

## PROLOGUE

### THE GHULYEH

**B**ehold, the Temple of Babil!” the tall Egyptian sea captain said to his three companions. He turned to the breathless men behind him on the ridge, their sweaty, upturned faces glistening in the dim light of the cave. Two of the men, the ones that could see, marveled at the beauty of the ancient shrine, so serene and inviting at the top of the ridge, without a hint of its true forbidden nature. The four men were treasure seekers from far-off lands, fools to some—daring adventurers to others—who had come to the island of Babil in search of the legendary Waters of Zemzem, magical waters from Heaven that could prolong life, heal wounds, or cure the afflicted of any disease. After a long sea voyage, a dangerous trek across the tropical island, and a brief hike through the cave, they were finally within sight of their long-sought-after goal. The dark-eyed captain, the leader of the expedition, uncorked a canteen and raised a toast to the temple.

“At last, my friends, here we are, where few men have been and fewer still have lived to talk about it. What say you now? You who have doubted me from the start, complaining of hardships all the way here—now you see, it is just as I said.”

The captain looked again at the beautiful temple.

“Magnificent, is it not?”

A fat little man just below him on the path drank from his canteen and nodded in agreement. His name was Abala, but we will come to know him as Rat-Face, a nickname he will acquire on account of his beady black eyes and long pointed nose. The rich merchant from Al-Basrah who had financed the voyage wore gold rings, an expensive red turban, and a white silk shirt now soaked with sweat, trappings that marked him as a wealthy man—hardly the sort you would expect to find on such a dangerous venture.

Standing behind him on the path was a huge Turk with a bald head and a black mustache, wearing a vest that flaunted his powerful arms. An empty goatskin pouch hung from his shoulder, and a great, curved sword was tucked into his belt. Around his waist was a rope tethered to an old blind man who had sat down on a crag, a wiry beggar from India with snow-white hair and scars where his eyes should be. How he came by those scars, the old man would never say, but they bore the mark of a punishment inflicted by men. After their steep climb up the ridge, the four weary adventurers stopped to rest and cool their parched throats as the captain went over some final instructions.

“All right, listen to me,” he said softly. “From here on out, you must all be extremely quiet. There is to be no talking. If you must speak, speak in a whisper. Do you understand?”

The captain turned to the big Turk tethered to the blind man.

“And you, watch out for him. Make sure he doesn’t stumble or make any noise, and whatever you do, don’t let him fall off the path. It’s essential that he enter the temple.”

The captain looked over the side of the ridge into a black abyss, which was all they could see of the cave floor. In the distance, silvery waterfalls streamed down the walls of the cave, and the vague outlines of other ridges rose up out of the dark like small underground mountains. The dome-like ceiling of the giant cave was a pale shade of blue and covered with stalactites, and up near the entrance, a beam of sunlight coming through a hole in the ceiling lit up a fluorescent green stream that came out of the dark, snaked over the floor, then dropped into a crack in the earth. The great cavern under Mount Kaf was truly a magical place in every sense of the word, and if he was destined to die here, the intrepid captain couldn't imagine a more suitable place to lay his bones.

After a brief descent down a dip in the ridge, the four men hiked in a line up to the entrance of the temple, where two gold columns twenty-feet high stood before a flight of white marble stairs. Straight overhead, one of two beams of light coming through more holes in the ceiling lit up the stairs and the first of the three levels of the massive shrine. The tall captain turned to Rat-Face behind him on the path and whispered in his ear.

"Follow me. And don't make a sound."

The captain gave a sign to the Turk to wait with the blind man and then led Rat-Face up the stairs. Just below the top step, the two men went down on their knees and peered out at the quiet temple. The brilliantly white shrine was perfectly still, with a fine coat of dust on the marble floor. It looked as if no one had stepped foot in it in a hundred years. But looks can be deceiving. The captain knew something was here—something terrible that watched over the precious waters. He scanned the three levels built onto the ridge, looking carefully for any sign of the purported guardian.

The wide-open concourse of the first level was clear, with just a colorful archway a dozen yards from the stairs and tall white pillars running up the sides of the broad marble floor. The large stone archway that marked the entrance to the shrine was adorned with two mosaics of avenging angels with flaming swords—blue angels against green backdrops made from aventurine stones that glinted in the light that came down from above. Fifty feet beyond the archway, a short flight of stairs led to a dark second level twice the size of the lower concourse. In the heavy shadows of this second tier, the captain could see the outlines of statues around the base of two giant obelisks one hundred feet tall. The pyramid tops of these granite giants reached so high that they nearly touched tips with the blue stalactites that covered the ceiling. At the rear of the second level, perfectly in line with the gap in the archway, a short flight of stairs led up to the altar under the second beam of sunlight, where a small white font stood alone at the top of the temple. The captain ran his eyes over each level of the ancient shrine, then turned to Rat-Face on the step beside him.

