



THE  
**DRUMS  
OF CHAOS**

RICHARD L. TIERNEY

# THE DRUMS OF CHAOS

by

**RICHARD L. TIERNEY**



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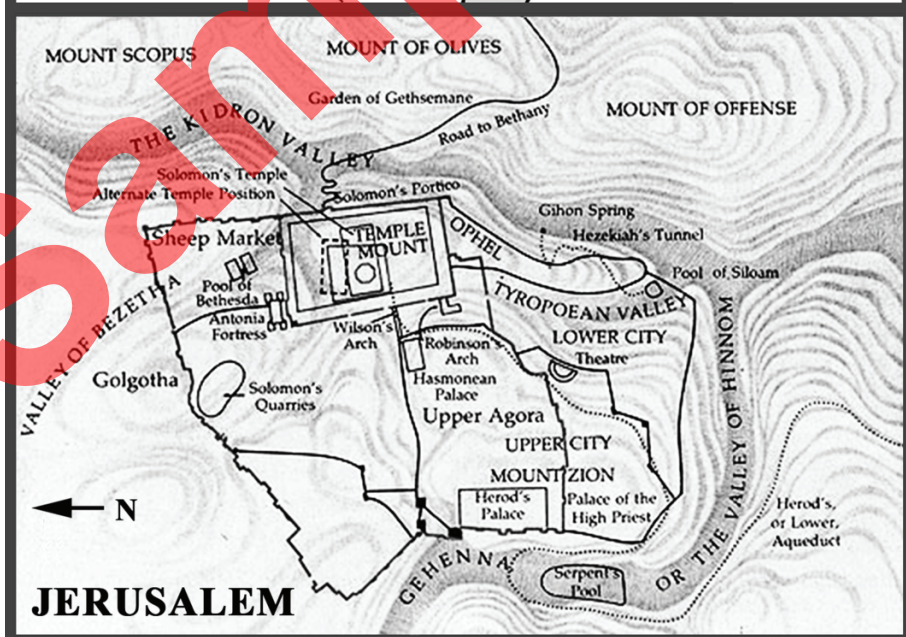
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# FOREWORD: THE GOOD SAMARITAN

by Robert M. Price and Edward Stasheff  
with poetry by Richard L. Tierney

The only reason I can think of not to call *The Drums of Chaos* Richard Tierney's masterpiece is that it might imply he will never reach its heights again, and there is certainly no reason to think that. But it is his finest prose so far, and that is saying something extraordinary, since Tierney is the obvious heir to Robert E. Howard's muse, as his many tales of Simon of Gitta and Red Sonja have amply proven. *The Drums of Chaos* illustrates like no previous Tierney opus what a wizard he is at synthesizing the *Weird Tales* cosmology (i.e., Howard's Hyborian Age *plus* Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos *plus* Clark Ashton Smith's Commoriom Myth Cycle *plus* the Bierce-Chambers-Derleth Mythology of Hastur) with *Star Wars*, Roman history, the Bible, and Gnosticism. In this novel one can taste a significant pinch of M.R. James as well.

While I'm sure many readers are already familiar with our hero Simon of Gitta and the short stories that led to his popularity, I'm equally sure there are some readers of *The Drums of Chaos* who are meeting Simon—along with his mentor Dositheus and apprentices Menander and Ilione—for the first time. For that audience, it might be helpful to provide some background. The Simon of Gitta stories were written from the late 1970s to the mid-2000s, appearing in a variety of fantasy, sword & sorcery, horror, and weird fiction magazines and anthologies. *The Drums of Chaos* takes place right in the middle of that story cycle. Although knowing Simon's history and adventures thus far isn't really needed to read and enjoy this book—everything relevant to the story is explained in the novel—being familiar with it may let readers better understand the world and the characters, their relationships and motivations.

Fortunately, the author has already provided a summary for us—and in rhyme, no less!—in his poem *Vengeance Quest*:

Black vultures soared above the mists, the sun rose redly burning  
When Simon the Mage to his ancient land returned with a vengeance-yearning.  
Adown the Empire's endless roads he'd wandered the provinces o'er,  
Steely of eye and with steel in hand, to settle an age-old score.

Beside the road in silence grim he paused upon his way.  
His comrades quailed to see him draw his blade, then hear him say:  
"The Romans slew my kith and kin, now vengeance I have sworn."  
A cold wind moaned among the trees like the sound of a hunter's horn.

Simon spent a relatively happy childhood growing up in Roman-occupied Samaria. But when he was sixteen, a troop of Roman legionaries—guided by an unscrupulous and greedy tax collector—killed Simon’s family, looted their property, and seized their home. Simon, however, fought well enough that the Romans decided to increase their profits by capturing him alive and selling him into slavery to one of the gladiator schools in Rome.

“They placed me in a cage,” he said, “and bore me off to Rome.  
For two full dark and bitter years the arena was my home.  
They trained me for the buckler and the wicked Thracian blade.  
I’ve sent to Hades’ echoing halls full many a wailing shade.

The “wicked Thracian blade” is a *sica*, a long dagger or small short sword with an inward-curving double-edged blade, often used by gladiators in the arena to get around the shields of their opponents. The *sica* became Simon’s signature weapon that he carried and fought with throughout his adventures across the ancient world.

“Two years I entertained the howling crowds with deeds of death,  
Till one day came a centuried wizard who, with his last breath,  
Uttered unto the Great Old Ones a dreadful vengeance-spell.  
Full twenty thousand perished when that great arena fell.

In *The Sword of Spartacus*, Simon’s earliest short story, he’s eighteen years old and been fighting for his life for two years in the arena to entertain his Roman enemies. In A.D. 27 he’s transferred to Fidenae, a town just outside Rome, to fight in the inaugural games of a newly-built gladiatorial amphitheater. Simon’s hatred of Romans, however, unknowing works in his favor, as it gained the attention of Dositheus, a Samaritan wizard, along with his apprentice Menander and their familiar, a surprisingly intelligent raven named Carbo.

Dositheus serves Tages, an elderly and wealthy wizard with a secret: he’s the last living survivor of Spartacus’ army of liberated slaves, and has been plotting his revenge on Rome ever since Spartacus was defeated in battle and his rebellion crushed decades ago. Simon gets unwittingly drawn into their plans, playing out his part of a ritual on the stadium floor to summon an ancient God who smites the amphitheater, killing thousands of Romans. Simon survives and escapes to freedom—but is now a wanted fugitive in the heart of the Roman Empire.

Historically, interestingly enough, in Fidenae in A.D. 27 a Roman amphitheater really *did* collapse, killing about 20,000 spectators—although due more to shoddy construction and overcrowding than to sorcery.

“An aged magus rescued me and hid me in his lair.  
 I watched him cast mad spells invoking Powers of Fire and Air.  
 I saw great globes of flame descend from out the midnight gloom;  
 Upon the blazing hills of Rome, ten thousand met their doom.

The next adventure, *The Fires of Mazda*, takes place only a few months later. Dositheus has started teaching Simon the magical arts, and provided him with a place to lie low until he can get out of Rome—in the mansion of Senator Junius. He and Dositheus are plotting to kill the Emperor with a complex ritual spell causing the gods to strike down Caesar, after which the Senator and his allies will restore the Roman Republic.

This is when Simon meets Helen, the love of his life. Just as he recognizes the goddess in her, she as she recognizes the god, and they discover they are literal soul-mates, True Spirits who have found each other in this mortal, material world. The problem is that Simon, too, has a role to play in the ritual spell that will strike down Caesar: he must sacrifice a fellow True Spirit, a virgin woman... who, of course, turns out to be Helen.

Simon refuses to sacrifice Helen, or let anyone else. His failure to complete this part of the ritual causes the spell to go disastrously wrong. The demon Atar rains fire down upon them and, although our heroes manage to escape unscathed, the blazing inferno incinerates a large swath of Rome. Unfortunately for the young lovers, it's too dangerous for Simon to stay with Helen in Rome—only if he flees beyond the borders of the Empire can he ever truly be safe.

