

When the Enemy is Near
A Tale of Faith and Perseverance

A novel by
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UNEDITED

First Draft

Introduction

Helplessness can make us despondent. When we're afraid, when we have no control over our lives and our vulnerability remains day after miserable day, we may wish our time would end. We lose hope and the slow slog to death begins. But, an eternal hope does exist. It buoys us when our trials appear unending.

Many people in Darsinia know this hope and possess a persistent faith; it convinces them they're loved and never alone. It reassures them the good they yearn for will come — “perhaps tomorrow all will be made right.” Until that day, they cling to the One who created them, the One who gave the eternal hope. They pray for his peace.

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Darsinia's war is over. There is no more fear, no more killing. The new king invites his people to Larsa to celebrate Festival and they come, yearning for things to be as they once were.

King Jadon insists Avri of Talla remain as Counselor to the King. He surprises his friend, Caleb, and asks him to be serve as regent for his infant son if it becomes necessary. Caleb

accepts without really understanding what might be required of him. Jadon, Avri and Caleb want peace, but they don't know the war isn't over for one Darsinian. He is obsessed with an artifact the royal family stole from his ancestor generations ago. He must have it or die.

In the Pyrrian Kingdom, a new and different enemy attacks. His threats are unseen; his tactics are deadly. King Jadon sends soldiers with some of his people to Beladin to rescue their allies. If they fail, the Pyrrian Kingdom will fall.

Conspirators invade Jadon's land as his people battle the unseen adversary in Beladin. Ruthless pirates and a perennial foe overrun two of his garrisons. War weary citizens hear of this and begin to doubt if Elyon will save them. King Jadon knows he must fight for his people, but who will save him if his faith should waver? There is still no peace for the people of Darsinia.

When the enemy is near, when he is so close you sense you're about to die, you will learn what you truly believe.

Prologue

The island of Onan
a day long, long ago

Esaias burst through the fragile, double doors of his third-floor rooms. Onan's bells rang a warning to the inhabitants of the tropical city: the chieftain's men are in the streets. Whenever the bells rang, chaos followed. People worried they'd be next to suffer their ruler's cruelty, but Esaias knew they came for him. In his rooms, the aged prophet searched through the scraps of paper and scrolls on his table and finally pushed all of it onto the tile floor. He needed a clean sheet of parchment. Finding one at last, he hurried to scratch out the words of his message.

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Alarmed by the clanging bells, Ben-Shari, Esaias' servant and companion, pushed his way through crowded streets and rushed to get to his master and friend. Breathless and afraid, he reached the inn at last and sprinted up the stairs. He ran through the open doors of their rooms to

warn his master. He found Esaias scribbling furiously at his desk, his bony left hand clutching the smooth, black onyx pendant which hung from a long, braided cord around his neck.

Ben-Shari had seen Esaias like this before, so he stood silent and ignored the heat and glaring sunlight pouring through the floor-to-ceiling windows. He watched his master write down the message he'd received from Elyon.

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Esaias paid no attention to Ben-Shari and continued writing. He grabbed a second sheet of parchment and wrote the words he still heard in his mind. In his haste, he spilled drops of ink on the rough paper. The black ink stained the wrinkled skin on his hands and arms, but he didn't stop to wash them; his message must be heard and he raced to record it while he had time. His missive was smudged, but his words were readable.

Esaias heard the downstairs door slam open and then the sound of large men coming up the stairs. He realized today would be his last day in these rented rooms. He and his servant had lived in their whitewashed, six-room inn for several years proclaiming Elyon, the Creator of All That Is, to the people of the island city-state of Onan.

Just before the men came in his rooms, he stuffed his incomplete prophecy into a clay jar on the shelf behind him. The jar wasn't a good hiding place, but Esaias believed the Holy One would preserve it. From his chair, he looked up at the five men who had muscled their way past Ben-Shari, crowding into the small room. The intruders concealed their eyes with masks and tucked their long hair under bandanas tied at the back of their heads. To Esaias, they resembled the younger, smooth-faced Kotori pirates who sauntered through the streets of Onan, cocky in their loose, pale linen pants and shirts, bright colored sashes at their waists.

These men, though, weren't pirates. They were some of the chieftain's enforcers. The broad, curved swords hanging from their waists had killed many of the prophet's friends. Despite the masks, Esaias knew two of the men.

"Malachi, welcome," he said. "Dan-El, who are your friends? You don't need to hide your faces in my presence. Why have you come?"

Malachi ripped off his mask and bandana and walked toward the prophet. "You know why we've come. The chieftain doesn't like your condemnations, Esaias. No man who criticizes him should expect to remain free in our city. We're taking you to the citadel's prison. Will you come peacefully?"

"Our people live in fear, Malachi. They despise the chieftain and his ways," Esaias answered. "Are the things I've said about him untrue?"

"That's not my concern. Will you come peacefully?"

Esaias stared at Malachi and thought about his reply. "No. It would be better for me to die here than to be killed by the madman who rules our island."

