

Chapter 1

“Omar, Omar!!” Aradan’s voice rang through the few rooms he occupied in the outer west wing of the palace.

“Yes, Master, I am coming.”

As fast as his short legs could manage Omar made his way to the main room where his master waited for him. It was an unusual time for him to be called but just now nothing was as usual.

Aradan, Omar’s master, was the first adviser for the Grandmaster Caspar. And Caspar was the first stargazer of the King of Persia, Syria and Mesopotamia. Aradan had spent nearly all his time the past week in the room high in the main tower of the palace studying the stars. Omar had been there with him several times.

“Caspar has called all his advisers together for a meeting to discuss the importance of the setting of the stars in the night sky, and I think it will be a long one this time. So make sure you can get me some tea during the meeting.”

Omar was Aradan’s tea boy. His task was to make sure his master always had sweet tea at hand and he was very diligent in his duties. He had a little copper stove fuelled by charcoal to keep the tea in the copper teakettle hot. He collected his boiling water and glowing embers from the kitchen furnaces and used the embers to fire the charcoal in his little stove. Then he put the herbs in the kettle and poured the boiling water over them. He had to keep it hot on his little stove without boiling the tea. At a sign from his master he would put a lump of sugar in a fine silver cup and pour the tea over it, stir it with a silver spoon and take it to his master on a silver plate. He always sat behind his master and waited till the master emptied the cup then he would take the cup back and clean it in warm water.

The commotion had begun a week ago. Caspar gathered all his advisers and told them of the unusual movements in the sky. Omar followed his master to the meeting to ensure him a regular serving of sweet tea. He sat with the other servants on their cushions against the wall, his little stove in front and the box of charcoal next to him. Caspar stood in the middle of the group of advisers discussing the situation. Omar at first didn’t listen to the explanations but because the other men were giving Caspar their full attention, Omar became curious.

Caspar had seen Jupiter move through the constellation of Aries the Ram. Omar knew Jupiter was a bright planet. He had learnt that from his master Aradan. Caspar explained that it was not so important in itself, but there were other things happening during this crossing as well. The sun was in Aries and Jupiter was in very close conjunction with the moon. Caspar was very excited and urged his advisers to find out what this all meant. He needed to explain to the King of the Medes and Persians what was happening.

“Aries the Ram is the Judean sign, the sign for Judea and Samaria, Palestine and Syria. And Jupiter is the Kings’ planet,” Caspar told his advisers. “Find out in the scrolls, find out.”

Omar knew it would be a busy time for him. His master would go to his rooms, collect some scrolls and carefully read them to find out what the signs could mean. The stars predicted that a great king was born in Judea, a region down on the coast of the great sea.

The meeting was over and Omar followed his master Aradan to the rooms carrying his little stove, the charcoal box and his teakettle. His master was so absorbed in Caspar’s explanation and in his own thoughts that he totally forgot to ask for his usual cups of tea. When they returned to his quarters in the outer west wing of the palace, only half the tea was gone. Aradan then went straight to the library to search for some scrolls. When he returned he was carrying two large volumes with him.

“Omar, this is very important. I want you to be with me and make sure I have enough tea while I am studying these scrolls.”

Omar knew this meant that as usual he was to sit on the side of the window while his master sat on the cushions in the big bay window. The master often talked to him, even though in most cases Omar didn’t understand what the master was talking about. He knew it was the way the master concentrated on the important features of the scrolls he was studying.

“If it is a king in Judea, maybe the Torah will tell us something about it. The Torah is the collection of the holy scrolls of the Jews. The great master Daniel is part of that. You know that Daniel was a great Magi who lived six hundred years ago. He was a Jew and in high esteem with King Nebuchadnezzar. He made him leader of the Zoroastrian priests of which Caspar is one. Daniel even ate at King Cyrus’ table. I think it would be a good idea to study the Torah first.”

Aradan took one of the large scrolls and began to read, looking through it till he found the story of Daniel, the great Magi. Aradan studied the text and then shook his head.

"No," he said to himself, "it is not here. Let me look somewhere else."

The rest of the day Aradan stayed in the bay window, reading and paging through the scrolls, and Omar went three times to the kitchen for boiling water to make new tea.

"Here it is," Aradan said, smiling. "The Jewish prophet Balaam says: 'I shall see him, but not now: I shall behold him, but not near: there shall come a star out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel'."

Aradan sat for some time thinking about what he had just read. There was a mention of the stars as being a sign for a king in Israel.

"Omar, a fresh cup of tea with an extra lump of sugar before we go to bed. Tomorrow morning we will tell Caspar what we have found."

His master was already making himself ready to visit the Grandmaster when, early the following morning, Omar went to the kitchen to collect his embers and boiling water.

After a breakfast of dates, figs, corn bread and honey with sweet tea, the master took the scrolls and hurried through the corridors to the chambers of Caspar. Omar had to run to keep up with Aradan.

They were admitted immediately.

"What did you find, Aradan?"

Aradan opened the Torah and read the passage of the prophet Balaam to Caspar. Caspar nodded.

"I have seen the signs again early this morning and the planets - even Saturn is rising. This is such a strong and awesome configuration. It all points to the birth of a great king in Judea."