By now, readers will not be surprised to learn that historically, in A.D. 27 there actually *was* a great fire on the Caelian Hill of Rome that burned down a great many building and killed even more people. This is an element of author Richard Tierney's style that makes his stories so effective: a seamless intertwining of fantasy fiction with historical fact that leaves the audience wondering if, just maybe, it might have actually happened that way.

“And once I fought in Ephesus a wizard dark and fell  
 Who offered up his daughters to the awful Queen of Hell—  
*Shupnikkurat*, who reigns in realms where nighted chasms yawn.  
 I'm proud I sent his soul to dwell amid her thousand spawn.

Simon makes his way to Persia and spends four years training as a magician under Daramos, an ancient, wise, and powerful wizard (who may or may not be entirely human). He and Helen have stayed in touch through letters carried back and forth by Dositheus' raven familiar Carbo. Simon's next adventure, *The Seed of the Star-God*, begins when Carbo delivers dreadful news: Helen is dead. When Roman soldiers attempted to capture and return Helen to her sorcerous father Prodikos, she killed herself rather than fall back into

his hands. Simon swears vengeance and returns to Ephesus to confront Prodikos.

Only it turned out Helen's father was a powerful sorcerer who'd been planning a ritual for decades to release the ancient goddess Shupnikkurat upon the world, and Helen was a key component in the spell. Her suicide was problematic, but fortunately Prodikos had a backup: Helen's younger sister Ilione. Simon, Dositheus, and Meander manage to foil the ritual, leaving Prodikos to be sucked into a hell-dimension, and save Ilione from a fate worse than death, adopting her into their quartet of wizardry.

By now Simon is twenty-four years old and Menander is sixteen (and quickly becoming infatuated with the beautiful young Ilinoie), and Dositheus is anyone's guess. They've left Ephesus, travelling across the ancient near east to Persepolis for further magical training under Daramos. But as they cross Judea and Samaria, Simon's homeland, he bids farewell to his friends and leaves the party. He has a different destination, a different goal: to avenge, with steel and blood, the death of his family at the hands of four Romans. That tale, of course, is *The Drums of Chaos*.

Then to his friends he turned and said, "Good comrades, I must go.  
My sword is eager for the feast, I hear the death-winds blow."  
He faced the east and raised his blade to the glaring crimson sun  
And swore an oath of vengeance in the Name of the Ancient One.

"Oh, leave us not!" his comrades cried. "Why would you seek your doom?  
Journey with us to safer lands and spare your soul from gloom."  
But Simon the Mage in steely rage strode off with sword in hand.  
They watched him vanish in the mists of that grim and god-cursed land.

This was merely a summary of the stories leading up to *The Drums of Chaos*. Simon had many, many more adventures after the events in this novel. Readers who are left wanting more can find all the Simon of Gitta short stories in the collection *Sorcery Against Caesar* from Pickman's Press.

While *The Drums of Chaos* is the greatest adventure of Simon of Gitta, it is also the culminating exploit of another, less known, Tierney hero (or anti-hero), the time-traveler John Taggart. Though he is explained sufficiently in the course of the book, you may appreciate his participation in the story a bit more if you know more about his background. Taggart is a narrative symbol of the bitter misanthropy occasionally evident in Tierney's work, especially his verse (see, for instance, his "To the Hydrogen Bomb" in his Arkham House *Collected Poems*, 1981). We meet Taggart first in the slightly tongue-in-cheek tale "Countdown for Kalara" (*Space and Time* # 56, 1980), where Taggart hates his life as a menial laborer in a meatpacking plant. With himself and his miserable state he pities yet despises the whole human race. Suddenly

he is drawn into an intergalactic conflict by the interference of a fellow-misanthrope, Pitts, who has made his way into the confidence of an alliance of space conquerors who have determined to wipe out all human life in the universe, starting with Kalara, the planet formerly composed of the Asteroid field between Jupiter and Mars. It had been colonized by the last, most-evolved humanoids from earth, whom the Great Race of Yith retrojected through time onto that ancient world to preserve the human species, replanting them in the past. Taggart befriends a band of these rebels whose adopted home world is about to be destroyed by Pitts and his cohorts. Pitts, who has taken the alias Taaran, "The Hateful One" (actually the name of an old Celtic devil god), invites the hate-filled Taggart to join the fun, but the latter sympathizes with the noble Kalarans and helps the group of them to escape into space. He is not able to save their world. Pitts (Taaran) despises humanity for the endless suffering they have brought upon themselves. So does Taggart, but in the last resort he cannot bring himself to sign on for their entire obliteration.

The space-war scenario of "Countdown for Kalara" has a larger cosmological background, and this is spelled out in more detail in the novella "The Lords of Pain." Tierney has upended the Derlethian hierarchy of Elder Gods and Great Old Ones, with the result that Elder Gods are now understood as cosmic sadists who created life to supply them psychic nourishment. They are the Lords of Pain, and all suffering feeds them. The Great Old Ones oppose their interests and seek to wipe out all the life the Pain Lords created, defeating the Lords in the process. Serving the Great Old Ones are the interstellar race of the Zarrians, gigantic cyborgs or living machines. In particular, their master is Black Zathog (whose name suggests a form of Tsathoggua, but who seems rather to be an avatar of Yog-Sothoth). Serving the Lords of Pain, the creators of life, are the Galactics, a purely mechanical robot force built to police the galaxy by a since-perished organic race in ancient times. They still seek to preserve order and protect humanoid life. In this story, Taggart has seemingly come to share in the ultra-Schopenhauerian antipathy for all life, a sort of super-Buddhism with only one noble truth: "Life is suffering." And the only way to eliminate suffering is to put life out of its misery. "The Lords of Pain" tells of the ultimate fate of humankind: after a series of devastating nuclear wars between America, Russia, and China, the Zarrians moved in to mop up the remainder of the human race, recruiting for their own purposes a handful of humans, like Taaran and Taggart, whose abilities and sympathies were beyond those of the herd. Henceforth Taggart, Taaran, and others assist the Zarrians by a series of cross-time expeditions meant to prevent human suffering by crucial interventions in past history. Again, these expeditions seek to ameliorate suffering by eliminating the sufferers! In "The Lords of Pain," Taggart himself is trying to open a gate to the Old Ones, using the ancient magic gem, the Fire of Asshurbanipal (see Robert

E. Howard's tale of that title). And the Lords of Pain play a key role in the mythic background of the Red Sonia novels of Tierney and David C. Smith.

*The Winds of Zarr* (Silver Scarab Press, 1975) has Taggart and Pitts as allies once again, working together amid the events of C. B. DeMille's Bible epic *The Ten Commandments* (the novella is dedicated to REH, CAS, HPL, and DeMille) to free Yog-Sothoth from his imprisonment within Mount Horeb/Sinai. Yahweh Sabaoth, you see, is one with Yog-Sothoth. Taggart so hates the inherent self-destructiveness of the human race that he wishes to put us out of our misery. There are other Taggart adventures including "The Howler in the Dark" (see my anthology, *The New Lovecraft Circle*, Fedogan & Bremer, 1996), where we hardly see either Taggart or Pitts. We only learn of some sadistic experiments performed upon hapless locals in this early tale reminiscent of Ramsey Campbell's "The Room in the Castle." Another Taggart tale is *Let There Be Darkness*, in which Taggart sets to rights the egregious injustices of Big Brother's regime in George Orwell's dystopian apocalypse 1984, by provoking an invasion of earth by the Crustaceans of Yuggoth!

