



Chapter One

Mishael sat on a low rock with his muscular forearms propped on his knees and pretended to study the bloody toes in his dog-eared and worn sandals.

"Are you going to help him?" asked a half whispered voice from above and behind him.

The voice startled Mishael and he turned with a jerk see a youth of seventeen or eighteen, about his age, looking down at him. "Why should I?" he replied as turned back and looked at the drama that was unfolding about twenty feet away.

"Because he'll get beaten to death."

Mishael shook his head. "No he won't. The soldier will rough him up, but he won't kill him. He'd have to explain too much to his superiors." Then casting a quick glance at the person standing behind him he said, "Besides, I don't see that you have a broken arm or leg, why don't you go help?"

"Look at me," the boy replied as he held his arms out to his side, "Do I look like I can defend myself let alone someone else?"

Mishael looked at the young man beside him. He was short and stocky, and if he had any muscles they were well hidden under a layer of soft skin. He wasn't fat, but he obviously preferred eating to exercise. His dark brown eyes were as large as a doe's and were an almost perfect match to his mop of sweat matted dark brown hair. His mouth seemed to be frozen in a perpetual smile which made his already chubby cheeks bulge even more. Everything about him seemed...round—except for his manner of speaking, which was razor sharp.

Had Mishael been standing next to him, he would have towered over him by at least a foot, maybe more. And although Mishael weighed forty or fifty pounds more, there wasn't an ounce of fat on his large frame. His bulging, chiseled muscles were a sharp contrast to smooth roundness of the person next to him. Mishael shook his head and said, "You're right, you don't look like you could defend yourself or anyone else."

"So?"

"So what?" Mishael said with slight irritation.

"Are you going to help him?"

"Will it make you shut up and go away?"

"Um, probably not," the youth said honestly, "but we really need to help him."

"We?"

"Sure, I'll help."

"What are you going to do, talk them to death?"

"Definitely not. I'm going to run up to the soldier, grab his fancy sword from his scabbard and slice off his head with one swift blow."

Mishael rolled his eyes and turned back toward the slender framed boy lying on the ground just in time to see the sadistic soldier kick him viciously in the ribs.

The fact was Mishael had made up his mind to help long before the talkative young man had suggested it. He had watched these Babylonian pagans abuse his fellow Jews too many times over the past weeks, and he had decided he wouldn't let it happen again. He was simply trying to figure out how best to do it without getting himself or the other boy killed.

Mishael rose to his feet and turned to face the young man behind him. "Do you have a name?" he asked as his mind raced to gel the plan in his brain.

"Hananiah," the youth said with far more confidence than he suddenly felt.

Mishael gave a weak smile and jerked his head toward the soldier. "Well, Hananiah, we're going to walk over there together. I'm going to stand between the soldier and the youth on the ground. You're going to help him to his feet and move him back into the crowd of people. Regardless of what the soldier says or does, you keep walking or dragging him as fast as you can. Don't look back or stop. Do you understand?"

Hananiah nodded his head and said, "And what are you going to do?"

"Pull the soldier's sword from his scabbard and slice off his head with one swift blow."

"Really?" Hananiah asked incredulously.

"Of course, not," Mishael replied with a bit of disgust, "you think I want to get killed?" Then looking into Hananiah's frightened eyes, he said, "Are you ready?"

Hananiah gulped hard in an effort to send his heart back down into its chest where it belonged instead of his throat where it was beating wildly out of control. As they started walking forward Hananiah asked in an almost quivering voice, "What's your name?"

"Mishael," he answered absently without taking his eyes off the soldier. His focus had already shifted from planning to implementation, and the fire in his eyes said in the next two minutes

there was pain in someone's future.

Mishael's long legs allowed him to arrive at the youth on the ground a fraction of a second before Hananiah, and he boldly stepped in front of the soldier as the man drew back his leg to deliver another kick. Although only seventeen years old, Mishael towered over the slender soldier and the distended veins coursing through the muscles in his neck, arms and chest made him all the more imposing. He wore no robe, only a dirty white tunic that clung to his barrel chest and hung down to the middle of his thighs—thighs the size of the soldier's waist. He didn't say a word as he inserted himself between the soldier and the young man on the ground curled in a fetal position.

"Get out of my way," the soldier commanded angrily.

"No," Mishael said calmly, "you've beat him enough."

"I said get out of my way."

That's when the soldier made the first of two mistakes...