mouth. Then that damn Josi was ordering her again, what was it, *Let your air out, Mary, relax, let it out, now another deep breath, lungs full, more, and Push!* Mary felt a wave of anger at the whole world but couldn’t do a damn thing about it except get the birth over and done for all time, forever, right away.

Antiphony put a rolled cloth in front of Mary’s lips. “Open and bite!” she commanded. Mary bit into it so hard she thought she surely would cut the cloth in two. “Push!” Josi told her. Mary wanted to hit her, or somebody. Instead she bore down.

"That's it!" Josi said. "Push! He's coming!"

Ah Yahweh in Heaven, Mary prayed, give me the damn messiah now or tell the angels I failed and take me up to Heaven right now, I beg You!

Then all of a sudden, a great, rushing release came. Her belly felt like it had fallen to the floor. Suddenly, she felt a great hollow.

"It's a boy!" Josi exclaimed, catching Jesus up in the linens.

Antiphony leaned to Mary's ear. "Take a breath, child, a deep one. You're almost done. Just the afterbirth. It will come soon with a few more easy contractions."

Mary's stomach continued fluttering as she watched Josi clean off Jesus. *Jesus!* she thought, *Here! Now!* Tears started in her eyes. She could barely see. She threw out her arms. "Josi!" she exclaimed. "Let me hold him!"

Josi brought Jesus to her and placed him in her arms. Still sitting on Antiphony's lap, Elizabeth holding onto her shoulder, she looked down at her baby. Hers. He was her flesh. Her newborn leader. Maybe a god. Love poured out of her heart and her whole body, and she surrounded him with it.

Jesus waved his arms and then cracked open his brown eyes and looked right at her. When she looked into their depth, she tumbled into a steep canyon of bright darkness that she had never known before; he was an alien being looking at her from her own flesh, trusting her completely, figuring her out, wondering, just staring back.

Antiphony said, "Hold him against your breast."

Josi helped Mary uncover herself on one side and then hold Jesus up for his first feeding.

Mary gave him her milk. At first he bit a little; it hurt. But Mary didn't care. Tears of bliss streamed down her face as he began to drink.

Josi went upstairs to tell Joseph that he could come down and see his new son.

Joseph had gone through this three times before. Even so, he stumbled downstairs, smelling the birth scents mixed with those of the donkeys, sheep, and goats as if it were the sweetest perfume in the world. His deep joy was as intense as ever before, no, he thought, more so, looking upon Jesus for the first time.

They held the circumcision on the eighth day in the upstairs family room. Often the father of a new son performed the circumcision, but he also could ask an official circumciser, usually a rabbi. He had chosen Zechariah. The older man had done hundreds for rural people in his long life as a Temple priest who lived in the wilderness. "I am deeply honored," he told Joseph, "more than you can imagine for this great one." Zechariah took out his special knife, sharpened to a keen edge,

enough to slice heaven from earth itself, so that the child would feel no pain.

He turned to his wife, Elizabeth. "Will you serve as the person who holds this child as I perform the cutting?"

Elizabeth started. "Me? But I am a woman! Let Joseph do it!"

"Joseph has already done so with one of his other sons, an honor usually awarded just once in a lifetime. Besides, are we not Essenes? Do we not let women be our rabbis? Here—sit in my chair, the best in the house."

Elizabeth, her face flushing, moved to his chair with its cushion and arms and sat. Her face grew lines of determination and her lips firmed. "Bring the child to me," she told Josi, honoring the young woman, for even becoming the bearer of a child to his ritual cutting was a station of high regard. Josi took Jesus from Mary's arms as Mary, full of joy, began to cry softly, and the older midwife, Antiphany, wiped her tears, too.

Josi carried Jesus the short distance to Elizabeth's legs where she sat, and the two of them made Jesus comfortable and removed his lower garments.

Zechariah looked at each of them, then intoned, "Jesus may be the salvation of our nation. But today he shall begin as did our first forefather and each male from then to now, in making an agreement with God. That first covenant and all others are sealed by the cutting of the foreskin."

Zechariah paused. Then he nodded to them all. "Almost two thousand years ago, he said, our first patriarch, Abram, was 99 years old. His wife, Sarai, was 90. Yet one day God came to their abode and spoke to them, saying, 'I'll make you a deal. Agree to worship only me, and I will give you this land of Canaan forever. But first, as a sign of your worshipping me and no other gods, every male in your household, even the servants, must be circumcised.'"

Then Zechariah, who was a sober and upstanding follower of the Laws, paused, looking at each of them, and gave them one of his rare ironic grins. He scratched his chin through his beard. "Well," he said, "the scriptures tell us that Abram fell on his face with laughter. And Sarai, she laughed at God, too. 'Impossible!' they exclaimed. It is a good thing," Zechariah told them all, that God lets us Jews laugh and be angry at God, and he forgives us. So God got busy with all kinds of promises, and finally he talked them into trying. And on that same day Abram heard God's words, he got out his best knife, honed it so you could shave with it, and circumcised himself. Then he did the same with every man and boy in his household, even the several workers they had purchased, just as God said. Then he and Sarai got together—another mystery at that age. And a year later, they had a son, Isaac, the best miracle of all."

Zechariah cleared his throat. "One more time," he said, "our Lord came to

them. The Holy Mystery announced to them, "This is our contract, written in flesh. Circumcise your new son and all your other infants on their eighth day from now on. And by the way, the two of you, your new names are Abraham and Sarah. You are two plainspoken strangers who have moved back here from Egypt. But someday your names and those of your sons will be known throughout the nations of the world in fear, blessings, and love."

Then they all stood, except for Elizabeth, and Zechariah bent over Jesus and performed the ceremony. Immediately after, they celebrated with a dance and song. They danced in two groups, as was the way of most nations then. Joseph and Zechariah linked arms on one side of the room, and the four women with Jesus still in Elizabeth's arms on the other. And they sang. For almost two thousand years, throughout their exiles in Egypt and Babylonia and their return home, the many cultures and faith groups among the Hebrews had chosen a variety of ritual songs. The Essenes long ago developed one for just such an occasion from their scriptures, "Circumcision of the Heart." As they stepped left and then right, forward and back, they sang

Love the Lord your God with all of your heart
and all of your soul, and follow the Law.
The fragrant heavens and soil we tread
God chose them to give to us.
For God, therefore, we cut our heart;
we give our flesh and blood.
We shout our covenant sealed with love
for we were banished into the wilds
but now live in milk and honey.

Elizabeth and Zechariah insisted that the new family of three stay with them for a while longer, which was, indeed, what Judith and the Mount Carmel Essenes intended. On the fortieth day, Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem, where Jesus and Mary received their purifications according to Jewish Law.

But throughout these weeks, as Joseph milked the goats and cleaned the animal's stalls, his ears pricked up at every strange cry of a bird or even the sudden occasional silence of the forested hills around them, likely from a bear or lion passing through. But who, he wondered, might instead be causing such a silence by stalking the homestead? What lengths, Joseph asked himself, would Herod go to if he killed his own relatives? How quickly might he slay a young and defenseless competitor for his kingdom?

Chapter 4: Flight to Egypt

Several months later, a half dozen berobed foreigners, dark-skinned from daily exposure to the sun, moved through the desert. Each of the two youngest carried a short sword, spear, and bow that they wore on top of their robes for thieves to see. Several times on their long journey, raggedly dressed men with scarred faces passed them going both ways, and offroad in the distance, they could see others on donkeys or even horses pausing and staring at them. Thus were the dangers between Persia and the outer Roman provinces like Palestine, on this branch of the Great Silk Road, a well-trodden highway of dust where no soldiers from any country patrolled.

The six were cold at night and hot during the day, their journey weeks long. They wore long wool robes, brown or grey, to stay warm at night but also to keep the unrelenting rays of the sun off them by day and to create a sheen of sweat on their bodies that, when the breezes blew upon them, made them feel cooler.

The two with weapons, youthful and strong, walked first, beside their donkeys, which carried large packs. Two older men came next, each of them riding one donkey and leading another with a big wrapped tent on its back and smaller sacks on the side. Two elderly gentlemen brought up the rear on camels that were impatient and balky at the slow pace of the donkeys in front of them. All six smelled of fresh sweat; the donkeys were slightly ripe. However, the camels gave off such a sharp scent of unwashed hair and clinging dung that all six men welcomed the wind in their faces. Whenever they stopped, they took turns giving the camels food and water as no one wanted to be assigned to it permanently: camels regurgitate their food and chew it more, giving them breath so bad that a person in front of them easily felt nausea from a burping or coughing camel.

At their campfire each night hands out to the small fire and with camels and donkeys at a distance, they ate dried figs and rye cakes, drank weakened wine, and argued, though genially. They used Greek because it was a common tongue for all. Four were Persians, one from Arabia, and one a Babylonian. The two latter were studying in Persia with the others. All were priests, young and old, in mystery schools in Persia.

“So,” said a younger one, tall, thin, and dark, “you really think this trip will result in meeting a great prophet of Israel as a baby. What good is seeing a baby?”

“I keep reminding you,” said a somewhat older man from Persia, “if we’re right, we need to invite his family to send him to our country when he gains his adulthood. He will need training.”

“And besides,” piped up another, also young but already well bearded like the rest, “though the Essenes have resources, we are bringing him gold!”

“But how,” asked the first one, “do we know we are following the right stars? There have been a million conjunctions in the skies these recent few years.”

“Melchior,” said one of the oldest of these wise men, who had listened patiently until now. He picked up a burning stick and waved it as the skies, its hot ember looking like a circling star. “All these conjunctions—less than the fingers on my hand, not ‘millions’—have been of the star Jupiter, the maker of kings. Whoever is coming is special. Judith and her Essenes at Mount Carmel have been planning this for many years. Now Jupiter has been very active in the skies, and we will follow it, as foretold.”

“But how will we know where to find him?” asked the young, skeptical wiseman.

“The stars,” said the old Persian, waving his burning stick again. “We go west from Jerusalem toward the next conjunction of Jupiter. Even now it begins to align.” He laid his stick on the edge of their fire and put his hands toward the blaze to warm them. “And we will stop in Jerusalem. The King there will welcome us. He is a Jew, and we will ask him. His name is Herod the Great.”

And so they did. King Herod allowed them to come before his throne, even hosting them to a fine meal of risen wheat bread, roast young lamb, fish, their choice of fine dry wines, and sweetmeats. They contributed frankincense to the meal, which Herod burned, even though normally it was reserved for Temple use, and they gave him a small, flat, gold carving of a royal figure riding a wide set of wings, a popular image in Persepolis. Herod loved statuary, and he ran his fingers over the image with pleasure.

Then the King waved his arms to beckon his advisors to come to him at the dining table, and he made a great show of consulting them. They told him, for he himself was not a scholar, that scripture predicted a messiah would arise from the lands around Bethlehem.

Then he said to his guests, “Please return to me that I may provide gifts and food for your travel homeward, and a message for your King. I also would like to know if you find a child who may be our messiah, so that I may go and worship him myself.”

The Persian contingent, well fed, left Jerusalem for Bethlehem in the dark of the early morning. The newest conjunction of Jupiter appeared, however, to point them slightly more to the west. Bethlehem, not far away, was more southward. They decided instead to head toward the mountain village of Ein Karem. There they wandered about for two days, asking questions in the broken Aramaic that two of them possessed until a farmer finally directed them toward Zechariah and Elizabeth’s, having heard of two infants recently born there in the past year.

They arrived at the simple home a good walk further north of the village in the wilderness at sunset, just in time for supper. Zechariah greeted them warmly, Essene to foreigners, for he knew something of their languages, as did Elizabeth. And all, visitors and householders alike, were believers in the mysteries. Elizabeth, when she went back inside to tell Mary and Josi who had arrived, put her hands to her face. "What will we feed them!" she exclaimed.

Mary, her face flushed with excitement, replied, "We have all the summer's vegetables and fresh flour to serve them, Cousin. Let's give them the best, and bring out the good wine! I'm sure they've brought gifts for us."

Josi nodded and gave Elizabeth's shoulders a squeeze. "We'll be fine, and we can always get more supplies. I'm sure they will not stay for long. They have come to see Jesus and talk with Joseph about his education, perhaps John's, too." Antiphany, Elizabeth's older midwife and now nursemaid, also still was there. She took the infants outside in the shade while the three other women began preparations.

And so it was. When the group of wise men saw the child in his manger-crib, which had been moved upstairs to the guestroom, they all crowded into the room and fell to their knees in honor, gathering around him so they could get a closer look. Wonder was in their eyes.

One of the two oldest even had trembling hands. He looked far off, then back to Jesus. "Yes," he said, nodding, to the others. "It is he, as foretold."

The Arab asked, "May we hold him?"

Josi placed Jesus in his arms, and each man in turn rocked him gently for a bit, stared into his eyes, or let Jesus use a strong grip to grab the man's finger.

The Babylonian magus said, "Some of us believe he is the reincarnation of Zend, father of the founder of the Persian faith of Zoroaster."

Mary nodded, flushed again. All of this was new to her, nothing the Mount Carmel Essenes had taught her.

John, now back in Elizabeth's arms, waved and sputtered as if he wanted attention, too.

"Who is this other child?" the Magi asked.

"His cousin," said Zechariah, "my son." He smiled. We Essenes predict he will play a part in helping Jesus."

"Then he is welcome to come train in our mystery school, too," said the oldest Persian.

Then they gave their gifts to Mary and Joseph. "Here are two packages to keep him healthy and safe," said the youngest priest. He handed Mary two big, carefully

wrapped handfuls, one of frankincense, the other of myrrh. Both were very expensive in Israel, reserved usually for wealthy priests to burn as a sacrifice. What many priests and King Herod himself did not know—but these wise men did, along with the two midwives, Josi and Antiphany, who lit up at seeing them—was that these rare incenses also were excellent cleansing and sterilizing powders. They were a wonderful way to help insure an infant's health.

Then the oldest wiseman wordlessly handed Joseph a small but heavy pouch, bowing as he did so.

Joseph opened it. His mouth dropped open. "But," he said, "this is a rich mase it as you need to through the years to raise him well. And if you can, send bothboys to us for a time."

Then Joseph did something he never did with any person in Israel, only with his God. He got down on one knee and bowed his head to the old Persian. "We are deeply honored. We thank you."

Mary, trying to see over the edge of the pouch, exclaimed, "What is it?"

Joseph held it open briefly for all to see. The gold glittered in the light of the flame in a niche above the table. They were so startled that a great, surprised silence settled on the room.

"We are friends of Judith, you know," said the other old Magi, his words of normal tone now seeming to ring in the sudden quiet. "She visited us when she was young. She is in part why we have travelled to find you. We also sent a messenger to her, letting her know of your plan to find you. Clearly she trusts all of you with the great responsibility of raising these children. We had thought to take the gold to her. But we feel safe giving it to you."

That night, they refused Zechariah's offer of the guest room.

"We have our large tents," said the Babylonian. "The guest room is filled with the children. Who would want to disturb a messiah and his assistant?"

"It would be safer and warmer for you to sleep in the stable with the animals," said Zechariah. "Our neighbors, though a distance away, will wonder at the fancy tents."

The Babylonian priest frowned. "Yes, we can do that. But only if the camels can stay outside. No one can sleep near them." He touched his nose.

Zechariah nodded sagely. "I never have owned a camel. But I have been close enough to them to be glad of that."

And so the six Magi and their donkeys slept in several free stalls, one of which was where Jesus had been born. The camels outside, glad to be alone for the night, were only mildly cantankerous and made only small grunts and groans as they folded their legs and lay down. Inside the stable, the heat from the animals, the

visitors, and the residents was so great that the whole house was warmer by several degrees in the cold of the night. The visitors were especially pleased after having been in the cold desert winds for so many nights. They hung their heavy woolen robes outside in the night breeze so they wouldn't absorb all the smells of the stable.

As they woke in the morning, everyone lay down on mats around the simple low table on top of Zechariah and Elizabeth's home, heads toward the center, and they all ate porridge and drank inexpensive sour wine as if it were the finest and most delicate of meals. When all were finished, the youngest Persian said, "Elder," speaking to the oldest, "last night I had a dream."

"Tell us, then," said the older man.

"It was a nightmare. A great plume of smoke rose from a wilderness into the dark sky. When I looked for its source, I saw blood splattered everywhere on the ground. Men in uniforms were plunging their knives into the hearts of children and babies. The soldiers who were doing this, the hair on top of each young one's head blazing like a bright red flame. I heard the screams of the women and infants. Then, Elder, I woke up."

Everyone at the table looked at each other from their couches. Zechariah said, "Why have you brought this dream to our table of peace?"

Joseph, usually quiet, spoke up. "May we talk about this? I am moved to feel that it is important. The dream troubles me. Their hair was the color of red fire. Our King Herod also is known as Herod the Edomite. 'Edom,'" he said to the guests, "means 'red.'"

For a minute, the group at the table stayed silent. Mary looked at Josi. Then she said, quietly, "Herod the Great has killed some of his young cousins, we've heard maybe even his own children, so they won't challenge him someday for his crown. Joseph and I have heard this several times from independent sources."

The Elder of the Persians sat up. He said, "This was no dream." He crossed his hands in the air from one side to the other in front of his face. "Nor is it past or present. It is the future. It is a vision. Talking about it draws me to a time soon to come on the landscape of what might happen. Would your King be so bold as to seek to kill Jesus?"

Zechariah cleared his throat. "Surely he would not do such a thing to the people of Israel! We are his own people. He is a Jew, no matter what others say about his corruption by the Romans."

Elizabeth, holding her infant son John in one arm, stretched her other hand to Zechariah, who lay beside her, and touched his face. "My husband, how much I love you for being such a staunch servant at the Temple of our Land. But if Herod

would kill his own, how much less trouble would it be to end the life of a few tiny, infant peasants in our wildlands?"

Again there was silence. Finally, the Elder stood. "Thank you most kindly, Zechariah, and you, Elizabeth, wife of the priest Zechariah, for your food and a place to lay our heads."

Then he turned to Mary, who was holding Jesus, and to Joseph, who lay with her on their mat. "We have been deeply honored, it is the honor of a lifetime, to meet such an esteemed soul, and all of you high souls, especially just as your children are starting their great mission on this earth in these unsettled times. How I wish I could live long enough to see his deeds come about!" He looked around him at his companions. "Perhaps some of my friends here will someday be allowed to share our mysteries with one or both children, should you send him them to us as they grow older.

"However," he said, "I am afraid we must leave. Now. Today. This King Herod expects us to return to him with news of Jesus and where we have found him. We've already spent four days, now, travelling here and wandering about, trying to find you. The King must be growing impatient for our visit to him on our way back to Persia."

He shook his head. "We must go home on a roundabout road far and wide of him, so that he does not hear any news of us having left his kingdom until we are long away. You—please consider this dream and whether to hide or flee for a time. My deepest wisdom tells me you are not safe here. Not anymore. Not in your homes or anywhere nearby. I apologize for us exposing you. Because of our great error in consulting your King, you are welcome to come to Persia to hide, even to travel with us now."

Joseph stood, nodded, and bowed. All the wise men rose with him. Then he stepped forward, as did Zechariah, and exchanged a hug and the Hebrew kiss of peace with them. "We must think about this and talk about it," he told them. "And if we were to travel with you, we might be too exposed. You yourselves must leave quickly, as you say. But thank you for your offer. We will go elsewhere if our Mount Carmel Essenes cannot hide us."

And with that, all six of the wise men quietly went to their sleeping places and gathered their belongings, minus the many gifts they had brought, and prepared their donkeys and camels.

With many an additional thank you and great praise exchanged by everyone, especially for Jesus, and with tears in the eyes of some of the older wisemen—they bade farewell, travelling west to the coast, planning to go far north before turning once again to the east and home.

For two days, the combined household of Zechariah and Joseph discussed nothing but whether to leave. They burned a little frankincense as a reminder of their visitors, and drank a flagon of the sweet wine the Magi had left. But they talked endlessly.

They thought at first to send a fast runner from their village to Judith to ask her what to do. "But there is not enough time for that," said Zechariah. You, all of you" —he looked especially at his wife, Elizabeth—"must go."

Elizabeth said, "But John is not Jesus!"

Zechariah nodded. "Yet he is an infant. How are they to tell the difference?"

Elizabeth put her hand on the middle of her forehead. "Of course," she said. "We should all pack tonight."

"But," said Zechariah, "'I will go north to Mount Carmel."

Elizabeth's eyes grew round with alarm.

"I know," said Zechariah. "You want me with you. You think I'm too old to take care of myself. But someone must tell Judith in person what we are doing. And someone must take them the gold."

He turned to Joseph. "Take enough of the coins to establish yourselves in Egypt in the large Jewish quarter of our people, there in the great city of Alexandria."

Joseph nodded. "No one will know us there."

"Oh, my husband, I do not feel right about this!"

"Nevertheless," said Zechariah, "it must be done. Go pack, now. We all should leave first thing in the morning, after I ask the neighbor to care for our sheep. Who knows what Herod will do? He is fussy, impatient, and dangerous. He may act in the next few days."

"You will join us soon in Alexandria," Elizabeth said. "You must."

Zechariah waved his hand. "Of course. If I can." Then he placed his arm around the shoulders of his wife of many dozens of years and led her to their bedroom so they could begin folding their clothes and fitting them into travel pouches. He kissed her on the forehead. Elizabeth took his hand firmly. But inside, she was trembling at one word of his: "If" he could join them, he had said. Not "when."

They all left just in time. A small group of Herod's murderers came the next day to Ein Karem with their short swords and thick-leather breastplates, their loin guards, and their bedraggled donkeys they had pushed to a trot all the way out to the tiny village. They were one of several groups that Herod had sent to Bethlehem

and into the countryside nearby.

When they arrived, they were laughing and boasting among each other, half a dozen of them. People in the streets saw them coming, Herod's butchers, or so they were called because they often randomly grabbed a farmer's lamb, sliced its throat, and took it with them for dinner. There were humors they sometimes accidentally ran over children in the streets, too. Startled mothers yanked their children into homes and side streets, and men left their shops and old men their stoops, hastening to warn others to hide their families and livestock.

Joseph, Mary, Josi, and Jesus were well away by this time. They had left before dawn, carrying little more than the clothes on their backs, escorted by two burly Essene guards who lived in Ein Karem and whom they paid for protection on the road—though the guards would have done it for nothing.

But Zechariah and Elizabeth needed a few more hours to arrange for the care of their wilderness farm by their neighbors. Zechariah had parted from them for a small trail north to Mount Carmel. Elizabeth and Antiphany, with John in the nursemaid's arms, rode two donkeys with two more tied behind them, and a young, strong, Essene married couple were leading the women and donkeys toward the southern road. As they passed through Ein Karem, they saw Herod's crew in the distance.

"This way," said the young couple, both armed and dressed like men, leading them to a narrow alternative path between buildings. At each intersection, their guards looked around the corners of houses before continuing on.

But that didn't stop them from hearing. Suddenly, a loud cry of a woman filled the air, hovering and spreading over all the hamlet's buildings. They heard a baby begin wailing, quickly cut off. Then the woman screamed like a rabbit just as the fox takes it. That, in turn, suddenly was cut off by a loud slap, followed by a hopeless, low sobbing. Elizabeth and her companions looked at each other, eyes widening.

As they neared the edge of the village, they heard another sequence, much the same. And by the time they were a few minutes away, yet one more series of fearsome cries carried across the rocky path to them.

The young woman guard turned to them and said, "Next they'll be going from farmstead to farm. We are well away."

They hurried as fast as they could. They were moving away from Bethlehem and the villages around it, so they hoped they would escape. Nevertheless, their guards kept looking over their shoulders, checking. Elizabeth found herself watching for shallow caves in the rock faces along the way, large trees, or even just rises in the land where they might somehow lie down and go unnoticed.

Many hours later, they caught up with Joseph's group at their preset meeting place behind a wayside inn run by an Essene couple. Sundown was striking a panoply of orange and red rays from where it soon would sink into the Mediterranean Sea, nightbirds were calling, and the hot, sandy winds were shifting, cooling them off. The older pair who ran the inn saw their alarm and, after hearing briefly of Herod's soldiers, directed them to go behind the inn in case anyone wanted to search the building itself. Herod was so notorious that no one wanted to underestimate his anger and reach.

Joseph's group joined them behind the two story building. Elizabeth now was carrying John. She dismounted from her donkey, put him down to hobble about, and she and Mary fell into each other's arms.

"What is wrong?" asked Mary. Joseph strode up to Elizabeth and gave her the kiss of peace.

Jesus, in Josi's arms nearby, still little more than a baby and covered in large robes as protection against the evening chill, was eying everyone cautiously, wondering why they weren't back in Elizabeth and Zechariah's home. When he saw that John, too, had joined them—his cousin who was six months older and seemed to Jesus infinitely bigger and smarter, almost like the adults—he started smiling.

In the bustle of people meeting, the two infants were almost forgotten except by Josi and Antiphany. The men quickly put up several tents, and the two nursemaids put the boys to bed in their dark tent together. Night crickets were calling. The boys fell asleep silently, gently placing their hands on each other in the glow of the single oil lamp Josi and Antiphany lit so they could repair clothing as they watched over the children.

The other adults, including the four guards, made a small campfire in a pit behind the inn, not far from the wall. The owners of the inn brought them sour beer to drink, big hunks of rye bread, and heaping bowls of freshly cooked lentils. Everyone was famished from the travel and the fear.

In the distance of the desert, a jackal suddenly cried. The sound was lonely. The wind stirred the palm fronds of the oasis not far from them, and the tree trunks groaned and cracked. They all had finished eating. Joseph said, "Now tell us your story."

Elizabeth turned large, dark eyes on each of them. In those eyes a terror gradually appeared, as in one who has seen the Jewish hell where offal and children are burnt, and she was still recovering from the sight.

"Another traveler on a horse going our way stopped to tell us there was blood in the streets of Ein Karem." She looked off in the distance. "We said nothing. Of course they were looking for Jesus and John. But they had no names. The traveler

told us he'd seen a dead baby, and then he watched, stunned, as Herod's butchers demanded directions to the farmsteads where other babies had been born." She shivered deeply and couldn't easily stop. Mary put both her arms around the old woman.

Joseph nodded once. One of the children gave a small cry in his sleep, and both Mary and Elizabeth's heads shot up, fear in their eyes. "It's okay," they heard Josi call quietly from within Jesus and John's tent.

Elizabeth rubbed her tired eyes and shook her head. "I will never forget the crying, cut off suddenly, of those little ones. I will never," she said, starting to cry, "forget the horrible shrieks of their mothers."

Mary shuddered and looked away.

Elizabeth wiped her face. The fire briefly flickered high, shining against her deeply lined that showed so many years of living in the wilds.

Mary stood suddenly and ran to her and Joseph's tent.

"Where is Zechariah, now?" Joseph asked. "Did he get away to Mount Carmel safely?"

Elizabeth nodded. "Now I must go to John. I will sleep in the tent with the babies and the nursemaids. Joseph, go now to Mary in your tent. She needs you."

Joseph said no more. He kissed Elizabeth reverently between the eyebrows, nodded his thanks to the guards, and then walked to his tent.

The four guards talked briefly. Then three of them put out the fire and went into their tent to sleep, even as a jackal yipped in the distance. The fourth guard began his turn to stand watch.

In the tent, Mary leaned against Joseph's chest and sobbed. Jesus, she knew, would be sleeping for several hours in his own tent with John and the nursemaids, until he was hungry or she called for him. She was glad Jesus was out of the tent. Babies, she thought, little children! They were being killed because of Jesus! *But it's not his fault!* she told herself. *Never!* She spoke to Joseph. "You must never tell Jesus how much sorrow I am feeling for the death of the infants, no matter how old he is! He must never think I blame him!"

Joseph nodded and kissed her hair.

"Why couldn't the angels have warned us!" she cried out. "What's wrong with them?"

Joseph quietly said, "but they did warn us. Through the dream the young Magi had."

"And Herod!" Mary exclaimed. "Why is he so evil!"

Joseph had learned mostly to listen to her when she was upset. He kept silent now but hugged her. But he thought about Herod, just another unhappy little dictator keeping himself propped up by the Roman state.

“As his mother,” Mary warned, “I should have known something would happen! I should have been able to save them all!”

Now Joseph did speak. “You give yourself too much power. Who knew what Herod would do, maybe not even God.”

Mary balled her hands tight. “I thought I would be helping Israel when I agreed to become Jesus’ mother!” she exclaimed. “Instead, all I’ve done is help kill off her infants!”

“From what Elizabeth says,” Joseph told her, “it’s probably just the little ones in and around Bethlehem, maybe just Ein Karem if anyone told Herod where the wise men went. You can’t raise a leader without raising death.”

That was too much for her. She jumped up in their tent, her head almost brushing its top, and spun away.

“How could you understand?” she demanded. “You aren’t his mother! You didn’t have to help decide what’s good for Israel!”

His face grew red. “Stop thinking of just yourself!”

She looked at him in horror and hurt pride.

Immediately he regretted speaking yet again. He shook his head to clear it. He was more used to spending his time among men and his own older sons who listened to moral criticisms as if such criticisms were the words of God himself, and then they all discussed them carefully. He’d learned from his former wife that women were different. But she had been a quiet one, slow to anger. Mary was something else entirely, a quick, bright young woman who flared up and then just as easily enveloped those she cared for with great love.

He held out his hand.

“Mary. I’m sorry. Come here, child.”

She spun on her heels and ran out of the tent.

He was afraid to follow.

She burst in upon Josi, Elizabeth, and Antiphany, who were just getting settled. Jesus and John were asleep in their bedding. Mary started sobbing in earnest.

Josi, with a quick look at the boys to see if they were still slumbering, put her arms around her friend. Elizabeth joined her, and then Antiphany.

“What’s wrong?” Josi asked.

Mary lifted her head.

"I killed them, Josi," she whispered. Her voice was hoarse. "Maybe I should be dead, too."

"It's Herod's fault," Elizabeth said. The wrinkles in her ancient face all drew down.

Mary shuddered at the mention of the old, diseased King.

"I think," Josi said, "even if we'd gone all the way to Egypt right after Jesus and John were born, Herod still would have found a way to get to us! Or to kill kids! You know he's a friend of Caesar Augustus. With Caesar's support, Herod can do anything!"

Mary nodded. Suddenly she looked up in fear.

What if he does follow us here?" she asked.

Josi put her finger on the side of her cheek. All three of the other women looked at her.

"No, she answered slowly. "They've done their killing. And no one except the Essene leaders at home knows where we've gone."

Mary sighed. She felt the beginning of relief curling through her.

"I quarreled with Joseph," she said.

"Do you want to stay here tonight?" Josi asked.

Mary paused. "No. I'd better go back to the tent. He'll be worried. I'll have to apologize to him." She blew out her breath. "Again. Why must I always be worked up?"

Josi wisely ignored the question and asked, "Do you want Jesus, yet?"

Mary shook her head. "Keep him here until he cries. Okay? I want to pray."

Mary kissed all three women good night, and she went back to her tent.

As she entered, the light from the opened flap showed the dimly lit figure of Joseph on his knees, head raised to the skies, eyes closed.

She silently stole up beside him and kneeled. She took his hand. He glanced down sharply and looked into her face.

She squeezed his hand, then lifted her head to the tent ceiling, too.

His tense body relaxed. An hour later, when Josi brought Jesus to them and Mary had fed him, she kept Jesus there, and all three of them fell asleep, Jesus in the middle and Joseph and Mary close to him on either side.

Their stay in Egypt lasted several years. They first all lived together in a small

Essene community in Zoan, a city on the east side of the delta of the Nile. It was dusty when the wind came from the east because they were so near to the desert, but the small and bustling city was so close to the Nile that much of its land was moist and florid. However, Zoan was one of the first cities on the busy trade routes between Jerusalem and Egypt, caravans going back and forth between the two every day, that the small band of travelers worried that some word of their names might travel back to Jerusalem, especially if Herod suspected Essenes.

So after a few weeks, they moved into a larger house in Alexandria. The city was huge—hundreds of thousands of people, the second most important metropolis in the great Roman Empire after Rome itself. In addition to Egyptians, Alexandria had very large numbers of Greeks and Jews. It was one of the few great cities in the world where, other than Jerusalem and Israel itself, Hebrews were respected. They controlled the northeast quarter of the city and had their own local government there, where they numbered about 100,000 people.

Joseph, Mary, and Elizabeth, their nursemaids, and especially the children easily were able to lose themselves in the city among an Essene community that numbered a few hundred souls. Some of the Essenes like to say they descended from, and were named after, the Hasadim, a word meaning loving-kindness. If so, the Egyptian Essenes certainly proved the story right: they poured their care upon the new band of visitors. The leaders knew who Jesus might be but only told the rest that Joseph, the four women, and the two infants came from Mount Carmel, the center of their movement in Galilee, and they sought protection.

The Essene leaders, both male and female in this liberal city, found them an old, inconspicuous, bare but clean home of smoothly-set limestone. It had the typical three rooms and flat roof (where people often slept at night for the cool breeze). Joseph immediately set about renovating it with money from the Magi so that it became a five-room home for two families with an outdoor kitchen big enough for both. His excellence at masonry and finishing brought him attention, and soon he had many jobs, repairing and building, in the Jewish quarter, where a skilled carpenter in a wealthy, growing city always was appreciated.

His work also allowed them to save much of the money from the Persian wise men. The whole group knew that the Essenes on Mount Carmel would send more gold if they needed it. But labor was in Joseph's blood. He gave it quietly and happily to God. And besides, he thought, it was good cover for their secret residency. Herod the great had died, some said horribly of his illnesses. Joseph tried not to pass judgement on that. However, his young and dangerous son Herod Antipas had taken the throne in their area, and no one knew, yet, whether he was even worse.

In this supportive band of Jews all about them, Jesus and John grew into slightly plump, happy young children. They slept and played together,

occasionally quarreled, and learned to walk and then run, one after the other. They often held hands in front of the house while they watched the busy people pouring back and forth on various jobs and social visits in the Hebrew quarter.

Neither of the children showed any special signs of being who they were, at least not yet. Both were obviously intelligent; but neither of the mothers had had children before, so the fact that the two boys were very bright was not unusually noticeable to them, especially considering that both women just assumed both boys would be special and smarter than normal. What Mary and Elizabeth did notice, however, was that John and especially Jesus seemed to have strong wills. This worried Mary in particular. She was afraid that if her baby really was the looked-for one, Israel's messiah, he was going to be a strongly armed soldier king bossing others around, as some of the ancient prophets had foretold. And that would put him in danger.

When they turned four, Jesus and John began morning lessons at the nearby Essene synagogue, where they listened to Bible stories, especially from the Torah, sang songs from the books, and memorized important scriptures, along with other children their age.

Both boys and girls learned together, not only because Jewish tradition encouraged it, but especially because this was Alexandria, one of the most supportive cities in the world for women of all races, sometimes even female slaves. In addition, girls of the Essene tradition were further encouraged in their education, much more so than if they had been born in Israel to Pharisee and Sadducee families. The latter, especially as women, were expected to keep their mouths shut, do their homemaking tasks, and leave the business to their men. However, as long as any Alexandrian family had money—and many Jewish households were comfortable, some even rich—then their women would be hard-pressed to find a less oppressive city in the entire world in that age.

However, women's lives were not perfect. All the adults in their household told both boys to pay particular attention to the girls, respecting and listening to their concerns. This was because at the age of ten, most of these girls would disappear from school and stay home to help their mothers. Then Jesus and John would have much more trouble learning what women were like and showing them the respect they deserved.

One day John and Jesus came up to Elizabeth and said, "Please tell us about the Land of Milk and Honey!"

"Again?" exclaimed Elizabeth, smiling. She was washing clothes behind their home and well bored with it. She volunteered for it to take a turn from cooking. You had to soak the clothes in tubs with vegetable ashes, beat them with wooden

paddles as the Egyptians did, drain the water, gently squeeze water out of the clothes, and then hang them to dry in the sun in the front of their house.

“How many times have you heard this story from me?” she asked the boys, her eyes twinkling.

“Two times,” said Jesus, then thought again. “Five?”

“A thousand times!” John exclaimed, throwing his arms out.

“And yet you still want to hear it again?”

“Yes!” both boys shouted together.

“Then sit yourselves down right there by the tub,” she said. “As you probably remember, once upon a time, there was a goddess whose name was Asherah.”

“She was God’s wife!” John shouted.

“Sshhh,” said Elizabeth. “This is a story just for us, not the neighbors. Agreed?”

Both boys quickly nodded.

“Asherah was indeed married to our God, Elohim. This was a thousand years ago. Back then, some people called God ‘El.’

“Before Elohim created our beautiful earth, there was nothing but a great ocean everywhere. Elohim and Asherah lived there, together. This was long before our people were stolen away to become slaves in Babylon. Then Elohim and Asherah lay down on their bench to eat dinner one night, and they decided to create the earth. They wanted some animals, so they made all kinds of insects and birds and goats and sheep and put them all over, especially in our land of Israel. Then they rested for a night.

But the next day, they woke up, and Asherah said, “El, we need something more on this earth we’ve made. We need some animals that are more like us.’

“Well, Elohim, he thought that was a great idea. ‘Sure, Asherah,’ he said. ‘Good idea! Let’s start with two, just like us. We can call them man and woman.’

“And so,” said Elizabeth,” they created Adam and Eve. And Adam and Eve had a bunch of kids, and their kids had more kids—all big families—until all of Israel and the earth was filled with people. And Elohim and Asherah looked at it and said, ‘This is so good!’”

“But what about the milk and honey?” asked John. Jesus nodded solemnly.