But we have background enough, I think, to see that, if *Winds of Zarr* is Tierney's Old Testament, *The Drums of Chaos* is his New Testament. If we think we may gauge some progression of religious thought from the less to the more humane between the two parts of the Bible, we see the same amelioration of the angry god of Tierney's imagination from one story to the other. This development can be traced not only through Taggart's particular utterances in *Drums of Chaos*, where he has rethought his rage against hapless humanity, but also in the fascinating discourses of Dositheus and Daramos. These Gnostic magi set forth the rudiments of a Higher Knowledge akin to that of Hindu-Buddhist Tantra, but also resembling the actual salvation mythology of historic Simonian Gnosticism. According to it, the soul of Simon, the Great Power of God, sought after the lost soul of his primordial soul mate the Ennoia, Sophia, the First Thought. She had been lost in the material world, her own creation, and her male counterpart sought her from one incarnation to another. Furthermore, all Gnostics possessing a fragment of the light of the two primordial entities shared this heavenly identity and destiny. This protological myth is set forth most completely and compactly in the pages of the Simon tale, "The Throne of Achamoth" (a collaboration between Tierney and yours truly, available in *Sorcery Against Caesar: The Complete Simon of Gitta Short Stories* (Pickman's Press, 2020). It represents an ingenious compilation of elements from the Cthulhu Mythos and from Valentinian, Simonian, and Manichean doctrines. Daramos must, for the sake of the reader, demonstrate how the super-Schopenhauerianism of Taggart can co-exist with the Gnostic Tantrism of Simon. The former tends to occupy the role of Lower Knowledge as measured against the Higher Knowledge of the latter. It is true as far as it goes, but Taggart is not yet the Gnostic initiate Simon is.

But in a larger sense, Tierney has reconciled the very different narrative

worlds of Taggart and Simon by his fantastically imaginative employment of the old black magic of pulp fiction, making Sword & Sorcery blend seamlessly with Space Opera Scientifiction. Who would have guessed that the result would be far more than a work of entertainment, but in its own way a genuine gospel of the spiritual imagination?

Sample file

*Think not that I am come to destroy the law... I am not come to destroy but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth shall pass away, not one jot nor tittle shall pass from the law, until all be fulfilled.*

— Matthew, *v.*, 17-18

Sample file

## PROLOGUE

The white-robed man sat motionless atop the barren hill, gazing southward. He sat in the southern quadrant of the circle drawn in the dust and divided into four parts. Before him ragged peaks extended into the wastelands, while behind him, far below, sprawled the surface of the wide Sea of the Arabah, its shimmering surface dimmed by a thin haze of dust. The sun, though bright in the near-cloudless sky, was losing some of its heat as it declined toward the western hills.

A breeze blew across the wide, flat top of the hill, fluttering the man's white robe and the loose ends of his white sash as he sat cross-legged and stared southward as if in a trance. The sun, edging lower, lined the features beneath the white headband—the large dark eyes, the prominent curved nose with flaring nostrils, the straggling beard that partly concealed a slightly receding chin. They were strange, rather striking features, somehow sheeplike or goatish in their overall cast.

There was a sound in the air, far off and high up. The man in white stirred slightly and looked toward the southwest. There, high above the hills, a faint black dot appeared against the glowing bronze of the late afternoon sky.

Closer it came, growing larger and larger, descending, while its strange high-pitched humming increased. It appeared flat and circular, oblong in silhouette, with something projecting upward in the middle. It approached rapidly, but slowed as it drew near.

Then it was at the lip of the hill's flat top, little more than twenty paces away, settling slowly down while its humming diminished. It was like a horizontal disk about twelve feet in diameter, gleaming a dark metallic blue, its edge surrounded by a solid wall or rail about three feet high. The upright object in it was a man.

The thing came to a complete halt and its humming ceased. Yet it continued to rest in midair about the length of a man's arm above the ground. Slowly the figure within it climbed over the rail, dropped to the sandy hilltop and walked forward.

The man in white rose. He was tall, perhaps half a head taller than average, and solidly built. His strange features remained expressionless.

The newcomer drew near and stopped. He was a man of medium height, on the slender side, and clad entirely in black. His shirt, long trousers and shoes were of a strange cut, and his face and hands seemed almost white in contrast to their blackness. He wore a wide belt, seemingly of woven strands of blue metal; its clasp glowed with a dim blue radiance. His brown

hair and beard were short and neatly trimmed. Strangest of all, his intent brown eyes stared through transparent discs held before them by a dark framework that hooked behind his ears.

“I know you,” the man in white said in Latin, “and I know why you come. You are one whom men of old called ‘the wizard’.”

The black-clad man scowled briefly as in puzzlement; then, hesitantly, in the same language, he said, “Your—father—must have sent you dreams. You see, I know you, also. You are called Bar Yosef, but your real father’s name would be—”

“Peace! You shall not tempt me as you have come to do, adversary of mankind.”

The one called “wizard” glanced about him at the rock-littered hilltop. “You have been here many days, Bar Yosef—longer than any mere human could have endured without food or water, I think. Yet you are partly human, and so you must be hungry. For you, the son of your father, I am prepared to do much. If you wish, I will make some of these stones about you turn into loaves of bread.”

“No.” The man in white abruptly shook his head so that his tangled brown locks whipped about his shoulders. “It is written that a man shall live not only by bread, but also by those things that come forth from Yahweh-Zava’ot.”

“You know the old writings,” said the wizard, “and you do not hesitate to speak the Name. And I am sure you know far older writings, and even the Name’s original form. But as for mankind—they shall not live at all if you do as your father intends.”

The white-clad one stood motionless, saying nothing.

“Will you not eat or drink, then?”

“My preparation must continue.”

The wizard sighed. “Will you let me try to convince you otherwise? I think I can, if you will come with me for an hour.”

The one called Bar Yosef stared at the other for a long moment. “I sense no treachery in you. I will come. But I will not be tempted.”

“We shall see.”

The white-clad man stepped out of the circle drawn in the dust and followed the wizard to the strange craft that hung motionless just above the ground. They climbed in over the side, and the wizard touched one of many glowing squares set into a sloping panel of dark metal. Immediately the craft began to hum and rise. The man in black touched more of the squares; the breeze of their passage became a wind as they sped northward. Then a shimmering dome of bluish light sprang into being about them, and though their speed increased they felt the wind of their passage no more. Below them the brown slopes dropped away until they were hurtling above the gray waters of the Sea of Arabah far below.

The man in white watched as the westward hills sped by, as the sinking sun was repeatedly hid by their peaks and exposed anew. His features remained impassive, but his large eyes widened even more with what seemed to be a touch of wonder.

“This is but the tiniest taste of the power you could have, Bar Yosef. Will you not reconsider?”

The white-clad man said nothing.

The sun set as they angled toward the northwest. The sky was the color of glowing bronze, the few clouds in it purple and bordered with fire. The sea passed behind them and they flew over ridges and hills shadowed with dusk. Then, as they angled downward, the form of a large walled city came into view, sprawling over two ridges and the shallow ravine between them. The pinpoint lights of many torches and cooking-fires gleamed in the gathering darkness.

“The holy city!” muttered Bar Yosef. “So quickly...”

Slowly the craft settled down, down, until it was directly above a complex containing the largest buildings in the city—a magnificent columned structure in the midst of wide marble-paved courts, and a dark, battlemented fortress just to the north of it.

Then the craft was still, sorcerously suspended just over the highest tower of the columned structure. The shimmering blue glow vanished and a cool breeze was felt once more. Bar Yosef turned to the man in black.

“Enemy of mankind, why have you brought me here to this, the holiest of temples?”

For answer, the wizard handed him a blue-glowing belt like his own.

“Put it on,” he said.

The man in white stood motionless, his dark eyes glowing with a mute inquiry.