"Bring them up quietly," he whispered.

Rat-Face moved down the steps like an overfed spider and returned with the Turk and the blind man from India. The captain motioned the Turk up to his side, then pointed to the altar framed by the gap in the archway.

"Steel yourself, my friend. There it is—eternal life, just within our grasp."

The Turk looked through the archway at the small font at the top of the temple.

“Allah curse your magic waters. Conjure up my payment, or I won’t take another step,” he said as he thrust out his hand.

“Of course, my friend, as agreed, half the payment up front and half at the end of the quest,” the captain replied calmly.

He opened his hand and revealed a ruby the size of a plum. The Turk reached for the gem, but the captain pulled it away.

“Belay yourself, my strong friend,” the captain said.

He looked again at the altar and made an inviting sweep with his hand.

“First, the waters.”

For a moment it looked like the big Turk might challenge the captain, but though he was a hired killer, as were many ex-soldiers, he still considered himself an honorable man, one who kept his word. With a last disapproving glance at the cunning captain, he stood and drew his sword, adjusted the empty goatskin slung over his shoulder, then turned to the blind man below him on the stairs.

“Come on, old man—time to earn your keep.”

“Certainly, good sir, certainly,” the old man said, only too happy to finally be of service.

The old man crawled up the steps on his hands and knees until the Turk yanked him to his feet by his spindly arm.

“Thank you, kind sir. Thank you!” the blind man said.

“Shut up,” the Turk said quietly. “All of your babbling will get us killed.”

He untied the rope around the blind man’s waist and then looked down at the captain, still kneeling on the stairs.

“Does he have to come?”

“Yes, it’s essential. It’s part of the prophecy. And remember, fill the goatskin, but be sure to leave some of the Waters in the font.”

The Turk stared hard at the captain, irritated by his constant reminders. He snorted in disapproval and then took the blind man by the arm and walked off toward the archway, leaving a path of footprints on the dusty floor. Guiding the blind man, the Turk passed through the beautiful archway, crossed the concourse without incident, then climbed the stairs to the second level and came to a halt.

Out in front of them, three tall statues of Sumerian gods faced the stairs. Most of the statues around the temple were made of white marble, but these were a shade of green or blue—it was difficult to tell in the twilight-like atmosphere between the two beams of light. Whatever their color, they looked like a trio of immobilized giants gathered for a ceremony in the sanctity of the cave. Beyond the statues were the giant obelisks. Even in the ashen light, the Turk was near

enough to see the indentations of cuneiform carved into their sides. The strange wedge-shaped characters used by the Sumerians ran up the lengths of the enormous obelisks as if the entire history of a people had been carved into the granite.

The deep shadows and uncanny silence of the second level made the Turk uneasy, and he turned and looked back at the captain. What looked like the decapitated heads of the captain and Rat-Face were in sight just above the top of the stairs, with the anxious captain waving at him to move on to the altar. The Turk leaned over and whispered in the blind man's ear.

“Go on, keep going.”

The old man put up his hands and shuffled across the floor, but the Turk jerked him to a halt.

“Pick up your feet, you fool!” he whispered. “Never mind. Take off your sandals. Hurry!”

The cooperative old man kneeled down and did as he was told, while the Turk kept his eye on the temple around them. Through the wide gap between the obelisks, the Turk could see a long white table inside a ring of statues and, beyond it, a third set of stairs that led up to the altar under the bar of light. The bright stream of sunlight illuminated a font that looked like a birdbath out of a sultan's garden, a small white receptacle that appeared far too humble to hold anything of value—hardly worth all the trouble it had taken to get here or the deaths of a number of shipmates.

“Magical waters,” the Turk scoffed softly. “Only a fool like you believes in that.”

He looked down at the blind man, still loosening his sandals.

“Indeed, sir, indeed,” the blind man whispered.

He slipped off his sandals and came to his feet, smiling, blissfully unaware that he'd just been insulted. The Turk shook his head at the pathetic old man. Unlike the captain and his two foolish companions, he was not a believer. He had no faith in waters from Heaven, nor did he believe that there was a jinni imprisoned beneath them, this Al-Dajjal, the evil King of the Jinn, as legend would have it.

According to the myth, five thousand years ago two angels from Heaven, Harut and Marut, did battle with Al-Dajjal, the great King of the Jinn. After his defeat, the terrible jinni fled to the island of Babil, the center of all magic, where he hid in the great cave under Mount Kaf. But there was no escaping the two emissaries from Heaven. They tracked down the jinni and drove him into the ground, then placed the Waters of Zemzem over him to hold him in his earthbound prison. Being of a heavenly nature, these waters were imbued with the power to extend life and provide perfect health to material beings, powers that made the waters a lure to every fool who dreamed of immortality. This was a tale popular throughout the Caliphate, where many were true believers. However, it was all too fanciful for a man as practical as the Turk. He put his faith in what he could see and feel, like the cold steel of the sword in his hand—this he believed in and little else.

