

## Chapter One



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ailea rose and gave the burly servant a hug. “I won’t forget, Malik. I promise.”

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



## Chapter Two



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

"Some trust in chariots."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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