The wizard touched his own belt-clasp. It suddenly gleamed like a fire-filled diamond. Immediately the man was surrounded by a bright, unnatural radiance that made his flesh and even his black clothing like sunlit alabaster. Bar Yosef shielded his eyes until they adjusted. When he looked again, he saw that the man had climbed from the craft and was standing in space a few feet away, gleaming with a blue-white radiance as bright as the morning star.

“Put on your belt,” the wizard repeated. “Come down with me into the innermost temple. I would have you see what your father is preparing for you.”

Bar Yosef shook his head and threw down the belt; it clattered metallically upon the floor of the sky-craft.

“You have not seen your father,” said the wizard. “But once, long ago, I saw his shadow.”

“You shall not tempt me!” Bar Yosef said firmly.

The wizard sighed, touched his belt-clasp and floated back to the craft. Once within, the radiance blinked out and he was again a man clad in black.

Below, from the darkening courts and streets, came the babble of many voices raised in excitement.

The wizard touched a glowing square on the panel. Again the dim blue glow arced above them as the craft sped northward, faster and faster; again the hills fell away, until the pair were speeding at an incredible velocity above the wide valley where the Jordan wound in deep shadow. West of the hills the fires of sunset were but a dimming red glow, and beneath them the far-off Great Sea lay like a band of dark gray. Neither man spoke; only the shrill humming of the strange sky-craft sounded in their ears.

They passed above a vast lake, then a smaller one. Ahead loomed the towering bulk of a three-peaked mountain, its snow-streaked summits dimly white against the night's deep purple.

"The mount of Baal-Hermon," muttered Bar Yosef. "Why do you bring me here, wizard?"

The man in black did not answer until at length the craft had come to rest upon the loftiest of the three peaks and the pair had clambered out.

"Look about you," he said.

Bar Yosef did so. The west was now shrouded in twilight, but still visible even to the horizon of the Great Sea. The lights of villages gleamed here and there amid the wooded foothills below. To the east the desert land was bathed in the eerie light of a newly-risen moon.

"All this could be yours to rule," said the wizard. "All this, and all that lies beyond. All this world from pole to pole, and all the people who now live so tragically upon it. Would not this be better for them—and for you—than what your father intends?"

The wind blew cold among the rocks and spires. Bar Yosef shook his head; a sadness gleamed in his large dark eyes.

"No, there must be an end," he said. "I will save them from their misery."

"You can! But there is another way than your father's."

"No!" said Bar Yosef with sudden passion. "Begone from me, adversary!"

"You call me man's adversary, yet you would—"

"I would end their misery." The man in white stood tall, rigid; his large eyes seemed almost luminous in the moonlight. "And, as for me, it is written: 'You shall serve only your lord Yahweh-Zava'ot.'"

The wizard sighed in resignation. His shoulders seemed to slump slightly. "Very well, then. Come. I will take you back."

There was silence between them as they sped southward beneath the glittering stars. Far below gleamed the faint lights of torchlit villages—small sparks of warmth lost in the midst of immense cold shadows.

When at last they came again to the level mountaintop in the southern wastelands, and the man called Bar Yosef stepped down from the craft, the wizard asked, "Must all their thousands of years of sufferings, then, be for nothing?"

Bar Yosef's strange features, limned in the moonlight and the dim blue glow of the wizard's craft, again showed sadness. "They shall know mercy."

"Yet you are partly human, even as they."

"And you are entirely of them, wizard—yet you speak as if you were not. So it is always with you. Go, adversary of your own kind, and leave me to my destiny."

"You could rule them! I could give you the power!"

Suddenly a far, shrill humming came from the southeastern sky. The two glanced up and saw a number of blue-gleaming lights moving among the stars, growing brighter.

"They come to minister to me," said Bar Yosef, "—and to see that I am unharmed. My time here is fulfilled. You must go now."

The wizard nodded. "I know. The dreams sent by your father reached minds other than yours. I will go, but you will see me again. You are human. I hope you will think on my words."

The wizard's craft sped off into the sky, vanishing silently amid the stars toward the north. Now no bluish glow shone from it.

Slowly the man in white turned and sat down once again in the southern quadrant of his dust-drawn circle, then waited with impassive features as the blue-white lights in the southeast grew steadily brighter.

THE BLACK SYNAGOGUE  
PART ONE

Sample file

## CHAPTER I

Gray clouds moved across the sky. A chill wind stirred the dust amid the grassy mounds and the jagged remnants of old walls and foundations. Among these ruins a lean old man labored with shovel and grubbing-hoe while his white hair and beard fluttered in the wind.

There came a footfall. Then, "Ho, Dositheus—still at it, I see."

The old man stood erect, pulling his brown symbol-embazoned cloak more closely about him, and stared at the newcomer. "Had you but helped with the work, Simon," he panted accusingly, "it would have gone faster."

The one called Simon shook his head. He was a young man in his mid-twenties, tall and well built. The wind fluttered the edges of his dark cloak and the straight black locks that hung nearly to his shoulders. There was something grim in the cast of his angular, clean-shaved features and his dark, deep-set eyes.

"Your work is madness. It will lead to nothing. Have done with it, O mentor, and come back to the inn."

Dositheus glared at him, then threw down his spade; it clattered on the stony dirt. "It *was* here, I tell you! Did I not show you the passage in the ancient book of Mattan, Priest of Baal, which says—?"

"Madness," Simon repeated. "The author of that work was as crazy as the sorcerer who owned it. I still think you paid far too much for the purchase of that sorcerer's books."

"Prodikos was no ordinary sorcerer, as you well know. He was the greatest mage in Ephesus, a city renowned for its magic. When he—died—I bid for whatever I could afford of his library, for it would have been a crime to let his books fall into the hands of anyone less learned than I."

Simon shook his head again. "You are obsessed. Day after day, for nearly a week now, you have come up here to delve in the dirt. What do you expect to find on this bleak ridgetop? Treasure?"

Dositheus' eyes narrowed, glittered. "You know better than that, Simon."

"Aye. Always you seek for some hidden knowledge that will add to your sorcerous power. But here? Look!" He swept his left arm toward the wide expanse of the ruin-cluttered ridge; as he did so his cloak fell open, revealing a red-brown tunic and a wide belt from which hung a large knife and a Roman gladius, or short-sword. "Look—rocks, dry grass and the stubs of ruins, which are well over a thousand years old. Did you really hope that anything of value would remain here after—?"

"The ages have hidden much," hissed Dositheus. "Have you learned so

little from me, and from the great mage Daramos under whom we studied for four years at Persepolis? There are secrets that have lain hidden in the earth a thousand times a thousand years—things of magic forged by sorcerers of bygone ages. What I seek is young by comparison—young on earth, that is, for it was forged amid the stars aeons before it was brought to this ruin when it was yet the wizard-built Shrine of Hali.”

Simon pulled his cloak about him again, shuddering from something more than the chill of the wind. He did not like the reminder that this was the site of Hali, that town destroyed by the Twelve Tribes under the leadership of Joshua so many centuries ago. Dositheus’ old scrolls from the library of Prodikos, most of them more ancient than the Five Books of Moses, told of monstrous rites that had been practiced here by the land’s ancient inhabitants, not all of whom had been human.

“I would think, Dositheus, that after what we experienced in Ephesus you would leave off these dark delvings. I never again want to come as close to an unearthly doom as we did while confronting the servitors of Assatur, the Star-God.”

Dositheus laughed suddenly. “And, yet, Simon, it was your own delvings into dark things that got us into that peril. Your goal then was revenge upon Rome for Helen’s death.”

“Speak not of that!” growled Simon warningly.

“Very well. But now you seek the Romans who slew your parents eight years ago and sold you into the arena. I think that if my delvings turn up a source of power, you will use it readily enough.”

“A sword will suffice for what I have to do. But, come—we should get on our way. It is a long way back to the inn.”