The Turk took hold of the blind man and steered him toward a twenty-foot-tall statue of the goddess Ereshkigal facing the stairs. The imposing green statue of the Sumerian goddess of

darkness appeared to look down at them with reproachful eyes, as if offended by the presence of the irreverent intruders.

“Are we close?” the blind man said softly. “Don’t forget—douse my eyes with the waters before you take them. You promised.”

“Be silent, old fool,” the Turk whispered.

The blind man bowed in apology and shuffled forward under the heavy hand of the Turk. They walked past the statue of the fierce-looking goddess onto a ring of gold tile on the marble floor, where a charred sword lay among a pile of ashes. The wary Turk immediately perceived the danger. He raised his sword, gripped the blind man like a shield, and backed up to the statue of the goddess. He swept his eyes across the temple floor and saw more piles of ash, and in places they weren’t even piles at all, just broad, dark smears on the white marble floor. His heart knocked at his chest as he sidled around the statue, still holding the blind man, his anxious eyes raking every corner of the marble shrine. With the change in angle, he saw the static figure of a man made of ash, like one of the poor souls burned at Pompeii. The man appeared to have been in flight and incinerated midstride, with the terror of his last moments inscribed on his face. The unnerved Turk looked back at the captain, but he was no longer there.

“A trap!” the Turk said.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” the blind man asked.

“Shut up!”

The bold mercenary was on the verge of panic, his mind racing. He scanned the obelisks and the statues around him and saw nothing but shadows. He had all but made up his mind to stab the blind man and make a run for the stairs when he spotted the captain and Rat-Face at the side of the temple, hiding behind a pillar, looking straight at him, apparently waiting for him to engage the temple guardian. The enraged Turk shoved the blind man to the floor and took a step toward the captain when a clip-clopping sound rushed out from behind an obelisk, and a huge shape came out of the dark.

“What is it? What’s there?” the blind man asked from the floor.

The stunned Turk looked up at the temple guardian and let his sword arm drop to his side.

“Allah, save us, a Ghulyeh,” he breathed out as a torrent of blue flame engulfed him and his frail companion.

Now was the moment. The bait had been taken, and the captain made his move for the font.

“Now, Abala . . . run!” he cried.

He broke away from the pillar and ran toward the altar, skirting the edge of the marble floor, the cowardly Rat-Face left behind, too terrified by the screams of the dying men to follow the captain’s lead.

The shrill screams echoed around the cave as the captain rushed up to the last pillar below the altar, stopped, and looked back at the Ghulyeh. The temple guardian was hidden behind an obelisk, but he could see her brilliant blue flame burning the men, holding them upright as they were roasted alive. The captain pulled out his canteen, dumped out its contents, and made a dash for the altar stairs. He ran around the obstruction of a giant blue throne and sailed up the steps, only to trip on a stair and fall on his knees. He dropped the canteen, and it rolled down the stairs, clanging off the shining marble. He clambered after it and caught it off the bounce as a clatter of hooves rushed up upon him, and a huge shadow washed over the stairs. The terrified captain looked up at the ghastly face of the temple guardian, at her three huge eyes burning with hate—one green, one red, and one blue.

“No, please!” the captain begged.

He dropped the canteen, threw up his arms, and screamed as a stream of blue flame blasted the stairs.

The captain’s agonized screams were more than Rat-Face could bear, and with a courage born of sheer terror, he bolted away from the pillar and ran for his life. He reached the first level and raced for the stairs, with the screeching Ghulyeh coming up fast behind him. With a desperate leap in advance of a blue flame, Rat-Face jumped off the front stairs, tumbled down the steps with his turban on fire, and crashed onto the path on the narrow ridge. He rolled over the ground and snuffed out the flames, then came to his feet and ran off as fast as his bandy legs would carry him. Once he was gone, all was quiet again except for the mournful clang-clang-clang of the empty canteen still rolling down the altar stairs, finally coming to rest on the marble floor. Adorning the side of the metal canteen was a small painting of a three-legged Ghulyeh standing next to a font, mounted over the hunched-up figure of the evil King of the Jinn.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE RELUCTANT SCRIBE

**D**uring the time of the great Abbasid Caliphate, in the latter part of the eighth century, there lived a twelve-year-old boy named Sinbad. Now we know him as the famous sailor who traveled the world on marvelous voyages, but at this point in his life he was just a quiet boy with a vivid imagination who loved his father, Amir, his older brother, Nebu, and everything to do with the sea.