“Oh yes,” said Elizabeth. When the earth started having a lot of people on it, they started worshiping Elohim and Asherah. And for Asherah, they decided to give her a headdress of horns. Some say she had cow horns; others, that they were goat horns. And just about that same time, Elohim decided that the people of Israel, who were trapped by the evil Pharaoh in Egypt for a while, should be sent

back to their home in Israel. So together, Elohim and Asherah told all of us Hebrews, 'Go home to Israel, and we will make your land a place of milk and honey.'

And so they all did. Pharaoh gave their leader, Joseph, a lot of goats to take with him, and some beehives and dates to make bee honey and date honey. And Asherah, well, she was the wearer of the horns, so she knew exactly how to make the goats and cows start giving our people milk.

"And that," said Elizabeth, "is how our country became the Land of Milk and Honey. Asherah invented the milk for the goats and cows to give us. And Elohim showed us how to turn dates into syrup for date honey, and told the wild bees to start making honey in their beehives."

Both John and Jesus nodded. Then Jesus frowned. "What happened to Asherah?"

"Well," Elizabeth sighed, "we don't hear much about her anymore, do we?"

Both boys shook their heads.

"But she's still right here with us. She joined up into one body with Elohim. That's why our ancient language calls Elohim the male-female God. He and Asherah are one. And Asherah is all around us." She spread her arms wide. "The land, the sea, the river, the flowers, and bushes, all are the body of Asherah. She has made the whole world beautiful for us. And we have the honor of living inside her."

John and Jesus looked at each other sagely as if they were old adults. Just then, Mary and Josi came around the corner.

"Elizabeth!" Mary scolded. "Are you telling the boys about Asherah again! You're going to get us all stoned!"

"Well, it's true," said Elizabeth, pointing upward. "Elohim is both genders. And no one here in Alexandria is going to hurt us."

"Oh, Mary," said Josi, "don't you want them to grow up thinking of women as being just as strong as men?"

"What about the story of Elijah fighting the priests of Ba'al and Asherah?" she asked. We both heard Rabbi Judith tell us that one at our betrothal."

Josi nodded. "A great story. But that was politics. The King was killing all of Yahweh's priests."

Mary raised her eyebrows, snorted, and took a deep breath. Then she turned to the two boys. "But don't you two tell anybody else!" she said. "This is our family's secret. Understand?"

They both nodded solemnly. "Can we go play, now?" asked John. He already

was edging away, taking Jesus' hand and pulling on him.

"Go!" said Mary. "But not too far! Stay in sight of our home!" The boys nodded again and were gone.

"Such a story!" Mary would explain. "Teaching the boys about foreign gods! You'll have them being stoned when they grow up, or before!"

"They know they should keep their mouths closed about Asherah, Elohim's wife, don't you, boys? Not a word?"

Both boys would nod solemnly.

"Except for Judith," said Elizabeth. "You can ask her."

Elizabeth just kept on washing clothes. Josi grabbed Mary's arm. "It's time we were cooking dinner!" she said. "You can complain about Asherah the Goddess all you want to me while we prepare food."

Several mornings each week after making breakfast, Joseph would go to his workshop or a job site, and Mary and Josi wound their way through the streets of dust and dung, headed for the Alexandrian Library. The local synagogue rabbi helped Mary and Josi enroll as student scholars with free passes to the great Library. When the boys were very small, the two young women left the care of Jesus and John to Elizabeth's nursemaid, Antiphony. Elizabeth often went to the market during the day while Mary and Josi headed for the Library. And once the boys were in school each morning, the two young women had even more time to lose themselves in the long rows of tables where librarians brought them scrolls from shelves that towered so high that thin, moveable ladders were needed to access them.

The Alexandrian Library was the intellectual center of the Western world. In older times, Alexandrians liked to joke that the Library held one book scroll for every citizen of the city. That was over half a million rolls of books. Many of these were lost in the great fire more than fifty years earlier when Julius Caesar held the city under siege. But replacements made by Queen Cleopatra and her Roman general and lover, Mark Antony, and later rich Roman patrons, helped restore much of its unique catalog of scrolls.

Mary and Josi liked to walk under the great portico, with its roof and its open-air sides filled with thick marble columns, and feel the power, grace, and quiet dignity of the place. The plaza around it was cleaned daily, so it smelled better than most places—of clean desert air or the scent of the great Sea, depending on the winds. They discovered that hunting for old book rolls was no easy job. A librarian had to help. He would guide Mary and Josi through the long halls and high rooms, with their shelves stacked tens of feet high with scrolls, to the rolled manuscripts,

all written by hand, that Mary and Josi wanted for the day.

Both young women knew Greek, the language of scholars throughout the Roman Empire. The Essenes on Mount Carmel had taught it to them. It was an unusual accomplishment among Jewish women. But it helped them study the many book rolls translated into Greek. And they planned on teaching their sons much of what they learned as the boys grew older.

Going to the large building became kind of a holiday for the two young women. They got out of the house and, more important, could use their Essene-trained minds.

Often they had dozens of book rolls all around them on the long marble table at which they were sitting. The papyrus scrolls, many of them new replacements, bore rich smells of an aromatic wood, earthy with just a hint of spice. As they studied, outside the windows covered with reed mats, often a few birds would chirp loudly, only to be frightened into silence when the famous Egyptian temple cats would stalk them.

"Josi!" Mary exclaimed one day. "Look at this one!"

"Another prophecy?" Josi asked.

Mary nodded and grinned.

"Haven't we found enough predictions of Jesus' life in our own Jewish scriptures?" Josi asked.

"You know it doesn't hurt to check everything," Mary told her. "If some prophet from another religion can predict Jesus' life, it just makes our own Hebrew prophets even more right."

Josi put her chin in her cupped hand. "Okay. Let's hear it. What religion are we listening to today?"

Mary bent over her book roll and peered at the beginning of it. "Zoroaster," she said. "That Persian religion."

She said it in a voice loud enough to carry to the next table, where a portly Egyptian gentleman heard. He looked strangely at these two women who were studying a religion even most learned men in his country didn't try to understand.

"This thing is called the Book of Zendavesta," Mary said more quietly. She lifted the scroll and peered at its fine print. "It says, 'A ruler of God shall be born of a virgin, and the wise astrologers of the Magi shall visit the baby.'"

Josi grinned. "It's you, completely. Not bad. And if you want to talk about wise astrologers, I've got something here that is almost as interesting."

She held up a bulky old book roll that smelled richly of ancient wood. "Within the rolls of this particular book," she said, "is an interesting theory on astrology

that claims we are getting further and further from accurate astrological dating. According to this," she paused dramatically, "Jesus was born in the star sign of Pisces."

"But he was born in early winter!" Mary exclaimed. "That's not Pisces' time of the year."

"That's just it," Josi answered. "According to this book, every two thousand years we grow further away from the correct procession of the constellations. This Marcus Lucanus, who wrote it, says that corrections were made long ago, but not more recently."

Mary paused. "Well, where in Pisces was Jesus born, then?"

"On the cusp," said Josi. "He's almost an Aries. He was born practically between the two signs."

An old, grey-haired Greek in a ragged toga slowly walked past them, carrying several book rolls under his arm. They waited for him to pass: they didn't dare mention Jesus' name loudly around others.

"I guess that would make sense," Mary finally said. "He acts like a Pisces. He's so sensitive and stubborn."

Josi nodded. "This roll has all kinds of mathematical proofs, too. And all kinds of drawings showing the stars and the world and how they used to be lined up and how they really are now. This roll says the stars move out of their orbits sometimes, Mary, even backward, as if they have a mind of their own."

Mary nodded. "Well, why not. Back and forth. How else did those stars come together to show the Magi where we were?"

"Oh that." Josi waved her hand. "That was just what they call a conjunction—Jupiter with another one or two greater stars. These things in the sky, they're always conjoining. By the way, have you and Joseph been, well, acting like these stars?"

Mary laughed and covered her blushing cheeks. "Josi! I'm going to ignore that." She shook her head. "Besides, that Jupiter conjunction happened long before Jesus' birth!"

"But it repeated itself two more times in less than a year!" Josi exclaimed. "Why couldn't it come back again?"

Mary sighed. "I wish one of the magi had stayed with us. There were so many things like that at the birth. It was beautiful. But kind of scary."

"I think it must be like that for all women their first time. You know, we're lucky that Elizabeth didn't die when she gave birth to John. A lot of older women do. She's really old. Even older than your husband, with whom you may or may

not be conjoining.”

Mary blushed again.

“Elizabeth was lucky,” said Josi. “And you. Even young women die giving birth.”

“Josi, hush. Don’t be so depressing. Elizabeth clearly is very thankful she is still around to raise her only child. And I’m thankful I get to raise Jesus. Especially after reading all these prophecies about what he’s going to become. How do you raise a King? I’m so glad he’s just a normal little boy right now. None of those special powers, yet, that some of the prophets predict.”

“Yeah,” said Josi. “But who knows when he might wave his hand and produce our bread for the day out of the thin air?” She leaned forward and stage whispered, “Wouldn’t that be exciting?”

Mary shook her head. “I like prophecies about what’s already happened, but not about the future.” She scooted closer to Josi and lowered her voice. “I’ve never told anyone, but when the angel visited me, and then Joseph, too, I felt so wondrous, but also scared. How can Jesus be so important? I’ll take him just as he is, Josi, right here and now in Alexandria. I’m afraid he won’t always be so human.”

Josi stood. “Let’s go home. Speaking of normal kids, both children must be awake and driving Elizabeth and Antiphany mad. Elizabeth is the most patient woman I’ve ever met. She is my role model for that. But goodness, she lets those kids run circles around her. Especially John. He’s the wildest little boy I’ve ever known.”

Mary smiled and rose, too. “And how many little boys have you known?”

“Oh, millions, I suppose,” said Josi, flipping her hand. “Well, maybe just Jesus and John. Don’t you think, though, it’s a good thing John likes to protect Jesus? John is so much bigger. But someday, I think, he may be the shorter of the two.”

“Really?” Mary asked. “But Elizabeth and I are about the same height.”

“Yes, but Zechariah was a short man. Aren’t your uncles and father tall?”

Mary nodded. They each carefully gathered up an armful of scrolls and started carrying them toward the librarian. When he saw them coming, he hurried toward them with one hand over his mouth: he was not used to anyone, let alone young women, bringing him the book rolls. Nervously, he took their bunches and laid them on a table near the shelves and the ladder where he would return them.

Mary sighed, “I hope my mother and father will have a chance to see Jesus, once we return to Nazareth.”

Josi shrugged. “Of course! They live nearby in Sepphoris, right?”

“Yes, but they’re so old! Even older than Elizabeth and Zechariah.” She frowned. “Too old, really, to be much fun for a young child.”

“The important thing is that they will love him. Surely he will feel that.”

Mary nodded firmly. “Just as all of us love him and John now.”

Josi looked at Mary admiringly. “Love is what’s important, isn’t it?”

Mary shrugged. “We could teach him all sorts of things, I suppose. How to be a king. How to be How to be a priest, or a rabbi.” Frown lines suddenly etched her young face. “But we still don’t know exactly what he’s supposed to become! But that doesn’t matter, not really. He still must learn how to love. Love is about the only thing we must teach him, along with a little discipline, and then send him to school for his scriptures.”

Josi grinned. “He does need the discipline. Jesus gets into everything.”

Mary shrugged. “I’m afraid he will do that all his life. He’ll probably be a rabble rouser when he becomes a man, getting everyone worked up.”

Mary led the way out through the great portico and down its granite steps. The Library was one of several buildings gathered around a central plaza, all together considered part of the Alexandrian Museum. A cool breeze blew down from the azure sky upon the women, rustling their robes, as the air began turning from the desert and started to rise from the Mediterranean Sea. Soon the keeper of the great lighthouse not many miles away would light the flame that he kept burning through every night, burning in front of the large curved-metal mirror at its top. Its beam would spread for thirty miles over the great waters, both beckoning and warning passing ships.

Mary and Josi continued thinking, Mary with unease and Josi admittedly with excitement, how both rowdy young boys might cause trouble someday. Josi figured this would happen especially when the two teamed up. Mary wondered, uneasy, if the angels who foreshadowed Jesus’ birth and proclaimed him to nearby shepherders would protect the boys in the future. especially whenever they were paired. A shiver ran through her.

Softly in the growing dark, only half-noticing all the busy sights and sounds of a great seaport city, they picked their way through the broad streets by the Museum complex, and then the narrower ones of large Jewish quarter. Quietly, their sandals slapped against the cobblestones until they came to their own home, where Elizabeth and Antiphany would have dinner waiting.

Chapter 5: Small-Town Kid

One hot, dry, Egyptian night bereft of even the slightest cooling breeze, Joseph had a dream. He had been tossing and turning on his reed mat beside Mary and Jesus. He fell into one more brief slumber and found himself dreaming, not sure whether he was awake or asleep, of a huge man on a throne. The towering figure smelled of rot and death. Then he fell forward, collapsing on the floor of his pavilion. His body splattered into a dark wave of liquid spreading in seven directions. Joseph awoke in a sweat, worried that perhaps God himself had somehow died. But then he remembered that the body had had a large “H” emblazoned on the front, just like in the dream of the Persian magi.

Not long after, news from Israel came to Alexandria that Herod the Great was dead. A few months later, Joseph and his small group discovered that Rome decided to divide Herod’s kingdom into several parts spread among his sons and his sister.

“Should we go back?” asked Mary as they all lay around their common table the next night, eating Egyptian bread mixed with bits of beef. Fish was the ever-present side dish in Alexandria. Sliced cucumbers lay on yet another plate, and everyone had glasses of both goat milk and sour wine.

“Young Herod Antipas now rules Galilee and the region,” said Joseph.

Elizabeth nodded her grey head and said, “And we don’t know how or why he survived Herod’s slaughter of his own family members. Perhaps this second Herod is ‘like father, like son,’ another murderous Jew who loves the Romans.”

“Will you return to Ein Karem?” James asked Elizabeth.

“As you know,” said the older woman, who was the eldest of the group, “Zechariah was followed to Mount Carmel by Herod’s men, where they came upon him near a spring on the mountain, questioned him, and then killed him because he would not reveal where John and I had gone. I don’t think it is safe to return to my own home.”

Mary reached her hand out to Elizabeth and placed it on her arm. “We’re so, so sorry, Aunt. Zechariah was a good man, a fine father in the line of descendants leading to the birth of John. We all will miss his gentle wisdom.”

Elizabeth nodded. The elder woman looked away, out the window, and took a deep breath. “We were both very old,” she said. “Now I will continue to raise John, the greatest gift I could have in my last years.”

“Let’s wait,” said Mary. She nodded quietly at the two young boys. “For both of them.”

And so the group of seven—Joseph’s family of three, Elizabeth’s of two—herself and John—and the two midwives, now nursemaids, Josi and Antiphany, stayed in Alexandria for a longer time. But it wasn’t too many months later that,

finally, they decided the boys needed to be raised in their own land. They also missed their Essene communities. But they were concerned, still, about Herod Antipas. So they decided to avoid their own homes at first and move to the large village of Capernaum on the northern shores of the Sea of Galilee. It was not far from Antipas' capitol at Tiberias, further west and south on the same shoreline; however, some wealthy Essenes who lived in Capernaum had invited them to "disappear" there, rather than return to where Herod the Great had sought them after the wise Persian magi had angered him by not returning to report on the whereabouts of the possible baby messiah.

Capernaum was a small but fast-growing town even then. It had a Roman tax collection post established only a few decades earlier, and it was near one of the great trade routes from Damascus and Tyre. The farmers south of it also owned some of the best-producing land in the whole Roman empire, and sent much of their wines, fruits, and vegetables through Capernaum to be delivered to other parts of Galilee and beyond to the Empire.

Here it was, unknown amid an expansive young town slowly becoming wealthy, that the boys Jesus and John learned to run, to catch bugs and let them go, and to play with the wooden rattles, spinning tops, hoops, and animals on wheels that Joseph and other fathers made for everyone's children. Young boys and girls played together on the streets and in their homes in their early years.

This was before the boys began formal training in Torah at five or six. Girls learned household work and sometimes healing arts while the boys were in school. After school and household chores, the street would erupt with slightly older children in play again before dinner. But by the age of ten, the boys were seriously involved in school and learning their fathers' trades, and the girls in household work, most of the day. A very small number of Jews, mostly Essenes, let their daughters be trained in scripture as well, but this was at home, mostly, or with the rare Essene teacher who might visit a home to train several girls along with the boys. Parents of Essene girls in training usually kept quiet about it, and non-Essene neighbors usually didn't complain and minded their own business, especially in the better-off, growing towns on trade routes like Capernaum where people had plenty of work and a little more money than in the countryside.

In these early years, John, big and strong, became a little leader in their own street's group of young boys and girls, and Jesus was his backup. Like any other children, they got along most of the time, argued occasionally, and then made up and played more. But at home, it was Jesus who helped John learn how to master the wooden toys that Joseph made so that John could show the other children. And Jesus was first to master Joseph's carpentry and stonemason tools under the protective eye of Joseph, and to show them to John.

Once John was old enough to feed himself and walk, Elizabeth's nursemaid,

Antiphany, returned to her family near Ein Karem and Bethlehem. As do all good parents and guardians, Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth, and Josi kept careful secret watch over the boys wherever they might be.

It was here in Capernaum that Jesus and John also quickly grew fond of the wonderful hills that suddenly fall from the wide blue skies to the rocky coast of the jewel-like Sea of Galilee. The Jordan River flowed through it, creating over sixty square miles of deep waters where tens of thousands of fish and other freshwater creatures lived. With big eyes, shuffling their bare feet in the sandy soil, Jesus and John would sit on low-lying rocks and watch the fishermen in their sturdy wood fishing boats come and go in small fleets.

And they would see the farmers carting their rich and abundant foods and flowers to the market from the nearby fertile plain of Gennesaret that flowed with abundant plant life. Traders and merchants from near and far sometimes would travel through the streets with their donkeys and even horses laden with goods to sell in the market, as well. People of many occupations and nations commingled on busy summer days. Romans, Greeks, and Persians often were among them, and a small group of Roman soldiers watched over the town.

Finally, when it was time to teach all the scriptures and other lessons to Jesus and John, when they were nine and ten, their parents and Josi decided it was safe to return home. Elizabeth longed to go home to her small farm near Ein Karem, especially as she knew others had been taking care of her land and animals and would give her ample food in return as payment. In addition, because of the importance of John according to scripture, they would give Elizabeth and her son small amounts of coin to help them buy the basics of what they needed—but not more, nothing extra, Elizabeth said, for both the scriptures and her own inclinations foretold that John would be raised in the wilderness as a child who knew only the bare necessities. Elizabeth had lived like that all her life with Zechariah before his death. Now, with John, she would continue.

Joseph wanted to return to Nazareth. Judith and the Essenes on Mount Carmel judged it a good move politically, for Herod Antipas, King of Galilee and Perea, was beginning to concentrate his awareness more on the Sea of Galilee area where he lived. Antipas still was not looking for John or Jesus. But the Essenes felt Jesus now would be safer if his family returned to Nazareth.

Besides, it was time for him to start serious formal studies for much of the day. Judy decided to move for a time to Sepphoris, only a few miles away, to teach Jesus. She would have been much more obvious—and a possible target of not only Herod Antipas but also the conservative Sanhedrin—had she moved to much smaller Capernaum. In Sepphoris, among a largely Hellenized liberal population of Jews, she could, in effect, disappear. This would be where she would teach Jesus. Each day, Joseph once again would take his tools on his donkey to Sepphoris to

work. And Jesus would go with him, help Joseph at times, but mostly train under Judy.

Returning to Nazareth was a big change for the family and for Josi, who now was considered a part of the family, too. But it was especially so for Jesus. At first, he hated it.

He was an alert and intelligent boy whose curiosity and reddish-brown hair had gained him notice by passing traders and Jewish travelers passing through Capernaum, where he, with John by his side, had plagued them with as many questions as they would allow.

In Nazareth, though, Jesus found little to see or do. His father, mother, Josi, John, and sometimes even Elizabeth, instead of accompanying him around the marketplace, the hills by the Sea of Galilee, and the seashore as they had done in Capernaum, no longer took him to new places. John and Elizabeth, of course, had returned to the wilderness. His father, though, now worked every day, all day, again, and his mother and Josi stayed home. At least he got to accompany Joseph to Sepphoris each day and return with him. Sometimes they talked, especially on the way home; at other times, especially early in the morning, they remained silent, drinking in the sunrise, the birds, and the farmers going to their fields.

“Why must you work so much now, Poppa?” Jesus asked one afternoon, after his studies with Judith were done. When he reached his father’s workplace, he had looked around for young boys his age, but none were visible. He skipped stones in the street for awhile, then returned to his father’s side where he picked up each of the tools and examined them carefully. He went out on the street again, walking to the limits of what his father would allow, which was several blocks, quietly looking in the alleys and people’s open front doorways at the rich homes.

Finally, frustrated, he came back once more to his father to see if he could get him to talk. “Must you work all the time?” Jesus asked. “The Essenes would support us. You could study instead.”

On that day, they were on the portico of a private house being built near the outskirts of Sepphoris. Joseph was pushing his wood planer along a raised timber to smooth it. Behind his ear was a chip of wood, the badge of his trade. The previous week, he had been shaping a stone pillar with chisels. In another month, he knew, the plan was for him and a group of others to lay decorative tiles throughout the floors of one of the new Roman public buildings.

At Jesus’ question, Joseph carefully put down his plane, lifted his foot up on a bench beside him, and laid his arm across his knee. “You must study,” said Joseph. “As much as you can. But I am a man who needs to work. I will not become a rabbi like you. And I will not sit idle. My namesake, the Joseph who is in our first book

of the Torah, Genesis, is my model. Do you remember his story?"

Jesus paused. "He had a multicolored coat. And he worked for Pharaoh in Egypt. He also helped start the Twelve Tribes of Israel. But the rest, I cannot remember it very well."

"Let me tell you his story," said Joseph.

Jesus smiled secretly within himself because he had caught his father on a day when he felt like speaking.

"He started," Joseph said, "as a boy with big dreams, probably because his mother encouraged him—a good thing, just like your mother encourages you."

Jesus nodded.

"But," said Joseph, "he also was a boy and a man who kept opening his mouth and getting into trouble."

"Like me?" asked Jesus.

"I hope not," Joseph answered. "No one taught him to be cautious. That coat was no help. It was made from expensive red and purple dyes, and his father gave no one else such a beautiful and expensive garment. All of his ten older half-brothers became jealous. They knew he was so smart and ambitious that their father liked him best. He made a big mistake in wearing it.

"Then when he was seventeen, Joseph slipped up again. He had two dreams that showed him he would be much more important and powerful than his brothers. And they became very mad. They talked behind his back, saying terrible things about him. Finally, they decided to kill him.

"But just before they did it, some merchants from far away were passing by. So the brothers decided to make some money and get rid of him all at the same time. They sold him into slavery, stripped off his beautiful coat, and covered it with blood to make it look like he had been killed. Maybe they even beat him.

"Joseph knew he had no choice. It was either die, be beaten and whipped by his new masters, or work as a slave. He chose slavery. However, he was so bright and energetic, much like you, Jesus, except maybe he opened his big mouth too much, that merchants eventually were able to sell him for very good money in Egypt to the captain of Pharaoh's guards. The man's name was Potiphar.

"Joseph worked so hard for Potiphar, and he was so smart, that Potiphar made Joseph the head of his household servants." Joseph shook his head. "But Joseph got in trouble again. Somehow, he attracted the attentions of Potiphar's wife. She liked him. Too much. Even though she was an Egyptian and he a Hebrew who could not even dine at the same table with her, she tried to seduce him. Joseph then made another mistake. Instead of merely avoiding her or thanking her but saying 'No,' he actually ran away from her."

“Was she wearing one of those really thin gowns the rich women in Egypt wear?”

Joseph looked at Jesus with one arched eyebrow. “You remember those from when we lived in Alexandria?”

Jesus nodded.

“Probably,” Joseph answered. “Now let me continue. “When he ran from her, Potiphar’s wife was surprised, hurt, and angry. To her it was a great insult. To get even, she accused him of raping her.

“The automatic sentence for such a crime was execution,” said Joseph. “But Captain Potiphar went to Pharaoh and told him, ‘My servant Joseph is the most honest and hardworking man I know, and my wife, whom I can’t control, already has had several other servants of ours put to death for raping her. Please do not kill him.’ Pharaoh replied, ‘I shall commute his sentence. But he is a slave. He must be punished.’ And so they put him in prison.

“And there his luck held. The warden of the jail put Jesus in charge of all other prisoners. He became well known especially for his ability to interpret dreams. After two years, Pharaoh himself had a strange dream, and a former prisoner remembered Jesus.

“Pharaoh said, ‘Bring this interpreter of dreams to me so that he may tell me about mine.’ Joseph came, confident and brash as ever, and predicted seven years of plentiful crop followed by the same number of bad years. Pharaoh liked the prediction so much that he freed Joseph and made him his second in command over all of Egypt, and married him off to the daughter, the father of whom was an Egyptian priest of the mysteries at the great temple in Heliopolis.”

“Did Joseph get into trouble again?” asked Jesus.

Joseph smiled. “This time he was very smart. He kept his mouth closed, married the priest’s daughter, and filled hundreds of granaries with wheat and barley for bread. Then when the famine came that he had predicted, he sold all the extra grain for bread, helping the Egyptians and other countries around them survive a terrible seven years.

“And so,” Joseph concluded, he became an emblem of the hardworking Jewish man. I am pleased to have been named after him.”

“And he even reconciled with his bad half-brothers,” Jesus said.

“You remember the story right,” said Joseph. “He brought them all to Egypt to live during the famine and many years after, helping them become rich and wise. And from Joseph, his half-brothers, and his younger full brother came the twelve tribes of Israel.”

Jesus sighed. “He had to learn patience,” he told his father. “God had planned

it all, so it all worked out and even made Israel a strong nation. Without Joseph and his Pharaoh, and later, Moses, we would not be a kingdom.”

“You have interpreted it as our rabbis do,” said Joseph, smiling. And also, with Joseph as our nation’s example, we Israelites work hard. For nothing comes without labor and purpose.”

“Do you like working here in Sepphoris?” Jesus asked.

“It is good work. Much variety. So much more than I could do in Nazareth, repairing walls and roofs all the time, and an occasional table for a widow. And the Romans and rich Jews here pay well.”

Then he looked carefully at Jesus. “I talk more when I am with you,” he said. “Maybe too much. Do you like living here in Nazareth and Israel?”

Jesus shook his head. “Egypt was better. I miss Cousin John and my other friends.” Jesus half hoped his father would put down his plane right there and come with him.

Joseph shook his head. “We have just moved here. You can make friends any time you want.”

Now Jesus looked around them. Seeing no one nearby, he said, “Is there no gold left from the Magi?”

Joseph shrugged. “We gave it all to the Essenes to handle for us. That is the right thing. We have travelled more than most people ever do, and have lived in three places already, four if you count Elizabeth and John’s home. We may already have spent what the Magi gave us.”

“Are we poor, then?” Jesus asked.

Joseph smiled, stood, and stretched. “We are both poor and rich, son.”

Jesus frowned.

“We live a simple life,” explained Joseph. “We are almost like Joseph the slave, for we live plainly but with plentiful resources to help us. We have a slightly larger home than most, more books, more herbs for our health. Otherwise, we live much like others. Most people in Israel are poor.”

“Not the rich Jews here in Sepphoris.”

“True,” said Joseph. “And not the rich Israelites in Jerusalem or Alexandria. But it is said, ‘Whoever works his land will have plenty of bread.’ And this” —he spread his hands around the half-built portico— “is my portion of land this week.”

“And the LORD is he who gives us the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant with Israel,” Jesus replied.

Joseph nodded. “You are learning your Torah well.”

“Judith is such a good teacher!” Jesus exclaimed. “I am glad to be taking lessons from her again!”

“She is the best Essene rabbi,” Joseph said. “Better than most rabbis anywhere.” He looked around them. Both knew they could not talk about a woman rabbi, for the other important Jewish groups—Sadducees, Pharisees, and Samaritans—allowed only men. And no woman could go into the inner part of the Temple in Jerusalem. The women who led Sabbath services usually were Essenes, and they did so entirely in secret, as on Mount Carmel.

“I told her about my cape.” Jesus had a fine wool covering for cold weather made from several shades of white, gray, and black threads. In Nazareth, his cloak had gained a reputation for being magical. Young children who had been sick got well more quickly, their mothers said, after handling Jesus’ mantle.

Jesus wandered away to stand by the road as Joseph finished his work for the day. He thought about the lucky charm of the cloak. It was one of the few unusual things about Jesus that, if anything could, might be thought of as beyond normal.

“It is not very important,” Judith had told them all when she visited Nazareth one weekend. Her hair had become entirely grey by this time, and the lines on her face had grown longer as she lay at table with them to break bread. She wore plain old robes so no one would notice her, just another old woman, and her robes smelled slightly of the donkey she had ridden there.

“Healers,” she told them, “long have considered the garment of an exceedingly healthy man to aid in curing sickness.”

“But it’s something!” Josi exclaimed. Josi and Mary’s eyes both grew wide as they waited for Judith’s reply.

Judith bent her head respectfully. She was older even than Joseph by several years, but she treated everyone she met with honor. “Yes,” she answered, “it is. It may mean he is a natural-born healer. He may have the gift of laying hands on people to cure them.”

Josi shuddered excitedly. Mary and Joseph simply looked at each other, Mary with an “I told you so” spark in her eye, Joseph with tentative acceptance.

“If you are thinking this proves he is a messiah,” Judith said, “don’t count on it.”

Josi looked down. Joseph nodded. Mary sighed and grew a wrinkle between her eyebrows.

Judith had then looked out through the door to the street where Jesus was playing with his wooden toys. “There will be other proofs,” she said softly. “They will come later.”

As Jesus grew into his tenth year, another great change began. It confused him no end. Mary and Joseph were becoming much closer to each other in ways he did not understand.

It started one spring evening when Jesus was off playing with other children near the synagogue and Josi was away in Jerusalem for several days, visiting her cousin. Mary had just finished cleaning up after their meal of fish, leeks, and millet.

She and Joseph were standing quietly in front of their home of stones that Joseph had quarried from nearby rocks in the cliffs and hills of the village. He had built onto it so that now it was six rooms, twice as large as when Mary first came there to live. The two of them now looked out over the hilly village with its steep cliffs. Behind them, the goatskin door was flapping in the breeze that cooled their faces. The wind gusted against the underside of the reeds in the roof, gently rattling them as it brought the mixed smells of the village and nearby farms to them.

Joseph put his arm quietly around Mary's waist. He had been holding Mary like this for several years now, though they still did not have a normal marriage relationship. It was unusual for a man and woman to live together without dampening their bed; yet they did so. Essenes, unlike other Jews except those of advanced age, found such relationships acceptable. And both had become so used to the idea of chastity that they would not have known how to change their situation during the early years of their marriage even if they had wanted to.

However, their gradually had shown more physical affection toward each other as they grew ever closer. They touched each other's arms, gave each other the kiss and hug of peace before sleeping, and on cold nights snuggled close together under their wool bedding.

For several minutes, now, Joseph left his arm around Mary's waist. He could feel her warmth beneath her robe. Then, unexpectedly, he placed his large and worn carpenter's hand on the spine of her back.

"Mary," he said. "The scribe of the Essenes was passing through the village today. He left a message. The elders and Judy among them have been reading the stars concerning our family. The elders have decided that we may pursue a normal married life."

She jerked her around and looked at him with surprise.

He nodded. "They said it must be in our hearts first, though, to do this thing."

She blushed from the top of her forehead to her leather-wrapped toes.

He looked away quickly. "It is in my heart, my dearest one," he said. "But only if it is in yours, too."

She did not answer him. But suddenly she found herself, almost without her

own volition, moving an inch closer to Joseph, enough to press herself against him. His breath felt hot.

He looked at her again. She was gazing off into the hills that began at the end of their street.

Quietly, she found herself saying, "It is in my heart, Joseph. I am ready. But I am afraid."

He watched her profile. Her chin was sharp and strong, her skin like that of a young olive. She had always been beautiful. She soon would be middle-aged by Jewish standards. But she had borne only one child, and Josi had always been there to help her with the hard work of keeping a family. Because of these advantages, she looked years younger than she was, still in the ripeness of early womanhood.

"I will help you," he said.

"Come inside," she answered. Quickly turning, she went behind the goat skin.

His heart began beating fast. He followed her. She was just inside the doorway, waiting. He could not understand the look in her eyes. "What is it you want, my dear one?" he asked. "I am not afraid, either to help you with this or to wait ten more years if you wish me to."

"I wanted you to come inside," she answered. Quickly she stretched up and kissed his mouth. Then she rested her head on his chest.

He felt the kiss down to his toes. He was a man still in full bloom, if now in his forties. And he had not been kissed in this manner for many years. He lifted her chin and gently returned the kiss, but longer.

She clung to him tightly. "My husband, aren't you afraid it will prove too difficult for you?"

He almost laughed. The proof against this was, that very moment, stirring below. "Moses died at 120 years of age," he told her. He smiled. "Yet he was still able to join with his dark Cushite woman. You shall be my woman of light, and I shall be your Moses."

She blushed deeply again. "You had better give me a few more days at least," she said. Her voice was husky. "I want to be completely ready."

He stroked her long, dark hair, which had fallen loose from her linen head cloth. "We have weeks," he told her. "Months. I will wait."

"Help me prepare," she answered. She jerkily lifted her lips to his mouth once more. The kiss brought forth physical feelings in her that she had never allowed before. She fought her automatic impulse to push the feelings away. She concentrated instead on her lips and the wonderful sensations that flowed from them throughout her, rising and stirring.

She finally broke from their embrace with a gasp. "It is more than I had supposed," she said, trying to catch her breath. She eyes were wide.

"But it is good," he said.

She raised one eyebrow and gave him an arch look. "You seem to know what you're doing," she told him.

"I have been a father before, many years ago, it now seems."

Mary straightened her linen head cloth and began aimlessly brushing at her robe. "Well, we can continue tomorrow evening when Jesus is out."

He watched her fondly.

"I think I will like this," she told him, giving him a quick look.

Then she hurried to the back rooms, blushing once again.

Jesus' two older half-brothers, James and Jose, were another source of confusion for Jesus. They continued to live with Joseph's relatives in Sepphoris. Jesus wondered at the fact that his father had already raised two boys, now men, with a woman Jesus never had met. How could this be, he wondered? What had this earlier family been like? Were his brothers anything at all like him?

He only saw them some weekends, or occasionally at his father's work locations. He liked them well enough. And thankfully, he thought, they treated him like a normal little brother to whom they tried to explain the ways of the world.

They even taught him several songs that he'd listened to when people sang at celebrations such as marriages. To Jesus' surprise, they knew all the words of stanzas he'd never even heard of before, including a few that made them grin at each other. Jesus suspected these parts had something to do with what happened after a couple was done with the ceremony.

Sepphoris itself, during the years when Jesus and his family stayed in Egypt and then Capernaum, grown from the ruins that the Romans had made of it—because it revolted—into a new city that sat like a shining white jewel on the crown of a hill. It was surrounded by a fortified wall and had two major Roman highways near it, Via Maris and Acre-Tiberias. Its central thoroughfare was paved with columns lining it on either side. A theater was being built, and artists had been brought in from Jerusalem and as far away as Rome to create colorful tiled mosaics large and small, public and private in many a street and home.

With Roman money and the wealth of the Jewish upper and middle classes pouring into it, the city was making the countryside around it more economically successful, too. Little Nazareth, even, was gaining new households, and more

farmers than ever were selling their goods in the city's busy markets.

From the city, on top of the flat roofs of all of its houses—a majority of these homes two and even three stories high with baths on the first level instead of barns—everyone looked out upon the green valley with its small towns of Nazareth and Cana, wooded areas on steep watersheds and by streams, and even smaller villages and farmsteads. On the outskirts of Sepphoris in the lower city, less expensive homes and even a few farmsteads gathered around dustier, narrower streets, but even here the homes looked cleaner and better built.

In Sepphoris, Jesus liked to ask James and Jose questions when their father wasn't around, such as "Why do the women in Sepphoris wear makeup, not just the Roman ones but the fancy Jewish ladies, too?" and "Have you ever been in a fight?" Now that Jesus was ten, they were in their early twenties, and once they learned Jesus would not repeat what they said to Joseph, they would answer him honestly. In this way, Jesus gained something of a worldly education about not just the Romans in Sepphoris but also the often-Hellenized Jews who made up the great majority of its population and seemed to believe, Jesus thought, that they were better than other Jews.

But now—now, Jesus thought, shaking his head—he was about to become a big brother. His whole world shifted slightly into another sphere that he had not expected. His mother was pregnant. How, he wondered, should he treat a little baby? How would his parents treat him with a helpless baby in the house? Babies were the most important members of a household, his poppa had taught him. And his momma cooed and bent over every little baby she met in every marketplace. Would the two of them not have time for him anymore?

The change for Joseph and Mary was great. They now had, in reality, what they only had in name before—a union of two people in a marriage of both spirit and flesh.

But Jesus the change was even greater. And at first he wasn't quite sure what happened. He had a dawning realization that something was up between his parents. They were giving each other looks that he could no longer interpret. They touched each other a little more, especially when they thought he wasn't looking. And they sometimes acted, well, *weird*.

He even started feeling a bit like an outsider. Before Mary and Joseph had come together in the flesh, Jesus grew up feeling he and they were all equal friends, along with Josi, even if he had to obey them sometimes. But they all had their jobs to do. His job was to grow up, share the work, and to learn.