Dositheus nodded reluctantly, stashed his tools in a rock cleft, then took up a long wooden staff and accompanied Simon from the ruins and down a path that hugged the slope of the hill. They walked briskly, and Simon once again marveled at his white-haired mentor who, although in his seventies, seemed spry as a goat. As they hastened on, the wind continued to blow, bending the dry grasses and rattling the leaves of the occasional oaks. Infrequently the westering sun peeked between the cloud layers, giving color to the gray slopes and ridges that undulated down before them to the distant shore of the Great Sea and the walled town of Ecdippa, anciently called Achzib.

“That is another reason I must soon go my own way,” Simon said presently as they walked. “In addition to avoiding any more of your entanglements with dark magic, I must do what I came here to do.”

“I see.” Dositheus was quiet for some moments, then, “What about young Menander, and the girl, Ilione? You rescued her from the dark designs of her false father Prodikos; she is partly your responsibility.”

“No. Prodikos’ daughter decided to go with you and Menander back to

Persepolis to study under the mage Daramos. You should have gone there as you originally intended instead of accompanying me here to the land of my birth.”

“Perhaps. But that was before I purchased Prodikos’ books and learned of what might lie hidden in the ruins of Hali.”

“And what might that be, Dositheus?”

“Ha! So you *are* interested.”

Simon sighed. “No. Forget I asked.”

They strode on in silence. For nearly two hours they walked, ever downward toward the town beside the sea, by worn paths and shallow grassy valleys and low ridges, until at last they began to see other people—farmers, sheepherders, travelers afoot and on mule-back. The sun had set beyond the sea when at last they spied the inn amid a clutter of lowly dwellings just outside the city walls, but its rays still tinged the undersides of massed clouds with red fire.

“Have you told Menander and Ilione yet?” said Dositheus.

“That I’m leaving? No—not yet.”

“Menander will be disappointed. He looks up to you, you know.”

“I will miss him, too.”

“And Ilione will be disappointed as well.”

Simon said nothing.

“She’s a lovely girl,” Dositheus went on, “—as lovely in her own way as her sister Helen was. She even looks a bit like her, as I’m sure you’ve noticed.”

Simon had noticed. Ilione, though not as tall as her older sister, and blonde rather than dark-haired, yet reminded him of Helen every time he looked at her.

“Fool!” Simon spun on old Dositheus, scowling. “Don’t you realize that’s another reason I must go? Ilione *is* lovely, but she can never replace Helen—and every time I see her it’s like a knife being twisted inside me. Speak no more of this!”

Silent once more, they walked the short distance to the inn, Simon scowling in dark introspection, Dositheus’ eyes showing irritation and a trace of sadness.

As they entered the gate leading to a path around the side of the building to a small garden, a stout man hurried out the front door and ran after them.

“A word with you, good sirs.”

Simon felt a slight annoyance as the paunchy, bearded innkeeper plucked at Dositheus’ sleeve. “Well, what is it?”

“I have information, perhaps,” said the man, grinning and glancing from one of them to the other while rubbing his fat-fingered hands together.

“Yes, Isaac?” Dositheus inquired mildly, laying a coin into one of those hands.

“Two soldiers came here not an hour ago, inquiring about three Samaritan travelers and a golden-haired girl with them.”

“Soldiers!” exclaimed Simon, laying a hand on his sword-haft. “Were they Romans?”

“I think not. They wore dark armor and black cloaks. I don’t believe I’ve ever seen their like before.”

“What did they want?” asked Dositheus.

“They asked where to find you. When I said I did not know, they asked where you roomed.” The innkeeper glanced up at the second story of the building.

“And I supposed you told them, for a consideration?” Simon growled.

The man shrugged and spread his palms. “No, no, of course not—yet, they may have learned. I saw them questioning the servants.”

“Where did they go? Into the city?”

“No, young sir. They took the road toward the hills—the road upon which you have but now arrived.”

Simon and Dositheus looked at one another, each one thinking the same thought.

“I thank you, Isaac,” said Dositheus, laying another coin upon the innkeeper’s palm. “If you see these men again, please let us know right away.”

The man bowed. “I shall. Of course I shall.” He turned and hastened away, his fixed grin flashing in his dark beard. Simon and Dositheus hurried up the outside stairway to the ledge that ran around the second story and strode rapidly to the suite they had rented. They tried the door, found it unlocked, and entered.

Two young people turned to face them from opposite corners of the room. One, a girl whose golden hair was done up in a loose coiffure, rose from a stool beside a fireplace where warm flames flickered. The other, a lad with eyes and hair as dark as Simon’s own, rose also. A large black raven stood upon the table at which the boy had been seated, one claw resting upon a partly unrolled scroll.

“Menander, why isn’t the door locked?” Simon demanded.

“Why should it be?” countered the lad. “Ilione and I are both here.”

Simon and Dositheus closed the door behind them. Dositheus asked, “Did either of you, by any chance, happen to see two soldiers dressed in black?”

“I *told* you!” cried the girl, shooting an accusing glance at Menander. “I told you they were from my father, but you wouldn’t listen—you said not to worry!” She ran forward and threw her arms around Simon. “Help me!” she cried. “My father—he’s come back from the grave! He’s sent his guards for me!”

Simon gripped her shoulders and shook her. “You’ve got to stop this, Ilione.”

Dositheus laid a hand on the girl’s brow, captured her gaze with his own and uttered a short prayer in a tongue she did not understand. She immedi-

ately relaxed a bit; her eyes, a delicate hazel in color, lost much of their anxiety.

“You are both such a comfort to me,” she sighed, but with a quaver still in her voice. “Tell me, Simon, what did the old wizard say?”

Simon looked away uneasily, but Menander stepped forward a pace and said, “It is a benediction given to our people by the ancient prophet Moshe. It means: ‘The Lord bless and keep you, the Lord make his face to shine upon—’”

“And you!” cried the girl, whirling. “You wouldn’t listen to me—wouldn’t lock the door, even—” She turned back to the others. “Simon, we saw them when we were coming back from shopping in town. We hid in the bushes until they left—Menander didn’t want to, but I insisted. They questioned the servants.”

“Did you hear what they said?” asked Dositheus.

“No—they were too far away,” Menander replied. “Why were they here, old mentor? What do they want?”

Simon and Dositheus glanced at one another.

“I knew it!” wailed the girl. “My father has come back—he has sent them for me!” She turned away and flung herself down upon a blanket-covered mat beside the fireplace, sobbing.

Menander advanced a step toward Dositheus. “Old mentor, is it true?”

Dositheus shook his head. “No, it is not possible. Prodikos is dead. Yet, those soldiers you saw were indeed asking about us. The innkeeper told us so.”

“Gods!” The lad hurried to the girl’s side. “Ilione, I’m sorry—I should have listened to you. But, please don’t be frightened. They can’t be your father’s soldiers. You heard Dositheus—it’s not possible!”

The girl continued to sob, ignoring him.

Simon went outside and made a quick circuit of the balcony surrounding the second floor. He saw no one that looked suspicious, though, of course, in the gathering shadows of twilight many forms could hide. To the west the walls of Ecdippa loomed against clouds tinged with the last vestige of sunset’s glow; eastward, the sky was clearing and the pale stars of Virgo, with diamond-bright Spica in their midst, were rising above the hills.

Returning inside, he closed and barred the door. “Lock the outer door of the adjacent room, too, Menander,” he said. Then, for Ilione’s benefit, he added, “I’ve no doubt this is a false alarm, but for our own peace of mind well sleep with the inner doors open so that we can call to one another if need be.”

Much later, after Ilione and Menander had retired to their separate chambers, Simon and Dositheus sat at the table in the main room and spoke in low whispers. The still flame of an oil lamp burned between them, and flames still flickered in the fireplace across the room. Above, amid the shadowy rafters, the raven perched in fitful sleep, stirring ever and anon with slight rustlings and croakings.

“What do you think, O mentor?” asked Simon.

