

# 1



THE HUNCHED FIGURE TOILED UP the winding trail leaning heavily upon his long crooked staff, stopping frequently to rest and to look down upon the placid lowlands, gazing toward the west in the direction of Askelon. He was an old man of years beyond counting, dressed in the robes and cowl of a priest. The hood threw a dark shadow across his features, and though the day was hot and the sun bright, he did not uncover his head but went on his way wrapped head to toe. Seen from a distance he might have been a black beetle scabbling up a hillock bearing the weight of his burdensome shell.

When he reached the summit of the plateau he sat down on a rock beneath an ancient wind-worn tree that threw its sparse, gnarled branches over the road. Many a pilgrim had sat there upon that rock to offer up a prayer to the gods for a fortuitous oracle.

But this traveler was no pilgrim and offered no prayers.

Instead, he sat and with narrowed eyes gazed out over the countryside. The air sang with bird-song and shimmered as the heat rose in waves from the land. In the misty blue distance his sharp eagle's vision could see the dark green line of Pelgrin Forest, lying like a vast green sea away to the west. In the valley below, peasants labored in the fields among their new crops. Their shouts to their lazy oxen drifted up the side of the hill like petitions to an unhearing god.

The old man turned his face away from the peaceful landscape shining green and golden beneath clear, untroubled blue skies. He looked toward the temple rising white and silent as a

tomb above him. Then he lifted himself heavily to his legs once more, took up his staff, and continued on.

When he reached the temple yard he stopped and leaned long on his staff, as if waiting for a sign, or as if, having come this far, he was unable to decide whether to finish what he came to do. After some time he turned his face to the east, toward the mountains whose mighty heads could be seen rising above their heavy shoulders. There, above the far peaks, he saw dark clouds assembling and moving westward on the wind.

The old priest nodded to himself and then went across the stone-paved yard to the temple steps. He climbed the stairs, raised the iron ring on the great wooden door, and knocked several times.

After a few moments the door opened and a man in a red cloak poked his head out. "The temple is not open at this hour." The man looked at the old priest unkindly. "Come back at the seventh hour if you want prayers or an omen."

"Do you not see that I am a priest?" asked the old one. "I have come to see the High Priest of Ariel."

"He sees no one," the temple guard said. "He is in retreat."

"Is he, indeed? But this is a matter of greatest urgency. He must see me."

The guard glared at the wrinkled old priest, and his features proclaimed that the old man and his crooked staff were a great nuisance.

But before he could reply, the old priest spoke again. "It is not for you to decide. Bring someone in authority. If not the High Priest, then the under-High Priest, or the Day Priest."

The temple guard glared a silent curse on the old man and closed the door. The elderly priest stood for a few moments and waited, head bent down. Just as he was about to raise the ring once again he heard steps on the other side of the door. A gray-cloaked priest, a young man with a pocked face, thrust his head through the opening. Behind him the guard stood frowning.

"Well," the young priest said, "what do you want?"

"I wish to speak with the High Priest. That is allowed, surely. It is a matter of some importance."

"He sees no one unannounced," snapped the priest.

"Then I wish to be announced at once," said the old man softly. His faded eyes hardened to stone.

"High Priest Pluell is in retreat; he cannot be disturbed. I am the Day Priest; I am empowered to help you."

The old man smiled slyly. "That I doubt most heartily. Still, you will do. Announce me to him. I can readily see that you are a man of some resource—you will find a way."

The young man's face convulsed in a mighty frown. He drew breath to shout the old man away. But before he could speak, the elderly priest raised his hand and said, "Do what I say." This was spoken simply, but with utmost authority. The younger priest felt it like a slap. His mouth snapped shut instantly.

"Wait over there," the Day Priest muttered. He pointed to a stone bench under a tree away across the temple yard by the wall.

"I will abide," said the old man. He turned and began slowly descending the temple steps.

"What name shall I give him?" shouted the young priest after him.

The old man paused, leaned on his staff, and seemed to ponder the question carefully. "Well?" called the Day Priest.

"Tell him," the old man began at length, "that a friend from the east has come." One gnarled hand disappeared beneath the folds of his robes. "And give him this." He withdrew his hand and held out a darkly glittering object.

The young man came out of the temple and took the talisman from the outstretched hand. He held it in his palm and examined it closely.

The object was a flat round medal made of black stone, and was inscribed with strange symbols which he did not recognize. It was cold in his hand, and a strange feeling came over him as he held the talisman—a feeling of deep foreboding, of doom gathering around him like the high dark clouds overhead.

Without another word he turned and went back into the temple. The old man continued down the steps and made his way slowly to the bench under the tree. He settled himself to wait in the shade.

THE DAY PROGRESSED LEISURELY. AT midday a straggling few pilgrims came to the temple. The Day Priest met them and took their offerings. The pilgrims waited and then were admitted into the temple for their oracle. They came out and went away chattering happily, full of the good fortune which had been assured them by the priests. None noticed the old man sitting quiet as an idol beneath the tree by the wall.

Evening came on, and with it a cool breeze out of the east, scented with the sweet musty smell of rain. As a crimson sun set in fiery brilliance away beyond the golden fields of the valley below the temple, a priest came out of the temple with a brand and lit the torch that stood in a stone pylon in the center of the temple yard.

The priest stood with his back turned to the old man, raised the brand and lit the torch, then turned slowly—feeling unseen eyes on him—and peered into the shadows at the old man still seated on the bench. From out of the darkness two bright eyes glittered back at him in the torchlight. The priest jumped back, almost dropping the torch. Then he turned and fled into the temple. The great wooden door slammed shut behind him, and the sound of its closing echoed through the empty yard.

The old man did not move; he merely closed his eyes once more and waited.

High clouds, flying swiftly on the upper winds like tattered sails, obscured the moon rising over the valley. The breeze came in gusts now, and in the distance could be heard the muted rumblings of thunder far away. A few dry leaves fluttered across the stone flagging of the temple yard, their tumbling shapes like skittering mice. The torch in the pylon sputtered as the wind played with it.

The old man sat with his head down; he drew his robes more closely around and waited.

At midnight the courtyard was dark and silent. Clouds covered the sky, and the distant mumbling of thunder sounded ever closer. The wind was fresh and steady out of the east, guttering the flame of the torch, making shadows leap and dance around the pylon.