But suddenly, in a swift change, sometimes he found himself and Josi being sent on long errands right after supper. When the two would return, his momma and poppa seemed distant from him, as if they shared a secret.

He didn't like that.

Suddenly he also had his own separate place to sleep. Formerly, everyone had slept together in the sleeping room. They had extra rooms, now, where they stored their belongings. Suddenly, now, Josi moved into one of them, and he into another. Alone. On some nights he felt a little lonely, but he didn't mind it so much, as he could read late by lamplight if he wanted. But still, he wondered why.

Of course, his mother explained it. "Your father and I are taking up a regular way of marriage, just like most married people do, my son."

That didn't make his uneasiness any better. Everything around him was changing, first the move back to a humble village when before they had lived in Alexandria, one of the great cities of the Roman Empire. Second, Cousin John was no longer his constant buddy. Third, his training in scripture began in earnest. With Mary's words, he knew her news was at the center of this latest change.

He went to Josi for some answers. One evening his parents were out in front of the house, watching the stars rise. He and Josi still were lying around the dinner table. He turned to her.

"My momma said she and Papa are to have a regular marriage," he told Josi.

She nodded. Mary already had filled her in. She and Josi had gently and thoroughly discussed how she felt about it, and what preparations she might want to make. Now, watching Jesus' face, Josi was careful not to smile but instead just listen to him.

Jesus asked, "Does that have something to do with our bodies, like in the Song of Songs?" He was too embarrassed to ask about sex, but he had learned the basics from James and Jose in Sepphoris, and from jokes and stories repeated on the streets where he and John had played in Alexandria. And, just as with the other Books of the Ketuvim, or "Writings" — the third of the three books in the Jewish Bible, he'd read the Song of Songs. He knew supposedly it was written by King Solomon about the love of God, but it gave clear directions for what happened between a man and a woman. He'd even secretly read it a second time.

"Yes. You are right," she said.

"This means babies, is this not true?" he asked.

Josi nodded. "Well, one baby. At a time. Usually." She looked down at the table in front of them.

"How is a baby made?" he asked.

Josi blushed. "I am not married, Jesus. I do not understand these things."

"But you're a midwife, are you not?"

Josi stuck her lips out in thought. "What did your poppa tell you?"

Jesus shrugged. "He has told me to watch the beasts of the field, and when I come of age, he will tell me how it is with a husband and wife."

Josi sighed. "Then you must wait as your poppa has told you." She stood and went to a shelf where she kept her sewing. She sat down again, not looking at him, and began to sew a rip in one of Joseph's work shirts.

Jesus rose, frustrated. "Our rabbis tell us we must know everything in our bible," he said. "But they don't explain Song of Songs. I should go to the Temple in Jerusalem, gather all the boys together, and we could all tell the high priest to explain these facts of life!"

Josi stopped, pale of face, and stared at him. "The Jerusalem Temple? You wouldn't dare!" she exclaimed.

Jesus kicked his sandaled toe against the floor. "I am joking," he said. "But Josi, is the Song of Songs accurate?" He knew well that both she and his mother, having been raised as educated Essene women on Mount Carmel, had read the scriptures, too, unlike most Jewish women.

Josi blushed. "Yes," she said, "as far as they go. If you understand metaphors."

Jesus saw her face go red. That and her words about knowing the metaphorical meanings was answer enough. He wondered about the exact mechanics, but decided probing further would get him nowhere.

"No going to Jerusalem about this!" Josi repeated. "Remember, we do not want anyone to notice us."

"I shall abstain from what is surely an important speech on this subject," he said, straight-faced.

Josi shook her head. "Do you talk like this with such humor to others?" she asked.

"Only you. And Cousin John. You're my friends."

Josi nodded. She felt surprisingly pleased that Jesus considered her a buddy of sorts. She hid her smile. "Oh my," she said, "Such a son. I guess I won't tell your mother."

Jesus shrugged, relaxed a little, and then lit an oil lamp for them. He picked up a book roll he had brought from his room. In addition to the Laws Judith taught him in Sepphoris, they also were reading the prophets and the various commentaries by other ancient Hebrews on the holy books. Sometimes he brought the rolls home to read them to his parents and Josi to receive their comments.

However, sometimes these studies left him with more questions than answers. On too many occasions, the scrolls suggested secrets more obscure than what his momma and poppa were sharing. That secret, at least, would lead to something he

could touch and feel—a baby, he hoped.

But his studies occasionally made him feel a vague unease in his chest and stomach. It would then gnaw at him. The histories of Moses and Joshua, for example, excited him as if he had really been there.

After reading these stories, for a brief hour or two he would feel ancient, as if he really were there in those beginning times of the flight from Egypt and the years after it, and he had suddenly jumped forward into a future that had become strange and much more modern, part of a new and advanced Roman Empire and traders from lands far away. His home, his parents and Josi, and all of Nazareth would then feel oddly out of place to him, as if ancient Egypt and Old Palestine were the only true homes.

The prophets were another source of disturbance to him. They made him grow restless and impatient, as if he were on the edge of knowing the whole truth of his life but somehow lacked the key to unlock the final door.

The prophets' predictions of a future messiah especially did this to him. Strangely, nobody would talk with him about this idea of a messiah. Judith told him, "Someday we will discuss this further." His parents and Josi kept silent, or told him Judith knew more about that. And his older brothers, James and Jose, would just give him blank looks as if to say, "Why are you bothering us with all this scripture stuff?" They were workmen, now, with little interest in becoming a rabbi like he would be.

When he and John had travelled the streets of Nazareth and were the leaders of the children on their block, they all had argued endlessly about the messiah. Sometimes they even played "messiah," which meant being a conquering king and slaying all their enemies around them with swords made of sticks. They couldn't agree on whether the leader of the messiah group was a king, a warrior, a high priest, or all three, so each time their playacting was different. But they liked pretend fighting, so eventually a war always was involved.

One night he even had a dream. Moses and Joshua, both with white beards down to their waists as in the old stories, stood arm in arm, with a much younger man sporting a short dark beard and long hair. The younger one had a drop of blood in the palm of each hand, and a circlet of red gemstones around his forehead. All three wore long robes so brilliant they shone like the sun behind pale clouds. Above was a wide purple sky. They all turned to him and smiled at him so radiantly that he awoke with a start, and a glow of happiness and warmth washing through him. Had he, he wondered, seen the messiah?

The next time he went to Judith's small house in Sepphoris, he spoke to her about it. Both were bent over the old scrolls, studying in the light of the sun streaming in through the open window that looked out upon her walled garden.

“Teacher,” he asked, “Rabbi?” This was her title of respect. He could never say it around non-Essenes, for Jewish women who read scripture, let alone held rabbinical office, were not normally allowed. Judith, though, as all Essenes knew, was more capable than most of the exclusively male rabbis throughout all lands in explaining the Laws and the prophets. If she had been born a man, his parents liked to tell him, she might have become Israel’s greatest Doctor of the Law.

“I dreamed, he said, “that I saw three men, maybe Moses, Joshua, and a younger prophet. They smiled at me.

“Who was the younger prophet?” Judith asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe the messiah?”

“Why do you call him that?” asked Judith.

Jesus shrugged. “Maybe a feeling?”

“And how did the dream make you feel?”

Jesus looked at the floor in front of him. Then he looked up at her. “Wonderful.” He described it to her.

Finally, she said, “It is a dream to remember. “Keep it close to your heart, and someday you will know what it means.”

But Jesus didn’t want to end the conversation there. “Who is the messiah?” he asked her. “Will he really come soon?”

Judith’s kind old face smiled at him. Most of her hair now was white, but her slender frame still was upright and her skin yet looked like a young woman’s.

“Is this what your friends say, that the messiah comes soon?” she asked.

Jesus nodded. “In Alexandria, yes. Even here. Some of them say the messiah is already here. Some say he is the High Priest in Jerusalem. Others say he is a man who hides in the hills and is preparing an army to throw the Romans out of our lands!”

“Do you believe these stories, Jesus?” she asked. She picked up the hot drink before her. Mary sent roasted barley with Jesus once a week, which she knew the older woman enjoyed with a bit of honey.

Jesus shook his head. “I do not know what to believe, Teacher. I—” he suddenly looked away and through the open window to the green hills beyond. The sun shone so brightly on them that leaves glittered as if they were small mirrors. The scents of Sepphoris—a blend of meat and vegetables on cook fires, sweet wines, and women’s perfumes—drifted through the air.

Judy leaned over and put her hand on his. “You are confused,” she said.

Jesus frowned. He raised his hand in the air as if he were a scholar making a point. “I *feel* like he is alive. I get excited when I think about him. But then I get

scared. And I *think* I should know who he is. But then I don't *want* to know him. It gets dark, Teacher, and—"

He put his head down and stared into his lap. The day room suddenly blurred in his vision as tears welled out of his eyes. He wiped the tears and fiercely willed them to stop.

"Relax, child," Judy said. She patted his hand. The wind rustled the reeds in the roof over her head, and a cool breeze came in the window and touched her face. "When you are older," she said, "you will understand why you feel this way."

Jesus looked up stubbornly. "Will I understand who the messiah is?" he asked.

"You will," she answered. "What are the stages of the Teacher as given by our sages?"

Jesus nodded. "Five years old, memorize Scripture. At ten, Torah. Fifteen, interpretate meanings. At twenty, find work. Thirty, teach."

Judith nodded. "We Galileans are among the most educated Jews in the world. Many of us know two or three languages. Most of us have studied scripture from the age of five or six. I promise you, Jesus, that you will learn answers to your questions about the messiah by the time you are twenty." She lifted her hand toward her shelves of book rolls. "Now, let us study. I will let you choose, today."

He immediately went to her library and took up a scroll. "Help me learn the Laws some more," he said to her. Then he added, more softly, "Teacher."

Judy took the papyrus from him. Through the door, only half-covered by its goat skin, she could hear younger children yelling and calling to each other in the street.

"Have you memorized this third section, yet?" she asked.

"Almost." He began reciting.

Judy had quickly learned in their daily sessions that even as a ten-year old, the boy possessed an unusually excellent memory. He could not, like a very few scribes and other men of learning, read a book roll once and recite it perfectly from memory. However, she had noticed that by the third time he had looked over a book carefully and understood its meaning, he could remember most of it. By the fourth or fifth time, he could repeat it exactly.

She thus varied her lessons, even at his youthful age when he should be memorizing Torah. He already had most of it in mind. So she also gave him more of the Laws, the Prophets, and of the Ketuvim or miscellaneous Writings that were not yet part of the Hebrew Bible but likely would be, someday. Like many other top rabbis in Galilee—a region of learned scholars even more so than Jerusalem itself—she also had an almost encyclopedic knowledge of the oral commentaries from several centuries of famous and scholarly teachers.

She taught him so much that one time he looked at her with a smile and said, “What if my head bursts, Teacher?” She answered, “then we will put a bag on it so all that knowledge stays in your hair.”

He also was learning languages. He could speak and write well in the everyday Aramaic all Jews spoke. He also knew classical Hebrew. Some days she taught him Greek; on others, she exposed him to High Egyptian, Persian, even some Sanskrit from faraway India.

As Jesus now recited from the Hebrew Laws, she nodded her head and closed her eyes, rocking slightly back and forth on the thick mat in her home that Josi had made for her lessons with Jesus. She listened to his voice fill the day room as he recited the musical sounds. She had so many plans for this child whom she had been chosen to teach—whom she had, in fact, helped bring into the world by training the twelve young girls for so many years.

Not all of her plans had to do with languages and laws, either. She knew he had to learn methods of discovering and practicing inner disciplines—the geography of the Spirit—much more than she alone could ever show him. She hoped to send him back to Egypt for more training, perhaps to Persia—even to India, where she herself once had journeyed for several years, visiting a young prince and his wives and studying under several very old wise men and women. So much depended, she thought, on the politics of the time, the Romans who so controlled them, and how safe the roads would be.

When Jesus finished, she looked carefully in his face and saw that he was content. She was very aware that one wrong decision on her part could lead him to death by sword or worse in the next several years. That thought made her lose her normal calmness and her hands shook a little as she walked Jesus to her door. They gave each other the kiss of peace and a hug, then he was walking down the street to find his father. And she retreated to the rooftop of her home, where she sat quietly on a wooden bench, facing the stars and the hills, and worked to find her center once again.

Chapter 6: Meeting the High Priests

Jesus was in an agony of suspense, waiting in the family room while his mother and Josi were having his little brother or sister in Joseph and Mary's bedroom. Each hour felt like a day as the sun slanting in from their front door took months, it seemed, to move across the floor. Flies buzzed so slowly he could have caught each one in slow motion; the scents of donkey, hay, and grass drifted in and out so leisurely they were nearly visible; dust sat suspended in midair. He prayed for his mother maybe a hundred thousand times. Then, finally, he heard it: a muffled little cry, so tiny and defenseless it only could come from a miniature human being. At first it scared him. But then he found himself grinning. The sound was just like that of a little, red-faced baby down the street that was always hungry.

Many weeks before his new baby brother was born, Jesus had worked out in his head most of what he called the Song of Songs thing. Between his older brothers' comments to each other, what few insights Josi would give him, and the metaphorical words of the Song of Songs, he knew the mechanics of how his new brother first came to be. There were details yet to figure out. He knew, for example, that Mary's stomach had slowly swollen with child, but he did not understand why this had to take nine months. Nor did he quite understand how the sexual parts met or fit. But he'd observed the basics happening in some sheep from a distance.

At the first sound of the baby, his father went into the bedroom without a glance at Jesus. Many endless minutes later he came out again, smiling. "You have a brother now, Son."

Jesus jumped up. "Can I see him, Poppa!"

Joseph nodded. "Yes. It is your turn."

Jesus never had doubted it would be anything but a brother. Of course, he had told himself, a sister would be okay, too. But he wanted someone with whom he could grow up together in the streets of Nazareth, running the blocks and controlling the playing like he had with Cousin John in Alexandria.

He rushed to the doorway.

"Slow down!" Joseph put his large carpenter's hand on his son's chest.

Jesus slowly slipped through the goatskin door cover and stood inside.

His momma looked pale. The other women were walking about the room, busy with various jobs. They all had happy, relaxed faces. His mother saw him and beamed. "Jesus," she said, "you must come here and see!"

When he reached her bedside, she held her hand out and grabbed his. "Look,

Jesus." She squeezed his fingers. Meet Simon, your new brother!"

Jesus craned his neck. On the other side of his mother's blanket-covered body was a midget bundle of swaddling clothes fastened by bands. At the top of the bundle was a little wrinkled face. Somehow it —he, Simon —was glowing. Jesus couldn't really see light, but he could feel it: Simon was a bonfire of great beauty. Did all babies come into life so brightly, he wondered?

Jesus' eyes watered with tears instantly. He stared at the tiny thing. Suddenly he realized it was too small and tightly wrapped to play with.

Without taking his eyes off Simon, he asked, slowly, "When can he get out of those wraps, Momma?"

"Not for a while, Son."

"May I— can I— touch him?"

"Maybe tomorrow. But first you must wash your hands." She lifted her hand to his cheek.

"Can he talk?" The question just tumbled out of him. He had already been told his brother wouldn't be able to say anything for a long time. But maybe, he thought, he could learn simple words like "food" and "play."

The women around the room smiled and glanced at Mary. "Not yet," she said.

"He is beautiful, Momma." Suddenly he turned his face into his mother's hand, which now was resting on his cheek, and he began to cry.

He stopped crying abruptly. "I will wash my hands very well and then I will hold him tomorrow."

"You can touch him," Mary repeated. Her own eyes began to brim with tears. "In several weeks we will help you hold him, too."

"It's time to go," Josi told him gently. "Come." She put her hands on his shoulders.

With one last glance at his new brother, Simon, and his mother, he let Josi guide him out. As he left, suddenly Mary, Josi, and the two other Essene midwives in the room began to sing. Jesus recognized it as perhaps the oldest song in the Book of Exodus that he had heard many times. He realized that here, now, his mother, Josi, and the other two women were using it as a celebration of the birth of Simon.

I will sing to the Lord, who is our most highly exalted.

Pharaoh's horses and drivers the Lord hurled into the sea.

Pharaoh's chariots and officers the Lord drowned in the Red Sea.

The deep waters have covered them; they sank to the depths like a stone.

Several weeks later, lying in his straw-mat bed, a cicada chirruping outside, he realized that his brother was never going to grow up. Jesus snorted, breathing in the smell of camel dung that some trader had left in the street. He licked his lips, tasting the fresh grapes that had been their dessert. Everyone, he thought, kept telling him Simon would not be old enough for them to play together for a very long time. And his idea of the two of them running in the street, he'd discovered, was ridiculous. "Maybe when the priests declare you a man, Simon may be able to keep up with you when you walk fast," Josi finally told him, her face quite serious." That was when Jesus gave up. Simon was great. But he'd never be a Cousin John to him.

But that night, he dreamed that his new brother had, himself, become a man. He and Jesus both had beards, and they were walking side by side with other men of several ages, some with facial hair and others clean shaven, and women of varying ages were among them as well, two of whom looked like his mother and Josi, but with graying hair and lines on their faces. They all were smiling as they walked, and singing—an old Hebrew song of sadness that somehow, through their voices and harmonies, brought great joy and strength to them.

In the dream, off to their left was a sea, and along the shore were men and women setting out to fish or preparing boats with large nets dripping with water. All around them was the smell of algae and bait, and the sounds of men and women talking about their work. This was what Jesus remembered when he woke up—the scent of the sea and of seaweed, and ten-foot tall piles of fresh sardines on a beach by the Sea of Galilee.

Soon, except for the presence of his brother, his life settled back into the routine of what it had been before.

But through the next months as he studied, he began to feel frustrated. Whereas before, he had felt confusion at certain passages in the prophets and Laws, now he felt annoyance. And when it came to the daily Laws for living, he felt anger.

"Why can't they explain this better!" he suddenly yelled at his book roll in Judith's home. He stirred restlessly back and forth on the thick mat on the floor beneath him, feeling the hard floor through the cushion as he rocked. Freshly baked rye bread, rough and unsweet, lay between them, along with raisins to sweeten it. She was at her own slightly raised platform, sitting in a shaft of sunlight, both of which she needed in order to keep her bones warm and above the drafts on her cold tile floor.

She looked at him sharply. Then her face softened. "What is the problem, Jesus?"

He flushed. "I'm sorry. But all they do is tell me what I can't do! I can't eat this; I can't drink that. I can't walk more than half a mile on the Sabbath or start a campfire and cook. I can't do anything! And I have to start obeying these Laws to the exact letter when I'm thirteen!"

Judith looked at her pupil shrewdly. There was no shadow of hair on his chin, yet. But the boy's voice was getting deeper.

"You are becoming a man," she said to him.

Jesus stared at her, open-mouthed. "I'm—what?" His voice cracked.

"Men become angry at these laws," she said. "Boys do not. Your voice is changing. Soon you'll have hair on your chest."

Jesus blushed.

Judith nodded. "It is time for your parents to take you to the Temple. You cannot be welcomed officially into manhood, yet. That is for the priests to do later next year after you turn thirteen. But at least you can go to Jerusalem this year for Passover."

Then her face looked off in the distance. "You will talk with the rabbi there," she continued. "Maybe they can help you understand why the Laws are important."

The Temple in Jerusalem was the visible reflection of the mighty Laws of the Hebrews. Herod the Great had started the building of the Second Temple some twenty-five years earlier, long before Jesus was born, and it was rumored that it might take another two decades to finish. Even incomplete, though, it was an intricate and dazzling set of structures of smooth white stone and carefully beveled granite walls and gates surrounding plazas for several types of worshippers, even foreign Gentiles. Incense wafted up constantly and, from their enclosures, doves cooed and goats bleated from their enclosures where they waited to be sacrificed.

This new Temple was more beautiful, said everyone, than even the long ago First Temple built by King David's son King Solomon a thousand years earlier, though they knew this only from descriptions of it in scriptures. And at that time, other small temples allowed animal sacrifices to Yahweh for another several hundred years until, later, the Jerusalem Temple became the only place for such fleshly offerings to God. Just a short time after, the Babylonians swept in, destroying the Great Temple of Solomon and taking many thousands of Israelites into slavery to Babylon itself.

When Jesus and his family first entered through the outer gate beneath the huge roofed and pillared walkway, he was blinded in the wide courtyard by a bright light. It was early morning and the sun was reflecting right into his eyes

from the shimmering golden panels of a great bronze gate facing eastward.

Joseph, Mary, and Josi walked across the courtyard toward this gate, so he followed. He craned his head back as his eyes followed the walls of the Temple up and up to the great roof whose sharp slopes seemed to cleave the sky itself. The building was as high as it was long, and its length stretched further than the center street of most small villages in the hills.

“You may meet with the priests inside,” Joseph said.

They went through the huge, gleaming, gold-covered opening. Inside was the spacious Women’s Court where no foreigners could go.

The family made offerings. Then Joseph left Jesus with a rabbi who would answer Jesus’ questions and instruct him in the Laws during the Passover days. Jesus would receive his lessons each day when he was free from his few family obligations.

He enjoyed this instruction. He and his rabbi lay on two of many benches in the Temple itself where many priests and students lay and debated points of the Law there in the open. Jesus’ particular teacher, an old man with a long grey beard who smelled of onions but seemed to Jesus very bright, was more thoroughly versed in matters of the Law than Judith, for he was able to give Hebrew reasons for following the Laws. These reasons had been developed over many hundreds of years by the learned men of the Hebrews in many countries.

Yet still Jesus was dissatisfied. He began offering reasons of his own, based on what he had read of Moses and, after him, the prophets.

His arguments, though unusual because they didn’t follow normal methods of explanation, were logical.

“Are you an Essene?” the rabbi finally asked.

Jesus shook his head. Technically he was not, for he had never been officially taken into the Essene community. Nor did he want to tell the rabbi that his parents were Essenes. Here in Jerusalem, among the Pharisee and Sadducee priests who controlled the Temple, Essenes were disliked. Many Essenes lived here in their own community in the southwest corner of the city on Mount Zion, and a few even were on the Sanhedrin ruling body of Jewish Law and religion. But his teacher here at the Temple was a Pharisee.

The rabbi kept staring at Jesus and stroking his beard, head on one side. Finally Jesus said, “An Essene woman sometimes teaches me.”

The Temple rabbi nodded. “Aha! No wonder.” He fingered his mustache. “Your explanations of the laws are too preachy. They sound as if you yourself were a prophet. Don’t be so big-headed, boy. Depend on the traditional teachings. Does this Essene woman encourage you to ignore the traditions?”

Jesus shook his head stubbornly. "Never, Rabbi."

"Hmm." The teacher tapped the bench beneath him. "Then it is your own weakness? Do you love the prophets so much that you would sound like one? Or do you simply dislike what has been done for hundreds of generations? Love tradition. It is Israel's rock. Do you know your Laws? Your commentaries? Recite them to me."

Jesus recited. He did so well that the rabbi grabbed his beard with one hand. "Boy, you know many passages. Come back tomorrow. I wish for the Rabbi Gamaliel to hear you. Then you may offer some of your Essene reasons to him."

Jesus went back to his family excited. Rabbi Gamaliel was one of the foremost young scholars and priests in Jerusalem. When he arrived at the friends' large home where Joseph and Mary were staying, he felt light on his feet as he approached the corner of the big guest room where their three bedrolls lay on the floor. Then he heard his mother telling Joseph where to pack the dried figs she had purchased, and she was stirring up dust as she moved quickly about. "Jesus, you're finally back," she said. "Good. Put your belongings together. We go tomorrow first thing. Those small scrolls you brought smell musty. Do you have to bring them everywhere?"

"Why are we leaving?" he asked, his eyebrows furrowed. "We only have been here two days!"

Mary looked up. "It is enough. We don't always stay the whole Passover week."

"Can we leave late in the morning? The Rabbi Gamaliel wishes me to meet with him."

Joseph, who was reading from a book roll, looked up, his eyes wide. "Gamaliel? That is something. You can stay behind a few hours. Your mother and I are leaving at dawn, but Josi is coming later. She will leave from her cousins' home where she is staying, so you may meet her there."

Jesus nodded.

"And, Jesus," said Joseph. "Remember not to say much about Judith. Especially not her name or that she is from Mount Carmel. If they think she lives in Sepphoris, they will discount her as some kind of unusual, overeducated Hellenistic Jew in that liberal city."

"Yes, Poppa. What if I meet an Essene rabbi?"

"There are plenty around, off in their own corner in Jerusalem. If they know who Judith is, then it is safe. But not in front of others."

Jesus nodded. "I will find Josi. I know where her cousins live. It's near the Temple."

"This evening we will tell her you might be going with her," his mother quietly said. "But Jesus, will you want to change your mind and come with us?"

"Yes, Momma, it is possible."

She nodded. "Then we will tell Josi that if you do not show up, she should not wait for you. If you have not come to her by noon, she should assume you already left with us."

Little did the three of them know the trouble this would cause.

Early the next morning as the sun rose in the eastern sky and he heard his parents preparing to go, Jesus woke from a dream in which he had been flying. He couldn't remember a dream like this ever before, and for a moment or two he recalled the dream and the freedom he felt, soaring from cloud to sunny cloud in a cobalt-blue sky. Jerusalem rabbis were no threat to him, he thought! He could fly right through all disputations and interpretations.

Then he sat up and, as he dressed in his same coarse wool shawl, he decided he would return to the Temple for a while and leave with Josi later. After a breakfast of mixed millet and wheat porridge served by their wealthier city friends, he kissed Joseph and Mary goodbye. He strode to the Temple. There he was met by his teacher in a small side room with coarse benches for students. The Rabbi Gamaliel came shortly thereafter, offered him watered-down wine flavored with lemon, placed his own thin cushion on a seat across from Jesus, and began asking the boy questions.

A few minutes before noon, Jesus realized he could not leave. It would be very impolite. Other rabbis slowly had filtered in, attracted by listening to the famous Gamaliel. And clearly, Jesus saw, they were not through with him.

"Ah yes," said Rabbi Gamaliel, standing up and stretching. His eyes were sparkling. "We will eat! Then we shall talk more."

The rabbi put his arm around Jesus' shoulders, an honorific touch, and led him to another room where a table was filled with lamb, salmon, olives, several other kinds of vegetables and fruits, and loaves of sweet wheat bread. Five rabbis and Jesus ate together, the older men asking polite questions of Jesus about Sepphoris, and talking with each other about the size and mood of that year's Passover crowds. Jesus did not make it to Josi's cousin's house that day.

It was normal for young people, especially boys of Jesus' age, to circulate loosely among a number of uncles, aunts, cousins, and even friends from their own or nearby villages, staying with one family or another, with each family taking care of the boy or perhaps a pair of girls and bringing them back to their villages. Parents trusted implicitly in this network of caring relatives and friends. So Joseph

and Mary were not surprised, at first, when Jesus did not come home with Josi. But after two more days, and visits to several village families, no one had seen Jesus. And their worry became too great.

Jesus stayed with the Temple priests for three days. During this time, more and more of the priests and rabbis became interested in him.

Each night he slept at Rabbi Joseph of Arimathea's house in a pleasant raised bed with fresh straw and recently washed cotton blankets. Rabbi Joseph had a small garden behind his home where doves and blackbirds sang early in the morning.

Jesus told Rabbi Joseph that while his parents were already on the way home, he knew others from Nazareth with whom he could return later. Rabbi Joseph trusted the boy's wisdom—and after all, Joseph thought, in one year the boy would go through the ritual ceremony for his age and would then be a grown man—so he did not enquire further.

The second night after they had finished eating, Rabbi Joseph looked at him keenly. Then he said, "You might do well, Jesus, to remember Ehud."

"The warrior in the Book of Judges?" Jesus asked.

"Yes. As you may remember, King Eglon led the Confederacy of Moab and Ammon, which oppressed Israel mightily for almost two decades. They sent one of their judges, the warrior named Ehud, to assassinate him. When he approached Eglon's palace, he told the guards outside that he had brought the usual tribute or payment Israel regularly made as a servant state."

Joseph leaned back. "In those days," he said, "all soldiers had short, curved weapons, semicircular like a sickle. But Ehud needed somehow to hide a sword on his person so he could kill the King. Taking his time, he made a two-edged straight-sword about the length of his forearm and hand. Then he went to the palace with his new weapon strapped flat to his right side beneath his clothes.

"I have Israel's tribute for the King," he told the guards. In those days, all warriors used their right hands, and so they drew their swords from the opposite side, where the weapons hung on their left. The palace guards no doubt carefully examined Ehud's his left side and, seeing no curved blade sticking out, neither above nor under his clothing, they let him pass through.

"When Ehud reached the King, he told him and his royal attendants, 'I have a private message meant only for the King's ears.' Eglon dismissed the others, and when the two men were alone, Ehud said, 'King Eglon, I have a message from God for you.' In respect to this high messenger from Israel, the King stood to receive it. He was a very stout man. Ehud had to stab him deep. He did so in the King's belly so hard that the hilt of his weapon stuck in the King's stomach. Having killed the

King and unable to retrieve his sword, he quietly withdrew.

“And then,” said Joseph, “the Moabites flew about in confusion. Ehud’s men took control of the fords of the River Jordan between the two nations, and when the Moabites did finally attack, Israel was able to conquer their army decisively.”

Jesus, with a half-smile on his face, said, “You have enhanced the story.”

Joseph grinned once, then grew serious. “Some tales,” he said, “are more exciting with a few probable details added.”

“Why tell me about Ehud’s adventure?”

“Why, indeed?” asked Joseph. He looked at the boy and waited.

“Should I possess such a sword?” Jesus asked.

“You do not possess it,” said Joseph. You are it. That is what Judith is making of you.”

Jesus grew frown lines between his eyes.

Joseph explained. “Judith, one of our finest Essene teachers, is helping you to become an Essene weapon against the silliness of the Pharisees’ Laws and their Rites, and the Sadducees’ attempts to turn us all into intellectual Greek Jews. They are only concerned about danger to their own points of view. Someday they all will look at you as an ancient curved blade, hardly worth fighting. But then you will cut through their sophistries, snick and snack” —Joseph waved his hand back and forth as if holding the weapon— “with your two straight edges. That is how she is preparing you.”

“Is this bad?” Jesus asked.

Joseph slowly shook his head. “It is good,” he said. “But it may help you to know one part of what you will become.”

Jesus’ parents, meanwhile, finally met with Josi on the dusty road at a watering spot on the winding road north along the Jordan River. She, like Mary, was riding by donkey along with the other mature women in their travelling parties while the men walked beside them, watching out for thieves and the less likely occasional lion or hyena. Josi had been travelling separately with her cousins. Now she joined Joseph and Mary’s group in anticipation of splitting at the road to Nazareth.

“Where is he?” Mary asked, looking around.

Josi frowned. “You mean Jesus? He is with you.”

“No,” said Mary, raising her arm high and then dropping it. “He is not!”

Josi’s eyes grew round. She shook her head. “I have not seen him once since we arrived in Jerusalem.”

“Joseph!” Mary exclaimed, turning quickly to him, this time raising both arms. Her face was pale.

Joseph sighed. “There’s nothing to do here,” he said. “We must go back.”

And so they did. They travelled faster, just the two of them this time, less worried about robbers than the fate of their son. They were worried especially because they feared what the Pharisees might have discovered. Did they know he was born of the group of maidens secretly raised to host a messiah? Did they know specifically that the infamous rumored Rabbi of Mount Carmel, Judith the Essene, was his teacher?

They arrived in Jerusalem the afternoon of the third day since they left. There they looked for him at the Essene homes they had stayed in, and then in the house where Josi had visited. Finally, they went to the Temple.

As they entered the outer court, tired and dusty from hurried travelling, the afternoon already was very late. The day was very hot, the moneychangers’ and animal sellers’ faces were drawn and their voices tired, and, the smell of their sweat permeated their stalls. As the two walked into the inner Women’s Court, they saw a sizeable group of priests clustered around someone sitting on a stool. Immediately they recognized several of the rabbis and priests, for they were among Israel’s most prominent Doctors of the Laws.

They saw young Rabbi Gamaliel, and with him his aged but still highly rational grandfather, the famous Rabbi Hillel. They also noticed Joseph of Arimathea, an Essene like them who someday would bury Jesus in his own family tomb, but now was a rich young rabbi. Rabbi Joseph was near the center of the group, bending over whomever was sitting on the stool.

Several of the older priests were members of the Sanhedrin, the ruling Jewish high court of Israel. It controlled all religious issues, appointments of the King and the High Priest, and final legislative rulings that came to it directly or from the smaller Jewish courts in other locations.

Most prominent of all, among the priests collected there, was the Sanhedrin’s powerful ruler, High Priest Annas. Lately he had been handing out the death penalty to Jewish prisoners whose sins were extreme. He did so even though he was forbidden it by the Romans. Soon, unknown to everyone, the Romans would force him to step down because of this.

However, Annas would remain one of the most powerful men in the lands. Five of his sons eventually would become, in turn, the High Priest. And Annas and his son-in-law Caiaphas would help put Jesus to death.

He was a short man, dark, and well proportioned. His black eyebrows grew almost together over his piercing eyes. Even though he was still relatively young,

two great wrinkles curved out and down like huge talons from his nose to below his mouth. Frown lines already spread from the outer corners of his eyes. His face was one used to bitter controversy, and to winning.

Joseph and Mary carefully avoided Annas and the others. Essenes were tolerated; however, they didn't want anyone asking them questions about Jesus. They would have enjoyed talking with the young and kind Rabbi Gamaliel and, of course, Essene Rabbi Joseph. But some of the others, especially High Priest Annas, disliked Essenes intensely. And they well knew, in any case, it was wise to avoid a crafty and ambitious man like Annas. He was in power, not by choice of the Jews, but by choice of the Romans.

Not immediately seeing Jesus, they quickly moved away to look elsewhere. They could not find him anywhere else in the Women's Court nor in the outer courtyard where sellers of female goats and lambs for commoners' sacrifices, along with a few moneychangers, had their stalls for the after-Passover people who had not yet left Jerusalem. Jesus was nowhere to be found. They walked around the streets surrounding the outside of the Temple. Finally they returned to the Temple grounds and waited patiently for one of the priests to break away from the intense, continuing discussion so they could ask if he had seen their son.

Suddenly the group shifted slightly. Joseph could see through it to the center. There, on the stool, was Jesus.

Joseph's stomach lurched. After all the hard traveling and worry, he had found his son in the midst of some of their worst potential enemies. Only Essenes knew, and then only vaguely, about the group of young girls who had been raised and trained at Mount Carmel. And even fewer knew that a child had been born from that group, much less about who or where he was.

He grabbed Mary's wrist and pointed Jesus out to her.

"Oh Joseph!" she exclaimed. "What do you think he has told them?"

Joseph shook his head.

They waited.

Finally, he said to Mary, "Let us go to him."

They walked up to the priests and waited.

Jesus was asking the priests a question. "How is it," the boy said, "that the ancient prophet Zechariah could in one moment say our messiah shall die like a sheep, and yet in the next moment say the messiah shall scatter us all with a whirlwind, leaving our nations desolate?"

"Some say the messiah must come twice," Joseph of Arimathea answered.

Rabbi Gamaliel shook his large head in the gathering dusk. "The former

passage in Zechariah does not state that the messiah shall die," he said, "but only that he shall be 'struck.' If indeed we may be sure it is a passage about the messiah. If it is such a passage, then cannot the messiah be struck, but live; and living, make war upon all the nations?"

Jesus nodded. He tapped one foot on the stone pavement. "Yes, but the second passage does not state the messiah will make war upon the nations, only that he will scatter them with a whirlwind. It is only because, among the first of the Psalms, in which the messiah breaks the earth with a rod of iron, that we assume he is a warrior. When is a whirlwind the same as a rod of iron?"

Young Rabbi Gamaliel shook his head and smiled.

Joseph chose this moment to interrupt. He edged forward. "Jesus," he said, "will you not come home now?"

All heads turned to look at him and Mary.

The High Priest, Annas, stared at them piercingly. Then a sociable smile curved upward on his face. "The parents," he said. His voice echoed across the courtyard. He strode in one long step to Joseph and clasped the carpenter's shoulder. "This is your son?"

Joseph nodded. He met the High Priest's stare quietly even as he noticed that the Temple guards, burly hill men standing around the courtyard walls, were watching him with curiosity.

"Your son is a wonder! Annas exclaimed. "We have had him three days here, and he knows almost as much as I do!"

"Thank you," Joseph said.

"Who taught him?" Annas asked. His eyes seemed suddenly more alert as he waited for the answer. The sun was setting behind the Temple walls. A young priest nearby lit an oil lamp. The light gleamed on Annas' forehead.

"I taught him, and several people from the area around our town," Joseph answered. "We are from Nazareth."

Annas tightened his grip on Joseph's shoulder and smiled more. "Ah, you Galilean farmers. A province full of resistance to the Romans." He winked at Joseph. "Good for you," he said in a low voice. "The Romans will someday be gone, and we shall have our lands to ourselves."

"Poppa!" Jesus exclaimed. His face was in shadows. He walked to his father's side. One of the younger priests tousled the boy's hair in passing.

Joseph put his hand around Jesus', enclosing it. The chill night air was entering the great doorway. Joseph shivered once, then rigidly held his body still.

"Bring him back next year!" Annas exclaimed. "The boy confounds us with

questions about minor prophets that even we have studied little, and then he answers his own questions!" He turned to Joseph of Arimathea. "Rabbi Joseph!" he said. "Come! Walk the family to the outer gates! Escort them to the edge of the city of wherever they wish to go!"