“I do not know,” said Dositheus. “The description of the soldiers fits those which Prodikos employed.”

“He was indeed a sorcerer, one of the greatest and most foul. It is said that such often return from death, especially to avenge themselves upon those who were their undoing in life. Could he—?”

Dositheus shook his head. “No. The soul of Prodikos is surely bound in the hell of Harag-Kolath, together with the souls he held in thrall who died with him. Still, he did serve beings far mightier than he, and their minions may yet walk the earth. Is it possible that someone in their service took note of me at the auction in Ephesus when I purchased several of Prodikos’ ancient books?” For several moments Dositheus scowled in silent thought; then, looking upward, he hissed, “Carbo—come down here!”

The raven stirred sleepily, fluttered its wings, croaked softly, then flapped down from the rafters to the table.

Dositheus pulled a small leather pouch from his robe, untied its drawstrings and poured from it perhaps a dozen white objects that rattled upon the table. Simon saw that they were carved of bone or ivory, faceted in a strange, irregular manner; each facet bore a graven symbol unfamiliar to him.

“Choose, Carbo,” said Dositheus. “Tell us from where the men in black have come.”

Again the raven croaked, as if in sleepy annoyance. Then, quickly, almost impatiently, it stooped and snapped up one of the white objects in its heavy bill. Dositheus took it from him.

“What nonsense is this?” asked Simon. “Do you seriously think that this raven can—?”

“Quiet, Simon! You have seen what Carbo can do. Did he not even save your life once? Watch, now.”

Simon did, remembering with a slight prickle of gooseflesh that occasion when Carbo’s judgment had proven better than Dositheus’ own. Yes, the raven’s intelligence was uncanny—yet, did Dositheus really believe in such a method of divination?

“Choose again, Carbo,” muttered the old man. “Choose as many of the bones as you like.”

Quickly the raven snatched up one more of them, dropped it in Dositheus’ outstretched hand, then spread its wings and flapped heavily up to his rafter once more.

“No more?” said the old man, looking up. “Only two?”

The raven tucked its head under its wing.

“So much for that!” growled Simon, rising. “I’m for bed.”

“Wait, Simon. This is curious. Carbo has picked the symbols for ‘darkness’ and ‘holy place’.”

“And what does that mean?”

“I asked from where the men in black came.”

Simon nodded. “I see. ‘Black fane’—that sounds sinister enough, I grant. But I think you’re just stirring up your fears for nothing, Dositheus. Anyway, your cryptic message tells us nothing concrete. Let’s clear our minds with a good night’s sleep.”

Dositheus nodded, though doubt remained in his eyes.

They bedded down in their blankets on opposite sides of the hearth, and Dositheus was soon asleep. Simon, however, lay awake for some time, staring thoughtfully at the wavering light-pattern cast by the dying fire upon the ceiling.

His mind was made up. Today he had finished buying supplies in Ecdippa; tomorrow he would take what he needed of them and journey southward—alone.

He sighed and turned restlessly, gazing into the glowing coals. He would miss his three companions. For many weeks they had journeyed together, first by ship from Ephesus to Antioch, thence on foot southward to Byblos, Sidon, Tyre and finally Ecdippa. They had made their living as street magicians, Simon and Dositheus performing slight-of-hand wonders that made the crowd gape while Menander and Ilione acted as stage assistants or collected the spectators’ donations. They were good at what they did and they worked well together.

It was during their stay in Antioch that Dositheus had announced his change of plans. Originally he had intended to journey with Menander and the orphaned Ilione to far Persepolis, where they would study mysterious arts under the tutelage of Daramos, greatest of mages. During the sea-passage from Ephesus, however, the old Samaritan scholar had time to read the ancient scrolls he purchased—and something he discovered in them made him decide to accompany Simon southward. Just what that discovery was he would not say, and Simon had not pressed him, his own dark goal being uppermost in his mind.

They had done well financially in the cities along their route, but once at Ecdippa Dositheus had lost interest in street-performing, leaving that to his three companions while he went forth during the day to delve in the ruins in the hills to the northeast.

The ruins of Hali, denounced in the *Book of Jasher*, which some said was older than the writings of the prophet Moshe.

Simon woke suddenly. He had heard a sound. The room was dark, the coals on the hearth barely glowing. There was a smell of smoke that was not of the fireplace, and he felt a draft. Then his skin prickled as he saw that the outside door stood open and two black forms stood in it, silhouetted against the starlit sky.

Simon moved slowly, holding his breath. His hands touched the handles of the sword and dagger that lay beside him.

The figures moved into the room. Bright metal glittered in their hands.

Simon leaped up, struck and slashed with all the skill and power of his gladiator-training. The blade of his sica ripped into the chest of one of the dark figures barely an instant before his Roman gladius shore through the neck-cords of the other. Instantly both of the men went down with a clatter.

“Dositheus!” yelled Simon. “Get up, quick! Bring light!”

But the old man was already on his feet, thrusting a torch into the heart coals. As the flame sprang up it revealed two black-cloaked forms sprawled on the floor. Highlights gleamed on helms and armor of black metal.

There was no blood.

“Simon!” Menander appeared in the doorway from the other apartment, clad only in a tunic, an unshaded oil lamp in his hand. “What happened?”

“Shut the door, Simon,” urged Dositheus, bracketing his torch upon the wall, “Hurry! No one must know of this.”

Simon did so, wondering at his old mentor’s anxiety—and suddenly noticed that the door was curiously burned. A large semicircular chunk containing the lock and part of the crossbar had been neatly taken out of it and now lay on the floor; evidently the sound of its fall had been what had wakened him. The chunk and the place where it had been were charred black and smoldering at the edges.

“Baal” gasped Simon. “Dositheus, what in the name of Hades—?”

Ilione, clad in a white shift, appeared in the doorway behind Menander. Her eyes widened. “Gods! My father’s guards!” she gasped, turning pale and gripping the door frame for support.

“No,” said Dositheus, stooping beside the still forms. “That is not possible. Yet they may well have been minions of the same dark cult which your father served. Look!” He rolled one of the bodies over and pointed to a black-and-yellow medallion upon its chest. “See those inset jewels? They form the sign of the Bull’s Face, emblem of the Cult of Assatur!”

But Simon was looking at the gaping wound his sword had made in the man’s neck. There was no blood, and even as he watched the wound seemed to be slowly closing, knitting.

“Dositheus—*look out!*”

The old man gasped as the fallen soldier’s hand shot out and gripped him by the throat. Ilione screamed. Simon snarled and struck with the short sword, shearing through muscles and vertebrae so that the guardsman’s head fell back and hung by a shred of flesh and tendon—but still the hand continued to squeeze Dositheus’ throat. Simon cursed frantically and hacked at the arm; it slackened its grip and fell to the floor, severed at the elbow.

“Simon! The other one!” screamed Menander.

Simon whirled to see the other soldier rising, its chest wound knitting bloodlessly beneath its medallion. Bright metal glittered in its rising hand. Simon ducked instinctively—just as a pencil-thin lance of light crackled from

the weapon. Yelling, he leaped and struck; the guard's black-helmed head spun from his shoulders and went clattering into a corner. For a moment the body stood upright, wobbling uncertainly, then crashed to the floor.

"Gods!" cried Menander.

Dositheus rose, coughing and clutching at his throat, staggered to a chair and sat down. Menander placed his lamp on the table, then rushed to Ilione, who had slid to her knees and was clutching the door frame in wide-eyed terror.

Simon knelt cautiously by the dead guardsmen, his blade ready. The bodies did not move—they seemed truly dead now. But still there was no blood. Slowly he walked back to his blankets, put on his sword belt over his tunic and sheathed his weapons, never once taking his eyes from the still forms.

They did not move.

Dositheus rose from his chair, stooped, lifted from the decapitated guard's right hand a small object of silvery metal and held it close to the lamp. Simon advanced and looked at it. It was a mirror-bright sphere somewhat larger than a walnut with a tube of similar metal about the length of a man's finger protruding from it.