For the last seven years, they had lived on a beach along the Arabian coast in a small stone cottage they had built themselves in what was a humble and hard existence. The nearest village was ten miles away and there were no other children around for the boys to play with. Not that it mattered much to Sinbad. He truly loved living by the sea and didn't mind the isolation. He had his brother as a constant companion and his studies to keep him busy, spending most of his time learning languages taught to him by his scholarly father. He had already mastered seven of the eight languages spoken by Amir and was now working on the eighth, Sanskrit. Of all the languages Sinbad spoke, he found Sanskrit the most challenging, and despite working hard at it all morning, he had only managed to complete half of today's lesson, which called for translating a story about the Waters of Zemzem from Sanskrit to Arabic, his native tongue. Now it was noon, and he was tired and fed up and wanted nothing more than to crumple up the assignment and throw it away.

He read over another line of the poetic Sanskrit, dipped his pen in his ink, and knocked over the bowl, spilling the rich black liquid all over the table.

"Oh, no," Sinbad cried.

He snatched up his work and shook off the ink, but it was too late—the translation was ruined. Now he'd have to start all over again. He tossed the ruined scroll onto the table in disgust, went to the open door, and looked out at the sea. Near the horizon a large dhow with two triangular sails was heading east toward the Indian Ocean, slicing through the water with a trail of foam in her wake. Sinbad could just make out her white lateen sails and several crewmen on deck. He looked with envy at the sailors on board the ship, wondering what distant lands and exotic ports they might visit and about the dangers they might face on the open sea. *It must be wonderful to be a sailor, where each new day brought the promise of adventure.* He watched the ship disappear into a bank of clouds and stared after her for a time after she was gone. More than anything in the world, he wished he could join them.

"Sinbad," he heard his brother cry. "Sinbad, help!"

Sinbad stepped out and looked around the corner of the small stone cottage at his older brother, Nebu, a few yards away, hanging upside down in the apple tree that overshadowed their home. He smiled at his brother's antics and strolled over.

"All right, now what are you up to? C'mon, Nebu, get down, you're going to hurt yourself."

"I won't get hurt. I could hang here all day," Nebu said.

Nebu had his arms and legs wrapped around a branch, and he let go with one hand and then the other in rapid succession, catching himself each time before he could fall.

"Well, if you can hang there all day, then why did you call for help?"

"Because I want to get down. I climbed up here to get some apples, but now I feel dizzy, and I can't really tell how far I am from the ground."

Nebu turned toward Sinbad and looked straight past him as if he wasn't there, his big brown eyes just staring blankly into space, for as fate would have it, Nebu was blind and had been since birth.

"You're not very high. You're just over my head. If you lower yourself, you can get onto my shoulders."

Sinbad positioned himself directly under Nebu.

"All right, come down slowly, don't just drop on me. You're too heavy."

"I'm not heavy. You're just skinny," Nebu said. Nebu lowered himself onto his brother's shoulders, and Sinbad stepped away from the tree.

"Hey, wait! What about my apples? I'm still hungry."

"You're always hungry," Sinbad said as he moved over to a branch loaded with fruit. "Okay, there's a branch right over your head. It's got tons of apples. Just reach up and grab it."

Nebu took hold of the branch and gave it a shake, and a dozen ripe apples fell, bombarding the brothers, who staggered around laughing with apples bouncing off their heads.

A short time later, Sinbad and Nebu were out on the beach in front of the cottage facing the sea and the crashing surf. The weather was calm and the winds were light on what was a perfect summer day. They had taken off their shirts and gone for a swim and were now sitting in the sand, eating the apples. Both boys were as brown as hazelnuts from their Arabic and Indian heritage and the long summer days in the sun. Of the two, Sinbad was the more handsome, with striking dark features and jet-black hair, while Nebu was not so much handsome as manly, and much taller and heavier than Sinbad. They were a couple of fine-looking boys, and despite their differences, to look at them was to know straight off that they had to be brothers.

Nebu leaned back in the sand and held out an apple to Sinbad.

"Hey, tell me something. What do your eyes see when you look at an apple?"



Sinbad had been gazing out at the sea rather absently, lulled into a daydream by the crashing surf. He turned to Nebu, who was feeling the apple as if he could unlock the mystery of its nature with his fingertips. Sinbad had never given an apple much thought before, but that's how it was with Nebu. He was always posing questions that caused Sinbad to take a fresh look at things or look more closely at something he took for granted.

“Well, let's see—it's round and smooth, and it shines a little, but mostly it's just red.”

“Red,” Nebu repeated. “Tell me about red.”

Sinbad knew he could never convey the true nature of a color to a boy who lived in a world of perpetual darkness, but still, he would try.

“Red is like . . .” Sinbad thought for a moment, “. . . like the morning sun on your face or a hot meal in your belly or how you feel when you're boiling mad, like when you tried for hours to catch a fish only to have some nasty bird swoop down and steal it away.”

Nebu nodded as if gaining an understanding of the color when Sinbad added softly, “Or it can be warm and soft, like a mother's embrace.”