The other rabbis and priests all nodded kindly. Some close to Jesus patted his back. Joseph of Arimathea smiled at Jesus and his parents, borrowed a torch from one of the guards along the walls, and gently led the family out of the Temple. He sensed that somehow Jesus had displeased his parents, so all the way through the dark, noisy streets of Jerusalem he explained how Jesus had amazed the group of priests.

"Jesus has stayed with me each night," he told them. "It has been an honor. He is so bright! And a good young man. You have raised him very well. And," he added, "I have heard the stories of the young girls of Mount Carmel." He looked at Mary. "You were one of them?"

She nodded.

"Well," he said. "We shall see how it all turns out. I know Judith from Mount Carmel." He looked at Joseph. "She is the 'old Essene woman' teaching him in Sepphoris?"

"She is," said Joseph. "As an Essene, do you object to a woman teaching him?"

"Never," said Joseph. I wish that I could be there, too, if she even were to allow me to help in some small way. She is a wonderful scholar and rabbi. But I will say nothing of her to the others, unless, of course, they are among the Essenes who are believers in the Mount Carmel quest."

"And about Jesus?"

"Nothing at all," said Joseph.

Jesus' head had been moving between Joseph and his parents. Finally, he said, "What quest, Rabbi?"

"That is for others to explain someday, when you are older," said Joseph. "It is nothing right now for you."

Finally, they were outside the gate of the city. After all of them, especially Jesus, thanked Rabbi Joseph profusely, he left. The moonlight was streaming down on the pastures by this time, and in the distance the occasional call of a sheep could be heard, comforting its lamb. The night smelled of fresh olives from a grove nearby.

As soon as they were around a bend in the dusty road, out of sight and hearing, Mary turned to Jesus.

"Why," she asked, "have you treated us like this?"

In the bright moonlight Jesus jerked his head up, surprised. He looked into his mother's eyes.

"Your father and I have been looking for you for days," she told him. "We were worried!"

Jesus felt like he was still with the priests, asking and answering questions. Without worrying about her reaction, he told his mother exactly what he was thinking. It seemed logical enough to him.

"Why did you have to look for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know it was my duty to be busy in my Poppa's business?" A silver lance of moonlight reflected off the top of his reddish-brown hair.

Joseph looked at him sharply. "My business isn't in the Temple, Jesus. I'm a builder in Nazareth and Sepphoris."

Jesus looked at him in confusion. Neither boy nor man could read the expression in the other's eyes, for their faces were shadowed.

"Yes, Poppa," Jesus finally said.

No one spoke a word more until they set up camp that night in a glade protected from the rising winds, which rippled loudly through the pine trees on the slight rise around them, overhead. After Jesus had gone to bed, Joseph and Mary walked a short way up between the dancing green bough and across a ravine to discuss the day's events.

"Do you think he knows who his real father is?" Mary asked.

Joseph looked at her gently. "No. And even if he did, who ever heard of calling God 'Poppa'? It is not done."

"Well, something happened, Joseph." She shivered in the cool night wind and wrapped her wool robes more tightly around her.

Joseph nodded. "We'll have to talk this over with Judith. We can't control him if he's going to be wandering off from us whenever he wants to argue with passing rabbis and priests. He might somehow, accidentally—he's just so damn smart—make them suspect who he is."

Mary reared back a little. Joseph usually didn't speak so emphatically. "Well then," she said. "He needs to be told." Her lips pressed firmly together.

"Maybe," Joseph answered. "But there are many ways of doing it. First we will talk with Judith."

"I feel like we're about to lose him," Mary said. A sleek black raven alighted on a lower branch of a nearby oak tree, stepped from side to side on the bark of the limb as if settling in, and spoke a soft, mumbling croak. The west wind was so high that it brought a hint of salt from the Mediterranean Sea. The raven lowered itself

in the strong breeze, folded its wings tight, and closed its eyes against the gathering night.

Chapter 7: Learning Who He Is

The first night after Joseph and his family returned to Nazareth, Jesus wondered about the tension in the air from his parents and Josi. He sat alone on the doorstep outside their mud-brick home, throwing flat stones into the street to see if he could make them skip in the hard dirt. He knew a camel caravan had gone through the main road of his village that very day because every once in a while, the sharp scent of fresh camel dung blew his way on the breeze.

He was aware that his parents worried about him, too much, he thought, as being Essenes was not that big a deal, not really. As long as they stayed out of the way, they were tolerated. The rabbis and priests in the Jerusalem Temple had even shown him much respect. But, he sensed, something else was going on here. What was it? He'd caught them more than once giving each other longer-than-usual looks. Did it have something to do with the strange events of three wise men from the East visiting his house when he was a baby? His parents told him they just were passing by. No, he thought, this had something to do with his talking in the Temple. But, he wondered, would his parents and Josi even bother to tell him?

He looked to the grey sky, wondering if enough rain would come for the farmers. If it didn't, he knew, the small part of his father's business around Nazareth might dry up.

It was lucky, Jesus thought, that his father worked in Sepphoris. But was that a good thing? The Roman-built city was filled with Jews who acted like Greeks, forgetting their Torah Laws, ignoring the Prophets, sometimes not even recognizing God. Yet his father worked for the Romans and these Hellenized Jews. After talking with the rabbis and priests in Jerusalem, Jesus felt torn between his father's work and his own studies. Who was right? Should his father work for those who have little or no faith in the Torah of their ancestors?

The next day when Jesus got ready to go to Sepphoris with his father, Joseph came to him in his room—he now had his own small chamber for sleeping and studying, as befit the son of a middle class family—and said, “I would like you to stay home today, Son. I am taking your mother instead to do some shopping.”

“But I can go, too,” Jesus said.

Joseph looked off through the small, high window in the wall. “Not today. Your mother and I have some private business to attend to.”

“What is it?” Jesus asked.

“Something personal,” Joseph said.

“But I can stay at Judith's longer and wait while you take care of it. I want to

tell her about the priests I talked to at the Temple!"

"Tomorrow," Joseph said. "Today, you may study. Or go say Shalom to Lazarus across the street, and ask him what boards he wants us to cut. Or, Son," Joseph waved an arm, "after days of arguing with Israel's experts in Jerusalem, why not take a day off? Go into the hills? Imagine you are David the young shepherd; sing some Psalms."

Jesus frowned. "Something is up," he said.

Joseph nodded. "Your mother and I will take care of it. We'll be back at the usual time this evening."

Joseph and Mary soon left, one with his tools on their donkey and the other with bags for shopping, sitting atop the poor beast who was carrying more weight than usual. Josi and his baby brother, Simon, went into their room to nap. Mary had left some of her own milk for Josi to give Simon while she was away. Jesus decided to study.

When Joseph and Mary arrived in Persepolis, they went straight to Judith's home. She greeted them warmly and offered them watered wine and bread. The sounds of a busy city surrounded them with a quiet hum interrupted by the calls of people in the streets, about their business.

"Come, let us go upstairs to the roof, where we can all lie in the sun on my dining benches, and we shall talk." As they rose up above the house, they could see all the flat roofs around them, where other women, and some craftsmen, were settling themselves to enjoy the warming air of the spring light. Everyone could see each other, a treetop community, but the three of them were far enough away from others that their conversation was private. Carrying their bread and wine, they sat on reed mats that Judith unfurled for them.

"How was Passover this year?" she asked. She already knew, from seeing new creases in their faces, that the answer was not simple.

Mary began to speak, stopped, then started again. She raised both her hands straight up in the air. "Jesus," she said. She let her arms fall. "He talked with the High Priest! And all those others. Thank goodness Joseph of Arimathea was there!"

Judith looked at Joseph.

"It was like this." He told her the story.

At the end, he paused. Mary blurted, "We're going to have to tell him! How else can we make him stay safe?"

Judith looked at her with her piercing dark-brown eyes, then nodded. "You are right," she said. "He doesn't know the danger he is creating for himself. And for his cousin John. And all of us. He must be told about his birth and the cause of it. But it must be gradual."

“What do you mean?” asked Joseph.

“We need to teach him the real truth about the prophecies,” she answered. “Not immediately. But in time.”

“You don’t mean the general prophecies in the Laws and Prophets, do you?” He rubbed his chin. “You want to teach him our Essene prophecies, the ones we used in deciding how to prepare for him?”

“Yes.” Her eyes suddenly sparked. “I will take him more closely under my tutelage, let him learn it all naturally as events unfold. I will teach him our predictions, our understanding. But I will not tell him exactly how we used them. Jesus can figure that out.”

“You’re going to let him know about the twelve of us handmaidens? And the magi?”

Judith nodded. “Eventually. He already has heard something about them. He needs eventually to become aware of the details, the reasons. He’s old enough that someday, someone will tell him what he doesn’t know, thinking he must already be aware of it. I would rather that when he discovers he is our chosen one, I can be there to help him accept it.”

Joseph’s eyebrows rose. “You will be there?” he asked. “What if he is here in Nazareth, or working with me in Sepphoris?”

The sun suddenly broke through a cloud and began shining in their eyes. Judith held her hand up to block it. She said, “It is time for me to teach him on Mount Carmel, where he will be more sheltered. I will return to my home in Mount Carmel in three days and, with your blessing, I will take Jesus with me.”

Mary looked stricken. “But he will not live with us anymore?”

Joseph said, “But Mary, there is much wisdom in what Judith says. We can tell the neighbors that Jesus is studying more intensely for a time at the Mount Carmel library. No one will suspect a thing.”

Mary’s eyes welled with tears. “How can I live without him?”

Joseph reached out and took her fingers in his. “He is a year from becoming a man,” he told her. “And you have our new baby, Simon to keep you busy. And you have Josi.” He squeezed her hand firmly.

Judith took a deep breath. She didn’t like taking Jesus away from them. And she disliked, even more, having to hide from everyone who Jesus and his family really were. Only some of the Essenes on Mount Carmel knew the whole story. The rest was rumor and subterfuge for the people living away from the mountain. Judith hated the concealment. But she’d forced herself to become increasingly used to it as the Mount Carmel Essenes had made their plans and raised the twelve maidens over many years, and then watched Jesus grow. Secrets were necessary.

Dreams had warned them this was so if Jesus was to survive.

When Joseph and Mary first told Jesus he was going to stay at Mount Carmel with the Essenes, he became very excited. They were all sitting on reed mats on top of their home. Behind them on the cliff that arose two streets over, doves were flying in and out of the woody shrubs clinging to its side, cooing to each other. "The mountain!" he exclaimed. He jumped up, almost spilling the sour wine and water near them. Several locusts buzzed away from the turf grass that grew on the low ledge around the outside of their roof. The insects smelled like a rich, dark tea from the Far East.

Mary tried not to frown. "At least you'll be able to come home for weekends."

Jesus let this idea pass. It was a wispy grey cloud on what was otherwise a perfect adventure. Who wanted to be part of a family for even two days a week if he could live on the Mountain? It was over twenty miles in length of wilderness and exploring.

Josi on her mat rocked Simon excitedly. The baby began to complain. "Oh, be quiet," said Josi. She smiled down on him. "Jesus is going away to live with Judith!"

"Don't forget," Joseph said, "your purpose there is to study. Not traipse the woods and ravines at all hours of every day."

Jesus nodded. His eyes sparkled. "Yes, I know. I'll only walk about on occasion. Judith said she's finally going to tell me what some of the prophecies really mean."

Joseph, Mary, and Josi exchanged quick glances across the room.

"Poppa?" Jesus asked.

"Yes?" Joseph looked at his son.

"Why is it I don't like to play all the time like I used to? Now that I'm almost of age, why do you only have me work with you a small part of each day? Other sons only go to school in the mornings. They must help their fathers the rest of the day."

Joseph replied, "When you are home each weekend, on the Sabbath we will all be able to rest together as a family and go to synagogue here in Nazareth. Then you will help me all the remaining day."

Jesus looked toward the section of the roof where Joseph worked on small projects on sunny days. A high bench with a waterproof box of tools under it stood in one corner.

Mary quickly turned her head away. Her eyes misted.

Josi could feel Jesus' excitement. "The mountain is wonderful!" she exclaimed.

"You have visited it. But your mother and I had the run of it when we lived there as girls!"

Jesus smiled broadly at her. "I want to hike it from beginning to end."

"I'm sure Judith will let you do that."

"Did you see any lions or bears?" he asked.

Josi looked at Mary, who rolled her eyes.

"Well, you're old enough to know, so yes!" She leaned forward. "If you go on a hike, take a friend! Your momma and I saw a small brown bear cub one time. We ran away as fast as we could, before it's mother spotted us! Just do what Judith says, and you'll be safe."

Joseph coughed into his hand. Then he said, "Son, your most important job is to study." He smiled gently. "You still like that, don't you?"

"Very much!" Jesus exclaimed. He glanced at his mother and saw she was upset. He kept his gaze on her.

Finally, her face flushing a bit, she said, "Don't let Judith's wonderful teachings make you forget where your parents are." Her voice trembled, then. "Come home every weekend, my son."

Jesus nodded. He knew he would miss them at least a little. "Yes, Momma."

"And you must take a donkey with clothes and your scrolls and everything else you will need," she added.

Jesus frowned and started to open his mouth.

"The boy probably wants to travel light," said Joseph. "He can take a little bit more to the mountain every time he visits us and goes back. He'll be well ready for winter by the time it comes."

"I promise, Momma," he said. "More clothes each time I return to Mount Carmel. Heavy clothes! Sheepskin turned inside out!"

Mary couldn't help but smile at his enthusiastic attempt to reassure her. She nodded and wiped her eyes. "Oh, Jesus," she said. "You must be careful. No slaying lions or giants like David. Take a sword into the woods. Watch yourself at the edge of cliffs. Be—"

"Momma!" he exclaimed.

Josi plopped a fussy Simon into Mary's lap. "It is time to make your baby ready for sleeping. But first he needs his mother's milk." She turned her face toward Jesus and gave him a wink.

Mary sighed. "Come along, Simon," she said. She went to Jesus and Joseph, giving each a kiss of peace, and to Jesus she gave a long hug.

Three days later, Jesus was gone.

The limestone and flint mountains of the Carmel chain, though really just a series of great hills in a braided, rolling thread, was at its highest point at over 1700 feet. They were tall to Jesus and most others in the nearby lands, especially if you lived, like he did, on the northeastern side with its sudden drop off that overlooked the Jezreel Valley, Nazareth, and many other towns and villages.

While growing up, he had visited the Essenes in their caves. Many of the caverns had short build-outs outwardly extending walls, roofs, and floors—of stone and mud brick. He'd been in a number of them. But he'd never with a chance to go exploring. His favorite place was the top of the mountain above the community. Here, high up, were wind-stirred fruit and wine orchards and wide, evenly spaced vegetable gardens. Hundreds of birds sang and chirped around the old, plain limestone-block synagogue that also sat there, two stories high but nearly invisible among the surrounding mature oaks and pines. The second story was flat and open, as most homes were, with a parapet a few feet high running around the outside. In all, it was a well-kept living relic first built, some said, perhaps five hundred years earlier. Now it had a few additions, the newest a century old.

In summer the extended building was filled with the scent of fresh olives, figs, and the thick growth of shrubbery in the nearby sunlit glades. It served as not only a place of worship but also held within in its thick, cool walls—a house of healing, a well-stocked library, and, on top, plenty of space for meetings and schooling. If you stood on the flat roof, you could look between the trees sometimes and glimpse the distant Mediterranean Sea. You even might spot small white dots moving slowly on the blue surface, which were great ships of commerce plying their trade from port to port, perhaps even from Athens, Alexandria, or Rome.

The building was long and sturdy enough to seem almost out of place, there in the middle of nowhere. However, hundreds of Essenes lived in the caves and small homes scattered within a few miles of it on the mountaintop, and many others lived independently on nearby settlements and farms. The synagogue and the mountaintop were the headquarters of the northern Essenes.

What really enraged some of the Sanhedrin's Pharisee priests and Zealots in Jerusalem was that anyone was allowed to approach the synagogue alter. Here on Mount Carmel, there were no courtyards where only the faithful could gather, no inner courts for only men or priests. The Essene's holy place had a simple stone alter facing east so it caught the rays of the rising sun streaming between a wide pillared doorway.

The alter itself—the holy of holies where normally only a male priest could approach—was similarly surrounded by open arches in front and on its sides with

steps leading up between the arches to the central box where the Torah was kept. Conservative priests and rabbis throughout the country swore and tore at their beards at the blasphemy of the northern Essenes allowing not just women, but even children and foreigners, to climb to the alter and touch the box holding the Torah. If Rome had not been in control of the lands, Zealots working for a few members of the Jerusalem Sanhedrin might have snuck onto the mountain by night to destroy the temple or, at the least, to steal the synagogue's Torah.

Jesus knew only vaguely of these disagreements, just enough to have made him cautious in the Great Temple courtyard in Jerusalem among its priests. Now here each day he gloried from sunrise to sunset, after brief devotions at the alter, in study in the library. Though compact, the Essene stores of scrolls were impressive. It also borrowed scrolls from Egypt and even occasionally from Athens for its students young and old. Multiple interpretations of the Ancient Scriptures existed from different translations in places as far away as Alexandria and Babylon where they had been held in captivity in ancient times. And the Essenes believe in honoring them all. Their goal was to pursue not just the intellect but what the old scrolls had to say about experiencing the spirit and God at the scriptures' heart.

Here Jesus spent hours, sometimes sneezing from the dust that arose when he opened a long unused book, at other times drinking herbal tea from the gardens. Josi would join him for a time each day, or on cold days invite him to her warm cavern home, and she would ask him what he had learned and answer his questions.

Jesus ate with everyone else three times a day in a big middle room near the center of the building. The foods largely were fresh or dried fruits and vegetables according to the season, grains and nuts, and smaller quantities of light meats.

In the evenings, after supper and after a period when he was allowed to explore, he slept in Judith's cave. Some of the younger Essenes lived in goatskin tents on top of the mountain near the synagogue, especially the very young men and women just visiting for the summer. However, many of the older or more important members lived in the nearby caves. Judith's small cavern like all the others, were natural: they had been hollowed out by water and wind blowing or dripping into their limestone interiors. The deeper ones with small entrances kept their owners especially cool in the summer and warm in the winter.

Judith's cave was divided into several parts, just as it had been when his mother, Mary, used to visit it. A small entrance room in front of the cave, which was built of mud brick on a foundation of rock, led into the cave's main living area, and this in turn led to several smaller, deeper rooms. The floors had been carefully leveled and covered by straw mats. The walls and the passages between rooms were hung with goatskins, and a little hole had been dug from the ceiling of the main room upward to the surface. This hole was an escape flue for smoke from the

small, busy fire Judith kept in the winter. She was old, and her body sometimes needed the extra warmth.

On the occasional cold night in the beginning several months of his stay with her, he slept in this same heated room with his aging teacher. On most nights, especially in summer, he had his own little room. He decorated it with grasses and wooden poles such that it began to look more like the inside of a shepherd's temporary cabin. That made him feel closer to nature.

As an Essene student, he studied subjects that many conservative scholars and priests thought shocking. In common with the Magi who had visited him as a baby, he learned the study of the stars, their movements and positions, and how they affected people and nations alike.

Like many of the Pharisees, he studied resurrection—or reincarnation—of the soul. This individual spirit, according to many Pharisees and Essenes, rose from the dead and could come again to earth at a later time, a not uncommon belief then in both West and East.

However, he followed tradition, too. As expected by Pharisees, Sadducees, and some Essenes, like most thirteen-year-old boys, he traveled to Jerusalem with his father, Joseph, to take his initiation into manhood at the Temple. However, Judith had warned him once again of the dangerous position Essenes, especially the Mount Carmel group, held in the political hierarchy of the Hebrews. And so—though many of the rabbis and priests, especially Joseph of Arimathea and Annas the High Priest, remembered him and greeted him kindly—this time Jesus did not dally after his ceremony, except when Joseph of Arimathea gave him a warm invitation to accompany him to his home while his poppa made a requisite visit to relatives. There they lay on benches in the rabbi's dining area and drank sweet wine that tasted more like grape juice than the cheap sour wine most of Israel drank. And they talked.

“At one time,” he said to Jesus, “the land of Israel was barren except for trees, grass, and animals, all the way from far north of here, down to the grass plains of Egypt. Everything was grass, then, even to the west of the Nile, except much further away. It had remained like the Garden of Eden in the early days for thousands of years.

“Then gradually, people entered. Noah and those before and after him. And many others. The original ancestors of the Twelve Tribes sometimes believed in many gods and sometimes in one. We often adopted the gods of others, too.

“But through Jacob Israel, Abraham, and Joseph whom you know well as the owner of the many-colored coat—and thanks to our ascendancy in Egypt during the great famine —we became better known than others in the land of Canaan. We

gradually gained land, wealth, and with them, power. When we were taken as slaves to Egypt, that proved a good event for us, for many of us learned a trade and gained many skills. Then Moses topped it all by leading us out of Egypt, back to our homeland of Canaan—Moses, a mystic, a seer of God in fire —whose vision and inner sight gave us a belief in the one God above and within all. And he gave us the most basic rules that this vision provides.”

“And then he travelled back up the mountain and wrote hundreds of other rules,” said Jesus.

Joseph laughed. “Yes, so many rules, over six hundred! If Moses’ travelling companions had been able to practice the first ten consistently, maybe Moses wouldn’t have bothered to climb up and bring back more! So many rules, what a stink!”

“And still we argue among ourselves,” Jesus added.

Joseph nodded. We have become an intellectual people, Jesus, whose priestly livelihood involves constant argument. That will not change but only get worse. Our priestly classes now often believe that the path of righteousness is a road paved with constant disputes. Still, that is far better than living by the sword, as we and all the tribes everywhere have done for a thousand years, now.

“But most important, Jesus,” said Joseph, is that there lies buried behind and beneath our religion a living flame of purity, of love of the high God, of faith. It is a raw, direct experience of God that our scriptures celebrate at their best, just as do the Egyptian priests in their Great Pyramid Temple, the Wise Men of Persia, and the followers of the Great Mother throughout the lands. That is why we Jews are great and will grow across the lands.

“We, the People of the Book, of the Torah and the Prophets—now and in another one and two thousand years—will follow the great trade routes on camels and ships to every foreign land in the entire world to bring our flame there.”

“Will we become a great people?” asked Jesus.

Joseph nodded. It is predicted. Those who follow the Torah and Prophets will cover the earth someday—dozens of colors, thousands of nations, millions of people. However, there also will be great tribulations. Human nature will not give up easily its love of blood and rage. Our prophets say that someday we and our offspring will be the owners and lenders in many of the whole world’s nations, but we also will be imprisoned and killed by the millions.”

Jesus frowned. “But that many Jews have never even been alive!”

“True, but we will propagate like the hares of the grasslands and birds of the forests until our enemies will imprison and slay us without end, an unholy winnowing that someday will kill a full third of us. They will smother us until we

expire like a flame beneath a clay bowl, and even use our hair, skin, and bones to make their clothing and implements as the ruthless Assyrians did six and seven hundred years ago. Yet we will arise again, stronger."

"Why do you teach such a terrible story, Rabbi?" asked Jesus. "I understand your interpretations. But few others ever mention such prophecies in this way."

Joseph raised his hands palms up. "So that you will know what may be the truth, and what is at stake, when it is your turn to teach."

"So," said Jesus, "you would make me into a rabbi like you?" He glanced up sideways at Joseph.

Joseph almost smiled. "No, you will make yourself into a rabbi of a unique type, I think. Soon you will arise from your humble beginnings and discover great opportunities and challenges. Take the challenges. I told you last year you are becoming a double-edged sword. Grasp the hilt of your dilemmas like a gladiator fighting several bulls at once in the Coliseum at Rome. Listen to Judith. Tell her everything. She will guide you."

The next day, he and his father, Joseph, returned to Nazareth, where Jesus visited for a brief holiday. Then he returned to Judith's abode on Mount Carmel. He found he even was starting to enjoy the almost daily barley bread and lentils the Essenes ate communally, especially dipped in olive oil. And a particularly large raven started taking up residence on the ledge of the library window when Jesus was in it, calling softly to him at times. He also far preferred the smell of the grains and the bushes in the Essene settlement to the frequent scent in Nazareth of dung from several different animals.

In common with the great prophet Daniel and many others, Jesus began studying divination by dreams. Judith taught him to write down his dreams upon waking and then, like the prophets, interpret them to foretell the future and understand the past. He learned quickly that his dreams that seemed most impressive and strongest merely were related to the day before or after. Dreams of seeming inconsequence often were the more important: looking at them was like standing on top of a mountain and seeing big cities or the sea far away.

Judith also insisted he learn the art of reading human bodies. "Just a magician's art, to fool people," he made the mistake of telling Judith one evening. "No," she patiently told him, "it is the first chapter in how to heal them." And so he made himself figure out what the movements, tones, and wrinkles of hand, eye, lips, and skin meant; gradually, he realized that whole histories of people could be divined in such a fashion and finally thanked Judith for it. She simply nodded.

Some of these practices could even have been considered illegal if the Sanhedrin knew the methods actively were being taught. Fortunately, the Essenes and many others throughout the lands thought such practices were acceptable. Even in Jesus' boyhood, most Hebrew priests and people already were taking a more open attitude about such things. But still, the intellectual elites of Israel often scoffed at them. For this reason, the Essenes avoided discussing them with others.

Jesus especially studied the prophecies, certainly an area of scholarly study not just allowed but encouraged by rabbis. However, unlike most young Jewish students or their elders, he didn't confine himself to just the predictions in the Books of the Prophets. For the first time, Judith let him read some of the many dreams and visions of the Essenes themselves, which were collected on book rolls in their mountain library. Many of them concerned Israel's messiah.

Judith waited patiently. After a summer, a winter, his Passover initiation, and nearly another summer, he finally discovered the truth about himself. At first it confused him.

One warm morning in Judith's cavern, he was reading carefully from a book roll Judith had given him. Outside, on the slopes, gardeners greeted each other as they began pruning and picking foods from their patches. Her front entry room's door was wide open to let in the early sun. Locusts were buzzing outside, and their sharp coffee-bean smell permeated the air as he shifted back and forth between lying and sitting on his reed mat on the cool floor. Judith was nearby, reading her own scroll.

Jesus suddenly lifted his eyes from the papyrus. "Judith!" he exclaimed. Then he calmed himself and pointed to a line of text. "This says that twelve girls shall be chosen to dedicate themselves in the synagogue, and one of them will become the messiah's mother!"

Judith looked up. She quietly nodded her head. The sunlight flickered as a bird flew past.

"But I know that my momma was one of a group of such girls here on Mount Carmel. You have told me about them!"

Judith nodded again, watching his eyes.

"But surely that was a different group," he said. "Have these twelve girls been chosen, yet, so the messiah may come?"

"They have, Jesus. Right here."

"But they can't have!" he said. "I haven't seen them. Never in any of my visits!" He looked out the door as if he might see them passing by.

"It was before you were born," Judith said.

He looked at her numbly. "Before? But, then, that must mean...." He shook his

head in disbelief. "Teacher, is the messiah already born?"

She closed her eyes once and opened them. "Here on Mount Carmel, we believe so. He is a young man, now."

Jesus took several shuddering breaths and shifted restlessly on his mat. Then he took a deeper, relaxing breath. "May I meet him?" he asked, more calmly.

A quick suspicion crossed his mind. "Is it my cousin John? Who I grew up with in Egypt and Capernaum? He is wise and strong." He sat up straight. "John would make an excellent messiah."

Judith shook her head. "He is the Forerunner, the man whom the prophets say will prepare the messiah's way." She glanced across the room at her own small library of book rolls carefully stacked in their wood cubbyholes.

Jesus became excited. He had studied these prophecies until he knew them by heart. "I know the Forerunner!" he exclaimed. "I know John, who will prepare the way!" He looked once more out the door as if John himself would suddenly appear, larger than life, his wide frame filling the space —even though both Jesus and Judith knew still lived in Ein Karem, far away near Jerusalem.

Judith watched him quietly. While doing so, she took her awareness deeply into the very center of herself.

Then she found herself speaking without knowing what would come. Gently, she said, "Your cousin John is the Forerunner for you."

Jesus' head snapped around. He looked deeply into her eyes. *No!* he thought, his refusal to believe burning its way through their stare and into her.

So intense was his thought that Judith heard it ring in her head.

"Yes," she answered. Outside, the cheery song of a bluebird pierced the blue sky. A whole flock of doves flew by, up the mountain, darkening the sun briefly. As she watched Jesus, her heart went out to him as if he were her own son. Then she saw that his breathing suddenly had become shallow. His face was pale. His eyes, though they were still on her, were clouding over.

She reached out and touched his hand. It was cold. He was in shock. She knew there were times when people must be touched firmly to bring them out of such a state. As a leader of the Essenes, it had been her job to bring bad news to people, and on one or two occasions to shake them several times to help them recover.

She also knew that shock sometimes is a healing response to events too hard to handle—to let it run its course. She slowly stood, stretched her aging sinews, and walked to a nearby chest. From it she drew a spare wool blanket. Softly she put it around his still shoulders. She tucked it around his legs. Then she built a fire in the nearby fireplace normally used just in the cold months. She wished she could pick him up and set him down outside in a beam of sun. But she didn't want to move

him.

Suddenly she felt tired. She had been preparing both Jesus and herself for this moment for over a year. Now she sat down near him again, her knees and back aching a little, to stay with him as long as he sat there. She knew he was barely aware of her, if at all. But at some point, he would want to talk.

Jesus stayed right there, hardly moving, not seeing anything, as far as she could tell, through the entire day. It wasn't until the late sun finally went down that he seemed to waken, nod to her, and ask for a drink of water. "Thank you," he told her. Then he gave her a hug and walked out the door. She knew he would walk the ridge of the mountain as he often did when he liked to think or simply empty his mind of himself. She understood that he still was processing what he had just learned. She remembered when she first realized she might lead her people in bringing the messiah into the world: that had been hard enough to accept. But this? She could barely imagine what he was feeling and thinking. What, she wondered, would such knowledge do to a normal ego, let alone that of a young man? Shaking her head, she went to her bedroom knowing she would find little or no sleep that night.

Jesus came back briefly the next day, hugged Judith and told her not to worry about him, and packed a small bag for hiking. Though his face was calm, Judith wondered if somehow he would initially reject what she had told him, or even if she would not see him again for weeks or perhaps even years. She dismissed most of these thoughts. What Jesus did not say to her was that he was having them, too.

He was gone for a week. He walked the long distance of the mountaintop as it slid from the northwest by the Mediterranean coast twenty miles to the southeast, deeply into Judea.

Judith explained his absence to the older members of the Essene community who knew about his birth. She cautioned them not to expect too much from him when he returned. Messiahs, she told them, aren't made overnight.

When Jesus came striding back to them, he received a reserved but happy reception from the community members who knew. Others—younger or temporary visitors—shrugged and imagined he had gone to see family or friends for a bit. Jesus accepted everyone's reaction calmly and quietly and followed the trail to Judith's cave.

In the following weeks, sparrows still chirped, late flowers still blossomed with their sweet perfume. Deer had half-grown fawns in attendance, and Jesus even saw a mother bear standing atop a high rock, looking down briefly over their settlement

before hurrying back into the thick brush. It was a time of renewal for everyone. Jesus began his studies again in the library and in Judith's home, where he still had his small room.

But now he was different. It was clear immediately Judith, and slowly to others. He now was no longer a boy but a man. The previous spring's Passover in Jerusalem was when he officially became of age; however, now he carried himself like an adult. The happy, sometimes unthinking boy was gone, replaced by a person who seemed years older. He knew who he was.

He did not become, as some Essenes thought he might, a rock that never showed its feelings. They soon realized he had, if anything, become more sensitive and gentle. He answered older Essene's questions about holy books and languages, freely admitting there was much he didn't know, yet. And he was especially kind to the Essene children, the young ones who came with their parents during the afternoons to study with the teachers. He would take them by the hand, crouch beside them to show them each flower, and point out the birds flying and calling overhead, naming them. Most of all, he asked each child how he or she was feeling that day. And then he would listen for as long as they wanted to tell him.

He didn't entirely lose his spontaneous and fiery natures, either. Instead, he sought to control them.

"Are you *sure*," he declared one afternoon to Judith. They were in a small study room of the library, the smell of old papyrus and parchment in the air, dust motes swirling in the sunbeam coming from the small, high window, making Jesus sneeze on occasion. Judith was telling him in greater detail how the twelve young girls, including his mother and Josi, had been prepared for his coming.

She was as calm as ever, more so, if possible, now that he knew the truth. Patiently she spoke of those years for the two women, who were young girls and then of age—fertile young women. "Your mother had no chance to be with a man," she explained. "There were the visions and the dreams. Then you were born, and there were more visions during your mother's pregnancy and after your birth. And the surprise visit of the magi from Persia."

Jesus waved his hand downward. "What if I don't *want* to be a messiah."

She looked at him shrewdly. "Why not?"

He turned his head away and stared out the small square window. A seagull from the Mediterranean flew by.

"I'm not enough," he said. "No one can do everything I'm supposed to do."

"Don't worry," Judith told him. "'Climb a mountain one step at a time. Do what you can. No one should ever ask for more than that.'"

He still was not content. Sometimes he felt like he was bursting with the

demands on him, though no one pressured him in the community. It was just, he thought, all the predictions in scripture!

After his discovery of how he had been conceived and born, Jesus did not go back to Nazareth for a month. Part of this was simply the need to be alone.

But part of it was fear of seeing his parents. He felt shy about talking about it with his poppa, who really wasn't his father, after all. But, Jesus thought, he still *felt* like his poppa. And it was embarrassing to think of talking about such personal physical things as conception and pregnancy with his momma.

Yet he still loved them both, just as much as before. They had been told by a messenger from Judith that he had discovered everything. He needed to go to them himself, he knew, to show them he still cared and wanted them. And his little brother, Simon, missed him.

The first day when he showed up at his home in Nazareth on foot, it looked smaller, even though he'd visited just several weeks earlier. The sun was going down behind Mount Carmel across the great Jezreel Valley behind him. Swallows flew in and out of the eaves of the simple houses, most of them one floor with living quarters, a stable below, and an open rooftop living area above. In the distance a shepherd's dog was barking, and the air was dry and carried the scent of ripening olives.

Mary was on top of their home and spotted him coming. In the far distance, she thought he was a much older, shorter man winding in and out of sight on the path from the mountain to the village. Then she saw it was someone younger—her Jesus. Tears sprang to her eyes as she wondered how he felt, now that he knew about himself. She hurried down the stairs and ran to meet him. "Jesus!" she called. Throwing her arms around him, she hugged him with all her strength.

Jesus' heart opened, and he hugged her back fiercely. "Momma," he managed to say, almost choking.

"Oh, my son!" she finally exclaimed. She drew back and looked at him, for he was the same height as she by this time.

He smiled shyly. They were just outside the front stoop.

His father strode up behind Mary and without a pause reached out with his strong carpenter's.

Jesus turned to him and grabbed him hard, too. The two men clasped each other strongly and exchanged the kiss of peace.

"Poppa!" Jesus exclaimed, his voice husky.

Joseph smiled down on him.

“Hello, Jesus,” Josi said. She slowly stepped forward from the open doorway.

He looked up and saw her, quiet and shy for a change. But her eyes still looked excited. A spark of mischief came into them. “Can I be your head nurse when you’re king of Israel?” she asked.

Jesus stared at her and began frowning. Her eyes were dancing, and he couldn’t resist them. A smile came to his lips. Then he started laughing and shook his head. “I will make you the general of the army!” he told her.

“Oh, you two!” Mary exclaimed. “Such a pair. Both of you hush!”

“Come on, Jesus.” Josi grabbed his hand shyly as several smaller neighbor children raced by, yelling. She said, “Come say hello to little brother Simon.”

“Come on, Son,” Joseph said. He was smiling widely. “Let’s go inside and have a meal before we talk about how to divide up the world.”

That night, sleeping in his old room, he awoke suddenly in a sweat. A vivid dream still swirled about him. In it, he was standing in the middle of a crashing thunderstorm filled with bolts of lightning. He was high up on barren, rocky mountain. Rain pelted him, and the very air around him smelled metallic. He looked down on one side of the mountain and, in the flashes of light, saw wolves, lions, and bears fighting with each other, swiping their claws and tearing chunks of fur and flesh from each other’s bodies.

But on the other side of the mountain, far down in a valley, the rain had stopped, the sun was peeking over the horizon, and people were dancing and singing in green fields under blue skies. Men were clasping each other’s arms in a circle, singing a marching song from the days of ancient battles, but here they simply stepped in time first left, then right. The women were fifty feet away, also illuminated by the sunlight, dancing in several rows facing each other, love on their faces as they sang songs of enchantment from the Song of Solomon.

In the dream, he’d looked above him and raised his arms in question to God: Why the two opposite scenes?

And he heard a voice in the thunder, a booming vibration in his head rather than actual words, saying, “What you do shall lead to both.”

That made him sit up in bed, wide awake. Lying down again, he tried to return to sleep, even used deep breathing methods for relaxing that he had learned from Judith, but nothing worked. He got out of bed and paced for several minutes back and forth in his small room. Then he said to himself, “I will ask Judith what this means.” After that, he finally was able to drift into simpler dreams.

When he returned to Mount Carmel, harvest season was in full swing. Birds' nests in the trees around them had loud chirps from half-grown young ones. The older Essenes passed around to everyone their yearly warning to watch out for adolescent bear cubs wandering into the community: the cubs didn't know better, but the mothers never were far away as their young ones tried to pick the berries from some of the Essene bushes

Jesus asked Judith about his dream of fierce animals and dancing people. But she only shook her head. "These are matters far beyond our times," she said. "Many generations away. Did Moses and Elijah's leadership bring nothing but happiness and good? No. Will yours? Nothing is perfect. So, don't worry about it."