"What is it?" Simon demanded.

"A weapon," muttered Dositheus. "A strange weapon. I have never seen its like. It shot forth that crackling ray."

Simon glanced at the far wall, where a small blackened patch smoldered upon the plaster. "Sorcery!" he growled. "Had I not moved quickly, it would have slain me. Dositheus, you'd better explain how—"

"No!" shrieked Ilione suddenly, pointing.

Simon whirled—and gasped to see that from the neck of each corpse a viscid greenish mass was oozing, gathering upon the floor as a veined translucent blob, pulsing, swelling. Then both blobs, each grown to nearly the diameter of a man's head, began to move forward across the floorboards. One of them paused by the hand of one of the guards; a formless pseudopod grew from the thing, lifted a small silvery weapon from the dead fingers, began to point it.

Simon hurled the sword. It pierced the blob-thing and thudded solidly into the floor, pinning it; another brilliant lance of fire flashed, crackling briefly against the plaster of the ceiling, and then the silvery object went clattering across the floor. The blob flowed away from the sword blade, apparently unhurt, leaving the sword sticking in the planks, and moved toward the outside door. Simon leaped over it, snatched up a wide-bladed shovel from beside the hearth. The thing was hurrying along the wall toward the crack under the door. Quickly Simon ran forward and scooped it up, then deftly flipped it into the embers of the fireplace. It bubbled, hissed, tried to crawl out of the fire, but Simon shoveled it back. The embers sputtered. Sweat ran down Simon's face; though the thing made no sound he seemed to hear its pain keening within his mind, along his nerve fibers.

Ilione screamed again. Simon whirled to see the other blob-thing clutching her ankle with a long pseudopod, flowing into that pseudopod toward her. Then Menander dashed forward with the torch he had snatched from the wall and held flame against it. Ilione shrieked as if her own flesh were being burned. The thing released her and retreated. Simon ran forward, scooped it up on the shovel and hurled it, too, into the embers, Menander following with the torch.

In another minute the blobs were nothing but tarry fluid bubbling on the ashes. The room was filled with a foul stench.

Ilione was trembling in old Dositheus' arms as he tried to comfort her. "It wanted in!" she sobbed. "It wanted my mind, my soul! I couldn't move! I felt its thoughts, its pain when the fire touched it!"

Simon strode forward, his expression grim, somber. "Dositheus, what were they?"

The old man, stroking the girl's blonde hair, looked up with troubled eyes. "I don't know. I've never seen their like. But you can be sure they are indeed minions of Assatur."

"Stirred up by your delvings in those ruins, perhaps?"

"I fear so. We must leave here, Simon, before—"

The door suddenly crashed open and the dark-bearded innkeeper hurried into the room, brandishing an axe. Three stout churls with clubs in their hands followed him.

"Baal and Ashtoreth!" he swore. "What's all this commotion? And that stink! What's been burning?" He glanced down at the hacked forms of the two guardsmen. "Gods! Murder's been done here!"

"No!" Dositheus hurried to his bedroll, plucked forth a pouch that jingled and approached the innkeeper. "No, good Isaac, not murder. These men attacked us in the night."

The innkeeper eyed the purse, then turned to his three burlies. "I'll handle this," he said. "Go—and reassure anyone who was awakened that all's under control now."

The three nodded and then left, muttering among themselves. Simon closed the door after them and turned to the innkeeper. "Are these two the men who inquired about us yesterday?"

"I... I think so." Isaac glanced uneasily at a severed head, then at the heavy-bladed sica at Simon's side.

"They are not from hereabouts?"

"I never saw them before yesterday."

Dositheus laid several gold pieces in Isaac's hand. "This should pay you for any damages and problems of—disposal. I am truly sorry for this disturbance, and I promise you that we shall all be gone from here before dawn."

The innkeeper jingled the coins meditatively. "I must consider my three loyal helpers."

Dositheus added three more coins to the pile. Isaac nodded, grinned, then popped them into his own pouch. Then, stealing a last appreciative glance at Ilione, he bowed and left the room.

“Dress and pack, all of you,” said Dositheus. “Hurry.”

“We’re not going out there, are we?” said Ilione, her voice quavering. “What if there are more of them—out there, in the night?”

“I doubt there are,” said Dositheus, “but we must leave before others of their kind learn of their failure—and before the local authorities get wind of this.”

Half an hour later they had packed all their gear and were leading their three burdened donkeys up the valley east of Ecdippa, toward the hilly skyline where the first hint of dawn was beginning to glow.

## CHAPTER II

An hour after dawn they came to a crossroads. Here they called a halt and breakfasted beneath a pair of oaks. The few travelers who passed at this early hour paid little attention to them as they sat and ate in silence. Ilione was still rather pale, Simon noticed, and though the sunlight was comfortably warm, she kept her cloak drawn closely about her. Still, she seemed calm now. Here in the clear daylight the terror of the night was withdrawing, seeming less real.

When they had finished their meal, Simon asked, "Where are you bound from here, Dositheus?"

The old man glanced toward the eastward hills. "Capharnaum."

Simon rose to his feet. "Then I must leave you. My mission draws me southward."

The others rose also. Dositheus said, "Must you, Simon?"

"You know it well, old mentor. I will miss you, but before we ever left Ephesus I told you where my destiny lies."

Dositheus nodded, glanced toward the three pack animals. "At least take one of the donkeys with you."

"No. I take only what I can carry comfortably. I must travel light."

"Money—"

"I have a fourth of what we have earned. It is more than enough to see me to Sebaste. The three of you will need the rest of it more than I."

Ilione suddenly ran forward and threw her arms around him. "Please, Simon, please don't leave us!"

The young Samaritan gently pried himself free of the girl's clutches. "I must, Ilione."

"What will we do?" There was a touch of desperation in the girl's voice. "You are strong, and a skilled fighter. You can protect us against robbers and—and things in the night."

"Nonsense, Ilione. Dositheus is a powerful wizard, you know that. And Menander has studied the arts of magic and self-defense under the mage Daramos as long as I have, and under Dositheus even longer. They will protect you—"

"Menander is young. No man is your equal, Simon—my sister often told me so."

Simon's face grew pained. He pushed the girl from him rather abruptly and turned to Dositheus. "My advice to you, old mentor, is to pursue your original plan. Take Menander and Ilione to Parthia, where they will learn and grow under the tutelage of Daramos."

“And will you follow us there, Simon?”

“Someday—perhaps.”

Dositheus nodded. “If you survive, you mean. Well, Simon, I have a quest also. I have struck a trail and I must follow it.”

Simon scowled. “I know you. The trails you have followed in quest of dark knowledge have often proven treacherous.”

“More so than yours for vengeance?”

Simon could think of no reply.

“We must each follow our own destiny.”

“And what of Menander and Ilione?” asked Simon.

“I shall continue to tutor them, as I have thus far.”

“I trust that your—quest—will not bring them into danger.”

Dositheus smiled. “Did you not just say that I am a powerful wizard? After all, I’ve lived to see well over seventy summers.”

“Very well.” Simon nodded. “Good fortune to you. And to you, Ilione. And you, Menander.” He shook the hand of each in turn. “And you, Carbo,” he added, addressing the dark bird that perched upon Menander’s shoulder. Then, abruptly, he turned and strode away down the road that led southward, not looking back.

He had walked for perhaps five minutes when he heard rapid footfalls behind him. Turning, he saw the youthful Menander hastening in his direction, the raven Carbo flapping along in the air beside him.

“Simon!” gasped Menander as he caught up. “I’m going with you.”

Simon stopped and faced the youth sternly. “You are not!”

“*Ita!*” croaked the raven as it settled down to its accustomed perch on the lad’s shoulder.