"Esaias. Friend," Malachi implored. "Please, just come with us."

Esaias crossed his arms and remained in his chair.

Dan-El grew impatient and stomped across the floor toward the defiant old man, grabbed him by a thin arm and pulled him to his feet.

"I'll go with you, but let Ben-Shari stay here," Esaias pleaded. "He has said nothing about the chieftain to anyone."

"We've come only for you, Esaias," Malachi answered, but to Ben-Shari, he ordered, "Don't try to leave the island."

Esaias had told his servant weeks ago he expected to be arrested soon, maybe even killed. Ben-Shari begged for them to leave the island then, but the prophet refused. “Still, make arrangements for us to leave at a moment’s notice,” he’d instructed. “I’ll plan our escape, but you find someone to take us from Onan.”

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After Malachi and his men left with his master, Ben-Shari went to work gathering the parchments and scrolls. A boat waited for him at the fishermen’s piers and he needed to get there fast. Since the streets were filled with terrified people now, he feared he might not make it in time for him and his master to leave the island.

“I hope your plan works, you reckless old fool,” Ben-Shari muttered. “We might both die today because you wouldn’t leave when you knew this was coming.”

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Esaias understood his captors would take him through the market on the way to the citadel and he knew his street merchant friends hated the chieftain. They wanted to defy him and the brutes who carried out their ruler’s violence. Esaias grinned as Malachi and Dan-El led him into the market; his captors were unaware of what was about to happen.

As the arresting party shoved through the crowded square, people began calling out for the prophet. This was the pre-arranged signal to Esaias’ friends. Market-goers became a mob and clamored around Malachi and his men, impeding their progress and separating one or two at a time from their captive. Malachi and Dan-El drew their sabers and pushed forward threatening to relieve someone of his hand — or his head, if necessary — to get through the throng. Both men were soon overpowered from behind and trapped on the ground while another group of friends hustled Esaias away to be lost amid the crush of people.

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Once safe in a quiet back alley, the relieved prophet spoke to his rescuers.

“Thank you, friends. Our plan worked!”

“It did, Esaias!” the fishmonger shouted. “We couldn’t let them take you to the citadel. We would never have seen you again.”

The spice seller chuckled, “I saw some of our friends beating Malachi’s men. I wonder how they like getting some of what they’ve given us.”

“It might be hard for you when they return . . .”

“It was worth it,” the chicken farmer interrupted. “Those men need to know what we can do when they push us too far.”

The friends stood silent for a few seconds; no one wanted to say what they all knew.

“But . . . it’s not safe for you now,” the spice seller said. “What will you do, Esaias?”

“It’s best if you don’t know.”

“We will never tell them anything, Esaias,” the fishmonger vowed.

The prophet looked from man to man, grateful for their friendship. “Thank you for helping me escape, but we must part now. We won’t see each other again until we live in the presence of Elyon. Peace go with you all.”

“And with you, Esaias,” they replied as one.

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After they said their goodbyes, Esaias worked his way through the maze of back streets to the fishermen’s piers. Since the chieftain had built the more substantial docks for traders and privateers, only poor fishermen, smugglers and thieves used the ruined structures where Ben-

Shari waited. Squawking sea gulls, hungry for any scrap of food, circled above a shabby old boat and helped Esaias find his servant.

As he boarded, the prophet eyed the fisherman who would take them to safety on a boat that seemed too small to navigate ocean currents. *“Is he fisherman or pirate?”*

No matter. Esaias had no choice; he must trust this man and his boat to get them off the island. They pulled away from the dock and got under sail right away, noisy seagulls protesting above as they followed the boat out to sea. The fisherman steered his boat toward Lyto, another island city-state. The people there would welcome, even shelter, Esaias and his servant from the hated chieftain of Onan.

As their island home grew smaller behind them, Ben-Shari came to the front of the boat and sat down beside his master.

“Once again, we escaped, master,” he said.

Esaias gave his friend a tired smile. “Yes, and I’ll have time to finish my prophecy. It’s fantastic, Ben-Shari. I understand so much more today.”

Pointing at the stone his master held, Ben-Shari said, “I’ve seen you do amazing things with this. You hold it when you write your prophecies. You held it when you healed the widow’s son. Is it the source of your power?”

“What? No, Ben-Shari. The Holy One did that. I had no power to do anything.”

“I couldn’t believe what I saw. The widow believed her son was dead, but you touched his brow and healed him. You raised a dead boy off his mat!” Ben-Shari remembered. “I believe this onyx is magical.”

“Ben-Shari?” Esaias stared at his servant. “What is this talk?”

“I want it, Esaias. I want its power.”

“There is no power in this stone!” Esaias shouted, as he stood, shocked and defiant. “It was my father’s gift. I cling to it as I cling to my memories of him and how he served Elyon. Only the Holy One could do through me what I’ve done.”