And now, as the months passed into fall and early winter, Judith began pressing him to learn more and more languages. She set a pace for his lessons that even grown men would have had trouble keeping.

"But *why* do I have to study Sanskrit!" he exclaimed one afternoon. "And what's this other one that's so like it, 'Pali.' What is it, and why two languages from India when one should be enough! And India is halfway beyond the edge of the world!"

Judith chuckled. "I think India is before the world's edge," she said. "Otherwise, according to some of the ancient Greeks, you would fall off the edge of the flat earth and into the mouths of dragons."

Jesus shook his head.

Judith picked up a fresh green and white leek, twisted it in half, and offered one of the pieces to Jesus. "You might go to India," she said. "Even if you don't, you must study their scriptures. Ancient Hindu is in Sanskrit. The newer books about Buddha are in Pali. Both are filled with practical advice."

"Will you just let me study Socrates some more? You say he studied India's holy books. And Pythagoras the Greek, he even came to Mount Carmel!"

"Socrates and Pythagoras did no translations of India's books. Do you want secondhand information?"

Jesus took the leek she was offering him. He bit a small piece off and tucked it in the corner of his mouth.

"No, I want firsthand accounts. But aren't our own ancient Hebrew scriptures, the Greek philosophers, and the even older Egyptian scrolls enough? There are so many more to read—I could go to the great Library of Alexandria. It's famous. It's large!"

Judith raised her finger and shook it at him once. "You are so impatient! You think you don't have enough time for what you want to do. But you have years! And you already know our own people's books so well that you would qualify as a

Doctor of the Laws, if you were old enough.”

Jesus stood and began pacing across the stone floor of the room. “Then send me to Egypt. Or Greece. I especially would like to learn more of the mystic Plato.”

“Plato,” said Judith, “after studying for a short time under Socrates, then ascended to his knowledge in Egypt.”

“But you still do plan for me to go to Alexandria someday?” he asked.

“We Essenes have planned it, those here on the mountain,” Judith answered. Then she began to smile, but thought better of it and returned to her serious countenance. “In a few years you can go to Egypt. But you already know enough Greek to study there in Alexandria. Right now, India beckons. So, Sanskrit it is, my student, India’s scholarly language. And Pali, the language of the common people. Come study.” She pointed at the book roll lying open before her.

“Wait,” Jesus said. “You’re serious about my going to India?” He stopped pacing. “All that way?”

“We want you to study the mysteries of their religion with their holy people. Many of them believe in one God above all others, just as we do. They know secrets of meditation and prayer, of inner control and quieting the self so that you may approach God more closely. Shouldn’t a messiah know these methods?”

Jesus flushed. “Of course. I thought, Rabbi, that such things would come to me in dreams and visions like other Essenes have had.”

“They will. But don’t forget, Jesus, God works through human beings, too, in bringing knowledge. Even the most unimportant donkey herder may give you something you need to know, even if that herder himself is unaware he is giving it. A teardrop of wisdom from one may be a river for others someday.”

Outside the small, high window, a child laughed gaily. Jesus took a deep breath and sat back down again.

“And besides,” said Judith. “I have not yet told you this. But I, myself, went to India to study.”

Jesus’ eyes grew round. “You? To India? A woman alone?” He stopped himself. “I’m sorry; I mean no disrespect.”

“It is fine,” said Judith. “A group of us travelled together. I stayed with a prince and his lovely wife,” she added. “And studied under a holy man for two years.”

“A prince and his wife,” Jesus said, surprise still on his face. “What would the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem think?”

“Don’t ask,” said Judith. “There have been rumors ever since then. I never talk about it.”

“Is this why you are able to teach me Sanskrit and Pali?” he asked. “You know them yourself?”

She nodded. “Now,” she said, “whether you wish to praise or curse your luck for having a rabbi who knows such faraway languages, it is time to return to today’s lesson. Please translate for me what these words about meditation say.”

Jesus sighed. “I thought you said there are practical lessons in India’s scriptures. When do we get to those?”

Judith smiled, then furrowed her brow. “First, the language. The rest will then come naturally. It took me five years to master these languages. I bet you can do them in three.” She pushed the book roll toward him.

Wearily Jesus took it and translated out loud what was on it, pausing for her corrections whenever he missed a difficult word. His excitement about travelling anywhere quickly disappeared as he recited her pronunciations after her.

For the next few years, languages and foreign books by holy men and philosophers occupied most of his weekdays. On weekends, he returned to Nazareth to spend Sabbath and a second day with his family. When he was on Mount Carmel, Judith insisted he also exercise every day. So, often, he would roam the mountain woods. At night, walking outside, he would stare up at the stars, wondering what they were, or whether any were places people could live someday.

As he walked, often he would shake his head to clear it. He had a sense of purpose, of future. He knew he was meant to travel and to learn. But he couldn’t see much past the many years of training as a messiah that everyone seemed to expect of him. What was he to do? At least, he admitted to himself, he really did love reading and studying. And he knew he was good at it compared to most students. He didn’t know why, but he was fast at picking up oral and written knowledge. He didn’t feel it made him any better, just different. He figured he was lucky to also enjoy it so much.

Whenever he walked outside at night, now, he looked more closely at the especially bright path thick with stars across the sky. The Egyptians, he knew, called it a long pool of cow’s milk. The Greeks and Romans sometimes named it the fish road or the milk way. Were all those stars, he wondered, just points of light on a giant sphere covering the earth—the inside of a black bowl pierced with many holes that let in an outward light of the heavens—like some Greek scholars argued? Or were they other suns, as one Greek philosopher, Anaxagoras, had taught? Would humans ever travel to them, he wondered?

And, he asked himself, of all the book rolls in the world, and so many more likely to be made for thousands of years, would his story ever be in one of them? *Maybe if I really am a messiah who helps Israel, he thought, I will merit a chapter or two*

in the history of my people. Perhaps, he thought, he might even be able to retire someday, after his messiah work was done, and write a scroll or two himself.

Chapter 8: Egyptian Mysteries

When Jesus was sixteen, Judith called him to her in the Carmel temple's worship area. A deep blue sky was behind him as he walked in the main door wearing a wreath of flowers that several of the young girls had insisted on giving to him because they matched his dark-red hair. The sweet perfume of the flowers trailed after him. His face was red, and Judith figured he was slightly embarrassed at having girls fuss over his hair. It was clear to her that he had not grown up in a household with sisters. Was this, she wondered, a deficit in his upbringing? Should she and the other Essenes have insisted that Joseph and Mary begun normal relations soon after Jesus was born?

She gave Jesus a smile, and they hugged and exchanged the kiss of peace. Then she searched his dark-brown eyes. "My son," she said, a name of endearment for a student. "We can teach you no more here." She reached out with a wrinkled hand and took one of his. "Boys younger than you already are being initiated into the Egyptian mysteries. That is where we want you to go, according to the dreams several of us elders recently have had. In Egypt you will take the first three degrees of initiation into the mysteries. There are seven degrees in all, though the last ones are reserved for older men."

"Yes, Rabbi. I have waited for so long for this day." He grinned, and his eyes twinkled.

"After you are done," she told him, "you shall return here. We will see how well you have succeeded. Then we may send you to India for several years, before you return to Egypt for further studies. And," she added, "I imagine you can stop over for a half year in Persia with the Zoroastrians."

She then moved her hand to his shoulder. "You leave us with my blessing, Jesus. Now go quickly to the cave and pack your things. Visit your family for a week."

"Will my father take me to Egypt?" asked Jesus. "He knows the way."

"He remembers it very well, I'm sure," said Judith, "from the years you all lived in Alexandria. But he is very busy with his work in Nazareth and Sepphoris. And we don't want anyone to notice he is missing from work. You can disappear easily enough. He can't."

"What do we tell the people of Nazareth, if they ask?"

"Just that your studies continue, and that you must pursue them on weekends, as well. Herod the Great may be long dead, but Herod Antipas grows increasingly unpredictable. We'd like to keep you alive, Jesus."

He nodded. "Yes, Rabbi."

"One week from today," said Judith, her voice softening again, "an apprentice from here on the mountain will guide you to Egypt."

"And guard me?" Jesus asked.

"No one should travel the long roads alone," said Judith. "But yes, to watch over you, as well."

"We shall fight lions together on the road, he and I," said Jesus, raising one eyebrow and trying not to smile.

She rolled her eyes. "Yes, strong one of Israel, lions aplenty. But I think your brains may be stronger than your brawn."

Jesus flexed his arm muscle. Then if I am not a wrestler of lions, I must outwit them with my head."

As Jesus neared Nazareth to visit his family, he caught glimpses from afar of several of them on the roof of their house. When he first entered the edge of the village, he knew without doubt that he was away from Mount Carmel and its fresh breezes. A dust devil blew up from the street toward him, bringing with it the smell of drying sheep dung laid out in people's gardens. The mountain Essenes used such fertilizer, too, but the strong breezes in the high hills carried it away quickly. Here in the village, sometimes it hung in the air for hours. As he walked his street, sparrows flew from one olive tree to another, and several saws and hammers sounded from two or three new homes or additions being built, likely from the extra wealth of having Sepphoris nearby.

His family was overjoyed to have him visit for an entire week, but they were sad that he would be gone for months in Egypt. Mary looked particularly downcast whenever she thought Jesus wasn't looking. But he knew. And though he was looking forward to the adventure of Egypt, he realized that he, himself, also didn't feel completely comfortable leaving Mary, Joseph, Simon, and Josi behind. He was used to seeing them many weekends. They still were the center of his heart, if not his studies.

"Come with me," he joked at supper the night before he was to leave. They all were lying on their benches around the table on the roof, their left elbows resting on their pillows, as people did at meals.

Simon jumped up. "Can we!?" he exclaimed. "He looked at his father. "I want to go!"

Beside Simon, Josi turned to him and put a hand on his shoulder. "Your brother is joking."

"But I want to see mummies!" exclaimed Simon.

"I will tell you all about them when I return," Jesus said, nodding very seriously. "Every detail. Then someday you can go on your own."

Simon knotted his brow, turned the corners of his mouth down, and slowly lay back on the bench he was sharing with Josi.

"I wish we could," Mary said. She blinked several times. Then she stood, shifted her entire body in the opposite direction, and lay down once more: she did this often, now, as her expanding belly made her ever more uncomfortable. She was full with child once again. Soon she would need pillows to prop herself in several places.

Josi smiled at him sadly. "Will you be in Alexandria most of the time?" She turned to Mary. "Do you remember, Sister, how we used to read all the book rolls we could find in the Library there?"

"Don't I wish," said Mary, looking off to her left in the distance, remembering.

Jesus shook his head. "Not Alexandria, Josi, or perhaps, just a small part of the time. The school is in Heliopolis, further south along the Nile. It is part of the priests' temple there, the Great Pyramid."

"They don't let women in that place," Josi said, matter of factly.

"I'm sorry, Jesus said. "They should. They used to, Judith says, hundreds of years ago."

The conversation lapsed into a brief silence.

Jesus then looked up from his food and glanced around the table at each of them in turn. "I will miss you," he said quietly.

Mary began crying. She struggled up and hurried into the bedroom.

"It's all right," Joseph said as Jesus started to rise. "She just doesn't like your going away."

"But I'll be back in several months!"

"And then you will go to India," Joseph answered. "Mothers don't like losing their sons, Jesus, until the sons are married at eighteen. Even then, they usually stay nearby with their wives."

"I won't be marrying," Jesus said.

"We understand that," Joseph told him. "But you will be traveling instead, starting two years sooner than many boys leave home." Joseph's voice suddenly became rough and low. "We will see little of you these coming years." He cleared his throat and looked at the floor.

"Poppa." Jesus reached his hand across the corner of the table to his father and

mother's long couch. "I will miss working beside you in the workshop on weekends."

Joseph took his son's hand in his own. They clasped each other strongly and gazed into each other's eyes.

"How about me?" asked Josi.

Jesus turned to her.

Her face was shiny with tears. "Will you miss me?" she asked.

Jesus smiled. "Every time I am sad, Josi, I will wish you were there to cheer me."

"How about me!" Simon exclaimed. He jumped off his and Josi's bench and ran to Jesus. "Take me! I am strong and can put up a tent!"

Jesus laughed. "I'm sure you can, my brother. But you must wait until you are older have have finished studying your Torah and Prophets. Then will you travel with me?"

Simon nodded eagerly. "Why will we travel?" he asked.

Jesus frowned. "Why? Well, because it will be good for us! We'll talk with all the people of Israel, maybe further than that!"

Simon nodded. "I will talk with many people," he said. "You can help me by talking with them, too!"

Jesus, Joseph, and Josi looked sharply at each other.

"I hope so," Jesus told his brother gently. "I really hope so, Simon."

After one week, he met his guide on the road. The young man—a big, strapping Essene with a thick, bushy beard and hairy arms who looked more like a blacksmith in girth and muscle than the priesthood for which he was training—planned to ride down to Hebron to pick up his cousin John, the Forerunner, who would be going with them. Then Jesus and John would take their Egyptian degrees in the mysteries together.

When Jesus heard that, he exclaimed, "John? Judith did not tell me!" His face looked wonderstruck. *I get to travel with John, again!* he thought. The two boys, now young men of sixteen, had been so close in Egypt and Capernaum, but they had seen almost nothing of each other for over five years, except for occasional brief holiday visits.

Jesus and his Essene guide met his cousin at John's home at Ein Kareem near Bethlehem. John, too, had gone back to see his mother, Elizabeth, before leaving for Egypt.

“Jesus!” shouted John, running out of Elizabeth’s wilderness farmstead.

The two young men wrapped their arms around each other and hugged fiercely amidst the rocks and short pine trees. They could smell Elizabeth’s olive orchard and hear her lambs from higher on the hill calling. She was old enough, now, that others helped her with her farm.

“Ah, it is so good to see you, John!” Jesus pulled back from their embrace and grabbed his cousin’s arms.

“We finally have time to talk!” John exclaimed, looking up slightly at Jesus. Though Jesus was about half a year younger, he already was a hand’s breadth taller than his older cousin.

“Why couldn’t you come to the Essenes on Mount Carmel and visit me?” Jesus asked.

“Why couldn’t you come to the Jerusalem Essenes or better yet the Dead Sea outpost and visit me?” John replied. He waved his hand. “These Essenes. All they know for young men like us is work!”

Jesus glanced sideways at their Essene guide from Mount Carmel, who was standing a few lengths away in the street. He was pursing his lips as if trying not to smile.

“This is good,” Jesus told John. “We shall ride our donkeys together and find out what each of us has learned. Is that lean animal poking his head around the corner of the house yours?”

“Yes, don’t let his thinness fool you. I’m told he is a fierce opponent of any hyenas that might come our way. But first you both will come in and visit my momma, and we will give you the best bread you have eaten in a year, and the warmest wools for sleeping. But I warn you,” he said. “The wine is as sour as ever.”

“As is your humor,” said Jesus. “Still the same.”

John clapped him on the shoulder, jarring him. Both looked at each other warmly.

The next day, as the dusty road moved beneath their feet and those of their donkeys, they talked for hours. The winds in these wild places came harder as the hills grew shorter, and the brown hills around them grew increasingly deserted and wild. They described their lessons, their rabbis, and what their Essene communities were like. Jesus’ Mount Carmel Essenes were more a mixed group of men, women, and children, many of whom had their own homes and jobs beyond the community walls.

But John’s Essenes were the stern old men who had been training him for many years in Jerusalem in the southwest quarter of the holy city. There, only male

priests, scribes, and students were allowed to live, though some women studied there, too, unofficially. The men lived in a walled area of their own. The official entrance to their quarter was called the Gate of the Essenes.

John's community also had sent him for two years to a smaller group in the desert by the Dead Sea where a hermit gathering called Qumran lived a very spare life. They rose early and worked all morning before the worst heat of the day, at noon they bathed in full immersion for cleanliness and as a purifying ritual and then ate together, getting their water from a system of pipes and cisterns that ran for miles from the hills nearby where rain fell. And in the afternoon they prayed, wrote, and read.

Though some women also were allowed in this Dead Sea village, the community was much more rigid in discipline and in limiting anyone's wealth and leisure. And there was little to see or do at their small temple and walled village anyway, for the dry lands and the salty sea stretched in hot, empty thirst around them in all directions.

The first night they camped on the road through the Sinai Peninsula, Jesus and John stayed up late around the small campfire they fed from dead brush and small limbs, its smoke giving off the honey-flower scent of acacia wood. In the distant elevations were groves of fruit trees tended by mountain Egyptians. Nearer but still distant, striped hyenas stopped to look at them before continuing to hunt quietly and surreptitiously in the dark for mice and other small animals.

Their muscular companion, more a guide than a guard, had gone to bed after dusk and eating. He was well asleep, now, in the tent sewn of goatskins, which they shared. A night bird called quietly from a giant yucca a hundred paces away.

A pause came in their conversation. Both young men were staring into the fire. John used a pointed stick to knock a few embers back from the edge, into the flame.

"John?" Jesus asked. "Have they—told you?"

John's head whipped around. Then his face relaxed, but his legs grew taut. "Told me what?"

"About, well, what we are to do," Jesus said.

John spoke carefully. "They have told me about how I will someday have a special job." He avoided Jesus' eyes. "Why? What have they told you?"

Jesus shrugged. "Oh, just that I have a special mission, too."

Both young men shifted themselves at the same time, then stared at the fire.

"Did they tell you we have a job to do together?" asked John.

Jesus paused. "Sort of."

A cloud drifted over the quarter moon, taking away what light there was

beyond the circle of their fire.

John threw down the pointed stick so that the tip made embers explode upward into the night sky.

"They told me I'm supposed to help you," he spoke out. "You're the messiah!"

They turned their heads toward each other and stared into each other's eyes.

Then Jesus turned his head back to the fire. "Yes. That is what they say."

John picked up the end of his stick again, the tip now flaming a little. He snuffed it out in the sandy dirt and drew several lines in the ground.

"Do you believe it?" he asked Jesus.

"Do you?" Jesus answered.

"I do. Why not? They're usually right. Don't you?"

Up to a point," Jesus replied. "But their predictions are so, well, long term. So vast. Everything they say about my birth. The way it came about. It's just—strange."

"Do you doubt it?" John asked.

"Not really." Jesus touched his forehead, a gesture he'd picked up from Judith. "Perhaps I am a messiah. But maybe not *the* messiah. The one in the Torah and the Prophets, marching at the head of a great army, conquering Rome, becoming king."

John looked at him from under his dark eyebrows.

"Why not?" he asked softly. "Why should a messiah not lead an army against these"—John scowled—"Romans?"

"It is not in me," Jesus said. "I don't want to."

"But you will do God's will?" John's voice was stern, commanding. It was the voice of a much older and experienced man. The darkness of the night seemed to back away from it even as the fire suddenly grew brighter.

"You sound like a prophet." Jesus smiled.

John looked off into the dark in the direction of the high peaks and summits. "The Jerusalem Essenes are hard teachers," he said. John shook his head. "The Essene priests, living with them, they broke me in two with their rules. Not just the six hundred and thirteen of the Torah. So many more."

"You have not broken, John; you just have bent," Jesus told him. "You still are the same John that I knew as a child. But yes, I, too, will do the will of God."

"You sound like a messiah." John smiled a little. Then his forehead wrinkled. "Do you mind if I don't believe in you entirely?" he asked.

Jesus' jaw tightened. "Then a pox upon you and yours to the seventh

generation of your children!"

John did a doubletake.

Jesus had a slight grin on his face.

John shook his head. "I almost believed you, except you know I never will have children."

Jesus smiled fully, then, and he said, "Not even I fully understand myself, Cousin. How can I expect you to?"

John's shoulders relaxed. He nodded and spread out one of his hands slowly passing it in front of the fire. Yellow and orange light danced between his fingers. "It's just that I have trouble accepting any of this."

"I do, too," Jesus answered. "I look for a sign. When and if it comes, that may help, but I'll still have my doubts."

John's face relaxed some. "Listen, Jesus. I'm ready to follow you. If you need something, ask."

Jesus said, "You are tough and true, Cousin. You're a better Essene than I am."

John shook his head. "I've just had more rules to follow."

"Maybe it's the hair shirt you had to wear at Qumran."

John reared back and smiled. "You know about that? Two years. After that, putting on cotton from Egypt made me feel like royalty."

Jesus grinned. "But according to the Essenes, you are royalty. You're the Forerunner."

John grimaced. "Okay. Maybe. But Jesus, I have to go by my own mind in these things. I won't follow you blindly. Is that clear?"

"More than clear, John." Jesus nodded his head. The heat of the fire on his face was making him feel his tiredness. "Let's go to sleep," he suggested. He stood and yawned.

John rose and stretched. He kicked some gritty sand over the fire, turning it to glowing coals.

"Come on, Cousin." He laid his arm across Jesus' back. "We have the whole year to decide these things."

They quietly slid under their thick cloaks in the tent, careful not to wake their guide. John began snoring almost immediately beneath his cover. Jesus took several hours to fall asleep. He was cold. He also was too busy thinking about what he and John had said. Finally he practiced the breathing exercises Judith once taught him that warmed your body when you didn't have enough blankets. Sleep came to him only reluctantly, as he slowly drifted off into dreams of his future.

One of the dreams woke him up. He sat up suddenly in the tent. In the distance, a fox yipped. The cold air streaming down from the mountains was redolent of fresh pines. He lay down again to remember his dream. In it, he had been walking toward a tall man with a face full of deep wrinkles. A snake was waving behind the person's head. The old one peered at him with the steely eyes of a hawk regarding its prey. His chest was a blazing sun.

"The Seven," said the ancient-looking one. "First the Three. Then the Four. That is our Pyramid."

Then his gnarled hands spread wide, and the intense yellow of his burning heart became a piercing white brilliance so bright that it had a black rim around its edge. In the dream, Jesus covered his eyes. 'Look upon this! See!' commanded the elderly one, now nothing more than skin and bones. In the dream, Jesus pried open his eyelids so that they were slits and gazed into the center of the purple-white brilliance. 'This will be you,' said the aged one, "when we are done."

Jesus slowly felt himself becoming sleepy again. As he returned to slumber, he considered the dream. The Three, then the Four. *Too many numbers*, he thought. *Too much sun. I'll figure it out later.* Then he fell asleep again.

The two young men arrived in Heliopolis soon thereafter, after a stop in Zoan to see the street where they had stayed for a time when they were babies and had escaped Herod the Great's decree of death for very young children around Ein Kareem.

There in the central park they saw two groups, one of men and one of women, practicing dance steps to the winding music of lyres, tambourines, lutes, and one trumpet. The sounds were exotic and mysterious to Jesus and John.

"Much more complex than our Galilean sounds," said Jesus.

"Or ours down in Judah," said John. "I had forgotten how rich their chords and harmonies are."

"So, you remember this music from your youth here?" their burly guide asked. "They're practicing for the next big festival. Maybe even for the contest to go to Alexandria. Good, aren't they?"

The other two nodded.

The men, their chests bare, were turning with athletic jumps and shifts of their bodies. The women, dancing on the opposite side of the square green area, wore diaphanous gowns that hid but suggested. They moved with beautiful grace.

They stayed there the night, then moved on. They would have liked to visit the home of their youth, Alexandria, but it was out of the way, far west of the Nile, whereas they were headed south to where the Nile ran wide and true before

splitting into its many paths through the delta.

They stayed one night in Heliopolis. Then, finally as the next evening arrived, their young, muscular guide dropped them off at the huge, priestly temple: the Great Pyramid southwest of Heliopolis. It was brilliant white in the setting sun, its even slopes on all four sides covered in limestone.

The Pyramid was an Egyptian temple and a training school. There they would be initiated into the Egyptian mysteries. It rose sharply, endlessly, into the bright blue sky above. Around its base were small stone huts and carefully cultivated ornamental and food-bearing gardens. Most young men from Egypt and even as far away as Rome, who wished to know God, were initiated here between their studies in the Heliopolis school. Priests and commoners of several nations came and went, carrying scrolls, bringing food, or hauling wood and stone for repairs. Temple cats, well fed, strolled about here and there in the warmth as the sun dipped to the horizon. The air all about smelled almost desert dry, with just a hint of grass and dung now and then.

The temple itself, the Pyramid, was covered in brilliant white limestone that shone for dozens of miles away as if an alien star had touched down upon the earth. The top was capped by a layer of gold that gleamed like the sun. During the day, the great building was so bright from sunlight that people had to lift their hands to their eyebrows to peer at it through narrowed eyes.

Underneath its exterior were stones, very large ones, each higher and wider than a tall human. They were fit tightly together so tightly that not even a thin knife blade could penetrate the cracks. Inside it was a series of dozens of rooms large and small, above and below the ground with many secret doors and hatches. Some of these spaces—where royalty lay—were sealed off forever. Only a few of the remaining ones could be found without the help of the Egyptian priests. Many of the secret rooms were aired and sunlit by long shafts passing from the outside, above, where only birds could see the openings, into the depths of the dark cells inside.

Jesus and John were immediately separated. Jesus found himself being led to a simple and comfortable little stone room on the outer edge of the pyramid. There he was given water and a basin for washing, simple but good bread, onions, and figs, and a sweet wine to drink. There also was a fresh-smelling rush mat on which he slept, his cloak covering him from the coolness emanating from the stones.

The next day he was taken before the temple's high priest in the large stone reception hall. Light streamed in from several shafts. The walls were covered with white linen hangings shining brightly where the sun hit them. In the darker corners, wool was hung, smelling freshly beaten to rid them of dust, in embroidered strips of gold, red, and purple. Reed mats colored in gold and dark

blue were spread down the center of the floor.

Light but strong wooden chairs with tall backs lined the two longer sides of the walls. Jesus and John's guide to Egypt had told them about this room. Here the priestly council met. At the far end of the hall was a throne chair of hard, heavy dark wood with wide armrests. The back of it held a relief-carving of a coiled golden serpent. It was partly hidden by a tall, thin man who sat leaning his arm on the flat surface of the raised side, watching Jesus enter. Behind him, the snake became three-dimensional, rising straight up high above his head as if about to strike. It all reminded Jesus of his dream.

The seated priest rose as Jesus walked around the table to come to him. He and the chair were on a foot-high platform, which made him seem even taller.

Jesus tentatively held out his hand, as he would have in Israel. The man stood back and looked at him. So, Jesus bowed.

The man bowed back. Jesus realized he probably was the high priest of the Pyramid. His robe was of the finest thick linen with great purple stripes alternating with bleached-white ones. On his chest was a heavy gold disk of the sun. The medallion gleamed and shimmered even when the sunlight did not directly strike it.

"You are here," he said. His heavy white eyebrows drew together over his dark eyes. He watched Jesus intently. "Welcome. I am the high priest, the First Prophet of Amun, in this temple."

Jesus addressed him respectfully. "Thank you, Holy One."

"You may address me as Hem. I am the Hem-Netjer-Tepi, the First Servant of God. If I were female, you would call me Hemet."

"I am honored to be here, Hem," said Jesus.

The high priest gestured to the seat nearest his platform chair.

When they both were sitting, the First Prophet, still on his raised serpent chair, said, "Why did you and your cousin not go to our school first? Do you think the mysteries are less important than scholarly book rolls?"

"We have trained in some of the Jewish mysteries already, Hem, and wish to know more."

"You speak for your cousin John, as well?"

"In this I do," Jesus answered.

The high priest's eyes relaxed a little. "This is what your rabbi, Judith, has told us, through her messengers. She also has kept us informed of your growth."

Jesus took note that here in Egypt, away from the male priests of Israel, the high priest dared to call Judith a rabbi.

The high priest's stare suddenly shot deep into Jesus' eyes. "We know you," the priest said. "You are the predicted one, according to prophecies in our country and others."

Jesus blinked once, surprised at the directness. Then he nodded slowly, obediently.

"One of our number was there," the priest continued, "when you were born. I believe you called your visitors when you were a baby the 'magi'?"

Jesus said, slowly, "I thought they all were from Persia."

The priest nodded. "They were. But he was an Egyptian we had sent there to learn how the Zoroastrians predict by the stars. He has since returned, and now we also use what he says of the future. He tells us you will burn bright."

Jesus kept his eye contact with the priest. "Yes, Hem."

"You know, don't you," said the priest, "that there were Jews in Zoroaster's country, and they learned from him?"

"I had heard that some of our Jewish mysteries came from the teachings of Zoroaster."

"Hmph," said the priest. "Before Zoroaster, before the Hindus, before even Persia, was Egypt. Our mysteries long have gone out into the world."

"That is why Judith sent me to you," said Jesus. She says you are the earliest."

The First Servant looked even more sternly at him and frowned. "Now I must tell you a story we are required to teach all new initiates, though few hear it directly from me. Listen with both your outer and inner ears. This is the Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor."

Hen shifted hard in his chair, settling deeper into its cushion. Dust from finely ground desert sand came up from his cushion, making Jesus withhold a sneeze. The indirect light from the bright, hot desert sun lit up the large room as an ibis flew by outside, squawking.

"There are many versions throughout Egypt," he said. "Here in the temple, though, only us, we keep the true meaning."

Jesus pricked his ears, hoping to get information that might help him in his first test.

"This," said the high priest, is the Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor.

"Once upon a time," he began, "a sailor travelled on a large ship with 120 others of his kind. He loved the crisp air and knew well the rocking of the boat in the sea. But then a great typhoon arose with roaring winds and lightning flashes, making all cry out. And, in the huge, tossing waves, the ship broke apart. All the men on board drowned. Except for one. Barely alive, he washed onto the shore of

an island. It was a paradise. Every kind of food grew there, both plant and animal, in profusion, and many types of wood and reed for building a shelter with your bare hands.

“After eating and making himself a small home from the elements, the sailor set to prepare a burnt offering in thanks to the gods. As he gave to the fire a dove that he had killed and blooded, suddenly the earth shook beneath him, a great wind came up, and he beheld in the distance a huge shadow approaching. As it grew close, he saw that it was a giant serpent. The sailor was on a spit of sand by the sea and had nowhere to run, so he waited, trembling, preparing himself to die.

“The serpent raised its head high up in the air, larger than a human, slithered close, and demanded three times in a deep bass voice, ‘How is it you’ve come to my island?’

“The sailor, afraid to answer, kept silent. Then the great snake struck, taking the poor man into its mouth. But not biting down, it merely held him firmly and glided back into the trees to its home deep in the center of the island, under a great mountain.

“There it put him down and demanded, three more times, ‘How have you come to my island?’

“The sailor began to talk quickly, telling the entire story of the broken ship and saying that the king had sent him and the rest of the crew on a voyage of discovery. The great beast coiled up and rested, listening carefully.

“When the sailor finished, the serpent said, ‘Do not fear, for in four months you will be rescued by your own kind and taken home. There are many tragedies in life. I came to this island with 74 of my kin and my daughter. Then a great star plunged from the sky and set everything on fire, even all of my relatives and friends. The loss of my daughter was hardest of all. But steadily I spiraled up through the funnel of this mountain, at the inner base of which we now lie, carrying her corpse with me through all its seven levels. When I came out of the top, she woke from the dead. Now she is a bright star shining above us each night.’

“The sailor bowed. He said, ‘If you will let me return to my land, I will bring back many gifts and riches for you from my king.’

“The great serpent just laughed. ‘I am rich here. I am the Lord of Punt, and all creatures serve me. But because of your offer of gifts to me, instead I will send you home, for your king, my gifts of ebony, green vegetables, the dried red meat of many animals, coins of gold, azure resins, ripe blue berries, and ivory wrapped in purple mantles of the finest silk. All you need do is tell me your stories and learn how to climb the chambers of my mountain.’

“And so the sailor stayed for four months. After sharing his life’s events and

learning from the great snake how to travel up and down the tunnels of the mountain, the man was rescued. He returned home with all the bountiful gifts promised him. He presented them to his king, who gave back to him half of the whole and made him a great lord of the realm."

At that end to the story, the high priest raised his hand and gestured at Jesus. "Do you know the meaning of this? Tell me. What is the mountain?"

Jesus looked at him. "A high place with inner rooms up and down it. It is this Great Pyramid?"

Hen nodded once. "The shipwrecked sailor?"

"Me," said Jesus. "And John. All students?"

"Those, at least, whom we expect to climb to the top," said the priest. He then watched Jesus closely. "And what," he asked, "is the serpent?"

"The snake in our book of Genesis?"

Hen shook his head.

Jesus looked far off, then back to the older man. "I don't know."

"You give up too easily. It is the snake of knowledge. The one our high priests wear on the tops of our crowns in picture and ceremony." He bent toward Jesus. "The snake is us, young aspirant. It is I and the others who will teach you! We will be your great serpent. We are the physicians of souls. Through us, someday, with your hard work and God willing, you may become a master of the seven levels."

Jesus bowed low. As he did so, already he began reviewing the high points of the story so he could analyze it later.

When Jesus sat up again, the First Prophet waved his hand quickly in front of Jesus' eyes. "You are thinking so much. Stop! Here we teach what is behind and beyond thought." Then he added, more gently. "You can ask any of us to repeat the story. Ideas and memories are not entirely forbidden. Your free time will be your own."

Jesus raised his eyebrows. "Yes, Hen."

"Now," said the priest. "You are going to pass the first degree of initiation without trouble. Boys younger than you sometimes pass it. Indeed, there are seven degrees. The second one may be too difficult for you. Most men wait until they are older than you. It is your decision."

"Thank you, Hen."

The high prophet leaned forward. From his chair on its platform, he peered down at Jesus with steel in his eyes. "Young man," he said. "Do not take the third degree." He looked off and up to his left, then back. "Judith says you are ready for it. My recommendation is that you aren't. Many men fail it! A boy, for that is what

you still are, has never taken it. You should wait.”

“But,” Jesus asked, “will you honor Judith’s request, if I wish to seek this more advanced degree?” He watched the priest carefully.

The high priest sat up straight and shook his head. “We do not like breaking rules. They say someone must be eighteen or older to take the third degree.”

Jesus opened his mouth but then stopped when Hen raised his finger.

“But,” he said, “we may—and I only say *may*—“make an exception in your case.”

He bent forward again. “After all, if you really are the predicted one, we wish to help you as much as possible.” The priest’s mouth turned down so sharply that it seemed to extend into his neck. “But you must know that we absolutely will not make things easier for you. In this matter, we do not care who you are. If you fail our tests, then you must stop. Some failures might even disqualify you completely, in which case you would never be allowed to return for more degrees.”

He glared into Jesus eyes. “Do you still wish to go on?” he asked.

Jesus felt a shiver down his spine that moved all the way down to his thighs. “Yes,” he said.

The high priest stood and came down from his podium to Jesus’ chair. Then, for the first time, he smiled. He held his hand out to Jesus. “Come!” he said. “Rise!”

Jesus felt confused now. He took Hen’s offered hand and found himself pulled up by the older man’s strong arm.

“Ah, good,” said Hen. We were hoping you wouldn’t frighten easily. Now I will greet you. We finally shake hands. Welcome to our pyramid!” He held out his right hand to Jesus.

Jesus took it. In Egypt, shaking hands was symbolic of a sharing of spiritual power, so he felt a warmth go through him for the first time for Hen. Then, unexpectedly, the priest pulled in for a hug. “You have the kiss of peace in Israel, do you not?” he asked. Jesus now was very surprised. He nodded. Suddenly he and the other man were exchanging a peck on each other’s cheek.

The older man stepped back and clapped his hands loudly in the air. “You will go now,” he said. As soon as he lowered his arms, a very tall, dark, and unusually man perhaps ten years older than Jesus appeared in the doorway to the chamber. “This priest of the third order,” said the high priest, “is a good student like you. He will take you to your bath of purification. Then he will guide you to your first test as soon as you are clean.”

As the young priest, still in his mid-twenties, led Jesus away, he turned his head and said, “My friends have named me Tekhenu, which means pillar, because

I am so long and straight.”

Jesus looked up at him, examining his face. The man towered three handspans above him. “I am Jesus,” he said.

“I know,” said Tekhenu. “Are you examining my height, or have you never seen such a dark face?”

“My cousin and I lived in Alexandria for several years when we were young,” said Jesus. “Sometimes we had Nubian playmates. Is that where you’re from?”

“Yes,” said Tekhenu, “in Egypt’s south in the headlands of the Nile. And you are not white, either, as are many of the Greeks and Romans and the Greek-descended Egyptians.”

“Well,” said Jesus, “have you seen many Jews from Galilee and Judah?”

“Occasionally,” said the tall priest. “But you are darker than average.”

Jesus smiled. “That comes from travel. I was in the desert for two weeks, travelling here. And when I help my father, a carpenter, we work outside.”

Tekhenu bowed. “I am honored to meet you, Jesus of Nazareth.”

Jesus returned the bow. “And I, you, Pillar of your people.”

Tekhenu smiled. “Now come, follow me, and I’ll take you to your first place of initiation.”

The passageways were narrow, so they walked in single file silently. Tekhenu had to duck in order to pass.

As Jesus followed, he wondered whether he would be able to pass the second test later, not to mention the third one, as Judith wanted. He knew he fully intended to take them. And later, someday, would Judith let him and John take the final four degrees? He pondered whether they were extremely difficult, especially if they were harder than the third degree that, according to the high priest, sounded almost impossible. What if he and John, supposedly a messiah and a forerunner, failed the Egyptian mysteries? If that happened, how could they still be respected enough to guide Israel? Or would the priests and scribes of Jerusalem not care at all about Egyptian mysteries from a country so far away from the capitol of all faithful Jews?

He found himself suddenly turning to the tall Black man beside him.

“Tekhenu,” he said, “are the second and third degrees of initiation very difficult?”