“No, nor you either, you crazy bird! Get back to the others, both of you.”

“*Please, Simon!* Let me go with you. Let me help you kill the Romans who slew your family.”

Simon shook his head, anger and sadness mingling in his eyes. “You don’t know what you’re saying, lad.”

“But I do! Didn’t the Romans kill my parents, too?”

“That was when you were too young to remember. You were only six when Dositheus bought you out of slavery. But I was sixteen—the age you are now—when it happened to me.”

“Yet I *know*, Simon. I think of it often. I want to kill Romans as much as you do!”

“Now listen, damn it!” growled Simon. “You have a responsibility to Dositheus and Ilione.”

Menander shook his head violently. “Dositheus needs no one, as you well know. And as for Ilione, she despises me.”

“Ah, so that’s it,” said Simon. He laid his hands on the lad’s shoulders

and looked into his dark eyes, saw the hurt there. “Tell me about it, Menander. You and Ilione seemed good friends during the voyage from Ephesus and in Antioch. What happened?”

Menander sighed. “It started when Dositheus said we were going with you, Simon, instead of to Parthia. I’d told her so much about Daramos, about his strange and fantastic powers and what a wonderful and kind teacher he is.”

“He is indeed. I know she was looking forward to the journey with excitement—she seemed almost to have forgotten the dark shadow that had lain upon her in her father’s house. I sensed she was disappointed—damn old Dositheus’ perversity! But surely Ilione hasn’t turned against you because of it?”

Menander hesitated. “Simon—she loves you.”

Simon started. Again he could find nothing to say.

“It’s true, Simon. Her sister Helen talked much of you while the two of them lived in the mansion of Senator Junius in Antium. And now I fear that Ilione, in her disappointment at not going to Parthia, has fixed all her hopes upon you—and she despises me for having given her promises that were broken. I can’t blame her—I, too, wish we could return to Daramos in Parthia.”

Instantly Simon realized the truth of what Menander had said. It explained Ilione’s moodiness, her impulsive clinging.

“Listen, Menander,” he said. “There is nothing between Ilione and me. What Helen and I shared was something that—that only the gods share. I can’t speak more of it. But you and Ilione?”

Menander shook his head. “We were friends—close friends. I... I have dreamed that something more might come of it, but...”

Simon clapped a hand on the youth’s shoulder. “Return to her,” he said. “She needs you, depend on it—now more than ever, I’m sure. And so does Dositheus. Keep him out of trouble if you can. They both need you, Menander, whether they know it or not.”

The lad nodded. “Very well, Simon. I’ll go back to them—but only if you promise me that you’ll come back to us again.”

Simon hesitated. “I—I will if I can.”

“You will if you want to, Simon.”

“Aye.” Simon impulsively reached out and clasped the youth’s arm, gazed into his serious dark eyes. “I promise I’ll see you again, Menander—and not the entire empire of Romans shall keep me from it!”

“In Capernaum, then?”

“Capernaum—or anywhere else you may be.”

Menander nodded, stoutly returning Simon’s handshake, then turned abruptly and hurried off back down the road. Simon stared after him until he was gone, then shifted his pack to a more comfortable position and resumed his journey southward.

\* \* \*

All that day the three of them journeyed southeastward through the hills, Ilione occasionally riding the donkey that was least burdened. Menander sympathized with her, knowing that her weariness was due in part to the shock of fear she had endured, but whenever he spoke to her she answered as shortly as possible, hugging her feelings to herself.

Once during the morning, they paused while Dositheus gazed back toward a wide ridge northeast of Ecdippa. Menander watched him closely.

“Why could I not find it?” he heard the old sage mumble. “Was it not there? If not, who found it? Where was it taken?”

“What was taken?” asked Menander.

“The Chalice of Byakh—” Dositheus suddenly cut himself short. “Damn you, Menander, must you probe my very thoughts unbidden?”

The lad wondered at his mentor’s unaccustomed vehemence. “Are not those ridgetops the ruins of Hali? What did you fail to find there?”

Dositheus glanced at Ilione who stood listlessly beside the donkeys, apparently paying no attention. “I’ll tell you in Capharnaum,” he said. “Come—we must get to a town before nightfall.”

They pushed on, stopping briefly twice more during the day. The sky was clear, and well before midmorning the terror of the night before seemed to Menander only a dimly-remembered nightmare. Even Ilione’s spirits seemed brighter. Still, Dositheus seemed anxious to press on with an urgency that made Menander wonder. Was the old man afraid that dusk might catch them outside of an inn’s protective walls?

They spent the night in a small, crowded inn at a village in the hills, and resumed their journey early in the morning. By midafternoon they had passed the crest of the hills and could gaze down across the beautiful fertile plain of Gennesaret. Beyond it sprawled the wide lake of the same name, the city of Capharnaum nestled on its shore. An hour before sunset they passed within the city’s western limits and before nightfall were lodged at a comfortable inn.

Menander saw to it that the animals were taken to the stable and given plenty of straw, then returned to the inn. After the three of them had ascended by the outside stairway to their suite of three rooms, they supped lightly and drank an herb tea, following which Ilione immediately retired to her chamber, exhausted.

“She will sleep well,” said Dositheus. “The potion I gave her will ensure it.”

“Indeed. Are we safe here, O mentor?”

“Yes, of course.”

Menander leaned forward, elbows on the table. “You promised you would tell me all. Do not spare me. Have you stirred up things that are a danger to us? What is this Chalice of Byakh which you seek?”

The old man sighed. “You read of that in the *Book of Jasher*, of course.”

“Aye, only last night—while pursuing the studies you had outlined for me. It is written that the servitors of Assatur once gathered in Hali to perform monstrous rites, and to drink the Golden Nectar of the Primal Gods from the Chalice of Byakh—and for this the men of Asher under Joshua destroyed the town and many others in the region. What does it all mean, O mentor?”

“I will tell you.” Dositheus filled a wine cup, sipped from it and set it down. “The *Book of Jasher* is perhaps over a thousand years old, but there are books far older—books which I have not yet allowed you to study.”

“The books you bought from Prodikos’s library?”

“Aye. They tell of this Shrine of Hali, which was named after a terrible and remote region of the cosmos whose nature you could not comprehend at your present stage of learning. Yet the town of the Shrine was but the last surviving outpost of an age-old kingdom that had vanished long before Joshua led the chosen folk of Yahweh to this land. That kingdom’s capital was the ancient and fabled city of Karakossa, whose long-vanished ruins lie buried beneath the soil of the valley of Gennesaret. There were worshipped the most ancient god and goddess Assatur and Shupnikkurat, whose rites were known to the men of age-lost Elam, Shem and even primal Attluma—aye, and even to those who ruled this world before the Elohim breathed life into Adam. Do you understand what I am saying, Menander?”

The lad sat motionless for a moment, his eyes wide with awe and perhaps a touch of fear. Then he recited in a hushed voice:

*“Yä, Assatur! Iä, Shupnikkurat!  
Kumat Karakossa ut Arag-Kolat.”*

“Quiet!” Dositheus glanced around as if fearful that someone might have heard, then took a deep gulp of his wine. “Aye, you remember—the chant to the great Spawning Ones in the temple of Ephesus. Do not repeat it!”

“Dositheus!” hissed the lad. “What forces are you tampering with?”

“Forces that will bring us power, perhaps.”

“Will they endanger Ilione? Those soldiers who came seeking us in Ecdippa—they did indeed resemble those who served her father. Were they truly sent from him?”

Dositheus shook his head. “Prodikos is destroyed. Yet, many other sorcerers still flourish. And even as the center of worship for Shupnikkurat was the great temple in Ephesus, so is the central fane of her mate Assatur in a city of this very valley. But, enough.” Dositheus gulped down the rest of his wine. “You must go to bed, Menander. I will tell you more another time, when we are both less exhausted.”

“Tomorrow?”