“I still want it, Esaias, and I will have it and its magic.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Esaias noticed the fisherman leaving the back of the boat and moving toward them. He understood then that his friend had betrayed him — for a stone he thought had magical powers.

“Ben-Shari, this is no talisman! The pendant has no magical power,” he insisted. “We have served Elyon together. We still can. Please, I have trusted you as a friend.”

The smelly fisherman lunged at the prophet, grabbed him with dirty, calloused hands and pinned Esaias’ arms to his sides. Ben-Shari ripped the pendant from his master’s neck, held it, stroked its smooth sides.

“Please, Ben-Shari,” Esaias begged. “It was my father’s gift. It has no magic.”

“That’s what you say,” the fisherman scoffed. Without any warning, he lifted the bewildered prophet and cast him overboard.

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“No!” Ben-Shari screamed. “What have you done? Turn this boat around. We must go back and save him. He is my master.”

The greedy fisherman laughed. “And now, Ben-Shari, I will take it from you.”

The two men fought as the small boat rocked on the open sea. The fisherman punched Ben-Shari’s stomach and threw him to the deck. He tried to wrest the pendant away, but the servant clung to it. Frustrated, he pounded Ben-Shari’s face into the deck, hoping to knock him unconscious, but still he hung on to the stone.

I will not let him have it! It is mine now.

He rolled onto his back and peered through a swollen eye at the attacker looming over him. He tasted the saltiness of his own blood from the cuts on his face and spat at the fisherman. “If you want it, you’ll have to drown me, too!”

The fisherman picked up a six-inch bait knife from the nets at his feet. He dove toward the defenseless servant, knife held high, ready to plunge it into Ben-Shari’s heart. With his last strength, Ben-Shari focused only on the knife and used both hands to twist it back toward his attacker. As the fisherman fell on him, Ben-Shari felt the knife pierce deep into the man’s chest and he exhaled forcefully. Dead.

Ben-Shari managed to roll out from under the man’s filthy weight and sat up on the deck. He touched the cuts on his face and felt the sticky, drying blood. When he was able to stand, he used his foot to push his attacker’s body overboard. He thought about trying to steer the boat back for Esaias, but decided he had surely drowned by now.

“I didn’t mean for Esaias to die,” he wailed to the sky, arms raised. “I only wanted the stone. The fisherman drowned my master and I had to kill him to protect myself.”

It was true. He hadn’t meant for Esaias to die, but he meant to have the pendant.

Ben-Shari sat down, took hold of the boat’s tiller and hoped to head toward Lyto. While he managed to ease his conscience for the moment, his actions would torment him and his descendants for generations to come.

Chapter 1

Near the Sea of Onan at night

On a rock ledge high above the Sea of Onan, a solitary figure defied the fierce winds churning the sea below and whipping his long coat against his legs. While the gale howled and rain pelted him, he remained focused on the distant island he would go to tomorrow. A heavy fog moved in from the sea, engulfing the island and swallowing up the rest of the hazy light from Onan's lighthouse. The sister islands, Lyto and Hazdi, were already obscured, but they were further down the coastline.

When Onan receded from view, he watched the workers on the ferry docks below. High waves crashed over the wharves, drenching the barefoot men who struggled to secure the boats and threatening to wash them into the sea. Post-mounted lanterns flickered in the strong wind; their light reflected in puddles of seawater collecting on the dock. The laborers' bare chests glistened. Their wet skin was black as onyx.

“Onyx,” Commander Tarkin mused. “Like the stone that haunts me.”

He turned from his brooding to the small fire in his camp. It had taken him a week to cross the Kovan Desert from Kriva. In the morning, he’d board a ferry for Onan to do something he really didn’t want to do — convince a man he despised to join him.

“Tomek believes he is a great and powerful leader. He boasts of his army,” Tarkin thought. *“That horde of thugs — murderers, the lot of them. They would be no match for the real soldiers I once commanded in Shakko Dar.”*

“But, I need those men to help me take the Darsinian throne from Jadon.”

He added more twigs to the dying fire. *“I’ll be cold again in this desert tonight—and wet. But it doesn’t matter since I’d never sleep on this rocky ground anyway.”*

“If only Devin were still king . . . I might be commander of the entire Darsinian army.”

Tarkin came so close to having complete access to the palace. He could’ve searched for the onyx then. He was sure the old prophet’s talisman was there somewhere. He dreamed of being the one who recovered what his ancient forebear had lost. His family could trace the stone from Lyto to Darsinia. From there, legend said agents for the royal family stole it from a drunken ancestor who bragged too loudly about the stone’s magic.

“If Avri and Caleb had just stayed out of Devin’s war!” he shouted to no one.

He’d come to loathe these men. His disgrace at the end of Darsinia’s civil war had transformed into renewed treason and he’d found new conspirators just as willing to remove Jadon from the throne as he was. Tomek, chieftain of Onan, would be the last one.

Tarkin sat down by the fire to warm himself and indulged his grudges.