“Really?” Nebu asked, a bit surprised. “You remember Mother's embrace?”

“Yeah, a little bit.”

“Well, that's something, isn't it? You were so young I didn't know you remembered her at all.”

“I don't, not much, just a few things—her face, her tucking me in at night, the smell of her hair, stuff like that. But what does it matter? I thought you wanted to know about red.”

“I do, absolutely,” Nebu said. He smelled the apple and turned it over in his hand. “So red is all this?”

“And more,” Sinbad said. “It's also fire, temper, and passion.”

“Passion,” Nebu scoffed. “What do you know about passion? You're only twelve.”

“Oh, and I suppose you know so much more at fourteen. Don't forget, Father makes me read a lot, and you'd be shocked to learn what's in some of those translations.”

“Yeah, right,” Nebu said skeptically. “When was the last time you even saw a girl?”

“Last year, in the village, there were lots of girls.”

“Did you talk to any?”

“No—and neither did you.”

“How do you know? You went off on your own. I talked to a couple of girls when Father and I were in the market buying ink for you.”

“So, you talked to two girls, big deal,” Sinbad said. “What difference does that make? I’ve seen plenty of girls, more than you. That’s for sure.”

“Ha-ha . . . Very funny, Sinbad.”

“I didn’t mean it like that, and you know it.”

Nebu wasn’t at all bothered by his brother’s accidental jibe. He knew Sinbad wasn’t mocking him; that was the last thing he would do. He sat up with his blind eyes facing the sea, still pondering the color red, then nodded as if he had reached a conclusion and declared firmly, “Well, if red is all that you say it is, then I think for sure, it’s settled—red is my favorite color.”

Nebu took a bite of the apple and grinned at Sinbad.

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Just prior to sunset Sinbad’s father returned home after fishing all day. Lately all the fishing spots close to the cottage seemed to have been vacated of fish, so Amir had decided to try his luck farther down the coast. It had required a day-long trip to an isolated cove several miles away. In the past the little cove had always provided plenty of fish, but today that was unfortunately not the case. As Amir approached his home through the light brush on the beach, he had only a couple of small ponyfish tied to a string to show for his efforts. For whatever reason old Father Neptune continued to withhold the great bounty of the sea. But such dry spells were common for an experienced fisherman like Amir, and he was already planning to return to the cove the following day.

At thirty-five, Amir was a man of medium height and medium build, well-mannered and well-educated, who took pride in his good word, if not his station in life. A dark beard covered half his face, and with his hard, deep-set eyes, he presented a rather stern appearance. There was nothing in his looks or manner, which was often abrupt with strangers, to suggest he was a man of strong sensitivities, a generous man who was gentle with animals and completely devoted to the welfare of his two sons. When he came through the open door of the cottage, he found Sinbad sitting alone, cleaning the ink-stained table with a rag.

“Where’s your brother?” Amir asked.

“I don’t know. I left him on the beach an hour ago,” Sinbad said casually and he went on scrubbing the stain.

Amir turned and looked out at the beach. There, a hundred feet away, he saw Nebu sitting in the sand with his arms around his knees, facing the sea, his curly black hair filled with a breeze.

“I’d prefer it if you didn’t leave him alone.”

“Why? He’s not helpless. He’s almost fifteen.”

“I know what he is, and he needs his brother,” Amir replied with his eyes fixed on Nebu.

Amir placed his fishing pole against the wall and laid the two fish on the table, taking note of the ink-stained mess.

“What happened here?”

“I knocked over my ink bowl again,” Sinbad muttered as he went on scrubbing the stain.

Amir picked up the ruined scroll and looked it over, then set it down without a word.

“I’ll redo it tonight,” Sinbad added.

“Don’t bother. Do it tomorrow. I’m going back to the cove again to see if I can change my luck. Apparently, neither of us had a very productive day.”

Sinbad looked down at the two small fish laid out on the table, at their cold black eyes staring up at him as if he were an accomplice to murder. The bright silver fish with orange tails were certainly delicious but too small to provide a decent meal for two hungry boys and a grown man. Amir walked up behind Sinbad and patted him on the shoulder with the sentiment that it was all okay—not just the ruined lesson and the bad day of fishing, but all of it, their tough luck and their hard life in general. He removed a goatskin water pouch slung from his shoulder and hung it on a post then sat down on his cot, bone-tired. He looked around at the crumbling stone walls and dirt floor of the tiny cottage, at Sinbad’s ragged clothes and worn sandals, and the two measly fish for dinner, and it pained him, the poverty of it all.

“I’m sorry about this, son,” Amir said.

“About what?” Sinbad asked, not at all sure what his father was talking about.

But Amir didn’t bother to explain. He just sat there with a grim look, dwelling on his troubles and his immutable past. Sinbad put down the rag and turned in his chair, concerned about his father.