Tekhenu answered with a nod, “I cannot say.”

“But aren’t you an initiate of the third order?”

Tekhenu turned up a hand. “I misspoke. I should have said, ‘I am not allowed to talk about them.’”

“Ah,” said Jesus. He felt butterflies in his stomach. What would they expect? Would he have to be mean or cruel to anyone, in which case he might have to refuse? What would Judith say? He sighed. He would, he decided, just have to take all this initiation business one step at a time.

Chapter 9: "Who Are You?"

The pillar-like priest, Tekhenu, older than Jesus but still relatively young himself, led Jesus forward through the narrow passages inside the pyramid, their sandals echoing in the gloom lit only by the small lamp the priest carried. As they paced, both could hear from a distance outside a group of priests singing a beautiful but somber chant, up and down the octave in harmony — something about Isis, Queen of the Dead, Jesus thought.

Finally, the two of them stopped before a small, bare cell lined with slabs of limestone. Jesus' mouth was growing drier by the minute. *How hard could this first initiation be*, he wondered? *Had that Queen of the Dead song possibly been for him? No*, he thought, *that's ridiculous. So many others have done this initiation. How bad could it be?* Even so, his jaw and chest were tight. He relaxed them and took several deep breaths.

In the little room, Tekhenu used his own small lamp to light a tall, fat candle. It flickered then burned bright with the woody, astringent scent of myrrh. It illuminated a small table in the middle of the room, making the pale walls glow gold. Myrrh, Jesus knew, was often used for anointing priests in Israel. However, he also remembered, it was part of embalming mummies in Egypt. He wondered which ritual use was meant for him here in this room. The candle's flame revealed Egyptian symbols and the scholarly Greek writing that was common among all countries of the Roman Empire. The two languages were painted in finger-high pictographs and letters at head and shoulder level on three of the walls. The room had no windows, just its wood-framed door.

Tekhenu nodded to Jesus. "You will stay here," he said. "Once a day I will bring you food, water, and another candle. Each day I will ask you this question: 'Who are you?' On the day when you answer it correctly, or admit that you cannot, you may leave the room. But only if you answer it right will you pass this test. For this is the first degree of your quest, the step when you discover who you are, and you then report it." He paused. "But if you should fail, you must wait at least a year before returning to try again."

Tekhenu bowed.

Jesus returned it.

Then the tall priest backed out of the room with a swish of his robes, closing the door behind him, which left a tiny flutter of dust slowly settling to the bare floor. Jesus was, except for the candle, alone in the dark beneath a mountain of carefully fitted stone.

Jesus sat on the bench of his bed against one wall, on the hard reed mat lying there, which would be his bed by night. He looked around. The room was bathed in a golden limestone color because of the candle. Jesus put his chin on his two fists. His elbows were on his knees. He briefly thought of John, and wondered if he would soon be going through this same experience in a similar room.

Jesus wondered what the high priest, Hen, wanted. "Who are you?" What kind of question was that? Jesus knew the answer couldn't be simply, "Jesus of Nazareth." Nor could it be, "the messiah." Both answers were obvious. The high priest already knew them. He expected more.

Jesus briefly wondered if the answer had to be the same for everyone in this first test. But he quickly realized there must be some allowance for variety, as there were so many possible words, meanings, and even languages in the many types of people who came from everywhere for these lessons.

For example, did the Egyptian priests expect him to remember some of his past lives? The Essenes on Mount Carmel had taught him about reincarnation of spirits. But he had no idea who, if anyone, he had been in past lives. Judith had said that could wait. So if that was the answer they wanted here, he would have to return home defeated.

He shifted restlessly and glanced at the Greek words and Egyptian hieroglyphics on the walls. His eye caught on one inscription. "Seek inside," it said.

Inside what? he wondered.

Near it, a symbol showed a heart pierced by an arrow. Under it were two ancient Egyptian symbols that, thanks to his language studies with Judith, he could translate. They said, "The center" and "The lightning bolt."

What is "the lightning bolt?" he asked himself. He saw the arrow symbol again, off to the left and over a column of sentences in both Greek and Egyptian. He read the Greek quickly:

THE LOTUS OF THE HEART, WHICH LIES IN THE CENTER OF
THE BREAST, BREATHE UPON IT.
THERE LET THOUGHTS LINGER, PIERCING THE GLOOM,
TURN THE FLOW OF THE RIVER TO IT,
LET MALE AND FEMALE JOIN,
HEAR THE SONG OF THE SOUL
THERE AS YOU CONCENTRATE.

He leaned back on his bed mat, confused. He was used to studying laws, predictions, history. Some of the prophets did offer images. And the Torah sometimes used symbols. But these painted words and pictures, they were giving

practical directions for how to think and feel.

He nodded. So that's how it will be, he thought. This is what the priests intended to teach him: not ideas, but actions. And the acts apparently were supposed to be internal. Judith had told him as much when she prepared him for going to Egypt. But now the reality of it bulged like a huge camel trying to come into his small cell door.

He sat cross-legged on his bed. He closed his eyes. And he tried following the directions by imagining he was breathing into the center of his chest near his heart. After a while, his breathing slowed, and he found himself becoming very relaxed but alert.

He already wanted to get up and find something to read, or perhaps go for a walk among the buildings around the pyramid. Then he noticed his body was growing cold. His first impulse was to reach his hands out and hold them over the flame of the candle. He forced himself to keep his hands down.

His chill increased in spite of the warmth in the room until his whole body began to grow numb. His chest was heavy and flattening as if a great weight pushed against it. He ignored these feelings and kept concentrating.

Gradually he became aware of his thoughts. They were rushing very fast, flipping into his head, one after another, talking all by themselves in his skull about everything from important ideas to little comments on how his body felt.

He kept concentrating on the spot between his breasts. Then a shadow passed near him, something felt more than seen, or perhaps a shade that darkened his thoughts within. He wondered what it was and let himself linger on it.

Suddenly, he felt guilt. He remembered a time in their small, mud-brick home in the Jewish quarter in Alexandria when he was perhaps four years old and his momma touched his chest right where he now was concentrating. Children had been out by the dozens in all the streets, running around mostly naked as young kids did in Egypt, some playing a jumping game, others yelling as they played with a leather ball, and he could recall the dusty mix of desert, ocean, and green reeds in the air. His momma had said to him, "Stop! What do you feel here?"

Wide eyed, he'd looked up at her, hesitated, and then said, "Anger?"

"Why?" she asked.

"Because Levi stole the ball when I had it!" he exclaimed. "He—"

"Jesus," she said, cutting him off. "I don't care why you're angry! What is it better for you to feel?"

Again he paused, staring into her eyes. "Love?" he asked.

She nodded. "Then go back out there. Love Levi. I don't care what happens

after that if you love him first.”

He'd nodded, turned, and gone back outside. He didn't remember what happened after that, but the shadow of guilt in him dissipated even now as he felt love building up in him, something he'd learned in childhood. He worked it into a nearly burning heat.

And soon all the little and big memories, comments, and labels in his head slowed down. Instead of rushing by quickly, they began bubbling upward, one after another, in slow progression. He could almost feel them coming from below and around him before they burst into full bloom in his head. Most seemed to be arising from his neck. In sudden irritation at the constant stream of useless words, he focused on the inside of his throat. He put his hand on his voice box and could feel it vibrating as the words arose in his head. He imagined it as two curtains in a doorway, opening and closing with his words. He slowly relaxed his whole neck, one hand still touching the front of it, until it stopped buzzing. His head became silent.

He let the quiet settle through him until it spread to each corner of himself. A sense of awe slowly came over him. Deep in the inner peace in his mind, an unthinking but always aware part of himself realized he had never felt such a total absence of words except, perhaps, when he was absorbed in a beautiful sunrise or gazing at mountains or valleys.

But he realized that he was still aware. He wondered, wordless, like a giant question mark, what that part of him was. Still without thinking, like a huge beast turning gradually on itself, he turned his awareness on this part of himself that remained aware.

And he found it. Like an eye looking at itself in a mirror, this part of him watched itself calmly. Then, completely surprising him, it merged with itself and exploded with a blinding flash of combined light and dark in which stars appeared, and the sun. The sun rapidly came closer until it became everything, heat, light, pleasure, a total knowing. As if this were not enough, his awareness boomed in a silent thunderclap to become, briefly, Everything. All of his life, all anyone could know, every opposite, somehow was there. He basked in it for an infinity of what might have been seconds or hours.

Then he reeled back, as if someone had struck him in the face. His mind began working again.

He discovered that tears were coursing down his face. He could feel his heart thumping in his chest. He blinked several times, then raised his numb and heavy hand and wiped his face. He looked at the candle. It had burned down to only a small fraction of a finger's breadth.

Slowly he stretched his limbs out from his seated position on the bench. His

left leg had been crooked partly under him. Now it began to sting terribly as circulation returned to it. He stood and paced back and forth around his small room until his circulation returned and his whole body felt warm. Then he lay down.

His heart still was beating in his breast, and he felt a rush in his stomach. He wondered whether he was feeling excitement, or was it fear? How, he wondered, had this experience happened? Was it the room that somehow encouraged it, or the candle's scent like incense, or, somehow, the leftover imprints of other seekers who had started their journeys to knowledge in this same small room? If the latter were true, he thought, he had been preceded by some impressive seekers.

Or, he wondered, was it just that he simply was ready? Did the opportunity to be alone with nothing in the room except the symbols and the directions on the wall somehow open a part of him he hardly knew was there? But of course it was there, he thought! It had always been there—his awareness. How could he never have simply looked at his own awareness? It seemed so obvious to him, now that he had seen it.

He closed his eyes and carefully remembered as much of his strange new experience as he could. He went over it three times in his head, just as Judith had taught him for recalling an important experience.

And as Jesus remembered, he also slowly fell asleep. He began to dream. In it, he was soaring away from the earth, its surface blue, white, green, and brown, and toward the stars. As he grew closer to one of them, it looked like his own sun. He felt himself go through its impossibly hot brightness, then on to another star, where the same thing happened, and then to another. He gradually fell into ever deeper sleep, only vaguely aware, at the end, of his sleepy vision of moving from one bright point to another. He slept deeply, restfully, for twelve hours, then awoke with a start.

The door made a scraping sound, and then the pillar of his people and third-level initiate, Tekhenu, entered the room. His black face was shiny with sweat, so Jesus figured he must have come directly from outside.

Jesus sat up quickly and rubbed his eyes. Tekhenu was carrying a bowl. Whisps of steam arose from it. Through the open door, Jesus could hear a gull not far from the Nile calling raucously. A cat slipped in, proudly carrying a dead pyramid rat that smelled of sewers. The cat cocked its head and looked at Jesus as if seeking approval.

Tekhenu put down the bowl of hot barley cereal he was carrying in one hand and a large clay cup of fermented barley for drinking in his other. Commoners in Egypt used pottery for glasses, and instead of the wine of the richer classes, they

drank beer. On top of the vessel was a carefully balanced bunch of grapes. Tucked under his arm was a replacement candle, which he then held out to the old candle stub, still burning, lit the new one, and replaced old with new in the candleholder.

Jesus stood.

“Good morning,” said Tekhenu, smiling. “How did you sleep, Jesus?” Then two furrows appeared between his thin eyebrows. “Most of us who have passed the first degree did not sleep through our first night in this room.”

Jesus nodded. “Thanks for the food, Tekhenu. In the middle of the night, I became sleepy and drifted off.”

Then the priest turned to face Jesus. His eyebrows rose high. He smiled and said, “Now it is time for your daily question. I will ask it each morning. Are you ready?”

Jesus nodded.

Tekhenu asked, “Who are you?”

Jesus, still waking up, stared at him, blinked, and then composed himself. Then he began to frown. He looked down, and then gently up again, to meet the slightly older man’s eyes. “My Poppa and I are one,” he said. Then he waited for the tall, dark priest to respond.

Tekhenu arched his eyebrows. His eyes darted up to the left and back. “I don’t remember your father having come with you on this trip!”

Jesus nodded. “My carpenter father is still in the north. But all of us have the same Father. He is within us,” he told Tekhenu. “Right here.” Jesus touched his chest.

Tekhenu frowned. “If I have understood you correctly,” he asked, “you are saying that you and God are one?”

Jesus’ eyes narrowed in concentration. He nodded. “Yes. That is another way of saying it.”

“There are many ways,” said Tekhenu. He rose to his full height, his head scraping the ceiling, and bowed once to the younger, shorter man, barely out of boyhood, in front of him. “I will tell the high priest exactly what you have stated. Have a good meal, Jesus.”

Jesus returned his bow, and as he did so, Tekhenu disappeared in a whisper of robes. All Jesus saw when he looked up was the door closing on him once again.

Jesus turned his head and looked at the writing on the wall once again. “Let the River flow there, let the god and the goddess join there,” it said. He thought of the river of awareness that had suddenly burst open to reveal things to him. And if a person could think of God as being both male and female, then perhaps both “the

god and the goddess" had been a part of it. He remembered one of the Torah's uses of the name of God as Elohim, and how it meant both male and female. He had felt comforted and held by a golden female part of God, just as much as he had been in awe of the lightning energy and power of the male part of God.

As for the "song of the soul" in his heart, well, he thought, he was feeling pretty good this morning. In his whole body he felt overwhelmingly free and pure. It was a great feeling. Yet, he then thought, *This must become stronger. How else can I become a messiah for Israel?* Then he set to his food and drink, waiting for the young priest to return and tell him whether he had given an acceptable answer.

Several hours later, the door creaked open once more, and Tekhenu with his tall, slender frame appeared. He looked troubled, and instantly Jesus felt his heart begin to beat faster. *Was my answer wrong,* wondered?

The Black priest bowed. Then, looking Jesus in the eye, he shook his head. "A strange answer. I've never heard anything like it. I've read widely, not just in our Egyptian religions but in yours and others. Mystical texts. Rituals. Symbols. No one ever has called God 'Poppa.'"

Finally, he smiled. "The First Prophet, Hen, says your answer is acceptable! Come. Your timing is excellent, for now the sun of Amun-Ra is in perfect position. We are waiting for you."

We, Jesus wondered? But he stood and followed.

Tekhenu led him to the same sunlit hall with the long table and the two rows of chairs where he first had met the high priest, Hen. As they entered, Jesus could hear, through the window shaft in the angled wall on one side, that priests outside of the temple were chanting a morning song. Inside, a bright shaft of sun lit the room, and curling smoke from burning frankincense filled the air.

This time the large room was filled with seated priests, faces of many shades of color—olive, yellow, red, pale, and black—almost all in white robes on either side of the long table. Down its length, each holy man—and two Nubian women—had a clay flagon of water before each. As Jesus walked toward them, they all watched him carefully. These were the higher priests of the Pyramid temple. Normally, once every four weeks at the change of the moon, the new first-degree initiates would be greeted as a group into the first order of the priesthood. But these lordly clerics of the pyramid had heard of Jesus. They all, sceptics and believers in him alike, wanted to see him.

No one spoke. Thick smoke from incense curled into the air from both ends of the table. At the far point, Hen sat on his raised platform. This time he was in his ceremonial black robes befitting the First Prophet of Egypt. As Tekhenu guided

Jesus to Hen, the old priest rose up high from his great serpent-back chair. He smiled at Jesus, stepped down from his raised dais, and took the young man by his elbow.

He led him to the other side of the long table where, to Jesus' surprise, several segments of a thick slate flooring had been removed, revealing a deep bath of water with steps going down into it. The small, clear pool sparkled brightly in the beam of sunlight hitting it directly. Jesus immediately remembered how many Jews had similar baths. Whether their family was rich enough to afford a small indoor pool, or they went to slightly larger communal baths in some of their houses of God, they used them for both health and spiritual purification. He had seen them especially in the dining areas of Essene buildings in Jerusalem and Qumran.

The priest placed one of his hands on Jesus' head and raised the other high. "Oh Amun-Ra," he called out, "oh Light and Creator, here is an initiate who knocks on the door of your universe. You already have opened it to him. Allow us to celebrate his entry to the Waters of the Original Infinity."

He took Jesus' elbow and gently tugged him straight down into the quiet depths, creating small wavelets as they descended. Then he placed his hands on Jesus' shoulders. "The Eye of Horus has found you," he intoned, his voice filling the room. "From the Upper Nile to the Lower, from your head in the clouds, high on the hills, to the soles of your feet resting in the great sea at the bottom, from the crown above your hair to the roots of your toes, this is the flow. It is your first purification."

Hen pressed down on Jesus' shoulders. Jesus gave way, letting himself be submerged.

Jesus bent his legs until the water was over his head. As he went under, he thought of how he never had gone through a ritual dipping like this, nothing more in Israel than a simple prayer or brief invocation, at the most. However, he remembered that Cousin John had experienced it—every day before lunch, apparently, when he lived and worked at the Essene retreat in Qumran by the Dead Sea. If John could do it, thought Jesus, then so could he. He gave himself up to the moment, finding himself submerged in both water and his oneness with his Poppa. In a timeless instant that seemed like forever, he felt himself floating both inside and out.

Hem then put his hands under Jesus's arms and lifted him up. As Jesus rose, the First Prophet then declared, speaking loudly, "Now your ka, your soul, has been purified by your success in the first initiation of our temple. The creator, Atum, has touched you. You are now a member of our order, a priest of the first degree with all rights and accesses granted thereunto."

He handed Jesus a towel of white linen that Jesus used to wipe his face. Then the high priest gave Jesus a clay chalice with water in it, like those on the long table.

All the priests rose, picked up their similar vessels, and held them up, waiting. Hem motioned to Jesus with his fingertips, so Jesus raised his simple chalice. Then, together, all drank.

Next, Hem took a very small jar of kohl, the same dark, oily material that both women and men of Egypt used to paint their eyes, and he drew the Egyptian ankh—a cross with a closed loop at the top—on Jesus' forehead between his eyes.

Then tall Tekhenu was at Jesus' side again, crooking a finger for Jesus to follow.

The older Black man led Jesus to a comfortable room very close to the outer wall of the pyramid with an open window in the slanted wall through which the sun streamed. Tekhenu smiled, nodded, and bowed. Then he left, even as Jesus bowed in return. He sat down, but immediately the First Servant of all strode silently through the door. Jesus began to rise again.

"No," said Hem. "Stay seated. You did well today."

Jesus snapped his head up. "Thank you, Hem. That was the best bath I ever have had."

Hem cocked one eyebrow and looked carefully at Jesus. He saw that the young initiate was smiling. "You joke about the ritual?" he asked.

"No," Jesus said. "Well, I make light of it, but I am telling you the truth. I've never before been immersed as a blessing, and it made me feel very close to God."

"To your Poppa," said Hem. Finally, he smiled. "Well and good. Take your change of dry clothes," he said, pointing at a small, neat bundle on the bed. You may rest here in your room in the temple for several days before returning to the school in Heliopolis."

"When may I take the second degree?" Jesus asked.

"When you are ready," the high priest said.

"I will begin it now, First Prophet."

The priest lost his smile. His eyes opened wide. "Surely not yet! You have just come from the first one!"

"Is it so difficult?" Jesus asked.

Hem frowned. "Yes. It is the first great cleaving of those who merely wish to know God from the people who really wish to follow our priestly way. Many grown men fail." Hem's frown deepened. "You should," he continued, "live on meager food, and meditate, at least a month before taking this degree."

Jesus nodded. "I meditate each day, First Prophet. And I eat sparingly already. I am ready."

The high priest shook his head. "Then wait. Prepare yourself for at least a week. Men have left the room screaming from this test."

Jesus said nothing, just looked at the older man expectantly.

Hem stared. He looked off high to his left, then high to his right. He shook his head once, and his mouth tightened. "Come, then," he said. "I only hope you are right."

Chapter 10: Endless Night

Carrying nothing else for light except a small olive-oil lamp, slowly the high priest, Hen, still dressed in his ceremonial black robes, took Jesus ever downward on several sets of stairs so narrow that the shoulders of the two men brushed both sides of the narrow space in the near-absolute darkness. Hen turned once and opened his mouth as if to speak to Jesus, then shook his head and turned back.

Each time they descended to a new level, three or four new sets of steps and occasionally a door branched off a landing so small they barely could turn in it. The air felt absolutely dry and smelled of ancient stones set so tightly and smoothly together that no mortar was needed. In the deathly silence, their sandals padded loudly on the slight grit of each step. Jesus sensed they were moving ever further back—and far underneath—the very center of the Great Pyramid. The walls were becoming increasingly cool to the touch.

They finally stopped at a small door of thick, ancient wood. Hen opened it and led Jesus into a dark side room lit only by the priest's lamp. In the room, little more in length and width than the size of a Long Face man, it held a sleeping mat on the cool floor, a rough blanket made of the coarse, outer guard hair of a camel, a dark-blue jug of water in one far corner, and a wide brown jar with a thick lid in another for relieving himself. Otherwise, the room was bare stone, clean and dry as dust.

"This," he told Jesus, "is the second step: the test of total darkness and seclusion. You will stay here. The door will be shut but not locked. If you leave the room without our permission, you have failed."

Jesus nodded.

"Once a day," the high priest continued, "a priest of higher degree will bring you food and peer at your face to see if you still are rational. He is not allowed to talk to you. You may scream or shout, beat the walls, or even inflict pain upon yourself except for permanent damage, and the test will continue. The only way you may end it without our permission is by leaving this room, or by going mad."

Jesus protested. "I will not act in any of these ways, Holy One. Why should I?"

The high priest did not smile.

"You will have no light," he told Jesus. "No sound comes down to this cell. Two men of every five who come here walk out the door before their time is up. One of every five loses his mind for a time, sometimes for months, occasionally, years. Half of the remaining two of five succeed but never go on to the third degree because they fear even worse tortures."

He stared hard at Jesus. "It really is torture, my son. The Romans came several

years ago to study this method. We made them take this degree to learn it. Most of them failed. One killed himself. Several others returned to Rome and use it now to successfully question traitors and enemies of their empire.”

“And yet there is good purpose for this?” Jesus asked.

“Learn what is important and what is not,” the high priest answered. “If you stay here, one of us eventually will come and remove you, sane or not.”

“How long is the test, Holy One?”

The older man said, simply, “We do not know. So I cannot tell you.”

Jesus wondered if he would be here for months, or whether they purposely intended everyone to go insane at some point. But no, he thought, two of five somehow passed the test.

The priest cleared his throat. “Before I leave, you should know that every aspirant to the second step hears the story of Kek. It comes from our most ancient times. I will tell it to you now. Please sit.”

Jesus lowered himself to the reed mat on the bare stone. He felt a slight shiver and so took up the rough wool blanket that smelled of camel and wrapped it around his shoulders. His mouth was sour, so he swallowed several times. The high priest’s face glinted from the olive oil lamp’s shine.

“This,” said the older man, is the story of Kek and the Rising Sun.

“Before the earth was born,” he continued, moving his hand in a wide, slow arc, “chaos ruled the cosmos. Just as in one of your two creation stories in your Torah, all was complete darkness. The lack of light was infinite: a great, endless ocean of waves of water vibrating in every direction. Atum, the All, the he-she creator god, it was Atum who had produced nothing in this eternal night except eight great parts, each one a god, each an infinite serpent.

“One of these immortal snakes was Kek. He was the Darkness itself. Some now say that his head was that of a serpent; others believe he had the face of a frog. This is so because, every fall, both creatures burrow into the mud of the Nile to disappear and die. Then they arise, reborn, in spring. This darkness was like Kek, who lived in the watery grave of the universe in its winter, almost dead.

“But Kek and his female consort and equal mate, Kauket, were not happy with their obscure, absolute night. In the emptiness of eons, they now sighed, an exclamation that took centuries, and began hoping to feel the waves of the other gods’ movements. They began to fear being alone in their great cosmic sea. As do all of Atum’s creatures, even the great creator god, Atum, himself, they desired more.

“Finally, one day, they felt the movement of the great he-she Atum near them. Together as one, they turned to their lord, and they cried out to him. “Oh creator of

all," they called, "we have come to know the sightlessness of the corpse, the breath of the decaying dead, the nothingness of your absence for a hundred thousand years. Let us create an opposite time so that we can set our own eyes on your creation!"

"Then all the other six gods thrashed and squirmed with anger through the whole length of the universe and its waters of chaos. They cried out to Kek and Kekua, 'You cannot change! We are male and female each, two of Water, two of Invisibility, and two of Infinity! How can we survive without your infinite, eternal Darkness?'

"Then Kauket, Kek's consort, boldly stood forth. 'If Atum grants,' she declared loudly, 'My lover, Kek, will be bringer of light each morning. 'And with Atum's permission, I shall become bringer of night each evening, bringing back the dark. In this way, oh gods of the unformed cosmos, Kek and I will compromise for the sake of your wishes and give all of us the best of both.'

"The other six gods agreed, thrashing their heads up and down in the great cosmic sea. And so it was that Atum reached one hand out to Kek and another to Kauket and touched each one on the forehead. At that instant, the sun burst forth, which they named 'Atum' for the creator god himself. Ever after, sun named Atum rose on the upstretched arms of Kek each dawn, and Kauket enfolded Atum in her arms each evening and took him to rest so that night might be restored. And through both piercing brightness and utter darkness and all that lay between, the other gods decided it was good."

Then priest left Jesus and strode to the door. Briefly, though, he paused. He turned. Leaning forward, he said, "Before I go, I have wanted to ask you, is it common in your nation to call God 'Poppa'?"

Jesus shook his head.

"I thought not," said the high priest. "Why do it?"

Jesus shrugged. "I feel he is close to me. They tell me he is my true birth father. I also have my father in the flesh, who betrothed my mother before my birth and has cared for me all my life. I feel very close to him. Shouldn't I feel the same way about God?"

"It may get you in trouble," the high priest said. "Some of our priests here already consider it disrespectful."

"I always will speak of him respectfully," Jesus said.

The high priest stared into his eyes. "Think of your 'Poppa' long and hard in this room, Jesus. Perhaps that will get you through this new initiation."

Then, without another word, the high priest swung the door tightly shut. His padding footsteps quickly faded away. Jesus found himself alone in a profound

darkness. On his reed mat, even with the camel blanket around him, he could feel the seeping cold of the stone underneath. The scent of dry, dusty old air with a slight touch of mold from even lower parts of the temple moved languidly whenever he shifted. He saw a few flickers of false light and realized they were caused by his blinking; then they, too, faded away.

He held his hand before his face. It was absolutely invisible. He closed his eyes and then opened them. The total darkness was the same.

He stood and used his hands to grope his way along the walls to the corner where he had seen the jug of water. He drank. Then he returned to the sleeping mat and sat down with crossed legs.

The darkness pressed in. His thoughts began drifting. He tried to concentrate on the center of his breast as he had done in the first room. But he was too distracted by his mind.

He thought of John. Surely, he believed, by this time John was taking his first degree or even finished with it. Would John take the second degree right away, too?

His thinking strayed to his home. He thought of his parents and of his new brother or sister being born about this time. Josi would be taking care of the new baby even as she continued to watch over his younger brother, Simon.

His thoughts drifted on. For several hours, his mind strayed, and he let it. Finally, he became bored.

He tried meditating within himself, but his mind still was unruly and refused to stop being busy. For something to do, he began reviewing some of his more interesting Essene lessons, especially from the prophetic books. He did this for several hours until he grew tired. Then he slept.

Jesus awoke suddenly. He opened his eyes. At first he thought he was still dreaming—wisps of a vision in which he had been flying again, this time over Mount Carmel. But it certainly was not real, for he found himself on a hard floor and there was no light here. Then he remembered where he was. The word “tomb” immediately leaped into his head. He knew, logically, this was untrue—he could get up and walk out of this place anytime he chose. Still, it was hard to imagine it otherwise.

He rolled his head on his shoulders to stretch his neck. He had no idea how long he had slept or what time of day it was: no sun or moon to rise or set, no birds calling or people talking. He imagined the dim stone walls of one corridor after another beyond his cell stretching endlessly away like slender roots of an enormous tree: all dark corridors leading from chamber to room to nothingness. The darkness that was so fulsome in his eyes pressed inward upon him as if it were

a huge, groping animal slowly grabbing for the center of his head.

He closed his eyes and pressed them with his fingertips. The darkness went away, was replaced by bright balls and particles of blues, reds, and yellows. When he pressed harder, he found, he could create a dazzling white. He stopped, concerned he might hurt himself.

He shifted restlessly, reached out for the jug of water, and remembered it was still in the corner. He slowly found his way to it, drank, and took another minute to find the larger pot and relieve himself. Then he took the water jug back to his sleeping mat. He drank from it long and deep to get rid of the hunger pangs in his stomach.

He tried once more to concentrate on the center of his breast. The darkness still was too distracting, very enclosing. So instead, he worked to remember some scholarly problems he had encountered recently in the Torah's Laws. He decided to focus on them. Intricate and subtle, the arguments for and against their meanings shifted and interpenetrated each other, seeking new applications. He examined them for what seemed like forever. At one point, he surprised himself by discovering he was talking out loud. He shrugged. Why not, he thought? The sound of his voice filled the little stone cell, giving distance and definition to its invisible walls, ceiling, and floor.

Then he heard footsteps. Someone began opening the door. Suddenly a light that seemed ten times brighter than the sun pierced deep and painfully into Jesus' eyes. He closed them quickly, waited a minute, and then slowly opened them. The light was nothing more than an oil lamp. And carrying the lamp was a face he recognized. "Tekhenu," exclaimed Jesus. "Pillar!"

The Long Face, thin priest was so black that only his eyes and his white robes stood out in the deep gloom. He smiled and bowed his head once. "Greetings, Jesus. I am not allowed to talk with you, but I will come once a day." He bent over the low table, traded the empty water jug for a full one, and laid down a loaf of rough, dry-looking bread. It smelled stale.

Jesus let his whole body fill with the light from the cheap castor oil lamp and the fruity scent it gave off as if he were bathing in the sun and smelling the most expensive of incense. He opened his ears fully to the quiet shuffling, clicking, and clacking sounds that Tekhenu made.

Tekhenu bent down and looked carefully in Jesus' eyes. Then he nodded, smiled at Jesus once more, and left. *Apparently*, Jesus thought, *I still look sane*.

Tekhenu's absence made the darkness feel like a solid weight now pressing down on Jesus. He stood and moved to the table. He reached for the loaf of bread, running his hands over the hard, smooth surface on the outside and slowly breaking it open. It was dry and unsweetened, at least a day old, but still warm

from the hotter temperatures of the air outside the pyramid.

Jesus broke off a piece and chewed on it thankfully, letting each bite dissolve fully in his mouth before swallowing—and old trick he had learned when travelling to fool his stomach into thinking it had received more. Then he worked on scholarly problems in his head again, going for many hours until his head nodded and he dropped off to sleep.

This next time he awoke, he knew he had not slept long. The dark no longer was pressing in on him. His eyes were filled with flashes of pretty colors.

He watched the colors for a while, but then his heart started beating fast, and he could feel his skin contracting. What if, he asked himself, seeing colors like this was a sign of madness?

He tried to make the colors go away by concentrating on his scholarly problems. It didn't work. He pressed his eyelids hard, thinking maybe he could fight the colors with more colors.

As soon as he took his fingertips away from his eyes, the colors were as before.

He stood. He felt for the wall, found it, and slowly began walking around the small cell with one hand always on the wall. The cool stone, now slightly damp from his breath in the room for a day or two, comforted him, made him more alert. The colors didn't go away, but at least he felt he was the master of them. He kept walking and walking, imagining a trough under his feet from hundreds of others who must have tread the same path in this room, tiring himself until he was ready for sleep.

The next time he awoke, he knew he had slept a long time. He glanced quickly at the door and saw it was shutting. He figured Tekhenu had visited him again. The shadow of light from beneath the door quickly faded. He jumped to his feet but then realized that if he chased after Tekhenu, he would leave the room and fail the test. But why would he want to chase after the priest, anyway? He felt some deeper part of him wanted to grab the Long Face priest's arm and drink in the light from his lamp, just for a minute, perhaps hear him say a few friendly words, even bask in the warmth of his smile.

Jesus shook his head and sat down again. How many times had Tekhenu visited him while he was sleeping? He was losing count of the visits, of the loaves of bread, of time.

The colors returned, flooding his vision. But this time, voices came with them.

Jesus reached out quickly for his food. He tore it apart bit by bit, then began eating it. That didn't stop the voices. They became more distinct, came closer.

He heard one voice repeating like an echo in a much larger space, "Time, time, time."

He firmly tossed his head back and forth.

The sound of his mother crying out in labor came to him, then quickly disappeared.

The voice of the high priest saying, "It may be too difficult!" passed by him, loud and quick. He even looked up, thinking he might find the door opening and the old man standing there. Then he realized the voice came from no single direction. It was in his head.

He fought the voices. At first he tried thinking of things, anything, to make the voices go away. He wove great fantasies in the air. This worked for a while, but some of his fantasies were becoming more real and uncontrollable than the voices.

He tried pacing. For a while, as before, it at least gave him a feeling of mastery over the voices. He walked around his little room. An hour stretched into two, then three. His feet began aching from walking on hard stone. He realized he was beginning to stumble. He found his mat and fell to it. His blood was pounding. The blood was pounding in his temples, making his eyes throb with alternating yellow and orange bursts of light. He was farther away than ever from tiredness and sleep.

Suddenly one voice made him sit up straight. It called loudly, "You are the son of God."

Laughter, strange and frightening, followed it.

"I wonder what Jesus is doing?" another voice asked. It sounded like John's.

A third voice yelled, "I am not going mad!"

Jesus put his fingers to his lips, tried to speak out loud. His tongue and throat were so dry he barely croaked. He found his jug, wetted his mouth, and then drank.

"Poison!" a voice exclaimed. He remembered the pestilences that Yahweh had visited upon Egypt when Moses told the Pharaoh to let his people go. The image of a large frog from the Nile, bloated, floating in an eddy of the great river, appeared before his eyes. He raised his free hand and brushed it through the image, and the three-dimensional picture in front of him slowly faded.

He then saw noticed a flicker at the other end of his small cell and, looking up, dimly could see a badly deformed man. Where his mouth and nose should have been was just a large hole. His hands had no fingers, his bare feet no toes. Jesus had seen people like this occasionally in Sepphoris, working with his father. They were lepers. Some lived in colonies, but others kept to the streets of rich districts in order to beg for money and food. The leprous moaned through his lipless hole and waved to Jesus with his stubby hands to approach. Jesus squeezed his eyes closed. The sight of the cripple remained. He realized the man was just an image in his head.

That scared him. Then, surprised, he almost dropped the water jug he was holding. He had been sitting sideways, half lounging on his floor mat as if on a dining couch, but now he hastily threw himself into a cross-legged position and tried concentrating intently on the center of his chest.

Suddenly his focus shifted itself to his heart. And this time, whether from fear, need, or his slightly different point of concentration, the change worked. Immediately he felt and saw a blue explosion of energy in his heart and the area around it, and he felt the blue spread quickly around his entire body in waves, clearing his space of both voices and other sights.

He rested his awareness in the center of it, clinging hard, until he finally drifted off into an empty, blank slate of a dream.

Again when he awoke, he had no idea whether he had slept long or short. He heard a grating noise, rock rubbing against stone. A section of wall in his cell began moving. He could just barely see a dim, vertical light becoming wider.

Then the light flared into a painful brightness. Jesus shut his eyes.

When he opened them again, the grating noise had stopped. Two men of unknowable age stood before him in priests' brilliant white robes, but with deep hoods covering their heads. They held thin candles in their hands, shading the light from him. Their faces were so far back in their hoods that only vague shadows of noses and foreheads were visible. One was Long Face with a long head, the other of average height but wide.

"You are Jesus," said the Long Face one.

Jesus pressed his eyes with the heels of his hands. Were the sliding wall and the men a dream? He wasn't sure. He wanted to crawl to them so he could reach out and touch their garments to see if they were real. "Who are you?" he asked.

"No names," said the other one. Jesus decided to think of them as Long Face and Wide.

"We have come to warn you," Long Face said. "You may die here, if you do not leave soon."

Jesus felt bumps grow on his flesh as a light shiver ran through him. His pulse suddenly grew rapid.

"What danger is here?" he asked in as calm a voice as he could muster.

Long Face lifted his candle a few inches. His forehead came more into view. It was high and refined. "The priests," he said, "they deceive you. You never will leave the temple. Not until you are their slave."

"Slave?" Jesus asked. He was growing cold. His legs felt tight.

Long Face hissed. "They are emptying your head. Making you into a shell!" He

waved his hand around the bare cell. "It all starts with illusions. Are you not seeing things?"

Jesus nodded.

"Soon, Jesus," said Wide, speaking in a lower, more modulated voice as if to a close friend, "your visions will be too much. They will then come and torture you." In a friendly gesture, he pointed at Long Face. "Look there!"

Long Face held up a leather whip that tapered to many small strands tipped with glinting shards of bone.

Despite himself, Jesus' mouth dropped open. "Why would they do that!"

"Oh, Jesus," said Wide, his voice full of sadness. "Why should they not? You are still just a boy. They sacrifice full-grown animals daily, blodding sheep and goats for our gods. Did you think they don't sacrifice men, too?"

Jesus' eyebrows rose.

"We have come to warn you!" exclaimed Long Face. "To save you before it is too late. Flee with us now! Or at least walk out the door and hope that they let you return to Nazareth!"

Jesus' muscles were knotting throughout his arms and chest. He realized he was beginning to shiver. He steeled himself and began taking deep breaths as if he were in the cold desert of Judah.

"This room is a torture!" Long Face complained. "They bring Roman soldiers here, too, to break them!"