Caspar looked at Aradan.

"This, Aradan, is a sign that will never return. Even the return of the son of Zoroaster will not be of such significance. We have to inform the King immediately. Come with me."

Nobody said anything to Omar and he couldn't think of anything better to do than to follow his master as he always did. They made their way through the corridors of the palace, crossed courtyards and passed servants and soldiers, who were everywhere in the palace.

When they came to the room before the great hall, Caspar asked for an immediate audience with the King. The room was already full of dignitaries and courtiers, important citizens and other people who wanted to seek council with the King about their problems. The king's advisor immediately placed Caspar at the top of the list. Caspar was one of the most eminent advisors of the King and was always given audience straight away.

It wasn't long before they could enter the great hall. The King was sitting as usual behind the low table from where he took or gave advice.

"Caspar, my good friend," the King said amicably. "What great news are you bringing me?"

"Master, your humble servant has observed the skies and the stars and we have come to the conclusion that the stars have indicated a great king is born in the region of Judea."

"In Judea? That is the kingdom over which Herod, the vassal of Rome, reigns."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"That's important. We have to see that we honour the birth in the style of a great king. We must send a dignitary of great importance to take our esteem to this new King of the Jews. It may benefit us later that we brought our friendship and honour to him."

"I thought you would think that way, Your Majesty."

"Scribe, make a note that I must think about the right man to take my greetings."

The King, looking in Caspar and Aradan's direction, smiled when he saw the serious face of the little boy behind Aradan, loaded with a stove and a teakettle.

"Thank you Caspar, may the gods be with you. I will think about this seriously and when I need your further counsel about this matter I will let you know immediately."

The three returned to the antechamber, where everybody was waiting. Many people looked with awe and respect at the greying Caspar and at the man who was in deep conversation with him. These were the most important men in the kingdom, the King's first advisers and healers. Omar understood their importance and felt good to be the tea slave of such an important man as Aradan. The three walked back through the courtyard to the western wing, where the observatory was located.

"You know, Aradan, I see in this sign not just a great king of Judea and the Jews but a great king for this world. The sign is too strong. All the planets are in such close conjunction that the power is immense. It is as if the coming of not just a king but of a God is announced. I would like to visit this child myself, to see for myself the power and the benevolence it signifies."

"It would be so fortunate to be those chosen servants of the King," Aradan agreed

Caspar and his stargazers watched the significant planets and the stars which indicated other important facts for the King. For days they didn't hear anything from him. Caspar didn't press because he knew that the King would think about it at the right time, then he would make the decision and it would be irreversible.

A week passed and then a servant of the King came to Caspar's rooms.

"The King requests his first adviser to come to the great hall at sunset. The King wishes you to have dinner with him and to discuss certain issues of state importance."

It was not an unusual request. Caspar was regularly a guest at the King's table, especially when the King needed some advice. Often Caspar sat with foreign emissaries, ambassadors or governors of the provinces at the King's table. The King was known to ask his advice in state affairs and frequently requested he look at the stars for the outcome.

"Tell the King that I will be honoured to be his guest."

Caspar, wearing his best cloak, went down to the central part of the palace. Everywhere on the walls and in the hallways there were sentries, watching everyone who came and went. Caspar was greeted with great respect and the soldiers stood to attention when he passed. Not that Caspar minded, but if a young soldier forgot he reminded him with a smile.

"I don't mind but your officer wouldn't take it so lightly, my young friend," he would say.

It was just sunset when he reached the King's great hall. When he was admitted Caspar was surprised that the table was only set for two. The King stood at the broad window that looked down at the royal courtyard with the lion fountain in the middle.

"Ah, my good friend Caspar, it is good that you are here. I have to talk to you. Have some refreshments."

The King clapped his hands and a servant appeared carrying a tray containing various snacks.

"Come, sit down with me," the King said as he sat down in the broad bay window on the cushions.

Caspar sat at the other side of the window and helped himself to a few of his favourite candied ginger pieces.

"Caspar, after you told me about the birth of the new King of the Jews, I did a lot of thinking and I have tried to find the right person to be my ambassador. I thought about General Arim but he is too warlike. Then I thought about my Great Vizier, but he is so diplomatic. I have thought about the Governor of the West but I don't think that he holds a high enough rank to see such a king. I even

thought about going myself but I can't be absent for such a long time."

The King looked out of the window at the splendid view of the sun setting behind the hills, colouring the sky gold and purple, then he turned.

"It is you," he said simply. "I want to send you. I want you to be my ambassador to this great king and pay him the tribute he deserves in my place."

"But Your Majesty ..."

"I know, my dear Caspar, I will not have your good council in the time of your absence but I want to send the best envoy I can think of and that is in this case you, a Priest of the Zoroastrian order. I have the feeling that this king will rule over the whole of the earth and I want to send a worthy envoy. Don't argue. I have made up my mind and I have already sealed my decision."

Caspar knew that this decision couldn't be reversed: not even the King himself could reverse a sealed decision.

"Yes, My Lord, I will prepare for my mission and I will try to be your worthy ambassador."

"You are, Caspar. You are. And now, let's eat and talk about the normal things in life."

The King clapped his hands and servants hurried to serve them their evening meal.