“Eight languages I know, for what?” Amir said. “There’s not a court in the Caliphate where I can show my face, and there isn’t a sultan or prince within a thousand miles who will hire me for fear of my enemies. So my destiny is this.”

Amir gestured at their paltry surroundings.

“There was a time in my life when I was an important man, a respected scholar. Sultans and kings sought my advice, and I was welcome at courts all over the world. And now . . . Now I am welcome nowhere, and the only thing I’m good for is to fish and hunt rabbits and teach you what I know.”

He looked at Sinbad and the scroll linking the two.

“I appreciate everything, Father, honest, I do,” Sinbad said. “I’m proud that I know so many languages, and I may complain a lot, but I like my studies.”

“No, you don’t,” Amir said flatly.

Sinbad was surprised by his father’s candid remark, and his guilty expression caused Amir to smile.

“I don’t know what you’re going to be, son, but one thing is certain—you won’t be a scribe.”

“What I want to be is a . . . .” Sinbad caught himself before he slipped and revealed a desire he’d kept hidden from both his father and Nebu.

“Go on. What?” Amir said. “If you could be anything in the world, what would it be?”

Sinbad held back for a moment, then, emboldened by his father’s invitation to hear what was in his heart, he gave voice for the first time to his secret dream.

“I would like to be a great merchant, a sea captain who travels the world!”

Amir took the revelation in stride and nodded as if he understood the reasonableness of Sinbad’s choice.

“In my time, I’ve known many a rich man who has acquired his fortune from across the sea, and I can’t ever recall meeting an old sailor who would have chosen a different profession. Still, fortunes are not made on desire alone. There needs to be opportunity, training, and dedication to the trade.”

“I study the tides and the weather all the time,” Sinbad said. “I always know when a storm is coming. And whenever we go to the village and I’m off on my own, I go to the old mariner’s shop and talk to him about sailing and the ways of the sea. I’ve learned a lot.”

“Have you now? All under my nose,” Amir said kindly.

Sinbad smiled.

“It’s not that I don’t want to be a scribe, Father, but it’s just that ever since I can remember, I’ve always loved the sea. I don’t know why, but for some reason I feel drawn to it.”

Sinbad looked out at the ocean.

“I want to know what’s out there beyond the horizon.”

Amir could tell Sinbad was sincere, and it touched him in a meaningful way. He thought it poignant that his son had kept this dream all to himself. He believed it revealed something admirable about his character and he felt compelled to offer some encouragement.

“So all this time you’ve been in love with the sea, but you haven’t spoken of it until now. I like that. A man who can keep a secret is a man to be trusted.”

Amir pointed at Sinbad, identifying him as such a man.

“But I’m glad you told me,” he went on. “Of course, you must continue your studies, but we’ll see what we can do about furthering your dreams. Perhaps it’s time we acquired a boat.”

“Oh, that would be wonderful! I could learn to sail, and we could fish out to sea. Surely, we’ll catch more than a couple of fish if we’re out on the ocean.”

“Yes, I know. I’ve been thinking about it, especially on days like today. But boats are expensive, and I don’t have the skill to build one, certainly not one I would trust on the open sea.

So we must make our plans. You keep to your studies—even a sailor can benefit from an education—and I’ll see what I can do about getting us a boat.”

“Oh, that’s great news. I can’t wait to tell Nebu.”

“No, don’t, not just yet. Let’s wait until we can buy a boat, and then we’ll tell your brother. Sometimes Nebu is sensitive about such things and thinks he’s holding us back. If we don’t get the boat, he’ll only blame himself, and there’s no need for that. For now, we’ll just keep it between us, all right?”

“Yes, of course,” Sinbad said.

“And as for you, just bear up as best you can, be patient, and carry on with your studies. Do what’s in front of you, what needs doing, but no matter what, never let go of your dreams.”

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Later that evening, Sinbad was out on the beach in front of a fire, roasting the ponyfish for dinner. The orange flames flickered in his dark eyes as he turned the fish on the grill, taking care not to let them burn. Amir and Nebu were washing up before dinner, and for the moment Sinbad was alone under the stars, squatting in the sand and looking out at the sea. The white foam of the breakers rushed up the shore and pulled back across the dark slant of the sand. Two seagulls caught in the moonlight called out to each other as they dipped and swooped over the glistening water. In Sinbad’s vivid imagination, the birds’ high-pitched cries were the voices of Odysseus’s Sirens, beckoning him to join them. Such romantic wanderings of the mind were common with Sinbad who often pictured himself as an intrepid sea captain caught in a storm or a desperate galley slave bent on escape. He turned over the fish and looked up at the stars.

*Someday I’ll steer my own ship by these very same stars and travel the world on marvelous adventures.*

He pulled the fish off the fire and set them on a plate, then spoke out loud, “Someday.”