Jesus searched for the exact spot in his heart that earlier had flashed blue light. Now, as if he were still having visions, he imagined it was a hard, bright white. His trembling quieted. He took more deep breaths and kept focusing.

"How did you get here?" he asked the two interlopers.

Wide answered in his warm, friendly voice, "We heard about you and came for you. This is a secret tunnel that only a few of us know. Come with us. We can save you."

Jesus shook his head slowly. "I think not. You wear priests' robes. Yet you fight against all the other priests. You say that you use this secret tunnel that almost no one else knows. There are only two ways in which I can consider you. Either you lie to other priests. Or you are lying to me. Which would you have me?"

Long Face held out his arm and showed his many scars on it to Jesus. "How," he asked, do you think I got these marks?" He brandished the whip in his other hand. "This! Is it not proof enough?"

The white light in his heart was growing ever brighter. He thought of his Poppa. A warmth began to flush his chest. The tension throughout him began to

recede.

"That was not a direct answer," he said. "I think if I must choose between all the other priests, many of whom have been kind and respectful to me, or the two of you with your frightening words, I shall not choose you. Please go. Now."

"Oh, Jesus," cried Wide in a mournful voice, "we don't want you to die!"

"You are an idiot," said Long Face. "You have so much to give to your countrymen if you leave now!"

Jesus frowned. "I do not like insults," he said. "I will take my chances here in this room."

Long Face and Wide slid toward the secret door and gave each other a quick look. Wide turned back. "Please, Son of God, come with us now! We believe in you!"

Jesus felt himself growing angry and then guilty for letting such an emotion build up in him. But both his head and his heart told him this had to be just a test, and now his gut was warning him, too.

"Leave me!" he exclaimed.

Long Face cursed him. Then both priests left, their white robes swishing loudly before the grating sound of the closing door announced their departure.

Then Jesus was in total darkness, still grappling with his dislike of them. And the warmth in his body still was spreading.

Gradually, the visions and voices came back. So did Tekhenu with food and water much later. The Pillar-like Black man looked at him with a curious glint in his eye, then left.

Jesus found he could not stop thinking about the two renegade priests. He knew he should forget them. But anger welled up in him, first, and then a fear that they were telling the truth and what if all the pyramid priests except those two were in a secret society of oppressors who brought initiates here just to capture them? Then he shook his head hard, as if clearing a swarm of biting flies around it as he grew afraid that he was thinking ridiculous thoughts.

His racing mind kept analyzing both sides of the issue, along with his emotions. He was so caught up in his analysis of all possibilities that, with his body nearly vibrating with the contradictory thoughts and feelings, he couldn't even begin to sleep. His heart was thumping in his chest, he kept tightening his jaw, and he had to strike around the room in the dark, feeling his way with one hand on the wall, to try to calm himself. It was all to no avail.

It was then that the light burst full on him. It was in his head but seemed to fill the room. He had never seen such a light like this, except when he was younger

and had felt such a light above his head. This light, though, filled up his entire vision, taking over the great dark and pushing it back. It was such a change, and so enticing and somehow right, that he sank himself into it, threw himself in as if swimming, letting it engulf his whole body. The light sustained itself for a long time, many minutes, perhaps it was even as long as a good sunrise or dusk, he just didn't know.

And then, as it waned, flickering out, he was so exhausted that everything left him, all thought, all feeling. He'd been awake for most of the past day or two, since the Long Face and Wide had appeared, but he didn't know how long. And now, tiredness beyond belief struck him silent. There was nothing but the dark. It just kept on, minute by hour, forever, seemingly. Finally, he fell asleep as it saturated every part of his body. Later, he awoke, having no idea how long he had slept. He walked on his knees to the nearby table. New bread and water was on it. Otherwise, everything was the same: night, absence, a big nothing.

That nothing simply stayed, as if to make a home in him. It seeped into him as if it were a crypt in a burial vault, or cold invading every cell in him.

But, he decided, he really didn't mind, for the emptiness felt safer, almost a friend, even if a deadly silent one. He was finding perfect solitude in it, one of the goals he had hoped to reach in Egypt. He normally might have smiled at the irony of finding such peace in desolate barrenness, but he felt nothing, now. He was supremely empty as if all of him except his eye and his ear had died. He'd gone beyond all speculations, they had disappeared. This was a new seed of contemplation in him: the idea that there was nothing to contemplate, no thought, not even a memory that was worthy. Wherever he might go, within or without, he was already there in his center. And nothing was there except his awareness and his surroundings. He ate, drank, slept, kept warm by moving; Tekhenu appeared with his light like a thousand pricking suns and looked in his eyes, then disappeared; sometimes his bread and water appeared while he slept. He stopped counting.

It didn't matter. All was endless absence.

Eventually—a week later or more, perhaps even several—Tekhenu bent down over the mat on which Jesus was sitting and spoke to him.

"Jesus," he said gently. "What are you thinking?"

Jesus just looked at him. "Nothing," he said.

"Is that good or bad?" asked Tekhenu.

"Neither," said Jesus.

"How do you feel about it?"

"Nothing," said Jesus, simply looking at him.

Tekhenu nodded and smiled. He held out his hand. Jesus took it. Tekhenu pulled him up. "Come," he said. "Right now. Follow me." He turned and began walking away.

Jesus followed him, no looking back, not caring that he was leaving the never-ending night of the cell. They passed through and up the lengthy, narrow passages.

Tekhenu reach out to catch Jesus on a couple of occasions when he stumbled while climbing. Otherwise, all remained the same within. The great blank awareness continued—no ideas, memories, or feelings. Jesus didn't even wonder if it would end. It just Was.

Tekhenu led Jesus into the great hall. The light from the shaft of sunlight blazing down onto the long center table blinded him. He stood with eyes half closed for several minutes until he could see again.

All the priests were gathered there once more, watching him closely. He was dirty and unshaven, his hair combed only by his fingers. The high priest beckoned to him. "Come, come," he told Jesus. "We were meeting today, so we asked Tekhenu to check on you."

Jesus walked forward. Hen, First Priest of the People, came down from his platform chair and stood waiting.

When Jesus reached him, Hen smiled and embraced him. Jesus had no idea what to do. Then all the other priests around the table stood, moved back, and linked hands. Slowly, they began to move in a great counterclockwise circle, chanting as they did so with singing voices:

Time is reversed; the sleeper awakes.

Time has gone backward; no one knows how.

The dead one arises, aware but no more.

His life is now empty, but still is restored.

And they danced, somberly, in a great circle, watching Jesus as they did so. They continued their chant as they moved, each one nodding to him as he passed. Jesus just stood, seeing them but thinking nothing.

Finally, the high priest took him by the arm. "Take some wine," he said. "We have good bread. We share it together. This, too, will be gone in weeks, perhaps a few months. You will have thoughts once again. You'll feel. But this, what you are now, you are the Eye of Atum-Ra. This you always will be. Nothing less. Someday more. You are a vessel awakened, one waiting to be filled. Now you can truly choose the water. Or rather, the water of creation will start choosing you."

And so it was that Jesus passed the second initiation. Tekhenu took him to his usual room in the temple with the sun streaming in each day. He ate and slept in

his room and was allowed to come and go freely for walks outside the pyramid, and within its long halls above and below ground that were open to the general priesthood, those who had passed the second level of initiation. He now had full privileges of the priests' common areas.

It took Jesus several weeks to begin functioning within himself again.

First, he regained desire for food. He found that it tasted exquisite, as if he had never eaten anything before: even water was like fine wine. Then he began feeling minor irritations and pleasures, sometimes with surprising intensities.

Finally, slowly, his emotional life returned. The first sign of it was a crushing despair, making him feel like tearing his hair out, and he understood why grown men wept and cut themselves, even jumped off high cliffs to their deaths. But this lasted only a few days, and he simply waited it out, like everything else in the past two months, until the inner anguish morphed into a panoply of normal emotions, anger, fear, hope, and most of all, a reawakening of love. Like his intense reawakening of the pleasures of taste, these emotions at first fell over and through him like giant waves from the sea; gradually, though, they calmed and became desultory, even controllable if he returned within himself to the pure awareness he now knew was his core self, while letting these waves of feeling subside.

Normal life began filling his void, slowly but surely. But it never, he now knew, could completely return. He was a new self, reborn, not any longer a scholar, a young man, a Jew, or a seeker. He still was, in a sense, all these, as many parts of his personality came back. But now he knew that he was not this self, or these selves. Beneath, behind, and above all, he was a being. Nothing more or less. He knew, too, without thinking about it, that everyone else was that way, too: even if they didn't know it.

And, he knew, this being at his center was the spark of his Poppa — within him and everyone else. Whenever he focused on it, an unknown world opened as if it were a door to the entire cosmos. It would have frightened him if looking through that door didn't also take the fear away. His Poppa was everywhere.

And how, he thought, will I ever explain this to others? The Egyptian mystery priests obviously understood. Probably John would, too. Maybe Judith — perhaps it was exactly what she had expected. But the usual Pharisees and Sadducees? If he started telling everyone that each of them had a hidden spark of Elohim or Yahweh in them, the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem eventually might come looking to jail him or worse.

Chapter 11: Temptation

Jesus rested in comfort for several weeks in his small stone cell on the east side of the great pyramid, with other aspirants just down the dark, inner hallway in their own small rooms. Several such living areas existed in the sprawling temple complex, each with its own dining area and outdoor exercise plaza. He often wondered which building Cousin John was in.

Each day Jesus went to the common eating room for his group twice. Though somewhat small, it had a high ceiling and a shaft to the outside to let air and sun in. Though everyone ate together at the same long tables, he often remained quiet except when someone asked him a question. If a person started a conversation, he drew them out so that they ended up doing most of the talking, a skill he'd learned on the streets of Alexandria when he and John were young boys. Sometimes, when he was feeling particularly sensitive or wanted to think deeply, he simply brought his water, bread, and bowl of porridge or lentils back to his room.

There, especially in the mornings, the sun streamed into his cell as a warm waterfall through the open shaft, along with the scents of dry African dust, an occasional whiff of exotic green algae and waterweed from the Nile not far away, and the ever-present air of camel, donkey, and cattle dung from the nearby city of Heliopolis.

In that time, he gradually came back to himself. His old personality slowly reasserted itself. And after the first weeks, watching his feelings and thoughts return, he even found himself thinking a wry thought one day; and he realized even his sense of humor also was back. But he had not forgotten his key discovery, his new center, who and what he was. Above all, behind everything else, he was an Awareness. Nothing more. Nothing less.

One day Jesus was sitting on a marble bench, absorbing the afternoon sun outside the temple in a small, ornamental garden with sweet-smelling flowers of several varieties. A pelican from the Nile flew overhead. It squawked twice, giving him goosebumps, even in the heat of the day, as he thought how in Egypt the bird represented death. At least, he thought to himself, now he was capable again of feeling such reactions. That had not been the case during his long night of about two months of emptiness.

He sensed motion behind him, and then a swish of a white robe, and the high priest—Hem, First Servant of God—stepped over a group of daisies and anemones as if he could float above them, and he sat down beside him on the bench.

“You have done very well, young man,” he said.

Jesus bowed his head once. "Thank you, Holy One."

"And now," asked Hem, "Who are you?"

"You know," said Jesus. "The Eye of Horus. The Witness."

"Are you and your Poppa still one?" the high priest asked.

"Jesus nodded. "But I don't understand that like before. I am filled with emptiness, even as I know that I am not that emptiness. I am one with Yahweh, my Poppa, with Elohim, my father-mother. But why would God want to be one with me when I see nothing but emptiness?"

The high priest nodded. "Yet your personality is returning, is it not?"

Jesus nodded.

That part of you is you but not-you. It is the box of tools that you have been given, like your family father in person, Joseph. He is a carpenter; is he not?"

Jesus nodded.

"So, your old self is your box. You have tools for cutting, for pounding, for sanding, many devices."

"And what am I supposed to do with this messy, imperfect box of myself to which I have returned?" asked Jesus, his eyebrows rising.

Hem nodded. "Sharpen things. Shape them better. Get rid of some; find others. Look in the toolbox and see what else is there."

"So, I should search, look, sort? Is that my job now?"

"No," said the First Servant of God. "Your job is to be the Eye of Horus. Be one with your Poppa. Let that guide your searching. Simply be one, then do what you will."

Jesus looked off in the distance, toward the steeply sloping great pyramid shining so brightly white in the late sunlight that you almost could not keep your eyes on it, but nevertheless he did. He set himself to do what the high priest said.

Together, they sat in companionable silence, each in his own way meditating within, even as continued to be aware of the beautiful garden.

Then, finally, the priest said, "You may stay and rest, here, as long as you need to. When that is finished, what will you do? Will you stay here and continue, in Heliopolis, to study at our school? As you know, we have a wonderful library. And there is the larger library in Alexandria, though its texts tend less toward the mystical. We are glad to provide transportation whenever and however each of our young priests like you need. You are one of us, now, a second-level initiate, no small accomplishment for a man who is not even twenty years old."

Jesus spoke carefully. "Thank you, Holy One, for inviting me to stay. I wish to

do this, but rather as one who is going through the third degree.”

The high priest abruptly turned his head to the right and looked off into the northern desert plain. The valley of the Nile glinted emerald with grass, and the far mouths of the Nile shone with light blue.

“I think not,” he finally said. He paused. “You are very young. It is for men who are on the verge of becoming important scholars, teachers, leaders. You will fail. Jesus, we have just found you. We do not want to lose you so quickly.”

“Is it more difficult than the second degree?” Jesus asked.

The high priest looked at him sharply. “It is easier to take,” he told Jesus, “but also easier to fail. Ask me no more.”

“I am sorry, Holy One. But I am ready to take the third degree whenever you will allow it.” Jesus picked up a fallen petal from a desert rose.

The high priest fidgeted slightly. “I am bound by our laws to tell you something, Jesus. Because of Judith’s request in this matter, all of us of the highest degrees have met and discussed whether a man so young may be allowed to take the third degree.”

Jesus waited.

The high priest frowned. “Against my own judgment, the council decided to allow Judith’s request. You may start your next degree whenever you are ready.” He cast a severe look at Jesus. “Understand, we are allowing this only because you are the predicted one.”

“I will start my new degree as soon as I may,” Jesus told him. He wriggled his bare toes in the mixed green grass and dry dust underfoot that had blown in during the day.

The high priest nodded. He stood slowly. He shook his head. Then he slowly nodded it once.

“Then that is that,” he said. “You confound me at every turn, Jesus. “Are you indeed the Expected One? You are proving at each step that you are. But if you are not, you also soon will fail. Please do not.”

Jesus then, without understanding or knowing why, suddenly went to his knees before the standing priest. He looked up at him and said, simply, “I will work hard to be one with my Poppa during the third initiation.’

The high priest put his hands on his hips. “Rest for two more weeks,” he said. “At the end of this time, a guide will come for you.” Then the older man stretched his arm, laid his hand on Jesus’ bowed head, and blessed him.

Then the older man turned to go. But first he paused. On a flowering pomegranate tree beside him, a curved limb was bent toward Jesus as if asking the

high priest to say one more thing to the younger man. Hen asked, quietly, "Are you really the predicted messiah of Israel?"

Jesus' head snapped up. The question, however softly spoken, penetrated him to his deepest core. "I don't know," he answered

The old man nodded his head. "A better answer than most. Do not fail your test, Jesus. I wish to see you again." He left quickly through the vine-covered gate of the small garden.

Several days later, Tekhenu showed up one morning in front of Jesus' small room, just after Jesus had eaten his morning porridge. Tekhenu knocked loudly on the thick acacia-wood door, stained dark from hundreds of years. When Jesus opened it, both men smiled immediately.

"Tekhenu!" Jesus exclaimed.

The tall Black priest gave him a gracious nod. The morning light poured into Jesus' room, highlighting the Pillar of His People's high brows. "I have come to bring you to our library," he said.

As they walked through the long, deep passageways that went under the temple and branched out underground to other structures near it, they talked. Tekhenu held a clay olive oil lamp to guide the way, partly shielding its flame against the light breeze blowing through the long tunnels. The air smelled of dust from the desert and of thousands of years of bare stone walls, floors, and ceilings.

Jesus told Tekhenu how much his mother and Josi had enjoyed the great Alexandrian Library when they all had lived there in Jesus and John's youth for several years.

"Yes," said Tekhenu. "Isn't it marvelous that women—or for that matter, not just Black Nubians like me but Black scholars of any race and religion can study there?"

Jesus nodded. "It is the world as it should be," he said.

"We Egyptians are open to all people if they have something to contribute or to learn from us."

"And what of your temple library here?" asked Jesus. "I've heard it is small, or, at least, not nearly the size of the Alexandrian Library.

"You will be pleasantly surprised," said Tekhenu. "Our library is quite the wonder, too. Yes, the Alexandrian one is far larger. But you'll be surprised by some of the ancient texts we have. The scrolls once were stored in a far larger library in Heliopolis. But as you know, much of the central city was destroyed by the Persian invaders several hundred years ago. Fortunately, our priests were able to save

many of the oldest manuscripts.”

“What authors do you have in it?”

“You will soon see,” said Tekhenu. “Here we are.”

They came into a large room far bigger than anything Jesus yet had seen in the underground parts of the temple complex, a space that stretched many lengths of a human into the distance with twelve shafts of sunlight angling down from the surface above and small squares of sand under each one for water from the occasional storm to collect. Everywhere were shelves reaching so high that ladders were along many of them for reaching the tops. And tubes of scrolls from several to many handspans in length lay one upon another in each nook. The scent of papyri and old wood filled the air. The place was a scholar’s dream.

Have I gone to heaven? Jesus thought. Out loud, he asked, “Is there a head librarian who can allow me to begin looking?”

Tekhenu smiled and bowed deeply. “You may proceed.”

Jesus’ mouth opened. “You? You’re in charge of this place?”

Tekhenu winked at him. “Did you think all this time that I had nothing better to do than squire you around, waiting each day for you to finish up your initiations?”

“But this is...grand!” Jesus exclaimed. His face lit up in a boyish look of wonder as he glanced around.

“It is!” Tekhenu agreed. “As a third-level initiate, I have been very pleased to have been given this job.” Then he pointed at a particular shelf. “Take a look over there,” he said.

Jesus walked over and began to read several subject titles in Egyptian and Greek on the wood edges. “These are the mystery books of King Solomon!” he declared. “Only a few copies of them exist, anywhere!” Judith had not let him read the Essene copy at Mount Carmel. She said he was not yet ready.

“Look there,” Tekhenu suggested, his eyes sparkling. He nodded at a far shelf protected by a wooden grate of hard cedar.

Jesus looked through the holes in the grate at the labels inside. “The lost books of Moses!” He whirled toward Tekhenu. “Those are real? Why don’t my people have them?”

The priest smiled happily. “Copies for all your scholarly centers are being made,” he told Jesus. “We found these books last year in an old, dry, unused storage room in Heliopolis. Some of the world’s most mystical and rare papyri are here. We even have a complete collection by Tehowti, also known as Thoth.”

“The one the Greeks called Hermes,” Jesus asked, “the books of the

mysteries?"

"Yes, Tekhenu nodded. "'*The Divine Shepherd, The World Virgin, The Key,* and all the others. Go ahead. Look!"

Jesus opened the grate and carefully began to draw one of the Moses rolls out. He paused. He looked at Tekhenu and frowned. "Why do you show me these? I thought I was to start my third degree."

The older priest bowed gravely. "You are required to rest before the third degree. Would you like to work here during that time?"

Jesus' face lit up.

Tekhenu raised a finger. "But you may read them only eight hours a day," he warned.

"Eight hours! Jesus complained. "It will take me months to study them properly!"

Tekhenu shrugged. "I know. But those are the rules because you are soon to take the third degree. In addition, you must not talk with anyone but me."

Jesus nodded. "I had hoped to see my cousin John."

"I have met him!" said Tekhenu. "He is a bear, a lion in the wilderness. So serious, but kind. I like him. But you must wait. No talking with anyone except High Priest Hen and with me. We trust you will obey these requirements as you go between here and your room in the temple. You will eat two meals as usual in the temple; I will bring you food and water here every midday."

Jesus nodded vigorously, showing a little more of his youthful excitement than he meant to. He looked around the expansive, scroll-lined room and spotted light wooden study tables in several corners, as well as long platforms down the middle for scholars who wished to stand as they read. He breathed deeply, inhaling the ancient smell, even the coolness of the thick stone walls. He felt he could stay here a year and not complain.

Tekhenu smiled. "You must enjoy yourself. Read anything you want. You may leave manuscripts out when you are done; I will be glad to reshelve them. Go ahead—start reading! I will come again at high noon with your meal."

They bowed to each other. Then Jesus immediately began studying.

He read, memorized, and took brief notes on cheap used papyrus that day, the next, and each day that followed. Every night, when he had to return to his temple room, he dreamed he was having illuminating conversations with teachers from everywhere and every time in history, some of them even the authors of the rolls he was reading.

In one dream especially, he and Moses had a good, long conversation about

the meanings of the Ten Commandments that Moses had just brought down from Mount Sinai, sweat and the pollen of mountain flowers still beading his brow from his descent of the rocky terrain, two stone tablets wrapped safely under an arm.

In another dream, he and Socrates, the true mystic from whom Plato received his most spiritual reflections, lay on dining couches at a quarter angle to each other in a room with a ceiling but no walls, and a low wood table full of grapes, fresh bread, and fine wine between them. They sipped and nibbled as they discussed what each had experienced of the concept "soul." When Jesus woke from that dream, his mouth was moist as if he really had drunk from the goblet and eaten from the plate. Every morning, he woke with new joy, trying to remember each detail he had dreamed, and greater joy that soon he would be back in the library among books so ancient that they existed almost nowhere else on earth.

After each day of study and before sleep, his mind was overflowing with all the wisdom and experience of the ancients he was finding. He recalled the words, reflected upon their place in history and in the wise men and women's lives, and meditated upon some of their deeper meanings. He especially valued the few women in the collection, for their viewpoint was not just different from those of most male authors but rather unique, speaking of God as a divine mother kind, beneficent, and sometimes just as terrible in punishment as the male gods. Among these few female authors, Nubian priests from hundreds of years earlier in Upper Egypt were especially represented.

Jesus rarely had been this excited. His young scholar's mind leaped easily back and forth from this new knowledge to important ideas he already had studied in his years with Judith, connecting new with old. The days passed quickly. He hardly noticed them.

After he had been in this room for several weeks, Tekhenu stopped to talk with him as Jesus was opening a new scroll so. Normally, Tekhenu wore a common robe to run his library, but today he wore his pure white-linen ceremonial garb. He was carrying a small ceremonial olive-oil lamp and a little shallow pottery cup holding a stick of burning myrrh incense, both of which he laid down before Jesus.

"You are all dressed up!" Jesus commented.

Tekhenu smiled. "I bring you a special occasion," he said. "The high priest said it is time."

Jesus sat up. On his youthful face, a crease appeared between his eyebrows.

Tekhenu bowed. Jesus then stood and returned it, bringing his head to his chest.

"Your eyes have sparkled every day you have been in here," said Tekhenu. "But now they look deep and concerned. But first let me ask you, have you enjoyed

your studies?"

"Oh yes!" Jesus exclaimed, too exuberantly. He took a deep breath and let it out. "Yes, very much. Today I learned from "The Keys" how there are six envelopes each of us has. May I tell you what they are?"

Tekhenu opened his mouth, but before he could reply, Jesus continued. "If I may use the Greek words in which your Egyptians wrote them, the outer envelope is our *soma* or physical body. Within it is our *pneuma*, our vital-energy body. Within that is our *psyche*, or everyday thoughts and perceptions, our daily self.

"And within that," Jesus said, "is our *logos*, or intelligent thinking self. And finally, within that" —Jesus paused dramatically— "is our *nous* or true aware self."

Tekhenu's face suddenly became more animated. "Excellent! You should seize upon these! They have helped me in my meditations often! You are such an excellent scholar—for a young man or a person of any age."

Jesus smiled happily.

"But now I must discuss something else with you. Let us both lay ourselves down and talk." He waved toward a corner where benches surrounded low tables for eating or more casual study.

They lay on two benches perpendicular to each other, heads just a few feet apart.

Tekhenu, face blank, then asked, "How would you like to study like this all the time?"

Jesus stared at him. "Could I?"

The priest nodded. "We can arrange it. But there is a price."

Jesus blinked. "A price?"

"Yes. Let me explain. We will set you up with a complete library of any books you want for your research, and your own school where you may teach. In two years, when you turn eighteen, you may become an official Doctor of the Laws in your own land, and move your school there. The Essenes will welcome you in Jerusalem or anywhere else you may choose, even should you want to hold your school in Alexandria.

"You are an excellent scholar," Tekhenu continued. "No matter where you choose, you will attract many students. You can spread a new philosophy throughout your Jewish people and perhaps, eventually, the whole world.

"However," said Tekhenu, "the cost is this. You will have to give up seeking more degrees in our temple."

Jesus frowned. He smiled, then grew serious again. "Is this another trick as in the second degree?"

"It is not," said Tekhenu, eyes alive with interest. "It is a test. We do not deceive you now, for you would see through it."

"Why are you offering me this?" Jesus asked.

"It is part of the third degree. We offer each candidate the thing he most wants, to the extent we can give it to him. We offer some candidates money, others power, or even a wife. Each man is may have what he most desires."

"Why haven't you given me the chance to travel?" Jesus asked.

The tall priest smiled. "An interesting question. But we believe that is not your deepest desire. You wish to become your nation's messiah."

Jesus started to protest.

"Wait!" the old priest exclaimed. "You hope for this. You also hope to do it by teaching everyone the things you have learned from books."

Tekhenu spread his hands. The beautiful silk sleeves of his robe caught the light where they rested on top of the wooden table.

"Who knows?" he told Jesus. "Maybe this is the way you are supposed to become the messiah!"

Jesus shook his head. "I am not sure this is what I am meant to do." He looked watchfully at Tekhenu. "You have finished the third degree. What were you offered?"

The deep brown features of the older man's face hardened, then softened. "I was given the opportunity to become the high priest of the main temple in the Upper Nile delta, south of here, among my own Nubian people."

Jesus reared back a little. "That would be quite an honor!"

Tekhenu sighed. "Yes, but am I deserving of it? But, I will say no more of my own choices and the reasons for them. We can talk about that someday after you have made your own decision.

"Remember," Tekhenu added. "This chance will never come again from us. We do not help people get what they want in the outer world, except at the time of their third degree. If you want it, we will give you all the aid we can—we will sponsor you for life, or until you become well established in our own Israel—as you develop into one of the greatest scholars the world has ever known. That is how much we believe in you, for we are sure you are capable of it. We offer you the worldly means. It is a once-in-a-lifetime chance to get exactly what you would most enjoy."

Jesus shook his head. "Ah, Tekhenu. If I met the Lord of the darkest Underworld himself, I'm not sure I could be tempted with anything so attractive."

He looked far off to his right, where sunlight played on a white wall.

“No,” he then said. “I can’t. The deeper I go within myself, the more it seems, well, not the right way.”

“You could take it, Jesus, and later change your mind.”

“No, I do not want it now, so I will not take it.”

Tekhenu raised his eyebrows. “I am glad to respect whatever choice you make. But I am required to offer you several days to think about it, to consult your inner awareness more carefully, to pray to you poppa or whatever you must do.”

Jesus shook his head. “I am sure, Tekhenu. It is okay; do not worry for me. You may go and tell whomever you must that I said ‘No.’ A messiah must be so much more than a scholar. If that truly is what I may become, then however much I love books, they are only a small part of the path.”

“What if you are not a messiah?” Tekhenu tilted his head.

Jesus became pale. “Then I am making a great mistake right now. If I am not a messiah, I should be doing exactly what you suggest.” But if I am meant for that role, that life, I must learn the mysteries wherever they are taught.” He stood.

Tekhenu joined him and bowed low. “You have decided. Even now I feel a flame of joy warming my heart. I do not know what you are to become, but I am glad for your choice.” The tall Black man raised his arms, and he and Jesus embraced with the kiss of peace. “I will go now,” said Tekhenu, and inform the high priest of your decision. Welcome, my Brother, to the third level of initiation.

After Tekhenu left, Jesus sat again at his usual study table. He still had several hours before dinner. The wood of the table and of his stool, even with its reed cushion, felt as hard as rock. The air was dusty from the wind that had come up, now, late in the day, blowing down the open shafts. The library smelled wonderful, he thought, of old papyrus and ancient stone, But his body felt so very weary to him, now, in every pore of his being. He had never felt quiet so alone, sitting there among all the books of the world, books that he could never own nor study as much as he wanted.

The high ceiling itself felt like it was pressing his shoulders down. He found himself almost wishing he were back in the total emptiness of body and soul that he experienced in the darkness of the second initiation. He realized, waiting there, half bent over, that he just had committed himself—more than he felt entirely comfortable—to becoming a messiah. *Whatever that means*, he thought. *Now I must live by more than words alone*. He hoped that he and all the other Essenes back home who held their almost impossible hopes for him, and now even some of the priests here, were not wrong.

The next day in his room, he awoke early to someone knocking on his thick

wood door. Sunlight was creeping in, but it wasn't even quite breakfast time. He sat up and pulled his coarse-knit white cotton tunic over his head. His stomach growled. Maybe, he thought, someone was bringing his barley porridge early. Or perhaps they planned to evict him from the room first thing, now that he was done with his third level. He slipped his feet into his leather sandals and stood. "Come in!" he called.

The door opened. There stood a tall, very dark figure dressed all in white.

"Tekhenu!" exclaimed Jesus. "What brings you here so early! Don't librarian priests ever sleep late?"

Tekhenu smiled with a bow. Jesus returned it. "Did you think," asked Tekhenu, "that we are simply going to tell you that you have passed the third initiation? Surely you must know by now that we have a ceremony for every significant event."

"Surely I am just one of many who have turned down what they most love," Jesus said.

"Now that is not true," said Tekhenu, coming closer to Jesus and offering him his hand in friendship. Jesus took it. And not letting go of Jesus, Tekhenu continued, "Your greatest love, as you have proven to us, is God. Amun-Ra. The Eye of Horus. Your 'Poppa,' as you so surprisingly say."

Tekhenu released Jesus. "And what do you say is your second love, that we made you reject? Research?"

Jesus gave him an up from under look. "Researching is okay. The best answer is 'Books.'"

The taller priest smiled. "Scrolls. Papyrus. Ten thousand years on hundreds of pages. But you know, of course, you still may read. anything you want. Any time. Just as long as you are committed to continuing progress in your other education."

"That other learning being what?" asked Jesus.

Tekhenu gave him a long look. Then, wordlessly, he tapped his head and his heart.

Jesus nodded. My teacher back home, Judith, wants me to travel to Persia, perhaps even India. I doubt she will send me so far away for mere books.

Tekhenu smiled with one side of his mouth. "A wonderful opportunity," he said. "Perhaps someday I will make such a trip. But for now," he said, "follow me. We all await you."

They arrived once more in the large meeting room with the long table and the chairs around it, and each chair was filled by the very same priests, male and female, as far as Jesus could tell. Tekhenu bowed and took the one chair that was

empty. Jesus heard a cooing and looked up. A dove flew through the open shaft of bright sunlight and into the room. It landed gently on the tall wood carving of the head of the snake that rose from the back of the high priest's chair. All the priests acted as if this were normal, not even bothering to glance at the white bird.

The high priest himself, Hen, Servant of the People, First Priest of the Temple, sat dressed gloriously in his ceremonial black robes, with his large gilt necklace of the eye of Horus on his chest and a wide belt fronted by a radiant sun on his waist. He motioned upward at the cooing creature above him and said, "Your arrival is announced!"

He stood. "Come, move forward!" he said to Jesus. "Stand over the pool in which we dipped you not more than a few weeks ago."

Jesus went to the slate lid over the water and stood on it. Then, one by one, each of the priests stood from their place at the table and gathered around him with Hen at one end.

"Here is another story," announced Hen, "from our long-ago days. It is Atum-Ra and the Golden Egg.

"In the time before time," he said, spreading his arms, "before the earth was created, eight gods and goddesses there were." He brought his arms down to his side. "They moved about endlessly, flowing through vibrating waters, vibrations themselves, within the realm of the creator, the God we call Atum-Ra.

"Finally, after countless ages, Atum-Ra decided to create the sun. It burst upon the gods and goddesses who, not knowing they had eyes, now could see. But there was nothing else to look at except their own vague, shadowy, sinuous form in the vibrant ocean of the cosmos.

"As one, they began to cry out, 'Atum-Ra, your sun is so good. But give us something to look at, a vision, a delight that rises and falls in the sunlight, a thing that follows the rhythms of dark and light, a reality that is more than just waters!'

"Atum-Ra frowned for the blink of an eyelid, which in our universe lasted for many decades. He looked down at his feet. Then he and she—for Atum-Ra was both male and female—spread their hands upward from below their waist to above their head, and they and the light that shone out from them became a great ovoid golden egg of such lightness and shimmering beauty that all eight of the gods and goddesses were humbled.

"Atum-Ra said, 'I give you this universal spirit of matter, that which is known as a *neter*, a cosmic sea of rightness, this infinite billions of gold particles vibrating all at once.'

"They all bowed before it. Then, two by two, they entered into it, stepping within its shining brilliance that shone with each tiny wavelet of what formerly had

been the dark.

“Behold!’ the he-she Atum-Ra then declared, ‘with your entrance, the egg becomes more!’

“Then from the bottom of the great oval shape came forth a mound of earth, rich, dark soil mixed with sand and clay, which became the first matter in the cosmos. Atum-Ra breathed upon it, and as it grew lumpier and browner, slowly a new green shoot appeared from it, bending back and forth, unfurling itself higher. Leaves appeared along its stalk.

“And then, at its top, a blossom broke forth. It was the first plant, a water lily, the Nile lotus, bursting forth with more gods and goddesses and the forms of animals and the first humans in its many fronds. And from it also exploded the physical sun, arching upward over the hill of dirt, creating the sky that we now every day when we raise our eyes to the horizon. Sun, sky, dark of night, lotus and fronds —all was a reflection of Atum-Ra and his original brightness.

“And all the gods that were the souls of the earth, sky, sea, fire, and ether, all such creatures new and old, began to sing a hymn in harmony to Atum-Ra.”

And at this point, all the priests around the table stood, clasped hands with each other as best they could in a giant circle, and began stepping left and right in unison, singing the song in which the high priest, Hen, led them:

We are born to the world from the male and female God
 The one who made each village,
 laid out every province in the land,
 raised up each temple in their One Name,
 who chose the offerings and made their Body present,
 the One who entered each tiny element of wood, stone, and clay,
 and everything that grows and lives,
 all of us live in this cosmic egg.
 Those who deny their path of gold will wither and die
 but those who walk in these shining waters—our souls are content,
 joining with God each day.

Then the priests of the temple went before Jesus, one by one, took his hand, and shook with him, each saying, “Salam—breathe peace within you.”

Jesus bowed his head lightly to each one, repeating what they had said. He’d sometimes heard the higher-level priests greeting each other like this in the temple passageways and halls. Now he understood he was one of them, an inner initiate, though perhaps not yet at as high a level as the men and women gathered in this

room to welcome him. Each priest's hand was different, warm or cool, dry or damp, firm or gentle. They were humming the song they had just sung as they waited in line to congratulate him. Some remained quite serious of face, but others were smiling. Throughout the room, the incense drifted in swirls upward through sunbeams and motes of dust.

They didn't kick him out of his room quite yet. Instead, they told him he could visit his Cousin John, who was staying in another part of the temple complex.

Jesus and John found each other in the central gardens of the temple where priests liked to sit and talk as the sun set. The two, now seventeen, gave each other a great hug, as men of Israel often did, clapping each other on their backs. They had been separated for many weeks. They decided to walk the perimeter of the great temple pyramid as the rays of the sun lowered and the starry constellation of the Hunter rose in the sky. They walked outside the circle of stone huts and gardens against the temple walls. Their feet kicked up sand and dust as they strode along.

"Two degrees!" John exclaimed. His voice carried far through the desert night. "I didn't think they'd let me take two right away!"

Jesus smiled. "You did very well, John."

"I'm sure you did even better," John said. "You took the first two degrees, didn't you?"

Jesus nodded.

"Tell me," John asked. "How were they for you?"

Jesus described them briefly.

John shook his head. Both young men had grown their hair longer during the preceding months in Egypt. In their late teens, they now were men. And only boys and rich Sadducees cut their hair short.

"In that first room, for level one, my experience was very different from yours," said John. He grabbed a small stone and tossed it at a distant sand dune. "'Who are you?' the priest asked me. The first day I said, 'I am John the Forerunner.'"

He laughed. "That upset their plans!" he told Jesus. "They hadn't heard about me. They had to go all the way to the high priest to find out what it meant."

"Did that work?" Jesus asked.

"No. They wouldn't let me out. So the next day I said, 'I am the reincarnation of Elijah the Prophet!'"

Jesus mouth dropped open. "Are you?" he asked.

John shrugged. "According to some ancient holy books, you and I come as a

pair. That is who I am—but only, according to the scrolls, if you are the Messiah.” He looked from under his eyebrows at Jesus.

Jesus hid his surprise.

“Well,” John continued, “that sent them scurrying again. All the way to the high priest a second time! But the answer was no. Absolutely. They didn’t care to comment on the truth or falsity of my assertion, they said. Whether I was Elijah or not, they still needed to know ‘Who I Am.’”

John shook his great head of hair blowing gently in the breeze from the sea not many furloughs away. Moonlight glinted off his dark curls.

Jesus laughed. “What did you finally do?” he asked John.

“I waited several days. Then I got tired of just sitting there. I started concentrating in the center of my chest like that writing on the wall suggested.”