Before the fish had cooled, his father and brother had joined him, and together they enjoyed the small but delicious meal of charbroiled ponyfish and roasted apples. When they had finished eating, Amir led Nebu back to the cottage, leaving Sinbad to put out the fire and wash the family plate. Once inside the cottage, Amir set Nebu down on the cot he shared with his brother and got him ready for bed. Nebu took off his sandals and removed his vest while Amir pulled out Nebu’s nightshirt from a large teak chest that held all their clothes. The heavy wooden chest with its thick leather bands, along with a blue dagger that he kept tucked in his sash, were the only belongings Amir had retained from his previous life.

“You should let me do some of the work,” Nebu said. “Sinbad does too much, and I’m his older brother. I want to help.”

“Don’t worry about Sinbad. He needs to stay busy. It’s good for him,” Amir said. “And you do more than your share. Come now, get ready for bed.”

Amir handed the nightshirt to his son, then took a small leather-bound book from the chest and sat down next to Nebu to say their evening prayers. He opened the book to a verse marked

with a strip of white silk then noticed Nebu was still holding the nightshirt with big tears now streaming down his cheeks. Amir closed the prayer book and turned to his son.

“Nebu, don’t do this to yourself. You’re not a burden, not to me or to Sinbad. Don’t ever think that. You help out in so many ways.”

Amir reached down and picked up a small basket from beside the cot.

“You do fine work, son. Feel the weave of this basket. It’s masterful—it’s easily worth a sack of lentils in trade.”

“A basket-weaver,” Nebu said scornfully. “Is that what will become of me when you’re gone?”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“You will someday. Mother did.”

Amir turned the basket over in his hands, reflecting on a painful day in his past.

“Sinbad has his own life, Father. I don’t want him to have to look after me, his blind, stupid brother.”

“You’re not stupid. Don’t ever say that.”

Amir set down the basket and put his arm around his boy.

“Nebuchadnezzar, do you know why I gave you that name?”

“Sinbad says you were mad at me because I was born blind. He said, ‘I’d never be able to spell it.’”

Amir had to smile at Sinbad’s cruel sense of humor.

“No,” he said gently. “That’s not why. It was because you are noble. I knew it when I first held you in my arms. So I named you after the strongest and greatest of all the kings.”

Amir pulled Nebu a little closer.

“God is kind, son, and he has not punished you with blindness or made it difficult for you to learn because he is angry with you. He gives to each of us different burdens and different gifts. What strength he drew from your eyes he put into your arms, and any wisdom that doesn’t take root in your mind is to be found in your heart.”

Nebu wiped away his tears and hugged his father.

\* \* \*

The next morning, a bright yellow sun peeled away the night and revealed a perfectly calm sea outside Sinbad’s home. Down at the water’s edge, a pair of hungry sandpipers hunted up their breakfast, racing back and forth along the sand in search of crabs, skirting the globs of blue jellyfish that had washed ashore overnight. Inside the cottage, Amir was already up and about.

He washed his face with water from the goatskin pouch, put on a clean shirt, and went over and checked on his boys. They were both sound asleep with their backs to each other and Nebu facing the wall. Amir noticed a small scroll in Sinbad's hand. He eased it out from between his son's fingers and unrolled it. It was a flawless translation of the story of the Waters of Zemzem, written in Arabic. Apparently, Sinbad had gotten up in the middle of the night and finished it. Amir looked down at his youngest son, sleeping as peacefully as the day he was born. He was such a good boy, so earnest and hard-working and clever, who always tried to do the right thing. He looked at Nebu, who was just as good in his own way. Like Sinbad, Nebu was an earnest, good-hearted boy, quite content in spite of his blindness and about as dependable as the rising sun.

Amir was overcome with emotion.

*My God, how I love these two boys,* he thought.

Amir knew that Sinbad and Nebu were both honest, guileless boys who would do their best to be ethical men and obedient to God. But the day was coming when he would have to release them into a wicked world, and he feared for them both.

*I must help them. I must help Nebu find his own way in life, help him to stand on his own two feet, even though he is blind. And I must find some way to help Sinbad fulfill his dream of becoming a sailor.*

Amir set the scroll on the table which oddly quivered on its rickety legs. All at once a great rumbling rose up from the earth and the whole cottage shook back and forth, knocking Amir to the ground. And then, as abruptly as it started, the shaking stopped. Amir got to his feet and checked on his boys. Sinbad was awake, stirred from sleep by the brief but powerful earthquake, but Nebu was still sound asleep.

"What was that?" Sinbad asked.

He yawned and looked at his father.

Amir locked eyes with Sinbad and listened. Suddenly a terrible fear rose up in his eyes and he rushed to the door, threw it open and looked out at the sea. The great expanse of the Arabian Sea was unusually calm—unnaturally so, appearing more like the smooth blue surface of an alpine lake. Sinbad hurried over to the door beside his father and looked out at the water. A bewitched silence hung in the air over the becalmed ocean, as if the whole of creation had been put under a spell. The eerie silence was broken by the calls of a flock of seagulls flying inland, their sharp cries like alarms warning of a coming catastrophe. All at once, the water along the shore drew back into the sea—back, back it went at an incredible speed, as if the entire ocean was being drawn into the mouth of a gargantuan whale.

Amir turned to Sinbad and shouted, "Get him up, now!"

Never in his life had Sinbad seen his father so afraid. He froze, and his father flew past him and pulled Nebu to his feet. Amir hurried Nebu out of the cottage then stopped and looked out at the ocean. By now the water had withdrawn more than a hundred yards from shore, and a thin

white line had appeared on the horizon, growing higher as it rushed toward them from across the surface of the sea.

“What is it, Father?” asked a bewildered Nebu. “What’s wrong?”

Sinbad turned to his father.

“The tree!” he cried. “We’ll climb the tree!”

Amir’s eyes snapped to the apple tree.

“Not high enough,” he said in a voice muted with despair.

Amir looked around for somewhere else to go and caught sight of the chest inside the cottage.

“The chest! Sinbad, go back inside!”

Amir rushed his boys back into the cottage and threw open the chest, scooped up the garments, and flung them aside.

“Get in!” he cried.

Amir helped Nebu into the chest, and Sinbad climbed in after him, tucking up into a ball beside his brother. Amir grabbed the water pouch off of his cot, pulled his blue dagger from his sash, and thrust them both into Sinbad’s hands. He looked back at the sea and saw a massive wall of white water heading straight for the beach. He grabbed hold of the lid to close the chest, when Sinbad put out his hand.

“No, Father, get in!” he pleaded.

But there wasn’t room. Amir gazed upon his boys for the last time.

“I love you both,” he said, his deep voice quavering with emotion.

He looked at Sinbad.

“Look after Nebu. He needs you.”

Amir closed the lid and bolted it shut, then turned just as a wall of water crashed into the cottage and swept everything away.

The huge tsunami rushed inland across the entire coastline, drowning everything in its path but the tallest trees. Seconds past, and then the large wooden chest rose to the surface like a cork and a series of smaller successive waves drove it inland, where it came to rest at the base of a small hill swept clean of brush by the waves. And there it sat, with no telling whether the boys inside were alive or dead. After a time, the tip of a dagger poked through the top of the chest and began to saw at the leather bands. An hour later, the two brothers stepped out of the chest onto the mud on the side of the hill. Sinbad slung the water pouch over his shoulder and tucked the dagger into his sash then helped Nebu up the muddy slope. Once atop the hill, Sinbad turned and looked back at a new coastline of swirling gray water filled with debris. He stood for a time with



hot tears in his eyes, perfectly silent, staring at the catastrophe that had taken his father and upended his life.

“Why has this happened, Nebu?” Sinbad asked softly. “What have we done to deserve this? Isn’t it enough that we’ve lost our mother, that you are blind . . . Must God take Father too?”

Sinbad sobbed, and Nebu put his arm around him.

“It’s all right,” Nebu said gently.

Nebu’s unseeing eyes were dropping tears as he tried to comfort his little brother. He reassured Sinbad that this tragedy was all part of God’s plan and that one day they would go to Heaven and be reunited with their mother and father. He said this even though he didn’t think it was true. Perhaps someday they might go to Heaven, but this disaster was not part of a plan. Nebu didn’t believe that for a moment. The God he knew, a God who loved his children, wouldn’t take a mother and father away from two young boys. No, it was just the way of the world—as much a part of it as wind and rain, or any storm or season. And though someday they might go to Heaven and see their parents again, even that wouldn’t make this right. This was a horrible tragedy, now and forevermore, and nothing could ever change that. Nebu only spoke of God and Heaven to help ease Sinbad’s pain, but from the vantage point of his dark world, God’s lone concern was with a person’s spirit, and he was tolerant of suffering for the banished children of Adam and Eve.

Nebu waited for Sinbad to stop crying before he told him it was time to leave. Sinbad looked out over his father’s watery grave and uttered a final prayer. Then, with nothing more to do, he turned his back on his past and walked off with Nebu into a cold and uncertain future.

**Here ends the free excerpt of my novel. I hope you liked it. If you'd like to read more, it is available on Kindle Unlimited and as an ebook, paperback and hardcover on Amazon. In addition to *The 1st Voyage of Sinbad: The Waters of Zemzem*, I have posted five of my scripts on my website, in case anyone wants to see what kind of movies I write. I also have a YouTube show that is dedicated to all things Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror. It has both cool and funny content. So if you like these genres and shows like Saturday Night Live and the old Monty Python, you might want to check it out.**

**Thanks again for taking an interest in my work.**

**John Royan**