“Did it work?” Jesus asked.

“No. So I tried concentrating in the same way but inside my head. Here.” He tapped his forehead between his eyebrows. “There was a drawing of a snake coming out of a man’s forehead on the other wall. That’s how I got the idea.”

Jesus nodded. He had seen it.

“That’s when it happened,” John said. “Right smack in the middle of that closed room, I saw purple and white streaks of lightning everywhere. You know, the kind that are there but aren’t, and you can still see through them to things in the room. And suddenly I just knew—I felt—that I was close to God. Like I was inside of him.”

“*Inside God?*” Jesus asked. “It was the other way around for me.” A shadow crossed his face. He looked up. The high top of the pyramid had come between them and the moon as they walked.

“Yes,” John said. “That must be possible, too, for that is how I explained it the next day. The priest asked me, ‘Who are you?’ I said, ‘I don’t know who I am but God is in here.’” John tapped his forehead again.

“That was it,” he said. He put both his hands out, palms up in exclamation. “They passed me.”

“How about your second degree?” Jesus asked. “Was the dark bad for you, too?”

John smiled. In the slow shadow cast by the moon rising over the pyramid, his teeth shone white.

“Yes and no.” He shook his head. “I spent most of the time praying. I started in a whisper. Each day I got louder. Pretty soon I was shouting and yelling my head off and marching around the room.”

“Did you get those visitors?” Jesus hesitantly asked. His sandal dislodged up an old, sand-clogged stick as they walked.

John scowled. “Those two? I threw the water jug at them. I picked up the other jar to throw, too, but they were gone by then. That’s when I finally decided they were real, and not just fantasies from my mind.”

Jesus laughed. “And you didn’t leave the room once?”

“No,” John answered. “I spent the last few days talking to God as loud as possible. I couldn’t have done it quietly like you. Did you finish your second degree just last week, too?”

“No,” Jesus answered. I finished it three weeks ago.”

They turned a corner and the moon lit up both their boyish faces with their beginning beards.

“Three weeks ago!” John exclaimed. “But that means you must have finished your first degree in one day, and with no rest after it!”

“Yes.”

John looked at him in amazement. “What have you been doing these three weeks? Waiting for me?”

“I took the third degree,” Jesus answered.

John stopped walking and stood with sand trickling into his sandals. He stared at Jesus. “You couldn’t. They don’t let anyone under eighteen years old take it. Even I have to wait.”

Jesus gave him a sideways glance, then said, “*Even* you? I wish I had so much self-confidence.”

John gave him a quick look, then another. He shook his head. “I deserved that. *Even* me. I’m just a loud, crazy Essene boy who doesn’t know a lion from the rear of an ass.”

Jesus said gently, “You’re more than that, John. I meant what I said at least partly in praise. Maybe I’m even a bit jealous of how forthright you are.”

John nodded. “Okay. But I still could learn more humility.”

“Why always so serious, Cousin?” Jesus asked.

“The business we’re about is important,” John answered. “Too much so. Especially if we’re going to really help, maybe make a difference in the future of Israel.”

“And that,” said Jesus, “is an even greater reason for levity. We must smile, sing, tell good stories, *listen* to good tales if we are to survive our own darknesses, let alone those of others.”

John finally relented with a grin of his own. "You are impossible," he said, shaking his head back and forth. "I hope we'll be able to work together someday, even as we hopefully help our small country. I could use a little humor now and then."

"And I," Jesus said, "will be glad to provide it."

"I am used to doing things sooner and better than most others around me. With your third order of initiation, I have, it seems, met my match in you."

Jesus blushed, slightly. "I am not better or worse than you, Cousin," he told John. "I am not allowed to talk about it. But Judith required them to let me take it. I can say only that it might be easier for you than it was for me."

John faced him. "Maybe the old Essenes are right, Jesus. Maybe we are who they want us to be."

"We need a few more years of learning, I think," said Jesus.

"A few?" John nodded. "Perhaps many." He reached down and scooped up a handful of warm sand. Opening his fingers, he let it trickle slowly through them. "We both must know God better: your 'Poppa,' and that Moses called 'Elohim—I Am That I Am' issuing from his burning bush."

"And the fire in our own hearts," Jesus added, "as Moses said."

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength," John replied. "The fifth book of the Torah. I hope you use that someday when you preach throughout our country."

"I'll plan on it," said Jesus. "Without love, we're all lost."

Both young men were silent for a moment. Then John asked, quietly, "Did the Essene messenger from Judith visit you, too, today?"

Jesus nodded. "I am to go home. Tomorrow. Will you travel with me?"

John shook his head. "I'm sorry, but I was told to stay. Study more. Eventually take the third degree."

Both men paused. The air between them seemed to sigh.

John then said, "You know, don't you, that if you start your travels to India soon, we may not see each other again for years?"

Jesus turned to him. "If that is so, then I am going to miss you all the more, Cousin."

The two men had reached the spot where the two of them would part for their separate rooms.

John opened his arms. "The more time we spend together, the more I believe we have work to do someday as a pair. I will miss you, too, my First Cousin."

They hugged mightily, holding themselves close, and gave each other the kiss of peace.

“Shalom, John,” said Jesus.

“Peace be with you, Jesus,” replied John.

And the two parted.

Chapter 12: An Indian Prince

That last night in the pyramid, before leaving for Nazareth, Jesus had a strange dream. In it, he stood on a dusty road beside a slow, narrow, damp-smelling river. A thin bearded man wearing a robe colored like the rainbow came dancing toward him, whirling and carrying a rope dark as ebony. The intense older figure handed it to Jesus and said, "We must go!" The thick cord became a snake that whipped about. Jesus followed the slender gentleman as he continued to cavort down the road; then they both were jiggling and swaying. Ahead of them on the horizon was a fawn-colored sky so intense that the air itself vibrated in tiny particles of gold. At once a big wind came up and swept both men into the air, but they weren't afraid. Instead, they kept twirling to unseen music that mimicked the wavelets of the breeze.

The next day, an Essene guide came to pick him up. Jesus didn't need help finding his way through the Sinai desert to Israel, but rarely did people travel alone. Instead, two would take turns staying up half the night to guard against robbers and unusually brave hyenas.

In a few days, his Essene guide stopped at the crossroads to Megiddo, bid a warm goodbye to Jesus, took their donkey, and began the few hours' trip on the Mount Carmel road alone, cudgel in hand to thwart a poor robber or two who might hide in the mountain caves. Jesus was safe, though, hiking on the route to Nazareth, which also was the well-travelled way to the developing Roman city of Sepphoris, where he had helped his father build new houses and plazas for many years.

Soon he was walking down the dusty street of his hometown at twilight. He waved to those who recognized him and stopping to talk with a few neighbors. They all were impressed that he had traveled so far away, to Egypt, to study, as most of them never had gone further than Jerusalem. Everyone believed it was the young man's destiny to be a great Doctor of the laws, perhaps the finest that their village and those near it, unassuming Jewish farmers and tradespeople, ever had produced.

The first thing Jesus heard when he stopped outside his yellow and tan brick home was the crying of a baby.

He paused, confused. He knew his brother Simon was much too old to cry like that. Then he remembered. He had a baby sister. The Essene who had travelled with him from Egypt had told him. But it hadn't seemed real until now.

Confidently and quietly, he walked through the door and into the family room, where he surprised his father.

"Jesus!" Joseph exclaimed. He jerked up from the book roll he was studying as he sat on his old reading mat.

"Hello, Poppa!" Jesus smiled.

They met each other halfway across the room and embraced.

Mary came hurrying out of the bedroom to see what the noise was all about. She saw Jesus and ran to him.

Even as Jesus hugged her, he could see she was tired and pale. Both of his parents looked much older than he remembered. It bothered him.

He drew back from his mother's embrace, and suddenly he was very aware of looking down upon her. She seemed much shorter, compared to his own increasing height. In fact, the whole room seemed, as he looked around, much smaller. He looked down at his mother questioningly.

"Yes, Jesus." She smiled in understanding. Her face was wet with tears. "You have grown even more!"

"It's good to be home, Momma." He wanted to wipe her tears with his fingers, but he was still dusty from traveling.

"Where is this new sister of mine!" he asked.

"She is in the bedroom with Josi," Mary told him. "Come with me. She is beautiful!"

She led him across the cool floor to the goatskin door.

Inside the small bedroom, Josi turned around. The baby was in her arms. Despite this, she ran to Jesus and awkwardly pressed against him, the tiny child between them, as she stood on tiptoe to plant a kiss on his cheek.

"Oh Jesus," she exclaimed, "You're home! Do you know how long we've been expecting you? Ever since the Essene messenger went to get you, many weeks, practically!"

Jesus stared down at the little bundle of unruly black hair and wrinkled, dark face that Josi was holding. The baby was getting ready to cry again.

Josi said, "Jesus, meet your new sister, Ruth!"

Hearing her name, Ruth paused, her mouth wide open. She looked at Jesus. Her eyes grew wide. She blinked three times.

Jesus bent more closely to her.

She grabbed his nose and pulled as hard as she could.

Jesus smiled and wrinkled his forehead in pain. "Ouch!" he said gently when she finally let go. "Did you say her name is 'Nose Grabber'?"

Josi pushed him with her free hand. "Mr. Joker is back in town. It's Ruth."

"After Ruth in the ancient books," Mary said, coming up beside them. "Ruth who was King David's ancestor and ours." Joseph was just behind them, his head near the ceiling of the small room. He was still a hand span taller than Jesus.

"I shall call her 'Strong Grip'!" Jesus stated.

"You won't say she is pretty?" Josi asked. She laughed. "Of course not. But someday she will be!"

"Oh, but she is cute," Jesus said.

Mary nodded approvingly.

"Jesus," said Joseph. ""Simon is behind the house playing. He's very excited about you coming home."

"Go see him alone," Mary suggested. "He gets embarrassed when we make a big fuss over him."

Jesus kissed his mother's cheek. "Shall I bring him in for supper?" he asked.

She nodded. "Now that we are all here, we can eat together for the first time in many months."

Jesus walked to the cleared spot of sparse grass behind the house. In this yard, simple wooden toys lay scattered that Joseph had made with his carpenter's tools over the years of Jesus' youth. Now they were Simon's. He was riding a little log-and-branch horse with a painted face. His five-year-old eyes were intent on his game.

The thin, muscular boy looked up at the person intruding on him. He saw a tall, handsome man with golden-red hair and intense, deep-set eyes. Suddenly he realized it was his brother. He scrambled off the log horse and ran to him across the rocky ground.

Jesus picked him up as Simon barreled into him.

"You are home!" Simon yelled. He hugged his big brother.

"What have you been doing while I was gone?" Jesus asked him.

Simon's face grew red with excitement. "Everything!" he burst out. "Fishing!"

"Where?" Jesus asked. He frowned. There weren't good places for fishing near Nazareth.

"By Capernaum!" Simon answered. "We're going to live there!"

"Capernaum?" Jesus was confused. No one had told him about this.

"Yes! Momma and Poppa talked about it when I was sort of asleep. We're going to live there after you go to India next week!"

"India next *week*?" Jesus exclaimed. He juggled his little brother into a more comfortable position in his arms. "We'd better ask Momma and Poppa more about

this. Are you hungry?"

"Yes!" replied Simon. "Always!"

Jesus smiled. "What about when you're done eating?"

"Then I'm sleepy!" explained Simon. Then he frowned. "Jesus," he said, "now that you're home, do I have to wash my hands before supper? Do you have to?"

Jesus showed him one of his gritty hands. "Look at that dirty. Even big brothers have to wash, Simon. Everyone does."

Simon scowled.

"I'll tell you all about Egypt and mummies while we wash," Jesus said.

"Mummies!" Simon exclaimed. "Did you see one?"

"Several," Jesus said. "I'll tell you about them while we wash."

Supper was a mixture of a normal meal and a party. While Jesus had been outside with Simon in the back yard, Mary had hurriedly cleaned up the rooftop day room. Though she had not had time to roast a whole lamb—a typical meal for a homecoming—she put out sweets such as dates and honeyed figs and raisins, a main course of smoked fish, and a vegetable of freshly cooked lentils flavored with onion, garlic, and several Indian spices on the low wood table.

Jesus barely had time to change into a better robe. When he climbed up to the roof, each of the adults and Simon gave him a kiss as one would for any well-loved guest.

As soon as they were all lying on their couches in pairs—each divan was long enough for two adults or three children—Joseph said the blessing. As they began dipping their bread slices into the large stoneware serving bowls of food, Jesus turned to his father.

"I would like to stay and rest here before going on, Poppa. Have you heard whether I am to leave for India soon?"

"Next week," Simon said, munching on a dried apple.

"Not that soon," Joseph said. "We'll talk with Judith. Perhaps next month."

"Are you moving to Capernaum?" Jesus asked.

Joseph and Mary looked at him in surprise. Josi's eyebrows went up.

"We've told no one," said Joseph. "How did you know?"

"Simon told me."

Both parents looked at Simon. The young boy kept eating and glanced at the ceiling.

Mary stopped frowning and turned back to Jesus. She raised her eyebrows. "You do not mind, do you?"

Jesus shook his head. "Why should I? It is not for me to say where you live."

"It is always your home, too, son," Joseph said.

"Jesus looked around the village from their rooftop. Their house was near the edge of town and thus higher, on a rise of the hill, than many others. "I am glad we have lived here," he said. "And I'm glad, Poppa, that you and I have spent many hours and days working in Sepphoris, and even weekends with my older brothers James and Joses. There, I have come to know the Romans and even the Greeks better." He paused. "Why did you choose Capernaum?"

Joseph nodded. "The Essenes on Mount Carmel think it is best."

"You mean Judith?" Jesus asked.

"The whole Council up there," said Joseph.

"They think it's safer," Mary interjected. "The Romans!" Her face grew bitter. "They always want the highest places for their garrisons. There's talk of them pushing out our community up there because we Essenes are dangerous rebels."

"Mary," Joseph interjected, "no one's heard them say we're menacing them."

"No, but that's the way they think!"

Joseph said to Jesus, "We're safe here in this home, just because Nazareth is in Galilee, and it is run by Herod Antipas, who at least is still a Jew in name. But the Mount Carmel Council would like a new Essene center started on the Sea of Galilee. Capernaum is on its north shore. It is a busy place that already is home to many Essenes."

Josi added, "What your father is too modest to tell you is that they would like us to help open the new center."

Jesus began smiling. "Poppa, Momma, Josi, you will be excellent leaders there." He looked at his little brother. "And you will have Simon to help you!"

Simon looked at his older brother and grinned. "Yes!" he said. "I'll lead!"

Joseph modestly looked down at the table. "But we will wait until after you are gone to move. We don't want all of us busy working while you are here with us."

"Where in Capernaum will we live?" Jesus asked.

Mary and Josi looked at each other happily. Joseph said, "They want us to move into a small villa."

"On the Sea!" Josi exclaimed.

Jesus' eyebrows jumped. "That sounds expensive!"

Joseph nodded. "They are paying. We won't own it, just be its managers."

"But won't you work anymore?"

"I will still do repairs and building during the day. The center will be run by a

Capernaum Council of Essenes. Bu guess who will do much of the caretaking?" He spread his hand toward Mary and Josi. "I'll help in the evenings."

Jesus shook his head. "From carpenter to center manager," he said.

"Don't forget the two of us!" said Mary. "From housewife and midwife to managers!"

"Yeah!" exclaimed Josi with a wide smile.

Jesus said, "It's good to have women managers. Isn't it, Poppa."

Joseph grinned. "Especially if they take care of everything when I'm out working!"

"The villa is already purchased!" Josi said. "By a friend of Judith's!"

"What friend is so rich among our Essenes?" Jesus asked.

"Oh, he's not one of us," Mary told him. "He's from far away. A prince. From India."

"A prince!" Jesus' eyes grew wide. "What's he doing here!"

"Right now he continues to visit Josi on Mount Carmel," Joseph said. "But he has come to fetch you."

Jesus paused. "A prince? I was expecting some kind of holy man."

"Why not a prince?" Mary exclaimed. "You are more worthy than a prince, yourself!"

Jesus blushed.

Joseph raised his hand.

"Wait, both of you. This prince, Jesus, has offered us sapphires and gold, like the Magi did, because we are your family. He is a powerful and hasty man. As we did at your birth, we are giving the gifts to the Essenes on the mountain. Judith and the Council say we must accept this gift, as it would be very rude not to."

Mary said, "This also means that Simon and Ruth can have an education in Capernaum from Greek and Roman scholars. They will teach all the children of the new community. they will become new leaders, men and women alike."

"At least by the time I come back from India," Jesus said, "you will have set up your carpentry business enough that I can help you again, and eventually take over."

"You will *not* be a carpenter," Mary said, firmly.

Before Jesus could disagree, Joseph raised his palm again. "And that is fine with me, Jesus. You already are becoming, at your young age, one of the best scholars in the land. You must become a rabbi with a following, a teacher of Essenes and perhaps even Pharisees and Sadducees, when you return. that is one of

the reasons for the new center. And for some of the prince's money, which the Essenes plan to invest."

Jesus opened his mouth to protest. But Mary quickly added, "Many Doctors of the laws are supported by rich patrons, men and even rich women. We, your Essene new and old communities, will be your rich supporters, my son."

Jesus grimaced. His shoulders rose and fell with a sigh. *They're right, he thought. Follow God, and the money will come from somewhere.* He looked at the old, comfortably worn wood table in front of them, the lounging seats on which they lay, and other pieces of long-owned outdoor furniture around the raised edges of their rooftop. He couldn't imagine seeing them in a villa by the Sea.

"There will be enough," Mary told him, "to support you for many years. With care, the money may still be there when you are an old man."

Jesus suddenly felt a rush of anxiety in his stomach. He didn't like thinking about getting old. He changed the subject.

"Tell me more about this rich prince," he said.

"Oh no you don't," Josi exclaimed. "You will meet him in a week or two. Now it is our turn to ask questions. You must tell us all about Egypt and the priests and the Great Pyramid."

Simon suddenly stood. "And mummies!"

Jesus took a quiet deep breath. He had been home only a couple of hours, and already his mind was full of India. He didn't want to talk about Egypt.

But everyone was listening expectantly, especially Simon. "If you're not careful," he told his little brother, "a mummy can seem to sneak up on you."

Simon's eyes grew as big as saucers.

"They really don't. But it feels like it!" Jesus went on from there. After a bit, as Simon started dozing on his bench, he quietly began telling his parents and Josi some of his other highlights, the temple grounds, the Great Pyramid, the priests, and the land. He couldn't tell them about his rites of initiation in the temple. But everything else was fair game. Soon, he was caught up in his stories, and obviously, so were they, as they talked until it was too dark to see each other. As Jesus went to his old room, which he now shared with Simon, whom he carried there, he wondered if he ever again would enjoy the basic life of the son of a builder in a small village. Already, he found a part of himself yearning for this life again, knowing that it was passing for good — no matter where he might be. In the future, he must get used to India, to a villa on the Sea of Galilee like some fancy Roman house, and a life of travelling and, eventually, teaching. He could only hpe with some anxiety as he fell asleep that as a teacher, he would succeed.

The next day Jesus was planning on visiting Judith, but there was no need. She came to him, and in no normal manner, either. She was riding a camel. The camel was part of the Indian prince's escort.

Jesus was on a crude but solid ladder laid against his home, fixing the walls in places high up where—claimed his mother—his father was becoming too old to safely reach. As Jesus worked, he saw a cloud of dust in the valley on the small shortcut trail leading from northern Mount Carmel to Nazareth. As the huge bloom of dust got closer, he saw strange beasts walking single file on the narrow path. *Camels*, he thought? They were not uncommon on the major trade routes. But what, he wondered, were they doing in the hills of Galilee? It was like a crocodile suddenly climbed out of Nazareth's main village spring.

He finally was able to make out figures on the camels' backs. One figure was tall and light-skinned with a white cloth wound around the top of his head. The light-skinned stranger was gleaming in the morning sunlight with jewels and gold. Beside him, a small but extremely dignified old woman, carefully wrapped in linens and a wool cloak, rode with a straight back and a quick gaze. It was, Jesus realized, Judith.

He jumped off the ladder and strode to meet them in the streets.

"Stop!" Judith commanded the group in a loud voice, raising her hand. Her large beast shuddered and paused.

The prince, and a dozen other men on camels behind him, barked a noisy variety of individual commands to halt their camels, forcing the restless animals to stop.

Jesus ran up to Judith's camel and looked up at her in wordless pleasure.

"Jesus," she said, looking down on him. Her warm voice was low and rough. She cleared it. "How was your trip?"

He went to one knee in the dust, bowed his head, and then rose again.

"Three degrees, Teacher." He held up his fingers. "Three!"

She smiled. "I know."

His eyes opened wide in surprise.

"I watched over you in my dreams," she explained. "I saw each degree awarded to you." She reached her hand down and laid it gently on his head.

"Besides," she added, "you are not thinking well today, my pupil. The Essene who helped you return to us already has reported everything you and John did."

"It is he!" a deep voice boomed. "The Expected One! Is it not?"

Jesus turned his head. The prince had dismounted and was coming around the front of Judith's camel, holding out his hands. He was tall and thin but muscular,

moving with easy assurance and dignity and holding his cloth-wrapped head high. As Jesus had noticed when he first saw the prince at a distance, the man's skin was lighter than everyone else's. The flashing of his jewels made the little town around them seem even dustier than normal.

When he reached Jesus, he embraced him as if Jesus was a relative or close friend.

"I am Prince Ravanna!" he exclaimed. "I have heard everything!"

"I am honored, Prince," Jesus said. Once more he bowed.

"He is polite! God's holy son is courteous!" Ravanna held both of his palms out to Judith and laughed.

"You will find he is everything we have told you, sir," Judith said, her lips flirting with a smile.

Jesus looked up at Judith with raised eyebrows. She looked deeply into his eyes. Her own sparkled with amusement.

Jesus turned back to Ravanna. "What have they told you about me, Prince?"

Ravanna waved one neatly manicured hand over his head. "The birth! The Magi! Egypt!"

He leaned toward Jesus and spoke low. People were coming out of their homes and staring at him and his entourage.

"A pupil of one of those very Magi is in my escort!" He gestured toward the camels behind Judith. Several men in long white-and-red robes sat watching Jesus intently.

Before Jesus could greet them, Ravanna took his arm.

"Come, King of Israel. I wish to meet your parents once again."

Then suddenly he let go of Jesus. He looked at his hand with worry. "My lord!" he said. "It never occurred to me that I might be too small an insect for you to even notice. If I have offended you by my touch, please discipline me." He dropped to both knees and bowed his cloth-wrapped head.

Jesus looked from Ravanna to his own work-stained old robe that was tied about his middle with a rope for climbing on his father's ladder. Then he looked at Judith helplessly.

"Go on," she said. The corner of her mouth twitched upward.

Awkwardly Jesus cleared his throat. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see some of his neighbors smiling at him. Others simply gawked.

"Rise up," he told the prince. "Sir."

Ravanna looked up hopefully. "Have I offended you, my lord?"

Jesus took the prince's shoulders.

"Please, you haven't offended me. It is good for people to touch. You may rise."

Ravanna gratefully stood. He wiped his dusty brow. "I was afraid that it may be, for you, like it is for me in India," he explained. "You see, I am a kshatriya, a person of superior warrior class, superior to all but the highest caste, the brahmins, the priests. No one of a lower class may touch me unless I so designate it."

Ravanna closed his eyes and shivered once. "And no one," he continued, "may ever touch me or even look at me if they are one of the trash, the classless. The penalty, should one of these untouchables come in contact with me, it is death!"

Ravanna opened his eyes a crack. "I was afraid I was Trash to you."

Jesus shook his head violently. "That is a terrible—"

Judith interrupted. Speaking low, she said, "Ravanna does not like to say so, Jesus, but he does not require this penalty in his kingdom. He discourages killing."

"Ah," said Ravanna, waving his arm, "but still I must enforce some kind of punish—"

Judith interrupted again. She turned to Ravanna. "Prince, our Jesus is a very touchable messiah. And he comes from both priestly and kingly descendants, brahmins and warriors, so you need have no fear he is either too high or too low for you." She spoke softly so that Jesus' neighbors, standing nearby, could not quite hear. Some of them began to drift closer.

"We do things differently here," she told the prince in a normal voice. "Maybe we are no better or worse than you Hindus." She looked at Jesus. "But we do touch each other."

"Some of my friends are farmers and fishers," Jesus added.

Ravanna looked at them in astonishment. "That a woman would interrupt me is unheard of," he said. Then he smiled. "Except for my first wife. But you are a priestess, Rabbi Judith, so I find it acceptable." He turned to Jesus. "But you—you are of two castes? Both brahmin and warrior? This is accepted?"

Judith nodded gravely. "It is. By everyone."

Then the prince carefully rearranged his face so that his expression was neutral once again.

"I am deeply honored," he told Jesus and bowed low.

Jesus then introduced Ravanna to his neighbors, telling them the prince was a friend from far away, come to visit the family. And they went into Jesus' small family home.

Several days later, Jesus visited Judith alone on Mount Carmel. They sat and talked in front of her cave, where she could let the sun warm her body. The mountainside all around them was full of sweet breezes as new green grass and spring blossoms popped seemingly each hour in the warming sky. A pair of wild turtledoves cooed in a tree nearby as they prepared a nest.

“Who is this Prince Ravanna?” Jesus asked her.

“He will be a companion, guide, and friend for you.” She glanced at Jesus’ face. “Don’t look so dubious. Underneath his many differences, he is a kind and rational soul. He labors greatly to be good. Let me tell you a story about him.”

“And you know this story how?”

“His oldest wife told it to me.”

“His *oldest*,” Jesus said. “This would be the first, who is allowed to interrupt him?”

“Just listen,” Judith said gently. “When Ravanna was young, his father ran their kingdom, for really they are kings, though they call themselves princes. And Ravanna, his oldest son, sought glory. He learned all the battle arts: horse riding, swords and daggers, bow and arrow, boxing strikes, deceptive stances, meditative dance movements, even battle formation for the day when he would become a leader in his father’s army. He grew especially expert in *silambam*—the bamboo staff.”

“Bamboo?” asked Jesus.

“A light but hard stalk of wood. It is not heavy or strong enough to knock someone out by hitting them over the head, as with our own oak staffs. The goal is to strike the weapon’s side against your opponent until he is so sore and stunned that he surrenders. If he refuses, if he keeps fighting, you may then poke him with the sharpened or metal-reinforced end in a part of his body where it will cause death.

“It was said, according to his first wife, that no one in the entire kingdom could beat him. Only when a great staff master from far away would come for a tournament could such a person might fight Ravanna to a draw, neither one winning.

“One year,” said Judith, “the kingdom had a short war. The written stories say thousands on each side mustered for battle on a great plain, which probably means,” Judith explained, “the actual number was closer to several hundred on each side, who met in a wide valley to fight.

“Ravanna’s father, the old prince, was getting along in age, but he insisted on leading his troops, as he felt was proper. His hair was so white, his skin deeply wrinkled, and his arm slow enough that by tradition he could have stayed home or

at least at the back of the engagement. But he also was a firm believer in honor.

“Everyone from the lowest water boy to Ravanna himself knew that his father—when the first headlong clash of forces met at the point where he led—would be killed. No one, though, least of all Ravanna, not even his first wife, his generals, or especially Ravanna, his son, could talk him out of it.

“But Ravanna found a way. In those days in his part of India, sometimes the customs of the land allowed each side to choose a hero. This has been true in Israel and Greece in our history. The two champions then battle to the death with the survivor winning the day for the entire army.

“Ravanna gathered his father’s generals and spoke to them passionately about choosing such a hero. It would, he said, save the lives of a large number of their young soldiers, even should the battle be won.

“‘But who will represent us?’ asked the generals. ‘Who among us can fight so valiantly and well?’

“‘I am he,’ said Ravanna. ‘They arrived at the battleground first, so we have the right to choose the weapon. I choose the bamboo stave.’

“And so it was. On the field, with the armies not more than thirty sword-lengths apart, Ravanna and the other side’s great warrior faced each other. He was a grisly, hairy mountain man ten handspans taller; his stave was as thick as Ravanna’s arm. He and Ravanna ran at each other, clashing with great roars from their throats, which were taken up by both armies. The two dealt each other one blow after another, rapidly at first, and then cautiously, circling each other. Ravanna’s hits were more numerous and faster as he danced around his opponent; the mountain soldier’s were less frequent but more brutal and harsh.

“Finally,” said Judith, “it was said that Ravanna dealt the taller man a blow right between the eyes, making him drop to his knees with closed eyes. ‘Kill, kill,’ chanted the hundreds of his soldiers behind him as the opposing force held its breath as one.

“Ravanna shook his head. Never before had he told anyone, except his first wife, how much he hated killing. The bamboo stave was to him an art form, a dance, an intricate mindful dance. He looked down at his opponent, his mind surely whirling. Next, he looked at his army, and at his enemy’s. Then he raised his voice and called out, loudly for all to hear, ‘I claim the right of grievous wound!’

“Everyone looked at each other in surprise. All knew that in villages when two people fought, if one became wounded so badly that he could never again challenge someone as an equal in combat, there was honor in the winner stopping the fight. But no champion of an army had ever asserted such a prerogative in a battle between two heroes.

“However,” said Judith, “his own forces were loyal to him. Ravanna had spent many hours training them and talking with him as one among equals, even though he was their prince to be. Several of them began to chant, and others took up the demand: ‘Wound, wound!’

“And so Ravanna proceeded. He should have plunged the sharpened end of his staff into the great, beating heart of the heroic giant before him. Instead, he raised the point of his staff to one of the soldier’s closed eyes, jabbed once, and as blood poured out, he pulled the end of his stake out again.

“His enemy, now his victim of war, groaned mightily. Hut clapped both of his large hands to his bleeding eye, and he fell forward to the ground. Silently, his comrades came forward, six of them, to carry him away. Grumbling and confused, the rest of their army turned and slowly retreated. Only their own high prince remained. He also was an older man. He nodded to Ravanna’s father, and he moved forward to begin negotiating his surrender.

“Ravanna’s army withdrew to their tents and fires behind the battle line and began a celebration that would last into the night. That is why, probably, few or none of them saw what happened next. Ravanna threw down his staff right there on the battlefield, cursed it, and would never take it up again. In a few more years, his father died, and the young prince came to power. At that time, he began careful, intense negotiations with the several kingdoms around him. “Only a tactical move, for the safety of all,’ he often told others. But his first wife knew better: Ravanna, no coward but rather a Great Prince of his lands and leader of his people, had no appetite for killing.”

Judith leaned back. “That, Jesus, is the most important story I can tell you about him. Years ago, when I visited India, I had many happy days in his huge villa, a place even bigger than Herod’s, especially in the long hours I spent with his first wife. I came to know him well, too. I think you will enjoy his company.”

“May I tell Ravanna that I know this story?” Jesus asked.

“Decide that for yourself. Or ask his wife.”

“You mean the first one,” he said, one eyebrow arching.

Judith smiled. “You are young. You must become used to Hindu customs while you are there. Of course, we do expect you to contain yourself to just one married partner when you return.” One corner of her mouth flickered upward.

Jesus frowned. “I plan on none.”

“I was joking,” Judith nodded. “I expect your cousin John would say the same as you do. Whatever you decide is good. However, we would like you to stay in India at least two or three years.

“Why India?” Jesus asked.

Judith reached to her side and picked up a small hand loom and a bundle of thread beside it. Then she rocked forward to begin weaving a thread in and out of the vertical strands already on it. Since Jesus had gone to Egypt, she had noticed the first small signs of arthritis in her fingers. She knew keeping her hands busy would long delay the gradual hardening of her joints.

Jesus picked up a long shoot of green onion close to him at the low table. He liked them better—they were stronger—than the leeks his mother had given him as snacks when he was growing up in Nazareth. The green onions grew more easily in the cooler air of Mount Carmel.

“There,” she said, “the Egyptian mysteries took a different turn. You would be wise to study both.”

“Wasn’t Egypt first,” he asked her, “and so better?”

“Who knows?” she exclaimed, raising one of her hands. “Egyptian and Persian mysteries go back at least ten thousand years. They developed in tandem. Some of the Persian sages, both men and women, eventually moved eastward into the Hindu Valley, perhaps two thousand years ago.”

Jesus nodded. “But do they train people to go through the degrees of initiation as in Egypt?”

“No,” she told him. “All individual is done individually. You choose a wise man or woman at one temple or another, or in some cases follow a master who may travel among cities and villages. In that situation you will walk a lot, but you will have a good mentor—you call such a person a guru—whom Ravanna and his priests will help you find. This guru must teach you the physical and psychic skills of individual enlightenment, which they call meditation or yoga.”

“Will this teacher be a scholar?” he asked.

“Yes and no,” said Judith. “He will know how to write Sanskrit well, a difficult language. And he’ll have read the ancient scriptures. Only some of them are available in print. Most important, he will be very skilled in oral recitation of most known Sanskrit and Pali scriptures and sayings. The two languages are related, the former of Hindu tradition, the latter of Buddhist teachings.”

Judith raised three fingers and tapped the center of her chest. “But those scholarly objects, though important, aren’t the main reason we wish to send you to India. There, your gurus will teach you how to meditate in yoga. The Hindus and Buddhists.”

Jesus shifted restlessly. “It sounds like what I’ve already learned in Egypt,” he finally said.

She smiled. “I know something about you that you do not yet realize, my young scholar. I will tell you. You are tired of intellectual studies.”

Jesus' eyes flew open and his back straightened. "What?"

She laughed, a quick, dry chuckle. "You just want to get your hands on those mystery books in the temple in Egypt again."

He nodded slowly. "Well, yes. I did not have the time to study them as I would like."

"Put aside such desires," she told him. I will tell you now that someday you will read more of them. But right now, in India, you will learn inner mastery of the very mysteries you want to read about. Why read? You can face them directly, absorb them, be them."

"So that I can do tricks like the priests in India who float in the air and walk on beds of burning coals?"

She put her loom down and looked him in the eye.

"No. You will learn mastery of self so you can do God's will."

"What is God's will?" he asked her. He put down the shoot of green onion in his hand. The two of them could hear, now, across the valley spread out before them, a lone shepherd playing a flute to lead his sheep to a higher pasture.

"For you, I don't know," she said. "It is what is left in you after you have removed all desires and activities that are unimportant."

"How does someone determine what is unimportant?" he asked.

"You ask me that every year." She sighed. "It is what *you* decide is unimportant, my son. For each of us, it is different. Would you have me quit working this loom? It is important to me, and I believe it is what God wants me to do when I sit with you on this mountainside at this moment. Yet it is useless for you to sit and weave, at least today. You must become the very best that you can, and let God help arrange what you do."

"It is too hard, Teacher." He stretched his legs out before him. The sun was coming in through Judith's door, hitting his feet. He felt the warmth.

Judith shook her head. "You are on a mountain climb. Don't pause at a delightful meadow just because you like it. Grow. Move upward. Keep to the path. Let the trail become your normal life. Then it will seem easier, or at least not as hard."

She picked up her loom and rose. "Now go and talk with some of the young men who are restless like you. Or take a walk along the top ridge of our own Mount Carmel. Your time as just a scholar, no matter how brilliantly promising, is passing. And I believe that is good and right for you, for all of us."

Jesus nodded. Then he gave her an unexpected grin. "At least I'll be traveling again. Where will I go after India?"

“You and your travelling! And all the questions you ask! For a future messiah, you are a brash young pupil!”

“Am I not like a woman rabbi who interrupts a prince?” He gave her an up-from-under glance.

Judith laughed. “At least Ravanna is respectful toward me!”

Jesus’ face grew serious again. “I have the utmost respect for you,” he said. “Without you, I would be nowhere, floating, perhaps taking wrong pathways for many years.”

Then he took one of Judith’s hands and kissed it. “I will miss you when I am in India.”

A tear came to Judith’s eye. “It is good to have you back, my son, even if just a week or two. Stay up here on the mountain for a couple more days, sleep here in my outer room, so that we may talk more.”

“It is done,” he said. “But now, for a short time, I will go see other friends of mine here in our community.”

He stood. Judith rose, too. Student and teacher looked deeply into each other’s eyes. Each felt they were becoming more equal, and by the time Jesus returned from India in several years, he might even be her superior in knowledge and meditation skills. Yet in this relationship, hers was the comfort to give.

“Go now,” she said. Gently she touched her fingertips to the spot between his eyebrows. “I will see you at supper in the temple in several hours.”

He walked further up the side of Mount Carmel, past the community temple, and into the woods above. When Judith touched him between the eyebrows like that, or laid the palm of her hand against the center of his chest, it was like a flower blossoming inside him, filling his whole body with a slow burst of energy. He felt that if he could learn in India to touch other people like that, it all might be worthwhile. He could perhaps heal them, at least in some small part.

At supper later, he questioned Judith more closely about the skills his gurus in India would teach him. As she ate her bread and vegetables, she quietly explained some of the Hindu beliefs to him. A few others gathered closely around them, almost too spellbound to eat, as they listened to Judith’s own stories of her travels in the Hindu land and what she had learned there.

By the time she was ready to return to her bed in her cave, Jesus was too excited to sleep. He spent the night wandering the bushy slopes and moonlit high forest along the many miles of the Carmel Mountain and its continuous ridge, considering how he might someday use his new skills to help Israelites, not just Essenes but everyone, even the Pharisees who were willing to listen.

When dawn broke over the mountains and the wide valley below, he still was

walking. Now he couldn't wait to start the long journey eastward with Ravanna.

- End of Book I -

The story continues in *Book II—Travels East*
and *Book III—Healer, Troublemaker*, forthcoming.